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## Sloth and the Penitential Self in Henry, Duke of Lancaster's *Le Livre de seyntz medicines / The Book of Holy Medicines*

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There is a point in Henry, duke of Lancaster's *Book of Holy Medicines*, the Anglo-Norman penitential treatise written in 1354, at which the narrator is confronted by what looks more like a situation comedy of manners than a spiritual dilemma.<sup>1</sup> Lady Sloth, personification of the deadly sin and arguably the most engaging of Henry's projections of his own sinful self, claiming to feel unwell and simply to need a place to rest awhile, slips into the castle of Henry's integral self almost before he has realized it:

Et par l'oraille entre ele en cest maner: ele y entre come une desheitez; qe a peyne dirroit homme a un deshaitee: —'Aletz la ou cea' ou 'Faites ceo cy ou cella.' Mes plutost demandroit homme: —'Serroit ceo plus vostre pleiser a aler cy qe la, ou faire ceo cy qe cella? Ne preignetz garde a nule altre chose forsqe tout a vostre aise, dormetz et repositz vous et ne pensetz a nule riens forsqe en vos delitez.' Et tout ensi est il, tresdouz Sires, quant jeo su desheitee et gise en pecché et me dors, come jeo face mult sovent; et toutdise en sui jeo malade. Et quant ceo pecché de peresce vient a la porte de l'oraille et me prie q'il puisse entrer, car el est durement desheitee et dist, mesqe elle soit un bien poi reposee, ele s'en irra; et tant fait qe elle einz vient, et quant elle y est, elle s'encouche et s'endort. Et si nul vient a la porte et die: — 'Jeo sui des amys Dame Peresce; lessez moi entrer pur la conforter', la porte serra mult prestement overte pur lesser entrer un soen amy q'ensi la

<sup>1</sup> One of the most prominent figures in the early years of the Hundred Years' War, and one of the richest men in the land, Henry wrote his treatise, a spiritual text by a layman rare for this time, a year before further endowing a hospital and college at Leicester originally founded by his father. The text survives in only two full manuscripts (Blackburn, Lancashire, Stonyhurst College, MS 24 and Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 218), and a fragment mis-bound with medical material (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 388.2), but is recorded as having been owned by at least one religious institution, as well as by associates and members of his immediate and extended aristocratic family; see E. J. Arnould, *Étude sur le Livre des saintes médecines du duc Henri de Lancastre* (Paris: Didier, 1948), pp. lxxvii–lxxii; and Jeanne Krochalis and Ruth J. Dean, "Henry of Lancaster's *Livre de Seyntz Medicines*: New Fragments of an Anglo-Norman Work", *The National Library of Wales Journal*, 18 (1973), 87–94. It is possible that Gower, Chaucer, and the *Gawain*-Poet were all familiar with this work, now edited as *Le Livre de seyntz medicines*, by E. J. Arnould, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1940). Subsequent references are to this edition, by page and line-number, in the body of the essay. Translations are from my forthcoming translation of this text for the French of England Translation Series. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Oliver Pickering as a generous colleague whose wit, learning, and professionalism are such that I cannot imagine his ever having had more than an intellectual acquaintance with that vice to which academics are most vulnerable.

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Peresce vorreit conforter de dire: — ‘Dame ne pernetz garde a nul rien qe soit, forsqe a vos aisez, et nomement al aise du corps: et de l’alme nous en penserons un altre jour quant nous serrons veultz et n’averons altre chose affaire.’ (p. 54, l. 18–p. 55, l. 10)

[And this is how she gets in through the ear; she comes in as though she were unwell. Now, you would hardly say to a sick person: ‘Go here or there,’ or: ‘Do this or that.’ Rather, you would ask: ‘Would you prefer to go here rather than there, or to do this rather than that? Do not worry about anything other than making yourself comfortable; sleep and rest and think only about your pleasure.’ And so it is just like this, most sweet Lord, when I am sick and lie in sin and slumber, as I do very often, and all the same it makes me ill. And then this sin of Sloth comes to the gate of the ear and begs to be let in, because she is very sick, and says that just as soon as she has rested a little while she will go; and she does so much that she gets in, and once she is here she goes to bed and falls asleep. And should anyone come to the gate and say: ‘I am a friend of Lady Sloth, let me come in to comfort her’, the gate will be very quickly opened to let in one of her friends, who is then eager to comfort Sloth by saying: ‘Lady, don’t worry about anything at all, except your comfort, and especially the comfort of the body; and we shall think about the soul some other day, when we are old and shall have nothing else to do.’]

Henry’s expression of hapless confusion humorously capitalizes on the fraught and contradictory obligations and responsibilities of hospitality, as the friends at whose encouragement he says he has written his text (p. 240, ll. 8–15) would immediately have recognized. The well-established (devotional and penitential) image of the self as castle and the exigencies of social intercourse come together in Henry’s tableau.<sup>2</sup> While hospitality is a not uncommon trope in devotional literature, and is also a focus of philosophical inquiry, its practice is, historically, predominantly a question of honour (of some importance to a writer such as Henry, who casts his relationship with God at least partly in feudal terms, and thinks of sin as shame).<sup>3</sup> Sloth is by no means the first lady to abuse a man’s sense of duty in this regard, whether in literature or in life, as is clear from Ranulf of Chester and William of Roumare’s successful scheme to capture Lincoln Castle from King Stephen, in the twelfth century, which begins with a welcome unguardedly extended to an apparently innocent visit from the aggressors’ wives.<sup>4</sup> With Henry’s soul, rather than worldly possessions, at stake, Sloth herself does not play the languid gentlewoman for long; she soon re-appears in the *Livre* as an alarmingly strong-willed housekeeper in occupation of Henry’s fortress (p. 58, l. 28–p. 63, l. 7). In bringing together the figure of Sloth as an initially disingenuously undemanding guest, and the familiar metaphor of the castle as spiritual integrity, Henry, with some self-irony, concentrates points of social, moral and spiritual reference. He does so by means of imagery with powerful resonance in both courtly secular and penitential literature that suggests a level of aesthetic and discursive complexity in his method; at the same time it amusingly figures his moral predicament.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For recent accounts of literary treatments of selfhood by means of architecture, see David Cowling, *Building the Text: Architecture as Metaphor in Late Medieval and Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Christiania Whitehead, *Castles of the Mind: A Study of Medieval Architectural Allegory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> See Julie Kerr, ‘The Open Door: Hospitality and Honour in Twelfth/Early Thirteenth-Century England’, *History*, 87 (2002), 322–35.

<sup>4</sup> See Julie Kerr, ‘“Welcome the Coming and Speed the Parting Guest”: Hospitality in Twelfth-Century England’, *Journal of Medieval History*, 33 (2007), 130–46 (p. 134).

<sup>5</sup> Gregory M. Sadlek usefully demonstrates how the penitential language of sloth can inform representation and understanding of secular and courtly behaviour, in ‘Love, Labor, and Sloth in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*’,

Henry's *Livre* falls roughly into two sections (pp. 1–130 and 131–244 of Arnould's edition), of which the first establishes the perilous condition of the narrator-sinner's spiritual self, imagined primarily as a physical body wounded by the deadly sins, the depredations of which are itemized in relation to the various parts of the body and the senses. This abject body can be made whole only through the ministrations of Christ the physician, who offers up his own blood by way of healing balm, and the second part of the treatise describes the conditions necessary for the sinner/patient's healing, recuperation, and hope of spiritual health and salvation. Divine intercession and the grace of God are imagined metaphorically as instances of contemporary medical procedure and treatments; so, for example, Mary's own milk, and Christ's own body, as redemptive cockerel, cooked up into chicken soup, constitute convalescent food, while the patient's wounds, once treated with Christ's blood, are tenderly wrapped in the bandages of Mary's Joys. Within this general structure there are further vividly realized metaphors of the spiritually troubled heart — for example, as a busy marketplace, as a whirlpool, as a foxes' earth, or as a fortress to be guarded. Such vibrant imagery shows acquaintance with encyclopaedic penitential manuals such as Laurent d'Orléans' late thirteenth-century *Somme le roi*, and preachers' handbooks such as the early fourteenth-century Franciscan *Fasciculus morum*.<sup>6</sup> Texts such as the *Somme* may systematically work through accounts of the sins as trees with various branches, or present them in family groups, as does Gower's *Mirour de l'omme*, where Sloth is mother of Somnolence, Laziness, Slackness, Idleness and Negligence.<sup>7</sup> Henry's treatment does not follow such carefully detailed taxonomies, and he does not develop any sophisticated technical vocabulary for the sin he calls *peresce*. The penitential *Weye of Paradys*, enumerating a list of sloth-related offences, obvious and abstruse, *inter alia* spiritual and worldly forgetfulness, the refusal to seek advice, and something that sounds like *Schadenfreude* ('vnconvenable gladnes'), warns that *slowthe* is 'gretly vnknown of many folke, as I trowe'.<sup>8</sup> For all his lack of technical vocabulary, however, Henry is clearly alive to the guises Sloth adopts; at its first appearance, agile and quick-talking (that Sloth is slow is untrue, warns the narrator), it leaps out of his mouth with a ready answer against activity of any kind (p. 22, l. 14–p. 23, l. 27), and Henry confesses to a number of failings this vice adumbrates, among them idleness — including hunting, making love, staying too long abed — and forgetfulness of spiritual and worldly duties, neglect of religious observance and of doing works of mercy, lack of rigour in the exercise of justice, and procrastination.

Siegfried Wenzel, in his still authoritative study of this most confusingly roomy of sins, manifest in everything from a reluctance to get up, to spiritual despair and suicidal thoughts, suggests that in the later Middle Ages, for lay folk at least, sloth became understood as rather more a sin of the flesh than of the spirit, and denoted laziness in general, while its more intellectually tortured aspect evolved into what the Renaissance called melancholy.<sup>9</sup> Henry

*Chaucer Review*, 26 (1992), 350–68. See also his *Idleness Working: The Discourse of Love's Labor from Ovid through Chaucer and Gower* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> *La Somme le roi par Frère Laurent*, ed. by Édith Brayer and Anne-Françoise Leurquin-Labie (Paris-Abbeville: SATF-Paillart, 2008); *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. and trans. by Siegfried Wenzel (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> John Gower, *Mirour de l'omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*, trans. by William Burton Wilson (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992), pp. 74–86.

<sup>8</sup> *The Middle English Weye of Paradys and the Middle French Voie de Paradis*, ed. by F. N. M. Diekstra (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 217.

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Wenzel, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North

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does not make Sloth structurally central (which is appropriate to its under-handedness), and does associate it with the flesh, but he is also alert to its dangers on all fronts, intellectual, spiritual, and physical and, moreover, to the way it permeates both somatic and mental faculties. The worked personification of the sin as female — by the end of the introductory episode, the originally male/neutral figure is a ‘male enchanteresse’ (‘evil enchantress’) (p. 23, l. 25) — together with its odd incarnation as, for example, a hellish brooding chicken (p. 63, ll. 8–14), are arguably attempts to reify and make alien this sin (as also to signal its unruly nature by virtue of the shifts in its representation), but, as will become evident, Henry also acknowledges that Sloth most aptly describes his deepest failings. The language with which Henry reflects on his difficulties in completing his daily spiritual entries even hints that, paradoxically, Sloth, as much as his good intention, is the very condition of his writing. As he celebrates the redemptive feast of Easter Sunday, he laments that anyone can see ‘qe jeo voise mult belement le pas en cest affaire’ (‘that I am making very slow progress in this matter’) (p. 98, ll. 10–11). The phrase ‘belement le pas’ occurs rarely in the *Livre*; at this point it describes the nature of procrastination (when the hour, put off, never arrives, p. 23, ll. 5–7), Sloth’s slipping into his heart (p. 54, ll. 12–17), and his reluctance to carry his weary body to give alms to the needy (p. 75, ll. 6–7). With regard to Sloth, Henry brings a particular inventiveness to bear on his devotional and penitential reading, in his contribution to the fourteenth-century vernacular exploration of the nature of sin and the human condition.

By the time the narrator gingerly negotiates Lady Sloth’s visit — announced by a pun on the need for warning and protection (p. 54, ll. 12–13) — it is already clear that he is not only receptive to, but a practitioner of, the vice she embodies.<sup>10</sup> Henry’s articulation of his problem as host to a sick visitor anticipates the Middle English *Patience*’s similarly witty characterization of Poverty as a lady who, regardless of the reluctant host’s wishes, will simply not be shown the door: ‘For þeras pouert hir proferes ho nyl be put vtter, | Bot lenge wheresoeuer hir lyst, lyke oþer greme’.<sup>11</sup> The *Patience* narrator notes ruefully that material poverty might at least attract long-suffering, and also *Patience*, whose playfellow (‘playfere’, l. 41) Poverty is. The observation that unwanted material discomfort may ultimately yield spiritual benefits may itself play knowingly on a traditional argument that poverty and want are the consequences of sloth and *impatience*.<sup>12</sup> Both narrators exploit the social dilemma the undesirable guest poses, to moral effect. While the courtesy books recommend one extend a welcome to all, Henry’s pre-emptive self-excusing, in his claim that Sloth, as a sick person,

Carolina Press, 1967), pp. 164–87 (p. 186). See also Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Michigan: State College Press, 1952), p. 213.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Or sumes a la darreyne garde — qi sages est si s’en garde’ (‘Now we are at the final cause for caution — anyone with any sense will be cautious of her’) (54.12–13). On the significance of puns to the devotional method of the *Livre* in general, see Catherine Batt, “De celle mordure vient la mort dure”: Perspectives on Puns and their Translation in Henry, duke of Lancaster’s *Le Livre de Seyntz Medicines*’, in *The Medieval Translator*, 10, ed. by Jacqueline Jenkins and Olivier Bertrand (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 405–17.

<sup>11</sup> *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1987), p. 187, ll. 41–42. Jonathan Nicholls briefly discusses *Patience* as an unwelcome guest in *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), pp. 81–82.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Sanson de Nantuil, *Les Proverbes de Salemon*, ed. by C. Claire Isoz, 3 vols, Anglo-Norman Text Society 44, 45, 50 (London: ANTS from Birkbeck College), I, 128–33, ll. 4083–242, for his expansion of and commentary on Proverbs 6. 6–11 to this effect. Lorraine Kochanske Stock argues that the poem characterizes Jonah as an example of *acedia*, sloth, in ‘The “Poynt” of *Patience*’, in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives of the ‘Pearl’-Poet*, ed. by Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1991), pp. 163–75.

cannot be turned away, for reasons of social propriety, reveals him to be fully aware of ethical works' censure of those who, laws of hospitality aside, do not take at least some precautionary measures to verify the goodwill of the stranger. It is in this spirit that, for example, John of Salisbury takes Dido to task for not more carefully vetting Aeneas, 'an unknown man, an exile, a fugitive, whose motives were unknown and whose person was suspect', who, while 'he was not to be excluded from hospitality, should still more suitably have entered as a stranger, not a ruler'.<sup>13</sup> Tellingly, Henry not only makes space for Sloth, but colludes with her in eliding her own behaviour with his own, here, and as described some thirty pages earlier, in his receptiveness to Sloth's advice. The unspecified sins Sloth brings in her wake, once she has succeeded in her pitiful request for shelter, and promised not to overstay her welcome, are imagined as friends who repeat to her, as animations of Henry's own impulses, the soothing words that he himself is all too willing to hear; the host becomes indistinguishable from the guest, to such an extent that, the narrator explains, the person more likely to be shut out and ignored is the *maistre* (master physician) (p. 55, l. 12) who arrives to identify true sickness as the infection that Sloth has brought with her. Her removal (in spite of the laws of hospitality) will bring immediate health to the soul, and the only remedy for sloth is full confession: 'Sur toutez riens confessetz vous sovent et criez Dieu mercye de bon coer, e soiez verrai repentant de voz mausfeitz' ('Above all else, go to confession often and beg God's mercy sincerely, and be truly repentant of your misdeeds') (p. 55, ll. 18–20).

Henry here anticipates aspects of the ethics of hospitality (and hospitality as ethics) that Derrida explores. What, Derrida asks, are the implications of a truly unconditional hospitality? If we understand ourselves primarily in relation to others, does not hospitality constitute an 'interruption of the self', when the host, in opening up the home, ultimately cedes the position of host to the guest?

[I]t is the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage — and who really always has been. And the guest, the invited hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The guest becomes the host's host. The guest (*hôte*) becomes the host (*hôte*) of the host (*hôte*).<sup>14</sup>

In a discussion of Levinas, Derrida provocatively identifies ethical discourse as itself 'an interruption of the self by the self', which throws open, by means of the paradoxes and problems hospitality raises, the question of phenomenology and how one conceptualizes selfhood.<sup>15</sup> Derrida's formulation of 'interruption' usefully exposes what is at issue in Henry's representation of selfhood and responsibility. Henry's hospitality trope both acknowledges his shortcomings and shows ironic awareness of his moral folly as host to sin, but as a metaphor it operates more to confirm his need for external resources — specifically God's grace — to rescue him from self-delusion than to encourage him to more rigorous and profound forms of self-examination and self-knowledge.

The *Livre's* narrative suffers its own minor interruption at this point, with the attempted interventions of the spiritual doctor, the unwelcome guest Henry wants to ignore, who counsels, in addition to confession as the remedy for sloth, active engagement with good

<sup>13</sup> John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. and trans. by Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Book VI, ch. 22, p. 131. See also Julie Kerr, 'The Open Door', p. 331.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 124–25. Mark W. Westmoreland gives a useful overview of Derrida's work on hospitality, in 'Interruptions: Derrida and Hospitality', *Kritike*, 2 (2008), 1–10.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 51.

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deeds. In explaining how Sloth is an instrument of the devil, he associates her with flesh, which is also feminized: ‘junez [...] pur meultz temprer vostre malveise char, et ne esparniez mye cele char tant q’elle soit ta meistresse, car ele tire a lui toutez lez enemys de l’alme et nomement cele Peresce’ (‘fast [...] the better to restrain your wicked flesh, and never spare that flesh so that she becomes your mistress, for she attracts to herself all the enemies of the soul, and especially Sloth’) (p. 55, l. 28–p. 56, l. 1). But this warning is instead differently accommodated. While Henry elsewhere associates Sloth with foul and transgressive flesh — a little later, in a description of the sin’s cunning domination of the hands, she is an ‘orde vile boituse qe gaires ne troeve nul part qe lui veie l’entree’ (‘dirty vile cripple who never finds anywhere that forbids her access’) (p. 70, ll. 5–7) — the advisor’s straightforward metaphor of remedial self-governance becomes part of a more complex envisioning of Sloth’s intellectual and physical insidiousness and Henry’s own complicity with it, by a return to the hospitality trope, via a digression that further imagines sloth as a sickness that requires treatment with theriac, a potent medicine that drives one poison out by means of another (p. 56, l. 3–p. 58, l. 27). The narrator explains that theriac is only efficacious if the original poison has not taken full hold (p. 56, ll. 12–15). Henry’s own moral constitution appears beyond help, for Sloth has caught the eye of Henry’s Free Will, and accordingly she polices and poisons the apertures of the body (p. 57, l. 33–p. 58, l. 27), allowing for further opportunity to make domestic comedy out of Henry’s spiritual haplessness, in what is a more honest self-representation than one that displaces vice onto the feminine *tout court*.

In Henry’s treatise, Sloth seduces Free Will, but she is also (apparently playing against type) a terrifyingly efficient household manager, the guest who has become the host, in Derrida’s formulation, and who sets about transforming her environment and preventing Sin from getting out through the door of the mouth in the form of confession, recommending that he relax now, for he will be better prepared another day (p. 58, l. 28–p. 63, l. 7).<sup>16</sup> While ‘cele male hostesse’ (‘that evil hostess’) (p. 59, ll. 13–14) is in control, Henry has not the wherewithal to engage eyes, mouth, and heart in the necessary remorse, repentance, and contrition to make a good confession, for Sloth has stopped up all the openings (eyes and ears) by which the light of the Holy Spirit might enter the body. Fear and Shame (conventionally the prompts to turn one from a sinful life) plan to oust Sloth, but have as their ally only Weak Will, who hides behind the others where he should take the lead, and betrays his pusillanimity with his name, for such weakness keeps company with Idleness, and Fortitude, not Half-Heartedness, is the counter to Sloth.<sup>17</sup> Sloth appears initially compliant to the trio’s request that they accompany Sin from the body, but she soon overcomes them in their turn, and remains in charge as ‘dame et meistresse de la bouche’ (‘lady and mistress of the mouth’) (p. 62, l. 32): ‘beau Sire Dieux, jeo su si feble qe jeo ne puisse a nul male contreester, ne nul bien faire a autri ne a moi meismes, sanz la grace de vous’ (‘dear Lord God, I am so weak that I

<sup>16</sup> For a vision of Perece (Sloth) as a hostess true to type, in charge of an inn on the way to Hell, presiding over the very picture of domestic filth, with nothing for her guests in a land of plenty but stale crusts, roasted turnips and water, served on the bare ground, see *La voie d’enfer et de paradis: An Unpublished Poem of the Fourteenth Century by Jehan de le Mote*, ed. by Sister M. Aquiline Pety (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1940), pp. 51–55, ll. 1009–152.

<sup>17</sup> Wenzel, *Sloth*, p. 55. Wenzel, *Fasciculus*, pp. 619–25: ‘In order to overcome [sloth], the virtue of strength [...] comes to our aid [...]’ (p. 619). See also *La Vye de Seynt Fraunceys*, ed. by D. W. Russell, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 59–60 (London: ANTS from Birkbeck College, 2002): ‘[...] peresce ne peut aver leu | en quor fort de le amur Jhesu’ (‘[...] sloth has no place in a heart strong with love of Jesus’) (p. 199, ll. 5951–52).

cannot resist any evil, nor do any good to others nor to myself without your grace') (p. 60, ll. 14–16).

For its double image of Sloth as alluring and hideous, the *Livre* seems to have taken inspiration from two personifications in Guillaume de Deguileville's (c. 1330–31) *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*.<sup>18</sup> Deguileville's allegorical narrative explicitly invokes and rewrites aspects of Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la rose*; so where, for example, Idleness in that poem welcomes the Dreamer into the garden of love to which only a privileged élite have access, in the *Pèlerinage* the attractive Oiseuse (Idleness), beguiles the Pilgrim-Dreamer as he seeks the road to salvation, only to lead him astray, and hand him over to her mother, Paresse (Sloth), a monstrous creature whose filthy ways more fully represent the sin's insidious action on the soul. Sloth stuns the Pilgrim with Apathy, trusses him up like a pig for the slaughter, and explains that he is now food for the devil, like many others before him. It is Sloth's work to prevent her victims from making confession. Henry is like Deguileville in noting Sloth's eminence as source of the other sins and, just as in the *Livre* the Narrator cannot find a means to escape the power of Sloth except with God's help, in the *Pèlerinage*, Grace-Dieu, the Grace of God, personified as a beautiful woman who is guide and advisor to the Pilgrim, has to rescue her charge from his own foolishness and sin. Sarah Kay has written of how the *Pèlerinage*'s metaphorical discursiveness is itself enigmatic, its very programme working against a straightforward recuperation of spiritual identity, and both works would reward comparative investigation of their respective projections of spiritual interiority.<sup>19</sup> Here one notes how, for both poem and treatise, narrative *impasse* self-reflexively registers the debilitating qualities of Sloth, and also the human inability to act without God's grace, while simultaneously the vice's depiction makes for some of the liveliest writing in either text.

In the *Livre* the narrative switches abruptly from Sloth as guest/host to Sloth in a grotesque incarnation as a Hellish Chicken, as Henry tries to explain his obsession with it: 'Le peccé de Peresce si est com une geline qe couve ses oefs tant q'ils devenent poucyns [...] la geline au diable, qe couve touz les autres pechez [...] tantqe ils soient grantz et parcruz.' ('The sin of sloth is like a hen that broods her eggs until they become chicks [...] the devil's hen, who nurtures all the other sins [...] until they are big and full grown') (p. 63, ll. 8–14). The hen is by tradition a positive nurturer, a 'symbol of divine wisdom', by association with Christ's words in Matthew 23. 37, and one whose exhausting self-sacrifice in rearing her chicks makes her a figure of the Incarnation.<sup>20</sup> This unexpected identification intensifies the shock of the change of vehicle that also identifies Sloth with the unconscious, for this hell-hen also nurtures evil thoughts, the seriousness of which are not recognized until the act of consent: 'et donqes se moustre (le peccé) a prime en sa propretee' ('and then sin shows itself in its true nature for the first time') (p. 63, ll. 20–21). Further metaphors of generation conflate Sloth and the Flesh — the Devil and Henry's flesh are father and mother to the sins (p. 88, ll. 7–8), but Pride and Sloth are also identified as father and mother to the other sins (p. 106, ll. 22–23).

<sup>18</sup> *Guillaume de Digulleville: Pèlerinage de vie humaine, Manuscrit BNF, fr. 1818 (1a–119a)*, transcribed and edited by Béatrice Stumpf <<http://www.cnrtl.fr/corpus/digulleville/>> [accessed 5 August 2011] (pdf: p. 236, l. 6737–p. 257, l. 7338).

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Kay, 'The Divided Path in Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de Vie Humaine*: Separation and Identity', *The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 70–94.

<sup>20</sup> *Bestiary*, trans. by Richard Barber (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), p. 174. The hen is not among the animals Bloomfield lists as commonly associated with sloth: *The Seven Deadly Sins*, pp. 247–48.



### *Sloth and the Penitential Self*

The difficulties of defining Sloth's parameters and influence write large Henry's problems with finding language adequate to the articulation of his own spiritual identity and responsibility.

Henry's figuring of Sloth and confession in terms of anxiousness over social decorum, and by means of metaphors of fortress and medicine, in part anticipates the episode concerning confession, the penitential and community, at the end of Passus 20 of the B-text of *Piers Plowman*. In the poem those in the fortified Barn of Unity demand a less painful treatment of their wounds of sin than the hard penitential medication Conscience has quite properly applied, and a friar, who has gained access by employing Courteous Language ('Hende Speche') to Peace, does the work of Sloth by demanding payment as his only remedy for sin. Conscience is left with just enough self-awareness to escape the Barn and call on Grace for help, which awakens the dreamer from his vision.<sup>21</sup> Henry does not share Langland's engagement with the social, and the Barn of Unity episode brings to conclusion a work of far greater sustained intellectual, moral and spiritual reach and energy than Henry displays, and, moreover, carries the weight of the working through of the tropes of spiritual medicine and architecture allegory in *Piers Plowman*.<sup>22</sup> But if Langland movingly intimates that the possibility of full spiritual unity and enlightenment, and their expression, lie ultimately beyond his poem, Henry, if rather more modestly, both registers a similar concern, and offers in his methodology a bridge between earlier penitential literature and Langland's poetry. To examine in detail how Henry's representation of sloth in general might enrich and illuminate appreciation of the sin's self-reflexive importance in *Piers Plowman* is the work of another paper.<sup>23</sup> But Henry's method, the way he conveys something of the nature of Sloth and its range through the very texture of his unsystematic, arresting, and negligent evocations of it, helps to define an aspect of the devotional culture from which Langland emerges and, on its own terms, expresses a particular humility, both literary and spiritual.

<sup>21</sup> William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt (London: Dent, 1995), pp. 358–61, Passus 20, ll. 305–87.

<sup>22</sup> See Rosanne Gasse, 'The Practice of Medicine in *Piers Plowman*', *Chaucer Review*, 39 (2004), 177–97. Whitehead, *Castles*, pp. 105–10, traces in Langland's treatment of architectural allegory a disillusion with, and ultimate rejection of, it, but his extraordinary envisioning of crisis by its means may be as much an exploitation of its possibilities as a dissatisfaction with it *qua* technique.

<sup>23</sup> For an important initial study of sloth's importance to Langland, see John M. Bowers, *The Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986). See also Anne Middleton's thoughtful and thought-provoking review of Bowers, in *Speculum*, 64 (1989), 130–34, especially her question about how examination of sloth might illuminate 'why the referential and discursive difficulties of the poem seem to coincide' (p. 133), which offers a helpful point of departure for further thought.