Theories of Poetry, 1256-1400

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Soli Deo gloria

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Abstract

This thesis explores some submerged aspects of the history of the theory of poetry in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, examining the circumstantial factors motivating its intellectual, religious, and moral developments. Starting with the early university men, it argues that the important poetic initiatives of scholastic writers, specifically, Roger Bacon, anticipated the literary advancements and innovative claims conventionally ascribed to the poetic theories of the Italian humanists at the turn of the century. It tracks these theoretical developments and ideas as they move through the exuberant affirmations of poetry made by Albertino Mussato and into the vernacular works of the English writers, John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, who ruthlessly interrogate the instability of their own art and explore the uncertainties of literary reception and transmission. Here, the progressive expansion of the status and power of poetic discourse, which had been fought for and won by previous generations of theorists, is conclusively and soundly rejected. The literary history that presents itself describes a rise and a fall of poetry, where the poetic theories born in Paris appear to flourish in Padua, before dying on the streets of London, crushed beneath the stampeding crowds of the House of Rumour. As the nature of poetic discourse (and of the poet) were crucial points of conflict throughout the period, a study of the theory of poetry is necessary for a full understanding of medieval literary history. This thesis represents a contribution to these discussions.

Contents

Abbreviations

DMLBS	*Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. Ronald Edward Latham (London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1975-2013)
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, continuatio mediaevalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, series latina
CSP	Roger Bacon, *Compendium studii philosophiae*, *Fr. Rogeri Bacon Opera Quaedam Hactenus Inedita,* ed. J. S. Brewer (London: Longman, 1859)
EETS ES	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
EETS OS	Early English Text Society, Original Series
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath, Sherman M. Kuhn and Robert E. Lewis, 12 vols. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1954-2001)
Megas, *Kyklos tēs Padouas*	Anastasios Megas, ed., *Ho prooumanistikos kyklos tēs Padouas (Lovato Lovati-Albertino Mussato) kai hoi tragōdies tou L. A. Seneca* (Thessaloniki, 1967)
MP	Roger Bacon, *Moralis philosophia*, ed. Eugenio Massa (Zurich: Thesaurus Mundi, 1953)
OM	Roger Bacon, *Opus maius*, ed. John Henry Bridges, 3 vols. (vols. I and II, Oxford, 1897; vol. III with corrections, Edinburgh, 1900; reprint, Frankfurt, 1964)
OHI	Roger Bacon, *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi*, ed. Robert Steele and Ferdinand Delorme, 16 fascicules (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905-40)

OQHI	Roger Bacon, *Fr. Rogeri Bacon Opera Quaedam Hactenus Inedita,* ed. J. S. Brewer, Rolls Series, 15 (London: Longman, 1859)
OT	Roger Bacon, *Opus tertium*, *Fr. Rogeri Bacon Opera Quaedam Hactenus Inedita*, ed. J. S. Brewer (London: Longman, 1859)
OTF	Roger Bacon, *Opus tertium: Fragment*, ed. Pierre Duhem (Quarrachi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1909)
PL	*Patrologia cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1841-64)
TEAMS	The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages

Introduction

Throughout the course of the thirteenth century, the status and function of poetry emerged as an important and increasingly contested field of enquiry. Within the developing institutional frameworks of the university in Paris, the disciplinary interactions of theology, Aristotelian philosophy, and literary studies gave rise to new structures of learning and thought that would have an enduring impact on the literary history of the period. The continuing ramifications of these foundational points of contact, which served to enlarge the horizons of what could be considered poetic, were more often defined by tense stand-offs and impassioned disputes, than unified affirmations of value. As an inherently ambiguous discursive category, poetry did not surrender itself to any singular or enduring system of classification, and, as a result, was regularly subject to the eruptive processes of re-evaluation and redefinition.

These early scholastic liaisons, which had been given focus by the classicizing interests of professional academics and theologians, were formative for the claims made by later Italian writers that poetry was a divine science. In contrast to conventional accounts of the period, this thesis finds the origins of literary humanism not in the special conditions of northern Italy, but in the university of Paris in the mid-thirteenth century, where the study of literary, philosophical, and theological texts had been reinvigorated by the rediscovery and popular reception of classical writers. It is here, at the intersection of secular poetics and biblical commentary, where poetic theories began to emerge that saw the responsibilities and powers of the scriptural writer as comparable to those of the secular poet.[1] These fluid distinctions, which

[1] This was, as Alastair Minnis has noted, an overlooked aspect of the medieval volume of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, which did not contain 'a substantial treatment of Bible commentary' (Alastair Minnis, 'The Trouble with Theology: Ethical Poetics and the

allowed for new claims to be made about the status of poetry, appealed in particular to Italian writers, who saw a tantalizing image of the venerated pagan *poeta* of the classical past in the inspired Christian poet. Here the dispassionate analysis of academic study was given life, and poetic theory was turned into poetic practice.

However, as this thesis will show, the supreme confidence in poetry and in the divine authority of the poet, which was initiated within Paris and brought to maturity by the Italian trecento writers, was not received with universal cheer and instead resulted in various modes of disproval, receiving a sustained response of criticism from the vernacular writers of England. This thesis will proceed by considering the work of Roger Bacon OFM (d. 1292), who elevated the status of poetry within the scholastic context, and the controversial Italian poet, Albertino Mussato (d. 1329), before examining the work of the English vernacular poets John Gower (d. 1408) and Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400). It is here, in the hands of these later poets, that the progressive expansion of the status and power of poetry, which had been fought for and won by previous generations of poetic theorists, is conclusively and soundly rejected, buried in layers of irony and redeployed with new critical emphases. As this thesis will suggest, by shaping the way texts could and should be read, the theory of poetry played a significant role in the intellectual and cultural life of the late Middle Ages. As such, a full appreciation of the poetic achievements and literary history of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries must, therefore, include an understanding of the subject.

As a study of the theory of poetry, this thesis takes as its central concerns the essential properties and functions of the poet and of poetry. It pursues something

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Ends of Scripture', *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel [Toronto, 2011] p. 21; Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages* [Cambridge, 2005]).

distinct from the study of poetics, which has as its proper focus the formal, linguistic, and rhetorical strategies necessary for literary compositions.[2] These were the preserve of the medieval *ars poetriae*. Though, of course, both areas of study are not exclusive and may usefully inform one another. Likewise, by considering poetry and the poet as unique artifacts and makers of culture, it is also distinct from the study of literary criticism and the reception of the classics, but necessarily intersects and relies on the established scholarship of these literary theoretical disciplines.

Important excavation work has been started by Ernst Curtius. Writing some seventy years ago in his expansive *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, he says:

> We still know too little today to give a comprehensive historical presentation of the theory of poetry. The problem has hardly been seen.[3]

In response to this he offers up the closing excursus of his work as 'specimens of a branch of study which has yet to be established' in the hopes to stimulate further work.[4] While this thesis takes Curtius' important initiatives as its methodological starting point, as we will see, it also necessarily departs from some of his early assessments. Indeed, much work has been done since Curtius' day. The foundational scholarly responses by Rita Copeland, Alastair Minnis, Ian Johnson, and Vincent Gillespie are important waymarkers within the discipline, and serve as a foundation on which this thesis intends to build. Rather than proposing a forced intervention within the established critical tradition, this thesis offers an extension of current scholarship, adding to the wider literary interests of the period by focusing specifically, and in a sustained way, on the conceptual development of poetry in Paris,

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[2] Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 2013) p. 468.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

Italy, and England. In doing so, it seeks to engage an analytical process that will explore a range of theoretical positions and statements.

The pan-European vision of Curtius' work, which was produced in the wake of the Second World War, informs the scope and method of this thesis. As we will see, despite the separation of time and space, writers throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries consistently worked within a shared cultural *imaginaire*, a horizon of literary expectations, which constituted a transnational palette of texts and poetic theories that could be deployed in different ways and within radically different contexts. This thesis will use a range of medieval texts to reflect and explain each other, and as a means to construct an image of the wider developments of poetic theory. In confronting an imperfect and incomplete textual record, where it is often unclear who had read what, and how ideas moved from place to place, this kind of comparative historicism is not without its problems. Subsequently, texts will not be made to address concerns beyond their own self-evident interests or their conceivable relationship to other works and writers. It is a method that rewards us with a wide contextual perspective, allowing us to better chart the evolution of poetic ideas and to advance further the moving frontiers of literary study. To this end, this thesis finds its focus in a diachronic vision of literary development, where texts and authors contribute to an overarching historical narrative, while also acknowledging their important synchronic contingency and local significance.

Although the time frame I have chosen for this study necessarily interrupts a continuum of intellectual progress, it nonetheless observes two important moments for the history of poetic theory. In 1256 the translation of Averroes' commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* marks the introduction of a new mode of literary analysis and production, and reflects the increasingly powerful influence of Aristotelian

philosophy on poetic theory. As suggested by the presence of an anonymous *quaestio* on the nature of poetry and the lecture notes of Bartholomew of Bruges on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Paris was a centre for the reception and study of the poetic theories generated by this text.[5] The ideas received here were blended with Horatian models of poetic discourse and entered into the popular literary consciousness as aphoristic excerpts in florilegia and encyclopedias.

At the other end of the period, concluding in 1400, the thesis closes with the death of Geoffrey Chaucer, who, as the terminal figure in this study represents a critical departure from the standards and values developed throughout the intervening years. The movement of the thesis, then, as we will see, is toward the literal and metaphoric death of the author. By plotting out significant moments of evolution between these two points, this study hopes to examine the shifting nature of poetic theory and consider how writers engaged with both their contemporaries and their common literary inheritance to construct their own vision of poetry. In order to examine the perceived function and status of poetry and the poet, and to understand the changing shape of poetic theory, it will be necessary to consider a range of texts and authors throughout the period, and to suggest the importance of lesser known figures as well as revisit more established writers.

Of course, the constraints of time and space mean there are important lacunae in the literary history presented here. Most notably absent from this discussion are the Francophone poets, Guillaume de Machaut (d. 1377), Jean Froissart (d. 1405), Eustache Deschamp, (d. c.1406/7) – writers who had some influence on the vernacular imagination of Chaucer – and also, Guillaume de Deguileville (d. 1360),

[5] Gilbert Dahan, 'Notes et textes sur la *Poétique* au Moyen Âge', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge* 47 (1980) pp. 171-239.

who reflects on own his status as a poet and the authority of his art.[6] In describing the texture of French writing in the period, Sarah Kay and Adrian Armstrong explain that French poetry was less concerned with substantive content [*connaissance*] than with mental acts and processes [*savoir*]: the transmission and shaping of knowledge 'relies on an audience's shared understanding' as a poem cannot produce knowledge in isolation.[7] It suggests a similar literary environment to the one we find described in the works of the English vernacular writers, who, as we will see, insist on the unavoidable breakdown of this kind of 'shared understanding'. For Chaucer and Gower, any such agreement between author and reader was simply impossible.

Rather than offer substantive commentary on the French writers, or on the theoretical contributions of Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*, this thesis follows a winding path of literary humanism through Paris, into northern Italy, and finally into London. Within this thesis, humanism is to be understood as referring to a broad range of aesthetic and intellectual impulses, which were directed by a desire to recover the texts and standards of classical learning. While humanism involved the recuperation and redeployment of the cultural, literary, and distinctly human achievements of the past, it also argued for the lasting significance of poetry and for the authoritative status of the poet. As we will see, according to these parameters, humanism and scholasticism often coalesced in productive ways and were not merely antithetical intellectual pursuits.

A successful investigation of all these concerns requires reflecting on an essential point of enquiry: what is poetry? It is a deceptively simple question, and as

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[6] Marco Nievergelt and Stephanie A. V. G. Kamath, ed. *The Pèlerinage Allegories of Guillaume de Deguileville: Tradition, Authority and Influence* (Woodbridge, 2013). On Chaucer, James Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Background of the Book of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill, 1968); Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1957).

[7] Adrian Armstrong and Sarah Kay, *Knowing Poetry: Verse in Medieval France from the Rose to the Rhétoriqueurs* (Ithaca, 2011) p. 197.

we will see, its answer is evasive, subtle, and constantly in flux. Even at its most mechanical level, the title of 'poetic' could be applied to a textured range of possible discursive elements. It could be something musical, or metaphorical, or something imagistic or affective, or, indeed, any combination of these things, which might occur within a narrative poem, a lyric, a prose treatise, an oration, a sermon, or as part of a verbal strategy more often found within the disciplinary scope of rhetoric. It is the ambidextrous nature of poetic discourse that makes its precise study difficult, and is perhaps what made it such an engaging site of exploration for medieval writers. Poetry could be whatever it needed to be, it was a discourse of requirement.

Chapter 1 will explore the contribution made by Bacon to the development of the theory of poetry in the period, arguing that he pursued a fierce defence of poetic discourse, asserting its status as a divine science and insisting on its theological, revelatory, and redemptive potential. It will also show that the rise of Aristotelian logic in the University of Paris, rather than simply supplanting the study of classics, allowed for new literary and theological possibilities which influenced Bacon's ambitious claims for the power of poetic language. By examining his statements on the divine nature of poetry and his energetic reception of ancient texts, this chapter will also argue for his unique place within the history of literary humanism. As it will suggest, Bacon's work not only complicates the conventionally antithetical worlds of scholasticism and humanism, but more firmly establishes the origins of trecento humanism in Paris.

Chapter 2 surveys the poetic theory of Mussato and his humanistic efforts to establish poetry as a divinely inspired mode of expression, elevating the status of the poet to that of the *vates*. As we will see, he desired to recover the standards of classical poetry and to establish himself as a Christian extension of the pagan literary

past. His radical claims for the scriptural significance of poetic texts and their theological status necessarily provoked a response of criticism, and in turn required defending. Producing the first significant defence of poetry in the period, Mussato explores the fields of poetic music, genre, and the disenthralling experience of figurative language, as he absorbs and repurposes a range of different theoretical materials.

Chapter 3 argues for the importance of Aristotelian moral philosophy to Gower's *Confessio amantis*, suggesting that his poem resists singular modes of interpretation in order to catalyze a process of self-analysis and ethical reflection. In the *Confessio*, Gower explores the nature and problems of moral reading, taking a sceptical view of the ability of poetic discourse to securely communicate meaning, distancing himself from the confident humanist claims of poetic authority in order to suggest that the balance of literary power was held elsewhere. Poetic meaning was ultimately determined by the unique psychological reflexes and internal equilibria of the reader. As we will see, the *Confessio* is deeply concerned with the psychology of reading and the mental impact of poetic texts.

Chapter 4 examines Chaucer's *House of Fame*, suggesting that it takes these ideas and concerns in a different direction and to their dramatic conclusion. It represents an important meta-poetic rejection of humanist poetic theory, denying the author any control over his work. It is an ironic and self-destructive riposte to the poetic self-conceptions of humanist writers like Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) and Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375). For Chaucer, the unpredictable processes of textual preservation and reception had resulted in an unstable literary tradition, where readers wilfully imposed their own imaginative meanings onto poetic works. However, as we will see, in the *House of Fame*, poetry strikes back. Neither author or reader is in

complete control of the text, and here narrative poetry assumes its own self-directing agency.

Chapter 1

The Category of the Poetic and the Work of Roger Bacon

I

Ernst Curtius, in his most well-known work, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, writes that:

> The great scholastics of the thirteenth century are not interested in poetry. You will look in vain for a scholastic vindication of it.[1]

It is not until the end of the century, and within the humanist coteries of northern Italy, that we first discover the applied desire to promote the status and function of poetry and defend its appointment as an essential category of study.[2] It is, however, an enduring assessment of the period that has more recently been challenged by an increasing critical awareness of the poetic and humanistic interests of the early university men.[3]

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[1] Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 2013) p. 593.

[2] On the activities of scholasticism and humanism being 'formidable opponents', with the latter superseding the former, see Concetta Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250-1500* (London, 1981) p. 18. On literary humanism as a unique product of mid-thirteenth-century Padua, see Leighton Reynolds and Nigel Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature* (Oxford, 1991) p. 124; Ronald Witt, *'In the Footsteps of the Ancients': The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2000); Bert Roest perceives that the interactions between Franciscan study and humanist thought were almost exclusively Italian phenomena (*A History of Franciscan Education* [Brill, 2000] pp. 168-71).

[3] Alastair Minnis cautions against Greenfield's generalizations (Alastair Minnis and Brian Scott, ed., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* [Oxford, 1998] p. 10) and Robert Black has suggested that Witt's narrow definition of humanism necessarily limits the full history of the period ('The Origins of Humanism', *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Angelo Mazzocco [Leiden, 2006] pp. 37-71). Paul O. Kristeller has suggested that the Italian humanists likely developed their study and imitation of the classics 'under the impact of influence received from France after the middle of the thirteenth century' (*Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* [Rome, 1956] p. 651); B. L. Ullmann, 'Some Aspects of the Origin of Italian humanism', *Philological Quarterly* 20 (1941) pp. 20-31; cf. Vincent Gillespie, 'The Senses in Literature: The Textures of

In particular, the work of Roger Bacon OFM (d. 1292) represents perhaps the most substantial and egregious exception to this broad historical narrative. Compelled by his ambitions for pedagogic reform, Bacon argues for the privileged utility of poetry, claiming it as an important mode of moral persuasion.[4] For Bacon, the force of literary language [*sermo potens*], which powerfully impacted the affections of its audience, could direct the will to love good and loathe sin [*ad amorem boni et odium peccati*].[5] Influenced by the newly available commentaries and translations of antique texts, Bacon sought to accurately recover the neglected resources of pagan writing, attempting to rehabilitate the diverse and often problematic achievements of secular authors by insisting on the moral capacity of all literature to inform right action.

The humanistic intensity of Bacon's project suggests an intellectual environment where the value and purpose of the arts and sciences had become a disputed and potentially subversive field of enquiry. Writing in the mid-thirteenth century in Paris and Oxford, Bacon's discursive allegiances not only represent a unique response to the category of the poetic, they also serve as important markers in charting the development of literary humanism in the period. This chapter will consider his contributions to the history of poetic theory, examining his scientific

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Perception', *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages 500-1450*, ed. Richard Newhauser (Oxford, 2014) pp. 153-73, esp. p. 165; Louis John Paetow, *The Morale Scolarium of John of Garlande* (Berkeley, 1927).

[4] For example, Roger Bacon, *Compendium studii philosophiae*, OQHI, p. 433, henceforth CSP. Amanda Power, *Roger Bacon and the Defence of Christendom* (Cambridge, 2013); idem, 'Roger Bacon and the Reform of Christendom', *Canterbury Studies in Franciscan History* 1 (2008) pp. 135-51; Jeremiah Hackett, ed., 'Roger Bacon and Aristotelianism', *Vivarium* 35.2 (1997); Roest, *Franciscan Education*, pp. 137-45; 168-71; Eugenio Massa, *Ruggero Bacone; etica e poetica nella storia dell' 'Opus maius'* (Roma, 1955).

[5] Roger Bacon, *Moralis philosophia*, ed. Eugenio Massa (Zurich, 1953) pp. 86, 249, 250, henceforth MP; idem, *Opus tertium*, OQHI, p. 305, henceforth OT; idem, *Opus maius*, ed. John Henry Bridges, 3 vols. (vols. I and II, Oxford, 1897; vol. III with corrections, Edinburgh, 1900; reprint, Frankfurt, 1964) III, p. 86, henceforth OM. On the power of speech, see Irène Rosier-Catach, *La Parole comme acte: Sur la grammaire et la sémantique au xiiie siècle* (Paris, 1994); idem, *Le pouvoir des mots au Moyen Âge*, ed., Nicole Bériou, Jean-Patrice Boudet, and Irène Rosier-Catach (Turnhout, 2014) pp. 225-38, 511-588; Pascale Bourgain, 'Les sens de la langue et des langues chez Roger Bacon', *Traduction et traducteurs au moyen âge*, ed. Geneviève Contamine (Paris, 1989) pp. 317-29.

classification of poetry and his understandings of literary response. As we will see, Bacon considered poetic discourse a powerful coalition of metaphoric language and the musical rhythms of metre, which had the important affective task of influencing the will and moving the soul toward its salvation.

II

Central to Bacon's high estimation of poetry, was his recognition that the procedures of speculative logic were unable to adequately effect moral behaviour.[6] The abstract complexities and linearity of both dialectic and demonstration [*dialeticum et demonstrativum*], which relied on the imperfect and fallen mechanisms of human perception, had only a limited impact on moral praxis, and were considered unfit for the practical rigours of moral philosophy.[7] As he notes, Aristotle writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the end of moral philosophy was not the contemplation of grace, but that we might become good.[8] While the speculative sciences culminated in naked truth, the practical sciences – moral philosophy and theology – pursued behavioural reform by stirring the individual to good works.[9] For Bacon, poetry was able to incline the mind [*ad inclinandum mentem*] and move the soul to good [*flectere*

[6] MP, pp. 250-1, 254.
[7] MP, pp. 209, 247, 250, 256.
[8] [Moralis philosophia, 'non est contemplacionis gratia, set ut boni fiamus'] (MP, p. 250; *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans., Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins [Chicago, 2011] II, 2, 1103b, 26-28). While this was a point of significance to Bacon, shaping his belief in the role of moral philosophy as it related to other disciplines, the addition of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to the university curriculum appears to have been an influential moment in medieval education more generally (OM, III, p. 87; Roger Bacon, *Quaestiones alterae supra libros primae philosophiae Aristotelis*, fasc. 11, OHI, pp. 27, 39, 41; Jeremiah Hackett, 'Roger Bacon on Rhetoric and Poetics', *Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays*, ed. idem [Leiden, 1997] p. 137).
[9] 'Therefore speculative science always aspires to its own end' [Ideo speculativa scientia semper aspirat ad finem suum] (OM, III, p. 76); Vincent Gillespie, 'Study of Classical Authors: From the Twelfth Century to 1450', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge, 2005) p. 169. 'The end of speculative science is truth, the end of practical science is good' [Nam finis speculative est veritas, finis practice est bonum] (MP, p. 250).

animum ad bonum] so that its audiences might be compelled toward behavioural reform.[10]

The immediacy of poetic discourse, then, which appealed directly and suddenly [*subito*] to the mind, worked to circumvent the defective systems of logical analysis and configure the *consuetudines* [moral habits] of an individual in a process of forceful induction.[11] Underlying his claims for the affective power of poetry is an adaptive synthesis of both Averroistic and Horatian theories of poetic function. Thus, by extending Averroes' claim that all poetry is either 'praise or blame', Bacon explains that poetic arguments [*argumentum poeticum*] should describe vices and praise virtues in order that men might be drawn to love good and hate error.[12] But also, by conflating the twin counters of Horace's famous aphorism – that poets want to be useful or to delight – Bacon insists that poetry should have both the benefit of moral instruction and the power to delight and move a person to action.[13] While this response to the scientific function of poetry would become a commonplace within the period, Bacon includes a further dimension to this model of poetry, insisting on the revelatory power of all poetic discourse – secular and sacred – to intimately communicate knowledge of the divine person. In doing so Bacon sought to radically elevate the study and scientific merit of the discursive arts.

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[10] MP, pp. 250, 251.

[11] *Consuetudo* is difficult to translate directly into English, combining the sense of character, custom, behaviour, and normal practice (Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 186); Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto, 1982) p. 26; MP, p. 249.

[12] 'And this expression which persuades us to love good works is had through the poetic argument' [Et hic habitus qui flectit nos ad amorem boni operis habetur per argumentum poeticum] OM, III, p. 86; 'All poetry is either praise or blame' [Omne itaque poema … aut est vituperatio aut est laudatio] (Herman the German, *De arte poetica cum Averrois expositione*, ed. L. Minio- Paluello (Brussels, 1968) p. 41.

[13] 'It is right that [poetry] should not only be used to teach, but to delight and to move' [Oportet enim non solum docere, sed delectare et promovere] (OM, III, p. 86). Bacon offers a subtle elision of Horace's aphorism '*aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae'* which he also cites here (Horace, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough [Cambridge, 1926] *The Art of Poetry*, ll. 333-34).

Indeed, the practical arguments [*practica argumenta*] of rhetoric and poetry shared an elevated status and function within Bacon's scientific hierarchy as discrete but interrelated disciplines.[14] Although some persuasive language was classified as absolute rhetoric [*absolute rethorica*], Bacon identified poetry as an independent category of argument that served the interests of moral philosophy by moving an audience to work in worship, laws and virtues.[15] This kind of 'rhetoric', he says, was properly called 'poetic' by Aristotle and other philosophers because poetry was used to win men to the integrity of virtue.[16] Proportional to his zealous belief that moral science was the most noble [*nobilissima*] part of philosophy and the end of all knowledge, Bacon argued for the important priority of poetic discourse within the categories of study.[17]

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[14] 'Practical arguments serve moral philosophy' [Moralibus autem ministrat practica argumenta] (OM, III, p. 87).

[15] [Ideo argumentum rethoricum … est in his, que nos flectunt ad opus in cultu divino, legibus et virtutibus] (MP, pp. 254-55). This is paralleled by the suggested objectives for moral philosophy*:* 'Truly this practical science is called moral and civil science, which orders man in his relation to God, and to his neighbour, and to himself, and proves these regulations, it invites and powerfully excites us to them' [Hec vero practica vocatur moralis et civilis sciencia, que ordinat hominem in Deum et ad proximum et ad seipsum, et probat has ordinaciones et ad eas nos invitat et excitat efficaciter] (MP, p. 3); Gillespie, 'Study of Classical Authors', p. 170.

[16] Again, the coda of this passage is supported by reference to Horace's poetic: 'It is a kind of rhetoric, but is properly called, poetic, according to Aristotle and other philosophers, because truthful poets used it to persuade men to the honesty of virtue; for poets wish to persuade or delight' [Rethoricum quidem est, sed vocatur proprio nomine 'poeticum' ab Aristotile et ceteris philosophis, quia poete veraces usi sunt eo in flectendo homines ad virtutum honestatem; nam prodesse volunt aut delectare poete] (MP, p. 255).

[17] 'Moral science is the most noble part of philosophy … moral philosophy is the end of the whole function of philosophy' [{Moralis sciencia} est nobilior omnibus partibus philosophie … moralis philosophia est finis omnium parcium philosophie] (MP, pp. 3-4). While this may be so, the *speculativa* remain important and necessary to the development of wisdom: 'I have shown in what proceeds that the knowledge of language, mathematics, perspective and experimental science are most useful and principally necessary in the study of wisdom, without which no one can accomplish in it as he should' [Manifestavi in precedentibus quod cognicio linguarum et mathematica atque perspectiva nec non sciencia experimentalis sunt maxime utiles et principaliter necessarie in studio sapientie, sine quibus nullus potest ut oporteret in ea proficere] (MP, p. 3). It is for this reason that the *Opus maius* concludes with the *Moralis philosophia*, encoding into the structure of the work the teleology of moral philosophy.

In contrast to the system of classification drawn from Aristotle's *Organon*, which regarded the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* as the last and least profitable disciplines, Bacon's estimation of moral philosophy made the strategies and methods of poetic arguments essential knowledge for the moral philosopher.[18] Just as revelation might augment reason, the persuasive eloquence of poetic discourse was a necessary partner to the study of wisdom.[19] 'Wisdom without eloquence', Bacon writes, 'is like a sharp sword in a paralysed hand; eloquence without wisdom is a sharp sword in an angered hand'.[20] The study of literature was, therefore, essential to the full investigation and understanding of all science.

In this way we can begin to see how Bacon's enthusiastic humanism laboured to discover within the category of the poetic a distinct mode of expression that would be indispensable for the progression and fullness of all scholastic endeavour and necessary for the advancement of the Christian faith. Adapting and transforming the Aristotelian works of Averroes, Avicenna, and Al-farabi, Bacon sought to colonize the poetical theories and assertions of classical authors, placing great emphasis on the manifold utility of eloquence and the faculties of literary response. As such, by combining a knowledge and love of ancient writers with the study of the world and the achievements of human understanding, Bacon aspired to an explicitly humanistic set of principles and values. His work is evidence of a submerged humanist

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[18] 'The moral philosopher knows the use of sweet discourse and delightful speech' [Nam moralis philosophus scit uti sermone suavi] (OT, p. 306). O. B. Hardison, *Poetics and Praxis, Understanding and Imagination: The Collected Essays of O.B. Hardison, Jr.*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Athens, 1997) pp. 23-24.

[19] Gillespie, 'Study of Classical Authors', pp. 170-1.

[20] [Sapientia sine eloquentia est quasi gladius actus in manu paralytici, sicut eloquentia expers sapientiae est quasi gladius acutus in manu furiosi] (OT, p. 4). John of Salisbury argues a similar Ciceronian and Horatian point, insisting that the moral philosopher have both eloquence and wisdom (John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon,* ed. Hall [Turnhout, 1991] 1.7; Horace, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, Epistle, I.4.8-11).

undercurrent within the scholastic tradition, which anticipates the more fully formed poetic initiatives of the Italian trecento writers.[21]

For Bacon, his pioneering effort represented an important academic intervention, correcting what he considered to be a disciplinary and intellectual absence within the centres of learning, where, with deleterious results, the study of literature and language had become increasingly marginalized subjects. As such, this chapter will first survey the nature of Bacon's reformative project and consider his rationale for the promotion of the study of these subjects. As we will see, Bacon sought to improve what he perceived as the disastrous standards of education and morality by focusing on the recuperation of ancient texts. In doing so, we will locate his work within the shifting intellectual and institutional landscape of the thirteenth century. Finally, this chapter will discuss more specifically Bacon's affective and theological vision of poetic discourse and argue for his important place within the history of the poetic theory of the period.

III

Writing shortly before the year 1267, Bacon repeatedly insists on the necessary interruption of what he considered to be a sustained period of intellectual and institutional decay:[22]

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[21] R. W. Southern, *Scholastic Humanism and the Unification of Europe*, 2 vols. (Oxford: 1995). In her discussion of the intellectual conditions of Italy, Concetta Greenfield builds on the ideas of Paul O. Kristeller to argue that 'these two traditions dominated different fields, with Scholasticism controlling the field of logic and natural philosophy, Humanism the field of eloquence and moral philosophy' (*Humanist and Scholastic Poetics*, p. 18.). To a similar end, by examining the reception and translation of Greco-Arabic thought, Charles Homer Haskins portrays the codified study of logic within the period as the 'enemy' of humanist work, despite its equal claim to classical origins (*The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1927) p. 93. That Bacon would be considered both a scholastic and a humanist according to Greenfield's own definitions, suggests an environment that allowed for a range of intellectual positions.

> In the last forty years certain men have risen up in the university, who made themselves masters and doctors of the study of theology and philosophy, when they have learned nothing worth knowing … They are themselves inexperienced boys, both of the world and the wise languages – Greek and Hebrew – which are necessary for study … They do not know all the parts and sciences of the philosophy of the world that contain wisdom, even though they presume to know about the study of theology, which requires every human wisdom [*omnem sapientiam humanam*].[23]
>
> (OT, p. 425)

For Bacon, the curricular prejudices of the ascendant *moderni* had achieved a double absence. The combined neglect of philological training and the study of antique texts served to suppress the production of informed translations and commentaries, in turn frustrating the discovery of new modes of discernment and expression. The proposed corrective, as this account suggests, involved liberating the diverse and often troublesome work of the pagan past, and engaging 'all the parts and sciences of the philosophy of the world' in study.

This response appears sustained by the universal scope of Bacon's moral philosophy and theology.[24]

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[22] On June 22, 1266 Pope Clement IV requested a survey of Bacon's work, the *Opus maius, Opus minus* and *Opus tertium* were completed a year later in 1267 (*Epistola Clementis IV papae. Ad Rogerium Baconem*, OQHI, p. 1); OM, xxiii; OM, I, p. 273; OT, pp. 289-90. While we can date CSP to c.1271-72, there is some difficulty in dating all of Bacon's works precisely, and determining whether he was writing from his time in Oxford or while in Paris (Jeremiah Hackett, 'Roger Bacon: His Life, Career and Works', *Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays*, ed. idem [Leiden, 1997] pp. 9-24).

[23] [Quod a quadraginta annis surrexerunt quidam in studio, qui seipsos creaverunt in magistros et doctores studii theologiae et philosophiae, cum tamen nunquam didicerunt aliquid dignum … Hi sunt pueri inexperti seipsos et mundum et linguas sapientiales, Graecam et Haebraeam, quae necessariae sunt studio … ignorant et omnes partes et scientias philosophiae mundi cum sapientia, quando praesumunt de studio theologiae, quod requirit omnem sapientiam humanam].

[24] On the relationship between theology and moral philosophy: 'While theology is the noblest of the sciences, the science that is most closely related with it [moral philosophy] is more noble than the others' [Set theologia est scienciarum nobilissima; ergo illa, que

> If theology recognizes soteriological truth as its own wherever it finds it; moral philosophy claims as its right anything it finds written elsewhere pertaining to it [*sui generis*].[25]
>
> (MP, p. 5)

Pervading and encompassing all disciplines, the principles of moral philosophy are collected wherever they are found and according to their relevance, expanding the standard *accessus* claim that 'almost all authors direct themselves to ethics'.[26] In this inclusive and comprehensive vision of knowledge, Bacon necessarily sanctions the study and exploration of all secular writing, insisting on the lasting moral and theological relevance of the literary deposit of the past. Indeed, the advancement of moral and theological understanding, and their shared objectives of salvation and right action, depend on the applied knowledge of 'every human wisdom'.[27]

Within his totalizing vision of study, Bacon regarded the work of Aristotle to be the foundation of all wisdom [*fundamenta totius sapientiae*], identifying specifically the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* as the two better books of logic [*duos libros*

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maxime convenit cum ea, est nobilior inter ceteras] [(MP, p. 4). For Bacon, moral philosophy is concerned with the perfection of salvation through virtue [salute hominis per virtutem] and the final inner purpose of human wisdom [sapiencie humane finis intra] (ibid.).

[25] [Si enim theologia veritates salutiferas esse suas intelligit, ubicumque eas invenerit … sic et moralis scientia in suum ius vendicat quicquid de rebus sui generis reperit alias esse scriptum]. Cf. 'For Christian law assumes whatever is worthy in the law of civil philosophy' [Lex enim Christiana assumit quicquid dignum est in lege civili philosophica] (CSP, p. 424).

[26] [Omnes auctores fere ad ethicam tendunt] (Munich, MS Clm 4610, in Karl Meiser, 'Über einen Commentar zu den Metamorphosendes Ovid', *Sitzungsberichte der Königlichen Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-philologischen Classe* [München 1885] p. 50); Gillespie, 'Study of Classical Authors', p. 170. Cf. MP, p. 3. *Accessus* writers often associated the behavioural objectives of moral philosophy as pertaining to the logical category of ethics: 'Therefore in the beginning of this book, just as in other places, it is called ethical, it is classified as moral philosophy' [Unde in principio istius libri sicut alibi dictum est quod ethice, idest philosphie morali supponitur este liber] (Milan Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS D 76 inf. 2, f. 33r.), and elsewhere: '[This work] is classified as ethics because it deals with moral behaviour' [ethice subponitur quia de moribus] (R. B. C. Huygens, ed., *Accessus ad auctores*, Latomus 12 [1953] p. 20).

[27] MP, p. 3. Bacon notes that 'all of the sciences are joined … neither can one be known without the other' [Quia omnes scientiae sunt connexae … nec potest una sciri sine alia] (OT, p. 37). In this context, we should consider any attempt to separate out a single discipline from his work for discussion as necessarily provisional.

logicae meliores].[28] The rediscovery of Aristotle in the thirteenth century was definitive in drawing attention to the category of the poetic, and motivating the study and analysis of literary response. However, according to Bacon, Aristotle suffered greatly at the hands of unskilled translators and expositors, who lacked both the linguistic and scientific knowledge [*lingua et scientia*] necessary to accurately recast the Philosopher's works into Latin, producing instead corrupt texts which resulted in the *multiplicatio ignorantiae*.[29]

In particular, he regrets that on the poetic argument [*de poetico argumenta*] we do not have the full thought of Aristotle [*non habemus mentem Aristotilis plenam*]; the rich taste of the original text had been reduced to a faint scent by the attenuating effects of sustained reproduction.[30] The thirteenth-century translation of Averroes' 'Middle Commentary' on the *Poetics*, undertaken by Herman the German (d. 1272), had been fundamentally compromised because he did not know anything worthwhile concerning languages or the sciences.[31] For Bacon, the failure of contemporary

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[28] CSP, 429; OM, III, p. 33. 'He who does not know [Aristotle's] works labours in vain and plows the sand, and can never be moved forward in anything' [Qui ignorat ejus labores, in vanum laborat et littus arat, nec unquam potest in aliis promoveri] (CSP, 468). Bacon was among the first to lecture on Aristotle, and appears in this regard influenced by Robert Grosseteste. OM, III, p. 33; Massa, *Etica e poetica*, p. 145.

[29] CSP, 469. 'It is right that the translator knows the language from which he translates, and the language into which he translates, and the knowledge which he wishes to translate. But who is this, and will we praise him? For he has produced wondrous works in his life!' [Oportet quod translator sciat linguam a qua transfert, et linguam in quam transfert, et scientiam quam vult transferre. Sed quis est hic, et laudabimus eum? Fecit enim mirabilia in vita sua] (OT, p. 471). He echoes the writer of Ecclesiasticus here, going on to argue that current scholarship was so bad it would have been better if the works of Aristotle were never translated, and that his translated works should be destroyed by fire (CSP, p. 469).

[30] MP, p. 267; OM, III, p. 33.

[31] [Nullus … scivit aliquid dignum de linguis et scientiis] (OT, p. 471), Bacon is referring here to Herman the German, Michael Scott (d. 1232), Alfred of England (d. 1245), and Gerard of Cremona (d. 1187). Bacon says that this is obvious, not only from their translations, but from the *conditionibus personarum*. While this is an apparently hostile *ad hominum* argument for the connection between a persons moral and intellectual status, it could be suggested that Bacon's understanding of the relationship between scientific ignorance and moral degeneracy was in keeping with his system of knowledge. As the fullness of moral philosophy and its improving effects demanded the study of all sciences, a lack of poetic and

philological expertise [*lingua*], combined with a lack of training in the moral logic of poetry [*scientia*], worked to subvert the important study and circulation of the *Poetics*, degrading what was to be the theoretical foundation of his new literary programme.[32] To restore the status and utility of literary studies, Bacon proposed an amended syllabus with a clear emphasis on the interrelated and interdependent subjects of literature and language.

Among the 'five or six' disciplines the *moderni* lacked, the science of wise languages [*scientia linguarum sapientialium*] (Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldean) was at the top of the list; not only was it necessary for the perfection of philosophy and theology, but also for the study of literature.[33] According to Bacon, if we wish to rejoice in the wisdom of the poets, it is necessary that we are trained in the languages of their work.[34] Without learning the *linguae alienae*, which were used by all poets [*omnes poetae*], the wisdom of past writers will be entirely lost, replaced by the limiting efforts of secondary exposition and translation, which would otherwise only serve to perpetuate the errors of previous generations and of inferior scholars.[35] The study of ancient languages was essential to the recovery and conservation of the knowledge and literature of the past, and the literature of the past was necessary for the full expansion of contemporary learning. As successors to the wise *antiqui*, the *moderni* were charged with the responsibility of engaging literary texts in their

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linguistic skill might then be easily associated with a flawed moral character. How could a man be good without knowledge of the poets?

[32] MP, p. 267. While Bacon was unaware of the later more accurate translation of the *Poetics* by William Moerbeke (c. 1278), he is nonetheless deeply critical of Moerbeke's capacity as translator (OT, p. 471).

[33] CSP, p. 433.

[34] CSP, p. 463. It is not immediately obvious what poets Bacon has in mind, although from context it might be assumed they are classical poets from the pagan past.

[35] OT, p. 88.

original language and independently discerning the value of their wisdom, or else, Bacon suggests, the *antiqui* might be stupid and we might be wise.[36]

In this way, Bacon sought to address what he considered to be a desperate absence of linguistic learning [*ignorantia linguarum*] and ancient poetry, providing a unifying focus for a divisive intellectual environment, which he saw as being governed by the interests of an increasingly myopic and self-serving *Parisius literatus*.[37] Within the factional conflicts attending the institutional development of the university, the status of poetry had become a point of potential division. In examining the increasingly disparate disciplinary attitudes to poetry we can begin to see the development of a new literary identity in the period, one that was deeply influenced by the institutional reception of Aristotle. As we will see, the work of Michael of Cornwall in the 1250s provides an important – and under-examined – response to the transformative influence of Aristotelian philosophy on the study of poetry, which resonates with Bacon's own literary and disciplinary emphases, and which further affirms Paris as a centre of poetic enquiry.

IV

The emergence of the university in the thirteenth century, together with the rapid expansion of the mendicant orders, produced new structures of learning in Paris that had important consequences for the study of literature. As the focus of intellectual activity moved from the cathedral schools to the university – from Orléans and Chartres to Paris – the study of classics gave way to the logic of language.[38] 'Paris

[36] OT, p. 88; CSP, p. 463.
[37] CSP, p. 463.
[38] Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 747; Martin Grabmann, *Mittelalterliches Geistesleben*, 3 vols. (1926-56) I, pp. 104-46. Cf. Matthew of Vendôme (fl. c.1175), 'Let Paris be proud of its logic and Orléans its authors' [Parisius logicam sibi iactitet, Aurelianis / Auctores] (*Opera*, ed. Franco Munari, vol. 2 [Roma, 1982] p. 76, ll. 33-34); Geoffrey of Vinsauf (fl. c.1200) 'At

and Orléans are at odds', writes Henri d'Andeli (d. c.1236) in the famous opening to the *Bataille des VII Arts* (c.1225), 'because they differ about learning'.[39] For d'Andeli, the logic of Paris had tragically routed the rich intellectual traditions and literary criticism of the schools.

But already in the twelfth century, Gerald of Wales (d. 1216) observed that the abuse of logic would suffocate and enervate the study of literature, and in his *De naturis rerum*, Alexander Neckham (d. 1217) had registered his concerns about the increasingly distorted priorities of logic within the liberal arts at Paris.[40] The changed arts curriculum of 1215 codified these anxieties, abolishing the classics and establishing logic as the principal subject of study.[41] Although this changed the learned enquiry of literature and its effects, it would be wrong to assume that the influence of the schools was suddenly and wholly expunged, or to suggest that the

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Paris arts are taught and bread dispensed to feed the strong. At Orléans the young are gently weaned onto ancient author's milk' [Parisius dispensat in artibus illos / Panes, unde cibat robustos. Aurelianis / Educat in cunis autorum lacte tenellos] (Edmond Faral, ed., *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* [Paris, 1924; 1954] *Poetria nova*, ll. 1010-12); John of Garland (d. c.1234) wrote 'Aid me great poets, you whom the city of Orléans attracts from all the world; the Latin language decays' [Vos vates magi … favete mihi … quos Aurelianis ab urbe / Orbe trahit toto … emarcet lingua latina] (Bruges, MS 456 f. 76v; Auguste Scheler, *Lexicographie latine du Xlle et du XUle siecle* [Leipzig, 1867] p. 9); see also, John of Garland, *L'Ars lectoria ecclesie de Jean de Garlande: Une grammaire versifiée du xiiie siècle et ses gloses*, ed. and trans. Elsa Marguin-Hamon (Turnhout, 2003); Eduard Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v.Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1995).

[39] 'Paris et Orliens ce sont .ij. … Qu'il ne sont pas de une science' (Henri d'Andeli, *The Battle of the Seven Arts*, ed. and trans. Louis John Paetow [Berkeley, 1914] p. 37).

[40] 'The abuse of the dialectical disciplines does not moderately enervate and suffocate literature' [Abusus dialecticae disciplinae … literaturam non mediocriter enervat et suffocat]; 'The insulter of literature will always be the abuse of logic' [Omni tempore literaturae sugillatrix logices abusio fuerit] Gerald of Wales, *Opera*, ed. J.S. Brewer, vol. 2 (London, 1862) pp. 351, 355; Alexander Neckham, *De naturis rerum*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1863) p. 283. For Bacon's opinion of Neckham, CSP, p. 457.

[41] Lynn Thorndike, trans., *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944) pp. 27-30; *Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, ed. Heinrich Denifle and Émile Chatelain, 4 vols. (Paris 1891-1899) I, pp. 78-9, henceforth CUP; Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3. vols. ed. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden (Oxford, 1895; Oxford, 1936) I, p. 440.

study of literary texts and poetic theory had been fully displaced by logic.[42] Indeed, not only did these intellectual developments provide new ways of thinking about poetry, but the interplay between disciplines and institutions also allowed for a range of responses to the category of the poetic.

While lamenting the increased neglect of the *auctores* (Homer, Claudian, Persius, etc.), John of Garland could still describe Paris as a centre of poetic enterprise.[43] 'The fame of Paris diffuses splendor', he says in the opening of his *Ars poetria*, 'the clerical order thrives, the fountain breaks forth the waters of Apollo'.[44] An Englishman trained at Oxford, John taught at the University of Paris (until c.1272), where Bacon claims to have had heard him lecture [*ego ab ejus ore audivi*] on the *novos libros poëtarum et antiquos*.[45] Invoking the methods and materials of the cathedral schools, John produced a forensic resource for the application of literary conventions based on an established type of treatise – the *ars poetria* – that had been refined the century prior and popularized by writers like Geoffrey of Vinsauf (fl. c.1208-1213).[46]

However, this derivative style of poetry and its study was to be ultimately eclipsed, not simply by a changed curriculum, but by the new literary possibilities

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[42] Edward Rand, 'The Classics in the Thirteenth Century', *Speculum* 4 (1929) pp. 249-69.
[43] Louis John Paetow, *The Morale Scolarium of John of Garlande* (Berkeley, 1927).
[44] 'Parisiana iubar diffundit gloria, clerus / Crescit, Apolineas fons iaculatur aquas' (Traugott Lawler, ed. and trans., *The 'Parisiana Poetria' of John of Garland. With Introduction and Notes* [New Haven, 1974] ll. 1-2).
[45] Paetow, *Morale Scolarium*, p. 82; CSP, p. 452, here, proving a particular etymological point, Bacon cites both Horace and Virgil accurately. While Paetow has described Garland as the 'lone humanist in the University of Paris during the thirteenth century' (p. 104) more recently Alastair Minnis has described Bacon as an 'intellectual loner' in the period ('The Trouble with Theology: Ethical Poetics and the Ends of Scripture', *Author, Reader, Book: Medieval Authorship in Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Partridge and Erik Kwakkel [Toronto, 2011] p. 26). The repeated figure of the lone humanist might suggest the presence of a more sustained humanist focus in Paris at this time.
[46] John of Garland, *De triumphis ecclesia*, ed. Thomas Wright (London, 1856) p.100; Giovanni Mari, 'Poetria magistri Johannis de anglici de arte prosayca, metrica, rithmica', *I trattati medievali di ritmica latina*, XX (Milan, 1899) pp. 407- 52; Doulgas Kelly, 'The Scope of the Treatment of Composition in the Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Arts of Poetry', *Speculum* 41.2 (1966) pp. 261-78.

discovered through the scholastic exploration of logic and, in particular, Aristotelian philosophy. Indeed, John's *poetria* represents the very form and style of learning criticized by Michael of Cornwall (fl. c.1255) in his mid-century flyting with Henry of Avranches (d. c.1262/63).[47] Michael's brash poem, which was performed in England before an ecclesiastical and academic audience, not only enacts the tectonic friction between the *artes* and the *auctores* but also represents an important response to these disciplinary tensions, marking a new development in the study and production of poetry at the time. As Michael's work shows, the standard antithesis between logic and literature simply breaks down. The rise of philosophical study did not censure literary endeavour, but allowed for new understandings of poetry.

While acknowledging that his opponent, Henry, was more accomplished in the metrical and linguistic strategies of versification (those literary formulae and standards documented in the *ars versificatoria* tradition), Michael condemns his ignorance and outmoded learning:

> If you are better than me, it is because poetry is more greatly known to you, nevertheless, you are not prepared according to the reasoning of Aristotle as I am … For I know that I am less than you and not mighty in the arts of poetry, which you know, but you do not know the methods of the arts.[48]

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[47] Peter Binkley, 'The Date and Setting of Michael of Cornwall's *Versus Contra Henricum Abrincensem*', *Medium Ævum* 60 (1991) pp. 76-84; J. C. Cox, 'Master Henry of Avranches as an International Poet', *Speculum* 3 (1928) pp. 34-63, at 42; Henry of Avranches, *The Shorter Latin Poems of Master Henry of Avranches Relating to England*, ed. J. C. Russell and J. P. Heironimus (Cambridge, 1935) p. 152.

[48] [Si maior me sis, quia sit magis ipsa poesis / Nota tibi, non es adeo tamen ad raciones / Promptus Aristotilis ut ego … Nam quamvis te sim minor et non forte poesim / Noscam, quam noscis, tamen artis non methodos scis] (Alfons Hilka, 'Eine mittellateinische Dichterfehde: Versus Michaelis Cornubiensis contra Henricum Abrincensem', in *Mittelalterliche Handschriften: Paläographische, Kunsthistorische, Literarische und Bibliotheksgeschtliche Untersuchungen. Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Hermann Degering*, ed. A. Bömer and J. Kirchner (Leipzig, 1926) pp. 123-54, ll. 37-67, henceforth *Versus*).

A tribute to the rutted paths of grammatical study, Henry is a *pseudopoeta*, knowing the superficial rules of poetry – the systems of metre, rhyme and poetic language – but lacking the logical methods and Aristotelian reasoning of the new liberal arts.[49] Henry's literary study represents a hollow shell of tropic standards and metrical regulation that lacks any greater wisdom. 'You know grammar', Michael writes, 'but you do not know natural philosophy or logic'.[50] Representing himself as part of an emergent class of liberal artists [*nos sumus artistae*], Michael is empowered by the authority of rational analysis and philosophical enquiry, insisting that his *ars* have defeated the anodyne structures of grammatical teaching.[51] According to Michael, the art of poetry is useless in isolation – a childish distraction – and must therefore be forged with a deeper purpose:

> You prefer boyish things, like plain prose or rhythm or metre – but what use are they? They offer absolutely nothing worth reflecting on, as it were, unless you know more. Whence, if the metrical art is sufficient for you, you propose to make yourself the greatest by making things of decoration, However, I have admitted to something better – I will become a philosopher.[52]
>
> (Michael, *Versus*, ll. 74-80)

Michael claims for himself a new kind of authorial identity, the *poeta philosophicus*, where literary production was to be informed by the study of philosophy and Aristotle, and less by the prescriptive codes and registers of the *ars poetriae*.

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[49] Michael, *Versus*, l. 627.
[50] [Grammaticalia scis, sed naturalia nescis, / Nec logicalia scis] (Michael, *Versus*, ll. 145-6).
[51] Michael, *Versus*, l. 173. 'The power of reasoning is ready at hand for me' [Raciones sunt michi prompte] (Michael, *Versus*, l. 195); 'My arts have subjugated your parts' [Ars Mihi, pars tibi se subiecit] (Michael, *Versus*, l. 115). *Partes* here refers to the reading of grammar, which was structured according to the eight parts speech.
[52] [Immo puerilia mavis, / Utputa sunt prose vel ridmi vel metra; pro se / Talia quid prosunt? Quasi prorsus pro nichilo sunt / Hec reputanda, nisi plus noveris. Unde tibi si / Sufficit ars metrica, proponis te fieri qua / Mundi maiorem, meliorem fassus ego rem / Philosophus fiam].

Defining his poetic status in opposition to the arrested development and anti-intellectualism of literary scholars 'who despised philosophers and wisdom itself', Michael produces a creative and affirming literary response to the disciplinary precedence of logic.[53] For Michael, the philosophical focus of the *artes*, while often critical of the study of the *auctores*, did not preclude the possibility of poetic innovation. Indeed, his poem appears to instantiate the intellectual tastes of a new class of writers that were eager to apply the principles of university logic and learning to their literary work. It not only identifies a ready audience for the reception of the *Poetics*, but also anticipates the enlarged poetic horizons of the Italian secular *poeta* and, as we will see, Bacon's own *persuasor*. Here, Michael invokes a new type of poetic authority, which was not only drawn from the imitation of established styles, but from the reception of Aristotle and the methods and disciplines of university training.

It is not insignificant then, that, while embroiled in the battle of the *artes* and *auctores*, the poem looks to Paris as the centre of this type of philosophical and literary achievement, 'you will fear Paris', Michael says, 'more than you have feared me'.[54] As a nexus of intellectual activity – accommodating both the study of logic and poetics – Paris represented a principal site of disciplinary tension and reform. Here, language and literature were contested subjects, not only challenged and changed by the zealous promotion of logic, but also by the poetical concerns of the theologians and the interests of the newly established religious orders. Here, the energetic reception and promotion of Aristotle had begun to blur the clear division between sacred and secular poetry. As we will consider now, it was a process that appears to

[53] [Nos philosophus spernas ipsamque sophiam] (Michael, *Versus*, l. 189).
[54] [Parisius metues me tu plus quam metuebas] (Michael, *Versus*, l. 314).

have opened the door for poets to claim a new kind of inspired and prophetic authority.

V

Exempt from studying or teaching in the faculty of arts, the mendicant orders came to Paris in the 1210s with the exclusive intent to study theology.[55] To this end, in 1228, under the direction of Jordan of Saxony OP (d. 1237), the Dominicans explicitly limited the parameters of their syllabus, prohibiting the study of pagan literature and philosophy:[56]

> [The students] shall not study in the books of the Gentiles and philosophers … They shall not learn secular sciences nor even the arts which are called liberal … but shall read only theological works whether they be youths or others.[57]
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> (Thorndike, trans., *University Records*, p. 30)

The books of the secular writers – their literatures, sciences and languages – which were so important to Bacon's theology and moral philosophy, are, in this foundational

[55] This was a conventional prerequisite for all members of the University until 1252. See Alan Cobban, *Universities in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1988) pp. 91-4; Marian Michèle Mulchahey, *'First the Bow Is Bent in Study…': Dominican Education before 1350* (Toronto, 1998) pp. 362-4; Roest, *Franciscan Education*, pp. 53-8; Ian P. Wei, *Intellectual Culture in Medieval Paris: Theologians and the University, c. 1100-1330* (Cambridge, 2012) p. 115; David Luscombe, 'Monks and Friars', *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy,* ed. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke (Cambridge, 2010) pp. 63-75.

[56] Such an approach appears sensitive to the pastoral interests of the Pope, Gregory IX, who in 1228 exhorted the Theology Faculty at the university 'to teach pure theology unfermented by worldly learning and cease adulterating the word of God with fictions of the philosophers' [Mandamus et districte precipimus, quatinus predicta vesania penitus abdicata sine fermento mundae scientie doceatis theologicam puritatem, non adulterantes verbum Dei philosophorum figmentis] (CUP, I, p. 116).

[57] [{Studentes]}in libris gentilium et philosophorum non studeant, … Seculares scientias non addiscant, nec etiam artes quas liberales vocant … sed tantum libros theologicos tam iuvenes quam alii legant] (CUP, I, p. 112). The final line here recalls the age restrictions often applied to the reading of Ovid.

period, withheld from the Dominican student.[58] (This period is also described by Bacon as the beginning of forty years of intellectual and institutional decline).[59] With papal support the Dominicans consolidated their influence and expanded their educational programme, systematically identifying and recruiting new talent with an evangelical pace and mission. Jordan of Saxony, in particular, was noted for his ability to convert arts students to the Order, leading them from the flavourless 'water' of pagan philosophy and literary texts to the 'stronger wine' of the Sacred Page.[60] Indeed, the Dominicans – more so than any other single group – enjoyed a consistently jaundiced view of literature and the effects of poetry.

Bacon had chastised the intellectual pubescence of both Albert the Great OP (d. 1280) and Thomas Aquinas OP (d. 1274) concerning these issues, but he also complained that the ignorance and prejudice of the *Praedicatores* had led them to edit the Sacred Page.[61] He found them guilty of erasing all poetic material from Scripture itself:[62]

> And this corruption is made worse when someone corrects according to his own will … [when] he alters what he does not understand, which is not permitted to be written in the books of the poets; but the Dominicans in particular intrude themselves with this sort of correction.[63]
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> (OT, p. 93)

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[58] These texts were only to be consulted under careful supervision, and upon the successful receipt of a special dispensation from a master of the Order (ibid.).
[59] 'For forty years the scholars of Paris have been publicly dragged down and the whole clerical order has been thrown into confusion' [Per viginti annos deductum publice Parisius … turbatus est totus clerus] (CSP, p. 429).
[60] *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica* (Rome, 1896-1949) I, p. 141.
[61] OT, p. 425.
[62] For example, Bacon points out that Paul used the verses of Epimendes and the poets in his letter to Titus (OM, III, p. 43).
[63] [Et in hoc aggravatur haec corruptio, quod quilibet corrigit pro sua voluntate. ... [Q]uilibet mutat quod non intelligit, quod non licet facere in libris poëtarum. Sed Praedicatores maxime intromiserunt se de hac correctione].

Here, the clear lack of literary training, combined with an institutionalized aversion to the poetic, resulted in an attempt to sanitize the Bible. These textual anxieties, and the latent desire to separate the divine mind from the human hand, appear symptomatic of an increased awareness of the shared literary effects and conventions of secular poetry and Scripture. Indeed, the comparative study of biblical and literary language, which had been motivated by a common interest in Aristotelian moral philosophy, reshaped the way Scripture was read in the period. It had not only furnished biblical exegesis with new technical dialects and modes of analysis, but it had also generated an interest in Scripture's affective force, its stylistic abundance, and the textual strategies of the human author.[64] As a result, new questions were asked about the scientific classification and theological potential of all poetic discourse, and in turn, about the important difference between human poetry and Scripture.

Albert the Great resolved this issue by distinguishing between the divine wisdom of sacred poetry, which expressed unquestionable truths through figurative language, and the duplicitous nature of human poetry, which proceeded by the wonders of lies and fables.[65] 'The poetic mode', he writes, 'is the weaker among the modes of philosophy', before concluding that all human poetry is deceptive and harmful [*deceptoria et mendosa*] and could only return the reader to worldly things.[66] Interestingly, despite his fundamental distrust of poetry, Albert appears comfortable with the axioms of the Arabic *Poetics*, possibly received through the works of Al-farabi. He flirts with ethical and affective criteria, writing that poetry intends to move

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[64] Alastair Minnis, 'The Trouble with Theology', pp. 21-37; idem, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1988); idem, 'Ethical Poetry, Poetic Theology: A Crisis of Medieval Authority?', *Medieval and Early Modern Authorship*, ed. Guillemette Bolens and Lukas Erne, SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature, 25 (Tübingen, 2011) pp. 293-308.

[65] This appears to be an appeal to the ancient accusation that all poets were liars, see Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 877.

[66] 'Poeticus enim modus infirmior est inter modos philosophiae' (Albert the Great, *Summa theologia*, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Auguste Borgnet [Paris, 1890-99] XXXI, p. 23, 24).

[*movere*] a reader to love or hate by the melodic patterning of verse.[67] Poetic propositions [*propositiones poeticae*], he explains, are imaginative and imitative, they imprint into the soul [*imprimunt in anima*] things to be loathed or things to be pursued.[68]

Nonetheless, for Albert, and for Thomas after him, the fictive and inherently human element of poetry was inexorably troubling, guaranteeing its place as the lowest and weakest form of logic. Like Albert, Thomas was unenthused by the truth-content of literary language, arguing that poets only use metaphors for superficial delight, while Scripture uses them out of necessity and usefulness (an interesting division of Horace's statement of poetic function).[69] Although he allows some concessions for the possibility of moral benefit, Thomas states that in human science, nothing can be found except in the literal sense: there can be no theological or revelatory depth to human art.[70]

The Franciscan writers of the period, while occasionally working to similar ends, pursued alternative priorities. For Alexander of Hales OFM (d. 1245) and his pupils, the Bible proceeded by authority and according to the figurative processes of the *modus poeticus* (which was historic, parabolic, and metaphoric) and was not

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[67] 'Poetry proceeds by fictions and by the imagination, it intends to move a person to delight, or to loathing, or desire, or love, or hatred … having been heard it soothes, so that it rouses easily' [Aliter etiam est in poetica, quae ex fictis et imaginatione movere intendit ad delectationem, vel abominationem, vel appetitum, vel amorem, vel odium … ut demulceat auditum, ut facilius provocet] (Albert, *Super Porphyrium de V universalibus, Opera Omnia,* ed. Borgnet, I, p. 16).

[68] Albert, *Analytica Posteriora*, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Borgnet, I, p. 7. Here Albert quietly echoes Averroes' claim that poetry works to produce likenesses and images in the mind of the audience according to the imaginative syllogism, see, Gillespie, 'Study of Classical Authors', p. 160.

[69] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, trans. John Rowan (Chicago, 1961) p. 34; idem, *Summa theologiae*, 1a.1, ed. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge, 2006) 1.1.9; Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics*, pp. 48-53.

[70] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics of Aristotle*, trans. Richard Berquist (South Bend, 2007) p. 3; idem, *Summa theologiae*, 1.1.10; idem, *Commentary on the Metaphysics*, p. 34. This is also heard in Albert's criticisms of poetry, where he considers that human poetry could only lead the reader back to worldly things.

intelligible to any 'art or science' that depended upon the powers of human reason.[71] While the lesser sciences sought to inform the intellect through the mechanisms of syllogistic reasoning, biblical science worked to induce a state of piety [*affectus pietatis*]. For Alexander, Scripture was not reducible to scientific fact or rational argument, but rather proceeded through poetic and mystical statements [*sermones mysticos*] that stirred the reader to action.[72]

Following Alexander, Saint Bonaventure OFM (d. 1275) directed his understanding of biblical exegesis according to the principles of Aristotelian moral philosophy, arguing that the *multiplex modus* of Scripture exists so that we might become good, not by mere deliberation, but by a disposition of the will:[73]

> Our affections are moved more strongly by examples than by arguments, by promises than by logical reasonings … Scripture, therefore, had to avoid the mode of proceeding by definition, division, and inferring.[74]
>
> (Bonaventure*, Breviloquium*, Pro., 5)

According to Bonaventure, Scripture was like all moral philosophy, which must rise above the logical systems of definition and division to move the affections of the reader through poetic statements.[75] But the newly shared methods and objectives of

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[71] Cf. Alexander of Hales, Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 217. Alexander died with his *Summa* unfinished, leaving his students to complete it (Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 197; Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* [Philadelphia, 2009] pp. 119-44). Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, ed. B. Klumper, 4 vols. (Quaracchi, 1924) I, p. 7; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 213. Bacon was unimpressed with the rigour of Alexander's work, see OT, p. 30

[72] Cf. Henry of Ghent's aggressive response to Alexander, Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 202.

[73] Bonaventure*, Breviloquium, Opera Omnia* (Quaracchi, 1891) Pro., 5; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 235.

[74] Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 235. [Et quia magis movetur affectus ad exempla quam ad argumenta magis ad promissiones quam ad ratiocinationes … Scriptura ista non debuit habere modum definitivum divisivum et collectivum]. *Definitivus, divisivus, collectivus* refer to the formation of syllogisms (ibid.).

[75] Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, I, p. 7; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 213.

sacred and secular writing worked to erode the formal distinction between them, and as the status of poetry rose to meet that of Scripture, Scripture was lowered to the more earthly realities of human authorship.

The powerful influence of Aristotle on the *modus poeticus* was decisive in establishing a common affective and ethical ground between biblical and literary language. For Bonaventure and Alexander the methodological trajectory of Scripture was governed by the same Aristotelian principle as Bacon's literary theory: that moral philosophy was not for abstract contemplation, but that we might become good.[76] Scripture was required to proceed poetically because, as Giles of Rome OSA (d. c.1285) explains, in all ethical texts, where the goal is that we should become good, we use figurative language that appeals to the senses [*sensus*] and persuasively stirs the affections [*affectus*].[77] Affective and figurative discourses were necessary because, according to Aristotle, matters of conduct were unfixed and variable and could not be understood through prescriptive modes of instruction.[78]

Bonaventure applies these Aristotelian principles to biblical exegesis. 'Scripture', he says, 'cannot proceed by way of certainty based on reasoning, because particular facts do not admit of formal proof'.[79] Because of its singularity and uncertainty, moral conduct is not to be understood according to 'facts or proofs,' but through poetic language, affective arguments, and in diverse ways that educate and enlarge the domain of the will.[80] As such, Bonaventure and Alexander explicitly direct their readings and explanations of Scripture according to the literary and

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[76] See note 8.
[77] Giles of Rome, *De regimine principum libri III* (Rome, 1556) fol. 2r-2v; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 248-9; John Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. David D. Fowler, et al. (New York, 1997) pp. 6-7. This would prove an important literary theoretical principle for John Gower (d. 1408), see Chapter 3.
[78] Ibid; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins, II.2 1104a1-2.
[79] Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Prologue, 5; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 236.
[80] Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 247.

rhetorical expectations of all ethical texts, effectively erasing the formal division between the sacred and secular page.

By emphasizing the inherent humanness of the biblical text, the discursive strategies of the author were tacitly acknowledged as valued parts of the ultimate effect and work of Scripture. Subsequently, extra-biblical texts, which might exploit the same linguistic and structural methods, and which might achieve the same affective and ethical ends, were free to assume a new theological status. As Alexander had said, 'the theological mode is poetic' [*theologicus modus est poeticus*].[81] It was not a great leap to say, then, that the poetic mode was theological. In contrast to Albert and Thomas, who insisted on the limited capacity of human poetry to speak of divine things, here, the potential for human effort to produce inspired or authoritative texts had become, in a way, reducible to a set of theoretical propositions. The shared objectives and methods of biblical and poetic writing necessarily coalesced to reveal the moral and theological potential of all human art. For writers like Bacon, the dissolution of these clear categorical boundaries appears to have helped elevate the status of literary studies, and worked to expose the theological and revelatory possibilities of all poetry.

Thus, by eroding the procedural differences between sacred and secular writing, the common influence of Aristotle served to not only bring into focus the poetic effects of Scripture, but also to illuminate the theological and redemptive capacity of poetic discourse. This shared space between biblical and poetic texts represents the point of departure for Bacon – and the Italian humanists after him – as he sought to promote the status of poetry and establish a new mode of moral and theological expression. As we will consider now, poetic discourse, for Bacon, was not

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[81] Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica*, I, p. 7; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 213.

only an affective form of moral persuasion, but was also able to elevate the mind to higher realms of understanding and to lead the reader toward divine wisdom. In this way, reformative and revelatory experiences could be, to an extent, manufactured through the music and beauty of all human poetry. The literary efforts of ancient writers were redeemed and awarded a new status and power as they too might lead the reader toward a state of divine revelation. The category of the poetic was not only relevant to the success of moral instruction, but also was to be considered a legitimate means of divine communication, which, by imparting sacred knowledge, assisted in the salvation of man.

VI

The sum of Roger Bacon's literary theory does not survive in a singular treatise or according to a coherent system of argumentation.[82] Rather, it is preserved in the form of discontinuous statements and excursus that are diffused throughout his entire corpus. The final achievement of these discussions represents a shifting and synthetic analysis of poetic language that offers the reader a provisional outline of his full thought.

In its totality, Bacon's impassioned commentary testifies to his belief in the necessary precedence and benefit of all rhetorical and poetical discourse. Throughout his work, he consistently claims a special priority for the categories of rhetoric and poetics, placing significant emphasis on the persuasive force of the logical arts to influence the will and move the mind *ad amorem veritatis*.[83] But also, for Bacon, the

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[82] Although Bacon claims to have produced a treatise on rhetoric, it remains unidentified (Roger Bacon, *Communia Mathematica Fratris Rogeri*, fasc. 16, OHI, p. 17; Hackett, 'Roger Bacon on Rhetoric and Poetics', p. 133). On the date of the *Communia* see David Lindberg, *Roger Bacon's Philosophy of Nature* (Oxford, 1983) xxv.

[83] Roger Bacon, *Opus tertium: Fragment*, ed. Pierre Duhem (Quarrachi, 1909) p. 178, henceforth OTF; OM, III, p. 88.

beauty and melody of these practical arguments included an explicit theological and revelatory power, which, by moving beyond the mechanical analyses of the speculative sciences, could elevate the mind into the sudden fullness of divine knowledge.[84] For Bacon, poetry was both moral and theological [*morale et theologicum*].[85]

As interrelated and independent modes of persuasion, the categories of rhetoric and the poetic similarly exploited the affectivity of language within sacred and secular writings.[86] Rhetorical arguments sought psychological assent through the use of lucid statements, eloquently dissolving the knots of questions and doubts [*nodis questionum et dubitacionum*] to achieve acquiescence.[87] Poetic arguments sought to project images and likenesses onto the sensitive plate of the imagination, which, in delighting the reader with beautiful imitations [*secundum similitudinem*], influenced the active response of assessment.[88] Although Bacon was explicit in formally discriminating between poetics and rhetoric, his anatomy of the two systems reveals a common set of methods and objectives that are united in their persuasive effect:

> The poet, like the orator, renders the listener docile through his teaching, he makes the reader attentive through delight, and compels the reader to work by moving or persuading.[89]
>
> (OM, III, p. 87)

Both rhetorical and poetic arguments shared a common hierological history and were used abundantly [*abundanter*] in Holy Scripture by the prophets, the

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[84] OTF, p. 158; MP, p. 251.
[85] [Argumentum poeticum, quod est morale et theologicum] (OT, p. 266).
[86] 'And this argument is used by moral philosophy and sacred scriptura' [Et hoc argumento utitur moralis philosophia et sacra scriptura] (OT, p. 266).
[87] MP, p. 252.
[88] In Bacon's poetic theory the capacity of independent moral judgement is significantly diminished in favour of the forceful persuasion of language (OM, III, p. 86; MP, p. 252, 258).
[89] [Unde tam poeta quam orator … docendo reddat auditores dociles, per delectationem faciat attentos, et promovendo seu flectendo cogat in opus].

apostles and Christ, and in all the books of the saints.[90] Refuting Albert and Thomas' declaration that human poetry could only lead back to human things, Bacon sharpens the theological application of these discourses into a powerful vindication of human art, claiming that poetic effort could lead man beyond himself to consider eternal things.[91] While practical arguments in general were able to excite and persuade the reader *ad amorem felicitatis aeternae*, enticing us toward a state of grace, poetic arguments (specifically) were classified as the most powerful means of soteriological persuasion [*in salutiferis rebus sunt fortissima*].[92] This was because, according to Bacon, poetry pertains to salvation [*pertinet ad salutem*]. It is a significant expansion of the common *accessus* claim that all poetry pertains to ethics, and is characteristic of Bacon's desire to enlarge the role of poetry within the sciences and within his own system of knowledge.[93]

Bacon aspired to nothing short of the full apotheosis of poetic discourse. 'Therefore I have elevated these arguments and the styles in which they are made to the status of divine arguments [*ad divina*]'.[94] Poetry was to be raised over all other philosophical modes [*super modos philosophicos*] and to be included among the

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[90] OM, III, p. 86; OT, p. 266; OTF, p. 179; MP, p. 261.

[91] In constructing his position here, Bacon appears to expand on an Augustinian principle, writing elsewhere that spiritual things are discovered through physical effects, just as the Creator is discovered through the creation [*creator per creaturam*]. If the matrix of reality, within which human art exists, is structured to reveal the spiritual truths of the character of God, then the efforts of human creativity, as an intrinsic part of the natural world, must also return the individual to the Creator (OM, I, p. 106). Bacon explains that the whole power of philosophy lies in the *sensu literali*, in nature, and the properties of natural things, both artificial and moral. By being appropriated in adaptations and likenesses, natural things can elicit the spiritual senses [ut per convenientes adaptationes et similitudines eliciantur sensus spirituales] (OT, p. 81). Thus, spiritual meaning is categorically drawn from poetic representations and the free play of allegoresis. Human poetry, by extension, becomes an authorized means of expressing spiritual truths.

[92] [{Practicis argumentis} excitemur et flectamur ad amorem felicitatis aeternae] (OM, III, p. 86).

[93] OM, III, p. 88.

[94] [Ideo elevavi hec argumenta et stilos in quibus fiunt ad divina] (OTF, p. 179).

divine [*in divinis*] modes of persuasion (i.e. miracles, prophecy, revelation).[95] For Bacon, poetry was theology; it was redeemed and redemptive. While he appears suspicious of the vanity and moral ambiguity of poets like Ovid, Bacon elsewhere argues that God had consistently and universally revealed his sacred truths to the pagan prophets and poets of the past.[96] 'God has revealed much of himself', he says, 'to the *mulierculis* and the Sibyls'.[97] Dispensing with convention, Bacon's *mulierculae* and prophetesses do not represent sensual curiosities, but instead agents of spiritual communion.[98] They use their generative influence to inform powerful verse and enrapture audiences in the ecstasies of divine revelation. By extending the power of inspired discourse beyond the accepted works of Christian authors, Bacon appears to pre-empt the aspirations of later Italian writers, who similarly sought to proactively adapt the historical status and tradition of the inspired secular prophet into the history of the faith. The divine science of poetry had a special – historic and universal – claim to inspired authority and a special access to revealed truths.

According to Bacon, as a divine mode of persuasion, it was through the aesthetic and musical powers of language, that poetry was able to forcefully apprehend the mind and transform the will in matters of faith and right action [*in fide et moralibus*].[99] The euphony of poetry represented a mode for personal transcendence, where the melody and beauty of words seized the soul with delight

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[95] [Et tetigi qui modi persuasionis adduntur in divinis super modos philosophicos] (ibid.). Elsewhere Bacon explicitly connects the power of miracles to the power of words, OT p. 96.
[96] MP, p. 255; OTF, p. 160.
[97] [Et Sibillis muleirculis Deus multa de se revelavit … illis quam plura de suis sacris veritatibus revelavit] (ibid.).
[98] The *locus classicus* for understandings of *mulierculae* in the period is 2 Tim 3:6-7; Anne E. Lester, 'Women Behind the Law: Lay Religious Women in Thirteenth-Century France and the Problem of Textual Resistance', *Jews and Christians in Thirteenth-Century France*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten and Judah D. Galinksy (New York, 2015) pp. 183-199. Cf. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy,* in *The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, 1973) 1.Pr.29.
[99] OT, p. 309.

and lifted the mind above itself to directly encounter divine wisdom. Drawing on the Averroistic *Poetics*, Avicenna, and Al-farabi's *De scientiis*, Bacon explains that poetic arguments should be made with beautiful rhythm and metres, and with sublime and decorous words, but also in prose and with the rhetorical colours of every kind of adorned speech in order to achieve the force of revelation.[100] Here, poetry was not limited to the formal constraints of verse, but, as an assimilative category, was to claim as its own every kind of discursive strategy in order to produce images and melodies that impacted the mind. For Bacon, the music of poetry was uniquely suited to the task of imparting divine knowledge.[101] He explains that the Holy Spirit himself did not speak into a vacuum, but specifically chose to express his sweet wisdom through the musical laws of metre and rhythm in order to attract the reader to the more intimate things of divine wisdom.[102]

Music and poetry shared a common affective power and were almost inseparable categories for Bacon. Although previously, Boethius had called music a type of forceful poetry, and both Bartholomew the Englishman OFM (d. 1272) and Robert Grosseteste OFM (d. 1253) had also confirmed the close correlation between the two disciplines.[103] Subsequently, Bacon understood that the knowledge of music

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[100] 'The poetic argument should be made with beautiful metres and rhythms, just as Aristotle teaches in his book on this argument, and Avicenna and everyone else teaches. For Alpharabius says in the book *De scientiis*, in the chapter on logic, that this argument should be high and elegant through beautiful metres and rhythms' [Argumentum poëticum … debet fieri cum pulchritudine metrica et rhythmica, sicut Aristoteles docet in libro suo de hoc argumento, et Avicenna et omnes hoc docent. Nam Alpharabius hoc dicit in libro de Scientiis, capitulo de Logica, quod argumentum hoc debet esse sublime et decorum per pulchritudinem metri et rhythmi] (OT, pp. 266, 267, 307). Dominicus Gundissalinus's Latin translation of Al-farabi's *Isa al-'ulum* was known in the period as *De scientiis* (Peter Victor Loewen, *Music in Early Franciscan Thought* [Leiden, 2013] p. 138).

[101] OT, p. 266.

[102] 'The Holy Spirit did not proffer his wisdom in a vacuum, but expressed it under the laws of metres and rhythms' [Spiritus enim Sanctus non in vacuum protulit suam sapientiam, sub legibus metricis et rhythmicis comprehensam] (OT, p. 266).

[103] [Vero musicam agentium genus poetarum est] (Boethius *De institutione musica*, ed. G. Friedlein, [Leipzig, 1867] p. 224). Bartholomew of England, *On the properties of things: John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De proprietatibus rerum*, 3 vols., ed.

was fundamental to the success of poetic arguments. Like Dante, who later lamented that the Psalter had been stripped of the sweetness of music and harmony [*dolcezza di musica e d'armonia*] in translation, Bacon perceived that much of the power of Scripture had been lost because its translators did not know how to render the melodies of Hebrew into Latin.[104] Bacon complains that without knowing the disciplines of either music or mathematics, the logic of poetry could not be taught or understood. While music accounted for the causes and reasons of prose, rhythm, and metre – that is the practical mechanics of melody and beauty – the satisfying measurements and ratios of poetry were reckoned according to the laws of mathematics.[105] It was the harmony and proportional beauty of poetry that determined its ability to impact the mind of the reader, as Bacon says, 'our minds are changed according to the properties of musical harmonies'.[106]

The pleasing modulation of poetic language, which delighted the senses with both rhythms and images, worked to exact a state of divine receptivity and awareness. For Bacon, the music of perceptible things [*sensibilia*] powerfully elevated [*rapuit*] the reader to the invisible things [*invisibilia*] of God.[107] It is an important point, as it pushes against what would become the standard Dominican and Thomist approach to

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M. C. Seymour *et al.* (Oxford, 1975-87) p. 1394; Robert Grosseteste, *De artibus liberalibus*, *Die philosophischen Werke des Robert Grosseteste, Bischofs von Lincoln*, ed. Ludwig Baur (Munster, 1912) pp. 1-7; Gillespie, 'Senses in Literature', p. 165.

[104] [Sed translatores Latini non habuerunt illam musicae potestatem] (OT, p. 267); Dante, *Convivio*, ed. P. Cudini (Milan, 1980) I.7.15.

[105] Bacon, *Communia mathematica*, p. 18. Likewise, a commentator on Geoffrey Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* writes: 'In so far as [poetry] pertains to music, it is classified as mathematics, for music is one of the mathematical sciences' [In quam vero ad musicam pertinet, supponitur mathematice philosophie. Musica enim est una de mathematicis scientiis] (Assissi, Biblioteca communale, MS 309, f. 2^{r}). Elsewhere, in reference to John of Garland, another commentary states: 'That the *ars rhythmica* is part of music as obvious by the authority of the *Parisian Poetria* … because rhythm should exist in proportionate harmony' [Illa sciencia {ars rhythmica} est pars musice, ut patet auctoritate Poetrie Parysiensis … quia ritimus consistit in consonancia debite proporcionata] Melk, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 873, p. 215, in Lawler, *Parisiana Poetria*, p. 333.

[106] [Animi nostri immutantur secundum proprietatem musicae harmoniae] (OT, p. 300).

[107] OT, p. 266.

poetry: here, human art can move the individual from the sensible to the invisible, from the human to the divine. By encountering the beauty and music of poetic language, the mind was suddenly and forcefully raptured [*subito et fortiter rapiatur*] up to the love of the thing being persuaded [*ad amorem rei persuasae*].[108] Thus, the poetic experience was one of violence and pleasure, ubiquitously described as a moment of *raptus*. Indeed, Bacon consistently invokes the rich semantic range of *rapere* to explain his theory of literary response, ascribing poetic language the cumulative power to seize, rape, ravish, and carry the mind away in ecstasy. But perhaps more immediate to his imagination was the revelatory and reformative experience of the Apostle Paul, who, as Bacon tells us, was forcibly raptured [*raptus fuit*] up to the third heaven and transformed in a sudden reversal of his will.[109]

Bacon explains that when confronted with the full sublimity of poetic discourse:

> The mind is suddenly raptured into the love of good and the loathing of evil, to the extent that the whole man, without prevision, is raptured and elevated above himself, so that he might not have his own mind in his power.[110]
>
> (OT, p. 307)

Here, the radical power [*radicalis potestas*] of poetry raptures the psychological faculties of the reader *in toto*, dispossessing the mind of intellectual and interpretative control. The immediacy of poetic discourse resists the forceful striving [*violentia*] of the reader to artificially achieve revelation or impose meaning onto the text, instead,

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[108] OT, p. 266.
[109] OT, p. 187; 2 Cor. 2:12. Paul would also be an important exemplar of *raptus* for Dante, see Chapter 4.
[110] [Ut animus subito rapiatur in amorem boni et odium mali; quatenus homo totus sine praevisione rapiatur et elevetur supra se, et non habeat mentem in sua potestate].

through the power of language, it elevates the mind *sine praevisione*.[111] That is, the reader is seized unexpectedly, and in a way which cannot be forecast or understood by codified systems of logic and exegesis, so that he might be wholly transformed in a sudden and forceful Pauline instant. If he was evil, Bacon says, he might desire good; if he was imperfect, he might assume a mind of perfection.[112] For Bacon, the powerful and sweet virtue of words could not be captured within any hermeneutical system, but rather operated according to its own poetic logic, which denied linear signification and worked through sublime likenesses and rhythms to deal directly with the will.[113]

These ideas appear to have been drawn, not only from the Arabic texts of Aristotle, but from established devotional and exegetical practices. In his interpretation of Leviticus 26, Richard of St Victor writes:

> When the sweetness of contemplation raptures us above ourselves … we exceed our human senses and become alienated from ourselves in divine affection.[114]

For Richard it is through the 'connection of some kind of similitude', which stuns the individual with something new and striking, that the mind is suddenly raised above itself to consider eternal matters.[115] The defamiliarizing force of language, which Richard suggests here, appears to have informed Bacon's own understanding of the revelatory and transformative nature of the poetic experience.

John Buridan (d. 1358) would come to classify this phenomenon as moral logic. 'Poetry', he writes, 'works to obscure knowledge delightfully through

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[111] Bacon explains that the reader will become good, *non violentia, sed virtute sermonis potenti et suavi* OT, p. 306.
[112] [Sed si fuerit malus amore boni absorbeatur; si imperfectus, induat animum perfectionis] (ibid.).
[113] Ibid.
[114] Richard of St Victor, 'Tractates On Certain Psalms', *Writings on the Spiritual Life: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, Walter, and Godfrey of St. Victor*, ed. and trans. Christopher Evans et al. (Brepols, 2013) p. 226.
[115] Ibid., pp. 192, 341.

metaphor'.[116] For Buridan, as for Bacon, the logic of poetry differed from other sciences because it did not achieve understanding through judgements of reason [*judicium rationis*], but through enticing the natural appetite of the will [*innatus appetitus*].[117] Similarly, for Bacon, the dissembling complexity of poetic language did not yield to subtle investigation, but delighted the affections of the reader through its obscurity and through its resistance to interpretative closure. Of course, such opacity might also be dangerous and the reader could be moved to wickedness or confusion, confirming the traditional distrust of poetry. But Bacon was not interested in policing the free use and limits of discourse, he was not after all a Dominican. The logic of poetry was a divine science like theology. It had the power to perfect the moral disposition of the reader through its melodies and through the delightful ambiguities of metaphoric language, it was capable of elevating the mind to the realm of heavenly knowledge. Poetry was, he suggests, a medium for divine revelation that was common to both biblical prophets and classical writers.

VII

In a curious sequence of passages, Bacon explores the possibility of reconciling classical and biblical modes of poetic revelation. Typical of his synthetic texture and style of writing, Bacon cites Seneca, who in turn is citing Plato, who explains that: 'The sane man beats at the doors of poetry in vain'.[118] In other words, poetry – its

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[116] [Poetria vero scientiam delectabiliter obscurare nititur per verborum transumptionem vel alio modo] (Jean Buridan, *Quaestiones super Decem Libros Ethicorum* [Frankfurt: Minerva, 1968; facs. Paris 1513 edition] Prologue, p. 2^{r}, col. b). Also part of Buridan's moral logic was Rhetoric which, in contrast to poetry, desires clear knowledge, employing words in their proper signification [Rhetorica claram scientiam desiderat, et verbis utitur in sua propria significatione retentis] (ibid.).

[117] Ibid.

[118] [Frustra poeticas fores compos sui pepulit] (MP, p. 183). On the divine frenzy of the inspired poet see Curtius, *European Literature,* pp. 506-7, and also Chapter 2.

interpretation and composition – was not accessible to those who were in possession of their own mind [*compos sui*]:

> The mind cannot touch anything sublime, which has been made in the heavens, as long as it is in the presence of itself [*quamdiu apud se est*].[119]
>
> (MP, p. 106)

After introducing the classical vision of poetry as an inspired and transcendent medium, Bacon bluntly interposes a paraphrase of 2 Kings 3:15:

> The prophet Elisha ordered that he should be led by singing, so that, excited by the delight of physical harmony [*armonie corporalis*], his mind would be easily raptured to divine things [*ad divina raperetur*].[120]
>
> (MP, p. 184)

He provides no context or expositional ligatures that might explain the intended relationship between the biblical verse and the antique text, and the two modes of literary response and production remain unresolved in any authorial way. It seems unlikely, given the boldness of his claims elsewhere, that the lack of commentary represents a kind of hesitancy or anxiety about poetic revelation and inspired discourses. More likely, the rawness of this collation allows us a glimpse into Bacon's scholarly method, as he sought to reconcile the wisdom of ancient writers with Scripture, drawing on compatible examples to produce new syntheses. As such, the static interface between the Christian and classical text speaks to his understanding of poetic revelation and the office of the poet.

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[119] [{Mens} non potest sublime quicquam et in arduo positum contingere quamdiu apud se est]' (MP, p. 184).

[120] [Helyseus quidem propheta iussit psaltantem adduci, ut, armonie corporalis delectacione excitatus, animus facilius ad divina raperetur]. 'But now bring me hither a minstrel. And when the minstrel played, the hand of the Lord came upon him' [Nunc autem adducite mihi psalten cumque caneret psaltes facta est super eum manus Domini et ait] (2 Kings 3:15).

It is important to note that Bacon introduces into the biblical paraphrase his stock means of imagining the poetic experience – the raptured mind [*animus raperetur*] – placing these passages into discussion with his wider theories of literary response. The classical claim of poetic alienation certainly resonates with his own conceptualization of supramental ascent, serving to reinforce his belief that poetry could not be understood through channels of rational analysis and linear intellection, and instead operated according to its own logic and by divesting the reader of their interpretative faculties in a sudden moment of *raptus*. As he says elsewhere, *revelatio non est potestate nostra*.[121] But also, significantly, Bacon is suggesting here that the crisis of poetic rapture was a shared feature of both Christian prophets and pagan poets.

By bringing scriptural and classical accounts of revelation together in a provocative, if only implied, parallel function, Bacon suggestively endows pagan poetry with the same enrapturing and revelatory powers as Scripture. As we will see in the next chapter, this kind of strategy could be deployed with particular focus and vigour by humanist writers as a method for defending the authoritative status of classical poetry and as a means to authorize their own synthetic literary experiments. That there was a working connection between pagan poets and the biblical poet-prophets is likewise suggested here by Bacon. The figure of Elisha confirmed for him that the delights of poetic music, which forcefully raptured the mind beyond itself in order to access the sublime truths of divine wisdom, were also used by pagan writers. Indeed, we have already heard him claim that God had revealed much of himself to the pagan *mulierculis* and Sibyls. This is an important, if only implied, defence of classical poetry, which appears to reconcile antique thought and literature with

[121] OM, p. 241.

Christian belief and Scripture. Here, poetry was not merely a mode of moral persuasion, but was a universal means of approaching eternal truths.

While clearly intrigued by the comparative effects of pagan and Christian literature, Bacon also appears interested in the numinous inspiration of the composing poet, writing (after Seneca) that 'the mind cannot utter anything sublime unless it is moved'.[122] In this sense, Bacon's biblical paraphrase not only considers the elevating and revelatory effect of poetic music, it also presents a working model of the inspired poet. Poetry is described as both the *means* and the *end* for inspired prophetic discourse.[123] Elisha appears to have been a useful literary prototype in this respect, as Bacon observes elsewhere, reworking his paraphrase with new emphases:

> The prophet Elisha ordered that he should be led by a singer, so that by his melody he was not only raptured in devotion, but was prepared for divine revelation.[124]
>
> (OT, p. 298)

As exemplified by Elisha, the prophet must be enraptured by the melody of poetry in order to achieve the elevated mental state necessary to produce further inspired utterances.[125] What we see is a ceaseless and cyclic process of revelation and poetic composition, a process, Bacon insists, was common to both secular and Christian writers.

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[122] [Non potest grande aliquid … loqui nisi mota mens] (MP, p. 184).
[123] That prophetic music could result in further prophetic revelations was similarly suggested by Albert the Great, who appears to be following Gregory the Great, who had also used Elisha as an exemplar (Gregory, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam*, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 142 [Turnhout, 1971] I.1.15, p. 12; Albert, *Postilla super Isaiam, Opera omnia*, ed. B. Geyer et al. [Münster 1951-] XIX.1.1, p. 11. Bacon's effort to connect this phenomenon to pagan literary practice appears to be unique within the scholastic context.
[124] [Nam et ipse Elisaeus propheta jussit psaltem adduci, ut ad ejus melodiam non solum raperetur in devotionem, sed ut ad revelationes divinas fieret praeparatus].
[125] Albertino Mussato appears to produce a similarly cyclical and self-generative vision of inspired poetry, which was also common to pagan and Christian writers, see Chapter 2.

Such a system suggests Bacon's ease with the necessary involvement of human effort in the production of inspired poetry. Revelatory utterances were, for Bacon, part inspiration and part perspiration. We are told specifically that Elisha was raptured to the contemplation of divine material [*ad divina*] through the delight of *armonie corporalis*, that is, the physical, worldly, and ultimately human quality of poetic music.[126] The corporality of poetic expression, which is dependent on the knowledge and skill of metre and language, was a necessary partner to the expression of revealed truth. Not only does Bacon suggest that the mental alienation of the inspired pagan poet was comparable to the divinely inspired poet-prophets of Scripture, he also indicates that the use of these kinds of discourses were necessary for the continued and full expansion of the kingdom of God on earth.[127]

VIII

Because of the immense moral and theological power of poetry, Bacon considered it essential to the intellectual prosperity of the university and to the spiritual life of the Church, fulfilling important instructional, homiletic, and pastoral functions. As such, he insisted on both the theoretical study and practical application of poetic arguments. These arguments were to be used by a new type of moral theologian he calls a *persuasor*.[128] As Bacon explains, the *persuasor* made sublime discourses [*sermones sublimes*] according to every type of adorned speech, in metre, rhythm, and prose, using examples, modes of reasoning, authorities, and metaphors to impact the

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[126] Bacon seems to have in mind here Augustine, *City of God, Volume VII: Books 21-22*, trans. George E. McCracken (Cambridge, 1957) 32.10, p. 373.
[127] That there was genealogical connection of purpose and method between pagan, biblical, and contemporary poets is a point exploited with particular emphasis by the Italian humanist, Albertino Mussato, see Chapter 2.
[128] [Scilicet docens componere argumentum poeticum, et utens eo] (OT, p. 308); Vincent, 'Senses in Literature', p. 165.

affections of his audience for the purpose of consolation, encouragement and the improvement of the will.[129]

The skills of the *persuasor*, Bacon argued, were particularly suited to the production of the *praedicandi argumenta* [the argument of preaching], where sublime and forceful words were used 'so that the faithless would be converted to the faith, and the faithful would be preserved in faith and morality'.[130] While these broad proselytistic objectives were commonplaces of preaching manuals, Bacon's *persuasor* achieves them by distinctive means: as an exemplary moral philosopher and theologian – a poet, orator, preacher, priest, and prophet – the *persuasor* confidently and eloquently manipulates the music and language of poetic arguments to elevate the minds of their audience into revelatory states of divine concord, leading them to the love of good and their salvation. While the figure of the *persuasor* was intended to provide an antidote for what he considered to be the increasing paucity of contemporary preaching, a discipline which had been emptied of the power of all wisdom and eloquence [*ab omni sapientia et eloquendi*], it also fulfilled his broader intellectual objectives by applying the newly available texts of Aristotle and other ancient writers.[131]

In this way, Bacon constructed a performative model for his revisionary programme of study, loading the figure of the *persuasor* with the important literary and humanistic qualities he saw lacking within the universities and the Church. As an exemplar of this new mode of learning, the *persuasor* is not only given considerable

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[129] The *persuasor* moves the audience to virtue: 'Now through examples of great wisdom, now through reasoning, now through authority, now through likeness obtained from natural things and in other ways' [Nunc per exempla magnorum sapientum, nunc per rationes, nunc per auctoritates, nunc per similitudines sumptas ex rebus naturalibus et aliis] (OT, p. 304-5).
[130] [Ut infideles ad fidem convertantur, et fideles in fide et moribus conserventur] (OT, p. 304, 305). The humanist figure of Bacon's *persuasor* finds its reflection in John of Wales' *predicatore*, see Chapter 4.
[131] OT, p. 304.

control over his art, but also immense theological, philosophical, and prophetic authority. The reader was to be moved to the love of whatever was being persuaded [*ad amorem rei persuasae*], that is, to what the *persuasor* intends [*intendit persuasor*].[132] For Bacon, the authorial intention of the poet, preacher, and prophet held precedence over any interpretative acts an audience might bring to bear on their discourse. Here, poetry was to be a stable and authoritative medium guided by the Spirit of God and the skilled work of a literary artist. Thus, as the architect of poetic and affective discourses, the *persuasor* represents a kind of master poet, creatively applying materials drawn from scholastic philosophy and theology to forge his work with the deeper purposes of salvation and right action.

The independent prophetic and ministerial authority of the *persuasor* appears to anticipate the secular *poeta* of the later Italian writers. For Dante (d. 1321), the poet was a theologian 'chosen by God' to reveal mystical truths through figurative language, but also a philosopher concerned with the logic of ethics.[133] Writing at the same time, the Paduan, Albertino Mussato (d. 1329), whom we will examine more closely in the next chapter, had argued that poetic discourse was another kind of theology.[134] He echoes Bacon's own position, arguing that the divine science of poetry was a mode of revelation sent from heaven, which was not only above the other sciences, but included and pervaded them all.[135] Here, the humanist explorations of poetic discourse appear indebted to the classicizing achievements of Parisian academics like Bacon, who had considered the affective and reformative powers of

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[132] OT, p. 304.
[133] Dante Alighieri*, De vulgari eloquentia,* ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge, 1996) 2.4.5; idem, *Epistolae*, ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1966) 13.16.
[134] Albertino Mussato, *Thesaurus Antiquitarum et Historiarum Italiae* ed. Joannes Georgius Graevius (Leiden, 1722), repr. *Opera* (Venice, 1630) *Epistola* 7, col. 57 B; 44 D.
[135] Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 B; *Epistola* 18, cols. 16 E, 61 B.

language to be important categories of study and necessary tools for the advancement and instruction of the Church.

As we will see in the next chapter, the claims made by the Italians – Mussato in particular – appear far less sui generis in light of Bacon's classical and literary emphases and the elevated status he afforded the poetic arts. While there is little forensic evidence to support the direct reception of Bacon's literary theoretical work within the Italian centres of learning in this period, his physics had certainly managed to cross the Alps by the beginning of the fourteenth century, and there is ample evidence that his poetics regularly travelled with his scientific and mathematical work.[136] Indeed, Bacon's poetic theory appears to have circulated in less tangible or easily measured ways. The notes of a student in Paris, who attended a lecture by Bacon on the utility of mathematics, contain an excursus on the enrapturing force of rhythmical and metrical language, esteeming the theological and inspired power of the poetic argument.[137] Thus, received through the ephemeral medium of lectures and classroom discussion, Bacon's poetic theory must have been, to some extent, digested, excerpted and carried out of Paris by the free movement of graduating students – masters, doctors, clergy – and by the international transhumance of the Orders.

While the impact and reception of Bacon's poetic theory within Italy (or anywhere) is difficult to ascertain with any precision and much work remains to be done in this area, the compelling similarities in approach suggest that the origins of Italian humanism were firmly rooted in the literary and scholastic context of the university of Paris. As we will see, the same debates regarding the classification and

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[136] Silvia Donati, 'The Anonymous Questions on Physics II-IV of MS Philadelphia, Free Library, Lewis Europ. 53 (ff. 71ra-85rb) and Roger Bacon', *Roger Bacon and Aristotelianism*, ed. Jeremiah Hackett, *Vivarium* 35 (1997) pp. 177-221.
[137] Robert Steele, 'Roger Bacon as Professor: A Student's Notes', *Isis* (1933) pp. 66-8.

theological status of poetic discourse that had begun in Paris continued in Italy, attracting momentum and focus amongst the educated laity of Padua.

IX

By tracing out the contours of Bacon's poetic theory, we have considered some of the institutional and intellectual tensions informing his work. For Bacon, the waning commitment to literary studies and the intellectual decline of Paris followed hard upon the rise of the mendicant orders and the increased professionalization of the academic class. In response, he sought to prioritize the enriching study of philosophy and literature, placing great emphasis on both the universal application of Aristotle and the redemptive power of poetic language. The mutual properties and goals of literary and biblical texts validated the theological potential of all poetry, and subsequently redefined the parameters of what constituted a poet. Indeed, the enlarged disciplinary scope of Michael of Cornwall's poet, who turned from the dry formulae of the *ars poetria* to scholastic philosophy, recalls the intellectual and literary priorities of Bacon's own *persuasor*, who was to fulfil a distinctly philosophical, theological, and ultimately prophetic mandate.

Bacon discovered in the *persuasor* the perfection of his intellectual and literary projects, creating a figure who, through exploiting the reformative and enrapturing power of poetic discourse, served the spiritual and moral needs of the Church. As we have seen, Bacon pursues a fierce defence of poetic discourse, arguing for its status as a divine science and insisting on the theological, revelatory, and redemptive potential of all forms of literature. While the full flowering of medieval humanism, its conception and completion, is conventionally associated with the special intellectual and cultural conditions of northern Italy, the humanistic intensity

of Bacon's work, as he sought to recover the thought of ancient writers and ennoble the efforts of human art, suggests an alternative narrative to the period. Indeed, by insisting on the important return to literary studies and ancient standards of eloquence, Bacon established himself as the morning star of Italian humanism. Celebrating the classical past and seeking to imitate antique modes of learning and expression, he worked to validate the revelatory power of literary language, striving to reconcile both classical and Christian theories of poetry.

However, Bacon's humanistic campaign was largely unsuccessful. In many ways his academic career was a failure. He died a political and institutional exile in 1292 and, with the important educational initiatives he proposed denied an enthusiastic reception, his work was unable to achieve any significant change within the university or Church. Nonetheless, as we will consider next, the literary principles Bacon had so fervently championed took root elsewhere, finding fertile ground within small groups of educated laymen in northern Italy, who, by building on the accomplishments of earlier scholastic work, developed a productive and innovative approach to the rehabilitation of antique texts. Here Bacon would have been able to see a reflection of his own ideas and aspirations, as the role of the poet took on the prophetic mission of the *vates*.

Chapter 2

Albertino Mussato and the Consolation of Poetry

I

Throughout his work, Albertino Mussato (d. 1329) consistently sought to classify poetry as a divine science and to defend its status as an inspired and revelatory medium. For Mussato, poetry was not only a mode of philosophy, it was a second theology [*altera theologia*], which, through its musical rhythms and sublime *integumenta*, worked to express the sacred truths of divine wisdom, and to facilitate the nourishing comfort of spiritual consolation.[1] Influenced by the popular reception of ancient writers within the Paduan *studium*, Mussato argued for the synthetic recovery and imitation of antique modes of writing, attempting to reconcile both classical and Christian theories of poetry. His literary mission, however, was not received with undivided approval. Poetry had become an increasingly contested scientific category and the humanistic emphases of Mussato's work proved to be as much a point of controversy and debate as they were a source of civic and intellectual pride for the Paduan literati.

This chapter will explore his controversial poetic theory, examining his distinctive meta-*poiesis* and methods of poetic self-representation. Mussato describes himself as a new *vates*, as a poet-prophet, and as an authoritative successor to the great classical and biblical writers of the past. As we will see, he sought to classify

[1] Albertino Mussato, *Thesaurus Antiquitarum et Historiarum Italie*, ed. John George Graevius (Leyden, 1722) repr. *Opera* (Venice, 1636) *Epistola* 7, col. 44 C. All citations of Mussato's work are from this edition except where noted. In particular, Mussato's *Evidentia tragediarum Senece* (pp. 113-34) and *Senece vita et mores* (pp. 145-71) are found in Megas, *Kyklos tēs Padouas*. For Italian translations of some of Mussato's letters, see Manlio Torquato Dazzi, *Il Mussato preumanista (1261-1329): L'ambiente e l'opera* (Vicenza, 1964) pp. 172-95.

poetry as a form of theology and philosophy, arguing that it was a universal means of expressing divine truth. Important to his inclusive approach to literary classification were the musical properties of verse and the affective powers of figurative language. While Mussato's idiolectic and imaginative conceptions of poetry, and of his own status as a poet, appear to build on the burgeoning literary initiatives of the period, the cumulative achievement of his work represents an innovative contribution to the history of poetic theory.

II

By the end of the thirteenth century, the secular *cenacoli* of northern Italy had developed an enthusiastic interest in the revival and imitation of classical poetry. Although the reproduction of ancient exemplars had long been part of grammatical study, the literary appetites of these laymen resulted in something distinct from the conventional heuristic and propaedeutic treatment of poetic texts.[2] In contrast to other European centres of learning, the intellectual and grammatical interests of northern and central Italy had been primarily governed by the legal-rhetorical concerns of *dictatores* and lawyers, who favoured the epistolary material of the *ars dictaminis*

[2] John of Salisbury memorably suggests that poetry was to be celebrated as the cradle of philosophy [poetas philosophorum cunas esse celebre est] (John of Salisbury, *Metalogicon*, ed. J. B. Hall [Turnhout, 1991] I.22). Conrad of Hirsau outlines a similar process of learning: '[I will] tell you what I can, considering the way in which the nourishing milk you draw from the poets may provide you with an opportunity for taking solid food in the form of more serious reading' [Inportunitati tuae morem geram pro posse, qualiter ipsius lactis nutrimentum quod sugis ex poetis occasio tibi sit solidi cibi idest lectionis altioris] (Alastair Minnis and Brian Scott, ed., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* [Oxford, 1998] p. 54; Conrad of Hirsau, *Conrad de Hirsau. Dialogue super Auctores*, ed. R. B. C. Hugyens [Brussels, 1955] p. 64). Likewise, Alexander Neckham's *Sacerdos ad altare accessurus* traces the progressive development of the student through increasingly complex set-texts before culminating in biblical study (Tony Hunt, *Teaching and Learning Latin* [Cambridge, 1991] pp. 250-73). Hugh of St Victor saw grammatical study as an instrument of philosophy [*instrumentum ad philosophiam*], which was handy for its ethical potential but ultimately limited by its inability to communicate clearly (*Didascalicon*, ed. G. H. Buttimer [Washington DC, 1939] II.28, III.4).

over the study of ancient poetry.[3] As Ronald Witt suggests, it was precisely because there was not a strong tradition of literary study – either of vernacular or Latin works – that classical poetry could be received with the intensity and excitement of a new discovery.[4]

Lovato dei Lovati (d. 1309) was foundational to both the success of this movement and to the rise of Padua as a centre for humanist activity. Despite flourishing in the 1220s, the commune's *studium*, its university, did not survive the arrival of the tyrant Ezzelino da Romano (d. 1258) in 1237, and was only re-established after his death in 1261.[5] The sudden return of formal study to Padua, after decades of enforced absence, allowed the newly popular tenets of ancient learning to be more readily seized upon by those interested in the liberal arts. Lovato was among the first generation of educated laymen to benefit from the restoration of the *studium* and the new opportunities it provided for the study of poetry. Adopting a classicizing approach to the Latin style, he celebrated the aesthetic standards of antiquity over those of contemporary French, Occitan, and Provencal literatures.[6]

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[3] Ronald Witt, 'The Arts of Letter-Writing', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2*: *The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Oxford, 2005) pp. 68-83; Ronald Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden, 2000) p. 17.

[4] Ronald Witt, *Italian Humanism and Medieval Rhetoric* (Aldershot, 2001) pp. 42-43.

[5] Girolamo Arnaldi, 'Il primo secolo dello studio di Padova', *Storia della cultura veneta Vol. 2*, ed. Arnaldi and Pastore Stocchi (Vicenza, 1976) pp.14-15; Paolo Marangon, 'Scuole e Università a Padova dall 1221-1256: Nuovi documenti', *Ad cognitionem scientiae festinare: Gli studi nell' Università e nei conventi di Padova nei secoli XIII e XIV*, ed. T. Pesenti (Trieste, 1997) pp. 47-54; Nancy Siraisi, *Arts and Sciences at Padua: The Studium of Padua before 1350* (Toronto, 1973) pp. 22-23.

[6] In a metrical letter to Bellino Bissolo, Lovato argues passionately against the barbarous [*barbaricus*] nature of French poetry (William P. Sisler, 'An Edition and Translation of Lovato Lovati's 'Metrical Epistles' with Parallel Passages from Ancient Authors', Ph.D. Diss. [The Johns Hopkins University, 1977] pp. 38-43). French literature appears to have been both a source of anxiety and an object of derision for Italian writers, see Kevin Brownlee, 'The Practice of Cultural Authority: Italian Responses to French Cultural Dominance in Il Tesoretto, Il Fiore, and the Commedia', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 33 (1997) pp. 258-69; Zygmunt Baranski, 'The Ethics of Literature: The Fiore and Medieval Traditions of Rewriting', *The Fiore in Context: Dante, France, Tuscany*, ed. Zygmunt Baranski and Patrick Boyde (London, 1994) pp. 207-32. Within this context, the

Lovato's belief in the absolute supremacy of classical poetry would lead Francis Petrarch (d. 1374) – who rarely mentioned his medieval contemporaries – to write:

> In recent times, Lovato of Padua would have easily been the prince of every poet that our age, or the age of our fathers, had seen, except he diverted his mind from heavenly cares to the noise of the courtroom.[7]

As a judge and statesman, his potential as a poet – at least for Petrarch – could never be fully realized. But Lovato's contribution to the intellectual life of Padua extended beyond his achievements in verse. During the formative period of the 1260s and 1270s he assembled around himself a learned coterie of students and writers who, under his tutelage, aspired to promote and imitate ancient forms of expression.

Among this group, which furnished Padua with some of its earliest humanists, was Lovato's most acclaimed protégé, Albertino Mussato.[8] As an apprentice and close friend, Mussato was the obvious heir to Lovato's legacy.[9] Giovanni del Virgilio (d. 1327) reports that, on his deathbed, Lovato bequeathed to his pupil his reed pipes, saying: 'Since you are considered gifted by the muses, by these you will be muse-

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new focus on the classics, and more broadly on Italian vernacular literature, appears to have been motivated by a desire to secure a national, or at least local, cultural identity and history, and as a means to shore up political and social cohesion.

[7] [Lovatus patavinus fuit nuper poetarum omnium quos nostra vel patrum nostrorum vidit etas facillime princeps, nisi … animum ab eliconiis curis ad forensem strepitum deflexisset] (Petrarch, *Rerum memorandarum libri*, ed. Giuseppe Billanovich, *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Francesco Petrarca*, no. 14 [Florence, 1943] p. 84). While this passage introduces a jovial account of Lovato, and occurs within a section of *Rerum* dedicated to examples of humour, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Petrarch's praise.

[8] Guido Billanovich, 'Il preumanesimo padovano', *Storia della cultura veneta: Il Trecento* (Vicenza, 1976) pp. 19-110; Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 113-15.

[9] On the friendship between Lovato and Mussato, see Mussato, *Epistola* 3, col. 38; Luigi Padrin, *Lupati de Lupatis, Bovetini de Bovetinis, Albertini Mussati necnon Jamboni Andreae de Favafuschis carmina quaedam ex codice veneto nunc primum edita: Nozze Giusti-Giustiani* (Padua, 1887) Poem 15, p. 13, ll.1-2; Poem 31, p. 25, ll. 27-28.

inspired. Ivy will circle your temples'.[10] Reflecting on their final encounter, Mussato explains in a verse letter to Lovato's nephew that not only did his mentor encourage him to seek out a poetic vocation, but that he should also cultivate a patriotic devotion to public duty over and above all other familial obligations:

> Why in your last admonishment did you tell me to love the common welfare after God and order me to put the interests of my sweet children after that of the motherland and to prize its welfare before that of my living father?[11]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 3, col. 38 E)

The memory of Ezzelino had darkened the political atmosphere of Padua and focused attention on the importance of good governance. It is unsurprising, then, that both Lovato and Mussato came to associate the office of the poet with civic responsibility. The poetic role Mussato inherited, and the one he self-consciously continued to develop, was intended to serve as an independent locus of authority that would actively protect the commune against moral and spiritual decay.

However, while Mussato consistently represents the production of poetry as an important public service and as an autonomous prophetic ministry, he also appears interested in developing a more conventional literary identity where, by praising the fame of a benefactor through the immortalizing medium of verse, the poet and his work were, in a symbiotic process, elevated in status and function and granted a similarly long-lasting fame.[12] It is a kind of poetic vain-glory that would form part of Chaucer's sustained criticism of humanist poetic theories in the *House of Fame*.

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[10] [Quia musis cerneris aptus / His Musatus eris. Hederae tua tempora lambent] (Philip Wicksteed and Edmund Gardner, *Dante and Giovanni del Virgilio* [Westminster, 1902] p. 190, ll. 217-19).

[11] [Cur mihi supremo monitu communia dixti / Post cultum summi jura colenda Dei?/ Jussisti patriae dulces postponere natos / Et patriam vivo praeposuisse patri?].

[12] On the conceptual substructures and medieval history of literary fame see Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* (Cambridge, 1984). See also, Vincent Gillespie, 'Authorship', *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford, 2013) pp. 137-54; Review, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame*, *Notes & Queries* 34.2 (1987) pp. 253-55.

Mussato engages in this kind of literary transaction when he praises the Holy Roman Emperor, King Henry VII: 'This book might help you [Henry] cling to your fame', he says, 'since I made it well, fame was also to be won by me'.[13] Thus, he appears to assume two conflicting poetic identities, building for himself a kind of literary hegemony. On the one hand he is a prophetic servant of the people, and on the other, a sponsored representative of the ruling class, seeking his own notoriety through worldly status. Ultimately however, he appears to have listened to the words of his mentor and focused his efforts on promoting poetry as an essential good for public exhortation, hoping to discover in the classical literary past a point of cultural unification for Padua.

In December 1315, Lovato's dying words would prove prescient and Mussato was crowned poet-laureate of Padua for his tragedy *Ecerinis* – a poem about the tyrannous reign of Ezzelino – and his prose history *De gestis Henrici VII Cesaris*.[14] Not only was *Ecerinis* the first Senecan tragedy to be composed in the classical style in over a thousand years, but it was the first time a poet had been laurelled since Statius in first-century Rome.[15] It is a striking historical moment, one that not only reveals a rigorous commitment to antique precedent, but also one that indicates the increasingly public position of the poet. That at least two commentaries on *Ecerinis* were produced in this period confirms the prominent place Mussato's poetry held

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[13] [Sic haeres famae sit Liber ille tuae … Quum bene quid feci, fuerit mihi gloria vinci] (Mussato, *Epistola* 2, col. 36 F).
[14] Witt states that the poem was clearly 'designed as political propaganda' (*In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, p. 124). It was also to be read annually in public, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1978) p. 38; Salvatore Di Maria, *The Italian Tragedy in the Renaissance: Cultural Realities and Theatrical Innovations* (London, 2002) p. 18; Billanovich, 'Il preumanesimo padovano', p. 64, n. 252.
[15] Hubert Müller, *Früher Humanismus in Oberitalien: Albertino Mussato* (Frankfurt, 1987); Ernst Wilkins, *The Making of the 'Canzoniere' and Other Petrarchan Studies* (Rome, 1951) pp. 21-23.

within the commune.[16] But Mussato's claims, for both his own status and the enduring significance of pagan poetry, attracted criticism and, in turn, required defending.

The defences of poetry produced by Mussato have been the subject of several studies that have sought to define his work in relation to the later poetic apologias of Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375), and Coluccio Salutati (d. 1406).[17] Classified as a prehumanist, Mussato has been viewed as a prelude to the achievements of later writers and as an early enemy of scholasticism.[18] While sharing some features with subsequent defences, his work must nonetheless be seen within its own context and as a product of its own intellectual and literary history. In order to understand Mussato's claims for the high status of poetry, it is necessary to also consider the network of writers and ideas that may have informed his thinking.

As such, this chapter will place his work within the historical development of the *vates* and at the intersection of poetic and prophetic discourses.[19] By appropriating the vatic *ministerium* of the prophet, a writer could claim for themselves sacred

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[16] The first commentary was produced sometime before 1317 by two masters teaching at the *studium*, Guizzardo da Bologna and Castellano da Bassano (*Ecerinide: Tragedia*, ed. Luigi Padrin [Bologna, 1900] pp. 69-247). The later work of Pace de Ferrara, *Evidentia Ecerinidis*, helped make the poem a school text (*Evidentia Ecerinidis edita per magistrum Pacem*, ed. Megas, *Kyklos tēs Padouas*, pp. 203-5).

[17] Over the last century Mussato has been discussed and typically defined as a prehumanist by Karl Vossler, *Poetische Theorien in der italienischen Frührenaissance*, Litterarhistorische Forschungen, no. 12 (Berlin, 1900) pp. 5-12; Gustavo Vinay, 'Studi sul Mussato: I. Il Mussato e líestetica medieval', *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 126 (1949) pp. 113-59; Billanovich, 'Il preumanesimo padovano', p. 75; Dazzi, *Il Mussato preumanista*, pp. 108-23; Giorgio Ronconi, *Le origini delle dispute umanistiche sulla poesia (Mussato e Petrarca)* (Rome, 1976); Concetta Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250-1500* (London, 1981) pp. 79-94; Ernst Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton, 1990) pp. 214-21; Ronald Witt, 'Coluccio Salutati and the Conception of the Poeta Theologus in the Fourteenth Century', *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977) pp. 540-42; idem, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 117-74.

[18] On the alleged incompatibility of scholasticism and humanism, see Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 9. Paul O. Kristeller, *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome, 1956) pp. 651-2, suggests the influence of Parisian scholasticism on the emergence of humanism in northern Italy.

[19] Brian Fitzgerald, *Inspiration and Authority in the Middle Ages: Prophets and their Critics from Scholasticism to Humanism* (Oxford, 2017) esp. pp. 193-230.

authority and ascribe to their work the inspired status of Scripture. But this alone is unable to fully account for Mussato's sophisticated and labile theory of poetry. Rather than resisting scholarly forms of knowledge *in toto*, he appears at ease with the axioms and scholastic systems of classification, repurposing learned material to form his own vision of poetic discourse.[20] As we will see, Mussato's evaluation of his own status as a poet results in an attempt to classify poetry as a divine science and as an independently authoritative and inspired medium. We will first look at an example of his poetic theory in practice and review the details of his life – as he presents them – by examining his autobiographical poem, *De celebratione suae diei nativitatis fienda vel non* [On whether or not his birthday should be celebrated].

Because Mussato's discussions on poetic theory are unsystematically divested across a range of forms – letters, poems, and treatises – *De celebratione* offers us a useful centre point with which to orientate ourselves and begin exploring his writing more broadly. Typical of his desire to imitate ancient modes of expression, Mussato appears to be the first lay writer to observe his own birthday since antiquity, it would be another fifty years before Petrarch (inspired by Suetonius) would discuss the details of his birth.[21] *De celebratione* provides us with a foundational understanding of his unique vision of poetry, which sought to indiscriminately and allusively blend classical and Christian poetic theories together in order to affirm the special historical role of the inspired poet throughout history. By arguing for the continued revelation of God to poets, Mussato attempts to conflate the theological distinction between the achievements of biblical poets, pagan poets, and his own work, using his own

[20] This is in direct contrast to Greenfield's claim that humanists 'rejected the scholastic culture that flourished in the thirteenth century' (*Humanist and Scholastic Poetics*, p. 36). As we have already seen with regards to Bacon's work, and it is the same here, playing humanism and scholasticism off against each other distorts the intellectual complexity of the period.

[21] Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, p. 118.

biographical circumstances to insert himself into the historical tradition of inspired writing and to confirm his own prophetic status.

III

Likely born the illegitimate son of a Paduan nobleman, Mussato claims to have raised himself from poverty to become an esteemed statesman and notary.[22] Almost all of what is known about his early life is preserved in *De celebratione*, where he explains how as a young boy he had been denied the benefit of a formal education and was instead burdened with the responsibility of supporting his family.[23] Nonetheless, by copying books for wealthier students he was not only able to secure a small income, but he was also able to access the texts necessary for study. 'A small profit from the schools', he writes, 'had been supplying a living to me, and my literature, which having been made by hand, was for sale'.[24] In this way, through the laborious and repetitive task of textual reproduction, Mussato worked to cultivate his literary interests and talents.

Later, he laments, he had become a worshipper of treasure [*cultor acerui*], prostituting his literary skills in pursuit of money and professional status within the law courts. 'In this art', he says, 'which was acquired at a price, I leased my words'.[25]

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[22] John Kenneth Hyde, *Padua in the Age of Dante* (Manchester, 1966) p. 166. Mussato first served as the Paduan ambassador to Florence and then as Executor of Justice of Florence, Giuseppe Billanovich, 'Tra Dante e Petrarca', *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 8 (1965) pp. 100-15. For a contemporary view of Mussato, see Guizzardo da Bologna and Castellano da Bassano's comments in Mussato, *Ecerinide: Tragedia, ed. Luigi Padrin* (Bologna, 1900) pp. 72-73.

[23] Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 A.

[24] [Parva mihi victu praebebant lucra Scholares, / Venalisque mea littera facta manu] (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 B).

[25] [Arte sub hac emptus pretio mea verba locavi] (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 D). Later, Petrarch would face the similar problem of having to sell his poems to make a living, which he contemplates in his *Secretum*, a confessional dialogue between himself and Augustine. The tension between a desire for the fame of literary notoriety and the meditative study and

The poem serves as a means for Mussato to reflect on the misfortunes and failures of his life. In particular, he regrets abusing his literary expertise because it had been won at great personal cost [*emptus pretio*]; the powers of language demanded substantial physical effort [*labor extremus*] and careful study to master.[26] Reduced to a material commodity, the high art of poetry had been denied its divine purpose and its hard-won skills had been sold for personal gain. His consistent recourse to distinctly mercantile imagery serves to reinforce the high evaluation of poetic discourse, suggesting that the work of the poet could not be adequately measured or defined by the material principles of worldly success. The effort and expertise of his art transcended conventional economies of value as the work of the poet was of greater worth than the work of other, more mundane professions.

By placing his literary skills beyond the reach of material compensation and beyond the secular interests of personal advancement, Mussato points toward the sacred status of poetry and of the poet. It represents a strategic enlargement of the authoritative scope and power of his own literary abilities, alluding to the perceived prestige of his own vocational calling and his divinely ordained poetic role. While he claims to have been set aside from a young age – like a biblical prophet – to pursue the difficult work of the Lord, he describes this calling in distinctly pagan terms. We are told that, in his destitute state, before undertaking the rigours of his scribal work and poetic training, he had been strengthened by the 'holy gods' [*numina sancta*].[27]

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production of sacred writing was something shared by both writers it seems. They both dramatize their vocational dark night of the soul through Augustinian confession.

[26] Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 B, C; 1 Samuel 3.

[27] 'And that one [Mussato's father], I supported with the very least, and I nourished my younger siblings, the *numina sancta* were enlarging my strength' [Ipseque cum minimis alui, fovique minores, / Augebant vires numina sancta meas] (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 B). Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge MA, 1916) III, ll. 543-4. While *numina sancta* appears to be a somewhat rare locution outside of Mussato's work, within the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries it could be used to refer more generally to pagan gods (John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. C. C. J. Webb, 2 vols. [Oxford,

These were important forces of literary influence for Mussato. As he suggests in his *Soliloquium* 4, without their intervening power the poet could not reliably express anything sacred:

> If there were no *numina* at all, the young man would only love earthly things, entirely ignoring heavenly things. And if by chance he ascended to the divine mind, the love of worldly people would make him despise it.[28]
>
> (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 4, col. 81 C)

For Mussato, the *numina* inspired and sustained the poet's connection to the divine; without them the poet would only be able to conceive of worldly things. While somewhat ambiguous figures, described as both the *numina minervae* and *numina sancta supremi dei*, they are fundamentally rooted in the classical past and associated with the achievements of secular authors.[29] Thus, rather than invoke the Christian God in this context, Mussato appeals to the providence and fortifying consolation of the gods of the great *antiqui*, locating his nascent poetic identity within the cultural and religious parameters of ancient learning.

It is a crucial moment of personal mythography, where he suggests that the same divine forces that had influenced the great writers of the classical past were also at work in his own life and upon his own poetic *métier*. But importantly, for Mussato, there was a continuity of function and purpose shared between classical, biblical, and contemporary poets. It was a consistent point of emphasis throughout his work, that the pagan poets, under the direction of these sorts of heavenly powers, wrote about the Christian God:

1909] col. 445 A; Thomas of Chobham, *Sermones*, ed. F. Morenzoni [Turnhout, 1993] 23, f. 90vb; Alexander Neckham, *Suppletio defectuum*, *Carmina minora*, ed. P. Hochgürtel [Turnhout, 2008] pp. 10, 70, 93).

[28] [Dilexit terrena puer, caelestia prorsus / Ignorans, ac si Numina nulla forent. / Et si forte aliquid divinum corde subibat, / Id mundanorum spernere fecit amor].

[29] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 3, col. 79 E; *Soliloquium* 4, col. 81 A.

> [The Christian God] was believed and alleged by our poets, Homer – the father of the Muses – and the Italian, Virgil. They called him Creator of Things, Father of the gods, and King of Men.[30]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 60 B-C)

'The divine poets,' he explains, 'during former ages, being pious, taught of the God from heaven'.[31] His vision of the poet as a prophet would allow him to claim: 'Our whole faith is predicted by holy Virgil'.[32]

The work of the poet transcended the discontinuous advancements of culture and human development to hold eternal value. 'The laurel is always green,' Mussato says, 'it is not seized by falling leaves, it has glory forever'.[33] The ancient poets remained relevant because they were informed by the same spiritual forces guiding Mussato; they spoke of the same God only without the benefit of the revelation of Scripture and without knowing the full import of their message. The poet, Mussato explains, was *immemor*, that is, without full knowledge of the wisdom he was imparting or of the divine truths he concealed within his work. Like the authors of Scripture, who were once described as being a pen in the hand of God, pagan poets had similarly expressed a knowledge beyond their own.[34]

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[30] [Creditus hic nostris allegatusque poetis / Moenio Patri Musarum, Italoque maroni / Hic opifex rerum, Divum pater, atque Hominum Rex / Dictus eis].
[31] [Divini per saecula prisca poetae / Esse pium caelis edocuere deum] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 C).
[32] [Nostra fides sancto tota est predicta Maroni] (Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 55 D), which is quoted in Giovannini de Mantua's letter to Mussato. Cf. Virgil, *Eclogues*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough and rev. G. P. Goold, IV, 6-7. Discussing the pagan poets, Mussato writes: 'None of their literary works are empty of our faith' [Ulla vacant nostra nec sua scripta fide] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E).
[33] [Utque viret Laurus semper, nec fronde caduca / Carpitur, aeternum sic habet illa decus] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 C)
[34] Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 C. While Greenfield makes the case for a Neoplatonic connection here, this idea also appears related to the exegetical commonplace where the relationship between the human *auctor* and the divine *inspirator* is compared to that of a pen in the hand of God. As the psalmist had famously written: 'My tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe' (Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics*, p. 83; Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* [Philadelphia,

As we find in *De celebratione*, Mussato was not only inspired by the *numina sancta*, he was also equipped with the learned skills of literary ability, insisting that his poetry was the product of a sacred union between human effort and divine influence. It was part inspiration, part perspiration. Indeed, the inclusive scope of his poetic vision, which insisted on including the accomplishments of pagan poets within the privileged history of holy writing, suggests that, for Mussato, the categorical boundaries between poetry and Scripture were easily traversed. As we have already seen in the last chapter, the space between Scripture and extra-biblical poetry had been narrowed by the dominating influence of Aristotelian moral philosophy; the Sacred and secular page both relied on the same discursive strategies and sought to generate the same affective responses.

The blurring of these formal distinctions seems to have paved the way for writers like Mussato to claim both a pagan and Christian poetic identity without any sense of contradiction. Thus, while suggesting that he was made a poet according to the customs of the pagan *antiqui*, that is, through literary training and divine appointment, he also suggests that, like the distinguished Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, he was able to perform the literary functions of the biblical poet-prophet.[35] By invoking the confessional registers of biblical lament and religious soliloquy in *De celebratione*, he represents himself as a continuator of Old Testament prophetic traditions.

IV

2009] pp. 37-38; Psalm 45:1). This posed a set of problems that surface more fully in the following chapters. Because a writer need not have full knowledge of his own meaning, the importance of authorial intent was significantly diminished, allowing the reader significant power of the text.

[35] 'According to ancient customs they [the *Fauni*] made me a poet' [Moribus antiquis sibi me fecere poetam] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 40 D). For Mussato, the *Fauni* were ancient gods who had the image of the *vates*.

The intimate tone Mussato achieves in *De celebratione*, which is much indebted to the autobiographical style of Lovato's early poetry and its focus on individual feeling and private meditation, has led Witt to suggest that, although related, the poem lacked the didacticism often attributed to the confessional genre, and that his laments against fortune and youthful erring are too general to be traced back to any specific source.[36] But this is to dismiss the synthetic and allusive nature of Mussato's carefully constructed self-representations. His general appeal to a particular style or tradition is important. While relating a broadly Senecan ideal, where a quite private life is contrasted against the dangers of public office, Mussato strives to represent the events of his own life according to the prophetic traditions of biblical lament.

Speaking in the self-recriminatory *cri de cœur* of biblical complaint, he depicts himself as a penitent confessional subject, admitting to the misuse of his spiritual inheritance and literary training. He describes his own mental anguish at the calamities of adverse fortune and sin in a way that resonates with the physical and mental afflictions of the psalmist and of Solomon. 'Struggles from everywhere', he says, 'aggravate my worried mind … at no time did any day allow me to rest'.[37] Assuming the panoptic vision of a biblical prophet, he reframes and expands Solomon's aphoristic claim to have seen all things under the sun:[38]

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[36] Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, p. 121.

[37] 'Undique sollicitas agitant certamina mentes … Quippe dies nunquam mihi prestitit ulla quietem' (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 64 D); Psalms 6:3-5; cf. 32. He also seems to have in mind Solomon's words, when he writes: 'All his days are full of sorrows and miseries, even in the night he does not rest in mind' (Ecclesiastes 2:23).

[38] A similarly far reaching vision is given to tragic poets: 'All destructive things are in their eyes' [Omnia sunt oculis perniciosa suis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 36 B). Sight was an important aspect, etymologically speaking, for the poet-prophet, see below.

> I have seen the highest summit, the top of the world, the exalted priest, and the imperial man, I have seen deeds, and I have seen men, and moral habits and changes in fortune.[39]
>
> (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 64 C)

The prophetic vision of the poet is global, religious, secular, political, and moral. It perceives through the wisdom of experience the vicissitudes of fortune itself. While, as we will see, this kind of comprehensive perspective is important for Mussato's understanding of the genre of tragedy, and draws on the prophetic traditions of the period, his general allusion to biblical precedent suggests that he considered there to be a close categorical relationship between the poetic works of Scripture and his own writings.

Indeed, we are told elsewhere that the holy songs of Solomon [*sancta Salomonis cantica*] contained every part of poetry [*tota poesis*]. That is, they were so authentically poetic they held a literary classification independent from their biblical status.[40] For Mussato, biblical poetry was categorically indistinguishable from the inspired work of pagan writers or, by extension, his own writing. There was essentially no difference between Solomon's or the psalmist's words and Mussato's own.[41] Such a claim suggests an important cultural and intellectual development – one particularly evidenced among Italian writers – where the theoretical principles drawn

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[39] [Vidi supremos apices, fastigia Mundi, / Pontificem excelsum, Caesareum que Virum, / Vidi actus, vidique Viros, moresque vicesque]. Cf. Ecclesiastes 1:14. Mussato also expresses his struggle with avarice in a distinctly proverbial and biblical voice; lamenting the powerful love of money he exclaims 'Oh pernicious root of all evil!' [O radix omnis pernitiosa mali!] (Mussato, *De celebratione*, col. 63 C).

[40] Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 D.

[41] The formal connection between biblical and pagan poetry had been introduced through Jerome, who used Latin and Greek literary terms to describe the features of biblical poetry (James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (London, 1981) pp. 149-56. In his Preface to Job, Jerome writes: 'The Psalter or the Lamentation of Jeremiah or almost all the songs of the Scriptures are to be understood in the manner of our Flaccus and the Greek Pindar and Alkaios and Sappho' [Et in morem nostri Flacci, Graecique Pindari, et Alcaei, et Sappho, vel Psalterium, vel Lamentationes Jeremiae, vel omnia ferme Scripturarum cantica comprehendi] (Jerome, *Prefatio Hieronymi in Librum Iob*, PL 28.1082).

from the dispassionate analysis and reading of Scripture could be applied practically in order to create new holy texts. Theology was not only just the study and exegesis of the Bible but was also the recreation and continuance of it. In this literary economy, sacred poetry was not restricted to a singular scriptural event, but, as a living medium, could be reproduced through the arrangement of verse by a skilled and inspired writer.

In particular, for Mussato, the words and music of lamentation represented the most potent means of replicating the authoritative work of biblical poets. 'Job', Mussato explains, 'wept about his ruin through esteemed metres in order to be made agreeable with the most high God'.[42] 'Job wrote his lamentations in heroic poetry and the psalmist pleased God in metrical song'.[43] In the same way that the great writers of Scripture lamented their misfortunes to win divine propitiation, Mussato laments his own plight, presenting himself in *De celebratione* as a new David, a new Job, and a new Solomon, in pursuit of consolation and divine favour.

Mussato's desire to extend the authority of Scripture beyond its canonical limits to include other modes of inspired writing is also suggested in his admiration and imitation of Augustine. Certainly, his acknowledgement of moral failure and his consistent hunger for money [*dira esuries auri*] in *De celebratione* recall Augustine's own confessions and life-long moral conflicts.[44] Augustine served as an important biographical and literary model for Mussato; he is described as a prophet, a sharer of God [*particeps dei*], a herald, as a shining lamp to the world, and was to be ranked in eminence next to the apostle Paul.[45] Equal in status to the writers of Scripture,

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[42] [Iob per metra suas deflevit nota ruinas / Taliter excelso gratificanda deo] (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 3, col. 79 C).
[43] [Edidit heroica sua job lamenta camoena, / Placavitque deum metrico psalmista canore] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 D).
[44] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 2008) 6.12.22.
[45] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 4, col. 81 B.

Augustine was an important prototype for extra-biblical literary authority and an exemplar for the continuation of sacred writing. The personal lament of Augustinian confession served, then, as an authoritative witness to Mussato's own prophetic and literary undertaking in *De celebratione*. Furthermore, this particular kind of imitative work, through which he sought to represent his misfortunes as a marker of poetic and prophetic distinction, appears fundamentally related to his understanding of the category of tragedy.

While the radically synthetic nature of *De celebratione* makes it difficult to classify formally, it nonetheless appears deeply influenced by the author's particular understanding of genre. Mussato appears to define his poetic identity and the circumstances of his life according to what he perceived as the formal expectations of tragedy. 'The principal material of tragedy', he writes, 'concerns the lament [*conquestio*] of misfortune'.[46] In *De celebratione*, Mussato presents himself as a tragic figure, inscribing his experiences within what he would argue was the highest form of writing. It is, on the one hand, a compelling means of self-representation, assuming the unique dual position of tragic subject and poet, and on the other, a functional way to unite a diverse range of literary traditions – biblical and pagan – within a singular literary genre. Just as the biblical poets made lamentations and the classical poets wrote tragedies, Mussato does both. Thus, by unifying the objectives and effects of biblical lament and classical tragedy, he sought to present his own poetic authority as equal to the venerated writers of both sacred and secular history. As Mussato's perception of genre was important to his system of poetic classification, we will consider it in greater detail later and within the context of his defences of poetry.

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[46] [Tragediarum materia principalior est de infortuniis conquestio] (Mussato, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece*, ed. Megas, p. 124).

Before turning to consider these aspects of Mussato's work it is necessary to first examine his understanding of the prophetic status of poetry and to locate his work within the theories of inspired writing of the period. As we will see, in order to represent poetry as an authoritative discourse, Mussato drew on the established tradition of vatic writing. As a category, the *vates* blurred the distinction between poet and prophet, providing him with a useful theoretical framework to further unite the status and achievements of pagan and biblical literary writers with his own poetic endeavours. In order to understand these claims, it is necessary to consider the ways in which the literary and prophetic attributes of the *vates* appear to have influenced his work and shaped his unique theory of poetry.

V

By awarding the poet the title of *vates*, Mussato sought to represent poetry as a sacred discourse, enclosing it within a continuous tradition of inspired writing, which was essential to the revelation of theological truth. He describes his own status in no uncertain terms: 'Now I am', he says, 'what I call a *vates*, the equal of a poet'.[47] According to Mussato, *vates* were commissioned with the task of relating divine truths through the musical rhythms and figurative language of verse, fulfilling the religious functions conventionally associated with institutionally authorized clergy and canonized writers of Scripture. The *vates* were to speak not only as poets, but were also to rejoice [*congaudere*] as priests and prophets.[48]

This range of responsibilities appears to have been informed by the popular definition of *vates* bequeathed to the Middle Ages by Isidore's *Etymologiae*. 'The meaning of the word *vates*', Isidore writes, 'is manifold, for now it means priest, now

[47] [Nunc ego, qui dicor Vates, instarque Poetae] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 60 E).
[48] Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 B.

prophet, now poet'.[49] Mussato revels in the semantic flexibility of the term, its shifting and often ambiguous nature provided a conveniently amorphous category with which to unite the diverse achievements of pagan and Christian writers with his own literary efforts. Building on the polysemy of the term, he argues that the biblical prophet and pagan poet were, historically, the same thing, collapsing their functional difference into a single class of writer. Mussato tells us that he was avowedly indebted to the work of Isidore [*Isidoro dignas grates refero*], who, he claims, had correctly discerned that 'divine poetry comes from a holy source'.[50] Because both sacred and profane *vates* drew from the same divine source, they spoke with the same authoritative and enduring voice. For Mussato, the sustained relevance of poetry represents an important feature of pagan and biblical prophetic traditions, and, consequently, of his own writing.

Engaged in the transmission of providential wisdom, *vates* were often ascribed the power of foreknowledge. Isidore had explained that 'those whom the pagan world calls *vates*, we call prophets' because prophets were 'pre-speakers' [*praefator*] who made true predictions about the future.[51] Mussato appears aware of the previsionary powers associated with the *vates*, declaring that, in spite of the hostile reception of his work, his own prognostications [*praesagia*] would live on in the future.[52] In other words, it did not matter if his poetry was rejected within his own lifetime, his prophetic premonitions – and what they exactly were is not clear – might yet be

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[49] [Vates … appellati sunt, cuius signifacatio multiplex est. Modo enim sacerdotum, modo prophetam, modo poetam significat] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae sive Origines*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911); *The Etymologies*, trans., S. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006) VII.7.12.15, p. 171. Peter Lombard cites this in his *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, ed. Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 2 vols. (Grottaferrata, 1971-81) IV.d24.18.

[50] [A sacro jam fonte venit divina poesis] (Mussato, *Epistolae* 18, col. 61 B).

[51] [Quos gentilitas vates appellant, hos nostri prophetas vocant … Qui autem [a] nobis prophetae, in Veteri Testamento videntes appellabantur, quia videbant ea quae ceteri non videbant] (Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay; *The Etymologies,* trans., S. Barney et al., VII.8.1, p. 166).

[52] [Mea quin praesagia vivant] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 D).

realized as true and his work might eventually receive its deserved acclaim.[53] But, for Mussato, the prognostic powers of the inspired 'pre-speaker' were ultimately less interesting than the potential for poetry to endow its author with lasting authority and the immortality of a good name.[54]

As Mussato's claim for the future success of his work suggests, he associated the powers of vatic prevision with the unique ability of poetry to secure an abiding fame for the poet and achieve for itself an indelible afterlife. By transcending the limits of the temporally bound position of the author, poetry could grant the poet's name eternal renown. 'I will win a name', Mussato says, 'in the most remote of ages'.[55] For Mussato, the everlasting relevance of poetry was encoded in the endless circularity of the laurel crown, which, by enclosing the poet within the perfection of its form, resisted the linear movement of history. 'The ages of the *vates*', he writes, 'are encircled with laurel. Their fame continues on for eternity'.[56] Mussato invests a great deal of energy into his discussions about this kind of literary immortality – far more than he puts into exploring the predictive quality of his *praesagia* – insisting on the continual and unfailing relevance of his work.

As a self-styled prophet, such a claim was not entirely without precedent. Gregory the Great had conceived of prophecy as offering insight to all times – present, past, and future – and Isaiah himself suggests the longevity of prophetic

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[53] That his *praesagia* were protested at all seems to confirm for him his prophetic status, satisfying Christ's dictum that a prophet has no honour in his own country or his own house (John 4:44; Luke 4:16-30; Matt. 13:54-7; Mark 6:1-6).

[54] These are exactly the humanist standards of poetic achievement and endurance that Chaucer rejects in the *House of Fame*, see Chapter 4.

[55] [Nomen ab eterna posteritate feram] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 D). Cf. 'If the great song might be fitting to the sublime office, my name will not be empty of everything' [Si deceant majus sublimia munera carmen, / Non erit ex toto nomen inane meum] (Mussato, *Epistolae* 1, col. 35 C).

[56] [Inde est, ut Vatum cingantur tempora lauro, / Pergat ad aeternos ut sua fama dies] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 C).

utterance, stating his voice would speak continuously down through the ages.[57] Like the words of the great prophets, which were stimulated by the generative powers of the Holy Spirit and preserved by the sustaining force of God's will, Mussato's poetry was assured lasting authority. He strongly believed that the revelation of God through verse was not confined to a singular historical moment, but was a relentless, universal process. 'After the birth of our God', he writes, 'new poets were able to sing just like [the Old Testament poets]'.[58] As an inspired and authoritative instrument of divine wisdom, the poet, according to Mussato, continued to advance the work of Scripture and share in the eternal relevance of the Sacred Page.

The great ministry [*grande ministerium*] of the *vates*, then, was empowered by their special function as a vehicle for divine inspiration.[59] 'Whoever was a *vates*', Mussato claims, 'he was a vessel [*vas*] of God'.[60] William of Brito (d. c.1150) had likewise claimed that the word *vates* – referring to either priest or prophet – came from *vas Dei*.[61] Like Brito, Mussato understood that, as vessels [*vasa*] for divine communication, *vates* were emptied of any interfering prejudices so that they might directly relate the uncorrupted word of God with immediacy and reliability. 'My opinion', Mussato tells us, 'does not set foot in my mind'.[62] His work, then, was to be considered exempt from the temporally delimiting effect of individual perspective

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[57] 'Prophetia tempora tria sunt, scilicet praeteritum, praesens, et futurum' (*Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam*, ed. M. Adriaen [Turnhout, 1971] I.1, p. 5). 'My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth … from this time forth and forevermore' (Isaiah 59:12). Cf. Isaiah 51:16, 55:11.

[58] [Dei testes quae post natalia nostril, / Et posuere novi, simul et cecinere Poetae] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 C). On the divestment of special faith after the incarnation, see Peter Lombard, *Sententiae*, ed. Collegium S. Bonaventurae, III.d.25.

[59] Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 40 F.

[60] [Quisquis erat Vates, / Vas erat ille Dei] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 C).

[61] William Brito, *Summa Britonis*, ed. L. W. Daly and B. A. Daly, 2 vols. (Padua, 1975) p. 817. Elsewhere Mussato suggests his interest in etymological issues, Anastasio Megas, ed., *Hoi hypotheseis tōn tragōdiōn tou Seneka [and] Apospasmata agnōstou hypomnēmatos stis tragōdie* (Thessalonikē, 1969) p. 75.

[62] [Non tamen ulla meae sic instet opinio menti] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 59 F).

and, instead, was to be revered as offering the foresight and continual significance granted by having access to divine inspiration. It is, as we have already seen, a prophetic convention associated with the human writers of Scripture, who, as impersonal instruments of God, were likened to a pen in His hand. But to what extent did the abiding power of inspired poetry rely on the involvement of human skill, and how were these two apparently conflicting powers to be reconciled?

The totalizing claims that Mussato makes for the role of divine inspiration, which resulted in the complete dissolution of personal bias, appear to rest uneasily beside his emphasis on the necessity of literary skill and the practical involvement of the writer in the composition of verse. For Mussato, it seems, the poet was able to inhabit both states simultaneously and without contradiction; he was able to order the production of the text while being controlled by the will of the Spirit. That is, human and divine power worked seamlessly – if ambiguously – together to produce poetry. To this end, Mussato distances himself from the idea of poetic madness [*vesania*], which the Latin poets themselves often used to explain the inspired process of the *vates*, and instead appears to rely more on contemporary scholastic theories of prophecy, which had sought to formalize the intellectual involvement of the individual in the prophetic task.

VI

For Mussato, the compositional frenzy of the *vates* was a problem that had the potential to devalue the high standing of poetry as both a human art and as a divine science. The theory of poetic madness had been set out in Plato's *Phaedrus*, but arrived in the Middle Ages indirectly and as a stock part of antique learning through

the work of Horace, Ovid, Statius, and Seneca.[63] Fulgentius claimed that he had 'rambled [*delirabam*] like a mad *vates*' and Isidore had derived *carmen* [song] from *carere mentem* [to be mad].[64] But according to Thomas Aquinas OP (d. 1274), this particular aspect of inspired writing was not common to holy prophets; they were, instead, influenced by calm and order, they listened to the still, small voice:[65]

> Alienation [from the senses] … does not happen in prophets through the disorder of nature, as with the possessed or the raving mad, but through a certain well-ordered cause.[66]

Mad prophets were false prophets.[67] In a similar way, Albert the Great OP (d. 1280) had also suggested that knowledge [*scientia*] and order [*ordo*] were central features of the prophetic voice and were necessary to both the utterance and understanding of revealed wisdom.[68]

Because the prophetic writer, by necessity, ordered his material according to human systems of expression and interpretation, he required a stable and informed intellect:[69]

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[63] See Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 474-76; Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics,* p. 25.
[64] Fabii Placiadis Fulgentii, *V.C. Opera*, ed. Rudolf Helm (Leipzig, 1898) I, p. 13; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay; *The Etymologies,* trans., S. Barney et al., I.39.4, p. 64.
[65] Cf. 'And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets' (1 Corinthians 14:32).
[66] [Alienatio … non fit in prophetis cum aliqua inordinatione naturae, sicut in arreptitiis vel furiosis, sed per aliquam causam ordinatam] (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 60 vols. [London, 1964-73] II-II, 173.a3.resp.).
[67] [Prophetae insani et stulti, non sunt veri prophetae, sed falsi] (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, II-II, 171.a1.ad3)
[68] Albert the Great, *Postilla super Isaiam*, *Opera omnia*, ed. B. Geyer et al. (Münster 1951-) XIX.prol., p. 2.
[69] Perhaps the most distinguished example of this for medieval writers was Ezra, whose ordering of the Psalms came to be viewed as an inspired and prophetic act: 'Ezra gave the psalms this order through the same inspiration as the Holy Spirit' [Eodem Spiritu revelante, psalmos ita disposuit] (Peter Lombard, *Commentarium in Psalmos Davidicos,* PL 191.60; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 111. See also, Isidore of Seville, *De ortu et obitu patrum*, ed. D. de Bruyne, *Préfaces de la Bible latine* [Namur, 1920] p. 34). Inspiration was often cited as an explanation for the lack of chronological order in the Bible and the random structural movement of the Psalms, both of which were used to

> While the Holy Spirit might be the first inspirer of the speech, nevertheless the reception of the inspiration and the order of utterance is in the power of the one speaking. Thus, the words of prophets are words of intelligence and reason and of the most ordered wisdom.[70]
>
> (Albert, *Super Isaiam*, prol., p. 2)

The bifurcated process of prophetic writing, where the divinely inspired message was dependent for its success on the rhetorical and ratiocinative powers of man, might explain Mussato's own understanding of the intermediary role of the *vates* as both an organizing agent and receptive vessel for the word of God. While, as he suggests, the composition of vatic poetry could be an inductive and unconscious encoding of revealed truths, rather than an effort of clarification or premeditated exegesis, it nonetheless relied on both the invisible influence of inspiration and the mechanical interventions of the writer.[71]

Thus, the prophetic mind was defined by its ability to unite human knowledge and divine power. 'Only a prophet [*divinos*]', he says 'seizes this work of art'.[72] That

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exemplify Scripture's poetic and musical purpose: 'Just as in making a melody on the strings of a psaltery, the strings are not touched according to their natural order but diversely and in interspersed fashion, now here now there, so likewise psalms to God's praise are not placed in the Psalter according to the continuous order of history but diversely, by interspersing what deals with later events, or alternatively according to what the devotion of the psalmist will rise to in the praise of God' [Sicut autem in cordis psalterii ad faciendam melodiam, non tanguntur corde secundum ordinem suum valorem, sed carptim et interpolate – nunc hic, nunc illic – sic ad Dei laudem in Psalterio non ponuntur Psalmi secundum ordinem continuum historie, sed carptim] (B. P. Shields, 'A Critical Edition of Selections from Nicholas Trivet's Commentarius literalis in Psalterium', PhD diss. (Rutgers University, 1970) p. 71; trans. Alastair Minnis, *Authorship*, p. 152).

[70] [Quamvis spiritus primus inspirator sit sermonis, tamen acceptio inspirationis et ordo prolationis in potestate est proferentis. Et sic verba prophetarum intelligentiae et rationis et ordinatissimae sapientiae sunt verba].

[71] This was not an overly unusual position to take. Peter Lombard confidently associated the *vis mentis* not only with the prophetic and inspired processes of the *vates*, but also with the intellectual power of the philosopher, who understands: 'Not by bodily or imaginary vision, but only by strength of mind, which is called understanding' [Intellecta, non corpora, vel imaginaria visione, sed tantum intellect ea vi mentis, quae dicitur intellectus] (*Commentarium in Epistolam ad Romanos*, PL 191.1327 B).

[72] [Non nisi divinos hoc capit artis opus] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 40 F)

is, only a prophet can adequately relate, order, and interpret revealed truth in verse. It is a suggestively playful line and one that appears to enact the interdependence of the twin components of vatic writing, as it could equally read: 'This work of art only seizes prophets'. That is, poetry itself seizes, leads, and inspires the prophet. The potential double play of his verse appears to reflect the dual nature of prophetic writing, where the control of the text was shared by both the invisible, guiding force of inspiration and the prophet's own intellectual, and ultimately discursive mediations. The union of these faculties, of human ingenuity and the endlessness of divine knowledge, granted the *vates* privileged access to the otherwise hidden secrets of nature and of God.

As agents of divine authority, prophets were said to possess an enlarged vision. They were able to observe the providential unfurling of history and to understand the hidden truths of God and the natural world. (We will recall the inclusive scope of Mussato's own literary vision in *De celebratione*). Gregory had conceived of prophecy as working to reveal a true reality [*ostendit quod est*] that had been hidden [*occulta*] from view, and according to Isidore, the *vates* were 'seers' [*videns*], who saw [*videre*] things concealed in mystery which others could not.[73] This was a defining feature of prophetic writers throughout the period, as Richard of St Victor (d. 1173) suggests:

> They are rightly called prophets who ponder the secrets of the divine nature, who contemplate celestial things, who penetrate inmost truths, and who

[73] Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam*, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnhout, 1971) I.1, p. 5. 'Those whom we call prophets were called seers (*videntes*) in the Old Testament, because they saw things that others did not see' (Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay; *The Etymologies,* trans., S. Barney et al., VII.8.1, p. 166).

> reveal the depths of mysteries … the knowledge of hidden things makes people prophets.[74]

Similarly, for contemporary writers like Giles of Rome OSA (d. 1316), prophets apprehended much through their special intellectual and inspirational sight. He compares the vision of a prophet to that of a bird in order to emphasize the panoptic gaze of their elevated mental position. As with Mussato, he notes their ubiquitous presence throughout history, stating that those 'who are called prophets today were once called seers [*qui enim propheta dicitur hodie, vocabatur olim videns*].[75] For Giles, the enlarged perspective of the trans-historical prophet afforded them access to enigmatic knowledge or thoughts [*aenigmaticam cognitionem*]. They were to expose the pre-laid traps of the Devil [*insidias Diaboli*], and were to serve as apertures [*cancellos*, *fenestrae*], offering enlarged and clear-sighted vision.[76]

For writers like Mussato, this broad set of inherited definitions would have helped confirm the historical continuity of vatic writing, shoring up a relationship of function between biblical prophets and the very first *vates,* the pagan *poetae theologi*, who similarly sought to reveal the hidden properties of nature and of the gods. One early fourteenth-century commentary on the *Consolatio philosophiae*, often attributed to William of Wheatley, explains that Orpheus – the first poet – was a *vates* simply because he knew a great deal [*ab multis*].[77] Just like the holy prophets of Scripture,

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[74] [Prophetae ergo recte dicuntur, qui Deitatis arcana rimantur, qui coelestia contemplantur, qui intima penetrant, qui mysteriorum profunda revelant … prophetas efficit cognitio secretorum] (Richard of St. Victor, *Mysticae adnotationes in psalmos*, PL 196.336 C); Christopher Evans, trans., *Writings on the spiritual life: a selection of works of Hugh, Adam, Achard, Richard, Walter, and Godfrey of St Victor* (Turnhout, 2013) p. 184.
[75] Cf. 1 Samuel 9:9.
[76] Giles of Rome, *In Canticum expositio II ('in principio') in editionibus quibusdam cum Thomae de Aquino operibus impressa*, Thomas de Aquino, ed. Parmensis t. XIV (1863) 1.2, p. 398; 2.5, p. 412.
[77] William Wheatley (dubium), *In Boethii De consolatione Philosophiae (commentum in editionibus quibusdam cum Thomae de Aquino operibus impressum)* Thomas de Aquino, ed. Parmensis, t. XXIV (1869) III.12, p. 96. This text also associates the powers of the *vates* with

the earliest pagan poets were defined by their commitment to the revelation of divine mysteries and to the discovery of arcane knowledge.[78]

Mussato tells us that these early pagan writers, who reflected on the gods and speculated about physical causes and universal origins through song and myth, were the first *vates*. Although he knew the Averroistic *Poetics* to some extent, he appears to have had Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – or a commentary on that text – in mind when he wrote:[79]

> [The divine poets] poured out to the first people hidden secrets in no way other than by composing metres. And these writers had begun to be known in certain places by the name *vates*.[80]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 C)

This perceptive power, which turned the truth of reality into verse, had been sent from heaven at the very start of history for the purpose of continuous theological revelation.[81] 'Since the first beginning of the world', he says, 'this art was theology and it will always remain a divine and good subject'.[82] For Mussato, *vates* were theologians because they investigated the truths of divine causes, and they were

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both a distinctive strength of mind [*vis mentis*] and sight [*videns*] (ibid.). On Wheatley, see Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Schools: From Roman Britain to Renaissance England* (London, 2006) p. 178.

[78] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 55 E; Thomas Aquinas*, In Metaphysicam Aristotelis commentaria*, ed. M.-R. Cathala (Turin, 1935) I.4.83-4.

[79] On Mussato's knowledge of Aristotle, H. A. Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1993) p. 117; cf. Vinay, 'Studi sul Mussato', pp. 135ff. On Mussato's relationship with the Parisian Aristotelians, Marsilius of Padua, and Pietro d'Albano, see Paul O. Kristeller, 'Umanesimo e scolastica a Padova fino al Petrarca', *Rivista di storia della filosofia medievale* 11 (1985) pp. 15-16; Dazzi, *Il Mussato preumanista*, pp. 27, 29; Frank Godthardt, 'The Life of Marsilius of Padua', *A Companion to Marsilius of Padua*, ed. G. Moreno-Riaño and C. Nederman (Leiden, 2012) p. 45.

[80] [Tecta quidem primae fudere aenigmata genti / Non nisi compositis infinuanda metris, / Hique alio dici coeperunt nomine vates].

[81] 'This science was sent to earth from heaven and together with the exalted God it has divine laws' [Haec fuit a summo demissa scientia caelo, / Cum simul excelso jus habet illa deo] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 A).

[82] [Fuit a primis Ars ista Theologa Mundi / Principiis manet ipsa tamen, divinaque semper, / subjectumque bonum] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 A).

prophets because they sought to reveal the hidden secrets of reality. However, paradoxically, their prophetic and theological work, which involved disclosing revealed truth, also required its active concealment through the use of figurative language.

VII

The *prisci poetae* communicated their insights through verse and in myths, and under the coverings of metaphor, which could be understood, according to Mussato, within a loose allegorical framework. He explains that the hidden truths of pagan myth correlated to events in Christian history: while the Bible speaks of the tower of Babel, pagan poets tell of Giants storming the heavens; just as God punishes Lucifer, Jove punishes Lycaon; Venus and the Virgin Mary were interchangeable. 'Who God is to us', Mussato says, 'was Jupiter to them'.[83]

In this way, vatic poetry related a different kind of historical knowledge to that of Scripture: 'While Genesis remembers origins in plain words, the mystical muse teaches with greater obscurity'.[84] In contrast to the historical texts of the Bible, which speak with clarity to ensure basic comprehension, poetic texts conveyed the same historical truths under the mystical coverings of figurative language. Christian meaning was always latent, waiting to be excavated from beneath the hard mantle of myth and metaphor. Just because poetry did not transmit historical information according to the literal sense, did not mean it was untrue or any less sacred than

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[83] [Qui nobis Deus est, Jupiter ille fuit] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 A). The lesser figures of these myths were, for Mussato, deified heroes who had achieved renown through great deeds, their veneration being no different to that of the famous saints of the Christian past. Witt considers Mussato's uniqueness to be the thoroughness of this connection between pagan myth and Christian history (Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 159, 246, 252).

[84] [Quae genesis planis memorat primordia verbis, / Nigmate majori mistica musa docet] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 A). The obscurity of poetic metaphor led Alan of Lille to define it as theological: *Anticlaudianus*, ed. R. Bossuat (Paris, 1955) prose prol. 41.

Scripture. Mussato's mystical muse appears to be an imaginative reconfiguration of a theological commonplace. We will recall the words of Bonaventure, who had explained that Scripture worked 'partly through plain words, partly through mystical words'.[85] Indeed, building on these kinds of exegetical principles, which were part of the cultural *imaginaire* of the period, Mussato explains that the poetic mode was used in the Apocalypse and by Christ, who had relayed hidden truth to his disciples under the cover of allegory [*parabola*], and by Solomon who pleased God through great fictions [*figmentis tantis*].[86]

While we have already observed these biblical exemplars of figurative language invoked as a defence of poetic discourse in the work of Roger Bacon, Mussato uses them here to justify his own claims for vatic authority. Like the mystical words of Scripture, the language of the *vates* revealed secrets by concealing them in metaphors and the imaginative figures of language, which:

> Through likenesses and images, represent one thing in appearance, but designate another with the understanding of the mind.[87]
>
> (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 157)

As if imitating the soteriological import of Scripture, Mussato instructs his own poetry to 'carry secret salvation as if beneath clothing'. 'I will stand with the prophets', he writes, 'however many obscurities might lurk in their words'.[88] Clearly he considers his use of figurative language to be part of biblical and antique traditions

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[85] [Partim per plana verba, partim per mystica] (Bonaventure, *Breviloquium, Opera Omnia* [Quaracchi, 1891] Prol., p. 4).
[86] [Nostra salus etiam demissus ab aethere christus / Nigmata discipulis dixit operta suis; sanctaque figmentis salomonis cantica tantis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E).
[87] [Sic et in similitudinibus et ymaginibus … aliud aspectui representant et aliud mentium intellectibus recommendant].
[88] [Defer enim tectam veluti sub veste salutem] (Mussato, *Epistola* 3, col. 38 C); [Staboque Prophetis / Quantumcumque suis lateant aenigmata dictis (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 62 D).

of prophetic writing, but the question should still be asked, why obscure the clarity of truth?

Mussato answers, explaining that the high eloquence of the *vates* [*alto eloquio vatum*] intended to conceal divine truth beneath poetic coverings [*velamina*] in order to entice the reader towards wisdom and towards greater measures of divine understanding:[89]

> The first true poets, beneath allegories, enigmas, likenesses and transformations and parables and figures, hiding certain things beneath coverings [*velamine*], were using philosophy, so that they might have led listeners with greater wonder [*maiori admiratione*] to divine contemplation.[90]
>
> (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 157)

The concealment of revelation under the cover of the dissembling language of metaphor, worked to excite a state of wonder [*admiratio*] in the reader and, through its affective impact, to move them to thoughtful reflection and to a deeper

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[89] Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 C. Similarly, according to Macrobius, writers do not use fable merely to entertain: 'Because they realize that frank, open exposition of herself is distasteful to Nature, who, just as she has withheld an understanding of herself from the uncouth senses of men by enveloping herself in variegated garments, has also desired to have her secrets handled by more prudent individuals through fabulous narratives … Only eminent men of superior intelligence gain a revelation of her truths; the others must be drawn to venerate her by the agency of those figures which protect her secrets from debasement' (Macrobius, *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis*, ed. J. Willis [Leipzig, 1970] 1.2.17-18, p. 7; *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W. H. Stahl [New York, 1952] pp. 86-7). Cf. Alexander of Hales, *Summa theologica,* Intro. 1.4.1.1.

[90] [Primi enim verique poete philosophiam sub allegoriis, enigmatibus, similitudinibus ac transfigurationibus, parabolis et figuris tecto quodam sub velamine utebantur, ut maiori admiratione auditores ad contemplationem divinam adducerent]. Mussato also seems to have in mind here the *Metamorphoses* commentary tradition, which is suggested in his inclusion of *transfigurationes*. The primary integumental conceit of the *Metamorphoses* was transformation, where, for example, the *ingeumenta* of the text could be equated to individual moral change or the mutability of natural world or some other alteration. For Mussato, the integumental model of the *Metamorphoses* appears to have become an independent mode of figurative expression (Vincent Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: From the Twelfth Century to 1450', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages,* ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson [Cambridge, 2005] pp. 194-6).

comprehension of heavenly things. 'Wonder,' says Mussato, 'entices attentive minds more greatly':[91]

> Poetry, which can be wondered at, makes those minds more attentive when it intends something other than the way its words sound.[92]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E)

Here, the defamiliarizing force of figurative language, which stimulated a reaction of *admiratio*, focused the reader and opened up new lines of reflective enquiry. The various poetic strategies of allegories, enigmas, likenesses, transformations, parables, figures, and fables all worked according to the same principles of concealment and in order to achieve the same affective and psychological end. As he explains, poets devised fictions with mystical words [*mystica verba*] so they might lead the mind of the reader to good.[93]

According to Mussato, the reader was more interested in discovering truths that were hidden inside the pleasing inventions of fable [*fabula ficta joci*] than by being told in plain words the bare facts.[94] Poetic truth [*poetica vera*] was not found in

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[91] [Allicit attentas magis admiratio mentes] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 B).

[92] [Quos magis attentos facit admiranda poesis, / Quum secus intendit, quam sua verba sonent].

[93] 'The holy poets at one time invented fictions, mystical words might entice good minds; poetry that can be wondered at makes those minds more attentive' [Invenere sacri quondam figmenta poetae, / Alliciant animos mystica verba bonos, / Quos magis attentos facit admiranda poesis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E).

[94] Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 B; *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 55 B. Fable was a notoriously unstable and often derided discursive category and Mussato uses it ambiguously here. According to Averroes' Middle Commentary on the *Poetics*, fables (particularly like those of Aesop) were not considered true poetry. Not only were their imaginative representations unnatural (they involved talking animals), but their music and metre added nothing to their meaning: their instructional value was limited to the narrative surface of the story (Herman the German, *De arte poetica cum Averrois expositione*, ed. L. Minio- Paluello, Corpus philosophorum medii ævi: Aristoteles latinus 33, 2nd edn. [Brussels, 1968] p. 51; see also Chapter 4). These are likely the kind of stories Mussato has in mind when he states elsewhere that the eminent verses of tragic poets were entirely free of fable ('No fable plays in their verses' [Versibus alludit fabula nulla suis] [Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 35 E]). While Conrad of Hirsau saw fables as bereft of spiritual meaning, Peter Comester had compared the figments of the poets to the croaking of frogs [*ranis loquacibus comparantur*] (Heinrich Denifle, *Die Entstehung der Universitäten des Mittelalters bis 1400* [Berlin, 1885; repr. Graz,

the didactic exposition of meaning, but in the ability of a text to generate an imaginative response and to move its reader to a deeper understanding of its hidden subject matter. Poetry was a site of interpretative liberation, where the reader could engage freely with the metaphoric complexity of a work, and not a place that required the rigorous imposition of formalized methods of exegesis. It was not a place of ethical didaxis.[95] Perhaps, in this way, we might begin to understand Mussato's occasional willingness to defend the value of his own priapic poetry – and morally controversial material in general – as the surface of a text was ultimately less important than the truths that might be retrieved from its depths by an engaged and discerning audience.[96] The pleasing metaphors and superficial *integumentum* of poetry were only a prelude to a more profound set of imaginative – and finally moral – processes.

While, as we will see, this kind of relativism opened up all sorts of problems for later poetic theorists like John Gower (d. 1408) and Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400),

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1956] p. 684; Conrad of Hirsau, *Accessus ad auctores*, ed. Huygens, pp. 88-9). The *locus classicus* for supporting this kind of pejorative view was Augustine, *Contra faustum manichaeum*, (PL 42.374). But Augustine could also be invoked in defence of the form. In *Contra mendacium* he defends Horace's satire and Aesop's fables against the charge that they were lies (PL 40.538), and in the *Soliloquia* he explains that a fable was false in as much as it was not literal, but that it was a lie composed for utility or delight (PL 32.894-5). These conflicting ideas resonate with Isidore and in John Balbus of Genoa (d. 1298), *Catholicon* (Mainz, 1460; repr. Westmead, 1971) s.v. *fabula*. However, the value of fable found redemption in the popular *Metamorphoses* commentary tradition that was developed within the twelfth-century Platonism of the cathedral schools by writers like Bernard Silvester (d. c.1178), William of Conches (d. c.1154), and Arnulf of Orleans (d. c.1003). It was developed further by their influential thirteenth-century successor, John of Garland (d. c.1270) and his *Integumenta Ovidii* (Arnulf of Orleans, *Allegoriae*, *Arnolfo d'Orleans, un cultore di Ovidia nel secolo XII,* ed. Fausto Ghisalberti [1932]; John of Garland, *Integumenta Ovidii,* ed. Ghisalberti Fausto [Milan, 1933] ll. 8-9; Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 194-6).

[95] On the ethical neutrality of poetry, see Vincent Gillespie, 'Ethice subponitur?: The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic', *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry and Hypothesis, 1100-1450*, ed. Philip Knox, Jonathon Morton, Daniel Reeve (Turnhout, 2018) pp. 297-327. See also the discussion at the start of Chapter 4.

[96] Albertino Mussato, 'Le Epistole Metriche del Mussato sulla Poesia', ed. E. Cecchini, R. Cardini et al., *Tradizione classica e letteratura umanistica*, i (Rome, 1985) pp. 95-119; Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 220.

for Mussato, it served to support his ambitious claim that poetry was not only theological and prophetic, but that it was also a mode of philosophy. Indeed, he insists on poetry's pervasive relevance to all disciplines. In doing so, he appears to engage in a shamelessly synthetic appropriation of academic material, unsystematically bringing together an eclectic range of different ideas and writers to create a Frankenstein's monster of poetic theory. Much of his knowledge of Aristotle and the Averroistic *Poetics* seems to have been mediated through secondary commentators like Albert and Aquinas, and likely received in fragmented form, which, when liberated from the methodological constraints of their scholastic context, could be put to new ends and used freely to justify his claims for poetry. This contingent quality of thought is a feature of Mussato's innovation, and his poetic theory appears more spontaneous and improvisational than committed to following the edicts of a single school of thought.

VIII

In a text certainly read in Padua during this period, we hear Albert the Great describe a set of literary principles similar to Mussato's own scientific classification of poetry:[97]

> Fable is not intended for any purpose other than arousal towards wonder [*ad mirandum*] … so that through wonder [*admirationem*] a cause may be sought and the truth may be known. Therefore, poetry gives a mode of philosophizing like the other logical sciences.[98]

[97] The thirteenth-century manuscript in Padua's Biblioteca Antoniana, MS Scaff.xxiii 660, contains a copy of Albert's *Metaphysica*.

[98] [Fabula non intenditur nisi excitatio ad mirandum […] ut per admirationem causa quaeratur, et sciatur veritas: et ideo poesis modum dat philosophandi sicut aliae scientiae logices] (Albert the Great, *Metaphysica*, *Opera Omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet (Paris, 1890-9) VI.1.2.6, p. 30).

Like Albert, Mussato perceived that the dissimulations of fictional narratives worked to engage the analytical faculties of the reader and cultivate the skills necessary for critical enquiry.[99] According to Mussato, this was a universal vatic trait. 'Solomon', he says, 'and all future prophets write to sharpen the mind with holy words'.[100] By concealing important truths in metaphor and fable, the *vates* sought to stimulate a philosophical mode of reasoning and refine their readers' intellectual habits.

That poetry represented a method of intellectual investigation appears to have influenced its classification within the sciences. Mussato argues that poets were, from the beginning of human history not only the first theologians and prophets, but also the first philosophers. 'It is true', he says, 'as we read in the books of the ancients that the first philosophers and theologians were poets'.[101] It is an assertion similarly made by Aquinas (and before him, Albert), who had described Aristotle's myth-lovers [*philomythes*] as the first theologians and philosophers:[102]

> It should be known that Orpheus was one of those first philosophers who, just like the poet theologians, spoke in metre about philosophy and about God.[103]

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[99] Albert's student, Ulrich of Strassburg, would take these premises and produce his own rudimentary defence of poetry, Peter Dronke, *Dante and Medieval Latin Traditions* (Cambridge, 1986) p. 127.

[100] [Sic salomon, reliqui sic et fecere prophetae, / Sic animos dictis exacuere sacris] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 D).

[101] [Constat quippe in antiquitatum libris primos philosophantes ac theologizantes fuisse poetas] (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 157).

[102] Aristotle who said in his *Metaphysics*: 'Even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of Wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders.' Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 8 (Oxford, 1954) 982b. Similarly Aquinas, writes: 'And since this wonder was the cause leading to philosophy, it is obvious that the philosopher is a kind of 'myth-lover', that is, a lover of fables, which is characteristic of the poets; [Et ex quo admiratio fuit causa inducens ad philosophiam, patet quod philosophus est aliqualiter 'philomythes', idest amator fabulae, quod proprium est poetarum] (Thomas Aquinas, *In Aristotelis libros Metaphysicorum*, I.3.55.

[103] [Sciendum est quod Orpheus iste fuit unus de primis philosophis qui erant quasi poetae theologi, loquentes metrice de philosophia et de Deo] (Thomas Aquinas, *In Aristotelis librum De anima commentarium*, ed. Angelo M. Pirotta (Turin, 1959) 1.12.190, p. 50).

To the same end, Albert also tells us that the *poetae theologi* had once composed metrical songs for the purpose of leading their audience toward both theological and philosophical knowledge. The work of the poet was defined as a form of philosophy:

> In this way the myth-lover is a philosopher himself: because his fable is made from things to be wondered at. Indeed, I call a myth-lover a poet who loves to create fables … a poet creates fables in order to excite someone towards wonder, and because wonder excites someone towards enquiry, it therefore also agrees with philosophy.[104]
>
> (Albert, *Metaphysica*, ed. A. Borgnet, VI.1.2.6, p. 30)

Perhaps influenced by the Arabic *Poetics*, Albert's emphasis differs that of his student, Aquinas. Here, poetry was a logical science because, as a mode of wonder [*modum amirandi*], it aroused the imagination and set in motion a philosophical process of truth-seeking.

According to Albert, it was through the wonder of poetry that causes might be sought for and truth would be understood [*per admirationem, causa quaeuntur, et sciatur veritas*].[105] Although, as we have seen in the last chapter, Albert would ultimately define poetry as a weaker mode of logic, Mussato seems to have perceived the philosophical status of poetry as confirmation of his belief in its scientific excellence, and he appears to recast the waxen nose of Albert into a new and more desirable form. Adapting this classification of poetry, and its emphasis on *admiratio*, Mussato defends the high status of his art, claiming that, as a method of investigating

[104] [Quia ipse Philomithes secundum hunc modum Philosophus est: quia fabula sua construitur ab ipso ex mirandis. Dico autem Philomiton poetam amantem fingere fabulas … {P}oeta fingit fabulam ut excitet ad admirandum, et quod admiratio ulterius excitet ad inquirendum, et sic constet philosophia].
[105] Albert, *Metaphysica*, ed. A. Borgnet, VI.1.2.6, p. 30.

the truth of reality and of God, it was both a second theology and a second philosophy [*philosophia altera*].[106]

However, because the poetic mode could produce error as easily as enlightenment, and because such error could diminish the high rank of the vatic office, the interpretation of poetry required discretion, vigilance, and caution. Mussato repeatedly insists on the circumspect interpretation of metaphoric language by a cautious mind [*cauta mente*]:[107]

> In fact, poetic truth, if one considers the matter *carefully*, contains one thing at first sight and conceals another upon further reflection. Nevertheless, some who do not consider it *carefully* enough denigrate poets and the poetic mode of proceeding [*methodum*] (emphasis added).[108]
>
> (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 157-58)

If true poetry – which is identifiable by its depth of meaning – is read without interpretative diligence and patient contemplation, it could lead to misunderstanding and thus to contempt of the poetic method and style.

Poetic *admiratio* did not compel an audience to assume an intellectual or moral position in any didactic way, nor did it yield to formulaic methods of exegesis, but rather it encouraged a process of deliberative evaluation. 'If the reader might rethink with a cautious mind', he writes, 'he will reap the reward of its enclosed virtue'.[109] One can only begin to plumb the depths of poetry if it is considered correctly [*si bene dispicias*], that is, through reflective and contemplative thought.

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[106] Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 C, E; idem, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 B.
[107] In his speech to the studium, he implores the liberal arts' students not to discern who the author might be, but rather what he is saying [Cernite non quis sit, sed quae pronuntiet] (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 35 A).
[108] [Vera equidem poetica sunt, si quis diligenter inspiciat, cum aliud aspectui subicitur et aliud intellectui subinfertur. Quamquam nonnulli parum diligentius considerantes poetas et poeticam methodum vilipendant].
[109] [{C}auta si mente repenset / Lector ab inclusa fructum virtute revellet] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 60 D).

However, not all poetry was for all people, if the poetic mode of signification did not please you, Mussato suggests you simply avoid it [*abstinuisse potes*].[110]

But avoiding it was easier said than done. On the basis of the philosophical classification of poetry, Mussato argues for its pervasive relevance to all fields of study. In what appears to be an attempt to reframe the standard Greek defence of Homeric poetry, Mussato insists that because poetic language transformed knowledge into images and figurative representations, it should be considered integral to the transmission and conservation of all learning.[111] Hence, he tells us that within the Greek gymnasium poetry related philosophical doctrines under the covering of figures that were verified by their own examples, and worked to pass on the ideas of the philosophers.[112] Because of its interdisciplinary compass, it was an important scholarly medium for a range of different subjects. 'No art', Mussato writes, 'is free from our Muse'.[113] Theology, natural philosophy, civil law, ethics, physics, mathematics, and the liberal arts all used whatever poetic material was germane to their interest and in the service of their procedures and reasoning.[114]

It is on this account that Mussato takes issue with the hypocrisy of a critic of poetry, the Venetian grammarian and notary Giovanni da Vigonza – 'the angry judge'

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[110] Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 B.
[111] Curtius, *European Literature*, p. 205; Plato, *Republic*, ed. and trans., Chris Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA, 2013) 1.3, p. 268-9. Because Plato's criticism was not applicable to the 'philosophical' work of the *vates*, Mussato was able to claim that 'the most high Aristotle and the writings of great Plato, having been uttered, prove our metres and teach them' [Summus Aristoteles et magni scripta Platonis / Dicta probant nostris, que docuere, metris] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E).
[112] 'At that time certain teaching, having been enclosed under certain figures, and having been verified, related their examples' [Dogmata sub certis quae tunc inclusa figuris / Tradidit exemplis verificata suis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 E).
[113] [{N}ostra non ars vacat ulla Camena] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 62 E).
[114] 'Lawyers, liberal artists, and the examiners of hidden nature' [Juristae, artistae, scrutatoresque latentis / Naturae] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 62 A); 'Now to you, you who fear, the frightful muse brings fears, now it soothes your heart with gentle words, now with ethics, now with physics, now truly with mathematics' [Nunc tibi, quo metuas, fert horrida Musa timores, / Nunc lenis placidis mulcet tua pectore verbis, / Ethica nunc, nunc Physis erit, nunc vera Mathesis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 60 D-E).

– because the study of law depended for its statutes on the use of Homeric verse.[115] 'In this matter,' Mussato tells him, 'you have more of the burden on you, than you have considered'.[116] Because poetry included and pervaded all disciplines, it was necessarily protected from any all-out attempts to reject its intellectual significance. To erase the importance of poetry and deny its relevance to the pursuit of wisdom would mean ignoring a vast hinterland of recorded knowledge stored within the verses of the poets. While poetry was essential to the full understanding of every discipline, there was one area of study in particular that shared a special relationship with vatic writing: music.

IX

Mussato appears to attribute much of the power and the historical ubiquity of poetry to the musicality of its rhythms and metres. According to both Boethius and Augustine, music described the harmonious proportions and movements of the spheres – that is, of the universe and of heaven – and was considered to be the connective tissue of the cosmos, uniting the human and the divine through the shared measurements and ratios of *numerus*.[117] Music was the divine language – the

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[115] 'Civil law annexes the versus of my homer' [Jus civile mei versus allegat Homeri] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 F).
[116] [Plus tibi in hoc oneris, quam mediteris, habes] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 B).
[117] Augustine, *De musica*, ed. G. Finaert and F.-J. Thonnard (Paris, 1947) on music and poetry see, 6.11; Boethius, *De institutione musica,* PL 63.1171-2, I.2. In his treatise on music, Boethius writes: 'Thus, from this, it can be understood (so that it is not spoken in vain by Plato) that the soul of the universe is being united by a musical concord' [Hinc etiam internosci potest, quod non frustra a Platone dictum est, mundi animam, musica convenientia fuisse conjunctam] (Boethius, *De institutione musica,* PL 63.1168, I.1). Similarly, Isidore emphasizes music's disciplinary precedence: 'Without music, no other discipline can be perfected, for nothing is without music' [Itaque sine Musica nulla disciplina potest esse perfecta, nihil enim sine illa] (Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay; *The Etymologies,* trans., S. Barney et al., III.17, p. 95). Augustine discusses the holistic and unifying effects of music and poetry as both a sensible and rational discipline: 'And, because whatever the mind is able to see is always present and is acknowledged to be immortal, numeric proportions seemed to be of this nature. But, because sound is something sensible, it flows away into the past and is imprinted on the memory. By a reasonable fiction it was fabled that the Muses

language of the cosmos – which spoke in the patterns, proportions, and numbers of mathematical order. '*Numerus*', Bonaventure explains, 'is the principal pattern in the mind of the Creator'.[118] By using the variation and measurements of metre, poets necessarily spoke the language of God. The poetic theology of the *vates* was not simply the concealment and confection of revealed truth, it was the ability to converse in the divine tongue, and to relate the thoughts of God with the immediacy of direct speech.

The music of poetry, then, served an important mediatory role between man and God. According to Mussato, it is through the *numerus* of verse – the pleasing measurements of hexameter – that Moses was able to reconcile the Hebrew people with their God.[119] It is a point of focus throughout his work and he repeatedly returns to emphasize the fact that biblical and pagan poets secured divine favour and delighted God through the metrical qualities of song:[120]

> These songs are musical, and have pleasant singing, and they please the holy gods in various rhythms. With harps holy prophets sung praises, and they

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were the daughters of Jupiter and Memory. Now, with reason bestowing its favor on the poets, need it be asked what the offspring likewise contained? Since this branch of learning partakes as well of sense as of the intellect, it received the name of music' [Et quoniam illud quod mens videt, semper est praesens et inmortale adprobatur – cuius generis numeri apparebant – sonus autem, quia sensibilis res est, praeterfluit in praeteritum tempus inprimitur que memoriae, rationabili mendacio iam poetis fauente ratione Iouis et Memoriae filias Musas esse confictum est. Unde ista disciplina sensus intellectusque particeps musicae nomen invenit] (Augustine, *De ordine*, PL 322.1014, II.14; *Happy Life, Answer to Skeptics, Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil, Soliloquies*, trans. Robert P. Russell et al. [New York, 2008] p. 138).

[118] [Numerus est praecipuum in animo Conditoris exemplar] (Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Collegium a S. Bonaventura, 10 vols. [Quaracchi, 1891] I.10.33); 'Music is the discipline that is concerned with *numerus*' [*Musica est disciplina quae de numeris loquitur*] (Cassiodorus, *Institutiones*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors [Oxford, 1937] II.3.21)

[119] 'It is said that during great peril, the teacher reconciled God to the Hebrew people with hexametrical feet' [Numen ad Hebreos per vasta pericula Doctor / Dicitur hexametro conciliasse pede] (Mussato, *Epistola* 4, col. 41 B).

[120] 'Job wrote his lamentations in heroic songs and the psalmist pleased God in metrical song' [Edidit heroica sua Job lamenta camoena / Placavitque Deum metrico Psalmista canore] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 D); 'Through his famous metres, Job wept his ruin so that he would be gratifying to God' [Job per metra suas deflevit nota ruinas / Taliter excelso gratificanda Deo] (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 2, col. 79 C)

> made a loud noise to heaven with sublime trumpets. The Hebrew people appeased their God with song and in hexameter and pentametrical feet.[121]
>
> (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 2, col. 79 C)

Poetry pleased and it appeased. The prophet, as the speaker and interpreter of the divine language, fulfilled an important civic and intercessional function, helping to sustain the spiritual health of the community and keep it in a right relationship with God. It is a prophetic attribute that would no doubt have resonated with Mussato's own concerns for the political stability and moral vigour of Padua. Indeed, the importance of music to his poetic theory is, perhaps, related to the unique Paduan emphasis on the public recitation of poetry. Not long after its composition, a civil statute was enacted which ruled that his tragedy, *Ecerinis*, was to be read aloud annually to the assembled commune.[122] The affective force of poetic music helped him fulfil his public office. As the music of poetry was conceived according to the end of the highest good, it positively influenced the behavioural habits of its audience.[123] Pleasant songs entice the ears, he says, in the same way food moves a mouth.[124]

Nonetheless, a full account of poetic music was not to be found in the creative application of metre:

> For it does not please the true God by modulation alone, creating its songs for this end. But the first poetry, rising up to the heavens from the origin of

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[121] [Musica sunt, placidos ut habent haec carmina cantus, / Quae placent variis Numina Sacra modis. / In citharis laudes sancti cecinere Prophetae, / Et caelo altisonis instrepuere turbis. / Gens Hebrae suum placavit carmine Numen, / scilicet hexametro, pentametroque pede].
[122] Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, i (Cambridge, 1978) p. 39.
[123] [Sit de fine boni summi concepta Poesis] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 C).
[124] Mussato, *Epistola* 3, col. 38 C. The alimentary imagery seems conventional and was often used for descriptions of the affective quality of poetry. Aquinas had early described the effect of poetry in similar terms.

> the world, searches through contemplation for things examined in the heavenly bodies.[125]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, cols. 61 B-C)

The music of poetry was not only a mode of intercession, it was a medium for philosophical contemplation and the independent discovery of revelation. In other words, it was a means to its own end.[126] Through encountering the music of poetry, the *vates* were elevated above themselves and to the heavens in order to actively seek out divine knowledge, which would, in turn, be translated into the metrical *sonus* of new poetry. Poetry was, in this respect, an endless, autophagic process. In his *Soliloquium* 4, this process is dramatized and we see his muse rise from the earth [*a terris surgens*] to ascend to the summit of the eighth sphere in order to bring back new revelations from the saints and from God.[127] What he describes, in effect, is an inherently circular, self-sustaining meta-praxis, where poetry is the discovery of the poem.

Expanding on this premise, he explains elsewhere that because ancient writers derived great pleasure from the music of other poets, they were able to produce their own sacred art. The delightful effects of poetry, which induced an elevated state of love within the reader, served as inspirational stimuli for the pursuit of knowledge and the creation of new poetic works. 'Much love lived in the old poets', he says, explaining that it was 'the mutual love of sacred art that allowed this'.[128] But this kind of literary mitosis, where poetry produced poetry in a continuous chain of reading,

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[125] [Nam verum non ipsa Deum modulamine solo / Placat ad hunc tantum prodens sua carmina finem; / Sed prior assurgens summis ab origine Mundi / Intuitu speculata suo rimatur in astris].
[126] Greenfield rightly observes here that 'poetry reflects the heavenly perfection and is a means to its contemplation' (*Humanist and Scholastic Poetics*, p. 64).
[127] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 4, col. 81 B.
[128] [Vixit in antiquis dilectio multa Poetis, / Mutuus hoc sacrae praebuit artis amor] (Mussato, *Epistola* 14, col. 50 D).

revelation, and composition, was not confined to the distant past. 'Likewise', he says, 'a treaty of love rules the living'.[129] The same procreative force that influenced ancient writers was also at work within contemporary poets, who, being filled with the musical and imaginative delights of great art, were led to create new beatified works. The progenitive nature of this relationship is made explicit in the playful – if not provocative – image of Mussato enjoying his marital bed with an antique text. 'Virgil', he says, 'rolled over and over alone in my bed with me'.[130]

Nonetheless, poetry was not transmitted simply through intimate contact with great texts, it was a fundamentally transcendent medium. It had been brought into existence at the very beginning of time and had continuously and indiscriminately manifested itself throughout history. In other words, it was not a human science, but a divine science, it had been established along with the foundations of the world — *ab origine mundi*. For Mussato, music was not specific to any period of time or vocation, it cut through the arbitrary demarcations of human history to take on an eternal significance. Accordingly, he argues, the continuity of vatic music meant that what was sung by the pagan poets was likewise celebrated at Mass by priests.[131]

In the personified voice of poetry, Mussato argues for the centrality of poetic music to the liturgy, arguing that not only was 'the church chanted in our metre', but also the songs of the pagan poets:

> Sometimes I record the testimony of holy Minerva, and ready Venus inscribes my duties. I sing holy songs, when holy Ministers celebrate holy offices: the blessed Virgin receives my respect, the following words I say,

[129] [In vivos foedus regnat amoris idem] (Mussato, *Epistola* 14, col. 50 D).
[130] [Virgilius thalamo mecum versatus in uno] (Mussato, *Epistola* 14, col. 50 D).
[131] Wheatley's early fourteenth-century commentary on the *Consolatio philosophiae* suggests the ease with which the music of poetry had been associated with the first emergence of the *vates*, with the commentator noting simply that 'Orpheus was called a *vates* because he made songs' [Orpheus dicitur vates quia carmina composuit] (William Wheatley, *In Boethii De consolatione Philosophiae*, III.12, p. 96).

> 'Hail holy Mother'. The holy Mass is said with heroic feet, holy vespers are sung more solemnly with my hymns. I please the holy gods with delightful metres.[132]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 44 B-C)

It is a dizzying inventory of poetic functions, which frames the offices of the liturgy with the indecorous imagery of pagan gods. Poetry serves both Minerva and the Virgin Mary, it pleases the *numina sancta* and the Christian God alike. Assisted by Venus, poetry governed the rhythms of Mass, modulating the intensity and emotional authenticity of religious experience. For Mussato, then, the liturgy equated to poetry in the same way that Scripture had equated to poetry; liturgical music was the music of the *vates*.[133] 'By my law and standard', says poetry, 'the *vates* are read in song, their music moves toward our most high God'.[134] The surface of a song, whether it calls to Venus or Mary, appears unimportant, it is only a superficial linguistic distinction, a difference in sign rather than ultimate meaning. The music of poetry spoke a universal language, a divine tongue, which operated beyond the constraints of linguistic differentiation to allow the poet and the reader access to the mind of God regardless of its content.

It is unsurprising then, that Mussato's assessment of poetry was met with critical disapproval. That his formulation of the *vates* was a unique intervention in the period is suggested when, in response to a critic, he simply explains that 'the name of

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[132] [Interdum sacrae refero monimenta Minervae, / Incidit officiis et Venus apta meis. / Sacra cano, sacri celebrant cum sacra Ministri, / Fungitur obsequiis Virgo beata meis. / Salve Sancta Parens, et verba frequentia dico, / Dicitur heroico cum sacra Missa pede. / Vespera sancta meis canitur solemnior hymnis, / Placo dulcisonis Numina sancta metris].

[133] For Aquinas, the reading of Scripture during the liturgy was a prophetic act: 'Qui in ecclesia … sacras scripturas legunt, dicuntur prophetantes' (*Lectura in 1 Corinthios*, vol. 1 ed. R. Cai, 8th edn. [Turin, 1953] 11.2.592).

[134] [Lege mea vates cantu, normaque leguntur, / Migrat ad excelsum musica nostra Deum] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 C).

the *vates* has moved slowly to you'.[135] Uniting sacred and secular poetry in meaning and insisting on the universal revelation of Christ through verse was going to raise a few eyebrows. Indeed, it provoked responses from two contemporaries, the grammarian and lawyer, Giovanni of Vigonza and, more significantly, the Dominican, Giovannino of Mantua OP (fl. c.1315), the text of the latter being preserved as an epistolary exchange between the friar and Mussato. In particular, the prophetic and interpretative powers awarded to the *vates* were untenable for the Dominican because they did not conform to his system of scientific classification which insisted that poetry was void of any truth-content.[136]

X

In the December of 1315, the same month that Mussato was crowned poet laureate of Padua, Giovannino of Mantua delivered a sermon that sought to reassert the disciplinary precedence of theology and denounce the elevated claims and pretensions

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[135] [Quod tibi surrepta est Antonomasia Vatum] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 61 A).

[136] Tangentially here, the independent theological authority of Mussato's *vates* seems to map onto those emergent heresies of the period that had similarly sought to promote the sovereignty of individual revelation. In particular, the heresy of the Free Spirit sought to elevate the priestly authority and interpretative power of the individual over the knowledge and expertise of the theologically educated, questioning, among other things, the functional necessity and ability of church hierarchies to arbitrate in matters of moral and spiritual governance. This movement had promoted the decentralization of religious authority by allowing the individual access to divine truth through the private interpretation of prophecy. This hinterland of heterodoxy seems to sit in the background of Mussato's attempts to reimagine the religious status of poetry and include pagan material within sacred history. See, Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, 1991) p. 79. While Marguerite Porete (d. 1310) and Guiard of Cressonessart (d. 1310) were tried and executed because of their alleged involvement with the Free Spirit, the independent religious authority of inspired writers had been promoted to similar ends among Franciscan Spirituals. The apocalyptic visionary, Ubertino of Casale OFM (d. 1329), who claimed that his work, *Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu*, had been produced through divine inspiration and without thought [*sine cogitatione*], appears to have considered private visionary experience a means of countering the sterile philosophizing and intramural exclusivity of Parisian and Franciscan forms of education (*Arbor vitae crucifixae Jesu* [Venice, 1485; repr. Turin, 1961] p. 6a; Sean L. Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* [Notre Dame, 2012]).

of other fields of study to scientific superiority.[137] The Dominican had been in Padua since the 1290s and would have witnessed the rise of the liberal arts, observing firsthand the increased influence of literary humanism within the *studium*.[138] Yet, interestingly, Giovannino's public admonishments did not include an evaluation of poetry. We are told that Mussato quickly seized on this, producing a tract – no longer extant – which argued that the conspicuous omission of poetry from such criticisms verified its theological status.[139] Giovannino responded with nine theses explaining why poetry was not a divine art, which were answered in turn by Mussato.[140]

The competing views of the exchange are uniquely reflected in the formal variation of the letters. While the verse epistle of Mussato is virtuosic in its frenzied and synthetic modulation of ideas and arguments, Giovannino develops his tract methodically, measuring out his objections according the dry logical formula of the scholastic *disputatio*. His views on poetry are made clear in his stated decision to

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[137] On the dating of these events, Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 119, 157 n. 113; Billanovich, 'Preumanesimo', p. 71; Nancy Siraisi, *Arts and Sciences at Padua: The Studium of Padua Before 1350* (Toronto, 1973) p. 47. On the tradition of these denunciations, Peter Denley, 'Giovanni Dominici's Opposition to Humanism,' *Studies in Church History* 17 (1981) pp. 103-114.

[138] Paolo Marangon, *Ad cognitionem scientiae festinare: Gli studi nell' Università e nei conventi di Padova nei secoli XIII e XIV*, ed. T. Pesenti (Trieste, 1997) p. 378.

[139] These events are recorded in the *Evidentia harum epistolarum*, which may have been the work of two Paduan scholars, Castellano of Bassano and Guizzardo of Bologna (Billanovich, 'Preumanesimo', pp. 72-3. It is printed with Mussato's other epistles in his *Opera*, *Evidentia harum epistolarum*, col. 54 B-C).

[140] Given that the Dominicans had been in charge of heresy inquisitions in Padua since 1303, there may have been more at stake for Mussato in his exchange with Giovannino. Public debate was an established part of civic culture in Padua, but the extreme nature of his claims may have placed him in a vulnerable position, not least as they represented a lay challenge to ecclesiastical authority. While he does not take the precaution of concealing his assertions within the protective form of a poetic narrative (although at one point he does speak in the voice of poetry), he still makes them as a poet, not as a theologian. Barbara Newman has observed that during the period '[poets] had license to proclaim with impunity ideas, however radical, that if voiced as formal theology could have provoked a swift, hostile response'. Mussato may well have benefited from the fact that poetry was not classified as theology (Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* [Philadelphia, 2003] p. 65; Nicolette Zeeman, 'The Schools Give a License to Poets', *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland [Cambridge, 1996] pp. 151-80).

write in prose [*prosaice*].[141] He explains that as a doctor of holy theology it would be injurious to the success of his discipline if it were bound to the rules of poetry; to write metrically and metaphorically required submitting to the poetic muses, those he calls, the *meretrices* [whores]. This is, of course, a pointed allusion to the wanton sensuousness of the Boethian muses – the *scenicas meretriculas* – who were banished by Lady Philosophy before she could begin her work.[142] Giovannino tells us that Boethius, perhaps inspired by the words of Solomon, described the poetic muses in such lascivious terms because poetic words were externally beautiful, but internally bitter and full of untruth.[143] In this way, the Dominican identifies poetry as an empty distraction which must be dismissed before any serious intellectual work can begin.

In support of this he expands Gregory's claim that the words of divine prophecy should not be restricted by the artificial rules of grammar to include the language and metres of poetry.[144] However, guiding and underwriting his argument, and his entire tract, is the standard Dominican response to the problem of poetry as it had been laid out by Aquinas.[145] Faithfully rehearsing the party line, Giovannino explains that poetry and Scripture *differunt omnino*. While poets used metaphors [*metaphorae*] for representing things and delighting audiences, Scripture – as its own measure [*radium*] – used figurative language usefully, both to protect its truth from the unworthy and to sustain the minds of the worthy.[146] Thus, there are two kinds of poetry, one that happened in Scripture and one that happened elsewhere.

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[141] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 54 E.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 57 D; 'For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword' (Proverbs 5:3-4).
[144] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 54 E; Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143-143b (Turnhout, 1979-85) Epistola ad Leandrum 5, p. 7.
[145] Aquinas, *In Metaphysicam*, I.4.83-4; I.3.63. Further to this, see the discussion in the preceding chapter.
[146] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 57 A.

Beyond the limits of the biblical text, poetic *figurae* were merely ornamental, lacking in reliability, verity, and utility. In contrast, the *divina scientia* of Scripture was *admirabilis* because it was both internally truthful and externally beautiful, it was the origin and perfection of all literary endeavour:[147]

> Every ornament of rhetorical eloquence, every mode of poetic speech, and any variety of beautiful admixture, originated in divine Scripture.[148]
>
> (Mussato, *Epistola, Fratris Joannini De Mantua*, col. 56 D)

The motiving force behind these arguments was the desire to establish the revealed truth of Scripture as a singular discursive achievement. Yet, in doing so, Giovannino appears to unavoidably discard the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic value of all non-Scriptural poetry – Christian and pagan alike – submitting to a reductive, if not aggressively myopic, vision of theology that left little room for literary study.[149] In this context, it is telling that Giovannino refused to acknowledge even the modest philosophical powers that had been awarded to poets by Albert, offering his opponent no quarter.[150]

This kind of wholesale rejection of poetry was obviously unacceptable to Mussato. As we have seen throughout this chapter, he deploys a range of arguments in his defence and in his response to Giovannino, asserting poetry's status as a divine science and as a mode of theology and philosophy, arguing that it provoked a response of wonder through its figurative language, which led to deeper investigations of the nature of things, and that it elevated the mind with the music of its rhythms. However, in his theological and philosophical classifications of poetry, he does not

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[147] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 56 D.
[148] [Omnis ornatus Rhetoricae eloquentiae, omnes modi poeticae locutionis, quaelibet varietas decorae permixtionis a Divinis Scripturis sumpsit exordium].
[149] Mussato, *Epistola*, *Fratris Joannini de Mantua*, col. 56 F.
[150] While Curtius has suggested this was not so much an attack on poetry as an attempt to enforce a particular model of classification, it nonetheless represents a radical dismissal of the scientific value of literary studies (*European Literature*, p. 217).

explicitly prioritize in his verse discussions the important category of tragedy and the unifying power of genre.

XI

In 1316, sometime after the exchange with Giovannino, Mussato addressed this issue directly – in part at the request of his friend, Marsilius of Padua (d. c.1342) – in two prose treatises, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece* and *Senece vita et mores*.[151] These texts confirm the centrality of tragedy to Mussato's poetic theory and testify to the powerful influence of Seneca on his work. They also suggest that Mussato was a unique beneficiary of the literary interests of Cardinal Nicholas Albertini of Prato OP (d. 1321).[152] Albertini had struggled with the allusive mythography of Seneca's tragedies and, in 1314, sought help from the Oxford Dominican, Nicholas Trevet OP (d. 1328).[153] At least one of Trevet's Seneca commentaries arrived in Padua shortly after its completion in 1315 and appears to have been read by Mussato.[154]

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[151] Both *Evidentia tragediarum Senece* (pp. 113-34) and *Senece vita et mores* (pp. 145-71) are found in Megas, *Kyklos tēs Padouas*.

[152] The two met in 1311 in the imperial court of Henry VII (Giuseppe Billanovich, *La tradizione del testo di Livio e le origini dell'umanesimo*, i [Padua, 1981] p. 45). On Albertini's connection to Dante, see Dante, *Epistolae*, ed. P. Toynbee (Oxford, 1920) Epistola 1, pp. 1-10. On Albertini's connection to Petrarch, Ruth J. Dean, 'Cultural Relations in the Middle Ages: Nicholas Trevet and Nicholas of Prato', *Studies in Philology* 45 (1948) p. 549 n. 15. More generally, on the connection between Albertini and the early fourteenth-century readers of Seneca, Fitzgerald, *Inspiration and Authority*, p. 157; Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 220-21.

[153] Albertini would become Trevet's patron, and the Dominican's literary criticism would have a far wider reception in Italy than England. See Roberto Weiss, 'Notes on the Popularity of the Writings of Nicholas Trevet, O.P., in Italy during the First Half of the Fourteenth Century', *Dominican Studies* 1 (1948) p. 264; Beryl Smalley, *English Friars and Antiquity in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960) p. 61; Dean 'Cultural Relations', pp. 549-50; Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 220-21.

[154] Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. lat. 1769. On this, see Guido Billanovich, 'Abbozzi e postille del Mussato nel Vaticano Lat. 1769', *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 28 (1985) pp. 24-6; Fitzgerald, *Authority and Inspiration*, 161ff. The date of its completion coincides with Mussato's other meditations on tragedy, which were part of a speech delivered to the college of the liberal arts in 1315 (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, cols. 33-6).

Mussato would discover in Seneca the perfect union of classical *auctoritas* and Christian theologian. He argues for the Roman's conversion – perhaps for the first time in the period – citing his spurious correspondence with Paul as evidence that *Seneca noscitur Christianus*. Not only does Seneca's salvation participate in Biblical history – being planted by Paul and watered by Apollos – but also, as a conduit for divine revelation, his literary efforts – which agreed with the moral and prophetic exhortations of Solomon [*concordat cum Salomone*] – were considered equal to Scripture:[155]

> Thus, Seneca sought to express poetic theology, so that in his work he should clearly prove himself a poet and a theologian.[156]
>
> (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 160)

Although the veneration of Seneca as an inspired *poeta theologus* no doubt confirmed for Mussato that the tragic style was the highest and most sublime point of the poetic art [*poetice artis supremum apicem et grandiloquum*], the genre also appears to have offered him a usefully flexible category.[157]

During the Middle Ages the generic criteria of tragedy lacked clear or consistent definition.[158] Efforts to describe the form by encyclopedists, commentators, and theorists relied on the limited information available in Isidore's *Etymologiae* and

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[155] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, pp. 154-5, 157. On the humanist reception of Seneca and his alleged letter to Paul, see Guido Martellotti, 'La questione dei due Seneca da Petrarca a Benvenuto', *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 15 (1972) pp. 149-71; Agostino Sottili, 'Albertino Mussato, Erasmo, l'Epistolario di Seneca con San Paolo', *Nova de veteribus: mittelund neulateinische Studien für Paul Gerhard Schmidt*, ed. Andreas Bihrer and Elisabeth Stein (Leipzig, 2004) pp. 647-78; Clara Maria Monti, 'Il *corpus* senecano dei padovani: Manoscritti e loro datazione', *Italia medioevale e umanistica* 50 (2009) pp. 51-99. On Mussato's seminal claim for Seneca's conversion, see Letizia Panizza, 'Gasparino Barzizza's Commentaries on Seneca's Letters', *Traditio* 33 (1977) p. 307 n. 39.

[156] '[Seneca] theologiam poeticam exprimere sic curavit, ut in ipso opere theologum se patenter ostenderet et poetam'.

[157] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 159-60. On the history and emergence of medieval conceptions of tragedy, see Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 206-23; Kelly, *Ideas and Forms of Tragedy*.

[158] Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', p. 207.

Boethius' *Consolatio*, but also in the peripheral, allusive, and often discordant observations found in earlier discussions of the form, like Horace's *Ars poetria* and Ovid's *Tristia* (all of which Mussato used).[159] The confused synthesis of dramatic theory inferred from these sources was further complicated by a dearth of examples of genuine tragic verse and a lack of material explaining the circumstances of performance. As such, tragedy was an equivocal literary form, and was often used to describe a range of narrative poetry that might be properly classified as epic and history. Its inherent malleability, then, as with the category of the *vates*, proved convenient for Mussato's poetic theory, allowing him to unite within it an inclusive range of biblical and classical texts.

Defining the genre, he cites Boethius's description of tragedy as a lament against the indiscriminate blows of fortune and states that 'the subject of any tragedy is the story of a certain power overturned under lamentation'.[160] He explains that *tragici vates* write about the struggles of a variable life [*dubiae certamina vitae*], concerning themselves with the catastrophes of twisting fortune [*fortuna volubilis*] and the fall and fate of great kings and leaders.[161] For prophets, every destructive thing is before their eyes, they see every cruelty.[162] For Mussato, the confluence of

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[159] On his use of these authors, see Mussato, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece*, ed. Megas, p. 124; idem, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, pp. 159-61. His Cento offers his most diffuse and allusive use of source texts, *Cento*, cols. 72-76.

[160] 'Boethius testifying: 'What else is the cry of tragedy but a lament that happy states are overthrown by the indiscriminate blows of fortune?'' [Testante Boetio: 'Quid aliud tragediarum clamor deflet, nisi fortunam indiscreto ictu felicia regna vertentem?'] (Mussato, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece*, ed. Megas, p. 124). In his commentary on the tragedies of Seneca, Mussato cites Boethius' discussion of the fable of Orpheus [*quale illud boecii de consolation … ubi hanc eadem tradit fabulam de Orpheo*] in order to associate the figure of the poet with the lament of fortune and as a means to reflect on the tragic impermanence of all things (Mussato, *Seneka [and] Apospasmata*, p. 76).

[161] Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 36 A; Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 160.

[162] [Omnia sunt oculis perniciosa suis … / Quae species omnis crudelitatis habent] (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 36 B).

Boethian lament, Senecan moral stoicism, and the prophetic function of the *vates* led him to understand that the purpose of tragedy was the consolation of the reader.

Tragedy was a useful song [*utile carmine*], which strengthened minds by seizing them with the dread of the vicissitudes of life.[163] 'Provoking fear', he says, 'restrains anxious hearts'.[164] By observing the fall of great men, the reader was taught to believe that fortune could be defeated [*vinci*]. Their paralyzing fear would be washed away [*ignavus diluitur metus*] when they saw that perseverance defeats [*vincit*] adversity. This is why tragic verse alternately elicits fear then comfort, balancing the disquiet of fortune with peaceful words [*placidis verbis*] of encouragement that softened the heart [*mulcet pectora*].[165] 'Now to you, who fear', he writes, 'the frightful muse brings dread, now it soothes your heart with gentle words'.[166]

Much of the consoling power of tragedy was also derived from the musical union of the poetic subject matter and its metre. Like Dante Alighieri (d. 1321), Mussato considered the predominate feature of the tragic foot [*pes*] to be the perfect coherence of sound and material [*et sono et materie*].[167] On this basis he divides the genre in two [*dupilicter*].[168] While tragedies, like those of Sophocles and Seneca, which concern the plight of great men, used iambic metre, tragedies, like those of Ennius, Lucan, Virgil, and Statius, which concerned battles and great victories, used heroic metre.[169] Nonetheless, the necessary connection of material and form often required the use of multiple different metres in any single work:

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[163] Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 36 A.
[164] [Ad constringit movens anxia corda timor] (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 36 A).
[165] Mussato, *Epistola* 1, cols. 35 F - 36 A.
[166] [Nunc tibi, quo metuas, fert horrida Musa timores, nunc lenis placidis mulcet] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 60 D).
[167] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge, 1996) 2.4.7.
[168] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p 160.
[169] Ibid.

> Indeed, the melodies of a subject matter are varied in variety … [The tragic poet] composes by means of distinct metres with diverse feet, so that those metres will correctly fit with each subject matter.[170]
>
> (Mussato, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece*, ed. Megas, p. 126)

That is why there is great metrical diversity in Seneca.[171] It is also why Boethius has Philosophy initially reject the poetic muses. In his response to Giovannino, Mussato explains that Philosophy did not need, at that particular time, the sweet songs of the poetic muse (Melpomene), but rather required the muse of astronomy (Urania), who, having roamed the heavens, was able to assist with theology.[172] Boethius varied his style according to his subject matter, and so made his prosimetrum with the help of both Urania and Melpomene: 'From the two he made a wonderful work, composing his whole poem from each part'.[173]

Mussato also uses the category of tragedy to defend poetry against the kind of absolutizing denouncements made by Giovannino. Classifying poetry required nuance, which the Dominican, and those like him, lacked. 'Where they should argue kind [*speciem*]', he says, 'they argue class [*genus*]'.[174] Without differentiating between the *species* of the poetic *genus* all poetry could be considered equally reprehensible, so that:

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[170] [In variatione quidem materiarum variantur melodie … per metra diversis distincta pedibus edit, ut materie singula metra convenient].
[171] Commentating on Seneca's tragedies, Mussato seeks to explain the variable metre within his texts, suggesting that Seneca alters his lines when voicing the lamentations of a chorus so that he might more authentically capture the multivalent sound of a crowd. 'In the cry of the people', he says, 'one voice lowers, another raises' [In clamoribus populorum unus vocem levat, alter summittit]. Thus, 'they do not keep one mode of speaking' [Quod unum modum non servabant] (Mussato, *Seneka [and] Apospasmata*, ed. Megas, p. 74).
[172] Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 62 C.
[173] [Ex binis confecit opus mirabile, totam / Ex utraque suam componens parte Poesim] (Mussato, *Epistola* 18, col. 62 C). On the mixed form, see Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago, 2013).
[174] [Ubi deberent arguere speciem, arguunt genus] (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 157).

> They might order Virgil, Ennius, Lucan, Ovid, and Statius to be banished from Italy, likewise Cicero and Seneca, and they might erase all the names of the poets, as the Latin, so the Greek.[175]
>
> (Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 158)

In order to prevent the indiscriminate trashing of classical texts, Mussato draws a sharp line between tragedy and comedy. He suggests that it was not the tragedians but, in fact, the comedians [*comedi*] – once known as actors [*histriones*] or players [*scenici*] – who incited men to debauchery by throwing their hands, shifting their feet, changing their faces, and twisting their mouths while reciting their verses.[176] Although comedians might induce cheerful laughter [*cachinnos hilares*], in doing so they converted the highest virtues into idle conversation and immoral speech [*confabulationes et turpiloquia*], hiding slander under their silent hearts and demeaning themselves for the sake of cheap entertainment.[177] 'They laugh at various fictions, and are laughed at themselves'.[178] These were the purveyors of contemptible poetry that required censure, not tragic poets — tragedy would not endure obscene laughter [*obscenos risus*].[179]

On this basis, Mussato adjusts the history of poetic theory to benefit the tragic *vates*. It was against the comedians – not all poets – that Augustine had often inveighed because comedians led men to lascivious behaviour through the false words of their fictions [*verba figmentis assimulata suis*].[180] Convinced of their corrupting influence, Cato had accused Scipio of leading the first comedians into Italy; they were known at that time as *lixae* [camp-followers] because of their wandering

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[175] [Pellendos censeant Italia Virgilium, Ennium, Ovidium, Lucnamun, Statium, hunc quoque Senecam et Marcum Tullium omne nomen tam latinorum quam grecorum deleant poetarum].
[176] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 158; idem, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 A.
[177] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 158; idem, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 A.
[178] [Rident figmentis variis, ridentur et ipsi] (Mussato, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 A).
[179] [Non amat obscenos irata Tragoedia risus] (Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 35 D).
[180] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 158; idem, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 A.

performances and debased ministrations.[181] In contrast to the great tragic poets of the past, comedians were ruinously ignoble and, as a socially liminal class, lacked any civic accountability. That Mussato conceived of comedy as the antithesis of tragedy was by no means unusual, but his particular set of historical emphases appear strategically significant, constituting a tactical response of disavowal.[182] In order to protect the high status of tragic verse, Mussato offers up comedy to his critics in its place, redirecting the focus of their attacks by reframing the parameters of the debate. If there is contemptible poetry, it is comedy.

Nonetheless, his ultimate gesture was toward inclusivity, and the loose generic expectations of tragedy, which could be applied to a diverse range of poetry, confirmed for him the historical cohesion of vatic writing. The common interests of tragedy necessarily blurred the formal lines between biblical and classical lament, connecting them to his own work and conferring onto the vatic office a unified sense of function and purpose. Like the great *tragici vates* and *poetae theologi,* Mussato was inspired by the Holy Spirit – the universal Paraclete of the *vates* [*Paraclyte vati*] – and could sing just as the holy prophets did.[183] He had been divinely called to write tragedy. Having been set on fire with tragic heat [*mens tragico succensa calore*], his mind was able to create the complex rhythms of tragic verse.[184] As much as Mussato's work represents a general defence of poetry, it is equally a defence of his own authority and status. The success or failure of poetry within Padua was inevitably

[181] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 158; idem, *Epistola* 7, col. 45 A.
[182] Mussato, *Senece vita et mores*, ed. Megas, p. 159. Horace, *Ars poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Harvard, 1926) l. 89. On the distinction between tragedy and comedy, see Jacopo della Lana, *Commento alla Commedia di Dante*, ed. Luciano Scarabelli, 3 vols. (Bologna, 1866-67) I.350. Isidore, *Etymologiae*, ed. W. M. Lindsay; *The Etymologies,* trans., S. Barney et al., III.18.19, p. 94; Balbus, *Catholicon*, s. v. *comedia*; Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 239-32.
[183] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 2, cols. 79 C, 78 E.
[184] Mussato, *Epistola* 1, col. 35 D.

tied to his own fate. And, he would argue, the fate of Padua was tied to the success of his poetry.

XII

In his letter to Marsilius, Mussato indicates that he had hoped to influence a movement of literary and educational regeneration, telling his friend to revive [*refocillare*] the numerous studies of natural philosophy that were contained within his works.[185] It is confirmation of his great faith in poetry and of his hopeful enthusiasm for a humanist renaissance that would not only see the successful integration of classical and Christian intellectual worlds, but would culturally unify the Paduan commune. However, his political fortunes prevented him personally achieving this and, in 1318, he was exiled from Padua. It is in this period and towards the end of his life, that he composed his *Soliloquia*, a series of religious poems that are often understood as evidence of his ultimate rejection of the classical past.

In these later works he appears to acknowledge the incompatibility of pagan and Christian literary models, resisting the vain gods [*vana numina*] of Minerva who had been so dutifully honoured in his poetry:[186]

> Flee, Calliope. Withdraw away from here, Thalia. With your muses fall back, theatrical Minerva.[187]
>
> (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 5, col. 83 C)

He denounces the value of his classical heritage in these works, writing:

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[185] Mussato, *Evidentia tragediarum Senece*, ed. Megas, p. 123.
[186] Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, pp. 160-1; Fitzgerald, *Authority and Inspiration*, p. 227. 'Forbear, muses of the nymph, and your usual sisters, it is not possible for you to extend your charm far enough' [Parcite Pierides Nymphae, solitaeque Sorores, / Non potis est vester pandere tanta lepor] (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 5, col. 82 E).
[187] [Effuge Calliope, procul hinc abscede Thalia, / Scenica cum Musis cede Minerva tuis].

> Neither Jove nor his sister-wife, Juno, are spoken about. Vain fables fall from my mind, I leave aside gods worshipped in error, and goddesses who lie down in despised posterity.[188]
>
> (Mussato, *Soliloquium* 3, col. 79 E)

However, to insist that this represents a sincere retraction of his earlier convictions would not only ignore his intensely synthetic and imitative style of writing, it would also disregard the necessary parameters of genre. His rejection of the muses and classical material is appropriate to the confessional demands of religious soliloquy and represents a final extension – as opposed to a repudiation – of his earlier poetic theory.

Just as we saw with Boethius, Mussato banishes the poetic muses from his later works because they are irrelevant to his subject matter. The sacramental, devotional, and homiletic material of these poems required a suitable guide, and Minerva's sisters are unable to assist his spiritual discourse [*sermo spiritualis*].[189] Not only Boethian, these poems are also his most explicitly Augustinian. Mussato's retraction in this context is an act of conscious imitation and an exercise in poetic self-representation not dissimilar to *De celebratione*.[190] In these poems, then, he aligns himself with the great religious poets of the past, confidently drawing a direct line of descent from the inspired words of the biblical prophets to his own poetic theology. But also, by lamenting the perennial affliction of sin for the purpose of consolation, he appears to further pursue his understanding of tragedy. The *Soliloquia* are entirely consonant with his earlier genre theory, and, by ventriloquizing a range of

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[188] [Non Jovis hic Juno soror, et narratur et uxor, / Decidit ex animo fabula vana meo: / Et cultos errore Deos omitto, Deasque / Qui cum despecta posteritate jacent].
[189] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 5, col. 82 E.
[190] Kevin Brownlee et al., 'Vernacular Literary Consciousness c.1100-c.1500: French, German and English Evidence', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages,* ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson [Cambridge, 2005] p. 441.

authoritative literary voices, serve as final assertion of the prophetic relevance of his tragic poetry.[191]

Throughout his life, Mussato consistently engaged with, and brought together, a heady mix of intellectual contexts, unsystematically populating his imagination with unique understandings of poetry that were drawn from an assortment of often conflicting, incomplete, and allusive source materials. The result is a bricolage of different viewpoints that connect in often confused and conflicting ways to form his body of work. However, it is this rampant intellectual eclecticism that makes him interesting to the development of poetic theory in the period. His efforts toward the reconciliation of classical and Christian theories of inspired speech are a novel intervention that influenced subsequent claims for the theological authority of the poet.

By defining poetry as a divine art, he sought to bestow upon the poet the sacred privileges of prophet and priest. As a *vates*, the poet was an autonomous interpreter and maker of holy texts, who, through the skilled composition of verse, could console audiences and move them to divine contemplation so that they, in turn, might produce their own inspired works. Poetry was a self-sustaining source of authority equal to that of Scripture. Through its music, it communicated the divine truths of a universal revelation independent from its material content. Poetic theology was not a blunt instrument of doctrine, it was the deep rhythms of the cosmos distilled through the sublime beauty and mathematical perfection of literary images and music, which bypassed the rational consciousness to speak divine words directly to the soul.

[191] Mussato, *Soliloquium* 5, col. 82 E.

Chapter 3

The Dark Matter of Poetry and the *Confessio amantis*

I

In his Middle English translation of Giles of Rome's OSA (d. 1316) political treatise, *De regimine principum*, John Trevisa (d. 1402) writes:

> [A]nd it is eseid moral mater (þat is to say þis derke mater) suffreth nouht sotil serchyng, but it is [of] syngulers doyngs þat ben ful vncerteyne, for þei ben ful changeable and varyant.[1]

Following his source, Trevisa sets out what he calls the *derke work* of Aristotelian moral philosophy, explaining that because individual conduct was contingent on the variability of circumstance, the exact moral requirements for right action were uncertain and singular, and could not be discovered through the *sotil resons* and *demonstracions* of *speculatif sciens*.[2] Instead, moral instruction was to proceed through types, figures, and likenesses, which were 'rude and boystous' [*simplex et grossus*], because it was through the simplicity of plain language that *sencible* and *felyng resons* could more persuasively inform the affections [*affectus*] of an audience and direct their will toward good.[3]

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[1] John Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, ed. David D. Fowler et al. (New York, 1997) p. 6, ll. 19-21.

[2] Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, p. 6, l. 42. Trevisa's use of the term *sotil* suggests a particular attitude toward scholastic thinking. The word had accrued a distinctive charge, often being put to use by anti-clerical writers to denote academic obfuscation and dissimulation, Kantik Ghosh, *Wycliffite Heresy* (Cambridge, 2002) p. 243, n.19; John E. Murdoch, '*Subtilitates Anglicanae* in Fourteenth-Century Paris: John of Mirecourt and Peter Ceffons', *Machaut's World: Science and Art in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Madeleine P. Cosman and Bruce Chandler, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 314 (1978) pp. 51-88.

[3] Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, p. 6, ll. 8-9; p. 7, ll. 5, 30-31.

Rather than prescribe transferable models of behaviour for specific instances, this figurative style of discourse presented paradigmatic examples – *euydens* and *prueves* – that anticipated a kind of ethical probability and provoked a deliberative response that Aristotle called 'rhetorical induction'.[4] Through the extended analysis of narrative exempla, rhetorical induction worked to influence the appetite of the will and cultivate within the reader a practical knowledge of what to desire and what to avoid.[5] However, this process was neither effortless, nor did it offer a guaranteed outcome. The imaginative internalization of exemplary material could just as easily yield positive psychological results as produce undesirable behaviour. Success depended on the reader being adequately equipped to navigate the interpretative complexity of figurative texts and being able to determine the utility of their meaning. In order to undertake the dark work of moral enquiry, it was necessary to unite the skills of literary exegesis with the hard introspective work of self-analysis.

These literary-theoretical principles had important consequences for the perceived nature and function of poetry, and were central to the poetic theory developed by John Gower (d. 1408) in his long Middle English poem, the *Confessio amantis*. For Gower, the work of writers like Giles of Rome served as influential ethical and rhetorical resources that passed down the deep learning of scholasticism, connecting his project to the thirteenth-century reception of Aristotle and the emergent poetic theories of the period. Writing in late fourteenth-century London,

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[4] Ibid, p. 7, ll. 9, 11; Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (Oxford, 1991) 1.2.8, 1356b; 1.3, 1094b21; 2.2, 1104a3-7. See William Lyon Benoit, 'Aristotle's Example: The Rhetorical Induction', *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 66 (1980) p. 188. The *Rhetoric* includes 'a digest of books I-IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, merging the two disciplines in Aristotle' (Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* [Berkeley, 1988] p. 73).

[5] For Aristotle, this case-based reasoning develops the virtue of prudence, which is described as a practical intelligence that deals with contingency of particulars 'since it is concerned with action and action is about particulars' (*Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins [Chicago, 2011] 1.7, 1096b25). Cf. Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, 1921) 1.53.153.

Gower conceives of his poetry, like the great humanists before him, as a Christian extension of the classical past, and as having the clear civic duty to deliver a much needed nostrum to a period of restless uncertainty.

An anthology of tales produced for 'Engelondes sake', the *Confessio* appears committed to the rhetorical strategies of moral philosophy, identifying itself as a repository of *wise consail*, which brought together a diverse range of narrative *ensamples* and *evidences* for the purpose of comparative evaluation.[6] But also, within the tales and through the confessional shrift of his fictional proxy, Amans, Gower considers the difficulties attending the moral appraisal and personal application of literary texts, producing a poem that appears pre-eminently concerned with how it should – and should not – be read. It was not only a resource for moral reading, it also dramatized the exegetical dilemmas facing the moral reader.

II

In the final book of the *Confessio* we hear Amans describe the uncertain knowledge of right action in distinctly Trevisian and Aristotelian terms. When reflecting on how to best resolve his romantic situation, he laments that 'this matiere is derk'.[7] Dissatisfied with his prolonged state of incertitude, he questions the effectiveness of

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[6] John Gower, *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell Peck, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, 2000-3) Pro. 24, all references to the *Confessio* are from this edition, henceforth CA. See also, J. Allen Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge, 2004) p. 65. Simpson has considered the 'deeply planted structural incongruities' of the *Confessio* as working toward a singular and coherent resolution; the successful psychic integration of Genius and Amans represents the reconciliation of the rule of self and the rule of the state, uniting the erotic and political domains of the poem (James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio amantis* (Cambridge, 1995) pp. 138, 181-2. However, as Hugh White has suggested, Gower appears 'more impressed with the tendency of things to fall out of always precarious harmonies and balances than with their capacities to achieve these' (*Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* [Oxford, 2000] p. 203). Likewise, Russell Peck notes, that it is 'a poem best understood as a sequence of queries rather than an anthology of answers' (*Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, 'Introduction', p. 18).

[7] CA, 8.2054.

exemplary lessons, before insisting on a more singular and conclusive mode of instruction, demanding his Confessor explicitly *teche* what he must do to achieve his *beste ende*.[8] It is a moment of profound misunderstanding – one of many in the *Confessio* – as Amans expects to discover the correct response to his circumstance in the easily transferable form of precept or injunction.[9]

However, as Genius explains, moral truth could only be taught through analogy and inference – in types, figures, and likenesses – and, as such, first required an active response of assessment:

> For I can do to thee no more
> Bot teche thee the rihte weie:
> Now ches if thou wolt live or deie.
>
> (CA, 8.2146-8)

Genius could only teach the *weie* – the method – with which to determine the singular content of good conduct, because, as Giles says, 'moral dede falleth nouȝt complet, þat is to say fullich, vnder tales'.[10] The success or failure – the life or death – of Amans' amorous pursuit was a *syngulers doyngs* and could only be resolved through the applied interpretation of past cases, narratives, and examples. It was impossible, Gower explains, echoing Trevisa's own words, 'to tellen every man his tale'.[11]

It is for this reason that he exhorts his reader to do everything with an abundance of counsel:[12]

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[8] CA, 8.2058-9. 'Amans seeks a final conclusion from the counsel of the Confessor' [*Confessio Amantis vnde pro finali conclusione consilium Confessoris impetrat*] (CA, 8.2030 ff.).
[9] William Robins, 'Romance, Exemplum, and the Subject of the *Confessio Amantis*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997) pp. 157-81.
[10] Trevisa, *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, p. 6, l. 10.
[11] CA, Pro. 81-2. That the outcome of Amans' lovesickness is a matter of life and death recalls Song of Solomon 8:6, 'For love is as strong as death'.
[12] 'Solomon: 'Do all things with counsel'' [Salomon. Omnia fac cum consilio] (CA, Pro. 156).

> For good consail is good to hiere.
>
> Althogh a man be wys himselve,
>
> Yit is the wisdom more of tuelve.
>
> (CA, Pro. 156-8)

This simple aphorism sets out the *rihte weie* to investigate moral truth and represents the governing principle of the poem. For Gower, the effective ruling of the self – and the state – was to be achieved through the protracted comparison of alternative viewpoints, that is, with 'consail on alle sides'.[13] The radical inclusivity of this moral vision – which appears to reach toward the divine vantage, as it is only God from 'whom no consail may ben hid' – involved the inductive assessment of competing truth-claims.[14] Thus, the poetry of the *Confessio* does not deliver a singular or coherent ethical epistemology. It is not an inert cache of exegetical norms or protreptic moralizations. Instead, it provides a polyvocal collection of dissimilar narratives and ethical perspectives that seek to address the contingency of moral knowledge by eliciting a response of judgement and of self-reflection.[15]

The wisdom offered in the *Confessio* is presented as the knowledge of the unknowability of moral truth and right action.[16] Gower connects the *wyse man* who understands how to use the text – his ideal reader – with the *wyse man* who understands [*underfongeth*] that because of the capriciousness of 'the fortune of this worldes chance', 'the sothe can no wisdom caste'.[17] To understand the *Confessio*, and the role of moral poetry more generally, is to understand its provisionality. In a 'world which neweth every dai' like dice cast by the hand of chance, a place where the

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[13] CA, Pro. 146.
[14] CA, Pro. 181.
[15] CA, Pro. 181; Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 65.
[16] CA, Pro. 47.
[17] CA, Pro. 70, 1.40; Alastair Minnis, ''Moral Gower' and Medieval Literary Theory' *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. idem (Cambridge, 1983) p. 55.

'certain noman knoweth', the *avisement* of the 'wyse man' can only subsist in a relative configuration of potentialities, figurative examples, and possible truths.[18] Any kind of coherence of meaning must occur beyond the page and within the reader.

Gower is certainly alert to the equivocating effect of a reader's response on his work, explaining that his poem sought to involve its audience in the creation of meaning:

> In som partie it mai by take
> As for to lawhe and for to pleye;
> And for to looke in other weye,
> It mai be wisdom to the wise,
> So that somdel for good apprise
> And eek somdel for lust and game
> I have it mad …
>
> (CA, 8.3056-62*)

While the circular sententiousness of the passage describes the poem as offering wisdom to the wise, its latitudinal epistemology is what is most striking. Building on the twin Horatian precepts of poetic delight and utility, Gower explains that the poem was *mad* to tolerate a range of possible responses. The meaning that the reader was to extract from the text – whether *lawhe* or *pleye*, *good* or *game* – was dependent upon their perspective, a subjective vision relative to the individual and their circumstance, which could just as easily yield something different if they were to 'looke in other weye'. That the reader was unavoidably complicit in the generation of literary value plays out a type of perspectival relativism described by Boethius:

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[18] CA, Pro. 59, 1400. 'The world is reversed in its outcomes as a tossed die, as quickly as the covetous hands throws at the games' [Mundus in euentu versatur ut alea casu, / Quam celer in ludis iactat auara manus] (CA, Pro. v).

> Alle thing that is iwist nis nat knowen by his nature propre, but by the nature of hem that comprehenden it.[19]

In a similar way, recognizing that the capabilities, prejudices, and needs of the individual unavoidably influenced their faculties of perception, Gower instructs his reader to 'take that him thenketh good, / And leve that which is not so'.[20]

Refusing to surrender any sure point of reference to the reader, Gower works hard to consistently efface the certainty and comforting presence of authorial control. From the very beginning of the poem he denies his audience the luxury of formal orientation, proposing to:[21]

> … go the middel weie
>
> And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
>
> Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore.
>
> (CA, Pro. 17-19)

While the *via media* of these lines may signal Gower's regard for the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, it also serves to enclose his text within an amorphous set of textual parameters.[22] Neither entirely of *lust* nor entirely of *lore*, but somewhere *betwen the tweie*, the content and limits of his poem remain undifferentiated and open to the protean and intractable responses of its audience. The poetry of the *Confessio*,

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[19] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, et al. (Boston, 1987) *Boece*, 5 pr. 6.27-4. All references to Chaucer's work from this edition. Although the *Consolatio* was somewhat ubiquitous, the extent to which Gower was familiar with it is questionable.

[20] CA, 8.260-1. Cf. Chaucer, *Nun's Priest's Tale*, l. 3443; Derek Pearsall, 'The Gower Tradition', *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair Minnis (Cambridge, 1983) pp. 179-97.

[21] Cf. the disorientating effects of the twin Aristotelian prologues and their conflicting objectives, material, and epistemology, discussed below.

[22] Genius describes Aristotle's ideal of virtue as the intermediate point between the extremities of vice: 'And thus betwen tomoche and lyte / Largesce … / Halt evere forth the middel weie' (CA, 5.7689-91; 7.2014-18). See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.7, 1107b; 3.12, 1119b20; 4.3, 1123b. Robert Grosseteste rendered this as *medietas est virtus* (*Aristoteles Latinus, Ethica Nicomachea,* XXVI, fasc. 4, ed. R. A. Gauthier [Leiden-Brussels, 1973] II.6, 07a5).

then, was not bound to a prescribed value, but had been *mad* to stimulate the free and shifting judgement of the reader. As we will see, Gower was far less interested in enforcing a single hermeneutic agenda than he was in exploring the unpredictable and multiform ways literary material worked to impact the internal life and moral habits of an individual.

Despite assuming the familiar moral and public responsibilities of the poet, he departs from established models of authorship. Gower abandons the radical confidence of the earlier humanist writers, who had esteemed their own literary and theological authority, in order to adopt a distinctly sceptical view of the power of poetic discourse. Although he demonstrates a strong belief in the transformative potential and moral benefit of his art, he appears equally suspicious of its ability to achieve anything with any certainty. That poetry could be both paralytically futile and morally valuable represents an important self-ironizing tension that drives the *Confessio* forward and, as we will see, is typical of Gower's desire to thoroughly excise all interpretative stability from his poem. Because the poetic experience represented a crisis of certainty for the reader, there was the very real – and necessary – danger that the dark matter of poetry might remain entirely impenetrable.

This chapter will continue by considering the various ways in which Gower works to disrupt the continuity of meaning within his work. It will examine his attempts to produce a stridently pluralistic text and his desire to involve the reader in an inductive response of comparative analysis. It will then look at his psychology of reading and consider how he saw poetry effecting the complex set of internal faculties of the reader. Important to this process is the role of poetic evidence as it relates to self-reflection and the expansion of self-knowledge. We will then be able to more precisely consider what Gower thought poetry was, what it did, and how it differed

from other modes of expression. In the examination of these issues, what we find is a paradoxical medium with the power to influence the moral life of its reader. One that was clear and obscure, open and closed, prized and mistrusted.

III

Throughout the *Confessio*, Gower mobilizes a range of discursive strategies in service of his poetic vision, aspiring to produce a multivalent text which, through its emphatic heterogeneity, worked to frustrate the recovery of certain knowledge. As we will see in these next sections, his linguistic techniques, self-commentary, and encyclopedism all served as mechanisms for the proliferation of voices, perspectives, and meanings. By displacing the hermeneutic centre of his poem, Gower affirms the interpretative powers of the reader, developing a model of poetry that privileged authorial evasiveness and semantic ambiguity.

Underlying Gower's poetic theory are the structural and pedagogic systems of the *compilatio*.[23] In the introduction to his influential encyclopedia, the *Speculum maius*, Vincent of Beauvais OP (d. 1264) sets out a method that resonates with Gower's own organizing principles and moral philosophy:[24]

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[23] Malcolm Parkes, 'The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book', *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays presented to R. W. Hunt*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford, 1975) pp. 115-41; Alastair Minnis 'Late-Medieval Discussions of *Compilatio* and the Role of the *Compilator*', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 101 (1979) pp. 285-41; idem, '*Nolens Auctor sed Compilator Reputari*: The Late Medieval Discourse of Compilation', *La méthode critique au Moyen Age*, ed. Mireille Chazan and Gilbert Dahan (Turnhout, 2008) pp. 47-63. Gower repeatedly tells us that his stories are found in, and compiled from, historical texts: 'I find ensample in Cronique' (CA, 1.759), 'I finde in the bokes write' (CA, 1.2458), 'Among the bokes of latin / I finde write' (CA, 1.1387-8), 'In a Cronique as it is write, / A gret ensample thou myht fynde' (1.1405-6), 'Ovide telleth in his bok' (CA, 1.333), 'In Metamore it telleth thus' (1.389), etc.. Moreover, Genius is described as one of those 'who these olde bokes rede / Of suche ensamples' (CA, 2.2140-1).

[24] Although the extent to which Gower was familiar with the encyclopedias of Vincent of Beauvais is difficult to measure, these works appear to have been known to Chaucer, see Pauline Aiken, 'Vincent of Beauvais and Dame Pertelote's Knowledge of Medicine', *Speculum* 10 (1935) pp. 281-7; 'The Summoner's Malady', *Studies in Philology* 23 (1936)

> [I] have not undertaken the huge task of bringing the statements of the philosophers into concord with each other, but rather I repeat whatever any one of them thought or wrote concerning any given thing, leaving it to the judgement of the reader [*lectoris arbitrio*] which opinion he should accept.[25]

Vincent's allegedly dispassionate anthologizing recalls Gower's own practices and desires. Indeed, this kind of writing, which encouraged the individual assessment of conflicting material, had a rich intellectual and academic history.[26]

Already in the twelfth century, Peter Abelard (d. 1142) had explained that many notable writers, including himself, compiled the unresolved sayings of others in order to provoke the judgement of the reader [*lectoris arbitrium*].[27] This was because considering contrary viewpoints would

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pp. 40-44; 'Chaucer's Legend of Cleopatra and the *Speculum historiale*', *Speculum* 23 (1938) pp. 232-36; 'Vincent of Beauvais and the Green Yeoman's Lecture on Demonology', *Studies in Philology* 35 (1938) pp. 1-9; 'Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Monk's Tale', *Speculum* 17 (1942) pp. 56-68; 'Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy', *Studies in Philology* 41 (1944) pp. 371-89.

[25] [Et ego quidem non ignoro philosophos inter se multa dixisse contraria … lectorem admoneo, ne forsan abhorreat, si quas hujusmodi contrarietates sub diversorum actorum nominibus in plerisque locis hujus operis insertas inveniat … non magno opere laborasse, dicta philosophorum ad concordiam redigere, sed tamen quid de unaquaque re quilibet eorum senserit aut scripserit, recitare, lectoris arbitrio relinquendo, cujus sententie potius debeat adherere] (Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, ed. 'Geschichtsbetrachtung bei Vincenz von Beauvais: Die 'Apologia Actoris' zum *Speculum Maius*', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 34 [1978] chp. 8). For an earlier version of the *Libellus apologeticus* see: Serge Lusignan, ed. *Préface au 'Speculum maius' de Vincent de Beauvais: Réfraction et diffraction,* Cahiers d'études médiévales 5 (Paris, 1979).

[26] Minnis, '*Nolens Auctor sed Compilator Reputari*', pp. 47-63

[27] Peter Abelard, *Sic et non: A Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago, 1977) Pro. 94; translation in Alastair Minnis and Brian Scott, ed., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375: The Commentary Tradition* (Oxford, 1988) p. 90. Minnis and Scott's translation of *arbitrium* as 'discretion' is not unproblematic. The medieval *discretio* appears to have had its own set of associations, see Mary E. Ingham, 'Discretio', *Mots Médiévaux Offerts Ruedi Imbach*, ed. Iñigo Atucha, Dragos Calma, Catherine König-Pralong, and I. Zavattero, Textes et études du moyen âge 57 (Turnhout, 2011) pp. 211-19. I use the more literal translation, 'the judgement of the reader'. It is an exegetical process similarly suggested in the long Wycliffite commentary to Luke, which reads: 'It is reserued to þe dome of þe redere to whiche of þes sentences it is raþere to assente, for euereiþer sentense haþ wise men and religious maynteneris eþere defenderis' (Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk. 2.9 f. 207 va-b).

> Encourage inexperienced readers to engage in that most important exercise, enquiry into the truth, and as a result of that enquiry give an edge to their critical faculty. For consistent or frequent questioning is defined as the first key to wisdom … by doubting we come to enquiry, and by enquiry we perceive the truth.[28]

Although Gower may not have been intimately familiar with these specific passages, their heuristic objectives are nonetheless played out in his theory of poetic function, and he appears purposeful in associating his work with the textual procedures and ambitions of encyclopedic writing.

He explains that, like the tradition of books 'wherof the world ensampled is', his work was studiously compiled [*compilauit*] from a range of competing sources, like a honeycomb gathered from various flowers.[29] Assuming the conveniently liminal status of the compiler, he locates his text in the shadowy borderlands of recreation and repetition, purporting to 'wryte of newe som matiere, / Essampled of

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[28] [Quae teneros lectores ad maximum inquirendae ueritatis exercitium prouocent et acutiores ex inquisitione reddant. Haec quippe prima sapientiae clauis definitur assidua scilicet seu frequens interrogatio … dubitando quippe ad inquisitionem uenimus; inquirendo ueritatem percipimus] (Abelard, *Sic et Non*, ed. Boyer and McKeon, Pro. 103-4; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 333).

[29] CA, Pro. 47, 22 ff. The *ex floribus recollectum* formulation was a common expression for the compiling of texts, Gower's use of the apian metaphor closely follows one of his encyclopedic sources, Brunetto Latini, who writes: '[This book] is *like a honeycomb gathered from diverse flowers*, for [it] is compiled [*compilés*] solely from the marvellous sayings of authors who before our time had treated of philosophy, each according to the part of it that he knew; for no earthly man can know it all' [{Cist livres} est autressi comme une bresce de miel ceuillie de diverse flors; car cist livre est compilés seulement de merveilleus diz autors qui devant notre tens ont traité de philosophie chascuns selonc ce qu'il en savoit partie; car toute ne la peuvent savoir homme terrien] (Brunetto Latini, *Li livres dou trésor*, ed. Francis Carmody (Berkley, 1948) p. 327. Translation in, Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages,* 2nd ed. [Philadelphia, 2009] p. 192). This imagery is classical in origin, Seneca writes: 'We should follow, they say, the example of bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for making honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in' [Apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari, quae vagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quicquid attulere, disponunt ac per favos digerunt et] (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae morales*, ed. and trans. Richard Gummere [London, 1962-67] 2:276).

these olde wyse'.[30] The indefinite admixture of old and new material was an important feature of both poetic and encyclopedic texts throughout the period. In his Middle English translation of Ralph Higden's (d. 1364) *Polychronicon*, Trevisa defines the work in similarly uncertain terms as partly his own and partly that of the *old wrtynges* of the *auctores*:[31]

> And þo I take it of oþer menis, I clepe þis storie myn; and for þat I write oþer whiles myn owne wordes and sentens of olde men.[32]

The liberating ambiguity of this kind of process no doubt appealed to Gower as it allowed him to further embed his text within an esteemed mode of writing that generated incertitude, denying his reader important coordinates with which to navigate the content of his poem.[33] We are left to determine for ourselves to what extent something was old or new, what had the authority of the *antiqui* and the novelty of the *moderni*. Rather than being given answers, we are left with questions.

This uncertainty is integral to the structure of the poem's introduction. Gower appears to announce his poem by means of extrinsic and intrinsic prologues, a scholastic practice that was popular with compilers, which served as a means of

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[30] CA, Pro. 6-7.

[31] Ralph Higden, *Polychronicon, with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, 9 vols. (London, 1865-86) I.11-2. See also Macrobius who explains that his work is 'sometimes set out plainly in my own words and sometimes faithfully in the actual words of old writers' [Modo nostris non obscure modo ipsis antiquorum fideliter verbis] (*Saturnalia*, ed. and trans. Robert A. Kaster [Harvard, 2011] 1.1.4). In his *Libellus apologeticus*, Vincent of Beauvais also describes his work as 'old, certainly, in its matter and authority, but new in its compilation and the joining of its parts' [Antiquum certe materia et auctoritate, novum vero compilatione et partium aggregatione] (Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, ed., 'Geschichtsbetrachtung bei Vincenz von Beauvais: Die 'Apologia Actoris' zum *Speculum Maius*', ch. 4). It is also a trope picked up by Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowles*, ll. 22-5.

[32] Higden, *Polychronicon,* trans. Trevisa, ed. Babington and Lumby, I.11-2.

[33] On the changing status of the *compilatio*, see Minnis, '*Nolens Auctor sed Compilator Reputari*', pp. 47-63; Bernard Guenée, 'L'Historien et la compilation au XIII^{e} siécle', *Journal des savants* (1985) p. 124.

classifying a text before introducing the writer's intention and methodology.[34] Thus, in an allusion to the conventional classification of poetry – *ethicae subponitur* – Gower tells us that his poem 'to wisdom al belongeth', before narrowing his focus in the intrinsic prologue to the examination of a specific branch of that science, human love.[35] However, the shifting perspectives of the double prologue only destabilize the teleology of his poem and serve to multiply within the text competing accounts of the nature of reality.

We are initially offered a Boethian vision of human agency, where

> … man is overal
>
> His oghne cause of wel and wo.
>
> That we fortune clepe so
>
> Out of the man himself it groweth.[36]

(CA, Pro. 546-9)

Here individual fortune is presented as a profitable ratio of effort and reward where all prosperity and adversity can be derived from 'the merits and demerits of man'.[37] If there are moments in the extrinsic prologue that push against this position, they are nowhere as clear as in the intrinsic prologue where all hope for certainty and individual agency is obliterated by the dominant capriciousness of the *Principis mundi — amor*.

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[34] This system works to locate the opening prologue within the Aristotelian hierarchy of sciences, which is 'followed by an 'intrinsic' prologue in which [the] *intentio* and *modus procedendi* were discussed' (Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 177-81); Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 140-57.

[35] CA, Pro. 67. See also, Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, p. 140; idem, 'Ironic Incongruence in the Prologue and Book I of Gower's Confessio Amantis', *Neophilologus* 72 (1988) pp. 618-19.

[36] On this, see Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Classical and Boethian Tradition in the Confessio Amantis', *Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge, 2004) pp. 187-90.

[37] [Secundum merita et demerita hominum] (Pro. 429-43 ff.).

In contrast to Gower's initial statement of belief, the second prologue describes the forces of *amor et fortuna* as co-conspirators in the continuance of earthly instability, working to 'turn blind wheels to entrap man' [*que cecas / plebis ad insidias vertit vterque rotas*].[38] 'Love is maister wher he wile', Gower writes, 'can no man him reule, / For loves lawe is out of reule'.[39] In contradistinction to his previous claims, he locates the causation and governance of individual fortune, not within the aegis of man, but in the mercurial personage of the queen of love herself, Venus, 'sche that is the source and welle / Of wel or wo'.[40] Whatever else may be happening here, it remains a jarring contrast of ideas, which, through the phrasal connector of *wel* and *wo*, directs the reader to compare both models of human agency, and question the perspective and character of the narrating voice in both accounts. Indeed, the precise relationship between the opening prologue and the material that it precedes – between the political and erotic interests of the poem – is largely unclear and any connection is left to be made in light of the reader's own judgement.[41]

IV

Despite its ostensible purpose, Gower's Latin apparatus – his marginal glosses, commentary, and head-verses – offer the reader little navigational help here.[42] Often

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[38] CA, 1.i.
[39] CA, 1.32, 18-19. This appears Boethian in origin: 'Who can give lovers laws? Love is a greater law unto itself [Quis legem det amantibus? / Maior lex amor est sibi] (Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand [Cambridge, 1918] 3.12.47-48).
[40] CA, 1.148-9.
[41] James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 281-2.
[42] On Gower's self-glossing see Sian Echard, 'With Carmen's Help: Latin Authorities in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Studies in Philology* 95.1 (1998) pp. 6-7; Derek Pearsall, 'Gower's Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. Alastair Minnis (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 13-25. Robert Yeager summarizes the critical consensus of Kate Harris, Peter Nicholson, Jeremy Griffiths, and Derek Pearsall, stating: '[They] appear content that Gower composed marginal glosses for his own poems'

viewed as a means of constraining the subversive freight of the vernacular, Gower's Latin has been seen as a stabilizing fixative, working to rein in the innovative excesses and slipperiness of his Middle English verse.[43] In this context, it has been considered a means of auto-exegesis that sought to marshal the authority of academic discourse and impose onto his poem a system of interpretative control.[44] However, such claims largely assume that Latin was secure in its authoritative status.[45] As we will see, Gower appears to problematize these hegemonic assumptions and, instead of creating a stable hermeneutic framework, his Latin apparatus serves to further impede the efforts of readers to wrest singular meaning from the poem.[46]

Rather than a hierarchy of language and form, with the Middle English subordinate to the Latin head-verse and gloss, what we find on Gower's page is a range of voices attempting to relate a single textual moment, speaking from different vantages, often agreeing, but often not.[47] An example of this is the familiar

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('English, Latin, and the Text as 'Other': The Page as Sign in the Work of John Gower', *Text* 3 [1987] p. 255).

[43] Pearsall, 'Gower's Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*', pp. 14, 18.

[44] Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1991) p. 203. This is in contrast with Larry Scanlon who sees the vernacular as the authoritative gloss to the Latin (*Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* [Cambridge, 1994] p. 247. Minnis suggests the commentary offered 'a final signified' but was ineffective, '*De Vulgari Auctoritate:* Chaucer, Gower, and the Men of Great Authority', *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. Robert Yeager, (Victoria, 1991) p. 65.

[45] According to Rita Copeland, Latin functions as a self-authorizing mechanism, which, within 'the protective enclosure of the academy … sustain[ed] the institutional power of the academic tradition' (*Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, p. 182).

[46] Echard, 'With Carmen's Help: Latin Authorities in the *Confessio Amantis*', p. 7. See also Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Latin Structure and Vernacular Space: Gower, Chaucer and the Boethian Tradition', *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. Robert Yeager (Victoria, 1991) p. 10, where he suggests the complex 'interplay between vernacular text and Latin apparatus becomes in many respects a substitute for the traditional Boethian dialogue'. Gower himself suggests that both languages were necessary for discovery of truth: 'In Latin tunge it rede and singe, / Yit for the more knoulechinge / Of trouthe, which is good to wite, / I schal declare as it is write / In Engleissh' (CA, 6.981-5).

[47] On glossing as means of 'textual harassment' see Robert W. Hanning, ''I Shall Fine It in a Maner Glose': Versions of Textual Harassment in Medieval Literature', *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca, 1987) p. 27, where he refers to the 'forcible imposition' of meaning through the gloss in the figures of

Augustinian Tale of Alexander and the Pirate. In this short narrative an aspiring despot – a 'rovere of the see' – is made to publicly defend his crimes before his captor, Alexander the Great.[48] The commentary restates the thief's persuasive defence of his actions, giving us the same direct speech in two ways, once from the margin and once from the centre of the page, in prose and in verse, in Latin and in the vernacular.[49] The linguistic and formal differences contravene a single reading of his address and, while important details remain, both accounts offer a fundamentally different record of exactly what was said.

Significantly, the tale itself explores the relativity of language and meaning. In both the text and gloss, we hear the thief argue that although he shared the same intention and actions as Alexander, he had been made to *beren* 'the name of pilour and of thief' and Alexander had been given the name *Emperour*. So what was in a name? Not much, according to the thief, he is only 'at meschief' according to those 'who seith' he is.[50] If his deeds were observed from another viewpoint, by another group, they might be extolled, and he might be assigned a radically different title. The thief functions as a type of metaphor for the approximate nature of language, describing himself according to the ornaments of rhetoric, stating that his actions and intent were the same in *colour* and *effect* as Alexander.[51] Because they shared the

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Criseyde and Alisoun of Bath. He contends that the practice of glossing is personified (pp. 40, 50). Similarly, Peggy A. Knapp considers Jankyn's 'glosyng' of Alisoun as an effort to impose his own idea of women onto his wife (''Wandrynge by the Weye:' On Alisoun and Augustine', *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman [Ithaca, 1987] pp. 142-57). This kind of gendered reading of the feminine text was significant literary trope not only for both Chaucer and Gower, but throughout the period more generally, see the discussion on Margery Kempe in Chapter 4.

[48] CA, 3.2368.

[49] Yeager, 'Oure English', p. 47.

[50] CA, 3.2387.

[51] J. J. Murphy, 'The Arts of Poetry and Prose', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2, The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge, 2005) p. 46, n. 4. That the thief *bore* his name certainly suggests the duties of a messenger of letters; later on we hear Amans implore Genius 'mi lettre *bere* unto the queene' (CA, 8.2209; MED *Beren* 1

same intention, the same value of meaning, and were part of the same rhetorical category, they should be identified in equal terms.

These tensions play out in the competing versions of the thief's address. That we are given two different perspectives on the same speech is suggested in the way the gloss alters or excises vernacular material. The thief's opening statement – 'I have an herte lich to thin' – is conspicuously found at the end of the gloss ('we have the same heart').[52] What we see in the margin is an inverted version of the speech, a mirror image of its likeness, which makes it difficult to determine the accurate record from its rhetorical re-invention — the *ordo naturalis* from the *ordo artificialis*. The gloss provides the reader with a different way of seeing the speech, effectively allowing us to 'look in the other way' and find a different rhetorical account of the same moment.[53]

By eliding and condensing his material in the gloss, and expanding it in the verse, Gower engages the conventions of *abbreviatio* and *amplificatio*. According to the *ars poetria*, the poet had a somewhat limited choice between two rhetorical procedures when setting out their work: they could either discuss their subject at length by making innovative elaborations, or they could treat it as briefly as

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e). In this respect the thief is made both the message and messenger. Furthermore, within the Boethian *ordo ordandi*, the thief looks like the spoken word [*voces*], which articulates things [res] and concepts [*intellectus*] and, when he is named, he becomes the written word [*scripta*]. Boethius' order of speaking seeks to explain the direction of signification: *scripta* signifies *voces*, and *voces* signifies *res* and *intellectus*. The written word, then, is the final point in the chain of meaning, and perhaps, Gower would say, the most vulnerable to misinterpretation (John Magee, *Boethius on Signification and Mind* [Leiden, 1989] pp. 64-92).

[52] CA, 8.2381, 2366 ff. The translation of *animus* as heart is suggested by the context of the statement which involves the shared *will* of the thief and Alexander. On the relationship between the heart and the will, see below for the discussion on the psychology of reading.

[53] An interesting analogue here is the prologue to the commentary on Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the writer, probably Bernard Silvester (d. 1178), sought to generate new allegorical meanings by reading the poem according to both the *ordo naturalis* and *ordo artificialis* (Bernard Silvester [*dubium*], *Commentum super sex libros Eneidos Virgilii*, ed. J. W. and E. F. Jones (Lincoln, 1979); E. G. Schreiber and T. E. Maresca, trans., *Commentary on the First Six Books of Vergil's 'Aeneid'* (Lincoln, 1977); Rita Copeland, 'Rhetoric and Literary Criticism', *The Oxford Handbook of Rhetorical Studies*, ed. Michael J. MacDonald [Oxford, 2017] p. 344).

possible.[54] Gower offers the reader both approaches. While the thief spends six lines of verse repetitiously describing the economic and social differences between himself and Alexander, Gower has him say in the gloss: 'Your estate differs to my estate'.[55] What we find is that both rhetorical strategies offered a unique account of the speech that were necessary for a balanced evaluation of its content. Not one single perspective had all the information or dispensed that information in necessarily the best way. Indeed, the thief's hortatory coda, which the gloss notably excludes, argues for just this kind of judicial assessment.

The thief's peroration makes a final appeal to Alexander: 'Forthi let rihtwisnesse / be peised evene in the balance'.[56] This is not just a call for fair judgement, it invokes a process of measured consideration, with *peisen* connoting a reflective and deliberative state of contemplation.[57] Alexander is urged to weigh the moral integrity of the thief evenly, balancing the name with its subject to insure a reliable connection of meaning. He should not, in other words, imitate Nebuchadnezzar who 'hath his word unpeysed / And handeleth onwrong every thing'.[58] As a reader, Alexander must look beyond the surface of the received word to ensure that it coheres with the intent and moral effect of its significance. It is, of course, the same process that the reader of the tale is encouraged to pursue as they are

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[54] These stylistic principles represented a fork in the poetic road [*in brivio*], and were almost always – from the start of the thirteenth century on – coupled together as contrasting methods for developing material (Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton, 2013] pp. 487-94).
[55] CA, 3.2396-402; [Quod status tuus a statu meo differt] (CA, 3.2366 ff.).
[56] Helen Cooper, ''Peised Evene in the Balance': A Thematic and Rhetorical Topos in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993) pp. 113-39. *Rihtwisnesse* has range of meaning and could be glossed as 'justice', but more likely describes something closer to moral virtue or righteousness. The later certainly resonates with the thief's interest in defining his moral action in positive terms (MED *right-wīsnes* 2 a. b).
[57] MED *peisen* 4.a.
[58] CA, *Pro. 56.

made to navigate the formal, linguistic, and narrative discrepancies of the gloss and text, and independently *peise* their meaning.

The reader is further caught up in Gower's linguistic games in his pervasive *rime rich* — the rhyming of homophones.[59] While he puts this technique to various thematic ends, the dominant effect is one of disorientation, as the repetition of sound, but not of sense, consistently forces the reader to re-examine the relationship between a word and its meaning. Directly after the thief's speech, Genius introduces Alexander's response, explaining that the king had 'herde hise wordes *wise*, / And seide unto him in this *wise* [manner] …'.[60] There is an obvious punning connection between *wordes wise* and the *rime rich*, and the material of the tale: the thief's wise words reflect the slipperiness of language, just as the *rime rich* enacts the double nature of words, performing for the reader the ambiguity of language. Despite its often clunky self-awareness, it is a stylistic choice that helps undermine the hermeneutic stability of the poem, complicating the retrieval of meaning from the text.

V

Gower's self-commentary represents a significant exploration of the parodic limits and relativizing effects of literary criticism. He invokes the idioms and principles of the commentary tradition to stage a contest of authority between gloss and text. In Book 1 we hear the lover repeatedly declare his intent to accurately relate his own

[59] Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, *'Betwene Ernest and Game': The Literary Artistry of the Confessio Amantis* (New York, 1990) pp. 55-56; Kim Zarins, 'Rich Words: Gower's Rime Riche in Dramatic Action', *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and Robert Yeager (Cambridge, 2010) pp. 239-53.
[60] CA, 3.2405-6, emphasis added.

circumstance for the benefit of 'hem that ben lovers', presenting himself as a living ensample of love's mercurial nature:[61]

> And for to proven it is so,
>
> I am miselven on of tho,
>
> Which to this Scole am underfonge
>
> (CA, 1.61-3)

The lover claims a privileged authority through the education of his experience: he is proof of the true nature of reality. Arguing that his *rede* [advice] is made 'in good feith', he explains that he will speak his case honestly:[62]

> Touchende of love and his fortune
>
> The which me liketh to comune
>
> And pleinly for to telle it oute.
>
> … and therfore I
>
> Woll wryte and schewe al openly
>
> How love and I togedre mette.
>
> (CA, 1.69-85)

This passage is an assertion of the veracity, reliability, and fidelity of his writing. The lover's repeated appeal to plainness and openness, terms that had accrued significance within the context of scriptural translation to infer lucidity and authenticity, suggest a total absence of dissimulation in his poem.[63] We will also recall the principles of Giles' inductive rhetoric where plain language and paradigmatic proof were important tools for discovering moral truth. While we will

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[61] CA, Pro. 72.
[62] CA, 1.77-8.
[63] For example, the refrain of the prologue to the Wycliffite Bible: 'I haue translatid as opinli or opinliere in English as in Latyn' (Anne Hudson, ed. *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* [Toronto, 1997] p. 69).

consider the significance of evidence-based rhetoric and plain speech later, it is sufficient to observe here that the lover claims a substantial moral and rhetorical authority as a witness to the material of his poem.

However, the gloss attending this passage rapidly deflates any equity the lover had accrued, exposing the poem's fictive machinery:

> Here, as though in the person of others [*in persona aliorum*], whom love has bound, the author represents himself to be a lover, [and] he proposes to write [about] their various passions, one by one, in the various sections of this book.[64]
>
> (CA, 1.60 ff.)

The incongruity is palpable. The poet's repeated appeals to veracity and openness collide with the meta-disclosure of the gloss that he is not speaking *in propria persona*, but rather is communicating the passions of others and feigning [*fingens*] the afflictions of a lover.[65] By placing the gloss and text in such direct competition, Gower sought to deny his poem an authoritative centre, parodying the efforts of literary critics who would defend a work – and attribute to it moral intent – by claiming that a poet wrote *in persona aliorum*.

For Gower, this kind of critical activity only served to multiply the parameters of meaning. Genius often depicts the act of glossing as a means of obfuscation, ironically declaiming that he will, 'tell out and let it noght be glosed'.[66] The contest between the gloss and text raises questions about the ability of literary critical apparatus to adequately account for a poet's intent or the moral stability of their

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[64] [Hic quasi in persona aliorum, quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse Amantem, varias eorum passiones variis huius libri distinccionibus per singula scribere proponit].
[65] DMLBS *fingere* 7. a. See also, John Gower, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay [Oxford, 1899-1902] *Vox clamantis*, 7.221. This dissonance is made more problematic when, at the climax of the *Confessio*, Amans is reminded that he has been 'John Gower' all along (CA, 8.2321).
[66] CA, 1.1256.

personae.[67] Only a decade after he finished the *Confessio*, these issues emerged as important vectors of engagement in the *querelle de la Rose*, an epistolary debate in France concerning the merit of Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose*.

A popular defence of the *Rose* argued that its controversial statements were not made by Jean de Meun but by morally compromised characters [*personnaiges*] and, thus, their speeches were in accord with their relative natures.[68] However, for Jean Gerson (d. 1429), because the distinction between the *personae* and their author was unclear, and because 'everything seemed to be said by [the poet]', he condemned the writer as he would a heretic or traitor.[69] That the value of the *Rose* was contested in this way reveals the reformative, and ultimately partisan, nature of this kind of literary criticism, bringing to the fore interpretative issues, which Gower had sought to parody, and which had been percolating in the margins of texts throughout the period, particularly in the works of Ovid.

Given his commitments to authorial ambiguity, it is unsurprising that the reception of Ovid loomed so large on Gower's intellectual horizons.[70] The *Metamorphoses*, like the *Rose*, presented him with a compelling poetic model of hermeneutic flexibility and evasive *personae*. It was a collection of texts that consistently denied easy classification, frustrating the often innovative efforts of commentators to control its wilful immorality and to redeem its utility, integumental

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[67] Paul Strohm, 'A Note on Gower's Persona', *Arts of Interpretation: The Text and Its Contexts 700-1600. Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Literature in Honor of E. Talbot Donaldson*, ed. Mary J. Carruthers and Elizabeth D. Kirk (Norman, 1982) p. 297; Robert Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 232-7.
[68] Christine McWebb, *Debating the Roman de la Rose: A Critical Anthology* (New York, 2007) pp. 278-9.
[69] [Tout semble estre dit en sa persone] McWebb, ed., *Debating the Roman de la Rose*, pp. 288-9.
[70] Andrew Galloway, 'Gower's Classicizing Vocations', *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, Brian Gastle, and R. F. Yeager (Oxford, 2017) pp. 266-80; idem, 'Ovid in Chaucer and Gower', *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, ed. John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands (Chichester, 2014) pp.187-201.

value, and purpose. Despite complex systems of exegesis, allegoresis, and moralization 'Ovidian poetics remained obstinately resistant to closure, [and] refused to be reducible to neat critical aphorism'.[71] The inclusive range of expositional assertions made in commentaries and *accessus*, which sought to account for the moral and authorial slipperiness of Ovid's approach to narrative, rather than delimiting his texts, only served to decentre authorial intent and validate the interventions of readers in his work.[72]

In commentaries on the *Heroides* we find evidence of a consistent effort to constrain Ovid's narrative intemperance. A common response to the poem was for the commentator to distinguish between the intentions of the speaking *persona* and those of the author, complicating the retrieval of singular meaning from the text.[73] In one thirteenth-century *accessus*, typical of its kind, the writer offers a desperately inclusive and creatively diverse catalogue of Ovid's intentions – and those of his characters – before elliptically explaining that 'the ultimate end of the book differs according to its various intentions'.[74] Increasingly throughout the period – and

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[71] Alastair Minnis, *Magister amoris: The 'Roman de la Rose' and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Oxford, 2001) p. 12.
[72] Vincent Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: From the Twelfth Century to 1450', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge, 2005) pp. 194-200.
[73] Ibid. p. 191.
[74] 'His intention is to write about three kinds of love: foolish love, unchaste love, and demented love … Another interpretation is that the intention of this book is to commend chaste love … or to attack unchaste love … Another interpretation is that the intention is to praise some of those who write letters for their chastity, and to blame some for their unchaste love. According to another interpretation, Ovid's intention is that since, in his manual on the art of love, he does not explain how someone might be courted by letter, he completes this part of his teaching here. According to another interpretation his intention in this book is to encourage the pursuit of virtue and to reject vice … It must be understood also that although throughout the whole book he has this intention, and those mentioned above, there are two further intentions in this book, one general and one particular. The general intention is to give pleasure and to give profitable advice to all his readers. But he has a particular intention in individual letters … And different letters have different intentions, because he had different purposes in mind in setting out <to commend> some for their chastity and blame others for their unchaste love' (Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, pp. 22-3; R.

certainly by the late 1380s when Gower was writing the *Confessio* – the category of *intentio* had come to function more as a way for the master reader to assume the controlling powers of the author and to inscribe their own meaning onto a text, than as an accurate reflection of any original purpose. Rather than determining the moral objectives of a text, these claims, which insisted on having grasped the true intentions of the *personae* and the *auctor*, served to displace the authorial centre of the work and to reveal its relative value.

This was the irony of magisterial readings, delimiting the functions and purposes of a text only served to demonstrate their innate malleability. There is already an awareness of this in the extensive range of *intentiones* attributed to the *Heroides*, which, in its elaborate assortment of moral purposes, seems to acknowledge the limits of this kind of exegesis. Gower appears to have recognized this also, using his own commentary to mimic the presumptive authority of medieval expositors and to subtly parody their attempts to impute new moral intention and meaning onto old texts. That he was interested in imitating this kind of discourse is seen in his suggestive appropriation of the technical language of literary criticism. His introductory glosses, in particular, represent an allusive pastiche of the axioms of the commentary tradition, invoking established categories of exposition to define the poem's *modus tractatus*, *intentio auctoris*, *utilitas*, *titulus*, and *materia*.[75]

Thus, in Book 1, we hear Gower introduce the method of treatment [*tractatus*] before explaining that, because the author intends [*intendit auctor*] to expound on the subject matter [*materia*] of the ubiquitous experience of love, his book – which is called [*nuncupatur*] the *Confessio amantis* – would be of particular use [*specialius*] to

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B. C. Huygens, ed. *Accessus ad auctores*, Latomus 12 [Brussels, 1953] 26-7); [Finalis causa secundum intentiones diversificantur] (Huygens, *Accessus ad auctores*, p. 32).

[75] On this terminology see Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 19-29. The duties of expositor appear to be shared between the gloss and the meta-poetics of the verse, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, p. 140.

those who suffer from an excess of passion.[76] An allusive imitation of conventional modes of literary exegesis, his gloss represents a mock *accessus* that seems to satirize the authoritative assertions of literary critics. By ascribing intent and meaning onto his text, he is quietly demonstrating its very resistance to final meaning. Rather than shoring up its foundations, Gower's commentary ironically reveals the instability of his poem.

This is what we see dramatized in the opening conflict between the claims of the lover and those of the gloss. Here we are forced to recognize the uncertainty of the text, and to conclude that neither perspective might be singular, final, or authoritative. As the debate of the *Rose* shows us, the relationship between the poet and his *personae* was up for grabs. The reader of the *Confessio* was required to engage a discordant and layered text, and evaluate the significance of multiple competing voices, languages, and perspectives – from both the text and the gloss – to find any certainty of meaning.[77] The ambiguous distance between the poet and his *personae*, and between the gloss and text, demands a reader who is able to navigate the uneven terrain of literary texts and establish for themselves the moral centre of the poem.

VI

For Gower, the reader was to look beyond the surface of his text – and its pre-exposited values – by means of an empirical process of independent observation. After the Tale of King Namplus and the Greeks, we hear Genius advise Amans in the correct method of discernment:

> Forthi the wise men ne demen

[76] Pro. 96 ff.
[77] See Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, p. 137, n. 6, for his views on Minnis' arguments concerning the tensions created by Gower's self-commentary.

> The thinges after that thei semen,
>
> Bot after that thei knowe and finde.
>
> The mirour scheweth in his kinde
>
> As he hadde al the world withinne,
>
> And is in soth nothing therinne.
>
> (CA, 3.1074-8)

While throughout the period the mirror was an established metaphor for the mental cinema of memory, for Gower it served as an important way of signifying the imaging powers of exemplary rhetoric. Figurative representations could offer the reader a 'mirour of ensamplerie'.[78] Here, then, his audience is encouraged to move past the inscribed word and its expositional prompts to autonomously explore the deep worlds of literary simulacra, and to make their interpretative responses in accord with their own discoveries of narrative evidence. As Genius says, we are to be informed, not by what we are told, but by what we *knowe* and *finde*.

This interpretative process has an interesting exegetical counter in the *Ovide moralisé* (c. 1316-1328), where the anonymous Franciscan writer similarly implored his reader to move past the literal meaning of the *Metamorphoses* and seek out its hidden moral value:

> Indeed, whoever takes Ovid at his word and will not see any other meaning or intention in him than the one that the author has crudely put into telling

[78] He describes Amans' lady as a 'Mirour and ensample of goode', while also explaining that Flassemblant offers a duplicitous 'glas' (CA, Prol. 496; 5.2605; 2.1921). On the literary topos of the mirror more generally, see Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-Imagery in the Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance,* trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge, 1982); Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 37.

> the story, then all would be misleading or mendacious [to him] … But under the fable lies covered a more useful moral message.[79]

Once the 'word' had been dispensed with, the *Ovide moralisé* pursues a radically different set of priorities to those of Gower. It is not interested in rhetorical effect or the imaginative impact of the poetic mode, but instead engages an assertively moralistic retelling of Ovid's fables, attempting to enclose the poem within a sanitized and distinctly Christian set of culturally syncretic parameters. Its inventive allegoresis works to ensure a correct response from its audience, protecting them from the uncertain moral values of Ovid's *personae*. In the *moralisé*, then, there was no danger that the reader might examine a fable and discover it disconcertingly void of useful meaning. Nor was there concern that they might somehow become lost in the ambiguities of an unpredictable and indeterminate textual universe. Yet, as Gower suggests, this is the exact situation we are confronted with in the *Confessio*.

In accord with their powerful capacity for simulation, rhetorical exempla produced an image of reality that was both convincing and illusory, projecting a likeness of the world into the imagination that was as empty as it was immersive. There is the very real possibility, then, that a reader might push through the specular surface of a text to find that there is no substantive depth, no security of meaning – *nothing therinne* – except the endless phantasms of a false reality. There was no guarantee they could salvage any moral value from the poetic experience as it offered only a reflection of themselves and of their desires. While transformative criticism like the *Ovide moralisé* – and much *Metamorphoses* commentary – attempted to

[79] [Voirs est, qui Ovide prendroit / A la letre, et n'i entendroit / Autre sen, autre entendement / que tel com l'auctors grossement / I met en racontant la fable, / Tout seroit chose mençognable / … Mes sous la fable gist couverte / La sentence plus profitable] (Ovid, *Ovide moralisé*, ed. Cornelius de Boer, Martina G. de Boer, and Jeannette Th. M. van't Sant, 5 vols. Verhandelingen der Koninklijke akademie van wetenschappen te Amsterdam: Afdeeling letterkunde, Nieuwe reeks, deel 15, 21, 30, 37, 43 [Amsterdam, 1915-38] 15.2525-30, 2536-7).

constrain the potential moral and mental disorder caused by the poem, Gower sought to produce a text that enacted these dangerous uncertainties and which, through the figures of Genius and Amans, examined the complex range of psychological responses to narrative poetry.

VII

Like Giles of Rome's *De regimine,* the *Confessio* served instructional and political purposes as a type of 'mirror for princes', being addressed first to Richard II and then, in a later recension, to Henry IV. However, as Gower indicates, it was not a book simply for the ruling class, but was for all readers, as 'every man for his partie a kingdom hath to justifie'.[80] Though his immediate audience was likely courtly and to some degree clerical, Gower sought to examine the universal problem of ethical decision-making by dramatizing the imaginative experience and internal conflict generated by an encounter with the poetic.[81] In this context, the poem represents a study of the psychology of reading that explores the tangled interactions of the internal faculties of the soul, observing both the beneficial and potentially detrimental impact of literary material.

The psychomachia of the *Confessio* takes place within the vast imaginative space of the *homo interior*.[82] While Gower introduces his work in the familiar context of the dream-vision, having his lover enter a birdsong-filled wood 'in the monthe of Maii', he undercuts convention and refuses to let his lover sleep.[83] Subsequently, we find Amans caught in the liminal realm of the imagination, where he explains that 'al

[80] CA, 8.2109.
[81] A motivating factor for his work could have been the reformation of courtly behaviour. There is a potential analogue in the Scottish court of James IV, where the mirror for princes tradition seems to have been introduced as means to counter certain behavioural issues.
[82] CA, 8.2749 ff.
[83] CA, 1.100.

wakende I dreme'. Neither asleep nor awake, 'ne fully quik ne fully ded', he is trapped in his own fantasy world and oppressed by the tyrannous images of his own *thoght*.[84] Rather than being taken up into a visionary state of rapture, Amans' journey is inwards and toward the psychogenic and imaginative centre of his own self. The poem, then, seems to occur within the theatre of the mind, where we are invited to witness the internal conflict between the psychological faculties of reason, will, and imagination, all of which were necessary for the interpretation of texts. It is important to briefly examine the interactions of these faculties before considering their potential relationship to his theory of poetry.

During the climactic debate between Amans and Genius, we discover that they are in fact essential aspects of a single narrator and are broadly representative of the faculties of will and reason. Caught between these internal powers, the narrator is forced to reconcile the appetites of his desire with his rational intellect:

> [A]nd thus betwen the tweie
> I stonde, and not if I schal live or deie.
> For thogh reson agein my will debate,
> I mai noght fle …
>
> (CA, 8.2234-7)

If we are to believe him, the stakes are high. We are consistently reminded throughout the poem that 'whan reson is put aside / And will governeth the corage [heart]' an individual is overtaken by a rapacious and bestial intemperance.[85] Nothing can satisfy

[84] CA, 3.51; 8.2451. The cognitive psychology of the period was drawn primarily from the Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic discussions of the subject in Cicero, Quintilian, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Augustine, and Martianus Capella. Boethius' account of the Stoic theory of sensible images was translated by Chaucer, who adapted into his work the commentary of thirteenth-century chronicler, Nicholas Trevet (Chaucer, *Boece*, 5 m. 4.6-19).
[85] CA, 3.2428-9.

a 'will which is noght resonable'.[86] As such, Genius tells Amans that he should govern his 'herte under that lawe, / The which of reson is governed / And noght of wille'.[87] Within Gower's psychological hierarchy, the heart appears to be a central seat of authority, as a king rules his empire, we are told, 'so is the herte principal … for governance'.[88]

The condition of the heart, whether subject to will or reason, is nourished by phenomena received through the senses and mediated by the imagination:

> And thus myn yhe is mad the gate,
>
> Thurgh which the deyntes of my thoght
>
> Of lust ben to myn herte broght.
>
> Riht as myn yhe with his lok
>
> Is to myn herte a lusti coc …
>
> Riht so myn ere in his astat,
>
> Wher as myn yhe mai noght serve,
>
> Can wel myn hertes thonk deserve.
>
> (CA, 6.824-32)

Gower was wary of the senses and of how they might affect the internal welfare of the individual, arguing that 'vision and hearing are fragile gateways of the mind', consistently warning against their weaknesses.[89] Stationed at the threshold of the soul,

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[86] CA, 3.2437. In contradistinction with beasts, the soul of man should 'to reson … serveth' (CA, 7.517).
[87] CA, 8.2134-6.
[88] CA, 7.487. On the Gower's Stoicism, see J. D. Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition* (Cambridge, 1979) p. 66; Galloway, *Gower's Classicizing Vocations*, p. 271.
[89] [Visus et auditus fragilis sunt ostia mentis] (CA, 1.iv). In his *Art of Poetry*, Horace writes that 'what comes in through the ear is less effective in stirring the mind than what is put before our faithful eyes and told by the spectator to himself' [Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem / quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus et quae / ipse sibi tradit spectator] (*Horace on Poetry: The 'Ars Poetica'*, ed. by Charles O. Brink (Cambridge, 1971)

these two senses 'bringen in the thridde' perceptive faculty, the imagination, which has its rightful place *amidde* the heart, converting the sensible data of sight and sound into images for Amans to *assaie*.[90]

Dante Alighieri (d. 1321) had earlier expressed the mechanics of perception in similar terms, saying:

> Your faculty of apprehension draws an image from a real existence and displays it within you, so that it makes the mind turn to it; and if, thus turned, the mind inclines toward it, that inclination is love.[91]

Gower works within the same set of ideas – which recall the early formulation of the imaginative effect of poetry – explaining that 'mental impressions imposed imaginations of happiness into the hearts of lovers'.[92] Once phenomena were passed through the senses to his mind, Amans' *thoght of lust* imprinted images of the things he desired into his heart.[93]

But also, when immersed in the darkness and silence of night, Amans' imagination simulates for him the nourishing effect of his senses:

> This lusti cokes name is hote
> Thoght, which hath evere hise pottes hote
> Of love buillende on the fyr
> With fantasie and with desir,

---

ll. 180-82. Translation in, Donald A. Russell, *Classical Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 1981) pp. 98-110.

[90] CA, 6.903-6.

[91] [Vostra apprensiva da esser verace / tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega, / si che l'animo ad essa volger face; / e se, rivolto, inver' di lei si piega, / quel piegare è amor] (Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. and ed. Charles S. Singleton. 3 vols. [Princeton, 1970-75] 18.22-26). Dante and Gower shared a common figure of influence in the Paris-trained Brunetto Latini.

[92] [Qualiter cogitatus impressiones leticie ymaginatiuas cordibus inserit amantum] (CA, 6.913 ff.). The imaginative quality of poetry will be considered further in Chapter 4.

[93] On the intellectual heritage of cognitive psychology in this period as it relates to emergence of vernacular poetry, see Burnley, *Chaucer's Language and the Philosophers' Tradition*, pp. 103-6.

Of whiche er this fulofte he fedde

Min herte …

(CA, 6.913-18)

Presented as another cook – as a curator of ingredients, but also the creator of new flavours – the *hote thoght* of Aman's febrile mind was always ready, whenever sensory excitement was absent, to feed his heart with images of desire in order to sustain his fantasies.

While the imagination served to translate the media of the senses into mental images to be impressed onto the heart, it was also a generative power related to the storage and recall of memory. Amans explains that internal *fodes* 'groweth of min oghne thoght'.[94] As a creative engine, the imagination produces its own sustenance, manufacturing images of desire as well as projecting images of sensible things onto the receptive faculty of the soul, before storing them as memories to be rationally investigated and recalled at a future point.[95]

These combined functions are associated with the figure of Genius. As the narrator's rational and imaginative intellect, he propagates moral initiatives while also transmitting and organizing received ideas, recalling tales in order to recast them into new contexts.[96] As both a priest of Venus and a Christian confessor, Genius holds an

[94] 6.745-50.
[95] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (London, 1964-73) Ia.78.4; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 67-72, 196-7; Winthrop Wetherbee, 'The Theme of Imagination in Medieval Poetry and the Allegorical Figure "Genius"', pp. 45-64; Alastair Minnis, 'Langland's Ymaginatif and Late-Medieval Theories of Imagination', *Comparative Criticism* 3 (1981) pp. 71-103.
[96] Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge, 199) p. 114. On the historical development of Genius, Jane Chance Nitzsche's, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York, 1975); Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 153-4, 180-4.

ambiguous dual ministry and is committed to the exigencies of love and morality.[97] He is, at best, a dubious moral guide, acknowledging as much himself.[98]

We must understand, then, that the faculties of the imagination and reason were not allied to a stable ideological position and did not offer a disinterested or moralizingly authoritative vision for right action. While the ratiocinative and mnemonic powers of the reader were unavoidably influenced by the desirous agenda of the heart, in a reciprocal way, the condition of the heart also informed the content and focus of the imagination.[99] These interactions were important to Gower's theory of poetic response, and shaped his understanding of the psychological and behavioural effects of literary texts.

VIII

Consumed by the focus of his own concupiscent desires, Amans cannot fully engage the estimative powers of his imagination, reason, and memory, rendering him unable to fully process the narrative poetry of Genius:

> His tales with myn Ere I herde,
>
> Bot to myn herte cam it noght

---

[97] CA, 1.235-88. For the argument that Genius was a reliable moral guide, John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York, 1975) p. 162; Donald G. Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization of Genius in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 33 (1972) p. 250; George D. Economou, 'The Character Genius in Alan de Lille, Jean de Meun, and John Gower', *Chaucer Review* 4.3 (1970) pp. 203-210; Jane Chance Nitzsche, *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, pp. 125-30; Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, p. 205. In contrast, for those that see him as an unreliable figure, David W. Hiscoe, 'The Ovidian Comic Strategy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*' *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985) pp. 367-85; Thomas J. Hatton, 'John Gower's Use of Ovid in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*' *Mediaevalia* 13 (1989) pp. 257-74; Hugh White, 'Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Neophilologus* 72 (1988) pp. 600-16; Simpson, 'Ironic Incongruence', pp. 617-32.

[98] CA, 1.266-71.

[99] CA, 5.199. Gower appears to be deeply suspicious of 'fals ymaginacion' (CA, 1.958, 2.2845, 4.1143). 'Proud ymaginacion', Genius says, 'makth an herte vein withinne' (CA, 5.198-99).

Ne sank no deppere in my thoght.

(CA, 2.2068-70)

As the sensible information of these tales did not impact his mind with enough force to leave a lasting or memorable impression, they were not translated to the domain of the heart, and were thus unable to influence his moral habits. 'The tales sounen in myn ere', Amans says, 'bot yit myn herte is elleswhere'.[100]

Possessed by the pain of desire, he cannot imaginatively respond to tales which were irrelevant to the appetite of his will or which violated the governmental regime of his heart, and instead he sought out literary works directly related to his status as a lover:

Min ere with a good pittance
Is fedd of redinge of romance
Of Ydoine and of Amadas
That whilom weren in mi cas,
And eke of othre many a score.

(CA, 6.877-81)

What Gower describes here is an unrestrained and self-serving reader, who avariciously consumes poetic texts that only relate to his immediate affective interests. As the allusion to the old French tale of Ydoine and Amadas suggests, Amans appears to conceive of himself as a lover in a romance: Amadas had remained faithful to his love despite testing circumstances in the same way that Amans appears ceaselessly devoted to his lady despite his depressing lack of success.[101] The tale becomes an internalized script that directs his behaviour and moral expectations.

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[100] CA, 7.5411-12.
[101] John R. Reinhard, ed., *Amadas et Ydoine*, *roman du XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1974); Ross G. Arthur, trans., *Amadas and Ydoine*, (New York, 1993); Simon Meecham-Jones, 'Questioning

It is his immense failure in love that compels Amans to seek consolation in the imaginative worlds of romantic poetry:

> For whan I of here loves rede,
>
> Min ere with the tale I fede;
>
> And with the lust of here histoire
>
> Somtime I drawe into memoire
>
> Hou sorwe mai noght evere laste.

(CA, 6.883-8)

His meditations on historic lovers provide only a fleeting and synthetic salve which 'endureth bot a throwe'.[102] Like a literary junkie, he must continually feed his will 'plesant … wordes suche as he mai gete' in order to ease and appease his lust-ruled heart.[103]

Chaucer seems to describe a similar kind of wilful reader in the *House of Fame,* when he has the textual embodiment of Dido lament how she was often read for *frendshippe*, complaining that readers only sought from her the pleasure and satisfaction of companionship.[104] Like Dido's literary *frendshippe*, Amans' narrative selections offered him solace and comfort during times of *melancolye*, *sorwful ymagynacioun* and *defaute of slep*, where he, like the narrator of the *Book of the*

Romance: Amadas and Ydoine in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Parergon* 17 (2000) pp. 35-49.

[102] CA, 6.890.

[103] CA, 6.897. Cf. 'The more that myn herte drinketh, / The more I may; so that me thinketh, / My thurst schal nevere ben aquein' (CA, 6.263-66).

[104] Vincent Gillespie, 'Authorship', *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford, 2013) p. 146. Dido's affective force had received a sustained history of criticism and interpretation: Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, 2008) 13.21; Francis Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age (Rerum senilium libri I-XVIII)*, ed. A Bernardo, S. Levin, and R. A. Bernardo (Baltimore, 1992) 17.4; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium* libri, ed. V. Romano, 2 vols. (Bari, 1951); idem, *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's 'Genealogia deorum gentilium' in an English Version with Introductory Essay and Commentary*, trans. Charles Grosvenor Osgood (Princeton, 1930) II.14.13. Craig Kallendorf, *In Praise of Aeneas: Virgil and Epideictic Rhetoric in the Early Italian Renaissance* (London, 1989) pp. 58-76.

Duchess, might read to 'drive the night away'.[105] However, narrative poetry was not simply a way to mainline the pleasures and affective relief of literary consolation, it was a legitimizing force that compounded the condition of the will.

In this context, rather than functioning as a productive mode of self-reflection, the internalization of literary material served only to reinforce a preformed vision of reality and to perpetuate already established moral habits. Because Amans' will dictated the focus of his imagination, and because his imagination fed the will of his heart, he had become trapped in an entropic cycle of desire that increasingly limited his interpretative range, narrowing his already myopic poetic tastes by impeding his ability to access the rational intellect. The will was an unreliable and selfish reader with no interest in pursuing the comparative evaluation of narrative evidence. It did not seek the discovery of right action, only the satisfaction of itself. And poetry, it seems, was incapable of reforming such a power. It could not guide the reader to moral truth under its own influence. As a result, Amans was governed entirely by the will of his own heart, which, being 'hotere than … fyr', had thoroughly consumed the thoughts of his imagination.[106]

Like Chaucer, Gower found Dido a useful figure for exploring the issue of reader response. Possessed by her will, Dido's name is tied to her passionate love for Aeneas, as Gower defines her by the surfeit of her desire: 'Dido sche was *hote* [called], / which loveth Eneas so *hote'*.[107] In her excess of love, she was unable to measure words with any sense of proportion, laying 'al hire herte' on Aeneas because

[105] Chaucer, *Book of the Duchess*, ll. 14, 23, 25, 49; Gillespie, 'Authorship', p. 146.
[106] CA, 6.210.
[107] CA, 6.87-8, emphasis added.

of ‘the wordes whiche he seide’, while similarly failing to convert literary material into healthy behaviour and attitudes.[108]

In her letter to Aeneas, she implores him to return quickly from Italy, or else:

> Sche scholde stonde in such degré
> As whilom stod a swan tofore,
> Of that sche hadde hire make lore [mate lost];
> For sorwe a fethere into hire brain
> She schof and hath hireselve slain:
> As king Menander in a lay [poem]
> The sothe hath founde, wher sche lay
> Sprantlende with hire wynges tweie,
> As sche which scholde thanne deie
> For love of him which was hire make.
> ‘And so schal I do for thi sake’,
> This qweene seide, ‘wel I wot’.
>
> (CA, 4.104-15)

Gower’s account of this scene is distinct from its original in the *Heroides*.[109] The image of a forlorn swan thrusting ‘a fethere into hire brain’ appears to have been his own invention. We are invited to see the quill – a common instrument of writing – pierce the mind and destroy the seat of reason in the same way that Dido’s

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[108] CA, 6.89-90.

[109] Chaucer translated the relevant lines from the *Heroides* in the *Legend of Good Women* in this way: ‘Ryght so,’ quod she, ‘as that the white swan / Ayenst his deth begynneth for to synge: / Ryght so to yow I make my compleynynge’ (ll. 1355-7). While throughout the period, there was a tradition of glossing the difficult opening lines of Dido’s lament with animal lore, Gower’s image appears unique (Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911; repr. 1962); *The Etymologies*, trans., S. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006) XII.7.18-19; John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975-88) Bk. 12.

immoderate and wilful acts of reading and writing brought about her own self-destruction.[110] The image of the quilled brain draws our attention to ways in which texts could inscribe upon the mind words and images that resulted in disastrous action.

Because she could not *fiele* or *se* her lover, she appears to have substituted sensory pleasure with the artificial delight of affective reading and writing.[111] This only served to compound her desires 'evere more and more'.[112] Like Amans, Dido was caught in the echo chamber of her own will, analogically applying narrative material to her own circumstance so that, as Gower says, 'sche hath hire oghne tale told / Unto hirself'.[113] Amans does the same thing, conceiving himself to be trapped in the tale of Pan, complaining that 'upon miself is thilke tale come'.[114] For Gower, a reader could become trapped in the tales they tell themselves. Rather than liberating an individual into the safety of moral knowledge, poetic texts could ensnare the will and corrupt the imagination in catastrophic ways.

However, the literary pessimism of Dido's story is immediately countered in the following Tale of Ulysses and Penelope where we are introduced to an alternative kind of reader. Ulysses was able to understand his wife's letter and respond to her appeal to return home because his 'gentil herte' was entirely governed by the wisdom

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[110] Isidore notes that when Aristotle was writing *De interpretatione*, he dipped his pen in his mind (*Etymologiae*, II.27.1, and on writing instruments more generally, see VI.14.1-8). Not only were swan feathers were a preferred material for pen making, the implied sharpness of the feather here also recalls the necessary 'tempering' of quills by scribes before writing (Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. Dáibhí O. Cróinín and David Ganz (Cambridge, 1990) p. 17; James J. John, 'Latin Paleography' *Medieval Studies: An Introduction*, ed. James M. Powell, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, 1992) pp. 54-5. Jean Froissart (d. 1405) outlines the necessary items for writing as 'Sense and memory, ink and paper and writing case, penknife and sharpened quill, and ready will' [Sens et memore / Encre et papier et escriptore, / Kanivet et penne taillie, / Et volenté apparellie] (Jean Froissart, *Le Joli Buisson de Jonece*, ed. Anthime Fourrier [Geneve, 1975] ll. 3-6).
[111] CA, 4.103.
[112] CA, 4.122.
[113] CA, 4.126-7.
[114] CA, 8.2238.

of reason.[115] Free from the dominating power of immoderate love, the will of his heart was seized *in toto* by 'pure ymaginacioun', which imprinted in him the rational desire for right action.[116] As an ideal reader, Ulysses exemplified the important critical quality of diligent and reasoned contemplation, carefully reading and rereading his wife's letter in order to weigh its significance and measure his own affective responses.[117]

Thus, when we hear Genius ask Amans, to 'tak a tale into thi mynde', we know he should do so with care and with self-awareness, lest he quill his brain.[118] The moral value of a tale, and its practical consequences, appear to have been entirely proportional to the internal condition of the reader. Whether an individual was governed by their will or reason – whether they were lovers or thinkers – determined the utility, effect, and meaning of a narrative work. We might suggest here, that there were no texts and no authors, and instead only readers. A text was simply a mirror for the mind to look at itself, a place for it to see whatever it desired. Hence, Gower's repeated admonition to 'know thiself' [*nosce teipsum*], as self-knowledge equated to a kind of narrative literacy.[119]

The cautious assessment of evidence through reason and self-analysis were fundamental to Gower's theory of poetry. Not all texts were equal and not all readers were equally capable. To read well required a prudent and self-aware mind. By examining Gower's focus on the evidential status of narrative poetry, we can further

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[115] CA, 4.204-6.
[116] CA, 4.211.
[117] CA, 4.207-9.
[118] CA, 3.781.
[119] CA, 7.2388; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 203-11; Eliza G. Wilkins, *"Know Thyself" in Greek and Latin Literature* (Chicago, 1917). Maria Wickert suggests that the theme of self-knowledge is central to all three of Gower's major works (*Studies in John Gower*, trans., Robert J. Meindl, 2nd rev. ed. [Tempe, 2016] p. 193).

observe his proposed method of reading and, in doing so, move toward a better understanding of his poetic theory.

IX

According to the rhetorical theory of *De regimine*, 'in moral matir the processe mote be by euydens [and] … by soche preues and dedes that falleth ofte tyme'. For Giles, and Aristotelian devotees like Gower, specific cases were to be resolved through the applied interpretation of past cases. Of central importance to this process was the imaginative and sensory force of 'evidence', which brought images before the eye of the mind in order to expose the will to examples of past experience. The rhetorical power of evidence was significant in its ability to reproduce a visual and inherently compelling representation of things not present, the medieval understanding of *evidentia* being a beneficiary of the late-antique concept of *enargeia* (ενάργεια).

An inherently evasive term, *enargeia* was defined as a type of discursive vividness that impacted the senses – particularly sight – with the force of clarity. Following Cicero, Quintilian translated *enargeia* as *evidentia*, describing it as a verbal quality that powerfully stimulated the imagination:

> From such impressions arises that ἐνάργεια which Cicero calls *illustratio* and *evidentia*, which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene, while our emotions will be no less actively stirred than if we were present at the actual occurrence.[120]

[120] [Insequitur ἐνάργεια, quae a Cicerone inlustratio et evidentia nominatur, quae non tam dicere videtur quam ostendere, et adfectus non aliter, quam si rebus ipsis intersimus, sequentur] (Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, trans. Donald A. Russell [Cambridge, 2002] 6.2.32).

The *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which was widely circulated in the Middle Ages and often attributed to Cicero, used the synonymic *demonstratio* to classify the same sensual effect:[121]

> It is *demonstratio* when an event is described in words that the business seems to be enacted and the subject to pass vividly before our eyes.[122]

Often transmitted in excerpted form, these ideas passed through the Arabic commentaries on the *Poetics* and were taken up by Paris-trained theorists like John of Garland (d. 1272) and later, Matthias of Linköping (d. c.1350), who reflected on the representational power of language to manifest objects vividly before the eyes.[123]

Evidentia came to be understood as a discourse that enacted a sensational and visual proof of its claims. Rather than directly relating its case to assert a specific meaning, it appealed to the faculties of perception and discernment to produce a unique response to its simulation.[124] The rhetorical utility of *evidentia* was often likened to the presentation of a legal case, which, by bringing events before the eyes of a jury, petitioned a relative judgement guided by individual circumstance rather than one beholden to the non-differentiating letter of the law.[125]

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[121] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 4.2.63-64.

[122] [Demonstratio est, cum ita verbis res exprimitur, ut geri negotium et res ante oculos esse videatur] (Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, 1954) 4.64.68, p. 404).

[123] Vincent Gillespie, 'The Songs of the Threshold: *Enargeia* and the Psalter', *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*, ed. Francis Leneghan and Tamara Atkin (Boydell and Brewer, 2017) p. 280; Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence*, International Studies in the History of Rhetoric 4 (Leiden, 2012).

[124] Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 6.2.27-29, 9.1.27.

[125] According to the Aristotelian divisions of rhetoric, the judicious recognition of 'proof' (anagnorisis [ἀναγνώρισις]) is best facilitated by artistic (entechnic) methods, which deal with probabilities, as opposed to the 'inartistic' (atechnic) 'signs' that confer prescriptive and inflexible truths. Like much of Aristotle's rhetorical and poetic theory, *enargeia* seems to have been rooted in the forensic oratory of the courts. See Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, 1986) pp. 10-13, 144-62; Graham Zanker, 'From Enargeia to Immersion: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Concept', *Rheinisches Museum N.F.*124 (1981) pp. 297-311.

The category of *evidentia* was central to Gower's poetic theory. After the Tale of Dives and Lazarus, Genius tells Amans that if he was able to remember the tale as well as it had been told, he would *beholde*

> To se so gret an evidence,
>
> Wherof the sothe experience
>
> Hath schewed openliche at ye.

(CA, 6.1113-15)

Correctly remembered, poetry could vividly manifest the evidence of past experience before the eye of the mind with the convincing force of truth. While Gower emphasizes here the visual power of evidence, he also points toward its important interlocking relationship with experience and memory. Poetic evidence was not simply a singular imagistic encounter, it was to be collected within the imaginative storehouse of the memory and to be reflected on, re-examined, and applied practically to new contexts, instances, and moral circumstances.[126]

Genius repeatedly encourages Amans to carefully commit the exemplary proofs of his tales *ad memoriam*:[127]

> Wherof, my sone, in remembrance
>
> Thou myt ensample taken hiere,
>
> As I have told, and what thou hiere
>
> Be wel war, and gif no credence,
>
> Bot if thou se more evidence.

(CA, 1.530-5)

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[126] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 71, 182, 156. As Carruthers suggests, it was necessary to have evidence in the form of a mental archive of past cases – a kind of moral horizon – in order to develop precepts for ethical decision-making.

[127] CA, 3.3172, 4.889-90.

As we have seen, evidence did not equate to moralizing prescription. It was inherently open to review: beliefs were to change if 'more evidence' was discovered. Just as poetry might present things to be loathed or desired, evidence provided a comparative basis for moral action by relating the lessons of past experience.[128] It was beneficial to be *war* of the counsel of former instances, because, Gower explains, 'experience [*experiencia*] of the deed teaches so that others might learn what path should be held amidst uncertain circumstances'. 'Every man', he says elsewhere, 'is othres lore'.[129] Of course, discerning right action through evidence involved a deliberative process that was fraught with uncertainty and the perils of misinterpretation.

All experience – fable, history, myth, Scripture – was collapsed into the single exemplary category of 'evidence'. All recorded human activity was to be seen as a series of discrete tales, which, regardless of content, held intrinsic evidential and moral value. '*Quecumque scripta sunt*', Gower reminds us, '*ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt*'.[130] A common means of defending the reading of pagan texts, Romans 15.4 emphasized for the medieval reader – and for Gower – the important activity of ethical discrimination, as Trevisa suggests elsewhere:

> The apostel seith nought, 'all that is write to our lore is sooth', but he seith, 'all that is i-write to our lore is i-write'.[131]

The value of poetic evidence, whether it was to be imitated or avoided, depended, not on its prescriptive statutes, but on the deliberative powers of the reader. Everything that had been written was not to be applied with indiscriminate literalism, the

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[128] 'And of old time how it hath be / I finde a gret experience, / Wherof to take an evidence / Good is, and to be war …' (CA, 1.1072-75).
[129] CA, 8.256; 'For al dai in experience / A man mai se thilke evidence' (CA, 2.1899). See Ralph Hanna, *Patient Reading/Reading Patience: Oxford Essays on Medieval English Literature* (Liverpool, 2017) 'John of Wales and 'Classicizing Friars'', n. 7, on the important inclusivity of the exempla tradition.
[130] CA, 4.2348 ff.
[131] Higden, *Polychronicon*, trans. Trevisa, ed. Babington and Lumby, I.18.

evidence of old experience required careful assessment and comparison. For Gower, it was a process necessary for training the moral faculty of the conscience.

X

Within the *Confessio*, the conscience did not have *a priori* access to apodictic truth, it did not exist outside of history, it was conditional, intersubjective, and culturally bound. As an internal arbiter of moral action, the conscience relied on the discovery of *a posteriori* evidence.[132] Just so, Genius provides Amans with tales, saying to him, 'wherof thou myht take evidence / To reule with thi conscience'.[133] While scholastic philosophy would divide the conscience between the powers of *conscentia* and *synderesis* – between a fallible moral faculty and the inherent perfection of natural reason – the *Confessio* offers no equivalent distinction.[134] There was no *synderesis*, no space for the metaphysical intuition of natural law, there was only the exteriority of the evidence of experience.

Because the conscience was entirely dependent on the accretive collection and assessment of narrative evidence, and because the consequences for misinterpretation were significant, Gower insisted on a plain style of poetry and straightforward speech. He appears wary of affective discourses and argues that poetic evidence should be presented to the conscience truthfully and openly.[135] This is not to say without art, but rather, free from the interfering convictions of authorial control and persuasion. The

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[132] Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, p. 77.
[133] CA, 1.247-8; 3.2249-50; 5.2919-20.
[134] Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, pp. 33, 77-78; idem, 'Gower's 'Confessio Amantis', Natural Morality, and Vernacular Ethics', *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Urban, Malte (Turnhout, 2009) pp. 135-53; Timothy C. Potts, 'Conscience', *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge, 1982) pp. 687-704; Denis J. M. Bradley, *Aquinas on the Twofold Human Good: Reason and Human Happiness in Aquinas's Moral Science* (Washington, 1997).
[135] CA, 8.3122.

visual and imaginative impact of evidence was not intended to convince, it was not a method of moral coercion, but one of moral demonstration. We see these discursive impulses surface in his discussion of rhetoric in Book 7, where Gower argues that a tale might be made 'plein [and] withoute frounce', directing us to consider his account of Catiline's trial for treason.[136]

Gower has the Roman consul Silanus present his case against Catiline first:

> Cillenus ferst his tale tolde,
>
> To trouthe and as he was beholde,
>
> The comun profit for to save,
>
> He seide hou tresoun scholde have
>
> A cruel deth …

(CA, 7.1607-11)

We are told that Silanus composes his tale in this manner because he 'spieken plein after the lawe'.[137] Like Gower, who emphasized the rhetorical status of his own 'rude wordis and … pleyne', Silanus avoids the 'lovely words of crafted speech' and uses instead plain language that was beholden to truth and to common profit.[138] This is contrasted against the language of Julius Caesar, who 'his tale tolde al otherwise'.[139] Caesar sought to excite the judges to pity through his eloquence, painting the wise words of his soul with all the colours of rhetoric in order to secure a more lenient verdict of exile.[140]

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[136] CA, 7.1594.
[137] CA, 7.1623.
[138] CA, 8.3122; [*Compositi pulcra sermonis verba*] (CA, 7.v).
[139] CA, 7.1616.
[140] Caesar's rhetorical strategies and his desire to win a relative verdict distinct from the literal interpretation of the law are part of the classical definitions of *enargeia* and *evidentia*. Gower suggests, that when partnered with a tyrannical mind, evidential discourse could be dangerous.

It is not impossible to make out Gower's own allegiances here. His emphasis on plain-speaking – his refusal to 'peint and pik' his words – sits in opposition to Caesar's seductive persuasions. However, a compelling feature of this exemplum is that it entirely omits the outcome of the trial. There is no authorial or judicial conclusion, only the evidence of 'the sothe experience'. As such, we are invited to sit with the Roman parliament and assess the efficacy of the speeches and their arguments, and to conclude for ourselves the appropriate judgement of the case. By offering examples for judgement, not precepts for moral instruction, the trial performs the function of Gower's understanding of poetic evidence and embodies his poetic theory. The completion of a text was to be found, not in the moral imperatives of the author, but in the response of the reader. It was the job of the author to get out of the way and let the reader assume control of the text.

Interestingly here, we might begin to understand the blandness of Gower's verse.[141] Its syntactic predictability, monotony, and deadening effect appears to enact his desire to produce a work free from the affective influence of authorial charisma and persuasion. Like Silanus' colourless arguments, Gower sought to relate the facts of his cases without *frounce* or ornament, describing the plain truth of experience, not to advance his own agenda, but for the purpose of common profit. By applying a juristic and evidential approach to the construction of his verse, he hoped to create an author-shaped hole in his text which was to be filled by his reader. As with the trial of Catiline, where he sought to decentre the axis of his work by conferring onto the reader the conclusive powers of a judge, Gower erases himself from his verse so that his readers might better advise themselves and reach their own conclusions.

[141] Maura Nolan, 'Sensation and the Plain Style in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *John Gower: Others and the Self*, ed. Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager, Publications of the John Gower Society XI (Cambridge, 2017) pp. 111-40. It is difficult to succinctly demonstrate the bland quality of his verse: it is cumulative in effect. It is also certainly a subjective and qualitative judgement, though perhaps not an uncontroversial one.

XI

Advising the self was fundamental to the moral life. And self-analysis was central to Gower's poetic theory. Genius describes the commonplace connection between rational self-governance and literary evidence when he tells Amans that, by drawing into his memory a taxonomy of moral stories, 'thow miht thiself the betre avise'.[142] Amans is told to 'ley thi conscience in weyhte … and schrif the hier'.[143] He is to reflect on his condition and consider his character in an effort to restore equilibrium to his internal faculties through confession and self-evaluation.

The penitential and introspective focus of the *Confessio* seems to reflect the enduring impact of Lateran IV, which gave impetus to, amongst other things, the increased technologizing of confessional practice and penitential theology.[144] These developments and their pastoral emphases confirmed the possibility for self-examination through poetic texts and coalesced into wider literary movements. Earlier in the century, in his letter to Giovanni Colonna di San Vito, Francis Petrarch (d. 1374) expressed a similar set of priorities to those of Gower:

> Nothing moves me so much as the quoted maxims [*esempi*] of great men. I like to rise above myself, to test my mind to see if it contains anything solid or lofty, or stout and firm against ill-fortune, or to find if my mind had been lying to me about itself. And there is no better way of doing this – except by direct experience [*oltre l'esperienza*], the surest mistress – than by

[142] CA, 2.3530.
[143] CA, 2.1926-7.
[144] On Lateran IV more generally, see Henry Charles Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church* (New York, 1968). On the *pastoralia* generated by Lateran IV, see Leonard E. Boyle, 'The Fourth Lateran Council and Manuals of Popular Theology', *The Popular Literature of Medieval England*, ed. Thomas J. Heffernan (Knoxville, 1985) pp. 30-43; Joseph Goering, 'The Internal Forum and the Literature of Penance and Confession', *History of Medieval Canon Law*, ed. W Hartmann and K. Pennington (Washington, 2001) pp. 1-75.

> comparing one's mind with those it would most like to resemble. Thus, as I am grateful to my authors who give me the chance of testing my mind against maxims [*esempi*] frequently quoted, so I hope my readers will thank me.[145]

Like Gower, Petrarch had perceived value in the examples [*esempi*] of former authorities because they provided a substitute experience with which to test the moral character of his mind. It reflects an interesting amendment to the revelatory powers of poetry: rather than being elevated above the self into a state of revealed knowledge, the mind was elevated into a place of objective self-observance. By the time we reach Gower, however, any supramental aspect of poetry seems to have been all but abandoned.

Although Gower's model of self-analysis was distinctly earthbound, it, like Petrarch's, encouraged the reader to test themselves against the evidence of past experience. Indeed, Genius instructs Amans in the correct response to his tales:[146]

> Nou thou hast herd this evidence,
> Thou miht thin oghne conscience
> Oppose …
>
> (CA, 5.2919-21)

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[145] [Non avvi cosa per me autorevole tanto quanto gli esempi degli uomini illustri. Imperocchè utile cosa è il levarsi in alto, e meter l'anima a prova per conoscere se in sè contenga alcun che di generoso, di forte, di fermo e costante contro la nemica fortuna, o se di sè medesima essa faccia vanto menzognero e bugiardo: e ad ottener questo, oltre l'esperienza di tutte cose maestra infallibile, altro non è che tanto giovi quanto il paragonarlo con quelli a cui vorrebesi assimigliare. E come a quelli che io leggo gratissimo mi professo se porgendomi illustri esempi mettanmi in grado di far di cotale esperimento, cosi spero che a me ne sian grati quei che mi leggono] Petrarch, *Lettere di Francesco Petrarch*, ed. Guiseppe Fracasetti (Le Monnier, 1863) pp. 142-3; *Letters from Petrarch*, trans. Morris Bishop (Bloomington, 1966) p. 68.

[146] We see this in the way Amans constantly wrestles with the significance of Genius' tales, as he struggles to understand their relevance and how they might apply to his circumstance, before slowly adopting the confessor's prompts, eventually applying the methods of probation to himself (CA, 5.3226-31).

By opposing the conscience with – and measuring it against – a diverse range of material, the reader was able to enlarge their field of self-knowledge. Genius seems to describe this kind of confessional audit in his tale of the angel who was sent to 'investigate the circumstances of men':[147]

> This angel with hise wordes wise
> Opposeth hem in sondri wise,
> Now lowde wordes and now softe,
> That mad hem to desputen ofte,
> And ech of hem his reson hadde.
> And thus with tales he hem ladde
> With good examinacioun,
> Til he knew the condicioun.
>
> (CA, 2.307-14)

The narrative strategy of the angel reflects the penitential psychoanalysis of the *Confessio*; his way of speaking parallels Gower's own efforts to spark debate through the discordant and sometimes conflicting juxtaposition of evidence.[148] In this sense, Gower was a *tumultuator* [one who causes debates], as he sought to bring the reader to a dialectical crisis and into a greater understanding of themselves and of moral truth.[149]

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[147] [Hominum condiciones exploraret] (CA, 2.293 ff.).
[148] For example, in the tale of Jupiter, Juno, and Tiresias, Amans is advised to 'hold thi tunge stille clos', lest he end up like the blinded Tiresias, who honestly tells Juno she was more amorous than Jupiter (CA, 3.769, 745). Similarly, in the tale of Phebus and Cornide, Genius admonishes Amans: 'Be war therfore and sei the beste' (CA, 3.815). Yet, in contrast to these tales, the Tale of Echo emphasizes the importance of veracity and openness because truth will inevitably out: 'Bot so privé mai be nothing, / That it ne comth to knowleching' (CA, 5.4597-8).
[149] See Abelard, *Sic et Non*, ed. Boyer and McKeon, Pro. 93; Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 90.

Encountering a diversity of viewpoints functioned as a means of increasing self-awareness.[150] As Petrarch says, it was a way to see if the mind was lying about itself. We might recall Amans' – and to an extent Dido's – self-delusions which were compounded by the singular narrative focus of their will. The way out of the echo chamber of desire, it seems, required challenging the assumptions of the conscience with a range of competing moral statements, that is, with 'counsel on all sides'. The reformative power of poetic writing was to be found in its diversity and in its ability to cultivate within the reader self-knowledge.[151] Nonetheless, Gower appears ultimately suspicious of the efficacy of this process, and despite the vast network of tales he encounters, Amans was unable to successfully determine his own circumstance in relation to the exemplary lovers of the past.

In Amans' case, the conscience could not be trained by the evidence of past experience. His will was unable to be reformed. The denouement of the poem finds Amans visited by a cacophonous procession of famous lovers – the exemplary figures from Genius' tales – who offer up a contrastive body of 'diverse opinoun', where 'ech his oghne avis / Hath told, on that, another this'.[152] The claustrophobic *presse* of their competing claims, like the sheer volume of material in the *Confessio*, results in paralysis rather than personal change. It is stultifying rather than divinely imitative.[153] It represents a comical stasis that ironically undercuts the entire confessional project, satirizing its own moral function by revealing the ultimate uncertainty of right action. It is both the failure of poetry and the failure of the reader. Only the sudden intervention of Venus could begin the process of resolving Amans' love-sickness. In

[150] We are reminded here of C. S. Lewis' famous criticism of Gower that 'he says too much' (*Allegory of Love*: *A Study in Medieval Tradition* [Oxford, 1958] p. 222).
[151] In this respect, the *Confessio* seeks to make self-examination socially responsible, Elizabeth Allen, 'Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading', *English Literary History* 63 (1997) pp. 634-36.
[152] CA, 8.2782; 8.2761-2.
[153] CA, 8.2750-2.

the end we are reminded that a poetic shrift, no matter how extensive and thorough, did not guarantee an assured moral outcome or self-actualization. It is, in the end, a bleak assessment of the moral utility of poetry.

So far, we have examined Gower's desire to create a polysemous and diverse text. We have considered his theory of reading, and how the faculties of will, reason, and the imagination converted literary material into moral behaviour. We have investigated the importance of self-knowledge as both a prerequisite for, and product of, the interpretation of narrative poetry. We have seen the interactions of memory and conscience as they relate to the assessment of the evidence of former experience. Having observed these aspects of the *Confessio* we can now, by way of conclusion, ask more specifically what poetry was, how it differed from other modes of discourse, and how Gower perceived his own status as a poet.

XII

Words were the most powerful force in the natural world:[154]

> That word above alle erthli thinges
>
> Is vertuous in his doinges,
>
> Wher so it be to evele or goode.
>
> (CA, 7.1547-9)

The potency of language was so great, Gower says, that 'word mai worche above kinde'.[155] The agency of rhetorical discourse was, he implies, equal to the

[154] This notion is repeated throughout the poem: 'Wordes ben of vertu grete' (CA, 6.449); 7.1575; 'These three are efficacious: herb, stone, speech; / And yet by force of word's weight more is moved' [Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute replete, / Vis tamen ex verbi pondere plura facit] (CA, 7.v).
[155] CA, 4.438.

transgressive and supernatural forces of magic.[156] 'Wordes maken … pes of were', he says, 'and werre of pes'.[157] As a language art, then, poetry should hold considerable power. Yet Gower does not defend its value, nor does he offer a convenient description of its distinctive attributes, purposes, or effects. It seems that, in line with the inductive programme of the *Confessio*, these were to be inferred from the evidence of the text and according to the reader's own perspective.

Gower's theory of poetry appears tied to his understanding of the category of rhetoric.[158] Throughout the period the study of rhetoric combined with poetics through the disciplinary filters of the universities and the grammar schools. We might understand then, that when Gower thinks of rhetoric he may have a range of blended discursive models in mind. The two categories appear to have coalesced in mutually profitable ways to the point that it is difficult to separate them in his thinking. While he certainly pursued the rhetorical objectives of Aristotle as set out by Giles of Rome – generating plainly worded *euydens* and *prueves* for comparative evaluation – he did so in the uniquely poetic form of verse.

We might understand his reasons for this in light of Brunetto Latini's comments on the formal effect of verse:

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[156] CA, 6.1399-1402.
[157] CA, 7.1574-6.
[158] For Gower's discussion on rhetoric, see Book 7.1507-1640. Following the lead of Giles of Rome's commentary on the *Rhetoric*, Gower elevates the discipline within the *trivium* and above dialectic and logic, see Georgiana Donvin, 'Rhetorical Gower: Aristotelianism in the Confessio Amantis' Treatment of 'Rethorique'', *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout, 2009) p. 161. Gower appears able to draw a distinction between Ciceronian and Aristotelian rhetoric, favouring the latter. He explains that nothing in his poem is founded 'uppon the forme of rethorique' where a writer might 'wordis forto peinte and pike, / As Tullius som tyme wrot' (CA, 8.3117-19). He does however, as we have seen, continually echo Aristotle's rhetorical dictum to 'let the virtue of style ... be defined as 'to be clear'' (Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy, 3.2.1).

> The way of prose is large and vast, as is the common speech of people today, but the way of poetry [*rime*] is more narrow and difficult, like a passage enclosed by walls and fortified by palisades.[159]
>
> (Latini, *Li livres dou trésor*, ed. Carmody, p. 301)

Latini's *Tresor*, like Giles' *De regimine*, was an important material resource for Gower and his statement here resonates with the ethical project of the *Confessio*. In accord with Gower's desire to displace the centre of authority within his text, rhyme and metred line appear to have been formally resistant to interpretation as their considerable fortifications inhibited the assured transmission of information. The opacity of poetry repelled the hermeneutic assault of the reader, who was required to travail in their efforts to seize meaning from within its formal defences.

The exegetical uncertainty of verse rests uneasily beside Gower's proposed clarity and openness. Indeed, Thomas Usk (d. 1388) had complained that readers indiscriminately consumed the 'delyciousnesse … of ryme by queynt knyttyng coloures' without paying attention to the 'goodnesse or … the badnesse of the sentence'.[160] Because of the formal distractions of verse, Usk wrote his *Testament of Love* in prose, explaining in a distinctly Trevisian way that 'rude wordes and boystous, percen the herte of the herer to the inrest poynte'.[161] For Gower, the dark veil of rhyme and metre, which obscured the narrative *sentence*, was an important

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[159] [La voie de prose est large & pleniere, si come est hore la commune parleure des jens, mais le sentier de rime plus estrois & plus fors, si come cellui qui est close & fermé de murs & de palis]. We find a similar idea expressed in the prologue to a popular French translation of Boethius' *Consolatio* where the prose facilitates comprehension, while the verse effectively obfuscates knowledge, in this case producing a type of blissful amnesia: 'And [the book] uses prose and metre, that is, it speaks in part plainly and without rhyme, and in the other part through rhymed verse, because in the prose parts it uses arguments that lead to consolation, while in the rhymed verse it combines pleasurable ways of speaking that make you forget your sorrows' [Et use de proses et de metres, c'est a dire qu'il parle d'une part plainement et sanz rymes et d'autre part par vers rymez, car es proses il use de raisons qui font a consolacion et es vers rymez etremesle aucunes delectables raisons qui font oublier la douleur] (Glynnis M. Cropp, ed., *Le livre de Boece de Consolacion* [Genève, 2006] pp. 88-9.
[160] Thomas Usk, *Testament of Love*, ed. R. Allen Shoaf (Kalamazoo, 1998) 1.Pro., ll. 1-4.
[161] Ibid. ll. 5-6.

aspect of his poetic theory. The poetic mode was not to be used for didactic instruction. It was difficult terrain and required careful navigation.

It is unsurprising, then, that Gower does not offer us a didactic defence of poetry. Within the literary economy of the *Confessio* that would be contradictory. Indeed, the very moment we might expect a vindicating assessment of the great poets of the past, it is withheld. In Book 5, Gower lays out an extensive history of the pagan gods found in the *poetarum fabulae*.[162] Within humanist traditions, such a catalogue might involve an exhortation of the enduring relevance of poetry, not so for Gower. In the absence of any such commendation we are simply left to sift and weigh the evidence of history ourselves. The merits of these ancient poets were, like so much of the *Confessio*, left to be judged by the reader.

However, in similar fashion to the Italian humanists before him, Gower seems to have considered himself an extension of this classical tradition. Gower's humanism is rooted in a personal reverence of the learning and pedagogy of past writers. In his cento, *Vox clamantis*, he writes:

> I acknowledge that my verses have been written with many models [*exemplis*] and strengthened by learned men of old.[163]

Moreover, a frequent manuscript partner to the *Confessio*, the *Eneidos bucolis*, describes Gower as a philosopher and, more radically, as a new Virgil.[164] In the same

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[162] CA, 5.747-1736.

[163] [Doctorum veterum mea carmina fortificando / Pluribus exemplis scripta fuisse reor] (John Gower, *The Complete Works of John* Gower, vol. 4, ed. G. C. Macaulay [Oxford, 1899-1902] *Vox clamantis*, 1.Pro., ll. 81-82). Not only was the cento a distinctly humanist impulse, which we find used by Mussato, we might also compare his use of *exemplum* with Petrarch's *esempli* above.

[164] There is some debate as to authorship of this poem, Yeager writes: 'If *Eneidos bucolis* is by Gower, it presents an advance on his demonstrated fictive self-fashioning, but not an inconceivable one … On the other hand, if it is, in fact, by someone else, its quintuple presence in manuscripts of his work may indicate how well Gower thought *Eneidos bucolis* caught his likeness' (John Gower, *The Minor Latin Works with In Praise of Peace*, ed. Robert Yeager [Kalamazoo, 2005] p. 3).

way that Virgil astounded the ears of the Romans with the vanities and delights of the pagan Muse, Gower's philosophical poetry shines for reborn Christians.[165] It is an interesting riff on the humanist claim that Virgil was either a Christian or unknowingly uttered divine wisdom. Here, Gower was the Christian and scholastic perfection of a pagan past. It is to this end that he suggests his works should be considered canonical, *ad legendum necessaria sunt*.[166]

In a quatrain attached to many *Confessio* manuscripts, Gower is described by a contemporary as an 'expert of poetry and also a satirical poet'.[167] While he was deeply indebted to medieval communal and estates satire, Gower's commitment to irony, uncertainty, and the forensic evaluation of evidence transcends the conventional satirical imperative to expose the degeneracies of vice, while at the same time working within these familiar moral frameworks.[168] It may be along these lines that Chaucer decided to dedicate *Troilus and Criseyde* to 'moral Gower'. As we have seen, moral poetry was not moralizing poetry, it was darkly uncertain, rich in diversity, and laden with a satirical force that enacted itself on the reader. Because moral poetry was fundamentally concerned with the art of interpretation, it makes sense for Chaucer to request 'moral Gower' to safeguard his poem's reception, especially given its own investigations into the ambiguities of reading and writing, and of perception and intent.[169]

In the prologue of the *Confessio*, Gower seems to construct an image of his idealized poet in the figure of Arion. As a skilled harper, Arion was able to bring

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[165] Gower, *Eneidos bucolis*, ed. Robert Yeager, ll. 13-16. In *Vox clamantis* Gower refuses to invoke the Muses, opting instead to offer sacrifices to the Christian God (VC, 2.3).
[166] Gower, *Quicquid homo scribat* (In fine), ed. Yeager, pr. 14.
[167] [Carminis Athleta satirus … sive Poeta] (Gower, *Eneidos bucolis*, n. prose).
[168] Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors', pp. 223-8.
[169] For a different take, see Yeager's earlier claims that Gower was invoked to be a measure of classical and poetic learning in contrast to 'philosophical Strode', who was to protect the poem's philosophical material, ''O Moral Gower": Chaucer's Dedication of Troilus and Criseyde', *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984) pp. 87-99.

unity and healing to all those who heard the powerful harmonies and virtuous melodies of his music.[170] His song was made in 'good mesure' with the pleasing ratios of rhythm and metre.[171] While Gower might seem to hope for the advent of a new Arion, the arrival of such a poet-figure seems unlikely.[172] The literary and linguistic uncertainty of the post-Babel world of the *Confessio* – a place where 'word is wynd' – appears inimical to the emergence of a singular and authoritative poetic voice.[173] Certainly, the self-serving poetry of Amans, who had for his lady 'ofte assaied / Rondeal, balade and virelai … to make', was incapable of resolving the social malaise of an entire nation.[174]

Not just a wilful reader, then, Amans also represents a wilful poet. Gower often collapses the activities of reading and writing together, presenting them as comparable habits of the imagination.[175] A bad reader, was a bad poet, because poetry, like reading, was an extension of the internal condition of the individual. As an apparent parallel to the *vir bonus* model of authorship, which insisted on the coherence between virtue and rhetorical skill, Gower's moral psychology suggests that the poetry of Arion required an internal state unachievable in a postlapsarian world.[176]

For Gower, Arion was a humanist fantasy, a parody of the authoritative and divinely inspired *poeta theologus*, at least as he perceived it. As we progress through

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[170] CA, Pro. 1053 ff.
[171] CA, Pro. 1056.
[172] This argument diverges from that of Echard, who, despite observing that the conditional tense of the language in this scene and suggesting that Gower acknowledged it would be difficult to find such a poet, agrees with Yeager's earlier assessment that Gower was indeed searching for a new Arion ('With Carmen's Help', pp. 29-30; Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* [Cambridge, 1990]).
[173] CA, 3.2768.
[174] CA, 1.2726-30.
[175] Cf. with Dido, whose excessive and busy writing similarly represents an extension of her internal condition.
[176] Gillespie, 'Authorship', pp. 140-1.

the expanse of the *Confessio*, we move further away from the stabilizing presence of Arion and closer to a recognition of the wholly unattainable and impractical nature of such a figure. Unlike the illusory and impossible poetic music of Arion, Gower's writing was pragmatic in its response to the relativity of language, embracing the uncertainty of moral truth and revelling in a plurality of discordant voices and competing evidential models. Gower did not sing with the same harmonious balance and high perfection of Arion. He did not seek to forcefully compel moral change in his audience. Instead, he got down and dirty with the equivocacy of words and stories – the only available means of communicating – in order to elicit from his audience an inductive response of deliberation.[177]

Gower invokes a humanist theory of authorship, only to reveal its absurdity. He appears deeply suspicious of the title and status of poet. The *Confessio* is not identified as a work of *poesie*, like that of Ovid, but is assiduously and explicitly classified as a book.[178] Rather than take up the mantle of poet, he points the reader toward the intellectual world of treatises, compilations, encyclopedias, confessional manuals, and preaching handbooks. Gower seems uninterested in assuming for himself the singular, final, and emphatic authority of what he imagined was the humanist writer's prerogative. Instead, he conceived of himself as one voice amongst many, one more perspective to be consulted in a constellation of work that was broad and deep. Other, wiser men, he explains, will come after him and will continue to write about the vanities of the world.[179]

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[177] Russell Peck, 'The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Studies in Philology* 91.3 (1994) pp. 250-69; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, pp. 198 ff.; Glending Olson, 'Rhetoric, John Gower, and the Late Medieval *Exemplum*', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 8 (1977) pp. 187-94, esp. p. 189.
[178] CA, 4.2668, 5.637.
[179] Gower, *Quicquid homo scribat* (In fine), ed. Yeager, ll. 7-9.

XIII

Motivated by the rhetorical principles of Aristotelian moral philosophy, the poetic theory of the *Confessio* envisioned a decentralized model of literary authority, where textual meaning was entirely relative to the unique perceptions and circumstantial needs of the reader. The dark matter of poetry demanded a unique response of evaluation. Poetic significance was entirely dependent on the unpredictable, idiosyncratic, and often refractory judgements of its audience. A text was only as good as its reader.

This was English humanism at the end of the fourteenth century: it was deeply committed to the study and imitation of the ancients, yet ruthlessly sceptical of any coherent assertion of poetic authority. In contrast to earlier humanist projects, the vernacular poets here appear invested in an ironic self-awareness of their own status as a reader. Within the vast expanse of literary history, a text could be but one voice amongst a diverse multitude of competing claims, genres, and perspectives. While for Gower, the dissolution of textual authority was part of a sustained moral programme, for other writers, like Chaucer, the rise of the reader inevitably led to the death of the author.

Chapter 4

Theories of Poetry and *The House of Fame*

I

Ethice subponitur quia de moribus tractat.[1] When confronted with the problem of classifying poetry within the parts of philosophy, this was the standard medieval commentary and *accessus* response, that poetry pertained to ethics, because it concerned moral behaviour. It is an inclusive claim that has had a lasting impact on the perceived nature of medieval poetry, shaping the direction and expectations of subsequent scholarly investigations into the literary history of the Middle Ages.[2] However, as has more recently been argued, this was not the only way to assess and classify poetic function in the period.[3] While some poets were used for the combined

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[1] R. B. C. Huygens, ed. *Accessus ad auctores, Bernard d'Utrecht, Conrad d'Hirsau, Dialogus super auctores* (Leiden, 1970) p. 25, also pp. 20-2, 26-7, 33.

[2] In his examination of medieval commentaries, Judson Boyce Allen popularized the critical view that medieval poetry constituted a form of ethics, the pursuit of the moral good, arguing that the categories of the literary and ethical coalesced so thoroughly that ethics was itself 'enacted poetry' (*The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* [Toronto, 1982] p. 12). Elsewhere, John Dagenais has suggested that above all medieval reading was an 'ethical activity': 'Where we tend to see our texts as webs of language, medieval readers saw a world of human action for good or ill' (*The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the 'Libro de Buen Amor* [Princeton, 1994] xvii). According to Dagenais, medieval literary texts 'reached out and grabbed the reader, involved him or her in praise and blame, in judgements about effective and ineffective human behavior' (ibid.). Jessica Rosenfeld has suggested that from its 'birth' vernacular poetry was concerned with ethics (*Ethics and Enjoyment in Late Medieval Poetry: Love after Aristotle* [Cambridge, 2011] p. 1).

[3] On the imaginative nature and moral neutrality of poetry, see the important response to Allen's work and the dominant idea of the ethical poetic in Vincent Gillespie, 'Ethice subponitur?: The Imaginative Syllogism and the Idea of the Poetic', *Medieval Thought Experiments: Poetry and Hypothesis, 1100-1450*, ed. Philip Knox, Jonathon Morton, Daniel Reeve (Turnhout, 2018) pp. 297-327. These ideas can be found with substantial reflections on the literary theoretical insights of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes in idem, 'Afterword: On Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Erotics of Reading', *On Allegory: Some Medieval Aspects and Approaches*, ed. Mary Carr, K. P. Clarke, and Marco Nievergelt (Newcastle, 2008) pp. 231-56; idem, 'Lunatics, Lovers, and Poets: Compact Imaginations in Chaucer and Medieval Literary Theory', *Shakespeare between the Middle Ages and Modernism: From Translator's*

purposes of grammatical and moral instruction, most poetry could not be defined as ethical in any obvious sense – it neither prescribed behavioural norms nor affirmed the criteria for right action – and might be more productively understood, as it was by poetic theorists in the period, as a means of producing acts of imagination.[4]

In his shorter commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, the influential Islamic scholar, Avicenna (d. 1037), considered poetry to be an imaginative mode of representation:

> Poetic premises are premises whose role is to cause *acts of imagination*, and not assent, to befall the soul, whenever they are accepted. And the production of imagination is the arousal of wonder, aggrandizement, down playing or belittlement, grief, or delight … And it is not one of the conditions of these premises that they be true or false, or widely accepted or repugnant, but rather that they be imaginative.[5]

For Avicenna, and many Islamic commentators, poetic statements were not statements of morality, they did not seek intellectual assent, nor did they relate any kind of true meaning, but were by definition a unique product of the individual imagination. Here, poetry was not simply a mode of moral persuasion, it was not a site of didaxis, but rather of catalysis, where its primary function was to generate vivid impressions within the mind.[6] Any moral application was a secondary function,

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Art to Academic Discourse, ed. Martin Prochazka and Jan Cermak (Prague, 2008) pp. 11-39. For any early response to Allen, Alastair Minnis, review, '*The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction*', *Speculum* 59.2 (1984) pp. 363-66.

[4] According to Herman the German's translation of Averroes' Middle Commentary of Aristotle's *Poetics*, fables like those of Aesop and proverbial writing like the *Disticha Catonis* were not properly poetic because they did not work 'per ymaginativas commotiones' (Hermannus Alemannus, *De arte poetica cum Averrois expositione*, ed. L. Minio-Paluello, Corpus philosophorum medii ævi, Aristoteles latinus, 33, 2nd edn. [Brussels, 1968] pp. 51-2.

[5] *Kitāb al-Majmū' aw al-Ḥikmah al-'arūḍīyah al-mansūb ilá Abī 'Alī ibn Sīnā*, ed. M. Salīm Sālim (Cairo, 1969) pp. 15.4-16.2, in Deborah Black, 'The Imaginative Syllogism in Arabic Philosophy: A Medieval Contribution to the Study of Metaphor', *Medieval Studies* 51 (1989) p. 245. Emphasis added.

[6] Gillespie, 'Ethice subponitur?', pp. 299, 308.

and was to be considered a result of the accidental stirrings and partial deliberations of the imaginatively engaged audience.

During the thirteenth century, this kind of imaginative poetics infiltrated scholastic Christian and Latin thinking on the subject through the translation of Arabic commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics*, influencing the work of writers throughout the period. A notable witness to this process is the poetic treatise of Matthias of Linköping (d. c.1350).[7] A Paris-trained theologian, Matthias was the advisor, amanuensis, and eventual confessor to Briggita of Sweden (d. 1373), a visionary whose writings would influence the discursive and religious self-representations of the English mystic and pilgrim, Margery Kempe (d. post-1438), who we will discuss further below.[8] For Matthias, poetry was fundamentally and uniquely imaginative:

> Whereas in our opinion all the resources of the language are normally used for rational statements, we maintain that poetry alone deals with statements that are imaginative … The perfect poet gives us pleasure by making us imagine a thing in accordance with its characteristics. This imagination, however, is accomplished by three means, viz. *visualization*, *intonation* and *metre*, but visualization alone is an essential part of poetry. For just as other sciences attain their ends by means of rational arguments, so does poetry by

[7] Alastair Minnis, 'Acculturizing Aristotle: Matthew of Linköping's *Translatio* of Poetic Representation', *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie 124* (2005) *Sonderheft: Retextualisierung in der mittelalterlichen Literatur*, ed. Joachim Bumke and Ursula Peters, pp. 238-59; Martin Camargo, 'A Good Idea, in Theory: Why Mathias of Linköping's Poetria Fell Short in Practice', *Rhetorica* 35.3 (2017) pp. 239-58; Gillespie, 'Lunatics, Lovers, and Poets', pp. 11-39; idem, 'Ethice subponitur?', pp. 316-17; idem, 'The Study of the Classical Authors from the Twelfth Century to c.1450', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge, 2005) pp. 175-77.

[8] Gunnel Cleve, 'Margery Kempe: A Scandinavian Influence in Medieval England', *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge, 1992) pp. 163-79.

> means of visualization … Thus, a visualization is the representation of something in words, as if it seems to pass vividly before our eyes.[9]

According to Matthias, the essential power of poetry was defined by its imitative *enargeia*, its ability to make absent things appear as though present before the eyes of the mind with vivid immediacy.[10] In contrast to earlier theories of poetry, the music and rules of metre had become only a secondary and unessential feature of its full apparatus. Here, poetry was simply a linguistic means for creating imaginative and imitative mental representations.

In his synthesis of Horatian and Arabic-Aristotelian poetics, Matthias also argues in a conventional way for the moral relevance of poetry, suggesting that it should work to incite its audience to virtue [*ad incitandum auditores ad virtutes*] by moving them to the love of good or the fear of evil.[11] He follows in a long tradition established by Arabic-influenced Aristotelians like the Chartrian-educated, Dominicus Gundissalinus (d. c.1190), who similarly argued that poetic statements were initially imaginative, but should also provide their audience with some kind of moral benefit:[12]

> The proper function of poetic speech is to make us imagine beautiful or loathsome things, which do not exist, so that the hearer might believe them

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[9] [Omnes plerumque sermocinales facultates circa sermones intellectuales arbitrantes insistere, poetriam solam circa sermones imaginatiuos asserimus conuersari … {Poeta} perfeccius delectat animam in faciendo rem secundum suas proprietates imaginari. Completur autem imaginacio per tria, scilicet per representacionem, tonum et metrum et sola quidem representacio est de esse poetrie. Sicut enim alie sciencie per raciones faciunt, quod intendit ita poetria per representacionem… Est igitur representacio ostensio rei per sermonem, tanquam iam ante oculos fieri videatur] (Magister Mathias Lincopensis, *Testa Nucis and Poetria*, ed. and trans. Birger Bergh, Samlinger utgivna av Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet, Latinska Skrifter, IX:2 [Arlöv: Berlings, 1996] p. 47). Translation amended.

[10] For a discussion on the concept of *enargeia*, see Chapter 3.

[11] Mathias Lincopensis, *Testa Nucis and Poetria*, p. 59.

[12] Edgar de Bruyne has argued for the pervasive influence of Gundissalinus' poetic theory, suggesting it had an impact on Dante Alighieri's work (*Études d'esthétique médiévale* [Bruges, 1946] t. II, pp. 398, 419).

> and come to abhor them or desire them … For the imagination is always more powerfully at work in man than knowledge or thought.[13]

Within a comparable, although notably muted, ethical vision, an anonymous *quaestio* on the nature of poetry, produced in Paris at the beginning of the fourteenth century, explains that 'poetic discourse or the poetic syllogism, is called 'imaginative' by the Philosopher' and its purpose is to win listeners to virtue through praise and encouragement.[14]

These sorts of aphoristic clippings from Arabic-Aristotelian poetic theory were circulated in excerpted form throughout the period in popular florilegial compilations and encyclopedias. Vincent of Beauvais OP (d. 1264) was able to reproduce the theoretical positions of Al-farabi in his discussion on the various species of *poetica*:

> The particular role of poetry is, through speeches, to make certain people imagine something as more beautiful or loathsome than it actually is, in such a way that the hearer, in believing it, will either abhor or desire it. Although it is certainly not true, the mind of the hearers will be stimulated to loathe or desire what is imagined.[15]

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[13] [Proprium est poeticae sermonibus suis facere imaginari aliquid pluchrum vel foedum, quod non est, ita ut auditor credat et aliquando abhorreat vel appetat … Imaginatio enim quandoque plus operatur in homine quam scientia vel cogitatio] (Dominicus Gundissalinus, *De divisione philosophiae*, ed. Ludwig Baur, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, vol. 4 [Münster, 1903] p. 74).

[14] [Sermo poeticus seu sillogismus poeticus ymaginativus a philosopho appellatur] (*Questio in Poetriam*, ed. by Gilbert Dahan, in 'Notes et textes sur la *Poétique* au Moyen-Âge', *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 47 [1980] pp. 215-16, 217).

[15] [Poeticae proprium est sermonibus suis facere imaginari, aliquid pulchrum vel foedum, quod non est ita, ut auditor credat et aliquid abhorreat vel appetat. Quanvis cum certum sit non esse in veritatate, animum tamen audientium eriguntur ad horrendum vel appetendum quod imaginatur] (Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum quadruplex, sive, Speculum maius: naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale,* 4 vols. [Douai, 1624; repr. Graz, 1964-5] *Speculum doctrinale*, 109.287).

According to Vincent's account, the purpose of poetry was not to relate truth, but to produce a powerfully convincing imaginative experience that directed the moral appetite toward good.

However, as we have seen already with John Gower (d. 1408), this kind of moral imperative depended more on the carefully conditioned interpretative reflexes of a moral reader than the latent presence of any intrinsic poetic good. Any response to the representational power of the poetic syllogism was a singular event, proportional to a reader's individual interests and abilities. This is why Albertino Mussato (d. 1329) had advised caution in dealing with the poetic mode and Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400) repeatedly suggests we 'assay' his texts.[16] In contrast to the divinely assured spiritual and moral teleology of biblical poetry, where readers might ascend through the senses of Scripture to confidently ascertain mystical and moral truth – where they might learn to love good and hate evil – secular poetry offered no inbuilt moral or interpretative limit.[17]

Indeed, Matthias appears quietly aware of the problems created by the self-directed hermeneutic agency of readers. He worries that the emphatic representations of poetry might evoke *passiones contrarie* to those that would lead to virtue, potentially rendering individuals unable to discern or desire what was morally right.[18] Once liberated by the imaginative interventions of a reader, poetry could not guarantee its own moral reception and, instead, sparked a process of creative, uncontrolled, and wantonly digressive interpretation. Thus, Matthias touches on the

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[16] Gillespie, 'The Study of the Classical Authors', p. 148.
[17] In this context we might consider Dante's desire to apply the strategies of scriptural exegesis to his own polysemous work – a word he coined to described his own poetry – as a means to close down the endless interpretative activity of his readers, appropriating for his text the delimiting borders and supportive infrastructures of biblical hermeneutics (Alastair Minnis and Brian, Scott, ed., *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100-c.1375, The Commentary Tradition* [Oxford, 1988] pp. 382-87, 394-8). On this, see Vincent Gillespie, 'On Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Erotics of Reading', pp. 231-56.
[18] Mathias Lincopensis, *Testa Nucis and Poetria*, p. 59.

immanent tension within almost all imaginative discourse, one that, as we will consider in this chapter, seems to have become increasingly problematic throughout the fourteenth century.[19] Regardless of its complexity, a tale cannot be relied on to securely transmit its own meaning and instead proliferates competing imaginative responses which result in unexpected uses, *moralitates*, and modes of allegoresis.

The writers considered in this chapter describe in their works the restless emergence of an increasingly decentralized hermeneutic economy, where the assessment of literary meaning and moral value had become a contested and subjective process. The poetic theories that emerge here suggest that the unpredictable, imprecise, and often wilful ways narrative texts were constantly reimagined by their readers had resulted in a crisis of authority: who decided how and what poetry meant? While such questions could produce a problematic stasis of meaning, they could also be productive, calling forth new methods of responding to the production and reception of past works. As this chapter will show, the waning viability of controlled and privileged confessions of meaning unavoidably gave rise to the democratization of poetry. Anyone was capable of interpretation, everyone was a storyteller. Here, there could be no enduring magisterial reader, no literary authority, no textual closure, no ethical poetic, only the unintended and unmoderated consequences of an endless string of individual imaginative performances.

As we will see, these ideas are given a particularly forceful and ironic examination in Chaucer's *House of Fame*. For Chaucer, the uncertainties attending the imaginative experience compounded with the atrophic effects of textual transmission to produce a disconcertingly fragmented literary record that resisted

[19] This is not to argue that the ambiguity of all figurative texts, which resisted easy ethical classification, should be considered as adhering to an amoral Arabic-Aristotelian imaginative poetics, although the wider and more imperceptible influence of these ideas on vernacular writers should not be discounted (Gillespie, 'Ethice Subponitur?', pp. 308-9).

exclusive claims to authority and meaning. The vivid likenesses created by the imaging faculties of the mind were, for Chaucer, impossible to control or predict with any consistency, not only by the author, but by the reader themselves. Before turning to look at his experimental meta-poetics and his rejection of past models of literary authority, this chapter will first offer a focused reading of Margery Kempe's tale of the Priest and the Pear Tree and consider the ways in which it opens out onto some of the poetic theories of the period that also served to destabilize the results of literary interpretation.[20]

Indeed, it is on the shifting and conflicted grounds of literary interpretation that Margery seeks to more deeply confirm her own authority and status, expressing a clear desire to establish herself as the arbiter of her own tale and as the determiner of her own meanings. While Margery's narrative excursion points to the distinctiveness of her own stylistic and formal accomplishments, it also suggests the ubiquity of these issues more generally. As we will see, not only do both these writers appear interested in the nature of literary authority, they are both comparably alert to the ways in which they might be read by their audiences. They both perceive reading as a kind of wilful act of imaginative reconstruction, insisting on being the final readers of their own work. For Margery, it is because of the plasticity of narrative discourse that she is able to write herself into a position of authority and become her own author, interpreter, and text, and reclaim from the clerical class her right to self-exegesis. Here, the free

[20] The title of her tale is given in an early sixteenth-century annotation to her *Book* in reddish-brown ink: 'Of þe preyst and þe pertre' (Kelly Parsons, 'The Red Ink Annotator of the Book of Margery Kempe and his Lay Audience', *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo [Victoria, 2001] pp. 143-216; cf. Joel Fredell, 'Design and Authorship in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Journal of the Early Book Society* 12 [2009] pp. 1-28; for a cultural materialist history of the reception of this tale, see Marea Mitchell, *The Book of Margery Kempe: Scholarship, Community, and Criticism* [New York, 2005] pp. 117-32).

play of narrative interpretation empowered her efforts toward self-actualization, helping her to achieve self-determining independence.

II

Likely sometime toward the end of 1417, Margery claims to have been brought before the Archbishop of York, where she was accused of heresy and threatened with death by burning.[21] According to the account of the trial in *The Book of Margery Kempe,* we are told that after she successfully counters the doctrinal charges brought against her, an unnamed *doctowr* complains to the Archbishop that she remains guilty of telling anti-clerical tales:

> 'Syr, sche telde me the werst talys of prestys that evyr I herde'. The bischop comawndyd hir to tellyn that tale. 'Sir, wyth yowr reverens, I spak but of o preste be the maner of exampyl, the whech as I have lernyd went wil in a wode … tyl the nygth cam upon hym. He, destytute of hys herborwe, fond a fayr erber in the whech he restyd that nyght, havyng a fayr pertre in the myddys al floreschyd wyth flowerys and belschyd, and blomys ful delectabil to hys syght, wher cam a bere, gret and boistows, hogely to beheldyn, schakyng the pertre and fellyng down the flowerys. Gredily this grevows best ete and devowryd tho fayr flowerys. And, whan he had etyn hem, turnyng his tayl ende in the prestys presens, voydyd hem owt ageyn at the hymyr party. The preste, havyng gret abhominacyon of that lothly syght, conceyvyng gret hevynes for dowte what it myth mene, on the next day he

[21] *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, 1996) 50, ll. 2810 n.; 52, 2914-15. On the issues of authorship and biographical veracity see, Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (Pennsylvania, 1994); idem, 'The Trope of the Scribe and the Question of Literary Authority in the Works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe', *Speculum* 66 (1991) pp. 820-38. On the legal procedures that may have been at work in bringing Margery to trial in York, see John H. Arnold, 'Margery's Trials: Heresy, Lollardy, and Dissent', *A Companion to 'The Book of Margery Kempe'*, ed. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis (Cambridge, 2004) pp. 85-93.

> wandrid forth in hys wey al hevy and pensife, whom it fortunyd to metyn wyth a semly agydd man lych to a palmyr er a pilgrime, the whiche enqwiryd of the preste the cawse of hys hevynes. The preste, rehersyng the mater beforn wretyn, seyd he conceyvyd gret drede and hevynes whan he beheld that lothly best defowlyn and devowryn so fayr flowerys and blomys and aftirward so horrybely to devoydyn hem befor hym at hys tayl ende, and he not undirstondyng what this myth mene. Than the palmyr, schewyng hymselfe the massanger of God, thus aresond hym, 'Preste, thu thiself art the pertre, sumdel florischyng and floweryng thorw thi servyse seyyng and the sacramentys ministryng, thow thu do undevowtly, for thu takyst ful lytyl heede how thu seyst thi mateynes and thi servyse, so it be blaberyd to an ende … Thu receyvyst ther the frute of evyrlestyng lyfe, the sacrament of the awter, in ful febyl disposicyon. Sithyn al the day aftyr thu myssespendist thi tyme, thu gevist the to bying and sellyng, choppyng and chongyng, as it wer a man of the werld. Thu sittyst at the ale, gevyng the to glotonye and excesse, to lust of thy body, thorw letchery and unclennesse. Thu brekyst the comawndmentys of God thorw sweryng, lying, detraccyon, and bakbytyng, and swech other synnes usyng. Thus be thy mysgovernawns, lych onto the lothly ber, thu devowryst and destroist the flowerys and blomys of vertuows levyng to thyn endles dampnacyon and many mannys hyndryng lesse than thu have grace of repentawns and amendyng'. Than the Erchebisshop likyd wel the tale and comendyd it, seying it was a good tale.
>
> (*Book*, 52, ll. 2978-3009)

Not merely a colourful rebuke of priestly hypocrisy, this long passage also represents an important reflection on the perceived status and function of narrative.[22] It serves as

[22] Edwin D. Craun suggests the tale emphasizes those power dynamics that Margery sought to destabilize – lay/clerical, male/female, learned/lewd – arguing that the story was intended to

a means for Margery to liberate her own interpretative and discursive acts and, in doing so, it also allowed her to wrest semiotic control from the hands of her clerical accusers.[23] Her tale poses a subversive challenge to the hermeneutic hegemony of the institutional Church, using its own literary and homiletic instruments of power against it, and as tools not just for clerical criticism, but also for her own self-definition.[24]

While the tale is initially interpreted as a universal and indiscriminate criticism of all priests – condemned as the *werst* the doctor had ever heard – Margery quickly reins in the excesses of his moralization by imposing her own interpretative limits on the story, explaining that – in a pointed allusion to the doctor himself – she speaks specifically of 'o preste'. It is an important moment for Margery, as we see her, not unlike a literary commentator, take control of the *integumentum* of the tale in order to dictate its meaning by means of an interpretative key, using the narrative mode to support her own claim for authoritative understanding.[25] Thus, not only does this make Margery a master reader of her own story, it also demonstrates her refusal to surrender to the control of clerical exegesis.

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offer a positive model of fraternal correction (*Ethics and Power in Medieval English Reformist Writing* [Cambridge, 2010] pp. 139-42).

[23] In this sense Margery's tale recalls the literary strategies expressed in the famous Herculean metaphor found in Ralph Higden's (d. 1364) *Polychronicon*, which could be invoked in defence of similarly layered discourses: 'Whan enemyes despised Horacius and bere hym an honde þat he hadde i-takke som of Omeres [vers], and i-medled among his and cleped hym a gaderere of old wrtynges, he answerede and seide, 'It were wel greet strengþe to wreste a mace oute of Hercules honde' … And þo I take it of oþer menis, I clepe þis storie myn; and for þat I write oþer whiles myn owne wordes and sentens of olde men, þe auctores I take for schelde and defens' (Ralph Higden, *Polychronicon, with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby, 9 vols. [London, 1865-86] I.11-2).

[24] Craun suggests that, by 'employing an exemplum to reprove powerful men', she is here imitating Briggita of Sweden (*Ethics and Power*, p. 139).

[25] In his *Integumenta Ovidii*, John of Garland (d. 1272) sought to provide the reader with a set of interpretative keys [*claves*] that would 'untie the knots of secret things, open closed matters, dissolve mists, and sing about hidden truths' [Nodos secreti denodat, clausa revelat / Rarificat nebulas, integumenta canit] (John of Garland, *Integumenta Ovidii,* ed. Ghisalberti Fausto [Milan, 1933] ll. 8-9). Although offering some interpretative flexibility, these kinds of readings were fundamentally prescriptive, invoking a range of possible solutions to a text that sought the successful enactment of a set of predetermined interpretative strategies.

It is a confident assertion of lay authority that is conspicuously supported by the tale itself, where it is the liminal figure of a 'palmyr er a pilgrime', not a priest, that defines what the bear and the pear tree *mene*. There is an intentional line of comparison connecting the tale to its teller: like the pilgrim of her story, Margery confronts clerical sin and, like the pilgrim, who is described as an instrument of divine revelation, Margery operates as an independent voice of religious authority.[26] The tale appears to function as a self-authorizing literary manifesto. It validates the social, spiritual, and interpretative authority of its speaker by mirroring the circumstances of its own composition and its own purpose. It is, in this respect, a tale about itself, about its own telling, and about its teller. Moreover, the fictional pilgrim's adaptive interpretation of natural phenomena reflects Margery's own moralizing application of the tale. This is allegoresis about allegoresis.[27] It is a self-reflexive meta-tale, a meta-allegoresis, that justifies the status of its teller and defends the potential benefits of its morally challenging narrative material.

Within this context, Margery appears to emphasize the affective influence of her story. Like the fictional priest, who was burdened with *hevynes* and *drede* at the sight of the bear, the doctor is forcibly moved by the tale, declaiming that it *smytyth* him to the heart.[28] Here, she appears to propose her own theory of literary response, explaining that the visceral intensity of his reaction was due to the fact that he shares

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[26] When finally convicted of his error, the doctor acknowledges Kempe's interpretative and ministerial authority by asking for forgiveness and prayer (*Book*, 52, l. 3017).

[27] According to Copeland and Melville, 'allegoresis in effect supplies the *integumentum* or veil with which to cover the text; it recuperates the text through concealment of it'. Paradoxically, then, 'the exegete's attempt 'to 'save' or recuperate the text … [is] a covering of the text so that it can be hermeneutically 'recovered'' (Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville, 'Allegory and Allegoresis, Rhetoric and Hermeneutics', *Exemplaria* 3 [1991] p. 171). On the radical freedom attending this kind of reading, see Gillespie, 'On Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Erotics of Reading', pp. 231-56.

[28] *Book*, 52, ll. 2992, 3010. Margery seems particularly skilled in this art, when she is imprisoned at Beverly she tells 'many good talys to hem þat wolde heryn hir, in so meche þat women wept sor & … wyth gret heuynes of her hertys' (*Book*, 53, ll. 3082-84; 38, ll. 2171-3).

the same moral failures as the priest of the tale, saying: 'Yyf any man be evyl plesyd wyth my prechyng note hym wel, for he is gylty'.[29] Accordingly, she suggests, the power and purpose of a tale was not found in its didactic precision or its obvious virtue, but in its capacity to indirectly elicit a reactive response of judgement. Here, provocative tales had a defensible function, they helped to expose unexamined moral conditions and, through analogy and comparison, to initiate a process of self-analysis.[30] As we have seen already with Gower, a tale must be turned to good by an alert and informed reader, it was not innately good in itself.

It is curious that, in contrast to the doctor's critical paroxysms, the Archbishop affirms the tale as good. But what makes it good? Defined by the image of a bear defecating in the woods, the tale is comically perverse, indecorous, and disruptive. Drawing on the satirical and derisive humour of medieval fabliaux, it lowers the sacrosanct to the level of excrement, debasing and humiliating the priestly office.[31] It is surely anything but good. What gives it merit, I suggest, is the moral application of its offensive imagery by both the pilgrim and Margery. It is not so much a good tale, as it is a good interpretation: good in that it productively harnesses the transformative

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[29] *Book*, 52, ll. 3014-5.

[30] The unstated implications of Craun's work on this passage suggest that, within the context of the post-Arundelian crisis of pastoral care, narrative discourse emerged as a productive method for fraternal correction. A tale was a functional means for extramural individuals to speak truth to power, because its teller was not required to hold equal or greater levels of institutional or intellectual authority: tales instructed through implication and thus transcended normal barriers of social distinction. It was not a mode of direct reproof, but rather sought to encourage the hearer to 'transfer judgment from a figure in the narrative to himself' (*Ethics and Power*, p. 140). As we have already seen with Gower, this process appears to have had a broad reception.

[31] We might also consider the pluralizing effect of laughter, in this case, the laughter of humiliation commonly associated with fabliaux. As Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested, laughter destabilizes didaxis, pedantry, and dogmatism, it liberates from the single meaning and the single level. By profaning the sacred, Margery could effectively assume a critical voice independent from the authority of the Church. And, by narrowing the distance between the sacerdotal and the grit and shit of reality, she was able to interpose her own spiritual authority into the situation (Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky [Indiana, 1984] p. 124). On this kind of laughter in relation to Chaucer, see Alastair Minnis, with V. J. Scattergood and J. J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer, (Oxford, 1995) p. 223.

powers of allegoresis to redeem what is otherwise debased subject-matter. In this respect, Bowet is forced, reluctantly I imagine, to acknowledge that Margery's tale has effectively and correctly mobilized the instructive strategies of the clerical exemplum, demonstrating to her audience the ideal model of pastoral admonishment.[32] It is a scene cloaked in layers of exemplarity, which shows how the superimposition of meaning onto gross natural objects and narratives could and should be used as an affective mode of behavioural instruction, and to catalyze a process of self-examination. As we see here, the moral value of the narrative mode was not prescriptive, but was rather a secondary result of an *a posteriori* response of judgement by an interpreter. Bears doing what bears do in the woods, much like the natural state of stories, have no native moral significance. They only assume meaning when acted upon by an external moral agency.

The scatological emphasis of the story is revealing of Margery's literary vision, and that of the period more generally. The punning connection between her *tale* and the bear's *tayl* suggests an analogy of function, where the telling of one was commensurate with the voiding of the other.[33] Margery repeatedly equates her tale with the loathsome bowel movements of a bear: both result in the same response of revulsion and both demand interpretation. It is only after the interposition of meaning that the tale is of value. Margery's image of a defecating bear, then, appears to describe the coarse material of an un-moralized and un-interpreted tale, that is, the fundamentally base nature of received narrative before it is transformed and made morally useful through the imaginative mediations of its interpreter. Even the most

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[32] Fiona Somerset, Jill C. Havens, and Derrick G. Pitard, ed., *Lollards and their Influence in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2003); Fiona Somerset, 'Wycliffite Spirituality', *Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale: Essays in Honour of Anne Hudson*, ed. Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchison, Medieval Church Studies 4 (Turnhout, 2005) pp. 375-86.
[33] Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991) p. 150.

abhorrent texts could be read well, the most reprobate and distasteful subjects could be turned to good.

III

In this way, Margery proposes a defence of problematic literary material. Her creative use of scatological and potentially anti-clerical subject-matter recalls the earlier efforts of commentators and theorists who sought to wrangle Christian truth from pagan texts and conscript immoral, or at best, morally ambiguous writers into the service of the faithful. In his expansive *Reductorium morale*, Peirre Bersuire (d. 1362) offers a vast archive of moralized material for preachers, which catalogued not only the signifying power of the natural world – in the form of a moralized digest of Bartholomew the Englishman's *De proprietatibus rerum* – but also the instructive potential of the *fabulae poetarum*. Often circulated independently as the *Ovidius moralizatus*, Bersuire's writings on the fables and mythological lore of the *Metamorphoses* propounded a model of literary exegesis that sought to redeem problematic narrative by relativizing its meaning.[34]

For Bersuire, fables were to be stripped of their pagan message and history, and compelled to take on new meanings in support of Christian doctrine and morality:

> Fables, enigmas, and poems must for the most part be used so that some moral sense may be drawn out from them and so that even that very falsity may be forced [*cogatur*] to serve truth.[35]

It is a coercive model of literary interpretation, where a text would be forcefully expropriated by, and reconciled to, the will of the Christian reader. Bersuire had

[34] Ralph Hexter, 'The *Allegari* of Pierre Bersuire: Interpretation and the *Reductorium Morale*', *Allegorica* 10 (1989) pp. 51-84; Gillespie, 'The Study of the Classical Authors', pp. 202-5.
[35] Pierre Bersuire, 'Selections from De Formis Figurisque Deorum', trans W. Reynolds, *Allegorica* 2 (1978) p. 63.

insisted that multiple, often contradictory, meanings might be drawn from a single text or passage.[36] The same tale could be read *in malo* and *in bono*, irrespective of content. Here, by superimposing an *integumentum* onto a fable, the reader was able to hermeneutically recover it – to decipher their own allegory – in accord with their own circumstantial or moral needs.[37] The intent of the reader trumped the intent of the author. As Margery suggests in her tale, it was possible to make something useful from ethically questionable stories or, as Bersuire suggests, to confirm the mysteries of morals and faith through man-made fictions.[38]

Furthermore, this kind of disenthralling exegetical practice had been present within grammatical instruction throughout the period. In its pursuit of literacy, the study of grammar, which conventionally involved the twin concerns of correct speech and the exposition of the poets – the *enarratio poetarum* – had adopted as its own the rhetorical discipline of composition, *inventio*.[39] Throughout the period the disciplinary lines between the interpretation of narrative poetry and the creative composition of rhetorical speeches had become increasingly porous. Composition was taught through the exposition of examples, so that *enarratio* constituted a form of *inventio* and vice versa. Thus, the school-room *enarratio*, in a similar way to Bersuire's allegoresis, sanctioned the exegetical reconstruction of narrative exempla as a legitimate means of receiving and responding to past work. Making an interpretation was, in effect, the writing of a new work.

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[36] Hexter, 'The *Allegari* of Pierre Bersuire', pp. 58, 71.
[37] Rita Copeland and Stephen Melville, 'Allegory and Allegoresis, Rhetoric and Hermeneutics', p. 171.
[38] Bersuire, 'De Formis Figurisque Deorum', p. 63.
[39] [{Grammar} in duas partes dividatur, recte loquendi scientiam et poetarum enarrationem] (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, trans. and ed. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. [Cambridge, 1920] 1.4.2). Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge, 1991) p. 17; Martin Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory, 350-1100*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 19 (Cambridge, 1994) pp. 54-5.

These formal procedures, which granted the reader significant authority over their text, seem to animate Margery's own moralizing endeavour. By claiming to speak in 'the maner of exampyl', she appears to locate her tale within the broad literary, grammatical, and homiletic traditions of narrative adaptation and moralization. That she had *lernyd* the tale suggests this was her own version of a received exemplum. The story itself is singled out as significant within her *Book* by the early marginal annotation, '*narracio*', indicating its perceived status as an exemplary tale, an exemplum of exemplary discourse.[40] While the production of exempla united the worlds of preaching and poetry through a common interest in the mechanics and effect of narrative discourse, the moralizing liberty of exemplification had eroded the stability of meaning and, with it, the foundations of literary authority.[41] Here, narrative works were valuable in so far as they might yield some circumstantial use or conform to a predetermined interpretative framework. The surface of a story was of far less importance than what might be recovered from beneath its ornamental coverings.

IV

[40] On the annotations and different hands in the manuscript, see Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS OS 212 (Oxford, 1940) pp. xxxv-xlv; Kelly Parsons, 'The Red Ink Annotator of the Book of Margery Kempe and his Lay Audience', pp. 143-216. Concerning *narracio*, while there was occasional variation, rhetorical *narratio* customarily designated a tale in both literary and homiletic contexts, for example, Caroline Eckhardt explains that 'Latin or English rubrics in different manuscripts call Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* variously *narratio* (narrative), *fabula* (tale/fable), 'tale', 'moral tale' or 'proverbis'; similarly, rubrics label the *Manciple's Tale narracio*, *fabula*, 'tale' or 'lytel tretis'' (Caroline D. Eckhardt, 'Genre', *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown [Oxford, 2000] p. 182).

[41] As Hexter observes, Bersuire's work was, to some extent, the 'Metamorphoses *ad usum praedicatorum*' (Hexter, 'The *Allegari* of Pierre Bersuire', p. 55). However, a counter movement, popular among Lollards, argued for the removal of this kind of material from preaching (Siegfried Wenzel, 'Ovid from the Pulpit', *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. G. Clark, F. T. Coulson, and K. L. McKinley [Cambridge, 2011] pp. 160-76).

The collections of exempla and homiletic proof texts produced by John of Wales OFM (d. 1285), that supplied his readers – most notably, Chaucer himself – with a rich source of antique material, had sought to tame the wild terrain of the literary past with similar relativizing consequences.[42] In comparison with Bersuire's popular, and eventually controversial free-range exegesis, John's defence of pagan material involved a call to prudence:[43]

> Therefore fables, just as other statements of the pagans, should be read for their usefulness, but their errors are to be guarded against.[44]

He concedes, however, that this kind of discrimination should also be applied to theological texts. All texts were prone to error and potentially useful. Christian writers could be just as misleading as pagan ones. Both required discernment. This idea effectively flattened the textual landscape. Because, according to John, the Christian *predicator* was the successor to the pagan poet-philosopher, sacred and secular works needed to be assessed on equal terms and as co-sharers in the continuous pursuit of divine wisdom and virtuous living.

It is not without irony, then, that John has Virgil – the pagan-poet *sine qua non* – articulate for him the experience of encountering and reconciling a barbaric literary

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[42] Like Bersuire, John of Wales also considered scripture, classical poetry, and the natural world to be equally useful for preaching (Hexter, 'The *Allegari* of Pierre Bersuire', p. 55). On Chaucer's relationship with the work of John of Wales, see Robert A. Pratt, 'Chaucer and the Hand that Fed Him', *Speculum* 41 (1966) pp. 619-42. On John's humanism more generally, William A. Pantin, 'John of Wales and Medieval Humanism', *Medieval Studies Presented to Aubrey Gwynn*, ed. John A. Watt, John B. Morrall, and Francis X. Martin (Dublin, 1961) pp. 297-319.

[43] On John's defence of poetry, see the important recent work by Ralph Hanna, *Patient Reading/Reading Patience: Oxford Essays on Medieval English Literature* [Liverpool, 2017] pp. 238-68; idem, 'The Wisdom of Poetry: John of Wales's Defense', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 27 (2017) pp. 303-326, which contains an edition and translation of chapters 3, 4, and 6 of John's *Compendiloquium*.

[44] [Ergo fabule, sicut et alia dicta gentilium, legende sunt ad vtilitatem, errores precauendo] (John of Wales, *Summa Iohannis Valensis de regimine uite humane seu Margarita doctorum ad omne propositum prout patet in tabula* [Venice, 1496, *GW* M13992] *Compendiloquium*, 8.6, fol 227^{vb}). All citations from this edition.

past. When asked about his reading of Ennius, Virgil responds: 'I am looking for gold in shit, truth in a truly despicable book'.[45] As a new kind of Virgil, John's ideal reader was to critically sift the crude material of the past in order to produce more eloquent and enriching discourses, pouring forth words of heavenly wisdom so that their audiences might be enlightened. These kinds of ideological and rhetorical recovery programmes, which sought to turn pagan shit into Christian gold, seem comparable to Margery's own literary ambitions, where the base matter of narrative was to be turned into moral good by means of her own exegetical ingenuity.

Margery seems to share John's idea of preaching, which involved the commixing of poetic and pastoral skills. With a similar humanist mandate to Roger Bacon's OFM (d. 1292) *persuasor*, John's *predicator* had a clear pastoral assignment:

> The preacher should study with painstaking diligence so that he knows how to instruct in doctrine and effectively admonish everyone, not just in rhetorical preaching but also in familiar conversational exchanges.[46]
>
> (John of Wales, *Communiloquium* fol. 1[r])

Not simply involved in pulpit oratory, a preacher was to carry out informal instructional and pastoral activities – the *cura animarum* – with considerable rhetorical versatility. This enlarged set of duties, probably influenced by the initiatives of Lateran IV, seems to resonate with Margery's own activities. When accused of unlicensed preaching, she explains: 'I preche not, ser, I come in no pulpytt. I use but

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[45] [Aurum in stercore quero, scilicet veritatem in tam vili libro] (John of Wales, *Communiloquium*, fol. 3[ra]). Virgil's pejorative commentary is normally taken as referring to Ennius' stylistic features, which obscured the wealth of his historical material (Ralph Hanna, *Patient Reading/Reading Patience: Oxford Essays on Medieval English Literature* [Liverpool, 2017] pp. 238-68).

[46] [Sedula diligentia studere debet vt sci{a}t omnes instruere doctrinaliter et admonere efficaciter, non solum in predicatione declamatoria sed in collatione familiari et mutua] (John of Wales, *Communiloquium*, fol. 1[ra]).

comownycacyon and good wordys'.[47] Her equivocal distinction between preaching and her own undertaking, suggests an implicit understanding of its broad rhetorical and moral scope. As her tale indicates, she was certainly involved in the colloquial exchange of practical instruction, teaching, and moral admonishment. By John's standards, although absent from the pulpit, Margery was in many ways a preacher in the tradition of the pagan philosopher-poet, delivering *good wordys* of heavenly wisdom by transforming unrefined narrative into gold.

V

Underwriting Margery's tale is her desire to remain a free interpretative agent. From the very start of her *Book*, she appears deeply concerned about her life being shaped to fit established categories of meaning and by the interference of scribal and clerical mediation. As we discover in the proem, she is reluctant to have her experiences recorded, waiting over twenty years before letting anyone write down the events of her life, and even then she begins the process with a semi-literate layman – possibly her son – suggesting a strong desire for control over the production of her *Book*.[48] It is this initial textual experiment that makes her second scribe notoriously uneasy, and

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[47] *Book*, 52, l. 2976. On Margery's potential appropriation of pulpit oratory, see Genelle Gertz-Robinson, 'Stepping into the Pulpit?: Women's Preaching in *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *The Examinations of Anne Askew*', *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, 2005) pp. 459-82. Lynn Staley has suggested that Margery's use of narrative places her in opposition to Lollard teachings which disproved of these kinds of materials being used in preaching (*Dissenting Fictions*, pp. 7, 120; cf. Wenzel, 'Ovid from the Pulpit', pp. 160-76).

[48] On the interfering presence of scribes as expressed by writers, particularly female writers, throughout the period, see Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, pp. 11-22. On Margery's possible familial connection to her first scribe, and on her scribes more generally, see Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book of the World and Margery Kempe* (Ithaca, 1983) pp. 29-30. On the *Book* as a collaboration between Margery and her amanuenses see, Nicholas Watson, 'The making of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Voices in Dialogue: Reading Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Linda Olson and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton (Notre Dame, 2005) pp. 395-434. On the identity of the manuscript's copyist as the Benedictine, Richard Salthouse (fl. 1443, d. pre-1487), and its monastic context, see Anthony Bale, 'Richard Salthouse of Norwich and the Scribe of *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *The Chaucer Review* 52.2 (2017) pp. 173-87.

his apparent attempts to confine her experiences within the normalizing generic apertures of female hagiography only seem to confirm Margery's anxieties.[49] She repeatedly struggles against clerical inscription, demanding that 'the forme of her levyngs' be read and written according to her own standards and tastes, and as a true reflection of her lived experience.[50]

It is not insignificant, then, that, during her trial in York, she describes herself as a poetic text. After she is accused of being a Lollard and a heretic, she prays:

> [S]o to be demenyd that day as was most *plesawns* to God and *profyte* to hir owyn sowle and good *exampyl* to hir evyn cristen.
>
> (*Book*, 52, ll. 2920-1, emphasis added)

In a seeming allusion to the pervasive Horatian maxim that poets either delight or offer some kind of profit, she hopes to be considered a pleasing and profitable poetic exemplum.[51] Here, the contest for exegetical control of her tale spills over into the inquisitorial probing of the Archbishop and his retinue, suggesting that her examination was to be understood as an act of forceful reading. In effect, she becomes an embodied text, a site of hermeneutic conflict and uncertainty, a story to be decoded and rewritten. Subject to the problems and processes of literary interpretation – of imaginative and wilful acts of reading – Margery presents herself as her own reader.

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[49] On the hybridity of the *Book*, see Julie Orlemanski, 'Margery's 'Noyse' and Distributed Expressivity', *Voice and Voicelessness in Medieval Europe*, ed. Irit Ruth Kleiman (New York, 2015) pp. 213-38; Roger Ellis, 'Margery Kempe's Scribe and the Miraculous Books', *Langland, the Mystics, and the Medieval English Religious Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey*, ed. Helen Phillips (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 161-75; John Hirsch, 'Author and Scribe in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', *Medium Aevum* 44 (1975) pp. 145-50.
[50] *Book*, pr., ll. 65.
[51] 'Poets desire to be useful or to delight' [Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae] (Horace, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough [Cambridge, 1926] *The Art of Poetry*, ll. 333-4).

The Archbishop seems particularly troubled by her resistance to his attempts to inscribe her within his own semantic boundaries. After he tells her, 'I her seyn thu art a ryth wikked woman', she replies simply:

> Ser, so I her seyn that ye arn a wikkyd man. And, yyf ye ben as wikkyd as men seyn, ye schal nevyr come in hevyn les than ye amende yow whil ye ben her.
>
> (*Book*, 52, ll. 2951-3)

Margery obstinately resists the hermeneutic closure of pre-set categories of meaning, here, using Bowet's own flimsy methods and standards of argumentation against him. It is the same approach she takes with her tale, appropriating the literary and homiletic traditions of the Church and redirecting them as mechanisms for clerical correction and criticism. Furthermore, that she wears white but was not a virgin seems to have been especially problematic to Bowet, as it scrambled the expected connection between appearance and meaning and prevented her from being easily identified within an established system of signs. Because of this the Archbishop considers shackling her to the ground during the trial, posing what was possibly the single greatest threat to a floating signifier like Margery, forced inertia.[52] It is a powerful visual reminder of the relationship between a poetic text and its reader.

Although these forms of interaction suggest the conventional image of a gendered text, where the covetous male reader successfully imposed his will on the feminine text through definition and exegetical closure, Margery ultimately frustrates Bowet and his clerical entourage in their attempts at classification. As with her avoidance of the title of wicked woman, she is, like many poetic texts, exegetically slippery and she insists on being the final judge her own meaning. Indeed, it is

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[52] Marea Mitchell, *Scholarship, Community, and Criticism*, p. 117.

through the self-authorizing agency of her 'good' tale that she is able to avoid the demarcation of heretic and establish herself as an interpreter and maker of valuable narrative. In these passages Margery becomes both a poetic text and its reader, she is a teller of her own tales, and the author of her own *Book*.

While Margery's work exists within its own context, with its own set of formal and religious commitments, the tale of the Priest and the Pear Tree nonetheless illuminates a set of perceived functions relating to poetic discourse. It suggests how the reception and interpretation of literary material had become defined by its resistance to singular or explicit meaning; and it recalls the creative ways in which the works of past writers might be received, repurposed, and imaginatively adapted into new settings for new readers. Here, the raw material of narrative was grist to the moral mill. These kinds of interpretative habits, however, if observed by Chaucer, would have further confirmed for him the radical absence of any authoritative text or writer.

Central to an understanding of Chaucer's poetic theory, the *House of Fame* offers his most sustained and creative meditation on the nature and status of his art. It charts the discovery of a literary history devoid of any stable *auctoritas*, where there were no singular *auctores* and, instead, simply an endless continuum of readers. Poetry, for him, was a fundamentally recursive and autophagic tradition, one defined by the undirected progress of endless textual intergradation. The random survival and transmission of texts, as they were interpreted, excerpted, and circulated according to the wants and needs of their audiences, had emptied them of context and meaning. Written in the closing decades of the fourteenth century (c.1374-86), and within the courtly and cosmopolitan worlds of London, but with the wider European context

firmly in mind, the *House of Fame* represents a unique, if not disruptive, contribution to the poetic theory of the period.[53]

This chapter will suggest that the poem represents an aggressive rejection of past models of literary authority, which results in a sustained authorial self-destruction.[54] It will proceed by considering Chaucer's assessment of the literary past, and by examining his reflections on the transformative processes attending its medieval reception. It will discuss how Chaucer conceived of the reformative way readers engaged with texts, before looking at his treatment of humanist modes of literary authority. We will then discuss some of the ways in which he sought to parody the humanist veneration of past authors, taking into view his suspicion of divinely inspired poetics and his denial of the god-like status of the author over their work.

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[53] On the distinctive European-ness of Chaucer's life and work, see Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Woodstock, 2019); James Simpson, 'Chaucer as a European Writer', *The Yale Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven, 2006) pp. 55-86. On Chaucer's London, see Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1989); idem, 'Politics and poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s', *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, 1990) pp. 83-112; Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992). The *House of Fame* is often seen as being written before *Parliament of Fowls*, but more recently Minnis has suggested it might be post *Troilus and Criseyde* (Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 110; Alastair Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, p. 171). While Skeat long ago suggested a date of c.1383-4, Helen Cooper has more recently suggested a very plausible date of December 10, 1384 (Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Walter W. Skeat [Oxford, 1894] I, p. lxiii; Helen Cooper, 'The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer: Ugolino in the House of Rumour', *New Medieval Literatures* 3 [1999] p. 64).

[54] Critical debate over the *House of Fame* as autobiographical *ars poetica* stretches back to George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Cambridge, 1915). For a selective overview of this history, see Susan Schibanoff, *Chaucer's Queer Poetics: Rereading the Dream Trio* (Toronto, 2006) pp. 152-96. See also J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame: An Exposition of 'The House of Fame'* (Oxford, 1968); Phillipa Hardman, 'Chaucer's Muses and His 'Art Poetical'', *Review of English Studies* 37 (1986) 478-94, which sees the invocations as evidence of Chaucer's claims for a poetic identity; Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer's Poetics and the Modern Reader* (Berkeley, 1987) pp. 22-50, on Chaucer's rhetorical poetics; Laurence K. Shook, '*The House of Fame*', *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Toronto, 1968) pp. 341-54. The most recent important contributions to this broad discussion can be found in Vincent Gillespie, 'Authorship', *A Handbook of Middle English Studies*, ed. Marion Turner (Oxford, 2013) pp. 137-54; Rebecca Davis, 'Fugitive Poetics in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 37 (2015) pp. 101-32.

Having observed Chaucer reject received ideas of authorship, we will then look at some of the organizing structures he erects in their place and as a means to describe his theory of literary reception and production. Finally, by way of concluding, we will be able to consider more directly the dangers Chaucer saw as being immanent to the imaginative experience of poetic discourse. Because there could be no certainty of meaning in the hallucinatory representations of the mind, and because neither the reader nor the author could control the imaginative effects of narrative texts, tales assumed the independent agency of a self-speaking medium. As we will see, because Chaucer appears to have regarded authority and meaning as arbitrarily acquired properties, the poetic theory that emerges from the *House of Fame* is ultimately self-immolating, ironic, and playfully irreverent in its estimation of literary value.

VI

The opening of the *House of Fame* finds Chaucer's dreamer-narrator, Geffrey, roaming up and down the elaborately decorated halls of a glass temple. Overfilled with gold images, portraiture, and carved figures, it is described as a 'chirche' and is presented as a vast treasury of 'olde werk'.[55] A glittering tribute to the achievements of the classical past, it commemorates the great Latin poets and their works, particularly those of 'Virgile in Eneydos' and the 'Epistle of Ovyde', which receive an equivocal retelling by Geffrey, who, like Chaucer, is himself a love poet in the tradition of Ovid.[56] While the Temple of Glass initially seems to be a celebration of

[55] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1987) *The House of Fame*, l. 127. Henceforth HF. All citations of Chaucer's works are from this edition.

[56] On Chaucer's Ovidian poetic self-representations, see John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven, 1979); Robert W. Hanning, 'Chaucer's First Ovid: Metamorphosis and Poetic

the wealth of Chaucer's own classical inheritance, it ultimately reveals itself as a disorientatingly ambiguous space.

As Geffrey discovers, the literary tradition inscribed within the temple had been shorn of its national identity, isolated from its origins and its makers, and denied the important geographical coordinates necessary for navigation and survey:

> 'A!' thoughte I, 'that madest us,
> Yet sawgh I never such noblesse
> Of ymages, ne such richesse,
> As I saugh graven in this chirche;
> But not wot I whoo did hem wirche,
> Ne where I am, ne in what contree'.
>
> (HF, ll. 470-5)

Disconnected from space and time, it is a lifelessly autonomous structure. The profound sense of dislocation is compounded when Geffrey steps outside of the temple to find, not the quickened movements of a 'stiryng man' as he had hoped, but instead a vast wasteland in the form of uncultivated fields of sand.

It is an incongruous sight. Although the temple is the product of great skill, it is without the vitality of a human infrastructure or a living culture to account for its existence; there was no one to orientate Geffrey or explain its significance. Furthermore, its surrounds are entirely devoid of the chaotic noise and movement of social exchange that was, as we find later in the House of Rumour, essential to the contagious propagation of narrative discourse. Instead, it is a closed literary ecosystem, cut off from the free-flowing movement of people and their marketplace transactions of news, gossip, tales, and tidings.

Tradition in *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*', *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, 1986) pp. 121-163.

It is an image that resonates with the description of Geffrey's own reading habits. During his journey to the House of Fame, his eagle-guide explains that he lacks *tydynges* – the important raw data of discourse – 'noght oonly fro fer contree' but also from his 'verray neyghebores', because of his excessive study:[57]

> And, also domb as any stoon,
>
> Thou sittest at another book
>
> Tyl fully daswed ys thy look
>
> And lyvest thus as an heremyte.
>
> (HF, ll. 656-9)

Rather than pursuing 'newe thynges', Geffrey is busy walking the graven walls of the glass temple, examining its 'olde werk' in a dazed stupor.[58] The ekphrastic way the stories tell themselves here reminds us of the explicitly visual and imaginative experience of poetry, and also of the way texts were received and recorded, by being impressed and engraved onto the walls of the reader's mind in unique and vivid ways.[59] Thus, we find him lurking in a kind of collective pan-European literary imagination, a storehouse of received tales. Described as a monk of the church of the classical tradition, he is silent and sterile, cut off from the world of living stories. He spends too much time in his head, enamoured by his own dynamic mental *repraesentationes*. This is, of course, the reason he is taken up and away from the desert temple by the eagle in the first place, so that he might find some new material to write about. It is a flight away from the apparent security of canonical Latin writers

[57] HF, ll. 647-8.
[58] HF, ll. 654.
[59] On the imagination as a repository for the collection of tales, see the relevant discussions and references in Chapter 3. Chaucer's repeated emphasis on the graven quality of the stories in the temple seems to allude to the psychological reception of texts as they are impressed into the sensitive faculty of the soul, further suggesting that we see in the temple is, to some degree, a mental space. On Chaucer and ekphrasis, see Andrew James Johnston, 'Ekphrasis in the Knight's Tale', *Rethinking the New Medievalism*, ed. R. Howard Bloch et al. (Baltimore, 2014) pp. 181-97.

and, as we will see, towards a model of literary transmission and authority characterized by uncertainty, instability, and the inexact, often disingenuous way narrative poetry was read and circulated.

But already in the Temple of Glass, we can see cracks begin to appear. Geffrey finds engraved on a brass tablet, Virgil's famous opening to the *Aeneid*:

> I wol now singen, yif I kan,
>
> The armes, and also the man.
>
> (HF, ll. 143-4)

Here, Virgil's confident statement of intent has been amended from its original to include a conditional proposal, that he *wol now* – as opposed to in the first instance – sing, 'yif I kan'. Although, to some extent, this might appear as modesty on Chaucer's behalf, humbling himself before his abbreviated history of Troy, it also points toward a tension inherent within the authority of ancient writing as it was received by medieval audiences.[60] The modified account of the *Aeneid* in the brass tablet suggests that the text had come down indirectly and, having been pre-digested and rewritten, was unsure of its own status and standing. It is *now* different to what it was before. It had been interfered with to the extent that it no longer had the confidence and authority of its original form. Like the temple itself, the material it enshrines was dislocated from its context and had lost the potency and cultural relevance of its first composition.

This is perhaps reflective of Chaucer's own reading experience. It is likely that much of his knowledge about classical texts had been deduced from a modular

[60] On the reception of the classics by Chaucer and more broadly in the period, Alastair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1982); Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge, 1992); John P. McCall, *Chaucer among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (College Park, 1979); Winthrop Wetherbee, *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on* Troilus and Criseyde (Ithaca, 1984); Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the Aeneid from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1995); Gillespie, 'The Study of the Classical Authors', pp. 145-235.

tradition of writing, where materials were circulated in gobbetized form, excerpted from their original context, adapted and synthesized into new environments, and put to new ends within encyclopedic compilations or preaching aids, like those of Vincent Beauvais and John of Wales.[61] As we have already seen, the tendency towards moralization had promoted an unstable mode of literary reception. Similarly, the Latin study texts of the grammar-schools, which were used for the instruction of literacy and the language arts, encouraged a fragmented and fragmenting application of ancient works.[62] For Chaucer, it was true, as Alan of Lille wrote regarding the contemporary management of patristic writers, that 'authority has a wax nose, it is able to be bent into different senses'.[63] A text was pliable, protean, and could take on a variegated array of possible forms regardless of its authorial pedigree.

In his account of Dido and Aeneas, Chaucer interrogates these tensions by bringing together two famously different versions of the tale – that of Virgil and Ovid – drawing attention to the fact that neither offered an authoritatively final account of the story.[64] Indeed, both writers were known to have treated their material in comparatively wilful ways, using it for the advancement of their own ends and the immediate needs of their own literary circumstance, ultimately producing differing accounts of the same characters. While Virgil may have been Dante Alighieri's (d. 1321) *autore*, according to Chaucer, he was just as delinquent with his readings as

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[61] Pratt, 'Chaucer and the Hand that Fed Him', pp. 619-42.
[62] Christopher Cannon, *From Literacy to Literature: England 1300-1400* (Oxford, 2016).
[63] [*Auctoritas cereum habet nasum, id est in diversum potest flecti sensum*] (Alan of Lille, *Opera Omnia*, *De fide catholica*, PL 210.333); Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 323, n. 49.
[64] On the reception and representations of Dido in the period, see Marilynn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis, 1994) pp. 128-62; Jacqueline T. Miller, *Poetic License: Authority and Authorship in Medieval and Renaissance Contexts* (Oxford, 1986) pp. 52-6; Gotz Schmitz, *The Fall of Women in Early English Narrative Verse* (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 17-43.

anyone.[65] Indeed, it is exactly this kind of authorial abuse that we hear Dido decry when her lament against the treachery of men slips into a more focused complaint about unfaithful readers and writers who mistreat their subject matter.

VII

As we have seen in the *Confessio Amantis*, the figure of Dido was useful to Gower for his reflections on the deficiencies of immoderate reading.[66] However, in the *House of Fame*, it is this very kind of poetic rereading and rewriting to which Dido objects. Speaking as an abused and disembodied tale, she bemoans the way readers and writers will take advantage of her down through the ages. Some, she complains, would use her to *magnyfy* their name for their own literary fame, others would use her for the affective consolation of *frendshippe*, and a third kind would use her according to the Horatian standards of 'delyt or syngular profit'.[67] This is the same method of personification evidenced by Margery who would likewise be concerned about her literary reception. But here, due to the wickedness of Fame, Dido complains that she will be circulated like literary currency, being 'red and songe … on every tonge' so that through the reformative processes of literary transmission her name would be *lorn*.[68]

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[65] Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley, 1980) 1.85.

[66] In contrast, we have seen Gower represent Dido as a helpless reader and writer, promoting an image of women as over-emotional and unstable. It is an interesting point of difference to both Chaucer and Margery's vision of women as mistreated texts. Also, in an allusive line from *Piers Plowman,* the story of Dido appears to have been so commonly passed around and retold that it could be used as its own mock-genre denoting a silly tale: ''It is but a dido … a disours tale!''. While this appears to be a wholly anomalous usage, and so should be considered cautiously, it nevertheless depicts the figure of Dido as abstracted and made to personify an impoverished discourse (William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd ed. [London, 1995] B XIII, l. 172; *MED* dīdō [n.]).

[67] HF, ll. 300-10. For an elaboration on this reading, Gillespie, 'Authorship', p. 145-6.

[68] HF, ll. 346-9. She also describes the actions of male readers in the language of exegetical control, satirically asking them to: 'Wayte upon the conclusyon, / And eek how that ye determynen, / And for the more part diffynen' (HF, ll. 342-44). Her point here is that the

No longer marking an original historical person, her name is hollowed out by her readers so that it can be filled with new significance and meaning. It is the same process heard in the court of Fame from the group of writers desiring unmerited glory, who ask:

> Let men glewe on us the name;
>
> Suffyceth that we han the fame.
>
> (HF, ll. 1761-2)

The constant rhyming connection between name, fame, and game, reflects the objective of this literary sport.[69] Here, a name had no stable connection to its meaning, a writer or a tale could be made to signify almost anything regardless of identity or subject matter. When liberated from their original contexts by the deracinating and syncretic powers of an undirected semiosis, poetic works could be consistently remade in the image of their readers, continually reformed and reinvented to serve new moral circumstances and ideological agendas. This was no ethical poetic. To have the fame of a good name, as a writer or text, depended less on content and merit, than the chance interventions of a receptive audience.

Of course, the very thing that Dido complains about, is the very thing that Chaucer is doing himself. Consciously so, it seems, as he highlights the fact that her complaint is his own unique contribution to her tradition, stating emphatically that, with regard to her speech: 'Non other auctour alegge I'.[70] While Chaucer acknowledges his own complicit participation in the reformative procedures of literary transmission, counting himself among the unfaithful readers of Dido, he is

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feminine text was always treated poorly, while the male reader never suffered the same kind of hermeneutic abuse.

[69] Throughout the period commentators often associated *fama* with *fando* [to be spoken], connecting the idea of fame to circulation of the spoken word (Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Imaginary World of Fame* [Cambridge, 1984] pp. 40-1).

[70] HF, l. 314.

also aware that his own audience will, in turn, respond to his work and his name with a similar set of interpretative reflexes.

In the opening proem, Chaucer seems to humorously and ironically attempt to guard against his unavoidable mistreatment, asking his readers to:

> … take hit wel and skorne hyt noght,
>
> Ne hyt mysdemen in her thoght
>
> Thorgh malicious entencion.
>
> (HF, ll. 91-3)

From the 1222 Council of Oxford on, malicious intent had become an important part of English defamation law and was certainly in use by the courts when Chaucer was writing the *House of Fame* around 1380.[71] His statement appears to be, at one level, an appeal to the rule of law, attempting to dissuade his readers from slander or libel and the injurious reconstruction of his name. But also, comparably, he seems to have in mind the commentary category of *intentio auctoris*, which, as we have seen in the last chapter, allowed the reader to inscribe their own perceived meaning onto a text, rather than offering any true reflection of original authorial significance. In this double register, Chaucer concedes his vulnerability to unsympathetic readers, and appears alert to his own equivocal involvement in the unstable and layered way texts were received. Just as he treated those writers and texts before him, so will he be treated by his readers.

The poetic theory that begins to emerge from the *House of Fame* sits in contrast to the earlier, and distinctly more confident, affirmations of poetry made by

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[71] The Constitution of the Council of Oxford, often referred to as *Auctoritate dei patris*, insisted on excommunicating 'all who for the sake of, hatred, profit, favour or any other cause maliciously impute a crime to anyone [Omnes illos qui gracia odii, lucri, vel favoris, vel alia quacunque de causa maliciose crimen imponunt alicui] (R. H. Helmholz, ed., *Select Cases on Defamation to 1600* [London, 1985] p. xiv). For a case from 1380, see Helmholz, ed., *Select Cases*, pp. 4-6.

the Italian humanists.[72] Indeed, Chaucer appears to parody what he perceived as the high seriousness of the humanist writer, comically undermining their pursuit of status. In rejecting this model of authorship, which, as we have seen in earlier chapters, insisted on the theological and ethical authority of the poet, and involved a deep reverence for the classical past, Chaucer looks to establish his own vision of poetry and of the poet that appears defined by the radical absence of any authoritative centre.[73]

VIII

The invisible presence of Dante is felt throughout the *House of Fame*.[74] While the extent to which Chaucer – or his English audience – could be familiar with his work is uncertain, he is nonetheless listed as a named authority next to Claudian and Virgil on the subject of hell.[75] Yet, given Chaucer's sustained criticism of *auctoritas*, it seems a dubious accolade and, although the tripartite structure of the *House of Fame* might signal an allusive homage to the classicizing achievements of the *Commedia*, it

[72] The arguments offered here differ from those of Piero Boitani, who works form the assumption that Chaucer shared with Dante a humanistic confidence in poetry (Piero Boitani, *The Imaginary World of Fame*, pp. 164, 203). Likewise it departs from sentiments like those of J. A. W. Bennett, who suggests that poem is 'vindication of poetry' (Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, xi). While this chapter agrees with Winthrop Wetherbee that it is 'poem about poetic tradition', it would disagree with his statement that, 'The *House of Fame* dramatizes the delusions and uncertainties that hinder a courtly love poet's attempt to reconcile his commitment to love with a desire to write poetry of a higher order – more philosophical, more Dantean, more classical' (*Chaucer and the Poets*, pp. 17-18). Chaucer's desire seems to have been to create a poetic theory that rejects these very ambitions.

[73] In her discussion on sceptical fideism in the *House of Fame*, Sheila Delany suggests that the 'thematic centre of the poem is its absence of fixity' and that Chaucer is 'reluctant to commit himself to a traditional role or to any single traditional point of view' (Sheila Delany, *Chaucer's House of Fame, The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, [Chicago, 1972] pp. 2, n. 2, 67).

[74] On Dante and Chaucer, see Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A Revaluation* (Norman, 1984) pp. 29-76; Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy*' (Stanford, 1989) pp. 20-49; Helen Cooper, 'The Four Last Things in Dante and Chaucer', pp. 39-66; John M. Fyler, *Language and the Declining World in Chaucer, Dante and Jean de Meun* (Cambridge, 2007) pp. 101-54; Alastair Minnis, '*De Vulgari Auctoritate*: Chaucer, Gower and Men of Great Authority', *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R. F. Yeager, ELS Monograph Series 51 (Victoria, 1991) pp. 36-74.

[75] HF, l. 450.

appears ultimately suspicious of its author's high estimation of poetry and of the poet, ruthlessly parodying the humanist pretence to literary authority.

The gold-feathered eagle that carries Geffrey up from the desert – a scene which seems to echo Dante's own escape from the 'gran diserto' of the *Inferno* – famously recalls the eagle of the *Purgatorio*, which violently seizes the dreaming poet and carries him to the fiery threshold of purgatory.[76] It is described as a moment of *raptus*: Dante was seized [*rapisse*] by the eagle, just as Ganymede was snatched up [*ratto*] to the council of the gods, just as Paul was raptured up to the third heaven.[77] This is the supramental ascent of the humanist writer, where, as we have seen with Mussato and with Bacon, the mind is suddenly and forcefully raised above itself so that it can access the revealed truth of divine wisdom. As Dante suggests here, the imaginative wanderings of the enraptured mind result in an almost divine [*quasi è divina*] set of initiatives.[78]

Comparably, for Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375), the inspired and disciplined poetic mind ascends above itself to freely roam the heavenly realms:[79]

> [P]oets have chosen a science or pursuit of knowledge which by constant meditation draws them away into the region of stars, among the divinely adorned dwellings of the gods and their heavenly splendours.[80]

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[76] Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.65; idem, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley, 1982) 9.19-30.
[77] Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Mandelbaum, 9.24, 33; idem, *Inferno*, trans. Mandelbaum, 2.32.
[78] Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Mandelbaum, 9.18.
[79] David Wallace, *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio*, Chaucer Studies 12 (Woodbridge, 1985).
[80] [Elegere poete scientiam, inter sydera, inter deorum sedes ornatusque celestes suos continua meditatione trahentem] (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, ed. Vincenzo Romano, vol. 2 (Bari, 1951) XIV.iv; idem, *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's 'Genealogia deorum gentilium' in an English Version with Introductory Essay and Commentary*, trans. Charles Grosvenor Osgood (Princeton, 1930) XIV.iv.

True poetry 'proceeds from the bosom of God', it is a pure mental activity 'infused with a strange supernal inspiration'.[81] Insulated from the everyday interests of the mutable sublunary world, the high thought of the *vates* had, as its right dwelling place, the eternal dominion of the heavens. These are the celestial regions encountered by Geffrey and his Dantean eagle, which, by their very nature, anticipate the inevitable apotheosis of the poet and of poetry.[82] However, Chaucer invokes the expectations of a humanist model of inspired poetic ascent only to subvert them, repeatedly denying them any purchase in his poem.[83] As we have already witnessed, the accretive ways in which texts were read and rewritten, where named content and authorial reputation were continually remodelled by the imaginative play of their readers, disallowed any valid claim to prophetically inspired control or literary immortality.

In contrast to Dante's dreamer-poet, it is not immediately clear to Geffrey that he is part of either classical or biblical traditions of heavenly sojourners, as he says, he is neither Ganymede or Enoch. Indeed, despite (or because of) the overt humanist cues, the eagle is prompted to explain that his ascent will not result in canonization, Geffrey will not be stellified, he will not be awarded the enduring status of a divinely inspired and heroically authoritative poet.[84] With this directional shift away from the expectations of humanist poetic theories, Chaucer satirizes the ambitions of earlier

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[81] Boccaccio, *Genealogie*, ed. Romano; *Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Osgood, XIV.viii, vii.
[82] The eagle is a layered pastiche of various literary figures and topoi, and appears to function as a parodic voice of authority. On its manifold reception, see Joseph A. Dane, 'Chaucer's Eagle's Ovid's Phaëthon: A Study in Literary Reception', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 11 (1981) pp. 71-82; James Simpson, 'Dante's 'Astripetam Aquilam' and the Theme of Poetic Discretion in the 'House of Fame'', *Essays and Studies* 39 (1986) pp. 1-18; John Steadman, 'Chaucer's Eagle: A Contemplative Symbol', *PMLA* 75 (1960) pp. 153-159; Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid*, pp. 43-56.
[83] On this, Fyler suggests that Chaucer 'repeatedly builds systems only to undermine them, and his poem moves in a diastolic/systolic rhythm of expansion and collapse' (*Chaucer and Ovid*, p. 25).
[84] HF, l. 586.

writers like Dante – and Mussato – who sought to recover the ancient rites of poetic laureation and to secure their own name and literary fame in perpetuity.

In the invocation to Book III, Chaucer notably adapts Dante's own appeal to Apollo from the opening of the *Paradiso*. Here, Dante describes himself as a *vaso*, a *vas Dei* [vessel of God] – a *vates* – which, he suggests, was a necessary precondition for receiving Apollo's beloved laurel [*l'amato alloro*].[85] While it is unsurprising that Chaucer does not include Dante's vatic allusion in his verse, his parody is more subtle and cutting than just this excision.[86] In his invocation, Dante writes:

> O godly force, if you so lend yourself
> to me, that I might show the shadow of
> the blessed realm inscribed within my mind,
> then you would see me underneath the tree
> you love; there I shall take as crown the leaves
> of which my theme and you shall make me worthy.[87]
>
> (Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.22-7)

In response, Chaucer has these stanzas say otherwise:

> And yif, devyne vertu, thow
> Wilt helpe me to shewe now
> That in myn hed ymarked ys –
> Loo, that is for to menen this,
> The Hous of Fame for to descryve –

[85] On *vates* as *vas dei,* see Chapter 2.
[86] 'O God of science and of lyght, / Appollo, thurgh thy grete myght, / This lytel laste bok thou gye!' (HF, ll. 1091-3); 'O good Apollo, for this final task / make me the vessel of your excellence, / what you, to merit your loved laurel, ask' [O buono Appollo, a l'ultimo lavoro / fammi del tuo valor sì fatto vaso, / come dimandi a dar l'amato alloro] (Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.13-15).
[87] [O divina virtù, se mi ti presti / tanto che l'ombra del beato regno / segnata nel mio capo io manifesti, / vedra'mi al piè del tuo diletto legno / venire, e coronarmi de le foglie / che la materia e tu mi farai degno] (Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.22-7).

> Thou shalt se me go as blyve
>
> Unto the nexte laure y see,
>
> And kysse yt, for hyt is thy tree.
>
> (HF, ll. 1101-8)

At one level, Chaucer's adaptive translation seems to enact the reformative processes of literary transmission that he returns to describe throughout his poem. Like the metonymic image of the *Aeneid* in the brass tablet, Dante's verse had been denuded of its original context and authority, and remade through the palimpsestic interventions of its reader, in this case, Chaucer. At another level, it more forcefully suggests his perceived divergence from humanist theories of poetry.

Here, Chaucer satirizes the high confidence of Dante's classicizing invocation, having Geffrey, almost compulsively, clarify his intended meaning ('Loo, that is for to menen this, / The Hous of Fame for to descryve'). The forward momentum of Dante's *terzine* is interrupted with the ironic intrusion of authorial hesitancy and neurosis, humorously undermining the lofty pretensions of its otherwise solemn subject matter. Dante's self-assured verse is replaced by the anxious ministrations of an overly-busy poet desperate to ensure that he is understood. But also, in parodying Dante's confident authorial persona through a type of glossed text, Chaucer seems to tease the author about his impulse toward self-exegesis and self-promotion, reducing these acts to a mid-flight outburst of insecurity.

In this context, we might recall Dante's attempts at self-canonization in his *Il Convivio*, an unfinished commentary on his own lyrics, which effectively declared his work to be worthy of the heuristic privileges normally reserved for Latin *auctores*.[88]

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[88] Alastair Minnis, 'The Author's Two Bodies?: Authority and Fallibility in Late-Medieval Textual Theory', *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, Their Scribes and Readers, Essays Presented to M. B. Parkes*, ed. P. R. Robinson and Rivkah Zim (Aldershot, 1997) p. 261.

Geffrey's self-glossing seems to parody these strategies, mocking Dante's self-reflexivity and his hunger to be considered equal to those that had come before him.[89] Indeed, while Dante would have happily included himself as one of the pillared authorities in the palace of Fame, having already equated his own poetic achievements with those of Virgil, Horace, Homer, Lucan, and Ovid in *Inferno* IV, Geffrey eschews these ambitions. Rather than taking up the crown of leaves [*coronarmi de le foglie*] with Dante, he promises instead to kiss the next laurel tree he sees. It is a witty subversion of the exalted status of poetic authority achieved through laureation, one that anticipates Geffrey's ultimate rejection of the laureate mantle and of being a named author.

When making his way through Fame's palace, Geffrey famously encounters a man who asks 'what is thy name? / Artow come hider to han fame?'[90] He responds emphatically:

> 'Nay, for sothe, frend', quod y;
> 'I cam noght hyder, graunt mercy,
> For no such cause, by my hed!
> Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
> That no wight have my name in honde.
> I wot myself best how y stonde;
> For what I drye, or what I thynke,
> I wil myselven al hyt drynke,
> Certeyn, for the more part,
> As fer forth as I kan myn art'.

[89] Alastair Minnis, ''Dante in Inglissh': What *Il Convivio* Really Did for Chaucer', *Essays in Criticism* 55.2 (2005) pp. 97-116.
[90] HF, ll. 1871-2.

(HF, ll. 1872-81)

Having just witnessed the capricious judgements of the court of Fame, Geffrey is scandalized by the way texts and authors were arbitrarily assigned the reputation of their name, refusing to participate in such fickle literary games, rejecting humanist models of poetic notoriety and laureation. Much like Kempe, who would insist on being the reader of her own tale and of herself, Geffrey considers himself to be the best judge of his own work and the ultimate determiner of his meaning. Rather than take on the named status of a laureate poet like Dante, he desires anonymity, wanting to keep his name out of the grasping hands of his readers and firmly in his own grip.

However, even his own self-evaluations are hobbled with uncertainty, and he says he knows his thoughts and experiences only, 'As *fer forth* as I kan myn art'. As a reader of his own art, Geffrey is just as limited and prejudiced as any other reader. It is a radical denial of literary authority: even the originary energies of the poet were unable to circumscribe the full significance of their work. Here, Chaucer does not so much kiss the laurel tree as take an axe to it and use it for kindling in a bonfire of literary vanities. There could be no authorial privilege, no high stakes authority, no stable *intentio auctoris*, and instead, only the variable will of readers, the unpredictable and imaginative *intentio lectoris*. Is this a Barthesian-style execution of the author? The first literary suicide?[91] Certainly, we are a long way from the opening proem, where he sought to forcefully limit the way his text was received, hounding his reader into submission with threats of violence and litigation.

Geffrey's perception of his own status as a poet seems to have changed here, and he is compelled to reject those models of poetry that revered past works and

[91] In the affirmative, see Gillespie, 'Authorship', pp. 149-52; also his discussion on the topic in, 'On Allegory, Allegoresis, and the Erotics of Reading', pp. 239. Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London, 1977) pp. 142-48.

writers. As a comic impression of a humanist writer, Geffrey is, with great dramatic irony, continually confronted by the implausibility of his literary ideology. Indeed, we are witness to the constant and progressive deconstruction of the narrator throughout the poem, as he is forced to repeatedly reconfigure his literary perceptions.[92] Here, we see him finally surrender to their inevitable conclusions, bringing to a point of crisis Chaucer's relentless parodying of his beliefs. Indeed, Chaucer's satirical adumbrations of humanist poetic theories should be considered within the context of his ultimate authorial denial. As we will consider now, he consistently seeks to undermine the prestige of inspired poetry, deriding the poet's reliance on the authority of past literary work, and by diminishing the lofty, almost God-like power of the author over his text.

IX

Through the literary convictions espoused by Geffrey, Chaucer consistently challenges the intense classicizing impulse of humanist writers and their perceived regard for the authority of past works. Likely around 1349, Francis Petrarch (d. 1374) had claimed in a letter to Boccaccio that on account of his deep immersion in the texts of ancient writers:

> They have become absorbed into my being and implanted not only in my memory but in the marrow of my bones, and have become one with my mind so that even if I never read them again in my life, they would inhere in me with their roots sunk in the depths of my soul.[93]

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[92] It is at the juncture between spaces, where he is leaving and entering new environments that he seems to encounter the significant aporias of his own poetic theory, where he must engage in a revaluation of his own poetic self-understanding (cf. HF, ll. 596).

[93] [Hec se michi tam familiariter ingessere et non modo memorie sed medulis affixa sunt unumque cum ingenio facta sunt meo. ut etsi per omnem vitam amplius non legantur, ipsa quidem hereant, actis in intima animi parte radicibus] (Francis Petrarch, *Le familiari*, ed.

As if a direct parody of these claims, Geffrey's vision of reality is so thoroughly mediated through, and distorted by, his deeply internalized veneration of authoritative texts that he can only think and speak in relation to received *auctoritas*.

As a distractedly obsessive reader, unable to respond to the living stories that are happening outside his very door, Geffrey appears to shun the knowledge of direct experience, and during his heavenly flight he favours the established testimony of his *auctores* over personal observation. The eagle offers him the opportunity to learn the names of the stars and their places in the heavens, because, he says:

> For though thou have hem ofte on honde,
>
> Yet nostow not wher that they stonde.
>
> (HF, ll. 1009-10)

But Geffrey claims he does not need to witness them, he believes what has already been written on the matter.[94] His trust in the authority of past writers is absolute. Because of the excessive consumption of their work, he is ultimately uninterested in what he might see and write himself, and he is satisfied with the knowledge absorbed through anterior texts. It is interesting that this exchange is recalled in Geffrey's later statement, which we have just observed, that he desires to keep his 'name in honde' and knows best where he might stand. By reprising the eagle's couplet, Geffrey seems to signal that his initial faith in the sayings of old works was no longer a viable mode of self-definition, nor did he wish for his work to be seen in the same absolutizing terms.

During his heavenly ascent he consistently defines his experience with reference to past *auctores*, using their works as a means to orientate himself and

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Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco, Edizione nazionale di Petrarca, no. 10-13 [Firenze, 1933-42] 4.106; idem, *Letters on Familiar Matters: Rerum familiarium libri XVII-XXIV*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo [Baltimore, 1985] 22.2).

[94] HF, ll. 1012-13.

explain his circumstances. He can only relate the majesty of the heavens with direct reference to Boethius' passage on the 'fetheres of Philosophye', relating what he sees through the words of a past master rather than his own.[95] Indeed, when struck by the sudden uncertainty of his corporeal state, he desperately looks for an authoritative way to express his ordeal. Scrambling to find firm ground to stand on, he can only describe his state of disquiet through received modes of expression.

Continuing this pattern of textually mediated experience, he complains that he had started to 'wexen in a were', echoing the words of Dante, who, during his own ascent, similarly worries that he was caught [*fu' inretito*] in a new perplexity [*un nuovo dubbio*].[96] He next defines his experience through the imagery of Paul's *raptus* from 2 Corinthians 12:2 – just as Dante does – saying that he does not know whether he is in 'body or in gost', before finally turning to 'Marcian' (Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*) and the 'Anteclaudian' (Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*) for an explanation of his troubling experience.[97] As these last two authors' descriptions of the heavenly realm are comparable to what he sees around him, Geffrey notes ironically, 'y kan hem now beleve'.[98] This whole incident, with the pile-up of voices and allusions, satirizes what Chaucer seems to have perceived as the detrimental need to relate to the world of experience through the authority of *auctores*.

Moreover, while Chaucer appears to parody the humanist desire to imbibe deeply the work of ancient writers, he also uses this moment to further deny Geffrey

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[95] HF, ll. 974-8. On this passage, see John M. Fyler, ''Cloude,' – and 'Al That Y of Spak': '*The House of Fame*', v. 978', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 87.4 (1986) pp. 565-568.

[96] HF, l. 979; Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.94-6.

[97] HF, ll. 981, 985-6; Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.5-7. Geffrey also believes the light of the stars will blind him, subverting the image of Dante bathing in the bright lights of the heavens, which, he says, no eagle has stared into (Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 1.47-8, 52-4).

[98] HF, l. 990.

the divinely gifted power of inspired poetic authority. Before recalling the works of Martianus and Alan, Geffrey states that, although he is unsure what state he is in, 'God, thou wost'.[99] Yet, God does not reveal to him the truth of his experience, as he says, clear understanding 'Nas me never yit ysent' regarding this matter. Geffrey does not have free access to secret reserves of divine knowledge, he is not a *poeta theologus* in the tradition of Dante or Mussato, mediating between the Creator and his creation. Instead, Geffrey can only turn to the records of fallible readers and writers to explain his experience — to Boethius, *Marcian*, the *Anteclaudian*, Dante, and Paul.[100] His literary world appears to be (in a Derridean sense) a closed semiotic system, limited to those subjective and imperfect claims of authority made by individuals from within its own encircled confines. It lacked the anchoring centre of divine revelation that the humanist poet was supposed to provide.

Within this passage, then, Geffrey's appeal to the creator-God – the one 'that made Adam' – seems deeply ironic.[101] Indeed, his repeated reference to the creative agency of God throughout the poem, an allusion to God's status as the author of creation, appears to be just another way in which Geffrey hopes to tether his bewildering experience to an authoritative – and troublingly evasive – reference point.[102] It raises the important and unsettling question: if the author is dead, what about the first and final author, God?[103] Has Chaucer staged the greatest double murder in literary history?

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[99] HF, l. 981.
[100] HF, ll. 1209-13.
[101] HF, l. 970.
[102] Much like his continual deferral to the authority of *auctores*, which was informed by an internalized catalogue of ancient writers, Geffrey's speech is marked by the repeated swearing of oaths as he desperately gropes in the dark for an authoritative hook to hang his statements on (HF, ll. 1067, 1084, 1131, 2000, etc.).
[103] Cf. 'And he that mover ys of al / That is and was and ever shal' (HF, ll. 81-2) with Revelation 1:8: 'I am the one who is, who always was, and who is still to come'.

On the surface of it, it seems possible. The divine author certainly appears to be just one more authority amongst many others, another *auctor* for Geffrey to reference and latch onto, something which he can use to frame the experience of his vision. Like all other writers, the divine author offers no intervening guidance, no 'clere entendement', and the experience of Geffrey's dream is left unglossed, and to be read according to his own imaginative predilections. Here, creation is just another abused text and God is just another absent author. In this sense, the poem's opening line – 'God turne us every drem to goode' – must be seen as profoundly ironic: the only moral intervention possible is that of the reader, who is now become god of the text.[104]

Nevertheless, this is not, in my view, a proto-atheistic proposition. Nor is it some kind of pre-postmodern denial of ultimate truth, it is not the death of God, if such a thing is even possible. It is, more generally, a response to the relativizing impact of a sustained tradition of moral reading, where, as we have seen, narratives were wilfully adapted to suit the circumstantial needs of their readers. But also, more specifically, it appears to be a parodic allusion to the perceived symmetry between the divine author and the human poet. It is more an ironic criticism of a particular way of constructing poetic authority than a statement of divine deficiency. It is a statement of literary value, not a theological proposition.

In one of his more famous verses, Alan of Lille echoes the famous Victorine maxim that the world was like a book written by the finger of God [*quasi quidam liber scriptus digito Dei*], describing creation as a work of art: 'All of creation, / Like

[104] In her reading of this line, Sheila Delany misses Chaucer's irony, suggesting that 'the Narrator transcends given alternatives in a fideistic appeal to the highest authority — a suprarational authority' (*The Poetics of Skeptical Fideism*, p. 41). As Alastair Minnis suggests, any evidence of transcendence is notably absent from the poem (*The Shorter Poems*, p. 215).

a book or a picture, / Is a mirror to us'.[105] In the same way that God presides providentially over his creation, the author stands as the creator and ruler of the universe of his poetic art. It is a bold statement of authorial control that was important to the literary vision of his *Anticlaudianus* and reflects an influential mode of poetic self-representation.[106] This kind of authorial identity was, however, for Chaucer, another false mechanism by which the poet might accrue to themselves authority and lasting glory. Geffrey's appeal to the authority of the creator-God parodies the favourable comparison between divine and human authors. Here, rather than the poet being immortalized as the divine ruler of his own text, the creator-God is humorously trammelled with the problematic features of human authorship, he is just another writer, and his creation is just another text. If human and divine authors were comparable, Chaucer suggests, God was indeed a deeply flawed writer.

For Chaucer, the poet was most certainly not the omnipotent creator of his own fictive worlds, neither were his words prophetically inspired nor definitively anchoring. Such rarefied claims were likely irreconcilable with his own practical encounters with the partial transmission of poetic texts. Moreover, they did not reflect what Chaucer saw in the messy discursive interactions of the bustling cosmopolitan world just outside his door, where people and their tales mingled with unguided freedom at the social intersections of taverns, markets, roads, and on the ever-moving waterways that flowed with the constant noise of comings and goings. These are the

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[105] [Omnis mundi creatura, / Quasi liber, et picture / Nobis est, et speculum] Alan of Lille, *Magistri Alani Rhythmus alter,* PL, 210: 579A. Hugh of St. Victor, *De Tribus Diebus*, PL 176.814; cf. 'For this whole world is like a book written by the finger of God, that is, created by divine power' [Universus enim mundus iste quasi quidam liber est, digito Dei scriptus, hoc est, virtute divina creates] (Pseudo-Julian of Toledo, *Commentarius in Nahum*, PL, 96.723). On the book of nature, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 2013) pp. 319-32.

[106] For a comparison between the literary strategies of the *Anticlaudianus* and the *House of Fame* see, Sarah Powrie, 'Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* as Intertext in Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *The Chaucer Review* 44.3 (2010) pp. 246-267.

stimuli that fill Chaucer's poetic imagination and are the images with which he constructs his poetic theory. Rather than an omniscient humanist author confidently rising above the fray of audience reception to assume a god-like control over his text, Geffrey hopes to become a nameless observer, a reporter of common tidings.[107] For Chaucer, the poet is not the subject of his text, but rather a witness to it. Entering through the window of the House of Rumour, Geffrey becomes more a narrative thief, than the master of the house.[108]

This chapter will continue by considering some of the imaginative structures Chaucer erects in order to support and organize his vision of poetic function. In displacing humanist models of poetry, he was tasked with describing what he perceived as the random transmission and fluid interchange of texts as they were sifted, compiled, and reworked by readers across the passage of time. Indeed, as Geffrey explains, chance [*Aventure*] was 'the moder of tydynges'.[109] In creating a literary universe governed by the uncertainty of the meaningless interventions of chance, Chaucer erodes the foundations of the very medium onto which his creation is inscribed. In the end there is nowhere left for him to stand, and his desire for authorial-erasure results in a text that cannot hold up under its own weight. As we will consider by way of conclusion, for Chaucer, the imaginative nature of poetry appears to be fundamentally illusory and could not be relied on by writers or readers to signify anything with any certainty.

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[107] On the subjective perspective of the observer in Chaucer's poetry as it might relate to developments in Italian art, see Michael Hagiioannu, 'Giotto's Bardi Chapel Frescoes and Chaucer's House of Fame: Influence, Evidence, and Interpretations', Chaucer Review 36.1 (2001) pp. 28-47; Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350-1450* (Oxford, 1971).
[108] John 10:1.
[109] HF, l. 1983.

Often compared with the shipwrecked Aeneas, Geffrey is initially deposited on the desolate and uncultured sands of a foreign land with the difficult frontier mission of discovering a new literary civilization, with new cultural monuments and linguistic boundaries.[110] Within a few short lines, the emptiness of the Libyan desert is turned into an image of the fruitful abundance of stories that he will find within the palace of Fame. Here, he will receive more *tydynges* 'then greynes be of sondes', more stories than 'cornes were in graunges'.[111] His journey promises to enlarge his literary horizons and provide him with new narrative lands to colonize.

As the recycled image suggests, Geffrey expects – and we expect – that the classical literary tradition being left behind will still be recognized in, and comparable with, what is to come: it will share the same formal structures and landscapes found in and around the Temple of Glass. Indeed, the image of the granary, a homely, perhaps vernacular, reflection of the Latinate glass temple, anticipates the security of an ordered and stable literary tradition. But the systems of communication Geffrey discovers are not like this. The otherwise anonymous House of Rumour describes a very different kind of imaginative structure, one that is less interested in securing archival unity and closure, than functioning as an open-ended conduit for the fluid ingress and egress of stories and storytellers. It was a space that required a new kind of *poiesis*, where poetry was not a stable artefact, but in constant flux.

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[110] While Nick Havely comments that the field of sand has become a 'playpit' for critics, it is usually considered to be a reflection of poetic or moral sterility (Geoffrey Chaucer, *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, ed. Helen Phillips and Nick Havely [London, 1997] p. 145). On the moral aspect see, J. A. W. Bennett, who reads it as the 'barren loves of Dido', and John Leyrerle, who reads it as a critique of private love (Bennett, *Chaucer's Book of Fame*, p. 48; John Leyerle, 'Chaucer's Windy Eagle', *UTQ* 40 [1971] p. 258).
[111] HF, ll. 691, 698.

During his ascent, Geffrey discovers that all discourse is in perpetual motion. In what might be an elaborate fart joke, the eagle famously reduces all speech to broken air (and with it any pretensions to the high status of poetry):[112]

> (Soun ys noght) but eyr ybroken,
>
> And every speche that ys spoken,
>
> Lowd or pryvee, foul or fair,
>
> In his substaunce ys but air.

(HF, ll. 765-8)

The eagle explains that all noise, whether animal or human, expands outward from its source in waves of concentric circles, like those formed by a stone dropped in water, before carrying its message to the House of Fame where it takes on the shape of its speaker.[113] Not only does this theory of undifferentiated noise flatten discourse so there could be no hierarchy of genre or speakers – we might recall Kempe's own *reductio ad stercore* – it also reduces all utterance to the important base element of liquid sound.

The waterish movement of speech was an important conceit for Chaucer. Expounding on the Aristotelian principles of motion, the eagle says that all natural objects are instinctively drawn toward their right and natural abode:

> That every kyndely thyng that is
>
> Hath a kyndely stede ther he
>
> May best in hyt conserved be;

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[112] Leyerle, 'Chaucer's Windy Eagle', p. 255.

[113] HF, l. 743. Dante compares the those who have not achieved fame in similar terms to these: 'He who spends his life without renown / leaves such a vestige of himself on earth / as smoke bequeaths to air or foam to water' [Sanza la qual chi sua vita consuma, / cotal vestigio in terra di sé lascia, / qual fummo in aere e in acqua la schiuma] (Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Mandelbaum, 24.49-51). On the grammatical science of this in relation to Priscian's *Institutiones grammaticae*, see Martin Irvine, 'Medieval Grammatical Theory and Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *Speculum* 60 (1985) pp. 866-7.

> Unto which place every thyng,
>
> Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng,
>
> Moveth for to come to,
>
> Whan that hyt is awey therfro.
>
> (HF, ll. 730-6)

Thus, speech moves toward its 'kyndely stede' in Fame's palace.[114] The river-like movement of this passage, as it snakes forward and winds back on itself, is reflected in the ensuing description of the gradual inclination of every *ryver* toward the *see*. In the same way, the progress of discourse was undeniable, it could not be permanently damned up or contained in any formal way.

The image of water flows throughout the poem, right to its very climax, where Chaucer compares the feet of a clamouring mob to the way eel trappers would stamp in a river's shallows in order to drive their prey toward precast snares.[115] For Chaucer, the submersible basket used to catch eels was to be added to the catalogue of containers – *panyers*, *hottes*, *dossers* – he associates with the *cage*-like House of Rumour, which he describes as a perforated structure with innumerable *entrees*, windows, and holes that allowed the sound of tidings to flow freely in and out of it.[116] It is an image that reminds us of Geffrey's earlier statements about the way he would consume his own work as his own reader, stating that, 'I wil myselven al hyt drynke'. In this context, he seems to have been describing himself as another kind of temporary container of liquid discourse, an unbounded passage through which narrative work will pass, as all drinks do, being imbibed and expelled in reconstituted form in the same way that stories move through the House of Rumour.

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[114] While Dante articulates a similar physics in *Paradiso* 1.135-38, it is also found translated by Chaucer in his *Boece*, III, met. 2.
[115] Rebecca Davis, 'Fugitive Poetics', pp. 101-32.
[116] HF, ll. 1935-40. *MED*, s.v. *panier(e* (n.), def. a.; s.v. *hotte* (n.), def. a.; and s.v. *doser* (n.), def. 2 (a).

Immersed within the currents of living speech, the wicker labyrinth of the House of Rumour filters an endless stream of discourse, catching myriad kinds of tidings before they flow on toward the palace of Fame and their judgement. It was not a storehouse of narrative work(ers), but rather a monument to the fluid and chaotic nature of literary production and transmission. Inside, amid the heaving mass of tales and tale-tellers, Geffrey gleefully witnesses the promiscuous frenzy of narrative proliferation, where tidings passed 'fro mouth to mouth', arbitrarily intermixing and continually shifting as they swapped identities and definitions in a procreative saturnalia of story-telling.[117] It is distinct from the ordered and immortalizing tectonics of the houses dedicated to Venus and Fame.

It represents a pronounced departure from past models of studious literary reception. Boccaccio had insisted on inhabiting a very different environment:

> [P]oets have sought and still seek their habitation in solitudes because contemplation of things divine is utterly impossible in places like the greedy and mercenary market, in courts, theatres, offices, or public squares, amid crowds of jostling citizens and women of the town.[118]
>
> (Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Gods*, trans. Osgood, XIV.xi)

This is precisely the kind of organic, practical, bustling public space we find in the House of Rumour. Overflowing with the ephemeral news of shipmen, *pilgrimes*, pardoners, *currours*, and *messagers*, it represents a noisy marketplace of stories and storytellers, that seem to anticipate the range of narrative voices set loose in the

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[117] HF, l. 2076.

[118] [Ob id solitudines incolunt et coluere poete, quia non in foro cupidinario, non in pretoriis, non in theatris, non in capitoliis aut plateis, publicisve locis versantibus, seu turbelis civicis inmixtis, vel mulierculis circumdatis sublimium rerum meditatio prestatur] (Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, ed. Romano, vol. 2, XIV.xi)

Canterbury Tales, for which the *House of Fame* may be an abandoned prologue.[119] The teeming diversity of the House of Rumour recalls the metropolitan world that Chaucer might have known while making his *rekenynges* as the comptroller of the wool customs in London, where he would have observed the arterial movement of people and their tales on the Thames. In choosing to live among the shifting and fragmented stories that 'duellen almost at [hys] dores', Chaucer signals his renunciation of the high-minded aspirations of humanist poetry.[120] The poet's place was to be immersed with the common people in the mundanity of life, not in the clouds, ascending to literary glory.

Geffrey's journey, then, is not toward the divine assurance of poetic authority, but away from it, and toward the discovery of – and participation in – a literary tradition defined by impermanence and anonymity. The eagle takes him from the classical order that we find preserved in Fame's palace and in the glass temple, into the very centre of the orgiastic maelstrom of the House of Rumour, where narratives were exchanged, distorted, and reduced to their base status of *tydynges*, comingling and compounding with each other until *fals* was indistinguishable from *soth*.[121] Here, Geffrey's visionary experience does not confirm the exclusive theological or inspired status of poetry, but instead, brings him toward the edge of a dark literary abyss, one that Chaucer himself seems forced to turn back from.

XI

[119] The *House of Fame* as an experimental prologue for a larger set of love stories, and as a trial run for the *Canterbury Tales* goes back to at least J. M. Manly, 'What Is Chaucer's *Hous of Fame*?', *Kittredge Anniversary Papers* (Boston, 1913) pp. 73-81.
[120] HF, l. 650.
[121] HF, l. 2108.

The poem famously breaks off just as we are about to be introduced to 'A man of gret auctorite' — or at least one that 'semed for to be'.[122] That such a figure could exist within the poem is entirely unlikely. Chaucer's commitment to irony, satire, and authorial abnegation – the kind modelled for him by Ovid and his medieval confrere, Jeun de Meun – had exiled from his text any sense of its own certainty of meaning and purpose. What we find in the *House of Fame*, then, is a sustained experiment in authorlessness, which continually threatens to spiral out of control, before eventually bringing the whole project to a grinding halt.

From the opening *dubitatio* on the nature of dreams, Chaucer attempts to remove himself from the centre of his poem. It is often assumed that the list of competing dream theories works to prevent the emergence of any singular method of interpretation.[123] Thus, with similarly ironic consequences to Jean de Meun's comments that people were deceived by their dreams, the comic excess of dream-lore in the proem is seen to problematize the recovery of any stable meaning from the poem.[124] While this may be so, Chaucer's focus is more specifically on the unknowable genesis of dreams: 'What causeth swevenes'.[125] As a result, by insisting that the cause of dreams could not be recovered in any certain way, he creates a literary text that is free from the anchoring weight of purpose and intention, one without any discernible *causa efficiens*.

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[122] HF, ll. 2157-8. Kay Stevenson, 'The Endings of Chaucer's *House of Fame*', *English Studies* 59 (1978) pp. 10-26.
[123] On this, see Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 14 (Cambridge, 1992); Robert R. Edwards, *The Dream of Chaucer: Representation and Reflection in the Early Narratives* (Durham, 1989); Fyler, ''Cloude', – and 'Al That Y of Spak', pp. 565-8.
[124] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose,* ed. Felix Lecoy. 3 vols, *Les Classiques français du moyen âge* 92, 95, 98 (Paris, 1970-82); Charles Dahlberg, trans., *The Romance of the Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun* (Hanover, 1983) ll. 18274-96.
[125] HF, l. 3.

The category of *causa efficiens* (and its various cognates) had migrated into literary criticism from biblical commentary at the beginning of the thirteenth century to become a relatively familiar part of the critical vocabulary, often assuming the categorical properties of *intentio auctoris*.[126] In his commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, Dante's friend, Giovanni del Virgilio (d. c.1327), would claim that the efficient cause of Ovid's text was twofold:

> [T]hat which moved and that which was moved. The moving cause was God Himself, who is the Prime Mover … But another moving cause could be the ultimate objective, that is, that Ovid should win the affection of the Emperor Octavian, and that his fame should be spread more widely though all the world. [127]

In a similar way, by denying his dream the security of an identifiable cause, Chaucer creates a uniquely, if only theoretically, authorless and Godless text. Not only does this narrative strategy serve to distance himself from his work and from the responsibilities of being its author, denying his poem a causal point of origin, it also offers us an important example of his theory of poetic function. Chaucer seems to want to do away with authors and readers altogether, ultimately suggesting that there were really only tales.

In the House of Rumour, we are consistently confronted with tales that tell themselves. Everything will inevitably be told, with or without authors, 'For al mot out, other late or rathe'.[128] It is a radically decentralized and democratized vision of

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[126] Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation*, pp. 109-13; on its circulation within commentaries and its relationship to other categories of *causa*, see idem, 'Academic Prologues to Authors', *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature: Vol. 1*, ed. Rita Copeland (Oxford, 2016) pp. 155-7.
[127] Minnis and Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism*, p. 361. For the Latin text, Giovanni del Virgilio, 'Giovanni del Virgilio espositore delle Metamorfosi', ed. Fausto Ghisalberti, *Giornale Dantesco* 34.4 (1933) pp. 1-110.
[128] HF, l. 2140.

literary production, which sees narrative poetry as a self-speaking medium. Rather than a superintending author working behind the scenes to achieve some pre-planned response of action, what we find in the *House of Fame* is a literary world where narratives are without beginnings and without endings, where they are in the process of a continual and progressive unfolding.

In an important statement about Chaucer's own authorial position, Geffrey tells us that in his roaming of the House of Rumour he had heard a *tydynge* from 'som contre':

> That shal not now be told for me –
>
> For hit no nede is, redely;
>
> Folk kan synge hit bet than I.
>
> (HF, ll. 2137-9)

Again he refuses to embrace the conclusive authority of a named laureate poet and instead confirms his own partiality, admitting to the fragmented condition of his work and suggesting that his efforts should be seen as provisional, subjective, and ultimately incomplete. What Geffrey offers his reader does not constitute a full record of all the tales he has heard, indeed, we are consistently reminded that the poem is bursting at its seams with an over-abundance of material that cannot be told.[129] Chaucer seems to have viewed his poetry as being inceptive rather than completive, seminal rather than final, it was to be a starting point for something bigger and entirely more unpredictable. He conceived of his tales as catalyzing agents in an endless process of imaginative and augmentative reading and writing.

Upon the discovery of the House of Rumour, we are told in a waterish simile that just as the sea was the mother of all *welles* and *sprynges*, Chance was the mother

[129] HF, ll. 674, 1174-80, 1256, 1282-4, 1299-1300 etc. Cf. Dante, *Paradiso*, trans. Mandelbaum, 23.61-3, where Dante skips over material because of its inexpressibility.

of all tidings.[130] It is interesting, then, that only a few lines after this, when Geffrey asks if he might visit this newly-found structure, the eagle says, 'Petre! that is myn entente'.[131] Of course, up until this point, it had been a conveniently unarticulated intent. Geffrey's discovery of the House of Rumour seems to be less a result of authorial foresight, than of pure chance. The sudden addition of an unplanned stopover on his journey vividly dramatizes the random way narratives develop by themselves as they are being read and written. Indeed, by assuming the status of a master controller of Geffrey's imaginative experience, the eagle seems to parody the self-interested assertions of authorial intent made by writers and commentators throughout the period, as he desperately tries to maintain an appearance of sure authority.[132] Like all authors the eagle is rushing to catch up to the wilful roving of his audience. And like all readers, Geffrey is wandering freely and creatively through the vivid landscapes of his imagination. And, yet, he is not entirely in control either: the images he encounters exert their own influence and power over him and his situation.

As Geffrey's unplanned excursion might suggest, the imaginative experience of poetry was an unguided one, which had immense potential to spark new directions of thought and narrative discovery. But Chaucer also appears profoundly suspicious of the potentially illusory and disorientating nature of these kinds of mental phenomena. Before the eagle arrives at the glass temple, Geffrey is overwhelmed by the visual impact of the vast field of sand:

> 'O Crist!' thoughte I, 'that art in blysse,
>
> Fro fantome and illusion

[130] HF, 1982-4.
[131] HF, 2000. Peter is an ambiguous and complex figure to invoke in this situation, because of his duplicitous and treacherous denials of Christ he would not seem out of place stationed at the walls of Fame's castle with the other two-faced characters, on this see below.
[132] On this, see the discussion in Chapter 3. In particular, we might be reminded of the *Heroides* commentary, where Ovid was ascribed a conveniently inclusive and similarly far-sighted range of intentions in an attempt to close the text down.

Me save!'

(HF, ll. 492-4)

That his words are *thoughte*, rather than said, serves to emphasize the internal nature of the drama. Like Matthias, who we discussed earlier, Chaucer suggests that there is some danger in the undirected exploration of the internal universe of the imagination, and that the *phantasmata* of the mind did not guarantee the discovery of certain knowledge. Throughout the period, phantasms were considered an imaginative experience common to both dreams and the sensory world of waking life. Both involved mental images being delivered to, what John Trevisa (d. 1402) would call, the 'fantastik ymaginacioun', before they were impressed into the soft mnemonic tissue of the mind.[133] Thus, Geffrey is not just wishing to be saved from the *fantome* of a confusing dream, but from the tyranny of his very imagination, which had refused to surrender to him any reliable information about his circumstance. From the beginning of the poem, then, Geffrey's imaginative experience is touched with the unnerving possibility that it cannot be trusted, and that at any moment the curtain could be pulled back to reveal that it is all merely a trick of the mind, that 'it is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing'.[134]

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[133] John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things, John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975-88) I.107. An occasional source for Chaucer, Vincent of Beauvais associates the hallucinogenic experience of *phantasmata* with both sense experience and dreams throughout his work (*Speculum naturale*, 25.86; Alastair Minnis, 'Langland's Ymaginatif and Late-Medieval Theories of Imagination', *Comparative Criticism* 3 [1981] pp. 72-3). On the traditional suspicion of the reliability of the imagination and scholastic discussions of *phantasmata*, see idem, 'Medieval Imagination and Memory', *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Vol. 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge, 2005) pp. 239-74, esp. 239-48. See also the discussion in Chapter 3. On Chaucer and Vincent of Beauvais, see the articles by Pauline Aiken cited in Chapter 3.

[134] This is also suggested in the way that Geffrey conceives of himself as being on a humanist journey toward canonization, saying 'this was thoo my fantasye', before the eagle explains that his imagined expectations were false and that 'Thow demest of thyself amys' (HF, ll. 593-96). William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford, 2005) *Macbeth*, 5.5.26-8.

The poetic experience generated by the poem threatens to undo itself as we begin to see more clearly the potentially deceptive nature of poetry. When approaching the palace of Fame, Geffrey discovers that the people stationed at its walls are not just the dubious figures of *mynstralles* and *gestiours* that 'tellen tales / Both of wepinge and of game', but also the more ambiguous and threatening *jugelours*, *magiciens*, *tregetours*, *wicches*, *sorceresses*, and *clerkes*, who use *naturel magik* and *ymages* to manipulate the well-being of their subjects.[135] The illusory nature of Geffrey's imaginative experience is suggested here in the shared affective duties of tale-tellers and deceivers.[136] But also, perhaps more troublingly, these figures are joined by a vast array of musicians – 'Many thousand tymes twelve' – in a way that seems to associate the powers of deception with the effects and artistry of poetic music.[137]

While Fame's tricksters achieve their devious intent by *craftely* making images, Orpheus, the first poet, similarly makes his songs *craftely*, which would inevitably result in the production of mental images.[138] Not only are both activities adverbially tied in a comparison of function and purpose, music is described as a fundamentally imitative and deceptive art, it is made 'as craft countrefeteth kynde'.[139] It is a damning assessment not only of the affective modulations of poetic music – often a highly prized literary feature – but of all art, and serves to undermine the authenticity and reliability of the imaginative encounter with the poetic. If poetry is an

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[135] HF, ll. 1259-70.
[136] HF, ll. 1271-81.
[137] HF, ll. 1216. Dante offers an interesting counter to this scene, writing: 'O fantasy [*imaginativa*], you that at times would snatch / us so from outward things – we notice nothing, / although a thousand trumpets sound around us' [O imaginativa che ne rube / talvolta sì di fuor, ch'om non s'accorge / perché dintorno suonin mille tube] (Dante, *Purgatorio*, trans. Mandelbaum, 17.13-15). For Chaucer, the poetic noise of trumpets and harpers serve to menace the imagination and represent a force of deception and of paralyzing uncertainty.
[138] HF, ll. 1203, 1267.
[139] HF, l. 1213.

imaginative forgery, a counterfeit similitude or likeness of reality, how can it have any value, how can it be trusted?

The problems continue inside the castle too, where the famous accusation that 'Omer made lyes, / Feynynge in hys poetries', is allowed to go unanswered, being introduced into the poem in an open-ended way that refuses absolute resolution.[140] There was, it seems, the real possibility that poets were liars and that the vivid images of their poetic representations should not be trusted. As this problem takes place within the context of a poem, it elicits a distinct tautological frustration, an Epimenidean paradox, which demands from the reader a self-reflexive examination of the veracity of the very poem itself. If poets lie, then what of Chaucer? If poetry is a trick of the mind, then what of the *House of Fame*? That the imaginative and affective powers of music and poetry are so firmly related to modes of deception destabilizes the entire text, like Fame's palace, the poem is built on a truly 'feble fundament'.[141]

The collective force of Chaucer's sustained and aggressive attacks on the author and the reader ultimately overtake him, and in their final analysis prove self-destructive. We are left with something that struggles to assert its own status and meaning. The poem ceaselessly dismantles itself, eroding its already shaky foundations with wave after wave of irony, parody, and authorial denial, washing away the stabilizing substrata of the authoritative writers of the past with the fluid transmission of texts. In a sense it is a poem about the unreliability of poetry, it is an imaginative discourse about the illusory nature of imaginative discourses.

Chaucer exposes the limited control authors and readers have over such imaginative experiences. His story of Phaeton's cosmic car accident takes on poignant significance here. Unable to control his father's chariot, he drops the reins and is

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[140] HF, ll. 1477-8.
[141] HF, l. 1132.

violently thrown ‘now up, now doun’, as though being led by those affective poets who ‘tellen tales / Both of wepinge and of game’, before losing his mind and being fatally ejected from his vehicle. Chaucer’s moralizing apostrophe offers a grave warning to readers about the uncontrollable nature of imaginative discourses:

> Loo, ys it not a gret myschaunce
>
> To lete a fool han governaunce
>
> Of thing that he can not demeyne?
>
> (HF, ll. 957-9)

It seems to describe what happens when poetry is liberated from the formal category constraints imposed on it by those commentators and authors who, when faced with these sorts of problems, would reflexively claim that poetry pertains to ethics – *ethice subponitur* – or insist that it should lead its audience to love good and hate evil. Without a horizon of moral expectations, the reader had no way of navigating their imaginative experience. They would be, as Geffrey was, stranded in an endless desert of formless imaginative potential. Likewise, without the presiding authority of a living author, poetry was simply unbridled imaginative power, it would buck and kick, and cast off its reader in a supreme act of psychic violence.

But also, in this case, the poet seems to be similarly ejected from the text. That the poem could not guarantee any singular or stable meaning, and had so thoroughly erased its own value and purpose, suggests that Chaucer had lost control of his own work. In the same way that Phaeton, who, in a fit of ambition and ignorance, had lost control of his father’s chariot, Chaucer’s efforts to produce an anti-Dantean text results in a catastrophic derailing. Regardless if this is Chaucer’s intent or not, whether it is a planned self-destruction or a happy little accident, the effect is the same. By making his poem reveal its own insufficiencies, by exposing the limits and

problems of all poetry, he writes himself right off the page. He is forced stop mid-line, before being unceremoniously ejected from his own text. In the end, we seem to be presented with a gratuitously nihilistic vision of poetry that reminds us of the conclusion to the *Manciple's Tale*:

> My sone, be war, and be noon auctour newe
>
> Of tidynges, wheither they been false or trewe.
>
> Whereso thou come, amonges hye or lowe,
>
> Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe.
>
> (MT, ll. 359-62)

It is better to say nothing than be misinterpreted. Silence, Chaucer suggests, is the only appropriate response to the problem of poetry. But this seems, to me at least, to be more of a question than a statement of fact.[142] Is it really better to keep quiet? Chaucer always appears less interested in poetic closure than he is in the endless possibilities of a text as it flowed through the ever-widening apertures of the imagination.

Indeed, to suggest that the *House of Fame*, and its larger and more unwieldy successor, the *Canterbury Tales*, should be considered somehow fragmentary or unfinished seems to miss Chaucer's point. In a sense the pilgrims were never supposed to make it to Canterbury and back, their journey is that of a text on the way to its final destination, it is an expedition without end. It is a collection of tales to be constantly enlarged and reimagined by generations of new authors and new readers. Just so, the *House of Fame* could never have been neatly rounded off. It seems to

[142] If we are to believe this passage as a statement of truth then it is self-defeating, as its very existence and our belief in it is proof that its claims are fallacious, and that silence is not the best option. It cannot, therefore, be taken prima facie and is, like the *House of Fame*, a starting point, a delicious irony, a knotty problem to be savoured, and continually revisited and re-answered.

reflect an impulse toward a kind of worldly realism. For Chaucer, real stories did not yield to any obvious order or limit. They did not unfold according to pre-set structures of meaning and intent – or of metre and rhyme – that had been engineered by the exacting will of some omniscient author in order to secure some predetermined response.[143] Nor were narrative texts entirely governed by the desires and directions of their audience. A tale just happens. Stories continually and uncontrollably unfurl themselves as they are read and written.

XII

It is a beautiful irony that John Lydgate would suggest that Chaucer wrote 'Dante in Inglissh', and it is an equally enjoyable commonplace that Thomas Hoccleve envisioned him as the father of English poetry.[144] That he was awarded such an esteemed critical afterlife, so quickly, despite his strenuous authorial avoidances, demonstrates the inherent malleability of *auctoritas*. His reception bears out his point: all authority was artificially constructed by the imaginative responses of its readers. Texts have cultural meaning and value in spite of – not because of – their authors.

The *House of Fame* describes the material systems of a literary tradition in constant flux, where the re-inscription of poems into new contexts had raised questions about the reliability of their meanings. Narrative poetry was under constant threat from scribal error, interfering glossators, excerpting and moralizing readers, and the contingent survival and circulation of manuscripts. Chaucer repeatedly draws

[143] We might consider here his confession that some of his verse might 'fayle in a sillabl' (HF, ll. 1098). It is worth noting that the passages which break the octosyllabic pattern are often lines containing direct speech (Edgar F. Shannon, Chaucer's Use of the Octosyllabic Verse in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 12.2 [1913] pp. 277-94). The natural mode of speaking does not come pre-packaged in perfect metre, and is unwieldy and improvisational.

[144] John Lydgate, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols. EETS ES 121-124 (Oxford, 1924) 1, Prologue, l. 303; Thomas Hoccleve, *Thomas Hoccleve, the Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, 1999) ll. 1863-7.

our attention to what is no longer with us. There are many names engraved on the icy foundations of Fame's palace that have melted away, lost to time or simply erased by the hot light of fame.[145] But also, there are texts yet to be recovered, preserved perfectly in the shade:

> For on that other syde I say
> Of this hil, that northward lay,
> How hit was writen ful of names
> Of folkes that hadden grete fames
> Of olde tyme, and yet they were
> As fressh as men had writen hem here
> The selve day ryght, or that houre
> That I upon hem gan to poure.
>
> (HF, ll. 1151-8)

While Geffrey consumes these freshly discovered texts with humanistic vigour, there is the sense that if he continues to *poure* over them, they might well melt away. Perhaps more immediately, it reminds us of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, which had itself remained hidden from the hot light of literary criticism, shaded on the cool northern slopes of Fame's castle, until it was identified in 1934 by Hope Emily Allen.[146] It serves to reinforce Chaucer's point: because new texts could always remerge from the past, there could be no single or permanent literary authority, no final text, no conclusive word.

The *House of Fame* represents a notable departure from the other poetic theories in this period. Here, poetry did not find its powers and purpose in the omnipotent influence of a divinely gifted author, nor in the music and elevating

[145] HF, ll. 1136-46.
[146] British Library, MS Additional 61823.

effects of its rhythms and verse, but rather in the idiosyncratic and radically uncontrollable imaginative responses of the reader. We are a long way from the exuberant humanism and pioneering spirit of Bacon and Mussato, who in their own ways sought to liberate poetic discourse into new intellectual and theological frontiers. Moreover, while Gower had observed the moral benefits of a decentralized mode of poetic exegesis, Chaucer perceived that the relativity of literary meaning was fertile ground for mischief. Rather than work within the inherited structures of poetic fame, chasing the vanity and status of an authoritative name, Chaucer wanted to watch the world burn, and to laugh to himself in the dying glow of the cinders of a dead literary tradition. In the operatic death of poetry, we hear the famous last words of Rutger Hauer's replicant, Roy Batty – himself a synthetic likeness of human experience, memory, and emotion – as he surrenders to the inevitable fate of all imaginative art:

> I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched c-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die.[147]

[147] Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner*, 1982.

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