

Active Absolution and Passive Penance: The Gendering of Forgiveness in the Auchinleck Manuscript's *Legend of Pope Gregory*

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Abstract

That the truly repentant can seek forgiveness for their sins is a part of the Catholic faith which has remained important throughout the history of Catholicism. The modern catechism still states that 'There is no one, however wicked and guilty, who may not confidently hope for [forgiveness], provided his repentance is honest.' Evidence for the importance of forgiveness to the medieval church can be found in both canonical tracts and secular narratives. One such secular narrative is the fourteenth century *The Legend of Pope Gregory*, a Middle English hagiographical romance. Having been condemned as 'popular' literature, the text has suffered from a lack of interest, despite the fact it is a clear example of the understood function of penance and forgiveness in late medieval society.

The plotline of the narrative contains double incest, condemning three souls (two male and one female) to exile from the wider community, and creating an overall theme of seeking penance/forgiveness. The journey from sin to forgiveness and readmission to the wider community, however, is strictly gendered. Though all commit the sin of incest, their individual approach to undertaking penance and seeking forgiveness is socially constructed and controlled by their gender. Beginning with a discussion of the concept of forgiveness and penance in the medieval Catholic Church, this article undertakes a close analysis of the text in order to analyse this gendering of forgiveness. It illustrates that, whilst the male characters can take control of their own futures and actively force their way back into inclusion within the community, the female must be passive in the exact same situation. Once she has sinned, she is entirely dependent on the good will of the Christian community to once more grant her the right to belong.

Key Words: Gender studies, medievalism, popular literature, manuscript studies, feminist theory.

Society in medieval England was full of social divisions: wealth separated the nobility from the peasantry, age separated the child from the adult, religious conviction separated the ordained from the lay person, and in almost all aspects of life, gender separated man from woman. Yet, as much as religion could separate those who pursued a holy life from those who did not, it also offered a unified belief that bound society together into a community. Catholicism offered both rewards and dangers that claimed to bypass earthly distinctions of wealth, age, and even gender. The lowest serf could gain a place in heaven, and the highest nobleman could be excommunicated, thereby banned from his place in heaven and the community at large. Sin was a great equaliser as all men could fall to it and all men could earn forgiveness from it, gaining re-admittance to the community from which their sin excluded them.

The idea of the danger of sin and the attainment of forgiveness was subject to much discussion in late medieval England. For the clergy, how confession was to be taken and what penance should be dispensed were popular subjects in handbooks. For the lay person, sin and forgiveness were central themes to many literary texts. One such example is *The Legend of Pope Gregory*, a text which blends the genres of hagiography and romance together to create a tale of knightly adventure, shocking mortal sin, and the attainment of forgiveness. It is a tale that appears to have been popular across Western Europe, with extant versions found in numerous late medieval languages, and retellings of the text published as recently as the turn of the twentieth century (Murdoch 2012, p.54). Despite its seemingly consistent and widespread popularity, the contents of the narrative have been little studied, and its wide reaching theme of forgiveness and re-admission to the wider Catholic community has barely been discussed by academics. Paying close attention to gender, this essay will examine the text of *The Legend of Pope Gregory* in detail to illustrate how the route to forgiveness and re-integration to the religious community is dependent upon the gender of the sinner, despite Paul's claim that 'There is [...]no male, nor female; for all ye be one in Christ Jesus' (The Bible, Galatians. 3:28).

There are many extant variations of *The Legend of Pope Gregory* from late medieval Europe. There are four known extant Middle English versions found in the following four manuscripts: MS. Advocates 19.2.1, MS. Cotton Cleopatra D IX, MS. Vernon, and MS. Rawlinson Poetry 225 (Keller 1914, p.VI). My research will focus primarily on the redaction found within MS. Advocates 19.2.1, commonly known as the Auchinleck manuscript, as it has a specific compilation date of between 1330 and 1340 (Keller 1914, p.VI). This small date range is far more definitive than is normal for manuscripts of this time, and allows for a

detailed historicist approach to literary analysis and the use of historical evidence where applicable. Unfortunately, *The Legend of Pope Gregory* is the first text in the extant Auchinleck manuscript, and as such has lost the opening leaves, containing approximately 270 lines of the poem. The text is also incomplete, with a stub left over showing that one leaf has been cut out of the manuscript (Keller 1914, p.VI). Where the text is missing from the Auchinleck redaction, I will turn to the redaction found in MS. Vernon, which is generally considered to be the archetype of English redactions (Murdoch 2012, p.54).

The Legend of Pope Gregory is not a well-known text and the layers of sin are complex. The mortal sin committed by the three ‘main’ characters is incest which includes brother-sister, mother-son, and aunt-nephew. Adding to this complexity, only one of these three characters is named. Due to the complex nature of the incest and the lack of names, I have summarised the plot below for clarity for the unfamiliar reader:

The eldest of a set of twins, one male and one female, promises his dying father he will look after his sister. The new Earl does this, keeping his sister uncomfortably close. The devil exploits their close relationship and possesses the brother, causing him to have sexual intercourse with her. Though his actions awaken her, she does not cry for help, and Gregory is conceived. A trusted knight takes the sister to his own home to have her child in secret, whilst the Earl goes on crusade as penance for his sins.

When the baby is born the sister casts him out to sea, wrapped in silk and placed alongside ivory tablets engraved with the story of his birth. Informed of her brother’s death, she assumes the title of lady and is soon beset by a duke determined to marry her. When she refuses, he lays siege to her lands.

Fishermen rescue the boat and save the baby, raising him as their own by orders of the local Abbot. When near adulthood, Gregory is told he is a foundling. The Abbot offers him a position, but he refuses and sets off to become a knight, carrying the tablets and wearing clothes fashioned from the silk.

Upon reaching his mother’s lands, Gregory defeats the Duke. The sister, failing to recognise her own son, marries him on the advice of her counsellors. After a period of time, a maid discovers Gregory crying over his ivory tablets and tells the sister. She investigates and realises she has married her son. Both are horrified and Gregory sets off on pilgrimage to make amends for the sin. He encounters a fisherman who chains him to a rock and throws the key into the sea. He remains there for twenty years.

The Pope dies, and an angel informs the cardinals that they will find the new Pope chained to a rock. A group set off and lodge with the fisherman. Upon the discovery of the key in a fish served for dinner, the group go to see Gregory and release him. He is made Pope, and his mother appears on pilgrimage to confess her sins. He forgives her and sends her to join a nunnery, where she relinquishes all her worldly goods and remains until she dies.

I will refer to the characters as Gregory, the brother (Gregory's father/uncle), the sister (Gregory's mother/aunt/wife), and the Knight (who helps the twins) from this point forwards.

Throughout the narrative all three characters are guilty of the sin of incest and all earn forgiveness and re-admittance into the Catholic community as the narrative progresses. The nature of their expulsion from the community is gendered, however, as the sister undergoes a different experience from the brother and Gregory. The initial sin of the twins provides evidence of this gendering from the beginning. Prior to incest actually occurring, the narrative discusses the relationship that occurs between the siblings:

We ben he seide of one blod
 Vr love schal neuere parten a twinne
 Hire wille schal beo don vche a del
 And heo schal sitte by my syde
 Wiþ ioye schal hire kepe well
 As a ladi þat is lad in pryde...
 Þe Maiden þer wiþ him bi lafte
 Bi twene hem þer rose no strif
 Heo weoren boþe leoue and sauhte
 He louede hire as his owne lyf
 Heo Coruen boþe wiþ o knyf
 And of o Coope dronken same
 Joye and blisse was heore lyf
 Astounde heo liuiden in muche game
 Þe child fule ofte his suster custe
 Wiþ loue trewe and herte god
 Whon þe fend þer of wuste
 Wiþ his art he torned heore mod (MS Vernon, ll.75-104)

[*"We are," he said, "of one blood"/For your love these twins will never part/Her will shall be done every day/And she will sit by my side/I shall keep her full of joy/As a lady to be proud of..."*]/*The maiden was left with him/They never had an argument/She was loved and her company was sought after/He loved her as he loved his own life/They were both crowned with a sword/And drank from one cup/Their lives were all joy and happiness/They lived in astonishing playfulness/he often kissed his sister/with true love and a good heart/when the devil/used his skills to turn the brother's mood.*]

The poem depicts a growing and increasingly inappropriate affection between the pair that is very unusual for fourteenth century England. Karl-Heinz Spieß, in his study of European nobility, observes that brothers and sisters did grow up together until the approximate age of seven, when they started to follow gender segregated paths according to the roles they would play in the future. This entailed a physical separation of the children and 'usually, they lived a considerable distance from each other until the end of their lives, with only very sporadic

personal contacts' (Spieß 2004, p.53). Imitation of this historical precedent is the norm when the raising of children is discussed in medieval literature. Phillips observes that 'Early education [of sons] was in women's hands but boys then moved to masculine training, often in another household,' and cites examples of this in Lancelot's story, *Sir Degaré* and *Floriant and Florete* (Phillips 2004, p.88). The twins in *The Legend of Pope Gregory*, however, act more like a married couple than adult siblings. The crowning of the sister alongside the brother, an act which I have found no historical reference for, invokes the image of a royal wife; the sharing of the cup equally reads as an intimate gesture. The reported kissing is more difficult to interpret as words like kiss and embrace carried a less sexualised connotation than today. That being said, commentaries of the time do display a concern about the dangers of kisses. Aquinas claimed, for example, that 'chastity has reference to sexual acts themselves; purity to sexual signs such as impure looks, kisses, and touches' (Payer 1991, 159). Consequently, when combined with the other acts, these kisses suggest an inappropriate level of affection between the twins. When these small instances of close affection are examined in the light of the normal distance between historical adult siblings, the narrative suggests that there is an inappropriate nature to their relationship that both twins should have put a stop to.

The twins' concerning constant proximity to each other is most obvious in their sleeping arrangements:

Heo ly3en bope up a Chaumbre a niht
 Heore bed nas not fer a twynne
 Be fend of helle dude al his miht
 Heore loue to *turnen* in to synne. (MS Vernon, ll.109-112)

[*They both lay in a bedroom at night/Their bed was not meant for twins/The devil from hell did all he could/To turn their love to sin.*]

The use of a double negative in 'nas not' emphasises that the sleeping arrangements were not acceptable for twins. Though sharing rooms and even beds was common in medieval England, post-pubescent individuals were again normally segregated by gender unless they were a married couple. When this norm is ignored in literature, it often leads to incest; in the Old French romance *Dit de la bourgeoisie de Rome*, for example, a mother shares a bed with her son and, prompted by the devil, has sexual intercourse with him despite knowing it is a sin (Gravdal 1995, p.283). By wilfully blurring the boundaries between spouse and sibling, both twins appear to be inviting sin into their lives. As neither protests the blurring of boundaries, both seem to be equally to blame for this invitation.

During the actual rape scene, however, the actions of the brother and sister are depicted in such a way that the sister takes the blame for the occurrence of sin. During the rape scene, the narrative describes that:

Heo þou3te 3if ich loude grede
 Þen schal my broþur foule beo schent
 And 3if I lete him don þis dede
 Vr soules schule to pyne beo dempt
 Þe beste red hire þouhte to do
 Heo lay stille and no word nolde speke
 Bote soffrede him his wille do (MS Vernon, ll.125-132)

[*She thought “if I cry out loudly/then the world will think badly of my brother/and if I let him do this deed/our souls shall be doomed to eternal pain”/she eventually decided it would be best/to lay still and not speak a word/and allow him to do the deed.*]

The text makes it explicit that the sister does not offer resistance to her brother’s advances, but allows him to do his will. Although her debate over whether to call for help arises from her concern for his reputation, we can see that her reputation is invariably linked to his. By crying out for help she would stain her own reputation as an impure non-virgin, belonging to a sinful family. Her decision to allow her brother his desires makes this scene very complex contextually as it is difficult to know how the medieval audience would react to this. The use of the ‘no word nolde speke’ double negative emphasises that she has made a decision to not interfere, but does so by placing emphasis on *her* will. She is actively choosing not to withhold her consent to sexual activity.

Whether or not she truly consents to sexual intercourse is difficult to determine by today’s standards, as her consent can be seen to be forced. For the medieval audience this would have been less complicated as the charge of rape did not rely on the nature of the victim’s consent. Rape, or *raptus* as it was described in fourteenth century England, paid little to no attention to whether or not the victim consented. The *Statutes of Westminster*, written less than 100 years before our redaction of *The Legend of Pope Gregory* read:

And the King prohibiteth that none do ravish, nor take away by force, any Maiden within Age, neither by her own consent, nor without; nor any Wife or Maiden of full Age, nor any other Woman, against her Will; (1275, 3 Edw 1, p.199).

This was quickly followed by a second Statute ten years later:

It is Provided, That if a Man from henceforth do ravish a Woman, married, Maid or other, where she did not consent, neither before nor after, he shall have Judgment of Life and Member. And likewise where a Man ravisheth a Woman, married Lady, Demosel, or other with Force, although she consent after, he shall have such Judgement as before is said (1285, 13 Edw 1, p.89).

Both statutes discuss rape as something that can happen with or without the consent of the woman. This lack of interest in female consent was linked inextricably with the role of medieval women as commodities who could be traded in marriage to gain power, prestige, influence, land, and wealth. As Eskow states, 'Traditional prescriptions against rape protected female chastity as a valuable asset – not of the chaste woman, but of her father, who could trade his daughter's virginity for economic or social gain from a prospective suitor' (Eskow 1996, p.680). Rape law was so interested in protecting the economic rights of male kin that female consent, rather than being a key point in defining rape, was used as a way to determine the woman's culpability in her own sexual assault. As she did not actively offer non-consent and physical resistance, the sister is as guilty of rape as her brother is (Cannon 2001, p.260). The double negative emphasising the sister's choice not to object suggests the narrator views her as a willing participant. Rather than a victim of rape, the sister is depicted as a wilful agent in her own devaluation through her decision not to object to her brother's attack. In comparison to this, the brother has no inner monologue that is put forward. We are simply told that he is possessed by the devil. The distinct difference in treatment between the two characters is the first moment where sin and forgiveness is gendered. Even though both commit the same sin of incestuous fornication, his depiction is much more sympathetic. He is possessed by the devil, something which could happen to anyone, whilst she is a willing accomplice to the devil's work. By depicting the woman as guiltier than the man for the same offense, the narrative constructs sin in a gendered manner.

The same gendering of sin can be seen in the second round of incest, where once more the sister is portrayed as guiltier than her male accomplice. When Gregory arrives in her life, wearing clothes made from the cloth she gave him as a baby, she briefly recognises him for her son. She disregards this thought, however, because of sexual desire:

Be leuedi þat was so trewe of loue,
 Þer sche lay bifor þe rode,
 Þe cloþ if silk sche newe aboue
 Þat sche him ʒaf into þe se flode.
 Þe comely leuedy feir of hewe
 Loked on him wiþ eyʒen to

Bot noþing sche him knewe
 So long he hadde ben hir fro.
 Hir ey3en on him fast sche þrewe
 & sey3e wele sche loued him þo;
 Þe cloþ of silk sche sey3e al newe
 Pat sche him 3af, þan hir was wo. (MS Advocates, ll.545-556)

*[The lady that was in true love,/knelt before the cross,/the silk cloth she knew
 above all others/as the one she gave to the baby she cast into the sea./The pretty
 lady of fair colour,/looked at him with her two eyes/but recognised
 nothing/because he had been from her for so long./She looked at him so much she
 knew/and understood that she loved him;/the silk cloth suddenly looked
 different/than the one she gave her son, that was her downfall.]*

The abandoning of a child who miraculously finds his/her lost parents is a common motif in medieval romance, and it is normal for ‘unknowns’ to carry a token of some sort to allow recognition. For example, in the romance *Sir Degaré*, which is also found in the Auchinleck manuscript, Degaré carries a pair of gloves which his mother gave to him before casting him out to sea. The gloves are enchanted with a spell that will prevent the gloves from fitting any other woman but her, allowing him to ensure he does not marry her. What is unusual in *The Legend of Pope Gregory* is that the cloth has no magical properties; Gregory is entirely dependent on his mother recognising it in order to prevent incest occurring. The sister completely fails in this regard. Where Gregory was innocent of knowledge of the incest his marriage would involve, the sister once again had the opportunity to prevent incest which she refused to take. The sister once more comes across as guiltier than her male counterpart.

When it comes to the committing of sin, therefore, we can see two different types of sinner emerging in *The Legend of Pope Gregory*. The men represent passive sinners; though both commit incest and are to be considered guilty of sin, their lack of an active role in perpetrating said sin lessens their crime. Though taking an active sexual role, the brother is a passive passenger along for the ride as the devil controls his actions, whilst Gregory’s ignorance of his relationship to his new wife makes him a passive sinner unaware of the reality of his actions. The sister, however, actively sins by making choices that directly allow incest to occur. She becomes the embodiment of the ‘weaker sex’, a term that aptly describes the tendency for women to succumb to sin in the teachings of the medieval Catholic Church. Despite the initial assertions for a sexless soul, the Church created many theological explanations for why women would fall to sin so easily. For Augustine, for example:

women was made in the image of God insofar as she had a rational soul. Sex differences only pertained to the physical body which certainly rendered women inferior. (Murray 1998, p.79-80.)

The arguments of the Church Fathers concluded that, although Paul was correct in his understanding of the soul as genderless, the body which housed the soul was not, and this explained why women were more likely to fall to temptation.¹ The gendering seen in *The Legend of Pope Gregory* is consequently in agreement with contemporary theological thinking. It demonstrates the weakness of women by making the sister an active sinner in direct contrast to her passive male relations. Yet, if this gendering is caused by the weakness of the body, it would not be illogical to assume that forgiveness, an interaction between the soul and God that is independent of the restraints and temptations of human flesh, should be a genderless experience. *The Legend of Pope Gregory*, however, shows that this is not the case.

When the sinful twins turn to the Knight in desperation, he immediately calls for them to undertake penance for their actions:

With strong penaunce a moten be bou3t
 Crist schal bringen ou out of bale
 Benkep on him and douteþ 3e nou3t (MS Vernon, ll.226-228)

[*With tough penance a chance can be bought/Christ shall bring you out of your downfall/think on him and do not doubt*]

The Knight's reaction upon hearing of the sin is to insist that *both* twins undertake penance for their actions. Despite this assertion, however, he does not suggest how the sister is to undertake this. Where he is specific as to what the brother shall do, the overriding concern of the men is how to hide the pregnancy that would inform the community about their sin, rather than how she shall undertake penance:

þe ladi shaltou send to me [the Knight]
 Til heo beo out of serwe I brou3t
 Bi him þat sit in Trinitie
 Me schal hire kepe and 3eme soft
 And don al þat hire wille be

¹ As is found in the many medieval redactions of the fall of man, nearly all of which blame Eve's weakness as a woman for the introduction of sin into the world.

þou shalt trewely on þi play
 Wenden in to þe holy lond
 Do nou riȝt as I þe say (MS Vernon, ll.248-255)

*[The lady you shall send to me,/until she is brought out of the sorrow of her
 pregnancy/by Jesus/I shall keep and care for her/and do all that she desires/For
 your sin, you shall/Go into the holy land/Do right now what I say]*

The knight advises the brother to go on crusade as a way of making penance for his sinful action. This suggestion is something that the brother can actively do; he is able to take his re-admittance to the community into his own hands by seeking forgiveness through warfare. His subsequent death transforms him from sinner to martyr; by making the active choice to risk and ultimately die for his religious beliefs, he is welcomed back into the religious community with open arms. In direct contrast, however, nothing is mentioned to the sister in regards to gaining forgiveness and acceptance back into the Christian community. Her pregnancy is even hidden away, protecting her from the suffering of social condemnation that would occur should it be known. She is kept in comfort, with all she desires. This is in no way the suffering of a penitent. Where her brother is given the opportunity to actively seek penance and re-integration with Catholic society, she is forced to sit on the side-lines of the narrative and wait.

This wait continues throughout the narrative, and the passivity of female penance is emphasised once more when contrasted with Gregory's later actions. Upon the discovery of the nature of their relationship, Gregory instructs the sister:

Penaunce al for to take
 To heauen blis it wil þe lede
 And of þi soule a gode seynt make
 Modur now we schul part atvinne
 And neuer oþer in þis lond se
 He haþ ous cleped and cald of sinne
 Þe holy gost and persons þre
 Bifor þe dom of alle mankin
 Bifor godes face so schal it be
 Better is lat þan neuer blinne
 Our soules to maken fre
 Robes riche hadde he þan
 As prince þat was miche of miȝt
 He toke cloþes of pouer manne
 Þe loue of god was on him liȝt
 At his modur leue he nam

Ar þe day was vp briȝt (MS Advocates, ll.826-842)

[To take penance/it will lead to heavenly bliss/and will make a good saint of your soul./Mother, now we shall part in two/and never see each other in this land again./He [God] has called us and accused us of sin/the holy ghost and three persons of the trinity/Before the dominion of all mankind/The evidence is before God's face/Better the accusation is late than never made/so that our souls can be made free"/He [Gregory] was wearing rich clothes/as fitted his position as a mighty prince./He put on the clothes of a poor man/he was filled with the light of God/With his mother's permission/he left before dawn.]

Once again a man advises the woman to take penance, but does not instruct her on how to do so. Gregory's reaction immediately actively seeks forgiveness. He casts off his wealth and riches and takes on the outfit of a penitent man. He seeks the suffering of the elements. He asks the fisherman to chain him to the rock. The extraordinary twenty year penance that not only earns him re-admission to the religious community, but allows him to advance to become leader of this community, is all sought after and enacted by him. The sister, however, disappears. Despite having been given advice, she is abandoned by the narrative. For the second time she is unable to follow what she has been instructed to do. Whereas both her brother and Gregory actively undertake penance of their own choosing, as a woman, she is unable to go out into the world to seek forgiveness. Instead, she is once again forced to sit and wait for forgiveness to find her.

At the very end of the text the sister finally manages to find forgiveness and to be re-admitted to the religious community from which her sinful nature had excluded her. This has been achieved, however, in a passive manner:

þe pope was wys of resound
 Penance he dude his Modur take
 He let hire pruyde fallen a doun
 Londes and rentes heo dude forsake
 An hous of Ordre in þe toun
 To his Modur he lette make
 þat ȝit stondeþ of Religioun
 þe Nonnes wereþ þe cloþus blake (MS Vernon, ll.1463-1470)

[The pope was very wise/he advised his Mother to do penance/and got rid of her pride/and had her give up her land and income/a religious order in the town/he had her join/it was a good religious place/where the nuns wear black cloth.]

When she travels to meet the Pope, Gregory finally gives her explicit instructions as to how she can achieve forgiveness to her sins. This penance is one that implicitly resolves the mistakes she has made during the text. It demands the relinquishing of her social status, her weakness for sexual attraction, and ultimately her ability to act in an active manner. Within the religious house, she will be living a passive life controlled by the orders of others. She has finally gained forgiveness; not achieved by active penance, but through the concern of a man. The epitome of the damsel in distress, the sister has been forced to passively wait for her salvation to be brought to her by a man.

In the way *The Legend of Pope Gregory* depicts sin and salvation, it is possible to see a distinct gendering of these actions. When sinning, the woman is depicted in a far more active role that ultimately leads her to appear far guiltier than her male accomplices. This depiction of a medieval woman, however, is hardly surprising; by being female, the sister is more likely to be tempted to fall to sin. It is the weakness of the female body, as is seen in the story of the Fall that encourages women to actively sin, whether in refusing to fight a brother's advances, ignoring the familiarity of a stranger because he is handsome, or disobeying a direct order not to eat the fruit from a certain tree. Yet, this active role changes when it comes to seeking forgiveness from sins. Although, as *The Legend of Pope Gregory* states clearly in the moral message to the reader, 'God is hende and Merciable/To Mon þat is in sunne I brouht' [God is kind and merciful/to the sinful man], it is evident from the narrative that women are required to take a different path to forgiveness. Having been an active sinner, the sister must passively wait as both her male accomplices achieve their penance; her forgiveness is ultimately completely dependent on Gregory undertaking his drastic penance and gaining the position to offer explicit instruction as to how to re-join the religious community. It is possible to see that this passivity is itself a penance as it requires the sister to take a quiet role that contradicts her previously active sinfulness. This is never, however, explicitly laid out as a penance in the manner that the brother's crusade and Gregory's rock are. The only specific penance she undertakes is that which is ordered by a man at the end: joining a nunnery.

Despite the claims of both Paul and the Church Fathers, it consequently appears that the medieval reader was likely to encounter representations of women that contradicted the concept that the soul was genderless. In texts such as *The Legend of Pope Gregory*, the

experience of penitent women was clearly differentiated from penitent men. *The Legend of Pope Gregory* was by no means isolated in this depiction; the Middle English *Life of Adam and Eve*, positioned alongside Gregory's narrative in both redactions, also depicts a woman whose penitent experience is different from the mans, and which ultimately fails until guided by men (Murdoch 2012, p.27). Consequently, it can be seen that fourteenth-century English readers had access to a depiction of forgiveness different from that taught in the Church. Rather than being a genderless process which all mankind experienced identically, fictional narratives forced women to become dependent on men to assure them of their forgiveness, whilst men could actively seek forgiveness which needed only to be confirmed by God. In order to be accepted back into the religious community, men may actively seek God's forgiveness whilst women must passively wait for the Christian community to arrange for God to forgive them.

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