

## Covetousness, ‘unkyndenesse’, and the ‘blered’ eye in *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’

In *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, the sin of covetousness – the excessive desire for money, for material goods, or even for knowledge as an end in itself – has serious and far-reaching consequences. Both poems present covetousness as a characteristically unnatural sin which is opposed to the natural impulse to be charitable, and both suggest that covetous people become estranged from their communities and from certain forms of ‘natural’ knowledge because they suppress this charitable impulse. Covetousness had long been characterised as an unnatural sin, at odds with the principles of charity and moderation that were enshrined in natural law.<sup>1</sup> In the fourteenth century, moreover, the rise of a social ethic based on ‘natural’ forms of affinity and reciprocity generated a particularly intense concern with covetousness as a ‘violat[ion]’ of the ‘natural order’.<sup>2</sup> *Piers Plowman*, which links charity to nature through puns on ‘kynde’ and ‘kyndenesse’, identifies covetousness repeatedly as an ‘unkynde’ sin.<sup>3</sup> For Langland, the multiple meanings of ‘kyndenesse’ affirm not only that charity is part of human

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**Abstract:** This article considers the significance of the ‘blered’ eye as a figure for covetousness in *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’. It argues that Langland and Chaucer drew on the particular symptoms of the ‘blered’ eye, and on its complex moralised, idiomatic and allegorical meanings, to describe covetousness as a characteristically ‘unkynde’ sin, which alienates people from ‘kynde’ relationships and ‘kynde’ knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Piers Plowman*, ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, covetousness, kynde, alchemy, active and contemplative lives, Leah and Rachael

<sup>1</sup> Newhauser, *Early History of Greed*, pp. 29, 43, 62, 71-72, 112-13.

<sup>2</sup> Galloway, ‘Social Ethic’, p. 371.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful summary of the extensive critical literature on ‘kynde’ in *Piers Plowman*, see Zeeman, *Discourse of Desire*, pp. 159-162. On the relationship between covetousness and ‘unkyndenesse’, see White, *Nature and Salvation*, pp. 97-98 and Davis, “‘Fullynge’ Nature”, p. 67.

nature, but also that it is a precondition for 'kynde' knowledge (knowledge derived from lived experience and the natural world), and the basis for 'kynde' social relationships, where people reciprocate God's love in their 'kyndenesse' towards one another.

'Unkynde' covetousness not only turns people against their best natural instincts in *Piers Plowman*, it also obscures 'kynde' knowledge and frustrates 'kynde' relationships. In 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', covetousness has very similar consequences. In this tale, alchemical experimentation is driven by the desire for wealth and knowledge and sustained by trickery and deception, so that covetousness produces forms of behaviour that are fundamentally opposed to charity. Although Chaucer does not use the term, the effects of covetousness in 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale' are 'unkynde' in Langland's complex sense: as the alchemists suppress their charitable instincts, they become alienated from the wider community and from various forms of 'natural' knowledge.

In this essay, I will argue that Chaucer and Langland figure effects of 'unkynde' covetousness using the imagery of the 'blered' eye. The 'blered' eye appears on three occasions in *Piers Plowman*, in the episode with the pardoner from the prologue, the confession of Covetise in B.5, and the speech of the Samaritan from B.17, and it forms an important part of the Yeoman's self description in 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale'. In all these contexts, it figures the effects of covetous desire. The sense of sight was closely identified with 'natural' knowledge. Insofar as the natural world (and lived experience in the natural world) revealed things about its creator, this knowledge was figured as available to the senses, and particularly to the eye.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Nicolette Zeeman observes, the ability of the eye to apprehend rational structures in creation exemplified the 'kynde' reciprocity on which natural knowledge depended.<sup>5</sup> Imagery of blurred and

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<sup>4</sup> On medieval accounts of sight and knowledge, see Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, pp. 104-46, Tachau, *Vision and Certitude*, and Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil*, esp. pp. 21-44.

<sup>5</sup> Zeeman, *Discourse of Desire*, pp. 167-78.

distorted vision suggests the way that sin might obscure this knowledge, leaving the sinner unable to ‘read the index of God’s power and love in creation’, as Carolyn Collette writes.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the ‘blered’ eye also carried further, more specific connotations, which speak to the complex connections these poems imagine between ‘unkynde’ covetousness, ‘kynde’ relationships, and ‘kynde’ knowledge. ‘Blereynesse’ named a disease where the eye became watery or rheumatic (‘lippitudo’ or ‘lippi oculi’ in Latin), which was often moralised as a sign of spiritual confusion. ‘Blerynge’ a person’s eye was also an idiomatic expression for trickery and deception. And the ‘blered’ eye was also associated with Leah from the book of Genesis (‘Lia lippis erat oculis’, Genesis 29:17), whose ‘blereynesse’ was read to figure the situation of the active life as opposed to the contemplative and of the Old Testament as opposed to the New. The complex connotations of the ‘blered’ eye allow Langland and Chaucer to suggest the consequences of ‘unkynde’ covetousness for individual sinners and for their communities, and to think about them in relation to practical work and eschatological history. Moreover, as these connotations unfold in *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, they reveal affinities between Chaucer and Langland’s conceptions of this sin.

Recent criticism has emphasised the likelihood that Chaucer knew *Piers Plowman*, and has identified Langland’s influence in many aspects of Chaucer’s work. Frank Grady proposes that *The House of Fame* reveals Chaucer’s reassessment of dream vision literature after reading *Piers Plowman*, while D. Vance Smith identifies Chaucer’s response to Langland’s thought about economics in *The Canterbury Tales*, and Anne Middleton argues that Chaucer’s Pardoner constitutes his attempt not only to understand

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<sup>6</sup> Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, p. 2. On sin and its consequences for natural knowledge see also Davis, ““Save man allone””.

but also to ‘exorcise’ Langland’s literary example.<sup>7</sup> For these critics, Chaucer’s response to Langland is manifest not only in local allusions but also in the larger structures and concerns of his poetry. My own analysis of *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ suggests not only that Langland and Chaucer drew on the same stock of images and ideas to discuss the effects of covetousness, but also that they developed those ideas in complex and comparable ways. Indeed, it seems to me that the consequences of covetousness in ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ become easier to understand when we read them in terms of Langland’s account of ‘unkyndenesse’. If, as Middleton proposes, ‘Chaucer learned late, but deeply, from Langland’, then it may be that *Piers Plowman* informed his thought about covetous desire and its larger ramifications.<sup>8</sup>

This article divides into three sections. I begin with an account of the ‘blered’ eye in its medical, moralised, idiomatic and allegorical contexts, where I suggest that ‘blereynesse’ points to different forms of spiritual confusion. I then turn to *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, where ‘blereynesse’ figures the complex ramifications of ‘unkyndenesse’ for sinners and their communities. Finally, I argue that Chaucer and Langland invoke exegetical accounts of Leah in order to think about the possible remedies for covetousness and ‘unkyndenesse’, and to ask whether such sins might ultimately be redeemed.

1.

In Middle English encyclopedias and medical texts, ‘blereynesse’ describes a condition where humours flow into the eye, making it difficult for the sufferer to see. Bartholomeus Anglicus’ *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (1240), in John Trevisa’s translation (1398), defines

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<sup>7</sup> Grady, ‘Chaucer Reading Langland’, Smith, ‘Chaucer as an English Writer’, pp. 91-98, Middleton, ‘Unacknowledged Text’, quotation at p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Middleton, ‘Unacknowledged Text’, p. 114.

‘blereynesse of y3en’ as a ‘clemy and glewy superfluyte of y3en clevinge to þe y3eliddes’, which damages the eye and inflames the eyelids, ultimately wearing them away (VII, 16).<sup>9</sup> ‘Blereynesse’ could be an early symptom of ophthalmia, a more painful form of swelling and inflammation, and could ultimately develop into albugo, a kind of ‘web’ across the eye:

Ferst a rewme renneþ to þe y3en and þerof comeþ an yuel þat hatte *obtalmia*, a schrewed blereynes and ache and a posteme, and if it is euel ikept þerof leueþ a litil mole and infeccioun, and long tyme turneþ and growiþ into a webbe and þicke, and occupieþ more place þan al þe blacke of þe i3e. This webbe turneþ into cloop by more þicnes and occupieþ more place, for it ocupieþ al þe blake of þe y3e, and at þe last it turneþ into þe kynde of a naile of þe honde, and so it is more þicke and hard (VII, 16).

‘Blereynesse’ was held to be contagious. In his *Inventarium* (1363, translated into Middle English in the fifteenth century), Guy de Chauliac notes that ophthalmia in one eye can produce a sympathetic condition in the other, calling it ‘a contagiouse sekenesse’ (II, ii, 2), while Lanfrank’s *Chirurgia Magna* (1296, trans. c.1380) implies that the ‘blered’ eye is communicable to other people, listing ‘obtolmia & blere i3ed’ among ‘sijknes of þe i3e ... þat ben seid contagious’ (III, iii, 1).<sup>10</sup> The ‘blered’ eye could result from environmental factors as well as from an imbalance of the humours. Lanfrank describes a ‘lizt’ form of ophthalmia that ‘mai come of a cause withoutforþ: as of hoot eir or of coold, or of smoke, or of poudre, or of wakinge, or of traueile’ (III, iii, 1), while Guy writes that

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<sup>9</sup> Bartholomeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things*, ed. by Seymour et al, I, 361.

<sup>10</sup> Guy de Chauliac, *The Cyrurgie*, ed. by Ogden, p. 133, Lanfrank, *Science of Cirurgie*, ed. by Von Fleischhacker, p. 241. On the inaccurate definition of ophthalmia in the Middle English translation of Lanfrank, see Von Fleischhacker’s note, p. 241.

‘þinges þat fallen in þe eyze’ can cause ophthalmia, including ‘smeke, poudre, wynde and þe sonne’ (II, ii, 2), and Bartholomeus, too, says that ‘unwilful rennyng of teres falliþ in þe iȝen somtyme of outward causes’, including ‘smytyng’ of the eye, hot air, cold air, ‘bitinge of smoke’, powder, and the smell of onions and garlic (VII, 18).<sup>11</sup> There was a close resemblance between ‘blereynesse’ and weeping. Guy describes the early symptoms of ophthalmia (the symptoms Bartholomeus identifies as ‘schrewed blereynes’) as ‘teres and humoures [that] renne oute boþe at þe nose þirles and at þe eyzen’; he also lists ‘blerednesse of þe eyze liddes and multitudes of teres’ among the ‘tokens and domes’ of ophthalmia (II, ii, 2). Gilbertus Anglicus in his *Compendium medicinae* (before c.1250, trans. fifteenth century) links the matter that forms in the eye during sleep to ‘blereynesse’: ‘And þe watir þat flowiþ on nyȝtis-tyme fro þe yȝen is viscouse as bridlym, and makeþ hem sumwhat blereyzed’ (II, 1).

These symptoms attracted a range of moralised interpretations. One of the most influential appears in the *Pastoral Rule* of Gregory the Great, where Gregory comments on Leviticus 21:20, which prohibits people with ‘blered’ eyes from making offerings to God. Gregory describes the ‘blereighed’ man in a state of spiritual confusion and internal conflict, as his natural impulse to know the truth is frustrated by his own sinful habits. This is an account of the way that sin undermines people’s best natural impulses, and alienates them from the forms of knowledge they instinctively desire:

Lippus vero est, cujus quidem ingenium ad cognitionem veritatis emicat, sed tamen hoc carnalia opera obscurant. In lippis quippe oculis pupillae sanae sunt, sed humore defluente infirmatae palpebrae grossescunt; quorum, quia infusione crebro atteruntur, etiam acies pupillae vitiatur. Et sunt nonnulli quorum sensum carnalis

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<sup>11</sup> However, Gilbertus Anglicus, *Healing and Society*, ed. by Getz, says that ophthalmia always has internal causes, distinguishing it from irritation caused by ‘smoke, duste, ... wynde, and suche oþer þingis’ (II, 1, p. 32).

vitae operatio sauciat, qui videre recta subtiliter per ingenium poterant, sed usu pravorum actuum caligant. Lippus itaque est, cujus sensum natura exacuit; sed conversationis pravitas confundit. (I, 11)

[The ‘bleary-eyed’ is he whose native wit flashes out for cognition of the truth, but whose carnal actions obscure it. For in the ‘bleary-eyed’ the pupils are healthy but the eyelids, weakened by the flow of humours, become gross, so that the pupils lose their sharpness because of the constant irritating influx. And there are some whose senses are wounded by the works of the carnal life, who are naturally able to see well but whose perverse actions cloud their vision. The ‘bleary-eyed’, then, is one whose sense nature has made keen, but whom a depraved habit of life confuses.]<sup>12</sup>

‘Blereynesse’, in Gregory’s account, describes the way that sin undermines people’s best natural impulses, and alienates them from knowledge of the truth. Later encyclopedias and medical texts often included Gregory’s moralisation in their accounts of ‘blereynesse’. The twelfth century Genoese physician Galvano da Levanto, for example, writes that ‘blered’ eyes are found in people who desire to know the truth, but whose minds are obscured by carnal actions: ‘Nam in lippis oculis pupille sane sunt sed humore defluente languente palpebre grosescunt quorum quia infusione crebre conteruntur, acies uitiat, pupillatio queritur’.<sup>13</sup> Bartholomeus, too, says that ‘blereynesse ... tokeneþ hem þat haueþ brijt wit and konnyng of treuthe; but þe work of fleisschlich lif makeþ hem derke and dymme’ (VII, 16). Pierre Bersuire offers a similar reading in his *Reductorium morale* (1325-37). Here, in Joseph Ziegler’s summary, ‘blered’ eyes represent people

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<sup>12</sup> Gregory, *Regulae Pastoralis Liber*, PL 77, cols 1-128 (col. 25). Translation adapted from Gregory, ‘Pastoral Rule’, trans. by Barmby.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion*, p. 88.

‘who, even though they have a healthy *pupilla intellectus*, yet suffer from *lippitudo carnalitatis*’.<sup>14</sup>

The ‘blered’ eye could also be moralised in other ways. In its account of Luke 18.31 where Christ heals a blind beggar, a fifteenth century sermon from the collection in Trinity College, Dublin, MS 241 likens different diseases of the eye to different forms of misdirected desire.<sup>15</sup> People who can open their eyes but cannot see represent those who know the truth but persist willfully in their sin, people who are blind in one eye are distracted by temporal goods, and people who are cross-eyed (‘lokyng agogel’) divide their attention between Christ and their worldly concerns. ‘Blered’ eyes, meanwhile, represent lechery:

[S]umme þer ben þat ben bler-yed. Pat maladie corruptiþ þe eyen of oþer men, þat is it mak iþ an oþer mannes ye to watere. Bi suche men ben vnderstonde letcherous men and wymmen þat anoyen oþer bi here lokyng and drawen to hem many oþer to her letcherie and when þei han drawen hem þei envenymen hem wiþ here letcherie. Of hem spekiþ þe Gospel of Mathew, and seiþ ‘Whoso lokiþ on a womman to couetise of his flesh, anon he haþ don letcherie wiþ here in soule’.

Suche men and wimmen ben lik to þe cokatris þat sleep a man only wiþ his siȝt.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion*, p. 309. Ziegler gives Constantinus as the immediate source for Bersuire’s moralisation.

<sup>15</sup> Trinity College, Dublin, MS 241, fols 71r-74v. On this sermon cycle, which survives partly in this manuscript, and partly in St John’s College, Cambridge, MS G.22 and Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 5388, see O’Mara and Paul, *A Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons*, I, 198-279 (this sermon is Dub/Trinity/241/027, and is summarised on pp. 242-44). On the relationship between this cycle and the Wycliffite Sermon Cycle, see *English Wycliffite Sermons*, ed. by Hudson and Gradon, I, 99-106.

<sup>16</sup> Trinity College, Dublin, MS 241, fol. 73v.



The symptoms of 'blereynesse' in this sermon are familiar from the medical texts: the 'blered' eye is watery and, crucially for the analogy with lechery, it is also contagious in the sense that Lanfrank implies, passing from one person to another. The sermon's moralisation, though distinct from Gregory's, nonetheless offers suggestive parallels to it. The sermon identifies lechery as a form of covetousness, translating the 'concupiscendum' of Matthew 5.28 as 'couetise of his flesh'. Moreover, the analogies with different eye complaints are framed as part of a more general observation about the way that sin deprives people of the 'goodes of kynde', including 'resoun, mynde and vnderstanding', so that their blindness is a 'double blyndnesse', both of ignorance and sin.<sup>17</sup> In this sermon too, then, the 'blered' eye is involved with an account of sin as a form of spiritual confusion, a privation of natural knowledge.

'Blereynesse' also carried colloquial associations with trickery and deception since, in Middle English idiom, to 'blere a mannys eye' was to hoodwink or delude him. This idiom appears repeatedly in *The Canterbury Tales*. The Reeve proposes to 'quite' the Miller's tale with a story about the 'blering of a proud milleres eye' (I, 3864-65), and the miller in the tale plans to trick the two students, saying 'by my thrift yet shal I blere hir eye' (I, 4049). A more complex example appears in 'The Manciple's Tale', where the crow tells Phoebus that he has been deceived by his wife and her lover, linking the 'blereynesse' that comes 'of wakinge, or of traueile' to the 'blereynesse' of deception: 'For al thy waiting, blered is thin eye ...' (IX, 252).<sup>18</sup> The idiom often appears in anticlerical and antifraternal literature, where it describes the confusion that corrupt clerics create among laypeople. The poem 'Freers, freers, wo ye be', for example, accuses the friars of deceiving people for money: 'Freers, ye can weyl lye, | *ad ffalundum*

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<sup>17</sup> Trinity College, Dublin, MS 241, fols. 72v and 73r.

<sup>18</sup> Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Mann. All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are from this edition.

*gentem*, | And weyl can blere a mannus ye | *pecunias habentem*'.<sup>19</sup> The Wycliffite 'Tractatus de pseudo-freris' attacks the hypocrisy of the friars' humble clothes in similar terms, saying that 'þise habitis of þe newe ordris bleren þe eyen of þe peple'.<sup>20</sup> While moralised readings of the 'blered' eye describe people who have become estranged from natural knowledge as a consequence of their own sin, this idiom positions 'blereighed' people as the victims of 'unkynde' trickery and deception.<sup>21</sup>

The 'blered' eye had two further sets of associations, derived from exegesis on the story of Leah and Rachael. In Genesis 29, Jacob agrees to serve Laban for seven years in order to marry his younger daughter Rachael, but, once the seven years are over, Laban tricks Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah instead; Jacob then serves Laban for another seven years in order to marry Rachael as well. Although Jacob prefers Rachael to Leah, Leah bears him more children; God grants Leah six sons while Rachael is initially unable to have any. Leah has 'blered' eyes, and Genesis contrasts Rachael's beauty with Leah's 'blereynesse', saying 'Rahel decora facie et venusto aspectu' while 'Lia lippis erat oculis', or, in the Wycliffite version, 'Rachel [was] fayr in face, and with seemly biholdynge', while 'Lya was with blerid eyen' (Genesis 29:17).<sup>22</sup> In his treatise *Against Faustus*, Augustine read the story of Leah and Rachael as an allegory for the active and contemplative lives, an interpretation that also appears in the works of

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<sup>19</sup> 'Freers, Freers, Wo Ye Be', ed. by Dean, p. 58, ll.13-16.

<sup>20</sup> 'Tractatus de pseudo-freris', ed. by Matthew, p. 316.

<sup>21</sup> Middle English texts do not always assume a connection between the medical and idiomatic senses of 'blereynesse'. In a satirical passage from the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament* (c. 1481), ed. by Davis, p. 77, the physician's man Colle lists the various conditions his master can cure, including 'All maner red eyn, bleryd eyn, and þe myegrym also', but there is no direct suggestion that the physician will 'blere' the eyes of his patients. In 'The Simonie' (c. 1321), ed. by Embree and Urquhart, p. 79, a physician begins 'to blere [a] wiues eize' by tricking her into buying medicines, but these are not a cure for 'blereynesse'.

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible [...] by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, ed. by Forshall and Madden.

Gregory the Great and which was widely disseminated in later medieval exegesis.<sup>23</sup> In this reading, Jacob married Leah first and Rachael second to show that Christians must work in the world before they can engage in contemplation. Leah's many children represent the practical benefits that come from the active life, chief amongst them the charitable acts of preaching the gospel and caring for the poor, but her 'blered' eyes represent the anxiety and confusion the active life entails.

According to another influential tradition, Leah and Rachael represented the synagogue and the church. In this interpretation, Jacob was a figure for Christ who 'married' the synagogue to acknowledge the claims of the law then 'married' the church for love. Leah's 'blereynesse' figured the spiritual 'blindness' of the Jews. Discussing Leah in his treatise *On Jacob*, Ambrose says that 'oculis infirmior ... tamquam synagoga, quae mentis caecitate Christum uidere non potuit' ['her eyes were somewhat weak, like the synagogue, that could not see Christ from blindness of spirit'] (II, 5, 25).<sup>24</sup> Similarly in his *Allegories on Sacred Scripture*, Isidore of Seville writes that 'Lia Synagoga figuram habuit, quae infirmis oculis cordis sacramenta Dei speculari non potuit,' while 'Rachel ... clara aspectu Ecclesiae typum tenuit, quae contemplationis acie Christi mysteria cernit' ['Leah embraces the figure of Synagoga, who could not perceive God's secrets with the weak eyes of her heart', while 'Rachael ... with her clear vision represents the type of Ecclesia – with sharp eyes she comprehended the secrets of God'].<sup>25</sup> This reading of Leah's 'blered' eyes corresponds to the iconography of *ecclesia*

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<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, ed. by Zycha, VI, 22, 52-58. On the exegetical tradition linking Leah and Rachael to the active and contemplative lives, see Butler, *Western Mysticism*, pp. 157-67, and Constable, 'Mary and Martha', pp. 1-141.

<sup>24</sup> Ambrose, 'De Iacob', in *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, ed. by Schenkl. Translation from Ambrose, 'Jacob and the Happy Life', trans. by McHugh.

<sup>25</sup> Isidore, *Allegoriae quaedam scripturae sacrae*, PL 83, col. 105; translated in Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church*, trans. by Chadeayne and Gottwald, p. 17. Isidore gives the same interpretation in an expanded form in his *Questiones in vetus testamentum*, PL 83, col. 264.

and *synagoga*, where the synagogue was often blind or blindfolded.<sup>26</sup> According to this interpretation, 'blereynesse' describes spiritual confusion in a particular eschatological context, awaiting Christ's atonement and the new forms of knowledge it makes possible.

In all these contexts, the 'blered' eye is linked to the confusion that arises when people become alienated from natural knowledge, whether through their own sin, the deception of others, the trials of the active life or the spiritual 'blindness' of the old law. Readings of 'blereynesse' as a medical condition provide resources to think about the subjective experience of this spiritual confusion, where sin frustrates people's natural inclination for the truth and cuts them off from the 'goodes of kynde', while the 'blered' eye's links to trickery, to the active life, and to the old law point to a range of contexts, social and eschatological, where such confusion might be most keenly at issue.

2.

*Piers Plowman* employs the imagery of 'blereynesse' on three occasions as the poem works out the implications of 'unkyndenesse', unfolding the logic by which sins against charity undermine 'kynde' relationships and obscure 'kynde' knowledge. In 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', the Yeoman's 'blered' eyes suggest his own susceptibility to covetous desires, and his own involvement in their 'unkynde' consequences. The situation of covetous people in these poems variously recalls Gregory's account of the 'bleary-eyed' man, whose sinful life distorts his natural inclination for the truth, and the idiomatic link between 'blereynesse' and trickery. But it also reflects Chaucer and Langland's sustained reflection on the consequences of 'unnatural' sin for individual sinners, and for their wider communities.

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<sup>26</sup> Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church*, p. 17. See also Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City*, esp. pp. 40-78, and Lipton, *Images of Intolerance*, p. 59.

In the prologue to *Piers Plowman*, the pardoner persuades people to give him their ‘rynges and broches’ by overstating the authority of his papal bull. As they come up kneeling to kiss this document, he strikes them with it so that their eyes water:

Ther preched a pardoner as he a preest were;  
Brouȝte forþ a bulle wiþ Bisshopes seles,  
And seide þat hymself myȝte assoillen hem alle  
Of falshede of fastynge and of Auowes ybroken.  
Lewed men leued hym wel and liked his speche;  
Comen vp knelynge to kissen his bulle.  
He bonched hem with his breuet and blered hire eiȝen  
And rauȝte with his Rageman rynges and broches. (B.Prol.68-75)<sup>27</sup>

Covetousness and ‘unkyndenesse’ are not named here, but both are clearly at issue. The pardoner will use his winnings to indulge sins of various kinds (the narrator names gluttony and lechery at ll.76-77), but his immediate goal is to acquire material goods, ‘rynges and broches’ and later ‘siluer’ (B.Prol.75, 81). Moreover, by taking the money they would otherwise give to the poor, the pardoner undermines the ‘kynde’ impulses of his audience and the flow of charity to the larger community: ‘þe parisshe preest and þe pardoner parten þe siluer | That þe pouere peple of þe parisshe sholde haue if þei ne were’ (B.Prol.81-82). Andrew Galloway notes that sermons like the one the pardoner preaches would often appeal to a ‘kynde’ connection between Christ and human beings, encouraging people to make charitable donations as a reciprocal response to God’s

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<sup>27</sup> *Piers Plowman: The B Version*, ed. by Kane and Donaldson. All quotations from *Piers Plowman* are from this edition.

grace.<sup>28</sup> A fifteenth-century sermon of this sort from Cambridge University Library, MS Gg 6.26 lists the faculties by which people apprehend the world around them, ‘eyen to se with, eres to here, handes to worke, and oþer naturall instrumentes of thi bodi’, as the ‘giftes of nature’ that demonstrate Christ’s kyndenesse.<sup>29</sup> The ‘Syon Pardon Sermon’ (before 1431) says that the ‘kyndenesse’ of pardons themselves should elicit a ‘kynde’ response from people: ‘euery man seinge þe grete mercy and charite of our merciful Lorde þat he in grauntyng schewith of suche pardon, wherby so greuous peynes are relesyd, owghte of kyndnes to be more lothe to offend hym wiþ any synne’.<sup>30</sup> Read in this context, the pardoner’s actions undermine not only the ‘kynde’ relationships that bind individuals to their community, but also the ‘kynde’ relationships that link human beings to God.

In Langland’s prologue, ‘blereynesse’ caused by ‘smytinge’ figures the effects of hoodwinking and trickery, but it also points to complex and conflicted forms of desire. A fifteenth century sermon from British Library, MS Additional 41321 uses a very similar account of a ‘fals pardoner’ to illustrate the ‘blyndenesse of mysbileue’: ‘Also in þis blyndenesse beþ alle þoo þat bileuen þat for a bulle purchased of a fals pardoner ... and þei paie him þanne a peny and leie hit on hire heuedes, þei beþ asoiled of alle hire synnes, as þei witterli wene’.<sup>31</sup> This gesture, which recalls a blessing, is recast later in the sermon as a blow on the head, when the preacher compares the pardoner’s victims to people playing blind man’s buff: ‘Alle suche ben maad blynde or blyndefeld for a tyme, as men pleyen abobbid, for þei beþ bobbid in hire bileue and in hire catel boþe’.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Galloway, ‘Fifteenth-Century Confession Sermon’, p. 261.

<sup>29</sup> Galloway, ‘Fifteenth-Century Confession Sermon’, p. 267.

<sup>30</sup> Rand, ‘The Syon Pardon Sermon’, p. 337.

<sup>31</sup> *Lollard Sermons*, ed. by Cigman, pp. 111/232, 112/266, 113/285-9. See also Galloway, *Penn Commentary*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>32</sup> *Lollard Sermons*, ed. by Cigman, pp. 113/302-114/304. A sermon from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 649 repeats a Middle English chant from the bobbid game, which also makes clear that the players are struck: ‘A bobbid, a bobbid, a biliried, smyte

sermon points to the implicit logic of Langland's image: the 'lewed men' desire absolution, but they are deceived both by the pardoner's trick and by their own willingness to believe him (they 'leued hym wel and liked his speche').<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the reciprocal desires of the deceiver and the deceived in these lines might seem to offer a troubling echo of 'kynde' reciprocity, as the pardoner's audience collude in their own deception, perpetuating the spiritual confusion that the pardoner creates.

*Piers Plowman* returns to the imagery of 'blereynesse' in B.5, when Covetise comes to confession:

Thanne cam Coueitise; I kan hym naȝt discryue,  
So hungrily and holwe sire heruy hym loked.  
He was bitelbrowed and baberlipped wiȝ two blered eizen;  
And lik a leperen purs lolled hise chekes  
Wel sidder þan his chyn; þei chyueled for elde;  
And as a bondemannes bacon his berd was yshaue... (B.5.188-93)

In the illustrated C text manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 104, the illustrator pays particularly close attention to these facial features, applying red pigment to Covetise's lips and lower eye lines.<sup>34</sup> Covetise's features are grotesquely physical but also suggestively figurative. His hollow cheeks, for example, symbolise his unsatisfied desire, resembling the leather purse he seeks to fill with money. His 'blered' eyes

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not her, bot þu smyte a gode!'; *Macaronic Sermon Collection*, ed. and trans. by Horner, pp. 353/183-355/184.

<sup>33</sup> Middleton, 'Unacknowledged Text', pp. 117-18, notes that, in its more sophisticated forms, satire on false and cynical preachers often focusses more on the 'audience's strange and malleable will to believe' than on the preacher's own intentions.

<sup>34</sup> *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile*, introduction by Pearsall, catalogue of images by Scott, fol 27r. See also the description on pp. xlvi-xlix and the colour reproduction before the main facsimile.

indicate a physical ailment with a moral meaning in a similar way, suggesting the distorting effects of sin on his spiritual understanding.<sup>35</sup>

Covetise's confession reveals his 'unkyndenesse' at every turn. He has no pity on the poor, who are compelled by 'pure nede' to borrow from him, and he does not offer food and drink in charity to his neighbours (B.5.254-59). Repentance names the inherent 'unkyndenesse' in Covetise's actions and withholds absolution from him until he makes restitution for his crimes: "'Thow art an vnkynde creature; I kan þee noȝt assoille | Til þow make restitucion", quod Repentaunce, "and rekene wiþ hem alle"' (B.5.270-71).<sup>36</sup> This demand for restitution adds a new layer of complexity to the problems that Covetise faces. Earlier in his confession, Repentance asks Covetise whether he has ever made restitution before, and Covetise responds that he once rifled through the bags of a group of merchants while they were resting (apparently confusing *restitucion* and *arestes*). This, as Repentance explains, 'was no restitucion ... but a robberis þefte' (B.5.233). Covetise blames his mistake on his lack of literacy: 'I wende riflynge were restitucion for I lerned neuere rede on boke, | And I kan no frenssh in feiþ but of þe ferþest ende of Northfolk' (B.5.235-36).<sup>37</sup> Yet this confusion, which Covetise locates at the level of language, in fact reflects a deeper alienation from 'kyndenesse'. Restitution, like charity, was understood as a 'kynde' impulse, and its necessity, as Wendy Scase observes, was often

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<sup>35</sup> Langum, 'Langland's Diseased Vision', p. 44, also reads Covetise's 'blered' eyes in the light of Bartholomeus's description and moralisation (in Trevisa's translation). Langum emphasises the way that Covetise abuses his intellectual abilities ('briȝt wit and konnyng of treuþe') to indulge his sin. Trevisa links 'blereynesse' to intellect in his 'Dialogue Between the Lord and the Clerk' (1387), *Idea of the Vernacular*, when the clerk claims that 'A blere-eyghed man, but he were al blynde of wit, myght se the solucioun of this resoun' (p. 133).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, 'Confessing Covetise', notes that this passage is revised in the C-text to stress the confessor's obligations under canon law.

<sup>37</sup> On Covetise's confusion of *restitucion* and *arestes*, and a further possible confusion of French *rifler* with Italian *rifare*, see 'riflen', in Alford, *Glossary of Legal Diction*, p. 136. For a more recent discussion of the word play in these lines, see Middleton, 'Loose Talk', p. 37.



explained in terms of ‘the claims of natural justice’.<sup>38</sup> The fourteenth century preachers’ manual *Fasciculus morum* treats restitution in a chapter on ‘the love and charity we have towards our neighbour’, charity that has its roots in ‘naturalis fraternitas’, ‘natural brotherhood’.<sup>39</sup> Through his ‘unkynde’ actions, Covetise has obscured the moral meaning of his ‘kynde’ experience and suppressed the ‘kynde’ instincts that make the logic of penance comprehensible. Understanding restitution, which should follow from natural fellow feeling, has become like reading a text in an unknown foreign language. *Piers Plowman* underscores the seriousness of this situation when, faced with the demand for restitution, Covetise himself falls into ‘wanhope’ and considers suicide (B.5.279). Repentance offers him a provisional solution (he should allow his bishop to redistribute his money) and a consoling image: compared to God’s mercy, human sin is like a spark in the middle of the sea (B.5.282-83a).

The ‘blered’ eye presents particular interpretative challenges in penitential contexts because of its close resemblance to weeping. Sermons and confessional manuals often point to tears as evidence of contrition, a stage of the penitential process that was otherwise hard to observe. Katherine O’Sullivan writes that, in confession and in court, tears could be interpreted as ‘euydences’ of sorrow and remorse. Here, she says, ‘weeping moves beyond mere emotional expression and into the realm of evidence and proof’.<sup>40</sup> In the monastic tradition, and later in some forms of lay affective piety, tears were also understood as a sign of compunction, a gift of grace that went beyond personal remorse and regret for sin.<sup>41</sup> Yet, medieval pastoral texts were also conscious that tears might be faked or manipulated, and that weeping was not in itself a guarantee of

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<sup>38</sup> Scase, *New Anticlericalism*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Fasciculus morum*, ed. and trans. by Wenzel, p. 186/1-2, p. 187. Restitution is discussed on p. 188.

<sup>40</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘Tears and Trial’, p. 193; for penitential contexts, see p. 197.

<sup>41</sup> McEntire, *Doctrine of Compunction*.

sincerity.<sup>42</sup> As Dallas Denery notes, a penitent might weep for many reasons, and the experience of suffering, even when sincere, was not necessarily an experience of true contrition. This was a problem both for confessors and for penitents. In confession, Denery writes, ‘the mere experience of bitterness could not bear the epistemological burden imposed upon it’.<sup>43</sup> Lee Patterson identifies the same anxieties in *Piers Plowman*, which acknowledges that the suffering of sin itself is hard to distinguish from the suffering that people feel when they are contrite. As a result, sin itself ‘preempts and absorbs the contritional impulse’ in the poem. Like Denery, Patterson notes that this reaction is just as confusing for the sinner who experiences suffering as it is for the confessor who observes it: ‘Langland shows us not Sins that are moved by contrition but, in an achievement of far greater complexity, the vicissitudes to which contrition itself is subject within the sinful soul’.<sup>44</sup>

In the episode with the pardoner and in the confession of Covetise, the ambiguity of ‘blered’ eyes, characterised by the ‘unwilful rennyng of teres’, responds to these anxieties about tears as evidence. Indeed, Langland emphasises the ambiguity of tears throughout B.5, noting that Repentence ‘made wille to wepe water wiþ hise eiȝen’ (B.5.61) and, later, that Robert the Robber ‘wepte faste water wiþ hise eiȝen’ (B.5.472), in terms that emphasise the materiality of tears rather than their motive.<sup>45</sup> When Sloth falls asleep during his confession, ‘Be-watchful’ (*Vigilate*) ‘fette water at hise eiȝen’, the ‘watir þat flowiþ on nyȝtis-tyme fro þe yȝen’ that Gilbert describes, and ‘flatte it on his face’, urging him to contrition (B.5.442-43). As the water that forms in the eye during sleep is recast as something like penitential tears, Langland acknowledges that different forms of weeping look essentially the same, so that the symptoms of sin can be mistaken

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<sup>42</sup> Blanchfield, ‘Weeping and Sincerity’, pp. xxi-xxx.

<sup>43</sup> Denery, *Seeing and Being Seen*, p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, pp. 394-95

<sup>45</sup> Trigg, ‘Langland’s Tears’, p. 33.

as signs of contrition. Covetise's 'blereynesse' expresses the same ambiguity in a more concise way, pointing to the resemblance between 'unwilful' and contrite tears. In this way, Covetise's 'blered' eyes not only reflect his own confusion but also confuse other people who see him.<sup>46</sup>

Lanfrank's account of the 'blered' eye as a contagious condition suggests another way that Covetise's sin might have an effect on the people around him. In B.5, Wrath and Sloth are introduced in lines that echo the introduction of Covetise:

Now awakeþ Wraþe wiþ two white eizen ... (B.5.135)

Thanne cam Coueitise; ... wiþ two blered eizen (B.5.188-90)

Thanne cam Sleuþe al bislabeled wiþ two slymy eizen. (B.5.385)

Read against the encyclopedias, it might seem that these sins display symptoms of the same disease at different stages: Sloth's slimy eyes recall Gilbert's description of the 'viscouse' matter that falls into people's eyes during sleep, making them 'sumwhat blereyzed', Covetise's 'blered' eyes display the early signs of ophthalmia where the discharge of watery humours inflames the eye and obstructs the sight, and the 'white' eyes of Sloth are obscured by albugo, the 'webbe' that covers 'al þe blake of þe yze' if ophthalmia is left untreated.<sup>47</sup> If this is so, it suggests the far-reaching consequences of

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<sup>46</sup> Davis, 'Cutaneous Time', p. 114, makes a related argument about the ambiguities of 'blereynesse' in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the 'blered' eye again confuses the onlooker as well as distorting the sight of the sufferer. Davis notes that the old woman appears 'sellyly blered' to Gawain in fitt 2 (l. 963), and argues that this phrase might equally describe the lady's eyes as watery and rheumatic or indicate that Gawain's perception of her is partial and distorted.

<sup>47</sup> Other interpretations are possible. Langum, 'Diseased Vision', p. 44, reads Wrath's white eyes in relation to the account of 'pale' eyes in the *Secretum secretorum*. Pearsall's

Covetise's sin. 'Unkyndenesse' here undermines not only the 'kynde' instincts that make penance coherent, but also the processes of observation and self-observation that make confession possible. The communication of this disease parodies the process (reciprocal and 'kynde') by which sinners might ordinarily provide exemplary instruction for one another.

Langland returns to the imagery of the 'blered' eye in passus 17, where the effects of 'unkynde' covetousness are once again at issue. At the end of his speech, the Samaritan offers an image of the three things that drive a man out of his house, a nagging wife, a leaky roof and the 'smoke and smolder' from a fire which leaves him 'blereighed':

That oon is a wikkede wif þat wol noȝt be chastised;  
Hir feere fleep hire for feere of hir tonge.  
And if his hous be vnhiled and reyne on his bedde  
He sekep and sekep til he slepe drye.  
And whan smoke and smolder smyt in his sighte  
It doop hym worse þan his wif or wete to slepe;  
For smoke and smolder smertep hise eighen  
Til he be blereighed or blynd ... (B.17.323-30)

Langland interpolates this reference to 'blereynesse' (caused by 'bitinge of smoke', as mentioned in the medical manuals and encyclopedias) into a familiar commonplace, often used to make an antifeminist point about nagging wives.<sup>48</sup> Langland recasts the

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note on these lines, *Piers Plowman*, ed. by Pearsall, p. 125, n. 103, suggests that Wrath's eyes are rolling with anger so that only the whites are visible.

<sup>48</sup> The image of the three things that drive a man out of his house, which derives ultimately from Proverbs 27:15, appears in a range of medieval texts including 'The Wife

commonplace as an allegory, emphasising the smoky fire rather than the wife, and uses it to disambiguate between ‘kynde’ and ‘unkynde’ sins. In the Samaritan’s account, the nagging wife represents ‘oure wikked flessch þat wol noȝt be chastised’, but which is comprehensible and forgivable because ‘kynde clyueþ on hym euere to contrarie þe soule’ (B.17.334-35). The leaky roof, meanwhile, figures ‘siknesse and sorwes þat we suffren ouȝte’, and which make people complain to God (B.17.340). These complaints, too, are possible to understand and forgive as part of the order of ‘kynde’: such people ‘han cause to contrarie by kynde of hir siknesse’ (B.17.344). The smoke and smolder, however, represent ‘coueitise and vnkyndenesse’ which actively resist both God’s mercy and human comprehension: ‘coueitise and vnkyndenesse ... quencheþ goddes mercy, | For vnkyndenesse is þe contrarie of alle kynnes reson’ (B.17.348-49).

This account of the ‘blered’ eye concludes a section of the poem that thinks in detail about ‘kynde’ relationships between human beings, and between human beings and God. Explaining his own parable, the Samaritan says that the *semyvif*, beaten and robbed and left half-alive, figures the situation of human beings after the fall, under attack by the devil, sustained by charity, and awaiting the coming of Christ. Mary Raschko argues that Langland integrates two medieval interpretations of the Samaritan parable, one of which takes it as an allegory to show how only God’s grace can save human beings while the other encourages people to imitate the Samaritan in their own good works, by emphasising the reciprocity between God’s love and human charity.<sup>49</sup> The Samaritan’s

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of Bath’s Tale’, Innocent III’s *De miseria* and the *Lamentations* of Matheolus. Following Skeat, Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines*, p. 61, proposes Peter the Chanter’s *Verbum abbreviatum* as Langland’s most direct source. Cannon, ‘Langland’s *Ars Grammatica*’, pp. 12-13, suggests that Langland may also have encountered it as a schoolroom commonplace in a text like Matthew of Vendôme’s *Tobias*.

<sup>49</sup> Raschko, ‘Love of God and Neighbour’. Davis, “‘Fullynge” Nature’, makes a related argument that the law of ‘kynde’ integrates competing claims about universal salvation in the poem: Christ’s ‘kynde’ relationship to human beings creates the possibility that salvation might extend to non-Christians through grace, but the law of ‘kynde’ also

speech shows, in universal terms, how the natural impulse to be 'kynde' allows people to establish a relationship to God through their relationships to one another. As Galloway writes, '[t]he Samaritan's notion of "kyndenesse" sacralizes an ethos of secular social cohesion'.<sup>50</sup> Yet, these reciprocal relationships, modelled on the Samaritan's own action, are threatened by the 'unkyndenesse' that manifests itself in covetous desire. As Hugh White observes, the Samaritan presents 'unkyndenesse' not only as a lack of charity towards fellow human beings, but also as a rejection of the essential affinity between human nature and God's, 'a fundamental unlovingness which opposes the *kynde* of God Himself'.<sup>51</sup> The Samaritan makes this point most strongly as he develops his image of the Trinity as a candle, comparing the Father to the wax, the Son to the wick, and the Holy Spirit to the flame, which catches light in the human soul. The flame grows when true love blows on it, an image for the reciprocal relationship between human and divine 'kyndenesse', but covetousness and 'unkyndenesse' put it out, so that only a glow remains (B.17.215-20). At the end of passus 17, the smoky fire that leaves a man 'blereighed or blynd' strongly recalls this image, suggesting a situation where the flame of the Holy Spirit has finally been extinguished.<sup>52</sup> This part of the poem offers the fullest explanation for the special status of covetousness, as a sin that opposes the natural, moral impulse to 'kyndenesse' by which human action comes to resemble God's.

By linking bodily sins and complaint in the face of suffering to 'kynde', the Samaritan allows that they might themselves form an instructive part of lived experience. The Samaritan's account of these 'kynde' sins seems confirms Zeeman's argument that, for Langland, sin itself could provide beneficial knowledge, and that 'kynde' might teach

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creates imperatives for Christians to convert people to the faith through charitable good works.

<sup>50</sup> Galloway, 'Social Ethic', p. 382.

<sup>51</sup> White, *Nature and Salvation*, p. 106.

<sup>52</sup> On the relationship between the torch and the smoky fire, see also Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines*, pp. 63-69.

‘through “natural” experiences of alienation, deprivation, poverty, sin and suffering’.<sup>53</sup> However, by making an exception for covetousness, the Samaritan locates it outside the instructive, exemplary order where other sins might have a positive role. Because covetousness is ‘þe contrarie of alle kynnes reson,’ it resists interpretation as part of ‘kynde’ experience. The Samaritan revisits a number of images and ideas from Covetise’s confession, but uses them to stress the unique strangeness of covetousness, rather than as a way to imagine the subjective experience of this sin. The Samaritan presents the *semyvif* as a man who has been ‘robbed or rifled’ and later describes the robbers as ‘Vnkynde cristene men’ who act out of ‘coueitise and enuye’, recalling the ‘unkynde’ ‘riflynge’ of Covetise in B.5 (B.17.102, 277). This allegory positions most human beings as the victims of sin, but reserves a special place for the ‘unkynde’ as perpetrators. The Samaritan also returns to the demand for restitution, which, in extreme cases, might lead people into ‘wanhope’, despair of Christ’s mercy. In B.5, Covetise’s despair seemed to emphasise the difficulty of making restitution, but in B.17 the Samaritan presents it as another form of ‘unkyndenesse’: restitution, however difficult, remains a ‘kynde’ impulse, whereas ‘wanhope’ comes about when people deny their ‘kynde’ relationship to God. The Samaritan’s image of the Holy Spirit struggling to catch light in the human soul echoes Repentance’s image of human sin as a spark extinguished by the sea of God’s mercy. Yet, while Repentance offered consolation to Covetise, the Samaritan restates the seriousness of covetousness and the obligations on human beings to reciprocate God’s love. Even as he describes the capacities of God’s mercy, the Samaritan removes the slender consolations offered to Covetise, pointing out that mercy depends on the very ‘kyndenesse’ that Covetise has suppressed. And, even as he allows that sin and suffering might provide an instructive part of ‘kynde’ experience, he makes an exception for ‘unkynde’ covetousness, which seems to resist ‘kynde’ understanding.

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<sup>53</sup> Zeeman, *Discourse of Desire*, p. 158. See also White, *Nature and Salvation*, p. 108.

In 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', as in *Piers Plowman*, the imagery of the 'blered' eye helps to describe the confusion and alienation caused by 'unkynde' covetousness. In the 'Prologue', the Yeoman describes his work for the alchemist Canon and says that long periods of blowing into the fire have changed the colour of his face: 'I am so used in the fir to blowe | That it hath chaunged my colour, I trowe' (VIII, 666-67). He returns to this idea in the first part of his tale, adding the detail about his 'blered' eye:

And wher my colour was bothe fressh and reed,  
Now is it wan and of a leden hewe.  
Whoso it useth, soore shal he rewe!  
And of my swink yet blered is min eye.  
Lo, which avantage is to multiplie! (VIII, 727-31)

'Blereynesse' in this example results not only from hot air and the 'bitinge of smoke', as it does for the man in the Samaritan's commonplace, but also from 'traueile'. The Yeoman's 'blered' eye is a direct consequence of his work, figuring 'the myopia produced by [his] excessive industry', as Isabel Davis writes.<sup>54</sup> Yet, this imagery also speaks to the covetous desire that motivates the Yeoman's work, and to the spiritual confusion that results from it. The recurrent imagery of changing colours and 'blerynge' eyes suggests that alchemical experimentation has produced a sort of 'transmutation' in the alchemists' bodies, pointing to the way their work has made them 'unkynde'.<sup>55</sup>

In the *Confessio Amantis* (c.1386-92), Gower describes alchemy as a science that is 'wrought be weie of kinde', a 'parfite medicine, | Which grounded is upon nature' (IV,

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<sup>54</sup> Davis, *Writing Masculinity*, p. 111.

<sup>55</sup> Patterson, 'Perpetual Motion', p. 38.



2508, 2624-25).<sup>56</sup> Alchemy seeks to understand natural processes in order to harness them for its own ends. According to alchemical theory, as Patterson observes, all substances are formed from a primary matter which is modified according to the disposition of the four elements within it. It follows that the alchemist should be able to turn one substance into another, or even to restore matter to its original condition, by adjusting the balance of these four elements. ‘In this sense’, Patterson says, ‘the alchemist does not violate but perfects nature’.<sup>57</sup> Yet, alchemy could also seem to approach this ‘kynde’ knowledge in an ‘unkynde’ way. In a context where the natural world could be a source of exemplary, ethical instruction, alchemy remains preoccupied with knowledge of natural processes as an end in itself, ignoring the knowledge that nature makes available and searching for knowledge that nature withholds. In *Piers Plowman*, Dame Study lists a number of sciences that are ‘yuel for to knowe’, and which she characterises as ‘fibicches in forelles of fele mennes wittes’: astronomy, geometry, geomancy, divination, necromancy and ‘Experimentȝ of Alkenamye’ (B.10.212-19). In these lines, as Zeeman notes, ‘Studie openly describes herself as the initiator of the most barren temptations of learning, a learning that refuses to see beyond the material world’.<sup>58</sup> For Study, the pursuit of alchemy is an abuse of knowledge, a form of *curiositas* that Anima will later describe in terms of ‘Coueitise to konne and to knowe science’ (B.15.62).<sup>59</sup> ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ acknowledges both these aspects of alchemy, presenting it as a search for natural knowledge that has lost its connection to nature, and as a worldly intellectual pursuit that reflects and produces covetous forms of desire.

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<sup>56</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Peck, II, pp. 293, 295.

<sup>57</sup> Patterson, ‘Perpetual Motion’, pp. 42-43.

<sup>58</sup> Zeeman, *Discourse of Desire*, p. 129.

<sup>59</sup> On *curiositas* as a central concern in *Piers Plowman*, see Emerson, “‘Coveitise to Konne’”.

In ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, the ‘unkyndenesse’ of alchemy is manifest in the way the alchemists trick other people, borrowing money on the promise that they can turn base metals into gold. This is a version of the clerical trickery practised by Langland’s pardoner, who ‘blered’ the eyes of his victims in the idiomatic sense. The Yeoman makes clear that this trickery subverts and undermines people’s ‘kynde’ impulses: the priest in his story offers to lend the canon money and the canon agrees to reveal the secrets of alchemy in return, ‘Somwhat to quite with youre kindenesse’ (VIII, 1055). Elsewhere, the Yeoman describes the relationship between alchemists and the larger community in terms that recall the ‘unkynde’ robbers and riflers of *Piers Plowman* B.5 and B.17, saying that alchemists are found ‘Lurkinge in hernes and in lanes blinde, | Whereas these robbours and these theves by kinde | Holden hir privee fereful residence’ (VIII, 658-60). ‘Unkyndenesse’ also emerges in the Yeoman’s story as the canon misleads the priest about the evidence of his own experience, an important source of ‘kynde’ knowledge. As Collette observes, the canon’s tricks involve ‘a litany of exhortations to look, to see, to trust sight’, as he confuses the priest about the evidence of his own eyes. Collette notes two occasions when the canon conflates sight with touch, combining two forms of natural, experiential proof in service of his deception: ‘Look what ther is – put in thin hand and grope!’, and ‘Putte in youre hand, and looketh what is ther’ (VIII, 1236, 1329).<sup>60</sup>

Yet, the Yeoman also suggests that the victims of alchemy collude in their own deception, by ignoring the evidence of their own experience. Like the pardoner’s victims in Langland’s prologue, they are misled in part by their own willingness to believe. In an apostrophe to the priest in his story, the Yeoman draws attention to his covetous desires: ‘O sely preest, o sely innocent! | With coveitise anon thow shalt be blent’ (VIII, 1076-7). Davis argues that the Yeoman presents the priest as ‘an internal contradiction’ here, by

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<sup>60</sup> Collette, *Species, Phantasms, and Images*, p. 157.

identifying him as ‘an innocent victim of his own “covetise”’.<sup>61</sup> The canon’s trick depends for its success on the priest’s ‘unkynde’ desires. Indeed, as Davis observes, the priest is tricked in a way that recalls the Yeoman’s own ‘blereynesse’ (the canon slips a hollow coal filled with silver filings into the fire while the priest turns away to wipe the sweat from his eyes (VIII, 1184-92)), so that this combination of deception and self-deception implicates the Yeoman himself.<sup>62</sup> In the ‘Prologue’, the Host points out that the Canon’s threadbare clothes seem to contradict the Yeoman’s claim that he is a successful alchemist: ‘Why is thy lord so sluttish, I thee prey? | - And is of power bettre cloth to beye, | If that his dede acorde with thy speche’ (VIII, 636-38). In *Dives and Pauper* (1405-10), Pauper notes the same contradiction, arguing that the alchemists’ poverty reveals their fraudulence:

‘wel Y wot þer is no man þat can don it [alchemy], for ʒif þey coudyn þey woldyn fyrst multipllyn to hymselfward and makyn hemself ryche. And comonly alle þat vsyn þat craft, but þey han ouʒt ellys for to takyn to, ben wol pore and wol nedy’.<sup>63</sup>

Although the Yeoman will later rehearse the alchemists’ explanation for their ‘threedbare array’ (they claim they are hiding their secret knowledge to avoid being attacked), the text makes clear at the outset that alchemy provides experiential evidence against itself (VIII, 890). The ‘unkynde’ deception that alchemists practise responds to an incipient ‘unkyndnesse’ in their victims, insofar as each person who invests in this science must first ignore the evidence of his or her ‘kynde’ experience.

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<sup>61</sup> Davis, *Writing Masculinity*, pp. 113-14.

<sup>62</sup> Davis, *Writing Masculinity*, p. 111.

<sup>63</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, ed. by Barnum, I, 185.

The Yeoman presents the alchemists' trickery as an extension of their own self-deception. In his 'Prologue', he says that alchemists themselves believe the 'fals' claims they make to deceive other people:

We blondren evere, and pouren in the fir,  
And for al that, we faille of oure desir,  
For evere we lakken oure conclusioun.  
To muchel folk we doon illusioun,  
And borwe gold – be it a pound or two,  
Or ten, or twelve, or manye sommes mo –  
And make hem wenen, at the leeste weye,  
That of a pound we koude make tweye.  
Yet it is fals; but ay we han good hope  
It for to doon ...

(VIII, 670-79)

'Pour[ing] in the fir' results in 'blered' eyes, as the Yeoman will go on to explain, and it is linked here not only to the 'illusioun' that alchemists do to others but also to the way they 'blondren evere' themselves, images that develop the theme of distorted vision. The Yeoman uses the language of infection to describe the way the alchemists communicate their self-deception. His narrative begins, 'Ther is a chanoun of religioun | Amonges us wolde infecte al a toun', and he claims that the alchemists' smell could 'infecte' a man a mile away (VIII, 972-73, 889). As a 'maladie [that] corruptiþ þe eyen of oper men', 'blereynesse' responds to this imagery of infection. The complex patterns of reciprocation by which the alchemists involve other people in their own self-deception, and the imagery of infection, suggest that 'unkyndenesse' perpetuates itself in a way that

echoes the mutual responsiveness of 'kynde' relationships, recalling perhaps the way that Langland's Covetise communicates his 'blereynesse' to the other sins.

Although 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale' lacks the explicitly penitential context of Covetise's confession or of the episode with the pardoner from Langland's prologue, the Yeoman nevertheless offers a confessional account of himself, punctuated with lamentation and with partial admissions of culpability. The Yeoman's performance, an autobiographical prologue followed by a tale deeply implicated in that prologue's concerns, also strongly recalls the Pardoner's prologue and tale, which engage directly with penitential discourse. Indeed, the Pardoner's prologue and tale articulate profound anxieties about penitential speech that surface in the Yeoman's tale in turn, as the Pardoner exposes his own conflicted motives of pride and remorse, his capacity for self-deception, and his ability to expend his energies on the endless recapitulation of the same theme.<sup>64</sup> Like Langland's sins, the Yeoman displays a range of physiological reactions that might be read as evidence of contrition, but which are made more ambiguous by the effects of his 'unkyndenesse'. Sweatiness could symbolise a full confession, as Ziegler notes, but the Yeoman's sweatiness results from his busy work around a hot fire in pursuit of the secrets of alchemy.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, in the Yeoman's story, the canon makes the priest's sweatiness the pretext for his 'unkynde' deception: 'Ye been right hoot – I se wel how ye swete. | Have here a clooth, and wipe away the wete ...' (VIII, 1186-87). The Yeoman also blushes as he tells his story: 'Evere whan that I speke of his falshede, | For shame of him my chekes wexen rede' (VIII, 1094-95). For confessors, blushing, like tears, was visible evidence of inner contrition, and the Yeoman says explicitly that he blushes for 'shame' in these lines. Yet, the Yeoman also makes clear that alchemy has

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<sup>64</sup> Middleton, 'Unacknowledged Text', identifies Chaucer's direct response to Langland's poetic project in these aspects of the Pardoner's performance. See also Patterson, *Subject of History*, pp. 374-97.

<sup>65</sup> Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion*, p. 190.

changed his complexion, so that ‘reednesse’ is no longer a reliable sign: ‘For reednesse have I noon, right wel I knowe, | In my visage, for fumes diverse | Of metals, which ye han herd me reherce, | Consumed and wasted han my reednesse’ (VIII, 1097-1100). The Yeoman’s ‘blered’ eyes, like the eyes of Langland’s Covetise, offer another example of this ambiguity; the symptoms of ‘blereynesse’ look like penitential weeping, but here they follow from peering into a smoky fire and signify the effects of ‘unkynde’, covetous desires.

*Piers Plowman* raises the possibility that, while most sins can form an instructive part of ‘kynde’ experience, ‘unkynde’ covetousness might resist interpretation in this way. Covetise’s confusion about the moral meaning of his own experience points in this direction, and the Samaritan makes this argument more explicitly. ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ also raises this question by interrogating the extent to which the Yeoman can draw exemplary lessons from his own experience. Where the Yeoman’s body appears to offer evidence of his contrition, it really displays the continuing effects of his sin. His ‘unkyndenesse’ undermines the ‘kynde’ instruction he might offer to other people. The Yeoman is also ambivalent about the exemplary lessons that derive from his own life. On the one hand, he identifies his life and his story as a warning to other people, saying ‘Lat every man be war by me for evere!’ (VIII, 737), and describing the ‘doublenesse’ of the canon ‘To th’entente that men may be war therby’ (VIII, 1300, 1306), and offers himself up ‘as a simple if extravagant exemplum of the wasted life’.<sup>66</sup> Yet, on the other, he repeatedly distances himself from the implications of his own experience. The Yeoman resists the evident connections between his life and his story, insisting, for example, that the canon in his narrative is not related to his master: ‘This chanoun was my lord, ye wolden wene? | Sire Hoost, in feith, and by the hevenes queene, | It was another chanoun, and nat he ...’ (VIII, 1088-90). And, as he extrapolates

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<sup>66</sup> Patterson, ‘Perpetual Motion’, p. 38.

moralising ‘sentence’ from his life at the end of the tale, the Yeoman continues to question whether he will be able to learn from his experience himself, in an image that recalls the smoky fire and the ‘blered’ eye: ‘O fy, for shame! – they that han been brent | Allas, kan they nat flee the fires hete?’ (VIII, 1407-8).

3.

Through its link to Leah from the book of Genesis, the imagery of the ‘blered’ eye identifies ‘unkynde’ covetousness with the active life and with the Old Law. Allegorical readings of Leah emphasised her ‘blereynesse’ in contrast to her sister Rachael, ‘fayr in face’ in Genesis, 29:17 (in the Wycliffite version), but often explicitly clear-sighted in the commentary tradition. This was one of a series of contrasts between the sisters that illustrated the relative conditions of the active and contemplative lives and of the synagogue and the church: confused and perceptive, ‘blereyed’ and beautiful, child-bearing and not. Yet, in these readings, the story of Genesis 29, where Jacob marries Leah then Rachael in turn, also suggested that the Christian might progress from work to contemplation, and anticipated the historical movement from the Old Law to the New. Langland and Chaucer respond to the optimism of this exegesis in different ways, revising the terms of the allegory to highlight the damaging effects of ‘unkynde’ covetousness, but also, in the case of *Piers Plowman*, to suggest reasons for hope in the face of this most serious sin.

In *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, covetousness and ‘unkyndenesse’ are closely involved with practical work. In his confession, Covetise offers a detailed account of his apprenticeship at Simon-at-the-Stile, his career as a traveling merchant, a draper and a money lender, and his marriage to Rose, herself a weaver and a brewer. He reveals a range of dishonest practices, designed to defraud his

customers: manipulating weights and measures, stretching the cloth he sells across a frame in a way that both lengthens and weakens it, and clipping coins. Mike Rodman Jones has shown that Langland's portrait of Covetise reflects contemporary concerns about 'regratorie', rigging and forestalling the market and overcharging for basic requirements in a way that contributes to poor people's deprivation.<sup>67</sup> Making money in this way is 'unkynde' because it harms the very people who should benefit most from charitable giving. The relationship between covetousness, 'unkyndenesse,' and the active life is reinforced by Haukyn's confession in B.13-14. Haukyn wears a coat that is stained by 'coueitise and unkynde desiryng', and Patience, his interlocutor, describes the way he directs his desire towards material goods: 'Moore to good þan to god þe gome his loue caste' (B.13.355-56).<sup>68</sup> In lines that are reassigned to Covetise in the C text, Haukyn describes his own dishonest trade practices, concealing his low-quality goods beneath his high-quality ones, using false weights and measures, and seeking 'þoruȝ wittes wyes to bigile' (B.13.360). The 'unkyndenesse' that Haukyn demonstrates in his working life undermines his devotion in turn. In church, he is more concerned about his losses and the loans he has made than his sins, and his covetousness restrains his natural impulse to be charitable: 'if I kidde any kyndenesse myn euencristen to helpe' he says, 'Vpon a cruwel coueitise my conscience gan hange' (B.13.389-90). For Haukyn, as for Covetise, 'unkyndenesse' distorts social relationships in a way that has serious consequences for spiritual understanding.

The Canon's Yeoman, too, describes his life in the language of urban trade, referring to alchemy repeatedly as a 'craft', and variously as 'werk' and 'labour'.<sup>69</sup> James

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<sup>67</sup> Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral*, pp. 17-32.

<sup>68</sup> White, *Nature and Salvation*, p. 100, suggests that covetousness and 'unkynde desiring' might be indistinguishable in Haukyn's speech.

<sup>69</sup> Cannon, 'Chaucer and the Language of London', argues that the Yeoman expresses himself in a craft idiolect, 'absorb[ing] the exclusivity of his craft to the impenetrability of a language' (p. 87).



Landman argues that the Yeoman's account of himself recalls the language of chancery petitions, where craftsmen gave evidence about commercial malpractice, conscious of the competing demands of their guilds and of the wider community.<sup>70</sup> Guilds described themselves in terms of the 'kynde' affinities between their members, as Galloway observes, but Landman points to suspicions in the wider community that the guilds' desire to protect trade secrets might conceal 'conspiracies injurious to the common profit', analogous to the practices of 'regrators' that Rodman Jones describes.<sup>71</sup> Like Covetise and Haukyn, the Yeoman describes trickery and deception as trade practices, but he also identifies his own craft idiolect, his 'termes ... so clerghial and so queinte', as deceptive in itself (VIII, 752). The Yeoman is as much a victim of this 'clerghial' language as the priest in his tale. As Patterson has shown, the impossibility of speaking plainly about alchemy frustrates the Yeoman's desire to speak plainly about himself in turn.<sup>72</sup> The Yeoman's situation, engaged with the language and materials of alchemy but unable to understand its principles or to see its products, offers as 'an image of alienated labor in the strongest sense'.<sup>73</sup>

Through its association with Leah, the imagery of the 'blered' eye links these accounts of 'unkynde' work to the larger medieval discourse about the active life. Indeed, the Yeoman's seven years' work with the Canon, usually read as a reference to the standard term of an apprenticeship, might constitute a further reference to Genesis 29, where Jacob works for seven years to marry Leah and Rachael in turn. This discourse emphasised the benefits of the active life as well as its trials. For Augustine and Gregory, Leah's 'blered' eyes figure the spiritual confusion that results from the active life, but her many children figure its positive outcomes, including preaching and care for the poor,

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<sup>70</sup> Landman, 'Laws of Community'.

<sup>71</sup> Galloway, 'Social Ethic', p. 374; Landman, 'Laws of Community', p. 405.

<sup>72</sup> Patterson, 'Perpetual Motion', p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> Knapp, 'The Work of Alchemy', p. 582.

which Augustine identifies explicitly as charitable acts. The active life could also condition the soul for contemplation, while the desire for contemplation improved the active life in turn. In his *Homilies on Ezekiel*, Gregory calls it ‘bonus ordo uiuendi’ [‘a good order of life’] to move from one to the other, ‘ut per hoc quod contemplatiua mentem accenderit, perfectius actiua teneatur’ [‘so that the active life may be lived the more perfectly because the contemplative has kindled the mind’] (II, 2, 11).<sup>74</sup> Walter Hilton’s epistle on the ‘mixed’ or ‘medeled’ life, which uses the allegory of Leah and Rachael to describe the proper balance between good works and contemplation for devout lay readers, says that charitable works help to nourish the ‘litol sparcle’ of divine fire that God implants in the soul, which is itself ‘not ellis but love and charite’, and which creates the desire for contemplation.<sup>75</sup> Hilton’s image strongly recalls the Samaritan’s speech from *Piers Plowman*, where ‘kyndenesse’ allows the flame of the Holy Spirit to catch light in the human soul. When *Piers Plowman* and ‘The Canon’s Tale’ invoke this larger discursive context through the imagery of ‘blereynesse’, they suggest a contrast between the active life that Augustine and Gregory describe, where practical work brings benefits for the soul, and the active lives that Covetise and the Yeoman actually experience. This contrast points to the way that ‘unkyndenesse’ strips practical work of its positive spiritual potential. Far from kindling the mind for contemplation or issuing in charitable good works, the active life produces in Covetise and the Yeoman only a ‘brennyng desire’ for material goods.

The effects of ‘unkynde’ covetousness can also be seen in the way these poems respond to the eschatological interpretation of Leah and Rachael as figures for the synagogue and the church. Following the precedent of the allegory of Leah and Rachael, both Chaucer and Langland draw comparisons between the ‘blereynesse’ of the present

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<sup>74</sup> Gregory, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelam Prophetam*, ed. by Adriaen. Translation from Gregory, *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. by Tomkinson.

<sup>75</sup> Hilton, ‘Epistle on the Mixed Life’, ed. by Windeatt, p. 121.

and the clear-sightedness of another historical period. Thus, in ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’, Chaucer offers a distinction between the Yeoman’s ‘blered’ eyes and the clear sight of St. Cecilia in ‘The Second Nun’s Tale’, while, in *Piers Plowman*, Langland contrasts ‘blereynesse’ to the clear sight that becomes possible in the moment of Christ’s atonement.<sup>76</sup> These variations on the allegory of Leah and Rachael have very different implications. Chaucer locates clear-sighted ‘kyndenesse’ in the distant past, confirming the damaging effects of covetousness in the present day, while Langland imagines that contemporary ‘blereynesse’ might be answered by a ‘kynde’ encounter with Christ, projected into the future.

The relationship between the Second Nun’s and Canon’s Yeoman’s tales is constituted by a dense network of contrasts and oppositions.<sup>77</sup> One of the most important of these contrasts is historical: the life of St. Cecilia takes place in the early history of the church while the Yeoman’s tale is set in the present day. James Dean argues that, taken together, the tales chart the ‘degeneration from Cecilia’s bright age to the modern era’, and John Fyler writes that ‘as we move from one tale to the other we move from the Golden Age to the Iron, from the heavenly suffusion and clarity of outline in the primitive Church ... to the alchemist’s world, in which man must indeed eat bread in the sweat of his face’.<sup>78</sup> Practical work takes different forms in these different historical circumstances. Cecilia’s ‘bisnesse’ is characteristically ‘kynde’, and has many of the positive outcomes that Augustine and Gregory identified with the active life. She

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<sup>76</sup> Grennen noted the contrast between the Yeoman’s ‘blereynesse’ and the clear sight of St. Cecilia in one of his influential articles on the relationship between ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ and ‘The Second Nun’s Tale’: ‘Saint Cecilia’s “Chemical Wedding”’, pp. 478-79.

<sup>77</sup> On the connections between ‘The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale’ and the ‘Second Nun’s Tale’, and on the critical literature discussing it, see Patterson, ‘Perpetual Motion’, pp. 26-27, and p. 26, n. 3. The tales also form part of a repeated pattern in *The Canterbury Tales* where a saint’s life precedes a tale with a long confessional prologue, as Patterson notes, *Subject of History*, pp. 367-68.

<sup>78</sup> Dean, ‘Dismantling the Canterbury Book’, pp. 750-51, and Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*, p. 158.

preaches and converts people to the faith, providing ‘ensample ... by good techinge’ (VIII, 93). She also instructs by her own example (her name means “‘the way to blinde”’, | For she ensample was’), and her exemplary qualities are continuous with those of the natural, created world; just as people may see the sun, moon and stars when they look at heaven, the Second Nun says, so they may see the ‘magnanimitee’ of faith, ‘the cleernesse hool of sapience’ and ‘sondry werkes brighte of excellence’ when they look at Cecilia (VIII, 92-3, 110-12). The Second Nun concludes her prologue by describing Cecilia ‘brenning evere in charite ful brighte’ (VIII, 118). Cecilia’s ‘kyndenesse’, her ‘charite’ and her easy exemplarity provide stark contrasts with the Yeoman’s ‘unkynde’ labour, motivated by covetous desire, and with the spiritual confusion it causes.<sup>79</sup> The Yeoman’s occupation further illustrates this historical contrast, since the practice of alchemy itself was thought to have declined from a golden age to the present day. In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower notes that the secrets of alchemy were once available to philosophers, but have since been lost: ‘now it stant al otherwise ... hou to make it, nou wot non | After the sothe experience’ (IV, 2580-83), a point the Yeoman rehearses when he says of alchemical knowledge that ‘men kan nat come therby, | For any wit that men han nowadays’ (VIII, 1395-96).<sup>80</sup>

This contrast between the clear-sighted golden age and the ‘blereyed’ present day gestures to the eschatological interpretation of Leah and Rachael, but also recasts the terms of that allegory in significant ways. In the last part of her ‘Prologue’, the Second

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<sup>79</sup> Newhauser, *Early History of Greed*, pp. 8, 18-20, 28-29, 34-35, 62, 71-73, 109, describes a long tradition linking the development of covetous desire to the decline of the world from a golden age.

<sup>80</sup> As Jennifer Sisk observes, ‘Religion, Alchemy, and Nostalgic Idealism’, p. 165, ‘The idea of loss is prevalent in alchemical literature, conveying a sense of longing for the ancient philosophers’ knowledge of how to achieve alchemical perfection’. For Sisk, the Second Nun’s and Canon’s Yeoman’s tales, though often read in contradistinction to one another, express related forms of nostalgia for an idealised past.

Nun offers a detailed explanation of Cecilia's name. Alongside many other etymological meanings, 'Cecilia' encodes a reference to Leah and to the active life:

Or ellis Cecile, as I writen finde,  
Is joined by a manere conjoininge  
Of 'hevene' and 'lia'; and here in figuringe  
The hevene is set for thoght of holinesse,  
And 'lia' for hir lasting bisnesse. (VIII, 94-98)

Yet, as the Second Nun explains it, the etymology of 'Cecilia' also means "'Wantinge of blindnesse",' expressing 'hir grete light | Of sapience', qualities more commonly associated with Rachael (VIII, 100-01). Leah's 'blereynesse', meanwhile, comes to characterise the Canon's Yeoman in the present day, where covetous work undermines 'kynde' understanding. By reassigning the attributes of Leah and Rachael in this way, Chaucer removes the optimism implicit in the exegetical tradition. Rather than a movement from the Old Law to the New, these tales describe a process of historical deterioration, where the spiritual benefits of the active life are gradually eroded.

In *Piers Plowman*, by contrast, Langland refers to the eschatological reading of Leah and Rachael in a way that preserves its hopeful possibilities. After the confessions of the sins B.5, Repentance prays to God for grace on their behalf. He invokes the idea of the *felix culpa* to demonstrate that everything, even sin, is 'for þe beste as I bileue', a gesture that identifies hope in the larger shape of Christian history, and he looks forward to the events of Good Friday, located both in the historical past and in the liturgical future (B.5.480-90a). After the confession of the sins, with its ambiguous imagery of 'white', 'blered' and 'slymy' eyes, Repentance anticipates Christ's crucifixion using clear oppositions between sight and blindness, darkness and light: 'The sonne for sorwe

þerof lees siȝt for a tyme ... *Populus qui ambulabat in tenebris vidit lucem magnam.* | The liȝt þat lepe out of þee, Lucifer it blente ...' (B.5.491-94). This pattern is repeated in B.17 and 18, where the Samaritan's discussion of 'blereynesse' is followed by a vision of the crucifixion that returns repeatedly to stark oppositions between sight and blindness. Christ's atonement is once again in the future, here, as the narrative of the dream vision moves through Christian history, and as Will moves through the Easter week liturgy in the waking episodes.<sup>81</sup>

For Langland, blindness gives way to clear sight as the Old Law gives way to the New in the moment of Christ's atonement, and the clarity of this imagery itself offers a contrast with the ambiguity of 'blereynesse'. The eschatological significance of sight and blindness is clearly expressed in the episode where Longinus, a 'blynde Iew', pierces Christ's side with his spear and is healed by his blood, addressing Christ as 'riȝtful Iesu' (B.18.82, 91). The healing and conversion of Longinus also produces an unambiguous instance of penitential weeping, as Longinus acknowledges his culpability, describes the pain it causes him, and asks Jesus for grace immediately before he weeps (B.18.88-91). This moment provides a stark contrast with the confession of Covetise and the episode with the Pardoner from the prologue, where the 'unwilful rennyng of teres' is an implied consequence of 'blereynesse'. The figure of Book, too, associates clear sight with the new possibilities of this particular historical moment. Book, who is introduced as 'a wight wiȝ two brode eiȝen', embodies the identity between revealed and natural knowledge that is only possible during the life of Christ, offering scriptural revelation but alleging it as his own 'kynde' experience (B.18.230). Jamie Taylor argues that Book's 'brode eiȝen' mark him out as a 'witnessing' personification, who offers the evidence of

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<sup>81</sup> The Samaritan's own position in this narrative is related to his place in the liturgy. See St-Jacques, 'Liturgical Associations of Langland's Samaritan'.

written texts and direct experience as related forms of testimony.<sup>82</sup> Gerald Kaske reads Book's 'two brode eizen' in terms of the allegory of Leah and Rachael, as 'an antithesis to the traditional blindness of the Jews and their law'.<sup>83</sup> Book's introduction also echoes the introductions of Covetise 'wiþ two blered eizen', Wrath 'wiþ two white eizen' and Sloth 'wiþ two slymy eizen', so that his 'two brode eizne' offer a further contrast with the imagery of 'blereynesse' that appears earlier in the poem, and the estrangement from natural knowledge it entails (B.5.190, 5.135, 5.385).

For Chaucer, the 'kyndenesse' that manifests itself in charity and exemplary instruction is a thing of the past. Langland, however, offers a contrast between 'blereynesse' and clear sight, informed by the eschatological interpretation of Leah and Rachael, which suggests that contemporary 'unkyndenesse' might yet find its antidote in a 'kynde' encounter with Christ, imagined as part of the liturgical future. The contrast between Chaucer's pessimism and Langland's optimism in this regard is reflected in the different attitudes to the future expressed in 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale' and in *Piers Plowman*. For the Yeoman, the 'good hope [that] crepeth in oure herte' is part of the destructive cycle of alchemical work, sustaining the alchemists in their self-deception: 'Swich supposing and hope is sharp and hard; | I warne yow wel, it is to seken evere' (VIII, 870, 873-74). Langland's narrator, by contrast, is sustained by a hopeful attitude to the future. Waking from his inner dream of the Fall, with the narrative of Christian history unfolding around him, Will expresses his desire to see Piers Plowman again, a desire that will be fulfilled in his vision of the crucifixion. As he does so, he wipes the water from his eyes: 'And I awaked þerwiþ and wiped myne eizen | And after Piers þe Plowman pried and stared' (B.16.167-68).

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Taylor, *Fictions of Evidence*, p. 126. Taylor points to the complexity of witnessing and testimony in this part of *Piers Plowman*, and in the poem as a whole.

<sup>83</sup> Kaske, 'Patristic Exegesis: The Defense', p. 40. Elsewhere, 'Speech of "Book"', p. 126, Kaske takes Book's 'brode eizen' to represent 'the relationship of the New Testament to both past and future'. See also Barney, *Penn Commentary*, V, pp. 54-55.

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Covetousness emerges as a particularly serious sin in *Piers Plowman* and 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', a sin that alienates people from their own best impulses, from their communities and from natural knowledge, and which tests the boundaries of understanding and forgiveness. For Langland, this sin is 'unkynde' because it is the opposite of charity, and it is consequently opposed to 'kynde' knowledge and 'kynde' experience in all their interrelated forms. I have argued that the same logic also informs 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale', where 'unkyndenesse' connects the proliferating consequences of covetous desire, as a speaker who is cut off from his community and profoundly ambivalent about the meaning of his own experience describes his failed investigations into the 'natural' secrets of alchemy. *Piers Plowman* and 'The Canon's Yeoman's Tale' present covetousness as a sin that forestalls its own amendment, because the impulse to reform and the self-knowledge that reform requires themselves depend on 'kyndenesse'. In both poems, 'unkynde' covetousness changes people's relationship to the exemplary order of nature, distorting the way they understand their own experiences and the way they appear as part of the lived experience of others. Where lived experience in the created world should provide a moral mirror for human beings, 'unkyndenesse' creates a category of experiences that cannot be assimilated into such an instructive pattern, and which may even obscure a sinner's ability to see the pattern at all.

Linked to spiritual confusion, deception, the active life and the Old Law, the 'blered' eye spoke to many aspects of 'unkynde' covetousness as Langland and Chaucer described it. Indeed, precisely because it implies many different interpretative contexts, the imagery of 'blereynesse' allows Langland and Chaucer to insist that the various psychological, social and spiritual consequences of 'unkynde' covetousness are



interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The ‘blered’ eye figures the way that ‘unkynde’ people spread confusion in the ‘kynde’ experience of others, because it is a contagious sickness, and because its symptoms could be mistaken for tears of contrition. And, by linking the spiritual confusion of covetous people to the confusion of their victims, ‘blereynesse’ helps to suggest a close relationship between deception and self-deception, as ‘unkynde’ people awaken the ‘unkynde’ desires of others. As Langland and Chaucer set out the connotations of the ‘blered’ eye, they reveal the close affinities between their respective accounts of ‘unkynde’ covetousness. Yet, their handling of this imagery also reveals important differences in the way they understand the larger historical context for this sin. For Chaucer, the ‘blereynesse’ of the present day forms a contrast with the clear-sightedness of a lost golden age, offering a darkly pessimistic view of the possibilities for reform and renewal, while, for Langland, contemporary ‘blereynesse’ may yet be answered by a ‘kynde’ encounter with Christ in the future. This hopeful possibility, reaffirmed even when the full implications of ‘unkynde’ covetousness have been set out in the poem, is itself a ‘kynde’ response to the mercy of God.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> My thanks to Isabel Davis, Catherine Nall and Nicolette Zeeman, and to the editors and anonymous readers for *YLS*, for their helpful comments on different versions of this article. An earlier version of this article was presented at the London Old and Middle English Research Seminar in October 2012.

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