CHAPTER 6

John Lydgate and the Eucharistic Poetic Tradition

The Making of Community

More than any other writer of the Middle Ages, John Lydgate purposefully draws on and engages with eucharistic poetics as an English literary tradition. As a monk and a self-proclaimed poet laureate, John Lydgate, the central poet of England’s fifteenth century, frequently depicts himself as an authority on both poetry and religious devotion.1 In Lydgate’s poetry on the Eucharist, he deliberately draws on the tradition of Middle English eucharistic poetics in order to reflect on the importance of the Eucharist to devotion and on the way in which he imagines poetry itself to be eucharistic. As Lydgate scholarship has come into its own over the past two decades—moving forward from defenses of Lydgate’s “dullness” to historicist explorations of his complex engagement in English politics through poetry—there has been a small but growing critical interest in Lydgate’s specifically religious writings.2 Such scholarship has effectively dem-


onstrated the ways in which Lydgate’s poetry makes careful interventions in fifteenth-century religious debates, particularly those surrounding heresy and iconoclasm. Extending this important work, my aim in this chapter is not so much to historicize Lydgate as to show how the Eucharist enables Lydgate to explore the spiritual power of poetic form. Rather than suggest that Lydgate’s definition of eucharistic poetics is wholly unique, or that his theology, or indeed even some of the individual works themselves, are original or radical, I argue that Lydgate’s poetic treatment of the Eucharist is significant because he recognizes and purposefully builds upon Middle English eucharistic poetics by showing how 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 Lydgate’s understanding of poetry.

For Lydgate, the Eucharist is central to both his own poetry and the English literary tradition because it is the highest form of figuration, containing and unifying the multiple meanings of “figure”—from physical representation to allegorical sign—in a way that no worldly linguistic sign can do. In one of the only studies on Lydgate’s treatment of the Eucharist, Andrew Cole asserts that Lydgate is extraordinary in relation to many other contemporary poets because “Lydgate displays a sacramental way of thinking that always approaches Christ’s bodily, sacramental presence . . . through language, metaphor, allegory, and, above all, poetry.” Although I share Cole’s view that Lydgate’s eucharistic theology is decidedly figurative, I strongly disagree that Lydgate is therefore extraordinary. Far from being anomalous or subversive, Lydgate is deliberately contributing to a vibrant vernacular eucharistic poetic tradition that invites engagement in a process of intellectual interpretation of signs, a reflective and transformative reading process that is both textual and poetic. Through an analysis of Lydgate’s poetic treatments of the Eucharist, particularly Pilgrimage of the Life of Man and A Procession of Corpus Christi,
I will show how the Eucharist provides a model for Lydgate’s own spiritual poetry. 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 that leads the reader from figurative language to divine truth. For Lydgate, poetic language both assists believers in coming to an understanding of the Eucharist and, at the same time, is itself a reflection of eucharistic theology insofar as it demands a level of intellectual engagement and self-reflection that has the power to transform the Christian community into the corporate body of Christ signified by the consecrated host.

LYDGATE’S LITERARY EUCHARIST

Lydgate’s poetic treatments of the Eucharist demonstrate his belief that poetic language—defined broadly as figurative language which self-consciously engages in literary tradition—is essential to devotion because it demands readers’ intellectual engagement.\(^5\) As recent scholarship has shown, throughout his poetic corpus, Lydgate self-consciously represents his poems as highly aesthetic literary artifacts, purposefully cultivating an ornate and syntactically difficult style.\(^6\) His often explicit emphasis on figurative language and literary tradition, specifically Chaucerian tradition, distinguish him as a poet uniquely concerned with defining the categories of the literary and the poetic.\(^7\) Throughout his many discussions of the Eucharist, Lydgate repeatedly emphasizes the Eucharist as a sacrament understood through figurative language and draws on the polysemy of the Middle English word “figure” to explore the ways in which the Eucharist draws on and informs literary aesthetics. In Lydgate’s poetry, the term “figure” can, and frequently does, refer to a whole range of meanings, including a person’s bodily form, a material representa-

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5. Gayk makes a similar point, focusing on Lydgate’s use of images rather than figurative language specifically. In her reading of one of Lydgate’s lyrics on the pieta, she points out that Lydgate’s “democratic insistence on the capacity of ‘folkys all’ to read complex visual figures with the exegetical skill of ‘doctres’ is surprising given the frequent infantilization of the laity by Lydgate’s clerical contemporaries.” Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 85. My definition of the poetic here draws on Maura Nolan’s definition of the category of the literary in relation to Lydgate: she offers “two main assumptions about what the term literary means: first, that a text is literary if it uses figurative language, and second, that the idea of the literary implies a notion of ‘tradition,’ of a group of texts joined together somehow by a common theme or purpose.” Maura Nolan, “Lydgate’s Worst Poem,” in *Lydgate Matters*, 72.


tion, a written character, a sign, a symbol, a prefiguration, or even a poem itself. His emphasis on “figure” in his writings on the Eucharist is both a theological choice emphasizing the Eucharist as sign rather than invisible bloody flesh as well as an argument for his own cultivated poetic style as essential to understanding the Eucharist.

Lydgate’s poetry frequently draws the reader’s attention to the textual and figurative nature of Christ’s eucharistic presence. Rather than focus on bloody, literal images of the host as Man of Sorrows or chunks of flesh, one of Lydgate’s preferred ways in which to describe Christ’s earthly body is metaphorically as bread. The metaphor of Christ as bread that is kneaded and baked through the process of the Incarnation and Passion is certainly not original to Lydgate, but his preference for this particular metaphor demonstrates his emphasis on figurative explanations of transubstantiation. In An Exposition of the Pater Noster, for example, Lydgate explicates “panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie” (give us today our daily bread) by explaining that “our daily bread” refers to the body of Christ “Knoden afforn Pilat, baken in thy passioun.” By describing the Passion as a bread-baking process, this poem implies not that bread is a vehicle for understanding Christ but that Christ’s life is a vehicle for understanding the sacramental bread. Thus Christ’s physical earthly existence becomes an historical prefiguration of his physical presence in the Eucharist. Although biblical narratives trace the institution of the Eucharist to the Last Supper, Lydgate’s explication of the Eucharist and the Passion depends upon the idea that the bread that medieval Christians receive was not fully baked until after the resurrection. Far from trying to undermine familiar narratives of sacred history, Lydgate emphasizes that Christ’s historical body is only accessible to medieval Christians through figuration; the bread, not Christ’s historical body, is believers’ most direct access to Christ. Even in this brief mention within his poetic explication of the pater noster, Lydgate does not attempt to simplify the Eucharist’s figurative status but rather demands that readers understand the Eucharist as metaphor, prefiguration, and literal presence at the same time.

In his Passion meditation, The Fifteen Oes, Lydgate elaborates on his understanding of Christ’s eucharistic presence by suggesting that the ingestion

8. “figure,” MED. Cole and Gayk also note the importance of the slippery nature of “figure” for Lydgate’s religious poetry and theology. See Cole, Literature and Heresy, 150; Gayk, Image, Text, and Religious Reform, 101.
9. This metaphor appears, for example, in An Exposition of the Pater Noster, The Fifteen Oes of Christ, The Virtues of the Mass, and Pilgrimage of the Life of Man.
10. On Christ as bread, see Rubin, Corpus Christi, 145–47.
of the Eucharist parallels the act of reading a poetic text: through intellectual ruminations over figurative language, the reader can gain access to truth much in the same way that, through the ingestion of consecrated bread, the believer ingests and literally internalizes Christ’s body. This meditation, Lydgate’s version of a popular English prayer in which the Eucharist often features prominently, refers to the Eucharist both explicitly and implicitly throughout, for example calling Christ “our eternall ffoode” (217) and comparing Christ’s body on the cross to a grape pressed in a wine press (315). Lydgate further draws on eucharistic discourse when he asks Christ to transform him internally with knowledge of the Passion:

Mercyful Iesu! of grace do adverte
With thilke lycour wich þou dedyst bleede,
By remembrance to write hem in myn herte
Ech day onys that I may hem reede,
Close þe capytallys vnder þi purpil weede
With offte thynkyng on thy bloody face,
Thorugh myn entraylles let þi passioun sprede,
Marked tho karectys whan I shal hens passe.

(281–88)

In a twist on the motif of the charter of Christ—in which Christ’s promise of redemption takes the form of a metaphorical legal document written on Christ’s body in wounds—Lydgate asks for Christ’s Passion to be invisibly inscribed on his own body. As Shannon Gayk suggests, the “stigmata that Lydgate seeks here are internal texts, inscribed in blood on the heart and meant to be read daily.” Unlike a literal manuscript on which the writing is intended to be legible and seen, Lydgate asks for Christ to “Close þe capytallys / . . . / Thorugh myn entraylles,” thus inviting the Passion to transform his internal sense of his own emotions and thoughts. This writing of the Passion

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15. The word “entrailles” often refers to the internal organs as the seat of emotions and thoughts. See: “entraille,” MED.
on his heart parallels the spiritual effects of the Eucharist: an ingestion and internalization of the suffering body of Christ that transforms the spiritual condition of Lydgate and, presumably, readers of the poem.

Through figurative references to the Eucharist as well as allusions to the Eucharist as figure, Lydgate depicts Christ as actively involved in forming his own body into a poetic text for readers to ingest. When, in the Fifteen Oes, Lydgate refers to Christ as the “plentyvous grape and vyne, / Wich on the cros for our Redempcyoun / In a pressorye pressid with gret pyne” (313–15), he makes the image of Christ’s blood more vivid by imagining it as flowing juice and implies that the Eucharist was the primary purpose of the crucifixion. The cross is like a wine press specifically designed to produce physical and spiritual sustenance for believers. When Lydgate describes how Christ operates the wine press with “gret pyne,” he emphasizes the intensity of both Christ’s pain and Christ’s labor in working to operate the metaphorical wine press; Christ’s body is both producer and product of the crucifixion. Lydgate suggests that Christ’s body in the Eucharist is a text produced for the reader’s consumption when he describes Christ as the son “of his [the Father’s] substance the ffygure treuly” (307). On the most basic level, this line refers to Christ as the true bodily presence of the Father’s divine essence, but the mention of both “substance” and “figure” in this context alludes to eucharistic discourses centering around the relationship between the Eucharist as figure and the Eucharist as the substantial presence of Christ’s body. To be “ffygure treuly” implies that Christ is a true human form who is also essentially figurative in nature, a sign pointing beyond himself toward a divine truth. Lydgate asks readers to see a unification of figure and truth in the Passion and the Eucharist. As in many Middle English texts from Handlyng Synne to The Book of Margery Kempe, both figure and truth are essential for the believer’s spiritual transformation.

Multiple modes of figuration, far from detracting from Christ’s Real Presence, highlight the Eucharist as a site for spiritually transformative acts of literary interpretation. In Lydgate’s Virtues of the Mass, he particularly highlights multiple meanings of the word “figure” as well as its synonyms in order to define different kinds of figuration and to show how the Eucharist challenges the distinctions between them. The poem begins its detailed examination of the Mass, as well as its spiritual and worldly benefits for believers, with an invitation to reflect on the priest’s vestments. Instead of immediately launching into a moralization or allegory of the priest’s liturgical garments, Lydgate

16. Like Lydgate’s discussion of Christ as bread, this metaphor is traditional. On the mystical wine press motif, see: Rubin, Corpus Christi, 313–14.
17. I discuss these debates in detail in my introductory chapter.
asks readers to turn inward, a turn that for Lydgate requires a focus on figu- 

tative language. He instructs readers to consider “with all your inward contem- 

placion, / As in a myrrour presenting in fygure / The morall menyng of that 
gostly armure” (3–5). By using the term “myrrour,” Lydgate depicts the Mass 
as a process of inward contemplation and an opportunity for self-reflection. 

However, unlike Love’s *Mirror* or texts from the Mirror for Princes tradition, 

Lydgate does not argue that the poem itself functions as a mirror. Rather, it 
is the priest’s physical appearance that is meant to inspire this self-reflection. 

Lydgate asks readers to imagine that the priest’s physical body or “fygure” is a 
symbol or allegorical sign for a greater moral meaning. Indeed, it is even pos- 
sible that Lydgate is not actually describing the priest’s vestments at all here 
since he only speaks about the priest’s “gostly armure,” which could equally 
suggest the priest’s spiritual preparations for the Mass. In this case, Lydgate 
invites his readers to imagine the priest’s inward state from looking at his body 
and use that as a text for their own spiritual reflection, which will lead to a 
higher moral meaning. In this poem, the process of understanding the Mass 
is a careful act of literary interpretation.

Lydgate complicates his definitions of the word “figure” by introducing the 

near-synonyms “sygne” and “token” into his explication of the Mass. When 

Lydgate begins his moralization of the priest’s vestments in earnest, over a 
hundred lines after introducing them in his opening stanza, he describes the 

priest’s amice as “a sygne, a token, and a fygure, / Owtward a shewyng, groun- 
dyd on the feythe” (146–47). Lydgate’s use of these three words is in some 

respects redundant since all three mean “representation,” surely the primary 
meaning of the line: the amice is an outward representation of the priest’s 
inward faith. However, by placing these words directly beside each other, 

Lydgate foregrounds the differences between them. His use of “sign” high- 
lights the priest’s actions at Mass as meaningful bodily gestures, and his use 
of “token” emphasizes the way in which the amice is metonymic: a concrete, 

physical representation of a related spiritual reality beyond itself. During 
the elevation prayer that Lydgate inserts after his discussion of the consecra- 
tion, Lydgate places particular emphasis on the word “figure” rather than the 
other near-synonyms in order to highlight the way in which the Eucharist 
implies historical prefiguration. In this devotional script, Lydgate invites read- 

ers to express their personal love for Christ, their need for Christ’s forgiveness,

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19. On the use of mirrors as figures for self-reflection, see Torti, *Glass of Form*. 

20. I am referring to the ways in which these two words’ definitions differ from those of “figure.” See “signe” and “token,” MED.
and their desire for Mary’s intercession.21 The prayer then very abruptly shifts from being a relatively conventional affective elevation prayer to focusing on the ways in which the Old Testament prefigures the Eucharist. Specifically, Lydgate directly addresses Christ in the Eucharist as “pascall lambe in Isaac fygyrd, / Owre spirytuall Manna” (361–62), referring to Christ’s eucharistic body as prefigured by the lamb eaten at the Passover, Abraham’s willing sacrifice of his son Isaac, and the heavenly bread the Israelites ate during the exodus from Egypt. This jarring shift from affective piety to Old Testament prefiguration encourages readers to see how figurative language is essential to any understanding of Christ’s presence.

For Lydgate, as for many of the authors I have considered in this study, the spiritual power of the Eucharist stems largely from its literary nature. At the climax of the elevation prayer in Virtues of the Mass, Lydgate brings together affective direct address and historical prefiguration by declaring, “Thow art in fygyre, O blessyd lord Iesu!” (369).22 Although many theologians argue that the miracle of Christ’s presence is that it is truth rather than merely figure, Lydgate chooses to emphasize the opposite side of the equation. For Lydgate, the power of the sacrament comes not despite the element of figuration that it necessarily involves but precisely because of the figuration. At the moment of elevation, during which the believer is supposed to come into close contact with Christ’s physical presence and imagine his crucified body, Lydgate asks readers to celebrate the multiple figurations that such an encounter with Christ’s body entails.23 At the conclusion of the elevation prayer, Lydgate refers to Christ as “myne aduertence, my mynde, and my memory” (386), three near-synonyms that parallel his earlier sign, token, and figure. These three

21. By referring to a “devotional script,” I am drawing on McNamer’s work on “intimate scripts.” By this term, I mean poems or prayers that aspire to guide readers into the performace of devotional or affective states. McNamer, Affective Meditation.

22. Cole also emphasizes how this line reveals Lydgate’s investment in the Eucharist as figu-rative. However, Cole suggests that the implications are much more theologically radical than I propose here when he says that “the sequence of lines indicates a phenomenological thought process, always associative and authentically disinterested in essences, substances, or fleshly bodies.” Cole, Literature and Heresy, 151.

23. For discussions of the widespread belief that seeing the consecrated host, rather than ingesting it, was a form of eucharistic reception, see the following: Charles Caspers, “The Western Church during the Late Middle Ages: Augencommunion or Popular Mysticism?” in Bread of Heaven: Customs and Practices Surrounding Holy Communion, ed. Caspers et al. (Kampen, NL: Kok Pharos, 1995), 83–98; Thomas Lentes, “As far as the eye can see . . . : Rituals of Gazing in the Late Middle Ages,” in The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, NJ: Department of Art and Archaeology, 2006), 360–73; Gary Macy, “The Eucharist and Popular Religiosity,” in Treasures from the Storeroom: Medieval Religion and the Eucharist (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 172–95; Rubin, Corpus Christi, 49–82.
nouns all refer to human consciousness with varying degrees of emphasis on the relationship between the soul and the intellect, but Lydgate's use of all three reveals his investment in the believer's intellectual experience of Christ. Rather than seeing the intellect and figurative language as barriers to affective union with Christ, Lydgate works to show that such elements actually enhance and heighten the believer's spiritual experience. For Lydgate, the literary becomes the spiritual because poetic language, like the Eucharist, invites readers to participate actively in their own internal spiritual transformation.

THE SACRAMENTAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF LYDGATE’S PILGRIMAGE

It would be a mistake to consider Lydgate's emphasis on the reader's intellectual engagement with the Eucharist as a purely democratizing gesture; Lydgate does not remove the need for church mediation or clerical instruction when he describes the Eucharist as essentially literary. In his translation of Deguileville's *Le Pèlerinage de la vie humaine, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, in which a detailed discussion of eucharistic doctrine comprises roughly 3,000 lines of the almost 25,000-line poem, Lydgate draws on the Eucharist as a way of examining the religious authority of the poetic. Lydgate amplifies Deguileville's second recension from approximately 18,000 lines to almost 25,000. My reading of the *Pilgrimage* does not suggest that this attitude toward the Eucharist is distinct from that of Deguileville. Rather, I argue that, regardless of the poem's originality or lack thereof, the poem serves to develop what I consider to be representative of Lydgate's presentation of the Eucharist throughout his poetic corpus. Whether original or not, his presentation of the Eucharist is deliberate.

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25. Lisa Cooper offers what is, to my knowledge, the only other in-depth scholarly examination of the Eucharist in Lydgate's poem. Although she also examines the Eucharist as a sign,
The ability of poetry to produce spiritual knowledge is the subject of both Lydgate’s and Deguileville’s poems; as several scholars have noted, the Pilgrimage is an allegory intently focused on examining the ways in which religious allegory functions.26 As in other medieval personification allegories, throughout the poem, the pilgrim-dreamer encounters literalizations or visual signs of abstract concepts such as Reason, Grace, and Nature; religious personification allegory fulfills its didactic purpose by providing concrete images that aid the reader in learning and remembering abstract moral and theological concepts. The Pilgrimage, in particular, focuses on how allegory produces spiritual knowledge by presenting unusually difficult and often bizarre literalizations—what C. S. Lewis refers to as “monstrosities”—of concepts that cannot be literally understood.27 The most famous example of such literalizations, and one that is central to the poem’s depiction of the Eucharist, occurs when Grace Dieu informs the pilgrim that, in order to progress on his pilgrimage, he must remove his eyes and place them in his ears. The didactic point of this image, in simplest terms, is that the reader needs to be guided by the words of scripture rather than by physical sight. However, the grotesque nature of the image challenges readers because of the discrepancy between the visual image and the abstract idea it represents.

Early in the poem, the Eucharist becomes a focal point for the poem’s examination of the disjunction between figure and truth in poetry. By insisting that the pilgrim understand the Eucharist as Christ’s literal physical presence—both within and without the allegorical fiction of the poem itself—the poem complicates the relationship between linguistic representation and truth because with regard to the Eucharist, unlike the poem’s other representations, there is no absolute divide between figure and truth. This understanding of transubstantiation is especially clear in Sapience’s defence of the Eucharist against Aristotle’s natural philosophy:


27. C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1936), 269. Nicolette Zeeman, for example, draws on Deguileville’s text, which she regards as particularly highlighting a general principle at play in medieval religious allegory more generally: “If allegory always works by juxtaposing unlike terms, religious allegory seems especially often to foreground the unlikeness and the possible discrepancies between the terms it brings together.” Zeeman, “Medieval Religious Allegory,” 149.
The grettest good most sovereyn
Ys ther closyd in certeyn;
Nat only “ymaginatiue,”
Nouther “Representatiue,”
(Vnderstond now wel my lore,)
Nor “Virtualiter” with-oute more;
But ther yt ys put sothfastly,
(Yiff thow lyst lerne ffeythfully,)
Bothen “Corporaliter”
And also ek “Realiter;”
Both “Presencialiter”
And also ek “Veraciter;”
With-oute al symulacioun,
Deceyt, or any Ficcioun.
(6045–58)\(^{28}\)

Sapience carefully uses Latin adverbs to describe the orthodox doctrine of transubstantiation and primarily uses vernacular literary words, such as “Representatiue” and “Ficcioun” to describe what she considers to be false and heretical views. It is heretical to view the Eucharist as an allegorical “Ficcioun” equivalent to the other fictions that the reader encounters.

When Lydgate describes the Eucharist in this poem, he presents it as a sign different than the other signs: everything in the poem is words transformed into flesh, but the Eucharist is literally the Word made flesh. The Eucharist is both truth and fiction. After the pilgrim has a rather typical miraculous vision of Christ’s flesh in the Eucharist, Lydgate explains the vision’s significance through personification allegory and historical figuration rather than a straightforward statement of doctrine. In this vision, Moses, a common prefiguration of the Christian priesthood, acts as a priest and, instead of providing manna, itself a frequent prefiguration of the Eucharist, he provides the Eucharist itself. Lydgate layers in further Old Testament figuration by explaining how the blood in the vision “sempte of a lambe” (3267), referring to the paschal lamb, a common prefiguration of Christ’s crucifixion. This series of figurations is decidedly intellectual and textual rather than affective and visual, particularly because this last figuration presents an impossible image: lamb blood that is visually distinct from human blood. By combining personifica-

\(^{28}\) All in-text citations of the Pilgrimage are from John Lydgate, The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS e.s. 77, 83, 92 (London: Kegan Paul, 1899, 1901, 1904).
tion and the exegetical practice of reading the Old Testament as prefiguring the events of the New Testament, Lydgate demands that readers interpret the text in two opposite ways. If patristic typological readings of the Old Testament require that readers take a literal historical narrative and interpret it as spiritually meaningful, personification allegory asks readers to imagine abstract spiritual ideals as if they were literal physical presences. Since the Pilgrimage operates under the explicit assumption that all readers and believers must necessarily accept the truth of transubstantiation, these contradictory modes of signification and interpretation reveal that the Eucharist is uniquely capable of absorbing all kinds of figurative discourses simultaneously.

The Pilgrimage’s insistence on the verbal over the visual—or ears over eyes—is a direct outgrowth of its presentation of the Eucharist as the fulfillment of figurative language. Grace Dieu insists that she must “bothe thyn Eyen take away, / And hem out off her place fette; / And in thyn Erys I shal hem sette” as a condition of continuing his pilgrimage and a prerequisite of eucharistic reception (6254–56). When the pilgrim objects to what he imagines to be a disfiguring process, Grace Dieu justifies the procedure by reminding him that he was initially unable to understand the spiritual efficacy of the Eucharist because “alle thy wyttys wer deceyved, / And lyede pleynly vn-to the, / What they felte or dyde se, / Saue the trouth (& thus yt stood) / Wi th thyn Eryng style a-bood” (6292–96). The Eucharist is her primary evidence of the importance of the verbal over the visual because belief in the Eucharist necessitates accepting the priest’s words rather than the physical appearance of bread. Likewise, in her earlier defence of the Eucharist against Nature’s complaints, Grace Dieu tells the pilgrim that four of the senses are deceived with regard to the Eucharist, but the sense of hearing makes up for the others because hearing “more clerly in sentence / Haueth full intelligence” (5261–62). The understanding of the verbal over the visual is essential to the poem as a whole, enforcing its focus on language, intellect, and memory, but the starting point for its epistemology is the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is thus the test case that proves that readers ought to privilege language over vision more generally because the verbal holds a larger claim to the highest levels of truth and understanding. After giving her initial eucharistic defence of the importance of ears over eyes, Grace Dieu turns to figurative language, specifically historical figuration, in order to confirm that the verbal is more intellectually and spiritually authoritative than the visual. She claims that the Old Testament prefigures the importance of hearing in relation to the Eucharist when Jacob deceives his father, Isaac, by pretending to be Esau. As Grace Dieu tells it, Isaac is deceived because he erroneously rejects his own recognition of Jacob’s voice in favor of the sense of touch: “But
the handys that I fel, / The handys ben off Esau” (5308–9). Through this exemplum, which she calls a “fygure” (5317), Grace Dieu presents the moral lesson that the pilgrim ought to “abyde on heryng, and ther reste; / ffully truste to hys sentence; / Yiff feyth to hym, & ful credence; / ffor heryng shal, with-oute slouthe, / Teche to the, the pleyne trouthe” (5334–38). Through this exemplum, Lydgate emphasizes the truth of the verbal both with regard to the sacraments and to spiritual truths more generally. This logic applies to the Eucharist and to Lydgate’s own poetry: what one sees can be significant, but words reach a higher spiritual and intellectual level of the soul. Through Lydgate’s emphasis on hearing, the poetic becomes a powerful route to truth.

In the Pilgrimage, the importance of hearing stems from Lydgate’s belief in the verbal, the textual, and the figurative language as essential to religious education. Grace Dieu’s demand that the pilgrim place his eyes in his ears is a gloss on Saint Paul’s letter to the Romans in which he states, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). Both Grace Dieu and St. Paul equate “hearing” with an understanding of spiritual truth. For Lydgate’s poem, “what is heard” refers to both oral preaching and written New Testament texts. Many of Lydgate’s readers may have been unlikely to be able to read or have direct access to the Bible as a physical text; however, Lydgate emphasizes that believers need to understand that the truth of Christ is rooted in the verbal, both oral and written. When the pilgrim initially expresses horror at the idea of transplanting his eyes into his ears because he erroneously imagines the process to be a literal surgical procedure, Lydgate demonstrates that the movement of understanding from the visual to the verbal is also a shift from literal to figurative modes of reading. Lydgate draws on the figurative meaning of sight as understanding in order to then transfer that figurative meaning to hearing; he thereby emphasizes that figuration and textuality are essential to spiritual understanding itself.

Within the Pilgrimage, figurative texts provide readers with access to higher levels of spiritual understanding but this movement from eyes to ears comes at a cost: this movement necessarily means less interest in direct physical experiences of truth and an intellectual commitment to believing what one is told. By evoking the image of the surgical removal of the pilgrim’s literal eyes, even as the poem insists on this transplantation as figurative, Lydgate also suggests that there is a virtue to a willfully chosen blindness to the external world. For Grace Dieu as for Lydgate, not all figurative language in and of itself is necessarily a guaranteed route to divine truth. The pilgrim and all

faithful believers need to listen to the correct sources of figurative language: voices of religious authority, including Lydgate’s own clerical voice and the voice of the priest at Mass declaring “hoc est corpus meum.” Verbal understanding may be more intellectually demanding for readers than affective images, but such understanding involves an increasing amount of obedience and subservience to divine authority, and in this poem, since the primacy of hearing is evidenced by transubstantiation, that obedience is also due to the voice of the institutional church.

Both allegorical interpretation and spiritual understanding necessarily involve submission to an external authority and a loss of immediate access to meaning. When Nature objects to Grace Dieu effecting transubstantiation, Grace Dieu accuses Nature of being too focused on the literal, physical world and failing to recognize that Nature herself falls under Grace Dieu’s jurisdiction; Grace Dieu does not so much assert superior logic as superior authority. She encourages Nature to see that “with-oute me ye ha no thing” (3737) and compares Nature to a swine that only sees the food on the ground in front of it and “in hys swynys lawe, / Off hys rudnesse bestyal, / Ne kan no ferther se at al / Toward the hevene, nor the tre / Wher he receyyveth hys plente/ That bar the frut for hys repast” (3718–23). Grace Dieu clearly draws on the figurative meaning of sight as understanding, but gives this understanding a peculiarly spatial dimension. The swine who only sees its food in front of it fails to understand because it chooses not to look at the world over any distance; it fails to see the spiritual truth that heaven provided the food, and fails to see even the physical tree from which the fruit fell because it was too far away. Spiritual understanding, in this analogy, demands an acknowledgment of power hierarchies and distant authorities. More than simply a rebuke to Nature, Grace Dieu’s swine analogy is clear advice to both the reader and the pilgrim that nonliteral understanding necessitates a surrender to authority—in this case not only divine authority but the authority of the institutional church—and such a surrender involves acknowledging that to a certain extent understanding lies outside of the self.

The importance of authority to interpretation applies both to authorities outside the text and levels of figurative meaning within the allegory itself. After demonstrating the importance of hearing to the Eucharist, Grace Dieu explains the spiritual efficacy of the Eucharist through another allegory: Charity baking bread. It is clear that the baking process is an allegory for Christ’s incarnation and resurrection when, for example, Grace Dieu explains that the grain was violently milled by stones fueled by scorn, envy, and derision. Before the crucifixion/milling and the baking/burial, Grace Dieu evokes the familiar patristic imagery of the shell and the kernel, for the literal meaning
to be discarded and the hidden spiritual meaning hidden inside, respectively, when she explains how Charity grew grain and collected it in her granary:

Tyl the thressherys (with gret hete)
Hadde this greyn ythrysshe & bete;
And after fannyd yt so clene
That ther was no chaff ysene,
And the strawh yleyd a-syde;
ffor ther ne myghte nat a-byde
Husk nor chaff, but puryd greyn,
Nor, no thing that was in veyn,
Al mad nakyd off entent,
Out off his olde vestement.
(5411–20)

The process of threshing the grain refers to Christ beginning his public ministry and thereby both fulfilling and superseding the Old Testament. With Christ’s coming, the “chaff” of the Old Law, or “olde vestement,” is cast off to reveal the “puryd greyn” or naked meaning of Christ. By claiming that the institution of the Eucharist offers believers clarity because it removes Old Testament historical prefiguration even while asserting the importance of the Eucharist—itsel understood as a figure—through an allegorical narrative, Grace Dieu shows that figuration is an essential part of understanding the sacrament. The veil cannot and should not be entirely lifted. By casting away the shell of the Old Testament through his institution of the Eucharist, Christ did not remove figuration; rather, he introduced more levels of figurative meaning. The incarnation of Christ is fulfilled in the Eucharist because it complicates rather than simplifies the available modes of figuration and signification. The challenge for believers is to recognize that certain kinds of figurative signification are more important than others; historical figuration of the Eucharist is less important than the full unification of figure and truth in the sacrament itself.

For Lydgate’s *Pilgrimage*, the long parade of signifiers—both within the section on the Eucharist and the poem’s long list of allegorical figures—suggests a richness of meaning and a poetic abundance that Lydgate sees as stemming from the sacramental and leading to the poetic. Lydgate praises the value of figurative language both because it places a hierarchy upon different levels of meaning and because it enables the overlap between these varying levels of

30. On the shell and kernel analogy, see David Aers, *Piers Plowman*. 

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signification. Even though one figure always leads to another figure and never to completely transparent spiritual enlightenment, the constant entangling of lines of signification provides readers with a sense of how Lydgate means to depict the transcendent and the true. Rather than leading to the collapse of signifier and signified, the Eucharist is the site of the multiplication of both, providing an abundance of language and an abundance of meaning. At the same time, the interpretive hierarchies the Pilgrimage proposes also suggest a social function to the Eucharist, particularly the clerical regulation of lay spirituality.

FIGURATION, COMMUNITY, AND A PROCESSION OF CORPUS CHRISTI

For Lydgate, poetry and the Eucharist share the social function of constructing the Christian community through spiritual and intellectual illumination. As he states in his *Fall of Princes*, “God sette writying & lettres in sentence, / Ageyn the dullness of our infirmyte, / This world tenlumyne be craft of eloquence.” As Meyer-Lee explains, Lydgate regards poetry as “a mode of illuminating bestowed by God on writers so that they may make manifest eternal truths not otherwise available.” In *A Procession of Corpus Christi*, the focus of this final section, Lydgate makes his clearest case for poetic language as a reflection and outgrowth of eucharistic theology by showing how the Eucharist and figurative language are both instrumental in constructing the corporate body of Christ signified by the consecrated host. In this poem, Lydgate uses metonymy and historical prefiguration in order to demonstrate the way in which the Eucharist's figurative language makes religious community possible. In *Procession*, Lydgate effects a medieval Christian community centered on a salvation history made legible through a shared hermeneutics of figural interpretation.

This poem centers on the way in which historical figures have made and continue to make the Eucharist intelligible to medieval Christians through written texts. *Procession* is a poem that, as the title suggests, describes a dramatic procession to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, and like much of the literature surrounding the feast day, this poem focuses both on Christ's eucharistic presence and the Christian community as corpus mysticum, the corporate body of Christ. In the poem, Lydgate describes a procession that...

includes, in historical order, twenty-six historical biblical figures and theologians, beginning with Adam and concluding with Thomas Aquinas. There is no mention in the text itself that it is a script or performance record—although it is certainly a possibility—but Lydgate invites his reader to imagine it as a physical procession of important religious men who prefigure, write about, or develop complex theologies on the Eucharist.

By constructing a complex web of figurations and significations in order to explain the importance both of the Eucharist and of the Christian community, Lydgate deliberately examines the role of figurative interpretation in shaping medieval Christians’ understanding of themselves as the corporate body of Christ.³³ The poem’s first stanza demonstrates the interdependence of spirituality and figurative poetics. Lydgate introduces the procession, saying, “For now þis day al derkenesse tenlumyne, / In youre presence fette out of fygure, / Schal beo declared by many vnkouþe signe / Gracyous misteryes grounded in scripture” (5–8).³⁴ According to Lydgate, this dramatic procession is designed to explain the importance of the Eucharist and the feast of Corpus Christi itself. This illumination must occur through figures, meaning both human bodies and figurative signs, and “many vnkouþe signe.” In other words, Lydgate intentionally presents the Eucharist in a way that is unfamiliar and intellectually challenging. The knowledge that readers are to gain about the feast and the sacrament comes necessarily through an intellectual process of disentangling known from unknown, truth from figure, and figure from sign. The immediacy of the physical procession, whether real or imagined, does not make spiritual knowledge more easily accessed; rather it makes interpretation more difficult because it demands that the Christian community view itself figuratively.

Through its use of a procession, the poem joins with writers such as William Langland and Margery Kempe by inviting readers to examine the complexity of the signifying relationship between corpus Christi and corpus mysticum.³⁵ Throughout the poem, Lydgate emphasizes the meaning of “figure” as “human body.” On one level, the human body is important to the feast


³⁵. On the relationship between corpus mysticum and corpus Christi, see de Lubac, Corpus mysticum: L’Euchariste. For an English translation see de Lubac, Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist.
day because it celebrates the human body of Christ present in the Eucharist; however, the human “figure” is also important in this poem as the bodies of both performers and viewers constitute a human community metonymically signifying the corporate body of Christ. As scholars have shown, medieval celebrations of the feast of Corpus Christi often capitalize on the way in which the *corpus Christi* and *corpus mysticum* signify each other. The more traditional Corpus Christi processions included both the consecrated host in a monstrance and representatives of a whole town’s community; the corporate body of Christ processed alongside the sacramental body of Christ. As the feast went on to develop in England, some municipalities produced more dramatic processions and less explicitly liturgical displays of devotion to the body of Christ. As Miri Rubin notes, the religious and social fraternity of the London skinners produced a dramatic procession involving *tableaux vivants*; she hypothesizes that Lydgate’s *Procession* may be either a commentary on or a script for that particular performance. Regardless of whether or not this particular procession was ever performed, Lydgate’s poem certainly expects his audience to be familiar with this sort of physical procession and understand that he is describing physical human bodies, not simply abstract images. Thus, Lydgate challenges his audience to see how each physical human body signifies a historical person and that historical person signifies the Eucharist, which itself signifies both the corporate and historical bodies of Christ. The complex chain of signification begins and ends with a human body, but that body’s meaning is not self-evident. Lydgate’s audience must continually consider how body relates to body, how *corpus mysticum* has both a figurative and a physical relationship to *corpus Christi*. This relationship is one that involves multiple kinds of figuration that Lydgate sets out to interpret for his audience.

In order to make sense of the poem’s series of historical figurations, Lydgate encourages readers to draw on a shared vocabulary of biblical prefiguration and salvation history, a salvation history that demands the audience’s inward interpretation in order for it to be made legible. Particularly in the first half of the poem, historical prefiguration is central to Lydgate’s understanding of the human body’s relationship to Christ. By examining food imagery throughout the Old Testament, Lydgate creates both a history for the Eucharist and a shared history for the fifteenth-century English Christian community. The Eucharist is not merely an object or an opportunity for a one-on-one personal relationship with Christ’s physical body; it is also an opportunity to

38. Ibid., 238.
engage with a historical community. As a representative example, let us consider the poem’s first figure, Adam:

First, þat þis feste may more beo magnefyed,  
Seópe and considerþe in youre ðymaginatþf  
For Adams synne howe Cryst was cucrefyed  
Vppon a crosse, to stinen al oure styyf.  
Fruty celestyal hong on þe tree of lyff,  
þe fruyt of fruytes, for shorte conclusyoun,  
Oure helpe, oure foode, and oure restoratyf  
And cheef repaste of oure redempcioun.  
(9–16)

While inviting his audience either to look on a physical performer or imagine one, Lydgate explains that the figure ought to remind the audience of a common historical prefiguration: the first man, Adam, prefigures the second Adam, Christ.39 However, the way in which Lydgate asks his audience to make the connection between Adam and Christ is astonishingly swift and makes considerable demands on the reader. After spending only two lines explaining that Christ’s crucifixion compensates for Adam’s Original Sin, Lydgate goes on to compare the fruit of the tree of knowledge to the Eucharist, referring to the Eucharist as “þe fruyt of fruytes.” The shift from one kind of fruit to another is swift and implicit, assuming that, by drawing on the conventional figurative relationship between Adam and Christ, readers will be able to make the leap from forbidden fruit to Eucharist through their own imaginative sight.

The interpretation in which Lydgate asks his audience to engage is fundamentally textual in nature, implying that the human community of the Christian church only becomes intelligible through textual representation. In large part, Lydgate creates this textual focus by presenting a procession of people whose identities are tied to writing: biblical characters, writers of books of the Bible, and writers of theology. In his description of Isaac, an ancestor of Mary, Lydgate praises the Virgin Mary, whom he explains is figured in the procession, not through a physical appearance but through an explicitly textual one. Mary’s name, spelt “Marye,” Lydgate tells us “is fygurde here with lettres five” (40). By excluding Mary physically from the procession, Lydgate is able to keep the entire procession male and thus maintain both the typical gender boundaries of traditional Corpus Christi processions as well as carefully dissociate this lone female figure from the priestly figures that otherwise

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39. The biblical source for this prefiguration is 1 Corinthians 15.
populate the procession. More significantly, however, this emphasis on Mary’s name highlights the importance of the written text to an understanding of the Christian community. Since many in Lydgate’s audience—particularly if this poem was intended to be read aloud at a public performance—would be hearing rather than reading the poem, Lydgate’s description of the number of letters of Mary’s name is oddly distancing. Such a description, much like many of the biblical and theological texts that the poem invokes, asks readers to imagine a text that they are not physically reading. These methods of figuration, through procession or through physical writing, are certainly different, but both involve a level of linguistic and textual interpretation. Whether the medieval audience of the poem would have had access to biblical texts, theological texts, or the text of the poem itself, Lydgate posits that the very idea of Christian community is bound together by textuality, grounded in the interpretation of figurative language.

According to Lydgate, the Eucharist provides spiritual clarity to the Christian church by making figurative interpretation possible. Lydgate emphasizes the supersession of the New Testament by the Old Testament, but does not therefore dismiss the Old Testament figures or the importance of figuration itself.40 After Lydgate concludes his description of Old Testament figures and writers, the word “figure” itself does not appear again until the concluding stanza of the poem. As he moves forward in history, Lydgate implies a degree of historical supersession such that Christian history fulfills and is therefore superior to Jewish history. Thus, the relationship between the figures in the procession is hierarchical with some figures more fully representing truth than others. In contrast to his description of Old Testament figures, Lydgate’s description of Saint Luke is illustrative:

Lucas confermēþe of þis hooly bloode,  
Tavoyde aweye al Ambeguytee,  
‘þis is my bodye þat schal for man beo ded,  
Him to delyver frome infernal powstee;  
To Jherusalem, þemperyal cite,  
Him to conduyte eternally tabyde,  
Adam oure fader and his posteritee,

40. My reading thus differs somewhat from Andrew Cole’s reading insofar as I argue that there is a degree of figurative supersession at work in the poem, even if Lydgate does not believe that the figure is a concealment that is eventually removed. Cole argues that, for Lydgate, “there is no figurative supersession, no discarding of form for the sake of substance or meaning.” Cole, Literature and Heresy, 151.
In his recounting of Luke’s gospel account of the Last Supper, Lydgate returns to the prefiguration from the second stanza—the relationship between Adam and Christ—and clearly demonstrates how Christ’s crucifixion is the solution to the problem of Original Sin created by Adam’s disobedience. Unlike the Old Testament figures, whom he explicitly names as figures and likenesses, Lydgate depicts Luke as straightforward and literal about the Eucharist in order to avoid any “Ambeguytee.” Of course, on many levels, this stanza about Luke does not in fact avoid ambiguity. If we are looking for a statement on or a response to contemporary discussions of transubstantiation and its alternatives, for example, we will not find answers here. Essentially, all this stanza reveals about the Eucharist is that the Eucharist is Christ’s body and that this body has the power, through the crucifixion, to provide salvation to all of humankind. This stanza is simultaneously straightforward and surprisingly vague, given the complex doctrinal discussions circulating around the Eucharist during the fifteenth century. However, Lydgate claims that Luke dispels ambiguity insofar as he fulfills the prophecies and prefigurations of the Old Testament. In that sense, with the coming of Christ and the institution of the Eucharist, figurative language from the Old Testament is clearer because it now signifies the historical person of Christ, but the veil of figuration does not disappear altogether. Lydgate still uses figuration to describe those who lived and wrote after the coming of Christ, but he suggests that Christ’s eucharistic presence makes such figuration intelligible.

As in the Pilgrimage, the figurative interpretation in which Lydgate asks readers to engage is essentially hierarchical, both with regard to the relationship between figure and truth and with regard to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the institutional church. In order to demonstrate that the Eucharist is different in kind from other figures in the poem insofar as it unites figure and truth, Lydgate carefully draws distinctions between the terms “figure,” “figure only,” and “likeness” throughout the poem.41 When describing Melchisedech’s offering of bread and wine, Lydgate cautiously explains that this offering is “fygure oonly of þe sacrament” (19), indicating that there is a distinction between the Eucharist—which is both figure and truth—and other symbols that do not contain and effect what they signify. All the figures in the poem are like

41. In contrast, Cole argues that Lydgate does not make such a sharp distinction. While it is true, as Cole argues, that this poem does not go behind appearances in order to make a direct statement on the true form of Christ’s sacramental body, I would argue that this interest in the figure is not a radical theological move. Cole, Literature and Heresy, 150.
the Eucharist insofar as they carry meaning across time; have a relationship
to physical bodies, texts, and the body of Christ; and point to a divine truth,
but not every figure operates in precisely the same way. When Lydgate uses
the term “likeness,” it has a much narrower range of meaning than “figure,”
suggesting primarily resemblance. So, for example, manna is both a “figure
and likeness” of the Eucharist because it both prefigures the Eucharist and,
as bread, physically resembles the host (53). And Aaron is a “likenesse . . .
Of trewe preesthode” because the way in which he performs priestly duties
for the Israelites resembles the duties of medieval Christian priests (57; 59).
Lydgate does not want his audience to equate manna with the Eucharist or
to equate Aaron with Christian priests. Rather, he continually reminds his
audience that there is a difference between different kinds of figuration and
resemblance. The Eucharist makes possible an enfolding of figure and truth
that is not fully possible outside of a sacramental context. Lydgate encourages
readers to engage in poetic interpretation while recognizing that such inter-
pretation has limits that have been defined by a wider church community and
ecclesiastical hierarchy that extend beyond the individual reader’s subjective
experience.

*Procession* emphasizes how its own use of figurative language makes the
social event of Corpus Christi legible as a feast that draws together a human
Christian community across temporal boundaries. The poem’s figurative lan-
guage, modeled on the Eucharist itself, invites readers to see themselves as
actively engaged in salvation history through poetic interpretation. In the
closing stanza, Lydgate reintroduces the word “figure” in order to encourage
readers to see how the Eucharist makes possible their own engagement in the
history of figuration that the poem presents. He concludes:

> With þeos figures shewed in youre presence,
> By diuers liknesses you to doo plesaunce,
> Resceiueþe hem with devoute reverence,
> Þis bred of lyfe yee kepe in Remembraunce
> Oute of þis Egipte of worldely grevaunce,
> Youre restoratyff celestyal manna,
> Of which God graunt eternal suffysaunce
> Where aungels sing everlasting Osanna.

(217–24)

He acknowledges that part of the function of figuration is to entertain read-
ers and to provide them with aesthetic pleasure, and through this aesthetic
pleasure, readers are meant to see how their own lives are also part of this
figural history and web of significations. He refers to manna once again as a prefiguration of the Eucharist, but then suggests that the Exodus narrative is not only a prefiguration of Christ but also a tropological allegory prefiguring Christians’ exile from the promised land of heaven. The readers themselves become figures in the poem, both drawing on and referring to the Eucharist. The Eucharist’s multiple levels of figuration make it possible for readers to see themselves as participating in that figuration. Lydgate suggests that the community becomes intelligible as a manifestation of the corpus mysticum by engaging in the theological and poetic work of interpreting figures.

Throughout his poetic treatments of the Eucharist, Lydgate consistently challenges readers to regard the Eucharist and poetic language as mutually constituting; neither would be intelligible without the other. Both eucharistic devotion and poetic interpretation demand the reader’s intellectual engagement and self-reflection, processes that Lydgate presents as leading to spiritual growth both of the individual and the wider Christian community. Instead of merely using figurative language to explain the Eucharist, Lydgate draws on the Eucharist to reveal the spiritual and social importance of figurative language. Thus, as a self-proclaimed authority on the Middle English poetic tradition, Lydgate engages with the vernacular tradition of eucharistic poetics in order to make a claim for the importance of his own highly figurative and intellectual poetic style. It is through eucharistic poetics—with its emphasis on the ways in which inscribed textual objects both invite and deny access to transcendent meaning—that believers can come to an understanding of both the historical and corporate bodies of Christ.