Part III
Spirituality and
Institutional Organizations
Comparing Spiritual and Material Goods: 
Poverty and Prosperity in *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* and Everyman

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Though critics have for some time now discussed the central role played by economic discourse in the anonymous morality play *The Summoning of Everyman*, they have offered varying analyses of the sources and significance of this imagery. V. A. Kolve argues that “Words like ‘reckoning’, ‘account-making’, ‘lending’, and ‘spending’ compose the essential verbal matrix of the play; and the account-book that Everyman brings with him is the emblem of their interrelationship.” ¹ Kolve notes that several earlier Middle English texts, including John Lydgate’s *Testament*, use similar imagery to depict the judgment of the soul at death, but Kolve looks to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25: 14–30 as the major source for *Everyman*’s economic discourse. ² Since Kolve’s analysis appeared, several scholars have discussed links between *Everyman* and literary traditions in late medieval England such as estates satire, penitential literature, and other dramatic texts. ³ Only a few scholars have looked at links between

² Kolve, “Everyman and the Parable of the Talents,” 71.


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the play’s imagery and medieval allegorical narratives. For example, Ladd discusses parallels between the economic imagery in *Everyman* and the imagery in *Piers Plowman*. Kolve cites Guillaume de Deguileville’s allegorical dream vision *Le Pèlerinage de l’âme* as paralleling the play’s depiction of Everyman’s journey to his reckoning as a pilgrimage; but Kolve does not discuss the economic discourse of either the French poem or its English translation in relation to *Everyman*. Nevertheless, a comparison of *Everyman* with the Middle English translation of Deguileville’s poem, *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, offers a profitable opportunity for exploring the depiction of spiritual and material goods in both texts.

It is not my intent to argue for direct influence of *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* on *The Summoning of Everyman*, though the author of the play could well have known the anonymous dream-vision narrative. *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, which was translated from Deguileville’s poem in 1413, circulated in manuscript form among courtly, clerical, and merchant audiences throughout the century and was also printed by Caxton in 1483. The morality play seems to date from the last years of the fifteenth century or first years of the sixteenth century: *Everyman* is based on a Dutch play first printed in 1495, but the earliest copies of the English play that survive are four undated printed editions that scholars estimate appeared between about 1510 and 1537. My analysis attempts to show that, despite their different genres and sources, *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* and *Everyman* have much in common in their representation of spiritual and material goods. Though both texts translate earlier works from the Continent, they depart from their sources in

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4 Ladd, “‘My condicion is mannes soule to kill’—Everyman’s Mercantile Salvation,” 58–72.

5 Kolve, “*Everyman* and the Parable of the Talents,” 80.


ways that suggest shaping by their English literary, theological, and social contexts. Both texts concern themselves with assessing a person’s spiritual state at the end of earthly life: the hero receives a visit from Death and learns that he is not prepared for the judgment he must face on his pilgrimage to the next life. Both texts are also similar in the extent to which economic discourse shapes their depictions of how a person’s spiritual state will be assessed. Each text uses several strategies to suggest differences between material and spiritual definitions of poverty and prosperity, while simultaneously illustrating the difficulty that human beings have in distinguishing between material goods and spiritual goods. In addition, though both texts depict the potential for material prosperity to blind lay Christians to spiritual values, both texts reserve their strongest condemnations for priests who use their spiritual authority for material profit. Comparing the discourses of spiritual and material goods in these two texts will thus give a more precise understanding of their commentaries on poverty and prosperity. In particular, we can see how *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* and *The Summoning of Everyman* portray the protagonist’s education in reading the differences between spiritual and material goods, at the same time that these texts engage the audience in a similar reading lesson.

Our examination of the economic imagery of *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* and *Everyman* will benefit from consideration of some of the debates about poverty and prosperity underway when these texts were composed. The depiction of spiritual and material goods in both works reflects several of the social and theological tensions at play in England during the later Middle Ages, when the sources of material wealth and poverty, as well as the discourses in which people expressed their faith, were undergoing significant change. Yet concerns about the relationship between earthly riches and faith among Christian theologians did not begin in the fifteenth century. In the twelfth century, Christian writers depicted riches as a great danger to the spiritual health of individuals, as well as to the spiritual health of the Christian church as an institution. For example, Bernard of Clairvaux describes the church as unhealthy or insane in its use of its wealth for decorating its buildings, rather than for clothing and feeding the poor:


(O vanity of vanities, but no more vain than insane! The church is resplendent in her walls, beggarly in her poor; she clothes her stones in gold, and leaves her sons naked; the rich man’s eye is fed at the expense of the indigent.)

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Debate over the theological significance of earthly poverty and prosperity grew in 
the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the Roman church constructed a 
penitential system that accepted material gifts as signs of contrition. At the same 
time, secular society developed a profit economy that redistributed wealth across 
older social boundaries based on noble rank and land ownership. New religious 
groups called for a return to the ideal of evangelical poverty, a movement that Rich-
ard Rex reads as “a moral reaction to the nascent commercialization of society.”9 As 
David Aers puts it, Europe was “a culture in transition.”10

In her study of almsgiving in medieval Cambridge, Miri Rubin notes that, 
while theologians agreed that spiritual goods were more virtuous than material 
goods, official Christian doctrine “did not reject earthly goods, which could be put 
to good use by good men.”11 Even among reformers, imitation of Christ’s poverty 
was an ideal held up more often to the clergy than to the laity. Lay Christians 
were encouraged to translate material goods into spiritual goods through offerings 
to the church and the poor, but the process was fraught with ambiguities. Mem-
bers of parish churches, guilds, and confraternities made gifts of their earthly pos-
sessions to build new churches, decorate existing ones, and finance chantries and 
festivals, without fully understanding the intermingling of worldly and spiritual 
goals that often motivated such acts: as Sarah Beckwith comments, these dona-
tions enacted “a complex display” of piety, social rank, and wealth.12 Care for the 
poor also involved negotiation between religious ideals and issues of social status, 
since donations to the needy were a traditional part of aristocratic responsibility; 
but material wealth and social rank were no longer as closely linked as in earlier 
times, so models of almsgiving based on religious devotion, rather than social rank, 
became more important.

Most New Testament discussions of wealth involve warnings of suffering in 
the afterlife for prosperous people who did not use their earthly goods to relieve the 
suffering of others: prominent examples cited in medieval literature and visual arts 
include the parable of the rich man who fails to receive comfort for his suffering in 
the afterlife because he refused to help the poor and sick Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) 
and Christ’s depiction of eternal life as the reward for those who take care of soci-
ety’s neediest members and eternal death as the reward for those who do not (Mat-
thew 25:31–46). The Lollards therefore argued that since “poor people were more 
truly created in God’s image than any human-made statue or painting could be,”

10 David Aers, “Piers Plowman and Problems in the Perception of Poverty: A Culture in 
11 Miri Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge 
University Press, 1987), 84.
12 Sarah Beckwith, Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings 
(London: Routledge, 1993), 33. See also Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge, 
86–87.
the money and gifts lavished on artistic images, buildings, feasts, and processions “should rightfully go to the relief of the poor.” To answer this argument, however, defenders of gifts to churches could borrow Christ’s comment to his disciples, when they argued that the perfume with which a woman had anointed his head should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor: they would always have the poor with them, but they would not always have him (Matthew 26:11). As a result of these conflicting views on the relationship between material and spiritual goods in the Bible and in commentaries, Christian clergy and lay members in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries engaged in complex negotiations over the means by which material prosperity might be converted into spiritual prosperity.

The representations of poverty and prosperity in *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* and *The Summoning of Everyman* reflect these theological ambiguities and social tensions. For example, although *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* does not present possession of material wealth as sinful in itself, the text does depict greed as a sin purged in Purgatory and punished in Hell. When the pilgrim soul views damned souls punished for avarice in Hell, his guardian angel describes them as those who “han sette her hertes ambitiously for to hepen and assemblen sommes of tresour, bothe of golde and of siluer, and kepen it withouten eny cause” (have set their hearts ambitiously to heap and assemble quantities of treasure, both of gold and of silver, and keep it without any cause [*Pilgrimage*, 3.7]). In addition, when the pilgrim soul views damned souls punished in Hell for treason, the text links their sin to greed by describing it in terms of stealing gold and silver from their king’s treasury and taking bribes from his enemies (*Pilgrimage*, 3.4). The narrative also suggests the power of greed to dehumanize those who practice it. While he is in Purgatory, the pilgrim soul sees deformed souls being taken into Hell, and his guardian angel explains, “Thise that haue her nayles hoke[d] and cacchynge, that ben couetous men” (These [souls] who have hooked and catching nails are covetous men [*Pilgrimage*, 2.6]).

When the pilgrim soul claims that he was never deformed by that sin, his guardian angel shows him the hooked nails among other signs of sin in his pilgrim’s sack, indicating that he also coveted material goods during his lifetime. Thanks to God’s mercy, the pilgrim soul will purge his sins in Purgatory rather than suffer eternally in Hell; but the pilgrim soul laments that he did not more regularly use the mirror of confession, which allows the living to see their spiritual faults clearly and atone for sins like avarice before death. Lack of spiritual vision thus prevents the pilgrim soul from reading his own true nature as well as the true nature of material goods while he was alive.

*The Pilgrimage of the Soul* also uses more indirect approaches to remind its audience to use worldly goods for spiritual profit. For example, when the pilgrim soul’s

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guardian angel explains that Limbo is the same place as Abraham’s bosom, the 
angel does so in terms of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man:

“This place,” quod he, “is Abraham’s bosom, whyder the goode Lazar was 
borne [of whom the riche gloton somtyme asked water for to kele] his tunge. 
In that place were put the rightful lyueres in the Olde Testament, whiche that 
abiden the comyng of oure Lorde Ihesu Crist.”

(“This place,” he said, “is Abraham’s bosom, where the good Lazarus was car-
ried [of whom the rich glutton once asked for water to cool] his tongue. In that 
place were put those who lived righteously in the Old Testament, who awaited 
the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” [Pilgrimage, 2.13]).

The angel thus associates material poverty with virtue, while associating material 
prosperity with the sin of gluttony and failure to help the needy. The angel’s reference 
to the materially poor but righteous Lazarus could serve to remind the text’s audience 
of the ending of the parable: when the rich man’s request for water is denied, he pleas-
d with Abraham to send Lazarus with a warning to his brothers against repeating his 
mistaken use of his wealth; but Abraham rejects this request as well, explaining that 
people who do not understand the warnings of Moses and the prophets will not be 
convinced by someone come back from the dead. Of course, both the Gospel parable 
and The Pilgrimage of the Soul use a narrative depiction of the afterlife as just such a 
warning to the living to reform their behavior before death. If understood spiritually, 
these texts will bring spiritual profit to their audiences.

What I find most interesting about the references to poverty and prosperity 
in The Pilgrimage of the Soul, however, is the way the text uses them to suggest the 
difficulty of reading the true relationship of material goods and spiritual goods. 
By revealing multiple meanings and associations in its economic discourse, The 
Pilgrimage of the Soul foregrounds the difficulty of understanding the relationship of 
words and meaning, letter and spirit, the material and spiritual significance of signs 
human and divine. The economic discourse in The Pilgrimage of the Soul encourages 
its audience to ask whether it is possible for human beings to determine the spiritual 
significance of something that takes material form, whether this is a gift of money, 
the words of a prayer, or a confraternity banquet.

For example, The Pilgrimage of the Soul plays with the paradox of using eco-
nomic discourse to represent spiritual concepts. This use of economic discourse 
should not surprise us, however, since it echoes language found widely in the Vul-
gate Bible and the vernacular translations circulating in medieval England. Christ’s 
death becomes a ransom or a purchase of human souls from eternal damnation:

Honored be þou, blisful Lorde an hy, 
That of the blisful Mayde were ybore, 
That with thy deth vs boughtest mightily. [. . .] 
Honoured be thou, Fader souereyne,
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That vowched sauf such ransome for to sende,
Thyn owne loued Sone to suffre peyne [. . .].

(Honored be you, blessed Lord on high,
Who were born of the blessed Virgin,
Who bought us mightily with your death. [. . .]
Honored be you, Father sovereign,
Who promised to send such a ransom,
Your own beloved Son to suffer pain [. . .] [Pilgrimage, 2.1]).

The image of Christ as ransom (redemptio) also occurs in the Vulgate Bible (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6, and Hebrews 9:15). In The Pilgrimage of the Soul, however, these references to ransom in the hymn of praise come shortly after Lady Mercy has traveled to Heaven to “purchase” a charter of pardon for the pilgrim soul from Christ, allowing the pilgrim soul to avoid sentencing to eternal damnation (Pilgrimage, 1.32). Although the terms might suggest the kind of bribing of officials that Everyman will try with Death, Christ’s pardon in The Pilgrimage of the Soul turns out to be freely given to all who have faith in God. Likewise, the bliss of Heaven becomes a human soul’s “mede” (wages or reward) for faithful service to God:

And man thow thaghtest to be vertuous,
To serue the by verrey loue and drede,
Rewardynge hem with blisse for hir mede [. . .].

(And you taught mankind to be virtuous,
To serve you in true love and fear,
Rewarding them with bliss as their wage [. . .] [Pilgrimage, 2.3]).

Yet, as Christ’s parable of the vineyard workers illustrates (Matthew 20:1–16), God’s wages do not follow the measures of earthly rewards: the workers who labored in the vineyard all day could not understand why they received the same wages as the workers hired in the afternoon.

References to mercy in this text also embody the ambiguity of economic discourse used to represent spiritual concepts or actions, since ‘mercy’ in the English of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could mean pardon for wrongdoing, human or divine compassion, the favor of a beloved or feudal superior, or a monetary fine. 14 Whereas, in the absence of other economic discourse, one might forget the shared root for ‘mercy’ and ‘merchandise’, in The Pilgrimage of the Soul the character Mercy helps bring the comparison of spiritual and material goods to the fore. It is Mercy who

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14 See the definitions under merci (n.[1]) and merci (n.[2]) in Hans Kurath, Sherman McAllister Kuhn, and Robert E. Lewis, eds., Middle English Dictionary (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). Cited hereafter as MED.
Mercy helps point out the need to look beyond the superficial level of words or actions when we try to read their significance for the material or spiritual economy. For example, Mercy’s list of those who will not receive pardon for their sins includes members of the clergy who have used their offices for material, rather than spiritual, profit:

\[\text{[A]ll those who have received orders or authority to maintain Christ’s laws and then miserably and cowardly withdraw themselves to worldly desires, not doing their duty in revealing and teaching the laws of our Lord, nor in punishing of misdoers, but only because of their covetousness of worldly goods. And also all those who have received such authorities or orders through simony, or such unlawful means and not with the intent to profit in their office, but only to be honored and made rich and to lead their lives in desires and delights (\textit{Pilgrimage}, 2.4).}\]

Mercy presents these false clerics as rich in material possessions and status, coveting worldly goods, and having worldly desires; but she also refers to these false clerics as acting “wrecchedly” (miserably or poorly), not just because their behavior is reprehensible but also because, though they have profited materially, they are spiritually poor in not having received the spiritual profit that they should have sought from their offices, had they understood their vows properly. Mercy’s use of the word ‘menyng’ offers another case of ambiguous language, for one would probably gloss ‘menyng’ as ‘means’ in this context to parallel the language of profit and worldly goods, except that the sentence goes on to discuss the intent of these false clerics, which suggests that one could also understand ‘menyng’ as ‘meaning’ or ‘intent’. The wordplay in this passage thus underscores the difficulty of discerning the spiritual and material motivations behind the words and actions of those whose titles suggest that they reject the inherent value of material profit. Once again, the economic discourse of the text alerts the audience of \textit{The Pilgrimage of the Soul} that it needs to read spiritually in order to understand the full significance of the narrative’s words.

An important part of the pilgrim soul’s transformation in this text involves overcoming his blindness about the spiritual reality behind material appearances and the material reality that may lie behind what appears to be a spiritual good. While the pilgrim soul purges his sins in the fires of Purgatory, his guardian angel instructs him in the differences between worldly goods and spiritual goods because he does not understand the economy of charity: to be specific, he does not understand how an act of charity done for the sake of one person could possibly benefit
someone else. The angel explains that whereas one person’s material prosperity causes the material poverty of others, spiritual goods benefit all:

Thanne seide myn aungel, “Thise maner of gostly goodes,” quod he, “ben not of condicioun lik to the goodes of the worlde that ben rescuyed into special possessioun, so that, as oon hath it, another mot nedes lacken it, and oo mannes welthe mane wrecches lacken. But who that doth eny goostly good to oo creature, he doth it in comoun to alle, as thou shalt clerely knowen hereafter. For thou shalt right so be partyner with hem of the benfetes that ben done to hem of hir frendes, wherfore thou shalt thanken hem goodely as the haue done to the. For it fareth by charite as it doth by light. Soth it is that ȝif a gret company be in a derk hous withoute confort of light and som oon hath a frend that bryngeth light into þat hous specialy to hym that he loueth, no doute also good part hauen alle the remenaunt that ben in the hous, ȝif the light be clere, as hast he to whom it was brought in special.”

(Then my angel said, “These types of spiritual goods,” he said, “are not of the same nature as the goods of the world, which are received into individual possession, so that, if one person has it, another must needs lack it, and many poor people lack one man’s wealth. But whoever does any spiritual good to one creature does it in common to all, as you shall clearly know hereafter. For, just like this, you shall be a partner with them in the benefits that are done to them by their friends, for which you will thank them well as they have done to you. For charity works as light does. Truly, if a large group is in a dark house without the comfort of light and someone has a friend who brings a light into that house just for the one he loves, no doubt all the rest of those who are in the house will have a good share in it, if the light is bright, [just] as the person has who was brought the light in particular” [Pilgrimage, 2.11]).

According to the angel, spiritual goods thus contrast to the concept of property or individual ownership that fuels both the false allure of material goods and the profit economy that developed in the late Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the angel’s use of an analogy to a physical substance (light) to explain the economy of spiritual goods offers a model for the transformation of material possessions into spiritual goods, if they are shared with those who need them, rather than kept for one individual’s use or mere possession. We might also see that this passage offers an important metatextual moment, for, if we are reading spiritually, we will understand that, like the light brought into a dark house, the angel’s words of instruction, though addressed to the pilgrim soul, offer spiritual illumination to all who will heed them.

The angel’s use of the term ‘benfetes’ or benefits (from the French *bienfait*) suggests that spiritual ‘goods’ are good deeds or good works. *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, like Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, suggests that spiritual profit involves labor and results from business; but spiritual business unites in a common goal rather than expressing itself in competition. For example, when the pilgrim soul asks his angel how his suffering in Purgatory might be relieved, the angel explains,
Thy frendes wole make instaunce by masses and by almesdedes and othere gode werkes, so that, by hir besy labour, the sonner mayst thow of thise peynes som conforte receyue. And also the charitable dedes and deuociouns duely done by the mynystres of Holy Chirche and othere goode lyuers shulle stonde the in grete stede in slakyng of thy peynes.

(Your friends will make appeal through masses and alms and other good works, so that, by their busy labor, the sooner you may receive some comfort from your pains. And also the charitable deeds and devotions duly done by the ministers of Holy Church and others who live well shall stand you in good stead in lessening your pains [Pilgrimage, 2.8]).

Spiritual goods in the Pilgrimage thus take many forms. One of those cited here is the giving of alms, which was considered part of the seven works of corporal mercy or care for the physical needs of others, based on Christ’s depiction of the saved and damned in Matthew 25. Parish priests in late medieval England were required to preach on the seven works of corporal mercy four times a year, and descriptions of them circulated in many English works of spiritual instruction during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For example, The Lay Folk’s Catechism explains that

That us behoues fulfill in al that we mai,
Is the seuen dedis of merci until our euen-cristen [. . .].
Of whilk the first is to fede tham that er hungry.
That othir, for to gif tham drynk that er thirsty.
The third, for to clethe tham that er clatheless.
The ferthe is to herber tham that er houselesse.
The fifte, for [to] visithe tham that ligges in sekenesse.
The sext, is to help tham that in prison er.
The seventh, to bery dede men that has mister.
Thise er the seuen bodily dedis of merci [. . .].

(What we ought to fulfill in all [ways] that we may,
Is the seven works of mercy for our fellow Christians [. . .].
Of which, the first is to feed those who are hungry.
The next, to give those drink who are thirsty.
The third, to clothe those who are clothesless.
The fourth is to shelter those who are homeless.
The fifth, [to] visit those who lie in sickness.
The sixth is to help those who are in prison.
The seventh, to bury dead people who need this.
These are the seven corporal works of mercy [. . .] [ll. 349–361]).

Other spiritual goods cited in the passage in *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* are prayers and other works of religious devotion that were considered works of spiritual mercy. On these, *The Lay Folks’ Catechism* teaches,

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\begin{align*}
\text{Thare er of merci allso seuen gasteli dedis [. . .]:} \\
\text{Ane is to consaile and wisse tham that er will.} \\
\text{A nothir is to withdrawe tham that will wrik ill.} \\
\text{The third is to solace tham that er sorowfull.} \\
\text{The ferthe is to pray for tham that er sinfull.} \\
\text{The fifte is to be tholemente when men misdos us.} \\
\text{The sext gladly to forgf when men has greued us.} \\
\text{The seuent, when men asks us for to her tham,} \\
\text{if we can mare than thai for to lere tham.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(There are also seven spiritual works of mercy [. . .]):

The first is to counsel and instruct those who will err.
The second is to restrain those who wish to do evil.
The third is to solace those who are sorrowful.
The fourth is to pray for those who are sinful.
The fifth is to be patient when someone mistreats us.
The sixth is to forgive when someone has grieved us.
The seventh is, when people ask us to listen to them,
To teach them if we know more than they [ll. 364–372]).

Acts of spiritual mercy were considered even more profitable than acts of corporal mercy: “Therfore as þe sowle is better þan þe body / So þese gostly mercyes be bet -
ter þan þe bodyly mercyes” (Therefore, as the soul is better than the body, / so these spiritual mercies are better than the corporal mercies [ll. 1157–1158]). In order for any spiritual labor to be fully profitable, however, the good work must derive from spiritual motivation, performed “with hool herte and cleer affeccioun, in clernes of conscience” (with perfect heart and pure feeling, in purity of conscience [*Pilgrimage*, 2.10]). *The Pilgrimage of the Soul* thus suggests that spiritual profit requires the ability to distinguish worldly motivations from spiritual ones, a reading skill that the pilgrim soul learns too late, but that the reader of the text may still acquire.

This same problem of distinguishing material profit from spiritual profit plays a central role in *The Summoning of Everyman*. The hero of the play begins as someone so prosperous in material terms that he can offer Death one thousand pounds to...
give him more time on earth. Some critics have argued that the play depicts Everyman as a merchant, despite the universality that his name suggests, and others have argued that the play’s original audience may have been primarily merchants. 

Although the play does not reveal the sources of Everyman’s wealth, the play does highlight his focus on earthly treasure, and Everyman’s transformation certainly depends upon his discovery that his Good Works rather than his Worldly Goods will accompany him when he gives the accounting for his life that God requires at the end of his journey. Scholars have written about the “merging of moral and commercial vocabulary [. . .] that makes Everyman’s book of reckoning such a powerful metaphor for a late medieval audience.” Critics like Kolve and Ladd also appreciate the ironic mirroring that underscores the play’s comparison between the characters Worldly Goods (Goodes) and Good Works (Good Dedes), who both first appear in the play unable to move from their prone positions, but for opposite reasons: Everyman cared so much for his material goods that he completely wrapped and locked them up (Everyman, ll. 394–397), while he cared so little for his good deeds that he almost let them die from exposure to cold, sickness, hunger, and capture—ironically, the very conditions the corporal works of mercy are supposed to alleviate (Everyman, ll. 486–88 and 619–620). The play thus uses economic discourse ironically to mark Everyman’s progress towards spiritual understanding, culminating in Everyman’s ultimate depiction of God as his “ghostly treasure” (spiritual treasure [Everyman, l. 589]). The play’s economic discourse tests the audience’s progress towards spiritual understanding as well.

If we examine the play as it circulated in Middle English, however, we find that Everyman employs more ironic moral/commercial wordplay than we might realize if we experience the play in a modern edition or performance. The earliest surviving copies of Everyman do not use regular spelling or punctuation, so performers and readers sometimes encountered ambiguous words and syntactic structures. For example, because of the rhymes used in the play and because proper nouns in the surviving copies do not usually begin with upper-case letters (which one would not hear in a performance anyway), we can tell that in this play the Middle English words for ‘good’, ‘God’, ‘goods’, and ‘gods’ become difficult to distinguish from

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20 Although Jacqueline Vanhoutte argues that the Middle English play may not have been performed (“When Elckerlijc Becomes Everyman: Translating Dutch to English, Performance to Print,” Studies in the Humanities 22 [1995]: 100–16), most scholars continue to treat the text as meant for dramatic performance, as well as reading. My argument does not rely on dramatic performance, but is enhanced by the possibility.
each other, creating ambiguity and irony in the characters’ statements. These variations in spelling and pronunciation seem to have occurred in other late Middle English texts as well: the *Middle English Dictionary* verifies that the Middle English words for ‘God’ and ‘good’ both took the forms ‘god’ or ‘gode’, with a long o pronunciation for both words attested in rhymes. In the context of *Everyman*, however, this ambiguity takes on special significance, allowing the play to perform part of its interrogation of the differences between material goods and spiritual goods through wordplay that tests the interpretive skills of the audience, as well as those of the hero.

The play first highlights humankind’s difficulty in recognizing the differences between spiritual and material goods in God’s opening speech:

I percyue here in my maieste
How that all creatures be to me vnkynde
Lyuyng without drede in worldly prosperyte
Of ghostly syght the people be so blynde
Drowned in synne they know me not for theyr god
In worldely ryches is all theyr mynde
They fere not my ryghtwysnes the sharpe rood [. . .]

(In I perceive, here in my majesty,
How all creatures are ungrateful to me,
Living in worldly prosperity, without fear.
Of spiritual sight, the people are so blind.
Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God.
On worldly riches is all their thought:
They fear not my righteousness, the sharp rod [. . .] [Everyman, ll. 22–28]).

In God’s view, worldly prosperity or riches have blinded the spiritual sight of human beings; and, because of this blindness, human beings do not recognize the speaker as their ‘God’. In the Middle-English text, however, multiple readings become possible in this passage. Since the rhyme word for ‘god’ in Skot’s printed edition is

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22 See *MED* under *God* (n.(1)), *god* (n.(2)), *god* (adj.), and *god* (adv.). For example, on the same page (C.i verso) in the surviving fragment of Pynson’s first edition of *Everyman*, we find ‘godes’ (l. 724) and ‘Goddes’ (l. 738) as spellings for modern English ‘God’s’.

23 Unless otherwise noted, citations of the play come from Greg’s edition of the Britwell Court copy of John Skot’s first printing, with my translations into modern English. (Superscript forms have been silently regularized.) Cawley’s edition both regularizes the spelling and modernizes the punctuation of the Middle English.
spelled ‘rood’ (l. 28), this suggests that both ‘god’ and ‘rood’ might have been pronounced with a long o by performers and readers of this text. Indeed, ‘rood’ might well be read as the Middle English word meaning ‘cross’ rather than a rod of punishment, because the following lines describe the revelation of God’s righteousness in the crucifixion of Christ. As a result of the possible long o pronunciation of ‘god’, we might read l. 26 in three possible ways: “they know me not for their God,” “they know me not for their good (i.e., that which is good for them),” or “they know me not for their spiritual good or treasure.” Even if one argues that ‘god’ and ‘rood’ were not meant to be true rhymes in this passage, one can see that the play constructs a situation that raises the potential for misreading the distinction between the Middle English words for ‘God’ and ‘good’.

The text’s possible wordplay on ‘god’ here parallels the central problem that Everyman faces. How can Everyman have no other gods or goods before the one God, when Everyman cannot recognize spiritual goods, blinded as he is from spiritual sight by worldly goods? In addition to other biblical allusions, perhaps we should look at the possibility that the play also alludes to the first commandment, though in English rather than in Latin: “The first commandment ys of echone / ‘Þou shalt haue no god but one’” (The first commandment to each person is / ‘Thou shalt have no God except one’).24 Like the acts of corporal mercy, the ten commandments circulated widely in English texts and churches during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In addition to their role in the mystery plays, the commandments were a subject on which English parish priests were required to preach four times a year, and they were recommended as a basis for a priest’s questions to a penitent during confession.25

Some of the strongest evidence for Everyman’s misreading of the significance of material goods, mistaking material goods for his God, comes from Everyman’s frequent references to his worldly goods as his ‘good’. For example, he tells Death: “Yet of my good wyl I gyue the yf thou wyl be kynde / Ye a thousand pound shalte thou haue [. . .]” (Yet of my goods will I give you if you will be kind. / Yes, a thousand pounds shall you have [. . .] [Everyman, ll. 121–122]). Death rejects this offer, yet Everyman wonders whether his worldly goods might still help him:

If that my good now helpe me myght
He wolde make my herte full lyght
I wyll speke to hym in this dystresse [. . .]


25 French, The People of the Parish, 177–78.
Come hyder good in al the hast thou may
For of counseyll I must desyre the [. . .]

(If my Goods might now help me,
He would make my heart very light.
I will speak to him in this distress. [. . .]
Come hither, Goods, in all the haste you may,
For I must desire counsel from you [. . .] [Everyman, ll. 389–400]).

Everyman then claims, “A good thou hast had longe my hertely loue” (Ah, Goods, you have long had my heartfelt love [Everyman, l. 457]). In all these cases, however, multiple meanings of ‘good’ may be in play. While in Middle English ‘good’ can refer to goods, especially property or money (MED god [n.(2)]), Everyman’s usage of the singular form opens up the possibility of understanding him to read his goods as his good or his God, which Everyman has, in effect, conflated: while others might turn to God in times of distress, Everyman turns to his worldly goods, though using discourse that sounds religious. The lexical ambiguity, but not the moral ambiguity, is resolved when Everyman reveals that he thinks his earthly goods will persuade God to overlook a deficient reckoning:

For parauenture thou mayst before god almyghty
My rekenynge helpe to clene and puryfye
For it is sayd euer amonge
That money maketh all ryght that is wronge [. . .]

(For perhaps you may help to clean and purify
My accounting before God almighty
For it is commonly said
That money makes everything right that is wrong [. . .] [Everyman, ll. 410–413]).

Even though he failed to bribe Death with a thousand pounds, Everyman continues to place his hope for salvation in his worldly goods, rather than in God’s mercy.

Skot’s printing identifies as “Goodes” the character that modern editors call Worldly Goods, and Everyman also uses this form in his speeches (for example, “Where arte thou my gooddes and ryches” [Where are you, my goods and riches] in l. 392); but even this word is ambiguous because in Middle English ‘goodes’ could also mean “good things, benefits, blessings,” usually defined further in context (MED god [n.(2)], def. 9). As a result, the play in its earliest surviving forms provides less distinction between the characters representing worldly goods and good works than modern editions do, and the ambiguity in the terms used for worldly goods in the early parts of the play requires the audience to pay close attention in order to understand Everyman’s mistaken reading of his material goods, due to his blindness to spiritual prosperity. If the audience pays attention, however, it hears
an echo of God’s opening speech, when the character Goodes explains to Everyman how his concern for material goods has led him to spiritual poverty: just as God explained at the beginning of the play that “Of ghostly syght the people be so blynde / [. . .] / In worldely ryches is all theyr mynde” (Of spiritual sight, the people are so blind. / [. . .] / On worldly riches is all their thought [Everyman, ll. 25–27]), Goodes tells Everyman, “For bycause on me thou dyd set thy mynde / Thy rekening I haue made blotted and blynde” (Because you set your thought on me / Your account book I have made smeared and obscured [Everyman, ll. 418–419]). Since the audience, rather than Everyman, heard God’s speech, the audience should be more enlightened than Everyman about reading material goods from a spiritual perspective at this point in the play.

Everyman finally does recognize virtuous acts as the true source of spiritual prosperity, and he recognizes them as the character Good Deeds:

Good dedes I praye you helpe me in this nede
Or elles I am for euer damned in dede
Therfore helpe me to make rekenynge
Before the redemer of all thynge
That kynge is and was and euer shall [. . .]

(Good Deeds, I pray you, help me in this need,
Or else I am forever damned indeed.
Therefore help me to give account [of myself]
Before the Redeemer of all things,
Who is and was and ever shall be King [. . .] [Everyman, ll. 539–543]).

Since Good Dedes is the true friend who eventually accompanies Everyman to his reckoning, we might read this character as the figure of “almes” (alms) that Death refers to in l. 78 as the “good frend” (good friend) who could keep Everyman from eternal damnation. As in The Pilgrimage of the Soul, however, Good Dedes here refers to more than generosity with one’s material goods.26 When Everyman needs to strengthen his Good Dedes to enable her to accompany him on his pilgrimage, he does not accomplish this with material gifts or acts of corporal mercy, but rather with acts of spiritual mercy instead: Everyman confesses his sins, performs penance, and prays (ll. 535–618). From Confession, Everyman receives a spiritual treasure: “a precyous iewell I wyll gyue the / Called penaunce” (a precious jewel I will give you / Called penance [Everyman, ll. 557–578]). Confession, penance, and prayer are the good deeds that “lyght” (enlighten) Everyman’s heart (Everyman, l. 627), as he earlier thought his worldly goods could. Everyman’s acts of spiritual mercy strengthen Good Dedes so that she becomes “hool” (healthy and spiritually pure [Everyman,

26 Here, I differ somewhat from Denise Ryan’s reading of Good Deeds as the acts of corporal mercy in Everyman (n. 3).
l. 632]). She is thus able to declare Everyman her "speyall frende" (special friend [Everyman, l. 629]) and herself prepared to aid in his spiritual reckoning.

With his new ability to read 'goodes' spiritually, Everyman then engages in a new accounting of his material goods, half of which he gives in alms and half of which he bequeaths "to be returned there it ought to be" (to be returned where it ought to be [Everyman, l. 702]). Here is where Everyman's good works echo the traditional deeds of corporal mercy. Though Everyman leaves unspecified where those bequests ought to go, the play suggests that Everyman's new recognition of spiritual "goodes" has cured him of the blindness caused by his material "goodes," so that his soul will finally receive spiritual profit from his "besyness" (business [Everyman, l. 683]). It is interesting that The Summoning of Everyman waits until this point before offering its condemnation of priests whose covetousness causes them to "by or sell" their "god" (buy or sell their God [Everyman, l. 757]). Usually, the charge of simony refers to buying or selling spiritual authority or misusing spiritual goods for material gain. The play here uses its wordplay to read these false priests as buying or selling their 'God' (like Judas), as well as buying or selling their 'good' (their virtue and their spiritual wealth). Whereas The Pilgrimage of the Soul makes its condemnation of simony early in the soul's instruction, the position of the condemnation in Everyman suggests that the play's hero may not be ready to understand the true significance of this problem until his own transformation has taken place — when he has learned to read God as his "ghostly treasure" (spiritual treasure [Everyman, l. 589]) and can make his "rekenynge sure" (faithful account [Everyman, l. 610]). The postponement of this text's critique of materialistic clergy heightens its dramatic force, but also serves to counter a reading of the play as a critique of the merchant class: merchants are not the only ones involved in buying and selling in this text. The continued economic wordplay in the discussion of false priests provides one more test of the audience's reading skills in distinguishing spiritual prosperity from material prosperity before the audience witnesses Everyman's final preparation for the reading of his account book.

My analysis attempts to clarify the extent to which both The Summoning of Everyman and The Pilgrimage of the Soul concern themselves with distinguishing between material and spiritual goods. Through their shared themes and imagery, these texts illustrate some the important ways in which theological debates about poverty and prosperity shaped vernacular literature in England during the late Middle Ages. These texts also show an even more significant similarity. By using wordplay that highlights the tension between material and spiritual readings of physical signs, each of these texts engages its audience in a personal and performative interrogation of the values that shape their views of poverty and prosperity: in addition to depicting the protagonist's education in recognizing the value of spiritual goods, each text employs economic imagery and wordplay that challenge the audience to develop skills in reading for spiritual profit.
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