Epilogue

At the opening of this project, I suggested that the medieval is a story modernity tells about itself. In the medieval, modernity finds evidence of its own sophistication, having surmounted its past and being thereby assured of a future. These narratives can simplify, or flatten, the sophistication of premodern practices and conventions: Such practices and conventions were not after all a failure to accomplish what the modern era accomplished but an accomplishment of something else. In the present study, I have shown that early English devotional literature does not fail to be affectively engaged but rather engages different conventions to evoke different devotional affects. But we must consider, as we reevaluate modernity's story, that scholars of the Middle Ages have been coauthors of that story, too. It is medievalists who have at times encouraged their contemporaries not to take the "rude exclamations" of medieval poetry too seriously,[1] or to not read too closely into poetic formulae.[2] Those most dedicated to unlocking the literature's meaning have at times been the first to suggest there is nothing more to it.

In the final pages of *Adam Usk's Secret*, Steven Justice considers the pitfalls of literary historical method – after all, asking us to consider the meaning of any and all features of a text invites us to consider all of them meaningful.[3] To say of a text, there is nothing more to it, flies in the face of the critical practice that has persisted from New Criticism through myriad critical and theoretical turns since. It may hinder understanding, after all, to ascribe more significance to a text than it can bear, or to overly complicate what others had oversimplified. Yet for Old and early Middle English, scholars have often taken nearly the opposite approach, casting doubt on the sophistication of the verse, assuming unusual features to be fumbles rather than innovations. It would be all too easy now to take an equal and opposite approach to that practice, making mountains out of every molehill. After all, every reference to a "feeling word" cannot be evidence of affective piety in and of itself.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:22:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009390279.007

Instead, I have attended to larger patterns of affective reference: conventions that take place in specific devotional literary contexts, beyond the choice of a single word in a single poem. And I have attended to the critical conventions that we use when approaching these works, including the suspicion that there is not so much going on in Old English as there was in the Late Antique traditions it draws upon, or in the high to Late Medieval and Early Modern ages that succeed it. In Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe's essay "Deaths and Transformations," the "deaths" of the title are those of late Old English poetic protagonists, but not, as she demonstrates, those of the poetic forms that memorialize them.[4] Searching for the "rise" of a particular practice or convention derives in part from the practical necessities of academic historical specialization.[5] But as we see when we work across the conventional bounds of that specialization, there are dangers in progressive narratives of history. As literary historians, we cannot assume that the most sophistication possible is the sophistication that will remind us of ourselves and the styles of our own era; at the same time, we must also guard against romanticizing either the styles or the stylists of centuries past. I have endeavored to work against these tendencies within the parameters of this study, and as a result this discussion has ranged from the stoicism of the Old English *Dream of the Rood* through depictions of Paradise and Judgment, through the long tradition of Soul and Body lyrics in England that stretches across the Conquest, and finally through verses on Mary and Christ ranging from Old to Middle English.

In Chapters 1–3, I considered the affective dynamics of pre-Conquest poems, considering the poetic conventions of three devotional topoi: the suffering of Christ and the saints, depictions of paradise, and soul and body monologues looking forward to the Last Judgment. Each of these contexts reveals a different combination of the conventions of homiletic, biblical, and devotional discourse with poetic formulae, producing a new hybrid aesthetic evoking the affective associations of both original sets of conventions. Chapter 1, on suffering, reveals how the associations of the vernacular topos of loyalty to one's lord enables the displacement of holy suffering onto a servant figure, rather than the saints themselves. Chapter 2, on paradise, considers how vernacular conventions for depicting treasure use a familiar affective association to evoke affective response to the ineffable, but how that very potential reveals the danger of losing that inexpressible joy as well. Finally, Chapter 3, on soul and body monologues, argues that the evocation of shame heightens the poetic elegiac topos of loss while looking forward to the more profound separations occasioned by the final judgment. This chapter links to the first of the final cluster of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:22:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009390279.007

chapters (Chapters 4–5), considering the ways these hybrid conventions shift and persist across the Conquest. Chapter 4 considers the specifically English tradition of soul and body monologues, rather than dialogues, and how the Old English conventions seen in Chapter 3 extend not only into Middle English but into Latin and French productions of post-Conquest England. This persistence is marked, but not unique: Chapter 5 reckons with the real changes in devotional poetry as the Old English traditions are supplanted by French poetic conventions and mix with new devotional habits, but reveals how even in this context the tropes of pre-Conquest poetry still appear. Devotional poetics across the Conquest is characterized by the hybridization of broader devotional topoi and vernacular poetic convention, but the conventions available on either side of the Conquest continue to shift and change. In these changes, the associated affects also shift to those we have more readily recognized, but they cannot be said to arise anew or even to dramatically increase in importance as scholarly narratives have sometimes held that they do.

Form can tell stories, and can rewrite cultural histories. In telling the story of the forms of devotional poetry, this work has attempted to show the importance of reading across the boundaries of period and place. These readings challenge received assumptions that have arisen from the artificial divides of periodization. The historical boundary between pre- and post-Conquest, and the linguistic shifts from Old to Middle English, became freighted with further significance. As Nicholas Watson has shown, the investments of Romantic philology that gave rise to editions and tools still in use also at times made medieval devotional literature "[serve] as not much more than a backdrop to the national story of the development of individual voice, emotional richness, and narrative interest told by the period's imaginative literature."[6] The lingering effects of these investments have continued to haunt both the scholarly understanding of the period and its popular conception, as Rambaran-Olm has argued, leading to understandings of the pre-Conquest period in particular as the "culturally isolated" opening chapter of a "triumphalist" narrative of the rise of English.[7]

Insular literatures are not as insulated as our modern academic boundaries of field, period, and discipline have made them seem. Early English devotional poetry – that is, poetry written in England, or read and adapted and incorporated into the English literary landscape – happens in Old and Middle English, and of course in Anglo-Latin. But it also happens in Old Saxon, in the case of *Genesis B*, and in French, in the case of *Un Samedi par nuit* and poems like it. Early English writers did not observe the

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:22:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009390279.007

linguistic boundaries that divide modern academic departments. Nor did they throw off the conventions of Old English literature all at once for as long as they were able to read and access them, as we have seen in the examples of twelfth-century Worcester. Even when conventions might no longer have been recognizable as throwbacks to Old English archetypes, poems such as the *Luue Ron* or the later soul and body lyrics suggest the ongoing prevalence of distinctively English conventions that we may trace back to pre-Conquest forebears.

The field boundaries that have often separated these texts rather than reading them side by side, as they might have at times existed in medieval libraries, partly reflect the practical necessities of the modern university. But they also reflect the interests and assumptions of our scholarly predecessors, whose priorities and assumptions have lingered in the structures of the field long after some of their conclusions or ideologies may have been set aside. Ideas of the "Anglo-Saxon" era, or of post-Conquest England, of early and late Middle English, have encouraged scholarship to begin and end at temporal, national, and linguistic dividing lines. We will understand medieval people – their literatures and their lives, their complex negotiations of feeling – when we challenge those boundaries that, perfectly unaware of the boundaries we would later draw for them, they lived across.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 16 Nov 2026 at 13:22:59, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009390279.007