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Late-Medieval Prison Writing in Context: The Values of Confinement

Millicent-Rose Newis

Abstract

This article is concerned with writing in and about confinement in the Middle Ages. It considers different types of late-medieval cell — anchoritic, monastic, and carceral — and explores some of their shared contexts, characteristics, and values. Through a close analysis of literature concerned with confinement, this article suggests that there is a difference in the value of cellular space and living in early and late medieval texts. It suggests several reasons for this change and focuses, in particular, upon work and labour.

‘Thus haue y told yow my poore ancre lijf
And what professioun that y am to bounde.
How thenke ye lo nys hit contemplatijf?’¹

The word ‘celle’ could refer to a number of small, enclosed spaces in the Middle Ages.² The very real spaces of the anchorhold or the room of a monk or a nun in a monastery would be called ‘celles’, but so could more conceptual spaces. In ‘How a Lover Praiseth His Lady’ (anon., c. 1450), for instance, Mary’s womb is a ‘golden cloyster [...] Naturys celle’,³ while in one of the N-Town Plays, the Devil threatens Herod with an altogether different, diabolical and prison-like cell: ‘I xalle hem brynge on to my celle; I xal hem [...] showe such myrthe as is in helle’.⁴ The sheer number of medieval sources — both literary and otherwise — concerning prisons is impressive. Surprisingly, however, and even though it is now generally accepted that the ‘birth’ of the prison can be traced to the Early Middle Ages (and not,

¹ *Fortunes Stabilnes: Charles of Orleans’ English Book of Love. A Critical Edition*, ed. by Mary-Jo Arn, Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 138 (New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), pp. 319–20 (ll. 4862–64). All further references are to this edition with line numbers in the text.

² I would like to thank Dr Alexandra da Costa and Professor Helen Cooper as well as the reviewers of *Leeds Medieval Studies* for their advice and support with this article.

³ ‘How a Lover Praiseth His Lady’, ed. by Eleanor Prescott Hammond, *Modern Philology*, 21.4 (1924), 379–95 (ll. 433–34).

⁴ ‘The Death of Herod’, in *The N-Town Plays: Cotton MS Vespasian D.8*, ed. by Stephen Spector, Early English Text Society, Supplemental Series, 11 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ll. 234–36.

as Michel Foucault suggests, the eighteenth century),⁵ it is not until the eighteenth century that the word ‘cell’ was used to denote a prison space.⁶ This semantic distinction, which separates the enclosed spiritual space and the enclosed penal space, is paralleled in traditional criticism concerned with medieval confinement. Until recently, scholars of secular prison writing have ‘had almost nothing to say about the Christological and purgatorial precedents of imprisonment that abounded in the Middle Ages’, explains Anthony Bale.⁷ In the same vein, more often than not, traditional criticism of anchoritic and monastic writing overlooks the carceral precedent. In the Middle Ages, however, both spiritual and secular confinement were imbricated in the philosophy of the cell — be it monastic, anchoritic or carceral. It is this overlap of traditions that is encapsulated by the epigraph to this article, in which the secular prison writer Charles d’Orléans (1394–1465) draws meaning from the spiritual ‘ancre lijf’ of confinement.

This article aligns with a recent impulse in medieval studies; one which indicates that spiritual and secular confinement have a long and complicated history which needs to be explored.⁸ This impulse has been chiefly motivated by the *Enfermement* group in France, and other contributions include Anthony Bale’s study of the prison of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and Megan Cassidy-Welch’s investigations of imprisonment in the medieval religious imagination.⁹ This article builds on studies by a close analysis of literature concerned with confinement in monasteries, anchorholds and prisons. Starting with early medieval sources of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, this article explores Cassidy-Welch’s claim that there is a positive relationship between imprisonment and ‘the promise of eternal liberation through participation in the Christian devotional economy’.¹⁰ It proposes literary examples which support this important idea, as well as some examples that suggest a distrust of the efficacy of this ‘promise’, even in this relatively early writing.

This study goes on to investigate some of the differences between the treatment of incarceration in early and late medieval texts. It argues that the devotional economy which underpins much earlier writing is more problematic in later-medieval writing, and the cell becomes a more contested space. This article suggests that one reason for the later, more overtly historicist developments might be found in the troubles of the fourteenth century, in which the very foundations of Western European society were shaken by plague, famine, revolt and religious reform. While the contained architecture and restrictive ideology of the

⁵ See Guy Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991).

⁶ There are no instances of this meaning in the *Middle English Dictionary* (hereafter *MED*), which lists the examples cited in this paragraph. Cf. *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), s. n. *celle*, 5; *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008–), s. n. *prison cell*, 1, and *cell* 4b (hereafter *OED*).

⁷ Anthony Bale, ‘God’s Cell: Christ as Prisoner and Pilgrimage to the Prison of Christ’, *Speculum*, 91 (2016), 1–35 (p. 6).

⁸ *Enfermements: le cloître et la prison, VIe–XVIIIe siècle. Actes du colloque international organisé par le Centre d’Étude et de Recherche en Histoire Culturelle*, ed. by Julie Claustre, Isabelle Heullant-Donat and Élisabeth Lusset, *Homme et société*, 38 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2011); *Enfermements II: règles et dérèglements en milieu clos (IVe–XIXe siècle)*, ed. by Claustre, Heullant-Donat, Élisabeth Lusset, and Bretschneider Falk, *Homme et société*, 49 (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2015); *Enfermements III: le genre enfermé: hommes et femmes en milieux clos (XIIIe siècle–XXe siècle)*, ed. by Claustre, Heullant-Donat, Élisabeth Lusset, and Bretschneider Falk (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2017).

⁹ See Bale, ‘God’s Cell’, p. 3; Megan Cassidy-Welch, *Imprisonment in the Medieval Religious Imagination, c. 1150–1400* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁰ Cassidy-Welch, p. 4.

cell might invite the text-centred and insular methods of New Criticism (like the cell, the text becomes ‘a small sheltered space, a sanctuary of and for the moment, and adoptable refuge, unusually intimate although often isolated’¹¹), the same cannot be said for later confinement writing. These later texts, I argue, are less insular and better suited to a Historicist method; one with an eye to the social, political and historical milieux in which texts are produced. When justifying the Historicist approach of his own criticism, David Aers explains that ‘historical communities, their economies and their social relations, their discourses and practices [...] provide the collective practices, including language, out of which texts are made’.¹² This article argues that such communities, economies and social relations are conspicuous in later medieval confinement writing when compared with earlier writing. More specifically, in late-fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writing, anxieties concerning the value of the cell are prominent.

A Prisoner of Christ

Medieval references to the cell often carry associations with biblical stories and prisoners. There are countless references to prisons and prisoners in the Bible. Joseph, Samson, Jeremiah, Micaiah, Zedekiah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Silas, Paul, Epaphras, Arisarchus and Junia as well as Jesus himself all experienced periods of imprisonment.¹³ Mark Olson argues that ‘[n]ever, ever, in any part of the Bible are prisons part of God’s way. Always they are used to oppress. Always they are an affront to the divine’.¹⁴ Indeed, Old and New Testament passages as well contemporary Roman authors attest to the terrible conditions of these cells, in which prisoners frequently died from illness, torture, execution or suicide.¹⁵ Yet the uniformly negative commentary on prisons in the Bible is broken by one important figure. Paul the Apostle, the most renowned and reoffending prisoner in the Bible, endowed the prison cell with a very different kind of value. While Paul’s imprisonments were certainly oppressive — he writes that he ‘desire[s] to depart’ (leaving it unclear whether prison or life is meant),¹⁶ he nevertheless chose to stay, not flee, after an earthquake knocked the prison gates open (Acts 16. 25–40). Despite the circumstances in which he wrote, Paul’s prison epistles are emphatically joyful: ‘I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice’, he proclaims, ‘for I know that this shall fall out to me unto salvation’ (Philippians 1. 19). Through suffering and constraint, Paul earned grace and hope as well as a kind of liberty. It is this economy of salvation that underpins the famous and paradoxical notion — one keenly felt in the medieval period — that a prisoner can be ‘the prisoner of Jesus Christ’ (Ephesians 3. 1, Philemon 1. 1, Philippians 1. 13).

While the prison space is clearly one of opportunity in the Pauline exemplar — and one metaphorically exploited by early Christian authorities such as the Desert Hermits — it was not

¹¹ Mark Jeffreys, ‘Anecdotes of a Jar: The Dominion of Spatial Tropes in Recent Criticism of the Lyric’, *Criticism*, 40 (1998), pp. 55–74 (p. 55).

¹² David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 3.

¹³ Christopher Marshall, ‘Prison, Prisoners and the Bible’, Breaking Down the Walls Conference, Matamata (2002) <http://restorativejustice.org> [Accessed 01/04/2020], p. 5.

¹⁴ Mark Olson, ‘No More Prisons, No Not One’, *The Other Side*, 25 (1989), 24–25 (p. 24).

¹⁵ Cf. Matthew 18. 34, Jeremiah 52. 11, Mark 6. 17–29; Marshall, p. 6; C. S. Wansink, *Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul’s Imprisonments* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 27–95.

¹⁶ Philippians 1. 23.

until the early-medieval period that self-imposed enclosure became a spiritual ideal that was more widely available and sought-after. The vocational eremitic retreat of monks and nuns into cloistered living flourished in the twelfth century. In this period of monastic renaissance, physical parameters were essential to monastic life: as Valerie Flint explains, '[s]pace, in framing the monk's activities, seems to sculp[t] and direct them too'.¹⁷ The cloister might not appear to be confined and enclosed, but carceral spaces were central to the very idea of monastic retreat in the medieval imagination. At a semantic level, the word *claustrum* — the word used to denote one cell, the cloister, or the entire monastic space — also means 'enclosure'; it holds associations with 'the bolt, bar or key that secured the gate or door' and further, 'a confined space, the rampart or wall that surrounds a camp or city, a prison or whatever can be considered a prison'.¹⁸ St Bernard was optimistic about the ability of the religious community to find comfort in the carceral space of Clairvaux Abbey in the early to mid-twelfth century:

What is more miraculous than that so many youths, so many young adults, so many of noble birth, in fact all whom I see here, are held as it were in an open prison [*carcere aperto*] without chains, fixed by the fear of God alone, that they may persevere in such penitential torment, beyond human strength, above nature, and against custom. [...] What are these [renunciations of the world] except the manifest proofs of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you?¹⁹

Bernard imagines the whole monastery as a prison of one's choosing. The carceral rhetoric acts as a reminder to novices in particular of the transformative experience of suffering and of the discipline that it has taken to access the liberation of contemplation. However, while St Bernard is able to stress the 'torment' and the 'miraculous' nature of the *carcer* simultaneously, these two disparate states are not so easily reconciled in all monastic writing. A contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Benedictine monk Peter of Celle, proposes that:

A room [*cella*] has one of two qualities, depending on the way of life of those who dwell in it. It is a hard place for carnal people, but a pleasant one for spiritual people. It is a prison for the flesh, a paradise for the mind.²⁰

As Hugh Feiss explains, the word 'cella' here might refer to an individual room in a monastery, to an entire small monastery, or, by a play on words, to Montier-la-Celle Abbey, near Troyes.²¹ While there were certainly monks and nuns who were able to access a mental paradise through claustration, many contemporary sources show that many monastics were evidently unsuited to the cloistered life.²² The twelfth-century miracle story, *The Nun of Watton* (generally believed

¹⁷ Valerie Flint, 'Space and Discipline in Early Medieval Europe', in *Medieval Practices of Space*, ed. by Barbara Hanawalt and Michal Kobiłka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 149–66 (p. 149). See also Paul Meyvaert, 'The Medieval Monastic Claustrum', *Gesta*, 12 (1973), 53–59; Joan Ferrante, 'Images of the Cloister: Haven or Prison?', *Mediaevalia*, 12 (1986), 57–66; Gregorio Penco, 'Monasterium-Carcer', *Studia Monastica*, 8 (1966), 133–43.

¹⁸ Meyvaert, p. 53.

¹⁹ *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons for the Autumn Season*, trans. by Irene Edmons and Rev. Mark Scott, Cistercian Father Series, 54 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), p. 179. Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sancti Bernardi Opera: Sermones II*, ed. by Jean Leclercq and H. M. Rochais, 8 vols (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957–77), v 371.

²⁰ *The Selected Works of Peter of Celle*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Feiss (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 140.

²¹ *Works of Peter of Celle*, p. 16.

²² The Eynsham Customary, for example, lists faults such as carelessness, laziness, drunkenness, chattering, whining, swearing, impudence and offensive gestures as common within the cloister. *The Customary of the*

to be written by the Cistercian abbot Aelred of Rievaulx and based on real events at the Gilbertine nunnery) describes a nun who becomes pregnant within the cloister. She tries to escape, to no avail: '[t]he divine will prevented your effort to leave; you tried again but did not succeed'.²³ The powerful and restrictive 'divine will' here recalls St Bernard's vision of a prison in which people are 'fixed by the fear of God'. It also, however, betrays the fine line between the spiritual challenge of those committed to abiding in one place and the distressing sense of inescapable imprisonment when the individual's will is not totally committed to the *claustrum*.

A comparable idea can be found in a very different text. Doing away with any ambiguity, Jean de Meun (c. 1240–1305) imagines the horrors of the cloister through La Vieille in the *Romance of the Rose*. The old woman suggests that any and every person is ill-suited to the monastic life: she envisages that every monk, like the Nun of Watton, 'comes to repent [his entry into the cloister] afterwards'.²⁴ Even if the *claustrum* seems appealing initially, it will become a *carcer* — and not an open one — before long. La Vieille likens 'the man who goes into a religious order' to the:

foolish fish who passed through the mouth of the trap-net and then, when he wanted to get back out, had to remain, in spite of himself within his prison forever, for there was no chance to go back.²⁵

The analogy between enclosed monks and trapped fish is one from which Bernard of Clairvaux also draws, but in a very different way, perhaps evoking the fishponds which formed the midpoint of many cloisters:

There are also clean fish in the ponds, who serve the Lord in cloisters, in spirit and power. It is right that monasteries should be compared to ponds, where the fish are to some extent enclosed [*incarcerati*] and have no freedom to wander but are always ready for the spiritual feast[.]”²⁶

While La Vieille warns of the horrors of involuntary captivity, St Bernard stresses the value of the enclosed space, both for the contemplative life, and for the promise of eternal liberation to come. Even in this comparatively early period, it is evident that the cloister and prison were indeed equated, and that the relationship between sacred and secular imprisonment need not be viewed dichotomously.

Despite their differences, St Bernard, Aelred of Rievaulx, Peter of Celle and Jean de Meun all rely on metaphor to link the monastery and the prison. There is, however, strong evidence to suggest that the frequent carceral references in Cistercian literature might have taken on more sinister and literal senses for offending monastics. In addition to the daily struggles that any monk or nun might face with the strictures of enclosure in a monastery or convent, some were enclosed within certain spaces as punishment and by force. Guy Geltner and Megan Cassidy-Welch describe the practice of *detrusio* (penal cloistering) and the structural integration of

Benedictine Abbey of Eynsham in Oxfordshire, ed. by Antonia Granse (Siegburg: Schmitt, 1963), pp. 83–84; see also Flint, p. 152.

²³ Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Nun of Watton*, trans. by John Boswell, in Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 452–58.

²⁴ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Charles Dahlbergh (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971 [repr. 1995]), ll. 13995–14000.

²⁵ de Lorris and de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, ll. 13949–76.

²⁶ Bernard of Clairvaux, p. 252; cf. *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, v 429.

penal prison cells for both laymen and monastics into all Cistercian houses by the beginning of the thirteenth century: 'Cistercian monasteries *did* have locked doors and chained inmates [...] some monks [and nuns, we should add], at least, did not voluntarily choose to remain in the monastery'.²⁷

A strict and tangible enclosure is keenly felt in anchoritic literature. Aelred of Rievaulx's *De Institutione Incolarum* (c. 1160), for example, carefully outlines the total enclosure of anchoritic women, as a wilful sacrifice which will facilitate unification with God.²⁸ Aelred's guide was a direct influence upon the anonymous thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* in which carceral language proliferates.²⁹ The heart, for example, is an enclosure: "'Wið alles cunnes warde,'" [with all kinds of guarding], the author follows Proverbs 4. 23, "'wite wel þin heorte, for sawle lif is in hire" - 3ef ha is wel iloket' ["keep your heart well, for the soul's life is in it", if it is well locked up]'.³⁰ The words 'iloket' and 'warde' here evoke something of the prison, and 'warde' could even mean 'a guarded or fortified area' and further, 'a cell; a secured section of a prison'.³¹ In addition to the enclosure of the heart, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* suggests the spirit is 'iput in a prisun, bitund [enclosed] in a cwalm-hus' (3.312), where 'cwalm-hus' has the sense of 'a prison; especially a prison for those about to be put to death'.³²

The carceral imagery of this earlier anchoritic writing complies with the Pauline exemplar and Cassidy-Welch's suggestions that the cell offers 'the promise of eternal liberation through participation in the Christian devotional economy'. Often, in fact, this 'economy' is often described in monetary terms. One analogy in *Ancrene Wisse*, which likens a sinner to a prisoner in a debtor's prison is particularly apt. See this example:

A mon þe leie i prisun [ant] ahte muche rancun ne o nane wise ne schulde ut, bute hit were to hongin, ear he hefde his rancun fülleliche ipaiet – nalde he cunne god þonc a mon the duste uppon him of peonehes a bigurdel for-te reimin him wið ant lesen him of

²⁷ Guy Geltner, 'Detrusio: Penal Cloistering in the Middle Ages', *Annali di Storia di Firenze*, 3 (2008), 9–30; Megan Cassidy-Welch, 'Incarceration and Liberation: Prisons in the Cistercian Monastery', *Viator*, 32 (2001), 23–42 (p. 24; emphasis mine). See also Cassidy-Welch, *Monastic Spaces and their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries*, Medieval Church Studies, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001).

²⁸ 'Voluntarium ho sacrificium est; *De Institutione Incolarum*', ed. by C. H. Talbot, in Aelredus Rievallensis, *Opera Omnia*, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1971), 637–82 (p. 650).

²⁹ It is worth noting that in 1298, between the dates *De Institutione Incolarum* and *Ancrene Wisse* were likely written, Pope Boniface VIII decreed the *Periculoso*. Written in response to an alleged growing licentiousness amongst nuns of all orders (and, it seems, an increasing misogyny more generally), this canon law ordered a new and more severe enclosure of religious women than had previously been demanded in the Western Church. 'Physical, rather than spiritual, claustration became the [female] monastic ideal', explain James Brundage and Elizabeth Makowski; it heralded an architecture of 'barred windows, locked doors, foreboding external walls': James A. Brundage and Elizabeth M. Makowski, 'Enclosure of Nuns: The Decretal *Periculoso* and its Commentators', *Journey of Medieval History*, 20 (1994), 143–55 (p. 153). While earlier claustration regulations had sought to provide a place of safety for contemplation, the *Periculoso*, Brundage and Makowski argue, was concerned above all with isolating nuns as punishment for their fallen nature, and with drawing them away from opportunities for fresh sin. In this way, the cell of the female monastic after the *Periculoso* is harder to separate from the type of strict enclosure that was specifically used for penal purposes in male monasteries. This movement towards a stricter enclosure helps to contextualise the increase in the language of enclosure in *Ancrene Wisse*.

³⁰ *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402 with Variants from other Manuscripts*, ed. by Bella Millett, Early English Text Society, original series, 325–26, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 2005–2006), I part 2, ll. 3–5. Translations are from *Ancrene Wisse: Guide for Anchoresses*, ed. and trans. by Hugh White (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 27. All further references are to these editions of the texts, with chapter and line numbers, or page numbers, given in the text.

³¹ MED, s. n. warde, 3a; 3d.

³² MED, s. n. qualm-hous, 1d.

pine, thah he wurpe hit ful hearde azeines his heorte? Al þe hur[t] were forȝeten for þe gleadnesse. O þis ilke wise we beoð alle i prisun her, ant ahen Godd greate deattes of sunne. (3.98–104)

[A man who lay in prison and owed a great ransom and who was quite unable to get out, unless to be hanged, before he had paid the ransom in full – would he not be very grateful to a man who threw at him a purse of pennies with which to buy himself out and free himself from suffering? Even if he threw it very hard against his heart, all the hurt would be forgotten because of the gladness. In this same way we are all in prison here and owe God great debts for sin (p. 63)]

The ransom, the author explains, is to redeem ourselves and clear the spiritual — not material — debts we owe to God. Despite some inevitable painful suffering, a life of confined penance is shown to be a positive force and cause of gladness. In a similar vein, Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–1416) applies the notion of ‘the profit of solitary liuyng’ to the anchorhold: ‘thi living is penance profitable. This place is prison, and this life is penance’.³³ In both these cases, points about the situation of all sinners, or even all of humanity, are given a specific poignance in the context of the prison-like anchorhold.

The points of tension concerning voluntary and involuntary incarceration that are evident in monastic writing are present in the anchoritic tradition, too. Like a monastic cell, an anchorhold could prove to be a haven or a *carcer*, depending on the state of mind of the occupant. One striking example comes from the letters concerning the enclosure of Christina Carpenter which were exchanged between the Bishop of Winchester and the Deacon of Guildford. In 1329, the ‘pious’ Christina chose ‘to endure perpetual enclosure’ ‘in all sanctity and chastity’.³⁴ Yet a letter dated 1332 makes clear that Christina, ‘wishing to return to her former place and established way of life’, fled from her anchorhold.³⁵ Her actions compelled a startling shift in both Winchester’s tone and his attitude towards the space of the cell. Where formerly Christina’s anchorhold was a place of opportunity to ‘serve Almighty God to greater profit’, post-escape it is a place in which:

Christina shall be thrust down into the said reclusory and that, with suitable care and competent diligence, duly reinstated she might know from your discretion how nefarious was that sin that she committed.³⁶

For the regretful anchoress, like the ill-suited monk or nun, the cell sheds its metaphorical value and becomes a very real prison space in which she is enclosed and guarded for the rest of her life.

A pressure on the ‘devotional economy’

Thus far, we have seen the overlap of anchoritic, monastic and prison spaces, and some of the tensions that surround the philosophy of the cell even in this relatively early writing. This

³³ *Julian of Norwich: Revelations of Divine Love: The Short Text and the Long Text*, ed. by Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Long Text, Chapter 77, ll. 29–30.

³⁴ ‘The Letters Concerning the Enclosure of Christina Carpenter’, in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. by Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 221–24 (pp. 221–22). The original letters are recorded in the register of Bishop John de Stratford (1323–1333), Hampshire Records Office, MS21M65/A1/5, f. 46v and f. 76r.

³⁵ ‘Letters Concerning the Enclosure of Christina Carpenter’, p. 223.

³⁶ ‘Letters Concerning the Enclosure of Christina Carpenter’, p. 224.

article now considers how these tensions manifest in later-medieval writing, in the time after about 1350. It argues that communities and social relations are more conspicuous parts of later-medieval writing. In particular, issues of work, productivity and purpose come to the fore of later-medieval writing in a way that puts pressure upon the Christian devotional economy which is conventional in earlier texts, and a key part of the ideals of confinement.

This article suggests that one reason for a general shift in the philosophy of the cell can be found in the troubles of the fourteenth century; it does not, however, draw a precise correlation between contemporary historical events and late-medieval confinement writing. In England (as well as in the rest of Europe), significant events including the Great Famine, the Great Cattle Plague, the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War and the Peasants' Revolt resulted in 'greatly changed circumstances': demographic collapse, political instabilities and religious upheaval.³⁷ Such events instigated a new interest in the age-old debate over what constitutes a positive engagement with the community, particularly in terms of labour.³⁸ Given the seriously decreased size of the workforce after the Black Death (estimates range from a 30% to 50% reduction), from the mid-fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth century, labour was much scarcer and consequently, it held an increased social value. This meant that, in the much-changed post-plague society, as Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel explain, 'work arguably shaped social identity to a much greater extent than in earlier or later times'.³⁹ As many have noted, particularly in relation to what is conventionally known as the Peasants' Revolt, the hardships of the fourteenth century saw a rise in people who were aware of their increased social, political and financial power as individual players in a diminished workforce. Majorie McIntosh describes how there was an increase in the number of people who were 'ready to resist outside demand which might limit their autonomy and hence their prosperity'.⁴⁰ In juxtaposition to such independent and self-interested behaviour was a trend which stressed the importance of socially responsible living and the need to contribute — in a very material sense as well as a spiritual sense — to the community. A case in point is the eponymous character of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370–1386), who works for the 'commune profit'.⁴¹ The numerous (and unsuccessful) post-plague labour ordinances, which had a great deal of influence over the contemporary debate, also engage with ideas of selfishness, by criticising people for acting 'in the interests of their own ease and greed', thus leading to the 'impoverishment of all members of the said commons' (1351 Statute of Labourers).⁴² Within this general milieu, the solitary figure becomes noteworthy. Around 1405, the author of *Dives and Pauper* (1405–1410) complains of the man who 'wil ben his owyn man & folwynn his owyn fantasys'. Such people:

³⁷ Aers, p. 9.

³⁸ For more information, see *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. by James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg and W. M. Ormrod (York: York Medieval Press, 2000).

³⁹ 'Introduction', in *The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labour in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 1–15 (p. 1).

⁴⁰ Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering 1200–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 136–37; see also Aers, particularly pp. 1–19.

⁴¹ The word appears a number of times across the A, B and C texts of *Piers Plowman* – see, for instance, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. by Derek Pearsall (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), Prologue ll. 169, 186 and 204; 4.119. While Langland criticises some, he does allow for *good* hermits. For context, see 'Piers Plowman and the Problem of Labour', in *The Problem of Labour*, pp. 101–22.

⁴² R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 64.

despysyn her souereynys, her doom & her gouernance ne 3euyn no tale of Goddis lawe ne of londys lawe ne of holy chirche ne han men of virtue ne of dignete in worchepe but for pride han hem in dispyt and ben besy to worchepyn himself in hyndryng of opere.⁴³

The rhetoric of ‘Goddis lawe’, ‘holy chirche’ and ‘worchepe’ invites a comparison between the self-interested figure and religious figures who live in physical isolation from the wider community. Albeit for different reasons, both secular and spiritual individuals are ‘ready to resist outside demand’.

Another element of contemporary social debate concerned the very nature of different kinds of work. The mid-fourteenth to the end of the fifteenth century saw a growing distrust over the extent to which contemplative, non-material labour such as preaching, praying and the hearing of confessions could be considered ‘work’ at all. Contemporary religious orders were not unaffected by this social climate. Late-medieval ecclesiastical satires condemn monks ‘with a unified stereotype’; a ‘distaste for work, whether manual or intellectual’.⁴⁴ There is a parallel between the criticism of the misanthropic figure in the passage above and the attack on Carmelite Friars in *Piers the Plowman’s Creed* (anon., c. 1393–1401), for example. Carmelites supposedly had a particularly spiritual focus and their work of prayer, community and service was primarily contemplative, but in the eyes of the ‘Menoure’ (Franciscans), ‘Carmes [...] ben but jugulers and japers’.⁴⁵ Like the solitary entrepreneurs who ‘3euyn no tale of Goddis lawe’, the Carmelites ‘lyven more in lecherie and lieth in her tales | Than suen any god liife’.⁴⁶ The medieval Carmelite order had a complex relationship with confinement. The early Carmelites were hermits — like anchorites, they lived in separate cells and they observed vows of silence, seclusion, and devoted themselves to prayer and meditation⁴⁷ — but in England in 1247, the order was transformed into one of mendicant friars. While some aspects of eremitical life remained, such as living and praying in separate cells, the Carmelites could also leave their abodes and engage with society. In *Piers the Plowman’s Creed*, it is the contemplative and confined work of the Carmelites that is attacked. The Franciscans suggest that this enclosure, which has lost its monastic ideal, has no real value to the community: furtively and slyly, the Carmelites ‘lyrken in her selles, | And wynnyn werldliche god, and wasten it in synne’.⁴⁸ A similar point is made in another Lollard text, *Jack Upland* (c. 1390), although this time, ‘al the fyve ordrys’ are under scrutiny.⁴⁹ Jack castigates those ‘idil men’ —

⁴³ *Dives and Pauper*, ed. by P. H. Barnum, Early English Text Society, Original Series, 275, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), i 357. For more information about the link between labour conditions and Lollard theology, see Chris Given-Wilson, ‘The Problem of Labour in the Context of English Government, c. 1350–1450’, in *The Problem of Labour*, pp. 85–100 and, for more context, Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁴⁴ Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 26.

⁴⁵ ‘Piers the Plowman’s Creed’, in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. by James Dean, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-piers-the-plowmans-crede>> [accessed 01/03/2020], l. 43.

⁴⁶ ‘Piers the Plowman’s Creed’, ll. 83–84.

⁴⁷ Andrew Jotischky, *The Carmelites and Antiquity: Mendicants and their Pasts in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 10.

⁴⁸ Jotischky, ll. 84–85.

⁴⁹ ‘Jack Upland’, in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. by James Dean, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991) <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-jack-upland>> [accessed 01/03/2020], l. 68.

'hidde Iopcritis' — who live 'closid [...] as fro the world in wallis of stoon, cloistris, and sellis' when they 'schulden have laboured in the world in help of alle thre partis of Cristis Chirche'.⁵⁰ Rather than a specific form of enclosure, the very idea of confinement itself which bolsters the antifraternal attack here. The particular use of enclosed spaces in these satires, as well as the pejorative way in which the cell is conflated with false work, is striking. Much more than in the examples of earlier confinement writing, it indicates a departure from the ideal Pauline notion that spiritual imprisonment is 'fruitful labour' for others and part of a beneficial Christian economy of salvation.⁵¹

Perhaps the rhetoric of such Lollard criticism ought to be expected as it fits with many other Lollard tenets. The 'closid' cell and the type of devotion that it represents contradicts the 'open' Lollard ideal in which divine intervention and understanding are accessible 'for comoun profyt of Cristene soulis'.⁵² The Lollard 'Sermon of Dead Men' alludes to this while using the cloister as a metaphor to argue against exclusive access to the Word of God; the Gospel is too important to be 'claspid vp, ne closed in no cloyster'.⁵³ Yet less intuitive, and certainly less publicised, were the internal critiques and changing ideals of the cell, work and the community from within spiritual traditions themselves. Within the monastic setting, monks and nuns were aware that after the worst plague years, monasteries and convents were not the strongholds of public support that they once were.⁵⁴ As James Clark argues, larger social doubts about the 'value of monasticism' forced monks and nuns to take 'both their messages and themselves outside into the lay community itself' in a startlingly new effort to 'win back' a public approval that they had previously enjoyed.⁵⁵ Whereas according to traditional eremitic ideals, the link between the monastery and the surrounding community would have been supported by faith alone, the later medieval tradition needed 'both visual' and 'verbal reminder[s] of the monastery's spiritual authority' through measures such as public sermons or processions (for which there is no evidence before 1350).⁵⁶ Monasteries 'adapted their buildings and forms of worship to better accommodate and appeal to the laity outside their walls'.⁵⁷

A similar kind of changed social awareness is evident in the anchoritic tradition, too. Rather than an effort to 'win back' the community, however, a comparison of anchoritic guides from the Early and Late Middle Ages suggests a tangible alteration to the very philosophy of the cell, with implications for the value of enclosure within the anchoritic tradition. As I have explained previously, early-medieval guides like *De Institutione*

⁵⁰ 'Jack Upland', ll. 34, 54, 48–50.

⁵¹ Paul often describes his imprisonment as productive, as in Philippians 1. 19–24, for example.

⁵² 'The Wycliffite Bible: From the Prologue', in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. by James Dean, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), <<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/dean-%20medieval-english-political-writings%3ehttps://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/dean-meditieval-english-political-writings>> [accessed 01/03/2020], l. 276. For the Lollard use of 'opun', see Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 131–41.

⁵³ 'The Sermon of Dead Men', in *Lollard Sermons*, ed. by Gloria Cigman, Early English Texts Society, Original Series, 294 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 207–40 (l. 1152).

⁵⁴ See James Clark, 'Selling the Holy Places: Monastic Efforts to Win Back the People in Fifteenth-century England', in *Social Attitudes and Political Structures in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Tim Thornton (Port Shroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000), pp. 13–32.

⁵⁵ Clark, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Clark, p. 20.

⁵⁷ Clark, p. 14.

Inclusarum and *Ancrene Wisse* prescribe complete enclosure and withdrawal from the world as the truest and most profitable means to connect with God. ‘Hu god is to beon ane’ [‘How good it is to be alone’] the writer of *Ancrene Wisse* exclaims confidently; ‘Godd his dearne runes ant heovenliche privetez schawde his leoveste freond nawt i monne floc, ah dude ther ha weren ane bi ham-seolven’ (3.480–01) [‘God shows his hidden mysteries and heavenly scents to his dearest friends, not in the crowds of men, but when they were alone by themselves’ (p. 75)]. The ideal anchoress must be ‘[b]lake ant unwurð to þe world wiðute’ (2.23–24) [‘black and worthless to the world outside’ (p. 28)]: she cannot be a counsellor; she cannot give material alms (only spiritual ones); she cannot actively help the sick — even her own blood relatives.⁵⁸ These standards were not selfish but ‘approved of across the community’ as ‘an act of love for one’s neighbour, but also to the rendering to God of the debt of praise on behalf of society at large’.⁵⁹ Yet some guides from the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries suggest a different approach to confinement. In contrast to the examples above, Richard Rolle suggests to his recluse in the *Form of Perfect Living* (c. 1348–1349), that material alms-deeds will help to gain spiritual purity.⁶⁰ The fifteenth-century *Myroure of Recluses* (a Middle-English translation of the *Speculum Inclusarum*) suggests that it is ‘vertuous & meritorie to releue’ both ‘þoure blood [relatives]’ and ‘an-oþer strange persone’ in any way when they are ill.⁶¹ In *The Scale of Perfection* (c. 1380–1396), Walter Hilton re-considers how an anchoress should relate to the outside world — ‘hou an ankir schal have hir to hem that comen to hir’.⁶² Hilton’s philosophy of solitude is very different to the total enclosure we have explored in the earlier guides:

though thou be in preiere or in devocioun, that thee thenketh looth for to breek of, for thee thenketh thou schuldest not leve God for mannys speche, me thenketh it is not so in this caas; for yif thou be wise, thou schal not leve God, but thou schal fynde Hym and have Hym and see Him in thyn evene Cristene as wel as in praier.⁶³

For Hilton, it is this type of social consciousness that constitutes productive and enlightened labour: if one ‘worche visili’, ‘comenyng with thyn evene Cristene is not moche agens thee, but helpith thee symtyme’.⁶⁴ Later anchoritic guides such as these suggest greater levels of acceptable — even useful — engagement with the community. In words that echo the changing ideals surrounding enclosure in the contemporary monastic tradition, Mari Hughes-Edwards describes this general shift in the treatment of anchoritic enclosure as a ‘paradoxical reliance upon acceptable social interaction’ as a necessity for the ‘perpetuation’ of the anchoritic tradition.⁶⁵ This comparison between earlier and later-medieval confinement

⁵⁸ For examples, see *Be Wohunge of Ure Laured*, ed. by W. Meredith Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), ll. 242–51; *Ancrene Wisse*, l.197–211.

⁵⁹ Hugh White, p. xi. Such solitariness is, of course, an ideal that can be upheld in literature. In practice, writing such as *Ancrene Wisse* perhaps already gives an indication of how thirteenth-century parishes interacted with their anchorites.

⁶⁰ Richard Rolle, ‘The Form of Perfect Living’, in *The Form of Living and Other Prose Treatises by Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. and trans. by Geraldine Hodgson (London: Baker, 1910), VI.35.

⁶¹ *The Myroure of Recluses*, ed. by Marta Powell Harley (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), pp. 6–7.

⁶² *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, ed. by Thomas Bestul (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), I.2368.

⁶³ *Walter Hilton*, I.2388–91.

⁶⁴ *Walter Hilton*, I.124.

⁶⁵ Mari Hughes-Edwards, ‘“How Good it is to be Alone”? Sociability, Solitude and Medieval English Anchoritism’,

writing suggests a change in both monastic and anchoritic literature to do with the very philosophy of confinement and the way it is valued.⁶⁶

Late-medieval prison writing

This article started by positing evidence to support the connectedness of secular prison cells and spiritual cells. The spiritual tradition drew from the prison cell in order to create meaning, and, as we shall see below, prison cells drew from eremitic cells in turn. It has also suggested that later-medieval literature seems to adopt a more socially-orientated and material value system, which complicates more traditional notions of the 'profit' or 'devotional economy' of contemplative confinement and solitude.

There is evidence that the secular prison space was also affected similar ideas within a shared contemporary social climate, albeit in different ways. To a greater extent than the spiritual material, the late-medieval prison cell often presents different, 'contrarious' philosophies of imprisonment which make the cell seem over-bearing and over-determined.⁶⁷ Through a consideration of different philosophies of imprisonment that are present in late-medieval writing, this article now discusses some of the 'ideological voices of the era' that Mikhael Bakhtin suggests are key to the formation of texts; 'each person's inner world and thought has its stabilised social audience that comprises the environment in which reasons, motives, values and so on are fashioned'.⁶⁸ Just as important, however, is a consideration of the extent to which the restrictive reality of the cell frustrates thinking about how an 'inner world' relates to the 'community'. Rather than a 'stabilised social audience', the late-medieval texts discussed below explore participation and exclusion from value systems more generally, whether it be the Christian devotional economy or something more material.

The least complex of the prison poems discussed, the anonymous *Complaint of a Prisoner Against Fortune* (IMEV 860) from around the mid fifteenth-century (hereafter *Complaint Against Fortune*), provides a useful foil against which to consider other, more problematic, prison poems.⁶⁹ In its entirety, the *Complaint Against Fortune* traces a broad movement from grief to consolation and critics have therefore characterised the poem as 'a Boethian one'.⁷⁰ But while Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (AD 523) did indeed influence much medieval prison writing, even the relatively simple *Complaint Against Fortune* frustrates the Boethian model in such a way that brings into question its utility. Albeit written by a Christian, the earlier stoic work makes no reference to Christ's incarnation, Christian grace or the Christological or Pauline prison exemplars. In contrast, the *Complaint Against Fortune*

Mystics Quarterly, 35 (2009), 31–61 (p. 32).

⁶⁶ Of sixteenth-century anchorites, Mary Erler writes that they 'assumed a central role in the parish's life, making a significant contribution not only spiritually but economically'. Mary Erler, *Reading and Writing During the Dissolution: Monks, Friars, and Nuns 1530–1558* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 16.

⁶⁷ The word 'contrarious' is used by Thomas Usk; *Thomas Usk: The Testament of Love*, ed. by R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998), 1.28; All further references are to this edition, with chapter and line numbers in the text.

⁶⁸ Michel Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, 18th edn (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 259–422 (p. 417).

⁶⁹ *Complaint of a Prisoner Against Fortune*, in *The Kingis Quair and Other Prison Poems*, ed. by Linne R. Mooney and Mary-Jo Arn, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), pp. 176–80. All further references are to this edition, with line numbers in the text.

⁷⁰ Joanna Summers, *Late Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 146.

moves from hopelessness to a distinctly Christian philosophy of the cell which more readily demonstrates traditional monastic and anchoritic ideologies than the Boethian model. Indeed, the poet pointedly negates important Boethian elements at times in favour of a pious Christian message. In the *Complaint*, the corresponding figure to Lady Philosophy would be the allegorical Fortune. Yet whereas Lady Philosophy guides Boethius through every nuance of his understanding in a complex and prolonged dialogue, Fortune appears only once in the *Complaint Against Fortune*, and the speaker finds his own way — one based on faith — to understand the spiritual value of the cell.

Even though the *Complaint Against Fortune* is the prison poem which partakes in the Pauline exemplar most readily, the prisoner's journey to Christian consolation is not easy, and the prisoner struggles to commit to the potential value of the situation. Immediately after he wilfully decides to 'betake' his 'soule to God and Seynt Marie' (l. 61), for example, the prisoner 'grievith' because his fame and his good reputation are lost (ll. 64–65). He is also troubled by the knowledge that he has 'no friende that wil [him] me now visite | In prison here' (ll. 85–86); they have forgotten the corporeal acts of mercy in Matthew 25. The spiritual potential of the cell is overshadowed by the true 'here' and 'now' of the speaker's incarceration.

Nonetheless, however arduous the progression may seem, the true movement of the *Complaint Against Fortune* is towards spiritual solace. The final seven rhyme royal stanzas are a sustained epiphanic realisation of the value of rejecting the world as 'fantasie' (l. 99) and of turning to the Church, Christ, God and Mary. In this way, the prisoner emerges like a contented anchorite or cloistered monk; no longer the reluctant prisoner who lies 'wrongfully [...] thus in prisoun' (l. 23) and bemoans 'hem that accusen' (l. 94), the prisoner comes to trust in a sacred justice system in which 'God chastiseth whom He lovith' (l. 36).

The discomfort of the prison cell here can be read in terms of the devotional economy of eremitic ideals. Of early anchoritic guides, Hugh White writes that the 'practice fulfils the demands of self-denial and suffering [...] it] constantly sees the sufferings of the anchorites in relation to the sufferings of Christ — the suffering is the following of Christ'.⁷¹ The speaker of the *Complaint Against Fortune* even draws a parallel between Christ's suffering 'upon the Crosse' (l. 135) and his own suffering '[h]ere in this lif with meke and contrite hert' (l. 137) — something found in spiritual confinement texts too.⁷² The speaker also, however, conceptualises the wider value of his suffering. Consider the homiletic tone of the passage:

Than best is this world to sette at nought
And mekely suffer al adversité
That may us availe of synnes that we have wrought,
In mede encresyng or relesyng, pardè,
Of peynes whiche in Purgatory be. (ll. 106–10)

No longer a solitary 'I', the speaker writes himself into that community 'that wilbe saved' (l. 38): the faithful 'us' and 'we' that readily accepts punishment for the fallen nature of humanity. Like Part Four of *Ancrene Wisse*, for example (which explains how each enclosed anchoress is a soldier in the army against the devil), 'the Fiende' in the *Complaint Against Fortune* is shown to be something which 'our [collective] soulis [...] trappe' (l. 132) — something that the private passionate effort of the enclosed penitent helps to combat for the greater good of the community. In this light, the personal adversity that characterises the earlier parts of

⁷¹ White, p. xi (emphasis in original).

⁷² Compare, for example, *Wohunge*, ll. 590–95.

the *Complaint* even comes to act as credit in the eventual and communal Christian devotional economy that the poem shares with more traditional monastic and anchoritic writing.

Yet the same cannot be said for George Ashby's *Complaint of a Prisoner in the Fleet* 1463 (hereafter *Complaint in the Fleet*). The significance of this text lies in the way in which the poet draws on spiritual precedent but ultimately fails to trust in the value of spiritual imprisonment. Despite being very different texts, there are several significant parallels between the anonymous *Complaint Against Fortune* and Ashby's *Complaint in the Fleet* which suggest that Ashby was either aware of the earlier prison poem (which circulated in three manuscripts) or the tropes of the genre.⁷³ The lamentations in the *Complaint Against Fortune* that 'wrongfully I lye thus in prison' (l. 34) and 'I have no friende that wil me now visite' (l. 85) are paralleled when Ashby⁷⁴ complains that he is 'in pryson wrongfully, certeyn' (l. 52) and that his 'old acquaintance disdeyned [him] | To vysyte' (ll. 37–38), forgetting the 'werkes of mercy' (l. 41).⁷⁵ Indeed, the majority of the stanzas in Ashby's *Complaint in the Fleet* present the spiritual ideals that are seen in the *Complaint Against Fortune*. Ashby professes to turn to:

[...] obey Hym that ys eternall
And to chaung my lyf to God greable
Both in pacyence and in feyth stable.
Knowyng in serteyn that my punysshying
Ys other whyle for my soule profytable. (ll. 103–07)

This 'profytable' imprisonment, which takes on purgatorial dimensions, implies a participation in the Pauline devotional economy of the cell. Ashby's rich and pious language of purgation is connected to his confinement: 'peraventure within lytyll space' (l. 140), he suggests, will he 'at last comfort have trewleche' (l. 138). In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the primary meaning of 'space' is temporal, but it can also refer to an area or room,⁷⁶ as it does in Julian's awareness of the 'time and space' in which she beheld the revelations.⁷⁷ Ashby, too, seems to share in the absolute reliance on Christ within the cell that characterises early eremitic ideals. The reliance on Christ as the source and provider of all things in confinement is held in Ashby's notion that '[a]ll thynges com of Jhesu, | And nothing without Hym may avayle' (ll. 295–96). Ashby himself even takes on the characteristics of a spiritual guide when, from stanza 18, he turns outwards to address and advise others: '[y]ef thow to pryson or trouble be brought [...] | Kepe pacyence' (ll. 124–27). '[P]acyence', from the Latin *patientia* meaning 'endurance of pain' or 'persistence', occurs fifteen times in the *Complaint in the Fleet*, which again reinforces the notion of the fruitful suffering of spiritual imprisonment.

⁷³ Mooney and Arn, p. 174.

⁷⁴ The poem is peppered with autobiographical detail, e.g. 'George Asshby ys my name, that is greved | By empyrsonment a hole yere and more' (ll. 29–30). The extent to which the narrator ought to be identified with the historical author has attracted critical attention; see especially Summers, pp. 142–69. For the purposes of this essay, I treat the *Complaint in the Fleet* as more or less autobiographical with no notable ironic discrepancy between speaker and writer.

⁷⁵ 'George Ashby: *Complaint of a Prisoner in the Fleet* 1463', in *The Kingis Quair and Other Prison Poems*, ed. by Linne R. Mooney and Mary-Jo Arn, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), pp. 153–63. All further references are to this edition, with line numbers in the text.

⁷⁶ *MED*, s. n. *space*, 8, 9, 12.

⁷⁷ *Shewings*, Long Text. 8.17.

While John Scattergood and Joanna Summers argue that the ‘virtue and value of patience’ is the ‘main theme’ of Ashby’s poem however,⁷⁸ the *Complaint in the Fleet* should not be considered Boethian, or even a poem of ‘repentant, Christological imprisonment’.⁷⁹ Ashby’s *Complaint in the Fleet* is a polyphonic text: alongside the main theme, he also plays upon different and conflicting value systems which imbue the text with a discord that would be out of place in early anchoritic and monastic models. Consider the beginning of the work:

Afore Myghelmas, that tyme of season,
 I was commytted geynst right and reason,
 Into a pryson, whos name the Flete hight,
 By a gret commaundment of a lord
 To whom I must obey for hys gret myght
 Though I cannat therto sadly accord;
 Yet I must hyt for a lesson record,
 Theryn abydyng without help singlere
 Sauf of God and Hys blessyd modyr there. (ll. 6–14)

The ‘lord’ who wields ‘gret’ command here could be secular — perhaps Edward IV himself — or perhaps divine. The latter option, in which Christ is both the enforcer of enclosure and the hope of liberation, recalls the kind of paradoxical spiritual imprisonment of the *carcer* in which devotees are ‘fixed by the fear of God alone’ (Bernard of Clairvaux) or prevented from escaping by ‘[d]ivine power’ (Aelred of Rievaulx). If Ashby is to be seen as a figure of spiritual imprisonment, then the ‘lesson’ that he self-consciously refers to ‘record’ can, as Summers suggests, be seen as ‘a form of sermon’.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the more worldly option marks the initiation of a prolonged rhetoric of opposition between Ashby and his wrongful accusers, in which the ‘lesson’ becomes ‘a public discourse given as proof of legal knowledge during a person’s examination’.⁸¹ To their detriment, Ashby pitches the earthly commander and his supporters against ‘God’, ‘Mary’, himself and the reader. Consider the charged language in the following passage:

But oth or other declaracion
 Coude at no season be herd ne takyn
 But not prayer ne exhortacion
 But of all pité and grace forsakyn,
 Myne enemyes on me awakyn,
 Takyn away hors, money, and goodes,
 Pullyng myn houses downe and gret woodes. (ll. 15–21)

As Ashby casts his ‘enemyes’ outside the Christian values of ‘prayer’, ‘pité’ and ‘grace’, he also recruits rich and pious language to undermine the secular legal grounds upon which the prosecutors might stand. While the words ‘oth’ and ‘exhortacion’ both have specific spiritual meanings, they also have a specific, and separate, secular and legal meanings. An ‘oth’ can be ‘a solemn invocation to God’ or ‘legal proof of someone’s innocence’; an ‘exhortation’ — an emphatic address urging someone to do something — is used in both religious texts

⁷⁸ See, for example, Summers, p. 167 and p. 147, and John Scattergood, ‘George Ashby’s *Prisoner’s Reflections* and the Virtue of Patience’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 37 (1993), 102–09.

⁷⁹ Summers, p. 147. See also Bale, p. 33.

⁸⁰ *MED*, s. n. *lessoun*, 1b.

⁸¹ *OED*, s. n. *lesson*, 1c.

and charters.⁸² It is both secular and spiritual values that are shown to be bypassed or even ignored — not ‘herd ne takyn’. The mention of ‘hors, money, and goodes’ is unequivocally material, but Ashby later complains that ‘[t]he grettest payne’ that he suffers is that he is ‘put to unpayable det’ (ll. 48–49). He draws from the theological metaphor whereby sin and penance are considered debts to be discharged by God whilst also referring to the worldly value system that governs debtors’ prisons. As such examples of counterutterance escalate, it becomes increasingly noticeable that Ashby embraces spiritual ideologies for two purposes: one which co-opts the eremitic precedent of imprisonment, and one which fuels his attack against his unjust imprisonment. The ambivalence at the core of Ashby’s text suggests an awareness of, but necessarily partial participation in, the expectations of the genre and of the spiritual value of imprisonment.

Looking at Ashby’s spiritual professions with an eye of scepticism betrays how ‘feyth stable’ or ‘serteyn’ is, in fact, only posited hypothetically *if* he were to ‘chaung [his] lyf’ to be whole-heartedly ‘greable’ within the spiritual tradition of imprisonment. Consider the final stanza of the *Complaint*:

Pryson properly ys a sepulture
Of lyvyng men with strong lokkes thereon,
Fortyfyed without any rupture,
Of synners a gret castigacion,
Of feythfull frendes a probacion,
Of fre liberte a sharp abstinence,
Lackynge volunté for theyre dew ponaunce. (ll. 344–50)

Coming after two *Amens* and a dedication to God, this explicit is not the culmination of a ‘Boethian *gradus* of ascendance’ but instead a cry of protest against the over-determined and emotionally over-bearing cell.⁸³ Signalling a relapse into the pessimism of the opening, the explicit evokes a cyclical, rather than linear, structure to both the poem and the speaker’s attitude towards imprisonment. In the final three chapters of *De Institutione Inclusarum*, Aelred of Rievaulx suggests that a threefold meditation within the cell which progresses from the past, through the present and to the future will assist one’s confidence in the spiritual value of imprisonment and grace. But unable to transcend his situation in such a way, the past comes back to ‘remembre and revolve in [the] mynde’ (l. 58) of the poet. Ashby also lacks ‘fre liberte’ and ‘volunté’ as well as the anticipation of transformation and resurrection that could transform the oppressive ‘sepulture’ into the kind advocated in *Ancrene Wisse*, in which the prisoner is ‘with Jesu Crist bitund as i sepulcre, biharret as he wes o the deore rode’ (3.563) [‘with Christ as in a sepulchre, confined as he was on the dear cross’ (p. 82)]. Given Ashby’s keen attention to his presence throughout the rest of the poem, the possessive pronoun ‘theyre’ aligns Ashby with the ‘synners’ for whom prison is a ‘gret castigacion’ instead of a faithful enclosed person who might participate in the spiritual value of the cell.

Ashby’s attitude towards imprisonment shows an awareness of the world outside the cell and the value of labour in the community from which he is excluded. Again, it is useful to remember that in Ashby’s contemporary society, work was particularly important; as Uebel and Robertson suggest, ‘work arguably shaped social identity to a much greater extent than

⁸² MED, s. n. *oth*, 1b, 1a; s. n. *exhortacioun*, 1a.

⁸³ Summers, p. 146.

in either earlier or later times'.⁸⁴ Ashby presents his literary identity as he carefully details his role as a clerk under the Lancastrian 'kyng' (Henry VI), 'quene' (Margaret of Anjou) and 'theyre uncle also, | The duk of Gloucetre' (ll. 60–61), by whom he was highly valued — 'cherysshed ryght well' (l. 62). He explains his 'servyce' in full:

Wrytyng to theyre sygnet full fourty yere
 As well beyond the see as on thys syde,
 Doyng my servyce as well there as here,
 Nat sparyng for to go ne for to ryde,
 Havyng pen and inke evyr at my syde,
 As truly as I coude to theyre entent
 Redy to acomplysshe theyre commandment.
 And in theyr servyce I spendyd all my youth,
 And now in pryson throwen in myn age (ll. 64–72)

Ashby does not differentiate between the good 'servyce' of his youth and the imprisonment of his old age as a basis for faith in the Christian devotional economy. Instead, by expounding upon the difference between his good work and the malicious persecutors' work, Ashby's poem develops beyond a rhetoric of opposition and into a pointed self-justification, which contrasts valuable public service against unproductive and anti-social prosecution. A similar note is sounded by Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* (1380s).⁸⁵ Entangled in, and imprisoned because of, turbulent politics London party politics, Usk describes how he worked to achieve 'commen profyte in comynaltie' (l. vi. 553) and that his service would be better employed outside of the cell: 'if me lyst to have grace of my lyfe and frenesse of that prison, I shulde openly confesse howe peace myght ben endused to enden al the firste rancours' (l. vi. 565–66). Despite the eighty years that separate Usk's *Testament* and Ashby's *Complaint*, both texts demonstrate self-exoneration, a keen awareness of different kinds of work, and an anxiety concerning the limited capacity for performing valuable public work from within the cell.

The prison writing of Charles, the Duke of Orléans (1394–1465), shares many of the concerns of the *Testament* and the *Complaint*. More than Usk and Ashby, however, Charles offers a conspicuous assessment of both spiritual and secular imprisonment, as well as an overt questioning of the value of the cell. Charles was seized at the battle of Agincourt and taken to England in 1415, aged twenty-one. Charles wrote both French and English poetry during his imprisonment. Almost all of his English poems are contained in a single manuscript: British Library MS Harley 682. While Charles was certainly not a victim of claustrophobic confinement — in some ways, Charles' time under arrest 'is hardly to be equated with imprisonment' at all,⁸⁶ and let alone within a cell — both real and metaphorical cellular spaces and solitary living play a crucial role in *Fortunes Stabilnes*. For the majority of the Harleian sequence, Charles' prison motif borrows from the courtly tradition in which the lover suffers in a metaphorical prison of love-longing: he is a 'caytjif', with Fortune as the guard (l. 1440); a 'martir [...] for love and a prisonere' (l. 1442); the speaker lives in the 'prison of Grevous Displeasance' (ll. 1012, 21, 30, 36) and the 'prison of Daunger' (l.

⁸⁴ Uebel and Robertson, p. 1.

⁸⁵ For more on Usk's text and imprisonment, see Joanna Summers, 'Thomas Usk and The Testament of Love', in *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 24–60. See also William Quinn, 'Thomas Usk's Imprisoned Voice', *Essays in Criticism*, 70 (2020), 275–301.

⁸⁶ *Fortunes Stabilnes*, p. 15.

4610).⁸⁷ Wounded through the eye and to the heart by Beauty, the speaker becomes a 'feudal vassal' whose 'bond' must be 'rent' (l. 2892) to Venus: 'lijk a prisonere, | [He] must abie the oth þat [he] swore' (l. 6280).⁸⁸ When the speaker's lover dies suddenly and prematurely (Ballade 55), however, he breaks away from the prison of love *topos* and begins a series of poems of mourning.

Ballade 59, which bears much resemblance to Christine de Pizan's short ballade 'Seulete sui' (after 1389), is a striking example of the importance of a very different kind of solitary retreat in this part of the sequence:

Alone am y and wille to be alone
 Alone, withouten pleasure or gladnes
 Alone in care, to sighe and grone
 <Alone>, to wayle the deth of my maystres
 Alone, which sorrow will me neuyr cesse.
 Alone, y curse the lijf y do endure.
 Alone this fayntith me my gret distress,
 Alone y lyue, an ofcast creature. (ll. 2054–61)

Although voluntary, the philosophy behind this lonely impulse is clearly not spiritual and it shows nothing of a promise of liberation through the Christian devotional economy. Charles even inverts the contemporary mystical use of the word 'creature' (to refer to an inclusiveness that binds God and all of creation) into something that stresses his lack of ability to participate in a community. As the narrative continues, however, the theological resonances of the speaker's condition intensify and, significantly, they do so in parallel with a questioning of the value of his self-contained existence and the value of the type of work that a solitary figure can undertake. Charles articulates this questioning through a conversation with Venus at a pivotal moment in the Harleian sequence. "But how lede ye yowre lijf?" (l. 4799) Venus demands. Her question is more than polite inquiry: the goddess has come to challenge the speaker on his occupation since leaving her service.

Charles' answer to Venus' question is startling. Finding an analogous relationship between his uncertain condition and a spiritual one, the speaker posits himself '[a]s an ancre' (l. 4802). Like a good anchorite, the speaker wears penitential 'clothis blake' (l. 4802), undertakes daily devotions, 'dwelle[s] a-sondir' from others (l. 4821) and suffers the 'paynfulle' life patiently (l. 4855) — '[c]ertis, to wrappe me in a sepulture | Me suitteth bet, as wisely god me saue | Then in my armes a newe ladi haue!' (ll. 4894–96). Also like an anchorite, his choice is irrevocable:

"Unto this paynfull, ded professioun
 Mi hert and y are swore vnto my last
 Withouten chaunge or newe opynyoun [...].

Thus have y told yow my poore ancre lijf
 And what professioun that y am bounde.
 How thenke ye lo nys hit contemplatif?" (ll. 4855–64)

⁸⁷ Like Ashby, Charles plays with an imprisoned persona that has an oblique relationship to himself. For a discussion of the autobiographical nature of the text, see Summers, pp. 90–107.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of the feudal themes in *Fortunes Stabilnes*, see E. A. Jones, 'O Sely Ankir', in *Anchorites in Their Communities*, ed. by Cate Gunn and Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), pp. 13–34 (p. 15).

True to character as the Goddess of Love, Venus is appalled, and she urges the speaker to ‘chaunge’ [...] þat thought’ (l. 4868) and ‘chese [...] a lady newe’ (l. 4876). Yet her attitude speaks to more than the loss of a love narrative: both Venus and the speaker point towards the complicated nature of eremitic isolation within late-medieval society. Rather than a genuine claim to spiritual solitude, the speaker’s alleged ‘professioun’ can be seen as a desperate attempt to justify a solipsistic practice. It shows a keen awareness — one which relates to the discussion of anchoritic and monastic spaces above — of the need to be ‘bounde’ to a community with a value system in which isolation is purposeful. To Venus, however, this ‘contemplatijf’ existence is deeply questionable: ‘ye are not worth at all!’ (l. 4898), she contends; ‘yowre labour vaylith not’ (l. 4961). Venus’ rejection of the speaker’s enthusiastic claim that he leads an ‘ancre’ life, which she assumes will be shared by ‘folk in generall’, signals a common lack of trust in the efficacy of ‘contemplatijf’ retreat as a licit and valuable ‘professioun’.

The exchange between the speaker and Venus implicates the value of eremitic living in other ways, too. Charles twists the Boethian model of consolation when Venus advises the struggling ‘contemplatijf’ to remember ‘that ye ar a man | And haue of nature als yowre lymys goode’ (ll. 4869–70), with a possible pun on genitals. Aware of, but ultimately unconvinced by, the spiritual, Boethian or amatory precedents which could potentially validate his isolated existence, the speaker despairs: “dwelle y so like a masid [distracted; troubled] man | That hath abidyng and wot no where” (ll. 4814–15). “Ye do yowre self confound!” (l. 4865) says Venus, in both a playful jab at the narrative persona and a nod to Charles’ complicated notion of imprisonment.

Without a legitimate connection to any authenticating value system, the prison in *Fortunes Stabilnes* becomes psychologically significant. At moments in which the worth of his physical imprisonment is most at question, Charles suggests entrapment within a brain cell — ‘one of the compartments into which the brain was believed divided’.⁸⁹ Anna McHugh explains how the imagery of the brain cell underpins the ‘basic mental universe’ of *Ancrene Wisse*: ‘the human mind and its innate desire to know God are figured as an enclosed space, miming the containment of God’s nature and providing an image of a place where the human seeks and finds the divine’.⁹⁰ The mental entrapment of *Fortunes Stabilnes*, however, is altogether more troubling. The speaker bemoans the closed ‘windowes of [his] derkid eyne’ (ll. 1608, 1616, 1624, 1628) which, if they were opened, would ‘light’ ‘the chambir of [his] thought trewly’ (ll. 1609–10) and stir his ‘fowle and sluggish slogarde’ (l. 1613). Implicitly, as Linne Mooney and Mary-Jo Arn explain, ‘the logic of his poetry often seems to work against itself which leads the speaker to an impasse’; the resultant feeling of mental stasis that results ‘is a perfect reflection of imprisonment, where a man of longing is by some power or other kept from that which he longs for and unable to effect changes that would ameliorate his suffering’.⁹¹ The speaker is not only incapable of the desire for God,⁹² but stuck in a torpor that makes any kind of lively spiritual seeking and finding, as described in *Ancrene Wisse*, impossible.

⁸⁹ MED, s. n. *celle*, 6.

⁹⁰ Anna McHugh, ‘Inner Space as Speaking Space in *Ancrene Wisse*’, in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold*, pp. 83–95 (p. 85).

⁹¹ Mooney and Arn, p. 121.

⁹² See Sarah Stanbury for the link between sight and desire, in Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

To a degree, this mental stasis presented by Charles can be likened to *acedia*. From the Greek, ἀκηδία, meaning indifference, listlessness, apathy; literally ‘non-caring-state’,⁹³ *acedia* refers to spiritual sloth or weariness. The state has a long and complex relationship with living and writing in confinement, and it is often warned against in early-medieval monastic and anchoritic writing. Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, is aware of the possibility for the ‘waking sleep’ (cf. Charles’ ‘waking dremys sad’ (l. 4640)) of *acedia* within the *claustrum*.⁹⁴ Aelred of Rievaulx, too, talks of ‘slouthe and ydelnesse’ (l. 224), and the *Ancrene Wisse* of ‘accidie’ within the cell. Yet whereas these authorities prescribe spiritual remedies — ‘lengthy Vigils’,⁹⁵ a ‘multitude of psalms in thy pryuat prayer’ (Aelred, ll. 219–20), and ‘gastelich gleadschipe ant frovre of gleadful hope’ (*Ancrene Wisse*, 4.1320–01) [‘spiritual gladness and the consolation of glad hope’ (p. 133)] — to prevent *acedia* taking hold, Charles prescribes work that is much more manual. What emerges from Charles’ treatment of *acedia* in the Harleian sequence is not a likeness to the spiritual ideals of the Early Middle Ages, but a harking back to a much older custom.

John Cassian, an early Desert Father who later became the founder of the Abbey of Saint-Victor at Marseille, describes the effects of *acedie* — a generalised abjection or ‘weariness or distress of the heart’ (‘taedium sive anxietatem cordis’) — in Book 10 of the *Institutes of the Monastic Life* (ll. 420–429).⁹⁶ He explains that this vice is especially dangerous to solitaries: when it has taken hold of some unhappy hermit, it produces ‘dislike of the place [and] disgust with the cell’ (*horrorem loci, fastidium cellae*, 2). Sounding much like Charles d’Orléans so many centuries later, the monk afflicted by *acedia*:

often groans because he can do no good while he stays there, and complains and sighs because he can bear no spiritual fruit [...]; he complains that he is cut off from spiritual gain, and is of no use in the place [...]. He talks too about some dutiful and religious offices; [...] that it would be a real work of piety to [‘govern others and be useful to a great number of people’]; and that he ought piously to devote his time to these things instead of staying uselessly and with no profit in his cell. (2)

In a metaphorical connection to the prison cell, Cassian extols Paul the Apostle (the renowned prisoner) who laboured with his own hands as a remedy to the idleness associated with *acedia*. In the Acts of the Apostles, Cassian explains, Paul not only taught this, but actually practised it himself (17), that he might set an example of good work (10). This material labour is shown not only to be beneficial on a personal level (an idle person will always be spiritually poor (21)), but also to have a tangible effect on the community: the labourer will not be a burden to others (9) because by working with his hands, he produce something useful (17).

Like Cassian, Charles d’Orléans prioritises manual labour over spiritual work, and he shows a deep-set desire to labour for communal profit. The speaker of *Fortunes Stabilnes* even posits his roundels as edifying ‘swettist mete’ (l. 3120) which are painstakingly crafted

⁹³ OED, s. n. *acedia*.

⁹⁴ See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. by C. Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), p. 67.

⁹⁵ Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. 67.

⁹⁶ John Cassian, *Institutes*, in ‘Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers’, ed. and trans. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350710.htm>> [accessed 01/03/21], X.i. All further English quotations are to this edition, with chapter numbers (which correspond to the Latin original) given in the text. For the Latin original, see John Cassian, *De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium uitiorum remediis*, Library of Latin Texts: Series A, Clavis Patrum Latinorum, 513 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010).

for other people: ‘with laboure y haue it for hem bought’ (l. 3132). It is in the same vein that Usk describes his *Testament* as ‘swetande travayle’ (Pr. 10), and Ashby describes the ‘labour of thys werk’ of the *Complaint* (l. 318). While they all posit conceits that appear to militate against *acedia*, however, Charles d’Orléans, Usk and Ashby alike appear unable to truly escape a depressed state. In a way that could feed into the contemporary climate in which the nature of labour itself is so important, these late-medieval prison writers are particularly dogged by a disbelief in their ability to contribute and produce in a way that they deem satisfactory. ‘As he that no thing may profite, | What do y now but wayle and crie?’ (ll. 4249–50, 4255–56, 4261–62), bemoans the speaker of *Fortunes Stabilnes*. Usk, too, complains of the unfruitful ‘wytless, thoughtful, syghtlesse lokyng’ that he ‘endure[s] in this derke prisone, caytysned fro frendshippe and acquayntaunce’ (1.1.11–12) in a way which articulates Ashby’s relapse into sorrow at the end of the *Complaint in the Fleet*. While Ashby, Usk and Charles d’Orléans all try to justify their imprisonment, they also demonstrate what is at stake if a prisoner is unable to partake in any kind of value system — metaphorical or material — that will make sense of their confinement.

In conclusion, the wide range of sources in this article have been employed to suggest, firstly, that there is a relationship between the discourses of spiritual and secular imprisonment in the Middle Ages. Secondly, the broad comparison between the High and the Late Middle Ages has demonstrated that a positive and spiritual philosophy of the cell (in which imprisonment is divinely justified and beneficial both to the prisoner and the Christian community at large) is widely appreciated in early-medieval texts, but that this is affected by the changed circumstances of the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In late-medieval writing in confinement, wider social values — one of which is work and a material participation in the community — is felt prominently. The late-medieval prison writers Ashby, Usk and Charles D’Orléans draw on many different philosophies of confinement. Despite this, the complicated nature of imprisonment in their texts suggests that, although aware, they remain ultimately unconvinced by any of the precedents which have the potential to validate their confinement.