“Master Alanus was lecturing at Montpellier, and knights (milites) in the vicinity heard that he was a great cleric and would answer any question asked of him.”—So begins an exemplum in the Summa de vitiis, composed around 1236 by Guillelmus Peraldus, an influential member of the Dominican Order, perhaps while the author was at the order’s priory in Lyon.1 In the exemplum, the knights decide to ask Alanus what the greatest sign of courtliness (curialitas) is, and he responds that this would be the act of giving in the most courtly fashion. The narrative then continues: “When [the knights] heard this, they agreed with his answer. But then he said that they should consult with each other and tell him which of the signs of boorishness (rusticitas) might be greater than all the others. They conferred with each other and could not come to a consensus, so they returned to him and said they were unable to agree. When he heard this, he rebuked them, saying: ‘I set you on the path to know the answer to the question I asked. For if giving is the most courtly thing, then taking, which is its opposite, is the most boorish. For this reason you, who ceaselessly rob from the poor, are the most boorish people.’”2


I begin with this exemplum, which emphasizes the ancient and esteemed place of Montpellier in the tradition of medieval learning, in order to point to some of the objects and strategies in Peraldus’ narrative that by the earlier thirteenth century had been developed within the field of hamartiology to speak truth to power. It is as important, that is to say, that the objects of Alanus’ reproof are knights as it is that the agent delivering their reprimand is a revered figure in the moral tradition. Presumably, he was intended to be understood as Alan of Lille, who on the basis of his didactic and allegorical-satirical works written in the twelfth century was turned into a noted representative of correction for those in positions of power in the high and late Middle Ages.3 Moreover, while the pathology of power implicit in this exemplum proceeds with regard to actual social occurrences, namely the oppression of the poor in early thirteenth-century France, it is not conceived of in exclusively political or institutional terms, no matter how important these features are to Peraldus’ scrutiny; rather, the analysis of abuses of power becomes primarily a question of motivating moral improvement as the catalyst for socially important change. Peraldus thinks habitually in terms of contrast and opposites: his Summa on the Vices had a companion within a decade and a half in the publication of the same author’s Summa on the Virtues, the vice of boorishness in the exemplum of Master Alanus is opposed by the contrary virtue of courtliness,4 the supremacy of the knights is contrasted with the powerlessness of the poor. But regardless of any Dominican identification with the dispossessed underclass, for the sake of motivating a powerful audience to rectify abusive behavior Peraldus also appropriates the features of social distinction to imbue virtue with the
