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Disciplining Bestial Hunger

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Abstract and Lay Summary

Hunger is an ever-present of human condition, a biological necessity, which finds further resonance in literary depictions. The period of the late Middle Ages, which this thesis surveys, is an especially poignant one from the perspective of bodily need and the attitudes surrounding them. The dynamics between these categories and the ways the thinkers of the period approached them serve as the main topic of the thesis's discussion.

The thesis observes the motif of bestial hunger and the disciplinary mechanisms surrounding it, either intended to control it or to further enable it. In an effort to identify more nuanced attitudes towards the way hunger functions three different texts have been selected.

Firstly, the chivalric romance, *The Tale of Sir Gowther*, which features the motif of hunger in the contexts of childhood, human and animal boundaries, penitence, noble and chivalric conduct, and sainthood. The narrative displays a multitude of literary and cultural influences, while being a psychoanalytically rich exploration of the individual's process of socialisation.

Secondly, the thesis discusses the compendious dream vision, *The Visions of Piers the Plowman*, which features several narratives which the thesis focuses on. The Rat Fable, a shorter narrative in the text's Prologue is observed from the perspective of political sophistry giving rise to unrestrained consumption. The second part focuses on the episode featuring Piers's interactions with Hunger embodied on the Half-Acre, and the further resonances of the encounter in the narrative.

Finally, Robert Henryson's Moral Fables are observed, where the classical Aesopic animal fables provide a framework for the poet's exploration of worldly injustice. This chapter follows different characters, among some others the Fox and the Wolf throughout the fable collection, observing the ways they avoid and use language in order to satiate their own voracity.

The thesis ultimately aims to observe the different manifestations of hunger in these late medieval texts. It synthesises multidisciplinary (psychoanalytical, ecological, economical) approaches in an effort to observe the ways the motif influences the characters and the narratives.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

A part of Chapter I. (pp. 67-8) is lifted directly from my published article on the same text: Szendrei, Balázs. "‘Thus Syr Gwother coverys is care’: The Role and Significance of Canine Care in the Tale of Sir Gowther." *eSharp*, Issue 30 Autumn (2022)

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In memory of Kentaro Miura

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Disciplining Bestial Hunger

1. Introduction

“You are not you when you are hungry.” - proclaims the popular chocolate bar’s advertisement. While the slogan, naturally, offers a convenient relief from the condition in an unsurprising effort to sell the chocolate bar, the slogan itself regardless addresses an insistent, fundamental biological anxiety. This fundamental anxiety over the control of one’s biological needs serves as the focus of this dissertation. Its dichotomy gestures towards a fundamental division within the subject; an essential part of the self becoming obstructed, returned to a less authentic state by the insistent, inevitable imperative of hunger. One cannot truly be oneself, it suggests, when hungry. While the slogan is a modern one, the anxiety surrounding the dissolution of the self, its fundamentally human regulatory functions failing in the face of hunger, is as ancient as our animal origins. The slogan and one’s attitude towards hunger represent the universal interface between biological determinism and free will. Materiality and psychology interact within the confines of hunger, and their balance is essential in the process of creating the human being.

Despite its universal, exceedingly linear nature, the behavioural patterns surrounding the urge of hunger represent a large stratum of the human experience. The literary motif of hunger is contextually sensitive, yet ubiquitous one, mirroring its real life counterpart. It can be small and personal, a craving for a particular food, or it can be widespread and all-encompassing, like a famine of a country claiming millions.

The motif's universality and plasticity, its ability to encapsulate contextually sensitive human experiences, however, represent a problem: that of representation. Thus, a narrowing of focus becomes necessary in order to observe the minute details of hunger and its relation to the mechanisms of the creation of the self. Among the different art forms, literature provides a unique opportunity to explore the motif through narratives, characters, interactions, and language. In the context of literature, hunger is and always has been as ever-present as it has been throughout the history of humanity. From the humanizing project of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, providing the wild man with bread and teaching him table manners to incorporate him into the body of humanity, through the Norse mythology's wolves, Skoll and Hati chasing the sun and the moon across the sky, and Fenrir, who will eventually consume them, humanity always found a ready source of interpretive potential in bestial hunger and its ability to make or unmake a human. From Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, through the chivalric romances of the European Middle Ages and from Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* to Kentaro Miura's *Berserk* and beyond, hunger and the hungering animal remains an insistent symbol.

Hunger does not only signal a bodily need for sustenance. It is a complex cascade of physiology, an intricate dance of hormones and neurotransmitters about which, despite the proliferation of sophisticated theories across many fields of psychology, anthropology, and a wider variety of interdisciplinary fields, we still do not know as much as we might reasonably expect. In one way, hunger's exact functioning and the subject's relation to it still represents an unexplored and a shadowy facet of humanity. The motif depicted in literature is strongly interconnected with the volitions of humanity needing to be brought to heel for a harmonious existence in human society. Material greed, sexuality, various needs and wants are represented through the lens of the motif. The disappearance of hunger, however, is no solution either, as the gluttons suffering in Dante's *Inferno* make clear. Those who suffer

punishment for gluttony in life in the third circle of Hell seem to neither care for nor feel hunger any longer. The only hungering presence is the monstrous canine towering over them, Cerberus buffeting them with both his barking and claws, the sinners echoing the call, howling like dogs themselves (*Inferno* VI, 19). Placed outside the cycle of hunger and its satisfaction appears to be more of a punishment than those in the *Purgatorio* 23 suffer, circling the tantalizing fruit-bearing tree and cleanly flowing stream, yet being cleansed from sin through their hunger and thirst. The cycle of hunger and its satisfaction features strongly in humanity's fundamental connection between its environment and the self.

The crucial element of this thesis, bestial hunger, which I wish to explore in detail, differs from the 'garden variant' everyday hunger in its manifestations. It is not necessarily a question of degree and scale, more of textual manifestation, and representation. The images conjured by the texts remain close to the hunger felt by humankind in their primal manifestation, but are also different from, for example, the tantalising hunger felt by Dante's sinners in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Bestial hunger is more primal, more fundamental, even if it remains "just" hunger, the seemingly straight-forward imperative of the body to seek sustenance. In its bestial manifestation, hunger becomes alloyed with the image of the animal, further modulating its exact meaning. The image of the hungry sinner gazing upon the fruit-bearing tree which Dante invokes is markedly different from the image of Hunger manifesting as a gigantic spectral canine unleashed upon the starving populus. Perhaps the main difference, beside of the animal imagery utilised by these texts, is the forcefulness of this imagery. There is a particularly active component, which animates the bestial characters of the texts observed by the thesis, uncovering hunger, and the anxieties surrounding it, as bestial. Perhaps Salisbry's words describe the period's attitude towards this particular facet of the human, and indeed animal experience.

The medieval image of paradise articulated most fully by the scholastic theologians reveals a consuming preoccupation with separating people from an animal-like appetite. It represents a logical expression of ecclesiastical desires to separate people from animals. Paradise would contain only that which people praised as their humanity. The victory over death was also a victory over hunger and a bestial appetite for food. (*The Beast Within*, p. 59-60)

If not the final victory, but the protracted, earthly battle with this urge, the fallen interconnectedness of human minds and animal bodies, comprises the main direction of this thesis. When hunger is described as bestial, it has strong connotations of fundamental human categories falling victim to it, becoming consumable when driven by the all-encompassing urge for sustenance. The anxieties surrounding hunger in the period of the late Middle Ages are many and varied, far exceeding, but not excluding the everyday concerns about gluttony. Humanity appears to balance on the edge of animality even at the best of times, and when external factors render expressions of humanity impossible, the final, radical expression of dialogism, the wrath of the starved. Salisbury further explores such expressions of hunger in the period's Europe, which she describes as 'ever-present, life numbing, and pervasive' (p. 135). In an environment like this, an environment uncomfortably not dissimilar to our own day and age in some respects, the anxieties surrounding hunger becoming bestial become more pronounced. Finally, Salisbury offers a striking synthesis of the prevailing attitude, which is characteristic of bestial hunger.

Not only did the poor accept animal food as part of charity but, because of their poverty, they were driven to eat other bestial things. We have seen that holy people feared allowing their hunger to turn them into animals, and they believed they could look to God for help in their fast. However, many people faced hunger

with no hope for spiritual reward. (...) People believed hunger could drive people to such desperation that even the human ties of family could not save people from descending to the worst kind of bestial behavior. (...) What would such “bestial” people not do when confronted with hunger? And, indeed, noble fears seem to have had some basis because during peasant revolts, rebels seem to have occasionally expressed their anger by converting their oppressors to food and eating them. As Juvenal, the classical satirist, observed of a revolt in ancient Egypt, “On the other side was hate, and the hate was hungry.” The victorious Egyptian rebels expressed their hate and hunger by eating the landlords. (*The Beast Within*, p. 135)

Salisbury’s words depict an attitude towards hunger’s bestial qualities, the Juvenalian ‘hungry hate’ seeming to resonate throughout all ages of humanity during times of personal and societal crises. Both the individual subject and the larger populus can, when oppressed or deprived, become bestial in their hunger. The anxious attitude towards such eventuality renders the barriers to humanity permeable, and the image of the animal lurks just outside it. ‘Once the early medieval paradigm of a strict separation of human and animal species began to blur, it seems people were quick to add social status to the criteria of full humanity.’ Bestial hunger is, however, not strictly limited to the category of bodily sustenance. One may hunger for many things beside from food, including more abstract concepts of acceptance, love, or even revenge, often in interconnected ways. The need for these can transcend the boundaries of everyday longing, and, as it will be observed throughout the thesis, cross over into more forceful manifestations. The most forceful and most universal way these complex, even conflicting emotions seem to find expression in art and literature, is through the impulse of hunger alloyed with the image of the animal. Thus, the categories that render hunger bestial can be

outlined in its degree, manifestation, and the anxieties its capability to dissolve the narrow confines of humanity's definition of itself provokes. When these three criteria are present, the thesis aims to triangulate bestial hunger's position in the text.

In order to demonstrate this bestial aspect of hunger the thesis focuses on, and aid the exploration of the topic throughout, I invoke three passages from William Shakespeare's plays to serve as a focalising lens to observe hunger in more detail. Firstly, the disciplining aspect of hunger. There is a particularly unsettling scene in Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*. Even though the thesis focuses on medieval literature, Shakespeare himself was a sharp observer of hunger in his plays, utilising the biological imperative and its many depictions, often positioning his characters in an immediately observable manner. This particular scene takes place in the first act, against the carnivalesque backdrop of Romans celebrating Lupercalia, where Caesar observes his political rival, the ascetic Cassius.

Let me have men about me that are fat,

Sleek-headed men and such as sleep a-nights.

Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look,

He thinks too much; such men are dangerous. (Act I. Scene 2, 202-6)

Cassius proves to be a deeply unsettling character for even someone as charismatic as Ceaser. He enjoys no plays, or music, reads and thinks too much, and only smiles in an attitude of knowing self-mockery. Caesar is greatly unsettled by these displays of Cassius not finding enjoyment in a straight-forward manner, unlike the boisterous and hedonistic Mark Antony. Cassius appears to be in tight control of his hunger, husbanding it for some mysterious purpose that is not immediately externally signified

by his body. This tight control over his own enjoyment and fulfilment of hunger strongly signifies a personality animated by a hunger of some sort, but regardless remaining in tight control.

In the narrower context of the European Middle Ages, the question of hunger is an especially pertinent one. The period was indeed dubbed by the influential French historian, Jacques Le Goff as “the universe of hunger” (*Civilisation*, p. 290). The specific context provides an intellectual, spiritual, and economic environment in which hunger can be observed in sharp focus. It is also unique in its outlook, providing a lens through which the impulse can be observed. Each and every age is haunted by hunger, and the often sophisticated ways man negotiates it changes as much as it fundamentally remains the same.

One is truly not oneself when hungry, but something uncomfortably close to a category that is not entirely human. Bestial hunger is a subversive, insidious infiltrator into the well-ordered, controlled confines of the human categories, unearthing and subverting elevated categories of ethics, laws, and the very fabric of harmonious human life. As the classical proverb, written down by Plautus, states: ‘Lupus est homo homini, non homo, quom qualis sit non novit.’ (‘Man is no man, but a wolf, to a stranger.’) The proverb has resonated with a fundamental wolfish animality lurking within man’s soul, compelling it to behave like a predator. The proverb inspired Sigmund Freud in his psychoanalytical observation of man’s ultimate, animalistic aggression, even in the context of human society. I would modify this line to fit the purposes and context of this thesis, emphasising the Freudian message. The danger and anxiety surrounding the bestial hunger lurking within all was a strong preoccupation of the thinkers of the Middle Ages when famine and starvation were always so close, so persistent, and so dangerous to society. As the thesis will aim to explore, when one is hungry, one may become not a human but a wolf to his fellow human.

This fundamental wolfishness, the universal, bestial quality of hunger sees itself depicted and explored in another of Shakespeare's plays exploring hunger in its many guises and forms. To observe the fundamental bestiality communicated through hunger two further Shakespearean examples will serve as useful focalizers.

Troilus and Cressida, a play set during the Trojan War in Greek antiquity, is notable for its utilisation of colourful metaphors of feeding and hunger. Among them features an exceedingly useful one from the perspective of this thesis, providing a lens through which the motif can be brought to sharper focus. Ulysses, the insightful military mastermind of Greek antiquity, admonishes the Greeks in Agamemnon's war council. He does so through the language of bestial hunger and consumption.

Then every thing includes itself in power,
 Power into will, will into appetite;
 And appetite, an universal wolf,
 So doubly seconded with will and power,
 Must make perforce an universal prey,
 And last eat up himself. (Act I, Scene 3, 119–24)

Ulysses speaks about the power that ultimately turns into appetite, the ultimate appetite which is ever the more powerful for its incorporation of its former two stages of will and power. The strength of the resulting universal wolf is such that it has no other choice, but to serve as its own prey, encompassing everything that hungers and eats, simultaneously, serving as both an original mover and final food to its own hunger. In Ulysses's worldview the self-consuming Ouroboros is not a serpent but a wolf, which finds its origins in will, and power, and ultimately turns into hunger.

Another play by Shakespeare similarly displays the playwright's preoccupation with bestial hunger. The demand of Shylock, the titular merchant of Venice, for Antonio's one-pound of flesh – the main catalyst of the play — is simultaneously nutritive and not. When Shylock is questioned by Salarino: 'what's that good for?' (Act III, Scene 1. 1286), his initial answer is first dismissive ('To bait fish withal'), then, as if finally articulating it to himself, he proclaims that it will 'feed his revenge'. This feeding on the pound of flesh segues into the speech about Jewish corporeality, about the universal human vulnerabilities and pleasures, powerfully amplified by the image of the pound of flesh.

As the play draws to its conclusion Shylock remains adamant about his demand for his pound of flesh. Gratiano's fear for his friend, Antonio's life compels him to reach for the most primal of imagery to describe Shylock's hunger for revenge and vindication through canine terminology.

O, be thou damn'd, inexecrable dog!

And for thy life let justice be accused.

Thou almost makest me waver in my faith

To hold opinion with Pythagoras,

That souls of animals infuse themselves

Into the trunks of men: thy currish spirit

Govern'd a wolf, who, hang'd for human slaughter,

Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,

And, whilst thou lay'st in thy unhallow'd dam,

Infused itself in thee; for thy desires

Are wolvis, bloody, starved and ravenous. (Act IV, Scene 1, 2063-2074)

Shylock's nearly literal bloodthirst, demanding the pound of flesh he was promised is seen by the desperate Gratiano as a behaviour only suitable for someone who is not even human, but whose body is inhabited and controlled by a ravenous, wolfish hunger overwriting reason, and compassion, the very qualities that elevate the human over the animal. The display of cruelty, and the wolfish qualities of Shylock, make Gratiano question his very faith, his entire outlook on the world. Naturally, Shylock's demand for flesh ultimately underlines his universal humanity, while simultaneously disproving it in its cruelty; a fitting depiction of the liminal space bestial hunger inhabits.

Similarly to Ulysses and Gratiano, I too wish to utilise the image of the hungering beasts as a device through which hunger is rendered more visible, and more sensitively adjusted than the "mere" lean and hungry look of Cassius. Animals are used to modulate one's approach to hunger, the combination of the motif of the animal and its hunger renders the otherwise elusive and difficult-to-negotiate motif tangible. It also modulates the motif minutely, rendering it applicable to specific situations, environments, and characters. Again, this observation is applicable to each and every literary-historical context of humanity, but the European Middle Ages provide a singularly layered and poignant preoccupation with hunger, its prevalence, and the anxieties surrounding the animal aspect of humanity coming to the fore.

The perception of hunger in the European Middle Ages is unique, providing an opportunity to observe the motif closely. Hunger constantly loomed large in the life of the period, fasting was a courageous act. Fasting and the Eucharist were two symbols strongly interconnected in the period's Christian mindset. There are numerous behavioural patterns associated with control over hunger, ranging from observation of Lenten tradition to asceticism in the period, thus even selecting the most applicable ones is a difficult task.

The unifying qualities of these behaviours in the period are observed by Caroline Walker Bynum in her *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. Throughout her comprehensive exploration of habits surrounding the discipline of the self in the context of fasting and feasting in the period, Bynum identifies several key aspects of these behaviours. Firstly, ‘To repress eating and hunger was to control the body in a discipline far more basic than any achieved by shedding the less frequent and essential gratifications of sex or money. (p. 2) Eating and its regulation, due to its everyday mundanity, yet overwhelming biological strength becomes a much more significant way towards affective piety. The discipline of such hunger reaches the very biological core of human and animal physiology; thus, it can be identified as the most powerful form of self-control, consequently far exceeding other aspects of self-control. Secondly, as Caroline Bynum observes, ‘It was to embrace hunger, to join with the vulnerability to famine that threatened all living things, in order to induce from the creator and provider of blessings the gifts of fertility, plenty, and salvation.’ (p. 33) Finally, and perhaps most importantly among all aspects in Bynum’s observation, ‘Hunger meant human vulnerability, which God comforted with food, or it meant human self-control, adopted in an effort to keep God's commandments. Thus, ultimately, Hunger was unquenchable desire; it was suffering.’ (p. 54)

In the context of the Middle Ages hunger is, on one hand, an atavistic display of the primary human vulnerability, a spiritual need, longing for the Eucharist and Communion. On the other hand, it is a bestial presence, something bordering on an invader, a quasi-autonomous, nearly parasitic quasi-entity inhabiting, puppeteering the human person, exploiting the weakness of the fallen flesh. Salisbury’s *The Beast Within* (2011), which serves as a strong influence on the thesis’s direction of research and methodology, focuses on the way the period’s thinker negotiated the question of humanity and divinity through the lens of the animal. Salisbury observes the changes occurring in the boundaries between man and

beast as an early foray into the shadowy, feral aspects of humanity within the period reflected in literature:

Finally, perhaps the change that was most influential in the growth of belief in metamorphosis was the blurring of lines between humans and animals. As people began to recognize, wonder about, and fear the beast within themselves, they began looking for this animal. Belief in metamorphosis, and particularly in werewolves, reveals a fear of the beast inside overwhelming the human qualities of rationality and spirituality, leaving only the animal appetites of lust, hunger, and rage. This fear, and the related discovery of transformed humans, reached its high point during the Renaissance and early modern periods and is outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, in the late Middle Ages, there were more frequent references to humans as animals. These stories point to the growing discovery that we, too, are animals. (Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, p. 144)

Despite the specificity the animal offers, the motif remains ubiquitous even within the narrower confines of medieval literature. In order to observe the different contexts applicable, I chose three texts as the subject of the thesis. Each on its own would deserve a thesis and feature multiple moving parts which can help to articulate and observe the disciplinary mechanisms (either of the self or the other) surrounding bestial hunger. They chiefly feature canines (dogs, foxes, and wolves) in their imagery, but lions, rats, mice, and even toads will find themselves within the scope of this thesis's investigative methodology.

They demonstrate different attributes of their respective genres, offering commentary and insight into their specific medieval environments. The anxiety surrounding one's animal hunger and the necessity to control it is an insistent preoccupation of the period's mind, thus the choice of texts which reflect on this in the context of the thesis is made in order to

observe the most pertinent aspects of the period's life. The three texts have been chosen in order to observe three different, fundamental aspects of the period's literature as well as its intellectual and spiritual life. They are all comprised of many moving parts themselves, thus allowing a wide spectrum of experiences and contexts to be modulated by bestial hunger and the discipline exerted over (or, indeed, subverted by) it.

In the first part, *The Tale of Sir Gowther*, a chivalric romance of the late fifteenth century has been chosen for its strong emphasis on, to quote Karl Steel's similarly titled exploration of the question (2011), how to make a human. The romance, a representative of the coming-of-age genre, follows the process from an appetitive childhood through a violent youth to the full integration into human society through chivalric discipline intertwined with the regulatory image of the hound being trained. The young duke, born from demonic rape, becomes a feral youth, brutalizing his subjects. After he comes to recognise his own brutality – his own brute nature – he sets out to receive a penance from the Pope, which requires him to live as a hound and remain silent. In the end, his salvation is achieved through these penitential acts forcing him to properly experience the process of integration into society and develop empathy in the process. It is a tale that encompasses many strata of the period's life, ranging from conception, motherhood, and childhood to the chivalric ideal, and even sainthood. It is what one may rightly perceive as a deep, psychoanalytical exploration of these categories, all communicated through the image and language of bestial hunger, consumption, and the protagonist's control or loss of control over them. His wild childhood, penitential process, and final salvation and sainthood are all strongly interconnected with bestial hunger, thus rendering romance an especially enticing subject for exploration. It is the text that focuses mostly on the individual, the intimate strata of hunger in its most personal, most vulnerable state, and which as a result also displays the most violent, the most overtly bloodthirsty displays of it as well among the texts of the thesis.

In the second part, William Langland's *The Visions of Piers Plowman* serves as a way to expand the scope of hunger. The text moves the scope from the deeply personal, psychological exploration of *Sir Gowther* towards societal power exerted or indeed subverted by hunger. This chapter of the thesis is comprised of three sub-chapters, negotiating two prominent parts of Langland's voluminous dream vision. Firstly, the thesis will focus on the poem's Prologue, which delineates the basic dynamics that will govern the poem's exploration of social order. Within the Prologue a short narrative, the Rat Fable, is contained, which, despite suffering from relative critical neglect, has recently garnered attention due to its sharp social criticism and strong resonance throughout the poem as a whole. This fable explores the way, through the lens of the rodent parliament, parasitic creatures plunder the pantry of the manor. The rats and mice, imagining themselves great lords, want to bell the cat that brutalizes them. However, in the end, they decide that the operation would be too much of an effort and agree to simply keep plundering the pantry as they did before. After discussing the short fable in the Prologue, I turn to Passus VI. In it the titular Plowman, Piers, wishes to establish a small agricultural utopia on his half-acre, but many of his recalcitrant workers simply make its smooth operation impossible. Piers summons Hunger, the very urge embodied in canine form, in order to discipline his workers into submission. The situation, however, spirals out of control. Although Piers seeks to discipline his recalcitrant workers through the operation of Hunger, the canine enforcer's actions prove not only too brutal, but fundamentally upset the operation of essential Christian tenets, such as compassion and charity. In the end, both Piers and Langland become disillusioned by their actions. Hunger, in his speech, reveals his own nature that ultimately distances people from one another, instead of forming a community through it. The hard lessons learned by both Piers and Langland in the episode resonate throughout the entirety of the poem, further amplifying the Rat Fable's

commentary on the fundamentally amoral unevenness of production, distribution, and consumption of foodstuffs.

In the third and final part of the thesis I turn to Robert Henryson's *The Moral Fables*, a collection of Aesopic fables which provides a diverse array of shorter narratives, exploring bestial hunger from different perspectives. These include penitential fasting, the letter of the law, and finally even ethics. In the process, however, all these categories become not only consumable but the very instrument which will make the powerful carry out their will, and satisfy their hunger, at the expense of the powerless. The examined tales are 'The Fox and the Wolf' and 'The Trial of the Fox', which provide an insight into Henryson's arguably most entertaining characters, the foxes. They are opportunistic predators, masters of linguistic flourishes, and often entertaining shenanigans, which in Henryson's version of the tale end to sobering effect. The bleakness and amorality become progressively more pronounced as the Fables progress, continuing in the tale of the 'Wolf and the Lamb', where the gratuitousness of language, morality, and even the very poetic project become questionable in the face of the universal wolfish hunger of the powerful. The final fable of the collection is somewhat of an outlier, 'The Paddock and the Mouse' which, similarly to the Rat Fable in *Piers Plowman*, has recently come to garner more critical attention. It depicts the encounter between the hungry and sympathetic mouse, who wishes to cross the river, and the treacherous toad. The fable serves as a final tale in the collection of fables, and one that depicts hunger as a dangerous, insidious, and subversive influence occluding reason.

Chapter I: Bestial Hunger in *The Tale of Sir Gowther*

I.1. Introduction

In the *Tale of Sir Gowther*, a monstrous child is conceived by a mysterious, demonic creature. Growing up the child-turned-youth grapples with his violent impulses which define his identity. Eventually, through penance and attempts to contain his appetite for violence and destruction, he reaches an equilibrium. Or so it may seem. The narrative is positioned uniquely in many respects, its qualities making it a gripping and graphic tale of heightened emotions, violence, and questionable salvation. This chapter explores the ways the tensions between Sir Gowther's urges represented by his preternatural hunger, violence, and body and acceptable, sanctioned social behaviour interact with one another before his epiphany and subsequent turn towards redemption and salvation.

Demonic, bestial, and finally human, the drives and needs, physical or spiritual, propelling Gowther through his journey remain the defining characteristics of the young duke. Yet, throughout his narrative voyage, the image of the hound will remain his guiding star, orienting his behavioural patterns and acts of disciplining his monstrous hunger and capacity for violence. This strong focus on the canine symbolism mapped on hunger also displays a preoccupation within the period, allowing one to negotiate human categories such as discipline through the image of the animal, the well-trained hound. As Emily Huber observes, 'The dogs of Gowther, and their relationship to Gowther as a dog, illustrate the contingency in the medieval cultural imagination of human identity upon animal identity' (p. 286). The romance draws much of its meaning from this shifting dynamic, never fully rejects its hero's animality, even after he emerges on the other side of the penitential, redrawing the boundaries of his humanity.

Gowther, in his need to reconcile his demonic heritage and animal nature with his role in Christendom, inhabits multiple categories throughout the narrative, often occupying them simultaneously. According to Huber, Gowther's personality, development, and struggles are all related to 'his appetite, manifest as hunger and aggression, and his barking inarticulacy' (p. 294). In her reading, the categories of 'muteness, hunger, and the "desire for articulateness" fuel this romance, a ferocious, bipolar narrative whose abrupt turnabout occurs when its protagonist is forced to confront his own species difference' (p. 288). Jamie C. Fumo similarly emphasises the significance of domestication of the internal canine Gowther's hungering psyche represents in the narrative, which serves as a catalyst propelling him through his journey to become a properly integrated member of Christian society. 'Gowther's challenge is not to exterminate but to internalize, to domesticate, the dog he (figuratively) is in order to become a faithful man of God' (p. 228). Thus, Gowther's journey is not only one guided by his need for disciplining his physicality, but also one for understanding and articulateness; to create a framework of references and behavioural patterns, which can render his otherwise monstrous and destructive urges appropriate. In short, he is to discipline himself, and his eternal drive of hunger. His way to this state leads through the image of the animal, the hound in his case.

The main problem preventing him from integrating into human society is that Gowther is primarily monstrous. Dana Oswald — in her work of comparative analysis discussing the unifying patterns in *Wonders of the East*, *Beowulf*, *Mandeville's Travels*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and *Sir Gowther* — designates the three types of monsters appearing in human form during the period's art and literature:

Thus, three types of monstrous humans exist: monsters of excess, monsters of lack, and hybrid monsters. Monsters of excess include the giants of Middle English romance, whose bodies are excessively large, excessively hairy, and

usually excessively violent. (...) While physical aberration is the primary attribute of monstrosity, deviant behaviour can serve to emphasize or exaggerate monstrosity. Monstrous behaviours help to mark the monster as a cultural as well as a physical Other. (Oswald, p. 6)

Gowther fits neatly into all three categories. Firstly, he is a monster of excess. He exhibits excessive hunger, consumption, sexuality, and violence. Secondly, he is, perhaps most prominently, a monster of lack, driven by the Lacanian concept of capitalised Lack, ever searching to satisfy his emotional and physical hunger manifesting in multiple ways. He does not lack parts of his body, as other monsters of the category may do in the period. He, however, initially lacks an essential internality that would render him truly human, his monstrous deeds of rape and violence point to a lack of compassion and empathy. Finally, he is a monster of hybridity: he is a descendant of a demon, a conceptual Saracen, a manifestation of the Anti-Christ through his relation to Merlin, an offspring of Cain, a werewolf, an attack dog, a vampire, an *enfant terrible*, false and penitent knight, and finally a saint. All the categories exist within Gowther, while his body essentially remains the same, yet simultaneously remains in constant flux, a site of change and dynamics fighting for dominance. His behaviour, his lack of disciplinary ability to control his impulses, however, is perhaps his most striking feature, resulting in the most graphic scenes of the tale.

Gowther also prominently resembles a Wild Man, embodying the medieval anxiety over this atavistic reminder of humanity's past infiltrating Christian society. Gowther is a case in point due to his conception. Dorothy Yamamoto in her exploration of the motif of the Wild Man identifies the character, like the Green Knight, as

‘composed of oppositional features—but what exactly is he opposed to? The figure most often invoked is that of the knight’ (p. 169).

The Wild Man, however, not only embodies an opposition to the chivalric idea. As a character, it synthesises the atavistic human qualities that may infiltrate the well-ordered, closely-watched boundaries of Christendom. The Wild Man can be considered an earlier representation of such anxieties; an ungovernable, uncontrollable, and atavistic creature animated by its wild volitions. There is an explicit heritage of the Wild Man in Gowther, who is overtly related to Merlin (10), who is associated with the tradition of the mystical Wild Man (Laskaya; Salisbury, *Breton Lays*, p. 266). White's definition of the Wild Man might as well be describing Gowther himself:

In the Christian Middle Ages, then, the Wild Man is the distillation of the specific anxieties underlying the three securities supposedly provided by the specifically Christian institutions of civilized life: the securities of sex (as organized by the institution of the family), sustenance (as provided by the political, social, and economic institutions), and salvation (as provided by the Church). (White, p. 21 Salter, pp. 78-9)

Gowther certainly fits White's designation. The young duke's sins and salvation will strongly connect with all three categories, which he will first pervert, then will integrate through their proper observation. Demon, anti-knight, or wild man, the locus of all Gowther's inappropriate, and monstrously enlarged, transgressive bodily urges and his resulting penance intended to counteract their effects find a locus in the canine mouth superimposed upon Gowther's mouth. His subsequent transformations, or rather, transitory states of being — as it will be argued, he resolutely remains the same, while his actions and attitudes change radically — are informed by the control of the mouth.

Huber identifies this symbolic locus, emphasising its role and importance in Gowther's formulation of identity and interactions with the world:

[M]ultiple discursive frameworks intersect in Sir Gowther, both of which are symbolically associated with the dog's mouth: first, his muteness, a presumed inability to communicate meaningfully with human beings; second, his appetitive drives, expressed in the fundamental hunger for food at the opening of the romance and later expanded to encompass sensual appetites, aggression, and desire itself. (p. 287)

Gowther not only physically, but also culturally embodies the Lacanian Other. His patterns of behaviour are monstrous and transgressive throughout the narrative, changing only (if, some argue, at all) through the mediating aspect of discipline. Throughout the narrative, the educative, civilising process reconfigures hunger through this very discipline into a pattern of behaviour that turns the destructive impulse into something that can be utilised in the service of good. Hunger and identity are conjoined constructs, and their changes are strongly interconnected, moving from unregulated and bestial towards refined and tightly controlled. Aaron Hostetter summarizes this aspect of the poem, when writing 'A change in the manner of eating alters appetite and subsequently identity. Hunger itself becomes educated so that the consumer no longer acts in an unsanitary, greedy, and thoughtless way' (p. 502).

When hunger and bodily urges are approached within the period of the late Middle Ages, one cannot avoid Mikhail Bakhtin's critical observations. The statements within the Russian literary critic's formative work, *Rabelais and His World*, have become a solid bedrock to discussions of the medieval body. It is especially true when discourse arrives to the subject of hunger. The very essence of Bakhtin's proposed grotesque body, which has proved so influential to the field, is encapsulated within just a handful of sentences.

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, and transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. (p. 26)

If one wished to encapsulate the first half of Sir Gowther's story it would be, in most essentialist terms, that precisely this grotesquely growing, transgressive body rampaging through the ordered society of Estryke poses the main conflict within the tale. Gowther's grotesque body and its transgressive urges remain the focal point of the conflict. The establishing conflict, however, is not only purely Bakhtinian grotesque. When the specificities of hunger are observed, Delville and Norris bring in the "negative" to Bakhtin's "positive", allowing the fear and anxiety surrounding a character such as Gowther to be explored. They utilise Julia Kristeva's reading, summarising that while in the Bakhtinian sense, the hungering stomach alludes to "the folkloric conception of the depths of the earth as a maternal womb", Kristeva posits the fear from the "archaic mother" uncontrolled and uncontrollable by patriarchal linearity. In their words, 'where Bakhtin concentrates on the comforting meaningfulness and the sense of connectedness afforded by the unfinished body, Kristeva insists that the formless is liable to be experienced as terror and argues that the dissolution of the borders "draws us to the place where meaning collapses"' (Delville, Norris, *The Politics and Aesthetics of Hunger*, p. 13). This collapse of meaning in the face of atavistic imperatives, such as hunger, and a resulting upsetting of the linear construction of identities and ideas is a feature not exclusive to Gowther's tale, but of all the texts observed

in this thesis with the collapse of meaning. The sophisticated, humanising attitudes are rendered ineffectual at best or become subverted and perverted at worst when clashing with the inexorable biological imperative of bestial hunger.

The language in which this dissolution and the attempts to discipline hunger are communicated strongly intertwine. All three texts I explore in the thesis will focus on language as a conceptual, thematic counterpart to hunger's mute focus on the body's drive. While Susan Morrison focuses on the taboo of excrement, her statement can be applied fruitfully to hunger as well. 'Ways in which we discipline our thoughts and fears about the body are evident in the linguistic world we come to share as we enter language' (p. 15). Gowther's story, entering language both in the sense of the text's status as a literary work, and within the narrative in Gowther's penance of silence, is indeed such an exploration of a body and its urges disciplined.

I. 2. The Heege Manuscript and *The Tale of Sir Gowther*

Sir Gowther's character and tale are both amalgams, creations and creatures of diverse influences and backgrounds. Gowther's tale appears in two late fifteenth-century manuscripts: British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 (commonly referred to as Royals) and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1 (commonly referred to as Advocates, or the Heege manuscript). The latter, Advocates version is one that is mostly concerned with the disciplining aspect of hunger, exploring the topic both within and without the textual environment of Sir Gowther's tale. In this, Anna Chen's discussion of the manuscript is an illuminating one, designating the manuscript as a pedagogically positioned one, intended for the education of adolescents.

In its original form, as Chen emphasises, the manuscript is comprised of a ‘collection of nine independent booklets, each of which contains either single texts or short anthologies of thematically related texts: long religious narrative poems in each of three of the booklets, for example, comic pieces in another, and, in three of the booklets, romances paired with didactic texts aimed at children’ (p. 362). Within its educational framework, *Sir Gowther* features in the second booklet, which pairs the tale with a conduct poem, *Urbanitatis*’ (p. 362). This pairing, focusing on the theme of good conduct, ‘underscore[s] the manuscript’s [pedagogical] methodology’, emphasising its content on the margins as a *llesun* (fol. 49r) (p. 364).

Naturally, the period’s teachers and thinkers did not consider the experience of childhood along the lines of the Freudian psychoanalytical terminology and categorisation in their pedagogical methodology. Yet, the infinite childish capacity for innocence and cruelty, and all the anxieties surrounding such impulses, did not escape their attention. As Chen observes, in the context of Gowther’s tale:

While childhood was understood in the Middle Ages as an undesirable period of socially ignorant bestiality, then, it was also conceptualized as an age of spiritual purity and special affinity with Christ. (...) [Gowther’s] invocations, in Advocates, of God specifically as a human child [673] bind childhood both to ideal humanness and to the Christian faith. What has happened to Gowther, then, is not only a maturation out of a wayward and appetitive infancy but also a metamorphosis of kinship in which he eats his way into becoming "Goddus chyld," *returning* [my emphasis], in his state of grace, to a state of childhood. (p. 383)

Chen's observation is instrumental in this thesis's understanding of Gowther, his tale as an educative journey told from the perspective of hunger. The inclusion of gory scenes in the tale 'signal Advocates' keen interest in uncontrolled appetite' (p. 361). The expansive manuscript also notably contains a list of hunting terminology, something that will inform Gowther's canine training as well, learning how to hunt in the service of Christendom, instead of his own insatiable hunger. Hunting also featured in children's literature at the time as an important part of their curriculum, the activity is an effective way to display one's mastery over both oneself and the kingdom of animals (p. 364). The hunting terminologies in the manuscript also extend into the realm of transcendent human and animal bodies through unique pairings creating expressions entirely unique to this textual environment, 'deliberately eliding the vocabularies of classification that, in theory, should separate human and animal identities' (p. 367). Among such expressions of the manuscript, the canine allusions to the depredations of the false knights behaving like wolves is one that cues Gowther's early ravages very deliberately.

Comparing "a rowte of knights" to "a rowte of wolves," [in (fol. 63r-v)] for example, unravels the borders separating the wolf, a figure for vice and greed in medieval Christian literature and one that usually populated the geographical, social, and psychological outskirts of the medieval landscape, from the knight in the centre of these spaces. In "a rowte of knights . . . a rowte of wolves" is captured, in a sense, the knight becoming the wolf, and the wolf becoming a man. (p. 367)

Finally, Chen's observation encapsulates the very reason Gowther's tale is included in the thesis focused on disciplining the impulse of bestial hunger, and the journey it entails. In short, Gowther's story is a "recipe" on how to make a human.

Gowther's transformation from a monstrous creature into a properly socialized member of his human community is underpinned by the medieval conception of children as uncouth, appetitive beasts who must be trained and tamed into civilized human beings through education, a process that is figured not only in *Sir Gowther* but also in the rest of the manuscript, and in the Middle Ages generally, as eating, as nourishment, and as nurture. The medieval perception of childhood as a transitional state between appetitive bestiality and self-controlled humanity can usefully frame the growing body of scholarship on what *Sir Gowther* can reveal about being, and becoming, human in the Middle Ages. (pp. 365-6)

I observe Gowther's tale and character from the perspective the Heege manuscript's pedagogically minded scribe, or schoolmaster would have probably intended. As the tale can be categorised as a romance, it entails a coming-of-age narrative, an impulsive child, with impulses of monstrous proportions learning the ways of the world that he thought he knew (just like Gowther '[t]o lerne *anodur lare*' [my emphasis] (237) and becoming a well-adjusted, responsible adult, embraced in the community of fully formed adulthood, ascending to become an exemplar of chivalry and Christianity. Yet, arguably, the tale is even more than that. Despite its relative shortness, the romance encapsulates a wide variety of themes, from anxieties over one's conception to infantile vulnerability, and the difficulty of disciplining one's impulses. The tale's horizon of perspectives broadened greatly, encompassing and incorporating the extreme manifestations of these categories, the monstrous, gory, and shocking, and the transcendental, healing, gentle and divine. It is also a tale of being born an appetitive quasi-animal, taught the difference between animal and human, and finally not only becoming human, but achieving the elevated position of responsibility and insight that knighthood, nobility, and finally sainthood entail. It is a tale of heightened emotions and bodily urges writ large, not unlike Gowther's own body.

Gowther's similarly to its counterparts found within the Heege manuscript, is focused on training appetitive children to become properly adjusted adults through disciplining their infantile voracity. In Chen's words, 'the narratives of transformation within this version of the romance are structured by two competing cultural imaginaries of childhood as socially brutish but also spiritually redemptive, whereby Gowther simultaneously eats his way out of one model of childhood and back into the other' (p. 361). This process, Gowther's way of hungering, disciplining, and eating his way out of his appetitive, bestial childhood is the focus of this chapter.

I. 3. Gowther's Conception and Hunger in his Youth

The first stage of Gowther's narrative journey, to quote Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's discussion of the issue, 'does not begin well' (p. 220). While Cohen in his observation particularly refers to the way Gowther's own story starts when he makes this remark, the protagonist's life journey begins on a footing that puts him on a direct trajectory to violent acts to come, while also serving as a warning about the way destructive urges can infiltrate one's discipline of the self. Thus, Cohen's words can also be interpreted when it comes to the opening lines of the poem proper in a similar manner, lending them and the narrative both a more sinister flavour when inspected closely. I would argue that the Prologue designates the main dynamics around which the narrative revolves, encapsulating the anxiety which surrounds the motif of bestial urges of the fallen human body manifesting as demons and fiends circling it. The poem, before arriving at Gowther's tale, starts with a classic Prologue, invoking God for protection from the evil that will serve as the centrepiece of the narrative.

The lines ring with a stern cautioning voice.

God, that art of myghtis most,

Fader and Sone and Holy Gost,

That bought man on Rode so dere,

Shilde us from the fowle fende,

That is about mannys sowle to shende

All tymes of the yere! (1-6)

The "fende" is not only infinitely insidious in its manifestations but also functions as a corrosive agent to the bonds linking members of human society. The fiends, or devils, have a great and varied arsenal, especially when it comes to tempting one into inappropriate consumption. Such manifestations haunting the human psyche have been the preoccupation of Nietzsche's investigation into morality as well, identifying unsatisfied libidinal drives rising up, coming to their own in a poetic fashion within the Christian system of references, when writing 'whereas the Christian who (...) thinks he has killed his sensuality, is wrong, for his sensuality still lives in an uncanny, vampire form, and torments him in hideous disguises' (p. 240). Nietzsche's words seem to echo some aspect of the anxiety in the period, for precisely such uncanny, hideous urges in disguise are at play in *The Tale of Sir Gowther*, and the Prologue goes to great length to establish their haunting presence.

As the narrative begins, the establishing lines find the duchy of Estryke in a hereditary crisis, threatening the dissolution of the ducal family. After her desperate prayer for a child, the Duchess, in her emotionally and morally vulnerable state, flees into an orchard. The

natural place - both a small reflection of the Garden of Eden and a place far away from the controlling bounds of society's artifice - serves as a "blind spot" in the Duchess's surveillance of her own body. The orchard, the miniaturised manifestation of wilderness, is where the natural intrudes on the socially controlled, that is already weakened by the Duke's ultimatum unsettling the Duchess's composure and will.

Trees and wilderness play an important role in depicting the interaction between the different dynamics of the atavistic and the ordered, nature and person. The period's orchards are much closer to a garden than any proper form of wilderness. As Gillian Rudd argues, 'further use to which forests in particular were put, both in actuality and in the imagination, was as places of exile or refuge' (p. 49). Thus, the singular tree in the orchard is a sufficiently strong representation of the forest and is thus rendered appropriate for the purpose of the Duchess. This purpose is to commune with the primordial wilderness and its inhabitants without the rigid surveillance system of disciplinary behaviour patterns the castle represents.

In hur orchard apon a day

Ho meyt a mon, tho sothe to say,

That hur of luffe besoghth,

As lyke hur lorde as he myght be;

He leyd hur down undur a tre,

With hur is wyll he wroghtth. (67-72)

Both the narrative and the lines remain ambiguous at this point for the reader, while simultaneously conveying a sense of wrongness by describing the male participant of the act

as "a mon", who "as lyke hur lorde as he myght be" who lay down under the tree. The choice of specific expression is crucial in the description, for, although the Duchess's slip of discipline and self-reflection in the instance of the prayer for a child invokes the supernatural element into both the narrative and her body, the real actor in the scene is not her, but the Fiend. The Fiend comes to her and lays her down under the tree and initiates the intercourse. The atavistic aspect of the Jungian Shadow, — the primeval trickster in the dark which will fundamentally influence Gowther's life, and which he will struggle to integrate — here literally embodied, interacts with the maternal body. The miniature shadowy forest of the orchard allows the metaphysical infiltration of the conceptual dark forest into the ordered human society. The shadowy mirror image of the Duke of Estryke in the figure of the Fiend is communicated in a thematically resonant line (72), where he 'wroghtth' his 'wyll' with the Duchess. This exact moment and this fiendish, demonic aspect of Gowther's father will resonate later in the poem, when Gowther is observed to 'wyrke is fadur wyll' (176) when he brutalizes the inhabitants of the countryside. The Fiend is thus not only identified by his appearance to be bestial, but his very will, his violence and sexual appetite, also remains a strong influence on Gowther's life. In my reading, the Fiend is the manifestation of the Lacanian concept, the primordial Father of Enjoyment, as it will be explored in detail.

The orchard's shadows mirror the dark forest, an ideal place for encounters with Jungian shadows indeed. It is not her sexual appetite that drives the Duchess to this place, but the pressing need to produce an heir and avert the hereditary crisis threatening her marriage to the Duke (56). The shadow of the magical forest invading ordered society will come back to haunt Gowther in a metaphysical way. His first real confrontation with his own shadow will not take place in a literal forest, however, but when he is admonished by the elderly earl. Into this shadowy wilderness, he will need to venture later in order to receive his penance and

find a new system of meaning to guide his life. The conceptual beasts and savages lurking within the wilderness will accompany him internally through his journey.

After the Duchess's intercourse with the Fiend she believed to be her noble husband, the following lines describe the sudden turn of events.

When he had is wylle all don

A felturd fende he start up son,

And stode and hur beheld;

He seyde, "Y have geyton a chylde on the

That in is yothe full wylde schall bee,

And weppons wyghtly weld." (73-78)

In the space of a single line, the ambiguous visitor is transformed into the terrifying, hair-covered fiend. It is not difficult to perceive the perspective of the scene's sudden shift, where the gaze of both the reader and the Duchess sees the animalistic apparition instead of the Duke suddenly standing up. He proclaims to the great horror of the Duchess three things. Firstly, that he has begotten a child on the Duchess. Secondly, that the child will grow to be, formulating the profound understatement, "wylde", and thirdly that he will become a man of violence, wielding weapons (79-90).

Despite the terrible revelation, the Duchess is quick on her feet, in both literal and figurative senses. She reacts by blessing herself in an act of spiritual "first aid", then proceeds to flee back into the safe and regulated space of the castle and society. She proclaims to her

lord that an angel has visited her, and if they sleep together that night, the child's conception is guaranteed. The Duke agrees. The scene simultaneously invokes and perverts the image of Mary after the Annunciation. The scene conflates the Duchess with Mary herself, and the Duke with Joseph. The scriptural scene, however, is not singularly applicable. As Czarnowus explains, the horrific revelation of the fiend also bears the same gestures towards the Annunciation, only in reverse, positioning Gowther as the anti-Christ (p. 112).

Gowther's journey through childhood, early adulthood, and into his penitential dynamics will display his relation to the different "names" of the fathers. His conception already haunted by the atavistic, magical father figure, his birth and monstrous physicality only further complicate his process of becoming who he is meant to be. Identifying against whose influence to rebel and whose ideals to emulate in his behaviour is the main question of the romance. Throughout his journey, Gowther will not only have to find himself in order to locate his authentic identity, but also has to uncover *exactly* which Name of the Father should guide his actions. Through his trials and tribulations, Gowther is hounded by his demonic heritage and the infernal hunger it entails. The young duke's journey enters its next stage when he is brought into the world.

As Gowther is born, it is hinted in oblique terms that he is 'Of won that coth do skathe' (105) or is one that could do harm. He is christened in a church by his father, the Duke, as Cohen points out, *in nomine patris*, in the name of the Father, 'just as the romance is constructed around the search for a father's Name under which to be' (*Becoming Male*, p. 222). As the infant Gowther rapidly grows, he proves to be a violent and supernaturally voracious child. Feeding him first becomes a challenge, then a crisis. In this situation the Duke has no other option but to expedite Gowther's feeding.

Tho Duke comford that Duches heynde,

And aftur melche wemen he sende,

Tho best in that cuntré,

That was full gud knyghttys wyffys.

He sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys,

Sone had he sleyne three! (109-114)

After comforting the Duchess, the Duke takes precautions to have Gowther, his only son and heir, become a good knight, literally sucking the chivalric virtue up through his milk by sending for wet nurses, all of whom are wives of well-established knights. Here, I argue, Gowther's infantile feeding can be observed through the lens of breastfeeding. The breastfeeding of the wetnurses and the motherly breastfeeding, in my reading, even though are very similar both in their method and outcome, do differ. Thus, I read them as two separate instances. In my perception, they are variations on the same theme of breastfeeding, modulated by the context of the female body's proximity to Gowther: the generically female, and the motherly. From the perspective of Gowther the first category of the wetnurses, of whom he slays no fewer than nine in the end (119), can be categorised as less tender, less intimate. Driven by the hunger of his rapidly growing body he kills them through the act of feeding. However, the motherly breastfeeding, rendered in striking detail in the *Advocates*, is a psychologically much more significant scene, and one that will become a determining factor in Gowther's future as well. Thus, following the chronology and the gradual development of both Gowther and the narrative, I too address these two acts of feeding as separate, discrete instances, with their own dynamics and narrative impact.

Firstly, the Duke and the Duchess are cognizant of the fact that Gowther is, in some way, capable of harm, as the lines establish immediately after the child's birth. Thus, the Duchess is reluctant to breastfeed him, knowing of Gowther's demonic heritage. This heritage compels the infant to, again, in some mysterious way, to consume the wetnurses, kill them through the act of breastfeeding (110-16). There is much debate surrounding the perceived sinfulness of Gowther at this stage as a mere newborn. Gowther, as the result, grows preternaturally fast, his hunger matching the pace of his growth. He kills several wet nurses through feeding; thus, the Duchess is reluctant to approach and breastfeed the child herself. The prominent motherly rejection and resulting monstrous feeding are emphasised by Czarnowus.

The monstrous child soon after his birth begins to epitomize wildness, since he "sythyn wax breme [and brathe]" [later became fierce and unruly] (105). The latter words introduce a degree of discord: at first Gowther's mother *knows* that he is monstrous and then he *turns into* a monster, which has an air of being a self-fulfilling prophesy. (p. 117)

While Gowther's infantile feeding is widely discussed in the criticism, this particular aspect of the remains somewhat under-observed in his case. There is a somewhat paradoxical argument here: the Duchess refuses to feed Gowther, because he is wild and capable to do harm, but the child grows wild *because* of the motherly refusal of breastfeeding is being (accurately) perceived as a wilful rejection. The young duke's wild appearance might initially, and overtly discourage the Duchess from breast-feeding him; and together with Gowther's preternatural hunger the combined effects signal catastrophe to the wet nurses attempting to feed the youth.

As he grows, Gowther retains his infantile bestial shagginess and remains a creature capable of, quite literally, bristling like a boar. Uebel's observation allows one to picture Gowther in such a light. '[A]s the Advocates manuscript has it even more suggestively, given the nature of the transgression against nature that engendered him, "breme as barre" (fierce as a wild boar [ME *bere*=bear)' (p. 100). Gowther is seen in a strange doubleness and appears to be an animal in human form. Laskaya and Salisbury posit some questions between the pointed inclusion of "barre" and "brathe", but the association found in Advocates is most fitting, even if it is a mere associative slip of the scribe committing the tale to parchment. The word with the bestial connotations is more fitting to emphasise Gowther's feral nature; Laskaya and Salisbury suggest that '*barre* evidently came to the scribe's mind more readily than the original *brathe*' (Notes for line 108, p. 299). The particularities of the expression gesture towards Gowther's hairy animality, a heritage of his demonic father and a signifier of his primordial, wild nature at full display, which become ever more apparent as he grows.

Tho chyld was yong and fast he wex -

The Duke gard prycke aftur sex -

Hende harkons yee:

Be twelfe monethys was gon

Nine norsus had he slon

Of ladys feyr and fre. (115-120)

The shaggy infant Gowther's first semi-autonomous action in the narrative depicted by the first verb he is associated with is feeding. Gowther's feeding, however, kills the wet nurses.

While the exact specificities of the action remain shrouded and ambiguous, happening behind closed doors as it were, the outcome is the same: nine nurses are slain, all of noble birth.

Even early on in the narrative clearly centres around the motif of illicit feeding, the perversion of the Eucharist: literal anthropophagy, cannibalism. (Florschuetz, p. 35). This anthropophagy, however, yet tethers on the brink of incredulity. How is such an act *exactly* possible? Here the boundaries are close to each other; breastfeeding the newborn is a natural act, yet Gowther, in his voracious appetite pushes the act to its extreme in magnitude in some mysterious manner that the wet nurses die in the process. Their noble bodies become drained of their vitality as the consequence of Gowther's unrestrained and unnatural hunger.

Here, I argue, that Gowther's character enters a new stage of development and aggression when the Duchess finally attempts to breastfeed him. Here Gowther's feeding is not simply a quasi-magical act that it was in the case of the wetnurses but a graphically detailed perversion of a tender moment in a child's development process. It is unique not only because of this brutality but also because of its strong preoccupation with the infantile psyche and its development reflected in the motif of hunger. This hunger, however, is demonic and bestial, even in Gowther's infantile state. The slaying of the noble wetnurses cannot stand any longer, and the ducal couple cannot find any more volunteers. The knights of the duchy even band together to demand the end of the gruesome practice (118-26). Thus, the Duchess decides to breastfeed Gowther herself.

His modur fell afowle unhappe,

Upon a day bad hym tho pappe,

He snaffulld to hit soo

He rofe tho hed fro tho brest -

Scho fell backward and cald a prest,

To chambur fled hym froo. (127-132)

One of the most critically prominent, most discussed, and most symbolically loaded scenes of the narrative occurs here. It is featured uniquely in the Advocates manuscript, marking a prominent example of the manuscript's focus on acts of consumption both appropriate and inappropriate. Gowther in this tense moment, finally on the breast of his own mother, precariously balances on the cusp of normalcy. If he is able to feed without putting his mother, into mortal danger, the entire dynastic crisis can be forgiven, the ranks of noble wet nurses suckled dry more or less forgotten, normality reasserting itself in the duchy of Estryke. Gowther "snaffulld" (129) to his mother's breast, a word that in its sound and semantics has attracted the attention of many critics. Laskaya and Salisbury explain the unique term, as "snaffle" and its related form "snuffle" means "to make a sniffing noise, to inhale audibly." (Notes for line 129, p. 299). Hostetter suggests a similar approach, although emphasising the comfort the word conjures. He writes when investigating the word's exact meaning: 'Possibly a *hapax legomenon*, it seems to mean "suckled." Such a homely, wholesome word creates the image of a baby's sweet reaction to its mother's breast, a tiny gurgle in anticipation of its meal' (p. 504). Dana Oswald suggests something similar but also emphasises that the expression appears to be entirely unique to the romance, not to be found anywhere else in the language of the period (p. 168).

Here the Bakhtinian concepts can be deployed to understand the activity of "snuffling" from the perspective of Gowther's questing quasi-canine nose. Like a pup (an admittedly dangerous one at that) he is orienting himself by utilising the interconnected senses of smell and taste, the word serving as a powerful onomatopoeia. He does not fuss, or

cry for his mother's breast, he inhales and sniffs, like a hound spooring prey. Gowther, in an instant, proceeds to bite the source of nourishment, tearing the nipple off his mother's breast. The Duchess cries for a priest and flees the room in horror, leaving the bloodthirsty child. Her cries are twofold, as Margaret Robson suggests. Firstly, pain and shock caused by the act of violence, understandably lie behind the Duchess's cries. Secondly, however, her realisation about the full extent of her transgression sets in, the vengeful child of the fiend, who provides a tactile reminder of her sin, foreshadowing his violent reign of terror in the future. She flees the scene, attempting to physically and mentally distance herself from the demonic infant while blessing herself. (pp. 144-5). Thus far, Gowther was fed by what the ducal couple hoped to incorporate; nourished by wives of noble knights, whose statues plummeted precipitously through Gowther's feeding rendering them food. Now, the Duchess finds herself as the target of the same voracious hunger, and she is savaged during the act, as if by an animal.

The oral violence bringing forth the canine aspect of the young Gowther is a central attribute to his physical and moral development. As Laskaya and Salisbury observe '[t]hat the infant Gowther is able to tear off his mother's nipple suggests the presence of teeth. Early dentition was often regarded as an indication of a child's extraordinary future and was frequently associated with dog-like attributes' (Notes for line 130, p. 299). Gowther corresponds to both categories. The presence of teeth, and early (or premature) dentition renders him a simultaneous, dual symbol of infantile vulnerability and imminent danger lurking in bestial canine form. Uebel sees this as a strong link between Gowther and his monstrous canine aspect of a werewolf expressed through the questing, fanged mouth, despite the youth pointedly not exhibiting any kind of expressly demonic behaviour, such as explicitly transforming (p. 101). Gowther's quasi-canine muzzle is also a locus of perverse transformation at this stage, as Huber observes:

The actions of his mouth are the first indications of the baby's instinctually aggressive and appetitive nature. Likewise, it is the work of the proverbial dog's mouth, as it bites at more food than it needs, befouls its muzzle with blood, laps up its own vomit, and licks other canine genitals. (p. 295)

Gowther's biting of the motherly nipple is arguably the most graphic and most widely discussed moment within the narrative, yet Gowther's hunger remains difficult to interpret as demonically aggressive or painfully innocent. Despite the psychological ambiguity, hunger remains the main motivator of the infant, foreshadowing the callous violence to come. Huber concludes that 'The mouth instantiated as the locus of his animal appetites, the poem then figurally locates desire broadly in Gowther's outrageous aggression and sexual violence' (p. 295).

Questions surrounding Gowther's intent and ability to control his hunger at this stage of his development are abundant within the criticism. This is a crucial question from the perspective of his perception and psychological profile, for despite the monstrously enlarged appetite, the transgressive feeding of Gowther is, as some observe, not explicitly demonised. The reception of Gowther's biting of the nipple appears to be differing in minute detail, but many have come to identify it as a violent, wilful assertion of the masculine identity, a prematurely enacted Oedipal gesture as the male child distances himself from the source of physical and emotional nourishment. Some, however, like Oswald, insist that the scribe/poet ascribes no malicious intent on Gowther's behalf. Oswald suggests, that, 'his infantile inability to control this impulse figures him, from the start, as a threat to women's bodies (...)' Gowther's crime is one of immoderate appetite for breastmilk, a desire that is instinctual, not intentional' (p. 168). Oswald further accentuates her compelling analysis by emphasising the act as a manifestation of 'prescient and dangerous masculinity' on Gowther's part. This, I

argue, remains a key to the young duke's psychological development: driven by his unnatural hunger and rejected by the motherly figure he is both cornered and ravenous.

Uebel perceives the biting and tearing of the motherly nipple can be and is perceived as a wilful act of rebellion: hunger weaponised. He observes Gowther's oral violence from the perspective of the larger psychoanalytic criticism, as an instinctual answer to the situation:

The early use of teeth as a weapon is well attested in the extensive psychoanalytic literature on biting and oral sadism, where infantile teething and sadistic biting of others are activities through which inner tension, or displeasure, is temporarily discharged and aggressivity is directed outward. (p. 101)

This infantile impulse will find later resonance in Gowther's aggression and penance as well, both circling back to the infantile oral violence persisting and developing into different manifestations in Gowther's adulthood. Thus, Uebel's argument remains compelling. Yet, as Blamires emphasises, despite the act marking the beginning of Gowther's "blood-curdling tyranny", one has to 'read beyond the vampire-like ghoulishness' and see the rejection as an act of "self-alienation from generic stock", the offspring not imbibing the "pedigree", the lineage provided by the mother's attempt to suckle him. (pp. 52-3) Blamires's interpretation of the act invokes the dynastical horror aspect of Gowther, who is a corrupting and insidious influence upon the kingdom, his misdeeds intrinsically linked to his physicality rooted in his hunger, growth, and resulting capacity to do violence, which will later strongly intertwine with Gowther's ultimate sainthood.

In an effort to further nuance the scene's perception, Florschuetz compares Gowther to a child featured in the *Old French Crusade Cycle* raised in the wilderness by a monk. The child formulates the question so captivating Florschuetz's attention in the context of

Gowther's oral aggression: "Sire, 'fait-il, 'qu'est mere? Et s'on le mangera? " ("Sire, what is a mother? Can one eat it?") (p. 40). This action, however, cannot be carried out in the case of Gowther. His biological imperative to fuel his rapidly growing body pushes his ungovernable hunger to the domain of the preternatural, resulting in his first slaughter of women, for he "sythyn wax breme and brathe" (108), growing to be fierce and violent an infant.

With many behavioural patterns, Gowther does not go through the process of orientation within the moral and societal framework of mastering proper discipline to control his body. Similarly to the breastfeeding and motherly rejection disrupting his linear process of Lacanian Oedipalisation, which would allow for a symbolic castration, through which the male subject loses the direct access to the maternal body. Žižek describes the Lacanian concept of Oedipalisation built on the Freudian original as 'the myth of the primal father [which] is conceived as a philogenetic projection into the mythic, prehistorical past of the Oedipus myth as the elementary articulation of the subject's ontogenesis' (*Looking Awry*, pp. 23-4). This ontogenetical process occupies a central place in Sir Gowther's tale, and I read his hunger as a crucial element of it. Gowther's aggressive sexuality in his youth, perverting the dynamics of love and reproduction through rape and torture will echo the disruption in the future, amplifying and distorting it in the process. Gowther, in Lacanian terms, in the symbolically castrative moment fails to integrate his psyche into this process, and instead asserts himself as the top of the paternal hierarchy, refusing the authority, which would distance him from the maternal body. This symbolic refusal will reoccur throughout the narrative in acts such as Gowther's forging of his own sword (the visible, phallic symbol of authority and violence (151-3)) and refusing to give it up even at the request of the Pope. In the process, Gowther becomes a challenger to the paternal authorities, which in turn will need to be reinstated throughout the narrative in symbolic gestures towards the Pope, the Emperor,

and the Earl. These are all the different faces, different names of the father, a Lacanian concept prominently applied to Gowther's narrative by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen.

Cohen's reading provides an important framework on which Gowther's developmental trajectory can be mapped on the Lacanian terminology.

Jacques Lacan's notion of "the Name of the Father" (*nom du pere*) is useful in describing the textual mechanics of both genres: these "identity romances" often trace how young men (*juvenes*) mature into their proper name through a series of adventures – and, "as it turns out," the adult identity into which they wander exactly coincides with a family name that may have been hidden from them until that point. Even when (or especially when) romance heroes do not know who their father is, their movement into adulthood is dictated nonetheless by the ghostly agency that the Name-of-the-Father embodies in its narrative determinacy: the Name is revealed at the precise moment when the hero becomes the history for which it stands. (*Gowther Among the Dogs*, p. 221)

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Name of the Father represents the symbolic authority of the father that introduces the subject to societal laws and the structure of language. This concept is crucial for understanding the regulation of desire, as it replaces the child's primal connection to the mother with the prohibitive law of the father. In the original French the concept is a pun, *Nom-du-Père*, which also means the "No-of-the-Father", emphasising the concept's essentially prohibitive nature, against which the subject struggles. This interaction shapes the subject's relationship to social norms and prohibitions. In the context of *Sir Gowther*, the Name of the Father can be seen as the force from which Gowther's animalistic hunger, and resulting imposition of societal and spiritual law that transforms his uncontrollable desires into a path of penance and

redemption. The subsequently occurring paternal figures of authority and enjoyment over the course of the narrative guide the young duke, from demonic through bestial to finally human.

The process is arguably the very point of the narrative progression, which maps on the concept of Oedipalisation, Gowther becoming a properly adjusted, Oedipalised subject in the process. Expressed through the vocabulary of the period's pre-Freudian thinker, and within the context of the narrative, this progression equates Gowther not only as the Christian everyman grappling with the original sin, but also (and perhaps more importantly) as a nobleman finally becoming a God-fearing, law-abiding knight, ruler, even a saint in the process. At this point of the poem, however, Gowther is not ready to experience the symbolic loss that would initiate the process of ontogenetic journey. His preternatural hunger poses two obstacles, between which Gowther is caught. His need to feed represents a simultaneous violent urgency (that killed the wetnurses in the preceding stanzas) and a primal, infantile vulnerability (for he may starve), which prevents him from experiencing a symbolic signifier replacing the maternal body and his hunger-turned-desire for it.

Thus, Gowther bites, as an act of survival, exploring his environment and differentiating between nourishing and discardable matter, in both a literal and conceptual sense. It is simultaneously an act of positive "hanging-on-bite" with which the child wishes to cling on to what is important (the maternal figure) and to ascribe meaning to the bitten. Gowther's bite read from a psychoanalytical perspective is not a simple rejection, or act of linear aggression, but a cognitively explorative act, and attempt to answer the question of the feral child: "What is a mother? Can one eat it?". The child clings to the protective, nutritive figure he wishes to explore to aid his cognitive mapping. Yet, the figure, in panic and pain, flees from him, rendering Gowther's experience a more psychologically coloured and conceptually refined scene than the one suggested by the critical consensus on the matter.

Gowther in this light resembles the Arthurian giant of Mont Saint Michel described in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. This particular giant is one that has been used in comparative analysis to understand Gowther better. One of the characteristics of the Giant is the monstrously enlarged sexual appetite clearly equated to its hunger, as observed by Anne Bartlett (p. 66). The explicit connection between the two gigantic appetites is further accentuated by Oswald's argument, pointing out the strange behaviours which bring the two characters in the vicinity. Both characters are notable for not only their monstrously enlarged bodily hungers which their respective monstrous bodies necessitate: their sexuality and appetites remain strongly interconnected. Their excessive expressions of gender, masculine bodies, and sustaining hungers are, in fact, desires that point towards societal incorporations in disguise. This very incorporation was the Duke's original idea, hoping that Gowther would incorporate chivalric virtue through his feeding. The process, however, is derailed by the child's preternaturally enlarged hunger. Following the argument posited by Oswald, one of the foremost critics aside from Cohen drawing parallel lines between the Giant and Gowther, one is ultimately presented with a reading that perceives hunger as a crucial motif that 'lays bare the desires for both physical and social' (p. 165). The observation is useful in developing further connective tissue between the literal biological urge, and the desires it symbolically represents. Oswald's comparative observation between the Giant and Gowther draws strong parallels between the two characters from the perspective of their insatiable, inhuman hunger fundamentally defining them and their behavioural patterns. 'The linkage between desire and appetite shows the danger presented to the human community by the dangerous body of the hypermasculine monster' (p. 165).

The 'body of the hypermasculine monster' is one that is capable of extreme violence when gripped by the motive force of the different, strongly interconnected manifestations of hunger. The attempt at the formulation of masculine identity focuses on the act of eating in a

social setting. The result of the attempt, however, is the perversion of the operation of the civilising process, which *should* result in a well-adjusted member of society, for such is its purpose. Gowther was meant to consume the milk of the wives of the well-established knights in a similar manner, literally *incorporating* the chivalric virtues in the process. The attempt, however, turns into a perverted act of the tender infantile feeding, resulting in Gowther cannibalising the wetnurses. Cohen also observes the Giant's character and behaviour from this perspective. His approach further accentuates the concepts which apply to Gowther's youthful rampage unleashed on the population of Estryke.

The monster's appetite is for "force and violence" (*vis et violentia*), erotic pleasure (*fedus coitus*), and vast quantities of disgusting foodstuffs (*tabum semesorum porcorum*). (...) The giant's body is one that knows neither limit nor control, only immediate sensual gratification. He dwells on his mountaintop, in isolation from the civil world, precisely because the desires to which his excessive form gives instant expression mark him as not quite human: men control their appetites (for *vis et violentia*, for *fedus coitus*), and that domination over their own bodies is what constitutes their humanity. (*Of Giants*, p. 38)

Cohen designates the space between impulse and action as the frontier of discipline and control, or the lack thereof. Gowther is a case in point: a solitary, isolated monster, driven by the urges of his preternatural body, lacking the will to exert any form of disciplinary principles over his action. At this point of the tale, he is ruled by his supernatural hunger and impulses alone. His lack of control over the various hungers and appetites depicted in Cohen's argument marks him as an outsider from the perspective of humanity, something feral and other. And as a creature resembling more of predatory animal than an infant human, Gowther is fed with meat.

That yong chyld Gowther,
 Bot fed hym up with rych fode
 And that full mych as hym behovyd,
 Full safly mey y sweyre. (135-8)

Gowther's carnivorous diet and demonic heritage results in his rapid growth into a premature young adulthood. Czarnowus observes, that '[t]he monstrous child, very early in life fed with "rych fode" [rich food] (133), resembles a carnivorous beast more than human offspring' (p. 118). As the young duke grows in strength and as he extends the reach of his hunger to the bodies of the duchy, so grows his cruelty both in degree and sophistication. The following scenes of the tale hold further appetitive horrors both for him and the population of the duchy, yet also position Gowther on the road of his salvation. In the next section I will discuss the ways in which he first subverts and then, ultimately discovers the disciplinary mechanisms which can properly express his appetite for violence.

I. 4 Gowther, The Young Animal

Gowther's journey, I argue, enters its new stage when he forges his sword at the age of fifteen. This act marks a transition from childhood to early adulthood due to several reasons, which in turn lead back to the ungovernable youth's monstrous urges and hungers.

Be that he was fifteen yere of eld
 He made a wepon that he schuld weld,
 No nodur mon myght hit beyr;
 A fachon bothe of styлле and yron,
 Wytte yow wyll he wex full styron
 And fell folke con he feyr. (139-144)

The act of forging the monstrous sword (fachon) extends the range of his hitherto oral violence, externalising the phallic object of violence in the process. The sword, as a symbol also permits him to masquerade as a false knight, wreaking havoc on the dutchy of Estryke. In this stage he is extremely dangerous, his perversions of chivalric duties and rampage against Christendom prompting an elderly earl to confront him, finally initiating Gowther's penitential dynamics. At fifteen, however, the young duke of Estryke is more and less than a young animal.

The sword Gowther forges is a weapon and a symbol which greatly preoccupies the author of the Advocates version of the tale. The weapon effectively broadcasts Gowther's monstrously capable physicality, for no other person can wield the sword due to its size and weight (141). The sword's weight and dimensions communicate Gowther's monstrous strength, his capacity to violence, while its shape signals an otherness, a diversion from the Christian chivalric ethos. In this regard Gowther's falchion is similar to the Green Knight's great axe, which marks him out as a supernatural outsider, a liminal figure at the margins of chivalry and the atavistic other. Similarly, the curved falchion wielded by the Giant of Mont St Michel is a sign of non-conformity. Instead of resembling the shape of the cross, as most

European swords of the period would do, it evokes the geometry of a curved fang, a symbol of predatory hunger and oral aggression with which criticism readily equates the young duke's falchion as much as it echoes the curved blade of the Saracen.

David Salter emphasises the strong connection between Gowther and his weapon being not simply a question of preference, observing three main attributes of the weapon's significance. Firstly, '[t]hroughout the poem, the sword is presented as an essential adjunct to Gowther's character, and hence it comes to assume something of the significance of a personal talisman' (p. 74). The pronouncement of the Fiend strongly connects the fahon with Gowther's demonic father, whose heritage manifests in Gowther through his monstrous strength, underlining the young duke's capacity and appetite for violence. The sword is even foreshadowed at the moment of Gowther's conception, when his demonic father prophesies its existence immediately after his intercourse with the Duchess, identifying his offspring with his capacity to wield it (75-78). The fahon is an integral part of Gowther's personality, a chief signifier with which he interacts with the world. Secondly, as Salter observes, 'Gowther's identity is mystically intertwined with his falchion, for not only is he responsible for forging the sword, but he alone is strong enough to use it' (p. 74). Gowther is responsible for forging the monstrous fahon; being a creator of the weapon grants him a connection markedly different from receiving a weapon from someone else. Thus, his weapon is not tethered to anyone's authority, but his own. His agency displayed through the sword's usage and ownership is seemingly his own. He, however, works his father's will, as the poem proclaims. The father, in this context, is the Fiend.

Furthermore, Salter explains this dynamic of the seemingly contradictory aspects of the young duke's salvation. His argument supporting Gowther's reconfiguration is *due to*, and not *against* his own nature as a warrior and later saintly figure as the result of the combative aspect of his penance. This approach reconciles the seemingly strongly conflicting elements

of Gowther's character. 'Thus, not merely does the poem claim that there is no conflict between Gowther's dual roles as knight and saint, it seems to imply that God grants him a place in heaven as a reward for so conscientiously discharging the morally burdensome obligations expected of a knight' (p. 76).

This observation is instrumental in understanding the young duke's character, and his connection to chivalry, violence, and disciplining authority. These categories are, in turn, also intertwined with his violent urges, his hunger, and strength, which they express through his acts of violence. Gowther's capacity to do harm, somewhat paradoxically, remains a major redemptive potential throughout the narrative, despite its destructive capacity being improperly utilised during the duke's violent youth. The essential bond tethering Gowther to the ideals of chivalric violence is also the reason why Andrea Hopkins's otherwise compelling reading of Gowther as an Everyman character, who having inherited Original Sin, 'seek[s] to escape the burden of his naturally sinful flesh' is difficult to integrate (p.152). As Blamires suggests, '[a]n Everyman-orientated reading unwarrantably reduces the 'knightly' dimension to lesser significance' (p. 46). Similarly to Blamires, I too insist on Salter's approach, identifying the knightly dimension as *the* focal point of Gowther's formulation of identity. The behavioural linchpin of chivalric conduct unifies discipline and violence in one, armoured and sealed identity. The armouring and sealing of the body in the process of assuming the knightly mantle effectively counteracts the seemingly ungovernable urges of the grotesque of Gowther's Bakhtinian body.

Furnish emphasises that the instrument remains the same, physically unchanged, just like Gowther fundamentally remains the same throughout the narrative (p.109). He does not overtly transform; he remains the same demonic, quasi-canine creature he was in his infancy. The most substantial change occurs when his body is transformed into his knightly identity, his armour hermetically sealing and concealing his hungering Bakhtinian body later in his

penitential journey. Fundamentally, it is the discipline he learns, governing body and deed that changes their interpretation from malevolent and diabolic to benevolent and divine.

At this early stage, Gowther does not simply commit violence against his fellow men, but is also unable to contain the manifestations of violence within the boundaries of sanction and discipline, represented in his overflowing, gigantic body and its enlarged needs and wants. He is, consequently, also a fraudster. Despite being formally knighted, he actively, systematically subverts and perverts the knightly virtues, wearing the guise and the name of a knight, an authority derived from his ducal father. In this aspect Gowther is lupine: both in the sense of Dante's incontinent She-Wolf unable to control her urges, and the scriptural warning of Christ of fraudsters being wolves themselves in Matthew 7:15 "false prophets" who wear the external camouflage of sheep-skin yet are "inwardly . . . ravening wolves." This aspect of the young duke is demonstrated most graphically when he seeks out a nunnery. The scene taking place there, I argue, marks a transition from oral to phallic violence, extending the range of the young duke's hunger for the body of Christendom.

He went to honte apon a day,

He see a nonry be tho way

And thedur con he ryde;

Tho pryorys and hur covent

With presescion ageyn hym went

Full hastely that tyde;

Thei wer full ferd of his body,

For he and is men bothe leyn hom by -

Tho sothe why schuld y hyde?

And sythyn he spard hom in hor kyrke

And brend hom up, thus con he werke;

Then went his name full wyde. (181-192)

The nuns receive Gowther courteously due to his noble position, as he rides in with his procession. Intriguingly enough, this is the only time when the Advocates mentions Gowther's "presescion", - his entourage, or followers - who will also rape the nuns. Aside from this single instant Gowther is a solitary predator, the narrative singularly focusing on his actions and development. The nuns' gaze focuses on Gowther's monstrously proportioned, preternaturally strong body that is most capable of violence. This particularity of his appearance is well-observed by Laskaya and Salisbury. 'That the prioress and her charges should be frightened of Gowther's body underscores his diabolical appearance. The absence of armour suggests Gowther's rejection of chivalric codes of conduct' (footnotes for line 187, p. 301). Gowther does not wear armour, his exposed body signifying brutal, undisguised masculine threat. Gowther finds pleasure in intimidating the nuns with his monstrous body's strength and capabilities, the question: "Why should I hide it?" (189) serving as a startling line giving voice to the feral youth. Blamires also points out when observing the scene in the Royals version of the text that Gowther's presence and violent behaviour in the scene is far from mere whim on his part, for in its pointed and deliberate application of subversively chaotic behaviour it becomes the antithesis of extended civilization itself (p. 53). Chen similarly emphasises the scene as a pertinent one, which uniquely in the Advocates version features the rape of the nuns, asserting that '[b]oth the scene's inclusion and its defiant

defense signal Advocates' keen interest in *uncontrolled appetite* [my emphasis]' (p. 361). Huber points out that there is nothing inherently monstrous in Gowther's body. As it will later turn out, he is, in fact, described as very handsome by the Emperor's steward (p. 297). Thus, Gowther's body frightens the nuns because of its capacity to do violence. And violence he does in a very particular way, perverting his reproductive function and asserting himself as the final authority in the light of the burning nunnery. Oswald reads Gowther's body as monstrous because of his abuse of authority, and his actions as a perversion of the noble pursuit of the hunt, an activity otherwise designed to display mastery over nature.

Gowther, in effect, hunts down these nuns, using and perverting the rules of the previous social order to his advantage. Here Gowther particularly subverts the order of the circulation of women: by raping nuns, he puts women who ought to remain out of circulation back into it, against their and the Church's will, locating himself as an authority above that of the Church. Then, once he has asserted his own law over these women's bodies, he destroys them utterly and thereby removes them from any other subsequent challenges to his own law. Through his position of authority, upheld by his use of the falchion, he resists the ultimate social authority, the Church, and reconfigures the circulation of women in transgressive but ultimately unproductive ways. (pp. 174-5)

In his violent and fluid spiritual state, the transformations instigated by Gowther are all taking place in the context of consumption, violence, and sexuality. These transformations are all perverted and pointedly unproductive. Gowther attacks Christendom at its very roots, transforming the noble wet nurses, the wives of good knights, into corpses through his insatiable consumption. He mutilates his mother's organ that would provide him with sustenance, and he rapes and burns nuns. The litany

of his transformative acts is long and graphic, yet, as Florschuetz points out, it returns to feeding on the maternal body.

In fact, the connection between the sustenance of milk and Gowther's acts of brutality is specifically noted by some of his later victims who lament "that ever modur h[im] fed" (162). Gowther's consumption of maternal blood thus is represented as a condition of his subsequent bloodthirsty predation upon his community. (p. 43)

This recurrence of Gowther's horroristic infantile feeding progressing into young adulthood is the hallmark of Gowther's violent forays as he extends his cruelty from the maternal body to its extended, more conceptualised representatives. Thus, the scene in the nunnery, I would argue, serves as a strong *amplificatio* of the earlier scenes taking place, Gowther returning with a vengeance to deploy his now fully grown body as a weapon against the feminine body. Huber observes these lines from a somewhat different perspective, interpreting his victims cursing Gowther from their own perspective of suffering. 'Their bodies subjected to Gowther's bestial appetite for violence, his victims wish starvation upon their earlier infant bodies' (p. 297).

Gowther's actions are perverse, systematic, and above all, expressly predatory. The lines describing the young duke's actions resonate strongly with his demonic heritage. The pattern draws upon the rhyme, Gowther taking "wyffus ageyn hor wyll" (195), being reminiscent of his demonic father's actions in the orchard ("With hur is wyll he wroghthh." (72)). Hudson and Zacher point out the lines that resemble one another, the bestial sexual rampage and anti-chivalric violence attacking instead of protecting women being deliberately anti-chivalric (p. 113 and p. 434). Gowther's rampage is not only transformative, rendering any possible element of desire (and resulting potential interpretation, compassion, and self-

reflection) into an excremental object, but also coldly systematic. He goes through the different clusters of desire to find satisfaction, yet when finally obtaining them, he realises their excremental nature and discards them in an outburst of frustrated violence. He is a hungry and petulant child of monstrous proportions, his infantile impulses enlarged and extended. He is not only infantile but also animalistic, an untrained canine beast rampaging through Christendom, biting and tearing at its body, not unlike his behaviour of the motherly breast. The instrument of his violence is his falchion this time, the monstrous sword's usage marking the extension of the infantile oral violence extending its reach to the length of the fachen.

The rape and murder of the nuns function as adult versions of his attack on the women's breasts as an infant, wherein his instinctual destructive impulses are meted out by means of his falchion and phallus rather than his mouth and teeth—a kind of nightmare progression from oral to phallic stage. (Huber, p. 297)

All these manifestations of Gowther's psychical and psychological Lack are rendered visible through his hunger for violence and sexuality. When Gowther throws friars off cliffs, hangs parsons from hooks, and burns the hermits his next monstrously violent attack on the Church (197-200), he does not simply act out of sport; it is his "dyssyre", and so are his other activities. Violence, and sexuality map on one another in the young duke's rampage. These transformative processes are pointless in producing true jouissance in Uebel's reading. 'The world and its multiplicitous others are chewed up, and swallowed, ultimately converted into homogenous waste matter.' Uebel locates the endpoint of Gowther's oral sadism and "anal universe", 'where intolerable differences are dissolved or wished away' (p. 101). In Gowther's case these differences are to be savaged, chewed or raped, in order to satisfy a hunger, a longing in the young duke. Gowther's very desire for annihilation is framed against the backdrop of his infernal

hunger in not only the narrative itself, but also in the larger criticism as well.

Florschuetz synthesises Gowther's hunger with his attacks on the body of Christendom and views it through the lens the young duke's emblematic falchion. Her choice of expressions draw strong connection between Gowther's falchion and hunger is especially notable, when writing:

The attacks on clergy and other members of the church suggest a literalization of church members as the body of Christ, as well as an attack on *Mater Ecclesia* herself, and Gowther's *hungry* [my emphasis] Eastern swords particularly eager to attack those targets, so much the better if they are also women, as in the case of the violated nuns who are then consumed by fire as Gowther burns them alive in their convent. Gowther's continuing campaign against "all that ever on Cryst con lefe" (all those who believe in Christ) (193) suggests that *his desire is to devour* [my emphasis] the Christian community, the body of Christ both enacted through the consumption of the Eucharist, and literalized within it. (p. 54)

Gowther, again, perverts the Eucharistic tradition in his effort to wreak havoc on the Christian bodies. The poem summarizes the young duke's ravaging in a way that connects Gowther's atavistic, demonic father with the shadowed forests.

Erly and late, lowde and styll,

He wold wyrke is fadur wyll

Wher he stod or sete.

Hontyng lufde he aldur best,

Parke, wodd and wylde forest,

Bothe be weyus and strete. (175-180)

Gowther perverts the act of the hunt as well, venturing into the dark, primordial forest during the act (“Parke, wodd and wylde forest, / Boþe be weyus and street” (162–64)). Hostetter emphasises that the tail-rhyme, completing the list of parks woods and wild forests with the roads and streets, washes all these settings together in Gowther’s eye; they all are places to range and pursue his unsanctioned prey of Christian bodies (p. 505). As Huber emphasises, ‘[Gowther] is a perfect predator—indiscriminate of the environment in which he pursues his quarry, whether it be private park, wild territory, or public civilized property’ (p. 298). It is from the forbidden forest’s darkness Gowther’s father, the Fiend comes, it is the environment in which the young duke ranges for his illicit quarry, and this is where he will chase Saladin back after doing battle with the Saracens (“Tho Sawdyn to a forest fled” (499)). This return to the wilderness, however, is again context sensitive. Gowther territorializes this atavistic domain of shadows through his insatiable violence. His later penance will take him into the wilderness yet again, but with the teachings of the divine greyhound, he will be nourished there in a position of vulnerability.

Gowther's twisted "hunting trips" are closely interconnected with his father's will, which he “wyrke” (176). He exercises that will by hunting people, tearing at the body of Christendom. However, as Gilian Adler observes, his modality of hunting has been pointedly perverted, reconfiguring the display of noble virtue into an instrument of violence in which he finds more enjoyment than any other activity (p. 56). He is the perfect predator disguised as the protector of Christendom, rampaging through the dutchy: a voracious and untrained canine presence ranging across the forests in search of prey. The motif of the hunt maps strongly on the controlled aspect of chivalric violence and Gowther’s personality as well.

Gowther's penitential journey and questing for salvation begins in earnest when he is confronted by the elderly earl about his possible demonic heritage. After the conversation, Gowther brutally questions his mother, the Duchess. After the demonic revelation, his world and ideology are in tectonic upheaval, his violent and infantile nature in utter distress, prompting him to question his mother at sword point (220-228). The moment marks Gowther's recognition of what Žižek dubs the "anal father of enjoyment" or the primordial, haunting image of the Master of Enjoyment (*The Metastases of Enjoyment*, p. 206). This leering demonic (literally, in Gowther's case) aspect of the Name of the Father is exactly the excessive, hedonistic Lacanian figure whose bidding Gowther did when he allowed his urges to control his actions. Literally, 'He wold wyrke is fadur wyll' (176). Gowther realises that his rebellion, aimed to subvert the disciplinary authority of the Duke and in extension God, has been the demonic influence, not at his own volition. The recognition serves as a moment of fundamental alienation; Gowther's hunger for a stable identity becomes the primary driving force in his journey of becoming from this moment.

The realisation shatters the frame of reference within which Gowther operated thus far, necessitating a fundamental re-evaluation and readjustment of his life. So, in search of behavioural template that allows him to rid of the demonic influence, he sets out to Rome 'To lerne anodur lare.' (237).

His fauchon con he with hym take,

He laft hit not for weyle ne wrake,

Hyt hong ei be his syde. (256-8)

Gowther notably takes his falchion with him to Rome, highlighting the importance of the fetishistic object and its strong connection to him. It is his source of both joy, "weyle"(pleasure, or even enjoyment) and "wrake"(pain); for good or evil it remains intimately close to his body, hanging on his side when not wielded in battle. The focaliser within the hostile and threatening internal and external world, but the instrument of salvation and externalisation as well; the falchion remains crucial in the ways Gowther's libidinal energy, and his drives are communicated and interacted with. It will also become the very instrument of his penitential journey and eventual salvation.

I. 5. Gowther Penitent

The next stage of the young duke's journey towards self-realization requires him to find a template of behavioural patterns upon which he can map his actions and identity in the future. Former father figures proven to be insufficient in providing a disciplinary template, Gowther has to seek out a stable image, a Name of the Father that can be relied upon for guidance through his disjointed psychological development.

Upon arriving to Rome, Gowther kneels in penitence before the Pope. He prays with "mylde devocyon" (268) and asks for confession. The Pope inquires about his person, to which question Gowther answers in a somewhat elusive way. He gives his name, emphasises his noble title, demonic heritage, and his love of God (272-280). The somewhat oblique answer the young duke gives has moved critics to vigorous discourse, which leads back to Gowther's control over his own bodily urges. Uebel and Oswald especially seem to be preoccupied with the answer, their observation centred around the dynamic between Gowther's body and mind. Firstly, Uebel points out, that the penitent duke "notably" focuses on his demonic parentage, and not on his horrific deeds of violence, appearing to somewhat shift the blame and responsibility (p. 104). The confession remains puzzlingly incomplete, a silence within Gowther's intention of conversion. Oswald's analysis offers a more nuanced reading:

[H]e leaves aside his own choices in pursuing the direction his monstrous body urged on him. This distinction, present in Gowther's omission, reveals a strikingly new notion: that one might be led astray by one's body, but that perhaps the body is not entirely to blame. (p. 181)

The Pope gives Gowther his appropriate penance. The words are carefully chosen for its conditions, as the Pope identifies Gowther's canine nature and need to discipline his violent impulses. In short, Gowther is to be domesticated. The expression is more than appropriate in his case. Cohen observes that 'the discipline of children in the Middle Ages was at times analogized to the domestication of animals' (*Medieval Identity Machines*, p. 60). In a similar manner Gowther's literary relative, Richard le Coer de Lion's unnatural, monstrously enlarged, and transgressive hunger, specifically for human flesh, is deployed as a psychological and material weapon against the Saracens (Hanning, *The Hunger for National Identity*, pp. 198-227, and McDonald, *Eating People and the Alimentary Logic of Richard Coeur de Lion*, pp. 124-50). This one deliberate element will prominently feature in Sir Gowther's narrative as well, for his unnatural hunger manifesting in violent acts is not "cured" or alleviated through the exercise of faculties that allow it to be controlled. As Czarnowus puts it in the context of Richard, is being 'put to good use' (p. 104). Reconfiguring Gowther's hunger-turned-violence is key in the tale, for the Pope's intent is *not* to quell the violent instincts within Gowther, but to *utilise* them for a cause best serving Christendom in the face of the Saracen threat.

"Wherser thu travellys, be northe or soth,

Thu eyt no meyt bot that thu revus of howndus mothe

Cum thy body within;

Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud,

Or thu reyde tokyn have fro God,

That forgyfyn is thi syn." (295-300)

Cohen's explanation of the Lacanian dynamics allows one to focus on the Pope's inventive penance incorporating transgression within. 'Masochism is always adulterous: it always, by its very nature, ruptures the demarcations that keep categories of knowledge/power/pleasure discrete' (*Medieval Identity Machines*, p. 104). The masochistic dynamics of Gowther's penance mirrors the solid demarcations ruptured by his earlier actions and is meant to reassert the coordinates of the human and the animal, the predator and the warrior. These, formerly faultily internalised, discrete categories of knowledge, power, and pleasure resulting in Gowther's monstrous acts are all erased and traced again by the canine act in the search for their authenticity in the new framework of references. In this regard hunger is an appropriate counterpoint, similarly, disrupting the usual channels of morality and power, as will be observed throughout the thesis.

Thus, Gowther's behaviour when receiving the instructions of the penance is appropriate. The penitential process is effectively initiated by him kneeling in front of the Pope ('As sone has he the Pope con see, / He knelys adown apon is kne.' (265-6)). Cohen interprets the gesture as Gowther literally bending the knee to the Lacanian Symbolic manifestation of the Name of the Father in supplication (*Becoming Male*, p. 230). It is not difficult to see it as the first wilfully canine gesture from Gowther either, who signals his readiness to undertake the penance by "coming to heel", physically placing himself in the posture of the obedient canine. The gesture signals the start of the proper adjustment of the fatherly figures and their role in Gowther's life. This recalibration coincides with the process of canine Oedipalisation. The gesture is also that of infantilisation but in a therapeutic, regenerative way. Eating and speaking become interconnected in their quality of control through his penance forcing him into a state of infantile muteness; *infans* (Latin: [one] unable to speak) (Uebel, p. 105).

The penance is one with two clear aspects to it, both directed towards the symbol of the dog, and in turn mediated by the dog's mouth. As Florschuetz observes:

Gowther's penance consists largely of the monitoring of his mouth—in particular, his speech and consumption. A pattern in the romance emerges in which Gowther must learn to recognize and even enforce categorical boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, sacred and polluted bodies, boundaries earlier transgressed with horrific results. (p. 36)

The first canine aspect to his persona is to exclusively receive sustenance from them, the second is to remain silent. The understanding of the second aspect is strongly interconnected with the ways Gowther modulates his hunger, this locus of his libidinal energies. The Freudian, pre-Oedipal drives so prevalent and prone to violent outbursts in Gowther are mute and will return to muteness when properly controlled. In-between lies the symbol of silence, to which the young duke is condemned by the Pope's decree 'Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud' (298). This part of the penance, however, goes even further in creating Gowther's internality, when read through the lens of his earlier actions. Huber does so, incorporating not only Gowther's former silence without internality, but also his role as a demonic canine in his pre-penitential state.

Gowther is also utterly without language during [the earlier] stage of his career: his subjection to his appetites ensures that he does not function with *ratio*. His inarticulacy places him outside of his human community. (...) Rather, before his conversion, language, the faculty of rational beings, appears to have no power to bring him into the category of the human. Perpetually an outsider, the half-demon Gowther stalks the borders of the mortal world, a snarling Cerberus, an enemy of the Church, and a martyr-making machine. (p. 297)

I argue that this exact pattern of behaviour is to be reversed by the Pope's prescription of penitential silence. Now, Gowther is to remain deliberately silent, as opposed to his former wilful refusal to heed human speech, and through it to cultivate rationality and empathy to counteract his unrestrained volitions. The canine act is there to strengthen his compassion and internality, rendering him unable to communicate in any other way, but through interactions with the hounds he is to emulate, and through sanctioned chivalric violence against his former self. When prescribing the appropriate penance, the Pope accurately identifies the locus of canine symbolism, uncovering the bestial aspect of Gowther. The verb "revus" (296) remains a contested one. While many argue that Gowther is to be rendered child-like and docile in his passive acceptance of the penitent alms ('And gete thi mete owt of houndis mouth', as the Royals version puts it), the verb "revus" means to "snatch". The Gowther of the Advocates is meant to undertake both martial training, as I will argue later, and to confront creatures very much like himself in strength and ferocity for his daily sustenance. As Huber observes, quite literally, 'Should he get into a dogfight over a bone, at least this time he will be fighting against a less vulnerable creature' (p. 299). Furthermore, he is to actively interpret God's will through the dog. He is to "lerne anodur lare", through reading ("thu reyde"(299)), and interpreting God's will actively; not to rely on his own actions but look for the master's instructions until he can differentiate good from bad, from prey to companion. It is a deliberate, internal act of interpretation, which requires Gowther to learn not only another set of rules, but a new language entirely. His surveillance of body and mind through his penance require of him to put into reversal the activities of his earlier life. He is to become part of the canine socialisation, as opposed to the human familialism he has so prominently resisted in Cohen's interpretation. Florschuetz observes that 'The injunction to eat only food taken from the mouths of dogs not only forces Gowther into a position of humility, but also becomes a means of teaching Gowther to inspect the world for signs of God's will' (p. 56).

The penance is not only unique, but also features puzzling attributes. The critical reception of its duration and severity compared to Gowther's own sins and other penitential figures will be addressed shortly at the last stage of Gowther's penitential journey. The penance's modality, however, gaining sustenance from the mouths of dogs, has some practical, historical context that is useful to observe.

The main contradiction in the penitential dynamic is the paradoxical proximity to the animal feeding it necessitates, and the perceived cleanliness of the act. As Salisbury observes, the penance meted out to Gowther by the Pope would, in turn, also necessitate a penance, for consuming foodstuff worried by dogs was considered a serious violation. This shared consumption reflects on a strong, underlying anxiety over contamination and proximity, as Salisbury observes. Surprisingly, the

The most likely explanation is that the greatest penance was assigned to the animal that lived closest to humans and was thus most threatening to the boundaries that separated the two. As dogs were the first animals to be domesticated, and their early domestication was due to the many parallels in the social organization of humans and wolves. If one's concern is to keep humans and animals separate, one would tend to focus most intensely on the animals that lived most closely to humans. (*The Beast Within*, p. 53)

Despite this somewhat incongruous detail, Gowther's canine act is sanctioned by the Pope.

I. 5. 1. Gowther's Canine Penance

Having established the theoretical framework of the penance it is time for Gowther to

experience the practical side of it. In an echo of an Arthurian knight seeking the Grail on an *aventure*, he sets out from Rome and arrives in another, unspecified, far country. His arrival and his experience initiate his canine penance.

He went owt of that ceté

Into anodur far cuntré,

Tho testamentys thus thei sey;

He seyt hym down undur a hyll,

A greyhownde broght hym meyt untyll

Or evon yche a dey.

Thre neythtys ther he ley:

Tho grwhownd ylke a dey

A whyte lofe he hym broghht;

On tho fort day come hym non,

Up he start and forthe con gon,

And lovyd God in his thoght. (307–18)

As he sits under the hill, Gowther's first canine companion, a greyhound approaches him, bringing him a loaf of white bread in his muzzle. Gowther is fed and nourished (both literally and conceptually) by the grace of God, the hound and its mouth becoming the locus of penance and contemplation. The symbol, especially in conjuncture with Gowther's continued

penance and his relation to hounds has produced what is arguably the most nuanced and most contentious discourse around the narrative. The greyhound, the most prestigious and holy among all the breeds Gowther encounters throughout the narrative, is interpreted as a canine priest in this particular constellation. Gowther receives the bread of communion, incorporating him into Christian society. The action mediated through the canine muzzle renders the connection between what Gowther is and what he has to become visible, the proximity of receiving the bread and loving God “in his thought” specifically forms an important connection, as Adler observes (p. 60). As Hudson suggests, ‘[l]ike the legendary greyhounds of St. Guinefort and St. Roche, its bread suggests the Eucharist; its arrival heralds Gowther’s redemption’ (p. 114). The arrival of the greyhound seems to signify Gowther’s acceptance by God, heralding the direction of the changes to come in the young duke’s behaviour. Huber, however, displays a degree of puzzlement about the episode.

The episode is never explained nor even mentioned again, and it has no causal connection to the plot in the rest of the poem. The greyhound’s ministering to Gowther is the first explicit depiction of an exchange between a domestic animal and a human in this text: despite its seeming *sui generis* character, it is affective, culturally loaded, and provocative—an emphatic statement of the centrality of dogs to the thematic backbone of this romance. (p. 285)

Gowther remains in this unidentified ‘far country’, lying down in the shadow of a hill and docilely receiving the white loaf the greyhound brings to him. Instead of the problematic and aggressive verb ‘revus’, or snatching of the morsel, as the penance would literally have him do, Gowther remains static. The scene is surprising from this perspective for a good reason: as Gillian Adler argues, the canine care received by Gowther during the pastoral episode has defused any instinct to approach the dog in an aggressive fashion. The scene serves both as a reversal and an unconcealment of true identities. As Adler puts it, it ‘indeed challenges

Gowther's original position of domination even countering the expectation that the dogs would share a similar nature to the brutish protagonist' (p. 59). If Gowther has been an aggressively dominant, uncontrollably destructive, prematurely hyper-masculine figure thus far, and while his future holds martial expression and proper chivalric conduct, in this very moment he occupies a space in between these two states. The salvific dynamic of the scene introduces the essential capacity for self-reflection. Within this meditative state, Gowther is tended to by the greyhound. He remains prone, 'ley', the greyhound tending to him. His posture is not unlike that of a pup. Huber identifies this as the first expression of authentic love towards Gowther, to whom the experience of the tender emotion must be entirely alien up until the moment. He, however, reciprocates love with love, for he is finally in a state both meditative and silent (p. 305). In Adler's reading,

[t]he greyhound at Rome becomes one among a series of dogs that symbolically acquire a divine role in that they effectively perform the maternal task of feeding, like Gowther's mother and wet nurses. The first dog teaches him to receive food properly and with restraint, and thus to contravene his prior indulgent eating habits.

(p. 59)

Thus, the greyhound becomes a transfigured mother surrogate to Gowther, a new materialisation upon which he is to map his identity. The *imitatio Christi* performed by the divine greyhound invokes a priestly interaction and is the first stage of feeding Gowther the proper Eucharist (as opposed to the one violently perverted or denied by him as an infant), allowing him to be incorporated into the communion through the act of love expressed through authentic and virtuous charity, or *caritas*. On the fourth day the greyhound vanishes and Gowther, now capable of interpreting God's will through signs, continues his journey. He displays the first remarkable instance of internality during the narrative. His hunger assuaged,

he finally stops impulsively acting and attacking and can finally start to think. And he thinks of the love of God.

I. 5. 2. Gowther Under the Table

In the following lines Gowther arrives at the court of Germany, where he takes his place under the Emperor's table. The Emperor, suspecting that Gowther must be undertaking penance, allows him to stay and be fed with the dogs. Gowther's canine act, however, is far from the docility he displayed formerly, as he fights for his meat under the table in the way of a voracious canine.

Ther come a spanyell with a bon,

In his mothe he hit bare,

Syr Gwother hit fro hym droghhe,

And gredely on hit he gnofe,

He wold nowdur curlu ne tartte.

Boddely sustynans wold he non

Bot what so he fro tho howndus wan,

If it wer gnaffyd or mard.

Tho Emperowre and tho Emperrys

And knyghttys and ladys at tho des

Seyt and hym behelld;

Thei gaffe tho hondus meyt ynoghhe,

Tho dompe Duke to hom he droghhe,

That was is best beld. (355-366)

The Emperor and his court are receptive of the canine penance to some degree, and they give the hounds meat. Gowther is again defined by his hunger, especially for meat. The penance must maintain a careful balance between the young duke's canine training and martial prowess. Gowther is to remain who he is, but what he *does* has to transform him internally; the way he articulates his body, and its impulses must be reconfigured, without sapping him of his strength. Just as he was put on a steady diet of 'rych fode' (136) by his parents, the Pope does not deem it appropriate for a fighter of Gowther's calibre to be weakened by penitential fasting alone, which would be detrimental to his power, and compromise his fighting ability. In his approach, the Pope reveals himself to be a perceptive political operator, for he decides to, in a manner that parallels the experience of Richard Coer de Lion, utilise Gowther's voracious and savage predatory instincts and brutal physicality.

Hostetter's observation of Gowther's actions under the table synthesises violence, otherness, and disciplining hunger. The penance necessitates the young duke to pantomime the courtly behaviour of carving and eating meat in a social setting. When the Emperor is seated, he indeed sends properly carved pieces of meat to Gowther (349-351) in accordance with proper etiquette. Gowther, in accordance with the penance, simply leaves the meat. He is not refusing the choice meat sent to him by the Emperor personally (which, of course, would be an indecorous gesture) but he simply 'lette hit stond and wold ryght non' (352). It is not

difficult to imagine Gowther simply turning his head from the meat in a gesture of a trained hunting dog's display of resistance to the tantalising sensory stimuli. At this point Gowther is indeed very hungry, as his following feeding among the dogs will indicate. Gowther turns to the Spaniel, and wrestles with it 'gredely' (356), refusing the offered curlew and quail (357).

The canine symbolism through which his actions are filtered serve to ritualise and reflect the spectacle of a noble feast. Through his canine act Gowther rejects the refined foodstuff the courtly setting and his social status afford. By feeding like a canine predator under the table to fulfil the exact wording of the penance, the bones and meat "carved" ('gnaffyd or mard' (360)) by his fellow hounds. This modality of the ritualised consumption in the courtly setting serves as a 'distorted reflection of the lord that [Gowther] is, though he is lord now only in the submersary realm of his own creation' (Hostetter, p. 512). Gowther, thus renders the otherwise elusive aspect of control in this setting visible. His act does not threaten to overflow and dissolve the ordered social experience of feasting, but serves as a reminder of the division between the surface and what lurks under it: violence under chivalry, savagery under refinement, profane under the divine, and the beast under the human.

Gowther descends into and inhabits, in the Jungian sense, the tight confines of the shadowy, bestial nether realm under the table that is filled with fangs and scraps; the symbolic descent into the underworld in search of integration of his own shadow (Jung, *Aion*, pp. 8-10). It, however, is insufficient on its own, missing certain aspects of Gowther, which need to be further pieced together, further integrated. The canine penance as a disciplinary, corrective exercise remains unfulfilled, incomplete without further addressing the young duke's central role as a knight, a champion of God. What Gowther derives from all these foodstuffs wrestled from the hounds under the table is *only* "boddely sustynans" (358). The precise phrasing places the strong emphasis on the *strictly* corporeal nourishment these meals provide to Gowther, satisfying only his biological needs as he gnaws (360), while leaving his

spiritual hunger unsatiated until the mute daughter of the Emperor offers him the proper, Eucharistic meal through the mediation of the greyhound later in the tale.

The symbols of violence deployed, and a carnivorous diet intersect one another in Gowther. Eating meat, as Fiddes observes, 'plays a singular part in people's affairs, not least through a common association with strength and aggression' (p. 11). Salisbury cites the scene in Chretien de Troyes' *Yvain, or the Knight and the Lion*. Eating raw meat is bestial: Yvain in his madness, living in the woods like a wild man (something that Gowther's heritage also gestures towards), kills an animal and eats its flesh uncooked. In contrast, Yvain's lion is allowed to consume the raw flesh as nature intended; the two in close proximity brings attention to the proper "human" way of consumption. Rendering oneself bestial through carnivorous consumption appears to be a major preoccupation of the time, the slippery slope towards bestiality needing vigilant avoidance at all costs. The question, however, is complicated. It is difficult to prescribe exact coordinates, especially when the nutritive qualities of certain foodstuffs come into question. Salisbury observes, that '[t]o avoid descending to bestial appetites, however, it was not enough simply to avoid grazing in the manner of an animal. People also reflected upon what might be a bestial menu. When they did so, they tended to focus on the diet of carnivores' (p. 50). Rebekah Pratt emphasises that within the period of the late Middle Ages 'meat in particular became associated with status and the ability to bestow power and strength. The sustaining of appropriate prowess initially required the consumption of more meat than those who did not protect or fight but eventually came to represent a physical superiority over other classes and those having more food could share it with others deemed worthy' (p. 21).

The hierarchy of power, and the order of feeding among predators accompanies Gowther's penance at the Emperor's court. Even though they are hounds and even greyhounds, I differentiate their presence and symbolism from the first, divine greyhound

Gowther encounters earlier on his journey. The divine greyhound feeding the penitent duke earlier can be perceived as a divine apparition (a saintly figure on its own right, if one is to consider St. Guinefort), both due to its behaviour and sudden disappearance from the narrative. The different breeds of dogs Gowther encounters in the courtly setting are strongly rooted in corporeality and represent a wilder, more everyday manifestation of canine behaviour. Even though these dogs serve the same function of feeding the penitent duke, their manifestation enmeshed in the courtly setting can be read differently. The dogs Gowther encounters under the table have strong symbolic significance, representing different levels of cleanliness and prestige in Hudson's reading. 'Two kinds of dogs are present in *Sir Gowther*: the ministering greyhounds figure divine grace, love, and fidelity, as in saints' legends, while the spaniels under the table who behave as dogs represent the protagonist's bestial, sinful nature that must be transcended' (p. 115). It is important to see the manner in which Gowther interacts with the spaniels. He is offered tastefully carved meat by the Emperor himself (349-51), yet he turns to a spaniel to wrestle (one is reminded of the Pope's expression "revus" (296) away the piece of unsavoury meat of which Florschuetz designates as being 'not only unsavoury but also compromised and contaminated state' (p. 57). The verb with which Gowther does so is a reminder and a remainder of his earlier oral violence.

The "gnaffyd or mard" [360] state of the flesh is reminiscent of the "snaffuld" and torn breast of Gowther's mother, which the infant Gowther had worried at as if he were indeed a dog at a bone. No longer a predatory cannibalistic consumer of humans, Gowther still eats like an animal or monster, but he neither looks nor acts as one. (Florschuetz, p. 57)

Here, the voracious eating of unsavoury foodstuff, however, is interpreted as a sign of penitence, mirroring Gowther's earlier shortcomings. He still eats and behaves like an animal, but does so only externally, while internally he rigidly, and obediently adheres to the letter of

the penance. His incorporation of the flesh is not a perversive activity, but one that is an abject display of discipline over the sight of formerly ungoverned violence. This, in Florschuetz's reading, serves as a parallel with Gowther's infantile attempt to feed.

Gowther's abject and mediated feeding upon soiled flesh under the emperor's table is implicitly measured against his earlier rapacious feasting directly upon the flesh and blood of his nurses and mother and is designated superior.

(Florschuetz, p. 57)

Gowther's first interaction with the greyhound also gestures towards not a progressive betterment of the young duke but signals, as emphasised earlier, a *return*. Quoting Uebel, Ambrisco emphasises the way the canine self is encouraged to resurface: 'Gowther base[s] his interactions with this gentle other . . . upon restraint and receptivity,' and this encounter *returns* [my emphasis] him to "an early state of non-aggressivity" (Ambrisco, p. 204). The non-violence of the non-human other towards Gowther diffuses his long-engrained instincts to respond to any external or internal impulse with violence. The interaction allows him to become receptive and restrained; these new coordinates to be mapped on his return to child-like (pup-like) innocence before the motherly rejection. Gowther's process of Oedipalisation, it can be argued, is not entirely linear, but more circular in its shape. Gowther, instead, is to reach back to his infantile vulnerability, while retaining his martial prowess, allowing him to inhabit both simultaneously. The difference between the two states is governed by his properly adjusted discipline, allowing him to differentiate between prey, packmate, and master. Just like the otherwise vulgar dogs become vehicles of divine penitence through their participation in the penitential dynamics, so does Gowther have to orient himself; the penitential acts rendering otherwise vulgar vessels fit for the Eucharist, and Gowther's monstrous body to become the instrument of divine, martial intervention on the battlefield.

The symbolism of chivalric conduct and the attitude of the well-mannered courtier intermingle in the image of the hound. Hudson brings the example of Christine de Pisan, an Italian poet from the period, who writes:

The dog naturally has many characteristics which the good man-at-arms ought to have. The dog loves his master marvellously and is very loyal to him. And the man-at-arms should be also. . . . He [the dog] . . . is very tough and fights with great skill. He has good understanding, knowledge, and is very amiable to those who do him kindness. (p. 99)

Pisan's identification of desirable attributes is strongly interlinked with the rhetoric of control and discipline, and Gowther is an exemplary case in point. The canine man-at-arms is an appropriate and inspiring martial image from Pisan's perspective. The role's dual capacity for violence and appropriately directing it. One without the other is meaningless, a useless, empty category at best and a terrible danger at worst. The canine knight's image encapsulates the positive, and properly controlled qualities of hound and warrior. Adler observes this when Gowther is required to follow the behavioural patterns introduced to him by the greyhound when writing, 'the royal and chivalric evocations of the greyhound represent a process of resituating Gowther within a knightly order in which knights can control or semioticize aggression and violence into displays of chivalry' (p. 59).

The process of training with the animal instinct at its centre is a concept that informs Gowther's development. He first systematically perverts institutions, such as the Church and chivalry, that would allow him a mediation of his acts, he locates all that in his externalised and transfigured artificial fang: his sword, the monstrous falchion (Uebel, p. 102). The different tiers and stages of canine manifestations found in Gowther's training also inspired Huber to identify these stages of canine significance (and signifiers) differently. She

designates the different developmental stages in Gowther's childhood as a young "hellhound", the mature (and untrained) hunting dog, and finally, the properly trained hunting hound unleashed upon the Saracen cur in service of God and Christendom (p. 311). Thus, the process of domestication as chivalric training of a canine man-at-arms becomes intelligible in Gowther's narrative.

The Emperor's dining table itself serves as an important demarcation line in the discourse represented by Gowther's canine and human body. It is a hard and un-transparent barrier, with those sitting ideally upright only catching glimpses of the shunned, excremental nether realm existing under it. The dynamic tension between the two realms represented the proper dining taking place on the surface, and the dogs fighting for the scraps and bones under it. The microcosm represented by the long dinner table of the court is one that serves as an important binary barrier between two worlds, mirroring the two worlds in friction represented in the narrative as well. Hostetter reflects on this duality:

While the surfaces of the narrative and the table maintain their lustre, order, and magnificence, Gowther's presence reminds the reader of awful remnants that have fallen out of sight, warred over by the hell-hounds of the hall. (p. 516)

The hard barrier of the table's wood, both symbolically and literally obscuring the view from both sides to the other corresponds to the societal norms keeping the vulgar and elevated apart in Hostetter's reading. Gowther descends willingly into this domestic quasi-underworld in order to labour and fight for his fare in the refuse falling down from the elevated strata of the gentle diners.

Rebekah Huber's assessment of the situation sees Gowther put on even footing with his adversary within the bounds of the appetitive training regimen. The young duke at this stage

receives no easy meal to assuage his hunger, and has to wrestle sustenance under the table in exact accordance with the letter of the penance.

Forms of gnauen [here: 'gnaffyd'] in Middle English that refer to eating almost exclusively describe animals chewing flesh, as in hounds gnawing on bones or worms gnawing on flesh in mortality images. No longer a passive, docile recipient of prestigious food, Gowther actively takes ("droghhe") from the Spaniel. His method of getting food from the dogs is consistent with the Pope's earlier instructions to "rev[e food] of howndus mothe." In addition, there is no clear indication that he eats using his hands. (p. 56)

The semantics of 'gnawing' has the same animalistic connotation as it is in modern English, gesturing towards Gowther neither breaking the bone for marrow with his hands, or removing any meat from it, but gnawing at it, very much like a dog indeed. The scene, despite its perception as an important milestone in Gowther's disciplinary penance, remains puzzling, for it upsets the linear penitential pattern somewhat. If the greyhound is holier than the Spaniels and the hunting dogs inhabiting the bestial nether realm under the table, can Gowther's greedy, animalistic wrestling and gnawing be interpreted as the young duke sliding back somewhat into his earlier patterns of oral violence? Or is it a sign that Gowther completely accepts his role, and acts the canine with complete dedication? Laskaya and Salisbury see the key in Gowther's attitude towards assuaging his hunger.

It may be recalled that a greyhound is the first dog to assist Gowther's penance by bringing him a loaf of bread (like the dog in the *Life of St. Roch*) while the spaniel and the hunting dogs serve as his dinner companions. Gowther's association with hunting dogs seems to complement his own early predilection for hunting prey

while his contact with greyhounds suggests an increasing association with the divine. (Footnote on line 445, p. 304)

In an effort to further understand this aspect of Gowther's canine penance, Gillian Adler draws attention to the way the exact mediation undertaken through the canine behaviour functions. Adler equates the phallus and consumption of meat, placing them in constellation with language through Derrida and McCance, synthesising their critical approach:

The scenes in which Gowther takes food from dogs' mouths call to mind Jacques Derrida's notion of "carnophallogocentrism," (...) to McCance, Derrida's term suggests "an essentialist framework that is patriarchal, privileging the 'virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband, or brother' ... [that] entails a literal and figurative 'eating' of the other (assimilating of difference)...and that gives priority to speech. (pp. 58-9)

The concept of carnophallogocentrism introduced by Derrida is one informing large strati of critical discourse around the subject of animality, the way Freud's primal fratricide is reinterpreted by the French philosopher. In Derrida's argument, 'The virile strength of the adult male, the father, husband, or brother belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of the subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh' (p. 255). The critical concept allows one to understand the power of the consumption of flesh-meat and its branching connections to claiming the paternal *phallus*. David Baumeister observes the concept that 'Carnophallogocentrism connects phallogocentric authority with the ingestion of animal flesh, whether literal or symbolic' (p. 54). Associations surrounding meat are not only strong, but also persistent into our very day and age, informing many an ideological choice due to its capacity to destabilise human control over one's bodily function. The medieval perception of

meat-eating also has similar connotations. Clark observes that ‘Meat was perceived to be “morally suspect” in that it linked human meat-eaters “to the life of passion and violence which was ascribed to carnivorous animals”’ (p. 74). The libidinal drives of passion and aggression strongly interlinked within the symbol of meat consumption. The dangers of lust and gluttony are both in close proximity to the humoral heating effects of meat, their capacity to render one bestial and unrestrained. Alison Langdon observes that ‘These two sins are those that most closely link humans and nonhuman animals in medieval understanding, and to participate in them is to descend into a bestial state’ (p. 4).

In this potentially polluting and dangerous carnivorous environment, one may reasonably suspect that it would be a much more straight-forward penitential pattern for Gowther to simply distance himself from the predatory patterns and fast entirely, or only take sustenance strictly sufficient to sustain his body. As it has been observed, the Pope has already thought of this contingency. Gowther is to remain resolutely carnivorous, wrestling under the table with his “fellow” hounds for scraps. The answer lies in Gowther’s strong connection between his penitential pattern and chivalric virtue holding the key to his salvation. Hostetter observes the problem in detail.

[Sir Gowther’s] unusual penance is both a lesson in social decorum and a training regime. (...) A diet of bread and water might leave the knight too enervated to defend Christendom against its foes. Yet fighting with dogs for his supper is just the sort of thing to prepare him for battling the “hethen hownd” (376), dragging Europe as well as an emperor’s daughter out of the jaws of Saracen peril. (...) What seems on its surface to be a penitential poem is actually a political one in its preoccupation with the proper sort of knight at the turn of the fifteenth century: a good consumer as well as a doughty fighter. (p. 499)

Thus, Gowther's hunger, as well as his acquisition, access to, and distribution of meat are all intrinsically linked to his relationship with the foodstuff, and in turn the phallus itself. These are all governed by the symbol of the hound, who become distributors of it, incorporating Gowther into their pack. His selfish consumption, the expression of monstrous and destructive hyper-masculinity allows no space for him to function as a prospective paternal figure not only consuming, but also distributing meat, thus imparting its nutritive qualities. Salisbury's explanation helps one to understand the final, ambiguous power-relation encapsulated in meat-eating within the period. 'Of course, we have seen that medieval Europeans favoured meat as a high status diet, so they could never fully equate meat eating with "bestial"' (p. 50). Again, Gowther oscillates between the realm of the noble, high-status individual, with not a mere appetite but a marked hunger (both symbolic and literal) for flesh and meat, while simultaneously embodying the bestial predator that threatens one's primary invulnerability towards beasts.

Exercising proper procreative and combative disciplines are all convergent in the symbol, necessitating strict regulation. And this regulation becomes tested in earnest on the battlefield, where Gowther is finally measured up against foes comparable in strength to his own. Despite the seemingly smooth progress of the penitential dynamic, however, the tale becomes increasingly anxious about its efficacy, thus testing Gowther's resolve becomes necessary in martial combat, a strong display of his properly controlled aggression.

I. 5. 3. Gowther, The Holy Hound of War

A new stage of the penitential process is initiated when Gowther breaks his passivity, and deploys his transfigured oral violence against the appropriate target, the enemies of Christendom. No longer wrestling with the dogs under the table, the young duke's canine training is finally tested in earnest. His experience during the battle is as psychological as it is physical, echoing his earlier lessons learned.

As Gowther takes to the field, he experiences psychomania, or psychosis similar to his earlier experiences of oral violence, but this time deployed on an even footing and against appropriate targets. The violence of combat is described by Huber in fittingly canine terms as she observes Gowther and his enemy through the lens of Dante's infernal guard dog, Cerberus:

The canine enemy of the Church, though wild, likewise enforces otherwise anxiously ambivalent dichotomies: Christian and heathen, saint and sinner, human and devil. He does so, though, through a curiously ambivalent status of his own, between race and between species. Both hellhound [the category Gowther formerly inhabited] and heathen hound establish these territories by means of their greatest weapon, the mouth, which expresses the dog's signifying traits: his appetite, manifest as hunger and aggression, and his barking inarticulacy. (p. 294)

These categories all come to the fore in Gowther's canine chivalry and mute penance, serving as a focaliser of his actions and discipline in a martial display.

After witnessing the first battle, a new character appears in the tale, whose presence and behaviour will further inform Gowther's disciplinary education. The Emperor's mute

daughter intuits the governing principles of Gowther's canine act and sends over a loaf of bread to the penitent duke with the literal mediation of a greyhound. The insight of the Princess is astonishing as she discerns Gowther's penitential dynamics. It is important to note, that 'Non hym knew bot that meyden gent' (419). Her insight, and ability to uncover the truth are singular. The Princess, her body governed by lack (lack of voice), is the one who can connect with Gowther, and uncover his true act. Not that he is Gowther concealed by the armour, but that he is 'canine concealed by his human aspect' (Huber, p. 313). First the Princess discerns that Gowther is the mysterious knight fighting the Saracen, ('Non hym knew bot hat bryghtt in bowr, / Tho dompe meydon schene.' (437-8)) then she also deciphers the way to feed Gowther.

Tho meydon toke too gruhowndus fyn

And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn

And putte a lofe in tho ton;

And in tho todur flesch full gud;

He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode,

That doghty of body and bon.

He seytt, made hym wyll at es,

Sythyn to chambur con he ches,

In that worthely won. (445-453)

The meal does not simply represent an act of drawing Gowther into Christian communion through the flesh and blood of Christ, the "lofe" and "wyn". The way Gowther consumes the Eucharistic meal infused with the healing properties of the noble greyhound's tongue speaks of his hunger becoming reconfigured for the appropriate foodstuff. Huber observes Gowther's attitude in detail:

And Gowther is now "eyggur" (449) for the nourishment they bring, as he "raft" (rips) the bread and meat from their mouths. Finally, he is voracious for the right kind of nourishment. (...) This emphasis on appetite, and specifically on appetite that suggests violence, lies at the heart of the poem's thematic undertaking in the final section. Gowther's crimes at the beginning of his career, the evidence of his monstrous hybridity, were crimes of appetite. Now, hungry for the divine, eating is no longer a destructive act for his infantile self. (p. 310)

The way Gowther takes the food from the hound's mouth is in line with the exact wording of the penance given by the Pope; "raft" and "revus" both depicting a not entirely gentle actions of taking the foodstuff. Gowther is reinvigorated by the nourishment. In Cohen's interpretation, the exclamation following the symbolic act of feeding, however, is strongly focused on his physicality. 'For the first time, Gowther's own corporeality is inserted into the text through a vigorous exclamation: "That doghthy of body and bon" (447)' (*Gowther among the Dogs*, p. 233). The nourishment provided by the Communion, and offset by the symbol of the greyhound, empowers Gowther in his capacity to protect Christendom and the "meydon" both. He not only receives the bread, however, but also "flesch full gud", or "other fresh meat", as Laskaya and Salisbury gloss the term. One might argue that, yet again, Gowther's predatory capacity and vigour, his strong association with hunting dogs through many avenues, would suffer without the meat. Receiving the bread and wine of the

communion would symbolise his incorporation into Christendom, but meat is what fuels his capacity to do battle. The vigour imparted by it renders his “body and bon doughty”. Spiritual control and physicality interact in this meal of Gowther.

Gowther’s behaviour signifies that he is now properly trained and domesticated. Florschuetz’s explanation sheds further light on Gowther’s ‘appetitive reformation’, as she describes it. Such a description is not only apt but also useful when Gowther’s penitential pattern intertwined with his training is considered. His canine qualities are developed through his reception of food, as Florschuetz emphasises.

These later scenes of corrected Eucharistic feeding also retroactively invite comparison to the violence of Gowther's childhood breast-feeding, where he rends the flesh in search of the blood within—emphasizing a desperate hunger for the life-giving blood that the nurses—and his mother—prove incapable of providing. (p. 58).

When the princess feeds Gowther, considering the violent youth’s earlier rampage through Estryke, one may be somewhat apprehensive about their proximity. Is the princess not in danger? Of course, Gowther is well into his penance now and is learning another system of meaning entirely, but one may be forgiven for being uneasy about the princess's safety. Anna Chen helpfully observes this quandary from the perspective of Gowther’s hunger. ‘The emperor fondly describes his daughter as “feyrur thar non be feyd” (l. 390), measuring her beauty through the language of consumption. Even the romantic attachment between Gowther and the emperor’s daughter is developed in Advocates entirely through food’ (Chen, p. 362). What Chen does not emphasise here is that this line resonates with the earlier curses of Gowther’s victims in Estryke (“Evyll heyle!” myght thei say, / That ever modur hom fed (164-5)). She, instead, observes the

deliberate changes the Advocates version implements as opposed to the Royals version of the tale.

Though a stanza in Royal comments directly upon their growing love, declaring that “ether of hem loved other right” (l. 370), no such articulation of their love appears in the Advocates version. Instead, their interactions are mediated through the bread and wine the maiden gives to the dogs in the knowledge that Gowther will consume them. The progress of their love, as marked by their interactions through food, exemplifies Advocates’ recognition and development of the potent symbolism of appetite and consumption. (Chen, p. 362)

This language of consumption and hunger also echoes in Gowther’s climactic battle against the Other, marking the last point of the poem explicitly describing the urge. As the final battle against the Saracens looms the poem reminds the reader that Gowther does as the Pope taught him, and even though he hungers (as the poem expressly insists on (606)), he only takes his sustenance from the hounds.

Bot he wold not for yre ne tene

No worde speyke, withowt wene,

For dowtte of Godus wreke;

If all he hongurt, noght he dyd eytte

Bot what he myght fro tho howndus geyt;

He dyd as tho Pwope con hym teche. (608-12)

Gowther's behaviour after the battle against the Saracens is stoic and contemplative.

Following the spectacular outburst of finally sanctioned violence, he solemnly, silently goes back to his quarters, neither giving voice to his 'yre' (608) or injuries, standing tall after the mighty and divine judgement he has meted out upon the enemy. He remains resolutely silent, even in the throes of hunger towards which the next lines gesture toward in a very close proximity indeed, establishing an important link between the two. Proper and divinely ordained, controlled violence, and the proper satiety of bodily hunger are similar in their manifestations, the two patterns of behaviour close now in Gowther's mind allowing him to understand their proper function. He cleanses himself in the blood of his enemies.

Florschuetz observes that 'The cleansing effects of blood suggested by Gowther's red armour recall the recent cleansing of the dogs' mouths with Eucharistically identified wine after Gowther's first battle' (p. 59). The connection between the symbols is strong, further underlining Gowther's penitential process linking his literal bloodthirst and capacity for violence with his salvation. The cleansing nature of the wet canine tongue will return in the chapter discussing *Piers Plowman* and the clerical canine's cleansing function.

Gowther also keeps his penitential silence, "for yre ne tene", echoing the earlier dichotomy of his falchion, which he keeps with himself in a similarly constructed line ('His fauchon con he with hym take, / He laft hit not for weyle ne wrake' (259-60)). Here, however, both attributes are negative, yet Gowther keeps his penitent silence. There is something incongruous in hunger and the canine penance mentioned in this context, however, just as the poetic vigour of the battle scenes is on full display. The inclusion of the line 'If all he hongurt, nocht he dyd eytte' (611) appears to be especially puzzling in the midst of the energetic scene of battle, as if reassuring the reader that even though Gowther's rampage through the battlefield may look similar to his earlier, youthful violence, *this time* it is properly controlled and sanctioned. The line also intrigued the Oswald, who notes:

This description comes not because we see a moment in which we suspect Gowther might eat or speak when he should not. It comes as a *reminder* [my emphasis] of Gowther's sanctioned and controlled behaviour, which then makes him worthy to ride beside the Emperor to protect him from harm (614). (p. 185)

Oswald's observation reaffirms Salter's argument that chivalric violence and Gowther's salvation are strongly interconnected, the former relying on the latter. The sanctioned violence serves as a final trial of the canine penance and the properly oriented hatred. In the following lines Gowther's hatred ("lothe") reflects on the now-externalised Other. His actions serve to deepen the divide between himself and them. The loathing he feels is especially poignant, for it echoes St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and Augustine's own experience of his hunger for God:

For within me was a famine of that inward food, Thyself, my God; yet, through that famine I was not hungered; but was without all longing for incorruptible sustenance, not because filled therewith, but the more empty, the more I loathed it. (Book III, Chapter 1.)

Even though Augustine loathes hunger itself, and Gowther loathes his enemies reflecting back his former sinfulness and otherness to himself, the connection leads to spiritual hunger in a transcendent sense. Gowther thus savages his externalised former selves with, loathing and hunger both motivating him on the battlefield.

Gowther's violence and resentment, however, are appropriate and encouraged here, for they are expressed through a properly ordained channel. Not unlike a trained warhound, Gowther is unleashed upon the Saracens for three consecutive days. During this time God provides Gowther with knightly equipment: sets of armour in first black, then red, and finally white. Gowther first fights wearing black armour, wielding "speyr" and "schyld" (571, 472,

458). In this state, he is nearly indistinguishable from the Saracens in this stage, who also wear “sabull blacke” or “Sarsyns blake” and who are described in canine terms as well, ‘as he once again snatches a prize, the emperor’s daughter, from their jaws’ (Florschuetz, p. 60). Florschuetz’s choice of word, I argue, is especially apt, for it applies yet again the same “revus” (296) the Pope prescribed to Gowther’s penance, only positioning now the Princess as the final food that satisfies.

In this process, the battlefield serves as a final test for Gowther’s resolve and control over his body and soul. Even though he is part of the swirling melee, he still has room for psychological development through the act of fighting. The lines where his falchion reappears (as opposed to his earlier usage of the God-granted spear) also serve as a reaffirming display of his now properly adjusted aggression and monstrous strength utilised in the defense of Christendom.

With his fachon large and long

Syche dyntus on them he dong

Hor lyfus myghtte thei lothe;

All that ever abode that becur

Of hor deythus meghtt be secur,

He styrd his hondus so rathe. (620-624)

Gowther on the third day of battle saves the Emperor’s life, decapitates the Sultan (630), with his heart filled not with any other emotion, but loathing. Gowther now finds not only to destroy in a self-serving manner to satisfy his bloodthirst. In the process he actively distances

himself from the external Other, by actively trying to weed them out of the world in a display of affective martial piety; their very presence, and continued existence causing him distress. This is emphasised by Laskaya and Salisbury's observation, who interpret the word projecting 'the sense being that the enemies' lives became painful (lothe) to them' (Footnotes to line 621, p. 305). Gowther, now a sanctioned warhound in the protection of Christendom courses through the battle; his sure stride and sense of urgency to eradicate the last traces of the other is equated with rhyming 'lothe' to 'rathe' in the last line of sure-footed, and dynamic canine movement. 'He styrd his hondus so rathe' (624) makes a strong connection with the hounds, evoking the swiftness of hunting dogs.

Gowther appears to be reunified as an initially divided subject with himself when he can finally internally suffer, disciplining his desires and producing the Lacanian *jouissance*. The problem is presented by Gowther's psychosis; the hunger reconfigured, or rather in need of reconfiguration at this time, that upsets the rhythm of a proper penitential narrative. Although Cohen does not make the explicit connection, Gowther is the case in point as he finally dons the Lacanian "armour of alienating identity". As Gowther passes through the infantile Mirror stage and arrives at a properly adjusted recognition of the self, through seeing himself reflected in the gaze of the hounds, gaining and implementing the virtual self-identity of the holy warhound he finally arrives to a stage of stable, molar identity (*Armour of Alienating Identity*, p. 1). This signals the final stage of the journey which Gowther started in his appetitive childhood, and which caused him so much suffering.

Gowther's spectacular display of martial prowess, rendered in loving and exhilarating detail by the romance, also designates the final location of his hunger as a definitive display of properly adjusted masculinity. Adler observes this particular detail from the perspective of Gowther's hunger:

The reminder of Gowther's hunger and inability to speak reinforces the sense that Gowther's performance in battle is inseparable from his religious vow of penance; both affirm his status as among the *miles Christi* and while the battle scenes help to redefine the chivalric dimension of Gowther's masculinity, the interspersed details on Gowther's eating ritual and encounters with the princess and the dogs indicate the gendered nature of his reformation. (p. 68)

In Adler's reading the chivalric display is closely interconnected with both the penitential process and being fed by what she designates as the 'canine intercessors.' Despite the tender reunification of Gowther with his infantile and feminine aspects, as he battles his final deeds on the battlefield remain violent, but properly sanctioned and divinely authorised, in line with Adler's interpretation (629-33).

In my reading, the last stage of Gowther's penitential journey is initiated by the fall of the princess from her tower. As she witnesses Gowther being wounded by a Saracen spear in sympathetic pains she moans (636), faints, and seemingly falls to her death. Huber observes that 'Gowther's human and creaturely attachments, his longing for "kind," and his grief over her apparent death poignantly articulate the reconfiguration of the function of his desire: "Then myssyd he that meydon schene" (648) (p. 313). The line gestures back towards the earlier usage of the term to the princess, when she recognised Gowther behind his armour on the battlefield. Faced with a vulnerable female body, his response is now a longing for connection rather than an appetite for consumption' (Huber, p. 313). Gowther finally develops nuanced internality, and the compassion he shows towards the vulnerable female other serves as the final element of his regenerative journey.

Upon her miraculous awakening, the Princess proclaims Gowther redeemed, his penance fulfilled (661-66). The Pope proudly proclaims Gowther ‘Goddus chyld’, signalling the closure of the penitential process; Gowther’s parentage no longer demonic as he is identified under the authority of the divine Name of the Father. The Princess and her miraculous recovery lead directly to the final stage of the tale, which, in turn seems to upset the linear penitential dynamic of the tale in a manner that is characteristic of the texts utilising the motif of bestial hunger, and in turn highlighting the fundamental anxiety about divine power in the face of the atavistic biological imperative.

I. 6. Gowther Redeemed and Sublimated

The final stage of Gowther’s journey, despite its strong redemptive tone, also gestures towards the larger, overarching problems with disciplining bestial hunger. Earlier stages of the narrative showcased different anxieties surrounding hunger, but the tale’s ending seems to question the very redemptive capacity of the canine penance Gowther dedicated himself to. In turn, the poetic project itself seems to become destabilized by hunger’s pervasive presence, which can be recognised as a unifying characteristic between the texts observed throughout the thesis.

After a spectacular wedding feast (685), echoing the feasting in the Emperor’s halls and serving as a marker of now properly adjusted consumption in courtly setting, Gowther and the princess set out to Estrkye. After many years of harmonious reign, Gowther passes away, marking his final stage of penitential journey and salvation. In accordance with his wishes, he is buried in the abbey he built in the place of the one he burned during his youthful rampage.

He is entombed in a golden shrine, which heals the bodies of supplicants with a physical lack: the blind, the mute, the “crokyd” and the mad (721-744). Gowther’s body in life governed by lack, hunger, and violence finally becomes a site of holiness and salvation. All is well, it seems. The resolution of the tale, however, is as critically contested as other elements of the narrative. Gowther’s salvation seems to send the wrong message about divine judgment of sinners. Andrea Hopkins investigates the question in detail. ‘If not even the righteous can be confident of salvation, how then can someone like Gowther, whose sins could not very well be worse, ever hope to compensate for his wickedness?’ (p. 175). Salter and Hopkins contrast Gowther’s ‘relatively comfortable’ penance with that of the earlier mentioned literary relative of the duke, Robert of Sicily. Robert’s penance is several years long, rendering Gowther’s penance, however intensive, or ‘telescoped’ it may be in Hopkins’s reading, indeed brief compared to his graphic sins. Dieter Mehl, in contrast with Salter’s well-informed and compelling emphasis on Gowther’s chivalric duties, does not see the fight against the Saracens as a commensurate penitence (pp. 126-7). Here, Gowther’s control over his own sinful, demonic body’s impulses again can provide an avenue of investigation.

Firstly, one is compelled to look at the princess’s role in the final stages of Gowther’s salvation. As has been already discussed, her role is triangulated through the language of consumption, her spiritually nutritive qualities are observed both by the Emperor and Gowther as the young duke is finally incorporated into the body of Christendom through the Eucharist. The princess and the care she provided are crucial elements in Gowther’s salvation, who learns tenderness and internality through these acts. Yet, Florschuetz here again provides an explanation to the princess’s nutritive qualities and Gowther’s canine act of snatching her from the mouth of the rival Saracen hound.

Her status as the last item to be stolen from the mouth of a “hownde” aligns her, as does her apparent resurrection, with the consumed body of Christ, the validated

object of sexual and alimentary desire. Her return to Gowther coincides with his authoritatively confirmed induction into the family and body of Christ and there her role ends. (p. 64)

The explanation is compelling. Gowther's supernatural hunger can only be satisfied through the dual consumption of the Eucharist and the symbolic snatching of the princess, as the final morsel from the hounds' mouths during his penitential journey. The princess, from the perspective of the canine penance, is the final, transcendent food that can finally satisfy Gowther's hunger, closing the problem of insatiable hunger, which started with the young duke's conception and the maternal body. Gowther thus finally behaves as a "good dog". The positive affirmation of his sanctioned and approved behaviour comes in the shape of the princess's final proclamation of God's message (661-9), clearly delineating Gowther as "Goddus child" (673), adjusting the final infantile designation as the sign of communion. Yet, after their marriage and return to Estryke, the princess disappears from the story without a trace, not unlike the holy greyhound bringing sustenance to Gowther under the hill during the earlier stages of his penitential journey. Gowther himself will follow shortly.

Gowther's final sublimation represents an elemental problem from the perspective of this thesis: has his transcendent, preternatural hunger, which so prominently governed his youth, been finally satiated? Has Gowther learned to discipline his infernal hunger fully through the canine training regime, or does it in a similar way to the holy greyhound and the Princess simply disappear? Florschuetz's argument certainly positions the resolution in a favourable light: Gowther has learned his lesson through his canine penance, and now he is reasserted at the pinnacle of civilized society. Yet, things do not seem to add up entirely.

During his harmonious reign, Gowther begets no children of his own. Oswald explains this phenomenon from Gowther's Arthurian heritage, stating that "[l]ike Arthur, he

ends his days childless, but, unlike Arthur, he affects his community in positive and constructive ways' (p. 191). Despite the normative marrying off his mother to the earl and his own marriage reasserting reproductive normalcy, there is no mention of any heirs of his own, the unspoken anxiety about his heritage possibly polluting Christendom looming large in the background of the finishing stanzas. This way the poem circles back to its very beginning, to the dynastic crisis and the question of transforming, hybrid bodies proves to be a source of anxiety. This aspect of the romance's ending is nothing short of jarring, serving as a serious caveat in Gowther's salvation, and attracting critical attention. Blamires questions where the hereditary origins of Gowther's impulses go at this stage but offers no clear answer (p. 57). Cohen's perspective is characteristically Lacanian, preoccupied with Gowther's conceptual disappearance from his own story, signifying his final ascendance to divinity. In his reading, 'Gowther has come to signify a transformative, corrective, normalizing principle. Gowther in triumph is Gowther abstracted, the hero who becomes an incorporeal Name under which miracles are performed: from inhuman origins to superhuman transfiguration, an inhuman end' (*Gowther among the Dogs*, p. 220).

Charbonneau finds the narrative's ending markedly unsatisfying, writing, 'How could an author expect us to believe this hopelessly ill-prepared transformation from devil's son to saint, from burner of convents to builder of them, from disfigurer and mutilator of women to caretaker of them?' (p. 21). The question is certainly a pertinent one, especially considering the anxieties Gowther literally embodies. Oswald aims to reconcile the question of Gowther's salvation from the perspective of the duke's hybrid body.

In *Sir Gowther*, the body ultimately cannot and does not infiltrate and destroy; the monstrous body is overtaken by the grace of God. Despite his transformation, however, Gowther's body continues to remain liminal, in certain ways. (...) He never produces heirs or participates in the economy of reproductive circulation,

the one desire that drove his mother into her initial encounter with the fiend. The fact is, with Gowther, something does remain unfinished. (p. 193)

Indeed, both Gowther and his tale feel somewhat unfinished. Despite the inspiring journey from demonic childhood to sainthood, the divine transformation remains ultimately 'untested'. With no heirs produced, as Oswald writes, '[t]he poet wants to make doubly sure that Gowther's monstrosity is excised from both body and community', mapping the initial anxiety of the atavistic and destructive Wild Man's infiltration onto the conclusion of the tale as well. 'The poet resolves this dilemma of transformation by removing Gowther from reproductive circulation, redeeming him, but not quite trusting the stability of his body' (p. 194).

Florschuetz, remains similarly unconvinced, when approaching the question with marked suspicion, observing Gowther's mixed heritage. Her argument also takes issue with the initial dynastic crisis reasserting itself, Gowther's salvation placing a caveat on the redemptive power of the penance's efficacy.

[T]he text's resolution suggests that firm boundaries between sacred and secular boundaries undermine the central project of Christianity. As a result, the rather unsatisfying conclusion to the family romance narrative in the text points to a deeper and more unsettling problem with the text's resolution—it doesn't solve any of the problems, secular or sacred, posed by its chaotic beginning. (p. 64)

The problem of the ending is a persistent one, to which Uebel's Lacanian analysis through Žižek brings a fitting conclusion. This reading is especially helpful when one wishes trace Gowther's hunger in the narrative. The reservations and anxieties surrounding the topic remain embedded in the seemingly hasty and markedly unsatisfying ending of the poem. In

an effort to answer this, Uebel observes the difference between the saint and the masochist (the two categories integral to Gowther's ontogenesis) establishes:

It is as if Gowther can only demonstrate how much power he possesses by how much of it he is able to sacrifice, to spend, to "trash." (...) Gowther's hagiography is, then, the story of his completion as sublime fetish, that object that, rather than satisfies desire, instead *causes* it. St. Gowther's existence means that the desire of the "Cryston pepull" to be healed will never cease. (p. 109)

This observation highlights the contract between Gowther's active pursuit of salvation, and his final disappearance, or sublimation as saint. According to Uebel, 'Gowther is not simply a catalyst for salvific desire, since "a saint's business," Lacan remarks, "is not *caritas*. Rather he acts as *trash* [*dechet*]; his business being *trashitas* [*il decharite*]' (p. 109). The word Uebel constructs is a uniquely descriptive one, emphasising the active component of Gowther's penance. The reading this approach offers is somewhat radical, for it questions whether Gowther has any business of partaking in *caritas*, the fundamental lesson of charity and kindness the young duke learned from his first canine teacher, the holy greyhound.

Gowther is most authentically himself when he fights, actively scourging his own self from the effects of his demonic otherness. From this perspective, even the triumphant, symbolically castrative moment of his decapitation of the Sultan (630), which is supposed to be his final defeat of the abject foreigner within, is but a hollow substitute offered to him through his penance; the final confrontation with his father, the Fiend, eludes him forevermore. In the state of fighting, Gowther is allowed to inflict pain, loss, and trauma. Despite all its outer finery, the colourful armours, and the chivalric ideal which he is so forcefully fed, combat is ultimately and violently non-rational. This state, I argue, is what most authentically reflects the Freudian death-drive within Gowther, a wordless animation

that not only propels him forward, but also offers him solace, an ultimately authentic form of self-expression of wordlessness. It is, however, but a brief moment of his narrative, and later anything resembling such self-expression is denied of him; his integration into the roles of ruler and saint culminating in becoming a golden shrine, only Gowther in name. The instrumentalization of his own death-drive, unleashing him upon the Saracen enemies of Christendom, appears to be an ultimate perversion. Gowther's instrumentality, his usefulness in combat, is contingent on his demonic strength and capacity to do violence. He is, as it has been emphasised, one with his weapon, the fetishistic object of the great falchion wielded by him. He does violence, he rules, he heals, and that is the totality of his existence.

The tale's ending is suffused with the atmosphere of anti-climax, or much rather, a false one. The end result, that Uebel discerns through the lens of Žižek's analysis, is instead perversion. There is something fundamental Gowther has left behind during his reunification with his infantile and feminine aspects throughout his penitential process and oral education. His return to the infantile state through his passivity and internality seems to be unsettled by the reading provided by Uebel, which emphasises the loss of an elusive surplus meaning in the process. The reading, however, explains the hidden, underlying anxiety about the enduring quality of Gowther's salvation. Gowther ceases to exist as an individual, finally evaporating, yet what he leaves behind is still contagious and anxiety-inducing.

What seems here another arcane proposition of Lacanian theory is actually fundamental to the general theory of perversion. Perversion arises when the subject's own desire is (taken to be) at the same time as the other person's desire. Gowther thus continues to have a contaminative effect, outlasting his death, on the people around him. There is, in other words, a perversity inhabiting what the poet sees as evidence of God's grace (738). (Uebel, pp. 109-10)

The words used by Uebel are descriptive of bestial hunger as a concept, its corrosive, contaminative effect on meaning and defined boundaries is detectable even in Gowther's final salvation. Contamination, and outlasting even death itself are concepts that seem to be at the forefront of the poet scribe's mind when the tale is finished, even when the imagery suggests salvation, healing, and golden opulence, a 'recovering' (745). Gowther's hunger for the elusive surplus meaning, however, remains elusive.

While the princess and the Eucharist communicated through her are the food, which finally seem to satiate Gowther's demonic hunger, Uebel's reading sees Gowther, as a person, together with his authentic impulses, needs, and wants, sublimated entirely in the process that is supposed to be corrective, therapeutic, and integrative. Gowther's driving urges and fighting against them or through them finally stilled, he becomes a name himself, aligning with the desire of the divine other. His sainthood is the best outcome he could have, but he as a person is subtracted from the equation. From this perspective, the tale's ending, despite the energetic fight scenes and Gowther developing touching internality at the end of his appetitive disciplinary journey, is one of hollowing out, one of contamination, one of failure of understanding. Read together with Florschuetz's observation about the overt anxiety of the poet about the devil's bloodline re-entering the royal bloodline, Gowther does not actually receive a full pardon, his body and soul are not fully healed, despite his sainthood and miracles he performs after his death he is not embraced. Despite his best efforts, and the papal pardon, and the princess's reassuring annunciation (mirroring the perverted version of the Annunciation at the beginning of the tale (85-8)), his body and soul remain suspect. Gowther himself, as a person, is the abject other, as Uebel emphasises throughout his argument. The external signifiers the young duke needs to accumulate *remain* external, the salvation only surface level, as Gowther is discarded in the process.

Indeed, it is not, strictly spoken, Gowther himself who performs these corrective miracles after his passing, healing the bodies of lack, but God through the shrine of gold. Even after his salvation, a vestige of the demonic remains within the young duke, something not even divine grace can excise from him. Similarly, his former penitential actions, in Uebel's reading, sees 'Gowther, haunted by his abject origins, remains suspended between oblivion and sublimity' (p. 105). The abjection, as outlined by Julia Kristeva's theory (that Uebel also draws upon (p. 105)) of the rejected abject becoming purified and incorporated in the penitential process, is what *appears* to happen to Gowther, and his acts of violence seem to correspond to the process perfectly. Firstly, as Kristeva establishes, 'Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be' (*Powers of Horror*, p. 10). This, I argue, is a fitting interpretation that can be applied to Gowther's chivalric violence; a desire to reenact the immemorial violence of infantile separation, now extrapolated to its final degree as a reflection on Gowther's infernal hunger. As Kristeva writes, 'It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order' (p. 4). The abjection, with all its anxieties, seems to have a corresponding description with bestial hunger, and its capacity to disturb the demarcation lines of identity, system, and order. The process of abjection, therefore, can be perceived as an exploration of this bestial hunger in Gowther. The meaning of the tale collapses on itself, the ascension to sainthood is as poor a substitute to fulfilling Gowther's insistent need for meaning as the decapitation of the Sultan was for his actual vengeance on his demonic father.

The process of abjection simply remains imperfect, misdirected as the strange ending and suggest. What should have been transformed in the process, Gowther as an authentic subject, incorporated and embraced, is instead rejected and evaporated. Despite the seemingly

triumphant integration of the abject, Gowther and his need for the elusive, surplus meaning he pursues through violence, becomes the discarded refuse, denied of agency.

At the end of the narrative, 'Contrary to the ideal penitential process, eradicating the demon, the foreigner within Gowther, fails ultimately to bring him to a state of transcendence. His salvation, his saintliness, is merely the culmination of a perverse process whereby Gowther ossifies, entombed "in schryne of gold" (725)' (Uebel, p. 110). Consequently, one may assume, Gowther's infernal hunger, a radical but authentic expression of pre-Oedipal desire, disappears from the world, only temporally channelled and assuaged, never truly satisfied in full, or even addressed in full during the penitential process. Even though, Gowther fought and chewed and disciplined his way to divine grace, to become 'Goddus chyld' (673), his final acceptance remains suspect, and the prize he pays for it is his own sublimation. At the end of the tale Gowther is nowhere to be found. He, similarly to the princess, disappears entirely. Despite all the gifts of status and holy acclaimed lavished on him, his therapeutic penance, and sainthood all remain meaningless in the face of the original impulse of his abjection. Kristeva's words about a child, who "swallowed up his parents too soon" may as well be written about Gowther and the efforts of the final containment of his infernal hunger:

What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the words of the father that is what he tries to cleanse himself of tirelessly. What solace does he come upon within such loathing? Perhaps a father, existing but unsettled, loving but unsteady, merely an apparition but an apparition that remains. (...) Out of the daze that has petrified [the subject] before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their objects, that is, from the

representations, out of such daze he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up — fear. (*Powers of Horror*, p. 6)

The solace Gowther's sainthood offers, is therefore characterized by fear, anxiety by any other name. Kristeva's phrasing is important here: the subject is not afraid, but he *causes* fear. Gowther is not afraid, for he is not there anymore, he simply disappears from the tale, not unlike the vanishing princess. The scribe poet, however, is confronted with an anxiety he attempts to hastily diffuse with the ending. The primordial emptiness and callousness of the original dynastic crisis embodied in the Fiend, ultimately causing Gowther's existence could be a final target of his hunger, something that would lead to a true integration. Yet, it is ultimately inaccessible, the discourse around it closed off. The only answer Gowther gets to his loathing is the unsteady images (names) of the father Gowther is offered, unsteady apparitions all. Thus, he causes the final word to emerge from the discourse initiated by and centred around his hunger: the pervasive anxiety surrounding all the categories discussed throughout the narrative, all insufficient in their capacity to assuage its insistent loathing, to fulfil that primordial emptiness.

In conclusion, Sir Gowther's journey marks a deep psychoanalytical investigation mapped on the framework of a chivalric romance utilising many inspirations and source materials. It is also one which undertakes the challenging task through the intertwining loci of symbols between bestial hunger and the disciplined hounds. The tale runs the gamut from infantile vulnerability, and oral violence, through monsters and chivalric virtue. In the process of Gowther's continuous "becoming" his journey takes him through shadowed forests, the battlefield, royal courts, and finally sainthood. Yet, the final satisfaction of his infernal, infantile hunger remains suspect, the resolution of his tale, despite its numerous redemptive qualities, keeping an uneasy distance from a final answer. Subversion, perversion,

and regeneration remain important thematic elements of the romance, yet Gowther's final sainthood leaves open the question of his final identity, which signals further anxieties. Indeed, the following textual manifestations of hunger observed by the thesis will also become characterised by anxiety and often difficulty, or even failure of representation or the absence of a clear moral message, despite the motif of hunger initially promising clarification. Similarly to Gowther, hunger also remains a perverting, subversive, insidious presence, foreshadowing its return, and muddying the moral ecosystem of the text, upsetting a straightforward linear interpretation. Hunger complicates and upsets otherwise seemingly clear moral lessons, and just like Gowther, even sublimated, satisfied, or fended off desperately, remains a looming threat to the body and even more to the soul.

Chapter II: Bestial Hunger in *Piers Plowman*

II. 1. Introduction

There is a strong tension between economic realities and Christian charitable impulses in William Langland's poem involving several dream visions, sins and virtues embodied, and a colourful variety of characters. Individual and collective embodiments of agency in this context are abundant and one may find oneself buffeted by uncomfortable ethical quandaries, to which Langland himself cannot offer a comforting answer. Questions of deserving and undeserving poverty, uneven and unsustainable consumption, and commodity and profit-driven economies discarding any semblance of humanity are all questions which resonate in today's intellectual life as much as they did in the period of the Middle Ages. Following the ravages of the Black Plague, the economic environment of Europe saw a restructuring, and Langland's England was an example of all these sweeping changes affecting the edifice of the feudal society of the period. Langland's preoccupation with the matter of the emergent proto-capitalism and its relations to Christianity, similarly to his contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer, speaks of these questions gaining prominence. The poem's aim is to have his subjects (such as Will the Dreamer, and Piers the Plowman) strive to do their best and find a way to do so. What thoughts, ideas, and actions constitute a good life and a harmonious functioning of the self in the Christian framework of the period is chief among the concerns of the poem. However, the road to doing well and finding salvation in the process is far from straightforward, and the stumbling blocks of the soul remain as relevant today as they were more than half a millennium ago. William Rhodes explains this phenomenon of the poem

concisely. ‘The quest for salvation by means of spiritually beneficial acts frequently finds itself threatened in *Piers Plowman* by economic relations that obscure or block the right path’ (*Medieval Political Ecology*, p. 118).

This chapter aims to observe such harsh realities intruding on and upsetting the smooth operation of the moral principles within the poem. The narrative is focused on finding what Rhodes calls “the right path” in many facets of life, and it struggles doing so mightily. Sins, pettiness, greed, and selfishness thwart the process of finding a virtuous, narrow path in the morass of needs and wants. This chapter is characterised by interfaces, the meetings and interactions between ethics and harsh, imperfect realities as much as the greater, overarching disciplinary mechanisms of society and their effects on the individual’s body and soul.

After establishing the broader strokes of the dynamics most important from the perspective of the thesis, different parts of the poem will be focused on in an effort to observe hunger’s role in it. The first such instance will be in the context of the poem’s Prologue. In it, Langland establishes many of the governing principles of his simulated world inhabited by embodiments of sins and virtues as much as knights and farmers. Within the Prologue a short, often overlooked part is dedicated to the Aesopic fable of the Belling of the Cat, or as it is often referred to, the Rat Fable. This particular miniature narrative is included in the thesis not only due to its formerly overlooked nature, but because it also showcases dynamics of hunger, restraint, production, and consumption in a compressed, yet significant form. Formerly it has been chiefly looked at from the perspective of its strictly historical context, but more novel approaches see it through a more universal lens, emphasising its resonance over the entirety of the narrative instead of it being a self-contained, short episode commenting on politics.

Secondly, the episode taking place in the Half-Acre of Passus VI. will be observed. In it a stationary pilgrimage takes place in the miniature agricultural utopia of the Half-Acre. The spiritually cleansing nature of labour is envisioned in it as a way to reach a truthful understanding of the world, while providing food in the process. The harsh realities of human nature, however, interface with the ideals of the key figure: Piers, the plowman. His recalcitrant workers refuse to participate in the work. Piers, in a disciplinary effort, invokes the embodied Hunger, whose actions as much as his words will fundamentally affect not only Piers but even Langland himself.

After a more general discussion on the episode, in the final section of the chapter a particular approach will be deployed to view Hunger's character and his effects on both Piers's character and the trajectory of the narrative. In it the clerical canine aspect of Hunger will be observed, and the ways it finds further resonance in the poem, often upsetting seemingly linear impulses of charity and need, while giving a preliminary context to the following chapter featuring Henryson's eloquent, and often similarly clerically inclined beasts exploiting language to fill their own stomachs as well.

II. 2: The Importance of Scarcity in *Piers Plowman*

In the context of opposing forces of Christian ethics and economic realities, scarcity as a governing principle can be identified as a category which greatly intrigued Christian thinkers. St. Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessions* has not only scorned eating and drinking as inescapable signs of the fallen animal nature of a person, but also established scarcity as an ever-present condition and is perplexed about the enjoyment and potentially corruptive

pleasure that it provides, arguing if a balance can be achieved between greed and necessary sustenance of the body only through the teachings of God (Book X, Chapter XXXI, 43-45). Thomas Aquinas, in a similar vein, argued for the exercise of 'measure', a considered and measured attitude to consumption as a curative of these inequalities, working in the closed system of consumption. Aquinas asserts that 'One man cannot overabound in external riches without another man lacking them, for temporal goods cannot be possessed by many at the same time' (p. 210). The principles of the church fathers remain important in the mindset of the period of the Middle Ages and resonate in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* as well. They are negotiated extensively in the poem, and in turn, become the target of the anthropomorphised sins embodied over the course of the text. Among the most notable of such characters are Gluttony and the Doctor of Divinity, who are not mere gluttons, but ventriloquise their narrative of restrained consumption without much moral substance. They themselves are, rather unsurprisingly, wasteful and gluttonous consumers of the highest order while commenting on the virtues of measured consumption. Gluttony itself features prominently in the process of intellectualising for Langland. Gluttony is among the first sins to be personified throughout the narrative. He becomes most associated with the undisciplined, animalistic consumption and the image of the canine beside Hunger's character appearing a little later. Uneven consumption is an important focaliser from the opening images of the Prologue. While characters such as Gluttony and Hunger, or the Doctor of Divinity gorge and enjoy themselves, others starve and suffer as a result. Their undisciplined, unrestrained consumption is not only sinful in its callous disregard towards their fellow men, but it also displays the attitude and fallen nature ruled by bodily appetites. Their presence in the poem is not only problematic on the material level (where they consume more than their fair share), but the narrative they introduce also subverts and

undermines the crucial Christian impulses embodied in the governing principles of measure and charity.

The motif of uneven consumption resulting in scarcity is so pervasive in the poem that one is forced to narrow one's focus to observe it in detail. In this Margaret Kim — one of the most influential observers of the dynamics of consumption and discipline within the poem, to whose reading I am greatly indebted — draws a parallel between the Hunger episode in Passus VI and the scene where Gluttony and Lot interact in Passus I. She identifies this first episode as an important moment of what she describes as the ‘very first instance of the abuse of consumption’ (p. 341). This particular term - the deliberate and visible (conspicuous) perversion and disruption of the operation of measured consumption that would otherwise assure the literal and spiritual health of larger society - governs not only the dialogism but also orients the underlying dynamics of restraint and discipline surrounding the practices of consumption as well. Kim observes the main tension between the governing Christian morality and the worldly powers of consumption:

Secular political authority feeds on the intimate relation between power and extravagant spending and lavish display, and it identifies lordship with the maintenance of great consumers, feudal magnates and members of their households, who spend and use excessively and conspicuously. In this way, political authority in medieval society operates on a worldly logic contrary to the Christian logic of discipline and restraint, particularly manifest in ascetic leanings. (p. 340)

Amongst the procession of wasteful characters, probably the most destructive ones are depicted in Passus 11, where a disturbing scene occurs: harlots and minstrels, wasteful consumers, non-producers, and favoured companions of Gluttony all playfully comment on

divinity (11.35-41). Blasphemy is only one layer of their transgression. Kim further accentuates her reading by observing the motif from the perspective of consumption which sharpens the societal divide of the poem.

The image of lords, ladies, and their sycophantic followers devouring God as they stuff and indulge themselves while the poor outside cry from starvation identifies the socially uncharitable behaviour of wealthy people as the deepest offence against the divine. (...) In seeing the eating, drinking, and merry-making of rich people and their parasitic retainers as a spiritual gnawing on the body of Christ, the poet suggests that victims of great, lordly consumption are poor people, Christ-like in their suffering. (p. 351)

This parasitic consumption, as Kim phrases it, is also a characteristic of the wasteful consumers refusing to participate in the moral economy of the Christian mindset predicated on charity and measure. This parasitic consumption and the subversive narratives justifying it will be the central focus of the Prologue's episode, the Rat Fable, as it will shortly be observed.

On the other side of the scale stands the character of the Antichrist, who chases everyone into the Barn of Unity from the fields. The character is similar to Hunger, only without any suggestion of control. Eleanor Johnson, a prominent observer of wasteful consumption in the poem, identifies the Antichrist's embodiment as 'ecosystemic collapse'. In her reading she draws a strong connection between Hunger and the character of the Antichrist, describing them both as 'figures of famine'. The illuminating and well-informed ecocentric reading provided by Johnson focuses on the importance of the soil as a crucial symbol, and the Antichrist's action aimed at spoiling it.

He overturns fields, he makes grains not grow, he sows rotten seed, he cuts back the branches of truth. He lays waste to the land, annihilating its current crops and reducing the odds that future crops will take hold. Individual human sloth—the wasting of time and energy—will bring the destruction of the land, the soil, the earth itself. (*Waste and Wasters*, p. 99)

The cascading ecosystemic collapse is strongly linked to the attitudes of wasteful consumption exacerbating it, enabling it, and allowing it to be perpetuated. In Jonhson's reading the Antichrist is also the arch-waster, the final link in the line beginning with the wasteful consumers depicted in the Prologue, continued in the Hunger episode and throughout the poem. 'Put otherwise, Antichrist is the famine that will not end, the Waster to end all wasting, the *vastator vastatorum*' (p. 100).

II. 3: The Economy of the Prologue

Observing the very beginning of the poem, one may recognise these thematic elements in a compressed form. The Prologue's opening images are animated by a sublime intensity, a poetic vigour embodied in the colourful profusion of images and activity. They outline a microcosm within which the meditation on economic realities and Christian values will take place over the course of the poem. Helen Barr observes this detail:

Within six lines, the Malvern Hills of the Prologue suddenly become a wilderness in which Will, the dreamer/narrator, is lost (P. 5–11). The apparently neat allegorical topography of heaven, hell, and middle earth that comes to geographical rescue dissolves into a shapeshifting carousel of human beings (and some rodents), going about their worldly business, and evaporates at the end of

the Prologue into a cacophony of traders' street cries in Cheapside. (*Major episodes*, p. 15)

In the colourful liveliness of the Prologue many concepts and characters can already be found which will populate the poem. Among them, I would argue, perhaps the inclusion of 'some rodents', as Barr puts it, is the most puzzling and intriguing from the perspective of this thesis. Their presence and actions become especially pertinent when one wishes to observe the locus of symbols comprised of food, consumption, and hunger. These symbols, urges, and needs are not represented in one instance only. They return time and again over the course of the poem, as will later be discussed in detail during the Hunger episode. The notion, however, remains useful to keep in mind when Langland's inclusion of the Rat Fable, or Rat Tale of the Prologue is concerned.

First, however, a short observation of consumption and its role in the Prologue is in order to provide a critical base for the Rat Fable. The difference between conspicuous and wasteful consumers and producers of foodstuff depicted in the Prologue is immediately addressed after the description of the colourful folk on the field in a straightforward manner, barely two dozen lines into the poem.

Somme potte hem to plogh, playde ful selde,

I In settinge and sowynge swonken ful harde

And wonne pat pis wastors with glotony destructh (Prologue 22-24)¹

¹ All quotations of the text are from Schmidt, A. V. C. "William Langland: The Vision of Piers Plowman—A Complete Edition of the B-Text." *Everyman's Library* (1978), unless otherwise indicated.

The lines of the Prologue are resonant throughout the poem, serving as a sharp dividing line between the two groups of society. On one side there are those who put themselves to the plough, working the land, and producing food. Among them, one may identify Piers, the eponymous plowman of the poem, operating the disciplinary apparatus of the conceptual plow-machine, as will be discussed during the Hunger episode. On the other side are the wasters, whose gluttony is destructive regardless of their social standing (P.35-42) (Kim, p. 351). However, the second category is much more populous, and very much more persistent throughout the poem, leaving little chance for the producers to balance the material and spiritual economy of the poem.

The plow's depiction in the Prologue also represents an opportunity to briefly observe the way Langland develops his ideas throughout the step-like formulation of the poem, further reinforcing the reason to observe the Prologue in detail. A pivotal argument for the connection between the role of the imagery surrounding the locus of food and drink so prominently depicted, and their recurring quality is observed by Raymond St-Jacques, who encapsulates different aspects of larger, overarching “structural patterns “in the poem (*Christus Medicus*, pp. 111-27). These structural patterns, in his interpretation, will be iteratively developed over the course of the poem, but they can already be found in the Prologue. He invokes Schmidt’s observation about such repeating patterns of structurality, and the connection to Spearing’s established idea of “the recurrence of the ideas of hunger and bread”, emphasising the importance of observation of recurrent symbols in this context. This recurrent narrative shape has been further recognised by Robertson and Hupp, representing a fundamental observation within the text’s critical development:

There are certain images set in the Prologue, those of food and clothing for example, that are used to give coherence to the poem ... Indeed, we may make the generalization that the structure of the poem is based largely on the repetition and

contrast of symbols which are progressively elaborated and developed.

(Robertson, Huppé, *Piers Plowman and Scriptural Tradition*, p. 245-6)

Even a brief survey of the criticism seems to suggest that the production and consumption of foodstuff is one of the pivotal questions of the poem already represented in the Prologue.

These interlocking ideas compiled by St-Jacques provide an important marker in the current study's efforts to interpret both the recurrence and the symbolism that returns throughout the narrative.

II. 4: The Rat Fable

Before approaching Hunger embodied in earnest one may fruitfully observe similar depictions of extremes when consumption is concerned occurring early in the narrative, stamping its seal upon the poem to come. There are many such pattern-forming thematic elements contained within the voluminous expanses of the narrative, influencing one another by providing commentaries on the dynamics centred around consumption. One can find characters gesturing towards Langland's concern about the way scarcity and abundance form certain patterns of meaning in his poem so focused on dialogism. One such prominent episode can be found in the Prologue. The Rat Fable is a peculiar, short narrative, which features Langland's critique of a miniaturised animal society and its 'habits, ramifications, and practices of consumption' (Kim, *The Politics of Consumption*, p. 357).

I argue that the fable comprises a dense kernel of patterns and dynamics concerning discipline and hunger (and especially discipline *through* hunger) in a nuclear state, which will be developed over the course of the poem. Both the fable and the narrative as a whole are uniquely concerned with consumption and policies surrounding it, thus rendering the motif ripe for observation, and to further contextualise the following discussion on Hunger's nature in the later passus. Animality remains a crucial point of the interpretive method in Langland's case. 'The animal characters in *Piers Plowman* do not stand just for good and evil; the author examines the bestial dispositions to consume, waste, destroy, and kill within all these characters, and makes these dispositions the basis of their being and endeavour' (Kim, p. 357). Both Hunger and the Rat Fable are cases in point, and their connections are as numerous as they are useful to observe in conjunction.

Viewing the fable through the lens of recent criticism one may observe a formulation of ideology in the miniaturised economy of the pantry raided by the rodents. The ways they and their speaker justify their actions and create narratives around their rapacious consumption is, even if Langland did not have the critical vocabulary yet, a way to observe an ideology forming, with all its characteristics and mechanisms concurrent with the contemporary understanding of the term. The Rat Fable is therefore a remarkable narrative, compressing the formulation of such a society predicated on the power of ideology governing its attitudes towards consumption. In order to observe the seductive narratives formulating in the fable I will utilise a combination of Karl Polanyi's economic approach, which has already been applied to the poem by Robert Epstein, and further extrapolate it into the direction represented by Lacanian psychoanalysis applied to the individual and the society the subject inhabits, as proposed by Slavoj Žižek (Epstein, *Summoning Hunger*, pp. 59-76). The path of Lacanian psychoanalysis connects the dynamics found in *Sir Gowther* to the Rat Fable and the Hunger episode, providing a reading expanding from the scope of the individual subject to larger communities and their relation to the individual. The Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to reading *Piers Plowman* is far from novel and has been well established by James Paxson and Daniel Murtaugh in their respective analyses of personification within the text. I, however, aim to redirect its focus and apply the framework on the Rat Fable in order to observe the morally subversive elements of bestial hunger and unrestrained, undisciplined consumption in the context of the fable.

The Rat Fable, or The Belling of the Cat, is a well-known Aesopic fable of the period. Its utilizations are numerous, but thus far the chief attitude towards its interpretation focused on the strictly allegorical, historicizing reading of the fable. In such readings, the Rat Parliament is widely recognized as an allegorized representation of the 1376 Good Parliament. According to Elizaveta Strakhov and Gwylin Dodd, these readings discuss the

political commentary within the fable, which Langland articulates through the fable (Strakhov, *But Who Will Bell the Cat?* pp. 2-4, Dodd, *A parliament full of rats?* pp. 21-49).

The fable might have been readily recognizable for the period's English audience through the 'fable from a Latin sermon preached by Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester, to a convocation of clergy at the 1376 Parliament' (Steiner, p. 7). In it, Brinton chastises the nobility's spiritual laxity for refusing to fight injustice, while admonishing the king, Edward III, for refusing to listen to the advice of his counsellors. The fable embodies many anxieties about the political order and the impotence of those in power selfishly seeking their own profit instead of the betterment of the community they intended to represent.

The rodents of the fable, despite their bestial rapacity and the base instincts that govern them completely, rendering them recognisable as political operators, are imbued with a self-reflective nature has also been noted as a contrast to the Aesopic original. Kim emphasises Langland's anxieties embodied in the congregation of rats not merely centred around his contemporary politics, but representing a wider interest in the underlying mechanisms of politics. In the self-reflection of the rodents, one may recognise Langland 'repeatedly call[ing] attention to these creatures' nature as bestial and unredeeming and to their own condition as compromised and unsympathetic, within a specific, definite arrangement of communal relations' (Kim, p. 359).

However useful the varied historical readings may be in the context of analysing Langland's political commentary and attitude towards royalty and governance, I would argue that an interpretation more in line with modern ecocentric and psychoanalytical readings focused on questions of consumption, production, regulation, sustainability and creation in relation to morally subversive narratives may be utilised effectively. A reading focused on wasteful, unrestrained consumption depicted by the fable also helps to further contextualise the following Hunger episode within the poem. This approach not only does not limit the

interpretive capacity proposed by the strict historical readings, but it also further accentuates them as well, in turn allowing a more nuanced understanding of Langland's political commentary by going further than focusing on the immediate contemporary political context.

The short fable's inclusion in the Prologue may seem abrupt after the profusion of images and characters on the field full of folk, taking place after the angelic scene and the babble of voices spewing Latin. Langland's rendition of the tale begins *in medias res*, taking place within the Prologue after a profusion of colourful images and scenes. On the field full of folk after an angel addresses the commotion in Latin, the general hubbub focuses on the miniature scene taking place. Langland's adaptation of the Aesopic tale observes a tide of vermin, "a ragtag rabble of rats" (P. 166), as Peter Sutton translates the line in the modern translation of the poem, comes running out and gathering into an impromptu congregation, a parliament of rats.

With that ran ther a route of ratons at ones

And smale mees myd hem: mo than a thousand mice;

Comen to a counseil for the commune profit; (P. 146-8)

The tone of the fable is swiftly established: the reason for the congregation of the rodents is far from the 'commune profit', the common good. It is entirely self-serving, for their problem is a characteristic rodent one, 'For a cat of a court cam whan hym liked' (P. 149), not only eating them but clawing them and playing with them cruelly. The pun is an obvious one, lending substance to historical readings: the feline of the *court* is one to fear. The cat is far from a simple allegorical representation of the sovereign, as I will later argue. The mouse

makes an observation in Latin “Ve terre ubi puer est rex!”, (‘Woe to the land where a child is king!’), lending further support to the cat being read as royalty (Strakhov, *But Who Will Bell the Cat?*, p. 11). The rodents eventually proceed to produce bells and collars fit for the purpose of belling the cat, to know where it may walk. Here the rat of renown, the first public speaker of the tale proposing the plan already identifies the venture serving ‘for oure commune profit’ (P. 169), the profit of the rodents. In the end, however, no one wishes to actually act and put the collar on the cat, not even for the whole kingdom of France. In this moment of instrumental impotence, a mouse steps to the podium and delivers the pivotal speech of the fable.

A mous that muche good kouthe, as me tho thoughte,

Strook forth sternely and stood bifore hem alle,

And to the route of ratons reherced thise wordes:

’Though we hadde ykilled the cat, yet sholde ther come another

To cracchen us and al oure kynde, though we copen under benches. cr

Forthi I counseille al the commune to late the cat worthe, let... be

And be we nevere so bolde the belle hym to shewe.

The while he caccheth conynges he coveiteth noght oure caroyne,

But fedeth hym al with venyson; defame we hym nevere. (P. 182-190)

The knowledgeable mouse proposes an enticing plan: the rodents should not bell the cat, for it would not only be dangerous, but it would also necessitate the repeated belling of the

kittens too. Furthermore, the best is to allow the cat to satisfy its hunger with venison and hare, the other prey animals surrounding the household. The rodents appear to be in favour, and the fable ends without Langland passing judgment, imploring the reader to interpret the tale however they may.

The fable's connection to the Hunger episode and other parts of the poem became more prominent in the recent criticism. An interpretation utilising such an approach allows one not only to observe the motif of the unrestrained, undisciplined bestial rapacity to be observed in the poem but also strengthens the conceptual connection between these seemingly loosely connected episodes and elements.

Firstly, Margaret Kim's thorough and exceedingly useful analysis of the fable suggests a strong connection between the Hunger episode's character, Waster, and the Rat Fable. In her reading a 'parallel between the bestial, consuming animals in the rat fable and Waster, suggesting that Langland carries out a moral rhetoric against all consumers and their maintenance of political corruption' (p. 358). Bestial hunger in its unrestrained, wastefully consuming, materially and morally subversive aspect becomes a problematised motif throughout the narrative, which will appear in the shape of Hunger again in a pronounced manner. In the case of the Rat Fable, this particular parallel is observed by Kim, arguing that 'the use of destructive, ravenous bestiality as a fundamental category of government as a whole is a scathing critique of all involved in that government' (p. 359). Reading the Hunger episode side-by-side with the fable, its shapes and dimensions mapped on social interactions appear to be not dissimilar. Several thematic overlaps can be observed between the two episodes. These talkative characters, such as the well-spoken mouse and later Hunger, are also similar to Henryson's hungering animals depicted in his beast fables in their verbosity. The self-reflective rats depict a dynamic very early on over the course of the poem: on one hand the fallen animal body's capacity, on the other the regulatory mechanisms of society.

The fable's connection to Hunger has been recently emphasised in the criticism. In the reading provided by Jill Mann, the fable 'predicates a naturally established balance between competing forces (cat versus rats and mice), and the personified Hunger is summoned by Piers to play a similarly regulatory role in the plowing of the half-acre' (*Allegory in Piers Plowman*, p. 68). Similarly, Elizaveta Strakhov also observes that 'the Rodent Parliament, generally viewed as a self-contained episode within the Prologue, sets up one of the central themes developed in *Piers Plowman's* later passūs: the proper organization of labour in a sustainable society, most immediately observable in the fraught ploughing of the half-acre' (p. 10). I similarly will endeavour to connect the two episodes in the larger context of the poem, observing certain themes in the Rat Fable which will then resonate in the Hunger episode.

Yet another connection between the Rat Fable and the immediate aftermath of the later Hunger episode in Passus 6 can also be observed. The alleged source of the rat fable, bishop Brinton's sermon, utilities one particular turn of phrase from *Piers Plowman*. After the ravages of Hunger in the passus Piers receives a pardon, which he, disillusioned with his modes of governance, tears up. Elizaveta Strakhov point out that the words of that fateful pardon, 'Benefac et bene habe' (B.7. 112), or 'do well and have well' are echoed in Brinton's sermon (*But Who Will Bell the Cat?* p. 6). The uncommon Latin formulation, only found in one other source, suggests that Brinton may have picked up the fable from reading Langland, rather than the other way around.

Langland follows his Aesopic source material faithfully up until a certain point, keeping the larger thematic elements of the original in place. He, however, also deviates from it in a way that will characterise Henryson's adaptations of similar fables as well. Langland introduces an eloquent little voice to nuance his version of the fable, the squeaker of the parliament: the mouse. The sensible, well-spoken mouse proposes that the belling of the cat is

a futile plan, for several reasons. Chiefly, there would only be a next cat after it, and a kitten would not only be without a bell, necessitating the perilous and pointless procedure to be repeated. The mouse's solution, however, allows Langland to introduce a chilling paradigm into the poem and observe it through the lens of unrestrained bestial hunger. The mouse observes the situation from the perspective of unregulated consumption himself; it is the language the rodents speak fluently and understand fully. The rats and mice, as Kim observes, 'first fantasize that it is possible to control the cat and his court, and subsequently, to be like the great predators: "We myhte be lordes alofte and lyue as vs luste" (177)' (p. 360). The mouse perceptively identifies the hidden, obscene desires of the assembly and addresses them: the rodents wish not to have a sustainable relationship, to produce themselves, but to plunder the abundance of the pantry without restraint. They, however, cannot simply descend upon the abundant foodstuff, and it is not only the cat that prevents them. They need a narrative to inhabit, for a certain sense of propriety (or an unconfessed fear from further retaliation of the cat and the humans) prevents them from outright formulating a system where they can consume to their hearts' content. They need some sort of permission, but they are at an impasse with the plans to bell the cat. There is an unspoken agreement, a certain surplus of meaning that the rodents cannot access immediately. In this momentary vacuum, the mouse projects the mindset of consumption characterising the rodents onto the cat, that royal predator decimating them. In the process of seemingly proposing a way out of the pressing indecision of the parliament, he provides a similar opportunity to Langland to Hunger's character later emerging in the poem. The proposition is a double-edged one, however. The mouse speaks with compelling eloquence, his message immediately agreeable for the hesitant rats not willing to risk their own hides to bell the cat.

The politically savvy mouse in his proposed plan emphasises that "best" (a miniaturized mousy parody of "do well, do better, do best" governing the poem's main preoccupation is

echoed in his approach) is not to confront the cat, for it will, in their stead, eat the hare and hunt for venison (P. 205-9). The proposal is as callous as it sounds, and it further highlights the rodents' way of thinking about the world, their limited scope of comprehension manifesting in attitudes to consumption as short-sighted as it is damaging, resembling Waster and all his wasteful ilk.

Both elements of the plan, the belling and the appeasement, carry within them an element of bribery. Critical orthodoxy represented by Anna Baldwin's reading interpreted the cat's intended bell as the bribe to a feudal magnate: pomp and circumstance, title, liveries of a knight (*The Theme of Government*, pp. 17-8). The reading is compelling, for it underlines the fundamental emptiness of these gestures, imbuing the rodents with a surplus of intangible capita which they did not create, yet trade for material gain. It also further highlights the transactional nature of such gestures; the bell is after all meant to be a warning system for the rodents. However, Baldwin remains insistent on the reading that kingship would be an effective regulatory remedy to the rampant rat rapacity. One may find Kim's argument more fitting, which emphasises the B version of the poem 'the nature of politics steeped in pragmatic materialism' (p. 358). In her reading, the transactional nature of politics is highlighted, especially in the B version.

II. 4. 2: Lady Mede

One may rightly associate bribes and coldly calculated mercantile compensation with Lady Mede's character within the context of the poem. She is the embodiment of monetary compensation, which cannot assuage the spiritual imbalance of the resulting situation. Mede in the Prologue is not a literally embodied character. One, however, may already perceive

something similar to her governing principles in the transactional suggestion made by the mouse. The character of Mede is a crucial one in many episodes concerning the intertwining spiritual and literal economics. William Rhodes points out the strong interaction between Lady Mede and what he designates as her 'biopolitical deployment', approximating her to Hunger's later role.

What does it mean that, for a moment, the poem's ambiguously transcendent figure wields the power of harsh physical necessity that drives people to work for survival? For one thing, it connects Mede's political economic assertion that 'No wight, as I wene, withouten Mede may libbe!' (B.3.227) to the biopolitical deployment of the need for food to live in the organization of the manorial economy. (p. 128)

In this "manorial economy," the rodents also participate: their entire discussion is centred around the household's abundance, and their survival is at stake. Yet, they do not wish to compensate the humans in a commensurate manner, being parasitic consumers.

Lady Mede represents a crucial interaction which can be easily imbalanced by the powerful. She is similar to Hunger and Gluttony when Langland's negotiation of biological necessities and their role in social interactions are concerned. This aspect of the character, according to James Simpson's reading, manifests perhaps most notably in the episode taking place in the Passus IV (*Spirituality and Economics*, pp. 83-103). In the episode, a farmer named Peace appears, who claims that his person, wife, and barn were all assaulted by Wrong. During the legal battle, Lady Mede offers a gift of pure gold to compensate for Peace, but the King is far from satisfied. Yet, the wasteful actions of Wrong are not made right in the procedure: the trashed barn, the assaulted maid, the stolen wife, horse, and chicken, and the bodily harm that came to Peace are not actually compensated for by Mede's

gift of gold. Wrong is not punished sufficiently for his transgressions either, and may well be the only one who ends up somewhat satisfied at the end of the episode. Eleanor Johnson observes that '[w]aste happens, and when its legal remedy—payout—feels insufficient, no one can do anything further, not even the King' (p. 83). In this context, the laws are simply incapable of dealing with the category of moral and material wastefulness of undisciplined actors unwilling to participate in the allegorized economy. Mede's presence enables this process. Only a collective fetishization allows Mede to compensate for Wrong's actions. To her character Slavoj Žižek's ideological description of money provided in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* is applicable. Just like money, Mede 'is in reality just an embodiment, a condensation, a materialization of a network of social relations – the fact that it functions as a universal equivalent of all commodities is conditioned by its position in the texture of social relations' (p. 60). These social relations, however, function insufficiently in the episode, creating an imbalance that is not entirely material. Waste is produced in the process, with which the system of social relations cannot deal sufficiently.

Utilizing Marxist or ecocentric readings is far from novel when it comes to interpreting *Piers Plowman* as a whole or the Mede episode in particular. William Rhodes approaches both Mede and Hunger from this perspective, offering a reading that encapsulates one of Langland's primary struggles with the interfacing agencies of production and consumption encapsulated in the locus of symbols surrounding these interlocking dynamics. Firstly, he acknowledges, that '[t]he will cannot fully be free to choose if the only other alternative might be penury or starvation' (*Personification*, p. 119). Thus, the subjects, the characters of the poem are often left with very few options, testing the tensile strength of their principles. How can one balance morality if the other side of the scale is occupied by hunger? *Personification* is an essential element in rendering these forces visible and negotiable.

Personification, insofar as it is particularly suited for making visible the forces that move the will, can allow us to see the otherwise invisible relations that makeup what we now call 'the economy' and that limit the personal will in ways both quotidian and profound. For Langland, personification is a technique that can mediate the individual experience of volitional constraint and the socioeconomic forces that shape the will, an art that illuminates the relationship between self and society. (p. 119)

In this context, Rhodes offers a reading of both *Hunger* and *Mede* as central governing principles in the poem. In Rhodes' reading, Langland contributes to the ongoing effort to find an adequate representation of economic agency. He utilizes personifications like *Meed*, *Hunger*, and *Hawkyn* to echo Marx's idea about individuals shaping history. Langland's utilization of the personifications such as *Mede* and *Hunger* give a tangible, observable form to the complex and varied aspects of economic reality presented in historical context. These characters interacting with both one another, and characters such as *Piers* in turn highlight the influence these economic conditions have on people's lives as they engage in countless interactions with the world, which in turn shape history (Rhodes, p. 121).

I argue that both Rhodes' and Johnson's respective approaches can be further extended and are readily applicable to the wasteful consumers of the *Rat Fable* as well in order to interpret the wasteful consumption embodied in the shape of the rodents. The rats are personifications just as much as *Mede* and *Hunger*, only somewhat alloyed and allegorized in their appearance, less clear-cut than the way the sins and virtues are personified. This is not without a reason. They embody the unrestrained, rapacious, self-serving and cowardly aspect of humanity in the fitting context of the political assembly of Parliament, with an intent to be read polysemously. They can easily occupy both categories simultaneously, offering political commentary as much as a wider observation of humanity's urges influencing such a

supposedly elevated and clear-minded congregation. Reading the rodents this way speaks more of Langland's resentment towards the politicians than one or the other image would do on its own.

In this context, the proffered bribe to the cat (either the bell or the life of the other animals) does not create a positive, morally, spiritually, or economically corrective force in the process. The cat's rule of terror remains in place, and with the royal feline appeased, the rats can keep plundering the contents of the larder. There is no effort to "do better," to address the systemic unsustainability of the condition when the powerful of the Rat Parliament can simply bribe themselves out of their predicament. Here again, I would also argue that the Hunger episode can be strongly linked to the Rat Fable's story. Something similar occurs in the case of Hunger embodied in the Half-Acre. Piers finds himself in a position where morally corrective disciplinary actions are required to achieve the fundamental goal of the 'stationary pilgrimage' of the plowing of the Half-Acre. Epstein observes that there is a fundamental irony in the passus. 'Langland is trying to establish just relations and enforce moral social behaviour, in contradistinction to the commercial impetus of Lady Mede. Yet, he ends up, with the aid of Hunger, enforcing exactly what Mede does: the rupturing of bonds of mutual obligation, replacing community with contract' (p. 70). Thus, Lady Mede's presence signals a disruption of the "natural" social relations. Her introduction represents a locus of symbols, where natural social bonds, indeed such as mutual obligations, see themselves supplanted with the elusive morality of payout and profit. The Rat Fable, I argue, depicts a very similar procedure. The narrative proposed by the mouse replaces any need for morally corrective action or the restraints of disciplined, non-wasteful consumption of the rodent populus. The "payout," the compensation, however, remains morally and economically insufficient. It does not produce a moral surplus but takes away

from it something difficult to identify, subverting the natural bonds of humanity.

II. 4. 3. Mousy Policy, or the Makings of Rodent Ideology

Similarly to Kim, I would also argue that in the Rat Fable, the mouse's cold calculated mercantile approach divests any spiritual or moral principle from the ruling, disciplinary body. It presents a cold, calculating society based on nothing, and nothing *but* the arithmetic of hunger and consumption. The situation of the rats, who are not difficult to identify as the distant kin of Waster featured in the Hunger episode, is a perilous tight-rope act of remaining out of sight of the cat, yet close enough to the abundant bounty offered by the human court or household. The perilous balance enabling the rodents to plunder the pantry is explained by the rhetoric of scarcity deployed by the well-spoken mouse, emphasising the focus on scarcity and the problem with the infinite rodent capacity for population growth.

From this perspective, the other arguably most thorough observer of the Rat Fable alongside Kim, Elizaveta Strakhov, helps to further underline the biological aspect of the rats in relation to the unchecked consumption intertwining with the language of sustainability. While historical readings often focus on the cat as the allegorised representation of royalty, Strakhov's reading provides a perspective in line with Kim's. In her reading, the motif of unregulated consumption on both sides of the equation is the key to the interpretation. Strakhov's argument is that the cat is an opportunistic and cruel predator. 'The cat's consumption of the rodents is unregulated and unchecked, as the emphasis on the cat's capricious and unpredictable attacks on the rodents for the purposes of deadly play, rather than actual satisfaction of hunger, reveals' (Strakhov, *Political Animals*, p. 8). The sense of unregulated consumption and the reign of rapacity represents an existential crisis for the

rodents. It is, however, an equation with two sides. On one hand, the cat terrorizes them, its feeding is indiscriminate and unregulated in its nature. It is playful cruelty, not only predation for subsistence, and it is wasteful: the cat does not only consume the rodents for sustenance, but its feeding has a disturbing element of elusive enjoyment, a *jouissance*, which cannot be explained in material terms. One may argue that it is in the cat's nature to play with its prey. The outcome, as observed by the rodents, is cruelty intertwined with consumption.

Belling the cat does not represent a solution, however. It does not address the larger, systemic question of the future sustainability of rodent society. The core problem, as Strakhov describes it, 'namely, how to restore sustainability to an ecosystem headed by an insatiably rapacious predator, given that the hierarchical position of the predator is required by the ecosystem itself' (p. 8). The cat's rapacity, even though unregulated by polite rodent society, is the final equalizer balancing *their* consumption in the end. The following argument of the mouse further highlights Strakhov's approach underlining the issue of unsustainability. The eloquent mouse addresses the issues of this precarious balance.

For may no renk ther reste have for ratones by nyghte,

For many mannes malt we mees wolde destruye,

And also ye route of ratones rende mennes clothes

Nere the cat of the court that kan yow overlepe;

For hadde ye rattes youre wille, ye kouthe noight rule yowselve. (B. Prol. 197–201)

The words of the mouse orator are preceptive: left unchecked, in their unregulated hunger the rats would destroy the delicate balance enabling them to subsist. Without the cat, they would

overrun the abundant, yet finite resources of the larder. This is why the mouse proposes his argument, to leave everything to the status quo, but offers a soothing narrative to effectively supplement it. Strakhov offers a compelling interpretation of this strategy of the 'agents of unsustainability', as she dubs them (p. 9). Furthermore, there is an important observation in Strakhov's argument, which illuminates the mouse's proposal:

Through this reasoning does the mouse arrive to his final strategy, attempting to balance the different, competing sides of consumption. The mouse's suggested strategy, since the cat's rapaciousness itself cannot be changed, is simply to reorient it onto other targets — rabbits — that exist in some separate ecosystem; this solution deflects the inviolate natural impulses of the predatory cat without disturbing the hierarchical order of the ecosystem itself. (Strakhov, p. 8)

Through the formulation of the narrative, the status quo is strengthened, while also giving the illusion of an overarching plan wrapped in the truism of "every rat for itself". The mouse's strategy does not propose any actual change but offers what the rats really wish, for a comforting narrative to continue their rampant consumption and hope that the cat will not catch them. The material reality of the cat continuing to savage their ranks is secondary. The balancing act proposed by the mouse is callous in its formulation and unnerving in its seductive nature. Yet, I argue, it has more far-reaching resonances within the fable and the larger poem as well than the balance of the miniature ecosystem of the pantry. A modern contemporary eco-centric reading can similarly identify the problem with the discomfort originating in the speech of the orator: the artificial narrative of sustainability it produces in the face of both scarcity and abundance.

The figure of the cat, an embodiment of the predatory nature of the royal court in most interpretations, is a rapacious consumer of all manner of household animals for the

protection of the human household. It does not serve as a force that could be reasoned with (it does not offer any perspective of its own within the bounds of the fable) but is a looming presence of insatiable and incalculable appetite. It only leaves the rats alone when its appetite drives it towards other prey, giving the rodents a measure of respite. Yet, it is the very household the feline guards that they desire and cannot leave, for it represents material abundance: in the final arithmetic of survival safety from hunger proves more important than safety from the predator. The cat, however, is indiscriminate in its cruelty, representing a power without any seeming agenda besides its own urges driving it. Strakhov sees the cat as a representative of an ultimately unknowable, calculating power, who is a natural part of the pantry's abundance. The rats feel the danger represented by the feline presence particularly keenly because of their parasitic attitude to consumption. As Kim observes 'The rodents feel most at danger because they live and operate in close proximity to the royal household, not because the cat has a naturally vigilant sense of justice to punish only destructive and unproductive animals' (*The Politics of Consuming Worldly Goods*, p. 361). This moral indifference will render the cat perfect for the mouse's purposes, as shortly will be observed.

This proximity, however, is also emphasised by implementing Salisbury's classification of Isidore and Aquinas's division of animals into two categories: domesticated and useful property, and wild animals, consumers of one's property (*The Beast Within*, pp. 10-13, 51-3). The rats epitomise the latter category, being wasteful, unproductive, and unrestrained consumers of property. Kim's interpretation underlines the fundamental governing mechanism orienting rodent society and its perception of its own self in the face of the looming feline predator. 'Members of this community best understand bestial desire, and government is described as the perpetual tension and reciprocal relationship between two species of destructive animals' (*Politics*, p. 362). Natural interfaces with unnatural in the episode, and the proximity is problematic. As in the case of Sir Gowther sharing meals with

his canine companions, here the rodents share in their meal with the unwilling hosts of the humans upon whose larders they prey. Needless to emphasise, the spiritual value is much different in the context of the larder's raiders from Gowther's spiritual sharing of the food with the holy greyhound and the royal hounds alike. Joyce E. Salisbury's influential observation about sharing meals with rodents in the period further underlines the unease Langland's imagery of the rats infesting the pantry of the household communicates. The pollution of the rodent bodies and sharing in their consumption, even unwittingly, was enough to be sanctioned by the Church, even justifying penitence in the unwitting consumer's case (Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, p. 67 and Steel, *How to Make a Human*, p. 82-3). Although this penitence appeared to be less severe than in case of sharing food with dogs (which brought a one-year penance, similar to patricide in its length, while eating food nibbled by mouse brought only a one-day penance), it necessitated a penance regardless.

Most importantly, there is no discourse whatsoever about *the production* of foodstuff in the political program of the rodents. The line 'And leten hire laboure lost and al hire longe studie.' (B. P. 81) further underlines the irony: all their "laboure" is centred around the belling of the cat, and none around actual food production. The human realm of production and accumulation is far displaced from their mindset; inaccessible and mystical. Only the household and the pantry are the points of contact, which the rodents raid. The cat serves as an oppressive arm enforcing some unknowable order, that consumes the rodents in turn. These creatures, in their unproductive and destructive nature, are really in the same trade as Wastour in the Hunger episode and other conspicuous wasters frolicking carefree throughout the poem. The unrestrained, undisciplined bestial hunger running rampant remains their guiding principle, no matter in which shape they manifest themselves. The presence of the rodents is not only problematic because it exacerbates the scarcity present throughout the closed material economy of the poem. The imbalance they create is as much economical as it

is biological and spiritual; a characteristic of all wasters and gluttons throughout the poem taking more than their fair share, while refusing to contribute to production. Their attitude introduces the imbalance into the closed system of the poem: where they take more than they need others may suffer due to their needs being exacerbated.

There is also a dynamic of natural unnaturalness in the ways the consumed rationalise the behaviour of their silent consumer, attempting to create a morality within the system of predation that is simultaneously both natural and unnatural, and fundamentally unmoralizable. The natural component is comprised of the dynamics of predator and prey, one keeping the other in check and *vice versa*, while the unnatural component is the narrative the rodents are trying to conjure around it.

Finally, the mouse decides that the best bribe is indeed what the cat craves; the best payout is to assuage its hunger somehow. Their methods are similar to those of Wrong's, connecting them to Waster depicted in the Hunger episode yet again. The rodents try to address the results of their unsustainable, selfish consumption by shifting the responsibility, forming a narrative which may have a material result that is seemingly satisfying. As a consequence, this endeavour subverts the moral economy of the poem and produces nothing but waste in the process. It is not incidental that the proposition of the mouse is not community-forming (all prey together against the predator, all oppressed against the oppressor), but remains highly individualised: a sort of miniature *laissez-faire* consumerism.

The "policy of appeasement" the mouse orator wishes to propose aims to bribe its way out of being eaten by proffering others to be consumed: the policy of appeasement comes with the sacrifice of others, which the rodents are more than willing to make if they are allowed to keep on plundering the abundance of the pantry. The entire speech of the mouse revolves around this mockery of moralising politics, referring to the ones to be eaten as

“them”, finding the policy to be the “best” (214-5). Despite his conciliatory tone, the mouse is, of course, positioned outside of the material dynamics of being sacrificed for the appeasement of the cat. The orator in the C text, instead of bluntly pointing a claw at the targeted others, simply lapses into a moralising speech on the regrettable and fallen nature of all things (206) in an attempt to justify his proposal. The rhetorically deflective and moralising speech conveys nothing but the deliberate abstraction of the ruler’s person, sublimating the ruler into a metaphysical force far from the reach of consequences and responsibility for their decisions. Whether the cat is an allegorised sovereign or some sublime force of ecology or economy, this distance created remains an important attribute. In the proposed narrative the cruel predation of the cat is part of the paradigm, and there is little use in trying to do anything about it. The mouse creates patterns of meaning, as Piers will attempt in Passus 6, but the rodent orator is not concerned with “filial law” which startles Piers so in the Hunger episode, which humanises his efforts.

The cat cares little about the discourse. The fable focuses on the parliament of the rats, and their ideas on how to address the unrestrained predators of the feline fiend. Yet, the mouse's proposal is more destructive than it first seems. Like Sir Gowther's rapacity and Hunger's later rampage, it threatens to destabilize society on the fundamental level, not only counter-acting the cat's depredation but potentially exacerbating the situation while carrying the external appearance of sage advice. The mouse finishes his speech by first exonerating himself in a way rather resembling Henryson's fox, who will be discussed in the next chapter. The comparison is apt: both the sly predator and the squeaking orator place great importance on their rhetoric, especially when it comes to their own respective skins. The mouse proceeds to admonish the parliament and does so again in the language of sustainable consumption.

‘I seye for me’, quod the mous, ‘I se so muchel after,
 Shal nevere the cat ne the kiton by my counseil be greved,
 Ne carpynge of this coler that costed me nevere.
 And though it costned me catel, biknowen it I nolde;
 But suffren as hymself wolde [s]o doon as hym liketh —
 Coupled and uncoupled to cacehe what thei mowe.
 Forthi ech a wis wight I warne—wite wel his owene!’ (B.P.202-8)

The advice the mouse gives bears the air of insightful and restrictive economic advice, something akin to austerity on the surface. He himself exonerates himself in the language of mercantile exchange, referring to the plans of belling costing him his "catel", his own cattle, or capital. Needless to say, he does not participate in any kind of exchange Lady Mede would recognise, but she would regardless look favourably upon the mouse. The conciliatory tone of the rodent seems prudent enough at face value, very much in line with the broader brushstrokes of the spirit of 'measure'. Other characters occurring later in the poem, such as the Doctor, Hunger, and Gluttony propose similar measures, with the same inherent problem: their proposal is applicable to everyone, except themselves (St-Jacques, *Christus Medicus*, pp. 111-27).

Strakhov continues to underline the importance of the motif of consumption and the significance of the Rat Fable, although reading the rodents and the fable's role in a different light from Kim's. In Strakhov's somewhat more favourable interpretation, the rodents 'emerge as ineffectual leaders, but ones that are cognizant of their role in the hierarchical structure of their society, importantly self-aware of their limitations as a governing body, and

deeply concerned with maintaining balance in their world.’ This aspect is underlined by the mouse’s stern words of admonishment about the rodents plundering the pantry without restraint. Strakhov interprets that ‘rather than corrupt, as they have been read, the rodents can instead be seen as wise, if flawed arbiters of the social good’ (*Political Animals*, p.10). This interpretation is compelling for it allows the observance of a connection to Piers’s role in the Hunger episode (struggling to “do best” in the face of the suddenly occurring food shortage). This aspect becomes especially pronounced, considering Strakhov's strong emphasis on the connection between the two episodes.

This reading identifies the rodents as flawed, but respectable representatives of their constituents. ‘On the one hand, this formulation paints sovereigns in a wholly negative light, while elevating the commons as purveyors of masterful political insight’ (Strakhov, *Political Animals*, p.14). This attribute of the interpretation is difficult to debate: the mouse certainly is a skilled orator and a shrewd political operator in the context of the miniature parliament. In her continued argument, however, Strakhov identifies the rodents as authentically insightful in their process of self-reflection. ‘Although the rodents’ concerns over their treatment by the cat are justified, the rodents also importantly realize their own parasitic role in the ecosystem due to their own overly rapacious consumption that also needs curbing by a predator’ (p. 14).

Thus, the interpretation balances the cat's role in the mouse's narrative and comprises a criticism of the sovereign's power, while also positioning it as an economic stabilizing force necessitated by the way the rodents live and behave. The intercession of the representatives of the Parliament appears to be a strong insistence of Langland. Their political insight, despite Strakhov’s earlier acknowledgment, highlights their selfish greed. This attitude encapsulated in the interpretation ultimately seems to allow Langland to criticize and satirize ‘the functional dysfunction of the whole system of sovereigns and subjects, without introducing any revolutionary impulse’ (p. 14).

Strakhov's interpretation of the mouse's words remains compelling for many reasons and represents an iteration of the critical orthodoxy chiefly preoccupied with the strict historical interpretation of the fable, equating it to the Good Parliament. However, I would argue that Strakhov interprets the narrative *exactly* the way the mouse wishes to provide within the very frame of reference proposed by the orator. There are many signs, which point towards a wilful political manipulation, creating a consistent ideology on the mouse's part, which I wish to elaborate upon and explore whether the oration can be taken seriously, or whether there is something more politically sophisticated and self-serving behind the mouse's words.

In this again Kim's reading provides further help to negotiate the tensions in the mouse's speech. 'While the apparent purpose of the rat parliament is to stay alive, its discussion also points to the victims in this pragmatic scheme. The entire discussion of the rat parliament in the B-text is an illustration of Langland's criticism of gluttony as a destructive and predatory sin that causes others to suffer' (Kim, p. 362). The first signal is what Strakhov perceives as insightful, self-reflective honesty about the recognition of their own role in the miniature ecosystem of the pantry. The mouse's recognition of the parasitic consumption perpetuated by the rodents, however, is far from subversive. Or, rather, subversive in a very specific way, permitting a larger, more systemic subversion in the narrative it provides. The sympathy and compassion which the mouse's words induce in Strakhov's reading demonstrates the seductive nature of the seeming self-effacing nature of the narrative readily provided. The rodents are much less on the party of Piers, however much one may wish to see them as miniature quasi-plowmen after a fashion, striving to do "better in their predicament (as the mouse literally emphasises in line P. 191, 'For bettre is a litel los than a long sorwe'), explaining the balance of the transaction bribing the cat with the lives of the other inhabitants of the 'court'. The advice in the mouse's words is pragmatic, but its meaning

is simple: "Better them than us". I would argue that this attitude, which gives the impression of a self-aware, even cynical critical stance, is exactly what legitimises the mouse's narrative.

The theatrical gesture allows the mouse an aesthetical distance within the framework, a certain disavowal of their own, non-productive, parasitic nature, which in turn is the element of the narrative which enables them to continue these activities no less undisturbed than before. The cynical disavowal is another important identification characteristic of an ideological formulation in Žižek's thinking, which can be applied to the Rat Fable. In the end, there is no need to bell the cat and its kittens, for that would remove a crucial element of the narrative as well. The cat remains an essential instrument of the mouse's proposed plan.

The momentary dissolution carried in his self-reflective recognition, which Strakhov observes in such a favourable light, represents 'the fundamental gesture of post-structuralism [which] is to deconstruct every substantial identity, to denounce behind its solid consistency an interplay of symbolic overdetermination – briefly, to dissolve the substantial identity into a network of non-substantial, differential relations; the notion of symptom is the necessary counterpoint to it, the substance of enjoyment, the real kernel around which this signifying interplay is structured' (*Ideology*, p. 78). This mechanism becomes an especially powerful interest of Langland's, emphasising this ideological observation in the C-text. The formulation of the mouse's ideology offers a comforting, "imaginary" solution to a real, systemic problem, allowing the rodent subjects to maintain their sense of identity and coherence in the face of a problem which would require fundamental changes in their attitude towards consumption. Naturally, it is not in their nature to do so or would indeed require observing "measure" in ways inimical to their decidedly animal nature. The systemic change, however, is rendered unnecessary; the belling of the cat is argued to be futile by the mouse for several reasons. It also affords the rodents a comforting projection of the world they may inhabit, without a need to meaningfully engage with the problems caused by their rapacity.

There is no revolutionary impulse, as Strakhov observes because that is the last thing the mouse wishes; his program is meant to protect and perpetuate the status quo, where arguably the rodents are consuming more than their fair share of the pantry's abundance. They only require a mechanism to justify it, for they clearly neither wish to bell the cat, nor start to produce their own foodstuff.

The mouse's narrative achieves its goal of providing a comforting fictitious, fantasized framework without any material contribution to production whatsoever, very much resembling Hunger's bottomless rapacity or the wasters' cavalier attitude to contributing to food production (i.e. curtly refusing to do so). The dimension of self-reflective recognition is the kernel of factual truth allowing to sell the greater lie of the larger narrative the mouse creates, and the rodents readily accept. The cynically self-analytical position the mouse adopts, as if trying to argue from a naked, undisguised state, is embodied in the observation of the rodents' parasitic consumption. This, in turn, allows the attitude of not only passivity (deliberate non-action) but a very specific attitude to be developed, what Žižek calls interpassivity. This particular attitude is another recognition characteristic of an ideology.

While observing the political actions, the libidinal pleasure of the Parliament and the different plans to bell the cat, the rats are in turn free not to interact with the problem: their discussion and activity within the bounds of their discourse is the point, the actual belling of the cat is readily discarded at the mouse's suggestion. No single rodent wishes to argue against it, to engage in the dangerous behaviour, which in turn would also bring the uncomfortable proximity of the cat into mind (the ringing of the bell signalling the cat's approach would be an uncomfortable intrusion of the real on the created imaginary order). Just like the Greek choir in a classical tragedy whose function is to "feel" for the audience by proxy, the Parliament and the subsequent ideological narrative the mouse provides function as the objective status of belief in their permissive dimension. The rodents have had the

discussion, come up with ideas, and forged the bell and the collar, which in turn they readily discarded, and will eventually go along with the perpetuated pain and suffering represented by the cat's predatory presence. They do so because it allows them not only to avoid the uncomfortable confrontation with the systemic issue but also because they experience a strange enjoyment of all facets of the fiction, as Langland hints at in the C text in detail. All is done in the service of their parasitic, unrestrained hunger: they feel genuinely anxious, tremble and argue, thus fulfilling their duty to the rodent community which they supposedly represent. Yet, precisely as a result of all these processes, they remain free to plunder the abundance of the pantry. Objectively, they went through all the trouble to solve their situation. The reality, however, perpetuates their parasitic presence in the pantry.

The concept of interpassivity also finds itself intertwined with another characteristic of ideology, which refers to the idea that individuals often believe that someone else holds the genuine belief that they themselves lack. This particular externalization of belief helps sustain ideological structures because it creates a fiction of belief that supports the system even if no one fully believes in it. As we shall see in the third chapter, this tension between the surface appearance and actual morality will find strong resonance in Henryson's character of the fox as well, especially in the fable of 'The Fox and the Wolf'. In it, the fox *objectively* participates in the penitential dynamic and shows all the external signs of contrition, even if the function of repentance and fasting is displaced into the symbol of his lupine confessor. Naturally, the charade allows him to uphold the external appearances towards the governing Big Other, while internally planning to satisfy his hunger for meat in the most devious ways possible. Regardless of his following misdeeds, objectively the fox is penitent. Similar displacement can also be observed in the Rat Fable. Similarly to the fox, in the mouse's proposed policy, neither belief nor morality plays a part in the economy of the household and pantry. They are meant to either find a materially corrective measure to bell the cat or address

the spiritual-material problem of their own consumption. They do neither, for they objectively have been through all the trouble of preparing to bell the cat and now are free to listen to the sage advice discouraging them from doing so. The mouse's speech has one function, and it is to create a fantasy for the rodents to inhabit and to deal with the cruelty of the cat. This, one may argue, is the actual function of the mouse's narrative, misdirecting, fantasizing and utilizing ideology. Žižek's definition of this function appears applicable to the mouse's speech. 'The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel' (p. 45).

The recognition of their own parasitic nature expressed in their rapacious consumption, and the seeming contrition proffered by the mouse in the face of the larger systemic powers governing their world is exactly what *allows* him to formulate his subversive rhetoric. 'Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account, the particular interest behind the ideological universality, the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reason to retain the mask' (p.26). The mouse is a case in point. One may emphasise the mouse's ideal world does away entirely with the inherent self-sufficiency of communities, distracting any other connection aside from the crudely mercantile. His proposed programme has neither the place nor the need for actual plans for sustainability; the looming ecological collapse (on one side the overpopulation of rodent kind, on the other the cat and its offspring's predation) is someone else's problem, namely of the fawns and the hares, who are also prey animals, but who supposedly do not partake in the abundance of the pantry the way the rodents do. Instead of creating any sort of cohesive action plan, the seductive narrative postpones the need to address the issue of sustainability, while also giving free rein to every individual consumer's rapacity to run rampant. It finds its purpose in the permission to consume without any material restraint or discipline, for the lack of social responsibility frees the individual subject

to do as they please. If everyone is on their own in this rat-eat-rat world, then all actions and acquisitions, however immoral or wasteful, may be permissible. The world the mouse envisions is one where the benefits are mutual: the cat keeps their competitors in check, while also appeasing its own hunger and impulses for cruelty. In it, the individual subject is simultaneously infinitely responsible for its own consumption and is infinitely capable of unlimited consumption and reproduction. This paradoxical contradiction is a ready indicator of an ideology forming under the mouse's paw.

It is this aspect of the paradoxical duality of superficial solution and the systemic corruption created that Kim also emphasises. In her reading, she poignantly calls the mouse's idea of bribing the cat with the lives of other creatures the "policy of appeasement". The policy, 'in material terms (...) ultimately benefits and serves the interests of both the royal feline and his parliamentary partners in government, for one gains a steady source of income and sustenance and the other an environment of relative security in which to conduct their acquisitive, destructive business undisturbed' (p. 364). Thus, seemingly, peace of mind and a *carte blanche* are simultaneously obtained by the rodents by simply implementing the narrative that permits them to ultimately do as they please. No actual action needs to take place, no steps to assuage the underlying systemic problems caused by their selfish, non-productive overconsumption, or to deal with the discomfort of personal sacrifice of implementing an actually actionable plan in practice.

One may be surprised to find so many of Zizek's identification characteristics of ideology so readily applicable to the Rat Fable. However, a similar reading was identified by Epstein's interpretation of *Piers Plowman*, utilising the Austro-Hungarian economic critic, Karl Polanyi, makes similar observations about the economic realities of the poem. Epstein's interpretation is chiefly focused on the Hunger episode. Yet, I would argue, that the approach

can be similarly applied to the Rat Fable as well to great effect, allowing the already well-observed link to be further strengthened between it and the Hunger episode in Passus VI.

Polanyi describes in his most influential, titled *The Great Transformation*, the ways economic narratives are utilised. He observes the commodification of the three great items of commercial economy, which are, in fact, entirely natural in their original state. These are land, labour, and money, which are transformed from nature, natural productive behaviour, and token purchasing power of society, respectively. The self-serving economy encapsulated in the ideological framework the mouse creates enables uneven production and distribution, which is the point of the fable, and possibly Polanyi's argument as well. 'None of them is produced for sale. The commodity description of labour, land, and money is entirely fictitious' (Epstein, *Summoning Hunger*, p. 61). Naturally, Polanyi refers to the Marxist category of abstraction, which Epstein so perceptively applies to the poem's economy. The process of abstraction is key in the rodents' worldview as well, allowing them to observe their parasitically consuming nature, while also distancing themselves enough not to do anything about it. The abstraction of labour, commodities, value and consumption all become part of a fiction the mouse offers. By rendering them nebulous, inaccessible and quasi-fictitious the disembodied resources become easy to control by the narrator.

This process is described by Žižek in the ideological framework as the dimension of "the symbolic and the real", synthesising Marxist and Lacanian theory. Žižek's framework of ideology also fits into the model provided by Polanyi's *Great Transformation*: it marks a transitional state moving between the feudal networks characterising medieval societies towards the commodity-focused one. The feudal system, in Žižek's analysis, is one, where 'relations between people are mystified, mediated through a web of ideological beliefs, superstitions' (*Ideology*, p. 31). This, I would argue, is exactly what will be observed in the Hunger episode as well, where Piers is confronted with his own ideas governing his actions

surrounding the material realities of food production, distribution, and consumption, modulating these processes in turn: compassion, charity, filial law are suddenly rendered tangible in the face of starvation. In this, Piers can be perceived as a subject confronted with the cold utilitarianism governing his world, not the preconceived notions of love towards his fellow man. The movement towards a commodity-focused, capitalist society has profound effects on the subject's consciousness. Zizek's words may as well be describing the mouse's programme. 'Although in capitalism the subjects are emancipated, perceiving themselves as free from medieval religious superstitions when they deal with one another they do so as rational utilitarians, guided by only their selfish interests' (p. 31). I would argue that this liminal, transitory space is being observed by the Rat Fable. It represents a dissolution of the traditionally observed, quasi-mystical relation to the sovereign, and marks a movement towards the seemingly rational, utilitarian standpoint of acquisition for its own sake. Humans and cats are stripped of their factual realities and are transplanted into the framework of the narrative enabling the rodents to consume as they please.

In the process the narrative also creates the useful fiction of the other, further unravelling the fabric of a cohesive society in the face of hunger and consumption. The other animals the cat consumes may as well be similar rodents and small animals, but they are not to be included in the Parliament's discussion and plans, which are only for the rodents.

Similarly, the categories of the mouse's narrative do not translate into material reality, for he does not propose an actual plan of action: he only appears to do so. The household's abundance produced by the labour of humans is not there for the rodents to plunder, their power to callously sacrifice other animals for their gain is not theirs, and the natural food chain is not for their disposal to morally justify all these activities. When all these natural categories interface with the entirely artificial ideological narrative the mouse creates, the artifice of the narrative created by the mouse enables the divorce of production and

consumption. This eventually precipitates, wasteful consumption and the resulting moral imbalance, frustrates Langland and his narrative to no end and the poem at large stands testament to his many manifestations of frustration about the inequality depicted in the miniature politicking of the rodents. His profound anxiety about deserving and undeserving needy will gain a new spectrum of colours when Piers is forced to formulate a narrative of his own to create a functioning agricultural society on the Half-Acre, to create patterns of consumption in the face of the post-plague fragmentation of society. Thus, I would argue, from a literary economical perspective of the poem, what David Aers originally described as characteristic “perplexities”, can already be readily observed in the Rat Fable in their condensed form (*Justice and Wage-Labor after the Black Death*, pp. 169-90). These perplexities, oscillations, and all-around puzzlement will prominently characterise the episode of Hunger as well, but the uncertainty about the incongruous nature of labour, production, consumption, and distribution is already at the forefront of the poem. And one would be compelled to dismiss Langland's observations comfortably preserved in the amber of the period's literature, were they not describing the future, our present, with such unnerving accuracy.

In this system, the mouse's narrative also does something that it ostensibly intends to prevent. Its "everyone for themselves" attitude enables the unrestrained rapacious consumption it seemingly intended to discipline into a sustainable pattern. It serves as an unspoken permission for the rodents to enjoy the "fruits of their labour", the abundance of the pantry, by simply accepting the mouse's oration and the random decimation of their numbers by the cat. By focusing on the cat as an external corrective force it in turn discards with the necessity of an internal one. Through the proposed "policy" no restraint need be placed on the individual rodent consumer, for they are all responsible for their sustenance. The permissive dimension of the narrative is where its surplus value lies. In this proposed economic

ecosystem, the external force is already in place to keep the consumption of the rodents in check: hence the mouse's argument *against* the belling of the cat. Competitors, whether weaklings or too fat due to too much consumption in the larder, the cat will catch them, thus keeping the tenuous balance of the household. Thus, the royal predator is elevated to a status from an accountable and accessible creature to an entity without such compunctions. Whether one wishes to interpret the cat as an allegory of the royal court or some other ruling personage, in my reading, is only secondary. The point is the mechanism with which its status is elevated. The ferocious feline, however, has an even further, more sophisticated role to play in the proposed mouse narrative, and Langland emphasises this in his subsequent revision of the text.

II. 4. 4. The Feline Big Other, or Why do the rodents love the cat?

The cat has two important functions in the mouse's ideological model. Naturally, the cat appears to be a consumer of the rodents, an allegorised representation of royalty praying upon the members of the parliament in the well-observed historical reading of the fable. I, however, am compelled to view the cat and its kittens through the lens of the ideology the mouse intends to construct. This reading can be considered an iteration of the one Kim and Strakhov provide by synthesising Zizek's reading of Lacan.

Kim's reading identifies both sides of the equation, rodents and cats, as equally destructive non-producers driven by their rapacity. Their understanding is based on the language of consumption. Kim's reading identifies two main elements of the non-productive forces of the government operating in the Rat Fable and the ways they reveal the undisguised rapacity of the political reality the fable intends to portray. Firstly, the '[m]embers of this

community best understand bestial desire, and government is described as the perpetual tension and reciprocal relationship between two species of destructive animals.' Langland's indictment of the powerful would already be damning enough by this description, but Kim's reading elucidates on this element being only the surface of the program; their language reflecting on their plans and ideas accurately, betraying their true nature governed by insatiable hunger. Kim continues with the observation, that '[t]he government operates on the tenuous balance of two negative, destructive forces countering each other.' The conclusion the reading offers is sobering, where Kim synthesizes these two attributes. 'These negative elements are key to Langland's critique; these are predatory and unscrupulous animals locked in a conflict, their respective impulses to consume keeping the system in balance' (p. 362).

In Kim's model of the household's miniature economy, there is no place for a just or rational society predicated on the rule of either category, but a 'system of checks and balances between these forces.' Ultimately only humans are producers of foodstuff. The relationship between the animals inhabiting the proximity of the household is one characterised by depredation and wasteful, selfish consumption: a world the mouse envisions in his speech is already in place. It is a system predicated on the rule of bestial hunger and nothing else has a place in it. 'There is no intrinsic structure of legitimate civil authority to speak of; it is simply the relationship between a predator and its prey living in close proximity to each other. Often the relationship between these two seems merely a suspension of anarchy in the constant tension, anxiety, and fear of the destruction of life and property' (p. 362).

Kim's point demonstrates one of the main inflexion points in the reading provided by Strakhov.

The inherent moral ambiguity of the rodents' experience as non-productive, destructive creatures constantly victimized and exploited by a force greater than

themselves bespeaks Langland's resistance to any stereotyped or sentimental notion about the nature of social oppression and domination. Far from sympathizing with the cat, we learn that any moral justification for its existence lies in its negative function as a restraining force upon the destructive tendencies of the rodents themselves. (p. 362).

Kim here goes against Baldwin's more traditional interpretation, which emphasizes that the cat's function is ultimately justified by the presence and destructive consumption of the rodents. Furthermore, as Baldwin observes 'the royal feline is also described as a natural killer and ravenous carnivore with an appetite for all small animals, not just household pests' (p. 17). Predatory hunger is a constant material presence without moral substance in its natural state. Its interpretation is the question for the rodents. They do not congregate because the cat, as Kim describes it, 'has a naturally vigilant sense of justice to punish only destructive and unproductive animals.' (P. 154) The cat's depredations are far from logical or consistent in their manifestation. They are non-essential, for the real problem is its cruelty, scratching and biting the rodents. Thus, there is a need created in the rodents, which cannot be addressed through material means, a certain Lacanian lack necessitating the Parliament and a creation of a spiritual, intellectual framework, which enables them to intellectualize the traumatic dimension of the cat's cruelty. Kim continues:

Even though the speaker mouse moralizes that the cat may serve as an agent of justice with his suppression of the unruly, his agency is not consistent or programmatic, and the ravenous instinct to kill and consume, rather than the ideal of justice, guides his action. The rats and mice make various successive attempts to rationalize their power relations with the cats, in terms that are pragmatic, material, and even moral. (p. 362)

While Baldwin and Strakhov formulate sympathetic approaches towards the rodents for various reasons, one may argue similarly to Kim that such representation is far from Langland's intent. Anne Savage makes a similar point when she argues that the external imposition of discipline on consumption does not eradicate the cause of wasting because it ultimately cannot function as a mechanism of internal moral control, thus the cat's presence only fulfils an imaginary function in rodent society. Its depredations inhabiting the dimension of the real are nothing but manifestations of its hunger. Furthermore, Savage's point strongly connects the Rat Fable to Hunger's later disciplinary actions. '[A]s any kind of real moral force, food remains ineffective: wasters can, sometimes, be made to work, but not to reform inwardly' (pp. 214-7). Consequently, disciplining hunger's impulse through an external force also remains ultimately ineffective. This resistance can be observed in rodent society as well. Just like the wasters of Passus VI, the rodents are wasteful consumers, and they will remain so, regardless of the cat's decimation and all the process of trying to futilely intellectualize its reasons besides hunger.

The cat thus does not function properly as an external or morally corrective agent. Its effects are only material. However, in the C text, the mouse gives an important role for the cat to play, which in turn can reconcile its function, and neatly harmonise the ideological framework. In this, my ideological reading relies on Kim's comparative analysis of the disparity between the B and C versions of texts dealing with the Rat Fable. The later iteration of the C version signals Langland's preoccupation with the cat's role in the proposed system. Kim observes the shifting focus of the mouse's speech given in the C text, which in my reading draws attention to the cat's function as the Lacanian Big Other.

In an effort to do so, the mouse in the C text gives a longer speech than in the B text, indicating Langland's preoccupation with the matter, needing to further flesh out the fable. In the C text, the mouse de-emphasises the formerly discussed bribery aspect of his program and

instead focuses on suffering and the victimhood of rodent kind. ('soffre and sey nougt, and so is pe beste I / Til pat meschief amende hem pat many man chasteth' (C. P. 214-15)). While the approach provided by Baldwin and Strakhov would take the words of the mouse as a further call for sympathy, Kim perceives the words as part of the deliberate ideological formulation.

Not only is he suggesting that quietism will work in favour of the rodents in the long run, but in the C-text he states that it is a morally purifying experience for "hem," those individuals who suffer and eventually learn from misfortune.

Instead of saying bluntly that they should allow the aggressor to target and sacrifice individuals for the maintenance of general peace (B. P. 206), the speaker in C presents the fallen nature of things as a moral basis for putting up with evil.

His speech is made in a self-righteous tone that nonetheless seeks to conceal undercurrents of self-interestedness; it moralizes on the suffering of others. (pp. 365-6)

Naturally, the "hem" does not include the mouse himself, but the quiet suffering purifies the subject in his worldview, making them chaste, and being all around "pe beste". Here, again, the mouse is not a miniature proxy to Piers, trying to do "the best", but someone who readily ventriloquizes the moralizing narrative to satisfy his parasitic hunger for the abundance of the household.

As a final point, the cat's role can finally be identified as the Big Other in the emergent rodent ideology counterbalancing their need to understand their traumatic predicament. Jacques Lacan's concept of the Big Other is especially useful to orient the cat's role in the ideological formulation. The concept of the Big Other [*l'Autre*] refers to the symbolic authority of language, societal norms, and laws that shape an individual's identity

and desires. It is not a person but a structure within the Symbolic order that provides a framework of rules, expectations, and meanings. Acting as an ever-present “gaze,” the Big Other influences how the subjects perceive themselves and others, dictating what is socially acceptable or forbidden. Though it symbolizes an ultimate authority through its perception as an all-knowing entity, Lacan argues this is an illusion—the Big Other is not all-knowing, revealing the incompleteness and limitations of societal structures (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*). Viewed from such a perspective, the cat serves less as an actual predatory animal, but through the mouse’s speech it becomes an instrumental part of the mouse’s permissive ideological formulation. Its purposes in it are both varied, but in the case of the mouse’s programme, it functions as the main driving force.

In this relation, as Kim emphasises, ultimately two non-producing consumers face one another. The Big Other is a complex symbol, existing in different stages, which are observable in the fable and are applicable to the cat. Firstly, the cat manifests as a divine ordering agent; ultimately unknowable, yet powerful. Applying the above-described criteria, the cat corresponds with the different aspects of the Big Other. It represents the social framework as well within which one may construct their identity, for which one upholds appearances and observes prohibitions to satisfy the stabilising agency. This attribute can also be applied to the Big Other, for the rodents need to observe certain behaviour patterns (such as coming out at night, remaining inconspicuous, and so on) to satisfy the powerful Big Other. Here, I would argue, that Zizek's final stage of discussion about the symbol is the most pertinent, and one that Langland tries to formulate in his own cultural context. In this, final stage of the big other it signals an ultimate critique of ideology itself in the state of utmost despair: what if there is no real Big Other? This does not mean that there is no actual big other in the context of the fable: the cat exists, and it poses a real problem. What if materially there is nothing else behind the symbol, but the virtual state of projection to which a state of

quasi-divinity is ascribed, similarly to the figure of the monarch? The cat's nearly divine status as the mortifying agent of the unworthy fallen rodent kind in the C text is consistent with such an approach, and it corresponds with the readings of Kim and Strakhov as well. The feline Big Other is readily moralised by the rodents, invested with sophisticated symbols and signifiers (bell and collar, divine agency, a signifier of a fallen world, and so on) in order to somehow intellectualise its material state: its unrestrained rapacity decimating the rodents. This is, on the level of materiality, nothing else but hunger manifest, the natural order of the food chain asserting itself, the predator consuming the prey. However, the mouse's ideology is a performance of purposefulness, which in turn invests the cat with a quasi-divine purpose as well, which can be reproduced indefinitely. This, in turn, allows them to inhabit this ideological reality, and continue their ventriloquising of virtues, while the obscene, permissive element of their miniature ideology allows them to continue to consume the abundance of the pantry. One may read this recognition encapsulated in Langland's fable, positioned so poignantly in the Prologue at the beginning of the sweeping poem, as the most daring and most subversive social criticism, an ultimate critique of the quasi-mystical power with which actors and positions in the government are invested, which has materially nothing behind the fantasy, but rapacity.

Zizek's words allow further integration of the concept, where the third period of the Big Other is associated with criticism similar to what is encapsulated in the rodents.

In the third period, we have the big Other, the symbolic order, with a traumatic element at its very heart; and in Lacanian theory, the fantasy is conceived as a construction allowing the subject to come to terms with this traumatic kernel. At this level, the final moment of the analysis is defined as 'going through the fantasy [*la traversée du fantasme*]': not its symbolic interpretation but the experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, is

merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing 'behind' the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this 'nothing' – that is, the lack in the Other. (*Ideology*, pp. 148)

The mouse's narrative attempts to utilize the cat but its final function for Langland is to demonstrate the impotence of such an external force in the face of impulses such as greed and wasteful consumption manifested in the rodents; bestial hunger undisciplined in its purest state attempting to find justification in the edifices of society meant to control such impulses. The mouse is ultimately ready to sacrifice the "little others", his fellow rodents of the household, for a seemingly restrictive and sustainable society predicated on the principles of austerity, which at its core permits him and his fellow rodents to continue their wasteful, unsustainable consumption *ad infinitum*.

Further applying Zizek's ideological terminology to Kim's reading of the Rat Fable, one may observe these dynamics in conjunction. By implementing the cat as the ultimately unknowable Big Other, the Rat Fable allows the rodents to enter the ideological state of mind, which allows them to consume in an unrestrained manner, while also allowing them to feel morally purified in the process through their decentralized suffering. The Marxist-Lacanian denial, the impulse to 'renounce enjoyment, sacrifice yourself and do not ask about the meaning of it' fits into the model, which explains that 'the value of the sacrifice lies in its very meaninglessness; true sacrifice is its end; you must find positive fulfilment in the sacrifice itself, not in its instrumental value: it is the renunciation, this giving up of enjoyment itself, which produces a certain surplus-enjoyment' (p. 89). This pathological state, predicated on the idea of sacrifice for its own sake, is 'the spirit of sacrifice', which can indefinitely perpetuate the ideological functioning of their society. In this system their suffering is internalized through interpassivity: the rodents themselves need not discipline or limit their rapacity, for the cat already fulfils this function for them, one way or another. Its

instrumentality lies in its function to perform the actions it can reliably, dependably do: to simply consume, to give in for unrestrained bestial hunger. The mouse's narrative simply provides a permissive framework for this natural function, within which these elements fit neatly together. The surplus enjoyment, something that cannot be materially located in the mouse's ideology, is the moral purification performed by the rodents as a community. Yet, his policy is anything but community-forming. It advertises individual consumption and disciplining it is not only senseless but would take away an important element of the ideology. The predator's objective function becomes obfuscated, and inaccessible for the rodents to accurately observe; thus, it is easy to implement into a fictitious system. Kim's reading of the dynamic provides an explanation. 'Individuals of certain power and status are not morally accountable to their community for their actions in such a scheme of things. Moralizing on such a senseless condition of oppression turns the ruler into a metaphysical agent who is beyond any communication or dialogue with the people' (p. 366). The cat only communicates through violence, through the medium of predatory hunger which is understandable for the rodents. It is a system which neatly implements the otherwise amoral agent of the cat. Moralizing the cat's rapacity is not simply senseless but prevents any further prospective attempts at belling it or its offspring in the future. 'Moralizing on such a senseless condition of oppression turns the ruler into a metaphysical agent who is beyond any communication or dialogue with the people' (p. 366). With this, the process of sublimation is complete for the cat. The need to discipline it in any way is entirely futile, for it is elevated to an inescapable force of nature, an agent of divine judgment.

Thus, the mouse's words can be further recognised as an ideology linked to the governance of bestial hunger. It has the important element of objective admission, the permissive dimension of "everyone for themselves" as if to say consume and enjoy to your heart's content, and the external force preventing the unlimited fulfilment of the rapacious

impulse. The cat's preventative, quasi-governance is what enables the Lacanian *jouissance* of the ideological attitude to function properly. This way the mouse's policy does not offer an escape but quite the opposite. Its primary function is not to distance the rodents from their reality, but to offer a social experience of reality as an escape. Its final function can be identified as a mechanism which has very little actual action plan, sustainability, or securing any sort of future for the rodents. It is not even the creation of rhetorical opposition. Its primary function is to provide the *jouissance* in the suffering, to create a social reality that the rodent society can inhabit indefinitely while needing not to engage with addressing any meaningful change taking place in material reality to ensure sustainability. Their suffering ensures this surplus enjoyment, not the by-product, but the actual product of the system. Thus, the rodents are indeed producers, but what they produce (their *jouissance*) is materially worthless, and ultimately meaningless outside the context of their miniature society, and their consumption produces nothing but waste.

And their future holds more of the same, for the mouse's narrative ensures that too. In this context, Zizek emphasizes the role of trauma and repetition in ideology, which one may apply to the Rat Fable's proposed rodent society as well. In Zizek's argument, ideological structures revolve around the repetition of traumatic events or fantasies that cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic order, thus (ironically) resulting in an excess, an emotional surplus which can be utilized in turn. This repetition serves to reinforce ideological narratives and maintain their hold on individual subjects as well. One may envision a future for the miniature society, where the political advice of the well-spoken mouse becomes the governing principle of the household's rodent. The cat and its offspring will keep devouring them for they will keep plundering the pantry. The repetition of the trauma ultimately, ironically ensures the sustainability of the mouse's proposed program in the future. The status quo can endure while the household's riches can be plundered and the cat keeps decimating

the rodent population, keeping it in check and providing the narrative of divine judgement and suffering where there is objectively nothing but predatory hunger. It achieves sustainability in the worst possible way, ensuring the non-productive double-negative system flourishes: the cat and its future kittens so perceptively implemented in the mouse's oratory can brutalize the rodent population at their leisure, ensuring the trauma of brutality to not only be enshrined in the narrative framework but to be repeated with surety as well. The *jouissance* found in suffering and the displaced locus of moral accountability combined with the interpassivity of behaviour renders the ideology proof against any further subversion. After all, it permits the rodents to keep consuming to their hearts' content. Through this, the sustainability of the unsustainable system is achieved. Thus, the fable functions not only as an exploration of ideology but also as an ultimate criticism of it as well.

The scene dissolves into a flurry of activity as the mouse finishes his speech and Langland, similarly to Henryson's final lines in his Fables, implores the reader to make whatever they may of the Rat Fable. (P. 209-10) As the fable ends hundreds of barristers-at-laws in silken coifs enter and start uproariously arguing about some matter. The scene is reminiscent of the dystopian comedy, *Brazil's* (1985) depiction of the *jouissance*-producing, yet ultimately unproductive bustle of bureaucratic activity: much ado about nothing indeed. Ultimately, the process *is* the goal, and one may be compelled to recognize a further critique of ideology already started in the Rat Fable. Such pointless, and unproductive activity is not unique to the Rat Fable either, for the Half-Acre's recalcitrant workers will be characterised by a similar, ferocious busyness after Hunger's disciplinary attack on them. The result is very much the same, the *appearance* of productivity.

In the closing lines of the Prologue, the scene further dissolves into a general hubbub of activity as bakers and brewers go about their business (P. 231). Langland, similarly to Chaucer's scathing critique of the Cook's character, focuses on the sellers of hot pies and

roasts: the tantalizing foodstuff purveyed by unsavoury characters remains a thematic element of the poem.

The Rat Fable critiques the excessive consumption and moral failings of the powerful, depicting them as rapacious, ravenous animals. This concise, yet telltale metaphor aligns with a medieval tradition where the powerful are likened to predators and the humble to prey. Whether Langland genuinely views the powerful as naturally predatory or employs the metaphor for rhetorical purposes remains a contested point in criticism. Regardless, his critique does not extend to proposing a dismantling of the political hierarchy, which means class distinctions, especially those relating to sinful consumption, persist within his work. As the later Hunger episode will demonstrate, he remains uneasy about any proposed changes, no matter how flawed the outcome of the interaction between Christian charitable impulse and mercantile proto-capitalism proves to be.

Langland's central concern remains poverty and its link to the suffering of the needy, both in body and soul. He argues that excessive consumption by the rich exacerbates this suffering, making the reduction of material waste and excess a direct means of alleviating poverty. In Langland's view, different social classes have different responsibilities based on their positions. The rich, having more power, are thus seen as having a greater responsibility to help the poor. Langland addresses his plea primarily to the rich and powerful, urging them to cut back on their excesses and give to the needy. Their actions, he suggests, would positively impact not only their households but also those socially below them.

Zizek's identification characteristics for the formulation of an ideology all find a place in the narrative. The creation of the permissible narrative permits unrestrained consumption for those who participate. It not only allows consumption, but it affirms their position as morally superior through the implementation of the inaccessible, ultimately unknowable great

other. The system is not only functional on its own, but also offers proof for the future; the jouissance of moral purification coupled with unrestrained consumption is ensured by feeding the cat and its future kittens. Viewed through the lens Zizek provides, the Rat Fable depicts ideology in its purest state, compressed and simplified, yet completely intact and allowed to be observed through the motif of unrestrained bestial hunger.

What the mouse's narrative achieves is not a society predicated on sustainability, a disciplined, moral, or measured attitude towards consumption and charity. In this ideal world one may take as they please, and let the cat take the rest.

II. 5. The Hunger Episode on the Half-Acre

II. 5. 1. Introduction

The second part of the chapter discussing *Piers Plowman* will discuss Passus VI, which features Piers aiming to establish an agricultural utopia as a stationary pilgrimage in search of Truth. The Passus starts out with high hopes for an agrarian utopia predicated on fairness and morally meritorious labour, an antithesis of the Rat Fable's selfish, parasitic wastefulness. It, however, becomes a contested ground as the harsh physical realities intrude on Piers's plans to establish his Half-Acre. Hunger's multitude of allegorical interpretations has long been the subject of critical debate. The spiritual aspect of hunger and thirst has been mostly observed through 'the lack of spiritual food in forgetfulness of the creator' (Robertson and Huppé, p. 84).

Recently, however, criticism has shifted towards the immediate, physical effects of Hunger and its effects on the miniature society of the Half-Acre. In this sub-chapter, I will endeavour to explore the ways these harsh, physical realities interact with Hunger's disciplinary aspect. Kathleen Hewett-Smith's argument, which marked a critical shift away from the predominantly allegorical readings, posits 'that the physical immediacy of this passage does not allow allegorical abstraction— indeed, that its very point is the success with which dire material conditions can, and perhaps in this case should, overshadow spiritual "compulsion"' (*Allegory on the Half-Acre*, p. 11). This inexorable material driving force sees itself represented through the image of Hunger personified, creating what Rhodes designates as a 'visible agent for a complex social process, and reveals how the personification of material forces can make bodies politically legible' (*Personification*, p. 106). Thus, the

different personifications, as such agents rendering complex dynamics and processes visible, provide a basis for observation when hungry bodies become the battleground upon which intimate vulnerabilities of human bodies and inexorable social processes clash.

II. 5. 2. Piers, the Plowman

Before Hunger is observed in detail, it is useful to briefly describe the one whose bidding the brutal enforcer will do throughout the Passus. Piers, the eponymous plowman of the poem, who is a character with many facets. He is the everyman, but he is also a righteous servant, the bailiff of Truth, and the Christian subject struggling to do best, regardless of the opposing circumstances presenting themselves time and again. The first encounter with him sees the character quietly emerge from the background of the poem, made flesh, as it were. Katherine Breen draws critical attention to this emergence. 'We encounter Piers, however, some forty years after Truth first set him to plowing— or, as Piers puts it in the C text, "as for the plough a potte me to lerne" (C.VII.191). There may be a sense in which Piers has been ploughing quietly in the background, unnoticed by the dreamer, throughout the poem's opening passus' (*Machines of the Mind*, p. 296). The sense that Piers exists in the world of the poem, quietly applying and learning his trade even before he is described and is given substance within the poem, gives the impression that he is already observing the occurrences of the Prologue, the field full of folk.

Somme putten hem to þe plouȝ, pleiden ful selde,

In settinge and sowynge swonken ful harde,

And wonnen þat þise wastours wiþ glotonye destruyeþ.

And somme putten hem to pride, apparailed hem þerafter,

In contenance of cloþyng comen disgised. (B. P. 20-24)

The expression Breen emphasises is one often remarked on in the Prologue. The idiom clearly differentiating between wasteful consumers and producers, unrepentant and repentant sinners. As Breen explains, 'The phrase "putten hem to þe plouȝ" also resembles the Middle English idiom "putten honde to the plough," and so functions paradigmatically as well as literally. That is to say, it refers to undertaking a task in general as well as to the beginning of agricultural labour in particular' (p. 278). The demarcation between the two groups speaks of Langland's fundamental categorisation of producers and consumers, those of the plough, and those of pride. The first category is characterised by their operation of the plough, sweating, sowing, and gathering ("wonnen", the direct opposite of wasting) what the wasters would otherwise squander. (Kim, *The Politics of Consuming*, pp. 352-3). They are the people of active production and measured consumption. The second, colourful group is very much the opposite in every regard.

Piers is most certainly the most prominent of the first group, emblematically operating the spiritual and literal agricultural machinery of the poem. In the C version of the poem, Piers describes how he was taught to plow, forty years after Truth first instructed him to do so. As Langland puts it, "as for the plouh a potte me to lerne" (C.7.191) The two activities are inseparably interconnected in the process of Piers's education as work, and work as education. This makes it possible for Piers to designate working the Half-Acre in Passus VI as a stationary pilgrimage and the colourful folk follow his guidance gladly. Hewett-Smith

calls it 'Piers's social covenant [that] is based upon the notion that work is necessary to both social and spiritual salvation' (*Allegory*, p. 6).

His moving and determined conviction befits the character, who embodies what Jill Mann calls the "work ethos" of the poem, from which Langland starts to gradually move away after the Hunger episode in Passus VI (*Nature of Need*, p. 24). Margaret Kim posits that however lofty the aspirations are of the labour undertaken, the net sum, the end result of the production of foodstuff is not inherently positive on its own. Contrasted with the Rat Fable, where the frantic activity of the Parliament cannot counter-balance the wasteful consumption of the rodents, Piers also embodies the problem of production as well, namely that it does not *automatically* create a moral framework.

In contrast to his discourse of waste, Langland's understanding of production is not primarily moral. While wasting is inimical to the well-being of the human community, the concept of productiveness is never praised intrinsically. The character Piers Plowman is an example of Langland's celebration of morally meritorious labour, but labour is not inherently meritorious. (Kim, *The Politics of Consuming*, p. 351)

Piers, however, is one to see the work, in light of his experience serving Truth, as an activity which can lead some way to salvation. He finds himself in a peculiar position at the end of Passus V. Due to his experience, he is a uniquely qualified leader to distribute labour among the prospective pilgrims wishing to seek Truth. Kathleen Hewett-Smith perceptively observed the interconnected nature of agricultural work and spiritual cleansing in the Passus. 'The theme of the passus is labour, and Piers's social covenant is based upon the notion that work is necessary to both social and spiritual salvation' (p. 6).

II. 5. 3. The Economy of the Half-Acre

Surveying all the wastefulness and obscene pleasure found in it, it is not difficult to see that there is hopefulness in the way Passus V ends and VI begins. After the animated back and forth of the fifth Passus, the beginning of Passus VI provides a tabula rasa for a miniature society to establish itself and prosper. It follows a Passus in which much has happened, Sins, such as Gluttony saw themselves personified. Even tales, such as Robin Hood are mentioned (V. 396). Against the backdrop of such carnivalesque activity, Piers emerges, setting a goal: to lead the people, the impromptu pilgrims, to his former master, Truth. After the establishing line of the sixth Passus, in which there is much complaint about the harshness of the journey, Piers stops and thinks, surveying the land that Rebecca Davis describes as ‘set at the crossroads of allegory and history’, an ‘image of the best that society can be, a field of plenty tilled by communal labour’ (*Books of Nature*, p. 183). The plenty’s production and fair distribution is the foremost concern of Piers, who is suddenly reminded that he has a half-acre at his disposal, which can simultaneously serve as a source of sustenance and a valuable pedagogical tool.

Quod Perkyn the Plowman, ‘By Seint Peter of Rome!

I have an half acre to erie by the heighe weye;

Hadde I erylid this half acre and sowen it after,

I wolde wende with yow and the wey teche.’(VI. 3-6)

The connection between agricultural work and the discipline of the self becomes clear as the *Passus* progresses. Kathleen Hewett-Smith observes the upcoming stationary pilgrimage's spiritual economy, when writing:

Piers sees the working of the field as a necessary precondition of the spiritual journey to Truth. (...) Having already witnessed the failure of the pilgrimage brought on by human ineptitude and greed, Piers seems to realize that one must attend first to the moral requirements of life in the world, rather than evading those responsibilities in the name of some illusory spiritual practice. (p. 4)

Thus, ethical and spiritual priorities firmly in place, the stationary pilgrimage awaits the colourful folk gathered around Piers.

Helen Barr, in similar vein, makes the argument that at this establishing moment, Piers sublimates the familiar labour to the activity of pilgrimage, not unlike the way in which gluttony and wasteful consumption are sublimated for broader issues of the discipline of the self (pp. 20-1). Piers's plan is strongly supported not only by Truth's teachings but also by scriptural motifs, which strongly resonate within the *Passus*. Hewett-Smith emphasises that the honest work of agricultural labour, especially the plowing of the Half-Acre gestures towards Isaiah 2:4, which also echo in the Knight's words of praise about Piers: "And they shall turn their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into sickles" (p. 5). The activity of plowing is both literal in its way of emphasising one's biological, material needs, and it also functions allegorically, gesturing to spiritual needs. The unity of allegory created through the close and inseparable proximation of the two, food production and salvation, serves as a delicate balancing act in an attempt to create a society nourished both physically and spiritually. This becomes clear when Piers is asked about what the ladies should do, "What

sholde we wommen werche the while?’ (VI. 8). Piers answers, outlining his most important points first.

And ye lovely ladies with youre longe fyngres,

That ye have silk and sandel to sowe whan tyme is

Chesibles for chapeleyns chirches to honoure.

Wyves and widewes, wolle and flex spynneth:

Maketh cloth, I counseille yow, and kenneth so youre doughtres.

The nedy and the naked, nymeth hede how thei liggeth,

And casteth hem clothes, for so comaundeth Truthe.

For I shal lenen hem liflode, but if the lond faille,

As longe as I lyve, for the Lordes love of hevene. (VI. 10-18)

Despite the hopefulness present in the way the sixth Passus starts, one can detect the sinister undertone in the way Piers sets out to the task. As Robert Worth Frank points out in his influential work *The Hungry Gap*, the scene might be of some puzzlement to the modern reader (p. 87). Piers vows an oath, stating: ‘For I shal lenen hem liflode, but if the lond faille’ (VI.17). For the reader of the late Middle Ages the lines resonate with dread and unease. All versions of *Piers Plowman*, despite their revisions, do contain the powerful line, as cascading crop failure resulting in agricultural collapse loomed large even in Langland's lifetime. Famine, the direct consequence of such collapse, both divides and unites communities. It refocuses both individualism and neighbourly compassion, sharpening the contrast between

morality and harsh necessity in the process. Survival of hunger in such a situation becomes an immediate concern, and compassion becomes a precious commodity, exposing the fault lines of any society.

Piers's seemingly throwaway line about crop failure and the humble hope encapsulated in the caveat becomes a dreadful portent of the violence and horror to come with the potential to unravel the very fabric of society and meaning. Frank's discussion of the topic highlights how the periodical return of famine, the phenomenon exacerbated by further factors in the period surrounding the poem, was a significant part of the human experience among all strata of European society of the time. Piers' ominous line foreshadows the events to come, and the character of hunger embodied that is soon to be introduced. Frank is adamant, that '[t]he [initial] details do not suggest famine' (p. 90). There is hope for the Half-Acre to be operated properly and allow subsistence for all the prospective stationary pilgrims working it, just like the utopian society of the barn of Unity in Passus XIX, which is simultaneously a symbolically charged building comprised of timbers of the cross and an actual barn. Both layers of the allegory emphasise the spiritual importance of agricultural labour, literally and otherwise (Rudd, *Greenery*, p. 200). The practically-minded plowman wastes no time in tasking the ladies with the less strenuous work.

The first order of business is to tend to the "nedy", and clothe them, in accordance with Truth's commandment. Truth, as Piers's teacher, instils these priorities in the plowman, for the needy must be tended to. The tone of Piers's speech is determined as his tasks start to take shape. As the Passus progresses, the allegorical vigour of the poem somewhat abates, as Piers himself sees the land as less of an allegorical representation, than a literal piece of land to be cultivated. A narrowing of focus takes place in Langland's narrative perception, focusing on the importance of the labour to be undertaken. The land is to be worked, and the people in need are to be the ones working it, furnishing the food *in fairness*. The economy of

the Half-Acre is predicated not only on the morally corrective agricultural work but on the equal exchange governed by it as well. The lines offer direction into prominent avenues of discourse, encompassing morality, modes of representation, and economy, all interconnected in this guiding principle. As noted by Epstein, '[f]ollowing Aquinas and scholastic ethical philosophy, Langland uses the language of "just prys" for commodities, and for labour, "measurable hire," or commensurate wages. As Conscience counsels [earlier], measurable hire "is no mede but a mercede, a manere dewe dette" (III.305)' (Epstein, p. 68). Naturally, determining the fair price is an entirely different question, resting on a free market devoid of manipulative actors. The "just prys" paid, not unlike the "fairness" with which the foodstuff must be produced, is not an abstraction, but a morally loaded category standing in opposition to wasteful consumption depicted by the Rat Fable and the many other wasters of the poem, a market reliant on bribery (represented by the character of Lady Mede), or the ilk of Waster acting as disruptive elements in opposition to this allegoric economy. The emphasis of the Prologue rests on the health of this economy, which is propelled by the dynamic between the labourer and his just reward for the work.

The agricultural work undertaken by Piers and his followers gestures towards the passage of Genesis 3:17-19, when God speaks to Adam and Eve directly after the Fall, proclaiming the ground cursed, bringing forth thistles and thorns and which Adam and his descendants are condemned to work with the sweat of their brow. Piers, by imitating Adam's role in his aspect of an agricultural worker aims to create a society from his fundamental understanding of humanity's role as ordained by the Old Testament.

Thus, to participate in the agricultural labour of the Half-Acre is to be part of the covenant and to refuse it is to be declaring one outside these dynamics, refusing to admit the effects of divine judgement. Thus, the work focused on food production is equally essential in its material and spiritual function. The Middle English expression of the Prologue, "putten

honde to the plough” and Langland’s “putten hem to þe plouȝ” resonate with Christ’s harsh words to the somewhat recalcitrant followers of his in Luke 9:62. Luke, Chapter 9 aligns strongly with the Half-Acre’s thematic elements, positioning Piers as a figure wishing to imitate Christ but facing the harsh material realities in the process. The scriptural chapter is chiefly concerned with Christ’s aspect as a provider of foodstuffs, leader, visionary, organiser of labour, and his journey to Jerusalem. In the chapter Christ feeds the five thousand (Luke 9:10-17), not unlike Piers attempting to feed his followers on the Half-Acre. However, the plowman receives no divine help in the process, needing to resort to different methods to feed his own disciples-turned-workers. In the closing line of the chapter Christ proclaims: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Plowing in this parable is a strong allusion to diligently working towards salvation in the service of God, without looking back at the distractions of earthly concerns. Katherine Breen further expands on the significance of the plow as not only an essential instrument of food production but as a virtual disciplinary machinery whose operation differentiates between the people of the plow and the people of pride, as the Prologue demarcates the field full of folk.

Yet the parable also equates plowing with spiritual cultivation, comparing the hard labour of following the plow to the hard labour of the journey to Jerusalem. The *Glossa Ordinaria* describes the plow of Luke 9:62 as an “instrumento compunctionis,” an instrument of penance whose wood and iron resemble those of the cross, and which the disciple should use to break down his own hardened heart so that it will bear good fruit. Even as it looks back to Genesis, via a typological connection to the moment when Adam first takes up the plow, this passage also looks forward to the passion that, at this moment in Luke, Jesus foresees but has not yet fulfilled. With this biblical allusion as its starting point,

Langland's poem becomes a loose reenactment of the travel narrative in Luke.

(*Machines of the Mind*, p. 280)

Thus, plowing and the plowman serves as a motif strongly interconnected both with the postlapsarian fate of Adam taking up the plow, and the final passion of Christ on the cross. From this perspective, Piers labours to imitate Adam and Christ, and Langland imitates them all by undertaking his poetic project. He follows the intellectual furrows, Passus by Passus, trying to work out the problem of how to do best through his proxy of the diligent plowman. The imagery of the harvest is a prominent one in the period, having the scriptural connotation of the Last Judgement. Chapter XIII of Matthew consists of two parables centred around sowing and reaping, seeds falling on different soils and the necessity to understand the parable's meaning of salvation. The parables and their imagery are very much applicable to Piers, who sows the seeds and who *equally* needs to understand the larger meaning of his labour. In the second parable, the Son of Man sows good seeds in the field, but while everyone is asleep his enemy, the devil sows the seed of evil. Finally, the harvesters are angels of judgement (Matthew 13:39) (Hewett-Smith, *Allegory on the Half-Acre*, p. 7).

Herein lies the Half-Acre, positioned just right for Piers to apply his trade and synthesise his different aspects in the process, both he and Langland becoming new links in the chain. It is not surprising that Piers sees sowing as an extremely important activity connecting the spiritual with the corporal, while later the sight of wasters sleeping in the shade makes him furious.

Despite the heady scriptural connotations, Piers remains a practical thinker educated by his long service to Truth. As the Passus progresses, Piers tasks the Knight to keep the Half-Acre safe and gets to work himself. With admirable foresight, he has taken great care to exclude the more prominently wasteful elements of the field full of folks that would be

actively participating in the morally corruptive and subversive activities, — namely Jack the Juggler and Janet from the Stews, and Danny the Dice- player, Dot the Madam, and the fraudulent Friar and the folk in his order, and Robin the Rhymer (IV. 70-73) — the common or garden variant of the reluctant idler will seem more than sufficient to hamstring the blossoming agricultural utopia's fragile balance. The animated energy of the agricultural work is heavily counter-balanced by the entertainingly inspired ways with which the wasters *avoid* said work (VI. 120-28). The ribaldry, however, cannot persist in the face of the approaching agricultural catastrophe. And their work which they shirk so well (by feigning lameness and pretending to be blind, among other methods) would be integral indeed. On the other side of the social spectrum, just like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Half-Acre does not feature members of the nobility, aside from the Knight (Breen, p. 299). However, despite his earnest admiration of Piers and the extent of his knowledge ('By Crist!' quod a knyght thoo, 'he kenneth us the beste; (VI. 21-3)), he will remain an ineffectual agent of discipline when he tries to aid Piers to press the idlers into work.

Rebecca Davis draws attention to further scriptural connotations of the episode. The topic of refusing to work for one's own sustenance primarily appears to invoke Paul's words in Thessalonians 3:6–15. The passage focuses on the importance of labour and being willing to work for one's food, as he himself did time and again (Thess. 2:9, 3:7-8). The passage of 3:10, however, is especially pertinent in the case of the Hunger episode. In it, the economically minded apostle addresses the question of working for one's food, when stating: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.' (Davis, *Books of Nature*, p. 186). Paul's words often appear to circle back to self-reliance and charity alike. The apostle, being one to vigorously persecute Christians himself before his conversion on the road to Damascus, must have been a particularly pleasing association for the reader, providing further alignment with

the knowledgeable plowman of the poem in his way of being a person of divinely inspired knowledge (Cor 11:6).

As the scene on the Half-Acre progresses, and work gets underway in earnest, the idlers' resistance to work becomes stronger. Adamant on not working, no matter Piers or the Knight's arguments, Waster and Bretoner crystallise as the main characters of the resistance. Piers, although agitated, first tries to reason through scriptural language. Rebecca Davis emphasises the way 'Piers echoes Holy Church's instructions when he confronts idlers who refuse to work for the food they consume' (p. 187). Piers declares in no uncertain terms their prospects.

“Ye wasten þat men wynnēn wiþ trauaille and wiþ tene,

Ac Truþe shal teche yow his teme to dryue,

Or ye shul eten barly breed and of þe broke drynke” (B.6.133–5).

Piers's accusation, “ye wasten”, is the operative accusation in the context of the declaration. As has been observed in the Rat Fable, wasting does not simply represent the inverse of production, it is also a morally and spiritually corrupting deliberate activity. The wasters are measured against the plowman and are found wanting. Truth, whose principles govern Piers's actions, will become a teacher of the wasters of how to be a “plow-team” (“one way or another”, as it is being implied somewhat menacingly), declares Piers. The threat is not hunger here, but simply undesirable foodstuffs: barely bread and brook water, or plain water. There is, however, not much effect to his words inspired by Holy Church's teachings: divine reason is a quality seemingly asleep in the idlers, who remain adamant on consumption, but

remain reluctant to participate in production. Piers becomes increasingly frustrated as his speech progresses, crescendoing into vengeful declaration.

In lecherie and losengerie ye lyven, and in sleuthe,

And al is thorough suffraunce that vengeaunce yow ne taketh! (VI. 143-4)

The wasters continue in their refusal to work. Bretoner, a braggart, is the most defiant in the face of Piers, '[a]nd bad hym go pissen with his plowgh' (VI.155). With all the connotations described above associated with the scripturally infused disciplinary mechanism of the plow, Piers is understandably vexed beyond measure. After a heated exchange of words between the righteously infuriated plowman supported by the Knight and the pointedly recalcitrant idlers, Piers in his desperation declares them "wolveskynnes" (VI.161), or wolves' kin. The image of the depredations of wolves besetting the agricultural utopia rushes to the fore, as Piers finally hollers for Hunger to help him restore order.

"Now by Crist," quod Peres the ploughman, "Y shal apayre yow alle,"

And houped aftur Hunger, that herde hym at the furste.

"Y preye the," quod Perus tho, "pur charite, sire Hunger,

Awreke me of this wastors, for the knyhte wil nat." (B.VI.167-70)

His whooping call for Sire Hunger is righteous but chilling. It displays an insufficiency in Piers's agrarian utopia's establishment, *ergo* an insufficiency in the teaching he received as

Truth's bailiff. Ralph Hanna observes that Piers has little other choice, for he is 'forced to seek other modes of social control' (p. 279). Hanna's attitude towards Piers's intent (as opposed to the crop failure more prevalent in critical orthodoxy represented by Frank's theory of the "hungry gap") resonates with Epstein's approach as well. Epstein argues that 'Hunger in this episode is not a force of nature, but rather a calculated element in Piers's response to a labour crisis, and in Langland's overall representation of political economy' (p. 60). Thus, Piers is reactive, but not to natural crop failure, but to human nature interfering with the operation of his envisioned utopia predicated on fairness and meritorious labour. Force remains the operative word here. Piers utilizes force to establish patterns of economy, society, and understanding over the course of the Passus. This would also explain the later frustration he feels upon receiving Truth's pardon in the following Passus.

It is not difficult to feel for Piers and sympathize with his frustration in the face of Waster and his ilk actively refusing to work, hindering and negating all the hard work undertaken on the Half-Acre by the other stationary pilgrims. Yet, Piers does not lash out in pure anger, for even in his anger, he is guided by Truth's principles. In its manifestation of disciplinary action, it is not corrective, but pointedly punitive, and vengeful, and Piers says so himself. Yet, I argue, the aggression is somewhat similar to Sir Gowther's, for however far the demonic knight may be from the upstanding plowman. For Piers, just like Gowther, all of a sudden finds himself in a situation where his cognitive mapping cannot function sufficiently, thus he tries to make an intellectual pathway the hard way, through violence. While Gowther rages against his parental figures, the female body, and the Church, Piers's cognitive mapping shorts when it comes to the question of the willful, amoral wasters. He is still cognizant of the needy, as his original tasking of the ladies suggests. Yet, he cannot compute the recalcitrant workers disregarding their fellow men in their wasteful consumption and non-contribution to the productive dynamics of the agricultural society. They are Piers's

workers and "bloody brethren" alike, for whom he is responsible as an experienced agricultural manager. David Strong emphasizes the way Piers keeps his duties at the forefront of his mind, even when he hollers for Hunger.

Piers' reaction is not a sign of momentary weakness, but the power to initiate an act that is honest and fulfilling. His anger demonstrates a desire to delineate right from wrong. Only by embracing the emotive factors accompanying an intellectual dilemma can one fully appreciate the magnitude of the issue in relation to one's well-being. These factors, an inherent part of being human, accentuate his commitment to those around him. (p. 76)

The call of the plowman is heeded. Hunger readily obliges and springs into action. The description is a flurry of images that results in graphic carnage wrought upon the recalcitrant workers.

Hunger in haste þoo hente Wastour by þe mawe

And wrong hym so by þe wombe þat al watrede hise eizen.

He buffeted þe Bretoner aboute þe chekes

That he loked lik a lanterne al his lif after.

He bette hem so boþe, he brast ner hire guttes;

Ne hadde Piers wiþ a pese loof preyed hym bileue,

They hadde be doluen boþe — ne deme þow noon ooþer. (B.VI.174-80)

The brutality of the attack is equally graphic and obscured, its ferocity bestial. Hunger clamps down on Waster “by þe mawe“, who is then wrung by his stomach, the very fitting area to attack for hunger, literally gnawing on Waster’s intestines. Bretoner on the other hand is buffeted by his cheeks, which sunk in so much that his face remained lantern-like to the end of his days. Bretoner’s body also becomes a site for hunger’s further symptoms, his belly swelling nearly to the point of bursting, a prominent sight of severe protein malnutrition. Piers calls off Hunger’s attack by baiting him with a loaf made out of peas.

The effects of Hunger border on the miraculous. Beggars spring into action and the formerly bedridden start to work. The flurry of activity begs the question: if the crop failure is the result of different factors (such as weather, blight, or all the wasteful activities of Waster’s kind) how did these people survive before Piers summoned Hunger? Epstein answers the question, by pointing out that they ‘of course (...) lived off alms’. This is supported by the “miraculous” healing of all of those who were formerly physically incapable of working the field all of a sudden doing so. (B.VI. 191–2, 194–5) (p. 66). The effects of Hunger’s brutality are satisfying in their manifestation, but an insidious problem comes with it. Epstein continues, observing the way ‘Piers takes obvious satisfaction from the ways in which groups and individuals previously presumed unable to work are forced into wage-labour by Hunger. What is not explicitly represented in the passage is the interruption of a network of communal social support that would be required to precipitate this action’ (p. 66). Ralph Hanna agrees with Epstein’s approach, adding that ‘[s]uch punitiveness encourages actual production, indeed almost obsessively industrious cooperation’ (p. 279).

However, this feverish activity has very little to do with ameliorating the food shortage. The problem is that the activities undertaken by the formerly bed-ridden have

very little to do with the actual immediate need of food-production to ameliorate Hunger's attacks. Thus, I would question Hanna's observation on the *actual* production being encouraged by Hunger's effect. Instead, just like the Rat Fable's Parliament and animated political activity, it is much closer to the *appearance* of the activity aimed at ameliorating the effects of hunger. They flail in the barns and dig ditches from sunrise to sunset for the pea-pottage Piers hands out in return. (VI.183-90) This is further supported by the way the Passus progresses: Hunger is only fed by subsistence foods, such as baked apples and peasecods, spring onions, and cherries foraged until the harvest can finally roll in (VI. 289-96). Only *then* does Hunger eat his fill and can depart.

Piers tries to pick up the pieces of his fragmented society, realizing that the real problem of wasteful consumers cannot be ameliorated through his programme.

For I am wel awroke of wastours thourgh thy myghte.

Ac I preie thee, er thow passe,' quod Piers to Hunger,

'Of beggeris and of bidderis what best be to doone? (VI. 201-3)

It is no overstatement to observe Hunger is punitive and regulatory discipline personified, but he is much more than just that. He is an intellectual device, through which Piers aims to negotiate the conflicting questions of charity and sustenance. William Rhodes sees Hunger as 'the personification of the disciplinary mechanism by which Piers's interpretation and categorization of bodies as either productive or wasteful translates into physical power over those bodies' (Rhodes, *Personification*, p.

106). While it is a practical application of Hunger, Katherine Breen furthers the argument, by pointing out Hunger's broader intellectual application not only by Piers but also by Langland himself.

More broadly, Hunger embodies a series of decisions about who should and should not receive a share of scarce food resources, as expressed, *inter alia*, by landholding practices, labour legislation, and institutional and individual charity. This dimension of Hunger is crucial to his nature as a being of reason since it helps Piers— and, through Piers, Langland's readers— to come to grips with hunger as a universal to be sought or avoided. (Breen, *Machines of the Mind*, pp. 298-9)

And Hunger is certainly not one to be controlled easily. He is simultaneously a brutal enforcer and a disruptive agent. The main problem with his figure is that he is and remains both, simultaneously. As a disciplinary mechanism he is reliable in his efficacy, but as a morally corrective agent, something Piers wanted him to be from the beginning, he remains insufficient. For Piers's purposes, Hunger remains an unreliable agent to create a moral framework in his agrarian utopia. Dividing the bodies of the workers into productive and unproductive is much less successful a categorisation than the Prologue's differentiation between the men of pride and the men of the plow swarming on the field. Hunger not only brutalizes the recalcitrant wasters of the Half-Acre, unravels the fabric of society otherwise inclined towards charity, but also disrupts the orderly flow of the very Passus itself. Hewett-Smith observes, that '[t]he well-observed attempt of Augustinian sublimation of literal "realities" (work-pilgrimage, hunger-vice) comes to an abrupt stop when Hunger steps on the scene' (p. 2). In this fresh start Hunger stands as an amoral coercive agent, with which one cannot ultimately

negotiate: do as Piers bids or starve. The brutality Hunger enforces is one that is fundamentally amoral, despite Piers's initial hope that he will serve a moral purpose.

Indeed, Hunger's answer to Piers's clearly unsettled question is callous and practical.

Here now,' quod Hunger, 'and hoold it for a wisdom:

Bolde beggeris and bigge that mowe hir breed biswynke,

With houndes breed and horse breed hoold up hir hertes—

Aba[v]e hem with benes, for bollynge of hir wombe;

And if the gomes grucche, bidde hem go swynke,

And he shal soupe swetter whan he it hath deserved. (VI. 212-17)

Hunger's response emphasizes the idea of need as the guiding principle of charity.

"Bolde beggeris" are to be contented with horse and hound bread. However, charity should be extended to anyone who is truly "nedy." Hunger's advice, just like his appearance, remains puzzling and unstable. David Aers recognised this part of Hunger's speech a "wobble", influentially describing the episode as one of "perplexities" (Aers, *Justice and Wage-Labor*, pp. 169-90). The expressions greatly resonate in the criticism, echoing the puzzlement many students of Langland felt about Hunger's commentary. The instability implied by the term in Aers's reading also refers to 'an abandonment of the punitive surveillance involved in the discriminatory relief from which he had begun.' (Aers, *Community*, p. 45)

Jill Mann offers an explanation for Aers's puzzlement, as she explains Hunger's response to Piers's questions. Mann sees Hunger's philosophy less as a wobble, an oscillation, and more as a dynamic pointing in two, opposing ways at once. In her reading, 'the internal contradictions of Hunger's speech are traceable not so much to a "wobble" in Langland's thinking as to the fact that the principle of need points in two directions at once—towards justice, and towards mercy' (*Nature of Need*, p. 21). While Mann's reading is illuminating as to the functioning of Hunger, it is far from being able to pin down Hunger's philosophy in a stable manner.

Ralph Hanna further explains Hunger's wobble as an allegorical instability always associated with Mede's character, drawing a connection between the two difficult-to-moralize embodied concepts of the poem. In his reading, the embodied concepts and the allegory that are involved in Langland's case are deployed with the purpose of clarifying issues of morality, but their embodiment and speech become a point of instability.

Allegory always promises to clarify moral issues, but in fact, always ambiguates and distances them by intruding a trope upon literal description (cf. Spenser's 'dark conceit'). To this difficulty, Langland's personification allegory adds a further problem, the very referential instability of language itself, the entitling name that should explain all as polyvalent disruptors of signification. Langland might well suspect the value of his poetic contribution precisely because the poem's language can never achieve that clarity that is an assumed property of the clerical language Piers's 'kynde knowyng' is supposed to subsume. (p. 281)

Thus, the problems with Hunger become yet more abundant, serving less as a clarification, but more as an embodied, allegorical obfuscation. Langland finds himself

in the same boat as Piers, in this regard. Hunger has been summoned to cut through the morass of wasters and deserving poor, but his deployment only brought into question the very morality of his master. Hunger's speech only further muddies the waters, and his lack of moral compass (despite his rather ironically self-serving advice of measure and temperance supported by scriptural examples in Latin) only further exacerbates the problem his presence represents. Again, the problem is that Hunger does not, cannot work as a morally corrective disciplinary agent. Its effects and its insufficiencies can be clearly mapped on the disciplined bodies themselves: the starving population does not get any closer to Truth's lessons, and as soon as Hunger is lulled to sleep, they immediately return to their earlier practices. The suffering bodies depicted by Langland, the starving populous battered and buffeted by Hunger, however, become *too* focused on the concerns of the material bodies. This manifests in two ways. Firstly, the work they undertake becomes entirely divested from its spiritual significance; they labour for their survival and sustenance, not out of any other impulse. Secondly, the suffering bodies upon which Hunger's disciplinary mechanisms are mapped become sites of suffering which does not even allow them to consider any sophisticated reason behind it. Gripped by hunger, their very survival being in jeopardy they have little concern for Piers and his lofty ideas of morality and spiritually cleansing work sublimating the journey of the pilgrimage.

Kathleen Hewett-Smith sees this as a failure of Hunger's deployment, the plowing of the Half-Acre no longer signifying the first step of the pilgrimage, but the very end of it.

The workers' earnest attention to the exigencies of the natural world, and their equally legitimate will to survive, have apparently revived the social covenant proposed at the beginning of the passus. (...) Now, however, under the immediate

threat of Hunger, the purpose of labor has lost completely its spiritual component. Indeed, the frightened workers labor for “no more / But lyflode.” The plowing of the half-acre, no longer an essential first step on the spiritual journey to Truth, has become the very end of that pilgrimage. (*Allegory on the Half-Acre*, p. 13)

Thus, Piers’s original vision of the pilgrimage stands corrupted. As Nicolette Zeeman indicates, Need is ‘problematic precisely because he is the corruption of something Langland values’ (p. 279). Need and Hunger are characters in close proximity, some, like Jill Mann even suggesting that they are very much the same character in different guises. Zeeman’s idea, however, remains applicable to Hunger regardless. His presence on the Half-Acre, deployed as a brutal enforcer, corrupts the fundamental Christian impulse of charity, which both Piers and Langland value.

Indeed, Piers himself is also troubled by his own social elevation into the position of authority, not as Truth’s proxy, but as a quasi-tyrannical figure, who can do as he pleases with the people of the Half-Acre. The dynamics between master and worker, “maister” and “amaistered” revolves around a dynamic of control that hinges on the limited autonomy of the hired individual. Necessity compels the labourer to engage in work for their sustenance. Piers realizes that the most effective strategy to ensure the smooth progression of work is to exploit the vulnerability inherent in the human body. ‘And for defaute of hire foode this folk is at my wille.’ (VI. 206) - realises Piers, and the realisation is terrible. The authority and responsibility, the magnitude of the coercive power that holds sway over people who are no different than him torments Piers, and his enforcer only appears sufficient on the level of momentary amelioration of the recalcitrant workforce. Yet again, however, Piers has to realise: ‘although hunger might briefly create the *appearance* [my emphasis] of a disciplined and well-organized community, it cannot generate a virtuous social order’ (*Machines of the Mind*, p. 219)

To further amplify this point, Hunger can be particularly easily summoned by Piers and can be distracted with a pea-loaf momentarily, but to make him actually leave is a much taller order. Hunger, true to his name, remains insatiable till the end of the Passus. He eats his fill and asks for more (VI. 296), no matter how much they try to feed him. It is only when the harvest is finally complete when Hunger can finally eat his fill (despite all the decidedly unproductive busy-work the itinerant beggars undertake as the result of his brutal pogrom (VI. 183-95)).

Hunger, satisfied, finally falls asleep, leaving Waster wandering on the fields and the beggars eating and drinking merrily. (VI. 298– 305) The carnivalesque enjoyment of the plenty brought in by the harvest rings hollow, however. As Hunger finally departs from the Half-Acre, one is reminded of the actual effect of hunger on the disciplined bodies of the workers. The marks of starvation are not only lasting but the application of it is dehumanizing, invoking starvation's bestial cruelty in its callous, biological efficacy as an instrument of discipline. The bodies of the stricken Waster and Bretoner will bear the marks of starvation until the end of their lives, yet they have learned very little from their experience. During the initial, brutal attack of Hunger Piers shows little sympathy for them. 'Suffre hem lyve,' he seide 'and lat hem ete with hegges' (IV.181), proclaims Piers. Later he receives confirmation from Hunger himself, ostensibly soothing Piers's inflamed sense of justice. 'Hunger's answer, naturally, is that Piers should control them with hunger; they should be fed on "houndes bred and hors breed" (VI. 224), explicitly reducing needy people to the level of working animals and offering minimal nutrition to keep them alive. Citing multiple biblical passages on the necessity of labour, Hunger assures Piers that this would fulfil the requirements of charity' (Epstein, p. 70). The words are in line with his original intentions but go way further than simply "amaistering" Waster and Bretoner: they are transfigured from

members of the community, “bloody bretheren” (VI. 206), into the status of livestock, fed fodder instead of proper food fit for human consumption. After his initial exultation over the effects of Hunger, the degree of cruelty is simply too much for Piers to bear as he witnesses the effects of starvation. Realizing the magnitude of his responsibility as Truth’s bailiff, who is meant to guide these people on their pilgrimage, his unsettled mind is far from soothed by Hunger’s morally questionable advice.

The Passus closes with the final prophecy about Hunger’s hastening return in the closing lines of the Passus foreshadowing a bleak future governed entirely by scarcity, where even death will be overtaken in power by dearth (‘Thanne shal deeth withdrawe and derthe be justice’ (VI. 328). The prospect of Dearth ruling over Death is far from a loose association. The prospect does not sit well with Piers. He experienced the way starvation imprisoned people in their own bodies, the site of discipline turning into a punitive prison sentence, rendering them incapable of higher moral judgment. All the work undertaken by the itinerant beggars and wasters mixed with the genuinely needy amounted to very little indeed; all the activity loosely related to agricultural work did not, could not hasten even by a minute the ripening of the fields and the final harvest. Similarly, the wasters refuse to work, Waster himself wanders about and the formerly starving beggars refuse anything but the highest quality food (VI.299-208). Little has changed on the Half-Acre in the end, and the prophecy of Hunger seems to reflect the inevitable future of further, more forceful famine.

From this perspective, Hunger entirely failed as a morally corrective disciplinary instrument, the very inverse of Dante’s penitents circling the tantalizing fruit-bearing tree and clearly flowing stream in *Purgatorio*, Canto 23. There the sinners are free to meditate on their sin of gluttony, their tantalized bodies serving as focalisers to their meditations. Piers’s experience is the opposite: while the inhabitants of the

Half-Acre suffered, they thought little about their moral principles, and as soon as they were free of Hunger's terrible gaze, ('Ac whiles Hunger was hir maister, ther wolde noon of hem chide, Ne stryven ayeins his statut, so sterneliche he loked!' (VI. 318-9) they immediately returned to their wasteful practices undisturbed. Similarly, Cato's advice (*Paupertatis onus pacienter ferre memento.* / Bear the burden of poverty bravely. VI. 314) goes spectacularly unheeded by the workmen. It is not difficult to see famine as a morass into which all that Piers holds dear, charity, morality, and discipline, go to waste.

Furthermore, I would argue in line with Epstein's observation that starvation appears to concentrate the individual's attention on themselves and their immediate families; little is afforded in the way of observing one's charitable obligations toward their "bloody brethren" in their need. From this perspective, Hunger's effects are similar to that of the Rat Fable's permissive ideological mechanisms and Lady Mede's ethos. Epstein points out this similarity embodied in Hunger: 'In summoning Hunger, Piers is instituting a regime of near-starvation to make wage-labor the only option for physical survival. He thereby replaces communal bonds with contract, making employer-employee the fundamental social relation' (p. 70). This rapturing and atomizing of a society, which was supposed to have been predicated on Truth's charitable impulses and fairness troubles Piers deeply. Rhodes sees this problem as a fundamental one. In his reading Hunger serves as a sobering interface between the larger world and the intimate functioning of the body. Hunger's deployment on the Half-Acre also sees Piers finding himself in a role he neither desired, nor was prepared for by his long service of Truth.

Hunger personifies the meeting point where economic processes that exceed individual control meet the individual experience of bodily suffering — and

explores the consequences of attempting to control this contact zone for the purposes of making people work. (...) The danger is not just for masters that desire ‘mede mesurelees that maistres desireth’ (B. III. 246), as Conscience maintains, but also threatens a figure as free from the taint of commercial greed as Piers the Plowman, because he finds himself in a role that allows or even requires him to exercise economic power. (Rhodes, *Personification*, p. 128)

In the end, Hunger’s deployment to the Half-Acre causes more problems than it solves, and the consequences reverberate as much in Piers’s character as they do in Langland’s entire poetic project. His encounter with Hunger, in this regard, is similar to the effect Henryson experienced on his own poetic project, as will be discussed in the following chapter. Hunger also serves as an ultimate demarcation line, not unlike the Prologue’s lines separating the folk on the field into two categories. After Hunger is done with the Half-Acre, even though the people are fed and content, he will return. Piers himself is a changed man after the experience, and Langland himself remains far from unaffected, as Hanna’s reading of the subsequent revisions of the poem suggests.

Piers wishes he could recapture the idealism with which this whole show started, return to everyone’s initial willingness to contract for a post. Instead, his having called Hunger, more clearly than the knight’s threat, has echoed the moment in the first vision when the wrathful king insists that he will punish malefactors. Like the king’s, Piers’s words create Dread (cf. 2.208). And Langland describes the ultimate effects of losing Dread in echoing language – ‘Faytours for fere flowen into bernis’ (183; cf. 2.236 ‘flowen into hernes’). At this point, not only Piers but the poet was perturbed. The subsequent passage shows intensive revision in both later versions as if Langland was never quite satisfied with his formulation. (p. 280)

Langland's own puzzlement and frustration is echoed by Piers in the following Passus. And the reader is only a little better off. There is a marked difficulty to discern a singular attitude of Hunger. Rosanne Gasse observes this profusion of meanings. In her reading, '[t]he Hunger episode provides no clear lesson—or rather too many. No single voice or position dominates for long, as Hunger is explored from multiple perspectives' (p. 68). Similarly, Hunger is difficult to discern as a singular embodied character, voice, or as some readings suggests, Waster himself in disguise. Kathleen Hewett-Smith goes as far as to designate Hunger's presence as a failure of representation, which explains the frustration felt by Langland and Piers alike. They both hoped that Hunger's deployment, either as an allegory or as an enforcer of discipline, would cut through the confusion of the deserving and undeserving poor, who can and cannot be corrected through meritorious labour. Hunger's effects and words, however, simply lead to more confusion than clarity. In this environment trying to identify a shape for Hunger becomes pressing. External signifiers may serve as an important pointer in approaching Hunger, but the character remains elusive.

Breen's argument sees Hunger's final function as neither an enforcer, nor a punisher, but as an embodied, conceptual explainer of his own nature when invoked artificially.

Crucially, (...) Hunger cannot be discharged as a being of reason until the quality of hunger ceases to exist as an accident in the substance of the folk. Langland's embodiment of Hunger is thus derived from and depends on the bodily condition of hunger even as it helps readers to gain conceptual purchase on the way hunger operates as a social phenomenon, indeed as a tool of public policy. (p. 219)

Hunger is, despite his embodiment, a biological imperative at heart. The multiple facets it represents are all poignant, his effect both on Piers and Langland is a lasting one.

However, Hunger, being linguistically gifted and an educated sophist, seems to elude a comprehensive interpretation. In this situation, however, a unique interpretation appears to offer an applicable and comprehensive key to negotiate the tricky proposition of imagining Hunger.

II. 5. 4. Hunger, the Clerical Canine

Imagining Hunger is a difficult task and discussing the character is indeed equally so. Aside from the lively critical debate surrounding the reason of his existence (summoned, endured, or both), the function he fulfils on the Half-Acre, or the “wobble” of his speech, his personified appearance remains unclear. Despite his personification, his prominent voice, his forceful, overbearing presence in the Passus, and his graphic physical interactions with the wasters, Hunger remains difficult to describe. Indeed, there are no descriptions in the poem pertaining to his shape or attributes of embodiment, no external signifiers aside from his effects on the inhabitants of the Half-Acre. Even these glimpses are subject to debate, as Hunger oscillates between the experience of hunger and an embodied character. Kathleen Hewett-Smith, aiming to ameliorate this problem, compares Langland’s character to the detailed description found in the *Roman de la Rose*, a very popular poem from late 13th century France, featuring allegorical dream vision and embodied vices and virtues, in a way that is not dissimilar to *Piers Plowman*.

In it, Hunger appears as a female character with a detailed descriptions of the external signifiers pertaining to deprivation. The *Roman* presents a rich, detailed description of all the effects of hunger on the embodied character, surveying them from top to bottom in a sobering blazon of starvation. Hewett-Smith, however, finds Langland's obfuscation of Hunger much more impactful and menacing. 'This vision of Hunger is bleak, and so is that in *Piers*, but Hunger in *Piers* is much more shocking and threatening' (*Allegory on the Half-Acre*, p. 9). Although Langland's lack of description amplifies and directs one's attention to the harshly disciplined bodies suffering under Hunger's rule, many of the thematic elements within the Passus remain unexplained.

From an interpretive perspective, Hunger remains as elusive from the reader's point of view as Piers's own understanding of the character. Some in the criticism perceive Hunger's presence as an open challenge, an interpretive enigma, deliberately planted by Langland in order to showcase the ways famine ruptures not only social cohesion but the process of intellectualisation and understanding itself. In Gruenler's reading Hunger serves as a strong catalyst 'that bring[s] simmering mimetic conflict to crisis' (p. 232). From the perspective of this thesis Gruenler's reading remains pertinent, for hunger proves to be a disruptor and a catalyst in the tale of Sir Gowther and Henryson's fables as well. The argument, however, does not offer an explanation for Hunger's bestial characteristics.

Some critical arguments even go as far to suggest that Hunger's implementation in the poem is an unsuccessful one, which only serves to highlight its own allegorical workings and the insufficiency of language when trying to deal with the process of intellectualising something so ambivalent in its nature. Hewett-Smith observes over the course of several of her writings this particular failure of Hunger's representation.

Because he is based in the concrete, Hunger is less successful as an abstraction, for we can separate him only with difficulty from his literal level of significance. Furthermore, it is this lesser degree of abstraction that both ensures his success as a means of coercion and requires his failure in the light of human mercy.

(Allegory on the Half-Acre, p. 9)

Hewett-Smith's reading of Hunger and Need represents a compelling argument, which Piers and Langland both seem to echo in their attitude towards the character. There is a strong feeling of frustration in the poem, an impotence in the face of not only Hunger's character and effects on the people, but also in the face of his interpretive capacity. The way the embodied biological imperative, further echoed in the character of Need, appears to actively resist a singular interpretation can also be considered similar to Sir Gowther's hybrid nature. Langland himself remained dissatisfied with the Hunger episode, as both his extensive revisions and Piers's later tearing of the pardon signify. This aspect of the poem would offer a strong thematic parallel with Henryson's own frustration towards his poetic project depicted in his fables struggling against the inexorable forces of the world. Hunger thus could be approached as the ultimate disruptor, unravelling the social *assemblage* irrespective of the literally context. This interpretation would lead to a satisfying conclusion, and something which would be compelling (even seductive from a scholarly perspective) in its finality. Yet, the interpretation of failure of representation does not encompass all aspects of Langland's Hunger, and cannot offer satisfactory explanation to many of the thematic elements surrounding the character.

In this thorny situation, Rosanne Gasse's unique interpretative approach to Hunger's character offers an elegant and applicable way through the critical quagmire (*Hunger and the Clerical Canine*, pp. 67-91). The reading she proffers stands as a

singular interpretation in the criticism, with all of such position's drawbacks and advantages. At the time of writing this thesis, her argument does not seem to have been widely accepted in the critical literature, and certain elements of it may seem to be rooted in the wider understanding of the canine form of Hunger instead of the primary textual source of the poem itself. Yet, despite all these, Gasse's argument presents a compelling, elegant, and applicable approach, which can explain the abundant "perplexities" which Hunger so prominently embodies. It also presents a unifying argument, which can explain many of the seemingly incongruous, loose thematic strands of the narrative effectively, harmonising them in the process. In an effort to provide a unifying interpretive framework for Hunger's embodiment and significance in the larger context of the poem, Gasse turns to the image of the canine.

The canine as a polysemous sign explains why Langland chose the implicit portrayal of Hunger as Piers's watchdog in his poem: as a sign, the hound matches point for point the fundamental ambiguity, the wobble that Langland wanted for Hunger itself because the hound can switch codes just as easily as Hunger can between being the good dog, loving and faithful St. Francis, and the bad dog, selfish and carnal Simon Legree. (p. 79)

The compelling and applicable argument enables Hunger to remain a symbol pointing in different directions simultaneously, at different extreme manifestations of distribution and consumption. These attributes allow for a locus of symbols to be observed: charity and voracious greed alike. The image of the morally ambiguous canine, whose hunger is or is not checked by their circumstances and discipline also provides an opportunity to inspect the motif in the poem. Hunger, throughout the sixth Passus has remained an untrustworthy presence, whose intentions remained self-serving, despite his dexterous linguistic flourishes momentarily convincing the virtuous

plowman wavering in the face of strong economic, ecological, and societal uncertainty. In such a morally compromised environment Hunger provided a clear and seemingly straight-forward solution, which only further deepened divides. The solution of starving the populus into submission brought into question the very humanity of its reluctant “master”, and only foreshadowed more severe hardships and starvation to come. Applying a disciplinary framework to such an unstable character thus proves to be ineffectual.

Hunger, however, served as a teacher of hard truths in the process as well. At this point the aspect of the clergyman can be layered on the canine manifestation of Hunger in an effort to further accentuate his words and actions. From this perspective, Hunger appears as a corrupted confessor, a subversive opportunist, and a shrewd exploiter of clerical language to fill his own belly, who serves as a template for a well-observed image in the period. Foxes preaching to flocks of geese or reading piously were prominently represented in the marginalia of manuscripts (these images can be found in the *Smithfield Decretals of Gregory IX* (Royal MS 10 E IV) and the *Utrecht Book of Hours*, respectively), and so in literature as well. Thus, the image of the dangerous predator inhabiting the position of the priest is not only scriptural (as it will be observed) but also familiar, perhaps even fashionable in the period of the late Middle Ages. It speaks of ambiguity, camouflage, a fine balance between the insistent urge to consume so readily associated with these predators. Yet, above all, a self-serving, sophist eloquence is associated with these images, an ability to deceive the flock of believers, often similarly depicted as animals: the canine predators do not preach or study scripture to tend to spiritual needs. Their motivation to do so runs counter to charitable impulses, or the pleasing concept of measured consumption. Their hunger is pointedly non-spiritual; it is entirely corporeal and entirely selfish. The role they inhabit is a transparent ruse, a

thin veneer of the most exalted spiritual leader's position covering the basest instincts and needs. Naturally, the observer of the illuminated margins of the manuscript, or the reader of the literary work witnessing the theatre of these canines is cognizant of the fact, in on the joke. They are not expected to believe the charade of these clerical canines for a moment. Yet, such elevated vantage point is not afforded to the characters on the page, as Piers and later Henryson's animals will learn the hard way. These clerical canines appear to lurk on the page, and from the perspective of disciplining hunger, their presence is an especially useful one to observe.

Indeed, the image of the clerical canine does not only modulate Hunger's character in *Piers Plowman*. It resonates throughout the narrative as a whole and serving as an *amplificatio* of the Rat Fable's self-serving ideological message as well. Applying this interpretation helps make sense of Hunger's otherwise often cryptic behaviour, actions, and perceptions of him in the text. Many of such details have been either viewed in isolation in the criticism, or have been simply disregarded. Thus, the image of the clerical canine, a familiar and fashionable representation in the period, is not only plausible, but very likely indeed. Just as importantly, it accords with the insistent association of bestial hunger with dogs in the tale of *Sir Gowther*, further accentuating the understanding of the canine duties and scriptural connotations meant to counteract bestial hunger. Similarly to the ferocious young duke's misadventures, however, the successful outcome is similarly questionable in this case as well.

The thematic resonance also allows further connection to be developed with the ambivalent figure of the clerical canine in the following chapter. Thus, observing Hunger from the perspective of the canine clergyman can uncover many of his morally exploitative methods, while providing an outline of a critical framework, which then

can be applied in the next chapter to Henryson's canines as well. In this process, Gasse's reading of Hunger as canine is not merely useful but instrumental.

How exactly, however, can one perceive Hunger as a canine presence, when his embodiment is so characteristically lean on descriptive detail? One's perception remains limited by descriptions of Hunger's embodiment, which is not simply sparse, but practically non-existent. His behaviour, actions, and perception of him by the folk of the Half-Acre, however, offer hints as to his nature. The reading provided by Gasse is a singularly useful one, which allows Hunger's otherwise "wobbly" and elusive character to be observed in a more nuanced and accurate way, while also affording the polysemia, the overlapping, simultaneous observation of different symbols, in Hunger's character which is characteristic of his disciplinary and canine aspects. Just like a dog can be "good" or "bad", dependent on the context of the animal's behaviour, Hunger's words and actions are also similarly context sensitive.

The first point of contact in this is the very moment Hunger is summoned to the field by Piers, who "houped" (VI. 168) after Hunger in a manner of the farmer, whose flock is threatened by the "wolveskinnes" (VI. 161) may call for a working dog (Gasse, p. 70). Hunger, as a well-trained working dog, immediately heeds his master's call, and jumps into action. The attack's ferocity and Piers's direct way of bidding Hunger to act this way has puzzled critics. The canine aspect of Hunger makes it not only easier to picture the character, but the approach also explains the seemingly incongruous particularities of the language deployed in the episode. Hunger attacks Waster, using his "mawe" and wrings him, like someone wringing out laundry. This image would make little sense, were Hunger wringing Waster by hand (of which there is no mention), instead of clamping down on his stomach with his maw; a particularly animalistic image for a predator instinctively attacking by biting and biting hard.

Wringing Waster conjures the image of a towering creature biting ferociously. Piers tries to distract Hunger with the “pese loaf”, which Gasse equates to “houndes breed” which Hunger himself later mentions as a fitting dish for “bolde beggeris”, a just compensation for their labour (‘Bolde beggeris and bigge that mowe hir breed biswynke, / With houndes breed and horse breed hoold up hir hertes’ ((VI. 214)) (Gasse, p. 70).

The voracity of the hound is also remarked through the trope of it returning to its vomit, a well-observed image in the period. Gluttony vomiting in the preceding Passus is linked to dogs, although ones that refuse to lap up his vomit (V. 355). The other character, 'Covetise, on the other hand, is as *hende* as a hound in the kitchen because he won't share his food with anyone (V. 257).’ Covetise even refers to himself as being known as a dog by his neighbours (‘Lam holden,’ quod he, ‘as hende as hounde is in kichene; / Amonges my neghebores namely swich a name ich have.’ V. 257-8).

A most puzzling element, however, occurs in the sixth Passus, just before Hunger can finally have his fill. Not surprisingly, this is the point where the inhabitants of the Half-Acre are stretched to their limit of endurance just before the harvest. They feed Hunger with all the subsistence food they can forage: cherries, peas, and baked apples. Katherine Breen interprets the scene from the perspective of Hunger’s embodiment.

As the people feed Hunger, then, they are also desperately feeding themselves. The same logic governs Piers’s offering to Hunger of a pease loaf baked for his children: in tendering this coerced “gift,” Piers responds to his children’s cries of hunger, to their urgent and nonnegotiable need to

be fed. Their need is part of the collective and overwhelming voraciousness that causes Hunger to “eet in haste and ax[e] after moore” (VI. 295). Since Hunger does not have a material existence separate from the folk, he is hungry when they are hungry and cannot be satisfied until they have been fed. (Breen, *Machines of the Mind*, p. 297)

However compelling this interpretation remains, offering a clarification of the simultaneous, dual nature of Hunger as embodied entity and the quality of the folks, it offers no explanation to one particular subsistence food’s role in the passage just before the harvest finally rolls in, consequently at the height of the famine. There is a nearly throwaway line to which Gasse draws attention, which can only be interpreted through Hunger’s canine nature.

Thanne povere folk for fere fedden Hunger yerne;

With grene poret and pesen to poisonne hym thei thoghte! (VI. 297-8)

The folk of the Half-Acre, in their desperation, try to feed Hunger with 'grene poret', or raw, green leeks, anxiously hoping that it will poison him. This intent would make little sense, should the people try to feed their own bodies directly with the vegetable, as Breen’s approach suggests. The green leeks, although certainly better tasting in soup or pottage, are not poisonous to humans. In the case of a canine, however, the N propyl disulphide, a compound found in onions, contained within the leeks can lead to deadly poisoning (Gasse, p. 82). These lines have very little other explanation (or indeed resonance) in current critical discourse, thus Gasse’s interpretation is not only singularly insightful, but it is also unique in providing a compelling explanation to this

otherwise incongruous, cryptic detail which has entirely alluded critical attention otherwise.

If the canine associations are compelling, the strong connection between the canine and the clergy in the period further augments Gasse's argument. The semiotic link of cleansing wetness between the dog's healing tongue licking the begging Lazaar and his wounds (Luke 16:19-31) appears to be a strong one. The allusion may be very much intentional on Langland's part, for a strong 'chain of watery references within the text connects the performance of the sacrament of penance to the wet and traditionally cleansing tongue of the dog, [and] Hunger as priest' (Gasse, p. 84). Exercising measured consumption, fasting, and contending with hunger are images unified by their main goal: the spiritual cleansing achieved through the rigours exerted on the body. The strenuous, laborious nature of cleansing oneself from sins that may stain the soul for an eternity. The process also offers a certain intellectualising aspect, "clarifying" issues by removing the worldly stains occluding one's vision of them. Hunger, from this perspective, offers again a way to intellectualise complicated questions of morality and spirituality, promising a clarity which may be achieved through hardship, but which may also cleanse and heal one's soul. Cleansing, however, is laborious and seemingly never-ending process in the poem, and staining one's soul through sin of any variety is much easier. Thus, the ones doing the strenuous cleansing in the narrative are often not exactly gentle.

In the Half-Acre, all the corporeal and spiritual healing power the itinerant beggars and wasters receive is a very harsh regime of healing indeed. Hunger brutalizes them with gleeful abandon, wringing them out and buffeting them in an energetic scene, mimicking the hard physical labour washing entailed in the period. The forceful ritual cleansing foreshadows the imagery of laundry in Gasse's reading V. 60, VI. 175,

XIV. 1-24, and Charity's labour in XV. 186-92. The laundry metaphors further gesture towards two notable passages occurring later in the poem. Firstly, 'Conscience's later use of the same metaphor in his equation of the Three Lives — Contrition, Confession, and Satisfaction — as three stages in the laundering of Haukyn's coat through the sacrament of penance (XIV. 1-24) which, just like Hunger's temporary penitential effect on the people, is another process doomed to be a failure in the long term'. Secondly, 'Christ's vow in passus 18 that sinners "shul be clensed clerliche and clene wasshen of hir synnes / In my prisone Purgatorie, til parce it hote" (XVIII. 392-93) which describes at last a cleansing ritual that will hold forever' (Gasse, p. 85). It is not difficult to imagine the strain such a never-ending and pointedly laborious activity entails. Yet even such a locus of images finds its way back to the insistent needs of the body.

Hunger's actions foreshadow all this spiritual healing and cleansing, and Christ's insatiable thirst for human salvation in XVIII. 366-73. Hunger certainly tries to eat and drink his fill, but satiety, by definition, remains an impossibility. In Gasse's reading this hunger (and supposedly naturally accompanying thirst) strengthens the significance of Hunger's clerical allusions, serving as an *imitatio Christi* in his own way, further accentuating the significance of the green leeks and its effects on canines. '[E]ven the threatened poisoning of Hunger fits into the Christology of the poem, because poison is offered to Christ on the cross at [Passus] XVIII. 52 and because Christ the drink of love exists in triumphant opposition to the Arch-Poisoner Lucifer's brew' (p. 86). Christ first refuses the offered myrrh-spiced wine laced with gall intended to shorten his suffering but drinks the offered water with vinegar. Christ's thirst is simultaneously a display of his insatiable spiritual need for justice and salvation for humanity, while the insistent corporeal urge just before the moment of his mortal

death is a signifier of his profoundly human vulnerability. The thirst-quenching effect of the vinegar water from the Roman soldier's rations (meant to purify and flavour the water, as opposed to the earlier offered gall's effects (Mark 15:23)) is what finally allows Christ to moisten his throat, and finally cry out in a loud clear voice, to commit his spirit into the hands of his Father (Luke 23:46). Kathleen Hewett-Smith sees the image and its inclusion in *Piers Plowman* as a most poignant signifier of the poem's preoccupation with need.

Christ's thirst for mankind's love cannot be quenched until the moment of re-union between God and man, the resurrection of the dead. Behind these daring images is a kind a mutual hunger on the part of both God and man to "eten al pat barn and his bloed dronken" (C.XIX.88). Such shared need ultimately redeems the rift between human and divine, not by privileging one destination over the other, but by reconfiguring that gap as the site of a discourse of mutuality, of recuperative faith. (Hewett-Smith, *Nede ne hath no lawe*, p. 253)

In this context Christ's corporeal and spiritual thirst points towards the moistness provided by the dog's healing tongue is a pre-requisite of the spiritually cleansing labour, not dissimilar to the plowing of the Half-Acre. Washing and moistening, however, appears to be predominantly a clerical function. 'The laundry metaphor at V. 60, VI. 175, and XIV. 1-24 pushes the bounds beyond the human and the steps in which the priest is involved because it also anticipates Anima's description in Passus XV of Charity's work ethic: his labor in a laundry' (Gasse, p. 84). This laundry imagery of Charity is a mile long ('And whan he is wery of þat werk þan wole he som tyme / Labouren in a lauendrye wel þe lengþe of a mile' (XV. 186-7)), the cleansing work is strenuous and physically demanding, inducing even the very manifestation of charitable impulse to labour through gritted teeth and groaning (XV. 191). This work also recalls

Piers's charity in Passus VI. Similarly to Charity's work, Piers's initial intent and later call for Hunger is also meant to be ultimately cleansing. It was, after all, the main goal of the stationary pilgrimage. Yet, his paradoxical 'punitive surveillance involved in discriminatory and disciplinary charity', as Aers so perceptively puts it, was contingent on food-handouts to the labourers ('And for defaute of foode pis folk is at my wille' (VI. 206)) and *their* markedly non-productive, but certainly groan-inducing and strenuous labour (Aers, *Community*, p. 45). Thus, effectively, not charity at all, but coercive wages, a biological necessity callously leveraged to exert control and motivate an otherwise recalcitrant workforce for production: the domain of profit and Lady Mede. Piers phrases his observation in merciless terms, the inhabitants of his miniature agricultural utopia are "at his will". Ultimately, despite his charitable impulses and hard labour, his cleansing with the help of Hunger was not only a failed attempt, but one that in turn stained his own soul in the process.

The laundry imagery's final meaning rests of Christ's proclamation in the later Passus. '[U]ltimately the laundry metaphor points forward to Christ's vow in Passus XVIII that sinners "shul be clensed clerliche and clene wasshen of hir synnes / In my prisone Purgatorie, til parce it hote" (XVIII. 392-93) which describes at last a cleansing ritual that will hold forever' (p. 85). Gasse here further connects the thirsting, moistening, cleansing imagery with Dante's Greyhound, the divine counter-point to the insatiable She-Wolf barring the pilgrim's way through the dark forest. While the She-Wolf embodies the overflowing, uncontainable voracity for all earthly excesses, the divine Greyhound's hunger is for no earthly material in *Inferno* Canto I, 103-04.

The canine tongue, however, whose equal capacity to cleansing wetness and an element of voracious appetite also links to another, more overtly clerical function as well. This symbol further underlines the moral ambiguity and context-sensitivity of the

canine maw, not unlike Gowther's mouth discussed in the preceding chapter of the thesis, where governance, intent, and control remained the final word determining propriety. Hunger himself, not unlike Henryson's canines of the next chapter, proves to be dexterously eloquent and well-versed in scriptural law, bringing no fewer than seven scriptural citations in Latin. His utterances range from the rather tame, asking for a harmonious work and charity between people ('*Alter alterius onera portate. / Bear ye one another's burdens.*' VI. 222, quoting Galatians VI. 2.) to ominous and vindictive ('*Michi vindictam et ego retribuam. / Vengeance belongeth to me, and I will repay.*' VI. 227, quoting Hebrews X. 30, cf. Romans XII. 19.) There is even a streak of meta-commentary in Hunger's speech, who emphasizes the work ethic of Genesis, further amplifying the labour's importance, Waster's transgression against it and Piers's significance as someone much in line with scriptural logic. However comforting these phrases are for Piers at his moment of moral doubt, the advice Hunger offers is generic at best and entirely self-serving at worst. Piers himself will later realise that, but at the time he considers them prudent and in line with the ethos of measure with which the poem is preoccupied. When taken with measure indeed, these instructions are reasonable. Hunger's moral instruction on the importance of a moderate diet, a "lovely lessoun" as Piers describes it (VI. 275). Gasse draws further parallels between Hunger's speech and Holy Church's earlier lecture on the subject (p. 81). Hunger's sermonizing allusion to the sauce of hunger sent forward to the lips is not observed by Gasse, but can easily be categorized as a reference to the voracious canine known to return to its vomit again; the empty stomach sending forth its bilious issue during starvation at the site of food is far from an appetizing image as Hunger describes it, much more the sign of extreme deprivation. Physiology, grown unaccustomed to eating, finally receiving food reacts this way. The soft palette due to unuse becomes tender when dealing with

food painful after a period of starvation. The character of Sire Surfet in Hunger's speech is also referred to in terms of his tongue as well, his "mawe" (VI. 265-8). The image forms a strong connection with Hunger's own maw, described during his graphic attack on Waster and Bretoner. However, Sire Surfet's maw is "afyngred", a contemporary expression of extreme hunger. The image Hunger conjures when describing Sire Surfet is that of a rival canine, his voracious competition, whom he tries to fend off by offering advice to Piers.

Not only the clerical wisdom Hunger offers, but his other words are at least as contentious as Piers's initial summons. Gasse observes that 'Hunger in sum is the very opposite of Clergie's later canine figure in Passus X, one taken from Isaiah 56:10 in which instead of the scriptural guardsmen falling asleep like dumb dogs, irresponsible priests are equated with "dourbe houndis"' (p. 82). Indeed, Hunger is not only not dumb, but vocal to the point of gregariousness. As Gasse puts it, 'Hunger, in contrast, acts as a clerical hound very much willing and able to bark, and his bite is considerably worse' (p. 82). The observation refocuses on the dual purpose of Hunger's canine maw, capable of speech and biting with equal gusto.

Finally, to further add to the layered polysemia represented by Hunger, Gasse finishes with the negative connotations of the clerical canine. As Hunger falls asleep, — the image consistent with the voracious canine finally fed and napping comfortably — he also falls silent. With no further need to preach and spiritually improve the inhabitants of the Half-Acre (an exercise whose efficacy indeed remains questionable at best), Hunger disappears. The next line focuses on Waster wandering aimlessly in search of something to drink. In Gasse's reading, this is a further allusion to the Isaiahan sleeping dog, the flock falling back on their aimless, undisciplined habits without the sleeping watchdog's watchful gaze (p. 81). Hunger's watchfulness is

emphasized pointedly, his terrible, stern gaze is that of a master's ('Ac whiles Hunger was hir maister, ther wolde noon of hem chide, / Ne stryven ayeins his statut, so sterneliche he loked!' (VI. 316-7)).

Gasse further links the clerical canine to the Hunger episode, and her final observation is characteristically helpful in interpreting a scene surrounded by lively critical debate. After Hunger's departure, Piers is haunted by his experience and the knowledge he gained. As he stands on the field he was meant to work "in fairness" Truth sends him a pardon with a wide array of caveats and clauses. When the priest finally opens the pardon, it only contains in Latin a passage from the Athanasian Creed, from Matthew XXV. 46: 'And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.' Piers, frustrated by his experience cries out as an answer: 'Though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for thou art with me.' (Psalm XXII. 4). As he does so, in his utter frustration over the matter, he tears the pardon in two (VII.115). After this, the otherwise upstanding plowman swears to stop working hard, and look after only his own belly ('Of preieres and of penaunce my plough shal ben hereafter, / In; consist And wopen whan J sholde slepe, though whete breed me faille.' (VII. 120-1)). The scene is sobering, and its lesson will remain with Piers later in the poem. Helen Barr observes the attitude surrounding the tearing of the pardon:

No dramatic episode in *Piers Plowman* has proved more baffling than what happens in Passus VII when Truth sends a pardon to Piers as he is still standing in the field. There is no consensus amongst readers as to what the pardon means, and why, after an altercation with a priest, Piers tears it up. (p. 21)

However, Gasse's canine approach here again comes to our help. The clerical canine connection 'is made explicit in the C version of Piers Plowman at C.IX.259-66 in terms which clearly connect the clergy, albeit once again in the negative, to the dog. In his explication of the terms of Truth's pardon, Piers warns bishops of the consequences of their ineffectual spiritual leadership' (p. 83).

The passage of admonishment thunders with Piers's indignation, the canine analogy is strongly reinforced in it as an admonishment of the corrupt and lazy clergy.

For many wakere wolues ar wroken into thy foldes;

Thy berkeres aren as blynde that bringeth forth thy lombren —

Dispergentur oues, þe dogge dar nat berke.

The tarre is vntydy þat to þe shep bylongeth;

Here salue is of supersedeas in sumnoures boxes.

Thy shep ben ner al shabbede, the wolf shytt wolle:

Sub molli pastore lupus lanam cacat, et grex

Incustoditus dilaceratur eo.

How, herde! where is thyn hound and thyn hardy herte,

For to go worye þe wolf that the wolle fouleth? (C. IX. 259-66)

Piers's words simultaneously connect the clergy to the overt image of the canine symbolism and the laundry metaphor. "Under a careless shepherd, the wolf soils the

wool. And the flock, left unguarded, is torn apart by it." – reads the proverb well-known in the period (Lindemann, pp. 359-61). Piers admonishes the clergy with the powerful image of soiled, white wool: a strong allusion to sin staining the soul, serving as a strong counter-point to the cleansing, washing metaphor so important for the clerical function. In fact, the imagery runs the dynamic in reverse: while the stricken lamb's blood would be a semiotically loaded cleansing agent (the way it was for Gowther's chivalric cleansing ritual, the blood of his enemies washing away his sins), the staining of the white wool of purity here is excremental, the result of the wolf's unchecked voracity soiling its purity. The proverb is followed by a further canine allusion, where the hound is equated with one's watchful consciousness, an externalized locus of driving force not allowing one's flock to be torn to shreds by the other, competing canine presence of the wolf. Their wilful silence in the face of the powerful does not merely signify shirking their duty. Their refusal to "bark" and remain asleep while the flock is brutalized by the predatory presence renders them complacent in the depredations. Piers has learned his painful lesson from Hunger well in the sixth Passus and is now adamant to pass it on. Hunger, a questionable watchdog of moral authority and community formation has left Piers concluding that the canine nature of the clergy renders them unfit to fulfil their role.

II. 5. 5. Conclusion and the Law of Need

Not only are the complacently sleeping watchdogs become problematic themselves, but the very nature of need further upsets the smooth operation of morality. The last apocalyptic Passus sees Will 'heavy-cheered, ailing of heart, and, above all,

hungry: “for y ne wiste where to ete ne at what place” (Green, pp. 9-10). As the Passus begins, Will wakes from the vision of the preceding Passus, where Piers founding of the Holy Church of Unity. In his predicament he meets the character of Need embodied, who greets him in a familiar manner, and calls him as Margaret Kim emphasizes, “faytour”, a fraudster ‘for not standing up for the right of the needy person’ (Kim, *Hunger, Need, and the Politics of Poverty*, p. 163). The unwelcome presence of the character blurs the line between the poem’s visions and the insistent biological need Will has to endure, further underlining the character’s message.

Need’s appearance in the narrative is indeed as intrusive as it is familiar as he pleads with Will to consider the virtue of neediness as political strategy (XXII. 6-9). Jill Mann sees even Hunger himself as an aspect of Need in disguise, ultimately manifesting ‘the movement from justice to mercy specified in Holy Church’s speech’ (Mann, *Nature of Need*, p. 20). Such impulses are depicted in Need’s speech, which captivated Hewett-Smith’s attention, emphasising the startling way Need appears again in the narrative. Need ‘interacts in and with the Dreamer’s “real world”’, ‘startling’ both the Dreamer and the reader (*Nede ne hath no lawe*, p. 246). Need also appears to be a shrewd political operator, in Kim’s reading, further strengthening the connection with Hunger’s earlier appearance on the Half-Acre. Kim asserts that ‘Need is both biological hunger, and an allegorical character who promotes need as a public agenda to be pleaded strategically’ (p. 163). These elements serve as key connections to Hunger, who also appeared as an insistent biological urge and an embodied, allegorical character, while offering a morally dubious commentary on his own nature. The words spoken by the Need are as powerful as they are disruptive to the smooth operation of morality when the needy is concerned.

And nede ne hath no lawe ne neuere shal falle in dette

For thre thynges þat he taketh his lyf for to saue:

That is mete, when men hym werneth for he no money weldeth,

Ne wyht þat now wol be his borwe ne no wed hath to legge;

And he cacche in þat caes and come therto by sleithe

He synegeth nat sothlich þat so wynneth his fode.

And thow he come so to a cloth and can no bettere cheuesaunce,

Nede anoen-riht nymeth hym vnder maynprise. (C. XXII. 10-17)

Need concludes, listing the necessities of human life which are not supposed to be subject of law, that ‘need has no law’, locating the vulnerabilities of the needy outside of an easily understandable or governable frame of reference. In Green’s reading the legal language deployed by the character refers to its material, matter-of-fact nature much more than an abstract moral tenet. (Green, p. 11) While Green surveys the critical field preoccupied with the allegorical meaning of Need’s appearance, his own critical attitude towards the outlaws of the period positions not Need, but Will as someone influenced by his status as a social outsider. ‘Very few of [the] critics seem prepared to lend much weight to the fact that the narrator, Will, encounters this figure outside his dreams, that he meets him at a time when he is hungry, and thus, in a quite literal sense, that the need he is confronting is his own’ (Green, p. 11). One may perceive this confrontation as a “conflict of interests”, Will’s insistent bodily discomfort manifesting Need’s similarly insistent and markedly self-serving character. Kim further emphasizes

the morally subversive element of Need's political agenda, which in turn appears to be very similar indeed to Hunger's earlier, self-serving commentary in Passus VI:

Rhetorically more certain than Will himself on the agenda of poverty, Need defines himself as beyond the subjective will, a biological condition that will assert itself regardless and in spite of the restraints of conventional morality. At the same time, he also dangerously renders null the notion of social accountability in his circular conception of need. By defining "nede" with nede, without any relational opposition to conditions outside poverty, this character does not define what "nede" is not. Since a needy person justifies himself with neediness, he is under no obligation to explain his neediness in terms other than his subjective expression, in terms that may bridge the gap between himself and the rest of his community. (Kim, p. 165)

The societal rift Need opens through the universal (and universally subversible) justification is indeed as universal as Need himself, ultimately leading back to the moral confusion that Piers and Langland experienced during the Half-Acre episode. I argue that Need's appearance is similar to Hunger's in this regard, disrupting and bringing into question fundamental logic of power and its exercise over the imperative of bodily need. 'Nede argues in these lines that the experience of material distress is beyond not only legal and social construction, but also beyond the purview of the moral dictates of conscience and the spiritual and institutional demands of the cardinal virtues' ("*Nede ne hath no lawe*", Hewett-Smith, p. 246). Need, just like Hunger, also disrupts the poetic project's exploration of morality itself. As Hewett-Smith observes, Need 'explodes the bounds/bonds of allegorical discourse not only by blurring the line between the visionary and mimetic, but also (...) by thrusting before us the undeniable actualities of indigence' (p. 246). Thus, the imperative of need falling outside the

framework of control and discipline one may exert over it, differentiating between the wasteful, parasitic consumers, the genuinely needy, and the greedily predatory becomes a complicated matter, further influencing the narrative's outlook and frustrating its allegorical logic. Langland himself struggles to find a surefire way out of the conundrum, as the universal human condition of neediness places itself out of the poem's ability to properly intellectualise. Need's assertion becomes especially poignant, when in the following chapter of the thesis, the same words of Need will be echoed by the lupine friar of Henryson's *Fables*; the line delivered in mock seriousness serving as a permissive justification for the fox to only adhere to the Lenten fast in his own twisted way. Thus, the subversion of regulatory principles Need's words represent, despite their charitable impulse, gets exploited by the predatory consumers, those who subvert the ethos and subject it to their own greed and voracity.

Thus, the Rat Fable's lesson on the reader and the Hunger episode's on Piers does not remain confined in their own narrative environment; their depictions and exploration of ravenous, bestial hunger influence and modulate other scenes and characters as well. Having learned the hard lesson of Hunger, Piers is unable to turn a blind eye over the clergy's moral inadequacy. The clash of feudal power and Christian moral impulse towards charity and love appears to have a clear winner; the emergent capitalist mindset embodied in the self-serving, undisciplined bestial hunger upsets Langland as much as it does Piers. Unbridled greed, waste, and overconsumption stain the soul and even though Charity labours tirelessly, the clergy that should aid the cleansing labour, slumber in the shade, shirking their work not unlike Wastour and his ilk. Thus, through his consternation at the clergy, Piers must embody the vigilant watchdog that barks at the approaching wolf. It is. However, all Langland can do, he

does through him; unable to fend off the approaching depredations, he can only give voice to his frustration in warning.

In conclusion, the Hunger episode is one that further underlines, amplifies, and nuances the motif of consumption established by the Prologue and the Rat Fable, and in turn influences the trajectory the exploration of it takes throughout the poem. Hunger, instead of serving as a morally corrective agent in Piers's control, slips the leash and offers incongruous and self-serving commentary. The effects of deprivation and starvation are far from morally purifying, or even community-forming. In fact, crucial Christian virtues, such as charity and compassion, come into question when hunger is deployed as a disciplinary device. Need and the needy remain crucial elements of the poem's intellectual and spiritual investigation, but the wasteful, ravenous consumers remain an uncomfortable presence subverting and exploiting the underlying morality in their own favour. In the end, Hunger has achieved a lasting effect on the Half-Acre's morality, not only the one Piers or perhaps even Langland originally envisioned. Both character and poet became troubled by the implications of bestial hunger's effect on the discipline of society and individuals alike. Langland, however, is far from the only one employing the clerical canine's approach to explore hunger preying upon the meek and the innocent. The next chapter features another prominent poet utilizing the imagery, which leaves him no less troubled than it did Langland.

Chapter III: Bestial Hunger in Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*

III. 1. Introduction

Robert Henryson's collection of fables appears to be a rewriting of the popular Aesopic fables. Rewriting these classic tales was a rhetorical exercise characteristic of the late fifteenth century. The *Fables* first masquerade as just such an exercise, or a close approximation of a seemingly menial translation the poet undertakes at the commission of an unnamed lord, as the Prologue establishes. Yet, as he synthesises these tales with newer material (such as Reynardian and epicized elements) the very poetic project appears to become destabilised, resulting in a self-defeating, redundant exercise in the face of the overwhelming cruelty and callousness of the pervasive corruption of the world, where unrestrained bestial hunger appears to rule. The very act of poeticising the predatory practices, the artificial methods which the powerful employ, appears to be an ultimately fruitless endeavour against the vulgar, corporeal realities from contemporary society that intrude into his fables. Yet, there is much to be gleaned from the ways Henryson alloys the classical material with both newer stylistic elements and a reluctance to interpret nature, or rather what appears to be natural, as morally just.

Bestial hunger is an overwhelmingly ubiquitous motif in Henryson's Fables; nearly all of the narratives feature it in one way or another. The animal characters inhabiting the fabular ecosystem are primarily moved by it: from mice through canines to the very top of the food chain, all of the animals display their inexorable need to feed. In order to observe the varied facets of the motif, the particular fables for discussion have been selected in an effort

to observe not only this ever-present bestial hunger, but do so through the lens of disciplinary mechanisms meant to control and channel these urges. Again, this narrowing of focus would still leave one with too many of the fables to observe. Thus, the different camouflages, something the preceding chapter has already gestured towards, will be the main focus of the chapter's primary methodology of analysis. The subversive, corrupting guises, which in turn enable the hunger of the powerful to be fulfilled, is very similar to the Rat Fable's permissive ideology and Hunger's self-serving sophism, only further extrapolated into the territories of sacramental and legal language.

The argument's development, similarly to the chapter on *Sir Gowther* and *Piers Plowman*, will follow the main organisational structure of the Fables. While in *Sir Gowther's* case this was the plotline of the penitent duke's life journey, and in the case of *Piers Plowman* the structure of Passuses following each other in a step-like fashion towards a greater understanding, Henryson's fables are organised more loosely. They do not follow neither chronology, nor step-like ascent. They, however, are organised in a logical structure in different manuscript versions, as it will be observed at the pertinent junction. There is a Prologue and a deliberate trajectory of the collection, reflecting on the way Henryson develops his increasingly more sophisticated ideas enacted by his animal characters. In the effort to follow this development (and, indeed, the increasingly darkening tone of the tales), the chapter will similarly follow the fables in the order they are included in the collection, starting with the discussion of the Prologue, and finishing with the final fable.

After establishing the essential critical framework for the Fables, the chapter will proceed to focus on the tales themselves, starting with the 'Cock and the Jasp'. This first tale is included in the selection due to its crucial position as the first tale in the collection, establishing the central conundrum bestial hunger and the animal character's control over it entail. The Cock encountering with the semi-precious stone, which has been carelessly swept

out of the house to the dung heap, debates its value to him from the perspective of his biological need for sustenance. The fable is concerned with the dynamics of immediate enjoyment and one's discipline over the immediate physical urges. Despite its seeming simplicity, featuring them at an early stage of the collection showcases Henrysons' preoccupation with the motif of hunger and discipline, which over the course of the following fables he develops into more sophisticated framework. Just like the Rat Fable, I argue, 'The Cock and the Jasp' contains many of the kernels of these later developments in a nucleic form. Observing it, however briefly, is therefore beneficial when approaching the motif in the larger context of the Fables.

The second fable in the focus of the chapter is 'The Fox and Wolf', which features arguably the two most important characters in the Fables, the titular canines. The fable serves as centrepiece of a trio of fables featuring the Fox and his son, who thoroughly subvert sacramental and legal language in the service of their own stomachs. In an effort to contextualise this darkly humorous Lenten fable, however, a subsection will be dedicated to the earlier development of the Fox's character over the course of the first fable featuring him, 'The Cock and the Fox'. As an introductory fable it is included to allow a brief observation of Lawrence's motives and characters, and his earlier manifestations of hunger as well in the context outside of 'The Fox and the Wolf'. In the main body of discussion on the fable the winding ways the Lawrence and his lupine confessor navigate their ways through sacramental language, thoroughly subverting it in the service of nothing more elevated than their own hunger. The third part of the subsection concentrates on the immediate aftermath of 'The Fox and the Wolf', where the Lion puts the Fox's son on trial. The consequences are catastrophic from the perspective of the young vulpine sinner, who is sacrificed in order to protect a much larger conceit, the predatory animals using and abusing language to exert power over the docile prey.

The following fable the chapter will focus on amplifies these thematic elements, further accentuating the ways the powerful use language to satiate their hunger. ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ is arguably the furthest extrapolation of the motif. It is, in some way, similar to ‘The Fox and the Wolf’ and ‘The Sheep and the Dog’, for it observe the ways legal language is used in the confrontation of predator and prey. However, in an effort to underline its gratuitous nature, discards the charade entirely; the well-spoken Lamb cannot argue with the belligerent Wolf whatsoever. This, I argue, represents the height of Henryson’s darkening tone. The fable paints a portrait of a world ruled entirely by hunger, the prey entirely impotent in the face of the predator.

Despite the dour finality of the fable, there is one more narrative included in the collection. ‘The Paddock and the Mouse’ does not focus on the prominent canines, but on the diminutive figures of the titular characters. The fable is included for several reasons in my argument, most importantly due to its capstone position in the collection, a seemingly incongruous “parting shot” from Henryson. Its main driving engine is also hunger and the way it occludes the judgement of the sympathetic mouse, who needs to rely on the paddock to cross the river. The tale ends abruptly and so does the collection of the fables; the final, bleak *moralitas* Henryson provides brings into question the entirety of the poetic project.

Even from a brief overview of the selected fables, the overarching organisation framework Henryson utilises is uniquely sharp, and often darkly humorous. It requires, by design, an active and investigate method of reading, lest one stumbles on one of Henryson’s many obstacles he puts in the way of a linear reading. Laura Wang, justifiably, observes the *Fables* from a critical position of fundamental distrust. In her reading, Henryson’s ‘real poetic and intellectual distinctiveness lies in his relentlessly wary approach to nature and natural law, an approach enabled by both his relatively humble social position and his innovations upon the popular genres of beast fable and epic’ (p. 21). Wang’s observation

underlines the uniqueness of Henryson's poetic tone. His perception of nature is not as a nostalgic, idealised image of a prelapsarian Edenic ecosystem, where animals live side-by-side in harmony, predatory hunger relegated to but an element of divine providence; a well-balanced, harmonious ecosystem, unlike our fallen world governed by scarcity and imbalance of resources. Instead, the harsh realities and inequalities of the world governed by hunger wearing the many colourful guises of legal and scriptural language preoccupy Henryson. The fabular ecosystem depicted is one ruled by hunger, from which neither prey animals nor lofty moral concepts are safe. The observation is one James Simpson deliberately describes as a 'dog-eat-dog world driven by hunger', in which 'ethics turns out here, that is, to be simply one more consumable in a world driven only by desire to consume' (p. 195).

Thus, what "should be" and "what is" are markedly different, divorced from one another in Henryson's reading. Within the gap lies the universe of human sinfulness governed by greed, and rapacity: predatory hunger sublimated and disguised by any other name. The disparity between nature and humanity's shadow mapped upon it remains a strong theme running through the fables; feigning and reality will supplant one another with relish and disastrous results as well. The polite terms and sweet rhetoric serve to communicate fundamental truths through linguistic figuration. The term 'figure' is a ubiquitous one throughout the *Fables* (Notes on line 7, Parkinson, p. 162). It is a crucial term, which refers to the very poetic project Henryson undertakes, attempting to observe the truths of the world through the lens of figurative language. David Moses emphasises the overarching theological meaning of 'the pre-humanist focus on the figurative in these fables and the presentation of behavioural 'types' mark Henryson's as a distinctly medieval mode. (...) The irrational becomes rational to illustrate the various sins mankind falls prey to when he forgets his reason and follows his instinct to become like a beast. Henryson's animals stand as meaningful signs in a fallen world' (p. 79). These animals themselves, however, are

fundamentally unreliable, constantly endeavouring to cheat and trick one another in the service of their fundamental biological hunger. Henryson does not provide an Edenic vision, for his figurative language representing animals serves to expose the harsh laws of the forest lurking below the surface of seemingly civilised society.

Wang further accentuates Moses's argument when she argues that 'to expose the ugliness of nature, especially by telling a fable about animal brutality, is to call attention to the failings of the current system' (p. 21). Nature is not inherently ugly, or brutish, but its well-ordered divine harmony is rendered ugly due to the human behaviours depicted by the animals; the artifice of society's power relations mapped upon their animal bodies, their sophistry and hypocrisy masquerading as their natural hunger.

Jill Mann similarly observes the governing principles in Henryson's fabular ecosystem. 'Predatory behaviour is a 'given' of the animal world; it is the shape of the action that places it in a conformation meaningful to human beings' (Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 35). The observation does not only paint a bleak picture of the fables themselves, but their final pedagogical effect as well, bringing to question the poetic project itself. Why write poetry about the uncompromising nature of the natural world which we ultimately cannot change? Mann's outlook on the subject is bleak. 'Whatever sympathy for the poor and downtrodden the fable arouses in the reader, this sympathy has nowhere to go; its potential for remedial action is blocked by the narrative's cynical recognition that in some form or other, things will always be thus' (Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 39).

There is an insufficiency of expression, and underlying frustration with the inability to integrate these lessons gleaned by Henryson. Thus, the poet innovates on the classical Aesopic fable material in an effort to create an intellectual framework sufficient to communicate his sharp observations. Simpson emphasises, that '[u]niquely among fabulists,

Henryson mixes the two great traditions of animal narrative, the Aesopian, beast fable tradition, and the Reynardian, beast-epic tradition' (*And that was Litel Nede*, p. 195). Jill Mann characterizes the beast epic as a tale with animals, where 'words proliferate, and the simple moral conclusion in which the action of beast fable culminates is dissolved in a sea of animal moralizing whose effect is comic rather than didactic' (*How Animals Mean*, p. 28). Mann designates the genre reaching its 'most influential in *Ysengrium* (1148-1149)', featuring its central character prominently returning in Henryson's fables, the wolf-monk (*How Animals Mean*, p. 18).

The unique fusion between more classical Aesopic material and the more gregarious, dark, humorous beast epic that characteristically offers little moralizing, results in Henryson's particular style of adapting the fables. It allows him to comment on social injustice and the predatory nature of many of his animal characters without restraint. The approach also affords him the freedom to utilise brutality, vulgar humour, satire, and flamboyant language in his fables to their full effect. This, in turn, not only intends to "improve" upon the more venerable, classical source material, but in the process underlines the insufficiencies of the classical Aesopic tales in the communication of morally complex and sobering real-world oppression of the weak. Just like in the case of the classical attitude towards the well-ordered and harmonious nature, Henryson finds the Aesopic material simply insufficient at best, and misleading at worst; too tame, too straight-forward, where the reality he sees is neither of those things. Thus, preserving the important characteristic of the Aesopic source material, the *moralitas*, while also depicting a morally complex and difficult (and markedly unsatisfying, sometimes even confusing) fable, Henryson creates a unique fusion of the genres even more critical than either of them taken in relative isolation.

The way the Prologue begins promises hard intellectual labour to come over the course of the overarching narrative, requiring the reader to be a diligent plowman. The allusion seems to be overt.

In lyke maner as throw a bustious eird,

Swa it be laubourit with grit diligence,

Springis the flouris and the corne abreird

Hailsum and gude to manniss sustenance,

Sa springis thar a morall sweit sentence

Oute of the subtell dyte of poetry

To gude purposis, quha culd it weill apply. (8-14)

The images of the Prologue appears to expensively gesture towards a multitude of literary traditions upon which Henryson draws. Chaucer and Langland's nature imagery are prominent among these, and one may be compelled to see the parallels between Henryson's preoccupation with the agricultural allegories and Langland's utopia depicted in Passus VI, intended to be predicated on the morally corrective effects of working the fields. Henryson builds on these traditions, yet the pertinent modifications draw one's attention to the priorities of the *Fables*. The lines of the stanza conjure, not the divisive and divided fields teeming, full of folk as in the case of Langland's dream vision, but poetry's abundant fields providing intellectual nourishment, yielding to those who are ready to work it with diligence. The soil in line 8 is a specific, rich, fertile soil; difficult to cultivate, but offers great potential to grow

crops. Parkinson draws attention to the different manuscript traditions and connotations of the soil's quality (p. 162). The work such soil promises is arduous, but the efforts offer worthwhile outcomes in the next line. The effect becomes clearer, reading through the interpretation of Parkinson's contrasts with Chaucer's depiction of new growth emerging effortlessly from old fields, Henryson stresses the arduous effort required to cultivate the fertile yet resistant terrain of storytelling and language to yield valuable lessons. This process demands persistent labour, with the reader resembling the student trailing behind the author, absorbing knowledge like a pupil learning from a teacher.

The abundance and vigorous life which are the fruits of diligent work are immediately and overtly related to good poetry. 'Hailsum' (11), or 'wholesome', sustaining, and nourishing crops are to be grown on such soil through diligent, strenuous labour. Bodily and intellectual sustenance are conflated with one another in the imagery, the diligent and disciplined work required to produce the resulting nourishment is very similar to the intellectual and disciplinary mechanisms Langland requires to be operated by his reader and characters alike. The following words 'sustenance', as in food that is not only nourishing, but essential in its capacity to sustain one's life, and 'sentence', which means literal 'meaning' in Parkinson's glossing, a signifier that will spring forth from diligent work. These two words are coupled strongly, the line-ending words resonating with one another. The morally upright and intellectually nourishing sentence arises from the interplay between the diligent labour of the reader and the subtle beauty of the poetry Henryson proffers and the student's own intellectual hunger is to be satiated by it. The fables do not only offer nourishing intellectual sustenance, however, but also the other meaning of the word 'sentence', as a weighty, legal term, a final word in a legal trial or a court of justice. Sentence and sustenance cannot be divorced in Henryson's poetic project, underlining one's need for both.

Again, Simpson's observations remind one to remain cautious about judgements rendered over those whose world is governed by need and hunger. In the process of observing the tensions within the driving force of hunger, Henryson becomes apprehensive of the very language which is meant to communicate its ambivalence. 'Nonetheless, under the great pressure of exposing its own potential uselessness, Henryson's poetry becomes a very refined instrument to isolate the precise need for poetry against the terrible pressures of the world's relentless need' (p. 195).

The Prologue further gestures towards his Aesopic source material, while also highlighting the genre characteristics of the beast epic as well.

My author in his fabillis tellis how
 That brutal beistis spak and understude
 And to gude purpois dispute and argow,
 Ane sillogisme propone and eik conclude,
 Puttyng exempill and similitude
 How mony men in operatioun
 Ar like to beistis in conditioun. (43-9)

The stanza, although only six lines in length, could well be considered Henryson's thesis statement and blueprint for the way he constructs his fables. His animal characters' primary function is to represent, to be signs to be read and interpreted, but they also display an astonishing acumen for rhetoric. These two functions run side-by-side throughout the fables,

but their relation to one another is contradictory. The first line of the stanza refers to the intermingling of Aesopic and Reynardian traditions so prominent in Henryson's fables; and the good purpose to which the 'brutal beistis' speak, argue, and understand remains a crucial point of the fables. "Brutal" (44) is glossed as 'irrational' in modern English by Parkinson. The bestial brutality of the animal characters, however, becomes a startling characteristic of the fables yet to follow. A sinister tone finds its way into Henryson's statement when the last lines of the stanza tighten their grip on the argument, and what the actual purpose of the *Fables*. Marlin interprets the lines from the perspective of the fallen human nature.

The goal of the *Fabilles*, the narrator tells us, is to “shoow mony men in operatioun / Ar like to beistis in conditioun” (48–49). Again, the idea is thoroughly grounded in medieval anthropology: it was a commonplace that humans' appetites stemmed from an “animal soul” shared with beasts, and that the failure of the “rational soul” to govern this entity leads to sin. (p. 135)

As it has been emphasised by Simpson, Henryson's unique style of fables stems from the deliberate fusion of the more traditional Aesopic material and Reynardian material. Jill Mann categorises the former as fables and the latter as beast epics.

They usually utilise a two-part system: the fable and the moralitas, or morality explaining it. In her influential characterisation, the animal fables are generally identified by being ‘a story with a moral, it is brief, and it represents animals (or trees or plants or non-sentient objects) as talking’ (Mann, p. 29). The Aesopic fables within this greater category are characterised, in Laura Wang's reading, by being ‘generally marked by practical wisdom’ (pp. 30-1).

The distinction between the two categories and Henryson's fables moving between them serves to underline the difficulties the fabulist faces. Roderick J. Lyall observes the

significance of the tonal shift occurring between the Aesopic original and the more modern Reynardian influence in Henryson's fables. 'The introduction of elements from the beast-epic tradition contributes to this movement [the darkening moral vision] by sharpening the social focus, but also by lending a comic dimension which frequently involves a greater degree of violence than is usual in the Aesopic fable' (pp. 89-104, and 96-7). This duality of heightened humour and elevated violence can be observed in the ways the fables diverge from the tamer Aesopic material, incorporating gory details and even vulgar humour in the process. Laura Wang further underlines Lyall's statement when writing, 'Henryson's introduction of Reynardian [beast epic] material into the Fabillis does more than heighten their comic violence (...) it also accentuates the relentless brutality of nature; the driving force of necessity ('neid') in all actions and relationships; and the openness of ethical discourse to exploitation' (p. 30). Need, the constant need to feed to be precise, can thus be identified as the central driving force of the fabular ecosystem. The way the animal characters negotiate their natural need to do so, I would argue, is where Henryson's social commentary can be located. In that interface of animal nature and the human proclivity of greed and overconsumption, the artifice of language, law, and morality predicated on human categories is the setting in which Henryson's fables operate. The callous playfulness of the predator is not a natural category, but entirely human. A recognition characteristic of that is the active, even playful subversion of disciplinary dynamics surrounding the Christian body, pressed into service of predatory hunger.

This point is further underlined by Jill Mann's influential observation, which describes these seemingly opposing dynamics Henryson incorporates:

Despite breaking the 'rules' of beast fable in these ways, Henryson manages to conclude his narratives in a way that turns epic 'game' back into fable 'earnest';

as in traditional fable, verbal elaboration is replaced by harsh physical reality. (p. 281)

This, again, is one of the most startling qualities of the Fables, and it time and time again underlines the bleakness of the setting, where bestial hunger, overtly or covertly, seems to always triumph over disciplinary mechanisms that should, in theory, prevent that very thing.

The linguistic abundance characterising the Reynardian beast epics is one Henryson utilises to its fullest extent. The brutal beasts truly speak and understand, as the Prologue states. They offer the whole internal universe of emotions and cognition through their ability to speak and argue with one another, allowing themselves to be, for lack of a better term, humanised despite their animal nature. Sooner or later, however, their eloquence gets abruptly terminated by a harsh physical reality that imposes on it the closure characteristic of fable. The brutality intrudes on the process of reasoning, and the animal with the stronger hunger and greater ruthlessness wins (Simpson, *Consuming Ethics*, pp. 321–36).

Not even the characteristic elements of the fables, the moralities (*moralitas*) provided at the end of the tales explaining the reader the moral message of the stories, offer a clear way out of the often bleak moral landscape. Language appears to be anything but sufficient to prevent brutal conclusions within the fables, and Henryson's narrator is left to apply moral principles to the often-gory outcomes of the tales in the end. Chad Schrock surveys the critical field when he offers a bleak outlook on the instrumental part of the beast fables, their finishing moralities. The act of poeticising worldly injustice, and the very language of the poem through which it is communicated, becomes an instrument to 'resistance in the Fables both to the vicious and carnivorous beast habitat of the fables themselves and to the troubled fifteenth-century Scottish political, legal, and social systems to which both fables and morals refer' (Schrock, p. 330).

The Prologue of the Fables further elucidates the interconnected categories of lust and appetite transforming the person into beasts.

Na mervell is ane man be lyke ane beist

Quhilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyte

That schame cannot him renye nor arreist

Bot takis all the lust and appetyte

Quhilk throw custum and the daylie ryte

Syne in the mynd sa fast is radicate

That he in brutal beist is transformate. (Prologue 50-56)

This stanza can be considered the continuation of the point made in the previous one. Here, however, Henryson directs his attention to another aspect of undisciplined hunger and sin's bestial nature. There is little room left for negotiation in the point-blank address of Henryson's wry remark "na mervell is ane man be lyke ane beist" (50) falls heavily in the first lines of the stanza. He is not surprised, and the reader should not be either, about the potential transformation taking place, at this stage only likening man to beast. This poetic affordance of likeness, however, will not persist long into the stanza, which will close with the unambiguous words of "transformate". In Henryson's interpretation, the appetites (carnal, and otherwise, the emphasis resting solidly on the lust and 'appetyte') are not only a problem on their own, but the very act of normalisation renders the person monstrous, literally transforming one into a beast (Moses, *Lyrical Liars*, pp. 27-48). The sin of voracious excess

is of course habitual and repeatedly normalised, as Peter 2:22 warns one, employing the vivid imagery of a greedy dog returning to its vomit. The image, however graphic it may be, is only part of Henryson's scathing criticism.

His outlook on sin's capacity to transform one into an animal is especially noteworthy. The Prologue's assertion of sin turning a human into an animal becomes especially poignant when viewed from the perspective of the poet's contemporaries. Wang further emphasises the exceptionally damning outlook of sinfulness in this context. She contrasts the fables with the wider literary context of the period, both scriptural and vernacular, from the perspective of the postlapsarian degradation. Wang draws attention to the impactful nature of this description, emphasising the gravitas of the statement, further highlighting not only the scriptural reference, but also the fact that 'The furthest [Henryson] ventures in describing the degrading effect of sin is to quote from Psalm 48:21, 'Man when he was in honour did not understand: he hath been compared to senseless beasts, and made like to them' (3, 110). Likewise, [Sir Gilbert] Hay compares certain aspects of men to select aspects of beasts, but *never equates the two* [my emphasis]' (Wang, p. 30). Crossing the line of equating men to beast is perhaps a step too far for many a contemporary intellectual of the period. Even in the most forceful moral consternation, the two contemporaries of Henryson appear to remain insistent on the unquestionable human supremacy over the domain of the brute beasts and the natural world. Not so Henryson himself; the lines of the Prologue mark a more radical, more impactful demarcation of thematic choice and critical approach to the nature of habitual sin's degrading potential. The conclusion Wang draws is an important one. It contrasts Henryson's approach with Sir Gilbert Hay's comparatively daring foray into the depths of beastly morality, concluding: 'Henryson, on the other hand, turns simile into metaphor, moving from 'lyke' to 'transformate' in six lines. By habitually giving himself over to sin, man becomes a beast' (Wang, p. 30).

The turn from simile into metaphor propels the form of literary investigation from the realm of theoretical framework meditating on the nature of sin to point-blank accusation. The device, the deliberate choice of “transformate” furthers the wry tone; the beginning of the stanza ‘Na mervell’ (50), ‘no wonder’ is a wry admission that habitual sin literally has the transformative capacity divesting the practising human from its birthright to the name, pushing them into the category of beasts.

This notion is further underlined as the prologue progresses, concluding in ‘Quhilk lufis ay carnall and foull delyte’ (51). The line ending rhyme rolls over in an insistent linking of concepts, establishing the strong chain of causality, locating the cluster of concepts inherent to habitual sin, the poor governance of one’s urges. The men rendered so inhuman in their habitual exercise of sin (both actively sinning and passively letting habitual sin to corrupt them), that they resemble (or markedly are transformed to) brutal beasts, who love carnall and foull delyte ‘lust and appetite’ are strongly rhymed with ‘custum and daily rite’ (53-54). Here a synonym of “custum and the daily rite” might be apparent for the period’s reader, directing the attention insistently towards a stratum of meanings intimately familiar to the student of the times. The practice of everyday disciplinary actions, which may even appear to be mundane, in order to achieve the very opposite effect of one giving oneself over to the delight of ‘lust and appetite’. Lyall points out that Henryson, like Gregory of Rimini, Bradwardine, and Ireland, puts ‘much greater stress upon the habit of sin’ than Thomas Aquinas, ‘for whom habitus is a positive term referring to the disposition to virtue deriving from the operation of grace’ (Lyall, pp. 83-94).

One may make the argument that this very mundanity of sin, a corrosion of discipline is a crucial mechanism of Henryson’s fables, where sin is not only a spectacular explosion of visible and tangible graphic violence but a progress of seemingly inconsequential decisions eroding grace and discipline; indeed, the inverse of Aquinas’s positive outlook on the habitual

operation of grace. The expression *habitus* is an operative word when it comes to interpreting hunger's disciplinary aspects, and Henryson, again, deliberately leads the reader to them. Hungers and appetites do not occur in an infrequent manner, but the sedition their poor governance represents is, in Henryson's reading, a question of normalisation, a question of everyday practice. *Habitus* is the fitting word to describe that progressive condition.

The manifold meanings of the term *habitus* in the context of the period's mindset would be difficult to breach (ranging from the literal perception of habits to clothing), but Katharine Breen offers in her extensive exploration of the topic.² The most pertinent elements of her discussion mark *habitus* — the word that has been applied from pieces of garment to both negative and positive habits to a wide range of behaviours and actions connecting body and soul — as Bourdieu “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” (*Imagining*, p. 6). In Laura Wang's summary sin and *habitus* are finally synthesised, giving an outline to the perils of bestial hunger's corruptive capacity in the context of Henryson's *Fables*. 'Indeed, on several occasions in the *Fabillis*, Henryson conveys the degrading effects of habitual sin: the reason is blinded, the conscience desensitized' (p. 30).

In this context one may observe the fables these dynamics most prominently in Henryson's collection of fables. They explore the uncomfortable truth conveyed by their animal characters, locating the origins of worldly evil in callous disregard and complacency, not dissimilar to the sleeping dogs of *Piers Plowman* being in charge of the flock. The fables which will be observed in this chapter all feature characters who have either become desensitised towards sin through their habitual exercise of the opposite of moral principles, or

² There is a strong connection between the *habitus* and *Piers Plowman* as well. The efforts of Piers to form “a vernacular habitus” through the performative symbolism of pilgrimage and penance (Breen, *Machines of the Mind*, p. 220)

are actively taking part in it. For them it is, as the Prologue emphasises, customary, and daily occurrence to, at best, disregard moral principles, and at worst, to actively subvert them in the service of their own stomachs. In this process they become more bestial than beast themselves.

Before narrowing the focus on the canine characters, it is useful to observe that Henryson's collection of fables focuses on the universal urge of bestial hunger, and the tensions which its control entails. The first three tales in the collection of Henryson's fables are animated by the thematic inclusion of hunger. The titular cock of the very first tale of the 'Cock and the Jasp' is a character most concerned with the tensions between hunger's biological and spiritual manifestations when he considers eating the jasp, the precious stone, found on the dung heap. The practically minded fowl proves to be perceptive when he contemplates the actual nutritional value of the gemstone with which he is presented before concluding: 'For houngrie men may not weil leif on lukis.' (104). His bodily need of hunger is not simply immediate but could only be satisfied with something like the grain, 'corne' (94), found in the earlier lines of the Prologue. No matter the enticing shine of the jasp, its symbolic significance, transcendent beauty, or even the medicinal effects that the period's natural philosopher might attribute to it, birds simply cannot eat it. Despite the many interpretations of what is and is not important in the fable (in which question the fable's *moralitas* is not simply unhelpful but is actively confusing), the cock is not an idle thinker, nor is he to be easily disregarded by the reader. Hunger seems to work exactly in reverse from the characters featured in the preceding fables and provides him with clarity to disregard the shining and enticing jasp as nothing but a malnutritious distraction from the pressing biological need to feed. James Goldstein defends the bird's thought process as 'impeccable' and interprets the fable from the disciplinary perspective of bodily hunger aligning the rooster-become-natural-philosopher and the reader (*Discipline and Relaxation*, p. 607).

Something similar, I would argue, will also occur in the case of ‘The Paddock and the Mouse’, the final tale of the fable collection, only with the tragic reversal of the mouse’s otherwise logical reasoning being foiled by the insistent imperative of hunger.

In the case of ‘The Cock and the Jasp’ Goldstein observes that the otherwise seemingly straightforward enjoyment of reading these fables is coloured by the ways the mechanisms of discipline impinge upon such enjoyment. One’s own hunger renders the fables to be considered as nothing but fables, devoid of the dimension of corporeal needs, the complex moral and corporal universe contingent on their genre. Thus, one is compelled to heed the advice of the cock, no matter how much one wishes to hold the fable at a comfortable aesthetic distance as only a fable. The disciplinary mechanisms, connected to one’s urges and needs, seem to intrude into these neatly ordered, ostensibly simple narratives. The infiltration is not dissimilar to the ways the characters of Hunger and Need disturb the moral universe of *Piers Plowman*, and even intrude on the Will’s own body modulating the narrative trajectory of the dream vision. Goldstein underlines this point, when writing:

The disciplinary mechanisms correcting the fiction are calculated to thwart the enjoyment incited by the fable. Yet as creatures who know hunger and need, readers cannot entirely abandon the rooster’s perspective so long as we occupy our bodies. (p. 607)

This prevention of escapist enjoyment is a striking characteristic of Henryson’s Fables. It reminds the reader that they and the fabular rooster both inhabit needy, earthly bodies, which insistently require nourishment and influence’s one’s actions. The jasp’s splendour, which in turn corresponds with the pure intellectual process, and the enjoyment of the fables prove to be, the reminder of hunger and need, the cold realities of the world both inside and outside the fabular ecosystem insistently intrude on the process of intellectualising.

Neither the reader nor the Cock are afforded the luxury to *not* be influenced by their earthly bodies. Hunger enjoys precedent in the fable. This motif will be further developed and accentuated through the following fables, which offer increasingly uncomfortable conclusions as the fable collection progresses. The following fables are a case in point, introducing a character who can run laps around all others in the fables, yet even he cannot escape the harsh realities hunger ultimately means.

III. 2. 'The Fox and the Wolf'

III. 2. 1. Introduction to the Fox's Character

'The Fox and the Wolf' is the centrepiece of the following section. It is a fable which showcases the depths of subversion and exploitation of the supposedly most heightened register of scripture and sacrament by Henryson's canines. The fable is positioned between 'The Cock and the Fox', a retelling of Chaucer's 'Nun's Priest's Tale', and 'The Trial of the Fox', a tale resembling both the *Parliament of Fowls* and a tale from *Synergises* and *Roman de Renart* (Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 283). In the fable the fox endeavours to exploit all possible angles in his attempt to justify his actions, even in the face of an ostensibly penitential narrative. In James Simpon's reading the tale is 'a sequence from the *Fables* that would appear to undo the poetic project altogether, as it exposes the gratuitousness of all moralizing talk about a dog-eat-dog world driven by hunger' (*And that was litel nede*, p. 197). The contamination of the subversive camouflage does not remain contained within the fables, but threaten to flow over into the very narrative's reader and author themselves. As Simpson observes, 'The fox of beast epic exposes and capitalizes on the potential violence of writing, and the self-delusions of reading. Narratives about him are, in short, unnormalized because they are, effectively, unformalizable' (*And that was litel nede*, p. 197). The fox is, therefore, a character through whom one may demonstrate this difficulty of moralisation depicted by the fables. Natural behaviour and natural urges interact with the human categories of camouflaged sin, guilt, and rapacious consumption, seeking to be legitimised by the deployment of language.

In the fable, the fox is entertainingly dexterous in his artistry to escape any consequences of his actions, while simultaneously lessening the penitential abstinence from meat as much as he can. The Reynardian tale features both the main characters of Henryson's fables and the protagonists of Reynardian and Ysengrim fables, featuring the fox and the wolf. Their interactions and dynamics are rewarding to observe as they expose the disposable gratuitousness of language camouflaging predatory urges.

The Fox remains the most important character in the expression of the basic tenets governing the fabular ecosystem's food chain. In it hunger and rapacity do not simply become the governing principle of every action; they expose the underlying dynamics perpetuated by the powerful to exploit the weak. James Simpson, characteristically, observes the dynamic communicated in the language of consumption. The very ethics meant to govern and discipline one's behaviour become a disposable commodity in this process. Laura Wang further underlines the notion, when writing about the fox's character. '[T]he environment of the *Fabillis*, the animal kingdom, turns out to be fundamentally indifferent to its ideals; and so, by implication, is the human realm. In its place reigns the law of the jungle, where insatiable appetite and brute force rule the day' (p. 31).

'The Fox and the Wolf' is a fable of undoing, subversion, and subterfuge. A post-modernist critic may perceive the process as 'deconstruction' but that is not necessarily an attitude the period of the Middle Ages can be associated with. The tale can be categorised within the literary context in various ways, but the reversal of ethics is pivotal in its interpretation, as Simpson's observation emphasises. 'The Fox and the Wolf' undoes sacramental practice' (p. 197). It is widely perceived as a Reynardian fable (characterised by its fabliaux-like, sometimes vulgar humour and heightened sense of violence), but its position within the collection of Henryson's fables is also useful to observe in order to identify further thematic currents. MacQueen categorises the three fables featuring the fox as one cohesive

narrative unit, uniquely concerned with hunger's role and the different facets of the motif. 'Henryson regarded three of his animal tales – 'The Cock and the Fox', 'The Fox and the Wolf', and 'The Trial of the Fox' – as forming a continuous narrative unit, a miniature beast-epic in three branches' (pp. 224-5).

MacQueen's argument identifies the three branches of hunger influencing the fox's escapades, which in turn he characterises as the "process of degeneracy", the gradual moral decay. This critical categorisation is a useful interpretive approach when this thesis and its reading of the tales are concerned. Indeed, one of the main manuscript sources of Henryson's *Fables*, the Bannatyne Manuscript, sees these three fables separated from the rest of the collection, comprising their own miniature narrative arc. The three branches of narratives differentiated by MacQueen appear to be predominantly concerned with rapacious hunger and its function within the spiritual ecosystem of the fables. 'In the first branch, [the fox's] evil scheme is the consequence of bodily hunger. In the second bodily needs are important in themselves, but they also force him to violate a spiritual compact – [the fox] sins in the soul as well as the body' (pp. 224-5). In this first branch, the reader is introduced to the prominent character of the fox, and receive an outline to his *modus operandi*. From the perspective of hunger, as MacQueen's argument suggests, it establishes the linear causality between Lawrence's evil deeds motivated by hunger, serving as a critical framework upon which Henryson iterates in the following misadventures of the fox throughout the *Fables*.

III. 2. 2. 'The Cock and the Fox'

After the next, similarly hunger-focused fable in the collection of 'The Two Mice', follows the Chaucerian tale of 'The Cock and the Fox'. The fable, beside of focusing on

hunger as well, introduces the character of the Lawrence the fox (arguably the protagonist of Henryson's fables and one of the primary characters exhibiting hunger in the narratives) and displays how the performative magic of prayer works perfectly, as intended. The emphasis may be puzzling but scriptural and legal language will become primary vehicles which predatory hunger will exploit throughout the fables. Language meant to defend the innocent will in turn become the very weapon the predator will wield the most dexterously and efficiently. Here, when the fox finally seizes the self-assured Chantecleir, language becomes the eloquent bird's final line of defence against the predator. MacQueen observes, that 'Chantecleir appears to sympathize with the fox's hunger and weariness while maintaining the fiction that the two are joined by a bond of friendship' (p. 212). Chantecleir's words are compassionate and emotionally charged, speaking directly to the fox's hunger.

Then spak the cok with sum gude spirit inspyrit,
 "Do my counsall and I sall warrand thee.
 Hungrie thow art and for grit travell tyrit,
 Richt faint of force and may not ferther fle.
 Swyith turne agane and say that I and ye
 Freindis ar maid and fellowis for ane yeir.
 Than will thay stint, I stand for it, and not steir." (558–64)

The fox opens his mouth to answer the heartfelt plea, making Chantecleir free to escape. 'The fox, although he has been duped by the use of his own technique, shows his degeneracy by a clumsy repetition, thus confirming that "falset failyies ay at the latter end" (568)' (MacQueen, p. 212). Naturally, there is little sympathy from the bird that was about to be eaten, but the fox is overcome by greed, his reason blinded in the process. The concluding

lines of the fable mark Lawrence's determination not to fall prey to legal interpretation ever again: "I wes mair fule," quod he, "coud nocht be still / But spake to put my pray into pleid." (581-2).

Although Chantecler is vain and shallow, he displays a capacity to learn from his own mistakes. The fox, however, will demonstrate the failure of the fallen earthly body's hunger to mute the voice of discipline and self-control, which prevents him from learning, from ultimately synthesising his experience in a useful way. In the end, he admonishes himself for engaging in formal discourse with the cock and concludes that he will not fall into the same trap again. Parkinson observes the fox's growing determination propelling him onward into his later adventures.

The lesson the fox derives from his loss is that a thief ought not to engage in formal dispute mechanisms like honest people, but just be a thief and make off with the goods. He has been fooled into acting on the values he had previously manipulated to catch Chantecler. (Notes on line 582, p. 171)

Similarly, Jill Mann posits that the ending of the tale of the 'Fox and the Cock' 'teach[es] the distrust of speech that characterizes fable' (p. 292). Yet, if not speech and cunning, then what is there for the fox to trust? The increasingly insistent question becomes even more pertinent when the following fable establishes not only a linear causality chain between evil deeds and punishment, but the ways the very language of sacrament becomes perverted in the service of the powerful and their all-encompassing hunger.

III. 2. 3. ‘The Fox and the Wolf’

The beginning of the next fable, ‘The Fox and the Wolf’, finds Lawrence in this unsettled, existentially challenged state, wandering the wilderness and gazing up at the stars for a sign to be given. The fable starts with a sweeping survey of the heavens, lending a mockingly epicized, grandiose astrological gravitas to the “fatal aventure and destenie that to this foxe befell” (616-7). The words resonate with the implied uncertain outcome, which Schrock observes. ‘[B]alancing the deterministic word *destenie* with its near-synonym *aventure*, which often indicates chance and whim. The fox picks up that binary himself: “My destenie and eik my weird I watt, / My aventure is cleirlie to me kend” (649–50)’ (Schrock, p. 338). The unlikely penitent pilgrim, the Dante-esque, and perhaps even Christ-like figure of the fox, driven by hunger thus wanders the wilderness in search of meaning and sustenance.

Despite the fox’s investigative gaze, the otherwise reliable heavenly signifiers become another prey to bestial hunger’s influence. The celestial opening provides the fable with a framework of signs predicated on divine providence, providing one with trustworthy semantic ground to stand upon. Lawrence, however, from the very outset of the fable and even in ‘The Cock and the Fox’ overtly tries to subvert this system, turn and direct it in a way that serve him and his belly. The primary way he achieves this goal is through language, providing an effective, although decidedly thin camouflage to his intentions. To this camouflage he will cling stubbornly to the very end, manipulating and exploiting it to fulfil the call of his own hungry stomach. The discarding of the gratuitous linguistic camouflage will occur in the tale explored next in the thesis, where the wolf demonstrates its gratuitousness in an instance of chilling

violence. The fox, a masterful and consummate rhetorician, on the other hand, luxuriates in the power of language, and the fable stands testimony to their propensity.

Indeed, both the very natural hunger and its artificial camouflage are two crucial and interconnected characteristics of Lawrence. It has been briefly observed that this is far from his first adventure motivated by hunger within Henryson's collection of fables. The wider literary context of the source material helps to further orient Lawrence's character (Reynard, or Renart by any other name) and motivations in the context of hunger and its manifestations. Jacques Le Goff, a prominent observer of medieval hunger in literature, inserts the observations on the *Roman de Renart* in the middle of his much larger discussion on the topic within the period.

[The *Roman de Renart* is] a drama, an epic of hunger, it shows us Renart, his family, and his companions ceaselessly impelled by the call of their empty bellies. The driving force of almost all the branches of the cycle is omnipresent and omnipotent hunger - the motive for Renart's cunning. Thus, impelled he steals hams, herrings, eels, and cheese from the crow, and chases hens and other birds. (Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization, 400-1500*, p. 231)³

Jill Mann, perhaps the most influential observer of the Reynardian traditions in Henryson's *Fables*, provides a legion of strong stylistic and thematic links between Renart and Lawrence. She also acknowledges Le Goff's positioning of Renart as a character particularly governed and motivated by hunger, someone who embodies the different dynamics the motif may offer. Her argument also helps in a circumspect way to link *aventure* or *aventure* with the

³ Le Goff also links the shifting literary interests embodied in the fox Renart and his family eventually becoming lords and ladies, the focus progressing to hunger writ large upon the bodies of giants. "Already the *chansons de geste* had made way for giants with huge appetites-close to peasant legends, ancestors of Pantagruel, brothers of the ogres. ". As it has been emphasised in the chapter discussing Sir Gowther's gigantic heritage, one may find these characters linked by their strong driving imperative of bodily hunger.

fox's hunger being his main driving force, the strongest and most immediate of catalysts when it comes to bestial excursions into the world. Mann's explanation extracts Renart/Lawrence from the world of romance and places him and his *aventure* in a world where he needs to identify a guiding principal framework and orient himself accordingly.

It is bodily need, not an idealistic confrontation with danger and difficulty, that drives Renart out into the world. So, when he shrugs off the threat of danger (...) the word 'aventure' is divested of its romance connotations and returned to the everyday world of random events. (*From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 224-5).

However comically grandiose it may feel to equate the fox's wandering of the wilderness after his unsuccessful raid on the chicken coop with that of the penitent knight errant's self-reflective quest, they both may fall under the designation of *aventure*. The world may indeed ring familiar to a reader of knightly romances, especially that of Sir Gowther. He too ventures into the wilderness on an *aventure*, a deliberate act of leaving society's confines behind to confront his own urges and the ways to finally discipline them to become an accepted member of human society upon his return. Lawrence has something similar in mind, although his ideals are much less lofty, his goals much less transcendent. His plan, however, is very much coloured by the practical instrumentality so characteristic of the fox's figure: he needs salvation and needs it fast. In the serene setting of the wilderness befitting of a classical *aventure*, driven by hunger and his earlier failure to devour Chanticleer in the preceding tale (which conditions are may indeed appear one and the same), Lawrence is forced to contemplate the fate of his soul after the humiliation he has suffered, and the hunger he still suffers from. The rough terrain of the wilderness he traverses (625-28) seems to anticipate the various features which will provide the setting for the upcoming happenings, but also evokes the dark forest of the *Divine Comedy*: a place of profound existential contemplation where one's way forward is shrouded and unclear. Observing the sky above, the fox seems to teeter

between rationality and instinct, caught between the two dynamics of his fabulised character: artifice and nature interface in both his surroundings and his depiction. Although lacking the sophisticated instruments of the trade (642-3) the fox is apt in negotiating the complicated subject of astrology formerly invoked by Henryson himself when describing the setting and the turning stars above in surprising, epic detail (621-41) (Parkinson, commentary on lines 625-28 and 642-43 p. 172). In Jill Mann's reading, however, the fox is capable of such interpretations of natural signs because he has been, like Chauntecleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, taught by Nature to read the heavens (p. 281). Indeed, the fox needs to get along surprisingly well without any artificial aid. Or, at least, he seems so ('But astrolab, quadrant, or almanak, / Teichit of nature be instructioun' (642-3)). The two categories of nature and artifice interface in the scene as the unlikely penitent is trying his best to glean insight into a future which lets him most easily off the hook. In his hurry to interpret the signs, however, the fox also overlooks signs which would warn him of his fatal future misadventure.

The outcome of the astrological investigation is thus inconclusive. Schrock observes the puzzling and rather improbable observations the fox makes of the surprisingly detailed heavens in the fable. 'Accurately communicating the natural outcome of the fox's unnatural behaviour has twisted the [providentially influenced] celestial language into an impossibly garbled accent' (p. 337). The dialogism of the situation, the conversation between the artifice of performative language and the physical reality thus becomes a pivotal dynamic in the establishing stanzas of the fable, which in turn foreshadow the gregarious canine's fatal 'aventure and destenie' (616-7). His interpretation of the astrological signs is as ingenious as it is ultimately dangerous. The fox in his haste and hunger overlooks the sign of the Sagittarius foreshadowing his fate. Schrock sees this as a case in point, further highlighting the vulpine astrologer's propensity to twist language to his advantage, representing the

dichotomy of the character and establishing his later misuse of the performative magic of the sacrament.

The fox's response is at once his masterstroke and his mistake. Warned by celestial language that permits his penitent response, he systematically manipulates earthly manifestations of divine linguistic power—the sacraments of confession and baptism—in order to retain their divine performativity but eliminate actual divine agency and the exposure of his own intention. (p. 339)

The fox remains bound by the blinding earthly pull of his hunger, rendering his position precarious, and just as unstable as his language. He is nothing but self-serving, his moral reflection upon his sinful life very much performative in nature: the performance relegated to the dimension of facades and camouflage instead of an authentic expression of existential peril.

In his following long and dramatic lament (648-62) he expresses his regret over not obtaining an education at school, his shame, and (in his opinion) the fundamentally misunderstood profession of thieves. His speech is quite impossible to take seriously, but the gusto and dexterity with which he performs it is nothing short of prodigious. Simpson places the emphasis on the dimension of appearances when observing the fox's moral dilemma. '[T]he fox 'seems' to experience remorse, since everything in this narrative, except hunger and power relations, is only apparent, and comically apparent at that' (*And there was litel nede*, p. 197). Within the larger fabular context of Henryson's fables the fox is the most prominent character occupying the dimension of appearances and camouflage. He indeed 'seems' many things, but remains, fundamentally, subservient to his own interests, his own impulses. His predicament is performative, 'gameful' even as Simpson suggests.

In emphasising his education and evidently luxuriating in the language the fox's character provides, Henryson identifies him as a fellow academic, drawing more attention to the precarious nature of performative language. The poet himself is also one dealing in the same linguistic obfuscation and dangerously slippery rhetoric, after all. As Schrock remarks in relation to the linguistic camouflage of the fox, there is a string of easily observable words connecting the fox's character and Henryson as participants of slippery language, inconsistencies of representation (figurative language) and outright fraud committed through falsifying, a sort of linguistic forgery: 'feigning', which word resonates throughout Henryson's Fables from the very beginning of its Prologue. (p. 332) Ultimately, however, language remains an instrument of the powerful; camouflage for hunger and a tool to be leveraged against the docile prey to justify the self-same hunger.

In this world, its fox and wolf in power, language is nothing but a tool that vicious intention uses for camouflage and violence. If not even the sacraments, signs instituted and guaranteed by God can hold up to the fox's hunger or his playful villainy, no language can. (Schrock, pp. 331-2)

As the fable progresses the fox concludes his somewhat inconclusive astrological meditation and sets out to find a confessor. In his need and inclination to twist natural signs to his advantage, he (rather unsurprisingly) immediately finds just the thing he needs. An unlikely confessor in the shape of a wolf emerges from the nearby "craig", or a shaded cave perfectly designed for a hermit (664). Lawrence practically pounces at the opportunity the wolf represents, and immediately starts to match the reality of a fellow canine predator (arguably the other, even more vicious protagonist of the fables) with the performative narrative constructed in his head that would allow him to wriggle out of his existentially threatening predicament. The description of the inherently

untrustworthy lupine friar emerging from the darkness mouthing his prayer in the ominously numbered line (666) is as sinister as it is entertaining.

Ane worthie doctour of divinitie,
 Freir Wolff Waitskaith, in science wonder sle,
 To preiche and pray wes new cum fra the closter
 With beidis in hand, sayand his Pater Noster. (666-669)

The doctor of divinity, Friar Wolf Waitskhaith, or “Do-Harm” appears in the fable, providing the perfect opportunity for the fox. While one may immediately perceive the conflict of interests in the fox seeking penance from his fellow canine predator, the problem is far more complicated than the wolf’s role as a confessor. John Marlin is quick to point out the cultural resonance of the lupine clergyman in the period. ‘The depiction of the wolf as a clergyman would stir expectations to anyone acquainted with the antifraternial tradition, and it seems ripe for allegorical explication’ (p. 140). As Marlin emphasises, a wide array of allegorical meanings is presented by Henryson in the image of the clerical canine in this scene. From the perspective of the thesis, the unlikely friar serves as a critical continuation of the clerical canine observed in the case of *Piers Plowman*, serving to further accentuate the image of the malevolent mendicant. The principal unease about the priestly predator comes down to the interpretation and indeed misinterpretation of signs and tales, which is one of the crucial thematic elements of the fable. Goldstein argues that the pedagogical, nearly meta-poetical tone permeating the wolf’s voice is applicable to the teacher-confessor role prescribed by the Fourth Lateran Council (p. 607). If Henryson’s attitude was formerly ambiguous towards the fox by association as a fellow teller of tall tales, he also cannot stop his

anxieties about the wolf, whom he identifies as one of the fellow 'teachers, who interpret fables' (Wheatley, *Mastering Aesop*, p. 179).

Furthermore, the meta-poetical references reach back to the Prologue of the Fables, and the following fable of the 'Trial of the Fox', featuring the illegitimate son of Lawrence standing trial in his father's stead. Henderson offers a compelling explanation.

Henryson supplies a religious sanction for this process of seeking the "Sad sentence" that lies "vnder ane fabill figurall" (1099-1100). He asks the reader to do, in effect, "As daylie dois the doctouris of deuyne" (1101). But where are we readers to find the rules for this serious game? For Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, interpreting the things mentioned in the Bible is an active reasoning process based on similarities. (p. 74)

The rules of the game are all seem to be written by the conniving canines, as the following stanzas will demonstrate. Basing one's interpretation of signs slavishly on similarities is a dangerous game indeed, as the fox will presently demonstrate. And it is indeed especially true, when it comes to dealing with doctors of divinity and the interpretations they supply, as Henryson seems to warn his reader.

The fox in his dire need for a confessor seizes on the opportunity provided by the wolf's sudden appearance. He immediately starts verbally converting the signs into his interpretation (allowing the performative magic of language to do most of the heavy lifting): the grey fur, the lean and pale cheeks and bare feet to the visual signifiers of a Franciscan confessor, a most convenient overlap when it comes to the fox's situation. In his interpretation of the signs, the wolf's lean and hungry appearance serves as a spiritual guiding light ('Ye ar the lanterne and the sicker way' (677)), the hollow cheeks

not dissimilar to the lantern-like face Hunger's ravages given to Bretoner until the end of his life in the Hunger episode (*PP*. VI.174-80). Hunger, similarly, proves to be a poor spiritual cleanser in the case of Friar Waitaskaith as well. As the fox further surveys his confessor in a desperate parody of the Petrarchan blazon, bare feet and grey fur become the rough-spun grey cowl (678), the lean and pale cheeks (679) (strong visual signifiers of hunger themselves) indubitable signifiers of the mendicant friar. The fox is one for reversals, and not only morals, but the signified meaning of signs also sees themselves inverted by him. One, however, may well suspect that such arbitrary interpretations may not end well for Lawrence, who makes them without any precaution. Schrock even goes as far as to say that '[h]is holiness is not only perfect but also reliably shown through the physique that would denote ferocity and strike fear without the fox's interpretive words' (p. 341). Thus, the image of the ferocious friar is a veritable representation of not only bestial hunger but also its permissive dimension through the language of sacrament, with which the wolf will naturally go along. The conversation taking place between the vulpine penitent and the lupine confessor is emblematic of the way bestial hunger infiltrates, subverts, and perverts a framework that is explicitly supposed to be a shield against the ravages of such impulses.

Although the signs presented in the narrative are inherently unreliable, the fox chooses to interpret them as trustworthy, perpetuating the semiotic fiction that suits his deceptive purposes. This manipulation is further exemplified when the wolf, playing the role of an orthodox confessor, fits so seamlessly into the fox's narrative that he seems designed for the role. Despite his acceptance of the fox as a potential penitent, the wolf appears to maintain his integrity, diligently correcting the fox on procedural aspects of confession and refraining from corruption, even blandly acknowledging the fox's true nature by calling him a "shrew" (704). Schrock points out that there is no

offer or exchange of bribes: the entirely fictitious exchange's pretence does not require it, and the transactional simply does not enter into the theatre of the penitential. Despite no sign of authenticity or sincerity the sacrament appears to take effect because the *words* fit the appropriate formula.

Convention, not intention, activates their performativity. They are verbal magic, possessing a power adrift from the authority or motives of their manipulator. This amoral verbal magic is the fox's attempt to answer persuasively his moral judgment through the stars while remaining an immoral beast in an immoral bestial world. (Schrock, p. 341)

There is an element of initially puzzling, seemingly wilful bending of the rules becoming progressively apparent in the fable, the way something 'seems' on the surface, yet is little more than a thin veneer, a flimsy, yet most convenient conceit exploited by the powerful for their gain. One simply cannot accept the fiction the fox provides, yet the interpretive magic of his words come to effect regardless. The natural greyness of the wolf's pelt moves the Fox to not simply "go along" with the image of his unlikely confessor, his fellow canine predator, but he wilfully twists the interpretation to its maximum limit. The way the tensile strength of the image of the wolf as a confessor is tested to its limit aligns with the tone of the fable.

Jill Mann emphasises one peculiarity of the fable: the Fox's willingness to accept the incongruous appearance in order to further his own gain, however unlikely the evidence may be. The faith in the value of linguistic "performative magic" encapsulated in the words spoken and symbols observed proves to be a fatal shortcoming. In the case of the 'nekhering' (a Scots pun, meaning a certain kind of herring, or fish, and a heavy blow to the nape of the neck (Parkinson, p. 190)) the Wolf receives in 'The Fox, the

Wolf, and the Cadger’, in Mann’s reading, ‘the wolf is swayed by the hope of food and so allows himself to put faith in an empty verbal formula’ (*From Aesop to Reynard* p. 279). The hope for food, the satisfaction of the rapacious canine hunger, erodes all restraint. The effect blinds the hungry canine to the collection of contradictory attributes of the situation. Relinquishing control to the performative magic of the verbal formula, however, only further emphasises the double-edged nature of the linguistic camouflage so emphasised by Mann. The method is effective, but only with caveats. ‘Ineffective when they offer resistance to the fulfilment of the listener's hopes and desires, words instantaneously acquire a magic effect when they harmonize with his wishes’ (p. 279). Hunger remains an imperative, which left unchecked has the capacity to override the otherwise seemingly strenuous logic of the wolf, lending substance to the formerly hollow promises of the fox in the process. The wilful ignorance and the opportunistic pouncing at the seemingly providential alignment of circumstances as a characteristic of habitual sin originating in a lack of insight (“consuetude”) is one of the main thematic strands connecting the fables and one that will also result in brutality, the Reynardian aspect of the fables.

In the ‘Reynardian’ fables rhetorical elaboration is accorded even greater space, and it often seems that linguistic exuberance is going to be allowed the dominance that it enjoys in beast epic. Sooner or later, however, it is abruptly terminated by a harsh physical reality that imposes on it the closure characteristic of the fable. In several fables, this move to closure is presented as a sudden shift from ‘game’ to ‘earnest’. (*From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 281)

Before violence crashes down, however, the game is already well afoot when the fox prostrates himself in front of the Wolf, who even wryly asks: “Ha,” quod the wolff, “schir tod, for quhat effek mak ye sic feir? (674-5), “feir” glossed by Parkinson as

“putting up an act” (p. 46). The wolf rightly identifies the fox’s disinclination to actually repent, yet until the performative boxes are checked he is more than willing to go along with his penitential pantomime.

The fox continues the insistent verbal handwringing, beseeching the unlikely frater to hear his confession, for, as he puts it “My conscience that prikkis me sa sair.” (690). While the line is pregnant with foreshadowing the Wolf asks the Fox whether he really repents his sins. Before the confession occurs Henryson’s narrator also goes along the play of the fox, by withdrawing in a sensitive manner (694–6). He upholds the secrecy of the makeshift confessional by not relaying the fox’s *actual* confession (one may only imagine the linguistic acrobatics the fox may execute in the process). The answer to the question of whether the fox repents is far from satisfactory in essence but will do for now. The Fox describes the delicious honey-sweetness of hens and the blood of lambs which he simply cannot resist: an argument for the fellow predator’s consideration and a general lament about his condition in one. His mind is simply unable to comprehend *actual*, thematically appropriate repentance and only regrets that he has slain (and consequently eaten) so few (700-3).

The wolf finally gives the penance to the fox, but not before the latter tries his best to align the penance’s performative linguistic magic with his own goals in the end. The game is simple and is communicated through the language of hunger’s manifest physical symptoms on the fox, which may indeed be present, but become theatrically exaggerated in the process of him relaying it. In the process of haggling about his penitence he echoes the words of the unjust steward (Luke 16:3) in the scriptural parable, for he is too ashamed to beg and wishes not to work but would gladly lay claim to a state of genteel living, or indeed, *pretend* to be one of them (710-1) (Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard*, p. 281). The parable of the unjust steward will echo down in

the relationship of the fox and the wolf, finding further resonance in the later fable featuring the 'nekhering'. The parable centres on the tale of the steward, who, when learning about his master's intent to dismiss him of his services. The steward starts to pardon his master's debtors and starts to lower their debts in an attempt to curry favour for his prospective future employment. The parable's main dichotomy relies on the transactional haggling involved in worldly and spiritual categories. Despite the grudging admiration Christ displays in the parable for the shrewd steward, admitting that 'the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light' (Luke 16:8). The fox is strongly associated with the worldly temptations and is indeed one well-versed in the ways of it. The conclusion is, however, that one cannot serve God and money simultaneously. The shrewdness and the grudging admiration echo in the character of Lawrence, who is indeed wise in his generation and shrewd in his transactional treatment of scriptural language. This shrewdness, however, does not extend further than material consideration, not accounting for divine judgement. And Lawrence is very much a case in point.

As the ostensibly penitential narrative progresses the fox remains unrepentant, his optimal state would be simply pretending to be a nobleman, so the wolf remarks, "Thow wantis pointis twa, Belangand to perfyte confessioun" (712–13). Despite his remark, he plays along with the process of the assignment of penance, strictly spoken keeping to the letter of it. Schrock observes the way the ultimately hollow formula of the penitence functions, which has 'ticked all the boxes', covering 'confession and contrition', thus allowing the penance to take place (p. 342). The observation emphasises the evident pretence of the entire penitential process: it is as gratuitous as language itself in the fables, the conversation here taking place between the powerful

predators of the forest. The two predators may as well dispense with all the formalities and go on their ways of natural consumption. Yet, they do anything of the sort.

After the somewhat wry scriptural reference and brief musings about *feigning* nobility, the fox continues his attempt to wriggle out of the restrictions of the penance. The wily vulpine also seems to be mindful of Need's advice from *Piers Plowman*, and deliberately invokes necessity as his reason to steal ('Neid causis me to steill quhairever I wend.' (709)). He brings attention to his starving, malnourished body and tender nature (both according to himself, naturally) as he pleads with the wolf for an easy and short penance.

"A, schir, consider my complexioun,
Seikly and waik and of my nature tender;
Lo, will ye se, I am baith lene and sklender.

"Yit nevertheles I wald, swa it wer licht,
Schort, and not grevand to my tendernes,
Tak part of pane, fulfill it gif I nicht,
To set my selie saull in way of grace." (716-22)

In this section, the word 'grace' (716) draws one's attention to a notably missing element of the entire dynamics of the confession. Schrock identifies this seemingly obvious element when writing, '[p]ractically speaking, the fox and the wolf negotiate the sacrament without reference to the God whose power presumably provides the sacrament with its engine of grace' (p. 342). The sacrament sees itself (at least, at this point) not so much as subverted, but simply disregarded, ending up nothing more than

empty pageantry hollowed out, divested from its substance. It is employed by predators among themselves for justification of satisfying their hunger in whichever way they eventually choose. As they proceed to negotiate the terms and conditions of the penance one cannot help but wonder at the point of the entire charade, the “game” the canines play. This is further underlined by the ways the penitential haggling further progresses.

The entire goal of this complicated verbal and theological acrobatics is encapsulated in the wolf’s words:

“Thow sall,” quod he, “forbeir flesch hyne to Pasche
 To tame this corps, that cursit carioun,
 And heir I reik thee full remissioun.” (724-5)

The lines hint at one of the most important underlying mechanics of the fable when control over hunger is concerned. The penitential fasting prescribed for the fox until Easter is to tame his flesh, ‘that cursed carrion’. In the context of the period’s Christian mindset, a fast until Easter automatically refers to Lent, which is one of the main periods when appetites of the flesh (of it and for it) are to be most explicitly constrained in a contemplative abstinence from meat, gesturing to Christ’s forty-day fast in the wilderness. This layer of irony is added to the fox’s penance, for he would have to participate in the Lenten abstinence anyway by default (were he human, that is), but the fact does not seem to prevent him from further negotiating the finer points of the penance.

Henryson uses religious holidays as focalizers in his narratives. Many of the fables gesture towards them their plot and thematic elements (most explicitly ‘The

Nekhering and the Cadger’). This is something we also see in *The Testament of Cresseid*, which MacQueen describes as ‘a tragedy of appetite appropriate to the Lenten season of the church’ (p. 188). Naturally, one may argue, the fox would be free from the Lenten tradition considering he is an animal. He, however, chooses to ostensibly participate in the sacramental dynamics, but only up to the point.

Unsurprisingly, the fox attempts to wriggle out of the penance’s already light restrictions as soon as he hears them. Naturally, the meatless penance meant for humans is far from satisfactory for his biological needs. He rattles off an entire litany of very pointedly meaty dishes, which he wishes to include in his diet in his pressing necessity. Some of them, like the sausages (‘pudding’), belong to the dimension of recognisably human foodstuff, but eating heads, feet, tripe, or ‘or laip ane lytill blude’ conjure the images of predatory frenzy dismembering the prey (726-8). The entire penitent abstinence from meat is rendered completely gratuitous with the fox’s final remark in the negotiations. He adds the caveat of consuming meat to it, in case he *needs* meat in his diet (“In cace I faut of flesch unto my fude.” (729)), which, as a predatory animal, he is biologically designed, and therefore determined to do.

The wolf graciously permits him to eat meat twice a week, invoking the law of necessity in one of the most duplicitous lines of the fable, as if in answer to the fox’s earlier claim of necessity making him steal (709).

“For grit mister I gif thee leif to dude
Twyse in the oulk, for neid may haif na law.” (730-1)

The wolf invokes a well-observed proverb here. It also appears in *Piers Plowman*, as has been observed earlier. The expression is not only colloquial, but also a part of legal

terminology. The line also pertains to canon law, as Jill Mann points out. The wolf translating the Latin ‘Necessitas non habet legem’ (‘need has no law’), which ‘justifies a starving man in appropriating food, is here cynically used to license the fox's rapacity’ (p. 281).

Wang is not satisfied with the simple utilisation of canon law as camouflage for hunger. In her reading, it becomes a justification in its own right. ‘In the world of the Fabillis the values of natural law, and the institutions set up to enforce it, become mere tools for the cleverest predators to use against their prey. ‘Neid’ not only has no law; it is the law, as we are shown time and time again’ (p. 35). And use it they shall.

There is what Simpson identifies as “amused detachment” with which one can look upon the charade the two canines enact: they *appear* to be a penitent and a priest in their *likeness* to the genuine article. The comedy’s perspective shifts when the stage of *unlikeness* is discovered: there is no effective penitence, or intention to repent in the fox, as it has been already explored: his love for meat and flesh is simply too strong. In the final stage, when the wolf finally agrees to initiate penitence, the likeness is discovered yet again, but in a much more subversive manner. Simpson highlights the realisation which may dawn with the recognition of what one may call the biological nature of the carnivorous animal characters: ‘Animals just cannot give up flesh, because they need it’ (p. 198). This is the unsettling oscillation encapsulated in biological hunger, which the two canines aim to tame one way or another: Lawrence is an animal with a body’s biologically determined needs, rendering eating permissible, and the entire penitential process entirely gratuitous. The conundrum will become yet more puzzling when contrasted with his illegitimate son in the following tale of the Trial of the Fox, where Henryson even seems to soften his attitude towards the necessity represented by Lawrence’s hunger. Indeed, both canines represent different facets of

the power of need and hunger. 'Neid causis me to steill quhair euer I wend' (709), Lawrence laments, and his lament from biological perspective is justified.

Simpson furthers the point when observing this dichotomy, asserting the biological necessity inherent in the dynamic. 'Animals need to eat. At this point, however, we move to the third, much more subversive stage of Reynardian perception (...): we now perceive that there is a profound likeness between animals and humans, but that it is we who are like them, not they who are like us' (p. 198).

Despite the justified biological needs, the fox yet again gives in to his inclination of verbal pageantry. After finally obtaining the penitence from the Wolf by hook or crook the Fox stumbles upon a river (736). There is a miniaturized pantomime similar to the beginning of the tale, a reenactment of the fox's frustration encapsulating the consequences of moral deflection in the fable. Lawrence wastes no time and starts to bitterly lament the unjustness of his condition, and his inability to fish. The lines link the fable to the later one about the nekhering, and the overarching aversion of predators to penitential fasting involving fish. Both appear to be accurate in the context of the *Fables*.

Fishing and fish are a motif yet again linking the different fables featuring the Lenten diet of fish. These link Christ's resistance towards the temptation of the Devil, the Flesh, and the World during his forty days in the wilderness (MacQueen, p. 188). The fox, however, is very much the opposite of Christ, for he in a rather amusing fashion keeps looking for anything to assuage his hunger, to be tempted with. The scriptural allusions and the vulpine frustrations quickly pile up as he tries to employ language in the situation. Lawrence runs the image of the apostles fishing for men in reverse (like the apostles in Mt. 4:19), exclaiming that it would have been better to stay

home, than become a “fisher in the devil’s name” (738-9). Does the exclamation represent a moment of inspired piety in the fox, a turn towards a more genuinely pious life emulating the apostles? One might argue that it has little to do with actual piety and more to do with the habitual, comic hubris of the fox. His usurpation of scriptural and penitential language will reach further heights presently, but for the time being he is content to liken himself to the apostles.

And said, “Better that I had biddin at hame
Nor bene ane fischar in the devillis name.

“Now man I sraip my meit out of the sand
For I haif nouter boittis, net, nor bait.”
As he wes thus for falt of meit murnand,
Lukand about his leving for to lait (738 – 43)

Lawrence laments to no avail, and the performative magic of language seems to fail to take effect. The flamboyantly worded, dramatic appeal is communicated through the language of the penance and fishing, the vulpine penitent equating the two in their fundamental impossibility (for him, at least). Naturally, he does all this in an effort to try every angle to wriggle out of even the slightest impingement of disciplinary measures on his consumption of meat. Schrock underlines the point in his observation. ‘Foxes are not made to catch fish. So far is he from having appropriate jaws and claws that he complains instead of lacking boats, net, and bait (l. 740): artificial aids. The choice now seems, not between meat and fish, but meat and hunger’ (p. 343). Naturally, Lawrence’s lament is ever so poignant when one considers that the arguably more

sophisticated activity of astrology came to him easier at the beginning of the tale, despite his lack of astrological instruments (642-4) – just at the exact moment when the penance – would finally bite the slippery fox “providentially, devilishly,” as Schrock puts it, a group of goats approaches, with one young goat straying from the herd (p. 343). The timing is perfect for the fox. However, the young kid is a goat, signifying a misalignment of language and reality, not fulfilling the fox’s needs. Yet, he realizes that performative ‘verbal magic’ of the sacrament does have the power to transform reality when performed correctly, turning something into what it evidently is not.

Syne over the heuch unto the see he hyis
 And tuke the kid be the hornis twane
 And in the watter outhir twyis or thryis
 He dowkit him and till him can he sayne,
 “Ga doun schir kid, cum up schir salmond agane,”
 Quhill he wes deid, syne to the land him drewch
 And of that new-maid salmond eit anewch. (747-753)

Seizing the kid by its horns (wilfully and deliberately misidentifying the innocent with the devil in the perversion of baptismal cleansing), the fox plunges him into the water two or three times. Uttering a twisted and perverted version of the baptismal benediction he then proceeds to devour the newly baptised “salmon,” still evidently a kid. The violence is sudden and callous, a twisted continuation of the playful humour thus far characterising the fable. The situation abound with scriptural allusions, which the fox gleefully subverts when submerging the kid. He manipulates this linguistic ability for his own benefit, bending the evident physical truth to match his fabricated

narrative. In the process Lawrence seems to ‘shape the world to his liking by the exercise of his verbal skills’ (*From Aesop to Reynard*, pp. 281-2).

The kid seems to be a strange choice, especially when contrasted with the lamb Lawrence’s son will take in the following fable of ‘The Trial of the Fox’, and the lamb devoured by the Wolf in the second-to-last one. The symbolism here appears to be somewhat strange, not entirely fitting with the correspondent scriptural references. The kid, a young goat, invoked Old Testament allusions, being a sacrificial animal bearing the sins of the community: a scapegoat. MacQueen also brings the New Testament allusions to Matthew 25: 33, ‘And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left’ (p. 244). The kid is but a child, however, as sinless as the lamb later eloquently proclaims to be (2638-54). The kid, however, is not afforded the luxury of even attempting to defend itself and is drowned by the fox.

The perverted rite of baptism and transubstantiation seemingly taking place is communicated in markedly powerful language. The fox addresses the kid, which is well beyond caring or hearing the benediction; the baptismal phrases are for the benefit of no one, but the fox himself and the letter of the penance he is subverting. The audacity is startling, but the fox is very much drunk on his linguistic power at this point. No more negotiating the terms of the penance, but the power of creation appears to be at his clawed fingertips. Simultaneously baptizing, drowning (the symbolic tomb of the baptized becoming a literal watery grave for the unfortunate kid in the process of rendering the language of the scripture *too* literal), and renaming the young goat a salmon also seems to usurp Christ’s role when feeding the multitude in the Gospels, applying the principles of transubstantiation (Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14) . Of course, the fox intends only to feed himself.

As Schrock emphasises, the fox is not one vested with divine authority. Regardless, he revels in the act of usurping it through his usage of divinely inspired language. ‘Of that fish he “eit anewch” (l. 753), at the end of the stanza. His bellyful of Christ-fish resolves his hunger and this stanza, just as a bellyful of Christ-fish-bread would satisfy spiritually, ultimately’ (p. 345). The vulpine blasphemer does not simply pervert the rite of baptism, submerging and renaming the kid, but in the process, he also lays claim to Adam’s role in Genesis of naming the animals. ‘A divinely deputized Adam once named the animals, and Lowrence is renaming one’ (p. 345).

All these transgressions and subversions serve that one final goal: to assuage the fox’s hunger, subverting the very purpose of the meatless penance. Yet the goal itself is far from simple in its manifestation. Simpson draws attention to the uncomfortable biological necessity the fox’s deeds embody, penitent fasting coming to a halt in the face of the imperative that hunger represents. The very point of the process comes to question in Simpson’s argument, marking a recognition of one’s fallen animal body’s needs camouflaged.

At this point we realize that we are the animals, and that the performance of penance is precisely that – a performance designed to provide the right appearances, but a performance also designed to mask and permit our animal natures to consume in the standard ways. The ‘law’ of penitence is subsumed by the ‘law’ of Nature. Penitence is gratuitous; there is ‘litel nede’ of it; it is a game that could easily have been dispensed with. (p. 198)

Simpson offers a contrasting reading of the fox and the wolf in Henryson’s fables, which highlights not only the main points of divergence between the two canines and

the ways they express their interactions with the world motivated by hunger, but also the ways their humour and violence influence the tone of the fable.

In Simpson's reading of the genre of beast-epic, the character of the fox presents a study in the manipulation of ethical norms, contrasting sharply with characters like the wolf, who embodies mere amorality. Unlike the wolf, who relies on brute force, the fox, as Simpson puts it, 'activates the ethical in a very precise way' (p. 196). In his interpretation the fox provokes ethical emotions such as pity, only to utilize these sentiments for his own unethical and pitiless objectives, effectively running ethics in reverse. This inversion not only highlights his cunning but also serves as one of the chief sources of humour in beast-epic narratives influenced by the Reynardian source material. The comedic effect lies within the audience's recognition of the fox's ethical manipulations, which mock the pretensions of moral behaviour and expose the superficiality and vulnerabilities of ethical norms. This humour is subversive, as it underlines the fox's ability to escape not only physical adversaries but more importantly sacramental, political, and legal frameworks that are generally trusted to uphold the moral order. Thus, the fox in beast-epic does not just entertain; he challenges the integrity of ethical and political structures, revealing their potential for exploitation and questioning their efficacy in a comically revealing light. '[The fox] escapes the power of writing itself to condemn him morally, partly because he is a better rhetorician than any learned writer. The fox of beast epic exposes and capitalizes on the potential violence of writing, and the self-delusions of reading. Narratives about him are, in short, unmoralized because they are, effectively, unmoralizable' (Simpson, p. 196). Simpson's explanation gestures towards the fundamental attributes of the fox's character and the mechanisms he deploys in his search for food. The fox remains a consummate rhetorician, and it is difficult not to be entertained by his dexterity with

language. Yet, in his hubris the fox makes the final element of the Reynardian beast epic fall into place.

While the wolf does away with morality and language, as Simpson observes, the fox perpetuates the dynamic, pushing language to its very limits in the service of his own belly. The continuation of the linguistic camouflage, however, and his trust placed into its efficacy results in the very predicament he is about to face.

After filling his belly with the goat-made-salmon the fox decides to further luxuriate in the power of language, now that his hunger is satisfied. At this point, the fable's verbal magic crescendos in the stanza starting with the line 'Thus fynelie fillit with young tender meit' (754), which emphasises the point of final fulfilment. The fox is finally full, and he hides himself away in the bushes where the sun shines warmly. Henryson's narrator makes a specific point of describing the comforting heat of the sun and the impulse to warm his comfortably full belly (757-9).

In this state, the fox, well content, utters the fateful line "Upon this wame set wer ane bolt full meit." (760). The idiom is a well-observed one in the period, with a multitude of meanings. The problem is that the language he so flagrantly abused thus far also affects him, becoming unexpectedly literal with an audible snap. Schrock's choice of expression is perhaps the most descriptive. In his reading the line represents 'language fully loaded' (p. 347). Schrock's explanation of the four different meanings of the pun-filled expressions is useful when one wishes to consider the fox, and the reckless linguistic displays prompted by hubris and hunger.

Firstly, the most literal and straight-forward meaning of the line communicates the fullness of the fox's belly with meat. His hunger fulfilled; he is finally content. Secondly, however, the belly stretched by the goat-meat the fox means it to be a perfect

target “full meit”, in Schrock’s glossing, “fully appropriate to strike”; the pun between the two too delicious for the fox to resist saying it out loud with satisfaction in his comfortable position. Thirdly, however, the language turns upon itself, and suddenly becomes too literal, too dangerous. The double-edged sword of the sacrament cuts the fox with its meaning in the following line, where the emphasis is placed on his reckless language manifesting the unintended consequences (Schrock, pp. 347-8). Parkinson’s explanation further underlines the expression reverberating as far as Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* “to make a bolt” of — that is, to take a risk on — something (Shakespeare, *Merry Wives* 3.4.24); if so, the fox means to say, “My stomach is worth the risk”, while it will also occur later in Henryson’s *Fables* (when the husbandman carelessly yells: “The wolff,” quod he, “mot have you all at anis!” (2244)), where again the literal meaning comes as a surprise.

And the literal meaning of the pun is a surprise indeed for the fox. The loaded language corresponds with a bow being drawn, the following line links the immediacy of language, hunger fulfilled, and looming violence, emphasising in the first line of the following stanza: Quhen this wes said (761). As soon as the fox says the fateful line the goatherd emerges, with wrath in his heart about his stolen goat, and bends his bow. ‘The foxe he prikkit fast unto the eird’ (767), the arrow pins the fox to the ground. Here the final, half-intended, risqué meaning of the pun manifests in a literal manner with the snap of the arrow. Schrock provides explanation, by pointing out the way the symbols interact in this line. ‘Now language is no longer unmoored from reference, available for free play. It inescapably and completely refers’ (p. 332). Language, thus far abused with relish, suddenly takes substance, becomes grounded. It runs counter-current to the fox’s earlier attempt at its utilisation to coax reality into its linguistic formula. Whereas only the sacrament has given substance to the fox’s words, here reality strikes. ‘The

arrow is the fullness of the fox's conscience; it "prikkit" (767) him as his conscience "prikkis" (690) him earlier. The goat's blood has cried from the ground, and God has heard its cry. This plenitude is narratival. The story has reached its climax, its fullness, its point of maximum distension. Now it satisfies' (Schrock, p. 348).

In mock epic fashion the fox is allowed a short monologue at the end of his 'criminal career,' as MacQueen calls it, and also marks the departure from what he recognises as the first branch of Reynardian fables featuring the fox in Henryson's collection. 'The theft of the kid is no more than the climax of the fox's criminal career. In the first branch, his evil scheme is the consequence of bodily hunger. In the second bodily needs are important in themselves, but they also force him to violate a spiritual compact – he sins in the soul as well as the body' (MacQueen, p. 224). The last words of the fox punctuate the end of the narrative branch.

"Now," quod the foxe, "allace and wellaway.

Gorrit I am and may na forther gane.

Methink na man may speik ane word in play

Bot now on dayis in ernist it is tane."

The hird him hynt and out he drew his flane

And for his kid and uther violence

He tuke his skyn and maid ane recompence. (768-774)

The characteristic final word of the fox, or *renardie*, an important element of the Reynardian tales displaying the fox having a last quip or remark, rings hollow in Henryson's interpretation of the fable (Mann, p. 236). The *renardie* gestures towards unfulfilled potential as much as mapping on the overarching games Henryson plays

with the Fables. The lines echo the earlier observation of the fox during his misadventures with the Chaucerian fable of the *Fox and the Cock* as well, representing the first branch of fables governed by bodily hunger. Here his words are poignant, as he lies mortally wounded by the ironically pricking arrow nailing him to the ground, finally *grounding* the meaning of his careless language. The brutality here is the opposite of gratuitous. The language changes from luxurious and extravagant to cold and clinical as the goatherd promptly skins the fox. The game is up for the vulpine enthusiast of language as he rightly observes (770-1)). “Play” and “ernist” recall Chaucer’s “game” and “ernest,” the poles of poetic payoff between which the *Canterbury Tales* roams erratically and freely and which both Chaucer and Henryson inherit (...) Henryson invokes this model of earthly poetics and ethics stabilized by divine meaning, calls it into being with his own words, hopes for it’ (Schrock, p. 333-4)

The game which Henryson hints at in his Prologue and the last words of the fox is played not only by the predators inhabiting the fabular ecosystem, but Henryson himself, who cannot help but to long for a world of performative magic shielding the meek from the mighty. This hope and the sobering realisations accompanying it echo down throughout the later fables, even influencing the very ending of the fables.

The fox’s downfall is sudden, and brutal, yet not without pathos. Even pathos, however, appears to be connected to the ironic fullness of the fox’s belly. MacQueen identifies this moment as part of the classical Greek hero’s downfall, connecting it to the motif of consumption and fulfilment of hunger. *Hybris* (wantonness) being the first, *koros* (satiety, literally in the fox’s case) the second, and *ate* (infatuation, reckless impulse) the third (p. 225). Naturally, imagining the fox as a tragic Greek hero fits the concept of humorous epicization heightening the register of the narrative Jill Mann so emphasises in the case of Henryson’s fables. The heightened feeling of pathos and the

humour derived from it certainly fits Lawrence's theatrical character. While MacQueen places the three steps of his classically inspired downfall in the sequence of the fox's actions mapped upon across the fable itself, the same interpretation is also applicable to the final moments of the fox. The audacious hubris culminates in his unwitting pun just at the time when he is fully filled, his hunger finally satiated. The arrow also filling his belly is certainly the result of his reckless impulses running away from his, his self-discipline simply not extending to the area of the language of scripture. In Schrock's explanation, the fox's words stretch the Edenic language's capacity to its limits finally snaps with the sound of an arrow pinning him to the ground. As the goatherd skins the fox (774) he finally puts an end to the camouflage, the animal skin covering the underlying corruption. He, from the camouflage of the animal skin covering the all-too-human impulse of rapacity allegorised in the fable, is turned back into his Edenic ideal nakedness: the naked truth on display. The effect is far from corrective, however, for the fox is in no position to exercise any knowledge gained from his *aventure*, just like the kid was in no position to hear the words of the twisted benediction. The gruesome memento is the final meaning of the tale in Schrock's reading, a gory memento to the results of one's uncontrolled hunger fulfilled. 'The fox's stripped corpse with its bulging belly, its full meat, is what's left at the end of the fable, the meat of the fable, what the fable means' (p. 349).

As the fable ends and the shortest *moralitas* in the Fables begins Henryson admonishes those who only mime contrition during confession. The words of the *moralitas* appear to be similar to that the utilised by the prologue of the fables.

This suddand deith and unprovysit end

Of this fals tod without contritioun

Exempill is exhortand folk to mend (777)

Because thay think thair lustie lyfe sa sweit. (81)

The words of the moralitas are similar to the ways the ‘Preaching of the Swallow’ explores the ways “consuetude” undermines any semblance of discipline or control over one’s hungers and appetites manifesting in different ways. The biological needs and transcendent surplus enjoyment fulfilling them both result in the transformation, reminding one that indeed, ‘How mony men in operatioun / Ar like to beistis in conditioun’ (48-9). The dynamic works the other way around as well in the fable: the laws of nature, biological necessities, see themselves subverted by sacramental language, resulting in the undoing of not only the effect of the sacrament, but through evocative language creating the unexpected “wrong sort” of outcome for the Fox who wishes to utilise the language. His failure lies within his act of giving in to the habitual exercise of sin, seeing signs where there are none, misinterpreting them for his own benefit, and disregarding any similar sign (astrology, penitential language) that would provide him a safe bastion from the brutal conclusion of the tale.

The short moralitas summarizes the spiritual failure of the fox in the fable ignited by his hunger (MacQueen, p. 224-5).

Sum bene also throw consuetude and ryte

Vincust with carnall sensualitie.

Suppose thay be as for the tym contryte,

Cannot forbeir nor fra thair sinnis fle.

Use drawis nature swa in propertie

Of beist and man that neidlingis thay man do
 As thay of lang tyme hes bene hantit to. (782-88)

The lines of the fable's *moralitas* will echo in The Preaching of the Swallow's *moralitas* as well, where they become even more pronounced ('Throw consuetude hantit from day to day. / Proceeding furth be use and consuetude, / The sin ryipis and schame is set on syde,' (1908-10)), emphasising the day-to-day normalisation of sin, the habitual setting by side of corrective moral discipline to regulate the body. Wang further emphasises this connection, emphasising the Neo-Augustinian doctrines influencing Henryson's approach to sin and hunger. 'The bodily appetites not only endanger the soul, but also render man quite unrecognizable from his prelapsarian self. This transformation is aided by the insidious effects of 'consuetude' or custom' (Wang, p. 30). In this, the fox of the fable is very much a case in point. The postlapsarian self, hiding under the camouflage of appearances is exposed with the final skinning of the fox, transforming the body back to its Edenic nakedness in a brutally straight-forward way. And transformation is indeed aided by consuetude and ryte. Parkinson ties lines back to the prologue (How mony men in operatioun Ar like to beistis in conditioun. 48–49), and the fable of the 'Cock and the Fox' ('Yit ilkane in thair kyndis natural / Hes mony divers inclinatioun' 399–40). The thematic reference here is that people resembling animals [through the effect of habitual sin rendering one bestial] can become, under appropriate circumstances, 'neidlingis' (necessarily) destroyed, namely through 'consuetude' and 'ryte' (782).

With the sudden end of the vulpine blasphemer, a shift also occurs in tone, as the Fables become more sombre and callously brutal. The linguistic exuberance, the joyful play with sacrament is immediately done away with at the very moment of the

fox's language reaches its full potential. From this point on there still is humour, even fabliaux-like ribald humour such as in the case of the 'The Wolf and the Wether', but the overarching tone of the fables noticeably darkens in the moment the bolt strikes the fox (Mann, p. 287).

The death of the fox is very much in line with what the fox has foreseen in the stars during his astrological meditation, a 'schamefull end' (653) indeed. The shortest *moralitas* among the fables seemingly features very little resolution. There is, arguably, very little justice to the situation either. The goatherd has taken his recompense for the lost kid, but the equation is transactional, not morally corrective. The final result appears to be loosely interconnected systems instead of a strong chain of causality and final divine judgement for the innocent and markedly little space afforded for reflection. Simpson analyses this sobering aspect of the *moralitas*:

The entire system of penitential law, then, seen from the perspective of humans being like animals, is exposed as wholly gratuitous, a dispensable game designed to provide some amusement, perhaps. Meanwhile, the routine, unstoppable patterns of consumption and recompense carry on undisturbed. (p. 198)

From the perspective of the thesis, this fable serves as an important centrepiece. It serves as a new iteration on the self-serving clerical canine motif depicted in Friar Waitskaith, and sees the Fox do everything in his power (and, arguably, even beyond) to avoid any disciplinary mechanisms affecting his consumption. In the process, he gleefully subverts even the most elevated words of the scripture, resulting in an unexpected, darkly humorous outcome. From the perspective of the kid, however, it matters very little indeed. The 'routine, unstoppable patterns of consumption' as Simpson identifies them, are entirely unperturbed by the charade. No systemic change

occurs, for there is simply no opposing force to the voracity of the powerful. What little there could be, sees itself thoroughly abused by the very powerful themselves. In a rare instance, however, the inexorable march of hunger sees itself briefly unsettled in the next fable featuring the Fox's careless offspring finding himself in the rarified air of the courtly setting, coming perilously close to giving away the game.

III. 3. 4. 'The Trial of the Fox'

The gradually darkening tone of the fables is carried over into the next narrative in the collection, 'The Trial of the Fox'. The tale further underlines the layers of camouflage with which bestial hunger is covered. Yet, it also features a rare moment of anxiety from the perspective of the powerful. Naturally, it is a moment of anxiety incomparable to that of the prey, which further underlines the entrenched position of the powerful in the fabular ecosystem. The fable represents a sinister thematic streak of the *Fabillis*, incorporating the elements of the court of law and politics, and exposing them to be a thin veneer on predatory hunger. In this fable, Father-war, or Father-worse, (also called Lawrence) the bastard son of the fox supposedly from the previous tale, looks for food himself, following his nose. Henryson emphasises this as a natural behaviour ('As nature will, seikand his meit be sent, / Off cace he fand his fatheris carioun' (810-1)) when he stumbles upon his father's skinned corpse. He disposes the corpse in the bog, so 'That he micht ringe and raxe intill his steid' (820), or to rule and reign in his stead. The very description of the fox's illegitimate son (a fact which appears to be comically exaggerated and emphasised by the narrator just before his

seeming slip of language about the natural behaviour of the fox in line 810) is encapsulated in the admonishment for his love of poultry (802). However, the words of the narrator appear to be not only conflicting, but also redundant: the fox is a predator by nature, ergo he must eat meat. He scents his prey, as nature intended. Love and sin have little to do with his consumption; Nature's law dictates the dynamic. The narrator's words, just like the fox's penitent intentions in the preceding tale, are difficult to take seriously, for they must be intended in jest as they oscillate between observation of natural behaviour and scathing admonishment of the greed and violence in humanity it allegorises.

As the tale progresses, it brings into focus the underlying political and legal mechanisms, doing away with the criticism of the fox's son, who cannot help but stand trial for the sins of his father. The fable, as Simpson observes, suddenly 'exposes the entire political order as a gratuitous cover for the real business of needy consumption' (p. 199).

In the tale, the Lion arrives with his court to call his varied subjects to parliament. As the Lion asserts his complete authority, it is not difficult to perceive the fundamentally ideological nature of his proclamation when read together with the preceding fable. They portray the rule of law as part of the natural order like the fox searching for food by scent. It, however, primarily serves to conceal the lion's own power of hunger disguised by the conceit of his royalty while also referring to the previous tale's happenings.

“Se neir be twentie mylis quhair I am
 The kid ga saiflie be the gaittis syde,
 Se tod Lowrie luke not upoun the lam

Na revand beistis nouthar ryn nor ryde.” (943-6)

Lawrence and the Wolf (not Friar Waitskaith from the previous tale for certain, for this one allows himself to be carelessly kicked by the mare) are being called forward to deliver summons to the mare, who is absent from the gathering. When the recalcitrant mare kicks the wolf the fox ostensibly in sympathy offers to fetch water to wash his wound, and stumbles upon lambs dancing on a dyke (1041–47). The wording of the stanza suggests anything but a good Samaritan rushing to help, his ironic spotting of the lambs ‘on cace’ and ‘sydelingis’ stealthy approach very much indicative of a predator approaching its prey (MacQueen, p. 243). When the fox and the wolf report their failure to summon the mare to court the lion laughs at Lawrence’s wit proclaiming the wolf a newly made doctor of divinity, another double reference to the preceding tale. Then the ewe, the devoured lamb’s mother, arrives, accusing the fox. The scene marks a departure from the somewhat comical tone and sours the moment of the predators all laughing together at the Wolf’s expense. The Ewe appeals to the Lion’s might, emphasising that the crime occurred within a mile from the lion’s proclamation of strength. MacQueen emphasises the dichotomy between the first and the second fox, while the Ewe’s language ends the previous merriment with a strong proclamation: ‘This harlet huresone and this hound of hell, / He werryit my lamb full doggitly (1071–72)’. MacQueen argues, that ‘[t]he first fox, driven as he was by hunger and the need to fulfil his penance, had some kind of excuse; the action of the second is wholly gratuitous’ (MacQueen, p. 244).

The problem in this context is not the actual act of killing and eating the lamb; the implications are more far reaching, and the lion recognises it. While the first Lawrence drowning of the kid was motivated by hunger and need (however amusingly transparent

his attempts were at camouflaging them) the second fox gets exposed in front of the court. While MacQueen identifies the gratuitous nature of the fox's actions as a strong sign of progressive moral decay echoed in the ewe's words, one may also consider the context. In MacQueen's reading, the damning tone of the beginning of the tale describing the fox in a negative light echoed in the words of the grief-stricken ewe's words. While the fox of the preceding tale went mostly unobserved, allowing the reader to formulate an opinion more-or-less autonomously, in the fable the son and the father are both damned by the narrator and the ewe. The first Lawrence drowned the kid in relative secrecy, while his illegitimate son exposes the political edifice in the process. The father's predatory hunger represented danger for the prey and ultimately himself, but his son risks exposing the more far-reaching gratuitous nature of camouflaging the same hunger with dynamics of legal language and judicial authority: the very attributes on which the lion's rule are contingent. The Fox realises his mistake and as a result, becomes flustered. When it would truly matter to exercise the power of his silver tongue, he fumbles. His defence is flimsy, arguing that he only wanted to play with the lamb and that the entire thing was a mere accident (1079-82). This moment further amplifies the lion's earlier proclamation of his own strength, and he cannot let the conceit be exposed, so he immediately marches the fox to the gallows where he is promptly hanged. The Fox's hanging finally seals his lips, securing the secrecy of hunger's camouflage as legal language.

Simpson points out that both the earlier speech of the lion (and in my reading the ewe's accusation and the swift sentencing of the Fox) '[expose] the consumption that is simultaneously the source and shame of the entire political order' (p. 200). From this perspective predatory hunger as a natural dynamic is not in focus any longer, but it is the way it interacts with the political edifice in its camouflaged state. Simpson's

argument ties together the two fables in their capacity to expose and subvert, drawing an uncomfortable conclusion.

The need to consume activates the political order and its apparently repressive justice, which seeks to disguise the fundamentally brutal character of the entire system. The fox not only exposes the gratuitousness of the political order, but also of learned expertise. (...) From the impenitent, insouciant, gratuitous play of the fox in 'The Fox and the Wolf', then, unfolds an ever-extending perspective capable of describing the entire world of sacramental and political law as gratuitous play designed to cover rapacity. (Simpson, p. 200)

These two tales about the foxes and their misadventures are followed by another, dark and sobering tale, 'The Sheep and the Dog', which endeavours to further expose the charade of the legal system. Simpson summarises the overarching dynamic of the thematic branch comprised of these three tales. 'In the space of three short narratives, these not insignificant realms of discourse are comically exposed as hollow and gratuitous in a world whose real driver is hunger' (p. 197).

III. 4. The Wolf and the Lamb

This part of the thesis explores the last two fables in the collection, representing another facet of bestial hunger rampant in the fabular ecosystem as much as it is in the real world it endeavours to mirror. It discusses the facet of hunger the wolf represents through the lens of 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. First, I will briefly discuss the ways the fables represent an aspect of hunger, observing the character's place in the Lenten dynamics Henryson is so

preoccupied with. After that, will follow a more in-depth analysis of the wolf's symbolic and scriptural connotations and how the fable amplifies themes of earlier tales, such as 'The Sheep and the Dog'. Following this I will explore of the central motif of gratuitous linguistic camouflage and how the wolf highlights the redundancy inherit in the dynamics governing predatory consumption in the fabular ecosystem. Language camouflages predatory intent, providing the illusion of justice, while only serving the powerful and their rapacity. The final section of the discussion explores the *moralitas*, which seems to be wrought with frustration, questioning the very validity of the poetic project of the fables, and in turn leading to the following, final fable's exploration of hunger.

'The Wolf and the Lamb' is an exceedingly simple tale. The fable is much more straightforward than others in the collection, which often teem with frantic action and twists, like 'The Trial of the Fox', or lengthy speeches like 'The Fox and the Wolf'. When one compares these, 'The Wolf and the Lamb' appears to be compressed, stripped down, and utilitarian both in its length and its plotline. In the fable the hungry wolf approaches the lamb drinking from a river. The lamb drinks downstream, but the wolf accuses him of fouling his water. Despite the Lamb's valiant legal defence, the Wolf eats the Lamb in the end. The conclusion appears to be as simple as it gets. Yet, the mode in which Henryson communicates the plot, is a key element of modulating the lesson Henryson intends to teach.

In the process of the modulation, the selection of the characters is an important element. The dynamic of power between the two characters, similarly to the following fable of 'The Paddock and the Mouse', is asymmetrical; the meek encountering the powerful. The wolf and the lamb are predator and prey, wild and domesticated respectively, embodying two extremes of human influence. The most bluntly brutal and voracious of the canine predators of the fabular ecosystem stumbles upon the meekest and most scripturally symbolic at a river. These thematic elements may be familiar to the reader, occurring in the earlier fable of 'The

Fox and the Wolf', and will return in the final fable of 'The Paddock and the Mouse' as well. The earlier fable concerning the two canines occurs fairly early in the collection of the fables, while 'The Wolf and the Lamb' is the penultimate one of the tales; one might rightly expect the overarching narrative trajectory of the fable collection to develop a conclusion. So, a resurgence of the similar encounter at the river seems first incongruent. One may wonder: is it, therefore, redundant for Henryson to reiterate the point he seemingly already made, or are there thematic elements that justify revisiting the seemingly very similar story? If it is indeed different, how exactly does that differ from the earlier tale? Laura Wang proposes the reading that Henryson is 'amplifying' Walter of England's original tale, *De Lupo et Agno* (Wang, p. 36). Wang's observations is also useful when considering Henryson's own fables within his collection; the oppression of the meek by the powerful and the gratuitousness of language meant to protect one from predatory hunger fail over and over again. Considering this approach, the fable's similarities to and differences from 'The Fox and the Wolf' can be helpful to observe. The Fox is dexterous in his linguistic approach and perpetuates language's rule wherever he can. The Wolf, in contrast, represents the inevitable blunt brutality of predatory hunger running its course without the constraints of the Fox's scruples.

The different foxes appearing in the Fables are predominantly characterised by their inclination towards temptation. They are also defined by their utilisation of seemingly providential, moral, and legal language in the service of said temptations. As Henryson explicitly writes, 'This tod I likkin to temptationis' (1132) in the *moralitas* of 'The Trial of the Fox'. The wolf, on the other hand, represents a very different predator, embodying a very different locus of symbols. The dynamics animating the wolf's character are contingent on his overt predatory power. This contrast becomes pronounced in the context of the fable of 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. The wolf embodies the aspect of voraciousness that is channelled into and displayed by uncaring, unflinching aggression. While in other fables earlier in the

collection he might have appeared as gullible and stupid due to his limited capacity of comprehension ('ressoun', as the lamb rightly calls it (2189)), Henryson showcases the less comical, and more chilling aspects of the predator as the *Fables* progresses. The fable of 'The Wolf and the Lamb' extrapolates the character to its logical conclusion: hunger and brutality serving a singular purpose, nothing else. The fox, on the other hand, is not just without morals like the wolf; he actively reverses ethical behaviour, as it has been observed earlier in detail. Much of the reader's enjoyment comes from the clever use of language that portrays the fox's cunningly immoral behaviour. While the wolf uses 'brute force' in an unamusing, 'unfunny' way, the fox cleverly and amusingly manipulates ethical principles to his own advantage, as Simpson observes. In his reading, this reversal of ethics is what lends Henryson's epicized fables their entertainment value, sweetening the deal of learning experience as the Prologue has established. The fox's character allows readers to at least laugh at the pretence of ethics by showing how ethical sentiments can be exploited. In contrast, there is no humour in the wolf's straightforward, aggressive power. Simpson's statement makes the contrast clear between the two canines. 'We do not laugh at the brute, voracious power of the wolf' (p. 196).

And this brutality and force are both connected to the wolf's raging, undisciplined hunger apparently overruling his higher faculties to reason, resulting in his repeated injuries and failure to feed. He, however, is also blinded to admittedly higher, more sophisticated feelings, such as ethics. While the fox is a master of his linguistic craft, evoking pity and performing the role of a linguistic trickster with relish, the wolf has neither the sense of, nor the need for such dynamics. The main sin governing the behaviour of the wolf is identified as 'greed, concupiscence' by MacQueen (p. 187). There is a strong Lenten thematic streak running through the *Fables*, and the wolf is one that suffers from it the most. It is emphasised during the 'The Fox, the Wolf, and the Cadger' after the ravenous lupine receives his

‘nekhering’, to the great entertainment of the fox actually laughing out loud (‘He that of resson can not be content / But couetis all, is abill all to tyne.’ (2189–90)). MacQueen observes, that Henryson renders reason the best defence against sinful concupiscence during the period of Lent. MacQueen identifies the wolf as the most significant of the Lenten characters governed by the temptation of physical hunger (p. 192).

The hunger embodied by the wolf is, as in the case of the fox, not something that can ultimately be tamed or channelled to contemplation by fasting. While the fox tries his best to at least uphold appearances, the wolf indulges in rhetoric exactly up until the point it serves his purposes and not a moment longer. The penultimate fable of Henryson starts out by describing the wolf within the context of hunger and violence as he approaches the river. Violence looms from the very outset of the fable, the very first lines communicating the lack of anything aside from cruelty.

Compared to other fables the pacing of this tale is fast and concise: in the first stanza, in only a handful of lines the wolf’s attributes are established: he is ‘cruell’ and ‘richt ravenous’ (2616). These governing principles of the character are encapsulated in the very first line of the fable, for at this point of the collection there is no point in attributing other characteristics to the wolf: both the reader and Henryson know this. Should any lingering doubt remain concerning the symbolism of the wolf, Henryson obliges in the moralitas, giving an explicit characterisation to the wolf and what he represents: an extortioner, an oppressor of ‘pure men’, whose inventiveness and subtlety in violence is notable.

The wolf betakinnis fals extortioneris

And oppressouris of pure men as we se

Be violence or craft in sutelté (2711-3)

While the different wolves symbolic meaning attached to the wolf's character will be discussed in detail when I turn to the *moralitas*, some further contextualisation can also be useful at the outset of the fable. One may well suspect that both the wolf and the lamb come with significant cultural connotations, when observing the scriptural connotations inherit in the two wolf and the lamb. While unnamed in the tale, unlike other fabular characters, such as Chanteclier and Lawrence, one may suspect Ysengrim a fitting name for the wolf. Aside from his more priestly monikers observed earlier, such as Father Wolf Waiskith, Moses dubs the predator 'Benjamin, for 'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf [in the morning he devours the prey, in the evening he divides the plunder.]' (Gen 49: 27)' (Moses, p. 85). The symbolism of the wolf's hunger unifies scriptural, fabular, and critical real-world statements here, all pointing to the wolf's rapacity manifesting in different ways. The *moralitas* of the fable will clarify the motif of rampaging hunger explicitly. Rapacious in all possible meanings of the word (materially and biologically), one can only expect the encounter of the lupine oppressor with the lamb to end in blood.

The other principal character, the lamb, unsurprisingly, also evokes immediate and tangible association with the meek and the pure, as much as the lost lamb and Christ himself, as Laura Wang observes (p. 36). Moses highlights the most notable scriptural allusion. 'The tale is not just of sheep and wolves (Luke 10: 3), or the pure, biblical lost lamb (Luke 15: 1), but of the sacrificial lamb.' In his reading 'the lamb is the good example, in contrast to which there is no 'value' to having a wolf around. He serves only as a warning' (Moses, p. 85). And a spectacular warning he is. The brief fable brims with adjectives describing the wolf's 'wickitnes'. He is 'cruell', 'ravenous and fell', 'rampand', 'angrie' (2630). I mentioned earlier, that MacQueen identifies his character as one governed by 'greed, concupiscence' (MacQueen, p. 189). I would also argue on a similar vein that the wolf is very similar to Dante's *Lupa* depicted in Canto I of the *Inferno*, the She-wolf of the *Divine Comedy* in his

aspect of incontinence; unable to govern his urges of both the body and the soul, ultimately resulting in manifestations of greed and rage alike. The beginning of the tale signals that there is little room afforded for changing categories, or what one may perceive as ‘character development’: the wolf is cruel and ravenous, the ‘selie’ lamb meek and innocent. The word is a ubiquitous one throughout the fables, applied to mice and sheep and shepherd alike, often paired with expressions of innocence, harmlessness and poverty. This fable is a case in point:

Thus drank thay baith bot not of ane intent,
 The wolfis thocht wes all on wickitnes,
 The selie lamb wes meik and innocent. (2622-5)

The wolf’s behaviour seems far from surprising. It conforms to the earlier pattern of experiences conveyed by the fables, while also amplifying the lurking threat he represented before. Henryson teaches the reader through the iterative method, building on what he introduced before, amplifying and further accentuating the message his character meant to convey. In this fable there is no fox, no Lawrence or Reynard, to alloy the tone of the tale with humour, or foil the lupine predator’s need to feed. The wolf, his mind set on violence, wastes no time, and threatens the lamb, accusing it of fouling the brook with his foul slavering, ‘besliming’ the water with his foul lips (2632-4). The language with which the verbal attack is carried out utilises the notion of bodily pollution (the lamb slavering into the clean water) and has absolutely nothing to do with the factual reality of the situation. The wolf is clearly looking for a reason to accost the ‘selie’ lamb. He also deploys forceful legal language, suggesting that the lamb should be drawn and hanged, a customary and brutal punishment for treason in Scotland during the period. Although this method of punishment

omits the disembowelling, the brutality of the suggested punishment foreshadows the final fate of the lamb.

The lamb, although shaking with fear, marshals his faculties and has enough presence of mind to articulate a legal defensive argument in the same language in which it *appears* to have been given, addressing the fraudulent accusations of the wolf. He nearly goes as far as to call out the wolf on his lie, telling him that he himself must know that the accusation is contrary to reason ('Ye wait alswa that your accusatioun / Failyeis fra treuth and contrair is to resoun.' (2643-2)). Naturally, the wolf is not to be reasoned with. The lamb expresses his defence not only on the language of respect and courtesy, but also in a carefully constructed, logical speech. He attempts to reason logically (the heavier things descend, thus the river cannot run backwards, towards where the wolf drunk (2646-50)), he asserts his innocence (he was not even born six months ago and his lips touched nothing contagious, only his mother's milk (2651-4)), and invokes the scriptural rule that the father's sins should not be punished on the child (2663-2670), and finally conclude that one should pursue due legal process when wishing to pursue a complaint. Jill Mann points out the futility of the entire charade. 'These arguments have, of course, absolutely no effect on the wolf, who jeeringly dismisses them as 'play' ('yit pleyis thow agane?' (2671)) and accuses the lamb of treasonably trying to substitute reason for 'wrang and reif' ('injustice and rapine': 2693-4) (p. 278). Mann's observation marks the end of 'play' the foxes self-indulgently perpetuated, and the wolf utilised until the point of convenience. The camouflage discarded only the rule of might and hunger remains. Goldstein further focuses the futility of the dynamics, when likening it to the sham legal battle depicted in 'The Sheep and the Dog', where the powerful canines and predators already established their legal mastery, literally fleecing the sheep. This callous brutality sees itself continued in Goldstein's reading of 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. 'The lamb's academic discipline, with his learned allusions, fails miserably, as does his insistence

that the wolf follow correct legal procedure. Ironically, the appeal to reasonable constraints on natural appetite that forms the argument of the entire book falls on deaf ears in this particular instance' (Goldstein, p. 609). The reading proffered by Goldstein is a useful one to observe. It observes the overarching argument depicted by Henryson, who is predominantly concerned with the moral discipline, the control exerted over sins which are allegorised in the motif of bestial hunger: greed, violence, and unrestrained consumption resulting in the oppression of the weak. At this point, as Goldstein's reading suggests, the entire poetic project of Henryson comes into question. What is there to be done when it cannot hope to constrain rapacity inherent in the wolves of the world?

Indeed, both characters seem to know that it is a foregone conclusion; there is little room for negotiation. Yet the lamb, rooted in place and shaking with terror, plays along with the game in the hope of things working out in the end. 'Nature will me defend' (2644), he proclaims. He clings to the belief that external forces, some kind of elusive mythical other embodied in nature's laws and divine order will shelter him. After all, he is not only a powerful symbol in and of himself, but also factually innocent on all counts. The answer is nothing but silence from the powers divine and natural. As in 'The Sheep and the Dog', 'God and nature are seemingly asleep' as McKenna observes (*Tragedy and the Consolation*, p. 497). He continues the argument, by pointing out that the laws of nature simply offer no defence in this situation.

The assumed rational laws of nature, and any mythic dimensions perceived therein, may finally be arbitrary when viewed from the tragic perspective, as the Wolf's dismissal of the Lamb's arguments implies. The tragic element in the Lamb's case is that all the myths, religious and cultural, fail him precisely because the Wolf will not accept their premises. (p. 497)

Similarly to the sheep, the lamb clings to the legal and linguistic formula, despite it proving fatally empty and ineffectual. Goldstein writes about ‘The Sheep and the Dog’ in particular, but his observation is perfectly applicable to the lamb’s tale as well: ‘[G]estures of resistance are limited, and the voice of complaint finally assimilates the meaning of the fable to the larger pattern of the suffering that God inflicts to discipline bodies’ (p. 608).

And in this pattern the lamb’s body suffers indeed, but with little allusion to discipline on his part. All the undisciplined consumption characterises the wolf. In the deafening silence the wolf refuses to engage in the debate on the level of logic, or even factual reality. He pivots and instead participates in the verbal game one final time during the Fables, seemingly for the show of it.

“Ha,” quod the wolff, “thou wald intruse ressoun
 Quhair wrang and reif suld dwell in propertie. (2693–94)

The wolf accuses the lamb of intruding upon reason, as if the action were like asserting the right of a false claimant for a property; this "propertie" should be shared by those already in possession. The wolf's most preferred method of such acquisition is the forceful, onomatopoeic "wrang and reif." The parallels between an overbearing person of property, protective of his capital, and the wolf here become even more pronounced. Laying aside all his previous fantastic theories about spewing poison and the crimes of the father (2672-3), the wolf now declares that the real treason: the lamb's insistence on mercy (“reuth”) is subverting the natural custom of “*crueltie*”. The lamb is unable to answer, as the wolf finally clamps down on his throat (2699). The brutality ensues in graphic detail, and there is no Reynardian humour to counterbalance the act.

The selie lamb culd do nathing bot bleit.
 Sone wes he heidit, the wolff wald do na grace,
 Syne drank his blude and of his flesche can eit
 Quhill he wes full, syne went his way on pace. (2700 – 3)

While the situation on the surface level is entirely natural, a wolf feeding on the prey animal, everything that surrounds it is anything but. Jill Mann, the chief proponent of language camouflaging predatory intent in the Fables, asks the questions: ‘Why does the wolf not devour the lamb immediately? Or why does he not make a better attempt at justifying his accusations, by, for example, moving downstream of the lamb?’ (p. 40). Once these questions have been asked, it becomes clear that it is the irrelevance of the verbal exchange to the development of the action that is the very point of its inclusion. The tension between the procrastinating conversation and the inexorable forward pressure created by the confrontation of predator and victim dramatizes a divergence between words and deeds’ (Mann, p. 40). The brutality carried out by the wolf is graphic, serving to reinforce the shocking nature of an act, which would otherwise be nothing more, but a predator’s natural feeding pattern. Indeed, Henryson cries out with a question before the *moralitas*:

Of his murther quhat sall we say allace,
 Wes not this reuth, wes not this grit pietie,
 To gar this selie lamb but gilt thus de? (2704-6)

Henryson calls it ‘murder’, a decidedly human category. At this point Laura Wang, synthesises Mann’ claim. ‘The end of the fable exposes the predatory uses of language and

thus reduces everyone—lamb, readers, and storyteller alike—to silence. The fable appears to collapse dumbly upon itself, as if it too has been implicated in this indictment’ (Wang, p. 36).

In this moment, as Wang argues, Henryson amplifies the emotional aspect of the tale in order to achieve pathos. Here, as opposed to Lawrence’s fate depicted in a mocking tone in ‘The Fox and the Wolf’, there is only authentic shock and sadness over the lamb’s fate, the pathos becoming genuine, the sympathy honest. This connects the fable with ‘The Sheep and the Dog’, where something similar happens at the ending: the poet shocked into prayer by the outcome of the tale. Something similar will shortly be observed in the case of ‘The Mouse and the Paddock’, where sympathy and pity will be used to characterise the mouse and the existential predicament she faces. In this fable, however, the symbolism surrounds the lamb, whose flesh and blood gets consumed in the end. The gesture towards the sacramental symbolism of the act is as loaded as it is puzzling. ‘It is not the only instance in which the *Fabillis* describe the drinking of animal blood and the eating of animal flesh, but put together in one line and linked with a lamb, the image is obtrusively sacramental’ (Wang, p. 36). In Wang’s reading the obtrusive nature of the sacramental allusions seem not to clarify, but to further complicate the matter of the fable’s ending. The wolf, through the frenzied and brutally detailed feeding on his prey, takes the sacrament: he ingests the flesh and blood of the lamb. He is a predatory canine at best, and a murderous oppressor at worst. Yet, unwittingly, he gets embraced into Christendom by taking the sacrament. The outcome is puzzling, the logic of the fable appears to collapse upon itself, as Wang suggests. Henryson’s final question signifies the end of the fable as it rings out in the silence left after the act of brutality (2704-6), which the *moralitas* attempts to answer.

And *attempting* to answer this question the *moralitas* of the fable does. It consists of a long and emotional explanation, serving as a marked counterpoint to the utilitarian and short fable. It discusses the ‘senseless existential horror’ of the tale, but also expands its scope,

encompassing the ‘wolves of the world’, whom the fable depicted in the shape of the wolf (McKenna, p. 497). The list goes on at length, listing the different aspects of the ‘three kinds of wolves who in this world now reign’ (2714). They are those, who pervert laws, and ‘Quhilk under poleit termis falset mingis’ (2715). The polite terms may well be familiar for the reader at this point, referring back to the Prologue of the fable collection. Henryson appears to display a little anxiety here again, just like he did in the case of Friar Wolf: language can be and is perverted to serve not to edify and instruct, but to gain and harm. The second ‘kynd of wolfis ravenous’ are those who have ‘aneuch plentie’ yet are ‘gredie and sa covetous’ (2728-9), and would not leave their fellow man in peace to exist. Here the wolf of the fable is a case in point. Third are the ‘men of heritage’, who have land, yet they oppress their tenants.

The thrid wolf ar men of heritage
 As lordis that hes land be Goddis lane
 And settis to the mailleris ane village
 And for ane tyme gressome payit and tane, (2745)

The lengthy description of the different aspects of the wolves displays Henryson’s frustration with the powerful wolves of the world in human shape. The closing question addresses a difficulty of the entire poetic project seemingly crumbling in the face of violence. What is there to say? It resembles ‘The Sheep and the Dog’s’ ending in its bleakness and foreshadows the final message resonating in the following fable. The lordly demands of the wolf refer back to the parable of the Unjust Steward formerly observed in relation to the fox: the demands and oppression from the wolf are taken as natural by the powerful predator: no choice in the matter or reward for the services rendered enter the conversation in the

preceding tale, nor in ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ (MacQueen, p. 192). Might makes right, and the predator with the mightier hunger rules. In other tales it may be the lion whose hunger is the strongest, but here it is the wolf. Simpson linearly equates hunger with might, and ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’ is a fable that showcases the strong correlation between the two categories (*Consuming Ethics*, pp. 326-7).

Similarly, the wolves of the world think little of the commensurate compensation of those who serve them and enable their power and plenty. The rapacity of the wolves overwrites even the suggestion of charity, or even transaction, is contrasted with the deprivation of the meek and oppressed tenants, who notably starve, despite their back-breaking labour. The *moralitas* is direct in its approach, leaving very little space for interpretation in its spelled out allegorical connections. The wolf of the fable represents the oppressive landlords and men of inheritance. Here, there is no charity, mercy, or “filial law” which made Piers so conflicted. There is only naked rapacity incentivising the landlord to squeeze hard. The tenants returning from their labour have little to look forward to in the meagre comfort of their homes, for they have little to drink or eat. Their misery is communicated through their meagre foodstuff, their thin cabbage soup, and malnourishment. A perfect counter-point to the voracity of the wolves of the world, who in turn devour the poor (2764). The imagery is as evocative as it is brutal, further amplifying the social criticism Henryson wishes to convey.

That scantlie may he purches by his maill

To leve upon dry breid and watter cail!

Hes thow not reuth to gar thy tennentis sweit

Into thy laubour with faynt and hungrie wame

And syne hes lytill gude to drink or eit

With his menyne at evin quhen he cummis hame? (2756-9)

Be nocht ane wolf thus to devoir the pure. (2764)

In this system the main enabler of oppression in Goldstein's reading is the lack of 'conscience' (2727) (p. 609). An essential human quality, which is lacking in the wolves of the world, rendering them, as opposed to the natural wolves, who feed for sustenance in the wilderness, *truly* bestial. In this system, '[l]ittle room is imagined for effective resistance to the social and legal disciplinary mechanisms that could lead to structural reform of the oppressive system itself' (p. 609). The outlook becomes bleaker by the minute, for these disciplinary mechanisms are indeed the ones implemented to supplement the conscience of the powerful, to bridle their rapacity and protect the meek from their depredations. In the end, however, these very mechanisms not only fail to offer protection from the wolves of the world but ultimately become the very instruments of their power. Yet, again, Jill Mann warns, that the outcome of the fable is far from the straight-forward message about the powerful oppressing the meek, despite what the *moralitas* appears to insist on. In her reading the *moralitas* of the fable is much more preoccupied with the words of the wolf than with the predatory feeding itself, which taken on its face value is a natural predator eating a prey animal. When Henryson asks: 'Off his murther quhat sall we say, allace?' (2704), *that* is the answer. Jill Mann's reading provides a framework not only for this particular fable's bleak outcome, but also illuminates the very reason why language appears so frequently to camouflage predatory intent. It serves as an important interface between natural hunger and the gratuitous nature of language when it comes to humans behaving like predators. 'The point of the story is not that the strong oppress the weak, but that they co-opt words to create

a fake justification for doing so. The reason for using an animal protagonist to make this point is startlingly clear: it makes apparent the redundancy of the linguistic camouflage that overlays brute reality. Wolves simply fall on their prey; human wolves write a script in which the lamb is the aggressor and deserves punishment. Linguistic justification does not impinge on the inevitable action; it is merely an extra luxury allowed to the one who wields superior power' (Mann, p. 40).

Furthermore, Mann also contrasts Henryson's long appeal with his source material. The 'elegiac Romulus ends the fable of the wolf and the lamb (II) with the terse acknowledgement of a cruel reality ('So the harmful man hurts the innocent and invents a reason for harming him. These wolves reign in every city': 15–16), Henryson ends with an eloquent appeal that enlists the fable in the cause of restoring social justice' (Mann, p. 268 and MacQueen, p. 124). The conclusion appears far from satisfying, however. If the fable serves as an amplification of earlier fables ('The Fox and the Wolf', 'The Sheep and the Dog', most notably), the *moralitas* itself arguably also serves as a similar amplification. Laura Wang observes this characteristic, identifying the *moralitas* as a bitter, but stubborn refusal to accept the corruption of the social order. Similarly to Mann, Wang contrasts the source material's short admittance of the world being what it is but draws a different conclusion from Henryson's approach. Mann observes the awareness and anxiety of Henryson's own potential redundancy of the poetic project, while Wang identifies it as the very attribute enabling Henryson to observe more accurately. 'Henryson's limited potential for 'impact on the world' also proves empowering, enabling him to think more freely than his prominent peers about the realities of political life and the possibility of reform' (Wang, p. 39). Again, the answer seems markedly unsatisfying. After the fable is done and the *moralitas* finished with its fervent prayer, what is there left to say? Where can poetic justice be located to counteract the force of unfettered bestial hunger manifesting in whichever way it may?

Simpson also puzzles over the question, using the language of hunger itself when attempting an answer. ‘Faced with the sheer, unstoppable processes of rapacious legal sentence, poetic sentence looks merely gratuitous. There is ‘litel nede’ of it. (...) Henryson himself insists on the force of the question: ‘Off his murther quhat sall we say, allace?’ (2704)’ (Simpson, p. 203).

The answer to the question is the next fable, the very last one in the collection. It does not iterate on ‘The Wolf and the Lamb’, for it, arguably, leaves nothing to further iterate on; gratuitous camouflage discarded, it is violence extrapolated to its farthest conclusion, hunger undisguised.

III. 5. ‘The Paddock and the Mouse’

This part of the chapter explores how in ‘The Paddock and the Mouse’ the fable collection comes to a close. It aims to reinforce Henryson’s message one final time: language is used to camouflage harmful intent. Here, however, the main character is a sympathetic mouse, who is tantalised by the nourishing foodstuff on the other side of the river: her hunger subverts her better judgement. She disregards instinct and logic not to trust the paddock, yet in their struggles the kite, the symbol of death, slays them both. Henryson’s final message is seemingly bleak, with a glimmer of redemptive quality, emphasising common humanity, but also observing that men may be rendered bestial in their behaviour.

In the fable the mouse, driven by hunger, and despite her better judgement, trusts the paddock’s offer to carry her over the river to the other shore. The paddock tries to drown the mouse, but the struggle of the little creatures in the river makes the kite notice them. The kite devours the pair in the end. The fable’s ending gives a sense of an unsatisfying tale. The

abrupt, brutal ending serves as a somewhat puzzling counterpoint to the preceding tale's biblical grandeur and refined rhetoric. Rosemary Greentree, a prominent voice among the few critical observers of the fable, asserts that 'The tale appears in varied forms in many medieval collections, and it is generally assumed that Henryson used the version of Gualterus Anglicus, Walter the Englishman, as his source' (*The Debate of the Paddock and the Mouse*, p. 481)

The mouse is established as a small and unclean animal in the period's mindset influenced by scripture and probably practical experience as vermin as well (Samuel 6:4-5, 6:11, 6:18; Leviticus 11:29; Isaiah 66:17). Yet, despite all the scriptural baggage the creature brings, the reader of the 'Paddock and the Mouse' cannot help but sympathise with the little 'selie' mouse (2778). The expression observed before makes the connection with the preceding tale's lamb; they are both poor, meek, and equally harmless. MacQueen's reading affirms the sympathy one may feel for the mice in Henryson's collection of fables. 'In two Aesopic fables, 'The Paddock and the Mouse' and 'The Two Mice', the small size and vulnerability of the mouse provided Henryson with a suitable image for the human soul in its dealings with the world' (p. 91). With similar emphasis Greentree observes the changes from the source material Henryson undertakes to evoke sympathy for the mouse and disgust towards the paddock, the source featuring a land rat and a frog instead.

A mouse is more appealing, and Henryson's mice are particularly charming. He has already presented the amusingly anthropomorphic mice from the town and the country, and also the small heroine who rescues the lion. A reader must be well disposed towards the engaging little creature who is hindered by her ridiculous predicament of having no horse to ride across the river and no way of hiring a boat or a mariner. (*The Debate of the Paddock and the Mouse*, p. 483)

Furthermore, the mouse is representative of the soul's childlike state, its innocence and helplessness against the callousness of the world; an allegory well-established within the period's popular debate genre (Greentree, p. 486). Furthermore, Henryson observes an important change from the Aesopic source material originally undertaken by another notable fabulist, Marie of France. Marie was greatly interested in not only the powerful oppressing the meek, but also in incorporating female figures in her fabular ecosystem. The mouse being female and sympathetic is her invention, although her tale ends with the little rodent escaping her predicament and the villainous frog being devoured (Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, p. 94). One cannot help, but feel for the mousy maid, who is a markedly different rodent from Caxton's rat in his version of the same tale, and especially different from Langland's hypocritical parliament of ravenous rodents.

Demonstrating the point, the hungry mouse cries and peeps in her pitiful display of distress, standing on the shore ('Scho ran cryand with mony pietuous peip.' (2783)). Henryson, very similarly to the preceding tale, colours the Aesopic source material with an emotional dimension, moving the reader to align with the mouse's plight, just like he did in the case of the lamb. Pity and shocking brutality serve an important role beyond merely lending realistic or heightened voice to the well-known fables, aiding recollection and interpretation. The 'selie' mouse cries for help, in a dramatic voice of urgency, as if a drowning person would cry for help ("“Help over! Help over!” this silie mous can cry, “For Goddis lufe, sumbodie, over the brym.” 2784-5).

The choice of words, like on many occasions throughout the fable, proves to involve an unfortunate pun (*sumbodie*, or some body), summoning the paddock representing the fallen earthly body. Answering it is an unlikely and ultimately undesirable source of help, which comes to the mouse's aid. The paddock emerges from the water and in a hoarse, untrustworthy voice greets the mouse: “Gude morne schir mous, quhat is your erand heir?”

(2790). If the mouse is an unclean, yet pitiful creature, the toad or frog that emerges is outright horroristic for the period's reader, signifying a dangerous and disturbing presence associated with decay. Greentree reads the animal from the perspective of a tormentor or ghastly devourer, and emphasises this aspect of the amphibian. The toad was 'thought to be a devourer of corpses, venomous and malevolent. The horrid details of her appearance and voice which expand Walter's brief reference to a garrulous frog with a flowery tongue confirm this' (p. 484). The revulsion works on several different levels when one heeds MacQueen's interpretation. In his reading the paddock is identified early as an allegorical reading of the sinful, earthly body; unable to reason, yet pulling the eloquently reasoning, but impotent soul ultimately towards damnation. From Greentree's perspective MacQueen's reading does make sense; the mouse is an innocent but ultimately needy and (although not easily) swayed character, while the paddock is one who clouds reason, just like the fallen earthly body does. A deceiver with a revolting presence, the toad offers a compelling representation of the postlapsarian body's needy nature. In MacQueen's reading the paddock even obliges to confirm her own role, although through suitably duplicitous wordplay. 'The word "bodie" implies the literal sense (...); the [mouse's] appeal for a body is immediately followed by the appearance of the paddock' (p. 93).

The size disparity between the two protagonist serves to further reinforce the strong emotional reaction, pity felt towards the mouse, and disgust towards the paddock. Greentree emphasises this addition to Henryson's original source material, further invoking sympathy for the hungry little rodent. '[A] toad, especially this toad, seems more powerful than the tiny mouse, whose littleness [in line 2799] is stressed in Henryson's tale' (p. 484). The toad appears courteous, addresses the mouse as 'sister', and asks how she could help. The mouse's answer showcases the depths of her desire for the imagined foodstuff beckoning her on the other side of the river.

“Seis thow,” quod scho, “of corne yone jolie flat

Of ryip aitis, of barlie, peis, and quheit?

I am hungrie and fane wald be thair at

Bot I am stoppit be this watter greit

And on this syde I get nathing till eit

Bot hard nuttis quhilkis with my teith I bore.

Wer I beyond, my feist wer fer the more. (2791-7)

She is gripped by hunger to such an extent that she proceeds to describe the images tantalising her in detail. One may be compelled to interpret the exuberant detail with which the mouse describes the tantalising foodstuff on the other side of the river as appearing in her mind’s eye as a sign of her little bestial appetite governing her actions. Despite how sympathetic the character of the little rodent may initially appear compelling readings propose a sense of admonishment towards the mouse’s attitude. Despite her cries for help, it seems like she is not running from abject starvation. The lines play a trick with one’s perception, as if in a joke. The mouse emphasises that on this side of the river she has nothing to eat (2795), but hard nuts which she needs to open with her teeth, instead of the feast grains, ripe oats, peas, and wheat, which awaits her on the other side. One may readily recognise the reference to the prominent nut-and-shell imagery of the *Fables’* Prologue (15–16) and recall in the earlier fable of ‘The Two Mice’ the city mouse’s refusal of her sister’s meal of withered peas and nuts, which threatens to break her tooth, sentencing her (she asserts dramatically) to starvation (220-4). Gopen also appears to take a stern look at the mouse, stating that ‘her appetite ... overwhelm[s] her good sense’ (p. 22).

Thus, readers may find themselves conflicted about the mouse's intended perception. Is it insistent hunger driving her to undertake the perilous journey, or the unwillingness to work for the nutritious kernel in the hard shell, as the Prologue instructed one may have to do? In the case of the fable the answer to the mouse's attitude is ultimately ambivalent. I propose that one may need to read the two superimposed upon one another in a polysemous manner. This would also reinforce the critical consensus that the mouse represents the soul. In its hunger it is both greedy and longing for the elusive feast just on the other shore, even salvation and heaven perhaps, but it is also wretched and starving in its postlapsarian state. Whatever drives the mouse in the end, greed and laziness or justifiable hunger, she is hungry, as Henryson will later also emphasise, reminding one of the fact (2851).

The two animals set out to debate the crossing of the river, the mouse very much weary of the paddock's disgusting and unsettling appearance. The lengthy logical debate not only asserts the mouse as a natural philosopher wondering about the paddock's ability to breath underwater and turning towards proverbs for wisdom. However, the mouse's reasoning is inconclusive. Her debate with the paddock asserts the amphibian as a liar. She lies about having gills and, in the end, proposes to tie themselves together bodily with a double twine. This lengthy debate (the dialogism taking up no fewer than 13 stanzas), in Greentree's reading, gestures to a wider literary tradition popular within the period: the debate between body and soul. Her reading further reinforces the allegorical reading of the two protagonists as body and soul, respectively.

The tradition begins with Old English addresses of the soul to the body, generally with bitter condemnation for the punishment expected by a damned soul, and continues with an increasing right of reply permitted to the body. In such dialogues, the body reproaches the soul, the thinking entity, for setting the course of the individual's life. (p. 482)

This reading further reaffirms MacQueen's observation of the paddock's corpor(e)ality, while also providing an answer to the binding thread between the two animals. 'The paddock as an amphibian is an effective symbol for the body, belonging to the material world, but still a possible receptacle for the soul. The forced union of the two is symbolized by the "doubill twynit threid" (2856) used by the mouse to bind her leg to that of the paddock' (p. 97).

The debate ultimately proves unfruitful, and the mouse needs to go along with the scheme, and the reader may also find themselves in the same situation. Jill Mann observes that 'the mouse and the toad argue their case by drawing on a traditional store of rhetoric, especially on proverbs, which are validated both by clerkly authority and by the cumulative weight of experience' (p. 273). From this perspective one may reasonably assume purposeful dialogism and the final outcome of the tale.

The inexperienced reader might reasonably assume that these opposing arguments offer a theoretical framework for evaluating the subsequent action, and that the action will demonstrate which argument is correct. (...) The problem is that both proverbial wisdom and experience point both ways, leaving natural impulses to determine action. (Mann, p. 273)

And, perhaps, so does the 'selie' mouse, hoping that the rhetorical elaboration can lead to a satisfying, logical conclusion in the face of the physical reality.

The problem, however, as one has come to expect with Henryson, the inexorable biological reality asserts itself violently, displaying callous disregard for the dialogism of the small creatures. Finally, the mouse decides to take the risk, for her biological need is pressing. Henryson again emphasises that she is hungry indeed, her judgement greatly influenced by the tantalising images of oats and grain on the other shore. And rhetorical elaboration and proverbial wisdom offers no clear answer. The mouse's actions and attitude,

one may argue, even falls into the category of ‘consuetude and ryte’, or ‘custom and habit’ the Prologue cautions the reader about: the normalising of consenting, permissive attitude when it comes to habitual sin resulting from the erosion of discipline. The unique expression is prominently emphasised across the *Fables* as a dimension of sin, especially in ‘The Fox and the Wolf’ (‘Sum bene also throw consuetude and ryte / Vincust with carnall sensualitie.’ (782-3)) and ‘The Preaching of the Swallow’ (‘Ressoun is blindit with affectioun / And carnall lust growis full grene and gay / Throw consuetude hantit from day to day. / Proceeding furth be use and consuetude, / The sin ryipis and schame is set on syde’ (1906-10)). This consenting attitude led to the downfall of the fox, the birds, and other sinners throughout the collection, and remains an important message of Henryson’s tales. In habitually consenting to sin, the sinful acts are normalised, allowing them to encroach on morality. Reason becomes blinded momentarily by temptation, allowing sin to ‘ripen’ like a poisonous weed, as the closing images of ‘The Preaching of the Swallow’ suggests (1905-22).

The mouse also comes close to this enticing category, her longing for the delectable foodstuff on the other side of the river is emotionally charged, blinded for the dangers the toad represents. The morality, however, is far from clearcut in the case of the little rodent. One is again reminded that this little sinner, if indeed a sinner she is, is hungry, and because of that she must place herself at the questionable mercy of the fundamentally untrustworthy toad. The mouse, driven by hunger, finally snaps at the toad to remain silent, and agrees to be conveyed to the other side of the river.

“Let be thy preiching,” quod the hungrie mous,
 “And be quhat craft thow gar me understand
 That thow wald gyde me to yone yonder land.” (2851-3)

The paddock's words of answer appear to be reassuring on the surface but carry an ominous tone and an innuendo only she is privy to.

“Thow wait,” quod scho, “ane bodie that hes neid
To help thameself suld mony wayis cast. (2854-5)

MacQueen's earlier observation about the paddock's sudden emergence is here reaffirmed. On the surface the line is an ineffectual one without much substance, serving as an unpassionate answer to the mouse finally consenting to be carried over to the other side. In MacQueen's reading, however, where the paddock displays her real nature. ‘This (...) is an example of the paddock's “fals ingyne”; the “neid” to which she refers is her own rather than the mouse's. The word “bodie” again refers to the paddock’ (p. 93). Thus, the mouse may be quick to dismiss the words when she is gripped by hunger. Her earlier careless words calling out for help (“Help over! Help over!” this silie mous can cry, / “For Goddis lufe, sumbodie, over the brym.” (2784-5)) come back with a vengeance here, as the paddock wilfully puns the expression, turning it into a general statement of corporeal need, and foreshadowing her own role as well. The general statement of the paddock underlines the insistence of the needy body, but it is not the hunger of the mouse she refers to after all, but her role as the allegorised version of the sinful earthly body.

However one may interpret the words of the paddock, a body indeed has its needs. Hunger's inexorable forward pressure serves as the final word in the debate both here, and in the ending of the fable. ‘The mouse is not wholly convinced. It is hunger rather than the paddock's skill in argument which forces her to continue the discussion, and her lingering suspicion of the scheme involving the “doubill twynit threid” (2857) which makes her insist on the “Murthour aith” [Murder oath]’ (MacQueen, p. 93). In her preoccupation with the

urgency of her hunger the mouse does not notice that the paddock swears by Jupiter (2869), which has been established a portent of false oaths throughout the fables (636, 2026).

During the crossing the paddock attempts to drown the mouse, who denounces the oathbreaker and cries for a priest to give her the last rights. All this splashing arouses the nearby kite's attention. In the last two stanzas the reader witnesses as the kite grabs the pair by the twine binding them, flies away with them, then proceeds to flay, disembowel, and consume them; the pair, despite all their eloquent reasoning and arguing 'settled thusly' ('Of thair debait thus quhen I hard outred' (2907)) become not even a full meal (2905) for the bird of prey in the end.

The kite itself, just like the paddock and the mouse, has an ambivalent reputation in the period's mindset, and in Henryson's reading as well. The fables have featured it before during the trial of the sheep in a company of ill repute: predators and fellow birds of prey as well. Kratzmann establishes a strong thematic connection with the diabolical churl in 'The Preaching of the Swallow' serving as an inexorable terminator of the pitiable, hungering creatures blinded by hunger arguing amongst themselves (Kratzmann, *Henryson's Fables*, p. 64). Similarly, Parkinson emphasises that 'throughout the fables, Henryson's birds of prey (compare *gled* and *graip*, lines 1175–79n) have been scavengers; the Scottish poet refuses to emulate Chaucer's interest in noble eagles and hawks (Parkinson, footnotes to line 2896, p. 197). The bird of prey is perceived as a messenger of hunger itself. The kite, according to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, "hath a voys of pleynynge and of mone as it were messenger of hungir, for when he hungrith he sechith his mete pewlynge with voys of pleynynge and of mone" (Parkinson, footnotes to line 2896). Henryson layers the symbols, just like in the case of 'The Wolf and the Lamb'. Similarly to 'The Fox and the Wolf' the fable ends in the skinning and disembowelling of the protagonists. The effect in the end is also similar. While in the earlier tale the Fox's linguistic camouflage was exposed, here the diminutive,

insignificant status of the pair is revealed. Greentree in her earlier work observes this dynamic as a ‘recurring motif (...) that of stripping away the outer covering, in a metaphorical or a literal sense. (...) Thus the literal references to skinning and stripping carry at least the threat of death, and we see a change in the creatures affected as the *Fables* proceed’ (*Reader, Teller*, p. 79).

The violent final two stanzas jolt the perspective of the fable, reasserts itself into the dimension of nature, setting up the final *moralitas* in the collection. The increasingly sophisticated pedagogy of Henryson displayed in the *Fables* about predatory intent here becomes most pronounced. The Fox perpetuated language, the Wolf discarded it when its convenience wore off. The kite does not even engage in camouflaging predatory intent with language: it does not need it. It simply utters its natural cry “Pew!” (2901) and flies away with its unsatisfactory meal finished. Yet again, the most violent of predators does not simply utilise or discard language: they need not even engage with it at the end of the fables. The meek and small may have their insignificant debates and reasoning, but the kite cares not. While the Wolf at least needed to satisfy some sort of formula for justification, the kite does not even engage with any of that. The kite is a force of nature, identified as sudden death by the *moralitas*. Yet, reading the bird of prey from the pattern established by the fables, it represents the epitome of predatory intent going full circle, and arriving back to the wordless consumption of the meek, there is ‘litel nede’, to use Simpson’s approach, to expose gratuitous linguistic camouflage. Greentree observes the sudden, jarring presence of physicality introduced by the kite’s sudden presence in the fable.

This gruesome moment gives a shocking restoration of perspective to the reader, as Henryson undermines the fantastic world of the fable, showing it as an absurd fiction by placing it beside the world of nature, and preparing to move to the

world of humanity, where the reader must examine not the preposterous contention of engaging animals, but that of body and soul. (p. 485)

The bodies of the two are indeed affected: skinned, dissected, and consumed only the fable stands as testament to their existence and sophisticated argument. Jill Mann clarifies the emotionally bleak final stanzas of the fable. One is not inclined to judge the mouse harshly, for in her, if greed is present, the sin is writ small. Yet, the sympathy one may feel is simply impotent, contained within the narrative, and allowed to be carried no longer than the ending of the fable. 'The reader's sympathy for the 'selie mous' (2893) is not allowed to affect the narrative outcome. ('Fable tolerates no compassion.') The pitiless savagery of the kite who carries off both animals is matched by the pitiless clarity with which the narrator describes their disembowelling, and his brusque conclusion' (Mann, p. 275). The outcome of the fable is as frustrating as it is emotionally draining. The deliberate establishment of the mouse as a character deserving compassion seems suddenly redundant in the context of the fable. Yet, the frustration of the impotent sympathy observed by Mann in the face of savagery is, arguably, the point of the tale. Similarly to the earlier fable of 'The Wolf and the Lamb', one is perturbed by the sudden death of the 'selie' character of the fable. The inclusion of this emotional dimension renders all the edifice of higher ethics, charity, and rhetoric redundant in the face of inexorable violence and voracity. They are categories, which in the end have little bearing on the happenings of the fable; their function appears to be nothing but to be overpowered by inexorable rapacity. In Mann's reading 'rhetoric proves only its own redundancy, running parallel to the narrative action without making a significant connection with it' (p. 275).

The conclusion asserts the ultimate rule of hunger through the kite's brutality, whose hunger is ultimately only half fulfilled by the pair, reaffirming their insignificance even as sustenance for the bird of prey. Jill Mann observes this redundancy in her reading,

emphasising the contrast between the tale preceding the appearance of the kite and the ensuing brutal violence.

Whatever the temporary amusement provoked by the imagined sight of these two animals solemnly swapping wise maxims, it is abruptly dispelled, first by the pathos and then by the savagery of the narrative conclusion. The verbal elaborations of beast epic become simply a larger-scale example of the ‘blanda verba’ which in fable mask and distract attention from fundamental physical realities. (p. 275)

The *moralitas* itself does not offer much consolation from said physical realities either. Its voice is intimate and personal, starting out with the emphasis placed on the common humanity.

My brother, gif thow will tak advertence
 Be this fabill thow may persave and se
 It passis far all kynd of pestilence
 Ane wickit mynd with wordis fair and sle. (2910-3)

Henryson’s emphasis on ‘my brother’ is a startling one in light of the fable: the paddock called the mouse ‘sister’ in order to circumvent her suspicions. Yet, in MacQueen’s reading the address stresses common humanity (p. 89). With the final *moralitas* the world of fables is left behind, the last scene jolting back one’s perspective into the discomfoting reality inhabited by humans behaving like animals. The stanza proceeds by reinforcing the message. One is right to remain suspicious about the rhetorical formula and poetry: the lesson finally well-learned. The intimate, personal

voice in Wheatley's reading has the potential to reflect on the entire poetic project's capacity to teach (p. 187).

The expressions of the fable from the Prologue and the fables proper are again observed here, 'fenyeit' (2925) most prominently: the pretence of language and rhetoric camouflaging ill intent. The exact symbolism of the fable is also explained, most prominently perhaps the mouse. The final words on the sympathetic character offer little consolation, but perhaps an explanation.

This lytill mous heir knit thus be the schyn
 The saull of man betakin may indeid,
 Bundin and fra the bodie may not twin
 Quhill cruell deith cum brek of lyfe the threid,
 The quhilk to droun suld ever stand in dreid
 Of carnall lust be the suggestioun
 Quhilk drawis ay the saull and druggis down. (2948-54)

The final lesson is the bodily urges and their corrupting influence on leading the soul astray. Finally, the kite embodies the finality of death, the end of all redemptive potential one may utilise over the course of the earthly life, the perilous crossing of the river. The words are incongruous with the mouse's character: carnal lust and seduction may be the last things coming to mind while reading the fable. It is done with pedagogical purpose, however. Goldstein observes the sobering message of the final *moralitas*.

Acknowledging that no amount of learning or ingenuity in the playful discipline of fiction is adequate in itself, Henryson finally abandons poetry for prayer. His final gesture seems emblematic of tensions in the work as a whole: on the one

hand Henryson affirms the value of poetry to delight and instruct; on the other, he registers considerable anxiety about its moral efficacy. (Goldstein, p. 610)

Goldstein's reading highlights the anxiety pervading Henryson's poetic project and its potential disciplinary dimension.

What is left to say finally? Simpson fittingly communicates his final thoughts through the language of consumption.

After the measurable good of interpretation has been so efficiently swallowed and consumed by the all-powerful and pre-emptive law of nature, what is the scrap, the 'laif', that could be left to the friars? Or what the scrap that could be left the reader of Henryson's own collection? (p. 203)

His attempt to answer his own question leads him to a conclusion most useful to the argument of this thesis is concerned. His observation on the genre of animal fables and their redemptive capacity is communicated, yet again, through the hungry animal bodies. Simpson summarises the difficult yet rewarding task of interpretation the fables present the reader with encapsulated in the motif of bestial hunger and the fine balance of discipline and control represented through it.

It offers the pleasure-giving possibilities of mimesis, as we see likeness where we expected none. It also offers a fundamental literary challenge of representing and constraining the body, and not just any body, but the hungry animal body. Fable must do that through a rhetorical practice that can persuasively represent the animal body, and yet constrain that body by appeal to the human-animal reader's rational soul. (p. 206)

When the impotent sympathy of the reader has nowhere to go, and Henryson is finished with his words of admonishment, there is so much yet so little left for one to meditate

upon. Similarly to the Fox's bloated belly full of meat, an arrow sticking out of it, or the little carcasses of the last fable barely satiating the kite's hunger, one is left with the meagre pickings of the *moralitas*, while Henryson leaves further interpretation to friars with not inconsiderable wryness and tiredness in his tone (2970-3). In the end, just like in the case of 'The Wolf and the Lamb', he abandons rhetoric for prayer, finishing his collection of fables on that note.

The final message is that of bleakness and wry cynicism. Or rather, so it appears on the surface. Henryson suggests, one is not to despair in the face of the overwhelming and callous violence embodied in the fables, but to hold on to the hope in divine providence and shared humanity, now armed with the knowledge and experience the fables have taught. 'To mak a sample or similitude' (2972) is left for the future interpreter. It remains their task to find use of the rhetoric which Henryson fears may be useless in the face of the inexorable cruelty of the world. His observation is applicable to the motif of hunger in the *Fables* as well. It is an inexorable imperative, which cannot be resisted through meticulous intellectualisation, or poesis. It represents tension and anxieties within his work depicting animals behaving like humans, and humans rendered bestial through their acts of habitual sin.

IV. Conclusion

Hunger remains a ubiquitous motif, a shared, universal driving force. The motif's depictions, alloyed with the animal, is not confined to the realm of biology, but transcends into more abstract categories. A subject may not only hunger for sustenance, but for love, community, and understanding. Just like Hunger's character in *Piers Plowman*, the lessons learned from the investigation of the motif are either too many, or ultimately too elusive in nature, too sensitive to context and underlying morality behind it. If any such conclusion exists, it may be the fundamental lesson of psychoanalysis Zizek is fond of emphasising: one's desires, wants and needs may be manipulated and influenced by many external factors, but anxiety remains an authentic expression of one's innermost self. Bestial hunger and the efforts to control it all seem to find their way back to this unifying anxiety about it, expressed in different ways in different contexts. What if trying to control it, discipline it, ultimately does not work, or works in unexpected ways? What effects does bestial hunger have on the sophisticated edifice of society, and humanity? All the categories that are so anxiously insisted upon as essential to humanity, can become consumable, or rendered entirely unintelligible by the inexorable power allegorized through the hungering animals. This anxiety surrounding bestial hunger and its pervasive presence characterizes the texts observed in the thesis. They all approach different strati of the self, the individual and its connection to its environment and fellow humans, and they all come to different conclusions. They, however, are also unified in their unease of handling the motif, and their ultimate failure to offer a reassuring conclusion.

The authentic anxiety depicted in *The Tale of Sir Gowther* is that of infiltration and contamination, as the atavistic, feral Other expresses itself in the ordered setting of chivalric virtue and good governance which may identify the male subject in the period. It is an intimate tale of constant transformation and becoming of the male subject, the ultimately vulnerable individual buffeted by the disciplinary dynamics of worldly and societal pressures. Finding ways that are divinely and societally sanctioned to express and utilise this nagging, gnawing physical and emotional hunger for tender, caring acceptance and brutal violence simultaneously characterises the balance of the tale, and the motif of bestial hunger within it. Disciplining it remains a lifelong journey for Gowther. Despite his internality and empathy developing in the process of self-acceptance and penance, the tale remains uncomfortable around him and his volitions, as if in the presence of a trained war hound that may lash out at any moment. The process of discipline in turn isolates Gowther from the reproductive dynamics of humanity, sublimating his subjectivity, turning his image into a golden statue in the process. His subjectivity and hunger for some transcendent, elusive surplus meaning of his penitential journey remains unaddressed; beside the divine approval and the regenerative attributes of Gowther's statues, the poem's discomfort remains nearly palpable as it insists on the inconclusive ending.

Piers Plowman, on the other hand, depicts a different anxiety; that of manipulation and subversion. Throughout the narrative the principles and dynamics depicted in the Prologue and the Rat Fable, I argue, remain not only present but fundamentally important guiding principles modulating the rest of the poem up until its very last Passus. Even though the step-like structure of the subsequent dream visions promises an intellectual clarification of many spiritual and worldly, the frustration of both the divinely inspired plowman and the poet remains an underlying motif

throughout the narrative. The Prologue differentiates between the different types of people who may inhabit human society (as much today as in the period of the late Middle Ages), dividing the field between people moved by selfish pride and wasteful, uneven consumption, and that of the producers of these goods. The Rat Fable depicts in a nuclear form the hypocrisy of ideology utilised in the service of voracity and greed, even when the eloquent rodents themselves do not contribute to food-production at all. In their case, their hunger motivates their miniature pantomime of human politics, which remains just as parasitic and wasteful as its larger counterpart. The Hunger episode of the Half-Acre confronts the morally upstanding plowman with the consequences of deploying hunger first as a moral cleansing agent, then as a form of societal disciplinary mechanism. Both fail in their own way, further underlying the anxiety hunger's presence represents. Hunger in his speech and role as a trained but ultimately selfish canine presence exposes the clerical language and its ultimate goal of feeding his own belly, not dissimilarly to the mouse's speech exposing the political mechanisms in service of hunger. Need's final appearance in the narrative represents the motif reemerging at the most inopportune moment, even intruding on the Will, the Dreamer's dream vision through his earthly body's vulnerability. The moral message Need imparts, however, is as subversive and permissive as the philosophy of the Rat Fable's eloquent mouse: "need has no law". One may not tame hunger, only fend it off momentarily, or sic it on his fellow man; neither of these conclusions are reassuring from a humanist perspective. If the elevated moral principles can fall prey to the fundamental biological need to feed, what is there to prevent the mighty preying upon the meek?

Henrysons's *Moral Fables* similarly look for an answer to this anxiety, yet only finding uncomfortable depictions of hunger in the process. These, in turn, further

accentuate the ways bestial hunger infiltrates and subverts the elevated, divine language and symbolism of the sacrament. In the service of the selfish canines even legal and scriptural language become instruments serving to satisfy the voracity of the powerful. Exposing such a conceit, this perverted social contract between predator and prey serves as the major anxiety as well, only for the powerful. The lion puts the fox to death because he comes too close exposing this, while the other predators participate in it up until the moment of convenience, and not a moment further. Henryson's *Fables* are populated by such instances (one may even argue that this subversion serves as their fundamental thesis statement), thus selecting only a few proved to be a difficult task and has been done in an effort to see the most emblematic characters, the canines, enacting this subversion. The final fable about the mouse and the paddock thus seems to be an outlier, featuring a miniature debate between these two, seemingly insignificantly marginal animal characters. Yet, its position and bleak moral message is a fitting departure both for the collection of the fables and the argument of this thesis as well.

Bestial hunger communicated through the images of the animal in the texts thus appears to depict a fundamental, underlying anxiety of humanity. The efforts to discipline it, or to deploy it as an instrument of discipline, all appear to be destined to failure: a failure of representation, a failure of understanding, to intellectualise it and control it. Paradoxically, the image's focus is indeed humanity itself and the interface between one's psyche and the surrounding environment. Hunger in its bestial aspect is the ultimate extrapolation of this intrusion, felt most intimately by body and soul. Its depictions in the texts observed by the thesis are fundamentally psychoanalytical in their aspect, even if the period's thinker communicated such observations through the language of virtue and sin, restraint, and violence. Wherever bestial hunger is depicted

in the texts, it functions as a corrosive agent, which erodes everything it touches. It unravels linear reasoning surrounding restraint and chivalry, notions of good governance, charity, and selfless impulses. It unravels the very meaning of the intellectualising, poetic project, which appears as a powerless, token gesture of the oppressed, raging against injustice of uneven distribution and consumption. I argue, the universal message of bestial hunger in these texts is *not* the great lesson of Freudian psychoanalysis, that there is a beast within every human being only waiting to be unleashed, infamously rendering the psychoanalyst and the subject fundamentally anxious in their exploration of the topic. Much rather, the texts observed in the thesis emphasise the ever-increasing importance of kindness, charity, and societal cohesion, which are supposed to serve as bulwark against the depredations of the mighty and the powerful. These predators in human shape hunger for riches so mightily, so bestially, that their capacity for greed and all manner of consumption transcends anything that could be described as human. Against their callous, uncaring attitude stands the seemingly imperfect and ineffectual poetic project, defiant.

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