INTRODUCTION: KEEPING PARADISE

God sett man in Paradys for he schuld worche.

Richard Fitzralph

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

Proverbial

In the summer of 1356, the scholar and then Archbishop of Armagh, Richard Fitzralph, preached a series of English sermons in London on the subject of apostolic poverty. Tensions between secular and mendicant clergy had been rising as the mendicants seemed to take over many of the functions (and hence a large portion of the tithes) associated with pastoral care. Fitzralph used the pulpit at St. Paul’s Cross to chastise the itinerant life led by the friars and, during one of his sermons, went so far as to bet his Bible that the friars could not produce scriptural proof that Christ himself begged voluntarily. While the friars did not win the wager, they did succeed in having Fitzralph called before the pope in Avignon and having him charged with heresy. In the course of defending both himself and the work of the secular clergy, Fitzralph boldly asserted that God created Adam and Eve in order “to work and keep Paradise.” Fitzralph’s assertion, while tactically aimed at the idleness of begging friars, had a larger implication: that a millennium’s worth of biblical and patristic writings was wrong in claiming that work—both the sweat of Adam’s brow and Eve’s distaff—was the consequence of the fall rather than its precursor.¹

In 1381, Fitzralph’s claim would be repeated by the renegade priest John Ball in his notoriously inflammatory sermon preached to the rebels camped outside the walls of London. In expounding the well-known couplet on Adam and Eve, Ball advocated not only social equality but also an end to serfdom, arguing that work was common to all and, therefore, those who worked should share equally in the fruits of their labors. By identifying Adam and Eve’s work with the symbolic labors of the common people, Ball pointed out the inherent absurdity of a system that allowed the

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accident of birth to assign some to harsh drudgery and others to a life of leisure. Dissenting Lollard preachers would also embrace unfallen labor as an exemplum against sloth, asking: if man worked busily in his state of innocence, how much harder should he work now, fallen and beset by enemies? Like other Fitzralph doctrines, this vision of Edenic labor would most likely have been unrecognizable to him several decades later, having been radicalized by rebels and Lollards. Conservative moral commentators like the writer John Gower were quick to refute this notion of “unfallen labor,” claiming that work was the lot of agricultural laborers because it proceeded from Adam’s sin and his subsequent expulsion from Paradise. For Gower, Adam’s transgression became a type for the transgressions of all subsequent labor violators. Lapsarian labor thus served, in a local context, as a rationale for compelling ostensibly greedy laborers to work under (less lucrative) yearly contracts, and, more globally, as a warrant for the “natural” divisions of labor that supported a corporate vision of medieval society.

What began for Fitzralph as a natural virtue could thus, in the span of fifty years, be transformed into a fundamental vice. The reason for this transformation was simple: the idea of labor and its Edenic mythology was getting caught up in—and subject to stress by—the very real labor problems that resulted when the labor force was dramatically reduced by the 1348 plague. After the first outbreaks, the laboring classes were equipped not only with the immediate economic capital that resulted from pressing labor shortages but also with the symbolic, spiritual capital that accrued from the social necessity of their work. And yet, the first national labor laws passed in 1349 characterized workers as malicious and lazy, “willing to beg in idleness rather than get their living by labor.” The successive reissuances of labor legislation over the next 150 years introduced new penalties that demanded unprecedented levels of worker visibility (public oaths and hiring procedures) alongside disciplinary uses of literacy (issuing letters patent to travelling workers and even licensing the branding of renegade laborers with the letter “F” for their falsity [fauxine]). These initial experiments in labor regulation ended only in the 1490s, when Henry VII repealed the laws, desiring to deal with labor problems “by softer means than by such extreme rigor.”

In investigating the representational crisis that ensued when theological valorizations of true labor met an actual labor shortage in the mid-fourteenth century, The Laborer’s Two Bodies seeks to document the far-reaching and dramatic effects of the first national labor laws in such extralegal domains as literature, spirituality, government, and trade. In exploring texts and images produced during this initial period of labor legislation, this book unites what have traditionally been seen as material discourses (labor laws that set prices and wages; trial records of labor offenders) with symbolic ones (sermons promoting the social and spiritual benefits of