The surgeon, because he both healed and hurt, served as a uniquely encompassing metaphor for the crucial struggle between damnation and salvation at the heart of medieval Christian identity. The mutilating effects of his violent techniques could suggest the punishments of the damned, as we saw in *Cleanliness* and its graphic description of the Dead Sea. Conversely, the physical restoration that resulted from successful treatment reminded authors of the divine grace that attended the bodies of the saved both here and in the afterlife, as *The Siege of Jerusalem* attests. While these two poems help us to understand the importance of the metaphor of the wounds of sin and its treatment, it remains to examine the effects such constructions had on the very men who embodied them: the priest who granted absolution and the surgeon who popularly represented him. This chapter will discuss the first of these figures with reference to the work of John Audelay, whose fifteenth-century single-author anthology of religious verse is doubly valuable as an example of this ubiquitous metaphor and as an autobiographical account of literal affliction and the various cultural meanings that illness assumed in the penitential culture of later medieval England. At the heart of this remarkable collection is an emerging conflict between the physical realities of chronic suffering and the official stance of the Church that confession, because it negates the sins that cause disease, is the only truly efficacious medicine. The overarching narrative in which this conflict plays out in Audelay’s anthology can tell us much about both the changing approach to devotion in the fifteenth century and the continued importance of the surgeon to discourses of salvation right up to the eve of the Reformation.

In 1426, Audelay, an aging chantry priest at the Augustinian abbey of Haughmond near Shrewsbury, completed the *Concilium conciencie*, or “pe cownsel of conseans,” a unified series of poems on a variety of religious themes. Despite the seclusion of its author and the markedly penitential
tone of many of the entries, there remains, in its forays into alliterative style and concern with ecclesiastical governance, an unmistakably worldly aspect to Audelay’s remarkable collection. This mixture of voices—the public and sermonic with the private and devotional—is especially pronounced in the longest and most famous poem of the manuscript, “Marcolf and Solomon.” In this sprawling verse sermon Audelay adopts the persona of Marcolf, the fool to the paradigmatically wise King Solomon, in order to embark on a trenchant critique of clerical corruption. This rhymed and alliterative work owes more than a passing debt to the reformer spirit and apocalyptic rhetoric of Piers Plowman; just as Langland’s Will fears that for his decaying England “drede is at the laste,” so too does the speaker of Audelay’s poem “dred lest dedle sun þis reme wyl deystry.” Yet although these two authors are separated by less than half a century, they write their respective volumes under drastically different conditions. This division is not merely centennial but also political. Langland, who died in 1387, writes during an exciting period of religious literature in English, at the peak of what Nicholas Watson has influentially termed “vernacular theology.” His attacks on clerical incontinence appear at a historical juncture at which laypeople could participate significantly, even profoundly, in ecclesiastical and doctrinal discussions through an expanding corpus of Middle English religious writing. By contrast, Audelay wrote in the chilly atmosphere that followed the publication of Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions in 1409, which sought to counteract the leveling activities of Lollard and orthodox thinkers alike by forbidding authors working in the vernacular from commenting on the sacraments, criticizing the Church, or writing or owning works of even partial scriptural translation without the express consent of an appointed committee. Audelay, according to Richard Firth Green, assumes the Marcolf persona precisely because of “the very danger of speaking too openly,” and in James Simpson’s words “brilliantly exploits a traditional discursive position.”

Yet Audelay is not primarily a political writer but a religious one. His collection as a whole has more in common with the didactic manuals of confession that flowered in the wake of the Fourth Lateran Council than with the overtly political sensibilities of Langland’s great poem. Its concerns are largely catechismal, with individual pieces addressing the merits of the Mass, the seven deadly sins, the works of mercy, and the form of general confession. Thus “Marcolf and Solomon,” despite its harsh consideration of clerical incontinence, constantly upholds the authority of priests, who alone have the power “to asoyle ȝoue of ȝour synne” (2.802). However, this is also an intensely personal collection. Indeed, it soon becomes apparent that when Audelay adopts the perspective of Marcolf to castigate priests who should be “lanternys of lyf” (2.71) for their “consians vnclere” (2.72),