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Holy vessels, tyrants, fools, and blind men : performing antinomianism and transgressive agency in English drama, 1450-1671

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HOLY VESSELS, TYRANTS, FOOLS, AND BLIND MEN: PERFORMING ANTINOMIANISM AND TRANSGRESSIVE AGENCY IN ENGLISH DRAMA, 1450-1671

by

Judith Claire Coleman

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
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in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Miriam Gilbert

ABSTRACT

Over four chapters, this study extends and focuses recent critical work on religious sects in literature to examine five plays and one theatrical prose work from the late medieval period through the late seventeenth century in England. Specifically, this study charts the appearance and conduct of antinomians, or those whose faith in Christ is the sole guide for their actions and who eschew all outward behavioral constraints. Antinomianism is, in some ways, a logical step for newly empowered individual believers with no direct mediator between themselves and the Word, but it represents a dangerous potential for religious and social anarchy. For some of the characters I consider, antinomianism has been mapped onto them by modern literary critics precisely because their transgressive agency is so frightening to their contemporaries. For others, antinomianism is depicted as a positive mode of interacting with the unenlightened, but it is clear that these figures are allowed privilege outside the reach of mainstream believers. A negative parody of these normal believers is also represented in my project, and these characters' buffoonish misinterpretations and selfish motives negate any positive reading of their "liberating" antinomian belief.

All of these characters—whether positive, negative, or even truly antinomian at all—reveal a key anxiety about personal belief and the well-being of civic and religious society in the mercurial landscape of pre- and post-Reformation England and the atmosphere of social and religious uncertainty that preceded the English Civil War. As such, an attention to the interconnections between the works under primary study and those circulating in the culture at the time is crucial to accurately identifying and understanding the myriad shades of religious belief that populate the pages of literature and polemics alike. In part, my project works to create a more complete and nuanced picture of the religious and literary landscapes of early modern England.

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee
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To my parents, Melanie and Richard Coleman, who always give the best advice.

No love's as random as God's love / I can't stand it.
Wilco
"Can't Stand It," from *Summerteeth*

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Over four chapters, this study extends and focuses recent critical work on religious sects in literature to examine five plays and one theatrical prose work from the late medieval period through the late seventeenth century in England. Specifically, this study charts the appearance and conduct of antinomians, or those whose faith in Christ is the sole guide for their actions and who eschew all outward behavioral constraints. Antinomianism is, in some ways, a logical step for newly empowered individual believers with no direct mediator between themselves and the Word, but it represents a dangerous potential for religious and social anarchy. For some of the characters I consider, antinomianism has been mapped onto them by modern literary critics precisely because their transgressive agency is so frightening to their contemporaries. For others, antinomianism is depicted as a positive mode of interacting with the unenlightened, but it is clear that these figures are allowed privilege outside the reach of mainstream believers. A negative parody of these normal believers is also represented in my project, and these characters' buffoonish misinterpretations and selfish motives negate any positive reading of their "liberating" antinomian belief.

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INTRODUCTION
THE LETTER AND SPIRIT OF ANTINOMIANISM

In the spring of 1993, writing on the "alienation from American political, economic, and social institutions" that academics faced during the McCarthy era, influential sociologist Edward Shils argues that this estrangement "still persists and expands" and has "taken hold in departments of the modern humanities and in the 'soft' social sciences." He caps his argument with a startling—and potentially confusing—pronouncement with regard to those disciplines: "Antinomianism runs through them all."[1] Shils briefly elaborates on the concept of antinomianism when he later implies its definition as "emancipation from all traditional norms,"[2] an understanding of the term that, while not entirely uncommon, is both overly broad and theologically inaccurate. Such an imprecise use of the word "antinomianism" would no doubt have passed unnoticed, however, were it not for the fact that it then persists through another work on academic liberty which references Shils, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* by Professor Matthew W. Finkin and Robert C. Post, and through that work into a *New York Times* piece by the early modern scholar Stanley Fish. Finkin and Post argue that, particularly "in the years since the Vietnam War, these battles [for academic turf] have proceeded in the general context of a growing 'antinomianism' within American intellectual culture that is skeptical of authority and distrusts those who seek to exercise it."[3] In their estimation, this antinomianism can, when coupled with "the most vulnerable point of scholarly self-governance, which is the extent to which faculty ought to have academic freedom to reformulate the very professional norms by which they are to be judged by their peers," become "corrosive."[4] Intriguingly, when Fish

references Finkin and Post's use of "antinomianism" in one of his Opinionator columns in the *Times Literary Supplement*, he tweaks their usage of the word to mean "the refusal to accept external constraints on the promptings of conscience and the inner light,"[5] which, while more precise in theological terms, is far from the definition given by Finkin and Post. While these authors do reference the "conscience of the individual scholar,"[6] they nowhere couch their argument in theological terms of the "light" or "spirit" within that categorizes true antinomian belief.

Fish's alteration to Finkin and Post's definition seems an unobtrusive attempt to imbue their use of "antinomianism" with a better sense of the nuances of that word and to some extent recover the term from a vague variation of "lawless" or "licentious"; the question, of course, is why such a recovery matters, and why the scholarly community in particular should return precision to an understanding of the heresy of antinomianism. It has been the unfortunate tendency for modern literary scholarship to mirror reactionary early modern polemic in reducing "antinomianism" to a synonym for "libertinism"; as with Shils, Finkin, and Post, "antinomianism" most often appears in modern critical works as a fustian way to denote one who answers to no external authority. And while such a definition does hint at the core principle of antinomian belief, it is too limited to allow for a nuanced discussion of antinomianism as a fully realized heresy in its own right or as a problematic tendency in other sects, from puritans to Familists. One task of this study will be to document some of the most egregious examples of the reduction of "antinomianism" to "libertinism" in contemporary studies of early modern English literary works while illuminating a more accurate understanding of antinomianism, both from the viewpoint of those practicing it and those who saw it as an insidious threat to

religious and civic stability. In turn, a new, more multifaceted understanding of antinomianism will open up heretofore unrecognized meanings in the primary texts under discussion, as well as clarify the absence of antinomianism from others, even when they appear an ideal medium for the heresy.

My project serves as a continuation and clarification of scholarship by Kristen Poole, Katherine Eisaman Maus, and Peter Lake with regard to religious heresy, faction, and interiority. With her *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton*, Poole represents a group of scholars who are beginning to approach sixteenth- and seventeenth-century belief on its own terms, who wish to understand the myriad intersections of orthodox and radical belief, of political maneuverings and social upheavals—in short, who wish to corral and define religious separatists and sectarians preaching and writing in this period and illuminate some of the problems and anxieties raised by those groups.[7] Poole's gaze does not extend to antinomians proper; however, her interest in Familists and her general observations about the appearance of sectarians in literature provides a model for engagement with antinomians. Similarly, Maus's insights in *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* strike at the heart of the antinomian problem without explicitly discussing it, though her argument that the salvific anxieties and epistemological uncertainties which erupt from questions of performance and inner truth reflect on and affect the political and social practices of early modern England certainly provides a key starting point for my own inquiry. Tying issues of inwardness and knowledge specifically to religious truths, for instance, Maus shows that the "hidden Christian God provides a prototype of the invisible object of knowledge comprehended but partially through visible works."[8] Determining truth—both with divine and human referents—then

becomes an anxious act of interpretation that is riddled with problems because "what is most truth about human beings in such a system is simultaneously least verifiable."[9] The fact that religious truth was an unstable and contested entity in early modern England, and the fact that the religious landscape was dotted with "others" who claimed for themselves access to religious truth creates an environment of palpable anxiety with regard to any kind of "knowing," an environment that has not yet been fully mapped.

Perhaps most influential is Peter Lake, whose acumen as both a religious and literary scholar provides an ideal model for my own scholarship. In *The Boxmaker's Revenge*, for instance, Lake is repeatedly attentive to the nuance and subtlety that distinguishes heresies like antinomianism and Anabaptism from one another, and part of what Lake achieves in this book is to clarify the beliefs of his two main subjects—the clergyman Stephen Denison and the sectarian John Etherington—while also acknowledging how complex and multifarious those beliefs were. In this work, Lake self-consciously confronts the antinomian question, often teasing out ways in which the specific doctrinal preoccupations of these men flirt with or entirely avoid falling into the realm of antinomian belief, as the case may be. In one particularly astute moment of clarification, Lake writes, "Etherington and Chibald's preoccupation with the impact and affective consequences of puritan legalism and their consequent concern with the relations between repentance and justification . . . and sanctification certainly did not render them antinomians. But it did speak to, indeed was part of, precisely the same emotional and cultural conjuncture within puritan piety that was producing genuine antinomians."[10] Lake is carefully attentive to theological minutiae here, and refrains from oversimplified categorizations that reduce the lived faith of his subjects to a two-

dimensional object. In the same way, I work to illuminate antinomianism in the texts under discussion here while also remaining attentive to the absence of antinomianism in places it only seems to appear. As with Poole, Maus, and Lake, my analysis depends on precise definition and an acknowledgement of the complications and subtleties naturally involved with any question of faith in early modern England.

The authoritative, *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of "antinomian" is "one who maintains that the moral law is not binding upon Christians, under the 'law of grace.'"[11] At first blush, this may not sound particularly radical, especially in light of the reliance on *sola fide* by most mainstream Protestant belief systems. However, it is not simply that antinomians wish to put particular emphasis on the fact that works cannot save; rather, they argue that the law—as external constraint on behavior—is superseded in favor of guidance by Christ. In theory, antinomianism, while clearly extreme, represents the privileging of an unmediated relationship between the believer and God that follows from Reformation principles. As Nicholas McDowell terms it, "While prominent heresiographers . . . represented antinomianism as a belief in universal salvation and thus a subversion of the Calvinist doctrine of election, free grace more usually involved an extension of Calvinist theology to its logical conclusions by denying the relevance of moral and religious law to the always-already-saved elect."[12] Yet, antinomians were less often seen as the heralds of Christian liberty than as dangerous and inconstant libertines. Because they eschewed all moral law—even the Decalogue, the holdover generally acceptable after Christianity discarded the ceremonial Mosaic Law—antinomians were automatically seen as lawless and subversive figures. In spite of this rejection of law, however, antinomians still championed Scripture, and specifically St.

Paul. For an antinomian, the letter of God's law was not the key to salvation; the spirit that pervaded that letter, however, was the spirit of Christ and was therefore integral to the salvific process. Early modern antinomians appealed to key passages in St. Paul that aligned with their purposes, such as Romans 10:4, which reads, "For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."[13] Another popular passage was Galatians 2:16, which reads, in part, "[W]e know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law"; both of these passages were taken as proof texts for an abandonment of any religious law for a new, internal "law" found only through Christ. Though Christ's own words were often used to defend the law—and, in fact, potentially to make the law stricter, especially for the precisianists striving for personal perfection—for the antinomian, "fulfillment" of the law through Christ automatically meant destruction of the same.[14]

The key struggle in this situation, for the antinomian, was how then to exist in the world until eternal salvation through Christ could be achieved in death. As Como explains, "Nowhere, though, did Paul explain how, if free from the dictates of the Torah, one could even know God's will, since God's will was known only through scripture–that is, through the Law."[15] How does one act rightly in the world if there is no blueprint by which one may build his or her good works? Antinomians answered by claiming their belief in Christ would lead them automatically and without external compulsion to the right path. Como continues, "True believers would obey God freely and joyfully without any extrinsic prompting at all."[16] This is echoed by antinomians like John Eaton, who

writes in his 1642 work *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ Alone*, "Whereupon the voyce of the Law exacteth and constraineth men to holy walking by feare of punishment, and hope of reward, and maketh *Hypocrites*; but the voice of the Gospel constraineth to holy walking by love, and maketh true Christians."[17] However noble the intentions of the antinomians, it was inevitable that their doctrine would be used by those with less religiously-minded aims, but in the mind of the antinomian—as represented especially by Eaton, who articulate an idealized brand of antinomian belief—there was no choice but to abandon the law, which constrained by force where there should only have been willful obedience. One should not do good works in the hope of reward. Indeed, because of Christ's act of salvation for the true believer, there is no need to strive for that reward; it has already been given. Problems can arise when those who cling to a "dead faith," as Eaton terms it, "*neglect free justification*,"[18] but ultimately salvation is conferred "objectively and passively, as the dark house is made light with the Sunbeames."[19]

To an antinomian like Eaton—generally considered the "father" of the movement—antinomianism represented a liberating form of Protestant reliance on God, an extreme leap of faith with the forces of devotion and conscience at its center. Rather than representing selfishness and a desire to act licentiously, ideal antinomianism represents a denial of self and an attunement to the will of God that disregards any worldly authority that contradicts that will. However, the claims made by these antinomians about personal agency and righteousness are radical and, in the wrong hands, potentially dangerous. In his *The Honey-Combe*, Eaton writes,

> First, by imputing unto us his Sonnes righteousnesse, he [God] utterly abolisheth from before himselfe all our sinnes, and freely makes us passively just and righteous; which serveth to make us truly and in very deed perfectly just and righteous in Gods owne eyes: and this is called Justification. And secondly he reneweth us by his spirit unto inherent and active holinesse and righteousnesse; which later is unperfect in this life, and serveth to approve us for righteous to the eyes of men, and is called Sanctification.[20]

Though the general gist of Eaton's statement—that the faithful are saved by Christ and owe even their good works to the will of God—is not at first glance a significant departure from normative Protestant belief, closer examination reveals evidence of why this expression of antinomian belief could be inherently anarchic. Eaton claims that believers are "truly and in very deed *perfectly just and righteous in Gods owne eyes*" (my emphasis), i.e. that the believer can do no wrong. It is not a huge leap—for antinomianism's detractors, at least—to argue that, if one is infallible and has the authority of God at their back, then the next logical step in their progression is lawlessness and a disregard for worldly authority. And if all believers are given license to follow any interior voice—if any impulse is ascribed to Christ and interpreted as a command of God, in other words—it would not take long for the unscrupulous to take advantage of and corrupt such a belief for their own, selfish ends. Besides the anxiety over potential licentiousness, what is also occurring here is a struggle over who has true access to God's will. For the true antinomian, God lives. He evolves and adapts, and His will is conveyed directly to believers, just as it was to Moses or Abraham. For the more mainstream Protestant, there are some parts of God's will that remain unchanging, the Decalogue among them. Though miracles might occur, and God might move a believer's soul in the direction of good, the framework of belief and religion needs to remain immovably in place. For antinomians, to suggest that the Decalogue is unnecessary for a

true believer might seem a logical extension of Christianity; for normative Protestants, such a move could be nothing but heresy.

The Christ-illuminated "dark house" that Eaton references above could easily be seen as the individual believer's soul or conscience, and this, of course, leads us to another key problem with antinomianism: because a believer's interiority is occluded from outside observation, there is no way to know definitely that the inspiration they claim to feel is from God or even that the antinomian truly believes they are enacting God's will. Antinomianism's power lies partially within its ability to mutate and shift, its tendency to disguise itself under another name and within another sect. The dark promise that lies at the core of antinomianism is destabilization and anarchy, but also liberation, and the fact that it cannot be pinned down, trapped, or even always labeled contributes to the fear and fervor it is able to elicit. In fact, the work of adequately "labeling" antinomian belief has just begun; it is only in the past decade that any extensive studies of early modern English antinomianism have appeared, and while they are invaluable to this work, their theories have not been comprehensively applied to the study of literature in that period. These works—most notably David R. Como's *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* and Theodore Dwight Bozeman's *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism in 1638*—definitively illustrate the existence of antinomianism as a religious movement in early modern England prior to the Civil War; until now, most attention has been given to the New England antinomian controversy of the 1630s, or to antinomianism as it appears in England in the 1640s. It is interesting to note, for instance, that the second part of the *OED*'s definition for "antinomian" reads,

"One of a sect which appeared in Germany in 1535, alleged to hold this opinion," and yet, no usage example is given by the dictionary dated before 1645. As I will show here, religious thinkers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were preoccupied with the heresy of antinomianism, and yet little attention has been given to their writing, and little consideration has been made of the way antinomianism might have appeared in popular culture at this time.

What will not be catalogued in detail in this study is the extensive body of anti-antinomian sentiment that reached a fever pitch in the mid-seventeenth century and the many polemics that attempted to outline the dangers of such a heresy. Rather, it is enough to quote from religious controversialist Henry Burton's *The Law and the Gospell reconciled*, published in 1631, to illustrate the way antinomianism was perceived by the majority of religious writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England; Burton writes, "For to deny the Morall Law to be of any more use to believers, or to be so much as a rule of conversations, or that they owe obedience unto it in poynt of duety and conscience: this strikes at the very root, and cutts in under the knot, not onely of christian charity, but of all civill society, and happy union and communion betweene King and Subiects."[21] It is in part the purpose of my study to show that the way antinomianism is repeatedly and unceasingly characterized in tracts like Burton's—as dangerously erratic and religiously and socially anarchistic—is well established in the early English consciousness by the end of the sixteenth century, and thus can be felt influencing the portrayal of puritan and Anabaptist characters in works like Thomas Middleton's *The Puritan* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, a survey of which comprises Chapter 3 of this work.

Even for the authors of the earliest works under consideration here—the N-Town cycle as well as the "biography" of Margery Kempe—"antinomianism" as a concept would have had currency; no less a figure than St. Augustine addressed the concept in his *On Faith and Works* when he writes about "certain unrighteous men who had interpreted certain rather obscure passages of St. Paul to mean that they did not have to lead a good life, since they were assured of salvation as long as they had the faith."[22] Though the term "antinomianism" was coined by Martin Luther,[23] its central tenets and the anxiety over faith and works it engenders would have found a place in the imagination even of N-Town's audience, though self-styled "antinomians" would not have been part of the religious culture. However, there is clear evidence that antinomianism as a category of belief was in place by the last days of the sixteenth century in England, and thus the potentially amorphous menace that antinomianism represents had solidified into a real presence with an articulated name. For instance, in the 1607 tract *The faith, doctrine, and religion, professed, & protected in the realme of England, and dominions of the same expressed in 39 articles* by Church of England clergyman Thomas Rogers, Rogers draws a direct connection between the errors of "Antinomies" and puritans, though the nature of their specific errors differ slightly. As the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Rogers outlines, he had a conflicted relationship with Puritanism and was forthright in his opinions on heretical notions and sects. Although he seemed to harbor puritan sympathies for at least part of his career, by the late 1580's he made his disagreement with the godly evident in a sermon given around Christmas in Bury, England; in it Rogers attacks *A fruitful sermon*, a work attributed to Laurence Chaderton, then master of Emmanual College, Cambridge, in which Chaderton maintains that the "Church of God

in England (deare Christians) which is the beloued spouse of Christ, which desireth to appeare most beautifull and perfect in the eyes of her louer, shee wanteth her Pastours, Teachers, Elders, Deacons and her Attenders vppon the poore."[24] In his attack on this argument, Rogers compares Chaderton both to Papists and to "H.N.", or Hendrik Niclaes, founder of the Family of Love;[25] like puritans and Anabaptists, Familists were often equated with antinomians, and these groups were routinely, if incorrectly, lumped together for the purposes of discrediting one or more of their beliefs as heretical. Here, Rogers provides an early example of such a practice, and distinguishes himself further by writing perhaps the earliest overt reference to English antinomians in the seventeenth century.

In 1607, in his *The faith, doctrine, and religion*, Rogers, under the heading "Proposition. No Christian man whosoever is freed from the obedience of the law Morall," describes one group "Of Iohannes Islebius, and his followers, the Antinonies,[26] who will not haue Gods lawe to be preached; nor the consciences of sinners to be terrified, and troubled with the iudgements of God."[27] "Iohannes Islebius" is a reference to Johann Agricola, the first post-Reformation figure to purport antinomian ideas, a move that then prompted Martin Luther to coin the term "antinomianism" in approximately 1537 in response to various theses by Agricola.[28] Luther describes the antinomians as perpetrating "an alien and new way of teaching the article of justification" that has the potential to "provide an occasion for Satan to burst into the Church and to give rise to endless sects and offenses"; [29] his anti-antinomian tracts arguably provide the precedent for later works on the subject, especially his assertions that the law is still necessary to illuminate sin within the believer and is not rendered useless or obsolete by the coming of

Christ. Rogers' reference to this debate indicates a clear awareness of the details of this controversy, and is, I argue, indicative of a larger consciousness of the antinomian problem in the early part of the seventeenth century.

Later in Thomas Rogers' *A fruitfull sermon*, in a section entitled, "Propsition. They who are elected unto salvation, if they come unto yeares of discretion, are called both outwardly by the word, and inwardly by the Spirit of God," he writes, "For such as be ordained unto everlasting life, if they live long in this world, they one time or other be called unto the knowledge of salvation by the preaching of Gods word; they obey that calling, through the operation of the holy Ghost, working within them; they feele in their soules the same spirit, bearing witnesse unto their spirits, how they are the children of God; and finally they walke religiously in all good workes."[30] What Rogers outlines is what he considers to be the "orthodox" position, but he could easily be describing the antinomian perspective as espoused by self-proclaimed antinomians. This is the key to the antinomian problem: because antinomianism springs from and is informed by a post-Reformation freedom and emphasis on personal relationship with Christ, its tenets as expressed by antinomian believers are sometimes indistinguishable from a more mainstream reliance on *sola fide*. The antinomian debate itself was grounded in a kind of hairsplitting, a slight reinterpretation of justification through Christ that was difficult to identify and combat. Rogers attempts to catalog the "adversaries unto this truth" as he has outlined it above, but such a catalog—much like the "catalog" of the movements of one's conscience that casuistry represents—is ultimately impossible. Rogers makes, an attempt, however, perhaps predictably beginning with "Papists" and working his way through "Catabaptists" and the "Familie of Love," pausing to elaborate on each enemy, which

includes both "Antonomies" and "Puritanes." "Antonomies," Rogers asserts, "thinke the outward calling by the word (though they have not the inward calling by the Spirit, and be destitute of good workes) a sufficient argument of their election unto life,"[31] while "Puritanes, who among other assurances given them from the Lord of their saluations, make their advancing of the Presbyteriall kingdome (by the putting downe of Bishops, Chancellours, &c.) a testimonie that they shall have part in that glorie, which shall be revealed hereafter."[32] Rogers shows a gross misunderstanding of self-professed antinomian doctrine; in actuality, true antinomians rely almost primarily on the "inward calling of the Spirit" and trust that good works will follow. Antinomian John Traske addresses this very problem when he postulates, "And doth not that obedience, which floweth from an inward principle of Love, farre transcend that, which is forced by feare?"[33] He thus argues that an internalized reliance on Christ brings forth more valuable fruit than actions dictated by an external law. This does, of course, depend on the believer being rightly aligned with Christ; only those actions truly inspired by internalized Christian principles would supersede those dictated by law, and knowing whether one is being guided by Christ is a thorny problem that lies at the center of antinomianism.

Rogers' mistake here proves an important point: an actual understanding of antinomian doctrine wasn't necessary in order to use "antinomian" as a buzzword, a hobgoblin for troublesome and potentially threatening perspectives on the justification issue. Antinomianism in this tract—as in myriad other tracts from the period and, as I will argue, sometimes in its literature as well—functions as a specter, a whisper of a threat that is omnipresent and yet rarely articulated. Like other potentially threatening groups like Puritans, Anabaptists, Familists, antinomians are seen as both amorphous and

pervasive, and their threat lies in part with their tendency to echo orthodox doctrine regarding faith and works, the problem of which continued to plague early modern English religious thinkers. As MacCulloch notes, "This argument over faith and works may sound abstruse, but it arose from a fundamental problem in the Reformation's proclamation of justification by faith. A logical conclusion of that doctrine might be antinomianism."[34] If that conclusion is indeed "logical"—and I agree with MacCulloch that it is—then it is always a possibility for any thinking believer. This was a problem Luther faced from almost the moment of Reformation; there were always those believers who took his reformed position on justification to its logical—if heterodox—conclusion. In Luther's disputations against the antinomians, he has to create a complex web of interpretation around this issue; in his sixth and final disputation, for example, he writes, "It is true that man is saved and justified without the help of the law, but without knowledge of the law he cannot come to a knowledge of sin, without which Christ is not useful. For Christ is of no benefit for the righteous, only for the unrighteous, miserable sinners. Men know their sins from the law and then they ask Christ for help."[35] Such maneuverings strike at the heart of the problem of a law that is made in some sense obsolete by the coming of Christ, but which must not be entirely abrogated if the world wants to maintain order through religious and civic structures.

On this issue, Theodore Dwight Bozeman asserts that the "precisianist strain" in Protestant faith represents the "higher standard" to which the elect hold themselves in exchange for the "boon of grace" they receive undeservedly.[36] Bozeman sees this obsession with perfection as providing one potential solution to the "problem" of justification by faith alone[37] and recognizes that the "Christian's saving faith [was] an

intriguingly dual affair: in one dimension freed from law, works, and retribution, but in a second firmly subject to them all."[38] To avoid falling into antinomian error, it was necessary to salvage good works as the duty of every good Christian; this led to the rise of covenant theology, which was at once a "pact forged by a deity who both imposed and fulfilled the conditions" that also incorporated a "reciprocal, ethical theme [that] harmonized with a vision of life within a rigorous monarchy ordered in every significant detail by the sacred Book."[39] Covenant theology specifically resisted any attempt at an antinomian reading of Christian salvation, though both covenant theology and antinomianism were doctrines designed to release the believer from the excruciating paralysis that could result from a doctrine of predestination. If one's fate is predetermined with no reference to merit or works, existence in the world can become a static, anxious exercise in despair. As David Zaret elaborates, "Covenant theology struck a balance between hope and despair, between certitude of either salvation or damnation."[40] In a similar vein—though by an entirely different methodology—antinomianism freed the believer by offering them direct access to the will of God as manifested by the Holy Spirit and Christ, thus circumventing altogether the mysteries of Calvinist predestination. These two doctrines may speak to similar anxieties, but they are fundamentally different in form and content. Zaret asserts that covenant theologians eschewed antinomian impulses by showing that the Old and New Testaments represented a salvific continuity; he asserts that "early covenant theology enabled Protestant theologians to maintain a distinction between Law and Gospel while at the same time retaining the validity of the Law."[41] Christ does not abrogate the Law, as the antinomians might claim; Zaret continues, "[T]he Gospel promise of salvation did not abolish God's original demand for

outward obedience but provided another way of satisfying that demand."[42] Intriguingly, Zaret positions the rise of covenant theology in Switzerland against the agitations of the Anabaptists, and the further development of the idea by Puritans against the threat of antinomians;[43] Bozeman, while recognizing this development, goes on to argue that it is the constant, unceasing attempt at a "disciplinary transfiguration of the self"[44] in Puritan thought that leads to significant "antinomian revolt."[45] The fear of libertinism leads then to over-precisianism, which then leads back to a counter movement primarily perceived as libertinism. Although Puritans attempt, in Zaret's terms, to "describe the inner experience of spiritual regeneration in terms of the Calvinist tenets of election, faith and grace,"[46] their reconciliation between the Old and New Testaments proves unsatisfactory for those committed solely to a program of justification through faith with no reference to outward moral constraint.

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In the study of early modern English antinomianism, there is perhaps no figure as enigmatic as John Traske, the erstwhile Judaizer-turned-antinomian Puritan radical preacher; he is, in a sense, at both the worst nightmare and fondest dream for antinomianism's detractors, as he represents perfectly the potential for both dangerous mutability and disruptive eschewing of laws and rules. Early in his career, Traske actually embraced Jewish dietary restrictions and Saturday Sabbath observance and, by the end of his career, had entirely rejected the whole of the Mosaic Law in favor of the antinomian heresy.[47] Ironically, of course, Traske, like other antinomian writers of the seventeenth century, turned to Scripture to justify his "lawlessness." In his quintessentially antinomian tract, *The trve gospel vindicated From the Reproach of A new*

Gospel, published in 1636, Traske works hard to increase readers' "understanding of the Scriptures," though, as one of his detractors, Edward Norris, indicates, Traske could "devise, as many senses [of Scripture] as will serve his turne."[48] Elsewhere, Norris calls Traske "another Proteus" who is "well knowne by common fame," although his "deceits" are supposedly hidden from the general populace.[49] Repeatedly, Traske's faith is portrayed as performative, disingenuous, and dangerously unstable; from his Judaizing phase, when he only appropriated certain ceremonies of Judaism without genuinely converting to the faith,[50] to his antinomian period, when he seemed to reject any prescribed action, Traske was considered the consummate actor. And, as Como notes in Traske's *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry, "Together with his second wife, Dorothy Coome . . . , his confidant Returne Hebdon, Jackson, and other disciples, Traske created a clandestine, 'Judaical' religious community that briefly subsisted entirely outside the boundaries of the English church."[51] Before Traske even embraced antinomianism, he proved himself capable of gathering followers—and unwanted attention from the authorities—and rallying them around a common principle of belief; if he could achieve this once, he could certainly achieve it again under a heretical banner. What Traske represents for this study is a touchstone of antinomian belief, but also the potential for unstable religious identity that threatens the fabric of orthodox religious identity; in the same way that antinomians—and their ciphers, including puritans, Anabaptists, and Familists—represented a threat to social and religious stability, so Traske illustrates the potential for a single individual to embody all of these threats. This is perhaps one reason antinomianism, for all its emphasis on personal belief, was seen as so insidious: it could easily mutate, shift, and spread its disruptive influence to other

believers, and in doing so, implode established and religious and civic systems from within.

Traske's constant, "Proteus"-like oscillations provided an apt model for the religious fluctuations the country felt under Henry, Edward, Mary, Elizabeth, and James; post-Reformation England seemed to be in a state of constant flux, and its religious upheavals are arguably reflected in its religious tracts and works of literature alike. And just as Traske shifted religious allegiances like a "Proteus," so too were figures central to literature of the period—actors on the stage—seen as shapeshifters, Protean usurpers who occupied, as critic Jonas Barish has illuminated, uncertain and potentially subversive positions in the public consciousness.[52] As much as Puritans might have attempted to distance themselves from the common stage play, they too were described in these Protean terms by their detractors. Oscillation and disguise then become the marks of dangerous instability; in the case of antinomianism, this translates into a literal "lawlessness" and, in the eyes of its enemies, libertinism. The stage player, with his fluid identity and "lawless" position in early modern society, occupies a similarly unstable niche.[53] And though the Puritan is best known for an obsession with the minutiae of law and an attempt at personal moral perfection, he or she is also aligned—somewhat awkwardly—with the dangerous shape shifter; because they cannot be defined as conformists, their doctrines are not definitively articulated, which then means they could adopt essentially any position on any issue. This kind of mutability and instability—even when only perceived, and not actually present—threatens the status quo; in the case of the antinomian, a reliance on individual interpretation eschews proscribed modes of religion and turns faith and right action into a miasma of competing consciences.

Similarly, stage players, separated from normative social structures by their profession and the geography of their places of work, represent a challenge to authority and a freedom to explore social and religious issues central to—but threatening for—those norms.

The focus of this study is firmly on dramatic works, with the exception of Margery Kempe, whose "biography" arguably embodies elements of intense performativity and is, in my estimation, a dramatic prose work that centers on Kempe's "performance" of faith. Ironically, the danger of antinomianism lies both in something that cannot be performed—interiority—and in the fear of performance, the threat that one might take it upon themselves to reform the world according to God's principles as revealed only to them. When the antinomians—and parodic antinomians—do attempt to "perform" this interiority, something gets very lost in translation. At the moment sectarians with antinomian tendencies pose the most threat—at the moment of Jonson, Middleton, and Marlowe, in other words—the antinomians on stage are the worst kind of performers, false Protean shells with little or no true identity. For Mary in the N-Town plays and Samson in *Samson Agonistes*, however, the antinomian moments are commentaries on the act of eschewing performance in favor of a true identity rooted in a knowledge of God; for Mary and Samson, their interiority matches their external actions, but no one else—including the audience—can truly understand the privileged access to Christ that they perform.

In my first chapter, I identify the Virgin Mary in the N-Town cycle as what can only be termed the singular "orthodox" antinomian in history. It is not only carrying the Christ child inside her body that classifies her as such, but rather the new understanding

that this embodiment of Christ offers her, an understanding closed to any outside her body. Mary eschews external constraint in favor of a burgeoning freedom that grows with her equally burgeoning pregnant belly. She transgresses Jewish law, but as the only true antinomian, Mary's rebellion is neither heretical nor threatening. Mary represents a unique crossroads of Old and New law, of salvation under Jewish law—seemingly impossible to perform for even the most righteous of believers—and salvation under Christian law—open to all who believe and who allow Christ to imbue all of their actions with righteousness. A close examination of the figure of Mary in the plays "Joseph's Doubt" and "The Trial of Mary and Joseph, "as well as attention to the prominent lack of Mary in "Judgement Day," reveals Mary to be an antinomian figure capable of defying the Mosaic Law in favor of a new law that literally lies inside of her. For the Catholic Englishman or woman viewing the cycle, little to no anxiety would be produced by that defiance; as the mother of Christ, Mary is in a privileged, unique position. Several years before the N-Town cycle was written and performed, however, another female proto-antinomian was causing great anxiety for authorities and fellow believers, and although I will argue that Margery Kempe is not, in fact, strictly an antinomian, her story will provide a valuable counterpoint to Mary in the cycle plays. Both of these women claim intimate knowledge of Christ, but only one—Mary—can verify that knowledge; it is Margery, then, that most resembles the anxious believers operating in the rest of the works under discussion.

Chapter 2 takes as its starting point Tamburlaine's declaration in Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, Part 1*, "I speak it, and my words are oracles" (3.3.102) to interrogate the source and depth of Tamburlaine's power in *Tamburlaine, Parts 1* and *2*. I

contend that we should take Tamburlaine literally here—his *words* determine the course of the future, and this course sometimes contradicts both Tamburlaine's will and the perceived will of God, whose Scourge Tamburlaine often purports to be. Throughout both plays, Tamburlaine's words exist outside of his person as a kind of inflexible law, and while some have used an examination of Tamburlaine and various kinds of "law" to label him "antinomian," the events of the play complicate any attempts to shoehorn Tamburlaine into such a category. Tamburlaine's actions—from the slaughter of Virgins to his own death—are determined by his utterances, and he must perform them to the letter even when his will evolves to contradict that utterance. Though to all appearances powerful, Tamburlaine is actually impotent to act according to his own will. For Tamburlaine to truly represent antinomianism, I argue, the referent for his actions would need to reside within his own conscience and/or will, and through that will, God; throughout the plays, however, Tamburlaine refers to his oaths or "customes" as though they are beyond his power to alter. By projecting his will outwards, Tamburlaine loses control over it and quickly becomes its slave. Instead of imagining himself to be Christ the Word—a charge often levied at actual antinomians—Tamburlaine must enact that which his words decree, even if that means reluctantly slaughtering Virgins or, even worse, dying himself. This chapter examines scenes spanning *Parts 1* and *2* to complicate the notion that Tamburlaine is entirely in control of his own fate, or even his own actions. At the center of antinomianism is confidence, an unshakeable faith that one's will aligns with the will of God, even if that will contradicts established religious doctrine. I contend that these plays illustrate a pattern of behavior that reveals Tamburlaine's strange powerlessness, his position, not as God's weapon against his enemies or as a rogue agent

guided by his own beliefs, but as an odd kind of pawn in a story masterminded by a power that originates with him but which he cannot control.

The third chapter concentrates on antinomian parodies of Puritan/Anabaptist characters in Thomas Middleton's *The Puritan, or the Widow of Watling Street* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. As the attention to contemporaneous polemics shows, the terms "antinomian," "Puritan," and "Anabaptist" were quite often collapsed together and used interchangeably in this period; too, these groups were often categorized simply as "libertines" with specific reference to the Gospel and the Law of God. This anxiety about lawlessness and libertinism erupts from the stage and translates into a call for containment and diffusion that is never quite achieved by the plays in question. In these plays, the characters with antinomian traits are depicted as buffoons and simpletons who often wildly misinterpret Scripture and act according to their own will; they disappear into the margins of the plays, but the anxiety they represent cannot fully be controlled. I argue that their presence in these plays—as well as the repeated emphasis on issues of law and grace and right interpretation—bespeaks a greater early modern English preoccupation with the destabilizing threat posed by antinomians than has heretofore been allowed; though they may be called "Puritans" or "Anabaptists," these parodic figures thus serve a greater purpose than to inject a kind of name-calling mirth into the action of the plays. It would be dangerous for these playwrights to suggest that antinomians have actual power, so their comings and goings in these plays are the stuff of comedy; often relegated to the back alleys and dark corners of the plays, they cheat those who would cheat them and rewrite the rules of libertinism and skullduggery, often while claiming the status of an elect believer. However, by parodying their Puritanical

characters as antinomians, Jonson and Middleton betray an anxiety about beliefs that could unmoor individuals from social and religious structures, and thus dissolve order at the center of society, even as they exist in the margins.

In my final chapter, I examine the problematic "rouzing motions" moment in John Milton's closet drama *Samson Agonistes* to argue that Samson is a true antinomian with unmediated access to God's will. Samson has been labeled an antinomian before, but the entire play has not been adequately viewed through this lens, and more problematically, some modern critics have identified his actions as "terrorism," the worst and most dangerous outbreak of antinomian belief. In this chapter, I work to diffuse the tension of such a label while being attentive to the fact that Samson, is, in fact, the Scourge of God and must act accordingly. Although Samson, like Mary, is technically living in a pre-Christian world, he is still given the power to transgress the Law by a promise of Christian liberty to come. Samson's transgression of Mosaic Law at the end of the play is a necessary move toward Christian liberty and the (never-achieved) perfection of right interpretation. Certainly, personal agency and conscience were of supreme importance to Milton, who believed—and here I am oversimplifying—that each individual could seek truth through the pursuit of knowledge and trials of conscience. It is not difficult to see how a critic of Milton would label the author himself antinomian, as his disregard for external law is ever clear, but it is not my intention to somehow "prove" that Samson in Milton's working is antinomian. Rather I work to tease out Milton's multi-faceted treatment of the Law as exemplified in Samson, and to examine how this leads to Samson's antinomian moment. Milton's Samson is a lawbreaker, but he has also been a judge and a keeper of the Law, and has a direct connection to God that is denied to other

characters in the poem and thus can know God's will in a way those around him cannot. It is my assertion that the language of antinomianism runs throughout the poem and that, once Samson realizes the true spirit of his own words, he cannot but break the Law in God's service.

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As we will see at the outset of Chapter 1, modern popular culture is still transfixed by some of the issues and problems plaguing the medieval and early modern authors under consideration here. Consider, for example, the 2010 song "Puritan Heart" by Matt Duncan; in the opening lines, Duncan croons, "You used to be a lot of fun, but so did I / The spirit used to move us; used to shimmy and shake like kites."[54] These brief lines reference a stereotypically "puritan" tendency—to follow the motions of the spirit—while also lamenting the loss of such spontaneity and freedom. In the chorus, Duncan pleads with his subject to "melt my puritan heart"; this time, he traffics in the image of a stern taskmaster puritan who does not allow himself pleasures of the flesh and hopes that his subject will help him return to a time when he was not bound by the edicts of his cold heart. In the brief space it takes Duncan to move from the first stanza to the repeated chorus, he has covered some important theological ground, though it is in the service of the typical appeal of a song about lost youth and love. More seriously, the specter of antinomianism continues to haunt prominent modes of Christian belief; according to religious scholar Robert S. McElvaine, this includes some forms of evangelical Christianity, who have "appropriated" Jesus as an internal compass to justify their own selfish and immoral actions.[55] The present study has implications beyond early modern England, then, which extend to a continued anxiety about right action, the power of

religious fervor, and the murky problem of individual conscience. I find the claim that the early modern world is simply a “precursor” to our modern, evolved world highly inaccurate; for the problem of antinomianism and all it embodies, it is more that the early modern world mirrors our own, and in the hundreds of intervening years, little headway has been made on reaching satisfactory explanations or conclusions to those problems.

Notes

[1] Edward Shils, "Do we still need academic freedom?", *The American Scholar* 62, no. 2. (1993): 203.

[2] Ibid., 204.

[3] Matthew W. Finkin and Robert C. Post, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 58.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Stanley Fish, "Are Academics Different?", Opinionator, *The New York Times Online* (February 15, 2009). Accessed March 19, 2013. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/are-academics-different/>.

[6] Finkin and Post, *For the Common Good*, 58.

[7] Kristen Poole, *Radical religion from Shakespeare to Milton: figures of nonconformity in early modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[8] Katherine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.

[9] Ibid., 11.

[10] Peter Lake, *The Boxmaker's Revenge: "Orthodoxy", "Heterodoxy" and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 274.

[11] All subsequent references to *The Oxford English Dictionary* will take the shortened form *OED*.

[12] Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 17.

[13] All Biblical quotations taken from the *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[14] See, for example, Matthew 5:17, which reads, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." In spite of Christ's admonition agains destruction, for antinomians, "fulfillment" necessarily meant destruction.

[15] David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 109.

[16] Ibid., 36.

[17] John Eaton, *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ alone* (London, 1642), 83-84.

[18] John Eaton, *The Discovery of the most dangerous Dead Faith* (London, 1642), 11.

[19] Eaton, *Honey-Combe*, 20. Eaton is not clear whether justification is granted to everyone universally; his writing seems to indicate that there are a distinct group of "justified persons" who are fundamentally different from those who cling to the Law in any way. What also becomes emphasized, peculiarly, is the "value" of the works offered up by the true antinomian versus the precisianist; Como, exploring this issue through the lens of Eaton, writes, "The only people who could truly offer up good fruit to God were those who, through the joyous apprehension of their free justification, knew themselves to be free from sin in God's sight" (216). Eaton seems unwilling to deny justification to anyone, but at the same time he implies a hierarchy of belief, with those who accept the spirit of Christ while eschewing the Law at the top of that hierarchy.

[20] Ibid., 22.

[21] Henry Burton, *The Law and the Gospell reconciled* (London, 1631), A2v.

[22] Augustine of Hippo, *St. Augustine on Faith and Works*, trans. Gregory J. Lombardo. Ancient Christian Writers 48 (New York: Newman, 1988), 29.

[23] See note 26 below.

[24] Laurence Chaderton, *A fruitfull sermon, upon the 3.4.5.6.7.&8. verses of the 12t. chapiter of the Epistle of S. Paule to the Romanes* (London, 1584), 36.

[25] "Rogers, Thomas (*c.*1553–1616)," John Craig in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee online ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, ed. Lawrence Goldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), accessed October 22, 2012, http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/article/23998.

[26] In the list of errata, the printer notes that "Antinonies" is actually an error, and that the correct word should be "Antinomies," a term used later in the same work to mean the same group of heretics.

[27] Thomas Rogers, *The faith, doctrine, and religion, professed, & protected in the Realme of England, and dominions of the same* (Cambridge, 1607), 39.

[28] Henry Eyster Jacobs and Rev. John A. W. Haas, ed., *The Lutheran Cyclopedia* (New York: Scribner's, 1899). The 1899 entry on "antinomianism" is one of the most extensive of any edition of *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, and outlines the controversy between Melanchthon, Agricola, and Luther clearly while at the same time exploring the theological roots of the term, asserting at one point that the "first antinomian was Satan in Paradise as he appears Gen. 3:1-4" (18), presumably because he questions the wording of God's law and urges Eve to disregard the letter for the spirit.

[29] Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue Is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, ed. and trans. Holger Sonntage (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 33.

[30] Rogers, *The faith, doctrine, and religion*, 75-76.

[31] Ibid., 77.

[32] Ibid., 78.

[33] John Traske, *The True Gospel Vindicated, From the Reproach of A new Gospel* (1636), 15-16.

[34] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 350.

[35] Luther, *Only the Decalogue*, 216.

[36] Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion & Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 38-39.

[37] Ibid., 39.

[38] Ibid., 32-33.

[39] Ibid., 34.

[40] David Zaret, *The heavenly contract: ideology and organization in pre-revolutionary Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 153.

[41] Ibid., 131.

[42] Ibid., 133-34.

[43] Ibid., 130-35.

[44] Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*, 93.

[45] Ibid., 107.

[46] Zaret, *The heavenly contract*, 150.

[47] For a summary of Traske's career, see David S. Katz's *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1603-1655* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 18-32.

[48] Edward Norris, *The nevv Gospel, not the true Gospel: Or, A discovery of the life and death, doctrin, and doings of Mr. Iohn Traske, and the effects of all, in his followers* (London, 1638), 166.

[49] Ibid., A3r.

[50] For a general discussion of Judaizing in the early modern period, see James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), especially 20-33. Shapiro notes that Judaism was seen as particularly threatening with regard to conversion; in Shapiro's view, because conversion could in some fundamental sense be acted or dissembled, Jews were often painted in theatrical terms. Judaizers like Traske were even more subversive than Jews because they were seen to have no true identity, instead existing in the slippery fissures between Christianity and Judaism.

[51] "Traske, John (*c.*1585–1636)," David R. Como in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2008, accessed March 21, 2013, http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/article/65826.

[52] Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 101.

[53] Steven Mullaney has fully illuminated the position of the theater in the "liberties" of London and the ways in which this position distances the theater—and the players—from law-abiding society in the minds of those who rally against it. See his *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988).

[54] Matt Duncan, vocal performance of "Puritan Heart," by Matt Duncan, recorded 2007-2009 on *Beacon*, HOP HOP, 2010, MP3.

[55] See Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2008).

CHAPTER 1
"HOW HAST ÞU CHAUNGYD ÞIN HOLY THOUGHT?": MARY, MARGERY KEMPE, AND ANTINOMIAN INTERPRETIVE MODES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

Though the Virgin Mary arguably does not occupy the same niche in contemporary American culture that she did in medieval English Catholic culture, the paradox she represents—the innocent, virginal girl heavy with child—continues to occupy the imaginations of the faithful and secular alike. In the modern songwriter Patty Griffin's "Mary," Griffin concentrates on the person of Mary, the woman whose body is marked by myriad conflicting symbols. She sings, "Mary, you're covered in roses. / You're covered in ashes. / You're covered in rain. / You're covered in babies, / Covered in slashes, / Covered in wilderness. / You're covered in stains."[1] The use of the word "covered" here would indicate that each item saturates Mary, leaving room for no other item, but Griffin maps a laundry list of competing objects onto Mary's body, ending with the significant "stains." "Stains" could be taken literally, or, as I read it, could represent the very multitude of attributes Griffin—and countless others—have attempted to impose onto Mary over the centuries. Too, "stains" could represent the dangerous potential of Mary's body; she is the paradoxical virgin mother, and though Griffin's song does not question Mary's honesty, others, including Joseph in the Gospels, often disbelieve Mary, if only for a short time. What Griffin does emphasize is Mary's womanliness and humanity; further in the song, Griffin sings, "Jesus said, 'Mother, / I couldn't stay another day longer.' / Flies right by and leaves a kiss upon her face. / While the angels were singing his praises in a blaze of glory, / Mary stays behind and starts cleaning up the place."[2] Like many a mother before and after her, Mary must contend with a child who

leaves home to pursue his own life; Mary remains behind and keeps the home comfortable, tidying up after her son and his Apostles. The listener is left with a sense that Mary is contemplative and grounded in the home; she is extraordinary, but very real.

It might be said that Patty Griffin is especially contemplative and more concerned with spiritual matters than most contemporary musicians; she is well known equally for her pop and gospel music. Even the most secular of musicians, however, seems to have a stake in the discussion of Mary. On their *The Spirit of Going* EP, released for Christmas 2007, the indie band The New Pornographers tackle the question of Mary's miraculous pregnancy with a poignancy and humanity that mirrors Griffin's. Speaking from Joseph's perspective, the band sings, "Rumors are flying all over Galilee these days / And Mary, I'm trying to be cool. / But my friends walk by and they cannot look at me in the eye. / Baby, I'm trying. / You're asking me to believe in too many things."[3] As he tries to come to terms with his position as "stepfather to a god," Joseph negotiates his trust in Mary, the condemnation of his friends, and the evidence of his own eyes. Finally, he pointedly asks, "Mary, is he mine?" He then quickly thereafter simply declares, "Mary, he is mine."[4] Whether Joseph is attempting to rewrite history or simply accepting the truth of his uniquely odd situation is unclear, but what does emerge is a sense that, even in modern pop music, the troubled mysteries of Marian theology are still being considered and thoughtfully explored.

The late medieval N-Town cycle is a drama obsessed with the Virgin Mary, and the concerns that arise in that work—Mary's will, Mary's body, Mary's purity—are the same concerns echoed in the above songs. It is these concerns—with Mary's body at the center—that are the most fraught with meaning, the most intriguing for a study of

medieval and early modern piety and the place of the individual in that piety. Intersecting these works is also a shifting landscape of belief, a Catholic England after the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, a potentially disruptive period that saw individual laypersons seeking their own answers with increasing frequency. A discussion of the Virgin Mary in medieval cycle plays might at first glance seem fundamentally antithetical to a discussion of antinomianism; labeling Mary an antinomian would be misguided at best and blasphemous at worst. Still, although the undercurrent of fear aroused by antinomianism in England was not to come to a head for centuries, anxiety about antinomianism is nearly as old as Christianity itself. As we saw in the Introduction, Saint Augustine calls antinomians "certain unrighteous men [who] had interpreted certain rather obscure passages of St. Paul to mean that they did not have to lead a good life, since they were assured of salvation as long as they had the faith."[5] Certainly, the general perception of antinomians would have them eschewing any need for external constraint; so, no "good" works, if "good" is defined as "conforming to the Decalogue," would be necessary or even desirable for a life truly centered in Christ. However, antinomian belief as outlined by antinomian thinkers of the seventeenth century focuses much more on internal compulsion, on the Holy Spirit/conscience as the wellspring of right action. As David R. Como contends, in spite of the charge of "lawlessness" often levied against them, all antinomian texts stress that the true believer will commit good works not done "out of external compulsion, but by virtue of a new, internalized principle that flowed from true belief."[6] Right action flows from right belief, or, as Como later terms it, "Freedom from the Law meant righteousness in the spirit."[7] It is important to note that Como is writing here about post-Reformation English antinomians, not about pre-

Reformation English Catholic belief; still, it is clear within the framework of the N-Town play under direct scrutiny here—"The Trial of Mary and Joseph"—that Mary is imbued with an agency that mystifies her detractors and that this agency springs from her unique position as the mother of Christ, who resides in her womb throughout the play.

"The Trial of Mary and Joseph" is the culmination of a series of interpretations and misinterpretations by central and peripheral characters that serve several functions. First, they throw into sharp relief the contrast between the unique purity of Mary and the seeming pollution of her human body as read by all of those outside her circle of belief. Second, they loosely represent the contrast between the severity of the Mosaic Law and the mercy of the new law in Christ, though the fact that the central subject of the play is Mary and that she does not need mercy—because she is innocent of any crime—diminishes the applicability of this comparison. Finally, they serve a basic dramatic function by heightening the audience's sense of involvement and suspense in the narrative; the audience knows Mary is innocent, so can feel a sense of self-satisfaction that they are interpreting her correctly, but still must witness a process of trial and judgment that mirrors their own contemporary justice system. Although a focus on the ways Mary and her detractors interpret and misinterpret her virginal body forms the central core of this argument, it is not my contention that Mary in the work under consideration here is an antinomian in the strictest—and heretical—sense of the word. Rather, Mary in the N-Town cycle and in portions of John Lydgate's poetry provides a model of ideal antinomian behavior, and is what one might paradoxically call the only orthodox antinomian; because she is in the privileged—and utterly unique—position of embodying Christ, Mary is allowed a certain level of transgressive agency. In the hands

of another, this agency could have destructive potential; at the very least, the wayward agent could lead others astray. For Mary, however, her deeper understanding of the truth renders her actions and interpretations valid; Mary is entirely aligned with truth. Though others see her as lawless for a brief period of time in these works, Mary is in fact governed by the new law of Christ, a law that will confound those whose understanding is obscured by an adherence to an outmoded mode of interpretation. As we will see in later chapters, Mary also provides the antithesis to figures in early modern drama whose antinomian interpretations reveal them to be both dangerous and farcical; their moments of misinterpretation mimic Mary's seeming moment of misinterpretation, but unlike Mary, these figures are not grounded in an absolute, right faith in Christ. Similarly, Margery Kempe, whose biography appears in roughly the same time period as N-Town, serves as a kind of mirror figure for Mary, a bridge between the absolutely righteous Mary and the absolutely contemptible figures of the early modern stage. Unlike Mary, Margery's actions and thoughts are fraught with doubt, and though some modern critics have labeled her "antinomian," this is not strictly so. However, she is valuable here as a roughly contemporary counter-model—and an East Anglian and female counter-model, at that—for Mary's transgressive agency, and the vastly different ways in which Mary and Margery are perceived throws Mary's privileged and relatively unproblematic position in these works into even greater relief.

Interiority, Personal Piety, and Mary's Problematic Body

An examination of the Virgin Mary, who quite literally embodies Christ within her womb and whose actions flow from this incarnation, is singularly illuminating both for medieval drama and contemporaneous religious belief. Mary's body is fraught with

contradiction; she is the virgin who is impregnated, the lawbreaker who is pure in the eyes of the law, the antinomian whose antinomianism is both paradoxical and nonthreatening. As Theresa Coletti succinctly terms it, "Mary's body is an ambiguous site of purity and pollution."[8] Her position in the society of the play is similarly ambiguous; Mary represents a unique crossroads of old and new law, of salvation under Jewish law—seemingly impossible for even the most righteous of persons—and salvation under Christian law—open to all who believe and who allow Christ to imbue their actions with righteousness. Mary is not simply an antinomian because she cannot "simply" be anything. The modes of interpretation employed by both Mary and her detractors and the inner compunction Mary feels provide an invaluable model against which to measure other antinomians, figures whose actions are more often than not cast in the worst possible light, but any attempt by another to emulate Mary is doomed for failure. Mary is utterly unique for several reasons, but the most important here is that her body contains the body of Christ; because Christ is inside of her, and because she has come to a new understanding of law and mercy through his presence, Mary's actions—seen by those around her as unlawful—are actually divinely sanctioned. Because of this, moments of interpretation in the play are fraught with anxiety. Until the detractors—and the audience—can reconcile Mary's contradictory states and come to an understanding of the Christian liberty she represents, her body remains a confounding and dangerous object.

The plays "Joseph's Doubt" and "The Trial of Mary and Joseph" are riddled with many moments of false interpretation and few of true; Joseph and the Detractors interpret Mary's face and body, Mary and Joseph interpret the Holy Spirit, and Mary reinterprets the law as it is presented to her in the trial. Even the audience members are implicated in

the system of interpretation; as Mary is portrayed on stage by a physical body, the body of the actor and the Virgin collapse and is displayed for the audience's analysis. The audience does, of course, have the advantage of omniscience as far as the action of the play is concerned; they know that the "justice" that threatens Mary and Joseph is outmoded and obsolete, and they can accept the contradictions of Mary's pregnant, virginal body. Still, the modes of interpretation and action Mary represents are potentially dangerous, and as I turn later in this study to the figure of Margery Kempe, another woman whose agency is fraught with misinterpretations and potential danger, Mary will provide a unique counterpoint to others who would try to claim the liberty afforded by divine inspiration.

Mary's body is fraught with interpretive issues from its very conception. The preoccupation with Mary's body in this cycle should not be entirely surprising given the countless depictions of that body immortalized in stained glass, sculpture, and paintings in medieval English culture. Indeed, as Gibson points out, it was the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which "first produced images of the Annunciation with the conceived Lord already visibly present to the human worshipper on fecundating beams of light sent from God's hands, or, less problematic theologically, images of the homunculus Christ visible within the windowed reliquary of Mary's womb."[9] These artistic depictions of Mary also focus on the extraordinary event of her conception, sometimes emphasizing the drama of her body in these moments to near-absurd degrees. As Barbara D. Palmer terms it, "Unlike ordinary mortal bodies, however, the body of the Virgin Mary is not subject to these human laws either in legend or in the portraiture of early art and drama. By definition her physical experiences are extraordinary and to represent them visually

invites extraordinary spectacle."[10] Whether or not her parents conceived Mary without sin also occupied much thought and debate in the early and medieval church, and as J. A. Tasioulas points out, the issue has serious implications for the humanity of Christ as well. She writes, "If Mary had a physiology wholly uncorrupted by the consequences of sin, then her body would have been incapable of nourishing the child Christ in the womb, and of providing milk for the new-born infant."[11] If Christ could flourish without this nourishment, then his humanity is called into question, and the salvific act of a fully human/fully divine being is thrown into doubt. N-Town's Mary is undoubtedly human, and her body, which stands at the center of the Marian cycle of N-Town, actually excites less spectacle here than one might expect. Indeed, "The Trial" hinges on Mary's body remaining relatively unremarkable; after she drinks to prove her innocence, her face and body stay the same. This moment, while in the sense of spectacle is relatively un-dramatic, is imbued with tension and represents a seismic shift of interpretive modes that casts piety, the law, and the will of God in an entirely new—and potentially disruptive—light.

Given that this discussion will encompass the N-Town cycle, the poetry of John Lydgate, and the life of Margery Kempe, it would be remiss of this study to fail to acknowledge the influence of East Anglian culture and piety on these works. As critic Gail McMurry Gibson has notably argued, the N-Town cycle in particular betrays uniquely East Anglian preoccupations with commercial success and anxiety, as well as an intense focus on Marian piety.[12] East Anglian piety in the fifteenth century—the time of the transcription of N-Town—had to negotiate the potentially treacherous preoccupations and concerns of the average layperson, including attempts to reconcile mercantile success

with the importance of poverty and charity and a burgeoning sense of individualism and desire to develop a personal relationship with God. As Nicole R. Rice terms it, the late fourteenth century saw an expanding interest in "spiritual ambition," or a "desire for the highest distinctions in the religious realm: assurance of salvation in the next life, and the possibility, in this life, of seeing and experiencing personal closeness to God through contemplation."[13] Key to this contemplation was the Holy Spirit, a concept personified in N-Town and important for Mary's position and knowledge in the plays, and central as well for much later outbursts of antinomian belief. Even in the case of tracts that describe the Holy Spirit in positive and untroubled terms, the relationship between the Holy Spirit, the individual conscience, and the compulsion to act is an anxious one fraught with tension and uncertainty. As we shall see, the problems of conscience play a major role in antinomian anxieties for Milton's Samson especially, and for the early modern period in general; for a post-Reformation piety with emphasis on the individual believer, this is not surprising. However, this conception of the Holy Spirit and conscience has its roots in medieval piety; in works such as *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*[14] and *A deuout treatyse called the tree and xii. Frutes of the holy goost*, the authors explore the same issues of internal compulsion and right action that come to a head with antinomian belief, and though Rice would see these tracts as generally quelling individualism, they in some sense pave the way for later—and more individualistic and dangerous—conceptions of conscience.

The anonymous author of *The Abbey* bases the entire structure of his "abbey" in "a place that is clepud conscience," but makes it very clear that the Holy Ghost will not dwell there until the conscience is made clean by maidens such as "Ryghtwysnesse" and

"Love-of-clennesse."[15] Rather than arguing that conscience—and through conscience, Christ/the Holy Spirit—informs and guides the believer vis-a-vis right action, *The Abbey* makes it clear that the believer must actively cleanse their conscience if they hope to achieve spiritual enlightenment; as the author terms it, "This abbey shal also be set on a good ryver: it is the more at ese and more delysyous. . . . Therfore grace and rychesse of werkus com fully to have wylle."[16] The importance of such works cannot be underestimated; the author continues, "For whan we doon any good dede of charite thorow grace of good entent, as many goode stones we leighen on oure housying in the blysse of hevene ifastened togederes wit the love of God and of oure evencristene."[17] Faith here is not a passive waiting for spiritual guidance through the Holy Spirit; rather, it is an active working towards a state in which one deserves a visit from the "wardeyn and vysitour" of this Abbey, the Holy Ghost.[18] Furthermore, it is working towards building one's home in heaven, a home made out of the "stones" of good works and held together by the mortar of God's love. However, this struggle is not only about the afterlife; in this life, the author asserts, we can utilize contemplation, or "a devoute rysyng up of the herte" that ideally results in "with brennende love to God to dwelle, and of his dylycys fretheren his soule and sumdel tasten of the swettenesse that Godys chosen schullen have in hevene."[19] Although this passage is somewhat obscure,[20] the general implication seems to be that one can achieve a heavenly state here on earth through "contemplacioun," or "religious meditation," or "contemplation of the Divinity and the divine order."[21] As we shall see, "contemplacioun" is a concept of the utmost importance for Margery Kempe's piety, and here it seems a key term; one would generally associate the kind of intense, prolonged meditation on the Divine with monasteries or nunneries, but as critics have

noted, the kind of tract represented by *The Abbey* was meant as a pietistical guide for those who could not (or did not want to) enter those institutions, i.e. a lay believer.

This idea of an "abbey" in one's mind, grounded in conscience and overseen by the Holy Spirit, was a popular one that would continue to flourish and adapt to the shifting religious landscape. I have included a discussion of this concept here, not because it represents a radical or anarchistic notion of piety—indeed, as R. N. Swanson notes, *The Abbey* "operates at a very general level of analogy, providing essentially moralistic advice which at times may seem platitudinous"[22]—but because this perfectly orthodox notion of the Holy Spirit and conscience represents a possible departure point for later, antinomian conceptions of divine inspiration. For the late medieval period, however, these images of an abbey in the soul were simply popular, enduring ways to conceive of an individual piety that existed outside the monastery but spoke to a need for an intensive, pseudo-mystical desire on the part of the laity for connection with God. An adaptation/translation of *The Abbey* which appeared at the end of the fifteenth century shows how these ideas endured; in *The abbaye of the Holy Ghost*, the author, John Alcock, writes that the "abbaye" of the Holy Ghost "shall be fou~ded or grou~ded in a clene conscience," that God is the "fou~der" and Christ shall be the "gouernour,"[23] and that God placed in Adam and Eve "a lytel precyous place that is callid Conscyence y^{t} lyth in theyr soules bytwene a place y^{t} is called Sinderesis[24] that styred a man to goodness."[25] Though the initial translator of *The Abbey* is unknown, Alcock was a well-known bishop and prolific writer. Lest it be suspected that Alcock was harboring some brand of pseudo-Protestant sympathies, it is also worthwhile to note that the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry makes much of Alcock's desire to "renovate contemporary

faith and religion within a strictly Catholic frame," not to overhaul that belief and cast it in a new mold.[26]

Even a clear move toward accommodating individual piety, then, was theoretically contained by a framework—however tepid or "platitudinous"—of orthodox construction. Yet, the emergence of tracts like *The Abbey* represents a growing group of what Rice terms "spiritually ambitious laypeople seeking the regular discipline and spiritual elevation of the cloister."[27] Rice's further clarification of what she terms the laity's "efforts to map active virtue and contemplative perfection onto their own bodies and practices" has clear applicability for a discussion of antinomianism;[28] however innocent or orthodox the motivations, such an effort could eventually result in transgressive and/or antinomian piety that needs neither intermediaries nor external constraint. Rice sees tracts like *The Abbaye of the Holy Ghost* and *The Charter of the Abbaye of the Holy Ghost* as responding "to a widespread desire to be 'in religion' by offering a 'reule' of an active life grounded in penance and a contemplative life that is passive and humble, never tinged with the fervor of a Margery Kempe or the misguided search for sensation."[29] In other words, these tracts work to diffuse the potentially dangerous individualistic impulses of what Theresa Coletti calls "an expanding lay readership for devotional writing, which itself reflected society's increasing attraction to spiritual ideals originally intended for cloistered monastics and recluses."[30] These tracts were being read and circulated by those believers who had to live in the world and interact with others, who did not have the leisure of devoting entire days to prayer and contemplation but were concerned about their potentially sinful impulses and their place in the salvific scheme. Intriguingly, like casuistry a century or so later, these tracts dwell

on the impulses of the Holy Ghost and conscience, but they chart the general outline of the "abbaye" of the Holy Ghost as authorized by God rather than work from the impulses of conscience to extrapolate outward in an attempt to determine one's rightness or election, a key distinction for separating them from any antinomian potential. The ideal outcome of reading one of these tracts would be reassurance and a sense of contemplative peace and alignment with God; similarly, the ideal outcome of watching the N-Town Marian cycle would be a sense of satisfaction in the knowledge that one has interpreted rightly where others in the play have been blinded by an outmoded sense of false piety and justice.

In "The Trial," Mary brings to life the concerns with conscience, right action, and spiritual alignment with God that Rice, Gibson, and others identify as occupying a central place in the mind of the late medieval layperson. Mary must read and interpret the words of Gabryel, her own body, and ultimately God in order to determine the actions she must take in the world, and though her position initially confuses and frustrates that world, it is eventually clear even to her detractors that Mary is rightly aligned and has been the lone voice of interpretive reason throughout the plays. This revelation is a process that builds throughout the other plays in the cycle; the effect of this building is to show Mary's defiance in "The Trial" as perfectly justified and the position of her detractors as misguided and even buffoonish. The radical moment of Mary's gentle defiance in "The Trial" has its roots clearly in other plays in the cycle, chiefly "The Parliament of Heaven," "The Salutation and Conception," and "Joseph's Doubt." Before Mary can begin to rely on the divine guiding principle that originates from the Christ child in her womb, she must herself be convinced of his divinity. Anticipating that Mary will have

some concerns about Gabryel's message about her virginal conception, Spiritus Sancti in "The Parliament of Heaven" proclaims, "And if she aske Þe how it myth be, / Telle here I, Þe Holy Gost, xal werke al this / . . . / here body xal be so fulfylt with blys / Þat she xal sone thynke Þis sownde credyble" (11.205-12).[31] Thus, Mary will be presented with Gabryel's words, which the audience will know ring true, but it will be the evidence of her own body that will convince her that she carries God's son. Indeed, though Gabryel's words prepare Mary and pave the way for her humble acceptance of the honor bestowed upon her, it is not until she feels the physical proof of her pregnancy that she truly believes. The description of the "action" reads: "*Here Þe Holy Gost discendit with iij bemys to oure Lady, the Sone of Þe Godhed nest with iij bemys to Þe Holy Gost, the Fadyr godly with iij bemys to Þe Sone. And so entre all thre to here bosom*."[32] Immediately, Mary "fele[s] in [her] body" (11.293) the perfect Christ child within her; she rightly interprets the evidence of her own body and readily accepts her singular position. Of course, Mary not only has the benefit of the Christ child in her womb, but of the other elements of the Trinity in her "bosom": guided by the Holy Spirit, the same guide also equated with conscience, Mary comes to an immediate understanding of her unique situation. By the end of her encounter with Gabryel, Mary is perfectly comfortable with her new, privileged position, and says, "Gramercy of ȝiyre grett goodnes, / And namely of ȝoure confortabyl massage, / For I vndyrstande by inspyracyon / Þat ȝe knowe by syngulere preuylage / Most of my sonys Incarnacyon" (11.320-24). Mary does not need Gabryel to explain Christ's nature as both human and divine; God's "inspiration" through the Holy Spirit provides that knowledge to her effortlessly.

Quite literally, Joseph has not penetrated Mary's body. Thus, he does not have privileged access to the kind of inspiration that Mary willingly accepts, and when confronted with the seemingly clear evidence of Mary's pregnant body, Joseph is at a loss as to how to interpret that body. Although Joseph returns from a nine-month absence to find Mary, who has supposedly remained virginal, large with child, Mary, secure in the new knowledge she now possesses, remains calm in the face of Joseph's dismay. When Joseph first encounters Mary in "Joseph's Doubt," he cannot see her face because it is radiating a bright light; he exclaims, "Me mervelylyth wyff, surely! ȝoure face I cannot se / But as Þe sonne with his bemys quan he is most bryth" (12.15-16). Yet, even this evidence that something more is happening here than infidelity is not enough to sway Joseph from accusing Mary of that act. He has no framework to interpret her shining face or her pregnant/virginal body, and so his thoughts immediately turn to the most logical explanation for her condition: she has been unfaithful. Before he comes to this conclusion, however, Mary tells Joseph, "Husbond, it is as it plesyth oure Lord, Þat grace of hym grew / *Who Þat evyr beholdyth me, veryly,* / *They xal be grettly steryd to vertu*" (12.17-19; my emphasis). Mary's face serves as a physical marker of her new condition, her virtuous position in the new law of her unborn child, Christ. Those who behold Mary and understand the true nature of what she represents will be "stirred to virtue," will embrace the new law and abandon the law that cannot save. Here, however, Joseph grossly misinterprets the brightness of her face and the "evidence" of her belly. He is obsessed with the carnal fact of her pregnancy, and cannot move past this "evidence" of her adultery until visited by an angel at the end of the play. As Gail Murray Gibson asserts, "Mary's swollen womb is clear evidence of 'synful gyse' to Joseph in the Ludas

Coventriae Doubt play; for the audience, just as surely, pregnancy makes of Mary the promised living Temple."[33] Mary's body symbolizes two seemingly contradictory things, but ultimately her embodiment of both Christ and Christian principles trumps the physical "evidence" against her.

Joseph is bogged down in the literal facts of Mary's pregnancy; he has been away, and has never embraced Mary carnally, and thus the child cannot be his. Because women cannot, in Joseph's experience, impregnate themselves, another man must be involved. Mary, however, knows the truth, not only about her pregnancy, but also about the consequences of that pregnancy for spiritual truth. In response to Joseph's outbursts, Mary calmly replies, "Sekyr, sere, beth nowth dysmayde, / Ryth aftyr Þe wyl of Goddys sonde" (12.23-24). These events accord with God's plan, his intentions to fulfill the Mosaic Law through incarnation and crucifixion, and Mary knows that any earthly evidence to the contrary is relatively unimportant. As Angellus later reveals to Joseph, "I tell Þe, God wyl of here be born, / And sche clene mayd as she was beforn, / To saue mankynd, Þat is forlorn" (12.155-57). Even in utero, Christ represents the new covenant, a covenant that does not rely on works or physical acts for salvation. When Joseph first sees Mary, however, he lacks the right information and the right kind of faith; as Mary says, "For vnknowlage he is deseyd" (12.130), and the knowledge he is lacking is not that which can be gained through empirical observation. Joseph is obsessed with the evidence of his own eyes, and he bombards Mary with questions and laments that he was ever convinced to take a young wife. Joseph is not, like Mary, imbued with knowledge and guided by the Holy Spirit, and his misunderstanding is, in a sense, only human. Mary's quiet explanations reveal her new understanding but fail to convince Joseph; the evidence

of her body is too great. Mary eventually asks God to "amend [Joseph's] mone" (12.86-87), or relieve his complaint, and finally God calls on Angelus to descend and explain the matter to Joseph. Faced with Angelus's assurance that Mary "is a ful clene may" (12.155), Joseph rapidly comes to a new understanding of her condition. And though he then asserts that "[s]o good a creature as she / Wold nevyr a done trespace, For sche is ful of grace" (12.163-65), his initial doubt reveals his flawed human/pre-Christian understanding and provides a moment of humor for the audience. Joseph's doubt is relatively non-threatening and easily resolved; he mistrusts his senses until those senses are corrected by direct divine intervention, and once this occurs, his participation in the divine mystery of Mary's pregnancy involves aligning himself with Mary even when faced with trial and tribulation. Joseph vows to "nevyrmore make such stryff" between himself and Mary (12.191), and even tells Mary that he was "nevyr wurthy, iwys / For to be þin husbonde" (12.204-5). Joseph is beginning to realize his own—somewhat trivial—position in the story unfolding inside Mary's body, but has also accepted that position with grace.

Once Joseph is convinced both of Mary's chastity and of the importance of the child she carries, he joins Mary in her new, quasi-antinomian interpretive mode and can be assured that his—and his wife's—actions are in accordance with God's will, even when they seem to contradict Mosaic Law. His subsequent proclamations of his own ignorance serve to underscore the new knowledge he has just acquired; at one point, he exclaims, "A mercy, mercy, my jentyl make, / Mercy, I have seyd al amys!" (12.182-83). "Mercy" is certainly what Joseph has acquired both intellectually and spiritually; the new law under Christ will be the law of mercy, not of works. As Kathleen M. Ashley asserts,

"A recurring concern in this cycle is learning itself. Above all, Christ is the personification of Wisdom in this cycle, and all human knowledge must be measured against that divine standard."[34] By desiring mercy, Joseph also desires knowledge, and knowledge he gains. Ashley continues, "Man's wit is not just his intellective faculty but that faculty by which he judges right from wrong, recognizes the truth of God, and decides to obey it."[35] Mary possesses the greatest amount of "wit" in the play, and given that Christ—the child in Mary's womb—stands in as wit, this is only appropriate. As we shall see, Mary's new "wit" or understanding also puts her into danger; by breaking from the conventional norms of the society around her, Mary risks falling victim to the punishments those norms proscribe, the consequences of an outdated law that has been superseded by the in-utero Christ.

Trial by Potion: Detractors and the "Evidence" of the Gaze

Before Mary and Joseph are discovered and put on trial for their seeming indiscretions, they decide to visit Elizabeth, future mother of John the Baptist, whose story in the cycle mirrors Mary's story in miniature. Contemplacio narrates the story of Elizabeth's miraculous conception, though here, unlike in Mary's story, Gabryel first appears to Elizabeth's husband, Zakarye, and tells him his elderly wife will conceive. Even faced with the words of an angel, however, Zakarye "not belevyd so" (13.34); he was too preoccupied with their advanced age and his own "vnwurthynes" (13.34). Contemplacio explains that "the plage of dompnesse hise lippis lappyd, lo" (13.35), meaning either that he is simply struck dumb, or that he speaks misinterpretation, that he cannot alter his interpretive framework in spite of divine assistance.[36] In contrast, Elizabeth immediately understands both her own and Mary's miraculous pregnancies;

like Mary, Elizabeth is "[f]ulfylled with þe Holy Gost" (13.57) and immediately proclaims Mary the "Modyr of God" (13.52) and "[b]lyssyd . . . amonge all women!" (13.58). Like Mary, Elizabeth is filled with new understanding; she can recognize these miraculous pregnancies as the work of God and sees Mary through a new interpretive lens, all through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Mary is still unique among women, however; Elizabeth's conception is miraculous, but John the Baptist is not the Son of God. However, Elizabeth's understanding is overhauled by a relationship with the Holy Spirit not unlike Mary's and marks another orthodox antinomian moment in the plays. At the end of their visit, Elizabeth proclaims that "[f]or now is cum mercy, and venjauns is past!" (13.172). Elizabeth, like Mary, can see the fault line separating the old from the new laws, and she rightly embraces the new law and its implications for justice.

Unlike Mary, however, Elizabeth is not subject to the "justice" of the public trial. Forced out of the small community of believers represented by Joseph, Elizabeth, and herself, Mary must now face the real danger of persecution. In "The Trial," the chief purveyors of a new "lawless" mode of interpretation—Mary and Joseph—are called to task for the seeming incompatibility of their behavior with the old law by which their actions are judged. When they enter the world of the trial, Mary and Joseph entire a world that is almost two dimensional in its structure; they are the most complete characters in it. For Douglas W. Hayes, a potential interpretive problem is raised for the audience when "historical figures" such as Mary and Joseph are contrasted with the "dramatized abstractions" of Backbiter and Raise Slander. Hayes argues that "the audience is simultaneously forced to think in terms of particularity and abstraction while forming any interpretation and consequently to consider the moral implications of that interpretation

in a historical, contemporary, and universal sense. . . . The temporal continuity of the historical/biblical narrative framework is disrupted and the audience is forced into contemporaneity."[37] This then makes the audience into "a jury that must listen to evidence and take interpretive action. . . . An interpretive crisis is set up where the audience must share worlds with the detractors and consider a major tenet of Christianity from a perspective [characterized by the] implied sarcasm" of the detractors.[38] While I agree with Hayes that viewing the mother of God trading barbs with stock allegorical characters might be jarring, I would argue that the audience is able to "read" Mary's body with a confidence that then allows them to appreciate the humor of such an unlikely pairing. It is the case that Backbiter and Raise Slander's accusations are perfectly reasonable when applied to an ordinary girl; Mary, however, cannot be held to the same standards. Indeed, the standards by which the detractors operate are no longer applicable. Though Mary appears at the trial as nothing more than a pregnant woman, the audience—and, through trial, the other figures in the play—realize her extraordinary otherness.[39]

Primus Detractor is the first to call attention to Mary's "sinful" state as—falsely—evidenced by her belly; he says, "Syr, in Þe tempyl a mayd Þer was / Calde Mayd Mary, Þe trewth to tell. / Sche semyd so holy withinne Þat plas, / Men seyd sche was fedde with holy aungell. / But to leve chast and clene virgine. / Howevyr it be, here wombe doth swelle / And is as gret as Þinne or myne!" (14.74-81). Primus Detractor is correct in noting that there is a significant difference between the Mary of the temple and the new Mary; Mary is still obeying God's law, but the law has changed. In the Temple, Mary was under the law of action; for Mary, this actually meant a law of inaction, but her adherence to a rule of chastity illustrated an adherence to that law. The new Mary is still

virginal, but her significance as a figure no longer depends on what she does; it is the miraculous child Mary carries—and the new law that this child embodies—that gives Mary her new power. When Primus Detractor says "howevyr it be," he is revealing his own ignorance; Mary is large with child, but in the process of gaining that child she is also filled with right knowledge, knowledge that moves her to right action without the need for outmoded, external rules. As Cindy Carlson writes, "In her [Mary's] obedience, we can see that the law may be obeyed and transcended at one and the same time."[40] A chaste woman cannot become pregnant; Mary is pregnant, and therefore she must not be chaste. As both virginal and maternal, however, Mary breaks free from the constraints of the "reason" used by those around her, those obsessed with the law and ignorant of the grace that guides Mary and Joseph's actions. It is significant also that Primus Detractor compares Mary's body to "þine or mine"; he or she falsely assumes that Mary is just another woman, and that her body can be "read" like anyone else's. For anyone else, the evidence of the burgeoning belly would indeed by damning; though Mary is human, her body is the site of miracles beyond the understanding of the ordinary person.

The play spends what seems an inordinate amount of time focusing on Mary's body. Secundus Detractor comments on Mary's attractiveness by declaring, "Be my trewth, al may wel be , For fresch and fayr she is to syght. / And such a mursel, as semyth me, / Wolde cause a ȝonge man to haue delyght" (14.90-93). Primus Detractor responds, "Such a ȝonge damesel of bewté bryght, / And of schap so comely also, / Of hire tayle ofte-tyme be lyght / And rygh tekyl vndyr Þe too" (14.94-97). Mary is beautiful and shapely, and the detractors enjoy gossiping about her. For the audience, knowing as they do that the detractors are speaking of the mother of God, such language would—at the

least—seem both surprising and inappropriate. It also serves to confirm that the detractors are farcical figures, prone to grave misinterpretations that have dangerous potential. Speaking to Episcopus, Secundus Detractor asserts, "Syb of Þi kyn Þow Þat she be, / All gret with chylde hire wombe doth swelle! / Do calle here hedyr, Þiself xal se / Þat it is trewthe Þat I Þe telle" (14.114-17). The detractor incites Episcopus to "try" Mary, to expose her to potential ridicule and violence. The detractors' cocky assurances to themselves that they are interpreting Mary correctly thus may seem only comical from the outside of the play, but inside, their words have the potential to bring harm to Mary and Joseph. The detractors speak of Mary as though she were any other woman; her body is assessed by them, and as they sneer at her attractiveness they also presume that they can tell "truth" by reading her body. If Mary were any other woman, the proof of her burgeoning belly would outweigh any "proof" she might provide; for Mary, however, the combined proof of her physical resistance to the trial and her invocation of God serves to exonerate her.

The detractors are too obsessed with Mary's body, however, to see beyond its boundaries. Speaking of Joseph's earlier doubt, Coletti argues, "The disturbing sight of the violated bodily margins of a pregnant virgin turns the traditional conception of Mary's singularity among women into what Joseph believes must be her likeness to them."[41] The same holds true for the detractors. Her swollen body colors all the false interpretations made by the detractors; as Coletti asserts, Mary's "protestations of cleanness offer discursive counterpoint to the spectacle of a swelling womb, which seems more than sufficient testimony that Mary is anything but pure."[42] Similarly, Emma Lipton identifies "the association of a woman's speech with her body, and specifically her

sexuality" as part of the fabliau tradition "The Trial" is working to invert, and points out that, here, Mary's protestations of innocence actually align with her pregnant body rather than that pregnant body polluting the protestations of innocence any other woman would falsely present.[43] Unlike Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zakarye, those who judge Mary don't have access to divine intervention through angels or the Holy Spirit; they must rely on their imperfect senses, senses which are colored by the interpretive framework in which they are entrenched.

The trial Mary and Joseph must endure continues the obsession the play shows with their bodies; Episcopus presents a bottle and says, "Here is þe botel of Goddys vengeauns. / This drynk xal be now þi purgacyon. / þis [hath] suche vertue by Goddys ordenauncs / þat what man drynk of þis potacyon / And goth serteyn in processyon / Here in þis place þis awtere abowth, / If he be gylty, sum maculacion / Pleyn in his face xal shewe it owth" (14.234-41). This drink literally "writes" guilt on the drinker's face and body; ordained by God, this trial is seemingly infallible. After Joseph has drunk and been proven innocent, Primus Doctor Legis echoes earlier exhortations against Mary when he says, "þu art with chylde we se in syght; / To us þi wombe þe doth accuse! / þer was nevyr woman ȝitt in such plyght / þat from mankynde hyre kowde excuse" (14.302-5). It is indeed "to them" that Mary's belly accuses her; to the audience, her belly is evidence only of her holiness and divine privilege. And the simple fact of there being no precedent—"never" a woman in the same position who was not guilty—does not prove the detractors' case; Mary's body is beyond the interpretive prowess of this court. As Matthew J. Kinservik argues, Mary's "obviously pregnant body . . . contains the conflict of Mosaic law with the new Word. Having exempted Mary from the carnal imperative of

the marriage law, the judges are now faced with a visible, public challenge to their compromised law."[44] He continues, "From the conception of Mary until Christ's birth, Mary's body is at the center of the old law's efforts to maintain control."[45] "The Trial" sees this control slipping and shifting; a new law of mercy now threatens to replace the old order, and as Mary embodies this new law, her position is potentially a dangerous threatening one.

Though confused by the initial evidence Mary's body represents, Episcopus does understand that something radical has shifted. When first confronted with Mary's pregnant body, Episcopus says, "How hast Þu chaungyd Þin holy thought?" (14.204). The audience knows that it is Mary's pregnancy—the act that seems to transgress the laws against adultery—that has changed Mary's "holy thought," that has realigned her spiritual disposition into accordance with the new law. Episcopus can sense that something is different about Mary, but he initially attributes this to a departure from her former holiness. Mary's "holy thought" has been altered in the same way her body has been altered, but not in the way Episcopus assumes. If, as Carlson asserts, "What is at issue in this pageant is not the integrity of Mary's rights but her physical integrity[,] . . . the issue of her wholeness, both physical and spiritual,"[46] then Mary's spiritual wholeness is in fact enacted by her embodiment of the Christ child, an "act" that seems to symbolize her physical fragmentation. In fact, Mary's "holy thought" is in some ways unchanged; she is still obedient to God and seeks His help and guidance. Her trust in Him is unshaken; while being bombarded with the words of her detractors, Mary calmly asserts, "Almyghty God xal be oure frende / Whan þe trewthe is tryed owth" (14.180-81). The detractors scoff at her, saying, "ȝa, on þis wyse excusyth here every scowte / Whan here

owyn synne hem doth defame!" (14.182-83). Proclaiming one's innocence and swearing that God will exonerate you is a common move for the accused, the detractor is saying, but what he or she doesn't understand is that Mary is the one true exception to the rule. Her mind and soul, like her body, cannot be properly read by comparison with other minds, souls, and bodies.

Ironically, to "prove" her physical integrity, Mary must submit to a test designed under the old law; she must drink the potion that will reveal her guilt or innocence. If Mary is defiled, the potion will prove it. This is again ironic in that physical "proof" up to this point has failed the detractors; Mary's swollen belly seems to be proof of her transgression, but it is in fact not. The potion, however, gains its power by "Goddys ordenauns," and is thus still useful as a tool in this liminal space between the old and new laws. Christ, though Mary's guide, has not yet come to supersede the law. In fact, the issue of Christ's relationship to the law—specifically after crucifixion—is the central controversy at the center of the antinomian crisis. Christ says, "Do not think that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil,"[47] and yet his coming does negate much of the Mosaic Law for most Christians. As we have seen, antinomians take this move one step further, arguing for the negation of the entire Mosaic Law. In "The Trial," Mary, who has Christ inside her, needs neither outward constraint nor the approval of others to "fulfill" the law; as an orthodox antinomian, Mary exists in a new reality governed by the new law of Christ, and can thus confidently act accordingly. Colin Fewer sees this new life as indicative of contemporary East Anglian piety; he writes, "Piety under the new dispensation of Christ expresses the central values of the new religious aesthetic of the fifteenth century in particular, the desire for the less

mediate forms of sacred experience available to the subject 'withinne' and 'aboven' himself."[48] Mary, then, is evidence of a burgeoning antinomian spirit as well as an example of the way in which piety is increasingly becoming a personal, inner experience. Reliant on her inner guide—which in this case is the infallible Christ—Mary is able to enact a more authentic spirituality that truly connects her with God, as opposed to the old and outmoded spirituality that potentially alienates its followers from true communion with the divine.

Aesthetically, it is necessary for a play audience to have a visual test for Mary and Joseph's guilt, and "The Trial" provides that. Though the audience knows Mary is innocent of fornication, for the purposes of the play they must rely on their sight, like the detractors, to witness proof of her innocence. The audience members are part of the rabble; Mary is on display in a double sense, both within and outside of the play. Of course, the audience's privileged position as fifteenth century Catholics means that they arrive at the play secure in the knowledge that Mary and Joseph are telling the truth; no matter the appearance of sin or strength of the arguments against them, Mary and Joseph will be exonerated. Lest they forget this fact for a moment, however, the audience is reminded at the beginning of the play that what they will hear from the detractors will be slander. Primus Detractor boasts that "to reyse slawndyr is al my lay" (14.40) and asserts that, were his brother Bakbytere with him, they would would raise more slander "within an howre thoreouth this town / Than evyr Þer was Þis thowsand ȝere" (14.46-48). The trial-by-ordeal via which Mary and Joseph are judged, a convention that, as we have seen, has its roots in fabliaux, is in some sense converted in "The Trial" to accommodate an ecclesiastical, medieval context that highlights the key issues at stake here:

interpretation, justice, and mercy. Keith Thomas has shown how trials-by-potion like the one here also reference the sometimes use of the Mass as a kind of "poison ordeal." As Thomas explains, "The suspected party would be required to communicate, on the assumption that he would be damned if guilty or dishonest."[49] Mary and Joseph don't face immediate death-by-poisoning if they fail the drinking test, but the stakes are in every sense higher than the death of a single dishonest individual. Mary's unblemished face in particular represents an entirely new system of interpretation, a mode that can't be understood by those around her. They understand that her face proves she is innocent, so they release her, but they are still unable to properly interpret what has just happened.

So, the court provides a recognizable setting that the audience can interpret visually and feel comfortable inhabiting. Lynn Squires touches on this issue when she writes, "In this play the ecclesiastical court, which is clearly an English rather than an ancient Judaic institution, is shown to adhere to the Old Law which prescribes revenge against moral offenders. Mary and Joseph, on the other hand, adhere to the New Law of mercy which prohibits taking earthly revenge against wrong-doers."[50] Mary is literally merciful in that she contains within her body that ultimate symbol of mercy, Christ. Given the power that this incarnation brings, Mary can serve as the voice of the new law, as the example of the strength that God's new salvific plan will give to humanity. Mary's forceful language at the trial only serves to underscore her new state of being. She says, "I trespacyd nevyr with erthely wyght. / Þerof I hope Þurowe Goddys sonde / Here to be purgyd before ȝoure syght / From all synne clene, lyke as myn husbonde. / Take me Þe botel out of ȝoure honde, /Here xal I drynke beforn ȝoure face. / Abowth Þis awtere than xal I fonde / Vij tymes to go, by Godys grace" (14.290-97). Mary's wish that through

God's dispensation she will be purged of sin is startlingly apt; God sends Mary the Christ child, and through this she is both purged of sin and provides the means for the rest of humanity to be purged as well. Primus Detractor and the other "backbiters" can't at first participate in this communal spirit as they don't know the truth that lies within Mary. As Alison M. Hunt phrases it, "[B]oth gossip and religious dissent are destructive speech acts with profound consequences for communal well-being. To interpret a neighbor's actions uncharitably is, as the adverb implies, to threaten the bond of charity that should have united accuser to accused."[51] This "bond" is, in fact, the "spirit" of salvation that fills Mary and will extend outwards from her through the birth and sacrifice of her child. Indeed, once Primus Detractor is "converted" through the physical evidence of Mary's chastity, he can participate in the new community of charity and mercy under the new law. Primus Detractor echoes Joseph in "Joseph's Doubt" when he cries, "Mercy, good Mary, I do me repent / Of my cursyd and fals language!" (14.366-67). He asks Mary to have mercy on him and, as such, begins to participate in the new merciful law that characterizes God's new covenant with humanity through Christ. Mary's seeming rebellion is folded quietly back into the play with the acceptance of her truth by the court; her privileged position as the mother of God and the nature of the accusations against her mean that she never poses a serious threat to the stability of the court or the society around her. In fact, by acquiescing to the demands of the court and aligning herself with their law, she models right action that flows equally from her own inherent nature and the Christ child she carries.

Indeed, one might reasonably assert that Mary is as important a key in the salvific process as Christ himself; as Gibson writes,

> Christ might be approached and invoked as the babe in Mary's arms or as the suffering, bleeding Lord upon the cross, but it was Mary who had contained the whole awe of his godhead in the tabernacle of her womb . . . Mary whose image figured that union sought by all Christian souls and whose body hallowed by Christ's presence was both type and model for the Church itself and for its holy sanctuaries.[52]

Through Mary—both figuratively and literally—Christ is to be found. As Gibson continues, "Divinity comes to rest in Mary, who is image and sign of the Word-bearer; her attribute of maternity asserts the principle, both incarnational and linguistic, of saving fecundity."[53] Mary is the vessel of the new law—the wisdom of God as incarnate in Christ—and thus her behavior is informed by that new law; Mary is a part of the old community in that she serves as a guide to spread the new word to that community, but she is also entirely apart from that community in that she no longer needs to abide by its external rules. The word "need" here is important: Mary literally has no need for external rules because the Christ child inside her leads her constantly to right action. This is why Mary serves as a proto-antinomian in these plays, and why she is also a potentially dangerous figure, even to those who revere her. Mary here stands for grace and mercy in a way that has the potential to supersede Christ, the traditional figure of these attributes.

Although the issues that arise from "The Trial" are central to late medieval Catholic piety, the subject itself is dramatized only in the N-Town cycle, and although the play was most likely interpolated into the cycle by a later scribe, the Marian emphasis and general themes of the play fall in line with the rest of the cycle.[54] The episode in question here—the public accusation, interrogation, and potential reprobation of Mary and Joseph for Mary's pregnancy—is taken from the apocryphal New Testament books Pseudo-Matthew and Protevangelium and only appears in medieval English literature in

one other place: John Lydgate's poem "Life of Our Lady."[55] In Lydgate's treatment of the episode, the themes of law and justice are prevalent; so, too, Lydgate repeatedly emphasizes Mary's obedience to the law and her obvious innocence. He likens Mary to "a myrrour, of all holynesse / The will of god, holyche dyd obeye / With all hir hert, and all hir bysynesse / And with all this, fulfilled of mekenesse" (1376-80). Mary is entirely obedient to God's will, and in that, she reflects him; indeed, God is also "reflected" in the child the Virgin carries with her. Also "inside" her is the Holy Spirit, which guides her actions and understanding in this work as well as in N-Town. Lydgate writes that Mary is "*so full sette afyre* / *With the holy goste,* ne thar but lytyll drede / To drynke water, whethir it be thyke or clere / To make a pref, of hir maydynhede" (1494-97, my emphasis); later, Lydgate reminds us again that the Holy Ghost was "ay hir gyde" (1607). When she speaks, Mary almost primarily addresses God; she reminds him "thou knowest euery hert" (1536) and asks him "if I haue, myne virgynyte / Conservede hoole, this is my oryson / . . . / Make opynly a demonstracion" (1600-1; 1605). Here Mary is perhaps meeker than in N-Town, but with these words, which echo Mary's assurance to her detractors that God would prove her innocent, it is almost as if she is challenging God, reminding him of his duty to exonerate her openly. Immediately following these words, Mary drinks from the water, and both she and Joseph are proven innocent; Lydgate writes that "thorugh hir merite, she hathe the mouthes shette / And lippys closed" and that her "humble hert, and deuoute obeysaunnce" sees her through this trial.[56] Just as the author of *The Abbey* contends that "contemplacioun is a devoute rysyng up of the herte,"[57] and with this contemplation comes the assistance of the Holy Ghost, so Lydgate reminds his reader that Mary, whose heart is the most humble and most devout, is given unique

access to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Mary's prayers—which come right before the drinking in each of these works—are immediately and resoundingly answered. In his discussion of the medieval church, Keith Thomas reminds us that prayer served as "intercession, whereby God was called upon to provide both guidance along the path to salvation, and help with more material difficulties."[58] Because she is the mother of Christ, Mary's prayers are given priority here; God works through her immediately and saves her from the slander of those who misinterpret her pregnant body and would wish to group her with bawds and adulterers.

In N-Town, Mary welcomes the gaze of her detractors, saying, "God, as I nevyr knew of mannys maculacion, / But evyr haue lyued in trew virginité, / Send me þis day þi holy consolacyon / þat all þis fayr peple my clennes may se" (14.334-37). In Chapter 12 of The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, one source of the episode dramatized here, Mary says, "stedfastly and without trembling: O Lord God, King over all, who knowest all secrets, if there be any pollution in me, or any sin, or any evil desires, or unchastity, expose me in the sight of all the people, and make me an example of punishment to all."[59] Then, "she went up to the altar of the Lord boldly, and drank the water of drinking, and walked round the altar seven times, and no spot was found in her."[60] Mary may be obedient both to God's will and the will of the court that tries her, but she is not abashed or timid; she is sure of the rightness of her understanding, and she moves forward, carrying out God's will. Because she has all of the cultural and religious significance of the Virgin Mary behind her, the fictional Mary in works by the N-Town author and John Lydgate can defy the expectations of those around her and act in a way that, for another,

would be dangerous not only to society, but to religious truth as well; were Mary not who she is, her claims and actions could easily be labeled "antinomianism."

The Troublesome Agency of Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe, by all accounts an actual layperson roughly contemporary to N-Town's Mary, is a figure that in some sense mirrors—or wishes desperately to mirror—key attributes of Mary's powerful piety: her intimate relationship with Christ and the assurance that her thoughts/actions are authorized by God. Given Mary's status as what I am terming the only "orthodox antinomian," it would then seem to follow logically that another who attempts to emulate Mary would, in fact, fall into the antinomian heresy. And in her influential book *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions*, author Lynn Staley does label Margery Kempe an antinomian; she writes, "antinomianism . . . stands at the core of Margery's conflict with authority."[61] However, Staley does not then clarify her position on Margery-as-antinomian or provide theological contextualization, and this is the only instance where the term appears in her book. It is true that Margery has much in common with the antinomian figure, but her relationships with the inner spirit and external law reveal more subtlety and complexity than the term "antinomian" will allow; Margery is not entirely passive to the inner voice that guides her, and her position on the Decalogue and on external moral constraints seems almost wholeheartedly positive. It is true that Margery often defies authority, and that she displays an independence authorized by a Christian understanding of liberty and right action, but the temptation to label her an antinomian should be, if not avoided, at the least qualified. A close examination of Margery Kempe in the fifteenth-century text *The Book of Margery Kempe* yields a picture of a woman authorized by her spiritual experiences to assert her own

will/the will of Christ in the face of dissenting authority, but it does not absolutely yield an antinomian reading. Still, Kempe does provide an intriguing counterpoint to the potentially transgressive Mary in N-Town and Lydgate; Kempe is in some sense Mary-in-action in the real world. She is not contained by a dramatic performance; her drama spills out—sometimes quite literally—wherever she goes, and the discomfort she engenders reveals the disruptions possible when a flesh-and-blood woman attempts to enact some of the agency authorized for Mary in these works.

Margery opens herself up repeatedly for guidance by Christ, but unlike Mary, Margery does not experience a convenient appearance by Gabryel or untroubled inspiration by the Holy Spirit. This desire on Margery's part—and the ways in which it is never fulfilled—opens Margery up to the suspicions of those around her. Relocating agency to an inner light beyond one's personal control also opens the way for the charge of libertinism; a believer can commit a sin—deemed so by the moral law's standards—and claim that Christ simply made them do it. And indeed, the most threatening aspect of the antinomian heresy might be that it grants the individual believer license to ignore external laws extolled by their church and state and instead rely on an internalized "Christian" principle that purports to appeal to a much higher authority. This higher authority compels the believer to enact good works, not out of fear of punishment, but out of a new and sincere desire to enact those works; as we have seen, some antinomians go so far as to say that the believer is "perfected" by Christ-as-internal-guide. John Eaton writes,

> Therefore the Law and the Gospel are two contrary doctrines: for *Moses* with his Law is a severe extractor, requiring of us by feare, and hope of reward, what we should work, and that we should give: briefly it requireth by precepts, and exacteth by threatenings: Contrariwise, the Gospel giveth freely, and requireth of

> us nothing else, but to hold out our hands, and to take that which is offered. Now to exact, and to give, to take and to offer, are cleane contrary, and cannot stand together.[62]

If the believer doesn't have to "work" at all, then "do best" becomes a moot point; the believer becomes a passive vessel for the work of God through them. Of course, for antinomianism's detractors, the compelling force claimed by antinomians is simply a screen for license and libertinism, and indeed the major problem would seem to be determining whether the inward, guiding principle is indeed Christ; if the voice is merely one's own conscience or, worse, corrupted, sinful, personal desire, then the works enacted are not in alignment with God's will at all. Still, the typical antinomian tract of the seventeenth century is marked by a sincere confidence that the true believer will know God's voice when he or she hears—and obeys—it.

So far, descriptions of typical antinomians and Margery Kempe would seem to collide in important ways. Margery claims to be given authority by Christ's interventions into her thought/decision making progress, and in many cases she seems unable to resist the compelling force of Christ. Still, before Margery begins her complicated relationship with Christ, she might be said to be more of an antinomian—at least as conceived by antinomianism's detractors—than after Christ begins to lead her; as the unnamed scribe writes of Margery, "She slandered her husband, her friends, and her own self; she spoke many a reproving word and many a harsh word; she knew no virtue nor goodness; she desired all wickedness; *just as the spirits tempted her to say and do, so she said and did*" (7; my emphasis).[63] She succumbs to the "will" of the evil spirits, even going so far as to speak ill against herself. And once she begins her "dalliance" with Christ, she is sometimes still compelled to do things that go against her own will—or at least the will

that we the reader are allowed to see. At the least, the voice of God/Christ/Holy Ghost inside Margery allows her to defy earthly authority; at one point on her pilgrimage, Margery is said to go "forth [to the river Jordan] by the grace of God and asked them [her detractors and fellow pilgrims] no permission" (54). And in perhaps the most recognizably "antinomian" episode, Margery in Book Two accompanies her daughter-in-law to Germany against the express injunction of her confessor; our scribe writes that she "was commanded in her heart to go over the sea with her daughter" and that she "would have put it out of her mind, and ever it came again so fast that she might not have rest or quiet in her mind but ever was labored and commanded to go over the sea" (165). Margery cannot stand not to go, and so she goes, and barely escapes punishment yet again from her detractors. Similarly, there are moments when Margery is said to be forced to do something entirely against her own will; the scribe writes, "She should sob and cry full loudly, *all against her will*" (72; my emphasis). These moments do seem to point to a clear antinomian impulse; Margery's agency is subsumed into the will of God/Christ speaking within her. Margery cannot resist the urge to go to the river or to Germany or to sob and weep constantly, the activity that is most often disturbing to those around her; for whatever reason, God/Christ wants her to complete these activities, and she cannot rest until she does.

However, Margery's "antinomianism" is complicated by the bulk of the *Book* and by the ultimate question of agency. Even when she completes an activity out of fear, she is not exactly following an antinomian impulse. The scribe at one point writes, "Then this creature dared not otherwise do than she was commanded in her soul" (25). This seems to be a conflation of what Eaton calls "cleane contrary" principles: Margery is compelled

within herself to certain actions, but enacts them, not out of passivity to the will of God, but out of fear. Indeed, Margery is rarely seen as passive; even when following what she believes is the will of God, she is beset by anxiety and spends a great deal of time questioning both herself and the voice within her. If Margery is an antinomian, she is a consistently uncomfortable and anxious one; she is constantly appealing to external interpretive devices to help her determine the nature of her inner voice. An anchoress to whom Margery appeals tells her to be "obedient to the will of our Lord God and fulfill with all her might whatever he put in her soul if it were not against the worship of God and profit of her fellow Christians" (32). The anchoress continues, "Holy Writ says that the soul of the righteous man is the seat of God, and so I trust, sister, that you are" (32).

Margery, who even to the end of the *Book* questions whether or not the voice within her is the voice of God, is constantly in search of "proof" one way or the other; here, she is pointing to Scripture as the "proof" text for her own experience. If Margery were a strict antinomian, then faith/trust in God would consistently override her need for this kind of proof, specifically of the Scriptural variety. For antinomians, Scripture—specifically, of course, Christian Scripture—is not obsolete, but any law or external constraint contained therein is. It cannot constrain or dictate behavior, and it cannot then interpret behavior either; for more orthodox believers, even outmoded Scriptural laws can provide a means by which to "weigh" and understand one's internal impulses through conscience. Antinomians of the seventeenth century, however, asserted that the truly faithful would indeed know right action innately. John Traske writes in his *The trve gospel vindicated* that "the sanctified person is no further foorth sanctified then he is in union with the Lord *Iesus* Christ; and it is not he that hath any habit of grace in his flesh;

but the Lord *Iesus* dwelling in him, doth put foorth the bright beames of his glory, in such vertues as doe best fit the time and place in which he lives. *Rom*. 8.9.10.11. 2. *Cor*. 1.8.9."[64] Traske appeals directly to Pauline epistles to support his case, referencing such verses as Romans 8:9, which reads, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him," and Romans 8:11, which reads, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells in you." Traske—as well as his fellow antinomians—takes quite literally Paul's assertion that "the Spirit of God dwells in you"; indeed, it is the internalized spirit of Christ that then leads one to enact God's will in the world. For Traske, Christ is the "rule of faith" by which everything, from Scripture to action, can be confidently interpreted; for Margery, however, the indwelling of Christ within her inspires mostly anxiety and rarely results in a passive, peaceful outpouring of right action that is the goal of every true antinomian.

The ultimate antinomian test is, of course, a rejection of any vestige of Mosaic Law, including the Decalogue, and Margery—and the text itself—consistently and clearly fails this test. God himself authorizes his commandments when he commends Margery for suffering "no man to break [the] commandments nor to swear by [God]" (117). While on her pilgrimage, Margery "spoke against them [her fellow pilgrims] for they swore great oaths and broke the commandment of our Lord God" (74). If she is an antinomian messenger, then she is a fundamentally conflicted one, for her message is for others to rely on the commandments of God—very external constraints indeed—to dictate their behavior. Margery again emphasizes the importance of obedience to God's

commandments when she is relaying the "bear" dream to the Archbishop of York; within her story is this interpretation by the palmer: "You break the commandments of God through swearing, lying, detraction, and backbiting, and the use of other such sins. Thus by your misgovernance, like the loathly bear, you devour and destroy the flowers and blooms of virtuous living to your endless damnation and many men's hindering unless you have grace from repentance and amending" (94). Similarly, when speaking to a priest in York, Margery says, "Sir, you should keep the commandments of God and not swear so negligently as you do." When the priest asks her if she herself keeps the commandments, she replies, "Sir, it is my will to keep them, for I am bound thereto, and so are you and every man who will be saved at the last" (89). Far from abandoning all external constraint, Margery agonizes over the Law and becomes a sort of evangelizer for its power and importance.

Of course, Margery would never claim that an adherence to external constraint alone could save the believer. The tension between outer/inner in this text is palpable, and Margery is constantly obsessed with those who are not acting rightly. She is also concerned with those who may put on the appearance of righteousness but who are possibly hypocritical; the scribe writes, "[F]or many speak and show full fair outward to the sight of the people—God knows what they are in their souls" (41). Christ certainly knows what is in Margery's soul, as he is said to dwell within it, but Margery still betrays a marked anxiety about the state of that soul, and certainly those around her—who occasionally accuse her of possession—are similarly preoccupied. And, strangely, even when Margery does appeal to externally authorizing devices, she is often still accused of evil deeds/words. She claims at one point that "the gospel gives [her] leave to speak of

God," which is oddly countered by those challenging her; the clerks say, "Here know we well that she has a devil within her, for she speaks of the gospel" (93). Others believe "she had been vexed with some evil spirit, not believing it was the work of God but rather some evil spirit, or a sudden sickness, or else simulation and hypocrisy falsely feigned by her own self" (61). This seems to be the crux of the problem: is Margery one of those whose interiority and exteriority fail to align, or do her actions truly flow from some righteousness bestowed by Christ? Even when she conforms to outwardly visible notions of piety—and indeed, there is no reason to assert that she breaks the commandments—her agency is perplexing enough to those around her to merit condemnation. As David Lawton asserts, "The problem is not Margery's orthodoxy, but orthodoxy from a channel to which it would normally be rationalized. What Kempe has to prove is not erudition but inspiration . . . Kempe asserts no book learning but the linguistic power of the Holy Ghost."[65] It is often said that Margery needs to provide an example to her fellow Christians, but she does not advocate antinomianism; rather, she is adamant about promoting external law through the commandments. It is not that Christ guides her to "right," moral action, per se; his requirements for Margery are often that she weep or wear white or some other morally neutral act. Still, the compulsion to complete these acts—and to preach law to those around her—stems from a questionable inspiration from an invisible voice that is, at best, problematic, even for Margery.

None of Margery's detractors blame Christ for Margery's actions; of course, as it is asserted again and again, many feel that Margery is possessed or, at the least, merely claiming divine inspiration. Margery's powers of elocution repeatedly save her from persecution, and although Margery ascribes those powers solely to Christ or the Holy

Ghost and "not from her own cunning" (83), it is clearly the case that she holds some personal responsibility for what is being said and done. However, none of Margery's detractors can successfully condemn her. As Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong asserts, "It is not simply that no clerk can find heresy in her speech; much more significant is that no clerk succeeds in condemning her engagement with divinity or her way of communicating that engagement publicly."[66] Margery speaks the words that others condemn, and while she tries to deflect her powers of elocution onto the Holy Ghost, it is she who is ultimately responsible and, in a sense, she claims that responsibility repeatedly by reminding the reader of her anxiety about the genesis of her "powers." By utilizing them—and by doing what the voice ultimately compels her to do—Margery is complying willingly with God while still maintaining her own agency.

The antinomian question hinges upon this agency. Christ says, "[F]or I shall make you buxom to my will so that you shall cry when I will, and where I will, both loud and still, for I told you, daughter, you are mine and I am yours, and so shall you be without end" (133). There is still a degree of Margery's active participation in Christ's statement here; according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, "buxom" generally means humility or obedience, and the fact that Christ says that Margery needs to be "buxom" to his will indicates, not that she will do his will against her own, but that she needs to *make herself* obedient to the wishes of Christ. Christ then goes on to say that he is Margery's and she is his, not that he is Margery and she is Christ. There is a subtle distinction here that goes against the antinomian grain; Margery is still required to make the decisions in this instance, though the decisions should clearly align with Christ's will. Similarly, in a later book the scribe writes, "For when she was bidden in her soul to go, she would in no way

withstand it, but for anything she would go forth, whatever befell" (148). It does not say that she *cannot* withstand it; it says that she *would* not. There is an important element of choice and personal agency in Margery's decisions, even when they are so clearly informed by the will of Christ or, in some cases, by the pain of punishment for not enacting that will. Christ later "thanks" Margery for suffering him "to work [his] will in [her] and that [she] would *let* [him] be so homely with [her]" (153; my emphasis). As Susan Kirtley terms it, Jesus "overwhelms" the conversations he has with Margery (46), but "Jesus never completely takes over, with Margery making frequent contributions."[67] Kirtley's examinations of Margery's conversations with Christ ultimately yield the conclusion that Margery is not an entirely passive listener; similarly, I assert that Margery is not an entirely passive actor. By the end of Book Two and near the conclusion of the entire *Book*, Margery asks that her will be made Christ's will and Christ's will be made her will "so that [she] may have but your will only" (182). Even in this plea, of course, there is Margery's agency; her intense desire is that her will and Christ's will align, and this desire becomes the action that brings about Christ's will through her, not her passivity.

As her complex relationship with Christ, the commandments, and agency attests, Margery does not simply let Christ rule her actions as the ideal antinomian would; instead, she is consistently questioning, testing, and asserting as well as extolling the virtues of an external law that a true antinomian could never willingly embrace. Margery is perhaps never simple, and in this case she is simply not antinomian in the strictest sense of the word. The yearning for personal closeness that can be seen in tracts like *The Abbey* and mystical writings of the period clearly informs Margery Kempe's piety, and, I

would argue, reveals key preoccupations that could potentially blossom into an antinomian mode of belief. Yet, Margery is not so fully carried away by her internal impulses as to be classified as a libertine or an antinomian; she cannot give herself to God/Christ in the same way that Mary gives herself to God. What Mary in N-Town—a construct of the medieval English imagination—and Margery in the *Book*—arguably also a "construct," but a living product of English medieval culture as well—both represent is an intense desire for alignment with God. As an "orthodox" antinomian, Mary achieves this union because of her unique, privileged position as the mother of Christ, whose presence inside Mary's body allows her to enter into a new covenant that supersedes the modes via which Mary is interpreted by others. For Margery, the desire is necessarily thwarted by the obvious fact that she is not Mary as well as the ever-present complications of Margery's insistence that she maintain her free will and that she—and others—adhere to the laws laid forth in Scripture. By labeling Margery an "antinomian" in unqualified terms, we do a disservice to the complexities of her faith as well as the nuances of the antinomian heresy. It is true that both Mary and Margery are occasionally "lawless," but in a larger narrative they more often uphold the Christian structures that antinomians would see as unnecessary for a true believer. Unlike the foolish Puritans of Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson's plays, who I argue are parodied via their reliance on antinomian modes, Mary and Margery represent true faith and the desire to follow God's will, a desire that can inform model antinomian belief but which also provides the underpinning for any sincere effort at observing the tenets of Christian belief.

Notes

[1] Patty Griffin, vocal performance of "Mary," by Patty Griffin, released June 23, 1998 on *Flaming Red*, Fontana A&M, 1998, MP3.

[2] Ibid.

[3] The New Pornographers, vocal performance of "Joseph, Who Understood," by A. C. Newman, released November 27, 2007 on *The Spirit of Giving*, Matador, 2007, MP3.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Augustine of Hippo, *St. Augustine: On Faith and Works*, 29.

[6] Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 36.

[7] Ibid., 404.

[8] Theresa Coletti, "Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary's Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles" in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sara Stanburg (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 68.

[9] Gail McMurry Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 7.

[10] Barbara D. Palmer, "Staging the Virgin's Body: Spectacular Effects of Annunciation and Assumption," in *The Dramatic Tradition of the Middle Ages*, ed. Clifford Davidson (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 2005), 155-72.

[11] J. A. Tasioulas, "Between Doctrine and Domesticity: The Portrayal of Mary in the N-Town Plays," in *Medieval Women in their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 227.

[12] See, for example, Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion* and "Bury St. Edmunds, Lydgate, and the N-Town Cycle," *Speculum* 56 (1981): 56-90.

[13] Nicole R. Rice, "Spiritual Ambition and the Translation of the Cloister: *The Abbey* and *Charter of the Holy Ghost*," *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 33 (2002): 224.

[14] There has been some general confusion about this tract—*The Abbey of the Holy Ghost* and other tracts by a similar name, including *The Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost*. As Rice and others have concluded, *The Abbey* is clearly a translation from an earlier French text on the same subject, and includes some key revisions of that text for an English audience. *The Charter* is a generally contemporaneous tract that expands on the ideas of *The Abbey*, but is not a direct or indirect translation of that work. N. F. Blake puts the date of composition for *The Abbey* between 1350 and 1370. See *The Abbey of the Holy Ghost*, in *Middle English Religious Prose*, ed. N. F. Blake (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 88.

[15] Ibid., 89.

[16] Ibid., 90.

[17] Ibid., 90.

[18] Ibid., 91.

[19] Ibid.

[20] N. F. Blake explains this passage by noting that "[a]ll the scribes had difficulty with this passage and it is impossible to decide what the original reading might have been since the French MSS are no help here." Blake glosses the final part of this passage to read "and to comfort his soul with the joys of God" (91n70).

[21] *The Middle English Dictionary*, "contemplacioun," accessed March 26, 2010, http://quod.lib.umich.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu.

[22] R. N. Swanson, *Catholic England: Faith, religion and observance before the Reformation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 93.

[23] John Alcock, *The abbaye of the Holy Ghost* (1497), aijr.

[24] The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "sinderesis" as "The faculty of mind which judges and recommends moral conduct; conscience applied to behavior." Accessed March 17, 2010, http://quod.lib.umich.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu.

[25] Alcock, *The abbaye*, aijv.

[26] "Alcock, John (1430–1500)," R. J. Schoeck in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, January 2004, accessed March 17, 2010, http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/article/289.

[27] Rice, "Spiritual Ambition," 224.

[28] Ibid., 226.

[29] Ibid., 245.

[30] Theresa Coletti, "*Paupertas est donum Dei*: Hagiography, Lay Religion, and the Economics of Salvation in the Digby *Mary Magdalen*," *Speculum* 76, no. 2 (2001): 372.

[31] All quotations from the N-Town cycle taken from *The N-Town Play: Cotton MS Vespasian D. 8*., ed. Stephen Spector, 2 vols. EETS SS, 11, 12. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[32] Ibid., 122.

[33] Gail McMurray Gibson, "'Porta haec clausa erit': Comedy, Conception, and Ezekiel's Closed Door in the *Ludas Coventriae* Play of 'Joseph's Return,'" *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1978): 144.

[34] Kathleen M. Ashley, "'Wyt' and 'Wysdam' in N-town Cycle," *Philological Quarterly* 58 (1979): 123.

[35] Ibid., 128.

[36] The *Middle English Dictionary* has no exact definition for "dompnesse," but it glosses the similar "dampnere" to mean "ne who condemns (himself) to perdition" or "one who 'judges' or interprets (the Scriptures)." Accessed March 29, 2010, http://quod.lib.umich.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu.

[37] Douglas W. Hayes, "Backbiter and the Rhetoric of Detraction," *Comparative Drama* 34, no. 1 (2000): 66.

[38] Ibid., 68.

[39] For a further discussion of the detractors, see also Alison M. Hunt, "Maculating Mary: The Detractors of the N-Town Cycle's 'Trial of Joseph and Mary," *Philological Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (1994): 11-29. Hunt points out that the detractors serve a basic function in the play by increasing Mary's reputation "by temporarily eclipsing it" (12). Through the trial, Mary's absolute uniqueness becomes clear to the wider community and is confirmed for the audience.

[40] Cindy L. Carlson, "Mary's Obedience and Power in the 'Trial of Mary and Joseph,'" *Comparative Drama* 29, no. 3 (1995): 353.

[41] Coletti, "The Paradox," 71.

[42] Coletti, "The Paradox," 69.

[43] Emma Lipton, "Language on Trial: Performing the Law in the N-Town Trial Play," in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 123.

[44] Matthew J. Kinservik, "The Struggle Over Mary's Body: Theological and Dramatic Resolution in the N-Town Assumption Play," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95 (1996): 195.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Carlson, "Mary's Obedience," 356.

[47] Matthew 5:17.

[48] Colin Fewer, "The 'Fygure' of the Market: The N-Town Cycle and East Anglian Lay Piety," *Philological Quarterly* 77 (1998): 133.

[49] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1971), 50.

[50] Lynn Squires, "Law and Disorder in *Ludus Coventriae*," in *The Drama of the Middle Ages: Comparative and Critical Essays*, ed. Clifford Davidson and John H. Stroupe (New York: AMS Press, 1982), 277.

[51] Hunt, "Maculating Mary," 25.

[52] Gibson, *Theater of Devotion*, 138.

[53] Ibid., 139.

[54] For the most generally accepted discussion of the structure and composition of N-Town, see Stephen Spector, "The Composition and Development of an Eclectic Manuscript: Cotton Vespasian D VIII," *Leeds Studies in English* 9 (1977): 62-83. For further, general discussion of "The Trial of Mary and Joseph," see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972); *The Mary Play From the N-town Manuscript*, ed. Peter Meredith, (London: Longman, 1987); Dr. Joannes Vriend, *The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Medieval Drama of England*, (Purmerend: J. Muusses, 1928): and Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955).

[55] All quotes taken from *A Critical Edition of John Lydgate's Life of Our Lady*, ed. Joseph A. Lauritis, Ralph A. Klinefelter, and Vernon F. Gallagher (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961).

[56] Ibid., lines 1600-1; 1605.

[57] *The Abbey*, 91.

[58] Ibid., 45.

[59] All quotations taken from "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew" in *The Anti-Nicene Fathers. Volume 8: The Twelve Patriarchs, Excerpts and Epistles, The Clementina, Apocrypha, Decretals, Memoirs of Edessa and Syriac Documents, Remains of the First Ages*, ed. Alexandera Roberts and James Donaldson (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886).

[60] Ibid., 374.

[61] Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 90.

[62] Eaton, *The Honey-Combe*, 83.

[63] All quotations taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (New York: Norton, 2001).

[64] Traske, *The true gospel vindicated*, C3v-C4r.

[65] David Lawton, "Voice, Authority, and Blasphemy in *The Book of Margery Kempe*," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 96.

[66] Elizabeth Psakis Armstrong, "'Understanding by Feeling' in Margery Kempe's *Book*," in *Margery Kempe: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire (New York: Garland, 1992), 25.

[67] Susan Kirtley, "Divine Dialogues: Margery Kempe's Conversations with Christ," *Exit 9: The Rutgers Journal of Comparative Literature* 7 (2005): 48.

CHAPTER 2
POWERLESS TAMBURLAINE:
ORACLES, CUSTOMS, AND THE ANTINOMIAN QUESTION

It has become a commonplace to acknowledge at the outset of any critical study of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, Parts 1* and *2* that the plays are "difficult." As a heroic figure, Tamburlaine leaves much to be desired; he is at turns greedy, cruel, and merciless, and yet he succeeds against insurmountable odds until the bitter end of *Tamburlaine, Part 2*, where his death is not exactly what one might term "justice." He inspires love in Zenocrate, a woman whom he takes captive and who at first swears never to love him, and he inspires loyalty in valiant warriors who turn from enemies to friends in a few well-wrought lines. He triumphs over countless acres of battlefield, but is felled by no discernable enemy; it is not a righteous Christian prince or even a Muslim warrior who vanquishes Tamburlaine, but a sudden distemper he feels after burning the Koran and cursing God out of Heaven. Yet, there seems to be some measure of Tamburlaine's control, even in this; he pronounces his own death and, approximately 200 lines later, he is dead. Complicating matters is the "Scourge of God" moniker Tamburlaine adopts from the start of his conquests; though he does indeed punish prideful—and heathenish—rulers via his conquests, he also slaughters virgins, kills his own son, and leaves death and destruction in his wake. Would-be king Cosroe echoes critical sentiment in Act 2, Scene 7 of *Tamburlaine the Great, Part 1* when he says, "The strangest men that ever nature made, / I know not how to take their tyrannies" (40-41).[1] Cosroe speaks here not only of Tamburlaine, but also of Theridamas and Techelles, warriors in Tamburlaine's armies who become extensions of Tamburlaine's conquering will.

Tamburlaine: God's Scourge, or Tyrannical Libertine?

The crux of critical problems with the plays is perception: are we to perceive Tamburlaine as a positive figure, worthy of emulation? Or is it rather that Marlowe constructs his plays to present Tamburlaine as a prideful cautionary tale, what Roy W. Battenhouse has termed "one of the most grandly moral spectacles in the whole realm of English drama"? [2] Any attempt at reading the plays through the lens of Marlowe's life only adds more confusion; was Marlowe an atheist flouting God through Tamburlaine, or does Tamburlaine's death provide some kind of "proof" of God's retribution to evildoers? And what are we to make as Tamburlaine as the "Scourge of God"? Other than his own assertion that he is somehow working God's will, there is little evidence of Tamburlaine's godliness. Perhaps, with Battenhouse, we should assume that Tamburlaine is a Scourge of God, but one that will be "cast into the fire" when God no longer has need of his services. In this view, Tamburlaine is "morally no better" than Bajazet and the others he punishes; God uses Tamburlaine's power as a sort of necessary evil, and then forsakes him when his duties have come to an end.[3] Critics who follow this line of reasoning—whom Richard Levin terms the "ironic critics" because of the irony that "undercuts Tamburlaine's 'apparent' triumphs and reduces them to a series of failures" that serve to morally instruct the audience[4]—find precedent for this kind of "Scourge of God" model in Scripture. One such passage can be found in Isaiah 10:5-16, which reads, in part,

> Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—the club in their hands is my fury! Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. . . . When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the

> king of Assyria and his haughty pride. For he says: 'By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding' . . . Shall the ax vaunt itself over the one who wields it, or the saw magnify itself against the one who handles it?

The resemblance to Tamburlaine's situation is certainly striking; the prideful Tamburlaine would be the ax wielded by a God that he barely acknowledges and certainly doesn't credit for his success. Even if Tamburlaine does not share God's motives, Battenhouse would argue, he still enacts his will and is then discarded when that will has been achieved. Battenhouse continues in his assessment: "The concept of the Scourge of God has, therefore, two complementary aspects: it serves to explain historical calamities by showing that they are chastisements of sin permitted by God; and it assures tyrants that God is not helpless before their power but that He will, when He has used them, destroy them utterly."[5] Whether this is the exact nature of Tamburlaine's situation, however, has not been resolved. Tamburlaine's exploits go far beyond punishing a tyrant or two, and the circumstances of his death are too murky to provide definitive evidence of God's handiwork and/or justice.

To wholeheartedly accept Battenhouse's argument is also to agree with an assessment of Tamburlaine as subject to Christian notions of morality; it also requires decisively finding Tamburlaine wanting of any real sense of that morality. At the other end of the spectrum are the more positive critical perceptions of Tamburlaine; for example, Eugene M. Waith sees Tamburlaine in line with heroes of mythology, whose "greatness . . . has less to do with goodness as it is usually understood than with the transforming energy of the divine spark."[6] This spark imputes to the hero a "special morality" that explains and forgives much of what we perceive as morally flawed.[7] For Waith and others, Marlowe's plays should not be read exclusively through a Christian

lens and assessed by Christianity's moral standards; rather, Tamburlaine should be accepted on his own terms as a near-mythological self-made warrior whose exploits rival those of the heroes of antiquity. However, it seems unavoidable that any critical engagement with Tamburlaine must acknowledge the religious dimension of the plays, even if no satisfactory synthesis can be found. Again and again, Tamburlaine invokes religious ideas or themes only to subvert or ignore them on follow-through; he acknowledges himself to be the Scourge of God, but what god this might be is not fully articulated. It would be tempting, with Paul H. Kocher, to posit this question: "May not all of Tamburlaine's religious ideas be harmonized by simply amputating the Christian appendages and considering him as the servant of a deity who is Power without Justice and who punishes disobedience in a man merely because disobedience is rebellion, regardless of fictions about right and wrong?"[8] However, with Waith I contend that this idea of "amputation" falls well short of ideal critical practices; regardless of the seeming contradictions and complications, we must accept the text as we are given it, religious contradictions and all.[9]

Clouding matters further is a nearly irresistible urge to mine the texts for clues of Marlowe's own religious leanings, to proclaim him "atheist" or "Catholic" or "blasphemous heretic." Much has been made of playwright Robert Greene's now-famous assessment of Tamburlaine in the epistle to his *Perimedes the blacke-smith* of "that Atheist *Tamburlan*" and his impious creator.[10] However, it is not the intention of this study to attempt any such biographical readings; rather, it seems more productive to excavate the religious elements of the texts with an eye to the "antinomian question" under scrutiny in this thesis at large. Given the fact that Tamburlaine disregards the law

and champions his own will, it would seem an appropriate critical move that would help to resolve some of Tamburlaine's contradictions to label him "antinomian." Critics have long skirted the issue, accusing Tamburlaine of antinomianism in deed if not in name—and occasionally in name.[11] And if we were to operate on a loose understanding of antinomianism as libertine abandon, or simply the privileging of one's own desires and will over all other influences, then Tamburlaine would surely fall into the antinomian category. Indeed, he seems an ideal candidate for such classification: bombastic, unyielding, voracious in his appetite, Tamburlaine constantly privileges his own will and is, as Stephen Greenblatt terms him, "a desiring machine that produces violence and death."[12] Recently, Roger E. Moore has come the nearest to a full articulation of Tamburlaine as an antinomian; in reading Tamburlaine through the lens of Gnosticism, Moore sees Tamburlaine as an "individual whose belief in his possession of a spiritual *gnosis*" leads him "to an antinomian disregard for all laws."[13] Moore couches his antinomian argument in terms of selfhood; he sees an antinomianism at play here that insists, "if the body is not the true self, then any sort of behavior is allowed; the spirit remains unsullied."[14] There are several reasons this argument fails to fully cohere. First, there is little indication in the plays that Tamburlaine does not see his body as important or that his body is not an extension of his spirit; in *Part 2*, Act 3, Scene 2, for example, Tamburlaine's body plays a central role in a sort of perverted baptism, an attempt to transfer to his sons some of his power and majesty. After cutting his arm, he tells his sons that he now "look[s] like a soldier" (117) and that the wound gives him "as great a grace and majesty" as the most luxurious trappings of jewels and gold (118-25). He then invites his sons to "with your fingers search my wound, / And in my blood wash all your hands

at once, / While I sit smiling to behold the sight" (126-28). Although Tamburlaine's body has remained up to this point un-violated by the swords of his enemies, it is not inviolate and thus somehow unreal or unimportant; on the contrary, Tamburlaine treats his body like a sacred vessel.[15] There is also little indication that Tamburlaine concerns himself with the state of his spirit, much less that his spirit is somehow "unsullied" by death and destruction; killing and conquering do not seem to harm his soul, but to argue that this is because Tamburlaine operates on a higher spiritual plane is to grant Tamburlaine a superhero status in the vein of Waith that the plays do not necessarily bear out.

Moore also asserts that "Tamburlaine always seems to fantasize about release from the constricting chains of his body and assumption into the realm of pure spirit. His earthly conquests pale in comparison with his spiritual destiny. Tamburlaine's empire in fact means very little to him, for he is more than ready to leave it behind 'If Jove, esteeming me too good for earth Raise me to match the faire Aldeboran' (2 Tam. 4.3.60-61)."[16] This reading is a bit baffling, and for the passage Moore quotes, the analysis is out of joint. In the full speech, while speaking to the captured Trebizon and Jerusalem of his son Celebinus, Tamburlaine warns,

> I Turke, I tel thee, this same Boy is he,
> That must (advaunst in higher pompe than this)
> Rifle the kingdomes I shall leave unsact,
> [If *Jove* esteeming me too good for earth,
> Raise me to match the faire *Aldeboran*,
> Above the threefold Astracisme of heaven,]
> Before I conquere all the triple world. (*2 Tam.*4.3.57-63; bracketed lines indicate quote by Moore)

Moore's reading places undue emphasis on these two lines and all but ignores the "if" that begins his first line of quotation; in context, the lines seem rather to function as a

promise to Tamburlaine's enemies that his work will be carried on after his death—even if he himself does not believe this—and an acceptance that he will one day die. For all of his boasting, Tamburlaine does not honestly believe that he is immortal; one day he will leave the corporeal plane. However, the lines do not bear out a reading that Tamburlaine is anxious to leave this world or that he has disdain for it.

Continuing in an argument in line with Waith's contention that Tamburlaine operates according to different, loftier moral standards, Moore asserts that Tamburlaine's "antinomian disdain for law and the rights of other people furnishes him with the perfect philosophy for political success. Bound by a higher Gnostic identity, Tamburlaine can act in any manner he pleases in relation to others because they are merely bodily and are governed by the law."[17] In my view, this argument represents all that is problematic about labeling Tamburlaine an antinomian. On the level of plot alone, there are difficulties with Moore's reading; while it is true, for instance, that Tamburlaine has no regard for his enemies—not unusual for one waging a war, and not specific to Tamburlaine even in the plays—he does actually privilege the rights of those outside himself, namely Zenocrate, Theridamas, and the others he has entrusted to be his right-hand men. In short, though his cruelty is certainly not under question, it does not entirely define him; he is not a two-dimensional tyrant. Furthermore, Moore equates "antinomianism" here with "acting in any manner one pleases," a move that does disservice to true antinomians and the subtlety of their beliefs and creates a religious identity for Tamburlaine that is not upheld by attentive readings of both plays. In Moore's view, Tamburlaine represents a "spiritual fanaticism" through which "Marlowe explores the antinomian excesses that often resulted from the inner light philosophies then emerging in England."[18] Although the purpose of

the present study as a whole is to show the influence of and response to antinomianism by Medieval, early modern, and Restoration dramatists, I cannot agree with Moore that Tamburlaine represents antinomianism or that Marlowe is dramatizing this kind of exploration. Moore falls into the trap occupied by Lynn Staley and other eminent scholars: equating "antinomianism" with "lawlessness."

There is something unsatisfying, then, about Moore's direct assessment—as well as the implied assessments of other critics—of Tamburlaine-as-antinomian when it is applied across both plays and centered on close-readings of the text.[19] Too, when it is compared to an understanding of antinomianism that came to fruition in the 1630s—but which had its roots much earlier in a collective British consciousness—Tamburlaine-as-antinomian is a near-but-not-quite fit for the antinomian label. Tamburlaine does repeatedly perform his own will with no regard for moral law, but again and again in the plays, there is a sense that this performance is not entirely within Tamburlaine's control. By the definitions given here, Tamburlaine is not an antinomian; though it seems that his will is enacted, it would be more accurate to say that his *proclamations* are enacted, and his proclamations are not always completely in line with his will. Furthermore, there is little to no indication that either Tamburlaine's proclamations or his will are influenced by or are extensions of the will of God/Christ, prerequisites for true antinomianism. While Tamburlaine's performances here may look like antinomianism, it is actually something much murkier, and he thus provides an ideal case study for rescuing "antinomianism" from the over-generalized usage to which it has hitherto been subjected. Rather than representing antinomianism—where one's will is aligned with Christ's to the detriment of external laws or constraints—Tamburlaine represents a perversion of Christ-

as-Word, an embodiment of his own proclamations whose self is entirely constituted by words, and who therefore is unable to act beyond the bounds of those proclamations. In the first play, this is almost entirely a successful mode of existence; with one or two exceptions, Tamburlaine proclaims, achieves, and is satisfied. However, it is those exceptions that reveal the most about Tamburlaine's strengths, weaknesses, and "true" identity. In *Part 2*, these cracks expand to ultimately overwhelm Tamburlaine and reveal that he is not entirely in control of himself and is certainly not in control of forces outside of himself. While seemingly in control, Tamburlaine is actually a slave to his words, and those words sometimes deviate in significant ways from what we can discern as his will.

Tamburlaine's Inescapable Utterances

Again and again in *Tamburlaine, Part 1*, Tamburlaine's words are at the forefront of—and sometimes constitute—the major action of the play. It is clear from the start of the play that Tamburlaine's words have an innate power that can win over his enemies, successfully woo a woman who begins the play engaged to someone else, and even, perhaps, determine the outcome of battle. The first time Tamburlaine appears on the stage, we are treated to the transformative power of words; after a few introductory speeches and attempts to woo Zenocrate, Tamburlaine gets down to the business of alerting us to his power and intentions. And although Tamburlaine's exact line is, "I am a Lord, for so my deeds shall proove" (*1 Tam.*1.2.34), he does not actually need the deeds to make the transition to Lord. Less than ten lines later, he has discarded his shepherd's "weeds" and has clothed himself in the garb of a warrior; I would argue that his spoken words have already also "garbed" him as a lord, for the first person to see Tamburlaine newly armored, Techelles, is in awe, and says, "As princely Lions when they rouse

themselves, / Stretching their pawes, and threatning heardes of Beastes, / So in his Armour looketh *Tamburlaine*: / Me thinks I see kings kneeling at his feet" (*1 Tam.*1.2.52-55). This feels like more than flattery, and given that it is actually premonition, it seems well established already that, once uttered, Tamburlaine's declarations take shape as reality; he is a lord not because he has donned armor, but because he proclaimed he would be a lord. That which gives him the ability to conquer kings and comport himself in a lordly manner now covers him like an invisible armor. This continues to impress newcomers when, later in this same scene, Theridamas, hitherto charged with apprehending Tamburlaine for Mycetes, encounters Tamburlaine for the first time and is similarly awed by him; by conversing with him, Tamburlaine completes the conversion of Theridamas from enemy to loyal companion. Theridamas is confused by this power; he proclaims, "Not *Hermes* Prolocutor to the Gods, / Could use perswasions more patheticall" (*1 Tam.*1.2.210-11) and asks, "What stronge enchantments tice my yeelding soule?" (*1 Tam.*1.2.224). Ultimately, he must yield to Tamburlaine's power, saying, "Won with thy words, and conquered with thy looks, / I yeeld my selfe, my men and horse to thee: / To be partaker of thy good or ill, / As long as life mantaines *Theridamas*" (*1 Tam.*1.2.228-31). From the outset, then, it is clear that Tamburlaine's words manifest themselves as the machinery of real power in the real world; in our first, brief encounter with Tamburlaine, we are witness to his words remaking him, body and spirit, and conquering and taming his greatest enemy.

This scene also contains Tamburlaine's famous assertion that he "hold[s] the Fates bound fast in yron chaines, / And with [his] hand[s] turne[s] Fortunes wheel about, / And sooner shall the Sun fall from his Spheare, / Than *Tamburlaine* be slaine or

overcome" (*1 Tam.*1.2.174-77). Here we already see complications for a power that has the potential to go unchecked and create a new world order with Tamburlaine's will at the center; as readers of the plays, we know that Tamburlaine will in fact die. Furthermore, he cannot truly control Fate or Fortune; his beloved Zenocrate will die in *Part 2* in spite of his efforts to save her, and his sons will prove disappointments, so much so that he murders one of them. Even if we disregard *Part 2*—certainly written after *Part 1*, even if it could be proven that Marlowe planned from the outset to write it—the Virgin scene in *Part 1*, which will be discussed in depth below, sees Tamburlaine desiring to change the course of events but finding himself unable to do so. Would one who controls fate be unable to spare a small group of Virgins at will? It seems unlikely. Rather, what holds Fate fast and controls Fortune's wheel is Tamburlaine's declarations, his verbalized wishes and intentions; once he has verbalized it, Tamburlaine is powerless to change that Fate, even if his wishes and intentions change direction.

Shedding further light on this issue is a series of references to oracles in *Part 1*, references that lie at the intersection between Tamburlaine-as-possible-antinomian and the Tamburlaine I have been describing here. After Theridamas has favorably compared Tamburlaine to Hermes as a persuasive speaker, for instance, Tamburlaine responds, "Nor are Apollos Oracles more true, / Then thou shalt find my vaunts substantiall" (*1 Tam.*1.2.212-13). Later in the play, Cosroe tells Tamburlaine, "For even as from assured oracle, / I take thy doome for satisfaction," to which Tamburlaine responds, "And so you mistake you not a whit my Lord. / For Fates and Oracles of heaven have sworne, / To roialise the deedes of Tamburlaine: / And make them blest that share in his attemptes" (*1 Tam.*2.3.4-9). And finally, declaring that his faithful followers will be kings, Tamburlaine

proclaims, “I speak it, and my words are oracles” (*1 Tam.*3.3.102). As one moves through the play, the relationship between Tamburlaine’s words and the words/power of oracles builds to a crescendo; first, Tamburlaine’s words are more powerful and substantive than the words of oracles are true, a bold claim given that the common conception of “oracle” is one of a truth that will inevitably come to pass. Then, Tamburlaine claims that both the fates and the oracles of heaven will “roialise” Tamburlaine’s deeds and do the same for Tamburlaine’s compatriots. The *OED* sheds light on this claim in that all three definitions of “royalize” given there add further depth to the reading of this line. Indeed, this line is actually cited by the *OED* as an example of its second definition—“To make famous, celebrate”—but the first definition—“To make royal; to invest with a royal character or standing”—seems as relevant here, especially in light of Tamburlaine’s adoption of lordly power and his assertion that he controls the fates/fortune. Though he ascribes some measure of causality to the heavens and a kind of predestination, it is, I argue, the act of articulation that seals both Tamburlaine’s kingly successes and our remembrance of those deeds; after all, Tamburlaine’s language is at the forefront of most critical praise of the plays. Finally, the third definition—“To rule as a monarch; to play the king”—foreshadows Tamburlaine’s success and demonstrates that there is truth in his words.

The culmination of this oracle discussion comes in Tamburlaine’s claim “I speak it, and my words are oracles” (*1 Tam.*3.3.102). On one level, this line—which follows “Fight all couragiously and be you kings” (*1 Tam.*3.3.101)—is simply a promise to Tamburlaine’s men that he will keep his word and reward their bravery with crowns. However, the assertion that Tamburlaine’s words are oracles lies both at the literal and metaphorical heart of the play. The editor of the Oxford *Tamburlaine*, David Fuller,

citing M. P. Tilley, glosses this line as: "To speak like an oracle, i.e. with certain truthfulness"; this falls short of a full understanding of "oracle" in a Scourge-of-God context and would provide a way to sidestep a potential minefield of religious meanings. Were we to pursue it to a religious conclusion, the idea of Tamburlaine-as-oracle would seem to fit nicely in a reading of Tamburlaine as an antinomian; as the *OED* notes, definitions for "oracle" include "the instrument, agency, or medium (usually a priest or a priestess) through which the gods were supposed to speak or prophesy," "a declaration or message expressed or delivered by divine inspiration," and "a person who . . . expounds or interprets the will of God, or a god." However, to assign Tamburlaine the position of oracle would be on over-simplification; firstly, Tamburlaine does not proclaim *himself* to be an oracle, but rather asserts that his *words* serve this function. It may seem to take a significant amount of hairsplitting to separate the man from his words, but the text repeatedly encourages such a move. Tamburlaine is not his words; he speaks them, but they do not constitute his person, and occasionally they actually seem to contradict his will. To return to the definition of "oracles," however, it may be that Tamburlaine thinks of his words according to the first two definitions given above; he does call himself the Scourge of God and claims that the heavens royalize his deeds, so at this stage in the play, Tamburlaine may in fact see himself as a divinely-inspired antinomian figure.

Oracle figures do, of course, have an extensive history in Scripture; in Acts 7:38, the Mosaic Law itself is referred to as "living oracles," and in Romans 3:2, "oracles" refers to the Hebrew Scriptures. However, this passage from 1 Peter 4:11 seems most particularly relevant for Tamburlaine: "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so

that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen." Donald Senior glosses this passage by saying that "[w]hile the gift of speech could be understood as any instance in which someone speaks, the reference to the 'oracle of God' suggests that the author particularly has in mind preaching or teaching in the public assembly or worship."[20] Senior goes on to note that the translation of "oracle of God" is literally "words of God"[21] and that one who claims to be "serving" God—as Tamburlaine does when he claims "Scourge of God" status— "is to do that in a way that communicates that the strength and authority of one's actions come from God, and not from oneself."[22] When one speaks the words of God as a preacher, and those words correspond with accepted doctrine and Scripture, one can be termed an oracle of God. However, if one claims to be speaking God's will and that will contradicts accepted doctrine and/or Scripture, then one could be labeled an antinomian. It is a delicate distinction, and should affect the way we think about Tamburlaine in these plays.

However, Tamburlaine does not claim to be speaking for God. This is important as it separates him clearly from true antinomians; the ultimate source of Tamburlaine's words cannot confidently be ascribed to God. And as we have seen, a key marker of true antinomianism is confidence that the guiding force within one's soul is God/Christ and that the actions one is taking are truly led/sanctioned by God. Consider, for example, this passage by antinomian John Eaton: "But because Gods imputation is an immediate act of God himselfe, it is not a weak imaginary thing (as the Papists blasphemously scoffe) like mans imputation: but it is of such a strong and powerfull, reall working and effectual operation, that it conveyeth (as the Sunne conveyes his beames into a dark house) that

perfect righteousness in Christ, to bee (as S. *Paul* faith) *in us, and upon us*."[23] Eaton's conviction rings in every word: God works his will through the antinomian believer by shining his light into their soul; it is a real, almost tangible, thing. This same conviction is echoed in John Traske, who writes, "In summe, this Rule [of faith] discovers not onely our Election, Adoption, Vocation, and Iustification to be free, all of grace, but also our Sanctification, renovation, translation, and conformation to *Christ, to bee his owne free and onely worke, and we alwayes but as Agents, acted by him, and as instruments used in his hand alone*; and Subjects which he hath created for his owne glory, and doth onely and alwayes use to the same hand."[24] As understood by antinomians, antinomianism requires a certain relinquishing of one's will to the will of God; Christ fills the true believer, and any good work can therefore be attributed to Christ alone. The believer becomes a vessel for God/Christ's will and certainly does not act according to the impulses of his or her own, inferior human will. Traske explains: "[N]or *every private mans Spirit* that can be the *Rule of Faith* at all. . . . if it bee left to every mans private spirit; then, to many men, so many mindes, as it is at this day, amongst such as understand not what this *Rule* is, or are not regulates thereby."[25] Tamburlaine's "spirit" triumphs in the plays because it is so overwhelmingly powerful, but there is no clear indication that God is the referent for whatever produces Tamburlaine's words, which themselves drive the action.

Tamburlaine certainly seems full of bravado and confidence, and his many victories should serve to bolster that confidence; instead, however, there seems a hollowness at the center of Tamburlaine's will, an emptiness he seeks to fill with earthly crowns that are not quite what he hoped they would be. In confluence with this is

Tamburlaine's attempts to control his own life and the world around him; in order to do this, he projects his proclamations outward and ultimately becomes a slave to them. Rather than being satisfied—as one might expect Tamburlaine to be when he realizes his repeated goals—Tamburlaine only begins the cycle again, constantly seeking something that seems to be just out of his reach. Or perhaps it is that what he repeats is not actually his will, and that his desire is not for conquest, but for a realization of self. Typically for the criticism of these plays, critical opinion on Tamburlaine's desires and selfhood is divided. Stephen Greenblatt sees Tamburlaine in an act of self-fashioning, explaining, "[M]en do violence as a means of marking boundaries, effecting transformation, signaling closure. . . . Tamburlaine seeks literally to make an enduring mark in the world, to stamp his image on time and space."[26] When he utters his words and then sees them become reality in the world, his selfhood is solidified; when he commits violent acts, he is assured of his existence. Greenblatt continues, "The effect is to dissolve the structure of sacramental and blood relations that normally determine identity in this period and to render the heroes virtually autochthonous, *their names and identities given by no one but themselves*. . . . In the neutrality of time and space that characterizes Marlowe's world, this 'constructive power' must *exist within the hero himself; if it should fail for an instant he would fall into nothingness*."[27] Hence, as Greenblatt continues, "the compulsion to repeat his name and his actions."[28] Tamburlaine must continuously speak and act to maintain his identity, but he cannot indefinitely repeat himself, so to speak; although he tries to will his sons to continue it, his cycle must end, and with it, his identity.[29]

Tamburlaine's words appear to form the core of his identity, and both plays are obsessed with words and speaking. However, while Christ *is* the Word, Tamburlaine can

never *become* his own words; the words must first be spoken, and Tamburlaine's active compliance with those words must follow—the seamless connection between word and action is elided. And while a true antinomian would strive for this very act—the unification of one's will with the will of Christ-the-Word—Tamburlaine struggles against the unification between his words and his will at key moments in the text, specifically in his interactions with the Virgins of Damascus and when faced with death. This is not to say that there are not instances in the text when Tamburlaine is compared to Christ—either self-consciously or not. After his defeat of Bajazeth in *Tamburlaine, Part 1*, for instance, Tamburlaine proclaims,

> Now cleare the triple region of the aire,
> And let the majestie of heaven beholde
> Their Scourge and Terrour treade on Emperours.
> Smile Stars that raign'd at my nativity,
> And dim the brightnesse of their neighbor Lamps:
> *Disdaine to borrow light of Cynthia,*
> *For I the chiefest Lamp of all the earth,*
> First rising in the East with milde aspect,
> But fixed now in the Meridian line (4.2.30-38; my emphasis)

Tamburlaine's assessment of himself as the "chiefest Lamp of all the earth" strongly echoes John 8:12, which reads, "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'" Tamburlaine is, of course, not Christ, and, while he inspires love in Zenocrate and loyalty in his followers, he cannot impute to them the holiness of Christ-as-Word. Tamburlaine's words, while powerful, are always dim echoes of that Word; his words control the action for the entirety of the two plays, but perish when Tamburlaine perishes—they are not the eternal Word that is Christ. In other words, it is not Christ-as-Word that works through Tamburlaine to enact a new heavenly law on earth, but rather the word of Tamburlaine

made manifest that controls both Tamburlaine and the subsequent action of the plays and creates a kind of new world order that comes to an end with Tamburlaine's death.

Glossing Tamburlaine's "words are oracles" proclamation and speaking more generally about the power of Tamburlaine's words, Claudia Richter proclaims that those words "reveal the future. By repetition in his own and other characters' speeches, the vision captured in these oracles comes true. His rhetoric of terror is constructed in such a way as to evoke awe in other characters and, more importantly, in the audiences."[30] Richter then posits that Tamburlaine's ultimate desire is to become his own word incarnate, and in doing so, emulate the Word that is Christ. She writes, "Just as the word of God creates the universe in *Genesis*, Tamburlaine's prophetic words creates a reality that is confirmed in his deeds and which serves as evidence of his divine election."[31] For Richter, Tamburlaine has an "unshattered belief in his own election and superiority."[32] I would not call into question the "prophetic" nature of Tamburlaine's words; however, I would argue, with Donaldson, that Tamburlaine is not assured of his "election," that he constantly seeks "evidence" but can never be sure of its existence. This is part of Tamburlaine's confidence problem; a true antinomian would feel confident—or at least constantly express confidence—that God has chosen him or her to reveal and enact God's evolving will to the world. Furthermore, what Tamburlaine takes as "evidence" is more words—asking others to proclaim him king or recognize his power verbally. He says to his followers, "Though *Mars* himselfe the angrie God of armes, / And all the earthly Potentates conspire, / To dispossesse me of this Diadem: / Yet will I weare it in despight of them, / As great commander of this Easterne world, / If you but say that *Tamburlaine* shall raigne" (*1 Tam.*2.7.58-63). After listening to such thrilling words, it is no surprise

that All respond: "Long live *Tamburlaine*, and raigne in *Asia*" (*1 Tam.*2.7.64), after which the crown sits "more surer on [Tamburlaine's] head" (*1 Tam.*2.7.65). Here, Tamburlaine privileges the words of others as a kind of echo of the power his own words wield; he looks for this echo as proof of his "election," as a power that can "royalize" him. Such an act seems at odds for someone sure that the stars and/or God have determined he will be successful; what is revealed here is an insecurity as well as a potential disconnect between Tamburlaine's words and his personal will/desires. Richter approaches a solid interpretation of this act when she writes, "Through a performative act of self-empowerment, the speaker acts *as if* he was expressing the divine will, thus turning himself/herself into an agent superior to other human beings."[33] This approximates quasi-antinomianism rhetoric but ultimately fails to express the fundamentals of that heresy. A true antinomian does not speak *as if* they are God; they speak the word of God as they know it through an alignment of their will with God's.

Regardless of their source, Tamburlaine's words are often so grand and persuasive as to seem divinely inspired, but such is the power of rhetoric in the plays. As David Daiches argues, "The high imagination that leads to the desire for great actions must always first prove itself in rhetoric. Rhetoric, indeed, is shown in this play to be itself a form of action."[34] It is, in fact, Tamburlaine's greatest "action" as depicted on the stage. After all, other than an almost comical pantomime between Tamburlaine and Bajazet in Act 3 of *Part 1*, we are not witness to Tamburlaine's actions of conquest; instead, we get first and second-hand accounts couched in magnificent terms, punctuated with Tamburlaine's explanation of his successes, his musings on desire, his proclamations of love, etc. As Johannes H. Birringer observes, "The play's rhetoric,

verbal and visual, becomes one great gesture of Tamburlaine's creative and destructive will to power, and many of the references to 'hunger' or 'thirst' function as primal metaphors for the relentless, all-consuming thrust of Tamburlaine's imaginative desire."[35] Tamburlaine does seem to "consume" a great deal with little regard for the consequences in this life or the next. His desires—most notably, for Zenocrate and for "earthly" crowns—are far from divine. As Battenhouse terms it, "No Protestant humanist would say that Tamburlaine's pursuit of earthly crowns or his love of earthly Zenocrate makes him genuinely godlike. On the contrary, these loves make him impious."[36] Battenhouse continues by asserting that Tamburlaine's "tragedy is explainable in terms of the degenerate source of his inspiration, the mistaken goal of his aspiration, and the intemperate course of his desire."[37] Tamburlaine's "inspiration" is exactly the issue here; as Judith Weil notes, "Through verbal and spectacular images Tamburlaine attempts to make his conquests genuinely heroic, even godlike. But they can be godlike only in an indirect way; they illustrate, but do not embody, the miraculous power he constantly seeks."[38] Tamburlaine is not God, and as the plays bear out, he is not the mouthpiece for God; his will and God's will do not align, and thus he is not a true antinomian. Rather, as Kimberly Benston explains, "For Tamburlaine asserts here the prestige of his voice as transcendental master signifier, the mystified source of all authority, law, and power. . . . Tamburlaine's victims are trapped by the 'antifestival' of the hero's tyrannical reign over expression."[39] What Benston does not explain, and what I argue here, is that Tamburlaine is himself one of those "victims"; he commits acts that he sometimes abhors and yields his life and power because of that voice. It is clear from a close examination of the plays that there is some power controlling Tamburlaine's language beyond his own will.

Language for Tamburlaine is clearly more than what W. L. Godshalk terms "a propagandistic device, enabling him to create the proper atmosphere for his conquests."[40] Along the same lines, Charles G. Masinton claims that Tamburlaine "sees in language a tool to disguise his will to power, a devise to inspire his friends and win support for himself, and a medium through which to voice the longings dearest to his heart. But his rhetoric is an abuse of the proper function of language, for he deceives his antagonists and allies alike into accepting his outrageous, egotistical claims to be Fortune's master and even convinces himself that he is godlike."[41] As propaganda, Tamburlaine's words are overwhelmingly effective; in the case of Theridamas, for example, Tamburlaine's words almost immediately and certainly permanently alter entrenched loyalties. James Robinson Howe perhaps comes the closest to properly articulating the power of Tamburlaine's words; writing about the "earthly crown" speech, Howe contends that "what is more important in this passage is the almost *instantaneous* embodiment of the aspirations of his mind into physical form, in nations and power. . . . it seems onstage that the future almost immediately becomes the present, and that *will* and *is* are also nearly joined. . . . With Tamburlaine, as with God, will and power, idea and act are one, joined."[42] Rather than deceiving his allies and antagonists, as Masinton suggests, it is rather that Tamburlaine's words instantly become realities, like Athena springing fully formed from Zeus's head. Tamburlaine has no reason to believe that he is neither Fortune's master nor godlike; for the majority of the first play and for parts of the second, it is the case that Tamburlaine's words give him the godlike power of determining the future. This is perhaps best illustrated in the first play when Tamburlaine proclaims, "For Wil and Shall best fitteth *Tamburlain*, / Whose smiling stars gives him assured hope / Of

martiall triumph, ere he meete his foes: / I that am tearm'd the Scourge and Wrath of God, / The onlely feare and terrour of the world, / Wil first subdue the Turke, and then inlarge / Those Christian Captives, which you keep as slaves" (*1 Tam.*3.3.41-50). In this speech, Tamburlaine points out that he has a destiny to fulfill ("whose smiling stars") and that others know him as the Scourge of God; he will in fact subdue the Turk and release the captives, as he promises. As both plays bear out, however, the only higher power on display is rhetorical power, the force of words to shape the world and the lives of those in it. Rather than being an *abuse* of language, Tamburlaine's rhetoric embodies the overwhelming *power* of language to shape the future, a future that, only for a time is in line with Tamburlaine's mighty will.

In one of the most scrutinized moments in either play, Tamburlaine provides the reader/audience perhaps the fullest articulation of his own motivation; he says,

> The thirst of raigne and sweetnes of a crown,
> That causde the eldest sonne of heavenly *Ops*,
> To thrust his doting father from his chaire,
> And place himselfe in the Emperiall heaven,
> Moov'd me to manage armes against thy state.
> What better president than mightie *Jove*?
> Nature that fram'd us of foure Elements,
> Warring within our breasts for regiment,
> Doth teach us all to have aspyring minds:
> Our soules, whose faculties can comprehend
> The wondrous Architecture of the world:
> And measure every wandring plannets coures:
> Still climing after knowledge infinite,
> And alwaies mooving as the restles Spheares,
> Wils us to weare our selves and never rest,
> Untill we reach the ripest fruit of all,
> That perfect blisse and sole felicitie
> The sweet fruition of an earthly crowne (*1 Tam*.2.6.12-29)

Taking Jove as his precedent, Tamburlaine proclaims that his aspirations are natural; his desire to conquer and obtain earthly crowns is an instinctual path for one as gifted as he is. And even when he raises the question of souls, it is to contend that a soul allows one to comprehend the architecture of the world, not of heaven or a spiritual realm. This is a speech grounded in the earthly realm, so it should not be too surprising that the power of Tamburlaine's speech springs, not from a divine referent, but from his own mind. A commonplace in most critical readings of this speech is the anti-climactic nature of the ending; surely there is something beyond an "earthly crowne" to strive for, especially if one believes oneself to be as important as Tamburlaine asserts. Why need destiny concern itself with such trivial pursuits? Weil's contention that "Tamburlaine explicitly sets Heaven down on earth when he decides that an 'earthly crown' is the 'perfect bliss and sole felicity"[43] is somewhat unsatisfying, but it does speak to the importance of tangible reality to Tamburlaine; he may traffic in "will" and "shall," but he lives in a constantly forward-moving present. At the center of the "earthly crown" speech, as Peter S. Donaldson points out, is "a kind of hollowness," a sense that scrambling for crowns and conquests is an empty jest.[44] Waith echoes this sentiment when he contends that Tamburlaine seeks an "earthly crown" not because "anything the earth has to offer has final value for him, but because domination of the earth represents the fulfilment [*sic*] of his mission—the fulfilment of himself. The speech is about the infinite aspiration taught us by nature and the never-ending activity to which the soul goads us."[45] Tamburlaine's "soul" certainly goads him to some end, but sometimes leaves Tamburlaine—and the audience—baffled in the process. It is these moments that reveal the fissures in a theory of Tamburlaine-as-antinomian or even Tamburlaine-as-Scourge-of-God.

Words and Deeds at Odds: Tamburlaine's Thwarted Will

The code of conduct that governs Tamburlaine's actions seems to be of his own invention but holds him like the binding law of God holds a precisianist. This is nowhere more evident than in the scene where Tamburlaine orders the slaughter of the Virgins of Damascus, a scene at the heart of many critics' difficulties with the plays, in spite of the fact that few critics actually provide an attentive close reading. Critical engagement with the Virgins scene—much like critical engagement with Tamburlaine himself—can be divided into two major camps: those who see the slaughter of the Virgins as a necessary action on the part of a superior conqueror, and those who see the same action as evidence of Tamburlaine's infinite capacity for cruelty and evil. For James Robinson Howe, for example, "[The governor of Damascus and the virgins] waited until the battle was almost lost. They did not recognize superior power until it demonstrated itself in battle. Soulless, they have no true life. Their murder is simply a demonstration of what was already true: that they lacked life."[46] That Howe finds Tamburlaine "admirable and superhuman" should be no surprise; like Waith, Howe holds Tamburlaine to a different standard, one in which his superiority truly does give him godlike power to operate outside any conventional notions of morality.[47] In the same vein, A. D. Hope contends that it "is appropriate for Tamburlaine to praise Zenocrate while the girls dangle on the spears of his soldiers before the eyes of their parents. The virgins perish in their lesser degrees of beauty and appeal as the other kings of the earth perish in their lesser degrees of force of character and genius for arms."[48] If Tamburlaine is a superhuman and Zenocrate one whose beauty is almost otherworldly, then the Damascans at their feet deserve death; they have been superseded by the most perfect versions of themselves. In contrast to this

apologist perspective, Masinton asserts that Tamburlaine, clad as he is in black like "the Devils and Vices in the moralities," "has no military reason for murdering the young girls—or for destroying Damascus, for that matter—but spreads desolation only to make himself feared throughout the world."[49] In a similar vein, Donald Peet contends that Marlowe "appears to be combining a rhetorical plan of construction with a cluster of rhetorical figures in an attempt to make the virgin's plea as persuasive as possible—and thus to stress the utter ruthlessness of Tamburlaine when he shows himself capable of withstanding such eloquence."[50] But while rhetoric is key in this play, it is really only Tamburlaine's rhetoric that matters, and he has already decreed the fate of the Virgins in establishing his custom of the tricolor flags. By this point in the play, as we shall see, Tamburlaine has conquered enough that his "customes" are well known; this is not an upstart conqueror who must create and constantly attend to his reputation, but rather a proven warrior who is already feared by those against whom he battles.

The scene does raise difficult questions: if Tamburlaine can slaughter the innocent to advance his pursuit of earthly crowns, then how can he term himself the "Scourge of God" and claim that he is on some kind of righteous mission? How, too, can we as audience maintain sympathy for him as a heroic character in the face of such actions? Rather than proving his lawless abandon, however, this scene reveals that a certain kind of "law" does in fact govern Tamburlaine's actions, and that beauty and love work to temper that law but can never fully usurp it. In this scene, Tamburlaine seems to strain against a wish to alter his course, to go against his previously declared path, but he is unable to do so. In his interactions with the Virgins, Tamburlaine twice refers to his "custome" as an unbreakable kind of law; when the Virgins come to him on the third day

of his siege of Damascus, he laments, "Alas poor fooles,[51] must you be first shal feele / The sworne destruction of *Damascus*. / They know my custome: could they not as well / Have sent ye out, when first my milkwhite flags / Through which sweet mercie threw her gentle beams, / Reflexing them on your disdainfull eies" (*1 Tam.*5.1.65-70). Tamburlaine is not reveling in slaughter here; he is lamenting the foolishness of the Governour of Damascus in ignoring Tamburlaine's "sworne" "customes," explained to him by the Messenger in the previous act: on the first day of the siege, Tamburlaine and his company will be dressed in white, and surrender will be met with mercy. On the second day, the tents and army will be clad in red, and all who "can manage armes" (*1 Tam.*4.1.57) will be sacrificed to his ire. Finally, on the third day of the Governour's holdout, a sea of black uniforms, tents, and flags will lie before the city, and none will be spared. The Messenger understands what the Governour's pride will not let him acknowledge: that Tamburlaine's "resolution far exceedeth all" (*1 Tam.*4.1.48). This is an important clue to understanding Tamburlaine's inability to yield when confronted with the Virgins: once declared, his word cannot be broken, even by him. Earlier in Act 4, when entreated by Zenocrate to "have some pitie for [her] sake, / Because it is [her] countries, and [her] Fathers" (*1 Tam.*4.2.123-24), Tamburlaine replies, "Not for the world *Zenocrate*, if I have sworn" (*1 Tam.*4.2.125). At the time he is confronted with the Virgins, Tamburlaine has established that his word is unbreakable. However, Tamburlaine does not often feel regret, much less admit to it, and the regret he expresses to the Virgins seems sincere. What, then, is stopping him from being merciful? His military prowess is such that surely no one will question it if he extends mercy to a group of lowly Virgins.

Most critics see Tamburlaine's inflexibility as symptomatic of his megalomania and/or extreme cruelty, but Tamburlaine's own words give us a clue of another, more complicated interpretation. The *OED* tells us that the general usage of "customs" is, of course, "a habitual or usual practice." However, the second definition is most useful here; it is given as "[a]n established usage which by long continuance has acquired the force of a law or right." Tamburlaine has established this custom, and it is now known as a kind of law. However, given that Tamburlaine himself "wrote" the law by uttering it, it would seem within his power to bend or break that law to spare a group of Virgins. In his interaction with them, however, he seems powerless. Tamburlaine is not an unfeeling machine—to his men, for instance, he is loyal and generous, and to Zenocrate he appears doting. Tamburlaine's lamenting query as to why the Governour could "not as well / Have sent ye out, when first my milkwhite flags" were hung indicates that he does feel remorse, but that the situation is now beyond his control. After listening to their entreaties, Tamburlaine responds, "Virgins, in vaine ye labour to prevent / That which *mine honor sweares* shal be perform'd" (*1 Tam.*5.1.106-107; my emphasis); this is another reiteration of Tamburlaine's "custome," and here, as in many other places, Tamburlaine uses "sweare" to indicate the severity of this promise. Curiously, however, he does not say, "That *I* have sworne shall be performed," but removes the oath from his own power, situating his "honor" as though it were a thing outside himself. To complete this distancing process, rather than reveling in the slaughter, as some critics accuse him, he shows the Virgins his sword—and states he is "pleas'd" they do not see Death there, another indication of his reluctance—only to delegate their slaughter to his soldiers: "But I am pleasde you shall not see him there, / He now is seated on my horsmens speares: /

And on their points his fleshless bodie feedes. / *Techelles*, straight goe charge a few of them / To chardge these Dames, and shew my servant death: / Sitting in scarlet on their armed speares" (*1 Tam.*5.1.113-18). The final moments of the Virgins' lives can be ones of confusion for the audience/reader, for if death is Tamburlaine's servant and he does not wish for the Virgins' death, why then must they die?

Masinton makes much of Tamburlaine's black attire as a representation of his evil, but in addition to representing evil and death, the color black also represents mourning; there is more textual evidence that Tamburlaine mourns the death of the Virgins than there is that he revels in it. When the Virgins entreat him one last time—"O pitie us" (*1 Tam.*5.1.119)—he immediately dismisses them, as though he can no longer bear their entreaties. One of the only critics to recognize that Tamburlaine feels pity, G. I. Duthie, writes, "Here we see the idea of genuine pity arising in Tamburlaine's mind for the first time: but it arises only to be rejected, unhesitatingly if regretfully. He is sincerely sorry for the Virigins. . . ."[52] Duthie continues, "There is real compassion here. But he cannot and will not break his oath: he must give full scope to his idea of Honor. . . ."[53] This returns us to Tamburlaine's search for selfhood, for a defining principle to stand at his core, which may well be honor or a code of martial ethics. Should we, with Weil, conclude that because "they are so remarkably eloquent and because theirs is not the responsibility for the tardy submission of Damascus, Marlowe's virgins seem more wise than foolish. By contrast, Tamburlaine's insistence upon punishing them in accordance with his established customs appears mad indeed"?[54] There is a certain logic to Tamburlaine's customs that elides madness; he must not appear weak in battle, and he has established certain rules that must be followed for a successful military campaign.

Were Tamburlaine to show no pity toward the Virgins, we could perhaps make more sense of his motivations; he has a goal to achieve, and he must follow a set course of action to achieve that goal. Anyone who stands in his way—be they emperor or Virgin—must be sacrificed to a greater purpose. Were Tamburlaine an antinomian, that purpose would be an enacting of God's will on earth; it might be grotesque, but it is not beyond the scope of the play to assert that the Virgins' death is part of a larger plan in which Tamburlaine is the key player for God. However, the scene is marked not by triumph, but by sadness. Tamburlaine seems confused and regretful, not exultant.

However, once the Virgins have been taken out of his sight, Tamburlaine can return to bravado, declaring that he "will not spare these proud Egyptians" for great wealth or the love of Venus, for "[t]hey have refusde the offer of their lives, / And know my customes are as peremptory / As wrathfull Planets, death, or destinie" (*1 Tam.*5.1.121-28).[55] As with the oracles quote in 3.3, Tamburlaine's referent here—his customs—seems once removed from his personal will or desires. His speech seems to serve more as a reminder to Tamburlaine himself than a true explanation of his desire to see the Virgins slaughtered; furthermore, his "customes" are, by his own admission, beyond his power to alter. And it is significant that Marlowe provides three comparisons here—to death, planetary movements, and destiny—that are beyond the control of individuals; Tamburlaine's "customes" serve as an inflexible law that binds Tamburlaine even when he might otherwise hesitate and show mercy. The first real stumbling block in Tamburlaine's interminable march toward domination, the death of the Virgins of Damascus provides a serious fissure in the facade of Tamburlaine as either a cruel and merciless tyrant or as the servant of God exacting justice on other barbarous tyrants. This

fissure will widen in *Part 2* as Tamburlaine first finds that his words cannot entirely control the world but eventually that they are powerful enough to conquer his seemingly unending march toward domination.

Death, Legacy, and the Limits of Tamburlaine's Power

In *Part 2*, as Judith Weil succinctly terms it, "Tamburlaine's poetic wisdom increasingly gives way to his poetic madness."[56] He spins larger and larger tales for himself, loftier goals to achieve and worlds to conquer. But, by the end of the plays, it is clear that the power of Tamburlaine's words have limitations; he can wield them to persuade others to switch allegiances, he can declare his own course of action—even when it seems miraculous—and follow it, but he cannot conquer death, change the course of nature, or will his sons to become what he wishes them to be. In Helen L. Gardner's estimation, "Man's desires and aspirations may be limitless, but their fulfilment [*sic*] is limited by forces outside the control of the will."[57] The first real blow to both Tamburlaine's will and the power of his words is Zenocrate's death; as Howe argues, "[I]n her death she forces Tamburlaine to recognize that even for him there are limits, that not everything he wills can occur."[58] Beside his words, the only power that has any chance of swaying Tamburlaine is Zenocrate, his captured love and subsequent wife. Tamburlaine calls her "onely Paragon of *Tamburlaine*, / Whose eies are brighter than the Lamps of heaven, / And speech more pleasant than sweet harmony: / That with thy lookes canst cleare the darkened Sky: / And calme the rage of thundring *Jupiter*" (*1 Tam.*3.3.119-123). If there is any heaven on earth for Tamburlaine, it is embodied in Zenocrate. As she lies dying, Tamburlaine muses, "*Zenocrate* that gave him light and life, / Whose eies shot fire from their Ivory bowers, / And tempered every soule with

lively heat, / Now by the malice of the angry Skies, / Whose jealousie admits no second Mate, / Drawes in the comfort of her latest breath / All dasled with the hellish mists of death" (*2 Tam.*2.4.8-14). Here we have Tamburlaine explaining Zeoncrate's tempering influence; even when he cannot do as she wishes—because he has sworn otherwise, for example—her beauty and generally clement nature affect him more than any other influence. After the Virgins of Damascus have been killed in *Part 1*, Tamburlaine delivers a sixty-five line speech praising Zenocrate's beauty and influence, potentially to assuage himself after the distasteful act that has just occured; Tamburlaine declares that Zenocrate's "sorrowes lay more siege unto my soule, / Than all my Army to *Damascus* walles. / And neither *Perseas* Soveraign, nor the Turk / Troubled my sences with conceit of foile, / So much by much, as dooth *Zenocrate*" (*1 Tam.*5.1.155-59). Still, it is important to remember that Tamburlaine cannot be merciful simply because Zenocrate asks him to, if he has already sworn otherwise.

It is not that Tamburlaine's rhetorical prowess is significantly diminished in *Part 2*; rather, the things he desires have moved beyond the sphere of rhetorical control. Tamburlaine can declare that he will achieve a crown or win a battle, and those things come to pass. But when Zenocrate is dying, Tamburlaine is nearly powerless. He pleads, "Live still my Love and so conserve my life, / Or dieng, be the author of my death" (*2 Tam.*2.4.55-56), to which Zenocrate responds, "But let me die my Love, yet let me die, / With love and patience let your true love die: / Your griefe and furie hurtes my second life" (*2 Tam.*2.4.66-68). Tamburlaine stops his pleading for a moment and kisses her, but she does not die immediately; it seems that Tamburlaine's entreaties have some power, as Zenocrate then remarks that her "life is lengthened yet a while" (*2 Tam.*2.4.71), and after

a musical interlude, she dies. After her death, Tamburlaine is steeped in grief; he begs Zenocrate to return from the heavens to be with him. Theridamas reminds him that "all this raging cannot make her live," further explaining, "If woords might serve, our voice hath rent the aire / . . . / Nothing prevailes, for she is dead my Lord" (*2 Tam.*2.4.120-24). Theridamas recognizes that, while death might be a servant for Tamburlaine on the battlefield, Tamburlaine ultimately does not control it; it sits invisibly on his sword, but it also waits in Zenocrate's chamber, and eventually, for Tamburlaine himself.

After Zenocrate's death, Tamburlaine becomes ever more frenzied. He burns the town where she died and keeps her body with him; he also sets up her portrait so that her "looks will shed such an influence in my campe, / As if *Bellona*, Goddesse of the war, / Threw naked swords and sulphur bals of fire, / Upon the heads of all our enemies" (*2 Tam.*3.2.39-42). Tamburlaine sees his army as a collective, an extension of himself represented chiefly by Theridamas; Tamburlaine expects that they will grieve as strongly as he does for Zenocrate. And regardless of whether this is true, for Tamburlaine, who stands at the center of the action, the world has shifted radically. As M. M. Mahood explains, "The death of Zenocrate represents the first major defeat of Tamburlaine's will to power. It is the fall of the lightbearer into an inner darkness. From this point in the play onwards, it is evident that even while Tamburlaine's conquests have enlarged his seeming power, his greatness of mind has been lost."[59] Zenocrate's death marks the moment where the fissure created by all that is invested in Tamburlaine's words begins to widen enough so that we can glimpse a future in which other situations might arise where Tamburlaine's words fail to fully control the action. This is most exemplified in Tamburlaine's sons, who fail in varying degrees to live up to their father's potential.

Tamburlaine's attempts to remold his sons in his own image reads as the inverse of his first encounter with Theridamas in *Part 1*; there, Tamburlaine did not need to remake Theridamas's core being, as he was already a great and noble warrior. Tamburlaine simply had to bring his considerable rhetorical charms to bear to convince Theridamas to abandon his previous allegiances for Tamburlaine's cause. Tamburlaine's sons, however, are fully formed adults; no matter the force of his words, he cannot fundamentally change their nature. The most disappointing is Calyphas, who plays cards with whores while his brothers are attempting to prove themselves in battle; he explains, "I know, sir, what it is to kil a man, / It works remorse of conscience in me, / I take no pleasure to be murtherous, / Nor care for blood when wine wil quench my thirst" (*2 Tam.*4.1.27-30). Regardless of whether one reads Calyphas as a coward or a pacifistic voice of reason in the plays, he is a disappointment to the martial Tamburlaine, and, as with Zenocrate's death, no amount of rhetoric can remedy the situation. With Zenocrate's death, however, Tamburlaine was powerless—neither his all-powerful words nor his skills in battle could save her. With Calyphas, Tamburlaine can act—he stabs him, and then proclaims that Calyphas is a "[f]orme not meet to give that subject essence, / Whose matter is the flesh of *Tamburlain*, / Wherein an incorporeall spirit mooves, / Made of the mould wherof thy self consists, / Which makes me valiant, proud, ambitious, / Ready to leavie power against thy throne, / That I might moove the turning Spheares of heaven, / For earth and al this aery region / Cannot containe the state of *Tamburlaine*" (*2 Tam.*4.1.114-22). Were one to make a case for Tamburlaine's antinomianism, this would seem a natural speech to quote; however, Tamburlaine makes no claim that this "incorporeall spirit" is Christ. Rather, it is what makes him a successful warrior; it is

what gives him power, and presumably what makes his rhetoric largely successful. It is also unique to Tamburlaine—his other sons might have some martial success, but they do not truly have Tamburlaine's spirit, and Tamburlaine cannot impute it to them in the way God imputes his will into the soul of an antinomian. When Tamburlaine says, "And til by vision, or by speach I hear / Immortall *Jove* say, Cease my *Tamburlaine*, I will persist a terrour to the world" (*2 Tam.*4.1.200-2), he is wrongly—whether out of naiveté or willful ignorance—ascribing the source of his power and success to a godly power. This is nowhere more evident than in Tamburlaine's death, a scene that cements the power of Tamburlaine's words as the only force strong enough to conquer Tamburlaine himself.

In spite of any lingering regret over the Virgins of Damascus, *Tamburlaine, Part 1* ends on a triumphant note: Tamburlaine's military campaigns have been successful, Zenocrate is his loving queen, and even Zenocrate's father, the Sultan, begrudgingly approves of their union. Were this the only Tamburlaine-focused play Marlowe had written, critical conversations about *Tamburlaine* would no doubt be marked by an incredulity that Tamburlaine has, in essence, "gotten away with it." Surely, inordinate pride cannot go unchecked, and even if Tamburlaine is the Scourge of God, as Battenhouse points out, Scourges are ultimately discarded by their Gods when their usefulness has been exhausted.[60] One of Marlowe's key sources for the Tamburlaine material, Thomas Fortescue's translation of Pedro Mexía's *The foreste*, certainly seems to support this view; the text reads,

> The greate *Tamburlayne*, that raygned not so many yéeres hence, a Capitayne no lesse blouddy then valiant, which also subdued so many Countries, and Prouinces: beinge demaunded, why he so more then tyrannously v|sed his Captiues, whereunto he answeared: forewrap|ped in coller. Supposest thou me to be any other, then the yre of God? whence wée haue in fine to conclude, that all sutche cruell and incarnate Deuils, are instruments wherewith God chastiseth

> sinne, as also, with the same approueth, and trieth the iuste: and yet they notwith|standinge are not hence helde for iuste, ne shall they escape the heauy iudgement of God. For necessarie is it, that example of ill happen, but woe be vnto him, by whom it happeneth. Further in this life, God assuredly at sometime dothe punish them, besides that in an other worlde, Hell & damnation is certainely allo ted them.[61]

Marlowe, of course, wrote a second part to *Tamburlaine*, and even if we accept "The Prologue's" assertion that "the generall welcomes Tamburlain receiv'd, / When he arrived last upon our stage, / Hath made our Poet pen his second part" (Prologue 1-3), the two plays are intimately connected and the action of the second follows from the first. As such, Tamburlaine's death—which is the culmination of *Part 2*—cannot and should not be treated as a distinct episode divorced from all that has come before it in the two plays.

Later in *The foreste*, Mexía/Fortescue offers this glowing assessment of Tamburlaine's career: "he neuer sawe the backe, or frounyng face of fortune, that he neuer was vanquished, or put to slighte by any, that he neuer tooke matter in hande, that he brought not to the wished effect, and that his corage, and industrie neuer failed hym to bryng it to good ende."[62] Indeed, there appears nowhere in this work a specific account of Tamburlaine's demise, thus complicating the initial condemnation of Tamburlaine as an "incarnate Deuil" who will surely be punished by God. In another translation of Mexía's source material, George Whetstone's *The myrror*, Tamburlaine's death is mentioned, but the account is hardly condemnatory:

> In the ende this great personage, without disgrace of fortune, after su~dry great victories, by the course of nature died, & left behind him two sons, euery way far vnlike their father: betwéen who~ enuy sowed such dissention, that through their incapacities to gouern the conquests of their Father, the children of *Baiazet,* whom they kept prisoners, stole into *Asia,* & so won the people to disobedience, as they recouered the goods & possessions that their father lost.[63]

Here, Tamburlaine dies naturally, and though his conquered lands are lost by his sons—surely a tragedy by Tamburlaine's standards—it is hardly the case that we can see God punishing Tamburlaine as a Scourge whose usefulness has been exhausted.

For *Tamburlaine, Part 2*, then, Marlowe fabricates the episode of Tamburlaine's death, and for modern critics—and perhaps for Elizabethan audiences themselves—interpreting the manner of Tamburlaine's death has become a litmus test for one's feelings about Tamburlaine himself and the "moral" Marlowe is trying to convey with his plays. This is brought to a head when Tamburlaine famously burns the Koran and challenges Mahomet to send a

> furious whyrlwind downe,
> To blow thy *Alcoran* up to thy throne,
> Where men report, thou sitt'st by God himselfe,
> Or vengeance on the head of *Tamburlain*,
> That shakes his sword against thy majesty,
> And spurns the Abstracts of thy foolish lawes.
> Wel souldiers, *Mahomet* remaines in hell,
> He cannot heare the voice of *Tamburlain*:
> Seeke out another Godhead to adore,
> The God that sits in heaven, if any God,
> For he is God alone, and none but he. (*2 Tam.*5.1.187-202)

A curious mixture of heresy and orthodoxy, this speech seems to finally confirm Tamburlaine's atheism, but it is a strange atheism that admits the existence of some kind of god only to then taunt him with the charge of impotency. The final lines are especially curious; if there is a god, Tamburlaine seems to suggest that he is the Christian God alone, that he accepts no equals. However, his very existence is called into question. To worship Mahomet is foolish; if one must worship *something*, then the jealous, wrathful Christian God is the best option, even if that God does not actually exist. This is hardly a ringing endorsement, and calls into question the very notion of Godliness. And if

Tamburlaine's words are the replacement for Christ/God as a guide for his actions, this pronouncement could then have implications for Tamburlaine's very existence as well; the moment of doubt encapsulated in "if any God" would thus reverberate throughout Tamburlaine's decline and death, causing a kind of implosion that destroys Tamburlaine from the inside out.

A mere sixteen lines after delivering this speech, Tamburlaine begins to feel himself "distempered sudainly" (*2 Tam.*5.1.218), which many critics take as proof of Mahomet and/or God's smiting of Tamburlaine. Battenhouse, for example, asserts that "[w]hen Tamburlaine burns his Book of Scripture the act dramatically epitomizes his flouting of Divine Law, and is a bold proclamation of religious antinomianism. The Koran, of course, is not Christian Scripture; yet for a Moslem to burn it in boastful contempt of *all* authority outside himself is an act epitomizing sacrilege."[64] However, a one-to-one correlation between Tamburlaine's burning of the Koran and his challenging speech to Mahomet—and indeed, to the "if any God" who sits in heaven—and his own death is not entirely satisfactory; enough time lapses between Tamburlaine's act/speech and his "sudden distemper" to throw doubt on the connection between them (sixteen lines on the stage would take more than a few seconds to utter), and Tamburlaine's survival through several more scenes—and several important speeches—is enough to call into question the idea that he is simply being punished by an angry deity.

Other critical interpretations of Tamburlaine's death yield similar dissatisfaction. Richter sees Tamburlaine's death as one of "exhaustion from his attempts to play at being the Messiah,"[65] while Waith contends that only Tamburlaine's death "proves that he does not control the fates."[66] However, Waith goes on to say that "[e]ven death is not

presented unequivocally as defeat. Tamburlaine's extravagant boasts, like those of Hercules, are largely made good, so that he and his followers become the amazement of the world."[67] Tamburlaine has conquered an incredible amount of the world, and his death does not come at the hands of a conqueror greater than himself, but rather as a result of Tamburlaine's own proclamation that he will die. Neither exactly a triumph nor a defeat, Tamburlaine's death is the ultimate proof that his words and his will are not wholly aligned.

In the lines leading up to Tamburlaine's death, it seems more plausible that his tremendous will is spent, that the force that stands in for God/Christ/moral law, etc. at the center of Tamburlaine's being has been used up. After examining Tamburlaine, a Physician explains to him: "Your vaines are full of accidentall heat, / Whereby the moisture of your blood is dried, / The *Humidum* and *Calor*, which some holde / Is not a parcell of the Elements, / But of a substance more divine and pure, / Is almost cleane extinguished and spent, / Which being the cause of life, imports your death" (*2 Tam.*5.3.84-90). Although some critics gloss the physician's diagnosis as proof that Tamburlaine is choleric—aptly defined by the *OED* as "of hot or fiery nature"—Johnstone Parr gives a more thorough explanation based on contemporaneous understanding of the "*spirits*—common terms among the Elizabethans"—as "aeriform fluids of a celestial nature generated in the blood by natural heat (*calor*) and radical moisture (*humidum*)."[68] Through an understanding of these spirits, Parr argues, "Elizabethans . . . possessed in their bodies an ingredient which might be characterized as virtually a piece of a star."[69] This would certainly accord with Tamburlaine's own understanding of himself as one favored by the stars and fated for success, but only

because the calor and humidum in his spirit are particularly well aligned for triumph. Through this reading, Parr then glosses Tamburlaine's death as a kind of irony: "Possibly the same celestial force which made Tamburlaine's career heaven-ordained at last deals to him a kind of retributive justice in that the celestial bodily ingredients refuse to function properly."[70] This is certainly a more satisfactory reading than a direct correlation between the burning of the Koran and Tamburlaine's death, but it is still the case that Tamburlaine himself has the last word, both literally and figuratively.

As this power ebbs, so does Tamburlaine's ability to set the course for the future with his words. He has energy for only one course more; he can no longer be positive that his words will become actions—that his sons will conquer that which he has not conquered, for instance. His last acts are speech acts; in one, he pleads,

> What daring God tormets my body thus,
> And seeks to conquer mighty *Tamburlaine*?
> Shall sickness proove me now to be a man,
> That have bene tearm'd the terrour of the world?
> *Techelles* and the rest, come take your swords,
> And threaten him whose hand afflicts my soul.
> Come let us march against the powers of heaven,
> And set blacke streamers in the firmament,
> To signifie the slaughter of the Gods.
> Ah friends, what shal I doe, I cannot stand,
> Come carie me to war against the Gods,
> That thus invie the health of *Tamburlaine*. (*2 Tam.*5.3.42-53)

Tamburlaine is misinterpreting here. It is not an external force that batters him, but the very spirit that lies within him. He cannot wage war against it, because it is himself. Although I do not agree with Moore's contention that Tamburlaine is antinomian, his reading of these final scenes do provide moments of insight; he contends that "Tamburlaine has spent his entire life challenging authority and asserting his own divine

nature, and at this late moment in part 2 he finally realizes the ultimate futility of respecting anything other than his own divinity."[71] Burning the Koran and daring God out of the sky is the first articulation of this; taking control of his own death is Tamburlaine's final act and one that proves both the great and yet limited natures of his power.

After some lamenting and a brief expression of his hopes for the future, Tamburlaine finally proclaims: "For *Tamburlaine,* the Scourge of God must die" (*2 Tam.*5.3.249), and he immediately dies. In this act, there is a kind of triumph. He has not been struck down by an enemy or even God, but has succumbed to the very "custome" that helped him to rule the world. When Tamburlaine questions the very notion of God at the end of his speech to Mahomet, he also begins to question the notion of himself. In one sense, he has "made" his own world—created it from his own words in the way that God created the Word/world—and that world is beginning to devolve into chaos. His beloved Zenocrate is gone and his sons are a disappointment to him, so much so that one of them must be dispatched. In short, his creative energy is flagging, and his world has changed. As the Word that sustains that world, he must flag with it. He wishes to declare war on the Gods who afflict him, but it would only mean war against his own words, which have power but cannot be conquered. Whether the play has returned us to right order at the end is unclear; is Tamburlaine really "punished" here, or has the force/"custome" that animates him—a force that cannot rightly be called antinomian, for it admits no god as its referent—simply fallen victim to its own power? Tamburlaine declares that none from Damascus will survive on the third day of his siege, and they cannot survive; he declares that he must die, and he is dead. "Powerless" is not a term often associated with

Tamburlaine, but in these instances, Tamburlaine seems powerless to alter his course once that course has been uttered.

What Tamburlaine represents is not antinomian, for true antinomianism not only originates with God but reflects God's living, changing will in the world. Tamburlaine's customs leave no room for change; once he utters them, they are fixed, even when he wishes to change his mind. Tamburlaine is not lawless, but his law originates from the power of his utterances and applies even to his own will. And in his interactions with the Virgins, Zenocrate, his sons, and, eventually, with death, Tamburlaine reveals that he both paradoxically determines the future but is also a helpless slave to that future, especially as it relates to others outside his own body. Tamburlaine may well inadvertently be the Scourge of God, but first and foremost he is a martial spirit made flesh, and it is that spirit that ultimately triumphs. There is little in the way of a moral lesson to learn from this Tamburlaine, trapped by words into bringing about the death of innocents and, ultimately, himself. His last act may in some sense be a triumph—in that it does not allow any outside power to conquer him—but it is an act that could never be duplicated by others. Tamburlaine is an anomaly, and no matter the power of aspiration, no other could wield the power that he wields. What the *Tamburlaine* plays provide is indeed a cautionary tale, but it is a lesson only for its protagonist, a lesson from which no other can truly benefit.

Notes

[1] All quotes taken from Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I and II*, ed. David Fuller, vol. 5, *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). In-text citations indicate *Part 1* or *Part 2* by providing *1 Tam.* or *2 Tam.* before the customary Act/Scene/Line numbers.

[2] Roy W. Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1964), 258.

[3] Ibid., 149. As Battenhouse notes, there is a long history of such interpretations of God's scourges. See his chapter, "Marlowe's Use of the Historical Sources," 129-49.

[4] Richard Levin, "The Contemporary Perception of Marlowe's Tamburlaine," *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984): 51.

[5] Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine*, 113.

[6] Eugene M. Waith, *The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare, and Dryden* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 16.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Paul H. Kocher, *Christopher Marlowe: A Study of his Thought, Learning, and Character* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 81.

[9] See Waith *Herculean Hero*, 61.

[10] Robert Greene, *Perimedes the black-smith* (1588), A3r.

[11] See Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine*, 171.

[12] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 195.

[13] Roger E. Moore, "The Spirit and the Letter: Marlowe's 'Tamburlaine' and Elizabethan Religious Radicalism," *Studies in Philology* 99, no. 2 (2002): 126.

[14] Ibid., 132.

[15] Moore provides a reading of this scene that ignores the greater part of Tamburlaine's speech to his sons; he writes, "Rather than admit his own vulnerability, Tamburlaine uses this opportunity to reinforce his transcendental identity. Tamburlaine demonstrates that he is not a body, for he tells his sons, 'A wound is nothing, be it nere so deepe'-whatever happens to his body in no way affects his true self (2 Tam. 3.3.115). With this statement Tamburlaine articulates a belief in the insignificance of matter" (132). Surely Tamburlaine's assertion that "a wound is nothing, be it nere so deepe" is a teaching moment for his sons not to fear wounds on the battlefield; as the speech continues, Tamburlaine makes it clear that wounds are to be valued, that they indicate the bravery

and prowess of a warrior. Having his sons then bathe themselves in his blood by probing his wound seems unavoidably an indication that the body is not "insignificant" as Moore would suggest.

[16] Ibid., 133.

[17] Ibid., 134.

[18] Ibid., 126-27.

[19] This study assumes that *Tamburlaine, Part 1* and *Tamburlaine, Part 2* comprise a continuous narrative and will treat the plays as such.

[20] Donald Senior, *1 Peter*, vol. 15 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 121.

[21] Ibid., 121.

[22] Ibid., 125.

[23] Eaton, *Honey-Combe.*

[24] Traske, *The True Gospel Vindicated*, G7r; "Christ" appears in italics in the original text, but otherwise italics indicate my emphasis.

[25] Ibid., F4r-v.

[26] Greenblatt, *Self-Fashioning*, 197.

[27] Ibid., 213; my emphasis.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See Ibid: "For even as no two performances or readings of a text are exactly the same, so the repeated acts of self-fashioning are never absolutely identical" (217).

[30] Claudia Richter, "Performing God's Wrath: *Tamburlaine*, Calvinism and the Phantasmata of Terror," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 143 (2007): 57.

[31] Ibid., 59.

[32] Ibid., 57.

[33] Ibid., 56.

[34] David Daiches, "Language and Action in Marlowe's 'Tamburlaine,'" in *Modern Christopher Marlowe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 79.

[35] Johannes H. Birringer, "Marlowe's Violent Stage: 'Mirrors' of Honor in Tamburlaine," *ELH: Journal of English Literary History* 51 (1984): 223.

[36] Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine,* 233.

[37] Ibid., 226.

[38] Judith Weil, *Christopher Marlowe: Merlin's Prophet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 108.

[39] Kimberly Benston, "Applause: Dramatic Form and the Tamburlanian Sublime," in *Christopher Marlowe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 220.

[40] W. L. Godshalk, *The Marlovian World Picture* (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 123.

[41] Charles G. Masinton, *Christopher Marlowe's Tragic Vision: A Study in Damnation* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1972), 18.

[42] James Robinson Howe, *Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Magic* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976), 55.

[43] Weil, *Merlin's Prophet*, 115.

[44] Peter S. Donaldson, "Conflict and Coherence: Narcissism and Tragic Structure in Marlowe," in *Narcissism and the Text: Studies in Literature and the Psychology of Self*, ed. Lynne Layton and Barbara Ann Schapiro (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 38.

[45] Waith, *Herculean Hero*, 67.

[46] Howe, *Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Magic*, 67.

[47] Ibid., 7.

[48] A. D. Hope, "*Tamburlaine*: The Argument of Arms," in *Christopher Marlowe: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 51.

[49] Masinton, *Christopher Marlowe's Tragic Vision*, 30. Masinton goes on to argue, somewhat tenuously, that this black-clad Tamburlaine "anticipates Shakespeare's use of black to symbolize evil in Aaron the Moor" (30).

[50] Donald Peet, "The Rhetoric of Tamburlaine," *ELH: Journal of English Literary History* 26, no. 2 (1959): 144.

[51] John D. Jump, editor of *Tamburlaine the Great* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), glosses "poor fooles" as "a form of address expressing pity," thus establishing Tamburlaine's pity for the Virgins from the outset of their encounter.

[52] G. I. Duthie, "The Dramatic Structure of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*, Part I," in *Shakespeare's Contemporaries: Modern Studies in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Max Bluestone and Norman Rabkin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 68-69.

[53] Ibid., 69.

[54] Weil, *Merlin's Prophet*, 130. Weil points out that the possibility that Tamburlaine had the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in Matthew 26 in mind in this scene.

[55] Fuller glosses "peremptory" thusly: "Both incontrovertible and precluding all doubt or hesitation, *OED* I.b and 3 (first cited use 1589)" (217). This understanding of Tamburlaine's "customes" takes us beyond a more modern notion of "custom" as a "habitual or usual practice" (*OED* I.a) and establishes an element of inescapability.

[56] Weil, *Merlin's Prophet*, 125.

[57] Helen L. Gardner, "The Second Part of 'Tamburlaine the Great,'" *Modern Language Review* 37, no. 1 (1942): 19.

[58] Howe, *Marlowe, Tamburlaine, and Magic*, 105.

[59] M. M. Mahood, *Poetry and Humanism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), 62.

[60] See Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine*, 149.

[61] Pedro Mexía, *The foreste or Collection of histories no less profitable, then pleasant and necessarie, dooen out of French into Englishe, by Thomas Fortescue* (1571), 41. David Fuller, editor of *Tamburlaine the Great, Parts I and II* in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* cites *The foreste* and George Whetstone's *The English myrror* as Marlowe's primary sources for the Tamburlaine story.

[62] Mexía, *The foreste*, 95.

[63] George Whetstone, *The English myrror* (1586), 82.

[64] Battenhouse, *Marlowe's Tamburlaine*, 171.

[65] Richter, "Performing God's Wrath," 63.

[66] Waith, *Herculean Hero*, 66.

[67] Ibid., 66.

[68] Johnstone Parr, *Tamburlaine's Malady and Other Essays on Astrology in Elizabethan Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1953), 18.

[69] Ibid., 17.

[70] Ibid., 19.

[71] Moore, "The Spirit and the Letter," 125.

CHAPTER 3
"THE MOTION'S GOOD, / AND OF THE SPIRIT": ANTINOMIAN PURITANS IN THOMAS MIDDLETON AND BEN JONSON

Few writers of the seventeenth century concern themselves with antinomianism more than Richard Baxter, the highly influential and popular nonconformist; starting in 1650 and ending in 1697, six years after his death, at least thirty-five tracts appeared under his authorship that address or mention antinomianism. His preoccupation with antinomianism is understandable given his attitude toward the power and scope of the heresy, which can be succinctly summarized by a quote from his 1670 tract *The life of faith in three parts*; he writes, "This Antinomian fancy destroyeth Religion."[1] In his musings on antinomianism, Baxter often reflects on the pervasiveness of the heresy in England's immediate history, and articulates a truism common to religious polemic from both the early and latter parts of the seventeenth century: antinomianism is intrinsically tied to and often masquerades as many other sects and modes of belief, including Puritanism, Anabaptism, and Familism. One of Baxter's typical invectives against antinomians/Anabaptists reads, "[T]he common road of this Heretical Devil being ordinarily by Separation to Anabaptistry, from Anabapistry [*sic*] to Antinomianism or Pelagianism (for there the way parted) and from Antinomianism to Libertinism, and so to Familism, and so to Hell without Repentance."[2] In the Preface to the same work, Baxter writes that "one half of them [Infidels] are Pelagian Anabaptists: the other are Antinomian Anabaptists. But these Foxes that are thus sent out to fire the harvest, are so tayled together for and by their joint opposition to the truth and the unity of the Church, and by their consent to an universal Liberty or Toleration, that their manifest differences

did joyn not their posteriors nor hinder them much from setting all their faces against the Church of Christ."[3]

Like many oft-reviled groups of the seventeenth century, antinomians—like Puritans and stage players—are both powerful and dangerous because of their ability to shift and mutate, thus making it difficult to define and confine them. In collapsing antinomians and Anabaptists, Baxter is participating in a commonplace association that would have been current in the late sixteenth and early parts of the seventeenth century as well as at the time he was writing. Indeed, one of the most pervasive methods of discrediting a religious group in early modern England seems to be guilt by association; repeatedly in religious polemic of the time, we see authors bundling together Familists, Brownists, Anabaptists, Puritans, and Antinomians in various groupings, and it is not difficult to find an author that links two or more of the groups together with little attention to the ways in which their fundamental beliefs might differ. Theological subtlety is clearly not a priority for these polemicists; to devote time to differentiating between a Brownist or an Anabaptist or an Antinomian would not reduce the threat those sectarians pose to right religious thought—and potentially to religious and civic order as well. What is repeatedly emphasized in these tracts is the threat these beliefs pose to stability and the potential ways they can corrupt an otherwise unsuspecting populace of innocent believers. Evoking such a vague sense of menace is of course an effective rhetorical strategy; an amorphous heretic is a particularly insidious threat to order, and if one cannot adequately identify a threat, one cannot also root out that threat with any efficacy. Writing in 1605 on the threat of Puritanism, for example, Church of England clergyman Oliver Ormerod echoes Baxter's contention when he asserts, "as *Proteus*

changed himself into divers shapes . . . so the Puritane changeth himself likewise into divers shapes, and appeareth sometimes like a Protestant, sometimes like a Papist, and sometimes like an Anabaptist."[4] A protean heretic could even appear in the guise of his or her own professed enemy; the threat they represent is then both pervasive and elusive.

One mode of diffusing such a threat is through parody and public ridicule, and the early modern English stage provides abundant examples of religious figures portrayed as hapless buffoons incapable of any kind of true sedition; the effectiveness of such parody at mitigating any threat to the religious order is most likely nil, but, of course, early modern English theater is not necessarily in the business of maintaining the status quo. Still, for Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson in particular, a keen dislike for Puritans, Familists, and other sectarians can be clearly discerned in plays like *The Family of Love*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and the two plays under consideration here: Middleton's *The Puritan, or the Widow of Watling Street* and Jonson's *The Alchemist*. Middleton's Puritans—Nicholas St. Antlings, Simon St. Mary Overies, and Frailty—and Jonson's Anabaptists—Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias—are, by turns, gullible, greedy, hypocritical, and so precise in their understanding of Scripture that they actually become libertines; this last point is key to an understanding of the way Middleton and Jonson's parody works. These characters are antinomian, and though these playwrights might not call attention to their characters' antinomianism by labeling them as such, the actions of those characters betray a deep-seated anxiety about charismatic personal piety, the potential for religious chaos, and the need for an interpretive framework that allows for personal freedom while at the same time quelling rebellion/heresy. What these two plays embody is several layers of polemical commentary on the early modern religious environment, and the fact that the

characters under scrutiny self-identify as Puritans and Anabaptists is central to their work as parodic texts illustrating the threat of sectaries. The Puritans and Anabaptists in these plays are clearly parodic figures, but in the course of illustrating their hypocritical precisianism, Middleton and Jonson also illustrate the threatening, amorphous nature of heretical belief—the Puritans/Anabaptists slip into antinomianism, but they could also be Familists or Quakers or the like if such a shift would be to their advantage, and thus their anarchic potential can never quite be diffused, though they are humiliated or temporarily subdued by the end of each play.

Critical attention to these buffoonish parodies of religious figures has tended to highlight what the playwrights make abundantly clear: Puritans—and Puritans disguised as Anabaptists—are hypocritical, self-righteous fools who are not above earthly desires for wealth and pleasure, but who purport to be God's elect and who will happily cheat or steal or fornicate if it serves their turn. As our understanding of more marginal religious groups like Familists and Brownists has come to the forefront of recent critical studies, so too, I argue, should we cultivate a better understanding of antinomianism and the ways that stage depictions of antinomian acts betray a preoccupation with personal piety and the potential for religious chaos in early modern England. What Middleton and Jonson stage in these antinomian moments is a wishful dismissal of the threat Puritanism could represent, the threat of both strict, overbearing constraint and the potential anarchy that comes from over-privileging individual conscience. When Nicholas in *The Puritan* declares that he will happily "nim" something but refuses to "steal" it because the Biblical commandment against theft uses the word "steal" (1.4.141-48), he demonstrates the precisianist lengths a hypocritical Puritan will go to in order to maintain a sense of

righteousness while also doing exactly as they please.[5] When Ananias in *The Alchemist* attributes Tribulation's twisted logic—logic that will allow them to ignore the unscrupulous means by which they must further "the holy cause" (3.1.11-50)—to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit, they demonstrate how one might pervert a bedrock of Protestant faith in order to further his or her own sinful ends.[6] In portraying their Puritans as scurrilous libertines, Middleton and Jonson are participating, not only in a widespread discourse about the potential dangers inchoate in Puritan belief, but in a larger effort to discredit Puritans by associating them with dangerous sectarians such as Anabaptists, Familists, Brownists, and antinomians. In the process, these playwrights are also contributing to an atmosphere of fear and mistrust with regard to these sects while at the same time seeming to reduce them to bumbling, nearly harmless gulls and fools.

William Hacket and the Threat of Transgressive Agency

There is no shortage of colorful tales of charismatic religious frauds in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, but one of the most fascinating is that of William Hacket, a self-styled prophet whose name continues to echo through polemics well after his death by hanging for sedition. Writing in 1655, Baxter explains, "Of this tribe was *Hacket, Coppinger* and *Arthington,* who lived a while as rapt up in the spirit, and in Antinomian fancies; and a great number of their party called *Grundletonians*. . . . I had an old Godly friend that lived neer them, and went once among them, and they breathed on him as to give him the Holy Ghost, and his family for three daies after pereceived him as a man of another spirit as half in an ecstasie, and after that he came to hmiself [*sic*], and came neer them no more."[7] Baxter's account here summarizes the relationship of Hacket—a self-styled prophet who claimed to be the messiah reborn—with the Puritan

community, who were at first supportive of his claims to be inspired by the spirit of God, but who distanced themselves from him after his trial and execution in 1591, when it was made clear that what Hacket desired was not simply religious reform, but also the assassination of the Queen and all of her advisors. By the end of his short career as a would-be messiah, Hacket's sense of his guidance by the Spirit was so strong that he felt confident challenging even God himself. Alexandra Walsham explains that having been "tried and convicted of treason, on 28 July Hacket was hung, drawn, and quartered on a gibbet erected near the spot by Cheapside Cross where his inglorious reign had begun less than a fortnight before. Pouring forth terrible blasphemies and railing loudly against Elizabeth I, he uttered one last execrable prayer: 'O God of heaven, mightie Jehovah . . . send some miracle out of a cloude to convert these Infidels, and deliver me from these mine enemies: If not, I will fire the heavens, and teare thee from thy throne with my handes.'"[8] Far from merely claiming to enact God's direct will in the world, then, Hacket had usurped God's position, replacing God's will with his own, decidedly human will.

Even after his swift downfall, not every assessment of Hacket was entirely condemnatory. Writing almost lovingly about "Hacquet" and his cohorts in his massively influential 1593 *Of the lavves of ecclesiasticall politie,* for example, Richard Hooker—who one might comfortably term a founder of Anglican theological thought—expresses his pity for their plight and laments that via Hacket and his cohorts' "passions of mind . . . thus were they trained by faire waies first accompting their own extraordinarie love to this Discipline a token of Gods more then ordinarie love towardes them; from hence they grewe to a strong conceipt that God which had moved them to love his Discipline more then the common sorte of men did might have a purpose by their meanes to bring a

wonderfull worke to pass."[9] Hooker leaves room in this account for a positive reading of Hacket's inspiration; God did seem to love Hacket more than "ordinary" and might well have divinely inspired him to effect change. Ironically, however, the more Hacket might have become convinced of his real inspiration by God, the more arrogant he became, and thus the more readily he departed from his godly path. Eventually, God "left them made in the ende an example for head-strong and inconsiderate zeale," a cautionary tale of taking one's position as God's chosen prophet and warrior beyond that which God has actually sanctioned.[10]

In most accounts, Hacket's tale reads like a polemicist's fable of the most unscrupulous and dangerous antinomian in history, and indeed, the language used to describe him is the same language often used to describe antinomianism. In Richard Cosin's *Conspiracie, for Pretended Reformation*, the definitive account of Hacket's religious errors and death published in 1592, Cosin recalls one of many instances where Hacket was moved to action by the spirit, this time to symbolically deface a portrait of the Queen; Cosin recounts, "Touching the *Queenes* armes defaced at *Kayes* house, *Hacket* did confesse, at the times of his examination, that hee did it, none other beeing present, and that hee was mooued thereunto inwardly by the spirit, to take away her whole power of her authoritie, and that hee would haue done worse, had it not bene for disquieting his hostesse where he lay, because when shee found it, she was very angrie therewith."[11] Later on the same page of his account, Cosin writes that "hee further confessed, that he meant also her Maiesties Counsell should bee remooued, because they were (hee sayde) wicked: and that hee himselfe (beeing mooued by the spirit) would haue placed certaine other new Counsellors (whome hee then named) to wayte vpon the

Queene, and to reforme Religion."[12] In rapid succession, Hacket moves from the controversial—albeit relatively harmless—act of defacing a portrait to a serious consideration of treasonous acts; later, Hacket would declare a desire to assassinate the Queen herself, presumably under the guidance of "the spirit" that had guided his previous actions. This language sounds much like that of antinomianism, and later accounts of Hacket make this connection concrete. In the 1655 report of Hacket's rise and demise quoted above, for example, Baxter groups Hacket with Grindeltonians and explicitly identifies him as an antinomian.[13] David Como, in his comprehensive study of pre-Civil War antinomianism, singles out Grindleton as "the earliest and most important hatching-ground for antinomian ideas,"[14] and though there is little to connect Hacket to the Grindletonians other than relative proximity, Baxter's identification of Hacket with antinomianism—even in hindsight—is potentially illuminating for our own consideration of self-styled "prophets" who claim to rely on inner motions of the spirit but who are most likely acting on the impulses of their own will.

Tellingly, Hacket is also linked with various other sects, most prominently Anabaptism and Puritanism. In his account, Cosin repeatedly likens Hacket to an Anabaptist; in a succinct summation of the problem Hacket poses, Cosin writes, "This he exemplified by the *Anabaptists* at *Munster* in *Westphalia,* and some others: that in like sort (as they did) this *Hacket* also affirmeth hee was sent from God, was a principall *Angel* sent before the Iudgement, that he doth participate (with horror I reherse it, said master *Sollicitor)* of the humane nature of *Iesus Christ,* and the two other are *Prophets,* one of *Mercy,* and the other of *Iudgement."*[15] Hacket's revolutionary actions—undertaken with a facade of God's inspiration and grace—exactly mirror those of

Anabaptists, and in turn, antinomians. Implicated here as well are Puritans; as W. J. Sheils shows in his consideration of Hacket's place in the Puritan community in Oundle, Hacket's conspiracy "had its roots firmly in local puritan developments" and was not rejected by some Puritan leaders until after Hacket's swift fall.[16] And, as Walsham notes, Hacket's plot had negative consequences for the Puritan cause, "already under a cloud as a result of Martin Marprelate's savage but hilarious tirade against 'that swinish rable' of 'pettie popes' and 'proud prelates', the bishops. Seized upon by conformist propagandists, the episode became the subject of several brutally anti-puritan tracts."[17] At once, Hacket represents the worst of beliefs common to Puritanism, Anabaptism, and antinomianism and provides an ideal model for anyone hoping to discredit any one—or all—of these groups.

In their comedies, Middleton and Jonson dramatize these same kinds of beliefs, and although Nicholas, Tribulation, and Ananias do not declare themselves king of kings or threaten the thrones of both Queen and God, their small acts of antinomianism represent the dangerous potential of already-established Puritan tendencies and desires for reform; as Steils points out with regard to Hacket's place in the Puritan community, "These hopes of reform, expressed in quasi-revolutionary terms, were an intrinsic feature of puritan preaching and thought, and it is not surprising that, in the aftermath of the Star Chamber trial, some of the more hot-headed godly attempted to bring that reformation about by revolutionary means in order to fulfil that prophecy."[18] Middleton and Jonson's characters have little interest in a godly revolution; their concerns are firmly for their own comfort and advancement, and this is one reason why they are such successful parodic figures. They take key tenets of Puritan practice—precise attention to Scripture and a

desire to enact God's will in the world—and reduce them to the selfish impulses of fools. They slip from upstanding godly brethren into antinomian dupes in a set of brief exchanges, and in doing so mirror the connections between these two groups that were already current in English culture at the time these plays were first performed.

The Godly on Stage

As we shall see, both *The Puritan* and *The Alchemist* are plays rooted firmly in their time and place—in some senses quite literally—and a key part of understanding both plays' cultural resonance must be an attention to a contemporaneous dialogue about Puritans and, as I argue, about the antinomian threat represented by self-righteous believers who believe they have unmediated access to God's will. These plays participate in a polemical tradition of attempting to diffuse the influence of Puritan critiques of contemporary culture—a series of complaints that would come to dominate the political and religious landscape of mid-seventeenth century England—through parody and slander, and inherent in that slander is an identification of Puritanism with insidious heretical groups, chief among them the antinomians. Because, as Huston Diehl terms it, religion was "neither a stable nor a unifying influence, but rather the very 'center and source of stress' in English society," it seems natural that the conflicts that saturated religious discourse—and hence, early modern society—would find an outlet on the early modern stage.[19] And while an entire network of polemicists and tract writers might exchange barbs and parse Scripture on a seemingly endless sea of paper, playwrights have the power to dramatize the heart of such matters in a few words or gestures; the key antinomian scenes in both of these plays strike at the core of post-Reformation fears concerning personal piety and religious and social order. I contend that Middleton and

Jonson tap into an existent network of meanings and connections to characterize their Puritan/"Anabaptist" characters as antinomians; these connections provide both a key layer of parodic meaning as well as a more disruptive shading to their characters. It is not simply that these Puritans and Anabaptists are being parodied as hypocrites in the vein of Jonson's own Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in *Bartholomew Faire* or Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; the parody Middleton and Jonson establish in *The Puritan* and *The Alchemist* works in a very specific way, and hinges on both the Puritan figures' interpretations of Scripture and their tendency to cling so tightly to the letter of the law that they actual betray the spirit of it while at times claiming to be inspired by the Spirit of God.

One professed goal of this study is to bring precision to an examination of sectarian groups like antinomians; it is highly problematic for modern scholars to equate "antinomian" with "lawless" without reference to actual antinomian texts or believers, as it betrays an inattention to theological subtleties as well as the existent variety of the sixteenth and seventeenth century religious landscape in England. Though they are themselves difficult to identify and define, one key group in this landscape is Puritans. In this discussion, I will rely on a definition of Puritanism articulated succinctly by Kristen Poole, one that encapsulates the heart of the issues I explore here. Poole writes,

> "Puritan," as it was used in pamphlets, poems, and plays, did not label a particular type of person; rather, in its early modern literary usage the term most often signified social elements that *resisted* categorization. In a culture loudly proclaiming the need for religious uniformity, "puritans" were the mutable, the indeterminable, the unlocatable; they seemingly incorporated pluralities, oppositions, and binaries. They were at once Protestant, Papist, and Jew; repressive killjoys and wanton libertines; of foreign origin and dangerously, subterraneously domestic; the sacred and the obscene.[20]

As we have already seen, this mutability was a liability for Puritanism's detractors; from the most cynical perspective, a Puritan could mutate quickly from a precisianist to an Anabaptist and even into a Papist. In truth, that there was a large and entirely unified group of believers marching under the banner of "Puritanism" is highly unlikely, especially in the early part of the seventeenth century when *The Puritan* and *The Alchemist* were first performed. [21] Even when a group of believers self identified as Puritans—or one of the "godly" or "brethren"—their beliefs and doctrines ran the gamut and could result in wildly different outpourings of individual worship.

Though it has proven nearly impossible for modern scholars to attempt a comprehensive definition of Puritanism, Middleton and Jonson's contemporaries seemed to feel it their duty to attempt such a classification, if only so that their readers could learn to identify and avoid Puritanical errors; however, even these writers can admit the difficulties of cataloguing Puritan belief. In a 1605 tract entitled *English Puritanisme Containening The maine opinions of the rigidest sort of those that are called Puritanes In the Realme of England,* religious controversialist William Bradshaw admits the problems of defining or categorizing a Puritan; the goal of this work is to catalog the "many absurd, erronious, Scismaticall, and Heriticall opinions, Concerninge Religion, Church, Goverment, and the Civil Magistracie" held by the "worst of them hold," but there is an admission on the part of the author that some Puritans hold "other opinions (yea some cleane contradictorie to these)" not documented here.[22] After a detailed, if short, list of the primary tenets of Puritan faith, Bradshaw concludes by stating, "They hould that not one of these opinions can be proved to be contrarie to the word of God and that if they might have leave that they are able to answer all that hath ben written against any one of

them."[23] The primary role this author sees Puritans occupying is that of interpreter, and in that role, Puritans can justify anything through their twisted logic and self-serving interpretations of Scripture. Again and again in the tract, Puritan dependence on Scriptural interpretation to justify their beliefs and actions is emphasized; Puritans believe that "the word of God contained in the writings of the Prophets and Apostles, is of absolute perfection" and "the sole Canon and rule of all matters of Religion . . . and that whatsoever done in the same service and worship cannot bee justified by the said word, is unlawfull."[24] Furthermore, they trust only that which is "apparently justified by the word, or by necessarie consequent deduced from the same";[25] this "deduction" is not centralized in one discernable authority, but is left to individual pastors, congregations and believers. Clearly, the potential for anarchy is palpable, and the tone of this tract is both condemnatory and keenly troubled.

In a general sense, the stage Puritan could be seen to embody the worst potential of Poole's definition of Puritanism above; acted by a Proteus, representative of Proteus, the Puritans under examination here embody contradictions and refract problematic beliefs that strike at the heart of potentially subversive tenets within Protestantism itself. Puritans are stereotypically seen as killjoys and vehement opponents of the theater; portraying them as characters on the stage was thus a particularly effective means of satire. In exploring the Protean charge with regards to anti-theatricality, Jonas Barish notes that, for Puritans, the idea of constant mutability that pervades the very profession of an actor represents a "lapse, dictated by weakness" that is also a falling into sin and a separation from God.[26] For antitheatricalists like William Prynne and Stephen Gosson, the theater stood for this weakness, a falling into "pleasure . . . idleness . . . [and] the

rejection of hard work and thrift as the roads to salvation."[27] As critics have pointed out, however, it is shortsighted to oversimplify the relationship between Puritans and antitheatricalists. Diehl has illuminated the ways in which the role of the precisianist preacher and the role of the playwright often collided; both are in the business of captivating their audience's attention through spectacle and in potentially instructing and guiding them. Perhaps more than any other depiction of Puritans on the early modern British stage, Middleton's play illustrates the potential of precisianism to become libertinism. Other stage Puritans—Shakespeare's Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, for instance—illustrate a kind of precisianist inflexibility and hypocrisy, but *The Puritan* is unique in its depiction of its Puritan characters as near ciphers espousing one problematic "theological" philosophy after another. Malvolio is, arguably, at least somewhat sympathetic; Middleton's Puritans are defined by little more than their foolishness. Similarly, while Jonson labels his antinomian characters "Anabaptists," they are actually nearly identical to his own or Middleton's Puritan characters; as Baxter insinuates, there was a great deal of slippage between these two terms at the time these plays were being performed.[28]

But, as Diehl terms it, the "rivalry between puritans and playwrights might be understood not so much as a struggle between those who seek to reform society and those who, wishing to resist that reformation, celebrate traditional forms of theater and festive play, but rather as a struggle over who is authorized to instruct, correct, and reform society."[29] In *The Puritan*, as Diehl aptly notes, Middleton lampoons both the Puritans—hypocritical, changeable, and gullible as they are—but also the "theatrical" figures who attempt to dupe the Puritan widow and her daughters; savvy viewers should recognize

and reject both groups' fickle piety and transparent chicanery, respectively. Diehl goes on to write, "Exposing both the hypocrisy of puritanism and the deception of the stage, they [playwrights] seek to legitimate the stage, paradoxically, by inculcating in their own spectators certain habits—an intense scrutiny of the gap between interior thoughts and external behavior, a deep distrust of theatricality, a heightened vigilance toward human failings—ordinarily associated with puritan discipline."[30] In this assertion, Diehl echoes those made in works like Thomas Heywood's famous 1612 *An apology for actors*, in which he situates the theater in relation to religious discourse as a potential tool for that discourse and a means by which the population can come to knowledge of their own vice and the ideals of virtue, key issues in a discussion of post-Reformation morality, subjectivity, and salvation anxiety. Eschewing any support for "licentious" theater (and thus marking a distinction between good and bad theater), Heywood claims that actors should be personable and eloquent in order to edify and claims that, if performed correctly, theater can speak to the merits of a nation, perfect the tongue of that nation, and instruct the members of that nation.[31] Heywood also distinguishes between dramatic genres, but notes that if the object of a play is moral, it can "perswade men to humanity and good life, to instruct them in civility and good manners, shewing them the fruits of honesty, and the end of villany."[32] Seeing villainy revealed and punished on stage could, in the view of theatrical apologists, stir the viewer to virtue, or at the least help them to distinguish villainy from virtue when they see it.

What Middleton and Jonson are doing with their Puritan figures is not overtly instructional, but in fact, their parody provides its own kind of instruction about the evils of the group being parodied; by presenting their antinomian characters as greedy,

subversive, and devious, these playwrights are demonstrating to their audiences the potential anarchy embodied by Puritan belief in farcical microcosm, and from there the audience should ideally develop a skepticism about the "godly" and their intentions. The theater seems an ideal place for the depiction of antinomians; actors also occupied a certain lawless "niche" in seventeenth-century society and seemed to dictate their own behavior without reference to accepted societal or religious norms. This "lawlessness" allowed actors to use the theater as a forum to flout certain societal norms and restrictions, such as sumptuary laws, and to explore issues that would otherwise be taboo. As Steven Mullaney has posited, the position of the theater at the outskirts of society—both literally and figuratively—allowed it to serve as a forum for "the negotiation and production of social meaning, of historical subjects, and of the systems of power that at once enable and constrain those subjects."[33] It also allowed for the representation and diffusion of problematic figures—like Puritans. Consider, for example, this quote by Jonathan Haynes, imagining that, instead of "rogues," Haynes is writing about seditious religious figures:

> But the rogue found himself quite welcome in the theater. There the audience could indulge, in safety from his vermin and pilfering, the curiosity and fascinated ambiguity always accompanying the figure of the rogue, and could indulge also the temptation to think through, via the status crime of vagabondage, the themes of social identity and political organization which had become unavoidable in England's post-feudal society, and which now preoccupied the drama.[34]

Like rogues, Puritans and other problematic religious figures had dangerous potential, and for every fool like Nicholas in *The Puritan*, there was a real-life "prophet" like William Hacket, plotting to assassinate the Queen and declaring himself messiah. In the

theater, sectarians could be observed, ridiculed, and relegated to powerlessness by the end of the show.

Puritans and theaters thus have a curious, complicated history, and indeed, some, like Patrick Collinson, posit that the theater in some important ways actually *creates* Puritanism. He asserts that "'Puritans' in Elizabethan and Jacobean England existed by virtue of being perceived to exist, most of all by their enemies, but eventually to themselves and to each other. Puritanism was more of a process and relationship than it was state or entity."[35] Although we may think we know a Puritan when we seen one, Collinson argues, what we are really seeing is the confluence of stereotypes created and propagated by the theater itself; this argument finds its roots in the attempt to discredit the Puritan author(s) of the Martin Marprelate tracts, and as other scholars—notably Kristen Poole—have elaborated, depictions of stage Puritans seems to have begun as an attempt to paint those pamphleteers as grotesque and comical in order to mitigate their influence.[36] With the depiction of Martin on stage—a means of diffusing his seditious potential—Collinson asserts, the main "elements" of Puritan parody, "outward piety . . , inner corruption, consisting of avarice, lust and sedition" become established as the "stable repertory" of those who wish to discredit Puritans as social commentators and figures of real reformed religiosity.[37] The Puritan-as-hypocrite thus becomes the standard, and the standard repeats itself in the drama that followed; when a hypocrite is needed, a Puritan caricature will fill the void and provide the template. Though acknowledging that "actual" Puritanism is not reducible to such a clear set of attributes, Collinson does show how actual Puritans—here represented by the Martinists—threaten the status quo; in response, establishment voices strike back by parodying those Puritans in the same terms

in which those Puritans questioned the normative state of affairs. The hypocrisy and avarice Martin sees in the bishops then become the means by which Martin—here representative of all Puritans—are disarmed. Thus, the relationship between the "real" world and the theatrical world becomes clear; the theatrical world, taking its cues from actual persons and events, exaggerates those persons and events to construct an almost monstrous fiction that swallows any real referent whole.

The line between the "real" and the theatrical in Middleton's *The Puritan* seems especially blurred considering the close connections Middleton draws between his Puritan gulls and the place of the play. As Swapan Chakravorty points out—contra Margot Heinemann's claim that we should associate the play's Puritans with moderate reformers—the churches of St. Antholin's and St. Mary Overy's, overseen by Nicholas Felton and William Symonds, are clearly represented in the play in the characters Nicholas St. Antlings and Simon St. Mary Overies. As Chakravorty notes, while Felton and Symonds were generally seen as moderates, "it does not follow that Jacobeans associated them or their congregations with moderation."[38] Looking back on England's troubles, for example, Restoration scholar Sir William Dugdale wrote in 1681, "[T]hey set up a Morning-Lecture at St. *Antholines*-Church in *London;* where (as Probationers for that purpose) they first made tryal of their abilities; which place was the grand Nursery, whence most of the Seditious Preachers were after sent abroad throughout all *England,* to poyson the People with their Antimonarchical Principles."[39] Mary Bly confirms that "St. Antlings was famous for a Puritan lecture series that began in 1599 and daily gathered devout Londoners."[40] Bly further cements ties between the play and its geographical context when she points out that the Widow, said to be "of Watling Street" is clearly

connected to the church of St. Mary Overies, itself located on Watling Street, and at the end of the play, when she is to remarry, the Widow chooses St. Antlings for the setting of her wedding.[41] Most intriguingly, Bly argues that the characters of Nicholas and Simon "*are* churches" and that, in a dark parody of the confluence of Christ and the church, "these two churches undergo a transgressive reformulation into sexualized, foolish, males."[42] Middleton thus utilizes already-established associations between these Puritan houses of worship and the radical ideas they are said to propagate and disseminate in order to ground his satire.

To cement the connections between Middleton's drama and the Puritans it overtly references, we may turn to William Crashaw's "The sermon preached at the Crosse, Feb. xiiii. 1607" for an overt reference to *The Puritan*; chiefly, Crashaw takes issue with the parodies of "*Nicolas S. Antlings*" and "*Simon S. Maryoueries*," as the connection between these fictional characters and real churches and the godly men who oversee them is clear.[43] Bemoaning the fact that stage plays are decaying the moral fabric of England, Crashaw writes that they "bring religion and holy things upon the stage" and abuse "God himselfe."[44] He continues, "*Two hypocrites must be brought foorth; and how shall they bee described but by these names, Nicolas S. Ant[...]ngs, Simon Saint Maryoueries?* Thus hypocrisie a child of hell must beare the names of two Churches of God, and two wherein Gods name is called on publikely euery day in the yeere, and in one of them his blessed word preached every day (an example scarce matchable in the world)."[45] These churches are thus "dishonoured, and that not on the stage nely, but even in print."[46] Middleton's parody is especially provocative given that the audience would know exactly which churches he was referencing; he degrades them by associating them with these stage

hypocrites, and by doing so "in print," he presumably ensures an even wider audience who will thus associate these churches with such depravity. By parodying these men as Puritans, Crashaw complains, Middleton is subverting the power of real Puritans to achieve their godly mission and, by parading such figures on the lowly stage, Middleton is insulting both God and the godly. The fact that Middleton's parody hits close enough to home to elicit a reaction from the actual Puritan community—and that Crashaw here ascribes real power to that parody—reveals that *The Puritan* has far-reaching implications beyond the stage, and that Nicholas, Simon, and Frailty, while providing comic relief, also speak to real fears about what it might mean for individuals to take the power of interpretation too far into their own hands. Though relatively secondary to the primary plot of the play, the Puritan servants in *The Puritan* suggest larger issues of personal morality and Scriptural exegesis that have massive implications beyond the boards of the stage.

As Crashaw indicates, Middleton's *The Puritan, or the Widow of Watling Street* was indeed first published in 1607 and, though the title page identifies the author as "W.S.,"[47] recent critical work has placed this play firmly in Middleton's oeuvre, though some critics—most notably Margot Heinemann—have resisted this placement in favor of asserting that Middleton himself might have been Puritan, or at least a Puritan sympathizer.[48] She asserts that, for Middleton, "a Puritan always means a sectary, and what he is satirising is not the broad main stream of reforming opposition, or the opinions of most of the 'middling sort' in the early years of the seventeenth century, but rather . . . 'ultra-holiness' and hypocrisy."[49] When she admits anti-Puritan satire, she appeals to the taste of the "common people" to account for Middleton's departure from what she sees as

his own personal views.[50] Still, though Heinemann acknowledges that hypocrisy and sectarianism could fall under the attack of Middleton's pen, she argues decidedly against Middleton as author of *The Puritan*. Nearly twenty years after Heinemann's book, N. W. Bawcutt took up the issue contra Heinemann to assert that Middleton "frequently and consistently referred to Puritans with contempt."[51] Donna B. Hamilton, in the introduction to *The Puritan* in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works,* sets the play in context with the Gunpowder Plot and asserts that Middleton worked to demonize Puritans and Catholics alike by aligning their practices for the purposes of parody.[52] Hamilton identifies the "dramatization of utter foolishness [as] perhaps the distinguishing mark of Middleton's satire in this play," and one example she provides is the Widow's acceptance of Pieboard's contention that her deceased husband is in purgatory, foolish because Protestants absolutely rejected purgatory as the "chief fiction of Roman Catholicism, invented by the pope to increase his power and extort money from the people." But, as Hamilton succinctly terms it, "in *The Puritan Widow*, the identification of Puritan with papist knows no limit."[53] Such a pairing may seem unlikely, but to recall Ormerod, we must remember that a Puritan can appear "sometimes like a Protestant, sometimes like a Papist, and sometimes like an Anabaptist."[54] He or she could also be a stand in for any number of other pesky marginal religious groups. In his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* entry for Thomas Middleton, Gary Taylor raises an intriguing point about Middleton's own experiences with sectarians; he notes that Middleton's satirizing of Puritans in *The Puritan* "may have had a personal edge: the brother of Avis's [Middleton's sister's] first husband was Roger Waterer, active for at least twenty years in the radical Brownist sect, but also accused of having defrauded Avis in the first weeks of

her widowhood."[55] What one sectarian is capable of, so another sectarian might as easily do; for the purposes of satire, a Puritan is as good as a Brownist.

Absurd Precisianism: "Nimming" with a Clear Conscience

Regardless of Middleton's personal Puritan or anti-Puritan leanings, the Puritans in *The Puritan* are clearly held up for ridicule. *The Puritan* is riddled with jests and jibes that poke fun at stereotypically Puritan behaviors and beliefs, including hypocrisy, anti-theatricalism, and long-winded self-righteousness. When the widow and her daughters, brother-in-law, and servants return from the patriarch's funeral at the outset of the play, for instance, they speak of him in what they imagine to be fond terms, but the traits they laud are those of the stereotypical stage Puritan: although the Widow contends that her late husband "outshined" all others, it is clear he outshined them only in greed and cunning. Several times characters mention that the late patriarch cheated a rightful heir out of some lands and then bestowed them on his frivolous son; this seems to be his greatest achievement, and speaks volumes about his character. The Puritan servants carry on their late master's tendency toward stereotypically Puritan modes of behavior and argumentation; when told that he must be "employed as an actor" (1.4.179) in order to cheat his master, for instance, the Puritan servant Nicholas St. Antlings balks, "An actor? O no, that's a player, and our parson rails against players mightily, I can tell you, because they brought him drunk upo'th' stage once, as he will be horribly drunk" (1.4.180-83). Nicholas alludes here to both the anti-theatrical tendencies of Puritans as well as the licentiousness of his parson, a man who purports to be godly but who must face an accurate reflection of his true self on the stage. And later in the play, while waiting for Pieboard to conjure up a demon or two in search of the chain Nicholas has "nimmed," Sir

Godfrey, wishing to help, tells Edmond, "Come, we'll into the next room, and because we'll be sure to keep him out there, we'll bar up the door with some of the godlies' zealous works" (4.2.95-97). Because these treatises are so massive and long-winded, they serve as bricks to form a bulky, impenetrable barrier. Middleton effectively uses this and the other Puritan stereotypes for his parody, painting his Puritan characters as gulls who will happily cheat others and indulge in immoderate activities, all while pretending godliness. However, the most powerful anti-Puritan satire Middleton injects into *The Puritan* comes in the form of a seemingly simple conversation over Biblical interpretation, one that registers the Puritan servants as dangerous individualists whose brand of Scriptural interpretation, if widely disseminated, could wholly undermine all attempts by social and religious authorities to regulate morality. The Puritan servants' misreadings and missteps reveal that they often eschew outward moral constraint in favor of loose reinterpretations of moral injunctions that suit the present situation; the result of these missteps in the world of the play is relatively minor, but the implications for early modern English society—a society permeated with concern about Puritans and lawlessness alike—are substantial.

Presented with opportunities for Scriptural interpretation, these figures resort to antinomian modes, ultimately asserting a liberty that results from a kind of precisianist attention to the "letter" of the law. They are paradoxical antinomians; they find lawlessness in an overly scrupulous attention to the law, but in doing so, they fulfill the pattern identified by Theodore Dwight Bozeman's theory that antinomianism represents a "backlash" against the obsession with overly precise modes of piety, like casuistry.[56] They represent both Puritans—the most infamous antitheatricalists threatening the stage

for which Middleton wrote—and anti-Puritans, comical hypocrites and bunglers who are easily dismissed or forgotten by the end of the play, though the anxiety they represent with regard to identity, morality, and theatricality itself remains. Their constantly shifting modes of interpretation elide categorization, and they represent an anxious threat to any kind of authority in these plays; they also stand in for the real-life figures who offer the same kinds of threat to actual social and religious authorities: the Puritans and, to an extent, other sects, from Familists to Anabaptists. These figures are difficult to pin down; like the actors playing them, they are changeable and often fickle creatures, and their fickleness, as we will see, intrudes upon their ability to read rightly and understand Scriptural and moral injunctions, which in turn leads them into antinomian error. Portraying these figures as antinomians in some ways serves to discredit them, but in other, significant ways, this depiction only increases their threat; in *The Puritan*, the Puritans' misunderstandings are presented in the comic mode, but the threat they pose is not entirely dissipated by this comedy.

The Scriptural misreadings in the play are most often performed by the Puritan servants Nicholas St. Antlings, Simon St. Mary Overies, and Frailty; when confronted by Corporal Oath, one of the scoundrels who will conspire to help his friends George Pieboard and Captain Idle marry the Puritan widow and her daughters, Nicholas announces he will visit Idle, who is his kinsman, and requests that Simon and Frailty lie to the widow for him. When asked if Puritans are allowed to lie, Frailty answers, "O ay, we may lie, but we must not swear" and Simon elaborates, "True, we may lie with our neighbor's wife, but we must not swear we did so" (1.3.64-66).[57] Frailty and Simon take the commandments against adultery and lying—"You shall not covet your neighbor's

house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exo. 20:17) and "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exo. 20:16), respectively—and twist them rhetorically to somehow become "You shall lie with your neighbor's wife at will, but not swear you did." Because the injunction against coveting thy neighbor's wife does not say "lie with thy neighbor's wife," it is perfectly acceptable for them to do so; curiously, however, "swearing" and "bearing false witness" seem to be too closely aligned for comfort, and thus swearing is off limits. Some clue to this strange distinction might lie in Matthew 5:33-37, which reads, in part, "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool. . . ." Taken from Christ's Sermon on the Mount, this passage clarifies and intensifies the Mosaic prohibition against bearing false witness; Christ's words are clear: he allows for no swearing. In upholding an injunction against swearing while at the same time ignoring the need for charity, Frailty and Simon seem to assign contradictory meanings to the same Biblical passage. After parsing out whether or not they are allowed to lie, Nicholas decides what fib he can use to explain his absence; he tells Simon to "[s]ay that [he is] gone to a fast," a "current" or acceptable excuse that Sir Godfrey will accept (1.3.69). Fasting may seem a relatively innocuous practice—and a reasonable lie for a community defined by their intense religious beliefs—but as the editors of *The Collected Middleton* point out, fasting was a potentially suspect activity often grouped with "prophesyings and conventicles" and that Canon 72 in the Canons of 1604 instructed "Ministers not to appoint public or private Fasts or Prophecies, or to

Exorcise, but by authority."[58] By claiming it as an acceptable activity that his Puritan master will condone—and by lying in the first place—Nicholas digs himself deeper into a position that is both an exaggerated version of Puritan rhetoric and antinomian rhetoric as it was understood by its detractors. Instead of using Christian liberty to argue for freedom from the Law, they use Christ's words to justify moments of over-scrupulousness; they seem to adhere strictly to the letter in favor of the spirit, but at the same time, the Christian virtues of honesty and chastity are disregarded because they are not laid down precisely in the Law. The misinterpretations here, while comical, also have sinister, antinomian implications: if one eschews the letter of the law for the "spirit" of the law, and that spirit is determined solely by the individual interpreter, then almost all licentious behavior becomes acceptable. Though portrayed as fools, Nicholas, Frailty, and Simon are Protean masters of ever-shifting meaning production.

Corporal's assessment of their hair splitting is that their answers are "an excellent tag of religion" (1.3.67); that is, they have all the appearance of religion, but their interiority is empty of meaning. Nicholas is obsessed with following the "rules" as long as his obedience can be predicated solely on overly strict attention to the language of those rules; Nicholas confuses the literal meaning of the Word for the true meaning. Nicholas mistakes the "spirit" of the law for the "letter" while at the same time completely misinterpreting both; he fails as both a precisianist and as an antinomian, but his bumbling misinterpretations smack of both. His over-precisianism causes him to abandon any semblance of moral behavior, and through his manglings of language he frees himself from any behavioral constraints. Though this is not behavior antinomian

apologists would condone, it is certainly the commonly perceived threat antinomianism represented.

An exchange later in the same scene, when Nicholas is asked to steal a gold chain from Sir Godfrey, the brother-in-law of the Puritan widow, even more explicitly represents Nicholas's antinomian mode of interpretation. Captain, in attempting to goad Nicholas into stealing Sir Godfrey's chain, asks, "If thou art minded to do me good—as thou gapst upon me comfortably and givst me charitable faces, which indeed is but a fashion in you all that are puritans—wilt soon at night steal me thy master's chain?" (1.4.104-8). When Nicholas vehemently refuses, Captain Idle jests that "[t]hough he be a puritan, yet he will be a true man" (1.4.124-25), an obvious jibe at slippery, hypocritical Puritans who can be impossible to read correctly. To this, Nicholas replies, "Why, cousin, you know 'tis written, thou shalt not steal" (1.4.126-27). In response, Idle urges Nicholas to ignore this commandment in favor of that which instructs the believer to "love thy neighbour and help him in extremities" (1.4.128-9), a commandment Nicholas claims not to know. When the Captain locates this commandment in the "chapter" of "Charity, the second verse" (1.4.132), Nicholas scoffs, "The first of Charity, quoth a. That's a good jest, there's no such chapter in my book" (1.4.133-34). Because the injunction says not to steal, and because "Charity" is not to be found in the Decalogue—or indeed, as a "book" in the Bible in the manner of Exodus or Matthew—Nicholas cannot in good conscience do what Idle asks; here Nicholas seems the stereotypical precisianist, obsessed with the minute details of the written law while disregarding what is clearly a Christian virtue: charity. Nicholas assumes that Idle is moving away from Scripture when he cites the need for charity, but in fact he is most likely referencing 1 Corinthians 13:2, which, in the

authorized *King James Bible* of 1611, reads, "And though I have the gift of prophesie, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge: and though I have all faith, so that I could remoove mountaines, and have no charitie, I am nothing."[59] Acts without the spirit of charity are empty; supposedly "moral" actions without divine referents are thus significantly meaningless. Ironically, the actual content of the second chapter of 1 Corinthians 13, while focusing on the importance of charity, also deals with understanding and knowledge, both of which Nicholas lacks. He is a flawed interpreter even within his own heretical genre, and though he acquiesces to the demands of Idle, as we shall see below, it takes significant textual maneuvering—not an appeal to the spirit of Christ embodied by charity—for him to arrive at the antinomian conclusion. Ironically, then, Nicholas, who expresses antinomian tendencies, cannot properly recognize a moment when the eschewing of works for the spirit would be appropriate; instead, he is ensnared in semantic arguments that ultimately lead him to the wrong conclusions about interpretation and good works.

Nicholas further voices his preoccupation with the letter of the law even more explicitly when he says, "Pray, do not wish me to be hanged. Anything else that I can do, had it been to rob, I would h' done't, but I must not steal. That's the word the literal, thou shalt not steal. And would you wish me to steal then?" (1.4.141-44). Yet, once Idle and Pieboard move away from language that too closely recalls Scripture and change the wording of their request, Nicholas is all too happy to comply; he will "nim" or "rob" Sir Godfrey, but not "steal" from him, because the commandment literally says "Thou shalt not *steale*" (Exo. 20:15; my emphasis).[60] He is not concerned with the spirit of the law, the prohibition against taking and keeping property that is not one's own, but instead

centers his morality on the words themselves, which are in truth empty without the divine referent.[61] To clarify matters and further emphasize the point, Pieboard says, "He is not contented absolutely, as you would say, to steal the chain from him, but to do you a pleasure, he will nim it from him" (1.4.153-55), to which Nicholas confirms, "Ay, that I will, cousin" (1.4.156). Now that the bothersome matter of the Decalogue has been dismissed with language, Nicholas's conscience is not troubling him; he further articulates his resolve when he proclaims, "Nay, grace of God, I'll rob him on't suddenly and hang it in the rosemary bank. But I bear that mind, cousin, I would not steal anything methinks for mine own feather" (1.4.201-4). For an audience, this is clearly a ridiculous declaration; Nicholas will in fact steal Sir Godfrey's chain, and whether he labels it as such or pretends that to "nim" or "rob" is a fundamentally different act, he cannot escape the reality of committing theft. His final declaration—"You see, cousin, I am willing to do you any kindness, always saving myself harmless" (1.4.209-10)—speaks volumes about his character, and about Puritan stereotypes in general; as long as he can justify his actions with slippery interpretations and runs no personal risk, he is perfectly willing to commit any crimes that might be presented to him.

Nicholas is a curious kind of antinomian and anti-antinomian, and his actions reflect the licentious behavior for which antinomians were often charged. In his words and actions he epitomizes the kind of believer criticized by antinomian John Eaton when he writes that those who live only by the literal knowledge of God "takest the word of god, and the doctrine from heaven to be thine only rule, and warrant, and wilt not (as thou sayest) goe one haires breadth from the word."[62] In this world of topsy-turvy moralities, one who keeps the commandments *to the letter* is honest; the larger ethics do not concern

this Puritan, who keeps faith only in the Bible, and then only in the exact words therein. He radically misreads the Bible, and instead of adopting Christ as the rule of faith and interpretive tool for Scripture, as true antinomians purport to do, Nicholas seems to have no interpretive framework supporting his readings of the text; as such, when he strays away from the literal words on the page, he is unable to make Christian sense of them. He becomes the kind of antinomian blasted by Puritan divine Henry Burton, who in his *The Law and the Gospell reconciled*, argues that antinomians are a threat to all authority; without outward constraint, both the moral and civic order are at risk of deteriorating. Indeed, Burton associates antinomians not only with libertines,[63] but again with "Papists," as the antinomian heresy threatens to break "down the walls of the City of God, that so Romes Trojans Horse full of traitorous Engines and armed Engineers, may finde the easier reentry for the erecting of their Dagon."[64] He also denies that, doctrinally, the antinomians have any novelty; rhetorically, he asks, "What Protestant, Divine, or other, but holds justification to be by faith, freely without workes?"[65] For Nicholas, the question is not whether his works will save him; his morality seems to have been formed in a vacuum, and he is concerned only with not doing what will damn him, not with doing what will save him. Curiously, his position is positively antinomian—and, by Burton's standard, also Protestant—in that he assigns no true salvific efficacy to his works; he knows to avoid stealing and swearing because the Scriptural words say to do so, but he seems not to concern himself with the reasoning behind or consequences of these injunctions.

Intriguingly, Middleton's own thoughts on this issue can be brought to bear on his Puritan-cum-antinomians; in the introduction to his *The Two Gates of Salvation, Set wide*

open: OR The Mariage of the Old And new Testament, published two years after *The Puritan*, Middleton identifies the differences between the Old and New Testament, and, typically, he begins by painting a picture of the Mosaic Law as outdated taskmaster. He writes, "God being throughly angred with *Man-kind* for disobedience, put a sharpe bridle into his mouth. That bridle was the Law, that law was a curst *Judge*, and ready to condemne, But the King of *Heaven* being as full of mercy as of Justice, abated the edge of the Axe . . . The bitternesse of the law was tasted, but the sweetnes of *Grace* could not be relished but by hope."[66] Yet, Middleton's ultimate purpose is not to chart the ways in which Christ negates the old law, but instead to show that the New Testament proceeds logically from doctrines found in the Old. Ultimately, Christ is the true center of all Biblical truth and "hath *Married the old and new Testament* together."[67] Middleton implies, with Burton and Traske, that an astute reader can use Christ as a lens through which to understand the ways the Old Testament prefigures a Christian covenant, but at the same time, specifically with Burton, he upholds the importance of the Old Testament on its own merits, implying that it contains discernable, still-relevant truth for the Christian believer. In *The Puritan*, Nicholas's attitude seems to be that the Decalogue is relevant as a "rule," but because he does not temper his adherence to that rule with Christian belief, he fails to act rightly. To Nicholas and his cohorts, the words of the commandments become dead things, and the works that spring from them are detached from any real signification. He is unable to live up to the ideals represented by Burton, Traske, and Middleton himself: he does not use the words of Scripture to overhaul his moral character in fundamental ways, but neither does he successfully embody an ideal represented by Christ.

What Nicholas is, then, is the embodiment of antinomianism as articulated by its most virulent detractors. He is not quite a Puritan because he eschews any attempt at self-perfection through the Word, though when he finally steals the chain, he reveals that he "sneaked it away by little and little most puritanically" and that he will now "hang it between heaven and earth among the rosemary branches" (2.2.3-8), a location that then lends itself to another overly-literal exchange when Sir Godfrey, while in conversation with Pieboard about finding his chain through conjuring, matter-of-factly states, "I know 'tis somewhere above the earth. . . . For first, my chain was rich, and no rich thing shall enter into heaven, you know" (3.5.160-1; 163-64). He is not quite a true antinomian, as his actions are too centered on the self and not on Christ. However, his actions do reveal potentially dangerous cracks in the precisianist Puritan facade, and his arguments question any sense that good works can have merit. For "real" Puritans, Nicholas's actions—and the actions of Simon, Frailty, the widow, and others—would represent unacceptable parodies of genuine concerns with Scriptural interpretation and the efficacy of works.

Jonson's "Anabaptists" and the Motions of the Spirit

In addition to Middleton's representation here, there are a number of Puritan hypocrites and gulls on the early modern English stage, and perhaps the most vicious and well-known Puritan parodies spring from the pen of Ben Jonson. In his play *The Alchemist*, two Puritan figures embody the antinomianism suggested by Nicholas, Frailty, and Simon by appealing directly to "the spirit" to justify their criminal activity.[68] Firstly, however, it is important to note that Jonson's Puritans here are more strictly identified as Anabaptists; though Tribulation Wholesome and Ananias have Puritanical names and

speak like Puritans, when they come to the door, Subtle tells Face, "Pray God it be my Anabaptist" (2.4.20), and indeed, this is the way Tribulation and Ananias are identified in the play. However, Puritans and Anabaptists were essentially synonymous terms for these playwrights and their audiences; as Bawcutt notes, "lumping" Puritans in with sects like "The Anabaptists and The Family of Love . . . [was] a common technique with anti-Puritan satirists."[69] Even Tribulation's name provides several layers of meaning here; it not only conjures visions of Puritan trial—he even says that "[t]hese chastisements are common to the Saints, / And such rebukes we of the separation / Must bear with willing shoulders as the trials / Sent forth to tempt our frailties" (3.1.1-5)—but also suggests Anabaptism, for as McCulloch outlines, the 1527 Schleitheim Confession, which outlined a "fully separatist Anabaptist" doctrine, contended that "the Church is not truly the Church unless it is suffering, and that is unlikely to be the case with a Church which has identified itself with the interests of the secular rulers."[70] Regardless of specific doctrine, however, Anabaptists, like Puritans and antinomians, were in many ways ciphers for any threat to social or ecclesiastical authority. Robert Hornback asserts that Puritans came to be associated with these "lower class" heresies because they contained the seeds of leveling, anti-hierarchical rebellion; Anabaptism, like antinomianism and Puritanism, was seen as a potentially disruptive and seditious force. Staging Puritanism in a carnivalesque manner thus helped to—or was seen to help—diffuse the potentially disastrous effect of Puritan influence on the vast mob of lower-class believers.[71]

However, the threat these sectarians represented could be very real, as the story of William Hacket, outlined at the outset of this chapter, can attest. John S. Mebane echoes this sentiment when he points out the specific connections Jonson makes between his

"Anabaptists" and John of Leyden and Bernt Knipperollinck, the Anabaptist extremists who were known to have terrorized the city of Münster in the 1530s.[72] Leyden termed himself "King of the World," but unlike Hacket, he was able to gain power for almost a year, supposedly turning Münster into his own personal harem and appropriating the citizens' food and goods.[73] Indeed, twice in the play Subtle references Leyden and Knipperdollinck; he says to Ananias, "Heathen, you Knipperdoling!" (2.5.13), and then later tells Face to "dispatch my brace of little John Leydens. . . ." (3.3.24). Like Nicholas St. Antlings, Ananias and Tribulation are foolish gulls who serve only their own self interest, but they also represent the real, dangerous potential of self-appointed "godly" believers. Rather than taking place at a safe remove from English soil, however, *The Alchemist* is rooted quite firmly in the same neighborhood as St. Paul's cathedral; as Jonson's Prologue states, "Our scene is London" (Prologue, 5), and as has been argued by Sarah Dustagheer, there is ample evidence that "Jonson's concern with place incorporated not only the civic quarter of Blackfriars but also and more pointedly, the actual playhouse itself."[74] Jonson's parody works by trafficking in stereotypes that would have been familiar to his audience, but that very familiarity belies the fact that these potentially dangerous Puritans/Anabaptists were quite literally in this theater's backyard.

Like *The Puritan*, *The Alchemist* garnered indignant criticism at the time of its first performance for its treatment of religious material; as the editors of *The Alchemist* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* note, one of the first commentaries on the play after its performance in Oxford in September 1610, written by future Church of England clergyman Henry Jackson of Corpus Christi College, expresses outrage at "the mockery of Anabaptists, for thereby 'they [i.e. the actors] most disgustingly violated

the holy scriptures themselves' and 'impiously and unnaturally polluted the scriptures.'"[75] Jackson is further irritated that "the university's theologians 'most eagerly flocked' to the performance, where 'impious shows' were performed 'with the greatest applause and to full houses' made up of 'pious and learned men.'"[76] Perhaps Jackson recognizes that it is a very short move from parodying men who use a veneer of religiosity to justify self-serving hypocrisy to ridiculing actual religious doctrine and men who see themselves as "the godly." Interestingly, Jackson's description of this performance first came to light in a *Times Literary Supplement* by Geoffrey Tillotson in 1933; within a few months, two responses appeared in the pages of that same literary magazine, the second of which, by F. S. Boas, expresses delight over what seems to be the timeless appeal of satirized "Anabaptists." Boas writes that those who were present at a recent revival of the play "will not be surprised that the scenes introducing the 'Anabaptists' were greeted by the shouts of applause, even from 'theologi,' of which Jackson so strongly disapproved."[77] Perhaps it is the case that, as representatives of a sect primarily associated with other countries, these Anabaptist characters allow for some distance between the theatergoers and the beliefs being parodied; whatever the reason, they appear comical even to those who hold religious doctrine sacred and would not perhaps otherwise tolerate its ridicule on stage. For an English audience, it seems, the "Anabaptist" was an inherently farcical figure, though, as we shall see, a potentially dangerous one as well.

Utilizing Anabaptists was not the sole province of playwrights, however. As Peter Lake has shown, both conformists and Presbyterians used Anabaptistism as a go-to insult to denote subversive and dangerous tendencies with regard to doctrine, especially in the

polemical disputes surrounding the Admonition controversy. John Whitgift, according to Lake, saw Anabaptists as "the clearest embodiment of an irresponsible protestant radicalism which, unchecked, could only lead to anarchy and disorder."[78] For Thomas Cartwright, Whitgift's presbyterian opponent, Anabaptist tendencies could also be appropriated to argue that "Whitgift had so whittled away the authority of scripture as to cast doubt on doctrines as central to orthodox protestantism as infant baptism."[79] Actual Anabaptist beliefs centered on "believer's baptism" and the need for adults to be re-baptized properly and in the true church, but—like Puritans—their primary threat seemed to lie in a desire to purify the Church and return to an uncorrupted truth to which they had privileged access. As Diarmaid McCulloch terms it, "They posed a radical challenge to the authority claimed by the western Church's hierarchy, but they did so in order to claim for themselves the first five centuries of Christianity; indeed, the essence of their case was that the official Church had unjustifiably added doctrine to this hard-fought original package."[80] Like Anabaptists, Presbyterians wanted to argue that there was a "true form of church government" to be found in Scripture;[81] more "modern" developments, instigated and decided upon as they were by very human agents, were more than potentially bankrupt and ineffective. Where they differed, of course, was in fundamentals of belief, but their interpretive modes were in many ways related. Seen from Whitgift's perspective, Carwright's "attitude to the discipline as a God-given tool for the creation and maintenance of a self-governing godly community seemed . . . to break down the barriers between the visible and invisible church in such a way as to open the door to all sorts of sectarian craziness."[82] One such sect could be the antinomians; by challenging outward moral constraint via the Decalogue and other laws, antinomians were calling into

question the "barriers between the visible and invisible church." By championing the motions of the spirit inside each believer, the antinomians were not only questioning man-made church structure, but also the necessity of such structure in the first place.

Utterly subversive in their doctrine, Anabaptists and antinomians—and to some extent, Puritans—thus take Protestant reform of the Catholic Church to an extreme; by eliminating outward structure and the need for outward law, these groups pave the way for anarchy. Oliver Ormerod, the anti-Puritan polemicist who associated Puritans with Proteans above, illuminates this threat clearly in his imagined "dialogue" between an "Englishman" and a "Germaine"; here, Ormerod outlines the evils represented by Puritans and Anabaptists, whom the Englishman and German determine are mirrors of each other. Like Puritans, the Anabaptists seek "puritie" and perfection in the established church;[83] also like Puritans, the Anabaptists seek to prove their piety through "Hypocriticall fastes" which seduce "many of the vulgar sorte."[84] Both groups flout the system and think they can do as they please; as the Englishman complains, the Puritans "thinke, [that] a Christian mans libertie is to live as he list, and for this cause some of them have refused to receive the Lords supper kneeling &c. They will not (forsooth) have their soules drawne under the yoak of humane power." He continues that Puritans "thinke it servitude and an unsupportable burthen, to submit their neckes and soules to the yoake of humaine obedience in thinges indifferent."[85] Ormerod's use of "things indifferent" points directly back to the Admonition Controversy of the 1570's, thirty years before Ormerod published his tract; in Ormerod's general estimation, Puritans (and by association, Anabaptists) are obsessed with the minutiae of worship to the detriment of the true referent of that worship: God.

Tribulation and Ananias thus represent a convergence of sectarian meaning, and their subversive behavior implicates both Puritans and Anabaptists by operating according to antinomian principles. At the beginning of Act 3, as Tribulation and Ananias prepare to strike a deal with the "alchemists" to transform their goods into gold, Ananias expresses concern about dealing with such obvious criminals; describing Subtle, he sees the "visible mark of the beast in his forehead. / And for his stone it is a work of darkness, / And with philosophy blinds the eyes of man" (3.1.8-10). Tribulation counters that they "must bend unto all means / That may giver furtherance to the holy cause" (3.1.11-12), to which Ananias rightly asserts that "the sanctified cause / Should have a sanctified course" (3.1.13-14). He is corrected again by Tribulation, who contends that "[t]he children of perdition are ofttimes / Made instruments even of the greatest works" (3.115-16), and by the end of the scene, Ananias is finally persuaded by Tribulations' logic, declaring that "the motion's good, / And *of the spirit*" (49-50; my emphasis) as he acquiesces. In spite of their misgivings about the methods of Subtle, Face, and Doll, the Anabaptists here are ultimately willing to leave their scruples at the door; at the end of the scene, Ananias has given the audience the first taste of antinomianism: though he had objections fifty lines before, Ananias has now been swayed by the motions of the "spirit" to reinterpret his situation in favor of Tribulation's opinion. His "spirit" here—guided as it clearly is by the force of Tribulation's personality and by both of their greedy desires—is a perversion of any true sense of guidance by the spirit of Christ.

It would seem that, like a true antinomian, Ananias is privileging the motions of the "spirit"—supposedly emanating from Christ—and eschewing outward constraints on action; however, there are important distinctions to be made here with regard to the way

Eaton and Ananias utilize the spirit. As we have seen, true antinomians champion Christ's spirit as a tool for Scriptural interpretation; with one's eyes illuminated by Christ's spirit, the meanings of both the Old and New Testament become clear. What Ananias is doing here is relying on Tribulation's "word" to color how he interprets his feelings about the situation; though he seems to recognize early on in the scene that his and Tribulation's actions are problematic, his conscience is untroubled at the end of it. The "spirit" has negated his worries and, we might assume, made him blameless. However, it is not the true spirit of Christ's inspiration, but is instead an emanation of the misguided, prideful reliance on his own sense of godliness.

This pattern continues into the next scene, when Tribulation says to Subtle that "The Brethren . . . are ready / To lend their willing hands to any project / *The spirit and you direct*" (3.2.12-14; my emphasis). Here it is not just that Ananias and Tribulation follow the "spirit" rather than any moral law, but they now equate the motions of that spirit—which, in its ideal antinomian form, is supposed to represent the direct word of Christ—with the desires of Subtle, the "alchemist" of the play and a consummate con man. When, later, Ananias's troublesome conscience springs up again, Tribulation is determined to quell it, even if that conscience is the manifestation of the true spirit of God; when Ananias worries about idolatry, Tribulation rebukes him: "I command thee, spirit of zeal but trouble, / To peace within him!" (3.2.84-84). Ananias's zealous conscience threatens to derail the deal with Subtle, and instead of embracing the motions of that spirit—which might emanate directly from God—Tribulation is embarrassed that those motions are interrupting his business deal. Later Tribulation identifies Ananias's passion as "an ignorant zeal," though he admits Ananias is "a man by revelation / That

hath a competent knowledge of the truth" (3.2.111; 113-14). Though Ananias's spirit-motivated outbursts are typical Puritan cant against idolatry, Popery, etc.—he identifies Subtle and his companions as "popish all" (3.2.107)—when compared to Tribulation's assessment of Subtle, Ananias does seem to have a better understanding of the "truth" of the situation.

The back and forth between the two brethren culminates in a discussion of the "lawfulness" of coining that echoes Nicholas's "nim" distinctions in *The Puritan*. Reacting to Tribulation's question about the lawfulness of coining, Ananias replies, "Lawful? / We know no magistrate. Or, if we did, this's foreign coin" (3.2.149-50). Like the elusive German Anabaptists of Ormerod's tracts, these foreign men with their foreign ideas—and foreign money—penetrate the London underground, bringing with them strange and lawless ways; it is Ananias here, however, who is suspicious of "foreign" coin. Subtle attempts to assuage Ananias when he, like Nicholas, makes a key semantic distinction, proclaiming that "[i]t is no coining, sir. It is but casting" (3.2.151). Such a tenuous differentiation appeals to Tribulation, who proclaims, "Ha! You distinguish well. Casting of money may be lawful" (3.2.152). Ananias, mollified, then replies, "Tis, sir" (3.2.53), after which Tribulation explains that we should believe Ananias, as this "case of conscience he is studied in" (3.2.155-56). In the same way that "nim" and "steal" can be distinguished from one another in spite of their identical definitions, so can "coining" and "casting" here be distinguished; what matters to these Brethren is not actually the spirit after all, but the slippery moral ground that can be maintained with convenient, timely appeals to that spirit. And although Ananias's understanding of his own conscience does seem to have a divine referent at inopportune moments, he is able to squash its influence

in favor of the earthly admonitions of Tribulation and Subtle. When the "spirit" is inconvenient, it is discarded; when it furthers Tribulation and Ananias's worldly ambitions, it becomes the yardstick by which they measure their behavior.

What Jonson and Middleton are dramatizing with their Puritan parodies is thus an antinomian mode of thinking and operating that, on the surface, has such a strong appearance of absurdity that even the most unlettered theatergoer would be able to see its shortcomings, but in reality represents a threat to civic and religious order that had precedent in figures like Hacket and John of Leyden. In their depictions of these figures, Jonson and Middleton dramatize an association between Puritans and other sectarian groups that was sometimes only fictional, but which nonetheless served to enhance the perceived danger of their threat. By portraying their Puritan figures slipping into antinomian modes, these playwrights participate in a polemical tradition of characterizing the godly as lawless, self-righteous hypocrites whose mistaken beliefs were all the more insidious for their supposed divine referent; such a portrayal is rich fodder for comedy, but also reveals deep-seated anxieties about the influence of any group who would claim direct access to God's will and abuse the authority of Scripture. By taking this claim to its extreme, Jonson and Middleton work to diffuse the menace their lawless characters represent to the order of their respective worlds. And although Nicholas, Ananias, and Tribulation are in some sense subdued by the end of their respective plays, the specter of their lawlessness—and the divine privilege they sometimes invoke to support it—lingers; as the scene of these plays, London, too, is populated by such figures who continually refuse to be relegated to the margins, and thus represent a very real threat to the heart of religious and civic identity in England.

Notes

[1] Richard Baxter, *The life of faith in three parts* (1670), 297.

[2] Richard Baxter, *The unreasonableness of infidelity* (London, 1655), 149. The subtitle of this work—*Written for the strengthening of the weak, the establishing of the tempted, the staying of the present Course of Apostasie, and the Recovery of those that have not sinned unto death*—typifies Baxter's particularly wide-reaching brand of moral instruction.

[3] Ibid., cr.

[4] Oliver Ormerod, *The Picture of a Puritan: or, A Relation of the opinions, qualities, and practices of the Anabaptists in Germanie, and of the Puritaines in England* (London, 1605), A3v-A4r.

[5] All quotations taken from Thomas Middleton, *The Puritan Widow*, in *The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

[6] All quotations taken from Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson, Volume 3*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[7] Baxter, *The unreasonableness of infidelity*, 149.

[8] Alexandra Walsham, "'Frantick Hacet': Prophecy, Sorcery, Insanity, and the Elizabethan Puritan Movement," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (1998): 28-29. Waslsham quotes here from Richard Cosin, *Conspiracie, for Pretenced Reformation viz. Presbyteriall Discipline* (London, 1592), 71-73.

[9] Richard Hooker, *Of the lavves of ecclesiasticall politie: the fift Book* (London, 1597), A4r. The *OED*'s definition for "accompting" in this situation would be, "An explanation; *es* one given as a justification for conduct, etc."

[10] Ibid.

[11] Cosin, *Conspiracie, for Pretended Reformation*, 61.

[12] Ibid.

[13] David Como in *Blown by the Spirit* defines two basic "types" of antinomians in early seventeenth-century England. The first, deemed "inherentist" or "perfectionist" antinomianism, asserts that the believer can actually achieve perfection in their lifetimes, and are thus absolved from following the Law and are free from sin (38). The second "type" is classified as "imputative"; in this view, Christians were still sinful creatures, but were seen by God as sinless through the lens of Christ's sacrifice (40). Hacket would seem to fit clearly in the inherentist category, which is less common—and more problematic—than imputative, which aligns more closely with mainstream Protestant belief.

[14] Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 266.

[15] Cosin, *Conspiracie, for Pretended Reformation*, 70.

[16] W. J. Steils, *The Puritans in the Diocese of Peterboroguh, 1558-1610*, vol. 30, Publications of the Northamptonshire Record Office (Northampton, 1979), 137.

[17] Walsham, "'Frantick Hacet,'" 30. See, for instance, Richard Bancroft's *Daungerous positions and proceedings published and practiced within the iland of Brytaine, under pretence of reformation, and for the presbiteriall discipline* (London, 1593).

[18] Steils, *The Puritans in the Diocese*, 138.

[19] Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 3.

[20] Poole, *Radical Religion*, 4.

[21] Peter Lake alludes to the seemingly endless debate about the word "puritan" in "Puritanism, Familism, and heresy in early Stuart England: the case of John Etherington revisited" when he refers to the debate as "the old chestnut of defining Puritanism." In *Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture*, ed. David Loewenstein and John Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 82. Most critics continue to use the word "puritan" even while admitting that the term is fraught with competing or contradictory meanings.

[22] William Bradshaw, *English Puritanisme Containening The maine opinions of the rigidest sort of those that are called Puritanes In the Realme of England* (1605), A1r.

[23] Ibid., 35.

[24] Ibid., 1.

[25] Ibid., 18.

[26] Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 105.

[27] Ibid., 114. Though the blanket assertion that all antitheatricalists were Puritans, or even that Gosson and Prynne were strictly Puritans, has been challenged by some—notably Lake—the arguments made by Prynne and Gosson with regard to Protean dissimulation do align with general Puritan sentiment.

[28] See Baxter, *The unreasonableness of infidelity*, 149.

[29] Huston Diehl, "Disciplining Puritans and players: early modern English comedy and the culture of reform," *Religion and Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 86.

[30] Ibid., 90.

[31] Thomas Heywood, *An apology for actors* (London, 1612), E3r, F3r.

[32] Ibid., F3v.

[33] Mullaney, *Place of the Stage,* x.

[34] Jonathan Haynes, "Representing the Underworld: 'The Alchemist,'" *Studies in Philology* 86, no. 1 (1989): 21.

[35] Patrick Collinson, "The Theatre constructs Puritanism," in *The Theatrical City: Culture, Theatre and Politics in London, 1576-1649,* ed. David L. Smith, Richard Strier, and David Bevington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 158.

[36] Ibid., 166. See also Kristen Poole, "Saints alive! Falstaff, Martin Marprelate, and the staging of Puritanism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (1995): 47-75.

[37] Collinson, "The Theatre constructs Puritanism," 167.

[38] Swapan Chakravorty, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 63.

[39] Sir William Dugdale, *A short view of the late troubles in England briefly setting forth, their rise, growth, and tragical conclusion* (London, 1681), 37.

[40] Mary Bly, "Carnal Geographies: Mocking and Mapping the Religious Body," in *Masculinity and the Metropolis of Vice, 1559-1650,* ed. Amanda Bailey and Roze Hentschell (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 105.

[41] Ibid., 104.

[42] Ibid., 104-5.

[43] All quotes taken from William Crashaw, *The sermon preached at the Crosse, Feb. xiiii. 1607. By W. Crashawe, Batchelour of Diuinitie, and preacher at the temple; iustified by the authour, both against Papist, and Brownist, to be the truth: wherein, this point is principally intended; that the religion of Rome, as now it stands established, is still as bad as euer it was*. (London, 1609), 170. N. W. Bawcutt in "Was Thomas Middleton a Puritan Dramatist?", *The Modern Language Review* 94.4 (Oct. 1999): 934 and Donna B. Hamilton in "*The Puritan Widow* or *The Puritan* or *The Widow of Watling Street*," in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 510-11 both mention Crashaw's sermon in connection to *The Puritan*, as does Paul Yachnin in "Reversal of Fortune: Shakespeare, Middleton, and the Puritans," *ELH: Journal of English Literary History* 70 (2003): 757-86. Here, Yachnin writes that both Middleton and Crashaw were "hardworking, anti-Catholic, English Protestant writers whose work attracted a public audience" and also notes that *The Puritan,* which was written for the Children of Paul's, would have been performed in the shadow of St. Paul's Church, where Crashaw's sermon was performed. Weighing in on the debate about Middleton's "Puritan" status, Yachnin ultimately contends that Middleton was an "authentic Protestant" in line with Crashaw, but that an "unbridgeable institutional divide" lay between them (772).

[44] Crashaw, *The sermon preached at the Crosse*, 170.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] An edition of *The puritaine or The vviddovv of Vvatling-streete Acted by the Children of Paules* was indeed published in 1607, the same year as Crashaw's sermon. The author is cited as "W.S.", and critics for many years thus attributed the play to William Shakespeare.

[48] Critical encounters with *The Puritan* are relatively scarce, but most notably, the play is addressed by Jennifer Panek in *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973); Theodore B. Leinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603-1613* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1986); and Mark Dominik, *Shakespeare-Middleton Collaborations* (Beaverton, Oregon: Alioth Press, 1988).

[49] Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 77.

[50] Ibid., 85.

[51] Bawcutt, "Puritan Dramatist?", 927.

[52] Hamilton, "*The Puritan Widow*," 510. Though the play's title is sometimes referred to as *The Puritan Widow* or *The Widow of Watling Street*, for clarity the play is referenced as *The Puritan* throughout this study.

[53] Ibid., 512.

[54] Ormerod, *The Picture of a Puritan*," A3v-A4r.

[55] "Middleton, Thomas (*ba* 1580, *d.* 1627)," Gary Taylor in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eee ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, May 2008, accessed March 10, 2013, http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/view/article/18682.

[56] See Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain*.

[57] Later in this scene, Nicholas, encountering Corporal Oth, proclaims that he "must not sweare" and that Oth has a "name for swearing." Richard Dutton in "Jonson, Shakespeare, and the Exorcists," *Shakespeare Survey* 58 (2005), identifies this moment as "familiar anti-puritan satire, mocking their insistence on the letter and show of divine law, while often ignoring its substance and spirit" (15). Dutton does not then interrogate the "letter v. spirit" parody further, and he does not ask why this particular brand of satire should be widely used, but he does identify it as such.

[58] Hamilton, "*The Puritan Widow*," 518n69.

[59] The authorized *King James Bible* of 1611 was more conservative than the *Geneva Bible*, and uses "charity" where the latter uses "love." This shift follows William Tyndale's translation, which was debated far into the seventeenth century. As the editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* note, "Tyndale's use of the word 'love,' echoed by the Geneva Bible, is set against the Catholic 'charity.' The latter term would gesture toward the religious doctrine of 'works,' against the Protestant insistence on salvation by faith alone." See "Literature of the Sacred," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Sixteenth Century; The Early Seventeenth Century*, ed. M. H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, vol. 1B (New York: Norton, 2000), 540.

[60] According to the *OED*, "nim" is colloquial slang used after the sixteenth century meaning "To appropriate (something not one's own); to steal, to filch, to pilfer (something)."

[61] In "*The Puritan Widow*," Hamilton notes that all involved miss the significance of the chain itself; she writes, "In works belonging to the *catena* traditions—such as the frequently reprinted *The Golden Chain* (1591) by the well-known Calvinist theologian William Perkins—the chain was used metaphorically for the way to salvation. These Puritans, however, seek only for lost jewellery" (511). As I note, questions of salvation and the means whereby it is achieved inform this play but are strikingly absent from its central plot lines

[62] Eaton, *The Honey-Combe*, 215.

[63] Burton, *The Law and the Gospell reconciled*, F2r.

[64] Ibid., av.

[65] Ibid., C2v.

[66] Thomas Middleton, *The Two Gates of Salvation, Set wide open: OR The Mariage of the Old And new Testament* (London, 1609), Bv.

[67] Ibid., B3r.

[68] It is not within the scope of this study to rehash the many investigations of Jonson's anti-Puritan sentiments, which are well known. It is enough to note here, with Barish in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, that Jonson's attitudes about theater and performativity were "split by contradictions" (132), to put it lightly. The Puritan/Anabaptists in *The Alchemist* represent some of the worst of what a commitment to theatrics and performance can yield, but of course, the decidedly non-Puritanical Subtle, Face, and Doll are also performers who end the play in various states of disgrace.

[69] Bawcutt, "Puritan Dramatist?", 927. For an extensive discussion of The Family of Love in early modern drama, see Kristen Poole, *Radical Religion from Shakespeare to Milton*.

[70] MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 169.

[71] Robert Hornback, "Staging Puritanism in the Early 1590s: The Carnivalesque, Rebellious Clown as Anti-Puritan Stereotype," *Renaissance and Reformation* 34, no. 3 (2000): 32. Hornback engages with both Poole and Collinson to further a discussion of Puritans, not only as somber killjoys, but also as "festive," grotesque figures. As all three of these scholars note, this tradition begins with the staging of satirical interludes featuring Martin Marprelate in an attempt to diffuse this decidedly Puritan-minded polemicist. Unfortunately, none of these interludes survive.

[72] John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 140-41.

[73] Ibid., 141.

[74] Sarah Dustagheer, "'Our Scene is London': *The Alchemist* and Urban Underworlds at the Blackfriars Playhouse," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* 147 (2011): 94.

[75] Peter Holland and William Sherman, "Introduction to *The Alchemist*," in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 544. Holland and Sherman cite Professor Geoffrey Tillotson's July 20, 1933 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "Othello and The Alchemist at Oxford in 1610," 494 for the account of Jackson's letter, which is quoted by Tillotson in the original Latin. Holland and Sherman provide the translation cited here.

[76] Holand and Sherman, "Introduction," 544.

[77] F. S. Boas, "*Othello* and *The Alchemist* at Oxford in 1610," *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 31, 1933, 576.

[78] Peter Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans? Presbyterianism and English Conformist Thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 22.

[79] Ibid., 23.

[80] MacCulloch, *The Reformation*, 184.

[81] Lake, *Anglicans and Puritans?*, 13.

[82] Ibid., 34.

[83] Ormerod, *The Picture of a Puritan*, C2r.

[84] Ibid., C4v.

[85] Ibid., Ev.

CHAPTER 4
"I MEAN TO SHEW YOU OF MY STRENGTH, YET GREATER": *SAMSON*'S ANTINOMIAN MOTIONS

Like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* plays, John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is considered intrinsically problematic by modern critics, and for similar reasons: at the core of each play is a character whose motivations could emanate from God, or could as easily originate from some less exalted source. Is Tamburlaine the Scourge of God, or does he use this (self-appointed) title to justify his brutality and wanton destruction? Is Milton's Samson truly the agent of God, or have his indiscretions permanently derailed him from God's path? Specifically, do his "rouzing motions" (1382)[1] represent the return of God's guidance, or has Samson succumbed to delusion stemming from his desire to return to God's good graces? It is the nature of these "rouzing motions" that preoccupy the bulk of the critical literature on *Samson*, and, indeed, they are difficult to ignore, as they represent a radical shift in Samson's position and lead to the major event of the play: the destruction of the temple at the festival of Dagon, the slaughter of countless Philistines, and the death of Samson. This chapter will explore the ways that Samson represents the positive potential of antinomianism in this moment, but as will soon become clear, serious complications arise over the course of Milton's closet drama to challenge any simple explanation for Samson's actions.

There are clear divergences between Tamburlaine and Samson, and these variances challenge the notion of Samson as simply a positive version of Tamburlaine just as they differentiate one from the other. As was argued in Chapter 2, Tamburlaine does not fit easily into an antinomian mold, and attempting to shoehorn him into that mold works against the evidence provided in the play. For Tamburlaine, we are presented

with a figure that might have sprung fully formed from the earth and merely proclaimed himself an agent of God; we are not privy to his thought processes, nor do we see him converse with or pray to any kind of deity.[2] In *Samson*, we are privy to Samson's struggle; we have the "evidence" of his monologues with himself and with various other characters in the play to scrutinize in order to determine the source of his motivation at the crucial moment of the rousing motions. Milton also provides us with a detailed backstory that provides a precedent against which we can weigh Samson's current situation, and this offers a kind of interpretive leverage not available to us in an analysis of the *Tamburlaine* plays. However, in spite of the amount we know about Samson and his predicament, a concrete understanding of the rousing motions remains elusive, with critics divided on their meaning and the significance they give to the ending of the play. Although they form the core of the vast body of Samson criticism, there is no consensus as to what Milton intends the motions to signify for Samson's character.

In the brief passage that contains these rousing motions, Samson radically shifts his position against "entertaining" at the Festival of Dagon and willingly follows the messenger who has come to take him there. The crucial passage reads:

> *Sam.* Be of good courage, I begin to feel
> Some rouzing motions in me which dispose
> To something extraordinary my thoughts.
> I with this Messenger will go along,
> Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour
> Our Law, or stain my vow of *Nazarite*.
> If there be aught of presage in my mind,
> This day will be remarkable in my life
> By some great act, or of my days the last. (1369-89)

This decisive moment in *Samson Agonistes* is highly contentious; what really happens when Samson experiences his "rouzing motions" and decides to attend the festival of Dagon, in spite of the fact that attending is in direct contradiction to the Mosaic Law? I argue that an important clue to understanding this moment comes fifty lines earlier, when Samson is firm in his conviction *not* to go, and is arguing with the Chorus and the Public Officer sent to fetch him to the festival; to the Officer's suggestion that Samson "[r]egard thyself, this will offend them highly" (1333),[3] Samson says simply, "Myself? my *conscience and internal peace*. / Can they think me so broken, so debas'd / With corporal servitude, that my mind ever / Will condescend to such absurd commands?" (1334-37; my emphasis). This is the only appearance of the word "conscience" in the play, and given its proximity to Samson's change of heart, it seems particularly significant. Of course, it also means a further complication: if Samson's conscience is the key to understanding Milton's drama, then no reader can truly be brought to that understanding. One's conscience is inscrutable—often to oneself, and always to an outsider—and, if understood in the terms of seventeenth-century religious thought, is either potentially liberating or eternally frustrating. However, as I will argue, it is through an understanding of conscience that we can bring Samson's rousing motions into greater focus, and though the exact nature of those motions remains indeterminate, within the world of the play we can identify Samson as a positive antinomian hero with unique privilege to God's inspiration, even if that inspiration remains obfuscated and mysterious.

Samson's Terrorism?

There is, another, more sinister comparison we might make between Tamburlaine and Samson, however, and it is one that fundamentally complicates any notion of Samson as a "positive" representative of anything. Both Tamburlaine and Samson might, without much rhetorical maneuvering, be considered terrorists, and as such, any access they might claim to divine inspiration would have to fall under intense moral scrutiny. With regard to Samson, this has most notably been addressed by Milton scholar John Carey; in a controversial piece that appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* one year after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Carey contends that, in light of those attacks, an enlightened reader must complicate any reading of *Samson Agonistes* as a work that praises Samson for his terrorist act, regardless of whether or not that act seems sanctioned by God. Comparing Samson to the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, Carey writes, "The similarities between the biblical Samson and the hijackers are obvious. Like them Samson sacrifices himself to achieve his ends. Like them he destroys many innocent victims, whose lives, hopes and loves are all quite unknown to him personally. He is, in effect, a suicide bomber, and like the suicide bombers he believes that his massacre is an expression of God's will."[4] As an abstract theological principle, antinomianism represents liberation and communion with God, but as a principle enacted by human beings in their lived experiences, antinomianism can of course cloak real oppression, anarchy, and, as Carey suggests here, terrorism in a religious façade. Mainstream religious doctrine the world over would not condone the slaughter of innocent people, but many suicide bombers claim religious martyrdom and look forward to a heavenly reward for their actions; this is antinomianism at its most dangerous, and

although Carey's premise has produced controversy and counter-arguments from many corners, modern critics of the play would be remiss if they did not consider the implications of Samson as an antinomian terrorist.

One key to the interpretation of *Samson* must then be perspective; as Regina M. Schwartz succinctly terms it, "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."[5] In the wake of Carey's *TLS* piece, in which he specifically targets Stanley Fish in particular as the worst kind of apologist for Samson's "terrorism," numerous critics have come to Fish's defense, even responding en masse in the volume *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism* in 2006. Anticipating—but not fully elaborating—my argument in this chapter, David Loewenstein argues, "Milton's work dramatizes the issue of conscience in radical religious terms. . . . Samson in one sense resembles the godly during the English revolution who insisted on giving themselves up to the strictest rules of holiness . . . and on maintaining freedom from an inappropriate authority in order to submit to a higher, more demanding if inscrutable authority."[6] The religious terms here are indeed "radical"; that Samson submits to a higher authority seems clear, but whether this justifies the kind of destruction Samson rains down on the Philistines is another matter.

Loewenstein continues, "Milton's Samson [is not] a terrorist in the sense of his acting like a present-day suicide bomber who commits an act of calculated, indiscriminate destruction."[7] Samson trusts God, and is antinomian in the sense that he seems confident his attendance at the festival is God's will; given the evidence in the play, it would be a stretch to argue that, like a terrorist, he quietly plans a violent act and then uses his God to justify that act. And, as Michael Lieb points out, "To speak of

terrorism or the committing of terrorist acts is to speak of motive."[8] Like Tamburlaine, Samson is in some ways powerless to determine his own course of action; unlike Tamburlaine, the Samson at the end of Milton's drama seems to have reconciled the stirrings of his own conscience with God's will. Rather than bemoan the way he *must* act, Samson is "resolved" and at peace for the first time in the play. He goes to the Festival of Dagon unsure what his course of action will be; at the moment of destruction, Samson looks to the Messenger "as one who pray'd" (1627), but as we hear of the devastation second hand, we cannot be sure whether he actually prays, and whether or not God answers. As Loewenstein terms it, the "Samson about to carry out 'some great act' (1389) after claiming to be moved by 'some rousing motions' (1382) is a Samson who goes to his end with some sense of mystery about his mission and its consequences, even within his own mind."[9] Samson is perhaps not the most astute reader of his own position, but in this case, if he cannot be sure, how can we ever hope to understand? And, more importantly, how can we categorize Samson—as a champion of God, a "hero of faith"?[10] An overly zealous terrorist?—if we cannot understand what he is thinking in his final moments? Though it can be maddening, I argue that it ultimately does not matter that we know definitively what Samson is thinking; rather, we have no reason to believe that Samson has abandoned his faith in God or is acting outside of God's warrant, and thus we must allow for a positive reading of his final moments as the manifestation of God's will.

Moving away from the loaded term "terrorist" for a moment, we might do better to label Samson a "religious radical." As Loewenstein points out, "[T]he label 'terrorist' . . . has frequently been used to demonize opponents, much as the volatile term 'heretic'

(as Milton himself understood) was used to malign religious enemies in the early modern period. . . ."[11] Ironically, of course, I wish to associate Samson with a heretical position only to then paint him in a positive light, but the larger point is that the word "terrorist" is now a word loaded with so much meaning as to be in danger of becoming meaningless, and in trying to equate Samson with a terrorist, precise meaning is everything. As the direct recipient of Carey's direct ire, Stanely Fish, writes, "If terrorism is the willingness to violate civil law in the name of a higher commitment, Samson and Milton (as Charles I would attest) are terrorists, as is the Abraham who is willing to sacrifice Isaac, and the Jael who smote Sisera sleeping through the temples nailed, and the Martin Luther King, Jr., who urged his followers to break laws he and they considered oppressive."[12] Though I would agree with Fish that labeling Samson a "terrorist" is reductive and problematic, Fish's counterargument here is a bit labored; as an advocate for nonviolent protest, Martin Luther King, Jr. seems an odd companion to a figure who did, indeed, murder his enemies by pulling a temple down upon their heads, or to a woman who drove a tent spike through her enemy's heart. However, Fish goes on to clarify, "Common to both lines of criticism is the worry that in the absence of an independent measure in relation to which judgments of right and wrong can be made, the moral life becomes a sham, for any act can be justified simply by claiming for it divine inspiration—not the devil, but God made me do it."[13] This is indeed the crux of the issue, and were it the task of Milton critics to weigh the actions of the whole of humanity in order to articulate a cohesive moral vision, then the enterprise would be doomed before it began. The focus, however, must be squarely on Samson and *Samson*, and in that focus, labeling Samson a terrorist

does little but stymie any real attempt to discuss violence—or any other action—in God's cause.

What Carey fails to acknowledge in his particular criticism of Fish is that Fish does not "approve" of Samson's actions in the play from any kind of objective moral standpoint; as Fish points out in his *How Milton Works*, we can only judge Samson according to the standard established in this play, and this standard relies on Samson's "reading of the divine will." He continues, "[A]nd insofar as it represents his desire to conform to that will, it is a virtuous action. *No other standard for evaluating it exists*—this is what the reader learns when his attempts to apply other standards are frustrated. . . ."[14] He then further clarifies that "Samson's act is praiseworthy because he intends it to be answerable to the divine will; whether it is or not, especially in the terms in which he conceives it, he cannot know, nor can we; and in relation to the problem of judging him as a moral being, whether it is or not does not matter."[15] It is tempting to interpret Fish's "it is does not matter" as an almost glib apology for violence in the name of God, but his reading is clearly more complex than that. It is not simply that *anyone* who "desire[s] to conform to [God's] will" can commit whatever atrocities they like, and we as "readers" must stand idly by; it is only *this* believer, this Samson, in the context of *this* play, who is allowed this "pass," as it were. This, in a nutshell, is *Samson*'s antinomian paradox: Samson desires to do God's will, and there is ample past evidence that he is one of God's chosen servants, so we must allow that there is the possibility his final act is sanctioned by God, even while we are not privy to what is happening inside Samson's mind/conscience and can therefore never be sure. For an "ordinary" believer claiming to speak to God, the degree of uncertainty an outsider might feel about that believer's

actions might easily overwhelm any desire to believe they have such a connection; in the world of *Samson*, even if we feel overwhelming unease, we must accept the possibility that God is speaking to Samson as he has done before, and as long as that possibility exists, we must allow for a positive reading of the rousing motions and of Samson's destruction of the Temple.

Antinomianism, *Samson*, and the Middle Problem

The essays by and in support of Fish don't entirely diffuse the tension created by Carey's reading of Samson-as-terrorist, but they do help to draw a more defined picture of the way perspective defines morality, and in his essay, Fish reaches the same conclusion I will articulate here: that the most fruitful label for Samson is that of antinomian.[16] Fish argues that Samson "is an antinomian, as, I believe, Milton was also. That is, he prefers to any outward justification of his actions the internal justification of the Spirit of God working within him (with due allowance always for the difficulty of telling the difference between that spirit and promptings less noble)."[17] It is this parenthetical disclaimer that identifies the crux of the matter, but more importantly for unpacking Fish's argument here is his definition of antinomianism, which for both seventeenth-century believers and for Milton's Samson is problematic. It is not that the true antinomian "prefers" to eschew outward constraint on action, but rather that he or she is called by God to act in a way previously not sanctioned by religious law. Samson does not seem to express a "preference" for this mode of religious operation; rather, he spends the entire play agonizing over his own decisions and their origins, and seems to long for the day when God made his path clear. Indeed, at key moments in the play he seems quite comfortable conforming to an outward Law, such as when he initially tells

the Messenger, "Thou knowst I am an *Ebrew*, therefore tell them, / Our Law forbids thir Religious Rites / My presence; for that cause I cannot come" (1319-21). Ironically, Samson's return to lawful obedience paves the way for his "rouzing motions" moment; as David V. Urban terms it, "Now a man of patience, Samson is not being egotistically obstinate. His resistance is his renewed commitment to the Law of Israel's God and a devotion to scripture that qualifies him again to be a worthy conduit for the internal scripture of the Spirit."[18] Once rightly re-aligned, he can become, as Norman T. Burns sees him, "a Samson whose 'trust . . . in the living God' (1140) is so restored that he is willing to follow an inner impulse even though it involves breaking a holy law" that he previously held dear.[19] Burns, much like Fish, asserts that, by following the rousing motions despite the legal prohibition to attend idolatrous festivals, Samson is acting as an antinomian hero, and in some way exemplifying Milton's own antinomian tendencies. In this, both Burns and Fish agree that "antinomianism" is perhaps the best definition for Samson, but neither provide an extended reading of the play through the lens of such a label.

It could be the case, as David Loewenstein suggests, that "[o]ne need not identify Milton specifically with any one contemporary radical religious movement or sect or writer to recognize that his *Samson Agonistes* evokes such a terrifying God who performs horrid spectacles of apocalyptic power that generate astonishment and awe."[20] At this point in the seventeenth century, so many radical religious groups use language similar to the language of antinomianism that it would potentially be impossible to identify which specific group Samson is channeling.[21] I argue that this problem of labeling, so to speak, addresses a kind of universality to antinomianism's core message: that any true believer

can receive the unmediated Word of God at any time, and that this Word can lead them to defy civil and religious law in order to bring about a righteous change in history. Numerous Milton critics use language that comes extremely close to the concept of antinomianism in their assessments of Samson, and they clearly strive to understand the play through similar concepts; for instance, in responding to Carey's terrorism piece, Lieb writes, "In *Samson Agonistes*, the catchword is not so much 'terror' as 'dread,' although the two can certainly be viewed as synonymous. . . . Samson veritably embodies God's dread. . . . [T]he Miltonic Samson subsumes within himself the divine role."[22] Regardless of the label one uses, the crucial interpretive issue is that of seeing Samson as a radical believer who is privy to God's will and has wisdom enough at the end of the play to follow that will in spite of his own fallen state. Beyond simply identifying Samson as antinomian here, I wish to situate Milton and his religious drama as part of a larger narrative about both conscience and antinomianism, a narrative not independent of sixteenth and seventeenth-century religious thought but representative of a culmination of what I would term the "antinomian strand" in that thought. Milton provides what might be called the most perfect expression of antinomianism, in part because Samson's thought processes are so inscrutable and because—to anyone except Samson—Samson's final decision is entirely occluded. The true antinomian believer is privy to the will of God; this is something not to be taken lightly and something that is impossible to fully share with any outsider. This is also something very easily misinterpreted, which means a true antinomian would constantly come under scrutiny as a heretic, a liar, and even a terrorist. As Fish terms it, "Only the intention, the unbidden and constitutive inward orientation, makes the difference, and the difference can only be recognized by one who

is its (internal) bearer. It takes one to know one."[23] We as readers can never be "sure" of Samson's motivations because even Milton cannot accurately dramatize Samson's internality, but more than any other figure on the early modern stage, Samson embodies the radical potential of positive antinomianism to enact God's will in the world.

Although the bulk of *Samson* is characterized more by dialogue and monologue than by frenzied action, I argue, contra many critics, that the middle of the play is both very present at the moment of the rousing motions and very important to understanding them. In a similar vein as many other critics, Fish writes, "The drama of the play is thus an interior one; the drama, as many have said, is interpretive, and the interpretive stakes are as high as they get, eternal life or spiritual death."[24] A drama that is primarily interior and interpretive has several drawbacks, of course, not the least of which is a lack of thrilling action to enlighten and entertain its audience. Too, when a drama is primarily internal, some of that internality may well be hidden from the audience, which makes for a frustrated viewing experience; this is the case with *Samson*. Echoing Samuel Johnson's infamous 1751 exhortation that *Samson Agonistes* was a play with no middle, Fish argues against those who would substitute "the conventional 'middle'" with "the middle of an interior plot—Samson's regeneration" in which Samson moves from "accusation of God to acceptance of responsibility to rejection of temptation to a reaffirmation of faith," a reading he heartily rejects.[25] For Fish, the soul-searching and debate that takes up the seemingly inactive interior of the play have little bearing on the ending of the play, and on our understanding of the rousing motions; however, I read these moments as key to following the progression of Samson from fallen man to anxious casuist to liberated antinomian. As "the middle" illustrates, Samson is both an ideal casuist and an ideal

antinomian; he spends the play painstakingly charting the motions of his own will/conscience, but then a motion we can understand as emanating from God overthrows all of this careful charting and "evidence." This is why the middle matters; it shows us a Samson doing what doubting believers of the seventeenth century were wont to do: attempt—if fruitlessly—to understand the way that God's mercy and salvation worked, something that is ultimately unknowable and which has to truly be taken on faith. Samson can never understand God through the use of his own reason, but through that same faculty he can come to an understanding of the way he must relate to God—i.e. that God's will is fluid, not bound to previously stated moral law, and that it must be obeyed nonetheless. The middle of the play sets Samson up as a casuist struggling to understand the motions of his conscience, that part of his will/mind that merits the only mention in the play a mere fifty lines before his decision to heed the rousing motions; liberation through antinomianism may conclude the play, but Samson's painstaking casuistic maneuverings comprise the center that makes that liberation understandable as God's grace interrupting Samson's life once more.

Samson is the casuistic process encapsulated, and the fact that the protagonist's journey then ends with an antinomian moment illustrates in miniature Theodore Bozeman's contention that antinomianism was in some sense "born" from the precisianist strain of Puritan thought. Antinomianism needs no other authority than Christ himself; conversely, precisianist puritans held themselves to standards and measures not achievable by even the most pious of believers. One of these systems of "measurement"—and indeed the practice that Bozeman identifies as the tipping point between precisianism and antinomianism—is casuistry, or the attempt to chart and

interpret the impulses of one's consciences with an eye to determining election or reprobation. As Wes Kisting points out, casuistry, which began as a practice developed for Catholic priests to provide guidance in the confessional,[26] grew in popularity in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, perhaps as believers with new freedoms attempted to navigate the murky waters left in the wake of the Reformation. Kisting writes, "[B]y translating the comparatively detached gaze of a watchful God into a more immediate, localized, inward presence, the casuistic idea of conscience profoundly intensified the believer's sense of spiritual visibility and accountability."[27] Such a description certainly applies to Samson here; his wounds are literally visible to any who see him, including God, but what seems to torment Samson the most is his own mind as he examines his spectacular fall from God's grace.[28] However, we should be cautious not to say Samson somehow "resolves" his doubts through this practice; in general, though casuistry was meant to comfort, it increased doubt more often than it pacified the believer. As Kisting explains, "Ironically, though casuistry emerged to pacify anxieties and moral paralysis, . . its complicated, hair-splitting theology and circular logic seems to have encouraged [paralysis] just as often."[29] Casuistry is by its nature an imperfect art, and ultimately could not resolve the frustrations of uncertainty felt by doubtful believers.[30] As Bozeman asserts, the "precisianist strain" in Protestant faith represents the "higher standard" to which the elect hold themselves in exchange for the "boon of grace" they receive undeservedly."[31] Bozeman sees this obsession with perfection as providing one potential solution to the "problem" of justification by faith alone[32] and recognizes that the "Christian's saving faith [was] an intriguingly dual affair: in one dimension freed from law, works, and retribution, but in a second firmly subject to them all."[33] Bozeman sees

the constant, unceasing attempt at a "disciplinary transfiguration of the self"[34] in Puritan thought as leading to significant "antinomian revolt."[35] The fear of libertinism leads to over-precisianism, which then leads back to a counter movement primarily perceived as libertinism by all of those outside of that movement. For some early modern believers, then, the frustration of uncertainty ultimately resulted in the casting off of external constraint in favor of an exclusive attention to interior compulsions; for these believers, the ideal collision of the Holy Spirit with the motions of the conscience could become a reality, and the individual would literally contain a guide for right action within his or her own mind.

In essence, what is fundamentally lacking for the casuist is confidence; anxiety about one's election/salvation leads them on an attempt to "prove" where they stand with God, but of course no amount of "charting" can truly trace the origins of a motion of one's conscience, and thus the anxiety grows. The casuist might feel a desire to attend church and then attempt to chart that desire as proof of his or her election, but ultimately even such a pious desire could never be certain proof that one's conscience is guided by God and not by Satan. This is, at its core, what Samson experiences. By agonizing over his own history, Samson fruitlessly tries to mine his own past to determine whether God has abandoned him, though he ultimately finds—as the casuists discovered repeatedly—that no amount of lists or charts can "prove" a motion of the conscience good or bad. Samson must abandon this process and return to faith—even when this contradicts the Law—in order to rightly align himself with God again. As Camille W. Slights terms it, Samson is

> not primarily the hero who suffers or the hero who resists temptation but the hero who doubts and by resolving doubt finally becomes free to act. Samson understands that his duty and his fulfillment is to act in accordance with the will of God; his problem at once spiritual, moral, intellectual, and practical, is that his particular circumstances . . . seem to make his duty impossible to perform. The central action of the tragedy is the process by which Samson decides what to do next, or, in the terminology of seventeenth-century casuistry, the resolving of a doubtful conscience.[36]

Samson "is wounded in conscience as well as body. His anguish is bred in his own mind. . . . He tries to examine his actions in relation to God's will, but his festering conscience has wasted the whole man so that reason and faith have decayed and his thoughts are erratic and confused."[37] It is not within his power to reconcile with God through reason, and his decision-making process has indeed become confused—consider, for example, his taunt to Harapha that his "heels are fettere'd, but [his] fist is free" (1235), though it is highly questionable whether Samson could win such a fight at this point in the play. However, I would argue that Samson's faith in God is intact, even while faith in his own worthiness is badly bruised, and that proof of this fact lies in the rousing motions themselves; God does not inspire those whom he has abandoned. Before Samson is able to arrive there through God's grace, however, he attempts to arrive at a definitive end through self-examination, and in this he resembles other doubtful believers of the seventeenth century.

When Samson appeals to his conscience, his narrative enters a dialogue about conscience that had become especially urgent in the seventeenth century, given that men ostensibly following their consciences were responsible for the regicide and failed revolution. In a sense, from the moment Samson articulates his understanding of his conscience, it must thereafter bear the weight of centuries of theory and debate on the

nature of that faculty as well as contemporaneous understandings of how one's conscience might be troublesome or even dangerous. The upheaval at the core of decades leading up to the publication of *Samson* complicates notions of what it means to act rightly and find salvation, and at the center of such concerns we find, repeatedly, the term "conscience." Far from simply being understood as one's innate moral compass, conscience could become a force compelling individual men and women to act outside of the scope of accepted religious and civic norms, as in the case of the antinomians and sectarians in general.

Scholars and religious writers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England spill a great deal of ink attempting to define or understand conscience; in Ephraim Huit's *The Anatomy of Conscience or The Svmme of Pauls Regeneracy*, for example, Huit writes, "*Conscience* is a knowledge ioyned with a knowledge. For by conscience we knowe what we know; and by it we knowe that thing of our selues which God knoweth of vs. The naturall condition of euery mans conscience is this; that it is placed in the middle betweene man and God, vnder God and aboue man."[38] This definition is, admittedly, vague, but it points to some key concepts that appear repeatedly in treatises of this kind: namely, that conscience is subordinate to God, but given by God; that it records our deeds and misdeeds and reports them to God; and that we can discover knowledge of ourselves and of God's will through conscience. As Kisting succinctly terms it, "As the inescapable mediator of the individual's relationship with the world, with God, and with his own soul, conscience served as filter, guide, and indelible record of the entire subjective experience—acting, at the final judgment, as unfailing witness to the whole character and quality of the believer's life."[39] The problem with conscience,

however, is that it can be difficult to understand; learning to identify the source of its impulses is an anxious—and fruitless—exercise for the majority of those who tackle conscience in their writing at this time. If the conscience is rightly aligned with God, then it can serve as a reliable moral compass; if, however, the conscience has been tarnished by sin, those same impulses—even when they appear godly—could actually originate from Satan. Moreover, believers run the risk of relying too heavily on conscience to dictate their actions; in doing so, they could potentially run afoul of religious and civic authorities. To avoid the charge of libertinism, the influence of conscience must then be limited; in other words, free will must be maintained and at the same time balanced with a careful attunement to the inner light.

It is thus a crucial exercise to establish what "conscience" is and how a believer might rightly attune him or herself to its voice; it would not do to confuse diabolical influence with the voice of right reason. Writing about "conscience" in 1663, eight years before *Samson Agonistes* was published, cleric John Bradshaw argues for a distinction between a "common" conscience and a "Christian" one; it is the Christian conscience that is both elusive and also integral to right faith and action. Bradshaw writes, "This tenderness of Conscience is a *gracious* mean, which distinguishes it from a *bare moral* virtue: For however there is Conscience in *every* man, as having the *law of nature* in his heart, so that a *mere natural* man or *Heathen*, may have some *kind* of tenderness of Conscience; yet here I speak of it as it is a *Christian* virtue, and therefore call it a *gracious* mean."[40] All men, Bradshaw asserts, have a faculty called "conscience," but there is something unique about the Christian conscience, something that emanates from God and is specifically involved in the Christian process of right action and,

perhaps, salvation. Writing nearly forty years earlier, Huit would agree; he explains, "These gifts of vertue are called grace for that they are effects of Gods countenance reconciled in Christ, so that though there be in vs conscience of sinne, yet these streames as currents lead vs to the fountaine of grace, set open in Christ."[41] Having knowledge of one's sins could, in an ideal scenario, lead to a moral sense of "rightness" that would then rightly inform action. This moral rightness naturally springs from Christ, who is often identified as the direct referent for a rightly aligned conscience's impulses.

Even if this were the case, a rightly aligned conscience does not usually give a believer a direct line to God, and there must naturally be limits to the power of conscience in an individual believer's life. Later in his treatise, Huit writes, "*Conscience* is bound to the obseruance of the Couenant of grace, or faith in Christ, and to respect the Law as a Rule of obedience, judge, and reuealer of sinne, and as a scourge of our owne righteousnesse, and instrument of God to lead vs to Christ, not to justifie vs in it selfe."[42] Like good works, conscience cannot save; it can only enlighten the believer to their sin and, in the case of true repentance, illuminate the godly path. If a believer understands his or her wrongdoing and sets out to seek redemption for it, his or her conscience can function properly; otherwise, it is eternally clouded. Writing in the early 1660's, clergyman Anthony Cade elaborates on this notion:

> [F]or every sinne is a wound unto the soul, and the continuance in sinne is a continuall stabbing of the Conscience: and though some feel not these wounds, or grieve not at them presently (through the senselesnesse or numnesse of their choked Conscience) yet the often stabbing will breed such inward festring, corruption, and putrefaction, that when the Lord touchet it, thy will roar and gnash their teeth, or grow unconsolable, and often make away themselves as Judas did. Therefore let us be carefull to keep our conscience waking, tender, sensible, easily offended with the least touch of sinne, by continuall mediation of Gods laws, and

> of the necessity of sanctification, and by consideration of our own frailties, and suspicion of our own inclinations. . . .[43]

Sinning—which is active—thus serves to cloud the inner light; keeping it clear becomes the responsibility of the believer who wishes to attune themselves rightly to conscience, and only when one understands that what they are doing is wrong can they atone for it.

In addition to providing guidance, conscience also has the power punish those who have fallen into sin. As Immanuel Bourne, a controversial Church of England clergyman writing in the 1620's, terms it, "But when this Conscience is awakened, or the chaines thereof vntied, then to the godly 'tis like Christ himselfe, the soueraigne comfort of the soule. But to the wicked, like the Mastiffe set at libertie; or like a Fiend of Hell to rend and teare his soule in peeces."[44] For Bourne, it is not as if there are two consciences, one bad and one good, two competing voices vying for attention in a person's ear. Rather, conscience, when understood by a godly person, is "like Christ," comforting and guiding the soul; when understood by a wicked person, conscience is disassociated from Christ and instead becomes an admonishing force more akin to Satan. In his own writing, Milton does appear to distinguish between a "good" and "bad" conscience, though his definitions continue along lines already established above; about the "good" conscience, he writes, "SINCERITY, which is also called 'integrity' and 'a good conscience,' means pursuing a single good course of action with a sincere and heartfelt desire and sense of purpose . . . Strictly speaking, however a good conscience is not the same thing as sincerity. It consists rather of an intellectual judgment of one's own deeds, and an approval of them which is directed by the light of nature or of grace" (652).[45] On the "evil" conscience, he argues, "Opposed to a good conscience is an evil conscience. This

means, roughly speaking, the judgment and disapproval of its own evil actions, which each individual mind performs by the light either of nature or of grace. It should really be called a consciousness of evil" (653). Important to note in the first definition is the phrase "intellectual judgment," which would seem to return agency back into the hands of the individual believer; each person must weigh their actions—aided of course by the "light"—before they enact them, and evil actions become, in a sense, their own punishment.

For Milton and his fellow regicides, "conscience" doubtlessly presented a thorny problem after the Restoration. If the stirrings of conscience prompted their revolutionary actions, then after that revolution had failed, what were they to make of their spiritual alignment? As N. H. Keeble terms it in his examination of Lucy Hutchinson's *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, "[T]he collapse of the Good Old Cause posed for [Lucy Hutchinson], as for all the defeated Puritans and their nonconformist successors, a daunting case of conscience. The 'revolution' of 1660 . . . tempted her, and them, to betray their Puritan allegiance, to doubt God's providential dealings with his elect nation, and to despair."[46] Keeble sees Hutchinson's *Memoirs*, like Milton's *Samson*, as "an attempt to perceive and accept God's purpose in and after the Restoration."[47] For Lucy Hutchinson, however, the *Memoirs* were perhaps attempting more than an understanding of the failed revolution or even a celebration of her late husband; they were also endeavoring to elide a difficult discussion about her husband's conscience by substituting a new history in place of the true account. In her prefatory "To My Children," Lucy writes of her husband, "He never did aniething without measuring it by the rule of conscience, and for the gaine of the whole world would not have committed one sinne or

omitted one duty against his conscience, that being perswaded neither his estate, honor, wife, children, nor his owne life weigh'd aniething with him in the ballance against Christe and his interest."[48] However, as Giuseppina Iacono Lobo has recently argued, in 1660 Colonel Hutchinson had written a petition attempting to distance himself from the revolutionaries; in part, he expresses a "deepe and sorrowfull sence which so heavily presses my soule, for that unfortunate guilt that lies upon it" for his participation in their plots and machinations.[49] This petition is conspicuously absent from the *Memoirs*, and in diverting attention to the Colonel's very "republican" conscience, Lobo argues, Lucy Hutchinson tries to "author" that very private and very "sacred part of his being."[50] However, such a power is beyond Lucy's reach, and it remains that Colonel Hutchinson's well-timed appeal to an uneasy conscience in fact served as evidence for his exoneration after the Restoration. One difficulty with conscience, it seems, is that it can sometimes seem to follow the whims of an individual believer, thus troubling that believer's spiritual history and attempts to act rightly in the world.

Casuistry represents an effort on the part of the godly to come to a better understanding of this faculty, but it is not only about charting the motions of one's conscience, though, as we have seen, this was a large part of its usage in the century leading up to *Samson Agonistes*; fittingly, it also has legal connotations and a history well beyond the precisianists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact, far from representing a tool of impossible moral standards, its usage more often denotes a kind of flexibility predicated on the individual. As Werner Stark writes, "The word casuistry (literally 'concern with individual cases') . . . [i]n its widest sense, . . has described a mentality which pays closer attention to the concrete instance than to abstract

generalities."[51] He continues that "[t]o confront [a confused believer] with the letter of the law and to refuse to make allowances in his personal, perhaps attenuating, circumstances would always mean to discourage and often to lose him. On the other hand, to give way to special pleading, to set aside obligations and commandments which must needs be binding on all men, would lead to a catastrophic undermining of human discipline and morality. The casuists tried to do their job without falling either into excessive hardness (legalism in the bad sense of the word) or into excessive softness (casuistry in the bad sense of the word)."[52] Of course, this attempt to find a middle ground has led to a generally negative perception of the word; all of the examples of "casuistry" given by the *OED* are negative usages, and the final word of their given definition is, "Often (and perhaps originally) applied to a quibbling or evasive way of dealing with difficult cases of duty; sophistry."

On one hand, becoming mired in the individual "case" seemed to do little for precisionists other than cause frustration and increase anxiety; on the other hand, flexibility seems a key concept for an understanding of Samson and his relationship to the Law—and to God. Casuistry seems ideally suited to help Samson—and through Samson, the reader—discover what the moment of the "rouzing motions" really signifies, and Milton allows for a kind of casuistry throughout the poem, specifically when Samson is considering his past and the flexibility he had—for instance, in marrying the woman of Timna—in fulfilling God's will. By applying a casuistic model to the play, Samson's "rouzing motions" can be understood to follow a logical line of dialogue with antinomian tendencies that permeates the action leading up to those motions. I am in agreement with Mary Ann Radzinowicz when she writes, "*Samson Agonistes* is a poem of growth and

change, depicting a hero who achieves late insight superior to his earlier insights,"[53] and yet, I would contend that Samson's early insights are not inferior to his later, only that he has not fully internalized the truths that he elucidates until his evolution, which occurs throughout the poem, is complete. Like other antinomians, Samson attributes his commendable actions to God, and comes to realize his own failures and how they bear out his fallen and hopeless nature outside of God. His actions as dictated by God do not always involve breaking the Law, but the contemplation of those actions does contribute to the ultimate law-breaking act that forms the crux of the action.

The Past in Present: Reading the Motions against Samson's Past

Firstly, and most obviously, Samson alludes to another instance in which he broke the Law for a higher purpose: his marriage to the woman of Timna. Samson, responding to the Chorus's query as to the nature of his extra-tribal marriages, says, "The first I saw at *Timna*, and she pleas'd / Mee, not my Parents, that I sought to wed, / The daughter of an Infidel: they knew not / That *what I motion'd was of God; I knew* / *From intimate impulse*, and therefore urg'd / The Marriage on" (219-224; my emphasis). Here, the "intimate impulse" leads Samson beyond the accepted sphere of a Hebrew, but for a higher purpose condoned by God and grasped only by Samson. As Bennett asserts, "Thus, Samson has easily understood that his first non-Jewish marriage—to the Timnan woman—God allowed in order to fulfil the very purpose of the law against intermarriage, that is, to preserve God's people from falling captive to false gods and morals, in this case by seeking Israel's political liberation and religious freedom."[54] This moment represents the first instance when Samson was instructed by God to supersede the Mosaic

Law for God's larger purpose, and the first parallel to the rousing motions that will come later in the poem.

Samson's language throughout the poem reveals that he sees his actions as rooted in God, and thus follows the Spirit of God when choosing his path. That the Spirit has led Samson in the direction parallel to that of the Law is not exactly coincidental, but it is ultimately of little importance. There is a language that threads itself into Samson's narrative which paves the way for the antinomian act that marks the climax of the play. In lines 241-46, Samson, responding to the Chorus's observation that Israel is still under the yoke of the Philistines, states, "That fault I take not on me, but transfer / On *Israel*'s governors, and Heads of Tribes, / Who seeing *those great acts which God had done* / *Singly by me* against their Conquerours / Acknowledg'd not, or not at all consider/d / Deliverance offerd." Samson does not take credit for his heroic actions; he states that they are deeds God has done. Further on, in lines 638-40, Samson asserts, "He [God] led me on to mightiest deeds / Above the nerve of mortal arm /Against the uncircumcis'd, our enemies." Samson's deeds are beyond the scope of mortals; they are both inspired by, and in some sense, enacted by God. By following the will of God, Samson is able to achieve things far beyond the reach of normal men, and he knows to credit God for those achievements. This language continues in lines 1211-19, when Samson says

> I was no private but a person rais'd
> With strength sufficient and command from Heav'n
> To free my Countrey; if their servile minds
> *Me their Deliverer* sent would not receive,
> But to thir Masters gave me up for nought,
> Th'unworthier they; whence to this day they serve.
> I was to do my part from Heav'n assign'd,
> And had perform'd it if my known offence

Had not disabl'd me, not all your force.

It is directly from heaven that Samson's commands come, and through the fulfillment of these commands Samson should have become the deliverer of his nation. While Samson allowed God to work through him he was on the road to becoming a savior, but he allowed the strength of his will to falter. It could be said that Samson's strength is the Spirit within him, and that when Samson falls to Dalila and loses that strength it is because he has lost his connection to God and let his own false reasoning supersede God's dictates.

For Milton, whose preoccupation with free will complicates the fall in *Paradise Lost*, acting rightly in the world involves a unique integration of man's reason and God's will. Yet, even within his own works, Milton's understanding of how this right action is informed or dictated by God's law can evade simple interpretation or simply evolve with Milton as a religious thinker; such shifting is evidence when one compares his early nationalistic prose and *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* to his later attitudes as embodied in *De Doctrina Christiana*.[55] In *Doctrine and Discipline*, Milton, while attempting to justify divorce by finding its precedent in Mosaic Law, writes of the law, "No no, this cannot be, that the Law whose integrity and faithfulnesse is next to God, should be either the shameless broker of our impurities, or the intended instrument of our destruction" (323).[56] Later in his career, in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton follows the more orthodox line of considering the Mosaic Law obsolete as an instrument of salvation; he writes, "Once the gospel, the new covenant through faith in Christ, is introduced, then all the old covenant, in other words the entire Mosaic law, is abolished"

(525-26). Like true antinomians, Milton does not then conclude that Christians are free to act in a sinful manner; rather,

> It is not a less perfect life that is required from Christians but, in fact, a more perfect life than was required of those who were under the law. The whole tenor of Christ's teaching shows this. There is, however, one difference. Moses imposed the literal or external law even on those who were unwilling to receive it; whereas Christ writes the internal law of God on the hearts of believers through his Spirit, and leads them as willing followers. (535)

Works are not entirely unimportant; the true Christian cannot sit idly by and expect to be saved through Christ. Faith, Milton writes,

> has its own works, which may be different from the works of the law. We are justified, then, by faith, but a living faith, not a dead one, and the only living faith is a faith which acts. . . . So we are justified by faith without the works of the law, but not without the works of faith; for a true and living faith cannot exist without works, though these may be different from the works of the written law. (490)

We must continue to enact good works, but not the works of a sinner slavishly—and fruitlessly—attempting to follow the letter of the Law. How, then, can we make sure that our actions are performed through faith and not through some attempt at keeping that Law? We must look to the Holy Spirit; Milton writes, "The above argument does not establish the doctrine of human merit, since both faith itself and the works of faith are works of the Spirit, not our own" (491). We do not deserve justification, nor can we exact it for ourselves, but through the Spirit we have faith and can then work through faith to bring God's will into action. Milton asserts that perfection is unattainable in this life,[57] but then goes on to write, "As a result, those who carry on this struggle with real vigor, and labor earnestly and tirelessly to attain perfection in Christ, are often, through God's mercy, described attributively in the Bible as 'perfect' and 'blameless' and 'sinless'" (483). This language skirts exceedingly close to that of inherentist antinomians, who

assert that the believer can actually achieve perfection in their lifetimes, and are thus absolved from following the Law and are free from sin.[58]

Through most of the poem, however, Samson keenly feels his own sin and acknowledges that God can see him as sinful; until the moment of the rousing motions he is a doubting antinomian whose lack of confidence makes him impotent. Early in the poem, Samson answers the lamentations of his father, Manoa, in this way: "Appoint not heavenly disposition, Father, / Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me / But justly; I my self have brought them on, / Sole Author I, sole cause: if aught seem vile, / As vile hath been my folly, who have profan'd / The mystery of God giv'n me under pledge / Of vow, and have betray'd it to a woman, / A *Canaanite*, my faithless enemy" (373-80). This passage is echoed in Samson's response to Harapha's taunts later in the narrative; Samson says, "All these indignities, for such they are / From thine, these evils I deserve and more, / Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me / Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon / Whose ear is ever open; and his eye / Gracious to re-admit the suppliant" (1168-73). In both of these examples, Samson acknowledges his role in his own suffering, even going so far as to call himself the "sole author" of his misery. He has not broken one of the Mosaic Laws, but has broken his vow to God, a vow which would automatically supersede the Law. In lines 1139-44, in response to the giant Harapha's jibes, Samson says, "I know no Spells, use no forbidden Arts; / My trust is in the living God who gave me / At my Nativity this strength, diffus'd / No less through all my sinews, joints and bones, / Than thine, while I preserv'd these locks unshorn, / The pledge of my unviolated vow." If the purpose of the Law, in the view of St. Paul, is to lead one to an understanding of one's own sin, then the Law in *Samson Agonistes*

achieves its purpose. By breaking the Law—in this case, by violating the vow—Samson finds himself in a fallen state and comes to realize that all his former good acts mean nothing without God.

Without quite knowing they are doing so, the Chorus helps to reinforce these ideas. They are not given the same insight that Samson ultimately possesses, but their language reveals that they are allowed some glimpse of the enlightenment given to Samson; chastising Samson in his despair, they remind him,

> Who made our Laws to bind us, not himself,
> And hath full right to exempt
> Whom so it pleases him by choice
> From National obstriction, without taint
> Of sin, or legal debt;
> For with his own Laws he can best dispence.
> He would not else who never wanted means,
> Nor in respect of the enemy just cause
> To set his people free,
> Have prompted this Heroic *Nazarite*,
> Against his vow of strictest purity,
> To seek in marriage that fallacious Bride,
> Unclean, unchaste.
> Down Reason then, at least vain reasonings down,
> Though Reason here aver
> That moral verdict quits her of unclean:
> Unchaste was subsequent, her stain not his. (309-25)

God, the Chorus asserts, would not have urged Samson to marry the woman of Timna if not for some larger purpose. This seems to clash with that which the Chorus deems reasonable; Samson's chosen bride was "unclean, unchaste" and did not represent a good marriage choice for any "reasonable" Israelite. Yet, God urged Samson to marry the woman of Timna with an "intimate impulse," thus, in effect, causing him to go against his reason. The Chorus makes an interesting distinction here between "vain reasonings"

and, if we are to assume the opposite, significant or worthwhile "reasonings." Fish calls this assertion by the Chorus a "stunning move," writing that here "the thesis that God's actions are not bound by the laws of reason is turned into a *reason* for, and an explanation of, one of his actions."[59] Fish implies that this in itself is an unreasonable effort on the part of the Chorus to afford God a dual nature of ultimate nearness (a nearness that would allow humans to somehow "read" God) and ultimate distance (a distance that would create a gulf between human intellect and God that cannot be spanned).[60] I read the Chorus's words in a different way: though they don't understand it, they have actually made a valid point about divine inspiration and action. Actions that originate with God (and for the Christian Milton, Christ) do not have to accord with "reasonable" actions, which, for the Chorus, would mean actions prescribed by the Law. Marrying the woman of Timna was "unreasonable" because it was against the Law, but, as the incident suggests, the Law is not actually equivalent to right reasoning. Once Samson realizes that his reason does not have to accord with the Law, his mind is free from those fetters but now bound by a higher understanding; as Radzinowicz asserts, "Samson is not freed to disobey God, for that, unrepented, is unforgivable, but he is freed from obedience to edicts thought to be emanating from God. He is free to obey only the substance of the truth, not the orthodox formulae. Like the consonance of freedom and obedience is the consonance of liberty and service."[61] Here again we find the language of antinomianism; for antinomians, there is no room for earthly reason when one is following the will of God as revealed through belief in Christ, for belief in Christ changes one's very appetites.[62] For Milton, reason is not abrogated along with truth, but "vain reasonings" that do not accord with God's will should be discarded. Samson, eventually, discards

them in a way that the members of the Chorus, who find safety in the word of the Law, cannot.

It is important to note that on a Biblical timeline the Samson story takes place before Christ; on a Miltonic timeline as outlined in *Paradise Lost*, the Samson story takes place after the fall of Adam and Eve and after the Son has offered himself up as a sacrifice in Book 3, but before he has actually become that sacrifice.[63] In a technical sense, Samson could not possibly be antinomian because it is only through Christ that the Mosaic Law is abrogated, and Samson prefigures Christ. Samson's failure to emulate the as yet un-enacted example of Christ is, according to critics like Derek N. C. Wood, Samson's fatal flaw. In Wood's estimation, Samson is the ultimate manifestation of the idea that life under the Law is hopeless slavery; he writes,

> He [Samson] snuffles along, seeking moral direction under an impossible Law, alienated from a silent, invisible God. He is uncertain whether his motions are impulses from that God—or his own carnal imaginings—or from Satan. In that darkness under the Law, ignorant of the progressive revelation in time and history, he is tragically unable to turn to the example of the Christ Incarnate or to know the patience, humility, and compassion acted out in Christ's life and recorded in the New Testament.[64]

Wood's assessment here is problematic for several reasons. For one, it implies that any believer pre-Christ—be it Biblical hero or more "common" believer—is excluded from interacting directly with God; this, in spite of ample evidence of pre-Christian believers seeing and speaking directly with God. Wood's argument also implies that there are no moments when Samson is sure of himself, that he must constantly question himself and God's directives, or that God is "silent" and does not speak to Samson; clearly, this is not the case, either in the Biblical narrative or in Milton's drama. The Law may be

impossible for all excepting Christ, but in the end, Samson is allowed—through God's grace—to transcend that Law in favor of a freedom that represents a precursor to Christ. Samson cannot know that the Mosaic Law will be cast aside with the coming of Christ, nor can he know that Christ will enact a different kind of example of how to live in the world, one that obeys the higher law that is God's law; unlike Wood, however, I do not see the lack of Christ as a referent as an insurmountable obstacle for Samson's relationship with God. It is true that, for genuine antinomians, and to some degree for Milton as well, Christ provides a means through which to live "perfectly" in the world. As Como explains, antinomian thinkers contended "that no act of human effort or will could do anything to earn salvation or assurance, both of which were to come solely from the overwhelming power of Christ's life and death (or, in certain formulations, through the inhabitation of Christ's spirit in the believer's soul)."[65] Milton, in a passage from *De Doctrina* that echoes this sentiment, writes, "Just as our sins, then, are imputed to Christ, so Christ's righteousness or merits are imputed to us, through faith" (486). I do not wish to assert that Milton believes the Christian capable of somehow becoming Christ, or that Christians are made sinless and perfect through faith in Christ, but rather that any good in the fallen Christian must come from Christ. Faith gives the human act merit, merit that does not exist for the act performed under the heavy shadow of the Law and the assumption that works can save.

In a way, even Samson's failure proves an antinomian point: nothing Samson can do will bring about the true salvation of his people, even as he "saves" them from their enemies. Even his final act does not save; that salvation has to come later, through Christ, and only Christ. In spite of Samson's failures as a salvific figure, and even though

Samson is pre-Christ, he is clearly not without the kind of enlightenment that comes to the Christian elect through faith. Joan S. Bennett asserts that the "rousing motions" represent the dawning of right reasoning, reasoning grounded in the spirit and not the letter of the Law, reasoning that looks beyond the restrictions of Mosaic Law, the purpose of which is to direct the sinner's attention to sin, and then to "lead its truest followers to transcend its own limits by the grace of a God who makes fallen people's efforts to keep a perfect Law acceptable 'works of faith.'"[66] "Transcending the limits" of the Law does not mean license; in fact, Samson is held to a higher standard of conduct than the Chorus because of his faith in a meaning beyond the Law's rituals. Individual situations are open to interpretation, but "Samson, with a growing ability to reason rightly, must carefully interpret, since even full Christian freedom from law never means law's abandonment or denial, but its fulfilment, that is, its truest interpretation."[67]

Burns points to the strength of the rousing motions to "prove" that they are from God and thus qualify as antinomian; for Samson, Burns argues, the Israelite Law is part of Samson's fundamental identity, and thus the rousing motions "must indeed be powerful if they can move Samson to break" the law of idolatry, one of the laws that defines Samson's very existence.[68] In fact, Samson is a nazirite for whom the prescriptions in the Mosaic Law would be especially binding. It is important to remember, for instance, that having his hair cut demonstrates two instances of betrayal to God, not one; Samson betrays God's confidence with Dalila, and betrays his vow as a nazirite never to cut his hair.[69] In spite of the evidence provided by the "strength" of the motions, however, their source has proven highly ambiguous for modern critics and casts doubt on the action that follows. In the Judges narrative, Samson's final words constitute

a prayer to God: "Oh Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes"[70] and a brief cry: "Let me die with the Philistines."[71] Milton's version, however, has no such prayer; instead, according to the secondhand account of the Hebrew Messenger, Samson's life ends thusly:

> [W]ith head a while enclin'd,
> And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd,
> Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd.
> At last with head erect thus cryed aloud,
> Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impos'd
> I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying,
> Not without wonder or delight beheld.
> Now of my own accord such other tryal
> I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater;
> As with amaze shall strike all who behold (1626-35),

at which point he pulls down the pillars, in turn killing the Philistines and himself. Much has been speculated of the moment when Samson stands silent, "as one who pray'd"[72] and on the phrase "Now of my own accord" that occurs in line 1643, as Samson's assertion that he is doing this through his own volition complicates the issue of divine inspiration. As Lieb asserts, however, "Samson is able to talk like God because he is able to act like God. That is, he is empowered to be triumphantly destructive in God's cause."[73] I would argue that Milton here champions free well by giving ambiguity to the final scene of destruction, but ultimately, as evidenced by Samson's inner dialogue throughout the drama, points to God as the ultimate "cause." By having Samson "chart" his past and the ways in which God has spoken to/influenced him, Milton sets Samson up as a casuist and allows the final revelation from God to fit with what has already come, even as it changes everything.

This brings us to the crux of the "problem" of the rousing motions: how can Samson know he is performing God's will? How can he have the confidence—so often denied to precisionist casuists—that at least some of the impulses of his conscience have emanated from God? At one level, he can know through his own experience; while he was God's champion he was rewarded with strength and victory. Once he fell to temptation, he was cast down and left to his own "reasonings" without the connection to God. Some might argue that, based on this model, Samson's final act is clearly not sanctioned by God; what kind of reward, indeed, is such a violent and bloody death? However, if we conclude from Milton's assertion that perfection cannot really be achieved in this life—an assertion exemplified by Milton's personal motto, taken from 2 Corinthians 12:9: "I am perfected in weakness"[74]—we must assume that it is in the next life that God's Israelite champions must find their perfection. They too will be saved by Christ eventually, for the gospel exists even in the time of Moses, though "obscurely."[75] Samson's knowledge of God is itself occasionally obscure, although his moments of clarity make it relatively straightforward to follow his enlightenment on to the final "rouzing motions" scene. It is gradual enlightenment that Samson experiences; at the beginning of the poem he mistakenly thinks that his ability to reason is far inferior to his strength. He asks, "But what is strength without a double share / Of wisdom, vast, unwieldy, burdensom, / Proudly secure, yet liable to fall / By weakest suttleties, not made to rule, / But to subserve where wisdom bears command" (53-57).

Through the rest of the poem, however, Samson comes to gain spiritual knowledge in the way elucidated by Milton in *De Doctrina*:

> Understanding of spiritual affairs is a habit instilled by God, by which the faithful who are ingrafted in Christ, when the darkness of their native ignorance has been dispersed, and their intellect enlightened in order to perceive celestial things, come to know, with God as their instructor, everything necessary for eternal salvation and for a truly blessed life. (478)

Here is another instance when we can find an antinomian parallel to Milton's writings. John Eaton, in his *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ Alone*, writes, "First, the spirituall knowledge apprehends the things which neither eye hath seene, nor eare hath heard, nor heart of naturall man can conceive; that is, it conceives the mysteries of God above reason, yeah, and contrary to naturall reason, sense, and feeling."[76] Man, through God's guidance, can come to perceive those things that are above "reason," at least that reason which is rooted in life under the Law. Milton would seem to agree with Eaton that false, human-centered knowledge makes God's will sometimes seems objectionable to "reason, sense, and feeling," but that following the will of God can defy that which is deemed "reasonable" by man's fallen perceptions. "Right" reason is that which is attuned to God, not focused on humanity. As Daniel T. Lochman argues, "'Right' reason, that reason which is most closely linked to one's moral act and spiritual destiny, determines choice for or against God. It clears away all conflicting, distracting passions and subordinate rational faculties by focussing on the central question of one's willed disposition toward God."[77] Samson makes the choice for God and not for the Law; he has attuned his reason—and arguably, his conscience—to the correct frequency. As a result, he is free from the Law, but now has a rather large responsibility on his shoulders: he must follow God's will, even if it seems to violate the precepts of his Law, his nation, and himself.[78] In an echo of Milton's *De Doctrina*, Bennett contends that the "resulting liberty demands from Samson, as from a Christian, a greater degree of perfection than the

law demands from the Chorus. For he must weigh each deed and motive against his own right reason and will not be excused for acting or willing blindly, out of piety."[79] Sharon Achinstein elaborates this idea with her emphasis on action; she writes, "External action, how one 'performs' in the world, matters. Samson's final action then is taken in this spirit of the only freedom left to him—willing compliance to God's laws, and as the voluntary exercise of his human power, 'Of mine own accord'."[80] Samson reassures the Chorus that the action he takes—namely, accompanying the Officer to the idolatrous feast of Dagon—will not be reprehensible. He says, "Happ'n what may, of me expect to hear / Nothing dishonourable, impure, unworthy / Our God, our Law, my Nation, or my self, / The last of me or no I cannot warrant" (1423-26). Samson doesn't know where the motions will lead him; he only knows that he must act, and although he breaks the Law, his act is not unreasonable because it signifies an alignment with God and an adherence to a higher Law. Samson is merely returning to the precedent he abandoned when he fell to Dalila's wiles: heeding the call of God. Now, in the moment of the "rouzing motions," Samson is truly obedient to God, for he defies even his own will in order to go to the temple.[81] By agreeing to go with the Officer, Samson is not obeying the Philistines, but God, whose will at that exact moment coincidentally aligns with the will of the Philistines, though his purpose is clearly at odds with their intention for Samson.

Milton's idea of a true Christian is not an automaton enacting God's will on earth, but a creature who is forced neither into mindless conformation with the Law nor with God's will; the Christian must attune his or her mind to a reasonable understanding of God's will and must understand the higher purpose with which his or her actions must comply in the same way that Samson comes to attune his reason to God's. As Achinstein

writes, "The last episodes of the play show that the conscience must not only be free from self-enslavement, but also that action not derive from external compulsion. Rather, action must be self-motivated and 'owned' in order for Samson to be open to contact with God. The law can *never* compel without removing human freedom; it merely offers occasion for accord and compliance."[82] Though not a Christian, Samson, like a good Christian, realizes that his fallen state has been brought about by his own actions, that he cannot raise himself out of his fallen state by adhering to the Law that he thinks defines him, and that his actions must represent more than the sum of the Law: they must represent as closely as possible the will of God, which Samson knows he was once able to ascertain. Once Samson realizes that he has outlined the precedent for acting as God's true, willing servant in his own life, knowing the right path is easy. Samson is a kind of antinomian, not because he is made perfect through an as-yet absent Christ, but because he chooses to follow God no matter the consequences. Furthermore, he follows God freely; Samson himself says, "But who constrains me to the Temple of *Dagon*, / Not dragging? the *Philistian* Lords command. / Commands are no constraints. If I obey them, / I do it freely; venturing to displease / God for the fear of Man, and Man prefer, / Set God behind" (1370-75). In the same way, God will not force Samson into obedience; Samson must understand and then obey. What Samson comes to understand is that, though the Mosaic Law emanates from God and is thus good, it can sometimes be inadequate. I do not agree with Joseph Wittreich when he asserts that Samson's confusions "have the effect of recalling the proposition that laws are to command what is good, and restrain what is evil, with the implication that to dispense with the law, especially divine law, is to turn the moral universe upside down and inside out."[83] Samson is not being asked to

dispense with divine law; he is being asked to choose true obedience to God, from whom all law originates.

Samson—and through Samson, Milton—is concerned more with understanding God directly than trying to discern God's meaning through his edicts. God is not static; he is a living God whose will is constantly being revealed. As such, the true believer must not close himself off to further revelation. Samson, ultimately, understands that his conduit to God has not been closed, and as such, once he re-aligns his will to God's, he can again become a sort of savior; at the least, he can understand God's impulses within himself and regain his physical strength, which was always God's gift. When he tells the Philistines just before he pulls down the pillars, "Now of my own accord such other tryal / I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater; / As with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1632-34), he means to display the strength that has returned to him now that he has once again learned to recognize and follow God's commands. Ultimately, Milton leaves salvation to the Son, but even here, there is an interesting parallel to *Samson*. Milton's poetic treatment of Christ in *Paradise Regain'd* has been yoked to *Samson* since they were first published together in 1671, and in Book 1 of *Paradise Regain'd*, Christ speaks a passage that closely mirrors the "rouzing motions" passage of *Samson*; he says,

> The Spirit descended on me like a Dove,
> And last the sum of all, my Father's voice,
> Audibly heard from Heav'n, pronounc'd me his,
> Me his beloved Son, in whom alone
> He was well pleas'd; by which I knew the time
> Now full, that I no more should live obscure,
> But openly begin, as best becomes
> The Authority which I deriv'd from Heaven.
> *And now by some strong motion I am led*
> *Into this Wilderness, to what intent*

> *I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know;*
> *For what concerns my knowledge God reveals.* (282-93; my emphasis)[84]

The parallel Biblical passage, from Luke 4:1, reads, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness"; were it not already clear to the reader that Christ has privileged access to the Holy Spirit, such a reference surely clarifies this point. However, Milton's intentions in including two such similar passages in *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson*, like the motions of Samson's conscience, are obscured; are we meant to draw a direct parallel between Christ and Samson, thus identifying Samson as a pre-cursor to Christ? Or, are we meant to read Samson's moment more critically, thus showing that any comparison between Samson and Christ is tempting, but false? There was a time when God was "well pleas'd" with Samson, and it is my argument that the "rouzing motions" signal a return to this state; for this moment, Samson becomes like Christ in an antinomian sense: he is filled with the Spirit, which him to move away from external constraint in order to act according to God's direct will, which is inscrutable. God reveals only what "concerns" Samson, and though Samson tries to know the unknowable—i.e. why, how, and when he was God's champion, and what he could possibly do to regain that status—it is not until God inspires him that Samson can return to the confident state of a believer assured that God's Spirit is working within him. Such a model of behavior is both radical—and heretical—for a more common believer, but given Milton's own expressed belief in the possibility of inner illumination through the Spirit, it is not impossible, and therefore it represents both the danger and the liberating potential of antinomian belief.

Samson's actions—based as they are in a Biblical, pre-Christian narrative—are not radical in and of themselves, but when the potential of his narrative is extended to modern believers, the spectre of antinomianism looms. Burns asserts that the "antinomianism implicit in the lawbreaking of Old Testament heroes"—heroes such as Phinehas, Jael, and Judith—"was usually tamed by asserting that they acted on divine commands and that God no longer communicated such commands directly to individuals."[85] Samson is in a unique position; on one hand, he represents an "antiquated," pre-Christian model of direct contact between God and his chosen champions, while also providing a model of Christian anxiety assuaged by true faith. And, linked as he is to Christ through the pairing of their Miltonic narratives, Samson's subversive potential is at once contained safely by the privileged position both he and Christ occupy, while at the same expressive of a thread of antinomianism that runs through sixteenth and seventeenth-century religious thought. In Samson's narrative, Milton reveals just enough of his casuistic process and history as God's champion to eternally frustrate his readers and critics, but ultimately, I affirm, he affords us glimpses of the potential power of truly listening, believing, and obeying God alone. Like antinomianism itself, this power forms the basis both of the best potential of any believer's faith and the worst kind of religious chicanery, but the possibility of one individual truly conversing with God and enacting His will on earth would, for Milton and most of the faithful believers of his time, merit tolerating innumerable pretenders who use a façade of sincere antinomian belief to cloak avarice, vice, and even terrorism.

Notes

[1] All quotations taken from John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Complete Works of John Milton, Volume II: The 1671 Poems*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] We do, of course, see Tamburlaine alternately speaking of God and boasting of his own power to God at the end of *Part 2*, Act 5, Scene 1, but this could be taken as further evidence of Tamburlaine's delusions and provides no definitive proof that he actually is God's Scourge.

[3] According to the *OED*, "regard" here should be taken to mean "To look after (oneself); to take care or be mindful of (one's own interest, health, etc.)." In fact, the line from *Samson* referenced here is used by the *OED* to illustrate this meaning.

[4] John Carey, "A work in praise of terrorism?: September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*," *The Times Literary Supplement* (September 6, 2002): 15.

[5] Regina M. Schwartz, "*Samson Agonistes*: The Force of Justice and the Violence of Idolatry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 634.

[6] David Loewenstein, "*Samson Agonistes* and the Culture of Religious Terror," in *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*, ed. Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 217.

[7] Ibid., 227.

[8] Michael Lieb, "Returning the Gorgon Medusa's Gaze: Terror and Annihilation in Milton," in *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*, ed. Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 241.

[9] Loewenstein, "Culture of Religious Terror," 215.

[10] See Hebrews 11:32.

[11] Ibid., 207.

[12] Stanley Fish, "'There Is Nothing He Cannot Ask': Milton, Liberalism, and Terrorism," in *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*, ed. Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006), 262.

[13] Ibid., 244.

[14] Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 426.

[15] Ibid., 428.

[16] However, Fish does not provide an extended reading of the play through an understanding of antinomianism, nor does he make an attempt to define "antinomianism" outside of a general kind of lawlessness in the face of an authority one feels contradicts God's will.

[17] Fish, "There Is Nothing He Cannot Ask," 258.

[18] David V. Urban, "'Rousing Motions' and the Silence of God: Scripture and Immediate Revelation in *Samson Agonistes* and *Clarel*," in *Milton & Melville: An Edition and Analysis of Melville's Annotations on Milton*, ed. Robin Grey (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 95.

[19] Norman T. Burns, "'Then Stood Up Phinehas': Milton's Antinomianism, and Samson's," *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 37.

[20] Loewenstein, "Culture of Religious Terror," 226.

[21] Loewenstein, for instance, favors Quakers as the group Samson is most likely emulating (see Ibid., 222-228).

[22] Lieb, "Terror and Annihilation in Milton," 237-38.

[23] Fish, "There Is Nothing He Cannot Ask," 252.

[24] Ibid., 256.

[25] Fish, *How Milton Works*, 407.

[26] Wes Kisting, "Authority and Inwardness: The Power of Conscience in Early Modern England," PhD diss., University of Iowa (2007), 6.

[27] Ibid., 8.

[28] See, for example, his desire at the outset of the play to find ease for his mind from "restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging, and present / Times past, what once I was, and what am now" (19-22).

[29] Ibid., 9.

[30] Theodore Dwight Bozeman notably asserts that the anxiety engendered by one's uncertain place in the salvific scheme is one key element in the break between Puritan precisianists and antinomians, who chose to abandon the seemingly never-ending attempt to chart one's conscience in favor of liberation through Christ. See his *The Precisianist Strain*.

[31] Ibid., 38-39.

[32] Ibid., 39.

[33] Ibid., 32-33.

[34] Ibid., 93.

[35] Ibid., 107.

[36] Camille W. Slights, "A Hero of Conscience: Samson Agonistes and Casuistry," *PMLA* 90, no. 3 (1975): 395-96.

[37] Ibid., 397.

[38] Ephraim Huit, *The Anatomy of Conscience or The Svmme of Pauls Regeneracy* (London: 1626), 43-44.

[39] Kisting, "Authority and Inwardness," 1.

[40] John Bradshaw, *A Moderate Short Discourse Concerning Tenderness of Conscience* (London, 1663), 6.

[41] Huit, *Anatomy of Conscience*, 55-56.

[42] Ibid., 172.

[43] Anthony Case, *Conscience It's Nature and Corruption, with it's repairs and means to inform it aright* (London, 1661), 52.

[44] Immanuel Bourne, *The Anatomie of Conscience* (London, 1623), 14.

[45] All quotations taken from John Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. William Alfred, Robert W. Ayers, et al., vol. 6 (New Haven: Yale University Press 1973).

[46] N. H. Keeble, "'The Colonel's Shadow': Lucy Hutchinson, Women's Writing and the Civil War," in *Literature and the English Civil War*, ed. Thomas Healy and Jonathan Sawday (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 228.

[47] Ibid., 229.

[48] Lucy Hutchinson, *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, ed. James Sutherland (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 6.

[49] Quoted in Giuseppina Iacono Lobo, "Lucy Hutchinson's Revisions of Conscience," *English Literary Renaissance* 42, no. 2 (2012): 320.

[50] Ibid., 341.

[51] Werner Stark, "Casuistry," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, ed. Philip Wiener, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1973), 257.

[52] Ibid., 259.

[53] Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), xx.

[54] Joan S. Bennett, "Reading *Samson Agonistes*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 227.

[55] Jason Rosenblatt, *Torah and Law in Paradise Lost* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 15.

[56] All quotations taken from John Milton, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush, John S. Diekhoff, et al., vol. 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959).

[57] See Ibid., 482.

[58] Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 38.

[59] Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence," 560.

[60] Ibid., 561.

[61] Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes*, 262.

[62] Gertrude Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History, With special reference to the period, 1640-1660* (London: Cresset Press, 1951), 15.

[63] See the Son's lines, "Behold me then, me for him, life for life / I offer, on me let thine anger fall; / Account me man; I for his sake will leave / Thy bosom, and this glory next to thee / Freely put off, and for him lastly die / Well pleased, on me let Death wreak all his rage" (3.236-41). Quotation taken from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow, England: Longman, 1998).

[64] Derek N. C. Wood, *"Exiled from Light": Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton's Samson Agonistes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 129.

[65] Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 35.

[66] Joan S. Bennett, *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1989), 124.

[67] Ibid., 129.

[68] Burns, "Milton's Antinomianism, and Samson's," 39.

[69] See Numbers 6:5, which reads, "All the days of the nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the Lord, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long."

[70] Judges 16:28.

[71] Judges 16:30.

[72] See, for example, Stanley Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 567, and Michael Lieb, "'Our Living Dread': The God of *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 24n26.

[73] Lieb, "The God of *Samson Agonistes*," 16.

[74] See mention of this motto in, for instance, Barbara Lewalski, *The Life of Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 257.

[75] See Milton, *De Doctrina*, 521.

[76] Eaton, *Honey-Combe*, 226.

[77] Daniel T. Lochman, "'Seeking Just Occasion': Law, Reason, and Justice at Samson's Peripety," *Milton Studies* 26 (1991): 279.

[78] See *Samson*, line 1425.

[79] Bennett, *Reviving Liberty*, 124.

[80] Sharon Achinstein, "*Samson Agonistes* and the Drama of Dissent," *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 150.

[81] In this moment, we see the briefest of parallels between Samson and Tamburlaine, who I argue in Chapter 2 must act against in accordance to his own utterances, even when this contradicts his will.

[82] Achinstein, "Drama of Dissent," 148.

[83] Joseph Wittreich, *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 232.

[84] Quotation taken from John Milton, *Paradise Regain'd*, in *The Complete Works of John Milton, Volume II: The 1671 Poems*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[85] Burns, "Milton's Antinomianism, and Samson's," 29.

CONCLUSION
POPULAR TEXTS AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

When a text is established enough to enter the general cultural consciousness, it becomes fair game for re-imagination and even for radicalization; it can take on meanings not intended or anticipated by the original author. For popular culture, such a re-imagination can yield fascinating explorations of alternate possibilities for character and plot. Milton's *Samson Agonistes,* for example, is itself a re-imagining of the Samson story from the Hebrew Bible, and the themes and characterization issues Milton emphasizes in his retelling speak volumes about Milton's own preoccupations. To return to the theme of popular music with which we began this study, we might also examine a more contemporaneous retelling of the Samson story in the songwriter Regina Spektor's "Samson." In the song, Spektor tells her listener, "Samson went back to bed, not much hair left on his head, / He ate a slice of Wonder bread and went right back to bed. / And the history books forgot about us, and the Bible didn't mention us / And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once / You are my sweetest downfall; I loved you first, I loved you first."[1] Spoken from the first-person perspective of one who "loved" Samson "first"—possibly the woman of Timna, or Delila—the narrator wishes to imagine an alternate history for herself and Samson; Spektor thus attempts to recast the Samson story as primarily a love story, one in which both Samson and the narrator could avoid their Biblical fate and remain in love, in obscurity. By returning to bed, Samson rejects his future position as the Scourge of God, and thus falls out of his own Biblical narrative; he's "forgotten" by history, but happy and satisfied in the moment. Later in the song, Spektor sings, "He couldn't bring the columns down. / No, he couldn't destroy a single

one. / And the history books forgot about us, and the Bible didn't mention us / And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once."[2] A Samson who finds contentment with domesticity is a Samson who abandons his position as God's chosen warrior. Spektor is clearly emphasizing the romantic aspects of this story in an attempt to recuperate one of the women in Samson's life; rather than simply serving as a cold temptress who betrays Samson, the narrator becomes a fully realized woman who truly loves him. This love radically alters his narrative and provides an amusing imaginative diversion in lyric form.

One potential problem with such a re-conception is a tendency to map meanings back onto texts that would not resonate with the author or the culture in which they lived and wrote. Sometimes texts can bear out the radical meanings a modern critic would wish to impose on them, but more often they resist such mapping, and it is these moments of resistance that are most fascinating and frustrating for the ongoing work of literary criticism. It is very tempting, for instance, to see heresy where it is not. Heresy is lively. Heresy is William Hacket claiming himself "king of kings" and holding forth in the streets, and to see such an incident reflected in literature is to see the writers of that time grappling with very real anxieties about public order, religious conviction, and the locus of authority in inventive ways; for the early modern period in England, exploring such anxieties in drama arguably provided a stage—both real and metaphorical—for a dialogue beyond the scope of official church or state doctrine.

At the outset of this study, I traced the use of "antinomianism" as a synonym for "lawless" through several layers of citation, ultimately ending with Stanley Fish, who is familiar enough with the meaning of the heresy to attempt to clarify its use and resonances. Fish applies this meaning in his study of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and

clearly has a grasp of its subtleties. For other critics of early modern literature, however, "antinomianism" dissolves into the miasma of the many and varied religious heresies at work in the homes and on the streets of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the use of the word to describe lawless behavior thus becomes more removed from the experiences and beliefs of real antinomian believers. It might seem that, for a modern critic not primarily concerned with religious issues, such confusion would be tolerable; a Brownist or a Familist or a Quaker might have similar beliefs, and mistaking one for another might not terribly muddle or negate an argument. However, as we as scholars develop a clearer picture of life and religious belief in this period and begin to hone in on the minutiae of that belief, more caution is needed to ensure that we employ language in a way that respects the lived experiences of those who left behind a record for our study and entertainment.

With the advent of invaluable resources like the *Early English Books Online* database, we are now able to skim centuries worth of pamphlets, polemics, and works of literature; with one well-phrased search, we can begin to map a term like "antinomianism" through thousands of pages of written works, and it is this process that I have endeavored to begin here. There is no shortage of "lawless" figures on the early modern stage—or in any writing of any period, for that matter—but determining whether that figure is antinomian requires a close attention to the language of self-styled antinomian tracts and the subtle ways that language departs from more orthodox positions on faith, works, and conscience. Given the impressive resources we can now rely upon, that attention is both more possible and more necessary if we hope to come to an understanding of early modern English literature on its own terms.

Some of the works under discussion here, while not newly "discovered," have suffered from a lack of attention, and it is these kinds of works that might serve as the richest fodder for completing such an understanding. Middleton's *The Puritan*, for instance, lived in obscurity for many years until the publication of *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* brought it to greater prominence in 2007, and since that time it has received new critical interest and joined works like Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to add shade and nuance to our understanding of that amorphous group known as "Puritans." Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, Part 1* and *Part 2*, while not obscure, have also suffered from a lack of critical attention; the sheer force of Tamburlaine's will has seemingly bullied critics into reductive thinking, and the plays' "minor" episodes rarely receive the attention of, say, the "earthly crown" speech or the burning of the Koran. And while the N-Town plays and Milton's *Samson* have no shortage of critical engagement, as a new understanding of contextual anxieties and meanings emerges, re-engagement with such texts becomes both necessary and illuminating for our understanding of their respective periods. While we should be careful of shoehorning any work into a mold of our own creation, we can forge more connections and come to a better understanding of the "geography" of a period if we are able to successfully "plot" a work on a map of that period's social, religious, and literary history.

We can also attempt an understanding of the ways our own concerns might mirror those of the subjects and authors of these works, although here, too, we should be cautious. In the case of antinomianism, a preoccupation with faith and works and the revealed will of God continues to occupy modern Christians, sometimes with questionable results. In truth, one reason I am attracted to the study of antinomianism is

the parallels I see between its central, heretical tenet—that adherence to an external moral code must be eschewed in favor of divine inspiration through Christ—at work in some evangelical religions of the American South. Although the published literature of such churches would shy away from such a claim, my own lived experience and dialogues with such believers has shown me that this heresy continues to thrive in modern-day religious belief. Determining how to live in the world when eternal life in heaven is the ultimate goal is highly problematic, and without an emphasis on good works—even if those works cannot "save" one's soul—the world suffers. What Robert S. McElvaine dubs "ChristianityLite" continues to plague the Christian community; as he terms it, the focus of ChristianityLite is squarely on "accepting Jesus as your Lord and Savior" and trusting Him with guiding your heart in the right direction.[3] The rewards for this "work" of accepting Christ are, in McElvaine's words, "eternal salvation, . . . riches in the here and now, good fortune, and a Get-Out-of-Jail-Free card that basically says that no matter what you do or how bad it is, you are still a Christian and will be forgiven."[4] McElvaine's cynicism here is palpable, but his assessment of a certain strain of evangelical believer in the American South is sadly accurate. And while these believers are not strictly antinomian—they pursue their own desires, not under the guise of Christ's guidance, but with the knowledge they will be forgiven by Christ when they "repent"—their behavior might well be recognizable to an early modern polemicist as "antinomianism." A small percentage of "believers" who pretend holiness while reveling in earthly desires seem to be an unfortunate by-product of any religious belief, regardless of whether that is seventeenth-century English or twenty-first-century American faith.

My focus in this study has been dramatic works in part because of the inherent difficulties in discerning the believer's true interiority; by "performing" their beliefs, these antinomians—and those who prove not to be antinomian, like Margery Kempe and Tamburlaine—are more easily judged, identified, and potentially diffused. However, the study of antinomians in literature is ripe for development, and beyond this current exploration, the scope of my own inquiry has already extended to figures like Sansloy in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Any text that concerns itself with religious law and God's revelation through true believers is a text that could bear out an antinomian reading; given that a great deal of early modern England shares such concerns, this study could have far-reaching implications for an understanding of the religious landscape of that time. My ultimate hope, however, is that my study contributes to and continues the work already established by Kristen Poole, Peter Lake, and others who are beginning to tease out what it might mean to self-identify as a religious sect in early modern England and how these sects are represented and often ridiculed in the literature of that time. In exploring the minutiae of what makes these antinomian characters "antinomian"—and what makes some of them decidedly not antinomian—I have endeavored to bring clarity and precision to a small corner of the early modern English religious landscape, one that also has potential significance for an understanding of any religious belief that centers on an individual's immediate relationship with the divine.

Notes

[1] Regina Spektor, vocal performance of "Samson," by Regina Spektor, released June 13, 2006 on *Begin to Hope*, Sire, 2006, MP3.

[2] Ibid.

[3] McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus*, 15.

[4] Ibid.

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