Introduction: reformations of the image

Images and books have long been considered parallel modes of representation. Etymologically, "iconography" is to write with images. Classical authors and Renaissance poets alike appealed to and contested the Horatian literary formulation of *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting so is poetry). Throughout the Middle Ages, clerics often justified images as *libri laicorum*, or books for the laity. Early modern writers spoke of the sisterhood of the arts. And today we speak of "reading" images and of "visual literacy"; we ask our students to consider the imagery of poems; we may even utter the cliché that "a picture paints a thousand words." Yet our muddled metaphors speak both to the surface sameness of and the underlying tension between these two modes of signification: even as we equate the two media, we know that images are not books, that seeing is quite different from hearing. Just as deeply held as our analogical association of image and word is our understanding that we must differentiate between the two types of signs.[1] And indeed, attempts to understand the sometimes fraught sisterhood of visual and verbal signs have a long history. It is the purpose of this book to explore a set of English theorizations of this relationship in the fifteenth century.

Although religious images have never been without their critics, the end of the fourteenth century marked a significant shift in the language and audience of these critiques in England: for the first time, arguments against images were being put forth by lay men and women in the vernacular.[2] The Lollard support of vernacular religious texts and critique of images made what had hitherto been Latinate, academic debates accessible to lay audiences and recast the image/text relationship as one of competition rather than complement. Many of these writers suggested that if vernacular books were available to the increasingly literate laity, there would be little need for visual "books," which could be easily misconstrued and improperly venerated. Moreover, growing lay literacy and a religious atmosphere grounded in affective and incarnational theologies

exerted pressure on traditional justifications of images as *libri laicorum*. The convergence of these cultural changes and new ideas raised a host of questions: How are images different from words? What role would the image play in a society in which the word was the preferred or dominant mode of religious teaching? Would images in this society merely be superfluous? Which sorts of signs are easiest for a layperson to interpret?

Many clerics rushed to defend the use of images as substitutes for books, and a number of written apologetics for visual culture appeared in the opening decades of the fifteenth century in both Latin and English. One such defense is found in the early fifteenth-century catechetical dialogue, *Dives and Pauper*. When Dives inquires about the purposes of images, Pauper first answers:

> Þey seruyn of thre thyngys. For þey been ordeynyd to steryn manys mende to thynkyn of Cristys incarnacioun and of his passioun and of holye seyntys lyuys. Also þey been ordeynyd to steryn mannys affeccioun and his herte to deuocioun, for often man is more steryd be syghte þan be heryng or redyngge. Also þey been ordeynyd to been a tokene and a book to þe lewyd peple, þat þey moun redyn in ymagerye and peynture þat clerkys redyn in boke.[3]

As we will see, Pauper is parroting the most commonplace argument for image use in the period. More remarkable is Dives' subsequent question; he immediately asks about the last of these points: How do I read this book? That he poses the question (and will do so multiple times) suggests that the centuries-old defense of images as *libri laicorum* was no longer as transparent as the medieval church had assumed. Dives was not alone in raising this question; writings about image use in the following century attempt to answer it again and again.

This book takes up the question as well, examining the collaboration and competition between visual and verbal signs in the century or so between the Lollard critiques of images and the Protestant destruction of them, and asking how fifteenth-century writers responded to Dives' question. It is not my intent to chart a linear narrative from Lollard iconomachy to Protestant iconoclasm, nor from images to books as the preferred medium for lay education. The story is, of course, rather more complex and circuitous than such an account would allow. The multiplicity of voices and positions represented in the chapters that follow suggests that while many in the fifteenth-century church were committed to reforming the use of images, they do not speak in unison on this issue. My discussion focuses on late medieval England where the issues were most hotly debated, but many contemporary continental theologians also expressed concern about

the proliferation of cult images and their misuse by the laypeople, raising these issues at the Council of Constance in 1415–17.[4] Indeed, most of the texts I consider are written by clerics and reflect the English church's new commitment to the ecclesiastical reforms advocated by the Council and implemented in England under the archbishopric of Henry Chichele (1414–43).[5] The texts herein suggest that the fifteenth century was as much an age of religious reform as it was an age of regulation and that the religious image was an important subject of reformist interest.

The reader will likely soon notice that this is a book about "the image" without any images. This absence is quite intentional. First and foremost, this book examines *ideas* about the religious image – about its uses, abuses, potential, and problems – rather than images themselves. The writers I consider theorize the image in all its forms (textual, mental, physical), though most begin with the material, devotional object. Thus, throughout the book, I use the word "image" as expansively as many of these authors do, to evoke first the material images called into question by many Lollard writers, but also to acknowledge the chameleon quality of the image.[6] Second, the writers herein largely use words to frame, describe, and explain images – sometimes to the point of eliminating the need for the image at all. In other words, they translate, or re-form, visual *libri laicorum* into verbal ones. Although my discussion focuses on representations of the image, it is important that these re-presentations are also re-formations insofar as they first convert one form (the visual image) into another (the verbal image), and second, do so to reform (in the theological sense) perception of images with vernacular texts. In this book, I thus use the term quite literally: to reform is simply to form again. But it is also to renew, restore, or amend.[7] By modeling the appropriate uses of images in vernacular texts, the writers I consider seek to amend the image or at least its reception. They seek to reform both the image itself and the image's audience. Reform is always both theological and aesthetic.

If these fifteenth-century attempts to reform the image suggest renovation rather than demolition of the images they consider, the historical irony is that these texts are now largely imageless. Just as the walls of churches were whitewashed and covered over with verses of scripture in the sixteenth century, so too do many medieval images remain only in the words that circumscribe and describe them.[8] And, in conveying clerical debates about the image in *verbal* books for the laity, these considerations of the visual image both embody and obscure the conflict over the status of the vernacular text. They speak to the close relationship between images and texts but also the growing distance between them as pedagogical media.

The tension between religious images and texts, however, has been relatively neglected in scholarly discussion of late medieval piety, which has directed our attention largely to the essential parity or complementarities of visual and verbal signs.[9] Thus scholars often emphasize how late medieval image and text alike are characterized by what Gail Gibson has helpfully called the "incarnational aesthetic" of the period.[10] Much recent work on the period's vernacular theology has focused on the relationship between the vernacular and corporeal, radical, and affective forms of religious practice and understanding.[11] It thus emphasizes "the image and/or relic's power to move."[12] Because the heterodox critique of material signs and the privileging of the written word is frequently considered marginal to the general tenor of the period and therefore not a significant theological or aesthetic influence on late medieval religious writing, scholars have often approached late medieval vernacular texts and devotional images in this period as complementary forms, seeing both as indicative of the affectivity and corporeality of this governing aesthetic.

This book builds on but ultimately diverges from this recent work and suggests that much fifteenth-century writing in the vernacular is marked by a concern for the *regulation* and *reformation* of affective, visual experience. To this end, I offer new readings of a set of some of the most important and prolific fifteenth-century theologians and poets whose work has previously been understood as dully orthodox, conservative, and even propagandistic.[13] I argue that this writing is characterized by a reformist aesthetic that is in conversation with late medieval forms of visual piety and heterodox critiques of that piety and that is indebted to philosophical discourses, ecclesiastical hermeneutics, medieval historiography, and bureaucratic writ. This book thus considers fifteenth-century writing as literature in its own right, measuring its value neither by its conformity to Chaucerian verse nor by its ability to foreshadow Renaissance humanism, but rather reading it as a considered (if often ambivalent) literary intervention in its own distinctive cultural situation. I argue that many fifteenth-century religious writers, while understanding the power and value of visual representation, also find in vernacular discourse a textual means of reforming the lay response to and use of devotional images.

The Defense of the Image and the Religion of the Book

The fifteenth-century responses to images discussed in this book are part of a long tradition of clerical attempts to reform visual representation

and to control responses to it with words.[14] In this section, I will briefly survey this tradition, looking at a few key moments in the early Middle Ages but focusing primarily on late medieval considerations of the relationship between visual and verbal signs. In the earliest "image debates," Christianity was represented as a religion of the book in battle with religions of the image. The early church's rejection of images was largely contingent on its reading of scriptural injunctions against idolatry (and most notably those found in the Decalogue and the *Liber Sapientiae*), but its position also derived from the church's desire to maintain distance between Christian practices and those of the contemporary pagan and imperial religions, in which the veneration of images was commonplace.[15] However, Constantine's conversion and the subsequent rise of Christianity to state religion of the Roman empire complicated this association of image veneration with pagan religion. Soon after the conversion, we find the first extant references to the newly converted laity's desire for images and to clerical fears that the reinstallation of images would only open the door for the return of pagan religion.[16] The question of the validity of images, however, came to the fore in the sixth century when members of the imperial family began bestowing images on churches, and the veneration of Christian images became more commonplace. When some theologians questioned the validity of such veneration, others responded with defenses of images. In two letters chiding Bishop Serenus of Marseille (who had destroyed paintings and statues to protect his subjects from idolatry), Pope Gregory the Great set forth a justification of images that would influence all subsequent debates on images.[17] In these letters Gregory explained to Serenus the following: "Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books."[18] As I have already noted, Gregory's emphasis on the pedagogical import of the image became the standard defense of visual art in the West throughout the Middle Ages.[19]

The kinship of image and writing established in this letter remained central to all subsequent debates. In the wake of the eighth- and ninth-century iconoclast controversies in the Eastern church, a synod extended the revelatory and salvific properties of the written word to the icon, arguing that because both word and image could give a person knowledge of the gospel and thus lead to salvation, images ought to be shown the same honor as the scriptures.[20] The synod, however, drew a technical distinction between the degrees of veneration that might be shown to God and to holy signs, distinguishing *latria* (the worship due only to God) from

dulia (the lesser form of worship demonstrated in the reverence shown to people and corporeal artifacts). These distinctions were initially met with some confusion by the Western church, which responded to the early controversies with an outright refutation of image veneration and a reassertion of the primacy of the Word. Commissioned by Charlemagne, the report on images in the *Libri carolini* (*c.* 790) claimed that images should not be venerated; they were to be used as pedagogical tools but not to be compared with the holy scriptures.[21] In 825 a synod held in Paris debated the statements of the *Libri carolini* and issued a letter on images and the iconoclast debates, emphasizing that it may be lawful to own images but it is not lawful to venerate them.[22] Thus the eighth- and ninth-century clerics ensured that while images had some mnemonic value, in the West texts were to maintain a privileged role in conveying knowledge.[23] While the *Libri carolini* may not have had a significant effect on the production of images, their Augustinian warnings about the "aesthetic seduction" of the visual arts and the privileged role of the word in the transmission of rational or abstract thought influenced the rhetoric of later debates.[24]

The twelfth-century Latin treatise, *Pictor in carmine*, reflects this continued worry about the danger unique to visual signs.[25] In the work's preface, the anonymous author laments the "monstrous" images in the church:

> I wished if possible to occupy the minds and eyes of the faithful in a more comely and useful fashion. For since the eyes of our contemporaries are apt to be caught by a pleasure that is not only vain, but even profane, and since I did not think it would be easy to do away altogether with the meaningless paintings in churches, especially in cathedral and parish churches, where public stations take place, I think it an excusable concession that they should enjoy at least that class of pictures which, as being the books of the laity, can suggest divine things to the unlearned, and stir up the learned to the love of the scriptures.[26]

Concerned about the seduction of the visible, the author promises to provide alternative images. He acknowledges that it would be difficult to "do away altogether with the meaningless paintings in churches," so he suggests, instead, a model of replacement. The remainder of the treatise provides typological readings of the scriptures, beginning with the Annunciation and concluding with the Apocalypse. These readings are given, the author explains, expressly to supply more appropriate subject matter for the artists, or "to curb the license of painters, or rather influence their work in churches where paintings are permitted."[27] While churches should not be decorated with frivolous ornamentation, which

produces "vain" or "profane" pleasures, the author concedes that they may be adorned with narrative images designed to function as books. In other words, religious images should always point back to the written word. As the treatise claims, their purpose is to "stir up the learned to the love of the scriptures." Thus, for this author, images remain subordinate to the text; visual experience should never be an end in itself.

The positions of the author resonate with broader Cistercian ambivalence about devotional images and ornamentation. In the twelfth century, both the Cistercians and the Carthusians campaigned against excesses in the visual art and ornamentation of churches, arguing that such art was not only superfluous but also potentially dangerous.[28] Perhaps best known from this reformist movement is Bernard of Clairvaux's *Apologia*, which also cautions against the dangers of visual pleasures.[29] While arguing that excessive imagery in churches may detract from the study of the scriptures and the inner worship of God and misappropriate money that could be better spent on feeding the poor, Bernard does not deny the Gregorian justification of images as books for the illiterate. As we will see, all of these concerns and approaches resurface in fifteenth-century considerations of the uses and values of visual and verbal *libri laicorum* in England.

Indeed, many critics of images throughout the Middle Ages assumed a similar position, arguing that images should be useful, not necessarily beautiful or pleasing to the senses.[30] These theologians claimed that the purpose of images is precisely to move the viewer beyond the realm of the external, material, and sensory to that of the internal and spiritual.[31] For contemplative writers, aesthetic pleasure ultimately was not to be found in an experience with the sensory, but rather with that which transcends sense experience.[32] Thus, while monastic writers regularly quote the Gregorian dictum and advocate the use of images as didactic devices, many are rather more cautious about condoning the adoration of images and emphasize instead the purity of unmediated, imageless adoration of the divine.[33]

All of these early attempts to delimit the use of images, however, point to the fact that religious images were clearly very popular and widely used by laity and clergy alike. Cathedrals, parishes, and laypeople continued to acquire and lavish money on statues, stained-glass windows, and painted panels. And while some clerics sought to regulate the use and production of images, many others saw the value of images in encouraging religious fervor. With the increasing interest in the physicality of the incarnate Christ and rise of affective devotional models in the later Middle Ages, ecclesiastical apprehension about the power of images lessened somewhat, and the Gregorian justification was expanded and modified to include

the affective value of images. By the thirteenth century, Aquinas incorporated affect into his own justification for the use of images. Images are useful, he explained, for teaching, for remembering, but also for arousing feelings of devotion.[34] The addition of affect to what had primarily been a pedagogical justification distinguished visual images from texts. To this end, Aquinas' contemporary, Bishop Durandus, suggested that a picture moves the emotions more than writing. Because they are better able to prompt affective response, Durandus continued, images should be shown more reverence than texts.[35]

Although the primary justifications for images throughout the earlier Middle Ages emphasized their didactic uses and thus their relation to texts, by the fourteenth century apologetics increasingly focused on the image's superior ability to stir emotions.[36] The relationship between affect and the visual image is now well known to scholars of late medieval religious literature.[37] Indeed, it is often the primary aspect of the tripartite justification of images that modern scholars now find of interest.[38] Unquestionably, late medieval England was steeped in affective, incarnational devotion. New forms of lay piety, influenced by Franciscan and Bernardine theology, de-emphasized the function of images as pedagogical *libri laicorum* and emphasized "the stirring of emotion rather than the imparting of knowledge."[39] The period's emphasis on the concrete, bodily, and human was accompanied by a transformation in the types of visual and literary art produced and the responses these arts prompted. Devotional texts such as Nicholas Love's influential translation of the *Meditaciones vitae Christi* encouraged their readers to visualize scenes from the life of Christ to arouse devotion and emotional identification.[40] Affective religious lyrics called their readers to "Behold" the suffering Christ and weep. The Corpus Christi play cycles vivified images and provided a means of participation and incorporation by collapsing the boundaries between distant history and collective memory, foreign lands and the confines of the local city streets, and biblical figures and fellow citizens.[41] Sermons sought to inspire religious fervor by recounting miracle-working images. And similarly, collections of *mirabilia*, such as the miracles recorded by Caesarius of Heisterbach, regularly describe images that reward their devotees by speaking, weeping, or even seeking revenge. Images of "a suffering human body racked on a cross" dominated the visual landscape and encouraged their viewers to suffer along with Christ rather than be instructed by him.[42] By the fifteenth century, most images of Christ focused on the "somber and tragic," and as Émile Mâle writes, "Jesus no longer taught; he suffered. Or rather he seemed to

offer his wounds and his blood as the supreme lesson."[43] In short, affective piety and images crafted to encourage emotional response had moved to the center of late medieval devotional practice.

Even though images were firmly integrated into the religious landscape of England, concern about the use of such images remained constant in late medieval clerical dialogues on the subject. As Michael Camille notes, in this period "representations were becoming more difficult to regulate and control, more unruly than ever in their form and variety, breaking boundaries as artists experimented with making them more 'lifelike.'"[44] A number of late fourteenth-century religious leaders articulated concern about the misuse of images. Richard Fitzralph, the archbishop of Armagh, denounced the veneration of cult images of Mary as superstition in 1356. Robert Rypon, preacher and subprior of Durham, similarly voiced distrust of the misleading representations of many visual images.[45] Indeed, in the later Middle Ages, images and image-making remained under the careful scrutiny of the church even if conversations about their validity were not often translated into public discourse.

However, after a long period of widespread acceptance of images with occasional reservations raised in Latin discourses and academic contexts, images once again became a matter of public debate at the end of the fourteenth century when contested by John Wyclif and his followers. Indeed, after Wyclif, to question the value of religious images or their veneration was to risk suspicion of heresy. Yet Wyclif's own position was remarkably conventional. Wyclif argued that images might be useful as *libri laicorum* or as aids to devotion but should not be venerated with either *latria* or *dulia*.[46] Thus, for Wyclif, although Christians might lawfully use some images, there was still need for caution, as he explains in a tract on the Decalogue:

> It is evident that images may be made both well and ill: well in order to rouse, assist, and kindle the minds of the faithful to love God more devoutly; and ill when by reason of images there is deviation from the true faith, as when the image is worshiped with *latria* or *dulia*, or unduly delighted in for its beauty, costliness, or attachment to irrelevant circumstances.[47]

Literalist readings of the first commandment are often starting points for Lollard discussions of images, but Wyclif's approach to images here is not particularly radical; he is simply rearticulating clerical commonplaces evident in earlier works such as *Pictor in carmine* and Bernard's *Apologia*. But in Wyclif's articulation we find in embryonic form the multiple threads that orthodox and heterodox writers alike will use to weave arguments for

and against religious images over the next century of polemic: material form and human response are interrelated; well-constructed images are useful insofar as they inspire the faithful to more pious feelings of devotion.[48] However, badly made images distract from "true faith." According to Wyclif, they do so in two ways. First, they inspire veneration rather than use, directing the viewer's attention to the image itself rather than pointing the reader to what the image signifies. Second, their beauty or ornamentation becomes a source of inordinate pleasure or delight. Moreover, ill-made images call attention to their excesses – to their costliness or their inappropriateness. They do not simply represent; they seduce.

Although Wyclif's comment ostensibly focuses on the *form* of images – on how they are made – it also implicitly addresses their *reception*. However the image is made, its viewer is responsible for worshipping or delighting in the inanimate artifact. Idolatry, then, may begin with the form of the image, but ultimately occurs by human misinterpretation and misuse of the image. Many people err and even commit idolatry, Wyclif writes, in thinking that there is any life in images and in believing that any one image is more powerful than another.[49] For this reason, he continues, the clergy must instruct the laity about image use, not only by insisting that images be "well made" but also by informing them of the danger of misinterpreting material signs.[50]

This tangled web of agency is replicated in the anti-image polemics of Wyclif's followers. Although the extent of iconophobia and iconoclasm in fact varies widely in extant Lollard writings, the issue of images seems to have served as a litmus test for determining late medieval heresy. Some Lollard critics of images emphasize that idolatry derives predominately from the form of the image itself, while for others it is found more in human misunderstanding or misreading of the image. Regardless of emphasis, most Lollard writers follow Wyclif in locating agency (and thus blame) in a combination of the object itself and the response of its audience. Yet if Wyclif held a quite traditional position on images (arguing for their pedagogical use but against their veneration), his followers became known for their distrust of visual signs.[51] Arguing against the dangers of images in one breath and for the value of vernacular scriptures in the next, Lollard writers often suggested the replacement of image with word, recasting the relationship as antithetical rather than analogous. The Lollard preacher, William Thorpe, argued that if priests were living holy lives and preaching regularly, "Þese þingis weren sufficient bokis and kalenders to knowe God bi and his seintis wiþouten ony ymage maade wiþ mannes hond."[52] To be sure, for many Lollards, the best mode of