Censorship and Intolerance in Medieval England

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ABSTRACT

Censorship is difficult to prove conclusively in the Middle Ages because manuscript culture is susceptible to the destruction of evidence, namely by burning works deemed unacceptable. Moreover, medieval authors were subject to many forms of intolerance which shaped their literary decisions. This dissertation proposes that the roots of formal print censorship in England are to be found in earlier forms of intolerance which sought to enforce conformity and that censorship is not distinct from intolerance, but rather is another form of intolerance. I draw on political writings by Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham to establish a model of intolerance, which I then test against a variety of vernacular works, including “Lanval” by Marie de France, the Parlement of Foules by Geoffrey Chaucer, the anonymous anti-Wycliffite satire Defend us from all Lollardry, and the late medieval morality play Mankind. I use Michael Walzer’s five-point scale of toleration in conjunction with John Christian Laursen’s simplified scale to compare varying degrees of tolerance and intolerance in literary works written before the age of print.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This project grew out of my curiosity about why formal censorship seems to appear in England in conjunction with the arrival of the printing press and the Reformation. An early clue was in a parenthetical comment in a footnote in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, in which Elizabeth Eisenstein mentioned that “New issues posed by censorship need more emphasis in studies dealing with religious toleration” (442). In the early stages of my attempt to pursue her suggestion, I read the pioneering work by R.I. Moore in *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* and David Nirenberg in *Communities of Violence*, books which take opposite approaches in attempting to explain why minorities were persecuted in the Middle Ages. Moore writes about medieval Europe in broad strokes to conclude that “persecution began as a weapon in the competition for political influence, and was turned by the victors into an instrument for consolidating their power over society at large” (138). Nirenberg focuses on specific communities at precise points in time to refute the “notion that we can best understand intolerance by stressing the fundamental continuity between collective systems of thought across historical time” (5). I then read more recent work by scholars like Cary J. Nederman and John Christian Laursen, which argues for a far greater stance of toleration in the Middle Ages than had previously been thought. In my dissertation, I hoped to test the claims from both sides of this debate to better understand how tolerance and
intolerance in the Middle Ages might have affected other related constraints, especially
censorship. I wondered whether those forms of tolerance that have recently been
attributed to the Middle Ages might help explain some recent work by textual scholars
who have drawn on vast stores of data to suggest that during the Renaissance censorship
may not have been as heavy-handed as once thought. I further hoped to ask whether the
formal censorship which emerged shortly after the invention of movable type had its
roots in medieval intolerance. In attempting to answer those questions, I hoped to find
continuities in both toleration and censorship from the Middle Ages, through the
Renaissance, and into the Enlightenment. This project aimed to fill a gap in the
scholarship. I had already found that few scholars had written on both censorship and
tolerations, and those who had considered either one had limited their studies, with
medievalists ending their research just before the advent of print, and those interested in
print culture largely ignoring the climate before Gutenberg. No study had yet to examine
these topics in relation to one another both before and after Caxton set up the first
printing press in England in 1476. I set out to do just that, but my research took me in a
different direction.

As the project evolved, two major factors changed the focus of my project. First,
as I began testing the hypotheses of those recent scholars who were attempting to rebut
the work of Moore and Nirenberg, I found it increasingly difficult to sustain arguments in
favor of toleration during the Middle Ages in England. In Chapter 2, for example, I will
develop a “model of intolerance” based on writings of three philosophers who have
recently been seen as proponents of forms of toleration. I argue that this purported
toleration instead may have masked underlying coercive force which served to promote conformity. Moreover, while scholars on both sides of the debate tend to look at oppressed minority groups such as Jews, Muslims, lepers, homosexuals, heretics, and the disabled, I was struck by the degree of intolerance even within dominant groups. I began to focus more on intolerance than on tolerance.

The second factor was the richness of the medieval materials. I had planned on covering the Middle Ages in a single chapter, with subsequent chapters focusing on the period after print. However, my discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of works by Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham easily formed a chapter of its own. Likewise, a few pages mentioning some romances in passing expanded to fill an entire chapter on Marie de France’s “Lanval.” Yet another chapter now centers on two examples of Middle English poetry, while my conclusion looks at the late medieval morality play Mankind. Though my project now ends around 1470, rather than 1800 as I had originally intended, I nevertheless hope I have made the case that during the Middle Ages intolerance was a more effective control than censorship and that the roots of formal print censorship may be found in earlier forms of intolerance.

In looking for the roots of censorship in earlier forms of intolerance, I have had to resist the temptation to judge each text on its own terms, so as not to formulate different definitions for each work. After all, it is obvious that concepts like toleration and intolerance have very different meanings in the twenty-first century than they did in the twentieth, much less in the twelfth or fifteenth centuries. I have found it more useful, instead, to work with definitions that I can then test against the literature in order to see
how those concepts evolved over time. As I will discuss in the first part of this chapter ("Reassessing Intolerance"), strictly speaking tolerance refers to forbearance of error, permitting something to exist which one knows to be wrong. In the Middle Ages, when truth was fixed and social and religious hierarchies held greater influence, there was, generally speaking, little room for tolerance; ideas and behaviors could be either accepted or rejected. Intolerance, in contrast, is a lack of tolerance, and in the Middle Ages intolerance typically manifests as persecution and overt violence. I will draw on two different scales to help quantify varying degrees of tolerance and intolerance.

In the second part of this chapter ("Censorship in England"), I will describe the history of censorship in England. In the Middle Ages, censorship meant the enforcement of ideological conformity through measures ranging from the threat of physical harm to the destruction of manuscripts. Following the invention of movable type, censorship typically refers to the requirement of pre-publication approval of a text or to the condemnation of it after it has been published. Before the age of print, I will argue, the precedents for censorship were forms of intolerance. I will argue that the intimidation that arises from the fear of persecution and of prosecution, and the threat of censorship, affects literary works but is not itself a form of censorship. For example, we will see in Chapter 3 that Lanval stands trial for the charge that he insulted Queen Guinevere. While the trial should not be regarded as censorship of Lanval, it can be understood as an example of intolerance that served to limit criticism of the king and queen by presenting Lanval as a warning to others who might speak ill of their superiors. Because the strict definition of censorship I use presumes the existence of a work that can either be altered
or destroyed as the primary means of preventing the circulation of ideas, I regard other strategies for limiting the dissemination of ideas not as censorship but as intolerance. Hence, one overarching hypothesis in this project is that censorship is not separate from intolerance, but, rather, that it is a form of intolerance.

My discussion of medieval intolerance (ca. 1100-1500) spans four chapters. In Chapter 2, I examine writings by three philosophers, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham. I investigate the ways they justified coercion and other forms of intolerance that they believed served the public good and protected the peace. Peter Abelard’s *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian* (ca. 1136-39) explores difference in the context of religious disagreement, and this work ultimately points to deep limitations on toleration even in debate. John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* (ca. 1156-57), written for his mentor Thomas Becket, centers on political disobedience and points to a climate that allowed for less toleration even within the realm of debate than we will see in Abelard’s *Dialogues*. John argues that a limited form of toleration can be a useful strategy for facilitating debate, so long as that debate results in the erroneous party correcting his mistake, but he specifies that coercion may be necessary for those who cannot be persuaded through reason. In his writings about the poverty controversy in the 1320s and 1330s, William of Ockham provides an instance of what happened when two men could not tolerate each other’s error, Ockham taking the stance that Pope John XXII had fallen into heresy, while the pope declared Ockham a heretic and had him excommunicated. The disruption Ockham’s obstinacy caused in the Franciscan community is emblematic of the justification for intolerance in the writings of all three of
these philosophers. Taken together, they help form a model of intolerance, wherein conformity was achieved by relentless intolerance; even limited forms of toleration, I argue, disguise coercive force to bring about conformity.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I test this model of intolerance against some vernacular works. Chapter 3 centers on “Lanval,” a lai composed by Marie de France around 1170, making it roughly contemporaneous with the philosophical writings of Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury. Written in Anglo-Norman, “Lanval” is a short Arthurian romance that depends both formally and thematically on issues of intolerance. Lanval is an outsider who has depleted his funds and is unable to meet his obligations to King Arthur and the other knights of the Round Table. He is rescued by a fairy queen who satisfies his emotional and sexual desires as well as gives him the funds to restore his status at court. However, these gifts come at a price. The fairy demands that Lanval never speak of her, a promise he accidentally breaks in defending himself against Queen Guinevere when she propositions him for sex. Lanval reveals the truth about his fairy lover to deflect Guinevere’s accusation that he prefers the company of young men. I give great consideration to her charge of sodomy against him, for it raises a number of important questions about difference, error, and disobedience in the Middle Ages. I also focus on the trial where Lanval must defend the charges that he has told a lie that insults, or slanders, the queen. The various agreements between characters as well as the legal mechanism for exposing and punishing traitors in “Lanval,” I will argue, sought to protect the peace by preventing disobedience and therefore ensure conformity. The manifestations of intolerance in “Lanval” are reflections in fiction of the philosophy we
will see in Chapter 2. This world has little tolerance for criticism, even when it might be true.

In Chapter 4, I look at two Middle English texts, one of elite literature and the other of popular literature, to ask whether restrictions on choice might have promoted conformity and preserved the peace. These works—Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* (ca. 1380) and the anonymous anti-Wycliffite satire *Defend us from all Lollardy* (ca. 1414-17)—underscore the highly hierarchical structure of the Late Middle Ages. The *Parlement of Foules* is not explicitly concerned with either censorship or intolerance, but it is an example of Chaucer’s exploration of free will. By examining his treatment of freedom and his use of legal terminology, I argue that the *Parlement of Foules* points to deep limitations on choice and that it far from celebrates free will. I will show that coercive force is exerted through necessity, usually in this poem through submission to Nature (herself a speaker in the *Parlement of Foules*). Moreover, Chaucer may have used the devices of the dream vision and the beast fable to mask political commentary and perhaps even to offer advice to a young Richard II. The anonymous author of *Defend us from all Lollardy* rails against the danger of heresy in response to the failed 1414 rebellion led by John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham. The poet offers the most overt intolerance of any author I consider in my dissertation, for he sees Wycliffite heretics as an immediate threat to the peace, safety, and unity of his community. He attacks heretics for their intolerance and he condemns Oldcastle for his cowardice and treason. These works suggest little room for tolerance of behavior that might disrupt society.
For my conclusion, Chapter 5, I turn to the late medieval morality play *Mankind* (ca. 1470-71), composed just before Caxton would set up the first printing press in England in 1476. This play, which was likely written by a monk at the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds in East Anglia, criticizes church corruption even as it instructs its audience on sound doctrine and shows the faithful how to live in such a way that minimizes social disruption. The allegory of Mankind’s fall from grace at the hands of invisible tempters, followed by his redemption through God’s mercy, is mirrored in the vice figures’ success at tricking the audience into such acts of irreverence as singing a bawdy “Christmas carol” and paying money to see a devil. The character of Mercy embodies patience, and therefore tolerance, yet this play ultimately condemns error, sin in particular. My discussion of *Mankind* brings us full circle to the issues of tolerance and intolerance in the Middle Ages first raised in Chapter 2, and, in so doing, demonstrates the ongoing pressure which enforced conformity through the end of the period.

**Reassessing Intolerance**

I understand tolerance as the forbearance of error, or, in other words, permitting something to exist which one knows to be wrong. As Bhikhu Parekh has written, “Agents of tolerance can be individuals, organizations, or governments” (354). However, since institutions like governments and the medieval church have “the right and the power to ban and suppress beliefs and practices which individuals and organizations do not have, the question of toleration is generally raised in relation to [those institutions]” (354). As we will see, individuals almost invariably acted in concert with institutional policies in the Middle Ages; the atmosphere of intolerance means that policies would be
implemented not only by agents of institutions but also by individual members of society.

In my introduction, I will discuss primarily state- and church-sanctioned intolerance, including intolerance which served to restrict the circulation of ideas; in subsequent chapters I will look for evidence of tolerance and intolerance in both personal and institutional spheres.

Historians, philosophers, and social scientists have been taking a new look at tolerance and intolerance since the 1980s. R.I. Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987, 2nd ed., 2007) argued that “some time around 1100 western Europe became a persecuting society” (ix). Moore’s book was followed by a series of responses including David Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence* (1996), which argued for a more nuanced view of persecution, writing about what he sees as the “fundamental interdependence of violence and tolerance in the Middle Ages” (7) to argue that “coexistence was in part predicated on … violence” (9). Since then, a small body of scholarship has begun to emerge that suggests toleration in Europe had its roots not with the expected authorities, Thomas Hobbes (d. 1679) and John Locke (d. 1705), but rather with textual and intellectual traditions already at work in the Middle Ages. These arguments are found chiefly in several collections of essays edited by some combination of Ian Hunter, John Christian Laursen, and Cary J. Nederman (1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2014). When I began this project, I expected to add to the body of scholarship that suggests a greater stance of toleration in England before the Enlightenment.

Although the field of toleration has only recently begun to receive rigorous scholarly attention, a handful of scholars have attempted to overturn the traditional view
that tolerance began in the Enlightenment with thinkers like Locke and was secured by figures like Bayle and Voltaire. For a number of reasons I think such claims are often overstated. For example, in the general introduction to the 1998 collection *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration before the Enlightenment*, Laursen and Nederman rehearse the major developments in our understanding of European tolerance. They state that the chief thrust of their book “is that there is no overstatement in saying that in medieval and early modern Europe the voices favoring and the actual practices of toleration were present, both in number and in variation, on a scale hitherto unappreciated” (2). Nederman’s own essay, “Toleration, Skepticism, and the ‘Clash of Ideas’: Principles of Liberty in the Writings of John of Salisbury,” attempts to refute longstanding beliefs about the history of tolerance—such as that it began with the Reformation, with the Enlightenment, or with John Locke—by showing how, in his view, one twelfth-century philosopher understood the concept. The overarching goal of the articles in this volume is to demonstrate that “ideas and practices of tolerance and toleration were available and in use long before the Enlightenment” (2). Collectively, the essays attempt to show “Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblances’ rather than some essentialist core meaning” of tolerance (1). Because of this concession, the volume lacks a unified definition that would apply to all of the texts and authors the various contributors write about, which has the consequence that each medieval and Early Modern source can appear more tolerant than it may actually be because each is judged on its own terms. A shared yardstick would help facilitate comparative judgments among
the works, and this is one reason that I have opted not to formulate new definitions for each of the works I examine based on the internal evidence presented in each.

The introduction to the section on the “medieval balance,” also by Nederman, outlines a variety of intolerant and violent activities, but it predominantly attempts to emphasize a developing concern in the Middle Ages with intellectual freedom. He writes in the historical introduction that the “medieval intelligentsia were in fact permitted reasonably wide latitude in debating fundamental issues concerning the faith, whatever our uninformed impressions may be,” adding that “freedom of intellectual inquiry into matters of central concern to orthodoxy seems to have been remarkably well preserved by the medieval Church, both before and after the rise of universities” (18). However, he also notes that such freedom was “never quite formally institutionalized” (18), an important point given the degree of intolerance I will show in the next chapter. As I will discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2, Nederman’s article on John of Salisbury suggests a stance of toleration is to be found in John’s Ciceronian skepticism, which Nederman characterizes as “of anti-dogmatism, not of absolute doubt” (60). In Nederman’s view, John’s anti-dogmatism shows up not so much as intolerance, however, but as tolerance for discussion of varying perspectives in pursuit of discovering the truth. As we will see, John’s *Policraticus* was a sort of instruction manual for those who wanted to get ahead at court. Nederman’s essay attributes to John the sort of stance on toleration you might expect from someone who wants to critique his superiors while avoiding not only the consequences of their wrath but also even the appearance of disobedience. The freedom to make bad choices is tempered by others’ freedom (or perhaps even duty) to point out
error. “John asserts that ‘it is permitted to censure that which is to be equitably
corrected.’ If we may not properly force people to do good, then we must equally be
respected and tolerated when we point out the error of their ways” (56). Nederman adds,
“In other words, if you are free to do wrong, then I must also be free to correct or reprove
you” (56). As I will show in Chapter 2, while Nederman might succeed in demonstrating
that theories of tolerance may have existed before the Enlightenment, he does not
necessarily succeed in demonstrating that these theories refute arguments such as
Moore’s, as we would expect from a collection entitled Beyond the Persecuting Society.

Laursen has assembled a variety of essays on heresy from a similar group of
contributors in Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe. This volume again sidesteps
the problem of formulating definitions that might allow for comparisons among the cases
by dismissing “the history of heresy as a literary genre,” stating that “it was not
monolithic. Rather, it was made up of a variety of sub-genres” (2). Hence, definitions of
“heresy, blasphemy, deviance, and evil, and what should be done about them, have
changed over time, and probably will continue to change. That process of change is one
of the most interesting things about these terms and the concepts they represent” (1). But
unlike the earlier Beyond the Persecuting Society, this collection does not attempt, as a
whole, to overturn popular beliefs about heresy. Instead, its aim is to explore “the ways in
which the writing of the history of heresy contributed to the understanding of the term
and its related concepts in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (1).

One concept that comes up in the texts I examine in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 is peace.
In Chapter 2 I develop a model of intolerance in order to show that intolerance served to
preserve the peace by enforcing conformity. Although Thomas Hobbes was writing after the period my dissertation now covers, the essay by Martyn P. Thompson in *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe* suggests that aspects of his work are relevant. Thompson uses the phrase “civil peace” to describe the aims of Hobbes’s philosophy, and we will see a similar idea of maintaining the peace, or the peace of the realm, throughout the medieval justifications for intolerance. Like his forerunners, Hobbes is intolerant of anything that disturbs the civil peace or promotes disorder, and he is eager for policies that, in his view, would promote unity, and with unity, civil peace. While *Leviathan* is not overtly a history of heresy, Thompson zeroes in on the moments in which Hobbes is participating in that literary tradition, specifically in *Leviathan*’s “extended play” on the *First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (92). He explains that “Hobbes well knew that St. Paul was condemning religious pluralism at Corinth, not endorsing it,” and so by “invoking St. Paul and the ideal of Christian unity to which Paul subscribed, Hobbes was condemning the religious factionalism of the late 1640s and early 1650s, not endorsing it” (93). This is significant, Thompson argues, because “Hobbes, on occasion, explicitly rejected the idea that the primitive Christian Church before Constantine was a model of good ecclesiastical order” (93). He adds that “part of the problem in Corinth sprang from the enduring attachments of some of the Christians to pagan ideas, beliefs, and practices. But Paul in no way endorsed this religious diversity” (93). It is perhaps because Hobbes was a believing Christian that he was so concerned that some of the things he said might get him into trouble. Laursen summarizes in the historical introduction to this section that “the history of heresy that Hobbes retailed was designed only to protect himself from
prosecution, not to promote tolerance of the expression of dissenting religious views.” (55). Indeed, as Thompson demonstrates, “from *The Elements of Law* (1640) to *Behemoth* (posthumously published in 1682), Hobbes insisted that both the nature of public worship and the logic of civil society required that sovereigns establish uniformity of religious worship” (77). Especially in a time of civil war stemming from a lack of religious uniformity (78), it is apparent why Hobbes might be intolerant of heretical positions while wanting to defend his own. By focusing on heresy as one target of intolerance, Thompson is able to draw more useful conclusions about Hobbes’s views on intolerance than by focusing on tolerance and intolerance directly. In my own inquiries, I will follow his lead by looking at related issues, such as those of choice and free will, to better understand constraints on toleration.

Another collection edited by Hunter, Laursen, and Nederman, *Heresy in Transition* (2005), is part of a series on “continuities between the middle ages and early modern Europe” (xi). This volume focuses on the threat of heresy within unified communities. Pluralism and tolerance seem to go together, while a strong authority claiming a monopoly on the truth seems to cause—or perhaps results from—intolerance. They posit that what rendered heresy special was that “those who were heretics had been admitted, through baptism and sacrament, into the unified soul—the communion—of the Christian church,” which meant that heterodoxy posed a threat “because those who adopted it maintained not only that they were Christians, but that their version of Christianity was truer and more pure than the orthodox one” (2). According to this logic, heresy “was therefore a disease of the soul that was extremely contagious if not quickly
treated; the prevention of its spread to the remainder of the believing community justified even the use of physical violence against those who persisted in upholding it” (2). “In sum,” they write, “resistance to the strict imposition of orthodoxy remained a feature of Latin Christianity throughout the Middle Ages” (4). One of the crucial moments in the introduction is when they suggest that it was not until the Reformation, when the Catholic church lost much of its power, that “the epithet ‘heretical’ came to denote nearly any form of apostasy or infidelity” (4). They believe this points to a change from the narrowly technical definition that “referred to obdurate dissident from orthodox authority into an all-purpose charge levied against anyone who expressed a belief or opinion different from one’s own” (4).

The essays in this collection deal primarily with the issue of defining heresy and heretics. As the editors explain, “Under circumstances in which religious belief and practice penetrated deep into society, and in which the civil and religious community were scarcely distinguishable, religious deviance was often perceived as an immediate threat to the community’s sacramental relation to God, to be met with violent expulsion” (5). Takashi Shogimen’s “William of Ockham and Conceptions of Heresy, c. 1250-c. 1530,” deals with Ockham and the inquisition during the Avignon Papacy. According to Shogimen, Ockham concluded that because different people had access to varying levels of knowledge about Christian doctrine (which one became a heretic by diverging from), different people should be held to different standards of accountability. For example, he writes that “the bishops are obliged to know more about Christian truths than their inferiors” (67) and that “what is prevalently known to every catholic determines the
minimal level of the knowledge of catholic truth one is bound to believe explicitly and, the higher the office one occupies in the ecclesiastical order, the larger amount of knowledge of such catholic truth one is expected to have” (68). Shogimen explains that Ockham “reduced the idea of heresy strictly to a contradiction of the textual sources of the Christian faith” (67) to argue that, in Ockham’s view, even the Church could be wrong about what should be considered heretical (65). This article, like the introduction, also strives towards definitions of heresy, pointing out first that theologians distinguished “between heretical doctrine and heretical persons, and yet they did not conceptualize it fully” (64), and second that there was no agreed-upon definition of heresy (65), which, as we will see in Chapter 2, was part of the problem Ockham himself faced (60-61). In these recent developments in the historiography of toleration, aspects of older philosophy are shown to persist in Hobbes’s writings, which makes him look less like an Enlightenment figure, while John of Salisbury is, wrongly in my view, made to look more like a modern.

One thread running throughout these collections is the relationship between heresy, tolerance, and intolerance, as is apparent from the titles of these volumes:

*Difference and Dissent: Theories of Tolerance in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (1996); *Religious Toleration: ‘The Variety of Rites’ from Cyrus to Defoe* (1999);

This most recent volume notes that the “tendency in recent scholarship on heretical ideas and movements has been largely to emphasize the ways in which the engines of enforcement were created and applied” and attempts, instead, to address “the myriad ways in which heresy accusations could be employed to fulfill political aims” (2). In Chapter 4 I will discuss Wycliffism, the heresy most closely associated with the English Middle Ages. However, as I will show, intolerance is not a problem only for heretics (or for racial or ethnic minorities, or for homosexuals, or for any other minority group). It may also be a problem within dominant groups.

Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* and Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence* are among the most influential books published on any subject about the Middle Ages in the last three decades. Moore writes about Europe broadly, while Nirenberg focuses on medieval Spain. Neither discusses England in any significant detail. Some of the responses I have mentioned look at England, though a great deal of the scholarship on English intolerance centers on the Wycliffites, whom I discuss in Chapter 4. One book that deals with tolerance and intolerance more broadly is Alexandra Walsham’s *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700*. Published in 2006, *Charitable Hatred* is among the most recent works on tolerance and intolerance in England specifically, but it covers only the period from 1500-1700, while I focus on the Middle Ages. However, many of her observations apply to earlier periods. Walsham, an historian, writes that “persecution was at once an expression of the passionate zeal that the faithful were expected to display for the truth and an act of charity and kindness to those who would otherwise slide unwittingly into the quagmire of irredeemable error, and
from thence heading into the abyss” (228). She adds, “For those locked inside this compelling set of assumptions, the concept of toleration was nothing less than anathema. Knowingly to permit individuals to continue to profess a false religion was not merely a deplorable dereliction of one’s responsibilities as a Christian” but indeed “a form of spiritual murder” (228). Another important book on tolerance in England, also from 2006, is Kathryn Kerby-Fulton’s *Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England*. Unlike Walsham, Kerby-Fulton is a literary scholar and while she considers facets of tolerance, she does not do so in the systematic way Walsham does. Moreover, because of her focus on the censorship of heretical documents as well as strategies that may have been used to evade censorship in a time of strictly enforced orthodoxy, I will have more to say about Kerby-Fulton’s work in the next section.

**Censorship in England**

I argue that censorship is a form of intolerance. Exerted by institutions rather than by individuals, censorship generally refers to the pre-publication approval of a text or to the condemnation of a work after it has been published; before the invention of print, censorship also involved other methods of enforcing ideological conformity in works, such as altering manuscripts or destroying them. Additional forces which shape literary decisions through intimidation, I will argue, are more accurately understood not as censorship but as other forms of intolerance. Censorship is often difficult to prove conclusively in any time period. Because of the scarcity of concrete evidence for censorship from the Middle Ages, in addition to looking for indirect formal literary clues
about restrictions on the free circulation of ideas, and especially criticism of authority, I also consider other signs of intolerance and limitations on choice that do survive in the literature. In this section I aim to describe the history of censorship in England, as well as the problems in defining and proving censorship in the Middle Ages, to show why my dissertation ultimately focuses on intolerance more broadly than the specific form of intolerance referred to as censorship.

G.H. Putnam’s two-volume *The Censorship of the Church of Rome and its Influence upon the Production and Distribution of Literature* (1906) remains the authority on church censorship, throughout Europe as well as in England. Putnam demonstrates that the medieval church provided a framework for censorship in general that would remain long after Henry VIII broke ties with Rome, a point that seems not to be clearly spelled out elsewhere. The most important book on censorship specifically in England is Frederick Seaton Siebert’s 1952 *Freedom of the Press in England 1476-1776: The Rise and Decline of Government Control*, which briefly acknowledges earlier statutes but draws primarily on contemporary documents like licenses, proclamations, royal patents, and laws. Starting with the year of Caxton’s first printed publication, Siebert traces a nearly linear path from oppression to freedom as practical and civil matters. Thus the medieval precedents do not inform his work, nor any of the scholarship derived from his work, such as Annabel Patterson’s 1984 *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern Europe*.

Patterson describes early modern strategies for evading censorship in the pulpit, on the stage, and in the press, through what she calls the “hermeneutics of censorship.”
For Patterson, all three were carefully controlled because all three routinely attempted to influence politics. “There is no question but that early modern censorship was inefficient and incoherent,” writes Patterson (13). The limitations on toleration I will explore in the Middle Ages may help to explain why from a twentieth-century perspective early modern censorship might have appeared inefficient and incoherent. Patterson’s argument does not take into account earlier signs of intolerance which, in my view, made censorship and other forms of intolerance the logical tools for preserving the social order.

Setting out to discover ways canonical early modern writers evaded the censor, Patterson searches for moments of interpretive ambiguity that become evidence of the “hermeneutics of censorship.” Although her model has been influential in the field of censorship, because it hinges on ambiguity it seems to me that Patterson’s criticism is impossible either to prove or to disprove. Some recent scholarship on censorship has begun to reevaluate Patterson’s hypothesis, but not by examining earlier forms of intolerance. For example, Cyndia Susan Clegg has written a series of books on censorship: *Press Censorship in Elizabethan England* (1997), *Press Censorship in Jacobean England* (2001), and *Press Censorship in Caroline England* (2008). Clegg, like Patterson and Siebert, follows the official record carefully, and like the others she focuses on the direct connections between texts, laws, and events. Debora Shuger, also a literary scholar, tackled the subject in her 2006 book *Censorship & Cultural Sensibility: The Regulation of Language in Tudor-Stuart England*. Shuger finds two models of censorship in early modern England, one stemming from Classical Rome and designed to prevent defamation, the other stemming from the Church of Rome and designed to safeguard
against heresy. More recently, Randy Robertson’s 2009 book *Censorship and Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England: The Subtle Art of Division* is rigorous but very narrowly focused; his history of censorship in England notes that “Clerical and lay controls of the printed word—mechanisms of both prepublication and postpublication censorship—existed as early as 1479” (2). In my dissertation, I hope to add to these voices by establishing that the roots of such censorship may be found in the religious, social, and political intolerance of the medieval period.

We now turn to the medieval roots of censorship; many of the methods of censorship and intolerance in the Middle Ages remain in the background of all the philosophical and literary works I consider. The history of church censorship, ca. 150-1559, is tied to preventing heresy. Putnam begins his study on *The Censorship of the Church of Rome* by pointing out that “Church censorship may be said to have begun as early as 150” (1.1). In subsequent centuries, he writes, numerous edicts cautioned the faithful “against the pernicious influence of various works classed as heretical, and the heretics who had been concerned in the production and circulation of such writings were threatened with penalties ranging from confiscation of property to imprisonment, excommunication, and death” (1.1-2). Although the famous *Index* of books banned by the Catholic Church did not emerge until 1559, Putnam points to several medieval predecessors, all directed by the Church. “After the middle of the 13th century,” he notes that “the papal condemnations of specific books frequently included the specification of names of the examiner or examiners, usually one or more of the cardinals” (1.24). Then, in a Bull issued by Alexander IV in 1256 against a tractate of William Saint-Amour, of
Paris, “the Pope says that his action is based upon the report of four cardinals, to whom had been confided the task of examining the work. All copies are ordered to be burnt within eight days, under penalty of excommunication” (1.24). The emphasis in Putnam’s example is on religious conformity, with severe religious consequences for failure to comply. Uniformity is created literally by eliminating the criticism of Church doctrines while simultaneously sending a message that imitators would meet a similar fate at the hands of the same censors. This system of censorship was for heretics who could not be reformed through reason. A similar strategy was employed for those who could be reformed through an appeal to reason, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Both strategies are intolerant of difference, and both rely on the same general principle: either change your ways, or burn in hell as a heretic or face excommunication and burn in hell anyway. The spiritual (and, with it, economic) health of English communities called for damnation as the inevitable consequence for obstinacy under both models. Compliance appears to have been so much the norm that cases of public condemnation were notable in their day and continue to stand out in the historical records.

Censorship is understood differently in the age of manuscripts than in the age of print. In the age of print, censorship applies to the pre-publication inspection or approval of a work, or to the destruction or condemnation of a work once it has been published. For the age of manuscripts, Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham offer a more useful definition. “Censorship,” they write, “is the correcting of a text to bring it into ideological, rather than factual, correctness” (110). Among the various reasons for the systematic destruction of books, Clemens and Graham single out religious zealotry and
ideological and social change in particular (67), and they mention the New Testament passage in which “the newly converted Christians of Ephesus gathered together their old books on the magical arts and burned them,” which began “a long history of Christian purification by fire of pagan or heretical works” (67). After this evidence of the voluntary destruction of heretical books by early Christians, Clemens and Graham have little to say at that juncture about censorship until the sixteenth century (67) and the Index of banned books (68). The paucity of evidence of texts modified during the Middle Ages suggests that destruction through force, rather than revision by the author, appears to have been the norm. Christopher de Hamel, the authority on illuminated manuscripts, privately confirmed to me that he could not recall having noticed a single instance of a surviving medieval manuscript that had been censored in such a way as to bring it into ideological conformity. This leads him to agree that censorship by forced revision may well be a post-Gutenberg development.

Even cases of a single work existing in many manuscript versions do not appear to offer much evidence of such forced amendment for ideological reasons. A survey of the textual notes for the Canterbury Tales, which exists in some 83 surviving manuscripts, suggests that most variants in that work arise from aesthetic and linguistic correction inherent in scribal transmission rather than ideological motivation or censorship. In the antifraternal satire “The Summoner’s Tale,” for example, the same

1 “And the man in whom the wicked spirit was, leaping upon them, and mastering them both, prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the Jews and the Gentiles that dwelt at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many of them that believed, came confessing and declaring their deeds. And many of them who had followed curious arts, brought together their books, and burnt them before all; and counting the price of them, they found the money to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. So mightily grew the word of God, and was confirmed.” (Acts 19.16-20, Douay-Rheims Version)
friar who accepts “persecuciouen for rightwisnesse” (1909), later threatens to get his revenge through slander:

‘Madame,’ quod he, ‘by God, I shal nat lye,
But I on oother wyse may be wreke,
I shal disclaundre hym over al ther I speke,
This false blasphemour that charged me
To parte that wol nat departed be
To every man yliche, with meschaunce!’ (2210-15)

The satire itself does not seem to be censored in the various manuscripts; antifratical satire was not only tolerated but even popular and socially acceptable in the late fourteenth century. The textual variant here, which replaces “sclaundre” or even “diffame” for “disclaundre” (*Riverside Chaucer* 1131), however, merely substitutes closely-related synonyms and does not appear to change the meaning at all.

On the other hand, one of the most famous lines from the *Tales* occurs when the host insults Chaucer’s literary ability and cuts short his tale of Sir Thopas: “‘By God,’ quod he, ‘for pleynly, at a word, / Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!’” (928-29). According to Corpus Christi College MS 198, however, “‘By God,’ quod he, ‘pleynly I þe say / ðou schalt no lenger rymen heere today[‘]” (*Riverside Chaucer* 1131). But again, this change points to aesthetic rather than ideological sensibilities, I think, and while it is a memorable difference it is not a strong instance of Clemens and Graham’s definition of censorship as “correcting … a text to bring it into ideological, rather than factual, correctness” (110). And because the alteration appears in only one manuscript, the well-known lines do not appear to have been taken as sufficiently offensive to merit true revision.
Looking at a number of Chaucer’s works, Anita Obermeier has recently argued that Chaucer created “three distinct literary censorship scenarios, corresponding to, but not necessarily overlapping with, his three roles of translator, compiler, and author” (81). Searching for evidence that authorial “self-criticism might function as a mechanism to circumvent censorship” (81), Obermeier has suggested that the *Manciple’s Tale* from the *Canterbury Tales* “can be read as a veiled and encompassing metaphor about the quandary offensive authors face unless they employ apology strategies,” adding that “the tale paints a metaphoric picture of a medieval poet’s precarious relationship to a potentially irascible monarch, which we might see in Chaucer’s and Gower’s relationships to Richard II” (81). She notes that “Richard was extremely touchy about personal criticism, threatening imprisonment for offenders, and in the 1397 royal declaration pronounced disparagement of his person as treason and thus a capital offence” (90). In Chapter 4, I will argue that Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* may well have been a daring attempt to see how far he could go in testing the king’s tolerance. Like Obermeier, I rely on formal, thematic, and historical data for evidence of self-censorship, since Chaucer appears to have written his poetry in such a way that it would not be considered ideologically offensive and thus not in need of revision. This sort of self-censorship, therefore, should be understood as the effect of intolerance, but not as censorship in a strict definition of the term.

Perhaps a stronger case could be made for the revisions of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, which exists in three versions and survives in more than fifty manuscripts. The earliest version, the A-text, was likely composed ca. 1367-70, when
many of the ideas that John Wycliff would later garner attention for were not considered particularly dangerous even if they were technically heretical. A later revision, the B-text, dates from ca. 1377-79 and it is significantly longer. During the 1380s, in what is referred to as the C-text, Langland would overhaul his poem once more to distance himself from views that were now deemed heretical. Kerby-Fulton has observed that the Blackfriars’ Council of 1382 banned several ecclesiastical and theological opinions as heretical, including three “of which the B-text falls foul” (“Langland and the Bibliographic Ego” 75). She explains that when these passages from the earlier B-text are compared against the later C-text, “we find that in each case Langland made significant alterations in his final version so as to suppress the ideas most likely to offend” (75). By the Clemens-Graham standard, Langland may be said to have censored himself in a way that Chaucer did not. However, since Langland himself apparently carried out these revisions, rather than someone other than the author acting after the fact to bring the text into ideological compliance, I suggest that strictly speaking these alterations should be seen as evidence of intolerance rather than as censorship.

Kerby-Fulton has found evidence of a form of censorship in the mid-fourteenth century that fits more faithfully with Clemens and Graham’s model. In one striking example of three poems in Cotton Cleopatra B.II, now in the British Library, she has discovered that “Two of the three poems (‘Preste’ and ‘Heu’) are heavily cancelled (as none of the other contents of the manuscripts are) with large Xs—large enough to give the suitable appearance of cancellation or censorship, but still allow the poetry to be read” (Books Under Suspicion 164-65). She takes this to be “the perfect form of
functional ambiguity or self-protection” (165), giving a nod to Patterson’s theory. But such perfunctory cancellation could hardly be said to “[correct] a text to bring it into ideological, rather than factual, correctness” (Clemens and Graham 110), as no correction has taken place. In a more convincing example, Kerby-Fulton points to a Joachite manuscript (Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 85) by Henry of Costesy, that has been heavily mutilated. She believes this is because, given a “contemporary papacy that was burning Franciscan Spirituals, it would be difficult to finesse any interpretation of these verses in a Franciscan commentary that could appear uncontroversial” (86). But she also notes that Henry’s treatment of all these verses had been removed from the Laud copy: “What is missing runs from Apocalypse 13:9 … to the discussion of the number of the beast… The torn portion runs, then, from John’s own covert appeal to the reader to ‘decode’ into another such appeal” (86). She explains that “Whoever tore this section out was knowledgeable enough about Franciscan Joachite exegesis to know it could be trouble,” adding that “What survives is Henry’s overt focus on Islam as the main external threat to the church and some of his numerical theories to calculate how long Islam would endure” (86). In her view, “Henry’s focus on Islam, for instance, sounds prima facie like a safe externalizing of the Apocalypse’s threats as coming from outside the church, but this is in part a code for anyone ‘with an ear’” (86). The removal of some passages, while leaving another that seemingly also ought to have been excised (because it deals with the taboo topic of predicting the Apocalypse) suggests that even banned topics could be tolerated in the right context. At the same time, the tolerated passage appears all the more chilling in light of the preceding censored pages. While the text does
not appear to have been modified, the manuscript has physically been altered to “bring it into ideological, rather than factual, correctness,” as Clemens and Graham put it (110).

While Clemens and Graham’s definition of censorship is based on medieval manuscript culture, some of the best evidence for it comes in manuscripts from the first century of print rather than during the Middle Ages. They observe that the “most drastic method of censorship, the burning of books, leaves little room for survival” but that in some cases “censorship involved lesser forms of intervention such as the erasure of offending passages in a book” (110). They are able to give a more concrete glimpse into the relationship between censorship and manuscripts, albeit after the dawn of print, in the aftermath of Henry VIII’s break from Rome:

Because the universal authority of the pope was no longer recognized in England, some owners of medieval manuscripts obliterated the word papa (pope) when they came upon it; if the word appeared in the genitive case, pape, they sometimes erased just the first letter, leaving ape! (110)

They add that even “greater care was taken to expunge references to Thomas Becket, the pro-papal archbishop of Canterbury who defied King Henry II and in 1170 was murdered in his cathedral by Henry’s liegemen,” for at the height of his dispute with Rome in 1538, “Henry VIII destroyed Becket’s shrine at Canterbury and issued a proclamation condemning his memory, eliminating his feast day from the calendar, and ordering all images of him to be removed from churches and all references to him in service books to be erased” (110-11). They proceed to demonstrate the effectiveness of Henry’s proclamation with the example of Newberry Library MS 35, “a fifteenth-century Book of Hours made in Bruges for use in England” (111). This book was owned by the Gonstone-Mildmay family, a family closely linked to the crown. Clemens and Graham’s illustration
is worth repeating here because it demonstrates the social pressure to conform on a very small scale in private libraries. They note that the family zealously complied with the 1538 proclamation:

Becket’s name has been scraped out both for his feast day (29 December) and for the commemoration of the translation of his relics (7 July). A further erasure of his name occurs within the litany, and the memorial to him within the suffrages of the saints has been vigorously crossed out—although the facing-page illustration of his martyrdom has not been tampered with. Nor is this the full extent of the book’s censorship. Within the text known as the Seven Joys of the Virgin, a reference to an indulgence of one hundred days granted by Pope Clement to anyone who should recite the text aloud has been expunged [ . . . ] and at other points in the manuscript, objectionable passages of text have been masked from view with sheets of paper pasted over them. (111)

Here we have a clear example of censorship implemented by subjects who are eager to demonstrate their obedience to the new head of the Church. As I will show, this phenomenon is a continuation of a culture of intolerance in the service of obedient conformity.

In addition to the examples mentioned by Clemens and Graham, Allen Frantzen has pointed to the sixteenth-century figure Matthew Parker, Anne Boleyn’s chaplain, who published early printed editions of Anglo-Saxon texts. According to Frantzen, many “Anglo-Saxon manuscripts are physically defective, and the texts they contain are aesthetically (as well as sometimes physically) defective” (45). He writes that

These defects—whether physical (burns, tears) or aesthetic (faulty meter or grammar)—are invitations to editors to reconstruct or ‘write,’ and thereby interpret, that which they claim only to restore. The hermeneutic moves of Parker and his assistants go well beyond anything scholars today would imagine. They wrote in many manuscripts in red chalk, leaving marks that usually, but not always, took the form of notes and comments. (45)
But what Frantzen finds most significant about their endeavor, aside from the rigor they applied to their print editions (45-46), is the ideological adjustments they made to texts which they assumed “had been tampered with late in the Anglo-Saxon era, or during the Conquest, when Lanfranc reformed monasticism and so altered scribal (and textual) culture, and that, as a result, evidence of both the pure early Church and its degradation had been destroyed” (45). Frantzen thus observes that the “charge that earlier scholars had rewritten texts for political ends is richly ironic, for those activities describe precisely the scholarly endeavors of [John] Bale and Parker and his assistants” (46) working in the age of print.

Frantzen provides a further example of such ideological revision of an Anglo-Saxon text in the mid-sixteenth century, Worcester manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 265, which was donated to the college by Parker. According to John Foxe, “words denying the Real Presence (‘Non est tamen hoc sacrificium corpus eius,’ p. 177) were erased; they were restored to the manuscript by Joscelyn from an Exeter manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 190” (46). Frantzen states that after complaining about the rewriting of early sources by corrupt Roman clergy, Foxe demonstrated a canny sense of textual emendation. His re-editing of the ‘Easter’ homily deliberately distorted the text to sharpen its polemical edge. His rewriting shows that he too understood the need to ‘rase out’ information contrary to his own views. (46)

Again, that the best-known examples of formal censorship of medieval documents, i.e., edits and revisions, rather than mutilation or destruction, occur after the Reformation suggests two things. First, it suggests that censorship and related forms of intolerance in
the Middle Ages were widespread and effective. Second, it suggests that conditions changed in the early sixteenth century such that censorship became more formalized.

I will now describe other forms of intolerance that for purposes of discussion could be seen to act as censorship during the Middle Ages. Ian Forrest documents that “Treason and heresy had been intimately linked since Innocent III’s decree *Vergentis* of 1199, which proposed that punishments for treason should also be applied to heresy, since attacking the majesty of Christ was in fact worse than attacking the majesty of a secular ruler” (150). And despite “the spiritual nature of the crime,” says Forrest, “heresy was an offence that secular authority, in this case the English crown, had a duty to resist, as protector of the church and guarantor of peace between men” (28). All forms of publication, written and oral, were therefore tightly controlled throughout the Middle Ages. Medieval intolerance and censorship, however strict or draconian they may appear by later standards, were part of a coherent worldview that provided the foundation for policies of intolerance and censorship well into the age of print.

Forrest points to the oral component of even written publication in the Middle Ages. “As a marker of heresy,” he writes, “literacy has perhaps been overestimated by historians and literary scholars, because ours are literate disciplines relying upon literate sources, and we naturally privilege them in our interpretations” (183). However, he also explains that

Because the written word is by its very nature recorded for posterity while the spoken word is not, legislation such as the constitutions issued by Arundel in 1409 have elicited greater excitement for the censorship of writing than for the restrictions on preaching and speaking. (183)
Hence, for Forrest, the “key to understanding the place of writing in the detection of heresy, however, is to examine how the authorities saw the use of books, bills, and libels within the context of oral communication” (183). H. Leith Spencer adds that when, “as More said of the Constitutions, ‘this is a lawe that so many so longe haue spoken of, and so fewe haue in all this whyle rought ['cared'] to seke whyther they say trouth or no’, we too must enquire further.” He clarifies that the “constitution of special interest for a study of preaching is the first, in which Arundel defined the circumstances which permitted a man to preach and prescribed certain limits to the contents of sermons” (165). Spencer outlines the specifics of this forerunner of print censorship that originated with Arundel’s Constitutions and persisted as a way to enforce intolerance:

First, ‘no secular or regular which is not authorised by the law, or otherwise specially privileged, to preach the word of God shall take upon him the office or use of preaching the said Word of God, or in any wise preach to the people or clergy in the Latin tongue, or in any vulgar tongue, within churches or without, except he first present himself to the Diocesan of that place where he intendeth to preach and of him be examined’. (165)

Arundel was attempting to leave no loopholes: unlicensed preaching was prohibited in any language and in any place without explicit prior permission. After proper examination, the candidate was issued a license, “the terms of which may vary at the diocesan’s discretion, and which he must show to the incumbent of the parish where he intends to preach” (165). The responsibility of enforcement fell on both parties:

Indeed, the incumbent, for his part, must demand to see the license before allowing the visitor to preach in his church. Because, as Arundel put it, ‘this wholesome statute might seem to bring hurt by means of exactions of money, or any other difficulty’, the examination of the candidate and the provision of the license should be performed without delay and free of charge. (165)
It is significant that, as Spencer notes, “this statute regulated visiting preachers” (166).

Arundel’s intolerance of unlicensed preaching was designed, in effect, to censor unapproved ideas and prevent them from entering a community; in light of the danger associated with error I will discuss throughout my dissertation, this intolerance of nonconformity of ideas, manifested here through a form of intolerance closely resembling censorship, can be understood as a necessary method for maintaining stability throughout society.

Against the backdrop of a society that prizes conformity, the rigid controls of pre-print licensing imposed by early modern censorship would hardly have been necessary in the Middle Ages, since it was understood that disseminating dangerous ideas or criticizing authority would not be tolerated. Kerby-Fulton has proposed that in the Middle Ages, “effective ‘censorship,’ as we understand it, was ultimately impossible, indeed, in any absolute sense an impractical task in the age before print” (17). In her view, this is because manuscript culture “was not much amenable even to authorial control, let alone authoritarian control. Imposing modern notions of publication on medieval authors has resulted in all kinds of misunderstanding about what book censorship, or even self-censorship, is or could be in late medieval England” (17). She writes that

In the period before print, and therefore before the attempts to control book production through licensing that prevailed during the Renaissance and Reformation, we cannot assume the kind of state- or church-centered power structures that made New Historicism so enticing for the study of later periods. Contrary to what those models have taught us, manuscript culture was, in fact, an enormously empowering mode of publication for the adventurous author. (17)
She has thus hypothesized that because “reproduction time was slower, texts could be more easily kept, at least early on, within reading circles, where oral delivery to a select group allowed yet more freedom,” noting that some of the texts she examines “make overt pleas—whether we take these at face value or not—to the reader to keep the circulation ‘secrète.’” The vast majority of medieval manuscripts contain little or no or inaccurate authorial attribution, and little concrete evidence of ownership” (17). Given the precaution taken on even small scales of publication, it is evident that authors and readers alike feared the intolerance and persecution they might suffer should they be associated with the authorship or possession of dangerous texts. An author’s need to control the circulation of his or her ideas (in manuscript) points to a kind of self-censorship that was apparently well understood by a culture which lived under the constant pressure to conform or else to hide nonconformity. In Chapter 3 we will witness the trouble that Lanval, a fictional knight at King Arthur’s court, faces for telling the truth and divulging a secret, simultaneously provoking consequences from a king and two queens. The need to keep a text “secrète” exposes the daily pressure to cover up nonconformity and betrays the pervasiveness and effectiveness of the intolerance that served to restrict the circulation of ideas during the Middle Ages.

Although both preaching and teaching required a license, Forrest aligns preaching more with publication in medieval England, because teaching was private (67). Harold Love, meanwhile, stipulates that various modes of publication (at least in the seventeenth century) are linked in the sense of movement from a private realm of creativity to a public realm of consumption. The problem is to determine whether any given text—in our
case a text transmitted through handwritten copies—has made this transition. We will need to recognize both a ‘strong’ sense in which the text must be shown to have become publicly available and a more inclusive ‘weak’ sense in which it is enough to show that the text has ceased to be a private possession. (36)

Following Love’s definition of publication, then, a text which asks readers to keep “secrette” would fall under the “weak” sense of the term, and if circulation is indeed controlled, such a text should belong to a category closer to private conversation or instruction than to publication. In another sense, however, by the time an idea was uttered it was as good as published, as my discussion of Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury in Chapter 2 will suggest. And as Kerby-Fulton has found, some documents were dangerous enough that their circulation needed to be controlled, even if the texts themselves were not destroyed: she shows that books could be hidden, both literally, such as under lock and key (74), and figuratively, such as by “changing the author’s name but leaving the text intact, or by cutting out the rubric or colophon,” or by miscataloguing the work, or by other ruses (74). Once again, that these strategies were apparently necessary points to intolerance and underscores the danger implicitly associated with some texts. A text that could exist only within such narrow limits (such as being kept completely secret or nearly secret) cannot be considered to be published in a meaningful sense and such a text would be aligned more closely with other private forms of communication.

One consequence of the emphasis on conformity (that is, a desire not to stand out) in the Middle Ages is that many works, whether innocuous or provocative, have no identifiable author. Indeed, the culture of anonymity worked to the advantage of those who wished to circumvent censorship and related forms of intolerance. Half of the
vernacular texts I consider have no identifiable author, but none of the works I examine contain material that would have been considered dangerous or heretical. Nicholas Watson has pointed out that fifteenth-century religious works tend to be “carefully anonymous” (833). He adds that for “writers of English theological works whose names we know—apart from Pecock, hagiographic poets such as Capgrave, Kokenham, and Lydgate … and, of course, Margery Kempe—we have to wait until the early sixteenth century” (833).

Anonymity could also be created after the fact. As part of her rigorous study of Joachite manuscripts, Kerby-Fulton found that “manuscripts of Joachim’s genuine writings have often been marked or mutilated to shore up the impression of orthodoxy by someone. Tactics can include the removal of the first (and thus identifying) leaf of Joachim’s work, or sometimes the final leaf” which presumably would have contained the explicit signaling the end of the work, as well (88). Moreover, she realized that upon examination, “only a tiny number of prelates”—all of them prominent and hence protected—“seem willing to sign themselves as individual owners or patrons of serious Joachititia” (88). This was a society in which merely possessing a document was equated with fully subscribing to the ideas in it. As Kerby-Fulton found in her thorough study of Henry of Costesy’s writings, “for all of Henry’s care, his interpretations and/or his name must have made some Insular readers and owners nervous” because most of “the extant manuscripts of his works display a remarkable codicological pattern, that is they are either somehow mutilated or show suppressed or absent authorship attribution” (83-84). This is significant because it is part of a phenomenon she sees repeated throughout the
century, namely “physical evidence that English owners of Joachite material were
ervous about overtly possessing it, especially if they were not highly and impeccably
positioned clerics” (84). On the one hand, it is tempting to see anonymity—whether in
ownership, authorship, or some other stage of publication—as one way of evading the
rules of censorship and therefore making some small “win” for toleration. On the other
hand, the very fact of anonymity points to a recognition that, at least in the wrong hands,
some ideas were dangerous enough that they should be tightly controlled, if not destroyed
altogether.

There are some further paradoxes in understanding intolerance which served to
restrict the circulation of ideas within manuscript culture, both before and after movable
type. One of Love’s central theses in *The Culture and Commerce of Texts* is that scribal
publication in the age of print “was one of several means of acquiring and transmitting …
privileged information, not meant to be available to all enquirers” (177). He demonstrates
that manuscript culture was useful for preserving and circulating documents only within
specific circles, with the purpose of holding an advantage over others who could not
access that information. It is distinct from church or state censorship, in which dangerous
works are destroyed for the sake of the greater good. Thus it is not an exact parallel to
compare medieval (or even Renaissance) practices to keep documents in the right hands
with the practices Love describes, such as when Thomas More was granted special
permission in March of 1527 to read “heretical books in order that, following the
example of the King (Henry VIII), More might be enabled to make good defence of the
Catholic Faith against the new heresies” (Putnam 2.258), or when Kerby-Fulton turns to a
“collection of Joachite materials owned by Richard de Kilvington, dean of St. Paul’s (1353-61). Kilvington’s Liber excerptionum abbatis Joachim (British Library, MS Royal 8.F.XVI) contains an anthology of genuine and spurious works” and the “physical manuscript itself … is full of puzzles.” She explains that “even though the book deals with issues a hundred years old, Kilvington himself seems to have been nervous that the Liber might get loose” (89). She describes his scheme: “His full name appears in a neat early anglicana formata hand on the top of every second page (that is, every odd-numbered page)—a highly unusual, and unusually thorough, way of marking medieval book ownership” (89-92). On this evidence she concludes that

his could only be an act of unprecedented caution, because, given the quire structure, if the book were unbound (and the staining of the outer leaves strongly suggests it was), no single loose bifolium would go into circulation without the dean’s name on it somewhere. It looks then, as if even a highly placed fourteenth-century church official could not own a copy of a Joachite text without making provision in case it, or even part of it, went astray. (92)

Both Thomas More’s need for permission to read censored materials and the earlier example of Kilvington’s branding each leaf to prevent circulation highlight a mindset in which conformity was established and maintained by suppressing publication effectively. In these examples, access to unsound ideas was restricted for the sake of the community, not just spiritually but also literally. Falsehood, not truth, was censored—and rightly so according to this worldview in which conformity was valued above all else.

Several generations before Eisenstein, Putnam concluded that the “whole business of the supervision of literature and the control of opinion was of necessity very materially modified by the invention of printing” (1.25). In Putnam’s view,
It was at first assumed that the control of literature by the Church would be strengthened by the new method of book production. The ecclesiastical authorities decided that no books should be printed excepting under their own supervision, and if there had been any effective means of carrying out such a decision, the printing-press would speedily have become a mere means of expression of Church doctrine and Church policy. (1.25)

And yet this initial impulse didn’t come out of thin air. My dissertation centers on the Middle Ages to show that press censorship was not invented in the late fifteenth century but was, rather, an adaptation of earlier forms of intolerance designed to preserve the civil peace. Such continuity, however, is sometimes obscured by the changes in the religious and political conditions during this period.

**Conclusion**

In addition to scholars of medieval and early modern censorship and intolerance whose works I have discussed, one further author whose ideas permeate my dissertation is the philosopher Michael Walzer. In his extended essay, *On Toleration* (1997), Walzer outlines five kinds of tolerance:

1. A resigned acceptance of difference for the sake of peace.
2. A passive, relaxed, benign indifference to difference. (‘It takes all kinds to make a world.’)
3. A kind of moral stoicism; a principled recognition that the ‘others’ have rights even if they exercise those rights in unattractive ways.
4. Openness to others; curiosity; perhaps even respect; a willingness to listen and learn.
5. An enthusiastic endorsement of difference. (10-11)

He is the first to admit that the final option on this scale is not, strictly speaking, toleration (11), even if it is what he thinks we should strive towards. And while Walzer puts this scale to good use in his study of what he describes as the “five regimes of
toleration” (multinational empires, international society, consociations, nation-states, and immigrant societies), his arguments are based on generalizations and large data samples. Walzer’s scale is based on modern political science and reflects the modern world; in subsequent chapters I will suggest some additions that might more fully accommodate the many limitations on toleration I see in the medieval world.

I believe I am the first to extrapolate Walzer’s scale of resignation, indifference, stoicism, curiosity, and enthusiasm (91) into a model for literary criticism for use on individual texts. I acknowledge that this scale is not perfectly suited to literary studies. However, because it accounts for varying degrees of toleration, it is more useful than the vague statements I have encountered while writing this dissertation. As literary theory, the sort of thinking Walzer’s scale produces is, on the one hand, helpful, because it can quantify a philosophical concept and make comparisons between texts and periods possible; on the other hand, such a scale can also restrict our ways of evaluating the data, leading to narrow readings and categorizations that are quite separate from past individuals’ understandings of their views on toleration. A scale like Walzer’s is helpful up to the point that it leads to mechanical readings of historical sources. In using his scale, I intend to resist the pitfall of mapping modern values onto the medieval world, as a sort of litmus test to establish if the text represents a tolerant or intolerant society.

The scale is particularly important for drawing comparisons among texts. As I have noted, Laursen and Nederman do not give a definition for tolerance or toleration in Beyond the Persecuting Society precisely because it has meant so many things to different people living under diverse circumstances (1). Without a way to quantify
differences in toleration, it is much easier for them to accomplish their goal of
demonstrating that “ideas and practices of toleration were available and in use long
before the Enlightenment” (2). Walzer’s scale helps us understand the degree to which
the ideas and practices of toleration may have been available and in use. As we will see in
the case of Abelard’s Dialogue in Chapter 2, for example, the basic argument has been
something like this, in writings by Moore, Pierre Payer, and Constant Mews: Abelard set
out to examine the beliefs of Jews, Christians, and the ancient philosophers; because he
claimed to do so in earnest, his text is an example of intellectual tolerance, especially of
Jews. If we are to discount the “enthusiastic endorsement of difference” as the highest
level of tolerance, since endorsement is really something other than toleration, the top
position on Walzer’s scale would be an “openness to others; curiosity; perhaps even
respect, a willingness to listen and learn” (11). This appears to correspond to their reading
of Abelard’s Dialogue. Ergo, Abelard was tolerant. And yet a careful reading of the first
dialogue in particular, that between the Philosopher and the Jew, reveals that it is notably
lacking in evidence for such an argument. Indeed, it is dominated by a lexicon of
persecution and difference, and the Jew, I believe, is more of a stereotype than either
Mews or Moore allow. As I will show in Chapter 2, the strongest evidence for Abelard’s
Dialogue as an instance of Walzer’s fourth type of toleration comes from the opening
frame and is not to be found in the body of the Dialogue.

When we discuss intolerance in the Middle Ages, censorship is often just beneath
the surface. Censorship and toleration continue to the present day to be politically-
charged subjects, their histories continually appropriated and repurposed for political
ends. Both concepts are poorly understood in historical contexts because they are wrongly thought to resemble modern debates. In critiquing Walzer’s scale, Laursen has clarified that “respect, endorsement, and celebration” are as far from toleration as is “organized, systematic, violent persecution” (“Orientation” 3). Whereas Walzer sees a continuum of toleration—resignation, indifference, stoicism, curiosity, and enthusiasm (91)—Laursen puts toleration as a middle position between two extremes, neither of which is toleration. I believe that Laursen’s distinction between toleration and positive respect for difference fits the historical record more accurately, which helps explain, for instance, why Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) ridicules the notion that every religious idea is equally valid but insists that all should be tolerated equally under the law anyway; for Locke, activities, not beliefs, should be regulated to ensure the civil peace. Likewise, in arguing against pre-publication licensing in the *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton suggests that some ideas are, at best, merely tolerable and ought not be celebrated, even if they are permitted to circulate; for Milton, some ideas are still too dangerous to be tolerated. By examining the histories of censorship and toleration in light of each other, my dissertation illuminates both, while simultaneously adding new knowledge to our understandings of historical and literary works which I hope will be of use to scholars who are not primarily concerned with censorship or toleration.

Detailed evidence now exists to show that printers in the Renaissance and Enlightenment were subject to censorship but that those rules were not always enforced strictly, illustrated vividly by D.F. McKenzie in “The London Book Trade in 1644” and “The London Book Trade in 1668.” In contrast, I argue that censorship in the Middle
Ages appears to have been more draconian because it was part of a concerted program of intolerance that sought to protect society from disruptive individuals and ideas. The best evidence of the censorship of manuscripts dates from the sixteenth century, which suggests that conditions changed broadly after the invention of the printing press. Hence, in order to understand the relationship between censorship and intolerance, I focus on intolerance in works from before 1476. Building on the historical foundation I have outlined in this introduction, I hope that later developments will appear more conservative and yet all the more revolutionary at the same time. We will see these ideas develop over the course of the Middle Ages, from their philosophical roots in Chapter 2, to an early test case of “Lanval” in Chapter 3, and then watch how a variety of Middle English authors responded to political and religious controversy in Chapters 4 and 5.
CHAPTER 2

THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES: COERCIVE DEBATE

My discussion of medieval (ca. 1100-1500) intolerance is divided into four chapters. The first draws on Latin writings, the rest on vernacular material. In this chapter, I look at texts by three prominent figures of the High Middle Ages, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham, highly influential thinkers who can be shown to take distinct but complementary approaches to exposing, correcting, and suppressing error and disobedience. The concept of tolerance, which I understand as the practice of toleration or forbearance of error, takes such different forms in various times and places that I feel justified in using these two terms interchangeably. Moreover, while censorship, tolerance, intolerance, and indeed the concept of intellectual freedom are modern ideals, they are useful labels for tracking the development of these complex concepts over time. By this shorthand I do not mean to attribute modern ideas to past thinkers, nor to evaluate these authors according to modern concepts of tolerance and intolerance. I will argue instead that sophisticated thinkers of the High Middle Ages saw coercion not only as justified but even as necessary for maintaining the peace, though each for different reasons. As we will see in subsequent chapters, their writings represent philosophical manifestations of intolerance that we will see expressed through other social and legal signals of intolerance in the popular literature of the Middle Ages that may be seen as precursors to formal censorship.
Scholars of medieval toleration, especially Cary Nederman and Constant Mews, have argued that debate itself was a form of toleration. My aim in this chapter is to establish that debate was staged in order to promote conformity, which differs from tolerance because it serves to eliminate, rather than allow, difference. I first look at Peter Abelard (d. 1142), who wrote a pair of hypothetical debates to prove the truth of Christian doctrine, especially by exposing the flaws of alternative systems of belief which he ultimately dismisses as dangerous to the soul. Abelard explores difference in the context of religious disagreement. While he understands peace as religious agreement within a community, the intolerance he appears to advocate is primarily condemnative rather than coercive; he is able to dismiss erroneous beliefs as dangerous to the individual but he is able to forbear them in infidels so long as they do not harm the Christian community. I then turn to John of Salisbury (d. 1180), whose political writings mention toleration in the context of maintaining political unity. He argues that a limited form of toleration of political disobedience can be useful as a strategy for facilitating debate which will ultimately lead to conformity, but he maintains that coercion is an appropriate measure against those who cannot be persuaded through reason. William of Ockham (d. 1347/49), in turn, deploys a third strategy of limited toleration to lead to the same goal of producing conformity. Takashi Shogimen has shown that Ockham believed laymen should be held to a different standard for determining heresy than should trained clergy. However, Ockham disputed passionately with Pope John XXII because neither man could tolerate the other’s alleged heresies, and in this sense his intolerance of religious error is similar to the condemnation advocated by his forerunners. The disruption brought
on by Ockham’s unwillingness to submit to Church authority offers an insight into the main reason that all three of these men favored unity of thought. Thus, although it is clearest in John of Salisbury, because his writings are most overtly political, all three advocated different means to reach the same end of eliminating discord within their respective communities by ensuring conformity. In this chapter, I will argue for a model of intolerance in which the unity of communities is maintained by exposing and condemning error and disobedience.

Peter Abelard (1079-1142)

Peter Abelard is well known for having been the victim of severe and repeated persecution by the Church. What is important about Abelard for my argument, however, is his role as one of the most influential teachers in the twelfth century. John of Salisbury, a key figure in the history of toleration in the English Middle Ages, traveled to Paris to study with Abelard around the same time Abelard was writing the text I will be examining in this chapter. Abelard’s contributions to the genre of debate are important on their own, but, as we will see, they are also apparent in John’s work. Taken together, the views of these men establish a coherent philosophy in which intolerance is necessary for the sake of the greater good. Toleration, as it manifests in their writings, served to bring about conformity by licensing a form of intellectual freedom which disguised coercive force.

Abelard “championed the use of reason in matters of faith,” writes Peter King in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. He also notes that Abelard’s “quick wit, sharp tongue, perfect memory, and boundless arrogance made him unbeatable in debate” to
such a degree that “he was said by supporter and detractor alike never to have lost an argument” (King). His audacity in debate made him at once a great teacher but also a threat to his superiors in the Church. Late in his life, in the mid-1130s, and long after his affair with Heloise, Abelard “was given permission to return to Paris … to teach in the schools on the Mont Ste.-Genevieve” (King). Around this time, he once again found himself in trouble with the Church authorities; it is also around this time that he wrote a pair of *Dialogues* in Latin (ca. 1136-39), one between a fictional pagan philosopher and a fictional Jew, the other between the same invented philosopher and a hypothetical Christian. His stated goal in these imaginary debates was to establish the true path to salvation. Not long after writing these dialogues, according to King, “his theological treatises were brought to the attention of Bernard of Clairvaux, who objected to some of Abelard’s conclusions as well as to his approach to matters of faith.” Eventually,

> Abelard asked the archbishop of Sens to arrange a public dispute between himself and Bernard on 3 June 1140, to settle their disagreements. Bernard initially refused the invitation on the grounds that one should not debate matters of faith, but then accepted it and, unknown to Abelard, arranged to convene another commission of enquiry to review Abelard’s works on suspicion of heresy. (King)

King adds that “When Abelard discovered that there was no debate but instead a kangaroo court, he refused to take part, announcing his intention to appeal to the Pope directly. He walked out of the proceedings and began travelling to Rome.” The response both of Abelard and of the Church authorities point to the same limited form of toleration licensed by debate that Abelard himself suggests in the *Dialogues*. Under this model, as I hope to show in this chapter and will explore further in subsequent chapters, authorities are justified in holding trials that might appear from a modern perspective to have been
merely perfunctory. I believe such action was understood at the time to be necessary because its main purpose was not so much to determine error, but rather to expose it and thereby correct or eliminate its threat. Further, Abelard ultimately accepted his own error and thus helped restore peace to his community:

The Council condemned nineteen propositions it claimed to find in his works and adjourned. Bernard launched a successful campaign petitioning the Papal Court before Abelard was out of France; a letter from the Pope upholding the decision of the Council of Soissons reached Abelard while he was at Cluny; Abelard was ordered to silence. By all accounts Abelard complied immediately, even meeting peacefully with Bernard in reconciliation. (King)

Abelard’s submission to authority presents a historical mirror of the fictional thought experiments he had considered in the Dialogues just a few years earlier.

Nederman, Mews, R.I. Moore, and others have presented the Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian as evidence of Abelard’s willingness to consider more than just the official Church position on theological matters, Judaism in particular. But, as I will show in my discussion of these scholars’ views, Abelard’s text appears to have been carefully crafted to conform to official Church doctrine. Indeed, this is so much the case, I believe, that Abelard’s limited toleration is best understood as a signal of the deep systemic pressures to conform in his world, a key feature of the model of intolerance I aim to establish in this chapter. First, I will lay the foundation of Abelard’s debate. I then consider recent scholarship that has found a stance of toleration in these writings, before I explore the coercive undercurrent that runs throughout the Dialogues.

On the surface, the Dialogue between the philosopher—putatively a man of reason, though not a Christian—and the Jew appears to consider with an open mind the
tenets of Judaism. However, Abelard uses this debate to expose the flaws in the Jew’s beliefs, which he ultimately dismisses. The debate with the Jew has the clearest connections to issues of toleration and conformity within the Christian scholastic world in which Abelard is situated. Hence, most of my evidence is drawn from it. Despite his genuine interest in the ways Judaism adapted over time to survive in changing social climates, Abelard portrays Jews as obstinate infidels who prefer wandering from their homeland and living as outcasts, rather than submitting to Christian truth and conforming to new conditions. Moreover, Abelard’s *Dialogues* suggest that peace is best understood as religious agreement within a community; he is able to engage in such a debate because the ideas presented through it confirm beliefs acceptable within his own orthodox community. His curiosity about their customs is thus simultaneously tolerant and intolerant: he forbears error in order to expose it, but this limited tolerance ultimately develops into condemnation.

When the philosopher and the Jew discuss the terms of their debate, the Jew worries that the philosopher could “overpower my simplicity by the strength of philosophical reasons” and requests that the philosopher “not boast that you have been victorious over us on that account” (28). He recognizes from the start that he cannot win the debate. He further asks the philosopher not to “turn the foolishness of one little man into the disgrace of a whole people, nor convict the faith because of one man’s deficiency, nor falsely accuse the faith of error because I fail somewhat in discussing it” (28). The philosopher agrees, promising not to “wrangle like a sophist” but instead to “examine reasons like a philosopher” (28). In repeatedly claiming that he wants to be
rational, the philosopher implies that the Jew is not. For example, he compares the Jew to the children of two parents, one who has converted to a new religion while the other has not. Those children, the philosopher says, “hold the firm faith of the parent with whom they remain. Upbringing is stronger in them than the origin of blood or reason since no matter by whom they are brought up, children will recognize those who brought them up as their fathers both in the faith and in their general upbringing” (25). Jews, he suggests, hold onto their beliefs out of tradition, not out of rational reflection. The philosopher then quotes Horace’s *Epistle* 1.2 to the effect that “A jar will retain the scent of what is first poured in it when new a very long time” (25). Abelard further criticizes the Jew for holding his beliefs out of custom rather than as the result of careful consideration; for Abelard’s philosopher, reason inevitably leads to the truth; failure to use reason is the very definition of error, and the Jew is discredited from the start.

Here and throughout the dialogue, the Jew responds with a rationale for his beliefs, rather than with a rebuttal of the objections raised against those beliefs and practices. Even granting Abelard’s Jew the benefit of the doubt, he is stigmatized from the start. “Confirmed and constrained in this way as if the whole world had conspired against us alone,” the Jew muses, “it is a wonder that we are allowed to live. We possess neither fields nor vineyards nor any landed estates because there is no one who can protect them for us from open or occult attack” (33). As a narrative device rather than a real person, Abelard’s Jew, sympathetic as he may be as a fictional character, is handicapped for both practical and theological reasons. Moreover, the Jew’s strategies in the debate are restricted by an opponent who confronts him in loaded charge after loaded
charge that frequently cannot be addressed through the rationality the philosopher
purports to embrace. As but one representative example at the end of a long series of
attacks on the Jew’s position, the philosopher asks the Jew,

How did he [God] constitute you a people special to himself by giving the
law, and why does he call Israel his firstborn whom such a great burden
weighs down for no reason? Who could even excuse you from the curse of
the Law, who you, because of your sins, as you admit yourselves, have
lost the promised land outside of which you can in no way fulfill the Law?
Because of this you are not permitted to exercise the vengeance of your
justice, nor are you allowed to celebrate the sacrifices or the offerings
instituted to cleanse away sins, nor can you even carry out the canticles of
the divine praises. [. . . ] You cannot be consecrated to the Lord since you
are deprived alike of priesthood and temple, so that you do not have the
solace of earthly dignity, you who asked only earthly things from the Lord
and who have only received the promise of an earthly reward, as was said.
(45)

The Jew’s reply to the philosopher’s litany of criticisms is not systematic, putatively
because the Jew finds it “difficult to keep track of [the objections] with a view to replying
to each of them in order” (45). Abelard’s Jew focuses in his responses on the elements of
Jewish belief and practice, such as circumcision (47-54), that stigmatize his position
rather than bolster it. For example,

For the sign of circumcision seems so abhorrent to the Gentiles that if we
were to seek their women, the women would in no way give their consent,
believing that the truncating of this member is the height of foulness, and
detesting the divine sign of holiness as idolatry. Or even if they were to
offer us their consent in this, we would shrink in horror from associating
that member with the foulness of unbelieving women—that member
sanctified to the Lord precisely through that sign by which we enter into a
covenant with him alone. And out of reverence for this sign, Abraham,
binding his servant by an oath, compelled him to put his hand to his thigh
so that that servant would so much more surely protect himself from
perjury, the more attention he paid to the greater holiness of this member.
(47)
In his turn, the philosopher exposes the Jew for not fully grasping the theology behind his own beliefs and practices, which the philosopher regards as repulsive on two counts: he finds the beliefs and practices as abhorrent as the Jew’s own lack of knowledge about his own beliefs. For instance, he takes the Jew’s arguments for circumcision and pushes them to their logical extremes, twisting the Jewish stance by offering his own interpretation of Scripture. First, he implies that the Jew is overreaching in his beliefs regarding circumcision: “You try to urge us to circumcision on the basis of the precept of circumcision and the example of Abraham” (63). He then exposes the error he perceives in this argument by offering a counterargument grounded in Scripture:

As a result you would also include in the sacrament of the Law those to whom, you agree, no Law was given; nor is the promise of the land made to them which was laid down in the covenant of circumcision. Consider how groundless your objection is. For when the Lord first said, ‘Every male from among you shall be circumcised’ and added, ‘Every male in your generations both the houseborn slave and the slave acquired with money and whoever is not of your blood,’ surely by ‘from among you’ he understands not only Abraham and his descendants, but those besides who belong to their family or possessions so that they had the power to order and compel them to be circumcised. (63)

Ultimately, it would be difficult for a historical Jew to take seriously the positions forwarded by Abelard’s fictional Jew, and in any case Jews were such outcasts that Abelard could not possibly have had them in mind for his audience. Moore notes that there are “occasional indications in the eleventh century of casual hostility towards them, most obviously in the ‘Jew striking’ of the midi, the observations of the Jew in Abelard’s Dialogue, or the occasional prohibitions which it was thought necessary to issue against assaults on Jews and their festivals” (110). Thus, although a dialogue whose outcome was determined before it even begins does not fit well with modern ideals for debate,
Abelard’s audience of orthodox Christians had no expectation of impartiality for his fictional agents. In subsequent chapters, we will see this same principle of condemnation play out in secular fiction and in religious satire regarding a variety of nonconformists. This coercive mechanism is important because it points to the intolerance of religious and political difference during the Middle Ages. In Abelard’s *Dialogues*, it manifests as a form of criticism that exposes religious error so as to discourage heretical beliefs within the orthodox community, but it does not appear to involve the same degree of coercion that we will see in the political sphere.

Even though Abelard’s philosopher condemns the Jew for not having a deep enough understanding of his own erroneous beliefs, this construct should not necessarily be read as a signal that the opposite is also true and that truth can be established through rational inquiry alone. Such a reading does not correspond with the nature of Church doctrine during this period, which (as Abelard had to be reminded throughout his life) was not open to debate. Rather, Abelard’s *Dialogues* suggest that people who hold erroneous beliefs, whether infidels or heretics, are refusing to use their capacity of reason to understand why they are wrong. Yet Nederman has suggested that in these *Dialogues* Abelard proposed that “open dialogue, even among people of apparently incommensurable viewpoints, is necessary in order to achieve truth” (“Introduction” 14). However, Abelard’s condemnation of the Jew suggests that such dialogue is more useful as a tool for exposing religious error than for determining correct beliefs (which are established by the Church). Nederman makes another surprising claim about tolerance in the context of Abelard’s *Dialogues*: “Truth, or at least its comprehension by mere mortal
beings, is open-ended and constantly subject to renewed inquiry” (14). But the purpose of Abelard’s inquiry is to determine who is correct, either the Jews or the Christians, so that the philosopher can choose the right one—not the right one for him, but the right one—thereby identifying a knowable Truth. As the philosopher himself often states, “I am seeking the salvation of my soul” (Abelard 28, e.g.). Again, when the Dialogues are read on their own terms, it is apparent that tolerance in Abelard’s view is limited to the realm of debate, and then only for the duration of the debate. Even if he does not necessarily advocate coercion against those who cannot be persuaded by reason, neither does he ever suggest that two positions could be equally valid.

Thus, while a debate whose outcome centers on a Christian doctrine, in this case salvation, signals sharp limitations on religious toleration, recent scholarship has suggested that it should not be read as being completely intolerant, either. As Mews rightly explains, “Modern notions of religious toleration should not be read back into the Dialogus. Abelard is never explicitly concerned in his writings with the right of alternative groups in society to hold dissenting views” (39). In the preface to the Dialogues, Abelard quotes an adage by Augustine on toleration, “There is no teaching so false that there is not some true teaching mixed in” (23). According to Mews, “Abelard was reminding his audience that the roots of toleration were to be found in the wisdom of Jewish and Christian tradition” and that “[t]he two dialogues which follow serve to instruct the reader in the underlying validity of Augustine’s dictum” (26). However, given that Abelard is not writing specifically on toleration, and that his audience is likely to be educated and committed Christians, such as monks, I doubt very much that his
purpose is to point to Judeo-Christian roots of toleration, unless, perhaps, Abelard had an ulterior motive separate from his purported toleration of Jews. A more plausible reading, in my view, is that Abelard understood Augustine to address the party in error; by framing these debates with Augustine’s dictum that it is appropriate to listen to the other side, Abelard is signaling the pressure to conform to accepted beliefs and practices, which one can only know by listening to official doctrine. Read this way, Abelard’s *Dialogues* can be viewed as a manifestation of the limited toleration in debate I believe his student John of Salisbury likewise had in mind when he later wrote that “one is free to doubt and inquire up to the point when truth shines through from the comparisons of positions as a result of the collision of doctrines” (*Policraticus* 7.8). Debate, for Abelard, though even more clearly for his student, is not conducted for its own sake, or to reach new conclusions, but for the explicit purpose of finding, or rather confirming, a truth that is already established.

In his summary of the first dialogue, Mews writes that “Abelard had set up the debate between the Jew and the Philosopher, not to establish the superiority of one position over the other, but in order to elucidate the rationale for Jewish observance of the Law as the arguments from reason as to why it was not essential to submit to the obligations of the Law” (27). Mews draws some conclusions about Abelard’s treatment of the Jew by outlining Abelard’s models for the genre. For example, he points to St. Anselm, who popularized the philosophical dialogue in the late eleventh century (28), and to Gilbert Crispin, who had written a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew a generation before Abelard. According to Mews, Gilbert’s Jew actually mentions
tolerance specifically (29), something that is only implicit in Abelard’s dialogue. Mews adds that it is “significant that Gilbert should consciously distance himself from the traditional anti-Jewish invective” (29), noting that the Jew is, in dialogues by both of these forerunners, converted in the end (29-30), a development missing in Abelard’s version. Does Abelard’s departure from the generic expectation point to tolerance of Jews (and, by extension, to Abelard’s own heresy)? Or does this departure point to the opposite, an intolerant commentary on Jewish obstinacy (which would no doubt satisfy Abelard’s fellow monks as well as his Church superiors)? Clearly it is more the latter than the former.

Mews finds that Abelard’s predecessors had used the genre “to establish the truth of Christian doctrine against the error of the unbeliever” (39). This seems to be an accurate description of the implicit argument of Abelard’s first dialogue, and, as I will later show, Abelard’s view fits well with the position taken by John of Salisbury. But according to Mews, “Abelard’s presentation of the Jew as an intelligent, reflective commentator differed markedly from the stereotype in most Jewish-Christian dialogues” (33). What’s more, Mews supposes that Abelard’s “sympathy for the position of the Jews in society is evident in a long, frequently quoted description of the practical problems they faced in society. He has the Jew make many perceptive remarks about the role of written law. How else could any society be governed without a written Law?” (33). However, we must remember that a main characteristic of the Dialogue is that Abelard’s philosopher responds to the Jew by attacking many of his positions. Again, I believe this is best understood as a sign of the limitations on toleration during the Middle Ages;
similarly, the philosopher’s criticism of those same laws as products of Jewish culture and its particular needs points to the limits of religious toleration within Abelard’s own community of orthodox Christians, who were bound to conform to relatively inflexible religious and political forces. In other words, the philosopher’s alleged toleration of the Jew might be a patronizing gesture made for the sake of peace and merely be the surface of limited toleration for ancient customs that might, in Abelard’s view, be reasonable only if they ensure justice. For example, in a section of the second debate, Abelard’s philosopher distinguishes natural justice or rights, which are universal, from positive justice or rights, which are culturally determined (119). While he says both are necessary, he is more interested in the ramifications of positive justice because it can vary (119-20). Abelard writes that the “right of positive justice is what is instituted by men to safeguard utility or uprightness more securely or to extend them, as is based on custom alone or on written authority, for example, the punishments of vengeance or the sentences of judges in the examination of accusations” (120). He stipulates that “with some people there is the custom of duels or of hot iron, but with others the oath is the end of every controversy and every discussion is committed to witnesses. So when we must live with others we must also hold to their institutions which we mentioned, just as we hold to natural rights” (120). From a modern perspective which values cultural relativism, such a statement could sound like a radical plea for toleration. However, the statement also acknowledges the importance of conforming not only in private belief but also in public demonstrations of those beliefs. Heretics (and Jews) must submit to Catholic rule even when they disagree with it. Abelard’s philosopher continues:
The Laws which you [the Christian] call divine, namely the Old and New Testaments, also lay down certain natural precepts which you call moral, such as the precept to love God or neighbor, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to murder. But some have the nature of positive justice which were suited to some peoples at a certain time, such as circumcision for the Jews and baptism for you, and several others whose precepts you call figurative. The Roman pontiffs or synods also enact new decrees every day or grant dispensations by which you say what was previously lawful becomes unlawful or vice versa, as if God had placed in their power by their precepts or permissions to make good or evil what were not so before, and as if their authority could pass judgment on our law. (120-21)

At first this statement appears to be an attack on the Church, which frequently changed its official position by creating new heresies and eliminating others. However, I believe the matter is much more complicated. Abelard’s philosopher shows himself to be a formidable debate partner to both the Jew and the Christian; when read as one complete work, such comments made to the Christian in the second dialogue undermine the credibility that he is genuinely considering the Jew’s position in the first dialogue. On the surface, comparing the stigmatized custom of circumcision with Christian baptism, for instance, would seem to validate the practice of adapting the laws to fit the changing needs of a culture. It is clear from context that Abelard’s philosopher understands this relativism as a historical process that has little bearing on the need to maintain social order through enforced submission to the rules of the majority—even as those rules change. Abelard specified elsewhere, notes translator Pierre Payer, that figurative precepts of the law had no justice in themselves, but rather were instituted as ad hoc means to other ends of justice (120n). Mews proposes here that the “philosopher’s criticism relates … to the Jew’s imposition of additional precepts” (Mews 33). Again, it
appears that Abelard’s interest in Jewish culture is a literary concession for demonstrating Christian truth and that it should not be read as a signal of modern ideals of toleration.

While Abelard’s philosopher is able to tolerate a fictional Jew for the sake of a debate which shows the truth of Christian doctrine, Abelard’s own sympathies are not with Jews in general. As I have already noted, the philosopher is “seeking the salvation of my soul” (28). That salvation is unavailable to Jews in the Christian understanding of the universe shared by Abelard’s readers. The trope of the literally “blind Jew” was used to represent their supposed “blindness” to the truth of Christ; this stereotype is implicit in Abelard’s treatment of the Jews in the work as a whole. In his dialogue with the Christian, for instance, the philosopher states that

we are more guilty either when we knowingly avoid what we ought to do, or when we do what must not be done, than if this were to happen through ignorance which would be able to offer some excuse. You know it is written: ‘The slave who knew his master’s wishes but did not prepare to fulfill them will get a severe beating.’ And elsewhere: ‘It were better not to have known the way of truth, than having known it, to turn back.’ (112)

This abstract discussion of virtue illuminates Abelard’s assumptions about the coercive and potentially violent consequences of ignoring obvious truths that permeate both dialogues. The Christian, of course, agrees with the philosopher’s view. This agreement is significant not only because it is emblematic of the limitations on debate in this time period. It is also important because one of the Jew’s main arguments for following the Old Testament alone likewise depends on a metaphor of a slave who knows his master’s wishes and must choose whether to follow them:

Suppose I am a slave of some master whom I am extremely afraid of offending, and I have many fellow slaves who are inspired with the same fear. They tell me that our master gave all his slaves an order in my
absence, but I am ignorant of it. They are carrying it out and they exhort me to do the same. What do you advise me to do if I should have a doubt about an order given in my absence? I do not believe that you or anyone else are going to advise me to despise the counsel of all the slaves and, following my own opinion, dissociate myself from what they are all carrying out, and which they all testify was the master’s order. (29-30)

In the context of the first dialogue, the Jew’s statement might sound like a reasonable argument for tolerating Jewish “blindness” to the New Testament. Indeed, it could even sound like Abelard demanding toleration for his own heresies, threatening his superiors that he will continue to ignore their orders. Abelard’s Jew is not converted to Christianity, as were the Jews in the earlier dialogues by St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin (Mews 29-30). It is therefore significant that his Jew does not have the last word. Rather, Abelard’s dialogue suggests that Christians must follow their master’s will, regardless of how they learned of his wishes. Thus, a reading of this work in which Abelard sees himself, metaphorically, as a Jew, does not generally hold up well, since the dialogue, read in this way, seems to demonstrate Abelard’s own submission to Church law. Furthermore, the last quarter of the dialogue is spoken by the philosopher, shifting the balance greatly in his favor. The Jew is not permitted to respond to the philosopher’s final points. Thus, it seems that as an infidel rather than a heretic, the Jew is beyond salvation and cannot be brought into the fold. This view, I maintain, is why a limited form of tolerance would be extended during debate. And even if the Jew is tolerated rather than converted, as we might expect in this genre, Abelard gives the last word to the anti-Jewish position. For example, Abelard’s philosopher asserts that “with divine grace providing for us [pagan philosophers?], a grace which has totally deprived you of any promise of a land, so that clearly no one journeys among you but you journey among all peoples, you should know
that we are not obliged to any of your legal observances” (63). The Jew is portrayed as an outsider in every way. It is useful to note once again that much of this first dialogue is given over to discussion of circumcision. This topic was favored, perhaps, because it provided a grotesque way to stigmatize Jews as deviants. As a further sign of the pressure to condemn those who refused to accept orthodox Christian doctrine even after having their error exposed and the correct position offered to them, the philosopher takes an especially condescending or patronizing tone in these final pages, as:

So even when it is first said in the very covenant of circumcision, ‘I will give to you and to your descendants the land in which you are now staying, the whole land of Canaan, as an eternal possession,’ I do not believe you are so stupid as to include in the term ‘eternal’ the blessedness of a future life for which it was out of place here to provide any teaching. (64-65)

Both Mews (32-33) and Payer (Abelard 11) agree that the philosopher is a mouthpiece for Abelard in this first dialogue, and his stance towards the Jew is most evident at the end of the first dialogue and when contrasted against the philosopher’s comments to the Christian. The evidence seems to be thin for an argument for the Augustinian tolerance through dialogue that Mews asserts for this work (26). Although both scholars insist that Abelard’s *Dialogue* is not generically anti-Jewish, these exchanges nevertheless underscore the point that medieval debate was never intended to promote unrestricted inquiry through acceptance, or even toleration, of religious difference. To the contrary: one legacy apparent in Abelard’s student John of Salisbury is that John is so convinced of the self-evident truth of official Christian doctrine that will appear through rational debate that he, in turn, deploys an argument similar to Abelard’s but concerning debate in the political sphere. Although John will prefer debate to coercion, he, too, is intolerant of
those people who disobey the wishes of their superiors. For both men, debate is more useful as a way of exposing error than as a way of establishing the truth. Left unchecked, they believe, toleration would lead to a disruption of their respective hierarchies. When Abelard’s first debate is understood as a manifestation of the limitations on tolerance, it becomes clear why the debate may be based on reason yet it cannot culminate in a conversion to orthodox Christianity by either the pagan philosopher or his Jew.

Although the second dialogue centers on a Christian—or perhaps because it centers on a Christian—the outcome of the Christian position being most persuasive is even more inevitable than in the first. The debate between the philosopher and the Christian, like the debate between the philosopher and the Jew, does not culminate in an overt conversion to Christianity through reason. However, in this second dialogue, the Christian, rather than the philosopher, is given the last word. The second dialogue is significantly longer than the first and appears to be unfinished. As an essay on Christian doctrine, rather than an essay dealing with toleration of competing viewpoints, the second dialogue “investigated the relationship between the discipline of ethics, concerning how the supreme good was to be attained, and divinity, concerning the supreme good itself” (Mews 27). For these reasons, the second debate further lays a foundation for the sort of limited toleration I will demonstrate in Abelard’s student John of Salisbury, where debate is permitted only when there is one possible outcome. This generic requirement again suggests that medieval debate aimed specifically to eliminate erroneous religious beliefs by exposing the error and by illuminating the truth. In subsequent chapters I will examine other expressions of limitations on personal, religious, and political choice during the
Middle Ages. For now, I want to suggest that Abelard is signaling the pressure to conform that is most apparent in spectacularly coercive manifestations like violence and censorship but that is never far below the surface, even in such seemingly tolerant genres as debate.

So far I have been arguing that the implications for medieval debate grow out of generic conventions. Mews, for example, seems to regard Abelard’s thought-experiment as evidence of toleration because, in his view, Abelard does not resort to straw men he can easily destroy. “Whereas the philosopher sees virtues to be desired and vices avoided for their own sake,” Mews writes, “the teaching of Christ presents a better reason for pursuing virtue and avoiding vice. The philosopher suggests that there may simply be different names given to the goal of this beatitude: pleasure by Epicurus, the kingdom of heaven by Christ. Is not the intention of living justly the same for all people?” (Mews 36). In this reading, Abelard attempts to create honest, rather than caricatured, representations of opposing viewpoints. When Mews explains the toleration he finds in Abelard’s *Dialogue*, he points to Abelard’s generic forerunners to propose that “Abelard was engaged in the same underlying program as St. Anselm and Gilbert Crispin, to lay out a rational framework vindicating the authority of Christian Doctrine, but he was prepared to enter more into dialogue than into disputation with those who were not Christians” (43). In Mews’s reading, Abelard’s “sympathies were more with the idealized Gentile philosopher he constructed in his mind than with the rational Jew, whose arguments he still considered limited in nature” (43). But it is also apparent that generic conventions are not produced by literary-aesthetic predecessors alone: the specific
audience and its demands (and restrictions) are equally influential in shaping the possibilities of the genre. Thus it is impossible to say, for example, whether Abelard himself is biased against the Jewish position in the first dialogue, or if he is merely attempting to satisfy his superiors; his literary decisions point to the pressure to conform, but the genre cannot suggest his every motive. It is likewise impossible to know whether Abelard’s tolerance for Jewish and pagan viewpoints was limited by any number of possibilities, such as his belief in doctrine, by his imagination, or if he was afraid of being accused yet once more of promoting heretical positions. After all, he was accused of heresy in 1121 and again in 1140 (Mews 25); he and his works were condemned by Pope Innocent II, who forbade him to teach (Abelard 4). While there is still debate over the exact year the Dialogues were composed, it is reasonable to infer that Abelard had every reason to fear his superiors, which would no doubt be reflected in his hesitancy to make either the Jew or the philosopher too appealing.

As Moore puts it, heretics “are those who refuse to subscribe to the doctrines and acknowledge the disciplines which the Church requires: no requirement, no heresy” (64). This is why heresy “can arise only in the context of the assertion of authority, which the heretic resists, and is therefore by definition a political matter” (64). Having suffered the consequences of voicing heterodox and heretical viewpoints himself, and in a time when beliefs were becoming more systematized (as Moore demonstrates as part of his central thesis in The Formation of a Persecuting Society), Abelard had a strong incentive to make a show of repeating accepted doctrine, even if he does it through a framework that so often looks to us moderns like a framework of toleration. Ultimately, the elaborate
framework for Abelard’s dialogues signals the limited nature of religious toleration in his world. These dialogues, both in their form and their content, can be seen as a testament to the ecclesiastical pressure to conform in the High Middle Ages. Whatever his motivation in writing the Dialogues, it is clear that Abelard inherited a genre that allowed for a degree of toleration, albeit in a limited sense compared to today.

John of Salisbury (ca. 1120-1180)

The political writings of John of Salisbury suggest a climate that allowed for even less toleration within the realm of debate than we saw in Abelard’s Dialogues. Whereas Abelard is primarily concerned with religious error, John focuses his attention on political disobedience. Perhaps because John did not struggle with religious heterodoxy, but rather embraced orthodox beliefs, he came to advocate a paradigm similar to Abelard’s but for the political realm. Thus, whereas Abelard saw peace as the result of agreement within a religious community (something John took for granted in his religious life), John would argue for social harmony which he understood as deriving from unity of political belief and signaled by limitations on political dissent. His enormous Policraticus spans eight books and was dedicated to and often addresses Thomas Becket, whom John served as secretary. In this work, John points to a society that attempted to maintain the civil peace by strictly enforcing conformity in various ways. Because the Policraticus is a political treatise rather than a dialogue, manifestations of tolerance and intolerance are encoded differently than in Abelard’s religious debates. Unlike Abelard, John offers clear advice on these subjects, and although he advocates limitations on toleration so as to minimize disruptive disobedience, he does so in a way that diminishes the possibility that
his advice itself could be perceived as an act of disobedience. The bulk of the 
*Policraticus* was written from 1156-1157 (*Policraticus* xviii), during a period of political 
exile owing to his having been “sufficiently vocal in his opposition to Henry [II]’s 
policies towards the English church” (xvii). Like his teacher Peter Abelard, John of 
Salisbury was the target of coercion; unlike Abelard, who responded by outlining a 
system of debate under which heretics and infidels ultimately must accept their error, 
John responded by describing a model under which political dissenters not only could 
voluntarily change their stance before they would be compelled through coercive means 
but also could accept the necessity of such coercive force, an element comparatively 
lacking in Abelard’s *Dialogues*.

After his period of political exile from Canterbury, John was subsequently 
recalled to the household of Theobald, who was archbishop of Canterbury and the patron 
of his successor, Thomas Becket. During this time John “seems to have undertaken to 
transform his self-consolatory meditation into a full-fledged volume of advice to his 
fellow clerical bureaucrats about how to avoid potential misfortunes of life at secular and 
ecclesiastical courts” (*Policraticus* xviii-xix), a task which he completed in the middle of 
1159 (xix). In both form and content, the *Policraticus* suggests that John of Salisbury 
recognized that it is unwise to speak freely. This is most apparent in Book 7, the bulk of 
which he had composed during his exile (xviii). Therefore, I am most interested in the 
comments on toleration and coercion he makes there, but I do not use Book 7 
exclusively. I will first examine John’s stance on toleration as he describes it in the 
*Policraticus*. I then address recent arguments that I believe attribute an overstated stance
of tolerance in John’s writings, and, finally, I investigate the narrow circumstances under
which I believe John favored a limited form of toleration.

John’s comments throughout the *Policraticus* demonstrate that truth, for John, is
knowable (as it had been for Abelard) and that debate is simply one way to help people
recognize their errors early on so that they may correct them before causing a disruption.
John’s distaste for physical coercion seems to be the main reason he prefers debate as the
first method for producing conformity and social cohesion. He stipulates, however, that
more aggressive means may be necessary if reason does not prevail over error in
correcting and preventing disobedience. In general, John is as critical of people who
doubt the official views as he is of people who fall into more outwardly disruptive kinds
of error. “There are numerous things about which the authority of the senses, reason or
religion persuades us,” writes John (*Policraticus* 7.7). “Doubt regarding these bears the
stamp of infirmity, error or crime.” Indeed, the range of debate John considers
appropriate is narrow, as truth is obvious to anyone capable of reason:

> For to ask whether the sun shines, snow is white, or fire burns is to be
> lacking in human sensation. Moreover, to ask whether three is greater than
> two and whether the whole contains its own middle-point and whether
> four is two doubled—these are the marks of one whose reason is dull or
> absent entirely. And he who places in question whether God exists, and
> whether this same power is wise or good, is not only irreligious but
treacherous, and is deservedly instructed by the lesson of punishment.
> *(7.7)*

This is why he repeatedly attacks those who are willfully at odds with the accepted social
order, and yet this is also the guiding principle for his limited toleration. The concept of
toleration, as John understands it, is appropriate only when it is extended to those who
have begun to stray but who have not yet posed a threat in the political sphere similar to the threat posed by heretics in the religious sphere.

Although he is writing primarily about political dissent, John frequently draws on religious examples. His attacks on dissent imply that he perceived heresy, and with it treason, as an imminent threat to society. Instead of criticizing actual heretics and traitors (and perhaps giving them attention or even credibility), he tends to draw on classical examples (as he does for so much of his material throughout the *Policraticus*) to refute contemporary heretics and traitors, and even to stigmatize them, much as Abelard did through his fictional Jew: “For the Epicurean denial of the existence of God, and its subjection of everything to chance, was already discredited long ago on the authority of God-made-man. Therefore, to resist principles or matters of fact known in themselves or to dispute about them is irrational or foolish or (what is worse) malicious” (7.7). Such “stubbornness” is dangerous, according to John, because it “most often impedes the examination of truth” (7.7). Even when John concedes that there are many things that cannot be known (*Policraticus* 7.2, e.g.) he distinguishes the unknown from the false. For John of Salisbury, it is appropriate to debate unsettled and unknown issues; manifest falsehoods are not only taboo topics of discussion but even considering them warrants punishment. John thus allows for a narrow form of toleration, licensed by the social need to persuade nonconformists of their error. In this way, he effectively favors what, for purposes of discussion, could be considered the censorship of ideas that pose a threat to the civil peace, and instead permits discussion only as a means to ensure conformity without having to resort to more disruptive forms of force. Perhaps being extended such
tolerance in his own life could have helped spare him “his period of self-proclaimed ‘disgrace’” (xviii); like Abelard, whose Dialogues suggest a sincere belief in exposing religious error for the greater good of the community of believers, John genuinely appears to advocate the need for political and religious uniformity in order to ensure the civil peace.

In Book 4, Chapter 8, “Of the moderation of the prince’s justice and mercy, which should be temperately mixed for the utility of the republic,” John underscores the importance of enforcing conformity for the collective good. He writes that “What obtains for the prince ought to obtain for everyone: no one is to prefer his own affairs to the affairs of others. Yet truly the amount of that affection, with which subjects are to be embraced like brothers in the arms of charity, must be confined to the limits of moderation” (4.8). He clarifies that in order for him to love his brothers, he must correct their errors in medical fashion; he must acknowledge the flesh and blood in them so that he may subject them to the words of the Spirit. It is above all the habit of physicians that when they are not able to cure an affliction with palliatives and gentle medicines, they employ harsher cures, as for example fire or iron. They would never use the harsher ones except when they have despaired in their desire to promote health gently. And thus, when mild power does not suffice for the ruler to cure the vices of inferiors, he properly administers intensely painful blows of punishment; pious cruelty rages against the evil, while the good are looked after in safety. (4.8)

However, although John repeatedly recommends force when gentleness is ineffective, he does prefer mild correction as the first response in promoting conformity, which he values highly:

For if the cithern player and other minstrels manage by great diligence to curb the fault of a wayward string and restore it to harmony with the others, producing the sweetest consonance of dissidences not by breaking
the strings but by stretching or relaxing them proportionally, then how much more should care be taken by princes to be moderate—at one time by the vigour of justice, at another by the forgiveness of mercy—so that subjects are made to be of a single mind as in a household and the works of peace and charity create one perfect and great harmony out of pursuits which appear discordant. (4.8)

Building on the metaphor of a cithern which must be properly tuned before it can be played harmoniously, John warns that “it is safer to relax strings than to stretch them too tensely. For of course the tension of relaxed strings may be regained by the skill of the craftsman and they should regain their pleasing sounds; but those which are once broken no craftsman may repair” (4.8). For John, then, moderation and a limited form of toleration are not ends in themselves, but rather are two means for avoiding an even greater breach of the public peace. John understands harmony not simply as unity and cooperation, but indeed as an absence of irreversible disobedience. Throughout the Policraticus he prefers gentle correction over harsh coercion, motivated by his desire to ensure peace through conformity and submission to authority.

Nederman has argued that John’s famous Ciceronian skepticism is suggestive of a stance of toleration. Although he admits that “an automatic connection between skeptical and tolerant stances has been convincingly challenged on historical grounds,” Nederman notes that “it remains the case that skepticism often supported principles of toleration towards religious differences in the early modern world” (53). Nederman is primarily interested in the scholastic skepticism associated with classical philosophers including Cicero, and which in the medieval world is most closely associated with St. Augustine (54). A historian of political science, Nederman insists that John of Salisbury’s writings demonstrate a stance of tolerance because he had subscribed to a school of philosophy
that permitted, for the sake of argument, entertaining ideas that were recognized as being
demonstrably false. In Nederman’s reading of the Poliorcatus, “John asserts that ‘it is
permitted to censure that which is to be equitably corrected.’ If we may not properly
force people to do good, then we must equally be respected and tolerated when we point
out the error of their ways. In other words, if you are free to do wrong, then I must also
be free to correct or reprove you” (56).

As I will demonstrate, there are limits to this toleration of criticism, and
identifying those limits helps define my model of intolerance. I am indebted to
Nederman’s reading, even though I think he makes too much of John’s Ciceronian
skepticism and overstates John’s stance on the toleration of criticism because he relies
most heavily on a section of Book 7 that indeed points to a greater sense of freedom of
speech than is found elsewhere in the Poliorcatus. Although I draw evidence from
throughout the Poliorcatus in my discussion of John of Salisbury, because Nederman
draws so heavily on a section of Chapter 7.25 in his argument for John’s stance of
toleration it makes sense to explore that chapter in greater depth at this juncture. In
Chapter 7.25, John aims to discuss “the love and acclaim of liberty; and of those
ancestors who endured patiently free speaking of the mind; and of the difference between
an offence and a taunt.” Throughout the Poliorcatus, John’s primary method of
illustration is the exemplum. “The sources for these exempla vary widely: many are
biblical, some derive from classical or patristic historians, and a few are even the
products of John’s own experiences at papal and royal courts” (Poliorcatus xxii).
Nederman explains in his introduction to his translation that “Many chapters of the text
are little more than a collection of such tales strung together with no apparent organisation or interconnection” (xxi). Chapter 7.25 fits Nederman’s characterization of John’s format, for many of the examples indeed lack a clear connection to his stated topics. Nevertheless, John’s text suggests a coherent relationship among the themes of liberty, speaking freely, and the difference between an offense and a taunt.

The themes of liberty, speaking freely, and the difference between an offense and a taunt are united less by their apparent emphasis on toleration of dissent, as John explains them, than they are by the distaste for disobedience he shows in his commentary on each. He views all three as ways in which people are prone to speak rashly or offensively, which he understands as leading to a disruption of harmonious relationships. For example, in praising liberty he cautions that “things which are said and done freely are devoid of rashness just as of timidity and, so long as the correct path is advanced, they are entitled to praise and esteem” (7.25). Although it is couched as guidance on how the recipients of advice should act, he further warns against criticizing one’s superior by adding,

Yet when under the pretext of liberty rashness has released the vigorous force of its own spirit, it runs into censure; yet it is more favourable to the ears of the vulgar than acceptable to the mind of whomever is most wise, inasmuch as it frequently takes refuge in the favour of others rather than in its own prudence. The best and wisest man is moderate with the reins of liberty and patiently takes note of whatever is said to him. And he does not oppose himself to the works of liberty, so long as damage to virtue does not occur. (7.25)

He practices what he preaches: as this brief example illustrates, Chapter 7.25 (like much of the Polieraticus) can be read both as a manual counseling clerics on how to avoid trouble and as gentle advice to John’s superiors. These two purposes come together when
John closes the chapter by framing his remarks as having been licensed by the “December liberty” of the right to criticize one’s superiors during the Saturnalia (7.25). By recalling this ancient convention, John implies that such a freedom of speech did not always apply in his understanding of how virtuous people live in society.

The comment about Saturnalia is the final paragraph of Book 7, so it concludes not only Chapter 25 but also the whole of Book 7. Thus, it serves both as a comment on the numerous exempla offered in Chapter 25 as well as a sort of plea for toleration of the criticism John may be perceived to have offered within Book 7. Towards the end of the chapter, he had drawn on an idea from Macrobius’s *Saturnalia* regarding taunts, which he describes as “a figurative attack because it is concealed either by deceit or urbanity so that it says one thing and means another” (7.25). There, John offers a number of instances of people whose comments brought trouble to both parties, building on Macrobius to urge his readers “to abstain from taunts that have injuries hidden within them” (7.25).

Throughout the *Policraticus*, John warns against both implicit and explicit criticism. What kind of criticism might John permit, then? At the end of the chapter he suggests that speakers are never at liberty to speak freely; he states explicitly that there are limits even within the licensed criticism of Saturnalia:

> at that time, without obtaining permission, since it is due to them as their right, they exercise their tongues and they disapprove with impunity of whatever irritated them during the whole year, even exposing crimes publicly, yet provided that in discharging the Saturnalian rites they do not hasten beyond their leave by the indictment of their lord or patron. I use this December liberty, therefore, and obeying your instructions that with the support of common law I faithfully censure what irritates you and me, it is not necessary to obtain confirmed permission for such remarks which serve the public utility and which are acceptable to your will. (7.25)
Through the conceit that his book participates in the classical rite of the Saturnalia, John suggests that there are two imperatives in criticism. First, the master must not be offended. Second, any criticism must serve the public utility. These imperatives together suggest not only that preserving the status quo trumps the individual’s privilege of judging his superiors but also that debate and criticism were permissible only within very narrow and tacitly-understood rules.

The writings of Abelard and Salisbury signal that the truth was fixed and knowable in the Middle Ages; John was not an advocate for a general freedom of speech or freedom of conscience. Again supposing that John’s Ciceronian skepticism translates directly into a form of toleration, Nederman concedes that John’s skeptical stance was most appropriate for unsettled issues (66), but then adds that the “realization of truth is hampered, not aided, by the suppression of divergent positions and the persecution of their adherents” (66). The overwhelming evidence he presents from John of Salisbury, however, suggests that debate was to be protected not necessarily because it might encourage a variety of viewpoints ultimately leading to the truth, but rather the opposite, because it had the potential to bring about conformity of belief seemingly without the usual forms of coercion. Whereas Abelard’s hypothetical Jew, Pagan, and Christian together formed an argument about Christian truth which implicitly points to his views on toleration, John is writing about purely abstract concepts which had immediate political applications. Thus, while John’s views must not be judged according to modern ideals, he nevertheless marks a major shift, for he is consciously discussing toleration, a concept always hidden beneath the surface in Abelard’s *Dialogues*. 
John quotes the satirist Varro to set up an argument earlier in the *Policraticus* that at first appears to favor the toleration of error when it cannot be corrected:

‘The vices of a spouse are to be either removed or endured. He who removes the vices is a preferable spouse; he who tolerates them makes himself a better person.’ Thus, the vices of princes and subjects are to be either endured or removed; for in fact their confederation either equals or surpasses conjugal affection. But even the words ‘to endure’ and ‘to remove’ are themselves cleverly adapted by Varro. It appears that ‘removing’ is meant in the sense of correction. It is beyond doubt that what cannot be removed is to be endured. (6.26)

In this section, which was likely written before his exile, John crucially explains in no uncertain terms that toleration, as he sees it, is a means for achieving conformity. Indeed, he clarifies that that coercion is, in fact, preferable to tolerating error:

Yet a faithful interpretation of this adds that what is understood by ‘vice’ is what honour and religion can securely endure. For vices are more insignificant than flagrant crimes; and there are a number of acts which one is not permitted to endure or which cannot faithfully be endured. A spouse may legally be separated from a spouse by reason of fornication, and he is very often a patron of turpitude who conceals the crime from his wife. Perhaps for that reason it is said: ‘He who cherishes an adulteress is both silly and impious.’ Moreover, this obtains equally of any sort of physical and spiritual adultery, even though the spiritual form is the worse and is to be more carefully avoided. (6.26)

Although John writes primarily about political intolerance, by applying a metaphor of infidelity in marriage across social, religious, and political spheres, he suggests that many forms of difference should be regarded as expressions of disobedience or error and, by extension, that disobedience and error are not tolerated in any arena. While the motivation for intolerance, the preservation of unity, is clear throughout his writings, the exact mechanism for deploying intolerance appears to vary. According to Nederman, “removing” is meant in the sense of “correction” (58). He emphasizes that “the ‘vices’ of
individuals which we ought to endure, if we are unable to correct them through free speech, must be distinguished from ‘flagrant crimes,’ that is, ‘acts which one is not permitted to endure or which cannot be faithfully endured’” (57). Yet as John himself explains, some acts are so dangerous that they must not be tolerated—or even corrected:

‘If your eye or your foot offend you, root it out and cast it away from you.’

I think that this is to be observed by the prince in regard to all of the members to the extent that not only are they to be rooted out, broken off and thrown far away, if they give offence to the faith or public security, but they are to be destroyed utterly so that the security of the corporate community may be procured by the extermination of the one member. (6.26)

John takes this a step further and advocates uniformity to such a degree that he believes not only that men are not even free in their thoughts but also that there is no meaningful distinction between adultery, heresy, and treason:

Likewise, this is the greatest counsel of wise men: ‘In your thought do not detract from the king and in the privacy of your bedroom do not speak ill of the powerful because the birds of the sky will convey your voice and he who has wings will pronounce your verdict.’ Will anything then be permitted in deed or word when even thought itself and the secrets of the bedroom and the judgments of the heart are regulated lest anything be plotted or undertaken against the prince? (6.26)

In merging adultery, heresy, and treason into the same category (which I believe is best understood as disobedience), John argues that these disturbances must be regulated, first through debate and then through force. Whatever debate he might advocate is limited by the need to stem disobedience before it can get out of control.

The paradigm of toleration found in the hypothetical Dialogues of Peter Abelard and expanded in the political manual Policraticus of John of Salisbury depends on an understanding of a single truth that is attainable through reason and debate. Abelard’s
debates are built upon Christian truths, his Jew tolerated as a device for demonstrating the truth of accepted Christian doctrine. John of Salisbury’s political writings outline practical advice for princes in dealing with a variety of types of nonconformity. The tolerance permitted under John’s Ciceronian skepticism was limited by his own experiences which had taught him that the safest route is to avoid criticizing one’s superiors. Moreover, while neither of Abelard’s dialogues culminates in a conversion, because the orthodox position prevails in both debates it is clear that he did not view debate as an opportunity for both parties to leave firmer in their own convictions. Far from it. For both of these philosophers, the purpose of debate was to refute one position and vindicate the other. To agree to disagree was an unacceptable outcome, for it signaled a failure of the brief toleration permitted during a discussion whose purpose was to expose the error, correct it, and restore the peace of the community by returning the dissenter to the fold.

William of Ockham (ca. 1285-1347)

An important philosopher of the Middle Ages, William of Ockham is primarily associated with the philosophical movements of nominalism and voluntarism, issues I will touch on in Chapter 4 in connection with his influence on subsequent English authors, chiefly (as Russell Peck has shown) Chaucer. A Franciscan, Ockham was a major figure in what has become known as the “poverty controversy.” The peace of the Franciscan community was disrupted in the 1320s when Pope John XXII suddenly rejected the standing arrangement under which the papacy owned the goods used by the Franciscans. In a series of bulls he insisted that it was now “heretical to deny that Christ
and the apostles had rights of ownership in the things they used” (*A Letter* xiii-xiv). A dispute broke out when William of Ockham could not agree to disagree with the pope, who had absolute authority in these matters. Ockham, in turn, believed the pope had fallen into heresy, while the pope declared Ockham a heretic. The debate that ensued unfolds much like the theoretical precedents we have seen in Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury: rather than encouraging toleration in a modern sense, such as by establishing common ground, this episode shows that each man believed he had a heartfelt duty to convince his opponent of his error. While much of Ockham’s output from the period after his excommunication is political in nature, it deals with religious, rather than secular, politics. Where Peter Abelard focused on religious error, and John of Salisbury on political disobedience, William of Ockham illuminates the political conditions within his Catholic community. Ockham’s writings from this period, most especially his “Letter to the Friars Minor,” preserve evidence supporting the model of intolerance I have been describing in this chapter, whereby conformity is enforced by exposing and condemning error and disobedience that disrupt the peace of communities.

In the spring of 1328, “Ockham fled Avignon and sought refuge with Ludwig of Bavaria, whom John had excommunicated in 1324 for functioning as Roman emperor without papal approval of his disputed election ten years before” (xiv). As a result, Ockham’s conflict with the pope was not merely theological; it was political, as well. Ockham could take such a bold stance against the pope because he was providing the intellect behind Ludwig’s attacks on the pope. Ultimately, “Ockham was excommunicated for leaving Avignon without papal permission, and he was regarded as
a heretic by John XXII and succeeding popes for rejecting John’s teachings on poverty”
(xiv). In “A Letter to the Friars Minor” (1334), Ockham addresses his fellow Franciscan
brothers about the poverty controversy. This document is a testament to the medieval
view that error was to be exposed, corrected, and condemned rather than tolerated. Both
Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury had argued that the peace (whether religious or
political) is best maintained when everyone in the hierarchy submits to the authority of
his superior. John, in particular, had suggested that this relationship works both ways, and
that although the main burden falls on the inferior (who must not offend the master and
whose criticisms must serve the public good), the superior must also listen to his inferior
for the benefit of those to whom he is responsible. As the controversy intensified,
William of Ockham found himself in the precarious position of disagreeing with a
superior authority who failed to be persuaded by the arguments he put forth. His tone is
often filled with indignation, a signal that Ockham was distressed by being at odds with a
worldview he accepted, in which a pope was regarded as infallible because he held the
highest authority. Thus, even as he addresses an apparently like-minded audience,
Ockham shows great discomfort in having to consider what he believes to be heretical
positions:

I stayed in Avignon almost four whole years before I recognized that the
one who presided there had fallen into heretical perversity; because, not
wishing to believe too readily that a person placed in so great an office
would define that heresies should be held, I did not care either to read or to
possess his heretical constitutions. (3)

Ockham’s anxiety over not only the proposition that the pope could have fallen into
heresy but also over being compelled to consider heretical positions again evokes the
pressure to avoid contact with erroneous doctrine (Abelard) or disobedience of authority (Salisbury). Moreover, it confirms the view forwarded by those earlier philosophers that two people could not hold conflicting positions, particularly if one of them was in a position to dictate the proper view to the other (such as a pope to a Franciscan). What is striking here is that instead of accepting his error, Ockham took the unusual position of treating the pope’s writings the same way a medieval scholar would treat other heretical documents: by avoiding reading or even possessing them. But although he rejected the positions forwarded by John XXII as heretical, Ockham otherwise appears to have accepted his own place in the hierarchy and submitted to the demands of his superiors. For example, even as he refused to change his position, he appears to have accepted that he could be compelled to hear the official doctrine. Ockham writes that “when some occasion arose, at the command of a superior I read and diligently studied three of his constitutions—or rather, heretical destitutions” (3). He is not persuaded by what he reads, and in a dramatic break from John of Salisbury’s directive against offending the master, his commentary suggests that he understands ridicule to be an appropriate response to error: “I found a great many things that were heretical, erroneous, silly, ridiculous, fantastic, insane, and defamatory, contrary and likewise plainly adverse to orthodox faith, good morals, natural reason, certain experience and fraternal charity” (3-4).

A formidable scholar, Ockham finds examples to support each of his claims. Generically, “A Letter to the Friars Minor” is not a dialogue like so many of Ockham’s other works, but it is related to them in that it takes John XXII’s assertions one by one and explains the problems with each. For instance, The Work of Ninety Days (which he
had already composed by the time he had written his “Letter to the Friars Minor”) is a sort of dialogue between John XXII and Ockham, in which he begins each chapter with an extended quotation from the pope and offers his own, written rebuttal to it. That work served to lay out “a coherent statement of the Franciscan position on gospel poverty as this had existed prior to John XVII’s blitzkrieg against it” (Ockham xv). In “A Letter,” in contrast, Ockham is addressing his fellow Franciscans and he does not structure his argument as a debate in the sense of a dialogue. Ockham’s choice of genre, a letter, suggests that he had a different purpose in mind than did Abelard in his Dialogues or Salisbury in the Policraticus. His audience is one factor. Perhaps because “A Letter” was intended for his equals and subordinates, rather than for his equals or superiors, it is framed primarily as a theologically sound defense of his position, which he justifies as standing in contrast to the pope’s position, and which he attempts to show is erroneous.

These generic constraints help define the model of intolerance I established with Abelard’s Dialogues, for in his “Letter” Ockham is cautious in framing what he perceives to be heresies, and he uses a paradigm similar to the one Abelard had deployed in his Dialogues: Ockham repeats the allegedly erroneous doctrines only within the context of mentioning them so that he can call attention to what he perceives as patent falsehoods and with the purpose of correcting them. Since this work was meant to be read by other Franciscans and not by the pope, however, the parallel is not exact. This distancing device appears to serve generic as well as practical purposes for both writers, but whereas Abelard sought to expose the error of infidels in laying out a rationale for Christian doctrine, Ockham sought to expose the error of the very people charged with determining
doctrine. He is methodical, organizing his charges into a number of lists, which range
from just four erroneous claims, to another with some 41 heresies perpetrated by the
pope. He shows the “error,” the “lack of plausibility,” the “conflict” with scripture,
reason and experience of each “erroneous” or “plainly false” claim the pope “asserts,”
“determines,” affirms,” or “pronounces,” to give a sampling of his tone. Through his tone
as well as through his examples, Ockham’s indignation points to a model similar to the
one offered, broadly, by Abelard and Salisbury, wherein error is not to be tolerated.
However, in both style and substance, Ockham breaks from that paradigm in that he does
not appear to view his own obstinacy as a kind of unacceptable disobedience, as it had
been for his predecessors (and, as his exile and excommunication confirm, continued to
be for his contemporaries). To the contrary, he persists in his beliefs, and attempts to rally
other Franciscans in disobeying their orders from the pope:

when this manifestly heretical pseudo-pope answered this appeal entered
by brother Michael, the Minister General, and drew up and published the
constitutions *Quia vir reprobus*, he strengthened us in many ways and
firmly united us in our purpose; for joining new heresies to old, he made
explicit a great many things we believed he would never assert and clearly
excluded many answers and evasions he could have made to some of our
attacks. (9)

Between his forceful argumentation and self-assured tone, Ockham makes the pope
appear not only ridiculous but also (like Abelard’s fictional Jew) blind to common sense.
Ockham, who, like John of Salisbury, has the peace of the community as his ultimate
goal, concludes by conceding that

if someone shows me plainly that the constitutions and sermons of the
pseudo-pope do not deviate from Catholic truth, or, alternatively, that one
should obey an heretical pope knowing that he is a heretic, I will not be
slow to return to the brothers who support him. No one, however, who can
prove neither of these things either by argument or by authorities should be hostile either to me or to anyone who does not obey the said heretic.

(14)

In the context of the model of intolerance I have been considering in this chapter, I think we should take Ockham at his word and trust that that his condemnation of the pope arose from a genuine belief in the pope’s error and is not merely retaliation for having been excommunicated.

Whereas Salisbury equated irreconcilable difference with disobedience and rationalized his own disagreement with his superiors this way, Ockham would not necessarily see himself as being disobedient. If anything, like his predecessors, he believed that only one interpretation of doctrine could be correct. Yet he also felt justified in disseminating his own beliefs because his disobedience was directed at an authority he felt justified in rejecting. For this reason, it is not entirely accurate to say that Ockham was calling for toleration of his own views; rather, in condemning the pope he points to a model of intolerance much like we saw in Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury, where condemnation is a necessary tool for restoring and maintaining the peace of a community. Read this way, Ockham’s views and approach suggest that he was earnest in his belief about the pope’s error and his recognition that both men could not be right. Since only one could prevail in matters of doctrine, his text suggests, the opposing view was not to be tolerated. Ockham further explains that anyone

who wishes to recall me or anyone else of those withdrawing from the obedience of the pseudo-pope and his supporters should attempt to provide a basis for his constitutions and sermons and show that they agree with the divine Scriptures; or else he should show by sacred texts or by manifest arguments that a pope cannot fall into heretical perversity, or that someone knowing that a pope is a notorious heretic should obey him. Let him not
allege the multitude of his adherents or rely on insults. For those who try to arm themselves with a multitude, lies, insults, threats, accusations, and calumnies show themselves to be naked of truth and reason. Let no one think, therefore, that because of the multitude of this pseudo-pope’s supporters or because of arguments that are common to heretics and to the orthodox, I would wish to abandon acknowledged truth. For I prefer the divine Scriptures to a man who is a simpleton in sacred literature, and I prefer the teaching of the holy fathers reigning with Christ to the deliverances of those living in this mortal life. (13-14)

Ockham’s certainty recalls John of Salisbury’s dismissal of principles which “one is not permitted to doubt” because they are “so evident by their light that they cannot remain unknown to rational examination but are seen by everyone commonly, yet to a greater or lesser extent according to the capacity and power of individuals” (*Policraticus* 7.7). In theory, Salisbury had concluded that “one is free to doubt and inquire up to the point when truth shines forth from the comparisons of positions as a result of the collision of doctrines” (7.8). In practice, this works more effectively in Abelard’s fictional debates than it does for Ockham, who quickly discovered that it may well have been impossible when the truth shines so differently to different minds.

Ockham’s writings, as well as his own experiences, suggest that the idea of free and open discourse is a later development. He could not simply refuse to accept the outcome dictated by the tenets of official doctrine and remain safely in his community. “That it was safe [for Ockham] to challenge these things only in exile and under the protection of one of the pope’s most powerful enemies, Louis of Bavaria, becomes very clear when we see the treatment meted out to those who attacked these bulls head on,” writes Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (*Books Under Suspicion* 330). But although Ockham was the victim of intolerance for his acts, which had added to the disruption of the Church
community, he appears to have advocated extending a form of toleration to others. By
drawing on a wide range of Ockham’s writings, Takashi Shogimen has detected a
surprising solution to the need to tolerate some heresies in order to maintain order.
According to Shogimen, Ockham called for a sort of sliding scale of heresy depending on
the background of the person in question. Although much of Ockham’s theology became
important for other reasons, his response to inquisition and excommunication points to
political motives similar to the refrains of John of Salisbury in the Polycraticus. Ockham
apparently was interested in the possibility of avoiding some civil disruptions through the
tolerating of difference. Shogimen writes,

Ockham defined heresy in a twofold manner: in the strict sense and in the
broad sense. Heresy in the strict sense was an assertion that was not
consonant with Scripture. More specifically, the strict sense of heresy may
take a threefold mode: an assertion may be judged heretical, (1) if it not
only opposes and but also verbally contradicts the truth as found in a
proper form of the Bible, (2) if it denies the content of Scripture as it is
obvious to both the learned and the ignorant, or (3) if it is shown through
lengthy and skilful deliberation by learned and wise scholars that the
assertion objects to Scripture, although in such a fashion that is not
necessarily evident to all other people. (64-65)

While this call for toleration could in part be intended as an attack on the pope, Shogimen
argues persuasively that for Ockham a “due process of correction is not a process for the
corrected to discover the truth” because the “conventional discourse on doctrinal
correction presumes an ecclesiastical monopoly of truth; hence the correction is supposed
to be correctly informed” (67). Such insistence that beliefs in religious matters are either
correct or incorrect recalls the limited toleration we saw in Abelard and Salisbury in that
debate served to reveal truth (rather than determine it) by exposing error. Moreover, in
the context of the poverty controversy I have been discussing, Shogimen’s reading of
Ockham helps explain Ockham’s divergence from those predecessors in his persistence in holding certain views even after they had been declared heretical. By attempting to reframe the definition of heresy so that scholars are held to a different standard, Ockham could be said to have developed a new form of toleration—distinct from the model as it manifests in the writings of Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, or indeed even in Ockham’s writings regarding the poverty controversy—that nevertheless served as a route for avoiding coercion. Shogimen sums up Ockham’s view: “what is prevalently known to every catholic determines the minimal level of the knowledge of catholic truth one is bound to believe explicitly and, the higher the office one occupies in the ecclesiastical order, the larger amount of knowledge of such catholic truth one is expected to have” (68). According to Shogimen,

This theological version of noblesse oblige obviously implies forbearance towards the uneducated and ignorant as well as intolerance of errors committed by the learned and the occupants of teaching offices in the Church, who are presumed and expected to have good knowledge of Christian faith. If one errs, therefore, the better the theological knowledge one is supposed to have, the more likely one is to be convicted of pertinacity. The degree of knowledge and understanding of Scripture is the fulcrum of the conviction of pertinacity. (68)

By insisting that clergy should have a deeper knowledge of religious doctrine than laymen, Ockham proposes an alternate route to the toleration of certain heresies, evidently to avoid prosecutions that would disrupt the civil peace. In this way, Shogimen provides for a form of medieval toleration that serves a similar purpose of minimizing disruptions to the unity of a community that we saw in Abelard and Salisbury but that arrives there through different means. For Shogimen, Ockham’s program is designed to
promote conformity of belief across the spectrum and it is grounded in the possibility and importance of conformity:

Heresy is not something that exists because it has been defined by ecclesiastical authority. Heresy is, for Ockham, a deliberate choice to reject the truth-value of the texts that are the sources of Christian faith. Heresy was thus reduced to a matter of incorrect reading; more precisely, a reader’s failure to comply with rational interpretive possibilities of the doctrinal texts. So heresy does not necessarily require institutional authority to be identified. Any literate, rational believer can decipher it. Likewise, a heretic is not an individual who deliberately chooses to reject the authority of the Church. For Ockham, a heretic is a person who deliberately fails to assent to the catholic truths, to which he is communally obliged to subscribe. (69)

His own dispute with the pope notwithstanding, by defining heresy so narrowly, Ockham in effect returns stray members of his community to the fold of mainstream belief. He relegates their misguided beliefs to a category other than heretical; they do not need to be corrected because they are not really in error. More significantly, by shifting the violation from being against the church to being against reason and the community as a whole, his paradigm suggests a different incentive for coöperation than under the threat of legal and religious sanctions alone, such as we saw in Abelard and Salisbury. Hence Ockham confronts the trouble of having to tolerate accidental heretics by avoiding having to persecute minor differences.

In his dispute with the pope, as in his other theological writings, Ockham showed justification for his intolerance in precisely the same paradigm that we saw with Abelard and Salisbury. Moreover, by resolving the threat of certain nonconformists by denying the existence of minor differences rather than tolerating them in a modern sense for holding alternative beliefs, I believe that Ockham shows a commitment to enforced
conformity through a stronger (but still limited) form of toleration than we have seen in Abelard or Salisbury. Thus, it is only in his philosophy for dealing with his larger community that Ockham is the only of these three to argue for something resembling toleration in a modern sense, though he gives no indication of a resignation to, or acceptance of, difference. Read in the context of medieval tolerance and intolerance, rather than attempting to situate him within schools of nominalism and voluntarism, Ockham provides a link not only to Abelard and Salisbury but also to theology, political theory, and philosophy. As we will see in subsequent chapters, these theories manifest in related ways in the vernacular literature of the Middle Ages, most especially in Chaucer. Russell Peck has led the charge, noting that

> Whether Chaucer knew directly or even indirectly of any of Ockham’s specific ideas we have no way of knowing. We do know that Ockham had enormous influence on other fourteenth-century thinkers at Oxford like Richard FitzRalph, Robert Holcot, Walter Burleigh, Thomas Bardwardine, John Wyclif, and Chaucer’s friend Ralph Strode. The concerns which Ockham discussed continued to be discussed throughout Chaucer’s lifetime. (746-47)

By his own standards, Ockham reaffirms the view that intolerance is sometimes a necessary component for maintaining order. We will soon see how this view plays out in the poetry of this period.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham each suggests that intolerance was preferred over tolerance during the Middle Ages as the means of enforcing conformity. However, there is one way that I have not yet discussed that might allow for a degree of tolerance within this framework of intolerance. As I
discussed in Chapter 1, the philosopher Michael Walzer proposes five kinds of toleration: resignation to difference for the sake of peace; a benignly relaxed, passive indifference to difference; a principled recognition that others have rights; openness or even curiosity; and finally, an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (10-11). However, as I will show in the following chapters, his scale does not fully account for the range of tolerance and intolerance seen in the Middle Ages because all five positions allow for the continued existence of difference. To conclude this chapter, I would like to propose a sixth kind of tolerance in addition to those Walzer describes, whereby error can be tolerated by reframing difference to emphasize common ground. Shogimen hints at something like it in his essay on Ockham.

I would now like to ask whether a stance of tolerance in Abelard’s Dialogues might be found in an apparent desire to find common ground. In his dream, Abelard is asked to preside over the debate between the Philosopher, the Jew, and the Christian, who say to him, “We are men belonging to different religious schools of thought. Of course we all equally profess ourselves to be worshippers of the one God; however, we each serve him with a different faith and a different way of life” (19). They tell him that one is a pagan philosopher who is content with the natural law, while the other two, a Jew and a Christian, possess sacred writings. They explain to him that “for some time we have been discussing and arguing among ourselves about our different religious schools of thought, and we have finally agreed to submit to your judgment” (19). The implication is that Abelard is tolerant in the sense of this sixth kind of “common ground” toleration because
the Jew, the Christian, and the Philosopher all want similar things from life, even if they employ slightly different means to the same ends.

In “Ha-Me’iri’s Theory of Religious Toleration,” Gary Remer demonstrates that “a uniquely Jewish theory of religious toleration was developed during the Middle Ages” (71). In a paradigm similar to the kind I am proposing, Remer notes that “for Ha-Me’iri the Jew who converts to Christianity still remains within the broader communion of monotheistic faiths” but that anyone “who has rejected all religion, however, stands outside the pale of civilized society and can therefore be punished with the harshest penalties” (84). While Remer is discussing the Jews specifically, I believe that Abelard may be working within a similar conceptualization of similarity rather than difference as a reason for toleration of perceived differences, albeit for different reasons. It is significant that Abelard’s philosopher is a monotheist, who therefore poses no serious threat to the basic assumptions of either the Jew or the Christian—or to Abelard’s Church superiors.

This kind of toleration is closest to resignation for the sake of peace (Walzer’s first kind of tolerance), but I believe it differs from it in that its motive is different; moreover, all three of Abelard’s types—the pagan Philosopher, the Jew, and the Christian—seem to have coexisted in society without needing a truce to prevent feuds (though other forces were clearly at work to maintain the order, as Moore and others have shown). Nor is my sixth kind of toleration aligned with indifference as Walzer describes it in his second kind of tolerance, since for Abelard the stakes in the debate are too high—his philosopher’s salvation is on the line. Searching for shared philosophies
resembles Walzer’s third kind, toleration on the grounds of moral stoicism. It differs from it because in searching for the supreme good to ensure his own salvation, Abelard’s figures hardly could be said to demonstrate “a principled recognition that the ‘others’ have rights even if they exercise those rights in unattractive ways” (11). All are monotheists searching for salvation, and therefore much closer to Christians than an actual Jew or Epicurean. Furthermore, the purported curiosity and “willingness to listen and learn” (11) of Walzer’s most convincing definition of toleration is impossible here because of generic constraints, pressure from above, and the inevitable stereotyping of fictional characters who are meant to represent types rather than actual historical figures. Mews, who believes that “the absence of adjudication” at the end of the first dialogue is a “pedagogical technique” to make “the reader form his own judgment in the debate” (27), finds the effect especially troubling in the second dialogue when he writes that the paradox of Abelard’s “position was that while he insisted there was a supreme truth to which all rational men were devoted, he was unwilling to come to a firm conclusion about what he thought” (41). Taken together, Abelard’s fictional debates do point to the supreme truth of Christianity, and his belief in a universal truth—which this dialogue seeks to demonstrate—rules out the possibility of Walzer’s fifth kind of tolerance, an “enthusiastic endorsement of difference” (11). Therefore, searching for commonalities (superficial though they may be) rather than blatantly revealing the errors of heretics and infidels appears to represent my sixth kind of toleration, one that would seem to fit in well with Abelard’s position in the church.
This strategy of finding commonalities is Abelard’s philosopher’s primary rhetorical tactic in the dialogue with the Christian. Although I cannot possibly catalogue every instance of the technique here, I will show how it works. In one instance, the philosopher rules out the possibility that “philosophers, who most despise earthly happiness and who have particular control over the flesh, would place the supreme good in base aspects of this life,” a mistake he says “many through ignorance attribute to Epicurus and his followers, the Epicureans, surely not understanding what these meant by pleasure, as we just said” (89). He then invokes Seneca for what at first appears to be a counterargument:

Otherwise, as we said, Seneca, that greatest upbuilder of morals, and himself of a most continent life, as you yourself profess, would never have introduced the opinion of Epicurus for moral instruction so often as if he were his teacher, if, as is claimed, Epicurus had strayed from the path of sobriety and uprightness. (89)

The Christian soon summarizes the philosopher’s argument: “both [Christians and the classically trained philosophers] have the same opinion regarding the supreme good, but the terminology is different; and so what appeared to be two opinions regarding the supreme good are reduced to one” (90). Ultimately, the Christian will have to prevail, even when differences are shown to be minimal, since only the Christian philosophy can assure Christian salvation. The philosopher states that in his opinion “this beatitude is what Epicurus calls pleasure and what your Christ calls the kingdom of heaven” before qualifying his stance:

However, what does it matter by what name it is called as long as the reality remains the same and beatitude is not diverse, and the intention of living justly for the philosophers is not different from that of the Christians? For both you and we arrange to live here in justice in order to
be glorified there; and we struggle here against vices in order to be
crowned there with the merits for virtues, that is, we obtain that supreme
good as the reward. (97)

The response, of course, is that intention also counts heavily (97) in a Christian
framework, and only the Christian can be saved. The philosophical argument in this
dialogue is complicated, and I am only attempting to show a different kind of tolerance.
Mews, too, hints that Abelard was searching for “common ground”—a phrase he uses
four times, by my count (36, 39, 40, 45). He suggests that because he was writing “in a
flush of enthusiasm for the moral teaching of the ancient philosophers (which he
contrasted with current monastic behavior), Abelard was not particularly interested in
discussing the nature of sin” (34). Instead, Mews writes, “he wanted to demonstrate the
validity of pagan philosophical insight for Christian reflection on the nature of the
supreme good, which was God. The moral precepts of the Gospels he saw as no more
than a reform of the natural law followed by the philosophers” (35). Ultimately, it seems
that toleration stemming from commonality rather than a respect for difference is, at best,
a limited form of toleration for the sake of peaceful coexistence. It is simultaneously an
act of endorsement and a negation of difference. Abelard had much more in common
with his superiors than with an Epicurean philosopher or a Jew, and once again he
appears to have been interested in toleration primarily as it affected him—as a heretic. If
there is a case to be made for a stance of toleration in Abelard’s Dialogues based on my
“common ground” model, such toleration would have been self serving, and even then
the evidence is weak for toleration in any modern sense.
However, I argue that even the repudiation of the existence of meaningful difference should be understood not as toleration but rather as strong evidence of a worldview in which conformity was prized and difference was to be avoided at all costs. Given this medieval preference for intolerance and coercion, the sixth kind of tolerance I have proposed, like the five Walzer describes, ultimately points to limitations on toleration in the Middle Ages. I am by no means proposing that Abelard favored radical toleration of all viewpoints on account of philosophical overlap. For practical reasons it is unlikely such a manuscript could have survived hundreds of years of Church censorship and likely would have been burned before his very eyes. In the exploration of different paths to salvation (or happiness in this life, and the next), opposing viewpoints were helpful to Abelard only insofar as they could provide evidence of Christian Truth, or help to rationalize his own heterodox views. As we have seen in writings by Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham, the absolute truth of the Middle Ages is incompatible with the relativism necessary for modern toleration. In this way, the Middle Ages may provide some forerunners of modern toleration, but not necessarily examples of it.

Alexandra Walsham has convincingly demonstrated that in the Middle Ages and Early Modern era, toleration “was an act of forbearance, long-suffering and also indulgence, a conscious decision to refrain from persecuting something one knew to be wicked and wrong” (4). Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and, to a lesser extent, William of Ockham are loathe to extend such forbearance because they understand toleration of difference as a threat to the unity of their respective communities. They favored, instead,
producing conformity, first through reason, but if necessary, through openly coercive means. In this paradigm, I believe that medieval debate as it manifests in the writings of Abelard, Salisbury, and Ockham served to enforce the peace through an intolerance of religious error and political disobedience. By modern standards, tolerance that exists only to produce conformity is merely a simulacrum of tolerance. But by the standards of the High Middle Ages, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and William of Ockham are acting humanely by aiming to promote peace through enforced conformity (or denial that error or disobedience has occurred, which produces the same effect). Although they cannot advocate forbearance or toleration of heresy or treason, they do propose thoughtful routes to avoid escalating conflict to the point that it becomes disruptive to society. John of Salisbury, writing to Thomas Becket but summing up the position implicit in the writings of both Abelard and Ockham, states that “Liberty … is not afraid to censure that which seems to oppose sound moral character,” adding that “man is to be free and it is always permitted to a free man to speak to persons about restraining their vices” (*Policraticus* 7.25). This “freedom” was acceptable because its purpose was to correct, albeit through words rather than physical violence, beliefs and actions that were dangerous not only to the individual but also to the community at large.

In this worldview, it was every person’s responsibility to expose harmful beliefs in his neighbors (and, in Ockham’s view, even in the pope) since the public utility trumped what later generations might think of as freedom of conscience. By modern ideals, this is intolerance so draconian that even the concept of toleration is a specter of actual forbearance. But according to their own standards, we should view all three as
advocating positions that seemed obvious to them and that would continue to be commonsensical to their heirs. Ultimately, the models for small-scale correction forwarded by these three figures do not dwell on the free dissemination of ideas, but, to the contrary, on ensuring their correction or elimination before they could spread.
CHAPTER 3

CENSORSHIP AND ACCEPTANCE IN “LANVAL”

In Chapter 2 I proposed a model of intolerance wherein conformity was achieved by relentless intolerance. I argued that some sophisticated thinkers of the High Middle Ages, Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury in particular, saw coercion not only as justified but indeed as necessary for maintaining order in society. I suggested that, taken together, the views of Abelard and Salisbury point to a coherent philosophy in which intolerance was seen as necessary for the sake of the greater good. Toleration, as those two thinkers understood it, served to bring about conformity by licensing a limited form of freedom which disguised coercive force. In the rest of my dissertation, I intend to test this claim against examples of vernacular literature to examine more specifically the relationship between intolerance and censorship as those forces were understood to work in practice. Chapter 3 centers on “Lanval,” one of the *lais* of Marie de France, while Chapter 4 considers two examples of Middle English poetry, Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* and the anonymous anti-Wycliffite poem *Defend us from all Lollardy*. In Chapter 5, I will test these ideas in the late medieval morality play *Mankind*.

In this chapter, I will try to establish some ways that the model of intolerance I developed in Chapter 2 can help us better understand the dynamics of Marie’s fictional, courtly world. According to the model I propose, there are reasons why intolerance is what we might call the default ethical position. I will focus especially on tests of
conformity and obedience, especially those within a legal context, to see if my model of intolerance might help explain some of the most important features of the poem. While “Lanval” offers clues about how one might move from a low level of toleration to a much higher level of toleration, perhaps even approaching acceptance or endorsement, I will show ways it may also point to deep, systemic intolerance that served to protect the public peace. I will be asking whether attempts to limit speech and behavior in “Lanval” might be seen as expressions of intolerance that might be understood as precursors of formal censorship. I will further ask if these attempts to restrict speech and action were used to prevent people from making choices that would be harmful to others, especially choices that would harm the reputation of those who held power and were charged with maintaining order. As will become clear, I see acceptance as the result, perhaps even the goal, of intolerance, even if it was difficult to achieve acceptance in the world Marie presents in this poem.

As I have noted, in writing about modern societies which practice tolerance Michael Walzer proposes five kinds of toleration: resignation to difference for the sake of peace; a benignly relaxed, passive indifference to difference; a principled recognition that others have rights; openness or even curiosity; and finally, an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (10-11). However, as we saw in Chapter 2, his scale does not fully account for the range of tolerance and intolerance seen in the Middle Ages because all five positions allow for the continued existence of difference. I suggested in Chapter 2 that one further kind of tolerance that might be found in the Middle Ages would be one in which error could be tolerated by reframing difference to emphasize common ground, thus
accommodating difference by minimizing the perception that difference exists. John Christian Laursen, too, has found it problematic to apply Walzer’s scale to medieval societies, writing that ‘‘Walzer’s second, fourth, and fifth kinds of tolerance take us too far away from the semantic field in which tolerance is best understood.’’ He instead proposes a simpler scale, with ‘‘organized, systematic, violent persecution’’ at one end and ‘‘respect, endorsement, and celebration’’ at the other (3). Laursen’s scale may be more useful for discussing tolerance and intolerance in the Middle Ages because it allows both for intolerance (which falls below Walzer’s scale) and for endorsement or celebration (which falls above Walzer’s scale if it is understood to be something beyond the ‘‘endorsement of difference’’). In this chapter, I will apply these scales to ‘‘Lanval’’ to see if there are ways that Marie’s poem might point to attitudes of tolerance and intolerance, and, if so, what vacillations in those stances might tell us about the function of intolerance.

‘‘Lanval’’ and its Courtly Context

The late twelfth-century poet Marie de France, as her name implies, was most likely born in France, although she was almost certainly writing in England. ‘‘Lanval’’ is one of twelve lais which she apparently wrote for a noble king, probably Henry II (ruled 1154-89) (Hanning and Ferrante 5-7). Indeed, this poem is English in its setting and many of its themes. Written in Anglo-Norman, the form of French then spoken at the English court, ‘‘Lanval’’ is a short Arthurian romance in 646 lines, set in England and likely intended for an English audience. It is a work roughly contemporaneous with Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and John of Salisbury (ca. 1120-1180), having been composed ca.
1170. An anonymous French *lai, Graëlent*, is an older version which is not set in Arthur’s court (Burgess 172); in subsequent centuries “Lanval” would be adapted into a number of English versions. “Lanval” is especially instructive for my discussion of intolerance because, many scholars agree, romance was used to inculcate a sense of national identity that celebrates traditional codes of behavior. According to Gillian Beer, the conventions of romance amplify the conventions of its original audience. Drawing on examples ranging from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century, Beer argues that romance “is usually acutely fashionable, cast in the exact mould of an age’s sensibility. Although it draws on basic human impulses it often registers with extraordinary refinement the peculiar forms and vacillations of a period” (12).

This poem centers on Lanval, an outsider of high birth who has depleted his funds, but who is allowed to remain at Arthur’s court even though he can no longer give gifts (1-32). He rides off alone to enjoy himself, and while napping by a river he is wooed by a fairy queen of seemingly limitless power, riches, and beauty (33-131). She grants Lanval love, sex, and gifts of gold on the condition that he never speak of her (132-200). Having regained his wealth, Lanval is able to restore his position at Arthur’s court (201-52). Queen Guinevere\(^2\) propositions Lanval for sex; when he refuses out of his loyalty to Arthur, she accuses him of preferring the company of young men. To deflect these charges he breaks his oath to the fairy by telling Guinevere that he has a lover whose

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1 The earliest surviving manuscript of the *Lais* is from the mid-thirteenth century; it contains all twelve *Lais* and is widely accepted as the best version. (Hanning and Ferrante 5)

2 While Marie does not refer to Arthur’s wife, the Queen, by name, scholars agree that she is Guinevere and refer to her as such. I will follow this convention.
lowest maidens are more beautiful than Guinevere (253-310). Arthur wants to execute Lanval for this insult against his queen, but Arthur’s knights counsel him to grant Lanval a trial where he can prove his innocence (311-646). The trial and the pretrial activities account for more than half of the poem; both the trial and the poem conclude when the fairy queen returns to exonerate Lanval. They leave, never to return. Although “Lanval” as a love story concerns Lanval and his fairy queen, in my reading it is primarily a poem about the relationships and agreements among Lanval, the fairy, the knights of the Round Table, and Arthur and Guinevere.

Walzer has written that “the objects of toleration, strictly speaking, are individual choices and performances: acts of adhesion, participation in rituals of membership and worship, enactments of cultural difference, and so on” (31). This anthropological perspective informs my understanding of moments that test tolerance both in practice and in literature. In assessing the poem according to Walzer’s five-point scale, and in considering ways in which Laursen’s simplified scale might offer a more nuanced understanding of the poem, I will focus on five main events that could be seen as tests of adhesion or rituals of membership: 1) Lanval’s initial toleration at court; 2) his encounter with the fairy; 3) the knights’ reception of his giving gifts; 4) his encounter with Guinevere; and 5) the trial. All five of these events concern pacts or agreements of some sort. Depending on whether we use Walzer’s scale or Laursen’s, some of these events suggest somewhat different interpretations of tolerance and intolerance at this fictional court, yet, I will argue, both scales point to deep limitations on tolerance within this poem. The final two events, Lanval’s encounter with Guinevere, and the trial that ensues,
are of special interest because, I hope to show, they are suggestive of forms of intolerance that served to control speech and that may therefore be seen as evidence for the roots of censorship.

**Lanval’s Limited Toleration at King Arthur’s Court**

The first test of adhesion or ritual of membership concerns Lanval’s status as an important nobleman from another kingdom. Outsiders are met, at best, with limited toleration in “Lanval.” The opening lines of the poem serve to establish the threat posed by outsiders, for the invading Scots and the Picts have driven King Arthur to Carlisle:

A Kardoel surjurnot li reis,  
Artur, li pruz e li curteis,  
Pur les Escoz e pur les Pis,  
Que destrui[e]nt le païs:  
En la tere de Loengre entroënt  
E mut suvent la damogoënt. (5-10)

[King Arthur was staying at Carduel— / That King of valiant and courtly estate— / His borders there he guarded well / Against the Pict, against the Scot, / Who’d cross into Logres to devastate / The countryside often, and a lot.]³

Marie’s contemporary Geoffrey of Monmouth related accounts of Arthur’s wars with the Picts (Burgess 173), which had occurred perhaps five centuries earlier. Marie was writing in the shadow of the Norman Invasion of England in 1066, and so it is shrewd of her to set her romance in this earlier time when the invading forces were not French but rather other natives of the British Isles. While thus deflecting the connection to recent French invaders, Marie nevertheless suggests that foreigners are to be regarded with suspicion. Arthur’s failure to protect his land against such aggressors points to a worldview in which

³ The Anglo-Norman citations are from Glyn Burgess’s 1995 edition of Alfred Ewert’s standard 1944 text. Unless otherwise noted, English translations are by Judith Shoaf.
outsiders pose a genuine and literal threat to the peace of the realm. Her polemical attack on these invaders suggests that they are not to be tolerated, much less accepted. If anything, Arthur’s need to hold court at Carlisle (5-10) suggests that the Scots and the Picts have subjected him to such persecution and intolerance that, for the sake of peace, he must acquiesce to them.

Despite the intolerance towards outsiders expressed in these opening lines, Lanval’s status as a foreigner does not seem to be a major liability for his being tolerated at court. Although he is a longstanding member of Arthur’s court, Lanval is regarded with suspicion because, we will later learn, he remains at court after exhausting his funds (30). Marie says this *lai* concerns a very noble vassal (3) who is the son of a king of high birth [“haut parage”] (27). In addition to his high status through birth, most people envied Lanval for his valor, for his generosity [“largesce”], his beauty, and his bravery or goodness [“prüesce”] (21-22). Although Lanval has the necessary qualities for a knight in Arthur’s court, none of Arthur’s men favored him (20). Some pretended to love him, but they would not have been at all disturbed if something bad were to befall him: “Tel li mustra semblant d’aumur, / S’al chevaler mesavenist, / Ja une feiz ne l’en pleinsist” [“Those who claimed to hold him dear / If fortune had brought him up short, / Would not have shed a kindly tear”] (24-26). These references suggest that Lanval will have difficulty persuading his peers to come to his aid in his time of need. I take this as evidence that Lanval is tolerated at a relatively low level by his fellow knights in this first test of adhesion. These knights seem to extend Walzer’s second kind of tolerance to Lanval: an attitude which is “passive, relaxed, benignly indifferent to difference” (10).
They do not endorse his difference, nor do they endorse him. He is not shunned and he is permitted to attend Arthur’s court. The other knights’ initial toleration of Lanval thus represents a clear example of toleration within the poem.

In the opening section Marie twice states that Arthur does not extend the same generosity to Lanval that he does to his other knights. The first time, she says that Arthur distributed gifts of wives and lands to counts and barons and all those who had served him at the Round Table, except for Lanval:

A la pentecuste en esté
I aveit li reis sujurné.
Asez I duna riches duns:
E as cuntes e as buruns,
A ceus de la table r[o]ünde—
N’ot tant de teus en tut le munde—
Femmes e tere departi,
Par tut, fors un ki l’ot servi:
Ceo fu Lanval, ne l’en sovient… (11-19)
[He held court there at Pentecost, / The summer feast we call Whitsun, / Giving gifts of impressive cost / To every count and each baron / And all knights of the Round Table. / Never elsewhere so many, such able / Knights assembled! Women and land / He shared out with generous hand / To all but one who’d served. Lanval / He forgot: no man helped his recall.]

Arthur deliberately excludes Lanval from this ritual of membership. However, that Arthur “did not remember” Lanval suggests that his exclusion of Lanval may not signal malice, even though such a mistake would appear to be intentional, which signals this is likely an act of tolerance or forbearance. When Marie reiterates Arthur’s oversight, it is specifically in the context of Lanval’s outsider status:

…mes luin ert de sun heritage.
De la meins[e] le rei fu.
Tut sun aveir ad despendu;
Kar li reis rien ne li dona,
Although he is part of the king’s household, he is unable to conform in two ways, being a foreigner and now having exhausted his funds. Lanval conforms as best he can under the circumstances of his bankruptcy; he neither receives nor asks for gifts. He remains obedient to his king, and, in turn, Arthur permits him to stay at court. Arthur’s treatment of Lanval suggests that like his knights, he tolerates Lanval’s presence without subjecting him to persecution but also without endorsing him or his difference. However, in forgetting to include Lanval, and only Lanval, in his distribution of gifts of women and land, Arthur signals that he is perhaps less tolerant of Lanval than are his knights. This is suggestive of Walzer’s first kind of toleration, “a resigned acceptance for the sake of peace” (10).

Because he is tolerated the possibility remains open that he may once again be accepted at court, or tolerated to a greater degree, should he regain his wealth. Ultimately, as I hope to show, through the fictional agents in her romance, Marie signals that acceptance—that is, being made acceptable—brought into conformity—could be earned only by forging, and honoring, one’s public and private pacts. For the first one-third of the poem, Lanval is tolerated at court in the truest sense of the concept: he is permitted to remain, yet he is not accepted as a full member of the Round Table. Marie does not explain why the rich foreigner Lanval joined Arthur’s court and offers no explanation for his apparent desire to remain once his funds are exhausted. Even as the court envies Lanval for his many positive traits, as a foreigner who has spent all his money he is
regarded with suspicion and is no longer useful to them. It appears, however, that the
tolerated extended to Lanval is sustained by his loyalty to the court and by Arthur’s
apparent desire to adhere to courtly conventions, courtesy in particular, which we must
take as a form of toleration. The knights are more tolerant of Lanval than is King Arthur,
though all tolerate him to some extent.

Marie juxtaposes Lanval’s status as an outsider and a loner against the cohesion
of Arthur’s other knights. Marie addresses her readers, warning that a foreigner without
counsel is very sad in another land, where he does not know where to seek help:

Seignurs, ne vus esmerveillez:
Hume estrange descunseillez
Mut est dolent en autre tere,
Quant il ne seit u sucurs quere. (35-38)
[My lords, I don’t astonish you: / A man alone, with no counsel—or bad—
/ A stranger in a strange land / Is sad, when no help’s at hand.]

Though “descunseillez” literally means “without counsel,” Ewert also glosses it as
“forlorn” (Burgess 196). These lines suggest that Marie may have viewed the condition
of Lanval’s friendlessness as creating a sense of hopelessness; the camaraderie of
belonging to the dominant group, she shows, was necessary for one’s own sanity and
physical well-being, and not just for one’s social standing. Though the poem does not
explain why Lanval does not simply leave Arthur’s court (perhaps to return home to his
father’s kingdom), it is significant that Lanval is unwavering in his loyalty to Arthur,
especially in the face of Arthur’s limited toleration of him.

This test of adhesion points to Lanval’s recognition that he must obey his king
and serve him honorably, even when he receives only grudging toleration in return.

Lanval seeks enjoyment away from court by going for a ride on his horse. Even as he
departs, Marie describes Lanval as the knight “que tant aveit le rei servi” [literally, “who had so well served the king”] (40). By juxtaposing references to Lanval’s loyalty to his king against his actions and status as an outsider, Marie would seem to confirm that he is initially tolerated, rather than being either accepted or overtly subjected to persecution.

The Fairy’s Enthusiastic Endorsement of Lanval

The second test of adhesion or ritual of membership I will consider is Lanval’s encounter with the fairy. As he naps by a river, Lanval is approached by two maidens (53-68) who invite him to the fairy queen’s palace (69-74) and then transport him there (75-92). The fairy queen, upon meeting Lanval, uses a vocabulary of love and friendship that has been missing so far in this poem. This vocabulary is fitting for romance, and it signals a different kind of relationship than between Lanval and the men in the poem—one resembling “enthusiastic endorsement” (Walzer 11). She calls Lanval her “beus amis” [handsome friend or lover] (110), then tells him that “jo vus aim sur tute rien” [literally, “I love you above all”] (116). He is struck with the spark of love (118) and responds appropriately (120), referring to her as his “Bele” [Beauty] (121). Although such terms of endearment might appear to modern readers as a mark of unconditional love, in fact their relationship is built on conditions, which is why I will argue we should understood their relationship as one of tolerance on Walzer’s scale rather than one of true acceptance or endorsement at the high end of Laursen’s scale.

In a clear ritual of membership, Lanval then pledges his allegiance to her, stating that he will do as she commands, even offering to give up the company of others in order to be with her (127-30). Though in Lanval’s case this is a truly self-serving suggestion,
given that he is already an outcast and so would be losing nothing but gaining everything, his offer that he will “guerpirai tutes genz” [literally, “abandon everyone”] (128) suggests that Marie’s original audience may have seen such a gesture as a genuine sacrifice, albeit one that would readily have been accepted as the necessary choice. Even my formulation that this is a “necessary choice” implies that there were more options to choose from than the most obvious resolution that brings the least harm. As I will discuss further in Chapters 4 and 5, one hypothesis of this dissertation that is illustrated in this scene is that the range of options in the Middle Ages was often limited in such a way that the most obvious choice was the only choice.

In return for his promise, Lanval is granted love, sex, and gifts of gold (133-42) that help restore his spirit as well as his social standing at Arthur’s court. Lanval’s willingness to accept the fairy’s terms is the familiar rash promise often found in romance, yet the way Marie has structured the arrangement points to a dynamic that pervades the poem, whereby those with power expect blind obedience from their subordinates. By accepting the restrictions on his speech, he is able to conform to the social expectations for a knight of high status, which not only begins to restore his status but also allows him the ability to “command” his fairy lover (218), whom he can see often, by day or night (215-18). It is clearly to his advantage to uphold his obligations to his fellow men as well as to his lover, since meeting those expectations saves him from the despair of being without companionship, both romantically and at court, in private and in public. It is not only through magic that Lanval finds an expedient solution to his problems: it is also through his ability to agree to the commands of his superior, to reach
an agreement of mutual toleration. (When he later incurs Guinevere’s wrath, or in other words her intolerance, it is because he refuses to submit to, or tolerate, her treasonous demands.) All such agreements, I wish to argue, may have been understood as necessary choices.

Katherine Kong has taken the oaths between Lanval and the fairy as evidence for her hypothesis about the development of individual subjectivity in the High Middle Ages. In her important article, “Guilty as Charged? Subjectivity and the Law in La Chanson de Roland and ‘Lanval,’” she takes a theoretical approach in exploring ways in which this poem, and its trial scene in particular, point to individual subjectivity. For Kong, this includes such issues as “how one comes to bear guilt” as well as how identity and subjectivity are formed under the law of a sovereign. In Kong’s view, “law” is not “merely a figure of speech” or reduced “to the status of metaphor; for it is the dominant discourse of power” in “Lanval” (35). While I remain skeptical about some of the specific legal or extralegal forces Kong sees allegorized in this poem, she confirms the role of various pacts in creating, and maintaining, order in this society. She writes that “The relationship between Lanval and the lady is contractual, and its commencement parallels fealty-swearing between a noble and his vassal. She offers terms, he accepts, she gives him a gift, they swear allegiance, embrace, and seal their agreement over a meal” (41).

As Walzer has observed, sometimes “toleration works best when relations of political superiority and inferiority are clearly marked and commonly recognized” (52). Perhaps this is why Lanval vows to do as the fairy commands (124), and indeed she
commands (144) him to follow her orders of never telling anyone about her (145-50).
While a condition such as this often propels the action of romance, especially in Breton
lais (such as the agreement between Orfeo and the fairy king in the anonymous
fourteenth-century Breton lai “Sir Orfeo”), this particular agreement suggests that
Marie’s first audience readily would have accepted a pact of silence as a reasonable or
even natural request from one’s superior. Moreover, the term “command” appears a third
time when Lanval consents to this arrangement (152), underscoring his responsibility to
obey his superior(s).

Whereas Lanval is initially tolerated at a low level by Arthur and the knights of
the Round Table, his encounter with the fairy suggests that even love may have been
understood to come with conditions that point to tolerance rather than full acceptance,
endorsement, or celebration. The power imbalance between Lanval and the fairy and the
fairy’s demands, taken together, suggest that the fairy enthusiastically endorses Lanval’s
difference; moreover, because she does not accept him unconditionally, the fairy may be
said to tolerate Lanval in Walzer’s fifth and highest kind of toleration, rather than the
enthusiastic endorsement at the high end of Laursen’s scale.

Lanval’s Renewed Toleration at Court

One striking test of adhesion and the rituals of membership that follow is Lanval’s
gift-giving and the allegiance this earns him from some of his fellow knights. When
Lanval’s fairy lover provides him with, among other things, the ability to become “the
richest donor” (“Lanval donout les riches duns”; 209), he is able to meet the social
expectation that he share gifts with the other knights. However, this does not necessarily
assure that he will be granted a greater degree of toleration, or even acceptance, in return. Lanval’s obedience to the fairy, and her high-level toleration of him, provides him the funds to feed and clothe his fellow knights (203-08), give rich gifts, ransom prisoners, and clothe jugglers, among other honors (209-12). As I will show, while the other knights may envy Lanval for his many positive attributes, they show him a much greater degree of toleration when he is rich and able to give gifts than when he is bankrupt even though he had asked nothing of them in return. Lanval’s new wealth partially restores his status, but it does not appear to bring him additional power within the rigid social structure of this court. Lanval thus finds himself in the precarious situation of having begun to act properly but his new status is not yet fully recognized by the members of the community.

For example, up to thirty knights (221) including Gawain and Yvain (225-26) initially forget to include Lanval in their summer festivities (219-24), a sign that they continue to tolerate him at a relatively low level, perhaps still at Walzer’s second level of toleration and extending an attitude of passive, relaxed, benign indifference to Lanval’s difference. Lanval has not yet passed this test of adhesion, it seems. Though not quite at the highest level of “enthusiastic endorsement,” in defending Lanval, Gawain is at least at Walzer’s fourth level of toleration, which involves openness and respect (11). Gawain speaks up:

‘Par Deu, seignurs, nus feimes mal  
De nostre cumpainun Lanval,  
Que tant est larges e curteis,  
E sis peres est riches reis,  
Que od nus ne l’avum amené.’ (229-33)  
[‘In God’s name, my lords, we sin / Against Lanval, our companion, / So courtly and generous in everything— / And his father’s a wealthy king— / He should be here; we’ve done him wrong.’]
Gawain here is thus much higher than the other knights in his toleration of Lanval. His speech raises two related issues about the resolution of error, an important concept in this poem which I believe is closely related to the low ends of both Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales; this event points to the relationship between error, its resolution, and other issues of tolerance, intolerance, and coercion.

First, in declaring their error in forgetting to bring Lanval, and in acknowledging Lanval’s generosity, courtesy, and lineage, Gawain implies that although Lanval’s status has begun to be restored, he does not yet fully conform to their rituals of membership. Lanval still has the same positive traits that Marie had mentioned at the start of the poem when the other knights refused to defend him. However, unlike at the beginning of the poem, Lanval’s valor, generosity, good looks, prowess, and high birth (21-27) are no longer a liability now that he is no longer bankrupt. Hence, Lanval is apparently able to neutralize somewhat his previous nonconformity simply by correcting his behavior and resuming the giving of gifts. Some of the knights accept him, however provisionally, because the wealthy Lanval is once again able to meet his social obligations to his king and peers.

Second, Gawain’s language suggests the knights’ error may be more malicious (and therefore in greater need of correction) than when Arthur initially forgot Lanval. If this is true, these knights might be understood to return Lanval’s renewed generosity with less tolerance than they had granted him when he was bankrupt. For example, although Arthur’s error would seem to be intentional, an act of forbearance, and rating as Walzer’s lowest form of tolerance, Marie spins it as passive; he gives gifts to the other knights but
not to Lanval, whom he did not remember: “Ceo fu Lanval, ne l’en sovient” (19). In contrast, the knights’ error would seem to be unintentional, yet because Lanval has behaved properly and is therefore entitled to being included with the other knights in their activities, Gawain treats their lapse with the gravity of an intentional error which could be misconstrued as an act of intolerance rather than as a form of tolerance.

Moreover, Gawain’s admission of error (“nus feimes mal / De nostre cumpainun Lanval”) suggests that under some circumstances error could be corrected by admitting error. This may be because the knights’ transgression is against their peer or inferior, rather than against their superior, and is therefore not regarded as an act of disobedience. However, I believe this is the only instance of an admission of error that has already taken place and that goes unpunished in this poem, and in order to make that case I would like to look ahead and briefly discuss Marie’s lexicon of error in “Lanval.” Other instances of the vocabulary of error occur in the context of preventing or punishing an error, such as when Arthur sends three of his men to fetch Lanval to bring him to trial, and Marie comments that Lanval is sad and troubled (“Il les enveie pur Lanval / Quë asez ad dolur e mal”; 331-32). In that case, Arthur is ensuring that Lanval will be present at his trial, for a failure to appear would be a further act of disobedience which Arthur has a responsibility to prevent.

Likewise, when Arthur later sends for all his men to advise him on how to proceed against Lanval, it is not to ensure justice for Lanval, but rather to prevent others from finding fault with his decision (“Que [hum] he li puis[se] a mal retraire”; 384). Other terms that Marie deploys to describe error, such as “tort,” often occur in legal
contexts, such as when Marie acknowledges that Lanval had been very wrongly accused (“Il iert retté a mut grant tort”; 423). This sense occurs again, with the final instance of “mal” in close proximity, at the end, when Lanval’s fairy testifies to Arthur that she doesn’t want Lanval to suffer for what he said and that Guinevere was wrong about Lanval having asked for her love: “Ne vuil mie que a mal li turt— / De ceo qu’il dist; ceo sachez tu / Que la reïne ad tort eü” (618-20). This evidence suggests that error persisted in an ongoing state, but that by admitting and exposing error, further error or disobedience could be prevented. Since Guinevere’s disobedience is only partially exposed, the poem is ambiguous as to whether her error will be corrected. But it does imply that the necessary corrective measures did not always have to be violent, or even openly coercive, but may have frequently involved resuming the appropriate action, such as when Lanval resumes giving gifts, or when Gawain not only admits his error but then also makes a point of including Lanval in the knights’ future activities, which, on the balance, I think we should take as a sign of increased tolerance for Lanval by his peers.

During Lanval’s transition from the object of toleration to the object of acceptance, he remains vulnerable. Although the knights return and persuade Lanval to join them (234-36), Guinevere manages to separate him from his cohort, leaving him once again in the dangerous position, through no apparent fault of his own, of being alone, away from the others: “Lanval s’en vait a une part, / Mut luin des autres” (253-54). Once he is alone, he forgets about his friends and begins longing for his beloved (254-58). While a pining lover certainly fulfills the generic expectations of romance, it also highlights the difficulty of maintaining or increasing one’s level of toleration after a
period of suspicion. Lanval has done everything right, and yet he is still endangered by
being alone because the other knights fail to watch to make sure that he is included in
their activities, or, in Walzer’s formulation, to include him in rituals of membership.

Without the full acceptance of the other knights—without their enthusiastic
endorsement of him regardless of difference—Lanval is vulnerable to the whims of a
powerful queen who need not fear retribution, since her superior (the king) will never
learn of her transgressions because her inferiors dare not speak ill of her. Guinevere
approaches Lanval because he can be separated from his group. She preys on the limits of
his adhesion. His fate in the rest of the poem hinges on differing perceptions of his status
as being accepted as opposed to being tolerated. Because it follows the restoration of his
status (at least in Gawain’s estimation), as we will soon see, the scene in which
Guinevere propositions Lanval provides an especially important insight into the
relationship between being accepted into the dominant group at a high level of tolerance
and only being tolerated by that group at a very low level. Marie has shown the knights as
a cohesive group standing in contradistinction to Lanval, the outsider. It is not until he is
accepted back into the group at a higher level of toleration that the consequences of his
vulnerability are most fully on display, for this is when, it turns out, he most needs the
protection of his peers not only against a conniving queen but also against a king who is
carrying out his duty to maintain order.

I believe that the instant in which Lanval is brought back into the fold of knights,
while simultaneously being separated from that group by a devious queen, is richly
symbolic of the tacit rules concerning toleration at this time. That Lanval could find
himself in such a precarious situation points not to a paradox, but rather to a clue about social expectations in the High Middle Ages. When he is later put on trial, Lanval finds himself most “alone, lost, without access / To parents or friends who might avail” (“Lanval fu sul e esgarê, / N’i aveit parent nê ami”; 397-98); but that is also when his generosity begins to pay off and his peers demonstrate their loyalty to him when Gawain and all his companions give themselves up for bail (400-01). Following Gawain’s speeches, the other knights do seem to extend Lanval a greater degree of toleration than they had before, as they will come to his aid even as they are charged with putting him on trial. It appears that Marie is signaling that although the social hierarchy, especially in a courtly setting, may demand appropriate behavior, this pressure entailed satisfying the demands of one’s superiors while simultaneously condemning overt disobedience and defending one’s peers. Moreover, this paradox of having to satisfy one’s superiors while also defending those peers who have earned a high degree of toleration, if not acceptance, enriches our understanding of my model of intolerance because it signals that intolerance is the default stance for maintaining order.

Slander and Intolerance in “Lanval”

An important turning point in this poem involves Lanval’s encounter with Queen Guinevere, whose tests of Lanval’s adhesion to Arthur backfire and provoke some of the greatest intolerance found in this poem. Once Lanval is rich, Guinevere, like the knights, treats him with a high degree of toleration, if not acceptance. Unlike the knights, she is quick to revoke this stance when she is snubbed; she then subjects Lanval to a high degree of intolerance and outright persecution. In this section I will be investigating how
slander and intolerance function in the fictional world of “Lanval” as precursors of later forms of censorship; I will argue that, taken together, Marie’s attitudes towards slander and intolerance as they function in Lanval’s interactions with Guinevere served to suppress political speech.

Lanval is alone because Guinevere’s maidens have distracted the other knights with Lanval choosing instead to wallow in the misery of being apart from his lover (253-58). Her scheme highlights Guinevere’s authority over Lanval which allows her to protect her own interests by taking advantage of his vulnerability. Additionally, while Marie never hints that Guinevere is in any way justified in taking advantage of Lanval, neither does she overtly condemn the ease with which Guinevere orchestrates separating Lanval from his peers, propositioning him, and then pursuing legal action against him when she does not get her way. Lanval is the victim, to be sure, but as much as Guinevere is the aggressor, Marie suggests that given the situation as known to everyone but Lanval and his fairy lover, Lanval appears to share in the blame and must pay publicly. Thus, like Lanval’s fairy lover who imposes a pact of silence on their relationship, Guinevere pursues Lanval knowing that she will always have the upper hand. I will argue that Guinevere’s acts further signal that those with power may act disobediently without fear of repercussions, since their inferiors are unable to expose the wrongdoings of their superiors.

Upon seeing Lanval alone (259), Guinevere wastes no time in declaring her love for him, telling him that she has honored him and loved him and held him dearly, then
offering to be his lover, stating that she will surrender as his mistress and that he will be pleased with her:

‘Lanval, mut vus ai honuré
E mut chéri e mut amé.
Tute m’amur poëz aveir;
Kar me dites vostre voleir!
Ma drüerie vus otrei;
Mut devez estre lié de mei.’ (263-68)
[‘Lanval, I really do respect you, / I really care, I really love, / And you can have all my love. / Tell me what you want! I expect you / Must be happy at what I say. / I’m offering to go all the way.’]

Lanval responds to her proposition honorably, even though—or perhaps because—she has every reason to suppose that he may still be out of favor with King Arthur and the other knights. He asks her to leave him alone, stating that he has no interest in loving her, and, moreover, citing his long service to his king, whose trust he does not wish to betray:

‘Dame,’ fet il, ‘lessez m’ester!
Jeo n’ai cure de vus amer.
Lungement ai servi le rei
Ne li voil pas mentir ma fei.
Ja pur vus ne pur vostre amur
Ne mesf[e]rai a mun seignur.’ (269-74)
[‘Lady,’ he said, ‘Let me go! / I never thought to love you so! / I’ve served the King for many a day; / His faith in me I won’t betray. / Not for you, your love, or anything / Would I ever act against my King!’]

Lanval’s response that he would not wrong his king for Guinevere or her love points to a dynamic that will continue as the poem unfolds. It appears that as the inferior (and sometimes outsider) Lanval accepts the necessary choice, which I have described as a situation in which no real options exist other than the one that minimizes harm. Due both to his arrangement with the fairy and to Guinevere’s status as King Arthur’s wife, Lanval must decline Guinevere’s proposition, and decline in such a way that does not offend her.
He cannot tolerate her treasonous request, but he knows he cannot express his
tolerance. In contrast, Guinevere, as the superior (and consummate insider), appears to
enjoy more freedom since she knows Lanval is unlikely to reveal her transgression. She
assumes he will have to tolerate her.

By asserting his loyalty to the king, Lanval does not merely confirm that he
belongs among Arthur’s men and that they were right to accept him as a peer, and, by
implication, he also calls attention to Guinevere’s act of disobedience and disloyalty
against her king and husband. This echoes a number of John of Salisbury’s comments in
_Policraticus_ 7.25, especially his discussion of the limitations on criticizing one’s
superiors even during the classical license of Saturnalia, where he suggested that in any
such criticism, the master must not be offended and that any such criticism must serve the
public utility. As we will see in Chapter 4, Chaucer likewise invokes the Ciceronian
concept of “commun profit” in his _Parlement of Foules_ in the frame of the “Dream of
Scipio.” Marie appears to confirm the mechanics of such a paradigm in an extended
section in which Guinevere becomes furious at Lanval’s response. The master is
offended, and the criticism does not seem to serve the public utility.

The queen does not seem to consider Lanval’s reasons for rejecting her and she
quickly moves from extending to him a great deal of tolerance to granting him virtually
none. If anything, Marie hints that his commitment to his king could even be the reason
Guinevere becomes enraged: “La reïne s’en curuça, / Irie fu, si mesparla” [“The Queen’s
heart filled with anger / Furious, she spoke a slander”] (275-76). While the terms
“curucier” and “irie” emphasize her anger, the verb “mesparler” points to the power
imbalance that both motivates and permits Guinevere’s actions. Claire M. Waters’s translation renders it as “spoke wrongly,” a literal translation of “mis-speak” (173), while Hanning and Ferrante gloss that she “insulted him” (112). Citing similar instances in Marie’s lais “Guigemar” and “Le Fresne,” however, Ewert notes in his glossary that “mesparler” can mean “speak ill,” but that it also carries connotations of “slander” (Burgess 206). Thus, while modern translators have focused on what Guinevere says next (that he has turned her down because he prefers young men) as an error or insult leveled against Lanval driven by her anger, it appears that Marie may have deliberately introduced the idea of slander here. Marie specifically does not state against whom this slanderous insult is directed, though obviously she implies it is against Lanval, which is how modern translators have taken it. However, I hope to show that there may be reason to believe she is targeting Arthur as much as she is Lanval: while her proposition to Lanval must be read on the surface as an act of disobedience against her husband, it appears that her charge against Lanval of same-sex relations could also be understood as a slander against Arthur.

So far as I know, no scholar has commented on this important preface (that in her anger she spoke a slander) to Guinevere’s accusations that Lanval has no interest in women. The most thorough commentary I have encountered on these lines is by Myra Stokes, who notes that Guinevere’s speech “is prefaced by a characterization entirely absent from the English redactions” (73). My contention is that even those critics who comment on her charge of sodomy as a manifestation of medieval intolerance do not seem to comprehend the full implications of Marie’s statement. As a result, modern
translations, like those of the previous century, emphasize the subsequent insult while downplaying a possible clue that Marie have been invoking the concept of slander.

For instance, Kong has erroneously argued that “Lanval is accused of a mesdire, a misspeaking,” adding that “Lanval’s actions are classified as misspeaking and felony” (42), a claim she repeats: “It was Lanval’s words that got him into trouble: he boasted and defended, was charged with felony and mesdire, and he is now mute, defended by the proclamation of a sovereign rivaling the king” (43). However, the term mesdire does not appear anywhere in the poem, while the related term, mesparler, occurs once, and it is clearly attributed to Guinevere preceding her slanderous insult against Lanval. In fact, Lanval is accused of a mesfait [wrongdoing] (363, 440), first by Guinevere, and then, formally, by Arthur. Given the climate of intolerance we have seen, and will see, and given the relative lack of evidence of censorship (which I believe may be due to the effectiveness of intolerance and coercion in the Middle Ages), I wish to argue that the concept of mesparler, understood in the sense of slander, may offer evidence of the workings of intolerance that, for purposes of discussion, may be seen as a forerunner of formal censorship.

The issue of Guinevere’s slander has further implications for what might be seen as intolerance resembling censorship. On the one hand, Lanval fails to participate in the physical pleasures associated with Guinevere’s maidens (252-53), and so it may be that Guinevere genuinely believes that Lanval does not take interest in women. But, on the other hand, I believe there is further evidence supporting an interpretation of mesparler as intentional slander rather than merely as misspeaking or as an insult. In his study of
Freedom of the Press in England, Frederick Seaton Siebert writes that the medieval Scandalum Magnatum statutes had been enacted to suppress “rumors affecting the king and the nobility (or in other words the government). Their immediate purpose was not to give damages to defamed persons but to stop contentious discussions and aspersions which tended to disturb the peace of the realm” (118). He further notes that a “person apprehended for disbursing such stories could successfully defend himself by pleading that he was merely repeating what he had heard. He had invented nothing” (118). Even though virtually all scholarship focuses on Guinevere’s allegations of sodomy, when read in the context of intolerance and censorship, however, this scene suggests to me that Guinevere’s slander may also have involved the lie that many people had often told her (“Asez le m’ad hum dit sovent”; 279) that Lanval is not interested in women. Siebert adds that under a statute of 1275, a full century after “Lanval” was written, a person who had circulated false rumors against the nobility “could now be forced to reveal the source of his information or go to prison” (118), an additional coercive measure that may have arisen from situations like this. Because Guinevere’s transgressions are never revealed to Arthur in this poem, it is unclear whether she could have faced punishment for her slander. Nevertheless, this scene illustrates a number of related aspects of intolerance that I believe served to limit political speech that could disturb the peace of the realm.

Guinevere highlights the political element of her allegation that Lanval has no interest in the delight of women (a slander, I have argued, which may also involve the claim that she has heard this often from many people) and that he instead takes the
pleasure of young men by stating that such behavior is a poor way for Lanval to repay his king, since it causes him to lose God’s grace:

‘Lanval,’ fet ele, ‘bien le quit, Vuz n’amez gueres cel delit; Asez le m’ad hum dit sovent Que des femmez n’avez talent. Vallez avez bien afeitiez, Ensemble od eus vus deduiez. Vileins cuarz, mauveis failliz, Mut est mi sires maubailliz Que pres de lui vus ad suffert; Mun escïent que Deus en pert!’ (277-86)

[‘Lanval,’ she said, ‘I think they’re right. / You don’t care much for such delight; / People have told me again and again / That women offer you no pleasure— / With a few well-schooled young men / You prefer to pass your leisure. / Peasant coward, faithless sinner, / My lord the King is hardly the winner / In letting your sort hang around; / He’s losing God’s own grace, I’ve found!’]

Though much has been written about the slanderous allegation of Lanval’s preference for men, little has been said about its connection to toleration. Burgess notes that this “charge was commonly levelled at men who repulse the advances of women,” adding that the “ Celts were frequently accused of this vice by ancient writers” (174). William Burgwinkle further suggests that Marie is “attentive to the subtle allusions to same-sex desire she might have found in the Celtic material from which she worked” in some of her other lais (149). He explains that the Celts were associated throughout the classical period with deviant sexual practices. This does not necessarily mean that these accounts are in any way true, but if they were based on evidence, however misinterpreted, the conservative oral folk tradition of the Celts might also have preserved echoes of those homoerotic practices in the warrior class into the twelfth century. (149)
With his emphasis on the sexual dynamics of the poem, Burgwinkle takes this as evidence that “Marie’s interest in these sometimes morally ambiguous tales (at least from a Christian viewpoint) suggests that she saw in them material that she could develop for her own purposes which would also interest and instruct the court” (149). Both Burgess and Burgwinkle imply a popular association of the Celts with same-sex relations. If such an association truly extended into Marie’s time, her first audience may have understood it as a formulaic insult. Not only would this insult have included same-sex practices, but it may also have been understood to carry with it an insinuation of foreignness. Thus, while the evidence suggests that every aspect of Guinevere’s accusations is false, the approach she takes in slandering Lanval suggests that she may be attempting to provoke him by testing his adhesion in subtly reminding him of his own status as an outsider who is only tolerated at court.

Recent scholars have emphasized Guinevere’s assertion that Arthur could lose God’s grace by allowing someone who takes pleasure in young men to remain at his court. Stefan Jurasinski, though not writing directly about tolerance, has persuasively argued that Guinevere’s remark mirrors the “dominant attitudes toward sodomy in the juridical literature of the early Middle Ages” (294). He explains,

Both the literature and normative texts of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries often reflect the view of sodomy expounded by Damian and others as an offense endangering not only those who engage in it but any collectivity that tolerates their membership. It is this notion of sodomy as a wrong done to others—as an offense endangering precisely those people who refrain from it—that Guinevere seems specifically to invoke. (294-95)
Juranski reads this passage in “Lanval” in light of Damian, who was writing about a century before Marie, to explain that seemingly private matters, such as one’s sexual preferences, were in fact understood at this time as matters of great consequence to the entire community.\(^4\) He writes that “sodomy was an offense that undermined the health of the state and whose guilt could be visited on secular and ecclesiastical authorities who did not punish it vehemently” (295). Just as Peter Abelard argued that people should conform in their public behavior as well as in their private beliefs (Abelard 120, \textit{e.g.}), and John of Salisbury wrote that one should never “detract from the king and in the privacy of your bedroom do not speak ill of the powerful because the birds of the sky will convey your voice and he who has wings will pronounce your verdict” (\textit{Policraticus} 6.26), Marie here signals a public danger in speaking improperly, even in private. This historical evidence supports my argument that underpinning the poem is a worldview in which such unacceptable behavior, or even the possibility of such behavior, poses a threat to society. Every moment he is in Carlisle, Lanval faces such tests of adhesion and must watch his tongue: this is the chilling effect of intolerance.

In sum, I believe Guinevere’s slanderous insult bears out my hypothesis that deviant behavior, ranging from one’s private disloyal thoughts or sexual preferences to one’s public acts of disobedience, was perceived by Marie’s first readers to have been a genuine threat to the peace of the realm. This helps explain why Lanval is so careful to

\(^4\) “Around the year 1051 Saint Peter Damian composed a long treatise called \textit{The Book of Gomorrah} in which he declaimed vituperatively against the evils of sexual relations between males, particularly among the clergy,” writes John Boswell. “He described in lurid detail several varieties of homosexual intercourse and charged that they were extremely common. He accused priests of having sexual relations with their spiritual advisees and stated that many clerics avoided ecclesiastical penalties by confessing to other gay clergy” (210-11). Pierre Payer, whose work on Peter Abelard was foundational to my model of intolerance in Chapter 2, has translated \textit{The Book of Gomorrah} and written extensively about it.
assert his loyalty to Arthur and the other knights at every turn, but most especially when
he could be suspected of any kind of disloyalty. Understood this way, Guinevere’s taunt
of Lanval’s supposed preference for men may be read as a powerful insult against the
vassal, for it is emblematic of the need for intolerance to avoid injury leading back to the
king and the community.

Conformity and Limitations on Choice in the Trial in “Lanval”

The most spectacular test of adhesion and the most visible rituals of membership
in “Lanval” occur during the trial and the pretrial activities. Lanval is provoked into
divulging the secret about his fairy lover when Queen Guinevere attempts to seduce
Lanval, accusing him of sodomy and forcing him to respond to her allegations. He admits
that he has a female lover who is so beautiful that even her poorest maid is superior to
Guinevere in body, face, beauty, breeding, and goodness:

Une de celes ke la sert,
Tute la plus povre meschine,
Vaut meuz de vus, dame reïne,
de cors, de vis e de beauté,
D’enseignement e de bunté. (298-302)
[Her serving maids, a poor or low / One, even, the poorest in her train, / Is
better than you are, Lady Queen: / In beauty of body and of face, / In
goodness and in well-bred grace.]

This misstep causes Lanval not only to lose his lover, now that he has violated the pact of
silence, but also to face criminal charges from Arthur for having insulted the queen.

Lanval behaves virtuously in his initial interaction with Guinevere, declining her
advances and citing his loyalty to his king (269-74); at this point, Guinevere does not
have a legal cause of action against Lanval. Following Guinevere’s insult, Lanval
immediately denies her charge of sodomy, his defense provoking a series of
consequences for which he takes full responsibility. In the heat of the moment, Lanval not only reveals the secret that he had sworn to keep but also insults his queen when he brags that even the lowliest of his lover’s servants are superior to Guinevere (296-302). For inadvertently breaking the terms of his fairy lover’s demand that he never speak of her, Lanval loses the material, sexual, and emotional benefits of their relationship, as well as faces social and legal trouble from his king. The second half of the poem centers on Lanval’s trial, brought on by Guinevere in retaliation for Lanval’s refusal to acquiesce to her treasonous proposition.

Though the situation is aggravated by Guinevere’s desire to punish Lanval for what are in effect her own misdeeds, it is striking that these consequences stem directly from Lanval’s failure to honor his pact with the fairy. That is, while Lanval would seem to be justified in telling Guinevere his secret as a way of deflecting her more serious charges, and while he is ultimately exonerated in court, this turn of events suggests that it is appropriate for Lanval to suffer for having broken his pact of silence with his fairy lover. While not readily apparent to modern readers, moreover, by insisting on Lanval’s silence (143-52, e.g.), I believe his fairy lover can be seen to have attempted to protect him from such troubles. In short, I will argue that Marie may be suggesting that those who break agreements are rightfully subjected to intolerance and persecution and that they should not be granted tolerance.

Beer has written that “in romance, as in dreams, queens and kings are our representatives. Their royalty universalizes them” (3). While Marie may be writing about knights, kings, queens, and even a fairy, Beer’s comment underscores my contention that
there was little expectation of freedom of speech in the Middle Ages, especially for those at court with political ambitions. That Lanval’s alleged slander took place in private and was provoked by the queen are not mitigating circumstances; if anything, they are the very conditions under which one must be most careful, Marie suggests. Likewise, that Lanval faces so many consequences for his indiscretion suggests that medieval people could contribute to the stability of their society by carefully regulating their own speech. I believe this is evidence which supports my model of intolerance.

Marie suggests that such consequences to Lanval are justified, both from his fairy lover as well as from King Arthur. Additionally, in both cases the consequences to Lanval are not capricious, even though Arthur’s allegations are known to the reader to be false. In the case of the fairy, according to the terms of their agreement, Lanval loses the affection and benefits of his lover, becoming unable to summon her at will (333-39, e.g.), cursing his heart as well as his mouth (345) and holding both his heart and his mouth accountable for his own error. That is to say that despite (or perhaps because of) Lanval’s deteriorating mental condition, Marie implies that he is aware that he, rather than his accuser (and social superior), is to blame for behaving disobediently and breaking his pact.

I see two related issues in this episode that I would like to consider in tandem. The first is Guinevere’s apparent sense of entitlement that justifies lying to Arthur to make sure Lanval is punished for his error. The second is Lanval’s mental and social status as he must deal with a system that sought to punish and correct nonconformists and perceived dissidents. I would like to explore the possibility that by reading “Lanval” in
the context of intolerance, such constraints and punishments may better be understood as natural for the poem’s original audience. Even as readers can sympathize with Lanval’s plight, they must also recognize his error and the need for consequences in the world of the poem.

Lanval’s fairy lover and Guinevere would both seem to benefit from the restrictions on their social inferiors, illustrated here through the character of Lanval. To modern readers, the fairy lover’s pact of silence could seem like a capricious use of her power over him, especially since she does not state her reasons for demanding his silence. Capricious demands are routine in romance. In a later Breton lai, “Sir Orfeo” (ca. 1325), for example, a fairy king has taken Queen Heurodis to the underworld; Sir Orfeo rescues her by compelling that fairy to honor his word and release her. Similarly, a number of Chaucer’s romances in the Canterbury Tales depend on various forms of pacts and secrecy, including the many tests of Griselda in the Clerk’s Tale, the pacts between the lovers in the Franklin’s Tale, Alla’s tests of Custance in the Man of Law’s Tale, and, in the clearest connection to the pact in “Lanval,” the bargain Guinevere makes with the knight in the Wife of Bath’s Tale. However, by insisting on Lanval’s silence (143-52, e.g.), rather than exercising her power capriciously, I believe his fairy lover can be seen to have attempted to shield him from trouble. In light of her contemporary John of Salisbury’s many warnings against speaking ill of one’s superiors, I think it is likely that Marie’s original audience would have interpreted this scene this way.

In contrast to the fairy’s benign use of power, Guinevere repeatedly exploits her position of power. Indeed, Arthur readily accepts Guinevere’s accusations against Lanval
and becomes upset over Lanval’s insult as an act of disobedience, and for that Lanval must stand trial (317-24). She further uses her power to ensure that her lie is never discovered up until the end, and even then facing no consequences for lying to Arthur about the circumstances under which Lanval insulted her. After the fairy sets the record straight (615-28), by sidestepping the issue of whether Lanval had propositioned Guinevere, as she claims to her husband, Marie may be hinting that Guinevere knows she is safe in abusing her power. The imbalance between a queen and her inferiors provided the means for a queen to use her power to impose her will on those who refused to obey her commands. And yet I do not think we should read Guinevere’s cruel desire to punish Lanval as a broad attack on the imbalance of power and justice at court, especially since it seems to be motivated by sexual jealousy.

Moreover, Marie shows that the trial is driven as much by Guinevere’s desire for retribution as it is by Arthur’s sincere belief that Lanval is in the wrong. There appears to be little choice involved in these proceedings: once Guinevere has accused Lanval to Arthur, the process must run its course. As protector of the kingdom, Arthur has a duty to hold a trial to expose publicly the knight’s disobedience. Upon learning that Lanval has insulted Guinevere, Arthur becomes angry, then swears an oath that if Lanval cannot defend himself in court, he will have him burned or hanged. That his first reaction to Lanval’s insult is to hold a trial underscores a system in which dissent is swiftly quashed, and dissent is tolerated only until it can be corrected or the offender removed from society:

Li reis s’en curuçat forment,
Juré en ad sun serement:
However, I do not wish to argue that this trial should be understood as a form of toleration. After all, if the fairy hadn’t shown up to corroborate Lanval’s statements, this would have been nothing but a show trial. Indeed, because the fairy had promised never to return, this is the expected outcome of the trial. If anything, Arthur is secure in extending the right to trial to Lanval because the trial appears to have served to document guilt. Hence, the right to trial as a check on a king’s propensity towards violence should not be read as a form of toleration. Rather, it should be read as a signal of Marie’s society’s desire to enforce conformity. While in the end regal power and social position are defeated by truth, if narrowly, the trial points to a model of strict intolerance which justifies punishing anyone who is perceived to be disrupting the hierarchy.

Since, under these circumstances, the need for a trial before punishment can be exacted should not be understood as a protection from the caprice of a king, Lanval’s despair has implications for my larger argument about intolerance as a form of social control. I believe Arthur’s duty to punish disobedience supports my model of intolerance in that error that could not be corrected was to be exterminated. Thus, it is not surprising that in his despair, Lanval is nearly suicidal (346, 358, etc.), for he recognizes not only that he is presumed guilty but also that he has no way to prove his innocence. The pressure to minimize social disruption suggests that this poem hinges tacitly on a paradigm similar to the one Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury describe in their philosophical writings. For example, this scene in “Lanval” mirrors Abelard’s willingness

S’il ne s’en peot en curt defendre,
Il le ferat arder u pendre. (325-28)

[The King was angry, to the core. / His oath against Lanval he swore: / In court he’d prove he was no liar, / Or else he’d hang, or die by fire.]
to satisfy his superiors, which I took in Chapter 2 to be strong evidence that intolerance and the threat of violence were effective means for producing conformity. (The constant threat of violence seen in the fictional world of romance, reflecting the actual conditions of the High Middle Ages, may also help explain why John of Salisbury has recently been regarded as such a radical thinker for having argued in favor of reason over violence.) The regularity in this poem of these expressions of intolerance in the service of enforcing conformity is mirrored by Lanval’s view of his own culpability in creating the conditions that lead to his anguish. Understood this way, Lanval’s distress at the impending punishment for having betrayed his duties to his king and to the fairy may be said to reflect the relentless pressure to conform in the society for which this poem was originally written.

Having a trial as the climax of a literary work makes for compelling storytelling, but it also implies that there was a possibility (or even probability) in the minds of Marie’s intended audience that Lanval could be (or would be) found guilty and be punished for his disobedience. The events of the trial take place in two stages, providing the dramatic tension for the final third of the poem. Having been accused of insulting the queen (and therefore Arthur), Lanval’s trial raises many issues of his obedience to the hierarchy. Whereas the first part of the poem centers on Lanval’s shift in status as he finds himself first unable and then again able to conform to the social expectations for someone of his rank, the trial sequence examines the allegiances of other knights to Lanval and to Arthur. Marie examines tension between the obligation of the knights to protect a fellow knight they have accepted as one of their own and their obligations to
their king. This is a delicate situation because there is not a “necessary choice” under which they would have one obvious option which would bring the least harm: either way, the knights are bound to cause a disruption to the order.

Elizabeth A. Francis has demonstrated that the trial scene in “Lanval” is modeled on contemporary legal procedure and that Marie draws on legal terminology; she shows, moreover, that by placing the poem in the context of other contemporary fiction, it is clear that Marie uses this legal terminology in a much more technical sense than other writers (120). The Duke of Cornwall’s statement, according to Francis, illuminates the poem’s central problem of whether Lanval should be brought to trial:

it turns upon the pronouncement that ‘Nus ne l’apele fors le rei’ and that strictly speaking the case should lapse—except for the fact that a vassal should never take any action which can reflect upon the prestige of his overlord. Lanval’s claim of the great beauty of his mistress belittles the queen. The ‘law’ assigned to the defendant is the ‘waging of an oath’ to produce a ‘warrant’. It is in effect to produce the fairy, either as ‘warranty’ or ‘warrantor’. (123)

For this reason, Francis explains, when the fairy “does appear, it is not merely her presence, and appearance, which fulfils the task set to the defendant. She makes a formal statement, asserting that Lanval’s ‘denial’ is true. This seems to be exactly the function, in many actual cases, of an overlord” (123). Although Arthur is motivated by anger that his wife has been insulted (325, e.g.), under the model of intolerance I am seeking to build through this project, where conformity is achieved through intolerance, he is clearly justified in pursuing legal action against Lanval.

Lanval is charged, in effect, with treason for having insulted the queen. Arthur takes this insult as an affront to his royal dignity and appears to prosecute Lanval with the
codified intolerance known as *lèse-majesté*, the crime of violating majesty. He appears before the king, sorrowful, silent and unspeaking; Arthur then accuses Lanval of doing him a great wrong by shaming and reviling him and insulting the queen. He charges Lanval with boasting foolishly, repeating Lanval’s defense to Guinevere that his lover’s lowest maid is more beautiful than Arthur’s queen:

> Il est devant le rei venu;  
> Mut fu dolent, taisanz e mu,  
> De grant dolur mustre semblant.  
> Li reis li dit par maltalant:  
> ‘Vassal, vus me avez mut mesfait!  
> Trop començastes vilein plait  
> De mei hunir e aviler  
> E la reïne lendengier.  
> Vanté vus estes de folie;  
> Trop par est noble vostre amie,  
> Quant plus est bele sa meschine  
> E plus vaillanz que la reïne.’ (359-70)

[Mute, he stands before the King; / In his sorrow, he can’t say a thing, / But his sorrow is obvious. / The King speaks, angry, malicious: / ‘Vassal, against me is your crime! / You acted like a peasant this time. / You debase me, shame, demean / Me, by slandering my Queen! / Madness, foolishness to boast / A lover nobler than we’ve ever seen, / Whose chambermaid would seem the most / Fair and worthy, beside the Queen!’]

Lanval denies this dishonor and shame, stating that he had not requested the queen’s love; he maintains that his statement was truthful and cites the punishment of losing his love that he is already enduring:

> Lanval defent la deshonur  
> E la hunte de sun seignur  
> De mot en mot, si cum il diest,  
> Que la reïne ne requist;  
> Mes de ceo dunt il ot parlè  
> Reconut il la verité,  
> De l’amur dunt il se vanta;  
> Dolent en est, perdue l’a. (371-78)

[Lanval begins his own defense: / Against his lord’s honor he’s made no
offense; / He refutes, word for word, / The demand for love the Queen
says she heard. / But as for what he said afterwards, / He admits the truth
of those words, / How he boasted of love and his lover— / It grieves him
now; he’s lost her forever."

Francis has noted this is one of the passages laden with contemporary legal terminology
(117-18), and in her translation of the poem Judith Shoaf notes at this point that “the legal
power of sworn testimony was very great; Lanval could clear himself of the Queen’s
charges simply by denying them under oath, though he did not dare deny the truth about
his beloved” (11). I would take this a step further and propose that Lanval’s precarious
position leaves him with few options. Read in the context of my model of intolerance, it
appears that he is unable to deny the charges under oath, as Shoaf has suggested, because
that would mean accusing the queen of lying; such a move also implies an attack on
Arthur (to whom Lanval has been publicly and privately loyal throughout) and would
necessitate even greater consequences to Lanval.

Arthur’s initial desire to have Lanval executed (328) is tempered by a legal
system in which error is examined and documented before it is corrected or removed. As
Francis explains,

Although Arthur vaguely threatens hanging and burning, he quite
normally refers the case for judgment. The court made up of vassals in the
household decide there is a case to be heard, but that it should be for the
court with full attendance of vassals to give the ‘medial judgment’. When
this court meets, [. . . ] [those] who think there is a case are those who
seek royal favour (presumably those earlier described as maliciously
disposed from jealousy of his personal qualities). (122-23)

Despite the possibility that political allegiances could diminish Lanval’s chances at
having a fair trial, by ensuring that Lanval has his day in court (389), the legal system
provides a mechanism for dealing with individuals who have apparently behaved
disobediently. Either Lanval must prove that his insult to the queen was in fact truthful and therefore not an insult, or the court must prove that his insult was an act of disobedience so that it can be exposed and eliminated publicly. The theatrics of the trial itself put Lanval on public display; even though he is ultimately—and spectacularly—exonerated, such a trial serves as a warning of the danger of speaking unguardedly to those with power. In other words, the trial serves not only as a test of Lanval’s adhesion, which he is presumed to have failed by virtue of having charges brought against him, but also as a ritual of membership for the other knights.

Through the trial, then, Arthur may be understood to extend a limited form of toleration to Lanval until he is proven either innocent or guilty. On the surface, a system of justice is indeed nothing but a mechanism for tolerance: Lanval’s claim is tolerated until it is proven false, in which case he will be punished, but if it is true, he will continue to be tolerated. However, because Arthur assumes Lanval is guilty, and because a number of the knights are ready to side with Arthur regardless of the evidence, this same trial may also be understood as a method of imposing intolerance that served to enforce conformity by signaling to others that they must never speak truth to power, especially if their statements could be taken as an insult.

The trial thus appears to have served to solidify social cohesion and to reinforce order. Arthur sends for all his men, asking them to advise him on what to do: “Tuz ses hummes ad enveiez / Pur dire dreit qu’il en deit faire, / Que [hum] ne li puis[se] a mal retraire” [“He called a council of all his knights, / To tell him to act within his rights”] (382-84). There is very little choice involved here. Arthur’s power to enforce compliance
is absolute; Marie confirms that they did as he commanded, whether they liked it or not:
“Cil unt sun commandement fait, / U eus seit bel, u eus seit lait” [“The men came to give
advice, / Whether they thought it nasty or nice”] (385-86). They judge that Lanval should
have his day in court, but that he must provide guarantees for his lord that he will await
Arthur’s judgment and return to his presence when a larger court can be gathered (387-
93). In contrast to the start of the poem, when Lanval is all alone with no one to turn to,
now, despite having offended Arthur, Lanval now enjoys higher standing with his fellow
knights. Where the knights initially showed Lanval a stance of resigned acceptance or
passive, relaxed indifference (Walzer’s first and second kinds of tolerance), many of
them now exhibit a stance of openness and respect (Walzer’s fourth kind of tolerance).

In this way, the knights suggest that they have a duty to support Lanval, even if
their first loyalty must always be to their king. For example, after the knights rule that
Lanval must offer guarantees that he will appear in court and Arthur makes the same
demand (397), Gawain offers himself as a guarantor for Lanval, all his companions
following him (399-400). By putting their own reputations and livelihoods on the line to
ensure justice for Lanval, the other knights show that they tolerate Lanval as a peer now
that he is wealthy. While they cannot criticize their superior, neither can they permit
injustice if it can be averted.

The knights’ heightened stance of toleration for Lanval now serves as a contrast
to their obligation not to offend their king. For example, the knights appear to show
genuine compassion for Lanval, checking in on him each day to make sure he is drinking
and eating, fearing that he might harm himself:
Chescun jur l’aloënt veer, 
Pur ceo k’il voleient saveir 
U il beüst, u il mangast; 
Mut dotouent k’il s’afolast. (411-14)
[Every day at his house they’d meet, / Checking on him, just to find / If he’d drunk water, if he’d still eat; / They feared Lanval might lose his mind.]

This display of loyalty to Lanval comes at no cost of loyalty to the king. The same knights who at the start of the poem overlooked Lanval because he had been unable to meet his obligations now treat him as a true equal deserving of their support. Their acceptance of Lanval extends so far that Marie states a hundred of them would have done everything to free him without a trial: “Jeo quid k’il en I ot teus cent / Ki feïssent tut lur poeir / Pur lui sanz pleit delivre aveir” [A hundred knights or more, I guess, / Would have done anything for him / So he could walk free away from this case] (420-22).

These knights have now moved at least to Walzer’s fifth level of toleration, the enthusiastic endorsement of difference, and, possibly, beyond toleration, to enthusiastic endorsement of his character, at the high end of Laursen’s scale. Marie emphasizes their loyalty to Lanval, a bold move on their part since the knights have no way of knowing that Arthur is in the wrong. At this point she reminds her readers that Lanval has been very wrongly accused (“Il iert retté a mut grant tort”; 423). Given that Arthur embodies order in his realm, Lanval’s insult must be taken as an affront to the hierarchy that Arthur and his knights are responsible for upholding. Again, it seems remarkable that the knights fully trust Lanval at his word when their king, Arthur, does not, and so this may be read as evidence that the trial is not entirely for show, and instead that it may have sought to serve justice based on the facts and not solely on a ruler’s whims.
In this scene, Marie presents a test of tolerance, or as Walzer says, a test of adhesion, by pitting knights against one another. Some side with Lanval, and others with Arthur. The possibility of an evenhanded trial is all the more striking in light of the several reminders that Marie drops in these passages calling attention to Lanval’s former status as an outsider. She notes, for example, that he is once again alone in great distress, with no family or friends: “Lanval fu sul e esgaré, / N’i aveit parent nē ami” [“Lanval’s alone, lost, without access / To parents or friends who might avail”] (398-99). Just as the trial is about to begin, she reiterates that the knights sit in judgment, worried and dismayed over the nobleman from another country who was in so much trouble amongst them:

Il sunt al jugement alé,
Mut sunt pensifs e esgaré
Del franc humme d’autre païs
Quë entre eus ert si entrepris. (427-30)
[They have gone to find their verdict / But they wonder, a little panicked / About this noble foreign knight / Who finds himself in such a plight.]

I believe this should simultaneously be read in two ways that might appear to be contradictory. First, the knights are deeply troubled that Lanval, whom they have come to value and has earned their loyalty, is in so much trouble. However, as Arthur’s vassals they also owe their king their unwavering loyalty. Therefore, it is not surprising that some of the knights do not support Lanval because doing so would come at the cost of their loyalty to King Arthur.

The rift that forms during this ritual of membership, as Walzer would put it, points to the boundaries of tolerance. Indeed, the factions that soon form point to the problem that it is impossible to be wholly loyal to two or more parties at the same time.
Just as Lanval cannot serve both Guinevere and Arthur, or Guinevere and the Fairy, the knights of the jury owe their allegiance to Arthur but also to each other (including Lanval). Obviously, their commitment to Arthur comes first, but, given the degree of intolerance of various kinds of error and disobedience in the Middle Ages, it is noteworthy that they give Lanval the benefit of the doubt and, in so doing, could be said to take his side rather than their king’s side. Kong has speculated that when the peers eventually decide to exonerate Lanval, “it would seem that his former good deeds cancel out the accusation of the queen” (43), though we can see their toleration (or even endorsement) of him is only part of the equation. Additionally, the poem calls far greater attention to Lanval’s advocates than to those who are not prepared to defend him if it will make them appear disloyal to their king. Marie devotes just two lines to the important point that many indeed want to damn Lanval in order to please their lord: “Encumbrer le veulent plusur / Pur la volenté sun seignur” [“More than one is ready to bring / Him in ‘guilty,’ to please the King”] (431-32). However, these two lines fit in well with the overwhelming other evidence that suggests they owe blind allegiance to their king.

In contrast, Marie writes an extended speech, in the mouth of Cornwall, defending the need for Lanval to have his day in court. Even though Cornwall is attempting to persuade his fellow knights to give Lanval the benefit of the doubt (which implies they are inclined not to give him such an advantage and instead side with Arthur), the imbalance in the pacing of the poem gives the impression that fairness to Lanval trumps the whims of an angry monarch. Cornwall notes, for example, that nobody besides the king is accusing Lanval (443) and that the reason for the case is doubt over Lanval’s
loyalty, which he can discharge by swearing an oath (446-50). Even as he alludes to the danger of dishonoring Arthur by not trying Lanval, Cornwall risks his own reputation to stand up for his peer. I believe Cornwall may not be taking as great a risk as Marie suggests, however. I wish to argue that he is secure in advocating the trial because either outcome will please Arthur: no matter the outcome of the trial, intolerance of disobedience will be reinforced. If Lanval is found not guilty, there was no disobedience in the first place. But if he is found guilty, Lanval will serve as an example to others of the price of disobedience.

This is the poem’s clearest statement of how courtly culture works. I believe this event, understood as a ritual of membership, helps clarify how intolerance in the Middle Ages may have served as an early precursor to censorship because it serves to silence dissent. Arthur does not tolerate insults to Guinevere and insists that the knights judge Lanval, assuming that he will be convicted and exiled. The knights agree that if Lanval spoke the truth, Arthur must grant him mercy, or, in other words, tolerate him. In this way, those knights who want to ensure Lanval a fair trial may also be said to tolerate the court’s own code of honor; those who are eager to consent to Arthur’s wishes without hearing any evidence are equally strong evidence of a culture of intolerance that valued coercive rituals of membership more than it valued the tolerance expected in courtly culture.

Cornwall further proposes that if Lanval cannot produce his fairy lover as proof that he meant no harm to Guinevere and was simply telling the truth when he
inadvertently insulted her (451-56), he loses his right to serve the king and must be exiled:

E s’il ne peot garant aveir,
Ceo li devum faire saveir:
Tut sun servise pert del rei,
E sil deit cungeer de sei. (457-60)
[But if he can’t prove his defense / Then we must pronounce this sentence: / He loses his right to serve the King, / And the King will send him packing.]

While this falls short of Arthur’s initial desire to have Lanval executed, it is nevertheless a sufficiently severe punishment that the knights agree to it. The knights’ decision is in harmony with the modes of correcting or eliminating error seen elsewhere in this poem. When Arthur’s men demand that Lanval provide proof that he does, in fact, have a lover more beautiful than Guinevere to prove that his speech was truthful, Lanval is unable to prove his innocence by summoning his lover because he has broken his pact with her.

Marie draws out the pretrial tension over the next seventy-five lines (471-546), during which time two beautiful maidens appear, dressed exquisitely, and who are initially mistaken for Lanval’s lover (471-82). However, Lanval truthfully states that he does not know them or where they come from or where they are going (483-84). They address Arthur, requesting that he prepare suitable lodging for their lady, a request which he willingly grants (485-97). Even though the presence of these maidens would seem to confirm the truth of Lanval’s boast for which he is standing trial, he has neither satisfied the knights’ stipulation that he produce his lady nor, upon their return, does he even claim to have known or loved them (525-26). The maidens cause quite a commotion, stalling the trial and irritating Arthur and Guinevere (545-46).
The fairy appears of her own volition, contrary to her threat that Lanval would never see her again should he violate her demand of secrecy. While readers expect lovers to be reunited at the end of a romance, the fairy’s return is especially important in this poem because she is material evidence in Lanval’s trial. Her appearance on his behalf suggests that she is more justified in exonerating the false accusations against him than in keeping her promise to punish him for betraying their secret. She tolerates his lapse of judgment in a way Guinevere does not. The sequence describing the arrival of the maidens and the fairy accounts for over ten percent of the poem’s total length; in addition to drawing out the tension generated by the trial, it also introduces the new possibility that Lanval might be acquitted after all.

The passages in which the maidens and then Lanval’s fairy lover arrive have little to say about tolerance or intolerance beyond the courtesy, which I have argued is a form of toleration, displayed by visitors at Arthur’s court (490, 533, e.g.), as well as the reciprocal courtesy Arthur extends to the visitors (495, 538-40, e.g.). Such actions are expected of those of such a station. However, that the knights are unable to control themselves because they are distracted by the maidens suggests a failure to adhere to courtly conventions and to Arthur’s wishes that they proceed with the trial. Arthur expresses his anger—that is, his intolerance towards them—and they fall into line and resume the trial (499-506) only to be interrupted yet again by the maidens’ return. I believe that Arthur’s need to enforce order in this way is suggestive of my model of intolerance. The third time the knights are about to make a ruling, they are once again interrupted, finally by the arrival of Lanval’s lover. Hence, although Arthur appears to
have trouble controlling his men in the presence of the beautiful maidens, it is significant that the knights are serving in the context of a trial, a public display that serves to reinforce Arthur’s absolute power over his kingdom.

It is my contention that forms of intolerance, and limitations on tolerance, served as more effective controls than censorship during the Middle Ages. One manifestation of this pressure that arises in this scene is related to intolerance which sought to stifle political speech, but instead of preventing people from saying certain things, this force pressures people into saying certain things. I wish to argue that Arthur’s attempts to compel the knights to speak so as to arrive quickly at a decision—before Lanval can be exonerated—may be seen as a form of intolerance related to censorship. The arrival of the maidens creates the possibility that Lanval might be acquitted, a situation that would not reflect well on Guinevere or Arthur; Guinevere pressures Arthur, who in turn pressures the knights, into returning a guilty verdict. Censorship implies preventing the dissemination of certain ideas, but in this scene I believe the related intolerance manifests as Arthur’s attempt to control speech in an affirmative, rather than negative, manner.

Thus, rather than being compelled not to speak in a certain way, I think there may also be a case to be made for intolerance that serves to shape discourse as conditions under which a person can be compelled to speak in a certain way, to take a position with which they may disagree, or to speak when they may prefer to remain silent. As I see it, this sort of intolerance generally has the backing of institutional force, and it is most apparent in legal settings, as it is here, where one can be compelled to offer testimony against one’s will, but it is also familiar in military contexts where there may be a
requirement to say things in a particular way, as well as in the classroom, where students may feel compelled to say “the right thing,” even if they disagree with their teachers, in order to get a good grade. Such compulsory speech and acts are common in “Lanval,” and as I will argue in Chapters 4 and 5, in the English Middle Ages these signal limitations on choice that, I maintain, served to promote conformity. In “Lanval,” Guinevere and the fairy queen use their power to prevent the circulation of rumors about them which could detract from their status. Whereas the women deploy intolerance that resembles more traditional censorship by punishing those who reveal their secrets, King Arthur may be said to use his power to compel speech in order to pressure his knights into making decisions that would reaffirm his power by depriving Lanval of a fair trial.

In just under a hundred lines Marie quickly wraps up the lai by publicly reuniting the lovers and thereby resolving the trial. The romance has, as expected, a happy ending. She devotes considerable time to describing the fairy queen’s beauty and the reaction her beauty provokes (547-92). The resolution is the most overtly romantic portion of the poem, as the subject in distress is rescued from trouble, the couple leaving Arthur’s kingdom. To be sure, gender roles are reversed, with the knight being rescued by his fairy queen. The poem ends before Marie explores the ramifications of her tidy ending, or before showing, perhaps, Guinevere suffering for the trouble she has caused through her slanders. The fairy queen, like the old hag in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale, is utterly in charge. She asserts a position of equality or even superiority over Arthur, explaining the situation to him in such a way that she can assure Lanval’s release but she conspicuously avoids exposing Guinevere’s lie. She addresses Arthur, telling him that she has fallen in
love with one of his vassals, Lanval, who was accused in his court: “Reis, j’ai amé un
tuen vassal: / Veez le cil ceo est Lanval! / Acheisuné fu en ta curt—” [“O King, I have
loved your vassal / This one, here! I mean Lanval. / In your court he’s accused of a
crime”] (615-17). Moreover, she informs Arthur that she doesn’t want Lanval to suffer
for what he said, explaining that Guinevere was wrong and that he never asked for her
love:

Ne vuil mie que a mal li turt—
De ceo qu’il dist; ceo sachez tu
Que la reïne ad tort eü:
Unques nul jur ne la requist. (618-21)
[I didn’t want him to have a bad time / For what he said; all along, / You
know, the Queen was in the wrong; / He never asked anything of her.]

In Burgwinkle’s view, Lanval’s “only victory is to leave this court that has betrayed him,
to disappear from sight in death or into the other world,” adding that this “flight from his
oppressors is both a victory and a defeat” (164). I hope I have not given such a dark
reading of this poem, but rather that I have shown how Lanval was able to move from a
low level of toleration at court to a high level of toleration, even if his reward of escaping
with the fairy means he must leave this court that has come to tolerate him at such a high
level, where many of the knights appear willing to tolerate Lanval to a higher degree than
they do their king. Nevertheless, in the context of my model of intolerance, I want to
stress how important it is that Lanval must stand trial for telling the truth about
Guinevere, and that in the end he must leave, whether in exile or elopement.

Lanval’s fairy lover is unchallenged when she asserts that Guinevere had lied
(620-21) and that Lanval was telling the truth in his boast (622-24), a sign that she is
tolerated to a high degree. Her testimony is accepted, and thus Arthur directs his men to
fully exonerate Lanval (625-29). Even so, it is also striking that the fairy queen does not expose the whole truth about Guinevere, instead providing only as much information as is necessary to ensure Lanval’s release. Whereas the fairy’s pact of silence with Lanval cannot be understood as censorship (because she is acting as an individual rather than as the representative of an institution), it appears that the fairy may be subject to a form of intolerance that limited her speech when she speaks in Arthur’s court (which is an institution). She withholds evidence of Guinevere’s treasonous attempt to seduce Lanval. It appears that such speech may not be acceptable in the world of “Lanval,” not only from disgraced (but loyal) knights like Lanval, but perhaps even from powerful sovereigns like the fairy queen who would stand to lose nothing by speaking unpleasant truths to Guinevere and Arthur. In that sense, the fairy may be understood to tolerate Guinevere’s errors at a much lower level than she tolerates, or even endorses, Arthur’s authority. However, such tolerance might also arise from a mutual interest in not undermining the authority of a fellow queen, especially in a way that might disturb the peace of the realm. Ultimately, this poem offers no evidence for formal censorship even as it offers many clues about related forms of intolerance that limited speech and behavior.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have drawn on Walzer’s five-point scale of toleration, which ranges from resignation to difference for the sake of peace, to a passive indifference to difference, then to a principled recognition that others have rights, next to openness or even curiosity, and finally to an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (10-11). I introduced a sixth kind of toleration in Chapter 2, whereby difference could be
tolerated by emphasizing common ground so as to minimize the perception of difference. However, I do not believe there is evidence here to support my common-ground model. The dominant mode of enforcing conformity in this poem is intolerance, not tolerance. Indeed, despite the seemingly ubiquitous intolerance in “Lanval,” I now wish to argue that this poem suggests—though it does not fulfill—a seventh kind of toleration we can add to our modification of Walzer’s scale: the acceptance of someone as a peer for having met the expectations of sameness. However, this kind of toleration should not be understood as Walzer’s highest level of tolerance, the “enthusiastic endorsement” of difference (11). It is acceptance not of error or of difference, but of error or difference that has been corrected so that it is no longer unacceptable or intolerable. This form of toleration is the lack of disobedience, and it appears to be the goal of the intolerance we have seen in “Lanval,” even if it is unfulfilled in this poem. For instance, the knights who come to Lanval’s defense may be taken as evidence that Lanval has attained this form of toleration, but the knights who remain loyal to Arthur may be taken as evidence that this form of toleration is limited, as well. I want to stress that this seventh kind of toleration I am proposing, which is a form of acceptance, is far from an endorsement of difference. It remains an expectation of conformity.

In Chapter 2 I proposed a model of intolerance in order to conceptualize how intolerance may have functioned in the Middle Ages, a context where, my reading of “Lanval” now suggests, Walzer’s scale of tolerance may lead us to find inflated evidence of toleration. I believe that Walzer’s scale and my model of intolerance, taken together, contribute to our understanding of forces that exerted pressure resembling censorship in
an age before censorship in its recognizably modern form. In “Lanval,” we have seen various forms of intolerance, including tremendous social pressure to conform as well as threats of physical and legal coercion. While pacts of silence between private parties should not be considered censorship, other forces resembling censorship appear to pressure individuals to speak, or not to speak, in certain ways. Codified intolerance, including the medieval statutes known as Scandalum Magnatum and the crime of violating majesty known as lèse-majesté, further helps explain why slander is pursued with such fervor in this poem.

In this chapter, I have argued that coercion, a powerful force in “Lanval,” hinges on social and legal pressures which serve to enforce various pacts, some public, others private, some voiced, others tacitly understood. Although it is Guinevere’s prerogative, through her husband, to make Lanval suffer publicly for speaking improperly against her privately, Lanval’s private pact with the fairy also leads to public consequences, both positive and negative, for the knight. Lanval’s interactions with both women suggest that Marie’s original audience may have accepted that those with power were justified in punishing their inferiors who speak improperly, even if they were telling the truth. Moreover, the circumstances leading up to the trial underscore Lanval’s disadvantage in relation to his superiors: he is tolerated at a much higher degree when he is rich than when he is unable to give gifts, but even at the trial many knights are prepared to grant Arthur’s wishes and deny Lanval justice. Lanval prevails in court when his fairy lover arrives to prove that he was not a liar or traitor. As a whole, these events point to a
program of relentless intolerance that served to silence any comments that were unflattering to royalty.

When I proposed my model of intolerance in Chapter 2, wherein conformity was achieved by relentless intolerance, I argued that the writings of Marie’s contemporaries Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury suggest that even limited forms of toleration disguised coercive force with the aim of protecting the peace of the community. The tension of “Lanval,” I have argued in Chapter 3, arises when the actors fail to adhere to the strict rules of medieval society. Marie depicts a conflict that could have been avoided by respecting limitations on speech. Read in this way, I believe the poem implicitly but compellingly makes a case for my model of intolerance.

Ultimately, “Lanval” is concerned with finding the truth and controlling how it is understood, frequently by restricting access to important pieces of information, much as it had been in the philosophical works I considered in Chapter 2. The narrative context is secular, however, not as it was for Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury, whose writings were religious and philosophical in nature. Marie’s poem has offered an opportunity to examine their contemporary philosophical attitudes in fiction. As I read this poem, both the structure and the thematic content of “Lanval” depend on facets of intolerance that help point to the roots of censorship. Thus I believe that Marie’s romance has been a fitting foil for the direct commentaries of Peter and John. Additionally, John of Salisbury and William of Ockham both hailed from England, and since Marie’s contemporary John had studied on the Continent but wrote advice specifically for those at English courts, his
contributions to my model of intolerance have offered the more direct connection to Marie’s work.

Burgwinkle draws on a number of John of Salisbury’s texts to argue that, in John’s view, “any knight or monk who shows less than complete regard for the established order, or who is led by personal ambition more than institutional allegiance, is liable to be ostracized, excluded, and, in many cases, sacrificed” (201). He concludes that Attacks on any class of individuals within a culture always point to deeper, perhaps unacknowledged, cultural conflicts that feed into a climate of sacrificial violence. Such a climate is attested to in the somewhat obsessive associations made between sodomy, heresy, foreign mores, and infidels that one finds throughout the century. (201)

Burgwinkle here is summarizing his findings about sodomy and charges of improper sexual conduct in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, issues we have seen are relevant to “Lanval.” While I think his reading of John is somewhat forced at times, his conclusions provide a useful context for my reading of “Lanval.” Burgwinkle’s brief but rich discussion of this poem centers primarily on Guinevere’s accusation that Lanval does not take any interest in women. “Fellow knights might be more tolerant, or even indifferent,” he suggests of Lanval’s outburst of self defense, “perhaps because they do not necessarily see themselves as the objects of his desire. Men seem to like and admire Lanval, especially once he is rich” (163). Although Burgwinkle writes about Lanval in a sexual context, his reading of this poem illuminates many facets of the poem relevant to my arguments about intolerance and political disobedience more broadly.

In “Lanval,” as in John of Salisbury’s Polericicus, error manifests primarily as political disobedience, and, moreover, various forms of difference and nonconformity
that might not appear to be political in nature on their surface are nevertheless understood in this poem as political disobedience. The *Policraticus* stresses the importance of conformity that served to maintain order. Conformity is also important in “Lanval,” wherein Marie suggests that there is little room for disobedience that could disrupt the social hierarchy. As I hope I have shown, disobedience is tolerated only when those with power lack the social and legal force to impose their will. Their tolerance is not the result of belief in political freedom or even a preference for avoiding confrontation that would disturb the peace. To the contrary, rather than forbearing error, those with power seek to eliminate error by shunning those who failed to conform and by pursuing them with legal action and a strict interpretation of the law.

Much of the tension in “Lanval” arises from threats to order in society, by which I mean disturbances both to the civil peace and to the social structure. As I see them, the key concepts in “Lanval” I have investigated in this chapter are linked by their connection to the concept of the “Great Chain of Being.” In his book on the subject, Arthur O. Lovejoy argued that the strict hierarchy of medieval and early modern Europe had its roots in an idea dating back at least to Aristotle. According to Lovejoy, from the Middle Ages through the late eighteenth century,

many philosophers, most men of science, and, indeed, most educated men, were to accept without question—the conception of the universe as a ‘Great Chain of Being,’ composed of an [ . . . ] infinite, number of links ranging in hierarchical order from the meagerest kind of existents, which barely escape non-existence, through ‘every possible’ grade up to the *ens perfectissimum* [ . . . ] between which and the Absolute Being the disparity was assumed to be infinite—every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the ‘least possible’ degree of difference. (59)
An Aristotelian idea recast for the Middle Ages by the Christian Stoic philosopher Boethius, the Great Chain came to represent harmony both in nature and in politics. It helps explain why Marie’s first readers would expect, for example, that Lanval should face punishment for what seems like a very minor error of speaking the truth to deflect a slander against him. It also serves as a powerful reminder of the rigidity of medieval English society, which we will see in the Middle English poetry represented in Chapters 4 and 5. *The Parlement of Foules* in particular, is notable because that poem is about animals, lower on the chain than humans but standing in for them. Chaucer himself had translated Boethius and he even includes a long quotation centering on the Great Chain drawn from *The Consolation of Philosophy* at the end of the *Knight’s Tale*:

> The Firste Movere of the cause above,  
> Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,  
> Greet was th’effect, and heigh was his entente.  
> Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente,  
> For with that faire cheyne of love he bond  
> The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond  
> In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee… (2987-93)

Just as the four elements of fire, air, water, and land were ordained to their places in the universe, so too was man. In this way, the Great Chain provides additional support for understanding how Marie’s poem deals with error and difference, and how her approach coincides with, but in some ways differs from, the philosophical stances forwarded by her contemporaries Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury. All would seem to agree that intolerance, including forms of intolerance resembling censorship, was necessary for preserving every type of order ordained by the Great Chain of Being.
John of Salisbury had argued that there are limits to freedom of speech, even within the licensed criticism of Saturnalia (*Policraticus* 7.25). He explains that there were two imperatives in criticizing one’s superiors: first, that the master must not be offended, and second that any criticism must serve the public utility. Arthur’s actions against Lanval suggest that John’s view was radical even despite his moderation, for the central conflict of “Lanval” emerges when the king takes offense at a comment that was not even intended as criticism. Lanval’s alleged insult could, however, be seen as serving the public utility in that by declining Guinevere’s treasonous proposition, he reaffirms his allegiance to Arthur. Moreover, even though Lanval is initially treated as an outsider, he is not a political or religious dissenter: to the contrary, he strives to conform and is eventually accepted even after he is falsely accused of treason. It is appropriate that Lanval ultimately leave Arthur’s realm, a convention of the genre of romance but also a signal that peace has truly been restored to the land. The desire to eliminate disobedience and error in Marie’s account of one fictional English court is in harmony with the contemporary philosophical literature by Peter Abelard and John of Salisbury. The social order is ultimately and expensively maintained. It is a victory for intolerance.
CHAPTER 4
INTOLERANCE AND LIMITATIONS ON CHOICE IN
MIDDLE ENGLISH LITERATURE

In Chapters 2 and 3 I have advanced a model of intolerance in medieval England which I will now test against some representative examples of Middle English poetry, one of elite literature and one of popular literature. I will examine limitations on choice to look for further evidence of intolerance that might help point to the roots of censorship. I will ask whether the purpose of intolerance, including forms of censorship, is to limit the range of possible thought and therefore restrict the range of available options upon which one could act. In “Lanval” we saw how one fictional knight, an outsider, moved from limited toleration at court to earning the endorsement of his peers. However, we also saw that this innocent knight faced the threat of execution for having insulted the queen and king. In this chapter I will again look for vacillations in degrees of toleration and of persecution. The first poem I discuss is Geoffrey Chaucer’s Parlement of Foules (ca. 1380), which is not overtly a political poem but which, I will argue, comments on political matters: through the devices of the dream vision and the beast fable, Chaucer is able to address a number of sensitive subjects obliquely. The Parlement of Foules has been regarded by many as a satire on courtly love, and thought by some to be a commentary on the negotiations in 1380 for the hand of Anne of Bohemia in marriage by Richard II of England, Charles of France, and Friedrich of Meissen. The charm of
Chaucer’s approach both softens and elevates the social, political, and philosophical commentary of the poem.

I will then explore how intolerance and persecution related to new legislation of censorship manifest in an overtly political satire written in response to the late fourteenth-century heretical sect led by John Wycliff (ca. 1330-1384) pejoratively known as Lollards. These heretics were perceived by religious and secular authorities alike to threaten the religious and political unity of England, and new measures of intolerance against them were imposed beginning with the Blackfriars Council of 1382, affirmed by an act passed by Parliament in 1401 known as the *De heretico comburendo*, and perhaps most famously by the Constitutions of Oxford under Archbishop Thomas Arundel in 1409. The satirical anti-Wycliffite poem *Defend us from all Lollardry* is emblematic of the outpouring of religious and political intolerance that arose in reaction to a failed rebellion in 1414 led by John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham.

The works I consider in this chapter encompass a range of responses to speech and freedom, ranging from constraints on free choice in the *Parlement of Foules* to heresy in *Defend us from all Lollardry*. The first poem is an examination of constraints on choice in a political setting and has clear if understated links to its contemporary social context, while the second poem, written in response to the 1414 Wycliffite insurrection, comments directly on heretics and the threat they posed to the peace and safety of the realm. Both of these works deal with the concepts I have referred to in Chapter 3 as “necessary choice.” I will consider ways that these works may signal limitations on choice such that only one option could be favored. In the *Parlement of*
Foules, Chaucer points to necessary choices related to good governance of human society as well as to natural imperatives which help ensure harmony in the world. In its intolerance of heresy and treason, Defend us from all Lollardry suggests that the necessary choice is to avoid any contact with heretics; in the eyes of that poet, an important necessary choice is to subject heretics to intolerance and persecution for one’s own sake, not theirs. In this chapter, then, I will ask how limitations both on tolerance and on choice might clarify my model of intolerance in an age of mounting persecution.

More specifically, I will again draw on Michael Walzer’s and John Christian Laursen’s scales to attempt to quantify the relative degrees of tolerance and intolerance within these poems to draw conclusions about the authors’ respective societies. Recall that Walzer proposes five kinds of toleration: resignation to difference for the sake of peace; a benignly relaxed, passive indifference to difference; a principled recognition that others have rights; openness or even curiosity; and finally, an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (10-11). As we have seen, his scale does not always account for the range of tolerance and intolerance seen in the Middle Ages because all five positions allow for the continued existence of difference. In response, Laursen has written that “Walzer’s second, fourth, and fifth kinds of tolerance take us too far away from the semantic field in which tolerance is best understood” and so he proposes a simpler scale which places “organized, systematic, violent persecution” at one end and “respect, endorsement, and celebration” at the other (3). Especially in my discussion of Defend us from all Lollardry, Laursen’s scale will be more useful for examining the degree of intolerance and persecution (both of which fall below Walzer’s scale) found in that poem. In these ways,
I will be looking for evidence of intolerance, and limitations on tolerance, which might point to controls that may have been more effective than censorship in enforcing conformity.

**Choice in Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules***

Dating from around 1380, Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* is a dream vision in which the narrator falls asleep while reading Cicero’s “The Dream of Scipio” (1-119) and is subsequently guided by Scipio through a garden and a temple (120-308) to a parliament where birds must choose their mates (309-679). Within the parliament, three tercel (male) eagles make speeches about their worthiness as they vie for the formel (female) eagle (414-83), but their debate is interrupted by the squawking of smaller birds (491-518). Nature intervenes and directs the birds to help the formel to make her choice (519-616). Unable to reach a decision, the formel requests waiting another year to select her mate (638-58). The other birds, however, are permitted to pair off by mutual agreement (666-72). Although it is set in winter and its reference to St. Valentine is widely regarded as the first such association of St. Valentine’s day with love, the poem ends with an ode to summer (673-92). The eagles are unable to reach a decision within the dream, and the birds’ singing awakens the narrator, who says he will always keep reading books (693-99).

In applying Walzer’s five-point scale of toleration to the *Parlement of Foules*, and in considering ways in which his and Laursen’s scales might help further illuminate our understanding of medieval tolerance and intolerance, I will be looking for events Walzer might describe as individual choices and performances such as acts of adhesion,
participation in rituals of membership and worship, and enactments of cultural difference (31). I see four main events in the Parlement of Foules that present tests of tolerance: 1) the frame of the poem including the account of the “Dream of Scipio,” the test of passing through the gate into the garden and then into the temple; 2) the opening of the parliament in which the birds must choose their mates, up through the tercels’ speeches and the formel’s lack of response; 3) the disorder which arises in the parliament in which the lower birds are charged with helping her choose; and 4) the conclusion, where the formel requests another year to decide while the lower birds pair off in enthusiastic compliance with Nature. As in Chapter 3, depending on whether we use Walzer’s scale or Laursen’s, some of these events may lead to different interpretations of tolerance and intolerance. Since these tests of adhesion are all about choice, I will further be asking what these events can tell us about my concept of necessary choice as a manifestation of intolerance in the Middle Ages. While the poem lacks, perhaps, enactments of cultural difference, I will argue that all four of these events point to rituals of membership and acts of adhesion specifically to Nature’s laws.

Chaucer uses the opening to frame the question of choice and destiny. However, in the opening frame of the poem, and in the subsequent part of the dream before the birds convene to choose their mates, Chaucer does not show many choices. But that is not to say that he does not comment, however indirectly, on the nature of choice. I will argue that because this lack of choice in the first part of the poem presents imperatives rather than tests of adhesion or rituals of membership, the opening frame is suggestive of a
stance of intolerance. What evidence there is in this poem of tolerance will be found in the tests of adhesion and rituals of membership within the birds’ parliament.

The narrator describes the contents of Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio.” As Bruce Kent Cowgill has noted, “the reputation of Scipio as a prototypical temporal leader was traditional by the fourteenth century” (316). In his dream, Scipio is visited by his late grandfather, Scipio the Elder, who answers his grandson’s questions about life after death. He explains that “oure present worldes lyves space / Nis but a maner deth, what wey we trace; / And rightful folk shul gon, after they dye, / To hevene” (53-56). He further describes how men who live virtuously, serving the “common profit” (“commune profyt”; 47 and “commune profit”; 75), will find “the wey to come into that hevene blisse” (72). This idea of a “way” (54, 72) suggests a path with a defined starting point, a defined route, and a defined ending point. The Christian implications of this philosophical guidance mirror constraints on choice I will describe in greater detail in my discussions of anti-Wycliffite rhetoric and of the morality play Mankind. The main idea Chaucer repeats from Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio” connects living virtuously to serving the “common profit” and being granted one’s heavenly reward, while “brekers of the law” and “likerous folk” will “whirle aboute th’erthe alwey in peyne” after they die (78-80). By emphasizing the need to choose the general welfare over one’s own, Chaucer may be suggesting that the only good choice is to stay on the right path, or, in other words, make the “necessary choice.”

After describing the contents of the “Dream of Scipio,” the narrator, “wery of my labour al the day, / Tok reste, that made me to slepe faste” (93-94). Then, he notes that
everybody’s dreams, including his own, are apparently beyond their control, deriving from their awake desires:

The wery huntere, slepynge in his bed,
To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon;
The juge dremeth how his plees been sped;
The cartere dremeth how his cart is gon;
The riche, of gold; the knyght fyght with his fon;
The syke met he drynketh of the tonne;
The lover met he hath his lady wonne. (99-105)

Chaucer suggests a sense of inevitability here, which he signals both in the narrator’s falling asleep and in his dreaming about Scipio the Elder after reading Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio.” Sleep and dreams, like much of waking experience, seem to be constrained by occupational imperatives (whether to rest after “labour al the day” of reading Cicero, or, as we will later see, of the birds to choose a proper partner in order to reproduce) and may involve little choice despite the semblance of options.

The idea of a way or path to heaven then reappears several stanzas later as part of the dream. Fast asleep, the narrator dreams of a garden, Scipio the Elder as his guide. They stop at a gate with two competing inscriptions, one inviting and the other terrifying (127-40). The first promises a utopian place where “grene and lusty May shal evere endure” (130), while the second, an allusion to Dante’s Gate of Hell, threatens “Disdayn and Daunger” to those who enter (136). To choose one is to choose the other, but choice appears to be further limited, for the first inscription reads, in part, “This is the wey to al good aventure” (131). Though “aventure” can also refer to a chance occurrence or a quest, among other things, the MED cites this instance of “aventure” in the Parlement of Foules in the sense of “fate, fortune, chance; one’s lot or destiny,” a context consistent
with my understanding of “wey” as a path where there are no options beyond the option
whether or not to proceed. Indeed, having been shown the gate of Nature’s garden, the
speaker must choose whether or not to enter:

    For with that oon encresede ay my fere
    And with that other gan myn herte bolde;
    That oon me hette, that other dide me colde;
    No wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese
    To entre or flen, or me to save or lese. (142-47).

This is, I believe not coincidentally, the first and only time Chaucer uses the word
“choose” in this poem outside of the context of the parliament. While the fear of making
the wrong choice implies that he has a choice, the speaker is warmed by the prospect of
choosing correctly but paralyzed by the possibility that he could make the wrong choice.
Unable to make up his mind, “Affrycan, my gide, / Me hente and shof in at the gates
wide” (153-54). Thus the choice is made for him when Scipio the Elder grabs him and
shoves him through the gate. He easily passes this test of adhesion by surrendering his
choice to his guide. Rather than choosing, he is compelled in a rather comic way.

    After Scipio the Elder shoves the narrator through the gate, Chaucer provides a
lengthy description of the utopian gardens typical of romance, replete with references to
painting and history (169-308). Peace and patience rule the garden, which is a tranquil
scene of birds, (190), rabbits (193), and deer (195). The garden is peaceful because
Nature’s law is tolerated at a high degree, perhaps even endorsed:

    Of instruments of strenges in acord
    Herde I so pleye a ravyshyng swetness,
    That God, that makere is of al and lord,
    Ne herde nevere beter, as I gesse.
    Therwith a wynd, unnethe it myghte be lesse,
Made in the leves grene a noyse softe  
Acordaunt to the foules song alofte. (197-203)

The presence of harmonious sounds in the garden is aligned with Chaucer’s description of the harmony in nature associated with the Great Chain of Being, which I discussed at the end of Chapter 3. There seems to be little choice but to follow Nature’s law; the result is order and beauty. In contrast, the temple is associated with disharmony. Outside the temple, women dance ceaselessly; “some of hem were gay; In / kertels, al dishevele, wente they there: / That was her offyce alwey, yer by yeere” (232-36). Inside the temple, desire, sadness, anger, and frustration reign:

Withinne the temple, of sykes hoote as fyr  
I herde a swogh that gan aboute renne,  
Whiche sikes were engendered with desyr,  
That maden every auter for to brenne  
Of new flaume; and wel espyed I thenne  
That al the cause of sorwes that they drye  
Cam of the bittere goddesse Jeloyse. (246-52)

The temple, then, represents a place where choice can lead to discord and genuine discomfort. The disorder within the temple contrasts with the peace in the surrounding gardens. The temple may thus also mirror the “necessary choice” in the earlier “Dream of Scipio” by showing the consequences of bad choices as an inducement to make good choices. On the other side of the temple, the narrator describes another tranquil nature scene to round out the triptych as he returns to the garden to give himself some solace (265-97) after the disturbing encounter he had within the temple:

Tho was I war wher that ther sat a queene  
That, as lyght the somer sonne shene  
Passeth the sterre, right so over mesure  
She fayrer was than any creature.
And in a lunde, upon an hil of floures,
   Was set this noble goddesse Nature. (298-303)

The presence of the goddess Nature in the serene garden would seem to affirm the
Boethian view that peace is maintained through strict adherence to the hierarchy of the
Great Chain of Being. There is little opportunity to test one’s adhesion to these rules:
Chaucer suggests that peace arises from adherence to Nature’s rules and that disorder
arises from a failure to adhere to Nature’s rules. The necessary choice is the one that
leads to harmony rather than discord.

Thus, early in the poem Chaucer hints that some choices may be limited sharply:
if there is a choice, the only decision may be whether or not to proceed in the first place.
Further evidence for such a reading comes from an Old English sense of the word
“choice,” which according to the *OED* could mean “to take, accept, or embrace what is
offered; not to refuse,” rather than the later sense of proceeding by one’s own accord.
Implicitly, I wish to argue, Chaucer signals that many choices in the late Middle Ages
may have been understood more precisely as paths (or ways) where the only decision was
whether to proceed, rather than as choices with options. In this way, the first part of the
poem suggests a stance of intolerance, where free will is constrained for the sake of the
greater good.

Chaucer’s approach to choice in this poem contrasts sharply between the first
part, where there are deep limitations on choice, and the later dream vision of the
parliament, where choice is the central concern because the context is a parliament in
which birds must choose their mates. However, as I will discuss, the birds’ choices are
also limited, for the females can only have males who have first chosen them, while the
males can only have females who agree to their request. Further, the birds are constrained by other natural imperatives: a sparrow cannot choose a hawk, or an eagle a dove; the lower birds cannot choose their mates until those above them have chosen theirs. Thus, the second major test of tolerance or ritual of membership in this poem concerns the mating ritual held every year on the same day. The birds’ parliament begins with an announcement that “this was on Seynt Valentynes day / Whan every foul cometh there to chese his make” (309-10). The birds are compelled, in a nice irony, to choose their mates. Chaucer commits four stanzas (337-364) to describing the assortment of birds at the parliament, with the birds of prey at the top and then descending in rank according to the Great Chain of Being: waterfowl, worm-eating birds, and seed-eating songbirds at the bottom. He concludes the introduction of the birds thus:

What shulde I seyn? Of foules every kynde
That in this world han fetheres and stature
Men myghten in that place assembled fynde
Byfore the noble goddesse Nature,
And ech of hem dide his besy cure
Benynely to chese or for to take,
By hire acord, his formel or his make. (365-71)

All of the birds must choose a mate or accept the offer by their own accord, which they do graciously. Chaucer deploys the words “choose” (146, 310, 370, 388, 399, 400, twice at 417, 623, and 631) and “choice” (406, 408, 649) in the seven stanzas in which Nature describes how the birds will choose their mates (365-413). Nature reiterates in a variety of ways the role the birds play in choosing their own mates. Her attention to the ritual—and the birds’ eagerness to carry it out—emphasizes the role of choice (and therefore of
tolerance) in this part of the poem, which stands in contrast to the lack of choice (and therefore to the role of intolerance) we saw in the first part of the poem.

For example, just as there is perfect balance in Nature (379-81), Nature instructs the birds to choose their mates:

‘Ye knowe wel how, Seynt Valentynes day,
By my statut and thorgh my governaunce,
Ye come for to cheese—and fle youre wey—
Youre makes, as I prike yow with plesaunce…[’] (386-89)

They are compelled to accept Nature’s law (“statut”; 387) and rule (“governaunce”; 387) and are consequently filled with pleasure (389) and therefore anxious to mate. But though they have been struck with love and will be able to choose their mates of their own accord, the lower birds must nevertheless wait to choose their mates until the higher birds have made their choices. One further rule that Nature says applies to all the birds equally is that all must agree to the choice; the tradition is that the choice is valid only by mutual consent:

‘But natheles, in this condicioun
Mot be the choys of everich that is heere,
That she agre to his eleccioun,
Whoso he be that shulde be hire feere.
This is oure usage alwey, fro yer to yeere,
And whoso may at this tyme have his grace
In blisful tyme he cam into this place!’ (407-13)

Nature permits choice in mating, even if there is an element of chance (“hap”; 402), which means that some might “wynne or lese” (402). Though the imperative to mate may be seen as (pleasantly) coercive, the imperative is limited by the fact that choice is valid only with consent. This element of freedom suggests, I think, a stance of tolerance within a framework of coercion.
The main action of the parliament centers on the formel eagle, who has three suitors. Each of the three tercel eagles gives a speech explaining why he is the most suitable mate for her. These males too are ranked. The royal tercel, who speaks first, twice acknowledges the role of choice in his attempt to woo the formel, drawing on Nature’s language in the previous stanza:

‘Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,
I chese, and chese with wil, and herte, and thought,
The formel on youre hond, so wel iwrought,
Whos I am al, and evere wol hire serve,
Do what hire lest, to do me live or sterve…[’] (416-20)

The royal tercel gives a lengthy speech, four stanzas compared to the two allotted to the second tercel or the three allotted to the third. In it, he acknowledges in several ways that the choice is ultimately up to the formel he is courting, and he shows his deference to her. His speech ends by offering her the opportunity to speak her mind (441). However, the formel does not accept him right away, instead blushing and saying nothing:

Ryght as the freshe, rede rose newe
Ayeyn the somer sonne coloured is,
Ryght so for shame al wexen gan the hewe
Of this formel, whan she herde al this;
She neyther answerde wel, ne seyde amys,
So sore abasht was she, tyl that Nature
Seyde, ‘Doughter, drede yow nought, I yow assure.’ (442-48)

Nature restores order, and the next tercel has his chance to speak. Neither the second nor the third tercel acknowledges the formel’s choice as a consideration, each instead simply attempting to make the case that he loves her most (449-83). They are puffed up and, as we will later see, belligerent. Their tolerance for Nature’s rules is limited by their own desire to prevail. The speeches go on all day:
Of al my lyf, syn that day I was born,
No gentil ple in love or other thyng
Ne herde nevere no man me beforne—
Who that hadde leyser and connyng
For to reherse hire chere and hire spekyng;
And from the morwe gan this speche laste
Tyl dounward went the sonne wonder faste. (484-90)

The royal tercel would seem to be favored because he is the only one who accommodates Nature’s wishes, but the others give good speeches, as well, and the formel ultimately does not make her choice. Nature seems to tolerate her refusal to choose (or participate in this ritual of membership and test of adhesion) much more than the lower birds, who have been pricked with plesaunce (389) and are eager to choose their mates and participate in these rituals for themselves.

The eagles’ debate is interrupted by the clamor of all of the lesser birds who are growing impatient to choose their own mates (491-518). Eventually Nature intervenes and brings order to the parliament by proposing that each of the four orders of birds send a representative to help the formel eagle make her choice. This portion of the parliament is the third major test of adhesion in the poem. Before the lower orders of birds can pair off, the eagles must first choose their mates. The lower birds tolerate Nature’s command, easily at first, but eventually only grudgingly. In Walzer’s paradigm, they could be said to move from his fifth kind of tolerance, an enthusiastic endorsement, to perhaps his third kind, a moral stoicism, a recognition that others have rights, even if they exercise them in unattractive ways (10-11). Their outburst, followed by Nature’s need to restore order, suggests that the lower orders of birds assent to Nature’s rules at all times, though with varying degrees of enthusiasm and tolerance.
Though each of these representatives sent to help the formel eagle select her mate is chosen by assent of his or her peers, collectively they are unable to reach a mutual agreement about a solution for which tercel the formel eagle should choose as her mate. Since all three suitors have offered good reasons to be chosen, the falcon, representing the birds of prey, suggests that it seems there must be a battle among the three tercel eagles (539), who respond in unison “Al redy!” (540). However, the falcon stops them from fighting on the grounds that the matter is out of their hands: all three have expressed their interest in her, and it is now up to the other birds to help her decide since she was unable to choose for herself. The falcon is attempting to enforce Nature’s rules on his superiors. The falcon adds that in his opinion, the formel already knows who she should pick, the highest-ranking of her suitors, the royal tercel:

‘And therefore pes! I sey, as to my wit,  
Me wolde thynke how that the worthieste  
Of knyghthod, and lengest had used it,  
Most of estat, of blod the gentilleste,  
Were sittyngest for hire, if that hir lest;  
And of these thre she wot hireself, I trowe,  
Which that he be, for it is light to knowe.’ (547-53)

The falcon’s recommendation deploys a number of words suggesting that knowledge should guide the formel, but his suggestions favor procedure and tradition over other choices, even if he admits that the choice is ultimately hers. The falcon brings the situation no closer to a resolution, which has the effect of gently satirizing the female further for her inability to make a choice even when the options are clear. The falcon thus points to adherence to Nature’s law as the means of maintaining order, but at the same time he shows deference to, or toleration of, the will of his superiors.
The waterfowl send a goose as their representative, who advises, “But she wol love hym, lat hym love another” (567). The goose’s statement that the tercel should choose someone else if the love is not mutual is in close harmony with Nature’s earlier explanation of how mates are to be chosen, whereby each bird must accept by mutual assent the offer proposed. Nevertheless, the goose is ridiculed by the sparrow-hawk (568-74) in an *ad hominem* attack, and “laughter aros of gentil foules alle” (575). The goose’s opinion is thus ignored even if it is the recommendation that Nature will later permit the formel eagle to pursue. The seed-eating turtledove speaks next, offering the opposite opinion from the goose: “‘Nay, God forbede a lovere shulde chaunge!’” (582). The turtledove argues that the tercels should continue offering their love regardless of the coldness of the formel. She adds that “Though that his lady everemore be straunge, / Yit lat hym serve hire ever, til he be ded” (584-85). The turtledove again advises against the goose’s advice and instead counsels that “though she deyede, I wolde non other make; / I wol ben hires, til that the deth me take” (587-88). A duck, in turn, ridicules the notion that “men shulde loven alwey causeles” (590). The duck’s opinion that there are more stars in the sky than just one pair (595) is dismissed by the falcon as unbefitting the situation of these high-ranking eagles (596-602). In an effort to speed things along so he can choose his own mate, the cuckoo, representing the worm-eaters, says that the eagles should remain single if they cannot choose a mate (603-09). The merlin, a small falcon, pipes up to insult the cuckoo and tell him that *he* should remain single (610-16). Even as the debate deteriorates and the lower orders of birds take out their frustration on each other, they nevertheless tolerate the various frameworks Nature has established for them
to follow. The parliament fails to advise the formel eagle on which of her three suitors she should accept as her mate. The pragmatic view of the lower orders satirizes the folly, indecision, and preciousness of their betters. The lower orders do business in a business-like way; only the dove is idealistic. Again, the birds begin at a high level of toleration of Nature’s rules but, as debate continues, they move to a middling form of toleration but one that is still clearly on the spectrum of tolerance. Nature steps in to restore order.

Thus the main action of the “parliament of fowls” centers on a frustrating attempt to choose a mate for the highest-ranking of the birds. The aristocratic eagles are gently satirized, she for her indecisiveness and they for their puffery and belligerence. The final test of adhesion or ritual of membership is when the birds must finally choose their mates. The formel eagle tolerates Nature’s law on her own terms, while the lower birds enthusiastically endorse Nature’s rule. In the end, Nature reaffirms her initial stipulation that the formel eagle must make her own decision: “That she hireself shal han hir eleccioun / Of whom hire lest; whoso be wroth or blythe, / Hym that she cheest, he shal hire han as swithe” (621-24). Nature adds that there is no reason in love, pointing out the folly in using reason to determine which tercel loves the formel the best (624-30). For the first time in the poem, the formel voices her opinion, which comes in the form of an unusual request to Nature: “‘Almyghty queen, unto this yer be don, / I axe respit for to avise me, / And after that to have my choys al fre” (647-49). Nature consents, and the formel eagle is permitted to have another year to choose her mate. Though the formel eagle does not choose her mate this year, the dream vision ends with the all the other birds choosing their mates “by evene acord” (667), flying away with their partners.
Though it falls below the choosing of the mates as a conclusion to the dream, Chaucer says that before the birds fly away they sing an ode to summer (680-92).

In the end, the lower birds are clearly at the high end of both Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales. They enthusiastically endorse Nature’s rules and show deference to the natural order, even if Nature has made the lower orders aroused and therefore, at times, impatient with the eagles’ prolonged ritual in their own desire to mate. In their deference to Nature when she steps in to restore order, the lower birds would seem to fulfill my seventh kind of toleration, described in Chapter 3 and unfulfilled in “Lanval,” wherein the goal is acceptance by being brought into conformity rather than a celebration of difference. Here, the birds’ conformity, or acquiescence, may be seen as a commentary on the lack of choices for the lower orders of humans even as they take an interest in those above them. The poem ends when the narrator awakes from his dream and vows to return to his books (693-699).

Clearly, those with more power have more options, but even those with power are subject to a number of constraints: those with power, like those without, Chaucer seems to be saying, must nevertheless tolerate many constraints that are beyond their control. All must make necessary choices. The contrast between the lack of choice in the frame of the poem and the emphasis on choice in the dream vision of the birds raises a number of issues about Chaucer’s intended commentary on the nature of choice and free will in the Parlement of Foules. First, I will offer some historical context to help explain, for example, why the formel eagle should have three male suitors and is permitted, as one of her options, to choose none of them until the following year. Then, I will examine more
closely the language Chaucer uses to propose that even within the parliament, choices may be more limited than they appear on the surface.

Larry Benson set out in 1982 to restore the view, once commonly accepted, that the *Parlement of Foules* is an occasional poem concerning “the negotiations for the marriage of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia; in the gathering of birds Anne is represented by the formel eagle and her three suitors—Richard, Charles of France, and Friedrich of Meissen—by the three tercel eagles that plead for the formel’s hand” (123). Chaucer’s own role in previous marriage negotiations for Richard adds further evidence for such a reading:

Efforts to obtain a bride for young King Richard had been continuing since 1377 when Chaucer himself took part in the negotiations that were intended to lead to the marriage of Richard and Princess Marie of France. The princess, however, died in the following year, and attention turned to Milan, where the question of Richard’s marriage to Caterina, daughter of Bernabò Visconti, lord of Milan, apparently came up on Chaucer’s second Italian journey. (136)

Benson explains that “Bernabò offered the hand of his daughter and an enormous dowry, and in the summer of 1379 an embassy was sent to Milan with full power to sign the marriage contract” (136). The political situation arising from the Great Schism caused this arrangement to fall through. Other brides were suggested, including the daughter of Chaucer’s friend and patron John of Gaunt, the king’s uncle. However, “the people insisted that a foreign princess be found, and emissaries were sent to seek the hand of Anne of Bohemia” (137). Such an arrangement was politically strategic for a number of reasons. Anne’s father, Charles IV of the House of Luxembourg, had been crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1355. According to Benson,
The House of Luxembourg, whose offer of Anne to Richard in 1377 had been brusquely refused, was now of great strategic importance both to England, which could deprive France of an ancient ally, and to Rome, since a union between England and the Empire would effectively surround Clementist France with Urbanist powers. (137)

But, as Benson writes, the emperor “was in a position to drive a hard bargain. Charles V [of France] had tried to prevent the match by offering his own daughter to Richard, but that offer was refused, and so Charles [V of France], having failed to gain Richard as a son-in-law, proposed his own son, the future Charles VI, as a suitable match for Anne” (137). Meanwhile, “Anne already had another suitor, Friedrich of Meissen, to whom she had been betrothed since 1373” (137). Thus after her father died and her brother Wenzel took over the negotiations, when “he finally agreed that Richard should have Anne, he did not even have to offer a dowry; instead, to the great scandal of the chroniclers, Richard had to pay him 20,000 florins, plus a loan of 60,000 more” (137). In Benson’s reading of the poem, then, “Anne had three suitors who fit the roles of the three eagles very well and among whom, according to the fiction of royal marriages, she had her free choice” (137). They were the ‘royal tercel,’ King Richard II; the ‘thridde tercel,’ the future Charles VI of France, who was not royal because his country’s crown was claimed by Richard and who was unable to boast of ‘long servyse’ since he had entered the competition only after Richard’s embassy had begun negotiations; and Friedrich of Meissen, ‘of lower kynde’ because he was only a princeling and neither heir nor claimant to a kingdom. (137-38)

Given these circumstances, Benson suggests that the Parlement of Foules may be read as a sort of coterie poem about a situation with which Chaucer was intimately involved.

Benson suggests that Chaucer and his peers “must have found the whole business slightly amusing.” But the poet shielded the king from satire. “What satire there is in the birds’
parliament is directed at the lower orders, impatient to get matters settled and not quite able to comprehend the more refined feelings of their betters” (138). Benson draws on a variety of evidence to show that this poem was most likely written in 1380, before any marriage arrangements had been finalized, which explains why the formel eagle does not make a decision (138). Nobody knew with certainty what the outcome would be.

While the historical context of the Parlement of Foules offers a satisfying explanation for many of the poem’s most unusual features, this poem is clearly more than a commentary on royal marriages or even a satire on love, or on parliaments. Although the choices most clearly represented in the poem are those of marriage and love, Chaucer may also be commenting on the philosophical problem of choice more broadly. Kathryn L. Lynch has shown the Parlement of Foules to be “a literary treatment of problems of the will” (85). By reading the poem “within the full context of late medieval voluntarism,” she believes that “the actions of narrator and formel, taken together, balance pessimism with optimism,” adding that “they do at least as much to affirm as to deny man’s independence, however limited the sphere in which it operates, although it is not until late in the poem that the full measure of either the formel’s or the narrator’s freedom emerges” (86). Lynch argues that Chaucer disputes a view forwarded by, among others, Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine, who, she notes, “relentlessly chipped away at man’s free will in order to exalt God’s omnipotence and omniscience” (86). She points to Chaucer’s reference to him in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale as evidence of his knowledge of the debate, even if he “does not betray a clear attitude to the archbishop” (87). While on the surface her argument is convincing, I do not believe the evidence fully bears it out. The
necessary choices in the frame of the poem would seem to contradict her view, and, as I will discuss, the historical context of the allegory shaped the choices available to the birds who represented historical figures. As I now wish to argue, I find, to the contrary, that Chaucer was himself subject to a number of constraints that meant, whatever his own views on the subject of free will, he inevitably mirrored existing (and therefore conservative) norms, such as those advocated by Archbishop Bradwardine.

In “Lanval,” we saw a range of tolerance on Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales in response to various tests of adhesion and rituals of membership; the trial scene in particular showcased a climate of intolerance which, I argued, served to enforce conformity. In the Parlement of Foules we again have legal language set in a parliament, another legal forum. However, this time there is no trial. Since parliaments meet for the purpose of making laws and to advise the monarch, it is not surprising that the language of choices and decision-making in the Parlement of Foules often invokes legal terms. I hypothesize that this connection between choice and legal terminology may point to limitations on choice. For instance, the terms in this poem are concerned not only with the individual and group acts of making decisions (choice, choose, conclusion, deem, elect, entente, judge, judgment, sentence, termyné, verdict, will), but also with the preceding descriptive and evaluative process (define, devyse, discrete, know, opinion, proof, reason), and, ultimately, with the imposition of the decision on the one hand (audience, authority, governance, parliament, will) and the personal acceptance of a particular resolution on the other (accept, accord, assent). On the surface, Chaucer’s use of legal terminology suggests the importance of reason, logic, and evidence in decision-
making; I will be asking whether the lexical evidence signals that many decisions might have few real options and could therefore be understood as “necessary choices.”

After the narrator falls asleep but before the parliament convenes, Chaucer begins deploying legalistic language more frequently. Here, as we have already seen, choice is understood not as a range of options but as a decision to proceed down the path into his dream, with the fear of erring a main consideration: “No wit hadde I, for errour, for to chese / To entre or flen, or me to save or lese” (146-47). As Scipio the Elder shoves him through the gates he says that the warning in the inscription does not apply to him “Ne by non but he Loves servaunt be” (159). Although the speaker of the poem has lost his sense of love, “Yit that thow canst not do, yit mayst thow se” (163). Scipio the Elder compares this to a man unable to wrestle himself but who is still able to enjoy watching the sport and judging the wrestlers: “For many a man that may nat stonde a pul / Yet liketh hym at wrastlyng for to be, / And demen yit wher he do bet or he” (164-66). According to the MED, “demen” is a legal word about reaching a decision. It is concerned with passing judgment or rendering a verdict. The MED cites this instance in the Parlement of Foules as an example of acting “as judge or arbiter.” Chaucer’s use of legalistic terms here, though not in a legal context, may signal that there was considerable pressure to make the right decision.

Unlike the frame, which merely hints at legal decisions as they relate to choice, the parliament of birds within the dream is much more forceful in its use of words with legal overtones to describe the process of decision-making. Of the fifteen or so words in this poem that I believe point to the moment of decision (including accord, agree, assent,
choose/choice, conclusioun, demen, devyse, diffyne, eleccioun, entente, juge, jugement, list, opinion, sentence, termyn, and verdit), all except for accord, agree, assent, choose/choice, and list carried legal overtones in Chaucer’s day, as several still do today.

In the *Parlement of Foules* there are four instances each of the most obvious terms, “juge” and “sentence” (although “sentence” is used in its legal sense only twice); three each of “devyse” (which concerns forming an opinion), “eleccioun” and “entente;” two each of “conclusioun” and “verdit;” and one each of “demen,” “diffyne,” “jugement,” and “termyn.” These terms suggest that either expertise, prior knowledge, or factual evidence are required to reach a legal decision such as a judgment, sentence, or verdict.

The more neutral “choose” and its variants, which come up often (more than a dozen times throughout the poem), are also frequently qualified by legal overtones. As we know from the tercel eagles’ plight, expressing a choice does not necessarily mean that one’s preference will be honored.

By deploying so many legal terms in close proximity to words about choice, Chaucer suggests that choices are generally made under some constraints, usually factual, procedural, or legal. For example, choice and election go hand in hand: “this condicioun / Mot be the choys of everich that is heere, / That she agre to his eleccioun” (407-09); the “foules of ravyne / Han chosen fyrst, by pleyn eleccioun” (528-29). Towards the end of the poem, Chaucer uses at least three different legal terms within three lines of the word “choosing”:

For I have herd al youre opynyoun, 
And in effect yit be we nevere the neer. 
But fynally, this is my conclusioun,
That she hireself shal han hir *eleccioun*
Of whom hire lest; whoso be wroth or blythe,
Hym that she *cheest*, he shal hire han as swithe. (617-23, my emphasis)

Nature recognizes the predicament the birds have created by failing to heed her rules, and so she must once again step in to remind the lesser birds that the formel will make her own choice, a choice the others will have to respect. This is similar to an earlier passage, when Nature ends the cacophony of debate by the lower birds:

> ‘Hold youre tonges there!
> And I shal sone, I hope, a conseyl fynde
> Yow to delyvere, and fro this noyse unbynde:
> I juge, of every folk men shul oon calle
> To seyn the verdit for yow foules alle.’ (521-25)

Chaucer in both cases deploys legalistic terms in Nature’s demands that the birds respect her plan for maintaining or restoring order, which they accept: “Assented were to this conclusioun / The briddes alle” (526-27). Thus, even when choice appears to connote free will, in the *Parlement of Foules* choice is nevertheless likely to be constrained. The law of Nature constrains all instinctual forms of life; they operate outside of reason and so Chaucer draws on both natural and human law for his lexicon here.

Even when the only requisite for choosing is having preferences, Chaucer signals circumstantial restrictions on decision making, most importantly Nature’s laws and the role of chance in determining whether we will be granted our choice:

> ‘In every part as it best liketh me—
It nedeth not his shap yow to *devyse*—
He shal first *chese* and spokon in his gyse.
> ‘And after hym by ordre shul ye *chese*,
After youre kynde, everich as yow *lyketh*.
And, as youre hap is, shul ye *wynne or lese*.’ (397-402, my emphasis)
Choices are made according to the natural order, higher birds first, then lower birds. After a choice has been made, Chaucer argues in his typical Boethian fashion, the outcome is up to chance. In this way, Nature enforces, or is equivalent to, the Great Chain of Being, discussed in Chapter 3. Terms like devyse (to inspect or reflect), as well as the concept of winning or losing, further accentuate constraints on the act of making decisions. Later in the poem Chaucer formulates the same idea thus: “Oure is the voys that han the charge in honde, / And to the juges dom ye moten stonde” (545-46), glossed in the Riverside, as “We who have the responsibility for deciding may speak, but you must abide by the judge’s decision.” In both cases, Chaucer implies a lack of agency (that may be seen as slightly coercive in light of the other evidence I have presented in Chapters 2 and 3) when it comes to making and instituting decisions. In this way, Chaucer’s satire on choice in the Parlement of Foules suggests that my model of intolerance, presented in Chapter 2, wherein debate was permitted as a way to enforce conformity, continued to be in force throughout the Middle Ages. Then, as now, one must accept the judge’s ruling. Nature’s order is strictly enforced.

In a passage especially rich in legal language, the narrator appraises that “of al my lyf, syn that day I was born, / So gentil ple in love or other thyng / Ne herde nevere no man me beforne” (484-85, my emphasis). In this poem replete with legal terms, there is surprisingly little evaluation of each tercel’s case, perhaps because the setting is a parliament rather than a trial, although in both instances a decision must be made. Nevertheless, in attempting to enforce Nature’s law, the parliament of fowls must weigh various factors which influence its ability to meet the biological imperative of mating.
For example, chaos first breaks out in the parliament when it becomes clear that pleading without proof—“cursed epleng” (495)—is insufficient for reaching a decision: “How sholde a juge eyther parti leve / For ye or nay withouten any preve?” (496-97). Further, the only other time Chaucer invokes “proof” is the falcon’s epiphany of the lunacy of using reason and evidence in matters of the heart:

Ful hard were it to preve by resoun  
Who loveth best this gentil formel heere:  
For everych hath swich replicacioun  
That non by skilles may be brought adoun. (534-37)

Ultimately, Nature exclaims that “I have herd al youre opynyoun, / And in effect yit be we never the neer” (618-19). The MED confirms that opinion could mean “a person’s belief, conviction, or view” and suggests that superstition can factor into opinion, citing the Parlement of Foules as an instance of the legal sense: “a judgment, decision, or verdict … [a] joint decision.” Thus the unelected birds who had interrupted the statements of the four representatives may be understood to have voiced personal opinions, but it seems that the statements made by those chosen by mutual assent of their peers to represent their order should be understood as carrying the weight of a legal opinion—a joint decision—which the formel is supposed to consider in order to make her choice. However, she does not make her choice other than requesting another year to decide, and Nature says that “If I were Resoun, thanne wolde I / Conseyle yow the royal tercel take” (632-33). But Nature is not Reason, and the choice to accept one of her suitors belongs to the formel eagle alone. Again, Chaucer seems to be pointing out that necessarily emotional decisions cannot be made through logic.
Read as a satire on parliaments, the birds are merely following procedure and still getting nowhere. A great deal of the hilarity of this work arises when each bird’s stance is unwavering (“Kek kek! kokkow! quek quek quek!”; 498) and a group decision can neither be made nor enforced. Within the poem, decisions are rarely imposed; rather, they are either license to proceed or to deliberate further, which in addition perhaps to satirizing the nature of committee decision-making also calls to mind the paradigm for correcting error through debate which we saw in Chapter 2.

The idea of “will,” which occurs fewer than five times in the *Parlement of Foules*, consistently denotes the active carrying out of a choice throughout the poem: “If it be youre wille / A wight may speke, hym were as fayr be stylle” (510-11). Other terms of acceptance or enforcement are more closely aligned with resignation to a decision, but by and large also have legal overtones, such as “accept” (532), “accord” (371, 381, and 668), and “assent” (526, 557). By elevating the natural imperative to mate to a courtly parliamentary debate, Chaucer may be pointing to restrictions on the king’s choice in securing a queen. Just as the male birds declare their choice in females, but the female must accept the offer in order for the match to be successful, Richard II could not marry Anne without her consent. In this poem all [males] may choose but nobody can be sure what he or she will get; many [first] choices may not be granted. While Richard may not have had much of a choice in choosing his queen (since his marriage would need to be the most politically advantageous he could secure), the ease with which the lower birds pair off may point to greater freedom of choice for those of lower rank in choosing their
mates. While the formel eagle would seem to be charged with choosing freely whom she loves and will marry, in reality she is a pawn in a game of political chess.

Inasmuch as the Parlement of Foules is a poem about choice, it is not necessarily about the deep restrictions on choice I initially hypothesized we might find below its surface in the legal terminology Chaucer uses so frequently in proximity to other language about choice. I believe the most straightforward reading is the one I have discussed above, offered by Benson, which dates the composition of the poem to around 1380 and which understands the beast fable to be a commentary on the marriage negotiations between Richard II and Anne of Bohemia. Nevertheless, other readings also point to evidence for limitations on choice that may be suggestive of intolerance as a way of maintaining order in society. For example, in his effort to show Ockham’s influence on Chaucer, Russell Peck has observed that “Chaucer’s personas often find themselves in the strange position of knowing and not-knowing simultaneously. Their knowledge obscures truth instead of making it available” (756). He claims that “Chaucer explores this problem in dealing with an obscured truth in all his dream visions,” pointing specifically to the narrator’s going to bed discontented in the Parlement of Foules. Peck writes that the narrator’s situation is not simply a problem of faulty abstraction; it is a problem of fearing to choose at all. To declare oneself is to commit oneself, and what if one should choose wrong? The gate through which the dreamer must pass bears a double inscription, and he, caught between desire and fear, lacks either wit or will to know how to proceed. His dilemma captures admirably the predicament of the contingencies in which the nominalists saw man enmeshed. (756-57)
Ultimately, Peck writes, rather than “simply act, men carry out plans. The problem is brilliantly demonstrated in the debate of the birds at the end of the *Parlement* as the tercel eagles become rhetoricians rather than lovers” (757). On the one hand, the birds’ lack of certainty about what will happen may simply reflect Chaucer’s uncertainty about whom Anne would choose. On the other hand, Peck provides a useful connection to the role of choice in Chaucer’s world, even if it does not hold up entirely to Benson’s historical arguments for the poem. Peck’s interpretation points to limitations on choice in the Middle Ages which, I believe, help affirm my arguments about intolerance more broadly.

Similarly, Cowgill’s reading of the political allegory as mirroring a breakdown in social order more broadly would be convenient for my overarching argument about social order being maintained through coercion. Assuming a date in the early 1380s, rather than in 1380, Cowgill believes that the birds’ squawking may represent the fallout from the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381, since, as he writes, “a complete dissolution of all social bonds loomed as a distinct future possibility” to Chaucer (333). But again, order is relatively stable throughout the parliament, and the bird representing Richard does not swoop in to restore order, as happened with the Peasants’ Revolt, and which would have made a convenient way for Chaucer to ingratiate himself to the king. Nevertheless, Cowgill’s observations are a powerful reminder that these tensions and issues were in the air and that Chaucer did not need to address them pointedly in order to make people think of them.

I will now be asking whether this poem might well be seen as a daring attempt to see how far a poet could go in testing the king’s tolerance. When this beast fable is read
as an allegory about the marriage negotiations between the representatives of Richard II and Anne of Bohemia, intended for an audience familiar with the situation, and perhaps even including Richard himself, the *Parlement of Foules* would seem to point to constraints on criticizing royalty and nobility similar to those we saw in Chapter 3 implicit in the need to prosecute Lanval for a minor insult against the queen. When it is read in this way, I now wish to argue, the *Parlement of Foules* can be understood as a commentary on the limitations in counseling (much less criticizing) one’s superiors.

The beast fable and its ability to charm readers may have allowed Chaucer an opportunity to discuss sensitive political matters without going too far. As Benson points out, the English people were anxious for their young king to marry (138) and produce an heir. While there could certainly have been aesthetic reasons for writing this as a beast fable, it appears that Chaucer may have been exercising some self-censorship by writing about birds who struggle to negotiate their marriages rather than about kings and princesses facing similar problems. Further, my model of intolerance, developed in Chapters 2 and 3, suggests that it was likely safer for Chaucer not to run the risk of commenting openly on these sensitive matters of statecraft. Perhaps the poem could be tolerated if it were putatively about birds and not people, but not if the commentary were less thinly veiled.

And so this poetic convention does not undermine, but indeed may signal, an atmosphere of intolerance of dissent. The smaller birds squawk when they are forced to wait until those above them have chosen their own mates, but through all of the voices in the poem, Chaucer offers primarily praise and only hints obliquely at criticism of the
eagles who represent Anne and her suitors. The various birds cannot agree which suitor
the formel eagle should choose, though the consensus seems to favor the royal tercel.
That Chaucer offers no criticism of any of the eagles may suggest that even with the
literary distance of fable he knew that criticism of nobility was unwise. The strategy of
showing the suitors as more evenly matched has the advantage of reflecting especially
well on Richard in the event that Anne were to choose him; it also suggests that Chaucer
might have wanted to avoid insulting the other two, which could reflect poorly on
Richard in the event that Anne were to choose one of them. Thus, Chaucer suggests in
1380 (two years before the 1382 marriage of Richard to Anne) that if she chose Charles
or Friedrich in the end, it should not be taken as an insult to Richard (whom the poem
favors) because she would have made her choice on emotion rather than reason and so
Chaucer may be understood, preemptively, to be helping Richard save face. The genre of
the beast fable may thus have allowed Chaucer to comment on such sensitive political
matters.

The poem’s consistent flattery of the royal tercel who represents Richard may
further be understood to permit Chaucer greater latitude in writing about the king’s
situation. For example, even Nature herself says that if she were Reason (and not Nature)
she would counsel the formel to pick the royal tercel. He gives the longest, most eloquent
speech, and throughout the poem he is described in the most positive light. Chaucer,
voiced by a variety of birds, by Nature, and by the speaker of the poem, offers repeated
praise for the royal tercel eagle. Even with the allegorical distance of a beast fable,
Richard is extolled, but never criticized, never satirized in any way.
The Parlement of Foules can therefore be read as a manifestation of limitations not only on political speech but also on tolerance, even if it is not a poem openly about these issues. However, there is one important way that this poem aligns thematically with the other works I am considering in Chapters 3 and 4 that does speak directly to our theme of tolerance and intolerance: the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain demanded that each person had a specific role to fulfill and that society could not function otherwise. The emphasis in this poem on rank and proper behavior, as well as Chaucer’s own need not to cross any boundaries in commenting on sensitive political matters, may both be understood as the result of intolerance. Even so, just as the lower orders of birds are dutiful (if not always delicate) in their adherence to Nature’s laws, Chaucer, too, defers to the king’s royal privilege even as he comments on Richard’s situation.

While the Parlement of Foules is not an examination of intolerance in the same way that “Lanval” takes on that issue, it may be read, rather, as a demonstration of the underlying limitations of discourse that served to enforce conformity. The poetic beauty of these works may have helped to pitch heightened fictional worlds as representations of a reality that was understood to be most stable and secure when people acted according to their position in the Great Chain of Being. Indeed, there is considerable emphasis throughout the poem not simply on choosing a mate, but on choosing one by one’s “order,” “kind” or “degree” (370-406). The long passage describing the birds (323-71) follows the hierarchy of the Great Chain, with the birds of prey at the top and the songbirds at the bottom. Despite the attention given to the smaller birds, they are largely a distraction to the business of the formel and the tercels which takes center stage. The
highest-ranking female in the *Parlement of Foules*, the formel eagle, has more options than those below her, including making for herself the option of not choosing any mate at all until the following year. However, all of the birds—even the formel who requests Nature’s permission to defer her choice until the next year—obey or assent to Nature, as when Nature steps in to end the disorder caused by the lower-ranking birds’ attempts to weigh in on matters that do not concern them: “Assented were to this conclusioun / the briddes alle” (526-27). In this way, the emphasis on order and accepting Natural order that permeates this poem is in harmony with the coercive pressure to conform that we saw throughout the philosophical justifications for intolerance in Chapter 2, as they are both closely tied to the Great Chain.

The Great Chain of Being is an especially important constraint throughout the *Parlement of Foules*, perhaps because the future peace of the realm depended on Richard II marrying and producing an heir. In the opening frame where he gives an account of the “Dream of Scipio,” Chaucer described human and cosmic hierarchies, an idea he links in both cases with the concept of “common profit” (“commune profyt”; 47 and “commune profit”; 75). One reason I find Benson’s reading of the poem so compelling is that he, unlike other critics, is able to explain the mysterious prominence of the “Dream of Scipio” in what otherwise appears to be a love poem. Benson argues that Chaucer’s summary of the “Dream of Scipio” and its emphasis on “common profit” served as a sort of “mirror for princes” intended as political advice for a young Richard II (129). Recall John of Salisbury’s comments in *Policraticus* 7.25, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, especially his discussion of the limitations on criticizing one’s superiors even during the
classical license of Saturnalia, where he suggested that in any such criticism, the master
must not be offended and that any such criticism must serve the public utility. That the
public good or welfare of the state is maintained by individual actors submitting to the
natural order of the universe provides an implicit link from John of Salisbury’s twelfth-
century political manual to the late fourteenth-century debate over heresy, as we will see
in the next section.

At the same time that Chaucer entertained his audience with an amusing story
about birds, he was also able to offer advice (and flattery) to a young king through the
charming genre of this beast fable. As such, I believe the Parlement of Foules may be
understood as evidence of self-censorship on Chaucer’s part, a claim that should not be
surprising, given the other evidence I have presented that in the Middle Ages intolerance
may actually have been a more effective control than censorship.

In looking for events signaling individual choices, acts of adhesion, and rituals of
membership, I have argued that Chaucer’s Parlement of Foules points to ready
compliance with the natural order, represented by the Great Chain of Being. The opening
of the poem helped frame the idea that many choices, especially those regarding good
government, were limited in such a way that the only good choice might be considered
the “necessary choice.” The account of the “Dream of Scipio,” the test of passing through
the gate into the garden, and the contrast between harmony in nature and disorder within
the temple, taken together, suggested in the frame of the poem that we are often
compelled to make the right choice even when we appear to have a range of choices. The
dream vision of the birds’ parliament raised three different tests of tolerance related to
choice. First, the birds were compelled to choose their mates and were subject to a number of constraints imposed by Nature. Failure to adhere to Nature’s rules led to disorder, at which point Nature would step in to restore the peace. Second, the formel eagle’s lack of response to the three tercels’ speeches, and her request at the end to have another year to make her choice, suggested that those at the top were subject to a greater latitude of toleration even if they ultimately had to submit to Nature’s law. The royal eagles were satirized for testing the limits of Nature’s toleration, while the lower orders of birds endorsed Nature’s laws and were satirized for letting their own eagerness to mate interfere with their adherence to Nature’s rules. Finally, the lower birds paired off in perfect compliance with Nature’s law, singing an ode to summer before they flew away with their mates. That Nature’s order was enforced throughout the poem would seem to affirm my model of intolerance: the narrator and the birds were all subject to limitations on tolerance that served to protect the peace.

**Intolerance and Persecution in Anti-Wycliffite Satire**

The gentle Horatian satire of the *Parlement of Foules* stands in sharp contrast to the biting, angry, Juvenalian satire written against Wycliffite heretics. One such satire, *Defend us from all Lollardry*, serves to ridicule its targets in a way that Chaucer’s polite, elegant poem does not.¹ The poem centers on John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, a Wycliffite who led a failed revolt in 1414. It was obviously composed before his execution in 1417, as it makes no mention of his death. The poet attacks Oldcastle personally, frequently drawing on a metaphor of an old castle gone to ruin, as well as attacking what he portrays

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¹ As Robert C. Elliott summarizes, “Horatian satire seeks to displace the social mask by the flick of laughter; Juvenalian satire would cleanse a rotten society in the fire of its hate” (115).
as an inevitable downward spiral of social disruption brought on by Wycliffism
generally. The poem consists of 152 lines in nineteen eight-line stanzas, generally
following an ababbcbc pattern. It lacks a narrative and it instead takes the form of
invective. The first four or six lines of each stanza comment on some social, political, or
religious menace presented by a specific Lollard or by Lollards generally, with the
remainder (usually a couplet) attacking Lollardy in coarse language as either the cause or
result of those troubles. Some of these targets include false preaching; forsaking one’s
king; rejecting saints, idols, and pilgrimages; and John Oldcastle himself.

The poem was written in response to John Wycliff’s followers who are generally
(though imprecisely, as Andrew Cole argues throughout Literature and Heresy in the Age
of Chaucer) referred to as Lollards. Cole’s argument for favoring the more specific terms
“Wycliffite” and “Wycliffism” over “Lollard” and “Lollardy” hinges on words like
“Lollare” and “Lollard” and suggests that these concepts were recognizable and
formulaic stereotypes designed to discredit doctrinally unsound beliefs and behavior
(thus, I might add, encouraging conformity). For this, Cole draws on William Langland’s
Piers Plowman, a work containing social and religious satire which exists in three
versions and survives in more than fifty manuscripts. As Derek Pearsall has written, in
the “1370s Langland shared many of the opinions (e.g. on secular lordship, priestly
poverty, disendowment) that came to be specifically identified in their more or less
extreme form as Wycliffite” (Langland 26), but by the time he was revising the poem for
the last time, he sought to distance himself from views that could now be considered
dangerous. “Many interventions in the C-text,” writes Pearsall, “may reflect Langland’s
growing awareness in the 1380s that the Lollards had moved in directions in which he was not prepared to follow them, and his urgent desire to dissociate his poem from the use from which it had been put by the leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt” (9). Cole offers an illuminating reading of Truth’s pardon in passus 9 of the C-text (Literature and Heresy 38-44), which leads him to conclude, among other things, that Langland’s “effort in C is to show that ‘lollardy’ is a construct—an utterance with a politically hostile valence that must be carefully weighed and, if need be, redirected against persons who are thought to be materially or economically unproductive, wasters and friars” (44). He suggests that Langland’s use of such terms draws on contemporary locutions about Wycliffites portraying them “as heretical beings who autochthonically pop out of the ground, ordain one another as priests, and corrupt the faith and realm with their preaching” (44).

However, Cole bypasses what seems to me the most important line, a line which will help us to see the degree of intolerance in Defend us from all Lollardy: “‘Forth lollares that lyuen in sleuthe and ouer-land strikares / But nat in this bulle,’ quod Peres, ‘til they ben amended, / Ne no beggare that beggeth, but yf they haue nede’” (9.159-61). That is, Truth is opposed to those who beg out of laziness, rather than out of true need. The concept of “amendment” occurs at least six times in the 354 lines of passus 9 of the C-text, and Langland appears to understand the term both in a sense of reforming men (16, 160, 238) and of improving hospitals, roads, and bridges in the service of helping others (30, 31, 33). Despite Langland’s sustained attack on those who disobey the Church in this section, he, too, seems to favor “amendment” as a kind of correction or improvement over coercion through violence. Until heretics “amend” their ways,
Langland argues, they are to be condemned by God’s law. Moreover, he suggests that “it is not lawful for you to make the law conform to your will, but (rather for you to conform) your will to the law” (“Non licet uobis legem voluntai, set voluntatem coniungere legi”; 9.213). Heresy is thus understood as willfully making the wrong choice (Cole 39, e.g.). However, Langland also implies that it is possible to make the right choice—what I have been calling the “necessary choice”—even after having first made the wrong choice.

Wycliffism was the most visible heresy in late medieval England, but as Andrew E. Larsen has pointed out, “heresy existed in England long before the advent of Lollards” (59). He writes that from “1160 to 1377, there are at least forty-five recorded cases of an individual or group accused of, investigated for, or punished for heresy or actions or ideas indicative of heterodox belief” (60). By the 1380s John Wycliff and his followers had caused enough of a disruption to warrant new measures against heretics, including formal censorship. According to Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “Wyclif was first brought to trial in 1377, but English political and anti-papal sentiment favored him, and his ideas were not seriously or authoritatively challenged until the Blackfriars Council of 1382” (“Prophecy and Suspicion” 319n). “Literary critics have viewed this event as a defining moment for late medieval writing with the understanding that the Blackfriars Council is synonymous with literary censorship,” writes Cole (Literature and Heresy 3). Kerby-Fulton notes that the Council condemned virtually Wyclif’s entire reformist program [. . . ] as heretical and latently seditious. Many clerics who had flirted with Wycliffism, publicly or privately, now either recanted or made stealthy revisions to their works; by 1389, English translations of the Bible and English interpretive works
were being systematically confiscated and burned, and those who wrote them imprisoned; by 1401, the statute *De heretico comburendo* was in effect, and now not only suspicious books but authors could be consigned to the flames; by 1407 it was an offense to preach the faults of the clergy before the laity; by 1409 virtually any religious literature written in English could be suspect, unless issued with episcopal approval. (“Prophecy and Suspicion” 319n)

Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409 have been regarded as the most draconian of these measures. Nicholas Watson finds that once the effects of Arundel’s Constitutions “had taken hold, the commonest and most influential response to the legislation among writers and their scribes was silent compliance” (831). He leaves no doubt that “the Constitutions worked (as was, no doubt, the hope), not by being wielded in public, but by creating an atmosphere in which self-censorship was assumed to be both for the common good and (for one’s own safety) prudent” (831). Thus by 1409 the mood had shifted from one of relative tolerance of Wycliff’s ideas to one in which heresy was not tolerated.

Despite the severe penalties for those accused of Wycliffism and the hope of “amendment” as a limited form of tolerance that sought to rehabilitate heretics, the sect did not disappear. Indeed, many late medieval English political writings are overtly concerned with the threat of Wycliffism. The short anonymous poem which begins “Lo, he that can be Cristes clerc…” (British Library MS Cotton Vespasian B. xvi. fol. 2v-3r) is emblematic of anti-Wycliffite satire and neatly demonstrates the role of choice and the danger it could pose to society as the sect gained momentum. This obscure poem, which Rossell Hope Robbins entitled *Defend us from all Lollardy* (the title I will adopt), is occasionally mentioned in passing, such as for its punning on “lolle” (to hang limply),
“loller” (a wastrel), and the epithet “Lollard” (Barr 110, e.g.).\(^2\) The poetry is workmanlike, and I suspect it has received so little attention because it is so angry and so intolerant in addition to lacking the refinement of some of the other poetry from this period. As the nineteenth-century historian John Waddington wrote,

> There is no more intrinsic value in these specimens of unintelligible doggerel, than in the rusty and broken pieces of ancient armour to be found in the ruins of a fortress or on the field of battle; but they are memorials of a conflict, the results of which still remain; and we notice them simply to indicate the nature and course of the momentous struggle. (230)

So while the poem has sometimes been acknowledged in the context of Wycliffism, it is of special interest to my project because, as Robbins has noted, it is the only Middle English poem dealing exclusively with the Lollards (332). Additionally, the sole extant copy of the poem was probably made some forty years after it was written, as it appears in a manuscript containing a C-text of *Piers Plowman* and some other anti-Wycliffite texts thought to be contemporary with the events they describe, ca. 1450-58 (Robbins 331). It appears to have been composed by an interested layman rather than an agent of church or state; the poem nevertheless represents the position of the church and the state.

Walzer’s five-point scale has been useful in assessing tolerance in other, more tolerant works. I will now see if it might help us to understand the degree of intolerance in *Defend us from all Lollardry*. Recall that Walzer proposes resignation to difference for the sake of peace, a passive indifference to difference, a principled recognition that others have rights, openness or even curiosity, and finally, an enthusiastic endorsement of

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\(^2\) Wendy Scase, for example, does not cite it at all in her comprehensive study ‘*Piers Plowman*’ and the *New Anticlericalism*, while Cole refers in passing to it in his discussion of Thomas Hoccleve in *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (110) and in a footnote in his article “Langland and the Invention of Lollardy” (55). Others who cite it similarly do so only in passing.
difference as five kinds of toleration (10-11). Laursen, in contrast, suggests a simplified scale which has “organized, systematic, violent persecution” at one end and “respect, endorsement, and celebration” at the other (3). In testing *Defend us from all Lollardry* against Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales, I will again look for events that signal individual choices and performances such as acts of adhesion, participation in rituals of membership and worship, and enactments of cultural difference (Walzer 31). This poem, which points to the central events of Oldcastle’s career, presents four such tests of adhesion: 1) the opening, which introduces Wycliffites as being foolish for persisting in their beliefs even though they will be burned for their heresy; 2) the poet’s attacks on the failed rebellion in 1414; 3) the poet’s condemnation of Oldcastle for his perversion of chivalry, becoming a cleric, and going into hiding; and 4) the danger Wycliffites pose to the pious through iconoclasm. Once again, depending on whether we use Walzer’s or Laursen’s scale, some of these events may lead to different interpretations.

The Wycliffites fail the most important ritual of membership in their refusal to adhere to Catholic doctrine and to obey the laws. Indeed, the entire poem deals with a sense of inevitability of corruption that stems from the misuse of human agency, which, the poet argues, can be avoided by avoiding contact with dangerous knowledge and people. The poet first rants about Wycliffites for persisting in their beliefs even though they know they will be burned for their heresy. The first stanza establishes the poet’s advice not to meddle in Lollardy, whether for lucre or reward:

Lo, he that can be Cristes clerc,
And knowe the knottes of his Crede,
Now may se a wonder werke,
Of harde happes to take goud heede.
The dome of dethe is hevy drede
For hym that wol not mercy crie.
Than is my rede, for mucke ne mede,
That no man melle of Lollardy. (1-8)

Already he announces a stance of intolerance which falls below Walzer’s lowest form of
tolerance. Then, in the second stanza, he professes that he would rather be illiterate than
to learn of Lollardy:

I sey for meself, yut wist I never
But now late what hit shuld be;
And by my trouth I have wel lever
No more kyn than my a, b, c.
To lolle so hie in suyche degree,
Hit is no perfit profecie;
Sauf seker sample to the an me
To be war of Lollardie. (9-16)

Mumbling or lounging idly like a Lollard (“lolle”; 13), he says, is no complete prophecy,
but is instead, a safe, sure example to you and me to beware of Lollardy. One early editor
has suggested amending “profecie” to “polecie” at line 14 (Ritson 105) so that the line
means preaching Wycliffite heresies is an imperfect policy. Such a reading would further
emphasize the poet’s desire for intolerance as a means of controlling heresy and would
point to the poet’s intolerance of what he knows to be wrong. His stance thus falls below
Walzer’s scale of tolerance and at the low end of Laursen’s continuum. The Wycliffites
may be useful as examples of what not to do, the poet suggests, which is why he argues
that the safest option is to be wary of them. If he tolerates them, it is only so that he can
know about them and be skeptical of their ways. This does not qualify even as Walzer’s
resigned acceptance of difference for the sake of peace (Walzer 10). By advising his
readers to avoid contact with Wycliffism, the poet advocates intolerance to an audience
that was likely already sympathetic to intolerance. He fans the flames of intolerance.
Stanza by stanza, the poet enumerates the ways that Wycliffite heretics threaten social and political stability. He attacks them for refusing to accept orthodox teachings, stating, for example, that they are foolish to persist in false beliefs for which they know they can be burned:

   The game is noght to lolle so hie,
   Ther fete failen fondement;
   And yut is a moch folie
   For fals beleve to ben brent. (17-20)

By invoking statutes that signal a shift in the legal climate from intolerance to persecution, the poet seems to accept that those forms of intolerance were the proper response to the threats inherent in the Wycliffite heresy. He could be said to endorse intolerance. The poet implies that heretics should, instead, accept orthodox teachings, or, in the Walzerian paradigm, that they should not persist in their failure to participate in rituals of membership in society. In his discussion of people and acts that test the limits of tolerance, Walzer specifically says these rituals may be religious in nature (31). In criticizing Wycliffites for failing to tolerate orthodox teachings, the poet signals a degree of intolerance on Laursen’s scale, not Walzer’s. The poet further criticizes Wycliffites for their erroneous translation of the Bible. Their failure at that test of adhesion leads them, in his view, to be “lewde” (ignorant):

   Ther the Bibell is al myswent
   To jangle of Job or Jeremye,
   That construen hit after her entent
   For lewde lust of Lollardie. (21-24)

Three of the refrain variants refer to the “lewde lust of Lollardie” (24, 56, and 136), stressing what the poet sees as their ignorant desires. While he consistently attacks the
Wycliffites for what he sees as their willful ignorance, as he states in the second stanza, he prefers to remain unaware of their ignorant ways and thus securely remain one of the orthodox. Additionally, their readings of the Bible are “myswent” (21)—erroneous, literally gone astray. As we will later see, in his view there is little hope for returning these dissenters to the fold. We are securely at the low end of Laursen’s scale, far below Walzer’s scale of toleration.

The next major test of adhesion which the Wycliffites fail, in the poet’s discussion of Oldcastle’s career, is Oldcastle’s revolt and its aftermath. The satiric attacks target heretics generally and John Oldcastle specifically. The secular literature I have already examined stresses the importance of proper behavior and obedience as the means of enforcing conformity and therefore order in society. This poem leaves behind the polite, courtly worlds of “Lanval” and the Parlement of Foules and openly attacks Oldcastle (or, rather, an “old castle”; 33) for betraying the “chief of chivalrie” (30, 94), that is, King Henry V. Like Chaucer in the Parlement of Foules, this poet does not name names even though it is obvious who he is discussing. That his commentary is less thinly veiled may point to the inferiority of his skill as a poet, but it may also point to institutional endorsement of criticism of enemies. After all, the poet, though not necessarily an agent of the church or the state, is espousing official views.

One of the main charges leveled against Oldcastle is his disruption of society by acting on his own rather than according to his station in society:

Hit is unkyndly for a knight,
That shuld be a kynges castel kepe,
To bable the Bibel day and night
In restyng tyme when he shuld slepe;
And carefully away to crepe,  
For all the chief of chivalrie:  
Well aught him to wail and wepe,  
That such a lust hath in Lollardie. (25-32)

The poet frequently attacks Oldcastle for acting improperly for someone of such status, for babbling nonsense about the Bible and then hiding when he is attacked, and for leading a revolt against the king. In an unsophisticated way, he accuses Oldcastle, in effect, of failing to heed his place in the Great Chain of Being. In one such attack, the poet goes so far as to say that

I trowe ther be no knight alyve  
That wold have don so open a shame,  
For that crafte to studi or strive:  
Hit is no gentel mannes game. (73-76)

In earlier works we saw that order was maintained by enforcing conformity to the expectations of the Great Chain; once again, disorder is understood as arising from nonconformity. Chivalric leaders ought not to preach heresy, sneak around, or act against nature. Oldcastle is both unchivalric and cowardly; the poet is intolerant of him for acting so shamefully.

As part of its persecutory stance towards Oldcastle and his followers, the poem abounds with negatives and warnings, which aim to constrain choice and deny toleration. Throughout his accusations, the poet insists that disruption is the unavoidable consequence of falling into Wycliffism. It is safer to avoid contact with corrupting forces altogether, he argues, than to risk one’s soul. Avoiding Wycliffism, then, might be described as a “necessary choice.” The poet’s intolerance for Wycliff and Oldcastle points to social disruption he sees as arising from heresy:
An old castel, and not repaired,  
With wast walles and wowes wide,  
The wages ben ful yvel wared  
With suich a capitayn to abide,  
That rereth riot for to ride  
Agayns the kynge and his clergie,  
With privé payne and pore pride.  
Ther is a poynt of Lollardie. (33-40)

That is, Lollardy leads to riding against the king and the church. The poet advocates intolerance because, in his view, there is little hope for returning these dissenters to the fold; moreover, because of the attempted revolt, the poet says, many men will soon pay dearly for the sins of those involved:

For many a man withyn a while  
Shal aby his gult ful sore;  
So fele gostes to begile  
Hym aught to rue evermore.  
For his sorowe shal he never restore  
That he venemed with envye;  
But ban the burthe that he was of bore,  
Or ever had lust in Lollardie. (41-48)

This error is so gross that the heretic must regret not only his decision to stray, but also the day he was born. The poet fears the Wycliffites’ treasonous nonconformity because of its ability to seduce those who are exposed to it. The best solution is to avoid contact with Lollards so they cannot corrupt you. Since the poet regards the Wycliffites’ error as both religious and political, he argues that the danger they pose is not merely to themselves and their own souls but also to others. He builds on the metaphor of sheep (49) which need to be protected from such “wolfes in her folde” (50), but who are led to ruin by the polluting forces of the ruined castle (Oldcastle) (51-56). Heretics and traitors are dangerous and should not be tolerated because of the threat they pose to the safety of the
community at large (38). There is little room for “amendment,” a signal of increased intolerance.

The poet extends the inevitability of these outcomes to society as a whole, writing, for instance, that Oldcastle literally drags everything down with him:

An old castel draw al don,
Hit is ful hard to rere hit newe,
With suyche a congregacion
That cast hem to be untrewe.
When beggers mow nether bake ne brewe,
Ne have wherewith to borrow ne bie,
Than mot riot robbe or reve,
Under the colour of Lollardie. (57-64)

That is, when a castle drags everything down with it (John Oldcastle falls into heresy and takes people with him), it is truly hard to build it up again with a congregation that requires its members to be false; when beggars are neither able to bake nor brew, nor have the wherewithal to borrow or buy, then they will riot, rob, and steal under the flag of Lollardy. Thus, the poet does imply the existence of choice, but he very much warns against making the wrong choice because one’s choices affect not only oneself but, more importantly, the rest of the community. The poet’s sense that contact with heresy leads to crime suggests that although humans are capable of making choices, in his view their will (or willpower) may be limited. Free will in this poem may be understood to pose a threat to the peace because choice can enable people to go astray and therefore cause harm to others. The poet thus justifies his stance of intolerance and persecution.

The third major failure of adhesion in this poem is when Oldcastle becomes a cleric, goes into hiding, and perverts chivalry. The poet portrays Oldcastle as a coward,
comparing him to a captain who has abandoned his men in battle and who instead sneaks from knighthood into the clergy:

The castel is not for a kynge  
Ther the walles ben overthrowe;  
And yut wel worse abidynge  
Whan the captayn away is flowe,  
And forsake spere and bowe,  
To crepe fro knighthode into clergie,  
Ther is a bitter blast yblowe,  
To be bawde of Lollardie. (65-72)

When this happens, he says, there is a bitter wind blowing to be a pimp of Lollardy. The poet further exposes Oldcastle’s cowardly perversion of chivalry as a stain on his character, a stain which he could have prevented by remaining among the orthodox:

I trowe ther be no knight alyve  
That wold have don so open a shame,  
For that crafte to studi or strive:  
Hit is no gentel mannes game.  
But if hym lust to have a name  
Of pelour under ipocrasie,  
And that wer a foule defame  
To have suyche lose of Lollardie. (73-80)

In other words, he says he believes there’s no knight alive who would have done such an open shame, for aspiring to that craft is not a gentleman’s game—unless he lusts to earn a reputation for accusations of hypocrisy and to deserve wicked defamation and to have such loss because of his Lollardy. This unsophisticated attack on Oldcastle’s failure to adhere to the conventions of the Great Chain is justification, in the poet’s view, for persecuting Oldcastle and those foolish enough to follow him. Peace in this poem, as throughout the literature I am considering in this project, is understood as conformity, which manifests here as a lack of treason, heresy, or other forms of disobedience,
instigated by heretics generally and Oldcastle specifically. According to the poet, Wycliffism leads “saunz faile and saunz doute, / To rere riot and robberie” (85-86).

While Lollards were stereotypically accused of idleness, beggary, and robbery (views which were repeated with such frequency that they were as good as fact), this poem was written in direct response to a rebellion which intended to kill the king. In this context, it is easy to understand why the poet would want to portray Oldcastle as a coward whose fearsome power deserved the intolerance of ridicule. He embodied a genuine threat to the social order—a threat that needed to be controlled, not tolerated.

The poet further attacks Oldcastle’s cowardice and perversion of chivalry for not letting grace be his guide; as a result, the poet says it is right not to suffer (or tolerate) him to roam around at liberty and instead make him hang his head low:

Of the hede hit is las charge,  
Whan Grace wol not be his gide;  
Ne suffre hym for to lepe at large,  
But hevely his hede to hide. (89-92)

The poet endorses the climate of persecution that has forced this traitor into hiding:

Where shuld he other route or ride  
Agayns the chief of chivalrie,  
Not hardi in no place to abide,  
For all the sekte of Lollardie. (93-96)

That is, now that he has been forced into hiding, Oldcastle can only murmur and walk against the king; on account of the persecution of Lollards, he can no longer boldly remain in one place. Even as he condemns Oldcastle’s cowardice, the poet seems to delight in the righteousness of persecuting him and the trouble such persecution brings down upon him.
Heretics are not just harmful to themselves and to their own souls, the poet avers. They endanger the safety of the state and the unity of religious practice. In the fourth test of adhesion in this poem, the Wycliffites are condemned for destroying images the pious need. The poet begins by attacking Wycliffites for not tolerating man-made images and pilgrimages, which they see as nothing but idolatry:

A God! what unkyndly gost  
Shuld greve that God gruced nought.  
Thes Lollardes that lothen ymages most  
With mannes handes made and wrought,  
And pilgrimages to be sought,  
Thei seien hit is but mawmentrie.  
He that this lose first up brought,  
Had gret lust in Lollardie. (97-104)

The poet’s criticism suggests that these Lollards should leave well enough alone, or in other words tolerate these orthodox practices which God never complained about. He is intolerant of their intolerance. He adds, sarcastically, that those who worship a figure made of stick or stone are utterly stupid, yet we should not censure the idea of the image: “Ho wor ful lewde that wolde byleve / In figure maad of stok or ston; / Yut fourme shuld we none repreve” (105-07). As in the previous stanza, the poet is intolerant of the Lollards’ intolerance:

Nether of Marie ne of Jon,  
Petre, Poule, ne other none  
Canonised by clergie;  
Than the seyntes everychon  
Be litel holde to Lollardie. (108-12)

Though these and other saints have been canonized by the church, they mean little to the Lollards. The reason this poses such a problem to the poet is not simply that Wycliffites
quietly reject idols in their own private worship. To the contrary, they defaced a statue of St. James in Kent, causing him to lose his head for a second time:

And namly James among hem alle
For he twyes had turnement;
Moch mischaunse mot him befalle
That last beheded hym of Kent. (113-16)

The poet prays that these Lollards, and indeed all Lollards, should also lose their heads for their iconoclasm:

And alle that were of that assent,
To Crist of heven I clepe and crie,
Send hem the same jugement,
And alle the sekte of Lollardie. (117-20)

The poet’s righteous rage underscores his justification of persecuting these heretics whose practices bring so much harm to others. In short, Wycliffites, acting as individuals, did not tolerate icons but were nevertheless expected to acquiesce to institutional policy that icons were necessary for the pious. The Wycliffites’ intolerance at a personal level was met with institutional persecution.

In the closing stanzas, the poet aligns the acts he has described with cowardice, falseness, frail folly, pride, and willfulness (121-32). He writes that because of the heavy sorrow of sin and shame, [heretics are] so overpowerd with adultery, that false belief is glad to seize upon the lust of Lollardy:

For synne and shame with sorowe strong,
So overset with avutrie,
That fals beleve is fayn to fonge
The lewde lust of Lollardie. (133-36)

It is under the flag of the preachings described throughout the poem that the Wycliffites attempted their insurrection:
And under colour of suiche lollynge,  
To shape sodeyn surreccion  
Agaynst oure liege lord kynge,  
With fals yimaginacion. (137-40)

However, the poet also takes some comfort in his knowledge that by the judgment of
knights and clergy, their cause is devolving into confusion:

And for that corsed conclusion,  
By dome of knighthode and clergie,  
Now turneth to confusion  
The sory sekte of Lollardie. (141-44)

Whereas earlier writers like John of Salisbury and even William Langland could urge the
correction of error, under the mounting threat of Wycliffism, as this later poem
exemplifies, more drastic measures of intolerance, including censorship and execution—
the “double deth” (149) of hanging and burning in the last stanza—might now be needed
to achieve the same ends. But whereas John of Salisbury advocated eliminating the
nonconformist as a last resort, after reason and debate had failed to produce conformity,
this poet is confident that his times called for eliminating the threat as the first line of
defense. Writing in an age of persecution and not simply intolerance, this poet writes
from the side that does the persecuting, implying throughout his poem that these heretics
were a pervasive danger and that they were burning pious, orthodox Christians. It is
striking that the poet is on the side of those who persecute and kill Wycliffites and yet he
is so fearful of their power and appeal that he foments hatred of them. This poem is the
epitome of intolerance slipping into persecution.

As in the earlier works, social peace was understood to flow from a unified
population which honored the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. But, as the history
and literature against Wycliffism suggests, the means of achieving this conformity took an intolerant turn. When religious error is viewed as an act of political treason, this poet argues, that error must be eliminated before it can proliferate and destroy the realm. Considering Oldcastle’s failure, the poet may not expect his reader to rebel against the king; nevertheless the poem attacks religious error for its social consequences. Thus the poet signals that belief and action cannot be separated for Wycliffite heretics and that tolerating or forbearing them may be tantamount to enthusiastically endorsing their difference. The poet does not advocate using reason to show Wycliffites why they are wrong, or even to show the orthodox why Wycliffism is wrong, because, in his view, anybody can threaten the unity of the political community simply by entertaining heterodox beliefs. In this way, he shows a preference for both censorship and intolerance. Again, his persecutory attitude is below Walzer’s scale of toleration and at the far low end of Laursen’s scale.

The poet’s stance of intolerance is also apparent in his rhetorical approach. He deploys ridicule and contempt to undermine the appeal and credibility of his enemy. For example, each stanza ends with a variation of the line most forcefully pitched in the last line of the poem, “Defende us all fro Lollardie” (152), each one showing readers why they would be unwise to fall into such error themselves. Some instances are simple warnings to “be war of Lollardie” (16), but most attack the sect in such damning terms as “lust” (32, 48, 104), “lewde lust” (24, 56, 136), and of being a “bawde [pimp] of Lollardie” (72), among others. Furthermore, the poet says you would be utterly stupid (“Ho wor ful lewde that wolde byleve…” ) to believe in Wycliffite theology (105).
Moreover, he offers little compassion for Wycliffite heretics. Rather than helping return them to the fold, as we might have expected earlier philosophers to do, he stigmatizes them as a warning to others. Again, there is little suggestion of choice in this poem, but many warnings against what not to do. The implication throughout the poem is that Wycliffites were doomed from the moment they accepted false preachings and that consequences to themselves and to society were inevitable. It is apparent that English society was growing more intolerant. Given the constant reminders of final judgment looming throughout the poem, an increase in intolerance also explains why the poet would imply that his readers may have a choice, but that the necessary choice is to avoid Lollards and Lollardy at all costs. Accordingly, the poem ends with a prayer:

For Holy Writ berith witness,
He that fals is to his kyng,
That shamful deth and hard distress
Shal be his dome at his endynge.
Than double deth for suyche lollynge
Is hevy, when we shul hennes hye.
Now, Lord, that madest of nought all thinge,
Defende us all fro Lollardie. (145-52)

This conclusion urging readers to beware of Lollardy fits well with issues surrounding intolerance and censorship in late medieval England, perhaps because the poem is, after all, a political response to an insurrection. By framing the needs of the moment on the grounds of maintaining order in society, the poet captures a deep belief in limiting choice for the sake of the greater good.

It is fitting for this study of intolerance and censorship in England that the only known surviving exclusively anti-Wycliffite poem is often regarded as satiric, for, as Robert C. Elliott has written, “ridicule … is a means of enforcing conformity” (84). In
*The Power of Satire*, he observes that “In any society in which high value is placed upon the opinions of others, ridicule will clearly be a potent deterrent to deviant behavior; the more a person dreads shame, the more he will avoid situations which might bring upon him the bad name conveyed by public mockery” (69). The nineteenth-century editor and antiquary Joseph Ritson, who described this poem as an example of “Satire against the Lollards,” commented that in order to “check the further progress of this popular heresy … the reigning clergy had recourse to two methods; of which Ridicule or Satire was the more innocent, but Hanging and Burning the more efficacious” (105). A subsequent nineteenth-century historian who quotes the poem from Ritson’s edition writes that “it deserves to be quoted as illustrative of the spirit of the age—or rather of the church—in its persecution of the Lollards. It is throughout a bitter satire on that hated sect, and particularly on Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham” (Punchard 381). It is curious that this poem garnered proportionately more attention in the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. It is noteworthy that the nineteenth-century scholars found it interesting because they understood its genre of satire to be a fundamental aspect of the intolerance it exemplifies. Thus, while this poem is not a particularly funny satire, it is nevertheless recognizable as satire for its angry ridicule of its target, as:

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And, pardé, lolle thei never so longe,
Yut wol lawe make hem lowte.
God wol not suffre hem be so stronge
To bryng her purpos so abowte,
   With saunz faile and saunz doute,
   To rere riot and robberie.
By reson thei shul not long route,
   While the taile is docked of Lollardie. (81-88)
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This stanza ridicules the Wycliffites in a number of ways. For example, they drone on in their sermons yet refuse to submit to the law. Not even God would suffer them to be strong enough to bring about their purpose, so they turn to riot and robbery. The line in French appears to mock their pretensions, and perhaps also, therefore, their obstinacy. The refrain variant is one of the most vivid in the entire poem, suggesting that the state will soon put the movement to its end like docking the tail of a dog.

Given the many layers of intolerance we have seen in *Defend us from all Lollardy*, it now stands to reason that the possibility of “amendment” in *Piers Plowman* might indeed be understood as a form of tolerance because it is not openly violent. Yet because it once again masks coercive force I believe it falls below Walzer’s weakest form of tolerance and should be seen as intolerance. Amendment may be said to lead to my seventh kind of limited toleration, seen in Chapter 3, whereby someone who has rejected his past nonconformity might be accepted by his community. This is also the aim of the limited toleration I described as part of my model of intolerance in Chapter 2. In light of the program of intolerance seen in *Defend us from all Lollardy*, the preference for amendment—improvement through correction—found in the C-text of *Piers Plowman* may now be understood to signal a somewhat greater latitude of tolerance than could be permitted a few decades later. The legislation of the first decade of the fifteenth century, *De heretico comburendo* and Arundel’s Constitutions, codified the formal censorship targeting Wycliffism. This shift is reflected in the literature, and it is especially apparent by comparing the scathing intolerance of *Defend us from all Lollardy* to works written just a few years before. This poem may be understood as coercive in stigmatizing
disobedience and heresy and in urging its readers into avoiding contact with Wycliffites. However, unlike some of the earlier works I have considered, this poem addresses those who have not yet gone astray, rather than those in need of correction. It stigmatizes acts of disobedience as examples of what not to do, rather than coercing those who have already fallen into error. It’s now too late for them.

_Defend us from all Lollardry_ illustrates four major tests of adhesion in tracing John Oldcastle’s career; the anonymous poet signals in all four cases that the failure of Wycliffites generally, and Oldcastle specifically, in those important rituals of membership in English society meant that, in his view, these heretics deserved to be persecuted. In the opening, which introduced Wycliffites as being foolish for persisting in their beliefs even though they knew they would be burned for their heresy, the poet endorsed official policies of persecution rather than toleration which might help amend these heretics. In his attacks on Oldcastle’s failed rebellion in 1414, the poet condemned Oldcastle for failing to adhere to his position in society and warned his readers about the seductive power of Wycliffism and the violent social consequences he associated with their heresy. He then denounced Oldcastle for his perversion of chivalry, becoming a cleric, and going into hiding, acts which the poet portrayed as cowardly but which he gleefully used as justification for persecuting Oldcastle and other heretics. The final test of adhesion which the Wycliffites failed, in the poet’s view, was their intolerance of orthodox practices which led them to destroy images needed by the pious. For beheading a statue of St. James in Kent, the poet said that Lollards should likewise be beheaded. None of these tests falls under any of Walzer’s five kinds of toleration, nor do they
correspond with either kind of toleration I have suggested in Chapters 2 and 3 in addition to Walzer’s. Laursen’s simplified scale of “organized, systematic, violent persecution” at one end and “respect, endorsement, and celebration” at the other (3) is more useful for understanding the degree of toleration in this poem, but only insofar that it accounts for the relentless persecution and violence this crude satirist advocated against the Wycliffites.

**Conclusion**

The lack of choice in the frame of Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules*, like the model of intolerance I developed in Chapter 2, masks coercive force. As Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales have helped make clear, other limitations on toleration in these works have been more overtly coercive. The limits on choice and on tolerance that I have been discussing in the Late Middle Ages, I wish to argue, derive from the same forces that led to the enactment of formal censorship. The *Parlement of Foules* is an examination of constraints on choice in a political setting, but it is also about the circulation of ideas in public. For example, there are constraints on which birds may speak, in what manner they may speak, and when they may speak. More importantly, if the beast fable is understood to be a commentary on the marriage negotiations between Richard II and Anne of Bohemia, and there are many good reasons to believe that it is, the poem itself suggests Chaucer may have been attempting to see how far he could go in testing the king’s tolerance. *Defend us from all Lollardry* is openly about the connection between what people may or may not do and what they may or may not preach. The anonymous poet portrays Wycliffite ideas as poisonous and deserving of intolerance that would serve to
restrict knowledge of their ways and beliefs (which he does, ironically, by discussing their ways and beliefs). The two works make a striking contrast. On the one hand, Chaucer winks and nods as he writes guardedly in a beast fable, in an intolerant world in which public discussion of ideas is dangerous. On the other hand, the author of *Defend us from all Lollardy* is fearless of the consequences of writing so openly about King Henry V and his friend John Oldcastle who had betrayed him so publicly, perhaps because the poet was on the side of those who persecuted and killed the heretics. We have moved from intolerance that served to censor dissent that might have disrupted the peace into the outright operation of a censoring, persecuting society.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Mankind and its Political Context

Following John Oldcastle’s hanging and burning in 1417, the Wycliffites were more cautious about expressing their beliefs openly. The upheavals that characterized much of the rest of the fifteenth century, including the Wars of the Roses, were much more the focus of social and political attention than were heretical sects. It was not until early in the reign of Henry VIII (r. 1509-47) that heresy was prosecuted on a “scale not seen in England for almost a century” (D’Alton 104). It was during the upheavals of the late fifteenth century that the morality play Mankind was written. Its author was most likely an anonymous monk in East Anglia, possibly at the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, writing around 1470 or 1471, and hence immediately before the arrival of the printing press in England in 1476. One of the playwright’s concerns is the danger of theological error, a problem which had been especially acute in East Anglia. According to Lynn Forest-Hill, “In the fifteenth century those who erred most problematically were the Lollards, whose activities appear to have been particularly problematic in East Anglia.” Forest-Hill adds that the “play’s message is not aimed at an audience of those who have erred, but takes the form of a dramatization of specific, or perhaps allegorical, contexts in which error may occur” (19). Like the anti-Wycliffite satire Defend us from all Lollardry discussed in Chapter 4, Mankind is written by the morally committed for the morally
committed. In short, *Mankind* was written by an agent of the church to help individuals conform to the expectations of that institution. As didactic literature, these works are intolerant of error. In *Defend us from all Lollardy*, error was religious and political; in *Mankind*, error is spiritual and moral, though recent readings have also suggested there may be a political dimension to the play.

These recent readings of *Mankind* as a work of overt political commentary connect the play to my discussion of *Defend us from all Lollardy* and questions of tolerance in the period. I will discuss this possibility first, followed by a more traditional reading of the play, again looking for what Michael Walzer has referred to as “tests of adhesion” and “rituals of membership.” Both the thematic elements of the play as well as its structure, I will argue, point to a limited degree of tolerance which permitted people to correct their error to avoid the need for harsher means (in this case, the threat of eternal damnation).

In David Bevington’s estimation, “*Mankind* is a culmination of the most popular elements in the late medieval English stage. As such, it appears to be more representative than the restrained *Everyman*, with its less typical plot of the coming of Death, its absence of burlesque comedy, and its textual affinity to continental drama” (17). The play opens with the first of ten or so sermons, as these speeches are often called, by Mercy (1-44), who serves as spiritual advisor to Mankind and to the audience. Mischief interrupts this sermon and is joined by the other vices (New-Guise, Nowadays, and Nought) in making fun of Mercy’s seriousness (45-185). Mankind then introduces himself and describes his condition of being made of a body and a soul, cursing his flesh as a
“stinking dunghill” that corrupts his soul (186-216). Mercy informs him that the life of man on earth is a battle between good and evil, instructing him to resist the temptations of the flesh and other worldly temptations (217-44). Mankind works in his field and staves off the temptations of the vice characters (245-330). However, the vice figures are successful at tricking the audience, first into joining in a vulgar Christmas carol and second into paying to see the spectacular devil Titivillus (331-528). Titivillus is visible to the audience but invisible to Mankind and thus easily tricks Mankind into giving up his work and joining the vice figures in sin (529-661). Mischief and his band of vices hold a mock court where Mankind swears his allegiance to their wicked ways of crime (662-733). Further antics ensue until Mankind is about to hang himself out of despair, believing he is no longer worthy of mercy, at which time Mercy pleads with him to seek forgiveness, which he finally does (734-900). The play ends with yet another sermon in which Mercy beseeches the audience to renounce sensual pleasures and beg for mercy so that they, too, may achieve everlasting life (901-14).

Recent scholarship has begun to situate the play more clearly within its contemporary political context of the Wars of the Roses to propose that it may contain far more political criticism than had previously been appreciated. As John A. Geck has pointed out, “all internal and external evidence for the play has directed most scholars to accept the Shrovetide 1471 date as the most compelling possibility”; he examines internal evidence to show that this play was most likely performed on Saturday, 23 February 1471 (33). He explains that the “Shrovetide festivities that would have included the play fell within the so-called Lancastrian Readeption, the seven months from October 1470 to
April 1471 when Henry VI reclaimed the English throne during the struggles now called the War of the Roses” (33-34). Geck writes that

the ties between local and national politics during [sic] fifteenth century, the political and judicial roles that those named in Mankind played, and themes within the play itself [. . .] suggest that Mankind may carry a politically subversive message, affiliating itself with the king in exile and praising loyalty and steadfastness in a politically uncertain time. (34)

Geck therefore argues that “we may be able to read Mankind not only as a simple morality play, but also as a play that was overtly political to its original audience” (49). Jessica Brantley and Thomas Fulton similarly offer a political reading, proposing that “If English kingship began to seem like a fiction during the Wars of the Roses, fictional works likewise responded to historical circumstance” (324). They go so far as to assert that the “particular environment in which this play was written makes a veiled criticism of kingship possible, or even likely, for the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds bred significant discontents” (326). In this way, in addition to reading Mankind as a morality play that operates on two levels (literal and spiritual), some recent critics have hinted at another level of allegory (political), which suggests that we might take aspects of Mankind as evidence of political intolerance and self-censorship, somewhat like Chaucer’s veiled commentary in the Parlement of Foules on the negotiations for the hand of Anne of Bohemia.

Brantley and Fulton have posited that “The unstable world of late-fifteenth-century England shaped the text in several distinct ways, for Mankynde’s relationship with the world around him is often cast in political terms that indict secular as well as ecclesiastical authority as suspect and unstable. The play projects the problems of the
monarchy onto the untrustworthy world of local politics embodied by the Vices” (344).

For example, when the actors take up a collection from the audience during the performance (in what is usually regarded as the first known instance of commercial acting in England), Brantley and Fulton suppose that the “extended demand for money—in which sympathy shifts again towards the rogues—might have suggested to its audience the church’s collection of tithes. But the appeal for money can also be seen in relation to taxation or other ways in which secular power enriched belief. Edward IV was renowned for his avarice” (341). However, I argue that this fund-raising effort for those staging the play (whether they were traveling actors or young monks remains debated) may be better understood less as political satire and more as moral satire in which members of the audience are tricked into betraying their own morals and their own souls.

Both possibilities depend on the device of allegory in order to criticize through satire. The playwright uses a similar device in a number of other instances to show the audience how easy it is to fall into disobedience; by manufacturing peer pressure to coerce the audience into paying to see a spectacular devil, the playwright traps the audience with the same skill the devil Titivillus uses against Mankind. Furthermore, once Titivillus comes out, he mentions specific members of the community by name. Master Huntington of Sawston, William Thurlay of Hauxton, Picharde of Trumpington, William Baker of Walton, Richard Bollman of Gayton, and William Patrick of Massingham (505-15), in addition to the unnamed members of the audience, are gently reminded that they are personally responsible for the misfortune that befalls Mankind at the hands of Titivillus. Because they are singled out for having helped bring out this devil, these
named men have incurred an additional sin for which they must repent. Far more than targeting the king’s avarice, the playwright seems to be targeting the audience’s sinful desire for worldly delights.

Geck provides a more convincing explanation of political commentary in this scene than that provided by Brantley and Fulton. Of the men listed by Titivillus and then by the other vices, Geck notes that only one, “‘William Fyde’, is enlisted as a helper to the worldlings, seven are sought out to be done harm, while three, Masters ‘Woode’, ‘Alynton’, and ‘Hamonde’ are considered men to be avoided” (38). Only these last three can be directly “tied to Edward IV and his Yorkist peers before and during the Readeption through bonds of local and household offices and marriage” (38). Geck thus proposes that for the original audience of Mankind, “the overacted caution on the parts of the worldlings would humorously display the gifts that loyalty brings, while possibly criticizing those who are tempted by the possibility of rising in the gentry under the Lancastrians” (38). If Mankind is a politically charged play, as this recent scholarship suggests, the play’s criticism is opaque. A reference to King Edward the Nothingth (690) in the trial sequence and the members of the community who are mentioned by name are perhaps the only transparently political references in the play. Ultimately, the political humor does not seem to correct error, or even comment on the nature of error: the playwright does not appear to condemn any political figures or secretly offer political advice, as Chaucer may well have intended with the “Dream of Scipio” in the Parlement of Foules. The political impulses I see in this play generate some topical humor for a
small and sympathetic coterie without necessarily testing the audience’s tolerance in that way.

**Patient Amendment in Mankind**

A more traditional reading of *Mankind*, in contrast, raises issues of tolerance that bring us full circle to the limitations on toleration we first encountered in Chapter 2. I will now be looking for evidence of tolerance in the play, especially forms of tolerance that might serve to amend error and thereby enforce conformity. I will once again draw on Walzer’s and John Christian Laursen’s scales to attempt to assess degrees of tolerance and intolerance within the play. Recall that Walzer proposes five kinds of toleration: resignation to difference for the sake of peace; a benignly relaxed, passive indifference to difference; a principled recognition that others have rights; openness or even curiosity; and finally, an enthusiastic endorsement of difference (10-11). Laursen simplifies this scale and instead proposes “organized, systematic, violent persecution” at one end of the spectrum and “respect, endorsement, and celebration” at the other (3). I see four main tests of adhesion or rituals of membership (Walzer 31)—that is, tests of tolerance—in this play which I will examine using these two scales. The first such test of adhesion centers on the introduction of the main characters (Mercy, Mankind, and the vice figures), in which Mercy and Mankind do not tolerate the vice characters and in which the vice figures also participate in their own rituals of membership in their slapstick comedy. The second ritual of membership involves the audience, rather than Mankind, when the vice figures seduce the audience into singing a lewd song and paying to see a devil. The third test of adhesion centers on Mankind as he falls into sin and is persuaded first by Titivillus
and then by the other vice characters to abandon Mercy’s teachings. The final ritual of membership in this morality play is the ending, in which Mankind enthusiastically endorses Mercy’s teachings and thus achieves salvation.

The first test of adhesion in *Mankind* suggests that avoiding sin and begging for mercy are two important “necessary choices” for Christians. In the opening lines of the play, Mercy explains that God sent his own son to be crucified because of humans’ inherently disobedient nature:

> The very fownder and beginner of owr first creacion,  
> Amonge us sinfull wrecchs He oweth to be magnifiede,  
> That for owr disobedie[n]e He hade non[e] indignacion  
> To sende His own son to be torn and crucifiede. (1-4)

Mercy addresses the “sovereigns” in the audience with a lesson that he will repeat many times throughout the play in his instructions to the character of Mankind:

> O soverence, I beseche yow your condicions to rectifye,  
> Ande with humilité and reverence to have a remocion  
> To this blissyde prince that owr nature doth glorifye,  
> That ye may be particable of His retribucion. (13-16)

In “beseeching” the audience, Mercy takes a much more patient tone with his audience than did the author of *Defend us from all Lollardry*. The possibility of rectifying one’s condition by changing one’s inclination (“remocion”) further points to a departure from the rigid intolerance of the earlier poem. Whereas that poet argued that it was too late to amend those already infected by Wycliffism, the *Mankind* playwright expresses a genuine desire for his audience to change their ways. It’s not too late for them. However, this stance of toleration is no higher on Walzer’s scale, I think, than a resigned acceptance for the sake of peace. Mercy is not benignly indifferent to sin: he insists that
his teachings are of universal importance. For example, Mercy indicates that his teachings apply to an audience of varied social status:

O ye soverens that sitt, and ye brothern that stonde right uppe,
Prike not yowr felicitys in thingys transitorye!
Beholde not the erth, bu lifte yowr ey[е] uppe!
Se how the hede the members daily do magnifye.
Who is the hede, forsoth, I shall yow certifye:
I mene owr Saviowr, that was likynnyde to a lambe;
ande his saintys be the members that daily he doth satisfye
With the preciose rever that runnith from his wombe. (29-36)

Religious doctrines and philosophical advice that apply to all humans are paired here with a strict hierarchy, which likewise none may escape: the Great Chain of Being, under which each person has a specific role to fulfill. The need to follow Mercy’s teachings is pitched as a ritual of membership in which all of humankind is expected to participate. Failure at this important test of adhesion results in damnation, while endorsing it leads to salvation.

Mercy’s speech is interrupted by the vice figures, Mischief, New-Guise, Nowadays, and Nought, who illustrate the pervasiveness of worldly temptations (45-161). For example, New-Guise urges the minstrels to play a common dance with such force that they burst their bellows. The vice characters get into a fight over dancing to this music:

NEW-GUISE: Ande how, minstrellys, pley the comyn trace!
    Ley on with thy ballys till his bely breste!
NOUGHT: I putt case I I breke my neke: how than?
NEW-GUISE: I giff no force, by Sent Tanne!
NOWADAYS: Leppe about lively! Thou art a wight man.
    Lett us be mery w[h]ill we be here.
NOUGHT: Shall I breke my neke to schew yow sport?
NOWADAYS: Therefor ever beware of thy reporte.
NOUGHT: I beschrew ye all! her[e] is a schrewde sorte.
The vice figures join in worldly pleasures such as music and dancing, despite Nought’s fears that he might break his neck. They try to include Mercy, but Mercy does not accept their invitation, a signal that he does not tolerate their actions: “Nay, brother, I will not daunce” (90). The vice characters’ banter and slapstick humor in harassing Mercy and each other provide a satiric contrast to Mercy’s explanation of Christian rituals of membership by acting out an alternative test of adhesion, one which would be better for humankind not to participate in. When they exit, Mercy offers another sermon, this time specifically on the subject of avoiding these and other worldly temptations: “This condicion of living, it is prejudiciall— / Beware thereof! It is wers than only felony or treason” (166-67). Mercy suggests that humankind should not tolerate their sinful “condition of living,” since it is worse than felony or treason. By equating sinful behavior, represented allegorically by song and dance, with felony or treason, Mercy’s intolerance of sinful behavior would seem to fall below Walzer’s scale and at the far end of Laursen’s scale, even if his approach is admittedly more tolerant than that of the author of Defend us from all Lollardy.

In his first speech, Mankind expresses his intention not to tolerate worldly temptations, as all men should:

Every man, for his degré, I trust shall be participatt,
If we will mortifye owr carnall condition
Ande owr voluntarye dysires, that ever be pervencionatt—
To renunce them, and yelde us under Godys provicion. (190-93)
Mankind suggests in this speech that one can find salvation only by submitting to God’s
wishes and overcoming one’s own desires. The didactic nature of this speech suggests
that enthusiastic endorsement—found at the high end of both Walzer’s and Laursen’s
scales—of Mercy’s teachings is what I have been calling a “necessary choice,” wherein
only one good option exists. Note, again, however, that Walzer’s fifth kind of toleration
is the enthusiastic endorsement of difference, and both Mankind and Mercy have only
endorsed sameness, while condemning the error of succumbing to temptation.

Mankind states that he is composed of “a body and of a soul, of condicion
contrarye— / Betwix them tweyn is a grett division. / He that shulde be subjecte, now he
hath the victory” (195-97). He laments that his “soull, so sotyll in thy substance, / Alasse,
what was thy fortune and thy chaunce / To be associat with my flesch, that stinking
dungehill?” (202-04). As we have seen throughout the literature, and perhaps as our own
experience confirms, it is not always easy to do as we are told. Given this situation, the
playwright points to a greater stance of toleration than does the poet of Defend us from all
Lollardy. According to the author of Mankind, humans have little choice but to strive to
overcome their condition as human and prone to error, but sin is tolerated so long as it
ceases and the sinner repents. Still it is better not to tolerate sin in ourselves, but to avoid
it in the first place. Mercy repeatedly instructs Mankind that he will be rewarded in the
next life for resisting temptation in this life:

The temptacion of the flesch ye must resist like a man,
For ther is ever a battel betwix the soull and the body:
Vita hominis est militia super terram.
Oppresse yowr gostly enmy and be Cristys own knight!
Be never a cowarde ageyn yowr adversary:
If ye will be crownyde, ye must nedys fight.
Intende well, and Gode will be yow adjutory. (226-32)

Mercy states that his doctrine is “convenient” (*i.e.*, sound) (844), and in his sermons he either warns Mankind that he is about to be tested or helps to usher him back to spiritual safety after he has fallen prey to various temptations. Mercy repeatedly advises Mankind to do as he is told in order to reach eternal bliss:

I have moche care for yow, my own frende.
Yowr enmys will be here anon; they make ther avaunte.
Thinke well in yowr hert: yowrn name is ‘Mankinde’;
Be not unkinde to Gode, I prey yow! Be his servante.
Be stedefast in condicion; se ye be not variant.
Lose not thorow[gh] foly that is bow[gh]te so dere!
Gode will prove yow son[e]; ande, if that ye be constant,
Of his blisse perpetuall ye shall be partener. (278-84)

The play again suggests that avoiding temptation and following God’s orders are what I see as “necessary choices,” but the playwright allows for redemption even as he condemns sin. Thus, the *Mankind* playwright suggests that humans have free will and are prone to making wrong choices. Unlike the author of *Defend us from all Lollardry*, who saw free will as a threat to the peace because choice can enable people to go astray and therefore cause harm to others, the author of *Mankind* takes a more patient approach. Humans may need much guidance, if not also coercion, in order to keep themselves in check and contribute to social stability through their conformity, but the possibility of redemption leads this author to favor limited tolerance over intolerance or persecution.

Despite the intolerance necessary in didactic literature, *Mankind* may suggest a stance of limited toleration. On the one hand, Mercy consistently instructs Mankind to steer clear of temptation: “My name is ‘Mercy.’ Ye be to me full hende; / To eschew vice
I will yow avise” (219-20). But on the other hand, the play sometimes also points to a stance of moderation. I will now consider whether moderation might be seen as a form of tolerance in this play. For example, Mercy says, “Take that is to be takyn, and leve that is to be refusyde” (185). Bevington glosses this as “Use moderately those things God intended you to enjoy, and refuse what should be refused.” Part of staying on the path to salvation, the play suggests, is abstinence from things which should be refused; at the same time, not everything is to be refused. It is in this way that the playwright may point to moderation as a form of tolerance. Indeed, Mercy openly advocates moderation rather than strict abstinence from activities he openly deems harmful:

Distempure not yowr brain with goode ale nor with win[e].
‘Mesure is tresure’; I forbid[d]e yow not the use.
Mesure yowrsylf ever. Beware of excesse.
The superfluouse g[u]ise I will that ye refuse;
When nature is suffisyde, anon that ye ses[s]e. (236-40)

Since humans require sustenance in order to survive, it is overindulgence that Mercy warns against. Moderation may thus be seen as one of Walzer’s middle kinds of toleration, such as a relaxed indifference or perhaps even a kind of moral stoicism. Given the danger associated with excess, however, I do not think Mercy’s moderation would qualify as openness or endorsement. Mercy further illustrates this point using the example of a horse that will obey his master when hungry but which will disobey when overfed:

If a man have an hors, and kepe him not to[o] hye,
He may then reull him at his own dysiere;
If he be fede over-well he will disobey
Ande, in happe, cast his master in the mire. (241-44)
On an allegorical level, Mercy’s proviso suggests that a man who has overindulged in worldly pleasures may rebel against God. When one fails to control one’s own bodily urges, Mercy teaches, each person has the potential to land his own soul in the mud. The danger of luxury and overindulgence are a constant in medieval literature as well as in moral satire, also a didactic genre. It is through moderation, or in other words toleration, that order is maintained in society.

In addition to advocating moderation, Mercy also preaches patience, as I have already mentioned. The OED suggests that patience is in fact synonymous with tolerance: “Forbearance or long-suffering under provocation; esp. tolerance of the faults or limitations of other people” (def. 1b). Mercy counsels Mankind,

Ye may not have your intent at your first desire,
Se the great patience of Job in tribulation:
Like as the smith trieth emr in the fierce,
So was he tried by God’s visitation. (285-88)

This initial comment on patience suggests that Mercy will tolerate sin, and this helps to frame the play’s depiction of falling into sin and the subsequent need for repentance. I will have more to say about Mercy’s patience later. By framing the irreverence of the center part of the play with an overt reminder of Mercy’s patience, the playwright suggests, in effect, that Mercy tolerates the blasphemy that follows; this framing device may be seen as a way of licensing depictions of sin which might not otherwise be tolerated.

Soon after Mercy counsels patience, the action is again interrupted by the vice figures and the introduction of Titivillus in the second major test of adhesion in the play. In this center portion of the play (323-725), both the audience and Mankind are trapped in
the very vices that Mercy has been advising the audience and Mankind alike to avoid. In this mayhem, Nowadays says to “Make rom, sers, for we have be longe! / We will cum gif yow a Cristemes song” (331-32). The singing of a Christmas carol would seem to be a virtuous activity, and Nought encourages audience participation in this putatively worthy activity: “Now I prey all the yemandry that is here / To singe with us, with a mery chere!” (333-34). However, it is not until after the audience has begun singing, and it would be awkward not to continue the call and response, that the song is revealed to have been a trap: “It is wretyn with a coll, / He that schitith with his hoyll / But he wippe his ars clen, / On his breche it shall be sen” (335-41, repetitions omitted). The focus then shifts back to Mankind’s struggle to ward off temptation, and he makes an earnest effort to work in his field while the vice figures engage in some slapstick comedy (344-453). The “worthifull soverence” of the audience are then tricked, a second time, betraying their virtue in favor of worldly pleasures. This time, the actors take up a collection, refusing to bring out the spectacular devil Titivillus until after the audience has paid. Nowadays explains that Titivillus “is a worschip[ful] man, sers, saving yowr reverens. / He lovith no grotys, nor pense of t[w]o-pens: / Gif us rede reyallys, if ye will se his abominabull presens” (463-65). Eventually, the actors are satisfied and Titivillus emerges, only to show himself to be the embodiment of craftiness. “Ever I go invisibull—it is my jett,” he says (529) as he tells the audience how he is going to trick Mankind into abandoning his work in the field. The play’s coarse humor and blasphemy, always spoken by vice characters, appears to license a limited form of toleration that, I wish to argue, may have served to amend the sinner.
Indeed, one historical curiosity regarding *Mankind* is that scholarly editors as recent as Joseph Quincy Adams in 1924 have censored the obscene passages for being “unprintable” (311), a sign of later intolerance. For the play’s original audience, these irreverent moments seem to be licensed not only by Mercy’s patience, by its performance during Shrovetide festivities, or by the device of associating such sin with allegorical representations of sin, but also by the play’s didactic purpose of teaching redemption on the condition that one ceases one’s sinful ways. Moreover, in succumbing to this peer pressure, the audience may be said to tolerate sin even as the play instructs them not to tolerate it.

The third major test of adhesion is when Mankind must decide whether he will endorse Mercy’s teachings or instead tolerate or even endorse worldly temptations. Titivillus then places a board in Mankind’s field to discourage him from working as he should and then mixes weeds in with his seeds:

To irke him of his labur I shall make a frame:
This borde shall be hid[d]e under the erth prevely.
His spade shall enter, I hope, onredily!
By then he hath assayde, he shall be very angry
Ande lose his paciens—peyn of schame.
I shall menge his corne with drawke and with durnell;
It shall not be like to sow nor to sell. (532-38)

Many of the temptations staged in this center portion of the play involve earthly temptations with consequences that are both temporal and spiritual. By inhibiting Mankind’s ability to produce a good harvest of crops, Titivillus aims to starve him in this life and corrupt him for the next. The plan works, and Mankind soon abandons his work and his prayer. He is useless to himself and to society. After succumbing to the ploys of
the invisible Titivillus, Mankind is much more susceptible to more apparent temptations; it is easier for him to tolerate (or even endorse) the sinful and criminal ways advocated by Mischief, Nowadays, New-Guise, and Nought. Mankind, like the audience before him, bows to peer pressure. Nowadays brags that he has stolen from a church: “I have laburryde all this night. W[h]en shall we go din[e]? / A chirche her[e]-beside shall pay for ale, brede, and win[e]: / Lo, here is stoff will serve” (632-34). In his turn, Mischief boasts that he escaped imprisonment, killed the jailer, and hints that he may have raped the jailer’s wife: “The chenys I brast asundyr, and killyde the jailere, / Ye[a], ande his fayer wiff halsyde in a cornere— / A, how swetly I kissyde the swete mowth of hers!” (643-45). Mankind then dreams that Mercy was hanged, which leads him to vow his allegiance to the vices:

I dreempt Mercy has hange—this was my vision—
Ande that to yow thre I shulde have recors and remocion.
Now I prey yow hertily of yowr goode will:
I crey yow mercy of all that I dide amisse. (655-58)

On its surface, the play moves from intolerance of sin at the opening to a stance of patience that served to amend; now the play would seem to endorse sin. Instead of being held accountable for their crimes in a court of law (much less in God’s final judgment), the vices hold their own court which parodies the legal system and results in a perverse verdict in which Mankind swears his loyalty to New-Guise, Nowadays, Nought, and Mischief. Mankind is instructed to rape all the women of the country while their husbands are out (703-04), to rob, steal, and kill as fast as he can (710), to skip Sunday mass and instead join the vices for a meal at the alehouse (710-12), and to become a highwayman, mugging his victims and then slitting their throats (714-16). To each of
these instructions, Mankind affirms, “I will, ser.” Mankind thus enthusiastically endorses sin, and in so doing no longer accepts Mercy’s teachings. The play could hardly be said to endorse these sinful and criminal acts; the playwright clearly indicts them through this mock trial by showing what not to do. Both Mankind and the audience are now in a position to need Mercy’s patience.

Mankind may participate in misplaced rituals of membership, but, unlike those heretics who had fallen into Wycliffism in *Defend us from all Lollardry*, it is not too late for Mankind. The tension created by the uncertainty of whether or not Mankind will repent represents both the final test of adhesion in this play and the ultimate ritual of membership for Christians. When Mercy returns, he is in a strong position to offer a sermon on the fickleness of human nature, comparing man’s inconsistency to a weather vane: “As the fane that turnith with the winde, so thou art convertible” (749). He prays on behalf of Mankind, whose sins he is tolerating in the hopes of amendment:

O goode Lady and Mother of Mercy, have pety and compassion
Of the wrecydhnes of Mankinde, that is so wanton and so fraill!
Lett Mercy excede Justice, dere Mother! A[d]mitt this supplicacion:
Equité be to leyde onparty, and Mercy to prevaill. (756-59)

Mankind’s fickleness is then illustrated as he continues his trajectory into a life of crime, sin, and worldly pleasures (772-810). Just as Mankind is about to hang himself, Mercy intervenes and begins a dialogue in which he counsels Mankind to repent:

Yowr criminose compleynt wo[u]ndith my hert as a lance!
Dispose yowrsylff mekly to aske mercy, and I will assent.
Yelde me nethyr golde nor tresure, but yowr humbyll obeisiance—
The voluntary subjeccion of yowr hert—and I am content. (816-19)
In his despair, Mankind says that “It is so abominabyl to rehers my iterat transgrescion, / I am not worthy to have mercy by no possibilité” (821-22). Mankind’s repeated transgressions, however, are countered by Mercy’s unwavering patience. Mercy maintains that Mankind must always repent because “The justice of God will as I will, as himsylfe doth preche: / Nolo mortem peccatoris, inquit, iff he will be redusible” (833-34). Here, Mercy is quoting Ezekiel 33:11 to the effect that he does not wish the death of a sinner before he has had the will to repent, another sign of his patience (and therefore of his limited toleration).

Despite his patience, however, Mercy also says, “Sinne not in hope of mercy! That is a crime notary. / To truste overmoche in a prince, it is not expedient. / In hope, when ye sin, ye thinke to have mercy: beware of that aventure!” (845-47). In acknowledging that the possibility of redemption is not a license to sin with the intention of repenting later, Mercy signals that he extends his patience in the service of helping sinners to amend their ways. He repeats:

   Offend not a prince on trust of his favour, as I seyd before. If ye fele yoursylfe trappyd in the snare of your gostly enmy, Aske mercy anon; beware of the continuance! Whill a wo[u]nd is fresch, it is provyd curabyll by survery, That, if it procede ovyrlong, it is cawse of gret grevans. (854-58)

In preaching that Mankind should always seek mercy through repentance, Mercy is patient. But his patience is limited by the spiritual need to repent quickly and to cease sinful behavior as soon as possible. He is able to forbear sinful activities inasmuch as he wants to prevent them and help amend the sinner. Mercy’s patience, moreover, may now be seen to resemble his stance of moderation, which I argued could be seen as a form of
limited toleration which served to promote conformity. Recall that I have forwarded a model of intolerance wherein conformity was achieved by relentless intolerance; in this model, limited forms of toleration may be preferred over outright coercion but often mask coercive force and nevertheless act in the service of intolerance. I believe Mercy’s patience is suggestive both of Walzer’s first kind of tolerance and of my model of intolerance because it appears to exert pressure on those who have fallen into error to reform their ways.

Both the trajectory of the play’s action and Mercy’s sermons suggest that patience is understood in this play as a form of tolerance that stands in contrast to the rigidity of *Defend us from all Lollardy*. Mercy may dislike sin but he is willing to tolerate it so long as the sinner repents. In this way, Mercy seems to be at Walzer’s lowest level of toleration: for the sake of peace, he allows the sinner time to repent. However, this toleration is predicated on the condition that the sinner agrees to go and sin no more, or, in other words, to amend the fault. The idea that patience and moderation should be extended in the service of amendment is in harmony with other medieval voices I have considered, most notably John of Salisbury. In Book 4, Chapter 8 of the *Policraticus*, “Of the moderation of the prince’s justice and mercy, which should be temperately mixed for the utility of the republic,” recall how John explains how conformity serves the collective good:

> What obtains for the prince ought to obtain for everyone: no one is to prefer his own affairs to the affairs of others. Yet truly the amount of that affection, with which subjects are to be embraced like brothers in the arms of charity, must be confined to the limits of moderation. And thus, for him to love his brothers, he must correct their errors in medical fashion; he
must acknowledge the flesh and blood in them so that he may subject them to the words of the Spirit. (4.8)

John then states that coercion should be deployed when moderation fails. Like John’s advocacy of moderation as a means of achieving conformity, the play’s earthy humor aids its satiric purpose of “telling the truth with a smile” (Horace Satires 1.1.28), while striving to correct error in a gentle, undisruptive way. *Mankind* is clever in its approach to exposing error while avoiding confrontation, which is also in line with John’s comments in the *Policraticus*. Mercy struggles to keep a positive outlook when he sees Mankind caught in a cosmic battle for his soul, fighting to avoid eternal damnation. The play, like its philosophical forerunner, advocates patience and moderation but only insofar as more severe consequences remain a constant threat. Mercy tolerates, perhaps even endorses, those sinners who amend their ways and agree to sin no more. This endorsement, as I have said before, is not endorsement of difference; it is an example of the seventh kind of toleration I theorized might describe the goal of tolerance in the Middle Ages and which I outlined at the end of Chapter 3. I suggested that one form of tolerance I see in the Middle Ages, and which neither Walzer’s nor Laursen’s scales considers, is the acceptance of someone as a peer for having met the expectations of sameness. It demands a lack of disobedience and therefore differs from Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales in that difference is not celebrated. Because sin is renounced and then forgiven, acceptance comes not from the acceptance of difference, but from the unacceptable being made acceptable. This goal was unfulfilled in “Lanval” but it is now fully realized in *Mankind*.

Much of the play’s excitement and entertainment comes from discord, breaking the law, and other disruptions of the peace by negative figures who represent vices. The
play asserts traditional authority even as the players disrupt the peace in order to lure the audience into sinning. Despite its rowdy humor, the play aims for peace and does not, in the end, undermine the authority of traditional power. As in Defend us from all Lollardry, Mankind often shows what not to do, teaching its audience not to make the wrong choice. There are many ways to go wrong, these works suggest, but very few ways to go right. It is therefore important to make the right choices (or necessary choices), the play teaches. However, the playwright doesn’t so much preach intolerance as he models the way humans should behave (conform) and, through the character of Mercy, perhaps, also models the way they should treat others (with patience). People should, like Christ, obey the Father. This path, as in the frame of the Parlement of Foules, is clear and simple—it is a necessary choice. Through the play itself, the playwright may even be said to extend tolerance to the audience by trapping them in sin in order to alert them to it so that they, too, can go and sin no more. Even the vulgar humor serves a moral purpose by showing, as Horace says, that “You laugh? Well, just change the name and you’ll find that this story, / As a matter of fact, means you” (1.1.69-70).

I now wish to argue that didactic literature tends to favor the extremes of Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales of tolerance. Whereas “Lanval” and the Parlement of Foules point to a greater range of tolerance, the didactic literature of Defend us from all Lollardry and Mankind depend on much narrower uses of tolerance and a stronger inclination towards intolerance or condemnation, which would fall below Walzer’s scale entirely. If this hypothesis is correct, it would help explain why the situation I have described as “necessary choice” falls at the low end of both scales. The moral lesson takes center stage
in *Defend us from all Lollardry* and *Mankind*, where the didactic purposes are obvious. The clearest example of “necessary choice” in the *Parlement of Foules*, Chaucer’s description of Cicero’s “Dream of Scipio,” also seems to serve a didactic purpose, especially if we are to take the emphasis there on the “common profit” as a “mirror for princes” (Benson 129) in which Chaucer may have been attempting to counsel a young Richard II on how to rule.

In the end, the function of toleration in *Mankind* seems closer to the sensibilities of John of Salisbury, whose limited toleration served to persuade nonconformists of their error so that they might change their ways without the need for violence, than to *Defend us from all Lollardry*, where intolerance signaled that the poet ultimately saw no room for nonconformists. This play differs greatly from *Defend us from all Lollardry* not just in its stance of greater tolerance but especially in its desire to return nonconformists to the fold through patience and amendment. As Forest-Hill explains, “the play states, and then shows, that mercy is always available to those who repent, even when they believe they do not deserve it. This does not suggest uncompromising anti-Lollard polemic, but a truly charitable Christian desire to recover the ‘lost sheep’” (21-22). This playwright’s approach is therefore much more reminiscent of my model of intolerance as it applied to John of Salisbury than to the strict intolerance we saw in *Defend us from all Lollardry* because unlike that anti-Wycliffite poem, *Mankind* allows (and encourages) the possibility of returning to the fold those who have fallen into error, which, as the play illustrates, is all humans (and not just Wycliffites, for example). Moreover, the very concept of mercy is notably missing in *Defend us from all Lollardry*. That Mercy is one
of the main characters in the allegory of *Mankind* suggests greater tolerance than in the earlier work, a stance which is mirrored throughout the play in Mercy’s teachings about the importance of admitting error and correcting one’s behavior. The play may signal that conformity is king, but that the route to conformity is a limited form tolerance, not intolerance or persecution.

**Conclusion**

Walzer’s and Laursen’s scales have been useful for comparing texts in different genres written at different times and for different audiences. They have provided an objective way of measuring shifting attitudes towards tolerance and intolerance over time, shifts which correspond to other markers of intolerance including legislation, prosecution, and formal censorship. These scales have supported my model of intolerance, wherein conformity was achieved by relentless intolerance and wherein even limited forms of toleration often disguised coercive force to bring about conformity. In addition to the five kinds of toleration that Walzer describes, I have added two more. In Chapter 2, I suggested that finding common ground so as to negate difference might be one form of medieval tolerance. However, we have not seen evidence for this common-ground model in the vernacular literature. In Chapter 3, I proposed a seventh kind of toleration which is based on my model of intolerance, whereby a person would be accepted for having met the expectations of sameness. It is not the toleration of error or of difference, but, ultimately, the enthusiastic endorsement of conformity.

In *Mankind*, Mercy is an allegorical representation of theological doctrine at the end of the Middle Ages that is in line with the philosophical and political ideals we had
seen at the beginning of the period in Chapter 2. The limited toleration represented by Mercy’s patience, which served to correct error rather than forbear it indefinitely, is an example of this seventh kind of toleration. *Mankind* suggests that because sin can be renounced and then forgiven, acceptance comes not from the acceptance of difference, but rather from the unacceptable being made acceptable. I now wish to argue that this coercive form of toleration served the same goal as censorship, which included both the destruction of books and the amendment of texts to bring them into ideological conformity. Both people and books must be made acceptable. Moreover, while individuals could choose to tolerate error in others, the institutional context we have seen for intolerance in all of the works I have discussed suggests that censorship—itself a form of institutional intolerance—likely developed from other forms of intolerance.

When I began this project, I hoped to discover the medieval precedents for formal print censorship. I soon found that censorship is difficult to prove conclusively in the Middle Ages because manuscript culture is susceptible to the destruction of evidence, namely by burning works deemed unacceptable. Moreover, medieval authors were subject to many other forms of intolerance which shaped their literary decisions. Since censorship is not separate from intolerance, but is rather a form of intolerance, I have looked for other clues about restrictions on the free circulation of ideas, and especially criticism of authority, in addition to examining the roles of tolerance and intolerance within literary works to better understand how those forces operated in medieval English society.
Indeed, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that these vernacular works I have considered were ever suppressed. “Lanval” exists in at least five manuscripts (Burgess 172) and was imitated throughout the Middle Ages. The textual condition of Chaucer’s Parlement of Foules is likewise stable. It survives in some fourteen manuscripts; while only two of these manuscripts are fragmentary, some are missing portions of text from the middle of the poem, and most lack the roundel at the end (Chaucer 1147). However, those differences do not affect the allegorical reading of the poem I favor, in which the eagles represent Anne of Bohemia, Richard II, Charles of France, and Friedrich of Meissen. In contrast, Defend us from all Lollardry survives in just one copy. This copy was probably made some forty years after Oldcastle’s 1414 revolt, as it appears in a manuscript containing a C-text of Piers Plowman and some anti-Wycliffite texts thought to be contemporary with the events they describe, ca. 1450-58 (Robbins 331). It is remarkable for being the only surviving Middle English “poem dealing exclusively with the Lollards” (332). Mankind similarly exists in a single manuscript. It is problematic “because the second leaf in the manuscript is missing, and it would have been on that leaf that New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought made their initial appearances,” writes Michael J. Preston. “Although accidents to manuscripts certainly have happened, it is my experience with medieval manuscripts that there was much censoring of them after the Reformation, both official censorship as well as the private acts of individuals” (215). If the missing leaf is evidence of censorship, one wonders why other leaves containing overtly political content survive untouched. As I discussed in Chapter 1, medieval manuscripts were sometimes censored in the first century of print
rather than during the Middle Ages. Such censorship often “involved lesser forms of intervention [than burning] such as the erasure of offending passages in a book” (Clemens and Graham 110). Thus, of all the works I have considered in my dissertation, only *Mankind* shows evidence of censorship, though if it was in fact censored, it is likely that this censorship occurred after the arrival of print.

All of these works, while not providing overt evidence of censorship during the Middle Ages, nevertheless point to forms of intolerance that may have served as more effective controls than censorship. Alexandra Walsham observes that

> Ecclesiastical and secular authorities were believed to have a solemn responsibility to punish those who departed from orthodoxy, to use any means necessary to uphold the true religion and reclaim those who strayed from the straight and narrow way. To take steps to correct religious deviance was a moral duty and a divinely ordained obligation, an act of compassion inspired by the conviction that heresy was, quite literally, soul-destroying. (1-2)

For this reason, she writes, “To allow men and women to persist in heterodox opinions was in effect to condemn them to eternal torment in hell” (2). This fits well with many of the texts I have discussed in my dissertation, and especially with those by John of Salisbury and William of Ockham, but most clearly with the anti-Wycliffite poem *Defend us from all Lollardy*. Moreover, to spurn orthodoxy endangered not only one’s own spiritual health and social standing but also the spiritual and political health of the entire community. This is articulated most clearly in the writings of John of Salisbury, but I believe the goal of enforcing conformity is confirmed by all of the texts I have examined. According to Walsham, medieval and early modern Englishmen accepted the view that “religious uniformity was crucial to the political stability and social order of a state as
well as to its spiritual welfare” (2). She elaborates that “toleration was anathema, a recipe for chaos and anarchy, if not an invitation to apocalyptic destruction. Any country that permitted religious pluralism was thus committing an act of corporate suicide” (2). Under these circumstances, the measures designed to return dissenters to the fold through debate which I discussed in Chapter 2, as well as the coercive practices seen in Chapters 3 and 4, set the stage for a coherent system of outright censorship. In Walsham’s words, cruelty was a form of kindness (2). In her view, intolerance was a defining characteristic of the Middle Ages:

As St Augustine, the patriarch of persecutors, wrote in the early fifth century: ‘What death is worse for the soul than the freedom to err?’ ‘It is better to love with severity than to deceive with indulgence.’ [. . .] Coercion was a bitter but efficacious medicine; its purpose was to cure and educate, to liberate individuals from bondage to falsehood, rather than to erase and exterminate. (2)

In terms of toleration, liberating individuals from “bondage to falsehood” through coercion and cruelty might have been better than exterminating them (and therefore condemning them to eternal damnation). As a precursor of formal censorship, however, eliminating dangerous practices was an effective means of maintaining the social order and saving people from themselves. Both cruelty and coercion were sometimes not just preferred, but perhaps even required, over the toleration of difference. Though the means could vary, the end goal of conformity remained unchanged throughout the medieval period.
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VITA

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