Introduction

In 1206 the man who would become St. Francis of Assisi was brought before the bishop to face punishment for his increasingly disruptive behavior. The stories of the saint’s life famously record how Francis’s father, a prosperous cloth merchant, sought legal recourse in response to his son’s actions. After giving away his own belongings, Francis took cloth from his father’s shop, sold it, and eventually threw the proceeds out of a church window. Though he eventually recovered the money, Francis’s father sought retribution for his son’s careless and rebellious conduct, and he insisted that Francis be stripped of his inheritance. While Francis replied willingly to his father’s demands, his acquiescence entailed a further challenge to earthly authority and the possessions on which it depended. In the presence of his father, the bishop, and those gathered at the court, Francis “took off and threw down all his clothes and returned them to his father. He did not even keep his trousers on, and he was completely stripped bare before everyone.” In this dramatic act Francis inaugurated a conception of poverty that would become a hallmark of religious life in the Middle Ages. Evoking the image of Jesus as a naked and persecuted figure, Francis transformed poverty into a sacred ideal performed in imitation of Christ. This theological premise embodied the saint’s own commitment to simplicity, for it defined poverty in the plainest of terms: to be poor was to share in the perfection of Christ himself.
2 The Claims of Poverty

Yet, once institutionalized, this straightforward philosophy would provoke a massive controversy, and antifraternal writers came to dispute the legitimacy of voluntary poverty and its effects on both the church and the lay community. As I shall discuss later, these debates are obviously central to the poverty controversies of the Middle Ages, but they also remain significant in modern scholarship on poverty, revealing an essential lesson about the fundamental ambiguity of poverty, especially as a force in the medieval period. Whether exploring the economic situation of medieval Assisi or the consequences of globalization in the present day, writers have continued to invoke Francis, but they have done so in utterly divergent ways. Such opinions are worth consideration because they illustrate how a claim of poverty, even if articulated with apparent straightforwardness, bears no direct relationship to material reality. As a result, its precise meaning and its ethical implications become a source of interpretive conflict.

The enduring nature of such conflicts is evident in the work of modern writers who have continued to debate the significance of Francis’s legacy, revealing its particular ethical stakes for the twenty-first century. Some have condemned the Franciscan ideal as a form of economic exploitation, while others have praised it as a sacred practice that undermines such oppression. Kenneth Wolf, for example, has recently criticized Francis’s conception of poverty, arguing that it constituted another form of power and prestige for the rich. He concentrates on the specifically voluntary nature of Franciscan poverty to consider how its claims of sanctity very likely had negative effects on those who did not choose to be poor:

Francis’s extreme love of poverty, pursued for the sake of his own spiritual progress . . . potentially made the lives of those suffering from involuntary poverty even more difficult. For one thing, Francis could not help but attract the attention of almsgivers, many of whom appreciated the vicarious spiritual advantages of supporting him in his quest for perfect poverty, as opposed to trying to alleviate the poverty of someone who did not want to be poor. Second, if the kind of “spiritual economy” that Francis epitomized, based as it was on deliberate divestment from this world and investment in
the next, required that Christians have something invested in this world in the first place, how were the poor expected to compete with the rich for entrance into the next life?

Wolf answers his own question by exposing what he sees as Franciscanism’s utter disregard for the spiritual welfare of the involuntary poor: “in a religious tradition where sacrifice meant little or nothing unless it was undertaken voluntarily, it was not at all obvious how the plight of the poor poor (as opposed to the formerly rich poor) was to be alleviated in the next world.”

In this account, we can begin to see the ambiguities that trouble medieval conceptions of poverty as Wolf strains to find a more precise vocabulary to distinguish what he calls the “poor poor” from those who falsely appropriate the “true” condition of poverty. He thus argues that the form of poverty established by Francis was not poverty at all but rather a strategic choice that made indigence spiritually valuable only when it was undertaken willingly by the elite. Having no option about living in poverty, the “true” poor could make no claims to spiritual perfection, and the “formerly rich poor” co-opted the alms that such people desperately needed. Given what he sees as the economic and ethical reality of Francis’s poverty, Wolf finds the saint’s continued popularity in the present day to be deeply troubling. To venerate Francis, he implies, is to be complicit in an exploitative tradition that has long denied the needs and worthiness of the “true” poor.

Discussing Francis in the very different context of postmodern globalization, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri work against this perspective by heralding the saint as an ideal for the present age. At the end of Empire, they invoke Francis as a figure representing the promise of the final triumph over capitalism. Hardt and Negri see the saint’s voluntary poverty as a legitimate and, indeed, deeply ethical form of life; it becomes a sign of solidarity with the poor, functioning as a decisive movement against the forms of domination and social division structuring relations in a capitalist society:

There is an ancient legend that might serve to illuminate the future life of communist militancy: that of St. Francis of Assisi. Consider
his work. To denounce the poverty of the multitude he adopted that common condition and discovered there the ontological power of a new society. The communist militant does the same, identifying in the common condition of the multitude its enormous wealth. Francis in opposition to nascent capitalism refused every instrumental discipline, and in opposition to the mortification of the flesh (in poverty and in the constituted order) he posed a joyous life, including all of being and nature, the animals, sister moon, brother sun, the birds of the field, the poor and exploited humans, together against the will of power and corruption. Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being. This is a revolution that no power will control—because biopower and communism, cooperation and evolution remain together, in love, simplicity and also innocence. This is the irrepresible lightness and joy of being communists.4

In this powerful tribute to the saint, Franciscanism becomes, so to speak, a modern call to arms because it functions to bring down a society defined by economic exploitation.

For Hardt and Negri, Francis’s poverty does not therefore promote elitism or reaffirm the privilege of the rich, as Wolf suggests; rather, it is a sign of unity with the involuntary poor, “a common condition” that he adopts so as to unleash a political revolution. To follow Francis’s call in the present day is thus to perform the work of justice. Considering Wolf’s perspective against that of Hardt and Negri, we see that the contradictions characterizing Franciscan poverty prove to be as salient in the twenty-first century as they were in the fourteenth: Francis emerges as both an elite man who exploited the poor to enhance his own social credit and as a saint who undertook a groundbreaking quest to ensure the protection of society’s most vulnerable members.

I begin my discussion of medieval culture with these brief modern vignettes about St. Francis because they crystallize a truth about poverty more generally in the Middle Ages: it is a highly flexible concept that tests our capacity to define material reality and to assess its ethical implications. Franciscanism forms only one strand in a complex—and equally contradictory—web of ideas about the nature and status of pov-
In this book, I specifically investigate how writers in late medieval England negotiate competing ideologies of poverty, an issue that proves to be central to the social and moral visions developed within a range of poetic, polemical, and dramatic texts. Discussing poverty in post-plague England, medieval writers drew on theological and political discourse to participate in a wider cultural debate that questioned the virtues of poverty with increasing rigor and hostility. As antifraternal arguments fused with objections to the rising power and mobility of lay workers, poverty and mendicancy came to be described more readily as signs of sinfulness than as hallmarks of Christian sanctity. With the enactment of labor laws that criminalized able-bodied begging and indiscriminate charity, one can see the development of a powerful social imaginary in fourteenth-century England. Constituting what critics have termed a “shift in values” or a “newer ethos,” labor became a sign of virtue while poverty emerged as a symptom of idleness and other sins.

I also explore the nature of the cultural shift concerning poverty in late medieval England and uncover new intricacies central to this ideological transformation by showing how literature is a crucial resource for understanding poverty and the particular anxieties it provoked. This book argues that literature reveals—and indeed embodies—the most urgent concerns defining the late medieval debates on poverty. While readers may tend to think of poverty primarily as an economic or historical issue, I contend that it is a subject intimately bound up with concerns about representation. In this sense, the book does not offer a comprehensive overview of historical shifts in attitudes toward poverty. Rather, I aim to complicate the traditional text-context relationship by suggesting that we need texts themselves to understand why poverty emerged as a site of historical and cultural crisis in late medieval England.

Literary texts are essential to the study of poverty because poverty is as much an economic force as it is an epistemological issue that challenges our ability to know and fix the precise nature of material reality. We only discern what we conceptualize as the economic through symbolic representation. As Louise Fradenburg explains, “representation—the signifier—is intrinsic to the practices of exchange that produce culturally variable definitions of wealth and poverty.” It is within discourse that these “culturally variable definitions of wealth and poverty” come
to life in especially fascinating ways, as texts make use of sophisticated rhetorical strategies and literary techniques in order to present arguments about the nature of need—an extremely slippery category. As the title of this book suggests, I invoke the notion of a claim as the most appropriate way of conveying both the complexity of poverty and its ideological urgency in the Middle Ages. Functioning both as a noun and a verb, the word “claim” encompasses an extraordinary range of meanings that illuminate how poverty makes material reality and ethical action inextricable from questions of representation and hermeneutics—questions central to literary practice itself.

If we consider the meaning of the word “claim” in relationship to poverty, we see that poverty can be understood in one way as a force that makes claims in and of itself. In this sense, poverty is something that “demands recognition” of an “alleged right, title, possession, [or] attribute.” In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, the claims that poverty could make were especially capacious, as evidenced by the major medieval discourses concerning poverty. For example, within the mendicant orders poverty asserted itself as a form of spiritual perfection. It was perceived as an authorizing force entitling at least the voluntary poor to material, symbolic, and spiritual rewards. The Franciscan Rule of 1223 offers a succinct account of this perspective, explaining how poverty enables the friars to claim holiness as well as the need for charitable assistance: “As pilgrims and strangers in this world, serving the Lord in poverty and humility, let [the friars] go seeking alms with confidence, and they should not be ashamed because, for our sakes, our Lord made Himself poor in this world.” The Rule goes on to praise the “sublime height of most exalted poverty” as a condition that makes the friars “poor in temporal things but exalted in virtue.” By undertaking poverty in sacred imitation of Jesus, the friars made claims to charitable aid, Christ-like sanctity, and perhaps even heavenly reward.

However, in the massive body of antifraternal thought that developed in the wake of the Franciscans’ popularity and the establishment of other fraternal orders, critics of the friars rejected such claims, denying that poverty and begging were evangelical virtues to be emulated in the medieval church. Asserting that the friars’ claims of spiritual perfection were at odds with the gospel message and that their claims of
need were at odds with material reality, the secular masters at the University of Paris were the first antifraternalists to attack the legitimacy of voluntary poverty. They began to undermine the notion that poverty was a virtue, viewing it not as a claim of sanctity but as a sign of idleness, covetousness, and other sins. The most outspoken critic in the early conflicts with the friars was William of St. Amour, and within the wide range of his antifraternal thought he developed a distinctive portrait of Christ and the apostles. Insisting that they worked for their food instead of begging from others, William argued that it was labor, and not poverty, that should be revered as a work of humility. In 1323 Pope John XXII affirmed such ideas when he declared heretical the Franciscan understanding of Christ’s poverty. Later, in fourteenth-century England, the archbishop Richard FitzRalph continued to criticize the friars’ way of life by describing poverty as “the effect of sin.” He argued that God called human beings not to live in indigence but to labor and accumulate wealth since “riches is good having & worpi to be loued of God.” In the long history of writing against the friars, poverty, especially in its voluntary form, was understood as an essentially sinful condition that made empty claims of sanctity. Poverty thus became, most centrally, a violation of Christian practice, not its perfect fulfillment.

While antifraternalists rejected the claims that poverty could make as a religious practice, secular lawmakers applied similar criticisms to their vision of poverty as a problem affecting lay society in the changed economic circumstances of post-plague England. The labor statutes did not react to poverty’s claims as a form of spiritual perfection, but rather objected to the rights and assertions that lay beggars were supposedly making with increasing intensity and frequency. In this sense, then, poverty can also be understood as a force that makes claims on behalf of the laity—even potentially on behalf of the involuntary poor. Indeed, those who experienced poverty not as a matter of choice could still make claims to alms and also possibly to sanctity based on their professed need and perhaps on their own association with the poor Christ (Matthew 25). The now obsolete sense that to claim is “to call for, cry for, [or] beg loudly” reveals how the act of begging might be understood not only as a form of supplication but as an explicit claim by which the poor asserted their presumed rights to charitable assistance.
Shaped by the anxieties of elite employers, the labor laws construct a particular image of poverty that condemns beggars precisely because they were perceived as claiming such rights illicitly. As part of its overall project to control workers and set their wages at pre-plague levels, the legislation consistently depicts an alleged class of lay people who rejected labor altogether so as to live in greater ease by begging. For example, the 1349 labor ordinance identifies a problem with people who are “willing to beg in Idleness rather than earn their Living by Labour.” In describing this problem, the legislation clearly draws on antifraternal writing to develop a representation of poverty almost certainly at odds with socioeconomic reality. The ideological work of the labor laws is important because it sought to restrict the claims that poverty could make by describing the poor, with very few exceptions, as fraudulent and sinful idlers. The 1349 ordinance goes on to condemn those people who “as long as they may live of begging, do refuse to labor, giving themselves to Idleness and Vice, and sometime to Theft and other Abominations.” In this framework, poverty is a choice that facilitates moral depravity. As it is feigned by reluctant workers, poverty becomes a claim of sinfulness, a declaration of idleness, and a challenge to the law itself.

Clearly, the discourses of antifraternalism and labor legislation contributed to the anti-poverty ethos by constructing poverty as a form of vice willfully chosen by those attempting to avoid labor. However, these discourses made an important exception in their denigration of poverty by acknowledging that it could be a legitimate and unavoidable hardship for some people, namely those incapable of working. In making this acknowledgment, lawmakers and antifraternalists implicitly called attention to a second meaning of the word “claim”—a meaning that reveals how poverty could make claims on the poor themselves. In this sense, the word “claim” loses its association with human agency and entitlement, becoming instead an undesirable consequence imposed on someone. Here poverty is not itself a claim but rather it makes claims on those who are subject to its force. For the involuntary poor especially, poverty grants few rights but takes from its victims, exacting various forms of hardship and suffering. This suffering might entail physical deprivation, as poverty left people hungry, thirsty, and exposed to the elements. In extreme cases such suffering could cause people to die, and in this sense the claims of poverty were catastrophic, literally stripping the poor of their very existence.
of their own lives. In other circumstances, the poor could experience physical suffering along with psychological and emotional pain resulting from the ill-effects of social division. Neglected by the rich, the poor might feel a sense of alienation and invisibility; or they might experience despair and shame if they provoked the ire of people disdainful of their presence.

Both antifraternal discourse and labor legislation imaginatively attempted to limit the ways in which poverty could make such claims on the poor by restricting the legitimate experience of need to those unable to work. This restrictive definition of poverty can be observed in theories advocating the practice of discriminate charity. For example, William of St. Amour argued that charity should not be given to just anyone. Making a person’s right to charitable aid contingent on his inability to labor, William declared that “the right of the prospective recipient to alms should be carefully scrutinized, and he should be advised to find work to support himself.” The labor laws codified this policy on charity, mandating that alms be given “only to such as cannot assist themselves or work.” These brief statements reveal how antifraternal discourse and labor legislation redefined the ethical response to need by reshaping the very conception of poverty and limiting its legitimate claims.

This necessary connection between issues of poverty and charity introduces yet another claim of poverty. Because poverty makes claims on behalf of the poor, and because it makes claims on the poor themselves, poverty is also a force that is significant for making claims on the wider community. Poverty privileges the category of human response; it is an issue fraught with deep epistemological and ethical complexity because it demands acts of interpretation that bear moral and material consequences for poor and rich alike. As a force that makes potentially dire material claims on the poor, poverty pricks the conscience of the Christian community. It reminds people of their charitable obligation to alleviate Christ’s own suffering by easing the suffering of the poor and showing mercy to those in need. As a condition that also makes claims to material and symbolic rewards, poverty puts those charitable obligations to the test. It demands that people make interpretive acts, forcing them to acknowledge the reality of suffering, to deny its presence, or to suspend judgment willfully.
The labor statutes in particular register great anxiety about the epistemological challenges triggered by the presence of poverty. The laws not only highlight the alleged dangers posed by wandering and anonymous beggars, they also attempt to supply such people with a distinct identity so as to clarify the appropriate response to claims of need. The 1376 Commons’ Petition against Vagrants seeks to make the exercise of discriminate charity possible by exposing the poor as people whose sinister acts and illicit demands harm the entire community:

And let it be known to the king and his parliament that many of the said wandering laborers have become mendicant beggars in order to lead an idle life; and they usually go away from their own districts into cities, boroughs, and other good towns to beg, although they are able-bodied and might well ease the commons by living on their labor and services, if they were willing to serve. Many of them become “staff strikers” and lead an idle life, commonly robbing poor people in simple villages, by two, by three or four together, so that their malice is very hard to bear. The majority of the said servants generally become strong thieves, increasing their robberies and felonies everyday on all sides, to the destruction of the kingdom.

In this passage we find a portrait of ominously shifting identities that are gradually channeled into a clear trajectory that we will revisit in the half-acre scene of Piers Plowman. Notice that the passage repeatedly refers to a process of becoming inaugurated by the movement from labor to begging: “wandering laborers have become mendicant beggars”; “many of [the mendicant beggars] become ‘staff strikers’”; “the majority of the said servants generally become strong thieves.” Able-bodied begging is but one step on a path of moral degeneration. The passage conveys the severity of this moral decline by following its depiction of an evolutionary process with an account that describes the multiplication of false beggars and their intrusion into various communities. With a kind of teeming pervasiveness they move in ever greater numbers into all places at all times: they rob people “by two, by three or four together . . . increasing their robberies and felonies everyday on all sides.”

While the petition attempts to construct a rhetorical identity for vagrant beggars, later legislation established other technologies of discern-
ment with practical applications for people responding to actual claims of poverty or need. The much discussed 1388 Cambridge Statute enacted all of the proposals listed in the 1376 petition; and this law was innovative, among other reasons, for establishing an ambitious system of documentary identification that required mobile workers and approved religious mendicants to carry letters of authorization. While the law’s attempt to regulate social identity has many implications, it is most significant for this discussion because it sought to simplify the response to poverty. Its new system of identification attempted to make discriminate charity practicable by creating the fantasy that social identity can be easily fixed and authorized. The single act of asking for some identification was meant to replace other more challenging forms of human response that required people to exercise moral judgment by acknowledging need, dismissing its real presence, or refusing to scrutinize what they thought ultimately unknowable.

In addition to occluding the difficulty of discernment, the emphasis on discriminate charity found in both labor legislation and antifraternal writing also promoted a restricted definition of poverty that obscured other categories of need. Most obvious is the refusal to acknowledge the possibility that poverty can make claims on people who work. In the century after the plague, it is true that this category of people would have been comparatively small, given that workers could take advantage of higher wages, lower food prices, and increased demand for labor. Yet this improved economic picture was hardly consistent or universal, and poverty would have nonetheless been a reality for many working people. The major late medieval discourses discussing poverty, however, disregard its pervasiveness and variability as a condition that could stem from many different factors including changes in the life cycle, unforeseen calamities, and gender inequality. In failing to acknowledge such realities, and in shaping cultural perceptions and social policies, such discourses may have functioned to increase the hardship of those not explicitly included in their restricted category of need. As we have seen, in both antifraternal thought and labor legislation, “true” poverty makes claims only on those who cannot work to prevent its presence. And it is only this group of “deserving” people who can make claims on the charitable intentions and material resources of the wider community.
Writers in antifraternal and legislative discourse thus make claims about poverty that attempt to limit the concept’s potentially fluid meaning. Turning to the literature of late medieval England, we will see that specific writers sometimes affirm these discourses and sometimes challenge them. In the chapters that follow, I examine a range of generically diverse texts united by their explicit attention to poverty as an issue of cultural contestation. In my exploration of works ranging from *Piers Plowman* and Wycliffite writings to *The Book of Margery Kempe* and the York plays, we find a range of complex arguments about poverty that give us a lens into a moment of cultural change. Discussing these texts in chronological order serves as a means of engaging with—and complicating—the narrative of cultural transition supplied by critics recounting the history of poverty in late medieval England. If one were to look for a sense of historical development across the texts I discuss, he or she would be likely to find a hardening of attitudes toward poverty by comparing, for example, *Piers Plowman* and the York cycle, the starting and end points of this book’s investigation into medieval literature. Indeed, Langland offers some sympathetic portraits of poverty and takes the ideals of Franciscanism seriously (even if he finally rejects those ideals), while the York plays, which continued to be performed roughly two hundred years after *Piers Plowman*, depended on a highly regulated guild system predicated on the primacy of labor, competition for commercial success, and the outright exclusion of the poor. Yet, in my view, recapitulating a tale about the ultimate triumph of the market is less interesting and less relevant to the complexities of poverty itself than exploring the intricacies that actually constitute a moment of cultural change. In short, then, this book does not argue *that* poverty falls from a virtue to a vice so much as it shows *how* that decline occurs in a variety of discursive arenas.

There are, admittedly, costs to such a methodology, and this book may not satisfy readers looking for a clear trajectory or a single argument that neatly sums up the literature of poverty in late medieval England. But it should also be acknowledged that such streamlined approaches have their own costs in that they can overlook continuities, ambiguities, and nuances that might defy easy assimilation into a grand narrative of change. This book attempts to resist the lure of such grand narratives...
and instead primarily focuses on the subtle rhetorical maneuvers of texts. This methodological decision is motivated by both ethical and intellectual concerns. We have seen, for example, how religious and secular discourse promotes the claim that poverty is a singular condition legitimate only for the disabled. Yet this idea, which derives power from its straightforwardness, is deeply problematic for assuming that poverty stems solely from the refusal or inability to work. Its clear and efficient argument thus comes with dangerous liabilities that occlude other categories of need experienced, for example, by the working poor. In pursuing multiple lines of inquiry and in exploring the contours of cultural transformation, *The Claims of Poverty* aims to show the importance of attending to specificities and varied possibilities for meaning.

Sensitivity to complexity is also essential to this book because it seeks to follow the mandates of its own subject; in this sense it approaches poverty as a force that necessitates careful attention to the processes of representation and interpretation. Shaped by aesthetic forms, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic slippages, literary texts place the signs of poverty before readers; and they demand that readers both interpret these signs and assess their ethical implications, in the same way that an almsgiver would evaluate the signs of need in the body and speech of the poor themselves. When viewed in this light, literature becomes far more than the repository of shifting historical attitudes toward poverty. Rather, a text’s complex use of signs embodies the very anxieties around representation that are at the heart of poverty itself. In the chapters that follow, I primarily attend to these signs through the practice of close reading. This practice is essential because it marks the first step in determining the very object of historical inquiry; the work of discerning a text’s formal operations helps readers understand that text’s ideological investments and ethical commitments.32

This is certainly the case with the C-text of *Piers Plowman* and the later Wycliffite poem *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*. The first two chapters of *The Claims of Poverty* explore the relationship between these works, offering the book’s most concentrated focus on interpretive issues. My reading of these texts serves as an extended exposition of the idea that questions of poverty are simultaneously questions of poetic practice. While I attend to the subtle maneuvers of texts throughout the book,
these opening chapters are distinctive for honing in on the poems themselves to consider how their formal dynamics are inextricable from their ideological assumptions. In the first chapter I argue that Langland’s use of allegory works as an ethical intervention in the dominant late medieval discourses on poverty that erode the subject’s epistemological and moral complexity. While Langland ultimately rejects the viability of the Franciscan ideal, his work is notable not so much for denigrating the virtues of poverty as for exposing the ideological limitations that structure the debates about poverty in the first place. The poem features a range of interlocutors who invoke Franciscanism, antifraternalism, anticlericalism, and labor legislation in order to claim poverty as either the highest virtue or the most wretched vice. Though they offer opposing arguments, Langland reveals how these ideological perspectives are ultimately united because they insist on rigid conceptions of need.

Langland’s poem contrasts with these discourses by employing complex and dynamic signs of allegory that personify aspects of poverty including hunger and need itself. In the course of the poem, the semantic wanderings of such figures ultimately stress the fundamental opacity of need. Approaching poverty in its fullest sense as a material and spiritual condition as well as a voluntary and involuntary practice, Langland exposes the extreme difficulty of defining poverty and recognizing its presence. He also illuminates how these interpretive acts have important theological, ethical, and material consequences. In both conceptual and formal terms, his poem reveals that the dominant discourses on poverty create the potential for ethical catastrophe: if an almsgiver were to accept their basic assumptions, he might fail to recognize his fellow human beings most in need of charitable aid.

The second chapter shows how the later poem Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede strategically attends to selective elements of Langland’s work in order to discuss poverty within the limited context of antifraternal satire. Unlike its poetic predecessor, the Crede insists that the signs of poverty are readily discernible as it contrasts fraternal corruption with the virtue of the true poor, embodied by Pierce the ploughman. Furthermore, the Crede is able to affirm the sanctity of true poverty by equating material reality with interior identity so that, in the world of the poem, need always signals humility and wealth always indicates cov-
etousness, pride, and other sins. The Crede’s antifraternal polemic is in some sense unusual because it comes in the form of a poem shaped by a deliberate aesthetic. This chapter reveals how the poem’s faith in the immanent discernability of material signs corresponds to its faith in textual signs as “clear” and “open” purveyors of meaning. The Crede thus abandons Langland’s allegorical and dialectical forms in favor of what we might see as a willfully “impoverished poetics.” The Crede privileges a linear time scheme and discrete narrative episodes, while eschewing the massive shifts in time, place, and perspective made possible by the fluid modes of allegory and dream vision. This literary methodology is essential because it ultimately allows the writer to present the climactic recitation of the Creed and the poem itself as works that transparently expose the “Truth” about the friars’ abuse of poverty.

The third chapter continues to show how poverty is a crucial topic in the Wycliffite program of ecclesiastical reform. Moving away from a primary focus on poetics to consider broader cultural contexts, I investigate two Wycliffite sermons and related texts so as to explore in greater detail how the demands of polemic shape writers’ conceptions of poverty and foster a particular vision of social relations. Developing an attack on the church’s wealth, Wycliffite writers seem to approach poverty as a Christian virtue: they want the church to abandon its wealth, and they passionately plead for the protection of the involuntary poor. However, by exploring the rhetorical strategies of their fervent call for reform, it becomes clear that their praise of poverty is far from straightforward; and this chapter ultimately challenges the dominant critical assumption that Wycliffism was a movement that highly valued poverty and the poor themselves.

While the Wycliffite writers express concern for the involuntary poor, they do so primarily in conjunction with their critique of the church’s covetousness (and almost never as a criticism of the rich laity). This framework has troubling ethical consequences. First, it makes care for the poor as much a polemical strategy as a charitable duty. And, second, in blaming the church alone for all moral failures, it obscures certain forms of social relation, rendering invisible the obligations that the lay elite bear to the poor people in their community. Exploring how the writers strategically employ antifraternal theories of dominion along with
a relativistic vocabulary of need, I show how the Wycliffites’ social and moral vision is committed most fundamentally to protecting the power and interests of the lay elite. The sermons finally promote a form of non-mendicant poverty for the church that ideally functions to maximize the resources of the lay community, who should work to support themselves, pay their rents, and restore the status of impoverished lords.

Whereas the Wycliffites explicitly rejected the notion of voluntary poverty as an ideal for the laity, chapter four shows how The Book of Margery Kempe presents a different perspective, one that seems committed to Franciscan values. Aligning Kempe with St. Francis, the Book describes her conversion as a rejection of worldly ambition, trade, and pride in her family’s elite status within the town of Lynn. Kempe’s commitment to poverty grows stronger when she embarks on a highly unusual path for a woman by following Christ’s command in Rome to give away all of her belongings and become a mendicant. Though Kempe’s life seems greatly at odds with the Wycliffite rejection of poverty, reading the Book in light of Franciscan theology and theories of dominion reveals that it ultimately shares ideological territory with the texts explored in the previous chapter. Drawing on the resources of hagiography, the Book seeks to present Kempe as a saint, and it therefore highlights her miraculous immunity to material hardship. Yet this form of sanctity becomes problematic in the context of the Book’s attachment to Franciscan ideals. This is the case because the Book transforms a radical conception of need, vulnerability, and weakness into a form of poverty that ultimately affirms the values associated with the urban elite. As such, Kempe’s poverty allows her to maintain financial security, to wield civil dominion, and to attain social acceptance.

Characterizing Kempe’s material poverty as strangely benign, the text ultimately redefines need as a form of powerlessness. Though she remains financially secure, Kempe’s status at the end of her life as an elderly and illiterate laywoman confirms her vulnerability and her dependence on other people. Perhaps Kempe’s greatest need can be found toward the end of her life when she searches for a scribe who is both morally and intellectually capable of recording her life story. Indeed, this search exposes the complex nature of Kempe’s need as a form of poverty shaped by divergent interests. In this sense, the text uneasily combines a
rigorous form of Franciscanism with the conventions of female hagiography, amalgamates traditional idealizations of poverty with urban mercantile values, and brings material deprivation together with the seemingly greater hardships of age, gender, and illiteracy.

Continuing to explore poverty within an urban context, the final chapter examines York’s Corpus Christi theater and approaches the civic drama as both a theatrical and economic production. Drama brings distinctive resources to bear on the exploration of poverty, because to stage poverty is to give presence to absence; by placing the signs of need in the bodies and speech of actors, the theater makes poverty visible. It moves throughout the streets of York; it permeates the spaces of the city. Drama also offers complex and multiple opportunities for meaning, as actors engage with other actors, as they interact with audience members, and as audience members respond to one another. Constituted by these varied points of contact, the performance of a play anatomizes social relations, making it difficult to obscure any facet of the community. This encompassing social dynamic, however, does not necessarily signal an idealized concept of social unity. Rather, the plays are at once a theological ideal and a material reality subject to the socioeconomic tensions that defined late medieval York.

Examining how the plays animate the relationship between rich and poor, this chapter finds that the pageant texts offer a sharp critique of the anti-poverty ethos as they acknowledge the reality of the able-bodied poor and articulate a powerful theory of indiscriminate almsgiving. The plays’ conception of poverty and charity, however, proves to be at odds with the political and social formations that structure the city. Investigating guild documents relevant to the plays, I show how the civic records produce a competing discourse of poverty and charity that renders the ideals of the pageants impracticable as widespread civic values.

By discussing a wide array of texts, this book reveals the far-reaching claims of poverty in late medieval literature and culture. It shows how the particular urgency associated with poverty derives primarily from the epistemological anxieties that this issue generates. Indeed, as a whole, the texts explored in this book exploit the very capaciousness of poverty, pulling the concept in different directions so as to advocate a variety of political, ethical, and theological positions. Specifically, their claims of
poverty can be said to expose the fundamental instability of need, to uncover the fraudulence of the friars, to lament the decline of the lay elite, to redefine the miraculous nature of female sanctity, and to reveal the limits of community. Despite the diversity of these conceptual positions, the texts explored in this book are united in mounting a serious inquiry into the moral value of poverty, an inquiry that ultimately excludes poverty as a virtue to be cultivated by the Christian community. Though their arguments participate in a wider movement denigrating poverty, the texts I consider nonetheless attest to the enduring power of this issue, which remained a force of tremendous gravity in medieval culture. Shaped by the vagaries of representation, poverty is a highly fluid sign, but it is a sign that demands acknowledgement and response, for it incites charitable obligations potentially owed to Christ himself. Addressing a subject that makes claims extending into the material, spiritual, and moral realms, the literature of poverty in late medieval England deserves our careful attention, for it has a profound role to play in shaping the culture’s economic practices, theological traditions, and ethical imagination.

The medieval literature of poverty also arguably has an important role to play in shaping our modern conceptions of poverty and social aid. Though The Claims of Poverty focuses primarily on medieval literature, there is an important aspect of this book that looks beyond the Middle Ages to insist that medieval texts offer valuable insights into many modern perspectives on poverty. It is not a coincidence, for example, that people still frequently think of poverty as a singular condition that stems from the inability or refusal to work. Barbara Ehrenreich’s Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America attests to the long afterlife of this idea by arguing that there is an entire class of low-wage laborers consistently overlooked in modern discussions of poverty. In the epilogue of this book, I focus on Nickel and Dimed and the controversy it provoked in order to pursue some of the continuities between medieval and modern writing about poverty. It is fascinating, for example, that critics of Nickel and Dimed take a page from antifraternal polemic. While Ehrenreich claims to prove the insufficiency of the minimum wage by living temporarily as a low-wage worker, the book’s critics view her experiment as nothing more than a fraudulent form of voluntary
poverty. Similar to the debate about Francis with which I began this introduction, the criticism surrounding *Nickel and Dimed* raises questions relevant to those also being asked seven hundred years ago: How exactly should poverty be defined? Is work the primary antidote to poverty? How can writers and advocates of the poor bridge the cultural and economic divide that separates them?

This last question, I think, is of particular importance given the massive and ever-widening socioeconomic divisions that structure modern society, rendering the poor largely invisible. Ehrenreich describes how poverty has received decidedly little attention as a modern issue. She remarks that “some odd optical property of our highly polarized and unequal society makes the poor almost invisible to their economic superiors.” The force of Ehrenreich’s comment was certainly affirmed in the recent past by Hurricane Katrina, an event that exposed this phenomenon of invisibility by making the pervasiveness of poverty suddenly clear. When it hit New Orleans in 2005, the storm ripped away the occlusions and ideological artifices that ordinarily push poverty to the margins. Television screens and newspapers revealed thousands of poor, elderly, and other vulnerable people—most of whom were African American—left abandoned in flood-ravaged areas where the federal and state governments dared not to go.

While localized to a particular time and place, this event exposed a larger, systemic problem sustained, in part, by ideological beliefs that gained currency during the medieval conflicts concerning poverty. In revealing the presence of poverty as a structural force, Hurricane Katrina also revealed the regular occlusion of poverty as a reality frequently denied by myths of equal opportunity—myths that promote hard work as the primary solution to economic deficiency. On a much less dramatic scale, my own students learned about such myths while taking an undergraduate course on poverty and medieval literature that featured a service learning component. As they worked at a variety of agencies serving the poor, they grew increasingly aware of poverty’s presence within the local community, and my students were especially shocked to encounter workers from their very own university eating lunch at a soup kitchen near campus. Poverty would seem to be a nearly ubiquitous reality, but its claims go largely unheard in modern day America, where it
takes an overwhelming natural disaster or, at least in the case of my course, a mandate of community service to reveal its actual presence.

Concentrating as it does on the medieval literature of poverty, this book, I believe, can help remedy the sense of invisibility that so often shrouds the reality of poverty. It can do so by making readers conscious of the ways in which ideology can function to obscure the varied and intricate claims of poverty so as to advance a particular social imaginary often at odds with material reality. The debates about poverty in medieval literature are still resurfacing today, and as they do, it is important to recognize how they continue to make claims on our present community. By attending to the representation of poverty in medieval literature, we can see how rigid definitions of need and universalizing assumptions about the poor have lasting ethical consequences that structure social relations and forge deep-seated divisions in our very own lives.