

Introduction: Reading sacred space in late medieval England

In the anonymous fifteenth-century continuation of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* known as *The Canterbury Interlude and the Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, the pilgrims finally arrive at the sacred destination of their pilgrimage, Canterbury Cathedral, their terrestrial Jerusalem (Figure 1). The Knight and his companions make for the shrine of St Thomas Becket but the Pardoner, the Miller, and the Host linger in the nave and look around them in wonder at the architecture and the stained glass:

The Pardoner and the Miller and other lewde sotes
Sought hemselff in the chirch, right as lewd gotes,
Pyred fast and poured highe oppon the glase,
Counterfeting gentilmen, the armes for to blase,
Diskyveryng fast the peyntour, and for the story mourned
And ared also – right as rammes horned!
'He bereth a balstaff,' quod the toon, 'and els a rakes ende'.
'Thow faillest,' quod the Miller, 'thowe hast nat wel thy mynde.
It is a spere, yf thowe canst se, with a prik tofore
To bussh adown his enmy and thurh the sholder bore.'
'Pese!' quod the Hoost of Southwork. 'Let stond the wyndow glased.
Goth up and doth your offerynge. Ye semeth half amased'.¹

The Pardoner and his companions gaze 'half amased' upon the stained glass and, perhaps unsurprisingly given their status as the 'lewdest' pilgrims on the road to Canterbury, they are unsuccessful in deciphering the iconography. But crucially, they do try. Even men in a state of sin are conditioned by their pastoral instruction to read the stained glass and to interpret the architecture and symbols that surround them when they enter the medieval cathedral. The church building is at the heart of lay piety and it is a space so marvellous, sacred, and laden with symbolism that even these Canterbury pilgrims cannot help but engage with it and respond.



1 Canterbury Cathedral.

This book is an investigation of the churches of late medieval England. How they were read, constructed, and contested by their communities and how their most important characteristic – their sanctity – was manifested and understood. It is an attempt to stand in the church, as the Canterbury pilgrims did, and by bringing together textual, visual, and material culture, to show how the laity were not only taught to view the church as a sacred space but to contribute to the production of that sanctity. The pilgrims' experiences in the cathedral and at the shrine of Thomas Becket provide a starting point for developing a reading of sacred space that foregrounds the role of lay practice and that is alert to the social and cultural contexts in which sacred space was operating and the debates in which it was entangled. Paul Strohm argues that

‘the peculiarity of medieval space involves the extent to which it is already symbolically organised by the meaning-making activities of the many generations that have traversed it’.² Consecrated by a ceremony that builds scriptural quotation, liturgical ritual, and communal participation into the very foundations of the building, the church as sacred space is a prime example of a material building and spiritual concept that is already densely laden with meaning. The church was the house of God on earth but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries this identity was under considerable scrutiny. Groups such as the Lollards asked whether the church community was better off without the church building, that ornamented distraction grown rich in visual decorations at the expense of the poor and needy. But the legacy of the pastoral care reforms of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 saw the church building reinvigorated as a space of teaching and edification. Stained glass windows and wall paintings of pastoral schema such as the Seven Works of Mercy or the Warning against Gossip helped the laity not only to control their behaviour but also to preserve the sanctity of the church by guarding against desecration. Furthermore, increased competition among the parish churches, cathedrals, and pilgrimage sites of medieval England meant that sanctity was increasingly valuable as a form of symbolic capital that could improve a church’s social as well as sacred status in the world.

Sacred spaces such as Canterbury Cathedral were a multimedia project and a community concern. They were constructed out of a fusion of architecture, iconography, material culture, and narrative practice. Master builders and artists worked together to create sacred spaces from stone, stained glass and sculpture, and writers and preachers turned to churches, shrines, and miracle sites as symbols of community, places of spiritual edification, and above all, as God’s house on earth. This study will bring cultural practices such as preaching, liturgical rituals such as church consecration, the visual arts, and the textual record into conversation with modern theoretical approaches, from theories of space and place to ideas of performance, in order to ask the question, as Mary Carruthers suggests, not only ‘what does it mean’ but ‘what is it good for?’³ Sacred spaces were constructed in stone, art, language, and embodied performance in order to glorify God and provide a place for worship, but they were also used to edify communities, negotiate social tensions, and debate theological issues. Sacred space was a key tool for medieval communities to represent, understand, and interact with the world around them.

My reading of the church as sacred space demands an interdisciplinary approach and I will have recourse to research from literary studies, history, art history, and a range of theoretical works throughout this book. In the last two decades scholars have increasingly turned to space as a topic for textual analysis and recent work in medieval studies by Keith Lilley, Robert Barrett Jr., and Catherine Clarke's *Mapping Medieval Chester* project team has sought to integrate textual constructions of space with related practices in other media, from maps and buildings to processions and performances.⁴ Such approaches ask questions not only about the ways in which medieval communities conceived of and represented the space around them but also how that space was lived and practised, and how it participated in the formation of communal identity. The church as sacred space in particular invites such a methodology, as performance and practice are at the core of sacred space from its inception in the consecration ceremony.

Since Paul Strohm's *Theory and the Premodern Text* in 2000, theoretical approaches to medieval texts have flourished. In the introduction to the 2013 *Handbook of Middle English Studies*, in which scholars brought a range of theories to bear upon literary texts, Marion Turner comments that 'Aristotle, Augustine, and Dante are theorists just as much as Derrida, Foucault, and Žižek. Theory helps us to open texts up and allow them to speak to us.'⁵ The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts that are my focus in this book are just as theoretical as their modern counterparts. From allegorical readings of church architecture to foundation legends, exempla warning against sacrilege to treatises on the relationship between the material and spiritual church, the medieval writers under discussion are themselves asking theoretical questions. What does the church symbolise, how is sanctity produced and maintained, what is sacrilege, how should we read the painted church? Michel Foucault described the Middle Ages as a space of 'emplacement', foregrounding the 'hierarchic ensemble of places' such as sacred and profane, celestial and terrestrial.⁶ In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argued that the Middle Ages is 'inhabited, haunted by the church' and he asks 'what would remain of the Church if there were no churches?'⁷ This is precisely the question that arises in Middle English debates on the material church in the light of Lollard concerns. How important was the building to the idea of the church? Both medieval and modern texts share an interest in exploring such theoretical issues as the relationship between building and concept, the production of space, and models of

spatial hierarchy. Turner concludes that ‘theory, in productive relationship with texts, can act as a catalyst, enabling dynamic reading experiences’.⁸ To encounter the sacred space of the church in the Middle Ages was a dynamic experience and by drawing upon modern theorists who share a focus on practice, production, and a synthesis between material and intellectual framings of space, I propose a new way of reading and understanding the medieval church in the modern world.

The dynamism of sacred space can be clearly seen in the depiction of the restoration of St Paul’s Cathedral in the Middle English miracle narrative *St Erkenwald*:

Mony a mery mason was made þer to wyrke,
 Harde stones for to hewe wyt eggit toles,
 Mony a grubber in grete þe grounde for to seche
 þat þe fundement on fyrst shuld þe fote halde.
 And as þai makkyde and mynyde a meruayle þai founden
 As 3et in crafty cronecles is kydde þe memorie.⁹

Here the construction of sacred space is depicted as skilled and joyful physical labour. Merry masons chisel at the stone with specialist tools, men dig deep into the ground to locate the foundations, and as they ‘make’ and ‘mine’ they discover a marvel: the uncorrupted body of a pagan judge who speaks to the bishop and the people about his plight as a righteous heathen. This moment in *St Erkenwald* figures the restoration of the church as an energetic and industrious process involving individuals whose collective effort and creativity unearths a marvel in their shared history. The late Middle Ages saw considerable rebuilding work being undertaken in churches and cathedrals across England as communities sought not only to maintain and repair but also to enlarge and elaborate upon their buildings, adding spires or extending porches, installing stained glass windows and populating the nave with devotional images. Sacred space was often a building site and as such occupied a prominent place in the public consciousness as medieval communities came into close contact with the material fabric of their buildings. And at such moments, they looked to their shared sacred history for support and encouragement. Miracles remembered in ‘crafty cronecles’, such as the one in *St Erkenwald*, were a powerful incentive for communities to honour their sacred spaces. *St Erkenwald*’s use of the alliterative ‘makkyde and mynyde’ alerts us to the productive relationship between textual and material creation; the Middle

English verb ‘to make’ is used both of material construction and poetic composition.¹⁰ *St Erkenwald* not only records the miraculous, it re-enacts it and brings it to life in the contemporary world. As Sari Katajala-Pelltomaa argues, ‘the recollection of miracles can be seen as an interaction with the sacred’ that strengthens and renews the original moment of sanctity.¹¹ Such interactions are especially beneficial when a community is rebuilding or restoring its church, as we shall see in *The Book of the Foundation of St Bartholomew’s Church* in Chapter 2 of this book.

A truly sacred space, however, relies upon the presence of God as well as human endeavour. In *St Erkenwald*, the miracle of the uncorrupted body and the subsequent miraculous baptism of the pagan judge made God’s presence known; at Canterbury Cathedral, it was the miracles of St Thomas Becket. Sacred space is often manifested in the form of miracles, instances of God’s supernatural works and intervention in the world. In *The Sacred and Profane*, a study that forms the foundation of my discussion of sanctity in this book, the historian of religion Mircea Eliade argues that in order to be made visible and to operate in the world, sanctity must be made manifest.¹² God’s presence is, of course, ubiquitous but a sacred space represents an intensification of that presence, a space in which God is experienced directly through supernatural events or visions. Eliade calls such a manifestation a ‘hierophany’, which he defines as ‘an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching the territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different’.¹³ A miracle creates a sacred space by marking out the place in which it occurs as ‘qualitatively different’ to the quotidian space that surrounds it, and such miracles can occur as freely in urban space – in city streets and domestic dwellings – as in ritually consecrated spaces such as the church. My focus in this book is on sacred space because while the church is the cornerstone of the medieval concept of sacred space, sacred outposts can emerge elsewhere as a result of miracles associated with the church. Any space can become sacred if God manifests his power and presence there and, conversely, a consecrated space such as a parish church can become transformed into a profane space if its sanctity is desecrated by sinful behaviour.

Sanctity is not confined to a single place, building, or geographical location – it is fundamentally spacious. As God’s house on earth, the church operates as a crucial centre of sanctity but its material objects can travel into the surrounding space and create spaces that are sanctified by association and that reinforce the original source

of sanctity by being a site of further miracles. A consecrated host might calm a storm at sea; the sounds of church bells might free a man from prison. Miracles can occur on a pilgrimage route or at a natural spring or well.¹⁴ Even prayers to the saint of a particular church can be efficacious as mentally imagining the space allows devotees to gain access to its sanctity even at a spatial remove. Sacred space is fluid, contagious, and unconstrained by material boundaries. It is flexible, adaptable, and manifests itself in a range of forms and environments.

The characteristic that all sacred spaces share, however, is their intense potency and their ability to organise and redraw the map of the surrounding space. Sacred spaces are magnetic and attractive, and as Eliade argues, they become ‘an absolute fixed point, a centre’ of orientation.¹⁵ The parish church is one such centre in the local environment and many of the texts under discussion in this book aim to promote and preserve that centrality. When a sacred space is created through miracles, however, a new topography is established as communities gather and regroup around the miracle site, going on pilgrimage to venerate the space and realigning their sacred map to accommodate the new site. Canterbury Cathedral, the ‘absolute fixed point’ in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and its continuations, was the most popular pilgrimage destination in medieval England and it formed the centre of the sacred map of the country, rather like Jerusalem in medieval *mappa mundi*. Canterbury’s centrality in medieval literature and culture makes it a perfect test case for examining how sacred space operates in late medieval England. How might *The Canterbury Interlude*’s recognisable cast of Chaucerian characters read the space and how might they produce, or destabilise, its sanctity?

The Canterbury Interlude: Chaucer’s pilgrims in sacred space

The Canterbury Interlude and the Merchant’s Tale of Beryn is found in a copy of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* known as MS Northumberland 455. The manuscript dates from 1450–70 but the text was composed as much as half a century earlier, perhaps to coincide with the 1420 jubilee of Thomas Becket’s martyrdom.¹⁶ The text is anonymous but a Latin couplet at the end of the ‘Tale of Beryn’ attributes the text to a ‘son of the church of St Thomas’ (*Filius ecclesie Thome*, 4024). This, coupled with additional evidence, suggests that the author might have been a monk at the cathedral with responsibilities for Becket’s shrine.¹⁷ The *Interlude* depicts the

pilgrims' arrival in Canterbury, their stay at a pilgrimage hostel called the Checker of the Hoop, and culminates in the fabliau adventures of the Pardoner with Kit the Tapster. Crucially, the text also depicts the pilgrims' experiences in the cathedral (Figure 1) and it gives an insight into the significant urban spaces of the city, such as the city walls. The *Interlude* has most often been analysed by literary critics in terms of its Chaucerian indebtedness but more recently Robert Sturges has argued that rather than assessing the *Interlude*-author as a reader of Chaucer, we should instead examine 'how its author uses Chaucer to serve his contemporary ends' and 'how adaptable Chaucer is to the needs of a later poet concerned with his own cultural circumstances'.¹⁸ For Sturges, the *Interlude* exhibits class and gender anxieties which are played out in the urban space of the city. I would argue that the text also manifests late medieval anxieties surrounding the use and meaning of church buildings and how the laity ought to understand and interact with their sacred confines. The episode has frequently been discussed by art historians as part of the textual evidence for medieval attitudes to the visual arts, attitudes that, as T. A. Heslop puts it, are full of 'ambivalence and contradiction'.¹⁹ Here I want to explore the text's dramatisation of lay engagement with church art and with devotional practice at the sacred destination of their pilgrimage, the shrine of Becket. The *Interlude* marshals a familiar group of characters, about whom the reader shares certain expectations, in order to play into, challenge, and frustrate late medieval approaches to sacred space and its visual codes. Sanctity, as I will argue throughout this book, is dependent upon lay practice for its production and maintenance and in the *Interlude* we are given an opportunity to see that practice in action, and the consequences for sacred space when it is carried out by less than ideal participants.

When the Miller and his companions enter the cathedral and look at the stained glass, they engage in a fourfold process of interpretation that pays very careful attention to its visual codes. To return to the quotation with which I began:

The Pardoner and the Miller and other lewde sotes
 Sought hemselff in the chirch, right as lewd gotes,
 Pyred fast and poured highe oppon the glase,
 Counterfeting gentilmen, the armes for to blase,
 Diskyveryng fast the peyntour, and for the story mourned
 And ared also – right as rammes horned!
 'He bereth a balstaff,' quod the toon, 'and els a rakes ende'.
 'Thow faillest,' quod the Miller, 'thowe hast nat wel thy mynde.

It is a spere, yf thowe canst se, with a prik tofore
 To bussh adown his enmy and thurh the sholder bore.
 'Pese!' quod the Hoost of Southwork. 'Let stond the wyndow glosed.
 Goth up and doth your offerynge. Ye semeth half amased.' (147–58)

Firstly, they focus on the visual iconography. They look intently and with purpose ('pyred' and 'poured') in order to discover what the image represents ('diskyveryng fast the peyntour'). Then they 'mourn' (meditate or consider) the 'story' within which the image operates, 'ared' (interpret) the meaning of the image, and finally debate among themselves as to their conclusions. Although the pilgrims are ultimately unsuccessful in their interpretation, as I will discuss further below, their reading practice is systematic and thorough. Indeed, it mirrors the model proposed in the fifteenth-century treatise on the Decalogue, *Dives and Pauper*, in response to Dives' question, 'how shulde I rede in þe book of peynture and of ymagerye?'²⁰ Phrased in terms of the popular trope that imagery is the book of the laity, Pauper's initial response is to offer an interpretation of the primary Christian symbol, the cross. He urges Dives repeatedly to 'take heid' of different aspects of the image and its meaning: 'take heid' of the crown of thorns and the shedding of Christ's blood 'for to dystroyze þe heye synne of pryde'; 'take heid' how Christ's hands are nailed to the cross to 'dystroyze þe synne þat Adam and Eue dedyn wyt here hondys' when they took the apple; and so on (p. 83). Leaving aside for a moment that Pauper's example focuses on a purely religious symbol, the *Interlude* pilgrims do 'take heid' of the stained glass and they do try to identify the particular elements of the scene in front of them. Pauper tells Dives that imagery 'sumwhat betokenyzt in special, sumqhat in comoun and in general' and he explains that 'in special tokene', for example, the Virgin is depicted with a child in her left arm 'in tokene' that she is the mother of God and with a lily or a rose in her right hand 'in tokene' that she is a virgin and the flower of all women (p. 91). The saints, too, have their special symbols: St Peter and his keys, St Paul and his sword, St Katherine and her wheel, St Margaret and her cross and dragon (pp. 91–3). These attributes not only have symbolic meaning – St Peter was given the keys to heaven by Christ, for example – but they also function as cues for narrative recollection. The image of St Margaret reminds the viewer that 'qhanne þe dragoun deuowryd here she blissyd here & be vertue of þe cros þe foul dragoun brast and she cam out of hym heyl and hool' (p. 93). The *Interlude*-pilgrims rack their brains

for a narrative with which they can make sense of the Canterbury glass, reminding us that religious imagery often functions as an aid to remembrance rather than a tool for teaching something new.²¹ But at this stage of the process, the pilgrims falter and with no authority figure like Pauper to turn to, they begin to quarrel among themselves.

Having moved from the literal meaning to the narrative context, the pilgrims each arrive at an individual interpretation that is judged and negotiated through communal dialogue. This is crucial because reading imagery, and reading sacred space, is a communal and social practice. Each reading by a particular community of readers at a particular time generates its own interpretation, about which there might be dissent and disagreement. The verb of interpretation that the *Interlude*-author uses, 'ared', supports this density of meaning as the verb is used elsewhere in the text of the interpretation of dreams, another mode of representation with deeply symbolic significance that also requires a complex and layered reading process.²² Michael Camille argues for the similarity between the process of reading text and image, focusing on the role of performance and social dialogue:

Medieval readers also used books in the ways they used images; in groups, speaking the words out loud, referring back and forth, repeating, returning, even adding to or correcting the unframed continuity of the work. Perception was a performance.²³

The pilgrims' act of perception here is doubly performative as it is, of course, the narrative construction of the *Interlude*-author. The meaning of sacred space is encoded in the building and its decorations by the church hierarchy, of which the *Interlude*-author is most likely a member, but it is read and interpreted by social groups who may, in the case of the pilgrims, be without the mediating presence of a priest. This leaves the interpretative process dangerously open and unpoliced, and rather than the window contributing to the production of sacred space, it generates confusion and argument. While it is unlikely that the *Interlude*-author, as a Canterbury monk, would have any sympathy with the Lollard position on imagery, the text's dramatization of the pilgrims' misinterpretation does raise similar concerns about the efficacy of visual representation as a stand-alone teaching tool.²⁴

The pilgrims' disagreement in the *Interlude* centres upon the implement that the figure in the window is holding and it unsettles the easy equivalence between 'tokene' and narrative that Pauper

rehearsed. The relationship between sign and signified is not straightforward here:

'He bereth a balstaff,' quod the toon, 'and els a rakes ende.'
 'Thou faillest,' quod the Miller, 'thowe hast nat wel thy mynde.
 It is a spere, yf thowe canst se, with a prik tofore
 To bussh adown his enmy and thurh the sholder bore.' (153–6)

It is significant that the Miller is portrayed in debate with a nameless pilgrim here ('quod the toon') as it demonstrates that the cathedral is a space for all, not just the known. This nameless pilgrim suggests that the figure in the window is bearing a staff or rake but the Miller forcefully disagrees, proposing instead that the man carries a spear. John Bowers suggests that the image that might have provoked such controversy could be the twelfth-century panel from the Ancestors of Christ window, featuring Adam tilling the earth:

It would be appropriate if the image causing such confusion in interpretation – a man with a staff? or rake? or spear? – were the panel originally in the north window, opposite the main southwest entrance, showing Adam delving the earth since the Miller and his friends so clearly belong to the unregenerated class of the Old Adam.²⁵

The pilgrims' inability to recognise the image could be a sign of their sin and an indication to the reader that while they might be able to enter the symbolic Jerusalem on their terrestrial pilgrimage, the heavenly Jerusalem is currently out of reach. Madeline Caviness argues that many of the images in the cathedral, most notably the typological windows, are particularly challenging and that they were directed at the monks of the cathedral rather than the general populous. Many of the images are 'bookish and esoteric' and Caviness suggests that 'the typological windows were less a poor man's Bible than an elaborate display of twelfth-century theology which could only be fully understood by the literate'.²⁶ The ability to successfully read the visual codes of sacred space was determined in large part by education and literacy, and by the status of the particular foundation. Canterbury Cathedral served multiple purposes: it was part of the Benedictine monastery, the seat of the archbishop of Canterbury, and a major pilgrimage site, and as such its visual iconography was seen by multiple audiences. The Canterbury pilgrims may not have been the target audience for the typological windows and as such their inability to read the image is

understandable. When they reached Becket's shrine in the Trinity Chapel, however, they would have seen the miracle windows that depicted pilgrims just such as themselves, visiting the shrine and encountering the saint; images that were deliberately designed for their edification and to validate their journey to the shrine.

But as Helen Barr has recently pointed out, the 'identity of the stick-like object over which the pilgrims squabble is never revealed'.²⁷ Indeed, Barr asserts that it is not 'possible conclusively to identify the window in question':

There are numerous windows in Trinity Chapel which feature such an implement: either as a weapon, pilgrim staff or St Thomas's pastoral staff. With no localisation of the window, what the pilgrims see has the potential to figure an implement that has a range of significances from healing to injury across the whole social spectrum.²⁸

Without a clear referent for the window, although it is tempting for us to judge the pilgrims' reading practice as ineffectual, we cannot be sure on what grounds they are wrong. Their interpretation might also be affected not only by their location in the cathedral but by their spatial positioning. Michael Camille comments wryly that if the image is the figure of Adam from the twelfth-century *Ancestors of Christ*, the windows were 'far above them, both spatially and cognitively'.²⁹ The *Interlude*-author does note that they 'poured highe' upon the glass in order to see it and when the Miller disagrees with his fellow pilgrim's interpretation, he comments 'yf thowe canst se', which suggests that their confused interpretation could be a result of the window's location inhibiting a clear view of its iconography. Any analysis of sacred space should take account of its physical coordinates and be aware that the lived, practised experience of sacred space is shaped by the access that different groups have to the space, both physical and visual, but also in terms of social status and knowledge. On a basic level, the laity were excluded from the most sacred space of the church, the chancel, and their knowledge of religious narratives was to a large extent dependent upon the education they received from their parish priest. The *Interlude* makes the status of the Miller and his companions abundantly clear when he repeats the Middle English word for uneducated twice in the space of as many lines: 'The Pardoner and the Miller and other *lewde* sotes/Sought hemself in the chirch, right as *lewde* gotes' (147–8, italics mine). Lay education was a major concern following the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council, and in the third chapter of this book I will analyse the