

## Chapter 1

# Signs and Symbols

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Omnis mundi creatura  
quasi liber et pictura  
nobis est in speculum;  
nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis,  
nostri status, nostrae sortis  
fidele signaculum.  
(Alan of Lille, ed. Raby 1959: 369)

[All creation, like a book or a picture, is a mirror to us – a true figure of our life, our death, our condition, our lot.]

To the medieval mind symbolic significance might be read into almost anything, when all creation was a mirror, figure and script that pointed beyond itself, reminding of an otherworldly dimension that offered the only true and abiding perspective. In the variety of his works the fifteenth-century Scottish poet Robert Henryson can represent – by way of introduction to this chapter – the sheer range of uses of signs and symbols in medieval writings. His *Garmont of Gud Ladeis* reads moral conduct in terms of the symbolism of female attire, and in his *Testament of Cresseid* the disfiguring leprosy that punishes Cresseid for defiance of the gods draws on traditions that see sickness as an outward sign of inner moral condition. In his *Orpheus and Eurydice* Henryson plays his own variations on medieval traditions of moralizing classical mythology to expound a Christian moral. Here the hero and heroine symbolize intellect and desire respectively: when Eurydice

flees through a May meadow from a would-be rapist shepherd, is stung by a venomous serpent and is summoned to hell, she flees from 'good vertew' (perhaps surprisingly to the modern reader) through the world's vain delights, and so descends into hell through excess of care for worldly things. Henryson's *Fables* include the grimly schematic symbolism of 'The Paddock and the Mouse', where a mouse (man's soul), in seeking to cross a river (the world) to reach better things, has no option but to be tied to a frog (man's body) that tries to drag her under and drown her, before both are seized by a kite (sudden death). Yet Henryson's interpretations may also signify challengingly, as in 'The Cock and the Jasp', where a cock finds a jewel (which betokens perfect wisdom and knowledge) but hankers instead for something edible (sensibly enough, for a chicken?) – only to be roundly condemned as an ignoramus on the basis of the otherworldly perspective that unifies the medieval reading of signs.

## Sign Systems

You can make a cross on the meal-table out of five bread-crumbs; but do not let anyone see this, except your wife. . . .

(*Instructions for a Devout and Literate Layman*,  
trans. Pantin 1976: 398–422)

As St Augustine had remarked in *De doctrina Christiana* ('On Christian Teaching'), 'A sign is a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression it presents to the senses' (trans. Green 1997: 31). In the Middle Ages, the natural world, the human body, or society and its constructions all had their symbolism and were full of signs to be interpreted. Most human experience could be read as symbolic: the successive ages of man; the powers or defects of the senses (vision or blindness, deafness, sweetness); the sleep of sin; illness, medicine and healing, which were seen as signs of moral failing and regeneration. Conduct was often evaluated symbolically in terms of conflicts between vices and virtues (personified in morality plays and innumerable allegories). As for the natural world, there was a long tradition of 'bestiaries', illustrated texts that expounded the moral symbolism discerned in the behaviour of animals and birds, as one preacher explains:

The Lord created different creatures with different natures not only for the sustenance of men, but also for their instruction, so that through

the same creature we may contemplate not only what may be useful for the body, but also what may be useful in the soul . . . For there is no creature . . . in which we may not contemplate some property belonging to it which may lead us to imitate God or . . . to flee from the Devil. For the whole world is full of different creatures, like a manuscript full of different letters and sentences, in which we can read whatever we ought to imitate or flee from . . .

(Thomas of Chobham (d. 1236?), *Summa de arte praedicandi* ('Manual of the Art of Preaching') (ed. Morenzoni 1988: 275))

The symbolism in plants, flowers, herbs and trees (and by extension in gardens and springs, and the character of the seasons) was also the focus of moralizing interpretations, while a science of astrological signs decoded the stars, and, as in Henryson's *Orpheus and Eurydice*, the ingenuity of medieval mythography read Christian symbolism into classical mythology. Analysed in texts called 'lapidaries', precious stones were credited with powers of healing and safeguarding, and gained symbolic meanings, as did both colours and also numbers, the subject of elaborate numerological symbolism (on all of which traditions the *Gawain*-poet draws). With their colours and gems, medieval clothes and jewellery, and above all ecclesiastical vestments, made symbolic statements, as did such accoutrements as armour and weapons. Heraldry developed a sophisticated lexicon of signs and signatures of kinship and descent. The regalia of kingship – crown, orb and sceptre – were replete with a symbolism of authority invested by coronation ritual, the most solemn amongst a system of symbolically charged ceremonies that included swearing of homage, and the dubbing and arming of knights, as also the observances and insignia of chivalric orders and the conduct of tournaments. In grander households some principal pastimes – hunting, jousting, feasting, dancing – were invested with symbolism, as were games and gift-giving, and all inform romance literature with its symbolic testings and questings. The quest draws meaning from a larger symbolism of movement and space: symbolic readings of journeys, and of the way taken, are especially resonant in the concept of the pilgrimage, as in romance, while architecture interprets built space in symbolic terms, in secular as well as ecclesiastical contexts.

Symbolism remained readable at different levels of understanding, education and literacy. Written explanations were provided even for medieval viewers of the 'typological' schemes of stained glass at Canterbury Cathedral, in which certain Old Testament episodes ('types') are read as prefigurations of New Testament episodes ('anti-types'),

and hence as signs that each episode in Christ's life fulfils a divinely ordained pattern (Michael 2004: 13, 25; see also Henry, ed., 1987). Since Jonah's three days in a whale's belly were understood to prefigure Christ's three days in the tomb (Matthew 12:40), Jonah's being spewed up by the whale offered a memorable symbol of Christ's resurrection, as did Samson's carrying off the gates of Gaza where he was captured and imprisoned (while visiting a prostitute, but typology often seized on parallels regardless of context). In *The Tale of Beryn* – a fifteenth-century sequel to *The Canterbury Tales* in which the pilgrims reach Canterbury – lower-class pilgrims 'counterfeting gentlemen' try interpreting images in the cathedral windows and squabble ignorantly over their significance (ed. Bowers 1992: 64). However baffled they appear, these humble pilgrims' conviction of symbolic meanings to be discovered reflects the wider typological awareness mirrored in the structure of mystery play cycles and throughout medieval visual culture.

Signs are for remembering: symbolism might prompt devout memorization by organizing knowledge, through pattern and tabulation, of core tenets of faith and cues for devotional observance, with no sign more central than Christ's body. Analysis of sins and virtues might be set out in the form of diagrammatic trees or wheels or other visual mnemonics. Always there is the structure lent by numerical pattern: the seven sacraments, seven works of mercy, seven deadly sins; Mary's joys and sorrows (variously, five, seven or fifteen); and Christ's five wounds, object of a fragmenting devotional attention that disassembled Christ's body into fetishized parts for veneration, focusing on separate images of wounded hands, feet and gaping side. Henry VI's confessor records how the king

made a rule that a certain dish which represented the five wounds of Christ, as it were red with blood, should be set on his table by his almoner before any other course when he was to take refreshment; and contemplating these images with great fervour he thanked God marvellously devoutly.

(trans. James 1919: 35)

The wounds become the 'Arma Christi', or 'Arms of Christ', quasi-heraldic badges of pain and shame ironically signifying glory, sacred insignia often conjoined with the 'Instruments of the Passion' – the emblematic objects and implements of torture that, by a kind of visual shorthand, prompt devout memories to recall man's ingratitude to Christ. Blazoned on bench-ends, screens, roof-bosses, in wall-paintings and external decoration, images of the Wounds and Instruments might be

displayed dispersedly throughout churches. 'His body hanging on the cross is a book open for your perusal', declares a fourteenth-century contemplative, the Monk of Farne, likening Christ's body to a text, and for a contemporary mystic, Richard Rolle, Christ's bloodied body is 'lyke a boke written al with rede ynke' (ed. Farmer 1961: 76; Ogilvie-Thomson 1988: 75).

Since their influence was so potent, the role of devotional images could not go unexamined, although the traditional orthodoxy – that images 'been ordeyned to been a tokene and a book to þe lewyd peple, þat þey moun [can] redyn in ymagerye and peynture þat clerkys redyn in boke' – continued to be a mainstream view, and images were defended because: 'ther ben mony thousand of pepull that couth [could] not ymagen in her hert how Crist was don on the rood, but as thei lerne hit by sight of images and payntours' (ed. Barnum 1976–2004: Vol. I, Pt. 1, 82; Erbe 1905: 171). Written for advanced contemplatives, the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* deplores how some will form distracting mental images of a God richly attired and enthroned 'fer more curiously þan euer was he depeynted in þis erþe' (ed. Hodgson 1944: 105), but the *Cloud's* contemplative contemporary Walter Hilton justifies images in a pastoral context because they prompt desirable devotional sentiments –

Amongst which signs the Church sets up images of Christ crucified . . . in order that the Passion and also the martyrdoms of other saints may be recalled to memory by looking at these images; and thus slow and carnal minds may be stirred to compunction and devotion.

(ed. Clark and Taylor 1987: Vol. I, 188; compare Figure 1.1)

Churches, therefore, in design, contents and adornment, came to present highly developed sign systems available to be read at different levels by different observers.

## Signs of Devotion

And þen anon is taken to hir a tabil [painted panel], ful wel depeynte with an ymage of oure Lorde crucified: and holdyng that open and vncouerd wiþ boþ handys, ful deuoutly she lokip . . . in þe same ymage with alle þe intente of hir mynde. And . . . sche is rauesched and waxes [grows] alle starke, holdyng þe tabil . . . And oþere-while þe same tabil is lenyd vpon hir breste, and some-tyme abouen her face, after dyuerse holdynges of þe tabil in þe bikumynge [attainment] of euery

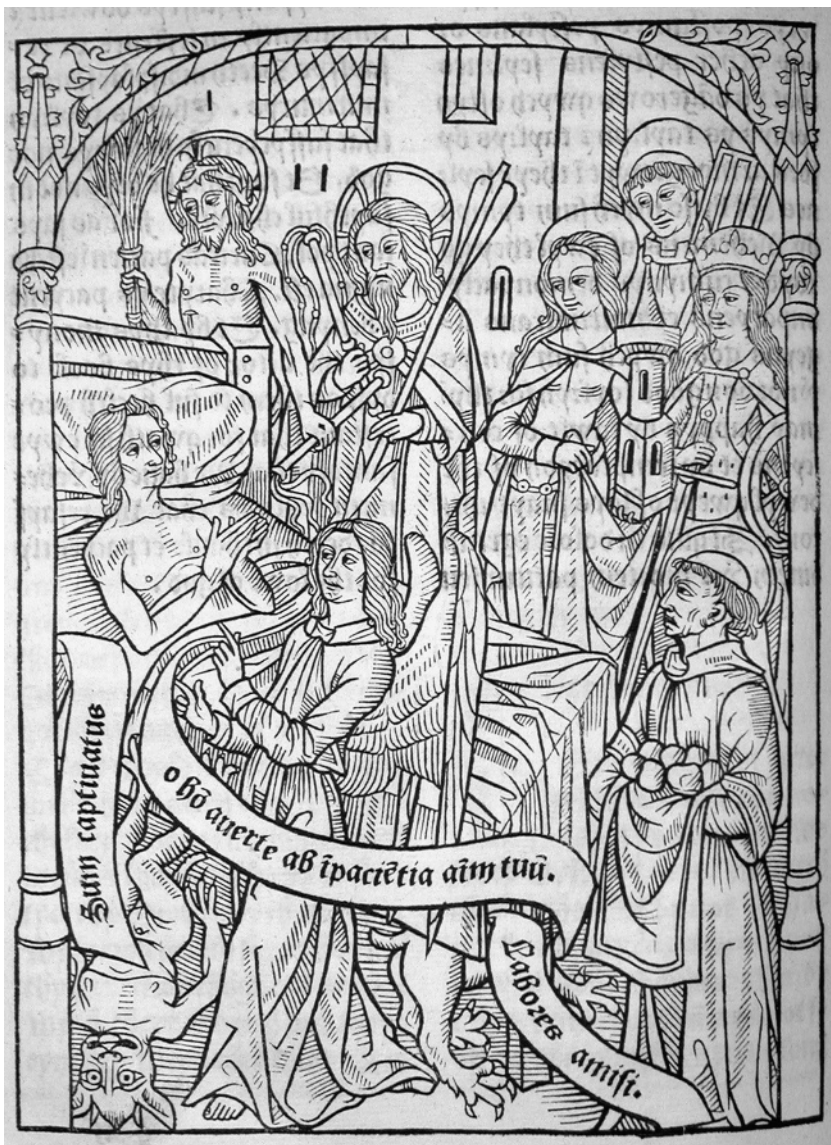


Figure 1.1 From *The Art of Good Lywyng and Deyng* (printed Paris, 1503): an angel bids the dying man turn his soul away from impatience. Reproduced by courtesy of The Master and Fellows of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

The image shows (left to right): Christ with the instruments of his scourging; God the Father with scourge and arrow; and four saints bearing the emblems of their sufferings – St Barbara with the tower in which she was imprisoned, St Lawrence with the gridiron on which he was roasted to death, St Catherine with the wheel on which she was tortured and the sword that beheaded her, and St Stephen with the stones with which he was pelted to death.

rauishynge. . . . And soo she durith a good space, wiþ incres of swetnesse, as semes to hem þat se right as she didde, in biholdynge of þe ymage, wiþ oþere hy3 tokens of deuocyone . . . but her countenance is stedfastly sette in consideracyone of þe ymage; so þat she byholdith no body nor noon oþere thinge but the tabil allonly. . . . Whan alle this is doon, mykel moor solempnely and moor merueylously þan I can or maye write, sche keueriþ [covers] and closeþ þe same tabil and takith it to som body bisyde hir.

(*The Life of St Elizabeth of Spalbeck*,  
ed. Horstmann 1885: 110)

In her rapt engagement with this painting the holy woman Elizabeth of Spalbeck exemplifies just how intense was the stimulus to devotion – and potentially to visionary experience – provided by images. In England *The Book of Margery Kempe* – the self-account of a Norfolk housewife and visionary – presents itself as recording the vivid experience of a comparably suggestible respondent to contemporary signs and symbols of devotion. (Indeed, Kempe's extravagant weeping is compared with the conduct of another Low Countries holy woman, Mary of Oignies, whose paramystical life appears in English translation alongside that of Elizabeth of Spalbeck). Kempe came to have God so constantly in her thoughts that she 'behelde hym in alle creaturys' (ed. Windeatt 2000: 320), and saw everything as a sign: nursing mothers and young children put her in mind of his Nativity, while witnessing animals or children being beaten reminds her of his Passion (164). Kempe's *Book* ignores or merges traditional dualisms – body and spirit, literal and symbolic – less because she is naïve or literal-minded than because inclusion matches better with experience. Moreover, Kempe acts out a medieval devotional tendency to see any one aspect of Christ's life as present in all others: she might have seen Annunciation images showing a beam of light descending to Mary – representing her sinless conception – while a small crucifix or a baby clutching a cross slides down the sunbeam towards her, encapsulating Christ's redeeming future death even at the instant of his conception (compare King 2006: plate I 2a). Or again, Kempe probably encountered the iconography of the 'Lily Crucifixion', an image which, in depicting Christ crucified on a lily flower, superimposes his anguishing death on to the lily identified with both the Annunciation and his mother (see Woodforde 1950: plate XXII). Everywhere repeated would be an Annunciation image where the dove of the Holy Spirit flies down towards Mary's ear when the Word is made flesh. One lyric confidently identifies which ear ('Blessed be, Lady, thy richt



ere: / The Holy Gost, he liht [alighted] in there, / Flesch and blod to take'; ed. Horstmann 1892: 126); Kempe hints at identification with Mary when recalling how she heard the Holy Ghost like a robin redbreast 'that song ful merily oftyntymes in hir ryght ere' (197). Imagery of Christ's conception as a beam of light was represented – according to stage directions – very literally and concretely in one mystery play cycle, probably East Anglian and now entitled *The N-Town Play*:

Here þe Holy Gost discendit with iij bemys to our Lady, the Sone of þe Godhed next with iij bemys to þe Holy Gost, the Fadyr godly with iij bemys to þe Sone. And so entre all thre to here bosom . . .

(ed. Spector 1991: 122)

Incarnation of the triune God in Mary's womb was represented highly concretely in such 'vierge ouvrante' images as 'The Lady of Boulton', once in Durham Cathedral, where the belly of an image of Mary, like a cupboard, 'was maide to open . . . from her breaste downward', to reveal the Trinity enclosed inside, with an image of God the father

holding betwixt his handes a fair & large crucifix of Christ all of gold . . . and every principall [major feast] daie the said image was opened that every man might se pictured within her the father, the sonne, and the holy ghost, moste curioselye and fynely gilted.

(*Rites of Durham*, ed. Fowler 1903: 30)

Just as a lyric hails 'Marye, mayde mylde and fre, / Chambre of þe Trynyte' (ed. Brown 1924: no. 32), so Kempe records herself being thanked by Christ for receiving and seating the Trinity in her soul (373). Above all, Kempe exemplifies how meditative devotion encouraged the contemplative to 'Make the in thy soule present' at the Gospel scenes (as one of the most popular vernacular texts of the fifteenth century, Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, advises). In her mind's eye, Kempe steps through the frame and inside the devotional image. In her meditations she assists at the births not only of Christ but also of the Virgin and John the Baptist, relating as mother of fourteen children to these three differently miraculous births, and inserting herself into such devotional scenes as the Visitation and the early life of Mary. When in contemplation she wraps Jesus in his swaddling clothes (77), addressing the Christ Child while tearfully 'havyng mend [mind] of the scharp deth that he schuld suffyr', Kempe acts out her own performance of those English lyrics that take the form of lullaby exchanges between Mary's fears and her child's



prophecies to her of his eventual death, so that Nativity and Passion images are superimposed into a kind of double exposure.

When Kempe records seeing in a Leicester church a crucifix 'petowsly poyntyd [piteously depicted] and lamentabyll to beheldyn' (228) and is prompted to 'pity and compassion' at the thought of Christ's Passion, her response exemplifies the effect of images that Hilton had endorsed. Similarly, in his *Testament* the monk John Lydgate recalls how as a boy of under fifteen 'holdyng my passage, / Myd of a cloyster, depicte vpon a wall', he saw a crucifix 'with this word "*Vide*" [Behold!] wrete there besyde', which moved him to write a poem in which Christ guides observers in contemplating his Passion (ed. MacCracken 1911: 356). Moreover, Kempe's other recorded reactions to artefacts, as well as her visions, reflect developments in devotional focus and the images that led and served this. In a Norwich church Kempe recalls seeing a 'pete' – a *pietà*, or image of Mary with the dead Christ across her lap – 'and thorw the beholdyng of that pete her mende was al holy occupyed in the Passyon' (286); equally, one poem by Lydgate was evidently planned to accompany an image of a 'pyte' ('looke on this fygure . . . My bloody woundis, set here in picture . . .') and guide meditation upon it ('Whan ye beholde this dolerous pyte . . .': 250–1). In another poem Lydgate tells how, during a sleepless night, he 'Vnclosyd a book that was contemplatiff' and found a 'meditacioun' preceded by 'an ymage ful notable / Lyke a pyte depeynt' (268), which moved him to pen the ensuing work. Some lyrics narrate how what appears at first sight the painted and carved artefact of a *pietà* turns into the lamenting Mary herself ('In a chirche as I gan knele . . . / I saw a pite in a place . . . / Ofte she wepte and sayde "*Alas*" . . .', cited in Woolf 1968: 257). In *De arte lacrimandi* ('On the Art of Weeping'), while kneeling before a *pietà*, the poet's spirit is ravished from his body to see a vision of Mary, whose autobiographical account is punctuated by the refrain 'Who can not wepe, come lerne att me' (ed. Garrett 1909: 269–94). In one lyric the speaker, confronted with Mary cradling the dead Christ, confesses 'I said I coud not wepe, I was so harde hartid', and is sharply reproved by Mary 'with wordys shortly that smarted . . . "*Thyne owne fadder þis nyght is deed!*"' (ed. Brown 1939: no. 9). To the priest who dryly reproaches her for weeping ('"*Damsel, Jhesu is ded long sithyn*"'), Kempe's riposte may represent her performance of the situation dramatized in such poems, where the *pietà* is a challenge to tears and compassion: '"*Sir, hys deth is as fresch to me as he had deyed this same day – and so me thynkyth it awt to be to yow and to alle Cristen pepil!*"' (286). The thrust of Kempe's

retort is that Christ's life and death should be concurrent with our experience. As potent a focus for devotion as the *pietà* was that of the 'Imago Pietatis' or Man of Sorrows. In this image, the wounded post-Crucifixion body of Christ usually stands visible from the waist up in a tomb chest, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion. It is a version of this image that Kempe apparently describes in her vision of Christ appearing 'with hys wowndys bledyng as fresch as thow he had ben scorgyd befor hir', as in succeeding visions of his body looming over her (368–70). Kempe's vision reflects trends to objectification of Christ's body in devotion. The 'Imago Pietatis' is a kind of freeze-frame picture abstracted from the Passion narrative without corresponding to any particular moment in it: a posed and arranged composition, selecting from both Crucifixion and entombment, which becomes the cue for innumerable poems and images (and may colour representations of the resurrected Christ as Man of Sorrows, as in the Wakefield *Play of the Resurrection*).

Kempe records being constantly at church when she had such visions reminiscent of the 'Imago Pietatis' (368–71), and the church fabric presented a system of such signs, serving the building's central focus on the Mass. The moment when the miracle of Eucharistic transubstantiation was displayed to the laity at the elevation of the Host is the focus of many lyrics and carols (declaring 'Though yt seme whit, yt ys rede; / Yt ys flesshe, yt semeyth bred', or, more daringly, 'In Virgyne Mary this brede was bake, / Whenne Criste of her manhoode did take'; ed. Greene 1977: nos 319, 318). Like many visionaries, Kempe has her mysterious insight during Mass when she sees the Host fluttering at elevation, evidently suggesting the dove of the Holy Spirit, as the priest staggers under the miraculous manifestation of God with us (129). It was to celebrate how life thereby defeats and succeeds death that on Good Friday the Host was 'buried' symbolically in an 'Easter Sepulchre' (sometimes an elaborate tomb-chest), to be taken out again on Easter Sunday morning as a sign of the Resurrection, a ritual Kempe records witnessing with devout emotion (275–6). Near to an Easter Sepulchre was a favoured place for burial of the dead, mentioned in many medieval wills that plan for interment inside a church. The two-decker or 'cadaver' tomb – displaying above the deceased's effigy in stately dignity of royal, noble or ecclesiastical robes while below is carved a naked skeleton or partly decomposed corpse prey to worms and toads – gave plastic form to the message of a widespread medieval cautionary exemplum of a son converted by gazing into his father's grave. Another 'memento mori'

was the theme of the 'danse macabre' (or Dance of Death), in which figures representative of various ranks and professions dance with their own skeletons (a motif overlapping with the 'carole' or dance-song symbolizing a courtly life of love and diversion, as in *The Romance of the Rose*). The Dance of Death famously depicted round the churchyard walls of the Innocents in Paris was imitated in St Paul's churchyard and accompanied by Lydgate's verses translated from the French poem inscribed at the Innocents. In Henryson's *The Thre Deid Pollis* ('The Three Skulls') the death's heads speak – with their fleshless skulls and hollowed-out eyes – reminding 'wantone yowth', fashionable ladies and 'febill aige' that all-devouring death makes a mockery of worldly distinctions (ed. Fox 1981: lines 43–4). In *The Three Dead Kings* – the one English poem treating the encounter of 'The Three Living and the Three Dead' – three kings out hunting together come face to face with the animated but decomposing corpses of their dead fathers, who warn their sons to live so that they do not fear Judgement Day ('Makis 3our merour be me!') (ed. Turville-Petre 1989: 148–57). The repentant kings build a minster on whose walls their encounter is recorded; such scenes – in which the three figures may represent different ages of man and estates of society – were a frequent subject of church wall-paintings. Indeed, it is into scenes of hunting – emblematic of courtly society at play – that signs and tokens of mortality impinge (as in Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*). In the lyric beginning 'In noontyde of a somers day' the narrator 'toke my hawke, me for to play' and sets off delightedly to hunt, 'My spanyellis renyng by my syde' (ed. Gray 1975: no. 80). Yet, in the midst of pursuing a pheasant, the jaunty huntsman stumbles, his leg torn by a briar, and, looking down, notices how the briar 'bare wrytyng in every leff – / This Latyn word, *revertere* [turn back]'. Forgetting pheasant and dogs, the hunter's 'hart fell down unto my to' and he sighingly reflects how, since 'This hawke of yowth' leads astray, 'than ys best *revertere*'. Also an admonishment, in the poem *Somer Soneday* (ed. Turville-Petre 1989: 140–7) the narrator, having become detached from the hunt in which he has been riding, encounters Dame Fortune rotating on her wheel the rising, falling and fallen figures of four kings – which might be captioned 'I shall reign', 'I reign', 'I have reigned' and (at the bottom) 'I am without a kingdom' – an image that also relates to wheel-like symbolizations of the ages of man's life. Drawing together such tokens of mortality, the alliterative romance *The Awntyrs off Arthure* opens by refashioning a well-known tale of how St Gregory encounters his mother's ghost who urges him to have Masses said for her soul. Isolated from their

hunting party by a sudden storm, Gawain and Guinevere are confronted by a gruesome apparition of Guinevere's mother as a corpse prey to toads and serpents and risen from the grave and purgatory to warn the Queen to amend her life, to have Masses said for her mother's soul, and to warn Gawain of the coming downfall of the Round Table and its values ('Your king is too covetous'; ed. Hanna 1974: 264).

## Following the Signs

In the mysterious *Corpus Christi Carol* the speaker laments that a falcon 'hath born my mak [mate] away' and carried him 'into an orchard brown':

In that orchard ther was an hall,  
That was hangid with purpill and pall.

And in that hall ther was a bed:  
Hit was hangid with gold so red.

And yn that bed ther lythe a knyght,  
His wowndes bledyng day and nyght.

By that bedes side ther kneleth a may,          maiden  
And she wepeth both nyght and day.

And by that beddes side ther stondith a ston,  
'*Corpus Christi*' wretyn thereon.

(ed. Greene 1977: no. 322A)

Inexhaustibly enigmatic, this image of a knight in a rich bed with his wounds constantly bleeding, and a kneeling maiden constantly weeping, summons up both a world of chivalrous endeavour and a suffering love and devotion, associating them with the Eucharistic sacrifice of blood and its mystery. For from ideas of Christ's Passion as a combat – as in William Dunbar's poem 'Done is a battell on the dragon blak' – waged out of God's love for mankind, a pervasive imagery developed of Christ as lover-knight jousting at a tournament of the Passion for his beloved, man's soul (see also Catherine Sanok's essay below). Christ's arms stretched wide on the cross could be viewed as a lover's arms outstretched to embrace, as in this advice to a female recluse on devotional images:

And as touchynge holy ymages, haue in byn awter þe ymage of þe crucifix  
... he is ysprad abroad to bykleppe [embrace] þe in his armes, in which  
þu schalt haue gret delectacioun ...

(ed. Ayto and Barratt 1984: 35)

Even Christ's assumption of human flesh in Mary's womb at the Incarnation could be likened to a knight's donning armour with the aid of a maiden, and his Deposition from the Cross to a disarming. St Paul's allegory of putting on the armour of God generated narratives of knightly arming for a spiritual quest. It is within such traditions that *Piers Plowman* describes Christ coming to his Crucifixion to joust 'in Piers armes, / In his helm and in his habergeon [coat of mail] – *humana natura*' (ed. Schmidt 1987: XVIII.22–3)). In one poignant lyric Christ calls the Cross his horse ('Mi palefrey is of tre / With nayles naylede þurh me'; ed. Brown 1924: no. 51), and torturers in the Wakefield Crucifixion play call on Christ to mount 'apon youre palfray sone', jesting about his being so tightly tied to his horse when 'Ye must just in tornamente' (ed. Stevens and Cawley 1994: 290). In some variations on this theme Christ speaks like a knightly lover, as in the lyric beginning 'Mi love is falle upon a may, / For love of hire I defende this day', where the narrator's passionate love is not to be denied ('Loue aunterus [daring love] no man forsaket; / It woundet sore whan it him taket . . .'; ed. Brown 1924: no. 73). In different tellings the lady's response to the Christ-knight's loving sacrifice may range from indifference to grateful treasuring of the knight's blood-stained armour, shield or shirt – allegorically, the memory of the Passion – as in Henryson's *The Bludy Serk*. Here a knight rescues a lady – abducted from her father and held captive in a dungeon by a giant – but is fatally wounded and begs his grieving lady 'Tak ye my sark [shirt] that is bludy, / And hing it forrow [in front of] ye' (lines 75–6). A concluding moralization likens 'The manis saule to the lady, / The gyane to Lucefeir, / The knyght to Chryst that deit on tre' (lines 99–101) and concludes 'Think on the bludy serk' (line 120).

To think on Christ's bloodied body as our lover and knight might make any other knightly endeavour seem vain, and many Grail romances – like Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal' – exploit the outward forms and conventions of a knightly narrative made up of adventures and quests, except that everything has been transposed and reordered to prompt discovery of otherworldly perspectives. Although Malory has radically pruned much commentary from his French source, *La Queste del Saint Graal*, retrospective explications by hermits and

recluses still promote the reading of all events as signs within a symbolic narrative, with adventures for the successful Grail knights – Bors, Galahad and Perceval – determined by marvellous signs and tokens that transcend and critique conventional knightly adventures. When Perceval's sister dies willingly, giving 'a dysshfulle of bloode' in order that another lady might be healed, this signals that the conventional way of abolishing such an oppressive 'custom of the castle' by male knightly challenge has been superseded by a Christ-like self-sacrifice of blood and life by a maiden ('And therefore there shall no more batayle be'; ed. Vinaver 1990: 1002–3).

Leaving behind their horses (essential to conventional knighthood but also sometimes symbolic of male sexuality), Grail knights move about now on mysterious ships – without sail or oar, and seemingly uncrewed and unvictualled – one of which names itself by an inscription, 'for I am Faythe' (984), and contains a sword destined for Galahad, among other marvellous artefacts (including spindles carved from the Tree of Life brought by Eve from Eden). Most of the ships are white, in a narrative where symbolism of whiteness and blackness – as of youth and age, or lions and serpents – is a key to spiritual significance. Nearly carried off to perdition by the fiend in the form of a supernaturally swift black horse, Perceval, alone with wild beasts on a sea-girt mountain, sees a lion battling a serpent, slays the serpent and dreams a 'mervaylous dreame' of a young lady riding a lion (she foretells that tomorrow Perceval must fight the world's greatest champion) and an old lady riding a serpent (she threatens "'I shall take you as he that somtyme was my man'": 914). A priest-like old man on a ship covered in white samite interprets the young lady as the New Law of Holy Church and the old lady and serpent as the Old Law and the devil. After the white ship has gone away 'he wyste nat whydir', it is succeeded by a ship 'coverde with sylk more blacker than ony beré'. Inside is a gentlewoman of great beauty – a shape-shifted Lucifer – who asks for Perceval's assistance ("for ye be a felowe of the Rounde Table") because, she claims, the greatest man of the world has disinherited her perpetually as "'I had a litill pryde, more than I oughte to have had'" (917). In sultry weather choice meats and potent wine are served 'and therewith he was chaffett [heated] a lityll more than he oughte to be . . . and prayde hir that she wolde be hys'. But, as the naked Perceval is about to lie down beside the naked lady in a pavilion, 'by adventure and grace he saw hys swerde ly on the erthe naked, where in the pomell was a rede crosse and the sygne of the crucifixe therin'. Making the sign of the cross on his forehead, he

promptly sees the pavilion 'chonged unto a smooke and a blak clowde' as the lady and her ship go 'with the wynde, rorynge and yellynge, that hit semed all the water brente after her' (919). Declaring that since "'my fleyssh woll be my mayster, I shall punyssh hit'", Perceval drives his sword into his thigh in a token self-castration, before the old man in the white ship returns to identify the gentlewoman with the old lady riding on a serpent and with Lucifer ("And that was the champion that thou fought withal . . .": 920).

Such a spiritualizing narrative – featuring struggles between good and evil played out through knightly quests – unfolds through the symbolism of a black-and-white moral landscape, but within this evil may assume deceptive appearances. That Bors' visions are first interpreted falsifyingly – by a man seemingly in religious apparel but riding a horse 'blacker than a byry' (962) – highlights the significance in these adventures of the process of interpreting signs and tokens, as does the tragicomic shallowness of Gawain, who cannot be bothered to stay for a hermit's interpretation of his spiritual state (949). Early in his quest Sir Bors

looked up into a tre, and there he saw a passynge [very] grete birde uppon that olde tre. And hit was passyng drye, withoute leyffe; so she sate above, and had birdis whiche were dede for hungir. So at the laste he [*sic*] smote hymselffe with hys beke, which was grete and sherpe, and so the grete birde bledde so faste that he dyed amonge hys birdys. And the yonge birdys toke lyff by the bloode of the grete birde. Whan Sir Bors saw thys he wyste well hit was a grete tokenynge . . .

(956)

His further vision of a worm-eaten tree, which would have impaired the whiteness of two lily-like flowers (958), betokens the spiritual dilemma that Bors confronts when he must choose whether to save his brother Sir Lionel from being killed by his captors or save a lady from imminent ravishment by a knight. Prizing chastity above all, Bors prevents the rape and seemingly fails to prevent his brother's death. As an abbot interprets the signs, "'the sere [withered] tree betokenyth thy brothir . . . whych ys dry withoute vertu'", rotten because he "'doth contrary to the Order off Knyghthode'", while the two white flowers signify the knight and gentlewoman who escaped damnation (968). Most significantly, when Christ who bled his heart's blood for mankind on the Cross revealed himself to Bors "'in the lyknesse of a fowle . . . there was the tokyn and the lyknesse of the Sankgreall that appered afore you, for the blood that the grete fowle bledde reysyd



the chykyngs frome dethe to lyff". Here, the familiar Eucharistic symbolism of the 'pelican in its piety' (reviving its chicks with its blood) comes to represent the Grail. As for the bare old tree in which the bird is sitting, this "betokenyth the worlde, whych ys naked and nedy, withoute fruyte, but if hit com of oure Lorde" (967), and the barren tree as a sign of spiritual emptiness is applied not only to Lionel but to Gawain ("in the ys neythir leeff nor grasse nor fruyte": 949), and to Lancelot, who is "lykened to an olde rottyn tre" (898), in a parallel with the fruitless fig tree accursed by Christ (Mark 11:13–14). The only way forward is by penitence (Lancelot dons a hair shirt) and by confession; otherwise, a hermit warns Lancelot, he will never see the Grail ("though he hit were here ye shall have no power to se hit, no more than a blynde man that sholde se a bryght swerde": 927).

When Lancelot is, for the first time in his life, unsuccessful in a tournament – where he helps a company of knights in black whom he sees being worsted by knights in white – a recluse later explains that the tournament "was but a tokenynge of oure Lorde" in which Lancelot failed to distinguish good from this world's vainglory ("hit ys nat worth a peare": 934). For Galahad, chivalric narrative and Christian symbolism can be fused: at the Castle of Maidens – through his knight-hood in overcoming seven knights – he abolishes the wicked custom of the castle and frees the captive maidens. As a hermit explains:

'the Castell of Maydyns betokenyth the good soulys that were in prison before the Incarnacion of oure Lorde Jesu Cryste. And the seven knyghtes betokenyth the seven dedly synnes that regned that tyme in the worlde. And I may lyckyn the good knyght Galahad unto the Sonne of the Hyghe Fadir, that lyght [alighted] within a maydyn, and bought all the soules oute of thralle . . .'

(892)

By contrast, even when Lancelot reaches the site where he will see something of the Grail, at a castle unguarded 'save two lyons kept the entré and the moone shone ryght clere', he still trusts in his sword and draws it against the lions: 'so there cam a dwerf sodenly and smote hym the arme so sore that the suerd felle oute of his hand'; and Lancelot hears himself reproached for lack of faith ("For He myght more avayle the than thyne armour, in what servyse that thou arte sette in": 1014). At this castle, glimpses of the Grail are translated into the traditional iconography of visions during Mass, when it appears as if the Man of Sorrows steps forth from the Grail or Mass chalice 'bledynge all opynly' (1030). With blood from the spear – earlier

identified as that which wounded Christ's crucified side – Galahad can heal at last the wounds of the Maimed King. Yet just as the focus of Malory's 'Sankgreal' implies honour for Lancelot despite his unfulfilled Grail quest – and a hermit interprets Ector's dream of Lancelot riding an ass as a parallel with Christ's entry into Jerusalem – so too in Malory's concluding part of *Le Morte Darthur* one of his few invented scenes allows, in the healing of Sir Urry, for Lancelot, a sinful, fallen man, to perform his own act of miraculous healing of a maimed knight, confirming the earlier remark of a recluse during the Grail Quest: "'of all erthly knyghtes I have moste pité of the, for I know well thou haste nat thy pere of ony erthly synfull man'" (934).

### **'The token of synne is turnyd to worshippe ...'**

A God, and yet a man?  
A mayde, and yet a mother?  
Witt wonders what witt can  
Conceave this or the other.

A God, and can he die?  
A dead man, can he live?  
What witt can well replie?  
What reason reason give?

God, truth it selfe doth teache it;  
Mans witt sinkes too farr under  
By reasons power to reach it –  
Beleeve, and leave to wonder!  
(ed. Brown 1939: no. 120)

The Incarnation – in which God became flesh and suffered in a human body – could be not only a sign of mankind's fallen condition in need of redemption but also a token of how human bodily nature has the potential to rise above itself. A flamboyant Nativity carol – with its clarion opening (from Romans 13) 'Owt of your slepe aryse and wake / For God mankynd nowe hath ytake' (ed. Greene 1977: no. 30) – hails the consequences of God's taking on of human flesh as an empowering revaluation of humankind:

And thorwe a maide faire and wys  
Now man is made of ful grete pris;

Now angelys knelen to mannys servys,  
And at this tyme al this byfel.  
Nowell!

Now man is brighter than the sonne;  
Now man in heven an hye shal wone;      dwell  
Blessyd be God this game is begonne . . .!

In her sixteen revelations of May 1373, recorded and subsequently meditated upon, Julian of Norwich presents extraordinary re-visionings and deconstructions: her 'shewings' not only transfigure signs and tokens that, seen through most other eyes, are common-places of devotional culture, but also thereby explore the empowering implications of the interrelationship between humankind and an incarnate God. Julian's shewings begin when a crucifix is held before her dying gaze, but her revelations develop when this painted artefact morphs into the cinema of moving image: as Julian watches, painted blood moves and trickles. Although Julian's shewings imply the devotional images of her day, both her descriptions and the contemplative inferences she draws always represent some intensifying transposition of contemporary images. In their photographic focus, close-ups and angled shots, her first and second revelations may reflect – yet develop far beyond – devotion to the crown of thorns and the cult of the Vernicle (an image of Christ's face, miraculously imprinted on St Veronica's veil, with which he wiped his face on his way to Calvary). The fourth revelation of streaming blood pans out boldly on all levels from devotions to the Flagellation and Christ's multiple wounds, just as the eighth revelation re-reads in clinical close-up what is implicitly the agonized and slumping crucified body of late-medieval visual culture. The tenth revelation that moves cinematically into Christ's side is a contemplative development from devotion to the Five Wounds, just as here and more generally Julian's alertness to a mutual enclosing – of us in God, and of God in us – imaginatively and spiritually transcends devotion to images representing the Trinity in the Virgin's womb. Julian's contemplation of God as our mother far transcends, yet still reflects, such advice to a recluse as that in *De institutione inclusarum* ('On the Instruction of the Enclosed') on how to read the image of the crucifix on her altar ('hys tetys beþ al naked ischewd to þe to 3yue þe melk of spiritual delectacioun and confortacioun'; ed. Ayto and Barratt 1984: 35). Yet, despite the intense visuality of her revelations, Julian guards against misleadingly literal understandings of symbolism spatial and material

(‘But it is not ment that the son syttith on the ryte hond . . . for there is no such syttyng, as to my syte, in the Trinite’; ed. Glasscoe 1993: 81).

As in the symbolism of pilgrimage towards enlightenment in *Piers Plowman* or Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, Christ shows himself to Julian ‘as it were in pilegrimage, that is to sey, he is here with us, ledand us, and shal ben till whan he hath browte us all to his bliss in hevyn’ (130). In interpreting what she has seen, Julian’s own longest contemplative pilgrimage arises because: ‘I saw our Lord God shewand to us no more blame than if we were as clene as holy as angelys be in hevyn’ (71). To Julian’s concerns comes a response ‘shewing full mystily a wondirful example of a lord that hath a servant’ (72), a symbolic sequence that only twenty years later does Julian see how to interpret. Julian had been shown a lord sitting at rest in a desert place and gazing lovingly at a servant standing by. The lord sends off the servant, who runs to do his will but falls into a valley and lies wounded, unable to look back at his lord. To the spiritual symbolism of each detail of colour, clothing, movement and position in this narrative image Julian’s contemplative imagination returns to discover accumulating layers of implication. As she comes to see, ‘in the servant is comprehended’ both Christ and Adam, ‘that is to say al man’, although ‘in the servant that was shewid for Adam . . . I saw many dyvers properties that myten be no manner ben aret [attributed] to single Adam’ (74). The symbolism of the lord is duly interpreted (‘the blewhede of the clothing betokinith his stedfastnes’), but it is the dynamically doubled entity of the servant – at once Adam, Christ and all mankind – that challenges Julian’s contemplative commentary. In her vision the Fall of man and Christ’s incarnation are daringly fused, conveying how the loving divine descent into human flesh and suffering identifies with our fallen humanity in order to redeem it. Yet Julian’s vision also ennobles the servant Adam, now seen toiling outside Eden in a gardener’s ragged, sweat-stained clothing, and – remarkably – passes over silently the whole tradition of human self-blame and guilt for the Fall (not to mention misogynistic condemnations of Eve). The lord’s sitting on the earth is to signify that God ‘made mans soule to ben his owen cyte and his dwellyng place’, while the servant’s thin garment of a single layer signifies ‘that there was ryte [nought] atwix the Godhod and manhede’ (79). From Adam we have our weakness and blindness, and from Christ our virtue and goodness, but because Christ has taken all our blameworthiness upon himself ‘therfore our Fadir may, ne will, no more blame assigne to us than to his owen

son'. Through Christ's triumphant return to heaven our human flesh that he assumed – 'which was Adams old kirtle, streyte, bare and short' – has been rendered by Christ 'fair, now white and bryte, and of endles cleness'. Astonishingly, as Julian sees it, 'our foule dedly flesh' is transfigured into something 'fairer and richer than was than the clothynge which I saw on the Fadir' (80).

Pondering her vision's symbolism, Julian comes to see that the beloved servant's fortunate fall is not only rewarded 'aboven that he shuld a ben if he had not fallen', but proves a source of honour (it is 'turnyd into hey and overpassing worship and endles bliss'). At once spiritual yet boldly humane, Julian's mystical intuition that 'the token of synne is turnyd to worshippe' (52) opens a theological perspective that can make a positive of the mingling of Lancelot's success with failure in Malory's 'Tale of the Sankgreal', or of the moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when Gawain returns home determined to see the green girdle as a "'syngne of my surfet'" (ed. Andrew and Waldron 2002: line 2433) and "'þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne'" (line 2509), whereas Camelot fashions the selfsame token into an elegant courtly blazon celebrating what his fallen humanity has accomplished. If Julian can proclaim that 'by the assay [experience] of this failynge we shall have an hey, mervelous knoweing of love in God without end' (99–100), then the girdle Gawain sees as "'þe bende of þis blame'" can be flourished simultaneously as an insignia of honour. Julian's visionary reinterpretation of the sinner – 'Thow he be helyd, his wounds arn seen afor God, not as wounds, but as worships' (54) – suggests how contemporaries' appraisal of the transgression signalled by Gawain's neck scar might interrelate this-worldly and otherworldly, bodily and spiritual, literal and symbolic, in ways that champion both humanity and the divine without exclusion. Not unlike Julian, the Nativity carol quoted above simply occludes possible damnation at Judgement Day ('Now shal God deme both the and me / Unto hys blysse yf we do wel . . .'), whilst exulting 'That ever was thralle, now ys he fre; / That ever was smalle, now grete is she'. St Augustine's 'other thing' – which so many signs recall to the medieval mind – is indeed an otherworldly perspective that reminds of this world's vanity. Yet, as this exuberant carol-writer may exemplify, signs and symbols remind not only of humankind's sinfulness but of coming exaltation, when the signs are fulfilled. Here God can be buttonholed like a brother, and all heaven and earth shall bow as mankind passes on his way to the court of heaven to gaze not at symbols but upon the face of God:

Now man may to heven wende;  
Now heven and erthe to hym they bende;  
He that was foo now is oure frende;  
This is no nay that I yowe telle.  
Nowell!

Now, blessyd brother, graunte us grace  
At domesday to se thy face,  
And in thy courte to have a place,  
That we mow there synge nowel.      may  
Nowell!

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