THE PRACTICE OF *MAKYNGE*:

MASCULINE POETIC IDENTITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH POETRY

by

KATHARINE WOODASON JAGER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty of English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE PRACTICE OF *MAKYNGE*: MASCULINE POETIC IDENTITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH POETRY

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Adviser: Professor Glenn Burger

This dissertation examines representations of masculine poetic identity in late 14th century English poetry. Using postcolonial theories of hybridity and relational poetics, as well as queer theories of gender performativity, my project argues that new masculinities were shaped, via poetry, by an emerging class of the literate commons. While medieval artisanal masculinity has been largely defined by guild membership and the production of material goods, I assert that "artisanal" might be productively expanded to include the creation of poetry, a practice defined by the subjects of this dissertation as *makynge*. In four chapters, organized around close readings of each poem, I argue that The Rebel Letters, Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Chaucer's "personal tale," The Tale of Sir Thopas, together imagine English poetry as a messy, massive site of translational invention, and that their *makeres* occupy an "in-between" class position mirrored by the "in-between" status of English, vis-à-vis more culturally dominant French and Latin traditions. As texts that are at once oral, aural, and written, these late medieval poems occupy a hybrid space. I contend that these texts, in their being read aloud, are predicated upon a living, English-speaking audience, and that they posit an artisanal, poetic masculinity performed within a context both linguistic and communal. By placing the gnomic, communally

authored chants of the Peasants' Rebellion within the larger milieu of better-known poets like Langland, the Gawain-poet, and Chaucer, I explore the influences of class and status on the masculine production of late medieval English poetry.

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i.m. Louise B. Tanko Jager Braglia
December 4, 1904 — February 22, 1981
Vygázz

"…history partakes quite evidently of the nature of poetry. It is a making."[1]

[1] Walter J. Ong, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA 90.1 (1975): 9-21, at 17.

Introduction

> Let human speech breathe out its best poor bridges
> from mind to world, mind to self, mind to mind.[2]

This dissertation, "The Practice of *Makynge*: Masculine Poetic Identity in Late Medieval English Poetry," explores the idea that making poetry confers identity for late medieval common-born men. Often obscured behind masks of anonymity and pseudonymity, the men who are my subjects frequently appear as personae, as first-person speakers who point out their textual presence even as they erase themselves. These moments of highly fictive self-referentiality establish a poetic identity, in a manner specific to late fourteenth century *makynge*.[3] Broadly defined, *makynge* is a late medieval practice that encompasses the composition, revision, inscription and performance of vernacular poetry. Because it produces literature, and because it requires the frequently public performance of that literature, *makynge* is a gendered activity available predominantly to men. Yet *makynge* is a practice that at once bestows authority and estranges socially, for the late fourteenth

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[2] Marie Ponsot, "Pathetic Fallacies are Bad Science, But," in Springing: New and Selected Poems (New York: Knopf, 2002) 33.

[3] Many scholars have examined these acts of self-referentiality in late medieval English verse composition. See, for instance, J.A. Burrow, Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain-poet (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), who argues that the late fourteenth century, which he organizes around the rule of Richard II, was a "period dominated by the narrative voice" (47). Additional analyses of Ricardian poetic identity can be found in Lois Ebin, ed., Vernacular Poetics in the Middle Ages (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1984), particularly her essay, "Poetics and Style in Late Medieval Literature," 263-93; and A.C. Spearing, "A Ricardian 'I': The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde,*" in Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honor of J.A. Burrow (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 1-22. Self-referentiality is not unique to English *makeres*; French lyric poets as early as the thirteenth century were digressively using the first person. See Michel Zink, Monique Briand Walker, transl., "Time and Representation of the Self in 13th Century French Poetry," Poetics Today 5.3, Medieval and Renaissance Representation: New Reflections (1984): 611-627; and Kevin Brownlee, Poetic Identity in Guillaume de Machaut (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984).

century Englishmen born into the common class who are my subjects. Modeled after artisanal traditions, the common-born *makere's* labor is an act of construction that does not produce material goods. His *makynge*, therefore, must be understood as a performance of immaterial labor.[4]

Judith Butler has argued that gender is a performative iteration, composed through the repetition of acts and words, the cumulative effect of which is an identity both sanctioned by norms and slightly, if imperceptibly, outside of them.[5] More recently, she posits that gender is "a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing," and that in such doing, one never acts alone but always in concert with others, always "with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary."[6] For poetry, the questions of iteration, performance and audience are not exclusively philosophical questions, but are deeply imbricated in how poetry functions and how it is made. Because it is a time-bound aesthetic medium, intended to be uttered aloud, a poem is implicitly a performance, one occurring differently each time it is read aloud by a human actor and one that speaks from one human to another, even if that other is not physically

[4] "Immaterial Labor" is a turn coined by 20th century radical Italian Marxist Maurizio Lazzarato, who defines it as "labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity." Immaterial labor does not produce a tangible object, but instead "involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work'—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion." See his "Immaterial Labor," in Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 133. See also Nick Dyer-Witherford, "Empire, Immaterial Labor, the New Combinations and the Global Worker," Rethinking Marxism 13. 3/4 (2001): 70-80. For an application of this contemporary theory to the medieval, see Ethan Knapp, "Poetic Work and Scribal Labor in Hoccleve and Langland," in Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson, eds. The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labor in Late Medieval England (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 209-228.

[5] Butler argues in Bodies That Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993), that performativity is "not a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, […] the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (2). Gender is itself a performative practice; one's gender "is an identity tenuously constructed in time…through a stylized repetition of acts." See her Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990) 140.

[6] Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (New York: Routledge, 2004) 1.

present. This is particularly true for late medieval communities, which were frequently reliant on a literate reader to speak a text aloud. Famously, Chaucer is himself depicted, in a fifteenth century illumination, as performing aloud his text to a listening audience. Associated with the oral practices of story-telling and entertainment, and frequently drawing attention to moments of voice and vocalization, the late medieval poetic texts that I examine might be understood as a performance in words, a continuing moment of sound and sense. For late medieval *makeres*, or practitioners of vernacular poetic composition, poetry is a site for the performance not only of literature but of identity, because it speaks in a gendered, subjective voice. That voice is a performative locus that exemplifies Michel de Certeau's idea that "the work of writing gives birth to both the product and its author."[7]

Late medieval English *makeres* are as diverse as their poetries. The poetic texts that I examine range from the Rebel Letters of 1381, the vernacular products of peasant rebellion, seen until now more as historical documents than as literary acts; to the alliterative revisions and erasures of Piers Plowman; to the alliterative chivalric quest of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; to Chaucer's "personal" tale, the interrupted metrical romance The Tale of Sir Thopas. In each case, vernacular poetry imagines a community of heterogeneous listeners as its audience, women and men of diverse dialects and tastes, a vernacular grouping standing somewhat outside of traditional medieval identities and estates. The *makere* of late medieval English verse addresses this community as himself a member, frequently using his poetic text as a site to explore his own role as a common-born, masculine adult subject.

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[7] Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, transl. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 157.

As members of the *laboratores*, those-who-work,[8] the late medieval English poets I examine must perform reputable, public labor in order to be properly figured as men. They include at one end of a laboring spectrum the peasants and artisans of the 1381 Rebellion, and the itinerant journeyman *makere*, "Will," in *Piers Plowman*. At the other end of this spectrum we find Chaucer, member of the king's affinity. In each case, these *makeres* are neither aristocrats nor clerics, but men who must labor. Often, they offer poetry as an example and as a refutation of this labor. In doing so, they construct a gender identity concerned with work that also questions the nature of work itself. As common born men, *makeres* belonged to a masculine group defined by public service and labor. It was this group "who participated formally in government, served on juries, operated in the most visible roles in the world of commerce. Public activity of the right kind in many ways defined the respectable male," according to Shannon McSheffrey.[9] Yet despite the multiple and daily iterative habits required to make poetry, many of which may resemble work, the *makere* does not work to produce something tangible, something reputable. The *makere's* performance of public, masculine labor while frequently an isolated endeavor, is the site for political, social, theological and economic anxieties over the nature of work and the ability of the state to control work more generally.[10]

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[8] This is the traditional, if overly schematized scholarly understanding of the organization of medieval society. See Georges Duby, The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined, transl. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[9] See her essay "Men and Masculinity in Late Medieval London Civic Culture: Governance, Patriarchy and Reputation," Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1999) 259.

[10] On the problematics of labor and political control specific to the late medieval period, see Kellie Robertson, The Laborer's Two Bodies (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). See also the preface to The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, and W.M. Ormrod (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2000), vii-viii; and Allen Frantzen's introduction "The Work of Work," in Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat, ed., The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery and Labor in Medieval England (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1994) 1-15.

Late medieval poetic identity is a masculine labor with language that presses *makeres* against and within their urbane artisanal, mercantile cohort. This cohort was itself various, complex and unstable, composed of profoundly "in-between" people, to borrow Homi Bhabha's term.[11] Like merchants, artificers, laborers, the *makeres* I am dealing with belong to a dynamic, urbane, profit-seeking, generative middle that more and more represents its own interests and desires about class, gender, identity, money and marriage.[12] This elite middle consists of the majority class of the commons, people "whose experience cannot really be expressed through any of the traditional medieval socioeconomic discourses," according to Glenn Burger.[13] The limits of this community are broad enough to include artisanal laborers, journeymen, as well as the sons of wine merchants lucky enough to be apprenticed into the king's retinue, as Chaucer was.

Membership in this elite group depends increasingly on literate masculine *auctoritee*, made manifest through the production and dissemination of texts.[14] By the fifteenth century, masculine *auctoritee* had hardened into a rigid sense of hierarchized instruction and control, evidenced in conduct books and poems directed towards newly rich wives,[15] in

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[11] Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 3.

[12] See Chapter Two, "Medieval Conjugality," in Chaucer's Queer Nation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 49-60.

[13] Burger 9.

[14] On literary authority, see A.J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

[15] For a discussion of the ways by which late medieval common born women used books of courtesy to reinterpret and remake their social and gender identities, see Felicity Riddy, "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in Courtesy Texts," Speculum 71.1 (1996): 66-86. Glenn Burger has also recently argued that late medieval common-born femininity is forcefully constructed via courtesy books, "Queering Domesticity," 42nd Annual Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 11 May 2007.

"common profit" books aimed at the mercantile elite,[16] and in the foundational poetry commissioned by artisanal guilds.[17] It had also become highly aware of itself as an English product with auspicious precedents in late fourteenth-century verse. Before Arundel's project to censor Lollard and heterodox writing before the growing emergence of print, vernacular poetic *auctoritee* was a site for linguistic and social possibility.[18] Late 14th century poetry was various, noisy, and frequently exploratory in its claims on voice and identity. It was also deeply connected to the oral performance of poetry itself, a recitation that enacts a community of listeners.

My epigraph is taken from a poem by the twentieth-century poet Marie Ponsot, whose pedagogy of both poetry and composition has informed my own,[19] and whose practice of recitation and habitual listening provides a concrete way to "read" a text that is akin to communally organized late medieval literary practices.[20] Late medieval people could acquire a text by hearing it read aloud, compose a text for a similar practice of oral recitation,

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[16] On the relationship between writing and the "common profit" among mercantile communities, see Kellie Robertson, "Common Language and Common Profit," The Postcolonial Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) 209-228.

[17] Lisa Cooper argues that vernacular poetry was used as a foundational text for late medieval stonemasons' guilds. See her "The 'Boke of Oure Charges': Constructing Community in the Masons Constitutions," Journal of the Early Book Society for the Study of Manuscripts and Printing History 6 (2003) 1-39.

[18] See Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitution of 1409," Speculum 70.4 (1995): 822-64.

[19] In particular, see Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, Beat Not the Poor Desk. Writing: What to Teach, How to Teach It and Why (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1982).

[20] On auditory communities and oral-aural forms of textuality in the Middle Ages, see Brian Stock, The Implication of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) 88-240; M.T. Clanchy, "Hearing and Seeing," in his From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 253-93; and Janet Coleman, "Vernacular Literacy and Lay Education," in her Medieval Readers and Writers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 18-57.

and could do so by speaking aloud that text to a more textually literate amanuensis.[21] Thus, medieval listening was a careful and habitually practiced skill that happened in community. It was the result not simply of textual illiteracy but of the oral recitation and memorization of texts.[22] Given that our relationship with texts is a silent and visual one, it is difficult for the twenty-first-century, highly literate reader to imagine this skill. But Ponsot and Deen's method provides a means of rethinking the relationship between hearing and composing, especially in regard to poetry, the literary genre that best accommodates simultaneously oral, aural and silent reading as modes of its performativity.[23] Dependent on oral recitation and listening, Ponsot and Deen's method has at its heart Walter J. Ong's notion that "Sight isolates, sound incorporates."[24] The process of Ponsot's pedagogy depends on the oral performance of student texts, and the communal listening to those texts by other students. In this process, students are denied recourse to visually reading the page in their analysis and criticism of one another's work; they must instead listen to the work being read aloud and then record their observations. These observations are orally addressed to the writer herself, who can use them to make an inductive assessment of what she has written. In both poetry and composition classes, the Ponsot and Deen method privileges speech as a means of connecting writer to audience. Ponsot and Deen note that "what the ear hears is the big things: wholes or emphases, such as a memorable sentence, a section of cogent reasoning,

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[21] I allude here to Margery Kempe's practice of reciting her book aloud to a literate priest, who then wrote down her words. See Margery Kempe, ed. Lynn Staley, The Book of Margery Kempe (Kalamazoo: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1993).

[22] On the habits of mind and memory, specifically for medieval religious, see Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study in Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[23] See Charles Bernstein, ed., Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[24] Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word (New York: Routledge, 1996) 72.

some vivid dialogue, a perfect ending, an image."[25] Listening highlights the cohesion, or lack thereof, of a poem's structure, and it privileges rhyme and meter as devices for creating that structure. It also highlights moments of vivid description and the well-turned phrase. In short, attending carefully to poetry is to make sense of its craftedness as a verbal thing; it is to understand poetry as elevated human speech that exists in time and among other humans.

I focus in this dissertation on moments of self-representation in several late medieval English poems, arguing that by listening to the ways in which poets depict themselves and their practice, as figured in their poetry, one can perceive a growing argument about poetic *makynge* as a gendered occupation and as a means of creating vernacular community. By listening to the aesthetic stuff out of which a poem is made—its rhyme, assonance, alliterative patterning, the metrical bend and sway of rhythm—we can begin to discern the lineaments of a new kind of Englishness that beginning to look less at the Continent and more, quite directly, at itself. For, whereas Sir Gawain and the Green Knight evokes both Arthuriana and the Trojan origins of Britain, it also invokes a community of Midlands-dialect speakers.

For the late fourteenth-century poets I examine, the anonymous makers of the Rebel Letters and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the author called "William Langland," and the satiric "popet" Geoffrey Chaucer, poetic identity is a performance instantiated by the composition, revision, recitation and dissemination of vernacular poetry. Poetic identity is located in moments of poetic self-representation, textual spots where male poets identify themselves, call out to others, point out their oral-aural practice, defend their poetic labor, and disguise themselves behind a mask of satire. These moments imagine a local English

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[25] Ponsot and Deen 56.

community.[26] I do not mean that such a community is actual, but rather, that the poetic texts function as a way of calling into being a new discourse. The moments of poetic self-representation that I examine are not historical biography but fiction, a way of imagining, or re-presenting, a poetic identity quite separate from who a poet is or was in "real life." Indeed, as poststructuralists Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes have argued, the author is dead.[27] The critical attempt to destabilize the text, to present it as a field of inquiry in its own right, has proved quite applicable to the medieval. To read late medieval poetry, with its proliferation of anonymous, pseudonymous, collective, ironic, and/or retracted authors for "proof" of autobiography is to engage in a critical fallacy. For many late medieval poems, the representative world of the poem is the only record we have of the existence of the poet himself, and does not provide any measure of factuality. It provides a strange darkness.

Contemporary poet Eavan Boland has posited, regarding the recuperation of past poetic identities, that the creation of a sense of self within a poem must often be "judged, like a quark or quasar, by absences, negations, negative energies, suppositions of space and distance."[28] These negations must be understood, in the case of the late medieval poets I examine, in terms of the complexly fluid, often dangerous relationships between vernacular poetry and power. In the case of disguised and erased *makeres* like the rebels of 1381, the

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[26] I use Benedict Anderson's notion of the imagined community as a grouping united around a shared sense of comradeship. He notes that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." See his Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983) 15.

[27] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Textual Strategies: Strategies in Post-structural Criticism, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979); and Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in Image, Music, Text trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

[28] Eavan Boland, "Finding Anne Bradstreet," in Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric ed. Jonathan F.S. Post (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 188.

absence of a "true" speaking voice in the poems must be understood via their relation to violent hegemony. For poets like Langland and the Gawain-poet, the seeming negation of a clear self within a poem seems less politically charged, though certainly fraught with questions of meaning over labor and the poet's contribution to the "common profit." For elite *makeres* like Chaucer, poetry serves as a site for re-invention and re-presentation quite different from his bureaucratic work as *esquire de servyce* and Justice of the Peace. It is through the negations, absences, and occlusions of an authorial self within vernacular poetry that masculine poetic identity for late medieval Englishmen might be located. More than this, I argue that *makynge*, because it is a time bound, bodily medium, is a kind of absent labor because it does not produce a tangible good. Taking my cue from post-capitalist Marxists and medieval scholars, I ask how the immaterial labor of making poetry might confer an occupational and gender identity separate from but also related to that conferred by the material production of artisanal goods. I ask, as well, how the immaterial labor of the poet might differ considerably from that of the scribe, a man similarly engaged in linguistic production but whose labor is the actual making of books.[29]

Makynge is a social practice, but time spent *makynge* is time not spent on other, possibly more productive activities. It is time spent outside of the artisanal or scribal workshop, in frequent solitude. Yet the poems that I examine are also sites within which men call out to other men, attempt to create a relational community and compete with their male peers. Masculine poetic identity is obsessed with defining and redefining itself and its bounds, often via a self-referential moment in the poem, but it does not attempt to

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[29] Hoccleve is the most famous fifteenth century example of a man who was a poet as well as a scribe, although he was never able to fully integrate these two roles into a whole identity. See Ethan Knapp, The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

"cognitively purify" itself as a harshly defined category set against lesser categories.[30] It seeks instead to instantiate what Isabel Davis calls "a new masculine modality: a kind of *urbanitas*, a pragmatic, non-heroic identity that is an unsteady accommodation between the 'common good' and the interior, appetitive self," one which attempts to incorporate social community while never feeling completely at home within that community.[31] Thus, in the Rebel Letters of 1381, true men call out in verse to other men, hoping for a radically new politics, and fail. In Piers Plowman, William Langland identifies himself to the civic authorities as well as to his own conscience as a man unable to work because of his poetic occupation. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, chivalric masculinity is built by an anonymous *makere* via delicately intimate speech acts between men, and is revealed to a listening audience to be an edifice composed of deception. And in his Tale of Sir Thopas, Chaucer depicts himself as the small-statured loser in a contest with other, more powerful yet also abusive, common men.

As verbal representation, all poetry is confected, is fantastic. But as representation, poetry allows for a kind of living and acting out of complex ideas concerning society, identity, and the self; it allows for an imagining of the possible. Butler has recently argued that "fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home."[32] It is in poetry, with its multiple speaking voices, its ventriloquisms, that possibilities unthinkable within daily life might be set forth. The daily life of the poet is not

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[30] I take the phrase "cognitive purification" from R.W. Connell. See his Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987) 246.

[31] See Davis, Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 11.

[32] Butler, Undoing 29.

the same thing as the verbal construct of his poem, because the poem is made up. But the making-up of the poem is what composes the poet's daily life; it is what occupies his time. Specifically, the poet's time is spent on the complex interrelationships between form and content. By *form* I mean the sonic, aesthetic abstractions of poetic composition—meter, rhyme, sound patterns, images. By *content* I mean the expression of these abstractions—in words, phrases, sentences and lines. Form in particular requires of the poet a series of decisions that influence his diction and syntax, and these decisions provide a subtle map by which to trace out the poet's idiolect. There may be "no more reliable way of initially entering a poet's private domain than by examining what he or she rhymes with what. Certainly, the abbreviated signature of a good many poets could be read by assembling a sample list of the end-words of their lines," according to twenty-first-century poet and critic Brad Leithauser.[33] The *makere's* choices of form and content, his use of certain rhymes or alliterative patterns but not others, are the representation of masculine poetic identity.

In late fourteenth-century poems, acts of poetic self-representation must be understood as mimesis that both reveals and conceals a masculine author. They are acts of *makynge* within the medieval tradition of the humility *topos* that create a complex (undercut but also asserted) masculine poetic identity. This identity is embattled, contested. It deceives as much as it disambiguates, occupying what Bhabha has called the "middle," that space of the postmodern, poststructuralist, postfeminist, postcolonial, a position that is neither "after" a historicist teleology nor "against" a specific oppressor, but is instead a productive space where identities have not yet been hardened into stability.[34]

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[33] Brad Leithauser, "Wild Irish," rev. of District and Circle, by Seamus Heaney, New York Times Book Review 16 July 2006: 12.

[34] Bhabha 4.

The Practice of *Makynge*

Poetry is made within specific social, economic, spiritual and material contexts. The *makeres* of poetry do not stand outside of these contexts, but must find ways to survive, to thrive, and also to aesthetically create from within historical moments that may be quite hostile to their claims. Poets appear in medieval history, and certainly their texts provide evidence of their production and their civic value, but analyses of the role of poets within larger medieval society have been confined for the most part to examinations of poetry and power.[35] I attempt here to examine instead what Steven Justice has referred to as "the local,"[36] the small and quotidian moments of meaning and usage that may be overlooked in attempts to make sense of the edifices of power. In our study of poetry, form is all too frequently made to follow political function. Yet poetry also, just as frequently, refuses the responsibility for telling a big story, insisting instead on "the supervening integrity of the local," the brief moments in which a self might speak to other selves. I focus specifically on the brief and often intimate moments in a poem in which a *makere* points himself out, in which he indicates his authorial presence. These moments of authorial presence often serve to downplay the *makere's* status in relation to other men; the fact that they do so indicates

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[35] Historicist and New Historicist critics situate the production of poetry within the poet's relationship to political power. For example, in his Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), Lee Patterson argues notably that "it was within and against the fashionable discourse of court versifying that [Chaucer's] poetry developed" (22). He also posits "that this poetry should concern itself above all with the subject of history—with the relation of agency to action, and with the legitimacy of historical engagement per se—is fully consistent with its address to a nobility whose class definition stressed an active role in the bringing of order to a disordinate world" (23). In addition to Patterson, Paul Strohm has examined Chaucer's social and political roles in Social Chaucer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). For a historicist analysis of the poem Pearl and its *makere*, see John Bowers, The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001). A general overview of the courtly relationship between poets and royalty is provided in Richard Firth Green, Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the later Middle Ages (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1980).

[36] Steven Justice, "Literary History," The Chaucer Review at Forty: Major Issues in Chaucer Studies IV: Audience and Receptions, 41st Annual Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 5 May 2006.

that they do not occupy the furthest tiers of privilege, where power so suffuses the air that it is almost invisible.

Makeres directed their poetry towards aristocratic power, and they frequently used dominant French and Latin literary models to do so. Yet in vernacular English *makeres* say ambivalent things about themselves, their audience of English-speakers, and their poetic practice. The late medieval *makere* could be literary authority, might serve as a bureaucrat in service to power, but he was not himself powerful. Able to speak in and to the discourses of power, the *makere* was also able to address a vernacular audience composed of women and men much like himself; he was in this way double-voiced.[37] The poet's sense of himself, as presented in his poetry, occurs not only via the long view of history and ideology, but within the day-to-day work of composing verse. I argue that late medieval English representations of *makynge*, and thereby, of being a poet, are bound up in the larger medieval questions concerning masculinity, vernacularity and work. We can, along the edges and occlusions of late medieval verse, sense a growing argument about the masculine self who makes. It is an argument concerned with working and making, practices that cohere socially for late medieval communities and also confer individual identities.

To make is to participate in culture and in community; it is also to work as an individual, in ways both concrete and immaterial.[38] *Maken* is a polysemous Middle English

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[37] The notion of the doubled voice is taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse Typologies in Prose," in Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971) 176-96. My own thinking about the *makere's* doubled—or perhaps tripled—voice, a multiply-pronged way of speaking that simultaneously addresses Continental literary precedents, political power, and a local vernacular audience, comes from Henry Louis Gates' observation that "a novelist such as Ralph Ellison or Ishmael Reed creates texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black novels, but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition." See his The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) xxiii.

[38] For an explication of the differences in the Middle English terms used to describe work, see Nicola Masciandaro, The Voice of the Hammer: Work in Medieval English Literature (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame

verb that exemplifies the proliferation of meanings inherent in vernacular language, and that is used in Middle English texts to refer to craftedness of all kinds. The term has its origins in the Anglo-Saxon *macian* and *gemacian*; in Anglo-Saxon translations from Latin, *macian* is used much less commonly than the verbs *don* (do) and *gewyrcan* (work) in order to convey the Latin *facere* (to make).[39] Throughout the Middle Ages and into contemporary usage, *to make* has had a variety of meanings, ranging from the transitive, primary sense of "to bring into existence by construction or elaboration; to produce (a material thing) by combination of parts, or by giving a certain form to a portion of matter, to manufacture; to construct, assemble, frame, fashion,"[40] to the more immaterial, less frequently used sense "to cause to be, render."[41] Included in these primary meanings is the more literary use of *to make* to mean "to compose, write as the author (a book, poem, letter, etc,)" or more specifically "to compose verses; to write poetry; to rhyme," and "to create."[42] This usage of *maken*, to indicate the composition of poetry, is a decidedly allusive, literary meaning that echoes the Greek term for imitator or producer.[43] The use of *makers* or *makaris,* to mean *poet,* persists among American poets today.[44]

University Press, 2007), particularly Chapter One, "The Vocabulary of Work," and Lisa Cooper, "'These Crafty Men': Figuring the Artisan in Late Medieval England," diss., Columbia University, 2003, particularly Chapter One, "Making Conversation: Artisans in Medieval Vocabularies."

[39] "Make v.1," The Oxford English Dictionary, <http://www.oed.com>.

[40] "Make v.1."

[41] See "Make: 34a trans.," OED.

[42] See "Make," meanings 4a., b., and c., OED.

[43] See "poet," OED. The word is derived from "ancient Greek ποητής, early variant of ποιητής maker, author, poet ποεῖν, ποιεῖν to make, create, produce, to compose, write." The Greek term means, loosely, "one who imitates."

[44] Contemporary American poet Sharon Olds' poem,"The Makaris," alludes to Scots poet William Dunbar's 15th century poem, "Lament for the Makaris," which canonizes Chaucer. Olds' poem, explicitly feminist, likens

The Middle English verbal forms of *maken* indicate it can be used to mean "design, construct, make," "build," and also an "action, behavior."[45] *Maken* could describe the power of God to create humans and the earth; it also meant to "construct or produce (a thing); "to found (a city, church, monastery, religious order)"; to build or repair a structure; to prepare a bed or a meal; "to write or compose (a book, poem, song, prayer, letter, etc.)"; to raise crops; to compile (a concordance); to pick a king or leader; "to produce sounds," and to utter words or music; to express feelings; to gesture; "to arrange and hold feasts" and ritual festivities; to enter into a contract; to promise, pledge or vow; to promulgate laws and governances; to give gifts; to perform actions; to bring about; to cause to be; to change; to pretend; to earn money, to acquire or gain.[46] Thus, *maken* means not only material construction and the fabrication of goods but also the more ephemeral interpersonal events occurring in communities, among fellow *makeres*. Indeed, of the four primary meanings for *makere*, the last three, "a maker, manufacturer, builder"; "the writer or composer of a book, poem, song, etc., author"; "a doer, perpetrator," imply that *maken* was a verb that conferred meaning by means of its practice, of its having been done.[47] In Middle English, *maken* means the creation of things and the social performance of gestures; it is a doing, a perpetration, a way of being in the world. Embedded in the word's meaning is the sense that just as a building or the production of a good is an action, so too is a poem an action. Or perhaps, also, a poem is a perpetration. *Maken* is not only an activity, then, but a practice. At once

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poetic making to both sexual intercourse and childbirth. See her Blood, Tin, Straw (New York: Knopf, 1999) 32-33.

[45] See "Make, n. (2) (a), (b), and (c)," The Middle English Dictionary,<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/med/>.

[46] "Maken," MED.

[47] "Makere," MED.

social, material and literary, the polyvalence of the term provides a sense of the oddly blurred distinction, in the later Middle Ages, between those who make goods and those who make verse. *Makeres* are included within the categories of those-who-make, the artisans and builders, the purveyors of goods. But what the poetic *makere* creates is verbal representation.

The question of how the poem is a crafted thing, when words and meters are so intangible, has dogged the study of poetry since Plato, who rejects poetry in Book X of The Republic as being antithetical to good governance and a stable society. He argues that "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers," because a poet is only "a creator of appearances."[48] Plato notes that "poetic individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach."[49] To further problematize the poet's role, Plato also points out that poets are liars who sweeten their lies and their seeming expertise with meter and rhyme. In this way, when a poet speaks "in meter and harmony and rhythm," people believe that "he speaks very well," even if he is no expert on his subject.[50] It is the prosodic elements of oral poetry that are most troubling to Plato, because they can be incredibly deceptive. He argues that when poems are "stripped of the colors which music puts upon them, and recited in simple prose," the emptiness of their imitation becomes obvious.[51] Devoid of the pleasure of their prosody, poems turned into simple prose "are like faces which were never really beautiful, but only blooming; and

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[48] Plato, B. Jowett, trans., The Republic and Other Works by Plato (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1989) 288-9.

[49] Plato 294.

[50] Plato 294.

[51] Plato 294.

now the bloom of youth has passed away from them."[52] A poem, for Plato, is an oral performance; its prosody is intrinsic to its seductive pleasures, for it is through the use of pleasing meters and rhymes that poetry's negative aspects most readily reach people's ears. Because a poem sounds good, its erroneous content has a better chance to deceive the listener.

For Plato, poetic making can duplicate and amplify bad human qualities, because it is the imitation of human action.[53] The poet might be so lazy and so driven to please and entertain his audience that he will describe and perpetuate intemperate behaviors, these being easier to imitate and more popular. Indeed, "the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated."[54] It is for these reasons that Plato declares poets should not be admitted into the ideal and well-ordered state. The poetic imitator "awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason," and he "implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small."[55] Poetic imitation, and imitators, cannot be easily controlled by the state. The entertaining and pleasing aspects of poetry are so dangerous that they must be banned; only "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men" are acceptable for admission into the ideal state.[56] Yet entertaining, "honeyed" poetry remains

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[52] Plato 294.

[53] Plato 298.

[54] Plato 299.

[55] Plato 299-300.

[56] Plato 301.

appealing to Plato, and he cannot get rid of it entirely. He must, however, be perpetually on guard against poetry's incredible attractions, and he posits that his argument objecting to poetry, because of its ability to inflame passions, indulge base social elements, and merely entertain might be used as a kind of charm. Plato and his interlocutor hope to use their anti-poetry argument in an incantatory way, repeating it to themselves "while we listen to her [i.e. poetry's] strains; that we may not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many."[57]

Aristotle, like his predecessor, struggles to define poetry as an art, because it is similar to but quite different from the plastic arts. But he does not seek to ban poetry from the ideal state, instead attempting to categorize and define the different types of poetic making. Poetry is representation, an act of mimesis, but the poem's mimetic act occupies no physical space. It is a production that doesn't make anything one might buy or sell or trade. For, while a sculpture might render the human form in three dimensions, the verbal representation of poetry doesn't really render at all. Or if it does, that rendering takes place only in the ear and in the mind. In his Poetics, Aristotle resolves this conundrum of materiality by arguing that poets may be described as makers because of their use of prosody. Society refers to poets as "elegiac-makers," or "epic-makers," he notes, "doing so not with respect to their imitation of objects, but with respect to the name common to the meter."[58] Note the parallel distinction that he draws between objects and meters; poets are makers not because they make things but because they make rhythmic language. And yet both things

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[57] Plato 302.

[58] Aristotle, Apostle, Hippocrates, Elizabeth Dobbs and Morris Parslow, trans., Poetics (Grinnell, IA: The Peripatetic Press, 1990) 1.

and meters have a human force in the world; both are the products of human effort and time. Where Plato found himself utterly discombobulated by the pleasures of listening to that rhythmic language, Aristotle attempts to parse the poet's actual craft. The poetic imitator organizes prosody, organizes repeated sounds and metrical patterns in order to make entertaining, aesthetically pleasing fiction. His making may be immaterial, but he is working with something quantifiable.

Medieval clerics and educators relied on Geoffrey of Vinsauf's thirteenth-century guidebook on poetry and rhetoric, Poetria nova, to teach poetic craft. The treatise was widespread in academic and clerical pedagogy, and certainly influenced Chaucer.[59] Geoffrey's treatise builds on Horace's earlier Ars poetica, hence its "new" title, and presents poetry and rhetoric as adjuncts in the process of making meaning. Written as poetry, the treatise exemplifies many of the rhetorical strategies it lays out, and attempts to categorize the general ways by which good poetry is constructed. Geoffrey points out the analogues between the making of a sturdy poem and that of making a building:

> Just as a person building a house first plans what he is to do, so a poet must plan his poem in advance of the writing. The poet must first find things to say, either in his mind or from material things. Then he must consider the order in which he says these things, the language in which he says them, and finally the use of voice, countenance, and action.[60]

Geoffrey compares poetic making with the processes of tangible building. The poet must either invent his subject or he must describe the physical world, and he must decide how he

[59] See Marjorie Woods Curry, "Poetic Digression and the Interpretation of Medieval Literary Texts," in Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Sanctandreani: Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress of Neo-Latin Studies (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1986) 617-626.

[60] Qtd. in James J. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) 170.

will present his material. The poet must decide upon his language, and in doing so, must also consider his tone of voice, his bodily countenance, and his performative effect. The poet here is not exclusively a textual writer, but is a performer, thinking ahead to when he must recite his text aloud and in what manner.

Geoffrey's instructions on poetry do not explicitly consider the interpenetration of poetry and politics. A Latin treatise, the Poetria nova was used primarily in academic settings, and although it influenced many late medieval writers and poets, the Poetria nova is only one of many influences on late medieval English *makynge*. Like classical poetic imitation, *makynge* was socially suspect as well as materially difficult to define. In its immateriality, and in its use of the vernacular, *makynge* is intimately close to Lollard heresy, peasant rebellion, popular preaching, fabliaux and minstrelsy, all of which use language in dangerous, subversive and often subaltern ways. *Makynge* is a hybrid of entertainment, high sentiment, translation, classical allusions, and local dialect; it is an aesthetic practice that is also a site for the representation of gendered poetic identities, however hidden or eclipsed by power.

Late medieval English poets referred to themselves largely as *makeres*, reserving *poet* for continental literary authorities like Petrarch and Dante.[61] Chaucer, notably, does not

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[61] See Glending Olson, "Making and Poetry in the Age of Chaucer," Comparative Literature 31.3 (summer 1979): 272-290. He notes that "Chaucer employs 'makere' and 'makyng' to describe himself, his contemporaries, and their activity, and 'poete' and 'poetrie' to designate the ancients, the most revered moderns, and their work" (274-5). In addition to Olson's analysis of the difference between Chaucerian *makynge* and poetry, above, A.V.C. Schmidt, The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987) reads Piers Plowman as an example of clerical English *makynge*. For analyses of fifteenth and sixteenth century *makeres*, particularly for the use of the term amongst Scots writers, see Lois Ebin, Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Priscilla Bawcutt, Dunbar the Makar (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); J.A. Burrow, "Dunbar, Henryson and Other Makars," Review 4 (1982) 113-127; and Raymond Southall, The Courtly Maker: An Essay on the Poetry of Wyatt and his Contemporaries (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965).

refer to himself as a *poet* at all, instead calling his production "my makyng."[62] This classification, where making is a humble vernacular practice and poetry a classical one, is a canonizing tactic; it is frequently used by the speaker to situate himself humbly within an illustrious tradition of better men.[63] *Makynge*, then, is presented in late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century English poetry as an almost quotidian technique used in the now. It is a skill that might be learned, an everyday craft that might be practiced in a workmanlike way. Poetry, conversely, is the product of genius and inspiration, and lives not in the present but in history. This schema separates the ordinary *makeres* of the present moment, and their well-made if boring poetic forms, from the inspired beauty of classical past masters. The *makere* is a kind of artisan of words, building sturdy, musical poems; his labor is daily. But the poet doesn't have to work at his craft; instead, poetry inheres in him and is poured out in a perfect blending of prosody, pleasure, and meaning. According to Glending Olson, within this schema, "the poet is one of the learned; the versifiers belong down the line with the artisans."[64] Poetry is educated, inspired, effortless. *Makynge* is something at which a man has to actively work, in ways similar to the work performed by an artisan.

Olson's schema positions *makynge* as a formal, craft-driven practice against the inspired, learnedness of poetry. The *makere* is a craftsman because he engages openly in form, one that he learns by doing, and he regularly creates poems that merely entertain. But the poet is unique in his gift of blending form, lyricism, function, and edification, according to Olson. He uses Dante to support the distinction between the *makere's* artisanal practice

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[62] He says to his scribe, "But after my makyng thow wryte more trewe," in his poem, "Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owene Scriveyn," Geoffrey Chaucer, Larry Benson ed., The Riverside Chaucer (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) 650.

[63] Chaucer uses this maneuver, as do Lydgate, Walton and Dunbar (Olson 275).

[64] Olson 280.

and the poet's inspiration, arguing that "the emphasis in the vernacular lyric [Italian] treatises on technique rather than on inspiration or learning reinforces the impression that making is perceived primarily as craftsmanship."[65] After De vulgari eloquentia, Olson argues, poetic "form, with its attendant values of pleasure and solace, replaces *fictio* as the principal conceptual basis of lyric."[66] Formal invention is a kind of craft, a technique that can be learned, in this sense, whereas *fictio* is pure inventiveness. I do not agree with Olson that a hard and definitive separation exists between formal craft practice and inspired fictiveness, however. Form cannot be separated from inspiration; it is frequently the source of inspiration, and both formal craft and lyric inventiveness are methods essential to poetic composition. Moreover, what Dante says is this: "I have often called those who write in the vernacular, 'poets.' I have presumed to do so, without reservation, and for good reason; for they are undoubtedly poets, if we consider the true definition of poetry, which is nothing other than a fiction expressed in verse according to [the arts of] rhetoric and music."[67] Dante himself does not split formal craft from *fictio;*[68] prosody and the composition of fiction are not distinguishable in practice. Composed fictiveness, where the fictiveness is created by means of the arts of music and rhetoric, is poetry. Further, although I agree with Olson that *makynge* is a term infused with craft and artisanal associations, I do not believe that medieval *makeres*, or versifiers, as Olson understands them, saw themselves positioned pejoratively "down the line with the artisans." Indeed, the association between artisanal craft production

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[65] Olson 276.

[66] Olson 279.

[67] Robert S. Haller, ed. and trans., Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1973) II.4.2, 38.

[68] The Latin phrase is "fictio rethorica musicaque composita," which Haller translates as "verse fiction expressed according to rhetoric and music" (38).

and vernacular *makynge* is not a negative one in late medieval English poetry;[69] to make vernacular poetry is to craft sturdy, entertaining, hopefully edifying forms. That these forms may be less than inspired does not make them any less shapely or aesthetic, and the fact that *makeres* do not call themselves poets speaks more to their own affinity for artisanal practice than it does to a pejorative judgment. Indeed, the *makere*, just like the French *faiseur*, is engaged in a kind of performative, musical practice.[70] The *makere's* labor creates not only music but fictiveness; that labor can certainly be organized around a workmanlike efficacy, but such efficacy is not necessarily opposed to moments of lyric inspiration. Indeed, the performance of that labor can itself set the stage for future inspiration.

Juxtaposed to Latin verse makers whose work was disseminated widely via textual literacy, and in relation to the literary traditions of France, the question of how and what *makere* might signify for medieval Englishmen is thus complex. A *makere* is one who makes vernacular English verse; *makynge*, as a practice, includes both oral and textual forms of poetry, ranging from public minstrelsy and song to a more formally written "boke." Within *makynge* there is an aesthetic and social tension between the more oral (and thus less-renowned) practitioners, often called *jangeleres*, and those *makeres* of more explicitly literary verse.[71] Yet the definition of the literary is constantly shifting, for late medieval *makeres*. The literary is not necessarily the textual, nor is the oral necessarily positioned against the written.

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[69] Medieval French poetry offers a similar dichotomy between the workmanlike maker of the present, and the seemingly more inspired poets of the past. "'Faiseur' is Eustache Deschamps's word for the maker of lyric poems; he uses it throughout his text on versifying, L'Art de dictier et de fere chançons, balades, virelais et rondeaux, in Oeuvres complètes de Eustache Deschamps, ed. Le Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire and Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1878-1903) VII 266-92.

[70] See Glending Olson, "Deschamps' Art de dictier and Chaucer's Literary Environment," Speculum 48.4 (1973): 714-23.

[71] This distinction is most explicit in the alliterative poem Wynnere and Wastour, when the speaker of the poem castigates a younger *jangelere* for pandering to his audience and from essentially plagiarizing past *makeres*:

Makynge is a fundamentally vernacular practice, engaged with the shifting fluidities of English speech. Chaucer famously elides literary *makynge* and speech at the end of his Troilus and Criseyde. Shifting into a first person narrative, Chaucer leaves behind the world of Troilus and Criseyde's failed romance to point out his own practice, and refers to himself and to his own practice as a *makere*. He calls the poem a "litel bok," "litel myn tragedye," addressing it as an object able to "go" from him out into the world (V.1786). But despite these textual referents, he also goes to great pains to argue that his "boke" is prosodic, poetic speech as well. He is only a "makere" (1787), and his vernacular product should "subgit be to alle poesye" (1790), poesy being represented by the superlative classical authorities Virgil, Ovid, Homer, Lucan, and Statius (1792). Chaucer's concern is with the poetic dilemma of how spoken, vernacular words cannot ever be adequately pinned down on the page. They cannot signify a stable meaning across dialects. Prosodic meters might sound one way in the *makere's* mouth but get mangled en route to their textual form:

> …ther is so gret diversite
> In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
> So prey I God that non myswrite the,
> Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge. (V.1793-6)

> Bot nowe a childe appon chere, withowtten chyn-wedys,
> That never wroghte thurgh witt thies wordes togedire,
> Fro he can jangle als a jaye and japes telle,
> He schall be levede and lovede and lett of a while
> Wele more than the man that made it hymselven. (25-8)

The boy without hairs on his chin, who never wrought words together can nonetheless jangle and tell entertaining stories that he has ostensibly "borrowed" from prior masters. And he is more beloved by his audience for doing so than the man who originally made the tales. See Wynnere and Wastour and the Parlement of the Thre Ages, ed. Warren Ginsburg (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1992).

As he does in his "Adam Scriveyn," Chaucer pleads to God and to himself that his scribe be able accurately to replicate his prosody when he writes it down. Nonetheless, there are so many dialects in vernacular English that Chaucer has no guarantee that his prosody, once written down, will even sound the same in another's voice. A different dialect, with different syllabic emphasis or elisions, will "mysmetre," create a deformation in the measure. This deformation is a loss of his poetic authority. Addressing his poem in the familiar second person, as "the," Chaucer presents himself as a parental *makere* losing control over his "litel" child, his carefully made meter and rhyme; this loss is connected to orality, because Chaucer cannot control how the poem will sound when it is spoken by a different tongue. Writing fails to capture the subtle distinctions in pronunciation—the emphasis on a particular syllable, for instance—that create poetic meter, and the diverse ways of speaking English make its writing down, the "writyng of oure tonge," a fraught process. There is the poem, composed by Chaucer in a particular way, with a specific prosody based ostensibly on his chosen dialect. And then there is the writing-down of that poem, the capture of that performative prosody and its transformation into a written page, followed by the performative recitation of the poem by others. Implicitly, Chaucer presents his *makynge* as an oral performative practice; it is associated with meter, and with the eventual recitation of that meter by another voice. Silent reading does not create bad meter, because meter is primarily an aural phenomenon. But bad oral recitation, or at the very least, *different kinds* of oral recitation, as well as bad listening, introduce misprision. It is "defaute of tonge," the speaking aloud of language, that introduces the prosodic misprision destructive to the *makere's* ideal metrical rhythm. That "defaute" occurs in the process of translation between the *makere's* vernacular composition, ostensibly spoken aloud, and the scribe's writing-down

of what he hears. Unlike the stabilities of Latin, shared across the Continent, English is fractured into regional tongues, some mutually unintelligible, some emphasizing different syllables, some bending or compressing vowels. Notice, though, despite its fracture, its complication, the language used to make vernacular poetry in Chaucer's thinking is possessed by a collective "we." It is "oure tonge," a shared English, even if that language is so diverse that its many sounds create problems for those who make poetry out of that tongue.[72]

Makynge as Masculine Authority

The masculinity of *makeres* was concerned with labor, and yet the labor of the *makere* was comprised of words and air. Although certainly informed by clerical and monastic discourses on immaterial labor, and the virtues of performing such labor, *makeres* were secular. Their practice is not necessarily a part of prayer, nor is it made legible by participation in a traditional clerical identity. Instead, as Geoffrey of Vinsauf's metaphor of poetic composition as building a house attempts to address, *makynge* verse is an activity quite similar to the construction of an actual structure; there are rules that govern each practice and that define it. Like the artisan and builder, the *makere* strives to create a structure with aesthetic integrity that is sturdy enough to withstand scrutiny and time. And, like the artisan and the builder, the *makere* participates in a collective "we," whether that we comprises a

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[72] The role of vernacular language in political and religious life was a fractious topic in late medieval England. For an overview of the various ways that medieval English writers thought through the dilemma of using the vernacular, see Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Critical analysis of the ways by which vernacularity can be used in a nationalist, populist, and frequently rebellious way can be found in Nicholas Watson and Fiona Somerset, eds., The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

guild, a confraternity or a dialect community. When Chaucer addresses those who use "oure tongue" he is not exclusively addressing an elite audience. His use of the first person plural assumes a larger participation in vernacular tradition. He reaches out to a "we" who must work for a living, and who must use English as a mother tongue. What makes *makynge* legible is that it is a masculine labor seen in relation to other kinds of artisanal labor. To construct a poetic text, and thereby to construct an English "we" around that text, the *makere* must use the immaterial tools of his trade. As Isabel Davis has argued, *makynge* is a practice of "masculine life writing that places labor at the center of the construction of the self, and reads tools as extensions of the desiring body."[73] For the *makere*, those tools are discursive and prosodic.

Moreover, the *makere* must be seen as possessed of, and by, his gender identity. Because man has for so long been synonymous with human, with the universal subject, man has been studied as the preeminent actor in history, a figure somehow freed of both body and gender. The figure of the late medieval poet is no exception. Scott Coltrane has observed that, "research on men is as old as scholarship itself, but a focus on masculinity, or men as explicitly gendered individuals is relatively recent."[74] Gender, for the most part, was the purview of women. In their analysis of gender as a social and historical construction, feminist theorists, both male and female, reassess the notion of *man* and masculinity as subjects worthy of study.[75] Feminist theory usefully points out that to perceive men as

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[73] Isabel Davis, Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 109.

[74] Scott Coltrane, "Theorizing Masculinities in Contemporary Social Science," in Theorizing Masculinities: Research on Men and Masculinities, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994) 39-60, at 41.

[75] The earliest explorations of masculinity studies emerged in the 1970's and 1980's, as part of a pro-feminist movement of men to critically analyze their own positions as gendered subjects. See, particularly, Clyde

universal subjects is to ignore women as humans. Masculinity studies sharpens this point to posit that men's identities, roles and behaviors are likewise circumscribed by social and political forces. Instead of perceiving men and masculinity as normative, masculinity studies insists on the consideration of men as subjective individuals shaped and influenced by the forces of gender.[76] Thus, critical study of masculinity emerges from twentieth-century feminist critical praxis, and has grown both in dialogue and alliance with feminist theory, queer theory, race studies and poststructuralism(s).[77]

To examine the identities of individual men is also to acknowledge a multiplicity of masculinities, some subordinate, some superordinate.[78] Because men have historically been associated with political, economic, social and familial power, it is easy to assume all men enjoy privilege, but such an assumption elides the experiences of men figured as subordinate.[79] According to R.W. Connell, all men are harmed by the binary splitting into superior and inferior that is the hallmark of "hegemonic masculinity."[80] As Susan Bordo

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Franklin, The Changing Definition of Masculinity (New York: Plenum, 1984); Tim Carrigan, R.W. Connell, and John Lee, "Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity," Theory and Society 14 (1985): 551-604; and Harry Brod, The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987). Brod early articulates a call for "men's studies," in Making 39-62.

[76] Sally Robinson points out that men as well as women are "marked" by gender. See her Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Robyn Wiegman argues that the falsely unified front of "masculinity" came under attack at the same time as queer theorists, feminists of color and poststructuralist theorists were challenging the seemingly unified category of "woman." See her "Unmaking: Men and Masculinity in Feminist Theory," in Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 31-59.

[77] See, for instance, Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner, eds., Men's Lives: 5th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000); and Judith Kegan Gardiner, ed., Masculinity Studies.

[78] Harry Brod argues for "superordinate studies" in his "Studying Masculinities as Superordinate Studies," in Masculinity Studies 161-75.

[79] Both R.W. Connell, in Masculinities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), and Michael Kimmel, in Manhood in America: A Cultural History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), argue for a reconsideration of the experiences of working class and queer men and men of color.

[80] Connell, Gender and Power 183.

argues, "within a Foucaldian/feminist framework … it is indeed senseless to view [all] men as the enemy" because "most men, equally with women, find themselves embedded and implicated in institutions and practices that they as individuals did not create and do not control—and that they frequently feel tyrannized by."[81] Yet in examining the ways by which subordinately figured men may lack power in relation to other men, we cannot ignore the ways by which masculinity is generally organized around power and exclusion. Moreover, the experiences of contemporary men are not transhistorical, but are instead predicated on past forms of knowledge, power and authority.

The bulk of critical work on masculinity studies is concerned with modernist and postmodernist manifestations of masculine identities.[82] Frequently, these manifestations are examined through a sociological and/or anthropological lens, allowing scholars to make broad claims regarding men, masculine identities, and behavior. Anthropologist David Gilmore concludes, in his analysis of masculinity across a variety of 20th century tribal communities, "so long as there are battles to be fought, wars to be won, heights to be scaled, hard work to be done, some of us will have to 'act like men.'"[83] Gilmore's modernist examination of masculinity as timeless as universal ("so long as") works to obscure the complex realities of pre-modern gender identities, which only rarely fit into such universal pronouncements of who "some of us" are, much less what it might mean, across time, to "act like men." This modernist focus on what and how masculinities might mean is further influenced by the widespread use of Robert Brannon's twentieth-century American

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[81] See Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 28.

[82] In the foundational textbook Masculinities, the history of masculinity begins in 1650. See Connell 186.

[83] Gilmore, Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), qtd. in Connell, Masculinities 32.

typologies to categorize specific kinds of masculinities.[84] But Ruth Mazo Karras usefully points out that Brannon's historically specific typologies cannot and do not apply to medieval identities, which understood female and male sex roles in quite different ways.[85]

Gender is not universally experienced in the same ways across time. The influences and instantiations of gender must be examined and understood historically. Davis observes that, just as masculinity studies insists that men have gender, "social and feminist historians have challenged the academy to broaden its notion of what constitutes historical research beyond questions of politics at the nation state level," urging for a more comprehensive understanding of history that might include analyses of women, children, families, and domestic life.[86] In the last decades of the twentieth century, scholars of the pre-modern have begun to examine the influences of gender, but all too frequently "gender" has been equated exclusively with "femininity." The attempt to achieve a broader understanding of gender history thus accomplishes a different, but equally pernicious, form of exclusivity if it does not also incorporate the study of men and masculinity. Thelma Fenster argues, in her preface, "Why Men?" to Clare Lees' influential Medieval Masculinities (1994), that for too long "the study of women's culture has almost always proceeded by asking how a woman's gender may shape what she does, and has even asked how the (woman) investigator's gender might bear on her study, but the relationship between a man's gender and his acts remains to

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[84] These typologies are: 1.) No Sissy Stuff, 2.) The Big Wheel, 3.) The Sturdy Oak, 4.) Give 'Em Hell. They were laid out by Robert Brannon, in "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately," in The Forty Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role, ed. Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1976) 12. They are used as well by Michael Kimmel in his The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) 30-1.

[85] Ruth Mazo Karras, From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University off Pennsylvania Press, 2003) 6-7.

[86] Isabel Davis, "Introduction—Unfamiliar Families: Investigating Marriage and the Family in the Past," in Isabel Davis, Miriam Muller, and Sarah Rees Jones, eds., Love, Marriage and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2003) 2.

be examined."[87] Despite the conflation of gender with women's studies, then, the study of gender cannot be understood as the exclusive purview of women and women's history.

Within the broadening scope of gender criticism, terms like *masculinity*, *manhood*, and *man* are no longer seen as the universalizing, gender-neutral foils against which women and femininity might be understood, but as integral categories marked by materiality, performativity, and multiplicity.[88] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler follow Deleuze, in Becoming Male in the Middle Ages (1997), to argue that "gender is a culturally specific process of becoming," a kind of alchemical bodily, social, sexual and subjective performance that is more about mutability than it is about a transhistorical permanence.[89] For both women and men, in the Middle Ages as now, gender is a process, a space of practice that is never fully mapped, never fully known. Female and male must be understood, as "not simply binaries, but multiplicities that are simultaneously relational and oppositional," Cohen and Wheeler posit.[90]

The relational aspect of gender, for both women and men, means that identity can only be understood contextually, within a social and sexual matrix of competition, dominance, partnership and group participation. Medieval men, in particular, occupied an intensely social world wherein they knew and were known by a wide variety of others. Therefore, as Jacqueline Murray claims, in Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities

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[87] Thelma Fenster, "Why Men? Preface," in Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages, ed. Clare Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) x.

[88] As Fenster argues, language is never gender neutral. "The terms *he*, *his*, and *man*, claimed as both grammatically masculine and neuter and allowing no visible feminine, paradoxically also masked the particularity and materiality of their masculine referents" (x).

[89] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, "Becoming and Unbecoming," in Becoming Male in the Middle Ages (New York: Garland, 1997) xi.

[90] Cohen and Wheeler xix.

(1999), the study of medieval "gender is only meaningful in relational terms."[91] These terms, for medieval men, must include analyses of both power and competition, because "if masculinity is relational, then how men interacted with others influenced their sense of masculine identity and their place in the world."[92] The "others" with whom men interacted could be women as often as they could be other men, but Murray argues that "it was male/male relationships that figured most prominently in a man's life," in rituals and situations like university initiation, the oral recitation of chivalric stories, scholastic and theological discussions, or the feast at an artisanal guild hall.[93]

Most recently, Ruth Mazo Karras organizes late medieval adult masculinity into three broad categories, the courtly, the academic, and the artisanal, in From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe (2005). In this way, she echoes the classic separation of medieval society into those who fight, those who pray, and those who work, although she is careful to specify the distinctions within and among these groups. One knight does not and cannot stand in for all knights. And each man, whether he is a knight, an academic or a journeyman, understands himself in relation to and in competition with other men. He does not mean as a man unless other men perceive him as such. Karras argues that masculinity must be understood as existing within a complex interplay of competitions between men, ultimately being created out of that competition. She notes that "in medieval Europe, boys learned to compete physically, intellectually, and economically with each other to achieve mature masculine identity. In so doing they defined what a man

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[91] Jacqueline Murray, "Introduction," in Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West (New York: Garland, 1991) x.

[92] Murray xii.

[93] Murray xii.

should and what a woman could never be."[94] If men are men because they are not women, they are also, crucially, men because they fraternize and compare themselves with other men.

The artisanal workshop organized and made legible common born masculinity, as Davis argues in her Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages (2007). The workshop was the site of the artisanal master's power and masculine authority, and as Davis points out, work is a primary concern, indeed a "fixation" for many late medieval texts.[95] The workshop was not only a place of labor, but was ideally annexed to a well-functioning home, to form a bifurcated space of work and domesticity over which a properly gendered male master exerted his authority.[96] Yet work and domesticity are spaces in constant production, never completely stable, an instability found in the "reflexive" poetry of the late medieval period.[97] Davis argues that "At the same time as engaging with cultural ideals of masculinity, the narrators of […] literary texts identify themselves not as good, industrious men but variously as idle, avaricious workers, inappropriate or unrewarded lovers or husbands, as adolescents or children."[98] Work and the *makere's* inability to do it correctly, combined with his strange homelessness within his own texts, meant that vernacular *makynge* was an occupation that was also somehow not an occupation. It did not produce adult men, even as it participated in the discourses of ideal masculinity, instead producing a variety of masculine identities that were in many ways subversive.

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[94] Karras, From Boys to Men 19.

[95] Davis, Writing 9.

[96] Davis 10.

[97] Davis 11.

[98] Davis 11.

Although Karras parses the distinctions between the three broad categories of medieval social life, she does not consider those men, *makeres*, whose gender identities did not easily fit within the tripartite structure. What the *makere* was *not* can reveal a great deal about who he might have been. *Makeres* were not chivalric aristocrats, although they wrote on courtly subjects and often directed their narratives towards an urban elite that crossed court, bureaucratic, intelligentsia, city mercantile groups on the one hand, and in the case of the peasant rebels of 1381 and Langland, an artisanal class including guild members, journeymen and small landholders. And, while *makeres* were similar to clerics and academics, in that they were highly literate and able in elite ways to use language, they were not universally associated with the university system. As Langland points out, when he is questioned about his own occupation, he had to drop out of school as a young man because the friends who had funded his education had died (C.V.40). And the peasant rebels of 1381, men who made and disseminated oral poetry, quite famously expressed their antipathy to the clerical elite and literate practice by murdering literate men and burning documents. Because of his concern for *makynge*, for the crafting, the production, of some kind of a good—however immaterial that good may be—the *makere* is perhaps closest in his social categorization to the artisan. But there is no guild for poets, although guilds existed for a wide variety of the textual trades. The *makere* did not have a clearly bounded association upon whom he could depend, except other *makeres*. He possessed no workshop, although he was engaged in labor.

Still, medieval masculinity and authority cannot be cleanly disarticulated, because to be a medieval authority was in many ways to be a man. Masculine authority structured and governed medieval literary practice as well as law, theology, occupational practice, and the family. Men served as *makeres*, the heads of their families, the masters of guilds and

household workshops, and as priests, clerics and academics. Men were knights, princes and kings, the embodiment of aristocratic power over others. Dependent on *not* being feminine, the gendered mandate of authority was nonetheless profoundly influenced by competition and rank between and among other men, what Ruth Karras calls a "core feature" of medieval masculinities.[99] Indeed, masculine authority is in many ways predicated on proving itself as being not an Other—not feminine, not a boy. As Michael Kimmel points out, adult masculinity, or manhood, "is demonstrated for other men's approval."[100] Gender identity for men, unlike for women, is "structured around relationships of power and men's differential access to that power of men as a group."[101] Masculinity, then, is "a relentless test by which [men] prove to other men, to women, and ultimately to ourselves, that we have successfully mastered the part."[102]

One way that literate men indicated mastery is by producing texts. As literature, late medieval *makynge* must be understood as an instantiation of literary authority, the power granted to those who who could read, write and interpret texts.[103] Textual authority is both literary and literal: only men in late medieval English society were officially allowed to use

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[99] Karras, From Boys to Men 10. Judith Bennett has argued similarly that the subaltern status of women and lower ranking men was dependent on the maintaining of a "patriarchal equilibrium." See her "Confronting Continuity," Journal of Women's History 9.3 (1997): 73-95.

[100] Kimmel, Michael S., The Gender of Desire: Essays on Male Sexuality (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) 33.

[101] Kimmel 40.

[102] Kimmel 41.

[103] On authority as a medieval literary prerogative, see A.J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). His fifth chapter, "Literary Theory and Literary Practice," charts the development of vernacular literature—as opposed to Latin and often theological texts—as authoritative, 160-210.

language in a public way, to speak and preach with authority.[104] The composition, reading, writing, and glossing of texts were tasks undertaken by clerical, highly literate men for other men, in a practice that was designed in many ways to objectify and exclude women. As Carolyn Dinshaw argues in her Chaucer's Sexual Poetics, gender structures, specifically femininity, are enacted via practices of reading and writing. She notes that late medieval "… literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—with the feminine."[105]

Thus Margery Kempe is restricted to presenting her spiritual prose autobiography to a literate male amanuensis, unable even to recite her text in the first person.[106] As female, Kempe is threatened and harassed by more powerful male authorities when she does try to assert herself, who tell her to give up her bad public behavior and return to more invisible and silent feminine pursuits like spinning and carding. Her choice, therefore, of exceedingly humble prose—spoken aloud to a literate man—is an attempt to conform to gender norms regarding writing. Because women were regarded as being more bodily, more oral, and thus more vernacular than men, late medieval women writers created their texts under great

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[104] For the Biblical sources of this notion, see Paul, 1 Cor. 14:34-35: "Let women keep silence in churches: for it is not permitted them to speak, but to be subject, as also the law saith. But if they would learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home." And the letter of Paul to Timothy, 1 Tim. 2:9-10: "let the women learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence."

[105] Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics 9.

[106] Kempe refers to herself as "this creatur," and as "she." See The Book of Margery Kempe.

risk.[107] As Nicholas Watson has argued, during the harsh climate of censorship that followed the Lollard heresy, the political situation in England was dangerous for all vernacular writers, but particularly for women, due to orthodox prohibitions against women's preaching and writing. [108] Consequently, vernacular poetry was not a genre in which late medieval English women named or identified themselves as *auctors*.[109] The public, linguistic authority necessary to allow for the performance of English poetry was a predominantly masculine endeavor. Spiritual autobiography—especially those dictated to a literate, male amanuensis, in the case of Kempe—was perhaps the only, and highly circumscribed, genre possible for medieval women writers of English.

Dinshaw's feminist heuristic contends with the ways in which authority was gendered masculine, but focuses its attentions exclusively on the rigid, almost airless construction of femininity accomplished by reading. She does not consider the ways by which masculinity—as anything other than the hegemonic—might itself be constructed in an overly rigid way by this clerical practice of reading and interpretation. Gendered reading practices were, in Dinshaw's argument, the purview of elite clerics. Yet clerical, often

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[107] Karma Lochrie argues that late medieval femininity is the nexus of orality, gossip and bodily excess. See her Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), particularly Chapter Three: "Tongues Wagging: Gossip, Women and Indiscreet Secrets" 56-92.

[108] See Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love," Speculum 68 (1993): 637-683.

[109] Some scholars have speculated that the anonymous English poems "The Assembly of Ladies" and "The Floure and the Leafe," with their first person speakers, may have been written by a female author. As Derek Pearsall claims in his introduction to The Floure and the Leafe, The Assembly of Ladies, The Isle of Ladies, ed. Derek Pearsall (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), "The poem is pervaded by an extraordinary charm and sweet reasonableness: it breathes through and softens even distressing moments and potentially severe moral judgments. It reads like a poem that Jane Bennet (of Pride and Prejudice) might have written" (3). Pearsall's aesthetic opinion of the poems' "feminine" style notwithstanding, no proof of female authorship has been found. In France, the situation for women poets was somewhat different—both Marie de France and Christine de Pizan wrote and disseminated texts under their own names. As a widow, Christine found a measure of independence that allowed her a certain literary authority. Yet Christine struggled to claim an authoritative space for herself as a female writer, and was frequently and publicly criticized for muddy, "feminine" thinking. She was publicly castigated for criticizing the misogyny in Jeun de Meun's Roman de la Rose; see Rosalind Brown-Grant, Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defense of Women (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 7-51.

celibate men were not the *only* men involved in literary production. And literary practice is not the exclusive purview of the educated elite. Nor is authority exclusive to literacy. Clerics dealt with texts, and in doing so, established a rigidly gendered way of reading those texts, a method that was dependent on their social power as elites. But literature is not simply, not exclusively, an elite textual phenomenon. Indeed, as a vernacular, often popular practice, *makynge* troubles the prevailing notions of masculinist literary authority. Non-elite men, using the vernacular, were able to make poetry that represented women and men. Their *makynge* represented themselves as men, as urbane workers and non-workers, as homeless and homed, as members of an emergent class.

Late medieval, common born men were not atoms of power, unconnected to and rarely influenced by others. Authority, for late medieval *makeres*, was connected both to literary production and to artisanal models of urban craft mastery. According to Gary David Shaw, although "the medieval urban social self was determinedly male-centered," this was perhaps because "the model of the male face, a father's face, required a subordinate body, whose members were male and female, hierarchically ordered, interdependent, but notionally appendages to the dominant man."[110] While men were perceived as authorities, in the superior position to women, their own sense of power was dependent on being in relation not only to other women but to other men as well. As James Farr argues, masculine authority in the artisanal workshop was performed amidst a hierarchy of relation, and "To obscure the distinction between a master artisan, an apprentice, and a wage-worker, not to mention a woman, was a threat to the constituted order and the master's place within it."[111]

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[110] Gary David Shaw, Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 45.

[111] James R. Farr, Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914 (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 33.

The corporate structure of the artisanal guild "was a constitutional system that did not simply organize work, but that translated the various activities of work into a moral representation of status and rank."[112]

In order to be an authority, then, a late medieval common man had to have a community which recognized him as such. For *makeres*, this community might also be understood as an audience the might receive his speech, to make it legible as both meaningful and powerful. Fundamentally relational, late medieval masculine authority hinges on the presupposition that to speak in public, to speak upon the page, is in many ways to be understood as a certain kind of man—one who is adult, accomplished and learned. This learnedness could be acquired through artisanal practice and accomplishment as much as it could be acquired through ecclesiastical, clerical or academic means. Masculine authority rests as well on the presumption that other men, and perhaps women, will listen. To speak in public is one instantiation of authority; to be listened to in public yet another. These public speech acts construct a gendered identity. They must be repeated over a lifetime of practice, among a variety of other people, before they cohere into something socially understood as masculine. That masculine poetic identity is an identity somehow slightly outside the more stable, hegemonic forms of merchant, clerical or chivalric masculinity, does not make it less meaningful. Merely, less deeply understood. Despite being authoritative, masculine poetic identity was by no means imbued with prowess or strength, nor was it a clear social good.

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[112] Farr 33.

Makynge as Artisanal Practice

The work of verbal representation is the poet's craft practice; in *makynge*, the poet's own occupational and gender identity is socially made. By the later Middle Ages, labor and its public performance had become highly politicized. Following the Black Death, the 1349, 1351 and 1361 Statutes of Laborers required that workers remain in the occupations they had had before 1348, that they accept artificially depressed prices, fees and wages fixed at pre-plague levels, and also that they remain in the same locales they had lived and worked in prior to the plague.[113] As these repeated legal attempts indicate, the bodies of the majority class of the commons were under continuous surveillance and attempted control, and, presumably, that control proved elusive. The act of laboring was a performance of both occupation and social identity; by working, common people embodied their categorization in the class of the *laboratores*, those who work. The embodiment of labor occurred not only in the physical tasks of agricultural and artisanal labor but also in the attempts by the state to punish common bodies through physical marks and pain. By 1388, the Statute had been emended to include a requirement that workers carry letters patent identifying them and their occupations, when they moved from town to town. It also included a stipulation that if workers falsified these documents, and thus attempted to perform a "new" occupation, their foreheads would be branded with the letter "F" for falsity.[114] The labor of common people

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[113] The Statutes of the Realm, 1101-1713, ed. A. Luders, et al., 11 vols. (London: 1810-28), vol. 1, 311-13. Exploration of the impact of the labor statutes upon literary production and authorial identity can be found in Robertson, The Laborer's Two Bodies; Anne Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name:' Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 206-45; and Middleton, "Acts of Vagrancy: The C-Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388," in Written Work: Langland, Labor and Authorship, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 208-317.

[114] The Statute reads: "for his falsity [fauxine] he shall be burned in the forehead with [a brand] made of iron and formed into the shape of the letter 'F' as a sign of Falsity" (34 Edw. III, c.10.SR, 367), qtd. in Kellie Robertson, "Branding and Labor Regulations," in The Middle Ages at Work 133-154.

was thus, in fourteenth century England, a performance that required careful scrutiny and control. Such scrutiny was intended to collapse the distinction between body, labor, and the state, keeping both a person's laboring body and his occupation legible to power.

The adult male subjects of this dissertation, men who made poems, were members of the emergent majority group of the commons, a class defined by work, but whose work was suddenly contested, valuable, and of newfound social importance. Late medieval common men were in many ways new men, as Anne Middleton has argued.[115] The internal immigration of the commons—from small farms and villages to larger market towns and cities—fostered a social and economic interpenetration of countryside and city. Their movement between these two spheres effectively blurred the distinction between agricultural, laboring identities and those organized around urban, mercantile guilds, profoundly complicating the ways in which laboring-class medieval people saw themselves, as well as how they were perceived by other, more powerful classes.

Poets and artisans cannot be understood interchangeably, nor can their identities be seen as synonymous. The objects of production wrought by masons, carvers, carpenters, weavers, saddle-makers are not poems. Nor are poems of the same utility as the stone foundation of a house. Yet I am interested less in the objects of production made by the late medieval artisanal class, or the representative guilds to which they sought to belong, each categories of incredible variety, than I am in the almost ineffable energy of making that this class harnessed towards new ends. Specifically, I posit that this energy of making was an engine of change in the ways by which occupational and gender identities were organized. This energy, the human creation of medieval things, goods, services, calories, necessities, and

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[115] See Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," Speculum 53.1 (1978): 94-114.

superfluities, is also a making of growing social and cultural power. More than this, the energy of artisanal making can be detected in the verbal products of the *makeres*, the poets of late medieval England who are themselves a part of this new class.

The mason makes literal foundations, he creates a product with sanctioned tools, laboring mightily to perform his task. His labor runs on sweat and calories, in a way that the poet's labor decidedly does not. Yet the artisan himself did not occupy a static social position. Like the poet's own liminal position, the artisan's social identity was in constant flux. Thus, when I use the term "medieval artisan," I do not mean a stable identity conferred by a static, strictly hierarchized system of bounded occupational craft guilds. As Gervase Rosser has shown, such a conception of medieval artisanal identity has been too-neat and overly schematized. He argues that "much of the oversimplification of traditional views [of artisans] results from the failure to recognize that an individual simultaneously possessed plural identities. […] The very concept of the 'artisan' in modern historiography has tended to be too unitary and too static."[116] Moreover, in their imagining of medieval artisans as members of a nostalgic, pre-industrial workforce, earlier critics have perpetuated the obsessions of their own historical moment at the expense of a clear view of the medieval. Rosser notes that, "the categories of nineteenth century discourse have blinkered modern interpretation."[117]

The medieval urban craft guild system, although it has often appeared to more contemporary scholars as a cleanly organized and hierarchized system, was often messily incomplete. The common conception of the guild as being composed of apprentices and

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[116] Gervase Rosser, "Crafts, Guilds and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town," Past and Present 154 (1997): 8-9.

[117] Rosser 8-9.

journeymen working assiduously to become master craftsmen says more about nineteenth and twentieth century nostalgic hopes for meaningful production than it does about the medieval. Ruth Mazo Karras notes, "the crafts still did not adhere to the textbook model for achieving mature masculinity in which an apprentice worked for a master for a period of time, became a journeyman, worked for another period of time to perfect his skills, created a masterpiece, and became a master."[118] Although a select few were able to achieve superlative status, the majority remained stuck in apprentice or journeyman status.

In a similar vein, James Farr argues that the question of defining the medieval artisan is "a deceptively simple question [that] becomes surprisingly complex when we shift away from the traditional frameworks in which this question could be answered toward one informed by cultural analysis."[119] Although an artisan was a member of the commons, the definition of who an artisan was and what exactly he did, was a complicated one for medieval people. In the broadest sense, an artisan's social identity was defined by the fact that he worked—as opposed to a monk or a knight, whose identities as religious and noble elite, respectively, were not dependent on material production—nonetheless, he might be involved in multiple occupations, none of which he might use to exclusively define himself. The bulk of medieval society performed artisanal, craft work in a variety of ways and with a variety of intensities, from the artisanal family (women and children included) producing saleable goods alongside the basic work of daily life, to the rare, and more hierarchized craft workshop more formally populated by apprentices, journeymen, and master artisans. Farr points out that "the traditional picture of the craftsman toiling alongside a couple of workers

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[118] Karras, From Boys to Men 113.

[119] Farr, Artisans 3.

in a shop turning out finished products that conformed to guild regulations, therefore, is not so much inaccurate as it is incomplete. The craft economy, we now realize, was surprisingly heterogeneous and dynamic."[120] Artisans, therefore, were not simply the elite master members of a craft guild, but rather a wide range of people and occupations. As Farr posits,

> 'Artisans' can be placed on a spectrum with, at one end, a journeyman working for wages little distinguishable … from wage-workers with no connection to the world of journeymen. At the other end of the spectrum we find entrepreneurial artisans no longer working primarily with their hands, spending most of their time wholesaling products or managing their enterprises. […] Indeed the boundaries at each end of the spectrum were porous, with men and women sliding into and out of what we think of as artisanal activity.[121]

The artisan was thus indeed a worker, but his work—and his work identity—varied. The varieties of artisanal work were indeed numerous,[122] but the question of how that work was organized, and whether or not that work served to organize a specific identity, is a complex one.

Although it has been a commonplace that artisanal guilds could serve—at least historiographically—as an indicator of occupational identity for medieval workers, the fact that only an elite few ever gained full membership in a guild complicates this notion. Heather Swanson argues that it was in fact the combination of the mercantile elite and the artisan masters who exerted the most economic and political power over the organization of craft guilds, using them as vehicles for controlling artisanal labor more generally, and that the

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[120] Farr 91.

[121] Farr 3.

[122] Farr counts over 180 craft guilds in late medieval London alone.

recording of craft guilds within official, civic documents had a clear political purpose: to organize the mystery and make it exceedingly difficult to obtain membership without money or social connections.[123] The historiographical focus on this urban elite, moreover, has been facilitated by the fact that guilds left records. Apprentices and journeymen did not. Ultimately, Swanson finds that

> Real power remained firmly in the hands of the elite and, as will be seen, almost no artisans penetrated this closed elite before the end of the 15th c. Such responsibility as was delegated to craft guilds did bind the leading artisans firmly into the hierarchical social order in a way that worked to the advantage of the merchants. By giving master craftsmen control of their labor force, the authorities effectively undermined the corporate identity which might develop amongst artisans as a whole.[124]

Master craftsmen and elite merchants greatly benefited from controlling the vast armature of labor upon which the guilds—as both social and economic structure—were built. By making guild membership an expensive and difficult prospect, the artisanal elite could better manipulate the labor of those who sought entry into the mystery. As a consequence from the population reduction of the Black Death, that labor was, by the mid to late 14th century, migratory and patchy. This catch-as-catch-can labor provided by women and men new to urban life was perceived as a threat to the freedom and order of the medieval town. As Swanson notes, "There was a profound suspicion of casual labor and constant reference to the necessity of employing servants for a fixed period, usually a year or

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[123] Heather Swanson, Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 111-12.

[124] Swanson 113.

half a year, even in the building trade which was characterized by a mobile workforce and day labor."[125] The desire to control the ranks of workers who had no attachment to town, other than their own earning power and hope for a better future, ensured that civic leaders would increase the restrictions on who, how, and when, an up-and-coming worker could enter the mystery. Furthermore, social restrictions were placed not only on whether a worker could obtain guild membership—and all the social and economic privileges such a membership would provide—but whether or not he was allowed to gather with other workers in public. Swanson points out that only guild members were allowed to congregate; apprentices and journeymen were prohibited from forming conventicles.[126] The stratification of labor within the artisanal guild system—the distinction between master, journeyman and apprentice—was a source of perpetual striving and jockeying for better position. By stratifying the status differences between masters, journeymen, and apprentices, the civic elite effectively found a way of "acquiring virtually free labour."[127] Moreover, most journeymen and apprentices only became free by means of redemption (they bought it, instead of receiving it via their inclusion into the mystery.)[128]

In short, the records of the period are the leavings of an elite few, and indicate a desire to control much more than they indicate a stable way of living and working in the late medieval town. Functioning much like the Statutes and Ordinances of Labourers issued by Parliament, guild records and labor regulations are the creation of an elite few. In the records, "the men voicing … views on idleness and work were prescribing a regimen

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[125] Swanson 114.

[126] Swanson 115.

[127] Swanson 115.

[128] Swanson 115.

applicable not to themselves, but to those of inferior social rank whose lot it was to labor."[129] For *makeres*, the question of voice is problematic, as *makeres* were frequently those most able to use texts to articulate power. Yet the *makeres* I examine, when articulate their own laboring practices, offer up an ambivalent representation of who they are, what they do, and how *makynge* might fit into the dominant models of late medieval labor. In many ways, their ambivalence also expresses a new possibility for how to think about the immaterial labor of *makynge*, and how to rethink labor more generally.

To make poems is *not* to perform agricultural, bodily labor; it is to *not* participate in the harvest, as the C-text *apologia* of Piers Plowman makes clear, because of being somehow too long, too tall, and too well-educated to do such work.[130] The poet's strange, and estranging, form of laborious *makynge* placed common men like Langland in a difficult ethical position, because it kept them from contributing materially to the needs of the community, while also placing them directly at odds with the state's interlocutors. The poet's work is, in many ways, literally to make legible experience. And yet the poet's work could not always be fully described by any of the letters patent required by law, could not be made legible enough to comply fully with what the state required of a person's work. As much an entertainer as a thinker, a reader, a writer, the poet could seem like a suspicious person, often moving from town to town, and frequently occupying interstitial neighborhoods.[131] In other ways, the poet could also be attached, as Chaucer and the Gawain-poet likely were, to a royal

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[129] Farr 13.

[130] Wan-Chuan Kao argues that it is Langland's extremely odd, perhaps queer body that sets him apart from other common workers. "Sartorial Chaos and Visions of Sumptuary Order in Piers Plowman," Masculinities in the Long Middle Ages Conference, The Graduate Center-CUNY, New York, NY, 17 March 2006.

[131] This is particularly true of Langland, who lives in an apartment in Cornhill, a slightly dodgy suburb of London.

household, a relationship that made their labor legible but did not necessarily allow for free expression. The *makere's* practice required him to engage in lengthy periods of solitude. But making words fit into meters requires a lot of physical action or inaction that is often socially disconcerting and alienating.

Thus, for late medieval poets, making poetry is a *vocatio* fraught by questions of power and material contribution, of utility, value, and the social good.[132] Augustine presents *vocatio* as God's calling upon the human subject to believe more fully and thus to testify to others as a good Christian, but the vernacular medieval poet could not easily bend his craft to fit these strictures of patristic calling, nor could he define his work according to what the labor Statutes required of him.[133] As Langland's perseverating over his occupation indicates, the poet might indeed be confronted by the civic authorities regarding what exactly he was doing with himself—he might internalize those questions into the allegorical figures of Reason and Conscience—but he nonetheless does not cease making poems. Though his *vocatio* set him apart from others because he could not—would not—participate in other forms of more materially valuable labor, the poets I examine did not put aside their poetry-making to fulfill other kinds of labor duties, but found ways to include and incorporate *makynge* into other laboring practices. Their texts grapple with what poets and English poetry might socially, spiritually, aesthetically and politically *do*.

The late medieval poem does not produce a tangible, material good of benefit to what late fourteenth and early fifteenth century writers termed the "common profit," or the

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[132] The Latin *vocare* (to call) is the root of the term; *vocatio* frequently describes a monastic or priestly calling, or the devotion of one's life to God. See Matthew, 20:16: "many are called but few are chosen."

[133] Augustine sees *vocatio* as being called by God towards heaven. He addresses God: "with no distracted mind but with focused attention I press on to the prize of our heavenly calling, to that place where I yearn to hear songs of praise and contemplate your delight, which neither comes, nor slips away" (XI.29.39). See The Confessions by St. Augustine, transl. Maria Boulding, OSB (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997) 310.

general society.[134] The question of whether English writing, more generally, might be of value to the common profit was at the heart of Lollard rhetoric, which argued for the value of English Biblical translations so as to better evangelize lay people who could not understand Latin. In the Prologue to the Wycliffite translation of the Bible, the English-speaking translator claims that his work was undertaken for the common profit of Christians; it is a linguistic contribution of clear spiritual value.

> At the bigynnyng I purposide, with Goddis helpe, to make the sentence as trewe and open in English as it is in Latyn, either more trewe and more open than it is in Latyn; and I preie, for charité and for comoun profyt of Cristene soulis, that if ony wiys man fynde ony defaute of the truthe of translacioun, let him sette in the trewe sentence and opin of Holi Writ, but loke that he examyne truli his Latyn Bible, for no doute he shal fynde ful manye Biblis in Latyn ful false, if he loke manie, nameli newe. (lines 274-280)[135]

The translator here claims that what he is doing—translating from Latin into Middle English—will not only benefit the Christian community but also clear up some nagging questions about truth, meaning, and translation. To his detractors, he urges a true examination of the Latin Bible, implying that such an inquiry will unearth copious examples of falsity in the Latin. In this, he implies that the Latin source does not provide a measure of truth, one that is stable and timeless, any more than the recent vernacular version does.

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[134] See Robertson, "Common Language and Common Profit," in The Postcolonial Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) 209-28. She argues that common profit books, or salvific prose texts written by lay people, came to "be seen as the merchant's answer to the church's traditional opposition to trade" (212).

[135] See The Wycliffite Bible: From the Prologue, ed. James M. Dean. Originally Published in Medieval English Political Writings (Kalamazoo, Michigan: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), from Cap. XV [Translating Scripture from Latin into English]. Obtained online at: <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/wyclifrm.htm>

The Lollard project of translating from Latin into English was neither one of secrecy nor of pleasure. Such a project makes public their exegesis, and their labor of translation provides a much-needed spiritual service to the people. Their working with language has a spiritual and a social value, even if it has an immaterial aspect as well, but it is not for the purposes of entertainment or time-wasting. The implication in this emphasis is that other kinds of language work—namely the making up of the pleasures of poetry and stories—do not possess a comparable value to the work of Biblical translation. What the translators are doing is "trewe," they may translate but they do not falsify. The instability of meaning that translation lays bare, however, is an instability and plurality intrinsic to vernacularity itself. There is no way to anchor a single English meaning to a Latin word, and that proliferation threatens to bleed into the multiplicity of meanings endemic to poetry, what Ralph Hanna has referred to as "… the polyvocality of later Middle English literary culture, its fission into distinct and plural literary communities."[136] Vernacular writing, story telling, the recitation of poetry, and even translation, made something out of nothing. Like coins represented value, so too did figurative language represent meaning, cloaking the original sign in mystifying, dishonest signification. Moreover, just as a counterfeit or clipped coin might find its way into circulation, so too could an infelicitous translation say one thing and mean another.[137]

A vernacular poem may edify, inculcate, make culture—all imperatives at the ethical heart of the utility of texts—but a poem is also pleasureable.[138] Whereas the Bible might be

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[136] See Hanna, Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and their Texts (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 12.

[137] For an analysis of medieval mercantilism and its connections to language, see Joel Kaye, Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange and Scientific Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[138] See Glending Olson, Literature as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) 90-127, for the relationship between poetry and pleasurable recreation.

understood as having a stable, concrete value outside of mercantile exchange, a poem cannot make such an ethical claim.[139] *Makynge* is part of the troubling proliferation of migratory people, goods, meanings and translations in late medieval England, a consequence of the upheaval wrought by years of plague.[140] As the Wife of Bath claims, "al is for to selle," including English itself. Late fourteenth century vernacular poetry is a site of profound concern over language, meaning, and translation, more so than perhaps other kinds of texts. As a hybrid genre, intended by the later Middle Ages to be both performed aloud and written down, poetry is speech; as elevated language, it occupies the same worry over meaning as the Wycliffite debates over Biblical translation, but it also cannot quite claim salvific utility. Instead, poetry, and poets, must continually justify their social value. It is the making of verse that is the poet's occupation, even if that daily habit must exist within the crux of, and continue to contribute to, the pervasive social anxieties over vernacularity.

Makynge as Vernacular Performativity

The bulk of recent scholarship on late medieval labor and authorial production perceives *makeres* exclusively as textual authors.[141] Seeing late medieval poets as writers much like ourselves, scholars have situated *makeres* and poetic making within a scribal model of

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[139] On the difficulties of reconciling poetry with both mercantilism and spirituality, see D. Vance Smith, Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), particularly Chapter Three, "Merchants in the Margin: Writing and the National Domestic in Piers Plowman."

[140] See particularly David Aers, Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430 (New York: Routledge, 1988) 26-53. Aers argues that post-plague, the labor Statutes attempting to fix "vagrant" workers in place must be understood as a contest between the dominant classes and the commons over "just what the 'common profit' actually was and who should define it," in regards to work, mobility, and language more generally (30).

[141] See, e.g., Ethan Knapp, Bureaucratic Muse, and his "Poetic Work and Scribal Labor," in The Middle Ages at Work, 209-229; and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Langland and the Bibilographic Ego," in Written Work: Langland, Labor and Authorship 67-143.

textual production. By conflating the *makere's* definition with that of the scribe, contemporary historians and literary critics erase the often subtle association between *makynge* and oral performance in medieval texts. *Makeres* do not define their practice, using it casually to refer at once to the oral practices of performance and composition as well as to silent reading and textual writing. In an action that parallels the hard critical split in conceptualizing the difference between oral poetics and material book production, Bertil Thuresson's compendium of Middle English occupational terms provides the ending "-maker" for many of the words used to denote artisanal production, from "piemakere" to "tapermakere" to "qwsshynmaker."[142] Easily codified as jobs involved in the production of material goods, clerical, textual professions are categorized as artisanal occupations. Thus, the *binders*, *stacioners*, *tixtwriters*, *bokeres*, *clerks*, *petyclerks*, *noteres*, *elluminurs*, and *portreours* whose task it was to literally make books are artisans in a way that *rymours* somehow are not. [143] The *rymour* or "the maker of rimes, a poet," is found under the rubric of the professional entertainers and physical performers, together with the *mynstrells* and *gleumen*, the singers, jugglers, pugilists and wrestlers.[144] A *rymour* made a performance, a moment of interesting time, out of language and song, in a way similar to other forms of public entertainment. Thuresson sees *rymours* only as entertainers and scribes as artisanal makers, thereby ignoring those *makeres* who might compose orally and textually, who might perform their poems as

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[142] See his Middle English Occupational Terms (Lund: Hakan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1950), particularly section XIV: "Words Denoting Artisans and Dealers" 192-240.

[143] Thuresson 183.

[144] Thuresson 183-191. His Section XIII: "Words Denoting Professional Entertainers and Musicians" also lists the following terms: *mynstrell, gleuman, horneblawer, cornur, trumpour, floutere, pipere, taborer, taburner, harper, fitheler, vyolour, gygour, crouther, rotour, gyterner, citoler, leuter, sautreour, symfanour, dauncere, hopper, hoppestre, leper, tombere, saylur, jugelir, tregettur, pleyer, bothman, bereward, champyoun, puygnur, wrastler.*

well as write down a master-copy. I posit that the occupational practice of the late medieval *makere* troubles the too-easy distinction between "mere," oral entertainment and material, textual production, because the *makere's* production is itself a hybrid form that occupies both the orally performative and the textual. Indeed, we possess late medieval poetry today because it was inscribed, but we must acknowledge that the act of inscription was a tense and worrisome act in which the *makere* himself lost a measure of control. Indeed, this tension between oral composition and recitation and later inscription may be one of the anxieties at play in both Langland and Chaucer's poetry. The *rymour* and the *makere*, then, are not scribes but something else. The *makere* does not disseminate his own texts, instead relying on the labor of other professionals to do so. And yet the question of what the *makere* of rhymes actually does, and whether what he does is locatable work, is difficult to parse.

Poetic composition and recitation are part of a bodily practice that requires long stretches of uninterrupted time. This use, or misuse, of time is at issue in how *maykнge* is quantified, often in attempts to align writing with the template definition of medieval labor, agriculture. In his essay, "Poetic Work and Scribal Labor," Ethan Knapp considers how the composition of poetry is figured as a kind of useful intellectual work, an acceptable spending of time. At the heart of the *makere's* spending of time is the question whether his composition actually produces anything; this question is also central to how other kinds of authorial and scribal labor are figured for late medieval society, as Kellie Robertson has argued.[145] Knapp argues that in many late medieval poems about work, writing cannot be quantified easily as work and that the "attempt to represent the specificity of materiality seems to drive these poets again and again into uneasy synthetic creations, in which the

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[145] See Robertson, Laborer's Two Bodies 49-50.

definition of vocation, the materiality of the labor, and the value of the commodity are all best derived from some supplement to textual labor itself."[146] At issue is what constitutes "textual labor," and how such labor does, and does not, make sense within medieval models of material production, themselves built around the making of viable crops. Knapp posits that the "supplement" that makes late medieval writing make sense is poetry's frequent and "oddly displaced comparison to agriculture," the labor that the majority of medieval people practiced, and back-breakingly so.[147] In medieval texts, written work is frequently compared to field work because, essentially, field work is how work is defined. Although Knapp's analysis admirably parses the oblique relation between written labor and agricultural labor, he elides any difference in the practice of the scribe, the writer and the poet. The writer *is* the poet, in Knapp's postulation.

I posit, conversely, that poetry is not only, or exclusively, writing. As the polysemous quality of *makere* indicates, the poet makes verse, rhymes, narratives, songs. This *makynge* is not necessarily a written poem. Rather, the stuff of his practice, the material with which the poet works, is speech. The making of a candle or a cushion, the making of corn, requires continuous occupational performance, and in the iteration and reiteration of these tasks, "an identity [is] tenuously constructed in time … through a stylized repetition of acts," to use Butler's definition.[148] For artisanal makers, the fruits of those acts are material, tangible. Yet for poetic *makeres*, occupational performance does not produce an object. It is as impossible to hold a rhyme as it is to hold the performance of public wrestling, tavern

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[146] Ethan Knapp, "Poetic Work and Scribal Labor" 225.

[147] Knapp 212.

[148] Butler, Gender Trouble 140.

songs, or boxing matches. And just as the poem is a hybrid, immaterial genre, so too are the gender and occupational identities of their *makeres*.

The public recitation of poetry is a trope throughout late fourteenth century poetry, one where an oral performer addresses his poem to a gathered audience. This trope can be seen in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, whose very fictiveness "is one of oral reportage: it is, on the face of it, the most oral of all Chaucer's poems, with all the tales purporting to be narrated *viva voce* to a listening audience," according to Derek Pearsall.[149] And it is famously evidenced in the opening gambit of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where the narrating "I" tells his audience that he shall tell a tale he has received via oral transmission. He heard it being performed aloud in town, and he remembers it successfully because of its alliterative prosody, its "lel lettres loken" (35). In both cases, the speaker of the poem claims to be an oral performer—and represents the act of performance within the text of the poem. But in each case, such oral performativity cannot be separated from literate practice. Thus, Chaucer urges his listeners, if they dislike the Miller's tale, to "turne over the leef and chese another tale" (I.3177), to explicitly engage in the act of textual reading, not listening at all. And the speaker of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins his narrative with a reference to Troy, The Iliad, and Virgil's own poetic narrative of exile, The Aeneid (I.15).

Late fourteenth century poets were neither exclusively oral performers nor completely textual writers, as these examples indicate. In moments of oral referentiality, most often localized around a speaking "I," poets confect a constantly moving identity, one that is "anything but stable and authoritative," according to Burger, because it requires "a constant labor of self-definition that cannot be secured by recourse to foundational

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[149] Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 190.

categories such as noble birth or clerical ordination."[150] For poets in particular, this constant labor of self-definition is connected to vernacular *makynge*, to using English not only as a written language but as a spoken instrument. They are particularly conscious of their position as writers of English relative to a longstanding French political and cultural hegemony, as their frequent use of French language and French literary sources implies. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a narrative, after all, concerning *chevalry* that is set predominantly in the castle of "Haut Desert"; Langland studs his Piers Plowman with French phrases and snatches of song, a lone voice crying "Dew vous saue, dame Emme" (C.Prol.226); and Chaucer was known in France not as a poet but as "une grante translateur," for his reworkings of French and Italian poetry.[151] Yet despite the inclusion of French within their poetry, what these poets make is explicitly English verse, directed towards English audiences. In this way, as contemporaries of Wyclif, poets were engaged in the debates regarding the representative power and danger of using the vernacular.

As *makeres* of English, late fourteenth century poets are participants, whether inadvertently or intentionally, in the larger religious and linguistic heresy of Lollardy, a conflict worked out in part in relation to the mutability of vernacular language and the necessity of Biblical translation.[152] By calling themselves *makeres*, they are also instantiating a community of English speakers, performers and writers, an act of community that by the early fifteenth century could no longer be imagined. In orthodox reaction to Lollardy, by

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[150] Burger, Chaucer's Queer Nation 54.

[151] Deschamps refers to the "grant translateur, noble Geoffrey Chaucer." Qtd. in James Wimsatt, Chaucer and His French Contemporaries: Natural Music in the Fourteenth Century (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 248-9.

[152] On Lollardy, see Ann Hudson, The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

1409 both church and state engaged in a systemic method of censorship.[153] Yet in the last forty years of the fourteenth century, in the social and political moments wherein Lollardy was conceived, English was a site for invention, expansion, and possibility. The poetic practices of the late fourteenth century are a composition of linguistic hybridity, a blending of dialects, languages, traditions, and voices into an English whole.

In his essay on postcolonial British hybridity and race, "Hybridity and Diaspora," Robert J.C. Young argues that "hybridity" must be understood in terms not only of race and sex but also language. Young argues that postcolonial criticism has long presented a Manichean division between "two antithetical groups, the colonizer and the colonized, self and Other, with the second only knowable through a necessarily false representation."[154] The consequence of this binary division has been an analysis of violent contact between human groups that focuses almost exclusively on models of "diffusion, assimilation, or isolation, not of interaction or counteraction."[155] The models of diffusion, assimilation and isolation, though productive, necessarily present a skewed view of history, because they do not accommodate the verities of human survival. Survival very often depends not on complete assimilation or isolation, but on the creation of some third way that includes both measures of assimilation and measures of resistance. Young posits that critics themselves must come up with a third way in their heretofore binary analyses of (post)colonial contacts, a new method that might "map and shadow the complexities of its generative and destructive processes."[156] He urges an examination of the hybridities of language itself, for it

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[153] It was unlawful, after Arundel's 1409 Constitutions, to own a vernacular Bible.

[154] Robert J.C. Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (New York: Routledge, 1995) 5.

[155] Young 5.

[156] Young 5.

is in language that the mixing, change, assimilation and counteraction of (post)colonial contacts are most evident. After an initial often violent contact with an Other, humans must find ways to survive. Language is the inventive site of that survival.

Young argues that we cannot think of postcolonial theory in terms only of colonizer and colonized, self and Other, a perception that reads contact between different human groups too simply. Instead, we must begin to consider these contacts as being at once destructive and generative, as inhabiting a middle space of possibility that, before contact, would not have existed. This is not to say that postcolonial encounters between human groups are wholly positive; they are not, as the history of war, conquest and human slavery makes clear. But what Young begins to reach for is a sense that humans possess an adaptive, linguistic capacity for making do and for remaking themselves in moments of colonial encounter. He looks towards creolized and pidgin languages—hybrid speech that can only exist in the third or fourth space between languages, a space that is itself entirely new—arguing that "the structure of pidgin—crudely—the vocabulary of one language superimposed on the grammar of another—suggests a different model from that of a straightforward power relation of dominance of colonizer over colonized."[157] Pidgin and creole are a newness, a remaking; they are linguistic practices that allow for more subtle, more accommodating, more obfuscating, ways of creating meaning. As Nicholas Watson and Fiona Somerset have argued, vernacularity "describes not a language as such, but a relation between one language situation and another, with the vernacular at least notionally

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[157] Young 5.

in the more embattled, or at least the less clear-cut position."[158] Middle English vernacular *makynge* engages with the fluid, changeable aspects of spoken language.[159]

Postcolonial theory, as gender theory, must be used, in medieval contexts, with both precision and a necessary kind of reformulation. I do not mean to argue that late medieval Britain can be neatly paralleled to nineteenth and twentieth century postcolonial history; to do so would be to ignore the integrity of both history and geography. However, the fact remains that Ricardian England was a realm at war with its former conqueror, engaged in internal debate over the use and function of vernacular English vis-à-vis French and Latin, and situated on the edge of civilized Europe. Late medieval royal documents are written and read aloud in French, although by 1362, the language of the realm had been declared to be English.[160] By the 1420's, the London Brewer's guild could officially change the language of its records from French to English, but during the latter half of the fourteenth century, English existed primarily as the language of daily use, not the language of official statements.[161] Both contemporary postcolonial theory and medieval studies can benefit from being pressed against one another so that their assumptions and misconceptions might be re-thought more productively. I argue that the late medieval English period is riven by anxiety over linguistic, gender, sex and class meanings, anxieties encouraged by emergent nationalism, generations of war, the development of both new vernaculars and a more

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[158] Watson and Somerset, The Vulgar Tongue x.

[159] On late medieval English multilingualism, see Tim William Machan, "Language Contact in Piers Plowman," Speculum 69.2 (1994): 359-385; and Linda Ersahm Voigts, "What's the Word? Bilingualism in Late-Medieval England," Speculum 71.4 (1996): 813-26.

[160] According to Douglas A. Kibbee, the 1362 Parliamentary Statute ordered that all government affairs be conducted in English; see his For to Speke French Trewely: The French Language in England, 1000-1600 (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991) 27. Kibbee also notes that the Statute was itself written in French (58).

[161] Kibbee 65.

"standardized" form of courtly poetry, and a hugely chaotic though increasingly bounded proto-bourgeois artisanal and mercantile class. Late fourteenth century poems are made out of an English as yet unstandardized, a language of incredible variability that was still marked by a residual taint of "Otherness" left over from centuries of Continental conquest. Within its borders, as today, English was a tongue spoken with inflections so different, from place to place, as to be almost unintelligible.

Chapter Summaries

My first chapter, "'Stonde Manlyche Togedyr in Trewthe': Truth, Masculinity and Artisanal Making in the Rebel Letters of 1381," explores the strange status of the scraps of vernacular poetic text that emerge from the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381. Embedded in Latin and French historical chronicles of the event, the Rebel Letters are attributed therein to a priest, John Ball, involved in the conflict. At once "historical document" and "literature," they have been credited exclusively to Ball, even though they do not claim him as their singular author, and have been read either as the frustrated apings of literate power, or as a tentative material claim for vernacular literacy. I read the Rebel Letters specifically as poems, however, arguing that they are intelligible to us on their own terms, and I seek to place them within the larger context of the medieval English poetic tradition. Their odd position within Latin and French texts affords us a glimpse of how both vernacular English and peasant masculinities can be swallowed whole by the dominant culture. I argue that the Rebel Letters are poems created and possessed by a community of authors, and that they use a kind of hybrid oral/literate English poetics as a means of disseminating a call to arms. The poems occupy an interstitial position between older, more performative oral methods of discerning truth and the newer, more fundamentally literate textual methods. The Rebel

Letters claim true masculinity as a performative relation, as that which is without deceit, and they present their texts in opposition to the literate understanding of truth as that which is without error. Quite literally, the poems "gader togedyr" a group of artisanal men under the auspices of "true" masculinity, seeking to redefine and restate the bounds of "true" identity.

My second chapter, "'A Glotoun of Wordes: Masculinity and Revision in Piers Plowman," argues that William Langland creates an erasable, fictive "I" in his revisions between the B- and C-texts of Piers Plowman. In a poem obsessed with winning and wasting, Langland presents us with an authorial masculinity that produces nothing anyone can eat, in three versions of a poem that takes as its subject a never-arriving pilgrimage towards truth. This discursive search is a claim about poetic identity, subject to the external manipulations of power and popular misreading, and one that Langland can control only through revision. Minstrels, janglers and goliards abound in Piers Plowman, but they are isolates, vagrants, much like the figure of the *makere* himself. It is in the final C-text that Langland places Will in dialogue with state power, where he answers questions regularly put to itinerant workers under the post-Rebellion 1388 Statute of Laborers. Will claims literacy and education, but cannot find an appropriate work identity that will please his interlocutors; he knows that he has "ytynt time and time myspened" (C.5.93). In many ways, Will's occupational practice is that of the journeyman, an adult man engaged in aesthetic work who never produces the masterpiece that might allow him access to powerful masculine mastery. I argue that Langland replaces the Passus XIII B-text minstrel character Haukyn/Activa Vita, with Will's evasive *apologia pro vita sua* in Passus V of the C-text, as part of a larger authorial claim: that idleness is part of a poet's work. Only free time allows him to make poetic verse. The poem is a substantiation of Langland's productive life, much as Haukyn's stained and foul-smelling garment is proof of Haukyn's participation in Activa Vita. Haukyn

is so active a man that his coat is composed, literally, of the sins of verbal poiesis—lying, gossip, potentially evil speech, the artfully false tongue. While Haukyn thus serves as a foil for Will in earlier versions, by the end of the 1380's, Will's method of idle and unlicensed begging, though less sinful than Haukyn's money-earning songs, had become an occupation both too dangerous (and too necessary) for an impoverished poet unconnected to courtly power. The well-wrought music and metonymized characters of the B-text must make way, therefore, for the plainer style and the apologia of the C-text. Will's ultimate apologia, however, is Piers Plowman.

"'The Teccheles Terms of Talking Noble': *Makynge* Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," my third chapter, uses speech act theory to read the poem's constructions of masculinity, arguing that SGGK, through its use of seemingly ordinary English pronouns, constructs a particular kind of layered, chivalric identity concerned primarily with the linguistic performances of etiquette. In a poem where identity is always being constructed, this chapter asks how the second person informal pronoun *thee* is used as a poetic mechanism for parsing the truth of masculine identity. Using the theories of J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, I chart the ways in which *thee* draws attention to the poem as a performative relation. Specifically, I argue that *thee* indicates not only shifts in power and relation between knights, but also an intimacy between performer and audience. Because uses of *thee* are restricted to family, close associates, and servants, *thee* among knights establishes an intimate relation between chivalric men; it is also a direct form of address that creates immediate community between its users. But *thee* is deceptive: it both makes another an intimate and is a mechanism for establishing hierarchy. *Thee's* uses, and abuses, would have been immediately apparent to a medieval audience. I shall consider the ways in which the poem aims its own address not only towards an aristocratic, knightly audience, but also

towards other poets and other artisans, focusing specifically on the ways in which the poem calls a relational community into being through acts of voyeurism and witness.

Finally, in my fourth chapter, "'Som Deyntee Thyng': Possibility and Chaucer's Unfinished Business," I argue that one of Chaucer's two "personal" tales, a satire of English verse form, The Tale of Sir Thopas, exemplifies the poet's hybrid role as both inventive maker and *esquire de servyce* to the royal court. All of the Canterbury Tales are in Chaucer's voice, but it is only in relation to Sir Thopas that other characters speak directly to Chaucer, familiarly asking, "what man artow" (VII.695)? Chaucer—described here as a "popet," a child-like and asexual "elvyssh"-seeming man—claims this tale as exemplar of his authority. Chaucer presents himself in as ironic and seemingly inoffensive a way as possible here so that he can deflect attention from the dangerous complexities of his actual labor in service to repressive power. He is forced, therefore, in this tale to speak in a forked tongue, and to offer up Melibee, a pedagogic prose translation, "a moral tale vertuous" (940), in place of his incongruous poem. Situated between the macabre and well-wrought dissonance of the anti-Semitic Prioress' Tale, and the prolix and violent didacticism of Melibee, Sir Thopas itself is a satiric verse about a child knight, and contains strange rhymes seen in no other Chaucerian example. While it is the one place in the Canterbury Tales where Chaucer could present his learned masculine prowess, he chooses instead to identify himself as a harmless, doll-like minstrel, easily manipulated and easily shut up. And he has the Host interrupt the poem in disgust, calling it "drasty speche" (923) and "rym doggerel" (925), and ultimately declaring that it is "nat worth a toord" (930), behaving in much the same aggressive way the Host does with the Pardoner. Although the Monk is silenced later in Fragment VII, and the Wife of Bath is interrupted by several male pilgrims, only the Pardoner is so similarly silenced by the Host's insults. Chaucer thus allies himself, however subtly, with his poetic representation,

the Pardoner, a strange outsider in service to bureaucracy. I shall examine the competing masculinities at work in the Thopas frame, arguing that Chaucer's prosodic inventions in Fragment VII, that range from rime royale to doggerel to prose to eight-line stanzas, along with his minstrel-like persona, help to explain his practice as a middle man in search of poetic possibility.

Medieval poetry does not happen outside of, or against, culture, but instead participates in, and contributes to, culture's constantly moving stream. More often than not, this contribution happens, for the poet, almost imperceptibly. The lineaments of cultural change are more often than not barely visible to those who are affected by, and who affect from within, those changes, if only because cultural change occurs tangential to the more engaging, often more interesting, and certainly more imperative activities of one's daily work. Certainly, poems do press against, converse with, and re-imagine society—because poems are moral, aesthetic and desirous projects. But, while a poem may effect change, the work of making the poem often obscures clear perception of those developments. *Makynge*, as such, is a labor of the possible and the beautiful. And, as I believe late fourteenth century poetry elucidates, the urge to make poetry is also an estranging one.

Making poetry is time spent not doing something else. My own understanding of the interconnection between poetic making and poetic self-representation is experiential. My *vocatio* as a poet has deeply informed how I think about written work, solitude, and a gendered self conferred by writing. I chose to make poems and go back to graduate school; that choice necessitated economic hardship. Many of my poet- and artist-friends chose to make money, and found that they could not reconcile their schedules in order to make art and also make substantial income. The practice of twenty-first century *makynge* is obviously quite different, in degree and in kind, than that of the late fourteenth century; each moment

is possessed of its own historical and theoretical integrity. I do not mean to imply that my own practice of feminist, post-postmodern American making is the same as that of a late fourteenth century Englishman, or that early twenty-first century *poeisis* can be easily transplanted onto the medieval. But the notion that *poeisis* is a site for the poet to create an authorial identity is one that might be profitably applied to the study of medieval literature, which is itself obsessed with renderings of an authorial self that is both representative and also somehow real. Pamela Sheingorn has recently argued that our twenty-first century fascination with openness in identity categories, the instability of either meaning or text, and the seeming end of capitalism have parallels in the late medieval; the end of the modern and its dawn might be places where the most compelling theoretical interventions are taking place.[162] I aim, therefore, in this dissertation to press history and formal literary criticism against some more recent theories of gender studies and of postcolonial poetics. My hope is that doing so might serve to illuminate both the medieval and the post-postmodern, in terms of how we think about poetic composition, revision and performance across time.

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[162] Pamela Sheingorn, "Medieval Studies and Interdisciplinarity," Medieval Studies Certificate Program, The Graduate Center-CUNY, New York, NY, 5 November 2004.

Chapter One

'Stonde Manlyche Togedyr in Trewthe': Truth, Masculinity and Poetic *Makynge* in the Rebel Letters of 1381

The six Middle English texts referred to variously as The Letters of John Ball or the Rebel Letters are scraps of vernacular speech associated with the Peasant's Rebellion of 1381.[163] Generally concerned with sin, apocalypse, truth and masculine togetherness, the Letters have a vexingly complicated archival history that calls into question their own truth value. Found only within Latin and French historiographic chronicles, the Letters do not exist as texts in their own right, but only in relation to, and subsumed by, the hegemonic literary power that the rebels of 1381 fought against. Four of the texts, titled Jakke Mylner, Jak Carter, Jakke Trewman, and the Exemplar epistolae johannis balle, are found within the Chronicon Henrici Knighton;[164] one text, the Littera johannis balle, Missa communibus

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[163] Several compilations of the texts group them exclusively under Ball's name. See, for example, Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); and Richard Firth Green, "John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature," in Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Other editions do not title the texts after Ball. R.H. Dobson includes the Letters under the rubric "The Literature of Protest," ascribing two letters to Ball and the rest to Mylner, Carter, and Trewman, in his essential compilation, The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 (London: Macmillan, 1970). The most recent editions pair Ball's letters and then title the rest of the pseudonymous texts "The Addresses of the Commons." See, for instance, James M. Dean, ed., Medieval English Political Writings (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Medieval Institute Publications, 1996). Because the Letters themselves do not claim Ball as their sole author, I refer to them throughout as the Rebel Letters. I use Dean's Medieval English Political Writings unless otherwise specified.

[164] Chronicon Henrici Knighton, ed. Joseph Rawson Lumby, RS 92 (London, 1895) 2:138, presents the texts as unlineated blocks of vernacular English, preceded by a Latin explanation: "In illa misera multitudine recensebatur xx. mille. Isti fuerunt ductores eorum, Thomas Baker primus motor sed postea principalis doctor, Jakke Strawe, Jakke Mylner, Jakke Carter, Jakke Trewman. Jakke Mylner alloquitor socios sic."

estsexiae, is in Thomas of Walsingham's Chronicon Angliae;[165] and one text, the Prima epistola johannis Balle was originally (and erroneously) ascribed to Stow's Annales.[166] They are presented within these Latin historical chronicles almost as transcriptions from a criminal trial, and, indeed, Thomas Walsingham claims that the Letter he reproduces in his Chronicon was found on John Ball's person prior to his execution. It was "a particular letter, full of enigmas, encouraging them [the rebels] to follow through with what they had begun," discovered in Ball's clothes, en route to the gibbet. [167] Available to us as historiographical documents, then, the Letters are woven into the writings about the event, but are rarely presented on their own.[168] This complexly overwritten provenance, coupled with the Letters' use of multiple first- and third-person speakers and allegorical rhetoric, has deeply shaded their later critical reception. The bulk of criticism on the Letters has looked almost exclusively at the forms of ideological occlusion found in the chronicles, foregoing a close analysis of the Letters themselves.[169] It is my contention, however, that the Letters are

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[165] Thomas of Walsingham's Chronicon Angliae, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson, RS 64 (London, 1874) 322.
[166] The text is now found in BL MS Cotton Tiberius C, viii, fol. 174a. For a discussion of the archival and historical difficulties in cataloguing the Letters, particularly the error with Stow's Annales, see Green's "The Letters of John Ball: Literary History and Historical Literature."

[167] Walsingham's text reads: "Miserat insuper ductoribus communium in Estsexia quondam literam aenigmatibus plenam, ad hortandum eos ut incepta perficerent; quae ex post inventa est in manica cujusdam suspendendi pro turbatione praefata, cujus tenor talis est" (322).

[168] For the history of the Rebellion, R.H. Dobson's The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 has usefully compiled primary documents, while R.H. Hilton and T.H. Aston, The English Rising of 1381 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Hilton, Bond Men Made Free (London: Methuen, 1977) each carefully discuss the context of the uprising. On medieval English peasant societies and conflict see R.H. Hilton, The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), and Hilton, Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism (London: Hambledon Press, 1985).

[169] Historicist and New Historicist critics understand the Letters as evidence of peasant vernacular consciousness, but rarely examine the Letters as formal literature. See, for instance, Steven Justice, Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); David Aers, "*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381," in David Wallace, ed., The Cambridge History of Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 432-454; Larry Scanlon, "Langland's England--King, Commons and Kind Wit," in Imagining a Medieval English Nation, ed. Kathryn Lavezzo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press,

"new" documents worthy of closer study and formal literary analysis. The Letters worry over and declaim questions of poetics, authorship, vernacularity and masculine truth, tropes found throughout late medieval English writing and pertinent to current critical questions about Middle English poetry and identity.

The Rebel Letters are not exactly letters; instead they couple salutary prose with brief, rhyming poems. In their content, they are a strange, almost overheard testament of men's making, pressing artisanal, criminal, and invented characters into defiant community, and using an idealized masculinity as the goad to urge other men to join their cause. Frustratingly opaque in tone, they appear at one glance to be doggerel, at another to be proverb, and yet at another to be participatory chant. Repetitively calling out to other men, and exhorting them to join in the cause of shared righteousness, the Letters are obsessed with questions of truth and justice, and they perceive those abstractions as intimately connected to masculinity. Thus, the Letter of John Ball (Stow), "greeteth wel all maner of men," an implicit address to the commons, itself composed of men of all kinds of status and craft occupation. And the text further urges its listeners to "stand manlike together in truth, and helpe Truth, and truth shal helpe you."[170] The Prima epistola Johannis Balle (from the Chronicon Henricii Knighton) uses almost identical language, calling out to a group of "alle maner men," and urging them to "stonde manlyche togedyr in trewthe."[171] In these forms of address, and in their use of true men as speakers of texts, the Letters insistently present truth as a kind of social adhesive that might bind a masculine community together. They do

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1991), particularly Chapter Five, "The Miller's Tale and the Politics of Laughter," 244-79; and Paul Strohm, Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), particularly Chapter 2, "A Reveille!" 42-51.

[170] Dean 136.

[171] Dean 139.

so as part of a larger medieval poetic tradition that uses the true man as the figure of exemplary, albeit often contested, virtue.

The *trwe mon* of late medieval English discourse is the Goodman, the sturdy body whose word is his bond. He is like bread a necessity, the foundation upon which the smooth running of everyday life progresses. He is a worker who makes food, goods, aesthetic objects, documents, speeches, war, and rebellion. As such, he is a maker in the most pragmatic sense, and as an upstanding citizen, he is no backbiter, gossip, or false liar, but a speaker of truth. And yet we know the *trwe mon's* name and see his shape largely because he is a figment of that most untruthful genre, poetry.[172] As a representation, both sound and literate sense, the late fourteenth century English poem calls into question whether *trewthe* can ever be actually found, and the shiftiness of the character of the true man in these poems, then, lends irony to the meaning of his very name. Thus, in Piers Plowman, itself three versions and thousands of alliterative lines, a man sets out in search of truth but never actually arrives.[173] Chaucer's plowman is "a trewe swynkere and a goode," a Sisyphean laborer carting dung who never actually gets to speak a tale.[174] Lydgate depicts the true man as a maligned lover slain by the pestilence of falsehood, in his "Compleynte on a Loveres Life,"[175] while in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, "trwe mon" is an epithet used by one duplicitous knight against another.[176] And the true man is an artisanal peasant everyman in

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[172] *Trwe mon* and *trwe woman* are terms also used within Lollard prose discourse to refer to fellow believers. See Anne Hudson, Lollards and Their Books (London: Hambledon Press, 2003) 165-80.

[173] William Langland, Pearsall, Derek, ed., Piers Plowman(C-text) (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).

[174] Larry Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer; see the General Prologue l.531.

[175] Norton-Smith, John, ed., John Lydgate, poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) 47-66.

[176] James Winny, ed. and trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Literary Texts, 1992).

the Rebel Letters,[177] where truth has the power to bind men together in masculine social gatherings but not power enough to make real their political claims. Thus, although the *trwe mon* populates much of the poetic, legal, political and theological writing of Ricardian England, as one who is faithful to king, to place, to occupation, to love, he must also be understood as the product of the shifting pluralities and contested edges of vernacular English. As the creation of a poet, himself a medieval masculine figuration whose own identity was contingent, the *trwe mon* is everywhere and nowhere. He appears as the middling representative of the late medieval English nation, as the shabby *jangelere* peddling verse, and as the peasant rebel burning cartularies in the London street.

The multiplicity of true men, and their vague shapes, in these medieval poetries reveals both truth and masculinity to be inherently unstable fields, to be categories of meaning that are themselves part of a process of what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, following Deleuze and Guattari, call "becoming," a state of identity that is not fixed but rather capaciously intermediary.[178] Cohen and Wheeler argue that

> The conceptual categories "man" and "woman" have profoundly material effects on the production of human subjects, and theorizing gender (femininities, masculinities, and all the possibilities those terms exclude) only historicizes the process of this sedimentation. The challenge, however, is to begin to see sexuality and its categories not simply as system-bound surfaces permanently encoded by the social process that produced their coherence, but as virtualities, bodies, and affects in motion that are always crossing lines, always becoming deterritorialized and reterritorialized, always

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[177] James M. Dean, Medieval English Political Writings (Kalamazoo: TEAMS Middle English Text Series, 1996).

[178] Jeffery Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., Becoming Male in the Middle Ages (Dumbarton Oaks: Garland, 1997) xi.

> becoming something other than an immobile and eternal self-same.[179]

I read the Rebel Letters as medieval poetic representations within which the abstractions *true* and *man* are imagined and re-imagined anew, representations in which masculinity is something in continuous production. The Rebel Letters are the product of men who make, members of a rapidly growing class of the commons composed of craftsmen, free holders, merchants, clerics, and wage-laborers.[180] In the case of these texts, what is made by this new class of men are poems, moments of linguistic possibility that enact a relational masculine identity, and that gather together men into a gendered community of social and political rebellion. I argue that such a masculinity is organized around the gendered craft work of making and doing, and that, as such, it may be categorized as artisanal, a perhaps more generous term.[181] The late medieval artisan was a

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[179] Cohen and Wheeler, Becoming x-xi.

[180] Contrary to popular conception, the Rebellion was not primarily composed of disgruntled peasant serfs. Rather, the demographic includes large proportions of high-ranking craftsmen who were highly involved in the daily operations of their manors and villages. As Christopher Dyer points out, using records from Essex, the county at the heart of the Rebellion, "the most striking common characteristic of our sample of rebels is their prominence in the government of their manor, village or hundred, either at the time of the revolt or within a few years of 1381. No less that 53 of them, out of 70 where we might expect to find evidence, are known to have served as reeves, chief pledges, affeerers, ale-tasters, bailiffs, jurors, constables, or in other positions of responsibility" (17). See his "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," in R.H. Hiltonand T.H. Aston, eds., The English Rising of 1381 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 9-42.

[181] The late medieval artisan was a masculine figure whose identity was fluid. Most artisans worked as wage laborers and journeymen, often moving at harvest time from an urban craft job back to a natal farm. Although many aspired towards the ideal that guild membership might provide, few could join that elite. For discussions of artisans in late medieval England, particularly the relationships between artisans and urban oligarchs, see Heather Swanson, Medieval Artisans: an Urban Class in Late Medieval England (London: Blackwell, 1989); Sylvia Thrupp, The Merchant Class of Medieval London (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948); Gervase Rosser, "Crafts, Guilds and the Negotiation of Work in the Medieval Town," Past and Present 154 (1997): 3-31; Phillipp R. Schofield, Peasant and Community in Medieval England, 1200-1500 (New York: Palgrave, 2003). For discussion of European artisans more generally, see James R. Farr, Artisans in Europe, 1300-1914 (Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2000). For analysis of the intersection of occupational and masculine identity, particularly for medieval artisans, see Ruth Mazo Karras, From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), specifically Chapter 4, "Masters and Men: Independence and Urban Craft Workers."

figure whose identity was indeed a site of "becoming." The artisan was a member of the commons who possessed saleable skills and whose authority rested both upon the performance of those skills and his position as head of a household. But the artisanal class was itself extremely various, including a wide range of abilities and ranks. As Heather Swanson has argued,

> … the artisan class was by no means a homogeneous one. It embraced at one extreme the wealthy and prestigious pewterers and goldsmiths, and at the other indigent and even destitute members of the textile and building crafts. Whilst at the bottom end of the scale, semi-skilled and underemployed artisans merge into the mass of the urban poor, the most prosperous among them aspired to join the merchant class. The common factor among these people was that they were skilled manufacturers, processing goods for sale: some might have their own workshops, others be paid piece-rates or a daily wage.[182]

Neither priests, nor clerics, nor knights, the artisan was also not an abject serf. Instead, he occupied a position of increasing power—even as that power was circumscribed by the Statutes that sought to fix his occupation, status, and residence firmly in place. Engaged in international business, local commerce, and the maintenance of separate trades and their guild mysteries, the artisan occupied an in-between space of mercantilism, work, and craft.[183] Moreover, his role as miller, carter, father, true man, was a performance that held together his immediate community of fellow male rebels, but that also served to unify

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[182] Swanson, Medieval Artisans: an Urban Class in Late Medieval England 2.

[183] As Dean notes, "the third estate was by the mid to late 14th century a congeries of arriviste gentry, prosperous (and not so prosperous) merchants, craftsmen, burgesses, yeomen, villains and serfs. Simply put, the peasant class consisted of all those who were not noble and not clerics; and many of the middle strata of the third estate—those who did not take an active role in governance—participated in the misnamed 'Peasants' Revolt of 1381'" (xii).

the larger grouping of artisanal men, women and their children. This performance was closely tied to the artisan's identity as a man who works; as Michael Uebel and Kellie Robertson have argued, "the equation of what you did with who you were was an almost inviolate one (unless, of course, you were a woman; in which case, who you were was likely to be dependent on what your husband did)."[184]

In the case of the Rebel Letters, the makers of the texts may actually have been artisans, as their names—those equations of doing and being—attest. But there are also explicitly made-up, poetic names in the Letters, names that function almost like the postmodern graffiti tags that simultaneously exemplify and obscure an artist's "true" identity. Taken together, then, the rebels' names are at once historical, pseudonymous, occupational, stolen from other poems. They are not identities but fictions, and the fact that they are fictions points to the very constructedness of late medieval *trwe* masculinity. Just as a gender identity may be constructed, invented, so too may a poem imagine anew the ways in which men are named. The Letters pair up the questions of naming with the questions endemic to poetry, asking what a name means, what words mean, how rhyme works, how truth is determined, how men might know one another via language. The gender identity invented in and by the Rebel Letters, therefore, is a poetic masculinity in constant motion, one whose bounds are organized communally, anonymously, fictively. The Rebel Letters are a performance of poetic relation, tiny lyrics by which male artisans communally know one another and are known on a lateral, democratic plane.

Because they express only a thwarted and obscure hope for a better-ordered future, the Rebel Letters can never be examples of a clearly delineated past. And the Letters are not

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[184] See Uebel and Robertson, eds., "Introduction," in The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labor in Late Medieval England (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

only *claims*, that which is stated, but also incantatory *poetry*, a literary form that combines content and form into an aesthetic whole. Made of rhymed and rhythmic speech, surely intended not only for silent reading but for oral performance as well, the Rebel Letters are decidedly "something other," an imagined present in which craft, pleasure, and the possibilities of a new kind of identity are possible. In their recitation, they call into being a participatory audience of listeners while also providing opportunity for plural, ambiguous, invented authorship, creating a textual community of readers, speakers, listeners and texts.[185] Made and unmade by a variety of men, refusing any clear ascription to one *trwe* masculine author, the Rebel Letters call into question the notions of truth and masculinity as "system bound surfaces permanently encoded by the social process that produced their coherence," instead offering us a version of medieval, laboring class[186] English masculinity that is itself always in motion, is only a virtuality, an ideal with which to hope for a different society.

The Intelligibility of Meaning, the Invisibility of Form: What Do We Mean When We Discuss the Rebel Letters?

Literate in Latin, possessed of the authority to preach publicly, John Ball was the only man in the uprising who appeared to be *auctor* to the chroniclers documenting the

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[185] I take this term from Brian Stock, who argues that textual communities are "groups of people whose social activities are centered around texts or, more precisely, around a literate interpreter of them. The text in question need not be written down nor the majority of the auditors actually literate." See his Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983) 522.

[186] Claire Sponsler, in her essay, "Outlaw Masculinities: Drag, Blackface, and Late Medieval Laboring-Class Festivities," in Becoming Male in the Middle Ages, 321-347, argues for a conception of "laboring class" masculinity, as opposed to a "peasant" or "plebeian" masculinity. She notes that using "laboring class" to describe these masculinities helps "to point to the formative role of work in shaping the meaning of these performances and hence the masculine identities linked to them. To think of them as laboring class performances is to envision them not as timeless and universal of the folk or the people, but as historically-defined activities that take place within specific socioeconomic orders determined, in the case of late medieval England, by labor and the control of the labor" (325).

events of 1381, clerics who simply could not see laboring class men as authors, much less as authors who would creatively use the vernacular to their own poetic advantage.[187] Although Ball may have appeared to be the most likely author for medieval and modern scholars alike, fitting neatly into both medieval conceptions of class and literacy and into modern conceptions of a single author, the texts themselves problematize each of these notions, because they claim to be the voices of many men. Conversely, the medieval chroniclers in which the Letters are found do provide stable, clear texts that have survived history with their provenance and individual authorship intact; they are thus much easier to read, and to research. Because of this, the bulk of contemporary scholarship has closely read what the chroniclers say about the Rebellion, focusing on the obvious bias that informs so much writing about it. This criticism, necessarily, finds in the chronicles an overwhelmingly negative, often stereotypical, depiction of the rebels as illiterate, animalistic fools.[188] It is clear that the chroniclers' representation of the rebels as violent animals precluded the possibility that the Letters might be a communal vernacular project created, composed, and led by many Englishmen and not simply the work of a raving heterodox priest. But while scholars have rightly read the chroniclers' ideological biases about the Rebellion, they have in many ways overdetermined the inability of the rebels to make clear their own political and textual ideas. In focusing intensively on the ways by which the chronicles cannot, do not, represent the rebels as fully human, scholars have inadvertently privileged the authoritative

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[187] This aporia has been replicated in the critical scholarship, which confusingly persists in attributing the Letters to Ball. Steven Justice offers an opposing view. Locating dialect differences in each of the letters, and paying close attention to the documents' own declamations of multiple authors, he argues that John Ball could not have produced all the texts, and that in those which claim to be written by other men, "the pseudonymous characters of Milner, Carter and Trewman make authorship programmatically unlocatable, [and] assert that these letters could have been written by anyone." See his Writing and Rebellion 38.

[188] For example, Strohm finds that the chroniclers depict the rebels "as yokel interlopers, as shifty manipulators of traditional oaths and understandings, as a purposely undisciplined rabble," Hochon's Arrow 34.

voices of the chroniclers.[189] They may even be over-emphasizing the chroniclers' rhetorical biases, and at the expense of listening closely to what it is the Rebel Letters actually have to say.[190] For, regardless of their strange place within the archive, if we consider how the Letters state their claims, it becomes clear that they are texts possessed of an aesthetic integrity in which men speak—albeit elliptically—about apocalypse, justice, truth, and masculine togetherness.

The fact that the Letters survive as texts within chronicles hostile to the rebels' claims has complicated their reception by later scholars, who point out that the Letters' ability to express anything authentic about the rebels themselves is severely compromised by the context within which we find the texts.[191] For the chroniclers, the rebels' vernacular texts are "literam aenigmatibus plenam," so full of peasant enigmas they do not deserve to be translated into the more stable and universal Latin, but appear almost "as is," as blocks of transcribed vernacular speech. This switch in the texts, replicating the content of the Letters without translation, is consonant with the rendering in the Anonimalle Chronicles of the words of the rebels in their native language. The text moves from French to English in a single sentence: "Et les ditz communes avoient entre eux une wache word en Engleys, 'With whom haldes yow?' et le response fuist, 'Wyth kynge Richard and with the trew communes.'"[192] In all three chronicles, the rebels' words stake a vernacular claim for

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[189] For instance, Aers' essay in The Cambridge History, *"Vox Populi*, and the Peasants' Revolt," does not even read the voices of the rebels at all, despite its title, focusing instead only upon what the elite chroniclers say about those voices.

[190] Andrew Galloway convincingly argues that Walsingham's bias may be overstated. See his "Making History Legal: Piers Plowman and the Rebels of 14th Century England," in William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays ed. Kathleen Hewitt-Smith (New York: Routledge, 2001) 7-39.

[191] Derek Pearsall, "Interpretative Models for the Peasants Revolt," in Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture eds. Patrick J. Gallacher and Helen Damico (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989) 67.

[192] Strohm, Hochon's Arrow 41. He quotes the Anonimalle Chronicle at 139.

meaning, though they are presented by the chroniclers as unintelligible gibberish, parchment scraps "full of riddles" fished from the clothes of a condemned man. But the rebels use English "wache words," linking the king and the "trew commune" in a phrase by which members of their community might be identified. Textually, what is compelling is the way that the authors move imperceptibly from one language to the next, privileging the languages of power, of cosmopolitan literary culture—Latin, French—above the spoken English language of the rebels. Writing seems to happen exclusively in those elite languages, while English can only be rendered as it sounds, as it occurs in spoken time.

The watch-words, in order to have meaning, need to be repeated, and the true commune is cemented by those acts of verbal repetition. Thus, throughout the chronicles, the rebels are characterized by their words. Froissart recounts that, "these unhappy people shouted and cried so loud, as though all the devils of hell had been among them."[193] Walsingham goes considerably further in his depictions of the rebels' noise, which marks them not just as devils but as less-than-human:

> … a horrible shouting broke out, not like the clamor normally produced by men, but of a sort which enormously exceeded all human noise and which could only be compared to the wailings of the inhabitants of hell. Such shouts used to be heard whenever the rebels beheaded anyone or destroyed houses, for as long as God permitted their iniquity to be unpunished. Words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks.[194]

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[193] Dobson, The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 189.

[194] Dobson 189.

Walsingham here elides the gathered shouting of the crowd with the wails of the insane, with the uncontrolled, unintelligible noise of animals. The rebels don't even have words in this example; rather, their throats sound with sheep-bleats, with the shrieking cries of peacocks. The ideological move, in these texts, is to erase the rebels' humanity. As Susan Crane has argued, for the literate chroniclers, the rebels "have nothing meaningful to communicate," but utterance, but noise; the rebels serve in these accounts as a foil for the chroniclers' own literate carefulness.[195] The chroniclers thus "guarantee the lucidity of their own accounts in part by repudiating the rebels' senseless racket."[196] English in these chronicles is so harsh, so closely allied with beastliness, it isn't worth deciphering. The chroniclers hear noise, and so they do not listen for sense.

Among poets, Chaucer and Gower each present the rebels as savage animals who stand up on their hind legs and make frightening, unintelligible noise. Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale, set fantastically in "thilke tyme, as I have understonde,/Beestes and brides koude speke and synge" (VII. 4070-1), tells the tale of lovelorn chickens beset by a fox. The ensuing uproar is charted by a catalogue of proper names—"Colle our dogge," Talbot, Gerland, and Malkyn (VII.3383-4)—similar to the catalogue of names found in the Rebel Letters.[197] The clamor created by the people and animals running amok in this tale is compared directly to the uproar of the Rebellion; Chaucer alludes to the immense noise

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[195] Susan Crane, "The Writing Lesson of 1381," in Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 201-21, at 209.

[196] Crane 209.

[197] Susan H. Cavanaugh's explanatory notes to the Nun's Priest's Tale point out that Talbot and Gerland are also dog's names; Malkyn is "a typical name for a country-girl or serving maid." See notes 3383 and 3384, Riverside 941.

created by the rebel throng, to Jack Straw, a peasant leader, and his followers, and to the rebels' murder of Flemings.[198]

> So hydous was the noyse—a, benedicitee!—
> Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
> Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
> Whan that they wolden any Flemyng kille,
> As thilke day was maad upon the fox. (VII. 3394-7)

Chaucer's representation of the rebels is both mild and brief, compared to Gower's cruel allegory of the rebels that takes several chapters of his Vox Clamantis. He compares them to ill-behaved domesticated animals: "I saw rebellious asses carried away by sudden revolt, and no one checked them by the bridle. … Indeed, their braying terrified all the citizens, as they loudly redoubled their usual 'hee haw' again and again."[199] Clearly, the distortions in the clerical and poetic representations of the Rebellion are severe. As Crane points out, "the rebels are effectively voiceless within literate discourse."[200] They are turned into animals and demons, rendered as so much crazed spectacle, as an outpouring of enraged noise. The consequence of these literary representations of the Rebellion has meant that the rebels have long been perceived as congenitally unable to participate in the discourses of literacy and meaning.

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[198] For analysis of the Rebellion in the Nun's Priest's Tale and in Gower's Vox Clamantis, see Ann W. Astell, "The Peasants' Revolt: Cock-Crow in Gower and Chaucer," Essays in Medieval Studies 10 (1993): 53-64. For more general analysis of the ways by which noise is used and interpreted by the literate chroniclers, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "An Introduction to Medieval Noise," Exemplaria 16.2 (1994): 1-8. Crane also notes that "noise replaces speech," in representations of the Rebel Letters, "Writing Lesson" 209.

[199] Eric W. Stockton, transl., The Major Latin Works of John Gower (University of Washington Press: Seattle, 1962) 54. The asses are the first of many animalized rebels; they are followed by oxen, swine, dogs, cats, foxes, domestic birds, flies, and frogs (54-90).

[200] Crane 210.

If we approach the Letters as texts, and not merely as bestial noise, we can begin to see the larger social and poetic context into which they fit. Examined in this way, the Letters' ordered, rhythmic, often rhymed language that echoes almost identically contemporary poems on similar subjects.[201] They may be strange transcriptions whose position in documentary history is obviously compromised, but I would argue that the Letters are aesthetic texts in and of their own right. And they do not claim to be anything other than what they are: vernacular poems in which a group of pseudonymous authors rely on the power of spoken utterance to create an audience. Whether or not the chroniclers conferred any authority upon them, the texts ostensibly produced by the rebels do speak, both musically and meaningfully.[202] Like many other brief, rhyming poems concerned with prophecy and politics, the Letters are profoundly allegorical. This use of *allegoresis* is a tactic that allows for the evasion of censorship, for the oblique gesture that speaks without completely saying. Nick Ronan argues that the Letters' riddling qualities are essential to their purpose. He reads them as popular, poetic allegories, "a form of writing which is constituted in dialogic opposition to the economies of textual production over which the institutions of the Church and the Court maintained a strict but increasingly shaky monopoly."[203] The texts' enigmas, read in this way, seem unthreatening, in part because the fundamental point

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[201] Rossell Hope Robbins points out that The Letter of John Ball (Stow, Annales) and a similar poem that also uses the seven deadly sins, Index, No. 2356, use almost identical language in their criticism of society. The final encomium, "God doe bote for nowe is time," of Ball's text marks a decisive shift, away from the general criticism of 2356, to open subversion. See his Historical Poems xlii.

[202] As Dobson argues, "such letters and verses may well provide only fragile evidence from which to prove the existence of a powerful radical tradition in late medieval England, but at least they remind us that the king's low-born subjects were not always and inevitably inarticulate" (380).

[203] Nick Ronan, "1381: Writing in Revolt: Signs of Confederacy in Chronicle Accounts of the English Rising," Forum for Modern Language Studies 25.4 (1989) 304-14, at 305.

of allegory is to obfuscate. But their multiplicity of meanings allows for a perhaps more subversive troubling of the status quo. He notes that

> Allegorical discourse makes a spectacle out of disguise by holding up to public view the constitutive absence, the inherent otherness upon which the relation between the signifier and signified is predicated. Allegory in this sense performs the reification of language, in that allegorical signifiers draw attention to themselves as signifiers, i.e. as substitutes for the absent signified. The poetic function of allegory is to put on display the spectacle of language as concealment. Its political function derives from this radically undecideable aspect of its semiotics—because allegory defies singular interpretation and can thus evade censorship, it can be read out in public, in the very seat of the power it can undermine.[204]

Ronan's definition of allegory, applied to the Rebel Letters, usefully perceives the Letters' many confusions and riddles as being part of a larger purpose—to speak openly while simultaneously evading censorship. He reads the Letters, here, as a poetic spectacle of vernacular doublespeak.

Similarly, Steven Justice reads the Letters as so many "acts of assertive literacy," finding in them an expression of vernacular English writing concerned with rural-based, peasant notions of performative truth.[205] In using English, Justice argues, the Rebel Letters "embodied a claim as well as message."[206] The rebels' texts are proof that they were indeed literate in vernacular English, and they exemplify the fact that "writing itself—both the

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[204] Ronan 311-12.

[205] Justice, Writing and Rebellion 24.

[206] Justice 30. Justice also argues that the chroniclers unwittingly included rebel claims intact, because they could not see those claims in a meaningful way. He points out that the chroniclers did not need to remind their audience of the essential malevolence of the rebellion. See his "Epilogue" to Writing and Rebellion 255-262.

activity and the product—was at issue in these letters: their composition and copying, recomposition and recopying were so many acts of *assertive* literacy."[207] This assertive literacy, according to Justice, is textual; he sees the Letters not as oral or aural products but as disseminated broadsides.[208] These vernacular broadsides, he posits, could have gone up throughout the southeast and helped spur the Rebellion in their recitation. As he argues, this form of vernacular literacy mattered because it claimed that those "who read only English—or even could only have English read to them—had a stake in intellectual and political life."[209]

While I concur that the rebels are making a distinctively vernacular claim about what language means and who controls thatt meaning, it is important to point out that the texts are not only written documents but are also representations of speech. Neither Ronan nor Justice consider the implications of spoken language in their interpretations of the Letters, instead approaching them as exclusively textual objects. Because they are rhymed, rhythmic English presented in the chronicles as vernacular transcriptions, the Letters should be read—and carefully—as examples of oral poetics and must be examined within the larger historical situation in which medieval English was contested, exalted, made heretical, and censored, in certain, largely literate contexts. For the rebels, using the vernacular was a decidedly political and poetical move, on par with what other contemporary poets were practicing in their own composition. Unlike those more elite contemporaries, however, the rebels' social position was uniquely aligned with the conception of the vernacular as local, subaltern, and chaotic. As Nicholas Watson and Fiona Somerset argue, "… as its derivation from the Latin

[207] Justice 24.

[208] Justice 28-9.

[209] Justice 30.

vernacularis (of a slave) suggests, the term describes a subaltern or local language or style, one accessible to a particular, generally non elite group"; *vernacular* is thus a term that is "apologetic and assertive at the same time."[210] Certainly, Justice acknowledges the power that using the vernacular conferred upon the rebels, but he sees that power as existing only in the realm of writing. I am not ready to declare that the texts were broadside, an assertion that Justice sequesters to a footnote; rather I posit that they may be the textual representations of an oral performance, and that they should be considered as oral-aural artifacts. Written broadsides are not the only ways that poems—the most easily memorized literary genre—can travel, especially in a society where less than 10% were literate in Latin, the lingua franca of the day.[211] In their efforts to claim power for the rebels, and to present the rebels' texts as literary objects worthy of study both Ronan and Justice read the Letters, literally, as texts and argue for an understanding of those texts as proof of literacy. In so doing, they ignore the fact that allegory, literacy and poetry are not contiguous. The conception of poetry as the product of deep reading, of carefully composed allegorical and semiotic symbols, is one profoundly influenced by print literacy. Contemporary scholars think of texts as rarefied written objects wrought from a highly literate education, but one need not be literate in order to make poems. In fact, as Aristotle's interest in the

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[210] See their "Introduction," The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004) ix-x. Their text contains useful essays on a variety of periods and questions relating to the use of the medieval vernacular. For analyses of vernacularity in late medieval English culture, see Kellie Robertson, "Common Language and Common Profit," in The Postcolonial Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, (New York: Palgrave, 2000) 209-228; Jill C. Havens, "'As Englishe is Comoun Langage to Oure Puple': The Lollards and their Imagined 'English' Community," in Imagining a Medieval Nation; also useful is the editorial material in Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans, eds., The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999); an additional source, one focused specifically on prose is Janel Mueller, The Native Tongue and the Word: Developments in English Prose Style, 1380-1580 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[211] See M.T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307 (London: Blackwell, 1993).

declamation of theatrical poetry and its concomitant genres attests, poetry has its origins in orality.[212] David Aers cites an instance from the Rebellion that focuses more on the oral nature of truth-telling and its close opposite, lying, a link implicitly made by the Letters' obsession with true men and true speech. It is a plea from Thursday 16 July 1381, taken from the Public Records Office:

> John Shirle of the county of Nottingham was taken because it was found that he had been a vagabond in various counties during the whole time of the disturbance, insurrection and tumult, carrying lies as well as silly and worthless talk from district to district, whereby the peace of the lord the king could rapidly be broken and the people be disquieted and disturbed … [W]hen these things had been acknowledged by him before the said justices, his evil behavior and condition were made plainly manifest and clear. And thereupon trustworthy witnesses in his presence at the time when the above-mentioned lies, evil words, threats and worthless talk had been spoken by him were requested; and they, being sworn to speak the truth about these matters, testified that all the aforesaid words imputed to him had indeed been spoken by him; and he, examined once again, did not deny the charges laid against him.[213]

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[212] Aristotle, Poetics. M.T. Clanchy notes that "literacy is unique among technologies in penetrating and structuring the intellect itself, which makes it hard for scholars, whose own skills are shaped by literacy, to reconstruct the mental changes which it brings about," Memory 185.

[213] Qtd. in Aers, Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430 (London: Routledge, 1988) 1. The Rebellion had its seeds in Fobbing, and it was from Fobbing that similar oral statements, perhaps poems, were made and then reiterated to supporters elsewhere. Thomas Knighton recounts that "Thomas Baker of Fobbing (so called because of his trade) took courage and exhort and ally himself with the men of his village. Then these men leagued themselves with others and in turn they contacted their friends and relations so that their message passed from village to village and area to area. They asked their friends to advise them and to bring assistance for those serious and urgent matters which affected them all. The people gathered together most eagerly in great troops, delighted that the day had come when they could help each other in the face of so urgent a necessity," Dobson 136.

John Shirle carries lies in his mouth, from place to place, fomenting revolution by means of "silly and worthless talk." Like Shirle's lies, and the Letters themselves, poems do not travel by means only of the book or page, but instead are able to move along the circuit of human movement. As I hope my reading makes clear, the Rebel Letters are indeed documents, are quite materially texts. What they document is not simply textual literacy, but the bodily, oral and aural genre of poetry. That this poetry is not consonant with Chaucer's Continental rhymes or Langland's alliterative staves does not make it any less than poetry, nor does it prevent the participation of this poetry within the larger literary discourse. Rather, using the spoken vernacular, not the elite languages of writing, Latin and French, the Rebel Letters harness the mnemonic ability of English meter and English rhyme to commit ideas to memory and to make those ideas politically real to a group of like-minded men. The noise the rebels made may have sounded demonic, bestial, to its chroniclers, but all poems are organized, often incantatory, noise. More than this, oral transmission was the primary way that information traveled for the majority of medieval English people.[214] The fact that the chroniclers focus on the noise made by the rebels is perhaps less an indication that the rebels were "voiceless" in literate discourse than that they were using their voices as a viable alternative to that discourse. To recite poetry is to vocalize, to perform in real time, and it is possible to read the Rebel Letters as transcriptions of those performances, however tainted, frangible, and limited they may be as literary texts.

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[214] Although the medieval majority could not read Latin, this does not mean that they had no access to literate discourse; rather, such access moved along oral routes of transmission. For discussion of orality and the oral transmission of information and literature in the later middle ages, see, for instance, Colin Richmond, "Hand and Mouth: Information Gathering and Use in England in the Later Middle Ages," Journal of Historical Sociology 1.3(1988): 232-252; and Nancy Bradbury, Writing Aloud: Storytelling in Late Medieval England (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998). For more general discussion of orality, see Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982).

The Rebel Letters corral the power of English masculine noise to convey meaning and political power in condensed linguistic envelopes of rhyme and sense. It is men who speak these texts, calling out to other men to join with them, in a way that participates in the longstanding practice among common men of the swearing of oaths and frankpledges.[215] A group was not formally coherent until its male members had verbally sworn their connections, their frankpledge, to one another. As Shannon McSheffrey argues, such public speaking and oath swearing were fundamentally masculine activities. "Men were the public actors in medieval society; it was they who participated formally in government, served on juries, operated in the most visible roles in the world of commerce. Public activity of the right kind in many ways defined the respectable male."[216] Thus, when the Rebel Letters greet well all manner of men, bidding those men to stand together manfully in truth and to trust in the power of truth to help them, they are enacting a public oath of fealty. Read as the products of oral, performative practice, then, the Letters complicate conventional notions of what medieval masculine *auctoritee* is and how it might function. As oral products, the Rebel Letters do not pretend to be books, or even to be poems, in the classical sense of the term. But they do use poetic language to call a group of rebellious men into being, and

[215] According to Phillipp R. Schofield, the frankpledge was an oral system of "mutual responsibility" which like other similar systems "also found their expressions in legal institutions such as the hue and cry, which required that individuals call forth the community against malefactors and through which the role of peacekeeper was extended beyond the office-holders and the worthies of village society to include all villagers" (167). Like the hue and the cry, the frankpledge was an oral, performative practice meant to draw public attention to one's verbal action. Sarah Rees Jones links the practice of frankpledge to the social pressures of being a good, *trwe* man. She notes that "entering the frankpledge, or entering the tithing, involved taking an oath of fealty and swearing in effect that one would be a good man: that is that one would keep the peace, abide by the laws of the community and not commit theft." The frankpledge was a means of knowing and being known; all visitors to a town had to be vouched for by a man who had himself taken the frankpledge, and stay in that man's house if spending the night. See her essay, "Household, Work, and the Problem of Mobile Labour: The Regulation of Labour in Medieval English Towns," in The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England ed. James B. Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, and W.M. Ormrod (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 2000) 141.

[216] See McSheffrey, "Men and Masculinity in Late Medieval London Civic Culture: Governance, Patriarchy and Reputation," in Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland, 1991) 259.

in so doing, they ask whether a spoken form of address is a real thing, an object of force within the world. They are asking whether a vernacular poem in the mouth, spoken communally, can matter politically. Richard Firth Green notes that, "in an oral society the precise words of the oath, at the moment that they are spoken, bind speaker and listener by virtue of the inherent performative power which resists translation or paraphrase."[217] The Rebel Letters are the moment of oath-taking; they are both made things and things in the process of being made. As Green argues, for predominantly oral societies a man's word "is no mere abstraction; it takes on some of the qualities of a piece of property to be defended against the world."[218]

Bound up in the flux of vernacular speech, during which meaning is forever threatening to detach itself from words, and out of which new meanings might be made, late medieval English poems are the site of ontological debate. They are charged and beautiful echoes, reminders of the speech act of oath taking. In oral culture, oath taking is a material, bodily act—a fact attested to in the word *troth*. An oath is a statement of truth, of troth; it binds two people together in mutual accord. Related etymologically to *true*, *troth*, and, ultimately, to *tree*, *trewthe* had long meant that which is faithful, that which accords with reality, that which is legitimate and exact.[219] For medieval people, *trewthe* could be a binding

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[217] See Green, A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 60.

[218] Green 47.

[219] Green posits an etymological link between *tree* and *true*, Crisis 52. The MED definition of "treue" extends lengthily; the term is clearly much used by medieval writers and "the meaning of 'treue' and related words is freq. contextual, and the precise gloss is determined by the word being modified; quots. have been assigned to the most likely sense, but alternative readings are possible." The OED notes that the adjective's etymology is quite ancient; it derives from a root term that means "'having or characterized by good faith,' deriv. of the noun which is represented by the OE. *treow*, *truw*, OHG. *triuwa*, Goth. *triggwa*."

commitment, a making real.[220] The link between *troth, tree* and *truth* is subtly found in those mnemonic objects used to cement an oral event, for, according to Green, the more true, the more "'thinglike' … an oral agreement can be made, the longer it will last in memory."[221] The object thus marks the truthful declamation of one's *troth*; the *betrothed* wear symbolic rings, for example. The sense that *trewthe* might be so exact as to be tangible can be seen in the now quite-specialized expressions, *the board is trued up*, or, *the wheel is out of true,*[222] which imply that *trewthe* might be understood not only as a way of being, but also as the product of skillful making. *Trewthe* is a brief moment in which word, thing, gesture and intention coalesce; a term so tangible it seemed to be beyond reproach. And yet *trewthe* can also be the name of a poetic character, a figure whose verisimilitude is made up out of words. As an imitation, a made thing, the *trwe* figuration is that which occupies representational space, but whose value depends on the quality of its construction.

When the *trwe* man speaks in the Rebel Letters, then, he calls out to the power of the real even though he is not real. He claims the legitimacy and exactness of trees, mnemonic objects, the best intentions. And he does so in complete disguise. His poem is at once a testament to his voice, because it speaks his words, as well as an erasure of his authorial identity. As it speaks, and by speaking, the *trwe* man's poem occludes who he is because who he is in the poem is nameless. He is a figurehead, a speaking stereotype, even as the poem

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[220] Thus, as Green argues, physical mnemonic devices—rings, sticks, batons, bent pennies, knives—connect the spoken troth with its instantiation, and are a particular vestige of oral culture, Crisis 53.

[221] Green 44.

[222] These idioms are still used by contemporary craftsmen and mechanics. The first expression, used by carpenters and woodworkers, refers to the straightness and integrity of a piece of wood; the second is most frequently used by cyclists and bicycle-repairers to refer to a wheel being out of alignment, but it is also used the refer to any wheeled or turning mechanism. In both cases, "true" refers to integrity, exactness, and the proper fitting into place of constituent parts. And in both cases, the consequences of something being "untrue" or "out of true" are disastrous. I thank Sean Kryston for pointing out the contemporary usage of this idiom.

quite literally acts as a personal testimonial, a means of speaking past death. Anne Middleton points out that, particularly for medieval texts, the signature of a text's author, however effaced, has a wit "that derives from the perpetual double life of the text, its claim to represent the spoken and the audible voice of someone's '*menyng*' as well as visible signs representing the meaning of things."[223] The makers of the Rebel Letters made texts, and in so doing, signed their names multiply, communally, anonymously, to the audible voice of *menying*. In the mouths of the makers of the Letters, English is a tool, is a product; it is the material out of which both poetry and political hope are made.

'Trewthe hat bene sette under a lokke': the Rebel Letters as Poetry

For the purposes of the following discussion, I shall focus on two documents, The Letter of John Ball, and Jakke Trewman, because of their shared concern for the themes of trewthe and true masculinity**.** The Littera Johannis Balle missa communibus essexiae, or The Letter of John Ball, is taken from Walsingham's Chronicon Angliae (British Library, Royal MS 13.E.ix.fol.287r); the "Addresses of the Commons," is taken from the Chronicon Henrici Knighton, which is organized into five subsections: Jakke Mylner, Jak Carter, Jakke Trewman, Exemplar epistolae Johannis Balle, and Prima epistola Johannis Balle. The Royal MS "Letter of John Ball" is in two discrete sections, which, although attributed again to Ball by Knighton, do not claim to be written by him.[224] The first section of the document is a block of prose cataloguing several characters who typify masculine laboring identity: Johon Schep, Johan Nameless, Johan the Mullere, Johon Carter, Peres Ploughman, Hobbe the

[223] Anne Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader, ed. Derek Pearsall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 206-45, at 35.

[224] Dean 135.

Robbere, and Johan Trewman. The second block of text is poetry in which Jakke Trewman speaks. In this text, Jakke Trewman is not a man defined by his labor, as his colleagues Jakke Carter and Johon Mylner, or even Hobbe the Robbere, clearly are.[225] Jakke Trewman, one suspects, chose his own name. In the poem, it is "Johon Schep, som tyme Seynte marie prest of York, and now of Colchestre," who initially greets, in prose, his audience of nameless men, millers, carters, robbers, true men, and even Piers Plowman himself.[226] But it is "Trewman and alle his felawes," who address the audience in rhyming poetry; they are the speakers who bid everyone to understand their meaning.

Schep's prose exhorts his fellows to "bee war of gyle in borugh," to be wary of the trickery endemic to urban living. "Hobbe the Robbere," is presumably a participant in such urban deceit and thievery; the audience is urged to chastise him well. The initial prose block is obviously salutatory, exhortative. It has a strange urgency, pairing up real names with obviously invented ones, and urging both individual wariness and community. The poem that follows is organized into a series of neat, proverb-esque rhyming couplets, with a center triple rhyme, the product of Trewman, the man who bids everyone listen, who gathers together "alle his felawes" into a shared group of listeners attending to a quick little lyric. In the poem, Trewman begins by describing the work of Johan the Mullere, a labor that is an act of diminution: he "hath ygrounde smal smal smal." His laborious self-sacrifice is mirrored in Christ's own martyrdom, for "the Kynges sone of hevene schal paye for al," a

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[225] Dean 135

[226] Because of their reference to the character Piers Plowman, the Letters have also been read in terms of their relationship to Langland's poem. In particular, Anne Middleton has focused on questions of authority, identity, and vagrancy, particularly in regards to the Letters' use of pseudonyms as a response to the Statutes of Laborers. See both her essays, "Kynde Name," and her "Acts of Vagrancy: the C-Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388," in Written Work: Langland, Labor and Authorship, eds. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 208-318.

pairing between a miller figure and Christ that appears elsewhere in the Letters.[227] Here, the Mullere has adequately completed his job; he is capable and skilled, a fact emphasized by the systrophe of "smal, smal, small." Dean sees in this repetition a reflection of great poverty; in times of scarcity, what is already small must be subdivided into more and more minute parts.[228] But I would argue against this reading, due to the labor-intensiveness of milling, as it would surely have cost more to have one's grain milled finely, an expense that in times of poverty most would forego. The Miller's ability to grind what is small ever smaller, to destroy and to produce, is linked here with Christ's salvation of humanity. Just as Christ died for the world's sins, in service to God, so too does the Miller serve his community with devoted, able labor. More than this, and consonant with Margaret Aston's argument that it was the feast of Corpus Christi that gave an organizing calendrical moment for the rebellion, as well as a profoundly communitarian social and theological impetus to the rebels' claims, I would argue that what the Miller claims he is doing is making very fine flour.[229] That flour—laboriously expensive, as fine as dust—is the flour used to make the Host, and in this, the Miller's work is connected not just to honest production and agricultural labor but to the miracle of transubstantiation as well.

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[227] The other miller-figure can be found in "The Addresses of the Commons" (Chronicon Henrici Knighton: Jakke Mylner). The text reads, in part, "Jakke Mylner alloquitur socios sic: Jakke Mylner asket help to turne hys mylne aright. He hath grounden smal, smal; the Kings sone of heven he schal pay for alle. Loke thi mylne go aright, with the foure sayles, and the post stande in steddefastnesse," Dean 136.

[228] See Dean, note 7.

[229] See Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants' Revolt" Past and Present 43 (1994): 3-47.

Whether urban or rural, all medieval communities were dependent in concrete ways upon agricultural production.[230] As Christopher Dyer points out, "The post-plague generations were not fixed in static hierarchies and traditional styles of life, but lived in one of the most dynamic periods in our economic and social history."[231] The rural countryside produced food, and without food, nothing, no one, could survive. Everyone in medieval Britain, then, had a stake in agriculture, and agricultural practice and its symbols permeate the Rebel Letters. This interpenetration of rural and urban, farm-laborer and artisanal maker, is brought to a violent climax during the Peasants' Revolt, in which, as Justice argues, it became painfully apparent that "the countryside has its own idiom of political judgment which discloses principles of order and self-rule adequate to ruling a nation."[232]

There is little more *trewe*, more tangible, local or relational, than food. A material object, uniting a medieval community in the ritual of both daily meals and in the feast of Corpus Christi, bread fueled life. Without bread, a community could not produce. And it was the feast of Corpus Christi that temporally organized a mass uprising across several English counties. Quite literally, bread held together the Rebellion, because the "fear of dearth and the need for bread, which generated a deep and echoing devotion to the Eucharistic host" among peasant communities, also created "an ethic and a legality

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[230] As Lee Patterson argues, "… the agrarian economy was thoroughly monetized and exchange oriented throughout the middle ages, that peasant society had been for many centuries highly stratified and differentiated, and that there existed since at least the twelfth century, a vigorous, monetized, and even credit-based peasant land market, a market for agricultural wage labor, and small-scale but essential rural industry and commodity production," Chaucer and the Subject of History (249). In a similar vein, in his "Work Ethics in the Fourteenth Century," in The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth Century England, Dyer points out that in Essex, "the weavers, tailors, carpenters and other craft workers listed in the poll tax accounts of 1381 are found from other documents to have held just under seven acres of land on average. At planting and harvest they suspended their work as artisans; in the slacker periods of the farming year they returned to their crafts" (31).

[231] Dyer, "Work Ethics" 37.

[232] Justice 188.

independent of, though often confirmed by, seigneurial administration and royal law."[233] This ethic was one preoccupied with food-production, and with the contribution of all able-bodied men and women. As Justice argues, "… in the late medieval countryside the object of everyday attention was food."[234] Food was the product of sweat and human calories, and its production was an entire community's problem. Because "England's agriculture, conservative and low yield, was a grudging provider […] the productivity of each depended to some degree on the productivity of all."[235] No community member could shirk his duty because his duty affected everyone. Thus, masculine artisanal identity revolved, in part, around the performance of shared, agricultural labor and the production of food and other goods. If a man did not labor, he would not eat—and he would anger his community.[236] Idlers, beggars, wastrels and prostitutes deserve banishment because they do not work towards food production. They are useless because they expected to eat what other people had labored to make.

In the Letter of John Ball (Royal MS), men are encouraged to "bee war of gyle in borugh," and it is guile that is opposed to the transparent actions of the true man. Following the miller-Christ pairing, the poem takes an ominous turn, describing the ways by which the audience, those who, according to the first speaker, Schep, should "stondeth togidre in godes name," should protect themselves from the duplicity that surrounds their social experience. They are urged to

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[233] Justice 176.

[234] Justice 155.

[235] Justice 174-5.

[236] A true man worked to make food, and food "set the criteria for social acceptability and shaped its vocabulary: the parasites of village society—the idlers and beggars, wastrels and prostitutes whose banishment the communities themselves sought, indeed all those who would not do their proper work—were unwanted not because they were corrupting, unsightly, or troublesome, but because they were 'useless,'" Justice 155.

Be war or ye be wo;
Knoweth your freend fro your foo.
Haveth ynow, and seith "Hoo!"
And do wel and better, and fleth synne,
And seketh pees, and hold you therinne.

By means of speech, by saying "hoo!" (stop), the audience can exert some controlling force on a chaotic society. The poem seems to exist within a realm of complete social uncertainty, a space where if one is not wary, one may quickly come to a bad end. Friends and foes mingle together, and it is up to the individual to determine who is to be trusted. It is also an individual imperative to know when a boundary has been crossed, to know the limits of satiety and acceptance, to "haveth ynow." Imperative exhortations, the poem's rhymed couplets sonically and conceptually link the nouns "small" and "all," "woe," "foe," and "hoo," and "synne," and "therinne." Trewman implores his listeners to beware, admonishing them that the result of not being wary is certain woe. People should live a measured, self-aware life; they should be careful to determine friend from enemy. And they should, in a reference to Piers Plowman's allegorical characters of Do Wel, Do Best, Do Bet, "do wel and bettre," and should also avoid sin, seek peace, and attend overall to the tasks at hand.[237]

Overall, the poem's rhythm is defined by the central grammatical break in each line and by the thumping parallel structure of the poem's definitive nouns. Each line is rhythmically split with a pause between two abstract nouns, and the poem itself repeats those nouns in symmetrical order as it progresses through its discussion of order and justice.

[237] The text's mention of Piers Plowman is the only late 14th century reference to Langland's poem.

The effect is drum-like, a pounding call-and-response song that could be easily taught to others, and repeated in a crowd. The poem's rhyming couplets, furthermore, have a proverbial quality as well. They are commonplace phrases, social injunctions, the truisms that people murmur at the advent of unjust bad news. Like the others with which it is included, the poem is "cryptic, loaded with allegorical and symbolic meanings couched in poetic language with internal rhyme and alliterations which are used with considerable skill," according to R.H. Hilton.[238] Specifically, it is roughly organized into rhyming couplets, following an AABBBCCD pattern. The meter, also rough, is not without a clear rhythmic pattern: each line has four strongly stressed syllables.[239] Clearly, the poem does not conform to the relatively regular iambic pentameter lines of Chaucer that have come to exemplify English poetry at its earliest recognizability. Chaucer's poetry *looks* like poetry; or, it has come to look to us like poetry. Spoken aloud, however, English meter and paired end-rhyme have considerably more flexibility than they may appear to on the page. A written text and the actual performance of a poem are often bad mirror images of one another; this may be why the lyrics of singers like Bob Dylan, when included in the pages of the *Norton Anthology*, do not resonate as powerfully as they do as song. The letters affixed to a page do not actually represent the experience of hearing the poem read aloud as an organic, time-bound moment.[240] Trewman's text utilizes the structures and patterns of poetry, and its

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[238] R.H. Hilton, Bond Men Made Free 214-15.

[239] Basil Bunting notes that English poetry rarely fits neatly into the imported French stress pattern of iambic pentameter, arguing that "in practise it is continually reverting to the four stresses of Old English." See his Basil Bunting on Poetry, ed. Peter Malkin (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1999) 30.

[240] Bunting has argued that the critical blind spot to rhythm often prevents the recognition of what it is a poet is actually doing, in time, with language. He notes that the analysis of Thomas Wyatt's seemingly failed attempts at iambic pentameter is essentially flawed, despite several hundred years of editorial tinkering with the manuscripts of Wyatt's poems, because it does not take into account the fact that Wyatt likely sang his lyrics. Bunting argues, although literary historians had long claimed that Wyatt simply couldn't count syllables correctly, "I prefer the evidence of my own ears, which tell me that Wyat [sic] wrote by the spoken sound or

prose form highlights the difference between looking at, i.e., reading, a text and actually listening to its form. In the case of this text, it is only through listening to an oral recitation that the lineaments of poetry can be discerned.

What occurs in this text is the real-time construction of a poem, spoken aloud to an audience. It is a production of poetry occurring not upon the page, but in time, in a body, in relation to a listening crowd. The text is the documentation, the textual capture, of a spoken moment. Thus, if the miller grinds the wheat into ever smaller increments, making flour for bread, grinding grain into the finest powder used for making the Communion wafer, Jakke Trewman makes poetic truth.[241] Or, he is truth. Or, he speaks truth. The boundary, in Trewman's appellation, between being and doing is blurred; truth is revealed in this text to be both a long term behavior and an action. A difference in meaning exists, in Middle English, between *sooth* and *truth*, the former meaning "a theoretical, transcendent kind of truth," more akin to a state of being, and "a practical, pragmatic quality," more closely linked to academic and legal uses.[242] But Trewman's text collapses, compresses, the sense between these two terms into a single performative act. He embodies truth—he speaks truth, behaves truthfully, uses truth to construct verse, and in his name, he is truth. And yet, in the case of this text, the true man's words are both true and not true. Because the true man's words are poetry. As a representation, this poetic "letter" may present verisimilitude, but it forever remains inherently fictive. It is a poem that is always in a state of becoming, representing a claim about both poetics and masculinity that is just out of reach, just beyond

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the sung sound of the words, not by their numbers, the number of syllables: words as they are spoken or sung, words arranged in swoops and loops of sound, not measured with a foot-rule or counted out like coins" (43). The same can be applied to the poem of Johan Trewman.

[241] Dean 135.

[242] Green, Crisis 26.

a stable definition. Trewman is a man whose statements are truth; therefore, his masculinity is the embodiment of true manhood. He is a man able to determine friend from foe, to distinguish when enough is enough, brave enough to say no to injustice. In opposition to a more clerical masculinity, which placed words on the page in order to codify textual laws, and presumably, for the rebels, to cheat common people out of land and money, Trewman's use of language is closely linked to social action, to words used in real time. His exhortations are concerned with the quotidian, with a relational concept of true living and true language, one in which one's word was quite literally one's bond.

The True Man's True Speech

The idea of naming oneself, for the rebels of 1381, must be understood as being in relation to what masculine *trewthe* was and how it was defined. Labor is what a man does and ostensibly labor is what names the male artisan. But, as Middleton observes of the Rebel Letters, "actual persons, craft typenames, nonce names, sectarian code names, obvious pseudonyms, and patent evasions mingle in the chronicles under the same naming conventions as purported actors in a newly defined arena of civil events."[243] In these poems, true men exhort one another to unite themselves manfully in the name of truth, but are themselves beyond any true name, any stable noun that might fix them into clear authorship. Who you are, the name given you by your parents, and/or your Christian name, and what you do, the name you might give to an inquisitor or tax collector, are two very different things. The lived truth of one's identity is flexible, is performed through everyday practice. It is a daily choice that accretes over time into a coherent, relational identity. But such

[243] Middleton, "Kynde Name" 67.

identities can be disguised as a means of evading power, as a means of self-preservation as well as a way of adhering to the older notion of ethical *trewthe*. These evasions function "as an act of defiance and solidarity—that a parody of the common name-form calls into question the social function to which it is perceived to be attached, landed proprietorship."[244] Someone who is nameless cannot be taxed, cannot be forced to work a job he does not wish to—but he is clearly not without a true identity and violent power of his own.

The only text in the Rebel Letters titled after a true man is the Chronicon Henrici Knighton's Jakke Trewman. Within the Letters, Trewman is the only moment of prose that is not attached to a corollary poem.[245] But to claim that this text is only a prose "letter," and thus, "not poetry," is misleading. It is rhythmical, roughly trochaic in its meter, with internally rhyming words: "flokke," and "lokke;" "trewthe to," "si didero," and "wo;" and "flode" and "gode."[246] I shall quote it in full:

> Jakke Trewman doth you to understande that falsnes and gyle have regned to long, and trewthe hat bene sette under a lokke, and falsnes regneth in every flokke. No man may come trewthe to, but he sing si didero. Speke, spende, and spede, quoth Jon of Banthon, and therefore synne fareth as wilde flode, trew love is away, that was so gode, and clerkus for welthe worche hem wo. God do bote for nowghe is tyme.[247]

Visually, Jakke Trewman's text appears to be prose, but read aloud, it sounds more like a poem or a chant. In four sentences, Jakke Trewman makes direct address to a stated, plural

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[244] Middleton, "Kynde Name" 68.

[245] Dean 138.

[246] Dean 138.

[247] Dean 138.

"you." He "doth you to understand," his words, and he makes clear that his speech pertains to what is true and proper. Where the Littera Johannis Balle missa communibus Essexiae exhorts its audience to "bee war of gyle in borugh," Jakke Trewman sees guile as much more freely ranging. It is not something exclusive to city life, but "regneth in every flokke," every congregation. He declares that, "falsnes and gyle have regned for long, and trewthe hat bene sette under a lokke." But it is the rhyme of "lokke" and "flokke," that seem pertinent, here. *Trewthe* has been set under a lock, it is been fixed rigidly to the written page, contrary to the older, more oral methods of determining truth. If truth is locked down on the page, kept separate from lived practice, and—perhaps in a hint to Lollard translation theory—from the congregation itself, lies are allowed not just to flourish but to obtain total power over a community. If all do not understand, do not actively know through habitual practice, *trewthe*, then falseness becomes a dictator, harming the relational harmony of the community that lives truth and works together. No man can come to truth, moreover, if he is unable to sing "si didero," meaning, "If I should give." *Trewthe* and work, here, are inextricably connected. If a man cannot sing, in good conscience, about the offering of his labor, then he has no access to *trewthe*; he cannot call himself true man. Truth is that which is lived; it is a discipline and a kind of glue that binds together a community. What it is not, according to Trewman, is an arbitrary fact kept exclusively to the inert page.

If we remove Trewman's own text from the confines of the page, reading it aloud, the sonic patterns of his diction begin to emerge. A rhyme scheme of AA'BBCCDEEE'F can be ascertained. If Trewman's prose block of text was lineated, it might look like this:

Jakke Trewman doth you to understande	A
that falsnes and gyle have regned to long,	A'
and trewthe hat bene sette under a lokke,	B

and falsnes regneth in every flokke. B

No man may come trewthe to, C
bot he syng *si dedero.* C

Speke, spende and spede, quoth Jon of Banthon, D

and therefore synne fareth as wilde flode, E
trew love is away, that was so gode, E

and clerkus for welthe worche hem wo. E'
God do bote, for nowghe is tyme. F[248]

Organized in lines on the page, the text looks like poetry. The end rhymes are not perfect, often edging more towards para-rhyme or half-rhyme. The lineation has an organic order, as the free-floating, unrhymed line about the corrupt John of Banthon attests.

According to the text, if truth is only the purview of those who can write, then sin ranges over the people like a wild flood of water, destroying everything in its path. True love, right relation and honest practice, that which was once so good, disappear from the land. More than this, "clerkus for welthe worche hem wo." Dean translates this phrase to mean: "clerks for riches cause them grief."[249] But I wonder if a more incisive reading might be: for wealth, clerks work themselves to woe. For the purposes of money, clerks pledge allegiance to the corrupted powerful. As the intermediary between the largely illiterate populace and the law, clerks made words for a living. They transcribed speech, they copied documents, and they produced texts of their own; they had their hands, literally, in the inkpots of medieval power. It is no wonder that Trewman zeroes in on the duplicity of

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[248] "Banthon" could also form a half- or near-rhyme with to/*didero.* I thank Steven F. Kruger for his invaluable assistance in scanning out the prosody of this section.

[249] Dean 138.

literate male clerics, men who were not high born but whose associations with power may have indeed seemed traitorous to the artisanal class out of which they had likely come. How could a clerk be a true man, when his labor contributed nothing to the local good, and where, more often than not, his labor actually contributed to the whittling away of the community's land-holdings? Laws inscribed, made textual, by clerics disturbed economic prosperity, forced labor and unfairly distributed the tax burden. Sin, in Trewman's text, is linked to the duplicity inherent in textuality. The clerks who wrote laws separated men from land, from a living, and rigidly ascribed their labor, and they did so in languages that the rebels of 1381 could not understand—French and Latin. Elite clerics could manipulate language as they saw fit, and no one could even catch them in their treachery, because no one knew exactly what was happening.[250] The power of the clerk lies in his ability to write and to translate, skills that have little to do with who he is and how he is known by others. A clerk could be a deplorable human, but that did not make his written words any less true. In this text, the sins of lying, of false-seeming and guile, are a kind of flooding cancer on the land that erase all semblance of true love. They are everywhere, inescapable. Only God can "do bote," can provide the purging remedy to get rid of such sin, and ominously, Trewman tells us, now is the time for such a cleansing. What is left open is who shall conduct that purge.

As the ones charged with the work of preaching, writing, making poems, clerking and translating, literate English men were the gendered fulcrum between older ideas of

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[250] In his contribution to the Cambridge History of Medieval Literature, "Lollardy," Steven Justice presents the case of the Lollard John Aston, who in 1382 published broadsides in both Latin and English. Brought to trial, Aston would only respond to the court using English, although he was directly instructed to use Latin due to the presence of lay people. Consequently, archbishop Courtenay refused to allow the trial to proceed—and thus prevented theological disputes from being revealed to the laity. He convicted Aston of contumacy and sent him to secular court (667).

verbal troth and the newer, increasingly influential conception of *trewthe* as a literal and literary fact. Given the exigencies of the Lollard heresy, a religious movement deeply concerned to make Biblical material available to a wider public, through a project of vernacular translation, and Arundel's subsequent fifteenth century censorship program of vernacular writing, "English" and its *trewthe* were spaces profoundly contested by literate, late medieval men.[251] Male clerics, archbishops and civic leaders were murdered during the Peasants' Rebellion, and archives destroyed, by other men, because of the tension between what men said, what men meant, and what men had written down. And yet late medieval England was simultaneously an oral and a textual, multilingual society, one where the precise English words of an oath could be almost unintelligible to someone from another region, where poetries of very different dialects and traditions were performed contemporaneously, where a 1362 Parliamentary statue could declaim, in French, that all government affairs should be conducted in English,[252] and where what was legally written down in Latin could be perceived to be an instrument of falsehood and oppression by those who spoke and read only English.

Jakke Trewman uses English in the hopes that it might have the power to make real a political ideal. That power is simultaneously one of community and of obscured identity. The men who speak in the Letters know one another, and call out to one another as men, but they consistently disguise themselves. They travel by code names, chosen appellations, the names of poetic characters. They call themselves "Nameless," and "True." And in their performance, they call together a group of like-minded, nameless true men. The true man is

[251] The gender implications for vernacular writers, particularly for women, are discussed in Nicholas Watson, "The Composition of Julian of Norwich's Revelation of Love," Speculum 68.3 (1993): 67-83.

[252] See Douglas Kibbee, For to Speke French Trewely: The French Language in England, 1000-1600 (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1991) 58.

a character who mans the Rebel Letters; he is the male who contributes his labor and skill to his community and who is willing to rise up in violence to protect the lived *trewthe* of those contested realms.

Green argues that truth is "the archetypal keyword in English," and that truth's continuing pluralities of meaning can be traced to the late medieval moment.[253] Central to the definition of truth was the eventual "subjugation of human to propositional truth;" in other words, the change from a predominantly oral and aural way of dealing with linguistic agreements to a more textual, literal methodology rooted in the technology of writing.[254] Necessarily, the technology of writing does not exclusively utilize either of these two methods of determining truth, nor can one method exist without the other. But the question of the spread of medieval vernacular literacy is intrinsic to the making of the Rebel Letters.

Green offers a schema for the competing meanings of late medieval English truth, dividing the term into four broad categories of sense: legal, ethical, theological, and intellectual.[255] Each of these categories of meaning was in use during the late fourteenth century, but the ethical senses "had become predominant, while theological ones were still fairly recent, and the intellectual senses were very new indeed."[256] The opposite is true for contemporary people, for whom "intellectual senses of the word *truth* predominate and ethical senses are now very rare—almost the exact opposite of Ricardian uses, and a

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[253] Green 4.

[254] Green 40.

[255] Green 9.

[256] Green 9.

potential trap for the philologically naïve."[257] For all four categories, however, what was in flux was the *way* that language was used to determine truth: whether spoken words, or words coupled with a ceremonial object, carried as much—if not more—significance as the words written in legal documents, civic rolls, and royal writs. Truth had long been used to "mean simply 'a contract,'" one signified by the stating of a troth that united two parties.[258] And even by the 1380's, these contractual, ethical, and eminently social senses of truth "remain strongly tied to the quality of keeping one's word"; the spoken is tied unproblematically to what is true in these cases.[259]

Truth's relationship to speech is a particular problem for vernacular poetry, made of changeable, regional tongues, which, although themselves perceived as intrinsically unstable, may also be stabilized in one form on the page. Late medieval poetry existed in the interstitial space between the orally produced and the literately transcribed in ways that are recorded only in the poems themselves, complex musical, metrical and sonic arrangements affixed to careful pages, created as much for the ear as for the eye. As Green argues, the encroachment of *truth* upon *sooth*, and thereby of the representational upon the real, "is bound up with the spread of literacy."[260] And vernacular literacy was the special province of the late medieval English poet.

For England during the late fourteenth century, in particular, worry over the truth of gender identity, over the truth of vernacular language—ultimately over truth itself—might be understood not simply as an abstract, ontological question but as a public anxiety over

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[257] Green 9-10.

[258] Green 13.

[259] Green 16.

[260] Green 40.

whether words and people meant what they claimed to mean. The true man, and his words, *trewthe*, together embody the intense religious, social and political battles to which medieval artisanal men were subject. According to Jeremy Lowe, this worry over truth is closely tied with the newer practices of reading, which he calls "a practice of continual judgment," a practice linked to the often communal habit of medieval reading.[261] Consequently, he argues that "Ricardian texts provoke response: they demand that we engage with them immediately, viscerally, repeatedly, and […] this quality in turn reflects changing philosophical attitudes towards truth and human perception current towards the end of the fourteenth century.[262] Lowe generally finds an intimate, organic connection existed between medieval text and reader in which meaning is co-produced; consequently, "judgment, the willed act of moral engagement, therefore becomes a process, a living, evolving relationship, an open circuit between text and respondent."[263] This poetic strategy of give and take, of mutuality, reflects the late medieval belief that the "particular moment counts for more than the overall message," and that the particular moment of textual engagement is individual and experiential, a process of discernment which reveal less a faith in stable, knowable truth than "the need for perpetual human enquiry."[264] Discernment occurs in changeable real time, and is always slightly different each time it is undertaken.

The true man asks, in the Rebel Letters, whether truth has been locked up, kept separate from the people who embody its practice. His poem posits that truth is something

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[261] Jeremy Lowe, Desiring Truth: the Process of Judgment in Fourteenth Century Art and Literature (New York: Routledge, 2005) 3.

[262] Lowe 3.

[263]Lowe 1.

[264] Lowe 3.

that lives in mouth and body, a practice that is not the exclusive purview of an educated elite. Truth is a lived discipline, something sought after and professed, not simply a term to be haggled over in court. And the texts of these true men asks as well whether truth and poetry can coexist, implicitly questioning whether the habitual practice of truth is not somehow like the work of making poems. A poem is an invention, a lie, but it also contains a slanted truth, to borrow the phrase from that much later poet, Emily Dickinson.[265] A poem can tell an allegorical truth, can express a paradox that is somehow, even in its obfuscation, clearer than what is written in the law rolls. Trewman's poems addresses the late fourteenth century social and political tension between *being*, *doing*, and *stating* truth, and because it does so using aesthetically patterned language, it also makes the claim that truth can, must be, a conflation of all three modes. The true man would not be true, would not be much of a man, if he could not be, do, and speak truth itself. And what he posits is that such a truth is individual and changeable—and necessarily so. Trewman's poem asks whether a man's integrity and humanity might be considered in capacious terms. Because, not despite, his pseudonymous status as nameless rebel artisan, the speaker of Trewman confers the power of experiential truth upon his audience, in that he claims that a given name matters less than the life one leads. One's inherited status, even one's newly chosen profession, do not count as much as an honest life lived in right relation to others. Rather, it is the truth of the quotidian—changeable, fickle, personal—that determines a person's essential humanity. In real time, a person's lived truth has an integrity that cannot be sundered; like a poem, that lived truth matters profoundly, even if the powers that be claim it does not.

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[265] Dickinsons's poem #1263 begins, "Tell all the truth but tell it slant--/Success in Circuit lies." See The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Reading Edition, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 494.

Bodies and Laws: the Poetics of Rebellion

Outside of the local relations that created *trewthe*, what linked artisanal men to each other were the Statutes that sought to control their work-identities and to obtain money from them and their dependents. These Statutes, and resistance to them, were the flashpoints for rebellion. The artisanal class had chafed under the requirements of both the 1352 Statute of Laborers and the later Poll Tax of the 1370's and 1380's, laws designed to command the labor and production of working men and women as well to profit from their very bodies.[266] The items of the Statute of Laborers pertain specifically to agricultural workers, wage laborers, and artisans, and specify the powers accorded to stewards, bailiffs and constables so that they might enforce the new law. It is, in short, a document written (in French) for the purpose of controlling the movement, labor, production, and wages of the English majority class.[267] Of particular interest is item four, which catalogues the ways in which artisans should conduct their labor and their profits:

> … that cordwainers and shoemakers shall not sell boots, shoes or anything else connected with their mystery otherwise than they did in the said twentieth year. Goldsmiths, saddlers, horse-smiths, spurriers, tanners, curriers, pelterers, tailors and all other workmen, artificers and labourers, as well as all other servants not specified here, shall be sworn before the said justices to conduct and employ their crafts and offices in the way they did in the said twentieth year and earlier, without refusing because of this ordinance. If any of the said servants, labourers, workmen or artificers infringe this ordinance after taking such an oath, they shall be

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[266] The Statute of Laborers sought to stabilize the British economy after the upheavals of the Black Death, by requiring that working people stay in the professions they had held prior to the plague and fixing their wages to a pre-1348 rate.

[267] Dobson 64-8.

> punished by fine, ransom or imprisonment, according to the discretion of the said justices.[268]

Men who identified as fabricators, makers of objects, were required to sell their products at the same prices as they had before the plague. They were required not only to adhere to these artificial economic rules, but also had to conduct their trades in the same manner as they had before plague had destroyed the local population and economy. Despite the fact that there may have been no one to help make shoes, much less to buy any, the cobbler had to proceed as if nothing adverse had occurred. He could make no profit from his altered situation, nor could he improvise his methods of production in order better to produce shoes. More than this, however, the law required that artisans swear a public oath before the officers of the law declaring that they would follow the new regulations. The Statute thus required workingmen to adhere to an identity they did not choose but that was chosen for them by royal and legal power. If a man had been a goldsmith before the plague, he had to remain so, regardless of whether his community even still existed, much less whether it still required his craft. Such men were bound to their work-identities by means of force. They could not choose who they wished to be, to make what they wished to make, but had to adhere to an identity ascribed to them by history and by power. More than this, they had to bind their words and identities to the arbitrary truth of the written law—they had to swear "without refusing because of this ordinance." They had to attach word, deed and occupation in a public declamation of masculine identity not because they chose to do so, as in the public statement of a marriage vow, but because the law suddenly required it of them. Their trothplight, in this situation, meant both everything and nothing. It was a forced oath, words said but not meant, their utterance extorted by the threat of violence and

[268] Dobson 66.

imprisonment. In this situation, the question of *trewthe*, of the performative power of the true man, was in direct conflict with the oaths that fabricators and craftsmen had to take. Such men could not refuse to swear, but neither could they swear in good conscience that they would always remain in their pre-plague professions, much less that they would not charge appropriate prices for their work. To do so would imperil their livelihoods and their families. And yet *not* to do so was forbidden.

In addition to the rigid strictures of a forced occupational identity, the Poll Tax required all men and women over the age of fifteen to pay a flat per-person tax, in order to raise national funds for the 100 Years War. By the time the third Poll Tax was issued in March of 1381, commissioners had been empowered to enforce the payment of the tax. The letter of appointment for the commissioners instructs them "to examine and inquire into the number of all lay persons, both men and women, of the said county, whether within or without franchises, provided they are more than fifteen years of age—excepting only genuine beggars and those who survive solely by alms."[269] The commissioners were given the power to inspect, to question, and to arrest in accordance with the new law.[270] Thus, the 1381 Poll Tax required that men and women submit to surveillance by outside authorities, men who alone determined the ability to pay; if one could or would not pay the tax, he was to be immediately arrested and imprisoned by the king's representatives.[271]

By 1381, if a man was the head of a household that supported several small children, infirm elderly, and unmarried daughters, he had to pay a Poll Tax on every warm body in his

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[269] Dobson 120-1.

[270] Dobson 121.

[271] R.H. Hilton notes that the notation of name, rank and occupation was an obsessive, invasive procedure. In essence, "the exchequer officials were making a census of all adults three times in less than six months—a procedure which even sophisticated modern populations find objectionable once every ten years," Bond Men Made Free 163-4.

household over the age of fifteen, whether those bodies contributed materially to the household or not. As his family's representative, the adult male artisan was not just responsible for his own craft and labor but for the well-being and the tax obligations of everyone in his care. Under the Poll Tax, it was not enough that a man support all members of his family; he now had to pay coin to the king for each one of them. A true man was one whose word was valuable, who provided labor for his immediate community and whose household was in right order. That household could contain many people who did not, or could not, work outside of its bounds—unmarried daughters, disabled or infirm relatives, or elders, for instance. Yet under the aegis of late medieval English labor and tax laws, a true man was someone whose labor meant only what documents claimed it should be.

Beyond their frustration over having to submit to what were perceived as unjust fees, laboring class men had to contend with the inquiries and examinations of commissioners from outside of their communities. Accustomed to policing themselves, laboring-class people were suddenly subject to being policed by armed strangers. The Chronicon Henrici Knighton documents the anger that peasants felt about the Poll Tax and it connects that anger to the first outbreak of the Peasants' Revolt. As Knighton recalls, these commissioners regularly abused their power, and did so in explicitly gendered ways. In the village of Fobbing in Essex, John Leg and three colleagues went on commission of the king to inspect peasants' ability to pay the tax.

> One of these commissioners came to a certain village to investigate the said tax and called together the men and women; he then, horrible to relate, shamelessly lifted the young girls to test whether they had enjoyed intercourse with men. In this way he compelled the friends and parents of these girls to pay the tax for them: many would rather pay for their daughters than see them touched in such a disgraceful

> way. These and similar actions by the said inquisitors much provoked the people.[272]

What exactly was so "horrible to relate?" How were girls being "tested?" And what can we make of that verb, "lifted?" I would argue that the commissioners were lifting girls up to peek beneath skirts, and perhaps also inspecting whether they were virgins in body, before the entire village—a public humiliation that would indeed be "horrible to relate." Thus, the commissioners of the Poll Tax, through their assault on the girls of Fobbing in Essex, called into question the boundaries of proper gender identity. In so doing, they display a perversely literal meaning of truth. By "lifting" the girls, the inspectors sought an almost literary determination of adult, sexual femininity, one defined by physical proof and by outside authority, and not by personal, subjective declaration or behavior. "Fifteen" is an arbitrary number, an age easily dissembled, disputed, but a body's truth—publicly inspected—was not. What is compelling about this discursive moment between the agents of literate, civic power and the artisanal men and women forced to submit to that power is the sense that *trewthe* is being bent to fit an arbitrary, unjust law. A girl's virginity is a truth not necessarily attached to her age, nor to her entry into socially-accepted adulthood; adult female nuns were virgins, many young unmarried girls were not virgins, and it was possible, as in the case of Margery Kempe, for a married mother of fourteen to reclaim her virginity later in life. Adult, married femininity is a social performance made real over time, via practice and relation. It is a truth that is connected more to behavior and action than to a literal, coldly intellectualized interpretation of the lack of bodily virginity. The commissioners read the bodies of the girls of Fobbing in the way they might read a legal document: to see if it contained "errors." In their search for bodily truth, in order to

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[272] Dobson 135.

determine who was an adult female and who still a girl, the commissioners at Fobbing indeed acted on the girls of the village, but their actions were designed not simply to denigrate young women. Rather, John Leg and his men aimed their assaults at the artisanal men responsible for those daughters, nieces, and sisters. The adult men of Fobbing were shamed by more powerful, armed men who forced them to watch helplessly as the honor of the young women in their care was questioned, and more painfully, as those young women were sexually assaulted before the entire community.[273] Masculinity in Fobbing was an identity wrought from action, work and relation. To shame the girls of Fobbing was to cause an equal if not more piercing humiliation for their male relatives, the result of which was public violence.[274]

In a similar conflation of bodies and truth, Richard enacts public violence upon the bodies of the captured rebel leaders. He compares those bodies to textual exempla, using the harm done to them as a lesson for others to learn from and memorialize. Richard, himself only fourteen years old, declares: "rustics you were and rustics you remain ... For as long as we live ... we will strive to trample on you so that your slavery may be an example to posterity, and so that those like you may now and in future have always before their eyes as if in a book your misery and reasons for cursing you and for fearing to do such things as you have done."[275] In his decree of torture and public execution, the king uses the rebels' bodies

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[273] In a recent op-ed concerning the murder of Indian women who had been victims of rape, Salman Rushdie commented that in cultures where honor and shame are bound together, "male honor resides in sexual probity, and the 'shaming' of women dishonors all men." See his "India and Pakistan's Code of Dishonor," The New York Times 10 July 2005: A13. On shame culture more generally, see Jean G. Peristiany, ed., Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

[274] Froissart notes that Wat Tyler, at Tower Hill, led a band of rebels who, after murdering the archbishop of Canterbury, "beheaded John Legge, the king's serjeant-at-arms, and with him a certain juror," Dobson 162.

[275] Crane 182.

as words on the pages of books, to the reading eyes of their contemporaries. The event of punishment is one to remember perpetually, to be fixed in time like a book fixes words in permanence. The noise of the crowd was silenced.

That which is true is immutable, exact, quickly and easily memorized. A body being tortured, for example. But among the rebels and their texts, *trewthe* is something more changeable, more relational, than public torture or written laws. *Trewthe* might best be understood as "a standard of behavior, and the fidelity that creates the standard […] is a concept only because it is first a social practice."[276] It is a way of both being and doing, for artisanal medieval men; as a "normative concept" as well as proof of divine grace, *trewthe* serves to create a community of mutual dependence and assistance.[277] But this schema, though neat, does not account for the essential fraudulence of poetry itself, nor does it accommodate the unjust violence done the bodies of the girls of Fobbing. Despite the fact that true men are upright citizens, they are also law-breaking violent rebels. And they are also poets, using that emblem of fickle changeability, vernacular language, to make their elliptical, allegorical points. Neither Johan nor Jakke Trewman's poetic words are true, authentic words, strictly opposed to falseness. Because they are poetry. What the true man's poem asks is not whether his words are authentic but whether words matter more in the mouth or in a book. More than this, how can poems—as hybrid genres existing halfway between body and page—attest to a more experiential notion of true identity? Poems are not laws. And it was laws that most seriously threatened the true man's contribution.

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[276] Crane 186.

[277] Crane 186.

The Noise of Poetry

Poetry exists in the mixed space between orality and literacy, because it is a time bound, bodily medium. As Robert Pinsky argues, "poetry is a vocal, which to say, a bodily art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth."[278] Poetry is, in this sense, perhaps the ultimate speech act, one whose recitation allows for a plurality of meanings to adhere to poem, image, character, performer. A poem can be both true and false at once, can speak out of both sides of its mouth. And the performer can ventriloquize, make melodies, poke fun. He can speak in the voices of multiple characters, can speak the voice of allegorical truth, can speak while never fully revealing himself. This sense of simultaneous spoken meaning is in many ways the condition of poetry itself, because a poem is never simply a verbal construct but a bodily performance, one in which language is used by a maker to confect the fictional world out of his body's air.[279] The efficacy and skill of its maker depends upon his ability to convince an audience that such a representation is completely, consumingly, believable; is, at least in the mind, almost beyond the real.

As representational speech, poetry plays with both meaning and obscurity. Daniel Tiffany argues that poetry "serves to remind us of the general obscurity of language, of the constant abrasion or clouding of meaning that characterizes any verbal act and that contributes moreover to the *charm* of language, to the curious efficacy of innumerable speech acts."[280] The charm of language is its taste in the mouth, its performative passage from one

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[278] See Pinsky, The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1998) 8.

[279] Walter J. Ong posits that "the oral word…never exists in a simply verbal context, as a written word does. Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body." See his Technologizing the Word 67.

[280] See Tiffany, "Fugitive Lyric: The Rhymes of the Canting Crew," PMLA 120.1 (2005): 82-96, at 83.

tongue to the next tongue, and the trail that it leaves among speakers, in the community and in the individual mind. Tiffany asserts that the marginalization of spoken forms of poetry that occurs with the spread of literacy is intrinsic to the lyric itself. The eventual and continual pushing aside and rendering unintelligible of older, oral poetries establishes "the conditions for a vital and complex—though often invisible—vernacular tradition of lyric expression: riddles, charms, spells, oaths, lullabies, and nursery rhymes; yet also curses, toasts, tongue twisters, namings, recipes, work songs, vendors' cries, beggars chants, and insults; as well as counting and alphabet songs, love tokens, spitting words, and secret languages."[281] Meant to be spoken, short, lyric poems are memorizable; they do not depend exclusively on the medieval privileges of vellum, ink, cerulean, gold leaf. Tiffany's focus is on early modern criminal songs written in jargon, but his argument can be usefully applied to the poetries of the later middle ages, most specifically the Rebel Letters of 1381, which likewise emerged from jargon, slang, cant, from an underworld that was not initially criminal but quickly became so. It behooves us, then, to consider not just the chroniclers' attribution of vocal noise to the rebel crowd but the rebels' own concern for English as a defining power in its own right. Perceiving that national identity could be ascertained by dialect, Londoners during the Revolt took to demanding of their Flemish neighbors the recitation of a daily phrase. Their awareness of the linguistic difference between "Breede and Chese," and "Case and Brode," "became a mechanism that led to murder."[282] When Flemings were asked to declare what they ate every day, *kaas en brood*, the English-speaking rebels, according to Froissart, found occasion to go "from street to street and slew all the Flemings that they

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[281] Tiffany 83.

[282] David Wallace cites the Cotton Julius B II (in Kingsford) manuscript for this example. See his "Chaucer and the Absent City," Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context 71.

could find in church or in any other place, there was none respited from death."[283] For the largely Latin-illiterate workers and artisans of the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381, English words mattered in the way that work and land mattered. As they well knew, although a true man may speak true words, his performative, embodied sense of *trewthe* could often be expressly at odds with what legal documents might claim. The fact that those documents could be falsified, misinterpreted, and translated, lent a greater weight to the relational *trewthe* that a true man could practice, even as that practice was increasingly marginalized into smaller and smaller edges of influence.

In the catalogue of characters, the speaker(s) of the Letters collate truth and fiction as if such abstractions were themselves no more than fictional characters giving up pseudonyms upon questioning by the police. The edge between what is real and what is invented in these Letters is always moving. The maker, in his creation of such ironic, winking multiplicity, addresses the very problem of truth implicit to the practice of naming, to the practice of making poems. If he is trustworthy, a true man is who he says he is, but sometimes he is someone else. A name is not always trustworthy, and, in a massed crowd, one's individual name has little value. One vocal identity mingles with many in a crowd, and although one voice may rouse the others in a call and response dialogue, the effect on those listening is an almost indiscriminate noise because the voice of the crowd is united in its very polyphonic raggedness. The chroniclers document this confusing collapse between crowd and individual, and the terrifying sounds of a group shouting out the same poetic phrases. As Froissart documents, the crowd "cried all with one voice, 'let us go to London!'"[284]

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[283] Dobson 188-9.

[284] Dobson 188.

Likewise, Gower relates that a peasant led an act of arson, but "he did not sing out alone, but drew many thousands along with him, and involved them in his nefarious doings. His voice gathered the madmen together."[285] Froissart and Gower's recollection of a unified chorus speaking aloud evokes the sound of chanting, the back and forth of one voice leading the group in the declamation of some rhythmic political idea. The fact that Gower's diction mimics the rebels' own is instructive: Gower tells us that the voice of a leader "gathered the madmen together," an echo of each of the letters of John Ball. It is not hard to hear in these exhortations a kind of tag-phrase, an initiation call that demands a response. The fact that all of these declamations, these verbal gatherings together, immediately precede rhyming poems leads me to believe that Gower's memory may be correct. The one voice does not sing out alone but gathers up the crowd, a group of men who know what is coming next: the poems they have all heard so often they have been memorized, and which they then proceed to recite from memory, in unison.

The Letters were likely material letters, texts passed from hand to hand, but that passage is not the only way that poems travel. All it takes is one person who can read in English to recite the written poem aloud several times. The illiterate audience who hears a short rhyming proverb that uses the seven deadly sins as well as images of everyday labor, mills, carts, robbers, true men, can quite easily commit the verse to memory. The Rebel Letters use no unfamiliar, or even very textual images, and their lines roughly cleave to the four-beat "master measure" of ballad meter and alliterative verse. They sound like the songs voiced by peddlers, vagrants, field hands, children; they sound like the way news and gossip travels orally in cultures prevented from accessing literate or textual means of

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[285] Qtd. in Aston 8.

dissemination.[286] Thus, whether the rebels could read Latin, could read English, could read anything, doesn't seem to me to be the point of their value. Perhaps the rebels could not read at all, but this does not preclude their awareness of English as an instrument they might use to disseminate *trewthe*. Nor does it preclude their awareness of the power that making a poem might confer upon them.

Mary Carruthers reminds us that "...we tend to dismiss memory as a reliable disseminator and instead look solely to writing (manuscript copies or letters) as the agent for all varieties of accurate transmission,"[287] but without memory we would not still possess The Odyssey or The Iliad. In a less literary context, what human child does *not* learn language from repetitive noise, nonsense rhymes, and didactic poetic stories? Concerned with justice and with knowledge, the Rebels' oral poems were available to a literate and illiterate audience alike. In their repetitions, their rhymes and parallel patternings, the poems act as a kind of mnemonic archive, shaping political and poetic information into an aesthetic, bodily form. Often humorous, occasionally threatening, the Rebel Letters are poetic catalogues that serve to bring an idealized, heightened reality into focus, pointing fingers simultaneously at poet, subject, audience and power. They figure true men out of the fiction of poetic language, claiming English as the material and the tool out of which sense and community are made. The speakers of Johan Trewman and Jakke Trewman were no man and every man. And their poems stake out a space for the pursuit of lived, relational *trewthe*. Neither wholly

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[286] I am mindful of Chuck D's 1996 statement that the oral poetries of hip hop act as a "black CNN," as a means of disseminating news. See his Autobiography of MistaChuck (Mercury Records, PolyGram, Philips) 1996. For a critical analysis of the possible links between the study of late medieval vernacularity and of twentieth century African-American modes of vernacular use, see Larry Scanlon, "Poets Laureate and the Language of Slaves: Petrarch, Chaucer and Langston Hughes," in Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, eds., The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2003) 220-66.

[287] See Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 160.

literate nor completely oral, the poems of the Rebel Letters stake a vernacular claim for what *trewe* masculinity might look like. Its lineaments are never clear, perhaps because it is not an error-free fact but an ethical practice. Like a flexible work identity and a chosen name, true masculinity is a performance of work, action and proper behavior. It is a gender identity that depends on community witness in order to cohere, and is defined by its production. The true man is the artisan making objects, a *makere*. But neither poetry nor the true men who made it lived exclusively on or by the page. The true man is a life's work. And the poem lives far longer than his life.

Chapter Two

'A Glotoun of Wordes': Masculinity and Revision in Piers Plowman

Like the Rebel Letters, Piers Plowman[288] does not have a single, historically locatable author, although Piers Plowman is a text putatively under the command of William Langland, a man whose presence in the historical record is ghostly, and who is named within the poem as either "I" or "Will," and who is referred to by critics of the poem as "Langland," or the "Dreamer." Whereas the Rebel Letters are poems produced collectively, Piers Plowman exists in three or four versions as a poem produced by an almost anonymous author that takes as its subject a pilgrimage for truth. The theme of truth informs the poem generally, inflecting Langland's construction of work, gender, and identity. Just as truth is a goal that is never actually attained, so too Langland's own search is for an occupational identity that fulfills his calling. His search for a stable, socially meaningful identity as *makere*, worker, and man is never completely realized, although it is a search that develops and unfolds via his revision of the poem.

Langland is, in many ways, a "glotoun of wordes," someone who consumes more than he contributes. Piers Plowman represents the conflict in identity for someone who is both man and poet, a *makere* who lacks a socially beneficial occupation. The speaker's

[288] Piers Plowman occurs in several revisions. References to the C-text use Piers Plowman, the C-text, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994). References to the B-text use Piers Plowman, the B-text, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, (London: J.M. Dent Everyman, 1995).

attempts to establish and define his identity as a *makere* never arrive at a conclusion, just as the poem's overall pilgrimage never arrives at a stable certainty, raising the question of "whether the singleness of truth is ever truly visible in the world constituted by human language," and in a poem in which the narrative voice is subjective, multiple, and often at odds with itself, as David Lawton has argued.[289] The masculine narrator of the poem is at once a speaker, a persona, a dreamer, and a commentator; his plurality of voices does not create a single, unified narrative, instead branching ever outward in discursive search. Indeed, as Isabel Davis posits, Piers Plowman is "a spectacular and tragic representation of the fractured male autos, a representation produced in the relations between characters and in the discrepancies between their world views."[290]

The moment in the B-text Prologue that givers me my title occurs when Langland's disquisition on the varieties of work is interrupted by someone whose adjectival description comes a bit too close to describing Will himself: "Thanne loked up a lunatik, a leene thyng withalle" (B. Prol.123).[291] Passus V of the C-text has come to be seen as the nexus of Langland's arguments about poetic *makynge*, late medieval labor practices and authorship.[292] Like the "to longe" figure of that later, autobiographical passage, this lean lunatic talks too much; he interrupts and banters, tossing words around, without ever actually saying what he

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[289] David Lawton, "The Subject of Piers Plowman," The Yearbook of Langland Studies 1 (1987): 1-30. 3.

[290]See Davis, Writing Masculinity 15.

[291] I follow in this chapter Lynn Staley's distinction between the author of the text and its protagonist. I refer to "Langland" as the author and to "Will" as the self-identified *makere* within Piers Plowman. See Staley, "Introduction," Margery Kempe 1-16.

[292] See Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., "Introduction," in Written Work: Langland, Labor and Authorship (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 1-13. For a dissenting view, see George Kane, "Langland: Labour, and 'Authorship,'" Notes and Queries 243.4 (1998): 420-25.

means.[293] He is interrupted by a sermonizing angel, whose Latin speech is stopped short by the English phrase "Thanne greved hym a goliardis, a glotoun of wordes" (B.Prol.139). A.V.C. Schmidt glosses "goliardis" here to mean "buffoon"; the term itself is somewhat more complex in its usage, often meaning in Langland's poem "street performer," "singer," "jester," and, I would argue, vernacular *makere*.[294] It is unclear in this example whether the goliard is a new character being introduced into the scene, or whether he is the same lunatic who wasn't listening earlier. As he does in the *apologia pro vita sua* of the C-text, Langland compresses multiple voices, some seemingly autobiographical, some speaking for him, some chastising him, when he discusses his complex occupation and the identity that it confers. In the B-text Prologue, Langland collapses many of the concerns about work, language, and poetry that emerge in their fullest force in his final revision of the poem, the C-text.[295]

The phrase "a glotoun of wordes," describes the late medieval vernacular *makere*, a man who is quite like a public, popular minstrel and a textually literate scribe. The *makere*, in Piers Plowman is a sinner, someone who partakes of gluttonous behavior; yet what he eats is

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[293] The poem's "lunatics" are frequently associated with minstrelsy and *makynge*; they appear in C.IX.105-38 as "lunatyk lollares and lepares aboute," and also as "munstrals of heuene" (IX.126). On lunacy, see Derek Pearsall, "'Lunatyk Lollares' in Piers Plowman," in Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990) 163-178. Both Lawrence Clopper's Songes of Rechelesness: Langland and the Franciscans (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), and Wendy Scase's Piers Plowman and the New Anticlericalism (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), discuss Langland's extreme distaste for (but also his similarity to) the itinerant friars who use poetic speech to ingratiate themselves.

[294] In the 12th century, goliards were associated with playful, parodic Latin poetry. Although Langland uses Latin quotations throughout Piers Plowman, it is primarily a Middle English poem.

[295] On the revisions of the B- and C-texts, see Alan Fletcher, "The Essential (Ephemeral) William Langland: Textual Revision as Ethical Process in Piers Plowman," Yearbook of Langland Studies 15 (2001) 61-98; Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, "Langland 'In His Working Clothes'? Scribe D, Authorial Loose Revision Material, and the Nature of Scribal Intervention," in Middle English Poetry: Texts and Traditions ed. A.J. Minnis (York,: York Medieval Publications, 2001)139-67; and A.V.C. Schmidt, "Langland's Visions and Revisions," Yearbook of Langland Studies 14 (2000): 5-27.

not food but language. He consumes language heedlessly. His is an occupation implicitly compared to the more honorable, communally responsible work of plowing and sowing, but one that comes up ethically short.

> The Commune contreved of Kynde Wit craftes
> And for profit of al the peple plowmen ordeyned
> To tilie and to travaille as trewe lif asketh. (B. Prol. 118-20)

In the poem's ideal imagining, everyone is meant to work for "profit of al the peple," although not everyone who works can perform such emblematic labor as the plowman, the character of the poem's title. The plowman's labor sustains, it is a production that has tangible, universal benefit. The plowman's work is real, *trewe* work, and it is implicitly paired with the not-work of *makynge*, of working for a wage, of exchange.[296] In this moment in the poem, Langland presses into service the vernacular figures of lunatic and goliard—the urban, public buffoons who do not perform real agricultural work—over against the beautifully educated Latin angels. In the course of his process of revising, erasing, compressing and rewriting, what emerges for Will is a continuing worry over what his work—*makynge*—means for himself as an individual and for his society. Like the goliard, Will the *makere* is a glutton, a man who eats not too many delicacies, but too many words.[297] And what Langland's revisions question is whether a man who eats and produces only words is actually a man.

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[296] The difficulty in reconciling the "real work" of the plowman with the immaterial labor of the scribe is discussed in Knapp, "Poetic Labor, Scribal Labor."

[297] Although Langland describes himself here as a "glutton," he does later claim that he a long leanness (C.V. 24).

Few critics of the poem have examined Will masculinity and his status a gendered figure, a masculine person. Ralph Hanna and Isabel Davis are the notable exceptions.[298] Hanna sees Will as an unsupervised hermit, one who uses his status as outsider to produce an intervention into multiple discourses. Langland's unbounded eremitical life, as a source for his C.V *apologia*, allows for "the possibility that an apparently defensible habit of life can be thoroughly indefensible, a source of—and not just a subject for—hostile inquiry."[299] As Hanna argues, English eremitic rules descend from Benedict's traditional masculine model, which regulates the lives and practices of those hermits and anchorites outside the monastery's walls. These rules are the instantiation of masculine clerical authority, and "define a religious figure other than the conventional model of learned masculine clericism" as a "hybrid feminized" figure, a man who is not quite a clerical man but who is nonetheless under the guidance and control of other clerics.[300] Like Margery Kempe, Will makes for himself a hybrid life of lay status and religious vocation; also like Kempe, he dresses so as to identify himself as a hermit but his clothes cause him no end of public trouble.[301] Fundamentally, Hanna sees Will as a religious layperson, a man "who makes his strongest vocational claims" in C.V, when he explains "his literate offices and … the rewards [that] his patronized prayers merit."[302] Consequently, Will's *makynges* are part of this overarching religious vocation, a way of "using" his literacy for a kind of spiritual purpose.

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[298] See Ralph Hanna, "Will's Work," in Written Work 23-66; and Isabel Davis, Writing Masculinity, particularly Chapter 1, "The Masculine Ethics of Langland's Piers Plowman" 12-37.

[299] Hanna, "Will's Work" 30.

[300] Hanna 30.

[301] Hanna 34.

[302] Hanna 42.

Like Hanna, Davis sees Langland as a cleric, and similarly notes that the indeterminacy of Will's vocation is "a central feature of its construction."[303] For Davis, the central dilemma of Langland's vocation is not necessarily his status as a hermit but his marriage. Langland's married status is problematic because it makes him a layperson just as it also makes him an urban, common born man responsible for his household and its economic production. She argues that "as a married clerk, he stands in curious relation to the estates taxonomy in which the poem is so invested, standing on a cusp between traditional identities."[304] It is "precisely his marital status that confuses the masculine propriety of his clerical labor and his clerical labor that throws his marriage into an area of moral doubt that lies beyond traditional gender paradigms."[305]

She notes that the labor about which Reason and Conscience interrogate him, in C.V, is that which "would seem to fit best with his domestic identity;" that identity is not that of a solitary hermit but of a married, urban, common born man.[306] Further, she points out that Reason and Conscience are also "aspects of the poem's subjectivity, and vocalize its sincere investments in the discourses of social control of the kind that are manifest in the labor law."[307] The poem is threaded with multiple discourses and authorities regarding the way that humans, and frequently, the male speaker Will, are meant to live. And it does not resolve these voices into a coherent, ideological whole, instead allowing Will at once to fulfill the ideal and to stray from it. Indeed, Davis sees this double-ness in Will's characterization

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[303] Davis, Writing 19.
[304] Davis 14.

[305] Davis 19.

[306] Davis 19.

[307] Davis 20.

as part of the poem's struggle with vernacularity: "Will's inability to repent fully [may not be] a tacit legitimation of his vernacular errancy; the poem has heterogeneous reactions to competing sources of authority, representing and managing them at their confluence: the fractured self."[308]

While I do not dispute Hanna's conclusion that Will may have been a religious lay man, I concur with Davis that Will's social and gendered position places him within the urban life of laypeople. Yet I do not think that identifying Will as a married cleric sufficiently addresses his own self-representation as a *makere*. A *makere* like Langland was certainly literate, and engaged in literate, clerical culture; the fact that his poem exists in multiple manuscripts attests to his ability to write and to disseminate his writing. But the immaterial labor of late medieval English *makynge* is not the exclusive province of textual literacy, because such *makynge* requires an oral, performative context in order to arrive at its fullest vernacular meaning. Little evidence exists, beyond the clues within the poem, to identify Will as either a cleric of minor orders or as a married hermit. But Piers Plowman is evidence in itself of poetic production; its existence identifies Will as a *makere*. Although the poem's content is concerned with questions of value to a religious, that is, the spiritual utility of immaterial labor and the living of a righteous and ethical life, the form of the poem is a perpetually revised and reshaped alliterative collocation of voices, dreams, and narratives. The production of that poetic collocation may have required an eremitic life, but such a requirement attests as well to the economic and social realities of vernacular *makynge*.

I focus in this chapter on the self-representation of the masculine self who makes verse, arguing that the fullest description that we have of the figure of Will is his own eloquent and recursive attempt to define himself and his occupational practice as a *makere*.

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[308] Davis 21.

Yet Will's representation of himself as a *makere* must be understood as the product of the practices of revision. Will's C.V *apologia* appears in the final version of the poem, I argue, at the expense of an earlier rendering in the B-text of the minstrel-figure Haukyn. In his own occupational pilgrimage towards a stable masculine identity, Will represents his vernacular *makynge* as a series of revisions that accommodate oral and performative modes of poetry only to later erase them. In doing so, he encourages his audience to experience the voice of the *makere* and the text made by that voice as "deformative," as a "performative event, a made thing," instead of as historical biography or fact.[309] To read Piers Plowman, and specifically, to read the *Apologia pro vita sua* episode in the C-text, as a performative event is to remain critically agnostic as to whether the "real" William Langland is represented in the poem.[310] I read the ways by which masculine self-representation is dealt with in the poem, arguing that Will represents *makeres* as itinerant outliers in search of social and occupational purpose. As Samuels and McGann point out, a poem "does not pretend to possess its own meaning. Meaning is what it goes in search of," and meaning is preeminently what Will attempts to locate when he presents himself as a *makere*, an urban common man who makes nothing anyone can eat.[311]

The poem's refusal of completion, its own state of endless flux and abundance, attests to the strangely labile quality of vernacular English poetry at the end of the fourteenth century. Because that poetry is the product of a man who represents himself as peculiarly

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[309] Lisa Samuels, and Jerome McGann "Deformance and Interpretation," New Literary History 30.1 (1999): 25-56. 30. On deformative modes of interpretation see Jerome McGann, Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

[310] See J.A. Burrow, "Fictions of Self," in Langland's Fictions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 82-108.

[311] Samuels and McGann 31.

ambivalent about being a poet, the poem also speaks to the equally changeable, contingent qualities of late medieval English masculinity, especially as that masculinity is organized around the work of *makynge* poems. As Ralph Hanna has observed, William Langland was so consumed by the composition of the three versions of the poem that he devoted the length of a human generation to it; he "spent odd portions of his entire maturity—something approaching a quarter century—in labor on the poem," but all those years produced quite little material sustenance.[312] In Will's case, *makynge* is an occupational practice that never arrives at mastery or completion. It is also a labor that doesn't pay.

Will's gender identity depends on the generalized masculine authority conferred to the *makere*, and also upon what he makes, alliterative poetry. But his poem never ends. Unlike a master artisan's putative masterpiece—a finished object of highly wrought skill, whose literal presence in the world proves and advertises the expertise of its maker—Langland's poem can never testify so cleanly as to his skill because it is never mastered. It is in a constant state of being tinkered with. And perhaps it cannot be mastered. Thus, I seek to chart the ways by which the poem, as made thing, might be understood as the representation of poetic labor, as proof of a medieval man's ambivalent, frustrated attempts at fashioning a new kind of occupational, gendered identity out of alliterative poetry. This poetic identity is similar, in its use of patterned language, to the identities called into being by the Rebel Letters, texts organized around and by artisanal labor, and by the new continental style of Chaucer, who largely obfuscates the labor of his own poetic production.[313] But Piers Plowman is a poem set apart from these other poetries by its obsession with the labor of

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[312] Ralph Hanna, William Langland: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages 3 (London:Variorum, 1993) 10.

[313] Allen Frantzen posits that Chaucer treated labor "indirectly, using irony and humor that express contempt, subtle and otherwise, for those who worked," The Work of Work 4.

making poetry and with the possible identity that such labor might create. For, despite the poem's title, it is not the peasant Piers Plowman, and his masculine, *trwe,* journeyman's labor, who drives the action of Piers Plowman. Rather, it is the literate and multilingual William Langland himself, obscured, occluded, disguised, who makes everything in the poem happen. Like the work of an adult journeyman, a man stuck between the child status of an apprentice and the full adult authority of a master, Will's work does not actually engender a stable, laboring identity but rather perpetuates his middling status as one between two idealized poles. Never producing a final masterpiece, and thereby attaining superior status as responsible, adult male, able to oversee and support a family and a workshop, the *makere* of Piers Plowman labors endlessly but never actually arrives at a sustainable endpoint. The masculine poetic identity produced in and by Piers Plowman is that of a frequently itinerant wage-worker, a skilled man capable of producing well-made objects who has no stable point of origin or home. Neither a boy-apprentice nor a fully adult master, the journeyman is defined by his labor but cannot fully control the shape of his social, gender identity because it is dependent on a revolving series of jobs in a variety of different workshops. Part of a larger influx of common people moving from countryside to city, gaining employment in households where they were unknown, the journeyman's adult but not-quite-responsible masculinity was frequently seen as a threat in need of control by other, more powerful men.[314]

Implicit in Langland's revisionary practice is the complexly hybrid relationship between the oral and the textual in late medieval vernacular poetry. He labors with words,

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[314] On the journeyman's particular dilemma, see Heather Swanson, "The Illusion of Economic Order," in Medieval Artisans 29; Sarah Rees Jones, "Household, Work and the Problem of Mobile Labour" 135; and Shannon McSheffrey, "Men and Masculinity" 243-278.

but the *makere's* word-labor is not identical to the textual labor of the scribe, because poetry is an oral and aural genre as much as it is visual. Alliterative verse gathers in coherence, its rhythmic and sonic valences accreting in repeated sound. To read alliterative verse silently is to grow lost in its catalogues; it is to ignore, in a fundamental way, the rhythm of its flexible, improvisatory staves. And it is to forget the late medieval habits of oral, performative recitation of texts.

Written manuscripts are our only record of the poem, and, as textual records, they do not tell us much about the methods of the poem's actual construction—we are only privy to what was inscribed on the page, and can hear nothing of the poem's recitation or public performance. There is no improvisation in a written text, although improvisation can certainly be textually recorded. Nonetheless, the abundance of Piers Plowman manuscripts show its poet to be an obsessive, highly literate, educated reviser who was very likely aware of the fact that his unfinished poem had been made public. As Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Anne Middleton have each argued, the three or four versions of the poem were likely in simultaneous circulation during Langland's own lifetime, a cause of frustration and concern for the author not only because of the lack of control he had over his own poem but because of the fraught political climate surrounding the rebellion of 1381.[315] Within Piers Plowman, the character of Piers may indeed be seen as aligned with the Rebels' identities as *trwe* men; he appears within the Rebel Letters as if co-opted by their rhetoric, snatched from one text only to be put to use in another.[316] As Hanna has observed, "at the moment John

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[315] See Kathryn Kerby Fulton's "Langland and the Bibliographic Ego;" Anne Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name.'"

[316] The Letter of John Ball (Royal MS) refers to "Peres Ploughman;" the letter of Jak Carter (Chronicon Henrici Knighton) likewise refers to "Peres Ploughman," and also contains the phrase "doth wele and ay bettur and bettur." See Dean, English Political Writings.

Ball cites Piers, one must recognize the existence of a general vernacular literary public and a general vernacular literary culture. In these circumstances, anyone so inclined can acquire the poem without the author's say-so, can read it without supervision, can absorb it and subject it to interpretation—even an interpretation the author would reject."[317] In light of these vernacular and often radically populist reappropriations of the poem, many of the C-text revisions "seem designed to allay suspicions that its author might himself be harboring radical sympathies," according to Richard Firth Green.[318] They put in writing the author's more orthodox view of the world and of politics.

The question of Piers Plowman's written construction is crucial to our understanding of its historical valence, yet textuality does not and cannot express the social, performative valence of the poem. Because it is the product of manuscript culture, there is no Piers Plowman master text from which we get a definitive edition; it exists in over fifty variant texts, none alike, suggesting that there may have been close to one hundred copies of the poem during the late fourteenth century.[319] Multiple copies of multiple versions were simultaneously circulating, none of them definitive, and all of them competing for an audience. None of these manuscripts provides a polished conclusiveness: there is the earliest A-text, the later, alliterative pleasures of the B-text, the final excisions and *apologia* of the C-text, the truncated (and disputed), perhaps earliest Z-text.

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[317] Ralph Hanna, Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and their Texts (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) 240.

[318] Green, Crisis 371.

[319] See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427," in New Medieval Literatures, ed. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland, and David Lawton (Oxford, England: Clarendon, 1997) 59-84.

Will's work is the production of alliterative verse—its composition, recitation, revision and dissemination. As G.H. Russell has pointed out, the C-text reworks and/or introduces several essential passages absent in the B- or A-texts.[320] Of particular relevance to my argument are two moments of conceptual revision. The first is the excision of the interrogation of Will by Imagyntatyf in B.XII, the revision of Haukyn and the introduction of the autobiographical C.V *apologia*. The second is the reworking of the figuration of the Seven Deadly Sins, which move from the cloak of Haukyn in the B-text to independent allegorical figures in the C-text.[321] I argue in this chapter that Passus V of the C-text, Langland's revisionary practice embodies the refractions and erasures an ambivalent and frustrated questioning of what it means to be a late medieval *makere*, to be a man without a "real" occupation that produces a useful, true good.

The *apologia* of the C-text depends in large part upon the erasure of the more stereotypical characterization of a minstrel found in the B-text's Haukyn. I find in Langland's act of revisionary erasure and occlusion a way to better—if more obliquely—represent himself and his strange occupation. In my reading of this revision, the minstrel Haukyn, who is so active a man that his coat is composed, literally, of the sins of verbal *poiesis*—lying, gossip, potentially evil speech, the artfully false tongue—must be taken apart, his incredibly wrought poetic body metonymized and made plain, in order for Langland to

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[320] Russell points out that the C-text introduces a new section on the nature of meed and grammaticality, in C.IV.317-409; adds the autobiographical passage in C.V.1-108; and reworks the figuration of sin in the passus X and XIII of the B-text in C.VI, VII and VIII "which result in a substantial modification of the portraits of the Seven Deadly Sins" 46. He also notes the alteration of the pardon scene in C.X, among several other additions. See his "Some Aspects of the Process of Revision," in Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches, ed. S.S. Hussey (London: Methuen, 1969) 27-49.

[321] See George Russell, "Poet as Reviser: The Metamorphosis of the Confession of the Seven Deadly Sins in Piers Plowman," in Acts of Interpretation: the Text in its Contexts, 700-1600. Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1982) 53-65.

present in Passus V of the C-text his own awkward and unfortunate occupational identity. Langland replaces the Passus XIII B-text minstrel character Haukyn/Activa Vita, with Will's evasive *apologia pro vita sua* in C.V, as part of a larger authorial claim: that idleness and revisionary repetition are the *makere's* work, for only idle time allows Langland to make and revise poetic verse. Much as Haukyn's stained and foul-smelling garment is proof of Haukyn's participation in Activa Vita, the corpus of Piers Plowman is a substantiation of Langland's productive life.

While Haukyn is an active member of the urban edges of medieval English society, a low-status, wafer-selling improviser who sells both sweet foodstuffs and unnecessary songs, he is not engaged in the textual, literary labor of making moralizing alliterative verse.[322] Nonetheless, Langland's own labor cannot be easily categorized as the good to Haukyn's bad, for while Haukyn serves as a foil for Will in earlier versions, by the end of the 1380's, Will's method of idle and unlicensed begging, though less sinful than Haukyn's money-earning songs, had become an occupation both too dangerous (and too necessary) for an impoverished poet unconnected to courtly power. If Haukyn wears sin in the B-text, by the C-text Langland has undressed him, and then rendered the allegorical figures of sin that were once only ornament as characters who are also his own urban compatriots in bad living. He unravels Haukyn's coat of sin and makes the Seven Deadly Sins his comrades in urban bad living.[323] The similarity between Langland's own declamation of what he does and who he is, and the self-defining statements made by the allegorical sins, is striking. In Passus VI, immediately following Will's own interrogation by Reason and Conscience as to what he

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[322] See Stella Maguire, "The Significance of Haukyn, Activa Vita, in Piers Plowman," Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language 25.98 (1949): 97-109.

[323] See John A. Alford, "Haukyn's Coat: Some Observations on Piers Plowman B XIV. 22-7," Medium Aevum 43 (1974): 133-38.

does and where he is meant to be, Pride, Wrath, Lechery, Envy, and Gluttony are each questioned by Repentaunce. This questioning directly parallels, in its diction and its forms of address, the interrogation of Will by Reason and Conscience. In response to Repentaunce's pressing, each allegorical sin gives a disquisition about what he does. They are urbane figures, firmly situated among the criminals, cheaters, drunks, prostitutes, liars, and backbiters of London. Pride offers "tales to telle in tauernes and in streets" (VI.50); Envy claims that he is a "brokour of bakbytynge and to blame menne ware/Amonges marchauntes many tymes and nameliche in Londone" (VI.95-6). Wrath positions himself amidst women in church, "amonges wyues and wydewes y am woned to sitte/Y parroked in pues" (VI.143-4), happily present even when nuns bicker; Lechery lives in social activity, in "handling and halsyng and also thorw kyssyng" (VI.187); Covetousness is a merchant engaged in a wide variety of urban cheating and stealing (VI.196-349); and Gluttony wanders from house to house in search in tantalizing food and drink, ending up among prostitutes and low-lifes in the tavern (VI.350-440). None lives well, and none resides in a decent neighborhood. Instead they rabble-rouse, cavort, cause fights and enjoy themselves. Their occupations further bad behavior. And, just as Will can't provide material proof of his job, these sins don't actually produce goods, although they are constantly busy stirring up trouble in their immediate communities. That community is, moreover, much like Will's own locality, an interstitial urban neighborhood in London where sinful living is abundant and magnetic in its attractions.

Practicing Alliterative *Makynge*

Piers Plowman scholarship historically attempts to identify the first-person speaker of the poem as "not only a focus but a narrative and discursive continuity, the fixed center

of a turning work," according to Lawton.[324] The poem is studded with multiple, discordant voices, three languages, textual and Biblical allusions, commentary on late medieval society, allegorizations of the Seven Deadly Sins, and a first-person *apologia*. Thus, an overview of essential texts will find explications of the poem's use of allegory,[325] its abiding concern with apocalyptic ideology,[326] its twisting structure of psychological crises,[327] its grammatical and exegetical trajectory of pilgrimage,[328] its participation in debates over anticlericalism and intra-fraternal conflict,[329] and its uses of the tropes of gender and family.[330] Even among these varied approaches, however, it is rare to find critical discussion of Piers Plowman's aesthetics and prosodic construction. Although A.V.C. Schmidt and Christine Chism each explicate the medieval uses of alliterative verse as a particular kind of aesthetic and perhaps political choice, their analyses do not contend with the C-text and its *apologia pro vita sua*.[331]

Schmidt locates Langland's alliterative prosody within a larger alliterative tradition that includes the poet of Wynnere and Wastour as well as the Gawain-poet. He sets out to

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[324] Lawton, "Subject" 2.

[325] David Aers, Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory (London: St. Martin's Press, 1975).

[326] Martin Bloomfield, Piers Plowman as Fourteenth Century Apocalypse (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962).

[327] John Bowers, The Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986).

[328] Mary Carruthers, The Search for St. Truth: A Study of Meaning in Piers Plowman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

[329] Lawrence Clopper, Songes; and Wendy Scase, New Anticlericalism.

[330] Teresa Tavormina, Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman (New York: Boydell and Brewer, 1995).

[331] See A.V.C. Schmidt's The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987); and Christine Chism, Alliterative Revivals (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

study three aspects of Langland's *poeisis*: "versecraft, diction and word play."[332] Schmidt argues overall that Langland was a focused and attentive composer of verse with an eye for aesthetics, and that "he is at his didactically most convincing when he is poetically most inventive."[333] Of most use is Schmidt's identification of Langland's flexible alliterative prosody. Reading his own edition of the B-text, Schmidt identifies three types of alliterative groupings in Langland's verse, the standard, the clustered, and the reduced. The standard is itself quite various, categorized into five subgroupings: normative, enriched, extended, enriched extended, and blank extended. The standard, normative line is organized into an aa/ax pattern, as in the following line: "So *lew*ede *la*borers of *li*tel *vnd*erstondyng" (C.XI.302) (emphasis and line choice mine). The normative line stresses two alliterative initial sounds in the first half of the line, what Schmidt calls a stave. In the second stave, the pattern is repeated once again, and is then followed by a new initial sound. The variations on this standard are many, including lines that utilize the same alliterating sound across all stresses in both staves (enriched: aa/aa); lines that extend the number of alliterating sounds in the first stave to three (extended: aaa/ax); lines that alliterate using the same sound five times (enriched extended: aaa/aa); and lines that alliterate across both staves with several shared initial sounds (blank extended: aax/ax or axa/ax).[334]

Schmidt identifies Langland as a "clerkly maker," arguing for this appellation not because Langland "belonged to a recognizable category of poet but that he was himself conscious of being a practitioner of the maker's art and a real member of the estate of

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[332] Schmidt, Clerkly 1.

[333] Schmidt 4.

[334] Schmidt 32-33.

clergy."[335] Yet the substantive proof of Langland's historical biography is slim, and the poem offers more information on the life of the itinerant *makere* than it does on membership within a male religious community. Identifying Langland as a clerk, an educated member of the second estate, does confer upon him and his poetic practice a veneer of respectability and ethical purpose, what Schmidt calls "the high moral function of poetry."[336] However, that "high moral function" is never elucidated, given over instead to a disquisition on clerkly learnedness. Schmidt posits that Langland had a background as a clerk because his prosodic practice follows the notions on Latin rhythmic writing laid out in Bede's De Arte Rhythmica and in Isidore's Etymologiae.[337] Bede's disquisitions do not specify vernacular poetry. But Isidore identifies, in his Etymologiae (1.27.2-4), an alliterative pattern in Latin verse. Schmidt argues that Langland was following Isidore's examples in his own alliterating *b* with *p*, *d* with *t*, and *g* with *k*.[338] As J.S. Wittig points out, however, Isidore's proposition of an alliterative relationship between the Latin *haud* and *aut* does not necessarily have any "bearing on the alliteration of Middle English *d* and *t*."[339]

Although the poem has moral, religious content, Langland does not identify himself or his *makynge*, in Piers Plowman, as having an explicit moral function. And, while the poem also utilizes a variety of other texts and languages, it is written in Middle English. If anything, Langland presents vernacular poetry as slightly dubious, easily misused by those

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[335] Schmidt 2.

[336] Schmidt 10.

[337] Qtd. in Schmidt 25-27.

[338] Schmidt 40-41.

[339] See J.S. Wittig, "Review of The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art," Speculum (66.1) 1991: 237-239, at 239.

with political agendas, and more entertaining than edifying. Schmidt reads the poem editorially, seeing it as the scribal product of an educated clerk. And he thinks of Langland as an author in the traditional sense: one who makes a master copy of his poem. This sense of Langland as learned, clerical author is opposed to the poem's own representations of oral, popular practice: Schmidt argues that Langland makes a distinction between "jangling" and *makynge*, wherein jangling is understood as oral, popular and "false" against Langland's seemingly more textual, literate practice.[340] But Schmidt does not consider the ways by which Langland also implies that all vernacular poetry—as verbal, vernacular representation—is false, because it doesn't actually do or produce anything tangible. If jangling is spurious activity, *makynge* is not close behind. And yet *makynge* is Langland's primary activity, at least as that activity is measured by means of the poem itself.

Chism accepts Langland's status as educated cleric, and argues for a practice of alliterative makynge that is more fluid, improvisatory and inventive. She recuperates alliterative verse from awkward critical attempts that sought to find in the alliterative tradition an unbroken chain of native English practice which had survived the French conquest by historicizing the particulars of late medieval alliterative *makynge*. She notes that, "alliterative poetry of the fourteenth century self-consciously recreated a recognizable 'classical' form of poetry associated specifically with English poetic history, drawing together contemporary oral and written rhythmic prose, alliterative rhymed verse, and logically devised metrical practices that distinguished it from its predecessors."[341] She finds that "stress becomes fundamental to alliterative meter only in early Middle English, when … a

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[340] Schmidt 5.

[341] Chism 18.

strongly stressed rhythmical prose tradition exerts its influence on alliterative poetry."[342] In the shift from a meter focused on syllable-count to one focused instead on stress, Chism sees "not only a decided break with Old English poetic methodologies but also a possibly self-conscious one," which suggests an ongoing improvisation of past styles and of the past itself.[343] Thus, if alliterative verse "performs a tradition it also claims the improvisational mastery to adapt, embroider, and depart from it."[344] Alliterative poetry, with is series of four-stave stresses and its rhythmic caesura break in the center of each line, was a form flexible enough to allow for highly individual running catalogues of ornamental description. Both Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Wynnere and Wastoure utilize these effects, as does Piers Plowman in a more abstracted manner. Because alliterative verse was improvisational, moreover, "the alliterative writer must not only create himself, a desirous audience, and the tradition he represents, but also make that creation alluring to as many different kinds of audience as he can."[345] The alliterative poet accomplishes this act of representative creation through his thematic focus on "artistry, illustrious subjects, claims to the authority of older, indigenous literary traditions, and displays of clerical skill."[346]

Alliterative verse was hybrid in its form, designed to be read aloud but also to call attention to the effects of its own visual, textual literacy. Thus, in Piers Plowman, alliterative staves are studded throughout with Latin quotations, internal allusions to and glosses on a superlative literary tradition. Further, Chism argues that the oral, aural and written qualities

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[342] Chism 27.

[343] Chism 27-29.

[344] Chism 30.

[345] Chism 38.

[346] Chism 38.

of alliterative verse afforded it "a kind of hyper-poetic status," both because it was so literate and literary and because it was composed in order to be recited.[347] Namely, "with its performance of antiquity and the unusual breadth of vocabulary, artistry, onomatopoesis, formal alliterative meter exercises a visible and verbal expertise that attains in several poems to coloratura performance. This meter wears its artistry on its […] elaborate sleeve—a visual poetic authority that poets would not find in such showy form in the French-derived syllabic end-rhymed meter that had been catching on in London writing workshops and the southeast as an acceptable vehicle" for poetry.[348]

Both Schmidt and Chism see the composition of alliterative verse as a textual, literate practice, the product of a solitary figure in a workshop. Yet the composition and revision of poetry is not simply a more aesthetic form of textual "editing," or a privileging the clarification of general ideas, as is frequently the case in the revision of critical prose.[349] Rather, because the expression of ideas in poetry is compressed by its formal and prosodic requirements—in the case of alliterative verse, a series of roughly four-beat staves linked by repeated consonantal sounds across a central caesura—the revision of a line or sentence of the poem is also an oral and aural practice. Poetic revision frequently alters alliteration, tone, meter, register, and meaning in one fell swoop, and occurs often by the repetitive oral recitation of the poem, line by line. Few critical examinations of revision in Piers Plowman studies confront the oral and aural aspects of the poem's detailed prosodic construction and aestheticism, instead viewing the composition of the poem as inspired and its revision as a

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[347] Chism 37.

[348] Chism 34.

[349] .V.C. Schmidt, "Langland's Visions and Revisions," The Yearbook of Langland Studies 14 (2000): 5-27. He notes that Langland's "immediate need was to subject it to a re-reading strong enough, in Harold Bloom's familiar phrase, to overcome the anxiety of his own influence" (10).

series of editing problems. Yet composition and revision are twin poetic processes, the practice of each conferring the same kind of interstitial occupational identity. Neither Schmidt nor Chism, in their examination of alliterative *makynge*, confronts the particular dilemmas of revision and rewriting in alliterative verse, two practices essential to Langland's relationship with the poem, of which the C-text is the last-abandoned draft.

In a later essay, Schmidt does argue that Langland's "chief responsibility," in revision and in the eventual composition of the C-text "must surely have been … to the poem itself."[350] He notes that both the C.V apologia and the sparring bout between Will and Imagynatyf in B.XII, when Will is asked why he persists in "meddling with makynges," are "suffused with Langland's characteristic distaste for wasting time."[351] The redemption of time "progressively becomes for him a matter of 'doing work,' that is to say, 'meddling with making,'" wherein Will makes an implicit case for himself as a religious cleric engaged in the production of poetry.[352] Similarly, Hanna reads Will's revisions of his poem and his life as an attempt to fit into the ambivalent strictures of eremitic regulations. He notes that the revisionary process from B- to C-text involves the bind of invisibility and acknowledgment, one in which, via Langland's reworking of Will and his vocation, "Will becomes a hermit, not to evade notice, but precisely to demand it—to enter into language as speaker and subject of his poem."[353] Hanna sees Will's acts of revision as part of a larger claim about the

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[350] Schmidt, "Langland's" 23.

[351] Schmidt, "Langland's" 23.

[352] Schmidt, "Langland's" 23.

[353] Ralph Hanna, "'Meddling with Makings' and Will's Work," in Late Medieval Texts and their Transmission: Essays in Honour of A.I. Doyle, ed. A.J. Minnis (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994) 85-94, at 87.

"poem as activity," one in which revision is presented as an honorable part of eremitical practice, an alternation of repetitive meddling with other kinds of itinerant work.[354]

Alan Fletcher finds in Langland's repetitive returning and reworking of the poem and of his own persona in the poem to be part of a larger sermon discourse regarding penance.[355] As he argues, "Repeated acts of 'making,' then, could be viewed as an ethico-textual practice which, by virtue of the spiritual benefit that might accrue from it, in this sense resembled the practice of penance. In turn, this espousal of process resembled the textual practice typifying the (penitential) sermon."[356] But it should be noted that, like a poem, the composition and recitation of a sermon is a textual practice that is also performative. A sermon is a written text, but one designed to be read aloud—and improvised or extemporized from—before an audience. Langland's revisions may indeed follow a penitential practice similar to the revision of sermons, but unlike the preacher, the *makere* is not producing spiritually edifying material, necessarily.[357] The poet may be *makynge* jokes, satire, entertainment, salacious stories; he may be wasting good time in his practice in order to help a future audience waste time in listening to his poem.

While Piers Plowman is a poem about spiritual seeking, about how to live a righteous life, it is also an elegantly composed and frequently entertaining poem. The B-text has generally been perceived as the more elegant and artistically composed version of the poem, when compared to the spare concision of the C-text. If there were a site for the *makere* to

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[354] Hanna, "'Meddling'" 92-3.

[355] Alan J. Fletcher, "The Essential" 80.

[356] Fletcher 68.

[357] Fletcher argues that the versions of Piers Plowman are like the iterated versions of a sermon, "Essential" 68-70. He also points out that his argument is conceptual, not empirical (75).

represent himself as a skillful master of beautifully wrought verses, the B-text would be it. Yet Langland's fullest depiction of Will as a *makere*, and as a *makere* under interrogation by the civic authorities, is in the spare, pared-down lines of the C-text. In fact, the sites of the most stringent revision of the poem occur around the depictions of poets and *makynge*. In the B-text Imagynatyf questions Will as to the social value of his practice as a *makere*:

> And thow medlest the with makynges, and myghtest go sey thi sauter
> And bidde for hem that yiueth the bred; for there ar bokes ynowe
> To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe,
> And prechoures to preue what it is of many a peyre freres. (B.XII.16-19)

Imagynatyf addresses Will as an intimate, but the terms he uses are those of rebuke. Will "meddles" with makings, according to Imagynatyf, a term that implies Will has nothing better to do with his time than fiddle around with his composition and revision. Indeed, Imagynatyf suggests that Will might do better with his time. He might go say his psalter, and pray for those that feed him, because there are books enough in the world that instruct men in how to live a more righteous life. The time Will spends on composition and reworking his *makynges* is time he could spend on more useful pursuits. As J.A. Burrow points out, "A man who lives, as William does, on other men's charity has no business to be writing poetry; and anyway such poetry is of dubious value."[358] Yet this brief moment in the B-text is fleshed out into a section of over one hundred lines in the C-text, lines in which Will perseverates, postures, and satirizes himself and his poetic practice. These one hundred odd

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[358] J.A. Burrow, "Words, Works and Will: Theme and Structure," in Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches 111-124, at 117.

lines are proof of his persistence at *makynge*, even in the face of social pressures and internal doubt as to whether it was meaningful or appropriate to continue.[359]

Haukyn: *Makere* Doing Well

Langland represents Haukyn as a weeping minstrel stained by sin in the B-text only to erase him, perhaps to make room for the representation of Will as a more engaged, but more complicated, *makere*-figure in the C-text. Haukyn may be a pathetic sinner, and Will may be an idling layabout, but Langland is the superlative *makere* in charge of both their fates, responsible for their depiction as poets, and thus, for his own public representation as a man-who-makes. Langland's craft is alliterative *makynge*, the proof of which is found in the endless tinkering with each version of the poem, specifically around his tinkering with the figure of the *makere*. This craft is a vernacular one, poised between the oral performative and the textual book. As Imagynatyf points out, Will meddles with *makynges*. But how, exactly, that meddling with vernacular language becomes a poem, or a textual book, is never specified. Only the existence of the text itself addresses this gap.

In his analysis of literacy and the imagination, The Poetics of the Mind's Eye, Christopher Collins argues that when literature begins to occupy a mixed space between the oral-literate, it frees itself of mnemonic sound devices like formulaic words, epithets and phrases and becomes instead "a means of organizing an embarrassment of riches revealed in and stored by writing itself."[360] Figures of thought such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, allegory and irony are "imaginal figures" fundamental to literary composition

[359] This addition is C.V.1-108. The C-text also adds two two ninety-six line insertions into C.IX, at lines 70-161 and 187-281, and a one hundred and nineteen line addition at C.III. 286-405.

[360] Christopher Collins, The Poetics of the Mind's Eye: Literature and the Psychology of Imagination (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) 19.

and revision.[361] Haukyn is an imaginal figure, himself an allegorical trope for Activa Vita, dressed in a coat composed of the Seven Deadly Sins. His passus in the B-text immediately follows one given over to disquisition by the figure of Imaginatyf, the allegorical personification of inward thinking and literary production. Will speaks with Imaginatyf, Patience, and Conscience—the three elements a moralizing poet might most need to possess—about Dowel, Dobest, and Dobet. They are seeking the meaning of a good life, looking for the proper combination of virtues and labor. Patience relates the fact that Love once told him that the right mixture of words, will and work shall bring a person to salvation:

> 'With wordes and with werkes,' quod she, 'and wil of thyn herte
> Thow love leelly thi soule al thi lyf tyme.' (B XIII. 141-2)

Clergie soon joins the conversation, urging people to read the Bible for correct interpretations of the problem. As they all walk along, "of Dowel carped" (l.221), they encounter a minstrel, whom Patience urges to tell Conscience "what craft he kouthe, and to what contree he wolde" (l.224). The question connects craft with *kouthe*, intimate knowing, and also with place. Whoever the man is, the usual markers of identity—dress, bearing, sex—by which people can be quickly categorized do not apply to him. He is an unknown, and the opening question he is asked indicates that both Patience and Conscience feel an urgent need to define him.

The minstrel declares that he is called Activa Vita, "al ydel ich hatie," a man who hates all idleness because he is so busy working in the world (l.226). He claims that although

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[361] Collins 16.

he has lied in order to make men laugh, unlike the "lordes mynstrals" he is unable to perform the usual repertory of minstrel-tricks.

> Ac for I kan neither taboure ne trompe ne telle no gestes,
> Farten ne fithelen at festes, ne harpen,
> Jape ne jogele ne gentilliche pipe,
> Ne neither saille ne saute ne synge with the gyterne,
> I have no goode giftes of thise grete lordes. (B.XIII.231-5)

Activa Vita cannot play the tambourine or the trumpet, nor is he able to perform alliterative poetry. He cannot musically fart, nor can he play fiddle or harp.[362] He neither entertains, nor juggles, nor play the pipes with any expertise. He cannot dance, or do entertaining gymnastics, or sing while accompanying himself on the gitern. But the long catalogue of what he doesn't do leads to an impression that perhaps Activa Vita protests overmuch, specifically listing all of the entertaining skills he somehow does not possess, in order to claim a more virtuous occupation for himself.[363] He is only a wafer-seller, and he presents that work in the most positive moral light.

> For all trewe travaillours and tiliers of erthe,
> From Mighelmesse to Mighelmesse I fynde hem with wafres (B.XIII.240-1).

Activa Vita provides sustenance to all true *travaillours*, true laborers. Interestingly, he uses a French-sounding term for workers, here; it is an inspired alliterative linking of *trewe*, *travaillours*, and *tiliers*, implicitly connecting the English notions of tilling, truth and true

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[362] The theme of farting in medieval literature is discussed in Valerie Allen, On Farting: Language and Laughter in the Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[363] Derek Pearsall has noted that this catalogue is the longest list of what a minstrel cannot do in the corpus of Middle English poetry; see his "Piers Plowman and the Problem of Labour," in The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth Century England 123.

masculinity with the French-derived term for the work itself.[364] It is unlikely that the Englishmen who actually were *travaillours* would refer to themselves using that term, and the noise of the ME *ploughmen*, with its guttural qualities and its plosive beginning, has a considerably harsher music than does the Romance confluence of vowels found in *travaillours*. Within the representative confines of the poem, the pairing of *trewe, travaillours*, and *tiliers*, makes a figural connection: the men are not ordinary English plowmen, but are true tillers and *travaillours*. As Stephen A. Barney argues, "alliteration, a collocative craft, draws things together."[365] Using that very craft, Langland makes Activa Vita speak melodiously, Continentally and in idealizing, educated terms, about those who work for a living, in contrast to his own migrant labor selling snacks. But his efforts to idealize the plowmen spill over into his own attempts to vindicate himself and his own work. His labor is selling excess, although he tries to convince his interlocutors that what he provides is necessary. He admits that he does not actually work in the fields himself, but he does provide for those who do—he fuels their labor with caloric sustenance. And his wafer selling is perpetual; he works from Michaelmas to Michaelmas, year-round.

According to Malcolm Godden, Activa Vita claims reputable status "with his talk of providing food for the hungry masses. A waferer has usually been defined as a baker or confectioner but he seems rather to have been a kind of peddler, a disreputable itinerant seller of not only 'bake breed' (a kind of biscuit) that Haukyn mentions but also, it appears,

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[364] The MED defines "travaillour" as (a) One who works, a laborer; one who works for his or her living; (b) one who does injury, a tormenter; (c) ~ of child, a woman in childbirth, a woman in labor; (d) a treader of a path, a traveler. The word's etymology is French: OF *travailleor*, *travelleeur*, *travelier*, AF *travailur*, *travailour* & ME *travailen* v.

[365] See Barney, "Langland's Mighty Line," in William Langland's Piers Plowman: A Book of Essays ed. Kathleen M. Hewett-Smith, (New York: Routledge, 2001) 106.

fruit and nuts and other delicacies."[366] The selling of wafers, little tidbits, and delicacies was a nefarious occupation, in part because it required itinerancy. Wafer-sellers traveled to where their goods were needed, and in this sense were part of a larger social group of migrants, vagrants and mobile beggars, all people who were able-bodied enough to move about and sell goods, but who continued to evade the late fourteenth century English labor ordinances that required more geographically fixed and socially stable occupations. And wafer-selling was also a job closely associated with excess, with sexual impropriety, and with the sin of covetousness.[367]

Almost as a refutation of the accusation that his labor is no labor at all, and that he only stirs up sin, Activa Vita presents himself and his occupation as virtuously difficult, emphasizing his suffering for the sake of his necessary work. He toils in a sweat making bread, and brings that bread to those who need it, even when it is cold outside:

For er I have breed of mele, ofte moot I swete,

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[366] Malcolm Godden, The Making of Piers Plowman (London, Longman: 1990) 110.

[367] A Wycliffite statement on waferers highlights this association, in a text that fluidly links the peddling of little delicacies with envy, pride, excess, social instability, and untoward sexual desires:

> Yif thei becomen pedderis berynge knyves, pursis, pynys and girdles and spices and sylk and precious pellure and forrouris for wymmen, and therto small gentil hondis, to gete love of hem and to have many grete giftis for litil good or bought; thei coveiten evyle here neighbouris goodis. Yif thei ben made wafreris, gevynge lords, ladies and riche men a fewe peris, appelis or nottis to have huge giftis to the covent, evyl thei coveiten here negheboris goodis.

See The English Works of John Wyclif hitherto unprinted, ed. F. Matthew, EETS OS 74(London, 1880) 12-13. The hands in this text are echoed by Haukyn's own roving fingers whenever he encounters young women along his route; after giving the girls a (perhaps sexual?) sign, "somtyme gan he taste/About the mouth or bynethe bigynneth to grope" (ll.346-7).

> And er the communes have corn ynough many a cold morwenyng;
> So, er my wafres be ywroght, much wo I tholye. (ll.261-3)

What Activa Vita makes, pastries, wafers, baked goods, must be produced before they are sold; his labor has two parts, the initial lengthy process of proofing, rising, kneading and baking, and then the task of selling those goods. It is work of the earliest hours, and he does it so that the people will have food to eat on a cold morning. The actual making of the wafers, he implies, is aesthetic in some sense: the wafers are "ywroght" objects made by hand. And in this line, the words *wafers*, *wrought* and *woe* combine to make a chain of meaning, as do the internal assonant o-sound of *so, wo*, and *tholye*; it is a linkage about which Barney claims, "the alliterative line luxuriates in lexis."[368] Activa Vita may produce superfluities, but he claims here that they are superfluities requiring energy, aesthetic care, and no small amount of emotional investment. He suffers woe for the sake of making wafers. But Activa Vita is not a modest man—he makes clear that he believes his well-made wafers are beloved by London in its entirety. When people go without his goods, they weep. The occasion of this going-without is remembered in precise and dramatic terms:

> Al Londoun, I leve, liketh wel my wafres,
> And louren whan thei lakken hem; it is noght longe ypassed
> There was a careful commune whan no cart com to towne
> With bake breed fro Stratford; tho gonnen beggeris wepe,
> And werkmen were agast a lite—this wole be thought longe;
> In the date of Oure Drighte, in a drye Aprill,
> A thousand and thre hundred, twies thritty and tene,
> My wafres there were gesene, whan Chichestre was maire.
> (ll.264-271)

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[368] Barney, "Langland's Mighty Line" 107.

He is clearly a traveler, moving from Stratford to London in a trade route, but the source of his fame is in London. His wafers are beloved by all Londoners; the working people become incredibly distressed when he does not provide them with baked goods. The commune grows heavy with cares at his absence, workmen are aghast that they can't have his biscuits, and beggars cry. The entire incident of scarcity is so powerful that he has enshrined it in memory: the event occurred in a dry April, when Chichester was the mayor, during the year 1370. The dating of this event is significant in a dream poem bereft of clear time-markers, where visual descriptions are rare and where objects, people and places so easily morph into one another.

At this point in the narrative, Will speaks, providing the reader with his own perception of Activa Vita, calling him "Haukyn the Actif Man" (l.273). Where Haukyn the Actif Man describes himself in prideful terms, Will pays particular attention to Haukyn's external attire, the garment that covers him, which Will describes as "a cote of Cristendom as Holy Kirke bileveth" (l.275). The garment is not attractive in and of itself, but it attracts Will's gaze. Almost magnetic in its filthiness, the garment is composed of many abstract parts.

> Ac it was moled in many places with manye sondry plottes—
> Of pride here a plot, and there a plot of unbuxom speche,
> Of scorning and of scoffyng and of unskillful berynge;
> As in apparaill and in porte proud amonges the peple;
> Ootherwise than he hath with herte or sighte shewynge;
> Hym wilnyng that alel men wende he were that he is noght,
> Forwhy he bosteth and braggeth with manye bolde othes.
> (ll.275-281)

Pride composes a part, bad speech another, scorning and scoffing and unskillful bearing also compose parts. These are, Will clarifies, the sins of urban living, not of solitude.

It is "apparaill," clothing and apparel, social skin, and the ways that skin incites envy in others, that so consumingly interest Haukyn. If his own words about London's uproar over missing his wafers don't damn him for the sins of pride and boastful bragging, Will castigates him for those very sins, here.

Although Haukyn/Activa Vita claimed earlier that he was no minstrel or poet, merely a wafer-seller, Will senses duplicity at work in Haukyn's claims about his work and his life. Using language that mirrors how he will also describe himself, Will says that Haukyn is "Yhabited as an heremyte, an ordre by hymselve," an identity that is essentially "religion saunz rule and resonable obedience," religion lacking the order of a rule or of reasonable obedience (B. XIII.285-6).[369] Will proceeds to criticize Haukyn for his pride and wanton self-love, the ways by which his behavior disambiguates the proud words he uses to describe himself. Just as *sooth* can mean "true," while *truth* can mean "the state of being true," Haukyn can use beautiful words that do not truly represent himself. And Will is aware of that disconnection at work in Haukyn's speech:

> Wilnynge that men wende his wit were the beste,
> Or for his crafty konnynge or of clerkes the wisest,
> Or strengest on stede, or styvest under girdel,
> And lovelokest to loken on and lelest of werkes,
> And noon so holy as he ne of lif clennere,
> Or feirest of feitures, of forme and of shafte,
> And most sotil of song other sleyest of hondes,
> And large to lene loos therby to cacche;
> And if he gyveth ought to povere gomes, [go] telle what he deleth;
> Povere of possession in purs and in cofre,
> And as a lyoun on to loke and lordlich of speche;
> Boldest of beggeris, a bostere that noght hath,
> In towne and in tavernes tales to telle
> And segge thyng that he nevere seigh and for sooth sweren it,

[369] The poem opens with the first person speaker providing a description of himself as a hermit: "In abite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes,/Wente forth in the world wondres to here" (C.Prol.3-4).

> Of dedes that he nevere dide demen and bosten,
> And of werkes that wel dide witnesse and siggen,
> 'Lo! If ye leve me noght, or that I lye wenen,
> Asketh at hym or at hym, and he yow kan telle
> What I suffrede and seigh and somtymes hadde,
> And what I kouthe and knew, and what kyn I com of.'
> (ll. 292-311)

I quote this passage in its entirety, because its length and energy reflect Will's later, quite urgent sense of having to address Haukyn's dissembling in his own explanation of what he does for a living. It is a section that exemplifies Barney's observation concerning "the receptiveness of the alliterative long line to a kind of nervous fullness, a busy-ness, characteristic of satire from Juvenal to Pope. Fools rush."[370] Once Will begins listing Haukyn's deceits, it is as if he cannot stop the rush of words and descriptions that agglutinate around the active man's performance. If Haukyn's protesting too much were not hint enough that his words are not to be trusted, Will drives the matter further home in this interjection. As Will relates, Haukyn thinks he is better than either a clerk or a hermit, but he also profits from a deceitful mimicry of their way of life. Unlike a rule-bound hermit, Haukyn has no structure in his peripatetic life. All he has is duplicity, a kind of crafty cunning that rests on an incredible pride. He attempts to be "most sotil of song other sleyest of hondes," the one with the most subtle songs and the best sleights of hand, but is nothing more than a lying beggar, telling stories wherever he ends up, and swearing he witnessed the actual events of the tall-tales he tells. His earnestness is itself deceitful, a ruse used to bewitch his audience, as he calls out to the crowd gathered around him, exhorting them to believe his stories, to ask around as to whether or not he is who he says he is. He urges his audience to ask their neighbors about his background, his identity, the veracity of

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[370] Barney, "Langland's Mighty Line" 108.

his narratives. In doing so, he implies that he knows people and is known—even if those immediately gathered to listen to him have no real sense of who he is. The onus of determining his identity is placed on others, on the asking around; Haukyn requests his listeners here to participate in gossip and speculation as a means of determining the truth of who he is. For, while he pretends to be a reputable man, someone whose past, whose family and whose reputation are transparent and well-known, the means used to determine that reputation depend on further duplicity and obfuscation. No one in the current audience may know him, he acknowledges, but there is someone just on the next block who knows him, intimately. As in a shell game, Haukyn places the burden of truth upon the rubes whom he deceives, continually urging them to keep searching in the hopes that the obvious truth will soon be found. And, as in a shell game, the sense of trickery and opacity depends upon the flux and anonymity of urban life. Were Haukyn in his natal village, everyone really would know him, and his family. But in London, he can invent and re-invent himself, affecting trustworthiness but in reality manipulating and entertaining everyone around him.

Will's long soliloquy seems to force Conscience to focus similarly on Haukyn, who zeroes in as well on Haukyn's dress. Almost as if he is pursued by its stench and dirtiness, Conscience swears sharply about Haukyn's cloak. "'By Crist!'" Conscience exclaims, "'thi beste cote, Haukyn,/Hath manye moles and spottes—it moste ben ywasshe!'" (ll.314-5). It is Haukyn's best coat that has been so badly cared for, and it's covered in stains and spots. Like a worried mother, Conscience urges Haukyn to wash the offending garment. Haukyn turns around, urging his interlocutors to look at the garment in its entirety, an action that causes Will to use the first-person. Suddenly, the "I" returns to the poem, intensely zeroing in upon a representative object: "and thanne took I hede," Will relates (l.319). The coat is more revolting than originally suspected, and here its construction becomes apparent:

> It was fouler bi fele fold than it first semed.
> It was bidropped with wrathe and wikkede wille,
> With envye and yvel speche entisynge to fighte,
> Lying and lakkynge and leve tonge to chide;
> All that he wiste wikked by any wight, tellen it,
> And blame men bihynde hir bak and bidden hem meschaunce.
> (ll.320-5)

Will relates, as a first-person observer, the description of Haukyn's dress. The cloak cloaks Haukyn in sins of speech: evil words that entice people to fight, lying, laughing, chiding tongues, blaming men behind their backs, bidding people bad luck and ill will. More than this, gossip exists in full force within his coat. As Will later declaims, "… that glotoun with grete othes his garnement hadde soiled" (l.400). Haukyn has "foule beflobered" his clothing with his sins of "fals speche" (l.401). He is dressed in, represented by, duplicitous and damage-causing spoken words.

> And that he wiste by Wille, [to Watte tellen it],
> And that Watte wiste, Will wiste it after,
> And made of frendes foes thorough a fals tonge (ll.326-8).

It is Haukyn's false tongue that somehow can be seen on his coat. In a fantastic simile, Langland compares these acts of gossip with the action of a tailor's shear: "As a shepsteres shere, ysherewed men and cursed hem" (ll.331). The damage wrought by Haukyn's destructive speech is made physical in this simile; as a pair of shears rips through fabric so too does evil speech tear through a victim's body.

Will: *Makere* Doing Better

The language used to describe Haukyn parallels that used by the poem's speaker to describe himself throughout the C-text. Both men use words in a public, performative way. Neither has an honorable occupation, instead spending time out and about, selling superfluities. And both are dressed in ratty, filthy wool. Yet where Haukyn's coat marks him as an overly active, sinful man, Will's dress, although similarly woolen, offers a more complex portrait of an eremitic and impoverished man continually seeking a purpose for his vocation as a *makere*. Haukyn's pleasure—and pain—in being in the world, enjoying its quotidian sins, must make way for a more anguished portrait of the *makere* himself. Will is not dressed in sin, per se, but in vagabond discomfort. The poem opens with a description of the speaker's dreaming while dressed in a wool shroud.

> In a somur sesoun whan softe was the sonne
> Y shope me into shroudes as y a shep were;
> In abite as an heremite, vnholy of werkes,
> Wente forth in the world wondres to here,
> And say many sellies and selkouthe thynges. (C.Prol.1-5)

Where Haukyn's clothing and false speech were associated with scissors slicing through fabric, Will is dressed in the fabric of a shepherd. Or, he is made to be like sheep. Like a shepherd who has spent so long with his flock, away from humans and civilization, Will here resembles an animal. Will's wool is rough, and makes him look like a hermit, a man unattached to domestic life and its attendant niceties. Neither Haukyn nor Will, in these representations, are men who have a stable domestic space to which to return at the end of their wandering. They live outside, in the streets and fields, and their clothing consequently reflects heavy wear and tear.

Dressed badly, he appears to be a mendicant, dependent on begging to keep himself fed and watered. As he puts it in C.V, he begs "withoute bagge or botel but my wombe one" (52); in other words, he carries nothing in which to carry sustenance except his own stomach. All Will has are the clothes on his back, and these clothes are pointedly rough, badly made, uncomfortable. He claims he is "yrobed in russet" (C.X.1), the coarse wool associated with hermits, Lollards and the poor.[371] Later, he is "wollewaerd and watschoed," wearing rough wool next to his skin and shoes filled with water (C.XX.1). Wool is what Haukyn wears, in his wandering, and wool, in Will's descriptions, exemplifies poverty, hunger and suffering. Yet wool is also clearly an emblem, in Haukyn's case, of the pleasures of language, even when those pleasures lead to the sins of gossip, backbiting, lying. Will's chastisement of Haukyn in the B-text would be quite well and good if his own self-description in the C-text did not so closely mirror Haukyn's own urbane vagrancy and sinful investment in the duplicitous pleasures of language.

Just as Haukyn is interrogated about his work—and provides a seemingly false answer as to his work and its relative importance—so too is Will himself interrogated by Reason and Conscience about the nature of his occupation in C.V. Although Will has identified himself, elliptically, as a *makere* in prior texts, it is only in the Passus V *apologia* that Langland places Will in dialogue with what seems to the representation of specifically secular power. And it is the C.V section that appears to be the most final addition to the most final version of the poem.[372] Because of the relatively late date of the C-text, Anne Middleton aligns the C.V interlude with the 1388 Statute of Laborers. As she argues, in her essay "Acts

[371] Pearsall, C-text, note 1-2 (178).

[372] E. Talbot Donaldson discusses the C-text order, and argues that the C.V autobiography and the C IX additions to Pier's pardon are the two latest additions to the poem. See his Piers Plowman: The C-text and Its Poet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949) 26-28.

of Vagrancy: The C Version 'Autobiography' and the Statute of 1388," Langland is asked probing questions by the twin figures of Reason and Conscience that have parallels in the questions regularly put to itinerant workers by civic authorities under the post-Rebellion 1388 Statute of Laborers.[373] Of particular interest to my argument is that section of the Statute that pertains to middling common men whose skills and labor are not vital to the everyday functioning of the late medieval urban economy. This section emends the earlier 1349 Statute that sought to stabilize laboring identities and wages after the Black Death. The 1388 Statute indicates that "artificers and craftsmen as well as servants and apprentices, who are not of great account and of whose craft or mistery men have no great need in time of harvest" can be effectively "forced to serve in harvest at cutting, gathering and bringing in the corn."[374] Men who are "not of great account," whose status is low enough that they cannot protest, can be forced to work in agricultural press-gangs in order to bring in the harvest. These are men whose skills—"whose craft or mistery"—are not in high demand, but whose labor is so needed by the state that they can be forced to work against their will. The Statute addresses those men who are *not* master craftsmen, for master craftsmen have skills, responsibility and status that require them to keep working at their chosen occupations.

The C.V scene begins in the Cornhill section of London, a place that Pearsall notes "had something of a reputation as a resort of London vagabonds; its pillories and stocks were famous, and there was a market that specialized in stolen clothes."[375] Will awakes from

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[373] Middleton argues that the C.V interlude is "fictively staged as an incipient prosecution under the 1388 statute." She sees Will's status as primarily that of an itinerant, and argues that the labor statutes sought to control his movement. See her "Acts of Vagrancy," in Written Work 208-317, at 211.

[374] C.3, Enrolled Statute of Cambridge, qtd. in Middleton, "Acts" 217.

[375] See Pearsall, C-text note 1 (97).

a dream to find himself a married layman who lives in a bad neighborhood, in a bad apartment, amidst lolling layabouts much like himself (C.V. 2-4). It is the allegorized figures of Reason and Conscience who question Will as to what exactly he does when he is *makynge*, and why he is not working with other men like him, men who as the Statute of 1388 claims are of no great account, to help bring in the harvest.

The setting is during harvest time, and Will points out that he is healthy, possessed of all his limbs, and has little to do with his time but sleep and drink. The time is a "hot heruest whenne y hadde myn hele/And lymes to labory with and louede wel fare/And no dede to do but to drynke and to slepe" (7-9). Will is neither infirm nor crippled, nor does he have other pressing concerns. In short, he presents himself as an ideal candidate for being forced into a harvest-gang of workers. Reason approaches him and begins to interrogate him in terms that echo the language of the 1388 Statute.

> 'Can thow seruen,' he sayde, 'or syngen in a churche,
> Or koke for my cokeres or to the cart piche,
> Mowen or mywen or make bond sheues,
> Repe or been rypereue and aryse erly,
> Or haue an horn and be Hayward and lygge theroute nyhtes,
> And kepe my corn in my croft fro pykares and theues?
> Or shap shon or cloth, or shep and kyne kepe,
> Heggen or harwen, or swyn or gees dryue,
> Or eny other kynes craft that to the commune nedeth,
> That thou betere therby that byleue the fynden?' (C.V. 12-25)

Reason addresses Will familiarly, asking "can thow" serve or sing in church? His use of the familiar second person instantiates an immediately intimate and also hierarchical relationship; he questions Will in the way that fathers interrogate sons, civic authorities

interrogate layabouts.[376] Reason and Conscience use the informal second person pronoun *thee*, addressing Will from a position of superiority. Their pointed use of *thee* is appropriate if we read these two figures, as Lawrence Clopper does, as civic authorities interrogating men about their occupations. He argues that, "since the Dreamer is interrogated on Cornhill, which is where he also lives, I think it is legitimate to assume that Reason and Conscience are not only personfications of his own mental faculties but also of the two legal authorities, the Constable and Beadle, charged with enforcing the [labor] ordinance."[377] Reason begins the interrogation by invoking class: he asks if Will is a member of the clergy, or whether he might be a laborer instead. The labors he asks after range from cooking to hay-mowing to crop-guarding to shepherding. Notably, as Davis points out, these are exclusively masculine activities.[378]

Reason lists a variety of skills and abilities, and identifies the more mundane ones as being of good use to him in a particular, possessive way. In doing so, he presents himself as a man in charge of a small farm who needs labor to get the harvest accomplished, and establishes a hierarchical relationship between a man of responsibility and service, who has power over others, and a man who has little power or responsibility at all. Can Will "coke for my cokeres" [cook for my haymakers], Reason asks? Can he "kepe my corn in my croft fro pykares and theues" [keep my grain in the barn safe from thieves]? Can he make clothes or shoes, herd or guard livestock? Reason wants to know what Will's occupation is, exactly, and he frames the question in ethical terms: does Will have a craft of any kind that is needed

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[376] It should be noted that Will is being intimately addressed by his own externalized sense of reason, i.e., he is talking with himself, and so speaking informally would make sense. But later in the section, when he responds to Reason's questions, he does use the formal "you": "Forthy rebuke me ryhte nauhte, Resoun, y yow praye" (C.V.82). This is perhaps a kind of externalized manifestation of an internal hierarchy.

[377] Clopper, "Need Men and Women Labor?" 119.

[378] Davis, Writing 13.

by the commons? As Imagynatyf asked of Haukyn, Reason wants to know whether the *makere* can provide anything in return to those whose work provides him with sustenance.

Yet Reason's litany leaves very little room for a reply. Like the alliterative phrases out of which Reason's speech is made, nouns accrete into clotted catalogues, spilling over from one line to the next. He questions obsessively, offering multiple versions of essentially the same initial inquiry: what does Will *do*? Like a parent questioning an adolescent child, Reason asks, "so, what do you think you are going to do with your life?" And, in similarly parental fashion, Reason presses heavily on Will as to what opportunities he might have, none of which are particularly appealing. Will's reply, however, is equally lengthy, equally digressive. He does not address any of Reason's questions head-on, instead offering up his own series of alliterative catalogues that state not what he can do but what he cannot. He perseverates, saying that he is

> to wayke to worche with sykel or with sythe
> And to long, lef me, lowe to stoupe,
> To wurche as a werkeman eny while to duyren (C.V.23-25).

Too weak to hold a scythe, too long to stoop low over the crops, Will is unable to work as a run-of-the-mill workman. He is too tall, too weak to participate.

Will presents himself as a man who does not have to work. Reason wants then to know whether Will belongs to the first estate: does he have land to live off, or a rich lineage that provides him with food (C.V.26-7)? "An ydel man thow semest," Reason tells him. Yet Will does not pass himself off as an aristocrat able to sustain himself on idleness and good relatives; if he did, Reason would not question him about the matter. Something about Will is socially, bodily, off-putting—he does not pass as an aristocrat, but neither does he pass as

a vagrant. And he has no good excuse for himself and his lack of worthwhile labor. Reason suspects, crucially, that Will is "a spendour that spene mot or a spille-tyme" [a spender that spends too much or one who spills time] (l.28). Will might be a man who spends more than he has or earns, a man engaged in the tricky and superfluous world of exchange. Or, he might be a man who "spills," or wastes, time. The notion of wasting time is intrinsic to the immaterial labor involved in the composition and performance of poetry. Time spent *makynge* verse is time not spent on other, more lucrative tasks—certainly tasks that would address Reason's initial, highly charged claim that Will do something to repay those who feed him. The composition of a poem does not produce a material good that can be exchanged for coin or for food. Unlike the production of shoes or clothes, the guarding of crops, the herding and driving of livestock, a poem does not contribute to what the "comune nedeth." *Makynge* poems is a literal waste of time. More than this, being entertained by the performance of a poem is also a waste of time. Unlike a sermon, the alliterative poem—however ethical or spiritually edifying it may be—also has an aesthetic value that cannot be easily quantified. It is pleasing to listen to, and its catalogue-like chains of repeated sounds and nouns carry over into one another in a manner that is not exclusively instructive.

Will represents his poetic practice as something that does not clearly contribute to the common good. When he is pressed as to whether his body is therefore so broken, "ymaymed thorw som myshap" (l.34) as to prevent his laboring, he denies this as well. He states instead that he had gone to school and learned about vocation, that "yf y be labour sholde lyuen and lyflode deseruen,/That laboure that y lerned beste therwith lyuen y sholde" (if I by labor should live and livelihood deserve, that labor that I learned best therewith live I should) (C.V.42-3). Langland is not a *jangelere*, perhaps because his *makynge* is a kind of

calling, a way of being in the world that is consonant with how he was educated and trained. Much later in the passus, Will claims literacy and education, but admits that cannot find an appropriate work identity that will please his interlocutors; he knows that he has "ytynt time and time myspened" (C.V.93). It is this misspent time that I wish to examine, because such ill-used, unproductive time—such idleness—is what creating and revising poetry requires. Will cannot openly state that idleness is of use, that he misspends time in order to make up poems. But Piers Plowman, as a whole, is the product of a lifetime of the industrious idleness of poetic invention and revision.[379] Whatever Langland does all day, it is not work that measures up to what the authorities determine work should be. Much as Haukyn roams from neighborhood to neighborhood peddling wafers, Will similarly has no fixed place where he works. What is worse, Will doesn't even have a tangible good to sell.

While Langland values the hard labor performed by virtuous *trwe* men like Piers and Piers' family, people so industrious that their very names are compound tag-phrases of their skills, he does not see the labor of making poems as quite so virtuous. Piers' wife is "Dame Worch-when-tyme-is;" his daughter is "Do rihte-so-or-thy-dame-shal-the-bete;" his son is "Soffre-thy-souereynes-haue-her-will-deme-hem-nat-yf-thow-doest-thow-shalt-hit-dere-abygge" (C.VIII.81-3). Conversely, Will's work identity is stated only obliquely, and the description of that identity often proceeds by means of negation. More often than not, Will tells us more about what he does not, cannot, and will not, do than about what he does. What Will does is waste time. To be a *makere*, as Will awkwardly, satirically, attempts to explain in his *apologia*, is to be occupied by language, but it is not a "real" occupation and so does not confer a stable identity. Even so, *makynge* is a job so involved and inward looking, so seemingly crazy, that the "lunatyk lollares" with whom he is aligned commit atrocious

[379] On *accedia* as a theme in Piers Plowman, see Bowers, A Crisis of Will in Piers Plowman.

social snubs. They are so consumed with their odd inner lives that they don't even notice the mayor of London when they pass by him on the street:

> … thauh a mete with the mayre ameddes the strete
> a reuerenseth hym ryht nauht, no rather then another. (C.IX.122-3)

Neither the lunatic lolling *makere* nor the politician whom he ignores, as if the mayor were any other fellow Londoner, are men of great birth or bearing. But the mayor is a more powerful man, with a significantly more powerful job, than the *makere* who has neither name nor title, and whose own transitory occupation places him among the layabouts, lock-pickers and ignorant hermits who live in rented London rooms:

> Thise lollares, lache-draweres, lewede ermytes
> Coueyten the contrarye, for as coterelles they libbeth. (C.IX. 192-3)

Langland castigates these socially marginalized men for their lack of contribution, but also praises the itinerant minstrels of god who contribute song and prayer. In both cases, the words he uses to describe these marginal men directly echo the diction of his *apologia*. Much as in his description of the urban-dwelling Seven Deadly Sins, the low-life, urban men Will so dislikes are too-close in their description to the "lollare" clothed Langland who lives in a "cote" with his family, in the interstitial neighborhood of Cornhill. He describes himself in his *apologia*:

> Thus y awakede, woet god, whan y wonede in Cornehull,
> Kytte and y in a cote, yclothed as a lollare,
> And lytel ylet by, leueth me for sothe,
> Amonges lollares of Londone and lewede ermytes,

For y made of tho men as resoun me tauhte. (C.V.1-5)

The speaker and his wife live among, and in similar fashion to, the lazy and ignorant men that Langland harshly criticizes in Passus IX, and throughout the poem. The terms used to describe the lunatic lollers echo those he uses to describe himself. More importantly, Langland also tells us that he "made of tho men as resoun me tauhte," that he has made up these men. Men who do not contribute to the common good are a central subject of Langland's *makynge*, but despite his ire and criticism about them, Langland includes himself within their ranks. More than this, he points out the fact that he has the power to make them up—that he has the power, perhaps, to make himself up, to confect an identity out of words. But an identity made out of vernacular words is not stable. A contemporary of Chaucer and Gower, living in the same small city, Langland nonetheless does not choose—or have the cultural capital to adopt—their more polished, courtly masculine poetic identities. Instead, he remains ambivalent throughout his poem about where, and with whom, he might comfortably socialize. A man of the people, Langland refuses to lavishly call out to the mayor, but the only place he can find for himself is among those men of such meager status they thieve for a living. Clearly, the man who writes Piers Plowman worries over his occupation and his social status, two primary ways by which medieval men define themselves.

Throughout Piers Plowman, the men whom Langland makes are men too much like Langland himself. They are men who must be criticized, castigated, and erased, in the case of Haukyn, so that Will can make enough room for his own poetic persona. Often, these men are involved in the making of oral, popular poetry, a poetry seemingly at odds with Langland's own production of tri-lingual, written and re-written literary verse. But I would argue that the distinction between oral and literate poetry is somewhat arbitrary, especially

for late medieval poets and especially for Langland himself. The hard split between oral and literate forms of medieval poetry is perhaps more apparent to highly literate contemporary scholars, for whom that split has immediate and obvious meaning. Identifying, much less discussing, examples of oral/aural poetry within the medieval record is considerably difficult because, as the product of ephemeral, performative traditions, evidence often does not exist in the historical record except as it is found—almost as overheard gossip or secondhand news—within other texts. Oral/aural poetry is therefore almost invisible. Rarely using the technologies of textuality and literacy, it exists in time, as a moment of performance. It is vernacular, musical, mnemonic, often brief, improvisatory and onomatopoetic.[380] In Piers Plowman, the oral elements of *makynge* often interrupt the poem's narrative movement, breaking through the descriptions in a kind of urban riot of noise. Yet it is imperative that we not perceive these "noises" as disruptive, but as intrinsic. As Maria Rosa Menocal has urged, we cannot impress upon medieval poetry and poetics the overly determined definitions, and hopes for aesthetic integrity, given to us by later histories. Medieval poetics consists of "fragments and […] riotous pluralities."[381] Such pluralities can be overheard in Langland's own written rendering of a crowd of Londoners, a catalogue of work and speech that dissolves into song:

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[380] A marvellous example of late medieval onomatopoetic poetry is "The Blacksmiths" (British Museum MS. Arundel 292, f 71b, in Kenneth Sisam, ed., Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose (London: Oxford University Press: 1921). It begins:

> Swarte smekyd smethes smateryd with smoke
> Dryue me to deth with den of here dyntes.
> Swech noys on nyghtes ne heerd men neuer:
> What knauene cry and clateryng of knockes! (Sisam 169)

[381] Maria Rosa Menocal, Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric *(*Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 10.

> Bothe bakeres and breweres, bochers and other,
> Webbesteres and walkeres and wynners with handes,
> As taylers and tanners and tulyers of the erthe,
> As dykers and deluers that doth here dedis ylle
> And dryueth forth here days with '*Dew vous saue, dame Emme.*'
> Cokes and here knaues cryede, 'hote pyes, hote!
> Goode gees and grys! ga we dyne, ga we!'
> Tauerners til hem tolde the same:
> 'Whit wyn of Oseye and wyn of Gascoyne,
> Of the Reule and of the Rochele the roost to defye!' (C.Prol.222-31)

The voices Langland captures here can only be represented as voices; they are a found poem within his poem. As a representation of daily life, these snippets are mundane noise included within a larger literary structure. An overheard French refrain bursts through the poem's descriptions of London life and work: "Dew vous saue, dame Emme." Cooks and food sellers cry out in an advertising ditty, and the tavern-keepers respond. Yet these songs are not simply abundant, overheard, urban noise. They mark rhythmic and diurnal time, the hours of the laboring day. The line of French song belongs to the ditch-diggers and delvers: they "dryueth forth here dayes" with the refrain. The beat of the refrain, the repeated words in a huckster's ditty, make time move forward because they are the embodiment of time. They attempt to sell, but they are attempts that marshal poetry in their purpose. They are poetic utterances that drive on the hours of the day, that "work" time, and thus make labor more manageable.[382]

Piers Plowman presses together the *makynge* of an oral/aural practice, dominated by illiterate, often itinerant laboring-class men who compose verse in an improvisatory fashion,

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[382] Paul Strohm, reading Jacques le Goff, argues that the later Middle Ages began to reorganize and reassess time, moving away from ecclesiastical time as towards a more mercantile understanding of time as secular and measurable. "Church's time" was frequently opposed to "merchant's time;" the latter can be understood as "a perfect exemplar of the new attitude towards time as desacralized (in its detachment from the round of ecclesiastical observance), measurable (by that device first prevalent in the fourteenth century, the publicly displayed twenty-four-hour clock), and available for practical use." See his Social Chaucer 124.

often from memory, with the *makynge* of a literary activity, the exclusive realm of multi-lingual, well-educated, clerkly men who write down their verse for posterity. Where Chaucer is able to successfully occupy blend oral makynge with literary activity, Langland cannot fully accommodate either persona. Neither an itinerant oral makere nor a scribe, Langland's poetic identity is a masculinity existing on the margins of other, more stable identities. His masterpiece is never finished, and will never provide him with access to adult responsibility. Married, but not quite gainfully employed, Langland's makynge is a masculine practice that never quite confers acceptability. His revisions of Piers Plowman, and his revisions of his persona as a makere within the poem, persistently ask how *makynge* is defined, and, implicitly, how *makynge* as a masculine practice fits into a shifting terrain of orality, textuality, recitation and reading.[383] Langland castigates low culture poets; they are pejoratively referred to as *gestours, disours, faytours, rybauds, lollares, losels*. Such men are, in Langland's poem, untrustworthy people who perform lies for money and for pleasure. As a Latin-literate, well-read man who uses textuality towards his own ends in his multiple revisions of his poem, Langland's worries over the oral performers of verse and jest, the itinerant men who use words to deceive or merely entertain, puts a certain distance between those popular poetic styles and his own production of alliterative, moralistic verse. But Piers Plowman was popular during Langland's lifetime, as its many extant manuscript copies attest. And Piers Plowman is a series of texts that refuse to be categorized itself, that itself refuses a stable identity for its *makere*, and that cannibalizes other poetic texts.[384]

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[383] Malcolm Godden in The Making of Piers Plowman argues that Langland was "caught up in the shift from public listening to private reading" (12).

[384] I refer here to Wynnere and Wastoure.

Will cannot, does not, fit into the stable laboring masculinities or the textual exempla that the poem idealizes. His masculine poetic identity places him between traditional models, and between the changing discourses regarding urban and rural life for common born men. As Davis notes, Langland's own masculine, occupational contributions were in social and political question.[385] The married working man is "produced as a compelling ideal" within the poem, a figure invested with restoring order to a disordered countryside, but Will himself is "compromised by the masculine ethics that are supported by the poem's earnest hopes for the future of the community."[386] Will's community is Cornhill, amidst society's itinerant dregs.

Makynge as Journeyman's Practice

Langland's "labor" produces a surfeit of something no one can actually consume. Rather, his is a labor that requires uninterrupted time, and that, like the labor of the late medieval journeyman, never moves forward and never ends. The journeyman's labor is perpetual, but it does not confer upon him the more stable identity enjoyed by married master craftsmen. In the middle of the craftworker's hierarchy, the journeyman has no men but apprentices beneath him. He works at a task for wages, and lives in a rented urban room, often far from his place of birth. He cannot find other employment in a different craft, for to do so risks whatever middling status he has already acquired. And he cannot marry and begin his own workshop and his own household, and thus could not become fully

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[385] Davis, Writing 13.

[386] Davis 14.

an adult.[387] The journeyman is a man, but he is unable to attain the full measures of authority: a workshop with journeymen and apprentices under his tutelage, guild membership, wife and family. He is a man with little power, despite his artisanal skills and ability to earn a living. Without recourse to the social networks that allowed the sons of masters to obtain guild membership by means of money or inheritance, the migratory journeyman, furthermore, is a man unattached to many of the usual means of determining medieval social status. Rather, the journeyman remains "mired in permanent dependency, the social equivalent of adolescence," and one which—although the ideal of full mastery and membership in an artisanal guild still encouraged journeymen and apprentices to hope for a more changeable future for themselves—was not simply a stage in life but a continuing marginal status.[388]

It is the countryside where the poem begins, and it is from the fields and streams of the Malvern Hills that the poem's speaker looks towards London.[389] Although Langland's poem is written in a dialect consistent with central England, and not one associated with London, the poem is overwhelmingly the product of the urban scene.[390] London holds few opportunities for truth, and Truth is an allegorical character, a virtue, a goal, an ideal, and a failed destination in Piers Plowman. Along the track from natal village to urban center, the

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[387] As Ruth Mazo Karras notes, in From Boys to Men, marriage was a marker of adulthood for both women and men of the artisanal class. Even though young, working men could live and work independently of their natal families, "the idea that a man was not fully adult until he married, and could not be a householder without a family, also pervaded the society" (145).

[388] Karras 110, 113.

[389] Larry Scanlon, "Langland's England--King, Commons and Kind Wit," in Imagining a Medieval English Nation 200.

[390] There is a body of criticism that examines the role of London in Piers Plowman. See Simon Horobin, "'In London and Opelond': The Dialect and Circulation of the C Version of Piers Plowman," Medium Ævum 74:2 (2005): 248-69; Derek Pearsall, "Langland's London," in Written Work 185-207; and Caroline Barron, "William Langland: A London Poet," in Chaucer's England 91-109.

late medieval journeyman traveled in search of better employment. The journeymen have a foot in the rural and the urban, but their work does not fit comfortably into either agricultural or dominant artisanal models. They exemplify *urbanitas* as much as they do itinerancy. As Davis notes, "Fear of itinerancy was, of course, alarm at a labor force which, after the Black Death, was increasingly economically and socially as well as geographically mobile; there is also evidence, however, that the sexual behavior of migrants was also reason for their being distrustfully regarded or, alternatively, that fears about mobile labor were thus hysterically displaced."[391] Within Langland's poem, true men can best be found in the countryside. But the countryside is also a fraught space pervasively riddled by deceitful men traveling back and forth from the rural to the urban and back again.

In Passus VIII of the C-text, the journey towards truth is immediately diverted into a long, busy agricultural scene in which wide varieties of men and women are exhorted to participate in planting, haying and harvest. But there is a distinct subset of characters who are not welcome in the Half-Acre. Piers tells us:

> And alle kyne crafty men that conne lyue in treuthe
> Y shal fynde hem fode that fayfulleche libbeth,
> Saue Iacke the iogelour and Ionet of the stuyues
> And Danyel the dees-playere and Denote the baude
> And frere faytour and folk of that ordre,
> That lollares and loseles lele men holdeth,
> And Robyn the rybauder for his rousty wordes. (C.VIII.69-75)

Crafty men who know how to live in truth are welcome and Piers will find food for them. But the exceptions to this ideal community are extensive and they are the entertainers among whom *makeres* were frequently categorized. Jack the juggler, Janet of the brothels,

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[391] Davis, Writing 19.

Daniel the dice-player, Denote the slut, the lying monk and the others like him who are held to be layabouts and shiftless by good men, and of course, Robin the ribald-tale-teller, because he has such rude words. These are the characters, or character types, who are not allowed into the Half-Acre, and who are later described, when people like them do enter the work-group, as tricksters, deceivers, dissemblers. They are "faytours aferd and fayned hem blynde/And leyde here legges alery as such lorelles conneth" (129-30), lying performers who pretend that they can to bend their own legs backwards. Such deception is not far from the work of representation, of *makynge*—both *faytours* and *makeres* must create a kind of inventive fantasy out of thin air, using performative deception to entertain and please an audience. Likewise, the *faytour* and the *makere* waste time, via these entertaining practices. Vernacular *makynges* are a kind of bending the leg backwards, in terms of their musical tricks, their pleasurable beauties, their mixing of truth and fact, their blend of the oral and the written.

The worry over the identity of the migratory man with no real job is the driving force behind the revision that removes the ribald minstrel dressed in sins, Haukyn of the earlier B-text, in order to replace him with the figure of Will, a man who openly refuses to work on an agricultural gang and who similarly refuses to apologize directly for his vocation. Will produces, instead, more *makynges*, more proof of that indirect, immaterial vocation. This revisionary erasure enacts Langland's larger authorial claim: idleness is necessary to a poet's work. The poem is a substantiation of Langland's productive life—even as that life is marginal, impoverished, and does not actually produce usable goods. For Langland, *makynge* is not so much a product as it is a lack, an absence of material substance that might actually matter in the world of goods and things, the realm of Activa Vita. Despite this association with immateriality, frequently connected to prayer and prayerfulness, *makynge* is not a clearly spiritual endeavor, no proof of a superlative, meditative life of the mind and soul. Rather,

because *makynge* requires leisure and solitude that only the very rich possess in any kind of abundance, the working poet of the artisanal class must occupy a dingy, interstitial world of materiality even as he writes poems of spiritual yearning and allegorical pilgrimage, poems which are the ineffable product of education, intense thought, and almost endless aesthetic polishing. For a man like Langland, neither beneficed clerk nor professor nor monk, making poems is a labor that militates against more gainful employment, even as its practice casts him (and his family) further and further into the impoverished and criminal edges of society. One cannot labor as a field-hand—as Will is asked whether he can or will do, in the *apologia*—if one spends all day meddling with makings.

Piers Plowman contends with the intensely personal and occupational problem of being a male poet in a class-bound, pre-modern society in the midst of economic flux. In Piers Plowman, poetry is both subject and object, and poets—of all kinds—are a class of men on society's edge. *Makeres*, in Piers Plowman (e.g. Will, Haukyn, the leg-bending entertainers of the harvest, even mendicant friars) are most like the forever traveling, oddly employed immigrant journeymen and artisans who move back and forth from the bad neighborhoods of London to the farms of their birth.

Langland's *makynge* is his identity. And that identity is partial, occluded, fictive, and resistant to easy resolution. As postmodern poet and critic Heather McHugh argues, poetry is itself a form of partiality, and its "economies operate by powers of intimation: glimmering and glints, rather than exhaustible sums."[392] There is no way to prove Langland's actual existence, any more than we might prove he never existed at all. All we have is his poem, in all its versions, each possessed of their own pleasures. Which may be as it should be.

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[392] Heather McHugh, Broken English: Poetry and Partiality (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 3.

McHugh posits that "more like evidence than judgment, the well-crafted poem can present several versions at once; it is the site of possibility. Having so many ends, it remains open-ended."[393] Piers Plowman's *I* is a textual construction, a way of being on the page that is simultaneously invented and real. This poetic *I* is a representation, and as such, it calls attention to its component parts, its fictitious qualities, and also its verisimilitude. Without such a combination of invention and realism, Piers Plowman*'s* speaker would not resonate, would not be believable. But I would argue that it is the intensely human and realist ambivalence of the poem's *I* its "author," that make him both so compelling and so resistant to analysis.

As a series of revisions Piers Plowman asks if poetry is a material object, a beautifully and luxuriously produced book, or if it is a medium more like song, made up of air, memory, and time. Langland's poetry, as such, is a complicated macaronic amalgam of alliterative English verse, French aphorism, and Latin Bibilical quotation. It offers up bits of overheard conversation and song as much as it is driven by a kind of didactic moralizing. As an allegory, it is a poem in which sins like Gluttony and Lechery stand up and walk around among the people. And, as John Bowers notes, it is an abstract, intellectually rigorous poem remarkable for its almost complete lack of visual imagery.[394] It is a dream beside a dream beside a dream; eight dreams, in fact, with one dream within a dream.[395] But it is difficult to determine exactly what kind of poem Piers Plowman is, which may be one of the great things it offers its audience. Piers Plowman is a poem that refuses to be anything other than what it is: a weird product of language, occasionally sublime, at once irritating and pleasing,

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[393] McHugh 3.
[394] Bowers, The Crisis of Will 30.

[395] On dreams and reflexity in the poem, see Steven Kruger, "Mirrors and the Trajectory of Vision in Piers Plowman," Speculum 66 (1991): 74-95.

whose total meaning is always just out of reach. More than this, Piers Plowman is the anti-masterpiece for its *makere*, William Langland, for, as an unfinished object, the poem asks whether medieval *makynge* is ever finally completed, finely polished into perfection, or whether it continually exists halfway between the author's possession and the audience's hold.

Chapter Three

'The Teccheles Terms of Talkyng Noble': *Makynge* Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight [hereafter SGGK] is a poem that focuses intensely upon the social behavior, clothing and speech of its Arthurian characters.[396] Their performative display purports to tell us not simply how one is known but who one actually *is*. In the representative world of the poem, the speech acts a knight performs and which surround him create what initially appears to be a stable chivalric identity. This identity rests on a strange tautology: a knight is a knight because he is a knight. It is his name, the clothes he wears, the language he uses, and how others perceive him that instantiate chivalric masculinity. As Larry Benson has observed, in SGGK a "knight's name, which is at once his identity and his fame, is 'an augur and program for life,' a sign of what his future conduct will be."[397] Names are socially legible forms of knowledge; in the poem "we are 'the person' (as opposed to the purely biological object), that, simultaneously, we claim to be and that our contemporaries accept us as being," as Jonathan Plummer has argued.[398] Yet just as SGGK offers a fantasy of stability and permanence, a world in which a name literally makes the man, it is also a poem in which deception undergirds most social behavior. Women and

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[396] All citations are taken from James Winny, ed. and trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Literary Texts, 1992).

[397] See Larry Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965) 222.

[398] See Jonathan Plummer, "Signifying the Self: Language and Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet, ed. Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy NY, 1991) 195-212, at 195.

men in SGGK are rarely who they initially claim to be, are in fact highly deceitful in their attempts to disguise themselves and to trick others. While SGGK thus offers an ideal of a secure, legible identity based on the proper performance of etiquette, it also posits that chivalric masculinity is always in formation, under perpetual construction, as Carolyn Dinshaw has argued.[399] The poem's focus on performativity is in many ways an attempt at controlling that which cannot be fully controlled, for if identity is always in formation, always being made, then the desire to attain stable certainty is fundamentally futile. SGGK is, according to Dinshaw, "so devoted to the surfaces of things … and so preoccupied with keeping the depths and fissures from bursting forth (its narrative swerve from beheading to confession and penance is the most pointed example) that it labors to limit the significance of its signs, the nature of its characters, the meanings of their actions."[400] The poem presents a fantasy of control over identity formation, even as it continually undercuts and undoes this fantasy. In fact, the poem posits that chivalric masculinity is a practice that hinges upon deceit. While Gawain's masculinity appears natural, innate, it is in fact a highly wrought performance that he struggles to reconcile with his interior sense of self. More than this, as a poetic form SGGK posits that the medium out of which Gawain's masculinity is made—vernacular alliterative poetry—is itself a practice of performance and deception. The anonymous *makere* of SGGK crafts both Gawain and his own persona through a hybridized mix of linguistic elements. But what he makes is merely verbal representation and the performance of his own textualized anonymity. The *makere* of SGGK is a first person voice, likely a man, who composes poetry about chivalry but who is himself not a knight. Nor is he

[399]Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss Is just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Diacritics 24.2/3 (1994): 204-226, at 218.

[400]Dinshaw 205.

a member of the implied audience for his poem: an elite, courtly group much like those in attendance at Haut Desert, women and men eager to learn how to speak and behave in an aristocratic way. The *makere* is an intimate, immediate *I*, speaking directly to a plural *you,* in the poem's first fitt. But he leaves open his own status and the actual status of his historical audience; he could be a cleric as easily as he could be a common-born man speaking to an audience similarly composed. SGGK is made of language, and it is that language—in its shape and form—that represents its *makere* as a man of skill and talent. He is able to make knights out of air, and to point out the ways that knights similarly make themselves out of speech acts.

Identity, in SGGK, is an aesthetic production that never completely concludes, despite the poem's own fetish for control and symmetry. Speech acts produce chivalric masculinity as a performance that can never be fully attained within the poem. And on the margins of the poem is the voice of the *makere*, the first-person narrator addressing a vernacular audience, who attempts to shape an identity organized around *makynge* as a social and aesthetic practice. The *makere* of SGGK is responsible for the construction—via poetic speech—of Gawain and Bertilak, the two chivalric heroes. He is also responsible for inscribing, and erasing, his own presence in the poem, in a gesture that points at his own capacities as a *makere*.[401] The *makere* of SGGK must thus be understood as a craftsman, one who shapes and constructs verbal fictions that include characters and his own persona. This persona is consonant with the varieties of representing the first-person subject in late medieval poetry; he is what A.C. Spearing has called the "Ricardian 'I,'" a fragmented, often anonymous speaker who offers multiple narrative perspectives, and who represents himself

[401]I borrow the term "pointing" from J.A. Burrow, who uses "pointing" to describe the moments in late medieval poetry where the poet draws attention to highly digressive details. See his Ricardian Poetry, 92 ff.

as both an individual and as an omniscient narrator.[402] As a *makere* of vernacular poetic language, the first person speaker of SGGK posits that identity—whether that of knights or that of anonymous *makeres*—is not a stable certainty but is always in the process of being socially created and understood. The chivalric masculinity of the fictive knight is a representation of the meta-textual performance of the poem's own narrating "I."

Chivalric masculinity in SGGK is a performative identity that is as laboriously produced as it is innate, natural, and effortless. The labor required to make this identity takes place both in, and outside of, the poem. A labor of *makynge* produces the alliterative lines of the poem, just as countless hours have gone into the production of Gawain's embroidered garments. Birds and flowers are "entayled so thyk/As mony burde theraboute had be seven wynter in toune" (612-13). It takes almost eighty lines to describe the apparel, ornamental decoration and well-wrought armor that cover the body of the hero, Gawain (566-639), in a lavish poetic display of what it takes to make a knight. Yet the first person speaker intrudes into these descriptions in a strange moment of self-inscription. When it comes to describing the pentangle on Gawain's armor, the narrator appears and draws attention to his performative practice—he is embedded in the poem, composed of words as much as the pentangle is, and unclear as to who or what he is. He wants to tell about the pentangle, even though such description might slow down the narrative: "I am in tent yow to telle, thof tary hyt me schulde" (624). It is as if the poem's catalogue of garments and armor has a force of its own, outside of the narrator's power. Robert Blanch and Julian Wasserman posit that, in this moment of description and first person narration, "*Gawain* is a

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[402] Spearing argues that critics frequently present Chaucer as an innovator, because he represents himself so fluidly, so uncertainly, but that "this unstable first person, which recent criticism has valiantly attempted to turn into a stable persona, belongs to the Ricardian age not just to Chaucer." See his "A Ricardian 'I': The Narrator of Troilus and Criseyde," in Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honor of J.A. Burrow 20.

work whose narrator, like Bertilak, is made over, disguised, masked. Yet unlike the Green Knight, the narrator of *Gawain* has never been asked to reveal his true self, and the reader thus remains as unable to describe the narrator as the narrator remains powerless to describe the trefoils of the Green Knight's surcoat."[403] While he is purportedly the *makere* of the poem, responsible for creating the visual catalogue in the first place, here he pretends to be powerless. He does so while simultaneously drawing attention to his very power as *makere*; he is the speaking "I," who has conjured up the scene in the first place. He presents himself as a man both self-effacing and quite authoritative. As a *makere*, he posits, he is capable of confecting himself, of representing not only the stuff of the poem but his own persona.

In SGGK, the *makere* wears words just as Gawain wears luxurious clothing. The *makere's* initiations, invocations and self-indications represent *makynge* as a practice performed out of speech acts. These speech acts clothe him in the veneer of a stable identity, but never reveal his actual identity. He names himself as neither cleric nor knight nor common-born. He is an anonymous *I*, covered in words that identify him as an authoritative *makere* of verse but that do not situate him among other, more recognizable forms of authoritative masculine identity. His practice of *makynge* creates worlds out of verse, but does not reveal him to be a man with a clear, identifiable social identity. Indeed, vernacular *makynge*, as imagined in SGGK, is a practice that is entirely performative. *Makynge* refuses to reveal the craftsman as anything but a persona, instead offering the poem's formal composition as proof of the *makere's* craft and skill. As the *makere's* representation, then Gawain telegraphs his participation in aristocratic manhood; he is immediately identifiable as masculine and chivalric because he wears the garb of elite knights. Gawain's body is covered

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[403] Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995) 138.

in the performative carapace of his chivalric masculinity; his clothing and armor serve here as a social skin. Gawain's masculine reputation emanates from him, extending beyond his native court into the unknown. When he travels in search of the Green Knight, he ends up in an unfamiliar castle where everyone already knows who he is, what he does, and of what he might socially and martially be capable. Indeed, the force of Gawain's reputation is such that the hall at Haut Desert is filled with knights each whispering to the one sitting next to him, that Gawain has arrived, "uch segge ful softly sayde to his fere" (915). These men murmur to one another that Gawain will provide them with "the teccheles termes of talkyng noble" (917); "teccheles" in this sense means faultless, without blame or effort, the seemingly innate skills of courtly speech.[404] While "talkyng noble" is an ability that seems to inhere in Gawain's very person, a social trick of chivalric behavior he has mastered without even trying, it is also presented as a discrete skill that might be learned by means of observation. The knights whisper that "in speche unspurd may we lerne/Syn we haf fonged that fine fader of nurture" (918-19), by careful listening and canny participation, the knights can learn the methods of "talkyng noble." Indeed, as Jeremy Lowe points out, "Gawain's courtliness at Bertilak's castle is something that others project *onto* him,"[405] in an economy of whispering and gossip. Noble talking is both an innate attribute that only knights possess and a skill that might be learned. It inheres as well as adheres.

Speech acts between and among chivalric men, in SGGK, serve to create a fragile chivalric masculinity, one which appears at first glance to be stable but which is also a commodity that can be acquired by others. In this way, the poem represents chivalric

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[404] The MED defines "teccheles" as "blameless, faultless." The word's only usage is in *SGGK*. "Teccheles" is a variant of the noun "tache," which means a characteristic, a feature of one's disposition, a peculiarity, a quirk; a blemish; a sign.

[405] Jeremy Lowe, Desiring Truth 178.

masculinity as an identity that must work hard at presenting itself as natural and innate, even as it also reveals itself to be something that can be learned. Just as the *makere's* own persona appears to be comfortably intimate, offering a first person voice while stubbornly refusing to reveal anything of that I, speech acts between knights are a mechanism for parsing the truth of masculine identity. I ask whether poetic speech can represent the masculine poetic self, arguing that SGGK's representation of its first person narrator is an attempt to render late medieval *makynge* as an occupational identity. This identity, although obscured and subsumed by the ornate content of the poem, is as highly produced—and as highly fragile and fungible—as the poem's own representations of chivalric masculinity. Indeed, SGGK represents both poetic *and* chivalric masculinity as being constituted by speech acts. A human person is responsible for formally crafting these acts, for rendering out of words the poetic edifices of performative masculinity. Speech acts in the poem serve not only to create knightly masculinity, but act as a trace of the *makere*'s own human presence. He made those words, those lines, that lengthy moment of *descriptio*. He is a man whose presence is marked by an *I* however occluded that *I* might make itself out to be.

Makynge *a Self Out of Speech*

SGGK, along with Cleanness, Patience and Pearl, is found in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript. Scholars attribute the poems are attributed to the same alliterative *makere*, a man who likely spoke a West Midlands dialect.[406] Nothing is concretely known about this man, although based on his dialect and his thematic preoccupations, scholars suspect he was a

[406] Angus McIntosh argues that the *makere's* dialect belongs to "a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire." See his "A New Approach to Middle English Dialectology," English Studies XLIV (1962): 1-11, at 5.

member of Richard II's Cheshire affinity.[407] Situating the *makere* within the northwest, Ad Putter argues that he was likely a cleric, and since "the northwest could boast no important seigniorial households," the poet was "almost certainly a cleric from the north west Midlands—probably a relatively unimportant cleric; perhaps in the service of a nobleman; and arguably, his patron belonged to the circle of prominent Cheshire courtiers at the royal household in London."[408] I do not dispute such historicist readings that attempt to situate the Cotton Nero A.x *makere's* poetic production within specific discourses of law, political power and courtliness, but it is difficult to reconcile such a reading with the very fictive, representational quality of the first person speaker in SGGK. The *I* who purports to tell the fantastic tale of SGGK is highly literate, but he is also stubbornly anonymous. He does not identify himself as a member of any social category, although his use of Cheshire dialect and his direct address to an audience imply his participation in a regional vernacular community of fellow dialect speakers. Only his formal composition of alliterative verse attests to his social or occupational identity. Certainly, that verse indicates his literate ability to participate in clerical culture. But it also represents him as a highly skilled *makere*, a man capable of rendering his own persona out of beautiful speech. Despite scholars' attempts to fit the *makere* of SGGK into the rubric of clerical bureaucracy, his poetry presents him not as a scribe but as a performer of alliterative verse lays. It makes critical sense to position the

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[407] Michael Bennett argues that the Gawain-poet was a member of this Cheshire affinity, seeing that affinity as a loose congeries of yeomen, archers, clerics, knights, and servants. See his "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Literary Achievement of the Northwest Midlands: The Historical Background," JMH 5 (1979): 63-88; as well as his Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Cambridge, 1983) 233-5; and his essay, "The Historical Background," in A Companion to the Gawain-poet, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1997) 71-90. John M. Bowers builds on this work to present a new historicist reading of *Pearl*; see his The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II.

[408] See Ad Putter, Introduction to the Gawain Poet (New York: Longman, 1996) 37.

makere of SGGK into the prevailing ideology of clerical literacy and low-level courtly striving, but as Mark Chinca has argued, late medieval poetry does not and cannot provide us with proof of the *makere's* participation in ideology.[409] It is difficult to know exactly how or what a speaking voice might mean, or even to whom that voice might be speaking. While a courtly poem may present the fiction of an elite audience, the poem itself is not necessarily the product of court culture. Particularly for poems that present moments of performative speech or minstrelsy, the extratextual context that frames the performance of those voices "is only partly and speculatively recoverable from the written record of the manuscripts."[410] In its being read aloud, the poem can reach a broad and diverse audience, and the voices in the poem can be performed multiply and can be interpreted in similarly multiple ways. All that we have of him now are his poems, written texts that purport to be oral performances, that confect a "fiction of orality" from the manuscript page.[411] The *makere* of SGGK identifies himself as a man who manufactures the possible, who invents and obscures himself and his characters.

The poem presents a fiction of speaking, a mode of minstrel-like performance, where the *makere* directly addresses an audience of listeners. The ultimate source of the story is said to be textual, taken from the books of Brutus ostensibly studied by the narrator, "the Brutus bokez thereof beres wyttenesse" (2523). But, as J.J. Anderson points out, "the narrator thinks of a written source as the script for an oral performance. He hears books rather than reads them. He alludes to himself several times as a listener and makes it clear

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[409] See Chinca, "'Women and Hunting Birds are Easy to Tame': Aristocratic Masculinity and the Early German Love Lyric," in Masculinity in Medieval Europe ed. D.M. Hadley (London: Longman, 1999) 199-213.

[410] Chinca 205.

[411] J.J. Anderson, Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005) 165.

that he puts his poem together from what he has heard, not what he has read."[412] The audience that he addresses is referred to as a group that "wyl lysten," as well; they are never referred to as readers (30). SGGK, as late medieval poetry, then, stands between oral performance and textual literacy. The idea that words hold less significance than moral actions—occupies the slippery space to which all acts of speech are prone. This blurriness between words and actions was a troubling problem for late medieval vernacular society, as older, oral traditions were cast aside in favor of newer, literate methods.[413] Where a man's word was once his bond, he more and more needed written documentation. In SGGK, the knight's words, his verbal performances, are presented as determinants of his trustworthiness. Gawain is described "as tulk of tale most trwe" (638), a knight most true of speech. But even as the poem purports to represent a smooth relationship between what a man says and who he is, it also undercuts this notion. Bertilak, after all, is also the Green Knight.

In his "Limited Inc a b c," Jacques Derrida claims that for all theories of speech acts, "the outside penetrates and thus determines the inside."[414] That is to say, speech represents thinking, and thus can never quite live up to what we most want speech to be, to be simply expressive. The pragmatic, outside ways in which speech gets used cannot perfectly match the "pure" ideals and hopes of our inside thoughts. We may tell the truth, but pure truth cannot ever totally be told; there is always a gap between what we say, what we think, and what is. One of the consequences of words, both spoken or written, is sense. But, to claim

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[412] Anderson 163.

[413] See Richard Firth Green, A Crisis of Truth.

[414] Jacques Derrida, Limited Inc. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 152-3.

that speech makes the world make sense, as theorists like John Searle and J.L. Austin have posited, is perhaps also to claim that speech is the stuff out of which we make nonsense, as well.[415] The signifiers of speech rarely measure up to the signs they represent, and, as Derrida argues further, "the theoretician of speech acts will have to get used to the idea that, knowingly or not, willingly or not, both his treatment of things and the things themselves are marked in advance by the possibility of fiction, either as the iterability of acts or as the system of conventionality."[416] The possibility of fiction is the juncture between the word and what it means. That juncture or gap was a troublesome problem for the late medieval English *makere,* trying to make verse out of a vernacular language decidedly in flux.[417] To make verse is to invent, to represent verbally a world in which men say they are one thing but actually mean something else entirely, one where Gawain's verbal agreements keep coming deceitfully undone. Knights speak to one another, in SGGK, with an intimacy that always borders on deception and on violence.

Language is constitutive of social identity. As Searle argues, "words have consequences."[418] Speech acts bind people to each other, as in the case of marriage; and bind people to larger communities, as in the case of oaths and pledges. But, although institutional power buttresses many performative speech acts, not every speech act is so obvious. In all speech acts, "there is something which is at the moment of uttering being

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[415]Searle and Austin have posited that speech acts—oaths, vows, pledges of allegiance—make social and institutional reality. See John Searle, The Construction of Social Reality (New York: The Free Press, 1995), particularly Chapter 3, "Language and Social Reality"; and J.L. Austin, How to Do Things With Words (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

[416] Derrida, "Limited" 100.

[417] Watson and Somerset, The Vulgar Tongue.

[418] Searle 66.

done by the person uttering."[419] What is being done between the knights of SGGK is identity, where the subtle differences between pronoun usage are enough to create a threat or a bond, depending on the performative valence of that usage. When Bertilak and Gawain enter into a spoken bond together, they speak with the utmost formality, addressing one another in the plural first person *we*, an act of collegiality and intimate togetherness. "Swete, swap we so, sware with trawthe,/Quether, leude, so lymp, lere other better," Bertilak says to Gawain (Sweet, let us swear troth, he says, whatever comes to us, whether it is good or bad, we'll swap it) (1108-9). The two men make a binding verbal agreement to share whatever gifts or bounty they receive while Gawain visits Haut Desert. If Gawain obtains something within the castle walls, he must give it, and if Bertilak hunts down prey, he must likewise offer it in kind. The gift-giving here is transparently reciprocal, an exchange between equals, and because the agreement is made by giving "trawthe," by making a verbal public oath, it is that much more meaningful.

When he speaks as Bertilak, in a public and courteous effort at making a gift-giving agreement with Gawain, the knight speaks formally. He uses the second person formal pronoun *ye* as his mode of address. "When ye wyl, with my wyf, that with yow schal sitte/And comfort yow with company, til I to cort torne" (1098-9). You should sit, when you want to, with my wife and socialize with her until I return to court, Bertilak tells him. Yet when he speaks as the Green Knight, Bertilak addresses other knights with the second person familiar pronoun, *thee*. The modes of address that Bertilak uses here are crucial: they create a social fabric of oaths, intimacy and implied violence. His public *we* and *ye* stand in opposition to the way that the Green Knight speaks to Arthur's court, or to the way that

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[419] Austin 60.

Gawain and the Green Knight speak to one another when they are testing one another on the battlefield. While these pronoun utterances might slip by unnoticed, woven as they are into the matrix of basic talk and narrative, they are charged speech acts relevant not only to the characters within the poem but to the vernacular audience listening to and/or reading the poem. It is through speech acts that chivalric masculine identities in SGGK are performed and understood as performative constructs.

Makynge Martial Intimacy

While the informal second person singular pronoun *thee* is now archaic, easily lost in quick reading, for late medieval English speakers using the term was a means to enact social distinctions, to express intimacy, and/or to publicly dress someone down.[420] Because Middle English uses of *thee* were primarily among family, close associates, and servants, *thee* among knights is a direct form of address that creates immediate community and intimacy between its users. It is also a term that makes vivid, particularly during poetic recitation, dialogue between two knights. Although Modern English speakers do not register the social valence of *thee*, contemporary medieval audiences for SGGK would have been readily aware of the subtle hieratic distinctions in *thee* usage. To use *thee* is to make another familiar, but it is also a mechanism for establishing hierarchy. It is a speech act that creates an immediate addressor and addressee and that establishes rank between them in a performative speech act interlaced with power. Judith Butler argues, speech acts are a performance through which authority—whether of one person over another, or of the state over a person, is exercised.

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[420] See Allan A. Metcalf, "Sir Gawain and You," Chaucer Review 5 (1971): 165-78; William Evans, "Dramatic Use of the Second Person Singular Pronoun in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Studia Neophilologica 39 (1967): 38-45; Jonathan Nicholls, The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-poet (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985) 106, 119.

> Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include […] statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse.[421]

In being articulated, a speech act can be a performance through which identity is constituted. Publicly performed words, then, are both an action and an act of power. In SGGK, use of the second person familiar pronoun *thee* does not only act *as* discourse, but *makes* discourse, for discourse cannot happen without an addressor, an *I*, and an addressee, a *thou*. When knights in the poem use *thee*, they create a discourse of power through which masculine chivalric identities are created and defined. Only a small word, used in the 'wrong' way, the 'wrong' context, *thee* unsettles the balance of courtly power and humiliates. Called out between heroic knights, in the test of battle-games, *thee* bounds the exclusive intimacy of knightly identity. Between knights, in SGGK, *thee* is a term that instantiates a martial intimacy, one fraught by threats of violence, and one which suggests just how fragile the poem's construction of chivalric masculinity might be. *Thee* makes Gawain a man's man as much as it makes him an inferior, in a poem where chivalric identity is always under construction.

Thee usage is hard to render in a translation from Middle to Modern English. James Winny acknowledges that one of the details he had to lose in his translation of SGGK was

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[421] Butler, Bodies That Matter 225.

the *makere's* context-specific usage of the separate informal and formal second person singular pronouns. In a brief essay on translation practice which follows the poem, Winny notes that "the poet's use of the second person singular presents a further problem for the translator," because "the pronouns *thou*, *thee*, and *thine* are no longer in common use, and to reintroduce them would be false to the spirit of a modern translation."[422] But, as he argues, a falsity to the "spirit" of modern translation is not as bad as the more serious problem "that these terms of address had nuances of meaning that are now lost or obscure."[423] Ultimately Winny solves this problem of meaning by declaring that while "modern readers may notice" the variations between *thee* and *you*, they "cannot be expected to recognize their significance."[424] He thus translates *thee* as *you* throughout the poem, despite the specificities of context in which the *makere* of SGGK uses the second person familiar pronoun.

Even though the use of *thee* distorts meaning when used in casual Modern English discourse, the pronoun has a long history of being used to convey or to undo hierarchical distinctions. In the early modern period, insistent and frequently socially inappropriate usage of *thee* was an effort at clarity, particularly among the Religious Society of Friends. Such speech acts, called "plain speech," were part of a broad spectrum of "plain" behaviors, such as the refusal to remove one's hat, the refusal to wear brightly colored clothes, and the

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[422] See SGGK 155-6. Winny's translation issues are obviously applicable to all translations from Middle into Modern English, because Middle English frequently does use the informal second person pronoun in quite subtle ways.

[423] SGGK 157.

[424] SGGK 157. I do not agree with Winny that modern readers will not notice *you/thee* distinctions. While not frequent, *thee* is still used in some Modern English speech communities, particularly among orthodox members of the Religious Society of Friends in the U.S. Although my membership in this speech community does place me in an admittedly small minority, I have been addressed as *thee* as recently as 2000. For an overview of American Quaker speech practices, see Ezra Kempton Maxfield, "Quaker 'Thee' and Its History," American Speech 1.12 (1926): 638-44.

refusal to take public oaths.[425] These behaviors were intended and widely perceived to be acts of resistance to ideological power. An early Friend, George Fox recounts that during the mid-seventeenth century, he changed his social behaviors to better reflect his sense of the equality between all people.

> When the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to "thee" and "thou" all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small. And as I traveled up and down, I was not to bid people "good morrow" or "good evening," neither might I bow or scrape with my leg to any one.[426]

A single standard of behavior applied to everyone. The matter was important enough for Friends to continue the use of "plain" behaviors in the face not simply of social opprobrium and the loss of capital, but of imprisonment and abuse.[427] Thomas Ellwood, aide to the poet John Milton, recounts that after becoming a Friend, he changed the way he related to his father, much to his father's offense. "Whenever I had occasion to speak to my father, though I had no hat now to offend him, yet my language did as much; for I durst not say 'you' to him, but 'thou' and 'thee,' as the occasion required, and then would he be sure to fall on me with his fists."[428] Ellwood's sister feared that their father would kill him in his anger at being addressed so disrespectfully.[429]

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[425] Jessamyn West, The Quaker Reader (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1962) 5-8.

[426] West 54.

[427] West 5-8.

[428] West 160.

[429] West 162.

Adhering to one standard of everyday language, in this case *thee*—the pronoun for children, spouses, servants—when speaking to social superiors calls into question whether superiority really matters. As Jessamyn West maintains, the use of "plain speech" among Friends was a refusal "to have one language which flattered and one which devalued."[430] It was an effort to be as true to one's word as possible, as if, through sheer linguistic force, a plain speaker could prevent herself from slipping into falsity, into ornament, and thus bind herself to saying only what she meant. The disturbing tendency of words to come unmoored from truth, from meaning, is at issue in the use of "plain speech."[431] To make a vow or an oath is to attempt to speak truthfully, to make one's intentions toward another plain. Austin argues that in the case of oaths, "accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*."[432] But to offer an oath is also to imply that there may be other times when one does not speak truthfully, when one's word is *not* one's bond. The oath, much like the late medieval and early modern use of *thee*, is a charged speech act. Among seventeenth century Friends, to use *thee* was an act of social leveling; *thee* was a mode of address as appropriate for king and for God as it was for children and for servants. To use *thee*, especially in a social milieu in which such distinctions mattered, is to point out the hierarchy that exists between the formal and informal modes of address. Between knights, in SGGK, *thee* acts as both hierarchical goad and as social leveler. Moreover, within the representation of the poem, the use of *thee* implies that knights may present themselves to be

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[430] West 6.

[431] Notably, while Friends who regularly use "plain speech" are in a shrinking minority, *thee* remains the mode of address used in contemporary marriage vows between American Friends. See Faith and Practice: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1998) 53.

[432] Austin 10.

fully in control of themselves and of how others perceive them, but that such control may not actually be possible. Indeed, *thee* indicates the social production of identity, a production that may appear effortless but that is also laborious. *Thee* is the fulcrum upon which the poem's representation of chivalric masculinity as a construct, as a process, is positioned. For the late medieval vernacular audience listening to and/or reading SGGK, *thee* is a single word that instantiates a wealth of hierarchical distinctions. The practice of *makynge* is rendered through the use of such seemingly minor pronouns. The *makere* practices his craft by knitting together words to form poetic meaning. The smallest and most fleeting speech acts are proof of his ability to make plausible his characters and the representational world within which they operate. Thee indicates not simply the performativity of chivalric masculinity, but the *makere's* own craft practice, his skill at *makynge* fiction.

The representational world of the poem is a heterocosm, a space that at once resembles lived reality and fantastically departs from it. Poetry, in this sense, acts "as a constitutive act, a social praxis," because it imbues aesthetic language with the power to invent, according to John Niles.[433] While it participates in and serves to create the historical moment in which it was made, SGGK, like late medieval English poetry more generally, does not pretend to realism. It is a fictional, verbal realm in which a giant green man can be decapitated, pick his head up off the floor, turn it to face his audience, and still keep talking. Within the poem, words act as both bond and as separation; they are a way to connect knights and also to split them into isolated, shamed individuals. But words are also the stuff out of which the poem itself is made, the crafted proof of the *makere's* aesthetic skill. He is capable of doing things—lots of strange things—with words. Indeed, SGGK begs the

[433] John D. Niles, "Reconceiving Beowulf: Poetry as Social Praxis," College English 61.2 (1998): 143-166, at 154.

question of whether a knight's word genuinely could ever be a bond if in fact all words are representational.

The "lel lettres" with which the poem begins eventually create the weird and beautiful images of the Green Knight who so brashly enters the Christmas court of King Arthur. And we, as audience, are meant to linger carefully over every description, every adjective that represents the Green Knight. The poem takes great pleasure in the verbal effects of the alliterative catalogue, a lengthy and lavishly detailed description of the Green Knight's equally lavish chivalric gear:

> And al grathed in grene this gome and his wedes:
> A strayte cote ful streght, that stek on his sides,
> A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne
> With pelure pured apert, the pane ful clene
> With blithe blaunner ful bright, and his hode bothe,
> That watz light fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes;
> Heme wel-haled hose of that same,
> That spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures under
> Of bright golde, upon silk bordes barred ful ryche,
> And scholes under schankes there the schalk rides;
> And all his vesture verayly watz clene verdure,
> Both the barres of his belt and other blithe stones,
> That were richely rayled in his array clene
> Aboutte himself and his sadel, upon silk werkez. (151-164)

The sentence is memorable not simply because it is so lengthy, but because it forces the audience to slow down, to bend to the *makere's* descriptive tyranny. The audience can visualize what he tells it to, starting with the Green Knight's straight coat, moving categorically to his mantle, furs and banner, his hood, hair and shoulders, his hose, his bright gold spurs resting on embroidered silk, on down to the encrusted jewels that adorn his

saddle.[434] The audience is meant to "see" this knight fully, and thereby, to admire the *makere's* skill at creating such a fine figure out of verse. His skills are on display, here, a staging of verbal representation that is akin to a material masterpiece made by a master artisan. Not once but twice the *makere* points out that the Green Knight's ornamentation is "clene." [435] This adjective is instructive; it speaks literally to the jeweler's craft of neatly setting stones in fine metal. "Clene" speaks as well to the *makere's* craft of adorning adjectives within the larger setting of the narrative. If he uses too many adjectives, or if they are too imprecise, he muddies meaning. Too few, and the audience can't fully visualize the grandiosity of the character. Thus the *makere* doesn't just say that the knight wears a well-fitting coat; he instructs his listeners to fixate on the Green Knight's "strayt" coat that is "ful streght" and that sticks "on his sides." This is a bespoke outfit, cleanly tailored to fit only the Green Knight, and the poem is a similarly bespoke effort to render that figure as clearly, as beautifully, as possible.[436] While the Green Knight is clearly elite, increased mercantile activity in late medieval English society meant that many common-born people could afford fine clothing. According to Susan Crane, for most of the medieval period, "garments for all social levels used simple geometric cuts that might conceal or reveal the body, but did not aspire to revise the body's contours;" it was only in the fourteenth century that cutting to fit emerges.[437] Chaucer's Wife of Bath, a female wool merchant who is a member of the

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[434] Derek Pearsall notes that this description is "a piece of conscious literary decoration." See his "Rhetorical 'Descriptio' in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," The Modern Language Review 50.2 (1955): 126-134, at 130.

[435] The *makere's* use of "clene" here has an echo in both Cleanness and Pearl. See Casey Finch, et. al., The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet.

[436] The late fourteenth century saw a growing taste for the finely tailored bespoke outfit, fitted for an individual aristocratic body. Such form-fitting clothing allowed for more personal self-expression in material. See Stella Mary Newton, Fashion in the Age of the Black Prince: A Study of the Years 1340-1365 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1980).

common class, is represented as wearing bespoke garments in quite public ways. She wears form-fitting scarlet hose and an immense head covering, both of which are intended to telegraph her social status and to highlight the specific shape of her body.[438]

When the Green Knight enters Arthur's hall, he refuses to dismount from his green horse, drawing the attention of everyone at court. Just as the audience for the poem has been encouraged to fixate on the Green Knight's body and adornment, so too does the courtly audience gathered at the Round Table. The Green Knight is intimidating: he brandishes a huge holly branch in one hand and an "ax in his other, a hoge and unmete" (206). Towering over everyone, the Green Knight rides directly to Arthur's dais and demands to see "the governour of this gyng" (225). The Green Knight is not being very polite—he carries a menacing weapon and refuses to submit to the authority of the king. Moreover, he is the first to speak, and from a physical height, because he has refused to dismount from his horse. Arthur attempts to restore order; appropriate for his status, he creates familiarity out of the Green Knight's very strangeness by using the familiar form of address. "Lyght luflych adoun and lenge, I the praye,/And quat-so thy wylle is we schal wyt after," he says (Dismount from your horse and linger, I pray thee. Spend some time and we'll talk and get to know your will)(254-5).

The Green Knight, however, will not conform. He refuses to get down from his horse, challenging the members of the hall to a macabre Christmas war game, and he addresses Arthur inappropriately, using the familiar form (254). When no one rises to his challenge, the Green Knight insults the crowd:

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[437] See Crane, The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing and Identity During the Hundred Years War (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 13.

[438] See Laura F. Hodges, Chaucer and Costume: the Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue (Cambridge, MA: DS Brewer, 2000) 162-171.

> 'What, is this Arthures hous?' quoth the hathel thenne,
> 'That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquests,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?'
> (309-12)

The challenger mocks Arthur's fame—where is your arrogance, your conquests, he asks? Where too are your terribleness, your wrath, your boastful words? It is the last question that stings. Arthur's reputation, like Gawain's, precedes him in the mouths and murmurings of other knights, other subjects. He himself has spoken great words which have been themselves repeated. Yet the Green Knight's behavior renders everyone speechless, even as he frustratingly demands to know why no one will respond.

The Green Knight's "grete wordes" are more subtly constituted than a traditional, physical act of boasting. And Gawain responds in kind, verbally rescuing the situation by drawing attention to his own careful use of speech. He beseeches the king for permission to take up the challenge. "'I beseche yow with sayez sene/This melly mot be myne,'" Gawain politely asks (341-2). Winny translates the request as "'I beg you in plain words/To let this task be mine.'" But Gawain's words are not plain; he falls all over himself in an effort to be effusively courteous, to address his uncle properly and formally. In so doing, his behavior and his acts of deferential speech provide a telling foil for the Green Knight's brusque incivility. Where the Green Knight refuses to dismount and uses the familiar form of address before a king he does not know, Gawain uses the formal form to ask Arthur—his uncle and intimate—if he might have permission to stand up from his seat and leave the dais. He performs, with exquisite care, the proper mode of polite address.

> 'Wolde ye, worthilych lorde,' quoth Wawan to the kyng,
> 'Bid me bowe fro this benche, and stoned by yow there,
> That I wythoute vylanye might voyde this table.' (343-5)

Gawain's courtesy is over the top. "I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest," Gawain complains in an elaborate *apologia* (354). I am the weakest one, and my mind is feeble, he bemoans. "But for as much as ye are myn em I am only to prayse" he declares (356). It is only because he is nephew to a great king, Gawain claims, that he deserves any praise at all. In this excessive apology, Gawain's performance appears intended for formal, public consumption, for although all eyes were first on the Green Knight's freakish dress and ornament, every ear has turned to listen to Gawain's pretty speech. It is those ears that, pressed "ryche togeder," determine that indeed Gawain should be the one to fight the Green Knight (362-5).

The *makere* gives over an entire stanza to Gawain's courtly prostrations before Arthur and the court, his polite attempts to take up the Green Knight's challenge so that Arthur won't have to. The fact that Gawain uses *you* emphasizes his mannered performance. The one person in the court who, by rights, might address Arthur using *thee*, Gawain insists on using the most formal locution he can, as if to offset his good manners against the churlishness of his opponent. The Green Knight may use *thee* with people he does not know, but Gawain will properly use *you* with his uncle. The Green Knight uses the familiar with Gawain as well, demanding to know his name in a brusque fashion: "I ethe the, hathel, how that thou hates" (379). Gawain gives it; he is, after all, "the goode knyght" to his adversary's bad in the first fitt (381). But the Green Knight never provides his own name in kind, instead withholding it as part of the larger battle-game that he uses to test Gawain.

> 'Yif I the telle trwly quen I the tape have,

> And thou me sothely hatz smyten, smartly I the teche
> Of my hous and my home and myn owene nome,
> Then may thou frayst my fare and forwardez holde;
> And if I spende no speche, thenne spedez thou the better,
> For thou may leng in thy londe and layt no fyrre—
> bot slokes!' (406-412)

Where Gawain is a man of many diverse and artful words, his adversary is gruff and withholding. He cuts himself off with the interjection 'bot slokes!' enough. And he likens talk to commerce, to spending. To keep silent in the Green Knight's idiolect is to "spende no speche." Chivalric identity, traditionally structured around conspicuous consumption and material display, is rendered here as being a kind of verbal commodity. The Green Knight's words are precious, not to be expended frivolously. The poem later presents an ideal exchange of gifts, a one-for-one equal trade between Gawain and Bertilak. But words, for the Green Knight, are not freely given gifts. They are instead carefully and parsimoniously doled out. Like a gruffly medieval Marlboro Man, the Green Knight uses words only when necessary. He refuses to divulge the information that would make him known, for although he knows Gawain and Arthur by name and stands in Arthur's court, he will not provide his audience with any of the means of properly addressing him, of ever fully knowing him. The Green Knight is a man of no address: no house, no home, no name. He is instead all boast, all physical performance, and super-physical prowess. He is the only person who could survive a public decapitation and turn that horror towards his own purposes. He picks up his own head, faces it towards the dais and, lifting up his own eyelids, continues to address royal power (446-8).

Compare this extreme discourtesy to Arthur's own verbal display of calm control in the face of supernatural horror. Although the poet tells us that the "kyng at hert hade

wonder," Arthur allows "no semblaunt be sene" (467-8). Instead he addresses Guenevere in a public display of paternal power meant to be heard by all. "Wyth cortays speche," Arthur tells her not to be alarmed (469). "To-day demay yow never," he says, formally (470). Do not be dismayed by what has just happened, for "well bycommes such craft upon Cristmasse" (471). Weird things happen at Christmas! Relax! Arthur's formality of speech here heightens the sense of real unease and strangeness that pervades the hall. His imperative to the queen, let today never dismay you, is not so much a consolation as it is an explicit instruction. Everyone, Arthur included, is disturbed by what has occurred, but by addressing the queen in formal tones of comfort—for she, being the embodiment of courtly femininity, is the only one with social license to express fear—the king can reclaim verbal control over his court. The Green Knight introduces the underbelly of chivalric power into Arthur's well-mannered court, questioning whether chivalry is all that well-mannered after all, built as it is on terror, war and masculine violence. Despite, or perhaps because of, his bad manners and direct modes of address, the Green Knight is the superlative representation, in the first fitt, of masculine courtly identity. His challenge to Arthur and Gawain is forceful enough that it threatens to snatch the power of attention away from the king.

As Cecily Clark has posited, Arthur speaks only sixteen lines in the text, "but they are enough to show what his characteristic manner is: he too uses imperatives freely and rarely stoops to qualify any proposition—and from him this is what is to be expected, since a king is above condition and concession and has every right to command."[439] It is this speech pattern that the Green Knight also uses: "whether he is in his own hall or in Arthur's he

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[439]Cecily Clark, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Characterisation by Syntax," Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism 16.4 (1966): 361-376, at 366.

speaks in the same lordly tone, and by this he shows himself to stand outside the ordinary conventions of Arthurian society."[440] But because the Green Knight speaks first, he puts Arthur and Gawain on the defensive. The Green Knight's forms of address force Arthur and Gawain to behave in compensatory fashion. Thus Arthur and Gawain deploy formal speech as a way to bound courtly space around themselves, their courtly audience, and Guenevere, while the Green Knight snatches attention toward himself, demanding that everyone look and listen to his aggression. But Arthur and Gawain's masculinity is not organized around aggressive shouting and transgressive battle games. Rather, it is defined by an overly careful, public way of speaking. Gawain and Arthur are to be understood as skilled not simply in acts of chivalric violence but in propriety and civility. They speak in order to refinish the polished surfaces of their representation.

If chivalric identity is performative, forever in the process of being made meaningful, then such identities must also be understood as public, as meant for consumption. The audience is meant to be as titillated and interested in the Green Knight's weirdness as it is consoled by Gawain's own formal rectitude. And, the audience is supposed to know these men, to recognize them. The fact that the poet refuses to give us the identity of the Green Knight is an aporia made meaningful by the fact that everybody knows Gawain. When Gawain finally goes questing and stumbles upon Bertilak's lovely castle in the sky, chivalry is produced in formal excess. Where the Green Knight was early reluctant to expend words, hoping to control his silence and his speech as if they were precious commodities, chivalry here is an otiose ideal. Everything is arranged to be as luxurious and as effortless as possible. The castle's servants kneel on the ground when Gawain enters and he is escorted into the

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[440] Clark 366.

hall by an entourage of knights and squires (816-824). The castle's lord comes down from his private chamber, "for to mete with menske the mon on the flor," to show his respect, and calls out to Gawain using the formal *you*: "ye ar welcum to welde as yow lykez" (834-5). Gawain responds in kind, "graunt mercy," he says, "ther Kryst hit yow foryelde" (838-9). This courteous interaction is clinched when "ayther other in armez con felde," the two knights, heretofore unknown to each other, embrace (841).

Gawain is politely questioned, after he has been gloriously fed, warmed and clothed, as to his identity. The *makere* belabors this process, as he does Gawain's earlier production of politesse.

> Thenne watz spyed and spured upon spare wyse
> Bi preve poyntez of that prynce, put to hymselven,
> That he biknew cortaysly of the court that he were
> That athel Arthure the hende haldez hym one,
> That is the ryche ryal kyng of the Rounde Table,
> And hit watz Wawen himself that in that won syttez. (901-6)

Ever delicately, correctly, "by preve poyntez," Gawain is asked about his identity. This performance of propriety is predicated on foreknowledge; the knights at Haut Desert have tact because they already know who Gawain is. His behavior is matchless, as is their own. It is Gawain himself who, these nobles believe, will provide them with a template for chivalric courtly behavior. Either a knight automatically has these skills, or he doesn't. And both the knights and Gawain indicate that they do possess the social skills that are the requisites of chivalry.

Even the lord of the castle, seemingly without being told, "couthely hym knowez and callez hym his nome" (937). This intimate, "couthely" knowledge sets off a subtle alarm in the back of the reader's head—why should anybody know Gawain in the oddly depopulated

geography that surrounds Haut Desert? But Gawain's chivalry heralds him, his "clannes and his cortaysye croked were never" (653). Gawain wears the right garments, the proper symbols, uses the most artfully formal speech. The force of that clean and straight courtesy, we are led to believe, is powerful enough to create an aura that precedes him right into this alien castle where he knows no one but everyone immediately knows him. Throughout the time that Gawain spends in Bertilak's castle, everyone addresses him in formal terms; they take great pains to treat him courteously and he responds with equally good manners. On infinite display, the members of Bertilak's castle perform chivalry in excess. The place is so concerned with manners that it is little surprise that the turrets and chimneys are so fantastic that they are initially described as "pared out of papure purely hit semed" (802). The poet compares the castle's crenellations to paper cut-outs, a complex signifier of both luxury and impermanence.[441] Symbolized as a paper cut out, the castle seems delicate, easily destroyed—the opposite of what a military stronghold should emphasize to onlookers. Yet the use of the paper simile also indicates a contemporary obsession with luxury goods, with expensive displays of aristocratic wealth. Just as the Green Knight introduces the innate violence of chivalry, so too does the *makere*, with the comparison of the castle's crenellations to paper cut-outs, question the actual force of chivalric identity. What if knights were also made of paper, inconsequential and easily swept away? What if the knight, and what he represents, is as ephemeral and precious as a rare model built to sit on a table and to be admired, but with little pragmatic use? The poetic rendering of chivalry might similarly be all speech, all hot air, as easily made and as easily ignored as a single pronoun.

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[441] See Patrick Greig Scott, "A Note on the Paper Castle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Notes and Queries 13.4 (1966): 125-6.

Throughout the time he spends in Bertilak's castle, Gawain uses the second person familiar pronoun *thee* only when he speaks with servants. He addresses the lord and the lady in proper formality, and the lady is the only aristocratic speaker who uses the informal pronoun with Gawain. The fact that she does so speaks to her strangely seductive behavior and dress. She comes into Gawain's bedchamber one morning with "hir thriven face and hir throte throwen al naked,/Hir brest bare before, and bihinde eke" (1741-2). She has her head uncovered—unusual for a married noblewoman—and has exposed her throat, chest and shoulders. And she calls out to him familiarly: "a, mon, how may thou slepe" (1746), like a mother calling out to a child.[442] This performance is not so much for Gawain, who remains "in dregh droupying of dreme draveled," but for the reader (1750). We are supposed to notice her lovely but skimpy clothing, her intimate behavior, and are meant perhaps to feel a hint of unease. The lady is not performing as a proper lady but as something else.[443] Like the Green Knight, she uses familiar address even when those around her do not. She speaks forthrightly, familiarly, in situations where she does not exactly have the leeway to do so. And, like the Green Knight, she determines the terms of discourse; she knows who Gawain is, but he never learns her name.

When Gawain finally leaves the lady's company, after accepting her love token of the magic girdle, he rides out on the last day of the year to meet his challenge. After approaching "the corsedest kyrk that ever I com inne," where he hears the sound of an ax being sharpened on a grindstone, he bravely announces himself by name (2196, 2202). From

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[442] A similar speech act occurs in Piers Plowman, when a female voice wakes the dreamer by asking, "Sone, slepestow" (B.I.5)?

[443] See Geraldine Heng, "A Woman Wants: The Lady, Gawain and the Forms of Seduction," Yale Journal of Criticism 5 (1992): 101-34; as well as her earlier "Feminine Knots and the Other: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA 106 (1992): 500-514. More recently, Sharon Rowley has examined the Lady's inscrutability and seemingly "natural," (and thereby *un*natural) femininity. See her "Textual Studies, Feminism and Performance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," The Chaucer Review 33.2 (2003): 158-177.

above, the Green Knight hails him: "thou schal haf al in hast that I the hyght ones" (2218). The Green Knight speaks to Gawain as knights do on the battlefield, using the familiar, in contrast to the way in which Bertilak and his knights in the hall used *you* with him. The outdoor battle between Gawain and the Green Knight revisits their original meeting, when they spoke roughly to each other and first tested each other. Here, Gawain need not impress with his courteous speech, but uses the informal in kind. Even so, Gawain's behavior does not match the bravado of his speech: he "schranke a lytel with the schulderes for the scharp yrne" (2267). Gawain here is described in the harsh consonants of Anglo-Saxon: his "schulderes" "schranke" from "scharp yrne." He is no Frenchified knight, adroit on the battlefield and well-versed in Gallic terminology. He shrinks from sharp iron. And he does so in a way that, onomatopoetically, whispers in a home-grown idiolect of secrecy and shame. It is that shrinking away which so infuriates his adversary. The Green Knight assaults Gawain "with mony prowde wordez," the most painful of which speak directly to Gawain's shameful flinching, his infelicitous splitting between brave, careless speech and frightened action (2269). "Thou art not Gawayn," the Green Knight tells him (2270). Where Bertilak knew Gawain "couthely" in the courteous setting of the hall, here the Green Knight declares that "such cowardice of that knight cowthe I never here" (2273). The Green Knight claims no longer to recognize Gawain because Gawain flinched. As Derek Pearsall has argued, Gawain thinks himself to be "the perfect knight, for his inner is his outer, just as he proclaims himself united in himself in the pentangle and equally in the inside and the outside of his shield."[444] The problem, here, is that Gawain's inner self has emerged in a moment of telling weakness. He is afraid, and if he is afraid and shows it he is no longer

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[444] See Derek Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the Order of Shame and the Inventions of Embarrassment." In A Companion to the Gawain-Poet 351-361, at 358-9.

such a man of proud strength. A fissure has erupted between his inner terror of death and his outward performance of bravado.

When the truth is revealed—that the magic girdle was given to Gawain with Bertilak's own knowledge—Gawain is stricken by wordlessness. "That other stif mon in study stod a gret whyle,/So agreved for greme he gryed withinne" (2369-70). Gawain is strong, immobile; he can't speak. And it is Bertilak, now also revealed to be the Green Knight, who drops his brusque *thou's* and again uses the formal form of address. The truth brings with it courtesy, although the courtesy feels like cold comfort to Gawain. Bertilak's deception drove him and his wife to trick Gawain, he tells him, and Gawain's only sin, as he sees it, was in desiring the token of the deception, the girdle, a little too much.

> Bot here yow lakked a little, sir, and lewte yow wonted;
> Bot that watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowying nauther,
> Bot for ye lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame (2364-7).

Gawain is now no longer *thee* but *sir* and *you*; the means of addressing him have shifted upwards considerably. Indicative of a reversed power structure, where now Bertilak confers authority and chivalric authenticity to Arthur's superlative knight, the use of the formal pronoun adds an ironic and multivalent register. Given that Gawain now believes himself to be "fawty and falce" as a consequence of his deception, while it is Bertilak and Morgan le Fay who have deceived, concealed and tricked their way through the narrative, the formality of Bertilak's address is a considerable irony (2382). Later in this moment, Bertilak attempts to absolve Gawain of his guilt. Like a confessor, Bertilak tells Gawain:

> Thou art confessed so clene, beknowen of thy mysses,
> And hatz the penaunce apert of the point of myn egge,
> I halde polysed of that plight, and pured as clene

> As thou hadez never forfeted sythen thou watz first borne;
> And I gif the, sir, the gurdel that is golde-hemmed;
> For hit is grene as my goune, Sir Gawayne, ye maye
> Thenk upon this ilke threpe, ther thou forth thryngez
> Among princes of prys, and this a pure tokem
> Of the chaunce of the grene chapel at chivalrous knyghtez.
> (2391-9)

Here Bertilak acts like an intimate priest, but he is no priest at all. Rather, he is the epitome of knightly aggression. He has no authority to act as confessor, and the fact that he attempts to wield that power makes him slightly dangerous. To compare him, and his violent chivalric power, to that of a confessor is troubling. Are priests like rapacious knights? Is confession something that could ravage the mind as ferociously as a mercenary might sack the foreign countryside? More than this, Bertilak's speech here reveals the uneasiness of the private confession as a mechanism of the intimate production of a self.[445] He wavers between the two forms of address, at once an intimate confessor to Gawain and also a foe. He is both close, with his *thou*, and he is also appallingly far, with his *sir* and *ye*. Where Bertilak stands, in terms of those around him, is never totally clear. Who Bertilak is, moreover, is continuously up in the air. Neither a fully human man nor a magical knight, his power seems limitless.

Gawain's worst sin seems to lie not in the blurring of identities—notice as well that Bertilak is not the one who pays penance for anything—but in not conforming more strictly to the markers of masculine chivalric identity. For an audience comprised of middling, common-born people, themselves engaged in the processes of performing new and fragile identities, Gawain's struggle to correctly perform chivalric masculinity might come as

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[445] On confession as a medieval technology that worked to control and also make possible the private, interiorized subject, see Karma Lochrie, Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

consolation. If identity is in continuous production, then proper performance might be a commodified skill, something to be learned even as it appears to be innate. Gawain has a private self, and that may be his worst fault. It is that private self who is intimately addressed in the bedchamber by the Lady, when she asks whether he is sleeping, speaking to him as a lovers do, as a mother might do to a child. His inner fear is made public when he shrinks in fear before the Green Knight's blade, and he is also publicly shamed by being tricked. And yet his anger is never directed towards the powerful one who tricked him, the knight who is never exactly who he says he is, but instead directed towards women generally and towards himself. Gawain rails against "cowarddyse and covetyse bothe" (2274), and declares that it was "care of thy knokke" that taught him to be cowardly (2379). But that is the only *thy* Gawain allows himself, with Bertilak, and he quickly declares that "al fawty is my fare" (2386). His reputation has been sullied, he no longer completely knows himself, and that alienation is rendered in his shift to the formal form. He is holding himself together enough to be correct, and he does so despite the fact that he has just been painfully deceived. Something strange has happened, inwardly, for Gawain, and yet that moment of private change is elided by his abrupt turn to propriety. As at Arthur's court, Gawain could by rights use the informal, speak familiarly and assertively with a fellow knight who is not behaving all that chivalrously. But Gawain can't allow himself that much leeway. The result is an effusion of dulcet *yow's* and *ye's* (2409-13). Bertilak's gift of the girdle is taken up as penance, becoming "a syngne of my surfet" for Gawain, visible proof of flinching, of accepting the token offered in duplicity (2433).

If the outward display of courtesy is, for true knights, a mirror image of their inner nature, then Gawain has found himself in an awkward bind.[446] He has had private dealings with a strange woman, and he has secretly accepted her gift. And he has concealed the receipt of that gift from her husband, the man with whom he has made a public, spoken agreement. More than this, even though her gift bestows on him invincibility, he somehow doesn't fully believe that he is invincible. He balks before accepting his due in a battle game. Somewhere within his inner self, he is afraid, and that fear has been made public in his hesitance in the face of death. Gawain's flinch is enough to make him unrecognizable to his foe, and perhaps, to the readers of the poem as well. "Thou art not Gawayn," the Green Knight tells him (2270). And, although the Green Knight has determined the terms of the battle throughout, and has played fast and loose with the boundaries of identity—is he magic knight or lord Bertilak? What kind of man can survive decapitation?—it is Gawain who must wear the girdle as a sign of duplicitous shame. "Trw mon trwe restore," the Green Knight tells him, just before he reveals his own "true" identity (2354). But Gawain has been the one knight, in the poem, who does most closely adhere to the conventions of public courtesy. Gawain is in many ways an exemplary "trwe mon": there is very little about himself that he must keep secret. Constructed out of spoken circumlocutions, profusions, displays of excessive etiquette, Gawain is a perfect knight even as he lays bare the notion that chivalric masculinity might be all show, and hollow at the core. The Green Knight indeed has something to hide, but he speaks as a man of certain authority, using the familiar whenever he—not the situation—determines that it is proper to do so. Gawain, conversely, refuses to use *thee* even when the situation would allow it.

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[446] Pearsall, "Courtesy" 358.

Derek Pearsall argues that Gawain is "shocked to think that he may have failed in some courteous observance," and his shock is deeply connected to his own sense of who he is. "To fail in observance" of etiquette, "for a knight whose inner and outer are one is to cease to be."[447] Yet the question of inner and outer matters less for the Green Knight than it does for Gawain. The Green Knight is a complicated mess of multiple identities, some supernatural and some real. But penance refuses to attach to him, and he speaks as a man supremely comfortable in his own authority. Chivalric identity, as a performance of etiquette that binds together one's inner and outer self, is something that concerns Gawain exclusively. Only he is shocked, only he scrambles to speak his anger correctly, and only he publicly dresses himself in a girdle of shame. If Gawain is a true knight, he can only be so mincingly true because he stands in relation to another representation of knightly masculinity. The Green Knight is ill-behaved, but compellingly attractive; we linger over him and somehow excuse his transgressions. The audience can accept his performance of chivalry even though it is clearly not chivalrous. Gawain, on the other hand, cannot ever seem to occupy his own knighthood fully. He is always performing, always excessive, always on display. Being called out, hailed as less than, by the Green Knight is all it takes for Gawain's identity to waver. He is shamed in the public space created between two knights, a public space that is itself somewhat private, constructed as it is out of the familiar forms of address. If *thee* is for servants and family, and if *thee* can unsettle the terms of a social interaction, then *thee* creates a space of hybridity between knights.

Thee hails Gawain as one-of-the-guys, but it also demands that he prove himself to be a "trwe mon." The fact that he flinches undermines his ability to be true, to be a masculine man and present a smooth connection between inner decision and outward performance.

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[447] Pearsall, "Courtesy" 359.

Butler asserts that, "to the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate. Moreover, this embodying is a repeated process. And one might construe repetition as precisely that which *undermines* the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language."[448] In his final battle with the Green Knight, Gawain resists, if only for a moment, the outward performance of masculine knighthood. He can't keep all his signifiers straight, even though he tries, repeatedly, to stick to one correct form of address, while the Green Knight uses language as if he owns it. Gawain is owned by, composed of, that language. No matter how carefully he uses *you* and *thee*, he can't ever fully master himself in speech; his terms are continually set by the Green Knight, a man who never sticks to a single discourse, to the terms of fixed identity. For the Green Knight, the familiar is as easily used as the formal. When he is Bertilak, he sticks with *you*; as the Green Knight, with *thee*. He slips easily between the two. But his very person calls into question whether the boundaries between the two forms of address are all that permanent, that significant. The Green Knight's dissembling, his ability to occupy multiple identities gracefully, undercuts the certainty of chivalric masculinity. Despite all of Gawain's careful production of the right kind of speech, he is always playing catch-up to a man who is profoundly untrustworthy, whose word is never his bond and who plays games with Gawain that create confusion and shame.

It is out of speech that Gawain is made, and ultimately, it is out of speech that Gawain, Bertilak, and the Lady make sense of each other. Each character is an *I* calling out to a *thee*, a *you*—and each uses those forms of discourse to render power, or to reclaim it from others. The *I* that is Gawain and the *I* that is the Green Knight claim their identities in

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[448] Butler, Bodies 231.

relation to their (and their readers') shared concept of masculinity. According to Butler, "when there is an 'I' who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that 'I' and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will.… [T]he 'I' only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated, and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the 'I'; it is the transitive invocation of the 'I.'"[449] In short, "recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject."[450] Gawain and Bertilak recognize one another as knights via speech acts. These speech acts are not oaths, though they are binding. *Thee* and *you* call a knight into being as a knight; their use performs identity on the most basic level of discourse.

Neither Gawain nor Bertilak can exist without the other to notice him, to call him into being, to see him. And they are noticed most clearly by the ways in which they talk—or refuse to talk—like aristocratic warriors. The Green Knight talks as easily and as familiarly with strange adversaries as he does with his own intimates. Known by all, he need not identify himself, or even conform to social convention. He knows, as if they were family, everyone in the poem. Gawain, conversely, is constantly performing and creating himself out of beautiful speech, the effect of which sets him slightly apart from those who might fully know him. He cannot be uncouth in the slightest, addressing his own family as *you*. And, although he is finally shamed by duplicity, he cannot declare his own firm identity in the face of that slippery untruth. Always in production, Gawain's masculinity is never quite finished, even though he tries desperately to fix himself into the conventions of correct speech.

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[449]Butler, Bodies 225.

[450] Butler, Bodies 226.

Makynge Vernacular Community

The narrating voice of SGGK is a first person speaker who speaks in vernacular, alliterative poetry, offering a representation of a subjective poetic identity in which an *I* might speak directly to a collective *you*. This *I* is an anonymous figure, a narrator in a poem that is "recurrently personalized without our ever being incited to identify 'the narrator' as a particular person."[451] The narrating voice, while anonymous, is most likely male; he speaks with literary and performative authority, telling a story about Arthurian knights and adventure in a manner that follows what A.C. Spearing calls "the general characteristics of the narrating process in Middle English romance—dramatic immediacy, emotional identification, wholehearted commitment to a fictive reality shared by story and audience."[452] Yet despite this devoted participation in the narration of the conventions of romance, the first person speaker also attempts to create a vernacular audience around his own voice. He hails his listeners directly, gathering them close to his characters, and assuming—in his use of the west Midlands vernacular—that they will be able to understand him. The narrator uses a specific dialect, one perceived by his contemporaries as being in many ways unintelligible. John Trevisa commented about English speakers whose dialect identified them as being different to the point of unintelligibility. In his 1387 translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*, he notes that "Al the longage of the Northhumbres and specialych at York, ys so scharp, slyttyng, and frotyng, and unschape, that we Southeron men may that longage unnethe understonde. Y trowe that that ys bycause that a buth nygh to strange men and

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[451] A.C. Spearing, "Poetic Identity," in Companion 35-52, at 44.

[452]Spearing, "Poetic Identity" 43.

aliens, that speketh strangelych, and also bycause that the kynges of Engelound woneth always fer fram that contray."[453] The *makere* of SGGK is not a "Southeron" man, like Trevisa and Chaucer, but "speketh strangelych." As a speaker of Cheshire dialect, his language is likely not as "scharp" as the Yorkshire dialect speaker described by Trevisa. But his poetic speech reaches out to others who might speak in a similarly "strange" way, making a community of dialect-speakers around the space of the poem. In its fictionalization of oral performance, SGGK makes a claim about the ability of regional words to create a kind of self, and a community in which that self makes sense. The poem posits that it might be in the performative space of recitation—a space necessarily time-bound and anchored in the human body—that identities and possibilities are taken up, discarded, posited, shared.

Although the poem's courtly, Arthurian narrative implies a similarly courtly audience,[454] the actual composition of that audience is never directly specified. It is a group of listeners, able to understand and appreciate not only the speaker's familiar romance narrative but also his specific dialect. Audience members are receptive to Gawain's adventures, ready to listen to the conventions of the romance genre, and are made up of speakers of the same regional English spoken by the narrator. This audience, likely based in Cheshire, may or may not have actually been itself aristocratic. Indeed, the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript, in its physical ordinariness and in "the religious emphasis of its contents suggest[s] an educated middle class audience rather than a predominantly aristocratic one," according to Anderson, for its intended community of reception.[455] This audience, composed of upwardly mobile common-born people, might indeed look to poetic

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[453] Qtd. in Kenneth Sisam, Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921) 150.

[454] At least, this is Bennett's view. See essay on "Historical Background," in Companion 71-90.

[455] Anderson 3.

representations of chivalry as a guide for how to better shape their own social identities. Like a courtesy book, SGGK provides crucial information—and indeed serves as a kind of pedagogy—for how to perform elite identity.[456] In this way, the poem posits that elite identities, much like the emergent identities of the merchants, artisans and bureaucrats who composed the urban majority, were not innate but could in fact be invented and reinvented depending upon circumstance. Just as an artisan could master his craft, so too could a person learn how to be socially "better," how to behave properly in public.

The narrator of the poem works hard to create an intimate bond between himself and his audience. He speaks their dialect, and addresses them directly, telling them a tale that then tells them how to behave. He strives to draw them closer, to establish an exclusive community, addressing them throughout as *ye*, a plural group of listeners.[457] He implies that he is a roving minstrel, simply an old-fashioned story-teller who has heard "this laye" (30) previously spoken. But unlike the speaker of Wynnere and Wastour, who identifies himself in the first fitt as an oral performer, the speaker of SGGK does not offer his poem within a courtly performative context. He tells a lay *about* the courts of the Round Table and Haut Desert, but his performance happens almost *in medias res* and does not openly address a noble audience. He merely asks his audience to listen to the song he offers. He promises beautiful poetry. But *I* says one thing and means another:

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[456] J.W. Nicholls explores how courtesy books, which provide an explicit model of social behavior and identity formation for the mercantile and artisanal elite, might also provide themes for the Gawain-poet. See his The Matter of Courtesy. Roberta Krueger examines the relationship between medieval French poetry and courtesy books, looking particularly at how courtesy books provided information for bourgeois on how to dress and behave in public. See her "Nouvelles Choses: Social Instability and the Problem of Fashion in the Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry, the Menagier du Paris, and Christine de Pizan's Livre des Trois Vertus," in Medieval Conduct, Kathleen Ashley and Robert Clark, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 49-85.

[457] I disagree with Blanch and Wasserman, who interpret the narrator's use of *ye* to address the audience as a formal mode of speaking to a single reader (138). *Ye* could just as easily be used to directly address a mixed group of listeners.

If ye wyl lysten this laye bot on little quile
I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde
with tonge,
As hit is stad and stoken
In stori stif and stronge,
With lel lettres loken,
In londe so hatz ben longe. (30-6)

The concluding quatrain of this bob-and-wheel stanza welds short, end-rhymed lines with long lines of unrhymed alliterative verse, to produce a strange confection that highlights the fictive, made-up quality of the text itself, calling attention to the poem's oral/aural context while pointedly invoking the use of literary conventions.

Professing modesty and experiential authority, the speaker offers up a lay, a minstrel's song, originally performed aloud. It is language with which he works, *makynge* up a story that has its origins in prior tales and in the local traditions of his audience. He implies that he received the tale via its alliterative metrics, "in stori stif and stronge/with lel lettres loken," a structure he claims is rooted both historically "longe," "in londe," and locally, "in toun." SGGK, which is presumably the "laye" he is presenting to his audience, is a rather new prosodic structure, however, an amalgam of three complicated fitts, that utilizes both Anglo-Saxon sound patterns and contemporary Continental developments in rhyme. As Ad Putter notes, the poem is "a conventional romance, deeply rooted in the tradition of the Old French *roman courtois,*"[458] yet one that uses an intricate tail-rhyme scheme and is also an alliterative poem in west Midlands dialect.

While roughly contemporary to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, SGGK is made of linguistic elements far more strange to the post-modern reader than Chaucer's sounded final

[458] Ad Putter, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 244.

-*e*. Where the London dialect of The Canterbury Tales has become, in no small part due to Chaucer's own connections to Lancastrian power, the very dialect of English rhyming poetry, SGGK sounds alien to the modern ear. Chaucer may sound different but remains comprehensible; to understand him one needs not translation but familiarity and practice. SGGK, conversely, seems so idiosyncratic, so full of regional, Germanic kinks and Scandinavian-influenced adjectives that the poem seems to demand a translator who might comb out its oddities of diction and syntax. Indeed, there is a much higher ratio of Germanic words to those derived from Romance in the works of the Gawain-poet than there is in Chaucer.[459] But, as James Winny notes in the introduction to his 1992, facing-page translation of the text, "one of the problems facing a translator of the poem is that it is not possible to represent in modern English the diversity of the poet's language, or to show how he calls upon different aspects of his mixed vocabulary to vary the tone and the associations of his narrative."[460] The *makere* of SGGK uses "words whose abrasive quality evokes a world of gnarled and weatherworn shapes into which Chaucer never ventured."[461] And, while Chaucer uses both French and English words "indifferently and without reserving either for particular tasks," effectively melding the two into a seemingly natural hybrid, in SGGK, "the two elements have not yet reached an accommodation, and the poet and his audience are sufficiently alive to the nuances of words still novel and alien to the regional

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[459] Hoyt Duggan cites an unpublished 1989 Kalamazoo paper by Norman Hinton, who compiled a database to chart the etymological distributions in both the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript and in Chaucer's poetry. Hinton offers the following distribution for the poetry from Cotton Nero A.x: Germanic: 58.5%, Romance: 41 %, Other: 0.15%; whereas for Chaucer's poetry the distribution is: Germanic: 38.5%, Romance: 61.2%, Other, 0.09%. See Duggan, "Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect," in Companion 221-242, at 239.

[460] SGGK x.

[461] SGGK viii.

culture for French words to be used for distinctive purposes."[462] SGGK is a poem set slightly apart from the matrices of French-influenced London power and that contemporary setting-apart takes the poem's meaning(s) ever further from the post-modern reader. We may know the name Chaucer, but there is no moniker we can fix to authorize, to know, the man who made SGGK, beyond his own idiolect.

This idiolect is one that strives towards intimate collectivity. The audience is formally beseeched as *ye*, a mixed group of plural listeners. And while the characters are usually discussed in the third person, there are startling narrative moments when the narrator addresses Gawain as *thee*. Gawain is both a name, a person who is discussed by others, and an intimate. At the end of the first fitt, the narrator offers Gawain an imperative, before the knight sets forth on his journey in search of the Green Knight, urging him to be brave as he leaves Arthur's court.

> Now thenk wel, Sir Gawan
> For wothe that thou ne wonde
> This aventure for to frayn
> That thou hatz tan on honde. (487-90)

Gawain is initially addressed as a third-person character, the knight known by everyone, a good and stable name. But the narrator is on close terms with this knight, a chivalric figure who is also a man, speaking to him familiarly. Do not let fear hold you back, the narrator tells him, from leaving on the quest that you have sworn to undertake. This narrative move creates a dyad between the *makere* and his character, a tight circle of care. As Blanch and Wasserman note, the *makere* "is certainly capable of virtually turning his back on his audience

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[462] SGGK ix.

as he does at the end of the first fitt of Gawain, where the narrator addresses his formerly third-person protagonist directly—first by name and then twice as "thou"—in order to warn the knight to consider the gravity of the adventure he has taken on."[463] Yet the narrator here does not exclude his audience so much as extend his empathy towards a character everyone knows, bringing Gawain closer to him and to his listeners. Gawain's reputation is so great that the audience immediately knows who he is. By directly addressing him using the familiar pronoun, the narrator makes that knowledge considerably more intimate.

Hailing Gawain as his own and his audience's intimate, the speaker positions himself as a familiar go-between finessing the distance between his poetic representation and his audience. And, with repeated deictic emphases,[464] he manifests a degree of personalized narrative that is immediate and subjective, and that conjures up an explicitly vernacular English audience receptive to his tale. He presents "this laye," to his listeners, a poem that is always in the process of being told. To listen to "this laye" is to listen perpetually, to repeat the meta-performance of orality every time one re-approaches the poem. Deixis implies a certain, almost pre-existing intimacy between speaker and audience. To use "this" is to point out that which is closest, in a gesture of immediacy and recognizability. Claiming the surrounding geography as "this Bretayn" (20), and Arthur as "this kyng" (37), is also to claim that the audience's knowledge covers these important nouns. The land is familiar to everyone; the king is known to all. The narrator's maneuvers of address create an audience of people like himself, people close enough to him that they can follow his deictic gestures pointing out important places and leaders. "This" Britain must be understood as "our" Britain, a shared collectivity in which the poem's audience participates.

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[463] Blanch and Wasserman 113.

[464] As Spearing notes, SGGK is "enormously rich" in deictics like *this*, *those, that, these*. See "Poetic Identity" 45.

Haut Desert is a castle made of paper, so "this" Britain cannot possibly be an actual, real place. Whatever intimacy forged between speaker and audience, whatever mixed vernacular shape that audience is required to take, SGGK is nonetheless a powerful fiction. The poem's emphasis on *deixis*, as well as its use of direct modes of address, requires its audience to consider more carefully the very constructedness of that fiction, however. Replete with delicate acts of courtesy and lavish displays of material excess, the poem also leads its audience to "consider courtly values critically," according to Anderson.[465] The narrator's very anonymity, combined with his reaching out to a receptive audience, means that the poem urges a critical reconsideration of how meaning is actually produced. Nothing certain is offered, even though the audience is comforted with familiarity, with intimacy. Instead, the audience is required to think for itself, to wonder over what is being asked of it, and to wonder as well over what and how chivalry might mean. As Anderson posits:

> [T]he narrative throughout works by implication, offering not meaning but possible meaning. It prompts questions, but does not answer them. The reader is not told what attitude to take to [any of the characters] and chivalry itself, as they are represented in the poem. Such an inexplicit narrative method is more than a means of stimulating and holding the reader's attention. It helps construct the world of chivalry as one where the surface is not necessarily a good guide to what lies beneath.[466]

The narrator's *deixis* calls into being a critical audience, one ready to be entertained but also willing to consider more closely what it is they are being asked to consume as part of that entertainment.

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[465] Anderson 3.

[466] Anderson 161.

The *makere* of SGGK presents himself as a member of a heterogeneous whole, a grouping of vernacular English speakers receptive to his alliterative practice and quick to comprehend his knotty idiolect. The narrator's deictic move—calling out to an audience who might enjoy "this laye"—is an imagining that postcolonial theorist Edouard Glissant usefully terms "the poetics of relation."[467] Relational poetics describes the interstitial quality and ambitious inventiveness of postcolonial poetry, an intimate togetherness instantiated by a poet calling out to an audience, joining the two together in a common vernacular. For twentieth and twenty-first century postcolonial poets, the "poetics of relation," are created by the necessities of composing in a hybrid language, one made of both the colonizers' words and their own, and in so doing, establish a kind of 'real time' linguistic community, one that uses the languages of power and of abjection with equal aplomb. Glissant posits that in a postcolonial context, a poet enacts a poetics of relation in the immediate moment of her own vernacular. The postcolonial vernacular poet's language is peripheral to the dominant languages of power, and in this way, she is able to create a new way mode of address that privileges the peripheral. He notes that "the poet's word leads from periphery to periphery, and yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery."[468] The poetics of relation occur on the periphery of more dominant languages, in the admixture of a creole or patois. It is in these new, hybrid vernaculars that community occurs.

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[467] Edouard Glissant, The Poetics of Relation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) 32.

[468] Glissant 29.

By the late fourteenth century, English was only just coming into power and prominence as a language of politics, trade and literature. The *makynge* of regional verse was in many ways an act of hybrid production, composed by men out of native dialects frequently at odds with more dominant French and Latin models. SGGK is an alliterative English poem composed in a West Midlands dialect that takes the transnational Arthurian narratives as its content. Although comprised predominantly of Germanic, English diction, and shaped into traditional aa-ax alliterative patterns, the poem also uses a bob-and-wheel rhyming tail to conclude its stanzas.[469] It is, then, an alliterative poem with a metrical romance tail affixed to each of its stanzas, often to elegant rhyming effect. The poetics of relation are possible in SGGK through the *makere's* usage of these prosodic meldings, as well as in the poem's hybrid mixture of Continental narratives with English style.

In the poem's form, the *makere* offers a trace of his own idiolect and his own skill as a verbal craftsman. He is able to blend together a variety of vocabularies and styles in order to create something unique within the milieu of late fourteenth century poetry. Moreover, in his acts of meta-textual minstrel performance, a hybridization of orality and literacy, the *makere* self-consciously calls out to a relational audience, requiring them to participate in his poetics. These audiences are multiple; they range from the implied courtly audience receptive to Arthuriana to a more middling vernacular audience receptive to consuming the romance genre as a mechanism for upward social mobility.[470] They are able to use courtly poetry as a model for courteous public behavior, poaching from that poetry the notion that

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[469] SGGK uses the aa-ax alliterative stave frequently used by other alliterative poets; this predominant pattern is also found in Patience and Cleanness. See Hoyt Duggan, "Meter, Stanza, Vocabulary, Dialect" 224.

[470] See Felicity Riddy, "Temporary Virginity and the Everyday Body: Le Bone Florence of Rome and Bourgeois Self-Making," in Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance, ed. Nicola McDonal, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 197-216.

identity is performative. But they would not be able to do so were the *makeres* of those poems, like the *makere* of SGGK, addressing these concerns in the first place. The *makere* of SGGK sets his poem in a courtly realm, but he addresses the speakers of his regional dialect. That dialect is presented as something profoundly malleable. Plummer argues that the *makere* of SGGK seems particularly "aware that language and other signs may not only denote an extant identity, but may also modify it, bring it into being, or even destroy it."[471] More than this, It is language that constitutes the *makere's* own social, gender identity. Masculine poetic identity is instantiated through the composition and performance of vernacular poetry. Language, in all of its dialects and derivations, is the stuff out of which *makynge* is produced, the material used by men engaged in aesthetically crafting verbal representation. It is no wonder that the *makere* of SGGK focuses his attentions on the romance genre, given the incredible variety and mixture already at work in the romance as a pan-Continental form. Indeed, the perception of English as "an aggregated shape," understood by others as having a shape, and understood by its practitioners as a stuff out of which material might be made "can be seen most clearly in the forms we call 'romance,' with the result that romance form bears a surprisingly close resemblance to commodity form—it is both haughty and mysterious, puffed up with ideas which seem to be in 'surplus' to the thought which initially caused it," as Christopher Cannon has argued.[472] SGGK, as a Middle English alliterative romance, offers the idea that chivalric identity might be a thing, a commodity, consumed by a waiting audience, even as it also questions whether language can indeed be a thing at all.

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[471] Plummer, "Signifying" 195.

[472] Christopher Cannon, The Grounds of English Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 13-14. R.A. Shoaf examines what he calls "the conflict in late fourteenth-century England … between chivalry and commerce as two systems of value," and finds that SGGK attempts to reconcile this conflict. See his The Poem as Green Girdle: Commercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984) vii.

The poem offers the romance as a genre that can be exquisitely shaped, elaborately fitted, to fit certain ideologies. But it also presents itself as a pointedly hybrid creation, something that blends together a variety of linguistic and literary sources into a new whole. Homi Bhabha has defined the hybrid as that which "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power,"[473] and SGGK is multiply hybrid: it mimics a *translatio imperii* by importing Continental narratives into English but also cannibalizes French prosodies for its own use. The poem begins with an invocation of the Troy myth, alluding to Virgil's Aeneas as well as to the Iliad (5). It is the siege of Troy that initiates the opening move of SGGK. The poem looks out over the western islands of the Mediterranean to Rome, Florence, and Lombardy where Romulus, Tirius, and Langobard, respectively, have set up great cities (8-13). Felix Brutus, eventual ancestor of the Arthurian court, must travel "fer over the French flod," before he arrives to the islands of Britain (13-14). The poem's alliterative noise is explicitly English, but it takes pains to set itself in a Continental, classical elsewhere. The Britain within which the poem is situated is itself arranged somehow over the "French" sea; it does not get placed within its own body of water. As Glissant argues, this ability to imagine and situate a representational world that is both within tradition and firmly outside of it enacts a postcolonial poetics of relation. "The power to experience the shock of elsewhere is what distinguishes the poet,"[474] as an inventor of hybrid new literary forms.

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[473] Homi Bhabha, Location of Culture 112.

[474] Glissant 29-30.

The *makere* of SGGK sets his Arthurian characters, recognizable to a wide audience, in a Britain that seems to belong to everyone. Yet "this" Britain is also somehow *not*-Britain, even as everyone in the poem speaks in English, instead occupying an imaginal space just past the Mediterranean, in a tradition begun by Virgil. The *makere* of SGGK is responsible for crafting the poem's characters and their speech acts, rendering the striving after a stable chivalric identity as a process in continual flux set in a recognizable space that is also wholly imaginative. SGGK might thus be understood as a poem of the "midcolonial," what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen calls "the time of 'always-already,' an intermediacy that no narrative can pin to a single moment of history in its origin or end."[475] In the immediate moment of telling "this laye," the *makere* presents himself as a minstrel figure positioned somehow out of time. He requires his audience to listen, and carefully, to his speech so that they might detect the very performativity at the poem's heart. It is in listening, and in the textual performance of listening that occurs in the poem, that the *makere* proposes English as a power that might form coherent communities. He offers a capacious poetics of Englishness that is the literal product of his native—not French, not Latin—poetic *makynge*. An anonymous *I* addressing a collective *you*, the *makere* of the poem offers his innovation as a token of his skill at wedding multiple languages to create new music. He is a translator of old forms, a craftsman carrying over Continental tropes into a regional English newness.

To translate means, literally, *to carry across*, to be situated between one language and another. But much like the changeable nature of identity, no language is pure or stable, and no translation ever perfect. Translations are always multiple, they are the mixed expressions

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[475] Cohen, "Introduction," in The Post-Colonial Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey Cohen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) 3.

resting between uneven linguistic poles, a point that has led Tejaswini Niranjana to argue that postcolonial hybridity might best be defined for the individual subject as the experience of "living in translation," of never fully occupying one place or one standard language.[476] SGGK emerges from a trilingual political and religious moment when "English" as language and as identity was yet to be fixed in place and where the infelicities of vernacular language were growing highly politicized.[477] It is a poem made of the melodies of a language in flux, built on words as yet unstandardized, which imagines a living audience that will share in and appreciate its specifities. Indeed, the poem creates its own standardized vocabulary of alliterative Cheshire dialect, using a mixture of Germanic, Norse and Romance derived words to form a recognizable idiolect. The poem posits that identity—for both its chivalric characters as well as for its own anonymous *makere*—is performed within a context both linguistic and communal. The *makere* is a man able to create these hybrid mixtures, an artisan of language.

The community imagined by the poem, and in which the *makere* positions himself, is an explicitly vernacular one, familiar with romance but also able to understand its regional dialect. It is a community open to poetry more generally, receptive to the *makere's* intimate claims on its time and attention. And it is a community of listeners gathered before the *makere's* voice. A poem intended for oral performance, SGGK makes manifest the hybrid qualities of late medieval English—its mixture of Continental themes and native forms, its blending of Germanic alliterative lines and French-style rhymes. It sounds out the mixtures of late medieval vernacular English. As Janet Coleman has argued, "the unrhymed

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[476] Tejaswini Niranjana, Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 46

[477] See Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change."

alliterative line was essentially new, and was written to be read, aloud or silently."[478] Designed for newness, and for performance, the alliterative lines out of which SGGK is wrought are invented by a human person. To recite those lines, to read the poem aloud, is to perform in the *makere's* first-person persona. It is to reenact the *makere's* voice, however fictional. Silent reading—the way twenty-first century people read—isolates the individual and makes reading a solitary, even solipsistic practice. But medieval reading practices include both silent and public reading and more often utilized reading aloud to groups. These practices create a fictive, momentary community that coheres around the force of beautiful speech in a relational grouping, a shared experience of recitation and listening to vernacular language. For the span of time it takes to read the text aloud, a crowd of people is united in the act of listening.[479] It is this listening that SGGK points out as a practice, a communal activity that creates both a vernacular audience and the *makere* himself, engaged with that audience.

The *makere* speaks in relation to this vernacular crowd, gathering them close to him, pointing out his characters as intimates, and presenting the speech of those characters as performative. To speak as a knight, in SGGK, is to speak contingently. But it is also to speak, on a deeper level, as the *makere's* mouthpiece, as his verbal construction. The poetics of relation instantiated in SGGK are at once self-mocking, modest, overweening, obsessive, joyous, critical, and pained, participating fully in an aesthetic back-and-forth between *makere* and audience. SGGK presents a generously expansive, hybrid poetics, imagining an alliterative English poetry as a messy, massive site of translational invention, one where

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[478] Janet Coleman, English Literature in History, 1350-1500: Medieval Readers and Writers (London: Hutchinson, 1981) 162.

[479] Twentieth century feminist poet Muriel Rukeyser calls this the poetry of "total response." See The Life of Poetry (Williamsburg, MA: Paris Press, 1996) 11.

rhythm and rhyme are in continuous motion, and where the prosodic power of Continental tropes is pressed against equally influential insular traditions.

Chapter Four

'Som Deyntee Thyng': Possibility and Chaucer's Unfinished Business

The Tale of Sir Thopas, Chaucer's "personal" contribution to The Canterbury Tales, is a Middle English metrical romance concerning the adventures of the "doghty swayn" (VII 724) Sir Thopas and his many attempts to *prike* "thurgh a fair forest" (754).[480] The tale sounds and acts like a standard romance; replete with quests, battles against monsters, and unrequited love-longing, it features a male hero whose complexion is the typical red and white. Like the metrical romances to which it refers, and from which it openly steals, Thopas is a narrative that both satirizes and upholds the standards of the genre. Thus, the tale rambles and goes nowhere, overemphasizes the hero's prowess, and dilates endlessly on minor, though frequently material, details.[481] And, consonant with the conventions of the genre, Thopas repeatedly points out the minstrel-like qualities of its narrator.[482] From its obsession with pointless quests, materiality, and child-like play, to its focus on the tropes of oral performance, then, Thopas is less the narrative of a knight errant than it is a medium for exploring poetic performativity itself. A well-made tale in both its diminution and

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[480] All citations are taken from Larry Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[481] Laura Hibbard Loomis argues that, "Nearly all the romances indulge in extreme exaggerations, especially of the hero's prowess; they make excessive use of insignificant detail; they show the same bourgeois absurdities in setting forth knight-errantry. Above all, they use the same worn devices of minstrel-style, the same stereotyped diction, with reiterated commonplace rhyme and phrases." See her "Sir Thopas," in Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, ed. W.F. Bryan, and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941) 486-559, at 491.

[482] See J.A. Burrow,"Explanatory Notes to the Prologue and the Tale of Sir Thopas," The Riverside Chaucer 917-23, at 918.

interruption, Thopas is Chaucer's poetic contribution to the Canterbury contest of tale-telling, and its frame is the only place where his body and physical aspect are discussed. Indeed, it is in the frame before the tale that Chaucer is asked both who he is and what he does, when Harry Bailly queries "what man artow?"[483] What kind of man is he, Harry wants to know; what occupation defines him, what does he do for a living?[484] As a display of vernacular poetry, Thopas is the answer to Harry's "what" question. It shows rather than tells, and thereby proves by means of its very doing, what Chaucer claims as his occupation and how he is therefore defined, within the representational realm of The Canterbury Tales. He is a man who makes vernacular literature.

In this chapter, I argue that the English metrical romance of Thopas is the poetic site for Chaucer to position himself within a contingent, occupational gender identity, one based on the production and performance of vernacular English verse. Chaucer's singular poetic skill, in Thopas, is his creation of his own performative persona, an act of fictionalizing himself and his audience.[485] John Burrow has observed that late medieval vernacular English poets frequently use their voices in quotation, a fictionalization of speaking which "leaves the poet free to exploit possibilities in the contemporary vernacular."[486] Through his

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[483] As Lee Patterson has argued, Harry's question implies that Chaucer is somehow unrecognizable; Harry does not ask the other pilgrims, who are named for their occupations, who they are. See his "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in the Tale of Sir Thopas and The Tale of Melibee," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 11 (1989): 117-175, at 118.

[484] The only other moment where the Host asks someone's occupation occurs when he questions the Canon's Yeoman about his master. He uses terminology similar to that he uses when he questions Chaucer: "Is he a clerk, or noon? Telle what he is" (l. 616). As Patricia Eberle points out, what Harry wants to know is not his "name and family connections, nor where he is from, but what he does for a living," "Commercial Language and the Commercial Outlook in The General Prologue," The Chaucer Review 18.2 (1983): 161-174, at 169.

[485] Walter Ong argues that "the person to whom the writer addresses himself normally is not present at all," but serves as a fiction constructed by the author, a fiction in which an audience fully participates. "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction," PMLA 90.1 (1975): 9-21, at 10.

[486] See Burrow, Ricardian Poetry 39.

polished riffing on the conventions of the romance genre as well as his emphasis on the invention of new prosodic methods, Chaucer identifies himself in Thopas as a *makere* of considerable ability.[487] He does this despite—and because of—his actual occupation in service to the king.

For members of the *laboratores*, the class into which Chaucer was born, manhood is socially legible. It is an embodied gender identity instantiated through responsible stewardship and productive labor, if identity is understood as a social performance "tenuously constructed in time … through a stylized repetition of acts," to use Judith Butler's definition.[488] A late medieval, common born man's occupation is a means of proving his identity, a way of habitually practicing "what" he is.[489] And performance, for men who make vernacular English verse, is an aspect of both gender and occupation. In the case of the *makere*, himself a member of the *laboratores*, masculinity is a vexed category of identity, because to make poetry is to occupy a position of responsibility and of literary authority, the exclusive province of men, but it is also to engage in immaterial labor.[490] Only men are able to preach and teach in public, to use language authoritatively, and the iterated performance of that authority confers a distinct occupational identity on *makeres*, one organized around

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[487] On the prosodic invention of Sir Thopas, see Alan T. Gaylord, "The Moment of Sir Thopas: Towards a New Look at Chaucer's Language," The Chaucer Review 16.4 (1982): 311-29.

[488] Butler, Gender Trouble 140.

[489] *Makynge* is time not spent on *other*, more productive activities like plowing, sowing, harvesting, although it is an iterative practice, a daily occupation, and in this way is a performance that establishes a kind of social identity in much the same way that other kinds of occupational activity might do, Bodies 2.

[490] I discuss immaterial labor in my Introduction; see note 4.

the production, revision, recitation and inscription of verse.[491] Yet such an occupation does not contribute in easily legible ways to the common good, and may in fact be perceived as a waste of time because of its very immateriality. For Harry Bailly, Chaucer's minstrel-like performance of vernacular poetry is a waste of time. It is without purpose. He castigates Chaucer, silencing the performance of Thopas by exclaiming angrily, "thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme" (931). Chaucer's vernacular *makynge*, his performance of a metrical romance is, according to Harry's assessment, a waste of time.

Harry's exclamation leaves open how, exactly, Thopas has accomplished this waste, and as a practice that "despendest" time *makinge* generally begs the question of value. Poetry's production—its invention, composition, revision, and inscription—requires time spent creating performative language. And the consumption of the poem, whether in reading or in listening, requires time spent in the thrall of that language. For both *makere* and audience, poetry wastes time not only because it occupies minutes and hours that might be spent on more productive, socially beneficial tasks but because those minutes and hours are given over to something completely intangible. Poetry is a waste of time because it is time given over to the immateriality of representation, to performativity itself. In Thopas, Chaucer offers a meta-commentary on his own work of composition, revision and recitation

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[491] On medieval authority and its connections to reading, writing and disseminating texts, see Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship. The Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale provides a critique of the masculine power over literary production and interpretation. It opens with the claim that

> Experience, though noon auctoritee
> Were in this world, is right ynogh for me
> To speke of the wo that is in marriage. (III.1-3)

The gendered implications of the Wife's insistence that her subjective experience is as good as, if not better than, the authoritative information found in books is eminently explored by Mary Carruthers, "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of the Lions," in Chaucer to Spenser: A Critical Reader, ed. Derek Pearsall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) 42-62.

of literary representation, as the production of immaterial labor. He thus offers a representation of his own labor of representation, one engaged in a contest of competing masculinities. The speaker of Thopas is a man whose masculinity does not register sufficiently to make him recognizable, and whose masculinity is connected to his role as an oral performer of poetry. The verbs he uses to describe his practice of composing and reciting rhymes are verbs rooted in orality: he offers to "*telle* verrayment/of myrthe and of solas" (713-14) [my emphasis]. His poetry is itself a time-bound medium, referred to by both speaker and by the Host as a prosodic, performative structure. He offers to tell "a rym lerned longe agoon" (709), and then protests, after Harry demands an end to the tale, that he has provided "the beste rym I kan" (928).

Thopas is Chaucer's vehicle for representing a performative masculine identity centered on *makynge* and reciting verse. In Thopas, this performative identity must be understood as a fiction, a kind of textual inventiveness instantiated through the composition and performance of verse and existing primarily within verse itself. It is also an identity in production, performed through labor. Yet the *makere's* labor, in producing a rhyme consisting "of myrthe and of solas," is rather different from Chaucer's actual labor as a member of the king's affinity. As *esquire de seryvce* and later Justice of the Peace, Chaucer served as a literate bureaucrat in service to power. This work firmly situated the historical Chaucer within "the middle strata," a grouping of the elite common class who are no longer identified exclusively, according to Paul Strohm, "in terms of vocation (merchant, craftsman), [but who] are identified in terms that emphasize their civic importance (citizen, burgess) and placed at the very heart of the realm."[492] Chaucer's occupational identity as a

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[492] Strohm, Social Chaucer 5. The term "middle strata" is from Sylvia Thrupp, Merchant Class of Medieval London (1300-1500) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

citizen and courtly bureaucrat was troubled then by the question of immateriality. Writing and copying laws is labor akin to writing poetry; both are endeavors that must continually justify their worth to a society for whom labor was routinely questioned and scrutinized.[493] To be a bureaucrat is to traffic in services and the production of texts,[494] while to be a *makere* is to traffic in entertainment, often in seemingly "low" ways. Both roles are organized around the masculine manipulation of language. Yet although the bureaucrat does contribute material texts of use to the common profit, the minstrel-like *makere*, as imagined in Thopas, only offers an entertaining waste of time. What Chaucer fetishizes in Thopas is not his scribal labor as much as his made up labor of performative *makynge*. He does not offer a model of the *makere* as writer or scribe, but instead presents a fiction of the *makere* as an oral performer, reluctant, hesitant, and seemingly ineffectual. In this representation, then, Chaucer offers a model of *makynge* that is entirely artificial, that constructs an ideal meta-performance of the *makere's* practice of continual composition and revision. This practice is neither entirely oral nor literate, but an amalgam of each, and it presents Chaucer as a participant in a larger poetic tradition concerned with defining itself alongside the tradition of artisanal, craft labor.

Chaucer is famously variable in his literary representations. They are evidence not only of his evident learning and prior reading, but also of his poetic skill. Chaucer's stylistic variations, his polyvocal performances of his own literary skill might be read as a

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[493] Kellie Robertson argues that the late fourteenth century labor laws "made it increasingly necessary for immaterial laborers like poets to show that their work was just as socially useful and, consequently, just as regulatable as carting or plowing." See The Laborer's Two Bodies 9.

[494] Ethan Knapp argues, specifically for the fifteenth century scribe and poet Thomas Hoccleve, that poetic identity was shaped by the "labor and objects of bureaucratic textual practice." See his "Bureaucratic Identity and the Construction of the Self in Hoccleve's Formulary and La male regle," Speculum 74.2 (1999): 357-76, at 358.

justification, "a mediated response to factionalism and contradiction within his own social experience" as a member of the bureaucratic elite, according to Strohm.[495] Yet his variations, his polyvocality, and his pointedly artificial self-representation also indicate that Chaucer is aware of himself and of his abilities as a *makere*. He is, essentially, showing off his skill at *makynge* verbally representational masterpieces. It is thus no wonder that Thopas is situated in Fragment VII, what Alan Gaylord has called the "literature group," because of its range.[496] Despite Chaucer's self-representation in this fragment as a bumbling, hesitant introvert, the multiplicity of genres in the fragment as a whole attests to his abilities as a highly literate and prosodically skilled *makere*, one who is as much at ease in the minstrel pose as he is in the pose of the prose-writer. By far the most varied of the manuscript groupings that constitute the Tales, as F.N. Robinson has posited, "there seems to be no principle of arrangement [in Fragment VII] save that of contrast or variety."[497] The grouping exemplifies literary diversity. Its tales include a wide range of styles, from the iambic pentameter couplets of the Shipman's Tale of love gone amiss; to the jewel-like rime royale of the Prioress's Tale; to Thopas' tail-rhyme stanzas of metrical romance; to the moral prose Melibee; to the turgid tragedies in elaborate eight-line stanzas of the Monk's Tale; and finally the animal allegory in iambic pentameter rhyming couplets of the Nun's Priest's Tale. While Thopas' call for Chaucer to perform in his own voice might appear to be the most appropriate site for an *apologia pro opere suo* for an elite poet in service to the king, Chaucer depicts himself instead as a diminished minstrel at odds with other middling men. This

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[495] Strohm, Social Chaucer 163-4.

[496] Alan Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas* in Fragment VII of the Canterbury Tales: Harry Bailly as Horseback Editor," PMLA 82.2 (1967): 226-235, at 227.

[497] See Robinson, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) 11.

depiction is multi-pronged, many-voiced, a kind of meta-performance in conversation with, and against, the reality of Chaucer's own accomplishments across a range of literary genres.

Makynge is an aesthetic practice, organized along an artisanal model: something is crafted, in the *makynge* of verse, and in its craftedness, reveals the skill of its *makere.* Yet that *makere* does not enjoy the benefits of a guild or a fellowship; there is no guild or fraternity for *makeres,* as there is for other members of the book-producing trades.[498] Neither an aristocrat nor a cleric, the *makere* is, fundamentally, a solitary figure much like a courtly bureaucrat, a man who must continually watch what he says. Chaucer's self-representation in Thopas is pointedly crafted, indeed draws attention to its composition and workmanship, but it is also coded as disjunct and isolated from other kinds of similar craftedness, other kinds of masculine identities. It is performed by a singular voice, speaking as an "I," after all. Chaucer represents *makynge* as a practice kept isolated from other forms of social and political discourse, but also a practice over which he has consummate control. Chaucer's *makynge* is concerned with aesthetics and the creation of fiction, and it is, in Thopas, an activity that happens in an apolitical, overly domesticated realm. As Strohm points out, "whatever the frictions among Chaucer's pilgrims, no blood is shed; although temporary alliances are formed, the pilgrim polity is not riven by self-interested faction; however overweening Harry Bailly's sway, tyrannicide need not occur."[499] The space Chaucer creates, from which he speaks as a *makere*, is a space of incredible control and dexterity. And this power of *makynge* is continually sequestered from the actual power under which Chaucer historically labored.

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[498] Paul Christianson notes that by the end of the fourteenth century, a group of limners had formed a mistery. See his A Directory of London Stationers and Book Artisans, 1300-1500 (New York: Bibliographic Society of America, 1990) 23.

[499] Strohm, Social Chaucer 168.

Makynge the Performance of Control

The persona of the *makere* allows Chaucer to speak in the voices of others, to speak in a voice that is verisimilitudinous but also wholly represented. Chaucer's practice of *makynge* must be understood as one of ventriloquism, of inhabiting a voice both authentic and obviously made up. Via the narrative frame that surrounds Thopas, and within the hackneyed confines of the tale itself, Chaucer represents himself as a *makere* somehow free of political responsibilities, a man amongst other men who merely entertains with the best rhymes and rhythms he can at that moment produce. As Lee Patterson has pointed out, Thopas reveals Chaucer to be a man interested mainly in indulging "a penchant for vaguely erotic daydreams, a dabbler who habitually leaves his ambitious projects unfinished, a bourgeois who celebrates a chivalric heroism he is unable to understand, and a ventriloquist who dresses up in other people's identities."[500] Chaucer's penchant for daydreams and ventriloquism is at the heart of his self-representation as a *makere*, an identity performed via the verbal fantasy that poetry allows. Within the brief confines of Thopas, Chaucer represents himself as a popular and populist oral poet, even as these forms of poetic activity were falling out of fashion,[501] and even as his audience is aware that his minstrelsy is itself a performative, literary fiction. After all, we possess Thopas because it is a text, a written performance of oral poetics.[502] Nonetheless, Chaucer's emphasis on his persona as a

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[500] Lee Patterson, "'What Man Artow?'" 132.

[501] On the decline of the court minstrel, see E.K. Chambers, The Medieval Stage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903) 1.42-86; Arthur K. Moore, "Sir Thopas as Criticism of Fourteenth Century Minstrelsy," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 53 (1954): 532-45; Richard Firth Green, Poets and Princepleasers 101-34.

[502] Alan Gaylord observes that Chaucer, in Sir Thopas, "had to devise a written speech in verse that would look or sound enough like what was spoken to seem authentic." See his "The Moment of Sir Thopas" 321.

minstrel, however nostalgically and artificially figured, is one that allows Chaucer to continue playing with poetry—even as he eventually retracts this play in favor of the didactic prose Melibee. Thus, the moment of Thopas, where as Alan Gaylord puts it, Chaucer "steps forward as the figure of himself," is a moment of the possible, a site for the fantasy of representing what was and what might yet be.[503] As Butler has recently argued, "fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home."[504] In his representative tale, Chaucer imagines a fantasy of embodied control, one where he can makes himself appear one way and then another, in a space sequestered from politics. That Chaucer sequesters his aesthetic practice from politics must be understood as a political act, one that claims not the power of hegemony, or the power of language used in service to ideology, but the power of poetic language to imagine the self and others otherwise.

As someone else, as the nostalgic minstrel figure, Chaucer can occupy an elsewhere structured by the practice of *makynge*, an imagined and imaginal, contingent space. For the voice that speaks Thopas is a subjective, individual voice, one anxious over its own right to speak. Unlike an actual minstrel, in service to a powerful patron and dependent on that patron and his audience to "buy" his poetic wares, the voice that speaks Thopas uses the performative qualities of the minstrel while imagining himself as somehow outside of politics. The contingency of this voiced, poetic identity perpetually raises the question of absence and silence. It is a hesitant voice called to speak out of the "sobre" quiet that follows the Prioress' Tale (VII.692). Just as a wake of sobriety extends out of the conclusion

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[503] Gaylord, "Moment" 311.

[504] Butler, Undoing Gender 29.

to the Prioress' violent "miracle," so too does her rime royale form, drifting into the Prologue to Thopas (691); it is as if the narrator is so stunned he forgets to shift back into his usual iambic pentameter couplets. The Host breaks this silence with bullying: he "japen tho bigan," bustling about until he alights on "me," a silent body that until that point had been largely subsumed into the generalized narrating voice that governs the larger literary project (693-4). By using the personal pronoun, the speaking voice here calls attention to himself as a subjective individual, someone speaking to an audience that might recognize him even as Harry can't figure out who he is. But this pointing himself out as an *I* familiar to an intimate audience of *you,* is at odds with Chaucer's representation of himself as being so introverted and reluctant to speak that he almost disappears. Initially silent, the speaking "me" looks at the ground, as if looking for rabbits, according to Harry (696). Painfully reluctant to say anything, the *I* offers something he already knows, a rhyme he remembers from a while back. Yet here he is also ambivalent, claiming one thing but doing another. He claims he is presenting something tried and true, but Thopas is a new style of an old form, and his self-deprecation is at odds with the poem's rollicking, heavily metered stanzas that pull the narrative forward continually into uncertain territory. Likewise, the initially reluctant *I* we must assume, is the same speaking *I* who assuredly calls out to the lords and ladies in his listening audience, drawing them ever further into his narrative. The first person voice that speaks in and around Thopas is an uncertain one, anxious about its role and its own proclivities. Although called by the same name, and favoring the same poetic style, as the omniscient narrator governing The Canterbury Tales, the *I* of Thopas is a strange absence. He speaks out of the tension between a desire to remain quiet and a desire to tell tales.

The speaker's ambivalence between absence and presence finds its form in Thopas. The story of a journey whose pleasures lie in the descriptive telling, Thopas is a

miniaturization of the discursively aimless pilgrimage of The Canterbury Tales, itself a story composed only of other stories, a journey that never arrives at its destination. Thopas is a poem that proceeds by means of *diminutio*, despite the fullness of its descriptions and travails. Organized into three fits of eighteen stanzas, nine stanzas, and four and a half stanzas, respectively, the poem progressively halves itself to the point of deletion.[505] This halving effect is accentuated in many of the manuscripts of the poem, which lay it out by separating the stanzas into consecutively smaller, bracketed sections, so that the tale looks as if it is dwindling away to nothing by the time it reaches the edge of the page.[506] Erasure is thus the culminating purpose of the poem. Further, the relationship between the poem's content, which in many stanzas consists only of lavish description of luxuries and genre conventions, and its form is a complex one, for the extensiveness of the poem's catalogues exists in formal tension with the aural and visual *diminutio* of the poem itself. In its perorations, Thopas formally occupies the state between expression and nothingness, and offers a metaphor for the difficulties of poetic composition, itself a practice of ambivalence, a continual weighing of whether one should leave the poem as it is and press on or erase what one has and start over. The practice of *makynge* is not an arrival at perfection, but a habit of invention and revision. Thopas exemplifies the deep ambivalence at the core of the *makere's* aesthetic labor: whether to continue or to cease his poetic speech.

Harry's angry demand that Chaucer cease his practice of composing and performing "drasty speche" has served, critically, as an indictment of the poem's virtues, for Thopas

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[505] J.A. Burrow notes that the stanzaic structure of Sir Thopas follows Macrobius in establishing a "harmonious" relationship of 2:1. See "'Sir Thopas': An Agony in Three Fitts," The Review of English Studies 22.85 (1971): 54-58.

[506] See Judith Tschann, "The Layout of Sir Thopas in the Ellesmere, Hengwrt, Cambridge Dd 4.24 and Cambridge Gg.4.27 Manuscripts," Chaucer Review 20.1 (1985): 1-13.

does not seem at first glance to be an appropriate choice to represent a *makere* of any mastery (923). It reads instead like a child's fantasy of chivalric adventure, a performance of play.[507] The tiny knight and his silly exertion fantastically "burlesques all of the topoi of [the] primal scene of romance," as Jeffery Cohen has argued.[508] Yet if the tale has a superordinate meaning, it is this emphasis on the performative, the fictive, the artificial. Indeed, Chaucer's ability to burlesque indicates that he is a master of verbal representation, for according to Gaylord, "no bad poet could achieve this kind of bad poetry."[509] Playfully unreal, everything that happens in the poem winks, ironically, at its own fictiveness, its ability to make fantasy. Organized around empty threats and continual delay, the battle which Thopas wages against the "perilous man of dede" (809), the giant Sir Olifaunt, is more pathetic than it is terrifying. Sir Olifaunt threatens to kill Thopas' horse, and Thopas tells him, "Tomorwe wol I meete with thee/Whan I have myn armoure" (817-18). Lacking armor, Thopas has to come back tomorrow. The narrative action must always happen later, when the stage has been suitably set, when Thopas is properly armed. What little violence does occur between Thopas and the giant is represented as the mock-fighting that might occur between two characters in a play. Thopas brandishes his "launcegay" (821), a parade or costume lance, and Sir Olifaunt pitches stones at him with a "staf-slyng" (829), a slingshot. In this, the two fighters comically invert the conventions of David and Goliath: the giant throws rocks at the fleeing

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[507] Both Lee Patterson and Jeffrey Cohen have observed that Thopas is decidedly childish in its humor and doll-like representation of Thopas. See Patterson, "What Man Artow?"; and Jeffrey Cohen, "Diminishing Masculinities in Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas," in Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde, ed. Peter Beidler (Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1998) 143-155.

[508] See Cohen, "Diminishing" 146.

[509] Alan Gaylord, "Chaucer's Dainty 'Dogerel': The 'Elvyssh' Prosody of Sir Thopas," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 1 (1979): 83-104, at 93.

child.[510] As always, in this romance, nothing bad happens to the hero, who escapes with the help of God, and by virtue of his own chivalric continence: "and al it was thurgh Goddes gras/And thurgh his fair berynge" (831-2). In Thopas, what matters most is the extravagant dressing, feeding and arming of Sir Thopas. The description of these material components and activities of the knight's characterization take up the bulk of what narrative there is. The color, cost and provenance of his dress are mentioned: his brown hose are from Bruges, "His robe of syklatoun/That cost many a jane (733-5). Expensive spices like "gyngebreed," "lycorys, and eek comyn" (854-5) are infused in his pre-battle wine. When he girds himself for battle, he wears "cloth of lake fyn and cleere," next to his "white leere" (857), his white skin; additionally, he wears breeches, a shirt, "an haubergeoun" (860), "a fyn hawberk," that is "al ywroght of Jewes werk" (863-4), his coat of armor, and a shield decorated with a carbuncle and a boar's head that "was all of gold so reed" (869).

As if he were a highly decorated toy being pushed across a board game, Thopas first begins his quest by pricking "north and est" (757), through the fantastic, herb-strewn landscape of Fairyland (760-5), only to find himself so immediately consumed by love-longing for an elf-queen that he "pryked as he were wood" (774). He urges his steed so hard that the horse's "sydes were all blood" (777), wearies, and finds himself "prikyng on the softe gras" (781). In fact, in a bathetic display of male sexual inadequacy, Thopas never actually gets anywhere, despite all of his strenuous pricking across the romantic plain.[511]

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[510] See Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Sir Thopas and David and Goliath," Modern Language Notes 51 (1936): 311-13.

[511] A number of critics have noticed the highly charged, sexual language in the tale, particularly around the word *prike*. See, e.g., George Williams, A New View of Chaucer (Durham: Duke UP, 1965) 145-51; Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer and 'Sir Thopas': Irony and Concupiscence," Texas Studies in Language and Literature 14 (1972): 389-403; and John Gardner, The Poetry of Chaucer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977) 307-8.

Cohen argues that *prike*, the favorite verb of the tale, ends up like the hero and his horse "comically exhausted from over-use."[512] Yet it is no wonder that, as a romance, Thopas uses *prike* so frequently. The term exemplifies the activity of the knight errant; it applies to the chivalric activities of stabbing, goading, pursuing on horseback and penetration, activities which frequently carry a sexualized charge, from the homosocial relationships between knights to the rape of young maids.[513] But, while *prike* is "a perfectly normal verb to ride out from the romances" because "pricking is what mounted knights do," Chaucer satirizes the usual use of *prike* to express adult masculine virility, because Thopas "does it and does it, through the ferocious forests of Flanders, filled with savage rabbits."[514] *Prike* is the linguistic means by which chivalric masculinity is instantiated, in late medieval romance, and Chaucer subverts the more violent and aggressively sexual meanings of the term to offer a risibly masculine figure of no threat to anyone or anything.

Prike is not exclusive to romance or to chivalry, however. It is also used, in a quotidian sense, as a precise term for the occupational labor of writing, used to mean the act of pricking a rubric, to mark down, to sew together or fasten.[515] To work in the scriptorium, the cleric must prick holes in the page that can then be used as guides to draw straight lines that constitute the format of the page. The doubled meaning of the term *prike* informs the production of *Sir Thopas* as both a poetic representation and as an aspect of the construction

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[512] The verb appears eight times in eighty-three lines. See Cohen, "Diminishing" 146.

[513] A number of critics have observed the homosocial charge at work in romance. See Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss is Just a Kiss"; and Richard Zeikowitz, Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-Sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). The rape of a young maid by an errant knight is the central narrative action in the Wife of Bath's Tale.

[514] See Gaylord, "Chaucer's Dainty 'Dogerel'" 91.

[515] The verbal forms of the Middle English *prike* are as follows: to pierce, stab, penetrate, agitate, goad, gallop, fight, incite, encourage, pursue, inscribe, mark down, or fasten, according to the MED.

of a material text. Thopas' endless *prickynge* is paralleled, in the polyvalent etymology of the term, with the tedious work of inscription. The knight errant must goad his horse, wage battle and go on quests, in the romance. And someone must prick the page in order to facilitate the setting down of that story. The work of manuscript *prickynge* is indeed a kind of bodily labor, for "literary production takes place on bodies—on the animal skins made into pages, on cursed scribes' scalps—and the rubbing and scraping that must be done to both suggests a figurative indentification here between the human body and the manuscript page, the text," according to Carolyn Dinshaw.[516] But this inscriptive work does not fully accommodate the labor of *makynge* poetry, of inventing and then representing the narrative of the knight errant *prikynge* along on his quest. Indeed, highlighting such work may be read as the textual poet's dig at the seeming easiness of merely oral *makynge*, of producing for an immediate, live audience. The oral makere does not have to imagine his labor as anything other than performative, public, live. But the textual poet, a man who is also a makere, must consider the role of textuality in the composition, inscription, copying and then dissemination of his poem. The labor of poetic *makynge* as imagined in Thopas is a mixed practice, one that must accommodate both oral performance and textual inscription. As Chaucer's performance of oral-style minstrelsy makes clear, late medieval vernacular poetry straddles a fine line between orality and textual literacy, embracing both modes, often within the same text.[517] Chaucer's repeated choice of the term *prike* emphasizes the strange absence

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[516] Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics 4.

[517] There is rarely a hard separation between the written and the oral in Chaucer's poetry. Jörg O. Fichte points out that in The Canterbury Tales, "we have an author who not only fictionalizes himself and his audience in a specific communicative situation which demands a two way exchange between teller and audience, but who also makes use of all the strategies of oral communication, including the oralization of written sources. On the other hand, we have an author who looks beyond this fictionalized aural audience to another audience perusing a written text." See his "Hearing and Reading The Canterbury Tales," in Mundlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im

of his own poetic labor—the knight pricks along the story, and the scribe pricks the page to prepare for the story, but what is centrally missing is the labor of the man who invents that story in the first place. In Thopas, the *makere's* labor of invention is invisible labor.

The *makere* creates verse in an activity related to the production of books and to bureaucratic tasks, but also quite different from these occupations. For the *makere's* production is not of a material text as much as it is of performative sound. *Makynge* interrupts silence itself to offer vernacular English speech and its eventual written representation, and Thopas is an example of the performance of a single vernacular voice talking about *makynge* itself. This talking is, in the case of *Thopas*, also a way of erasing the labor involved in creating representation. Rendered as easy "solaas" (I.798), produced effortlessly by an "elvyssh" narrator in consummate control of his textual project, the *makere's* labor in Thopas seems to be no labor at all. Yet only labor that is silent and solitary can ever be rendered as effortless—there is no sweating or swearing involved in *makynge*, and its practitioners do it alone, so no one can see them actually performing it. Representing the practice of *makynge* as no labor at all is a means to domesticate the ludic, the fictive and the pleasurable qualities of poetic narrative and to affix a codifiable price upon *makynge* as a social product. Yet to render invisible is also a gesture of power and resistance: it is to speak out of both sides of his mouth.

In the doubled voice of a minstrel, Chaucer points out his ability to confect not only the entire *Canterbury* project but also his own poetic identity, and he does so under the guise of fictiveness. This creation of fictiveness is fundamentally the labor of the *makere.* Thopas is performative proof of Chaucer own practice of *makynge,* a parodic masterpiece of poetic

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englischen Mittelalter ed. Willi Erzgraber and Sabine Volk (Tubingen: Gunter Nar Verlag, 1988). 121-132, at 131.

skills. For what Chaucer parodies in Thopas is "not the romances but the fancies and temptations of his own practice."[518] Through the quick confines of metrical romance, he imagines a masculine identity produced by the immaterial labor of *makynge* vernacular poetry, a solitary, individual labor of creating fiction and creating fictiveness itself, one that eventually finds itself pricked—fastened—onto a page.[519] Both Thopas and his *makere* are fictive representations, diminutive men who repeatedly indicate their very confectedness and artificiality. Chaucer is the "popet in an arm t'enbrace" (701), reluctantly goaded, indeed pricked, into telling a tale by the bullying of Harry Bailly. And Sir Thopas is the puppet's puppet, "a doll in bright clothing," who is traversed about a satiric stage.[520]

Makynge **Masculine Identity: Value and Embodiment**

Designed for oral performance, and indeed fetishizing the minstrel tropes of such performance, Thopas presents a fictive ideal of embodied poetry. There is an *I* that governs the tale, and that draws attention to itself and to its masculine body, emphasizing his presence as a subjective individual. Embodiment, for the late medieval *makere* more generally, is a question not only of voice but of value. The body that governs Thopas, speaking its rhythms and rhymes, is a body *not* doing other kinds of more productive labor. The poetic work that it is doing—producing meter and narrative, creating a metrical romance "rym," and performing it—is perceived as completely worthless. According to Harry Bailly, "thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord" (930). Thopas is a tale intended to be

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[518] See Gaylord, "Moment" 320.

[519] This laborious solitude is a practice unavailable to lay medieval women; it is a masculine activity associated with scribal and bureaucratic occupation.

[520] Cohen, "Diminishing" 145.

a speech act, to participate in the larger conversation between Chaucer and Harry Bailly; it is a tale that is in many ways all noise, because it is about nothing, with nothing but other poems, stock formulae, popular tropes, for its content.[521] Itself deemed worthless, Thopas can read like a long advertisement for the stuff of courtliness. It is studded throughout with what are effectively product placements—the goods, objects, ornaments and luxury items with which fantasy knights adorn themselves. In fact, there almost many lines and rhymes given over to cataloguing treats and finery—the "roial spicerye/of gyngebreed that was ful fyn (853-4), the "jambeux of quyrboilly," the "swerdes shethe of yvory" (875-6), the "spere of fyn cipress" (881). What's painfully lacking is narrative action, having been replaced, it seems, with a kind of "pure" poetry, a poetics of description and repetition, exclusively. That poetics is spoken emphatically by a voice that calls attention to its artificiality, its own lack of value beyond the capacity to recite lengthy descriptions of luxuries.

Thopas appears initially to be value-less, a poetry of air and fripperies. This lack of value, perhaps even anti-value, is echoed later in the Retraction, where Chaucer disavows some of his earlier work for "sownen into synne" (X.1085), for having sounded into sin. He claims only that writing which "is writen for our doctrine" (X.1082), the explicitly Christian texts of good ethical value, such as his translations of Boethius, his hagiographies, his homilies, and his writings on morality and devotion (X.1087). And he revokes the Canterbury Tales. Overly concerned with worldly pleasures and capable of sowing sin, poetry is a tricky business in Chaucer's texts. His prose Parson's Tale addresses directly the problem of poetic value in a long disquisition regarding the proliferation of sin. Unlike the roly-poly minstrel of Thopas, eager to regale his audience with worthless fripperies, the

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[521] See C. David Benson, "Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales," The Chaucer Review 18.1 (1983): 61-76, at 68.

Parson urges his audience to beware the "synne of double tonge," that is, the sin of saying one thing and meaning another. The Parson describes this sin of language as occurring when men "speken faire byforn fold and wickedly bihynde, or elles they maken semblant as though they speeke of good entencioun, or elles in game and pley, and yet they speke of wikked entente" (X.644). The sin of the doubled tongue is the multiplication of meaning, the making of semblance, the joking with evil intent—in short, the stuff out of which popular vernacular poetry is made. With its emphasis on "pleye," on the proper balance between "ernest" and "game," between "sentence" and "solaas," the poetics of the Canterbury Tales is organized around the tension between instruction and delight.[522] Yet the fact that the Parson must instruct so harshly, on the issues of sin and language-play, attests to the Canterbury Tales being fundamentally unable to strike a balance between the two critical poles. His tale is the corrective to the sins inherent in the Canterbury Tales; his tale cuts short the tale-telling contest.

The Parson's Tale and Chaucer's Retraction conclude the Canterbury Project, but they are not Chaucer's only opinions on the purpose and placement of vernacular *makynge*. He may retract his earlier works for their sinful lechery, but he cannot fully erase them. Moreover, he represents himself in the Thopas not as a properly sober, moral Christian disavowing poetry for its sinfulness but as a *makere* offering an oral performance of a tale defined by its obsession with the narrative pleasures of the romance genre. Chaucer speaks, then, in a doubled tongue, about the practice of his *makynge*. A literate, smooth-talking middle man in service to hegemony, he is a man who must in fact double his own voice in order to remain employed. David Carlson has pointed out that, as part of his bureaucratic

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[522] Alan Gaylord lays out these distinctions, and argues that Harry Bailly's aesthetic assessment must be read as Chaucer's attempt at reconciling them, in his "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 235.

duties, "Chaucer *was* the police, not in an attenuated or metaphoric sense: in the better part of his mature employment, he was an official of the repressive apparatus of the state" [emphasis original].[523] Yet Chaucer's labor as a member of the "police" was not his only contribution to late medieval society, nor was it the only way in which he identified himself and his occupational duties. As immaterial labor, *makynge* produces nothing anyone can eat. But it requires food and shelter in order to be practiced, and Chaucer's bureaucratic duties certainly provided for his ability to keep *makynge*. Chaucer's representation of himself, a plurality of expression that finds its climax in the Thopas-Melibee link, is a means of clearing space for a new masculine identity organized less around police work than around working with poetry. To work with poetry is to work outside of politics, in many ways, to engage in a kind of subterfuge, parody and erasure.

Chaucer represents himself, as a *makere*, to be a threat to no one. Short, but wide in the waist like Harry Bailly, the *makere* of Thopas is compared to a performing object so parodic that he is easily manipulated by women. He describes him as being

> … a popet in an arm t'enbrace
> For any woman, small and fair of face.
> He semeth elvyssh by his contenaunce,
> For unto no wight dooth he daliaunce. (VII.701-4)

He is a doll, a little plaything, his countenance is "elvyssh," abstracted and inward-looking. At the moment when he is poised to speak as an author, Chaucer instead points out his oddly diminished masculine body as being the body from which poetry emerges. *Makynge*,

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[523] David R. Carlson, Chaucer's Jobs (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2004) 1.

this pointing indicates, is a practice that's harmless. Yet to point out so directly the harmlessness, the lack of importance, of *makynge* is revelatory. Chaucer protests a bit too much that he means no harm. As David Wallace has commented, the Chaucer who speaks as a *makere*

> is a person who cannot hold a level gaze … whose passivity is said to invite physical handling, whose body is read as his social being. And this too is an author portrait: a portrait, specifically, of an author about to speak for himself. Such emphases upon physical vulnerability and social isolation suggest the impress of political pressures requiring a new explanatory framework.[524]

Chaucer's winking, parodic representation of his own passivity, of his own powerlessness as a *makere* is an indication of the very real power of *makynge* to imagine and reimagine the possible. *Makynge* is a practice connected to a suspiciously isolated, decidedly unmanly body, whose impropriety and "drasty rhyming" are simply too much for Harry Bailly. The association between the *makere's* oddly shaped, and thereby improperly gendered, body and his work is not unique to Chaucer. Both William Langland and Thomas Hoccleve represent their bodies as deformed; in Langland's case, the deformity somehow prevents him from laboring, whereas Hoccleve complains that his body is misshapen because of his bureaucratic, scribal labor.[525] The *makere* is both meaningless and unrecognizeable; he fits in

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[524] David Wallace, "In Flaundres," Studies in the Age of Chaucer 19 (1997): 63-91, at 74-5.

[525] In his Regement of Princes, Hoccleve complains that, like Langland, he cannot complete agricultural labor due to his literary work. Yet while Langland does not provide a reason for this inability, Hoccleve says that

> My bak unbuxom hath swich thyng forsworn,
> At instaunce of wrytynge, his werreyour,
> That stowpynge hath him spilt with his labour. (ll.985-7)

to the social fabric of the Canterbury Tales as badly as does the Pardoner, the other improperly gendered male figure also interrupted by the Host.[526]

For the late medieval *makere*, the practice of craft confers not simply identity but recognizability, a way of being known in the world. If Chaucer's craft practice were meaningful, and conferred a stable masculinity, then Harry would perhaps be able to recognize him and his work; Harry might not have to ask, "what man artow?" (695) But Harry's question points out the very invisibility of late medieval poetic *makynge* as a definable practice that might confer a stable identity. Indeed, Harry's insulting question is one of both kind and degree, for, if as Pierre Bourdieu asserts, "to praise a man one has only to say of him, 'he's a man,'" then the inverse must be understood as an insult.[527] To hurt a man, one has to question whether he *is* a man. Hailing Chaucer as not quite a man, Harry also addresses him familiarly, further dressing him down by using "artow," the second person informal pronoun. He speaks to Chaucer as one would speak to children, servants, family. Harry's very public words—he calls out to the other male pilgrims, in the formal register, "now war yow, sires, and lat this man have place!" (699)—instantiate rank, reputation and shame, concerns at the heart of late medieval, common-born masculine society, according to

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His back has been misshapen because of stooping for so many hours over his writing. As he points out, this labor is unfamiliar to most people; many men think "that wrytynge/No travaille is; they holde it but a game" (988-9). See his 'My Compleinte' and Other Poems, ed. Roger Ellis (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001).

[526] The Pardoner offers the pilgrims "som honest thyng" (VI.328), in diction that parallels the Host's request that Chaucer provide "som deyntee thyng" (VII.711). Neither the Pardoner nor Chaucer provide an honest, dainty tale, instead presenting poems that subvert the pilgrims' expectations. When the Host later tells the Pardoner that he wants to place the Pardoner's testicles "shryned in a hogges toord" (955). He speaks to the Pardoner in the familiar, as he also does with Chaucer.

[527] Pierre Bourdieu, "La domination masculine," Actes de la recherché en sciences sociales 84 (1990): 2-31, at 21.

David Gary Shaw.[528] Yet more importantly, in this discursive moment, Harry's use of the familiar hails Chaucer as a peer. Both men share a similar "middling" status, as do the majority of the pilgrims,[529] and by depicting conflict between Harry and Chaucer-the-"popet," Chaucer indicates their affinity. Shaw points out that while there existed a sharp and obvious social distinction between aristocrats and serfs in late medieval society, "there was a very different and more chaotic sense of standing prevalent within groups,"[530] and in these more equal groups a "man's meaning was fluid and variable," dependent on his own words, his work, and the perceptions of others.[531] The *makere's* masculinity is one of shifting utility, an identity that requires a constant effort of explanation and refutation, because the *makere* cannot comfortably rely on his work as contributing soberly to the common good of late medieval English society.

Where Chaucer-as-narrator begins the Canterbury project with visual descriptions of the pilgrims, their dress and bodies, Harry usurps this authorial prerogative in the Thopas frame. He shames Chaucer openly, using his own body as a template against which Chaucer's will be judged. Chaucer is "in the waast shape as wel as I," but where Harry can command attention and deference, Chaucer is a plaything, a doll to be carried about in the arms of girls. Harry's words here have a sexual charge—Chaucer is so diminutive, so unmanly, that it is women who can physically control him as they might control a toy. Laura Gowing has argued that, "sexual insults, as public social dramas, might perhaps be seen as

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[528] Shaw argues that among urban, common-born medieval people, particularly among men, "honor was the lynchpin of the self," Necessary 31.

[529] Strohm, Social Chaucer 67.

[530] Shaw, Necessary 70.

[531] Shaw, Necessary 116.

one of the repetitious acts or performances that … constitute gender."[532] Where Harry first wondered whether Chaucer was a man at all, here he points out that Chaucer is not a man but a "popet," and one easily handled by women. The slight here is not that Chaucer is a boy, or even that he is a woman, those two insults common by comparison. It is that Chaucer is a dainty, small girl, a doll-like plaything of women.[533] As a genre classified for ladies, the romance is an ideal form for Chaucer to offer. Harry calls him the girlish plaything of women; he responds in kind, with a metrical romance. So effeminate, so far down the scale in rank, his gender identity registers only as a joke, in Harry's eyes.

A common born, medieval man's adult masculinity was established "by testing and proving himself against other men," in a complex matrix of hierarchy and relation, according to Ruth Karras.[534] Harry is quick to compare—and thereby differentiate—himself from Chaucer's more suspiciously gendered body. He closely reads Chaucer's demeanor and his shape, "thanne at erst he looked upon me" (694), and he mocks: "thou lookest as thou woldest fynde an hare,/For evere upon the ground I se thee stare" (696-7). Chaucer stares at the ground instead of looking at others; it's as if he is hunting rabbits, so intent is he on facing the grass below his feet. He is socially awkward, a non-participatory observer more interested in being still and unobtrusive than he is in holding forth socially. And Harry treats him roughly, as if he were an older brother, goading Geoffrey, and demanding he behave differently. "Looke up murily," Harry commands of Geoffrey, look up with acceptable

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[532] See her Domestic Dangers: Women, Words and Sex in Early Modern London (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 4.

[533] The MED defines "popet" as (a) A youth, young girl; a babe; also, a small person; (b) a doll; (c) a wax figure used in necromancy.

[534] Karras, From Boys to Men 11.

affect (698). Chaucer's poetic self, in the narrative frame introducing Thopas is a man failing at the proper performance of common-born manhood. But this failure suggests that the gender identities of the urbane majority class were anything but stable, instead existing as a kind of broad middle in which identity was in constant production. For late medieval common men in particular, "good hands made a good living, a good reputation,"[535] and a man's responsible reputation was what mattered most in terms of his social identity. In Thopas, Chaucer places himself as a man among other common men, but one whose reputation depends not on his hands, per se, but on his poetic abilities. In doing so he asks implicitly whether *makynge* is work, and what kind of masculinity such embodied, immaterial, performative work might confer. There are no "hands" creating the performance of Thopas, only voice, albeit a voice situated in a small, male body.

Just as Harry critiques that body, so too does he act as arbiter of literary taste. Obsessed with the practice of telling beautiful lies, Fragment VII comes the "closest of anything we have from Chaucer to providing his literary aesthetic."[536] That aesthetic is, according to Gaylord, one mediated primarily by the Host, a man who is "a realist, a literalist, and a materialist, by practice, if not by profession."[537] It is Harry who establishes the contest of the Tales, and it is Harry who bullies, goads, interrupts, and comments upon each tale within the narrative frame. Like an author, Harry passes critical judgment, and yet, like a reader or a listener, Harry also stands outside the fray of creative production. He may demand satisfying entertainment, and declare some stories as being nothing but "drasty speche," but he does not venture to contribute anything of his own *makynge* to the mix of

[535] Shaw, Necessary 154.

[536] Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 227.

[537] Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 232.

tales, each vying for primacy. And, while he may appreciate or abhor a tale quite vigorously, the Host's reaction is not nuanced: he does not perceive a poem as "a thing-in-itself," but rather as something that "serves rather to mirror his own likes and dislikes, or to point to something which is already known."[538] His desire for diversion and his critical assessments are not a reflection of his sensitivity to poetry more generally, nor does he have "any great feeling of responsibility towards the artist" as an individual.[539] Rather, the Host is able to respond powerfully to the proper admixture of instruction, entertainment and well-wrought rhymes, but he refuses to be transported on the journey-to-nowhere that defines The Canterbury Tales as poetry. As Gaylord posits, "if Harry is the Apostle of the Obvious, Chaucer is the Master of Indirections."[540]

Yet if Harry is the Apostle of the Obvious, it could also be said that he is the arbiter of hegemonic power. Indeed, as Dinshaw has argued, Harry's "function as master of ceremonies may well be to register unacknowledged ideology in the Tales as a whole."[541] And it is Harry's displeasure at Thopas that indicates how the tale—and perhaps Chaucer himself—resists Harry's dominant and dominating opinion on gender, performance, narrative and aesthetics. Fragment VII may indeed by the "literature group" due to its variety of tales and genres, but it is also the Fragment that most fully "explores the more muddled present, where subjects can increase and multiply in meaningful ways within the fragmentation of human language and embodiment," according to Burger.[542] That

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[538] Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 232.

[539] Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 232.

[540] Gaylord, "*Sentence* and *Solaas*" 235.

[541] See Dinshaw, Chaucer's Sexual Poetics 94.

[542] Burger, Chaucer's Queer Nation 184.

fragmentation cannot be accommodated by Harry's prevailing worldview, which is driven by finite terms of value and rigidly organized social functioning. He establishes this kind of valuation early on in the pilgrimage, when he suggests his contest of tales. Those who do not follow his assessment, or his taste, will literally pay for it: "whoso be rebel to my juggement/Shal paye for al that by the wey is spent" (I 833-34). Harry assigns monetary value to the worth of the entire contest of tales, but it isn't exactly a fair fight, if he is the only judge. If anyone resists his opinion, she will pay for it. As the variety of tales represented in the Tales indicate, poetry and narrative are inherently subjective, allowing for individual experience and desire. Harry's desire, in the Canterbury contest, is the only one that matters, however.

Harry is the de facto leader of the pilgrimage, even though he is not—by birth—an aristocratic man born into power and prestige. While he serves as "governing figure, as ruler, as king," of the journey,[543] his literary taste and his social status represent him as "a figure of bourgeois masculinity."[544] Harry's identity, then, is mixed—he can neither represent an actual king nor can he fully occupy a merchant or artisanal position. Instead his identity is organized around Harry's performance of hegemonic masculinity, on his being, above all else, "a man's man," according to Tison Pugh.[545] His alpha male status "ultimately depends as much upon his ability to manipulate genders as upon his ability to encourage tales."[546] And this manipulation is built into the narrative frame of the Tales, from which Harry

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[543] David R. Pinchaske and Laura Sweetland, "Chaucer on Medieval Monarchy: Harry Bailly in the Canterbury Tales," Chaucer Review 11 (1977): 179-200, at 198.

[544] Mark Allen, "Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity in Chaucer's Host," in Masculinities in Chaucer 9-21, at 9.

[545] Tison Pugh, "Queering Harry Bailly: Gendered Carnival, Social Ideologies, and Masculinity Under Duress in the Canterbury Tales," The Chaucer Review 41.1 (2006): 39-69, at 39.

[546] Pugh 43.

continually expresses his need to control the tales and tale-tellers so that they fit sufficiently into his conceptions of what is appropriate. As Pugh argues, "For the Host, play and amusement are not merely innocent recreational pastimes designed for fun and frivolity; rather, they are inextricably linked to his desire to control the pilgrims."[547]

Fragment VII, in its variety, fits uneasily into Harry's dominant aesthetic. The tales are various and inventive, comprising a corpus of literary skill that represents not Harry's taste but Chaucer's own. More than this, the tales in Fragment VII demonstrates Chaucer's occupational practice. His *makynge*, in Fragment VII, is wide-ranging and diverse, a showcase for his mastery of poetic styles and multiple genres. Like the display of a journeyman's masterpiece, that object intended to prove his ability to practice his trade, the fragment presents Chaucer's occupational competence. He offers rhyming iambic pentameter couplets, rime royale, elaborate eight-line stanzas, thumping tail rhymes, and prose. And he represents himself as *makere* of these forms, as a man engaged in an occupational practice that is entertaining but not exactly socially useful. Just as the multiplicity of genres in Fragment VII does not fit comfortably into what Harry deems aesthetically acceptable, so too is Chaucer's self-representation of masculine identity fits awkwardly into how common-born men should behave.

But here I must point out that Harry doesn't exactly have good taste, nor is he—obviously—a well-mannered and "sad" adult urban male.[548] In Thopas, Chaucer not only satirizes popular romance as a genre, but he points out that Harry is a philistine, and in so doing, also questions power more generally. Harry's sputtering and indignation indicate that

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[547] Pugh 42-3.

[548] Barbara Hanawalt points out the frequency of this term in late medieval English documents, and offers an analysis of its social meaning. See her Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

he cannot reasonably decide aesthetic questions, that he is more buffoon than careful critic. No one but the *makere* himself can adequately judge the value of poetry and poetic production. As a waste of time, Thopas implies that poetry's utility is pleasurable entertainment—in short, that poetry has no profitable utility, no function. In this, I'd argue that Chaucer is quite trickily pointing out that vernacular speech is indeed labile, its figurations resistant to being co-opted by power. Thopas is an offering that is intended to fail not because it is derivative, bad poetry, necessarily, but because it refuses Harry's prevailing hope that poetry might be a container for hegemony. In its lack of moral content, Thopas asks whether poetry needs to instruct, or whether it might simply delight. Harry's request for "som deyntee thing" (711) for an excellent, delicate and recognizable thing, cannot be met. Harry is not the arbiter of Chaucer's aesthetic. And poetry is fundamentally not a "thing" but a vernacular performance, a spoken utterance that is mutable, fickle, and largely subjective in its worth.

Metrical Romance: *Makynge* Imagined Community

Although Harry Bailly thinks that Thopas is worthless, I am less interested in whether the poem is in fact execrable than I am in how Chaucer uses metrical romance to represent himself as a masculine subject engaged in the practice of *makynge* vernacular poetry, and in how he uses that poetry to address an English audience receptive to his claims. While Harry is dissatisfied enough with Thopas' pointless questing to demand a different tale, he does not represent the entirety Canterbury audience, nor can his character fully accommodate the implied, historical audience that might indeed take pleasure in a metrical romance like Thopas. A vernacular audience is repeatedly called into being by the speaker of the poem—there are lords required to listen, the "knyght and ladye free"

beseeched to hear the next fit (892). This audience is one familiar with other romances, for the speaker lists them, and positions his own tale within their representative tradition.

> Men speken of romances of prys,
> Of Horn child and of Ypotys,
> Of Beves and sir Gy,
> Of sir Lybeux and Pleyndamour—
> But sir Thopas, he bereth the flour
> Of roial chivalry. (VII 897-902)

These lords and ladies, the speaker implies by means of his catalogue, are avid consumers of romance, able to understand his reference. They are also able, crucially, to understand his idiolect and his accent. Although the implied audience of fellow pilgrims who are listening to Thopas hail from all across England, they all speak and understand Chaucer's own London dialect. Bowers points out that "although London is hardly mentioned in Chaucer's works, every town is treated as if it were London, every household a London household, nearly every character a London speaker. London is nowhere but everywhere."[549]

The romances that the speaker cites are collected in the early fourteenth century Auchinleck manuscript, a compilation of metrical English romances in circulation in London during the 1330's and 1340's.[550] Addressed in English, the audience for popular romance consisted of the prosperous top end of the common class, the gentry, merchants and successful artisans.[551] This middling group of romance consumers was urbane and

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[549] John Bowers, "Chaucer After Smithfield: From Postcolonial Writer to Imperialist Author," in The Postcolonial Middle Ages 53-66, at 60.

[550] See Laura Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340," PMLA 57.3 (1942): 595-627.

[551] Harriet Hudson has argued that "Middle English popular romances reached a diverse audience, depending on the occasion of their reading or recitation, and were produced in diverse milieux." See her "Class, Family

concerned with the proper ordering of both domestic and mercantile or artisanal space, as Felicity Riddy has claimed.[552] Romances reached the urban household and workshop space, and perhaps could be found in "the goldsmith's, the tailor's, the grocer's; perhaps in the hall, or in the parlor, or in one of the chambers. There must have been a mixed readership of men and women, old and young, sons and daughters, as well as the para-family members who were servants and apprentices."[553] Riddy's imagined scene of reading accommodates romance as a means to instruct and clarify as well as to entertain. Reading, in this domestic milieu, is not a solitary but a public activity in which an authority reads aloud to a properly organized, properly gendered household. As Riddy argues, many late medieval romances, with their narratives of sexuality, family, bodies, and quests, enact an entertaining "fantasy of the process" of making stable social and gender identities.[554] Through the representation of the frequently maimed bodies of its heroes and heroines, the romance is a way to think through the problems inherent in properly gendering this emergent class.

Common-born but also urbane and well-to-do, the broad middle class of late medieval gentry, mercantile and artisanal society is directly addressed by the Canterbury Tales.[555] Indeed, the Tales are engaged in the fantasy of the invention of stable identities for this emergent class, but the fantasy that Thopas offers is not one of fixity. In effect an anti-

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and Gender in Some Middle English Popular Romances,' in Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994) 76-94, at 77. See also Derek Pearsall, "The Audiences of the Middle English Romances," in Historical and Editorial Studies in Medieval and Early Modern English for Johan Gerritsen, ed. Mary-Jo Arn and Hanneke Wirtjes (Groningen: Wolters-Nordhoff, 1985) 37-47.

552 Felicity Riddy, "Temporary Virginity and the Everyday Body."

553 Riddy 201.

554 Riddy 201-2.

555 See Patricia Eberle, "Commerical Outlook."

romance built of impersonation and parody, rather than courtly otiosity or fantasies of pure bloodlines, Thopas offers the pleasures of containment and luxury material goods. Although Thopas is described as being "a doghty swayn" (l.724), he is not a superlative example of royal chivalry. Rather, as a fair child (l.830), his small body and pointless "prikynge" along on his quest refuse to provide a stable, masculine identity that might easily be consumed by an audience. By virtue of the tale's genre, Thopas as character appears to fit the mold of chivalric masculinity, yet his strangely childlike body—like Chaucer's own representative poetic body—resists the dominant models for authoritative masculine identity and behavior.[556] Chaucer's metrical English romance looks and sounds like a traditional romance, fixed in its ways, but it is, as Glenn Burger argues "very much a present thing," a poem that does not "create a reality effect of stable origins for such a genre, out there in a real noble past," but that instead imagines a different, contingent present in which identities have not yet been codified.[557] While Chaucer might imagine this present through the adolescent masculinity of little Sir Thopas, an idealized, clearly fictional character through which stability might be shaped, he presents instead a representation of his own short, fat body. He fictionalizes himself, offering an improperly gendered masculine figure through which to imagine a poetic masculinity of the contingent present, one that is at odds with hegemony as much as it is also privileged by it.

Historically, Chaucer was a man on the margins of the court and City elites. His peers consisted of "career diplomats, civil servants, officials and administrators who were

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[556] On the links between Thopas' childlike body and Chaucer's own, see both Cohen, "Diminishing," and Patterson, "What Man Artow."

[557] Burger, Chaucer's Queer Nation 178.

attached to the court and government."[558] These peers served for Chaucer and his contemporaries as a seemingly natural audience for their work.[559] But Thopas is not a poem directed at this audience, per se. Chaucer's presentation of himself as a minstrel, in a highly wrought display of vernacular *makynge,* is oddly disconnected from his actual labor in service to the king and to his implied audience of other members of the king's affinity. Instead, the textual performance of *makynge* that appears in Thopas is consonant with other kinds of contemporaneous poetic invention engaged in addressing a broadly English, middling audience. Chaucer's poetic work, as seen in Thopas, is part of a larger shift towards what Anne Middleton has called "public poetry," or "poetry defined by a constant relation of speaker to audience within an ideally conceived worldly community," a community defined by its "high-minded secularism."[560] Via the metrical romance of Thopas, Chaucer situates himself among a broader community of vernacular thinkers, listeners and *makeres*, men engaged in creating a wide variety of innovative poetic and prose texts.

Thopas works against many of the conventions of the genre of the popular romance. If one of the central projects of the romance is to present a narrative in which masculine "identity is finally in the gift of community," as Susan Crane has argued, then Thopas consummately rejects this ideal.[561] The poem works instead to parody the convention of interpellating the hero into a meaningful communal endeavor "by isolating the central

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[558] See V.J. Scattergood, "Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II," in English Court Culture in the Middle Ages, ed. V.J. Scattergood and J.W. Sherbourne (New York: St. Martin's, 1983) 29-43, at 38.

[559] See Kerby-Fulton and Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles."

[560] Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," Speculum 53 (1978): 94-114, at 95, 112.

[561] Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1994) 29.

character, stranding him on an empty stage where his rushing about looks absurdly autonomous."[562] Where successful romance creates for its audience a model for appropriate social positions, Thopas offers only an individual's perpetual *prikynge*. The purpose for the child-knight's perorations is never clear; he has family but no obligations to them and a beloved who requires nothing. He is a solitary figure, immediately recognizable as a romance hero but also strangely different. The interrupted, contested form of the poem, and its hybrid qualities, add to Thopas' solitary strangeness. Set in the middling Flemish town of Poperyng the poem situates its English speaking hero in a mercantile place just beyond the English channel, a setting that is not so alien as to be unidentifiable but that is also decidedly "away."[563] The poem works to domesticate that sense of "away," however, in its explicitly English diction. John Bowers points out that, in the Tales, "when narratives are projected across the Channel and stories are set in Brittany, Flanders, and Lombardy, the speech and customs are thoroughly anglicized."[564] Anglicization is not the exclusive purview of Chaucer, however. Romance, generally, is a French form; but in the early part of the fourteenth century the English metrical romance took this Continental shape and introduced specifically English settings and terms.[565] Metrical romance is a genre that is both quite English, and that also exemplifies a strange kind of international hybridity. It is also a site for poetic and linguistic invention: in Thopas Chaucer introduces dozens of terms he uses

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[562]Crane 29.

[563] See David Wallace, "In Flaundres" 73.

[564] John Bowers, "Chaucer After Smithfield" 56.

[565] Loomis, "Auchinleck" 613-21.

nowhere else in the Tales.[566] He also slightly alters the traditional twelve line stanza of the romance, thus proving that he can "master a form, the tail-rhyme, which epitomizes the mingling and confusing of royal romance with the popular idiom, French wine with English sprouts."[567] Thopas' range of idiolect and prosodic newness, its mingling of Continental and insular poetic traditions, and its setting in Flanders, establish it as a complicated vernacular poem, one that calls out to an audience equally complicated.

The performance of poetic practice that Chaucer enacts in Thopas must be understood as existing within a larger and varied tradition of vernacular English poetry, a spectrum that encompasses the verses of the abject, as in the Rebel Letters, the alliterative seeking set forth by the impoverished William Langland, in Piers Plowman, and the highly polished, anonymous performativity of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Chaucer did not make poetry in a vacuum, nor were the colleagues he names in his poetry the only other men engaged in the practice of late medieval English *makynge*.[568] During the fourteenth century, popular metrical romances existed side-by-side with brief lyrics, in a vibrant and pluralistic poetic milieu only later codified into a traditional canon. This canon, of course, privileges Chaucer as father of English poetry; but the late fourteenth century moment within which Chaucer and his contemporaries composed poetry had not yet arrived at that decisive conclusion. Nor had the emergent middle into which Chaucer was born become rigidly codified into a bounded class. Instead, both vernacular poetry and the middle strata of the

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[566] Loomis notes that Thopas contains twenty three terms which Chaucer uses nowhere else: *aketoun, auntrous, comyn*, cordewain, *crest, dapple-grey, destrer*, gyngebreed, hepe, *jambeaux*, lake, launcegay, *leere, mazelyn, quyrboilly, payndemayn, rewel-boon, symphonye, spelle, staf-slynge, syklatoun*, trie, wonger. Of these, the italicized terms appear in other romances. See Sources and Analogues 391 n.3.

[567] Gaylord, "Dainty 'Dogerel'" 103

[568] Chaucer famously names Gower and Strode, in his own poems, but leaves out his contemporaries Langland and the Gawain-poet.

upwardly mobile common class existed in a moment of possibility. Burger has argued that it is in the *General Prologue* that "a 'new' group of English men and women is identified as a group: largely southern and metropolitan, a middling class neither aristocratic nor peasant, come together by chance association but gaining some sense of identity and community as the pilgrims of the *Canterbury Tales*."[569] The middling group forms "an emergent imagined community capable of articulating its own new 'national' identity," one that is "something not yet known, and therefore separate from the kind of 'English nation' defined a generation later by the fifteenth-century Lancastrian state apparatus."[570] Chaucer represents this possibility, and positions himself squarely within it as not simply a courtly bureaucrat but an aesthetic *makere*, in the *Canterbury Tales*. His *makynge* is a craft practice along the lines of an artisanal model and yet also profoundly separate and isolated from the community offered by the artisanal guild system. His *makere's* voice is singular, beautifully and satirically wrought. And that voice reaches out towards a mixed, vernacular, middling audience, calling it into being and situating the *makere* in its midst.

The performance of a poetic voice, one that points out its artificiality, imagines a community organized around vernacularity. Benedict Anderson has argued that reading *about* reading is a method of confirming and creating an imagined community.[571] At some remove, a similar confirmation is at work in the moments where Chaucer points out his minstrel-like orality. The repeated reference to a speaking *I* who beseeches lords and ladies to listen to him, is a method of forcing an audience—whether one reading the text or

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[569] See Burger, Chaucer's Queer Nation 198.

[570] Burger 198.

[571] He argues that "the imagined community is confirmed by the doubleness of our reading about our young man [or character] reading." See his Imagined Communities 37.

listening to its recitation—to pay attention to itself *as an audience* joined in an act of consuming a narrative. By highlighting his vocal presence in the poem, the *makere* is able not only to indicate his own abilities but also to imagine a group of people who might share in the enjoyment of those abilities. Seth Lerer has argued that Thopas is "the supreme moment in the Tales that actively engages the phenomenon of voice,"[572] and it is the voice of the poet that creates a vernacular audience around its noise. Chaucer uses his poetic voice not simply to indicate the ways by which speech and labor combine in the practice of *makynge*, but also to hail a vernacular audience receptive to this identity formation. Towards the end of Thopas, he addresses this audience openly, calling them towards his poetic "spelle."

> Now holde youre mouth, par charitee
> Bothe knight and lady free,
> And herkneth to my spelle;
> Of bataille and of chivalry,
> and of ladyes love-drury
> Anon I wol yow telle. (ll.891-896)

The first person speaker here exhorts his audience to put their ears towards—"herkneth"—his spell of poetic language and entertaining narrative.[573] Required to collectively control their mouths, his audience here is hailed as one of listeners, not readers. Where Chaucer earlier blurred the difference between listening and reading, in the Prologue to the Miller's Tale, where he tells his audience to "Turne over the leef and chese another tale" (I.3176-7), if they do not like what they read, here he calls attention to Middle English poetry's connection to orality and performative recitation. He points out his own poetic voice, that of

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[572] See his "'Now holde youre mouth': The Romance of Orality in the Thopas-Melibee Section of the Canterbury Tales," in Oral Poetics in Middle English Poetry, ed. Mark C. Amodio with the assistance of Sarah Gray Miller (New York: Garland, 1994) 183.

[573] The moment here is similar in diction to the opening of another popular romance, "Bevis of Hampton;" see Loomis, Sources and Analogues 533.

a *makere* of popular romance, in a textual reenactment of public, oral reading, as an explicit way of creating an audience. Hesitant and introverted, but also famously ironic and brilliantly witty, Chaucer as *makere* asks for silence in order to emphasize, to control, and to draw attention to his labor of verse composition. As a dramatic medium, silence creates an audience, for without it the performance cannot be adequately heard. Silence is what the speaker of Thopas asks from his audience—that they "holde" their mouths—because it emphasizes the sound of an individual voice. Combining the tropes of orality and literacy in a hybrid poetic form, Chaucer calls into being a vernacular audience for inventive poetry, what postcolonial critic Edouard Glissant calls relational poetics. Glissant argues that relational poetics occurs in linguistic moments of plurality and chance, moments where a dominant literary form might find itself reinvented as a parodic newness, one that embodies "a dialectics between the oral and the written, the thought of multilingualism, the balance between the present moment and duration, the questioning of literary genres, the power of the baroque, the nonprojectile imaginary construct."[574] In Thopas, Chaucer creates a form that, in its newness, creates not only a platform for the realization of a possible masculine identity but also a vernacular, middling audience able to recognize that identity as part of its own constitution.

Makynge Chaucer's Voice

Chaucer's voice has frequently been associated with materiality, perhaps because he so successfully emphasizes the visual descriptions of each of the Canterbury pilgrims in the General Prologue. Most famously, the painted representation of his characters occurs in the

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[574] Glissant, The Poetics of Relation 35.

Ellesmere manuscript, which features color portraits of each of the pilgrims. The characters are visually depicted in the Ellesmere following Chaucer's precise descriptions of their bodies, faces and clothing from the General Prologue: the Wife of Bath, for instance, is pictured wearing a broad-brimmed hat, riding upon the "amblere"(I.469). Chaucer himself is depicted in the Ellesmere as a small rotund, bearded man.[575] As the visual images indicate, the clothing, hair, facial features, and disfigurements of the Canterbury characters create sharply realized representations for each reader.[576] Despite this highly visual association rendered by the voice's ability to represent a visual image within the mind's eye,[577] however, the first person voice of the Tales is instantiated by its use of poetic form and meter. It is vernacular sound, patterned and rhymed.

Thopas' performative recitation is what most irritates Harry Bailly, because what he hears is not what he expected to get. By looking at Chaucer, "Me thynketh by his cheere," Harry assumes that he knows what Thopas will be: something both entertaining and edifying. With its London dialect and its metrical romance form, Thopas is immediately referential, the poem does not fulfill Harry's expectations for a "deyntee" thing. Indeed, the rhymes that Chaucer offers are so startling to Harry that he calls them "doggerel."[578] What Harry is angry about is rhythmic speech, the instantiation of the *makere's* voice set at odds

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[575] Chaucer's portrait appears adjacent to the prose Melibee in the Ellesmere MS.

[576] The precision of these descriptions, particularly in regards to clothing, have offered scholars a wealth of information regarding the characters' appearances and the potential motivations for their social behavior. See for instance, Laura F. Hodges, Chaucer and Costume. Not all details found in the text exist in the illuminations, however; see Richard Emmons, "Text and Image in the Portraits of the Ellesmere Taletellers," in The Ellesmere Chaucer: Essays in Interpretation, ed. Martin Stevens and Daniel Woodward (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1995) 143-70.

[577] The Hengwrt manuscript, which comprises as good a copy of The Canterbury Tales as the Ellesmere, is not illuminated.

[578] Gaylord notes that "doggerel" is used in English for the first time in Thopas, "Dainty" 85.

with Harry's own expectations. He doesn't criticize the lack of narrative or content in Thopas; what he's angry about is Chaucer's "drasty speche./Now swich a rym the devel I biteche!" (923-4). According to Gaylord, "What offends him is not the form, but its peculiar employment; so that what he condemns, in effect, is not the meter but the prosody."[579] It is, after all, time that Harry accuses Chaucer of wasting (931). As the expression of poetic time, prosody is a punctuation of both meter and rhyme, and what Chaucer does with his prosody in Thopas is a controlled sleight of hand. Well-wrought froth, Thopas' prosody benefits from close examination but does not require focused attentiveness to be understood or enjoyed. Gaylord posits that the tail rhyme stanza form of Thopas "submits itself to either careful or careless attention: its large strokes are humorous enough for the most casual reader of romances to appreciate; but its effect stems from a fine-tuned balance of phonological, metrical and semantic shadings and tensions which represent craftsmanship" of the highest order.[580] The prosodic music of Thopas "is at once familiar and disturbing," and Chaucer's role as performer of such sounds establishes him not as an elite poet or even as a capable translator of Continental verse but as a local English minstrel, a *makere* engaged in the "discordant practice" of vernacular performative entertainment.[581] Thopas does not offer moral elevation or instruction, or even the elegant innovations of iambic pentameter or rime royale. Instead, it offers the fiction of minstrelsy, spoken by an artificial voice. Further, while Thopas contributes the pleasures of familiar meter, perfect rhymes and long lists of trifles, it goes nowhere. Cantering and lurching along, alighting quickly on its tail rhymes only to push them further into the next stanza, the poem literally *is* movement.

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[579] Gaylord, "Dainty" 86.

[580] Gaylord, "Moment" 319.

[581] Gaylord, "Moment" 312.

While the poem is performed by an individual *I* that calls attention to its very noise, that points out its own choreography of oral performance, it is also a textual voice.[582] It is "by a deep paradox that [that] very invitation is delivered in the style of the poet's speaking voice addressed to us. Though the substance is literate the manner is still oral."[583] The Canterbury Tales famously begin in an omniscient, universalizing voice that makes up its very orality, always pointing out its voice-ness *and* its textuality. At the opening of the Tales, the speaking "I" is both a voice and an all-seeing eye, able to see the pilgrims beginning their collective trek towards the martyr's shrine at Canterbury, "from every shires ende/Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende" (15-16). Yet this all-seeing eye is also an individual "I" who speaks in the text as a person located at a precise spot: "in a seson on a day/In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay" (I 19-20.) The voice does not claim a gender, although, as Dinshaw has argued, the voice is an authorial, and thus implicitly masculine, voice.[584] And yet when the poem's "I" does point out the body from which it emerges, in the frame around Thopas, it is clear that this body is not a properly masculine body at all. The makere's body, in the Tales, is improperly gendered, an impropriety figured in his continual ambivalence about whether his identity can even be represented. He is an identifiable *I,* not a pseudonymous speaker, as in the Rebel Letters or Piers Plowman, nor an anonymity, as in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The *I* is named, by others, as "Chaucer," a voice of authority and also an abject and castigated character. As Derek Brewer argues, "the self-

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[582] While Chaucer frequently "turns to books for authority, in his verse he *talks* about them" [emphasis original]. Derek Brewer, "Orality and Literacy in Chaucer," in Mundlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im englischen Mittelalter, 85-121, at 85.

[583] Brewer, "Orality" 86.

[584] Dinshaw notes that, the beginning of the Canterbury Tales is a moment of control over signification, and that "whoever exerts control of signification, of language and the literary act, is associated with the masculine in patriarchal society," Chaucer's Sexual Poetics 10.

conscious double image, part fiction, part reality, which the poet creates of himself to the imagined reader, is reflected in that ambiguity of much of his meaning."[585] As narrator, Chaucer claims his characters are taken from real life, but he also subtly and self-consciously points out his own role in actually representing these characters as fiction. More importantly, he indicates that he is representing *himself* as a fiction as well.

In chummy tones, the man's narrating voice that initiates and governs the Tales claims to offer up his descriptions from life: he is at the Tabard, night falls, and pilgrims have gathered there as well (ll.20-30.) And his encounters with each pilgrim, like the specificity of his voice, are personal and individual: "So hadde I spoken with hem everichon" (l.31). The narrator then turns to his audience to address directly the issue of this speaking. Before he gets any further with his poem, he says,

> Me thinketh it acordaunt to resoun,
> To telle yow al the condicioun
> Of ech of hem, so as it semed me,
> And whiche they weren, and of what degree;
> And eek in what array that they were inne. (37-41)

He presents himself here as a reasonable observer, a reporter amidst people who represent the various estates, and he implies that his role in the poem is merely to relate the facts taken from his encounters with these people. But, as Donald Howard has noted, even though we may read each individual tale as if it were "a dramatic monologue spoken by its teller," we can never quite forget Chaucer's presence as author; in each tale, we listen to the speaker and simultaneously "understand that some of Chaucer's attitudes spill into it."[586] The effect of

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[585] Brewer, "Orality and Literacy" 109-110.

this spillage is that the nature and quality of the poem's *I* is unreliable. He is able to ventriloquize so successfully he disappears into his characters, but never effaces himself completely, continually popping back into the narrative to point out his very presence. These interjections and interruptions create a pluralized authorial presence, on one hand an *I* as author, on the other, an *I* as a character within the text itself. Together, these voices present an *I* almost schizoid in its proliferation of viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.[587] Understanding this voice requires an act of interpretation, as H. Marshall Leicester has observed, because we never know exactly who is speaking, who is being impersonated. The speaker consistently "puts fictional others between himself and us."[588]

This slippage between voices—the narrator speaking now as an *I,* now as an other—is one of Chaucer's central *makynges*. The narrating voice's ability to ventriloquize, to occupy other voices, particularly in the narrative frame established in the General Prologue, determines the Tales as discursive fiction. As Barbara Nolan argues, Chaucer is fundamentally "a quick-change artist, a shape shifter, a prestidigitator, a player with voices."[589] Playing with voices is playing with representation, and playing with representation is practicing *makynge*, which Chaucer continually reminds us he is doing. Even as the

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[586] Howard, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 231. Howard calls this phenomenon "unimpersonated artistry," a situation which, "in its more subtle uses … allows a gross or 'low' character to use language, rhetoric, or wit above his capabilities" (231). He argues that unimpersonated artistry can be "coupled with an impersonated lack of art, an artlessness or gaucherie which causes a character to tell a bad tale, as in Sir Thopas" (231). Whether Thopas is a "bad tale," and what function such a tale might serve, is open to interpretation, however.

[587] See B.H. Bronson, In Search of Chaucer (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) 25-33.

[588] See Leicester, The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 414.

[589] See Barbara Nolan, "'A Poet Ther Was': Chaucer's Voices in the General Prologue," PMLA 101.2 (1986): 154-169, at158.

speaking *I* presents the character of the Miller as a person recorded from life, as an example of verisimilitude, he also claims a slippery relationship between the real and the invented:

> He [the Miller] nolde his wordes for no man forbere,
> But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
> M'athynketh that I shal reherce it here.
> And therefore every gentil wight I preye,
> For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
> Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
> His tales alle, be they better or werse,
> Or elles falsen some of my mateere.
> And therefore, whoso list it nay yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale. (I (A) 3168-3177)

Is the *I* merely rehearsing, saying out loud, the tale he once heard from the Miller? Or has he made the whole thing up, in an act of literary falsification? Is he telling, or are we reading? The line between reportage and inventive fiction, between recitation and literate reading, is blurred in this moment, as it is later in Thopas. Although the speaker here claims he is merely rehearsing what he has heard elsewhere, he also openly points out that his audience might be reading the text of the poem as well. Indeed, if they dislike the Miller's Tale, they might simply turn the page and find another, more suitable story. This combination of self-deprecation and ambition, of oral performance and literate practice, defines Chaucer's representation of himself as a *makere*. He is a man who invents poetic forms and structures, but claims that they are merely the rehearsal of the materials originally declaimed by others. He speaks as an immediately recognizable reporter, addressing his audience colloquially, pretending his lack of control over what is happening even as he is also pointing out his skill as a *makere*.

Generally, critics have interpreted the plurality of the poem's *I* as a problem in need of solving, a multiplicity that necessitates being catalogued into discrete components.[590] By and large, the authorial voice of the Tales is perceived as being split into three orderly parts: the pilgrim, the man, and the poet. Of these, it is the voice of the pilgrim that has been most frequently linked to Chaucer's self-representation. E. Talbot Donaldson, in his influential essay, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," describes the predominant *I* of the poem as the voice of Chaucer the pilgrim, a member of the heterogeneous company en route to Canterbury.[591] He argues that the voice of Chaucer the pilgrim is that of a fellow traveler, just one of the many others who have arrived together at the Tabard. Chaucer the pilgrim provides us with an outlook that is both obtuse and quite sophisticated, a "wonderfully complex, ironic, comic, serious vision of the world."[592] This persona is quite different from the voice of Chaucer the poet, because the poet "operates in a realm which is above and subsumes those in which Chaucer the man and Chaucer the pilgrim have their being."[593] Chaucer as pilgrim tells the Thopas as a kind of satirical spoof, a way of playing the part of the poet while also poking fun at its limits. Indeed, according to Donaldson, the interplay between the pilgrim and the poet personae reaches its comic climax in Thopas, a poem that "bears the same complex relation to the kind of romance it satirizes and to Chaucer's own poetry as Chaucer the pilgrim does to the pilgrims he describes and to Chaucer the poet."[594] This parallelism,

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[590] Nolan argues that, "critics propose a false problem when they try to determine who is speaking in a Chaucerian passage—whether, for example, we are to hear the poet or the pilgrim or the man at a particular moment in the General Prologue." She posits, and I agree, that the real problem is rhetorical. See "'A Poet Ther Was,'" 157.

[591] E.T. Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," PMLA 69.4 (1954): 928-936, at 929.

[592] Donaldson 929.

[593] Donaldson 936.

[594] Donaldson 936.

though elegant, does not adequately explain the interplay between the two voices, nor does it fully accommodate the role of the poet as being anything other than transcendent. Chaucer offers up Thopas as comical, and his own persona as diminutive, but we would do well to remain skeptical as to why he might choose to do so and what might be accomplished. The poem is as funny as it is sad, and Chaucer's self-portrait is, while humorous, troubling enough to Harry Bailly to cause him to interrupt and curse Chaucer. Chaucer thus represents *makynge* and the *makere's* masculine identity as being in direct and almost violent competition with other men. *Makynge* is vernacular poetic labor that Harry finds incredibly troubling and rather suspicious. Yet Donaldson's conception of Chaucer the pilgrim as distinct from Chaucer the poet reifies "poet" as an identity of superlative, transcendent genius. He perceives the poet as a transhistorical figure, and his analysis of Thopas as being the way to work through the hard split between the poet-as-genius and the poet-as-pilgrim implies that the poem itself is a bifurcated construct, a shape split in two over the issue of the *I*. Yet, the poem itself never resolves this seeming conflict between two halves. Instead, the poem consistently presents the voice as a both/and construct. The speaking *I* of the poem is both a member of the entourage, offering up his own tale to their contest of tales, and the *makere* who has represented the whole thing, and who points out his ability to complete such a representation successfully.

Donald Howard attempts to understand the poem's *I* not as a pilgrim, a character among other characters, but as a man. He argues, in his essay, "Chaucer the Man," that the poem's speaking subject is a man, and that "this man, whom we feel that we know, is a real and living presence in his works, and that his presence in them is what makes them

interesting and good."[595] Yet Howard is not interested, in this essay, in the historical biography of this "man," beyond pointing out that Chaucer was a bourgeois customs clerk. Instead, he argues that, "Chaucer the man is present in the Canterbury Tales not 'objectively' through any explicit representation, but dynamically—through an implied relationship between himself and his audience."[596] This representation is limited and only partial. And in this partiality, Chaucer encourages readers to interpret and to "intuit what he thinks, to project ourselves into the role of the implied author, to overreach ourselves and become one with him."[597]

Howard's understanding of Chaucer as a "man" is similar to Donaldson's earlier perception of Chaucer as a "poet." In each case, a universalizing, transcendent meaning lurks behind each term.[598] Howard considers Chaucer to be a man, but what he means is that Chaucer is a universal human. He does not consider the ways by which the masculinity subsumed in the term "man" might influence Chaucer's social identity or the construction of his poetry. In the Tales, Chaucer does represent himself as a man with an identity as a masculine *makere*, a man among other men, engaged in a contest of competing masculinities that are never sufficiently resolved into stable, traditional identities. While Howard perceives that Chaucer's self-representation is deeply connected to his poetic *makynge* and to his identity as a *makere* of verse, arguing that, "the writer is by necessity an exhibitionist, and so presents something of himself in everything he writes," he does not consider that this self-

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[595] See Donald R. Howard, "Chaucer the Man," PMLA 80.4 (1965): 337-343, at 337. He argues this concept as well in his later book, The Idea of the Canterbury Tales.

[596] Howard, "Chaucer" 342.

[597] Howard, "Chaucer" 343.

[598] "Man" and "poet" are frequently collapsed beneath the rubric of humanism, and are identities that are perceived as public, as universal, and as unmarked by gender.

representation might be influenced by gender. In Chaucer's best poetry, he argues, we feel him as "a man speaking to other men [sic]."[599] But *makeres* are gendered subjects. And Chaucer presents his poetic identity—that of the *makere*—as being openly and often unpleasantly contingent, local, and specific to his particularly "elvyssh" male body. Further, readers—medieval and contemporary—are composed of heterogeneous groups of people who are likewise gendered subjects. It is this mutual relationship between the *makere* of Thopas and his imagined audience of English pilgrims that parallels that between a *makere* and an English community willing to be entertained by him. Indeed, as Mark Chinca posits, for medieval poetry, the significance of gender constructions in and through texts "is not only in words; it is created above all through performance in a social context," one that we can today only speculatively perceive.[600]

A conflict exists, therefore, between the critic's desire to interpret the nature and quality of the poem's speaking *I* and the poem's own refusal to offer up any neat conclusion or resolution. Chaucer the pilgrim amongst other pilgrims is also Chaucer the man, the *makere* who represents himself as the performer of Thopas. And, forever lurking in the background is Chaucer the *auctor* of the entire Canterbury project. Indeed, John Major presses this very issue when he wonders, "is the 'I' of the General Prologue Chaucer the man, Chaucer the poet, or a persona created for the situation by the poet?"[601] Major posits that the speaking *I* of the Tales is a master narrator, "a marvelously alert, ironic, facetious master of every situation," who is also a "self-styled booby" able to deprecate his own

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[599] Howard 337.

[600] Mark Chinca, "'Women and Hunting Birds Are Easy to Tame'" 204.

[601] John M. Major, "The Personality of Chaucer the Pilgrim" PMLA 75.3 (1960): 160-162, at 160.

literary skills in the Thopas-Melibee link.[602] Chaucer the narrator is a satirist, offering up "a spirit of pure, rollicking fun aimed at amusing the readers, burlesquing fashionable romances (and dull sermons?), pulling the legs of other pilgrims, showing up the Host for a fraudulent literary critic, and finally, with superb daring, laughing at the whole pretentious scheme of his author's composition."[603] Both Donaldson and Major perceive the *I* of the Tales as being a kind of artifice, a persona capable of impersonating himself. And both perceive this voice as openly satirical when it comes to self-representation. While I do not doubt Chaucer's self-satire in the Thopas-Melibee link, neither critic examines the historical or political purpose of this satire. Chaucer's choice of satire and irony, particularly in his self-representation, are a feature of the text. Yet neither critic considers what function Chaucer's self-representation, as a vernacular *makere*, might serve. Nor do they consider what this choice of diminution might say about vernacular English poetry more generally.

More recently, Leicester, in his The Disenchanted Self, argues that critical attempts to find a hard separation between the voice of the pilgrim, that of the man, and that of the poet only provide a false sense of security that we can know who is speaking at any time.[604] The text offers up a voice in its own right; this voice-of-the-text stands outside of the voices of Chaucer the pilgrim or Chaucer the man that we would like to hear.[605] Indeed, as Leicester argues in an earlier essay, "the speaker is created by the text itself as a structure of linguistic relationships, and the character of the speaker is a function of the specific

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[602] Major 162.

[603] Major 162.

[604] See particularly Leicester's "Conclusion: The Disenchanted Self" 383-417. He argues similarly for a textual reading of the voices in the Tales in an earlier essay, "A General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales," PMLA 5.2 (1980): 213-224.

[605] Leicester, Disenchanted 414.

deployment of those relationships in a particular case to produce the voice of the text."[606] Chaucer's text, then, resists any attempt to ascribe a fixed identity upon any of its speakers, but it particularly offers up a conundrum regarding the nature of the *I*. Leicester posits that, "because his 'identity' is a function of what he leaves unspoken—that is, because it is derived from implication, irony, innuendo, and the potentialities of meaning and intention that occur in the gaps between observations drawn from radically different realms of discourse—there is room for the temptation to reduce his uncomfortable indeterminacy by forcing gaps shut and spelling out the connections."[607] Attempts to ascribe meaning based on these gaps forces an overly literal interpretation of the subjectivity of the speaker, in effect denying him "his agency in the production of a performance."[608] According to Leicester, interpreting the poem's *I* as Chaucer the pilgrim or Chaucer the man, does not recognize the fact that Chaucer was and had a self.[609]

While Leicester admirably attempts to recuperate the notion of Chaucer as possessed of an identity capacious enough to include *both* author and self, he does not consider the ways by which Chaucer represents himself as a gendered *makere*, instead focusing on Chaucer's rendering of his characters.[610] Leicester argues that Chaucer's authorial perspective is one associated with a fluid desire to "appreciate and enact a variety of positions, including gender positions. It is allied with the desire and ability to see the 'feminine' in men and the

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[606] Leicester, "A General Prologue" 217.

[607] Leicester, Disenchanted 389.

[608] Leicester, Disenchanted 390.

[609]Leicester, Disenchanted 390.

[610] Leicester argues that Chaucerian authorial impersonation "oscillates continually and simultaneously between…the desire and practice of dominating others and turning them into versions and extensions of the self [as represented by the Pardoner] … and … the desire and practice of exploring new roles, possibilities, and personalities [as represented by the Wife]" Disenchanted 414.

'masculine' in women and imagine how subjects who occupy those bodies with those social constructions might feel, act, desire and 'go on' practically in the circumstances."[611] But he does not apply these insights to Chaucer's own gendered self-representation as a diminutive "popet." I posit, conversely, that the oscillating voice that goes in search of multiple gendered positions is one that Chaucer applies as much to other characters, e.g. the Pardoner and the Wife, as he does to himself. Chaucer represents his own gender as being highly suspect, a threat to hegemonic masculinities as much as it also a gesture towards the possibility of other kinds of gendered identity.

Attempts to define and demarcate the complex nature of the text's speaking *I,* therefore, cannot and do not accommodate the subjective, plural quality of that voice as this appears in Chaucer's personal tale, Thopas. Nor have they, as Leicester's argument suggests, applied theories of gender and deconstruction to Chaucer's presentation of himself as an embodied figure. The plural quality of the poem's *I* implies that pilgrim, poet, narrator, all emerge from the same source: a small male body. This performance of an ambivalent, contingent and masculine *I* comes together in the narrative frame around Thopas. Where Donaldson and Major see Thopas as exclusively a humorous satire, a site for the lampooning of the self in an execrably derivative poem, I wonder whether such an interpretation merely repeats what the Host has to say about Chaucer's particular metrical romance, at the expense of understanding why Thopas is the poetic means by which Chaucer identifies himself as a *makere.* Further, Chaucer's own participation as a pilgrim and an embodied man in the Tales, must be understood as suggesting that late medieval common born identity is continually in production, forever delaying arrival at stability.

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[611]Leicester, Disenchanted 414.

The Canterbury Tales is composed of a vernacular group of women and men who collectively represent each of the three estates of medieval society.[612] The chivalric elite and the religious are in the minority—they comprise only a few of the pilgrims—whereas the vast and changeable "middle" of the artisanal and merchant commons predominate.[613] The pilgrimage group includes successful people as well as outcasts, and it is at the end of this list that the speaking *I* situates himself. There are a reeve, a miller, a summoner, a pardoner, a manciple "and myself—ther were namo" (I(A).542-44). The question of who "myself" might be, and why he associates himself with artisans, merchants, a pardoner and a summoner, is one continually offered but never answered.

The *I* of the Tales is known as a third person name, a reputation.[614] In the Prologue to the Man of Law's Tale, the Man of Law discusses the literary shortcomings of "Chaucer." The Prologue establishes Chaucer as someone talked about, but never directly addressed. Such modes of address matter, in the Tales. "They are the carefully controlled stylistic signals about relationships between people rather than traits of characterization as such," according to Derek Brewer.[615] The Man of Law is beseeched by the Host, who speaks to him in the formal mode, with obsequious respect. "Acquiteth yow now of youre biheeste;/Thanne have ye do youre devoir ate leeste" (II 37-8), Harry says. Harry's use of

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[612] See Jill Mann, Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the Genreal Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

[613] See David Wallace, Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and France (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), particularly Chapter Two, "The General Prologue and the Anatomy of Associational Form" 65-82.

[614] R.M. Lumiansky sees this reference as indicative of the Man of Law's recognition of Chaucer among the other pilgrims. See his Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955) 65. Nevill Coghill and Christopher Tolkien observe that this reference might only indicate that the Man of Law is aware of Chaucer's reputation. See their The Man of Law's Tale (London: Harrap, 1969) 14.

[615] Brewer, "Orality and Literacy" 111.

the formal "you," here, must be heard against his later uses of the informal, familiar "thou" with Chaucer. Where Chaucer is the Host's equal or inferior, as the use of "thou" indicates, the Man of Law is the Host's social better. The Man of Law is addressed with respect, as befits his reputation. Yet what he speaks about is the reputation of Chaucer, as a *makere*. According to the Man of Law, Chaucer's poetic reputation is not necessarily one of mastery or skillfulness. Chaucer is ignorant when it comes to the poetic skills of meter and crafty rhymes, and the Man of Law points out that whatever Chaucer does offer is in "swich Englissh as he kan," in whatever feeble vernacular voice he has. Yet Chaucer's seeming lack of ability has not prevented him from telling multiple tales of lovers and their adventures; he has in fact told more of these tales than even Ovid did.

> I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
> That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
> On metres and on rymyng craftily,
> Hath seyd hem in swich Englissh as he kan
> Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
> And it he have noght seyd hem in another.
> For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
> Mo than Ovide made of mencioun
> In his Episteles, that been ful olde.
> What sholde I tellen hem, syn they ben tolde? (II(BI).46-56)

The Man of Law points out that he doesn't even really want to participate in what Chaucer has already done. And he also makes clear that he is not a *makere* like Chaucer, a man who creates and performs rhyme and meter, even shoddy ones. The Man of Law prefers to utilize prose: "I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make" (96). The irony, of course, is that

the Man of Law is not speaking in prose at all, but in Chaucer's own iambic pentameter couplets.[616]

The Man of Law's criticism of Chaucer's skills parallels the Host's own displeasure. In both cases, Chaucer is accused of being a hack, someone who just reiterates things he's heard elsewhere, and doesn't even accomplish that pathetic task very well. The Man of Law and the Host position themselves as arbiters of poetic practice, and in so doing, engage in a competition of masculinities that they appear to win. Yet this appearance is deceptive; just as Harry comes off as a boor, so too does the Man of Law give the impression of being an overeducated fop. Although the Man of Law criticizes Chaucer's poetic skills, he is also careful to catalogue Chaucer's accomplishments, and undercuts his own literary skills in a display of humility. Chaucer's accomplishments precede the Man of Law's own; the Man of Law comes "after hym with hawebake," with a humble dish that cannot compare even to Chaucer's own seeming hack work (95). Yet the Man of Law's humility is overweening. It is an indication of his own learnedness, for he speaks—as befitting his education and his profession—with educated aplomb, a fact he indicates by using the humility *topos* as well as by comparing the content of Chaucer's poetry to that of Ovid. He also rehearses and catalogues Chaucer's other literary accomplishments; for instance, his re-telling of the tale of Ceyx and Alcione in the Book of the Duchess, (II (BI).l.57), and his treatment of the stories of women in The Legend of Good Women (ll. 59-76).

Obliquely, then, through the mouth of the Man of Law, Chaucer presents his own poetic accomplishments. The Man of Law is a learned man, who has heard of "Chaucer," and knows enough to talk about "Chaucer's" oeuvre. Chaucer becomes, in this discursive moment, not simply a pilgrim or a narrator, but someone who stands outside of the

[616] The Man of Law's Tale, furthermore, is in Chaucer's invented stanza form of rime royale.

pilgrimage altogether. He is a *makere* of considerable reputation. The layers of irony in this representation are multiple, and they work to point out Chaucer's repeated depictions of himself as a literary figure who is at once a textual construct and an oral performer, for Brewer posits that this meta-literary use of irony is based on the interplay between literacy and orality implicit in Chaucer's poetry. He argues that "literacy divides the author from the audience, requires some degree of education, and demands that both author and audience 'invent each other,' via heightened acts of pointing out the author's presence as a literary and yet also somehow real and present character."[617] Chaucer's "own presentation of himself in his poems is devised particularly to insert literacy into orality"; it points out his presence as simultaneously an authorial name, a speaking subject, and the controlling aegis behind poem's very representation.[618]

In Thopas, Chaucer depicts himself and his labor as an act of puppetry; he is merely a "popet," a performing object, and thus he cannot be responsible for what he says. Yet this characterization is rather disingenuous, for if Chaucer-the-poet is merely a puppet throwing his voice, then what is the meaning of the Tales and of late medieval poetic labor more generally? To conclude by resorting to biography, I will point out that in his capacity as Justice of the Peace, Chaucer likely presided over many cases of labor infractions regarding the Statute of Laborers.[619] I disagree with David Carlson, that "the end product of Chaucer's literary texts—what Chaucer brought into the market-place for sale—was the articulation of

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[617] Brewer, "Orality and Literacy" 118.

[618] Brewer, "Orality" 118.

[619] Kellie Robertson made this point in her talk, "Nice Work (If You Can Get It): Authorship and Immaterial Labor in the Late Middle Ages," The Medieval Club of New York, The Graduate Center-CUNY, New York, NY, 1 December 2006.

hegemony,"[620] because the Chaucer who is the *makere* of Thopas may indeed be a plaything, a doll, but his puppetmaster is not power. The puppetmaster is Chaucer himself, in a complex act of many layered ventriloquism. Chaucer was a common-born man with public duties to bureaucratic power. But he was also publicly engaged in *makynge* poems, ones that allow him space to create a separate speaking self able to be satirized and seemingly emasculated, to talk back to the Harry Baillys of the world, and ultimately, to interrupt the notion that poetry must have a purpose. The voice with which Chaucer speaks in his representative poem is an individual and subjective masculine voice that suggests—in its fracturing and tricky self-awareness, its combination of both "ernest" and "game"—that *makynge* might be both a waste of time and a possibility.

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[620] Carlson, Chaucer's Jobs 64.

Epilogue

> I came from a working class family where if you said, "I've been writing for three hours and I have to lie down," they would say, "Do you know what I've been doing for the past eleven hours?" And so then I feel like a total wimp. I could say, "Oh, I was just on a construction site. Get me a brew, honey. I just built a house."[621]

To read poetry is, in many ways, to communicate with the dead. It is to be addressed by someone who is not actually present, to be spoken to by an invisibility that is also quite painfully, quite persistently, human. To make poetry is also an attempt at communication, albeit one in charged, aestheticized language. It is to represent the quotidian and the possible. And it is also a way to talk back to those who are not immediately present. For as much as poets compose for a broad, heterogeneous audience, they are also composing for others like themselves. By which I mean others who make verse. Because making poetry is frequently such a solitary activity, one that precludes other kinds of perhaps more social employment, it is inevitably lonely work. And yet, the desire to address an other, a subject outside the self, is often so deep that the requisite loneliness of making poetry can make a kind of sense. Making poems is a practice organized as much around solitude as it is around sociality, albeit a sociality among other poets and other texts.

This dissertation has argued that late medieval poetic *makynge* confers a gendered, occupational identity. When I began this project, I hoped to situate my argument among

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[621] Mary Gordon, "Mother Lodes: A Conversation," New York Magazine <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/35797/>

historicist and New Historicist readings of late medieval poetry. My aim was to establish a critical practice that was rigorous and compelling, one that could address with integrity the historical *and* aesthetic complexities of late fourteenth century English poets, their work and the community imagined by that work. Because the poems and poets that have been the subjects of this dissertation are over six hundred years old, I could not afford an ahistorical approach. Yet I was resistant to the tendency, in many historicist discourses, to treat literary texts as the revelation of ideology, as inert "bundles of historical and cultural content," in the words of Mark David Rasmussen.[622] Someone made Middle English poetry, someone about whom I was very interested. Thus, I resisted the odd certainty that historicist methods seemed to offer, one where a poem served as "a fantasy machinery for converting fact into symbol, leaving no remainder and showing no marks of labor," as Marjorie Levinson has observed.[623] All poems, even anonymous ones, are made by a human person. It was clear to me, when I read late medieval English poetry, that an author was present, was guiding my reading. However anonymized or pseudonymized, however obscured by persona or posturing, someone had made a text. I wanted to respect that human presence.

The subjects of this dissertation were predominantly members of the common class. Unable, by virtue of this membership, to pursue a life of aristocratic leisure or of monastic contemplation, they sought a way to support themselves and their families while also continuing to compose poetry. I have argued that these men made poetry along an artisanal model, offering up their well-wrought verse as proof of their craftsmanship. Such craftsmanship is public and performative. By presenting poetry to an audience, the late

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[622] Mark David Rasmussen, "New Formalism?" Renaissance Literature and its Formal Engagements, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 1-14, at 1.

[623]Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism?" PMLA 22.2 (March 2007): 558-69, at 565.

medieval *makere* is pursuing an occupational practice, albeit one for which few men found financial compensation.

I do not wish to make a parallel between the craft of the professional, bureaucratic scribe and the practice of *makynge* poetry, because, as I have argued, poetry is not only, not exclusively, a textual product. Nor does it become public exclusively by textual means, especially in a manuscript culture. The work of *makynge* poems is a performance, as is the work of reading or reciting poems. The late medieval poems that I examine frequently draw attention to themselves as texts intended to be read aloud to an audience; that is, they draw attention to themselves as oral and aural performances. In such a situation, the *makere* of late medieval verse cannot and does not occupy the stable position of other kinds of bureaucratic or scribal labor. A stationer, for example, may set out his materials, and is immediately recognizable as a stationer, a man working in the book trade. Consider then the 1395 censure of a man who sold the accoutrements of writing and of texts for his living. He was trying a bit too hard, and too publicly, to earn a profit. The stationer "keeps part of his shop open on holy days and double feasts and hangs outside his documents and various writings, and writes and pursues his craft in sight of the people to the great disgrace of upright men of his craft, and as a wicked example to other crafts."[624] The stationer's setting out, in plain sight, the stuff and habits of his trade is a performative act, one read by other members of his craft, and ostensibly, by the public as well. The stationer's performance of labor is troublesome to his competitors because it infringes upon times when others are *not* selling or trading goods. The stationer, writing in public on a holy day, becomes a bit more than an ordinary, individual man. He performs his occupation, and transgressively. Conversely, the

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[624] See Francis W. Steer, ed., Scrivener's Company Common Paper, 1357-1628 (London: London Records Society, 1968) 66.

makere is rarely obvious in his practice, except perhaps when he is reciting his verse. The time spent according to Langland on "meddlyng with makynges" is rather invisible time. It is not public, but instead must happen outside of other kinds of more obvious labor, like the stationer's putting out of his documents.[625]

The late medieval poems that I examine persistently imagine their own recitation in an attempt to recuperate, or to re-imagine, a public performance of their craft. If the *makere's* practice is invisible, because so immaterial, as work, the recitation of his poem is a public announcement of presence. And in the Rebel Letters, in SGGK and in Thopas, the *makere* attempts to occupy the persona of a public speaker. He addresses a crowd, in a way that he could not have, when he was engaged in the labor of composition. The persona of the minstrel *makere* is a fiction, one that is inextricably a part of the practice of *makynge*. In his invention of the fictive, the *makere* is also inventing himself—as both a solitary composer of verse, a man often mumbling to himself in the street, and as a public figure, reaching out to a receptive audience. As Evelyn Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado and Marilyn Lawrence have argued, the persona of the poem's speaker cannot be confined to one, stable role. The speakers of late medieval poems are "shapeshifters, who can step back and forth over the borderlines of narrative; they may tell or read narratives, act out roles within their stories by using gestures and actions, address their audience or comment on their tales from a position outside the fictional world."[626] This shapeshifting quality is unique to the late fourteenth century, a moment of English vernacular variety and experimentation in poetic styles. The

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[625] There are certainly visual representations of late medieval writers engaged in the practice of writing. Chaucer is famously depicted as reading aloud to an aristocratic audience, in a lavish frontispiece to Troilus and Criseyde. My interest is less in visual representation, however, than it is in the poetic representation of *makynge* as a habit that socially isolates.

[626] See Evelyn Vitz, Nancy Freeman Regalado and Marilyn Lawrence, eds., "Introduction," Performing Medieval Narrative (Suffolk, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2001) 3.

late medieval English *makere* is engaged in imagining himself and his vernacular community in a new way, one that was no longer available after Arundel to the men who made poetry.

The fifteenth century certainly saw many *makeres* who imagined themselves in terms of their craft, and who represented their verse as crafted.[627] Lydgate, Hoccleve and Dunbar all depicted themselves as *makeres* of verse, but they did so in terms of their relation to prior, past English masters.[628] Chaucer looked back upon the past masters who served as superlative poets to his feeble *makynge*, frequently situating himself against their accomplishments. Yet he also presented himself as existing within a seething present of vernacular verse production, as did the other subjects of this dissertation. Their poetries accommodated a diverse and diversely popular audience existing in the present tense. Unlike the poets of the fifteenth century, men employed as scribes, bureaucrats, and as explicitly court poets, the men whose poetic work I read could not depend on those ancillary skills of their literacy. They were not hunchbacked scribes, broken by their bureaucratic labor, like Thomas Hoccleve. They were instead artisans and rebels, journeymen, impoverished and anonymous, employed tangentially to power but still able to create poetry outside of those obligations. Their texts imagine, like the Rebel Letters, what poetry might do in real time as a source of inspiration and collectivity for a heterogeneous audience of other common born people. And, like Piers Plowman, SGGK, and Thopas, they imagine as well how vernacular poetry might be used in multiple ways as a means to represent the self and the practice of *makynge* verse itself.

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[627] On the theme of craftedness in fifteenth century poetry, see Lois Ebin, Illuminator, Makar, Vates.

[628] As Maura Nolan observes, Lydgate's poetry was deeply involved not only in canonizing Chaucer but in creating a public and publicly conservative culture. See her John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.)

The initial source of inspiration for this dissertation was my hope of answering a question that had nagged me since I had completed my MFA in poetry, itself an experience marked by an odd and lovely combination of isolation and community organized around poetry. I wanted to know, concretely and perhaps historically, how poetry might be a craft. Having taken several classes titled "The Craft of Poetry," none of which defined or even addressed what that "craft" was or how it might be practiced, I struggled to understand in what ways poetry might be defined as crafted. As a text that is both pinned to the page *and* intended to be performed in real time, the poem must be understand as being crafted immaterially. The poem doesn't occupy space, like two- and three-dimensional art; it is a thing and an experience. But it is also not music, not theater, and decidedly not a novel.

Poetry rarely makes much of anything happen. But it also consoles and entertains. It may be sold, but not for very much. Making poetry, in the past as now, is a practice that occurs in silence, far from much social activity, and yet it is also an attempt to address others in an act of conviviality. Craftedness is the practice of making verse. It is what poets spend the bulk of their time in pursuit of. It is why, in many ways, they seek out one another: to get objective help in crafting what they are trying to make. A poem is made in various ways: meaning combines with expression, aesthetics combines with style, private emotion with a public address. Formal poetry opened up, for me, a way to speak to history, a way to speak with poets outside of my immediate moment.[629] Before I came to this dissertation, I had been writing formal verse as an attempt to define poetic craft for myself; I did so because of an abiding interest in music, and because I wanted to find a way to address the formal poetry

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[629] Certainly, writing in free verse is also a way to speak to other poets; the bulk of the poetry in the canonical anthologies however, utilizes form and meter. See, for example, Margaret Feguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy, eds., The Norton Anthology of Poetry. 4th Edition (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996).

that I was reading. But then I grew obsessed with history and with medieval poetry, because I sensed in that poetry a parallel concern for craft and for poetic craftedness. I detected as well a profound concern, in late medieval poetry, for what poetry was supposed to *do*, socially and personally, for the man who made it.

While I could have simply taken my concern for form and poetics and used that as the critical basis for my dissertation, this approach was considerably more complicated than it initially appeared. Defining the critical practice of this project, therefore, was not as simple as eschewing historicism and replacing that method with a formalist one, because then I'd have to explicate my position as a new formalist literary critic. This is a difficult endeavor, because new formalist literary scholarship is itself a kind of method that refuses to advocate a method, that seeks to focus instead on form for the seeming sake of form. Indeed, Marjorie Levinson has recently explored the resurgence in new formalist literary scholarship, itself a "vexed and consequential" area of study due to the variety of "modes and degrees of identification" amongst its practitioners.[630] Levinson organizes new formalist criticism into two essential types: that which makes a continuum with new historicist methods, or "activist formalism," and that which responds antagonistically to such methods, "or normative formalism."[631] As she puts it, "The central work of the movement as a whole is rededication, a word I choose because new formalism seeks not only to reinstate the problematic of form so as to recover values forgotten, rejected or vulgarized as the direct or indirect consequence of new historicism's dominance but also to generate commitment to and community around

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[630] Levinson 558.

[631] Levinson 559.

the idea of form."[632] Yet Levinson's historical reach extends only to the early modern; she does not discuss the ways by which medieval scholars might utilize the tools of new formalist criticism to apply to early English literature prior to 1500. I sought, then, to participate in an act of rededication, one derived from my own affective commitment to formal poetics but one that also used my training as a medievalist.

But I struggled as well with how to reconcile a new formalist act of literary scholarship with my own participation in the community of New Formalist poets with whom I socialized and shared my poems. Outside of the forced community of an MFA program, itself quite varied in terms of style and creative affinity, I gravitate towards other poets who utilize form. My aesthetic affinities, then, lie with the New Formalist school, a subgenre of contemporary American and British poetry that has sought to revivify the interest in and the practice of rhyming, metrical poetry.[633] As a poetic movement, New Formalism began in the late 1980's via a series of anthologies, gatherings and conferences, the most popular of which was begun in part by poet Dana Gioia (currently head of the National Endowment for the Arts, under the Bush administration) at Westchester University, Westchester, Pennsylvania. The contemporary New Formalist ethos is marked by an interest in narrative, use of traditional forms, and political conservatism; it echoes both New Criticism and the 1950's school of New Formalism.[634] In its political conservatism,

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[632] Levinson 561.

[633] The seminal anthologies that group together younger poets under the "New Formalist" rubric are Annie Finch, ed., A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form By Contemporary Women (Brownsville, OR: Storyline Press, 1994), and Mark Jarman and David Mason, eds., Rebel Angels: Twenty Five Poets of the New Formalism (Brownsville, OR: Storyline Press, 1996). Critical analyses of New Formalist poetry and poetics can be found in Dana Gioia, Can Poetry Matter: Essays on Poetry and American Culture (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2002); Robert McPhillips, The New Formalism: A Critical Introduction (Charlotte, NC: Volcanic Ash Books, 2003); and Annie Finch, After New Formalism: Poets on Form, Narrative and Tradition (Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 1999).

[634] See Susan Wolfson, "Reading for Form" MLQ 61.1 (2000); 1-16, at 8 note 20.

contemporary New Formalism attempts to separate poetry from what it perceives as the damaging influences of liberalism.[635] Following this line of thought, poetry should be narrative,[636] but that narrative should not involve personal confession, political statements, or even much intense feeling. Frequently, such poetry is outwardly polished but oddly homogeneous; it is a style dominated by older, well-off, white men. As poet Daisy Fried puts it, this style of poetry is well-published. It tends to reflect a kind of aged sentiment, often reflecting

> […] one more aging poet's particular calibration
>
> of ostentatious deepthink, wist- or rue-
> or manfully facing mortal intimations.[637]

One reads such poetry for the well-wrought line or image, but not necessarily to be shocked or to think in new ways. Of course, the New Formalist impulse towards an aesthetics that might somehow be devoid of politics is itself a political act. No text is written outside of history, outside of the shaping forces of political power, because no human being can exist outside of these forces, as Judith Butler has shown.

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[635] In the New Formalist poetry workshop where I am currently a member, it is unpopular to write poems about war. As one member persistently claims, poems about war are political and are in support of conscientious objectors. Despite my argument that poets have an obligation to imagine new possibilities, and that poems about war—whether in support of it or objecting to it—are inherently political because war is itself political, my colleague won't budge.

[636] The newest wing of the New Formalist school advocates what it calls "expansive poetry," which may be defined as blank verse narrative marked by aesthetic polish. Expansive poetry tends not to be expansive in its content, however. See Paul Lake, "Rhythm and Truth: The Future of Expansive Poetics," Hellas: A Journal of Poetry and the Humanities 4.1 (1993): 93-95.

[637] Daisy Fried, "Neat Hair," in My Brother is Getting Arrested Again (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006, at 9.

Until I wrote this dissertation, I had thought of myself as a formalist poet, but I had not known how to situate my critical practice. Among new formalist literary critics, there exists a certain antipathy to the New Formalist school of poetry. As Susan Wolfson stresses, reading for form "does not imply advocacy of formal*ism*, in the traditional political, literary, and critical sense of an ideologically toned disciplinary commitment that prioritizes and privileges form in relation to other possible locations of value."[638] Because I identify as a feminist scholar, one with an abiding political and personal interest in the study of gender and in gender performativity, I did not feel I could rely exclusively on the New Formalist poets' reading methods, which tend to favor appreciation over analysis. At the same time, I did not feel as though I could produce a strictly new formalist work of literary criticism, because to do so seemed to require ignoring my social and affective participation within the New Formalist school. Politics notwithstanding, the number of living (not to mention *youthful*) American poets writing in form is very small. I did not feel I could completely eschew my aesthetic and social connections to this community.

As a consequence of these affinities, I also did not feel entirely comfortable in hewing to a strictly historicist method, for to do so felt as though I had to jettison my genuine and deeply personal interest in form and aesthetics. When I read late medieval poetry, I was continually struck not simply by its strangeness, its very real sense of historical distance, but by its obsession with authorship, even as it attempted to disguise or obscure the "real" author behind the text. Highly formal, and often quite beautifully wrought, late medieval poetry presented itself as a kind of crafted, artisanal product. It offered itself as an exemplum of poetic mastery, as a well-made form. And yet at the same time, it was poetry

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[638] Wolfson, 8 note 20.

that engaged—whether directly or obliquely—with the political force involved in the act of verbal representation. As W.J.T. Mitchell reminds us, representation is an inherently political act. "When something stands for something to somebody, it does so by virtue of a kind of social agreement—'"let us agree that this will stand for that"'—which, once understood, need not be restated on every occasion," he points out.[639] Representation becomes, over time, a kind of social covenant, a mutual agreement to participate in the act of using one thing or sign to mean another. Late medieval poets represented a verbal world, one that they presented in overt ways to an audience. And they also, quite self-consciously and pointedly, represented themselves within those poems. I sought to understand why they did so, and to answer a question more pointed than my initial inquiry into the craft of poetry. When late medieval poets discussed their practice, in their poems, when they called themselves *makeres*, what exactly did they mean? In other words, how did they represent themselves, as poets and as gendered subjects?

The late fourteenth century saw a proliferation of styles, genres and modes of vernacular English poetry. It saw as well the proliferation of *makeres* engaged in a variety of forms, who used those forms as the arena for representing themselves as men. Their masculinity was organized around the practice of *makynge* poetry; as such, it was a practice that encouraged identification with laboring class models of male gender identity, ones based on the public performance of work and responsibility. Yet the *makere* was not, because of his aesthetic practice, a responsible worker, a responsible man. His work obviates other kinds of more productive labor. His work claims a space for the *makynge* of poetry as an activity akin to the construction of buildings. As my epigraph points out, for writers who

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[639] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Representation," in Critical Terms for Literary Study, 2nd Edition, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 11-22, at 13.

come from laboring class backgrounds, the work of writing can never compare to the toil of one's family members. Yet poetic *makynge* does build a house, a verbal representation and a possibility.

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