Like Handlyng Synne and Pearl, William Langland’s Piers Plowman aims to replace simplistic models of eucharistic devotion with more complex and identity-transforming ones. However, unlike those texts, the identity that Piers Plowman seeks to reform is communal rather than individual. In contrast to the more dominant Ambrosian eucharistic models, Langland draws on Augustine’s presentation of the host as an allegorical sign of the Christian community. For Langland, as for Augustine, the Eucharist was paradoxically both reality and figure; it was a sign that both signified and contained the physical body of Christ, and signified Christ’s mystical body, the community of the faithful. Langland treats the Eucharist in Augustinian terms in order to resist simple correlations between Christ’s mystical body and the fourteenth-century earthly Christian church; he exploits the disjunction between literal and allegorical levels of his text precisely to invite readers to transform their social world.

Though scholars have often examined Langland’s theology and interest in religious practice, very few scholars have treated Langland’s views on the Eucharist directly. Indeed, until David Aers’s recent treatment of the topic, to my knowledge there had not been a single scholarly article on the Eucha-

1. In an important overview of Piers Plowman’s theology, Robert Adams remarks that Langland’s views on the Eucharist are of little interest because “his attitude seems altogether conventional and pious; and since the Eucharist is not frequently mentioned in the poem, it seems unlikely that the subject holds much promise for extensive future research.” Robert
rist in *Piers Plowman*. Surveying the poem as a whole, Aers argues that, for Langland, the Eucharist cannot be separated from the context of its reception, the Christian community. He concludes by claiming that Langland’s theology is somewhat radical in its avoidance of debates about the Real Presence. Aers is right to point to the importance of the Christian community within Langland’s eucharistic theology, but his conclusion does not reflect the full complexity of Langland’s treatment of the Eucharist. This chapter will present a detailed reading of the poem’s penultimate passus—19 in the B Text, 21 in the C text, the one passus most centrally concerned with eucharistic theology. I want to reconsider Aers’s crucial point, Langland’s commitment to Christian community, in the light of another interest that has received ample scholarly attention: Langland’s interest in allegory. By highlighting Passus 19’s exploration of both allegory and the Eucharist, I show that Langland’s interest in the corporate body of Christ is not a slight to belief in the Real Presence, but rather stems from his sense of the inseparability of the two as sacramentally related concepts.

Passus 19 begins and ends with instances of failed eucharistic reception: when Will falls asleep at Easter Mass immediately prior to the consecration, and when the Christians in the Barn of Unity reject Conscience’s call to receive the Eucharist. 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, chal-


lenge and enable the human community’s access to Christ. Thus, I argue that the passus constitutes a direct engagement in discussions of the Eucharist as a sign. Langland examines the host as an allegorical sign of Christ’s body, both Christ’s historical body and the corporate body of all Christians. Like most students of the topic in the past thirty years, I agree that Langland’s intense focus on materiality continually causes failures or breaks in the poem’s allegorical structure, dramatizing the limits of both allegory and language. As Kathleen Hewett-Smith points out, Langland’s use of concrete detail frustrates “the success of allegorical interpretation by forcing our attention to an historically immediate material world, to the literal level of the sign, by advertising the disparity between real and ideal, signifier and signified.” At the same time, by arguing that Langland sees the Eucharist as an instance of allegory, I aim to shift the emphasis of this and similar claims, suggesting that Langland does in fact regard the perfect reflection of a transcendent signified in the material signifier as potentially possible. The reason that such a reflection almost never occurs is not due to the inherent inadequacies of language but because of the human community’s failure.

THE ALLEGORICAL PRESENCE

Piers Plowman participates in an ongoing theological discussion about the relationship between allegory, ecclesiology, and the Eucharist. Since so much of modern literary scholars’ attention has been to the writings of Wyclif and the Lollards, there has been a critical tendency to assume that late medieval orthodox writings about the Eucharist always collapse the division between sign and signified in the sacrament. However, as I outline in my introd-


6. I am building off the work of Lawrence Clopper and Pamela Raabe who both suggest that Langland does not necessarily see a great tension between figural and literal, universal and individual. See Lawrence M. Clopper, “Langland and Allegory: A Proposition,” Yearbook of Langland Studies 15 (2001), 35–42; Raabe, Imitating God.
tory chapter, many texts in both Latin and the vernacular celebrate the Eucharist precisely because of the complex relationship between figure and truth that the sacrament enacts. Allegorical language actually became increasingly important to definitions of the Eucharist as the doctrine of the Real Presence and the later doctrine of transubstantiation began to become defining elements of mainstream thought.

Drawing on Augustine’s theory of verbal signs—that Christ the Word redeemed language and therefore language provides partial access to the divine—many theologians believed that treating the Eucharist as a sign enhanced its sanctity. It is a critical commonplace that Western medieval theologians often focused their thinking around a common theory of verbal signs that derived much of its authority from the Incarnation of Christ. Since Christ is both the Word made flesh and the mediator between God and humanity, it made sense to regard verbal signs as the primary means of gaining knowledge of the divine. Christ the Word redeemed language, and it is therefore through signs that humans can come to know him. Augustine, the theologian largely responsible for formulating this theory of signs, argued that verbal signs “whether literal or figurative, truly, if partially, represent really existing things.” Even though Augustine draws a sharp distinction between sign and signified, he assumes that there is a real relationship between the two.

Eucharistic language afforded writers of Middle English with the opportunity to discuss the relationship of transcendence to language itself. Medieval theologians typically based their understanding of the Eucharist as a sign in theory that proposed a real but complex relationship between sign and signified. During the later Middle Ages, verbal sign theory became a way of explaining the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist that did not diminish its sanctity. In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine argues that literal signification may be able to express fairly simple aspects of reality, but metaphorical signification and figurative language are better suited to expressing realities that are complex and difficult to understand. Figurative language gives mystery and honor to its subject both by clarifying it and by suggesting the inherent difficulty of comprehending it. In this context, it is evident that medieval theologians’ insistence that the Eucharist was a sign could often be an affirmation of the Eucharist’s spiritual worth. Like a figurative sign in scripture, the Eucharist posed interpretive difficulties because its meaning was not readily apparent. However, the nature of Christ’s presence as both beyond the

sign and a part of it simultaneously protected Christ's presence from the disdain of nonbelievers and led to the spiritual benefit of the faithful. Throughout the Middle Ages, theologians often strengthened their arguments for Christ's presence in the host precisely by insisting that the Eucharist be understood as an instance of figurative language.

In the ninth century, during what became the first major eucharistic debates of the Middle Ages, Paschasius and Ratramnus set the precedent for future definitions of the Eucharist by arguing that defining the relationship between figure and truth was the central challenge of understanding Christ's presence in the host. These two monks at Corbie wrote the first theological treatises devoted specifically to a doctrinal treatment of the Eucharist, and both defined the nature of Christ's presence by examining the relationship between the terms \textit{figura} and \textit{veritas}.\footnote{Celia Chazelle, "Figure, Character, and the Glorified Body in the Carolingian Eucharistic Controversy," \textit{Traditio} 47 (1992): 1–36; Levy, \textit{John Wyclif}, 126–37; Macy, \textit{Theologies of the Eucharist}, 21–31.} The major difference between the two treatises was that, unlike Ratramnus, Paschasius insisted on the real presence of Christ's true body and blood in the host. According to Paschasius, the figurative nature of the Eucharist pertains to the sensible elements of the sacrament—the bread and wine—while the truth pertains to Christ. In his formulation, figurative language functions as a sort of veil, masking the truth that is fully present. Paschasius argues that the Eucharist “is a figure or character which is sensed exteriorly, but the whole truth, and not a shadow, is perceived on the inside, and through this, nothing else is shown than truth and sacrament of the flesh itself.”\footnote{"Est autem figura uel character hoc quod exterius sentitur, sed totum ueritas et nulla adumbratio quod intrinsecus percipitur ac per hoc nihil aliud hinc inde quam ueritas et sacramentum ipsius carnis aperitur." Paschasius Radbertus, \textit{De Corpore et Sanguine Domini}, ed. Bede Paulus, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis XVI (Turnhout, BE: Brepols, 1969), 30. Translation is my own.} Paschasius recognizes that any sacrament is essentially a sign but he suggests that within the sacrament of the Eucharist is contained the signified itself. Ratramnus, on the other hand, contended that the change in the host takes place on a spiritual level, and Christ is therefore only figuratively present in the host. For Ratramnus, there must always be a sharp distinction between figure and truth, sign and signified; by definition, a figure must signify a reality beyond and separate from itself.\footnote{Ratramnus, \textit{De Corpore et Sanguine Domini}, ed. J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1954), VI–VIII.} The Eucharist therefore signifies Christ but is not Christ himself. Ratramnus's definition of Christ's presence in the Eucharist was simpler than Paschasius’s insofar as it posited a clear separation between figure and truth, host and body. The fact
that Paschasius’s views on the Eucharist were the ones to become dominant over the next several centuries ensured that the relationship between figure and truth in the Eucharist remained fraught and therefore continued to incite controversy.

In the later Middle Ages, even as eucharistic doctrines became more insistent on Christ’s literal physical presence in the host, theologians began to use a sacramental vocabulary that defined signifier (the appearance of bread) and signified (Christ’s physical presence) as increasingly distinct.12 The clear distinction between figure and truth was important even for theologians who insisted that sign (host) and signified (body) coincided in the Eucharist. In the twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor reshaped eucharistic theology by redefining the term sacramentum in a way that collapsed figure and truth even as it emphasized the two categories as distinct. As Marcia Colish has shown, Hugh’s greatest contribution to eucharistic theology is that he shifted the definition of a sacrament from a visible sign of invisible grace to a sign that contains and effects what it signifies.13 The previous definition of sacramentum allowed for a variety of relationships between sign and signified, but Hugh’s new definition depended upon the interweaving of truth and figure by suggesting that the sign has real effects. In his 1130 De Sacramentis, Hugh argues that the Eucharist is both truth and figure simultaneously: “Is the sacrament of the altar then not truth because it is a figure? Then neither is the death of Christ truth because it is a figure, and the resurrection of Christ is not truth because it is a figure.”14 According to Hugh, a strict separation between truth and figure is logically flawed because the Christian faith is rooted in events, Christ’s death and resurrection, which are also truth and figure. Just as Paschasius did three centuries earlier, Hugh insists that the figural element of the Eucharist is the visible species since, through the consecration, the species appear present when, in reality, only the body of Christ is there. Hugh divides the Eucharist into three components: sacramentum tantum (the visible species), sacramentum et res sacramenti (the body and blood invisible beneath the species), and res tantum (spiritual grace). This language became tremendously influential. His terminology allowed orthodox theologians to argue that the Eucharist is a sign while at the same time insisting that there can be no sharp separation between sign and signified in the Eucharist. For Hugh and the

12. Ian Christopher Levy provides a useful overview of some of the major shifts in vocabulary in late medieval eucharistic theology. Levy, John Wyclif, 123–215.
many medieval theologians who followed him, the power of the Eucharist as a mystery thus lay in the way it both maintained and confounded distinctions between figure and truth.

One way in which treatments of the Eucharist became explicitly allegorical was in discussions of the consecrated host as a sign of the Christian community. Starting in about 1050, theologians began to draw a sharp distinction between *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum.* Corpus Christi referred only to the sacramental and historical bodies of Christ while corpus mysticum was the corporate body of Christ as manifest in the community of the faithful. While the sacrament both signified and contained the historical body of Christ, it only allegorically signified the corporate or mystical body of Christ. 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. Communal readings of the Eucharist became more purely allegorical because they suggested a meaning for the host that was beyond the host itself.

Allegorical and communal readings persisted alongside literal, physical interpretations of the host in both Latin and vernacular literature throughout the late Middle Ages. For example, in his fourteenth-century poem, “De Septem Sacramentis,” William of Shoreham explains that through eucharistic reception, the whole Christian community “o body beþe in e mystyke.” However, like many orthodox theologians, William is careful to distinguish between corpus Christi and corpus mysticum,

> Ac þaȝ we be tokned þer
>    Ine oure sauueoure,
> Ne lef þou nauȝt þeþ[t] we be þer,
> Ne forþe nauȝt of oure
>    þat were;
> þaȝ þer be tokned þynges two,
> þer nys bote o þyng þere;
> And þat hys swete ihesu cryst
>    Ine flesche and eke ine bloude.

Although the host signifies both Christ’s physical body and the mystical body of Christ, William urges his readers to understand that only Christ’s physical body is literally present in the sacrament; the mystical body is only figuratively

---

15. See my introductory chapter.
17. Ibid., 25.
present. Likewise, the fifteenth-century sermon that serves as the prologue to the ordinances of the York Corpus Christi guild draws on the allegorical meaning of the *corpus mysticum*, suggesting that guild members must honor the literal body in the consecrated host by becoming the mystical body, which the host allegorically signifies. The sermon’s author tells guild members that “since our fraternity for the veneration of this same precious sacrament has been begun by rule, gathered together in the faith of the Church in peaceful unity, we will be a homogeneous part of the mystical body of Christ through our prayers, devotions, and acts of charity.”

Several of Langland’s contemporaries likewise extol the importance of the Christian community within their sermons’ discussions of the Eucharist’s signification. In addition, as recent scholarship has shown, the documents surrounding the celebration and promotion of the feast of Corpus Christi particularly rely on an understanding of the Christian community as enacting the body of Christ, the body that Christians also worship in the consecrated host. When Langland associates the Eucharist in his poem with both ecclesiology and allegory, in my view, he is not so much making a radical interpretive move, as Aers suggests, as participating in a continuing discussion about the relationship between the *corpus mysticum* and *corpus Christi*.

**EUCHARIST AS SOCIAL SIGN IN PIERS PLOWMAN**

In Passus 19 of *Piers Plowman*, Langland repeatedly depicts the Eucharist as a sign in order to highlight the way in which this sacrament unites transcendent meaning and literal material reality. He links the seemingly disparate elements of the passus—the discussion of names, Christ’s vita, Pentecost, the founding of the church, the invitation to and rejection of the Eucharist—through the concept of signification as it is elaborated in eucharistic theology. The two failed moments of eucharistic reception that frame Passus 19 are instances in

---


20. It is worth noting that these scholars present both the Eucharist and the very concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy as complex and multifaceted. Beckwith, *Signifying God*; James, “Ritual”; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 213–87.

which the material sign could have been united with its signified; the bread and Christ’s physical body could have physically united with the corporate body of the faithful through the act of eating the host. This unification fails because the community does not act as the socially harmonious corporate body that the consecrated host signifies. Langland argues that proper eucharistic reception requires Christians to understand the Eucharist as a sign of both Christ’s physical and corporate bodies, and to recognize their own ethical obligation to become one with that signified body.

In Passus 19, Langland argues that the Eucharist is a communal act with communal significance. At the beginning of the passus, Langland is deeply suspicious of modes of worshipping the Eucharist that disregard the social world. By describing Will as falling asleep in the middle of Mass, Langland highlights the disjunction between two models of eucharistic devotion: the Eucharist as an individual affective encounter with Christ and the Eucharist as a celebration of the Christian community. Langland never fully explains the significance of Will’s sleep at this moment, but there are at least two provocative possibilities. The first is that Will’s dream is a vision of Christ’s Real Presence in the host. Like in sermon exempla that encourage individual affective devotion to the host through narratives of bleeding hosts or a mutilated Christ-child on the altar, Will dreams of a bloody Christ-like figure experiencing the tortures of the Passion. Instead of participating in the Mass and seeing the host elevated, Will sees that “Piers the Plowman was peynted al blody, / And com in with a cros before the commune peple, / And right lik in alle lymes to Oure Lord Jesu” (B.19.6–8). If read as a fairly typical eucharistic vision, Will is seeing the Real Presence hidden behind the host: Christ, with his irreducible humanity emphasized by his representation as the earthly Piers Plowman, offering himself as a sacrifice before the people. However, this eucharistic vision is atypical because Will does not see the literal, historical body of the human Christ. He sees either Piers Plowman looking like Christ or, as Conscience will later suggest, Christ dressed as Piers Plowman. According to Will, Piers is “right lik in alle lymes” to Christ; he is not Christ himself. If this is a eucharistic vision, it is not one that transcends representation. Rather it emphasizes the truth of the host’s representation through another act of representation.

A second possible interpretation of Will’s sleep during Mass is that it allegorically signifies his lack of spiritual awareness. By not consciously participating in the Mass, Will fails to be part of the spiritual community and

22. On bloody eucharistic miracles in sermon exempla, see Bynum, “Seeing and Seeing Beyond”; Rubin, Corpus Christi, 108–47.
therefore fails to enact the corporate body of Christ that the host signifies. This interpretation of Will's sleep as a manifestation of his sinfulness is supported by the fact that his act is sinful on the literal level: most medieval Christians would consider falling asleep at Mass to be a sin.\textsuperscript{23} However, since Will's dream is an exploration of the significance of the Eucharist in relation to the church, reading Will's slumber as a sign of moral failure is not a fully satisfying explanation either.

What these two explanations have in common is that both depict this attempted eucharistic reception as a moment dependent on allegorical representation—either Christ represented as Piers, or sin represented as sleep—and both create a division between Will's individual experience and his community's act of worship. Although Langland never fully articulates the precise significance of Will falling asleep at Mass, Will's sleep is clearly a move away from his immediate historical, physical community and therefore undercuts his initial motivations for going to Mass; he does not celebrate the Easter Mass with his family, and he sleeps through the Eucharist. Whatever spiritual truths he may encounter in his dream, he has had to sacrifice the communal aspect of worship in order to receive them. While Langland clearly believes that individual piety can be fruitful, he is very skeptical of any spirituality that totally neglects communal worship.

In this passus, individual devotion gains its importance from its social context. The poem's celebration of Easter starting at the end of Passus 18 is a return to the social world and, with it, the Eucharist, the sacrament that celebrates the unity of the church.\textsuperscript{24} At the end of Passus 18, after witnessing the Harrowing of Hell and the reconciliation of Mercy, Truth, Justice, and Peace, Will wakes up and returns to his social community in order to celebrate Easter, the same event of which he has just been dreaming. Easter was the most important celebration of the church's liturgical year, marking the greatest event in Christian history—Christ's Resurrection—and Langland depicts this celebration as fundamentally social. Will awakens on Easter to two sounds that

\textsuperscript{23} Falling asleep at Mass was typically associated with sloth. For example, Robert Mannyng's \textit{Handlyng Synne} begins its section on sloth with a long treatise against sleeping when one should be at Mass and not paying proper attention during the Mass itself. Mannyng argues that “he ys ful of slownesse / Þat may and wyle nat here hys messe.” Mannyng, \textit{Handlyng Synne}, 108. On sloth in \textit{Piers Plowman}, see John M. Bowers, \textit{The Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman}, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986).

\textsuperscript{24} In this respect, I agree with James Simpson who argues that the final two passus “reimagine the whole of society as springing from and contributing to this renewed Church.” James Simpson, \textit{Piers Plowman: An Introduction}, 2nd rev. ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), 194. On the poem's final outward turn, see also Malcolm Godden, \textit{The Making of Piers Plowman} (London: Longman, 1990), 152.
blend into one another: the earthly church’s bells and Love’s heavenly singing from his dream. Earth and heaven join together as a community united in celebration and music. The song Love sings—“Ecce quam bonum et quam iocundum”—is from the first verse of Psalm 132, which announces “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell in unity” (B.18.425a). This song suggests that one of the primary reasons for joy at the Resurrection is the united Christian community, which the Resurrection created, and Will himself recognizes the bells and the singing as calls to communal celebration. As soon as he wakes, he “called Kytte my wif and Calote my doghter: / ‘Ariseth and go reverenceth Goddes resurexion’” (B.18.428–29). Will knows that Easter is a communal event, and he must therefore celebrate it with his family and in a church. In Passus 19, the poem turns away from the more purely psychological dialogues of Passus 8–18 and toward Easter, a community celebration that ought to culminate in eucharistic reception.

After the Easter setting with which the passus begins and ends, the central biblical event in Passus 19 is Pentecost, an event that centers on the social manifestations of Christian spirituality. One reason that Pentecost plays such a central part in this passus, marking the transition from the discussion of the names of Christ to the foundation of the church, is that it allows Langland to explicitly place Will’s individual spiritual quest within the broader context of the entire church’s search for unity with God. As Langland describes it, Pentecost is an event that unites the Christian community throughout history. Pentecost, which traditionally marks the birth of the Christian church, was the moment at which the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and endowed each of them with individual gifts. It is significant, both for Langland’s poem and for the Christian tradition more generally, that the Spirit bestows these gifts within a communal setting and for the benefit and production of a Christian community. In *Piers Plowman*, Pentecost is not a firmly historical event; the need for and availability of the Holy Spirit to the Christian people is constant. After Conscience tells Will about the crucifixion and resurrection, Will experiences the original feast of Pentecost as if he himself were present at that historical moment. He dreams that he hears hundreds of others praying to the Holy Spirit with him, suggesting that there are more people present at this dream-version of Pentecost than would have been present at the historical event. Conscience demands that Will not simply witness the coming of the Holy Spirit, but actually participate in it. In their communal prayer, all the people present sing Pentecost hymns, which necessarily postdate the original event. This anachronism functions in the same way that anachronism often

---

25. Translation is from the note in A. V. C. Schmidt’s edition.
does within medieval devotional texts: it emphasizes the way in which spiritual events transcend history. The participation of both Will and Piers Plowman in the original Pentecost implies that the foundation of the church and the Holy Spirit’s involvement in it is not a finite historical fact, but an ongoing process. In this poem, the church is not simply an institution, but a community of believers that transcends time and space.

In his description of Pentecost, Langland subordinates individual identity to group identity even as he celebrates individual abilities and works. Grace tells Conscience that, in order to defend the church from the Antichrist, he “gaf ech man a grace to gye with hymself, / That Ydelnesse encommre hym noght, ne Envye ne Pride: / Divisiones graciarium sunt” (B.19.227–29a). Grace cites this passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians—“There are varieties of graces, but the same Spirit”—partly in order to invoke the famous metaphor that follows it: the community is the body of Christ, and each individual person is a member of that body. In explaining the reason for bestowing gifts, Grace suggests both that every individual is autonomous and therefore has a responsibility to defend himself against the attacks of the Antichrist, and that every individual’s gifts serve a purpose in promoting and protecting the well-being of the entire Christian community. Grace suggests that everyone, “Loke that noon lakke oother, but loveth alle as bretheren,” because all gifts are essential to the functioning of the greater community, and all crafts, no matter how undignified, originate from a gift of Grace (B.19.256). Although Grace places particular emphasis on crafts rather than gifts and lists many professions that are more medieval than ancient, his instructions are otherwise a very direct application of Paul’s directions to the Christian community in Corinth. For Paul as for Langland, individual gifts are very significant, but primarily insofar as they contribute to the greater Christian community: the corporate body of Christ. Individual identity and group identity are interdependent, but group identity, because it is essentially the identity of Christ, is the most important.

**SIGNS OF CHRIST**

Since, according to Langland, Christians ought to know and worship Christ within their own social context—and not primarily through direct, personal encounters with Christ—individuals must understand Christ through signs and language. When Passus 19 shifts from Will’s eucharistic vision of Piers to Conscience’s explication of the many names for Christ, the transition seems abrupt, but the two moments are thematically linked insofar as both are explo-
rations of the immediacy of Christ through signs. The discussion of the names of Christ is an examination of the reliability of signs as objects of devotion, an issue that is central to medieval eucharistic theology, since transubstantiation simultaneously demands that believers disregard their faith in physical signs and that they direct their deepest devotion to a sign that proclaims the physical presence of Christ. In his explication of Christ’s names, Langland shows that it is essential for every Christian to understand the complex ways in which signs provide access to the divine.

Through Will and Conscience’s discussion of the identity of the bloody man in Will’s vision, Langland suggests that recognizing Christ through signs is one of the greatest challenges of Christian devotion. When Will sees the bloody figure carrying a cross, he becomes confused and asks Conscience, “Is this Jesus the justere . . . that Jewes dide to dethe? / Or it is Piers the Plowman! Who peynted hym so rede?” (B.19.10–11). For Will, as for the reader, the identity of the bloody man is vitally important because it determines one’s proper devotional response to the vision. If Will were to kneel down and worship this bloody figure, he might be performing proper religious devotion or he might be committing idolatry by worshipping Piers instead of Christ. Will cannot determine the relationship between physical signs and the identity they signify, and his inability to do so makes devotion very difficult. Conscience provides a solution to Will’s quandary by informing him that the bloody man is Christ dressed in the colors and armor of Piers. Christ bears signs that represent Piers even though he is not Piers. This answer leads Will to question the stability of signs in worship, a problem he approaches by asking whether “Jesus” or “Christ” is the most appropriate name for the second person in the Trinity. The fact that this question directly follows a Mass-inspired vision of Christ strongly implies that the question itself is directly relevant to the Eucharist; in both eucharistic adoration and the worship of Christ’s name, the object of worship is Christ as he is perceived through a sign. When Conscience tells Will that the figure who stands before the commons is Christ even though he looks like Piers, Conscience points to the challenges that worship through representation poses for belief.

In his explanation of Christ’s names, Conscience argues that verbal signs of Christ are devotional tools that have a close relationship to that which they signify, but must not be mistaken for the signified itself. After Conscience identifies the bloody man as Christ, Will asks

“Why calle ye hym Crist?” quod I, “sithen Jewes called hym Jesus?
Patriarkes and prophetes propheced before
That alle kynne creatures sholden knelen and bowen
By asking this question, Will attempts to establish a firm relationship between signifier Christ and signified. Will wants to determine both the proper way to worship Christ and the best way of understanding Christ's identity through language. According to his logic, if “Jesus” is a holy and accurate name for the second person of the Trinity, there must be a real relationship between the word “Jesus” and Jesus himself; Will takes the popular devotional tradition of reflecting ardently on the name “Jesus” a step further by implying that no other word can accurately represent Jesus. Will believes that there should be one word that is a better representation of Jesus than all others, and so when faced with Conscience’s reference to Jesus as “Christ,” Will is more willing to concede that “Christ” is a better name than he is willing to admit that multiple names could equally refer to the same divine reality (B.19.24). Conscience responds to Will’s question by asserting that both “Jesus” and “Christ” are accurate descriptions of the same person—Conscience himself often refers to Christ as “Jesus” in the course of the passage—but that the difference between the names is the different aspects of Christ to which they refer. He argues that, much in the same way that one person can be knight, king, and conqueror simultaneously, various names can accurately apply to Christ. Conscience claims that “Christ” corresponds to the word “conqueror,” which “cometh of special grace, / And of hardynes of herte and of hendenesse— / To make lords of laddes, of lond thathe wyneth, / And fre men foule thralles, that folwen noght his laws” (B.19.30–33). The name “Christ,” which both Will and Conscience agree that Jews do not use, signifies Jesus’ power over the Jews and demonstrates his spiritual authority over all others who do not believe in Christ. In this way, Conscience challenges Will’s perception by showing that names are arbitrary to the extent that it is possible for one person to be accurately called many different names. However, Conscience does not therefore suggest that signs have no direct relationship to that which they signify. Like Augustine, Conscience regards signs as bearing a relationship to truth, but signs are not that truth itself.

Conscience explicates Christ’s names through a retelling of the story of Christ’s life and, in doing so, shows that names and appearances have the

power to reveal as well as conceal true identity. For example, when the Magi come to offer Christ gifts at the Nativity, Conscience emphasizes that their gifts have figural values that are hidden beneath their external appearances. The kings offer “Reson, covered under sense,” “Rightwisnesse under reed gold,” and “Pitee, apperynge by mirre” (B.19.86; 88; 92). In all three cases, Conscience implies that the gifts’ true significance is internal and hidden; their physical qualities and appearance are almost entirely incidental. Conscience goes on to argue that signs, in themselves, do not provide reliable and complete access to truth by showing how Christ’s name changes over time. He divides Christ’s ministry into three parts, the three names that have been the objects of Will’s searching since Passus 8: Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest. As in the rest of the poem, the distinction between these three terms is not particularly decisive, in the sense that Will is never able to arrive at a conclusive definition of the three terms apart from specific actions. It is therefore fitting that Conscience invokes these names here in the context of his discussion of the way in which names cannot fully describe Christ. The name “Jesus” does not provide complete knowledge of the nature of Christ, much in the same way that the word “Dobet” can never provide Will with a specific and complete path for Christian living.

The events of Christ’s life necessitate a proliferation of names, names that Christ always exceeds. Unlike personifications in the poem, such as Conscience or Mede, whose actions can strain but never exceed or change the word that signifies them, Christ continually exceeds the signs that purport to contain him. Christ is a signified who can never be fully contained by any sign, although many signs accurately describe specific aspects of him. Conscience’s retelling of Christ’s life in Passus 19, in contrast to the version of Christ’s life in Passus 18, focuses primarily on miracles of transformation: the Incarnation, the transformation of water into wine, miraculous healings, and the Resurrection. In this narrative, the relationship between signs and substance continually shifts. Conscience begins this narrative with the Incarnation and shows that this transformation of God into man brought about the name “Jesus.” At the second major event in Conscience’s narrative, the wedding feast at Cana at which Christ transforms water into wine, requires giving Christ another name. As Conscience tells it, this miracle is one of signification:

In his juventee this Jesus at Jewene feeste
Turnede water into wyn, as Holy Writt telleth,
And there bigan God of his grace to do wel.
For wyn is likned to lawe, and lif of holynesse.
(B.19.108–11)
Conscience’s interpretation downplays the importance of the transformation of the physical elements of water and wine; the fact that the people at the wedding feast had run out of wine, the biblical motivation for performing the miracle, does not even merit a mention. Instead, Conscience argues that the wine is only relevant because of what it signifies apart from the physical wine itself: law and holiness. Although the physical miracle is the transformation of water into wine, the importance of the miracle is the way in which it alters patterns of signification. From this miracle arises another of Christ’s many names, “A fauntekyn ful of wit, filius Marie” (B.19.118). Jesus performs this miracle in front of his mother in order to show her his otherworldly nature, to ensure that she is fully aware that he “thorugh Grace was gete, and of no gome ells” (B.19.121). Conscience calls Jesus “son of Mary” at the same moment that he reveals the extent to which Christ transcends that identity. The significance of the miracle is that it reveals that Christ is not just the son of Mary but fully the son of God.27

Langland depicts knowledge of the limits and powers of signs as a defining aspect of Christian identity and belief. In Conscience’s narrative, the enemies of Christ, particularly the Jews, have him put to death in part because the proliferation of his names was too extensive. As Christ continues to perform miracles of transformation, his followers develop more names in their attempts to more accurately describe his identity in light of his transformative power. Because of his miraculous deeds:

Forthi the contree ther Jesu cam called hym fili David,
And nempned hym of Nazareth—and no man so worthi
To be kaiser or kyng of the kyngdom of Juda,
Ne over Jewes justice, as Jesus was, hem thoughte.
(B.19.136–39)

Jesus’ actions bring about public changes in the way in which those around him refer to him—he receives not only the name “fili David” but also the titles of kaiser, king, and justice—and it is precisely these changes in name, and the claims to power that such changes imply, that the Jewish high priests object to. Although the authorities undoubtedly fear the political power that these

27. It is worth noting that Langland significantly changes the emphasis of the biblical account in order to create this parallel between physical transformation and the limits of signification. First, given that Mary experienced the virgin birth firsthand, most medieval accounts of Mary’s life involve her recognition that Jesus is fully the son of God. Second, in the biblical narrative, Mary demands that Christ perform the miracle; Christ does not demand that Mary be there to witness it.
new names imply, Langland arranges the narrative in order to suggest that it is in response to the names themselves “wherof hadde Cayphas envye, and othere of the Jewes, / And for to doon hym to dethe day and nyght thei casten” (B.19.140–41). As Conscience has explained, “Jesus” was the way in which the Jews first referred to Christ, and their ultimate rejection of Christ is signaled by their unwillingness to refer to him by any other name. According to Conscience, unlike the Jews, Christians are partly defined by their willingness to see beyond the one-to-one correspondence of sign and signified, Christ’s name and Christ himself.

Through the doubting Thomas episode, Conscience claims that signs are the primary way in which contemporary Christians must come to understand Christ. Near the end of Passus 19’s version of Christ’s life, Conscience tells the story of doubting Thomas, the apostle who would only believe in the Resurrection once he had touched Christ’s wounds. Christ presents Thomas with physical evidence of his transformation from death into life, and Thomas acknowledges this transformation by giving Christ yet more names, crying out “Dominus meus et Deus meus” (B.19.173). Christ then concludes the episode by proclaiming, “Blessed mote thei be, in body and in soule, / That neve shul se me in sighte as thow seest nowthe, / And lelliche bil eve al this—I love hem and blesse hem” (B.19.180–82). Although Christ approves of Thomas, he argues that he wants others to acknowledge him in the same way without requiring physical proof. While Thomas progressed from physical proof to belief in the resurrected Christ to the creation of verbal signs to describe Christ, future Christians ought to be able to believe in divine truth through those created signs alone. The truth of the words themselves ought to be enough to show that “Lord” and “God” are appropriate names for Christ. Although, as Conscience has shown, there is no single sign that will provide complete understanding of Christ, the collection of signs that the church makes available to Christians through scripture and liturgy offer essential access to divine truth.

COMMUNAL FAILURE

In his description of the foundation of the church in the second half of Passus 19, Langland argues that Christians must understand the Eucharist as a sign—of both Christ’s historical and corporate bodies—in order to recognize their own obligation to become the harmonious body signified by the consecrated host. The community’s failure to be that signified body is the focus of the conclusion of Passus 19. In contrast to Christ who always exceeds the signs that represent him, the Christian community struggles to live up to the
name that ought to signify it: Unity. After his description of Pentecost, Langland narrates the foundation of the institutional church, with Piers as a figure for the papacy and his barn, Unity, as a figure for the institution itself. Unlike the many names for Christ, the name “Unity” does not describe the church as it is; it describes the church as it ought to be. Langland details how Piers builds Unity from scripture, the writings of the church fathers, and the cardinal virtues. The foundation of the church is perfect and has the potential to protect believers from the assaults of the Antichrist. However, the strength of the church depends not only on its foundational elements but also on the moral and spiritual integrity of the Christians within it. Once Pride plans to attack Piers and his barn, Conscience advises all Christians “to wende / Hastiliche into Unitee and holde we us there, / And praye we that a pees were in Piers bern the Plowman” (B.19.359–61). According to Conscience, the only way to defend Unity from outside attacks is to embody unity itself. Christians must bring their gifts together as the corporate body of Christ if they are to defend that corporate body from attack. Conscience’s call to Unity is somewhat circular: Conscience assumes that, by attacking Piers and the foundation of the church, Pride attacks all Christians as if they were already united in the church. In order to defend Unity from attack, Conscience argues that Christians must form a unified body of believers that Conscience assumes already exists. In this passus, as in much of the poem, Langland suggests that there is a gap between what the church ought to be and the way it actually operates in the contemporary world. Conscience’s call to Unity is a call for recognition of a shared identity that has yet to be performed.

The ideal identity of the Christian community is one in which the Eucharist symbolizes the unity that the community embodies. Langland depicts the Barn of Unity as a place built to store grain, an object that allegorically signifies both the Eucharist and the Christian community. Grain was a common medieval image for the Eucharist. Since, much like Unity’s storage of grain, the medieval church’s identity and authority rested on its control of the sacraments, the association of Piers’s grains with the Eucharist is clear. The way in which the grains also signify the Christian community is twofold. First, theologians who regarded communal symbolism as a central part of the Eucharist, such as Alger of Liège and Hugh of St. Victor, often contended that the individual grains and grapes that compose the eucharistic species symbolize

28. As Stephen Barney points out, “Presenting the foundation of the Church as an elaborated allegory seems to distance it conceptually as well as temporally from the Church of the brewer and the vicar that we encounter later.” Barney, Penn Commentary, 146.

29. For examples of eucharistic grain imagery, see Aquinas, Summae Theologiae, 3a.74, 3; Astell, Eating Beauty, 57; Rubin, Corpus Christi, 312–16.
individual Christians united with each other and with Christ in the church.30 Second, this passage draws heavily on the biblical parable of the wheat and the tares that describe all of humanity as wheat and weeds growing in a field.31 In this parable, the farmer, the parable’s representative of divine judgment, cannot readily distinguish between the wheat and the weeds in his field until they are fully grown, and so he allows both to grow together. When both are grown, he gathers the wheat into his barn and sets fire to the weeds. The wheat represents the saved, the weeds represent the damned, and the barn represents the kingdom of heaven. Langland clearly draws on this parable in his description of gathering the grains into Unity. Unity is different from the barn in the parable because it exists in the temporal world, but it is like the parable’s barn insofar as it is a place in which Christians are gathered together in preparation for their final judgment. In his description of Unity as the ideal church, Langland envisions the purpose of the church as the preservation of grain: the unification of individual Christians symbolized by the Eucharist.

Conscience regards eucharistic reception as both effecting and declaring the community’s union with Christ. When Conscience calls all Christians to receive the Eucharist in Unity, he is inviting them to complete their identity as Unity, as united in the body of Christ. Once the Christians have dug a moat around Unity, they undertake the work of penance: “Some thorugh bedes biddynghe and some thorugh pilgrimage / And othere pryvy penances, and somme thorugh penyes delynge” (B.19.379–80). Conscience believes these individual penitential acts demonstrate the moral and spiritual strength of the community as a whole and proclaims, “I care noght . . . though Pride come nouthe; / The lord of lust shal be letted al this Lente” (B.19.385–86). By virtue of every individual’s Lenten devotion, Conscience thinks the Christian community is unified and now needs only to receive the Eucharist in order to fully realize its strength against sin. He explains that the Eucharist is the natural conclusion to their penitence: “‘Cometh,’ quod Conscience, ‘ye Cristene, and dyneth, / That han labored lelly al this Lenten tyme. / Here is bread yblessed, and Goddes body therunder’” (B.19.387–89). According to Conscience, the community ought to receive the Eucharist because it has demonstrated its Christian unity in devotion and because the Eucharist also strengthens and effects that unity. The community can only fully achieve unity when it is physically unified with Christ’s body in the sacrament of the Eucharist, when the

31. Lorraine Kochanske Stock has investigated the influence of this parable on *Piers Plowman* in “Parable, Allegory, History, and *Piers Plowman*,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 5 (1991), 143–64.
sign—the consecrated host that both represents and is Christ’s body—literally becomes one with the bodies of the signified, the Christian community.

For Conscience, the Eucharist does not merely symbolize social unity; the people must literally enact social justice in order to make the Eucharist’s symbolism possible. After inviting everyone in Unity to receive the Eucharist, Conscience puts a single condition on eucharistic reception:

Grace, thorough Goddes word, gaf Piers power,
Myght to maken it, and men to ete it after
In helpe of hir heele ones in a monthe,
Or as ofte as thei hadde need, tho that hadde ypaied
To Piers pardon the Plowman, Redde quod debes.
(B.19.390–94)

In many ways, Conscience’s invitation is a fairly straightforward assertion of orthodox eucharistic theology. He affirms the Real Presence of Christ in the host and the sacramental power of the priesthood as represented by Piers. Even the penitential condition that he places on reception is typical insofar as theologians required Christians to participate in the sacrament of penance before receiving the Eucharist annually at Easter.32 What is striking about Conscience’s condition is not its emphasis on penitence but its contention that the performance of penance must be irreducibly social and material.33 The command “Redde quod debes” (give back what you owe) demands social responsibility since it emphasizes one’s material debts to other people rather than simply one’s spiritual debts to God. Individual Christians must work toward unity if they are to properly receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity.

Conscience’s condition suggests that, within the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist, there ought to be a union of literal reality and allegori-

32. Conscience recommends more frequent eucharistic reception than the required yearly reception, but this discrepancy is far from radical. After all, Conscience is calling for monthly communion in what he initially perceives to be a strong and ideal version of the institutional church. Theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, typically agreed that more frequent reception is an ideal but is often not possible in a world corrupted by sin. Aquinas notes that Pope Innocent III recommended annual communion because he was living at a time when “wickedness was multiplied and love grew cold” (iniquitatis abundantiam refrigescente caritate multorum). Summa Theologiae, 3a.80, 10. David Aers regards Conscience’s recommendation as marking a sharper deviation from contemporary medieval practices. Aers, “Sacrament of the Altar,” 48–49.

33. What makes the social nature of Conscience’s condition striking is a matter of emphasis rather than a radical deviation from orthodox tradition. Several medieval sermons do emphasize the need for social reconciliation as a precursor to eucharistic reception. For example, see Ross, Middle English Sermons, 125–33; Mirk, Mirk’s Festial, 129–32.
cal ideal, of social justice and the idea of the harmonious corporate body of Christ. The passus’s conclusion explores the negative response of the three estates—represented by a brewer, a vicar, and a lord and a king—and their refusal to accept Conscience’s condition; by showing how these representatives of the Christian community refuse to live up to this condition, Langland implies that they reject the Eucharist itself. The community turns away from the Eucharist precisely because it does not want this unity of material and transcendent; the individuals in Unity want to separate their daily lives from abstract spiritual truth. The first to reject Conscience’s call to the Eucharist is a brewer who recognizes that his practice of cheating his customers—by selling “bothe dregges and draf”—is forbidden by the cardinal virtue of justice (B.19.403). The brewer implicitly accepts Conscience’s alignment of eucharistic reception with justice, but is unwilling to give up his unjust business practices. Conscience responds by defending and explicating the relationship between social justice and the Eucharist. He condemns the brewer, saying, “But Conscience be thi commune fode, and Cardinale Vertues, / Leve it wel, thei ben lost, both lif and soule” (B.19.410-11). In his defense of the cardinal virtues, Conscience unites these virtues with the Eucharist, referring to both as food. In order to be part of the mystical body signified by the Eucharist, every person must properly order his conscience around the cardinal virtues; a Christian life consists not solely of prayer but also of carefully discerned righteous actions toward one’s fellow Christians. The brewer rejects the Eucharist because he does not want to enact the social unity that the host signifies.

As the “lewed” vicar—the representative of the second estate and the second person to protest Conscience’s condition—demonstrates, the members of the community fail to realize that their daily lives could have allegorical or spiritual significance at all. They have become so focused on material things that they can no longer see the material world’s connection to transcendent meaning. The vicar protests Conscience’s condition because he refuses to recognize abstract ideals beyond his literal, physical reality. In particular, he cannot see the way in which the Eucharist signifies a divine, transcendent reality beyond the church hierarchy. He rejects Conscience’s claim that the cardinal virtues are necessary to righteous living because “I knew nevere Cardynal that he ne cam fro the Pope” (B.19.417). The vicar refuses to distinguish between the cardinal virtues—justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude—and car-

34. David Aers makes a similar point when he suggests that the community rejects the Eucharist because reception requires ethical social behavior. He argues that this scene “suggests that Christians now want the Eucharist only if it has absolutely no entailments for their social practices.” Aers, “Sacrament of the Altar,” 50.
dinals, the high-ranked clergy who advise the Pope. According to the vicar, when cardinals visit an area, the local clergy take the people’s food in order to serve the cardinals. In contrast to Conscience’s argument that the cardinal virtues will provide the commons with access to spiritual food, the Eucharist, the vicar claims that the cardinals of the church steal the commons’ food, the necessities of daily life. Although Langland is no doubt sympathetic to the vicar’s complaint that the cardinals and the Pope have strayed from Christian virtues by abusing the common people, Langland suggest that the vicar’s argument is deeply flawed insofar as it is a response to Conscience’s call to the Eucharist. By listing the faults of others within the earthly church—rather than choosing to perform restitution for his own sins in order to build up Unity—the vicar rejects Conscience’s invitation and therefore implicitly rejects the Eucharist itself. For Langland, the church does not solely consist of its hierarchy; the church is the entire Christian community. In contrast, the vicar only sees the church in its literal manifestation as the fourteenth-century ecclesiastical hierarchy. To some extent, the vicar recognizes literal-mindedness as a fault when he points out that the commons “couten ful litel / The counsel of Conscience or Cardinale Vertues / But if thei sown, as by sighte, somewhat to wynnyng” (B.19.455–57). However, the vicar places the blame for such materialism almost entirely on the church hierarchy’s corruption rather than on individual Christians. The vicar refuses to recognize the ideal of Unity—the vision of what the church ought to be—and rejects the Eucharist along with the very idea of transcendent meaning. For the vicar, the Eucharist is virtually worthless because he does not value or recognize the possibility of allegorical, transcendent meaning within the fourteenth-century church.

According to Langland, proper eucharistic reception requires that Christians recognize their own role as the signified corporate body of Christ, a body in which all members are equally important. He argues for this allegorical interpretation of the Eucharist through his negative example of the king, the chief representative of the first estate and the only member of the Christian community who claims to meet Conscience’s condition for eucharistic recep-


36. In general, scholars have tended to be sympathetic to the vicar’s argument because it contains valuable and valid social critiques. For example, see Barney, Penn Commentary, 167–79; Priscilla Jenkins, “Conscience: The Frustration of Allegory,” in Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches, ed. S. S. Hussey (London: Methuen, 1969), 125–42; Robertson and Huppé, Piers Plowman, 227.
tion. The king argues that he is worthy of the Eucharist through reference to the body politic of which he is metaphorically the head. According to the king, although he takes from others, he only does so within the boundaries of the law: “I am heed of lawe: / For ye ben but members and I above alle. / And sith I am youre aller heed, I am youre aller heele, / And Holy Chirche chief help and chieftain of the commune” (B.19.473–76). The king claims that, because he is the source of laws, he always acts in accordance with the law and is therefore just and worthy to receive the Eucharist. Instead of being humbly penitent, the king believes his earthly authority makes it virtually impossible for him to be unjust and proclaims that he “may boldely be housled” (B.19.479). The passus ends before Langland tells us whether or not this king ultimately does receive the Eucharist, but there is good reason to suspect that this king does not live up to Conscience’s standards. Most importantly, he ignores the metaphor of the community as the corporate body of Christ, a metaphor that the passus has been alluding to since its description of Pentecost, because that metaphor places Christ as the head of the body. Instead of focusing on Christ’s body, the king speaks only about the body politic. The king fails to realize that his own authority is not absolute and therefore insists upon a single metaphor of the communal body and imagines that metaphor as totally authoritative.

When Conscience challenges the king’s claim to the Eucharist, he demonstrates that proper eucharistic reception involves both the recognition of the host as a sign of the communal body and a commitment to literal justice within that social body. Although the king eagerly accepts that the host is intimately related to an abstract idea of the social body, Conscience insists that the king must also account for his daily actions toward others. In order to emphasize the importance of personal accountability, Conscience places specific conditions on the king’s eucharistic reception: “That thow konne defende, / And rule thi reaume in reson, right wel and in truthe, / That thow [have thyn asking], as the lawe asketh: Omnia sunt tua ad defendendum set non ad deprehendendum” (B.19.481–83a) (The realm is yours for defending, not for plundering). Conscience will permit the king to receive the Eucharist as long as he is willing to be accountable for his specific social actions, rather than rely on the metaphor of the body politic as his sole justification for his worthiness. For Conscience, the king’s figural justice must have a basis in material reality. Although the king comes closest to eucharistic reception, the dream ends there, and when Will wakes, no one has received the Eucharist. None of the people in Unity have been able to reconcile their own actions with Conscience’s condition for eucharistic reception. This failure to secure the identity

37. I am grateful to Stephen Barney for this translation.
of Unity through the sacrament of Unity contributes to Unity’s vulnerability to the Antichrist in the poem’s final passus. The community has failed to become the unified body of Christ signified by the consecrated host.

For Langland, the power of the Eucharist lies in its unification of the two halves of the allegorical sign: the material appearance of bread unites with Christ’s body, and the consecrated host that signifies the Christian community becomes one with that community through eucharistic reception. He argues that the host’s communal significance cannot be complete without communal participation. As he shows in his discussion of Christ’s names, it is essential for Christians to understand the nature of the signs that signify Christ. In the case of the Eucharist, Christians must recognize their own obligation to enact the social justice and equality that the host signifies. The Christians in Unity fail to receive the Eucharist because they refuse to recognize their role in the Eucharist’s signification and to transform their own divided social body into the perfect reflection of the unified body of Christ.

For Langland, the process of transforming the community into the body of Christ is a process of reading and interpretation of both his text and the consecrated host. Characteristically, Langland depicts such interpretation as a complicated and confusing process, but one that is vital to the shaping of the Christian community. In the next chapter, I will turn to Julian of Norwich, a writer who intently focuses on this process of devotional reading—of both host and written text—and shows how an understanding of devotional reading as socially transformative is essential to the mystical body of Christ.