

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Reading Ritual: Biblical Hermeneutics and the Liturgical “Text” in Pre-Reformation England

Matthew J. Rinkevich

Volume 41, numéro 2, printemps 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085963ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29833>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Rinkevich, M. (2018). Reading Ritual: Biblical Hermeneutics and the Liturgical “Text” in Pre-Reformation England. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(2), 37–63. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i2.29833>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article avance que les auteurs catholiques anglais de la période pré-Réforme ont considéré la liturgie comme un type de texte biblique pouvant être interprété avec les outils exégétiques traditionnels, tels que l'allégorèse. L'étude se penche en particulier sur trois ouvrages dévotionnels des premières décennies du XVI^e siècle : les *Meditatytions for Goostly Exerctyse, in the Tyme of the Masse* (c.1515) de B. Langford, *The Vertue of the Masse* de John Lydgate dans l'édition de 1520 de Wynken de Worde, et les sermons de John Fisher publiés sous le titre *Lamentationes, Carmen et Vae* (c.1534). Ces exégèses liturgiques utilisent la théologie sacramentelle catholique et soulignent le fait que son orthodoxie correspond à l'accent que mettent les réformateurs sur l'alphabétisation des fidèles. En replaçant chaque texte dans un contexte plus large, cette analyse approfondit les descriptions de la culture religieuse soulignant les ruptures entre le Moyen Âge et la Renaissance ainsi qu'entre le catholicisme et le protestantisme. On propose ainsi une vision plus complète des expériences religieuses entourant les débuts de la Réforme anglaise.

Reading Ritual: Biblical Hermeneutics and the Liturgical “Text” in Pre-Reformation England*

MATTHEW J. RINKEVICH

University of Delaware

This article argues that orthodox English writers during the pre-Reformation period conceptualized the liturgy as a type of biblical text interpreted with traditional exegetical tools, especially allegoresis. In particular, it focuses upon three devotional works produced during the first several decades of the sixteenth century: B. Langforde’s Meditatyons for Goostly Exercese, in the Tyme of the Masse (ca. 1515); Wynken de Worde’s 1520 edition of John Lydgate’s The Vertue of the Masse; and John Fisher’s sermon Lamentationes, Carmen, et Vae (ca. 1534). These liturgical exegeses uphold orthodox sacramental theology and maintain that such orthodoxy complements the emphasis placed upon literacy by reformers. Placing each text within a larger context, this analysis complicates narratives of religious culture that insist upon divisions between the medieval and the early modern and the Catholic and the Protestant. It offers a fuller picture of religious experiences surrounding the English Reformation’s inception.

Cet article avance que les auteurs catholiques anglais de la période pré-Réforme ont considéré la liturgie comme un type de texte biblique pouvant être interprété avec les outils exégétiques traditionnels, tels que l’allégorèse. L’étude se penche en particulier sur trois ouvrages dévotionnels des premières décennies du XVI^e siècle : les Meditatyons for Goostly Exercese, in the Tyme of the Masse (c.1515) de B. Langford, The Vertue of the Masse de John Lydgate dans l’édition de 1520 de Wynken de Worde, et les sermons de John Fisher publiés sous le titre Lamentationes, Carmen et Vae (c.1534). Ces exégèses liturgiques utilisent la théologie sacramentelle catholique et soulignent le fait que son orthodoxie correspond à l’accent que mettent les réformateurs sur l’alphabétisation des fidèles. En replaçant chaque texte dans un contexte plus large, cette analyse approfondit les descriptions de la culture religieuse soulignant les ruptures entre le Moyen Âge et la Renaissance ainsi qu’entre le catholicisme et le protestantisme. On propose ainsi une vision plus complète des expériences religieuses entourant les débuts de la Réforme anglaise.

During the sixteenth century, English reformers saw their biblical devotion—the attention they paid to both scriptural reading and preaching—as one

* I would like to thank Kristen Poole, Julian Yates, James Dean, Jane Wessel, and Carolyne King for responding to earlier versions of this article. I am also indebted to the two anonymous readers whose constructive criticism strengthened this piece considerably.

of the major practices distinguishing them from those who adhered to the Old Religion. They believed that, while Catholics fiddled with rosary beads and craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the consecrated host, Protestants rightly privileged the Bible as the bedrock of Christian piety. Admittedly, Protestants found both scriptural and liturgical devotion necessary, but as Arnold Hunt recognizes, “the word was primary, the sacraments secondary.”¹ He explains, “The value of the sacraments lay in their use as means to confirm and strengthen the assurance of one’s salvation.”² God’s word, especially when preached, brought about conversion, and his sacraments signified and sustained it. Embracing word and sacrament, Protestant theologians decried papist biblical neglect in treatises such as Cranmer’s *Defence of the Trve and Catholike Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Bloud of Our Sauuour Christ* (1550) and John Field’s *Admonition to the Parliament* (1572).³ Popular authors also voiced their disdain for Catholic practices in gleefully satirical works like *A Balade of a Preist that Loste His Nose for Sayinge of Masse as I Suppose* (1570).⁴ Describing the physical mutilation of a Catholic priest, Sir John of Lee, this broadside recounts the follies of Catholic believers, including their biblical negligence. Like his coreligionists, Sir John “rayless at gods boke & reeles at his masse.” Scandalously, the Bible lies neglected while priests dance to the altar.

Such a narrative might make for ribald broadsides and polemical treatises, but otherwise it fails to withstand much scrutiny. From at least the late medieval period, reading—including private, even scriptural, reading—grew as a central component of popular devotion, and although many of the Catholic faithful were illiterate, the scriptures (and reading more generally) thrived in religious

1. Arnold Hunt, “The Lord’s Supper in Early Modern England,” in *Past & Present* 161 (1998): 39–83, 55.

2. Hunt, “The Lord’s Supper in Early Modern England,” 57.

3. See Thomas Cranmer, *A Defence of the Trve and Catholike Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Bloud of Our Sauuour Christ* (London: R. Wolfe, 1550), and John Field, *An Admonition to the Parliament: A View of Popishe Abuses Yet Remayning in the Englishe Church, for the which Godly Minsters Have Refused to Subscribe* (Hemel Hempstead: J. Stroud, 1572). Cranmer upholds the central importance of the Eucharist for Christian worship but rejects sacrificial conceptions of the sacrament. Field excoriates the 1559 Elizabethan religious settlements, lamenting congregants’ lack of biblical knowledge.

4. *A Balade of a Preist that Loste His Nose for Sayinge of Masse as I Suppose* (London: 1570). Original spellings have been retained when citing primary sources; the only exception is the standardization of the long “s.” I have standardized capitalizations in titles. Italics indicate textual expansions, as do non-italics in titles.

practice and piety.⁵ Margaret Aston suggests that English emphasis on reading intensified in both ecclesiastical and secular circles after 1300, and literacy was no longer solely or primarily the domain of the clergy.⁶ In part, popular devotional practices such as private affective meditation caused this bibliophilic tendency; readers devoured treatises, hagiographies, fables, poems, prayer collections, and miracle stories, using them to strengthen their prayer lives.⁷ Due to the efforts of printers like William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde, print publications littered the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century marketplace, especially after 1500 when de Worde established his shop in Fleet Street and began printing for popular audiences.⁸ While Caxton primarily depended upon royal and noble patronage, de Worde embraced the lucrative possibilities of the popular press and published inexpensive quarto- and octavo-sized romances, children's books, devotionals, manner and marriage manuals, medicinal texts, and polemical sermons for only a few pennies.⁹ Vernacular works dominated.¹⁰

5. Although conservative estimates place English literacy at approximately 10 percent (for men) during the first decade of the sixteenth century and at 30 percent (again, for men) by 1600, rudimentary reading literacy was doubtlessly higher. Ian Moulton sees a direct correlation between the rise of literacy and the increased emphasis placed upon reading in Christian devotion. See Moulton's Introduction, in *Reading and Literacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Ian Frederick Moulton (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), xi, and Joad Raymond's "The Origins of Popular Print Culture," in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Volume One: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660*, ed. Joad Raymond (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

6. Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984), 103.

7. Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 68–77.

8. James Moran, *Wynkyn de Worde: Father of Fleet Street* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2003), 17. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, in her foundational *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and Brian Cummings, in *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), stress the importance of print publications for both orthodox and reformed popular religious movements during the early sixteenth century.

9. Moran, 21–22.

10. Almost two-thirds of books printed in England were in English at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In Europe, vernacular publications were under 30 percent. See Tamara Atkin and A. S. G. Edwards's chapter, "Printers, Publishers and Promoters to 1558," in *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain 1476–1558*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 27–44.

Consulting reference books housed in the parish church and possibly educated with scriptural breviaries and psalters, pre-Reformation Christians—if they were literate—had a great deal of reading material at their disposal.¹¹ And marketplace and church house alike provided them.

Mindful of this confessional and literary landscape, I turn to the relationship between pre-Reformation ritual worship and reading practice. I suggest that, while sixteenth-century Protestant polemic and succeeding historical narratives sometimes recognize a sharp divide between literary piety and liturgical devotion, the actual experience of English Christians before Henry VIII's break from Rome was more complex.¹² In particular, I point to several sixteenth-century texts by Catholic writers who appreciated the importance of biblical familiarity in Christian life and integrated it into liturgical worship. In these treatises, poems, and sermons, ritual celebrations like the Mass become a type of (biblical) reading. Focusing on these works, I join with other scholars revising our understanding of the period. Peter Stallybrass, for instance, demonstrates that bookmaking was central to Catholic worship during the sixteenth century.¹³ Similarly, Andrew Hope's survey of sixteenth-century imported books, particularly liturgical works, leads him to conclude that late medieval Catholic ritual was bibliocentric. He explains, "Sacramental grace required the use of the correct liturgical words and the new technology of printing held out the hope of imposing verbal uniformity in ways that had not been possible before."¹⁴ Additionally, Alexandra Walsham makes a strong case for the active reading culture of post-Reformation English Catholicism; she argues that devotional reading might have offered an alternative to missionary efforts and liturgical

11. Stacy Gee's "Parochial Libraries in Pre-Reformation England," in *Learning and Literacy in Medieval England and Abroad*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 199–222, examines parish libraries from 1350 to 1536. In the two centuries before the Reformation, at least 192 parishes owned one or more reference books.

12. Among those succeeding historical narratives, I count works like Craig R. Thompson's *The Bible in English 1525–1611* (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1958), Gerald Hammond's *The Making of the English Bible* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1982), and E. H. Robertson's *Makers of the English Bible* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2000).

13. Peter Stallybrass, "Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible," in *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies*, ed. Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 47.

14. Andrew Hope, "The Printed Book Trade in Response to Luther: English Books Printed Abroad," in Gillespie and Powell, ed., 272.

practice.¹⁵ Building upon these studies, I further deconstruct the notion that Catholic investment in liturgical worship precluded individuated scriptural devotion—an idea that has persisted since it was put forth in polemical tracts like *A Balade of a Preist*.

However, my goal is not to prove that Catholics read the Bible—that they did is without question. Rather, I challenge a persistent historical narrative of Catholic biblical antipathy by highlighting an unusual and exciting epistemological approach to both reading and ritual. Examining three devotional works produced during the first several decades of the sixteenth century, I show that orthodox writers during the period conceptualized the liturgy as a type of biblical text—one interpreted and experienced through traditional hermeneutical tools. In particular, I highlight the manner in which they used allegoresis, the major interpretive mode of medieval biblical exegesis, to understand the liturgy.¹⁶ Doing so, I focus on reading practices that collapsed the divide between word and sacrament, which others have recognized without unpacking as thoroughly as they might. For example, Walsham argues that, for many Catholics in Elizabethan England, “poring over a book was an act of worship, the printed item becoming as much of an icon and object of pious reverence as an alabaster image, *agnus dei*, crucifix or string of rosary beads.”¹⁷ Reversing Walsham’s observation, I highlight the manner in which some pre-Reformation Catholics constructed ritual worship as akin to “poring over a book.” They invited worshippers—readers—to interpret it. In making this argument, I first examine B. Langforde’s *Meditatyonys for Goostly Exercyse, in the Tyme of the Masse*, an unpublished manuscript from the first approximate decade of the sixteenth century. This devotional treatise allegorizes the liturgy as a biblical narrative, and in its pages, Langforde applies traditional reading modes to church ritual. Proceeding from Langforde’s *Meditatyonys*, I examine

15. Alexandra Walsham, “Domme Preachers’: Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print,” in *Past & Present* 168 (2000): 72–123, 80.

16. Allegory became entrenched in Christian theology when Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE) and others adopted it as a tool for interpreting the Jewish scriptures. Concepts like the *Quadrige* with its four interpretive senses—the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical—influenced medieval and early modern conceptions of the Bible and literature. See John S. Pendergast’s *Religion, Allegory, and Literacy in Early Modern England, 1560–1640: The Control of the Word* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), particularly chapter 2, “Augustine and Early Modern Literacy.”

17. Walsham, 120.

a 1520 edition of John Lydgate's *The Vertue of the Masse*. Lydgate's poem, published on the cheap in de Worde's print shop, also interprets the Mass as a biblical allegory, and it encourages biblical and liturgical reading. Finally, I conclude with John Fisher's Good Friday sermon *Lamentationes, Carmen, et Vae* (ca. 1534). Fisher's sermon, by presenting the crucifix as a bibliographic image, constructs Catholic worship as a reading experience and combats the iconoclastic inclinations of reformers. Committed to traditional Catholic sacramentality, each of these writers instructs believers by presenting the liturgy as a Bible to be read.

The works of Langforde, Lydgate, and Fisher convert the liturgical experience into a literary one. They suggest that divine worship is an act of reading and provide the glosses necessary for comprehension. Written or published in the thirty years before Henry VIII's legislative reformation, these texts demonstrate a significant and generically diverse English investment in biblical reading before the Reformation. They also reveal, to appropriate Patrick Collinson's description of Protestant England, "a whole world of biblical thought, reflection, imagination and rhetoric."¹⁸ Focusing on the manner in which three Catholic writers read church liturgy, I interpret their works (or, in the case of Lydgate's *Vertue*, its publication) as participating in 1) the reading and print culture of late medieval and early modern England, and 2) the controversy of religious nonconformity, both preceding and during the Reformation. The liturgical exegeses offered by Langforde, Lydgate, and Fisher uphold orthodox sacramental theology and insist that such orthodoxy complements the emphasis placed upon literacy by reformers. Placing each text within a larger historical, religious, and literary context, this analysis further complicates narratives of religious culture that insist upon divisions between the medieval and the early modern and the Catholic and the Protestant, especially in regard to liturgy and literacy. It aims to offer a fuller picture of English religious experiences during the Reformation's inception.

18. Patrick Collinson, "The Coherence of the Text: How It Hangeth Together: The Bible in Reformation England," in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honour of James Atkinson*, ed. W. P. Stephens (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 84.

Liturgical literacy

The earliest of the three texts considered here is B. Langforde’s *Meditatyons for Goostly Exercyse, in the Tyme of the Masse*. This manuscript reveals very little about itself, and because of this fact, as well as the minimal scholarly attention the *Meditatyons* has received, some introductory information seems necessary. Langforde, possibly a scribe rather than an author, identifies himself as a priest, but remains largely anonymous otherwise.¹⁹ The few scholars who have examined his treatise—a collection of some twenty-seven pages measuring approximately 138 millimetres by 185 millimetres—cannot agree upon the age of the document. J. Wickham Legg, who provides the source text for this analysis, dates the devotional pamphlet to anywhere from the middle of the fifteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth, and Gregory Dix states that the *Meditatyons* was composed during the 1400s. J. A. W. Bennett, Thomas Frederick Simmons, and Aston, however, all favour a late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century composition date, and Bennett and Simmons offer the reign of Henry VII as the likeliest period of production: 1485–1509. Eamon Duffy identifies the *Meditatyons* as an early sixteenth-century treatise, and Suzanne Yeager, in her unpublished master’s thesis, traces the document’s secretary hand to the first third or first quarter of the sixteenth century. Finally, a catalogue published online by the Bodleian Library, which houses the manuscript, dates it to the early sixteenth century.²⁰ Given this information, one may offer 1500–1515 as the most likely period in which Langforde composed the *Meditatyons*.

Although Langforde omits his composition date, he clearly explains why he writes. Langforde hopes his *Meditatyons* will deepen the liturgical experience

19. I present Langforde as actively composing the *Meditatyons*. I am, however, aware that he may have transcribed the piece. See S. M. Yeager’s “Wood Empt 17 ‘Meditatyons for Goostly Exercyse, in the Tyme of the Masse’: An Edition and Notes” (master’s thesis, Hertford College, Oxford, 1997), 4, 29–30.

20. Consult J. Wickham Legg, ed., *Tracts on the Mass* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1904), xv; Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1975), 605; J. A. W. Bennett’s “Vernacular and the Liturgy in the English Middle Ages,” in *The Humane Medievalist and Other Essays in English Literature and Learning, from Chaucer to Eliot*, ed. Piero Boitani (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1982), 127; Thomas Frederick Simmons, ed., *The Lay Folks Mass Book; Or, The Manner of Hearing Mass, with Rubrics and Devotions for the People, in Four Texts, and Offices in English According to the Use of York, from Manuscripts of the Xth to the XVth Century* (London: N. Trübner, 1879), 168; Aston, 123; Duffy, 19; Yeager, 3–4; and “MSS. Wood,” *Bodleian Library, University of Oxford*, last modified on 13 July 2011, <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/online/medieval/wood/wood.html> (site page discontinued).

of his readers. The *Meditatyon*s directs readers to contemplate the life, suffering, and death of Christ as recorded in the Gospels, and to accomplish its meditative aims, it encourages them to draw parallels between Mass parts and Gospel events. Consider, for example, the following excerpt:

And thus in the tyme of euery masse and nothing lettyng yor other devocyon, you may gyffe thankes, honor and reuerence to Allmyghty god, and from the begynnyng of the masse vnto the sacryng, yow may haue medytatyon of our Lordes blyssyd Incarnatyon and preching. And from the sacryng vnto the vsing be done, you may remember the mandye, the turmentes, the Passyon and deith of our sauour, and after the post Common yow may consyder the Ioyfull staite of the Resurrectyon, and in the tyme of **Ite missa est** hys glorious Ascensyon.²¹

In this passage, Langforde likens the first part of the Mass, with its epistolary and evangelical readings, to Christ's public ministry. Then, he interprets the second part of the Mass, in which the canon was recited and communion received, as an image of Christ's Passion. Doing so, he highlights the cult of the Blessed Sacrament in which the faithful worshipped the consecrated altar bread and wine as Christ himself. Finally, Langforde presents the concluding rites as a meditative enactment of Jesus's resurrection and ascension. The priest insists that worshippers read the liturgical celebration in a particular manner; he directs them to read it as an allegory of the life of Christ, who descended into humanity's "vaile of myserie" (19) through his incarnation. As an allegory, the Mass becomes a veil that, once lifted, reveals the Christian mysteries, i.e., the salvific actions of Christ's life, death, and resurrection recounted in the Bible.

Doing so, Langforde participates within a larger tradition of biblical hermeneutics that dominated the medieval period, namely allegorical interpretation. Fundamentally, allegoresis is a mode of reading in which one detects the multiple and veiled meanings of a piece of writing. It centres on careful and laborious textual analysis. Participating within this tradition, Langforde offers his *Meditatyon*s as a gloss to properly read the Mass and make sense of its oblique ritual elements. Langforde begins this task by

21. Legg, ed., 28 (hereafter cited in the text). Italics indicate textual expansions made by Legg; bolded text indicates red ink in the original manuscript. Some punctuation has been revised for the present study.

taxonomically identifying several sacred vestments and vessels. By recording the names of the various ritual objects, Langforde prepares those reading his tract to become better readers of the Mass; he improves their basic literacy. Assessing his rhetorical choice within an allegorical context, one can relate this basic identification to the first feature of the medieval *Quadriga*: the literal. By describing the various objects and actions observed by the viewer—the chalice, the corporal, the altar, etc. (19)—Langforde introduces the literal sense of the Mass. The viewer must initially recognize and understand the *litera* to deepen their reading, lift the veil, and progress toward deeper meditation. Langforde continues this rudimentary yet essential task throughout, identifying the recitation of the Gospel (22), the canon (23–26), and other ritual moments.

The *Meditatyons* then insists that every discernible feature of the Mass represents something related to the life of Christ; each transcends its immediate appearance, usage, and function. An altar is not just a block of stone, a chalice is not simply a cup, and most important, a host is not just a piece of bread. According to Langforde, the priest “signifith Crist,” his vestments “signifyth **The Garmentes, Whyte and purpule** with which herode and the Iewys dyd clothe our Sauyour in grett scorn and derysyon,” the chalice signifies the tomb in which Christ was placed after his death, and the water and wine in the chalice “represent the expresse effusyon **of Blood and watter** from hys blyssyd Side” (19). Langforde offers readers this litany of allegoresis, and through it, he invites them to begin reading the Mass allegorically. The church service becomes a polysemous text, and it compels churchgoers to become its readers and interpreters.

Cultural literacy lies at the heart of Langforde’s project, and he presages the modern pedagogical work of E. D. Hirsch and others.²² While emphasizing technical literacy—what Walter Ong defines as turning linguistic symbols into sounds—Hirsch also insists upon the necessity of shared general knowledge among readers, and he argues that “true literacy” requires such cultural literacy.²³ Through his *Meditatyons*, Langforde also encourages the formation of readers with shared cultural resources upon which they can draw during

22. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

23. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 8, and Hirsch, 10. Pendergast, 17–18, uses the work of Hirsch and Ong to understand Augustine’s investment in allegorical interpretations of the Bible.

divine services. First he offers the practical information presented here as the *litera* of his allegory, and then he provides the scriptural knowledge—a source of cultural capital—to give those vessels, vestments, and actions meaning. He offers an interpretive key for greater comprehension. For Langforde, appreciation of the Mass depends upon such knowledge, and ignorance of it weakens the spiritual lives of the faithful. Hirsch argues, “Any reader who doesn’t possess the knowledge assumed in a piece he or she reads will in fact be illiterate with respect to that particular piece of writing,” and Langforde shares his sentiments.²⁴ He fashions a type of liturgical literacy through which the faithful can comprehend sacerdotal actions.

Strengthening the faiths of his readers through greater liturgical literacy, Langforde depends upon and encourages biblical literacy. Such intertextuality establishes the place of his devotional within Reformation contexts. Langforde informs readers that his “intent ys to move soolles to the devotyon of the masse and to the Lovyng Remembrance of the **Passyon of Cryst**” (21), and he encourages such devotion through implicit and explicit scriptural allusions. After the taxonomy with which Langforde begins his text, he offers a series of meditations—each inaugurated by a liturgical action—and his biblical dependence becomes apparent when analyzing even a few of these contemplative injunctions. Langforde devotes the first of these meditations to the priest’s vesting. For example, the cleric’s adornment of the maniple, a strip of cloth worn on the left wrist, should encourage readers to “remember the roips with the whiche the knyghtes dyd bynd our Sauyors handes when thai dyd Leyd hym fro Tyrant to Tyrant” (21). Similarly, the chasuble, the priest’s outermost vestment, should remind them of “the Purpule Mantell wherin they dyd cloithe our Sauyour [...] saing, haile kyng of Jewys” (21). As Langforde glosses the Mass, he returns repeatedly to the Passion narratives, translating the liturgical text into a biblical language. Relying on the congregation’s biblical familiarity, he uses their cultural literacy to clarify the meaning of the liturgical rite.

The outlawed Wycliffe Bible, translated by the condemned heretic and proto-Protestant John Wycliffe, potentially influences Langforde as he does so.²⁵

24. Hirsch, 13.

25. See Steven Justice’s “Lollardy,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 687–89; Aston’s chapters “Lollardy and the Reformaton: Survival or Revival?” and “John Wycliffe’s Reformation Reputation” in *Lollards and Reformers*; Anne Hudson’s *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford:

When Langforde describes the soldiers who arrested Christ, the priest refers to the band as “knyghtes,” and his word choice suggests the possibility of Lollard influence.²⁶ In his English translation of the New Testament, Wycliffe also uses this term when describing the same episode. As Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas—in Wycliffe’s translation of the Johannine Gospel—“hadde takun a cumpany of knyztis, and [...] he cam thidur with lanternys, and brondis, and armeris” (18:3–4). This “cumpany of knyztis,” a translation of the Vulgate’s *cohors* (18:12), or military unit, appears unique to Wycliffe. Later bibles, such as the Coverdale Bible (1535), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishops’ Bible (1568), and the King James Bible (1611), offer different translations. Of course, Langforde’s composition predates these editions, but still, they point to Wycliffe’s singular translation and, by extension, his possible influence. Additionally, a survey of contemporary devotional tracts and pamphlets devoted to the Passion, as well as the York and N-Town plays, discloses no “knyghtes.”²⁷ Langforde presents the Mass in a peculiarly scriptural context. The liturgy repeatedly directs readers to a biblical narrative, and Mass attendance becomes a form of scriptural reading. Such reading, conceivably facilitated through Lollard biblical translations, attempts to strengthen the relationship between ritual and reading by presenting liturgical participation as a type of literacy. Like many reformers, Langforde stresses the central importance of the Bible, and “literate” attendants approach the Mass as a gracious celebration through which they can deepen their biblical knowledge.

At times, Langforde’s scriptural focus even eclipses the liturgical rite. As the offertory concludes, he encourages readers to reflect upon Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (23). During this event,

Clarendon Press, 1988); and Geoffrey Martin’s “Wyclif, Lollards, and Historians, 1384–1984,” in *Lollards and their Influence in Late Medieval England*, ed. Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2009), 237–50.

26. For Wycliffe’s translation, see Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, ed., *The New Testament in English According to the Version by John Wycliffe about A.D. 1380 and Revised by John Purvey about A.D. 1388* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).

27. See *A Contemplacyon or Medytacyon of the Shedyng of the Blood of Our Lorde Ihesu Cryste at Seuene Tymys* (Westminster: Wynkyn de Worde, 1500); *The VII Shedynges of the Blode of Ihesu Cryste* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1509), a later edition of the earlier text; and *A Glorious Medytacyon of Ihesus Crystes Passyon* (London: Richard Fakes, 1523). Additionally, consult Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1982), and Douglas Sugano, ed., *The N-Town Plays* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007).

recounted in all four of the canonical Gospels, the citizens of Jerusalem greeted Christ with cries of “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest” (KJV Matt 21:9).²⁸ This parallels the Mass part, known as the *Sanctus*, to which Langforde refers; the Sarum ritual text reads, “*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domine: osana in excelsis*” (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: hosanna in the highest).²⁹ When reflecting upon this liturgical moment, Langforde includes the following Latin quotation: “**Benedictus qui venit in nomine domini [:] Oziana filio dauid**” (23). He offers a scriptural allusion rather than a liturgical one. While Langforde has a liturgical text upon which to draw—indeed, he describes the ritual moment in which it is proclaimed—his meditation ignores that resource, seemingly in favour of a scriptural one. William Maskell, when examining pre-Reformation English liturgical texts, indicates that the *Sanctus* remains uniform throughout the major cathedral uses, and none of these variants includes the ablative “filio dauid,” or “to the Son of David.”³⁰ However, Matthew’s Gospel, as indicated above, does. The relationship between liturgical interpretation and scriptural narrative becomes stronger still.

This biblical allusion, along with others, further concretizes the connection Langforde attempts to draw between liturgical worship and scriptural text. Of course, scriptural allusions permeated the medieval liturgy. The *Sanctus* itself attests to that intertextuality. However, Langforde goes to great lengths to present the Eucharistic liturgy as a hybrid reading and worship experience through allegorical modalities and scriptural allusions. It is necessary to stress Langforde’s myopic focus on scriptural events as truths veiled by liturgical *literae* because he writes during a period rich with extra-scriptural traditions. One must notice what Langforde omits. While pious practices such as the Stations of the Cross, popular during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, meditated upon non-biblical events such as Christ’s three falls on the way to Calvary

28. The decision to use the King James Bible is based solely upon readers’ general familiarity with the translation and the lack of an authorized one during the period considered.

29. William Maskell, ed., *The Ancient Liturgy of the Church of England According to the Uses of Sarum, York, Hereford, and Bangor, and the Roman Liturgy Arranged in Parallel Columns with Preface and Notes*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882), 110.

30. Maskell, ed., 110–11.

and Veronica’s veil, Langforde makes no recourse to those narratives.³¹ He also ignores the numerical obsessions of sixteenth-century popular devotion; one will not find the careful tallying of Christ’s wounds or the drops of his blood catalogued, for example, in *The VII Shedynges of the Blode of Ihesu Cryste* (1509) or *A Glorious Medytacyon of Ihesus Crystes Passyon* (1523). Instead, he focuses primarily on the Bible and biblical narratives, a practice continued throughout his *Meditatyons*. Through Langforde’s direction, readers see the Mass as a biblical text—perhaps even another Bible—that provides them with grace and good instruction.

I stress the ways in which Langforde’s *Meditatyons* reflects the controversial religious culture of its production, particularly as this relates to an increasing interest in literacy, print, and reformation. Although never printed or published, his devotional was composed in the wake of Caxton’s introduction of the printing press in England and approximately three decades before Henry VIII severed the English church from the Holy See. While Langforde utilizes allegory—what Luther would dismiss as “empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures”—to describe the liturgical actions of the Mass, he presents the liturgy as a readable and interpretable text by doing so.³² Writing during a period in which religious nonconformists criticized the sacerdotal priesthood, bemoaned the apathetic faiths of those who mumbled through a Mass, and presented the Bible as the primary source of religious truth, Langforde expresses some sympathy with reforming principles. Aston describes his *Meditatyons* as a typical Passion tract used to stir the emotions during private devotion; furthermore, she argues, “the devotional interests of lay people reaching towards books, disputing and sometimes rejecting the lessons of church images, undermined and eroded ancient clerical assumptions.”³³ To a degree, both statements are true. However, Langforde does not simply stir the hearts of his readers. He places “ancient clerical assumptions” within a reading context—a practice followed by others. He insists upon the formation of an active, engaged, and literate church in which the faithful focus on scriptural

31. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1912), s.v. “Way of the Cross,” accessed 6 December 2016, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15569a.htm>. Yeager, 19, notes the *Meditatyons*’s avoidance of narrative digressions, especially in comparison to other lengthy and apocryphal descriptions of the Passion.

32. Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther’s Works, Volume 1: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1–5*, trans. George V. Schick (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 233.

33. Aston, 123, 131.

narratives as they attend Mass, even providing partial biblical translations—some potentially reflecting Lollard influence. Such actions suggest sympathy with radical religious sentiments, but the question remains: how far do these revisionary sentiments go—how deeply do they run?

Langforde's orthodoxy becomes most apparent when he reflects upon the Eucharist. Although he suggests reading practices—in one form or another—are an essential part of devout religious experience, he still makes this point within the context of the Mass, and thus, he maintains the salvific efficacy of the church's ritual celebrations. While Wycliffe, succeeding Lollards, and the majority of later Protestants rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation, Langforde does not. From the beginning of his allegorical presentation of the Mass, Langforde suggests the exceptionality of the Eucharistic bread and wine:

The Chales dothe signyfe the sepulchur of our **Lorde**.

The Paten Signifythe the stone that coueryd yt.

The Corparaice, The Sudarye and Syndo signyfyeth wher in hys blyssyd body was layd.

The oyst The body of Cryst.

The watter and wyne doith represent the expresse effusyon of **Blood and watter**. (19)

While the chalice signifies Christ's sepulchre and the paten signifies the stone covering it, the host equates with his body in a seemingly one-to-one correspondence. Although ambiguous, the absent verb is striking. Everything else signifies, but the host simply is, and even though Langforde may return to representation with the second Eucharistic element—the wine—his explicit preservation of sacramental integrity appears thereafter. (His focus upon the commingling of water and wine may refer to the offertory in which the chalice was prepared for the canon, but not yet consecrated.) Later, Langforde insists, "So our blyssyd Lord wolle gyff vnto vs vnder the qualyties and taist of breid and wyne hys blyssyd body and bloode" (27). Such an affirmation cannot be ignored. For Langforde, the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ, it is essential for salvation, and the Mass is the means through which it is confected. Churchgoers may read the biblical liturgy, but they must also recognize the sacrifice enacted before them.

Langforde’s *Meditatyons* situates the pre-Reformation liturgical experience within literary and literacy contexts, and in short, ritual worship becomes a type of reading. Written on the eve of the Reformation, the *Meditatyons* forms a hermeneutic that simultaneously upholds traditional doctrine and responds to the emphasis placed upon literacy by religious nonconformists, humanist intellectuals, and printers and book merchants. Rite and writing are met together; ritual and reading have kissed each other. However, as I seek to illustrate throughout this analysis, such a jointure is not unique to the *Meditatyons*.

Medieval piety and early modern print

Written a century before Langforde’s *Meditatyons*, Lydgate’s *The Interpretation and Virtues of the Mass* also constructs the liturgical experience as an act of reading. This devotional poem remained popular into the sixteenth century, and de Worde published at least two editions during the period—the first in 1500 and the second in 1520. The later edition, entitled *The Vertue of the Masse*, merits further attention. Mindful of Langforde’s interpretive work, Lydgate’s medieval context, and finally, the practices of the early modern print market, one can discern the place of the 1520 *Vertue* within conversations about Reformation-era liturgy and literacy. While Lydgate participates in an established tradition of liturgical contemplation, he, like Langforde, emphasizes the scriptural nature of the Mass by constructing an allegorical reading of it. And I suggest this feature of his work becomes especially important when considering its early modern publication. Following the eruption of Luther’s ninety-five theses onto the Continental scene in 1517, de Worde’s publication directs readers’ attention toward the increasing concern of English Christians with biblical translations; religious tradition and innovation; and the relationship between their national church, their monarch, and the pope in Rome.

One hundred years before Luther, England faced doctrinal and political problems with which many in the sixteenth century would have empathized, and Lydgate’s responses to the issues of his day illustrate his commitment to both orthodox sacramentality and the formation of a reading public. Additionally, they suggest why a printer in 1520 would have found his works so appealing; they spoke to early sixteenth-century religious and political tensions. Lydgate devoted much of his oeuvre, in the words of Lee Patterson, to the “historical

legitimacy and spiritual seriousness” of Henry V.³⁴ Following the reign of his father, Henry IV, who seized the throne after Richard II was deposed in 1399, Henry V commissioned Lydgate as part of his larger defense of the Lancastrian succession. Furthermore, the monk’s religious poetry, again often composed under the king’s patronage, demonstrated the monarch’s commitment to Christian orthodoxy. Lydgate’s *A Defence of Holy Church*, written shortly after Henry took the crown in 1413, allayed fears that the king would not respond seriously to Lollardy, and similarly, his *The Kings of England sithen William Conqueror* (1426) vindicated the Lancastrian government.³⁵ Although such works constitute only a fraction of Lydgate’s literary corpus, they place him within a religio-political context, and furthermore, they demonstrate his commitment to traditional religious belief. Such a commitment, also expressed in Lydgate’s poetic treatise on the Mass, endows his work with a vitality that lasted beyond his death in 1451 and well into the era of the Reformation.

Wynkyn de Worde’s 1520 edition of the *Vertue* demonstrates the diachronous nature of Lydgate’s poem. In *Theory and the Premodern Text*, Paul Strohm explores the notion of diachronic literature, or literature that significantly, or even perhaps chaotically, challenges strict periodization.³⁶ Strohm argues that a text contains “within itself intimations of past and future that amount to a form of implicit diachrony.”³⁷ The literary work inevitably disappoints critics who insist upon clean, synchronous readings. A continuum of time, ideology, context, and culture abides within its pages, and reading activates a surprising and even destabilizing experience. As a medieval text published during the early modern period, Lydgate’s *Vertue* demonstrates the polysemy of supposed epochs. Its intention to assist readers “to houe a memory all of crystes passyon”

34. Lee Patterson, “Making Identities in Fifteenth-Century England: Henry V and John Lydgate,” in *Acts of Recognition: Essays on Medieval Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 126.

35. Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bio-Bibliography* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Press, 1997), 18, 25. Anxieties over the king’s orthodoxy stemmed from his friendship with Lollard rebel John Oldcastle and conflicts with Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury. See Annabel Patterson’s “Sir John Oldcastle as Symbol of Reformation Historiography,” in *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6–26.

36. Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), particularly chapter 6, “Chaucer’s *Troilus* as Temporal Archive.”

37. Strohm, 93.

and to recognize the Mass as "Our bame / our tryacle helth / our medycyne / Agayne ghostly gladnesse our restoracyon" has ramifications for the time of its composition, as well as for that of the Reformation.³⁸ Orthodoxy demanded such work in the face of Lollardy in 1400, and after Luther, it felt a similar need. However, like Langforde's *Meditatyons*, Lydgate's treatise betrays the willingness of its author to embrace certain aspects of reformed practice. In his poem, Lydgate strengthens the bond between a liturgical experience and a scriptural one, and he offers reading as an integral part of worship. The *Vertue's* polysemy suggests more than a temporal fluidity; it betrays a confessional one as well. As stated earlier, such mutability, along with that found in the works of Langforde and Fisher, complicates dominant historical narratives of the Reformation and invites us to contemplate the ways reading shaped Christian worship in pre-Reformation England.

Like the Lollard nonconformists of the fifteenth century, as well as their Protestant successors, Lydgate stresses the importance of scriptural knowledge in his poetic treatise. The virtue of the Mass is partly the scriptural knowledge it imparts, and as with Langforde, Lydgate facilitates such biblical literacy through allegory. Allegorical terms abound throughout his *Vertue*, and each mention of "myroure," "morall menyng" (sig. A1^v), "sygne," "token," and "fygure / Outwarde shewyng" (sig. A4) places one within an allegorical context. These words direct readers to the polysemous nature of the liturgical "text" and simultaneously suggest the poet's analytical project. Just as texts are diachronous, allegories in general are incoherent, "forcing us to unify the work by imposing meaning on it."³⁹ Thus, Lydgate, by discerning the signs, tokens, and outward figures of the Mass ritual, attempts to impose liturgical meaning. He unifies a ritual of seemingly disparate elements through allegorical interpretation.

In Lydgate, the first major aim of such allegorical ordering is the establishment of the Mass's moral meaning. The poet reads the signs of the Mass as providing instruction for virtuous living. While Langforde's *Meditatyons* likens the priest's vestments to objects found in the Passion narrative, Lydgate's *Vertue* sees a moral lesson in the vesting. The amice, used to cover the priest's underclothing or, perhaps, his head, functions as a sign of the faith he must

38. John Lydgate, *The Vertue of the Masse* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1520), sig. A1^v (hereafter cited in the text).

39. Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

possess; the long white alb “is ryghtwysnes perpetuall to endure”; the cincture, “clennesse and chastyte”; etc. (sig. A4). Although focused on the celebrant, Lydgate presents the vestments as moral lessons for readers. He allegorizes them as virtues that one must possess to worship God properly. They are the “armure” worn by “chrystes champyon” (sig. A4), and such armour teaches the faithful the qualities for which they and their ministers must strive.

However, moral allegory alone does not satisfy Lydgate. He also relates parts of the Mass to biblical events, and this explicit transition to a sustained biblical reading of the liturgy conflates both word and rite, inviting readers to see the close connection between them. This typological work begins with the *Gloria*, the hymn of praise that occurred during the liturgy’s initial stages. The *Vertue* presents this oration as a “token of vnyte and of perfyte pease / At crystes byrthe herde in latyn tonge” and, a little later, as connoting the “treble peas in bedleem,” or Bethlehem (sig. A4^v; sig. A5). Referencing the Nativity account in which choirs of angels announced the birth of Christ (KJV Luke 2:13–15), Lydgate complicates his earlier moral allegoresis by placing notions of unity and perfect peace within the scriptural context of the *Gloria*. In short, he emphasizes the biblical, the Nativity story, in order to explicate the liturgical, the *Gloria*. The necessary virtues for his readers’ salvation, first detected in the clerical garb, can be found in biblical narratives. The offertory’s lesson finds its scriptural precedent as well:

By interpretacyon who wysely can aduerte
 The offertory eis made of offrynge
 As whan a man offreth to god his herto
 Rychest oblacyon rekened by wrytynge
 And for Melchysedeche bothe preest and kynge
 Gaue breed and wyne to Abraham for vycory
 For whiche oblacyon in fygure remembrynge
 In eche daye at masse is sayd an offertory (sig. A6)

The offertory, in which the priest blessed the bread and wine later consecrated, first appears as an allegorical representation of devotion: “man offreth to god his [heart].” That interpretation, however, does not suffice. Lydgate again likens the liturgical event to a scriptural one, namely the encounter between the patriarch Abraham and the mysterious priest-king Melchizedek. In the Genesis

account, after Abraham had defeated the army of Elam, Melchizedek offered the patriarch bread, wine, and his benediction (KJV Gen. 14:18–20). This encounter with Melchizedek becomes that which the offertory is “in fygure remembrynge.” Lydgate directs readers to a biblical narrative through liturgical action.

The monk-poet also stresses the importance of reading and scriptural texts. First, Lydgate emphasizes the importance of the Epistles—the New Testament reading that preceded the Gospel. The Epistles reveal the “token and fygure [...] Of crystes comynge by euydent scripture” (sig. A5). These sacred works explicated intimations of Christ’s life in the Hebrew Bible, i.e., the evident scripture. The apostles recognized the typological veil obscuring the Christian meaning of the Jewish scriptures, and they drew it back for their audiences. For Lydgate, such recognition justifies the inclusion of their writings in the Mass, and he makes that justification clear: the Epistles “by prophesy of redynge / To vs declareth moost gracyous tydyng” (sig. A5^v). Lydgate interprets a group of texts that, themselves, interpreted other works. The act of reading—the apostles’ reading of the Hebrew Bible; the reading of their Epistles during Mass; and finally, the proper reading, or understanding, of their place within the liturgy—emerges as essential for proper worship. Lydgate pulls back layers of ritual and text to reveal the Christian reality expressed in the Mass.

The elevation of the sacrament provides readers with a particularly compelling revelatory moment. In medieval Christianity, the elevation of the Eucharistic species was the pinnacle of the liturgical experience, especially during a period in which reception of Holy Communion was infrequent, and devout English Christians often travelled from church to church to witness the exposition of the consecrated host.⁴⁰ Lydgate presents this central ritual moment as one in which popular devotion, reading, and biblical exegesis collide. During the elevation, the poet abjures his readers to focus upon the mystery of the altar, praying devoutly. If they cannot find the necessary words, he offers a “lytell contemplacyon” (sig. A7). This prayer, consisting of nine eight-line stanzas, transmutes into an extensive act of reading in which Jennifer Bryan sees “affective vernacular reading linked surely and transparently to ritual performance.” The liturgical “shells of sign and symbol”

40. See Duffy, 91–130, for an examination of the late medieval Mass and Eucharistic piety and Miri Rubin’s *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

facilitate the development of an interior subjectivity.⁴¹ Private reading during public ritual forms the personal religiosity espoused by reformers, and Lydgate encourages this devotion. He presents Christ as the sacrifice “figured in Ysaac [Isaac]” and as the truth veiled behind figures such as Joshua and Samson (sig. A7^v–A8). As the consecration occurs, Lydgate encourages the faithful to read devoutly and allegorically, mindful of biblical narratives and their Christological signification.

Lydgate presents the consecration, the bedrock of medieval Christian piety, as an experience best approached through the reading act, the supposed foundation of reformed practice and theology. He offers his “lytell contemplacyon” to be read during the ritual event, and he explicates the scriptural allegories of Christ. He suggests that the God made present on the altar is, in turn, made present in the Bible, and the biblical figures conceal him just as the elements of bread and wine do. Again, Lydgate challenges his audience to interpret the Mass in a particular manner. He invites them to approach the liturgy utilizing the tools of medieval biblical exegesis. They read the Mass as countless theologians before them read the Bible: allegorically. Although the early modern author of *A Balade of a Preist* detects a sharp divide between the papist and the reformer—the former “reeles at his masse” while the latter venerates “gods boke”—Lydgate counters such notions, which were popular during the beginning of the fifteenth century and a century later when de Worde published his 1520 edition of the *Vertue*.

In 1521, the year after he published Lydgate’s *Vertue*, de Worde also put out *The Sermon of Iohan the Bysshop of Rochester Made Agayn the Pernicious Doctryn of Martin Luther*, and this work helps us understand not only John Fisher’s larger didactic project, but Langforde’s and Lydgate’s purposes as well. The sermon delivers upon the promises of its title and details Fisher’s objections to Luther’s doctrine—particularly the German’s rejection of papal authority, his belief in faith over works, and the supremacy of the Bible as the ultimate source of divine revelation. Allegorizing the scriptures in defense of the papacy and offering vernacular translations of the Bible (even though the publication of such translations was technically illegal due to Arundel’s constitutions of 1407), Fisher’s sermon and de Worde’s printing of it—a relatively inexpensive

41. Bryan, 58–59.

quarto—summarizes Luther’s doctrine, refutes it, and disseminates this refutation.⁴²

One objection Fisher raises against Luther, namely the latter’s refusal to accept extra-scriptural traditions, offers a point of intersection with Lydgate’s and Langforde’s treatises. While explaining that the true Christian is “bounde to byleue many mo thynges than be wrytten & put *in the byble*,” Fisher employs the words of the allegorically minded Origen:

But in the obseruancyes of *the chirche* be many thynges whiche is necessary for vs to do and yet *the* reason why that we so do is not open to al men. As in example, whan *that* we make our prayers knelynge and whan amonges all the other plages of heuen we chose the eest parte towarde *the* whiche we make our prayer I thynke not that the reason of this is lyghtly knowen to any man. Of *the* obseruancyes also and rytes *that* we vse aboute *the* sacrament of *the* alter to be consecrate [...] whoo can expresse the reason of al those words, gestures, orders.⁴³

This passage, primarily addressing liturgical practices, insists one need not comprehend the church’s liturgies; the “reason why that we so do is not open to al men.” Liturgical customs are part of the church’s patrimony, and for Fisher, Luther’s objections to them on the grounds of their scriptural absence are untenable given the words and traditions of the church fathers. However, the allegorical readings offered by Langforde and Lydgate attempt to give the “reason why.” Concerning the Mass and other rituals, what a Lutheran reformer might see as meaningless and artificial, the two priests recognize as pregnant with meaning—even scriptural meaning. Both allegorists participate within the

42. See “The Constitutions of Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, Against the Lollards, Made in a Provincial Convocation at Oxford,” in *A Collection of the Laws and Canons of the Church of England, from Its First Foundation to the Conquest, and from the Conquest to the Reign of King Henry VIII: Translated into English with Explanatory Notes*, ed. John Johnson, 2 vols. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1851), 2:457–75.

43. John Fisher, *The Sermon of Iohan the Bysshop of Rochester Made Agayn the Pernicious Doctryne of Martin Luther Within the Octaues of the Ascensyon by the Assignement of the Most Reuerend Fader in God the Lord Thomas Cardinal of Yorke & Legate Ex Latere from Our Holy Father the Pope* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1521), sig. C4; sig. C4^v.

medieval traditions of the *meditatio* and biblical exegesis, but their respective contexts give their interpretations special importance.

Additionally, the tumultuous religious and political context in which de Worde's publication of the *Vertue* appeared gives that work further, diachronous meaning. As English subjects heard news of Luther's doctrinal battles on the Continent; as their pastors preached against his teachings; and as their king prepared his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, a retort to Luther that would eventually earn Henry VIII the title "Defender of the Faith," they could also purchase a cheap octavo pamphlet written a century before by Lydgate, servant of another royal defender of orthodoxy. Lydgate's *Vertue* offered them a source of liturgical devotion that incorporated the public's growing interest in reading. By alluding to the scriptures and even loosely translating them—Lydgate paraphrases Psalm 42—the *Vertue* has the potential to remind them of the controversy inaugurated at Wittenberg. As Luther, the German friar-turned-revolutionary, insisted upon the formation of biblical readers, Lydgate's (and de Worde's) audience could practise their own brand of scripture-centred reading—a type of reading grounded in the church's liturgical experience. Biblical controversy was not new to them: Fisher counts Wycliffe among the heretics whose tempests have "vexyd the chirch of christ."⁴⁴ Luther ushered in yet another storm.

The book of the crucifix

A friend of Continental and English humanists such as Erasmus, John Colet, Thomas More, and Johannes Reuchlin, Fisher devoted much of his later life to combatting the gales of Luther and, eventually, those of his own king. In addition to the 1521 sermon against Luther, Fisher preached against Lutheranism in 1526 at St. Paul's Cross, and he, along with Thomas Wolsey, William Warham, and Cuthbert Tunstall, examined imported books for heresy.⁴⁵ When Henry VIII began proceedings to divorce Catherine of Aragon, Fisher served as the primary counsellor to the queen in the legatine trial of 1529, and his defense of Catherine, as well as his refusal to acknowledge Henry as supreme head

44. Fisher, *The Sermon [...] Agayn the Pernicious Doctryn of Martin Luther*, sig. A2–A2^v.

45. Richard Rex, "The Polemical Theologian," in *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Eamon Duffy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 109–30.

of the English church, eventually led to Fisher’s execution on 22 June 1535. The defender of the faith who had confronted Luther in his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* would introduce his own iconoclasm, and defenses of the papacy—such as the 1521 sermon preached by the bishop of Rochester against “the pernicious doctryn of Martin Luther”—would become treasonous.

In the years before his death, Fisher preached the Good Friday sermon *Lamentationes, Carmen, et Vae*, and in this sermon, he appropriated popular reading practices, integrating them into acts of ritual worship.⁴⁶ At first glance, the liturgical implications of Fisher’s words are unclear, but the context surrounding his sermon clarifies them. In part, they are a general defense of church roods, but more importantly, they allude to the so-called “creeping to the cross” practised during the Good Friday liturgy. As Duffy explains, during the service the covered crucifix was unveiled, allowing the faithful to creep “barefoot and on their knees to kiss the foot of the cross.”⁴⁷ This devotion was one of the highlights of the Good Friday liturgy and a source of vexation for reformers from the 1530s onward.⁴⁸ Commenting upon the ritual action celebrated within the church building, Fisher allegorizes the crucifix as a book and, like Langforde and Lydgate, presents the liturgical experience as an act of reading. Describing Christ as the “Aucthor of all libertie,” Fisher explains that those who read “this most wonderfull booke (I say of the Crucifixe) [...] shall come to more fruitfull knowledge, then many other which dayly studie vpon their common bookes.”⁴⁹ Presenting Christ as an author and his crucifixion as a book, Fisher counters the iconoclastic impulses of reformers by forging a

46. Janel Mueller, in “Complications of Intertextuality: John Fisher, Katherine Parr, and ‘The Book of the Crucifix,’” in *Representing Women in Renaissance England*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 29–30, suggests Fisher might have preached the sermon between 1531 and 1534. She argues that his use of the term “bishop of Rome” rather than “pope” possibly reflects the tension between Henry and Rome at that time. Fisher was sent to the Tower of London in 1534.

47. Duffy, 29.

48. Duffy, 29.

49. A copy of Fisher’s sermon, *A Sermon Verie Fruitfull, Godly, and Learned vpon thys Sentence of the Prophet Ezechiell, Lamentationes, Carmen, et Vae, Very Aptely Applied vnto the Passion of Christ: Preached vpon a Good Friday, by the Same Iohn Fisher, Bishop of Rochester*, was first published in the collection entitled *A Spirituall Consolation, Written by Iohn Fysshier Bishoppe of Rochester, to Hys Sister Elizabeth, at Suche Tyme as Hée Was Prisoner in the Tower of London* (London: W. Carter, 1578). See Fisher, *A Sermon [...] vpon a Good Friday*, sig. E5 (hereafter cited in the text).

connection between the reading acts extolled by nonconformists and traditional statutory veneration. This allegorization of the crucifix orients reading within the sacred space of the church; as Janel Mueller explains, “The words will literally be read onto the object of devotion, thus merging the biblical text into the ceremonial action of the rite for Good Friday.”⁵⁰ Although Mueller argues that Fisher distances himself from notions of popular scriptural reading, I am less sure this is the case.⁵¹ Admittedly, Fisher insists that contemplation of the crucifix provides enough “reading” for any person, peasant or noble (sig. E5–E6^V), but commendations of piety are not condemnations of reading. Rather, the bishop challenges the boundary between reading and rite, and such a challenge joins orthodox and reformed sensibilities. Traditional liturgical worship need not be interpreted as markedly different from scriptural reading, but rather, the two practices are mutually enriching.

Although Langforde and Lydgate’s presentations of divine worship as an act of scriptural reading remain largely implicit, such is not the case for Fisher. Furthermore, he expects his audiences to share his frame of reference and to cooperate with him in the act of allegoresis. After observing, “But you maruell peradventure why I call *the* crucifix a booke: I will now tell you the consideration why” (sig. F1–F1^V), the bishop unpacks his allegory. First, he compares Christ’s cross to the covers of a book and laments, “The leaues of this booke be *the* armes, the handes, legges, and feete, with the other members of his most precious and blessed body” (sig. E8). He then fleshes out the image:

Furthermore when a booke is spread, you see that in the leaues are many lynes drawn. And many letters, some read, some blacke, and some blewe, so in this booke, (the moste blessed bodie of Christ) was drawne many lynes, for it was all so scourged with whippes, so *that* euery where *the* print of *the* cordes of *the* scourges, was left behynd, & that in euery place, from *the* necke downward vnto the soles of his feete, so *that* there was no margent lefte in all thys booke, there was no voyd place. (sig. F1–F1^V)

Composed by a voracious reader, these lines do not demonstrate, as Mueller suggests, the machinations of a conservative churchman attempting to counter

50. Mueller, 30.

51. Mueller, 31.

the reading impulses of his congregants.⁵² Rather, they reveal an author familiar with the written word, as well as a congregation similarly familiar—or assumed to be so by the bishop. Fisher’s concern that his audience might “maruell” lies not in their ignorance of books. Indeed, he explicates the cross rather than the book; he turns to books to help readers see the venerated cross differently. Hunt insists upon “the two-way relationship between the preacher and his audience,” and while his focus postdates Fisher’s sermon, his point is well taken.⁵³ The audience must participate in the construction of Fisher’s crucifix-book. Like the unveiled crucifix on Good Friday, the allegorical “booke is spread.” Hearers must be aware of the hard leather boards; they must have viewed—and, perhaps, touched—flesh-coloured pages with ink spilling into the margins. Although little information about the sermon remains, Fisher’s devotion to his own flock at Rochester and his popularity as a preacher increase the likelihood of a general audience. Regardless, Fisher clearly believed this audience would comprehend and appreciate the bibliographic nature of his sermon’s imagery.⁵⁴

And what are Fisher’s congregants to do with this book? They must read it. What is more, they must read it within the liturgical setting of the church building. As he offers his meditation on Ezekiel’s words, “Lamentationes, Carmen, et vae, that is to say, lamentation, songe, & woe” (sig. E3; KJV Eze 2:10), Fisher introduces the book of the crucifix. Then, the bishop explains, “*the Image of the Crucifix is hunge vp in euery Church, to the entent that we*

52. See Maria Dowling, *Fisher of Men: A Life of John Fisher, 1469–1535* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 40–41, for information on Fisher’s extensive library, its bequeathal to Cambridge University, and its probable seizure by Henry VIII.

53. Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5

54. As Hunt reminds readers in *The Art of Hearing*, we must remember the nature of the “textual transmission of early modern sermons.” Hunt explains that the doctrinal part of the sermon “in which the preacher expounded the sense and meaning of his text and drew out its theological and moral significance” was oftentimes recorded in preachers’ prepared notes and, thus, more easily transmitted into print. He further explains: “The more practical part of sermon, in which the preacher drew out ‘uses’ or ‘applications’ suited to a particular occasion, or a particular audience, stood much less chance of being recorded in written or printed form” (154–55). Fisher’s sermon was probably preached in the 1530s and printed in 1578, forty-five years after the bishop’s execution. It is difficult—if not impossible—to trace its “textual transmission.” However, I will suggest that his crucifix-book is more easily catalogued a practical “use” or “application” than a refined doctrinal point. Part of a Good Friday sermon, Fisher’s allegory speaks to a particular audience, i.e., those creeping to the cross.

may see how gréuouslie sinne was punyshed in that moste blessed bodye of our Sauyour Christ Iesu” (sig. F4). It is significant that Fisher, after providing an extensive metaphor allegorizing the crucifix as a book, explains that the image of Christ’s Passion is erected within the church to be seen. He suggests a Catholic church is a sacred space in which the faithful read. The devout come to see, or read, the book of the Passion erected before them. Admittedly, such a suggestion does not offer congregants the biblical reading experience advocated by Luther and others, but yet, it does place traditional worship within a distinct (even ecumenical) literary context. Fisher absolves the reading act of its heterodox connotations and reorients it within a larger liturgical practice. He revises Protestant polemic to suit his own ends. Fisher combats iconoclasm by offering the cross as a book to be read, and he continues a tradition detected earlier in the works of Langforde and Lydgate.

I have advocated an interpretation of three sixteenth-century religious works that complicates our understanding of the English Reformation. Interpreting Catholic ritual worship as a literary experience, Langforde’s *Meditatyons*, Lydgate’s *Vertue*, and Fisher’s *Lamentationes* weaken confessional divides, revealing reading’s wide and varied epistemological influences. These writers utilize the tradition of prolonged allegorical interpretation to construct the worship experience as a reading act, and they create something appealing to both traditionalists and the reform-minded. By offering a hidden biblical meaning concealed behind the veil of the liturgical *litera*, they dismiss denominational conflicts and contradictions. Gordon Teskey argues, “Ritual is a bodily expression of the hope that behind the threat that we pose to one another lies the truth of our belonging to one spiritual project,” and though he believes such hope belies the reality of culturally potent discord, Langforde, Lydgate (with de Worde), and Fisher prove his point.⁵⁵ Interpreting the liturgy as a biblical text, they moderate the growing divide between ritual and reading. Simultaneously, they encourage readers today to reconsider dominant narratives and to recognize parallels between orthodox and nonconforming believers.

Langforde, Lydgate, and Fisher fuse word and ritual, and the preservation and development of this fusion must be traced further. Luther’s theses, Henry’s

55. Teskey, 132.

divorce, and Cranmer’s Prayerbook do not usher in the epochal shifts detected by Whig historians. The story of the Reformation proves far more complex; it is a series of negotiations, disputes, and diachronous mutations. Guided by early modern commentators—men and women directly experiencing the Reformation’s reconfiguration of English Christianity—students of early modern religious culture must see what is there, concealed behind the veil.