Introduction

Tropological discourse has a long, distinct tradition that writers in the late Middle Ages traced to Gregory the Great. Gregory’s Moralia in Job is perhaps the most concentrated, sustained project of tropological exegesis in Western Christianity: half a million words, occupying three volumes of the Corpus Christianorum. In the preface, Gregory explains that the “brothers” who asked him to write a commentary were not satisfied that he should “only explicate the words of the history according to the allegorical senses,” but wanted him to “go on to turn [inclinarem] the allegorical senses into writing about the moral sense.” In asking Gregory to turn or incline himself to the moralitas, the brothers recapitulate the etymology of the exegetical term tropologia. In classical Greek, the root, tropos, means a turn or a way of life. The first sense—“turn”—is poetic or rhetorical, in a manner familiar to modern literary critics: a trope was a turn of phrase, and “tropology” treated any use of figurative language. Early Christians capitalized on the term’s double meaning of

Unless otherwise noted, all English biblical quotations are cited from the Chal- loner revision of the Douay-Rheims, and Latin from the Stuttgart Vulgate; both are available in parallel online at www.latinvulgate.com.

“turn” and “way of life” to name the sense of scripture that involves the conversion or turning around of life, the moral sense. According to tropological theory, interpretation is never complete without action, and that action can take the form of writing. Tropology, in other words, is never simply an analysis of one text. It is also an invention of another—a fruitful activity, acted out in the production of life and literature, even profane literature.

Medieval exegetes typically identified three spiritual senses of scripture: the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical. According to the allegorical sense, key people, things, and events in the Old Testament correspond metaphysically to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection in the New Testament. (Modern exegesis tends to speak of these correspondences in terms of “typology,” and Erich Auerbach identified them influentially for medieval studies as figura.) The allegorical sense thus teaches the doctrines of the Christian faith. The tropological sense involves the conversion of those Christian doctrines into one’s own actions on the way to the kingdom of heaven. The anagogical sense concerns the final fulfillment of those doctrines in the contemplative union of the soul with God and the historical consummation of the church in the kingdom of heaven. Because tropological reading and action convert allegorized history back into lived history, they perform a vital circulatory function. According to Paul’s sophisticated exegetical theory, the literal-historical sense of scripture “killeth” unless the spirit of allegorical and anagogical interpretation “quickeneth” (2 Cor. 3:6). On the other hand, as the Epistle of James insists, “so also faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Without tropological interpretation and action, the Bible would be not only a dead letter but dead spirit as well. Letter and spirit require each other in order for the word of God to have life. Through the habits of tropology, living people keep the literal and spiritual meanings of scripture in circulation through practices of contemplation and action.

As they developed into the Middle Ages, the theory and practice of the moral sense of scripture functioned in several interrelated registers.

In terms of history, tropological theory enabled theologians and exegetes to articulate how readers in the present could re-present and collaborate with the distant persons, things, and events to which the text of scripture granted access. In terms of the present, tropological reading of scripture asks what a passage means for us, today. Tropological reading overlays the text with the reader’s array of ethical options; it transposes the text’s *Sitz im Leben* from its original lifeworld to the present life. Consequently, tropological reading and invention involve much more than moral concepts and images—in fact, a literally moral text such as the Ten Commandments is least amenable to tropological interpretation, for tropology is not discourse about ethical concepts or images. Rather, it is a practice by which readers are led by the hand (*manuductio*) from history through doctrine (the allegorical sense) to action, converting the perverted will in the process, and lighting the path to the futureconsummation of the good (the anagogical sense). This “hermeneutic committed to human progress,” as Gilbert Dahan calls it, assumes that scripture dynamically corresponds to the pilgrim movements of readers and communities. These readers invent goodness in both senses of the rhetorical term: they discover moral sources in the Bible, and they create new works that participate in the goodness for which the God of the Bible created the world.

This book makes four related arguments. First, for many medieval and early modern exegetes, poets, and dramatists, the tropological sense of scripture was the key to any successful literal, allegorical, or anagogical reading because it circulates the hermeneutical endeavor out into the reader’s life, where the reader’s actions can render him or her a fit interpreter. Writers capitalized on this circulatory dynamic to turn words, especially the words of sacred scripture, into works—books as well as deeds. Second, this kind of tropological making entails a literary ethics distinct from rhetoric and moral philosophy and theology, though also overlapping in important ways. Tropology situates ethics within biblical

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4. “Literary ethics” names the ideas and practices involved in communities’ efforts to make and use texts to form individuals and institutions and to foster human flourishing and due care for the world.
history, both as a linear progression of events and as a narrative in which readers can participate sacramentally—the story of salvation, oriented toward the union of the soul with God and of Christ with his bride, the church. The tropological inventions that occupy this book place literary ethics within a sacramental economy that links literature to liturgy, performativity to penance, and poetic making to habituation in virtue. Third, this habit of tropological invention inspired a shadow tradition of English poetry and drama that has been obscured by Chaucerian, laureate narratives of the invention of English literature. For all its ethical commitments and rootedness in biblical traditions, this literature is no less inventive and productive of new literary formations than its laureate counterpart. Finally, tropological invention was hardly a proprietary practice of medieval Catholics, spurned by literal-minded Reformers. In fact, it survived as the most important principle of continuity between “medieval” and Reformation biblical cultures, inspiring exegesis, poetry, and drama even in the court of the radical reformist King Edward VI. Tropologies demonstrates that the Bible, long seen as a major fulcrum of Reformation ruptures, could foster ethical and hermeneutical practices that united Protestants and Catholics spiritually, if not ecclesiastically, across confessional and temporal divides.

In the works studied here, ethics according to the tropological sense works dynamically and flexibly, irreducible to a single moral. So it is wrong to read the history of exegesis as a set of codes with which to decrypt the meanings, ethical or otherwise, encoded in late medieval literature. This was the putative, and at times actual, sin of D.W. Robertson, perhaps the most controversial figure in Anglo-American medieval literary studies well beyond his death in 1992. But sustained critical attention to the supple dynamics of medieval ethical literature demonstrates why Robertson’s research into the history of exegesis was a great stride in the right direction, opening a way to think about medieval literary ethics beyond the rhetorical tradition. Looking back across the decades, it seems that the answer to all that ailed “Robertsonianism” (to the extent that such a school ever existed) was not to abandon research on the Christian exegetical sources of medieval literary invention, but

to probe those traditions with greater dexterity, especially in an effort to understand how classical-rhetorical forms of literary ethics and the forms that emerged from spiritual exegesis relate to each other.

The shibboleth of “Robertsonianism” has not been so intimidating as to ward off all comers. Alastair Minnis, Mary Dove, Lesley Smith, and E. Ann Matter, to name just a few, have reinvigorated the historical study of exegesis by and for literary scholars. Yet it does seem as though the embargo laid on Robertsonianism has forestalled inquiry into the area where spiritual exegesis and ethics overlap, precisely because Robertson’s most memorable “totalizing” claim was that exegetical research allowed modern readers to decode every medieval text for an ethical lesson about the love of God and neighbor. The research on theological exegesis of the past few decades has enabled us now to specify how—when medieval literatures did indeed seek to lead to love of God and neighbor—they invented their diverse ways and manifold proximate ends.

William Langland’s long alliterative dream vision *Piers Plowman* occupies a central place in this book because it gathers and redeploy multiple earlier tropological traditions, Latinate and vernacular. Its diversity of tropological forms, topoi, and methods furnishes a critical apparatus by which to recognize tropological inventions in other works. As extensive research on manuscript production, use, and transmission has demonstrated, *Piers Plowman* functions as “a visible, and far from unique, connective between diverse versions of local community” in late medieval England. And because it exerted direct and indirect influence on a wide ideological range of reformist thought and literature through the seventeenth century, *Piers Plowman* opens up comparative perspectives across a *longue durée*.

Chapter 1, “Tropological Theory,” distinguishes the unique role of tropology from the overlapping discourses of rhetoric and moral philosophy and theology. Scholars of medieval literature are accustomed to thinking of poetry as a branch of ethics, which in turn is a part of philosophy. Poetry then employs the tools of rhetoric to move readers and listeners to the good. But in a large segment of medieval intellectual life,
ethics was considered more a part of biblical study than of philosophy. And although biblical literature also invested in rhetoric, its ultimate goal was not to move people to good action but to draw them into participation in the story of salvation narrated in scripture and fulfilled tropologically in the present. This chapter surveys this distinctive understanding of tropological exegesis from Augustine to Erasmus, with special attention to Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermons on the Song of Songs), and the high Middle Ages’ most ambitious theorist of tropology, Bonaventure (On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology). Like these exegetes, the poets and dramatists studied here practice a tropological ethics that merges the eternal and mystical calling of the soul with the historical specificity of practical action. A final section of the chapter explores how Piers Plowman theorizes tropology in a vision of Piers sowing the seeds of the virtues in scripture and cultivating them by exegesis. Piers Plowman also furnishes examples of five varieties of tropology that will be encountered throughout the book, including the work of Stephen Batman, an important Protestant reader of Piers Plowman who employs tropology to bridge the intellectual and ecclesial gap opened by the Reformation.

Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with how exegetical habits—literal and tropological, respectively—contribute to literary invention. In chapter 2, ”How to Invent History: Patience, the Glossa ordinaria, and the Ethics of the Literal Sense,” I argue that the author of Pearl, Cleanliness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight develops his distinctive “realizing imagination” in order to open the literal history of scripture to affective and ethical participation. Focusing on the Jonah story in Patience, I compare the poet’s interest in literal narrative detail and psychology to that of academic commentaries on Jonah, particularly the Glossa ordinaria. If the Patience-Poet has a literal imagination, then it is one that opens up the brute facts of linear history to the providential ordering of salvation history, with its meaningful intervals between corresponding people, things, and events. He can do this not because he can expect his readers to have an experience of the seamless ordering of history to salvation, but because the theology that underwrites the Glossa ordinaria’s inventive exegetical habits provides him with tools to reimagine story and history. The poet portrays Jonah’s dilemma as a conflict between God’s transcendent interests and Jonah’s own immanent, historical exigencies. Patience adapts the theology of
allegory to set up non-Christological correspondences that stage the argument not only between Jonah and God, but between the literal sense and the spiritual senses in order to reconcile them. This kind of historical imagination allows the spiritual sense of tropology to flourish within the literal sense of scripture, reconciling the potential conflicts of literal and allegorical reading. The Patience-Poet’s project, then, can be read as cognate to the fourteenth-century scholastic project to integrate literal and spiritual senses. The poem models a practice of biblical paraphrase with tropological purpose that flourished across the Reformation, especially in the English reception of Erasmus’s Paraphrases on the New Testament.

Patience assumes a metaphysics of history according to which readers of scripture can actually participate in its history by inventing new works. However, this metaphysics can seem to risk either absorbing the past into the present’s exigencies or rendering the present a mere reiteration of the past. Tropological invention therefore raises the literary and ethical problematic of originality and repetition, understood in the rhetorical tradition according to the figure of model and copy. Chapter 3, “‘Beatus qui verba vertit in opera’: Langland’s Ethical Invention,” investigates the phenomenology of literary and ethical invention in Piers Plowman in order to inquire how writers and ethical agents can participate in the world of scripture without being absorbed into it—how they can both copy an all-encompassing model and create entirely unique, unforeseeable phenomena. In the Pentecost episode in Piers Plowman, Will and Conscience find themselves on the scene in first-century Jerusalem, inventing with the gathered crowd one of the most famous hymns of the liturgy, the sequence Veni, Creator Spiritus. Like the apostles who are speaking in tongues, the crowd invents a completely new song—indeed, invents the Christian liturgy—but it is already a copy of the Holy Spirit’s gift. Such a “copy” defies classical rhetorical models, according to which an invention must vie with and displace its model. Unlike Rita Copeland’s Chaucer, who translates classical antiquity in order to supersede it, Piers Plowman eschews competition, seeking to conserve its biblical and liturgical models, yet nevertheless inventing previously unforeseeable phenomena. Some of the most original and powerful literature of the period displays a similarly harmonious, irenic relationship with its sources, seeking to embody them rather than to overturn them in an agonistic struggle for literary supremacy. Such works strive
to incarnate their source texts as literature, while also moving readers to enact their ethical directives.

Chapter 4, “Practices of Satisfaction and Piers Plowman’s Dynamic Middle,” addresses the crucial passage from a literary mode of participation in the history of salvation to the sacramental mode that has often been considered more central to the Catholic Church’s understanding of salvation. This chapter probes the overlap between word and sacrament in the climactic passēs of Piers Plowman that are structured by the Holy Week liturgy, where Will’s participation in the Mass frames his writing of the poem. These scenes of writing as sacramental participation shed light on Reformation-era debates about penance and the role of good works in the Christian life. Piers Plowman ends with the corruption of the church and the undoing of the penitential self as the pitiful Contrition abandons his own allegorical essence and “clene forȝete to crye and to wepe.”7 No wonder some of the poem’s best readers have identified failure as its chief engine of invention and closure. Nevertheless, Langland designs the work to subordinate the poem’s failures to the productive work of satisfaction, the third “part” of the sacrament of penance. Langland conceives of sacramental and literary satisfaction not as the termination of a discrete penitential sequence (contrition, confession, satisfaction), but as an ongoing, open-ended habit of beginning again and making good ends. If we can understand Langland’s tropological invention as satisfactory, we can better appreciate the failures and successes of penance in the late Middle Ages, and better recognize practices of satisfaction across the Reformation that narratives of decline and loss tend to overlook. Langland’s vision also helps us understand the penitential thought that animates early Reformation literature of conversion, especially Sir Thomas Wyatt’s A Paraphrase of the Penitential Psalms and

the glosses of *Piers Plowman*’s first editor, the radical Protestant Robert Crowley. Uniting all three beyond their deep differences of practice and theology was the scriptural belief that the phenomenon of sacramental penance appears fully only when seen in eschatological perspective.

What becomes of tropological participation in the history of salvation when the sacramental economy goes into eclipse? Chapter 5, “Tropology Reformed: Scripture, Salvation, Drama,” argues both that tropology became an important channel of exegetical and ethical continuity between late medieval and early Reformation English religious culture, and also that tropology enabled various Protestant writers to bypass the sacramental economy on which Langland’s practice of tropology depended. The first part of the chapter tracks permutations of tropological theory and practice in the theological and exegetical works of Erasmus, John Calvin, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, Thomas More, and Martin Bucer. These discourses frame the dramatic culture of the court of the Reformed boy-king Edward VI, who himself likely acted in apocalyptic, anti-Catholic plays and revels scripted by scholars steeped in Erasmian (Nicholas Udall) and Bucerian (Bernardino Ochino) tropological theory. Figures from that culture of court drama reappear during the reign of Mary in Coventry, where one John Careless, imprisoned for radical Protestant street drama, is released temporarily to perform in the city’s traditional mystery plays. Careless’s letters from prison to fellow radicals, recorded in John Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, movingly capture him reinventing practices of consolation and tropological participation in biblical history that he learned from Coventry’s medieval dramatic culture. As he scripts his own martyrdom from the tropes of biblical drama, Careless bears testimony to radical Protestantism’s ability to sustain a participatory understanding of ethics and salvation despite its rejection of the sacramental economy.

Chapter 6, “Mirror of Scripture: Ethics and Anagogy in the York Doomsday Pageant,” imagines the tropological possibilities of the “medieval” York Play during the last decade of its performance in a Protestant age. Entertaining critiques of “works righteousness,” this speculative reformist performance of the play stages a confrontation between the tropological and anagogical senses to challenge the efficacy of good works and maintain the gratuitous judgment of Christ the King. At the same time, the thought experiment reveals how the play’s original
Catholic theology contains resources for thinking beyond merit when considering the relationship between virtue ethics and salvation. Specifically, the chapter considers how medieval biblical drama enlisted optical theory to address obstacles to ethical participation in the story of salvation. In several episodes, the York Play deploys the image of a mirror to articulate the complex moral and soteriological functions of a performed Bible. Combining two pervasive mirror topoi—the mirror of scripture and the mirror as moral exemplar—the play displaces the topoi from their conventional medium, the book, onto drama, thus exploring what would become another pervasive mirror topos, the drama-as-mirror. The Doomsday pageant presents God as a judging spectator and the audience as the object of scrutiny. The pageant fosters an eschatological conversion of the gaze. Truly to see means to be seen truly. So while the York Play certainly endeavors to train its audience to be good spectator-participants, the Doomsday pageant seeks to render them the spectated-participated, thereby throwing their “goodness” into eschatological question. Other pageants in the play critique ecclesial pretensions to control the body of Christ in the transubstantiated Eucharistic host, but the Doomsday pageant defies the pretensions of a virtuous laity to possess the body of Christ through ethical works of mercy. As it rebuffs claims to Eucharistic hegemony, the pageant also invites a redefinition of “sacramental theater” that affirms the function of both the social body and the Eucharistic body in making Christ present.

By attending to tropology, this study illuminates changes and continuities in ethical thought and literature during a period of energetic reform in English religious culture from roughly 1350 to 1600. In debates about the revelatory and ethical functions of scripture, poetry, and drama, reformist writers acknowledged the tropological imperative that Christians embody the text of scripture in their actions. By studying tropology as an engine of literary invention in the poetry, religious literature, and drama of this long age of reform, Tropologies shows how the possibilities of poetry and drama changed as theology reconceived scripture’s salvific power and institutions reformed laypeople’s access to it. This approach demands that we treat works of narrative poetry and drama as powerful theological thought machines in their own right, thereby integrating vernacular literary texts more richly into the history of exegesis and religious reform.