

Revisionary Retelling: The Metapoetics of Authorship in Medieval England

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ABSTRACT

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When Geoffrey Chaucer depicts characters debating the flaws of his works in *The Legend of Good Women*, or when Marie de France tells histories of literary transmission to frame her *Lais*, these authors are writing what I describe as metapoetic narratives. By “metapoetic” I mean that their works are in part about the making of poetry, commenting on the authors’ poetic activity and creative processes from within. My dissertation, “Revisionary Retelling: The Metapoetics of Authorship in Medieval England,” examines how this self-conscious mode of writing enables certain vernacular authors to reflect on their positions as retellers of well-known narratives and established literary traditions. I argue that such self-reflection is central to the efflorescence of vernacular literatures in medieval England.

In the last few decades, scholars have called into question the idea that the Middle Ages valued only established literary authority and had no interest in originality, with recent critics noting how medieval authors do make conscious use of the interpretive and distorting possibilities of translation and retelling. Although this line of criticism has been revolutionary, it still tends to view literary authority as inherently limited, so that newer authors must remain entirely subordinate to their sources or seek to replace them. This dynamic of limited authority would seem to be intensified for Anglo-Norman or Middle English retellers; long-standing scholarly narratives have similarly cast the English vernacular languages as competing for linguistic authority with Latin and French. “Revisionary Retelling” challenges these understandings of vernacular creativity by bringing to light the alternative conceptions of authorship and literary authority being invented and explored by writers working in both Anglo-

Norman and Middle English. Rather than simply accepting or rejecting a subordinate status, authors such as Marie de France, the *Orfeo* poet, Thomas Chestre, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate take a revisionary view of the challenges inherent to translation and retelling: challenges such as intertextual dependencies, interpretive distortions, and the recombination of traditions. In their metapoetic narratives, these writers theorize authorship and literary authority by dramatizing those types of literary challenges, as well as their processes of revision more broadly. As these authors tell stories about the possibilities and problems of vernacular retelling, they simultaneously imagine and enact a type of authorship—and a type of authority—based in creative revision.

The first chapter traces this metapoetic mode back to Marie de France's Anglo-Norman *Lais*, arguing that Marie offers a vision of authorship as an ongoing, trans-historic process of collaborative interpretation. Chapter Two examines how later Middle English lay authors consciously use their second-class status in relation to the French lays to leverage themselves into a position of critical distance from the traditions on which they draw. The third chapter argues that Chaucer willfully depicts his own canon as dependent and unstable in his catalogues of his works, and thereby takes ownership of the challenges of vernacular authorship and invents himself as an authoritative Middle English writer. In my fourth chapter, I suggest that the proliferation of literary authorities in John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, which might seem to constrain and subjectify the text, counter-intuitively asserts the equal value of writing across languages, time, and retellings. Together, these four chapters demonstrate the rich complexity of medieval critical retelling and the power of retold narratives to creatively revise not just their sources, but also literary history itself.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.	ii
Introduction.	1
Chapter 1	
The <i>surplus</i> of the <i>ore</i> : Reinterpreting Transmission in Marie de France's <i>Lais</i>	14
I. Obscurity and surplus in the General Prologue.	17
II. The jeweled box and the bare branch: Collaborative transformations in <i>Laüstic</i> and <i>Chevrefoil</i>	27
III. Choose Your Own <i>Aventure</i> : Living Interpretively in <i>Yonec</i> and <i>Eliduc</i>	41
Chapter 2	
<i>Of a ley pat was ysette</i> : Revising the Lay Tradition in Middle English	67
I. The Exaggerated Minstrel-King of <i>Sir Orfeo</i>	71
II. The Unmotivated Self-Authored Hero of <i>Sir Launfal</i>	85
III. The "Fre" Author-Clerk of <i>The Franklin's Tale</i>	108
Chapter 3	
<i>He useth bokes for to make</i> : Chaucer's Catalogues of Vernacular Authorship	126
I. Subjected to Revision: The Constrained Translator of <i>The Legend of Good Women</i>	129
II. Appropriating Revision: The Man of Law's Magpie-Muse	147
III. Perpetual Revision: The <i>Retraction's</i> Author-in-process	162
Chapter 4	
<i>Auctour, Translatour, Maistir, Prynce</i> : Leveling with Authority in Lydgate's <i>Fall of Princes</i>	177
I. <i>Auctour</i> and <i>Translatour</i> : Framing Narration.	181
II. <i>Auctours</i> upon <i>Auctours</i> : Remodeling Authorship.	201
III. <i>Maistir</i> and <i>Prynce</i> : Humbling Authorities.	218
Bibliography:	240

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Introduction to Revisionary Retelling: The Metapoetics of Authorship in Medieval England

I. What is a medieval author?

“Revisionary Retelling” changes the critical conception of medieval vernacular creativity by uncovering a widespread practice of metapoetic reflection on authorship in medieval England. Before we can address this metapoetics of authorship though, we must explore what a medieval “author” is. To speak of an “author” in modern parlance is to speak not just of a writer, but specifically of an original creator, an innovator of ideas.¹ This modern conception absorbs an obsolete usage of the word, which connoted “an inventor, constructor, or founder,”² thereby giving the modern idea of an author its implication of originality and innovation. The deeper history of the word, however, tells a different tale about what an “author” can be. The word comes into English from Latin through Anglo-Norman. The Anglo-Norman word “autour” or “auctor” connects the originary, creative connotation of the word especially to God, while the writerly connotation is linked instead to authority.³ “Auctor” is etymologically related to the

¹ Dictionary.com even specifies that an author is “the composer of a literary work, *as distinguished from a compiler, translator, editor, or copyist*”; “Dictionary.com,” accessed March 26, 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/>. s.v. “author” 1a, (my emphasis).

² “Oxford English Dictionary Online” (Oxford University Press, 2014), s.v. “author, n.” 1a. The OED gives as two of its examples for this usage: “c1386. Chaucer *Parson's Tale* 808. ‘The auctour . . . of matrimonye, that is Crist,’” and “1576. W. Lambarde *Perambulation of Kent* 264. ‘One Robert Creuequer. . . the authour of the Castle.’”

³ “The Anglo-Norman Dictionary,” n.d., s.v. “auctor” 1, 6, <http://www.anglo-norman.net/>. See also “OED Online,” s.v. “author, n.” 4. See also Minnis on what he calls a “*translatio auctoritatis*” (xxvii)—the shift in medieval thought from locating authority exclusively with God as author of creation to allowing human authors some authority over texts as well; A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship:*

Latin “auctoritas,”⁴ and medieval usages of the word in connection to writing, in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English, assume that sense of established authority, tying authorship to tradition rather than innovation.⁵ The word “author” and the concept of authorship have, that is, changed valence between the Middle Ages and today. If modern authorship necessarily implies originality,⁶ medieval authorship necessarily implies tradition.

Strangely, medieval scholars—who are those best positioned to appreciate this shift—nevertheless continue to privilege originality and innovation. It would be wrong, of course, to suggest that the Middle Ages only valued established texts and authority and had no interest in creativity. Yet medieval creativity functioned within a conception of authorship and literary authority that valued the use, adaptation, and interpretation of authoritative traditions—a conception of authority in which “writers gain authority less by their originality than by their contribution to an ongoing tradition.”⁷ Scholarship remains stuck between that medieval conception of literary authority as deriving from a relationship to traditions, and the modern idea of literary authority springing fully formed from the head of the innovative genius who defies or outstrips such traditions. While critics recognize in theory the inappropriateness of the modern model of authorship for the Middle Ages, that modern understanding of authorship as agonistic

Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), xxvii, 73–117.

⁴ See also Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 10–12.

⁵ “AND,” s.v. “auctor”; “Middle English Dictionary,” n.d., s.v. “auctour,” <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

⁶ This is, to be sure, an overgeneralization, particularly given the past decades’ shift toward appreciating and authorizing creative modes of remixing, mash-up, etc. These post-post modern phenomena in some ways look quite medieval.

⁷ Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et al., eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (Penn State Press, 1999), 5.

innovation still haunts the ways in which scholars represent medieval authorship.⁸ This habit persists even among scholars who explore the ways in which the Middle Ages valued translation, commentary, and adaptation as creative modes. Scholars such as Rita Copeland and Alastair Minnis have demonstrated that medieval authors often make conscious use of the interpretive and transformative possibilities of translation, retelling, and commentary.⁹ This line of criticism has been revolutionary, but it often leads to a view of literary authority as a zero sum game in which newer authors must remain entirely subordinate to their sources or seek to compete with and ideally replace them.¹⁰

This belief in a dichotomy between appropriation and subordination is implicit in the way Copeland outlines the two main models of *translatio studii* that are available to medieval authors: the models of Cicero and Horace emphasized that translation served the target text, offering a model of altering meaning and supplanting the source, while the models of Jerome and Boethius aimed to serve the source text and conserve its original meaning.¹¹ Copeland writes that the former type of *translatio* served as “a primary vehicle for vernacular participation in, and

⁸ See also Michelle R. Warren, “Translation,” in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm, Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature, 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51–67. Warren calls in particular for “a decentered aesthetic order, one that would set aside the very notion that ‘originals’ are worth more than their translations” (51).

⁹ See Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*.

¹⁰ See e.g. Vincent Gillespie, “Authorship,” in *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2013), 135–54; Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir, *Medieval Translations and Cultural Discourse: The Movement of Texts in England, France and Scandinavia* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2012). Gillespie suggests that “contestative engagements with the literary inheritance of the past are the common currency of medieval Latin and vernacular literature” through which medieval authors were encouraged “to bite the hand that fed them” (141). Ríkharrðsdóttir writes that “the translated text not only reshapes its source, but furthermore appropriates its intrinsic literary authority by replacing the source with its own linguistic version” (10).

¹¹ Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, 37–62.

ultimately appropriation of, the cultural privilege of Latin academic discourse.”¹² Such conceptions of competitive dynamics between source and translation or retelling implicitly bring to the Middle Ages the modern sense of authority as oppressive and limiting. In order for vernacular literature to make a place for itself, in these views, it must out-maneuver and defeat Latin literature, and so triumphantly take over the supposedly limited position of literary authority. The modern prejudice against strongly dependent, formulaic, or traditionalist writing quietly creeps back into scholarship, privileging those who could seem to struggle against their sources.

Old evolutionary models of the “rise” of vernacular languages likewise contribute to seeing vernacular authorship in medieval England as driven by competition. The idea that the languages of medieval England were in competition for linguistic authority parallels and exacerbates the notion of texts competing for literary authority—both ideas assume a necessary dynamic of competition, disallowing the possibility that multiple languages or authors might have more harmonious or collaborative relationships with each other. Scholars often depict vernacular languages as being in a defensive or competitive position in relation to other languages, suggesting for example that they “developed in competition with one another, or with a prestigious classical or learned language such as Latin or Greek.”¹³ Ardis Butterfield has noted how the idea of the rise of English persists in scholarship, “and it has been all too tempting to cast this as a triumphant story. Other languages are fought off; English is liberated and

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, eds., *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), ix. Somerset and Watson suggest that calling something a vernacular is either a defensive response to a sense of inferiority, or a “claim for prestige . . . of authenticity or integrity . . . or the more assertive prestige that comes with the successful displacement of the husk of the old” (x).

isolated.”¹⁴ The fact that English ultimately did replace French and Latin as the language of cultural authority in England can too easily be read backward onto medieval history as indicating a concerted struggle among languages for that pride of place. Recent scholarship has been working to shift our critical understanding of the relationships of England’s three (and more) literary languages, demonstrating that more complex and flexible multilingual situations and contexts actually existed.¹⁵ Bringing together the issues of literary and linguistic authority, Alastair Minnis has more recently noted:

It is inaccurate and misleading to think of vernacular texts as having displaced Latin ones, in respect of prestige – as if *auctoritas* was a finite commodity, whose increment in one area meant its diminution in another. Rather, textual authority in general, like authoritative textual meaning in particular . . . was regarded as well-nigh inexhaustible, there to be discovered, inscribed, transmitted.¹⁶

While some medieval authors undoubtedly felt themselves to be in competition for literary authority with other writers, languages, and traditions, that dynamic of competition was by no means absolute or necessary.¹⁷

Part of the problem with developing a clear conception of authorship in medieval England is the conspicuous absence from English literature of the “the sustained analysis of texts

¹⁴ Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy* (Oxford University Press, 2009), xxiv.

¹⁵ See, e.g.: Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy*; Elizabeth Tyler, ed., *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in Medieval England, c.800-c.1250* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, ed., *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain: The French of England c.1100-c.1500* (Woodbridge, UK ; Rochester, NY: York Medieval, 2009).

¹⁶ A. J. Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature: Valuing the Vernacular* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁷ In a related move, Wogan-Browne et al. suggest that Middle English writers “almost always do more than merely imitate or appropriate Latin conventions,” and that along with a views of translation as “war” with or “theft” from predecessors, there was a sense that the linguistic difference of English offered alternative ways of making meaning; see Wogan-Browne et al., *The Idea of the Vernacular*, 7–8.

and language found in Latin theoretical discussions,”¹⁸ or of works explicitly developing a “vernacular hermeneutics.”¹⁹ Such works can be found in French and Italian, most famously in Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*. But Minnis notes that though Middle English did not produce “formal exegetical treatise[s] . . . or commentated translation[s]” in the manner of other vernaculars, it did not lack such a “vernacular hermeneutics” altogether.²⁰ Middle English vernacular hermeneutics simply tends to be interwoven implicitly into narratives themselves, rather than elaborated explicitly and abstractly on its own. Eleanor Johnson argues, in this vein, that through “moments of metapoetics and metacriticism” literary works can “step outside of themselves, to do the work of theoretical commentary” and literary theory.²¹ In order to break away from modern ideas of authorship that lurk within scholarship, then, it is necessary to find the conceptions of authorship and literary authority implicit within medieval English narratives.

“Revisionary Retelling” discovers such theoretical work undertaken metapoetically within a group of works that dramatize, enact, and reimagine the processes, possibilities, and problems of their versions of authorship. By examining how these actual medieval texts depict authorship and literary authority, my research has uncovered models of vernacular authorship that are ruled not by a dynamic of competition, but rather by impulses toward collaboration,

¹⁸ Ibid., 315.

¹⁹ Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature*, 3. Minnis gives Nicole Oresme and Dante as representative examples of the vernacular hermeneutics going on in other languages (*Translations of Authority*, 1-4).

²⁰ Ibid., 4. Minnis suggests the reason for the absence of overt hermeneutical texts is that “vernacular hermeneutics . . . needed high-level sponsorship to thrive, but the prospect for that happening in Britain was remote at a time when books in English were generally coming under suspicion, due to fears prompted by the Wycliffite heresy” (3-4). He offers works such as *Piers Plowman* and *The Book of Margery Kempe* as examples of “Orthodox Middle English hermeneutics” that were able “to participate in theological disputes” within narrative (Ibid.).

²¹ Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 16.

critical evaluation, and revision. Specifically, “Revisionary Retelling” traces a tradition of self-conscious narratives in medieval England—narratives that are in part *about* the process of vernacular retelling and about the networks of sources, readers, and patrons that influence and define vernacular authors and translators. As envisioned in these texts, which range from the twelfth through the fifteenth century and include works in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English, literary authority can be shareable, expansive, and interactive. Rather than either battling with sources or accepting subordination, these authors—including Marie de France, the *Orfeo* poet, Thomas Chestre, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate—invite their supposedly constraining sources and traditions into their narratives to participate in their metapoetic explorations of vernacular authorship.

II. The Problem of John Lydgate

The idea of a shareable authorship and literary authority, which values revision and adaptation beyond what we might think of as appropriative erasure of previous texts, helps us gain purchase on medieval texts that decidedly do not fit the modern sensibility of the innovative individual author. Medieval scholars have long loved to hate the fifteenth century in general, and its most famous and prolific figure, John Lydgate, in particular. Some of the most prominent scholars of Lydgate have also been some of his harshest critics. Henry Bergen comments that, “we search his works in vain for evidence either of imagination or originality.”²² Derek Pearsall offers a more mixed assessment that Lydgate’s work “combine[s] a total lack of originality with

²² Henry Bergen, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, Early English Text Society. Extra Series, no. 121-124 (Washington: The Carnegie institution of Washington, 1923), xxi.

an extraordinary readiness to experiment”²³ and that his innovations, such as they are, come from misunderstanding Chaucer and other traditions.²⁴ Lydgate’s tendency toward linguistic translation and his habit of verbose dilation have generated a scholarly consensus that he is not a very interesting, nor a very good, writer.²⁵ Yet Lydgate was hugely popular in the fifteenth century and beyond, and was often grouped with Chaucer and Gower as one of the “great fathers of English.”²⁶ Rather than assuming that both authors and readers of the fifteenth century lacked literary taste or refinement, then, we would do better to assume that our inability to appreciate Lydgate is our own fault, a symptom of our continued entrenchment in contemporary ideas of “good” authorship.²⁷

It is precisely in trying to identify Lydgate’s “originality” that we are doing him an injustice by measuring him against a model of authorship that was not his own.²⁸ Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*, which is the subject of Chapter 4, is by no means an “original” work. It is a translation of Laurent de Premierfait’s French translation of Boccaccio’s Latin *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*. Columbia University’s library catalogue entry for the Early English Text

²³ Derek Albert Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, Poets of the Later Middle Ages (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), 172.

²⁴ Derek A. Pearsall, “Lydgate as Innovator,” *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1992): 10.

²⁵ To be sure, the critical tide is beginning to turn on this, as I will discuss further in Chapter 4. Maura Nolan, for example, remarks on the surprising degree to which even Lydgate’s supposedly “topical” or “instrumental” texts, such as his Disguisings, engage in “complex forms of literary discourse” (2-3); Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2–3.

²⁶ See Andrew Higl, “Printing Power: Selling Lydgate, Gower, and Chaucer,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 23, no. 1 (2006): 57; David Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” *ELH* 54, no. 4 (December 1, 1987): 765–66. See also Maura Nolan, who links the three authors in their creation of “public poetry,” though with the meaning of “public” shifting in the 15th century; Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, 4–5.

²⁷ In Chapter 4, I discuss other ways that critics have sought to appreciate Lydgate as well.

²⁸ For a different revisionary view of the “lack of individualism” in the fifteenth century see Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century.”

Society edition of the text, which is titled “*Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*,” ironically illustrates the critical consensus on Lydgate’s authorship by listing the author as Boccaccio.²⁹ Lydgate himself might well accept this attribution; he refers to “Bochas” throughout the text as “myn auctour” and even as “auctour off this book” (I. 141). Lydgate is consistently transparent or even insistent about his literary debts, in particular to his two source texts; he begins his own prologue by discussing the authorial motivations of Laurent and Boccaccio before more briefly treating his own. If we judge the value of this text based on Lydgate’s original additions to it, we are left with very little to value.

However, Lydgate’s extensive discussions of Boccaccio, Laurent and other figures of literary authority do not supersede his own revisionary agency or authorial self-positioning. On the contrary, these self-conscious meditations on varieties of literary authority and intertextual relationship form an integral part of Lydgate’s conception of his own authorship, and of authorship broadly. On the one hand, such relationships necessarily inform and shape the author that he is; and on the other hand, Lydgate pointedly makes these kinds of relationships a subject of his text. His version of “Boccaccio’s” *Fall of Princes* reflects self-consciously on his own and Laurent de Premierfait’s positions as vernacular translators, Boccaccio’s relationship to figures such as Dante and Petrarch, and so on. In any individual instance of these intertextual or inter-authorial relationships in the text, the newer figure tends to present himself as humble and deferential to his literary forebear; however, the sum of these depictions across the text tells a

²⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen (Washington: The Carnegie institution of Washington, 1923)., in Columbia University Libraries *CLIO*, <http://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/969510?counter=2>, accessed March 31, 2014. The author attribution varies in WorldCat listings, with some just naming Lydgate as author, but others including Boccaccio and/or Henry Bergen. One listing notably includes Boccaccio, Laurent, Lydgate and Henry Bergen all as co-authors of the text; https://www.worldcat.org/title/lydgates-fall-of-princes/oclc/2702055&referer=brief_results, accessed March 31, 2014.

different story about authorship broadly conceived. Counter-intuitively, the proliferation of literary authorities in Lydgate's translation-of-a-translation works toward a vision of equally distributed, non-hierarchical literary authority, shared by authors across time, languages, and retellings. While Lydgate remains very conscious of his literary debts, *Fall of Princes* also demonstrates that such debt is as integral a part of authorship as creativity—all authors are both retellers and innovators, both humble and authoritative.

My project enables us to understand and appreciate authors like John Lydgate, by exploring the conceptions of authorship that drove his works, and by placing his theoretical conception into the broader context of similar conceptions of authorship that drove the works of other medieval English authors as well—from other frequently maligned retellers such as Thomas Chestre, to better beloved authors such as Marie de France and Geoffrey Chaucer. Indeed, the vision of authorship elaborated by Marie de France in her *Lais*, discussed in Chapter 1, is similar to Lydgate's vision of shareable literary authority. Like Lydgate, Marie includes within her narratives the stories of their composition, transmission, and translation—stories that include the characters, herself, and her readers. In so doing, her narratives engage in synchronic, multi-layered representations of long literary histories that are also ongoing literary processes. Through these complex depictions her *Lais* suggest that literary authority lies in participation in those processes rather than any definitive origin or end point. Both Marie and Lydgate harmoniously balance their debts to sources and traditions with a strong assertion of the creative value of retelling. By discovering these conceptions of authorship that underlie the works of two so very different and distant authors, “Revisionary Retelling” offers substantial evidence for a widespread practice of medieval English metapoetics from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries, and thereby represents a new conception of medieval vernacular authorship.

III. A Theory of Medieval Vernacular Authorship

Beginning with Marie and ending with Lydgate, “Revisionary Retelling” examines the continuity of self-conscious reflection on issues of authorship and revisionary creativity through the Middle Ages, as well as analyzing the strategies and aims of particular authors in particular literary and linguistic contexts. What unites Marie de France, the *Orfeo* poet, Thomas Chestre, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate is their engagement in what I term a “metapoetics of authorship.”³⁰ That is, these authors all write narratives that reflect self-consciously on their own processes, as vernacular retellers, of reading, interpretation, revision, and translation.

All of the texts I discuss are in part translations, or at the very least, make some use of material that the author would have accessed originally in another language. However, translation is just one part of the broader activity of “retelling” literary sources and traditions that these authors are engaged in. In my terms, retelling can include not only linguistic transfer but also reuse of conventions, recombination of sources texts or discourses, and adaptation or reinterpretation of sources or traditions. My focus on retelling as a broad category also signals my interest in the *narrative* effects of shifting from one version of a story to another. That is, I am interested in how the narrative material itself changes in retelling, in terms of plot, tone, style, characterization, as so on, as opposed to simply exploring the linguistic or socio-historical implications of linguistic or cultural translation. Finally, the term “retelling” offers a more expansive and more neutral set of connotations than the term “translation.” “Retelling” can unite a range of authorial practices—from rather literal translation to rather transformative revision—that are not always seen as equally valuable in modern conceptions of authorship, but which, as I

³⁰ “Metapoetic(s)” is certainly a term that can be applied to a much wider range of texts and literary devices than I am concerned with. For my purposes, I focus in on the root word “poesis” and its connotation of the creative process of making poetry. Specifically, I am concerned with narratives and authors that exhibit self-consciousness about their creative processes and their situation within broader literary traditions, and that reflect openly on those processes and relationships.

will demonstrate, are intimately related in medieval narratives as elements of an authorship of revisionary creativity.

By emphasizing the importance of a shared or distributed model of literary authority, I do not mean to suggest that the Middle Ages had no conception of a hierarchy of literary authorities. Indeed, the etymological relationship of “author” to “authority” meant that the title of *auctor* most often went to venerable Latinate figures. The authors I examine are acutely aware of the constraints placed on them by established literary and linguistic traditions, and of the possibility that their works might be perceived as subordinate to those traditions. But rather than simply accepting or rejecting a subordinate status, these authors take a revisionary view of the challenges inherent to translation and retelling: challenges such as intertextual dependencies, interpretive distortions, and the recombination of traditions. In their metapoetic narratives, these writers reimagine such potential constraints as virtues—as defining features, integral to their poetics of self-reflexive critical revision. These authors assert, in other words, that those features of retelling that are now often perceived as weaknesses are instead precisely the qualities that make such works valuable.

My focus on form, tone, and nuances of presentation enables us to see how my texts theorize authorship and literary authority through dramatizing their processes of revision. As I show, authorial examination of the creative process occurs at multiple narrative levels.³¹ Within the diegetic world of the narratives, characters engage in activities that mirror those of the author, including telling hypodiegetic stories-within-stories. At the extradiegetic level of

³¹ My terminology to distinguish these levels is drawn from modern narrative theory. See Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject* (Ohio State University Press, 2002), 1.; Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980). I follow critics such as Malina and Mieke Bal (whom Malina cites) in preferring the term “hypodiegetic” for stories-within-the-story, rather than Genette’s “metadiegetic”; Malina, *Breaking the Frame*, 145 n.

narration, narrators comment on their own activities of retelling and interpretation. And finally at the level of narrative framing, narrators and authors gesture beyond the story to apparently extratextual histories of literary transmission.³² By turning these seemingly discrete authorial processes into narratives and narrative devices, my authors create a new narrative about the possibilities of vernacular retelling. They simultaneously imagine and enact a type of authorship—and a type of authority—based in creative revision. This self-reflexive mode was central to the efflorescence of vernacular literatures in medieval England, in that it affirmed and explored the value of the creative process of revision at the heart of vernacular literary production.

³² I say “apparently extratextual” because often such literary histories are invented, revised, or embellished and the narratorial gestures remain an integral part of the larger narrative.

Chapter 1

The *surplus of the ore*: Reinterpreting Transmission in Marie de France's *Lais*

In two of Marie de France's lays, characters are depicted as the authors of their own narrative traditions, composing the original versions of the lays that Marie is now retelling. These lays offer only the most blatant examples of the interests in authorship, interpretation, and transmission that operate throughout her collection. Marie's almost obsessive insistence on the Breton origins of the lays frames the narratives with attention to their transmission history,¹ and many of the characters function as surrogate authors, engaging in acts of interpretation, revision, and retelling within the narratives.² Both the attention to transmission history and the surrogate authorship of characters have been noted by critics, yet the extent of their interrelation and of their recurrence at multiple diegetic levels has not been fully explored—nor have their consequences for how we understand Marie's conceptions of authorship. A close examination of these interests throughout the collection will illuminate both how the metapoetic tactics of particular lays operate, as well as each lay's participation in elaborating a concept of interpretive retelling's value, a concept which is developed and enacted across the *Lais* as a whole.

¹ On Marie's insistence on the Breton origins of her narratives, see Jean-Michel Caluwé, "Du Chant du Rossignol au Laöstic de Marie de France: Sources et Fiction dans le Lai," in *Chant et Enchantement Au Moyen Age*, Collection Moyen Age (Toulouse (France): Ed. Universitaires du sud, 1997), 172–73; Philippe Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France: Contes D'amour et D'aventures du Moyen Age*, 2e éd., Littératures Modernes 19 (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995), 56; Milena Mikhaïlova, "A L'ombre de la Lettre: La Voix, la Note, le Chant, la Langue," *Mediaevalia* 26, no. 1 (2005): 225.

² For discussions of characters as surrogate authors see Michelle A Freeman, "The Changing Figure of the Male: The Revenge of the Female Storyteller," in *In Quest of Marie de France a Twelfth-Century Poet*, Medieval and Renaissance Series, 10 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen. xii, 1992), 243–61; Dolores W Frese, "Marie de France and the 'Surplus of Sense': A Modest Proposal Concerning the Lais," in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, Albert Bates Lord Studies in Oral Tradition, 11 (New York: Garland. xiv, 1992), 216–33; SunHee Kim Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's Eliduc," in *Semiotic Rotations: Modes of Meanings in Cultural Worlds* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age. xi, 2007), 179–195.

Tracing Marie's conceptions of translation and retelling also clarifies the apparently contradictory impulses that scholarship has found in her models of interpretation and transmission.³ Given the *Lais*'s clear investment in engaging with older literary traditions, Marie has been seen as embracing a project of *translatio studii*.⁴ But exactly what kind of *translatio* she enacts and advocates for has remained under debate. Her prologues to individual lays often stress narrative continuity through time and translation, and some critics have argued she is invested in memory and remembrance, aligning her with the idea of *translatio* as a preservation and clarification of older narrative.⁵ Yet what other critics have described as Marie's "poetics of obscurity"⁶ would seem to be in tension with the aims of preservation or of clarifying interpretation; the *Lais* leave their own meaning obscure and indeterminate, even actively engaging in occultation of meaning, requiring interpretive work of the reader rather than performing interpretation for them. As works that require a gloss, Marie's lays parallel the authoritative ancient texts that she discusses in her General Prologue and that twelfth century

³ For another argument about the *non*-contradiction of Marie's apparently conflicting impulses toward clarification and obfuscation of meaning see Denyse Delcourt, "Oiseaux, Ombre, Désir: Écrire dans les Lais de Marie de France," *MLN: Modern Language Notes* 120, no. 4 (2005): 807–809.

⁴ Though for a contrary view see Eva Rosenn, "The Sexual and Textual Politics of Marie's Poetics," in *In Quest of Marie de France a Twelfth-Century Poet*, Medieval and Renaissance Series, 10 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen. xii, 1992), 228.

⁵ See Jean-Claude Delclos, "Encore Le Prologue Des Lais de Marie de France," *Le Moyen Age: Revue D'histoire et de Philologie* 90, no. 2 (1984): 223–32; Douglas Kelly, "Translatio Studii: Translation, Adaptation, and Allegory in Medieval French Literature," *Philological Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (1978): 287–310; Logan E Whalen, *Marie De France and the Poetics of Memory* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

⁶ Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "The Parable of the Sower and Obscurity in the Prologue to Marie de France's Lais," *Christianity and Literature* 57, no. 3 (Spr 2008): 358. On Marie as obscuring meaning or complicating the idea of determinate meaning, see also R. Howard Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Alexandre Leupin, "The Impossible Task of Manifesting 'Literature': On Marie de France's Obscurity," *Exemplaria* 3, no. 1 (1991): 221–42; Robert Stuart Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative, 1100-1500* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 100.

vernacular authors were so keen to translate.⁷ This parallel between her works and authoritative ancient ones might suggest that Marie's *translatio* is the type that tends toward usurpation or replacement rather than preservation of previous authority. These two interests of Marie, then, seem to offer contradictory directions for her literary project. Rather than representing a contradiction in Marie's work, however, I argue that these apparently very different impulses—toward transmission and toward occultation of meaning—are central to the *Lais*' self-conscious reflection on the inherent tensions in the processes of vernacular translation and retelling.

In the following discussion, I trace how the individual lays serve as the primary diegetic level of a multilayered exploration of the processes of interpretation, translation, and transmission, which also extends to the extradiegetic layers of the General Prologue and the framing prologues and conclusions to each lay, and to the supposed extratextual history of the narratives, which Marie discusses in those frames. As we will see, in the General Prologue, Marie addresses her own project and its models and aims overtly, though also obscurely. And the concepts she establishes there—of the value of engagement with older texts and traditions, and yet of the transformation and ongoing obscurity inherent to processes of transmission—can be seen in action within the lays themselves. In particular, *Laüstic*, *Chevrefoil*, *Yonec*, and *Eliduc* depict not simply individual author-figures or creative or interpretive acts, but rather a series of author-like characters engaging in processes of reinterpretation and revision that resemble vernacular translation and transmission. In *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil*, we follow a series of reinterpretations of a symbolic object through the narrative and beyond, to the Bretons, Marie, and ourselves—a process of transmission that also transforms its object. In *Yonec*, and *Eliduc*,

⁷ Marie herself comments on the rage for translation of Latin texts among her contemporaries in her General Prologue (28-32). See also M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993); Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983); Wogan-Browne, *Language and Culture in Medieval Britain*.

we observe how the recombination of traditions both inside and outside of the story can dramatically change narrative possibility for the characters, authors, and readers. Across each of these lays, and the collection as a whole, different technologies of transmission, different authors and forms of authority, and different interpreters and interpretations work with and against each other to recombine traditions, and to revise meanings while allowing them to proliferate.

The diegetic depictions of revisionary transmission within the lays are, moreover, quite similar to those Marie describes herself undertaking at the extradiegetic level of her narrative framing. Her own authorship is represented as simply the most recent part of the long literary history of such transmission and revision in the extratextual life of the narratives. And this history does not end with Marie but continues indefinitely among her readers and possible retellers. The recurring depiction of interpretive revision across all diegetic levels of the text—and throughout its narrative history—constructs a vision of authorship as driven by the creative force of continual reinterpretation and revision. Rather than privileging the origin point of source texts or the end point of any particular retelling, the *Lais* offer a vision of vernacular authorship as an ongoing, trans-historic process of collaborative interpretation.

I. Obscurity and *surplus* in the General Prologue

Critics tend to agree that the General Prologue to the *Lais* offers a statement of Marie's literary theory and method, and it is often seen as an interpretive guide for the lays that follow.⁸

Yet the guiding statements it offers are famously obscure. Marie rehearses or alludes to a number

⁸ See Pierre Jonin, "Les Préambules des Lais de Marie de France," *Mélanges de Littérature Du Moyen Age Au XXe Siècle Offerts À Mademoiselle Jeanne Lods. Paris: Ecole Normale Supérieure de Jeunes Filles*, 1978, 351–64; Rupert T. Pickens, "La Poétique de Marie de France D'après les Prologues des Lais," *Lettres Romanes* 32, no. 4 (1978): 367–84. While most critics would agree with this general idea that the GP is an interpretive guide, there has been much debate about what exactly the theory and method are that are offered here.

of fairly conventional introductory *topoi* in asserting the value and authority of her work-to-come, yet this “ensemble de lieux communs . . . est toujours plus que la somme de ses parties.”⁹ Marie recombines and reinterprets a variety of introductory conventions and authorizing strategies in ways that might seem contradictory. Her revisionary treatment of those conventions, however, reveals an underlying literary theory that authorizes those very processes of revision.

One of the purposes of the General Prologue is to give Marie a chance to explain her decision not to translate a Latin work as so many of her contemporaries were doing. She claims that her initial impulse was “de latin en romaunz traire” (30),¹⁰ but she dismisses that idea as overdone, and turns instead to “lais . . . k’oï aveie” (33).¹¹ With this smooth exchange of Latin texts for *lais*, Marie implicitly asserts that these “oral,” “Breton”¹² narratives have an equivalent authority and value to that of Latin texts. She vouches that:

Ne dutai pas, bien le saveie,

⁹ Delclos, “Encore le Prologue des Lais de Marie de France,” 231.

¹⁰ All quotations of the original French are from A. Ewert, *Lais*, Blackwell’s French Texts (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1944).

¹¹ “translating from Latin to Romance;” “the *lais* I’d heard.” All English translations, unless otherwise noted, are from Robert W. Hanning and Joan Ferrante, eds., *The Lais of Marie De France*, 1st ed. (New York: Dutton, 1978).

¹² Both terms are scare-quoted because both remain somewhat under question. Marie admits to using some written sources, and critics have found many other instances of influence or direct borrowing from textual sources. It is clear, then, that Marie did not *only* use oral, Breton sources, but it remains a question whether she used *any*. Ménard suggests that there is no reason to disbelieve Marie when she claims to be using Breton sources: Ménard, *Les Lais de Marie de France*, 45–46. Jonin also chooses to believe her but points out that “tout ce monde celtique a été domestiqué, humanisé, ennobli, embelli”; Pierre Jonin, “Le Bâton et la Belette ou Marie de France Devant la Matière Celtique,” *Marche Romane* 30 (1980): 162. On the other hand, Mickel argues that there is little evidence that Marie’s sources are actually ancient; Emanuel J. Mickel, “Antiquities in Marie’s Lais,” in *In Quest of Marie de France a Twelfth-Century Poet*, Medieval and Renaissance Series, 10 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, xii, 1992), 123–135. And in a somewhat different vein, Yoder questions whether Marie’s term “li Bretun” refers to people of Brittany or people of Britain: Emily K. Yoder, “Chaucer and the ‘Breton’ Lay,” *Chaucer Review* 12, no. 1 (1977): 74–77.

Ke pur remembrance les firent
Des aventures k'il oïrent
Cil ki primes les comencierent
E ki avant les enveierent. (34-38)¹³

Marie's affirmation that the original lay-makers had heard these *aventures* ("k'il oïrent") parallels her own statement that she had heard them ("k'oï aveie"), and this chain of aural (and perhaps oral) transmission represents an authorizing force similar to that of a textual source citation. By choosing to work on these non-Latinate materials, Marie broadens the scope of *translatio*, affirming that previous vernacular languages and literatures are important sources of authority and knowledge as well. The alternative authority of these narratives stems from their connection to an ancient Celtic oral tradition,¹⁴ which is, like that of conventional *translatio*, based on the preservation and transmission of cultural memory.¹⁵ This choice to authorize and privilege the oral, Breton tradition, though, by no means represents indifference or antagonism toward authoritative Latin texts. Despite her apparent rejection of them, Marie draws on Latinate materials throughout the *Lais*, using them in combination with oral, vernacular materials. For

¹³ "I did not doubt, indeed I knew well,/ that those who first began them/ and sent them forth/ composed them in order to preserve/ adventures they had heard."

¹⁴ Attributing these stories to the ancient Celts might, in fact, have enabled Marie to access an even more impressive linguistic and cultural antiquity than Latin could offer—namely, the "crooked Greek" of Brutus's descendants, as Geoffrey of Monmouth calls the British language. See *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael A. Faletra (Broadview Press, 2008), 56. As Susan Crane argues, the shared Celtic origins of the Bretons and the British peoples may have led Marie to conflate the two to some degree, seeing them as "constitut[ing] a cross-channel territory;" Susan Crane, "How to Translate a Werewolf," in *The Medieval Translator 10*, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Olivier Bertrand (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 373. This *matière de Bretagne* may have also had a special currency for the Angevin kings and the authors they patronized, who used it in different ways to assert control over Celtic lands and peoples; Martin Aurel, "Henry II and Arthurian Legend," in *Henry II: New Interpretations*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Nicholas Vincent (Woodbridge, UK ; Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2007), 362–94.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the ongoing twelfth century faith in oral tradition as a "living memory" (as opposed to the "artificial memory" of texts) see Clanchy: *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066-1307*, 294–97.

Marie, Latin and vernacular traditions do not compete, but cooperate to offer alternative possibilities of narrative and interpretation.

Indeed Marie prefaces her turn to this alternative archive by beginning her General Prologue according to a traditional textual and scholarly model. She cites Priscian as the authority for the ancient literary “custom” of interpretive glossing that, presumably, she intends to follow in her present work of vernacular-to-vernacular translation. This move could seem to situate Marie within a more conservative model—of *translatio* conceived as clarification of older works—a model that she simply transfers to another language and cultural milieu. Yet in describing these ancient literary conventions, Marie reinterprets them so as to develop a custom-fit literary theory. She writes:

Custume fu as anciens,
Ceo tes[ti]moine Preciens,
Es livres ke jadis feseient
Assez oscurement diseient
Pur ceus ki a venir esteient
E ki aprendre les deveient,
K'i peüssent gloser la lettre
E de lur sen le surplus mettre. (9-16)¹⁶

Marie suggests that the ancients intentionally wrote obscurely in order to invite, or even necessitate, future interpretation or glossing. Yet Marie’s articulation of how this glossing works is itself somewhat ambiguous, particularly in the line “de lur sen le surplus mettre,” which remains a crux.¹⁷ For one, “leur sen” could refer either to the meaning of the original texts or to the understanding of readers. This ambiguity leaves it unclear whether the *surplus* arises from

¹⁶ “The custom among the ancients—/ as Priscian testifies—/ was to speak quite obscurely/ in the books they wrote,/ so that those who were to come after/ and study them/ might gloss the letter/ and supply its significance from their own wisdom.” The translation of these lines is contested, as I will discuss.

¹⁷ On this crux see Tony Hunt, “Glossing Marie de France,” *Romanische Forschungen: Vierteljahresschrift Für Romanische Sprachen Und Literaturen* 86, no. 3–4 (1974): 379–418; Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation*, 82.

the text itself or from the reader's intelligence. Secondly, the ambiguity of "leur sen" is paralleled by the ambiguity of the word "surplus." *Surplus* can mean both "balance, amount required to make up a sum" or "excess, additional amount."¹⁸ The first of these meanings, suggesting that the *surplus* is necessary to "complete" the meaning of the original text, would seem to link the *surplus* to the text's own meaning, and so offer a clarifying function. The second sense suggests instead that *surplus* adds to the meaning, casting the gloss as changing the original text's meaning. This double meaning highlights the tension or even paradox inherent to interpretation: namely that it can be necessary for understanding the meaning of an original text, yet at the same time, it can obscure that meaning by changing it as it attempts to reveal it.

Part of what has troubled critics about how to interpret these lines is that Marie seems to have gotten Priscian wrong; the section of Priscian generally accepted as Marie's source for this passage indicates that ancient grammarians were obscure *unintentionally* because their knowledge was less developed than the knowledge of those who followed them.¹⁹ But, as Sally Burch has argued, "Marie's own wording shows that she knows perfectly well that she is going beyond her *auctor*, adding material of her own (*de [son] sen le surplus mettre*) to Priscian's concept."²⁰ Marie revises Priscian even as she uses him as an authoritative grounding for her conception of interpretive glossing. And she revises him in a way that potentially undermines the value of literature as a means to an end—as a way to achieve clarification and preservation of a previous text—by suggesting that the process of *translatio*, while beneficial, does not offer a

¹⁸ "AND.", s.v. "surplus," 1, 2. Hereafter: "AND."

¹⁹ cf. Mortimer J. Donovan, "Priscian and the Obscurity of the Ancients," *Speculum* 36, no. 1 (January 1, 1961): 79–80. Donovan argues that Marie is actually following a conventional twelfth century usage of Priscian to indicate that ancient obscurity comes from imperfect knowledge, which the moderns will improve upon.

²⁰ Sally Burch, "The Prologue to Marie's Lais: Back to the Littera," *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 89 (1998): 31.

clear path to an original meaning. Instead of clarifying, *translatio* transforms, multiplies, and even obscures meaning.

While this could seem like an intractable problem, Marie insists on the value of such glossing not in spite of but on account of these tensions. Her description of the effects and the value of this type of interpretive process in fact repeats and underscores the tension between clarification and obfuscation:

Li philosophe le saveient
E par eus memes entendeient,
Cum plus trespasserunt le tens,
Plus serreient sutil de sens
E plus se savreient garder
De ceo k'i ert, a trespasser. (17-22)²¹

The key terms of the literary theory expressed here are just as ambiguous as the notion of *surplus*. The idea that the “sens”²² will become more “sutil” through time is generally taken as indicating an ongoing refinement of knowledge or increasingly savvy readers, picking up on the word “sutil”’s positive connotations of “subtle” or “clever” to suggest improvement or clarification of “sens.” Yet “sutil” can also have the potentially negative connotations of “complex” or “misleading,” suggesting the possibility of increased obscurity rather than increased clarity.²³ In this vein, as Hanning and Ferrante note, the lines could be taken to mean

²¹ These lines are among the most obscure in the prologue, and their meaning has been hotly debated. See Burch, “The Prologue to Marie’s Lais.” Burch surveys the history of editorial interpretation of these lines, and concludes that their meaning is: “The philosophers knew it, and they themselves understood that the further they [i.e. their works] pass through time, the richer they would be with meaning, and the better they would be able to preserve themselves from that which was to pass” (25) though many other critics have taken the lines to mean that it is either “li philosophe” or those who come after the ancients (“ceus ki a venir esteient” [13]) who are to be improved by the passage of time.

²² The word “sens” is likewise ambiguous, in the same way as it is in line sixteen, referring in context either to the texts’ meaning or the readers’ understanding and intelligence or, arguably, both.

²³ “AND.” s.v. “sotil” 4, 5, 6.

“the more time went by, the more difficult the sense became.”²⁴ The tension and ambiguity of “sutil” mirrors that of “surplus,” and the two concepts together offer a vision of an interpretive process that may continually increase obscurity and range of meaning, even as it attempts, or claims, to clarify and confirm an original, authoritative meaning. The ambiguity of these two key terms, and their tug-of-war between clarification and obfuscation, establish a persistent tension at the center of the conceptions of translation and interpretation that underpin Marie’s project. That tension so fundamental to her project, moreover, reflects and repeats the tensions inherent in the processes of *translatio* and glossing themselves.

In the absence of a reliable result of clarified meaning, what Marie emphasizes and seems to value is those very processes. Whatever exactly it is that we understand to be becoming increasingly “sutil” in lines 17-22, and whatever we understand “sutil” itself to mean, the lines envision a process that is ongoing across time, rather than fixing on an end point at which the process will have been completed or the product perfected. The process of interpretation is never done because each reader, interpreter, or reteller produces or discovers a *surplus* that needs to be glossed in turn.²⁵ This lack of determinate meaning could be seen as a vicious cycle, or a problem that calls the entire project of *translatio* into question. But Marie asserts the value of this cycle, affirming that it is beneficial for the interpreter:

Ki de vice se volt defendre
Estudier deit e entendre
E grevos’ ovre comencier:
Par [ceo] se puet plus esloignier

²⁴ Hanning and Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie De France*, 28 n. They suggest this reading requires an emendation, and reject it in favor of “the more time they spent,/ the more subtle their minds would become” (28).

²⁵ See also Robert Stuart Sturges, “Texts and Readers in Marie de France’s Lais,” *Romanic Review: A Journal Devoted to the Study of Romance Literature* 71, no. 3 (1980): 82.

E de grant dolor delivrer. (23-27)²⁶

Marie conflates the activities of interpretation, translation and authorship in these lines as the idea of studying and glossing the ancients slips into that of beginning a “grevos’ ovre” of one’s own, which could equally be a work of authorship or a work of interpretation or both. Such revisionary activity is beneficial for the newer author or interpreter in defending her from vice, and delivering her from “grant dolor.” Notably, it is enough to commence (“comencier”) working on this “grevos’ ovre” to receive these benefits—the completion of the project does not seem to matter—so that Marie’s ideas once again prioritize process over product.

While beneficial potentially, or in certain respects, however, Marie suggests that this work is also potentially quite difficult or even unpleasant. The word “grevos,” which describes the type of literary-interpretive work Marie is promoting and presently engaged in, could simply mean “weighty” or important, but its range of meanings tends to more negative connotations such as “burdensome,” “injurious,” and “distasteful.”²⁷ The value of this interpretive-creative process would seem to be somewhat ambivalent itself, then, suggesting that the process of self-betterment through interpretation and retelling is not always an easy one. We will see this ambivalence play out in the lays, as characters’ acts of interpretation, transmission, and retelling often do not lead to a definitively or uncomplicatedly happy ending, even if they enrich the meaning of the characters’ lives and narratives.

In her prologue to *Guigemar*, which offers a second beginning to the collection, Marie hints at some of the problems her own project is causing her, along with its benefits. She implies

²⁶ “He who would guard himself from vice/ should study and understand/ and begin a weighty work/ by which he might keep vice at a distance,/ and free himself from great sorrow.”

²⁷ “AND.” s.v. “grevous” 1, 3, 5.

that her literary accomplishments have benefited her:²⁸ that she is one of the men and women considered “de grant pris” about whom people do (and ought to) speak well (4-8). Yet if her literary and linguistic performance has bred positive interpretations, it has also bred the envy and negative interpretations of people who “dient vileinie” (9-10). Her work, it would seem, does not have clear and definitive meaning, but rather, has been interpreted by her audiences in a variety of ways, over which Marie has little control other than to suggest that her critics are like cowardly and vicious dogs (13). Despite her bitterness toward these critics, she asserts that:

Nel voil mie pur ceo leissier,
Si gangleür u losengier
Le me volent a mal turner;
Ceo est lur dreit de mesparler. (15-18)²⁹

Not only will the possibility of negative interpretations not discourage Marie from continuing her project, but in fact she begrudgingly allows that her critics have a right to their opinions and their own linguistic acts, even if they are acts of evil misspeaking. She allows, that is, that both positive and negative interpretations of her work are valid, despite being contradictory. Together these interpretations contribute to redefining—and arguably making more complex or obscure—the meaning of her works.

Marie’s introductory reflections in the General Prologue and the prologue to *Guigemar* position her and her project as just one point on a line of obscure narratives and interpretive retellings. She glosses her ancient sources but is also a source of obscure or ambiguous meaning

²⁸ She does not say explicitly that it is her literary work that has made her be considered by some “de grant pris” and given rise to envy from others. Yet it doesn’t seem like too much of a stretch to assume, given that these comments about praise and slander follow after her opening remark that “Ki de bone mateire traite,/ Mult li peise si bien n’est faite” (“Whoever deals with good material/ feels pain if its treated improperly”) (*Guigemar* 1-2), and immediately precedes further comments on the lay genre: “Les contes ke jo sai verrais,/ Dunt li Bretun unt fait les lais/ Vos conterai assez briefment” (“The tales—and I know they’re true—/ from which the Bretons made their *lais*/ I’ll now recount for you briefly”) (19-21).

²⁹ “I don’t propose to give up because of that;/ if spiteful critics or slanderers/ wish to turn my accomplishments against me,/ they have a right to their evil talk.”

for her readers. Their interpretation of her does not necessarily clarify her value or purpose but, we may assume, is nevertheless beneficial to them in some way, as well as productive of a *surplus* that another interpreter must engage with in turn. Marie's work, as representative of her larger conception of the value of critical engagement and retelling, prioritizes the transmission of ongoing interpretive possibility, rather than the transmission of authoritative meaning. The value that she places on the process of interpretation itself exceeds *translatio studii*'s usually more goal-oriented interest in transferring Latin texts and/or their authority into the vernacular. Marie emphasizes the processes of creative revision that transcend any individual text, author, or meaning.

The General Prologue, as I said, can be seen as an interpretive guide for the lays. But also, insofar as it was most likely written after the individual lays as part of the process of forming the narratives into a unified work for presentation,³⁰ we might also see the operations of the lays as a practical guide to better understanding the General Prologue. Marie's ideas of the value of an ongoing, collaborative process of reinterpretation—with obscurity leading to interpretation, leading to obscure *surplus* and so on—undergird the metapoetic narrative processes of the lays as well. The lay narratives experiment with and enact those ideas in a variety of ways, exploring how interpretive transmission can create, confuse, and change meaning.

³⁰ See Delclos, "Encore Le Prologue des Lais de Marie de France," 229; Pickens, "La Poétique de Marie de France d'après les Prologues des Lais," 367–68.

II. The jeweled box and the bare branch: Collaborative transformations in *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil*

Many critics have noted that the majority, if not all, of the lays center on the meaning of some symbolic object that draws both characters and readers into active interpretation.³¹ In *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil*, this type of interpretive activity is in fact the main action of the narratives' plots; both lays center on characters engaging in processes of transmission and interpretation. These two lays reveal and perform the transformative effects of such transmission as the interpreted object moves across different interpreters, languages, meanings, and even media. As the objects and their revisions are transmitted, meanings accrete and change, with each interpreter leaving his or her own mark, or *surplus*, so that there is always more interpretive work to be done. Through this process, meaning becomes more "sutil" both in that it is more refined and more obscure. The processes of transmission that these lays depict appear to be successful for the participants, who do manage to communicate with each other in some way—yet the lays themselves leave the ultimate meaning of those communications, and the narratives that depict them, in large part obscure, focusing instead on the processes by which meaning grows and changes.

Laüstic centers on the transformative interpretations of the body of a nightingale. In this lay, a married Lady³² and her neighbor fall in love, but can only see each other at their adjoining windows at night. When her husband complains about her getting out of bed so often, she claims to be doing so in order to listen to the nightingale's song. In a fit of jealousy, her husband kills

³¹ See Frese, "Marie de France and the 'Surplus of Sense'"; Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*"; Potkay, "The Parable of the Sower and Obscurity in the Prologue to Marie de France's *Lais*"; Sturges, "Texts and Readers in Marie de France's *Lais*."

³² I capitalize "Lady" as the identifying marker of the women whom Marie does not name.

the bird, also effectively putting an end to the love affair. The Lady sends the bird to her lover as a way of telling him what has happened, and he keeps it in a bejeweled box. Many critics have suggested that the nightingale is a metaphor for the literary process and have seen the Lady as the author-figure in that process.³³ Yet the Lady is not the only author-figure in the lay and is not even the original one; she too draws on previous literary traditions. She is the first character within the story to use the nightingale as a surrogate text, though, when she makes it her excuse for standing by the window at night where she can see her neighbor. She tells her husband:

Il nen ad joië en cest mund,
Ki n'ot le laüstic chanter.
Pur ceo me vois ici ester.
Tant ducement li oi la nuit
Que mut me semble grant deduit;
Tant me delit' e tant le voil
Que jeo ne puis dormir de l'oïl. (84-90)³⁴

The Lady's description of desire for and joy in the nightingale, and particularly its effect of keeping her up at night, repeats language and tropes typical of courtly love rhetoric. And indeed, the use of the nightingale as a metaphoric figure for love in this manner is itself conventional,³⁵ so that the Lady here speaks, as Delcourt suggests, "à la manière d'un poète."³⁶ She speaks both as a poet, and much like other poets have spoken before her. The Lady's act of authorship relies

³³ See Delcourt, "Oiseaux, Ombre, Désir"; Frese, "Marie de France and the 'Surplus of Sense'"; Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*"; Claude-Henry Joubert, *Oyez ke dit Marie: Etude sur les Lais de Marie de France, XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Corti, 1987); Potkay, "The Parable of the Sower and Obscurity in the Prologue to Marie de France's *Lais*"; Sturges, "Texts and Readers in Marie de France's *Lais*."

³⁴ "there is no joy in this world/ like hearing the nightingale sing./ That's why I stand there./ It sounds so sweet at night/ that it gives me great pleasure;/ it delights me so and I so desire it/ that I cannot close my eyes."

³⁵ See Sylvia Huot, "Troubadour Lyric and Old French Narrative," in *The Troubadours: An Introduction* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, xii, 1999), 264.

³⁶ Delcourt, "Oiseaux, Ombre, Désir," 821.

on previous authors and a pre-existing tradition, figuring her very much as a typical vernacular reteller.

The Lady speaks metaphorically yet she intends her husband to understand her literally, to think her nightingale is just a nightingale. Her poetic double speak, that is, has a meaning that is meant to remain obscure to her husband. On top of that, the conventional poetic discourse she uses also carries with it a multiplicity of meaning. In the twelfth century, the nightingale was not only “a pervasive image in . . . love poetry”³⁷ but, more ominously, was also “synonymous”³⁸ with the Ovidian Philomela. This darker side of conventional nightingale imagery casts a shadow on the love that the Lady here describes with such joy, and so prefigures the unhappy turn the narrative will ultimately take. While the Lady’s speech seems in certain ways quite clear and conventional, then, the imagery that she creatively reuses for her love story in-process is riddled with obscurity and a rich range of meaning that exceeds her authorial control.

Indeed, in some sense the Lady’s use of the nightingale imagery creates the conditions for the narrative’s unhappy turn of events, by giving her husband the opportunity to interpret her obscure speech and add his own interpretive contribution to the narrative she has created. Whether or not he believes her story or understands the metaphoric meaning of the nightingale, the husband seizes on the literal meaning that is available to him and uses it for his own purposes.³⁹ The husband captures and kills a nightingale, and represents this to the Lady as a

³⁷ Huot, “Troubadour Lyric and Old French Narrative,” 264.

³⁸ June Hall McCash, “Philomena’s Window: Issues of Intertextuality and Influence in the Works of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes,” in *De Sens Rassis: Essays in Honor of Rupert T. Pickens*, ed. Keith Busby, Bernard Guidot, and Logan Whalen, Faux Titre, 259 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 423. See also Kristine Brightenback, “The Metamorphoses and Narrative Conjointure in ‘Deus Amanz,’ ‘Yonec,’ and ‘Le Laüstic,’” *Romanic Review* 72, no. 1981 (1981): 1–12.

³⁹ See also Caluwé, “Du Chant du Rossignol au Laüstic de Marie de France: Sources et Fiction dans le Lai,” 184.

literal solution to her metaphoric problem, saying: “desor poëz gisir⁴⁰ en peis:/ Il ne vus esveillerat meis” (109-110).⁴¹ To what had been a purely discursive or metaphoric bird, he adds the literal *surplus* of a physical body, and he revises the meaning of that literalized bird-love by transforming it from a living, singing creature to a silent, dead one.

The husband’s literalization of the nightingale also adds to and changes the Lady’s poetic conception of her love. The death of the bird deprives the Lady of her excuse to go to the window at night, and so deprives her of the opportunity to see her lover. The husband has effectively killed the love affair in killing the bird that the Lady used to symbolize it, and his action constitutes a violent translation of the meaning of the symbol. The husband’s interpretive activity has altered the poetic figure of the bird, contributing a *surplus* that makes it more *sutil*, that is, both richer and more complex. Now as a violently silenced bird, the nightingale brings to the fore those darker, Ovidian associations that were always available potentially.⁴² But what’s more, the bird is no longer simply a figure for the love, now ended, between the Lady and her neighbor. It now also represents the husband’s interpretive response to the Lady’s poetic discourse, representing, that is, the transmission and revision of the symbolic bird.

The layers of meaning added by the husband’s revisionary interpretations give the Lady in turn something to interpret, and in the process of transmitting the bird’s new significance to her lover, she once again revises its form and meaning. Before sending the body of the nightingale to her lover, she prepares the bird by wrapping it up “En une piece de samite,/ A or

⁴⁰ The verb “gisir” itself has a rich multiplicity of meaning that makes the husband’s comment here quite *sutil*. In addition to “to lie (asleep)” it can mean “to lie (dead)” or to lie with someone in sexual intercourse; “AND.” s.v. “gisir,” v.n. 1 and sbst. inf. 2. His comment may contain a threat and an allusion to his wife’s affair, then, or those meanings could be simply available to the reader as a *surplus* to the husband’s literalization.

⁴¹ “From now on you can lie in peace:/ he will never again awaken you.”

brusdé e tut escrit” (135-6).⁴³ The piece of cloth, as a shroud for the bird’s body, adds to the message both physically and symbolically. It offers an interpretive contribution that is not so easily pinned down, which has at least two elements: the obscure writing or decoration on the cloth, and the cloth itself. The cloth adds a literal layer to the physical image of the dead bird, and represents another change in form. The Lady translates the bird from a bloody and bare dead body to a carefully prepared and enshrouded body—a change that speaks to her understanding of the larger significance of the bird’s death, but that also adds to that significance. Critics often assume that what is “tut escrit” on the cloth is the story of the nightingale and its death, so that the cloth literally glosses the material body of the bird for the lover. It does seem fair to assume that he would need some explanation for her sending him a dead bird, and so this is a compelling idea.⁴⁴ But it remains only an interpretive assumption, as Marie does not tell us what is “escrit” on the cloth. In leaving the contents of the cloth’s writing and/or decoration unspecified, Marie gives it unlimited interpretive potential for the reader.⁴⁵ This enigmatic silent writing creates an obscurity at the center of the bird’s revised meaning—an obscurity that makes the symbol more *sutil*, even if we cannot understand the full depths of that *sutil* meaning.

The Lady’s lover makes the final interpretive translation of the bird within the diegetic level of the narrative. After receiving the Lady’s message, he makes his own creative additions to the meaning and form of the transmitted symbol. He seals the enshrouded bird in a box “de or fin od bones pieres, / Mut preciuses e mut cheres” (151-2), which he carries with him “tuz jurs”

⁴³ “In a piece of samite,/ embroidered in gold and writing.”

⁴⁴ Though, of course, the Lady also sends a messenger to deliver the bird, who might contribute an oral component to the transmitted message.

⁴⁵ Contributing to this opening of interpretive possibilities is the continued reuse and recombination of Ovidian Philomela imagery—in addition to the nightingale itself, Marie gives us a violent husband a piece of cloth that tells a story the wronged woman cannot herself tell more directly.

(156).⁴⁶ In its resemblance to a reliquary, the box suggests that he reinterprets the bird as a relic of their love affair and/or as itself a martyr for love. The neighbor adds a layer of religious allusion that again makes the bird-symbol both more *sutil* and more obscure. It is unclear, after all, whether the narrative as a whole means to approve this sacralization of the adulterous affair or, on the contrary, to highlight the inappropriate or even blasphemous qualities of such love-worship. In either case, the neighbor's revision of the symbol adds literal and metaphoric layers, which both represent and register his creative contributions to the transmitted object's form and meaning.

The series of interpretations and translations that begins within the events of the narrative continues beyond them and into the extradiegetic and even extratextual levels of the narrative as well. Marie demonstrates and performs this continuation of the process as she retells the composition of the (supposed) original lay:

Cele aventure fu cuntee,
Ne pot estre lunges celee.
Un lai en firent li Bretun:
Le Laüstic l'apelë hum. (157-60)⁴⁷

Marie describes the history of the narrative's transmission and transformation from a "historical" event to a Breton lay. She notes that the original events of the "aventure" were recounted, presumably orally, until at a certain point the Bretons made a lay based on those recounted events, translating the more straightforward, oral rehearsal of the "aventure" into a crafted poetic and probably musical form.⁴⁸ These comments in the conclusion work together with those at the

⁴⁶ Made of "pure gold and good stones,/ very precious and very dear;" "always."

⁴⁷ "This adventure was told,/ it could not be concealed for long./ The Bretons made a lai about it/ which men call *The Nightingale*."

opening of the lay to give the full picture of the narrative's transmission up to Marie's present version. In the opening, Marie tells us:

Une aventure vus dirai,
Dunt li Bretun firent un lai;
Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,
Si l'apelent en lur país. (1-4)⁴⁹

Her differentiation of the terms "aventure" and "lai" in these two framing comments highlights different stages in the narrative's history and most likely different forms that it has taken. Marie will tell us about the "aventure" from which the Bretons made a "lai," and her version is presumably something more and other than either of those previous forms, even if we call hers a *lai* as well. Marie's version, moreover, is not the end of this process, which carries on in her readers. She inscribes the reader, in fact, into that very first line of the lay, as the "vus" who will be next to encounter this transmitted narrative, and who must next attempt to interpret its obscure meanings.

Marie's framing comments seem to tell us something about the extratextual history of the narrative, yet leave that history in other ways still quite obscure. She specifies that she is telling us not the Breton "lai" but the "aventure" that inspired the "lai," but though the two are clearly distinct, the relationship between them, and between each of them and Marie's version, remains uncertain.⁵⁰ Her terminology appears to be quite precise and yet remains unclear. Marie also adds a curious *surplus* to this history when she tells us, in describing the lay's title:

⁴⁸ On Marie's descriptions of these stages of transmission (which become conventional) see Caluwé, "Du Chant du Rossignol au Laüstic de Marie de France: Sources et Fiction dans le Lai"; Mortimer J. Donovan, *The Breton Lay: A Guide to Varieties*. (Londres/Notre Dame: Univers. of Notre Dame Pr., 1969), 2–5.

⁴⁹ "I shall tell you an adventure/ about which the Bretons made a *lai*./ *Laüstic* was the name, I think/ they gave it in their land."

⁵⁰ This occurs in many of her lays. On the obscurity of her literary historical terms and her relation to the Breton tradition she describes, see Caluwé, "Du Chant du Rossignol au Laüstic de Marie de France:

Laüstic ad nun, ceo m'est vis,
Si l'apelent en lur país;
Ceo est russignol en franceis
E nihtegale en dreit engleis. (3-6)⁵¹

Marie here translates the title of the lay, which is also the name of its central figure or image into both French and English. Despite giving this translation at the beginning of her version, though, she continues to use the Breton word “laüstic” rather than the French “russignol” within the narrative. By so doing, she retains an enigmatic trace of her supposed source.⁵² This untranslated word connects her version to the Breton tradition, suggesting continuity across the narrative’s transmission, yet without really clarifying the relationship between Marie’s narrative and those sources. On the contrary, the word obscures the narrative’s meaning even further. The continued use of the Breton word suggests that the “laüstic” has some kind of *surplus* that makes it more than just a nightingale (or a “russignol”) and that renders it not entirely translatable. The “laüstic” itself, the center of meaning in the lay, remains richly obscure at both the diegetic and extradiegetic levels, and this obscurity is what drives the ongoing process of interpretation and transmission of the narrative. Both the meaning of the bird within the narrative, and the meaning of the narrative itself become richer and more complex with each transformation—yet they do not necessarily become clearer. Rather, the narrative focuses on the processes themselves.

The processes of interpretation and transmission that occur in and around the lay of *Chevrefoil* are even more overt than those in *Laüstic*. The lay centers on the composition,

Sources et Fiction dans le Lai”; Leupin, “The Impossible Task of Manifesting ‘Literature’”; Mikhailova, “A L’ombre de la Lettre.”

⁵¹ “*Laüstic* was the name, I think,/ they gave it in their land./ In French it is *rossignol*,/ and *nightingale* in proper English.”

⁵² Susan Crane has a related reading of the translation of the title/name in *Bisclavret*; see Crane, “How to Translate a Werewolf.”

interpretation and transmission of a very brief text: a hazel branch with Tristram's name inscribed on it. In the lay, Tristram is living in exile because of his love for the Queen.⁵³ When he hears that she will pass through a certain spot on her way to court, he plans and executes the creation of the branch-text in order to have a meeting with her. The Queen advises him how to be reconciled with King Mark, and he returns into exile and writes a lay about the encounter. As in *Laüstic*, the symbolic object and its message undergo various interpretations and translations over the course of the narrative, the narrative's transformation into a "Breton" lay, and Marie's retelling of that lay. Marie's interest in the processes of interpretive transmission for their own sake is clearest in this (arguably) most metapoetic of her lays, which offers a *mise en abyme* of its own creation⁵⁴ as a narrative about those same interpretive processes. By using a famous narrative as its material and by focusing its series of interpretations on a textual object, this lay makes its own interpretive and transformative operations more visible, and so more blatantly insists on the value of those operations as a means of generating narrative and encouraging complex and multifaceted interpretive activity.

Tristram's creation of the hazel branch sign, and the Queen's interpretation of it, are the central moments, and indeed the main actions, of the lay. Marie describes his preparation of the branch-message very carefully:

Une codre trencha par mi,
Tute quarreie la fendi.
Quant il ad paré le bastun,
De sun cutel escrit sun nun. (51-4)⁵⁵

⁵³ I follow Marie in not naming the character and instead just referring to her as "the Queen."

⁵⁴ See Walter: "le texte 'met en abîme' les circonstances de sa propre création"; *Lais*, Edition Bilingue (Livre de Poche, 2000), 477.

⁵⁵ "He cut a hazel tree in half,/ then he squared it./ When he had prepared the wood,/ he wrote his name on it with his knife."

There is at least as much emphasis on the shaping of the branch as on its one-word message, suggesting that the branch's form is significant as well as its text. The one-word text of the name, after all, is only a part of the branch's larger message, which carries much more information than that brief text.⁵⁶ Marie details the surprisingly long and complex message that the branch conveys to the Queen:

Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit
Qu'il li aveit mandé e dit
Que lunges ot ilec esté
E atendu e surjurné
Pur espier e pur saver
Coment il la peüst veer,
Kar ne pot nent vivre sanz li;
D'euls deus fu il [tut] autresi
Cume del chevrefoil esteit
Ki a la codre se perneit:
Quant il s'i est laciez e pris
E tut entur le fust s'est mis,
Ensemble poënt bien durer;
Mes ki puis les volt desevrer,
Li codres muert hastivement
E li chevrefoil ensemment.
'Bele amie, si est de nus:
Ne vus sanz mei, ne mei sanz vus!' (61-78)⁵⁷

Along with its primary, practical purpose—to get the Queen to stop so that she can speak with Tristram—the sign has a wealth of meanings that arise from its text, form, material, location, and participation in a tradition of such communications. This passage offers an interpretive

⁵⁶ What exactly the message of the branch is, and how that message is conveyed has been the subject of much debate. See Glyn Sheridan Burgess, *The Lais of Marie de France: Text and Context* (Manchester University Press ND, 1987), 65–70; Jean-Claude Delclos, “A la Recherche du Chèvrefeuille: Réflexions sur un Lai de Marie de France,” *Le Moyen Age: Revue D'histoire et de Philologie* 106, no. 1 (2000): 37–47. I follow those who take literally the statement that Tristram writes just his name on the branch, rather than writing a longer message or some kind of code.

⁵⁷ “This was the message of the writing/ that he had sent to her:/ he had been there a long time,/ had waited and remained/ to find out and to discover/ how he could see her,/ for he could not live without her./ With the two of them it was just/ as it is with the honeysuckle/ that attaches itself to the hazel tree:/ when it has wound and attached/ and worked itself around the trunk,/ the two can survive together;/ but if someone tries to separate them,/ the hazel dies quickly/ and the honeysuckle with it./ ‘Sweet love, so it is with us:/ You cannot live without me, nor I without you.’”

translation of that larger signification. The text of Tristram's name indicates his presence in the forest and authorship of the message; the branch's placement on the road the Queen will take speaks to his diligence in waiting and watching for her; the material of the branch evokes the metaphor that describes their love and need for each other; and the fact that it is a hazel branch without honeysuckle entwining it emphasizes Tristram's desolate state in being separated from the Queen. The message the branch conveys to the Queen is a combination of the individual meanings of the one-word text and of the placement and material of the branch, and it requires the Queen's interpretive contribution to complete it.

In part, Tristram's message to the Queen is itself about the composition, interpretation and transmission of such messages—just as is Marie's lay, which commemorates Tristram's message. Marie suggests that the Queen is likely to be watching out for such a sign, since the lovers have communicated this way before: “Que mut grant gardē en perneit—/ Autre feiz li fu avenu/ Que si l'aveit aparceü” (56-8).⁵⁸ This symbolic message carries with it the memory of their previous experiences of transmitting and interpreting signs, in addition to its own present message.⁵⁹ The process of transmission of such messages is just as much of interest to Tristram as are the results of that process. Tristram is allegedly the original composer of the lay about these events, and he composes the lay, we are told:

Pur la joie qu'il ot eüe
De s'amie qu'il ot veüe
E pur ceo k'il aveit escrit
Si cum la reïne l'ot dit,

⁵⁸ “she should be on the watch for it,/ for it had happened before/ and she had noticed it then”

⁵⁹ Some critics have even argued that the lines “Ceo fu la summe de l'escrit/ Qu'il li aveit mandé e dit” suggest that Tristram has also recently sent the Queen an actual letter, the contents of which the sign of the branch is simply a reminder of. For a summary of the interpretations of this moment see Delclos, “A la Recherche du Chèvrefeuille,” 40–44.

Pur les paroles remembrer. (107-111)⁶⁰

He is motivated to retell the story of his message not just to recount his meeting with his love, but also to recount and transmit the message itself (“ceo k’il aveit escrit”). In retelling that interaction he also adds to it: his narrative of his initial message about transmission and interpretation also takes into account the Queen’s reception of that message, as well as adding the “paroles” of the couple following their creative and interpretive activity. The narrative of his message, it would seem, is not complete without the story of its reception and transmission. Marie inscribes the processes of interpretation and revision into Tristram’s original moment of composition, suggesting that those processes are inherent to an authorship based in retelling.

Tristram’s transmission of his message, and the Queen’s interpretation of it, would appear to be successful, and so might seem to offer a positive vision of the possibility of conveying authoritative original meaning across translations and retellings. Yet Marie’s narrative also contains elements that remain obscure for her reader. Tristram’s lay is supposedly meant to preserve (“remembrer”) the “paroles” that the couple exchanged at their meeting. Yet, though Marie’s lay mentions the “paroles,” it does not actually transmit them. In a sense, the reference to these unspecified “paroles” functions similarly to Tristram’s original branch-message: the branch’s single word text was a sign that transmitted information only to those with the proper interpretive keys. The reference to the “paroles” likewise might cause Tristram and the Queen to remember their specific words, but this time readers are not allowed to “overhear” that fully informed interpretation. Readers can “remember” the fact that “paroles” were spoken,

⁶⁰ “On account of the joy he had experienced from the sight of his beloved and because of what he had written . . . in order to record his words (as the queen had said he should).” This translation is from Glyn S Burgess and Keith Busby, *The Lais of Marie De France*, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England ; New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1986), 110. I find the Burgess and Busby translation here more compelling and more evocative than Hanning and Ferrante’s (“for the joy he’d felt/ from his love when he saw her,/ by means of the stick he inscribed/ as the queen had instructed,/ and in order to remember the words”) which takes the “e pur” of line 109 out of the logical sequence of “pur”s.

but are left without access to their contents, and so are shut out of one of the primary centers of meaning in Tristram's original lay. These "paroles" may mean something to the reader, but it will not be the same thing that they mean to Tristram and the Queen; it will instead be a *surplus* that adds to and changes that original meaning.

If readers know less than the characters about that original signification, we are more informed about the larger literary tradition of Tristan legends, which also brings a *surplus* to our understanding of the lay. Marie's version of the legend is notable for its brevity and narrowness of focus, drawing from the wealth of source material a single scene, which in its pared down state resembles the hazel branch's single word text. Like Tristram's name on the hazel branch, the text of the lay conveys something literally, but also leaves much unsaid and assumed. Marie refers to events outside of the episode as though we already know them, acknowledging the remainder of the legend not included in her version and positioning her version as a part of that larger story. Marie's version thus invites (or demands), as Reed suggests, "the reading of a pre-informed public"⁶¹ to fill in the details she leaves out with their knowledge of the untold remainder of the lovers' story. Readers' familiarity with the Tristan tradition, that is, acts as a kind of *surplus* or gloss around the edges of this single brief episode, enacting an interpretive move that mirrors the Queen's informed glossing of Tristram's single-word text.⁶² Part of that readerly gloss is the specter of the "meinte dolur" (9) and death that await the lovers, which casts a shadow over their love in general and over the apparent happiness of this excerpted episode. This shadow of impending doom might be taken as a sympathetic intensifier of the sweetness

⁶¹ Thomas L. Reed, "Glossing the Hazel: Authority, Intention, and Interpretation in Marie de France's Tristan, 'Chievrefoil,'" *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1995): 124.

⁶² See also Reed, "Glossing the Hazel." Reed argues that the branch itself physically resembles a manuscript page with blank margins that might be filled in by vegetal, honeysuckle-like, border decoration and/or with a textual gloss (124-25).

and pathos of this moment of happiness, or it might be taken as a more critical reflection on the destructive nature of the adulterous love. Our broader knowledge of the lovers' ultimate fate certainly affects our interpretation of the events, that is, but does not offer a definitive meaning for them. Nor is it clear whether or how this foreshadowing might affect our interpretation of the value of the processes of transmission, interpretation, and authorship depicted here.⁶³

If there is doubt about those processes, though, Marie herself is implicated in that doubt, as are her readers. Marie positions her own lay as the most recent in a series of creative reinterpretations (like that of *Laüstic*) that begins with the characters in the narrative. Tristram's initial message preserves and transmits previous messages and interpretations, and his lay is about that meta-message. The process of transmission is imagined as carrying on through to Marie's version as well. The continuity of the process is underscored by the parallel between the phrases describing how Tristram "mandé e dit" (62) his message to the Queen and how the Breton lay was "cunté e dit" (5) to Marie. Marie is aligned with the Queen in reception and interpretation as well as with Tristram in composition, positioning herself therefore not at the end, but in the middle of a series of reinterpretations that will continue with her readers and revisers. In so doing, she constructs authorship not as a top-down mode of authoritativeness, but as a flexible, shared mode of creating meaning collaboratively.

By using this pared down version of a well-known story, Marie is able to de-emphasize content or meaning and to more clearly make her single episode a complex *mis en abyme* of its own process of transformative transmission. As does *Laüstic*, *Chevrefoil* dramatizes, at both the diegetic and extradiegetic levels, the kinds of transmission processes that go on in *translatio studii*. These are processes of the preservation or communication of meaning, but also of

⁶³ For a discussion of this lay as potentially suggesting that interpretive activity can be negative, see Reed, *Ibid.*

interpretation and translation that necessarily change the events, objects, or meaning being related. Marie's careful delineation of the series of transformations connects the different narrative levels of these lays, and makes the lays in part about their own literary history. Those histories, though, do not offer us access to some kernel of authoritative truth or a definitive meaning, but rather they present us with a process of continual negotiation, revision, and accumulation of meanings. By depicting that ongoing, collaborative process as beginning within, or even prior to the events of the lays, Marie envisions an authorizing precedent for her narratives and for the interpretive process itself, co-creating herself and her readers as "authors."

III. Choose Your Own *Aventure*: Living Interpretively in *Yonec* and *Eliduc*

Laüstic and *Chevrefoil* examined how one symbol or message could be transformed through its translation across various interpreters and media. *Yonec* and *Eliduc* depict and enact a different kind of engagement with the processes of reinterpretation and transmission of literary traditions. These lays focus on the productive power of recombining received traditions as a form of revisionary authorship. The Lady of *Yonec* and Guildelüec in *Eliduc* both draw together potentially incompatible conventions and ideas from pagan and Christian, Latin and vernacular, textual and oral traditions. As they do, their recombinations open up alternative narrative possibilities and change the narratives they are in. Though the characters do not literally compose a version of their experiences, as do Tristram and the Lady of *Chaitivel*, they do in some sense revise their own life stories by interpretively combining previous texts and traditions in ways that affect the direction of the plot. Both stories achieve their moments of greatest narrative movement through such recombinations, by means of which characters reinterpret their own narratives and narrative contexts. If the lays of the previous section explore an authorship

of reinterpretation, these explore an authorship of recombination. Just as the reinterpretations within *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil* mirror and authorize Marie's own process of writing of those lays as creative retellings of her sources, so too the productive recombinations of *Yonec* and *Eliduc* mirror Marie's tendencies to combine disparate traditions and authorities into new, revisionary narratives.

In *Yonec*, the narrative is set in motion by the Lady's recombination of love stories—which are pagan, oral, and most likely vernacular—with Christian and most likely Latin devotional texts.⁶⁴ At the beginning of the lay, the Lady finds herself living an unsatisfactory life, kept isolated and imprisoned by a jealous, older husband. Her unhappiness about this situation is equally religious and social; she complains that:

Jeo ne puis al muster venir
Ne le servise Deu oïr.
Si jo puisse od gent parler
E en deduit od eus aler
Jo li mustresse beu semblant. (75-79)⁶⁵

She bemoans that she is deprived of regular access to both religious and secular social discourses. She does have some limited access to both of these types of discourse, though, through her occasional companions. She is guarded by an old woman, the husband's sister, who is depicted carrying her psalter in order to read psalms (59-60) and so who offers the chance for some religious discourse. The Lady is, furthermore, sometimes allowed to speak with the rather

⁶⁴ Freeman likewise sees the Lady of *Yonec* as a storyteller, yet argues for the likelihood that her love story is in fact a fiction, fabricated to take control of her life and avenge herself on her husband. See Freeman, "The Changing Figure of the Male," 254–57.

⁶⁵ "I can't even go to church/ or hear God's service./ If I could speak to people/ and enjoy myself with them/ I'd be very gracious to my lord."

enigmatic “autres femmes . . . / en un’ autre chambre par sei” (33),⁶⁶ offering her occasional access to secular social interactions. These women are the most likely candidates among her companions to have told the Lady the local narratives of *aventure* (“en cest païs”) that she claims to have often heard (93-94).⁶⁷ The Lady’s various female companions, that is, provide her with some access to the religious and secular discourses and types of human interaction that she lacks, but not enough to satisfy her.

The Lady reshapes her life by drawing these two discourses or traditions together, each of which is insufficient to her needs on its own. She combines them first in her prayerful recollection of the narratives she has heard about very different kinds of lives:

Mut ai sovent oï cunter
 Que l’em suleit jadis trover
 Aventures en cest païs,
 Ki rechatouent les pensis:
 Chevalers trovoënt puceles
 A lur talent gentes e beles,
 E dames truvoënt amanz
 Beaus e curteis, [pruz] e vaillanz,
 Si que blamees n’en esteint,
 Ne nul fors eles nes veeient.
 Si ceo peot estrë e ceo fu,
 Si unc a nul est avenu,
 Deu, ki de tut ad poësté,
 Il en face ma volenté! (91-104)⁶⁸

⁶⁶ “other women.../ in another chamber by themselves”

⁶⁷ See Freeman, “The Changing Figure of the Male,” 250–51. Freeman also associates the devotional elements of the Lady’s narrative with the old woman and the *aventure* elements with the “autres femmes.” This can of course only be speculative, since the Lady doesn’t say when or from whom she has heard these stories. Yet the Lady’s description of the stories as being from “cest païs” seems to indicate that Caerwent is not her own country, but rather one she moved to after her marriage, in which case she would be less likely to have learned the stories of “cest païs” in childhood or prior to arrival at the castle, and the mostly likely source for them there would seem to be these other courtly women.

⁶⁸ “I’ve often heard/ that one could once find/ adventures in this land/ that brought relief to the unhappy./ Knights might find young girls/ to their desire, noble and lovely;/ and ladies find lovers/ so handsome, courtly, brave, and valiant/ that they could not be blamed,/ and no one else would see them./ If that might

This invocation draws on an archive of supposedly ancient love stories,⁶⁹ while placing those stories within the Christian context of a prayer for divine assistance. Through the combination of these potentially contradictory or incompatible discourses, the Lady is able to sketch the outlines of a new kind of narrative that she wants to be a part of and that can be fulfilling both socially and spiritually.

The recounting of “aventures” that happened “jadis” “en cest païs”—which, as we learn earlier, is “Carwent” (13), in Wales—places these narratives as exactly the kind of ancient Celtic tales Marie claims to be translating, creating a *mise en abyme* that positions the Lady as a surrogate author or reteller. The Lady uses her knowledge of these old stories to interpret her own position as conforming to their narrative patterns, casting herself as the embattled heroine. Critics have noted the self-conscious quality of this moment in which, as Robert Sturges notes, “the unnamed heroine . . . wishes that she might gain her freedom by becoming what the author and the reader know her to be: the heroine of a *lai*.”⁷⁰ It is her recognition of this narrative possibility and her desire to fulfill it that enable the story, since her hawk-knight, Muldumarec, cannot come to her until she is able to recognize him as a possibility and wish for him.⁷¹ She must correctly interpret and actively choose her narrative position before the story can go on, and

be or ever was,/ if that has ever happened to anyone,/ God, who has power over everything,/ grant me my wish in this.”

⁶⁹ That is, these stories are presented as ancient within the narrative. However, notably, they could very well describe at least one of Marie’s other narratives as well, namely *Lanval*. While this could seem to affirm Marie’s claims to ancient sources for her own narratives, it also creates something of an odd temporal rupture, in which Marie’s own stories seem to be presented as ancient.

⁷⁰ Sturges, “Texts and Readers in Marie de France’s Lais,” 245. Hanning and Ferrante suggest, similarly, that the lady “uses her imagination to create the kind of love she needs” but they attribute this to the mind’s freedom from imprisonment; see *The Lais of Marie De France*, 152–3.

⁷¹ He tells her upon his arrival, “Jeo vus ai lungement amé/.../Mes ne poeie a vus venir/ Ne fors de mun païs eissir,/ Si vus ne me eüssez requis” (127-33); “I have loved you for a long time/.../yet I couldn’t have come to you/ or left my own land/ had you not asked for me.”

when she does the force of her surrogate-authorial agency is clear; Muldumarec arrives almost immediately after her prayer. The Lady is not only a surrogate author, then, but is more specifically a self-authoring character. She directs the narrative conventions and contexts of her own story, changing it from a *mal mariée* narrative to a romantic *aventure*.

The Lady's self-authorship involves both retelling and recombination. Even as she adopts the conventional narrative patterns she has learned from the old *aventures*, the Lady also alters those conventions by interweaving Christian traditions into them. By voicing her desire for this kind of narrative in a prayer, the Lady positions God as the organizer of such romantic *aventures*. Susan Johnson notes that the verb "racheter" (of "rechatouent" line 94) "has a strong religious connotation . . . of 'to deliver, to redeem,'" ⁷² so that these pagan love narratives seem to offer a Christ-like redemption. The Lady's interpretation of what is necessary for her love to be blameless likewise grafts Christian traditions onto secular or even pagan narrative conventions. Her first description of the conventions of the old stories indicates that it is the lovers' knightly qualities that make it unexceptionable that the women should love them: the lovers are "Beaus e curteis, [pruz] e vaillanz,/ Si que blamees n'en esteint" (98-99). ⁷³ But the Lady tells Muldumarec "qu'ele en ferat son dru,/ S'en Deu creïst e issi fust/ Que lur amur estre peüst" (138-40) ⁷⁴—he must establish the blamelessness of their love not by proving his courtesy or valor, but by proving that he is a Christian—and hence, not pagan or diabolical—figure. Their love will only be possible if these two different traditions can be successfully combined.

⁷² Susan M Johnson, "Christian Allusion and Divine Justice in Yonec," in *In Quest of Marie de France a Twelfth-Century Poet*, Medieval and Renaissance Series, 10 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen. xii, 1992), 165.

⁷³ "so handsome, courtly, brave, and valiant/ that they could not be blamed." It is perhaps ambiguous whether "they" who "could not be blamed" are the women or the knights, as well as what exactly "they" are not blamed for. But in either case, the men's knightly qualities seem to make the love between the couples unexceptionable.

⁷⁴ "she would take him as her lover/ if he believed in God,/ and if their love was really possible."

Luckily for the Lady, Muldumarec himself embodies the kinds of hybridity and ability to combine ostensibly incompatible traditions that her prayer evoked. He dutifully pronounces that “Jeo crei mut bien al Creatur,” (149)⁷⁵ and takes the Eucharist by magically either taking on the Lady’s appearance or merging with her body.⁷⁶ This most magical, fairy-like moment is also the most Christian moment for the character. Rather than conflicting, as we might expect them too, the different traditions represented by Muldumarec’s magic and his faith affirm and reinforce each other here to fulfill the Lady’s prayer and change her life and narrative. Her prayer draws the kind of Christian traditions represented by the old woman’s psalter into her real-life re-enactment of the oral, secular stories she had been told, creating a hybrid narrative. And this recombinatory authorship enables an alternative narrative that offers the Lady both the social and spiritual fulfillment that she was lacking at the beginning of her story.

The Lady’s surrogate authorship parallels Marie’s, and it also calls attention to those parallels. In shifting these old *aventures* from the realm of the literary to the realm of her own life, the Lady is reversing the typical movement of transmission from the “real” to the literary, as when Tristram turns his experiences into a lay. She undergoes, as Sturges suggests, a “passage from a presumed reality into fictionality,”⁷⁷ in a move that underscores the narrative’s own status as narrative. She draws on the typical plot conventions of these ancient stories as models for her desired changes to her own life story and, indeed, her description of those typical plots prefigures

⁷⁵ “I do believe in the creator.”

⁷⁶ The logistics of the scene are unclear. He says he will take on her appearance (“la semblance de vos prendrai” [161]), and the illusion obviously requires that there be only one Lady visible. Yet the couple is described as lying in bed beside each other immediately before and after the priest’s visit (166, 191), so the Lady does not seem to have hidden during the procedure, and must either have been made invisible herself, or have shared her body and its appearance with the knight.

⁷⁷ Sturges, “Texts and Readers in Marie de France’s Lais,” 246.

elements of her own narrative.⁷⁸ This gesture points us outside of the diegetic level of the story and of the Lady's surrogate authorship to recognize, in a deepening of the *mise en abyme*, the mirroring of Marie's own metapoetic authorial activities in writing this narrative of a self-authoring heroine.

The narrative's recombination of different traditions is, after all, occurring at two different diegetic levels at the same time: it is being done both by the Lady in her acts of self-authorship, and it is being done to the Lady by Marie. Marie's narrative draws together and recombines different literary, linguistic, and religious traditions as well. Critics have variously argued that the story relies on Christian allegory, that it derives from Celtic folklore, that it is heavily influenced by Virgil, and that all of the above may be the case.⁷⁹ The two women, character and author, are engaging in very similar activities of creative recombination at different diegetic levels of the narrative and at different stages of the narrative's history. They are both part of the same process—a process of generating new narrative through ongoing recombinatory authorship.

This kind of recombination is another form of revisionary transmission, and is related to the series of reinterpretations examined in the previous section. These two different types of authorship come together in *Yonec* as Muldumarec takes over the direction of the narrative after the Lady sets her new Christianized *aventure* in motion. Muldumarec's hybrid and changeable

⁷⁸ Muldumarec is a lover who is “beaus e curteis, [pruz] e vaillanz,” able to reclaim her from sadness, and he can be at times invisible to anyone but her.

⁷⁹ Logié, who argues that Marie is alluding to Virgil, also gives useful overviews of the arguments for Christian and Celtic sources; see Philippe Logié, “La Catabasse d’Yonec: Un Souvenir de Virgile?,” *Bien Dire et Bien Apprendre: Revue de Médiévisique* 24 (2007): 141–51. Frese suggests that the Christian element in Marie's lay is evidence of “Marie's own particular genius to have invented revisionistically . . . the precursive *matière* inherited from pagan antiquity”; see “Marie de France and the ‘Surplus of Sense,’” 224. For other views on Christian allegory and/or religious analogues, see Johnson, “Christian Allusion and Divine Justice in *Yonec*”; Freeman, “The Changing Figure of the Male”; K. Sarah-Jane Murray, “The Ring and the Sword: Marie de France's *Yonec* in Light of the *Vie de Saint Alexis*,” *Romance Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2006): 25–42.

body can be seen as not only as the product of the Lady's authorship of recombination, but also, at a larger scale, as a representation of the processes of blurring and hybridization that work across the diegetic levels of the narrative and across the narrative's history, exceeding the Lady's, or any individual author's, control.

If the Lady's combination of different traditions adds a *surplus* of Christian morality and symbolism to the ancient love stories she wants to emulate, Muldumarec himself offers further layers of meaning and narrative possibilities unanticipated by the Lady. Seeing the Lady's surprise at his hybrid bird-knight form, he says

n'eiez poür!
Gentil oisel ad en ostur;
si li segrei [vus] sunt oscur,
Gardez ke seiez a seür
Si fetes de mei vostre ami! (121-25)⁸⁰

He acknowledges that his situation has "segrei" that are, and it seems will remain, "oscur" to her as well as to the reader. He asserts that those "segrei" are nothing we need to worry about, yet implies they are important. Though the Lady's surrogate-authorial act brought Muldumarec to her, once he is there she is not in control of the full range of his meanings. His knowledge and/or possession of such "segrei" signals that he has a special interpretive viewpoint and narrative function that enables him to reshape the narrative beyond what the Lady had originally conceived.⁸¹

⁸⁰ "don't be afraid./ The hawk is a noble bird,/ although its secrets are unknown to you. / Be assured/ and accept me as your love."

⁸¹ Other critics have focused on the Lady as writer within the lay but most have not commented on Muldumarec's role. See Bloch, *The Anonymous Marie de France*, 108–109; Freeman, "The Changing Figure of the Male"; Delcourt, "Oiseaux, Ombre, Désir." An exception is Sturges, who does see Muldumarec as projecting himself into a "future narrative" in a parallel to the Lady's self-authorization; Sturges, "Texts and Readers in Marie de France's Lais," 246–47.

His new, interpretive viewpoint is made manifest when he predicts the events of their narrative on three occasions. In addition to containing a *surplus* of obscure meaning in his hybrid form, Muldumarec offers his own interpretation and revision of their narrative, engaging in a surrogate authorship that is informed by an almost extradiegetic foreknowledge of events. That is, he already knows the end of their story, and so sees the narrative from a perspective that is partly outside of it. His predictions are in this sense pre-tellings that are distinct from retellings only in their temporality: he recounts what he knows will have happened. Yet at times these supposed predictions are also self-fulfilling prophecies, altering the narrative *by* telling its future. Muldumarec is, therefore, also an interpretive reteller of the story from within, so that he and the Lady collaborate to create the full story. Though the Lady and Muldumarec have different approaches as authors (recombination and pre-telling respectively), both exemplify the ways in which transformative transmission enables and creates new narrative, as the narrative's greatest shifts in direction occur primarily in and through the moments of the characters' surrogate authorship.

Muldumarec pre-tells events at three different points, with increasing specificity and revisionary effect. The first time, his prediction could also be simply an educated guess. At their first meeting, he warns the Lady to maintain “mesure” (201) in her behavior thereafter, so as not to arouse suspicion by being too happy, and predicts that if she does not, “ceste veille nus traïra” (203)⁸² and he will ultimately be killed. When this pre-telling is fulfilled by his fatal wound from the barbs her husband has placed in the window, Muldumarec offers further information about the narrative's future, telling the Lady that:

De lui est enceinte d'enfant,
Un fiz avra pruz e vaillant:
Icil [la] recunforterat;

⁸² “This old woman will betray us.”

Yonec numer le f[e]rat,
Il vengerat [e] lui e li,
Il oscirat sun enemi. (327-332)⁸³

This pre-telling is not cast as a potentially hypothetical “if . . . then” as was the first; the predominance of the future tense here indicates a definite foreknowledge. But at the same time, such foretelling would seem to function as a self-fulfilling prophecy or a pre-scripting of the narrative. This is clearest in the case of the child’s name. Muldumarec does not predict a name that the husband or someone else gives the child independently. Rather, he says that she will name the child Yonec—or, literally, that she will make the child to be named Yonec (“Yonec numer le f[e]rat”)—giving her the name to choose so that he might just as well be directing as predicting the future.⁸⁴

The way Muldumarec’s magical foreknowledge directly shapes, or authors, the future of the narrative is most obvious in his final pre-telling and its fulfillment in the conclusion of the lay. On his deathbed, Muldumarec gives the lady his sword for their unborn child and tells her:

Quand il aura grandi
E chevalier pruz e vaillant,
A une feste u ele irra,
Sun seignur e lui amerra.
En une abbeïe vendrunt;
Par une tumbe kil verrunt
Orrunt renoveler sa mort
E cum il fu ocis a tort.
Ileoc li baillerat s’espeie
L’aventure li seit cuntee
Cum il fu nez, ki le engendra;

⁸³ “that she was pregnant with his child./ She would have a son, brave and strong,/ who would comfort her;/ she would call him Yonec./ He would avenge both of them/ and kill their enemy.”

⁸⁴ When the narrative catches up to this pre-telling, we are told that after the Lady returns to her husband and her child is born “Yonec le firent numer” (459) (“They named him Yonec”), which implies that she may have gotten, or have had to get, her husband’s approval for the name. But one way or another she does seem to have succeeded in ‘making the child to be named Yonec’ just as Muldumarec said.

Asez verrunt k'il en fera. (425-36)⁸⁵

The details of the feast and abbey are out of Muldumarec's control and so do indicate some magical foreknowledge. But again, his description of the lady's actions to her also shapes her future behavior. She does not reveal Yonec's origins to him until she recognizes the moment at which she has been told she will do so, and she then does so in just the terms pre-scripted by her lover. By pre-telling these events, Muldumarec provides her narrative and life with a shape and an endpoint. He enters the narrative the Lady has begun for herself and, like any active reader and reteller, contributes his *surplus* to reshape that narrative.

Underscoring the ongoing processes of collaborative authorship that drive the lay, its final crisis moment centers on a pair of interpretive retellings of the preceding narrative. Just as Muldumarec foresees, when the lady, her husband, and Yonec find and ask about the tomb, the people of the region recount ("recunter" [512]) the story of Muldumarec's murder. They say that he was "pur l'amur de une dame ocis" (520),⁸⁶ offering an interpretation of the events that seems to place some of the blame for Muldumarec's death on the Lady (an interpretation that Muldumarec also predicted and to some degree shared⁸⁷). Recognizing the pre-told circumstances, the lady then retells the story to Yonec with her own interpretation of events, which puts the blame for Muldumarec's death on her husband rather than herself.⁸⁸ The people's interpretive recounting spurs the Lady to offer her own retelling and interpretation. By inciting

⁸⁵ "When the son had grown and become/ a brave and valiant knight,/ she would go to a festival,/ taking him and her lord with her./ They would come to an abbey./ There, beside a tomb,/ they would hear the story of his death,/ how he was wrongfully killed./ There she would give her son the sword./ The adventure would be recited to him,/ how he was born and who his father was;/ then they'd see what he would do."

⁸⁶ "killed for the love of a lady."

⁸⁷ See his comments to the Lady at 401-409.

⁸⁸ Similarly: Murray, "The Ring and the Sword," 33.

Yonec to act and avenge her, the Lady (at least temporarily) regains interpretive control over her narrative, and then instantly dies. Her death comes as an unexpected *surplus* to this final interpretive retelling that completes her authorship.

After his mother's retelling, Yonec himself must interpret his mother's version of the story and choose the direction the story will take from that point forward. Muldumarec predicts that Yonec will avenge them, but his final pre-telling turns over control of the ultimate outcome of events to Yonec, saying: "Asez verrunt k'il en fera" (436).⁸⁹ Yonec does complete the Lady's narrative, and Muldumarec's, by avenging them and succeeding his true father. Yet, though he kills his stepfather, he seems to have his own interpretation of that action. Marie writes that:

Quant sis fiz veit que el morte fu,
Sun parastre ad le chief tolu
De l'espeie que fu sun pere
Ad dun vengié le doel sa mere. (541-4)⁹⁰

Yonec performs his pre-scripted part perfectly, using Muldumarec's sword to murder his father's murderer. Yet the passage's emphasis on his mother's death and sorrow suggest that Yonec is more motivated by love of her than by the narrative of his origins and of a father he never knew. However, since the story ends with that moment, the remainder of Yonec's life, and his interpretation of what has passed before, remain to some degree "segrei," and open to readerly interpretation.

Demonstrating the full scope of the interpretive, revisionary process that the lay is involved in, Marie offers a glimpse of another, previous layer of such readerly interpretation in her description of the original lay's composition. She writes: "Lunc tens après un lai en firent,/

⁸⁹ "then they'd see what he [Yonec] would do."

⁹⁰ "when her son saw that she had died,/ he cut off his stepfather's head./ Thus with his father's sword/ he avenged his mother's sorrow."

De la pité, de la dolur/ que cil suffrirent pur amur” (551-54).⁹¹ Marie suggests that the original composers of the lay saw the main point of the *aventure* as being about suffering in love, and critics have suggested that this is also Marie’s lay’s main point.⁹² Yet Marie does not necessarily assert in her closing comment that “la pité, de la dolur/ que cil suffrirent pur amur” is what her own version of the narrative is primarily about. While her lovers certainly suffer, it is debatable whether that suffering is the main purpose of Marie’s version of the narrative. Even if her version does contain an element of that original intent, it also exceeds it, by combining that story of suffering love with a metapoetic depiction of characters shaping their narratives and lives through revisionary recombination.

This lay, like *Laüstic* and *Chevrefoil*, enacts a series of reinterpretations within the narrative that also extend beyond it. In this lay, however, those reinterpretations do not change the meaning of a central symbolic object, but rather, recombine and reinterpret the genre and context of the narrative itself.⁹³ The Lady revises her life from a *mal mariée* to a Christianized *aventure* of love. That model love story originally included only a lover, not a child, but Muldumarec introduces a son into their story and then, with his own pre-told death, adds a narrative of filial vengeance and inheritance. As the Lady and Muldumarec write and retell events that have happened or will happen, they creatively combine or reinterpret different traditions, giving their lives new contexts that alter the course of their narrative. The main

⁹¹ “Long after, those who heard this adventure/ composed a lay about it,/ about the pain and the grief/ that they suffered for love.”

⁹² See Frese, “Marie de France and the ‘Surplus of Sense’”; June Hall McCash, “The Curse of the White Hind and the Cure of the Weasel: Animal Magic in the Lais of Marie de France,” in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 199–209; Murray, “The Ring and the Sword.”

⁹³ Johnson notes that Marie “has blended together at least three well-known story types”: the “*inclusa*,” the “form-changing lover” and the son’s revenge for his father’s murder, and she suggests that, while combinations of some of those forms existed previously, there is no known previous combination of all of them; “Christian Allusion and Divine Justice in Yonec,” 161–162.

narrative movement occurs around these moments of pre-telling and retelling. Or to put it more strongly, the narrative only moves forward through change—through recombination and reinterpretation, demonstrating the generative power of those forces of transformative transmission.

The generative and transformative powers of retelling are depicted even more strongly in *Eliduc*. As the longest and perhaps most plot-driven of the lays, *Eliduc* is much less frequently seen as self-conscious about its narrative processes, in comparison with Marie's other lays.⁹⁴ Yet, as in *Yonec*, *Eliduc*'s greatest moments of narrative movement coincide with a character's reinterpretation of the narrative. Though we might expect Eliduc himself to participate in this process, as Muldumarec does, here it is the two women, the hero's wife and his lover, for whom the adventure of creative interpretation really happens. Both Guildelüec and Guilliadun alter the course of the hero-centered story that *Eliduc* at first seems to be by reinterpreting the narrative and adding a *surplus* of alternative traditions and discourses. The recombinations and reinterpretations of the characters are, indeed, so powerful that they seem to change the literary history of Marie's lay even as we read it.

The dramatic revision of the narrative from within is prefigured by Marie's introductory statements about the lay. She begins with a synopsis of the bulk of the plot: a brave knight named Eliduc has a beloved wife, but falls in love with a girl while campaigning in another country; the girl's name is Guilliadun and the wife's Guildelüec.⁹⁵ In concentrating primarily on Eliduc before switching to the women, the synopsis echoes the development of the narrative itself. The lay begins by describing how Eliduc is wrongly banished from Brittany by his lord.

⁹⁴ For a notable exception, see: Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*."

⁹⁵ This is a loose paraphrase of Marie's lines 5-20.

After Eliduc meets Guilliadun in Britain, while serving her father, the narrative begins to shift somewhat away from him to focus on her feelings and actions as well, up to the point where she swoons and lies apparently dead upon learning that Eliduc is married. And after Eliduc's return with Guilliadun to Brittany, much of the end of the story is focalized through Guildelüec's perspective, as she finds, interprets, and responds to Guilliadun's body.

The history of the lay's title, which Marie also comments on, likewise echoes that narrative development from Eliduc to the women. Marie tells us that:

D'eles deus ad li lai a nun
Guildelüec ha Gualadun.⁹⁶
Elidus fu primes nomez,
Mes ore est li nuns remüez,
Kar des dames est avenu. (21-25)⁹⁷

The lay was, we are told "primes" called *Eliduc* before being changed to be "ore" called *Guildelüec ha Gualadun*. Yet Marie's discussion of the title offers a miniature chiasmus of that history and plot: she gives the newer, women-centered title first, before acknowledging its former name, reversing the priority of the hero before the heroines. Despite the heavy emphasis on Eliduc in her synopsis, she asserts the women's centrality to the narrative in claiming that the *aventure* "happened" ("est avenu") to them in particular. This somewhat odd prefatory commentary (to which I will return later) alerts the reader from the beginning that the narrative may not be quite what it seems "primes" to be, and prepares us for the narrative to change before our eyes.

⁹⁶ Hanning and Ferrante note that "the spelling of the name in the alternate title differs from the name of the character as it is otherwise given in the *lai* (*Guilliadun*)"; *The Lais of Marie De France*, 196 n. I will maintain this alternate spelling whenever referring to the lay's alternate title, but will use *Guilliadun* when referring to the character.

⁹⁷ "From these two the *lai* is named/ *Guildeluec and Gualadun*./ At first the *lai* was called *Eliduc*,/ but now the name has been changed,/ for it happened to the women."

What the narrative seems to be at first is a military epic focusing on the hero and his negotiation of tricky homosocial, knightly bonds—first to his original lord in Brittany, and then to Guilliadun’s father in Britain.⁹⁸ Eliduc’s defeat of his second lord’s enemies proves him to be an appropriate hero for that masculine, heroic genre. Yet it also draws the attention of Guilliadun, who interprets him differently. SunHee Geertz notes how “the narrative shifts from echoing the genre of the military epic to foregrounding generic elements of courtly romance.”⁹⁹ It makes this shift just at the moment when “La fille al rei l’oï numer” (273).¹⁰⁰ It is Guilliadun who initiates and drives the initial change in the narrative.

When she summons Eliduc to meet with her, she introduces herself and her romance genre into Eliduc’s epic. Her behavior at that meeting signals the generic shift: she seems to suggest the idea of love to him through her sighs, given that, in reflecting on their meeting, Eliduc is troubled “Que tant ducement l’apela,/ E de ceo ke ele suspira” (317-18).¹⁰¹ Such sighs are a romance convention, and the demands of their conventionality seem to lead the hero to reciprocate Guilliadun’s feelings, almost in spite of himself. Guilliadun continues to drive the affair forward, and to push the narrative in the generic direction of romance. She sends Eliduc love tokens,¹⁰² and is the first to declare her love openly. As long as she remains in control of the narrative on her own terms and her own turf, the combination of genres works fairly well.

The military epic storyline continues unhindered as Eliduc utterly defeats the king’s enemies; it

⁹⁸ Gertz, “Transforming Genres in Marie de France’s Eliduc,” 181.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ “The king’s daughter heard him spoken of.”

¹⁰¹ “because she had summoned him so sweetly,/ because she had sighed.”

¹⁰² The sending of these love tokens includes some interesting conversation about interpretation between Guilliadun and her chamberlain (355-73; 419-440). For a discussion of this scene as part of Marie’s investigation of the indeterminacy of meaning see: Sturges, “Texts and Readers in Marie de France’s Lais,” 292–94.

is simply enhanced by the addition of the romance narrative, with the lovers meeting often and happily.

Two possible threats to this happy narrative are raised: the affair's potential conflict with Eliduc's loyalty to Guilliadun's father, and its conflict with his loyalty to Guildelüec.¹⁰³ The conflict with her father proves to be a red herring, never arising again even after Eliduc steals Guilliadun away from her homeland. This lack of attention to homosocial allegiance demonstrates how fully the narrative has been changed by Guilliadun's reinterpretation. The conflict with his other heterosexual love, however, proves devastating to Guilliadun's surrogate authorship. She loses control of the narrative on the voyage to Brittany when she learns that Eliduc has a wife, a revelation that leads her to swoon and appear to be dead. She is unable, or unwilling, to effectively reinterpret or recombine this unexpected narrative twist into the romance narrative she sees herself and Eliduc as participating in. The fact of Eliduc's marriage works that epic-romance hybrid narrative into a knot that is beyond Guilliadun's interpretive powers, as well as beyond Eliduc's. The narrative becomes stuck, as Guilliadun is stuck between life and death, unable to resolve itself.

The resolution only comes when Guildelüec steps in to author another recombinatory revision of the narrative. This revisionary moment occurs when Guildelüec finds Guilliadun's body—the complementary moment to Guilliadun's interpretive crisis on the boat when she learns of Guildelüec's existence. Guildelüec's interpretive actions serve as a corrective to Guilliadun's inability to incorporate the character of Eliduc's wife into her romance-epic

¹⁰³ The conflict with her father is raised in lines 685-89, the conflict with Guildelüec at 322-26, among others.

narrative.¹⁰⁴ In very strong contrast, when Guildelüec sees Guilliadun's body, she is able to interpret it instantly, and she explains the sight to her valet, saying:

Veiz tu... ceste femme,
Que de beuté resemble gemme?
Ceo est l'amie mun seignur,
Pur quei il meine tel dolur. (1021-24)¹⁰⁵

With acute powers of interpretation, Guildelüec recognizes and interprets the at least a part of the *surplus* meanings of this other woman's body. Through the sight of the body, Guildelüec understands the whole plot and crisis of the preceding narrative of *Eliduc (and Guilliadun)*—a love story she had not realized that she was a part of.

Shortly after this Guildelüec exercises her special interpretive abilities again, when she observes one weasel miraculously cure another (killed by her valet) by placing a certain herb in its mouth. Guildelüec takes in this information and reapplies it to her situation, placing the same herb in Guilliadun's mouth and thereby reviving her. The pair of weasels offers a miniature story-within-the-story, which runs across the narrative of *Eliduc* just as the first weasel runs across Guilliadun's body. Guildelüec interprets this hypodiegetic narrative as revealing something about her own narrative, and critics have likewise tended to see the weasels as providing a parallel or allegory of the main plot. There has, however, been some critical controversy regarding the relation of the weasel pair to the three main characters.¹⁰⁶ The analogy

¹⁰⁴ see also: Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*." Gertz likewise sees Guildelüec as representing the ideal reader and author at this moment, but particularly as compared to the less successful interpretive actions of *Eliduc* and the sailor during the storm at sea scene.

¹⁰⁵ "Do you see... this woman/ whose beauty resembles a jewel?/ This is my lord's love/ for whom he feels such grief."

¹⁰⁶ The controversy depends partly upon the ambiguous gender of the weasels. The word "musteile" (1032) is feminine, but that of course does not necessarily mean that both of the animals are feminine. Hanning and Ferrante make the first weasel female and the second male, suggesting that "the lover who grieves for his dead mate seems to represent *Eliduc*, but the flower *he* finds to bring her back to life is his wife's charity"; *The Lais of Marie De France*, 225 n. Burgess and Busby maintain gender neutrality in

between Guilliadun and the first, felled and revived, weasel is fairly clear,¹⁰⁷ but the second weasel is trickier to identify. In its role as griever for a fallen companion, it would seem to represent Eliduc, yet in its role as healer, it would seem to represent Guildelüec. Rather than trying to resolve on a one-to-one relationship between figures in the analogous story, though, it is more compelling to suggest that the meaning of the weasel in relation to the trio of human characters changes over the course of the episode. The second weasel represents first (“primes”) Eliduc and now (“ore”) Guildelüec. Notably, that shift in the weasel’s meaning echoes the shift in the narrative’s focus just as it is occurring. As she observes and interprets the weasel’s narrative, Guildelüec receives a model for the productive revision of her own story. The weasel episode does not offer an exact allegory for the situation of the human characters, but it is the very difference of the weasel from the human story that offers the means of happily revising the humans’ narrative. It is less important that the weasels mean something exact in relation to the human narrative than that Guildelüec is able to reuse their narrative as a gloss on and creative revision of her own.

This narrative that Guildelüec draws into her own to help her revise it is itself interestingly hybrid. The episode of the weasels is generally seen as a folklore motif, which would mark it as part of the popular, vernacular materials that Marie is keen to draw from (or to

their translation while citing T.S. Duncan as noting that weasels tend to be associated with the feminine so that the two weasels may be “a reflection of Eliduc’s two ladies”; *The Lais of Marie De France*, 128.

¹⁰⁷ Though Fitz suggests it represents both Guilliadun and the sailor whom Eliduc kills on the boat from England to Brittany, an interpretation of a double significance not unlike my view of the second weasel’s double (or multiple) identity. See Brewster E. Fitz, “The Storm Episode and the Weasel Episode: Sacrificial Casuistry in Marie de France’s Eliduc,” *Modern Language Notes* 89, no. 4 (1974): 548. For another discussion of the weasels as allegory see Fabienne Pomel, “Les Belettes et La Florette Magique: Le Miroir Trouble Du Merveilleux Dans Eliduc,” in *Furent les Merveilles Pruvees et les Aventures Truvees. Hommage à Francis Dubost. Ed. Francis Gingras, Françoise Laurent, Frédérique Le Nan and Jean-René Valette* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005), 509–23.

claim to draw from).¹⁰⁸ Yet this episode could also be argued to derive from scholarly Latin materials. Marie's description of the second weasel's behavior upon finding its companion dead echoes one of its attributes in the second-family bestiaries,¹⁰⁹ where we learn that "weasels are said to be so skilled in medicine that, if by any chance their babies are killed, they can make them come alive again."¹¹⁰ The bestiaries are part of a tradition of scholarly scientific inquiry and spiritual reflection that would seem to have very little in common with the popular romance (possibly of pagan origin) that the story of *Eliduc* seemed to be. Yet they are also a kind of text that is particularly appropriate to use as a model for creative glossing and recombination; the bestiaries draw together disparate authoritative sources, and reuse and rethink them to make their own multilayered statements about animals and the world at large.¹¹¹ This textual tradition, then, is engaged in practices of creative re-combination very similar to those in which Guildelüec and Marie herself are engaged.

Guildelüec finds a solution for what had seemed to be an irresolvable problem through an act of interpretation and creative transformation that draws on Latinate bookish knowledge that might seem somewhat foreign to the heroic-romantic narrative we have been in. By interweaving such apparently disparate traditions, Guildelüec's revision of what had been first

¹⁰⁸ Gertz cites Spitzer for labeling the weasels "folkloristic": "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*," 182. See also: Jonin, "Le Bâton et la Belette ou Marie de France Devant la Matière Celtique."

¹⁰⁹ I am indebted to Susan Crane for originally suggesting this connection. See also McCash, "The Curse of the White Hind and the Cure of the Weasel"; Pomel, "Les Belettes et la Florette Magique," 511. To be sure, it is possible that the bestiaries simply also draw on the same folklore material that Marie uses. Yet the possibility that Marie does allude here to more scholarly versions of such narratives is strengthened by her similar practice elsewhere in the *Lais*. Susan Crane has suggested that *Bislavret* draws on such learned, Latinate material, including possibly the bestiaries; Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 61–62.

¹¹⁰ Terence Hanbury White, *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (Dover Publications, 2010), 93.

¹¹¹ See: Susan Crane, "A Taxonomy of Creatures in the Second-Family Bestiary," *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008): 1–48.

her husband's and then his lover's narrative authorizes her so that the narrative becomes hers as well. She resolves the narrative not only by healing her husband's lover, but also by choosing to step aside and join a convent so they can be together—she enables their romantic narrative to have a happy ending by combining it with a story of her own selfless and pious act.¹¹²

The interpretive, revisionary work that Guildelüec brings to the story preserves her and the other characters from vice, just as Marie suggested in her General Prologue. The love triangle that the three characters find themselves in is potentially a source of sin and conflict. Guildelüec radically changes the narrative context so that vice becomes virtue: the vice of Eliduc's betrayal of his vow to her¹¹³ becomes the virtue of first her own dedication to God, and then that of all three main characters when Eliduc and Guilliadun later follow suit. Potential sin and conflict has become mutual harmony and salvation.¹¹⁴ As Gertz has noted, however, the moralizing ending of the lay does not fully erase or replace other generic conventions and concerns; "the happily-ever-after marriage [of Eliduc and Guilliadun] . . . *coexists* with religious

¹¹² Guildelüec's feelings about this self-revision are somewhat unclear. She doesn't seem completely devastated at the change in her marital fortunes. Her sorrow at finding her husband's apparently dead lover is, she claims, "Tant par pitié, tant par amour" (1027) ("as much for pity as for love"), and so at least part of her sorrow will be relieved by seeing Guilliadun revived and reunited with Eliduc. McCash puts a positive spin on this by noting that "exchanging Eliduc for Christ as a husband seems hardly a sacrifice": "The Curse of the White Hind and the Cure of the Weasel," 206. This might particularly be the case given the less than exemplary qualities many critics have observed in Eliduc's conduct both in battle and in love; see e.g. Gertz, "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's Eliduc." And her change in marital status may represent a change in power: as an Abbess, she could have more authority than she did as Eliduc's wife.

¹¹³ It is not the potential adultery alone that would be vicious, given how sympathetically adultery is treated in other of the *Lais*. Rather, what seems to be vicious about Eliduc's love affair is that he is had previous really loved Guildelüec—at the beginning of the story Marie tells us that Eliduc and Guildelüec "mut s'entr'amerent lëaument" (12) ("loved each other loyally")—and vows to be faithful to her when he leaves for Britain (83-84).

¹¹⁴ The relationship of the three main characters at the end has even been likened to the love between the Holy Trinity; see Monica Brzezinski Potkay, "The Limits of Romantic Allegory in Marie de France's Eliduc," *Medieval Perspectives* 9 (1994): 135–45.

literature's divinely abnegate-the-world ending."¹¹⁵ This leaves the reader not so much with one kind of narrative replacing another as with something much more complex and multifarious: multiple narratives overlaying each other to produce new possibilities for what a satisfactory ending might be. The interpretive response of the reader is, furthermore, engaged in assessing how and whether the different narratives and traditions that have come together in this lay do coexist peaceably, and whether the ending actually is satisfactory—and for whom.

The diegetic narrative's recombination of genres and discourses continues, as in the other lays, into the extradiegetic and extratextual levels, when Marie calls attention to process of the narrative's transmission and transformations. At the end of the lay she notes how the events were first translated into literary (or literary-musical) form: "De l'aventure de ces trois/ Li auntien Bretun curteis/ Firent le lai pur remembrer" (1181-3).¹¹⁶ This careful description of the initial composition raises the possibility of differences between her version and the Breton original. She suggests that in the "auntien" source the focus is on all three of the main characters. Arguably the same can be said of Marie's version, yet Marie has already told us in her prefatory statement that the *aventure* "des dames est avenu" (25), and it is not the *lai* itself but rather "L'aventure dunt li lais fu" (26)¹¹⁷ that she is currently retelling. Marie indicates that there is a definite link between her version and her source, yet also implies that they are distinct narratives, with their own interests or interpretive spins on their common material.

The history of transmission and reinterpretation that is inherent in her discussion of the title change appears to offer us some interpretive access to the lay to come, yet her discussion also strangely obscures the specifics of the history of change it describes. Marie tells us that that

¹¹⁵ "Transforming Genres in Marie de France's *Eliduc*," 183.

¹¹⁶ "from the adventures of these three,/ the ancient courtly Bretons/ composed the *lai*, to remember it."

¹¹⁷ "happened to the women;" "the adventure behind the lai" (or literally 'from which the lay was made').

lay is called “Guilidelüec ha Gualadun” but that “Elidus fu primes nomez,/ Mes ore est li nuns remüez,/ Kar des dames est avenu” (22-25).¹¹⁸ The assertion that the lay has an ancient history is made especially clear and pointed through Marie’s retention (or use) of the Breton conjunction “ha,” as well as, perhaps, the alternate spelling “Gualadun.” As in her use of the word “laüstic” instead of “russignol,” this “ha” suggests a trace of the supposed Breton source. This trace raises its own *surplus* of interpretive questions. The Breton “ha” would seem to suggest that Marie’s source already bore the changed title and so that it must also have contained the history of its name change when Marie encountered it. Yet attaching the marker of antiquity to the newer title runs counter to the movement of the lay itself: from Eliduc at the beginning to the women as the newer protagonists. What’s more, the idea that her source already contained this revision of itself runs counter to the assumption—and implication—that Marie must have had some hand in the narrative’s recombinatory transformations. Indeed, some critics even suggest that Marie’s statement here implies that “*she* has changed its name.”¹¹⁹ The “ha” offers a *surplus* of Breton antiquity and alterity that is very difficult to parse.

The antiquity of the “ha” is also in tension with the implied immediacy of the word “ore,”¹²⁰ in Marie’s statement that “mes ore est li nun remüez” to *Guilidelüec ha Gualadun*. This deictic marker creates a temporal anomaly that suggests that the lay has recently been given an ancient name. If Marie’s source contained this history of its transformation and process of transmission, retelling that narrative gives Marie’s own methods of revisionary *translatio* an authoritative history and precedent. If this ancient history and antique-sounding name are

¹¹⁸ “Guilidelüec and Gualadun;” “At first the *lai* was called *Eliduc*, / but now the name has been changed, / for it happened to the women.”

¹¹⁹ McCash “The Curse of the White Hind and the Cure of the Weasel,” 208. See also: Joubert, *Oyez ke dit Marie*, 96.

¹²⁰ *AND* gives: “now,” “presently,” “recently,” or even, as “mes ore,” “henceforth;” “AND.” s.v. “ore².”

fabricated by Marie, on the other hand, this moment represents a demonstration of the transformative power of revisionary retelling: given that Marie is one of our main sources of information about the “Breton lay” genre, if she has invented this transmission history for her lay, she has also, in some sense, changed literary history more largely.

Marie’s emphasis on the name change highlights the lay’s diegetic divergence from the more typical hero-story, *Eliduc*, to become the more unusual heroine-story, *Guildelüec ha Gualadun*, and makes that transformation one of the primary focuses of the lay. Her insistence that the *aventure* “des dames est avenu” is an interpretive move that redirects the audience’s expectations of who or what will be important in the lay, and prefigures the change of perspective that readers of the lay will experience as they move through it. The lay is about Eliduc “primes” as the action focuses on him for the first three hundred lines or so. But as first Guilliadun and then Guildelüec take over and revise the course of that narrative, it becomes “ore” theirs. By delaying the women’s activity in the story until part way through the lay, Marie positions their narrative as a revisionary gloss on the typical hero-centered story she begins with. That is, the lay’s revision and name change occur within the lay itself, at the point when the women take control of the narrative. Marie’s lay includes and emphasizes that change, and is in a sense two lays in one, both the original and its revision, “primes” *Eliduc* and “ore” *Guildelüec ha Gualadun*.

The revision of the narrative is carried out on multiple levels at once: by the characters, in the imagined history of the lay, by Marie and by readers who must interpret and encounter this text that changes as we read it. This repetition at multiple levels of the narrative figures the diachronic process of literary transmission and revision across time as a synchronic, metapoetic representation of that process. The multilayered, synchronic representation in this narrative is a

miniature version of what the *Lais* do as a whole through Marie's discussions of the transmission and revision histories of each narrative and of her literary project's sources, models, and aims.

Like the *Lais* as a whole, the story of *Eliduc/Guildelüec ha Gualadun* is a story of transformative interpretation, one that contains its own transmission history and so leaves that history also open to interpretation and revision. While Marie seems to preserve the past through her discussion of what the lay was like "primes," that "first" history is also simply a part of her version's enactment of its own transformation. Through its emphasis on and authorization of that transformative process, this final lay in Marie's collection, like the collection as a whole, invests value in the "ore," the ongoing "now" of the reinterpetive moment, suggesting that it is not less important, and is perhaps far more interesting, than the venerable "primes."

The *Lais* lack a final authorial statement that would close the collection in the way that the General Prologue opens it, and this final lay stands in for that missing metacritical conclusion,¹²¹ offering a metapoetic one instead. By not closing the frame that she opens with the General Prologue,¹²² Marie underscores the inherent obscurity of her project and its *sutil* richness, both of which invite or even require the processes of collaborative reinterpretation to continue among her readers. Through the layered, metapoetic operations of her lays, Marie dramatizes the potential and the value of those processes of interpretation, translation, retelling, and transmission that she discusses in her General Prologue. Just as the jeweled box in *Laüstic* both conceals and represents the previous versions of the symbolic bird, and just as the double

¹²¹ Sharon Kinoshita and Peggy McCracken, *Marie de France: A Critical Companion* (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2012), 34. This of course, assumes a manuscript ordering that includes *Eliduc* as the final lay.

¹²² As noted above, the General Prologue likely was written later than the individual lays, and so might be seen as offering concluding or summative thoughts on the project. Yet its placement at the beginning rather than the end, as well as its own inherent complexity and obscurity, still leave the collection's meaning very much open to interpretation.

title of Marie's final lay both evokes and revokes an obscure previous version of the narrative, the *Lais*, while seeming to draw an authoritative past into the present, are always revising that past so that their power and authority lie more in the "ore" than the "primes." What they preserve is not so much some original event, or truth, as the process itself—a *mise en abyme* of the collaborative transformations of their material over time and across retellings. Marie's elaborations of the process of *translatio* demonstrate that meaning is always in the making, and suggest that the authority of vernacular literature lies in its particular *surplus*: the always-present action of reinterpreting and revising.

Chapter 2

Of a ley pat was ysette: Revising the Lay Tradition in Middle English

By the fourteenth century, Marie and the French “Breton lay” tradition she initiated had themselves become, as she foresaw, an ancient and obscure authority to be reckoned with.¹ The French lays of the twelfth century remained well known and in circulation even as Middle English authors were beginning to explore the possibilities of their own vernacular, in part through translating those popular French narratives.² Writers in Middle English in this period faced some similar challenges to those faced by Marie in the twelfth century—most particularly, the need to justify the choice of their less authoritative literary language. Middle English secular literature was generally perceived as less sophisticated than the aristocratic French tradition, and as having a more popular, less courtly, audience.³ Past scholarship has, in turn, condemned the

¹ For an overview of the different types of lays in French and English see Donovan, *The Breton Lay*. On Marie’s own legacy see Sylvia Huot, “The Afterlife of a Twelfth-Century Poet: Marie de France in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Li Premerains Vers. Essays in Honor of Keith Busby*, ed. Catherine M. Jones, Logan E Whalen, and Douglas Kelly (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011).

² See Elizabeth Archibald, “The Breton Lay in Middle English: Genre, Transmission and the Franklin’s Tale,” in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, ed. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge, England: Brewer, xi, 2000), 59–60; John B Beston, “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature.*, Harvard English Studies, 5 (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1974), 319–36; Kathryn Hume, “Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin’s Tale a Breton Lai,” *Philological Quarterly* 51 (1972): 373. Beston notes that the fame of the lay genre did not necessarily extend to Marie herself, however (325).

³ Spearing, for example suggests that “along with the change in language” there is “a move down the social scale” in Middle English translations of French romances; see “Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 12 (1990): 127. Scholars differ about just how far “down the social scale” the audience for Middle English romances went, but they seem to agree that it was at least a small step down from the royal audience of Marie. See Beston, “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” 319–22; A. J Bliss, ed., *Sir Launfal*, Nelson’s Medieval and Renaissance Library (London: T. Nelson, 1960), 15; Donovan, *The Breton Lay*, 122–23, 191; Myra Stokes, “Lanval to Sir Launfal: A Story Becomes Popular,” in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2000), 59–60. Crane notes that the negative comparison to continental French literature extended to

majority of Middle English lays as poor attempts to imitate the aristocratic French genre, attempts that merely succeed in “besmirching and mutilating the tradition.”⁴ In the last couple of decades, though, the critical tide has turned against this dismissal of Middle English lays and romances more broadly.⁵ Jane Gilbert, for example, asserts that approaching a popular romance with the assumption “of the inferiority of its design and poverty of its execution . . . is a sure route to missing altogether any point the text may have.”⁶ The idea that Middle English lays “mutilate” the French tradition presupposes that the texts were attempting to imitate the tradition faithfully. Yet that presupposition misses altogether the possibility that Middle English authors were trying to do something different, even perhaps intentionally distorting or revising in order to critically examine French lay traditions and their relationship to them. Leaving authorial intention aside, though, scholarship now recognizes that the Middle English lays’ divergences from convention can do something far more powerful than merely fail at imitation.

This chapter advances scholarly reconsideration and recuperation of Middle English lays by examining how certain authors were themselves interested in thinking through their relationships to French traditions. Lays such as *Sir Orfeo*, Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* not only pick up on the metapoetic devices of the lay tradition, but also translate those interests in various ways into their own social and linguistic frameworks. I argue that the authors of these lays are acutely conscious of their works’ status as

insular Anglo-Norman works as well; see *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 3–4.

⁴ Myra Seaman rehearses this view in order to take issue with it herself in “Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance,” *Medieval Perspectives* 15 (2000): 106.

⁵ For a discussion of changing critical attitudes toward Middle English romance see: Putter and Gilbert, introduction to *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, pp. 15–31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

revisions of French lay traditions from a position of social difference, if not inferiority, but that rather than being either negatively constrained by that or fighting against it, these authors use that position of inferiority to leverage themselves into a position of critical distance.

They achieve this distance through a practice of exaggerating or awkwardly misusing the tradition's conventions and authorizing tactics in ways that expose how those conventions normally operate, and draw attention to their circularity as self-authorizing devices. As a courtly genre that frequently depicts its aristocratic characters as the authors of their own narratives, the French lay tradition quietly uses its implicit social authority to reaffirm its developing narrative authority, and vice versa, often blending the two types of authority by situating its stories within a narrative of supposedly historical aristocratic, vernacular transmission. As these authorizing moves are reproduced in the more marginal literature of Middle English, however, the somewhat circular operations of the French tradition's self-affirming narrative logic⁷ become exposed and subject to critical revision.

In the following discussion, I treat the Middle English lays' revisions to their sources as demonstrating careful authorial control. Given our greater access to source material for the Middle English lays than for the French lays such as Marie's, it is easier to see the degree to which the Middle English authors carefully revise and manipulate their sources to create metapoetic effects. Such intertextual involvement at the moment of composition might not have been fully apparent to all audiences of the lays, but it also likely would have been apparent to at least some, even if only a small, elite group.⁸ Even if the only fully informed audience for these

⁷ By "narrative logic" I mean the operations of the narrative within a set of generic conventions or expectations regarding plot, theme, etc.

⁸ It is more useful, that is, to talk about "audiences" for the lays than a single "audience;" Jane Gilbert notes that "the different circumstances of circulation and transmission of the romances imply a variety of different audiences . . . not only drawn from the lower social ranks . . . [and] these audiences were not

revisions was the lay's own author, moreover, examining how these authors revise their sources offers valuable insight into the degree of deliberate reuse and rethinking of traditional materials that they engage in. Far from being simple retellers whose ineptitude tarnishes the traditions they draw on, these Middle English authors are savvy and critical revisers of those traditions, even when they distort and abuse them.

Alongside revisions to their particular sources, the authors reuse and revise lay conventions generally—in particular, the motifs of the self-authoring hero⁹ and the narrativized literary history—in ways that most likely would have been more visible to a wider audience that was familiar with lay traditions even if not with the particular source narratives. Such reuse becomes increasingly revisionary in the movement from *Sir Orfeo* to *Sir Launfal* to *The Franklin's Tale*,¹⁰ as the genre's conventional tactics of authorization are exaggerated, fractured and finally reinvented. Divergences from convention that at first look like rhetorical weaknesses

necessarily ignorant of or unable to appreciate finer productions"; see *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, Longman Medieval and Renaissance Library (Harlow, England ; New York: Longman, 2000), 21. Still, different audiences would possibly understand and appreciate the narratives differently. In this vein, David Rollo suggests that the for twelfth-century Latin and Old French romances, their "densely allusive" quality may represent an authorial interest in keeping certain audiences in the dark about certain elements of the narrative; see *Glamorous Sorcery: Magic and Literacy in the High Middle Ages*, *Medieval Cultures*, v. 25 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xiv. The idea that Chaucer's works specifically were particularly addressed to and best understood by a small "circle" (while clearly being read and enjoyed in different ways by different audiences) has been persuasively argued by Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, my term "self-authoring hero" is shorthand for the way in which many heroes and heroines of Marie's lays operate as surrogate author figures, engaging in activities such as interpretation, retelling and revision of their own lives and the events of their narratives, and doing so in ways that mirror the activities of the extradiegetic narrator and extratextual narrative history.

¹⁰ My placing of *Sir Launfal* before *The Franklin's Tale* in this discussion is primarily thematic and is not meant to indicate an assumption about their respective dating or about a direct influence. Some critics suggest that Chestre is influenced by Chaucer; see Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 15. The reverse has also been proposed at least in regard to *Sir Thopas*'s allusion to *Libeaus Desconus* (if that work is accepted as Chestre's); see Robert M Correale, ed., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), Vol I, 652–53. In any case, the accepted dating of *Sir Launfal* and *The Franklin's Tale* makes them roughly contemporary—1390s for *The Franklin's Tale* and late fourteenth century for *Sir Launfal*—and there is no obvious allusion or borrowing between them to indicate one text's definite priority or direct influence on the other.

look quite different—and, as I will demonstrate, make a fascinating kind of sense—when viewed as a critical engagement with those conventions. Rereading the lays’ divergences and anomalies in this way, rather than dismissing them as mere authorial ineptitude, enriches our understanding of these texts, and also demonstrates the great innovative potential of such retold tales.

I. The Exaggerated Minstrel-King of *Sir Orfeo*

Of the three lays examined in this chapter, *Sir Orfeo* is the most straightforward in its reuse of the authorizing tactics of the French lays for English literature. Critics have noted that *Sir Orfeo* (along with the other early Middle English lays of the Auchinleck manuscript¹¹) remains most in line with the “spirit” of the French lays, and of Marie’s lays in particular.¹² While it is by no means certain that the *Orfeo* poet knew Marie’s work, in many ways *Sir Orfeo* does remain quite close to the model of metapoetic vernacular retelling found in Marie’s lays, particularly in the way the poem offers a “commentary on its own process of creation and transmission”¹³ and uses that literary self-consciousness as a means of authorization. The lay’s subject matter does some of this metapoetic work. The Orpheus myth—as an authoritative,

¹¹ That is *Sir Degaré* and *Lay le Freine*. Of this group, I believe only *Orfeo* picks up on the metapoetic interests of Marie’s lays (or French lays in the tradition of Marie) in a significant way. This is perhaps particularly true of the Auchinleck version of *Orfeo*. The lay also exists in two other versions, and the three vary from each other considerably. The Auchinleck version is generally considered to be the “best,” and is most often analyzed by critics. Bliss found it “impracticable” to synthesize the many variants of the different versions, and so printed all three in his edition (xvii).

¹² Furnish, for example suggests that they “are completely faithful to the spirit of Marie” in their thematic interests; see “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays,” *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History* 62 (2007): 96. Kathryn Hume similarly says that *Orfeo* and *Freine* are “closest to Marie’s [lays] in spirit and theme, and are likewise quite close to the *Franklin’s Tale*”; see “Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin’s Tale a Breton Lai,” 372.

¹³ Roy Michael Liuzza, “Sir Orfeo: Sources, Traditions, and the Poetics of Performance,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991): 274.

classical narrative about “what poetry can do or be brought to do, and its limits”¹⁴—offers a particularly rich source for a metapoetic narrative.¹⁵ *Sir Orfeo* recombines the Orpheus myth with a number of different traditions,¹⁶ using its revisions of the authoritative classical material, to revise and transform the lay tradition as well.¹⁷

The lay plays with its generic conventions through a strategy of exaggeration. Its revision of the classical hero’s fate dramatically inflates the narrative’s claims regarding poetic authority, but also draws attention to the operations of its authorizing claims through such exaggeration. In a similar way, the poem takes the genre’s conventional mutual reaffirmation of social and narrative authority to a logical but very visible extreme through its insistent conflation

¹⁴ E. C Ronquist, “The Powers of Poetry in *Sir Orfeo*,” *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 99.

¹⁵ Though the Middle English author may not have known the classical myth directly from its Latin versions, the basic Orpheus storyline was available from more contemporary French sources such as the *Ovide moralisé*, which presented the classical narrative followed by a Christian, allegorical interpretation. See, e.g., *Ovide Moralisé En Prose (texte Du Quinzième Siècle)*, Verhandelingen Der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen. Afd. Letterkunde. Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 61, no.2 (Amsterdam: North-Holland Pub. Co, 1954); *Œuvres de Philippe de Vitry* (Genève: Slatkine, 1978).

¹⁶ Jeff Rider suggests that the poet was “well-versed in the Orpheus tradition” including the classical and Christianized versions, to which he or she also brought Celtic paradigms; “Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages: Allegorization, Remythification and *Sir Orfeo*,” *Papers on Language & Literature* 24, no. 4 (Fall 1988): 355. Donovan and others likewise argue for the influence of Celtic folk material particularly in the introduction of the Fairy world; Donovan, *The Breton Lay*. Dominique Battles offers a range of compelling connections to Anglo-Saxon traditions and narrative elements, including exile poetry and outlaw narratives; Dominique Battles, “*Sir Orfeo* and English Identity,” *Studies in Philology* 107, no. 2 (2010): 179–211.

¹⁷ It should be said that the question of authorial agency and creativity in regard to these recombinations and revisions in the Middle English lay is complicated by the presumed existence of a French antecedent, hinted at by other texts that mention a “*lai d’Orpheus*.” Given this assumed but lost direct source, it is impossible to know what choices were made by the Middle English poet and what he inherited. In the absence of evidence for the French antecedent’s contents, however, and given the clear evidence of a revisionary Middle English hand at work in the lay, it does not seem unreasonable to attribute some of the choices, and some self-consciousness about the lay’s metapoetic effects, to the *Orfeo* poet. The poet’s anonymity, moreover, makes it easier to conceive of this as a collaborative effort at a metapoetic narrative.

of the narrative authority of the minstrel¹⁸ with the political authority of the king. Finally, the lay makes much more overt the transformative and appropriative tendencies of the lay convention of narrativizing literary histories, as it unabashedly claims the classical past for Middle English literature.¹⁹ If the figure of the English poet-king Orfeo authorizes the Middle English text by affirming the beneficial, revisionary power of retelling (in the “spirit” of Marie’s lays), the lay’s larger-than-life depiction of that figure also works to reveal the brushstrokes, as it were, of the genre’s conventional self-authorizing operations.

The lay’s boldest revision of the mythological source material is the transformation of the Orpheus myth’s conclusion from unhappy to happy, as Orfeo regains both queen and kingdom. This revision affirms and authorizes the lay’s own practices of transformative revision on two levels. For one, it asserts the beneficial power of poetic retelling within the diegetic space of the narrative as Orfeo takes on the role of self-authoring hero to actively change his fate. And secondly, it extradiegetically confirms the power of retelling for the narrative as the English narrative gives new life, and a happy ending, to the classical tragedy.

Within the narrative, Orfeo’s musical-narrative talents literalize the motif of the self-authoring hero; he is as Lerer suggests (citing Robert Hanning) a “creator of fictions.”²⁰ Orfeo’s

¹⁸ Like other critics, I see the minstrel figure as representing narrative authority in this lay through the blurring of oral and written as well as lyric and narrative motifs that take place in the lay genre. As Liuzza notes, Middle English romances in particular tended to mix elements of oral and written traditions, and *Orfeo* “derives part of its effect from the conscious manipulation of the boundaries between orality and textuality”; Liuzza, “Sir Orfeo,” 271–272. Likewise, Lerer notes that the Auchinleck narrator presents the harpist-king as having “skill with words as well as with music”; “Artifice and Artistry in Sir Orfeo,” *Speculum: A Journal of Medieval Studies* 60 (1985): 94.

¹⁹ Beston suggests that *Sir Orfeo* along with *Lay le Freine* and *Launfal* are “almost as bent on appropriating the personages and happenings of their originals to England as on asserting their Breton provenance”; “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” 333.

²⁰ “Artifice and Artistry in Sir Orfeo,” 107.

minstrelsy twice enables him to change his classical fate: when he saves his wife and when he regains his kingdom. In both moments, he draws on his skills as a minstrel to create a plausible narrative around himself that works to change the narrative he is in. In the Fairy King's court Orfeo presents himself as "bot a pouer menstrel" (430),²¹ who is looking for work. This self-fictionalization is repeated and expanded in the scene of his return to Winchester, when he first tells the beggar that he is "a minstrel of pouer liif" (486), and then elaborates the story so that he becomes "an harpou of hepenisse" (513) upon meeting his steward. The retelling of this fictional persona is a key part of the strategy that returns Orfeo to happiness. In each case it offers the opportunity for further narratives that help Orfeo achieve his ends. In the Fairy court, his minstrel persona gives him the chance to entertain the king and so to get from him the promise of reward; he narrates himself into a position where he can negotiate for the release of his wife. In the beggar's house, Orfeo's self-narrativizing earns him additional narratives about himself; he asks for "tidinges of þat lond" (487) and the beggar "Told him euerich a grot" (490) about the disappearances of both Queen and King, and about the Steward's rule. The beggar retells Orfeo's own story to him, offering him, that is, a glimpse of how his story has been preserved and transmitted in the ten years of his absence—knowledge that he uses in his final self-narrating and testing of his steward.

The complex, double narrative Orfeo uses to test his steward upon his return to court overtly calls attention to the status of the teller and of the tale at hand as narrative, breaking out of the diegetic world of the story. Orfeo-in-disguise tells the Steward, and the court at large, two

²¹ All quotations are from the Auchinleck version as given in A. J Bliss, ed., *Sir Orfeo*, Oxford English Monographs 4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

very different but equally plausible conclusions to the story of Winchester's missing king.²² He gives the first version when the Steward recognizes his King's harp in the minstrel's hands and demands to know where he got it. The "minstrel" responds:

In vncouþe þede,
Þurth a wildernes as y ʒede,
Þer y founde in a dale
Wiþ lyouns a man to-torn smale,
& wolves him frete wiþ teþ so scharp;
Bi him y fond þis ich harp;
Wele ten ʒere it is y-go. (535-41)

This first version claims that the king is long dead, giving the unhappy ending that the court probably expected. Indeed an unhappy ending (though not this one exactly) might well be what an audience familiar with the classical or moralized versions of the Orpheus myth might expect as well. The minstrel-king's fictional account of his own death could recall the classical Orpheus' death by dismemberment.²³ This first version of the story is "false" as far as the diegesis of *Sir Orfeo* goes, but it represents a very plausible narrative for an Orpheus figure.²⁴

After seeing the Steward's appropriately mournful response to the first story, however, Orfeo offers a second, happier version, saying:

Steward, herkne now þis þing:
ʒif ich were Orfeo þe king,
& hadde y-suffred ful ʒore
In wildernisse miche sore,
& hadde y-won mi quen o-wy
& were mi-self hider y-come

²² That is, the conclusion to the story of the missing king that the beggar told to Orfeo-in-disguise. Felicity Riddy comments on this double retelling first by the beggar and then by Orfeo, noting that in Orfeo's retelling, "now the past is used in rather a different way from previously" so that "the beggar's unfinished account of the painful events of the past is completed and transformed in Orfeo's"; "The Uses of the Past in *Sir Orfeo*," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 6 (1976): 14.

²³ Liuzza, "Sir Orfeo," 275–77.

²⁴ Liuzza notes that "the lay does not suppress or ignore" the original myth nor "slavishly repeat the authoritative version" but rather it includes and revises those elements; *Ibid.*, 277.

Pouerlich to þe, þus stille,
For-to asay þi gode wille,
& ich founde þe þus trewe,
Pou no schust it never rewe. (557-70)

This version recounts in brief the events of the lay about Orfeo that we have just read, so we know that this is the true version of the story, from a diegetic standpoint. Its happy ending contradicts, at least hypothetically, the unhappy version the disguised King previously told. Oddly, though, Orfeo tells the two stories in grammatical moods that are contrary to their diegetic truth. He tells the false sequence of events in the active, past tense of experience, and the true one in the subjunctive/conditional of a non-truth or hypothetical. What's more, the complex syntactic structure of this passage, including the anaphora on "&," calls attention to his speech as rhetoric and as poetic, narrative performance. The narrative status of this second version even seems to be emphasized by its introductory call to attention, "herkne now"—a phrase resembling those conventional to oral or pseudo-oral narratives, such as the poet's instruction at the beginning of *Orfeo* to "herkneþ, lordinges [þat beþ trewe]" (23). Orfeo, that is, emphasizes and privileges this second version's constructed poetic elements over the very important information of its contents.

The oddity of this subjunctive retelling, which continues to puzzle critics,²⁵ undermines the audience's assumptions about the reality or unreality of each version. The first version affirms a plot that is not true diegetically, but that could recall the classical tradition that this lay originates and diverges from. The second version marks as merely hypothetical or even non-true the version that is diegetically correct. The strange mood of this second version allows it to avoid directly contradicting the first, as "the minstrel Orfeo is very careful to give only

²⁵ Critics frequently note the hypothetical or conditional nature of this passage, yet rarely attempt to explain it. For another take on the odd grammatical mood, see Ronquist "The Powers of Poetry in Sir Orfeo," 107.

hypothetical existence to Orfeo the king,²⁶ so that the two, contradictory versions of events are both allowed to stand. Of course, taking an extradiegetic view, both versions are equally imagined, constructed narratives, and both represent plausible narrative possibilities. By crossing the wires of the grammatical and diegetic reality of the two narratives, the poet calls attention to their shared status as narrative, as well as to the narrative status of his self-authoring hero. This alignment of the two versions authorizes the lay's radical revision of the myth—asserting that the unhappy ending is no more, or less, real or valid than the happy one—while also drawing attention to that revision.

Orfeo's double telling of the ending of his narrative offers an echo or *mise en abyme* of the Middle English poet's own revisionary activity at the extradiegetic level. Eyvind Ronquist suggests that Orfeo's subjunctive story "is a 'magical' extension of the normal control poetry exercises over its audience" when the audience consents to suspend disbelief and accept the conditions of a narrative.²⁷ Within the lay, the Steward suspends his disbelief in just this way, accepting the happy version of the story as the true one, despite the fact that the minstrel never confirms the hypothetical proposition that he might be the king. Likewise the tale-telling hero offers an unhappy version of the narrative that is more in keeping with the original myth and its contemporary, moralized retellings, but the lay asks the audience to affirm the truth of the revised, happy ending along with the Steward. By going along with this, at the same time as the Steward within the narrative approves and authorizes the return of his king from the dead,²⁸ the

²⁶ Ibid., 106.

²⁷ Ibid., 107.

²⁸ Ronquist suggests that the court audience for Orfeo's narratives (including the Steward) in fact is responsible for "transforming the beggar-minstrel into someone proper to be a king" based on their acceptance of his hypothetical narrative; Ibid.

audience outside of the narrative approves and authorizes the revision of the Orpheus myth that the *Orfeo* poet is engaged in.

Orfeo's doubled self-narrative replicates within the lay what the *Orfeo* poet is doing to larger narrative traditions through the lay. Just as Orfeo saves his own and Heurodis' lives and gives them a new fate within the narrative, the *Orfeo* poet gives new life to the classical narrative²⁹ by revising it so as to turn death into life.³⁰ In this, the *Orfeo* poet seems to share some version of the attitude discussed in the context of Marie's lays—the belief that such collaborative, creative retelling contributes to and builds meaning, and that the transformations inherent in such retelling are ultimately healthy rather than destructive. *Sir Orfeo* literalizes the health benefits of retelling by allowing the protagonists to live, and the lay also gives its mythic tradition a new lease on life through translating it into a new genre³¹ and a new language. The Orpheus myth is always in some way about the power of poetry, but the *Orfeo* poet has revised it to be about the power of vernacular poetic retelling.

In constructing this revision of the myth's metapoetic elements, the poet exaggerates the recombinatory moves typical of Marie, and in the process makes clear how much such revisionary narratives can distort and change their sources in reuse. Likewise, other conventional motifs become exaggerated in ways that make their strategies of self-authorization much more overt than they were in Marie's lays. Most notably, the poet amplifies the linkage

²⁹ Liuzza, "Sir Orfeo," 178–79.

³⁰ Roy Liuzza has noted how the allusions to the classical narrative suggest that the poet's revision of the ending is in some sense a "correction" of the faults or errors of the original narrative and hero; *Ibid.*, 178.

³¹ Jeff Rider suggests the poet's aim is to work against the contemporary tradition of allegorizing the Orpheus myth and to render such allegorization "inadequate" by putting the narrative into a new context (the Breton lay) that gives it new meaning; "Receiving Orpheus in the Middle Ages," 347–48.

between narrative and social authority that was implicit in the self-authoring heroes of the French lays. In the figure of the minstrel-king whose story centers on narrative powers and rulership, *Sir Orfeo* shows that those authorities are intertwined and inextricable. The translation of the motif of the self-authoring hero into the Middle English poem reveals that the motif, and lay self-authorization more broadly, depend on a circular logic of aristocratic narrative self-affirmation.

Throughout the lay, Orfeo's minstrelsy remains central to his identity and to his kingship. The first thing we learn of the hero is that "Orfeo mest of ani þing/ Loued þe gle of harping" (25-26) and that "Him-self he lerned for-to harp" (29) so well that "þer no- þing was/ A better harpour in no plas" (31-32). This affirmation of his artistic prowess comes before the assertions of his more conventional courtly characteristics: that he was "a stalworþ man & hardi bo;/ Large & curteys he was al-so" (41-42). The priority given to his poetic abilities suggests that they are at least as important to his kingly identity as his courtly qualities, and possibly more important. To the extent that Orfeo undergoes a heroic testing, after all, it is a test of his musical and narratorial abilities rather than his knightly ones. He performs his way through tricky situations: his harp is instrumental in protecting him from wild beasts in the wilderness, gaining entry to the Fairy court and winning back Heurodis, and finally testing his Steward and regaining his kingdom. At each major shift in the narrative, when Orfeo is preparing for a departure that signals the new portion of the story, he equips himself with his harp as we might see a conventional romance hero taking up arms.³² As Longworth notes, "the role Orfeo plays—the

³² When Orfeo goes into exile "He no hadde kirtel no hode,/ Schert, ne no nother gode,/ Bot his harp he tok algate" (229-31); when he rouses himself to follow Heurodis into the Fairy world he "henge his harp opon his bac" (344); and when he sets off from the beggar's house to reclaim his kingdom he "heng his harp his rigge opon" (500).

wandering minstrel—appears to be a disguise, but is in fact his true vocation.”³³ Orfeo is not a king and a minstrel; he is a minstrel-king. The two elements of that role are inextricable from each other, but it is the minstrel who drives his narrative.

The parallelism and even conflation of narrative and socio-political authorities is not confined to the figure of the self-authoring Orfeo. In fact the lay’s introductory passage broadens this exaggerated codependence to the genre generally, through an imagined history of aristocratic transmission. The poet repeats the convention of asserting an ancient history of lay transmission and of his narrative in particular:³⁴

In Breteyne þis layes were wrouzt,
[First y-founde & fourþ y-brouzt,
Of aventours þat fel bi dayes,
Wher-of Bretouns maked her layes.]
When kinges miȝt ovr y-here
Of ani mervailes þat þer were,
þai token an harp in gle and game
& maked a lay & ȝaf it name.
Now of þis aventours þat weren y-falle
Y can tel sum, ac nouȝt alle.
Ac herkneþ, lordinges [þat beþ trewe,]
Ichil ȝou telle [Sir Orfewe.³⁵ (13-24)

The beginning and ending of this passage sound quite like Marie’s typical framing comments on the origins and transmission history of her narratives: “aventours” occur that inspire the Bretons

³³ Robert M Longworth, “Sir Orfeo, the Minstrel, and the Minstrel’s Art,” *Studies in Philology* 79 (1982): 10.

³⁴ Donovan goes over these conventional openings across the Middle English and Old French lays in Donovan, *The Breton Lay*, 2–5.

³⁵ It is notable that the hero’s name in line 24 is given a different spelling than is used elsewhere in the manuscript, and this alternative spelling is given for what appears to be the lay’s title rather than simply the hero’s name. Thinking back on Marie’s alternative spelling in the title of *Guildelüec ha Gualadun* (as well as the naming of the lay of “Launval” in *Sir Launfal*, which I will discuss below), it seems possible that this alternative spelling for a hero’s name in and as the title of a lay might itself be a convention, marking a distinction between character and story as well as offering some trace of a source through a moment of non-translation.

to compose lays, which are passed along until this present retelling. But here it is not just any Bretons who composed these lays; it is Breton kings specifically.³⁶ The *Orfeo* poet revises the motif of the importance of the ancient oral traditions by conflating that traditional narrative authority with a tradition of royal authority.

The poem reaffirms this linkage of kingship and narrative authority in the description of Orfeo's ancestors, "King Pluto" and "King Juno" (43-44), who "sum-time were as godes y-hold/ For auentours þat þai dede & told" (45-46, my emphasis). These "kings" are famous not just for their actions but also for their narratives of those actions. Orfeo's ancestors are, that is, exactly the sort of people who wrote lays such as the one we are currently reading. Their history reinforces the introduction's assertion of a tradition of kingly authorship.³⁷ At the same time, this detail authorizes Orfeo's role as minstrel-king in particular by giving him an ancestry of twinned kingly and narrative authority. Though Orfeo does not write his own lay, as some of Marie's characters do, he would certainly seem to be capable of doing so; the poet's insistent overlaying of narrative authority and kingly authority serves a role similar to that of Marie's motif of aristocratic self-authorship.

Such aristocratic self-authorship is a primary engine of self-authorization in Marie's lays; the aristocratic characters, themes, and audience all contribute to support and build the narrative's revisionary authority. *Sir Orfeo*'s magnification of this traditional motif makes explicit the interdependence of narrative and political authority that remains implicit in the

³⁶ My interpretation of this passage depends on accepting the critical assessment that the missing opening of *Sir Orfeo* in the Auchinleck manuscript was identical to the opening of *Lay le Freine*. Both the edition of Bliss and that of Laskaya and Salisbury accept this, and therefore I include this point, though I think the argument would also stand without it. It should be noted, though, that neither the Harley nor the Ashmole versions of *Orfeo* would allow this reading. Ashmole has the Bretons making lays "off kyngys" (23), and Harley doesn't mention kings here at all. See Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*.

³⁷ King David must also come to mind, though he is not explicitly invoked.

French lays. His exaggeration of the motif into one of kingly self-authorship and royal narrative traditions draws attention to the sociopolitical power inherent in aristocratic genre and its aristocratic characters. While this exposure of the interdependence of authorities in the lay tradition may have a register of social critique,³⁸ it is inherently a narrative issue as well. The circularity of that traditional process of aristocratic self-authorization opens up the narrative logic of the genre to critique. The *Orfeo* poet exposes the circular workings of that engine of self-authorization as he adapts the genre and its conventions for his own literary and linguistic context. The aristocratic characters in *Orfeo* still control their narratives from within, much like Marie's, but here, through the bolder lines in which that control is drawn by the *Orfeo* poet, their self-authorizing tactics begin to look more artificial than in the more subtle French lays. The exaggerated poetic kings of the Middle English poem appear more clearly as authorizing devices, and so draw attention to the self-authorizations of the tradition more largely.

Building on and exacerbating this critical reflection on the genre's self-authoring hero, the poem also exaggerates the authorizing convention of narrating literary history. The narrated literary history of *Sir Orfeo* works to create a particularly English literary authority in the lay, but this English authority is shown to be unabashedly appropriative and manipulative as it overtly reimagines a classical Greek myth as an ancient British tale.³⁹ This appropriation of the classical

³⁸ Namely, there may be a degree of movement "down the social scale" in the interests and attitude of this lay, as I will note in the later two lays below. While what stands out in the poem is Orfeo's triumphant regaining of his kingdom, ultimately he passes political control to the Steward. The Steward may also be an aristocrat, but is certainly in an inferior social position to the king, and could be seen as more of an administrator or bureaucrat than an aristocrat. Likewise, the Winchester that Orfeo returns to after his quest could be seen as resembling a temporally forward-looking mercantile center, especially in contrast to the fairy king's more isolated castle. Though on this latter point cf. D. Battles, who sees Winchester as a temporally backwards-looking depiction of an Anglo-Saxon *burh* in contrast to the Norman-looking fairy castle; "Sir Orfeo and English Identity," 189.

³⁹ I am, for simplicity's sake, here conflating "English" and "British" to oppose the vernacular and the classical traditions at work in the lay. If, though, we interrogated how exactly the "Bretoun" Celtic elements are understood by the poet and the audience, the recombination of source traditions here might

past begins very baldly toward the beginning of the lay, when the author informs us that “Orfeo was a kinge,/ In Ingland an heize lording” (39-40) and furthermore:

His fader was comen of King Pluto
& his moder of King Juno,
þat sum time were as godes yhold
For aventours þat þai dede & told.
Þis king soiournd in Traciens,
þat was a cité of noble defens –
(For Winchester was cleped þo
Traciens, wiþ-outen no.) (43-50)

The undoubtedly familiar names of Orpheus, Pluto, Juno, and Thrace give a sense of antiquity and authority to the narrative—yet those names and figures are all significantly revised. The larger-than-life, classical proportions of the figures have been reshaped into more manageable forms for a short romance, with the large region of Thrace becoming the city of Winchester,⁴⁰ and the gods Pluto and Juno becoming former kings. These figures are also more particularly translated (in all the medieval senses of the word) into Englishness: they are kings of England, their capital city is the ancient Anglo-Saxon capital, and the classical mythological framework is replaced with a British one (so that, while Pluto and Juno can no longer be gods, the story will admit the more familiar supernatural land of Fairy). Yet by invoking the classical names even as

be much more complicated, as it is frequently unclear whether the descriptive cultural terms employed by lay authors refer to the lands and people of Brittany, Britain or both; see Yoder, “Chaucer and the ‘Breton’ Lay.” In this vein, Dominique Battles argues that the “Celtic” fairy world is consistently marked as culturally Norman in the poem and is opposed to the culturally Anglo-Saxon-looking world of Orfeo’s Winchester; D. Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity.” Still, by the fourteenth-century, that very mixture of French, Celtic, and Anglo-Saxon elements might itself seem uniquely “English.”

⁴⁰ The Auchinleck is the only version that contains this couplet referring to Winchester. Bliss questions the authenticity of the couplet, particularly given its absence in the later manuscripts of the poem; *Sir Orfeo*, xv, 52. But, like Battles, I find the lines compelling enough to retain, given the way they seem to be “responding to, and re-enforcing” other elements of the poem that emphasize a particular Englishness in opposition to more authoritative cultural identities; D. Battles, “Sir Orfeo and English Identity,” 191. Furnish likens the Thrace/Winchester conflation to the famous reference to Aeneas at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with both cases of “radical myth-making” offering a “typological connection of the classical and medieval”; “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays,” 114.

it replaces the Greek with the British, the lay still claims some part of the authority of classical traditions as its own. The *Orfeo* poet thus takes what could be rather typical moments of self-authorization through authoritative traditions, and exaggerates them so that they are overtly appropriative and transformative.

If we accept Juno's translation from a goddess to a king as genuine and intentional, and not a scribal error or an error of authorial ignorance, it offers a particularly puzzling example of obviously distorting appropriation. Juno is too prominent a mythological figure for the idea that her gender transformation was an error to be very convincing. Given the compelling implications of the many revisionary changes and exaggerations we have seen so far, it seems that, as Liuzza suggests, the poem's differences from classical traditions should be regarded "as a matter of choice rather than ignorance."⁴¹ In this light, the purpose of Juno's gender translation might be how very obvious it is. The appropriation and transformation of "King" Juno offers a very overt assertion of revisionary authority over the ancient and famous narrative.

This instance is merely a more exaggerated and obvious version of the kind of appropriative tactics Marie uses, such as when she excerpts and adapts elements of the classical Philomela narrative for her *Laüstic*. In both cases the elements of classical narrative lend authority to the new narrative, even as they are radically revised out of their original context and meaning. The self-authorization enacted in *Orfeo* boldly acknowledges the genre's conventional tactics of revising its literary past in the interest of self-authorization, but it nevertheless continues to use those tactics. And the poem underscores the boldness of such a move, furthermore, by vehemently insisting on its truth "wip-uten no" at this moment of clearest falsification and revision.

⁴¹ Liuzza, "Sir Orfeo," 275.

Sir Orfeo emphasizes Englishness and the combined powers of narrative and political rule in a way that seems designed to suggest, rather unsubtly, the rise of English as a new literary language and inheritor of literary traditions. This could seem like a somewhat combative stance toward tradition, as though the Middle English poet were attempting to replace his sources. Yet the exaggerated visibility of his appropriation and transformation of the narrative defuses the sense of conflict. The Middle English narrative's relation to the classical source and French lay tradition may be authorizing, but the lay's authority does not take the place of the authority of those traditions. On the contrary, it participates in and adapts those traditions from a self-conscious position of critical distance. Instead of usurping the place of the Orpheus myth, the poet engages in a kind of dialogue with it, overtly performing a creative revision that lets us see the range of narrative possibility. Lack of subtlety is a common critique of the Middle English lays, and is generally seen as evidence of their inferiority to the French narratives they are translating. In *Orfeo*, however, such lack of subtlety is itself the means of claiming authority alongside the lay's authoritative sources. In other words, this supposedly inferior attribute becomes a means toward an alternative authority of criticism, an authority that is used even more critically and pointedly by the later fourteenth-century lay poets.

II. The Unmotivated Self-Authoring Hero of *Sir Launfal*

If *Sir Orfeo* takes the lay's generic link to nobility a bit too far, *Sir Launfal* has been accused of doing the opposite: of turning its aristocratic source narrative into a crude, bourgeois, materialistic fantasy in which "the upper classes are treated with a marked lack of reverence."⁴²

⁴² Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 42.

Scholars have long accused *Sir Launfal* of deviating from the high aesthetic and formal standards of the earlier French lay tradition, and in particular from its ultimate source, in Marie's *Lanval*.⁴³ And since the genre's conventions were well-known to fourteenth-century audiences, those earliest readers could well have recognized the lay's divergences from generic traditions as well, and could have agreed with more recent critics' assessment that Chestre's work is a "fascinating disaster."⁴⁴ However critics have already begun to revise this long-standing critical view to consider how we might see the lay's divergences as productive rather than simply as failures. This critical reassessment has so far centered on the lay's treatment of class; scholars have suggested that what was previously seen as the lay's "lack of sensibility and refinement"⁴⁵ in dealing with aristocratic material is instead a class-conscious critique of courtly ideals.⁴⁶ If Chestre's style is somewhat rough or crude, this line of thinking suggests, that roughness works in concert with his depiction of crude courtiers who fail to live by the values that supposedly define courtly culture.⁴⁷ By examining how apparent weaknesses of characterization and style

⁴³ Anne Laskaya summarizes critical comparisons of *Lanval* to *Sir Launfal* in Anne Laskaya, "Thomas Chestre's Revisions of Manhood in *Sir Launfal*," in *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, ed. Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack (Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 193.

⁴⁴ Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," 193.

⁴⁵ Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 42–43.

⁴⁶ Critics who find intentional critique and subversion of courtly ideals in the lay include: Shearle Furnish, "Civilization and Savagery in Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal*," *Medieval Perspectives* 3 (1988): 137–49; Dinah Hazell, "The Blinding of Gwennere: Thomas Chestre as Social Critic," *Arthurian Literature* 20 (2003): 123–43; Timothy D O'Brien, "The 'Readerly' *Sir Launfal*," *Parergon: Bulletin of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 8 (1990): 33–45; Sif Ríkharrðsdóttir, "The Imperial Implications of Medieval Translations: Old Norse and Middle English Versions of Marie de France's *Lais*," *Studies in Philology* 105, no. 2 (2008): 144–64; Seaman, "Thomas Chestre's *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance."

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that an element of this sort of critique is also present in Marie de France's original narrative, where she seems to be contrasting the hypocritical behaviors of Arthur's court to the true courtliness of the Lady and Lanval. See Hanning and Ferrante, *The Lais of Marie De France*, 124; Stokes, "Lanval to *Sir Launfal*," 68.

can actually be productive elements, this critical reevaluation has allowed us to see Chestre's narrative as a site of experimentation with narrative conventions and expectations.

I argue that such experimentation and critique in *Sir Launfal* goes beyond the narrative's depiction of courtly culture, to reflect broadly upon generic strategies and conventions, as well as upon the Middle English text's and author's relation to the French tradition.⁴⁸ Much as was the case in *Sir Orfeo*, *Sir Launfal*'s supposed generic "failings" can be reassessed as a metapoetic commentary on the lay genre. *Sir Launfal*, in fact, offers a pattern of creative abuse of its source texts and literary traditions. Its apparent mishandling of plot, characterization, and references to literary history creates productive disjunctures, which draw attention to problems within the conventional narrative logic and authorizing strategies of the genre.

The plot of *Sir Launfal* includes some staggering moments of inconsistency, which tend to occur at points where Chestre is recombining his various sources. Before going into the inconsistencies themselves, then, it will be useful to outline Chestre's sources and the relationships between them. Chestre might have had some knowledge of Marie de France's *Lanval*,⁴⁹ but his *Sir Launfal* is based primarily on the earlier Middle English translation, *Sir Landevale* (sometimes reproducing lines of that lay more or less verbatim), while also taking elements from the late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century Old French lay *Graelent*, and most likely borrowing from at least one other lost source (as well as containing at least a few moments

⁴⁸ Though I don't see Marie's *Lanval* as one of her most metapoetic lays, there is certainly an element of self-consciousness to it, which Chestre may also be picking up on and revising. In this vein, Spearing argues that Marie's narrative is "a fantasy about fantasy" in which "Marie tells a story about what seems to be a story that Lanval tells about himself" (136) with Marie herself being represented in the lay as "the fairy lady who confines him to the world of fiction" (140); Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters."

⁴⁹ See A. J. Bliss, "The Hero's Name in the Middle English Versions of Lanval," *Medium Ævum* 27, no. 1958 (1958): 84–85; Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," 148.

of authorial invention).⁵⁰ What is particularly unusual about Chestre's sources, and what makes their clashes in *Sir Launfal* all the more surprising, is how analogous they are to each other. *Sir Landevale* is a relatively straightforward translation of Marie's *Lanval*, and the plot of *Graelent* bears a striking resemblance to that of *Lanval*, so much so that *Graelent* has been conjectured either to have derived from Marie's narrative itself, or to have come from the same Breton source tale.⁵¹

All four versions of the narrative (*Lanval*, *Sir Landevale*, *Sir Launfal* and *Graelent*)⁵² contain the same basic plot elements:⁵³ the hero is a knight in service of the king. He falls into poverty and his anxiety over his state impels him to ride out on a brief excursion into the woods. There he meets a lady (named Triamour in *Sir Launfal*) who grants him her love and, drawing on overtly or implicitly magical resources, solves his money troubles. At some point in all four versions the Queen (Guinevere in the *Lanval* versions) falls for the hero, and becomes very angry

⁵⁰ The "missing" source—perhaps the unidentified "Frensch tale" (474) mentioned during Launfal's fight with the Earl of Chester—is conjectured to contain analogues to that tournament scene as well as the Sir Valentyne episode that follows; see Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, Middle English Texts (Kalamazoo, Mich: Published for TEAMS (the Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages) in association with the University of Rochester by Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), 202. Bliss suggests that the Sir Valentyne episode derives from a story in Andreas Capellanus's *The Art of Courtly Love*; Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 25. The depiction of Arthur's courtship of and marriage to Guinevere, and the episode of Guinevere's blinding are unique to Chestre among the different versions of the narrative.

⁵¹ See Glyn S Burgess and Leslie C Brook, eds., *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*, vol. IV, Arthurian Archives: French Arthurian Literature (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 357–58. Bliss also discusses the relationships between these and other analogous lays and Celtic narratives; Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 18–21.

⁵² The editions of these works that I have consulted are, respectively: Ewert, *Lais. Sir Landevale* and *Sir Launfal* in Bliss, *Sir Launfal*. "Graelent" in Burgess and Brook, *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*.

⁵³ The events of *Graelent* unfold in a somewhat different order than in the other versions (a fact I will discuss further below) yet the overarching movement of the crises and their resolutions is the same.

when he refuses her advances. This precipitates a second crisis: the hero's Lady has demanded secrecy about their affair on pain of losing her love and her monetary and/or magical assistance; but while fending off the Queen's anger, the hero mentions that he has a beloved who is far more beautiful than the Queen. The Queen publically accuses him of shaming her, and the King demands that the hero either face trial for treason or produce his beloved as evidence for his claims, but she will not come because he has broken his vow of secrecy. In the end, however, the Lady arrives after all and exonerates the hero, and the two of them leave court together.

Given the similarity between the sources, it seems quite surprising, or even suspect, that it should be so difficult for Chestre to blend them into one coherent narrative. The sources are not completely identical in the order of events, or in how exactly those events unfold, but they are close enough that a coherent, synoptic version is easily imaginable. Yet in several instances, when retelling the episodes that are somewhat different in the sources, Chestre's composite version retains elements of both *Graelent's* and *Lanval/Sir Landevale's* different, contradictory versions of events, thereby giving rise to moments of glaring disjuncture. This context for the lay's inconsistencies is itself worth examining, in that Chestre innovates the conditions that cause him so much apparent trouble. The fact that he uses multiple sources for the narrative is unusual, given that, as Bliss notes, "the use of more than one source is difficult to parallel in [Middle English] literature."⁵⁴ While it is fairly common for lays to integrate tropes or discourses from other genres into the main romance plot, *Sir Launfal* tweaks that convention by drawing wholly on previous *romance* texts, at least two of which are specifically lays—and on multiple romances that are narrative analogues. This unusual reliance on multiple romance sources could make

⁵⁴ Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 28.

Chestre's lay look particularly bound to and dependent upon generic conventions, yet it also provides him with an opportunity to turn the genre against itself.

As we will see, the sources clash in the lay in ways that disrupt not only the flow of the plot, but also the larger coherence and logic of the narrative world. These disjunctures have been dismissed as the result of a "consistently inept and careless" handling of source material,⁵⁵ which has left the lay "unsatisfying and inconsistent."⁵⁶ But the assumption that such consistent inconsistency can only be a sign of authorial failure misses the implications that these disjunctures have, both for the narrative at hand and for the lay genre more broadly. *Sir Launfal* gives us a narrative that honors its sources and generic conventions, but that does so, it would seem, to a fault—stripping the action and the main characters of clear and logical motivation as it follows all of its sources at once.⁵⁷ In this way, the seemingly disorderly emplotment of the poem becomes a de facto critique of the disorderly logic of the genre overall.

Chestre's apparent failures to combine his sources adequately occur most noticeably around the central events of Launfal's love story, so that the basic plot of the lay becomes visibly disjointed. For example, the Queen's actions and motivations, which serve a crucial antagonistic role for the hero and his romantic narrative, are notoriously confused in Chestre's version.⁵⁸ She demonstrates enmity for Launfal at the beginning of the story, but later declares: "J haue þe

⁵⁵ M. Mills, "The Composition and Style of the 'Southern' Octavian, Sir Launfal and Libeaus Desconus," *Medium Ævum* 31 (1962): 89.

⁵⁶ B. K. Martin, "Sir Launfal and the Folktale," *Medium Ævum* 35 (1966): 200. Martin seems to disagree with these views only insofar as they treat *Sir Launfal* as a lay, suggesting that its one-dimensionality and flat characterization are, rather, folktale conventions.

⁵⁷ By "motivation" I mean a sense of realistic explanations for actions or causal connections between events.

⁵⁸ For other comments on the discrepancies of the Queen's actions see Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 28–30; Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," 151–52.

louyd wyth all my myzt/ More þan þys seuen 3ere!” (677-78).⁵⁹ This discrepancy seems to arise from the differences in the order of key events in the sources. In *Graelent* the Queen propositions the hero near the beginning of the story, and it is her anger over his refusal that leads her to encourage the king to neglect and impoverish him. In *Lanval* and *Sir Landevale*, on the other hand, the Queen does not proposition the hero until after he has met his Lady and returned to court. By combining *Graelent*’s early hatred with the delayed proposition of *Lanval*, Chestre’s version makes the Queen’s actions doubly unmotivated: we have no understanding of why she neglects Launfal at the beginning, nor why she attempts to seduce him later.

Chestre recombines his sources in the most awkward way imaginable, thus rendering the Queen both inconsistent and unexplained. We could attempt to explain her actions by speculating on the Queen’s “psychology”⁶⁰—positing, for example, that she was really in love with Launfal the whole time and was trying either to punish him or to protect herself through her neglect of him in the early part of the lay; or, on the other hand, that she never loved him and is interested in him now only for the mysterious new wealth and fame that arise from Triamour’s magical assistance. But if Chestre was imagining some complex emotional turmoil or mercenary attitudes for the Queen, he is not very explicit about it. And such subtle depth of character for the Queen would, in any case, itself be inconsistent both with the depiction of other characters and with Chestre’s rather off-handedly violent treatment of the Queen in the end of the story.⁶¹

⁵⁹ All quotations of *Sir Launfal* are from Bliss, *Sir Launfal*.

⁶⁰ I take the idea for this speculation from Bliss, who suggests that the discrepancy in the Queen’s attitudes toward Launfal “would be explicable in terms of modern psychology”; *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶¹ During the early part of Launfal’s trial, the Queen makes the rash oath: “Yyf he bryngeth a fayrer thyng,/ Put out my eeyn gray” (809-10). Later, after Triamour has arrived and been declared more beautiful than that Queen, the fairy woman outs Guinevere as having been the one making improper

There is no good reason, then, to explain away the disjunctures by psychologizing the Queen's actions.

The simplest explanation might be that this is just poor characterization—but that does not mean it should be dismissed or ignored as such. As noted, the Queen's actions are quite important to the plot of the lay: the hero must be neglected so that he needs assistance from his lady, Triamour, and he must be put in a situation where he is goaded into breaking his vow of secrecy about his love. These plot points arise more naturally in the sources, where the Queen's hatred only develops after she has been rejected by the hero and where her declaration of love, if unexpected, is not in direct tension with other expressed feelings about him. In Chestre's version, the Queen fulfills these necessary plot points without any clear reason to do so, and even with some reason *not* to do so: if she has really loved him for the last seven years, it would be more generically conventional for her to show him special favor than to neglect him.

The only clear explanation for the Queen's actions is that they are required by the plot. The plot moves forward according to conventional narrative logic, putting the hero into the situations he is supposed to be in. Yet it does so in an unmistakably awkward way, undercutting the "logic" of that narrative logic by demotivating the actions that drive that necessary plot movement and so disarticulating the links between the narrative's chain of events. This disjunctive treatment of the Queen's actions has only a small effect by itself, but becomes more striking when juxtaposed with the extended demotivation of the hero throughout the lay.

Like the Queen, Launfal becomes demotivated through moments of friction between the sources, with the effect of troubling the narrative logic of the lay. In *Lanval* and *Graelent* the hero's poverty is caused by the King's failure to provide the support owed to the knight in his

advances, and then "blew on her swych a breth/ That never eft myght sche se" (1007-1008), effectively fulfilling the Queen's oath. This blinding is not from any of the known sources.

service, while in *Sir Landevale* it is the hero's own excessive spending that impoverishes him.⁶² Chestre's version contains a combination of these elements, giving two potential causes for the hero's impoverishment. Here, it is Queen Guinevere who neglects Launfal when distributing gifts: "Euerych knyzt sche ȝaf broche oȝer ryng,/ But Syr Launfal sche yaf noȝyng:/ ȝat greuede hym many a syde" (70-72); but this slight, while offensive, does not impoverish the hero, who has a position of honor at court as the king's steward, and whom the king clearly holds in high regard, offering him "greet spendyng!/ And my suster sones two" (81-82) when he leaves.⁶³ Launfal is described as exhibiting "largesse" and "bounté" (31) while at court, yet those are conventionally genteel attributes,⁶⁴ which do not appear to threaten his wealth. It is not until he leaves court that he begins to spend "so sauegleych hys good . . . / ȝat he ward yn greet dette" (130-31). Since Launfal only becomes poor after his departure in Chestre's version, his reason for leaving remains unclear, particularly given his good standing with the King.

Chestre combines his sources' different explanations for the hero's impoverishment, potentially offering two causes. Yet the doubled causes, rather than strengthening the emplotment of the story, actually create a problem of motivation for the hero. In all of the sources the hero's poverty motivates him to ride out from court. Clinging to this plot movement, Chestre's hero still leaves court immediately after the Queen's neglect, despite the fact that he is not yet poor. But because he is not yet poor, he cannot go out immediately to meet Triamour.

⁶² Compare *Lanval* (17-19), *Graelent* (154-57) and *Sir Landevale* (21-24).

⁶³ Mills notes that Arthur's generosity to Launfal is "genuinely original" to Chestre but suggests that, "in view of the incongruity it creates, it is hardly [something] to boast about," M. Mills, "Bliss, A.J., Ed. *Sir Launfal* (Book Review)," *Medium Ævum* 31 (1962): 77.

⁶⁴ According to the *MED*, "largesse" is a "virtuous willingness to give or spend freely," and "bounté" can indicate "virtue" and "kindness" as well as "generosity;" "Middle English Dictionary." s.v. "largenesse" (1a) and "bountē" (1a, 2a, 3a).

Instead, in a dramatic break with the court unparalleled in any of the known sources, Launfal goes into an extended and self-imposed exile in the town of “Karlyoun” (88),⁶⁵ where he not only impoverishes himself but falls into especially grievous poverty in comparison to the sources, lacking even “hosyn & schon,/ Cleyly brech & scherte” (200-201).⁶⁶ Launfal exiles and impoverishes himself of his own accord and for no apparent reason,⁶⁷ impelled seemingly only by the requirements of the plot: he must fall into poverty in order to be saved by Triamour. The plot seems to move forward almost in spite of itself, with unexpected causes leading to expected ends. Chestre’s recombined narrative, that is, moves forward through its generically conventional plot points, but it does so in unmotivated and illogical ways that draw attention to the artificiality of conventional lay emplotment.

At its most extreme, this illogical plot movement makes the hero appear to be aware of the narrative he is in. When Arthur’s court fails to impoverish him, Launfal takes matters into his own hands, taking on an authorial role by actively shifting the plot so as to generate the appropriate conditions for meeting his fairy mistress. The first example of this is when the hero invents an explanation for his departure from Arthur’s court. He tells Arthur that “a lettere was to hym come/ þat deþ hadde his fadyr ynome – / He most to hys beryyng (76-78). This reason for

⁶⁵ This is quite a separation, assuming “Kardeuyle” (8), where Arthur is said to be holding court at the beginning of the story, is Carlisle in the north of England and “Karlyoun” is Caerleon in Wales, as per Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 141 glossary. Though cf. Mills’ suggestion that “Kardevyle” may refer to Cardiff; Mills, “Bliss, A.J., Ed. *Sir Launfal* (Book Review),” 77. In any case, in none of the sources does the hero leave the court for more than a day. In *Graelent*, he has been living in town all along while serving his king, and this also seems to be the case in *Lanval*. Only Chestre has the hero choose to remove himself from the court for an extended period of time.

⁶⁶ Compare *Lanval* (29-52), *Sir Landevale* (23-50) and *Graelent* (163-203).

⁶⁷ Though see Furnish, who attributes Launfal’s departure and subsequent self-impoverishment to excessive pride; Furnish, “Civilization and Savagery in Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*,” 138. I see this as representing, once again, the desire to discover a “psychological” explanation for unmotivated actions that is not actually suggested by the text.

his departure would seem to be a lie, since it is the only mention of the father's death and since Launfal does not go to a funeral. In fact, the untruth of the moment is ironically highlighted by the subsequent narratorial comment that "Launfal tok leue, *wythoute fable*" (85, my emphasis). While on the one hand the phrase "wythoute fable" could simply be read as a metanarrative comment asserting the veracity of the story, its proximity to Launfal's leave-taking lie gives it an ironic edge. The hero's "fable" of his father's death enables him to take leave and so move the story forward. Just as Launfal's motivation for leaving the court has become muddy in Chestre's version, here his reason for lying about his departure is not particularly clear. What is clear about this moment is that Launfal creates an alternative narrative that enables him to escape a wrong turn in his own plot. Chestre, that is, almost seems to have handed over the emplotment of the narrative to its main character. The artificiality of this form of emplotment draws attention to just how unmotivated or illogical the narrative has become, despite remaining faithful to its sources.

The hero maintains this plot-correcting momentum with another falsified self-representation shortly after this. Upon his arrival at Caerleon, he tells the Mayor:

Syr Meyr, wythout lesyng,
J am þepartyþ [departed] fram þe kyng,
And þat rewyth me sore;
Neþer þar noman, beneþe ne aboue,
For þe Kyng Artours loue
Onowre me neuermore. (100-105)

It might not be exactly a "lesyng" that Launfal is sorry for his departure from the king, nor that he is of the opinion that no man should honor him any longer because of this departure, yet this self-representation is certainly misleading. He gives the impression that he has been cast off from the court, while in actuality he departed of his own initiative and with the monetary assistance and good will of the king. This self-representation leads the Mayor to slight him, giving him

apparently a more humble accommodation, “a chamber by my orchardsyd(e)” (124), and neglecting to invite him to the town’s “feste of greet solempnit ” (182). Launfal is himself the source of the negative reputation he gains in Caerleon⁶⁸—a negative reputation that is necessary to the advancement of the plot. The Mayor’s and townspeople’s neglect of him, combined with his (unexplained) exaggeration of the previously honorable quality of largesse into the negative quality of spending “saugegelych” (130), push him into the depths of poverty necessary for his salvation by Triamour. Launfal himself re-creates artificially the necessary narrative conditions for advancing the plot, conditions that develop more organically in the sources.

The apparent lack of motivation for Launfal’s actions could be attributed to a failure to fit *Graelent*’s “town” episodes smoothly into the *Lanval/Sir Landevale* storyline. Yet the friction caused here by the two different versions of the plot can also be seen to work productively in Chestre’s composite version. The generation of the appropriate narrative conditions for Launfal to meet Triamour and so advance the plot is, notably, accomplished by moving between the plots of the different sources. When the Carlisle-court (analogous to that of *Lanval/Sir Landevale*) fails to put the hero on the right track, he shifts into the Caerleon “town” plot of *Graelent*. The move into the alternate plot line of the analogous narrative gives Launfal a second chance at meeting his lady and righting the plot that has gone awry.

The lay plays with the divergences of the analogous source plots, using the sources’ differences to solve the problem that the differences themselves had created. If Chestre’s rough combination of his sources causes a narrative disjuncture, it is a disjuncture that calls attention to the narrative’s unstoppable movement towards its generically necessary conclusion despite all of

⁶⁸ The comment that “Lyte men of hym tolde” (189) may imply that there is a danger of Launfal ceasing to be talked about at all. In the reputation-centered courtly world, though, having no reputation is as bad as, or worse than, having a bad reputation.

the obstacles thrown in its way. *Sir Launfal*'s unmotivated plot, a disjointed composite of seemingly more smooth and plausible lay plots, creatively abuses the genre's conventional narrative logic and thereby calls the genre's own motivations into question. By following the paths of generic convention into the pitfalls of plot disjunctures, *Sir Launfal* implicitly critiques the disjunctive nature of the narrative logic that drives the genre overall. As we will see, this strategy recurs to great effect in the ending (or un-ending) of the narrative.

Sir Launfal's demotivation of its characters and derailing of its plot are part of a larger pattern of misuse of generic conventions—a pattern that includes the productive mishandling of the genre's conventional authorizing strategies, such as narrating literary histories. *Sir Launfal*'s creative abuse of these strategies begins in the first few lines of the poem, which seem to offer a fairly conventional reference to the lay's composition. Within this brief prologue, though, there is an intriguing moment of syntactic confusion:

Be douȝty Artours dawes,
þat held Engelond yn good lawes,
þer fell a wondyr cas
Of a ley þat was ysette,
þat hyȝt 'Launual', & hatte ȝette.
Now herkenep how hyt was. (1-6)

If we accept the critical tendency to gloss the rather obscure line “Of a ley þat was ysette” as “Of which a lay was composed,”⁶⁹ this opening would seem to be in line with common French lay openings that describe an *aventure* (or, here, a *cas*) being turned into a lay. It is notable, though, that at this moment of invoking the supposedly authorizing history of transmission, Chestre is again recombining his sources. His lay's first two lines that establish the Arthurian setting are

⁶⁹ This is Laskaya and Salisbury's gloss, but other editions gloss the line more or less this way as well; Laskaya and Salisbury, *The Middle English Breton Lays*, 210.

very close to the first lines of *Sir Landevale*, but *Sir Landevale* then moves immediately into the action of the story.⁷⁰ Chestre's reference to the narrative's history in lines 3-6, on the other hand, resembles the more dilated openings of *Graelent* and *Lanval*.⁷¹ By combining sources here, *Sir Launfal*'s opening makes an interestingly falsified gesture toward the longevity and authority of the narrative at hand. Chestre's narrative is not in a direct line with the "wondyr cas" of the original events, because it is, even at that very moment, a patchwork of different narratives. This irony might not have been visible to most audiences of the lay, yet Chestre's choice to turn the opening references to narrative traditions into a newly recombined patchwork nevertheless reflects the artifice of such conventional gestures to tradition.

Implicit in Chestre's patchwork opening is the recognition that the authorizing function performed by descriptions of a lay's transmission history and generic affiliations is inherently circular, using the lay tradition to authorize itself. This circularity and artifice become more visible, moreover, if we put pressure on the interpretation of the line "Of a ley þat was ysette." "Of which a lay was composed" would certainly be what we expect the poem to say, yet that reading requires a bit of syntactic gymnastics.⁷² What lines three and four actually say, read

⁷⁰*Sir Landevale* begins: "Sothly, by Arthurys day/ Was Bretayn yn grete nobley,/ For, yn hys tyme, a grete whyle/ He sojourned at Carlile" (1-4).

⁷¹ *Graelent* begins: "L'aventure de Graelent/ Vos dirai si con je l'entent;/ Bons en est li lais a oïr/ Et les note(i)s a retenir" (1-4), ("The adventure of Graelent/ I shall tell you, just as I understand it;/ The lay is good to listen to/ And the melody good to retain); Marie's *Lanval* begins: "L'aventure d'un autre lai,/ Cum ele avient, vus cunterai:/ Fait fu d'un mut gentil vassal;/ En bretans l'apelent Lanval" (1-4), ("I shall tell you the adventure of another *lai*,/ just as it happened:/ it was composed about a very noble vassal;/ in Breton, they call him Lanval"). All French and English quotations of *Graelent* are from Burgess and Brook eds., *Eleven Old French Narrative Lays*. French quotations of *Lanval* are from Alfred Ewert ed., *Lais* and English translations from Hanning and Ferrante eds., *The Lais of Marie De France*.

⁷² If we accept the common gloss, the syntax here would be quite a bit more convoluted than the typical poetic disarrangement found in the lay. And the meter of the lay is not so exacting or precise that it is impossible to imagine another, clearer phrasing.

straightforwardly, is: “There befell a wonderful case / Of a lay that was composed”—that is, that the composition of the lay ‘Launual’ is itself the ‘wonderful case’ that ‘befell’ in Arthur’s day. Assuming ‘Launual’ is the lay we are reading, this creates a *mise en abyme*, asserting that the most important story in the narrative is the story of its own composition. It is also possible, though, that the lay ‘Launual’ might be Marie de France’s lay, not Chestre’s. Line five offers the only instance in the manuscript of this spelling of the hero’s name,⁷³ and this unique spelling corresponds with the set of spelling variants in the English manuscripts of Marie’s *Lanval*.⁷⁴ If the prologue refers to Marie’s original lay, the nature of the *mise en abyme* shifts slightly to suggest that the narrative we are currently reading is the narrative of its *source’s* composition. In either case the opening emphasizes the process of the narrative’s creation as central to the story we are about to hear. Through this very awkwardness in its opening, then, the lay foregrounds the circularity of the type of literary self-reflection common to the genre. While seemingly trying to repeat the conventional, authorizing claim that the lay stems from an *aventure*, *Sir Launfal* here reveals that, in fact, it stems from itself, from its own narrative tradition—a tradition which *is* the *aventure*, the narrative’s most important, central concern.

Likewise, with the possible allusion to Marie’s version of the narrative, the lay to some degree follows the convention of referring back to its particular source and transmission history, but the emphasis and significance of such a reference is altered; the allusion to an authoritative narrative history is notably shifted from the conventional ancient Breton oral tradition, to the

⁷³ The hero’s name is usually given as “Launfal” but other variants include “Launfale,” “Launfel” and “Launfall”; Bliss, “The Hero’s Name in the Middle English Versions of Lanval,” 81–82. The difference between these forms and “Launual” may seem small, given u/v crossover in orthography and v/f crossover in spelling and pronunciation, but if it is not significant, it is surprising that we don’t find this variant spelling repeated in the manuscript.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

more recent and familiar French textual tradition. Rather than offering us the common story of linear transmission from supposedly historical *aventure*, to Breton lay, to translations thereof, *Sir Launfal*'s history focuses entirely on the literary. The opening's obscure syntax, in other words, exposes the circular quality of the conventional authorizing moves of the genre as it offers to tell us about the self-propagating tradition of narratives about narrative.

The lay's productive mishandling of such authorizing gestures continues in its treatment of the Arthurian tradition. *Sir Launfal* offers far more authenticating Arthurian details and allusions than do its sources, arguably taking this authorizing strategy to a ridiculous extreme. The example of this that might have been most noticeable to medieval audiences is the proliferation of Arthurian locations.⁷⁵ Where the action in *Sir Landevale* all takes place in the general vicinity of Carlisle, *Sir Launfal* takes us on a tour of locales associated with Arthur, from the court's initial sojourn at "Kardeuyle" (8) to Launfal's stay in "Karlyoun" (88) to his companions Sir Hugh and Sir John's return to the court now in Glastonbury (148-50), then back to "Cardeuyle" (1021) for the trial scene, and finally to the hero's departure for "Olyroun" (1023) with Triamour. This array of familiar locations could seem to represent an attempt to authorize the narrative by giving it "the Arthurian flavour expected by a late-medieval audience."⁷⁶ Yet for audiences familiar with the tradition, rather than providing a rich, full picture of the Arthurian world, the proliferation of locales in the lay would have provided a

⁷⁵ A less visible example is the proliferation of Arthurian characters in comparison to the sources. Chester adds a roll-call of knights at the beginning of the lay (13-22) and gives Merlin a role (38); and where *Sir Landevale* relies primarily on Ywain and Gawain to represent the group of knights in the actions at Arthur's court, Chestre introduces several others, including Gaheris and Agravain (638), Percival (814), and Lancelot (910). Of particular interest, though, is the fact that Chestre may have doubled the characters of Ywain and Gawain. Bliss suggests that the names of the nephews of Arthur, "Syr Huwe & Syr Jon" (136), are corrupted forms of Ywain and Gawain: "in the Percy version of *Landevale*, ll. 35ff, Huon=Ywayn and Gaion=Gawayn,"; Bliss, *Sir Launfal*, 86 n.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

strangely distorted image of that world. Laskaya and Salisbury note that Caerleon and Carlisle are both associated with Camelot and “have a confused and interwoven role to play in the late medieval Arthurian records” and that similarly, Glastonbury “has long been associated with the island of Avalon,”⁷⁷ creating another set of overlapping locales. The lay’s doubling of locations undercuts the superficially authorizing force of the array of Arthurian place names by pointing out the confusion of the Arthurian tradition itself.

At other moments, Chestre’s added allusions disjunctively cast the Arthurian tradition as ancient in relation to the narrative we are in, disrupting the integrity of the narrative world. One such moment occurs when the hero first meets his lady in her pavilion in the woods. In all three versions of the Lanval story the pavilion is described as extremely lavish, and the Lady’s wealth is favorably compared with that of historically wealthy figures. In Marie these figures are Queen Semiramis and Emperor Octavian (82-85) and in *Sir Landevale* they are Alexander, Solomon and Charlemagne (87-89). In *Sir Launfal*: “Alysaundre þe conquerour, / Ne Kyng Artour yn hys most honour, / Ne hadde noon scwych juell” (274-76). Arthur, the reigning king within the world of the narrative, is here put in the place of ancient figures of legend. The lay, that is, treats Arthur as both coexistent with and anciently predating the diegetic world of the narrative’s action. This double vision of Arthur creates a temporal disjuncture in our understanding of the narrative’s participation in the Arthurian tradition. On the one hand the legendary status of the King seems to affirm the antiquity of the Arthurian material the lay draws on, and so might serve to authorize Chestre’s narrative. But on the other hand it disrupts the conventional conceit that this narrative is a part of that ancient tradition: acknowledging the antiquity of Arthur exposes the newness of this version of the narrative.

⁷⁷ Laskaya and Salisbury, *The Middle English Breton Lays*, pp. 241–45.

A similarly inappropriate, even anachronistic, allusion occurs during the later tournament scene, when the narrator comments that “Syth þe Rounde Table was,/ A bettere turnement þer nas” (451-2).⁷⁸ This praise is not particularly strong if, as is the case within the world of the narrative, the Round Table is still in operation. Such a comparison is more normally used to refer the present action back to a legendary golden age. The allusion again creates a temporal rupture between the diegetic world of the narrative and the Arthurian tradition, even as it seems to attempt to use that allusion to lend authority to the narrative.

In the lay tradition more broadly, such allusions to source traditions are meant to invoke an idea of continuity or of authentic transmission. Yet here, *Chestre’s* Arthurian allusions, as well as his introductory reference to the narrative’s history, effectively do the opposite: they become exposed as essentially self-authorizing tactics. What’s more, through their overt circularity, these self-authorizing gestures expose the central illogic of the conventional practice of using the lay tradition to authorize itself. The systematic mishandling of his material, rather than merely marking *Chestre’s* ineptitude as an author, thus becomes the lay’s crucial means of critiquing and revising the smooth, self-authorizing operations of traditional lays.

The lay’s conclusion brings together the various strategies discussed above, creating friction between sources, disrupting the logic of generic emplotment, and mishandling conventional authorizing moves. But it also pushes those strategies even further into creative abuse so that as the plot (despite all obstacles) approaches its generically necessary conclusion, the fabric of the narrative world begins to fall apart. In the end *Chestre’s* revisionary, composite

⁷⁸ Since the tournament in question occurs in the portion of the text assumed to derive from a lost third source, it is possible *Chestre* has here imported an allusion to the legendary Round Table found in that unknown “Frensch tale” (474). This would then offer another instance of his multiple source texts conflicting with interesting results.

narrative spectacularly fails to cohere, offering a conclusion that is not only illogical but also impossible.

The narrative's ultimate dissolution is prefigured subtly in the scene of Launfal's trial. The jurors struggle to come to a judgment, having been given conflicting versions of events by the hero and the Queen. Their job is to interpret these versions to decide whether to exonerate or condemn Launfal. The jurors, in other words, face a task not unlike Chestre's: they must try to compile disparate versions of a narrative into one coherent and compelling version. And, like Chestre, they seem to have some trouble doing so. Chestre describes the jurors' deliberations in terms that are intriguingly revised from the scene's source in *Sir Landevale*. He writes:

A newe tale þey gonne þo,
Some of wele & some of wo,
Har lord þe Kyng to queme:
Some dampnede Launfal þere,
And some made hym quyt and skere –
Har tales wer well breme. (877-82)

This passage is quite close to *Sir Landevale*, but its range of meaning is importantly expanded, in large part by the use of the words “tale” and “tales” instead of “speche” and “spake.”⁷⁹ In one sense “tale” here refers to the legal argumentation of a case,⁸⁰ yet the word's richer range of meanings is too evocative to ignore. As the jurors discuss possible outcomes for the case, they also invent *tales* about the hero. The familiar poetic pair of “wele & . . . wo”⁸¹ helps draw the meaning of “tale” toward the sense of “story,” as does line 882's emphasis on the quality of the

⁷⁹ The passage in *Sir Landevale* is: “A new speche began they tho:/ Summe said wele, and summe said not so;/ Summe wolde hym to dethe deem,/ The king their lorde for to queme;/ Summe hym wolde make clere –/ And while they spake thus in fere. . .” (379-84).

⁸⁰ *MED* s.v. “tale” (4c).

⁸¹ This pair appears, for example, in the Harley 3810 version of *Sir Orfeo*'s prologue on the lay genre: “Sum ben of wele, & sum of wo,/ & sum of joy & merthe also” (5-6); Bliss, *Sir Orfeo*.

juror's "tales," described as "well breme."⁸² The passage evokes a metapoetic image of the jurors madly story-telling in an attempt to find the best version or interpretation of Launfal's actions—and the best ending for the lay of *Sir Launfal*.

The lay's conclusion echoes this moment by also imagining of a range of narrative possibilities. After Launfal has been acquitted and has ridden away with Triamour, Chestre gives us a double ending:

Euery er, vpon a certayn day,
Me may here Launfales stede nay,
And hym se wyth syzt.
Ho þat wyll þer axsy justus, . . .
þer he may fynde justes anoon
Wyth Syr Launfal þe knyzt.

þus Launfal, wythouten fable,
þat noble knyzt of þe Rounde Table,
Was take ynto Fayrye;
Sepþe saw hym yn þys lond noman,
Ne no more of hym telle y ne can,
Forsopþe, wythoute lye. (1024-1038)

These final stanzas offer two endings that are contradictory: Launfal appears once a year to joust and/but is never seen again. Given that the first of these stanzas loosely revises the ending of *Graelent* and the second closely follows the ending of *Sir Landevale*,⁸³ this might seem to be a particularly egregious instance of the sources not being smoothly integrated. Yet the source

⁸² According to the *MED*, "breme" can mean "splendid" (1a) or "gay" (2a) as well as "fierce" or "vehement" (3a.b) or "stern" (4). Laskya and Salisbury gloss the line "Har tales wer well breme" as "[their] arguments [were] quite heated" (235). While that is a perfectly reasonable interpretation, it again limits the rich range of meaning in these lines.

⁸³ *Graelent*: "En sa terre o lui l'en mena./ Encor dient cil du païs/ Que Graalant i est toz vis./ Ses destriers qui li eschapa./ En la forest ariere ala; . . . / Puis lonc tens el païs heni;. . . / Por son seignor que perdu ot" (732-50), ("She took him off to her land./ People in the region still say/ That Graelent is there and still alive./ His horse which had escaped from him,/ Went back into the forest; . . . / Afterwards for a long time, it neighed in that region; . . . / Because of its lord whom it had lost"). *Sir Landevale*: "And thus was Landevale brought from Cardoyll,/ With his fere, into a joly yle . . . / Of hym syns herde neuer man – / No further of Landevall telle J can" (531-36).

narratives do not actually contradict each other in this way. The key detail that disrupts the coherence of these two endings is unique to *Sir Launfal*: namely, the detail of Launfal's appearing to joust once a year. In *Graelent* the hero leaves his horse behind when he goes off to his mistress' fairy land and the horse may be heard neighing for its lost master long afterwards (giving a lingering reminder of the *aventure* that is analogous to the yearly jousting Chestre mentions) but the hero himself does not return. If Chestre had remained faithful to his sources and simply stitched them together (with however rough a hand) there would have been no contradiction here. This added detail gives the composite narrative a unique ending that is unmistakably incoherent.

The phrases, "wythouten fable" (1033) and "Forsobe, wythoute lye," (1038) hammer home this failure of narrative coherence, by once again ironically making bold truth claims at a moment of obvious non-truth.⁸⁴ And this moment of non-truth is also the moment when the narrative decidedly falls apart. Chestre's metanarrative comment that, "Ne no more of hym telle y ne can" (1037) is a fairly conventional way to move toward a conclusion, asserting that the narrative material has run out. Yet in the context of the narrative's dissolution into two contradictory possibilities, this comment takes on an ironic undertone: Chestre can say no more because the hero's future as he has just described it is impossible to tell as one single narrative.

The irresolution in the ending of the story of Launfal is not without some precedent. It has been suggested that Marie's depiction of Arthur's court in her original lay "hints at troubling

⁸⁴ Timothy O'Brien notes that Chestre uses formulaic truth claims much more frequently than his sources, once every twenty-eight lines, in fact (35–36), so that by the end of the narrative, "the formulaic expression has attracted so much attention to itself that . . . it has shed, or perhaps parasitically consumed, its conventionality" (41), serving in fact to call into question the authority of the narrator and his sources; "The 'Readerly' Sir Launfal."

tensions in the ‘real’ feudal world.”⁸⁵ Marie’s Lanval chooses to reject the “injustice and hypocrisy”⁸⁶ of that world when he rides off with his mistress, leaving those tensions unresolved. *Sir Launfal*’s own unresolved ending shifts that social critique into a narrative one, hinting, we might say, at troubling tensions in the world of courtly *narrative*. The two endings are equally plausible, equally conventional, but incompatible, and the narrative’s final impossibility completes the pattern of creative misuse that has worked to question and trouble generic conventions throughout the lay.

The fracturing of the narrative is, I would suggest, the core translational strategy of the lay, and it reveals the underlying literary principles of Chrestre’s sometimes unprepossessing work. The two conclusions represent an opening up of alternative narratives that are enabled by breaking away from strict conventions, or at least, by productively mishandling those conventions. If the hero becomes impossible, he also becomes “transformed, legendary, and immortal – that is, literary.”⁸⁷ The ending fulfills the lay’s introductory promise to offer a metapoetic narrative about narrative, as the unity and coherence of plot and hero give way to a vision of open narrative possibilities. The lay’s refusal of conventional closure is, then, also an insistence on the creative potential of revisionary narrative.

Chestre inserts himself into the end of the poem—immediately after the double ending dissolves the story into narrative possibilities—in a way that works in concert with the lay’s other creative abuses. It is conventional for lays to end, as they began, with some metanarrative reference to the history of the story, and perhaps a comment on its Breton origins and its

⁸⁵ Roberta L. Krueger, “The Wound, The Knot, And The Book: Marie De France And Literary Traditions Of Love In The Lais,” in *A Companion to Marie de France*, ed. L. Whalen (Boston: Brill, 2011), 68–69.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸⁷ Furnish, “Thematic Structure and Symbolic Motif in the Middle English Breton Lays,” 117.

transmission up to the present version.⁸⁸ Here, in the place where the audience would expect to hear some reiteration or development of the poem's literary history, we instead hear that "Thomas Chestre made þys tale/ Of þe noble knyȝt Syr Launfale" (1039-40). The emphasis on Chestre's own "making" takes the place of linking the narrative back to authorizing oral traditions and a history of transmission. In a sense Chestre's conclusion does replicate the conventional reiteration of introductory comments, given that, as we saw, Chestre's introduction also emphasized the composition of *this* narrative over its supposedly authorizing history. The lay's final statement is likewise to ignore the authority and continuity of its literary traditions in favor of its Middle English reteller, and in favor of this particular revision of the narrative, with all its creative abuses.

Viewed as an imitation of a traditional French lay, *Sir Launfal* is perhaps not particularly successful. But if the lay is a "fascinating disaster,"⁸⁹ that may be exactly the point: *Sir Launfal*'s apparent failure to imitate the French tradition can also be read as success at interrogating that tradition. The lay's disjunctures work productively to create a narrative that calls attention to inherent assumptions and illogic in the genre's authorizing conventions. It is thus the very features that have often been seen as marking Middle English lays as unauthoritative—their lower social prestige and apparent aesthetic and thematic failures in comparison to French lays—that enable *Sir Launfal* to take a position of metapoetic critique.

⁸⁸ This type of ending is not only conventional, but also is present in Chestre's sources. Though somewhat more subdued than in other of her lays, Marie's *Lanval* does contain a concluding reference to the Bretons as originators of the narrative: "Od li s'en vait en Avalun,/ Ceo nus recurent li Bretun" (641-42), ("With her he went to Avalun,/ so the Bretons tell us"). *Graelent* contains a fuller version of the convention: "L'aventure du chevalier,/ Comme il s'en ala o s'amie,/ Fu par toute Bretaingne oïe/ .I. lai en firent li Breton/ Graalant Muer l'apele l'on" (752-56), ("And the adventure of the knight,/ How he departed with his beloved,/ Were [sic] heard throughout all Brittany. / The Bretons composed a lay about it./ It was called Graalent Muer").

⁸⁹ A.C. Spearing, "Marie De France and Her Middle English Adapters," p. 148.

III. The “Fre” Author-Clerk of *The Franklin’s Tale*⁹⁰

Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* is an unusual Middle English lay,⁹¹ in that it does not derive from the French lay tradition: rather, the story is drawn primarily from Boccaccio’s *Filocolo*.⁹² The narrator⁹³ calls his tale a lay, however, and does so as part of a very typical introductory statement on the lay genre:⁹⁴ “Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes / Of diverse aventures maden layes,/ Rymeyed in hir firste Briton tonge/ And oon of hem have I in remembraunce”

⁹⁰ For the most part I treat *The Franklin’s Tale* as a stand-alone “Breton lay,” a treatment that admittedly separates it artificially from the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*. Like any of the individual tales, the meaning of *The Franklin’s Tale* must necessarily shift when put into the context of the frame and its pilgrim narrator, and again when read intertextually with the other tales. Unfortunately, space does not allow me to treat those multiple levels of metapoetic play and intertextuality in this chapter. Still, I believe that reading the tale in the context of its purported genre is useful in other ways.

⁹¹ Whether or not *The Franklin’s Tale* is actually a “Breton lay” is up for debate. Beston includes *The Franklin’s Tale* in his discussion of fourteenth-century lays but calls it an “anomaly”; “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” 319. Donovan likewise includes it and, after discussing its conventional and unconventional elements decrees it to be not a “true lay” but an “imitation” of one; *The Breton Lay*, 176–79. Hume argues that Chaucer was intentionally evoking specific generic expectations with the use of the term “lay”; “Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin’s Tale a Breton Lai,” 365. As Archibald points out, particularly in Middle English, “lay” was at best a generically ambiguous term which was perhaps not well understood, or used rather broadly; “The Breton Lay in Middle English,” 55–58.

⁹² The critical consensus seems at least to rest on *Filocolo* as a jumping off point, though Chaucer has “rewritten it so distinctively” (Finlayson 387) that many critics have remained skeptical, or assumed there were other sources as well”; John Finlayson, “Invention and Disjunction: Chaucer’s Rewriting of Boccaccio in the Franklin’s Tale,” *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 89 (2008): 387. Dominique Battles gives a useful survey of the debates regarding the sources for *The Franklin’s Tale*; “Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale and Boccaccio’s *Filocolo* Reconsidered,” *Chaucer Review* 34, no. 1 (1999): 38–39. See also *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Vol I, 211–65.

⁹³ I have chosen not to call the narrator “the Franklin” given that I am not able in this chapter to think through the implications of the Franklin as a character in the larger context of the *Canterbury Tales* beyond his role as narrator of this tale. For two informative and very different readings of the Franklin as character and narrator see Susan Crane, “The Franklin as Dorigen,” *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 24 (1990): 236–52; Jamie C Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo: Antiquity, Authority, and Chaucerian Poetics* (Toronto, ON: U of Toronto P, 2010).

⁹⁴ Helen Cooper suggests that this generic self-identification is “almost the only definitive characteristic of the genre”; Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 232. I believe the genre has other recognizable conventions and features, yet agree that the self-referential element of overtly discussing the lay genre is chief among those conventions.

(V 709-14).⁹⁵ Chaucer's evocation of the lay genre sets up expectations of other generic conventions—expectations that the tale alternately meets and frustrates. Through its self-conscious play with generic conventions, Chaucer's "Breton lay," much like the other Middle English lays before it, creatively translates the French genre and traditions it draws on into something differently legible and relevant to its own fourteenth-century Middle English context.

Like the other Middle English lay authors, Chaucer significantly revises the genre's conventions as he reuses them, and his revision also centers around the genre's traditional social and narrative logics. Like Chestre, Chaucer disrupts the genre's conventions, but he generally does so more subtly, by incorporating the disruption into the plot of the narrative.⁹⁶ While Chestre's uncourtly aristocrats, through Launfal, still control their own narrative (however illogically), Chaucer depicts his more conventional aristocrats trying and failing to engage in such acts of self-authoring. As the narrative proceeds, *The Franklin's Tale's* "Breton lay" gets stuck, becomes untellable, and then turns into something else entirely as narrative control is taken over by the Clerk of Orléans, with his magic of illusion. The figure of the magician-clerk is not unconventional to romance literature,⁹⁷ but Chaucer uses the figure in unconventional ways, and the Clerk's non-aristocratic surrogate authorship opens up the lay genre to alternative authorities and narrative possibilities.

⁹⁵ All Chaucer quotations are from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson (Oxford University Press US, 2008).

⁹⁶ For a discussion of how Chaucer disrupts the conventions of his source in Boccaccio as well, see Finlayson, "Invention and Disjunction," 387.

⁹⁷ Though some scholars do see the Clerk as somewhat unconventional. Hume suggests that the Clerk's type of magical illusions—which are informed by and effected through bookish knowledge—are "not quite in accord with normal lai usage" and that the Clerk himself, as a figure of a "medieval, university-trained mortal magician, whose power is based on book-learning," is "foreign to the lais"; Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin's Tale a Breton Lai," 370.

Typically in metapoetic lays, as we have seen, at least one of the characters involved in the central love story also acts as a surrogate author-figure, engaging in interpretation and retelling of the narrative from within. In *The Franklin's Tale*, the most obvious candidate for the job would seem to be Aurelius, given that he is depicted as a poet as well as a lover. His poetic activity does appear to be an attempt to reshape the narrative. Aurelius writes “manye layes,/ Songes, compleintes, roundels, virelayes” (V 947-48) that obliquely describe his unrequited love for Dorigen. Through such conventional romance signals, Aurelius attempts to alert Dorigen to his love and to convert the story into an adulterous romance. The love plot here looks loosely similar to the one found in Marie’s *Eliduc*, where a third party (Guilliadun/ Aurelius) tries to revise the narrative with an adulterous love plot. Given the tendencies of conventional romance toward adulterous relationships,⁹⁸ the audience might well expect the narrative to go Aurelius’s way. His attempt to turn the narrative into an extramarital love affair fails, however. In that failure, as Donovan suggests, the tale “momentarily loses its identity as a Breton lay.”⁹⁹ To be sure, Dorigen and Arveragus’s marriage is depicted as happy, and these sorts of marriages do not tend to be subverted by adulterous relationships. On the other hand, Marie’s *Eliduc* offers an authoritative precedent for just such a storyline. This precedent makes Aurelius’ success a possibility, particularly since he is depicted as a genteel figure: “Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche, and wys,/ And wel biloved, and holden in greet prys” (V933-34). Despite having many of the generic qualifications for taking on the roles of self-authoring hero and lover,

⁹⁸ Archibald suggests that Chaucer and his audience would still have expected the French-style romance adultery and that Chaucer is subverting genre through his depiction of a happy marriage and the failure of the adulterous plot; Archibald, “The Breton Lay in Middle English,” 68. As Hume notes, however, it is not exactly that adultery itself is celebrated in traditional lays; “as a rule it is only ungentle marriages which are violated by people of integrity”; “Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin’s Tale a Breton Lai,” 369.

⁹⁹ Donovan, *The Breton Lay*, 185.

however, Aurelius is unable to fulfill those roles. The lay, that is, sends the reader mixed messages through its unusual use of conventions.

Aurelius makes another attempt to gain control of the narrative, this time through an appeal to the classical tradition, in his prayer to Apollo to assist him in meeting Dorigen's impossible demand. Here too he takes up a conventional tactic of self-authoring heroes who seek to change the narrative's direction, that of the recombination of multiple traditions. Yet this attempt at recombinatory authorship proves just as ineffectual as his first attempt to redirect the narrative. Like the Lady in *Yonec*, Aurelius frames his prayer as a set of directions; he begs Apollo: "Now voucheth sauf that I may yow devyse/ How that I may been holpen and in what wyse" (V 1043-44), before going on to describe two possible schemes by which Lucina might create a flood to cover the rocks that trouble Dorigen. The rhetorical formulation of laying out such detailed plans sets up the readerly expectation that what we are about to hear is, in fact, what will occur.¹⁰⁰ But this expectation is not fulfilled and in fact, as Fumo notes, Chaucer "goes to some lengths to highlight the anticlimactic nature of Aurelius's prayer."¹⁰¹ The prayer, and the convention of recombination in which it takes part, turn out to be dead ends. Aurelius's display of classical knowledge in his prayer proves to be extraneous to the narrative; it is an irrelevant allusion, an unnecessary nod to prior traditions—traditions, moreover, that prove useless as sources of authority in this case.

¹⁰⁰ After all, this type of classical, mythological knowledge has proved very helpful in analogous narrative situations—most significantly in Boccaccio's *Filocolo* version of this same story; see Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo*, 183. In Boccaccio's version, it is the magician, Tebano, who prays to classical gods and the natural elements as part of his incantation to fulfill the lady's impossible request, and his prayers are promptly answered. The reader has very good literary precedent to expect Aurelius' prayer to succeed.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. As part of her larger exploration of Apollo as a figure of literary authority for Chaucer, Fumo suggests that here, as well as in *The Squire's Tale*, Apollo's "failures of authority license assertions of authorship" (165).

Aurelius's lament calls up a host of alternative narrative possibilities and expectations that—rather than assisting in the revision of the narrative, as such things do in Marie—stall the course of the narrative, leaving Aurelius stuck in ineffectual lament for “two yeer and moore” (V 1102). He demonstrates knowledge of past tradition, but either lacks the re-creative powers to remake that past in a way that would be useful to his present narrative, or finds the tradition itself to be powerless to effect any “real” change.¹⁰² In the absence of the conventional generic logic that normally supports lover-poets in lays, Aurelius is powerless.

Given Aurelius's failure to drive the narrative, we might expect one of the other aristocratic characters involved in its central love story to step into the role of surrogate author. Both Dorigen and Arveragus have a moment at which they attempt to take control of the narrative using their own sets of traditions or conventions, but both also fail to do so successfully. Dorigen's moment is, like Aurelius's prayer to Apollo, a moment of ineffectual recombinatory authorship. Upon finding that Aurelius has met her conditions, Dorigen laments “al a day or two” (V 1348) about her rash promise. Her lament draws on a scholarly archive of narratives of suicidal, virtuous women (from Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*), whom she uses as precedents for her assertion that she would rather “lese/ My lif than of my body to have a shame” (V 1360-61). She presents these narratives very much as literary authorities, prefacing her recital by asserting that “certes, lo, thise stories beren witnesse” (V 1367). Yet not all of the narratives are particularly relevant to Dorigen's current situation, and as she goes on and on with the

¹⁰² This could be seen as a humorous, and unconventionally realist, send up of such conventions. In this vein, Beston suggests that the Franklin, while “enamored of the old world of romance” is “continually deflating the romantic atmosphere he strives for” by “inject[ing] his own common sense into it”; “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” 329. A fourteenth-century audience would most likely accept (or even expect) the efficacy of a prayer to Apollo in literature, while not expecting it to do any good in their own lives.

narratives the reader begins to doubt her commitment to acting on their example.¹⁰³ The logical conclusion she claims to be forming from these authoritative precedents remains, after all, in the future tense—“I *wol* conclude that it is bet for me/ To sleen myself than been defouled thus” (V 1422-23, my emphasis)—and is followed by further narratives rather than decisive action.

Dorigen draws on an authoritative tradition, but she cannot seem finally either to follow or to reject its authority, nor to find a way to reinterpret it to her benefit. Like Aurelius’s prayer to Apollo, Dorigen’s complaint leaves her stuck within an unproductive tradition, the authority and logic of which constrain her even as they are shown to be either inappropriate or ineffective.

Arveragus likewise tries to reinterpret the narrative into a framework that he understands and into a discourse that is proper to him and to his station, when he asserts that the central concern of Dorigen’s predicament is keeping *trouthe* rather than committing infidelity. “Holding one’s promise whatever may result is a literary *donné*”¹⁰⁴ and it is, moreover, a desirable and courtly quality that Arveragus seizes upon as a respectable lifeline to draw into his troubled story. But he finds himself in a catch twenty-two: there is a direct conflict here between different versions of honor as defined by his courtly code, so that the honorable story of *trouthe*-keeping cannot be told without the dishonorable story of his wife’s infidelity to-be. After all, “even those sufficiently versed in courtly French literature to accept—as a literary convention if nothing else—the idea of an adulterous affair, might have found Arveragus’ compliance distasteful and debased.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Arveragus himself seems to see it that way as well. He begins his indecent

¹⁰³ Citing A.C. Spearing, Dominique Battles notes that “Dorigen’s list of exempla becomes increasingly remote from her own situation the longer she goes on, and it soon became clear ‘that the rhetorical structure is a form of evasion of reality’”; “Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale and Boccaccio’s Filocolo Reconsidered,” 53.

¹⁰⁴ Hume, “Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin’s Tale a Breton Lai,” 378.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 377.

proposal with the dismissive “Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?” (V 1469), but after Arveragus insists that “Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe” (V 1479) the narrator tells us that “But with that word he brast anon to wepe” (V 1480). Arveragus’ weeping betrays the tension between the virtue of *trouthe*-keeping and the vicious circumstances that must arise from Dorigen keeping her *trouthe* in this case. Arveragus finds himself trapped between conventions that prove irreconcilable in his specific situation.

The purpose of the device of *trouthe*-keeping may be, as Hume suggests, “to allow the plot to unfold,”¹⁰⁶ but the plot that appears to be unfolding is one that is untenable and untellable. Arveragus’s recognition of the un-tellability of his situation as a traditional story of honor leads him to demand Dorigen’s secrecy, telling her: “I yow forbede, up peyne of deeth,/ That nevere, whil thee lasteth lyf ne breeth,/ To no wight telle thou of this aventure” (V 1481-83). This desire *not* to retell the story has serious implications. The term “aventure” here acts as a reminder that we are operating within the lay genre—“aventures” being the stuff out of which “Thise olde gentil Britouns in hir dayes” “maden layes” (V 709-10). As we have seen, the lay genre conventionally takes as a central concern its own ongoing transmission, and frequently the character-authors within lays participate actively in that process of transmission. With this demand for secrecy, Arveragus breaks with these conventions and becomes a kind of anti-author, attempting to prevent the narrative from being transmitted. Given that this demand for secrecy runs exactly counter to the generic interests of lays, Arveragus’s anti-authorship has the potential to undermine the very narrative we are in. Notably, moreover, this danger to the narrative comes from a failure of the courtly genre itself: two definitions of virtue that are both conventionally viable clash and create a narrative impasse.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 378.

Reaffirming the sense that the narrative may be endangered by Arveragus's paradox of honor and his act of anti-authorship, the lay's narrator feels the need to undergird the logic of both character and narrative here. The narrator anticipates and attempts to prevent readerly objection to this moment, saying:

Paraventure an heep of yow, ywis,
Wol holden hym a lewed man in this
That he wol putte his wyf in jupartie.
Herkneth the tale er ye upon hire crie.
She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth;
And whan that ye han herd the tale, demeth. (V 1493-98)

This statement defends Arveragus's choice through reference to the narrative's end, as though the character knows that all will turn out well. Susan Crane has noted how the similarity between the narrator's comment "She may have bettre fortune than yow semeth" and Arveragus's earlier statement "It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day" (V 1473) gives the sense that "the narrator is taking confidence in the plot from his hero rather than foreknowing it."¹⁰⁷ These narratorial deferrals, in a way, seek to recast Arveragus as the self-authoring hero and so to affirm that the narrative is in conventional, aristocratic hands.

By extension, the narrator's comments also suggest that Arveragus's honor, and courtly notions of honor more generally, are not compromised by the paradox created here, since their conflict is ultimately sidestepped by the happy outcome of the narrative. The narrator thus anticipates critics' suggestions that this *trouthe*-keeping motif can be regarded as a "narrative device" that "allow[s] the plot to unfold"¹⁰⁸ and nothing more. Yet such hedging still acknowledges that there is, in fact, a conflict. And the narrator's defense of his characters and plot is part a self-defense as well; as Hume suggests, he does not "wish to be thought ungentle

¹⁰⁷ Crane, "The Franklin as Dorigen," 249.

¹⁰⁸ Hume, "Why Chaucer Calls the Franklin's Tale a Breton Lai," 378.

for breaking the rules of courtly literature. He only wishes to work up to the solution of his tale.”¹⁰⁹ The narrator tries to cover up the conflict in courtly values that his narrative has revealed, through a faulty logic that ineffectually aims to reproduce the genre’s conventional narrative logic—which has been disrupted by these failures of aristocratic narrative control.

All of the aristocratic figures in Chaucer’s lay fail to revise the narrative they find themselves in as analogous characters do in metapoetic French lays. This failure disappoints readerly expectations regarding the genre’s conventional narrative logic and modes of authorization and derails the course of the narrative. Chaucer does not leave us without a surrogate author in the tale, however; the Clerk of Orléans steps in to fill this role, revising the direction of the plot, as well as shifting the locus of narrative authority away from aristocratic control.¹¹⁰

As we saw, the narrative gets derailed by the unconventional failure of Aurelius’ prayer to Apollo. Not only does Apollo *not* step in to help Aurelius but also, and more importantly, the prayer does not impel Aurelius himself to seek a different resolution,¹¹¹ leaving the narrative

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 377.

¹¹⁰ Chaucer’s vernacular self-authorization interestingly takes an opposite tack from Marie’s in this regard. Marie asserts the possibility of vernacular literary authority that is accessible to secular aristocrats, taking authority out of the monopolization of Latin-literate clerks, for example, when she notes in her *Fables*: “To end these tales I’ve here narrated/ And into Romance tongue translated,/ I’ll give my name for memory:/ I am from France, my name’s Marie./ And it may hap that many a clerk/ Will claim as his what is my work.” (*Epilogue* 1-6); Harriet Spiegel, ed., *Fables*, Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching 32 (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press in association with the Medieval Academy of America, 1994). Chaucer takes vernacular authority from aristocrats and gives it to a clerk. Yet, of course, this is a clerk stripped of any religious association, so that the implications of this appropriation of authority operate on a different social register.

¹¹¹ In contrast, in Boccaccio’s version the lover sets out on a quest, on his own initiative, to fulfill his lady’s demands. Chaucer could have easily done the same thing, and even seems to hint at this narrative possibility that he does not take up, through Aurelius’ proffer to make a pilgrimage in support of his prayer: “Thy temple in Delphos wol I barefoot seke” (V 1077). This journey could have offered a tidy

stagnated in Aurelius' two-year (and more!) lament. The plot is able to get back on track only by the intervention of another clerk: Aurelius's brother. As well as physically guiding Aurelius to the Clerk of Orléans, Aurelius's brother represents the first step in shifting the narrative authority from the aristocratic sphere to the clerical and more bourgeois sphere of the "businessman-magician"¹¹² Clerk of Orléans. Aurelius's brother represents a kind of minor double for the Clerk, even offering a foretaste of the Clerk's illusions through his description of the "diverse apparences" of "tregetours withinne an halle" (V 1139-51), which he realizes might be of use in Aurelius's conundrum. As a clerk himself and a brother to a squire, he acts as a bridge between the different social statuses of Aurelius and the Clerk and between different narrative traditions and authorities.

This shift in narrative focus and control is marked by a unique moment of narrative disjuncture. The brother's delayed recollection, after two-plus years, of the possible recourse to magical intervention is a rather clunky means of moving the narrative forward. Like the narrative disjunctures in *Sir Launfal*, the brother's intervention in the plot draws attention to itself through its awkwardness.¹¹³ He is an intrusive and unnecessary plot device, a kind of *deus ex machina* (not unlike the Clerk's magic) that allows the plot to leap forward from the ineffectual lament in which it was stuck. The brother's extraneousness to the plot is quite telling.

narrative means of his meeting with the Clerk of Orléans, and almost begs to be followed through, but instead offers just another dead end.

¹¹² Ruggiers quoted in Paul Battles, "Magic and Metafiction in the Franklin's Tale: Chaucer's Clerk of Orléans as Double of the Franklin," in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, Studies in Medieval Culture, 42 (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, xxv, 2002), 255.

¹¹³ As is often the case in *Launfal*, moreover, Chaucer's awkward narrative moment stems from an addition to the source. The character of the brother is a Chaucerian invention and his only function in the plot is to lead Aurelius to the Clerk of Orléans. In Boccaccio's *Filocolo* version, the lover sets out of his own initiative to seek a solution, and subsequently meets the magician without any need of fraternal assistance. See *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 222.

Given how easily Chaucer could have followed Boccaccio in more efficiently linking problem to solution, lover to magician, Chaucer seems to have made this narrative shift as awkward as possible, purposely drawing attention to its rupture of more typical narrative movement.

The brother's appearance may break the flow of the initial plot, but it also initiates a new current of emplotment—a kind of clerical *aventure* that takes control of the narrative and changes the nature of the story. The central moment of this clerical authorship is the scene of the Clerk's illusions in his library.¹¹⁴ The form of the Clerk's magic—the entertaining art of vivid “diverse apparences” (V 1140)—has been seen by many critics as analogous to minstrel performance or the illusions of literary creation.¹¹⁵ As Paul Battles notes, the illusions the Clerk shows Aurelius in his library “have an obvious narrative quality,”¹¹⁶ offering a series of familiar romance scenes and motifs such as hunting, hawking, and dancing.

As the illusions progress, moreover, they enact a circular movement out of and back into the diegetic reality of the narrative world, blurring the line between that reality and the hypodiegetic story-world of the illusions. The illusions begin after the Clerk has brought Aurelius “hoom to his house” (V 1185); there:

¹¹⁴ Other critics have likewise focused on this moment of magic as more significant to plot and meaning than the moment of the apparent removal of the rocks. See Sherron Knopp, “Poetry as Conjuring Act: The Franklin's Tale and The Tempest,” *Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 38 (2004): 342; V. A. Kolve, “Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens: Poetry vs. Magic in Chaucer's Franklin's Tale,” in *Poetics: Theory and Practice in Medieval English Literature*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti, The J.A.W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Seventh Series (Perugia, 1991), 188–91.

¹¹⁵ Battles notes that critics have been making this connection between the Clerk's magic and poetic activity since Paul Ruggiers in 1965 and gives a useful bibliography of such criticism; “Magic and Metafiction in the Franklin's Tale,” 247–48. Both Knopp and Kolve suggest that the odd first person plural of “al oure revel was ago” (V 1204) represents an intrusion of the narratorial or authorial voice into the scene—an intrusion that underscores the powerful self-conscious significance of this moment; Knopp, “Poetry as Conjuring Act,” 342–44; Kolve, “Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens,” 188. See also John Stephens and Marcella Ryan, “Metafictional Strategies and the Theme of Sexual Power in the Wife of Bath's and Franklin's Tales,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 33 (1989): 65–66.

¹¹⁶ Battles, “Magic and Metafiction in the Franklin's Tale,” 251.

Hem lakked no vitaille that myghte hem plese.
So wel arrayed hous as ther was oon
Aurelius in his lyf saugh nevere noon.
He shewed hym, er he wente to sopeer,
Forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer; . . .
He saugh, whan voyded were thise wilde deer,
Thise fauconers upon a fair ryver,
That with hir haukes han the heron slayn.
Tho saugh he knyghtes justyng in a playn;
And after this he dide hym swich plesaunce
That he hym shewed his lady on a daunce,
On which hymself he daunced, as hym thoughte. (V 1186-1201)

At their beginning, the illusions blend into the descriptions of the Clerk's house, so that we might think that the "forestes" and "parkes" are a real part of the Clerk's grounds—until they are suddenly "voyded" and replaced with another vision.¹¹⁷ Emerging seamlessly from the diegetic reality of the narrative, the illusions upset our sense of that diegetic reality when they are exposed as unreal. As the scenes and action change, we begin to feel secure in their illusionary nature, and the line between the hypodiegetic illusions and diegetic reality seems to be re-established. Yet the illusions come full circle back into the diegetic world of the narrative when Aurelius and Dorigen appear in them, once again troubling the sense of a distinction between the different diegetic layers of narrative. Through their metapoetic play, that is, the Clerk's illusions suggest—or point out—that the world the Clerk and Aurelius are a part of is just as much narrative as the illusions. This troubling of diegetic reality demonstrates the Clerk's authority, and perhaps, *gives* him the authority, to revise that world.

The blurring of narrative and reality here is underscored by the fact that the Clerk's narrative illusion may also be a narrative *allusion*. Robert Cook has suggested that Chaucer adapted the Clerk's illusions directly from the "uncanny and hallucinatory" visions that Orfeo has in the wilderness, noting parallels in both the contents and the mood of the description of the

¹¹⁷ Knopp, "Poetry as Conjuring Act," 342–43.

visions.¹¹⁸ While the evidence for this direct use is perhaps somewhat thin, the implications are compelling enough to mention. If Chaucer did borrow from *Orfeo*, the illusions would not merely resemble narrative, but would in fact be pieces of a previous Breton lay. In either case, however, the images are fairly conventional romance scenes. The Clerk uses the material of older traditions to remake the narrative he is in, engaging in very successful surrogate authorship in direct contrast to the failed attempts of the aristocratic characters to do the same.

The Clerk's allusion to romance motifs draws attention to the lay genre's practices of retelling and reuse, in a way that could seem to be in keeping with the spirit of the genre's self-conscious dependence on previous narratives, and attention to its own transmission.¹¹⁹ Yet to call attention to the genre's modes of self-authorization at the same moment that the narrative marks itself as narrative is to point out the constructed, even fictive, quality of such generic self-authorization more largely. The Clerk's revisionary illusions enable the narrative's movement, but they do so by exposing the circularity of the traditional operations of lays, such as Marie's, which authorize themselves by telling stories about authoritative literary histories.

The Clerk's illusions are the raw material of romance, offering typical scenes that could very easily be transformed into a coherent narrative, with just a little application of some conventional generic logic. This is precisely what Aurelius does, "reading himself into the text"

¹¹⁸ "Chaucer's Franklin's Tale and Sir Orfeo," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin of the Modern Language Society of Helsinki* 95, no. 3 (1994): 335. Cook's argument builds off of Loomis's influential suggestion that Chaucer was familiar with the Auchinleck manuscript. Cook links *Franklin's Tale* lines 1189-1204 to *Sir Orfeo* lines 281-322, in which Orfeo has visions of "a hunting scene with hounds;" "a host of a thousand armed knights parading with drawn swords;" "knights and ladies dancing to music;" ladies "carrying falcons and slaying various birds, including herons;" and of his beloved wife amongst them.

¹¹⁹ This moment may even call our attention to the very self-fulfilling logic of *Orfeo* in particular contrast to Aurelius's current situation. King Orfeo actively employs his own narrative authority to regain his lady, while Aurelius must rely on a middle-class figure's magical-narrative agency—an agency that changes the nature of the narrative, even as it helps Aurelius achieve his conventional goal.

which “the clerk (author) directs and manipulates.”¹²⁰ The Clerk’s illusions offer Aurelius a vision of the narrative control he expected but failed to effect, as well as, apparently, a corrective for that failure, a means to get the narrative back on track. For Aurelius, within the narrative, the Clerk seems to be adding a patch of conventional romance motifs to the lay’s ruptured narrative flow. Yet the “obvious narrative quality”¹²¹ of the illusions enables us to see through this—to see the Clerk’s intervention as an attempt to re-engineer the kinds of self-authoring operations that work more subtly in traditional lays. Here we can see the Clerk as author and Aurelius as reader-patron conspiring to use the disconnected motifs of the illusions to rewrite their narrative from within and so achieve the impossible but inevitable fulfillment of Dorigen’s request.¹²² While the Clerk’s illusions help restore conventional generic logic at the diegetic level, then, at the extra-diegetic level that logic is exposed as a carefully manipulated self-authorizing tactic.

The Clerk is a surrogate author-figure, yet as a non-aristocratic character, his surrogacy is not quite in the mold of the traditional lays. His divergence from that convention is highlighted by his resembling, anachronistically, a fourteenth-century writer; in fact, many scholars have seen the Clerk as standing in for the specific author behind the tale itself, Chaucer. Paul Battles argues that the “suggestive similarities” between the two figures center on their shared status as “well-to-do, upper-middle-class professional[s],”¹²³ educated bureaucrats whose

¹²⁰ Stephens and Ryan, “Metafictional Strategies and the Theme of Sexual Power in the Wife of Bath’s and Franklin’s Tales,” 66.

¹²¹ “Magic and Metafiction in the Franklin’s Tale,” 251.

¹²² See Kolve, who notes that the rocks don’t appear in Clerk’s illusion, just Dorigen & Aurelius, an image of “desire fulfilled, in a world without moral consequence” and that “by creating the ‘appearance’ of removal [of the rocks], the clerk in effect rewrites *The Franklin’s Tale* from within”; “Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens,” 191.

¹²³ Battles, “Magic and Metafiction in the Franklin’s Tale,” 255.

“income depends on producing fictions for aristocrats.”¹²⁴ Even if we do not see the Clerk as standing in for Chaucer specifically, though, the Clerk still represents a surprisingly realistic-looking author for this type of narrative, at least from an extradiegetic, fourteenth-century perspective. In the place of a self-authoring aristocratic hero the tale gives us the type of professional clerk who was writing such stories in fourteenth-century England. This constitutes an example of what Beston has described as *The Franklin’s Tale’s* effect of “continually deflating the romantic atmosphere” of the tale, by making the diegetic world of the romance narrative run up against “the world of fourteenth-century realities.”¹²⁵ The figure of the author-Clerk disrupts the genre’s traditional claim to a history of self-sufficient and self-authorizing aristocratic transmission, pointing instead to an alternative literary history of non-aristocratic writers working with patrons to author the narratives of aristocratic literary and social authority.

The depiction of the Clerk’s alternative authority changes the nature of the narrative, shifting it from centering on heterosexual love among aristocrats to focusing on homosocial class relations. To be sure, the story still manages to reach the inevitable ending of the romance plot in which all ends well for its deserving aristocrats,¹²⁶ despite the apparently insurmountable obstacles to such an ending. Yet the very end of *The Franklin’s Tale* famously turns away from the love plot to focus instead on the three men and their relative social and moral statuses.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 252. Though more commonly aligned with Chaucer, the Clerk is also occasionally seen as a surrogate for the Franklin. Battles gives an overview of critics who see the Clerk as a surrogate for Chaucer, including Kolve, Schuman and Spearing; Ibid. See also Knopp, “Poetry as Conjuring Act.” Battles himself is among those who see the Clerk as a surrogate for the Franklin (see esp. 253-66) as is Fumo; Fumo, *The Legacy of Apollo*. I lean toward aligning the Clerk more with Chaucer, given the Franklin’s hostility toward the Clerk’s magic (V 1270-96), and the Franklin’s anxious attempt to shore up Arveragus’ aristocratic authority as discussed above.

¹²⁵ “How Much Was Known of the Breton Lai in Fourteenth-Century England?,” 329. Likewise, Finlayson notes that in the tale, magic, courtly love and *trouthe* “are all subject to the intrusion of elements of ‘reality’ which suggests that they are ‘illusions’, that can exist only within the confines of the literary structure of the *lay*”; “Invention and Disjunction,” 398.

¹²⁶ The disappearance of Dorigen from the narrative notwithstanding.

Aurelius frees Dorigen from her promise to him after he is moved to imitate the “grete gentillesse” (V 1527) of Arveragus’s desire to keep *trouthe* by sending Dorigen to him.¹²⁷

Aurelius’s imitation of this act of “gentillesse” stems not so much from a reverence for courtly values themselves as from a desire to use the value of “gentillesse” to adjust social inequivalences. His comment “Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede/ As wel as kan a knyght” (V 1543-44) points to this element of social competition in his actions. This competitive social element is reaffirmed and dramatically enlarged by the Clerk’s subsequent re-imitation, when he frees Aurelius from his debt because:

Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother.
Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght;
But God forbede, for his blisful myght,
But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede
As wel as any of yow, it is no drede! (V 1608-12)

By joining in this “gentil” one-upmanship, the Clerk turns what was an intra-aristocratic issue into one that crosses class lines. The Clerk is the focus of the end of the narrative, getting the last word of dialogue and the last line but five of the tale as a whole. With this focus on class-crossing homosocial relations, the tale becomes decidedly something other than a Breton lay.

The tale’s open-ended final question about the men’s relative merit, “Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?” (V 1622), participates in this generic shift. This question picks up on the literary convention of the *question d’amour*, but here it is a convention behaving badly: the question is not about love. The question’s new subject, the quality of generosity, is still an aristocratic value, yet the narrative affirms the importance of *gentillese* and of being “fre,” by opening those aristocratic qualities to the Clerk as well. This expansion of social values to the

¹²⁷ Though, notably, Aurelius’s thoughts also reemphasize the contradictory courtly codes at work here, since he suggests both that Arveragus displays “gentillesse” in sending Dorigen to him, and also that to follow through on her *trouthe* to him would be “so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse/ Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse” (V 1523-24).

Clerk parallels the narrative's extension of literary authority to him. The narrative still uses the motif of the surrogate-author to authorize itself, as is conventional, but it does so by admitting the literary authority of a middle class, clerk-bureaucrat figure. The Clerk is the most narratively "fre": he is not stymied by the constraints of aristocratic convention as Dorigen, Aurelius, and Arveragus all find themselves to be.¹²⁸ Rather, he is "fre" to use and adapt those conventions for his own purposes, in ways that enable new narrative possibility.

This procedure of simultaneously troubling and reusing courtly French narrative conventions makes *The Franklin's Tale* in some ways a quite typical Middle English, metapoetic lay. As we have seen, with these strategies of simultaneous reuse and revision, the Middle English lays remain to some degree in the "spirit" of their French predecessors. But at the same time, these authors also revise that tradition to offer a somewhat more cynical recognition of the tensions and disruptions that can occur between different literary and social conventions, as well as the creative possibilities of such revision and recombination. The relationship between these Middle English lays and the French tradition they follow is, then, more complicated than either complete dependence or radical departure. In different ways, these authors all leverage their divergence from such traditions into positions of critical distance from which they can examine the narrative and social conventions of the lay genre, and revise those conventions for a new literary context. Those revisions involve varying degrees of exposure of the circular, self-invented nature of the French genre's now-traditional authorizing moves. Yet at the same time the Middle English authors use that precedent of vernacular self-authorization for their own

¹²⁸ Crane suggests that the Franklin as narrator is also constrained and disempowered by the conventions of the romance genre, as well as shut out of the authorizing clerical discourse of the narrative; "The Franklin as Dorigen," 243–47.

works. This complicated interplay of dependence and revision is central to their alternative authorship and authority.

While the *Franklin's Tale* contributes to the emergent tradition of Middle English metapoetic commentary on the lay genre, it is also just one among Chaucer's many metapoetic experiments. His "Breton lay" offers a significant contribution to that experimentation, though. As Kolve suggests, "Not for the first time in Chaucer's work, but here in an especially brilliant fashion, poetic practice becomes a form of theory."¹²⁹ Chaucer's use of the Breton lay genre enriches his experimentation by drawing on a deep history of such metapoetic vernacular exploration, which also offers a precedent for revising its own traditions. Marie's lays turn vernacular literary history and transmission into an authorizing metapoetic narrative. The Middle English lays experiment with a revisionary critique of that self-authorizing tradition as they adapt it for their new vernacular. As we will see in the next chapter, Chaucer builds on these strategies within his authorial catalogues, expanding the revisionary critique to question the validity and viability of literary *auctoritas* more largely, even as he turns himself into a figure of Middle English authorship.

¹²⁹ "Rocky Shores and Pleasure Gardens," 166.

Chapter 3: *He useth bokes for to make*¹: Chaucer's Catalogues of Vernacular Authorship

A full account of Chaucer's experiments with metapoetic treatments of authors, storytellers, and interpreters would require at least its own whole book. Rather than making an abbreviated or incomplete attempt at such an account, I will focus here on the metapoetics of a rather unassuming and understudied Chaucerian form—the authorial catalogue.² Catalogues might seem to be straightforward, uncrafted texts, yet they can also, as in Chaucer's case, be carefully crafted to tell a story about the author and the body of works they describe. At three points in his corpus, Chaucer provides a catalogue of his own works: in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Retraction*. These catalogues are often seen as Chaucer's attempt to establish himself as a great writer with an authoritative canon, following the precedent of self-cataloguing authors such as Augustine, Bede and Chrétien de Troyes.³ The listing and categorizing functions of such catalogues work to

¹ *Legend of Good Women* G342. All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

² While critical discussions of one catalogue might occasionally refer to another, or even treat a pairing of two catalogues at some length, the catalogues have rarely all been treated together. A notable exception is Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999). Jamie Fumo suggests that the intertextual “palinodic exchange” of the *Legend* and *Retraction*, shifts our understanding of both texts, but notes that few other critics look at the two together (except for Obermeier); see: “The God of Love and Love of God: Palinodic Exchange in the Prologue of the Legend of Good Women and the ‘Retraction,’” in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, *Chaucer Studies*, 36 (Cambridge, England: Brewer, xvii, 2006), 159. Critical comparison of the *Legend* prologue and the Introduction to *The Man of Law's Tale* is more common; see e.g. Michael Foster, *Chaucer's Narrators and the Rhetoric of Self-Representation* (Peter Lang, 2008), esp. 135–140; Lee Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances: Form and History in the Canterbury Tales*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 100.

³ Discussing these analogous authorial catalogues, Correale notes that such self-catalogues “seem to serve the purpose of establishing and authenticating an author's canon” Correale, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 803–4. See also: Olive Sayce, “Chaucer's ‘Retractions’: The Conclusion of the Canterbury Tales and Its Place in Literary Tradition,” *Medium Aevum* 40, no. 1971 (1971): 238.

formalize an author's canon as fact, as knowledge that exists in the world to be organized and recorded.⁴ Yet Chaucer's catalogues refuse such formalization or finalization.⁵ Each, in its own ways, is incomplete and ambiguous, riddled with anomalies that have long puzzled critics. I believe that the catalogues' anomalies are in fact a key to their project—a project of dramatizing the difficulties and peculiarities of revisionary vernacular authorship through the micro-narratives of Chaucer's poetic works. Examining the catalogues as a rhetorical form illuminates the concerns and ambiguities of each, as well as the larger pattern of Chaucer using himself as the guinea pig for experiments with ideas of authorship and authority.

The catalogues' anomalies uncover and draw attention to the revisions, reinterpretations, and manipulations of the works they enumerate, telling a story about the vernacular author's intertextual debts and divergences. It is tempting to take these as true stories about the author; in discussing their Chaucerian canons, after all, the three catalogues all gesture beyond the narratives that contain them to offer, apparently, an extradiegetical perspective on the author and works they describe. The catalogues, however, are not wholly outside of narrative: for one, they appear within Chaucerian stories as a part of those stories,⁶ and what's more, the lists they give do not correspond precisely with the reality of Chaucer's works, offering alternative versions, or revisions, of Chaucerian canons. The catalogues, that is, are stories about Chaucer told within

⁴ On the formalizing and quantifying functions of lists see Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 88.

⁵ On Chaucer's larger "thematic resistance to closure in his poetry" see Rosemarie Potz McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books: Resistance to Closure in Medieval Discourse* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 3.

⁶ This point is clearest, of course, for the catalogues in the *LGW* and the *Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale*, given that those are spoken by characters. As I will discuss below, the diegetic status of the *Retraction* has been a matter of much critical debate, yet I see it as remaining within narrative.

stories by Chaucer, so that their gesture outside of narrative becomes paradoxically also a hypodiegetic gesture back into the narratives they list.

This layered, story-within-a-story feature of the catalogues is similar to the *mise en abyme* approach to metapoetic self-reflection found in Marie and the Middle English lays, involving texts that dramatize processes of vernacular authorship within narrative. Yet Chaucer refocuses the attention of this metapoetic tradition by using versions of himself for the *mise en abyme*—that is, by turning the vernacular reteller into a narrative within his own narratives. Chaucer’s attention to authorship is, then, more overt and specific, yet this attention to himself is less self-aggrandizing than it is often considered to be; the catalogues are not just self-portraits, rather, taken together, they also offer a portrait of vernacular authorship more broadly. While Chaucer uses himself as the figure of the vernacular author, the catalogues do not offer us a clear or straightforward authorization of that figure. Rather, the three catalogues position the vernacular author very differently in regards to sources, readers, and authority. The *Legend of Good Women*’s catalogue overtly addresses Chaucer’s constrained position in relation to the patrons and sources that shape his works, while also more implicitly demonstrating how a translator can work within such constraints to shape his own text. The Man of Law takes that vernacular translator as a model for his own attempts at retelling, imagining Chaucer as a manipulative reteller capable of usurping the authority of his sources—but also revealing how inseparable the vernacular author is from those intertexts. The *Retraction* shows us an author taking ownership and responsibility for his works, apparently freed from the constraints of the earlier catalogues, yet leaving the works’ meaning still indeterminate and open to revision. Reading across the catalogues, we can see that the author, as much as his canon, is under continual revision.

Within each catalogue, and across the larger story that the three of them tell together, Chaucer defines his body of works through revisionary retelling to such an extent that even that very self-definition—and the ideas of authorship that underlie it—are subject to revision. The three catalogues present three different stories about vernacular authorship, three different versions of Chaucer and his works, which are all true stories about vernacular authorship in certain ways, but none of which gives the whole truth. Rather, Chaucer envisions vernacular authorship itself as defined by continual redefinition, revision, reinterpretation. If the definition and evaluation of vernacular authorship remains slippery, multiple, and ambiguous, those are exactly the qualities that Chaucer asserts to be the creative heart of vernacular retelling. It is precisely by taking ownership of these unstable, revisionary qualities that Chaucer invents himself as a Middle English “Author”: as a writer worthy of a catalogue, or even three.

I. Subjected to Revision: The Constrained Translator of *The Legend of Good Women*

We might say that the Prologue to *Legend of Good Women* tells a story not of Chaucer the author, but rather, of Chaucer the translator. Chaucer consistently depicts his diegetic persona as wholly dependent for his literary material on sources and patrons, with little, if any, innovative or creative capacities of his own. This story, however, is meant to be read with several grains of salt. The *Legend's* prologue relies heavily on French poetic genres and themes,⁷ but it is, ironically, Chaucer's departures from his main French source that make his diegetic persona appear so very humbled and constrained. The prologue's central premise of

⁷ For discussions of Chaucer's use of French sources for *LGW*, see R. Barton Palmer, “Chaucer's Legend of Good Women: The Narrator's Tale,” in *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*, Chaucer Studies, 31 (Cambridge, England: Brewer., 2003), 183–94; James I Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries: Natural Music in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); B. A. Windeatt, ed., *Chaucer's Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1982).

depicting an author's dream vision, in which he is judged and punished by powerful readers for writing ill of women, is taken from Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement du Roi de Navarre*.⁸

Chaucer's presentation of himself as poet-defendant is strikingly different from that of his analog in the *Navarre*, however. Machaut's narrator-persona argues vociferously for his work and its contested meaning, thereby asserting that he has the authority to back up his works' claims and so establishing himself as an author.⁹ Rather than similarly defending his work and his own literary authority, the *Legend's* diegetic Chaucer for the most part quietly complies with the judgments against him, and even contributes to depictions of himself as inept and unauthoritative. Chaucer turns the authorizing devices of his French source on their heads, ironically undercutting them so as to cast his own vernacular authorship as demeaned, constrained, and manipulative.

At the center of this metapoetic self-depiction is the catalogue, which comes in two parts: a "bad" and a "good" list. These are articulated amidst the God of Love and the Lady Alceste's larger discussion of Chaucer's alleged "heresy" (F330 G256) against Love, and their proposed punishment for that crime: the commission of the *Legend* itself. The "bad" list consists of the two works condemned by Love as "heresy ayeins my lawe" (F330, G 256): the *Romaunt of the Rose* (F329, G 255) and *Troilus and Criseyde* (F332, G 265). The "good" list consists of the works enumerated by Alceste as positive (or at least neutral) examples to balance the wrong

⁸ See: Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: Garland Pub, 1988).

⁹ The poet is ultimately condemned and accepts punishment, but he still is afforded the chance to have his say and his day in court. The bulk of Machaut's narrative consists of the debate, rather than the punishment (as in *LGW*). And his punishment of three poems is rather lighter than Chaucer's assignment to spend the majority of his time every year for the rest of his life working on the *Legend* (F481-83).

done by the previous two (F417-28).¹⁰ In the F-version of the prologue this list constitutes a fairly complete catalogue of Chaucer's works up to that time.¹¹ Given the thoroughness of the list, there could certainly be an element of self-advertisement at work here: though the catalogue begins with Love's negative assessment, the "good" works that Alceste enumerates ultimately outweigh the "bad," and of course since any publicity is good publicity, the "bad" list might still be considered self-promoting. Critics have, moreover, suggested that the *Legend* ultimately ironizes Love and Alceste as narrow-minded readers and thereby offers an underhanded authorization of the sophistication and complexity of Chaucer's works.¹² Yet Chaucer

¹⁰ Namely: *The House of Fame*, the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, "al the love of Palamon and Arcite/. . . and many an ympne for your halydayes,/ That highten balades, roundeles, virelayes" as well as such other "holyness" as "Boece,/ And . . . the lyf also of Seynt Cecile/ [and] . . . Origenes upon the Maudeleyne." Finally, we might also consider the commissioned "glorious legende/ Of goode wymmen" (F483-84, G473-74) as a projected addendum to the catalogue's "good" list.

¹¹ I follow the prevailing view that F is the older version of the Prologue. For a concise summary of the debate over dating see Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 11–12. The only extant work that might seem to be missing from the F catalogue is *Anelida and Arcite*, though Frank notes that the omission is understandable, given that the work was "obviously abandoned at a very early stage;" *Ibid.*, 3. Perhaps also missing is the *Book of the Lion*, a work Chaucer lists in the *Retraction*, and which scholars assume to have been an early work; see F. M. Dear, "Chaucer's Book of the Lion," *Me* 7 (1938): 105–12. The G prologue contains almost the same list at G413-18, with the addition of "the Wreched Engendrynge of Mankynde" (G414), which is thought to have been a prose translation of Pope Innocent III's *De miseria humane conditionis*. No such work is extant, though Chaucer does use pieces of *De Miseria* in other works, perhaps most notably the *Man of Law's* Prologue; see Robert Enzer Lewis, "Chaucer's Artistic Use of Pope Innocent III's de Miseria Humane Conditionis in the Man of Law's Prologue and Tale," *PMLA* 81, no. 7 (December 1, 1966): 485–92. If the presumed dates are correct, "Wreched Engendrynge" was written (or at least, in progress) after Chaucer had begun work on the *Canterbury Tales*. Its inclusion in the G catalogue therefore begs the question of why Chaucer did not also add the *CT* to the catalogue.

¹² Recent criticism, though quite varied in its focus, tends to agree that the *Legend* is in some way about reading and interpretation. See for example Lisa J Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Betsy McCormick, "Remembering the Game: Debating the Legend's Women," in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, ed. Carolyn P. Collette, *Chaucer Studies*, 36 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 105–31. The *Legend* is also frequently seen as a turning point in Chaucer's career and as a move toward self-authorization and self-definition. See Sheila Delany, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*. For an overview of the critical history of the *Legend* see Collette's introduction to *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2006), ix–xviii.

juxtaposes the authorizing tendencies of the catalogic mode with his insistent presentation of his diegetic persona as intertextually dependent and constrained by other literary authorities. This interplay of self-deprecation and self-promotion is both funny and deeply serious. Though Chaucer makes fun of the constrained position of a patronized translator, he also affirms and accepts it as his own model of authorship, and as a model that still holds creative possibilities. To the extent that the catalogue offers Chaucer some authorization, that is, it authorizes him while also making clear the degree to which he remains constrained by a larger network of literary authorities that shape the contents and reception of his productions.

Both the immediate context and the form of the *Legend's* catalogue illuminate the degree to which the diegetic-Chaucer is shaped by his readers. The catalogue's division between the two speakers, and into "bad" and "good" works, structures its delineation of Chaucer's works according to readers' different interpretations of them. The fact that these reader-patrons may be mistaken or misguided in their assessments of Chaucer does not make their interpretative authority any less powerful. Whether or not Love and Alceste are good or bad readers, through their collaborative listing and discussion they establish and assess a version of a Chaucerian canon, thereby creating a vision of Chaucerian authorship. To put it more strongly, Chaucer's catalogue, and by extension his authorship, are *formed* out of these reader-patrons' interpretations and expectations. The authorial portrait Chaucer paints here includes, as an integral element of the author's work and authority, the very strong influence of such figures.

At first glance, however, the image of Chaucerian authority given here does not appear very flattering. The patron figures of Love and Alceste, as well as Chaucer's diegetic persona himself, all take pains to distance Chaucer's work from authorship or *auctoritas* in the most

conservative sense of original creation. Even while Love blames Chaucer for the contents and reception of *Romaunt* and *Troilus*, he emphasizes Chaucer's role as translator rather than a strict "author," asserting:

. . . of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyst,
And hynderest hem with thy translacioun . . .
For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose,
Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,
That is an heresy ayeins my lawe. (F323-30, G249-56)

Love not only notes specifically that *Romaunt* is a translation, but generalizes "translacioun" as Chaucer's writing mode. To be sure, translating was a common and legitimate mode of authorial expression in the Middle Ages,¹³ so much so that it can be argued that it "is the activity of the [medieval] writer."¹⁴ Nevertheless some people still saw it as a form of writing that remained secondary to more authoritative originals.¹⁵ The view that retelling and translation cannot be creative is certainly not very creditable, but it could still be quite powerful, particularly when espoused by patron-readers such as Love and Alceste.

Alceste's subsequent differentiation between the activities of translation and original "ending" underscores the second-tier status accorded to the former. Though ostensibly Chaucer's supporter in this debate, Alceste takes an even dimmer view of his authority over his

¹³ For an examination of the appropriative possibilities of translation, see Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*.

¹⁴ Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 30, original emphasis.

¹⁵ Translation is not directly addressed in Bonaventure's four ways of "making a book"—as scribe, compiler, commentator, or author, with authority and responsibility increasing down the list—but we might assume translation would be categorized at best with commentary rather than true authorship; qtd. in Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 94. This secondary status is also evident in the way translated texts are often referred to by the names of their original authors, e.g. Chaucer's own "Origenes upon the Maudeleyne" (LGW F 428) and "Boece de Consolacione" (*Retr* X1088).

works than does Love.¹⁶ In fact, her defense of Chaucer against Love's accusations rests in large part on Chaucer's lack of agency and responsibility in relation to his writings. She suggests, regarding his composition of *Romaunt and Troilus*, that:

. . . for this man ys nyce,
He myghte doon yt, gessyng no malice,
But for he useth thynges for to make;
Hym rekketh nocht of what matere he take.¹⁷
Or him was boden maken thilke tweye
Of som persone, and durste yt nat withseye;
Or him repenteth outrely of this.
He ne hath nat doon so greuously amys
To translaten that olde clerkes writen,
As thogh that he of malice wolde enditen
Despit of love, and had himself yt wrought. (F362-72)

Alceste imagines Chaucer in the first place as someone who “makes” books much more in the vein of a *scriptor* than an *auctor*,¹⁸ copying willy-nilly any “matere” that comes his way just because that is what he is used to doing. Her supposition that the works might have been done on commission (“him was boden maken thilke tweye/ Of som persone”) gives Chaucer a bit more credit for being aware of the meaning of his “matere;” the idea that he might have wanted to “withseye” the commission from the beginning and now “repenteth outrely” suggests that he may recognize those works’ negative qualities. But that awareness still does not represent agency over the texts he is “boden” to write. Finally, like Love, Alceste points out that Chaucer is “just” a translator, and explicitly marks that role as representing less responsibility, and thus

¹⁶ Frank likewise notes that “the defense Alceste advances for the poet is...really no defense at all. It is all a glorious wriggling out from under”; see *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 27. For critics who argue that, on the contrary, Alceste is a more savvy reader than Love, see Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 250; Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*.

¹⁷ The point is perhaps even stronger in the G Prologue's subtle revision: “He may translate a thyng in no malyce,/ But for he useth bokes for to make,/ And taketh non hed of what matere he take” (G341-43).

¹⁸ See Bonaventure qtd. in Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 94.

less authority, for the works produced than does the role of a proper author who conceives of the ideas originally “and had himself yt wrought.” This attitude could seem not just to devalue Chaucer’s literary authority, but also to devalue vernacular translation as a whole, suggesting that authority rests primarily with the original work and author. However, in this instance that lack of responsibility ironically works in Chaucer’s favor, exonerating him of the charge of heresy. The potentially negative element of lost agency becomes a virtue, shielding the translator from blame,¹⁹ and so enabling him to translate whatever he wants.

Alceste’s characterization of Chaucer as an almost passive repeater of texts is partially affirmed by Chaucer’s self-presentation (or rather, the presentation of his diegetic persona). Much of the *Legend’s* prologue can be traced to French sources or analogues, particularly the works of Guillaume de Machaut and Jean Froissart.²⁰ In the passages of the prologue leading up to his catalogue, Chaucer acknowledges and even exaggerates these great debts, casting himself as a passive repeater, much as Alceste does. He first discusses his authorship through a humility topos, expressing his inability to properly praise his beloved daisy (the flower that will also represent Alceste), saying: “Allas, that I ne had Englyssh, ryme or prose,/ Suffisant this flour to preyse aryght!” (F66-67). His lack of sufficient English is so complete, he tells us, that his only mode of composition is to pick through the works of others who have written on such themes before: “I come after, glenyng here and there,/ And am ful glad yf I may fynde an ere/ Of any goodly word that ye had left” (F75-77). This type of compositional “gleaning” potentially has a creative element, given that the gleaner finds things “left” by other authors; that is, he might fill in gaps, or expand on underdeveloped elements in the narrative traditions he follows. Chaucer

¹⁹ Minnis, similarly says that Chaucer at times uses the role of *compiler* as a “shield and defense”; *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁰ For discussions of Chaucer’s relationship to French poetic traditions see Palmer, “Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women: The Narrator’s Tale,” 186; Wimsatt, *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*, 164–67.

downplays that potential, however, saying that his gleaned works “rehercen eft/ That ye han in your fresshe songes sayd” (F78-79). He suggests that his gleaned works do not revise or reimagine but simply rehearse the “fresshe,” original works of his predecessors. His heavy reliance on Machaut’s *Jugement du Roi de Navarre* might seem to corroborate this self-presentation.²¹ Chaucer does, however, diverge greatly from that model, and ironically he does so particularly through his self-representation as an un-creative, un-authoritative reteller. This self-representation that seems to demean and dismiss Chaucer as an author, is in fact one of the more creative elements of the prologue.²² Chaucer’s innovation, that is, comes through his acknowledgment and acceptance of a position of indebtedness to his sources.

Chaucer’s other major creative addition to his source in Machaut is the nature of the text commissioned as punishment for the writer’s literary crimes. Both the *Legend’s* story-collection genre and the emphasis on that commissioned work as the main event of the text are changes from the model of the *Navarre*.²³ This creative addition on Chaucer’s part is likewise represented as being out of diegetic-Chaucer’s control, however, and as showcasing the authority of its patrons rather than of its writer. The prologue depicts the commission as very closely

²¹ Wimsatt even considers the “glenyng” passage’s apostrophe to be directly addressed to Machaut and Froissart; see *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries*, 167.

²² To be sure, humility topoi are entirely conventional and common. It is Chaucer’s combination and repackaging here of elements from sources, analogues, and conventional topoi that I am suggesting is original.

²³ In *Navarre*, the “Jugement” is itself the main event, as the title suggests. Machaut’s penance is also to compose more poetry, but his assignment is three independent poems: a lay, a song and a ballade (*Navarre* 4182-89), of which only the lay follows, and that only in certain manuscripts; see Palmer’s introduction to *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, xxxvii.

directed by Love and Alceste.²⁴ Alceste gives Chaucer the genre, theme and basic plot outline of the work in her original assignment of penance:

Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,
The moste partye of thy tyme spende
In maykyng of a glorious legende
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;
And telle of false men that hem bytraien. (F480-86, G471-76)

Love then adds what little content Alceste left open, directing that the legendary should include the women who are present in the company of Alceste and who also appeared in Chaucer's earlier ballad (F554-57),²⁵ that the work should begin with Cleopatra (F567, G542), that it should use Alceste as its final, crowning example (F548-50, G 539-40), and that each legend should be relatively short (F576-77).²⁶ All that seems to remain to Chaucer is choice of meter, about which Love graciously offers: "Make the metres of hem as the lest" (F562). The commission would seem, then, to leave the author little room for creativity. Underscoring this, Chaucer's final comment, "And with that word my bokes gan I take,/ And ryght thus on my Legende gan I make" (F578-79), depicts him not only jumping to complete the commission immediately, but

²⁴ Frank sees the issue of freedom of choice of material to be central to the *Legend's* exploration of Chaucer-as-writer *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 1–36.

²⁵ The ballad complicates the diegetic picture of responsibility for the contents of the legends. In the F-version, diegetic-Chaucer gives this ballad himself, in advance, almost as a prospective catalogue for the contents of the text to come. It then coincidentally turns out, though, that those ladies whom he mentions are the same ladies accompanying Alceste, so the fact of their presence, along with Love's command to use them in the legendary, seem to cancel out diegetic-Chaucer's authorial choice to put them in his ballad. In the G-version, the ballad is sung by the ladies themselves, not by the narrator, and Love does not instruct him to include the women from the ballad. The G-version also, then, also leaves the writer's agency somewhat uncertain.

²⁶ This length instruction is missing from G. This change might also shift some responsibility for the legends to Chaucer, and might suggest some resistance to the commission, if it is his own choice to tell the legends as quickly as possible. By this I do not mean to revive the "legend of Chaucer's boredom" but to suggest the possibility that the narrator character is *depicted* by Chaucer as resistant to the fictional commission which is "comically dramatized as a burdensome penance"; Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 189–210, 207.

making the commissioned work directly out of the kinds of old books he discussed at the beginning of the Prologue, so that we might imagine him “gleaning” from them and “rehearsing” their contents.²⁷ Between the constraining authorities of his patrons and sources, the prologue suggests, Chaucer has little to do with the *Legend* other than physically writing it down. This depiction certainly misrepresents Chaucer’s real creative contributions to the text. In so doing, it turns Chaucer’s diegetic persona into Alceste’s “mere” vernacular translator.

While not wholly accurate, this self-representation is not wholly inaccurate either. Chaucer’s references to “olde apprevd stories” (F 21), “olde bokes,” (F 25) and to previous authors of “leef or ... flour” (F 72) material invoke the Latinate and French traditions that were his actual sources for the text. Diegetic-Chaucer presents himself and his insufficient “Englyssh” (F66) as subordinate to both of these more established and authoritative literary languages and textual traditions. On top of that, he depicts himself as at the whim of powerful patrons who judge and dictate his material very strictly. Both of these types of literary constraint—authoritative previous texts or traditions²⁸ and authoritative readers²⁹—may well have affected Chaucer’s work in reality, and they were certainly common constraints for contemporary vernacular English literary production more generally. Chaucer’s self-presentation, in other

²⁷ And indeed, the legends themselves are derived in large part from Latin works such as those of Ovid and Virgil, which certainly fit the bill as “old apprevd stories” (F 21); see *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1065–75.

²⁸ Frank argues that the *Legend* offers Chaucer a chance to escape the constraints of the courtly traditions that he had operated within for the majority of his prior works, and that this constituted a “declaration of independence” regarding his choice of material and mode; Frank *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 35. Frank doesn’t address, though, the degree to which classical authors and traditions might likewise represent a constraining, authoritative tradition.

²⁹ I do not mean to suggest that *Legend* was necessarily an actual commission. Some critics believe the *Legend* was a royal commission, based on the reference to Queen Anne in the F version of the Prologue (F 496-97). Fisher goes so far as to suggest that, in fact, the *Legend* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* “appear to stem from the same royal command”; see *John Gower, Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (Taylor & Francis, 1964), 235. See also *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1059.

words, is not only realistic, but also potentially very real. Both at the scale of an individual work, such as the *Legend*, and at the larger scale of his body of works, as in the catalogue, Chaucer reveals himself to be entangled in a network of literary authorities that shape and define him as a vernacular reteller.

The diegetic Chaucer offers one moment of mild resistance to the view of his works imposed by Love and Alceste. Rather than authoritatively freeing him from his constraints, however, his demand for recognition opens up a range of possible understandings of the value of the translator's role, without settling on any one of them. As Chaucer thanks Alceste for appeasing Love's anger, he offers a mild protest against their characterization of his works:

But trewly I wende, as in this cas,
Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas. . . .
Ne a trewe lover oght me not to blame
Thogh that I speke a fals love-re som shame.
They oghte rather with me for to holde
For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde,
Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
Algate, God woot, yt was my entente
To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce. (F462 -72)

After letting Alceste stick up for him by suggesting he has no agency over his translations, diegetic-Chaucer here pushes back against that depiction. He uses the first person pronoun to characterize the ideas expressed in *Troilus and Criseyde* (“I speke,” “I of Creseyde wroot or tolde”), and describes his own “entente” in formulating those ideas. This comment asserts that Chaucer did have responsibility for the work, and that his *entente* as a translator deserves recognition. The rhyme of “my entente” and “what so myn auctour mente” could work in support of this assertion of the value of the translator's contributions, by drawing attention to the similarity of the phrases: both express writerly intention, and both are equally valid.

For diegetic-Chaucer, however, his self-assertion seems to be possible only by leaving the original *auctour* to take the blame for the alleged heresy against Love. He says that his *entente* was to support Love, “what so myn auctour mente,” implying that the source *auctour* may well have meant to “doon to love trespas.” He dissociates his own *entente* from that of his source, and so is able to have the best of both worlds: he escapes the charge of heresy, but lays claim to some type of authority or agency over his translation. Yet by dissociating from the *entente* of his source, the character positions himself either as a bad reader or as an unfaithful, manipulative translator: that is, he must either have not understood the *auctour*’s meaning, or have been prepared to change it. In this light, diegetic-Chaucer’s affirmation, or even authorization, of the role of translator relies on acknowledging disjunctures between translation and source, and so encodes that infidelity or rupture into the possibility of translational authority. We might then read the rhyme of “my entente” and “what so myn auctour mente” as signaling the tension between the two rather than—or as well as—their similarity.

The narrative does not rest here, however, but offers yet another perspective. Alceste is quick to counter that Chaucer’s intention—and presumably the *auctour*’s as well—are irrelevant to the current discussion, and that it is only how she and Love interpret the works that matters.³⁰ She says:

Lat be thyn arguyng,
 For Love ne wol nat countrepleted be
 In ryght ne wrong; and lerne that at me!
 Thow hast thy grace, and hold the ryght therto.
 Now wol I seyn what penance thou shalt do
 For thy trespas. (F475-80)

³⁰ See also McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, 123–4. McGerr likewise sees this exchange as suggesting the author’s intentions “may not have any more authority than the one imposed by a text’s readers or translators” (124). She sees this as part of a larger pattern in Chaucer’s works of acknowledging ultimate limitations of this [authorial] intent in the face of the reader’s reinscription of the text” (12).

Alceste dismisses writerly *entente* in favor of readerly interpretation, or more particularly, the interpretation of authoritative reader-patrons. Her comment implies that, for herself and Love, the question of *entente*, and even the question of agency, take a back seat to the need for someone to do “penance” to correct what they have perceived as a “trespas” against their ideological tastes. Her assertion of social authority, as someone who can judge wrongs and assign penance in this way, is also a claim to the position of literary authority that diegetic-Chaucer seemed briefly to be attempting to occupy. Through their literary authority as patrons, she and Love control not only the meaning of Chaucer’s previous works, but also his production of new ones.

Alceste’s dismissal of writerly *entente* puts an end to the prologue’s debate about whether or not a translator can have agency or authority. The discussion ends, however, without being resolved. The prologue plays with a variety of ideas, and puts diegetic-Chaucer in a variety of roles: from the faithful or even passive “gleaning” translator, to a translator who is equal to an author, to the unfaithful and usurping translator. These various ideas about translation are allowed to stand. At the same time, though, the discussion demonstrates that regardless of a translator’s authority or lack thereof, he remains constrained by other authorities, both literary and socio-political. Though Love and Alceste’s critiques of Chaucer’s works and views of his authorship may be wrong, they still have the power to evoke from the author a new text in response.

The legends themselves are the penance that Chaucer has to pay, and they are the end product of the prologue’s overt discussion of the translator’s variety of constraints. As Sheila

Delany has noted: “Prologue and legends are related as theory and practice.”³¹ In the legendary, the abstractions of the prologue are put to work on real texts, depicting translation and retelling in action, but this practical view of translation does not resolve the question of the authority of translation. Rather, it again makes the uncertainty and constraint of the role of translator a central concern.

The legends struggle with the same forms of authority that diegetic-Chaucer struggled with in the Prologue: namely, authoritative texts and authoritative readers, the constraints of the sources and the constraints of the commission. And their struggle is quite evident: critical opinion has not tended to look too kindly on the legends’ poetic qualities, debating less whether they are flawed and more whether their flaws are intentional or not.³² Chaucer’s *entente*, that is, remains unclear to critics, who continue to debate whether the legends are ironic or sincere.³³ As other critics have noted, however, many of the legends’ supposed failings or infelicities arise from tensions between the various authorities and aims of the text: tensions among differing sources, between sources and the intended thematic purpose of the legendary, and between the intentions of Love’s original commission of nineteen legends and the actual execution of the

³¹ Delany, *The Naked Text*, 70.

³² For a range of readings of the tensions of the legends as intentional see Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*; McCormick, “Remembering the Game”; Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*; Palmer, “Chaucer’s Legend of Good Women: The Narrator’s Tale.”

³³ Quinn notes that there is a “centuries old critical impasse regarding [*LGW*’s] intended sincerity or lack thereof”; “The Legend of Good Women: Performance, Performativity, and Presentation,” in *The Legend of Good Women: Context and Reception*, ed. Carolyn P. Collette, *Chaucer Studies*, 36 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 4. Even those who view the legends as non-ironic treat them cautiously. Frank has mixed reviews, seeing the legends as valiant attempts on Chaucer’s part to break with courtly traditions and do something new, and though some fail to fulfill their potential, he urges regarding them with “a sympathetic eye”; Frank *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 169.

almost-ten³⁴ narratives written.³⁵ The legends' anomalies can, then, be read productively as dramatizing the difficulties of a writer's negotiations of his various constraining authorities, showing how the tensions between such authorities can shape and distort the text.

The double legend of Hypsipyle and Medea is representative of the variety of tensions at play across the legendary, as well as the metapoetic implications of such tensions.³⁶ For one, this legend demonstrates tension between sources. Chaucer cites two main sources for this legend: Guido delle Colonne (1396, 1464) and Ovid (1465, 1678), as well as the supplemental "Argonautycon" (1457). On the surface, he seems to be doing his duty to cite source authority deferentially, and we might imagine him "gleaning" from these various sources to "rehearse" the story. Yet he is not straightforward about his use of those sources. Noting that Jason's arrival in Lemnos, Hypsipyle's land, is "nat rehersed of Guido,/ Yit seyth Ovyde in his Epistels so" (1464-65), Chaucer implies that the story of Hypsipyle meeting and falling in love with Jason is in the

³⁴ My very precise count of "almost-ten" reflects that the fourth legend includes both Medea and Hypsipyle, and that the ninth legend of Hypermnestra is unfinished.

³⁵ Perhaps most glaring among these tensions is that the legends as we have them do not really fulfill Love's commission: Chaucer does not complete the assigned nineteen legends, and includes two legends not assigned (Philomela and Medea). The unfinished state of the *Legend* is part of critical issues with this work, as with all of Chaucer's apparently unfinished works. To be sure, it is possible that Chaucer intended to complete the fictional commission at some point and, along with that, to revise the commission to fit the legends he ended up writing. The question remains why he did not finish. Most critics no longer hold the view that we can see Chaucer actually growing bored of writing the *Legend* through narratorial comments; see Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 189–210. Other critics, though, see *LGW*'s incomplete state as part of Chaucer's larger interest in non-completion. See McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*; Míceál F Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the Parson's Tale," in *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400-1602*, ed. Thomas A. Pendergast and Barbara Kline (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 71–72.

³⁶ For a related examination of Chaucer's re-writerly activity, see Christopher Baswell's discussion of the Dido legend. Baswell argues that the way Chaucer uses Virgil and Ovid "reveals the narrator's sense of his own power to reshape his inherited sources, and thus to remake ancient authority as his own"; Baswell *Virgil in Medieval England*, 256.

Heroides, which it is not.³⁷ The account seems to be borrowed from the *Aeneid*'s portrayal of Dido³⁸ and so is not Ovidian at all, but is rather a creative recombination, achieved through reappropriating Virgilian material as Ovidian. To suggest, as Chaucer later does, that we can authenticate and fill out the details of this legend by reading “th’origynal, that telleth al the cas” (1558), is therefore rather misleading. Indeed, this would be an unhelpful suggestion even if we did not recognize the Dido-esque qualities of Hypsipyle; since Chaucer cited three sources for his version, there is no one “origynal” we can turn to to hear “al the cas.” Ovid alone, or even Ovid, Guido and the “Argonautycon” together cannot fully explain this version of Hypsipyle, which is a unique Chaucerian recombination. The proliferation of sources leads Chaucer to misrepresent them, and so to appear disingenuous or sneaky in his use of them to create his version of Hypsipyle.

Chaucer’s treatment of Medea in the second part of this legend distorts and revises Love’s commission as well as his sources. Though her story is included apparently just as a supplement to Hypsipyle’s, Medea is nevertheless treated as one of the “good,” wronged women in her own right.³⁹ She is not one of the women listed in Chaucer’s ballad in the prologue, however, and so her inclusion in the legendary might signal some resistance to the constraints of

³⁷ Hypsipyle’s letter to Jason in the *Heroides* gives almost no details of their courtship or relationship, focusing mainly on Jason’s recent winning the Golden Fleece, and on the perfidy of Medea, his new love interest. See Ovid, *Heroides* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).

³⁸ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1069.

³⁹ The *Legend*’s commissioned design is itself contradictory and imprecise. Women such as Helen and Canacee, implicated in adultery and incest, respectively, stretch the notion of “good” women. And despite the directive to tell about the “false men that hem bytraien” (*LGW* F484, 486), first two assigned legends, of Cleopatra and of Thisbe, both feature men devoted to their lovers. The inappropriateness of Medea, then, is in some ways rather typical.

the commission.⁴⁰ The legend is notable, furthermore, for its glaring omission of Medea's murders of her two children (not to mention her various other murders). Chaucer does quite a bit of abbreviating in all of the legends, thereby achieving the short length specified by Love. This in itself may reflect critically back on the tensions between execution, details of commission, and intended moral of the legends. By trimming out one of the most infamous elements of Medea's story, Chaucer is able to end her legend cleanly, focusing his moralization on Jason, avoiding the moral discomfort of the filicide, and keeping the story nice and short as Love requested. This omission is also particularly egregious, though, and can't help but be felt.⁴¹ To cast Medea as a "good woman" is to stretch Love's commission to the breaking point, both through Medea's questionable "goodness" and through the implication that this is as good as women get.⁴² The Medea legend is an extreme case of the kinds of distortions that go on in all the legends. The fact that it is not a part of the original commission in the prologue suggests that it may be meant to stand out, as having been added on Chaucer's own initiative, and so to call our attention to the other instances in which Chaucer must awkwardly graft Love's inconsistent readerly agenda onto clashing and inconsistent source material. Throughout the legends, such awkward moments enact the struggle between different textual authorities—including multiple sources as well as the

⁴⁰ Again, it is also possible that Chaucer was simply not done figuring out the shape of the *Legend*. The fact that there is no change in the ballad's projected contents between the F and G prologues, however, may indicate that the ballad's contents at least were settled. The question would remain what the relation between the ballad and legendary was meant to be.

⁴¹ Chaucer systematically omits the magical metamorphoses of his retold Ovidian heroines, and so it might well make sense for him to omit the murders of Pelias, or of Creon and his daughter, given their magical elements. But Medea's murder of her children does not include any such magical element. The *Heroides* doesn't include the filicides either, but does include enough other damning details to problematize Medea's characterization as a "good" woman.

⁴² As Frank notes, such moments of anti-feminist humor in the *Legend* are echoed in Lydgate's reference to Chaucer's work, in *Fall of Princes*, where he suggests Chaucer gave up the *Legend* because it was too difficult to find nineteen good women to write about; Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 189. See also *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen (Washington: The Carnegie institution of Washington, 1923), I. 330–336.

demands of reader-patrons—showing how those competing forces can shape and constrain artistic production.

Taking a step outside of the *Legend*, it is clear that Chaucer is in creative control of his self-presentation here and of his response to the commission of his fictional patrons. Yet, as noted, the constraining forces he depicts, while narrativized, are not necessarily false. To the extent that Chaucer does prevail in the *Legend* over the constraints of sources and readers, and the problematic nature of literary authority, he does so not by ignoring or renouncing those constraints, but by leveraging them. Extradiegetic Chaucer, that is, uses diegetic Chaucer as the means by which to tell a story about vernacular retelling, a metapoetic narrative that is itself creatively revisionary even as it depicts such retelling as constrained and stymied, and even as it relies, itself, on authoritative sources and traditions.

This metapoetic exploration's potential for an alternative or particular kind of authorization at the extradiegetic level of the text can be seen in what Christopher Baswell has called "the Prologue's most cunning moment of inserting Chaucer into the canon of *auctores*"⁴³—the moment where Love identifies Alceste to Chaucer by asking, "Hastow nat in a book, lyth in thy cheste,/ The grete goodnesse of the quene Alceste,/ That turned was into a dayesye" (F510-12). Alceste's metamorphosis into a daisy is not found in any known version of her story and would appear to be Chaucer's creative addition. Therefore, if this version of Alceste appears in a book in Chaucer's chest, Baswell suggests, it must be in this book, in the *Legend of Good Women*.⁴⁴ Yet what Baswell does not note is that, while the daisy does not appear in other Alceste narratives, Chaucer's discussion of the daisy is heavily indebted to the marguerite poems of French poets such as Machaut and Froissart. Bringing the works of those

⁴³ Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England*, 251.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

authors together with the mythological figure of Alceste, Chaucer is creatively recombining classical and French traditions. Even in that moment of thinly-disguised self-canonization, then, Chaucer's work is still contained within a network of competing literary authorities that can shape its meaning, form, and status. By metapoetically dramatizing them, Chaucer claims those constraining forces as creative constraints that define, and in fact enable, the creativity of vernacular retelling.

II. Appropriating Revision: The Man of Law's Magpie-Muse

The catalogue in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* offers a creative remix of the *Legend's* explorations of both the theory and the practice of vernacular retelling. This second Chaucerian catalogue builds on those concerns by depicting another reteller, the Man of Law, engaging with and assessing Chaucer's works as a model for his own tale-telling—and what's more, by using the *Legend* itself as the primary basis of discussion. This time a diegetic version of Chaucer, though ostensibly present on the pilgrimage, does not contribute to the discussion.⁴⁵ Instead, this second Chaucerian catalogue offers a vision of a writer and his work as canonized in the memory of a reader without access to the author himself, and it is an even more subjective and anomalous catalogue than Love and Alceste's.

The Man of Law's catalogue is also more limited in scope than that of the *Legend*. Despite the wide-ranging knowledge implied by his comment, “if he have noght seyde hem.../ in o book, he hath seyde hem in another” (II 51-52), he cites only parts of two works, the *Book of the Duchess* and *Legend of Good Women*, or as he calls them, “Ceys and Alcione” (II 57) and “the

⁴⁵ It is one of the curiosities of the Man of Law's discussion of Chaucer that the Man of Law either doesn't know or doesn't acknowledge the author among the pilgrims, and conversely that neither pilgrim Chaucer in the diegetic moment nor narrator Chaucer in retelling the moment make any comment about the other character's discussion of him.

Seintes Legende of Cupide” (II 61).⁴⁶ He spends most of his time on the *Legend*, briefly describing several of its characters and their narratives, and giving the impression of offering a more penetrating, if more limited, assessment of the author. This apparent list of the figures in the *Legend of Good Women*, however, contains many additions to and omissions from the actual contents of that work as we have it, and at times seems to confuse the *Legend* with the works of Ovid, one of Chaucer’s primary sources.⁴⁷ As with the *Legend*’s catalogue, critics have interpreted the errors in the Man of Law’s account of Chaucer’s works as ironizing the Man of Law as a bad reader.⁴⁸ Yet, as I will demonstrate, these supposed errors can be read in a more positive light as revealing the Man of Law to be an intertextual reader of Chaucer’s retold tales, as well as a revisionary reteller himself.

Through his discussion of Chaucer’s works and his own relationship to Chaucer-as-Author, the Man of Law raises the problem of retelling: the difficulty new authors or retellers face in attempting to make their narratives valuable, or “thrifty” (II 46), in their own right while burdened with the looming authority of previous literature. As in the *Legend*, the anomalies in the Man of Law’s discussion of Chaucer and his works can be seen to explore metapoetically some of the problems and tensions inherent to contemporary ideas of vernacular authorship—but

⁴⁶ Though the works did not have official or stable titles, these designations for them might still look somewhat anomalous to readers familiar with Chaucer’s works. In particular “Ceys and Alcione” is misleading and insufficient as a title of a Chaucerian work, given that it represents only about 150 lines in an introduction to the main narrative of the *Book of the Duchess* (BD 62-214). “The Seintes Legende of Cupide” is at least a plausible name for *LGW*, but doesn’t appear as an actual title in any extant manuscripts of *LGW*. The majority of manuscripts that have an alternative title give something like “the boke of .ix goode women”; *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1179.

⁴⁷ For a summary of list’s relation to *LGW* and to Ovid, see *The Riverside Chaucer* 855.

⁴⁸ Allen notes that critics have tended to describe the Man of Law’s relationship to his story mainly through his weaknesses and offers a brief survey of some such readings; “Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading,” *ELH: Journal of English Literary History* 64, no. 3 (1997): 650 n. See also Rodney Delasanta, “And of Great Reverence: Chaucer’s Man of Law,” *The Chaucer Review* 5, no. 4 (April 1, 1971): 288–310; Foster, *Chaucer’s Narrators and the Rhetoric of Self-Representation*, 139–140.

to quite different ends. In the *Legend*, Chaucer depicted himself as a writer significantly shaped and constrained by “these olde appreved stories” (*LGW* F21) that he was drawing on, and by the authority of reader-patrons who directed his artistic production. The Man of Law claims similar constraints, citing Chaucer’s prolific canon as a hindrance to his own narrative possibilities. Yet where the *Legend*’s Chaucer works primarily within the constraints of that network of authorities, the Man of Law creatively revises and takes apart the conceptions of constraining and hierarchical literary authority depicted in the *Legend*. His faulty Chaucerian catalogue can be read productively as a creative revision both of Chaucer’s body of works and of those works’ relationship to their sources, as well as, more largely, a metapoetic reflection of vernacular literature as compiled, manipulated, and revisionary itself. This depiction of Chaucer and vernacular retelling becomes the means by which the Man of Law himself can take up the position of reteller, enabling him to extrapolate a revisionary view of literary authority more broadly and to make space for himself in the crowded field of tale-tellers.

If the Man of Law introduces errors into his Chaucerian catalogue, they are the informed and productive errors of an intertextual reader, and they call attention to Chaucer’s own processes of self-conscious creative revision. The Man of Law’s anomalies begin at the basic level of his catalogue’s contents. He lists sixteen women as treated in the “Seintes Legende of Cupide,” and his list is a mixed bag of women who do appear in the legendary, women who appear only in the prologue, and women who do not appear in the *Legend* at all, as we have it.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Of the Man of Law’s sixteen women, only eight have full narratives in the *Legend* (Lucrece, Thisbe, Dido, Phyllis, Ariadne, Hypsipyle, Medea and Hypermnestra). Another five are mentioned in the *Legend*’s prologue, though their narratives are not told (Hero, Helen, Laodamia and Penelope and Alcestis), but three of the Man of Law’s women do not appear anywhere in the *Legend* (Deianira, Hermione and Briseis). He also leaves out two figures who do have full legends (Cleopatra and Philomela) as well as five women mentioned in the *Legend*’s Prologue (Esther, “Marcia Catoun,” Isolde,

The very loose relation of his list to the actual contents of Chaucer's text repeats the *Legend's* own internal discrepancies between its prologue's projected contents of nineteen legends, and the only almost-ten legends actually written. Whether the Man of Law's incorrect list indicates a *Legend* still in progress or, more self-deprecatingly, points out the inconsistencies of the *Legend*, it draws attention to the unsettled and unfinished nature of the Chaucerian corpus the Man of Law is drawing on.

Beyond the level of contents, the way the Man of Law describes these supposedly Chaucerian subjects is creatively and productively erroneous. His reference to Hero and Leander, for example, picks up on a metapoetic issue raised in the *Legend* itself: the tension between its reader-patrons and its author, or between the commission and the execution of the legends. This item in the Man of Law's catalogue stands out at first for its emphasis on the male figure in the couple, as the Man of Law bewails "the dreynthe Leandre for his Erro" (II 69). Hero and Leander are mentioned in the *Legend's* prologue, but their story is not ultimately told. Even if Chaucer was planning to add this story to the *Legend* at some point, though, qua "Legend of Good *Women*" the story should be told as a "Legend of Hero," with Leander only secondarily commended if at all. In fact, given the original commission's directive that the *Legend* should consist of "goode wymmen" and the "false men that hem bytraien" (*LGW* F484, 486), technically Hero and Leander should not be a part of it at all. The *Legend* itself already breaks that imperative however with faithful male figures such as Piramus. The Man of Law's discrepant emphasis on Leander calls attention to similar discrepancies in the *Legend* itself.

Lavina and Polyxena). Some critics believe the Man of Law's anomalous list means Chaucer was still working on the *LGW*; see Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 198. This would seem like a strange place to signal that projected revision, however, without any corresponding evidence in the *Legend* itself—particularly since Chaucer did revise the *LGW* prologue. Given the other anomalies of the Man of Law's catalogue, moreover, it is both compelling and productive to view this as intentionally misrepresenting the *Legend*.

This anomalous emphasis on Leander may have a precedent in the *Legend*, then, but it does not actually have a source there. Ovid's *Heroides*, on the other hand, from which Chaucer draws a good deal of material for the legends, does offer such a source: *Heroides* includes a letter from Leander to Hero, as well as the other way around. Particularly in the absence of a corresponding narrative in the *Legend*, then, the Man of Law's emphasis on Leander suggests that what he is thinking of here may actually be Ovid. Ovid's version of the narrative, which almost certainly would have been a main source for Chaucer's, fills the empty space left by the narrative's absence in the *Legend*. The Man of Law, that is, misremembers Ovid's narrative as Chaucer's, and so writes a "Legend of Hero" into the Chaucerian canon. The Man of Law fills in the apparent gaps in Chaucer's work by conflating and combining Chaucerian and Ovidian narratives, thereby revising the Chaucerian canon. If the Man of Law's recollection of the *Legend* is flawed, then, it also point out and works to correct what could be perceived as a flaw—though a very characteristic and defining one—of Chaucer's work: its incompleteness.

The Man of Law's account of the "Legend of Medea" speaks back to Chaucer's corpus in a different way: by drawing attention to Chaucer's practices of revisionary distortion of his sources. The Man of Law recounts a fuller version of Medea's story than the *Legend* contains when he apostrophizes: "the crueltee of the, queene Medea,/ Thy litel children hangynge by the hals,/ For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!" (II 72-74).⁵⁰ Given that, as we saw, the *Legend's* version conspicuously omits the filicide, this image of the "litel children hangynge by the hals" is not Chaucerian.⁵¹ The Man of Law's "error" of referring to the murder of the children calls

⁵⁰ This item in the catalogue stands out from the others by virtue of being given the largest number of lines in the Man of Law's recital. Medea gets three lines while the other figures get only one line or even share one – the one other exception being the two lines shared by Ariadne & Hypsipyle.

⁵¹ Chaucer does mention the murder in *BD* (725-27), and in *LGW* the murder is obliquely foretold or at least wished by Hypsipyle who, when she realizes that Jason has left her, "preyede God.../That she that

attention to the murder's palpable absence in the *Legend*, exposing Chaucer's manipulation of his material to make it fit the context of the *Legend's* commission. By calling attention to Chaucer's elisions, in this way, the Man of Law highlights Chaucer's own practices of interpretive retelling, illuminating the particular kind of creative agency at work in selectively editing a work while translating it.

At the same time that he exposes Chaucer's creative revisions of his sources, moreover, the Man of Law engages in some similar revisionary work himself. The detail of that the children are murdered by hanging "has no parallel";⁵² the Man of Law seems to have filled this detail in from his own imagination, or at least, from another unknown version of the narrative. The Medea narrative that the Man of Law retells, like that of the *Legend's* Hypsipyle, cannot be fully explained by any one of his sources, nor by the sum of all of them. His version is, in a sense, a third text, one that is neither Chaucerian nor Ovidian but is uniquely his own creation, or rather re-creation. This Medea is a product of the Man of Law's intertextual reading and revisionary retelling, which are modeled on Chaucer's own similar practices.

By attributing his own revised narratives back to Chaucer, moreover, the Man of Law also revises the Chaucerian corpus as he describes it. The Man of Law's intertextual Chaucerian-Ovidian (and more) catalogue represents a kind of reading-together of the different bodies of work in a way that likely would have occurred for Chaucer's readers.⁵³ Readers familiar with Ovid or the broader mythological tradition would read with those versions of narratives overlaying the *Legend*, making visible the moments where Chaucer has adapted,

hadde his herte yraft hire fro/ Moste fynden hym untrew to hir also./ And that she moste bothe hire chylde[n] spylle" (*LGW* 1571-74). But in neither instance are there specifics about the *method* of murder.

⁵² *The Riverside Chaucer*, 855.

⁵³ At the very least Chaucer's primary intended audience would have been familiar with both bodies of work, per Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 41–51.

elided, and revised. That type of intertextual reading creates just such a third text in the minds of savvy readers, a metatext that includes Chaucerian works alongside their sources or analogues. The Man of Law's catalogue dramatizes that kind of reading and also exaggerates it by depicting Chaucer's works as literally inseparable from their intertexts. This readerly misremembering or misrepresentation of the actual intertextual relationship between the texts blurs the *Legend* and the *Heroides* into one productively confused corpus, that gives rise to the Man of Law's own role as a tale-teller.

The Man of Law distorts that intertextual relationship even further by extolling Chaucer over Ovid even as he silently exaggerates Chaucer's use of Ovidian sources. As prelude to his catalogue, the Man of Law asserts that Chaucer "hath toold of loveris up and doun/ Mo than Ovide made of menciou/ In his Episteles, that been ful olde" (II 53-55). This comparison puts the vernacular poet above the Latinate *auctor*, at least in the volume of output of his love poetry, and so could seem, on the surface, to be a bold authorizing move. Ironically, however, all of the Chaucerian works the Man of Law mentions have sources or analogues in Ovid. The catalogue, in fact, almost goes out of its way to make this intertextual debt absolute. The Man of Law fails to mention Chaucer's legend of Cleopatra, a figure whom Ovid doesn't write about, and his reference to the narrative of "Ceys and Alcione," (II 57) which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, isolates that story from its Chaucerian context within the *Book of the Duchess*, which primarily derives from French analogues. If the Man of Law wanted to highlight Chaucer's literary production that is "mo" than Ovid, or at least outside of Ovidian influence, that is, he misses some very obvious chances to do so. Instead he describes a Chaucerian corpus that is entirely Ovidian, exaggerating Chaucer's intertextual borrowings from Ovid.

At the same time that it exaggerates Chaucer's reliance on Ovid, the catalogue erases Ovid from the picture, attributing the composite canon entirely to Chaucer. The other irony of the Man of Law's assertion that Chaucer has written "Mo than Ovide made of mencioun/ In his Episteles" is that, for the works listed in the catalogue, the opposite is true: the Man of Law cites more figures from the *Heroides* than Chaucer actually "made of mencioun" in the *Legend of Good Women*.⁵⁴ The Man of Law wrongly attributes versions of these Ovidian stories to Chaucer, and then uses those narratives as means for suggesting that Chaucer has written "mo" than Ovid. Through this revisionary view of Chaucer and Ovid's intertextual relations, the Man of Law enacts on Chaucer's behalf an extreme version of the competitive type of *translatio* that aims to appropriate and usurp the narrative material and literary authority of sources.⁵⁵ The Man of Law abuses the potential authorizing power of the intertextual relationship between Chaucer and Ovid, side-stepping any direct source attribution and simply claiming Ovid's narratives, and by extension his literary authority, for Chaucer. Of course for an audience familiar with the *Legend* or with Ovid, the Man of Law's misrepresentation would likely be quite evident, and so it would have the reverse effect: comically deflating the image of Author Chaucer created by the catalogue.

By drawing its metapoetic catalogue almost exclusively from the *Legend*, which has its own metapoetic catalogue, The Man of Law's Introduction creates a dizzying *mise en abyme* of self-conscious Chaucerian intertextuality, focused on the literary genealogy of Ovid to Chaucer to Chaucer's readers and literary descendants. Read together, these two catalogues offer opposed but interrelated visions of retelling, giving exaggerated and ironic examples of what

⁵⁴ The Man of Law does mention two stories contained in the *Legend* that are not in the *Heroides*—Thisbe and Lucrece, but those figures appear in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, respectively.

⁵⁵ On the appropriation and usurpation available through translation and retelling, see Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*.

were the two typical conceptions of vernacular retelling: either, as in the *Legend of Good Women*, accepting a position of dependence on and submission to past authorities and authoritative reader-patrons, or, as in the *Man of Law's Introduction*, usurping and appropriating the authority of past writing through manipulative, creative revision. Chaucer lets us see through both of these representations of retelling, however, making clear that neither is the whole truth, while acknowledging that both are part of vernacular authorship.

The Man of Law's vision of Chaucer's canon as an embodiment of the appropriative possibilities of retelling also serves the character in his own present need to take on the role of the tale-teller. At first glance, the Man of Law's discussion of this prolific author's works looks like a conventional introductory gesture of deferent allusion to a source. But of course, Chaucer is not the source of the tale the Man of Law tells. In fact, the Man of Law explicitly asserts that he will *not* retell a Chaucerian tale:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on rymyng craftily,
Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man. (II 46-50)

Chaucer is the reason for his delay in coming up with a tale to tell, since the author has already told so many stories and the Man of Law feels that to retell them would be pointless: "What sholde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde?" (II 56). This comment implies a view of retelling as a less worthwhile (and less "thrifty" or profitable⁵⁶) form of tale-telling. Indeed, the Man of Law's account of Chaucer's works, far from inspiring him, leaves him wondering, "But of my tale how

⁵⁶ On the currency and exchange value of narrative authority in the *Man of Law's Tale, Introduction, Prologue* and *Epilogue*, see Gania Barlow, "A Thrifty Tale: Narrative Authority and the Competing Values of the Man of Law's Tale," *The Chaucer Review* 44, no. 4 (2010): 397–420.

shal I doon this day?" (II 90). Chaucer is in fact the opposite of a source: he is an obstacle to tale-telling.

Though the Man of Law's assessment of Chaucer's literary merits is rather tempered here (a point I will return to), he nevertheless sets up Chaucer as a prolific and established author "of olde tyme," who is well-known by "many a man." And while he is not a source, Chaucer does represent a kind of literary authority for the Man of Law: he is a previous author whose works influence and constrain the newer tale-teller's narrative possibilities. Chaucer is to the Man of Law, in some sense, as Ovid is to Chaucer. The Man of Law makes the choice not to attempt to retell the works of this predecessor, however, instead meditating on the quintessential and defining problem of vernacular retellers, namely, what it means to "come after" (II 95) another author:

Me were looth be likned, doutelees,
To Muses that men clepe Pierides—
Methamorphosios woot what I mene;
But nathelees, I recche noight a bene
Though I come after hym with hawebake.
I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make. (II 91-96)

With these comments, the Man of Law extrapolates out from the specific discussion of Chaucer's works that precedes them, to offer an idiosyncratic and revisionary view of literary authority and dependency in the mode of retelling more broadly. This brief but rich reflection therefore bears some close scrutiny.

His reflection begins, perhaps unsurprisingly, with a flawed intertextual reference. The Man of Law's primary concern about being "likned . . . To Muses that men clepe Pierides" (II.91-92), offers a confused allusion to a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The daughters of King Pierus (who are called the Pierides after their father) challenge the Muses (who are also known as the Pierides because they were born in Pieria) to a singing contest; the mortal women

inevitably lose and are transformed into magpies as punishment for their hubris in attempting to imitate, or even usurp, the ultimate artistic authority.⁵⁷ If we read the allusion through the original myth, the reference suggests that retelling a Chaucerian tale would involve Man of Law in a similar transgression of the bounds of literary authority. The Man of Law makes clear, however, that retelling does not necessarily make you a magpie. His strategy for avoiding magpie status is, on the contrary, to accept a secondary and even inferior status by declaring that: “nathelless, I recche nocht a bene/ Though I come after hym with hawebake” (II 94-95). He resigns himself to being second rate in relation to Chaucer:⁵⁸ not only coming after him, but also coming after with an admittedly inferior dish.⁵⁹ By accepting that inferior position, the Man of Law can avoid the potential hubris of pretending at being a Muse and so of being labeled a magpie, while still being able to tell a story. Read through the original Pierides myth, in this way, the allusion looks like a fairly typical humility topos that affirms Chaucer’s authoritative status and the Man of Law’s subordinate position.

This establishment of an authoritative Chaucer is undermined both diegetically and extradiegetically, however. The reader is, of course, aware that it is Chaucer constructing this version of himself—and, as we know from the myth, casting yourself as a muse is the surest sign of a magpie.⁶⁰ Within the Man of Law’s own discussion, moreover, his praise of Chaucer is neither consistent nor very enthusiastic. Much of his discussion does indicate that he considers

⁵⁷ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation* (London: Penguin, 2004), 5.294–678.

⁵⁸ Grammatically, “hym” must refer to Chaucer, though the closest subject is “the Muses that men clepe Pierides.”

⁵⁹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 88 n. 95.

⁶⁰ As Helen Cooper notes, “it seems to be an irony not lost on Chaucer that Muse and magpie share the same name, just as the true poet is the ventriloquist for the Man of Law”; Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 123.

Chaucer to be authoritative in some respect.⁶¹ Yet he also remarks that Chaucer “kan but lewedly/ On metres and on rymyng craftily” (II 47-48) and that his works are written merely “in swich Englissh as he kan” (II 49). These comments certainly soft-pedal the quality of Chaucer’s poetics. In the Man of Law’s assessment, it seems that Chaucer has been able to accrue a great deal of authority despite being simply a vernacular poet of mediocre talents. The Man of Law’s portrait of the author—or rather, Chaucer’s self-portrait—humorously vacillates between extremes of praise and mockery, authority and hawebake, through which Chaucer puts himself into a lose-lose situation that exposes him as a magpie from every angle. While the myth-metaphor seems to offer Chaucer a position of authority with one hand, then, it in fact takes it away with both.

A revisionary view of literary authority more broadly opens up, however, if we read the Man of Law’s mythical allusion “straight”—that is, if we read it as he actually delivers it, with all its apparent flaws, rather than assuming he means to invoke the original version of the myth. He retells the story of mortal women who hubristically seek to usurp the authority of the Muses, but his version of that story ironically repeats the attempted usurpation. By conflating the two groups of women into a single figure “that men clepe Pierides,” he re-casts the usurpers as self-identical to the Muses they aspired to be, succeeding rhetorically where the magpie Pierides failed in the original myth. In the Man of Law’s version, their failed attempt to outdo the goddesses still raises the pretenders to an association with the authentic Muses. They are

⁶¹ He judges Chaucer’s literary output as larger than that of Ovid, and suggests that his treatment of the *Legend* narratives is too definitive to attempt retelling. He also admires Chaucer’s choice of material as more seemly than that of *certain* authors, commenting that Chaucer never wrote “swich unkynde abhomynacions” (II 88) as the incest stories of Canacee and Apollonius of Tyre. This comment has generally been taken as a subtle allusion to Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, in which both narratives appear. The allusion has even been taken a sign of hostility or competition between the two authors, though other critics have interpreted it as more tongue-in-cheek, particularly given that “Canace” is one of the women in Chaucer’s ballad in the *LGW* prologue (*LGW* 265). For a treatment of this allusion and the relationship of the two authors, see Fisher, *John Gower, Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer*.

certainly recognized as second rate: the Man of Law does not want to be “likned” to them. Yet the “hawebake” of their inferior artistry still earns them a claim to some of the authority of the artists they “come after”—after all, the Man of Law calls them “*Muses* that men clepe Pierides.” This conflated magpie-muse once again represents the kinds of appropriation possible through retelling, physically embodying the type of appropriation the Man of Law’s Chaucerian-Ovidian catalogue undertook. At the same time, the Man of Law also affirms the inferior nature of the retellers and their literary product, taking a rather dim view of retelling not unlike that expressed by Alceste.

If the magpies get the boon of being conflated with the Muses in the Man of Law’s version of the myth, though, the Muses also are forced into conflation with the magpies—and that association is damaging. The Man of Law’s “loathing” for the hybrid magpie-muse suggests that its muse half does not make up for its magpie half; it is less than the sum of its parts. The authority of the real Muses, that is, has been undercut or tainted by the magpies’ attempt to appropriate it.⁶² The Man of Law’s version of the myth, then, depicts artistic authority as a zero sum game: if the magpies gain some authority by association with the Muses, the Muses lose that same measure of authority. As I have argued elsewhere, the Man of Law imagines narrative authority as quantifiable, as a currency that is exchangeable and equivalent with other forms of currency,⁶³ flattening out its complexities into something that he can manipulate and control. Yet that quantification of narrative authority threatens to get out of hand. The hybrid magpie-muse the Man of Law invokes does not even have enough authority as a composite entity to earn his

⁶² This may pick up on a hint in the *Metamorphoses* version, where one of the Muses, in recounting the story of the contest, comments that “shame as it was to compete with these girls, we thought it was even/more shaming to bow to their claim” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 5.315–16.) Even though the Muses win and do not “bow to their claim,” engaging in the contest at all, having any kind of association with the magpie “girls,” is itself shaming to the Muses.

⁶³ Barlow, “A Thrifty Tale.”

respect, and so the implication of his version of the myth may be even more cynical, suggesting that such authority is in fact perishable: the more people who attempt to claim some of it, the less there is to go around.

The Man of Law's conception of diminishing authority can be observed in his depiction of the relationship between Chaucer and Ovid as well. His calling Ovid's "Metamorphosios" as a witness to his Pierides myth encourages us to associate his earlier composite Chaucerian-Ovidian canon with the present allusion. By the same trick of conflation that drives the myth, the catalogue gives Ovidian authority to Chaucer while still noting Chaucer's mediocre abilities as an author. And just as the Muses lose authority through association with the magpies, so Ovid comes out the worse in this vision of his association with Chaucer: his contribution to the narratives of the Man of Law's intertextual catalogue is erased and, as a result, his "Episteles" (II 55) are outdone by Chaucer's writings about lovers, if not in quality then at least in quantity. The hybrid Chaucerian-Ovidian figure constructed by the Man of Law might then, like the magpie-muse, be less than the sum of its parts.

The Man of Law compounds the trend of diminishing literary authority by taking magpie Chaucer as a Muse whom he can mock and disdain to use as a source, while still affirming that his own ability to critique his Muse does not mean his literary production will be any better than mere "haweake" itself. As a representation of literary authority employed by a reteller, this image looks curiously self-defeating—for Chaucer no less than for the Man of Law. If the Man of Law's treatment of Chaucer leaves us, on the one hand, with a semi-positive image of Chaucer as an Author *for* the Man of Law, on the other hand it suggests an amusingly deflating image of Chaucer as the author *of* the Man of Law: continually following himself with haweake in a self-canceling downward spiral.

What looks at the diegetic level like the Man of Law's humility topos turns out to be, at the extradiegetic level, Chaucer's. By using the conventions of the humility topos to actually lampoon its author, the Man of Law's discussion of Chaucer has the opposite effect of that device's conventional purpose. And in a larger sense, the conception of literary authority envisioned here also turns the logic of such authorizing devices on its head. Humility topoi generally work with other introductory moves, such as a deferential discussion of sources and previous authors, to authorize the work that is to follow: a reteller humbly positions himself in relation to other authors in order to enable himself to appropriate or share in some part of their authority.⁶⁴ The inherent tension of humility topoi, then, is that despite claiming humility they can serve as a powerful source of authority. The Man of Law's discussion takes this tension and makes it a driving illogic of his revisionary view of literary authority: if humility towards one's sources enables a reteller to appropriate that source's authority, why not just skip the middleman and humble the sources directly? The Man of Law disparages other authors, from both sets of Pierides to Ovid to Chaucer, clearing them out of his way as a means toward taking the position of tale-teller himself. In a sense, that is, the Man of Law takes a wholly backward approach to taking on a literary voice and space: rather than invoking past authority so as to claim some part of it, he qualifies and belittles all past authority and disclaims any share. It is this negation of literary authority that seems to empower the Man of Law to finally tell his tale. He shrugs off the whole discussion of the problem of "coming after" another author as not worth a bean, and begins his prologue within five lines.

While empowering for the Man of Law in the short term, his slash-and-burn approach to literary authority risks being unsustainably destructive in the long term, tending toward the

⁶⁴ Rita Copeland has shown how the authority of sources could actually be taken on and even usurped by re-users under the guise of these kinds of introductory moves of deference and self-deprecation; see Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, 63–86.

negation of all literary authority. Still, his vision offers some insight into the dynamics of literary authority and vernacular authorship. As we saw, before he sets about destroying literary authority generally, the Man of Law carefully constructs the shaky authority of his non-source, Chaucer, in an exaggeration and perversion of conventional self-authorizing moves, in which a writer constructs a vision of the authority of his sources. The Man of Law's creative destruction, that is, reveals how other authors creatively construct the literary authority they draw on; and if such authority is created by writers and retellers, then it is also revisable. The Man of Law's destructive revisions of conventional literary topoi hint at the possibility that such revision could also be productive. This is the vision that will be explored, cautiously, in the *Retraction*, Chaucer's final catalogue.

III. Perpetual Revision: The *Retraction*'s Author-in-process

In the *Legend of Good Women* and the Man of Law's Introduction, Chaucer puts his catalogues in the mouths of his characters, figures whom it is possible to dismiss as merely flawed readers giving a flawed account of their author. In the *Retraction*, however, we are apparently presented with the author finally giving an account of himself. Many critics have argued that the *Retraction* represents the historical Chaucer's true voice finally emerging from the polysemous cacophony of the *Canterbury Tales* to offer either repentance or self-promotion.⁶⁵ Chaucer takes ownership of his works here as he never has before, downplaying the constraining influences of sources and readers that his other two catalogues emphasize. Even as he seems to claim a kind of authority over his works, however, he appears to reject that

⁶⁵ Overviews of scholarly interpretations of the *Retraction* can be found in Fumo, "The God of Love and Love of God"; Phyllis Portnoy, "The Best-Text/best-Book of Canterbury: The Dialogic of the Fragments," *Florilegium: Carleton University Annual Papers on Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 13 (1994): 161–72.

authority and the bulk of his writing along with it. Reading this final catalogue alongside its more obviously self-conscious, ambiguous, and ironic fellows illuminates some of the *Retraction*'s own irregularities and intertextual implications, complicating the picture of the author and his works that the text seems to offer at first glance.

The *Retraction* is Chaucer's final catalogue, but it is not the final word on his works. The *Retraction* offers a perspective that is extradiegetical in relation to the catalogues of the *Legend* and the Man of Law. Yet the perspective is still not outside of narrative altogether. Rather, Chaucer here continues to use himself and his body of works as a means of telling a story about vernacular authorship. The more we look into the *Retraction* catalogue's particulars, the more we run into the same problem we found in the previous two catalogues: namely, that the catalogue is not altogether accurate or straightforward. The author in the *Retraction* struggles to perform a moralized self-critique of his works even while exhibiting a contradictory impulse toward self-authorization, and while his works evade his attempts at definition and closure. The catalogue's various ambiguities, anomalies, and omissions draw a picture of a body of works still under revision and subject to reinterpretation. If the *Retraction* offers any kind of authorizing vision for Chaucer, then, it does so by casting his body of works as representative of vernacular authorship generally as they enact and model a continuous process of revision—of texts, of meanings, and of authorship itself.

Chaucer's last catalogue maintains the trend established by the first two of undermining or ironizing the conventional self-authorization that authorial catalogues offer, by criticizing the works as it lists them.⁶⁶ While the other catalogues came from the mouths of critical readers, this

⁶⁶ On the self-authorizing quality of analogous authorial self-catalogues, see *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 803–4.

final catalogue comes from the mouth of a self-critical author. The list famously appears within a moralized rejection of the bulk of his writings:

Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;/ and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees, the whiche I revoke in my retracciouns:/ as is the book of Troilus; the book also of Fame; the book of the xxv. Ladies; the book of the Duchesse; the book of Seint Valentynes day of the Parlement of Briddes; the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne;/ the book of the Leoun;⁶⁷ and many another book, if they were in my remembraunce, and many a song and many a leccherous lay, that Crist for his grete mercy foryeve me the synne./ But of the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and other bookes of legendes of seintes and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun, / that thanke I oure Lord Jhesu Crist. (X 1084-89)

Similar to the structure of the *Legend's* catalogue, the list here is divided into “bad” and “good” works, though under a quite different rubric for what those judgments mean. This interpretive categorization might look more plausible and authoritative than the *Legend's*, given that it is spoken by the author himself, and that it is based in Christian morality. Yet once again, the list contains anomalies that call its purpose and meaning into question. The occasional specificity and detail of the catalogue give an impression of thoroughness that is deceiving, and the texts that are omitted, or included ambiguously, open cracks in our understanding of the catalogue's moralized organization.

Chaucer is quite thorough in his explicit naming of the “bad” works, and so we might well wonder at the absence from that list of the *Romaunt of the Rose*. Certainly his inclusion in the “bad” list of “many another book, if they were in my remembrance” (X 1087) theoretically covers this omission. Yet it is hard to believe he would forget to include in this “bad” list the work that featured so prominently in the *Legend* as one of two works judged to be “bad” by

⁶⁷ Scholars presume this otherwise unknown text to be a lost reworking of Machaut's *Dit dou Lyon*, and to have been among Chaucer's very early works. Dear posits that it was written for Prince Lionel of Antwerp on the occasion of either his marriage or his death, both of which occurred in 1368; “Chaucer's Book of the Lion,” 105. If the early date for this text correct, the work's absence from the *Legend's* catalogue is quite curious. As much as we might want to engage in wild speculations about this work, however, as Dear points out doing so is futile (yet interesting!) (105).

Love. The *Romaunt* is, moreover, the only long work Chaucer doesn't name, and so would find itself quite lonely in the apparently large group of "many another book."⁶⁸ Ironically, the phrase "many another book," which seems superficially to cover Chaucer's forgotten literary sins, in fact, implies a greater number of sins—that is, a greater number of "bad" works—than he actually seems to have committed. As an echo of a confessional phrase,⁶⁹ the inclusion of "many" forgotten sinful texts is perhaps commendable, yet in this context it is hard to take seriously. The implication of a great number of unnamed sinful books inflates Chaucer's sins and repentance, but also inflates his canon, depicting him as a more prolific author than he can really claim to be.

Chaucer's apparent misrepresentation of the size of his canon continues in the "good" list. In contrast to the "bad" list, the "good" list is almost humorously short, containing only *Boece* by name, and then referring more vaguely to "other bookes of legendes of seintes and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun" (X 1088). This reticence could be meant to indicate modesty or humility, if we take the list to be meant as a sincere confession. But, as with the reference to "many another [bad] book," it is difficult to imagine what "other [good] bookes" Chaucer is obliquely calling to his defense. This sub-list implies a variety of lengthy treatises or tomes on religious themes—a type of work that is conspicuously lacking from the extant Chaucerian canon. Reaching beyond the extant works, we might allow him two works

⁶⁸ I am excepting certain presumed lost works mentioned in the *Legend* prologue, which would in any case mostly likely fall under the "good" works, as I discuss below. *Anelida and Arcite* and *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* are also not mentioned. However, since the former is left out of the *Legend's* catalogue too, and given its extremely unfinished state (that is, more unfinished than the average Chaucerian text) and its uneasy relation to *the Knight's Tale*, we might assume Chaucer did not think of it as worth mentioning as one of his works. The *Astrolabe*, as a scientific treatise, might just be too neutral to warrant inclusion one way or the other.

⁶⁹ Sayce notes that the phrase "'and many another book, if they were in my remembraunce' ... is a humorous allusion to a confessional phrase, [and] serves to weaken the force of the confession"; "Chaucer's 'Retractions,'" 245.

mentioned in the *Legend's* catalogue, “Wreched Engendrynge of Mankynde”⁷⁰ and “Origenes upon the Maudeleyne.”⁷¹ These could possibly have been independent books, if Chaucer indeed did complete such translations, and together could account for his “other bookes of . . . omelies.” We might also grant him that handful of Canterbury Tales that do not “sownen into synne,” particularly the “religious” works that might be thought of as “legendes of seintes”—if we use the term “saints” rather loosely—namely, *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, and *The Second Nun's Tale*. Yet neither independently nor as a group could these be very convincingly called “other bookes,” let alone multiple “other bookes” that contain multiple “legendes of seintes.” Finally, the inclusion of still more books of “moralitee, and devocioun” implies long Chaucerian religious works that are something other than all of the above. These terms are loose enough to implicate any number of works, but do not clearly refer to any specific, known “books.” Chaucer's vague description of his “good” works, then, begins to look like another sly inflation of his body of works rather than a demurral.

Ironically, the closest thing we have to a Chaucerian book of saints' legends is *The Legend of Good Women*—or, as the Man of Law calls it, “the Seintes Legende of Cupide” (II 61)—which playfully aligns its wronged mythological women with Christian saints. It is perhaps unsurprising, given that morally questionable alignment, that *Legend* appears in the “bad” list here. The *Legend* was central to the other two catalogues, however, both of which cast it as an example of Chaucerian morality. The Man of Law praises the *Legend* as a moral work through its avoidance of incest stories. The *Legend* casts itself as a work of penance for sins against the God of Love in language that seems to attempt (whether seriously or ironically) to

⁷⁰ This work is mentioned in the *Legend's* G Prologue (LGW G414), and is thought to be a lost prose translation of Pope Innocent III's *De miseria humane conditionis*. See *The Riverside Chaucer*, 1065.

⁷¹ LGW F428. This work is thought to be a lost translation of a homily by pseudo-Origin; *Ibid.*

equate the pagan and Christian gods and their respective systems of *amor* and *caritas*.⁷² The centrality of the *Legend* to the other catalogues makes its positioning in the *Retraction* stand out. This intertextual connection draws our attention to the differing interpretations of the work across the catalogues, highlighting the catalogues' conflicting and shifting interpretations of the Chaucerian canon.

We might wish to conclude that Chaucer is here retracting the idea of the *Legend's* morality that the other two catalogues develop. But there is yet another anomaly in this item that troubles any attempt to read it as the author sincerely rejecting or distancing himself from the work—namely, the number of ladies referred to in the title that the text is given here: “the book of the xxv. Ladies” (X 1086). *The Riverside Chaucer* notes that “XXV” is possibly an error for “XIX,”⁷³ though that does not seem like the most likely of scribal errors.⁷⁴ Even if the number were meant to be nineteen, moreover, the item is still anomalous within the context of the *Retraction*. While there are nineteen ladies mentioned in the *Legend's* prologue, there are only (almost) ten women in the extant legendary. At the very least, this anomaly reflects the unfinished and in-flux nature of the *Legend* and of Chaucer's body of works more broadly. Given Chaucer's tendencies toward self-mockery, moreover, it is tempting to read the “xxv. Ladies” as metapoetically underscoring those qualities of instability and unfinishedness in his works; and this reading opens up a mine of potential comic self-deprecation. If we read this item as revising the total number of projected legends to twenty-five, the catalogue's reference pushes

⁷² Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales*, 67–70. Kiser suggests that through the *Legend's* God of Love, Chaucer is critiquing other overly simplistic attempts to unite the very different types of love.

⁷³ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 965.

⁷⁴ Hammond notes, moreover, that “most manuscripts” contain the number twenty-five “expressed in words, in Roman or in Arabic numerals,” making it a very persistent error if it was one. Eleanor Prescott Hammond, “Chaucer's ‘Book of the Twenty-Five Ladies,’” *Modern Language Notes* 48, no. 8 (December 1, 1933): 515.

the work even further from completion than it already is (as we have it) and so in a way unravels the fabric of the text. That growing gap between plan and completed text, might also seem to imply that work was still in progress on the *Legend*, but this would mean Chaucer returning to a work he here preemptively condemns as containing only “worldly vanitees” (X 1085), thereby undermining the possibility of the author’s sincere repentance. The catalogue’s treatment of the *Legend*—as a text of doubtful virtue possibly still in progress—works against the *Retraction*’s apparent aim of finalizing the meaning of the works and closing the Chaucerian canon.

The definitive judgment of Chaucer’s works that the catalogue appears to offer is an illusion, and the catalogue’s treatment of the *Canterbury Tales* makes this particularly clear. That work is partially but obscurely censured when Chaucer includes in the “bad” list “the tales of Canterbury, thilke that sownen into synne” (X 1086). He indicates that certain of the tales are in the “bad” list, and others presumably in the “good,” but we are given no clues about how to differentiate among them. The wary reader might wish to avoid the *Canterbury Tales* all together—but of course to know that she ought to be wary, a reader will likely have already read through the tales, or at least some of them, before getting to the *Retraction*. Chaucer’s vague condemnation calls the value of all parts of the text into question—including the *Retraction* that concludes it. That judgment, however, comes too late to affect a reader’s first engagement with the text, and too little to inform the reevaluation of the text that it encourages.

At one moment Chaucer does seem to offer us a glimpse into his authorial “entente” (X 1083), but the statement of intent he offers is wrapped up in contradiction. As he apologizes for anything that might “displese” the reader (X 1082), Chaucer affirms that he “wolde ful fayn have seyde bettre if I hadde had konnyngne./ For oure book seith, ‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (X 1082-83). Chaucer defends himself by deploying the “Al

that is written,” saying derived from Romans 15:4, which, Sayce notes, had been widely adopted as a means of justifying “the generally instructive purpose of all literature, secular as well as religious.”⁷⁵ This is, however, as Cooper points out, a “deeply ambivalent quotation,”⁷⁶ which covers all of his works without saying anything particular about any of them. The “al that is written” philosophy assures us that there is good to be taken from any text if we know how to find it, since “there is no book a saint cannot read.”⁷⁷ This doctrine effectively shrugs off authorial intention altogether, putting the burden of moralizing interpretation on the reader; it suggests we needn’t bother to understand Chaucer’s *entente*, even as Chaucer uses the doctrine to express his *entente*.

The “al that is written” doctrine, moreover, contradicts the entire premise of the catalogue’s division into “good” and “bad” lists, giving us two, incompatible assessments of Chaucer’s body of works. Though the *Retraction* seems to offer some confident judgments and interpretive guides for Chaucer’s works, that is, the proliferation of these different attempts to settle the canon’s meaning actually cancel each other out, and leave the work’s and the author’s *entente* ambiguous. Rather than giving us a definitive authoritative self-assessment or clarification of his works, what the *Retraction*’s catalogue does give us is a metapoetic representation of an author struggling to come to terms with a body of works that cannot easily be summarized or contained.

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⁷⁵ Sayce “Chaucer’s ‘Retractions,’” 245.

⁷⁶ Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 411.

⁷⁷ Victor Yelverton Haines, “Where Are Chaucer’s ‘Retractions?’,” *Florilegium: Carleton University Annual Papers on Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages* 10 for 1988–1991 (1991): 132. Haines sees Chaucer’s use of this saying as sincere.

The *Retraction* as a whole shares its catalogue's illusion of offering an extradiegetic perspective on the author, as well as presenting its own set of anomalies that serve to trouble that illusion. One of the major critical problems regarding the *Retraction* is how precisely we can define its diegetic relationship to the *Canterbury Tales* and to *The Parson's Tale* in particular.⁷⁸ Specifically, it is not at all clear whether we are really "outside" of the narrative of the *Canterbury Tales* or just at a different diegetic level of it. This uncertainty emerges in part from the issues of Chaucer's misrepresentations of his canon discussed above, which could be read as self-revisions of the story of his works. The uncertainty also arises more overtly at the very beginning of the *Retraction*, through the fact that it is difficult to tell where the *Parson's Tale* ends and the *Retraction* begins.

Reading across the texts, omitting the rubric that separates the two in some manuscripts,⁷⁹ there is no clue that the narrative voice has changed until several lines into the *Retraction*:

Thanne shal men understone what is the fruyt of penaunce; and, after the word of Jhesu Crist, it is the endeles blisse of hevne This blisful regne may men purchace by poverte espritueel, and the glorie by lowenesse, the plentee of joye by hunger and thurst, and the reste by travaille, and the lyf by deeth and mortificacion of synne./ Now preye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse./ And if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrete it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde bettre if I hadde had konnyng./ For oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and that is myn entente. Wherfore I biseke yow mekely, for the mercy

⁷⁸ In fact, the *Retraction*'s authenticity and relationship to *ParsT* have both been debated. Some believe the *Retraction* is not written by Chaucer at all; *The Riverside Chaucer*, 965. Though, citing manuscript evidence, Cooper suggests that, "the case for their being Chaucer's is as strong as for the Parson's Tale itself"; *The Canterbury Tales*, 410. Of those who believe it is Chaucerian, some suggest it is not meant to be attached to *CT*, but rather to put a close to Chaucer's whole canon, see Matthew C. Wolfe, "Placing Chaucer's Retraction for a Reception of Closure," *Chaucer Review* 33, no. 4 (1999): 427–31. Vaughan argues that the *ParsT* and *Retraction* do belong together, but as a work independent of the *CT*; Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries."

⁷⁹ See *The Riverside Chaucer*, 965. See also Vaughn, who argues that the rubric is a post-Chaucerian invention of scribes; Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries."

of God, that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me and foryeve me my giltes;/ and namely of my translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees. (X 1076-85)

The beginning of the *Retraction* (lines 1081-1084) serves just as well as a conclusion to the *Parson's Tale*—a conclusion that the tale otherwise lacks.⁸⁰ The voice of the *Retraction* is not clearly or necessarily Chaucer's until he refers to “my translacions and enditynges of wordly vanitees,” or even perhaps not until he specifically names *Troilus* in the next line (X 1086).⁸¹ Notably, that clearest indication of the shift in voice occurs in mid-sentence, and the beginning of the sentence in which it occurs (“Wherfore I biseke yow...that ye preye for me that Crist have mercy on me”) could plausibly still be the voice of the *Parson's Tale*. The transition between the two texts is not simply blurred, then—it is as blurred as it could possibly be.

That overlapping of narrative voices underscores the thematic continuity between the works as well. As critics have noted, the *Parson's Tale*, with its appeal for “penaunce,” could seem to have evoked the *Retraction*: the idea being that Chaucer has been so moved by the moral and devotional messages of the Parson's “litel tretys” that he spontaneously offers this literary repentance.⁸² This sense of the words of the character having a real effect on the author creates a metalepsis—a collapsing of the diegetic levels of the text, through which the character and author seem to interact. Together, the blurring of narrative content and narrative voice have the

⁸⁰ On the blurring of these voices and texts, see Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 965; Gregory Roper, “Dropping the Personae and Reforming the Self: The Parson's Tale and the End of The Canterbury Tales,” in *Closure in the Canterbury Tales: The Role of the Parson's Tale*, ed. David Raybin and Linda Tarte Holley, *Studies in Medieval Culture* 41 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 175; Vaughan, “Creating Comfortable Boundaries,” 46–48. Cf. Obermeier who suggests the change is clear from “if ther be any thyng in it that liketh hem...” because the new voice hits on *delectatio* not *utilitas*, and so cannot be the Parson; Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*, 212.

⁸¹ The voice's apparent ownership and authorship of “this litel tretys” (X 1081), the tale we have just read, could go either way: with the Parson as the diegetic speaker, and/or Chaucer as the (semi-) extradiegetic author.

⁸² See Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 411; Roper, “Dropping the Personae and Reforming the Self.”

effect of a slow revelation of the author behind his character, resulting in a double vision in lines 1081-84 of a simultaneous Parson and Chaucer. This double vision mixes diegetic levels, and makes it quite difficult, if not impossible, to be absolutely certain that the Chaucerian voice we get in the *Retraction* is really “outside” of narrative. The text might also seem to be finally more clearly distinguishing Chaucer’s diegetic persona from his authorial voice, yet the uncertainty of the diegetic status of this moment leaves the author as still a diegetic poet-persona, rather than as the “real” Chaucer.

Along with the problem of its uncertain diegetic status, the *Retraction* is troubled by an uncertain generic status, leaving its ultimate purpose or intentions likewise obscured. Chaucer calls this text his “retracciouns” (X.1085), but this name looks more like a clear generic marker than it in fact is. There are two types of analogues for literary *retractio*, which not only have quite different aims, but also are both quite different from Chaucer’s version.⁸³ One type of *retractio* is a sincere authorial renunciation, as some critics have claimed that Chaucer’s is. Authors of this type, however, tend to renounce their body of works without specifying the names of those “bad” works as Chaucer does.⁸⁴ The other analogue stems from the very different model offered by Augustine’s *Retractationes*, which is not a renunciation but literally ‘a going back over,’ a careful retracing of older works.⁸⁵ Chaucer’s use of the plural form “retracciouns” has been seen as a nod to the Augustinian model of correction rather than recantation.⁸⁶ Yet Chaucer’s version does not entirely match this type of *retractio* either.

⁸³ Correale, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 775–808.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 783–802.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 777–79. See also McGerr, *Chaucer’s Open Books*, 132–35.

⁸⁶ See Correale, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 777–79; Haines, “Where Are Chaucer’s ‘Retracciouns’?,” 137; Sayce, “Chaucer’s ‘Retractions.’”

Augustine and Bede (who follows Augustine's example) do not just acknowledge flaws in their works generally but also go on to offer specific corrections of errors, which Chaucer does not do.⁸⁷ Chaucer seems, characteristically, to play with the differences between these types of *retractio*. He combines the two different models—telling us the names of specific works that need correction due to “worldly vanities,” but remaining silent about the specifics of those “vanities” or how they might be fixed. He thereby leaves ambiguous what, if any, judgment he has actually passed on the works. This ambiguity is in tension with the tendency toward closure that both models of *retractio* normally offer. *Retractio* as renunciation closes works by negating them, and *retractio* as correction closes by amending them.⁸⁸ Chaucer's combination of these different types of *retractio* does not quite achieve either recantation or correction, and so refuses the closure that either model would offer.

This double motion of gesturing toward closure but then deferring or refusing that closure is enhanced by tensions between the modes of the *retractio* and the authorial catalogue. A *retractio* must necessarily come after an author's works in that it responds to them and offers a final authorial judgment (whatever type of judgment that might be). Authorial catalogues, on the contrary, tend to appear in prologues, introducing and authenticating their author prior to reading.⁸⁹ Chaucer's other two catalogues follow this format—appearing in a prologue and an

⁸⁷ See Augustine, *The Retractions* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1968).; Bede, *The Venerable Bede Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Cistercian Publications, 1989). The latter does not include a full translation of the *Retractatio*, but includes notes on passages of the *Commentary* that were corrected by Bede in the *Retractatio*.

⁸⁸ McGerr suggests, moreover, that even Augustine's *Retractiones* present a “paradox, for Augustine here attempts to reopen his past works and close them at the same time” (133), but that ultimately he “seeks to close his texts to other interpretations” (134).

⁸⁹ Correale, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 777. See also Sayce, “Chaucer's ‘Retractions,’” 236.

introduction to a tale-teller's supposedly oral narrative⁹⁰—and they work, if not necessarily to establish the authority of the writer and text, at least to set up the explorations of authorship that the works engage in.⁹¹ The catalogic element of Chaucer's *Retraction* enumerates and calls our attention to the works in an introductory way, while the corrective and/or penitential *retractio* motif seems to turn away from both the *Canterbury Tales* and the works as a whole. Through this double motion, the *Retraction* functions as both a conclusion and an introduction to the Chaucerian canon, reopening the works to reinterpretation just when we seemed to be leaving them for good.

In combining the conventions of authorial catalogues and *retractio*, with their contradictory impulses—and more particularly, in the *way* he uses and combines the two—Chaucer unsettles both, offering new possibilities of authorial self-positioning. The combination of the catalogue and the *retractio* obscures the author and his *entente*, rather than clarifying them as either of those conventional gestures alone would generally do. This obfuscation, though, is in fact a part of Chaucer's self-positioning. Even as the *Retraction* depicts its author attempting to fix the meaning of his works through his own interpretation, it demonstrates the insufficiency of even that ostensibly authoritative interpretation. If authorial catalogues tend to precondition a readers' understanding of an author and his works, the *Retraction*, by coming at the end of Chaucer's canon, asks us to recondition our understanding of the author—to return to and reevaluate the works. In place of any final judgment that might settle the question of its writer's

⁹⁰ The catalogue in the *Man of Law's Tale* certainly plays with the format, given that it is not a catalogue of the Man of Law's works. However it is perhaps worth remembering that the Man of Law's Introduction offers a kind of renewed beginning to *CT*, and may even have been intended as a beginning for the work at some point in Chaucer's plans; see Helen Cooper, *The Structure of the Canterbury Tales* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), 16.

⁹¹ To be sure, there are other kinds of catalogues or lists that might appear at the end of works, such as the lists of authors at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* to whom Chaucer sends his "litel bok" (1786), or lists of the contents of a codex. Chaucer might be playing with relations to these other types of lists as well.

authority, then, the *Retraction* offers a cycle of conclusion leading to a renewed beginning. While the *Retraction* superficially looks like a break with the works, it is in fact simply a revision of them, a new work built out of retellings and reinterpretations of elements of the larger body of works. The final catalogue's depiction of authorship does not, then, contradict or replace the other two catalogues and their depictions of authorship, but rather, it takes part in the larger narrative about the author that contains all three catalogues.

The authorial catalogue tends to be an authorizing device, establishing a canon and an authorial identity for a writer. Chaucer inscribes instability and revision into that very form, both within each catalogue, and in the shifting stories he tells about his authorship across the three catalogues. The catalogues together offer an exploration of an author struggling with apparently constricting forms of previous literary authority in an attempt to make a place for his own works. Over the course of the three catalogues, as well as within each one, the author figure is put into multiple, competing positions of self-definition so that he is multiplied into an array of possible Chaucers with an array of possible canons.

This multiplied Chaucer serves, more broadly, as a figure for vernacular English authorship: shaped by the multiple authorities of a wide intertextual and readerly network, the vernacular author is variously and/or simultaneously a mere translator, a manipulative magpie, a authoritative muse, and a critic who reevaluates and renews the other types of authors. It is the perpetual movement of this network's revisions and reinterpretations that the catalogues envision as the driving force of vernacular authorship. Chaucer embodies that volatile process, using himself and his canon of works as an experiment to set it in motion. By so doing, he takes ownership of this vision of authorship, and so is authorized within it, to the extent that one can

be. Chaucer's catalogues consciously expose the auto-fabrication of vernacular authority even as they enact it—acknowledging the manipulations, revisions, and distortions inherent to such retelling, but standing by them as the meaningful and defining features of vernacular authorship.

To the extent that we now have an authoritative Chaucerian canon, it is one that is built as much on this kind of disruption and discord as it is on stability and harmony. The Chaucerian canon is fragmentary and incomplete in places, messily cobbled together in others, and always subject to (and requiring) editorial and readerly interpretation. These ruptures in meaning, though, are just as central to Chaucer's canonicity as the coherences. Thinking back to the value of obscurity in Marie's Prologue, we can appreciate more fully how such incompleteness, the gaps in knowability, make Chaucer's works all the more rich and useful as objects of interpretation.⁹² And, on a larger scale, the notoriously messy state of the canon does felicitously match the state in which authority and meaning are left within the works themselves. In their many incompletenesses and multiplicities, Chaucer and his canon authorize reinterpretation and revision as vital creative modes for vernacular literature.

⁹² For related discussions of the value of such gaps in Chaucer and literature generally see McGerr, *Chaucer's Open Books*; Patterson, *Temporal Circumstances*; Sturges, *Medieval Interpretation*; Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries"; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

Chapter Four

Auctour, Translatour, Maistir, Prynce: Leveling with Authority in Lydgate's Fall of Princes

Critics have never denied that John Lydgate is aware of his literary indebtedness. Indeed, the prevalence of translations among his works and his frequent, even obsessive, allusions to previous texts and authors—particularly his imitations and invocations of Chaucer—make his literary debts omnipresent. Despite the growing scholarly interest in his work in the last couple of decades, and the improving opinion of his poetic abilities,¹ it remains difficult to escape the critical commonplace that Lydgate is a supremely subservient,² if not supremely unoriginal, author.³ In attempting to counter this conventionally negative view, some recent scholarship has gone to the other extreme, arguing that Lydgate claims a special authority, for himself or poetry generally, through his conceptions of fame or of laureate status.⁴ These polarized views of Lydgatean authority are understandable, given that Lydgate himself makes use of the extremes of

¹ See Mary Catherine Flannery, *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2012); Robert J Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 61 (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2007); Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, 2; Larry Scanlon and James Simpson, eds., *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); James Simpson, “Bulldozing the Middle Ages: The Case of ‘John Lydgate,’” in *New Medieval Literatures*, 4, ed. Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland, and David Lawton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 213–42.

² This applies even to critics such as Lawton and Lerer who have attempted to rehabilitate Lydgate, and the fifteenth century more generally; see Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century”; Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993). These critics have seen Lydgate as engaged in a kind of self-fashioning “of the patronized and the subservient” (Lerer 5), through a poetics of dullness (Lawton) and one of childhood (Lerer) respectively. I find their views on the ways Lydgate dramatizes his position of subservience very useful, but I don’t think abjection is the whole story, nor exclusive to himself, in *Fall of Princes*.

³ For overviews of the critical reception of Lydgate, see Lois Ebin, *John Lydgate* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), prologue, n.p.; Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes: Narrative Tragedy in Its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 1–24; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 1–22.

⁴ See Flannery, *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame*; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*.

abjection and laureation in his depictions of authorship in many of his works. What scholars have overlooked, however, is the way Lydgate deploys those extremes in the service of a very different conception of authorship that is not defined by the hierarchies implicit in both abjection and laureation. Specifically, I argue that Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* offers a vision of a community of authors across time, who are equally constrained by previous literary authorities but for whom, counter-intuitively, those constraints are equally enabling and authorizing. *Fall of Princes* is *about* authorship and the tensions of intertextual debts and creative impulses that animate and vex Lydgate's oeuvre overall, and so is a key text for understanding Lydgate's ideas about authorship.

Fall of Princes is a translation of the French *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes* by Laurent de Premierfait (ca. 1405-09), which is itself a translation of Boccaccio's Latin, *De casibus virorum illustrium* (ca. 1355-60).⁵ As a twice-translated work commissioned and apparently closely directed at times by Lydgate's patron, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester,⁶ *Fall of Princes* is decidedly indebted to authorities both literary and social, and it is often taken as an example of the author at his most dull and least creative.⁷ In the General Prologue to *Fall of*

⁵ On the dates of the sources' composition see Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, Vol. I, pp. x–xiv. Laurent de Premierfait translated *De casibus* twice, and it is the second version (amplified to more than twice the length of the original) that serves as Lydgate's immediate source. Petrina suggests that Lydgate used Boccaccio's text as well as Laurent's translation; Alessandra Petrina, "John Lydgate's Fall of Princes and the Politics of Translation," in *Cross-Cultural Encounters: Literary Perspectives*, ed. Silvia Albertazzi and Claudia Peliconi (Rome: Officina Edizioni, 2005), 216.

⁶ On Humphrey's involvement see Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 51–78; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 223–45; Alessandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, v. 124 (Leiden, Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2004), 294–312; Jennifer Summit, "'Stable in Study': Lydgate's Fall of Princes and Duke Humphrey's Library," in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 207–31.

⁷ Mortimer discusses the critical neglect of and, at times, contempt for *Fall of Princes* (even amongst Lydgate scholars) and likewise seeks to contribute to its current "rehabilitation"; Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 1–24.

Princes, Lydgate depicts his agency in the genesis of the text as quite minimal, implying that his creative participation falls below that of his “auctour” (I.141) Bochas⁸ (Lydgate’s version of Boccaccio’s first person narrator)⁹; his “noble translatur” (I.99) “Laurence” (Laurent de Premierfait); Lydgate’s patron, “prynce” (I.373) Humphrey Duke of Gloucester; and even other authors, such as his “maistir” (I.246) Chaucer, who are not, in point of fact, directly responsible for producing the text at hand. Lydgate presents himself as a translator who simply transfers the authoritative work of others into a new language, and moreover, as a translator who acts at the bidding of a patron whose intellectual and moral interests are the real driving forces of the work. In the General Prologue, that is, Lydgate appears to be constrained from all sides, trapped at the bottom of a very weighty hierarchy of authorities. Yet these self-depictions are not the whole story about Lydgate in the *Fall of Princes*, and they are far from being the only visions of authorship in the text.

Lydgate’s attention to his constraining authorities generates, notably, one of his most significant creative contributions to the translation: namely, his revision of the frame narrative.¹⁰ The original *De casibus* is framed as a vision in which Boccaccio is visited by spirits of historical and mythical figures who relate the stories of their unhappy changes of fortune, or their

⁸ All quotations from *Fall of Princes* are from *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*.

⁹ The different spellings of authors’ names across the translations of the text offer a useful way to distinguish authors from characterized representations of those authors in later versions of the text. I will refer to both the author and first-person narrator of the original *De casibus* as “Boccaccio.” The first person narrator in Laurent de Premierfait’s translation will be referred to with Laurent’s spelling of “Boccace;” Lydgate’s third person narrator-character will be, according to his spelling, “Bochas.” Likewise when referring to the author of *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes* I will use the spelling “Laurent,” but when discussing Lydgate’s “noble translatur” (I.99) I will use Lydgate’s spelling of “Laurence.”

¹⁰ I do not mean to suggest that Lydgate does not also significantly revise the fall narratives themselves, just that the framing of the text will be my main focus. For an examination of a self-conscious revision of one of the fall narratives, see Maura Nolan, “Lydgate’s Literary History: Chaucer, Gower and Canacee,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society* 27 (2005): 59–92.

“falls.” That frame, describing how the narrator-author receives his visitations and records the stories he hears, is present in both Boccaccio’s and Laurent’s versions. Lydgate includes the frame, in turn, but revises it so that it tells not only the story of that original visionary composition, but also the stories of the text’s subsequent transformations, including the work of the “noble translatur,” the impact and influence of other authors, and Duke Humphrey’s active patronage of Lydgate’s own translation. Beyond simply mentioning these activities and authorities that shape the text, Lydgate dramatizes them, depicting scenes of authorship, translation, humility, and patronage. By turning Bochas and Laurence, as well as Chaucer, Duke Humphrey and others, into characters, *Fall of Princes* becomes a metapoetic story about the text’s narration, composition, and translation, across its different versions¹¹—a story that is larger than just Lydgate’s own authorial experience.

The depictions of these other authors engage in a creative re-conception of literary authority that makes space for vernacular authorship by leveling hierarchies of literary authority. Lydgate frequently presents his own authorial situation as constrained and subjected, a depiction that seems to evoke a hierarchy of literary authorities, with Lydgate at the bottom. However, the larger context provided by these other metapoetic figures tells a different story about the relationship of authors to each other. Reading across the text’s engagements with various types of authorship, the different figures begin to look more or less the same, even across languages

¹¹ Scholars have noticed the self-conscious qualities of the text, but the extent and implications of the text’s metapoetics have not been sufficiently explored. Some scholars have dismissed the self-conscious elements of the text as empty gestures; e.g. Tim William Machan, “Textual Authority and the Works of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Henryson,” in *Writing After Chaucer*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998), 190. Machan argues that, while “one is continually struck by the number of metatextual issues, themes, and references” in *Fall of Princes*, “one is equally struck by the limited ways in which they are developed” (190).

and across centuries:¹² they are cast as indebted retellers in the model of Lydgate himself. Not only do Lydgate's source authors struggle with the same kinds of issues with narration and retelling that Lydgate does, but even the venerable authors that influence Lydgate's sources are shown to be caught up in remarkably similar intertextual debts and constraining relationships to authorities. Lydgate seems to take a cue from the Man of Law's idea of humbling his sources, yet he does so with a more egalitarian aim, moving toward a more collaborative view of authorship like that of Marie de France. The formidable hierarchy of *auctours* and *maistirs*, which from his smaller, personal perspective humbles Lydgate, looks from a larger perspective rather more like a fellowship of similarly humble authors, sharing in a broadly distributed literary authority, and participating equally in both the benefits and limitations of authorship. Counter-intuitively, it is by submitting itself to all of its constraining authorities, by giving them all space in the text, that *Fall of Princes* is able to achieve an alternative vision of a non-hierarchical literary authority and a community of equal authors engaged in revisionary retelling.

I. *Auctour* and *Translatour*: Framing Narration

Lydgate's ability to cast such a wide metapoetic net stems from his idiosyncratic choice to translate Boccaccio's (and Laurent's) first person narrator into the third person character "Bochas." Boccaccio is certainly a character in the original *De casibus*, as well, but there he is cast in the familiar role of the first-person narrator of a vision text. Boccaccio receives visits

¹² Maura Nolan notes some intriguingly related temporal/literary blurring or rupture in Lydgate's texts, which she attributes to the socio-political crisis surrounding Henry V's death, an instance "in which contingency rends diachronic narratives of development (both literary history and the history of the public) by exposing their falsities" (9-10). She relates this also to Paul Strohm's concept of "unruly diachrony" in Lydgate's writing: "a moment at which the residual and the emergent collide to produce oddly asynchronous texts, both ancient and modern at once"; Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, 9-10. See also Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 93.

from the spirits of once-illustrious, now-fallen men and women, interacts with them, and records their unfortunate life stories. As such, he is represented as the single, transparent mediator between the narratives and the reader, supposedly receiving the stories directly from the participants and relating them just as he heard them. This narrative framing is repeated, for the most part, in Laurent's translation. Laurent does begin with two prologues in his own voice, which call attention to the added layer of mediation represented by his activities as translator. Yet that mediating layer becomes much less visible, perhaps even invisible, when Laurent shifts into a translation of Boccaccio's prologue and takes on the first person narrative voice of "Jehann Boccace acteur de ce livre."¹³ Throughout the rest of his text, Laurent continues to translate Boccaccio's first-person Latin into first-person French, so that the translator's presence and voice are subsumed into that of "Boccace," the visionary narrator. Laurence's merging with Boccace is not remarkable; it is, in fact, what we would expect of a translation, even one that greatly adapts and expands its original as Laurent's does.

What is surprising is that Lydgate takes a very different tack in his own translation of Laurent. Rather than translating Laurent's first person "Boccace" into a first person "Bochas," Lydgate retains the first person for himself alone,¹⁴ and reports on the activities and opinions of "Bochas, auctour" (I. 141)—as well as of "Laurence" the "noble translatur" (I. 99)—using the third person. In *Fall of Princes*, then, the "I" of the narration is no longer a close interlocutor

¹³ "Jean Bocacce, author of this book." Translations of Laurent are mine unless otherwise noted. For the original French of this passage see Patricia May Gathercole, ed., *Laurent de Premierfait's Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes, Book 1, Translated from Boccaccio. A Critical Ed. Based on 6 MSS*, University of North Carolina. Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, no. 74 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 90.

¹⁴ This is not to suggest that the "I" of *Fall of Princes* offers access to the "real" person of Lydgate, nor even to a coherent narrative voice. As Spearing suggests, such self-identicalness and coherence of a first-person narrator is extremely rare and not expected in medieval texts; see A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Autographies: The I of the Text*, The Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). Yet Lydgate's narration is distinguished from the character of Bochas, and is still self-reflexive and metapoetic, even if it does not have a single, coherent subjectivity.

with the spirits in the vision, but is rather a narratorial figure one more diegetic level away.¹⁵

This shift in perspective is in some ways slight, but it means that, throughout the work, even in the midst of the fall stories, Bochas and his activities of narration are frequently the center of attention, even a subject of the narrative. What's more, turning Laurence as well as Bochas into characters serves to dramatize at a larger scale the layered, mediated status of Lydgate's text.

The shift in perspective, that is, creates the conditions in which the text can closely attend to both its narratorial contents and context: how it tells its stories and how it comes to be told and retold itself.

Lydgate's self-conscious treatment of both of those elements gives rise to metalepses, slippages that blur the divisions between the diegetic levels of narrative, and so trouble the hierarchical structure of those levels.¹⁶ As a result, different types of narrative and the different author-narrators of the text become conflated and equalized, in ways that work against conventional hierarchies of narrative and authorship. While we might expect that the frame should operate in service of the narratives—that the frame is there to tell the fall stories—Lydgate's metapoetic treatment of narration reminds us that, conversely, the fall narratives are also a part of the story of Bochas as narrator. In the same way, Bochas is part of Laurence's story. And as we will see, rather than simply being constraining sources that Lydgate cannot escape, the characters of the *translatour* and the *auctour* are central figures in the frame narrative of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*—a frame that tells the story of the text's multi-layered composition.

¹⁵ I do not count Laurence's position as *translatour* as adding another *diegetic* level to the text. Though it adds to the complex framing and mediation of the work as a whole, Lydgate's Laurence is not generally shown telling the story of Bochas' telling.

¹⁶ David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Routledge Encyclopedia Of Narrative Theory* (Taylor & Francis, 2005), s.v. "metalepsis," 303–304. See also Genette, *Narrative Discourse*. Genette defines "*narrative metalepsis*" as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic [i.e., in my terms, hypodiegetic] universe, etc.) or the inverse" (234-35).

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Lydgate's General Prologue ends with the telling metanarrative comment "Vpon Bochas riht thus I will proceede" (I.469). Bochas is the main character of *Fall of Princes*; his presence as the original recipient and recorder of the visions is constantly reinforced, with his name cropping up all over the text in what Alexandra Gillespie has described as "hundreds of digressive references to 'myn auctor Bochas.'" ¹⁷ The frequency of these references suggests that they are actually central to the text's interests, though they may appear "digressive" in relation to the flow of the hypodiegetic fall narratives. Lydgate's predominant method of beginning a new fall narrative or set of related narratives is to refer to Bochas's witnessing and/or writing of it, in keeping with the visionary context. A few examples from Book III can give a sense of the pattern and proliferation of this motif: ¹⁸ "And whil Bochas gan muse in this mateer . . . With wepyng eien [to hym] ther dede appeer . . ." (III. 708-10); "Whil Bochas stynte, & wold ha been in pes,/ A knyht appered callid Artabanus" (III. 2641-2); "Afftir other þat put hemsilf in pres,/ Tofor Bochas ther compleyntis to discure,/ Cam off Athenys Alcibiades" (III. 3284-86), and so on. Lydgate references Bochas in this way in the first few lines of new "falls" across the text, reminding us at the outset of nearly every story of the visionary narrator's presence and activity. ¹⁹ It is not surprising that the person receiving the visions that make up the bulk of the

¹⁷ Alexandra Gillespie, "Framing Lydgate's Fall of Princes: The Evidence of Book History," *Mediaevalia: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Medieval Studies Worldwide* 20 (2001): 153. Gillespie associates these references with the text's "self-professed artifice" of "breaking" and remaking its sources—that is, its additions and revisions, including Lydgate's moralizing apostrophes and envoys (153).

¹⁸ Book III was selected as representative of examples that can be found throughout the text.

¹⁹ When Bochas's name is omitted at the beginning of a fall it frequently seems to be because the next fall's narrative follows historically and temporally from the previous, as in the cases of Ancus who succeeds to Hostilius, and Lucinio who succeeds to Ancus (III. 792-835), so that the text can easily remain within the hypodiegetic level of the fall narratives even when switching subjects. On other occasions Bochas's name is omitted but the visionary conceit of a procession of spirits is maintained, so

text should be so visible in the narrative, but typically, that visionary figure would be represented in the first person—as an “I” who is cast as the single mediator between the reader and the vision. In some cases, such narrators are even meant to be nearly transparent as mediators—to appear primarily to be a channel for the vision.²⁰ By replacing the visionary “I” with a third person character whose activity of narration is constantly referred to, Lydgate emphatically puts the narrator’s body between the reader and the narratives. This positioning overtly acknowledges how Bochas’ narration frames and structures readers’ experience of the falls—as indeed is true of any act of narration. Lydgate makes that necessary mediating quality unmistakably visible, and turns it into an object of attention in the text. Instead of just listening to the narratives, readers are made to listen to the narration—and to look at the narrator.

The slight distance Lydgate gives us from the visionary narrator, “this seid[e] Bochas, auctour off this book,” (I. 141) means that as we watch Bochas engage in the process of writing his book, we can see more clearly how, in narrating the stories of his interlocutors, the *auctour* is interpreting and shaping his material. The choices Bochas makes, and his actions of narration, are made more visible by Lydgate’s version of the visionary narrator. For example, Lydgate frequently calls attention to the shifts between narration and commentary that occur more quietly in his source, with moments such as: “Iohn Bochas heer makith a digressioun,/ And bi rebukyng cast hym for tassaile/ Thilke officeres that wer in Rome toun” (III. 3228-33) and “Myn auctour Bochas makth a rehersaile,/ In eschewyng of froward idilnesse” (III. 3781-82). Where the first person narrator in Boccaccio or Laurent simply enters into a “digressioun” or “rehersaile,”

that Bochas is implicitly present to witness and transcribe; e.g. “Next cam Mirra with face ful pitous” (I. 5706), etc.

²⁰ Chaucer plays with this motif by casting his narrator-persona as a very active main character in many of his dream visions, rather than simply a witness. See also Spearing, *Medieval Autographies*. Spearing suggests that most medieval “I”s are non-personal.

without labeling it as such, Lydgate narrates that narratorial movement.²¹ In other words, he takes an activity of the narration (the narrator's digression or rehearsal) and turns it into a metanarrative comment about the narration. The effect is to keep the reader's attention as much on Bochas as on the visions he sees. In particular, the dramatization of Bochas's narratorial activities such as commentary, digression, and so on, marks them out *as* narratorial moves, making us more attentive to Bochas's mediating negotiation of his material.

This foregrounding of narration is not merely a side effect of the choice to put Bochas in the third person; at points Lydgate also more dramatically changes his sources in ways that draw attention to narration. His revision of the fall of Jocasta offers an example. Laurent de Premierfait's version of the story, here following Boccaccio quite closely, begins:

Certes il souffisoit que une foiz je eusse entré en l'istoire de la cité de Thebes. . . .
mais la grant maleurté de la royne Jocasta a peu tant faire que encores je y
retourneray. Ceste Jocasta donques qui certes fut engendree de noble lignie, en la
premiere flour de son aage fut conjointe par mariage a Laius roy de Thebes.²²

After a brief comment about why he is returning to a Theban story, Laurent's narrator Bocacce launches directly into Jocasta's marriage as the beginning of her "grant maleurté." Rather than simply translating, Lydgate completely reconceives the presentation of this narrative:

Off queen Iocasta Bochas doth eek endite,
Princesse off Thebes, a myhti gret cite,
Off hir vnhappis he doolfulli doth write,
Ymagynyng how he dede hir see

²¹ Compare Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte Le Opere* (Brescia: La Scuola, 1969), 242, 262; Louis Brewer Hall, ed., *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, Milestones of Thought in the History of Ideas (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co, 1965), 97, 104. Bergen does not give Laurent's French but says that "Laurence [sic] does nothing more than translate . . . literally"; see Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, Vol. IV p. 195.

²² Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 133. This can be translated: "Certainly it ought to suffice that I have entered once into the history of the city of Thebes. . . . but the great misfortune of Queen Jocasta was able to make me return there again. This Jocasta then, who truly was engendered of a noble line, in the first flowering of her adulthood was joined in marriage to Laius, king of Thebes." Cf. Boccaccio's original: "Erat equidem satis semel intrasse Thebas, sed ut iterum reintrarem Yocaste grande infortunium potuit. Hec enim, ex claro progenita sanguine, Layo, Thebanorum regi, primo sue etatis flore coniugio iuncta, summa cum alacritate ex viro concepisse filium percepit." (Branca I.viii, p 38).

To hym appeere in gret aduersite,
 Lich a woman that wolde in teres reyne,
 For that Fortune gan at hir so disdeyne. . . .
 Which gaff to Bochas ful gret occasioun,
 Whan he sauh hir pitous apparaile,
 For to make a lamentacioun. . . .
 He wrot off hir a story large & pleyn,
 And off her birthe first he doth diffyne,
 And affermeth in his book certeyn,
 She was descendid off a noble lyne;
 In flouryng age eek whan she dede shyne,
 She weddid was, for hir gret beute,
 Onto the kyng off Thebes the cite. (I. 3158-85)

Lydgate has added a framing vision scene not present in his source, depicting Jocasta appearing before Bochas. To be sure, a good deal of expansion to his source text is standard procedure for Lydgate, yet how Lydgate chooses to expand is still significant. Here, he takes Laurent’s brief metanarrative comment—that Jocasta’s misfortune warrants telling—and narrativizes it, so that we see Bochas observing and responding to her misfortune. Lydgate dramatizes Bochas’s narration by describing the affective manner of his writing (“doolfulli”), and how he is moved to express a narrative “lamentacioun,” by his “ymagynyng” of Jocasta’s pitiful appearance which “gaff [him] ful gret occasioun” to write her story. Lydgate also gives a metatextual account of Bochas’s process of writing that “lamentacioun,” describing the “story large & pleyn” that Bochas writes “in his book,” and specifying at what point Bochas began his narrative (“off hir birthe first he doth diffyne”). Only then does Lydgate return to his source and to the fall narrative itself. Through revisions like this, *The Fall of Princes* creates more space for the narrative of Bochas’s visions and composition—and, in fact, creates more *narrative* of the writing process. He inserts a history of the writing process itself, that is, into the story he tells.

Lydgate’s choice to treat Bochas as a third person character makes the diegetic layers of the text more visible, clearly positioning Bochas’ vision as diegesis, and pushing the fall

narratives into a hypodiegetic level.²³ Even as *Fall of Princes* makes those levels more visible, however, it also at times transgresses them with moments of metalepsis that blur or break down what had appeared to be firm and systematic divisions between the levels of the narrative. Some amount of slippage is perhaps unsurprising, or even inherent, in Boccaccio's original dream vision, in which historical and mythological characters converse with the author. Yet the conceit of Boccaccio's visionary context is that these are the spirits of deceased figures, recounting events that happened in the distant past for both themselves and the narrator. In that context, the spirits' interactions with the author do not necessarily transgress narrative levels, since their past lives are temporally and narratively distinct from their spiritual present. Lydgate activates the metaleptic potential of the visionary context, though, by blurring the lines at times between the hypodiegetic levels of the spirits' life stories, and the diegetic level of Bochas's vision and narration of those life stories. At moments, that is, the visionary present overlaps with the temporality of the spirits' past lives, breaking down the boundaries between Bochas's narrative and his narration.

An example of this occurs in the very first fall narrative, that of Adam and Eve. In the visionary present, the first couple approaches Bochas and suggests that he begin his series of narratives with them (I. 489-90). Lydgate then narrates a rather odd transition between Bochas's vision and Adam and Eve's narrative:

And whan Iohn Bochas nakid hem beheeld,
Withoute the hand fourmyd off Nature, —
Off slym off therthe in Damascene the feeld

²³ These may, arguably, be the same diegetic positions the frame and falls hold in Boccaccio and Laurent: the falls are stories told within the main story of the vision, which is not really extradiegetic. Yet the first person visionary conceit of the frame's diegesis gives it an immediacy that obscures that it too is a story told by the extradiegetic narrator/author.

God made hem fairest a-boue ech creature. (I. 498-501)²⁴

The narrative slips strangely from the diegetic level of the visionary present of Bochas beholding the couple in front of him, into hypodiegesis of the scene of their original creation. There is no conclusion for the “whan” clause (“whan Iohn Bochas nakid hem beheeld”) unless it is somewhere after the whole story of the original Fall, which follows from this beginning.²⁵ The syntax of these opening lines suggests a temporal or causal relationship between Bochas’s seeing the spirits of the first couple and the events of their lives that he goes on to describe—something like: *when Bochas saw them standing there naked, they were formed of the slime of the earth.* This odd syntax places the creation story within, or as dependent on, Bochas’s visionary recollection of it. Of course, taking a larger view of the narrative, this diegetic relation is accurate: the hypodiegesis of the creation story is contained within the diegesis of Bochas’s vision of the first couple, and so the *story* of Adam and Eve that we get is a result of Bochas’s narration. The syntax here emphasizes that hierarchical diegetic relationship of these two moments at the expense of distorting their temporal or historical relation. By blurring the diegetic levels between them, this moment suggests that there is no real difference or distinction between the “original” story told by Adam, and Bochas’s retelling of that story. Both levels of

²⁴ Laurent’s version of this vision scene and transition into the narrative is instructively different: “Je fu moult esbahi et commencay merueilleusement resgarder ces deux vieillars qui a peines pouvoient parler, qui avoient esté faiz senz ouvraige de nature, et qui se disoient peres de tous les hommes mortelz et qui habitoient en paradis terrestre, ains que ilz trespassassent le commandement de Dieu, et pource je prins volentiers ces deux vieillars a les mettre au commencement de ce livre devant tous les aultres maleureux. / Le premier Adam donques fu fait par la main de Dieu du lymon de la terre” (Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 96.)

²⁵ On Lydgate’s syntax see Phillipa Hardman, “Lydgate’s Uneasy Syntax,” in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 12–35. I agree with Hardman’s argument that Lydgate’s syntax is not broken or deficient, as many critics have claimed, but simply open to “long uninterrupted sequences,” (16) through which it “resists the limits inherent in normal syntax and verse structures” so as to connect images or ideas across those normal limits (23-24). In that vein, I do not see this moment in the Adam and Eve scene as an issue of deficient or even lazy syntax, but of intentional syntactical connection of the diegetic and hypodiegetic layers of the narrative.

narrative are equally important to the larger story of the text—the retelling is just as significant as the original.

Such crossing or flattening of narrative levels recurs occasionally throughout the text at moments of transition between a fall narrative and Bochas’s vision.²⁶ In Book IX, for example, we hear that:

As verray heir and trewe successour
Bi eleccioun and also bi lynage,
Cam Andronicus, as lord & emperour,
Constantynople, crownid yong of age,
Next to Bochas, with trist & pale visage. (IX. 1338-42)

This moment presents the historical temporality of the events narrated and the temporality of their narration as overlapping, and moreover as parallel almost to the point of conflation. In the beginning of this sentence, we seem to be within the hypodiegetic level of the fall narratives, hearing about the historical succession of how Andronicus “cam” next to the throne. But in the final line we are suddenly pulled back into the diegetic level of Bochas’ narration, hearing how Andronicus came “next” to tell his story. The verb “cam” and the deictic marker “next” both work simultaneously in both temporalities: Andronicus comes next in line for the throne and next in line to tell his story, at the same time. Within the *Fall of Princes* those two moments of coming next are expressed literally at the same time, using the same words. This overlapping of the two diegetic temporalities signals their equivalence within the larger narrative time of *Fall of Princes*, which contains and mediates both of the other two. For the purposes of a reader of the text, the events of Andronicus’ life which he tells, and Bochas’ reception and transmission of the

²⁶ To give a few more examples from across the text: “Afftir the fal of Aman, dout[e]les/ Whan he beste wende ha regned in his flours,/ Tofor John Bochas cam Artaxerses” (III. 4852-54); “Afftir this vengauce taken on Milo,/ Cam Cleomenes of Macedoyne kyng;/ And to Bochas gan shewe his dedli wo” (V. 281-83); “Ferther to write as Ihon Bochas began,/ Aftir that Guilliam was put from his rewn,/ To hym appeered Guyot Lycynyan” (IX. 1639-41); in all of these the temporality of the spirits’ lives and that of the visionary visitation are blurred into what could seem to be a single, continuous temporality.

story of those events are simultaneous: both occur for us as we read about them in Lydgate's text. The transgression of the diegetic levels has the effect here of flattening out the hierarchy of those levels into a single narrative moment. Through this kind of revisionary retelling of its source texts, *Fall of Princes* becomes in part a story about the mediating qualities of narration, the way narration necessarily makes its material a part of itself.

Though the form of a framed story collection could tend to carefully differentiate and even prioritize its layers of narrative, here Lydgate's tendency toward metalepses levels such distinctions, showing how both parts are equal, as necessary components of one larger narrative: the story of the composition of *Fall of Princes*. This leveling might be read as an assertion of Lydgate's authorial control over his source and over the multiple layers of his text, and so as reestablishing a new hierarchy with him on top. Yet he does not give us a reason to see his own narration as better or different than the previous acts of narration that he retells. His is simply the most recent layer of narration, which can itself be retranslated, retold, and leveled out with the narratorial activities of Laurence, Bochas, and Andronicus in the previous layers. Indeed, as I will demonstrate below, Lydgate's larger representations of authorship and literary authority work against such hierarchization, instead emphasizing parity and equivalence among different types of authors, across languages genres and time.

The story of the text's composition and layers of narratorial mediation would not be complete without the intermediary figure of the French translator, Laurent de Premierfait, or, as Lydgate calls him, "Laurence." Critics have generally seemed to consider the figure of Laurence to be unimportant to understanding Lydgate's narrative,²⁷ even suggesting that Lydgate hides the

²⁷ That is to say, scholarship has disregarded the role of the character Laurence, as distinct from the historical Laurent de Premierfait. Critics certainly acknowledge the role of Laurent's intermediary

role of the intermediary translation.²⁸ Nigel Mortimer, for one, suggests that Lydgate attempts to “camouflage the influence of [Laurent’s] *Des Cas*” and to imply that he has worked directly from Boccaccio.²⁹ To be sure, the character of the *noble translatour* is not as visible in *Fall of Princes* as *myn auctour*, Bochas is; Laurence is mentioned by name only four times.³⁰ Yet it seems like a stretch to call this a “suppression.”³¹ Even Lydgate’s brief reminders of the intermediary translation are, as Petrina notes, “surprising”³² and they have a great impact on the vision of authorship and authority offered by the frame narrative. The inclusion of Laurence creates a richer picture of the complex, layered status of Lydgate’s translation-of-a-translation. The text’s treatment of authorship broadens to include not just a traditional Latin “auctour” but another previous vernacular “translatour” and so, in a larger sense, to encompass a transmission process that mirrors a typical *translatio studii*, moving from Latin, through French, to English.

Far from being hidden in Lydgate’s text, Laurence is no less than the subject of the first sentence of *The Fall of Princes*:

He that whilom dede his dilligence

translation as a convenient means of accessing Boccaccio, and perhaps as an encouraging precedent for Lydgate’s *amplificatio* of the text (not that he needs any).

²⁸ See Machan, “Textual Authority and the Works of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and Henryson,” 187; Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 40–41. For a view of Laurence as more relevant see Petrina, “John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes and the Politics of Translation,” 216; Alessandra Petrina, “Translation and Lancastrian Politics: Duke Humphrey and the Prologue to Book IV of John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes,” in *The Medieval Translator*, 10, ed. Jacqueline Jenkins and Olivier Bertrand (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 333–47.

²⁹ Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 40–41.

³⁰ These references are: I. 3, I. 36, I. 79 and IX. 1886. See also Mortimer, though he misses the I. 36 instance (*Ibid.*, 41.) Laurence is also invoked, though not referred to by name, in several other sentences in the Prologue and throughout, e.g.: “this noble translatour” (I. 99); “in Frenssh myn auctour recordeth thus, parde” (VII 966); “the Frenssh vnkouth compendiously compyled” (IX. 3329).

³¹ Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 41.

³² Petrina, “Translation and Lancastrian Politics,” 335.

The book of Bochas in Frensh to translate
Out of Latyn, he callid was Laurence. (I. 1-3)

The text begins with Laurence as the acknowledged translator of Bochas, and with the two authors vying for pride of place in the first sentence of the Prologue—Bochas is named first, but Laurence is the subject of the sentence, and the pronoun “he” at the beginning of the sentence anticipates his later naming and so in a way puts him first. In fact, this first sentence frames Bochas with Laurence and his translation. “The book of Bochas” is framed syntactically, placed at the center of a sentence that begins with a pronoun referring to Laurence and ends with his proper name. And that syntactic framing also highlights the larger narrative framing of the text, reflecting at the level of syntax how Boccaccio’s text is received through the intermediary of Laurent’s translation in Lydgate’s version. This attention to the framing of the text echoes, at one diegetic level out, Lydgate’s reminders, examined above, about how the fall narratives are framed and shaped by Bochas’s telling of them. In both the form and the content of the first sentence, then, the text gives us a picture of its own layered, transmitted, mediated status.

Throughout the General Prologue, Lydgate treats Laurence as a character in much the same way that he treats Bochas. Laurence’s commentary on the text and his reasons for writing (adapted from Laurent’s prologues) are the primary focus of *Fall of Princes* up to line 112. Just as he does for Bochas, Lydgate sets Laurence’s writing in scene, describing the context of that initial translation:

The tyme trewli remembrid and the date,
The yere when kyng Iohn thoruh his mortal fate
Was prisoner brouht to this regioun,
Whan he first gan on this translacioun. (I. 4-7)

In addition to dedicating the first sentence of the text to the translator, Lydgate makes the first narrated “scene” of *Fall of Princes* the scene of Laurence’s translation. Indeed, rather than

hiding Laurence in favor of Bochas, Lydgate here does the opposite. He suggests that Laurence's translation was written in the year when Jean II of France was brought as a prisoner to England, which was after the Battle of Poitiers, in 1356. But that date is actually about when Boccaccio's *De casibus* was written. Laurent did not write his first translation of *Des cas* until 1400, and the second translation (Lydgate's source) not until 1405.³³ Lydgate pushes the date of Laurence's translation back to the date of Boccaccio's composition, conflating original and translation, but doing so in favor of the translator rather than the author. Whether this misdating of Laurence's translation was intentional or erroneous, Lydgate chooses to begin his own version with a detailed description of the scene of Laurence's translation.

This initial scene of Laurence translating "The book of Bochas" (I. 2) puts the rest of the text, the whole story of Bochas's visions, into the narrative of Laurence's translation as a kind of hypodiegesis. Lydgate does not maintain this additional diegetic layer consistently throughout the text, but by evoking it at the very beginning, he reminds us very strongly that the story he is telling us is Laurence's narrative about Bochas' narrative, and not Bochas'/ Boccaccio's narrative directly. Rather than privileging his "auctour" at the expense of his "translatour," that is, Lydgate positions the authoritative original material as a story he is telling about a translator's encounter with it, suggesting that that encounter is an important subject as well. Lydgate frames the authority of Bochas within the authority of Laurence, as part of Laurence's story rather as necessarily important in its own right.

In spite of Lydgate's great attention to and complex negotiations of his two sources—or rather as a part of those negotiations—the text at moments blurs its distinctions between the two figures, in a kind of source-metalepsis that equates them. An example of this occurs when the

³³ On the dates of the sources, see Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, Vol. I pp. x–xiv; Vol. IV p. 396.

prologue moves away from Laurence to focus on Bochas. Lydgate accomplishes this transition by linking the motivations of the two authors:

For which, pleynli, this noble translatur
Caste off purpos these stories for to write,
And for to doon his dilligent labour
As thei fill in ordre to endite,
That men afftir myhte hemsilff delite,
Auentures, so as thei fill in deede,
Off sundry pryncis to beholde & reede,

And haue a maner contemplacioun,
That thynges all, wher Fortune may atteyne,
Be transitory of condicioun;
For she off kynde is hasti & sodeyne, . . .

And for hir chaunge and for hir doubilnesse,
This Bochas biddith that men sholde enclyne
Sette ther hertis, void off vnstabilnesse,
Vpon thynges which that been deuyve. (I.99-116)

The first stanza positions the reader in Laurence's motivations: he decided to translate the text so that "men afftir" could "delite" themselves with the narratives. As we enter the middle stanza, then, we seem to still be hearing Laurence's motivations: not only will men "delite" in the stories but also they will have "haue a maner contemplacioun" about the vagaries of Fortune. The middle stanza's line of thought about Fortune continues in the third stanza, as we hear about Fortune's "chaunge" and "doubilnesse," which, it turns out are motivating factors for Bochas as well. In Bergen's edition these three stanzas are all part of one long sentence, and that editorial choice speaks to the way the three stanzas participate in one ongoing sequence of ideas. The middle stanza of this sequence works equally to follow from Laurence's motivations or to precede Bochas's. The two authors share the same motivation to write and in some sense overlap for readers in that shared purpose and that shared stanza so that it speaks about both of them at once.

If we read across that overlap of Laurence and Bochas, moreover, the sequence of the stanzas represents the relationship between the two authors in a somewhat backwards way. The logical sequence of the stanzas is effectively: *Laurence wrote so that men could contemplate the unstableness of Fortune, which unstableness inspired Bochas*. By situating unstable Fortune as the conclusion to Laurence's motivation and the beginning of Bochas's, the sequence could seem to position Bochas as one of the men contemplating Fortune as Laurence hopes they will, or in other words, to suggest that Bochas is inspired by Laurence. Rather than constructing an upside-down hierarchy that privileges Laurence over Bochas, however, the strangeness of this logic might serve to remind us that in the context of *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate's translation of the story of Bochas *is* inspired by Laurent de Premierfait and his own translation. Lydgate positions Laurent's text firmly between Boccaccio's and his own, much as he positions Bochas's narratorial figure between the fall narratives and the reader. Both the content and the form of Lydgate's treatment of his two authors throughout the General Prologue persistently remind us of the status of *Fall of Princes* as a translation-of-a-translation, and one that honors its debts to both "auctor" and "translatour." Lydgate consistently refuses to set "auctor" and "translatour" into the hierarchy we might expect, instead treating both of them as equally important.

Laurence is less visible through the rest of *Fall of Princes* than he is in the General Prologue. It is not surprising that he should fade from view as the narrative of Bochas's vision begins, given that Laurent de Premierfait disappears in the same way in his version. Laurent notes in his own prologue that he will be expanding the Boccaccian material,³⁴ but beginning with his translation of Boccaccio's prologue (Prologue III in *Des cas*),³⁵ Laurent subsumes himself into the first-person of his narrator, Boccace, even when adapting his source. His

³⁴ See: Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 88–90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92–93.

creative contributions are not marked as such, nor is the reader reminded of his activities as translator.³⁶ Nevertheless Laurent's narrator, Boccace, necessarily remains a composite: he is part Boccaccio, part Laurent.³⁷ The care with which Lydgate emphasizes the role of the *noble translatour* in the General Prologue serves as a reminder that Lydgate's Bochas is also a composite, containing elements of each previous author and narrator.

Laurence does not disappear from Lydgate's text, though his level of visibility and active participation in the narrative varies. At one moment in the middle of the text, Laurence is so aligned with Bochas that the two seem to have merged into a single "auctour." In Book VII, Lydgate authorizes some of details of the fall of Vitellius with the comment: "in Frenssh myn auctour recordeth thus, parde" (VII 966). This comment is quite unusual: "Frenssh" clearly refers to Lydgate's immediate source in Laurent, but normally "myn auctour" refers to Bochas. Though Lydgate does occasionally grant others the title of "auctour,"³⁸ this is the only time he could seem to be using it for Laurence, who is usually specifically designated a *translatour*. This comment calls both Laurence and Bochas to mind and conflates them, reminding us of the composite nature of Lydgate's narrator. Lydgate's *auctour* Bochas has recorded the details of the story in French, because Bochas has his source in Laurent's Boccace. The honorific term

³⁶ See Anne Dawson Hedeman, *Translating the Past: Laurent de Premierfait and Boccaccio's De Casibus*, ed. J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008). Hedeman notes that in the presentation copies of *Des cas* Laurent "pared down visual references to Boccaccio as author, which effectively enhanced the immediacy of his readers' experience of the translation" (77-78) giving them the stories "apparently unmediated by an author" (84). This is precisely the opposite approach to Lydgate's.

³⁷ Laurent's contributions include material from other authors and texts as well. Bergen notes that Laurent added to his second translation of Boccaccio in part by "interpolating all manner of odd pieces of information from the books he had read – Justin, Florus, Livy, Vincent, Valerius Maximus and others" Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, Vol I., xiv.

³⁸ The list includes the Bible (I. 6488), Andalus who tells the fable of Fortune and Glad Poverty (III.197), and Virgil (IV. 71), as well as several instances of referring generally to "auctours," e.g.: "As olde auctours off Romulus do write" (II. 4168), "This said[e] Xerxes, be record off auctours" (III. 2234), "Bi rehearsaile of these olde auctours" (IV. 3313), etc.

auctour slips over from the authority of the original Boccaccio and onto the author of the French translation, through whom Lydgate receives the *auctoritas* of Boccaccio's text. *Auctour* and *translatour* are equated in their shared status as part of the figure of Bochas. Rather than being hierarchized, the two figures are shown to participate equally in Lydgate's new version of their text.

Laurence reappears in the final book of *Fall of Princes* under quite different circumstances: not only clearly distinguished from Bochas, but even potentially cast in a negative light as having distorted Boccaccio's text as a meddling translator. Laurence is named again in Book IX as an intermediary between Boccaccio and Lydgate, but this time as one with a distinctly political agenda. This occurs as Lydgate is describing of the arrival of the next spirit, Charles of Anjou, "Of whos comyng myn auctour a gret while/ Astonid was" (IX. 1860-61). Lydgate reports Bochas's reaction to this spirit's arrival, telling how Bochas "Gaff to France this comendacioun": namely, that it surpasses other countries as the sun surpasses the stars (IX. 1877-79).³⁹ But Lydgate backpedals immediately after rehearsing this praise, noting that:

Thes wordis be nat take out of myn auctour,—
Entitled heer for a remembraunce
Bi oon Laurence, which was a translatour
Of this processe, to comende Fraunce. (IX. 1884-87)

Lydgate calls into question this "comendacioun" of France by assuring us that it comes from Laurence and not from "myn auctour." Here he distances Laurence from participation in the figure of "myn auctour," not embracing him as his "noble translatour" but coldly calling him "oon Laurence"—a certain pro-France translator.

³⁹ By citing "myn auctour" (1860) above, Lydgate implies that "myn auctour" is the speaker of the following "comendacioun," though with his slippery syntax he avoids directly assigning a clear subject to the verbs of the "commendacioun"; see IX.1863-77.

This strange little passage works on several levels as a metapoetic reflection on the text's historical and literary situation as a retold vernacular retelling. It offers a drama of source trouble, depicting differences in the sources that require the translator to interpret and choose between them. Lydgate's rejection of the "comendacioun" serves to expose the French translator's changes to the original Latin text, and this exposure could call Laurent's authority into question: not only is he not a faithful translator, this suggests, but he even distorts the "auctour" Boccaccio by putting biased, pro-France statements in his mouth. Cutting down Laurent in relation to Boccaccio would seem to fit the conventional mold of privileging the older source and authors over any newer version. Yet the hierarchical balancing of authorities is not so clear here. Lydgate could have simply left out this "comendacioun," silencing Laurent's francophile sentiments completely. His choice instead to include and acknowledge Laurent's addition, would seem to mark the significance or even authority of the *translatour's* contributions, which cannot be ignored even when Lydgate strongly disagrees with them.

At another level, by calling out these words as *not* Boccaccio's—words that we've just received from Bochas—Lydgate distinguishes his narrator from the author, reminding us that his character is dependent on Laurent's text and is distanced from Boccaccio. We know that "myn auctour" does not include Laurence in this instance, but its referent still presents something of a puzzle. Normally, again, "myn auctour" means Lydgate's composite narrator, Bochas, but here it cannot. Lydgate cannot mean that "thes woordis" do not come from Bochas, because Bochas just *has* given us those words. Lydgate's Bochas says these words because Laurent's Boccace does, and it is Boccace, rather than Boccaccio, upon whom Lydgate's narrator is based. In this instance, Lydgate seems to tie "myn auctour" directly back to the Latin text and to Boccaccio, skipping over the intermediary translation with its troublesome pro-France sentiments. The

elements of the composite narrator are here alternately associated and differentiated, both with each other and with the source texts they represent. Lydgate's comments have pulled apart the layers of his narrator, exposing its composite makeup.

"Myn auctour Bochas" we begin to suspect, is not only not Boccaccio, but it is not any one person, real or imaginary—it is, rather, a figure of *auctoritas* that can be used in different ways at different times and that includes within it all of the authors, source texts, and authorities that contributed to Lydgate's text. In this light, we might reflect on two other instances when Lydgate distinguishes the historical author Boccaccio from the *auctour*-character within *Fall of Princes*. First, in the General Prologue, within a list of other authors who wrote moral tragedies about the falls of princes, Lydgate notes: "And Iohn Bochas wrot maters lamentable,/ The fall of pryncis" (I.269-70). This "Iohn Bochas" is listed alongside Chaucer, Seneca, Cicero and Petrarch as just another example of authors of moral tragedies, without any insistence that he is the Bochas that Lydgate has been calling "myn auctour" throughout the General Prologue, or that his "fall of pryncis" is *this Fall of Princes*. At the other end of the text, in the first Envoy to Duke Humphrey toward the end of Book IX, Lydgate gives a similar list of generic predecessors, noting that Chaucer previously "The Fal Of Prynces gan pitously compleyne,/ As Petrark did, and also Iohn Bochas" (IX. 3422-23). Coming near the end of the text and after all of the complex negotiations of the layers of Lydgate's composite *auctour*-narrator-character throughout, this second instance more clearly serves to distinguish the text's composite Bochas from this "Iohn Bochas." This distinction suggests that we cannot imagine Boccaccio as "myn auctour"—or rather, that he is not the sole *auctour*, and that there is no sole authority for this layered text, which has many authors and many *auctours*.

The authority we might expect to rest with the figure of Boccaccio, the author of the Latin source, is distributed across a range of figures: authors, translators, and even fictional composite characters. In the final closing sections of the text, Bochas as “myn auctour” is essentially absent, his—or perhaps ‘its’—identity having dissolved so that the name “Bochas” primarily refers to the book itself.⁴⁰ Bochas *is* the text, not only in the metonymic way in which authors’ names can stand in for their works, but also because Lydgate turns the character of the author into a metapoetic representation of his composite, twice retold narrative. Conversely, as the other side of the same coin, the mediated, composite text speaks to its composite authorship and its distributed authority.

II. *Auctours upon Auctours: Remodeling Authorship*

In addition to dramatizing its own narration and composition, *Fall of Princes* makes a great deal of space for examining authorship and literary authority more generally. The centrality of the source authors, Bochas and Laurence, could seem to establish a fairly traditional, hierarchical or genealogical view of literary authority descending from literary predecessors.⁴¹ And the General Prologue seems to draw just such a picture of a formidable hierarchy of literary authorities pressing down on the Middle English author. Lydgate does not really come into view until about two hundred lines into the General Prologue, which has up to that point introduced the text, as we have seen, by discussing his sources and their reasons for writing, rather than Lydgate’s own. He finally arrives, or at least becomes more visible as the first-person narrator, in a humility topos, in which he expresses his inability “in rethorik myn

⁴⁰ “Bochas” does sometimes refer to the book as opposed to the source author earlier in the text as well, but here in the end it almost exclusively does.

⁴¹ For a “genealogical” reading of Lydgate’s relation to Chaucer in particular see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 58.

auctour for to sue” (I. 230). Almost as soon as he appears in the narrative, he is pushed out again by this inability. He expresses an urgent need for literary assistance, wondering “But, o allas! who shal be my muse,/ Or onto whom shal I for helpe calle?” (I.239-40). This quest for assistance leads him first to Chaucer and then to a list of other authors, during the course of which, again, Lydgate’s authorial presence goes out of focus. This attention to Chaucer and other authors at first looks digressive, as they are not directly a part of the genesis of *The Fall of Princes*.⁴² They are, however, introduced as forming part of the tradition of moral literature: alongside “Iohn Bochas” (I.269), Chaucer also wrote about “the fall of pryncis” (I.249), and Seneca and Petrarch wrote similar moral tragedies as well (I.253-57). These authors are necessary generic and thematic predecessors for Lydgate, if not direct sources. This passage seems to cast Lydgate as subordinate not just to his immediate source author, but also to the whole, grand spectrum of literary history from Seneca to Chaucer.

Yet Lydgate’s metapoetic characterization of various other authors at moments throughout the text offers an alternative to this conventional picture of imposing hierarchies of authority. Though Lydgate depicts himself as being deferent to past authors, he depicts other authors that way as well, drawing a complex picture of literary interdependencies that is not always clearly hierarchical. His depictions of other authors’ relations to their own sources and authorities eschews distinctions or hierarchization beyond the fact that each individual author is humble before his own predecessors. From this broader historical perspective on authorship, the hierarchy or genealogy we might expect is leveled out. Rather than imagining previous *auctours* as forbiddingly authoritative, Lydgate casts many of them in his own image: as retellers who are constrained in their own particular ways by their sources, previous authors and literary patrons.

⁴² Petrina suggests these authors serve here as “an *ubi sunt* motif”; see Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England*, 299.

Lydgate's characterization of his *noble translatour*, beyond calling attention to the mediated, composite status of the text, also tells a story about Laurence's own experience of commissioned translation. Lydgate dramatizes his *translatour's* experience by creatively retelling Laurent de Premierfait's own comments from Prologue II of *Des Cas*.⁴³ The first hundred and fifty lines or so (I. 8-154) of the General Prologue of *Fall of Princes* describe that *Des Cas* prologue at some length. I say "describe" because Lydgate does not simply translate Laurent's prologue, but rather narrates what "Laurence" says:

In his prologe affermyng off resoun,
 Artificeres hauyng exercise
 May chaunge and turn bi good discrecioun
 Shappis, formys, and newli hem deuyse,
 Make and vnmake in many sondry wyse,
 As potteres, which to that craft entende,
 Breke and renewe ther vesselis to a-mende. (I. 8-14)

The image of the "artificeres" is translated from Laurent, where it forms a part of his justification for translating and adapting Boccaccio's work (as well as re-doing and expanding his first, shorter translation).⁴⁴ In *Fall of Princes*, this passage has been read as offering Lydgate's text an authorizing image of the power of creative retelling,⁴⁵ yet there is a good deal of irony in Lydgate's way of reusing the passage. The idea that poets are like potters who must sometimes unmake in order to remake their material certainly *could* work as well for Lydgate as for

⁴³ See Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*. I am adopting Gathercole's numerical titles for the three prologues to the second translation of *Des cas*, which are based on their ordering in most manuscripts: Prologue I addresses Laurent's patron, Jean Duc de Berry, and then expounds on the moral matter of worldly fortune; Prologue II gives his justification for adapting Boccaccio; Prologue III is a translation of Boccaccio's prologue, and was also included in Laurent's first translation. See also Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, xlvii–lxv.

⁴⁴ See Gathercole 88-90.

⁴⁵ See Gillespie, "Framing Lydgate's Fall of Princes," 156; Petrina, "Translation and Lancastrian Politics," 335.

Laurent, but Lydgate pointedly attributes this image to his *noble translatour*, as part of what Laurence “affirms” in his prologue.⁴⁶ In so doing, Lydgate distances himself from the claim to revisionary authority that is implicit in the image. Not only is Lydgate not the one suggesting the right to “make and vnmake,” but his reporting of Laurence’s views on the matter is in a sense precisely the opposite: it is a repetition of his source’s words rather than a remaking of them. Laurence is here characterized as a creative reteller, while Lydgate himself is not as obviously cast that way.

There is, however, a slippage between Lydgate’s ostensibly modest self-positioning and his actual practice: even as he gives the impression of faithful repetition of Laurent’s words, Lydgate is likewise making and unmaking his French source. In particular, Lydgate takes parts of Laurent’s Prologue II, which are originally metanarrative commentary on the translation to follow, and narrates them as elements of his character Laurence’s story of translation. That is, Lydgate turns narration into narrative, just as we saw him doing for Bochas. In Laurent’s justification for translating and adapting Boccaccio’s text, he expresses the fairly commonplace idea that it is all right to retell old works as long as “on le face par bonté de couraige et par mouvement de pure charité qui en soy ne contient enuie, ne arrogance.”⁴⁷ Lydgate translates this warning against “presumpcioun” (I. 29), but turns it into a much more personal and particular motivation for his character, Laurence:

Thus Laurence fro hym envie excludid
Thouh toforn hym translatid was this book,
Withynne hymself he fulli hath concludid,
Vpon that labour whan he caste his look,

⁴⁶ That is, we might almost punctuate this passage: “In his prologe affermynge: ‘off resoun,/Artificeres hauyng exercise’” since, as Lydgate suggests, what follows “affermynge” is a translated quotation of Laurent’s Prologue II: “Selon raison et bonnes meurs l’omme soy excercant” (Gathercole 88).

⁴⁷ “. . . one does it from the goodness of his heart and through motives of pure charity, who holds in himself neither envy nor arrogance.” For the original see Gathercole 89.

He wold amende it; but first he forsook
Presumpcioun, and took to hym meknesse,
In his prologe as he doth expresse. (I. 36-42)

In another part of *Des Cas*' Prologue II, Laurent acknowledges that he is amending his own "premier translation" (his first translation of ca. 1400), but this is a separate point from the generalization about retelling.⁴⁸ Lydgate takes these different parts of Laurent's prologue and reshapes them into a rather different story, in which the "premier translation" is the work of a translator prior to Laurence, which Laurence is revising, just as Lydgate is revising Laurent's. This prior translation is represented as the reason Laurence personally and particularly needs to work on excluding envy and forsaking presumption. Lydgate's version of the literary history of his text imagines some kind of conflict or drama between Laurence and this "premier translation." Lydgate's revision, that is, creates for Laurence, out of Laurent's own prologue commentary, a more dramatic narrative about his translation. Whether or not Lydgate knew that the previous translation Laurent refers to was his own first translation, Lydgate draws the character of Laurence as a kindred spirit, as someone setting out to the work of retranslation, with the necessity of humbly negotiating multiple authors.

Adding to this sense of Laurence as a kindred spirit, Lydgate depicts that intermediary translation as a patronized commission, noting that his *noble translatour*: "was requerid/ Off estatis, which gan hym eek compelle/ A-mong hem holde off rethorik the welle,/ To vndirfong this labour. (I.45-48). Lydgate notes that Laurence's translation was commissioned by a noble patron or patrons ("estatis"). *Des cas* was written for an authoritative literary patron, Jean Duc de Berry,⁴⁹ whom Laurent addresses in the first sentence of *Des Cas*

⁴⁸ Gathercole 89.

⁴⁹ Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 16. See also Hedeman, *Translating the Past*, 56–8. Hedeman suggests that Berry didn't actively commission *Des cas*, but that it was given to him by a

Prologue I.⁵⁰ While excising the specifics of that historical relationship, Lydgate is careful to include a reference to Laurence's entanglement with this type of socio-political authority, and to underscore its constraining power to "require" and "compel" the translator. The immediate source for Lydgate's text is, much like his own, dependent upon and influenced by the extra-literary authority of patrons.

The narrative of Lydgate's *noble translatour*, as depicted in the *Fall of Princes*, is a narrative of multiple authors and potential conflicts of authority arising out the work of revising or re-translating Boccaccio on commission. It is a story that sounds quite familiar, as it is the story of *Fall of Princes* too. Even though Laurent de Premierfait is one of the previous authors that Lydgate himself must grapple with and humble himself before, Lydgate depicts the *translatour* not just as an authoritative predecessor, but also as a dependent reteller who is more like the Middle English author than not. This dependence is not necessarily wholly oppressive however; Laurence is, as Lydgate notes, considered "off rethorik the welle" by these noble "estatis." As we will see, the dependence and humility that Lydgate insists upon—for himself as well as for other authors—does not take away from their literary authority and is, in fact, a crucial part of it.

It might not seem that surprising to find the *noble translatour* drawn in Lydgate's own image, since the two are both vernacular translators of the same text. It is more surprising, however, to find Lydgate doing something quite similar with the characterization of Bochas. Alongside his depiction as the elevated *auctour* of the text, Bochas is also shown to have his own

common acquaintance between him and Laurent. My interest, though, is in Lydgate's representation of Laurence rather than the historical situation of Laurent.

⁵⁰ Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 75.

complicated relationship with authorities and source texts (though he is not depicted as writing under commission). Even while he is given the honorific of “auctour,” Bochas remains dependent on previous texts and authors as well. In the General Prologue, for example, Lydgate narrates how Bochas, “this said auctour” (I.71):

Hath gadred out, with rethoriques sueete,
In dyuers bookes which that he hath rad,
Off philisophres and many an old poete,
Besied hym bothe in cold and hete
Out to compile and writen as he fond
The fall of nobles in many dyuers lond. (I. 72-77)

The effort and activity of Bochas’s writing is emphasized, as is its derivative nature. Bochas is both an *auctour* who has labored to craft his work with “rethoriques sueete” and he is a compiler, heavily indebted to the authority of previous writers.⁵¹ This depiction of the “auctour” Bochas as a compiler, drawing from the work of old poets, begins to create a *mise en abyme* image of *auctour* behind *auctour*, stretching ever further back into the past. Lydgate’s turn, in the next line, to how Laurence uses Bochas’s compiled book—“Vpon whos book in his translacioun,/ This seid Laurence rehersith in certeyn. . .” (I.78-79)—enhances the effect; Lydgate uses Laurence who uses Bochas who uses old poets who, we might imagine (and will find below), likewise draw on even older texts and authors. This delineation of sources looks a bit like a conventional genealogical hierarchy, with the implicit understanding of authority resting with the older “father” authors. But its *mise en abyme* quality also draws attention to the problem of such genealogies by raising the question of whether there is ever an origin point or resting place for literary authority, or whether it is always deferred back to the previous generation. If every author defers authority to his sources, than no author really “has” it—instead they all share in

⁵¹ Per Bonaventure a *compiler* is a kind of book-maker but one who merely “writes the materials of others, adding, but nothing of his own” and so holds less authority than an *auctor* proper and even than a *commentator*; quoted in Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, 94.

both their humble deferrals and in the authority that accrues through participating in this august line of deferrals.

Lydgate's depiction of Bochas as one of these deferrers, with his own literary debts, is different than the depiction of the narrator in either of his sources. In his own prologue, Boccaccio makes no mention of specific source texts, so that as Gathercole notes, "one has the impression . . . that his work, full of factual knowledge, is drawn from his memory, rather than taken directly from books."⁵² In his translation, Laurent de Premierfait describes his consultation of historians to fill out certain details that were excluded from Boccaccio's original—not, Laurent avers, because "Bocacce" didn't know the stories, but most likely because as a "tres grant et renommé hystorian" for whom the stories were "si fichees en memoire," Bocacce must have felt some narratives didn't need retelling.⁵³ Laurent contrasts his own laborious, bookish efforts at retelling—and retelling as much as possible—to Boccaccio's authoritative familiarity with the narratives and indifference to such comprehensiveness. Boccaccio presents himself as in full command of his material; Laurent seems to believe him, and explains away anything that might suggest otherwise. Lydgate's translation offers a quite different author, and different vision of authority. He recognizes that the buck does not stop with Boccaccio; however great an *auctour* he might be, there are other authors before him that he must rely on. Even as he takes on the authoritative role of *auctour*, the originator of the visionary premise and general organization

⁵² Gathercole, *Des Cas Des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*, 13.

⁵³ "So great and renowned a historian" for whom the stories were "so fixed in the memory." The full passage is: "Et si ne vueil pas dire que Jehan Boccace acteur de ce livre, qui en son temps fut tres grant et renommé hystorian, ait delessié les dictes hitoires par ignorance de les non avoir sceues ou par orgueil de les non daigner escrire, car il les avoit si promptes a la main et si fichees en memoire il les reputa communes et cogneues aux aultres comme a soy" (Gathercole 90). Laurent does describe the text as "escript et compilé par Jehan Boccace" (75), so that we might envision his Boccaccio compiling material out of "dyuers bookes" as Lydgate's Bochas does, but this element is not emphasized, and in fact is countered by his other depictions of Boccaccio knowing the stories so well that he didn't need to retell them.

of the narrative that would become *Fall of Princes*, Bochas remains situated in his own intertextual relations.

Despite persistently using the honorific “myn auctour,” for Bochas throughout the text, when Lydgate actually narrates Bochas’s activities and relationships as a writer, the *auctour* looks more like a fellow reteller. Lydgate does not spend much time lavishing praise on his source author (especially when compared with his praise of Chaucer—about whom, more below). On the contrary, rather than praising Bochas, Lydgate shows Bochas praising other authors. In Book VI, Lydgate tells how Bochas cut short his description of Julius Caesar’s death and “To write of Tullie in hast he gan hym dresse” and then goes on to give Bochas’s descriptions of Cicero as “Laumpe and lantern of Romeyn oratours” (VI.2955), who has “al this world most cleerli enlumyned” (VI. 3003) “with the suetnesse/ Of his ditees” (VI. 3001-02). In two places, furthermore, we hear of Bochas’s feelings of inadequacy to tell about Cicero; his “bareyn stile/ is insufficient” (VI.2952-53) and “his termys & resouns wer to rude” (VI.2964). Later, in Book VIII, Bochas greets Petrarch in similar terms:

Wolkome maistir, crownid with laureer,
Which han Italie lik a sunne cleer
With poetrie, pleynli to descryue,
Most soueraynli enlumyned bi your lyue. (VIII.67-70)

Petrarch is also, to Bochas, a “lanterne, liht and direccioun” (VIII.76) and “cheeff examplaire to my gret auauntage,/ To refourme the rudnesse of my stile/ With aureat colours of your fressh langage” (VIII.79-81). Finally, in Book IX, Bochas addresses Dante as “cleerest sonne, daysterre and souereyn liht/ Of our cite” (IX. 2522-23) who “has enlumyned Itaile & Lumbardie/ With laureat dites in thi flouryng daies” (IX. 2525-26), and Dante is later also called his “maister” (IX. 2555). All three authors are described through Bochas’s point of view with

flowery and obsequious commentary, through which we get a very clear picture of his literary debts, and a rather different perspective on our *auctour*.

The relationships depicted in these descriptions of Bochas's own *auctours*, moreover, look quite similar to Lydgate's relationship to Chaucer, whom Lydgate hailed in the General Prologue as "maistir," "souereyne," "lodesterre" (I.246-52), writer of "many a fressh dite" (I. 352), "off Inglissh in makyng . . . the beste" (I. 356), reformer of the English language "with colours of suetnesse" (I.277), and who acted for Lydgate as a kind of muse, even as his authority humbled the newer author and made him feel inadequate in comparison (I.239-40). To some degree, of course, this kind of language is formulaic, and similar scenes do occur in the sources.⁵⁴ Yet the way Lydgate deploys those formulae is still significant. When we might expect him to use this type of language for Bochas, he instead depicts himself and Bochas as both using that language for other authors. Lydgate and his *auctour* share a discourse of humility toward predecessors, making their literary debts look equivalent, rather than placing Lydgate below Bochas. In a sense this can be seen as raising Chaucer and Lydgate both to the level of Bochas and his *auctours*,⁵⁵ but seeing this as an elevation, as opposed to an equalization or balancing of their authorities, is a matter of perspective.⁵⁶

The scene of Bochas's discussion of Cicero elaborates the sense of similarity between the *auctor* and Lydgate's types of authorship. Bochas's anxiety over writing about "Tully" has a

⁵⁴ In comparison, Laurent's Boccace describes "Tulle" as "tresnoble orateur" and "prince de eloquence latine" who "eust le langaige cler et resplendissant deuant tous autres orateurs de langaige latin" (Bergen Vol. IV, p 265-266). Petrarch wears a "couronne de laurier" (Bergen 292) but isn't, as Lydgate's Bochas makes him, "laureate" (VIII. 61), and the praise of Petrarch in Laurent's version isn't vocalized or as strong. Laurent actually writes more about Dante than Lydgate does (Bergen Vol. IV, 385-86).

⁵⁵ For an argument in this vein about Lydgate's use of Chaucer and his other sources in *Troy Book* see Christopher Baswell, "Troy Book: How Lydgate Translates Chaucer into Latin," in *Translation Theory and Practice in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeanette Beer (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1997), 215-37.

⁵⁶ I will return to this issue below when I discuss Chaucer's role in the text at greater length.

basis in Lydgate's sources, but Lydgate reshapes the scene, creating interesting reversals of the normal dynamics of literary authority and imitation. Lydgate adds to the attention given Cicero by appending a catalogue of his works (VI.3158-74). This addition creates another parallel between Cicero and Chaucer, echoing the catalogue of Chaucer's works in the General Prologue, which also appears in the midst of a humility topos and expression of anxiety about following the older author. In regards to the authors' composition of their versions of *Fall of Princes*, Tully is the kind of predecessor to Bochas that Chaucer is to Lydgate: not directly a source, but a force to be reckoned with nonetheless, and one whose authority, however tangential, tugs on and shapes the reteller. Because the depiction of Chaucer and his catalogue come first, though, when we get to Cicero's catalogue it echoes Chaucer's; the terms of the analogy between the two *auctours* are reversed so that Lydgate's Chaucer appears to be the model for Bochas's Cicero.

The figure of Cicero offers an expansion of the text's perspective on literary hierarchies; he extends the text's treatment of authorship beyond its three primary authors, and turns out to fit into the same model—as a constrained reteller, indebted to previous literary and socio-political authorities. The General Prologue depicts Cicero as having a patron as well: Julius Caesar. Cicero's relationship with Caesar is cast as analogous to Lydgate's status as patronized author when Caesar's love of “wise bookis” (I. 364) is set up as an authorizing precedent for the bookishness of Lydgate's patron, Duke Humphrey (I.372-89). What's more, Lydgate tells us that Cicero is just one of “these poetis I make of mencioun,” who “Were had in gret deynte/ With kyngis, pryncis in euery regioun” (I. 358-60). Lydgate imagines patronage as a defining feature of a Poet, creating what Lerer calls “a myth of patronage”⁵⁷ for ancient authors. This idea is reiterated in the “chapitle of þe gouernance of Poetis” in Book III, in which the repeating theme

⁵⁷ Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 37. Lerer sees this myth as standing in contrast to Lydgate and other contemporary writers, however, while I see it as reflecting Lydgate's status.

of the final line of each stanza centers on the “support of princis to fynde hem [i.e. poets] ther dispence” (III. 3843). Lydgate imagines an ancient history of patronage that is modeled on his own status as a patronized author, thereby creating an authorizing precedent for his own type of authorship.

Cicero is an *auctour* for Bochas, a patronized poet, and also, it turns out, an indebted translator. Lydgate tells us that this authoritative “Tully”:

Grekissh bookis of old antiquite,
Maad of rethorik and in ther vulgar songe,
He translatic into Latyn tunge. (VI. 3008-10)⁵⁸

Cicero is indebted to previous authors and authorities—both literary and extra-literary—as much as Bochas, Laurence and Lydgate are. The discussion of Cicero’s translation of Greek texts here draws a complicated picture of linguistic and literary authorities. The Greek texts of rhetoric clearly possess an ancient authority that Cicero desires to draw into his own “tunge,” positioning Latin at the receiving end of *translatio studii*, rather than the giving end it normally occupies in the Middle Ages. This serves as a reminder that Latin draws on older languages as well—most importantly, on Greek and Hebrew. Tully-as-translator reminds us that the authority doesn’t rest with classical Latin literature either, but rather that Latin literature was drawn from older texts in much the same way that more recent vernacular literature draws from Latin.

This is not simply an instance of an infinite regress of literary authority into the past, however. Even as it is positioned as the older, more authoritative language, the Greek text/tongue is described as “vulgar,” aligning the Greek language with vernacularity. Both Greek and Latin are languages of great authority from Lydgate’s perspective, but both had also been humble “vulgars” or vernaculars in their own times. Given Lydgate’s loose syntax, the

⁵⁸ Per Bergen, Laurent does briefly mention “translation,” saying that Cicero “translata rethorique de grec en langage latin,” but Bergen takes this to mean “he introduced rhetoric into the Latin language” (Bergen IV, p 266).

phrase “and in ther vulgar songe” could apply to the next line on Cicero’s Latin translation as well as to the books of Greek rhetoric; that is, the term “vulgar” seems to apply to both the Greek texts and Latin translation at the same time, casting the two languages, and the literatures produced in them, as having a parity of stature.

This vision of Cicero’s literary relationships and debts plays with traditional ideas of the hierarchies of linguistic authorities: Lydgate casts this ancient and formidable author as a patronized vernacular translator, just like himself, but also asserts that a translation is not of less value than its source. Lydgate’s description of Cicero’s relationship to Plato affirms the equal value of different languages and authors across time. He first says that Cicero “Surmountid all” other orators (VI. 3092), but then shortly thereafter says that Cicero is:

So famous holde of auctori[t]e,
To be comparid bi ther oppynyoun
To the philisophre that callid was Platoun. (VI. 3118-20)

Cicero has great authority, but is still to be understood only in the context of older, still more authoritative authors. Yet, once again, the depiction of this relationship does not simply push authority unidirectionally further and further back into the past. On the one hand, Cicero gains authority by association with Plato. But on the other hand, though Plato is “sours & well” of rhetoric (VI. 3125):

Yit the Grekis recorden in sentence,
How Tullius in parti and in all
Was onto Plato in rethorik egall. (VI. 3127-29)

Not only is Cicero said to be the equal of Plato, but this idea is affirmed by “the Grekis” themselves in an authoritative “sentence.” The newer, Latin writer’s authority is backed up by the Greeks, but also made equivalent to theirs, so that dependence is acknowledged but subordination is disallowed. Even as this scene seems at first to draw a conventional sort of

genealogical hierarchy of previous authors—Bochas follows Cicero who follows Plato—with literary authority ever dwindling as we move forward in time, the way Lydgate depicts these figures and their placement within the larger context of the work as a whole offers an alternative perspective to that hierarchization, instead making each author look “egall.”

While, as we have seen, Lydgate remodels his *auctours* in his own image—as indebted retellers as well as authoritative writers—up to this point he has generally presented himself only as the indebted reteller without very explicitly claiming the authority that goes along with those intertextual debts for the other authors. This changes, however, in his treatment of the meeting between Petrarch and Bochas in the Prologue to Book VIII, which again echoes an earlier scene of Lydgate’s authorship. This backwards echo, in which the older author recalls the newer, draws Lydgate more clearly into the equal community of authors he has been imagining.

In this prologue, Bochas experiences an episode of weariness that interrupts his writing and endangers the completion of the text. The sources attribute this episode to sloth, and Lydgate’s Bochas adds the factor of his age, describing (in direct speech) how: “now fordullid be impotence of age/. . . My labour up of writyng I resigne” (VIII. 82-84). Petrarch’s spirit arrives and delivers a lecture that motivates Bochas to carry on with his work, so that: “Will ouercam thymptent feeblesse / Of crokid age, that Bochas vndirtook/ For tacomplisshe up his eihte book” (VIII.187-89). Immediately following this, and apparently moved by quite similar problems and inspirations, Lydgate tells how: “I folwyng aftir, fordullid with rudnesse...” (VIII. 190):

Thouh pallid age hath fordullid me,
Tremblyng ioyntes let myn hand to write, . . .
Yit in this labour treuli me taquite

I shal proceede, as it is to me dewe,
In thes too bookis Bochas for to sewe. (VIII. 197-203).

Lydgate at first glance seems to be “folwyng” doggedly in Bochas’s wake—here going beyond simply replicating the contents of his source, to imitate even Bochas’s authorial and bodily state while writing the text. Interestingly, though, one of the elements that strongly links the two authors here—namely, the idea that their “crokid” or “pallid” age is largely responsible for slowing down their work—is an addition of Lydgate’s.⁵⁹ Boccaccio mentions his age briefly, but does not link his age directly to his present sloth. Indeed, Boccaccio had much less reason to complain of age when writing this scene originally than Lydgate does when translating it: Boccaccio would have been in his 40s, Lydgate in his 60s.⁶⁰ Though it would likely not be all that apparent to readers, Lydgate here is modeling Bochas on himself, even as he also does the reverse by echoing Bochas’s pause in writing.⁶¹ The two authors are both shaped by the other so that they gain, again, a parity or equality.

The visibility of this two-way modeling increases, furthermore, when we remember that Lydgate has previously interrupted the text himself in a very similar way. In the Prologue of Book III, Lydgate almost gives up continuing with his work, due to “werynesse” (III.26) in the face of how much text remains to translate, as well as the fact that “Support was non my dulnesse for to guie;/ Pouert approachid; in stal crokid age” (III.64-65). Lydgate’s work is interrupted by weariness, dullness and age, much as is the case in the Book VIII prologue for

⁵⁹ Bergen notes that “Lines 82-84 have no counterpart in Laurence and express a favourite sentiment of Lydgate’s”; Bergen, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, Vol. IV, 296.

⁶⁰ Boccaccio was born in 1313, and *De casibus* begun ca. 1355; Lydgate was born ca.1370 and *Fall of Princes* began ca. 1431. See Bergen Vol I, ix-x.

⁶¹ Lerer suggests similarly that in this prologue Bochas “is most clearly a fictive stand-in for Lydgate himself,” though he views this as an imitation of Chaucer’s Clerk’s references to Petrarch; see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, 35.

both Bochas and Lydgate. In this instance Lydgate adds poverty to the mix, and his relief comes in the more material form of “Mi lordis fredam and bounteous largess” (III.74) rather than by the advice or example of a literary forebear,⁶² but the narrative arc of the episode remains quite similar. By adding this episode, which parallels the Book VIII prologue, to an earlier part of the text, Lydgate once again makes his own authorial experience the precedent. When we get to Bochas’s weariness in Book VIII, it seems to echo Lydgate’s weariness from Book III, as well as modeling Lydgate’s second episode of weariness in Book VIII. These episodes, that is, create a loop from Lydgate to Bochas to Lydgate, unsettling the precedence and priority between the two authors.

In a way similar to the unusual dynamics of authority between Cicero and Plato, the echoes in situation and experience between Lydgate and Bochas ignore the conventional hierarchies of authors that place the older as superior to the newer, and instead depict the two authors as peers sharing similar experiences. Lydgate’s discussions of authorial predecessors—his *auctour* Bochas, Bochas’s *auctor* Cicero and Cicero’s *auctour* Plato— at first glance seem to offer a rather hierarchical model of literary relationships, a vision of exponentially increasing greatness of literary forebears. Yet as we have seen, reading across the relationships between authors in the text lets us see the overall picture in a different light. Each author looks a lot like the others in relation to their own *auctours*: dependent, perhaps, but not necessarily subordinate.

⁶² The themes of weariness and poverty echo the material of the sources’ prologue to Book III, which Lydgate translates as well, beginning at line 92. This consists of comparison of the narrative pause offered by the prologue to a rest stop on a long journey, and then an allegorical debate between Poverty and Fortune. The themes of the original text may then have shaped Lydgate’s narrative of his experience, suggesting this prologue as a thematically appropriate place for him to insert his episode of poverty, begging, and relief. But here Lydgate’s description of his own experience comes before the thematically related material from his sources, and so it might seem to readers that his experience of weariness and poverty shapes the prologue that follows rather than the other way around. In comparison, see Bergen, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, Vol. IV, pp 181–86; Boccaccio, *Tutte Le Opere*, 192–200; Brewer Hall, *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 67–72.

Cicero, Bochas, Laurence and Lydgate are all retellers, whose works are necessarily shaped by source texts and authors, and often patrons, and who are caught up in a network of literary dependence and influence that looks essentially the same to different authors across time. But the extension of this pattern from ancient Latin and Greek authors to more contemporary figures suggests that all authors may well be indebted and constrained on the model of our Middle English translator, and that that model, in fact, is the model of authorship generally. This subordination, that is, is part of an equality function, in which all writers all share in this new model of authorship.

Our model author offers a small biographical detail in the midst of “folwyng” Bochas in Book VIII, as he describes his own age and “rudnesse” (VIII. 190):

I was born in Lidgate,
Wher Bachus licour doth ful scarsli fleete,
My drie soule for to dewe & weete. (VIII.194-96)

This is certainly not much of a self-authorization, yet it is a notable self-*assertion*.⁶³ Lydgate suggests he is defined by the “dry,” anti-literary qualities of his hometown, seeming to take ownership of the constraints on his artistic abilities.⁶⁴ Lest this look too much like a simple humility topos, though, while he acknowledges his constraints, Lydgate’s constrained authorial identity revises other authors in its own image in a way that has a leveling effect on conventional hierarchical visions of literary relationships. The text’s proliferation and range of authors (from Lydgate to Plato) enables this long view of literary authority, subtly asserting that we are all, in a sense, vernacular retellers.

⁶³ For a reading of Lydgate’s limited self-assertions of this sort, and his authorial construction through texts, see Gillespie, “Framing Lydgate’s Fall of Princes.”

⁶⁴ Cf. Lawton, who sees this moment as typical of these sorts of humility topoi in 15th century texts generally: serving to purchase the right to public, political commentary with the price of personal debasement; Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” 764.

III. *Maistir* and *Prynce*: Humbling Authorities

Lydgate implicitly includes himself in that picture of distributed authority insofar as his kind of authorship offers the model for the other authors. Yet, as noted, when he treats his own authorial position explicitly, particularly in conversation with other *English* authors or patrons, the picture looks much less rosy and equitable. In particular, the figures of Lydgate's *maistir* Chaucer and Duke Humphrey, his *prynce*, represent two distinct types of constraining authority that reintroduce the possibility of hierarchy and bring conflicts of authority into the text.

Lydgate depicts himself as particularly constrained by these two figures, in a way that offers a possible counter-narrative to the equal distribution of authority depicted elsewhere. Yet both Chaucer and Humphrey are also important, enabling influences for Lydgate and his work, and it is *through* their disruptive potential that these figures help fill out the story of *The Fall of Princes* and its Middle English translator.

The tension and disruption introduced by the figures of the *maistir* and the *prynce* enables Lydgate to showcase his humility—a humility that is as inventive as it is insistent, as he desperately tries to defer to all of his authorities at once. Yet, as we have seen, the text extends this kind of humble position to authors from Bochas to Cicero. Turning himself into the model of humility, then, is also a means for Lydgate to equate himself with such authors. From Cicero's own perspective, the text suggests, he would appear just as constrained by his relationships to Caesar and Plato as Lydgate is by his relationships to Humphrey and Chaucer. Through these two figures Lydgate displays his humility—but his humility is simply the small-scale, individual instantiation of what he has elsewhere asserted that every author experiences, no matter how old or authoritative. And at moments in the depictions of both *maistir* and *prynce*

we can see beyond Lydgate's humble perspective to a more balanced view of these formidable authorities.

As the "cheeff poete off Breteyne" (I.247) and Lydgate's "maistir" (I.246), Chaucer enables Lydgate's composition in English, which would not have been possible if Chaucer had not done "his besynesse/. . . Out off our tunge tauoiden al reudnesse, / And to refourme it with colours of suetnesse" (I.275-78). In this capacity, Chaucer serves Lydgate as the formidable, past literary authority that we might have expected Bochas or one of the older authors to be.⁶⁵

The *maistir* first appears in the General Prologue, where Lydgate includes him as a predecessor in the "fall of princes" genre along with a list of other authors. Yet, while he links Chaucer with those other authors to some degree, the way Lydgate treats his *maistir* is also quite different.

The others—Seneca, Cicero, Petrarch and "Iohn Bochas"—are all discussed within the space of four stanzas (I.253-73). The discussion of Chaucer, in contrast, takes up one stanza before those four (I.246-52), and then twelve more after (I.274-357), in which Lydgate goes well beyond citing Chaucer's "fall of princes"-style *Monk's Tale* to offer a quite complete Chaucerian catalogue (more complete than any of Chaucer's own catalogues of his works).⁶⁶ This long elaboration of Chaucer's catalogue not only pushes Lydgate out of the picture just when he has

finally come on scene, but it also pushes *Bochas* out of the picture for a moment. The figure of

⁶⁵ For a related reading of how Lydgate positions and uses Chaucer's unique Middle English authority—though one that comes to quite different conclusions—see Baswell, "Troy Book," 215–17. Baswell discusses an interruption of Chaucerian material into the text of *Troy Book*, much like the ones I discuss below (232).

⁶⁶ Given the metapoetics of Chaucer's own self-catalogues, discussed in the previous chapter, Lydgate's Chaucerian catalogue strikes me as a quite savvy, and smartly ambiguous, way of representing his *maistir*'s literary authority, which, as we will see, is not so oppressively unattainable as it might first appear. Petrina suggests the Chaucerian catalogue here "has been generally ignored by literary critics"; see Petrina, "John Lydgate's Fall of Princes and the Politics of Translation," 218. We are, I think, too ready to take for granted Lydgate's obsession with Chaucer, without necessarily looking carefully at what his specific invocations of the *maistir* actually do.

maistir Chaucer stops and reroutes the progress of the text, demanding special attention and treatment.

This special treatment and its disruptive potential continue through the poem. In particular, Chaucer's previous texts represent an impediment to Lydgate in ways that the work of other authors does not. Lydgate cites many authors throughout *Fall of Princes* as sources for various incidents, openly acknowledging his retelling of their work, without any hesitation or explanation. Yet at several points when he finds himself facing a story told by Chaucer, retelling represents a problem that he must address. In Book I, for example, Lydgate declines to tell the stories of the daughters of Danaus, and of Procne and Philomela, since Chaucer has already told them in the *Legend of Good Women*.⁶⁷ Lydgate insists that:

Ther pitous fate in open to expresse,
It were to me but a presumpcioun,
Sithe that Chaucer dede his besynesse
In his legende, as maad is mencion,
Ther martirdam and ther passioun,
For to reherse hem dede his besy peyne,
As Cheef poete callid of Breteyne. (I.1793-99)

Chaucer's authorial agency is so urgently of interest to Lydgate here that the Chief Poet's position as the subject of the sentence, and the description of the effort he put into his writerly activity, are doubled ("Chaucer dede his besynesse;" "hem dede his besy peyne"). Lydgate then confirms that he will not retell these stories but "will pass ouer and speke off hem no more" (I.1807) and moves on to the next "fall." In this instance, Chaucer's previous text does prevent Lydgate's retelling (apart from the extent to which the stories appear in *occupatio*). Though his

⁶⁷ Notably, this kind of unwillingness to retell *LGW* is the same problem the Man of Law faces, and he likewise grapples with the problem of Chaucer in part through a Chaucerian catalogue. On Lydgate and other fifteenth-century authors taking on the subjected, unworthy roles of Chaucerian reader-characters like the Man of Law, see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*. The Man of Law is not one of Lerer's primary figures of interest, however. I find Lerer's idea of Lydgate following Chaucerian models of authorship appealing, but have a different idea of what exactly those models are.

sources recount the narratives, here the authority of the Chaucerian version trumps the authority of Lydgate's own *auctour*. By overtly discussing how and why he chooses not to tell these stories, Lydgate brings the tensions between his literary authorities into narrative focus.

The complete disruption of the narrative by a past Chaucerian text is unique, but the idea that retelling Chaucerian narratives might be presumptuous or unnecessary, even when the narratives also appear in his sources, recurs.⁶⁸ Lydgate suggests a compromise, for example, in the case of Zenobia (who appears in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*), noting that:

But for Chauceer dide hym so weel aquite
In his tragedies hir pitous fall tentrete,
I will pass ouer, rehersyng but the grete. (VIII. 669-72)

Here Lydgate suggests he will just go through the story quickly, since Chaucer already did such a good job on it. But it is still curious that he feels the need to mention Chaucer's version, given that he goes on to tell a version of the narrative more like his source's than like Chaucer's.⁶⁹ In this case, then, the *auctour* wins out over the *maistir*—though not without some fuss.

The friction between *auctour* and *maistir* is more overt in Book VI's discussion of Antony and Cleopatra. Lydgate says that he will "set aside" the "tragedie" of Anthony and Cleopatra (VI. 3620-21), because those figures too appear in the *Legend of Good Women*. Yet in a strangely smooth, unblinking sequence, he moves from asserting that he should not retell something told by Chaucer, to narrating Bochas's telling of the story:

⁶⁸ Lydgate does not always note when he is retelling a Chaucerian story, however. For example in the case of Virginia (II.1345-1428) he makes no comment about Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* version. Interestingly, Virginia, follows directly on another Chaucerian story, that of Lucrece, which Lydgate *does* debate about retelling (about which, more below).

⁶⁹ That is, the outline of the story is more like Boccaccio's. See Boccaccio, *Tutte Le Opere*, 678–82; Brewer Hall, *The Fates of Illustrious Men*, 207–210. Laurence's version seems to be longer (?) as Bergen notes that it "occupies four columns" (Vol. IV, p 302). Cf. Chaucer *Monk's Tale* VII 2247-2374. Notably, in his version Chaucer says that he will not tell all the battles of Cenobia but that "whoso list hem for to rede" (VII 2319) can "unto my maistir Petrak go" (VII 2325).

Thyng onys said be labour of Chauceer
 Wer presumpcioun me to make ageyn,
 Whos makyng was so notable & enteer,
 Riht compendious and notable in certeyn.
 Which to reherse the labour wer but veyn,
 Bochas remembryng how Cleopatras
 Caused Antonye that he destroyed was . . . (VI. 3627-33)

Lydgate manages the movement from not retelling to retelling through some productive syntactical ambiguity,⁷⁰ which creates a logical flow something like: *it's vain to retell Chaucer's version because Bochas remembers the story as well*; or: *it's vain to retell Chaucer's version because I'm going to retell Bochas's*—as, indeed, he goes on to do. Lydgate slips, that is, from repeating the idea that it is unnecessary to retell what Chaucer has already told, to the idea that he is rejecting Chaucer's version for the version in his source. As was the case with the story of Zenobia, the Chaucer-versus-Bochas tension here is enhanced by the fact that these two authors tell quite different versions of this story, so that Lydgate's choice of which version to follow might register to savvy readers that there is contradiction in the source traditions.⁷¹ Choosing to retell his source's version of the story might still not seem to be that surprising a choice, however—if Lydgate had not turned it into a subject of narrative concern.

⁷⁰ Bergen has made an interesting punctuation choice in this regard: putting a full stop at the end of line 3630 and connecting 3631 to the final two lines. It would seem at first more logical to include line 3631 (“Which to reherse the labour wer but veyn”) as the conclusion of the previous sentence's comments on not retelling Chaucer. But this would leave the shift of subject to Bochas in line 3632 quite abrupt. Attaching 3631 to the last two lines, as Bergen does (or, indeed, doing away with editorial punctuation altogether and allowing the syntax to be looser) works to connect those last two lines to the preceding discussion, but only by creating that strange logical sequence. Again, on the flexibility of Lydgate's syntax, see Hardman, “Lydgate's Uneasy Syntax.”

⁷¹ Lydgate seems to acknowledge this difference subtly in his discussion of the Antony and Cleopatra story. Chaucer's *LGW* version focuses on Cleopatra's martyr-like death for love, eliding her more unsavory aspects and Lydgate's description of Chaucer's version emphasizes the romantic elements of the narrative. The version that Lydgate goes on to tell though, “Bochas's” version, focuses on how the relationship with Cleopatra “Caused Antonye that he destroyed was” (VI.3633) through “auarice” and “lustis foul & abhominable” (VI.3634, 3636), taking a rather less sympathetic view of Cleopatra.

Lydgate's recurrent need to raise the issue of Chaucerian versions of stories alongside those of his direct sources enacts a drama of source conflict, showcasing the translator's dilemma of having to choose between multiple authoritative texts and authors. On the one hand, the conflict of sources could seem to constrain the translator even more—pinning him between a rock and a hard place, as it were, by making it impossible to follow all of the sources faithfully, and possibly undermining the narrative by showcasing its contradictory source traditions. On the other hand, by positioning himself as the arbiter, the one that must judge and choose between the different versions, the translator becomes endowed with a certain amount of authority himself.⁷² Lydgate performs this drama primarily through his intertextual relations with Chaucer, making a different decision in each case and so representing the range of options open to translators in such circumstances. Chaucer is depicted as his *maistir* and as a formidable, even disruptive force. Yet he also, through those disruptions, serves as a useful and flexible tool in the text's larger explorations of authorship and authority. Taken together, moreover, Chaucer's disruptions of the text serve as much to implicitly demonstrate that his authority is *not* insurmountable as they do to explicitly assert his importance for Lydgate. There is, after all, only one occasion on which Lydgate actually refrains from retelling a Chaucerian narrative. Though Lydgate generally gives us a picture of Chaucer as seen through his own humble eyes, at times his depiction of the *maistir* lets us see beyond that personal vision of the towering authority of his *maistir* to the more humble vernacular reteller that underlies it.

In the concluding sections of the text, which offer a closing frame for the text's explorations of literary authorities, this double vision of Chaucer becomes clearer. The first "Envoy to Duke Humphrey" (the second of five concluding sections) goes through another list of authoritative previous authors like the General Prologue's list, but this time in three groupings: a

⁷² See Flannery, *John Lydgate and the Poetics of Fame*.

general *auctours* list—Virgil, Homer, Dares, Ovid, and Chaucer (IX. 3401-3405)—that Lydgate uses to contrast his own inability; a list of English writers, each with their own unique excellence—Gower’s “moral mateer”, “Stroode in his philosophye,” and “Richard Hermyte”⁷³ with his “parfyt lyvyng” (IX. 3410-13); and finally a list of other “fall of princes” authors—Chaucer again along with Petrarch and “Iohn Bochas” (IX. 3421-23). There is certainly some differentiation between the authors, given their division into these three groups, but the significance of these differentiations or how one group relates to another is not totally clear, other than that Lydgate uses them all to offer authoritative figures in contrast to himself.⁷⁴ The proliferation of these author figures and the relative lack of clear distinctions between them are in keeping with the text’s earlier equalizing of literary authority. The lists suggest that English authors are just as formidable as Greek, Latin and Italian.

Working against this vision of parity among authors, however, Chaucer once again takes up an inordinate amount of space, seeming to be cast as the first among equals: as though Lydgate is positioning his *maistir* Chaucer not only within, but even at the top of this group of famous authors. Not only is Chaucer the only author to appear twice, but also in each appearance he is given more attention than the other authors. In the first list, he receives three lines of a stanza rather than the one each accorded to the older authors. He then also returns—after the brief digression on the other three Englishmen⁷⁵—for the better part of another two

⁷³ This refers to the *Prick of Conscience* author, often wrongly identified as Richard Rolle.

⁷⁴ Indeed, the organizing criteria for the three lists are quite different—one based on Lydgate’s unfamiliarity; one organized around a rather loose generic similarity; one based on nationality—and so give a sense of randomness to the lists as a group.

⁷⁵ Though Chaucer is present even in his absence in that list of English authors; not only do we expect him to be mentioned among great English authors, but more particularly, the mention of moral Gower and philosophical Strode echoes Chaucer’s reference to the two men with the same qualities at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* (V 1856-57).

stanzas in the third list. This preeminence brings back into the text a hint of a conventional hierarchy of authority.

Chaucer's double inclusion might look suspiciously disproportionate and unbalanced at first glance, yet the way Lydgate presents him across the series of lists actually works to level out Chaucer's apparent exceptionality. At the end of the first group of authors—those whose works and literary style Lydgate humbly claims he was “nevir aqueynted with” (IX 3401)—Lydgate notes that Chaucer “among alle that euere wer rad or songe,/ Excellyd al othir in our Englyssh tounge” (IX. 3407). The stanza ends on this rather strong note for Chaucerian authority, but the following stanza takes a sudden turn as it moves into the group of English authors:

I can nat been a iuge in this mateer,
As I can conceyve folwyng my fantasye,
In moral mateer ful notable was Goweer,
And so was Stroode in his philosophye,
In parfyt lyvyng, which passith poysye,
Richard Hermyte, contemplatiff of sentence,
Drowh in Ynglyssh the Prykke of Conscience. (IX. 3408-3414)

This praise of the great merits of Gower, Strode and the *Prick of Conscience* author is in tension with the depiction of Chaucer as without competition in English.⁷⁶ Given the looseness of Lydgate's syntax, we might well read the comment that he “can nat been a iuge” as referring backwards to Chaucer's excellence (*I can't judge whether Chaucer really excelled all others, because here are some more great English authors*) as well as forwards to the other three authors (*I'm not authorized to judge authors, but these guys seem good*). The merits of the other English authors serve as a corrective balance to the hyperbolic praise of Chaucer (particularly that of “Richard Hermyte” whose “parfyt lyvyng ... *passith poysye*”! [IX. 3412]). Lydgate reiterates just

⁷⁶ Not to mention that Lydgate's claim to be unable to judge literary merit, and his subsequent assessment of the strengths of the three English authors are themselves in tension, though both can be seen simply as humility topoi.

after this, futhermore, that “my mayster had[d]e nevir pere” (IX. 3420), and then goes on to put Chaucer into another group of authors who look suspiciously like peers, saying that Chaucer:

The Fal of Pryces gan pitously compleyne,
As Petrark did, and also Iohn Bochas;
Laureat Fraunceys, poetys bothe tweyen,
Toold how prynces for ther greet trespace
Wer ovirthrowe, rehersyng al the caas,
As Chauceer did[e] in the Monkys Tale. (IX. 3422-3427)

The similarity of these three authors is doubly emphasized: *Chaucer complained as did Petrarch and Boccaccio*, and *both of those two poets rehearsed the whole story as did Chaucer*. The chiasitic structure of the doubled comparison blurs questions of literary influence or priority, leveling out all “fall of princes” authors as equivalent, and assimilating Chaucer to the larger distribution of literary authority.

Imagining Chaucer as equivalent to Petrarch and Boccaccio (not to mention Homer and Virgil) could, to be sure, be seen as a radical promotion or authorization of the Middle English *maistir*. And, of course, the idea that Lydgate and other fifteenth-century authors sought to promote the figure of an authoritative “father” Chaucer to authorize their own Middle English writings is widely accepted.⁷⁷ But this not a narrative of the “triumph of English” at the expense of other literary or linguistic authorities. The promotion of Chaucer here does not raise him *above* the other authors. Rather, it participates in the general leveling and distribution of literary authority, but this time by bringing the vernacular author *up* to the level of literary authority equally occupied by authors from Plato to Petrarch.

Though Lydgate might seem to be trying to have it both ways—leveling literary authority among more traditional *auctours* on the one hand, but promoting Chaucer as some kind of

⁷⁷ See John H. Fisher, “A Language Policy for Lancastrian England,” in *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998), 81–99; Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*; A. C. Spearing, “Father Chaucer,” in *Writing After Chaucer*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998), 145–66.

exceptionally authoritative case on the other—these are simply two different perspectives on the same vision of authorship. Chaucer is Lydgate's *maistir* on the small scale, but taking a larger view, he is one author among many. Chaucer's special status seems to offer an exception to the distribution of authority, but it is in fact a pseudo-exception that proves the rule: a Middle English author can be just as authoritative—by being just as humble—as any one else.

The other exceptional figure of authority, and the final actor in the drama of Lydgate's translation, is his patron, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, who comes into (or is put into) conflict with the text's other authorities, much as Chaucer is. Duke Humphrey uniquely possesses a doubled authority: as a "prynce" he obviously wields sociopolitical authority, but as an active contributor to both the text's contents and its form, Humphrey also possesses literary authority. The character of the "prynce"-patron raises the threat of disruptive tensions between these two modes of authority: between worldly, political authority that is hierarchical, and poetical, literary authority that, in Lydgate's vision of authorship, is not hierarchical. That threat is diffused in the end by marking the two authorities as distinct. Humphrey's literary authority as a contributor to the text is equalized with that of other contributors and authors. His sociopolitical authority as "prynce" is set apart as exceeding the bounds of the narrative.⁷⁸ Yet at the same time Lydgate highlights that that extraliterary princely authority is the subject of the narrative, opening up new questions about the relationships between these different forms of authority.

The General Prologue depicts Humphrey as a driving force and important figure of authority for and within the text. In language similar to his description of Laurence's and

⁷⁸ Humphrey's sociopolitical authority is also for the most part outside of the bounds of this discussion. On the more historical, sociopolitical elements of Lydgate's relationships to his royal and aristocratic patrons, see Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*; Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England*.

Bochas's reasons for writing, Lydgate describes Humphrey's moral "entent" (I.428) that motivates the commission: namely, his belief that it is "unto pryncis gretli necessarie/ To yiue exauple how this world doth varie" (I.426-27).⁷⁹ The patron is here aligned with *translatour* and *auctour* as a kind of "cause" of the text at hand. Yet while Humphrey's commission of the text according to his own *entent* initiates and gives direction to Lydgate's translation, the Duke's oversight of the composition process can also be seen to have disruptive effects that highlight tensions in the compositional process.⁸⁰

The most overt moment of disruption comes at the end of the Prologue to Book II: Humphrey arrives to commission the addition of moralizing envoys, and his arrival disrupts Lydgate's transition into the first fall narrative. As he moves out of his prologue, Lydgate sets us in the scene of Bochas beginning to write Book II, describing "Iohn Bochas procedyng in his book" (II. 127), and telling about the appearance of the spirit of "Myhti Saul" (II. 134) who asks Bochas to put him first in the following section of the text. Lydgate then gives us the scene of his own writing, representing himself following Bochas dutifully:

Anon afftir, I off entencioun,
with penne in hande faste gan me speede,
As I koude, in my translacioun. (II. 141-43)

⁷⁹ Likewise, Laurence "Ful weel he felte the labour was notable/ . . . How that thei fill to putte in remembraunce,/ Therin to shewe Fortunys variaunce" (I.50-54); and Bochas wrote "for a memoriall" that there is "noon so hih in his estate . . . / Fre fro thawaityng & daunger of Fortune" (I.62-64).

⁸⁰ Petrina suggests that the book "was directed throughout by the patron, even to the detriment of the final result," including making the author "be often inconsistent in his advice"; see Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England*, 311. This puts the blame for the inconsistencies in the text on the patron rather than the poet. I am inclined to redirect this idea along the lines of James Simpson's suggestion that Lydgate may well be very aware of and "in charge of" such inconsistencies in moralization and in representation of his patron; see James Simpson, "'For Al My Body . . . Weieth Nat an Unce': Empty Poets and Rhetorical Weight in Lydgate's Churl and the Bird," in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 132.

Just as Lydgate is ready “in this labour ferthere to proceede,” (II. 144), Humphrey interrupts him: “My lord cam forbi, and gan to taken heede” (II. 145) of the translation, and to require the addition of envoys. The envoys constitute another element of Lydgate’s creative contribution to his translation,⁸¹ and, they were some of the best known elements of the text; as Mortimer notes: “it is a well-known irony that the envoys were to become the most popular. . . parts of the *Fall*, displacing the Boccaccian material they were intended to elucidate.”⁸² In his depiction of their commission, however, Lydgate represents both the form and content of the envoys as arising very much “Vnder support of [Humphrey’s] magnyficence” (II.156), underscoring his patron’s role in the creative process rather than his own.⁸³ Lydgate depicts Humphrey’s commission as enabling and initiating the writing of the text quite literally, shaping both content and form.

Humphrey has arrived to guide and contribute to the text’s composition, but his arrival also interrupts that process.⁸⁴ The scene of Lydgate’s translation is overlaid on the scene of

⁸¹ The question of the purpose and effects (not to mention the quality) of the envoys has been rather vexed in scholarship. Mortimer suggests Humphrey would have been disappointed by the generalizations and inconsistencies of the envoys (59-60), but that they offer Lydgate an opportunity for creativity, being among “the parts of the poem where Lydgate’s hands are least tied by the constraints of fidelity to any anterior text” (212); see Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*. Summit lays the blame for the envoys’ at times dull moralizing at Humphrey’s feet; see Summit, “Stable in Study,” 208. On the general purpose and quality of the envoys see also Ebin, *John Lydgate*, 69; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 236, 244; Petrina, “Translation and Lancastrian Politics,” 340.

⁸² Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 212.

⁸³ Simpson suggests that throughout Lydgate’s works he makes the moralizing of texts like the envoys intentionally vacuous and contradictory in response to the “pathetic longing of patrons that poets will offer up panacea and plenitude”; see Simpson, “For Al My Body . . . Weieth Nat an Unce,” 139. If the envoys are meant to be a pathetic response to a pathetic desire, marking them as Humphrey’s takes on quite a different meaning.

⁸⁴ The scene’s placement in the middle of the Saul narrative evokes the idea of a real-time interruption; that is, it suggests that Humphrey made this request for envoys as Lydgate was actually beginning to translate Book II. Yet this “real time” effect is undermined by the fact that Book I contains fifteen envoys. Even if Humphrey’s request really did come as Lydgate was translating Book II, the author clearly revised the first book to include envoys, in which case he could just as easily have included the request for envoys in the narration of the original commission in the General Prologue without interrupting the

Bochas's writing in a metalepsis: Bochas begins his second book, and "anon afftir" Lydgate takes pen in hand to follow him, so that we get a sense of the two authors working almost simultaneously. It is not only the progress of the translation that is interrupted by Humphrey's arrival, then, but also the progress of Saul telling his story to Bochas, which had already begun before Humphrey's arrival. As Lydgate tells it, that is, Humphrey's visit interrupts not only his work, but also Bochas's. After describing the visit, Lydgate returns to the narrative and begins Book II proper with the line: "This said[e] Saul, of whom I spak toforn" (II.162). This line draws attention to the interruption by offering not just one retrospective gesture but two ("*This said[e]*" and "*I spak toforn*"). Humphrey's very noticeable interruption constitutes another conflict of authorities—pitting in a way, patron versus *auctour*, insofar as their different authorities would seem to require quite different, and even contradictory, things of the translator. After all, not only does Humphrey's visit interrupt the flow of the narrative in this scene, it also interrupts Bochas' text broadly through the addition of envoys throughout.

Lydgate's transition back into his narration of "Bochas" after Humphrey's visit reflects this tension between *auctour* and *prynce*. He writes that, following Humphrey's commission of envoys:

As I coude, I gan my penne auaunce,
 Al-be I was bareyn off eloquence,
 Folwyng myn auctour in substaunce & sentence:
 For it suffised, pleykli, onto me,
 So that my lord my makyng took at gre. (II.157-61)

Lydgate's humility topos here serves double duty to humble himself before both "myn auctour" and "my lord." Yet there is a certain amount of irony in the attempt to do that double duty; following his author "as I coude" means something quite different now that Lydgate cannot

Prologue to Book II. The "real time" effect then is a choice to dramatize a scene of Humphrey's direction of Lydgate's translation, and Lydgate chooses to narrate that moment as a disruption.

really follow his source “in substaunce” anymore, since Humphrey has just required him to add to the text. Here the authority of his patron seems to have trumped the authority of his source text, suggesting the return of a hierarchy of authorities, with Humphrey on top.

Lydgate’s struggle to accommodate all of his driving authorities reaches a fever pitch in the double retelling of the story of Lucrece in Books II and III, in the course of which *auctour*, *maistir* and *prynce* all present conflicting constraints on the translator.⁸⁵ In Book II, Lydgate first asserts that retelling the story of Lucrece is unnecessary:

It nedith nat rehersyn the processe,
Sithe that Chaucer, cheeff poete off Bretayne,
Wrot off hir liff a legende souerayne. (II.978-80)

For a moment it looks as though Chaucer’s authority will triumph here, preventing retelling, as it did the first time Lydgate make this type of comment, toward the end of Book I.⁸⁶ Shortly after this, though, Lydgate changes course, saying that after all he will “stynte” at Lucrece because “It were pite hir story for to hide” (II.1002-1003); on top of which:

Also my lord bad I sholde abide,
By good auys at leiser to translate
The doolful processe off hir pitous fate.
Folwyng the traxis off Collucyus. (II.1006-1009)

This is the second instance of Lydgate referring to a previous Chaucerian version, and is also the first instance of what becomes a habit for Lydgate of going on to retell Chaucerian narratives despite his protests against so doing. This case is particularly complicated, though, given the addition of “my lord” Duke Humphrey’s request for the Lucrece story. Here rather than *auctour*

⁸⁵ Mortimer discusses the Lucrece stories, their sources, and historical circumstances at some length; see Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 61–78.

⁸⁶ Indeed, Chaucer does begin to derail the narrative; Lydgate notes that in the same text where Chaucer told about Lucrece he also told about Dido and Aeneas (II.986-87), “Eek othir stories” (II.988). That is, Lydgate enters into a brief digression on the contents of *The Legend of Good Women*, for a moment wandering away not just from his translation of Bochas, but even from his *occupatio* on not telling the Lucrece story.

versus *maistir*, we have *prynce* versus *maistir*. The patron introduces another set of constraints upon the translator, constraints that here directly conflict with Lydgate's stated desire *not* to retell Lucrece. Humphrey's request for Coluccio Salutati's⁸⁷ version of the Lucrece story in place of the brief reference to Lucrece found at this point in the source⁸⁸ also creates conflict between *prynce* and *auctour*. Overriding both Lydgate's desire not to retell a story told by Chaucer, and the aim of following the source carefully, Humphrey would seem to come into conflict here with both *maistir* and *auctour*.⁸⁹

Though Humphrey's patronly demands win out in that case, Lydgate offers another version of how such tensions might play out—much as when he presented multiple ways of responding to previous Chaucerian versions of narratives. The Lucrece question rears its head again in Book III, at the moment where Lydgate's sources originally told her story. After beginning the story, Lydgate takes a couple of stanzas to acknowledge and justify telling it a second time:

I folwe muste and make mencion,
Afftir myn auctour parcel rehersyng,
Touchyng hir wordis said in hir deieng.
Al-be-it so, be biddyng off my lord,
Rehersed haue in my translacioun
Afftir Pierius heer and ther a woord. (III. 978-83)

⁸⁷ As Eleanor Hammond seems to have first noted, both "Collucyus" here and "Pierius" at III.983 refer to Coluccio Salutati, a.k.a. Linus Colucius Pierius, a manuscript of whose Duke Humphrey owned; see Eleanor Prescott Hammond, "Lydgate and Coluccio Salutati," *Modern Philology* 25, no. 1 (1927): 49–50.; see also Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England*, 302–304. Here Humphrey is depicted preferring Italian humanist texts to local English ones like Chaucer's, offering perhaps another type of metaliterary conflict.

⁸⁸ Bergen gives Laurent's brief version: Bergen, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, Vol IV, 174–75.

⁸⁹ We might remember, moreover, that Lydgate's great fidelity to Bochas is also mandated by Humphrey, who "bad me I sholde in especiall,/ Folwyng myn auctour, writen as I fynde" (I. 443-44), so that Humphrey's patronly demands are themselves in conflict.

Lydgate claims to have such fidelity to “myn auctour” that he cannot omit this story in spite of the awkward doubling with the earlier *Salutati* version of the narrative that the original version’s inclusion causes. The moment once again draws attention to the disruptive potential of the patron’s involvement; Lydgate’s justification reminds us that the reason this doubling has occurred is Humphrey’s earlier intervention and addition to the *auctour*’s text. Lydgate does make space for Bochas as well as Humphrey, though, with this second *Lucrece* narrative. The tension here between *auctour* and *prynce* has reversed polarity, so that the *auctour*’s interests come first (or at least, they can be considered when not directly gainsaid by the patron). The inclusion of Bochas’s version returns Lydgate’s text and authorities to a kind of peace, by managing to accommodate both *prynce* and *auctour*—yet it can do so only awkwardly and only by acknowledging its bumpy, composite composition, within which Humphrey is one contributor among many.

Humphrey’s unique authority, both literary and socio-political, troubles the balance of authorities that Lydgate has worked to construct, but that turbulence is leveled out in the final sections of the text. Humphrey is the addressee for two concluding Envoys that treat him and his authority quite differently from one another.⁹⁰ The first Envoy puts a great emphasis on the commission of the text, beginning with an apostrophe to the “Ryght reuerent Prynce” (IX. 3303), calling the finished translation “your book” (IX.3306), and reminding “my lord” of his obligations to “supporte me in myn age” (IX. 3355). The tone is perhaps slightly less laudatory than in the General Prologue,⁹¹ but Humphrey is still very much cast as a main driving force of

⁹⁰ In Bergen’s edition these two envoys are given the running headers “An Envoy to Duke Humphrey” and “A Final Envoy to Duke Humphrey.” I will refer to them as the first and second Envoys.

⁹¹ Lydgate’s importuning about patronly obligations both here and elsewhere suggests that the Duke’s active involvement and financial investment in the book had ebbed, and so dramatizes the precarious position of an author working on commission. For a more historical view of the actual relations between

the text—however careless a driver he may be. The second Envoy to Duke Humphrey begins in a similar vein addressing the “noble prynce” (IX. 3541) with the assurance that if he “hath this in mynde and theron doth attende,/ Mawgre Fortvnys mutabilite,/ Ye shal to-Godward encresyn and ascende” (IX. 3546-48). But as it progresses, this Envoy takes a rather different tone, noting forcefully in a way not seen before in the text that its moral warning applies to Humphrey particularly as much as to princes generally.⁹² Lydgate says, “Though your estat lyk Phebus wer shynyng,/ Yit, for al that, ye haue no sewerte” (IX. 3565-66):

As men dysserve, be record of wrytyng,
An expert thyng by old auctoryte,
Ye shal receyve your mede or your punysshing....
Lyk your dyscert shal rede your legende. (IX. 3573-78)

This second Envoy is similar in style and tone to many of the moral envoys throughout the text. But those were addressed generally to “princes.” By virtue of being addressed to one particular “noble prince” the second person “ye” here takes on quite a bit more directed force; these are not just moral truisms but particular advice for the Duke.⁹³ The *prynce* here becomes rather more pupil than patron, giving a quite different picture of the balance of authorities between author and addressee. Lydgate’s emphasis in this stanza in particular on the “record of wrytyng” and the “legende” of Humphrey’s fate (whether “mede or... punysshing”)—what people will write, read, and say about him—implicitly asserts that literary authority (though non-hierarchical in itself) can in certain circumstances trump socio-political authority. Humphrey’s status as literary

patrons and poets in the fifteenth century, and between Humphrey and Lydgate in particular, see Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*.

⁹² See also Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” 786–87.

⁹³ In the late 1430s, when this Envoy was likely written, Humphrey seems to have been in need of some good advice, suffering political setbacks such that “by the end of 1438 he had all but lost his influence in English politics”; Susanne Saygin, *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1390-1447) and the Italian Humanists* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 78.

patron is emphasized again in the first “go litil book” (IX. 3589) section, yet after the second envoy’s recommendation of “almesse” and “compassyoun” (IX. 3585-87) with the stern admonition that “Lyk your dyscert shal rede your legende” (IX. 3578), Lydgate’s begging for money and instruction to the “litil book” to “Pray to þe Prince to haue on the pite” (IX. 3590) could take on a more ominous undertone: Humphrey had better respect and attend to this moral “litil book” (and its translator), or risk becoming an addition to Lydgate’s text as another fallen prince.⁹⁴

Up to this point Humphrey has represented a kind of efficient cause for the text’s generation, as patron and contributor, but this second Envoy instead implicates him in its final cause of giving advice to princes. This shift in perspective on the *prynce*’s role in relation to the text restores balance to the text’s literary authorities by resituating Humphrey instead, qua “prynce,” in a different type of authority. Humphrey’s socio-political authority cannot be folded into the text’s general leveling of literary authorities and remains distinct—and distinctly constraining. That type of authority, however, also positions Humphrey as subject to the text—as a prince to be advised by the broadly shared authority of moral literature—even if the text’s author is likewise subject to him. The relation between these two types of authority, then, is left somewhat uncertain and open to shifting positions of dominance in different contexts.

⁹⁴ Green suggests that aristocratic patrons were looking for these types of practical warnings (at least in regards to fickle fortune) and that the role of advisor, wielding literary authority, was common to fifteenth century court poets; Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 135–49.

*Finis libri Bochasij*⁹⁵

Lydgate gives a fittingly layered conclusion to his multi-layered text, by providing a series of “final” sections: the story of King Jean II’s capture by the English, which is “Off Bochas book the laste tragedie” (IX.3204), is followed by one final “chapitle” reiterating the dangers of Fortune, the two Envoys to Duke Humphrey, and two final “go little book”-type apostrophes to the text. These sections close the frame of the text by returning to the General Prologue’s metatextual (and metapoetic) discussion of the book’s various purposes, concerns and debts. We have already seen what this closing frame looks like for Lydgate’s *auctours*, *maistir* and *prynce* in the two Envoys. The two final apostrophes likewise revisit the text’s multiple authorities by sending the book out twice: first begging “þe Prince to haue on the pite” (IX. 3590) and then to “kis the steppis” of an undifferentiated group of “Laureat poetes, which hadde souereynte/ Of elloquence to supporte thy makynge” (IX. 3605-3607). With these two apostrophes, Lydgate in one way distinguishes the socio-political authority of the patron from the authority of the literary tradition, while in another way balancing them as two powerful modes of authority, by addressing each in a similar way. The book remains indebted to and constrained by all of its authorities in the end; they still represent powerful figures for the text and its translator, even as they have been leveled into a kind of balance. Both in content and in form, this series of “final” comments repeats the proliferation and conflation of authorities that has persisted throughout the text, staging a final dramatization of the text’s composite authorship and its vision of broadly shared authority.

I suggested above that Lydgate’s comment in the prologue to Book VIII that, “I was born in Lidgate,/ Wher Bachus licour doth ful scarsli fleete” (VIII. 194-95), represents a laying claim

⁹⁵ “Finis libri Bochasij” is the rubric (supplied by Bergen from the Rylands-Jersey manuscript[?]) which comes at the end of the last fall (that of Jean II of France) and before the five concluding sections of the text; Bergen, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, Vol. III, pp 1010–11.

to his authorial constraints. Giving this self-assertion as he is “folwyng aftir” Bochas, and amidst protestations of his inability “Of corious makyng in Inglissh to endite” (VIII. 200), he identifies himself with and through his constrained position of apparent non-authority. He makes a very similar self-assertion in the first Envoy to Duke Humphrey. Immediately following his discussion of the “fall of princes” writings of Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, he writes:

But I that stonde lowe doun in the vale,
So greet a book in Ynglyssh to translate,
Did it be constreynt and no presumpcioun.
Born in a vyllage which callyd is Lydgate,
Be old[e] tyme a famous castel toun;
In Danys tyme it was bete doun,
Tyme whan Seynt Edmond, martir, mayde and kyng,
Was slayn at Oxne, be recoord of wrytyng.
I me excuse, now this book is I-doo,
How I was nevir yit at Cytheroun,
Nor on the mounteyn callyd Pernaso,
Wheer nyne musys haue ther mansyoun.
But to conclude myn entencioun,
I wyl procede forth with whyte and blak;
And where I faylle let Lydgate ber the lak. (IX. 3428-42)

As in the Book VIII Prologue, Lydgate’s self-assertion here comes within a humility topos, at a moment of extreme subjection to his authorities, so that he identifies himself within and through these formidable constraining forces.

That humility effect is enhanced in this instance by the fact that his humble claim to never have been to Mount Parnassus echoes the humility topos imagery of Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Prologue*, in which the Franklin says:

I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;
Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn.
I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,
Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.
Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede. (CT V. 719-723).

While remaining dependent on Chaucer's texts, however, Lydgate also revises the trope, by geographically placing not only the literary authority of the Muses, but also his own humble disavowal of authority. Whereas Chaucer's Franklin was defined only by where he wasn't, Lydgate locates himself. The Muses live on Parnassus; our author lives in a place that was once "a famous castel toun," but which was long since beaten down into a village—and even that defeat seems to be most memorable due to its contemporaneity with Saint Edmund's martyrdom rather than for its own sake. The town is defined by important events in the distant past, even unrelated historical events, and by previous versions of itself. It is this humble village, with its richly layered past, that itself defines Lydgate's authorial identity, as an indebted vernacular reteller. If Lydgate is "lowe doun in the vale," it is from this perspective that he has the best view of the strata that make up the "vale" of literary history that positions and defines him. Lydgate's authorial identity—and his vernacular authority—comes *through* this attention to and universalization of his constrained position.

The town of Lydgate also offers a useful figure for the *Fall of Princes* itself, which similarly meditates on its own rich past as a vernacular translation twice over, and one that is informed by a variety of authorities not directly related to its contents. The text offers special insight into the vexed and mediated natures of both narrative and authorship through its composite composition and its complex layering of stories within stories, narrators within narrators, authors behind authors. The particular composition and retelling of this vernacular translation are the main story dramatized, but by drawing its other authors and their own compositions into that narrative, the text suggests that the story of its vernacular authorship is not so different from the story of authorship generally. The hierarchical conceptions of literary authority that seem at first glance to underpin the text are rewritten as simply the perspective of

each individual author, who must be humble before their authorities in order to find their own place in what, taking a broader view, looks instead like an equal fellowship of authors. In the last stanza, the book is no longer “Bochas” but rather is “Callid Fall of Princis from ther felicite” (IX. 3622). We might just as well call it “Lydgate.” By making room for all of his various authorities—his *auctours*, *translatours*, *maistirs* and *prynces*—Lydgate locates the position from which he can send his book out under his own, and decidedly vernacular, authority.

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