

Introduction

The gaze of late medieval England was fixed on the broken body of a wounded and bloody Jesus surrounded by weeping bystanders. Church wall paintings, manuscript illuminations, rood screens, roof bosses, reliquaries, and carvings graphically depict the anguish and pain of the tortured Christ. Sermons recount the agony, dramas reenact it, and spiritual guides counsel their disciples to meditate on the torments of the dying Jesus. In this book, I investigate the graphic Passion images that pervade late medieval English sermons, drama, art, and devotional literature. Two questions orient this study of religion and culture. First, what is the nature of this christological portraiture which shaped the ethos of late medieval England? Second, what lived responses did this portraiture seek to engender? That is, what is the connection in medieval religious life between the wounded Savior and personal transformation, public works of compassion, and even bodily imitation of Jesus' suffering?

From the time of Jesus Christ's own life, and most visibly in the Crucifixion, suffering has been a major theme within the Christian tradition. But attitudes toward suffering and the functions of suffering in the Christian life have changed over time. Contemporary scholarly analyses of the forms of twelfth-century English religious devotion reveal an increasing focus on the humanity of Jesus; by the fourteenth century, depictions of the suffering Jesus were predominant.¹ From the twelfth century to the fourteenth century, a growing number of theological texts pondered the nature and effects of Christ's Crucifixion; in painting

and sculpture, depictions of the suffering Christ in agony began to outnumber representations of the majestic Christ of Resurrection and judgment; liturgical dramas reenacted the circumstances of Jesus' Passion and death; and poets lamented the anguish of the suffering Savior and his bereaved followers.²

Medieval sermons also became more focused on the theme of the Passion. Preachers, speaking more and more often on this topic in the vernacular, preached not only in churches on Sundays but also on feast days, at festivals, and on other special occasions. They spoke not only from pulpits in churches and cathedrals but also from movable pulpits carried out to churchyards and into town centers or at the site of preaching crosses outside church buildings or at town and city gathering places. Indeed, the preachers themselves often held wooden crucifixes as they preached.³ Medieval sermonizers were the popular media of their day, and the Passion of Christ was one of their dominant theological themes.

Churchgoers were further surrounded by vivid depictions of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in the art and architecture of medieval churches.⁴ The image-rich environment in which preaching about the suffering Jesus occurred reinforced the christological subject matter of the sermons; even the smallest parish churches in England were often embellished with graphic floor-to-ceiling wall paintings and colorful tapestries chronicling the Passion of Christ. In many churches, huge crucifixes hung on the wall above the pulpit. Preaching crosses were decorated with scenes from Jesus' Passion, and tapestries and painted cloths adorned the movable pulpits. Norwich Cathedral, for example, housed a spectacular fourteenth-century artistic rendering of Christ's Passion.⁵ Also, around the turn of the fourteenth century, the *pietà*, a new form of religious portrayal of the suffering Savior, emerged. Fascination with the relics of Jesus' suffering increased, and artistic representations of the instruments of Christ's Crucifixion multiplied—all indicative of increasing attention to the humanity of Jesus and, even more specifically, to the Passion and death of Jesus Christ.⁶ Blood drips from this Savior's gaping wounds—torment and anguish abound—and yet all of this, in literature and art, claimed to nourish the spiritual life and to stir people to worship God: "And so when we come into [a] church . . . and when you see a cross, think with great sorrow and compunction of heart of the death Christ suffered for humankind; and so before the cross that moves you to devotion, worship Christ with all your might."⁷

Still, modern historians of religion are often suspicious of so-called spiritual suffering and devotion to a wounded God. Is not the suffering Jesus image really about a tyrannical God of judgment who cruelly demands the torture of the "Beloved Son" as satisfaction for humanity's wrongs? Is not the visage of Christ in agony in fact a reflection of a religious world of gloom and fear, a sign of the "dark ages," of an angst-ridden society terrified by death and mesmerized by a bloody and tormented figure who is a constant reminder of the fate that awaits unrepentant sinners?⁸ Or, alternatively, from an equally critical perspective, is

this fascination with the suffering Jesus not attributable to excesses in devotional practice which manifest the decline of medieval culture? Is this devotion to a wounded God not excessive and even maudlin? And is the piety of the wounded Jesus not theologically naive and so enamored of Jesus' humanity as to have lost sight of his divinity?⁹

Two Themes: Jesus as Agent of Divine Love and Power of Human Transformation

In response to questions like these, I explore the religious integrity of the cultural environment behind this "gospel of gore" as a world where many medieval believers could experience authentic spiritual transformation and renewal. The first of the overarching claims informing my work, then, is that far from being the creation of excessive outpourings of untempered spirituality, the image of the suffering Jesus, present in the concrete, physical events from arrest to Crucifixion, functions as the primary scriptural symbol for conveying the depth of a merciful God's love for humankind. Jesus Christ's endurance of agony and death reveals a God of boundless love seeking to heal the breach between humanity and God. The Passion of the Christ who is willing to suffer on humanity's behalf offers a vivid narrative of divine mercy, a startling portrayal of God's love for humanity. To the medieval viewer and reader, the pathos of the First Person and the willingness of the Second Person of the Trinity to endure anguish, torture, and death testify to the immensity of divine love for humankind.

Two central claims about the significance of the suffering Jesus have emerged from my research. First, in response to historians like Jean Delumeau who focus on the late medieval depiction of a wrathful and judgmental God, I articulate how images that at first appear to be incongruent—the fear- and guilt-provoking God of justice, on the one hand, and the merciful and compassionate God of love, on the other—are, in fact, inseparably related to one another in medieval religious life and, even more important, are linked in a critical way in the figure of the suffering Jesus.¹⁰ To the medieval mind reflected in the texts discussed in this book, the search for the meaning of piety was an attempt to comprehend the mercy of the Divine manifest in the suffering of Jesus Christ. Why would a God of unsurpassable might, the source of all justice, become human in order to die on humanity's behalf? The dialectic of the mercy and justice of God has been a feature of Western religious thought and a topic of some controversy since soon after Jesus' death. The question of the nature of divine justice was critical in leading the twelfth-century Anselm of Canterbury to articulate the "satisfaction theory" of the Atonement as an alternative to the traditional theological view which suggested that the tricking of the devil was at the center of Christ's work.¹¹ The late medieval English public theology of sermons, art, and drama was not overly concerned with exploring the justice of God (a variety of views about divine jus-

tice are reflected in the art and literature of late medieval England); rather, the authors and artists considered here are characterized by their desire to name, depict, and experience the awesome character of the Passion as an act of divine mercy directed toward humans.

Second, in contrast to historians like Johan Huizinga whose analyses of the *passio Christi* phenomena suggest that medieval piety centered almost exclusively (and even “excessively”) on the humanity of Jesus, I argue that consideration of medieval sources suggests that the concentration on Jesus’ suffering was consistently directed toward and complemented by an understanding of the divinity of Christ.¹² Far from signaling mere humanity, as it does for many contemporary viewers, the physicality of the wounded Jesus, presented with shocking palpability in medieval art and narratives, manifested the reality of divine presence in Jesus Christ and made tangible the doctrinal claim that the Divine became human. In this vein, I illustrate how some of the common iconographic details of late medieval Crucifixion scenes (the depiction of the chalice beneath Jesus’ feet into which his blood pours or the cross as the tree of life) manifest an integral focus on the divinity of Jesus in depictions of his suffering and death. I demonstrate the theological sophistication of the God of medieval popular culture and counter the claims of historians like Aron Gurevich who point to the “qualitative distinction” between the “bread of theologians” and the “crumbs of folk Christianity” in medieval literature and spirituality.¹³

The polymorphous evocation of the divine compassion manifested in the suffering Christ goes beyond a demonstration of God’s love, however. This leads to the second overarching theme in this book: the flooding of viewers’ senses with extravagant depictions of pain and anguish comprises an urgent appeal to the audience to respond to Jesus Christ’s expression of love. The significance of the suffering Jesus tradition in medieval piety is not its testimony to a declining culture but rather its dramatic witness to the depth of divine love for humanity and, inseparable from this, its significant role in evoking a *response* of love on the part of humans.

Two themes emerge in my analysis of the medieval response to the suffering Jesus. First, in the dynamics of appeal, the physicality of Christ is central to the rhetoric of transformation generated by the bleeding figure of Christ. Christ’s wounds and anguish are magnified in order to evoke the believer’s compassionate response to the agonies he endures. Empathetic reflection was a cornerstone of medieval religious life: in sermons, drama, art, and literature, the suffering Jesus invited medieval Christians to remember actively the events of his death, to enter into the events, and to weep and mourn at his suffering along with and in imitation of his first-century followers. While historians like Thomas Tentler have recognized the importance of the believer’s sorrow in the process of healing in the late medieval sacramental system, I call attention to the integral place of the suffering Christ in *evoking* that curative sorrow.¹⁴ So, for example, recollections

of Jesus' Passion highlight his suffering and indicate that he suffered not only because he was in physical pain but also because he grieved when he saw Mary's sorrow as she witnessed his agony. Authentic and Christ-inspired sorrow thus functions in medieval texts to betoken the believers' acceptance of the divine offer of mercy; the insincere or misdirected expression of sorrow, as depicted by the antagonists in the martyrs' narratives discussed in chapter 4, marks their refusal to respond to divine mercy and signals their subsequent condemnation by God.

Sorrowful compassion awakens believers to their own complicity in the sins for which Christ suffers; encountering the bodily presence of the bleeding and tormented Savior jars believers into attending to this relationship. In the personal encounter with the Divine Other, bleeding wounds make tangible the sin-based alienation of the human from the Divine. In one narrative, which I consider in chapter 1, Mary appears to sinners who have sworn oaths by Christ's Passion, arms, side, and bleeding wounds. She holds the bloody Christ child in her lap and accuses the oath-takers of "dismembering" her son. Recognizing and acknowledging their own implication in the sin for which Christ suffers leads believers to confession. Through confession, humans are reconciled with the Divine and, as some texts suggest, become even closer to God than they would have been had they not sinned.

This leads to the second theme. In the late medieval English context, devotion to the suffering Jesus did not inculcate an individualistic private piety; rather, love of God and love of neighbor were understood as being intimately related. The believers' alliance of compassion with Jesus enabled them to perceive Jesus in other humans. Christ-identified compassion thus becomes the basis for the transformation of the social world into one in which believers, in imitation of the merciful Jesus, learn to extend Christ's mercy to their neighbors. Alliance with Jesus refigured the world as a cosmos infused with the presence of the suffering Jesus, so that, modeling themselves upon Jesus, believers acted with mercy to alleviate the suffering in their own communities. The suffering Jesus functioned to inculcate common social practices such as confession and works of mercy (feeding the hungry and providing shelter for the poor), practices which contributed to the cohesion of medieval society. Thus in construals of the Last Judgment, persons are judged according to whether they saw Christ in their needy neighbors and responded with the compassion evoked by meditation on the suffering Christ.

In late medieval English Christianity, the figure of the suffering Jesus functioned to promote a conservative and ecclesiastically based social cohesion (in part through the association of Christ with the sacramental system and with the wider social system of good works). In the materials considered in this book, for the most part, the figure of the suffering Jesus is not allied with any widespread movements to subvert the medieval social order; yet, within an ecclesiastical setting, and especially in the narratives of holy people, including holy women, the

figure of the suffering Christ does function to empower individuals to stand over and against society, both as God's representatives to others and as advocates for humans before God.¹⁵ My findings, then, corroborate and advance the work of medievalists such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Richard Kieckhefer who have noted the prevalence of suffering in medieval texts but have not always been explicit in developing the theological and social implications of this theme.¹⁶

This project is an exercise in cultural and religious history. By systematically analyzing the now disparate but plentiful data that sheds light on the theme, in England, of the suffering Jesus, this project contributes to the history of medieval religion, which has long noted the dramatic presence of the wounded Christ in the late medieval world but has not satisfactorily accounted for the religious meaning and function of this phenomenon. Since this christological focus of piety is not unique to England, my exploration of its significance in the geographically and chronologically unified England of 1250–1450 will contribute methodology, data, and theory to the study of the suffering Christ theme in other areas of medieval Europe. This project also contributes to the work of historians and scholars of religion who maintain that in order to understand the religious sensibilities of a historical era, we must find ways of gaining access to the lived religion of the people.¹⁷ My method in approaching the suffering Christ theme through sermons, drama, church decorations, hagiographic narratives, and spiritual treatises calls attention to the resources that illuminate medieval practice and belief and contributes to our understanding of the intersections between medieval theology and medieval piety.

The questions of the provenance and secondary interpretations of these narratives and works of art in the history of Western culture are important questions, but they are not the questions addressed in this book. I am interested, rather, in the study of these media from the perspective of a late medieval "aesthetics of response," so to speak. That is, I am interested in interrogating the literary and religious *meaning* and *function* of these texts within the popular culture of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England—whatever might be the historical origins before or the readings of these texts after my frame of reference in the late Middle Ages. To study the function of these texts and artifacts in their late medieval contexts is not the same, however, as arguing that we can re-create the inner thoughts and consciousness of medieval readers and viewers. Instead, it suggests that we can roughly interpret the mediated sensibilities of an age in which gory figurations of the suffering Jesus—refracted through the media of sermons, drama, spiritual guidance literature, and art—commanded the hearts and minds of an entire culture. I do not think that it is possible to excavate an author's or creator's original intentions in producing a particular work. I do think, however, that the historian can make informed judgments about the meaning of particular images and themes by studying the culturally embedded significations projected by the works in question. In other words, I focus on how this material functioned in late medi-

eval culture by interpreting the meaning of the available artifacts in light of my own methodological questions and presuppositions. When one looks at a culture like that of late medieval England, one can identify, almost like a gestalt, certain “patterns” or “configurations” in which particular images meaningfully appear and reappear. In analyzing these patterns of appearance, the historian can make fundamental claims about how these configurations of meaning functioned to shape and define the spiritual ethos of a culture.

Overview of the Project

In chapters 1 through 4, I provide a general analysis of the religious meaning of the suffering Jesus in English narrative and artistic depictions. The first section of chapter 1 considers the meaning of the Passion of Christ conveyed to medieval audiences through popular spiritual guides and a variety of homily collections designed for preaching to lay audiences. I explore the manner in which the wounded Jesus advocated on behalf of humans to the Divine and also sought to evoke a spiritual transformation in the witnesses to his life and Passion. I draw on medieval exempla, the tales preachers used to illustrate their sermons. Although these are stock tales, centuries old in some cases, my concern is not with their origins but with how they function in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sermons to concretize the relationship between the medieval Christian and the suffering Savior. I ask how they portray the Divine and the divine offer of mercy and how they seek to stir a response on the part of the audience. Sermons and spiritual guidance texts portray the suffering Christ as God’s loving offer of mercy to a fallen and sinful humankind. Christ appeals to people to respond to the divine offer of mercy.

In keeping with the observations of the first section, the second section of chapter 1 is a theological exploration of how medieval Christians’ own identification with the suffering Christ functioned to transform and deepen believers’ relationships to God and to the world. I consider the works of two spiritual guides, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, and consider three common types of Christ-identified suffering which emerge in the lives of individual believers: suffering borne of contrition, compassion, and longing. Reflection on the Passion of Jesus does not lead to the pursuit of suffering for its own sake, but rather it is a medium for experiencing the presence of suffering in the lives of Christ’s disciples during the believer’s spiritual journey toward love of God. Julian and Margery depict a Christian life-journey directed toward an experiential love and knowledge of God. Pain functions in these texts as a part of the process of identification with Christ as the person advances in relationship to the Divine and learns to perceive God as Love.

Why did religious figures like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich seek to imitate the suffering of Jesus? The answer lies in one of the underlying tenets of

fourteenth- and fifteenth-century spirituality; namely, that one understands through experience. Comprehension at an intellectual level is superseded by a deeper level of affective understanding through experiencing or feeling. Along with this notion went the conviction that the praxis of imitation provided one of the best ways to understand the world through experience. Many medieval religious figures, both men and women, set out to refigure mimetically in their own lives the Christ who redeemed them from sin and made God present to them. The life of imitation took many forms, from the Dominicans' and Franciscans' imitation of Christ's peripatetic life; to the ethical imitation of Christ characteristic of spiritual leaders like the fourteenth-century Walter Hilton, who taught his readers to model their religious lives on Christ's example of charity; to the more dramatic imitative actions of religious figures such as Mary of Oignies and Heinrich Suso, who marked their own bodies with the stigmata and signs of Christ's suffering. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, writers often expressed a strong desire (some might say obsession) to share in the sufferings of Christ. Through christological role-playing, histrionic displays of grief, and even self-mutilation, medieval imitators of the Passion reenacted the events surrounding Jesus' suffering and explicitly linked themselves with Christ's salvific work. In a worldview that connected the suffering Jesus with the work of Christ in the world, modeling themselves after Christ provided a way for believers to change their own, and others', spiritual demeanor. The imitators of Christ could learn to act in the world as Christ did. I will suggest that by imitating Christ believers could understand something of who Jesus Christ was as both human and divine. I take this view to be at the heart of the pervasive references to Jesus' Passion in the late Middle Ages: identification through suffering with Jesus' humanity leads to an experiential understanding of his divinity.

Although this book is primarily a study of written texts, chapter 2, in keeping with Barbara Raw's recent work on Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion iconography, demonstrates the significant connections between artistic and literary sources in medieval culture.¹⁸ Arguing that a successful analysis of Middle English piety must also be attentive to the visual arts (certainly one of the most powerful conveyers of medieval religious belief), I analyze illuminations in Psalters and Books of Hours as well as selected wall paintings to explore the meanings and contexts of representative examples of artistic depictions of the suffering Jesus.

Artistic depictions of the Passion of Jesus in Psalters and Books of Hours visually refigure the world so that time reveals its "truest" meaning as an ongoing commemoration of the merciful work of Jesus Christ on behalf of humanity. This liturgical transformation of temporality links the present with the past by naming the present as the time for recollecting the events of Jesus' life and death; it also links the present and past with the future as the time of the coming to fruition of the Passion of Christ. Contemporary temporal existence, therefore, is charged with sacred purpose because it has the potential for serving as a living

reenactment of the “hours” of Christ’s Passion and death and of their ongoing meaning. Consideration of church wall paintings further illustrates how the recollection of the Passion of Christ also transformed space by consecrating churches into places of remembrance of the suffering and death of Jesus. Transformed by art, space and time bring salvation history into the present, and viewers are invited to participate in the events depicted in the paintings and illuminations.

Among the many meanings of the Crucifixion, I highlight three aspects of Crucifixion iconography. First, I consider the link between the Crucifixion and the Hebrew Scripture tradition of sacrifice to explain the work of Christ on behalf of humanity and the association of the crucified Christ with the Eucharist. I draw attention to a sample of artistic renderings of the Crucifixion, the wounds of Jesus, and the instruments of torture to exemplify the iconographic details that demonstrate the understanding of the divinity of Jesus Christ which is at the heart of the meaning of Jesus’ death for medieval Christians. Second, I consider the role of the suffering Jesus as the divine source of spiritual food for humanity. Images in which disciples such as Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea drink the blood of the crucified Christ depict the life-giving power of Christ feeding his followers and make visible the nurturing transformation of humanity by the suffering divine body. The cross-gendering of Jesus so prevalent in medieval literature—Jesus as Mother who feeds the world with his/her body—is also reflected in medieval art in which the Jesus whose blood nourishes the world has clear iconographic parallels with the nursing Mary whose milk feeds Jesus.¹⁹ The third category I discuss is central to medieval English literature and art: Jesus as healer. As explained by the fourteenth-century Augustinian canon, Walter Hilton, among others, the name “Jesus” means “healer” in Middle English.²⁰ The healing of the blind Longinus who spears Jesus in the chest and then is cured as Christ’s blood falls into his eyes parallels the allegorical healing which reflection on the suffering Jesus affords to Christian believers. In reading and praying, believers were taught by the christological art that surrounded them to recognize Jesus as divine sacrifice, as nurturer, and as healer.

Chapter 3 considers liturgical drama, including the York and N-Town mystery plays, and demonstrates that in liturgical drama the words and actions of the suffering Jesus, literally and typologically portrayed, constitute a rhetoric of persuasion, appealing to the audience to respond with repentance and gratitude for Christ’s reconciliation of God’s justice with God’s mercy. Through an elaborate interweaving of scenes prefiguring Christ’s Passion—in which religious figures prophesy it, events record it, and characters recollect it—the audience’s attention is focused on the suffering Jesus. Thus, viewers are taught the “spiritual grammar,” as it were, fundamental to the teachings of English religious leaders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the social context of ritual celebration in which the performers enter into and are transformed by the world they depict, the audience is invited to inhabit the cosmos created by the plays. In

compassionate response to the agony of the suffering Jesus to which all the dramas point, the audience becomes part of the transformation enacted therein. The performances engender the very spiritual world they depict by providing living models for how the audience is to respond to the christological actions they reenact.

In particular, the plays promote the sacraments of baptism, Eucharist, and confession as critical to the spiritual health of Christians. The words and actions of the medieval plays are not solely etiological stories; they also teach audiences how to comport themselves in the present to prepare for receiving the sacraments. For the most part, I understand the mystery plays as extensions of the educational mission of the more progressive clerics of late medieval England.²¹ The plays are not primarily subversions of spiritual practices and goals of the church hierarchy. On the contrary, the plays promote the sacramental system that in turn guaranteed the place of the priestly class in medieval society. The sacrament of confession was, in the words of Thomas Tentler, “a comprehensive and organized system of social control” whose goal was to “make people obey not only men, but morality and law.”²² The religiosity reflected in liturgical drama is a social phenomenon in which society is refigured as a manifestation of divine presence, and individuals are invited to be part of the orderly transformation of place and time into a sacred world. Throughout the book, I will note that the same vision of reality unfolds again and again in art, drama, and sermons and that viewers are invited to inhabit the sacred cosmos created by the ways of living described in these different media.

Chapter 4 develops my analysis of the “literature of response” to the Passion of Christ by examining the gender-identified public responses of female spiritual leaders to the suffering Jesus. In considering the Middle English versions of the lives of four holy women—St. Katherine of Alexandria, St. Margaret of Antioch, Elizabeth of Spalbeek, and Margery Kempe—I explore the ways in which the female body becomes a literary figure for mediating Christ to the world in medieval spiritual literature. These women carry on the work of Christ by graphically imprinting Christ’s pain on their own flesh through the willing endurance of torture (as in the cases of Margaret of Antioch and Katherine of Alexandria), through self-beating and self-mutilation (as in the narrative of Elizabeth of Spalbeek), and through weeping and shouting as they take Christ’s suffering into themselves (as in the life of Margery Kempe). These mimetic exercises link the female body with the Divine so intimately that these women become conduits of divine power and advocates on behalf of humans to the Divine. The stories of Katherine, Margaret, Elizabeth, and Margery testify to these holy women’s tenacious physical identification with the suffering Christ; in and through their suffering in solidarity with Christ, medieval holy women become identified with him so closely that they become brokers of the spiritual power that inheres in

Jesus himself. Through their suffering, holy women become like Jesus: purveyors of divine power who act on humanity's behalf.

In connection with this, the concluding section of chapter 4 considers the public work of Margery Kempe as a way to explore how she "becomes" Christ to the world. I point in particular to the vast power wielded by figures like Margery Kempe who claim to influence the status of hundreds of thousands of souls in purgatory. Lest this sound excessive, I suggest that this extravagance is not uncommon in texts about women and reveals something of the public domain of women's spiritual power. While the saying of masses was a common priestly and thus male practice, weeping and praying on behalf of the world in association with the suffering Jesus constitute an analogous and largely female form of spiritual influence. Like the Margaret and Katherine of the martyr narratives, and like Philip of Clairvaux's Elizabeth of Spalbeek, Margery Kempe is both an agent of spiritual transformation for the faithful in this life and an advocate for divine mercy for souls in the next.

A Christ-Centered Culture?

In words which apply to art, drama, and devotional literature, the fourteenth-century English preacher John Waldeby described the goal of preaching as "not only to stir the intelligence towards what is true by means of the inevitable conclusions of arguments but also, by means of narrative and likely persuasion, to stir the emotions to piety."²³ This study of the Passion of Christ, one of the most emotional and theological of focal concerns within medieval piety and preaching, opens a window onto the religious sensibilities of late medieval England. As a historical pastiche, this book is a selectively representative portrait of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century milieu and seeks to illuminate the religious world of late medieval England.

In this world, suffering is transformed from being a sign of powerless victimization to becoming the central signifier of the presence of a loving and merciful God who acts on behalf of humans. The suffering of Christ is not simply a historical event, completed at some point in the past. Rather, in the medieval world, the Crucifixion is ongoing as it is reenacted in the Mass, in liturgical drama, and in the minds and bodies of people who meditate on it. Viewers and readers learn to respond to the Passion of Christ as a present event. They are encouraged to cultivate a relationship of personal connection with the suffering Christ, so that the motivation for the sinner's reformation is friendship and alliance with the Crucified One and not just fear of damnation. A perception of humanity's deep need for mercy and a fascination with the visage of divine mercy pervade late medieval English spiritual life. The Passion of Jesus points to the re-creation of the universe as God's space, in which the merciful action of Jesus Christ pro-

vokes viewers of his life and death to imitate his mercy through their own interactions with their neighbors. In addition to fostering social uniformity in a world dominated by the church, the suffering Jesus image also empowered believers to undertake the radical, controversial, and dramatic action of calling people to recognize their own need for mercy and spiritual transformation.

All of this is not to suggest, of course, that the Christian society of late medieval England was a completely cohesive world of spiritually aware and engaged religious practitioners. Tens of thousands of petty larcenies and assaults were committed in England each year; robbery, fraud, forgery, and violent bloodshed abounded.²⁴ We have only to recall Margery Kempe's rebuke of the archbishop of York for his wickedness²⁵ and Chaucer's tales of carpenters and prelates irreverently swearing by Christ's wounds, his heart, his blood, his arms, and his feet to recognize how broken was the world in which these texts were embedded. This literature and art emerged in a world that its authors and creators deemed to be in desperate need of transformation. In this book, I explore how this image of the Passion of Jesus functioned to preach change and consolation to a sinful and suffering world.