**Rereading Henry Suso and Eucharistic Theology in Fifteenth-Century England**

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to our knowledge of the reception of Henry Suso’s work in England by comparing the treatment of Eucharistic theology in chapter six of *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* with a newly-discovered version of that chapter in Cambridge, St John’s College MS G.25. Examination of the two versions reveals that MS G.25, unusually for this text, is not written in dialogue form; it also omits significant material from *The Seven Poyntes*, as well as including additional matter from Suso’s Latin text. It is argued that these differences, taken together, reveal the author’s anxiety about certain aspects of contemporary mainstream Eucharistic piety, specifically his concern that believers misunderstand the nature of the sacrament and focus too readily on the visible host, rather than upon the sacramental process which it signifies. The paper also demonstrates the extent to which the text’s Eucharistic doctrine is compatible with that of John Wyclif, whilst remaining unimpeachably orthodox.

It has long been assumed that a medieval Anglophone audience interested in Henry Suso’s *Horologium Sapientiae* would turn to *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* (hereafter *The Seven Poyntes*), a shortened English translation in dialogue form which appears to have enjoyed some popularity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, it has recently been discovered that a manuscript contains a version of chapter six of *The Seven Poyntes* which differs significantly from the text as we currently know it.[[2]](#endnote-2) The manuscript in question, Cambridge, St. John’s College MS G.25, was written in the first half of the fifteenth century, and contains religious texts in English prose: the *Elucidarium*, an Apocalypse commentary, part of the Gospel harmony *Oon of Foure*, and two Wycliffite sermons, *Vae octuplex* and *Of Mynistris in þe Chirche*, as well as the version of *The Seven Poyntes* which is the focus of this paper.[[3]](#endnote-3) The Suso text is introduced by the rubric ‘Here endiþ þe passioun of oure lord Jhesu crist, and bigynneþ how þe sacrament of þe auter cristis be resceyued worþili and deuotly’ (f.85r), and thus, for convenience, I refer to it as *þe Sacrament of þe auter*; the authorship of this version remains unknown. Its treatment of chapter six of *The Seven Poyntes* is considerably shortened, it is written in a single voice rather than in dialogue form, and there are significant differences of content. In this essay I examine some of these differences and suggest that this reworking of Suso in English offers a distinctive view of Eucharistic theology which may reflect growing anxieties surrounding this subject in late-medieval England.

The Latin text of *Horologium sapientiae* is itself a paraphrase and expansion of Suso’s own earlier German work, *Das Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* (*The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*), and both texts exemplify the passionate mystical and affective devotion to Christ we might expect from a pupil of Meister Eckhart. The dating of the German text is uncertain (perhaps 1320s), with the Latin version following within ten to twenty years. If manuscript survival is any indication, both the *Büchlein* and the *Horologium sapientiae* were extremely popular; around one hundred complete manuscripts of the *Büchlein* are extant, plus some eighty fragments, and around 380 of the *Horologium sapientiae*.[[4]](#endnote-4) The Latin text was certainly available in England by the 1370s, and some time after this date the anonymous English paraphrase was produced by a chaplain for the use of his lady: [[5]](#endnote-5)

My moste worschipful lady aftir ȝowre hyȝ worþynesse, & derrest-loued goostly douȝhter after ȝour vertuous meeknes, y, ȝowre trewe chapeleyne, vnworthy þe name of ȝe fader, considerynge ȝowre excellente wisdame bothe to god and to þe worlde and felynge by experiens by the sparcles of gostly communicacyon ¶ The heet of the fyre of loue to oure lord Jhesu […] I am stirede to wryte aftere myne simple kunnynge to ȝowe, as ȝe deuowtlye desyrene, a lytele schort tretyse of euerelastynge wisdam & þe trewe loue of Jhesu, drawne owt in englische of þat deuowt contemplatyfe boke wrytene clergialye in latyne þe whiche is clepede þe Orloge of wisdame. (325, ll.1-6, 9-13)

While drawing his lady’s attention to the scholarly nature of his original, ‘wrytene clergialye in latyne’, the chaplain subsequently explains that, since much of the original text deals with matters of concern only to professional religious, he will omit those and concentrate instead on things ‘þat me þinkeþ edifiyng to ȝowe’ (325, ll.29-30). The result of this abridgement, designed to appeal to a particular female lay reader, is a text of around half the length of the Latin which, Roger Lovatt suggests, reduces Suso’s work ‘to the level of a conventional, weakly affective, almost anodyne piety’.[[6]](#endnote-6) Perhaps this judgement is a little unfair; while Suso’s original passionate intensity is undoubtedly watered down, the English text retains some moments of vivid affective power and a clear sense of the possibility of mystical union with God. Conventional or not, such devotional positioning does not appear to have hindered the text’s popularity with English readers. *The Seven Poyntes* is known to exist in at least seventeen manuscripts; eight of these are complete, or complete except for the Prologue, while the remainder are extracts, mostly of chapter four, a form for spiritual living grounded in the love of Christ, or chapter five, on the *disce mori* theme; in only one other case does chapter six appear alone. In around 1491 the full text was printed by Caxton as *The Book of divers ghostly matters*.[[7]](#endnote-7) In addition, the prayer to the Eucharist which closes chapter six of *The Seven Poyntes* finds further life as the conclusion of the treatise *De sacramento* which appears at the end of some manuscripts of Nicholas Love’s *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.[[8]](#endnote-8) *The Seven Poyntes*, at least in part, can therefore claim its place in the mainstream of late-medieval English piety. Reading it alongside *þe Sacrament of þe auter*, however,the two texts seem to me to develop theological approaches which, whilst remaining within the broad bounds of orthodoxy, differ in important details. Given the subject matter of the chapter as a whole, it is unsurprising that these differences centre around Eucharistic theology, and it is to this that I now turn.

The centrality of Eucharistic doctrine to the understanding of religious controversy in late medieval England is well understood. In the 1960s Gordon Leff noted Wyclif’s significant contribution to discussion of the doctrine, and the later development of his ideas among those described as Lollards. Twenty years later Anne Hudson emphasized the importance in heresy proceedings of questions on the Eucharist, usually focusing on the precise nature of transubstantiation and the extent to which the bread and wine does or does not remain after the words of consecration have been pronounced. In the 1990s Nicholas Watson identified anxieties surrounding the Eucharist as one of the reasons for what he characterized as the decline in late-medieval vernacular theology in England, while Paul Strohm suggested that such doctrine became ‘the litmus test of orthodoxy, precisely because its internal paradoxes and contradictions were so pronounced […] as to constitute a ground so uneven that no one meant to stumble could fail to stumble’; in other words, Eucharistic questioning became a means by which the discovery of heretical beliefs could be guaranteed.[[9]](#endnote-9) The nature of the ground was indeed perilous, for the distinctions separating orthodox and heretical comprehension were of the finest: is Christ’s real presence in the consecrated host a sacramental or a carnal presence, and what precisely is meant by those terms? Is the substance of bread and wine replaced at the moment of consecration by Christ’s presence, leaving only the accidents, or can the bread and wine co-exist with Christ in the host? If the former, is the substance of bread and wine annihilated during this process?[[10]](#endnote-10) The pitfalls of entering into debate on such speculations are evident even for the theologically trained; for laymen with a relatively unsophisticated understanding of the doctrine, error seems inevitable.

In such a context there is every justification for reading contemporary textual references to Eucharistic theology with the closest possible attention; similar care should also be taken over texts in which we might have expected to find such references, but from which they are absent. As I have already noted, the text of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is considerably shorter than chapter six of *The Seven Poyntes*, a reduction which is achieved through the omission of significant sections of material, many of which are explicitly concerned with the Eucharist. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the most interesting series of omissions centres around discussion of Christ’s presence in the consecrated Host. In *The Seven Poyntes* the Disciple seeks explicit confirmation on this point: ‘I haue wel vndirstande þou hast seyde þat þou arte in this sacramente not figurally, but really and bodily; And if hit be so, I preye the mekely to be tauʓte.’ In response Wisdom replies that he is indeed ‘conteyned in þis sacramente god and man, with body and soule, flesche and blode, as I wente oute of my moder wombe and hanged on the crosse’ (366, ll.9-11, 14-16). *The Seven Poyntes* is closely following its Latin source here, but the author of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* negotiates this moment slightly differently; the speaker asserts that Christ is present in the host in terms almost identical to those in *The Seven Poyntes*, but there is nothing which corresponds in any way to the Disciple’s explicit reference to a distinction between figural and bodily presence. The agreement in both texts that the body present in the Eucharist is the same body which hung on the cross is entirely orthodox, and contrasts with Wyclif’s position which, while accepting Christ’s Real Presence in the consecrated host, rejects the notion that this presence is of the carnal ‘Galilean body’ of Christ.[[11]](#endnote-11) Crucially, however, the author of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is not to be drawn on the question of whether this body is to be regarded as ‘figural’ or ‘real’; instead the text merely refers to Christ being contained ‘verrili’ in the sacrament (f.85v). This is an important omission, since the very terminology of figural presence was freighted with meaning. Aers notes Wyclif’s use of the term in his interpretation of the sacrament as a figuration of the union between Christ and his Church through the distinctive form of the bread as an ‘efficacious figure’ [figura efficax].[[12]](#endnote-12) However, this does not mean that Wyclif regarded Christ’s presence in the host as purely figural, a heretical position perhaps most recently associated with Berengar of Tours.[[13]](#endnote-13) By utilizing the terminology of this distinction, the questioner in *The Seven Poyntes* (‘I haue wel vndirstande þou hast seyde þat þou arte in this sacramente not figurally, but really and bodily’) demonstrates an acknowledgment of differing hermeneutic approaches to Christ’s real presence, and a willingness to at least make reference to them; the author of *þe* *Sacrament of þe auter*, by contrast, does not entertain discussion of such a distinction even to reject it, perhaps indicating a recognition of how contentious it is, and how easily even a fleeting reference might lead one astray. In this respect chronology may be significant; in the 1370s and 1380s the Eucharist was already a possible focus for heresy, of course, but early fifteenth-century legislative provisions added substantially to the dangers of mishandling so sensitive a subject.[[14]](#endnote-14) That this was so seems to gain support elsewhere in the text, during a discussion of transubstantiation. In *The Seven Poyntes*, Wisdom explains that his bodily presence in the Host is effected by God’s might; for those who might consider this impossible, he asserts that since God made the world from nothing, he can easily turn one thing into another: ‘if hit seme possibil þat þe maker of the worlde seyde and alle thinges were made of noȝte, why schulde hee not turne one thinge in to an oþere þorow his priuey power?’ (366, ll.44-45 – 367, l.1) The author of *þe* *Sacrament of þe auter* omits this reference, again steering clear of too detailed a discussion of the metaphysics of the Eucharist. Crucially, both texts caution that the mystery of the Eucharist is beyond human comprehension; in the words of *þe Sacrament of þe auter*, ‘no tunge mai declare, neþir eny bodili witt mai perceyue, neþir mannys resoun may comprehende how þe lordis bodi is conteyned in þe sacrament; but it is couenable to knowe þis bi feiþ aloone’ (f.85v). This is very careful wording, as a doctrinally unexceptionable assertion of Christ’s corporeal presence in the Host is immediately followed by a refusal to discuss how this can be accomplished: a refusal, that is, to enter into precisely those contemporary debates about substance and accidents, or about ‘material bread’, which divided mainstream and Wycliffite thinkers.[[15]](#endnote-15) If, as Strohm suggests, the complexities of Eucharistic theology did indeed fill it with ‘places of potential doctrinal entrapment’, such a refusal is entirely understandable.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Perhaps, however, there is more to the matter than this. It may be that the distinction between figural and bodily presence, so prominent in the discourse of heresy and, indeed, in modern scholarship on the subject, simply misses the point as far as the author of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is concerned, serving as itdoes to focus on the outward sign (the consecrated host) at the expense of the sacrament itself. Such attention to the visible, while very much at the centre of popular mainstream Eucharistic piety, might be regarded by opponents of such piety, including Wycliffites, as what Stephen Penn characterizes as ‘a collective obsession with the outward nature of the host’, an activity engaged in by ‘*cultores signorum* (“worshippers of signs”).’[[17]](#endnote-17) To worship the Eucharistic sign rather than that which it signifies is idolatry, and demonstrates a catastrophic failure to grasp the nature of the sacrament as an act or process through which the recipient is sanctified by the action of God’s freely-bestowed grace. Perhaps for the author of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* the mention of alternative hermeneutic approaches to Christ’s Eucharistic presence is to risk arresting the mind at the outward sign, rather than penetrating to the sacramental understanding which lies behind it. That this is indeed the case seems to be borne out elsewhere; for example, *The Seven Poyntes* provides an explanation of the purpose of the Eucharist that is missing from the later version:

ffor riȝte as drye stickis ȝeuen kynde mater to bodily fyre forto brenne more feruently and maken ȝe flawmes þer-of to sprynge vp and sprede alle-aboute, so, forsoþ, þis worshepful sacramente, þat is noryschynge of goostly hete, ȝeuith grete encrese to þe fyre of goddes loue and norischith hit, whan it is devoutely receyved. (365, ll.40-44)

This explanation offers a vivid and compelling image in order to help the Disciple comprehend the Eucharist’s function, and the analogy certainly does not venture into doctrinal details which might be considered contentious, so its omission from *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is not easy to explain on those grounds. However, it seems to me that this omission may reflect an anxiety that the Eucharist is in danger of being detached from its liturgical context, and indeed from its sacramental function, in order to take on an undesirable additional signification. Its purity as a moment of contact between man and divine grace, which symbolizes the promise of salvation, has been compromised as it becomes a means of generating spiritual desire; in other words, it is being utilized instrumentally, not sacramentally. Such an interpretation seems to gather support from a further omission of material found in *The Seven Poyntes*, which concerns the reward a Christian can expect for receiving the Eucharist. In *The Seven Poyntes* the Disciple enquires ‘what good þou ȝeuest be þy presence to þe man þat devoutely receyueþ thee’, earning himself a sharp rebuke from Wisdom, who points out that such a materialistic outlook is inappropriate for ‘an amarows herte’ (372, ll.6-7, 10). This does not appear in *þe* *Sacrament of þe auter*, and again may suggest discomfort with the prospect of adopting an instrumental approach to the Eucharist in which it becomes an object of exchange – a type of discomfort with which Wyclif himself might have been familiar. Indeed in both these examples, instrumentality of purpose is yoked to the possibility of reification; reception of the Eucharist as transformative moment, as spiritual process, becomes instead objectified as a functional act which is meritorious in itself.

Towards the end of chapter six, *The Seven Poyntes* refers explicitly to Christ’s words at the Last Supper in a passage that does not appear in *þe Sacrament of þe auter*: ‘for hee, þe wisdame of god, atte his laste soper in þe ordynaunce of this heelful sacramente seyde thus: “þis is my body, þat I schalle ȝeve for ȝow”, and “þis is my blode, þat schalle be schadde for ȝowe in þe remyssyone of synnes”’ (375, ll.35-38). This omission cannot be attributed to reluctance on the part of the author of the later text to quote from the Scriptures, since he certainly does so elsewhere; instead it seems to suggest that he was wary of a tendency to identify the consecrated bread too readily with Christ himself. Such an identification, encouraged by the biblical wording and increasingly a characteristic of orthodox Eucharistic theology, might lead, in the words of Aers, to ‘an exorbitant and one-sided cult of the presence of Christ’s Galilean body under the consecrated elements’ - once again, the reification of the sacramental sign - which was rejected by Wyclif in favour of the ‘efficacious figure’ mentioned above .[[18]](#endnote-19)

In all these cases of omitted material, the author seems intent on diverting his reader away from an undesirable focus on the outward sign at the expense of the sacramental process. The alternative, sacramentally-centred focus appears to be positively promoted in three instances in which *þe Sacrament of þe auter* includes material drawn from Suso’s Latin which has been omitted from the earlier *Seven Poyntes*. The most substantial of these appears during discussion of the need for believers to receive the sacrament even though they feel unworthy:

Wher a syk man haastiþ not to a leche, and þe pore man knockiþ at þe dore of a ryche man? þerfore come nyȝ and knocke at þe dore of Ih*es*u, and doute no þi*n*g, for he is a leche and moost pitous deler and moost large rewarder; for bi his word aloone he restoriþ alle þi*n*gis, bi his presence he heeliþ wou*n*dis and hurtis, he puttiþ awei sorwe and ȝyueþ gladnesse of herte […] lo a wo*m*man þat was vnclene cam bihy*n*de and touchide ih*es*u and was heelid; a synful womman is clensid þe while she kisseþ his feet; þe wo*m*man of chanaan was herd þe while she criede and secide not; þe leprouse men þat camen to Ih*es*u weren heelid; blynde me*n* and me*n* trauelid of fendis and men syke in palesie and alle merueilis aȝens kynde gete*n* heelþe while þei bileeuen and neiȝen to Ih*es*u; forwhi uertu ȝede out of hi*m* and heelide alle me*n*; but also pupplicans and synneris disserue*n* forȝyuenesse while þei neiȝen to Ih*es*u. ȝhe Ih*es*u þat cam into þis world, not to clepe riȝtful me*n* but synful me*n*, forsook not þe feeste and herborw of synful men and pupplicans. (ff.91v-92r)

This passage, taken directly from the Latin, provides a range of examples to encourage the hesitant Christian to put his faith in the salvific power of the Eucharist. The redemptive reach of Christ’s sacrifice is boundless, as the diseased, the unclean and the sinful, women as well as men, are all included in the divine dispensation. The inclusion of this passage appears to satisfy a deeply humane pastoral impulse, the speaker emphasizing that everyone in his audience can and will be granted salvation, if they only ask for it by receiving the sacrificial meal. It is an optimistic message, and one which serves as a clear reminder of the Eucharist’s proper status as sacramental process, which touches sinful mankind with God’s bountiful grace. Two further additions confirm this truth, articulating with great clarity the real end to which the sacrament has been ordained. The first of these expands upon the speaker’s realisation that Christ is present to him, both as God and man,

not where he was not bifore, but forbi his presence he haþ liȝtned me wiþ sum beem of teching, and haþ shewid pryui þingis; and he haþ brouȝt hid þingis forþ into þe liȝt, and now he haþ tauȝt þo þingis bi goostli grace and quyke whiche I knew first bi lettvre. (f.87r)

This sense of Christ’s presence as divine grace is a clear indication that sacramental contact has been made, resulting in a new level of knowledge which both confirms and supersedes the speaker’s previous merely theoretical understanding, gained from reading written texts. Such contact may, exceptionally, lead to a transcendent comprehension of the divine which extends beyond the limits of faith itself:

Soþeli I seie þis poynt: not bi comyn custom, but oonli sum tyme, þis knowing is maad; þat is, whanne þe soule is rauyshid to heuenli þingis, and is reisid to knowe heuenli privitees, as goddis grace fouchiþ saaf to shewe þes þingis, eþir oþere þingis lyk þese. And whanne a man is takun awey from þes priuitees of heuene, he shal go aȝen to þe comyne techingis of feiþ. (f.90r)

Receiving God’s grace through the Eucharist can sometimes result in a heavenly understanding that equates with perfect knowledge, a spiritual and intellectual apprehension which is greater even than faith, but only on those exceptional occasions when grace permits the soul to rise to the full perception of heavenly mysteries. The emphasis on grace here, which is much less pronounced in *The Seven Poyntes*, is also consistent with Wyclif’s (and hence Augustine’s) predestinarian soteriology.[[19]](#endnote-20) After this moment of surpassing knowledge the soul once again descends and must rely on the more usual experience of faith. This is the true culmination of the sacramental experience, the end towards which all the believer’s desires must be directed. To approach the Eucharist on any other terms, to debate over the precise nature of Christ’s Real Presence, or to wonder what kind of reward will be forthcoming as a result of receiving the consecrated bread, is to fail to grasp the concept of the sacrament as transformational process, and instead to align oneself with those *cultores signorum* so despised by Wyclif, and whose practices, if taken to extremes, might seem to take them beyond the legitimate bounds of Christianity itself.

The mystical sacramental union of man with God has a fascinating parallel in what is the most noticeable difference between *The Seven Poyntes* and *þe Sacrament of þe auter* -- that of form. *The Seven Poyntes* and its Latin and German precursors are all written in the form of a dialogue between Wisdom, representing Christ, and a Disciple. The Prologue to the *Büchlein* explains that this is ‘damit sie desto mehr anreize’ [in order that it is more stimulating], while that to the *Horologium* notes that the form is employed to convey matters ‘ad ferventiorem modum’ [in a more vivid manner].[[20]](#endnote-21) In the Prologue to *The Seven Poyntes* the chaplain notes that his Latin source is a book employing the ‘manere of spekynge bye-twix þe maystre, euerlastyng wisdam, & þe deuowt discyple þat wrote þe boke’, and he follows this model in his English translation (325, ll.21-22). In so doing he adopts the persona of the Disciple, asking questions in the role of mediator between his ‘moste worschipful lady’, and Christ as Wisdom. In the manuscripts of the English text the names of the interlocutors are given before each speech and are usually rubricated, underlined or otherwise distinguished from the spoken words themselves. In the dialogue the figure of Wisdom/Christ generally refers to himself in the first person, for example speaking of ‘my laste soper’, and assuring the Disciple that ‘with-oute eny doute I am conteyned in þis sacramente god and man’ (366, ll.2-3, 13-14). The Disciple, anxiously seeking Wisdom, describes himself as a priest who is painfully aware of his inadequacies; Christ, he notes ruefully, has chosen him ‘vnto þe offyce of preste, noȝte of myne deserte’ (370, ll.11-14).

In *þe Sacrament of þe auter*, by contrast, the dialogue form has been transformed into a passionate and highly rhetorical monologue in which the interactions between Wisdom, the Disciple and a potentially passive audience have been replaced by a much more direct relation, mirroring, I suggest, the desired union between man and God. The separate interlocutors have been replaced by a first person address in which the speaker expounds Christian wisdom, although he is now distinct from Christ, to whom he refers only in the third person. The intellectual progression of the monologue is no longer governed by the enquiries of the Disciple, but by hypothetical questions and reservations attributed by the speaker to the audience, which is frequently addressed in the second person. The effect is to place the reader or listener in the position previously occupied by the questioning Disciple; she becomes, by implication, the source of the questions which mould the text, and hence assumes complicity in its construction.[[21]](#endnote-22) The text acquires a performative character; the use of personal address, coupled with rhetorical questions, assumes both emotional and intellectual involvement from the audience:

But herto may it be seid þat no tunge mai declare, neþir eny bodili witt mai perceyue, neþir mannys resoun may comprehende, how þe lordis bodi is conteyned in þe sacrament, but it is couenable to knowe þis bi feiþ aloone; forwhi þis is þe greet worchyng of goddis vertu aloone, þerfore þou owist forto bileeue þis feiþfulli and to be war of presumptuous enqueryng. Neþeles, to excite þi feruour, þat is greet desir, more þan to make opyn a þing knowun to god aloone, I shal answere sumwhat to þi derk questioun. (ff.85v-86)

The speaker anticipates his audience’s desire for knowledge and, while acknowledging the superiority of faith over rational explanation, offers to provide answers in order to excite additional fervour. The great pitfalls of dialogic writing -- its sterile artifice and potential for dryness (notwithstanding Suso’s claims for its vividness) -- are replaced by a passionate monologue uniting speaker and audience in a common purpose. It is not possible to read or hear the text dispassionately as the to-and-fro debate of disembodied interlocutors whose concerns may be quite different from those of the audience; instead the reader or listener is addressed directly, is presumed to be deeply interested in the matter under discussion, and is constantly being goaded into a response. For example, the speaker provides explicit instruction on the desired demeanour and mental state of those receiving the Eucharist:

Whanne þu gost vp to þe worshipful auter, bihold wiþ yʓen of feiþ þe hooli bodi and blood of þi lord god, so þat þou bileeue wiþ al þin herte moost serteynli and wiþouten any doute, and knowleche bi mouþ, þat þe ilke sacrid ooste is verri goddis sone […] aftirward wiþ due reuerence and souereyn honour come to þi god, and wiþ meek deuocioun wondre þou þat so greet a lord fouche saaf to come to so littil a seruaunt, and so greet and noble to a wrecche worm, and so greet mageste to þee, so foul a mesel. And seie þou wiþ drede and reuerence: ‘lord, I am not worþi’. (ff.87v-88r)

This material appears in almost identical form in *The Seven Poyntes*, but the effect is quite different. There the reader is a mere spectator, watching and listening as Wisdom instructs his Disciple in what *he* should do. Here, the reader herself becomes the object of instruction; every member of the speaker’s audience is exhorted to open the eyes of faith, to affirm belief in the presence of Christ in the consecrated host, and to meditate on his or her unfitness to be worthy of the sacrifice. The text becomes personal, and while the audience may choose whether or not to obey, it cannot refuse to respond. This formal alteration reflects the Eucharistic concerns discussed earlier; while the dialogue form of *The Seven Poyntes* allows the audience to view the text as passive observer, concerned with the outward forms of the exchanges between Wisdom and the Disciple, the monologue implicates the audience fully into the process, mirroring the desire of the author of *þe Sacrament of þe auter* to move beyond concern with the sign of the host to the sacramental truth that lies beyond it. Thus the form of the text may be considered mimetic of the sacramental positioning the author seeks to promote.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is unique in its desire to emphasize the sacramental aspect of the Eucharist; the same concern is also manifest throughout *The Seven Poyntes*, which identifies the most critical moment in the Mass in words which closely translate Suso’s Latin, and which are repeated almost verbatim in *þe Sacrament of þe auter*:

þat is þe tyme of holy receyuenge and goostly etynge [of the consecrated host]: ffor þanne heuene is in manere opuned and þe loued sone of þe fadir is sente in to at soule þat is wel disposed, and þere-to bodily is oonyd. (377, ll.16-18)

The reception and spiritual consumption of the host is the moment at which heaven is opened and Christ can descend into the believer’s soul: the moment of sacramental transformation. While both texts share this focus, however, the message in *þe Sacrament of þe auter* is articulated with considerably greater clarity. The omission of material which might be seen to encourage an instrumental or reificatory approach to the Eucharist is coupled with the inclusion of that which explicitly emphasizes the sacramental process and the operation of grace; thus the text’s argument appears less discursive and more focused, effects which are amplified by the decision to abandon the dialogue form in favour of the single compelling voice. *þe Sacrament of þe auter* does not so much rewrite the Eucharistic theology of *The Seven Poyntes* as attempt to reposition or refocus it; such a repositioning is, perhaps, to be expected following several decades of significant doctrinal contention between the mainstream church and Wycliffism discussed earlier, not to mention anxieties within the mainstream church itself. The resulting text betrays its author’s discomfort with those mainstream approaches to the Eucharist which place undue emphasis on the visible sign, seeking instead to bring the truth of the sacrament as process back to the centre of its discussion. Yet while this may reveal sympathies which are in many respects very close to those of Wyclif, the text as a whole remains unimpeachably orthodox; the author thus accomplishes the tricky feat of balancing a critique of contemporary pious practices with the exposition of a consistent and doctrinally unexceptionable sacramental theology, and emerges triumphantly.

1. The authoritative edition of Suso is Pius Künzle (ed.), *Heinrich Seuses Horologium Sapientiae* (Freiburg, 1977). The English version, much reduced in content, is edited by Karl Horstmann as ‘*Orologium Sapientiae* or *The Seven Poyntes of Trewe Wisdom* aus MS. Douce 114’, *Anglia*, 10 (1888), 323-89. All references are by page and line number in this edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chapter six is based on Book II, Chapter 4 of the *Horologium sapientiae*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a full description of the manuscript, including foliation, see M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of St John’s College, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1913), 228-29. More recently, the manuscript has been described by Pamela Gradon (ed.), *English Wycliffite Sermons* (Oxford, 1988), vol. 2, xx-xxi. St John’s College Library also holds a very comprehensive unpublished description produced by Craig Thorold for the Cambridge MPhil in Medieval and Renaissance Literature. I am grateful to the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge, for permission to quote from the manuscript. My thanks also to Dr Richard Beadle for sharing with me his thoughts on the dating of the handwriting. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Bihlmeyer quoted in Nicholas Heller (ed.), *The Exemplar: Life and Writings of Blessed Henry Suso, O.P.*, tr. Sister M. Ann Edward, O.P. (Dubuque, Iowa, 1962), vol. 2, vii; Künzle, 103-249. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Roger Lovatt, ‘Henry Suso and the Medieval Mystical Tradition in England’,in Marion Glasscoe (ed.), *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England* (Exeter, 1982), 47-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lovatt, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500*, ed. J. Burke-Severs and Albert E. Hartung (New Haven, 1967-), vol 9, 3125-27 and 3466-67; R.E. Lewis, N.F. Blake and A.S.G. Edwards (eds), *Index of Printed Middle English Prose* (New York, 1985), no. 465; *STC* 3305. See also Lovatt, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter, 2005), 93-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gordon Leff, *Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c.1250-c.1450* (Manchester, 1967), 549-57, 573-87; Anne Hudson, ‘The Examination of Lollards’, in *Lollards and their Books* (London, 1985), 125-40; Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford, 1988), 281-90; Nicholas Watson, ‘Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409’, *Speculum*, 70 (1995), 822-64; Paul Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation 1399-1422* (New Haven, 1998), 45-53 (quote at 47). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*, 46-48; David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, 2004), 1-28, 53-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. David Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, 2004), 53-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Aers notes that Wyclif’s own choice of terminology may have obscured the distinctiveness of the figurative nature of the sacramental sign in his exegesis, leading to significant misunderstanding of his position; nevertheless, that he interpreted Christ’s presence as figurative – whatever he intended by that word - is evident: *Sanctifying Signs*, 58-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. John Wyclif, *De eucharistia tractatus maior*, ed. J. Loserth (London, 1892), 2. For a brief discussion of Wyclif’s views on Berengar, see Stephen Penn, ‘Wyclif and the Sacraments’, in *A Companion to John Wyclif*, ed. Ian Christopher Levy (Leiden, 2006), 241-91 (262-64 and 266). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See the statute *De heretico comburendo* (1401) and Arundel’s *Constitutions* of 1407-09 which certainly increased the legislative focus on the definition and detection of heresy in the first decade of the fifteenth century. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a succinct explanation of the orthodox and Wycliffite positions, and discussion of these in relation to key late-medieval texts, see Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, chapters 1 and 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For a comprehensive discussion of late-medieval cultural practices relating to the Eucharist, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991). See also Penn, ‘Wyclif and the Sacraments’, 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Aers, *Sanctifying Signs*, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. For a succinct discussion see Ian Christopher Levy, ‘Wyclif and the Christian Life’, in *A Companion to Wyclif*, 293-363 (348-54). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Nicholas Heller (ed.), *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, in *The Exemplar: Life and Writings of Blessed Henry Suso*, tr. Sister M. Ann Edward, O.P., (Dubuque, Iowa, 1962), vol. 2, 4; Henry Suso, *Wisdom’s Watch Upon the Hours*, tr. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. (Washington, DC, 1994), 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. I am grateful to Dr Alixe Bovey for sharing her thoughts with me on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)