

JOHN GOWER

Poetry and Propaganda in
Fourteenth-Century
England

DAVID R. CARLSON

Publications of the John Gower Society

VII

JOHN GOWER,
POETRY AND PROPAGANDA
IN
FOURTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLAND

Publications of the John Gower Society

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POETRY AND PROPAGANDA
IN
FOURTEENTH-CENTURY
ENGLAND

David R. Carlson

D. S. BREWER

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ABBREVIATIONS AND CITATION FORMS

CCR	<i>Calendar of the Close Rolls</i> , cited by annual coverage ranges (e. g., CCR 1339–41) from the series: <i>Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III</i> , 14 vols. (London: HMSO, 1896–1913); <i>Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Richard II</i> , 6 vols. (London: HMSO, 1914–1927); and <i>Calendar of the Close Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Henry IV</i> , 5 vols. (London: HMSO, 1927–1932)
CPR	<i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls</i> , cited by annual coverage ranges (e. g., CPR 1399–1401) from the series: <i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward III</i> , 16 vols. (London: HMSO, 1891–1914); <i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Richard II</i> , 6 vols. (London: HMSO, 1895–1909); and <i>Calendar of the Patent Rolls preserved in the Public Record Office: Henry IV</i> , 4 vols. (London: HMSO, 1903–1909)
EETS os or es	Early English Text Society original series or extra series
METS	TEAMS (The Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages) Middle English Text Series
NIMEV	Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, <i>A New Index of Middle English Verse</i> (London: British Library, 2005)
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts
PR	Chris Given-Wilson, gen. ed., <i>The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England</i> , CD-ROM ed. (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2005)
Rigg, History	A. G. Rigg, <i>A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066–1422</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)
RP	<i>Rotuli parliamentorum: ut et petitiones, et placita in parlamento</i> , ed. Richard Blyke, John Strachey, et al., 8 vols. (London: [s. n.], 1780–1832)
RS	Rolls Series, or <i>Rerum Britannicarum medii aevi scriptores</i>
SR	<i>Statutes of the Realm</i> , ed. J. Caley et al., 11 vols. in 12 (London: Eyre and Strahan, 1810–1828)
Wright, Political Poems	Thomas Wright, ed., <i>Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History Composed During the Period from the Accession of EDW. III. to that of RIC. III.</i> , RS 14, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1859–1861)

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For Gower's writings, I have used the four-volume edition of G. C. Macaulay, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, except for the *Cronica tripartita*, cited from the edition and the verse translation of A. G. Rigg, in *John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events*, ed. David R. Carlson; for Chaucer's, *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, cited in the system of abbreviations for individual pieces therein, p. 779; and for Langland's, the B-text, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt. In citations of other Middle English poems – especially brief and obscure pieces, some often edited and reprinted, under varying titles – NIMEV designations are supplied, for clarity's sake; also, in quotations of Middle English writings, the orthographies are modernised (e. g., by use of "th" in place of thorn). For ancient authors, only a standard *textus receptus* is quoted, with references given by the standard systems of citation, as in *L'année philologique*, e. g., or sometimes by means of something more explicit; likewise for Shakespeare. In all quotations of editions of texts, editorial punctuation has sometimes been tacitly altered, by way of rectification or for fitting the quoted matter into context. Except where express credit is given otherwise, all the translations from original languages are authorial.

INTRODUCTION

GOWER IN HISTORY

More history than John Gower, perhaps; much of state-papers, little literary criticism. Provision needs always be made for poetry's special character, and it is. In poetry, *materiam superat opus*; in prose too, including the government documents. Gower and the other contemporary writers who so laboured over the fourteenth-century prose and verse were all mundane historical actors as well. They were in witness to their times, in what writing of theirs remains, and so reflect or refract conditions. In fact the late medieval writers also intervened in the historical *materia* with which they lived – *processus* might be preferable to Ovid's term; they made change – however slight, still sensible alteration – some of them more deliberately than others, more actively, and those some not always but only at some times. "A serious, honest mind understands – and can understand – nothing of history," it is said; "history in return is marvelously suited to delight an erudite cynic."¹ Though motives are partial or at best mixed, the objective herein is also so narrow.

The matter is to establish that poetry was written in fourteenth-century England by sponsorship of the monarchic state, in prosecution of state-official purposes, and that the slight though century-long official verse-production culminated in the late writings of the English poet John Gower (d. 1408), "ancient" and "moral," most critically his *Cronica tripertita* and "In Praise of Peace," the one Latin, the other an English-language performance, c. 1399–1405.²

The issue of royal or aristocratic patronage of such artists as Gower, in a broad or general sense – the use or enjoyment of literary art by persons who were not themselves artists but who, in exchange for art, lent such as were their material support, one way and another, for purposes of art-appreciation

¹ The quotations in this paragraph are Ovid, *Met.* 2.5 (cf. *Tristia* 2.336), and E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Richard Seaver/Viking, 1976), p. 141; reference is to Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt, 1978), p. 222; and allusion is to Ronald Syme, *History in Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978).

² The epithets are Shakespeare, *Pericles* sc. 1.3, and Chaucer, *Tr.* 5.1856.

or conspicuous consumption or some combination – does not enter in, or only rarely, at an oblique angle.³

Likewise, no discussion of the issue of the English state-formation, the extent of its development, or its nationalism is essayed. The political-economic arrangements in place in the fourteenth century were monarchic and feudal-agricultural, rather than liberal-democratic and industrial-capitalist; though England was not a modern nation, there was an English state nonetheless. For by the fourteenth century, well-established, more or less autonomous, centralised institutions of governance, headed by a monarch and other related hereditary nobles, had a power to enforce binding and permanent rules, by violence, and otherwise to coerce various populations' activities; and this power, embodied in the persons at work in the institutionalised offices, was exercised throughout England and connected other (definable though mutable) territories, not always pervadingly or unfailingly, but broadly enough and stably. When convenient, it is preferred to use personal names (Richard II) or titles of office (clerk of the Privy Seal) or specific departmental designations (the exchequer); nonetheless, sometimes the term "state" is licensed for generalising about the particular doings of the persons or office-holders or government departments established in evidence.⁴

Nor need there be apology for somewhat anachronistic use of the church-derived term "propaganda," though the "Congregatio de propaganda fide" was established only in the seventeenth century. The intention has been to use it, more like the sometimes synonymous Greek term "panegyric," without moral or political judgment, for or against; for propaganda is only purposeful, persuasive provision of information, of the sort the Congregatio

³ A noteworthy Veblenesque approach to the issue of English late medieval patronage is represented in the papers of Patricia J. Eberle cited below, esp. "The Politics of Courtly Style at the Court of Richard II," in *The Spirit of the Court*, ed. Glyn S. Burgess and Robert A. Taylor (Cambridge: Brewer, 1985), pp. 168–178. Something like on the Chaucerian complaints is in Carlson, *Chaucer's Jobs* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 33–44; otherwise, in Carlson, "The 'Opicius' Poems (British Library, Cotton Vespasian B.iv) and the Humanist Anti-Literature in Early Tudor England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 55 (2002), esp. 879–880.

⁴ The terms of the definition essayed are taken from the historicising Weberian sociologist Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power Volume 1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 37; for the differences of the pre-capitalist state in particular, see Mann, "States, Ancient and Modern," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 18 (1977), 262–298. Such citations may be taken to imply a greater theoretical rigour than is in fact in use here, however; for the rest, a particularly instructive brief review of the issues and developments in praxis of the "English State" in just the period under consideration is Gerald Harriss, "Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England," *Past & Present* 138 (1993), 28–57, whose usage is emulated herein.

provides on the faith even now.⁵ Negative historical connotations tend to crowd in, however, as also about the term “state,” perhaps; no matter.

The period in consideration was marked by visible broadly based social and cultural movements, represented in the great 1381 Social Revolt, for example, and in the vernacular literary devotions, with women’s significant participation, though these too come in for little or no attention. Rather, the concentration is on the few, non-popular elite cultural actors, in both the political and literary spheres: monarchs themselves and their executive ministers, operating domestically on a realm-wide level or internationally; and the poets and other writers who served them, all men and ostentatiously learned, performing their duties for audiences of like highly literate formation.

Within these terms of reference, it is only to be demonstrated that, on particular occasions, particular poets were employed for producing particular propagandistic or panegyric writings on behalf of the English state, such as it was at particular moments, in the period 1314–1405.

The demonstration divides into two sections. The first, “Fourteenth-Century Panegyric Verse and Official Writing,” offers source-criticism, literary-historical background, and explanatory context for consideration of Gower’s late writings (chapters one through five). The second, “Gower’s State-Official Late Poetry,” concludes that Gower’s late work was state-sponsored verse panegyric and that, also, Gower retained some independence from the official agenda, as did others likewise implicated in enacting it (chapters six through nine).

The beginning is an examination of the fourteenth-century sources of information on English state-official poetry and the problems of the sources’ witness, in context of the well documented case of Robert Baston and less well known others who wrote after the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. More commonly, contemporary external evidence (commissions and receipts, as well as third-party accounts) is wanting; the sponsoring agencies of official poetry sought to hide their contributions, in modesty; and the poets themselves (including Gower) were evasive or misleading, pretending sponsorship when there was none, and pretending spontaneity, offering criticism even, when sponsorship was present (chapter one).

Brought in next is an approach to the problem of official sponsorship by way of a poorly understood, evasive kind of documentary source, in the state-propaganda of the reign of Edward III and after, taking the ephemeral form of royal writs and the especially elusive official newsletters. The newsletters and other like state-papers were used by mid-century chroniclers

⁵ The paramount debt throughout is to the work of Alan Cameron, esp. “Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt,” *Historia* 14 (1965), 470–509, and *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), whence is taken the title; also, Peter Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

and pamphleteers, including Robert Avesbury, Thomas Favent, and Henry Knighton (chapter two).

The same sources may have come into the hands too of the mostly anonymous poets of the same decades, including Laurence Minot, the Anglo-Latin poet known as the “Anonymous of Calais,” and others, and small-scale state-official poetic performances can be identified. The mid-century evidence is poor and difficult to interpret, however, in large part by consequence of the purely literary matter of language-style; the analysis cannot be conclusive (chapter three).

With corroborating evidence from such lesser instances, it can be demonstrated, nevertheless, that the Anglo-Latin poets Walter Peterborough, in 1367 (chapter four), and Richard Maidstone, in 1392 (chapter five), were acting as poetic state-agents, by virtue of their use of such state-deriving sources of information. In both cases, other evidence impinges: information from outside witnesses to these poets’ lives and work, as well as the poets’ own performance-internal remarks. The fundamental consideration is that both may appear to have used state-official sources as the basis of their verse advertising achievements of the Edwardian and Ricardian regimes, respectively, much as Gower would for another in 1400.

In the circumstance of the Lancastrian advent to state-control in 1399, other writers too were employed in propaganda-production by state-agencies: both prose-document producing secretarial clerks, including Adam Usk (chapter six), and possibly also a group of mostly anonymous poets, including the *Richard the Redeless*-poet (chapter seven). And Gower based his *Cronica tripertita* (February 1400) on the official account of the Lancastrian usurpation, “The Record and Process of the Deposition of Richard II” (October–November 1399), which Gower was provided by, or obtained from, Henry IV or his agents and then versified (chapter eight).

Gower took pay from the same Lancastrian regime in 1399 October, providing something like a receipt at the time, in which he promised to write more; and he did then produce a series of shorter poems as well, including “In Praise of Peace,” acknowledging the payment’s implication that he was a beholden Lancastrian client and was serving the new regime’s agenda by arguing for and promoting Henry’s kingship and immediate objectives. Finally, however, comparison of Gower’s late state-official poetry with his earlier more extensive satiric writing shows that the relationship with the Lancastrian regime that the poet entered into in 1399–1400 did not prevent him from castigating its faults, in keeping with the socially critical attitude of his earlier poetry (chapter nine).

CHAPTER ONE

OFFICIAL VERSE: THE SOURCES AND PROBLEMS OF EVIDENCE

The Case of Robert Baston

The well-attested early fourteenth-century effort went wrong badly. For his invasion of Scotland in 1314, the Plantagenet King of England Edward II, like the great Macedonian Alexander before him, took a contemporary Choerilus along in train, ostensibly “the famousest prosodist in all England,” a man named Robert Baston, whose career in poetry is in fact otherwise unknown, despite the chronicler’s assertion of his magnitude. The English king

famosiorem metristam in universo regno Anglie, videlicet quemdam fratrem Carmelitam, secum adduxit, ut de triumpho suo de Scotis adipiscendo ad ipsorum dedecus metra compingeret, et ad memoriale sempiternum Scotis sic per eum, ut putabat, devincendis relinquenda.

[took in train with him the famousest prosodist in all England, a Carmelite, to fashion verses of his triumph over the Scots, in disparagement of them, to bequeath a sempiternal monument to the conquest of the Scots that he was expecting to achieve.]

But then the Scots laid hold of Edward’s poet, and, having already humiliated Edward and the English on the field of battle at Bannockburn, embarrassed him and them by these other, evidently concomitant means. The Scots put the English “metrista” Baston to work writing verses – “absque ambiguitate,” moreover (since the Scots knew something already about English poets) – instead in praise of Scottish valour, making mock of the English, by way of his ransom from captivity: “et pro redempcione sua compulsus est.” At least some of the verses Baston wrote under compulsion survive, attested by more than one copy, in one case independently of the chronicle account that pretends to give these particulars of Baston’s employment, and then quotes some of the verses, “pro bonitate ipsorum” [on account of their goodness].¹

¹ There is analysis in A. G. Rigg, “Antiquaries and Authors: The Supposed Works of Robert Baston, O. Carm.,” in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar, 1978), pp. 317–319 and 327; also, Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066–1422*

It is not clear whether the episode was remarkable because Edward II had meant to use a poet in such a fashion, as if such employment were uncommon or unprecedented – the Scots chronicler adverts Edward's pride in comment on the episode: "O superba presumpcio, et presumptuosa superbia!" – or whether it was remarkable because the intention to use a poet in such a fashion was turned back against itself in the instance, uncommonly or unprecedentedly. In either case, however, the episode establishes this baseline of belief current amongst the English from early in the fourteenth century: this is what poets were, or were for, in some measure or other. Not free agents, muse-driven, self-activating or self-motivating, producing *ars gratia artis*, or not wholly so: poets were promiscuous tools, or were also, to be used for propaganda production on behalf of commissioning agencies within the secular state.

External Witness

The clerical poet Baston's employment by the secular authorities is not an isolated episode, at least in perspective of later fourteenth-century English literature. The episode instantiates state employment of poetry, with relatively clear and extensive evidence; it provides a set of evidentiary criteria by means of which later, less well attested, but variously possible or putative cases of state-official verse might be evaluated; and it illustrates, or helps adumbrate, the kinds of problems that inhere in such evidence as there is.

External witness of commissioning would be optimal, with receipts best of all, spelling it out that a poet was paid by a commissioning agent for writing a particular piece. No such evidence exists for England before the fifteenth century, however, and then somewhat obliquely: about 1439, the Abbot of St Alban's, John Whethamstede (c. 1392–1465) – who was in general otherwise unusually punctilious about his own cultural benefactions, for long an associate of Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (1390–1447) – had it

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 244–245. Quotations are from the *Scotichronicon* of John Fordun (d. 1384), redacted and continued (to 1437) by Walter Bower, in D. E. R. Watt, gen. ed., Norman F. Shead, Wendy B. Stevenson, and D. E. R. Watt, ed., with Alan Borthwick, R. E. Latham, J. R. S. Phillips, and Martin S. Smith, *Scotichronicon by Walter Bower in Latin and English*, vol. 6 (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), 366, whence come two quotations of the Baston poem (inc. "De planctu cudo metrum cum carmine nudo"), pp. 366–375. The same matter is published also in Walter Goodall, ed., *Scotichronicon*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: [s. n.], 1759), II, 251–253; the other witness (fragmentary) to the poem is printed in W. D. Macray, "Robert Baston's Poem on the Battle of Bannockburn," *English Historical Review* 19 (1904), 507–508. For translation of the Baston poem is used the 2004 laureate performance of Edwin Morgan, "The Battle Of Bannockburn: A Translation of 'Metrum de Praelio Apud Bannockburn,' by Robert Baston," repr. in *A Book of Lives* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), pp. 16–20.

noted in one of his account books that John Lydgate of Bury St Edmunds (c. 1370–1450), also of the *Humphrey-Kreis*, was paid for producing a verse life of the saints Alban and Amphibalus, and the product of the poet's labours survives:

Item, cuidam monacho de Burgo Sancti Edmundi, propter translationem vite Sancti Albani in nostrum vulgare. iii li. vi s. viii d.²

Explicit but exceedingly rare, in fact absent for the previous century: the best evidence available earlier is of the sort that occurs in the Baston case, third-party, or external, attestation to a poet's express commissioning. Such third-party sources' credibility has always to be evaluated, of course: in the present instance, the chronicler was likely the Scots cleric John Fordun (d. 1384), who had an interest in Edward II's humiliation – as a cleric, in rebuking the vainglory of a sodomite; as a Scot, in reduction of England's power – though he was writing for a near-contemporary audience, in a position to reject utter or implausible invention. Also, the chronicler supplied corroboration in the form of the verse itself, which he quoted fully – too much verse, too peculiar in nature, for ready fabrication – in a form in turn corroborated by the other independent copy of the same verse.

Performance-Internal Evidence

The Baston case has another kind of witness of commissioning, internal to the verse itself, also recurrent in other cases later, but probably to be regarded as less reliable than external or third-party witness. Baston names himself, within the surviving poem, and says more besides, not much, but hinting at the circumstances of the composition:

Sum Carmelita Baston cognomine dictus,
Qui doleo vita in tali strage relictus.

[I am a Carmelite, and my surname is Baston.
I grieve that I survive a happening so harrowing and ghastly.]

² Derek A. Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bio-bibliography*, English Literary Studies Monograph Series 71 (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1997), p. 59, nos. 13 and 13A. For the episode and its context in Lydgate's career, see Reginald Webber, "Judas Non Dormit: John Lydgate and Late-Medieval Benedictine Episcopal Conflicts," *American Benedictine Review* 60 (2009), esp. 348–349; also, Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 187–190 and 155–157. Pearsall has important pages on Whethamstede, in *John Lydgate* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970), pp. 43–45; for Whethamstede's associations with Humphrey and his circle in particular, see Carlson, "The Civic Poetry of Abbot John Whethamstede of St. Albans († 1465)," *Mediaeval Studies* 61 (1999), 219–228.

The poet's interest in saying so much here is as clear as that of the chronicler in retailing his account of the affair elsewhere, though different: in Baston's case, exculpation. The verse characterises itself as a lament ("De planctu cudo metrum cum carmine nudo;/ Risum retrudo dum tali themate ludo" [Pain is my refrain, pain comes dragging its rough train;/ Laughter I disdain, or my elegy would be in vain]), and it turns out to be neither as pro-Scots nor as anti-English as might have been wished; by pointing out that he had been captured in the battle in question, the English defeat at Bannockburn ("in tali strage relictus"), Baston asserts his English alignment and excuses his verse-performance.

Baston's intimation that he performed the poetry under duress complements (or is complemented by) the chronicler's information, in a way that is rare. More often, poets' own testimonials are probably less credible than such third-party witnesses as the chroniclers. Corroboration is the more to be desired, for internal evidence of this sort – of poets' and other writers' own remarks, within their own works, about their relations with patrons and other possibly commissioning agents – is untrustworthy.

The Writers' Interest

In the first place, it was in a poet's interest to advertise a patronal relation, even, or especially, in cases where no such relation obtained. Patronal sponsorship of some sort – from church or state, institutional or personal – lent writers' works a form of external authority that was valuable in itself, and might also be transvaluable into other goods. The external authority of sponsorship for writing added value to the authority in the writing itself: writing is rendered more credible by the external sanction and so more attractive to potential readerships; greater credibility and attractiveness might then be traded for reward, tangible or otherwise, if only in the form of further sponsorship for more writing. By virtue of the rewards that might accrue, poets and other writers must always be suspected of inventing patronal sponsorships. Even when representing facts, such work-internal assertions must always at least also be self-aggrandisement.

Interested in attracting patronage, whether having it or not, most often, contemporary writers equivocate. In 1386, Nicholas Lynn (fl. 1386–1411), another Carmelite, published his *Kalendarium* – an impressive technical work in its own right, well received, historically successful: Geoffrey Chaucer used it – with a dedication to the royal uncle John of Gaunt (1340–1399), asserting that he had written "at the asking and for the pleasure" of the man himself: "ad petitionem et complacenciam."³ The duke of Lancaster

³ Ed. Sigmund Eisner, *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), p. 59; see J. A. W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 76–77.

employed various other Carmelites, in various other capacities – including his confessor Richard Maidstone (d. 1396), who was also a writer, though Maidstone makes no assertion of Lancastrian sponsorship for his literary labours in the Latin poem of his that survives; and Walter Peterborough (fl. c. 1367), not a Carmelite, describes himself as “arte ducis poeta” [the duke’s own poet by trade].⁴

For Nicholas Lynn’s assertion, however, there is no better or other corroborative external evidence, and it must admit varying interpretations. Least likely is that the duke directed the writer to write the particular book that he did, paid him for so doing, and enjoyed the product. Had the great man done as much, Nicholas might be expected to have said so, or at least more than he has. The same duke had ordered a compilation of records of the 1377 coronation proceedings for chancery enrollment, with a *memorandum* attaching that specified the nature of his contribution: “Memorandum quod predictus Rex Castelle et Legionis Dux Lancastrie et Senescallus Anglie, istum processum per manus suas proprias in Cancellaria domini Regis liberauit ibidem in rotulis eiusdem Cancellarie irrotulandum” [Be it known that the said King of Castile and León, duke of Lancaster, and steward of England, delivered this account of the proceedings by his own hands in the chancery of the lord king to be enrolled in the rolls of the said chancery].⁵

Instructive contrast of another sort – denying sponsorship, rather than detailing its particulars – comes in the well-connected Benedictine Roger Dymmok’s dedicatory epistle to Richard II in his 1395 *Liber contra xii errores et hereses lollardorum*, where Dymmok put it that he wrote aggressively, in effect, on his own initiative, for his royal addressee’s betterment by the instruction, heedless of any wish, express or otherwise, of the king whom he addressed:

Hinc est, gloriosissime ac excellentissime domine, quod uestre celsitudini presens opusculum decreui dirigere, in uestrarum bibliothecarum numero reponendum, ad refelendum insurgencium heresum nouitates. . . . Si ergo aliqua quoquomodo utilia scripserim, gratias refero sapientie largitori, de cuius ope confisus hoc opusculum inchoaui et ad finem utrumque perdux i et uestre celsitudini destinaui.

[Hence comes it, my lord most glorious and excelling, that I have decided to present your highness with the present work, fit to be set

⁴ On Walter’s patronage, see below pp. 84–92; on Maidstone’s, pp. 96–98. A useful guide to the Carmelite literary activity is Richard Copsey, “The Carmelites in England 1242–1540: Surviving Writings,” *Carmelus* 43 (1996), 175–224.

⁵ Ed. and trans. Leopold G. Wickham Legg, *English Coronation Records* (London: Constable, 1901), pp. 150 and 168; for copies of the document, “Processus factus ad Coronacionem domini Regis Anglie Ricardi secundi post conquestum Anno regni sui primo,” see Patricia J. Eberle, “Richard II and the Literary Arts,” in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), pp. 234 and 238–239.

amongst your other books, for striking down all of insurgent heresy's novelties. . . . Have I written anything of the least use at all, therefore, the thanks I defer unto that wisdom's provider, trusting to the wealth of whom I undertook the work, brought it to completion, and dedicated it to your highness.]⁶

inchoavi, perduxi, destinaui, Dymmok has it; Philippe de Mézières's *Epistre au roi Richart*, imposed on the same king in the same year, makes likewise bold with its address. No matter "que je ne soie pas digne d'ouvrir ma bouche, tresdevot roi, de parler ou escrire a vostre grande sapience royale" [that I am not worthy, most devout king, to speak or to write to your royal wisdom], yet "je ouverray ma bouche" [I will raise up my voice], and to the same instructive end – for the Christian god's praises, "au bien de pais de la cresente et consolacion de vostre royale majeste" [for the good of the peace of christianity and the solace of your royal majesty] – even though, admittedly, Richard may not have wanted to hear so much.⁷

The Carmelite chronographer made a different insinuation, that the object of his address had asked for the writing, his phrasing being closer kin to the remark in the contemporary manual of geomancy that likewise claimed to have been compiled "Ad consolacionem mocionemque specialem excellentissimi domini nostri Ricardi, regnorum Anglie et Francie regis nobilissimi" [for the solace and at the particular instance of our most excellent lord Richard, noblest king of the realms of England and France].⁸ By contrast with the apologies of Dymmok and Mézières, Nicholas Lynn's "ad petitionem et contemplacionem" and the geomancer's "ad consolacionem et mocionem specialem" pretend to represent another circumstance. In an absence of specifics or evidence in corroboration, however, in the forms in which they are made, the latter remarks, unobjectionable flattery and not wildly untrue, remain evasive: at once highly suggestive and hard to deny.

⁶ *Liber contra xii errores et hereses lollardorum*, ed. H. S. Cronin (London: Wyclif Society, 1922), p. 9.

⁷ *Letter to King Richard II: A Plea Made in 1395 for Peace between England and France*, ed. and trans. G. W. Coopland (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1975), pp. 75 and 76. On the Mézières *Epistre*, see Eberle, "Richard II and the Literary Arts," pp. 249–251, and Glynnis M. Cropp and Alison Hanham, "Richard II from Donkey to Royal Martyr: Perceptions of Eustache Deschamps and Contemporary French Writers," *Parergon* 24 (2007), 120–123; Stefan Vander Elst, "'Tu es pèlerin en la sainte cité': Chaucer's Knight and Philippe de Mézières," *Studies in Philology* 106 (2009), 381–384, has useful information on Mézières's implication in English literary-political affairs.

⁸ From quotation in Jean-Philippe Genet, *Four English Political Tracts of the Later Middle Ages*, Camden Fourth Series 18 (London: Royal Historical Society, 1977), pp. 22–23. On the passage, see esp. Katharine Breen, "A Different Kind of Book for Richard's Sake: MS Bodley 581 as Ethical Handbook," *Chaucer Review* 45 (2010), 123–124 and 164, also adducing the parallel with the Mézières *Epistre*, p. 146; also, Eberle, "Richard II and the Literary Arts," pp. 241–244.

The phrasing appears to have been chosen not for reportorial accuracy but for its suggestive equivocation.

‘Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,
The moste partye of thy tyme spende
In makynge of a glorious legende
Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;
And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
That al hir lyf ne don nat but assayen
How many women they may doon a shame;
For in youre world that is now holde a game.’ (F 481–489)

By means of this passage of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Geoffrey Chaucer tried something similar. Though more extensively detailed than the remarks of Nicholas Lynn or the geomancer, in the end Chaucer’s are still more oblique. Explicit instruction appears laid upon the poet (“The moste partye of thy tyme spende/ In makynge of a glorious legende”), and Chaucer represents it that he did as he was commanded, more or less, by the evidence of the (incomplete?) series of *legenda* “Of goode wymmen,” – “maydenes and wyves,/ That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves;/ And telle,” etc. – that came subjoined to the prologue.⁹

The evasion in the *Legend of Good Women* prologue is that the commissioning agency is fictional, or patently fictionalised, as is the poet too. Like the explicit instruction for the contents of the book, the final instruction to the poet appears particular and real, or realistic:

‘Goo now thy wey, this penaunce ys but lyte.
And whan this book ys maad, yive it the quene,
On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene.’ (F 495–497)

Also, however, the same instruction distinguishes between the commissioning agent and “the quene,” clearly someone else here, even though the prologue otherwise requires to be read allegorically, as if “the quene” to

⁹ See esp. Andrew Taylor, “Anne of Bohemia and the Making of Chaucer,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 19 (1997), 95–119, who puts it (p. 97) that “poets may claim a connection in the hopes of acquiring patronage or flatter a patron whose interest in their work is nominal.” In general, I rely on the analysis in John H. Fisher, “The Revision of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*: An Occasional Explanation,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43.4 (November 1978), 75–84; also, John M. Bowers, “Chaucer after Retters: The Wartime Origins of English Literature,” in *Inscribing the Hundred Years’ War in French and English Cultures*, ed. Denise N. Baker (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 109–112, and “Rival Poets: Gower’s *Confessio* and Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*,” in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: Brewer, 2010), pp. 276–287; and T. G. P. Jones, “Was Richard II a Tyrant? Richard’s Use of the Books of Rules for Princes,” in *Fourteenth Century England V*, ed. Nigel Saul (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), pp. 148–151.

whom the finished book was to be rendered was already also a character in the fiction: a mythologically dead woman reanimating, Alceste herself, who addresses the poet in these passages quoted from the prologue, on behalf of the dead myth's consort abstraction, the God of Love, to whom the poet's writings have putatively given offence: "Yt were better worthy, trewely,/ A worm to neghen ner my flour than thou" (F 317–318).

The Chaucerian humour: *Troilus and Criseyde* is of course the only substantial verse-composition that Chaucer ever brought to completion and publication. In it, he did his best work; on it, his contemporary literary reputation rested. The poet in the *Legend of Good Women* prologue is no more realistically biographical than the commissioning agents he encounters in the same prologue: self-aggrandisement is the point too of the *Legend of Good Women* prologue. Though it creates an impression of appearing to connect Chaucer's writing to the express command of some great and important personages, *allegorice* even England's king and queen, it does not. It cannot, in the terms with which it works: rather, it trades in only the impression of an appearance, incorporating concrete particulars even ("at Eltham or at Sheene"), but finally indistinct from the likewise unfalsifiable "ad petitionem et complacenciam."

It remains possible that Chaucer was commanded, by someone he cared to listen to, to write such legends of good women as he did produce, and that he occluded the commission (to the extent he did) out of respect for his own or his commissioners' vanity, or for some other irrecoverable reason. No such act of commissioning as is alleged in the prologue, however detailed in its particulars, is likely ever to be able to explain Chaucer's work on the *Legend*. Apart from the innumerable small-scaled literary choices that would have remained for the writer to make, Chaucer's pre-occupation over time with the matter of the framed collection of tales, for example – the kind of compound-complex genre-experiment he tried earlier, it seems, with the materials that were to become the *Monk's Tale*, and tried again after the *Legend of Good Women* in the *Canterbury Tales* – indicates a larger, more strictly literary motivation at work in him, of a sort that a royal commission at most might have complemented but probably cannot have created. Notwithstanding any such issues of a commission's causal efficacy or heuristic value, in any event, the claim at issue here, that there was an act of commission in this instance, is incredible as it is presented. The internal evidence of Chaucer's prologue is no good, and there is no other evidence.

John Gower tried the same, too, with the *Confessio amantis*. Not that in this case, either, any such commission would explain much about such grand literary labour; still, here too there is an internal evidence. The big poem's English prologue has an account (repeated more briefly in Latin later) of Gower's express commandment by Richard II, with less obfuscation *per allegoria* and greater circumstantiality than Chaucer uses, both poet and prince appearing in *personas proprias*, as if Gower's "bok for king Richardes sake"

(*24) were written to the same king's order.¹⁰ "He bad me" ("I thenke and have it understonde"), Gower asserts:

He hath this charge upon me leid,
 And bad me doo my besynesse
 That to his hihe worthinesse
 Som newe thing I scholde boke,
 That he himself it mihte loke
 After the forme of my writynge.
 And thus upon his comandynge
 Myn herte is wel the more glad
 To write so as he me bad. (*48–*56)

The story is not necessarily invention. Gower may be believed to have had relations of some sort or other, or direct contact, with this or other members of the royal family, on other occasions, as Chaucer did too; and, unlike Chaucer's allegorical dream-vision, Gower's story is persuasively realistic, ostentatiously so even: "In Temse whan it was flowende" (39) notes the tide-level on the river. Some of the particulars probably are elaborated, drifting towards a Chaucer-like mythologising or allegorisation of the still possibly real encounter: the humble "bote" (40, 44) of the aged *vates*, who is recognised, juxtaposing the boy-king's unmistakable grand "barge" (45), meeting "Under the toun of newe Troye,/ Which tok of Brut his ferste joye" (37–38). And Gower insists rather a lot on repeating terms of commandment, though there is too, despite all the reiteration, the odd qualification "I thenke and have it understonde" (*34): by way of "ligeance" (*25) to "My liege lord" (*42), as the king's "liege man," (*27), who "schal his wil observe" (*72), "With al myn hertes obeissance" (*26), Gower does what "a king himselve bit" (*75) – "My kinges heste schal nought falle" (*70) – namely, that the poet was "In his service to travaile" (*78): "yit wol I fonde," "And longe have had,"

So as I made my beheste,
 To make a bok after his heste. (*80–*82)

There is no corroborating evidence for the particular story outside the poem itself, however, and the ways in which this story of focused royal attention flattered Gower, engrossing him and the *Confessio amantis*, remain patent, at work in circulation, whether the story is veracious or not, or veri-

¹⁰ For the analysis, see Frank Grady, "Gower's Boat, Richard's Barge, and the True Story of the *Confessio Amantis*: Text and Gloss," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002), 1–15; also, Kurt Olsson, "Composing the King, 1390–1391: Gower's Ricardian Rhetoric," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 31 (2009), 142–144, and Brian Gastle, "Gower's Business: Artistic Production of Cultural Capital and the Tale of Florent," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, pp. 182–188.

similar. Moreover, the fact that Gower dropped the story from other redactions of his English poem – though only replacing the one story of the king’s “heste” with mention of another, of “myn oghne lord,/ Which of Lancastre is Henri named” (86–87), obligating the poet “To stonde at his commandement” (84) – proves, unequivocally, that Gower’s interest was not in establishing or reporting facts, as if for a record, in the interest of accuracy, but in using the story of royal sponsorship for the benefits that could accrue to him from so doing. The profit for Gower went, and the story vanished, as in Chaucer too the verisimilar circumstantiality of “yive it the quene,” be it “at Eltham or at Sheene,” was dropped out of the other redaction of the *Legend*-prologue. Reporting was not the issue, and was never the only issue, and this is always the case with writers’ own internal witness: inevitably, it is too interested to be simply credible.¹¹

Patronal Occlusion

Poets’ internal attestations to their relations with commissioning agencies need always to be suspected of exaggerating the patronal contributions, for doing so interested writers. Worse than this disturbance of the internal evidence, however, and probably more confounding of utility, is the patronal interest, which could run in the opposite direction. The poets exaggerate; commissioning agencies may wish to dissimulate. Conspicuous consumption of wasteful inessentials is intended for advertisement; hence

¹¹ That Lydgate (in a royally patronised writing) pretends that Chaucer and such other precedent writers as Gower had enjoyed royal patronage is probably not in itself good evidence that they did, for the pretense stood to benefit Lydgate, by imposing on his patrons the burden-reward of illustrious imputed precedent, and Lydgate need not have had independent information, despite his near-contemporaneity, beyond what is otherwise available:

And these poetes I make off menciou
 Were bi old tyme had in gret deynte,
 With kyngis, pryncis in euery regioun,
 Gretli preferrid afftir ther degre;
 For lordis hadde plesance for to see,
 To studie a-mong, and to caste ther lookis
 At good[e] leiser vpon wise bookis.

Regrettably (unless ironically), the illustration Lydgate supplies is C. Julius Caesar entering “the school off Tullius,” “off gret affeccioun,” in order to “heere his lecture” (these quotations being *Fall of Princes* 1.358–364 and 367–368, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS es 121 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924]). The *locus classicus*, so to speak, would be the first-century CE *Laus Pisonis*, in which a tyronian poet (“et nondum vicesima venerit aestas” [261]), pleading for patronage (“tu mihi Maecenas tereti cantabere versu” [248]), pretends that Vergil his “maister” had enjoyed as much, and crucially: “et sterili tantum cantasset avena/ ignotus populis, si Maecenate careret” (234–235).

the poet-patron portrait that occurs in presentation copies, possibly sometimes mimetic of some reality, though also always proleptic, of necessity, and coercively idealising, showing patrons how poets wished such personages might act. By contrast, panegyric writings are purposeful, or industrial, as Thorstein Veblen might have said, close kin in this to propaganda; and so commissioning agents of such writings would always need to be concerned to occlude their contributions, or at least to discourage broadcast of them, for whoever needs to buy his own encomium must already be impoverished, wanting praiseworthy deeds. He who pays a poet to praise him appears the less praiseworthy by light of the payment, which voids any putative praise of persuasive power. Only wealth would speak, and it would tell only of vanity.

At St Alban's, the abbot accounted his pious acts; the saints' life Lydgate wrote him for money praises him – inconveniently, at length: "A clerk notable, perfit of livyng,/ Hauyng in costom, euery hour and space,/ T'outray slouthe and vertu to purchase" (1.885–887), and so forth, with reference also to the learned abbot's own literary labours, "bi diligent occupaciouns/ Geyn idilnesse" (1.892–893), and his "librarie" foundations (1.891) – emphasising appropriate virtues of monastic discipline.¹² Lydgate does not quite name the commissioning agent in the poem itself, however, having recourse to allegorisation instead:

Of his name the ethymologie,
 Sayde of an hom or a stede of whete,
 Of God providid, doth clerkly sygnifie
 Whete gleenes of many old poete,
 Greyn, frute, and flour, with rethoriques swete
 Of philosophres, callyng to memorie
 Of his labour the laureat reportorie. (1.897–903)

One piece of Chaucerian work that all but certainly must have been commissioned, the *Book of the Duchess*, has the same kind of allegorising allusions (probably) to the same sort of commissioning agent (probably), whose name is embedded *sub allegoria* (probably) in the poet's mention of "A long castel . . ./ Be Seynt Johan, on a ryche hil" (1318–1319) near the end of the performance. Of course there is no external evidence for a commission to Chaucer on the occasion, or for payment.¹³ The Lydgate case differs only in

¹² Quoting Lydgate's "Epilogue" to Book One (1.876–931), ed. George F. Reinecke, *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus by John Lydgate* (New York: Garland, 1985), at pp. 38–41.

¹³ For such evidence of commissioning as can be developed in the case of the *Book of the Duchess*, see N. B. Lewis, "The Anniversary Service for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, 12th September 1374," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937), 176–192; Edward I. Condren, "The Historical Context of the *Book of the Duchess*: A New Hypothesis," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971), 195–212; J. J. N. Palmer, "The Historical Context of

this external-evidentiary respect: no more than does Chaucer, Lydgate does not mention any commission or payment in the poem itself, though both are confirmed in the external evidence in his case. The poet was bound to avoid, in the commissioning agency's interest. Patrons of panegyric and propaganda would also want to hide. Poets involved in such relations with patrons must be expected to have colluded in the dissimulation, though when not subject to such patronal constraint poets may have been interested to invent or to embroider.

Spontaneity and Criticism

From a patron's perspective, effusions of spontaneity were more efficacious than self-avowing propaganda-like panegyrics. The apparently spontaneous, however, does equally well in all the respects that matter; from outside – in an absence of extensive credible evidence – it can be difficult to distinguish the properly from the only apparently spontaneous, the more so when it remains in the interest of a commissioning agency to hide or to obscure its own role in the production of propagandistic art, and in the interest of commissioned poets likewise to obscure on behalf of their patrons.¹⁴

Regrettably, perhaps, from this perspective of the evidentiary utility of the internal evidence of the writings themselves, there is finally this peculiar property inherent in panegyric. Confounding for historical reconstruction, it is a paradox of panegyric, or of propagandistic writing in general, that it is the more effective, the less panegyric or propagandistic it appears to be. It can be too transparent, and it may be the less persuasive the less attentive it is to possible alternatives. A limit must come. Still, panegyric intention or purpose may need to hide itself in order properly to be realised. The best propaganda is also antithetical and so critical. Consequently, express panegyric purpose internal to a piece of writing may be evidence of incom-

the *Book of the Duchess: A Revision*," *Chaucer Review* 8 (1974), 253–261; and Philipa Hardman, "The *Book of the Duchess* as a Memorial Monument," *Chaucer Review* 28 (1994), 205–215. Another case possibly of commissioning may be the (c. 1385?) "Complaint of Mars" (NIMEV 913), said by the near-contemporary collector and book-redistributor John Shirley to have been "made" by Chaucer "at the commandment of" the duke of Lancaster (all dubious). Worth recalling in this connection may be that John of Gaunt paid Chaucer an annuity from 1374: see *Chaucer Life-Records*, ed. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), pp. 271–274.

¹⁴ The point was made by C. Plinius Caecilius Secundus, in his (non-spontaneous) consular *Panegyricus* (100 CE) 3.1: "sciamusque nullum esse neque sincerius, neque acceptius genus gratiarum, quam quod illas acclamationes aemuletur, quae fingendi non habent tempus." On the development of the customary spontaneous imperial *acclamationes* that he mentions, see Charlotte Roueché, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire: New Evidence from Aphrodisias," *Journal of Roman Studies* 74 (1984), 181–188, esp. 188 on Pliny.

petence and failure, and therefore evidence of non-commission or spontaneity. Internally, then, not only is the spontaneous hard to distinguish from the apparently spontaneous – spontaneous panegyric being the better – but also, propaganda can be hard to distinguish from antithetical criticism, the critical comprising a needful element of the most persuasive propaganda.

In 1401, a letter addressing King Henry IV was put into a wider circulation than the putative address would indicate: from the evidence of its recirculation, the thing was not a letter but a polemical tract addressing a rather broader audience than the king in person alone.¹⁵ The piece in question is highly, bitterly critical of the state of affairs about the king's domains: "Quia lex et iusticia sunt exules in regno, habundant furta et homicidia, adulteria, fornicaciones, extorsiones, pauperum oppressiones, iniurie, iniusticie, diuerse contumelie, et nunc pro lege sufficit tyrannica voluntas" [For law and justice are exiles from this realm, which yet abounds in robbery and murder, adultery, fornication, extortion, oppression of the poor, injury, injustice, strife of all sorts, and even now, in place of the law, a tyrannical will holds sway] (21–25). "Igitur, totus in lacrimas resolutus, corde vulneribus lacerato, pre dolore, assero cum propheta quod qui beatum te dicunt ipsi te decipiunt et semitas gressuum tuorum dissipant" [Therefore, dissolved all in tears, pierced to the marrow with such injuries, sorrowfully I assert, in company of the prophet, that those who name you blessed deceive you, and they lay waste the way of your going forth] (16–18), explains the writer to the monarch, justifying his castigations: "Vnde tantam desolacionem in cordibus pruden-

¹⁵ The letter is quoted from the text in Carlson, *The Deposition of Richard II* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies Press, 2007), pp. 87–94, by line-number following parenthetically after citations. The analysis depends on Grady, "The Lancastrian Gower and the Limits of Exemplarity," *Speculum* 70 (1995), 552–554; see also Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399–1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 174–178, and Jenni Nuttall, *The Creation of Lancastrian Kingship: Literature, Language and Politics in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 43–44. On Repingdon's career, see Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 172–181. An antecedent possibly of influence on Repingdon, certainly analogous, would be the *Speculum regis Edwardi* addressed to Edward III, widely circulated in the 1330s; on it, see Cary J. Nederman and Cynthia J. Neville, "The Origin of the *Speculum Regis Edwardi* III of William of Pagula," *Studi Medievali*, 3rd ser., 38 (1997), 317–329; also, with reference to its literary context, David Matthews, *Writing to the King: Nation, Kingship, and Literature in England, 1250–1350* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 108–115. Likewise, the *Modus tenendi parlamentum* may have about it an analogous ambivalence – reformist tract or descriptive procedural manual? – though the problems of text, authorships, and date posed by the *Modus* seem intractable (to me), so it is only mentioned here; for the two perspectives, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, "Reformist Intellectual Culture in the English and Irish Civil Service: The *Modus tenendi parlamentum* and its Literary Relations," *Traditio* 53 (1998), 149–202, and W. C. Weber, "The Purpose of the English *Modus Tenendi Parlamentum*," *Parliamentary History* 17 (1998), 149–177.