Challenging Communion

Garrison, Jennifer, Stevens, Jacqueline

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In late medieval England, cultural expectations of the Eucharist were fantastically high and astoundingly numerous. According to both popular wisdom and ecclesiastical authorities, ingesting the Eucharist could grant believers everything from personal fulfillment and complete identification with the suffering body of Christ to salvation and the unification of fractured communities. At first glance, these eucharistic promises of fulfillment and completeness seem to require little to no intellectual labor on the part of believers. Take, for instance, a particularly vivid example from a fourteenth-century verse sermon on the feast of Corpus Christi. In the central exemplum of the poem, an unbelieving Jew attends a Mass during which he sees each individual Christian literally eat the entire bleeding body of the infant Christ. As he describes the event afterward to his Christian travel companion, “I sauh wiþ myn eȝen two / Where þou and oþur mo, / Vche of ow heold a child blodie, / And siþen ȝe eten hit, I nul not lye.” Confronted with this horrifying proof of Christ’s physical presence in the consecrated host, the Jew converts to Christianity not simply because of the self-evident truth of the doctrine of transubstantiation but also because “leuere ichaue cristned...”

1. For an overview of the Eucharist’s role in late medieval religious culture, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

The Jewish man is content to engage in the cannibalism of eating Christ’s flesh during the Mass, provided he, like the Christians, does not have to think about how it works. The sermon then goes on to detail how eucharistic reception unites the Christian community, deters sinful behavior, and limits time in purgatory. As gruesome and somewhat absurd as this exemplum is, the promise that it makes believers is one that would have been quite familiar to medieval audiences: a belief in the Eucharist will help each believer to reach a largely unthinking but highly beneficial union between Christ and oneself. Despite the various physical and conceptual boundaries between the believer and the Eucharist—from altar screens to infrequent eucharistic reception to a doctrine of transubstantiation that defied human logic—the desire for direct contact with Christ’s body in the host became increasingly fervent in the late Middle Ages; this desire stemmed at least in part from simplistic eucharistic promises of spiritual completeness.

However, contrary to our generally accepted scholarly assumptions, many mainstream believers—clerical and lay believers who regarded themselves as orthodox—doubted these promises. In this book, I identify a pervasive Middle English literary tradition that rejects simplistic notions of eucharistic promise. Writers of Middle English often take advantage of the ways in which eucharistic theology itself contests the boundaries between the material and the spiritual, and these writers challenge the eucharistic ideal of union between Christ and the community of believers. By troubling the definitions of literal and figurative, they respond to and reformulate eucharistic theology in politically challenging and poetically complex ways. I argue that Middle English texts often reject simple eucharistic promises in order to offer what they regard as a better version of the Eucharist, one that is intellectually and spiritually demanding and that invites readers to transform themselves and their communities.

Over the course of this book, I argue that writers of Middle English engage in what I term “eucharistic poetics,” formal literary techniques, including but not limited to figuration and allegory, that emphasize both communion with and alienation from Christ in order to encourage readers to contemplate and question not only their own personal connection with the divine but also the necessity of the institutional church as mediator between Christ and humanity. For Middle English writers, as for many medieval theologians, the Eucharist is a sign that paradoxically both signifies and contains the physical body of Christ. Vernacular writers from William Langland to Margery Kempe take advantage of this paradox, exploring the difficulty of a direct encounter with
a physical body that is always expressed in signs, whose very identity is itself linguistic and textual: the Word made flesh.

In much of Middle English literature, the Eucharist and the poetic become mutually defining; both gain their meaning from simultaneously enabling and frustrating access to transcendence. Middle English writers draw on the Eucharist to reimagine the function of poetic language; both the Eucharist and poetic language promise an abundance of meaning beyond the literal sign, an abundance that can never be fully realized. From the Pearl-dreamer’s frustrated encounter with the irreducibly allegorical Lamb to Julian of Norwich’s failed attempts to understand Christ’s suffering through metaphorical “likenesses,” vernacular texts encourage their readers to desire communion with Christ’s body but simultaneously depict that body as ultimately inaccessible. For many writers of Middle English, through this dynamic of inviting and refusing interpretation, the sacrament of the Eucharist provides a model for devotional reading practices as always predicated on distance, mediation, and the refusal of total access to transcendent meaning.

Eucharistic poetics centers on the self-conscious use of literary language—language that is figurative, semantically dense, or gestures toward a literary tradition—to explore the reader’s ability to access transcendence through a textual, material object. Recently, scholars of Early Modern literature have shown how poets such as John Donne and George Herbert draw on the Eucharist in an effort to produce poetry that replaced the medieval Eucharist’s unification of sign and meaning, materiality and divinity. However, medieval poets, unlike their successors, do not necessarily regard their own time period as possessing a plenitude of meaning deriving from the Mass. Rather, Middle English writers often engage with the Eucharist precisely to foreground the important spiritual work of frustrated meaning, meaning that is only partially understood whether through sacrament or language. In Middle English texts, the Eucharist is often vital to poetic meaning because it simultaneously invites the reader’s engagement and proclaims its own opacity. For Middle English writers, as for most Latin theologians, this opacity stems from the ways in which a belief in the material presence of Christ both challenged and supported belief in the Eucharist as a sign of the Christian community of believers.

The Eucharist was often a symbol of both the human community’s connection with the divine and the necessity of individual believers’ submission before the institutional church. Though this sense of distance from the divine was often theologically and poetically productive, it stemmed in large part

from the social and political restrictions the ecclesiastical hierarchy placed on individual believers, especially the medieval laity. During the period of time covered by this study—beginning with the surge of vernacular pastoral literature in the late thirteenth century and extending roughly to the end of the fifteenth century—the relationship between readers and Christ’s body in the Eucharist became increasingly politically fraught. According to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the relationship between individual believer and the body of Christ required church mediation; only priests could make Christ’s body present through the miracle of transubstantiation. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, following Parliament’s 1401 De Heretico Comburendo and Archbishop Arundel’s 1409 Constitutions, which authorized the burning of heretics and banned vernacular theology respectively, those who questioned the literal, physical presence of Christ’s body in the altar bread faced the very real threats of persecution and execution.5 The relationship between community, identity, and the Eucharist was not merely of poetic or theological importance; how the Christian community imagined the Eucharist had the power to transform the very nature of that community.

I have titled this book Challenging Communion because Middle English texts challenge the received ideas surrounding the Eucharist in at least three important ways. First, taking “communion” as a synonym for “Eucharist,” Middle English texts challenge mainstream believers’ preconceived beliefs about the simplistic nature and effects of the sacrament itself. Second, they question the ideal of a simple identification, or communion, between Christ and individual believers, between Christ and the Christian community, and between members of the earthly human community. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Middle English texts often present the Eucharist itself as intellectually and spiritually demanding because it invites believers to transform their individual and community identities. On all three levels, these texts examine the power of the Eucharist through textual representation in order to show and celebrate the ways in which the Eucharist is a challenging communion.

**DEFINING EUCHARISTIC POETICS**

As a divinely inscribed material object, the transubstantiated altar bread was central to how late medieval writers imagined the written text as well as figu-

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rative and poetic language. In this study, I focus predominately on a broad range of nondramatic literature—penitential manuals, dream visions, religious allegories, mystical literature, devotional treatises, and lyrics—that presents itself as, for lack of a better term, nonheterodox. Though there is extensive scholarship on Lollard texts that explicitly reject transubstantiation, there has been no recognition of the way in which belief in transubstantiation enables writers to focus on the power of the Eucharist as a textual object. In fact, considering the cultural importance of the Eucharist, there has been surprisingly little literary scholarship on this central symbol outside of the context of heresy. An important exception to this general rule is the scholarship on medieval drama. Sarah Beckwith, drawing on the work of Mervyn James and Miri Rubin on Corpus Christi celebrations, has persuasively shown the importance of the Eucharist to medieval drama, particularly the York Corpus Christi plays. According to Beckwith, these plays rely on an understanding of the Christian community as enacting the body of Christ, the body that Christians also worship in the consecrated host. Through performance, the plays reinterpret the nature of sacramentality itself, moving “the sacraments away from the possession of the church and toward the relations performed

6. Over the past few decades, studies of heretical literature, particularly Lollard literature, have become central to medieval literary studies, and a central defining feature of such literature is often a rejection of the Eucharist. A few of the most influential works in the expanding field of Lollard studies include the following: Margaret Aston, Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion (London: Hambledon, 1984); Andrew Cole, Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008); Rita Copeland, Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001); Kantik Ghosh, The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002); Anne Hudson, The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, eds., Lollards and Their Influence in Late Medieval England (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2003). For an important recent evaluation of the field, see Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds., Wycliffite Controversies (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 2011).


between people.” Though such theater shares many of the concerns of the texts I consider here, as Beckwith argues, the plays’ particular reinterpretation of the Eucharist is distinct to the dramatic form, made possible by physical performance. My approach in this book is similar to Beckwith’s insofar as the texts I consider also reflect on the Eucharist as a symbol of the Christian community. However, Beckwith’s work is explicitly invested in celebrating versions of sacramentality that privilege the Eucharist as a sacramental action rather than a physical object; she goes so far as to argue that the York plays’ vision of sacramentality is more legitimate than the medieval liturgy’s version, which she calls “bastardized” because of its lack of focus on the community. In contrast, I am not interested in establishing which versions of the Eucharist are truer or theologically superior. And indeed, for the Middle English texts that I examine, the Eucharist’s status as an object is part of its power and appeal. They foreground their own status as textual objects in order to reflect on and celebrate the transubstantiated altar bread as itself a divinely inscribed textual object.

Medieval discussions of the Eucharist center on the very nature of materiality, and Christ’s material presence was one that had profound political and social implications. Unlike the dramatic tradition that Beckwith describes, eucharistic poetics is a literary system of expression that considers the extent to which readers can access transcendent meaning through textual objects; this literary tradition thus extends beyond the genre of poetry, and its implications extend beyond texts that explicitly discuss the sacrament of the Eucharist. By emphasizing the physical form of the Eucharist alongside the literary forms of Middle English texts themselves, these texts trouble and explore the relationship between materiality and spirituality. My study builds upon recent medieval literary scholarship on form’s complex entanglements with history. Scholars such as Christopher Cannon, Maura Nolan, Shannon Gayk, and Kathleen Tonry, to name but a few, emphasize the ways in which Middle English texts are often intensely interested in what literary form is and means within its historical and political context. As Tonry points out, Middle Eng-

10. Ibid., 115.
11. In this way, my project shares some of the same concerns as those of Shannon Gayk and Robyn Malo in their recent special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, “The Sacred Object,” which explores “how sacred objects are understood as instruments of divine power.” Shannon Gayk and Robyn Malo, “The Sacred Object,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44.3 (2014): 460.
12. On this recent return to “form” as a category of analysis, see especially the following: Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004); Shannon Gayk and Kathleen Tonry, eds. *Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century* (Colum-
lish literature is “a powerfully innovative corpus that offers up to the attentive reader often surprising configurations of the ‘literary’ and the ‘thynges’ of history.” If form, as Cannon argues, is the intersection between materiality and thought, the Eucharist is an example of form par excellence. By using poetic techniques to block and invite readerly participation, eucharistic poetics encourage readers to consider the ways in which the political and ecclesiastical power structures mediate the believer’s access to the divine body. The Christian understanding of language and the Eucharist both derive from the central mystery of the Incarnation; the Word became flesh and redeemed human language, and it is through the words of the priest that the Word again becomes flesh on the altar during the Mass. Eucharistic poetics brings together the period’s interest in literary form with its central cultural symbol.

Through their engagement in eucharistic poetics, Middle English writers depict the reading of literary language, particularly figurative language, as a spiritual, intellectual, and emotional process. By presenting the Eucharist as a text in need of both devotional and poetic interpretation, vernacular writers trouble our modern critical categories of affective piety and vernacular theology. Recent scholarship on late medieval religious literature has sought to break down previous scholarly distinctions between intellectually serious theological texts and more emotional works of devotional literature. Previously, scholars had tended to assume that intellectual engagement with eucharistic theology in the vernacular was almost, by its very nature, always threatening to become heretical; by extension, affective explorations of the

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14. Christopher Cannon argues that “form is that which thought and things have in common.” Cannon, Grounds of English Literature, 5.
15. As Miri Rubin points out, the Eucharist was often directly associated with the Incarnation. Rubin, Corpus Christi, 142–47.
16. Over the past fifteen years, following the lead of Nicholas Watson, many literary scholars have begun to rethink the nature of Middle English religious writings by reclassifying many texts as “vernacular theology” rather than “devotional literature” in order to highlight the intellectual seriousness of such vernacular texts: Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change.” English Language Notes recently published a special issue in which many notable scholars of Middle English literature, including Elizabeth Robertson, Daniel Donoghue, Linda Georgianna, Kate Crassons, C. David Benson, Katherine C. Little, Lynn Staley, James Simpson, and Nicholas Watson, examine the effect of this term on the field. See Bruce Holsinger, ed., English Language Notes 44.1 (2006): 77–137.
Eucharist would therefore be intellectually simple and uninteresting. The erosion of these two categories as distinct within modern scholarship offers us an important opportunity to reconsider the Eucharist’s importance to religious literature.

My discussion of eucharistic poetics should further challenge any absolute boundary between vernacular theology and devotional literature by showing how literary treatments of the Eucharist demand both intellectual and emotional engagement. This process often centers on moments of thwarted identification with the divine presence in the host. In contrast to Cristina Cervone’s recent study in which she argues for a highly intellectual relationship between theology and poetic form in Middle English texts, I contend that eucharistic poetics does not make a sharp distinction between the theological and the devotional, or the intellectual and the affective. Throughout this book, I use the term “identification” to include both the recognition of the self in the other and the self’s attempts to become the other. Although I have drawn the term from psychoanalytic discourse, I do not use it in an exclusively psychoanalytic sense. Attempts to identify with Christ can range

17. Previous literary scholarship on the Eucharist has too often drawn exclusively on Caroline Walker Bynum’s descriptions of female mystics’ ecstatic eucharistic devotion to depict lay eucharistic piety as a wholly affective experience centered on the believer’s identification with Christ’s crucified body. For Bynum, the scholastic doctrine of transubstantiation is central to female mystics’ devotion primarily because it enables an affective identification with Christ that transcends argument; these mystics respond to eucharistic doctrine primarily emotionally rather than intellectually: “The sense of imitatio as becoming or being (not merely feeling or understanding) lay in the background of eucharistic devotion. The eucharist was an especially appropriate vehicle for the effort to become Christ because the eucharist is Christ. The doctrine of transubstantiation was crucial. One became Christ in eating Christ’s crucified body.” Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 256–57.


19. As John Arnold notes, scholars have tended wrongly to assume a uniformity of lay belief in the Eucharist. Belief necessarily will depend upon a variety of social, economic, and personal factors, including a level of individual choice. John H. Arnold, “The Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England,” in *The Unorthodox Imagination in Late Medieval England*, ed. Sophie Page (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010), 65–95.

from Margery Kempe’s emotional attempts to become one with Christ to William Langland’s intellectual assessments of the similarities between Christ and the human community. However, in all the texts I examine, these attempts at identification are similar in that they all end with the recognition of human lack. The writers use this lack in order to show the necessity of the Church and its sacraments to Christians’ struggle for union with God even as they recognize that full union is not possible during earthly life. This process of simultaneous identification and resistance to identification is a function of literary language. In one of the most influential modern discussions of allegory, Paul de Man argues that, because allegory makes visible the distance between the literal sign and the allegorical abstraction it represents, allegory prevents the reader’s emotional identification with the text. As he argues, “allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin. . . . [In] so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully though painfully, recognized as a non-self.”

Though De Man’s particular focus is allegory, his statement holds true for eucharistic poetics more broadly. Instead of offering a moment of identification with the divine, eucharistic poetics invite the reader to participate in the creation of the text’s meaning even as it highlights the fact that representation and transcendent reality fail to perfectly coincide. De Man’s description gestures toward one of the most startling aspects of eucharistic poetics: Figurative language works in concert with affective piety in Middle English religious writing not by inviting communion but by resisting affective identification between the reader and the divine. In doing so, these texts offer their readers the opportunity to redefine the Eucharist and reimagine the nature of Christian identity and Christian community.

**POETIC THEOLOGIES**

Middle English texts often examine the nature of both individual and community identities by exploring an uncertainty that lies at the heart of most eucharistic theology: ideas of Christ’s material presence in the consecrated host trouble and resist ideas about the host’s allegorical representation of the Christian community as the mystical body of Christ. In this section, I will show how Latin theology itself highlighted disjunctions between the literal and allegorical in its definitions of Christ’s eucharistic presence.

Broadly speaking, there were two basic medieval approaches to the theology of the Eucharist based on the writings of two church fathers: what modern scholars often identify as the Augustinian approach and the Ambrosian approach. Augustine and Ambrose themselves did not suggest that their viewpoints were contradictory in any way, and medieval theologians likewise did not argue that the works of Ambrose and Augustine were anything other than complementary. However, those medieval theologians who tended to argue for a more figurative and spiritual understanding of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist drew predominately from Augustine, and those who argued for a more literal physical understanding drew mostly from the work of Ambrose. In the end, the views that won out and became seen as orthodox by the beginning of the fourteenth century were those views most heavily influenced by Ambrose. Though the Ambrosian approach became dominant in Latin theology, both approaches were available to vernacular writers.

Augustine viewed Christ as present in the Eucharist figuratively through the presence of the Christian community. The faith community becomes the mystical body of Christ through its faith and charity; the reality of the sacrament is Christ’s mystical body, the faithful. He argues that “the faithful know the body of Christ if they should not neglect to be the body of Christ.” In fact, Augustine warns against understanding the Eucharist in any way that could be construed as cannibalism. In his explication of Psalm 98, Augustine argues that Christ’s meaning in the institution of the Eucharist was fundamentally spiritual: “Understand spiritually what I have said. You are not to eat this body which you see, nor to drink that blood which they who will crucify me will pour forth. I have commended to you a certain sacrament; spiritually understood, it will give life. Although it is necessary that it be visibly celebrated, it must be spiritually understood.”

Augustine never wrote a tract solely on the Eucharist, but his discussions of the Eucharist in various other works were influential on later medieval theology.

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works enabled later theologians to argue authoritatively that the Eucharist should be understood primarily in a spiritual, communal, and, ultimately, a figurative sense.

In contrast, Ambrose saw the Eucharist as Christ's literal, physical body and the appearance of the altar bread as a thin veil rendering the presence of Christ invisible. In On the Sacraments and On the Mysteries, Ambrose addresses a group of newly initiated Christians and explains the sacrament in strikingly literal terms. For Ambrose, the same body that was born of Mary and crucified is physically present in the consecrated host; his presence is just beyond the realm of human sensation. He argues that Christ is physically present in the host and the only reason believers cannot sense the presence of flesh and blood is that God knows it would horrify them.25 As we saw in the exemplum that began this introduction, this argument—that God shields his followers from sensing the true nature of the act of cannibalism in which they engage—became enormously influential in the Middle Ages. Although Augustine saw the presence of Christ realized through the actions of the faithful, Ambrose saw Christ's Real Presence as something from which the faithful needed to be shielded.

The eleventh-century Berengarian controversy, the first major victory for the Ambrosian approach to the eucharistic presence, vividly illustrates the extent to which a literal understanding of Christ's presence in the consecrated host began to dominate orthodox medieval theology. Berengar of Tours was a theologian trained in Chartres who strongly believed in the use of reason in theology. By 1047, he began to publish his eucharistic doctrine, a doctrine that started to be condemned as early as 1049.26 Berengar argued that, since Christ is not deceptive, bread must be present in the host after the consecration.27 Making an appeal to metaphor with reference to Augustine's On Christian Doctrine, Berengar argued that the host is a visible sign (sacramentum) of Christ's presence (res sacramenti) and not the presence itself. The Eucharist establishes a real but spiritual communion between the believer and the body of Christ. Berengar's opponents, most notably Lanfranc of Bec,
drew on Ambrose’s writings and were unwilling to accept such a radical split between *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*. In 1059, at the Easter Council of Rome, Berengar’s writings were burnt, and he was forced to sign a confession that affirmed that “the bread and wine which are placed on the altar are, after consecration, not only a sacrament, but are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. And they are sensibly, not only in a sacrament, but in truth, handled and broken in the hands of the priest, and crushed by the teeth of the faithful.” The result of the controversy and the horrifyingly literal nature of Berengar’s oath was that no orthodox theologian of the Middle Ages would seriously challenge Christ’s Real Presence in the Eucharist.

Two centuries later, Thomas Aquinas defined “transubstantiation” in a distinctly Ambrosian sense and established what was to become the orthodox understanding of the Eucharist for centuries. His definition firmly established the transformation of the consecrated bread as literal, physical transformation and further enforced the idea of the Eucharist as a sacred object rather than a communal event. At the time Aquinas was writing, “transubstantiation” had been in use for about a century, but there was little agreement on the precise meaning of the term; it could encompass a whole range of explanations for the nature of eucharistic transformation. Drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas defines transubstantiation as a process during which the accidents (sensible qualities) of the sacramental bread remain unchanged, but the substance (essence) of the bread is transformed into the body and blood of Christ and none of the substance of the bread remains. However literal his definition of transubstantiation is, Aquinas does not conceive of the Eucharist in a graphic, physical sense. Instead, his use of Aristotle’s definition of “substance” allows him to conceive of Christ’s presence as both a physical reality and something that is completely beyond the senses. Christ is really, physically, substantially present in the Eucharist, but one can only sense that presence through the intellect and through faith.

Although later medieval eucharistic theology took a decidedly more Ambrosian approach, the more figurative and literary Augustinian approach still persisted, even among the most apparently orthodox versions of eucharist-
ristic theology. Many theological texts insist on understanding the Eucharist in terms of the complex relationship between truth and figure that it enacts. Throughout the Middle Ages, most orthodox theologians understood the nature of Christ’s eucharistic presence through reference to figurative language. Almost every theologian, whether orthodox or heretical, recognized that the physical host was an allegorical sign in the sense that it represented something other than or beyond itself; they typically used the terms figura (figure) and veritas (truth) to distinguish between the sign and signified in the sacrament. Transubstantiation became an essential component of mainstream theological thought in the fourteenth century, but discussions of the Eucharist’s allegorical nature continued both in the vernacular and in Latin.

One important way in which figurative readings of the Eucharist shifted over the course of the Middle Ages was that later medieval theologians placed far less emphasis on Augustine’s understanding of the host as a sign of the Christian community, the corporate body of Christ. The increased emphasis on transubstantiation meant that any such Augustinian communal interpretations of the host had to become explicitly allegorical. As Henri de Lubac has shown, there were three basic categories of Christ’s body in the Middle Ages: (1) the historical body of Christ, (2) Christ as present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, and (3) the corporate body of Christ as manifest in the community of the faithful.31 In the earlier Middle Ages, theologians used the term corpus mysticum to signify the body of Christ as it was mysteriously present in the Eucharist. However, once theologians became increasingly focused on defining the precise physical nature of Christ’s presence in the host they began referring to the sacramental body as the corpus verum.32 Starting around 1050, the corporate body of Christ, which had been referred to as simply corpus Christi, began to be referred to as corpus mysticum and corpus Christi referred only to the sacramental and historical bodies of Christ.33 The Berengarian controversy effectively fused the historical and sacramental bodies of Christ, and the idea of the corporate body gradually became more separate from the Eucharist because the ecclesial body could not be physically present in the host in the same way that Christ’s historical body could. Since the community of the faithful could only be figuratively present in the consecrated host, the


32. de Lubac, Corpus Mysticum, 221.

corporate body did not easily fit into definitions of the Eucharist that insisted on Christ’s body as physically present. At the same time as the definition of *corpus mysticum* as the community of the faithful arose, scholastic theology began to refer less and less to the host as an ecclesiological symbol.

Although they were not a central feature of all eucharistic theology in the late Middle Ages, discussions of the Eucharist as a sign of community were far from radical; such discussions appear in many medieval texts, both orthodox and heretical. In order to discuss the Eucharist while remaining within the boundaries of orthodoxy, many writers clearly differentiated between the literal presence of Christ’s physical body and the way in which the host signifies but does not contain the corporate body of Christ. Even Thomas Aquinas regarded the Christian community as essential to the meaning of the Eucharist. He distinguishes between *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum* by arguing: “Now the reality of this sacrament is twofold, as we have explained, one which is signified and contained, namely Christ himself, the other which is signified yet not contained, namely Christ’s mystical body which is the fellowship of the saints. Whoever, then, receives the sacrament by that very fact signifies that he is joined with Christ and incorporated in his members.”

For many writers, both *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum* were signified in the host: the difference between the two methods of signification was that *corpus Christi* was literally present in the host while *corpus mysticum* was not. In this sense, communal readings of the Eucharist became more purely allegorical because they suggested a meaning for the host that was outside and other than the host itself. The distinction between Ambrosian and Augustinian approaches to the Eucharist was therefore by no means absolute. Indeed, theologians often celebrated the paradoxically highly literal and highly allegorical presence of Christ’s body.

**MIDDLE ENGLISH EUCHARISTS**

It is precisely by reshaping the relationship between *corpus mysticum* and *corpus Christi* that Middle English writers challenge the belief in simplistic eucharistic promises of complete fulfillment. Middle English texts exploit the

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differences between Augustinian and Ambrosian approaches to the Eucharist and explore the ways in which both ecclesiastical and linguistic mediation of Christ’s body simultaneously restrict and provide access to the divine. In doing so, they aim to transform Christian identity and Christian community.

The structure of this book is both thematic and roughly chronological, beginning with the surge of pastoralia produced at the end of the thirteenth century and extending into the fifteenth century. The first two chapters examine how two Middle English texts—Handlyng Synne and Pearl—use the specific literary tropes of exemplarity and metaphor respectively in order to challenge the ideal of perfect identity between individual believer and the divine. The next two chapters demonstrate how Piers Plowman and Julian of Norwich’s A Revelation of Love use allegory to explore the Augustinian belief in the Eucharist as a sign of the corporate body of Christ. Finally, I turn to texts that examine the ways in which eucharistic poetics can provide a path to divine knowledge in ways that are either individualistic, as Nicholas Love and Margery Kempe suggest, or communal, as John Lydgate argues.

The eucharistic poetic tradition that I identify over the course of this book is widespread, and so I have aimed to demonstrate the tradition’s pervasiveness by selecting texts from a wide range of genres, from lyric to penitential manual. To a certain extent, each of the texts and authors that I have chosen is representative of its genre and time period. However, each of my primary texts also makes an intellectually, poetically, and theologically complex and unique contribution to the eucharistic poetic tradition. Each uses intricate literary or poetic strategies in order to offer readers a practical and idealistic version of the Eucharist that aims at creating genuine spiritual community on earth.

My first chapter, “Resisting the Fantasy of Identification,” takes as its focus Robert Mannyng’s early-fourteenth-century penitential manual, Handlyng Synne. Through his use of exempla, Mannyng pokes holes in the eucharistic fantasy of perfect identity between human believer and the divine. Drawing on both scholastic theology’s emphasis on mediation and popular late medieval modes of lay eucharistic piety that celebrated bloody sacrificial imagery and the idea of direct contact with Christ’s body, Mannyng suggests to his lay audience that, although the Eucharist offers believers a fleeting union with Christ’s body, it simultaneously demands they seek a deeper devotion through recognition of their own distance from the divine. Mannyng uses the intrinsic resources of the exemplum genre—a genre that persuades readers by asking them to identify themselves with its characters—in order to highlight the impossibility of total identification with Christ.

From Mannyng’s exempla aimed at a broad lay audience, I turn my attention to highly sophisticated metaphors meant for aristocrats. My second
chapter, “Devotional Submission and the Pearl-Poet,” investigates the poetic engagements with eucharistic theology in the most formally intricate extant poem in Middle English: *Pearl*. Focusing on the four works of the Pearl-poet—*Pearl, Cleanness, Patience,* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—I argue that the poet presents the Mass as a ritual way for the aristocratic subject to secure a stable Christian identity through practicing emotional control. In *Pearl*, through his elaborate use of the pearl metaphor, the poet depicts the dreamer’s attempts to possess both his lost pearl and the eucharistic host as futile. The Eucharist, which appears as a piece of bread that looks nothing like the physical body of Christ, teaches the aristocratic subject to be satisfied with simultaneous absence and presence, and to recognize what it is that he truly lacks: Christ.

In the next chapter, “Christ’s Allegorical Bodies and the Failure of Community,” my focus shifts to allegory, the literary trope that theologians most frequently associate with eucharistic theology. My discussion centers on the relationship between allegory and eucharistic theology in William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. The poem takes on simplistic assertions that the Christian community is one body in Christ—seemingly effortless in its communal solidarity and unity—and replaces them with an invitation to readers to engage in the frustrating and ongoing work of reforming a fractured community. I focus on the poem’s penultimate passus, which begins with Will falling asleep during the Mass immediately before he would have received the Eucharist and ends with the Christian community in Unity refusing Conscience’s call to eucharistic reception. Framed by these two eucharistic moments, the middle of the passus is an investigation of the way in which signs, particularly Christ’s name and the church as a sign of Christ’s presence on earth, challenge and enable the human community’s access to Christ.

Julian of Norwich’s *A Revelation of Love*, the subject of my fourth chapter, also focuses on the allegorical corporate body and actively resists the ideal of personal identification with Christ. Instead, Julian argues that believers ought to long for a communal unification with the body of Christ, a unification that is not realized in earthly life but is instead suspended across both time and individual identity. Throughout her text, Julian uses eucharistic language—images of blood, feeding, and union—to reflect on the power of signs to bring about union between Christ and his earthly church. Julian depicts the Eucharist as essential to human devotion precisely because it is a sign of a union with God that is not yet realized but for which the human community ought to long continually. The institutional church is thus a necessary part of Julian’s model of human devotion because it provides the sacraments and therefore invites the Christian community as a whole to thirst for fulfillment.
in Christ. Although mystical experiences, because they offer direct contact with the divine outside of an institutional context, pose a potential threat to the ecclesiastical hierarchy’s monopoly on access to Christ’s body, Julian uses eucharistic poetics in order to argue for the importance of church mediation to salvation.

In the penultimate chapter, “The Willful Surrender of Eucharistic Reading,” I examine two texts not often associated with poetics: Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. I argue that both texts dwell on eucharistic fulfillment in order to underscore the ways personal expectations of perfect understanding must be set aside and replaced with willed, disciplined acceptance of lack of knowledge and certainty. With his series of meditations on Christ’s life, Love provides a tool for lay people to engage in a pleasurable surrender of the will to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, a surrender dependent on the intangible nature of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. *The Book of Margery Kempe* not only enacts Love’s model of devotion but also asks readers to consider the eucharistic nature of their own reading practices. The *Book* frequently depicts both Margery and her ecstatic eucharistic piety as alienating to the community around her and thus challenges readers to accept the alienation and distance that is so often at the heart of even the most fervent literary depictions of eucharistic devotion.

John Lydgate, the central English poet of the fifteenth century, recognizes and deliberately draws upon the tradition of Middle English eucharistic poetics in order to explore the spiritual power of poetic form. In my final chapter, “John Lydgate and the Eucharistic Poetic Tradition: The Making of Community,” I argue that, according to Lydgate, the Eucharist and the poetic have a reciprocal relationship: not only is poetic language a powerful tool for understanding the Eucharist, but the Eucharist is also fundamental to an understanding of the nature of poetry. The Eucharist is the highest form of figurative language, containing and bringing into conflict the multiple meanings of figure, including human body, representation, symbol, written character, metaphor, and prophecy. Poetry and the Eucharist share the social function of illuminating the Christian church by drawing the believer into an interpretive relationship mediated by the authority of both the poet and the ecclesiastical hierarchy; this relationship leads the reader from figurative language to divine truth. Drawing particularly on *A Procession of Corpus Christi* and *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, I show how Lydgate self-consciously describes the medieval Christian community as only legible through a Christian figural poetics made possible through Christ’s body in the Eucharist. Lydgate resists simplistic beliefs in the divine presence and replaces them with a eucharistic poetics.
that demands intellectual and affective exertion in order to make Christian community possible.

For Middle English writers, the Eucharist and the poetic provide vital access to transcendence and that access comes because of, rather than in spite of, the limitations placed on the reader’s experience of the divine. As I will show in the chapters that follow, these writers refute easy promises of eucharistic fulfillment in order to offer instead the joy and satisfaction that comes as a result of readers’ affective, spiritual, and intellectual work of poetic and textual interpretation.