Poetics of the Past, Politics of the Present:

Chaucer, Gower, and Old Books

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Abstract

This thesis examines the poetics and politics of 'olde bokes' (*Legend of Good Women,* G, 25) in selected works by Chaucer and Gower, paying particular attention to the way in which both writers appropriate their sources and the theories of history and political ideas informing these appropriations. It argues that Chaucer eschews metanarratives in his appropriations of the past and its writings, emphasising the multiplicity of voices that are contained in written discourse across time. In contrast, Gower, while acknowledging the presence of multiple voices, appropriates the writings of the past in an attempt to arrive at a harmonised poetic voice of his own. These poetics of the past result in different politics of the present in both writers' works. While Gower's politics are generally nostalgic and conservative, Chaucer is apolitical and primarily interested in the processes of political discourse. In this respect, Gower is a writer who strives to make sense of history and tradition and formulate poignant political statements in the face of contemporary struggles, whereas Chaucer does not offer unambiguous statements, but rather creates a multi-facetted poetic voice that highlights the reasons why such statements are impossible to achieve in the face of discursive heterogeneity.

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Acknowledgements

Note on the Texts

All references to Chaucer's works are to *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All references to Gower's *Vox Clamantis* are to *The Latin Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902), translations are taken from *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962). References to his *Confessio Amantis* are to *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). All translations of the Latin verses in the *Confessio* are taken from *The Latin Verses in the Confessio Amantis: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. Siân Echard and Claire Fanger (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991).

Introduction

This project arises out of an interest in the ways in which the past can be read and utilised in any given present, and the significance of the reader's position in relation to her or his source material. It is based on the premise that any encounter with textual traces of the past involves a reconstruction that echoes that attempted by the novice Adso at the close of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Adso offers the following account of his endeavours:

> At the end of my patient reconstructions, I had before me a kind of lesser library, a symbol of the greater, vanished one: a library made up of fragments, quotations, unfinished sentences, amputated stumps of books.[1]

Adso is referring to his attempt to gather copies of all the books that constituted the collection of the now destroyed monastery library at the centre of Eco's novel. His statement is important for the understanding of our practice of reading the past (especially the medieval past) in a number of ways. Firstly, his attempt to reconstruct a library of which he has an at best cursory knowledge mirrors post-medieval philological and historicist criticism. In his reconstruction, Adso can only proceed on the basis of the burnt fragments he has collected on a later visit to the site of the monastery library, just as post-medieval textual criticism has to tread cautiously through the surviving textual traces of the past, proceeding incrementally on its search for authoritative texts or a reconstructed history of a specific text. Significantly, any conclusive findings of post-medieval criticism can always only be a reconstruction of an original, just as Adso's results in a 'lesser library.' Nevertheless, the desire to reconstruct such an original always remains, and is perceivable in most schools of literary criticism as well as in Eco's project of

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[1] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador, 1984), 500.

constructing a fictional narrative based on his knowledge of the Middle Ages and strongly influenced by his twentieth-century cultural context.

The present study examines the ways in which Geoffrey Chaucer (*c*. 1340-1400) and John Gower (*c*. 1330-1408) conceptualise history and appropriate the past and authoritative texts in their literary oeuvres, what I will refer to as their poetics of the past and politics of the present. Chaucer and Gower are engaged in reconstructions of the past within their texts that echo Adso's attempts at reconstructing the contents of the monastery library. Both writers make frequent recourse to writings of the past, incorporating them into poetic projects that are firmly anchored within their Ricardian present, just as Adso strives to gain access to the fabled library collection via a search of other libraries that still exist within his own time frame. Similarly, I myself as a twenty-first-century reader of Chaucer's and Gower's texts have to attempt to reconstruct theories informing the uses of history and its writings in these texts, but can only do so via recourse to the theoretical discourse on history that is available to me at this particular point in time. This project, then, regards the medieval discourse on history and historiography as only one aspect informing our present understanding of the texts examined in this study.

The passage from *The Name of the Rose* has a further bearing on my readings of Chaucer's and Gower's texts. While Eco is looking back from the late twentieth century to the fourteenth century, the two fourteenth-century writers are looking back to their own cultural past, and this use of the ancient past within the present of late-fourteenth-century England merits close analysis. On another level, I myself as critic am looking back at Chaucer's and Gower's works, aiming for an understanding of these texts that is firmly anchored within my own present while taking into account the temporal gap between my critical practice and the medieval context that fostered these particular literary texts. The three main areas I will be

focussing on in my readings are the two writers' uses of the past within their texts, their different conceptualisations of history and its use-value for the present, and the ways in which we can read these from the vantage point of our (post)modern present.[2]

Throughout the following chapters some key terms are used repeatedly, and their centrality to my argument necessitates a few brief definitions at this point. By the terms 'the past' and 'history' I am referring to the cultural past on the one hand and its narrativisation ('history') on the other. These two terms are directly pertinent for my understanding of poetics of the past and politics of the present. I take the former to describe the ways in which writers (in the present case, Chaucer and Gower) incorporate the past and history into their own literary creations. The possible motivations for these uses are referred to throughout this study as the politics of the present, being ultimately concerned with possible reasons for and effects of (both desired and unintended) the poetics of the past. The final term in need of definition at this point is 'authority,' a particularly important one for our understanding of medieval literature. Throughout this study, I refer to 'authority' in the widest sense, encompassing all types of social actions and literary texts that are invested with a certain amount of prominence and truth-value within social and literary discourses.

This introductory chapter aims to provide an overview of the scope and aims of the present study. It is divided into four sections, opening with an account of the connection between Chaucer and Gower as it can be gleaned from documentary and literary evidence. This section also provides brief overviews of both poets' lives singling out those key events and general themes in the authorial biographies that are pertinent for the readings that follow. The second section presents a brief outline

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[2] I bracket the 'post' of (post)modern in order not to imply a straight periodical teleology, a decision that will become clearer in the third section of this introductory chapter.

of what I consider to be key events and developments of the reign of Richard II. The third section outlines my theoretical approach to the texts studied here, focussing especially on different conceptions of temporal development that inform my interpretive strategies in this study. The final section of this introductory chapter offers a brief outline of the organisation and scope of this study as well as synopses of the individual chapters.

Why Chaucer and Gower?

As two of the major vernacular writers of the Ricardian period, Chaucer and Gower provide a solid base for a comparative study.[3] This section proposes to explain in more detail the choice of Chaucer and Gower as the objects of this study, assessing their personal and professional relationship as well as offering a selective outline of both writers' lives as they can be reconstructed on the basis of documentary and literary evidence. Although, as will become evident in the third section of this introduction, I do not follow a straightforwardly author-centred critical approach to the texts studied here, Chaucer's and Gower's personal circumstances provide useful initial insights into how their literary texts relate to each other and their authors' lives, as well as providing my comparative reading with a degree of analytical focus that could not be achieved were these texts to be read without consideration of the historical horizon of their production.

We can assume from the literary and documentary evidence that Chaucer and Gower not only knew each other personally, but also that they were relatively close friends. As we will see later, Chaucer entrusted Gower with powers of attorney during one of his journeys abroad in the 1370s, but at this point, I want to

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[3] See, for example, the still influential argument provided in John A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* (London: Routledge, 1971).

focus on the evidence for a friendship between the two writers that is provided by their works. The most immediately apparent proof of this friendship appears in the penultimate stanza of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1386). Having bid his 'litel bok' (V, 1786) to go out into the world, Chaucer's narrator exclaims:

> O moral Gower, this book I directe
> To the and to the, philosophical Strode,
> To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
> Of youre benignites and zeles goode. (V, 1856-9)

The second dedicatee, Strode, does not interest me here, but the dedication and request for correction to 'moral Gower' indicates that the two writers knew each other and shared work in progress.[4] Such a sharing would also explain the apparently derisory reference in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Prologue*[5] to 'swiche unkynde abhominacions' (II, 88) that can, it is implied, be found in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (after 1391). However, this does not indicate that Chaucer disapproved of Gower's choice of narrative material in his *magnum opus*, but rather that Chaucer deliberately has his Man of Law misread the stories of his contemporary.[6]

More indirect evidence for the friendship between the two writers is provided by Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (*c.* 1386-7) when read alongside Gower's *Confessio*. At the end of the earliest version of his *Confessio*, Gower has Venus bid the poet's narrative alter ego to 'gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete' (VIII, 1941*) and

> [...] him telle this message,
> That he upon his latere age,

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[4] Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6-7.

[5] The dating of individual tales within the *Canterbury Tales* is notoriously difficult. I take Chaucer to have started work on individual tales before the overall frame had even been conceived in the late 1380s, and to have continued work on the collection until his death.

[6] See Elizabeth Allen, 'Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble With Reading,' *ELH* 63 (1997): 627-55.

> To sette an ende of alle his werk,
> As he which is myn owne clerk,
> Do make his testament of love,
> As thou hast do thi shrifte above,
> So that mi Court it mai recorde. (VIII, 2951*-7*)

The fact that Gower erased this reference to his fellow poet when revising the *Confessio* has often been taken as an indicator of a falling-out between the two poets, but what is more important for my comparative reading of their works is the fact that they knew each other and seem to have been working in what Lynn Staley calls an atmosphere of 'collaborative competition.'[7] The implication of Venus' command to the Gower of the end of the *Confessio* is that it was fairly common for the two poets to meet regularly and that it would not be out of line for Gower to pass on the goddess' command to finally finish the *Legend of Good Women*.

Indeed, the prologues to the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Confessio Amantis* provide us with some of the most striking insights into the extent of the overlap between Chaucer's and Gower's poetic projects. In his groundbreaking, if now dated, study of Gower's life and works, John Fisher conjectures that both poems might have been motivated by the same royal commission,[8] but this theory has now lost much of its initial force. Nevertheless, the two prologues exhibit remarkable similarities. To this day, the meeting between Gower and Richard II on the River Thames as it is presented in the earliest version of the *Confessio* remains one of the most striking scenes of royal commission, although there is now a general critical consensus that we will never know for sure whether such a meeting

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[7] Lynn Staley, 'Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,' *Speculum* 75 (2000): 68-96 (71). For an analysis of the quarrel between the poets, see Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Rivalry, Rape and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer,' in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 1991), 130-52.

[8] John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (London: Methuen, 1965), 235.

ever took place.[9] In Chaucer's *Legend*, the poet-narrator also encounters a decidedly royal figure in the prologue, and it has been convincingly argued by several critics that the court of love of the Prologue to the *Legend* is an allegory on the court of Richard II.[10] Were it not for the references to each other in both poets' works, these courtly scenes at the opening of both poems could be described as merely accidental, but considering that there is enough proof for us to assume that Chaucer and Gower were closely acquainted, we should regard the *Legend* and the *Confessio* as products of this friendship. Even if there has never been an actual royal commission for these two poems, Chaucer and Gower seem to have shared their initial plans for their large narrative projects at the end of the 1380s.

The possibility of a shared royal commission for both poems is, however, not the most interesting feature of the *Legend* and the *Confessio* within the context of the present project. I want to now turn our attention to the treatment of old books in both prologues. A relevant passage in Chaucer's prologue reads as follows:

> Thanne mote we to bokes that we fynde,
> Thourgh whiche that olde thynges ben in mynde,
> And to the doctryne of these olde wyse
> Yeven credence, in every skylful wyse,
> [...]
> And if that olde bokes weren aweye,
> Yloren were of remembraunce the keye.
> Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve,
> There as there is non other assay preve. (G, 17-28)

Rita Copeland notes that, although these lines are identical in both the F and G versions of the Prologue, the later G version increases the focus on academic reading practices. In her words, 'G defines the key of remembrance with greater specificity [than F] in terms of the system of retrieving ancient lore, a tradition of

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[9] See the overview of criticism in 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.

[10] See, for example, David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 337-78.

exegetical reception.'[11] The past wisdom contained in old books is here effectively set up as the sole solid base on which to base life in the present. Interestingly, Chaucer does not cast his view forward into the future but contends himself with forging a connection between the past of the old books and the present of his poem.

Whereas the *Legend* only refers to old books several lines into the prologue, Gower's *Confessio* places writings of the past at the centre of its program from the very opening line of its prologue.

> Of hem that writen ous tofore
> The bokes duelle, and we therfore
> Ben tawht of that was write tho:
> Forthi good is that we also
> In oure tyme among ous hiere
> Do wryte of newe som matiere,
> Essampled of these olde wyse
> So that it myhte in such a wyse,
> Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,
> Beleve to the worldes eere
> In tyme comende after this. (Prol., 1*-11*)

In this passage, Gower sets up old books as repositories of knowledge, just as Chaucer does in his *Legend*. However, while venerating old books, Gower takes a decidedly authorial stance. Essentially, he asserts his freedom of writing 'of newe som matiere,' effectively appropriating the models of 'hem that written ous tofore' for his own narrative project that is both anchored 'in oure tyme among ous hiere' and looks forward to the poet's posterity and the future in general, connecting the present with both past and future.

Based on the evidence provided by these two passages from the *Legend* and the *Confessio* we can state, therefore, that Chaucer and Gower placed old books, the wisdom they contain and its retrieval through their readerly and writerly activity at the centre of their poetic projects. It is the purpose of the present study to trace this

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[11] Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic traditions and vernacular texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 190.

common theme through a representative sample of both poets' works, spanning most of their careers, starting in the mid-1370s and ending around the middle of the 1390s. The primary focus of this comparison is provided by the poetics of the past in Chaucer's and Gower's works, but once the poetics have been analysed, the following chapters also propose to examine the texts' interventions in their contemporary political discourses, reading the politics of the Ricardian present through the lens provided by the poetics of the past as pursued by Chaucer and Gower. In order for this to be successful, we have to extend our readerly attention from the texts themselves to the authors' biographies, based on the documentary and circumstantial evidence that survives to this day.

A perusal of this evidence for the two writers' lives reveals that we have a much more solid documentary base for an examination of Chaucer's life than we have for Gower's. The edited volume of Chaucer's life records extends to some 600 pages, complemented by Derek Pearsall's excellent critical biography. In contrast, nothing comparable exists for Gower's life, with an edition of Gower life records only now being pursued.[12] There are a number reasons for this disparity, the post-medieval favouring of Chaucer over his contemporary being one of them, and the difficulties in assigning specific occurrences of the apparently fairly common name

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[12] Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966); Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992). For Gower's life, see John Gower, *The Latin Works of John Gower*, ed. George C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902), vii-xxx; Fisher, *John Gower*, 37-69; Robert Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster: Gower's Urban Contexts,' in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 43-60; John Hines, Nathalie Cohen, and Simon Roffey, '*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*: Records and Memorials of his Life and Death,' in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 23-41.

'John Gower' to the poet we read today another.[13] However, the explanation for the relative abundance of documents on Chaucer's life that interests me most at this point is to be found in the fact that Chaucer spent much of his life working in various official functions, first for Edward III and then for Richard II, before dying shortly after the accession to the throne of Henry IV. Surely, it is to be expected that an official with a career like Chaucer's appears in the records more often than a poet like Gower who, for the last three decades of the fourteenth century, lived in the relative seclusion of the Priory of St Mary Overy's in Southwark, just outside the London city limits, and who apparently was never officially employed by either the court or central government.

Chaucer travelled widely, undertaking a number of journeys, both domestic and abroad, if not on royal than at least on some kind of official business, as on his journey to Dartmouth in August 1373.[14] The two journeys to Italy in 1372-3 and 1378 respectively are noteworthy, since they offered the aspiring poet of the *Book of the Duchess* (shortly after 1368) a chance to acquaint himself with the vernacular poetry of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio.[15] The 1372-3 journey to Genoa and Florence had the purpose of negotiating the appointment of a special seaport for the use of Genoese merchants.[16] Neither the undated warrant for issuing a commission to Chaucer nor the enrolment of that commission upon the Treaty Roll state the reason for Chaucer's inclusion on this mission, but it is fair to assume that, because of his early contact with Italian merchants in his father's wine business, his function

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[13] For the post-medieval favouring of Chaucer over Gower, see Siân Echard, 'Introduction: Gower's Reputation,' in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 1-22; Dinshaw, 'Rivalry, Rape and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer.' For the name 'John Gower' and its popularity see Gower, *The Latin Works of John Gower*, viii; Fisher, *John Gower*, 37; Hines, Cohen, and Roffey, '*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*,' 24.

[14] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 40-1.

[15] Chaucer's Italian influences are examined by, among others, Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*; Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[16] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 32-3.

was more that of interpreter than senior negotiator.[17] Chaucer went back to Italy in 1378, and one of the documents connected with this mission contains imprecise but important information on the poet's social circle. Chaucer was granted King's Letters of General Attorney 'sub nominibus Johannis Gower et Ricardi Forester […] per unum annum duraturas.'[18] We can safely assume that this Johannis Gower is identical with John Gower the poet. In addition to a clear indication of Chaucer's connection with the court and central government (both the commission of 1372 and the Letters of 1378 are enrolled on the Chancery Treaty Roll), these documents thus provide an initial picture of his international influences and his acquaintance with Gower, both of which would become important later in his literary career.

In the domestic sphere, Chaucer's financial situation was, from 1367 onwards, increasingly secure. On June 20th 1367 a Privy Seal Writ authorising the sealing of Letters Patent granting Chaucer 20 marks annually for life was issued.[19] It is explicitly stated that Chaucer received the annuity as a reward for 'bon service,' but the high number of other exchequer annuities for the same regnal year suggests that Edward III was not especially fond of his 'ame esquire,' at least not necessarily more so than of the other junior members of his household. Not even the use of the Privy Seal to authorise the writ is particularly striking, since at the time the Privy Seal office was gradually moving away from its previous close connection with the king. From June 13th 1374, Chaucer enjoyed an additional annuity of £10, granted by John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. It is not clear what prompted this grant, but the fact that Chaucer's wife Philippa had been in the service of Gaunt's wife for some time offers an explanation.

Philippa's connection with the house of Lancaster partially motivated the grant insofar that, being issued on the day after Chaucer took the oath as controller

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[17] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 102-9.
[18] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 54.
[19] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 123-4.

of customs at the port of London,[20] the annuity can reasonably be assumed to enable Chaucer and his wife to support an existence in London. Chaucer had been appointed as controller of customs on June 8th 1374 by Letters Patent that are enrolled in Chancery. The appointment indicates the beginning of a gradual movement away from the court, given that the position was not a significant step upwards for an esquire like Chaucer.[21] The new position certainly freed Chaucer from his previous close dependence on the king and his court, and gave his working life a more regular organisation compared to his less clearly defined duties as esquire to Edward III. On May 8th 1382, Chaucer was appointed controller of the Petty Custom, and the enrolled Letters Patent also provide for a deputy,[22] suggesting that Chaucer was busy on business other than the port of London. The exact nature of this other business remains unclear, but Chaucer's literary career was gathering momentum during the early 1380s, and I agree with Derek Pearsall that Chaucer was most probably busy writing his translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and his own longest narrative poem, *Troilus and Criseyde*.[23]

One month prior to his appointment to the Customs Port, Chaucer had been granted the rent-free lease of a dwelling above the gate of Aldgate. The lease is entered in the *London Letter-Book G*, and requires Chaucer to keep the building in good repair ('sustentabit et reparabit').[24] Again, this document is not necessarily an indicator of a particularly distinguished social position occupied by Chaucer, since the lease is one of four made by the city in 1373-74.[25] However, it does prove that the epicentre of Chaucer's life was slowly but gradually moving away from Westminster, and in combination with his position at the Customs Port, the

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[20] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 157.
[21] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 96.
[22] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 160.
[23] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 129.
[24] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 144-5.
[25] For a summary of the other three, see Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 145.

dwelling above Aldgate would prove to be a major influence on his life and literary work over the following 15 or so years. The dwelling provided the poet with a base near the metropolitan centre of his country, one from which he could witness not only the hectic daily life passing through a London city gate, but also the turbulent events of the Rising of 1381.[26]

Chaucer stayed in Aldgate until October 1386, when the lease of the dwelling was delivered to one Richard Forester, probably identical with the one we remember from the King's Letters of General Attorney.[27] This transfer coincides with Chaucer's short tenure as knight of the Shire for Kent in the Wonderful Parliament. Although the return naming Chaucer among others is undated, the election must have taken place between August 8th 1386 and October 1st of the same year, that is between the issuing of a Writ ordering the election of members of parliament for Kent and the opening of parliament.[28] The reason for Chaucer's election cannot be identified with absolute certainty, but scholars generally assume that he was one of a group relatively loyal to Richard II at a time when the king expected considerable parliamentary opposition. And indeed there was a host of motions during the Wonderful Parliament, mainly aimed at curbing the number officials and liveried retainers with significantly close ties to the king and his party. Not least because of his position as Controller of Customs Chaucer must have felt the impending danger to his own position in this increasingly hostile climate.

The year 1386 marks a significant break in Chaucer's life. Soon after the Wonderful Parliament he vacated his position at the Port of London, and left London for Kent. The period of his work for the king on diplomatic business and later as official at the Customs gave way to a more detached life, away from

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[26] For a discussion of the Rising of 1381, see below p. 23.

[27] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 146.

[28] Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 364-6. For a discussion of the Wonderful Parliament, see below p. 26.

London and the court at Westminster. Chaucer was to slowly reassume official positions later in the 1380s and 1390s, but he was never to return to either the early closeness to the royal court or his position at the very centre of metropolitan life in London. The records featuring Chaucer illustrate two things: Firstly, the number of records and the fact that most of them were issued from Chancery or other government departments illuminate the ever expanding central government. Secondly, the fact that Chaucer, a man not of noble birth or in any way connected to the aristocracy, survived and indeed prospered in this machinery goes to show that many official functions were increasingly executed by the emerging social group of people like Chaucer, who were capable of fulfilling official task to the satisfaction of their superiors.[29]

Since Gower apparently never pursued a sustained career at the royal court or within the City of London, it is not possible to single out individual events in his biography to the extent possible in Chaucer's case. Gower does not seem to have fully severed his ties with those parts of society close to the royal court at Westminster and merchant circles in London of which Chaucer was a member, and his poetry strongly suggests that he was an astute social observer and commentator. Still, as I have indicated already, we simply do not have the kind of firm documentary evidence that we have in the case of his contemporary and friend. The purpose of the following paragraphs is to outline Gower's connection with the law as well as his choice of living quarters within the Priory of St Mary Overie in Southwark, assessing the impact on and significance for his poetics and politics.

With regard to Gower's connection with the field of law, we do not have hard documentary evidence that would clearly link Gower with official legal institutions. Still, as Hines, Cohen and Roffey state, 'it is highly plausible that part of the younger Gower's education would have taken place in the Inns of Court of

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[29] Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1-23.

London.'[30] Based on references in his poetry we can further assume that he did have a detailed knowledge of legal proceedings together with an at least distant connection with the profession as a whole. The famous reference in the *Mirour de l'Omme* (*c.* 1375) to the poet's garment's striped sleeves (21772-4) has been taken as evidence for his legal career,[31] and, as we will see in chapter one, the *Vox Clamantis* (early 1380s) contains a number of clues as to Gower's connection with and knowledge of the field of law.[32] I am convinced that Gower's first-hand experience of the legal profession not only sharpened his awareness of the shortcomings of his former colleagues (who are at the receiving end of much of his most severe criticism in his poetry), but that it also raised his awareness of the effects to which language can be put by a skilful practitioner. This would have put him in a position to employ his three literary languages (French, Latin, and English) to the literary and poetic effects that are examined in the following chapters.

Gower's involvement in the legal profession also undoubtedly helped him accumulate enough property to provide him with income to support his later literary pursuits. As Robert Epstein conjectures, 'when John Gower came to London, probably in the 1360s, this nexus of commerce, royal service, public administration and law provided him with both a livelihood and his first audience.'[33] Macaulay assumed that at least one of the property transactions allegedly involving Gower and a seller of doubtful age was so dubious that the John Gower in question could not be identical with the moral poet known to us. However, as Hines, Cohen and Roffey state, this is more of a proof for the astuteness with which Gower conducted

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[30] Hines, Cohen, and Roffey, '*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*,' 25.
[31] Hines, Cohen, and Roffey, '*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*,' 25. The quotation is taken from John Gower, *The French Works of John Gower*, ed. George C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899).
[32] For an extended account of Gower and the law, see Fisher, *John Gower*, 55-8.
[33] Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 44.

his business than a shadow tainting his reputation.[34] This same Gower would later become an affiliated member of the so-called Chaucer circle,[35] as well as become Chaucer's attorney and co-dedicatee of the latter's most accomplished work to date. Still, the fact that Chaucer granted Gower power of attorney does not on its own prove that Gower was closer to Chaucer than the second attorney, John Forester. As Epstein states, 'if it were not for their poetry, Gower would be no more linked to Chaucer than Forester is.'[36] This intersection of documentary and literary evidence is the reason why a comparison, such as the present study, of both poets' works is needed, but we should first have a brief look at the geographical areas in which the two poets lived during most of their writing careers and their possible significance for the poetics and politics.

It is significant that Gower spent most of his literary career living in Southwark, 'a contested space, simultaneously in the city and outside it.'[37] Southwark thus echoes the familiar illumination from *Vox Clamantis* manuscripts of Gower pointing an arrow at a globe, an image that informs much of Gower's social criticism, as we will see in the following chapters. Life in Southwark, 'an administrative jungle,'[38] undoubtedly also raised Gower's awareness of division in society, certainly the main theme that runs through all his major poetic works. It is true that Southwark as a social and geographic area does not feature directly in Gower's poetry, but the poet's experience of the heterogeneous society bustling around his chosen abode, combined with his earlier experience of the legal profession across the river Thames in London certainly provided him with much of the raw material for the wide-ranging social criticism in his poems.[39]

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[34] Hines, Cohen, and Roffey, '*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*,' 25.
[35] See Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 42.
[36] Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 47.
[37] Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 52.
[38] Martha Carlin, *Medieval Southwark* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), 101.
[39] Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 53.

With regard to Gower's living-quarters within the Priory of St Mary Overie, we have much less evidence on which to base our conclusions. For one, we cannot ascertain with a high degree of certainty what prompted Gower to take up quarters within the Priory's boundaries. A long-running theory assumes that one of the main motivations behind Gower's move was the double presence of a monastery library and a scriptorium. However, critics have cast doubt on Gower's reliance on the Priory's scriptorium for the production of manuscripts of his poems.[40] It now seems much more likely that at least the extant copies of his major works were produced within the then burgeoning trade of professional or semi-professional scribes, just as were the works by his two contemporaries, Chaucer and Langland.[41] We can, however, be quite confident that the Priory provided Gower with a very specific environment in which to produce his texts. As Epstein proposes,

> It is easy to imagine Chaucer reading his envoys to a group of London friends as post-prandial entertainment. It is easier to imagine Gower scribbling his verses alone in a monastic cloister – which, in fact, he probably did.[42]

Although we should not automatically assume that Gower led a completely secluded life in the Priory (he certainly left it regularly, if only to share work in progress with Chaucer), Epstein's image of the solitary poet scribbling away in his cloister has a certain appeal. I would argue that this relative seclusion contributed greatly to the fact that Gower's works are far more homogenous than those of

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[40] See Fisher, *John Gower*, 59-60, 116-27; A.I. Doyle and Malcolm B. Parkes, 'The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century,' in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N.R. Ker*, ed. Malcolm B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar, 1978), 163-210 (200).

[41] See Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, 'Scribe D and the Making of Ricardian Literature,' in *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower*, ed. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 2001), 217-37; Doyle and Parkes, 'The Production of Copies'; Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 44-5.

[42] Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster,' 47-8.

Chaucer.

The general picture that emerges from the documentary and circumstantial evidence for Gower's life is of a man who apparently started his adult life with quite a solid professional education. This would have enabled him to work within the field of law, most probably conducting property transactions, both for himself and for clients. Gower then went into semi-retirement in the Priory of St Mary Overie, apparently living on his rental income, where he seems to have spent much of his time drafting and revising his major literary works during the last three decades of his life. We can see that, in contrast to Chaucer, Gower did not have to rely on a day job to earn his living, but was able to commit most of his energy to the pursuit of his burgeoning literary career.

This is not the place to offer a detailed analysis of the two writers' works in relation to their biographies, but it is worthwhile to examine briefly the significance of their living quarters at Aldgate and in Southwark respectively. The Rising of 1381 is one of historical events that feature frequently in my contextual readings of Chaucer's and Gower's texts throughout the following chapters, and in this respect we should note that the two writers' living quarters would have provided them with front-row seats, so to say, during the tumultuous events of June 1381. Both Aldgate, above which Chaucer lived, and London Bridge, not far from St Mary Overie, would have served the rebels as entryways into London, and it is highly probable that both Chaucer and Gower would have been there to witness it.[43] Recent criticism has devoted considerable energy to the ways in which both Gower and Chaucer deal with the Rising of 1381 in their poems. Steven Justice's study of the Rising of 1381 is by far the most sustained examination of the impact of 1381 on English writing in

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[43] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 146.

general,[44] and his comparison of Chaucer's and Gower's reactions features prominently in my reading of the texts concerned in the first two chapters of the present study. Eve Salisbury's study of Gower's poetics in the *Vox Clamantis* is also highly thought provoking,[45] and has significantly influenced my reading of the poem. What I would like to emphasise here is the fact that I am convinced that both poets' relative proximity to the events of 1381 strongly influenced their literary reactions to the Rising. Had they had to rely solely on word-of-mouth tradition of a geographically distant event, their literary renditions of it would certainly have taken a vastly different shape.

The social aspects of Chaucer's poetry have been studied in detail over the previous two decades, most notably by Paul Strohm. The main thread that runs through Strohm's analyses from the 1970s to the early 1990s is that of the likely reception of Chaucer's texts by their contemporary audience. This culminated in the groundbreaking monograph, *Social Chaucer*, which remains a most valuable analysis of Chaucer's socio-political context and the situation of his texts within that context. Further, Strohm is important for any comparative study of Chaucer's and Gower's works, because he is one of a relatively small number of critics who have published a detailed comparison of the two poets' works.[46] In one of his earlier essays, Strohm offers an analysis of form and social statement in the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis*, proposing to examine these 'two medieval instances in which the external form of a major work can be seen as an artistic meditation of contemporary social issues, expressive not only of aesthetic choices,

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[44] Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[45] Eve Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins: Gower's Monstrous Body Poetic,' in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 1998), 159-84.

[46] Unfortunately, the excellent comparison of the ethics and use of exemplary narrative in Chaucer and Gower in J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) appeared in print after the research for this project had been completed.

but also of the social perspective of its author.'[47] Although I do not fully share Strohm's historicist approach, as will become clear in the third section of this introductory chapter, his fusion of aesthetics and politics informs much of the contextual readings I offer in the following chapters.

Both the differences and similarities in both poets' lives are the key reference points for the comparison of the poetics and politics of the past in Chaucer's and Gower's works I offer in the following chapters. By examining the poetics of texts by both writers that either share common themes or that are narrowly contemporary, the present study proposes to offer case studies of texts from all stages of the poets' careers during the 20 years after the mid-1370s. Before providing a more detailed account of my theoretical approach to the texts studied in the following chapters, I will now offer a brief overview of key events and developments of the reign of Richard II.

Chaucer and Gower in Ricardian England

The reign of Richard II (1377-99) constitutes a particularly turbulent period in English medieval history. Nigel Saul describes it as 'an "absolutist" experiment conceived out of its time and predestined to failure,' one that does, however, seem much less singular when viewed from the perspective of European court culture at the time.[48] Other historians do not share Saul's at least partially positive view of Richard II. For example, emphasising the negative aspect of the reign, May McKisack states that Richard was simply too weak to assert his royal authority, but

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[47] Paul Strohm, 'Form and Social Statement in *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 17-40 (18).

[48] Nigel Saul, 'The Kingship of Richard II,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 37-57 (37).

that 'his success would have been the tragedy of a nation.'[49] In a more recent study, Miri Rubin is astonished that a king as capable of 'imaginative thought' as Richard could be so tragically incapable of judging the long-term effects of his policies.[50] Richard's reign can essentially be seen as a transitional period in which England was still recovering from the consequences of the Black Death of 1348-9 and suffering from the long-term war with France, while the crown attempted to assert a position of power that was only to be fully attained under the Tudors in the sixteenth century. One of the main problems for an assessment of Richard's reign lies in the fact that most of the chronicles of the reign date from after the king's deposition in 1399 and show him in a decidedly negative light. Much work has been done on the so-called Lancastrian propaganda machine, and there is now a general consensus among historians that many of the chronicles originally viewed Richard much more favourably.[51]

When thinking about Chaucer's and Gower's writings we should, of course, not limit our attention to those from the 1380s and 1390s. Chaucer, for example, composed the *Book of the Duchess* to commemorate Blanche of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's first wife, who died in 1368. The lack of a detectable Italian influence on the poem together with the clearly detectable French models informing the poem

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[49] May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 498.

[50] Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 2005), 159.

[51] See John Taylor, 'Richard II in the Chronicles,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 15-35. For a detailed analysis of Richard's portrayal in the chronicles of Thomas Walsingham, see George B. Stow, 'Richard II in Thomas Walsingham's Chronicles,' *Speculum* 59 (1984): 68-102. The ways in which propaganda served to legitimise Henry IV's accession to the throne are discussed at length in Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

suggests that it was completed before Chaucer's first journey to Italy in 1372.[52]

Gower, too, was already writing before Richard's accession to the throne. His *Mirour de l'Omme*, an Anglo-French poem of roughly 30.000 lines, would fit the culture of the court of Edward III, and the absence of references to either Richard or events early in his reign would suggest that Gower stopped working on the *Mirour* some time in the late 1370s.[53] Already at this early stage in his career, Gower was concerned with social disorder. As Yeager states, the *Mirour* illustrates that 'only Man himself [sic], a microcosm of the world at large, made in God's image and gifted with Reason, can bring about all of the disorder that everywhere abounds.'[54] In this sense, both writers' early texts would constitute promising subjects for analysis, but given the interest in the present study on the different ways in which Chaucer and Gower filter and refract key themes of Richard's reign, they do not enter the readings offered in the following chapters.

Richard came to the throne in 1377 when he was only 10, meaning that the day-to-day running of the country was delegated to a great council consisting of, among others, the king's paternal uncles. To a degree, Richard seems to have been content with this arrangement during the first decade of his reign. As Caroline Barron argues, 'he was happy to govern by fits and starts and to leave the routine work to others.'[55] Still, despite the relative detachment from government during the early years of his reign, a number of developments were already set in motion during this time that would later be of immense importance for the realm and for

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[52] See Alastair J. Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 79-80. For the French models for the *Book of the Duchess*, see Ardis Butterfield, 'Chaucer's French Inheritance,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20-35.

[53] Robert F. Yeager, 'John Gower's French,' in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 137-51 (142).

[54] Yeager, 'John Gower's French,' 141.

[55] Caroline M. Barron, 'Richard II and London,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 129-54 (130).

Richard's relationship with his subjects and the magnates. Most importantly, the young king developed close ties to people like Simon Burley, Michael de la Pole and Robert de Vere, who were to have great influence over the king, a situation that caused indignation on the part of the magnates who felt that their traditional rights were being scorned.[56] In addition, in 1382 Richard married Anne of Bohemia, who seems to have had a calming influence on the king's notorious temper, and whose death in 1394 was a severe blow to Richard, that has been cited as one of the reasons for the tyranny of Richard's final years.[57]

By far the most important event of the early 1380s was, of course, the so-called Peasants' Revolt of the summer of 1381. The term is, in fact, a misnomer, since the rebelling peasants were soon joined by disaffected city-dwellers. For example, Thomas Walsingham says of the rebels' entry into London that 'the common people of the city and especially the poor favoured the rustics and stopped the mayor from closing the gates.'[58] Because of this heterogeneous make up of the rebels it is more accurate to refer to the rebellion as the Rising of 1381. Furthermore, there is no clearly identifiable common cause behind the Rising beyond the widespread disaffection of the population. In this light, it should be seen as a series of localised revolts that culminated when they converged in and around London.[59] The Rising should also not be seen as an event isolated from the larger developments of the fourteenth century. Ultimately, the Black Death of 1348-9 constitutes the root cause for the rebels' disaffection, although a number of

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[56] For a definition of the term 'magnates' and the constitution of this social group during the fourteenth century, see Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1996), 29-54.

[57] Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 368. For a detailed discussion of Anne's Czech cultural background, see Alfred Thomas, *Anne's Bohemia: Czeck Literature and Society, 1310-1420* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[58] Quoted in R. B. Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983), 168-9.

[59] See John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England: 1370-1529* (London: Longman, 1983), 25; Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*, 121.

interrelated causes have been brought forward recently.[60] With a large proportion of the English labouring population dead, the period after the Black Death saw an unprecedented rise in mobility of the work force and its ability to control the level of wages, to which the ruling classes reacted with the Statute of Labourers of 1351 that attempted to control the level of wages and curb the mobility of workers. In addition, the crown's constant need to fund its failing war-effort with the French with ever higher and more frequent taxes during the 1370s and early 1380s meant that the population was suffering from mostly unmanageable tax levies. It was this that sparked the Rising in 1381, when the rural population finally refused to pay up.

This is not the place to offer a detailed analysis of the Rising as it figures in the writings of Chaucer and Gower that I go on to analyse in the first two chapters, but an overview of the main aims and objectives of the rebels is in order. It would be wrong to argue that the rebels wanted to overturn completely the social framework of England. They swore allegiance to King Richard, and most of their energy was aimed at doing away with the increasing growth of the middle ranks of the gentry. In addition, they strove to abandon serfdom and fix the rent for land to a level acceptable to them, essentially wrestling control from the landowners. Within the context of this study, the rebels' attacks on written culture constitute the most important aspect of the Rising. The rebels' actions have frequently been described as a sustained attack on literate culture as a whole, but more recent studies argue for a more specific program of destroying *legal* documents, and specifically those that

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[60] For detailed discussions of the social and political effects of the Black Death and their relation to 1381, see Jim Bolton, '"The World Turned Upside Down": Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change,' in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), 17-78; W. M. Ormrod, 'The Politics of Pestilence: Government in England after the Black Death,' in *The Black Death in England*, ed. W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1996), 147-81.

served the gentry to curtail the rights of the lower ranks.[61] As Walsingham states, the rebels 'declared that all court rolls and old muniments should be burnt so that once the memory of ancient customs had been wiped out their lords would be completely unable to vindicate their rights over them.'[62] The rebels knew what kinds of documents they were looking for. They did not randomly attack literate culture but tried, and ultimately failed, to deprive the ruling classes of their written instruments of control.

Once the Rising had been quelled, there followed a period of relative calm in Richard's reign, with no large-scale opposition to the king's person or his policies. The teenage-king had taken a decisive stance that contributed to the relatively swift end of the Rising when he led the rebels away from the corpse of Wat Tyler, proclaiming that he, their king, was their only true leader. The early and mid-1380s did not, however, bring about a complete turnaround in the way England was governed. Richard had not yet reached maturity, and the council was still at the centre of power. Still, the Rising was immediately seized upon by those in power in order to argue for a strengthening of the king's position and the need for increased obedience to him. In the parliament of 1383, chancellor Michael de la Pole explicitly blamed the Rising on the lack of respect towards the king by his subjects, largely ignoring the financial, political and economic reasons that lay at its root.[63] The summer of 1381 had certainly sent shockwaves through the upper strata of society, and it seems that in the years following the Rising they strove to find ways to reassert their authority over the lower ranks and, as far as the king's party was

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[61] See, for example, Susan Crane, 'The Writing Lesson of 1381,' in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 201-21; Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 198-205.

[62] Quoted in Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 133-4.

[63] See de la Pole's speech to parliament in late October 1383, quoted in Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 362-3.

concerned, to rally behind the head of state.

This relative calm in English politics did not, however, last long. The magnates became increasingly uncomfortable with Richard's policy of rewarding those close to him with titles and lands. Starting with the Wonderful Parliament of 1386, they started to systematically remove the royal favourites from the corridors of power. Michael de la Pole was impeached and officials were granted unprecedented access to the Royal household and accounts. Just over a year later, 'when it had come to a confrontation with the Appellants [before and during the Merciless Parliament of February 1388] Richard had simply been outgunned. He had no ready army and his supporters were too few.'[64] Richard had, of course, realised this lack of a power base and tried to improve his situation during his extended travels of the Midlands, 'actively seeking to harness the loyalties of the provinces against his baronial opponents.'[65] At least in Cheshire, this policy paid off, but the army that was eventually led against the Appellants at Radcot Bridge in December 1387 was defeated. Richard also tried to muster support from London, but the mayor and aldermen refused to provide men-at-arms, on the grounds that Londoners had little experience of fighting and would only defend their city.[66] Eventually, Richard was left isolated and could not protect his favourites against the united front of the parliamentary opposition.

Still, the Merciless Parliament did not focus exclusively on curtailing the king's powers and impeaching his favourites. There was also a marked concern with public order throughout the realm and an attempt to control the increasing excesses of bastard feudalism. Throughout the fourteenth century there had been several attempts to put 'restraint upon the easy exercise of temporary forms of

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[64] Saul, 'The Kingship of Richard II,' 50.

[65] Michael J. Bennett, 'Richard II and the Wider Realm,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 187-204 (192-3).

[66] Barron, 'Richard II and London,' 132.

association—affinities, congregations, confederacies, covins, and other gatherings for purposes of extortion or local domination,' and these figured prominently in the Merciless Parliament.[67] Richard here rose to the challenge, promising to set a good example by putting a stop to his own practice of retaining, which served to appease the parliamentary commons and put the Lords in a more than compromising position. Richard did, of course, not live up to his promise once he had fully re-asserted his royal power a few years later. Nonetheless, this link between retaining and public order seems to have been especially close at the time, and one of Chaucer's shorter poems, the *Lak of Stedfastnesse* (after 1386), picks up on this theme. As Paul Strohm convincingly argues, the poem 'does inhabit a specific place of its own in a larger discussion of public order, new forms of retention, and the social responsibility of the nobles and the king.'[68] The *Lak of Stedfastnesse* is, however, not the only Chaucerian text that comments on the developments of the 1380s, as will become evident in my reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* as I present it in chapter three.

During the aftermath of the Merciless Parliament, the Appellants enjoyed some early success. Having effectively taken control of the day-to-day running of the country, they mounted a military campaign against French interests in Flanders, went some way to bring royal finances under control, and seem to have managed to get the backing of the parliamentary commons. Nevertheless, these successes were short-lived. A military campaign on the continent enjoyed minor local successes but failed to achieve its main goal of unsettling French interests in Flanders. The renewed military activity after the relative calm of the period before the Merciless Parliament put a strain on government finances that could not be sustained without renewed taxation for which parliamentary approval was needed, which in return

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[67] Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 59.

[68] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 66.

alienated the parliamentary commons. In addition, the four Appellant Lords were not bound together by an overarching common interest, which enabled Richard to fragment them, drawing Henry of Derby closer to the Royal side of the divide once again.

Once Richard had proclaimed his majority and taken the reigns of government into his own hands in 1389, another period of relative calm followed. A sustained movement to achieve a lasting peace with France ensured that the crown did not rely as heavily as before on parliamentary approval of taxes, although Richard still required extensive revenues,[69] and the Appellant faction was sufficiently fragmented not to pose a notable threat to Richard's authority. Still, this should not lead us to conclude that Richard did not take his royal authority for granted. In fact, the 1390s saw him embark on a programme of long-term development and assertion of the crown's standing and prestige. As Saul argues:

> The vigorous new kingship that Richard styled in the 1390s obviously originated as a response to the setbacks and humiliations of the 1380s. Richard's general aim was to enhance the prestige and authority of his office—to raise himself above, and to distance himself from, his subjects. In that way, he believed, he could strengthen his claims to his subjects' obedience.[70]

To a degree, Richard succeeded in this, but as the final years of his reign show, he did not fully achieve his aim of bringing long-term stability both to the English crown and the realm as a whole.

One of the major sources of conflict both during the 1380s and 1390s was Richard's choice of and reliance on counsellors and close associates that did not meet the approval of the magnates who traditionally occupied these positions. This constant criticism of Richard's counsellors can be seen, for example, in Gower's *Vox* (VI, vii, 555*-60*), where Gower initially exempts Richard from criticism on

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[69] See Saul, *Richard II*, 261-9.
[70] Saul, 'The Kingship of Richard II,' 49.

the grounds that it is not the king but his advisors who are bringing the country to ruin. In an important sense, royal advice does, of course, equal power, and thus emblematises much of the friction between Richard who tried to build an untraditional circle of associates and the magnates who tried to safeguard their traditional rights of access to the king's ear. This led to repeated attempts at forcing the king to accept counsellors not of his own choosing, most notably after 1386, which Richard increasingly viewed with suspicion.[71]

Another important aspect when it comes to influence on Richard's policies is the role of women as intercessors. During the fourteenth century, the roles of queens became progressively defined less in relation to affairs of state than to their roles as wives and mothers. In return, the intercessory models of queenship became increasingly important.[72] When Queen Anne first came to London in 1382, she was handed a petition by the citizens of London that explicitly casts her in the role as intermediary between them and her future husband.[73] Until her death in 1394, Anne interceded with Richard on several occasions. During the Merciless Parliament, she unsuccessfully tried to save Simon Burley's life, but managed to save the lives of six justices and sergeants-at-law, and she played a major role in the king's reconciliation with the citizens of London after they refused him a loan in 1392.[74]

When Richard finally got his revenge on the Appellants in 1397, he could be seen as still enjoying the general support of the country, although this is notoriously difficult to test on the basis of the documentary evidence. After the accession of Henry IV in 1399 the descriptions of Richard in the chronicles suddenly shift from mildly positive to unfailingly negative, indicating the extent of the Lancastrian

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[71] Anthony Goodman, 'Richard II's Councils,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 59-82 (61).

[72] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 95.

[73] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 105-6.

[74] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 106-8. Another detailed analysis of queens as intercessors is contained in Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 212-46.

propaganda machine. Nonetheless, Chris Given-Wilson is convinced that 'what we see in 1397 is a relatively popular king taking measures which were widely supported.'[75] Events only turned against the king when he exiled Henry of Derby and Thomas, duke of Norfolk in 1398, seized the Lancastrian inheritance and then left England for an extended campaign in Ireland. These actions alienated Richard's opponents even further, reduced his power-base to the principality of Chester, and, perhaps most importantly, created a power-vacuum in England that was practically already filled by Henry of Derby when Richard finally made his way back across the Irish Sea.

The closing moments of Richard's reign show a king who had lost the ability to control events. He eventually agreed to a meeting with Henry, who at this point still declared that he did not aim to depose his cousin but rather wanted to aid him in the governance of the realm.[76] Still, when Richard and Henry met, the king must have already realised that his struggle to retain the crown was already over.[77] There is no clear way to assess when exactly Henry decided to depose Richard, but Paul Strohm convincingly argues for a logical pattern towards the eventual claim to the throne.[78] In any case, Richard was escorted to the Tower of London, where on September 29th 1399 he reluctantly agreed to surrender his crown. Apparently not content with the resignation, by the end of October Henry IV sent his cousin to the northern castle at Pontefract, where Richard finally died toward the end of February 1400. The officially named cause of death was starvation, but doubts remain as to whether Henry IV and his supporters did not, in fact, have a helping hand in the former king's death. A rebellion by Richard's supporters in late 1399 must have

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[75] Chris Given-Wilson, 'Richard II and the Higher Nobility,' in *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 107-28 (110).

[76] See Saul, *Richard II*, 416.

[77] Saul, *Richard II*, 415.

[78] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 75-90.

reminded the new king of the danger posed by the deposed king's continued presence and it would be fair to assume that a decision was taken to dispose of Richard.[79]

To conclude, we can see that Richard's reign is characterised by a set of power-struggles that surfaced again and again during the 1380s and 1390s. In the last instance, the ways in which the parties involved acted and reacted in these struggles determined the outcome. The Rising of 1381 reminded the higher social strata of the importance of coherence in the face of social unrest. Richard's reaction to the Appellants' challenge in 1387/9 did nothing to avert the Lords' take-over of government and the execution of Richard's favourites, but it did enable the king to develop a strategy to reappropriate his royal power. The relative calm of the 1390s was largely due to the fact that Richard and his supporters had successfully fragmented the opposition; a success that was then destroyed when the king embarked on the tyranny that was to end his reign. It is this serious of struggles over who has authority and power in politics that provides a valuable background for the readings of Chaucer's and Gower's texts that follow. Although it is not always possible to identify specific events in their texts, the volatile political climate of the late fourteenth century as a whole is echoed in the juxtaposition, questioning and construction of authority in the texts of Chaucer and Gower.

Reading the Past and Its Texts

The reading of texts inevitably involves a high degree of bridging the gap between the text and the reader's experience and expectations. Meaning in and knowledge about a text can only be produced by forging connections between these two opposing sides of the reading process. This section offers an outline of my

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[79] See Saul, *Richard II*, 424-9.

theoretical approach to critical reading and its aims and objectives. In order to better understand my own positioning in relation to the texts studied, the section opens with a description of my concept of temporal development and history, before moving on to a discussion of what I regard as the tasks for and implications of literary criticism. By describing my own critical position as well as those positions of other critics in relation to mine, this outline prepares the readings that I will offer in the individual chapters of this study.

I am convinced that all critical practice has to be highly aware of both its historical position and its conception of time and history. Since all reading practices can only be realised across the temporal (and often cultural) divide separating reader and text, the critic must formulate her or his own historical and cultural situation before attempting to read the text or texts in question. This kind of prioritising is especially important where texts from temporally distant periods such as the Middle Ages are being read, but it should also constitute the first step in readings of texts that are contemporary to the writer. It could be argued that the Middle Ages are especially dissimilar to our present condition, but I am convinced that contemporary texts have to be approached from a similarly self-conscious position on the part of the critic, since no text contains a fixed meaning but relies on the reader's critical expectations and cultural position for the creation of that meaning. In the last instance, then, the reader's concept of time is a primary factor in the creation of the gap between reader and text over which the reading process aims to build its interpretive bridge.

I will here focus on only two different possibilities of conceptualising time and historical development: teleological and non-linear. If we are following the teleological model, we are bound by a concept of step-by-step development that precludes the possibility of ever returning to an earlier moment in time let alone of reversing the development that has led to our specific moment. Such a model would

conceive of history as an incremental process that continues from period to period, with the implication that each of these periods is a discernible improvement on its predecessors. A non-linear model of time, on the other hand, does not provide for such an incremental process, but rather makes the totality of time and history constantly available to any given present. This flattening of time is often seen as one of the main elements of our present (post)modern condition. Paul Strohm, for example, perceives in (post)modern architecture, 'a flattening of historical difference that opens up items of the past to arbitrary and playful citation.'[80] Strohm here echoes Fredric Jameson view of the (post)modern condition. For Jameson, this 'situation evidently determines what the architecture historians call 'historicism', namely the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion.'[81] Clearly, this kind of 'historicism' is not limited to architectural discourse, but equally available to all other fields of cultural production, most notably literary criticism.

A good example of this kind of approach to history is provided by Glenn Burger's *Chaucer's Queer Nation*.[82] Burger rejects teleological conceptions of time in favour of the following model proposed by Bruno Latour:

> Let us suppose, for example, that we are going to regroup the contemporary elements along a spiral rather than a line. We do have a future and a past, but the future takes the form of a circle extending in all directions, and the past is not surpassed but revisited, repeated, surrounded, proliferated, recombined, reinterpreted, and reshuffled ... In such a framework, our actions are recognized at last as polytemporal.[83]

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[80] Paul Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 150-1.

[81] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,' in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 188-232 (202).

[82] Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). I will return to Burger's argument later. At this point, I am merely interested in his concept of history.

[83] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 75-6.

Such a spiral-shaped, polytemporal concept of history facilitates not only the constant revisiting and reinterpretation of any given past, but, more significantly, disposes of the numerous steps involved in reaching back into the past across the teleological model. In Latour's model, the past still has to be revisited from the vantage point of the present, but the reader no longer has to traverse the entirety of history, finally being able to enjoy shortcuts provided for by the polytemporality of this concept of history.

The reader taking this route into the past also has to account for the status of her or his own present, since the constant revisiting and reinterpretation of the past necessarily effects the immediate present of the reader. It is true that Latour's concept provides for a future, but for the immediate purpose of interpretation we have to wonder whether the reader witnesses a progress of time during the act of interpretation. In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' Walter Benjamin addresses the task of the historical materialist, when he states that

> A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a *unique experience with the past*. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough *to blast open the continuum of history*.[84]

Traditionally, materialist practice has pursued a programme of using the past to explain the present. In this study, I propose to reverse the direction of this kind of materialism insofar as I want to 'blast open the continuum of history' and provide a 'unique experience with the past' that explicitly forges a connection between my present as interpretive context and the past of Chaucer's and Gower's texts as

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[84] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 245-55 (254).

objects of study.

There can be no doubt that Benjamin's materialism serves a decidedly Marxist agenda, and this political dimension of his practice is significant for my approach to Chaucer and Gower. Benjamin reads the past according to his own radical politics and I argue that Chaucer and Gower employ their poetics of the past if not for radical political ends then certainly as interventions in the highly charged political discourse of Ricardian England. Similarly, the two medieval writers do not attempt to present a fixed image of the past, but forge connections between their past and their present that echo the connections I forge between the past of their texts and my own interpretive present. In this sense, my readings of Chaucer and Gower are not only contributions to criticism of medieval literature, but also, in a way that is much more general and harder to specify, interventions in the current cultural climate of (post)modernism.

Even if we subscribe to the (post)modern flattening of time, however, we have to acknowledge that the medieval is a period that is distinctly dissimilar to our own (post)modern condition. This is due, on the one hand, to its temporal distance that, even when considered within Latour's polytemporal model, can never be fully dissolved, and, on the other hand, by the fact that many of the concepts that are commonplace to us today—for example, the post-Romantic notion of authorship— were simply not available to medieval writers like Chaucer and Gower. Any attempt to reconstruct the original medieval context that fostered texts like those examined in the present study can, in the last instance, only contribute to a widening of this gap. Even shifting the focus from historical context to discursive practices can always only be a partial reconstruction, echoing Adso's attempts to reconstruct the destroyed monastery library that only heightens his awareness that his new library is nothing but a 'lesser library.' It is fair to say that any given present constructs its very own picture of the past, contingent on its own cultural situation, critical

preferences and the selection of textual witnesses consulted during the process of reconstruction. In this study, I argue that Chaucer and Gower are engaged in just such a reconstruction of their cultural past, either when they appropriate allegedly authoritative sources from that past or rewrite specific moments of both their immediate and more distant pasts, for example in their varying accounts of the Rising of 1381 or their narratives of Troy.

Since we can only create meaning out of texts by using our interpretive tools, we should always be aware of the text of history as entirely outside of our own experience. This necessarily brings with it a certain amount of supplementation of the text with the tools of our own theoretical repertoire. Paul Strohm states that 'A necessary task of theory is precisely to provoke a text into unpremeditated articulation, into the utterance of what it somehow contains or knows but neither intends nor is able to say.'[85] This task necessarily involves a considerable degree of personal experience and theoretical positioning that does not propose to fully *know* the text on its own terrain. In fact, Strohm all but denies this possibility of reading the text on its own without the intervention of the reader's own expectations. This approach has much to offer, since it at once acknowledges the alterity of the text and proposes to bridge this gap by supplementing the text with interpretive tools that the text itself is not capable of prefiguring. Approached in this way, a text becomes just as much a part of our own readerly present as it is anchored in its own historical moment.

According to Pierre Macherey, the critic's preconceived assumptions about a text are integral to the creation of meaning. Macherey states that

> The work that the author wrote is not precisely the work that is explicated by the critic. Let us say, provisionally, that the critic,

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[85] Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, xiii.

employing a new language, brings out a *difference* within the work by demonstrating that it is *other than it is*.[86]

By approaching the text with the critical language currently available in a specific intellectual climate, the critic causes the text to effectively become '*other than it is*,' anticipating Strohm's task of theory cited above. Significantly, both Macherey and Strohm provide for a changing set of critical expectations that perform and facilitate the task of criticism, illustrating that the critic's historical and cultural situation is just as if not more important than any given text's original conditions of production.

The readings I offer throughout the following chapters all arise from the question of how and why Chaucer and Gower conceptualise and utilise history and authorities from the past in their literary works. At this point, I should acknowledge that this is not an original question to ask of Chaucer's and Gower's works, but rather one that has been frequently addressed throughout the last decades. Alastair Minnis' study *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* and Lee Patterson's *Chaucer and the Subject of History* are important contributions of our understanding of Chaucer's depiction of the pagan past and his view of the subjectivity of history.[87] No specific analysis of history in Gower has been undertaken to date, but studies such as Robert Yeager's *The Search for a New Arion*, James Simpson's *Sciences and the Self*, and Larry Scanlon's *Narrative, Authority, and Power* provide useful insights into Gower's poetics and his appropriation of sources.[88] It should, therefore, be stressed here that I do not propose to negate these and other of my readings' predecessors,

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[86] Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978), 7.

[87] Alastair J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982); Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[88] Robert F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990); James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio amantis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The medieval exemplum and the Chaucerian tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

but am constructing my argument loosely around them. Once again, Macherey provides a useful statement on this issue:

> The present state of a question, if we are using the expression in its true sense rather than to denote an inert, definitive, suprahistorical vagueness, is actually the conjunction of several questions. There is no definitive question, and probably there has never been an isolated question.[89]

In their very discursiveness, the questions posed by critics cannot transcend history but always remain elements of the fluid entity that is literary criticism. In this sense, the questions I ask in this study are formed from a combination my own expectations of the texts and from those questions posed by earlier critics.

Of the numerous schools of criticism currently active, two stand out specifically in their influence on my readings: Queer Theory and Historicism. My own critical practice does not fit neatly into any one of these, but is rather engaged in a dialogue with both. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, Queer Theory provides me with a critical framework for reading history and criticism against the grain, forging connections between apparently unrelated and un-relatable elements. Historicism, on the other hand, supplies much of the socio-political information that is vital for the contextual dimension of my readings. This is not the place to offer all-encompassing descriptions of these two critical practices, but rather an opportunity to clarify which of the numerous earlier studies of medieval literature are most important for my own approach. In Macherey's terms, the following paragraphs aim to outline the expanse of questions that combine with my own expectations in the analysis of Chaucer's and Gower's poetics and politics of the past.

Earlier in this section I mentioned one of the major contributions to queer discourse on the Middle Ages, Glenn Burger's *Chaucer's Queer Nation*. There,

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[89] Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 9.

Burger proposes to

> attempt to bring postmodern and premodern, historicist and theoretical, marginal and hegemonic into a different, less knowable relationship with each other, to imagine a productive 'middle' in which relationships between the past and present, marginal and dominant, canonical and noncanonical can proliferate.[90]

It is precisely this kind creation of a new relationship between my (post)modern present and Chaucer and Gower's medieval past that I am pursuing in the present study. However, my approach differs from that of Burger and other queer critics insofar as my thematic focus is not provided by constructions of sexuality. Carolyn Dinshaw, for example, describes her seminal study *Getting Medieval* as following what she calls

> a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time between, on the one hand, lives, texts, and other cultural phenomena left out of sexual categories back then and, on the other, those left out of current sexual categories now.[91]

I fully agree that such highlighting of sexual categories back then and now has to be done and constitutes a valuable extension of traditional critical discourse, even though this is not the objective of the present study. Rather, my focus is provided by the question of history, how it is conceptualised today and has been in the past and how Chaucer and Gower put it to use in their texts.

As I examined above, Queer Theory opposes the teleological view of history followed by traditional Historicism. In the introduction to their collection *Queering the Middle Ages*, Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger describe this opposition in the following way:

> Traditional historicism is anything but preposterous; instead, it insists on straight chronologies that privilege a valuebased

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[90] Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation*, xiii.

[91] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

movement of supersession and progress –classical antiquity, Dark Ages, Middle Ages, modernity; pre-, modern, and post–. The preposterous thinking of queer theory might usefully interrupt such teleological sequences and the causal explanations –of decadence and decay, efflorescence, Renaissance, and Enlightenment– that accompany them.[92]

Teleological sequences can be extremely hindering in our pursuit of forging connections between past and present as their incremental focus does not easily provide for a stepping or reaching back through time. Since I am convinced that this reaching back through time is fundamental in our examination of how materials from disparate time-frames relate to each other it follows that we should move beyond teleological sequences in order to arrive at an alternative organisation of temporality.

A sole focus on Queer Theory, however, does not, I would argue, provide for the broadening of reading and the creation of meaning that I want to pursue in this study. For this, we have to combine queer insights with those provided by other theoretical discourses. Diane Watt's *Amoral Gower* provides a good example of a similar approach. In her introduction, Watt declares that her reading of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

> is informed by queer and feminist theory, as well as textual criticism, linguistic and narrative theory, and historicist and psychoanalytic approaches to literature. From my own perspective, it is my sense of my role as interpreter and the responsibilities it entails that justifies my eclectic theoretical approach.[93]

Here we have a similar combination of a diverse selection of theoretical approaches with the reader's interpretive positioning in relation to the text(s) studied that I aim to pursue in this study. From within our position within the historical present, we as readers have to take stock of the theoretical insights available to us and merge them

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[92] Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds., *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xii.

[93] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, xiv.

with our own readerly expectations in order to construct our own, personal approach to literature, before applying them to the text(s) under scrutiny. I would argue that a failure to do so would expose us to the risk of merely repeating the findings of earlier readings, since identical theoretical approaches are bound to produce near-identical findings even when applied to different texts.

Historicist theory is the second general approach informing the readings I offer in the following chapters. I do not follow the practice of reading all texts as literature pursued by historicist critics today. Nevertheless, I am heavily indebted to the view of history as text proposed by Historicists. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Historicist critics read and interpret the historical environments in which the texts they study participate. In his *Negotiating the Past*, Lee Patterson offers the following statement:

> But in fact the knowledge we gain from sources other than the text, however essential to our understanding, is no more objective, and therefore of no greater authority, than that provided by the text itself. The appeal to 'history' so commonly made in current critical discourses of all varieties is necessarily always to a reconstruction fabricated according to processes of interpretation that are identical to those applied to the 'not-history' of the literary text.[94]

Here we have, once again, an echo of Adso's reconstruction of the destroyed monastery library. However much we try, we can never gain access to the historical environment in its un-interpreted form. The fact that we apply the same interpretive strategies to text and history results in a history that is just as much formed through and by the our readerly expectations, which are in turn conditioned by our situation in the immediate historical present.

The number of Historicist readings of medieval texts has proliferated since the 1980s, and consequently a conclusive overview cannot be provided here.

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[94] Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 44.

However, several studies stand out in their significance for my readings. For example, Alastair Minnis' *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* offers an incisive reading of Chaucer's use of Pagan antiquity, focussing on *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*. His central argument can be summarised with the following passage:

> Chaucer was actually acutely aware of the essential differences between the pagan past and the Christian present, and to some extent he tried to avoid imposing 'modern' criteria and classifications on 'ancient' experience, striving to present it with historical plausibility.[95]

As will become clear in the following chapters, I do not subscribe to this view of Chaucer as interested in 'historical plausibility,' but am more inclined to view him as a writer who scrutinises the past's presence in his own culture. To a degree, my approach is closer to Patterson, who is

> trying to understand Chaucer's relation to the subject of history –to history as a topic for poetry, as a material and social world for representation, and (to shift the meaning of the word 'subject') as the individual person forged in the dialectic between the subjective and the social.[96]

Still, I am not as interested in history-as-subject as Patterson, but focus instead on Chaucer's and Gower's strategies of approaching history as a cultural construct influencing all aspects of culture.

In this respect, there are a number of other studies that are pertinent for my readings of Chaucer's and Gower's text that should be briefly mentioned here. James Simpson's comparison of Gower's *Confessio* and Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus* (1181-3) provides a very useful case study of the 'ways in which a seminal text like the *Anticlaudianus* provides an extremely revealing frame for understanding a vernacular poet who follows almost exactly two hundred years

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[95] Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 21.
[96] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 19.

later.'[97] Throughout the course of his study, Simpson extends his focus beyond Gower's reception of the *Anticlaudianus*, offering deep insights into both Alan's and Gower's reception and transformation of classical texts, mostly those of Ovid. It is this extension of focus that is important for my readings, as it prepares my examination of Chaucer's and Gower's ways of appropriating the past and its writings beyond a relatively narrow focus of selected writers.

The question of poetics and the reception of tradition is also central to a number of other studies. For example, David Aers has spent considerable time examining Chaucer's poetics, beginning with his early comparison the creative imagination in Chaucer and Langland.[98] More recently, Aers has moved on to the analysis of relationship and struggle between ecclesiastical and lay powers as it can be found in a range of texts, including those by Chaucer and Gower.[99] As far as the reception and assertion of authority within literary texts is concerned, Larry Scanlon's study of the medieval *exemplum* within the Chaucerian tradition offers some of the most useful and thought-provoking insights into how writers like Chaucer and Gower conceived of their own authorial position in relation to their imposing forebears.[100] As will become apparent over the course of the following chapters, these and a number of other studies frequently intersect with my own understanding of Chaucer's and Gower's texts.

Looking beyond the study of medieval literature to New Historicist readings of Renaissance literature, the most easily detectable element of this kind of criticism that makes its way into my readings is the historical anecdote that opens many readings of this kind. As Frank Grady states in a recent article, the anecdote forms a

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[97] Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 21.

[98] David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980).

[99] David Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church: Writing in England, 1360-1409* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000).

[100] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*.

'narration of some obscure or little-known historical episode resurrected so as to be read against or alongside a different-but-similar moment in a canonical text.'[101] The readings I offer in the following chapters take up this practice of opening the discussion of canonical texts with such circumstantial anecdotes, but my anecdotes do not feature such 'obscure or little-known historical episode[s].' Rather, I set up short passages from post-medieval discussions of history and the practice of its writing as interpretive backgrounds for the readings of Chaucer's and Gower's texts that follow. Naturally, the treatments and uses of history as I examine them in the medieval texts should not be regarded as fully-fitting these post-medieval discussions. In fact, this inherent dissimilarity is the key factor enabling the relationships between medieval and (post)modern that I want to forge in this study insofar as, in L. O. Aranye Fradenburg words, 'relationships can only transpire between things that are not identical.'[102] I do not subscribe to Fradenburg's psychoanalytic approach to literature, but this reliance on non-identity and relationships has a significant bearing on my querying historicist approach. The post-medieval anecdotes I offer are not identical with Chaucer's and Gower's medieval texts, but they are important tools in my readings of these texts from the vantage point of my twenty-first-century present.

It should be apparent by now that my primary objective is not the reading of medieval texts within their original historical environment. I agree with Fredric Jameson, who in an interview in 1998 said the following:

> I have always stood for political, social, and historical readings of
> works of art, but I certainly do not think you start that way. You start

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[101] Grady, 'Gower's Boat, Richard's Barge,' 1.
[102] L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 69.

with aesthetics, purely aesthetic problems, and then, at the term of these analyses, you end up in the political.[103]

Although I do not focus solely on aesthetic questions in my readings, all of my individual chapters first attempt to offer an understanding of the textual processes at work in Chaucer and Gower, always with one eye focussed on the relationship between (post)modern present and medieval past. Only once this has been achieved, do we have a better understanding of the theoretical and practical dimension of history in Chaucer's and Gower's texts and can move on to an attempt to offer historical explanations for both writers' poetics of the past.

To sum up, I want to pursue a kind of querying historicism that has as its primary objective a reaching back to or, more accurately, a transposing into my present of the medieval texts studied in the following chapters. I firmly believe that the critic's readerly position and interpretive expectations render literary texts unable to remain in their original historical moment. Rather, the texts and their meanings are created anew every time a reading is undertaken, becoming part of the critic's moment in time, only connected to their past via the indisputable fact that they were created in that past. My analysis of Chaucer's and Gower's poetics and politics of the past must, therefore, first describe the terms of reference according to which history, read from the vantage point of the twenty-first-century, works within their texts, before moving on to the examination of how these workings can be explained in relation to the texts' historical moment, a moment that is always as reconstructed as is the explanation of textual processes in the texts.

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[103] Fredric Jameson, 'Marxism and the Historicity of Theory: An interview by Xudong Zhang,' in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 149-63 (152).

Chapter Outline

The examination of Chaucer's and Gower's poetics and politics of the past is pursued in three largely independent but nonetheless intersecting steps, divided into three two-chapter sections. There is a rough temporal organisation of the chapters, starting in the mid-1370s and ending in the mid-1390s, and this is complemented by generic distinctions, starting with early poems connected to the genre of dream poetry, and then moving on to advice for princes via the intermediate step of Chaucer's and Gower's treatment of the story of Troy. However, the main principle informing the chapter and section organisation is provided by theoretical, literary and practical history. The opening section examines both writers' early poetry with regard to the emerging theoretical concepts of history and its writing that we can find in these texts. The middle section offers the writing of Troy as an example for how both writers tackle the task of composing poems that deal with one particular element of the ancient past. The final section builds on these two sections in order to examine how Chaucer and Gower utilise the past for the directly and indirectly political purpose of advising rulers. The following paragraphs aim to provide a brief chapter-by-chapter synopsis of the present study that defines the scope and purpose of the readings offered in this study.

The Rising of 1381 provides the historical background for the first chapter, examining the authority of history in Gower's Anglo-Latin *Vox Clamantis*. The interpretive lens through which I read Gower's poem in this chapter is provided by Walter Benjamin's angel of history, an image that highlights the chaotic nature of history and the human impotence in the face of that chaos. I argue that Gower similarly sees his present's ties with its originary past as almost irretrievably lost, a theme that later becomes one of the major concerns in his *Confessio*. In the light of this assumption, the chapter traces Gower's poetics of incorporating a large number

of lines and passages from older texts into his own narrative, arguing that the clash between Gower's original and borrowed lines mirrors that between his corrupted present and its idealised past. This view of the past and the present in Gower's poem also informs the politics of the *Vox*. The closing section of this chapter examines both the narrative voice and possible audience of Gower's poem, before offering an analysis of the wide-ranging social criticism throughout the poem.

The second chapter builds up on the reading of the *Vox*, opening with a reading of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, a text that has frequently been closely linked with Gower's account of the Rising of 1381 in the opening book of the *Vox*. The reading of Chaucer's treatment of literary and social authority I offer in this chapter views Chaucer as largely eschewing the attempt to offer fixed authorial statements, and is supported by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic intertextuality that provides the interpretive horizon for this chapter. In the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer offers treatments of literary and social authority that emphasise the performative aspects of language over the belief in stable meanings and fixed systems of social power. My argument here is that Chaucer's use of authoritative sources and powerful characters such as Chauntecleer as we find it in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* (and virtually all of his later works) can be traced back to the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, where authority is already not taken at face value but constantly juxtaposed with competing ideas.

The third chapter opens with a survey of medieval historiography in order to better situate Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in relation to the traditions of writing history that were available to him. This chapter argues that Chaucer uses his account of Troy as a thorough critique of medieval historiography, interweaving providential and circular views of history. My argument here centres on the question whether Chaucer's text presents history as repeating itself or progressing

towards a predefined end, reading the text through the lens of Julian Barnes' *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. This chapter reads Chaucer's *Troilus* as a fictionalised mirror image for Chaucer's contemporary society, relying on the widespread myth of British Trojan origins and concerning itself with an assessment of the viability of the search for past origins and the repercussions for human agency in shaping a future that is either predestined by providence or doomed to failure because of the very reliance of a past that has already failed.

This reading of Chaucer's *Troilus* is followed in the next chapter by a reading of Gower's treatment of Trojan material. As opposed to his contemporary, Gower does not devote an entire poem to Troy, but rather distributes the material unevenly throughout his oeuvre. Reading Gower's Trojan memory alongside Jacques Derrida's concept a responsible inheritance as he outlines it in his *Specters of Marx*, this chapter, then, opens with a brief account of Troy in the *Vox Clamantis* before moving on to an analysis of the Trojan episodes in the *Confessio*. Interestingly, Gower does not include a significant number of episodes that feature the siege of Troy itself, but rather focuses on the build-up and aftermath of the war. Although Troy is not Gower's main theme in his poetry, the Troy story provides him with a useful platform to strengthen his criticism of contemporary English society and its shortcomings when compared to its perceived predecessors, echoing some of the concerns of Chaucer's *Troilus*.

The penultimate chapter moves closer to the field of the political aspects of their poetics of the past, singling out Book VII of the *Confessio* and Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* as two texts that are quite explicitly concerned with government and the possibilities of advice for princes. Taking its cue from Friedrich Nietzsche's image of the architect of the future, this chapter argues that, in these two texts, Chaucer and Gower address directly the limitations of using past authority within the present and the responsibilities it entails for themselves as writers and readers. This kind of

detailed comparison of two closely related texts enables me to provide a side-by-side study of the two poets' politics against the background of their poetics of the past that have been analysed up to this point in this study.

The final chapter examines Chaucer's and Gower's treatment of the story of Virginia in the light of Jean Baudrillard's concept of regicide as sacrifice. Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Gower's *Tale of Virginia* are here treated as case studies for the two poets' utilisation of and authorial self-positioning in relation to a very precisely defined stretch of Roman history. Within the context of the present study, these two texts and their different treatments of Virginia function as condensed embodiments of both poets' poetics and politics of the past as they have been outlines and analysed throughout this study. This chapter places particular focus on the different ways in which Chaucer and Gower position themselves in relation to the source material for the story of Virginia, as well as the significance of the different treatments of Virginia as heroine in both texts. As I will argue, Chaucer and Gower effectively imagine Virginia as a metonym of history, which in turn makes their treatment of her emblematic for their views on the writing and utility of history.

The central thesis of this study is that poetics of the past and politics of the present offer a useful matrix for our understanding of the works of Chaucer and Gower, especially when these are read alongside each other. The following chapters aim to illustrate the differences between both writers' treatment of the past and its sources in their works, arguing that Chaucer constantly stresses the performative construction of both the past (in the form of history) and authority within the present. In the last instance, Chaucer suggests that any kind of definitive authoritative statement is impossible, since it is always already superseded by its innumerable successors or contemporaneous statements. Gower, on the other hand, does not deny the performative nature of discourse, but he is at pains to stress that

in any given situation the social agent *has* to formulate a forceful statement, no matter what comes after it. The fact that Gower's *Confessio* has stimulated a lively critical debate on whether it is informed by a coherent moral and poetical programme or not is an indicator for this view: I suggest that Gower does *not* follow a coherent programme in his works, but that he rather aims to illustrate the contingency of authoritative statements by constantly re-shaping the elements of his moral and political agenda. While Gower's politics are generally nostalgic and conservative, Chaucer is apolitical and primarily interested in the processes of political discourse. In this respect, Gower is a writer who strives to make sense of history and tradition and formulate poignant political statements in the face of contemporary struggles, whereas Chaucer does not offer unambiguous statements, but rather creates a multi-facetted poetic voice that highlights the reasons why such statements are impossible to achieve in the face of discursive heterogeneity.

1 Gower's *Vox Clamantis* and the Authority of History

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[104]

This passage from Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' paints a graphic picture of historical development. Benjamin's angel is trapped in his present and can neither recover the past nor foresee the future. He can only perceive the ever-growing pile of debris that builds up in front of his eyes, while he himself is violently propelled into a future to which his back is turned. A similarly grim view can be taken on the human position in history, and in Benjamin's case the parallels are rather obvious. When he composed the 'Theses,' he had already fled fascist Germany and settled in a semi-comfortable exile in Paris. In essence, Benjamin found himself trapped in a historical present in which he had to witness the constant deterioration not only of the political climate but also of human values. His description of the angel of history poses the question of how the course of history can be influenced if the angel—and we as humans for that matter—cannot leave the immediate present, be it backward in time or forward into the unknowable future. The past is lost and the future closed to his gaze, no matter how hard the angel struggles against the storm blowing from paradise.

   This chapter reads Gower's *Vox Clamantis* against the background of Benjamin's angel of history, drawing out the parallels between Benjamin's view of

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[104] Benjamin, 'Theses,' 249.

history and Gower's poetics and politics in his Anglo-Latin work of social criticism. I argue that Gower's *Vox* creates a scene similar to that of Benjamin's angel. Where Benjamin feared that the Second World War would inevitably lead to the destruction of civilisation,[105] Gower is deeply concerned about the survival of his society in the face of recent catastrophic events, most notably the Rising of 1381. His narrator finds himself in a position in history where he is cut off from the idyll of an idealised past and is concerned about his and his society's progress into the future, leading to a deeply apocalyptic tenor in the poem.[106] The first section of this chapter analyses this position of the narrator in historical development in relation to the juxtaposition of the idealised past and Gower's Ricardian present that runs through the *Vox*. Several studies have focussed on Gower's strategy of interspersing his own verses with numerous borrowings from old, authoritative sources, and I want to argue that this strategy is a textual manifestation of Gower's theory of history, which relies heavily on the juxtaposition of past and present, old and new as well as original and corrupted.[107] Given the particularly high density of borrowed lines and passages in the nightmare account of the Rising of 1381 that Gower added to an earlier version of the poem after 1381, it should come as no surprise that most studies of the *Vox* have largely focussed on this first book. However, we should not read Book I in isolation from the remaining six books, but rather see it as a later, more graphic and concise formulation of the theory of history that is informing the earlier six-book version of the poem.

A second element that should contribute to our understanding of the *Vox* is

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[105] Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 19.

[106] James M. Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* (Cambridge: The Medieval Academy of America, 1997), 244; Russell A. Peck, 'John Gower and the Book of Daniel,' in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 159-87.

[107] For two of the most insightful studies of Gower's poetics in the *Vox*, see Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins'; Robert F. Yeager, 'Did Gower Write *Cento*?' in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 113-32.

the question of the intended and implied audiences. Together with the significance of Gower's choice of Latin for his wide-ranging and thorough critique of English society in the late 1370s and early 1380s these audiences provide the focus for the second section of this chapter. Judith Ferster has suggested that Gower's choice of Latin and the consequently narrower audience enables him to offer a more drastic kind of criticism than is possible in the later English *Confessio Amantis*.[108] However, the choice of Latin not only addresses the poem to the Latinate social strata, but simultaneously excludes the non-Latinate members of society from both the audience of the *Vox* and also from the narrative itself. Again, Book I with its masking of the rebels of 1381 as beasts is an exemplification of the remaining six books that constantly attempt to suppress the presence of the lower social strata.

Both the theory of history informing the *Vox* and the implied and intended audiences of the poem are important for our understanding of its political agenda as it is examined in the final section of this chapter. According to Eve Salisbury, 'of the poetry of the time, it [the *Vox*] alone cries from the wilderness in an attempt to unveil the corrupt political structures from which the monstrous events of the Rising of 1381 emerge.'[109] This is certainly true in relation to the Rising of 1381, but we should not discard the similarities between the social criticism of the *Vox* and other contemporary works, most notably Langland's *Piers Plowman*, which can also be seen to 'unveil the corrupt political structures,' albeit not in direct relation to the events of the summer of 1381. Furthermore, the political agenda Gower pursues in his *Vox* suffers from a distinct lack of alternatives to the current social structure. Gower does criticise society, but he does not propose to revolutionise the social structure. His is a rather nostalgic agenda that wants 'to make whole what has been

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[108] Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 112-3.
[109] Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins,' 160.

smashed,' relying on the juxtaposition of past and present, new and old to argue the case for a return to the idealised social order of the past.

Past and Present, *Cento* and Schollboy Plagiarism

The *Vox* cannot be described as a fully-fledged formulation of a theory of history, but a closer look at Gower's treatment of past and present and his poetics in the poem reveals a view of history that informs the social criticism that runs through the poem. Where Benjamin's angel sees only a pile of debris in the past, Gower wants to reach across the divide between his present and an idealised past. Essentially, Benjamin's angel is forced to look at the past when he would rather focus on the future, whereas Gower wants his contemporaries to remember the past and use it to remodel their present society. In this Gower can be seen to go against the traditional Christian belief in the seven ages of the world as an integral part of Christian teleological history.[110] Gower does provide a deeply apocalyptic view of the future, but his frequent recourse to the past implies that he aims to highlight the rupture between the idealised past and his present in order to arrive at an equally idealised route into the future. In this section I examine Gower's depiction of the binary opposition between the past and the present and propose a reading of his strategy of juxtaposing original and borrowed lines throughout the poem, sometimes compared to the classical mode of *cento* and described by Macaulay as 'schoolboy plagiarism,'[111] as a textual manifestation of this view of the course of history as almost irrevocably interrupted. Gower effectively creates a hybrid textual surface of old and new verses that echoes the pile of debris contemplated by

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[110] For discussions of the seven ages, see Dean, *World Grown Old*; John A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

[111] See Gower, *The Latin Works of John Gower*, xxxii; Yeager, 'Did Gower Write *Cento*?'

Benjamin's angel of history.

The juxtaposition of idealised past and corrupted present is an integral part of Gower's view of history that stresses the difference between the past and the present highlighting a rupture that has all but destroyed the teleological development of history. According to John Fisher, the *visio* of Book I is 'not history but a poet-philosopher's meditation on the meaning of history.'[112] However, in the light of recent developments in critical and cultural theory we should ask whether the writing of and meditation on the meaning of history are actually two distinct practices. In other words: Could Gower, or anyone, write history without thinking about the meaning of that very history? I regard the *Vox* as both Gower's meditation on the meaning of history and his literary account of what he regards as significant in the history of England in the 1370s and 1380s. Gower is trying to make sense of his contemporary history by providing a coherent account of the time up to the Rising of 1381. In many ways, his representation of the rebels in Book I is similar to the accounts of the Rising we find in the chronicles of the time.[113] Book I employs the Rising of 1381 to illustrate the urgency of Gower's socio-political criticism in Books II-VII that had already been put into circulation. Gower singles out one particular stretch of time for his narrative instead of the all-encompassing teleological account Fisher seems to expect from a work of history. Book I describes the events of the summer of 1381, which Gower probably witnessed directly, living in Southwark at the time of the Rising, against the idealised horizon of the lost past, in order to show how far his society has strayed from the path prepared by that past.

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[112] Fisher, *John Gower*, 173.

[113] For analyses of the chronicle accounts in relation to the *Vox*, see David Aers, '*Vox Populi* and the Literature of 1381,' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 432-53; Crane, 'Writing Lesson'; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 32-56. Gower's depiction of the rebels of 1381 will be part of my discussion of audience and politics in the *Vox* later in this chapter.

Building upon this conception of history, the tenor of the poem is deeply apocalyptic.[114] An early indicator can be found in the prologue to Book I:

> Insula quem Pathmos suscepit in Apocalipsi,
> Cuius ego nomen gesto, gubernet opus. (I, prol. 57-8)

> [May the one whom the Isle of Pathmos received in the Apocalypse,
> and whose name I bear, guide this work.]

This invocation of the author of the biblical Apocalypse, John of Pathmos, firmly lays the ground for Gower's criticism of the socio-political context in which he finds himself trapped. As Russell Peck argues, the invocation is combined with the guardian angel, Gower's enigmatic identification of himself, and the similarities between the *Vox* and the Book of Daniel to create Gower's apocalyptic perspective.[115] Gower portrays himself as the *vox clamantis in deserto*, the voice crying in the wilderness, warning his contemporaries of the dire consequences of their corrupted way of life, but he does so in order to avert these consequences, echoing Benjamin's angel's attempt to 'make whole what has been smashed.' Gower wants to re-establish the lost link between his present and the idealised past by invoking the past authority of John of Pathmos.

Book I is by far the most graphic illustration of the apocalyptic tenor of the poem. The world Gower presents there is so thoroughly turned upside down that a return to the Edenic state the narrator finds himself in at the outset and which can be seen as a representation of Gower's idealised past seems all but impossible. However, we should not ignore the status of Book I as a late addition to the poem and rather read it as a more graphic manifestation of the pessimistic outlook that features in the remaining six books. Having already finished the six-book version of the *Vox*, Gower was prompted by the events of the summer of 1381 to add his nightmarish *visio* account of the Rising of that year, prefacing the socio-political

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[114] Dean, *World Grown Old*, 244; Peck, 'Book of Daniel.'
[115] Peck, 'Book of Daniel,' 167-9.

criticism of the earlier version with what should be regarded as a direct result of the subject of this criticism. The tenor of the *visio* of Book I is built upon the foundation Gower lays out in the middle section of the poem, and most notably in the final book, where he refers to Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the composite statue as found in the *Book of Daniel*. Gower would later come back to this statue in the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis* (585-662), and in the *Vox* he employs this image to open the summary of the ills affecting his society as he has described them in the preceding books. The opening chapter of Book VII starts with a further emphasis on the significance of the past for the present:

> Quod solet antiquis nuper latitare figuris,
> Possumus ex nostris verificare malis:
> Quod veteres fusca sompni timuere sub vmbra,
> Iam monstrat casus peruigil ecce nouus.
> Nunc caput a statua Nabugod prescinditur auri,
> Fictilis et ferri stant duo iamque pedes: (VII, i, 1-6)

> [We can establish from our own evils what is wont to lie concealed in ancient symbols. The ever-active misfortune of modern times reveals what the ancients were fearful of under the dark shadow of sleep. The golden head of Nebuchadnezzar's statue has now been cut off, yet the two feet of iron and clay still stand.]

What started out as itself a dream in Book I is here portrayed as a daylight enactment of the sleeping fears of ancient times. Gower presents himself and his contemporaries as living inside the dreams-turned-reality of biblical writings, which in return enables him to understand more fully the matter contained in the writings of the past. In the post-1381 version of the poem, Book VII thus closes a circle that starts with the *visio* of Book I and then deals with the corruption of the ideals of the past that affects all parts of society.

It is highly significant for my understanding of Gower's theory of history in the *Vox* that he does not once mention the statue's torso. The focus throughout is placed solely on the cut-off golden head representing the lost Golden Age and the imminent last age of clay. Gower mentions the clay feet of the statue at the

beginning of the third chapter of Book VII:

> Vltima per terras superest modo fictilis etas,
> Vnde pedes statue dant michi signa fore.
> Non cicius figuli fragilis nam fictilis olla
> Rupta fit in testas, dum lapis angit eas,
> Quin plus condicio fragilis temptata virorum
> Rupta iacet vicii de gratuitate sui. (VII, iii, 135-40)

> [The last age, that of clay is at hand throughout the world. The feet
> of the statue furnish me signs of it. When a storm strikes it, the
> potter's frail pot of clay is not broken into fragments more quickly
> than man's frail nature lies broken, by the weight of its sin.]

Humans are here likened to their own frail products, alienated from themselves, with their nature lying crushed by the weight of their sins. The focus on the last age, the *ultima etas* echoes the apocalyptic tenor of the poem as a whole, and the fact that Gower explicitly refers to the pots of clay that *Rupta fit in testas*, are broken into fragments, echoes the lament throughout the poem of the severely corrupted state of Gower's contemporary society. The implication seems to be that when the present's ties with its originary past are this easily broken, when history is fragmented, it is only a matter of time until society itself is irreversibly crushed and becomes a part of the ever-growing pile of debris accumulating in front of Benjamin's angel of history.

The erasure of the middle section of the statue and the linking of the clay feet with the age of clay adds to Gower's focus on the perceived rupture separating his present from the idealised past. Just as the remaining parts of the statue do not feature in the poem, so Gower does not describe the individual steps that led to the corruption of his society but only provides a criticism of the end-product and its effects on the link between past and present. Nebuchadnezzar's statue is often read as a metaphor for the body politic. Eve Salisbury, for example, argues that the monstrous statue with is head cut off and only the feet remaining illustrates the

monstrosity of Gower's society.[116] However, there is another dimension to Gower's use of the statue. Read against the strategy of juxtaposing the extremes of distant past and immediate present, the emphasis on the upper and lower parts of the statue becomes a powerful graphic embodiment of Gower's theory of history. He openly links the clay feet with the age of clay that is then contrasted with the cut-off golden head and the Age of Gold. Gower uses the widely accepted link between the statue and the body politic to illustrate how the threat to the body politic posed not only by the Rising of 1381 but also by the corruption raging rampant in society is facilitated by the rupture separating his present from its originary past.

This rupture between past and present and Gower's attempt to 'make whole what has been smashed' is also illustrated by the numerous quotations of lines and even whole passages from older works that he weaves into the poem. Recent reappraisals of Gower's technique have shown that Gower's *Vox* exhibits sophisticated poetics. Robert Yeager's analysis of the striking similarities between Gower's technique and the classical rhetorical style of *cento* writing has paved the way for further studies linking Gower's poetics with his narrative matter in the poem.[117] I would argue that Gower's use of his sources is informed by his theory of history, and that the numerous borrowed lines and passages in the poem echo the juxtaposition of past and present. The presence of older writings in the *Vox* highlights the rupture between past and present insofar as it reminds Gower's audience of the virtues of their predecessors.

One problem with Yeager's findings is their rejection of any kind of

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[116] Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins,' 174.

[117] Yeager, 'Did Gower Write *Cento*?' For examples of readings of the *Vox* that build on Yeager's findings, see Andrew Galloway, 'Gower in His Most Learned Role and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381,' *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 329-47; Bruce Harbert, 'Lessons from the Great Clerk: Ovid and John Gower,' in *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian influences on literature and art from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83-97; Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins.'

significance of the selection of sources for the meaning of their new narrative environment. This is the reason why I think that Gower does not adopt the *cento* style uncritically, if at all. In Ausonius' words, *cento* involves merging 'scattered tags … into a whole to harmonise different meanings, to make pieces arbitrarily connected seem naturally related, to let foreign elements show no chink of light between, to prevent the far-fetched from proclaiming the force which united them.'[118] This definition does not fit Gower's poetic method in the *Vox*. His selection and incorporation of source material can be read as inflated with meaning, and this meaning is provided by the theory of history that relies on the juxtaposition of past and present, old and new. I would argue that Gower's technique should be seen in the light of what is now called intertextuality. For example, Roland Barthes states:

> We know that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.[119]

Gower creates just such a multi-dimensional space and lets his various sources clash with each other as well as with his own text. Towards the end of her analysis of the *Vox*, Eve Salisbury also compares Gower's poetical technique to postmodern works, which 'draw from a multitude of sources, to splice them together in innovative ways, and to create pastiches that defy generic classification.'[120] In the *Vox*, Gower is aware of his text as a tissue of quotations and he consciously uses his sources and their contrast with his original lines as a textual element of his theory of history.

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[118] Quoted and translated in Yeager, 'Did Gower Write *Cento*?' 115.
[119] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 166-72 (170).
[120] Salisbury, 'Remembering Origins,' 179.

However, Gower does conform to Ausonius' rule that the 'foreign elements show no chink of light between' insofar as he splices his varied sources skilfully into his own verses, making the quotations obvious only for those readers of the *Vox* who share Gower's thorough knowledge of Latin texts. There can be no doubt that Gower was a very bookish poet,[121] and his audience has to match this bookishness in order to realise the scope of Gower's borrowing technique. But Gower does not hide the fact that he does rely heavily on his sources, but rather makes it clear from the beginning of both the six- and seven-book versions of the poem, as the following examples illustrate.

> Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri,
> Nam dabit experta res magis esse fidem. (I, prol., 1-2)

> [Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future, for a thing
> which has previously been experienced will produce greater faith.]

> Doctorum veterum mea carmina fortificando
> Pluribus exemplis scripta fuisse reor. (II, prol., 81-2)

> [I acknowledge that my verses have been written with many models
> and strengthened by learned men of old.]

In addition to informing us readers of the presence of older writings in Gower's poem, these two couplets also prepare us for the juxtaposition of old and new, past and present, which is a key element throughout the *Vox*, and that is needed for the creation of the historical depth Gower needs to mount his critique of English society in the 1370s and 1380s.[122] For my present purpose, we should note that Gower is here foreshadowing his reference to the sleeping fears of the ancients. Essentially, the sources strengthen Gower's verses, but they can also be better understood with the benefit of historical hindsight and the present experience of Gower's contemporary society.

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[121] Siân Echard, 'Gower's 'bokes of Latin': Language, Politics, and Poetry,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 123-56 (123).
[122] Galloway, 'Gower in His Most Learned Role,' 335.

By far the highest number of borrowed lines are taken from Ovid,[123] and near the beginning of Book I we find a particularly dense concentration of Ovidian lines, painting an idyllic picture of the idealised past:

Omnia tunc florent, tunc est noua temporis etas,	(*Fasti*, i, 151)
Ludit et in pratis luxuriando pecus.	(*Fasti*, i, 156)
Tunc fecundus ager, pecorum tunc hora creandi	(*Fasti*, iii, 241)
Tunc renouatque suos reptile quodque iocos;	
Prataque pubescunt variorum flore colorum,	
Indocilique loquax gutture cantat auis;	(*Tristia*, iii 12, 7-8)
Queque diu latuit tunc se qua tollat in auras	
Inuenit occultam fertilis herba viam;	(*Fasti*, iii, 239-40)
Tuncque pruinosos mollitur Lucifer agros,	
Inque suos pullos concitat ales opus.	(*Amores*, I,vi, 65-6)
Tunc glacialis yemps canos hirsuta capillos	(*Metam.*, II, 30)
Deserit, et placidi redditus orbis erat:	
Quicquid yemps operit gelido de frigore credit,	
Et periunt lapse sole tepente niues.	
Arboribus redeunt detonse frigore frondes,	(*Fasti*, iii, 235-7)
Regnat et estatis pompa per omne nemus:	
Rore refudit humum, dat terre gramina, siluis	
Frondes, arboribus pomaque grata satis:	
Mille fuit variis florum renouata coronis,	
Herbifer in cuius lege virescit ager.	
Flos sua regna petit, florumque coloribus amplus	
Ludit ager, que suus gaudia vultus habet.	
Iam legit ingenua violas sibi compta puella	
Rustica, quas nullo terra serente vehit.	(*Tristia*, iii 12, 5-6)
Tot fuerant illuc quot habet natura colores,	
Pictaque dissimili flore superbit humus:	(*Fasti*, iv, 429-30)
O quia digestos volui numerare colores,	
Nec potui, numera copia maior erat.	(*Fasti*, v, 213-4)
	(I, i, 33-60)

[*Then everything flourished, then there was a new epoch of time, and the cattle sported wantonly in the fields. Then the land was fertile, then was the hour of the herds to mate*, and it was then that the reptile might renew its sports. *The meadows were covered with the bloom of different flowers, and the chattering bird sang with its untutored throat. Then too the teeming grass which had long lain concealed found a hidden path through which it lifted itself into the gentle breezes. Lucifer thawed out the frosty fields, and the mother bird sped to its work for its young. Then icy, bristling winter shed its hoary locks* and there was a return of a restful world. *Whatever Winter had hidden it yielded from the icy cold, and the fallen snows passed away in the warming sun. The foliage shorn away by the cold*

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[123] Stockton counts a total of 537 Ovidian lines in the poem, the majority (270) in Book I. See John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and the Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), 27.

returned to the trees, and Summer's splendor held sway in every grove. She sprinkled the soil with dew, and bestowed grasses upon the earth, leaves to the woods, and welcome fruits to the trees. The greening plain was renewed by a thousand different garlands of flowers and flourished under her sway. Flora sought out her realms and the field revelled, filled with the hues of flowers, and its face was joyful. *Now the innocent rural maiden plucked violets to deck herself out; the earth bore them, although no one had sown them. There were as many hues there as nature affords, and the ground was splendidly painted with different blooms. O how I wished to enumerate the separate colours! But I could not; their abundance was too great in number.*]

I cite this passage in full, because it is a good illustration of the 'overwhelming industry' with which Gower incorporates his quotations into his text without interrupting his own narrative.[124] Gower's appropriation of his sources also illustrates how texts and words are processed in memory, how 'they are made our own.'[125] He does not rehearse the material he finds in his sources for its own sake, but rather incorporates it into his narrative and makes it contribute to his discussion of change throughout time that highlights the difference between the past of his sources and his own historical present.

It is significant that in the above passage Gower creates an idyllic scenery that can be regarded as his view of the idealised past that has been lost by the time he composed the *Vox*. However, this scenery is not described as immutable. Already in the fourth line of the passage, Gower inserts one of his own lines referring to how 'the reptile might renew its sport,' an obvious reference to the Garden of Eden and the snake as the primary agent of Adam and Eve's fall. Consequently, the paradisal setting is short-lived, and duly blasted away by

> Innumerabilia monstra timenda nimis,
> Diuersas plebis sortes vulgaris iniquas
> Innumeris turmis ire per arua vagas: (I, ii, 170-2)

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[124] Paul E. Beichner, 'Gower's Use of *Aurora* in *Vox Clamantis*,' *Speculum* 30 (1955): 582-95 (592).

[125] Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12.

> [innumerable terrifying monsters, various rascally bands of the common mob, wandering through the fields in countless throngs.]

Given this imminent destruction of the paradisal scene, Gower's choice of Ovid's description of the Roman Saturnalia and their associated myths in the *Fasti* as the main source for lines in his passage might seem odd, because Gower's *visio* is certainly not much of a celebration. However, on closer examination this choice does begin to make sense. As Mikhail Bakhtin has shown in his analysis of the works of Rabelais, the Roman Saturnalia with their conjuring up of a lost Golden Age are an influence on the medieval feast days.

> The gay aspect of the feast presented this happier future of a general material affluence, equality, and freedom, just as the Roman Saturnalia announced the return of the Golden Age. Thus, the medieval feast had, as it were, the two faces of Janus. Its official, ecclesiastical face was turned to the past and sanctioned the existing order, but the face of the people of the marketplace looked into the future and laughed, attending the funeral of the past and present. The marketplace feast opposed the protective, timeless stability, the unchanging established order and ideology, and stressed the element of change and renewal.[126]

The fact that the rebels entered London on the day of Corpus Christi is important for our understanding of Bakhtin's statement in relation to Gower's representation of the paradisal setting and its destruction by the *plebs*. Gower prefaces the destruction of the Golden Age and the common mob's attendance at the funeral of the past and present with a prolonged description of precisely that Golden Age, effectively sanctioning the existing order. In this respect, Gower's borrowings from Ovid strengthen his juxtaposition of past and present, highlighting the rupture between them. The fact that the rebels are turned from humans into unreasoning beasts is another sign of the corruption affecting society. Because the present society is so distanced from its former glory, the rebels as members of that society

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[126] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 81.

are no longer seen as human.

Given that the borrowed lines are a textual manifestation of Gower's view of history and its juxtaposition of past and present, old and new, his narrator's self-description as an unworthy person is important. In the prologue to Book II, the original introduction to the poem as a whole, he pleads:

> Qui legis hec eciam, te supplico, vir, quod honeste
> Scripta feras, viciis nec memor esto meis:
> Rem non personam, mentem non corpus in ista
> Suscipe materia, sum miser ipse quia. (II, prol., 11-4)
>
> [Likewise I beg of you, the man who reads these writings, that you
> bear with them generously and not be too conscious of my faults.
> Embrace the matter, not the man, and the spirit, not the bodily form
> in this material, for I myself am a poor fellow.]

This is a clear example of the common humility *topos*,[127] but in the *Vox* it is implicitly employed to situate Gower's narrator against the horizon of older, more authoritative sources that are spliced into the narrative. The narrator is a 'poor fellow' compared to the masters of old and thus metonymic of his socio-political context. The present is an almost irredeemably corrupted version of the past, and Gower wants his society to be remodelled according to the original social order. Similarly, Gower's poem has to rely heavily on the masters of the past to become valuable at all, illustrating the importance of reaching back across time, as Benjamin puts it to 'awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.'

Latin and its Audiences

Gower obviously does not present his view of the rupture between the idealised past and his historical present solely for its own sake, but incorporates it into the educational programme of the *Vox*. The audience of the poem is meant to realise

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[127] Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953).

that the current state of society merits a return to the all but lost originary past, and they should be as horrified by the description of the Rising of 1381 as is Gower's narrator. But who exactly should be regarded as the audience for the poem? And what significance should we attach to the Gower's choice of Latin for his second major work? The view of Gower's writing evolving towards the use of English in his works has been frequently supported,[128] but I would like to argue in this section that Latin is in fact a particularly appropriate medium for Gower's meditation on the ills of his time and the comparable merit of the idealised past. The choice of Latin also serves to address a relatively clearly delimited social group, excluding the non-Latinate populace from the audience of the *Vox*, as well as leaving no room for the vernacular voices of the rebels of 1381. The language and audience of the *Vox* are thus connected and should be examined in relation to each other.

At the beginning of the prologue to Book III, Gower's narrator emphasises that his material does not arise solely out of his own personal impulse:

> A me non ipso loquor hec, set que michi plebis
> Vox dedit, et sortem plangit vbique malam: (III, prol., 11-2)

> [I am not speaking of these things on my own part; rather, the voice of the people has reported them to me, and it complains of their adverse fate at every hand.]

Gower here presents his Latin poetic voice as a product of the voice of the people, a *plebs* who, we remember were depicted as 'innumerable terrifying monsters, various rascally bands of the common mob' in Book I (ii, 170-2). What, then, are we to make of Gower's rendition of the *vox populi* in the rather un-plebeian Latin medium? He certainly does not propose to speak for the common mob that is depicted as a graphic example for the corruption of his society in relation to its originary past. Towards the end of Book VII, we encounter a further reference to

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[128] See for example, Derek Pearsall, 'The Gower Tradition,' in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 179-97.

this ominous *plebis vox*:

> Quod scripsi plebis vox est, set et ista videbis,
> Quo clamat populus, est ibi sepe deus. (VII, xxv, 1470-1)
>
> [What I have set down is the voice of the people, but you will see
> that where the people call out, God is often there.]

Gower here utilises the traditional identification of the *vox populi* with the *vox dei*, the voice of God.[129] Such an identification emphasises the prophetic nature of the poem, lending it greater authority by presenting Gower's account of the Rising of 1381 and his social criticism in Books I-VII as a textual manifestation of the voice of God, filtered through the fallible human agency of Gower as poet. Therefore, the narrator does not actually relate what the common mob has told him, but gets his primary inspiration from God, a fact that is already alluded to in the prologue to Book II, the original opening of the poem:

> Inceptum per te perfecto fine fruator
> Hoc opus ad laudem nominis, oro, tui. (II, prol., 9-10)
>
> [I pray that this work, begun with Thy [Christ's] help for the praise
> of Thy name, may achieve a fitting conclusion.]

Gower conjures up the voice of the common people and simultaneously silences it by referring to the *vox dei* as the primary source for his material. This double movement is characteristic of the discourse of the ruling classes, who, as the chronicle evidence shows, vehemently tried to silence the voices of the governed populace.[130]

The double movement of conjuring up the common voice and striving to silence it at the same time can best be seen in the often quoted passage opening chapter 11 of Book I, where Gower represents the rebels' voices within his Latin text:

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[129] Aers, '*Vox Populi*,' 440; Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 210.
[130] Aers, '*Vox Populi*'; Crane, 'Writing Lesson'; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 32-56.

> Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat,
> Bette que Gibbe simul Hykke venire iubent:
> Colle furit, quem Geffe iuuat, nocumenta parantes,
> Cum quibus ad dampnum Wille coire vouet.
> Grigge rapit, dum Dawe strepit, comes est quibus Hobbe,
> Lorkyn et in medio non minor esse putat:
> Hudde ferit, quos Iudde terit, dum Tebbe minatur,
> Iakke domos que viros vellit et ense necat:
> Hogge suam pompam vibrat, dum se putat omni
> Maiorem Rege nobilitate fore:
> Balle propheta docet, quem spiritus ante malignus
> Edocuit, que sua tunc fuit alta scola. (I, xi, 783-94)

> [Wat calls, Tom comes to him, and Sim does not loiter behind. Bet and Gib order Hick to come at once. Col rages, whom Geff helps to do damage. Will swears to join with them for mischief. Grigg grabs, while Daw roars and Hobb is their partner, and Lorkin intends no less to be in the thick of things. Hudd strikes while Tebb threatens those whom Judd tramples on. Jack tears down houses and kills men with his sword. Hogg brandishes his pomp, for with his noble bearing he thinks he is greater than any king. The prophet Ball teaches them; a malicious spirit had previously taught him, and he then constituted their deppest learning.]

I quote this passage in full because it illustrates the way in which Gower uses the enclosure of the rebels' speech in Latin in order to 'erase any traces of verbal performance on the part of the rebels.'[131] Essentially, Gower *has* to mention or at least imply the humanness of the rebels, but the enclosure in Latin and the fact that the vernacular names of the rebels stand out from the rest of the passage serve him to highlight the fact that they are occupying a space that is not intended for them. Furthermore, the reference to the preacher John Ball suggest that the rebels learned their verbal performance from the very parts of society they are attacking, as David Aers points out.[132] Even more significantly, Gower stresses that Ball had been taught by a *spiritus malignus*, a malicious spirit, making his preaching a threat that infests not only the social system, but also the Latin language in which much of the official business of that system (and Gower's poem) are conducted.

In this respect, Gower's choice of Latin as the medium for his poem is

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[131] Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 213.
[132] Aers, '*Vox Populi*,' 442.

interesting, since it raises questions about the status of Latin within cultural discourse in the late fourteenth-century. In his *Convivio* (1306-8), Dante describes Latin as 'perpetual and not corruptible, while the vernacular is both unstable and corruptible,'[133] and Derek Pearsall says of the Latin in the *Confessio Amantis* that it may be intended to 'contain or encase the potentially volatile nature of the English.'[134] Looking at the intrusion of the rebels into Gower's Latin narrative space, we realise that Gower certainly does not see Latin as incorruptible. Latin may be ostensibly stable, but the rebels' presence in his Latin narrative space is only one manifestation of the corruption that affects both the low culture of the rebels and the high culture of written discourse in Latin.

As I have mentioned briefly in the previous section, Gower's *Vox* assumes an audience that must be fairly well read in Latin literature. However, the ability to recognise Gower's frequent recourse to older sources is not the only quality the audience must possess. They must also, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, be acutely aware of the socio-political context of England in the late 1370s and 1380s, in order to understand Gower's frequent references to contemporary events throughout the poem. But for the time being we should consider the fact that the poem is clearly intended for private reading, as the prologues to Book I and II respectively make clear:

> Omne quod est huius operis lacrimabile, *lector*
> Scriptum de lacrimis censeat esse meis: (I, prol., 35-6; my emphasis)
>
> [The *reader* may judge everything in this book which is tearful to
> have been written with my own tears.]
>
> Qui *legis* hec eciam, te supplico, vir, quod honeste

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[133] Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio*, ed. G. Busnelli and G. Vandelli, 2 vols. (Florence: Felice le Monnier, 1934-7), I. 5, 33. Translated in Dante Alighieri, *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri*, trans. Robert S. Haller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), 62.

[134] Derek Pearsall, 'Gower's Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*,' in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 13-25 (22).

> Scripta feras, viciis nec memor esto meis: (II, prol., 11-2; my emphasis)

> [Likewise I beg of you, the man who *reads* these writings, that you bear with them generously and not be too conscious of my faults.]

I have already mentioned the significance of the narrator's acknowledgment of his faults in the second couplet.[135] I now want to highlight the fact that Gower clearly marks his audience as male and stresses the distance between his narrator and his audience that is facilitated by the private reading of the *Vox*. This distance contributes to the attempt to silence the rebels of 1381 by denying them even the indirect voice of public recital. Unlike Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*, which 'was often first encountered in its own time as a sociable pastime,'[136] Gower does not address an audience that would be present at an oral performance of the *Vox*. In this sense, silent reading, a social phenomenon of increasing importance in the fourteenth century,[137] underscores the silencing of the rebels' noises in the *Vox*.

Gower's relation to his proposed audience is not easy to define, since considerable doubt remains as to Gower's social position. Paul Strohm regards him as an outsider to the circulation of bribes and favours, which gave wealthy members of society at least an indirect voice in English politics.[138] Be that as it may, Gower's narrator certainly strives to attain a voice of his own. In the prologue to Book II he asks the following question:

> Quid si pauca sciam, numquid michi scribere pauce
> Competit, immo iuuat alter vt illa sciat.
> De modicis igitur modicum dabo pauper, et inde
> Malo valere parum quam valuisse nichil.
> Non miser est talis, aliquid qui non dare possit;
> Si dare non possum munera, verba dabo.
> Attamen in domino credenti nulla facultas

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[135] See above, p. 65.

[136] Barry Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13.

[137] Paul Saenger, 'Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society,' *Viator* 13 (1982): 367-414.

[138] Strohm, 'Form and Social Statement,' 38.

Est impossibilis, dum bene sentit opus. (II, prol., 59-66)

> [What if I do know but little? Surely it is fitting for me to write that little. It may indeed help another to learn. In my poverty I shall therefore offer a little of what little I have, since I prefer to be worth a trifle rather than worth nothing. There is no man so poor that he cannot give something; if I cannot give gifts, I shall give words. And yet to the man trusting in the Lord, no field of endeavour is impossible, when his work is of good intention.]

Gower's narrator here builds upon his earlier self-representation as a 'poor fellow,' insisting that even if his writing, and the socio-political context of which it is a textual manifestation, is merely 'worth a trifle' may still 'help another to learn.' Gower's gift to his contemporaries is his writing, and the combination of his attempt to 'make whole what has been smashed,' both in the sense of remodelling the present and creating a coherent whole out of the pile of debris made up of old writings and historical events illustrates that Gower is involved in an educational project aimed at his Latinate and powerful audience.

The Politics of History

The *visio* of Book I utilises the spectre that haunted the upper strata of English society after the alarmingly disruptive events of 1381. I have already shown how Gower must have seen the Rising as an almost direct result of the corruption affecting the whole society, and how his account of the Rising in Book I relates to the remaining parts of the *Vox*. David Aers suggests that in Book I Gower 'implies that even if the current polity is as corrupt as his own satire of the 1370s might have seemed to suggest, any actual alternative is infinitely worse.'[139] I think this view goes too far with regard to Gower's agenda in *Vox Clamantis*. Gower does indeed discard the rebels' views, but this does not mean that he rules out any actual alternative to the current polity. The nightmarish events of Book I utilise the all too

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[139] Aers, '*Vox Populi*,' 441.

real disturbance of the Rising to create an awareness of the inevitable consequences of social corruption. In the post 1381 version of the poem, Gower's warnings are no longer abstract thoughts, but are strengthened by the actual upheaval. For Gower, the alternative to his corrupted polity must lie in exorcising the evil ghosts corrupting society. *Vox Clamantis* urges a return to the original path of Christian teleological history, eventually ending with the salvation of all righteous souls.

Book II and the latecomer Book I function as introductions, demarcating the vast field Gower covers in *Vox Clamantis*. Book III then marks the starting point for Gower's wide-ranging socio-political criticism. The narrator proposes to relate the corruption raging rampant in all social estates, without shunning away from graphic detail.

> Qui culpat vicia virtutes laudat, vt inde
> Stet magis ipse bonus in bonitate sua:
> Vt patet oppositum nigris manifestius album,
> Sic bona cum viciis sunt patefacta magis: (III, prol., 29-32)
>
> [He who arraigns vices is praising virtues, in order that the good may thereby stand out all the more in his goodness. Just as white is more plainly evident when placed next to black, so good things are made more readily apparent when they are placed by evil ones.]

This passage mentions the setting up of binary oppositions, which Gower employs throughout his poem. He aims to portray his contemporary society as corrupt as it is in order to highlight the qualities of the past. Only by singling out the most graphic examples from all parts of his society, can Gower follow his agenda of a return to the social order of an idealised past.

One thing about *Vox Clamantis* and Gower's political agenda is puzzling, however. In some passages Gower seems to contradict statements he makes elsewhere in his poem. David Aers singles out the case of war and its justification. He counters Robert Yeager's argument for a prevailing pacifism underlying Gower's poem. Aers argues that such an argument cannot be upheld, because

although Gower does indeed criticise all wars, his focus on and criticism of the reasons behind contemporary wars necessarily implies the existence of justified wars. Why else could Gower praise Richard II's father, the Black Knight, in the glorified fashion he does?[140] In my view, this is a case of Gower highlighting the possibility of righteous action, and at the same time emphasising that the way official business is conducted in his society is unjust.

Another instance of this internal contradiction is the beginning of chapter one of Book III. There are two versions of lines 1-28, of which only the second mentions the Great Schism. This strongly suggests that the first version was written before 1378, when the Schism started.

> Scisma patens hodie monstrat quod sunt duo pape,
> Vnus scismaticus, alter et ille bonus:
> Francia scismaticum colit et statuit venerandum,
> Anglia set rectam seruat vbique fidem. (III, i, 3-6)

> [The schism evident today shows that there are two popes, one a schismatic and the other the proper one. France favours the schismatic and declares that he ought to be revered, but England everywhere preserves the right faith.]

At first sight, this nationalistic statement suggests that, at least when it comes to choosing which pope to follow, England can still judge right from wrong. But a closer look reveals that not all is well within the English clergy. The three revised versions of the passage following on this remark read:

> Morigeris verbis modo sunt quam plura docentes,
> Facta tamen dictis dissona cerno suis. (III, i, 7**-8**)

> [I observe how much they teach with their moral words, but their deeds are not in harmony with what they say.]

> Delicias mundi negat omnis regula Cristi,
> Sed modo prelati preuaricantur ibi. (III, i, 11*-2*)

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[140] David Aers, 'Reflections on Gower as "*Sapiens* in ethics and Politics",' in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. Robert F. Yeager Asheville: Pegasus Press, 1998), 185-201 (189-93); Robert F. Yeager, '*Pax Poetica*: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower,' *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1987): 97-121.

[Every rule of Christ rejects the delights of the world, but prelates
now sin in this respect.]

Inter prelatos dum Cristi quero sequaces,
Regula nulla malet, que prius esse solet. (III, i, 9-10)

[As I seek for followers of Christ among the prelates [I find that][141]
none of the rule remains which used to be in force.]

From the first version, where the prelates are at least teaching in accordance with Christ, even though their deeds betray their sins, they are fully turned into sinners in the second. In the final version the narrator has to actively seek out true followers of Christ, but there is not even a trace of Christ's rule left among prelates. Gower gets more and more graphic in the process of revising his poem, in order to make his point that the English clergy are deeply corrupted.

With regard to political issues, Book VI is certainly the most interesting book in *Vox Clamantis*. Considering that Gower most probably spent some time as a lawyer, his outspoken criticism of this group in Book VI is quite striking.[142] At the beginning of his treatment of lawyers, Gower describes them in condemning terms.

Hec est linguosa gens, que vult litigiosa
In falsis causis vociferare magis.
Vult sibi causidicus seruare modum meretricis,
Que nisi sit donum nescit amare virum,
Est et, vt ipse vides, semper venalis ad omnes;
Aurum si sibi des, corpus habere potes. (VI, i, 41-6)

[This is the garrulous, litigious tribe which much prefers to
vociferate in false causes. The lawyer chooses to follow the way of
the whore, who cannot love a man unless it be for a gift. And as you
see, he is always for sale to everyone; if you give him gold, you can
have his body.]

Lawyers willingly choose the wrong path, preferring to amass wealth to the furthering of justice. This is, of course, in line with the far-reaching desire for gifts and wealth Gower perceives in other parts of society. Two chapters later, he

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[141] Stockton's addition.
[142] For Gower as a lawyer, see above p. 14.

indicates the damaging effect the lawyers' professional ethos, or lack thereof, has on justice in general:

> Aurea dum legis lanx ponderat, equa statera
> Non erit, hoc et opus iura moderna docent. (VI, iii, 169-70)

> [As long as a scale of gold weighs the laws, the balance will not be just; yet today's justice teaches this practice.]

The way things stand in Gower's society, equality is suppressed by the prominence of money. Just causes are let down in favour of those promising to balance the scale of gold.

In accordance with his general strategy in the *Vox*, Gower does not go as far as criticising the basis of the profession. Traces of the lost past are still discernible in Gower's society, but people fail to live up to the ideals of the past. The law is an element within Gower's society, and therefore he can argue that:

> Est bona lex in se fateor, tamen eius inique
> Rectores video flectere iura modo.
> Non licet, vt dicunt, quod conspiracio fiat,
> Non tamen hoc faciunt quod sua iura docent: (VI, iii, 237-40)

> [I grant that law is good in itself, but I now see its wicked masters distorting justice. It is not permissible to enter into conspiracy, so they say, but nevertheless they do not teach what their own laws teach.]

It is not the profession that is corrupt, but the people working in it. The description of lawyers and their profession positions Gower and his narrator both within and without the sphere of the poem. Gower's past as a lawyer distances himself and his narrator from the criticized group. He has seen the corrupted ethos for himself, and his subsequent criticism presents him as a somehow sobered individual. He has left the profession, and is now able to highlight its shortcomings from the position of a crown witness.

In chapter 7 of Book VI, Gower then turns his attention away from the lawyers, and focuses on the rulers of his society.

> Ergo videre queunt quotquot qui regna gubernant,
> Nostre pars sortis maxima spectat eis.
> Quicquid delirant reges, plectuntur Achiui,
> Nam caput infirmum membra dolere facit:
> Dux si perdat iter, errant de plebe sequentes,
> Et via qua redient est dubitanda magis. (VI, vii, 495-500)

> [Therefore, all who govern kingdoms can see that the greatest part of our fate depends on them. The people must atone for whatever errors the great commit, since a weak head makes the members suffer. If the leader looses the way, his followers among the people go astray, and the road by which they return is much in doubt.]

It is the leaders who drag down society with them. An ideal body politic functions as an integral working unit, but Gower's society does not. The leader, the young Richard II, does not fulfil his duty properly, and consequently the other members of society go astray. The peasants refuse to do their assigned work, the ecclesiastical and aristocratic orders have abandoned their traditional merits, and the lawyers are no longer working for the law, but only for their own profit.

Gower's reference to the head of the body politic urges an analysis of Gower's view on Richard's conduct of government. In this respect, another heavily revised passage in Book VI is important. In both versions of lines 545-80, the king is referred to as a young boy, but the responsibility this boy has for the state of the realm is different in the two versions.

> Stat puer immunis culpe, set qui puerile
> Instruerent regimen, non sine labe manent:
> Sic non rex set consilium sunt causa doloris,
> Quo quasi communi murmure plangit humus.
> Tempora matura si rex etatis haberet,
> Equaret libram que modo iure caret: (VI, vii, 555*-60*)

> [The boy is free of blame, but those who have instrumented his boyish reign shall not endure without a fall. So not the king but his council is the cause of our sorrow, for which the land grieves as if with a general murmur. If the king were of mature age, he would set right the scale which is now without justice.]

> Rex, puer indoctus, morales negligit actus,
> In quibus a puero crescere possit homo:
> Sic etenim puerum iuuenilis concio ducit,
> Quod nichil expediens, sit nisi velle, sapit.

Que vult ille, volunt iuuenes sibi consociati,
Ille subintrat iter, hiique sequntur eum: (VI, vii, 555-60)

[The king, an undisciplined boy, neglects the moral behaviour by which a man might grow up from a boy. Indeed, youthful company so sways the boy that he has a taste for nothing practical, unless it be his whim. The young men associated with him want what he wants; he enters upon a course of action and they follow him.]

In the earlier version, Richard is blameless, because he is too young not to follow the false council. In the revised version it is Richard who is leading the way, unchecked by too weak a group of associates. These revisions probably date from 1386, shortly before the Lords Appellants' victory over Richard. By that time Gower was beginning to be alarmed by the kings conduct of affairs.[143]

What remains unclear in this passage is Gower's stance on the necessity of council to the king. This issue was hotly debated in the Middle Ages, and there were various arguments in favour of a government mixed between king and proper council. Even those who argued in favour of government to lie solely in the hands of a king had to bow to reality and admit that this would only apply to an absolutely wise king. In most real-life scenarios the king in question was not such a ruler, which necessitated the presence of a circle around the king, able to ensure royal policy kept to an acceptable path.[144] I read Gower's treatment of king and council as further illustration of his point about the contrast between the ideal and his present society. Ideally, the king should rule wisely, and there should be no need for royal council. In reality, however, Richard does not rule wisely. The corruption of society has extended all the way through to the head of the body politic.

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[143] Saul, *Richard II*, 437. For the nature and date of Gower's revisions, see Fisher, *John Gower*, 102, 12-4.

[144] James M. Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Conclusion

In *Vox Clamantis* Gower pursues a politics caught between an affirmation of his current society and a severe criticism of the corrupted social and political structures surrounding him. At the core of *Vox Clamantis* lies a theory of history that relies on the contrast between the past and Gower's present. Gower uses this opposition to strengthen his argument that his society is nothing but a blatant perversion of an ideal Christian society. Just like the real society, Gower's literary landscape also has to be strengthened by older, more respected, writings, before it can be valued. This is how the vast array of borrowed lines and passages that make their way into the Vox become an important layer to Gower's theory of history.

The complicated assignation of blame for the events in the poem complicates the search for Gower's political alignment. The rebels surely transgress their boundaries, but in relation to Books Two through Seven the Rising becomes an almost direct consequence of the corruption penetrating alarmingly deep into society. It is the higher social estates that have gone astray, and the lower social strata are merely dragged along. Only after every single part of society has returned to the ideal path can the society as a whole be exorcised of the corrupting ghosts. The question remains, however, if a return to this idealized society is described as possible, or if it remains a cry from the wilderness, suffocated by the very ghosts it tries to exorcise. Despite his increasingly drastic attempts to revert the social degeneration, Gower is, in the last instance, just as impotent as Benjamin's angel of history, who as we remember 'would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.' Powerless to rid society of the corruption, Gower has to watch and write 'while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.'

2 Chaucer's Dreams: Authority in Writing and Society

> When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is
> not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the
> aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices.
> No, he receives the word from another's voice and filled with that
> other voice. The word enters his context from another context,
> permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds
> the word already inhabited.[145]

This is Mikhail Bakhtin's description of dialogic intertextuality, taken from his
study of Fyodor Dostoevsky's poetics. In essence, Bakhtin points out that every
speaker has to take into account that her or his utterance relies on those by earlier
speakers. Today, this view is a commonplace in discussions of intertextuality, and
there are countless statements by other critics and theorists that pick up Bakhtin's
point. Chaucer's poetry prefigures the post-medieval view of intertextuality insofar
as it displays a strong awareness of its position in a network of intertextual
references. This chapter reads three of Chaucer's dream-narratives against the
background of Bakhtin's view of intertextuality, examining the ways in which
Chaucer situates himself in relation to both his literary forebears and
contemporaries, most notably Gower. My argument is that Chaucer, far from
uncritically accepting the authority of other writers, is engaged in a constant
questioning of the nature and status of that very authority.

Given that the previous chapter focuses on Gower's account of the Rising of
1381 and his far ranging critique of late Edwardian and early Ricardian society, it is
necessary to start this chapter with Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, the text that most
openly refers to the Rising and that has occasionally been read as a direct—if
belated—response to Gower's *Vox*. However, I do not propose to limit the
significance of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* to its relation to Gower's poem, but would

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[145] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 201.

rather like to extend our critical focus to Chaucer's treatment of authority and his strategy to contain the infamous reference to Jack Straw (VII, 3394) within a tale that is in fact *not* about the Rising of 1381 but rather about Chauntecleer and Pertelote's reaction to the external threat posed by Russel the fox. In my reading, Gower's *Vox* is only one of many intertextual reference points for Chaucer's text. Chauntecleer's dream and the ensuing debate between the cockerel and his wife on its meaning highlight the process by which different readers of a text (in this case the dream) exert different interpretive powers over it and arrive at different conclusions about its significance and meaning.

The treatment of authority in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* sheds light on literary authority in the *House of Fame*. This earlier dream-narrative is a prime example of the ways in which Chaucer asserts his individual poetic voice against the corpus of authoritative texts that pervades medieval culture. The poem is densely populated with literary and cultural authorities ranging from Virgil and Ovid to Roman historians, and Geffrey, Chaucer's narrator, negotiates an open-ended passage through these personified texts that constantly stresses his own identity as reader and writer in relation to them. But the focus on literary authorities in the poem should not lead us to the conclusion that the real-life London in which Chaucer lived and worked does not inform much of the intertextual play. On the contrary, London as a densely and heterogeneously populated social space lies at the heart of Chaucer's poetic practice in the *House*.

In the slightly later *Parliament of Fowls* we find a similar concern with authority, but in this case it is very clearly centred on the appropriation of social authority. Literary authorities are not as prominent in the *Parliament* as they are in the *House*, but the narrative of the bird-parliament can be seen as an application within the social sphere of the conclusions of the journey to Fame's palace in the *House*. Over the course of the poem, Chaucer's narrator retreats from an actively

involved role to that of commentator of the parliamentary proceedings he witnesses, illustrating how the assertion of an individual position is not limited to literary practice but extends to the interactions within society in which authority has to be dialogically asserted within the given discursive conditions, in this case that of the bird-parliament.

The *Nun's Priest's Tale*: Parody or Earnest Game?

The *Nun's Priest's Tale* is most probably one of the last tales to be included in the *Canterbury Tales*. Although Chaucer's beast fable of Chauntecleer and Pertelote cannot be precisely dated, we can safely assume that it was written at some point in the 1390s, after the overall scope of the collection had been developed and many, if not all, of the other tales completed.[146] The *Nun's Priest's Tale* would thus have been written by a Chaucer who had the bulk of his literary career already behind him and who was able to look back on that career and use the *Nun's Priest's Tale* to contemplate many of the themes he had touched upon in his earlier writings. The tale is therefore inscribed in an intertextual network consisting not only of Chaucer's works, but also those of his predecessors and contemporaries, most notably, Gower. In my view, Charles Muscatine's statement that the tale 'fittingly serves to cap all of Chaucer's poetry,'[147] does not do justice to the Chaucer's poetics, as it implies a degree of closure that is generally eschewed throughout Chaucer's poetry. The tale does, however, provide us with valuable insights into the older Chaucer's treatment of authorities that have a bearing on the meaning of his oeuvre as a whole.

   One element that immediately sets the *Nun's Priest's Tale* apart from the

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[146] Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed., *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 340.

[147] Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 237-8.

remainder of Chaucer's works is the fact that it contains two of the most directly historical references in Chaucer's poetry.[148] The first of these appears when Russel the fox is about to seize Chauntecleer the cockerel. Chaucer's narrator inserts a lament on fate, in the course of which he mentions Richard Lionheart:

> O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
> That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
> With shot, compleynedest his deth so soore,
> Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy lore,
> This Friday for to chide, as diden ye? (VII, 3347-51)

This reference to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* and its lament on the death of Richard Lionheart works on two levels. Firstly, Chaucer here invokes the common humility topos, just as Gower does throughout his *Vox*. When it comes to relating sad and serious facts, Chaucer's narrator, the Nun's Priest, lacks the rhetorical skills called for in Vinsauf's *Poetria*. He does, however, still relate his tale, emphasising the fact that the Nun's Priest asserts his own poetic voice despite the supposedly superior predecessors. Secondly, the reference to Richard Lionheart serves to bridge the gap between the literary barnyard of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the historical world of medieval England, be it the relatively distant past of Richard Lionheart.

This bridge between the literary reality of the tale and the historical reality of Chaucer's England is then strengthened in the one instance where contemporary English history forces its way onto the stage of Chaucer's poetry. Once Russel carries off Chauntecleer, the previously quiet and relatively peaceful barnyard suddenly erupts into hectic action, when humans and animals alike pursue the fox:

> So hydous was the noyse – a, benedicitee! –
> Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meynee
> Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille
> Whan that they wolden any Fleming kille,
> As thilke day was maad upon the fox. (VII, 3393-7)

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[148] Winthrop Wetherbee, *The Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 120.

Chaucer here, of course, alludes to the Rising of 1381. Jakke Straw was a well-known leader of the rebels, and according to several chronicles, Flemish weavers were one of the targets of the rebels in London. The *Anonimalle Chronicle*, for example, states that 'the commons had it proclaimed that whoever could catch any Fleming or other aliens of any nation, might cut off their head.'[149] However, the allusion is very playful, certainly due to a degree to the time that had passed between the actual event and Chaucer's literary rendering of it.[150] In this sense, there is definitely a degree of black humour on Chaucer's part here, especially when we compare Chaucer's passage to Gower's horrified account of the Rising in the opening book of his *Vox*.

The parodying reference in this passage to Book I of Gower's *Vox Clamantis* has long been recognised. Ian Bishop describes it as 'merely incidental parody'[151]. However, the extent and nature of the parody is an issue of debate. Critics such as Derek Pearsall and David Aers who follow Bishop, argue for a cautious reading of the passage with regard to Chaucer's political views and his wholesale (dis)approval of Gower's poem. In his biography of Chaucer, Pearsall does not offer much sympathy for those who stress the importance of the reference to Gower's poem. In Pearsall's view, it is a 'desperate plea' which is entered to raise Chaucer's intellectual profile by making him share 'the radical or at least more sophisticated ideas of his modern admirers.' Pearsall's position is echoed by David Aers, who also plays down any strong link between Gower's *Vox* and the Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*.[152]

Steven Justice strongly disagrees with such a cautious reading of the *Nun's Priest's Tale's* relationship to the *Vox Clamantis*. For Justice, a parody of Gower's

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[149] quoted in Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 162.
[150] Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 340.
[151] Ian Bishop, 'The *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the Liberal Arts,' *Review of English Studies* 30 (1979): 257-67 (264).
[152] Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church*, 107 n; Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 147.

account of the Rising of 1381 lies at the core of the meaning of Chaucer's tale. He even suggests that 'Chauntecleer –bird and singer and dreamer of terrifying beast-dreams– is John Gower, and the tale is book I of the *Vox clamantis* in deadpan.'[153] Building upon this opening assumption, Justice then embarks on an analytical tour-de-force, highlighting various instances of intertextual play between both texts. He does admit that it is impossible to determine whether Chaucer's tale is an instance of 'collegial teasing or outright confrontation,' but remarks like 'Chaucer is getting personal here, suggesting that Gower's poetic originated in his psychosexual and intestinal dysfunctions'[154] clearly imply that Chaucer disapproved of Gower, either personally or professionally. The main reservation I have about Justice's argument is that he focuses almost exclusively on the *Vox* as an intertextual reference point for the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Although Gower's poem probably informed Chaucer's text, most notably in the fox-chase episode, we should not try to constrain the *Nun's Priest's Tale* by confining its meaning exclusively to a parody of Gower's *visio*.

The one factor that immediately distinguishes Chaucer's tale from Gower's *Vox* is the Nun's Priest's professed non-historical concern. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Gower's poem is quite directly concerned with the writing and development of history. Chaucer's tale, on the other hand, has its plot unfold in 'a yeerd […], enclosed al aboute / with stikkes, and a drye dych withoute' (VII, 2847-8), and this yard is not populated by humans but by animals. Of course, domestic and wild beast feature prominently in Book I of the *Vox*, but in contrast to Gower, Chaucer does not portray his farmyard characters as humans-turned-beasts. Generally, Chaucer's literary space is almost impenetrably sealed off from human interference. The threatening effect of the unexpected appearance of Jack Straw on the stage of the narrative is imprisoned by what Stephen Knight call 'a set of

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[153] Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 214.
[154] Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 217.

multiple containments,' or, as Paul Strohm puts it, 'the literary supersaturation of this tale.' Essentially, the Rising of 1381 is purged of its historical significance, appearing as it does towards the end of a tale that is very conscious of its literariness and thoroughly patrols its border with the historical.[155] This does not mean that the obvious reference to 1381 is not significant in the tale, but rather that it should be read within the context of the barnyard that is subjected to an external threat, just as the upper strata of English society were in the summer of 1381.

Like Gower's *Vox*, Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* contains a comprehensive set of intertextual references. But Chaucer's tale does not rely as heavily on borrowed passages as the *Vox*. Whereas Gower constantly emphasises the gap he perceives between his idealised past and his corrupted present, Chaucer creates a narrative space filled with frequently competing voices that, significantly, share the same temporal dimension. The allusion to 1381 and with it to the *Vox* as well as other accounts of the Rising is only a small element of this conglomerate of different voices. Scattered across the tale we find references to philosophical discussions of divine providence in Boethius and St. Augustine, which Chaucer treated in more detail in the *Knight's Tale* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, and which feature prominently in my reading of *Troilus* presented in the next chapter. In addition, even if contemporary history is not a central concern in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, historiography enters the frame in the form of stories about Troy and emperor Nero. This illustrates how even a text like the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, with its attempts to seal itself off from the historical context external to it, cannot erase at least some traces of that context.

The fact that the *Nun's Priest's Tale* contains various contesting voices does

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[155] Richard W. Fehrenbacher, '"A Yeerd Enclosed al Aboute": Literature and History in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*,' *The Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 134-48 (135); Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 144; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 165.

not mean, however, that one of these possesses a definitive authority. Mirroring the framework of competing voices and storytellers of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, the tale of Chauntecleer, Pertelote, and Russel presents its audience with an abundance of voices, without favouring any one of them over the others. In this light, it is not at all clear what exactly the Priest's parting injunction urges us to do with his tale:

> But ye that holden this tale a folye,
> As of a fox, or of a cock and hen,
> Taketh the moralite, goode men.
> For Seint Paul seith that al that writen is,
> To oure doctrine it is ywrite, ywis;
> Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille. (VII, 3438-43)

But what *is* the *fruyt* and what the *chaf* in this tale? The problem here is that the tale does not homogenise its heterogeneous voices enough for a unified moral to blossom and be picked by the reader. Larry Scanlon proposes a way out of this interpretive impasse by claiming that if there is indeed a single moral to this particular tale it must be that 'all writing is doctrinal.'[156] This is certainly what the Priest says (following St. Paul), but it leaves us as readers none the wiser as to how exactly we are supposed to separate fruit and chafe.

The emphasis on the doctrinal carries with it certain implications for authority. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, as in most of Chaucer's writings, authority is not presented as a transcendental quality of writing or speaking. Authority in Chaucer's poetry is something that can and has to be appropriated by the reader of a text through an interpretive process.[157] When Chauntecleer's patriarchal position of royal authority is attacked by Pertelote in her response to what she perceives as an unmanly cowardly reading of his dream, he lists a host of authorities on dream

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[156] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 54.
[157] Andrew Galloway, 'Authority,' in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 23-39 (29); Lynn Staley, 'Personal Identity,' in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 360-77 (372).

theory to strengthen his case for a prophetic reading of the dream. However, his case is not central to his position in the debate. Instead of insisting on his dream as prophecy, which it later turns out to be, his sole aim is to defend and strengthen his own position of patriarchal authority. The debate is eventually settled when Chauntecleer casts aside the authorities he has invoked, discarding his dream altogether and instead asserting his sexual authority over Pertelote:

> I am so ful of joye and of solas,
> That I diffye bothe sweven an dreem.
> [...]
> Real he was, he was nemoore aferd.
> He fethered Pertelote twenty tyme,
> And trad hire eke as ofte, er it was pryme. (VIII, 3170-8)

Chauntecleer has retained his authority over Pertelote and within his barnyard-kingdom, but he has not done so through the validity of the invoked authorities, but rather by utilising them in his attempt to prove his male dominance and safeguard his position of power.

Focussing on the interpretive power of the reader in appropriating authority necessarily exposes that reader to threats from other readers who aspire to the same degree of authority. This might well be the informing principle behind Chaucer's unexpected inclusion of the Rising of 1381 in his tale, as I have said in the introduction to this chapter.[158] One of the elements of the rebellion was the systematic destruction of legal documents and attacks on those who were involved in their production, circulation, and usage. The rising thus posed a threat to those in power by trying to render them powerless to appropriate authority through interpretation. But the appearance of Jack Straw is only a relatively minor element in the tale. As a whole, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is less about history than it is a negotiation with authority and the way it passes through different contexts and can be possessed by different readerly interpreters. Scanlon even goes as far as positing

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[158] See above, p. 80

that it 'is a story about the authority of utterance: who has it, where it comes from, and how it is maintained.'[159] This is a clue urging us to turn our attention to one of Chaucer's earlier texts, one that is most openly concerned with utterances and authority: the *House of Fame*.

The *House of Fame* and the Fabulation of History

When lamenting Aeneas' betrayal of Dido in Book I of the *House of Fame*, Chaucer's lyrical alter ego, the dreamer Geffrey, exclaims that 'hyt is not al gold that glareth' (272). The immediate context of this proverb is strictly limited to false appearances of male lovers, but in the context of the dream narrative as a whole, the remark takes on a much wider significance. It has long been recognised that the *House of Fame* is a meditation on poetic practice and literary authority,[160] and on the basis of this meditation 'hyt is not al gold that glareth' goes beyond the false appearances of male lovers. Geffrey's lament should be read in the context of the juxtaposition of different and frequently contesting authorities that runs through the poem, bringing the contradictions between these authorities to the fore. The result is a questioning of the very concept of literary authority and of any belief in its status within literary and scientific discourse as valuable and truthful; authority is essentially treated as not living up to its 'glaring' reputation.

A reading of the *House of Fame* should, however, not be confined to Chaucer's treatment of his esteemed and authoritative predecessors or its implications for his own literary practice. The poem is not solely a gesture of a poet

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[159] Larry Scanlon, 'The Authority of Fable: Allegory and Irony in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*,' *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 43-68 (55).

[160] This has been pointed out by, amongst many others, Jacqueline T. Miller, 'The Writing on the Wall: Authority and Authorship in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,' *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 95-115 (96); Glending Olson, 'Geoffrey Chaucer,' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 566-88.

establishing himself in the company of older writers, but is just as much a literary treatise on history and the way the past can be read and written in the present. For example, it is significant that Virgil's *Aeneid*, one of the key sources for the transferral of ancient matter into the Middle Ages, occupies pride of place in Chaucer's poem. My reading of the *House of Fame* therefore starts with Chaucer's treatment of the Dido story, especially his authorial self-positioning in relation to Virgil and Ovid's *Heroides* as the second major source for the Dido story. I then follow Geffrey on his journey to the houses of Fame and Rumour, eventually arriving at the paradigmatic space of linguistic and literary production. By the time of the premature end of the poem, Chaucer has illustrated that literature and tradition are spaces inhabited by contesting authorities, stressing the impossibility of verifying transmitted facts and avoiding the fabulation of history.

The whole of Book I of the *House of Fame* is devoted to the story of Aeneas and Dido. Falling asleep unusually soon, Geffrey finds himself

> Withyn a temple ymad of glas,
> In which ther were moo ymages
> Of gold, stondynge in sundry stages,
> And moo riche tabernacles,
> And with perre moo pynacles,
> And moo curiose portreytures,
> And queynte maner of figures
> Of olde werk, then I saugh ever. (120-7)

It is important to note here that this first scene of the dream-narrative is purely visual and devoid of sound. Geffrey is a solitary visitor to the glass temple and has to rely on the paintings on the wall as sources of information. As he duly recognises, the temple is devoted to Venus, who is depicted on one of these wall paintings together with Cupid and Vulcan. But this should not lead us to conclude that this temple is a place of worship. The inclusion of Venus and her temple enables Chaucer to align his poem with European poetic tradition, building upon the

inheritance of Virgil, Ovid, and others.[161] At this early point in the narrative, we do not know what exactly Geffrey will find at the temple, but there are already hints that literary tradition will play a major part in it.

This assumption is confirmed a few lines later when, roaming up and down the temple, Geffrey comes across an inscription reading:

> 'I wol now synge, yif I kan,
> The armes and also the man
> That first cam, thurgh his destinee,
> Fugityf of Troy contree,
> In Itayle, with ful moche pyne
> Unto the strondes of Lavyne.' (143-8)

This almost literal translation of the first lines of Virgil's *Aeneid* serves to fully transform the temple from a place of worship to a place of literature, where the narrator has to find and negotiate his position within literary tradition. Piero Boitani argues that Chaucer treats the *Aeneid* as the 'supreme model of art,'[162] but I would argue that Chaucer does not actually show such an unquestioning reverence to the old text. True, Virgil is a constant presence in the *House of Fame*, if not directly, then filtered through the lens of Dante and his influence on the poem, but this does not mean that Chaucer cannot display a degree of questioning of the Roman poet.[163]

Before moving on to Chaucer's treatment of Virgil's *Aeneid*, it is appropriate to pause briefly and examine the *Aeneid's* position within medieval European literary discourse. There can be no doubt that the *Aeneid* was of immense importance for the European Middle Ages, indicated, for example, by the fact that Dante chose none other than Virgil as his guide in his *Divine Comedy*. In the field of historiography, in my view closely related to that of literature, Virgil's epic poem

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[161] Piero Boitani, 'Chaucer's Labyrinth: Fourteenth-Century Literature and Language,' *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 197-220 (199).

[162] Boitani, 'Chaucer's Labyrinth,' 199.

[163] For Dante in the *House of Fame*, see Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 110; Steve Ellis, 'Chaucer, Dante, and Damnation,' *The Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 282-94.

lies at the heart of the tradition of *translatio imperii*. I will return to this point in my discussion of Chaucer's critique of historiography brought forward in the next chapter, but in order to understand the significance of Chaucer's treatment of the *Aeneid* in the *House of Fame*, a brief excursus on medieval historiography is necessary. In England, one of the most prominent writers of the *translatio imperii* is Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *History of the King's of Britain* is one of the key texts arguing for Britain's Trojan origins, essentially extending the reach of Virgil's exposition of Rome's Trojan origins to medieval England. Thus, Virgil's poem is situated at the intersection of literature and historiography, and it is in this respect that the appearance of the *Aeneid* in Chaucer's poem is potentially infused with conflicting interests. Chaucer steers clear of these conflicts by not openly aligning his narrative with Virgil's text. The narration of events that Geffrey offers is based on Virgil's poem, but only filtered through the visual depiction of the *Aeneid* on the temple walls, and the account as a whole is a long way from the close translation of the opening lines of Virgil's poem that initiates Geffrey's retelling of the story of Aeneas and Dido.

Within the context of my reading of Chaucer's treatment of literary and historical authority, the most significant aspect of Chaucer's account of the Dido story is his switching between the two most authoritative writers on the subject, Virgil *and* Ovid. Having followed Virgil through most of the temporal sequence of Dido's story, Chaucer has Geffrey switch to Ovid's *Heroides* as his source for Dido's lament, bringing together these two source texts only after the queen of Carthage has slain herself:

> And al the maner how she deyde,
> And alle the wordes that she seyde,
> Whoso to knowe hit hath purpos,
> Rede Virgile in Eneydos
> Or the Epistle of Ovyde, (375-9)

Chaucer mentions Virgil and Ovid at this point in his narrative to stress the hybridity and relative independence of his own version of the Dido story. His narrator is certainly bound by the fact that the story depicted on the temple wall is the *Aeneid*, but after the opening lines, Geffrey immediately switches from reading words to reading pictures. He *sees* the events he relates as opposed to only *reading* them in Virgil's story. Once Dido enters the frame of vision, Virgil's authority on the matter is undermined by the introduction of the opposing angle on her story, as it is contained in Ovid's *Heroides*. Dido's story is invested with a certain independence from the authorities transmitting it, and Chaucer uses it as a case in point to illustrate the unreliability of authoritative accounts, exposing their supposed authority as indeterminate.[164] In the last instance, Chaucer's combination of Ovid and Virgil serves to highlight the differing interpretations of Dido's story as it is contained in the two revered authoritative accounts.[165]

This highlighting of the major contradictions of the two most authoritative accounts of Dido's story enables Chaucer to add his own version to the pool of authorities, and to openly assume an independent narrative stance:

> In suche wordes gan to pleyne
> Dydo of hir grete peyne,
> As me mette redely –
> Non other auctour alegge I. (311-4)

At this point the dream becomes the main source for Chaucer's imagination, illustrating that when it comes to the reading, understanding, and transmission of a story a good deal of interpreting power resides in the reader.[166] Thus, the first book serves Chaucer to prepare his own account of the production of discourse, both literary and historical, as he describes it in the following two books of the poem.

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[164] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 114.

[165] Miller, 'The Writing on the Wall,' 105.

[166] Katherine H. Terrell, 'Reallocation of Hermeneutic Authority in Chaucer's *House of Fame*,' *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 279-90 (279).

Dido and the transmission of her story illustrate that there will never be one definitive authority on any given story, and the choice of Virgil's *Aeneid* as the main text whose authority is thus questioned indicates that Chaucer is not only interested in literary production, but extends his field to include the writing of history.

Of course, Geffrey does not remain in the unpopulated temple of Book I, but embarks on a journey to its complete opposite, Fame's court as it described in Book III. There, all manner of figures are present, ranging from revered poets to unidentified contemporary characters seeking fame and renown. Over in the house of Rumour, the concept of a chaotic crowd is developed to extremes. While some kind of (arbitrary) order is preserved in Fame's palace, the whirling wicker-house of Rumour is resounding with an overabundance of tidings, passed on from mouth to mouth and constantly increasing until being catapulted out of the cage and making their way to the static house of Fame. At first sight, these two spaces are quite removed from Chaucer's experience of everyday life in London, an impression heightened by the fact that the dreamer only arrives there after a prolonged air-bound journey in the claws of an eagle. However, on second sight, we recognise clues in both the journey and the two houses of Fame and Rumour, indicating that they are in fact are much closer to everyday life on earth than had first seemed.

When Geffrey steps out of the temple at the end of Book I, he finds himself standing in the middle of a desert closely resembling that around Carthage. Still in the extended realm of the Dido story, there is no sign of life around Geffrey, and only when gazing upwards into the heavens, he finds an eagle, larger than any he has seen before.

> Hyt was of gold, and shon so bryghte
> That never sawe men such a syghte,
> But yf the heven had ywonne
> Al newe of gold another sonne; (503-6)

It feels almost as if the dreamer has arrived at the end of his dream, with a new sun heralding another day and awaking Geffrey from his sleep. But we, and the narrator, are aware that not all that glares is gold. Chaucer here plays with the image and creates a suspense that is heightened by the insertion of the second proem between Geffrey's first sighting of the eagle and his actual seizure by the bird at the beginning of Book II.

Once the eagle has clutched the dreamer with his grim paws and long nails, Geffrey is so astonished and scared 'That al my felynge gan to dede / For-whi hit was to gret affray' (552-3). Now the eagle does indeed have to awake the dreamer 'right in the same vois and stevene / that useth oon I koude nevene' (561-2). This familiar voice has variably been read as either belonging to Chaucer's wife, one of his servants, Christ and his Apostles or Boethius' Lady Philosophy[167]. The identity behind this voice will never be found out, although it is likely that it is someone who had a close connection to Chaucer. Later in the journey, the eagle openly refers to Geffrey's daily life, when he scolds him for ignoring tidings from far countries and his neighbours:

> Thou herist neyther that ne this;
> For when thy labour doon al ys,
> And hast mad alle thy rekenynges,
> In stede of reste and newe thynges
> Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
> And, also domb as any stoon,
> Thou sittest at another book
> Tyl fully daswed is thy look; (651-8)

Critics have long recognized the reference in this passage to Chaucer's position as controller of customs,[168] and coming at this point in the narrative, it firmly

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[167] See the explanatory note in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3 ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 982.

[168] See for example Sheila Lindenbaum, 'London texts and literate practice,' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 284-309 (291); Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 110.

establishes a link between the experience of the dream and the waking life of the poet/narrator.

Following this link between the dream world and the real experience of Chaucer in London, we can argue that the journey, forced on Geffrey by the eagle as proxy of Jove, does not necessarily distance the narrator from his waking life. The desert landscape of Libya is left behind, and as London enters the narrative, the destination of the journey, Fame's palace and Rumour's house, move closer to Geffrey and his daily life than their position, in the middle of earth, sea, and heaven suggests. But Chaucer is not content with linking the dream experience to his narrator's life, he also makes clear the parallels to English society on a wider scale. Carrying his cargo up through the spheres, the eagle points Geffrey's attention the galaxy,

> Which men clepeth the Milky Wey
> For hyt is whit (and somme, parfey,
> Kallen hyt Watlynge Strete),
> That ones was ybrent with hete,
> Whan the sonnes sone the rede,
> That highte Pheton, wolde lede
> Algate hys fader carte, and gye. (937-43)

J. Stephen Russel points out that Chaucer here goes well beyond the common medieval practice of naming the galaxy after a local main road. In the *House of Fame*, a link is implied between the burning Milky Way and the rebels of 1381. During the height of the uprising in mid-June 1381, the rebels laid waste to the area around the 'real' Watling Street, and, as previously stated, Chaucer probably witnessed them passing through the city wall at Aldgate, where he had quarters at the time.[169] Read this way, the passage employs the single moment in the history of Ricardian England that was most traumatic for those high up on the social ladder. Chaucer is not one for frequent and unmediated recourse to his political context,

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[169] J. Stephen Russel, 'Is London Burning? A Chaucerian Allusion to the Rising of 1381,' *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1995): 107-9.

and an allusion of this relative directness definitely puts the context of late fourteenth-century London on the narrative map of the poem.

However, the context of London as an urban space is not a common presence in Chaucer's poetry. The *Canterbury Tales* start just on the edges of the city, and throughout the collection there is a movement to a certain degree away from London.[170] One of his other major works, *Troilus and Criseyde* is deliberately set in ancient Troy, which however much entangled in the fate of medieval London, is not the city in which Chaucer lived. Nonetheless, we can assume that Chaucer's experience of the 'specifically *urban* character of London life'[171] did exert at least some influence on his literary depiction of populated spaces. The allusion to the Rising of 1381 is probably a later addition and not, as Russel suggests, an indicator for a date after that eventful summer.[172] The *House of Fame* is the work of an author who found himself in the midst of an urban metropolis, whose professional life was divided between the coming and going of merchants from everywhere around the known world and the possibly no less hectic environment of the royal court, and whose intellectual curiosity evidently introduced him to a vast array of writings, many of which make their way into the poem. The eagle-guided journey does indeed not carry the dreamer away from his waking life, but closer to it, as indicated by the proximity of the Milky Way and the leaving behind of the unpopulated temple indicate.

The journey ends when the eagle drops Geffrey at the foot of the hill on which Fame's palace is built. From this point, the dreamer is once again left to his own devices in this truly dream-like place that is both beyond description and close to the life of Chaucer the poet. Fame's court is populated by the pearls of poetic

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[170] Fehrenbacher, "'A Yeerd Enclosed al Aboute",' 136-7.

[171] David Wallace, 'Chaucer and the Absent City,' in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 59-90 (61) (original emphasis).

[172] Russel, 'Is London Burning?' 109.

tradition. Minstrels, Latin poets, Biblical figures, mythical characters and many more, all are present either within or without the palace. Inside the palace, Geffrey notices several metal pillars, each devoted to one element of tradition. There are too many for him to describe, but he notes that Josephus the Hebrew, Statius, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian all have one pillar to themselves, while the matter of Troy is distributed to several figures:

> Ful wonder hy on a piler
> Of yren, he, the gret Omer;
> And with him Dares and Tytus
> Before, and eke he Lollius,
> And Guydo eke de Columpnis,
> And Englyssh Gaufride, ywis;
> And ech of these, as have I joye,
> Was besy for to bere up Troye. (1465-72)

This is the pillar where literature meets history, and Geffrey does not fail to acknowledge that

> Betwext hem was a litel envye.
> Oon seyde that Omer made lyes,
> Feynynge in hys poetries,
> And was to Grekes favourable;
> Therfor held he hyt but fable. (1476-80)

Chaucer later joined the figures on this pillar when he composed *Troilus and Criseyde*, his very own version of the Troy story. As was the case with his earlier treatment of the Dido story, Chaucer does not attempt to settle the dispute between the Troy poets, but is content with noticing its existence, this time almost in passing. Not even here, in the palace where all the authorities meet, can the one *true* version be found, and the conflict is bound to continue and grow with the influx of new versions.

Geffrey stays at the court for a while and witnesses the alarmingly random process of Fame bestowing good or bad renown on several bands of petitioners. But when one of the other figures at the court tells him to visit the house of rumour,

where he shall find the tidings of love he desires, he looses no time to visit this whirling wicker-house. Once there, he finds himself in the midst of a crowd of people of such a magnitude that he can barely move for want of space. The house of Rumour is a melting pot not only of persons but also of utterances, strikingly similar to the London of Chaucer's real-life experience. Everything spoken down on earth makes its way up here, and Geffrey says that

> […] al the wondermost was this:
> Whan oon had herd a thing, ywis,
> He com forth right to another wight,
> And gan him tellen anon-ryght
> The same that to him was told,
> Or hyt a forlong way was old,
> But gan somewhat for to eche
> To this tydynge in this speche
> More than hit ever was. (2059-67)

Geffrey has now arrived at what Britton J. Harwood calls the maternal womb of poetic tradition.[173] Tidings are nurtured until they have increased enough to be catapulted out of the 'Domus Dedaly' (1920), the labyrinth of language, and make their way to Fame where they are judged and transmitted to the earthly realm.

This interplay between the labyrinth of language and the transmission of tidings through Fame is strikingly similar to Bakhtin's dialogic intertextuality. Just as, for Bakhtin, every word is always already 'permeated with the interpretations of others,' Chaucer has utterances grow with every individual speaker who appropriates them. Within the context of the *House of Fame*, with its overarching concern with poetic practice and authorial identity, such a view explains the self-positioning of Geffrey in relation to the material he relates. The story of Dido, for example, is not fully independent from its earlier versions, but in the hands of Chaucer and his narrator it takes on a semi-independence that arises mainly out of

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[173] Britton J. Harwood, 'Reading Class and Gender into Chaucer's *Hous*,' in *Class and Gender in Early English literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian R. Overing (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 95-111 (99-101).

the triangle of Virgil, Ovid, and the *House of Fame* itself. Still, the *House* is mainly concerned with poetic authority and its appropriation, ignoring to a degree the social dimension beyond the dream-narrative. For an insight into Chaucer's views on social authority and its relation to poetic authority we have to turn our attention to a later dream vision, the *Parliament of Fowls*.

The Social Appropriation of Authority in the *Parliament of Fowls*

The *Parliament of Fowls* is structurally as puzzling as the *House of Fame*. Numerous critics have tried to find a coherent narrative programme behind Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the garden of love and Venus' temple, and the bird-parliament as the three parts constituting the poem.[174] However, none of these studies has succeeded in detecting such a unified theme, at least not one that is individually more convincing than competing readings. I want to offer a reading of the poem that focuses on Chaucer's treatment of authority, both within the textual realm we are familiar with from the *House of Fame*, and within the social allegory of the bird-parliament. The different parts of the poem do not actually need a unifying theme, the very discrepancy between them being central to the creation of meaning in the *Parliament*. The weight of the narrative is squarely set on the way a reader, both of textual artefacts and social contexts, has to appropriate a kind of authority that is valuable in the given context. The ambivalent conclusion to the bird-parliament and the narrator's seeking of further reading at the end of the poem signal the fluidity of social interaction and the need for a constant re-appropriation

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[174] See, for example, Helen Cooney, 'The *Parlement of Foules:* A Theodicy of Love,' *The Chaucer Review* 32 (1998): 339-76; H.M. Leicester Jr., 'The Harmony of Chaucer's *Parlement*: A Dissonant Voice,' *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 15-34; Kathryn L. Lynch, 'The *Parliament of Fowls* and Late Medieval Voluntarism, Part I,' *The Chaucer Review* 25 (1990): 1-16; Kathryn L. Lynch, 'The *Parliament of Fowls* and Late Medieval Voluntarism, Part II,' *The Chaucer Review* 25 (1990): 85-95.

of authority after a particular situation has drawn to a close.

In the *Parliament of Fowls*, a frame of two identified texts, books in general, and the reading process involved in creating meaning for these texts, surrounds the central scene of the bird assembly. The first 29 lines of the poem mention words for either *reading* or *book* no less than eight times, and when the bird-parliament has ended, the awaking narrator immediately reaches for 'other bookes' (690). In an attempt to justify his interest in old books, and especially Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the narrator argues that

> For out of olde feldys, as men seyth,
> Cometh al this new corne fro yere to yere,
> And out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
> Cometh al thys new science that men lere. (22-5)

In this passage, human agency is ignored in a move to free scientific discourse from the mundane realm of humans, historically bound up as it is.[175] Texts are presented as containers of a transcendental scientific quality, providing nourishment for the human mind, just as agrarian production provides food for the human body. David Aers notes that this concept of knowledge is then disparaged in the poem as a whole.[176] The books are old whereas the science is new, and in combination with the readerly emphasis of the poem as a whole, this opposition suggests the need for human involvement in this transformation of books into science.

The *Somnium Scipionis* is taken as an exemplary text to illustrate the workings of this process. Chaucer had already alluded to this particular text in the *Book of the Duchess* and the *House of Fame*, but this time his narrator is reading the text proper, instead of mentioning it only in passing. There are two possible reasons behind the use of the *Somnium*, but none of these is fully convincing for the

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[175] David Aers, '*The Parliament of Fowls*: Authority, the Knower and the Known,' in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. William A. Quinn (New York: Garland, 1999), 279-98 (280).
[176] Aers, '*The Parliament of Fowls*,' 280.

meaning of this part of the poem. The fact that Scipio had by the fourteenth century acquired a reputation as the paradigmatic temporal leader would explain the inclusion of his dream as a primarily political text.[177] To a degree, the *Parliament* encourages such a reading. The narrator's summary of Cicero's text focuses on the opposition between those who 'loveth comune profyt' (47) and 'brekers of the lawe […] and lecherous folke' (78-9), providing a civic tenor for the poem that is later taken up in the lower birds' desire for 'comune spede' (507).[178] But this explanation can only remain partial, because the professed main concern of the poem is love, and the *Somnium Scipionis* does not openly mention this topic.

The second possible explanation for the presence of the *Somnium* is its importance for medieval dream-theory. The *Somnium* was the only part of Cicero's *Republic* that was known to the Middle Ages, and this was only due to Macrobius' commentary in Scipio's dream. Macrobius was, of course, one of the key medieval thinkers on dreams, who clearly saw some dreams as vehicles for accurate prophecies.[179] This explanation calls for a rather open use of the *Somnium* as an authorisation for the dream that follows in the *Parliament*. It soon becomes apparent that the narrator does not use the book he reads in such a way. His own dream begins with the appearance of Afrikanus, 'right in that self array / That Scipion hym sawe before that tyde' (96-7). The narrator then inserts a stanza, modelled on a poem by Claudian:[180]

> The wery hunter, slepynge in hys bed,

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[177] Bruce Kent Cowgill, 'The *Parlement of Foules* and the Body Politic,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 74 (1975): 315-35 (316-7).

[178] Paul Olsen, 'Aristotle's *Politics* and the Foundations of Human Society,' in *Chaucer's Dream Visions and Shorter Poems*, ed. William A. Quinn (New York: Garland, 1999), 259-78; Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 129.

[179] Caroline D. Eckhardt, 'Genre,' in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 180-94 (184); Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); J. Stephen Russel, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), 61-2.

[180] R.A. Pratt, 'Chaucer's Claudian,' *Speculum* 22 (1947): 419-29.

> To woode ayeine hys mynde gooth anoon;
> The juge dremeth how hys plees ben sped;
> The cartar dremeth how his carte is gon;
> The ryche of golde; the knyght fyght with his fone;
> The seke met he drynketh of the tonne;
> The lover meteth he hath hys lady wonne.
> Can I not seyne, yf that the cause were
> For I redde had of Aufrikan before (99-107)

At this point, the narrator drops any aspirations for prophetic authority, because the link between his daily activities and his dream identifies his dream as a worthless *insomnium*.[181] Chaucer stresses the link between his narrator's dream and his real-life experience, juxtaposing Macrobius with another authority on dreams, in order to illustrate how a reader can appropriate a text and in the process free that text from some of the restrictions commonly applied to it.

This appropriation of the *Somnium Scipionis* by the narrator brings with it an undermining of any inherent meaning the old text might be assumed to have. Taking this particular old book as his field from where he wants to extract meaning, the narrator has to put his own expectations and interests to work on the text. Given his professed interest in love, this requires a combination of Cicero's text with other textual influences, and this is exactly what happens at the gate opening into the garden in which the main action of the narrative takes place. The double inscription on the gate, warning the reader of the double-sided nature of love, one blissful and one of sorrow (127-40), introduces Dante's *Divine Comedy* (*c.* 1310-4) into the textual frame around the dream. Dante's text provides the narrator with a language of transition, with the result that Afrikanus vanishes entirely from the narrative, once he has shoved the hesitant narrator through the gate (154).[182] It seems almost as if the narrator is unable to realise that, taken on its own, Cicero's text will not suffice in creating the dream-experience of the narrator. A character from the very

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[181] Nick R. Havely, 'The *Parliament of Fowls*,' in *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*, ed. Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (London: Longman, 1997), 219-73 (220).
[182] Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 270; Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 124.

text the narrator has been reading all day has to seize him and literally shove him into his dream.

Once in the garden, there are two further texts exerting influence on the narrator: Boccaccio's *Teseida* (*c.* 1340-1) and Alan of Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* (before 1170). The former provides him with most of the description of the temple of Venus, and the latter with that of the goddess Nature. But these texts are not incorporated into the narrative without the narrator subjecting them to his interpretive powers as a reader, changing their original sequence (as, for example, in the description of Venus, which appears earlier than in Boccaccio's text) or drastically shortening them (as in the comparatively short description of Nature).[183] At this point in the *Parliament*, textual authorities are no longer regarded as providers of transcendental wisdom, but rather as raw materials that can and indeed have to be used by the reader, in this case the narrator. 'Olde feldys' will not provide enough 'new corne' without the intervention of the human agrarian, and similarly, 'olde bokes' have to be subjected to the agency of human readers, if they are used for the provision of 'new science.'

The garden in which the action of the dream proper of the *Parliament* takes place is a space markedly different from the one of which the waking narrator says that he 'The longe day ful fast I rad and yerne.' (21). Instead of having only 'a booke […] write with lettres olde' (19) for company, he now finds himself in a garden where he observes several mythical figures in and around Venus' temple, best expressed in the stanza beginning at line 288, where he mentions some of those disappointed lovers whose stories he finds painted on the temple walls, in what Paul

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[183] Havely, 'The *Parliament of Fowls*,' 221-4; Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 271-6, 81-90; David Wallace, 'Chaucer's Continental Inheritance: the Early Poems and *Troilus and Criseyde*,' in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Jill Mann and Piero Boitani (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19-37 (27).

Strohm calls an 'antihistorical jumble.'[184] Leaving the temple, the narrator is surrounded by so many birds

> And that so huge a noyse gan they make
> That erthe and eyr and tree and every lake
> So ful was that unnethe was ther space
> For me to stonde, so ful was al the place. (312-5)

The emphasis in this passage is on the 'noyse' made by the birds, which may remind us of the closing scene in the *House of Fame* with its depiction of the overcrowded house of Rumour. The narrator, trying to relate his dream-experience is almost silenced by the clamour of the birds, and indeed the narrator becomes an observer rather than an active participant in the following parliament scene.

Of course, the 'noyse' of the birds is not comprehensible for the human narrator, but he does not have to cope with this chaotic scene of the avian crowd for very long, since he soon realises that the goddess Nature

> Bad every foule to take her owen place
> As they were wont alwey fro yere to yere,
> Seynt Valentynes day, to stonden there.
> That ys to sey, the fowles of ravyne
> Were hyest sette, and than the foules smale
> That eten as hem Nature wolde enclyne –
> As worm or thynge of which I tel no tale.
> And watir foule sate lowest in the dale,
> But foule that lyveth by seede sate on the grene,
> And that so fele that wonder was to sene. (320-9)

The previously unordered assembly of birds is now hierarchically ordered by Nature. The link between the bird parliament and human society is obvious. Just as a hierarchical ordering of the different social estates was still widely adhered to in the late fourteenth century, the different kinds of birds are positioned according to their degree.[185]

Despite various attempts to identify historical persons or precise social

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[184] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 126.
[185] Aers, '*Vox Populi*,' 446; Tim W. Machan, 'Texts,' in *A Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 428-42 (438).

groups as models for Chaucer's depiction of the different groups in the bird parliament, I think such an interpretive programme must by necessity be frustrated.[186] Chaucer's style in general is far too ambiguous to make such identifications possible. Furthermore, specific real-life models behind the text would unjustifiably constrain its relation to the poet's London experience on a broader scale. The bird parliament represents Chaucer's society, refracted through his literary imagination. Compared to the earlier *House of Fame*, this representation of the poet's actually lived experience is more direct, the focus being on the depiction of human actors, disguised as the various kinds of birds, a narrative strategy that was widely used in the fourteenth century.[187] The *Parliament* presents us with a narrator who finds himself in the midst of a scene filled with action, not with a procession of literary authorities, as in the *House of Fame*.

Such a relatively precisely demarcated social frame for the poem can be explained if we consider the time of composition and Chaucer's position and circumstances within this time span. Various attempts have been made to determine a precise date for the poem and an accompanying occasion for which the text was produced.[188] The occasion most frequently brought forward is the marriage in 1382 of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia, or the negotiations leading up to the marriage. Marriage proposals started arriving at the English court shortly after Richard's accession, the first being an offer from the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV, of the hand of his daughter Anne. This was, of course, the one that, in a slightly altered form, was to be the one eventually taken up, but in the meantime a number of other

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[186] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 127.

[187] For an overview of the status of bird allegory, see Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 277-81.

[188] Larry D. Benson, 'The Occasion of the *Parliament of Fowls*,' in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honor of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. Larry D. Benson and Siegfried Wenzel (Kalamazoo: Institute for Medieval Studies, 1982), 123-44; Machan, 'Texts,' 438. For a summary of the debate around the date of the *Parliament, see* Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 256-60.

offers followed. Among these were the hands of Marie, the daughter of Charles V of France, one of the daughters of Charles of Navarre, and, perhaps most promisingly, an alliance with the Visconti of Milan. It was this that brought Chaucer to Italy in 1378, but the negotiations came to a halt when the schism dividing the Catholic church started. As a result, the curia in Rome proposed a match between Richard and the house of Luxemburg, taking up the earlier offer of Charles IV, who had by then died. From this point onwards, negotiations went relatively smoothly, and Anne and Richard were married in 1382.[189]

However, there is no persuasive textual evidence suggesting that the *Parliament* was written especially for the marriage celebrations, the negotiations, or, as some critics have argued, the first Valentine's Day after the marriage. In the poem, marriage is certainly a key element, and it could be extended to include heterosexual love and perceived sexual perversion as well.[190] The professed purpose of the bird parliament is, after all, for every bird to find a suitable mate, and the speeches of the first three suitors have a distinct air of aristocratic courtship. Still, it would seem utterly inappropriate to a contemporary audience that the female formel refuses to accept any one of her suitors. Chaucer, who generally negotiates his way with an astute awareness of possible conflict, would probably not have risked such an obvious alignment of his bird character with the new queen. Nonetheless, the early 1380s as a time frame for the *Parliament* is appropriate. Rhyme and meter alone suggest that the poem was composed after the *House of Fame*. In addition, Chaucer was at this point in his career moving away from French literary models and towards a more Italian style. We can therefore assume that the poem was

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[189] For a comprehensive overview of the various marriage negotiations, see Saul, *Richard II*, 83-91.

[190] Sarah Emsley, "'By Evene Acord": Marriage and Genre in the *Parliament of Fowls*,' *The Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 139-49. The element of sodomy, especially in relation to Richard II is treated in Ordelle G. Hill and Gardiner Stillwell, 'A Conduct Book for Richard II,' *Philological Quarterly* 73 (1994): 317-28.

finished somewhere midway between the *House of Fame* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, the former granting a first glimpse of an Italian influence, and the latter heavily indebted to Boccaccio. Thus, the critics who posit the time around Richard's marriage to Anne as the occasion for the poem, might well be correct in their dating, though the focus on the marriage itself must be seen as weak in the face of textual evidence.

At this time, Chaucer was still controller of customs and increasingly affiliated to those circles at the court of Richard II that probably provided the initial audience for his poems. He had also already travelled extensively to the continent, raising his awareness of differences in social and cultural issues between his native England and continental Europe.[191] Just a short time before the composition, he witnessed that notorious illustration of differences within English society itself: the Rising of 1381. If we combine all these factors, we have a promising contextual frame for the *Parliament*. In the poem, the varying concepts of love as the different birds bring them forward are an illustration of Chaucer's increasingly diversifying society. The *Parliament* is thus not solely concerned with love, but should also be read as a commentary on the body politic, one that highlights and explains potential threats to social harmony, but does not assume the prophetic voice of Gower's *Vox Clamantis*.

During the course of the bird-parliament, a conflict soon arises between the birds, due to their differing priorities. As the narrator notes after his description of the social hierarchy, the whole point of the assembly is not the assembly as a whole, but rather 'a formel egle, of shappe the gentileste' (373). This female eagle, somewhat situated outside the social hierarchy proper, becomes the focus of the parliamentary proceedings. Three eagles take turns vying for the female's attention and love, stressing the timelessness of their love for the female, seemingly without

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[191] Pearsall, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 102-9, 128. See above, p. 10.

any consideration for the other birds' right to speak. Their speeches last from the morning 'til dounwarde went the sonne wonder fast' (490). Essentially, the three eagles exploit their position in the hierarchy to such a degree that they monopolise the proceedings. This threatens the mating of the lower birds, because Nature had devised that 'by order, shul ye chese, / Aftir youre kynde' (400-1), and the bird-parliament has to be finalized on this particular Valentines Day.[192]

The lower birds do not fail to realise this impending threat to their own procreation, and

> The noyse of foules for to ben delyvered
> So loude rong: 'Have doon, and let us wende!'
> That wel wende I the woode had al toshyvered. (491-3)

Although this does not have to be a direct reference to the Rising of 1381, described in clamorous terms in Gower's *Vox*, this passage is significant. The lower birds react to the eagles' abuse of the time available for the parliament by questioning their authority.[193] Instead of patiently waiting their turn, they want to be set free from the confines of the social hierarchy. The impending threat of social unrest can only be averted by the goddess Nature herself, who as 'the vyker of th'almyghty lorde' (379)

> With facound voys seyde: 'Holde youre tonges there!
> And I shal soone, I hope, a counseylle fynde
> Yow for to deliveren and from this noyse unbynde.
> I jugge, of every folke, men shal one calle,
> To seyne the veirdit for yow foules alle.' (521-5)

Nature does not use her own authority to overcome the impasse, but rather decrees that every class of birds elect a speaker in order to arrive at a verdict satisfactory for everyone.

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[192] Judith Hutchinson, '*The Parliament of Fowls*: A Literary Entertainment,' *Neophilologus* 61 (1977): 145-51 (149).

[193] On the different uses of time and their implications for society, see Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 125-30.

However, this proves to be an impractical solution, as the different kinds of birds have different views on how the problem should be solved. There is, of course, an inherent contradiction in letting lower birds debate the choice of a mate for the female eagle. Obviously, they do not have the same concept of love as the aristocratic birds, and thus the eagles are unlikely from the start to ever accept the verdict of birds so much below them on the social ladder. The one bird that accepts his inability to decide for the eagles is the cuckoo.

> 'So I,' quod he, 'may have my make in pes,
> I reche not how longe that ye stryve.
> Lat eche of hem be soleyne al her lyve –
> This ys my rede – syn they may not accorde!
> This shorte lesson nedeth not recorde.' (605-9)

This seemingly self-centred view, focussing on the cuckoo's own mating, has an air of anti-social behaviour, as he refuses to take on the social responsibility bestowed on him by Nature to join the debate on a solution for the impasse created by the eagles' prolonged speeches. Nevertheless, the cuckoo's conclusion gets to the core of the problem. He is the one bird realising that the solution will not be forthcoming, and that the birds should see to their own needs instead of those of those higher up on the social ladder.[194]

After the birds have come forward with their individual verdicts, Nature sums up the result.

> 'Now, pes,'quod Nature, 'I comaunde here!
> For I have herde al youre opynyon,
> And, in effecte, yet be we nevere the nere.
> Byt fynally, this ys my conclusyon:
> That she hir selfe shal have hir eleccion
> Of whom hir lyste – who so be wrooth or blythe,
> Hym that she cheest, he shal hire han as swithe, (617-23)

Only by letting the female eagle at the centre of the problem decide for herself, can the lower birds get a chance to choose their own mates. The female eagle, however,

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[194] Hutchinson, '*The Parliament of Fowls*: A Literary Entertainment,' 149.

does not decide in favour of any one of her suitors, but rather asks 'respite, for to avysen me, / And after that to have my choyse al fre' (648-9). The decision is deferred for another year, but it is not altogether certain that next year's debate will not prove as fruitless as the present one.[195] The eagles are thus excluded from the mating process, and by extension also from the decision making processes of the parliamentary body of the birds.

In the *Parliament*, the goddess Nature is not presented as an authoritative figure, who makes full use of the powers invested in her as 'the vyker of th'almyghty lorde' (379). Instead, the members of the bird society assembled under her guidance are put in a position to try to keep the parliamentary proceedings on course. Considering the focus in the *Somnium Scipionis* on 'comune profyt,' we cannot fail to notice that in the bird-parliament, speakers of varying social degrees assuming the authority to speak for all the birds jeopardise the concept of the common good. Social authority is presented as something that can certainly be appropriated, but that does not have any exchange value as a universal currency within social discourse in general. Each authoritative bird-speaker does only speak for his own social rank, and not even Nature intervenes to give a final and universal verdict. Contradictory views coexist within society, and in his *Parliament*, Chaucer stresses the need for an active and lively interchange of ideas, despite the seeming impossibility of reconciliation of these different views, as well as the very real likelihood of stalemate.

Conclusion

The *Nun's Priest's Tale*, although it was written almost two decades after the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, deals with similar issues to those of the two

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[195] Minnis, *The Shorter Poems*, 301-3.

earlier poems. All three texts are concerned with the notion of authority and its significance for human actors in historically-bound circumstances. However, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* should not be regarded as a concluding statement which finalises Chaucer's discussion of authority. The later text takes up issues raised by the two early poems and transfers them into the new context of the barnyard, where the animal actors have to negotiate their way through the interplay of different authoritative statements and must find ways to apply these to their specific circumstances.

For a more detailed and more exhaustive discussion the issues raised by the Nun's Priest's fable of Chauntecleer and Russel, we have to turn our attention to Chaucer's early career as a poet. At a time when Gower was composing his early version of *Vox Clamantis*, Chaucer chose not to tackle the shortcomings of his society, but rather composed the *House of Fame* as a treatise on the status and truth-value of textual authorities. Here we have an intriguing insight into the workings of language and its implications for writing in general and the writing of history in particular. Having singled out the story of Dido for an illustration of how two different authorities on one single story undermine their own respective aspirations for truth, the dreamer Geffrey enters Fame's court and the house of Rumour. These are the loci of literary history and human utterances respectively. At the end of the poem, the belief in individual fame as an indicator for truth, and indeed the very possibility of language to arrive at a fully truthful account of things past are thoroughly undermined. The *House of Fame* views poetic practice as a constantly fluctuating interplay of new and old versions of any given story.

This view of authority also informs much of the *Parliament of Fowls*, but not in the rather abstract sphere of literature and language. Like the final scene of the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament* is inhabited by a variety of competing voices, but here we are presented with birds acting in a parliamentary convention, who are

easily recognisable as representing human actors. This then transcends the boundaries of the literary landscape of the *House of Fame* and brings us closer to the society Chaucer himself was living in. In such a social context, the various actors are asked to find a universally satisfying solution to the impasse posed by the aristocratic birds' problematic search for a mate. However, the poem posits such a solution as similarly impossible to find as the ultimately authoritative account in the *House of Fame*. Society is as densely populated with different views on how things ought to be done as is language and literature. An ending is only achieved in the *Parliament* when the question of the aristocratic birds has been sidelined and the remaining parts of the bird-society can go about their business of mating. The *Parliament* thus finishes on a statement we find in all three of these texts: a definite authority does not exist, and this poses significant problems for all those involved in any kind of interaction, be it with literary forbears or the face-to-face confrontation of social intercourse. But these problems are inherent in the very notion of authority in social and literary language, and society still has to find a way of overcoming them, even if the 'men of gret auctoritee' does not make his long awaited entry onto the stage.

3 Time Past and Time Present in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

> And does history repeat itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce? No, that's too grand, too considered a process. History just burps, and we taste again that raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.[196]

This short passage from Julian Barnes' literary meditation on historiography and the meaning of history illustrates the continuing currency in twentieth-century discourse of the question for the essential mechanism(s) informing historical development. The statement is, of course, heavily indebted to Karl Marx's notion of the farcical repetition of history, which in return is an elaboration and transformation of Hegel's views. The discussion of the repetitiveness of history does itself stretch back into the past via various signposts along the way. Barnes, Marx, and Hegel are only three proponents of a field of knowledge that is far too vast to retrace on this occasion. The concept of a circular movement in history, even if it is presented in the disguise of indigestion, as opposed to a teleological development towards a pre-defined end is only one element of human thinking on history and time, but one that is especially significant for a reading of historiography, time, and politics in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*.

An initial connection between the quotation from Barnes and Chaucer's poem is provided by the fact that the *Troilus* is itself, at least in the first three books, 'a deliberate attempt to conflate past and present,' or, as Paul Strohm has more recently put it, a poem 'about the past in the present, about *anachronism.*'[197] This chapter argues that Chaucer uses his Trojan poem for a negotiation of conflicting

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[196] Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 241.

[197] H.M. Leicester Jr., 'Oure Tonges *Différance:* Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer,' in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15-26 (17); Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, 96 (my emphasis).

theoretical notions of history and historiography, both Christian and pagan. This negotiation is a significant factor informing his unparalleled attempt to 'imagine and to reconstruct a spiritually foreign ancient culture' and set up a carefully arranged 'poetic confrontation of pagan past and Christian present.'[198] Contrary to Alastair Minnis' opinion, Chaucer goes beyond being a purely Christian historian,[199] by deliberately aligning his fictional Trojan society with his experience of contemporary England. The notion of London as a direct successor of Troy, fairly widespread in Chaucer's time, enabled him to create his poem in part as a mirror that presents a refracted image of English society in the 1380s.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the medieval historiographical tradition before moving on to a discussion of the ways in which Chaucer uses his *Troilus* as a critique of this tradition. Throughout the poem, notions of teleological and circular history are constantly juxtaposed, highlighting their incommensurability but refusing to promote one over the other. Chaucer was working on the *Troilus* for most of the mid-1380s, and most probably completed work on the poem around the time of his tenure as member of the Wonderful Parliament in 1386, and there is an implied connection between his fictional Trojan society and the London of his actually lived experience.[200] This chapter ends with a case study of Chaucer's mirror-imagery of Troy and London, an analysis of his Trojan parliament in Book IV. This analysis is built upon the critique of historiography and Chaucer's treatment of time past and time present, and I hope to illustrate how the fictional society of the *Troilus* is indeed a kind a 'raw-onion sandwich,' one that Chaucer's audience tastes.

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[198] John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation & Interpretation in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xiii, 72.

[199] Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 13-30.

[200] For a discussion of the dating of the poem, see Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 3-11. J.S.P. Tatlock suggests an earlier date, but his argument is not very convincing. See J.S.P. Tatlock, 'The Date of the Troilus: And Minor Chauceriana,' *Modern Language Notes* 50 (1935): 277-96.

Troilus and Criseyde and Historiography

Historiography and its uses for the understanding of the human condition within history is one of Chaucer's prime concerns in *Troilus and Criseyde*, despite the narrator's desperate attempts to avoid the historical context of his narrative matter (cf. I, 141-4). The poem enters into a close and multi-facetted discussion of the matter of Troy, as it is found in the numerous earlier Trojan narratives, both literary and historiographical. Chaucer had, of course, an immensely varied corpus of writings on history and historiography at his disposal, and in the *Troilus* he offers a thorough critique of this corpus. This section begins with a brief definition of medieval historiography, both Christian and secular, and then moves on to an analysis of the strategies Chaucer employs in his poem in order to offer a critique of this historiographical tradition. Using his sources in a particularly inventive way he manages to highlight the gaps and shortcomings of both Christian and pagan ways of theorising history, blending these two opposing views and creating a narrative space where they can clash and their incommensurability be illustrated.

The terms 'medieval historical writing' and 'medieval historiography' defy easy definition. Isidore of Seville, in his *Etymologiarum*, provides a seemingly simple definition:

> Historia est narratio rei gestae per quam ea quae in praeterito facta sunt, dignoscuntur.
>
> [History is the narration of events by which those things which were done in the past are sorted out.][201]

But even though this definition forms the core of subsequent medieval historiography, it does not fully explain medieval engagements with the past. Not

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[201] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: 1850), 122. Translated in Marie D. Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968), 167.

only did the period we nowadays denote as the Middle Ages produce an astonishing generic variety of writings on history, there was also a debate around how and why writers should engage with their past. With the passing of time and under changing political contexts, definitions of historiography changed, making it hard for us in the twenty-first century to limit the term to one single, all-encompassing meaning.[202] The two main strains of medieval dealings with the past are Augustinianism with its supervening transcendentalism and attempts to create a secular historiography, which gained momentum from the twelfth century onwards.[203]

In part, this secular strain of historiography grew out of the immense problems medieval writers had with interpreting the changing movements of time against the static eternal pattern imposed on reality by St. Augustine of Hippo.[204] As Ernst Breisach has noted, Augustine's change from the pagan cyclical pattern of history to a teleological pattern of development does not constitute a clear-cut transition,[205] but it can certainly be seen as one of the key arguments in Augustine's philosophy. For Augustine, history cannot be 'merely a fallible narration of worldly wretchedness, but the embodiment of a divine institution whose eschaton would be the Last Judgment.'[206] However, Augustine is not primarily concerned with historiography. Whenever he mentions secular history, he is at pains to stress that he does not intend to enter the sphere of the historian.[207] In Book III of the *City of*

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[202] Felice Lifshitz, 'Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographical' Texts as Historical Narrative,' *Viator* 25 (1994): 95-113 (97).

[203] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 84; James Simpson, 'The Other Book of Troy: Guido dell Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae* in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century England,' *Speculum* 72 (1998): 397-423 (401-2).

[204] Marjorie E. Reeves, 'History and Prophecy in Medieval Thought,' *Medievalia et Humanistica* 7 (1974): 51-75 (51).

[205] Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 77.

[206] Eugene Vance, 'The Past as Text and the Historiography of Tomorrow: Notes on a Recent Book,' *Modern Language Notes* 113 (1998): 951-79 (952).

[207] See Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 2.

God, he states that

> si ennarare vel commemorare conemur, nihil aliquid quam scriptores
> etiam nos erimus historiae (III, 18)
>
> [if we should try to describe or even mention them, we should
> become in our own person a mere historian][208]

What he is doing in his work is emphasising the opposition between the earthly city of man and the divine city of God. Humans confined to earthly spaces can only gain access to the city of God by leading devoutly Christian lives. Lee Patterson is certainly right in saying that for Augustine, history 'is a *via peregrinationis*, a place of exile, a land of unlikeness.'[209] The matter related in Chaucer's poem is described in similar terms. Only a few lines into the poem, the narrator says of himself that he 'Ne dar to love, for myn unliklynesse,' (16) which detaches him from the narrative, whose professed main concern is 'the double sorwe of Troilus' (I, 1), and the love between Troilus and Criseyde. The narrator is as exiled in his story, as Augustine feels exiled in history and time.

In Augustinian thought, there is a sharp distinction between *eternity* and *time*. In Book Eleven of the *City of God*, Augustine mentions this distinction:

> Si enim recte discernitur aeternitas et tempus quod tempus sine
> aliqua mobili mutabilitate non est, in aeternitate autem nulla mutatio
> est, quis non videat quod tempora non fuissent nisi creatura fieret
> quae aliquid aliqua motione mutaret, cuius motionis et mutationis
> cum aliud atque aliud, quae simul esse non possunt, cedit atque
> succedit, in brevioribus vel productioribus morarum intervallis
> tempus sequeretur? (XI, 6)
>
> [For if eternity and time are rightly distinguished in that time does
> not exist without some movement and change, while there is no
> change in eternity, who could not see that time would not have
> existed unless something had been created to cause change by some
> movement?]

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[208] All quotations from *The City of God* are taken from Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. T.E. Page, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).

[209] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 87.

Following from this view on time as a divine creation that came into being simultaneously with the world, history must be a straightforward teleological process the sole aim of which is the fulfilment of God's plan for the salvation of the human soul. In positing this, Augustine excludes any belief in a cyclical movement of history, as there can be no room for a recurrence of events in a temporality regarded as the enactment of divine providence. Augustine criticises the postulation of periodic cycles by the Physicists:

> A quo ludibrio prorsus immortalem animam, etiam cum sapientiam perceperit, liberare non possunt, euntem sine cessatione ad falsam beatitudinem et ad veram miseriam sine cessatione redeuntem. (XII, 14)

> [From this whirligig they are quite unable to free their immortal soul even though it has attained wisdom, for in its own uninterrupted circular course it moves back and forth between false happiness and genuine unhappiness.]

For Augustine the only escape from this cyclical movement lies in a strict adherence to Christian teaching. Only those who do not believe will walk in circles, whereas those initiated to the guidance of Christian teaching are progressing towards the predestined end of time and thus to the City of God. But, even on entering God's city, human beings will still not witness a change to the nature of the godly design behind this teleological progression, since that will eternally be 'altitudinem tuam, quam nullus potest nosse hominum' (XII, 15) [thy [God's] sublimity, which no man can discover]. Thus, the world-process is conditioned by time as created by God, and humans are in no position to draw up conjectures concerning the world's end. This is important for my reading of *Troilus and Criseyde* as a meditation on providence and the inability of human beings to read their place in time accurately enough to change the course of events.

Divine providence is also one of the key concerns in another hugely popular philosophical work of the early Middle Ages, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Chaucer translated this work shortly before he started composing his *Troilus*, and it is clear that it influenced his literary practice to a great degree. The element in Boethius I am considering with regard to *Troilus* is that most difficult concept to grasp, 'the difference between human reason and divine intelligence, and between the human experience of time and the divine apprehension of Eternity.'[210] Like Augustine, Boethius situates providence outside the mundane realm of temporal experience. In Chaucer's translation Lady Philosophy says about providence:

> And thilke devyne thought that is iset in the tour (that is to seyn, in the heighte) of the simplicite of God, stablisseth many maner gises to thinges that ben to done; the whiche manere whan that men looken it in thilke pure clennesse of the devyne intelligence, it is cleped purveaunce. (IV, Pr. 6)

The actual workings of this divine providence are called destiny, of which Lady Philosophy says that it

> departeth and ordeyneth alle thinges singulerly and devyded in moevynges in places, in formes, in tymes, as thus: lat the unfoldynge of temporel ordenaunce, assembled and oonyd in the lokynge of the devyne thought, be cleped purveaunce, and thilke same assemblynge and oonynge, devyded and unfolden by tymes, lat that been called destine. (IV, Pr. 6)

Providence sits high above in a tower, holding together all the threads of its plan, from which temporal enactment it is detached and shielded by the tower walls. Human beings are barred from entering the tower of providence, and can thus never achieve insight into the divine plan. As in Augustine, God is the only locus where the whole 'unfoldynge of temporel ordenaunce' is 'oonyd'. Even though the temporal development of the world is 'thilke same assemblynge', it only unfolds over time and the end is only known to God and cannot be guessed at by man. In Jill Mann's words, 'it s precisely this difference of perspective that gives rise to human doubts about providence. [...] They can only glimpse a part of the whole

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[210] Frank Grady, 'The Boethian Reader of *Troilus and Criseyde*,' *The Chaucer Review* 33 (1999): 230-51 (230).

pattern, which inevitably appears to them as fragmentary and confused.'[211]

Against the horizon of this Christian philosophy of history and providence an increasingly secularized version of historiography developed from the twelfth century onwards. Richard Vaughan has shown that the Christian tenor in most, if not all, medieval writings on history should be seen as necessary lip service to the theologians. Underneath the surface of Christian chronology, Vaughan finds signs of a profound interest in the past that goes far beyond the original Augustinian focus on historical time as God's providence put to work on earth.[212] It can be argued that one of the reasons behind this gradual departure from Augustine's teachings are the problems caused by the status of the Roman Church as sole judge on what parts of earthly history are signs of God's plan.[213] One of the key writers of this emerging tradition of secular historiography is Otto of Freising. Otto was writing within the political context of the Holy Roman Empire (his nephew Frederick Barbarossa was emperor at the time), and it should not astonish us that he argued in favour of providential legitimacy for historical reality.[214]

Secular historiography was increasingly utilised for the furthering of political goals. The pictures of the past which had been transmitted to medieval writers by their predecessors were no longer considered static truths, but were often freely re-created and revised by successive generations to adapt them to contemporary political needs.[215] For Gabrielle M. Spiegel, medieval rulers and political actors were not interested primarily in accounts of 'what actually

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[211] Jill Mann, 'Chance and Destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Knight's Tale*,' in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 75-92 (79).

[212] See Richard Vaughan, 'The Past in the Middle Ages,' *Journal of Medieval History* 12 (1986): 1-14.

[213] See Frederick P. Pickering, *Augustinus oder Boethius: Geschichtsschreibung und Epische Dichtung im Mittelalter* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1967), 26.

[214] See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 90.

[215] See Lifshitz, 'Beyond Positivism and Genre,' 100; Vaughan, 'The Past in the Middle Ages,' 11.

happened,' but more in the potential of historiography 'to address contemporary political life via a displacement to the past, and to embed both prescription and polemic in an apparently 'factual,' because realistic, account of the historical legacy that the past had bequeathed.'[216] There are several reasons *why* historiography became increasingly secularized and appropriated by the political realm from the twelfth century onwards. In addition to the growing disillusionment with Augustinian historiography, changes in inheritance laws were important. There is most probably a link between the change from a horizontal passing of land within a family to a system of primogeniture and the increase in dynastic histories and the growing dependence on mythic origins by medieval rulers to justify their claims to power.[217]

In England, the myth of Trojan origins became the defining factor of secular history. During the reign of Henry II, who ascended the English throne in 1154, a number of Anglo-Norman and Latin chronicles were produced, the main purpose being the recording of the king's and his ancestors' *gestae*. Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (*c.* 1165), a work that would later become one of the source texts for Chaucer's reworking of the Troy material in his *Troilus*, should also be examined in this context. But the most influential work with regard to the creation of Troy as the founding myth for the Norman rulers of England is Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1138). This text provided the main secularising strategy for medieval English historiography, departing from the Augustinian teaching, which, for England, was mainly entailed in Bede's *Historia*

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[216] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xii-xiii.

[217] See Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 68; Francis Ingledew, 'The Book of Troy and the Genealogical Construction of History: The Case of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*,' *Speculum* 69 (1994): 665-704 (678-88); Simpson, 'The Other Book of Troy,' 401-2.

ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (731). Geoffrey was criticized for this departure from Christian providence and his preference for a *translatio imperii*, but nevertheless, his text succeeded in shaping Troy as a British founding myth well into the reign of Richard II.[218]

In his *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer creates a unique blend of both the philosophical and theological writings on history and historiography and literary works he had at his disposal during the composition of his poem. I now turn my attention to Chaucer's treatment and critique of the tradition of historical writing and in particular narratives of Troy, which dominated both scholarly and literary discourse in fourteenth-century Europe, focussing on the points where Chaucer goes beyond his main source, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* (*c.* 1338), using the thematic framework of the Italian poem to mount his critique of medieval historiography in general. I argue that Chaucer composes his unique Troy poem utilising the by his time well established secular historiography, and building upon widely known accounts of the Trojan war, as found in Benoît de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* and Guido delle Colonne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (1287), a later translation into Latin of the *Roman*. Into these narratives, Chaucer incorporates Augustinian and Boethian thoughts on time and history, and the position of Christians within these concepts. Chaucer's meditation on historiography does not emphasise the secular/Christian distinction. He mounts his critique of historiography from within the secular tradition, and focuses on the opposition between pagan and Christian concepts of history (cyclical as opposed to teleological) as he finds them in Augustine and Boethius. The result is a poem that refuses to side with either the literary sources or the philosophical works, but rather reinscribes their concepts in order to highlight gaps and shortcomings of medieval

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[218] See Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 199-204; Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 93-6.

theories of history.

In contemporary critical debates, Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* is widely acknowledged as Chaucer's main source. The Italian poet departs from the traditional structuring of the Troy story. In contrast to the common structuring of the material through a profoundly historical concern with the siege of Troy, *Il Filostrato* deals with only a part of the matter of Troy, setting up strict boundaries confining his narrative to the stretch of time over which the love between Troiolo and Criseida develops. Boccaccio offers a deeply personal account of Troy; not concerned with the siege itself, his limited focus lies only with what is significant to the lovers. The dominant narrative persona is a young lover *like* Troiolo, which makes a departure from the main thematic concern with love all but impossible. Taking up the focus on one single love story from Boccaccio, Chaucer does not deal with human love alone, but raises questions on historiography per se. His narrative is much more multi-facetted than Boccaccio's because the story from the Italian base text is enhanced by material Chaucer finds in other sources, which are far less prominent on the surface of his poem.

For Barbara Nolan, *Il Filostrato* and Benoît's *Roman de Troie* should be regarded as two of the formal models for Chaucer's *Troilus*.[219] I want to pick up her argument at this point, and further it by introducing Guido's *Historia Destructionis Troiae* into the set of texts influencing Chaucer in his composition. The story of the love of Troilus for Briseida was first related in Benoît's poem, and therefore this text constitutes a crucial model for Boccaccio and consequently for Chaucer. But we should remember that Guido's *Historia* was for some time considered more authoritative than Benoît's vernacular romance, and should therefore be considered in combination with the *Roman*. Both texts, in their function as historiographical

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[219] See Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the 'Roman Antique'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 199.

works, are not sources for Chaucer's poem in the way Boccaccio's is. Chaucer does not offer a historical account of 'how this town com to destrucccion' (I, 141) and refers his readers to precisely those authorities invoked by Guido: 'in Dares, or in Dite, / Whoso that kan may rede hem as they write' (I, 146-7). The historical context is only present in the *Troilus* insofar that Chaucer's narrator constantly alludes to the historical stage from which the love-story is taken.

From within this secular tradition of Troy narratives, Chaucer hints at Augustine's critique of cyclical history, and also makes use of Augustinian and Boethian thoughts on Providence and God as being entirely situated outside of the realm of earthly time. By exploiting our foreknowledge of the end of the story, Chaucer's poem situates the readers in a position very similar to that occupied by divine providence outside history as described in the *Consolation*. In the very first stanza of the poem, Chaucer's narrator already foreshadows the end of the story:

> The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
> That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
> In lovynge, how his aventures fellen
> Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie,
> My purpos is, er that I parte fro ye.
> Thesiphone, thow help me for t'endite
> Thise woful vers, that wepen as I write. (I, 1-7)

His audience is thus given insight into the design of the poem, and from the outset there is an expectation of mutability, which Chaucer later exploits for his meditation of the theme of time and change.[220] I read this foreshadowing of the tragic ending as a profound illustration of the division between providence and destiny, both in Augustine and Boethius. From the very beginning, the grand design of the story is clear, and we as readers are now waiting for it to unfold over time. Some 50 lines later, the narrator raises the same point again:

> For now wil I gon streght to my matere,
> In which ye may the double sorwes here

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[220] Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 51.

> Of Troilus in lovynge of Criseyde,
> And how that she forsok hym er she deyde. (I, 53-6)

However, this unfolding of providence over the course of time in the poem is not completely in line with an Augustinian teleological movement.

Throughout the entirety of the poem there is a progressive movement towards the end when, after being slain on the battlefield, Troilus's 'lighte goost ful blisfully is went / Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe sphere' (V, 1808-9). This could well be read as a gesture towards the salvation of the human soul through God. But there is also a pattern of varied repetition, which runs through the poem, and stands in direct opposition to the teleological movement towards salvation. For example, we see Troilus riding past Criseyde's window twice in Book II, the first time by sheer chance, and the second time prearranged by Pandarus, the arbitrator of the love between the two characters. This pattern of repetition is emphasised at the beginning of Book II, when the poem builds upon our foreknowledge of the ending by using references to the story of Thebes, which was generally seen as a dark mirror to the story of Troy.[221] When Pandarus starts his intercession in favour of Troilus, he enters Criseyde's house and finds her and two of her ladies

> Withinne a paved parlour, and they thre
> Herden a mayden reden hem the geste
> Of the siege of Thebes, while hem leste. (II, 82-4)

Probably half in jest, but certainly preoccupied by his business as an arbitrator of love, Pandarus asks about the book being read: 'Is it of love? O, som good ye me lere!' (II, 97), and on learning that it is about Thebes states:

> [...] Al this I knowe myselve,
> And al th'assege of Thebes and the care;
> For herof ben maked bokes twelve.
> But lat be this, and telle me how ye fare.
> Do wey youre barbe,and shew your face bare;
> Do wey youre book, rys up, and let us daunce,

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[221] See Grady, 'The Boethian Reader of *Troilus and Criseyde*,' 235.

And lat us don to May som observaunce. (II, 106-12)

Clearly, at this point in the story the main concern seems to lie outside the reality of the siege and in the more domestic sphere of love and 'daunce'. Pandarus proclaims an eagerness to learn about love, a subject on which he is more experienced than the tentative Troilus. This concern with love, which, as we know, is the cause of Troilus's 'double sorwe', excludes the reality of the besieged Trojans and its almost painstakingly clear parallels to the Theban stories that are being read. Echoing Augustine's refusal to deal with secular history, Criseyde and Pandarus fail to observe and realise the Theban implications for their own place in time. The only plausible explanation for this refusal of the obvious lies in the situation of the characters. They are firmly set inside the temporal unfolding of providence, whereas we already know the end of the story and can therefore weave together the frequent allusions to that end, just like 'purveaunce knytteth alle thingis in hir ordres' (*Boece* IV, Pr. 6).

One character who is to a certain degree able to draw up historical parallels is Troilus's sister, Cassandra, but in accordance with her fate no one believes her. When in Book V Troilus dreams of his beloved lying in the arms of and kissing a sleeping boar, 'he thought al wel he hadde his lady lorn' (V, 1445). Cassandra reveals to him through 'a fewe olde stories' (V, 1459) that

> This ilke boor bitokneth Diomede,
> Tideus sone, that down descended is
> Fro Meleagre, that made the boor to blede;
> And thy lady, wherso she be, ywis,
> This Diomede hire herte hath, and she his.
> Wep if thow wolt, or lef, for out of doute,
> This Diomede is inne, and thow art oute. (V, 1513-9)

However, Troilus calls Cassandra a 'sorceresse' and refuses to believe in her 'false goost of prophecye' (V, 1521), but which nonetheless is the truth. Cassandra's interpretation shows that Criseyde's behaviour illustrates how the Trojan story is

closely woven into the pattern of historical experience, Criseyde acting as a metonym for Troy in relation to Theban history.[222] However, Cassandra's power is strictly limited to her present.[223] She cannot foresee the future like Criseyde's father, Calchas, who in the very beginning 'knew wel that Troie shal destroied be' (I, 68). Calchas *is* able to foresee the future, but fails to realise that his own actions play an important role in the fall of Troy. His defection to the Greek army leaves Criseyde devoid of protection and eventually makes possible her love for Troilus, and his suggestion to exchange his daughter for Antenor in Book IV is the beginning of the end of Troy, and of *Troilus and Criseyde* for that matter. Like all the characters in the poem, Cassandra and Calchas are trapped inside temporality and cannot grasp the workings of providence.

The single most prominent fusion of different notions on the concept of history lies in Chaucer's unique blending of providential foreknowledge and teleological progress towards a predestined end with the pattern of repetition mentioned above. From the outset Chaucer puts us in an almost godlike position from where we can oversee the scope of the story. However, we are as powerless as the narrator when it comes to altering the course of the narrative. We can only read the verse, of which the narrator says: 'that wepen as I write' (I, 7). It seems that not even the narrator, or Chaucer for that matter, has the power to change the teleology of the story. Setting up this frame of providence guiding destiny in the story, the poet then introduces the cyclical pattern of history as a layer undermining our sense of predestination in the Augustinian and Boethian sense. The unidirectional linearity of Christian history and the pagan notion of the historical cycle are two diametrically opposed concepts. But in Chaucer's poem, this contrast is

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[222] See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 130-1.
[223] See Valerie A. Ross, 'Believing Cassandra: Intertextual Politics and the Interpretation of Dreams in *Troilus and Criseyde*,' *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 339-56 (344).

undermined. True, the Trojan society he presents is firmly set within a pattern of repetition. Still, the events do not return in their original form, but are slightly altered. The contrast between pagan and Christian philosophy is further undermined by the pagan characters failing to realise the cyclical pattern inherent in the resurfacing in the Theban scenes in the poem. They, as blind pagans, should notice this, but instead it is the Christian readers who can interpret the repetitions accurately.

Christian teleology is also questioned throughout the last two books of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer's narrator introduces the fourth book as the final book where the end of Troilus is narrated:

> This ilke ferthe book me helpeth fyne,
> So that the losse of lyf and love yfeere
> Of Troilus be fully shewed here. (IV, 26-8)

But in fact the promised ending is continually deferred. When Troilus finds Criseyde lifeless, he almost commits suicide, but she wakes up from her swoon 'as Gode wolde' (IV, 1212). This dramatic scene is followed by the second consummation, when Criseyde pleads, 'lat us rise, and streght to bedde go' (IV, 1242). Closely mirroring the first consummation scene of Book III, the poem here disappoints our expectations of an ending, offering an anticlimactic repetition instead.[224] Only at the very end of Book V is the promised ending finally achieved. It stretches from line 1751 (Troilus's last battle) over to the stanza beginning with 'Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye' (V, 1786), where the poet almost seems to be pleading his narrative to end. But the 'litel bok' refuses to end and instead shows Troilus's going 'up to the holughnesse of the eighthe sphere' (V, 1809) before concluding with a deeply Christian epilogue and then the dedication to 'moral Gower' (V, 1856). Finally, it ends with a final invocation of Christ:

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[224] See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 128.

> Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,
> So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne,
> For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne. (V, 1867-9)

There is not one single ending to the poem, but the narrator tries to end his story no less than five times, before eventually pleading to Christ.

This ending is not what one would expect considering the providential foreknowledge supplied throughout the poem. Troilus is freed from this world, but goes forth 'Ther as Mercurye sorted hym to dwelle' (V, 1827). He is not assigned his place by God, to whom Chaucer's audience is told to 'of youre herte up casteth the visage' (V, 1838). Chaucer cannot solve the dilemma posed by his *matere* of the love between Troilus and Criseyde, but can only bring forward a fairly standardized Christian doctrinal statement at the end of his narrative. Medieval historiography fails to supply him with a means to solve the contradictions of earthly life and he has to seek consolation in precisely that concept of predestination he tries so subtly to dismantle throughout his narrative. But having followed the narrator through his subversion of Christian teleology and predestination, we know how unsatisfying this consolation is. Just as Chaucer refuses to side with either pagan or Christian historiography throughout his poem, the endings of *Troilus and Criseyde* resist closure and leave the opposition between Christianity and the pagan past largely unresolved.

'Save Oure Tonges Difference': Troy and London

The *Troilus* is co-dedicated to John Gower, the poet and close friend of Chaucer, who was at the time of this poem about to start work on his encyclopaedic vernacular work, the *Confessio Amantis*. The 'moral Gower' Chaucer addresses (V, 1856) therefore cannot be the author of the *Confessio*, but rather the outspoken critic of the socio-political context of late 1370s and early 1380s England we can

detect in the Anglo-Norman *Mirour de l'omme* and the Anglo-Latin *Vox Clamantis*.[225] The *Troilus* situates itself within an intertextual frame with these professedly political works in order to strengthen its own political agenda that is, however, never explicitly formulated, and might well go unnoticed were it not for the late invocation of 'moral Gower.' In addition, by the fourteenth century, the analogy between Troy and London was very much at the centre of both political and literary discourse in England. When Nicholas Brembre, a central figure in the time before and after the Rising of 1381, was impeached during the Merciless Parliament of 1387, his opponents accused him of planning to rename London *Parva Troia* and styling himself duke of Troy.[226] Within the royal court itself, the Troy/London analogy can also be detected. During his Smithfield tournament in 1390, Richard II had London openly referred to as 'la neufe Troy'[227]. The myth of Trojan origins was central to the formation of British and English identity during the Ricardian era, and as a consequence, literary works containing Trojan material can be read as involved in the political struggles of the time, and the *Troilus* is no exception.

Throughout the *Troilus*, there is a constant concern about the time past of Chaucer's fictional Trojans and the time present of Ricardian London. The link between these two societies is implied at the same time as the gap between them is constantly emphasised. In the proem to Book II, this complicated relationship is pushed forward onto the stage of the narrative:

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge

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[225] See Jane Chance, *The Mythographic Chaucer: the Fabulation of Sexual Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 108; Robert F. Yeager, '"O Moral Gower:" Chaucer's Dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde*,' *The Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 87-99.

[226] See Henry Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396*, trans. G.H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 93.

[227] See Sheila Lindenbaum, 'The Smithfield Tournament of 1390,' *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 20 (1990): 1-20; Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*.

> Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
> And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
> Ek for to wynnen love in sundry ages,
> In sundry londes, sundry ben usages. (II, 22-8)

The passing of time undoubtedly brings about change, but this change does not effect the qualities of the deeds done. Even though the ways to achieve a goal—in this case that of love—are different in different times and places, Chaucer's narrator refuses to posit any qualifications about their merits. Troy is temporally removed from Chaucer's London experience, but it is simultaneously held up as a polis worthy of consideration and contemplation.

H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. argues that the *Troilus* is apparently anticipating readings of the 'radical discontinuity of time and therefore of the impossibility of history.'[228] He clearly envisages Chaucer as a kind of medieval pre-postmodernist, and I generally do not want to argue against such a view. Chaucer's poetry has several characteristics that, at least for critics writing from within the postmodern condition, can easily be construed as an anticipation of various elements of postmodern discourse. However, I am not fully convinced that Chaucer is actually as thoroughly deconstructionist as Leicester would have us believe. I would rather argue that the negotiation of historiography, both pagan and Christian, as I have outlined it in the previous section, urges us to re-evaluate the relation between Chaucer's Troy and his contemporary context. I would argue that instead of subscribing to 'the impossibility of history,' Chaucer uses his Trojan poem to reach back into the literary and historical past in order to transpose the time past of his fictional Trojans into the time present of his contemporary experience. As Barnes puts it: 'History just burps.'

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[228] Leicester Jr., 'Oure Tonges *Différance:* Textuality and Deconstruction in Chaucer,' 17.

This is how I read Paul Strohm's notion of 'the past in the present' in the *Troilus*.[229] Indeed, there are at least two instances where the contexts of ancient Troy and medieval London are explicitly connected. Describing Criseyde in Book I, the narrator remarks that

> Right as oure firste lettre is now an A,
> In beaute first so stood she, makeles. (171-2)

This is clearly a reference to Anne of Bohemia, who was married to Richard II in January 1382. Thus, the couplet posits a clear and undisputable link between the female protagonists of the poem and the queen of England, and by extension also between Troy and London. Later, during the parliament scene in Book IV,

> The noyse of peple up sterte thane at ones,
> As breme as blase of strawe iset on-fire. (183-4)

I will return to the parliament below, but at this point it is necessary to point out the implied link between the proceedings of Chaucer's Trojan parliament and the Rising of 1381. This traumatic case of social unrest saw parts of London go up in flames and, as discussed in the previous chapter, had a certain Jack Straw as one of its leaders.[230] Even though these two couplets are only small elements in the development of the narrative, the inclusion of these similes creates the impression that the Trojan society is, after all, not very far from that of Ricardian England.

The image of a besieged city, and Troy was the most prominent city under siege for the Middle Ages, is indeed not very far from the experience in England and London, particularly during the 1380s. The memory of the peasants taking over London during the Rising of 1381, effectively bringing the metropolis to a standstill, was certainly a spectre haunting the minds of many members of the London public. Once more, we are reminded of Gower's nightmarish depiction of

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[229] Strohm, *Theory and the Premodern Text*, 39.

[230] Chaucer refers to Jack Straw and the Rising more explicitly in the 'Nun's Priest's Tale.' (VII, 3393-7). See above, p. 82.

the rebels entering New Troy. Chaucer himself was one of the emerging middle ranks of society, who did no longer have sole and unmodifiable links to either the court party or the opposition, but negotiated the middle ground between these two extremes. The Rising probably strengthened his conviction that unquestioning factional allegiance is a dangerous choice in times of political upheaval.[231] This could well be one of the reasons for his ambiguous style that does not seek to resolve differences in favour of one side of an opposition. However, the *Troilus*, and other contemporary texts, imply that just as the Trojans were besieged partly because of their own actions, so the London public found itself attacked by another part of English society, because of the ruling class's failure to foresee the results of its actions jeopardising the livelihoods of the lower realms of society.

The peasants and London populace aside, there were other, possibly more dangerous threats for England. Richard led a well prepared but ill-fated campaign against the Scots in 1385. The presence of a military adversary, whose might evidently surpassed that of the English forces, must surely have left an imprint on the minds of those in power under Richard. Throughout the 1380s the fear of a major military and political defeat was a constant presence. The possibility of a French invasion had loomed over English politics since 1383, when the then chancellor Michael de la Pole commissioned the Duke of Lancaster to start peace negotiations with the French, who had taken over Flanders after the collapse of the Despenser Crusade of that year.[232] In the years following this blow to English continental ambitions, de la Pole pursued a policy of appeasement, knowing that the limited financial resources at his disposal left him no alternative in the face of

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[231] See Paul Strohm, 'Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s,' in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 83-112 (90-7).
[232] Saul, *Richard II*, 135.

French expansion.[233] In 1386, the French built an armada of around 30,000 men at arms, ready to invade England. At this point, Richard's government soon ran into a serious financial crisis, and had to abandon the dream of a grand army defending the realm. An army of only around 4,500 men stationed around London was all they could achieve.[234] This impending military threat is a vital contextual element for Chaucer's Trojan poem. 1380s England saw itself threatened by an external enemy (France) and internal subversion (the Rising of 1381), just as Troy was besieged by the Greek army and eventually betrayed by Antenor and Aeneas.

As the alleged predecessor of England, Troy was invested with huge importance. The two central questions medieval people asked with regard to Troy were concerned with the reasons for the self destruction of a society that enacted its most deeply held values and that society's failure to avert the fall even when the outcome had become 'terrifyingly clear.'[235] These are also questions Chaucer ponders in his poem. However, in my reading, the outcome may be terrifyingly clear to us as readers, and indeed Chaucer makes sure that we know the outcome at the very beginning of the poem, but the characters of the narrative are not able to come to the same conclusions. Calchas knows that Troy will fall, but still he proposes the exchange of his daughter for Antenor, which on the one hand robs Troilus of his private solace, and on the other hand brings Antenor back into the city. We as readers know that 'he was after traitour to the town' (IV, 204), but the Trojans and Calchas do not. The events as we witness them in the narrative serve to illustrate the perceived inability for human minds to go beyond their actual historical experience and put it in the wider context of divine providence, as it is contained in the Augustinian concept of Christian teleological history.

An important element of this strategy is the constant resurfacing of Theban

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[233] Saul, *Richard II*, 141-2.
[234] Saul, *Richard II*, 152-5; McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307-1399*, 442-3.
[235] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 115.

history within the narrative. Thebes is mainly presented as the predecessor of Troy; Criseyde and Pandarus talk about a 'romaunce' about Thebes, but fail to realise the similarities to their own situation (II, 100-12), and Cassandra presents a thoroughly historicised interpretation of Troilus' dream in Book V. This interpretation stretches over no less than nine stanzas (V, 1457-1519), and in it Cassandra succeeds in developing a close relation between the Theban lineage of Criseyde's new lover, Diomede, and the events in her brother's present life. However, just as Criseyde and Pandarus fail to see the implications of the material they are reading, Cassandra's reading of the dream is seen by her only in relation to Troilus' personal life, and she fails to see the significance for Troy as a whole. As the audience, we are in a better informed position than her, benefiting not only from historical hindsight but also from the knowledge that Troilus' fate and that of Troy are intricately intertwined. This is a hint for Chaucer's fourteenth-century audience not only to read his poem for pleasure (as Criseyde does), nor to brush it aside (as Pandarus does), nor to limit it solely to the personal sphere (as Cassandra does), but to be aware of the implications for their own society as a several times removed successor for Troy. The Trojans fail to link Theban history to their own circumstances, but Chaucer's audience is asked to be well aware of their perceived Trojan heritage.

Chaucer's poem highlights the perceived inability to arrive at a coherent picture of things to come. In the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the complicated web of private and public experience and the critique of historical concepts negotiate a middle-way between prophecy and resignation in the face of human powerlessness. The poem serves to hold up a mirror to Chaucer's contemporaries, confronting them with a society which is both admirable and unable to avert its tragic end. The medieval myth of London's Trojan heritage makes it highly improbable that the audience of the poem did not draw parallels between the fictional world and their own lived reality. Even though the poem does not present a clear sighted view of

the future, there is a strain going through the whole narrative that is strongly in favour of human action. The case of Pandarus alone shows the necessity for human intervention. If he did not intervene, the love between Troilus and Criseyde would never develop. The poem can thus be read as an appeal to Chaucer's audience to be aware of the past, and, even though direct lessons cannot be learned from it, at least to try not to repeat similar mistakes.

The parliament scene in Book IV (141-217) presents me with an opportunity to illustrate how this mirroring of Troy and London works in the poem. We know that Chaucer was a knight of the shire for Kent during the Wonderful Parliament of 1386,[236] and this first-hand experience might well be an informing factor behind his description of the proceedings in the Trojan parliament. John P. McCall and George Rudisill, Jr. propose a direct link between the Wonderful Parliament in England and the fictional parliament in Chaucer's poem. They argue that Chaucer was 'astounded by the vindictiveness of his friends' political adversaries,'[237] and that he therefore expanded the descriptions of the Trojan parliament in his sources 'in a specific, philosophical and melancholy way to suit the contemporary scene.'[238] As much as I agree that Chaucer uses his Trojan parliament scene in a way that bears no resemblance to his sources, I am not, however, fully convinced that in composing the parliament scene he was specifically referring to the Wonderful Parliament.

Chaucer's experience as a member of parliament is a biographical fact that cannot be discarded, but we should not limit our reading of the parliament scene in *Troilus and Criseyde* to a perceived analogy between the real and the fictional

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[236] See Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 364-5.

[237] John P McCall and George Jr. Rudisill, 'The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament,' *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 58 (1959): 276-88 (87).

[238] McCall and Rudisill, 'The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament,' 87.

parliaments. As a closer look at the textual and historical evidence reveals, this analogy is not as convincing as McCall and Rudisill would like it to be. D.W. Robertson, Jr. is right to point out that there was no figure as powerful as Hector to intervene in the proceedings of the Wonderful Parliament, and that, most importantly, the fairly undisputed position of king Priam is not comparable to Richard II, who was facing considerable opposition at this point in his reign.[239] Instead of directly referring to the Wonderful Parliament, Chaucer uses his Trojan parliament to conflate the fictional Trojan society and the medieval practice of parliamentary decision making, in effect transposing the tradition of Troy into the medieval present and superimposing medieval custom onto it.

The Trojan polis of the tradition Chaucer engages was, of course, ruled by a patriarchal aristocracy. Hector, Troilus' older brother, is the prime representative of this system of government in the poem. Whenever he appears in the narrative, he is fulfilling public duties. In Book I, we witness him vowing protection to Criseyde, after her father, Calchas, has deserted to the Greek camp (I, 99-126), and later on in the poem, he is the only character opposing the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor during the parliament scene in Book IV. As Rosanne Gasse points out, we should not forget that medieval tradition generally knew Hector not only as one of the worthiest knights of human memory, but also as one of the two figures who opposed the abduction of Helen. Had his fellow Trojans heeded Hector's advice at this crucial point in their history, the Trojan War, with all its tragic consequences, might have been averted.[240]

Chaucer presents Hector in a position where he can once again avert the tragic course of events. When he throws in his weight to save Criseyde and with her

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[239] D.W. Jr. Robertson, 'The Probable Date and Purpose of Chaucer's *Troilus*,' *Mediaevalia et Humanistica* 13 (1985): 143-71 (153).

[240] Rosanne Gasse, 'Deiphebus, Hector, and Troilus in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*,' *The Chaucer Review* 32 (1998): 423-39 (n. 17).

the moral integrity of the Trojan polis, arguing that 'we usen here no women for to selle' (IV, 182), his fellow Trojans cry out in a mixture of surprise and anger, echoing, as I have said above, the violent Rising of 1381:

> The noyse of peple up sterte thane at ones,
> As breme as blase of strawe iset on-fire;
> For infortune it wolde, for the nones,
> They sholden hire confusioun desire.
> 'Ector,' quod they, 'what goost may yow enspyre
> This woman thus to shilde and doon us lesse
> Daun Antenor – a wrong wey now ye chese –
> 'That is so wys and ek so bold baroun?
> And we han need folk, as men may see.
> He is ek oon the grettest of this town.
> O Ector, lat tho fantasies be!
> O kyng Priam,' quod they, 'thus sygge we,
> That al oure vois is to forgon Criseyde.'
> And to delivren Antenor they preyde. (IV, 183-96)

We as readers, of course, know that the ghost inspiring Hector to protect Criseyde is his earlier pledge to shield her from evil. Chivalric honour is thus behind Hector's intervention in the parliament. Unwittingly, he also tries to avert the downfall of Troy itself. However, his lack of awareness of the wider implications of the situation means that Hector cannot convince his subjects, and himself for that matter, of the fatefulness of the decision. Hector fails to fulfil his assigned role as leader of the polis because he is unable to take into account the fatal implications of the exchange, and Troilus even surrenders his public voice completely. Had these two princes joined forces against the decision, they might have averted the disastrous outcome. Hector's failure to avert the exchange lets the eventual traitor Antenor back into the city, a consequence Chaucer deliberately emphasises (IV, 204). The parliamentary decision overruling Hectors' patriarchal voice functions as a warning, and ,as we will see, as part of an appeal for a stable, moral, and powerful patriarchy that is supported by wise advisors.

This reading of Hector's role makes the parliament scene the most prominent political aspect of the poem. Appearing towards the end of the story, just

when the love between Criseyde and Troilus is at its seemingly most secure height, the parliament marks the point where the upward movement of the two lovers at the centre of our attention turns into a downward spiral, constantly accelerating, and ending with the death of Troilus on the battlefield. We are reminded of the purpose of the narrative to relate 'in lovynge, how his [Troilus'] aventures fellen / fro wo to welle, and after out of joie' (I, 3-4), echoing the revolving wheel of Fortune. The time for the final development of the story to start has come when Greek ambassadors enter Troy to propose an exchange of Criseyde for the captured Antenor.

> The cause itold of hire coming, the olde
> Priam, the kyng, ful soone in general
> Let her-upon his parlement to holde,
> Of which th'effect rehercen yow I shal.
> Th'ambassadours ben answerd for fynal;
> Th'eschaunge of prisoners and al this need
> Hem liketh wel, and forth in they procede. (IV, 141-7)

On hearing of the proposed exchange of Criseyde, the king does not decide on the case himself, but rather convenes a parliament to advise him on the best course of action. The political agency does not lie solely with the king, who is strangely inactive and marginal in the parliament scene, but rather with his assembled advisors. It is they who favour the idea of the exchange of a female citizen for a prisoner of war. This focus on the royal advisors is Chaucer's own addition to his sources. Neither Benoît, nor Guido nor Boccaccio present us with similarly prominent advisors, a fact that lays particular stress on Chaucer's treatment of this scene.[241] Chaucer's Trojan parliament is his own version of the common criticism of the importance of royal advisors in the day-to-day running of the country. Knowing that the exchange eventually settles the fate of both Troy and Troilus, we also cannot help but notice the underlying criticism of parliamentary decisions as not

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[241] See McCall and Rudisill, 'The Parliament of 1386 and Chaucer's Trojan Parliament,' 282-5.

necessarily wise and well weighed.

However, we must not forget that not only the royal advisors fail to see the full implications of their decision, but that Hector, too, does not think beyond his vow of protection to Criseyde, and that the king himself is completely passive during the parliament scene. Instead of assigning the blame for the eventual fall of Troy to specific characters or the advisors as a group, Chaucer implicates the Trojan society as a whole in the process of self-destruction. Everyone from the king down to the 'peple' plays a part in this scene, and thus royal advisors are not the sole problem. In fact, the problem seems to be the all too human inability of Chaucer's fictional Trojans to recognise the warnings of the past and see into the future.

In the case of Troy, the solution is clear to us, but since the Trojans cannot see into the future, they do not realise the fatefulness of their decisions. The parliament is an arena where the opposing forces of patriarchy and parliamentary rule clash, with only one party emerging as the winner of the contest, and, ironically, dragging the polis one step closer towards its end. Pointing out that a view of the future is impossible, Chaucer gives his contemporary audience the chance to witness his self-destructive Trojan parliament in order to forge a connection to a society that, because of the myth of Trojan origins and especially because of Chaucer's treatment of time and history, was integral to the discourse of fourteenth-century England. Chaucer's Trojan parliament thus demonstrates a marked resistance to offer any kind of solution to the problems facing Ricardian England in the 1380s.

Conclusion

Coming back to our initial question: does history repeat itself? Well, not exactly. Considering the by Chaucer's time well established dichotomy of Christian and

secular historiography, it might come as a surprise that Chaucer does engage directly with this opposition. Instead of emphasising the secular nature of his subject matter, namely the function of Troy for the construction of England's genealogical heritage, the poet aims his critique at the distinction between pagan and Christian concepts of history. Creating his fictional Trojan society, Chaucer utilises his characters and their story for an illustration of the shortcomings and conceptual limitations in the theories of history of both England's pagan ancestors and medieval historiography on the lines of Augustine and Boethius.

However, knowing that Chaucer only rarely uses his poetry for a direct and unambiguous commentary on his own immediate socio-political context, his movement away from the secular/religious divide in historiography is far less surprising. It is highly probable that Chaucer considered secular historiography as too much invested with political conflict. The choice of Troy as a setting for his critique of historiography enables him to meditate on the less immediately political opposition between the teleological history of Christian theology and the cyclically revolving pagan concept of history. Chaucer uses his fictional Troy as a mirror for Ricardian England in a way that makes use of the different historiographical discourses available at the time in order to highlight the ways in which the Trojans are engaged in decision making processes that bring their society ever closer to its fall.

4 Gower's Trojan Memory: a Selective Inheritance

> There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. An inheritance is always the reaffirmation of a debt, but a critical, selective, and filtering reaffirmation, which is why we distinguish several spirits.[242]

This statement is made halfway through Jacques Derrida's critique of the supposed end of Marxism after the collapse of Soviet Communism and the subsequent preoccupation of Western intellectuals with the end of history. The most prominent proponents of this end of history are Francis Fukuyama, who posits liberal democracy as the logical end of historical development, and on a decidedly more postmodern note Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, who both question the validity of the narration of history as a metanarrative for the human experience of historical reality.[243] Derrida positions himself firmly against Fukuyama's belief in liberal democracy and the end of history, arguing that historical development cannot be described as a coherent metanarrative. Still, his argument about inheritance and the reaffirmation of debts to the past illustrates that Derrida regards the past as a pool of knowledge, or spirits as he calls them, that has to be constantly surveyed from within any given present. The further emphasis on the critical and selective filtering of the debt to the past stresses the importance of a reader's critical awareness of her or his past and an ability to interpret that past in ways that are pertinent for the specific present of this reader of the past.

Derrida clearly sets up the inheritance of things past in the present not as a fixed, monolithic phenomenon, but rather as a fluid and self-consciously selective

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[242] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The state of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 91-2.

[243] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Jean Baudrillard, 'The Illusion of the End,' in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (London: Routledge, 1997), 39-46.

choice, and it is this that informs my reading of Gower's treatment of the myth of Britain's Trojan origins that was, as the previous chapter has shown, particularly widespread and powerful in Ricardian England. In a sense, we can even speak of the presence of a Trojan spirit in late fourteenth-century England. Troy is certainly an aspect of the ancient past that was particularly important for Gower, as his recourse to Trojan matter in the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Confessio Amantis* shows, but his specific use of this material has so far not attracted widespread critical attention.[244] Sylvia Federico's recent monograph on the Troy myth in the late Middle Ages raises a number of interesting points, but her psychoanalytically informed historicism leads Federico to conclusions different to mine.[245]

This chapter reads Gower's use of the myth of Trojan origins, arguing that he employs Trojan material in a way that aims to make his contemporaries aware of their position as Troy's successors. His general focus on events before and after the Trojan war suggests that Gower aims to highlight the Trojans' shortcomings, arguing that it is his contemporaries' responsibility not to commit similar mistakes in the late fourteenth century. In this, Gower is echoing some of the concerns of Chaucer in his *Troilus*. In Book I of the *Vox*, Troy is used as one of the many examples that serve to highlight the rupture between Gower's present and his idealised past. Gower's London is compared throughout to Troy, which itself had a number of moral flaws that set it apart from the idealised past. The fact that Gower's contemporaries do not even compare favourably to the far from perfect Trojans makes their shortcomings all the more apparent.

In the frame narrative of the *Confessio*, references to Troy appear in the first recension but are then dropped in the two later versions of the prologue and

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[244] For a list of the Trojan episodes in the *Confessio* and a note on their political significance, see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 221.

[245] Sylvia Federico, *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1-28.

epilogue. On the one hand, this is due to Richard II's and his supporters' use of the Troy myth. Since the dedication to the king is dropped from the poem, so is the Troy myth with its close links to Richard's ceremonial kingship. On the other hand, the erasure of the Troy myth from the *Confessio's* frame serves to stress its position as only one among many textual traces of the past that Gower weaves into his poem. The Trojan episodes that are distributed unevenly across the *Confessio* survive Gower's revisions intact. The fact that the Troy story is only one of many stories Gower refers to in the *Confessio* distinguishes his use of the material from Chaucer's *Troilus*. In addition, Gower focuses almost exclusively on episodes from before or just after the war. He is less interested in the war itself but rather in the human decisions and misjudgements that caused the war and its dire consequences. This selection of episodes enables Gower to make his contemporaries aware of the responsibilities they have towards their perceived Trojan predecessors and future generations, pointing out where and when the supposedly grand Trojan society made mistakes that eventually led to its downfall.

Troy and the State of England in the *Vox Clamantis*

Troy makes a few brief appearances in the opening book of the *Vox Clamantis*. These refer to both the continuity between the ancient city and Gower's contemporary London and Brutus, the legendary founder of Britain. As a group, these references to Troy are best read against the background of the view of history that Gower exhibits in the poem as a whole and that I have examined in chapter one. Troy effectively becomes one of the exemplary cases Gower brings forward in the *Vox* in order to illustrate the difference between his idealised past and his present. However, Gower does not ignore the fact that Troy itself fell because of its moral failures and shortcomings, but rather employs it as an already flawed society

that nonetheless is inherently preferable to the all-pervasive corruption he perceives in his own society. Furthermore, Gower's inclusion of the Troy myth in his account of the Rising of 1381 can be read as an attempt to counter the rebels' agenda of destroying written records curtailing their freedoms and rights. The very fact that Gower reinscribes one of the main elements of authoritative literary and historical discourse in medieval England illustrates the extent to which he wants to re-assert the authority of writing and with it the traditional social order.

The rebels' entry into London is, of course, central to Gower's account of the Rising, and in chapter 13 of Book I his narrator describes the event in the following graphic terms:

> A dextrisque nouam me tunc vidisse putabam
> Troiam, que vidue languida more fuit :
> Que solet ex muris cingi patuit sine muro,
> Nec potuit seras claudere porta suas.
> Mille lupi mixtique lupis vrsi gradientes
> A siluis statuunt vrbis adire domos : (I, xiii, 879-84)

> [On my right then I thought I saw New Troy, which was powerless as a widow. Ordinarily surrounded by walls, it lay exposed as a widow, and the city gate could not shut its bars. A thousand wolves and bears approaching with the wolves determined to go out of the woods to the homes of the city.]

Federico emphasises the sexual imagery contained in the reference to New Troy as a defenceless widow,[246] but I am here more interested in Gower's use of the New Troy-London analogy. The headnote to this chapter tells us that the rebels 'entered New Troy—that is the city of London.' By explicitly referring to the analogy, Gower makes sure that the account of what happened next is not lost on his audience; the headnote acts as an interpretive aid for an audience that Gower needs to be unfailingly aware of the analogy he is about to exploit. The opening reference to the city gate that 'could not shut its bars' resembles the original Troy, whose city walls, we remember, had been torn down in order to get the wooden horse into the

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[246] Federico, *New Troy*, 8-9.

city, a story Gower was later to incorporate into the *Confessio Amantis*. The account of the ravaging of New Troy by the rebels relies on this self-destructive element in the ancient story of Troy, as the narrator exclaims: 'Omnia traduntur, postes reserauimus hosti / Et fit in infida prodicione fides' (I, xiii, 903-4) [We unlocked our doors to the enemy and faith was kept only in faithless treason]. This line fits in with Gower's strategy in the *Vox* as a whole to implicate not only the rebels but also the other constituent parts of his society which is also echoed when the narrator laments 'denaturans vrbis natura prioris / Que vulgi furias arma mouere sinis!' (I, xiii, 979-80) [O the degenerate nature of our former city, which allowed the madly raging rabble to take up arms!]. Echoing the self-destructive aspect of the Trojan story, Gower thus presents the rebels entrance into London as partly self-inflicted. This complicity of the Londoners in the Rising of 1381 is also condemned in Walsingham's chronicle, and after the Rising had been quelled, a number of aldermen were accused of aiding the Rebels' entry into London.[247]

One contributing factor to the initial success of the Rising was the striking inactivity on the part of those who were supposed to defend the city against the intruders, echoing Troy's fate.

> Ecce senem Calcas, cuius sapiencia maior
> Omnibus est, nullum tunc sapuisse modum :
> Anthenor ex pactis componere federa pacis
> Tunc nequit, immo furor omne resoluit opus :
> A vecorde probum non tunc distancia nouit,
> Fit cor Tersitis et Diomedis idem :
> Lingue composite verbis nil rethor Vluxes
> Tunc valuit, nec ei sermo beatus erat : (I, xiii, 961-8)

> [Behold, even the old man Calchas, whose wisdom was greater than everyone's, then knew no course of action. Antenor did not know then by what means to arrange peace treaties; instead the great frenzy destroyed all his efforts. No difference marked the worthy

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[247] For Walsingham, see Dobson, ed., *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, 168-9. The trials of the aldermen is discussed, in relation to Chaucer's *Troilus*, in Marion Turner, '*Troilus and Criseyde* and the 'Treasonous Aldermen' of 1382: Tales of the City in Late Fourteenth-Century London,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 225-57.

man from the foolish: Thersites' heart became the same as Diomedes'. The orator Ulysses was then of no help with his words of well chosen speech, and blessed discourse was not his.]

The significance of this passage in relation to my discussion of the *Vox* lies less in possible links between the Trojan and Greek characters Gower lists here than in his emphasis on wisdom, negotiation and discourse. According to the legend, Calchas deserted Troy at an early stage in the siege, because he, as Chaucer states 'wel wiste he by sort that Troye sholde / Destroyed ben' (*Troilus*, I, 76-7), and Antenor, again according to Chaucer, was later to become a 'traitour to the town' (*Troilus*, IV, 204). Together with Ulysses' loss of 'blessed discourse,' the references to Antenor and Calchas illustrate the inability of humans to influence and fully comprehend the course of history. Calchas knows that Troy will fall, but he cannot avert the downfall, as we have seen in Chaucer's *Troilus*,[248] and Antenor makes his fellow Trojans believe that he has negotiated a peace treaty, but they fail to realise that this treaty is insincere. Essentially, Gower's fellow Londoners are just as caught up in their destructive fate as were the Trojans, but Gower stresses that even compared to Trojans of little merit his contemporary London fails.

In fact, Gower presents London as a lesser image of Troy that is once again being ransacked by intruders who are not being met by an adequate display of force and moral integrity.

> Subdita Troiana cecidit victoria victa,
> Troiaque preda fero fit velut agna lupo.
> Rusticus agreditur, miles nec in vrbe resistit,
> Hectore Troia caret, Argos Achille suo :
> Hectoris aut Troili nil tunc audacia vicit,
> Quin magis hii victi rem sine corde sinunt ;
> Nec solito Priamus fulsit tunc liber honore,
> Set patitur dominus quid sibi seruus agat. (I, xiii, 989-96)

> [The Trojan victory was lost in defeat, and Troy became a prey to the wild beast, just like a lamb to the wolf. The peasant attacked and the knight in the city did not resist; Troy was without a Hector,

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[248] See above, p.127.

Argos without its Achilles. No boldness of a Hector or a Troilus defeated anything then, but instead those who were defeated suffered the whole affair without courage. Priam did not shine then with his usual honor; instead the master put up with whatever the servant did to him.]

Just as Hector and Troilus were slain during the final stages of the siege, so London has nothing to offer against the onslaught of the rebels. With the absence of any outstanding warriors, the defenders of the city lose their courage, and the social hierarchy is turned upside down, with Priam's loss of honour metonymic for the degeneration of the aristocracy in London.

Gower's description of the execution of Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury, combines his criticism of the upper strata of Ricardian society with the question of human foreknowledge of the future. The headnote to the chapter in question explains that 'Hic tracta secundum visionem sompnii, quasi per figuram, de morte Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi' (I, xiv, headnote) [Here he treats, as if through a symbol, of the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury, according to the vision of his dream]. Helenus was, of course, one of the many Trojans who eventually turned against their city, when he passed on the Palladium to Antenor, and he was also one of the seers who knew about the eventual downfall of the city. In this sense, Gower's choice of Helenus as analogy for Sudbury is not as ill-chosen as Stockton assumes.[249] True, Sudbury did not have the divining abilities of Helenus, and he was not related to the royal family as Helenus was, but considering Gower's subsequent criticism of the ecclesiastic orders in the *Vox*, it is obvious that Gower takes Sudbury as largely responsible for his own fate and the moral decline of English society as a whole. Federico argues that Gower here 'surprisingly, reasserts the rebels' interpretation of treason by figuring Sudbury as Helenus.'[250] Federico then, rightly, points out that Gower is essentially merely previewing his

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[249] Gower, *Major Latin Works*, 358.
[250] Federico, *New Troy*, 15.

later criticism of the upper social strata in the poem, and I would argue that Gower is at this point engaged in a two-directional movement of condemning the rebels' actions and simultaneously referring to the widespread corruption in the upper social strata as the main reason behind the Rising.

In the penultimate chapter of Book I, Gower once again returns to the legendary foundation of Britain. The rebellion has been suppressed; one of its leaders, Wat Tyler, put to the sword, but the ship on which the narrator finds himself is still in danger. It cannot find a peaceful harbour, and even when it is eventually thrown onto a landing place, the place is not peaceful. Embarking, the narrator learns from an old man that

> 'Exulis hec dici nuper solit Insula Bruti,
> Quam sibi compaciens ipsa Diana dabat.
> Huius enim terre gens hec est inchola, ritus
> Cuius amore procul dissona plura tenet.
> [...]
> Non magis esse probos ad finem solis ab ortu
> Estimo, si populi mutuus esset amor.' (I, xx, 1963-82)

> ['This once used to be called the island of Brut, an exile. Diana gave it to him out of pity. The people of this land are wild. Their way of life involves far more quarrelling than love. […] [Yet] I think there is no worthier people under the sun, if there were mutual love among them.']

Having left London, the concentrated essence of the myth of Trojan origins, the narrator now encounters the myth in its most general form: through the pagan exile Brutus, grandson of Aeneas. Gower thus goes back to the very point from which the myth of Britain's Trojan origins developed. In line with his emphasis on the perversion of his contemporary society and the theme of division and absence of mutual love, a theme that would a few years later become one of the guiding principles of his *Confessio*,[251] he laments the quarrels among Britons and stresses

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[251] For one reading of division as a central theme in the *Confessio*, see Hugh White, 'Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*,' *Neophilologus* 72 (1988): 600-16.

that this people would certainly be the worthiest, if only they found 'mutual love among them.' Essentially, even before 1381 Britain was always already flawed, both in the sense of having lost the moral values of Gower's idealised past and by basing its mythical heritage on the city of Troy that fell because of its own moral shortcomings.

In the *Vox*, the Trojan myth is one element in Gower's strategy juxtaposing the past and the present, but its use remains limited to the first book, indicating that only after the Rising of 1381 Gower thought of it as a helpful tool to emphasise his point about the shortcomings of his society. However, Troy is not a central structural element in this poem. Gower's use of the Troy material is not particularly inventive, focussing on relatively few and well known characters, and he does not relate any specific episodes from the Trojan War. Nevertheless, the very fact that he includes Trojan material in his second version of the *Vox* indicates an increasing awareness of the myth on Gower's part, and we will therefore now take a closer look at his later work, the *Confessio Amantis*.

Troy in the Prologue and Epilogue to the *Confessio Amantis*

Gower's decision to dedicate his *Confessio Amantis* to Henry of Derby, the future King Henry IV, during the sixteenth year of Richard II's reign (21 June 1392 to 21 June 1393), after a first version, dedicated to Richard II, had already been put into circulation, has led to a long running debate among critics on a perceived change in Gower's political allegiance. Undoubtedly, there is a political aspect to these revisions, and they are generally read as indicators for a growing disenchantment with Richard on Gower's part. We should not forget, however, that the rededication is not the only element Gower changed in his revision of the Prologue and ending of the *Confessio*, but that he also changed those passages in the original version of the

poem's frame narrative that openly referred to Britain's Trojan origins. These changes are intertwined with the substitution of Henry for Richard, and with regard to Gower's use of the Troy myth serve to affect the meaning of the *Confessio* in ways that are not usually taken into account by critics of the poem.

The textual history of the *Confessio* poses considerable problems for an analysis of the revisions and their likely motivations. Macaulay constructed a rather neat system of three consecutive versions of the poem, a system that has come under increasing attack in recent years.[252] Apart from a number of relatively minor readings in the over fifty *Confessio* manuscripts, the most immediately apparent changes appear in the Prologue and the ending of the poem, and we can be fairly certain that these are authorial.[253] Still, the fact that all extant *Confessio* manuscripts date from after 1400, and considerable doubt must remain as to the exact timing and sequence of Gower's revisions. It is all but impossible to draw up a linear table of manuscript provenance, and we should also remember that the dates written in the margins of or in the revisions themselves might be misleading and could have been inserted at a later date.[254] As I am here more interested in Gower's treatment of the Troy myth in the *Confessio* than in his view of Richard's conduct as king, I will not attempt to pinpoint specific events during Richard's reign that might or might not have prompted him to replace the dedication to the king. Indeed, as Lynn Staley has recently pointed out, we should read Gower's revisions more with an eye on fairly general, long-term developments in the 1390s than with a desire to single out individual historical events,[255] and the general cultural currency of the Troy myth in

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[252] For recent critiques of Macaulay's system, see Peter Nicholson, 'Gower's Revisions in the *Confessio Amantis*,' *The Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 123-43; Staley, 'Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,' 77-80.

[253] Nicholson, 'Gower's Revisions in the *Confessio Amantis*,' 140.

[254] Fisher, *John Gower*, 120.

[255] Staley, 'Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,' 75.

Ricardian England provides an appropriate reference point for such a reading of revisions in the frame narrative of the *Confessio*.

The most immediately apparent differences between the two Prologues are the change from 'A bok for king Richardes sake, / to whom belongeth my ligeance' (Prol., 24*-5*) in the first version to 'A bok for Engelondes sake, / the yer sextenthe of kyng Richard' (Prol., 24-5) in the revised version, and the fact that the revised version has Henry of Derby as Gower's liege lord (Prol., 86-7). For my reading of Troy in the *Confessio*, the excision of the river scene is the most important change in the whole prologue.

> As it bifel upon a tyde,
> As thing which scholde tho betyde, -
> Under the toun of newe Troye,
> Which tok of Brut his ferste joye,
> In Temse when it was flowende
> As I be bote cam rowende,
> So as fortune hir tyme sette,
> My liege lord par chaunce I mette; (Prol., 35*-42*)

We know from the *Vox* that Gower was used to naming London New Troy, and this references to the Thames picks up on the earlier poem. Whether this chance encounter between Gower the poet and Richard the king actually took place has been a matter of some debate,[256] but for my purposes, the answer to this question is not essential. It will suffice if we leave the question of the truth-value of the episode aside and consider its excision in the light of what happened next on Richard's barge. Gower changes the specific commissioning of the poem by the king ('Som newe thing I sholde boke, / That he himself it mihte loke' [Prol., 51*-2*]) to the rather less striking

> Thus I, which am a burel clerk,
> Purpose forto wryte a bok
> After the world that whilom tok
> Long tyme in olde daies passed; (Prol., 52-5)

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[256] For a summary of this discussion, see Grady, 'Gower's Boat, Richard's Barge,' 3-7.

Gower excises both the grand Trojan scene on Brutus' river and the royal commission for the poem, but to understand the motives behind this, we must first mention the changes Gower made to the ending of the poem.

Towards the end of Book 8, after the dreamer has taken his leave from Venus' court, Gower also revised the epilogue to the poem. The original version has a Latin prayer inserted after line 2970*:

> Ad laudem Cristi, quem tu, virgo, peperisti,
> Sit laus Ricardi, quem sceptra colunt leopardi.
> Ad sua precepta compleui carmina cepta,
> Que Bruti nata legat Anglia perpetuata.
>
> [In praise of Christ, conceived
> By virgin pure and fair,
> Let praise of Richard be,
> Whom leopard arms declare;
> Begun at his command,
> The poems are now complete
> For all time and for England
> Brutus' child, to read.]

In the revised version this is changed to:

> Parce precor, Criste, populus quo gaudeat iste ;
> Anglia ne triste subeat, rex summe, resiste.
> Corrige quosque status, fragiles absolute reatus ;
> Vnde deo gratus vigeat locus iste beatus.
>
> [I pray thee, Christ, be kind
> That England joy may find
> And keep her, King of kings,
> From suffering sad things.
> With all estates be firm,
> Toward sinners mercy turn,
> That pleasing God this place
> May flourish in thy grace.]

Both versions mention England, but both King Richard and Brutus are excised in the revision, focussing more on England in general and Christ as 'rex summe.' Thus, the epilogue continues the complementary excisions of both Richard and Troy from the Prologue, indicating that these are intricately intertwined elements.

We can safely assume that the rededication prompted Gower to erase the

Trojan references from the frame of the *Confessio*, especially since the myth of Britain's Trojan origins was quite closely linked to royal authority. On a general level, the myth was an important tool for English kings to justify their position of power based on a royal lineage stretching back all the way to the legendary founder of Britain, Brutus.[257] By the time the *Confessio* was put into circulation, there must have already been an increasing concern throughout England as to who would succeed the childless Richard after his death, and it would be plausible that the explicit use of the Troy myth was seen by Gower as drawing too much attention to the uncertain issue of royal succession. Furthermore, Gower makes Henry the de facto heir not to the throne but to the position of dedicatee of the *Confessio*, making it even more complicated to have Troy alongside Henry in the poem. This would effectively have constituted a statement in favour of Henry's eventual succession to the throne, a statement that would most probably have been inconceivable to Gower in the early 1390s.

The issue of succession was, by the 1390s, quite complicated. In a charter dating from late 1376 or early 1377, Edward III had explicitly privileged John of Gaunt as Richard's successor.[258] However, in 1385, Richard had himself named Roger Mortimer as his heir, a move that went against the earlier charter by his grandfather, and which, in 1394, was opposed by Gaunt in parliament.[259] We can assume that Gaunt's parliamentary action in 1394 did arise from an uneasiness with Richard's choice of heir that had also been felt by those not directly linked to Gaunt's circle(s). In this climate, Gower's dedication to Henry of Derby would have made the use of the Troy myth a very daring move.

Between the first and final version of the poem, the Prologue and ending

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[257] See Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*, 199-200.
[258] See Michael Bennett, 'Edward III's Entail and the Succession to the Crown, 1376-1471,' *English Historical Review* 113 (1998): 580-609.
[259] See Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 77-8.

show a move away from specific issues to more general points. The river-scene on the Thames presents Richard as the source of regal power through its use of London and the Thames as Brutus' city and river. Most importantly, the king is portrayed as the poem's patron, essentially the source of Gower's poetic enterprise. The first version also includes a prolonged passage of praise for Richard at the end of Book Eight. Taken together, beginning and ending of the first version of the poem firmly establish Richard as addressee of the poem, and it is this direct address that is taken out of the final version. Here we read that the poem is written for 'Engelondes sake,' and there is no mention of the grand scene on the Thames. At the end of the poem, a general discussion of virtuous kingship is substituted for the earlier praise of a specific king, Richard. This move towards a wider frame of reference also has implications for the poem as a whole,[260] suggesting that Gower felt the initial close connection with Richard to be too limiting for his poem.

The Trojan Episodes in the *Confessio Amantis*

The Trojan episodes in the *Confessio* pose two significant difficulties for the interpreter. Firstly, they are quite unevenly distributed across the first six books of the poem. Secondly, the erasure of the Trojan references in the frame narrative would suggest that the significance of the Trojan episodes for the meaning of the poem as whole does not lie in their shared Trojan theme. These episodes do, nonetheless, relate to the confession frame of the poem, if we take this to mean that Gower wants his audience to extract profitable learning from the *Confessio*. We have already seen how Gower directs the *Confessio* towards Richard II's and England's sake in the first and revised versions respectively, suggesting that the tales Genius relates must have a significance for both the king and the realm in a

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[260] Staley, 'Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,' 78.

more general sense. Amans serves as metonymic representative who is supposed to delight in and learn from the stories he hears, and the tales of Troy provide a focal point for this learning process.[261] To a degree, Gower's poetic voice is similar to Nestor's in the tale of 'Athemas and Demephon' (III, 1757-856), where Nestor is the only one to oppose the hasty decisions of the two kings and suggests that 'better is to winne be fair speche' (III, 1833).

It is significant that Gower all but ignores the actual siege of Troy, focussing mainly on the reasons for and consequences of the Trojan War. This focus possibly arises out of an awareness of the widespread knowledge of the siege, but at the same time an insufficient awareness on the part of the audience of what Gower considers the key reasons behind the War. In order to highlight the all too human failings that caused the war, Gower consciously selects the tales of 'Jason and Medea' (V, 3240-4223) and 'Paris and Helen' (V, 7195-695) as his two core episodes in which the immediate causes of the War surface. However, before he presents us with these two tales, he sets up a pageant of Trojan stories in the wider sense, ranging from the eve of the destruction of Troy in the tale of the 'Trojan Horse' (I, 1077-209) to the hiding of Achilles in 'Achilles and Deidamia' (V, 2961-3201). Thus, he presents his audience with the wider context of the Trojan War before he embarks on his more detailed discussion of how it started in the first place.

Like Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*, Gower expects his audience to know the general aspects of the Trojan War. Over the course of his Trojan tales, Gower only gradually provides information about the siege, with the first three tales ('Trojan Horse,' 'King Namplus and the Greeks,' [III, 973-1088] and 'Athemas and Demephon') mentioning the siege but not its precise context and causes. At the

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[261] Winthrop Wetherbee, 'John Gower,' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 589-609 (602).

opening of the 'Tale of Orestes' (III, 1885-2195) a tale with strongly political undertones,[262] we are told that 'the siege laste longe there, / er that the Greks it mihten winne' (II, 1888-9), but this remains but a cursory description of the context of the siege. Only in the tale of 'Achilles and Deidamia' does Gower provide a rudimentary causal frame for the War:

> For it befell that ilke throwe
> At Troie, wher the Siege lay
> Upon the cause of Menelay
> And of his queene dame Heleine,
> That Gregois hadden mochel peine
> Alday to fighte and to assaile. (V, 3070-5)

Situating Helen and Menelaus at the centre of the Troy story, Gower treads a very thin line between assuming knowledge on his audience's part, presumably through the popular Troy books of Benoît and Guido,[263] and at the same time supplying the central elements of the story himself. The further Gower progresses in the *Confessio* and the closer he gets to his central tale of 'Paris and Helen,' the more he has to employ his selective memory in order to guide his audience in the desired direction of his enquiry into the reasons of the Trojan War.

However, the fact that Gower gradually reminds his audience of the elements of the Troy story does not mean that he employs Troy as a direct parallel for his contemporary society. As is the case in the *Vox*, there is a temporal distance between London and Troy that is diligently upheld throughout the *Confessio*.[264] Genius frequently refers to written sources, as, for example, when he opens the tale of 'Achilles and Deidamia' with the line 'in a Cronique write I finde' (V, 2960).

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[262] See Fisher, *John Gower*, 196; Elizabeth Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm,' in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 135-62 (150).

[263] For a discussion of the sources for the *Confessio*, see Karl Eichinger, *Die Trojasage als Stoffquelle fuer John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Munich: Wolf, 1900).

[264] For this element in the *Vox*, see Galloway, 'Gower in His Most Learned Role,' 332.

This conforms to Gower's general strategy to treat the past as it is contained in books as both removed from and significant for the present. In this sense, Gower's Trojan tales could be seen to achieve a similarly mirroring effect to that of Chaucer's *Troilus*, and the individual tales do indeed repeatedly mention certain themes. One of the most prominent of these themes are the repeated sieges and wars endured by the Greeks. Only at the last minute are Athemas and Demephon convinced not to slaughter their subjects wholesale. Agamemnon's son seeks vengeance for his father's murder, laying siege to his mother's city 'til ate laste thei it wonne' (III, 2049), clearly echoing the prolonged siege of Troy. This sequence of sieges and wars implicitly extends from Troy to London, especially given the importance of London as New Troy.

These constant reminders of wars and sieges underline Gower's ambivalent view on war and peace.[265] There are examples, most notably the tales of 'Athemas and Demephon' and 'Telaphus and Teucer' (III, 2639-717), in which Gower shows how unnecessary bloodshed can be avoided, but there are also instances where Gower illustrates the human inability to avert wars and slaughter. For example, in the tale of the 'Trojan Horse' he unambiguously presents the Trojans in a good light and condemns the Greeks,[266] but the Trojans are still unable to avert the fall of their city. Once the Greeks have finished their horse and brought it to the gates of the city, the Trojans approach it 'in gret devocioun' (I, 1139), failing to detect the Greek ploy. Soon they realise that the horse is too big for the city gates, and

> Thei of the toun, whiche understonde
> That al this thing was do for goode,
> For pes, wherof that thei ben glade,
> The gates that Neptunus made
> A thousand wynter ther tofore,
> Thei have anon tobroke and tore ;
> The stronge walles doun thei bete,
> So that in to the large strete

[265] For Gower's pacifism, see above, p. 72 and Yeager, '*Pax Poetica*.'
[266] Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, 135-6.

> This hors with gret solempnite
> Was broght withinne the Cite,
> And offred with gret reverence,
> Which was to Troie an evidence
> Of love and pes for everemo. (I, 1149-61)

Of course, these 'strong walles' are not the ancient walls proper, for the Greeks had already razed Laomedon's Troy to the ground and Priam built a new Troy, which was then besieged. The emphasis on Neptune as the original founder of the city and the thousand years that have passed since then serves Gower to highlight the fact that the Trojans, by dismantling the city's defences, also sever the ties to the originary moment in their history. Once again we are reminded of the *Vox* with its lament on the rupture between past and present.

Gower's treatment of the subject of Troy is capped by the tales of 'Jason and Medea' and 'Paris and Helen,' which provide the background for virtually all preceding Trojan tales.[267] By deferring the discussion of the root-causes for the Trojan War until these two relatively extended tales, with the exception of 'Ulysses and Telegonus' (VI, 1391-788) the last of the Trojan episodes, Gower heightens its effect. The audience already knows the outcome, and can thus closely scrutinise the Trojans and the Greeks on the path leading them to war. Both stories were frequently moralised in the Middle Ages, and this popularity makes them particularly suited for Gower's purpose.[268] By utilising two well known episodes and inserting them at the end of his wide-ranging treatment of the Trojan War, he can focus on the human failures at the root of the siege of Troy and can lay his narrative stress on those moments where the in no way inevitable war could have been averted, had reason and good governance held reign in both the Trojan and Greek circles.

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[267] Russell A. Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 120-2.

[268] Derek Pearsall, 'Gower's Narrative Art,' *PMLA* 81 (1966): 475-84 (483).

Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece lies at the root of the Trojan War. On their way to Colchos, Jason and the Argonauts briefly land on Trojan soil, and Genius duly reports Laomedon's inhospitable behaviour towards them:

> Hou Lamedon the king of Troie,
> Which oghte wel have mad hem joie,
> Whan theu to reste a while him preide,
> Out of his lond he hem congeide ;
> And so fell the dissencion,
> Which after was destruccion
> Of that Cite, as men mai hiere :
> Bot that is noght to mi matiere. (V, 3303-10)

Despite being merely an aside 'that is noght to mi matiere,' Genius succeeds in linking Jason's quest to the Trojan War and thus the other Trojan tales. Because of this link Gower's descriptions of Jason and Medea are especially significant for our understanding of his view of the Troy story as a whole. Throughout the tale Jason is presented as worthy but vain. In fact, Gower erases all those elements from his tale that might serve to heighten our approval of Jason. There is no mention of Peleus' intrigue against Jason, which is found in Gower's sources, Benoît, Guido, and Ovid,[269] effectively stripping Jason of any motive for deserting Medea. The all but suppressed reference to Laomedon also serves to deny the audience any ground to sympathise with Jason.[270] Jason is longing for earthly adventure and we are not given any hints of a higher motivation behind his actions.[271] The tale thus creates a layer of human folly and unreasonable behaviour at the root of the Trojan War.

Medea, on the other hand, is seen slightly more favourable than in Benoît and Guido. However, this does not arise out of an erasure of her unnatural deeds.

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[269] For a source study, see Eichinger, *Die Trojasage als Stoffquelle fuer John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, 58-71.

[270] Pearsall, 'Gower's Narrative Art,' 482; Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 109-10.

[271] John Lawlor, 'On Romanticism in the *Confessio Amantis*,' in *Patterns of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C.S. Lewis*, ed. John Lawlor (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 122-40 (130-1). For another position, see C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study of Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 210.

She does act against nature, and quite spectacularly so, by rejuvenating Eson and killing the two sons she bore Jason, but these acts are unmistakably linked to Jason's perjury.[272] Because Jason is meant to appear as the villain in this tale exemplifying perjury, Medea's shortcomings are not amplified in the way that Jason's motivation and eventual perjury are brought to the centre of the narrative. Medea's trust in Jason does seem naïve, but Jason does nonetheless vow to 'treuly fulfille / Youre heste, whil mi lif mai laste' (V, 3454-5).[273] This vow he obviously does not fulfil, and Medea becomes a metonym for the countless people who suffer in the Trojan War because of perjury, and to whom Gower devotes the other Trojan episodes in the *Confessio*.

In relation to Troy, 'Jason and Medea' should be read as a prelude to 'Paris and Helen.' John Fisher is certainly right in claiming that the tale, 'fraught with political overtones' as it is, contributes to the development of political themes in the *Confessio*.[274] However, it does not just contribute to the political themes, but more significantly to the Trojan plot in the poem. Read in the context of the preceding Troy episodes, 'Jason and Medea' points our attention to the reasons for the Trojan War, preparing us for the more detailed discussion in 'Paris and Helen,' but at the same time providing an alternative set of events to those in Priam's Troy. Similar to Chaucer's strategy of extending the Trojan frame backwards to the story of Thebes, Gower inscribes Jason's vain quest for the Golden Fleece and his unjustified betrayal of Medea in our memory as a cause no less significant than the abduction of Helen.

The tale of 'Paris and Helen' opens by stating that it is 'to alle men, as who seith knowe' (V, 7195) how Hercules and Jason approached Laomedon 'bot he hem

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[272] For the relation of Jason's sin to Medea's unnaturalness, see Patrick Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Pres, 1975), 155.

[273] Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, 121.

[274] Fisher, *John Gower*, 196.

wrathfully congeide' (V, 7202). This is essentially a reiteration of the passage in 'Jason and Medea,' but this time it is not immediately banished to the sidelines of the story. We are informed of the Greeks' vengeance on Troy, which 'destruide king and al, / and leften bot the brente wal' (V, 7209-10). The core of this passage is the fact that the Greeks take many hostages,

> Among the whiche ther was on,
> The kinges doughter Lamedon,
> Esione, that faire thing,
> Which unto Thelamon the king
> Be Hercules and be thassent
> Of al the hole parlement
> Was at his wille yove and granted. (V, 7213-9)

By refusing his hospitality to the Argonauts, Laomedon settles not only his fate, but also that of his city, and, through Esiona as hostage, that of the new Troy that will be built by his son, Priam, 'which was not thilke time at hom' (V, 7227). Laomedon's error is, however, not the only instance where false judgement has destructive consequences. Thelamon's refusal to return Esiona is another, because it eventually leads to Paris' abduction of Helen, which in return is based on an unreasonable decision by the Trojan parliament.[275] This recurring pattern urges Gower's audience to consider the individual steps leading up to the fateful abduction, which is after all the central concern in this exemplar of sacrilege, and it also has implications for London as the medieval version of Priam's 'cite newe' (V, 7231).

The rebuilding of Laomedon's Troy by his son, Priam, is initially described as praiseworthy. The 'cite newe' is strong enough that 'a fewe men it mihte kepe / from al the world' (V, 7250-1), and it is impossible to tell 'hou that the cite was riche of good' (V, 7257). Troy is once again seemingly impregnable, but there are dark clouds looming on the horizon:

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[275] Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 120-2.

> King Priamus to him bethoghte
> What thei of Grece whilom wroghte,
> And what was of her swerd devoured,
> And hou his Soster deshonoured
> With Thelamon awey was lad :
> And so thenkende he wax unglad,
> And sette anon a parlement,
> To which the lordes were assent. (V, 7259-66)

Priam's loyalty to his family negatively affects his awareness of both his father's behaviour that led to the destruction of Troy and to the Greeks' military might which was able to overcome the defences of Laomedon's Troy. All Priam can think of is his revenge for his dishonoured sister. However, Priam is not presented as despicably vengeful as Namplus in 'Namplus and the Greeks.' The fact that he immediately convenes a parliament to discuss the course of action clearly shows that Troy is a city wisely governed by a king who seeks the counsel of his lords.[276] Thus the tale has direct implications for Gower's London and Richard II as the English king, and the proceedings that follow in the tale are related to Gower's historical context, even if they are not necessarily aligned with precise contemporary events.

Priam's treatment of the lords of Troy would have gained a special significance in the light of Richard II's relations with the city of London, which had been worsening for a long time. In 1392 they escalated into open hostilities, when Richard failed to secure a loan from the city.[277] The accounts of this event in the contemporary chronicles are remarkable in that they do not blame either side of the dispute, but rather blame Richard's counsellors, reminding us of Gower's first

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[276] Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 120-2.

[277] For this 'long-running grudge, ' see Caroline M. Barron, 'The Quarrel of Richard II with London, 1392-7,' in *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of May McKisack*, ed. F.R.H. du Boulay and Caroline M. Barron (London: 1971), 173-217. See also Fisher, *John Gower*, 118.

version of the *Vox*.[278] However, Lynn Staley has pointed out that in relation to the subsequent reconciliation between Richard and the city we should not only look at the chronicle accounts but also at Richard Maidstone's *Concordia*. In this Latin poem, the reconciliation takes place between New Troy and Richard and is described in deliberately majestic tones. Richard is compared to, among others, Paris and Troilus, in Staley's words 'implicitly urging him to maintain control by displaying a wisdom those earlier figures did not possess.'[279] The tale of 'Paris and Helen' combines these two elements of contemporary discourse, the common figuration of London as New Troy and the attack on Richard II's advisors.

The parliament does indeed justify the trust invested in it by both the king and framework of political advice in the *Confessio*.

> Thei seiden alle, 'Accord and pes.'
> To setten either part in reste
> It thoghte hem thanne for the beste
> With resonable amendement ;
> And thus was Anthenor forth sent
> To axe Esionam ayein
> And witen what thei wolden sein. (V, 7270-6)

The Trojans by no means seek peace without any concession on the Greeks' part, but send Antenor to demand Esiona back. The focus here is on negotiations as opposed to immediate war, and as such the passage ties in with Gower's dislike for avoidable war, and can also be read as a narrative refraction of the ongoing peace negotiations between England and France that were contributing to the alienation between Richard II and the magnates of the realm.[280] However, because of Thelamon's refusal and the Greeks' 'wordes stoute' (V, 7282) that Antenor brings back from his mission, this chance for peace is forfeited, and once again an error of

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[278] See, for example, L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey, eds., *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), 496-7.

[279] Staley, 'Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,' 80.

[280] See above, p. 28 and Saul, *Richard II*, 197, 205-34.

judgement, this time on the part of Thelamon, raises the spectre of a destructive war. The Trojans are forced to reconvene in a second parliament, deciding their reaction to this most recent rebuke.

This second parliament is centred on the opposing views of Hector and Paris, both sons of the king and worthy warriors. Hector cautions his fellow citizens, pointing out the might of the Greeks, because 'to hem belongeth al Europe' (V, 7340), but also vows to accept any parliamentary accord, and that in the case of a war against the Greeks he will 'be the ferste / to grieven hem' (V, 7364-5). In Hector's judgement

> Betre is to leve, than beginne
> Thing which as mai noght ben achieved ;
> He is noght wys that fint him grieved,
> And doth so that his grief be more ;
> For who that loketh al tofore
> And wol noght se what is behinde,
> He mai fulofte hise harmes finde. (V, 7346-52)

According to Hector, reasoned foresight is preferable to a war that cannot be won. The Trojans should see beyond their immediate grief and take into account the possibility of immeasurably increasing this very grief by engaging the Greek 'manhode / of worthinesse and of knihthode' (V, 7337-8). Paris, on the other hand, points out that

> Strong thing it is to soffre wrong,
> And suffre shame is more strong,
> Bot we have suffred bothe tuo. (V, 7377-9)

Paris wants the Trojans to go to war, because of the wrong and the shame they have suffered at the hands of the Greeks. In the parliamentary debate, Hector and Paris represent mature and wilful judgement respectively.[281] Thus this second Trojan parliament takes up the issue of wise and unwise counsel that are the key points of the first parliament scene.

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[281] Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 120-1.

Up to this point, the description of the Trojans is neither favourable nor condemning. They have voted for peace in the first parliament, and might well do the likewise in this crucial scene. However, it does not take long for the famous judgement of Paris to enter the scene (V, 7400-29), and for the Trojans to go along with Paris' unwise counsel. In Gower's version the Trojan War is essentially caused by a dream,[282] and the subsequent dismissal of Cassandra's warning that the Trojans shall 'ben for evere thanne undo' (V, 7450) stresses the importance in this tale on wise speech as opposed to vengeance and unreasonable decisions.[283] The consequences of this decision have already been dealt with in the other Trojan episodes in the *Confessio*, but to make sure that the audience does not miss the point, the tale goes on to relate how

> [...]Paris out of holi place
> Be Stelthe hath take a mannes wif,
> Wherof that he shal lese his lif
> And many a worthi man therto,
> And al the Cite be fordo,
> Which nevere shal be mad ayein.
> And so it fell, riht as thei sein,
> The Sacrilege which he wroghte
> Was cause why the Gregois soughte
> Unto the toun and it beleie, (V, 7572-81)

The abduction of Helen here serves as an explanation why the tale of 'Paris and Helen' is included under the heading of sacrilege, and David Hiscoe has suggested that 'Genius inevitably implies that the rape would have been just fine had it taken place elsewhere.'[284] However, this passage does not limit the whole tale to the topic of sacrilege, but rather focuses it even more strongly on Paris' actions and the wilfulness of his counsel. The confession frame demands that the tale has to be

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[282] Constance B. Hieatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions: The Poetic Exploitation of the Dream-Experience in Chaucer and His Contemporaries* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 47.

[283] Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury*, 58.

[284] David W. Hiscoe, 'The Ovidian Comic Strategy in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*,' *Philological Quarterly* 64 (1985): 367-85 (368).

applied to and adapted for a particular sin, and in this case Paris' sacrilege is not inappropriate in a tale that continuously sets up the dichotomy of good and bad counsel, reason and wilfulness.

Conclusion

The matter of Troy can be found in Gower's writings from the early 1380s to the early 1390s, with traces still present in later revisions of the *Confessio*. The most general feature of Gower's use of Troy in his poetry is the analogy between Troy and London as New Troy, but he goes beyond the common, glorifying use of the myth of Britain's Trojan origins. In the *Vox*, he widens the scope of the Troy-London analogy by employing it in order to highlight the shortcomings of his contemporary society when compared to its—itself fatally flawed—Trojan predecessor. Troy effectively becomes one particular element of the always already lost past that, even if it is not ideal, is ultimately preferable to the thoroughly corrupted society in which Gower finds himself and that he criticises throughout the poem.

This move beyond the constraints of the traditional story can also be felt in the *Confessio*. The erasure of the Trojan references in the Prologue and Epilogue in the second and third recension illustrate Gower's growing awareness of the links between the traditional Troy myth and royal lineage. The excision of the references opens up the way for an interpretation of the Trojan episodes in the poem that is not handcuffed to the myth of Trojan origins, and that can therefore focus on the underlying theme of human failure leading towards war, whilst still building upon the knowledge of the analogy between Troy and Britain/London. Thus, Gower's critical selection of material from the pool of Trojan memory can be read as directly informed by an agenda to raise his audience's awareness of its own shortcomings,

by analysing the misled decisions that led to the destruction of Troy and the numerous minor and major upheavals connected to the siege. Gower re-affirms his society's debt to the past, but does so selectively, filtering his Trojan memory in a way that highlights the shortcomings and human failures of his contemporary society.

5 The *Tale of Melibee* and *Confessio Amantis* VII: What to do with Knowledge

> When the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle; only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it.[285]

> These individuals do not carry forward any kind of process but live contemporaneously with one another; thanks to history, which permits such a collaboration, they live as that republic of genius of which Schopenhauer once spoke; one giant calls to another across the desert intervals of time and, undisturbed by the excited, chattering dwarfs who creep about beneath them, the exalted spirit-dialogue goes on.[286]

These two passages from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Untimely Meditations* respectively provide an appropriate starting point for this chapter that is concerned with the ways in which Chaucer and Gower utilise the past and its writings for largely political purposes within their immediate present. The focus now shifts away from questions on how both writers represent and reshape their sources to the question of what exactly is to be done with sources from the past and the knowledge they contain. Nietzsche's invocation of the 'architect of the future' and the exalted dialogue between the supermen that constitute the republic of genius serves to illustrate that for Nietzsche, and, as I argue in this chapter for Chaucer and Gower, the past is nothing but a raw material. Only when the Delphic utterances of the past and the dialogue between the supermen can be transformed and shaped into statements that are comprehensible in the present of the 'chattering dwarfs' can they become meaningful, a view that obviously does not provide for a stable set of meanings contained in the past.

We have already seen how Chaucer and Gower utilise the mythical past of ancient Troy for their critique of Ricardian society, but we have not yet focussed on

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[285] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 94.

[286] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Holingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 111.

the specific poetics of the past and politics of present and future. This chapter, then, is about the usefulness of a past in the present, and strategies for transforming this past into a tool for shaping the future. Until recently, Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* has often been ignored or discarded by critics; a trend that has only in the last two decades been reversed. As David Wallace succinctly puts it, we should treat '*Melibee* as if it were worthy of a literary-critical reading.'[287] We might as well leave out the 'as if' qualification. The tale, with its array of authoritative quotations and concern with proper counsel and action within the present, is certainly worthy of our serious attention. I want to read the *Melibee* alongside Book VII of Gower's *Confessio*, another text that has over the last twenty years become the focal point of critical attention. It is no longer seen as the long digression Macaulay perceived it to be, but is regarded as a central element of Gower's poem.[288] Book VII is central to Gower's project, not just in the *Confessio* but in his literary oeuvre as a whole, insofar that it brings together many of the elements that are only touched on in the rest of his works. We have Genius as the lecturing authority figure who assembles a congregation of past authorities that he then applies to the immediate context of Amans' confession and the larger question of proper rule of the body politic.

This chapter, therefore, is concerned with knowledge of the past and its application(s) in the present. Before we can move on to the question of how these two texts can be applied to the context of Ricardian England, however, we have to begin with an analysis of the use of textual traces of the past within the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII themselves. In both texts, different strategies are employed to utilise authoritative writings of the past within the present. The next step on the way to the

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[287] Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 229.

[288] See John Gower, *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. George C. Macaulay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), xix-xx. For some recent studies see Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 198-229; Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 191-214; Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 282-97; Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm.'

wider Ricardian context is the portrayal of audiences within the two texts. The *Melibee* is addressed, in the first instance, to the fictional assembly of pilgrims, and Genius, in *Confessio* VII, directly addresses Amans, who also commissions the long excursus on the education of princes. The reactions of both these fictional audiences, as well as several other imbedded audiences in the texts are vitally important for my reading of the relationship between the texts and their immediate socio-political context of England in the 1390s. The chapter closes with this relationship, arguing that both texts employ their poetics of the past in order to facilitate a politics of present and future. The politics informing both texts necessarily consists of pieces and fragments and remains unfinished, but is nonetheless addressed to the reconstructive efforts of the political actor (i. e. every member of the body politic), whom Nietzsche calls the 'architect of the future.'

Old Texts in a Contemporary Context

Both the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII employ traditional knowledge and authoritative texts from the past as central elements in their discussion of authority and proper rule in the present. Essentially, both Chaucer and Gower are engaged in a project of transposing past texts into their present. The *Melibee* is an almost verbatim translation of Renaud de Louens' *Livre de Melibee* (1337), which in return is a fairly free translation of Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii* (1246).[289] *Confessio* VII, on the other hand, is not as close a translation as the *Melibee*. It relies heavily on the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum* tradition, Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum* (1277-80), from which much of the section on *Practique* is taken and Brunetto Latini's *Livres dou Tresor* (1260-7),

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[289] For a discussion of the sources for the *Melibee*, see William Askins, 'The Tale of Melibee,' in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, I*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), 321-408 (321-8).

which supplies the division of philosophy that forms the basis of Genius'

exposition.[290] The question both Chaucer and Gower's texts ask, therefore, is how

old and authoritative texts can be put to use within the temporal confines of the

present.

The *Melibee* is a useful example of Chaucer's appropriation of textual

material for the discursive demands of the present. As Daniel Kempton succinctly

puts it, Chaucer's source 'is not an origin and arbiter of the tale's meaning but

merely another version of the text, which is heard in the background as counterpoint

and dissonance.'[291] In this sense it is important to note Chaucer's addition of short

passages throughout his tale that serve to bring the *Melibee* more closely in line

with his other works. For example, in the *Thopas-Melibee* link, Chaucer the pilgrim

states that the tale he is about to tell after his *Tale of Sir Thopas* is cut short by the

host is 'told somtyme in sundry wise / of sundry folk' (VII, 941-2). This focus on

change through time reminds us of the stress on 'sundry ages,' 'sundry londes,' and

'sundry usages' in *Troilus*, which as I have argued in chapter three is a self-

consciously historiographical poem. This implied link between the two poems

illustrates that the *Melibee* is not simply a close translation of an earlier text, but

also a treatise on how the textual past can be put to use within the present.

The central aspect of the *Melibee* is the opposition between words 'spoken

discreetly by ordinaunce' (VII, 113) and the 'wordes in an hochepot' (VII, 1257)

that Melibee creates out of his first counsel. Given the sheer number of authoritative

quotations we encounter throughout the tale, the *Melibee* would seem to be much

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[290] For readings of *Confessio* VII as a mirror for princes, see Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 108-34; M. A. Manzalaoui, '"Noght in the Registre of Venus": Gower's English Mirror for Princes,' in *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett, Aetatis Suae LXX*, ed. P. L. Heyworth (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), 159-83; Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, 191-214; Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm'; Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 282-97; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 198-229.

[291] Daniel Kempton, 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee: 'A Litel Thyng in Prose',' *Genre* 21 (1988): 263-78 (note 7).

more of a 'hochepot' than a text ordered by 'ordinaunce.' This reminds us of the *House of Fame*, particularly of its closing scene in the house of rumour. Whereas in the earlier poem Chaucer's narrator encounters a great congregation of people, who 'rouned everych in the others ere' (2044), Prudence at one point exclaims that the 'trouthe of thynges and the profit been rather founden in fewe folk that been wise and ful of resoun than by gret multitude of folk ther every men crieth and clatereth what that hym liketh.' (VII, 1069). We can see, therefore, that the addition of the 'hochepot' image highlights the theme of multiple voices in the *Melibee*, aligning the translation with the open-ended theory of history as Chaucer develops it in the *House of Fame*.[292]

But we should not limit our reading of the *Melibee* to a comparison with Chaucer's other works. With regard to the treatment of old texts within the context of the tale, the general collapsing of temporal distances is highly significant.[293] Because the sources quoted are no longer situated in the distant past, they can become semi-active participants in the narrative, brought to life in a puppet theatre of authorities by Melibee and Prudence in their function as the discursive centres of the poem. Melibee and Prudence are comparable to Nietzsche's supermen. They are engaged in a collaboration across time, calling to past authorities and making them speak in the present. As an audience, we are not directly involved in this dialogue, raising the question whether critical opinion on the *Melibee* is just one instance of what Nietzsche would call the chattering of dwarfs. In order to better understand the use of sources in the *Melibee*, we have to listen in to Melibee and Prudence's discussion and make sense of their processes of making sense of older sources.

In contrast to the *Melibee*, *Confessio* VII constantly emphasise the age of the

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[292] See above, p. 88.
[293] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 209.

sources Genius cites in his 'lecture on higher education,'[294] stressing the temporal distance between the past of the sources and the present of Amans' confession. In addition, Genius explicitly states that he actively seeks his material in his sources, implying that they are passive material out of which he can shape his lecture. In this respect, *Confessio* VII is wholly congruent with Gower's general strategy to stress the distance and rupture between past and present that is an element in the *Confessio* from the opening statement 'of hem that written ous tofore' (Prol., 1), and found even more explicitly in the lament on the state of Gower's contemporary society and the over-saturation with borrowed lines that we find in the *Vox*. For Gower, source material is significant and meaningful in relation to the present, but in contrast to Chaucer, he is at pains not to make it an integral part of that present.

As is the case in the rest of Gower's oeuvre, *Confessio* VII invariably depicts his present as an inferior offspring of the past. For example, Genius says at the beginning of the section on liberality that 'The worldes good was ferst commune / Bot afterward upon fortune / Was thilke comun profit cessed' (VII, 1991-3). The deterioration of the original harmony is presented as entirely manmade, for 'anon for singulier beyete / drouh every man to his partie' (VII, 1996-7). The harmony is not lost accidentally, but rather actively given up. Division and the neglected 'comun profit' are, of course, central elements in the *Confessio*, as numerous critics have pointed out,[295] and the combination of disruption and the need for and chance to order and rearrange the cultural past is an important factor informing Genius' treatment of his old sources in the present of the confession. For Gower, knowledge exists in a chain stretching from the past to the present, and in *Confessio* VII there are two instances where Genius explicitly draws up lineages of knowledge. In the course of his discussion of Astronomy, he states that 'thei hadde

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[294] Manzalaoui, '"Noght in the Registre of Venus",' 165.
[295] Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 279-80; White, 'Division and Failure.'

a gret travail on honde / that made it ferst ben understonde' (1443-4) and of the first

lawgivers he says that their 'name shal be rad and sunge / and holde in Croniquee

write' (3048-9). More specifically,

> Unto thebreus was Moïses
> The ferste, and to thegipciens
> Mercurius, and to Troiens
> Ferst was Neume Pompilius,
> To Athenes Ligurgius
> Yaf ferste the lawe, and to Gregois
> Foronëus hath thilke vois,
> And Romulus to the Romeins. (3054-61)

This passage is significant insofar as it not only stresses the importance of the

respective first lawgivers, but also, through the skilled use of enjambments,

emphasises the interrelation between them. Such stress on lineages calls for the

virtuous mind (in the figure of Genius) to impose a structure on the apparent chaos

and division of knowledge over the course of historical development.

These different uses of sources in the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII illustrate

Chaucer's and Gower's views on history and historical development. The *Melibee*

focuses on dialogue as the main structuring element, and this brings with it the

possibility of disagreement between the two speakers. Only Prudence's 'rhetorical

performance'eventually makes Melibee grudgingly accept her proposed reaction to

the attack on his household and end the cycle of violence.[296] In addition, there is

never any wholesale agreement between the authorities quoted by both speakers.

For example, Prudence argues that God, as the sovereign judge, expects humans to

'Leveth the vengeance to me, and I shal do it' (1459), whereas Melibee quotes

another source, saying that 'If thou take no vengeance of an oold vileynye, thou

sompnest thyne adversaries to do thee a newe vileynye' (1462). This kind of

contradiction illustrates the possibility of utilising selected quotations to

substantiate a point and of defending a position against an opposing set of

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[296] Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 224.

quotations. Interestingly, there are instances where the contradiction lies within the discourse of Prudence alone, rather than between sources quoted by different speakers. Within the space of only four lines, she quotes Salomon twice, firstly saying that 'manye freendes have thou, but among a thousand cheese thee oon to be thy conseillor' (1167) and secondly that 'salvacion of thynges is where as ther been manye conseillors' (1171). As David Wallace argues, the contradiction in this case is far less critical than would first seem, because the context has changed,[297] and with it the relation between past source and the present of the narrative. *Melibee* does not present historical knowledge as a unified whole of authoritative texts, but rather uses the dialogue between Melibee and Prudence in order to highlight and amplify the contradictions inherent in it.

The chaotic and apparently incoherent stream of quotations in the *Melibee* has prompted Daniel Kempton to conclude that they 'do not mean to mean,'[298] and there is certainly a point to be made about them not professing a single unified meaning. However, subject to Melibee and Prudence's interpretive agency, the quotations are invested with meaning, even if this is constantly shifting. In this sense, it is significant that Chaucer the Pilgrim invokes the four evangelists in the *Thopas-Melibee* link (VII, 943-8), implying that if these four authorities can differ considerably without altering the *sententia* of the Gospels, then, surely, he can offer a new version of this particular tale without distorting its *sententia*.[299] Nonetheless, the obvious contradictions between the authorities cited in the tale undercut the belief in such an uniformity of meaning. If anything, the *Melibee* tells us that authorities necessarily clash with each other, and that they can only be invested with a degree of meaning through the discursive agency of speakers.

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[297] Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 233.
[298] Kempton, 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee,' 268.
[299] See Kempton, 'Chaucer's Tale of Melibee,' 265; Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 209.

Throughout the *Melibee* we find an emphasis on advice and counsel as not fixed. When Melibee initially refuses to alter his reading of his first counsel, Prudence rebukes him for not realising 'that it is no folie to chaunge conseil whan the thyng is changed, or elles whan the thyng semeth ootherweyes than it was biforn' (VII, 1065). Not only the context can change, but also our reading of it. A little later, Prudence all but repeats this sentiment (VII, 1224), and then sums up her position thus:

> And take this for a general reule, that every conseil that is affirmed
> so strongly that it may nat be changed for no condicion that may
> bityde, I seye that thilke conseil is wikked.' (VII, 1231)

The meaning of counsel, and by extension that of authorities, has to be constantly checked against the continually changing context of the present. An interpretation that is fixed does not account for the impossibility of fixed meanings. It is significant that Prudence explicitly states that any counsel that is fixed and refuses negotiation is unquestionably wicked, replacing fixity with an insistence on change. One instance where this need for changing interpretations is obvious is the clash between Melibee and Prudence on the physicians' advice that one ill can be cured by its contrary (VII, 1276-90). Blinded by his lust for revenge, Melibee interprets the advice as meaning that he should respond to one attack with another, fiercer one. After a prolonged play on the meaning of the signifier 'contrarie,' Prudence eventually convinces him that war cannot be its own contrary, arguing that he should counter war with peace.[300] Strictly speaking, this is not an example for the interpretation of authorities, but the fact that Melibee can believe, if only for a short time, that his wrong meaning for this particular signifier is appropriate for his situation has strong implications for the use of authorities in the present. The whole

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[300] Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths, '"Swete Wordes" of Non-Sense: The Deconstruction of the Moral *Melibee,* Part I,' *The Chaucer Review* 23 (1989): 338-61 (350-1).

process of creating meaning is entirely reliant on the moral and ethical vigilance of the interpreter, and Melibee fails to fulfil this role.

In *Confessio* VII, on the other hand, there is not such a strong emphasis on dialogue between speakers and between a speaker and the context. One side of the dialogue that runs through the *Confessio* as a whole all but vanishes, and this absence of Amans from the stage of the narrative in Book VII sets up Genius as the sole organising entity behind the material on 'hou Alisandre was betawht / to Aristotle' (VI, 2411-2). Genius also tends to present his material in a way that suggests that authorities on his subject speak with one voice. For example, on the creation of the four elements he says 'Wherof, if that I shal conforme / The figure unto that it is / These olde clerkes tellen this' (VII, 342-4). In the *Melibee*, we would almost certainly be presented with *one* source having *one* opinion on the subject, but Genius prefers to combine several 'olde clerkes' into one source, eliminating the possibility of contradiction. He does not present this combined voice of different 'clerkes' as the only possible meaning, but explicitly projects it on the background of historical knowledge in which 'the lores ben diverse' (VII, 23). The fact that Genius actively selects from this diverse assembly of knowledge stresses the capacity of one mind (in this case his) that is governed by reason and wisdom to harmonise the pool of authorities into one coherent whole.

Confessio VII, with its focus on Genius as the organising entity behind the material that he relates, follows a different, much more fixed view of knowledge and authority than the *Melibee*. The emphasis is placed firmly on the way in which Genius organises and structures his material.[301] In compartmentalising his memory into a well-structured whole, Genius puts into practice the organisation of knowledge that he finds in Latini, Giles of Rome, and the *Secretum Secretorum*.

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[301] Goetz Schmitz, *The Middel Weie: Stil- und Aufbauformen in John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1974), 70-4.

The fact that he combines the structure of these sources illustrates that he himself is not simply a passive receiver of knowledge, but rather an active shaper and organiser of that knowledge. Interestingly, Gower does not mention his written sources for his structure, but instead implies a far more significant parallel. Talking about the division of the earth, Genius speaks of Noah's sons:

> Sem, Cam, Japhet the brethren hihte; -
> And whanne thilke almyhty hond
> Withdrouh the water fro the lond,
> And al the rage was aweie,
> And Erthe was the mannes weie,
> The Sones thre, of whiche I tolde,
> Riht after that hemselve wolde,
> This world departe thei begonne. (VII, 546-53)

In the first instance, the division of the earth is facilitated by God ('thilke almyhty hond'), but in the context of Gower's division of philosophy into 'thre pointz in principal' (VII, 29) the fact that the earth was divided by Noah's *three* sons is of more interest. Gower here traces his division of philosophy, and thus of historical knowledge, back to one of the key moments in biblical history, proposing to follow the offspring of Noah, whom he later incorporates into his lineage of lawgivers.[302] Hierarchies are manmade, and as such they are extendable backwards and forwards in time. Gower is engaged in just such a project of extension and perpetuation of knowledge. As M. A. Manzalaoui puts it, 'he is re-laying the flowerbeds' of knowledge.[303] By selecting specific sources and ordering them, Genius creates a new discourse that nevertheless betrays its origins in the past.

Thus, we realise that both texts relate well to Chaucer and Gower's other works. *Confessio* VII exhibits the tendency to impose a rigid structure on narrative material and use that structure to convincingly make a point about the present in relation to the past we also find in *Vox Clamantis* and in the *Confessio* as a whole.

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[302] See above, p. 174.
[303] Manzalaoui, '"Noght in the Registre of Venus",' 168.

The incorporation of Genius' sermon on the division of philosophy and the education of Alexander into the confessional frame in combination with the fact that Book VII does actually pick up several of the issues that have been hinted at in the preceding parts of the poem certainly make this penultimate book less of a digression than some critics have made it out to be. The *Melibee*, on the other hand, follows the tendency in Chaucer's other works to stress the changeable state of knowledge. As such, Chaucer's translation works to undermine the notion of doctrine as a single unified whole. Where Gower, in Book VII, creates his own doctrine out of the pool of inherited knowledge, Chaucer's *Melibee* makes a point about doctrine as constantly being remade and actively reshaped.

Narrative Frames and Fictional Audiences

The pervasive emphasis on interpretation in both the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII has implications for the two texts' position within their respective narrative frames. Chaucer's *Melibee* is directly addressed to the assembly of pilgrims, and *Confessio* VII to Amans as the subject of the confession that has already taken up the best part of six books. These two audiences are, of course, purely fictional, but they nonetheless offer us an insight into how exactly these two texts could and should be read and interpreted. In addition to this external interpretation of the material in both texts, we are also confronted with several sets of internal audiences that are themselves engaged in interpretive processes. The reactions of Melibee to the attack on his family, his interpretation of his counsel, and the interpretive processes of some of the audiences in Genius' exempla extend the focus on interpretation to within the texts themselves.

Because the *Melibee* is assigned to Chaucer the pilgrim, it is tempting to see it as a central tale in the *Canterbury Tales* framework. The problem with this kind

of reading is that the *Tales* as a whole does not openly profess to have any kind of central point, essentially presenting a collection of narrative voices that is only held together by the fact that the speakers have 'by aventure yfalle / in felaweshippe' (I, 25-6).[304] The *Melibee*, with its chaotic array of authoritative quotations and *sententia* surely fits into the frame, but it remains only one of a number of voices that lack a centre, posing an important question about hierarchy. According to Paul Strohm, the *Melibee* explicitly deals with hierarchy, both within the individual and the body politic, essentially going against the anti-hierarchical thrust of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole.[305] However, given the random invocation of authorities and the fact that it is indeed Prudence (a woman) who overturns the advice of Melibee's counsellors, the hierarchy in the tale does not conform to patriarchal expectations and a belief in the hierarchies of textual authority. Essentially, the *Melibee* illustrates how source material in the hand of a prudent reader can turn a hierarchy (in this case that of husband and wife) almost upside down, but eventually strengthen the original head of this hierarchy, since Melibee transforms not 'from one gender (masculine) to another (feminine), but from one form of masculinity to another.'[306] In the same sense, Melibee and Prudence do not resist the hierarchic arrangement of authorities, but the tale makes sure to point out that such a hierarchy is not inherent in tradition but is entirely constructed.

In contrast to the Melibee, Confessio VII is a self-confessed digression from the confessional frame of the poem, and Genius freely admits that what he is about to tell is 'noght in the register / of Venus' (VII, 19-20) and that he is

> [...] somdel therof destraught;
> For it is noght to the matiere

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[304] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 144-5.

[305] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 161-3.

[306] Daniel Rubey, 'The Five Wounds of Melibee's Daughter: Transforming Masculinities,' in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 157-71 (159).

> Of love, why we sitten hiere
> To schryve, so as Venus bad. (VII, 7-9)

Genius acknowledges that not only does Book VII go beyond his perceived discursive authority, but also that it constitutes an open transgression of Venus' order to heal Amans of his love-wounds. In addition, Book VII consists almost exclusively of Genius' monologue, whereas the other books are constructed around a dialogue between Genius and Amans, further severing the ties between Book VII and the *Confessio* as a whole. Nonetheless, given the fact that Gower's purpose in the *Confessio* was always at least partly about instruction,[307] Book VII has a clearly defined purpose. As Paul Strohm argues, the *Confessio* recognises disorder 'while asserting the possibility of its containment,'[308] and in Book VII Genius illustrates how an informed reader can harmonise a selection of disparate sources, while still containing them in the overall structure of the *Confessio*.

It is notable that Book VII echoes many of the previous books' themes, treating openly what had previously only been hinted at below the surface of the lover's confession.[309] Book VII is also more directly applicable to the real world outside that of the dream populated by Genius and Amans. Due to the nature of the book as an account of the education of Alexander, many of the exempla Genius utilises show a markedly practical application of moral behaviour, bridging the gap between Amans' microcosm of disappointed love and the significance for the wider macrocosm.[310] As James Simpson illustrates, the education of Alexander is also

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[307] J.A.W. Bennett, ed., *Selections from John Gower* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), xvi.

[308] Strohm, 'Form and Social Statement,' 35.

[309] George R. Coffman, 'John Gower in His Most Significant Role,' in *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 40-8 (47); Fisher, *John Gower*, 196-8; Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 140.

[310] Kathryn McKinley, 'Kingship and the Body Politic: Classical *Ecphrasis* and *Confessio Amantis* VII,' *Mediaevalia* 21 (1996): 161-87. For a discussion of micro- and macrocosm in the *Confessio*, see Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm.'

related to the other books of the *Confessio*, if we regard the *Divisio Philosophiae* as Genius outlines it at the opening of Book VII as the '*real* frame of the poem.' Relying heavily on the hierarchy of the division, Book VII forms a logical culmination of practical politics, prepared by the ethical and economic narratives of the previous books.[311] Whichever way we read it, there is a definite movement in the poem, and given its characteristics, Book VII fulfils an important function within the overall framework of the *Confessio*.

An additional factor that ties Book VII in with the rest of the *Confessio* is Amans' explicit request for Genius to tell him more about the education of Alexander. Book VII should be seen as an antidote to the bad example of how *not* to educate a prince that is given in the 'Tale of Nectanabus' (VI, 1789-2366).[312] Since Amans himself is conspicuously absent form most of Book VII, only Genius' opening statements and his frequent addresses to Amans remind us that the penitent is still there in front of the priest. Still, Amans is not the only listener within Book VII. Within the exempla Genius relates, there are numerous audiences, generally failing to grasp the respective implications of their situations. One of these situations can be found in the story of Ahab and Micaiah (VII, 2527-694). As king of Israel, Ahab is uncertain whether he should go into battle against Benedab, the king of Syria. He asks Sedechie, a prophet, for advice, and is told that he should go into battle and that he will come out victorious. But Josaphat, the king of Judea, is not convinced by Sedechie's counsel and asks for a second opinion. Ahab then summons Micaiah, a prophet who has previously fallen out of favour with the king. Micaiah is informed of Sedechie's prophecy, and the courtiers plead with him

> That he wol seie no contraire,
> Wherof the king mai be displesed,
> For so shal every man be esed,
> And he mai helpe himselve also. (VII, 2614-7)

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[311] Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 220, 3.
[312] Peck, *Kingship & Common Profit*, 140.

Contrary to this suggestion to simply confirm the earlier prophecy out of self-interest, Micaiah proposes to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. But Micaiah's speech fails to convince the king, who is then duly killed in the ensuing battle with Benedab, proving that Micaiah was right after all. As Genius states at the end of the story,

> So sit it wel a king therfore
> To loven hem tat trouthe mene;
> For ate laste it wol be sene
> That flaterie is nothing worth. (VII, 2686-9)

The task for a king and any kind of audience must therefore be to separate the flatterers from the truth-tellers. In every interpretive situation, the listener must always be on guard so as to not fall prey to the non-truth of flatterers, just as Genius has to take care to select his sources in a way that enables him offer valuable teaching to Amans.

Chaucer's *Melibee* treats the truth-value of authoritative sources in a different way to *Confessio* VII. In the link between his two tales, Chaucer the pilgrim directly addresses his audience, proposing to delight this fictional assembly with the doctrine contained in the tale he is about to tell (VII, 938), but he then goes on to subvert this very notion of doctrine as a fixed entity from which pleasure can be derived. We do not, of course, know how the assembly of pilgrims as a whole reacts, but we do get the reaction of one of the pilgrim, namely the host. Significantly, he is also the one who interrupts pilgrim Chaucer's first attempt to tell a tale and urges him to tell something else instead. Thus, Harry is essentially the commissioning entity behind the *Melibee*. Even though the tale is addressed to all the pilgrims, the host is the first point of call within this group, and is also the one who speaks immediately after the tale, trying to link the tale with his real-life experience. His comparison between Prudence and his own wife obviously seems misplaced, even though Askins takes this reading to be congruent with the reading

of the story current in Chaucer's time.[313] The host's response is an example of how the *Melibee* should not be linked to real-life experience. His focus on Prudence's treatment of her husband ignores her concern with reconciliation and, more significantly, does not take into account the treatment of sources we find in the tale. I would argue that instead of transposing the characters of Melibee and Prudence into reality, the audience of the tale is urged to meditate on the processes of creating meaning out of discursive material that underlies the *Melibee*.

The fact that Harry picks out the submission of Melibee to his wife does, however, have some bearing on the tale. There can be no doubt that Prudence has the upper hand in the tale, and Melibee acknowledges as much when he explicitly submits to her advice. Melibee's submission cuts in two directions: firstly he has to submit himself to Prudence's advice in order to learn from it, and secondly, because he fails to learn the lesson of how to read advice and authoritative knowledge, he has to hand over the reigns to his wife at the end of the tale in order to bring the narrative to an end. In this respect, the *Melibee* argues for an initial passivity that gives way to a reflective activity that enables the social actor to put to use the learning he or she has taken from the initial passivity. It is this second part of the process that Melibee fails to achieve, and this has repercussions for the audience of the tale, both within and without the pilgrimage frame. The lesson that is supposed to be taken from the tale is certainly not the doctrine of the authoritative sources, which is far too heterogeneous to be accepted. Instead, Melibee, the host, the other pilgrims, and the audience outside of the tale should all realise that the focal point of the tale is the very process of appropriating the sources within an ever-changing present context. Melibee does not, which is why Prudence has to undermine her emphasis on wise counsel and actively intervene at the end, and the host obviously

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[313] William Askins, 'The *Tale of Melibee* and the Crisis at Westminster, November, 1387,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* (1986): 103-12.

fails to get this point, just as the internal audiences in *Confessio* VII more often than not fail to interpret advice correctly.

Actual Audiences and Fictional Advice

Both the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII employ old texts and the interpretive agency of fictional audiences in order to illustrate the ways in which their fictional advice can be applied to the actual audiences of Ricardian England. Such a reading relies on a general awareness of the kinds of audiences that are addressed by the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII, even if it is impossible to identify historically specific people as addressees. Only after this step can we move on to an analysis of how these two texts, with their fictional advice, add up to lessons on kingship that rely on a practical application of the textual past. Nietzsche's architect of the future has to join the 'exalted spirit-dialogue' between the supermen, in order for the future of the 'chattering dwarfs who creep up beneath them' to be changed, and Chaucer and Gower can be seen to relate their texts to general developments in their historical context, such as the Rising of 1381, the Appellants' threat to Richard's rule, and the role of women, specifically Anne of Bohemia and Joan of Kent, as intercessors.

Confessio VII is a text that can successfully be read as both an address to an actual king of the realm and an address to every individual member of the body politic. In this respect, the revisions and rededication of the *Confessio* as a whole are not quite as problematic as would first seem. As I have said in the previous chapter, the revisions of the poem do not simply assign it to a new dedicatee but rather invest the poem with a more general frame of reference.[314] In the version without Richard as commissioner and dedicatee, the poem effectively addresses every literate member of society. In Book VII, there is an undisputable focus on

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[314] See above, p. 150.

kingship and proper rule, but this does not necessarily mean that it is addressed solely to the king of the realm, as Elizabeth Porter proposes.[315] Largely due to the focus on the body politic in comparison to the individual human body, the poem is just as much addressed to the literate community as a whole, as Anne Middleton has successfully argued quite some time ago.[316] I would argue that the *Confessio* as a whole and Book VII in particular deliberately address both the high and mighty of the realm and each individual literate member of the body politic. Just as a king has to rule the realm in accordance with the rules laid out in Genius' lecture, so the individual has to rule her or his self according to the same rules in order for the body politic as a whole to work.

Compared to *Confessio* VII, the *Melibee* does not as clearly label itself as a Mirror for Princes. It is certainly not a 'direct descendant of the *Secretum Secretorum*,'[317] a work that is central to Gower's project in *Confessio* VII. David Wallace chooses to label the *Melibee* as a 'handbook for go-betweens' as opposed to a fully fledged *Fürstenspiegel*,[318] but Stephen Knight makes an equally valid point when he argues that the *Melibee* is a 'serious and thoughtful address to the powerful on how to save their power.'[319] Indeed, the tale, with its emphasis on interpretive action as necessary for discursive agency, is significant in relation to the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole if we follow Paul Strohm's very convincing argument about the pilgrims as a form of discursively organised mirror image of the real-life body politic.[320] Within the story-telling contest, each pilgrim has to struggle

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[315] Porter, 'Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm,' 142-3. James Simpson follows a similar argument. See Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 217-8.

[316] For a discussion of poetry as addressed to the whole community, see Anne Middleton, 'The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II,' *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94-114.

[317] Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 89.

[318] Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 221.

[319] Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 139.

[320] Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, 144-82.

for discursive agency, and Chaucer the pilgrim is no exception, despite the fact that he, as the overall narrator, should be in a relatively more powerful position. Just as the narrator has to reassert his position, so a king has to be constantly aware of his power as discursively produced and necessarily subject to change and challenge.[321] This representation of discursive agency and power within the tale is significant for the tale's context.

As we have seen in the chapter on Gower's *Vox*, Gower was not alone in presenting the rebels of 1381 as an animalistic rabble, and the uprising as absolutely out of proportion with what it tried to unsettle. But as Susan Crane and Paul Strohm have shown, there was a remarkably structured programme to the Rising, one that defies the chronicle attempts to render the rebels as an incoherent and inhuman assembly.[322] Two of the central elements of this programme are the all-pervasive criticism of Richard's royal advisors and the equally coherent focus on tradition, traditional rights, and the focus on writing as an 'instrument of oppression.'[323] One of the constant elements in the chronicle accounts of the Rising is the Rebels' choice of old written records as their primary point of attack. According to Walsingham's account, the rebels 'worked to give old muniments over to the flames; […] It was dangerous to be known a cleric; much more dangerous to be found with an inkwell.'[324] Essentially, the rebels strove to erase all traces of memory of those records that curtailed their liberties.[325] We should not, however, take this to mean that the rebels saw written records only as objects that needed to be destroyed. The historical consciousness of the lower strata of English society also worked to make old records work for their purpose. Going back four years from the Rising of

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[321] The notion of royal power as discursively produced is taken from Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 214.
[322] See Crane, 'Writing Lesson'; Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 33-56.
[323] Crane, 'Writing Lesson,' 205.
[324] Quoted and translated in Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 198.
[325] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 43.

1381, we find a series of attempts by villages that to free themselves form customary services by way of what a parliamentary statute calls 'their malicious interpretation.'[326] We can see, therefore, that written records were not purely seen as oppressive, but also as material that can be subjected to an interpretation that accounts for the villagers' immediate needs but goes against the general demands of those in power. Only when the attempt at reinterpretation failed did records become objects to be destroyed. I would argue that the *Melibee* with its focus on interpretation of old sources illustrates this earlier stage of peasant unrest in England, one that only turned into open rebellion because it failed in its project of liberating the villagers.

The other significant factor of the Rising is the rebels' reinterpretation of the traditional three estates. According to a number of chronicles, they proposed to do away with any intermediate ranks between the king and the commons. As the *Anonimalle* chronicle tells us, their watchword was to hold 'Wyth kynge Richarde and wyth the trew communes.'[327] Just as Nebuchadnezzar's statue is stripped of its torso in Gower's *Vox*, the rebels propose to adapt the body politic to their needs by erasing its entire middle section. This was, of course, an improbable proposition given the power in the hands of the people occupying the middle to high social ranks. Furthermore, as I have argued in my chapter on the *Vox*, Gower also uses the disfigured statue as an image for his disrupted historical timescale, and it is in relation to this use that the rebels' actions are significant. Essentially, they are engaged in a process of reinterpreting the past that goes beyond the focus on written records by applying a radical reinterpretation to the body politic itself. It is important in this respect that they do not propose to depose Richard II, but rather

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[326] See Rosamond Faith, 'The 'Great Rumour' of 1377 and Peasant Ideology,' in *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. Rodney H. Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 43-73.

[327] V.H. Galbraith, ed., *The Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333-1381* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), 139.

focus on those that hold sway over the king. Once they are gone, the rebel argument goes, the body politic can return to its previous, working state. However, if we return to the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII, we realise that such a gesture in itself is impossible. Prudence does not threaten Melibee's position of power beyond the domestic sphere, and Genius goes to great lengths to argue that a body politic and an individual human body are rendered worthless if any one of its constituent parts refuses to do its duty of upholding the body as a whole.

In the Appellants' attack on Richard's favourites, we find an even stronger echo of the two texts we are concerned with here. Like the rebels of 1381 and so many literary and political tracts from the time, the Appellants did not engage in an attack on the person of the king himself but confronted his advisors for infringing the magnate's traditional rights of access to the king. This focus on tradition as unchangeable should be familiar by now from *Confessio* VII. But in the Parliament's Rolls, we find an even more striking echo of the *Melibee* in particular. Confronted with the incompatibility of their appeals to both common law and civil law, they devise the following loophole:

> The trial will not be carried out anywhere else than parliament, nor by any other law than the law and procedure of parliament. And that it pertains to the lords of parliament ... by *ancient custom* to be the judges in such a case, and to judge such cases with the king's assent.... And that their intention is not to carry out such a high case as this Appeal is .. in any lower court or place in the realm, which courts and places are nothing but executors of *ancient laws* and customs of the realm and of ordinances and statutes of parliament.[328]

It is immediately apparent that the Appellants interpret ancient customs and ancient laws of the realm in favour of their goal of trying Richard's favourites. As Nigel

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[328] Quoted and translated in Andrew Galloway, 'The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*,' in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 67-104 (71). Emphases mine.

Saul rightly points out, this strategy effectively allowed them to 'make up the rules as they went along.'[329] If we look back at the *Melibee*, we cannot fail to realise that this is exactly what Melibee and Prudence are doing in relation to their interpretation of authoritative texts. For them there are no fixed rules on how to interpret sources from the past, but only the ever-changing demand of the immediate present calling for shifts in their interpretive focus. In a less direct way, *Confessio* VII also echoes the Appellants' strategy, but only insofar that Genius has already made up the rules, so to say, on how his source material should be interpreted.

Finally, the role of women as intercessors and royal advisors is particularly significant for my reading of the *Melibee*. David Wallace suggests that the *Melibee* puts forward Prudence as the character changing her husband's behaviour 'since the idea of man working 'chaunge' in the breast of a more powerful male upsets all norms of heterosexual propriety.'[330] When read against the delicate process of convincing Melibee of Prudence's argument and his resistance to immediately submit to her ordinance this statement certainly rings true. Indeed, there is evidence that both Richard's wife, Anne, and his mother, Joan of Kent, played significant roles as intercessors and mediators or the king's temper. Anne's tomb inscription attributes her with calming quarrels, and she is credited with saving mayor John of Northampton's life when he was pushed out office.[331] Gardiner Stillwell even goes as far as putting forward Prudence as a mirror image of Anne, but as William Askins argues, the king's mother, Joan of Kent, is a much more likely candidate, given her frequent involvement in mediating quarrels.[332] It does not matter so much

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[329] Saul, *Richard II*, 192.
[330] Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 237.
[331] See Galloway, 'The Literature of 1388 and the Politics of Pity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*,' 72.
[332] Gardiner Stillwell, 'The Political Meaning of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*,' *Speculum* 19 (1944): 433-44 (443); Askins, 'The *Tale of Melibee*,' 107.

here whether Prudence is meant to mirror Anne or Joan. We can, however, be sure that the *Melibee* is strikingly appropriate for its Ricardian context.

Thus, we can safely say that there is ample evidence in favour of a contextual reading of the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII. I have here only picked out three scenarios, but the Rising of 1381 and the Appellants' actions both echo the concern in both texts with tradition, knowledge and ways of interpreting them. Then there are the roles of Anne and Joan as mediators who certainly had a high degree of influence of Richard. All this, it seems to me, urges us to look once again at the lessons both texts teach and their relation to the socio-political context of Ricardian England.

Conclusion

It is safe to say, then, that both the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII are about certain ways of achieving an understanding of history and the past. The strategies of putting the past to use within the respective presences of the narratives are directly meaningful in relation to their Ricardian context. Although, as so often, direct historical references are hard to find in Chaucer and Gower's text, I have shown that a reasonably focussed look at selected elements of the socio-political context of Ricardian England reveals striking similarities. The Rising of 1381 and the events leading up to it were heavily reliant on the meaning and possible use value of tradition and written authority, while the Appellants seem to have been well aware of their own position caught between traditional rights of magnates and the incommensurability of the question of Richard's conduct as king with that very tradition. Once we combine this with the apparently growing influence of female counsellors such as Anne of Bohemia and Joan of Kent and the obvious similarities to Prudence as counsellor in the *Melibee* we can no longer ignore the position of

these two texts within their socio-political context.

However, my reading has shown that the strategies for the use of the past within the present as they inform the *Melibee* and *Confessio* VII differ, although both take a view of history and authority as an unfixed discourse as their point of departure. In the *Melibee*, authoritative sources are a necessary ingredient of prudent counsel, but the focus is much more on the processes of counsel than on the authoritative sources themselves. The fact that Melibee fails to recognise the prudence of his wife's counsel until it is almost too late illustrates that whoever is counselled has to interpret not only the authoritative sources that are invoked within the counselling discourse, but also the relation between the counsel and the immediate context of the present.

In *Confessio* VII, on the other hand, the focus is more on Genius as a teacher/counsellor figure who has to impart a coherent structure on inherited tradition and authoritative sources from the past. Genius does not suggest that history and tradition are in any way fixed entities, which points to a certain degree of overlap with the fluid presentation of textual authority as we find it in the *Melibee*. But Genius' excursus on the education of princes goes far beyond the array of frequently contradicting sources that are invoked by Prudence and Melibee. Genius is the only prominent figure in Book VII, and this sidelining of Amans takes away all potential for an opposing view to that of Genius. Essentially, since Genius is the only fully present speaker he can impose a structure on his inherited knowledge, which in return creates the sense of a linear chain of history and a high degree of coherence within the authoritative tradition summoned up by Genius.

6 Tales of Virginia

> Behind the obligation to expiate the privilege the king retains through death, his murder aims to keep what threatened to accumulate and become fixed on the king's person (status, wealth, women and power) within the flow of exchanges, within the group's reciprocal movements. His death prevents this accident. This is the essence and function of sacrifice: to extinguish what threatens to fall out of the group's symbolic control and to bury it under all the weight of the dead.[333]

This passage is taken from Jean Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, discussing the gradual destruction of the 'original unities of life and death and the rituals which integrated the relations between generations in traditional societies.'[334] For Baudrillard, the king's person and function is an integral part of the traditional socio-political order, rather than an entity that stands outside of it. As a result of this positioning, the social group is largely in control with regard to the king's powers. Once he exceeds the remit assigned to him by the social group, the flow of exchanges has to be kept intact by the violent excision of the king's person from the social body, illustrating the extent to which kingly authority is not a god-given but rather a socially determined value. This view conforms to Baudrillard's view of the sign in contemporary society as bearing 'no relation to any reality whatsoever,' saying that 'it is its own pure simulacrum,'[335] a view that shows a strong affinity with the postmodern dismissal of the hermeneutics of depth and surface in signification. Throughout his works, Baudrillard challenges Marxist dogma, asserting that the operation and diversification of linguistic codes are more important for the circulation of material goods than the modes of production described by Marx. For Baudrillard, use value does not have any autonomy but 'is

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[333] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), 138-9.
[334] Mike Gane, Introduction to Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, xii.
[335] Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 170.

only the *satellite* and *alibi* of exchange value,'[336] setting him on a collision course with the Marxist view of use values as authentic and unfalsifiable. His concept of value (both use and exchange value) leads Baudrillard to the conclusion that 'the only challenge to the dominance of symbolic value is death.'[337] Thus, death as extinction is posited as the only means of countering or escaping from the flow of exchanges within the social group.

This final chapter focuses on the treatment of kingship, virginity, and textual authorities as commodities in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Gower's 'Tale of Virginia' (VII, 5131-306). In addition to the removal of a corrupt ruler in both texts, the character of Virginia illustrates the discursive construction of virginity.[338] Similarly, the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' treat textual authorities as invested with exchange value that has to be brought under the symbolic control of the reader/writer. In this respect, these two tales, with their individual treatments of the story of Virginia provide useful examples for a close comparison of the appropriation of old texts for literary and political purpose in the present. Indeed, the very fact that the story of Virginia was popular in the Middle Ages as a moral example about politics and an *exemplum* of evil government firmly places Chaucer and Gower within the system of exchange of textual sources.[339]

As we have seen in the previous chapters, both writers strive hard to find their own authorial position within the exchange system of literary authority. Criticism of the *Physician's Tale* has focussed much more strongly on the use of source texts in the tale than is the case in readings of Gower's 'Tale of Virginia.'

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[336] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1981), 139.

[337] Steven Connor, 'Baudrillard, Jean,' in *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Payne (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 50-2 (51).

[338] For recent discussions on medieval virginity in general, see the essays collected in Anke Bernau, Sarah Salih, and Ruth Evans, eds., *Medieval Virginities* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003).

[339] For the popularity of the Virginia story during the Middle Ages, see the notes in Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 902.

Sheila Delany is representative in her conclusion that Chaucer's tale is relatively unsuccessful poetically because the story as it is found in the sources is not suitable for Chaucer's poetic imagination.[340] On the other hand, readers of Gower's version of the story generally agree that he only adapts his main source very subtly, leaving much of the material he finds in it intact. The appropriation of sources in both tales is relevant for our understanding of their situation in and significance for the socio-political context of Ricardian England. Essentially, both writers de-historicise their sources with regard to the original Roman context of the Virginia story before re-historicising them in relation to their own experience of medieval England. In order to align their versions with the context of Ricardian England, Chaucer and Gower include several contemporary references of varying prominence. Throughout his tale, Gower focuses on issues of kingship, making the 'Tale of Virginia' fit the other tales in *Confessio* VII. Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*, on the other hand, does not have such a clearly defined political purpose, but is concerned with politics on a more general level, including the educational of and guardianship over children that is one of the main responsibilities of parents, and only by extension of a king in relation to the body politic.

Read alongside the treatment of other female figures we have encountered throughout this study, Virginia and her story in the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' provide a useful case study of the ways in which Chaucer and Gower use tradition, history and authoritative sources. The final section of this chapter argues for a reading of Virginia as a part of history that emphasises Virginia's exchange value within her patriarchal society. As one of the many old stories Chaucer and Gower tell, Virginia and her story are integral parts of the body of history. Both writers use and appropriate Virginia's story in ways that stress this

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[340] Sheila Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis of Poetic Imagination in *The Physician's Tale*,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 47-60.

aspect, constantly emphasising the *written* tradition that enables them to re-tell the story as they do. In this respect, it is significant that Chaucer has Virginius eventually decapitate his daughter, illustrating Chaucer's view of history and tradition as severely disjointed and fragmented. Gower, on the other hand, has Virginia killed with a stab through the heart, implying that as a part of the body of history Virginia is killed but in a way that leaves the structural integrity of her body largely intact. Chaucer sees history as a collection of scattered pieces that have to be re-assembled, while Gower laments the fact that the body of history is dead, but still re-creates it in his own texts in ways that create the illusion that the processes of structural disintegration can still be reversed.

Source Appropriation and Politics

The *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' are only two among many versions of the Virginia story, and the ways in which they situate themselves against these other versions are highly significant for our understanding of their poetics and politics. The main source for most medieval versions of the story is the account in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (*c.* 29 BC) and in the case of Chaucer and Gower, the version in de Meun's continuation of the *Roman de la Rose* (1275-80) is also important.[341] Both de Meun and Livy provide the basic outline of the story as it is found in the two English versions considered here. This section examines the extent to which Chaucer and Gower rely on earlier versions of the story, arguing that Chaucer is at pains to escape from the overwhelming symbolic control of his sources, while Gower seems content with making minor alterations that mainly serve to bring the tale in line with the concern with the education of princes that

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[341] Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, trans. B. O. Foster, 14 vols., vol. 2, *Loeb Classical Library* (London: William Heinemann, 1920); Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

informs *Confessio* VII. Thus, both writers choose different ways to appropriate this particularly Roman tale and to make it relevant for their own socio-political context. Chaucer virtually erases all the Roman elements of the original version and gives it a wholly new socio-political content, while Gower seems content with an acknowledgement of the story's Roman context and only changes those elements that are clearly at odds with his medieval context.

Given that the first surviving account of the Virginia story, written by Quintus Fabius Pictor, postdates the alleged event by some 200 years, the story cannot be regarded as a historically verifiable fact.[342] This first version provides the basic outline of the story of Virginia, the beautiful girl whom one of the corrupt decemvirs, Apius, tries to force from Virginius' control by abusing the powers vested in him by law. Virginius kills his daughter and the decemvirs, including Apius, are deposed by a spontaneous uprising. After several treatments of this story, Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* takes up this plot, another 200 years later. Livy leaves the purported facts intact, but adapts the story to his theme of the degeneration of Rome from the great republican golden age. He prefaces the story with an account of the general corruption of the decemvirs and the resulting threat to the integrity of Rome as a polis, both in the military field and the domestic field of daily life. In this context, the Virginia story becomes much more centred on the ethical and moral issues of Virginius' reaction to Apius' abuse of the law than was the case in the earlier versions. As Fichte states, the rebellion that deposes the decemvirs in Livy's account 'becomes an act of self-defence, a way of securing the moral values of the Roman family against the immorality of the rulers and thus preserving the ethical foundation of the Roman state.'[343]

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[342] A concise account of the Virginia tradition is provided in Joerg O. Fichte, 'Incident - History - Exemplum - Novella: The Transformation of History in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*,' *Florilegium* 5 (1983): 189-207 (191-8).

[343] Fichte, 'Incident - History - Exemplum - Novella,' 193.

The version of the Virginia story that is included in the *Roman de la Rose* is a rigorously shortened adaptation of Livy, who is named as the source. The story is presented as a case for the corruption of justice. In the lines leading up to the Virginia story, de Meun discusses the preference of caritas over justice, asking that 'if men loved, they would never harm each other,' meaning that 'since Transgression would leave, what end would Justice serve?'[344] Genius then goes on to tell the story in its basic outline, focussing on Apius' misuse of the powers invested in him by law. Sheila Delany argues that the *Roman* is a 'moral vision with a political effect,' employed in order 'to expose and denounce the perversion of social justice by the rich,'[345] and de Meun does indeed largely ignore the lower social classes in favour of his focus on Apius. Livy and de Meun thus create a frame of reference for the Virginia story that is significant for our understanding of the critiques of the effects of justice, wealth, and power on society, literature, and history as we find them in the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia.'

At the opening of the *Physician's Tale*, there is a strong implication that Livy will serve as the primary source for the tale. Chaucer's Physician opens his tale by stating that

> Ther was, as telleth Titus Livius,
> A knyght that called was Virginius,
> Fulfild of honour and of worthynesse,
> And strong of freendes, and of greet richesse. (VI, 1-4)

However, the Physician here simply throws in Livy as authoritative source and Virginius as a character before leaving them hanging in mid air when he abruptly switches his focus from Livy and Virginius to the latter's maiden daughter, the as yet unnamed Virginia in line 5. Virginia is an only child of fourteen years, facts not mentioned in any other version of the story. She has reached an age that allows her

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[344] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 113.

[345] Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis,' 49.

to be married off as her father's only object of exchange on the marriage market.[346] Where her father is worthy and honourable, she possesses 'excellent beautee' (VI, 7). But her outer appearance is secondary, since 'a thousand foold moore virtuous was she' (VI, 40), and the list of her inner qualities (VI, 41-66) is not found in any other version of the story. Where others reach above their status,

> No countrefeted termes hadde she
> To seme wys, but after hir degree
> She spak, and alle hire wordes, moore and lesse,
> Sowynge in vertu and in gentillese. (VI, 51-4)

Chaucer here invests the usually marginal figure of Virginia not only with superior virtue, but also with the ability to sow 'vertu' and 'gentilesse' with her speech. This further emphasises that she has a certain exchange value, not only in relation to her marriageable age, but also with regard to the furthering of virtuous behaviour, an element that has implications for the Physician's own educational project in the tale.

In the description of Virginia, the Physician raises the issue of counterfeiting nature, going on to cite Pygmalion, Apelles, and Zeuxis as examples of the impossibility of such an attempt. Nevertheless, he assumes the authority to give a verbatim account of Nature's thoughts, framing her alleged speech with 'as though she wolde seyn' (VI, 11) and 'This semeth me that Nature wolde seye' (VI, 29). These framing statements illustrate that the Physician is here merely giving his *own* personal thoughts on Nature, not objectively verifiable facts, despite his protestations to the contrary.[347] Furthermore, the Physician is, of course, not only counterfeiting Nature, but in a sense also his sources. To an audience familiar with Livy, the opening reference to the Roman historian would suggest a narrative that

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[346] Martha S. Waller, '*The Physician's Tale*: Geoffrey Chaucer and Fray Juan García de Castrojeriz,' *Speculum* 51 (1976): 292-306 (296).

[347] See Linda Lomperis, 'Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices: Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* as Socially Symbolic Act,' in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 21-37 (23-4).

follows that of its source quite closely. As I have said above, these expectations are soon disappointed. Significantly, there are no other references to named sources throughout the tale with the qualified exception of the biblical story of Jephtha's daughter, invoked by Virginia just before her father kills her (VI, 240).[348] The parenthetical aside '(The Doctour maketh this descripcioun)' (VI, 117), a reference to Augustine, serves to emphasise that the Physician claims to base his account on veritable sources.[349]

Despite this professed reliance on authoritative sources, it becomes increasingly obvious that, as the tale progresses, the Physician is at pains to escape from the sources supplying him with most of the material for his narrative. When he finally names Apius he does so no longer on the basis of authorial sources, but rather states that

> (So was his name, for this is no fable,
> But knowen for historial thyng notable;
> The sentence of it sooth is, out of doute) (VI, 155-7)

In addition to relegating the evil judge to a parenthetical aside at this point, Chaucer's Physician suggests that he is no longer concerned with Livy as his source, let alone the *Roman*, but rather relies on the wider frame of reference provided by the supposedly verifiable facts of history. The Physician is himself increasingly aware of the incommensurability of his sources with his particular version of the Virginia story. In order to tell the tale he wants to tell, he must decide whether to stretch his sources almost to breaking point, or not to invoke them throughout his narrative and thereby to assert personal control. His sources threaten to fall out of his symbolic control, and therefore he has to sacrifice the traditionally revered authoritative sources in order to reassert the control he needs for the

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[348] For a discussion of the significance of the reference to Jephtha's daughter, see Richard L. Hoffman, 'Jephtha's Daughter and Chaucer's Virginia,' *The Chaucer Review* 2 (1967): 20-31.

[349] The 'Doctour' is identified with Augustine in Chaucer, *Riverside Chaucer*, 903.

successful completion of his tale. The Physician thus effectively asserts that he is no longer counterfeiting either Nature or his sources but is engaged in a narrative project of his own.

The insertion of the extended scene at the end of the tale in which Virginius informs his daughter of his decision to kill her (VI, 207-55) contains the strongest evidence for the Physician's attempt to escape from the confines of his sources. In addition to elevating Virginia to a much more central position than we find in other versions of her story, the Physician here invests her with a voice that actively tries to shape her destiny. Still, the Physician cannot, in the last instance, save his Virginia from male aggression (first by Apius and then by her father when he kills her), and eventually has to give in to the demands of his sources, making his Virginia implore her father to

> 'Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!'
> And with that word she preyed hym ful ofte
> That with his swerd he wolde smyte softe;
> And with that word aswowne doun she fil. (VI, 250-3)

At this point in the narrative, the Physician acknowledges the overwhelming demands of his sources to sacrifice Virginia. It is important to notice Virginia's impotence to change her fate, a fact that is closely related to her father's patriarchal power over her. Feminist critics have commented at length on the patriarchal relation between Virginia and her father,[350] and the Physician's relation to his sources mirrors that of his characters. Just as Virginia cannot overturn her father's patriarchal power over her, so the Physician cannot, in the last instance change his story beyond the dictates of his authoritative (and in a sense patriarchal) sources.

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[350] See, for example, Robin L. Bott, '"O, Keep Me From Their Worse Than Killing Lust": Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*,' in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 189-211; Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis'; Lomperis, 'Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices.'

One of the main elements of the Virginia story is, of course, its Roman setting. This is alluded to several times in Gower's 'Tale of Virginia.' The tale opens with a reference to Rome at the time of Apius Claudius (VII, 5131), Virginia's father was 'in Romanie / the ledinge of chivalerie / in governance hath undertake' (VII, 5155-7) and comes riding to Rome once the trial gets under way (VII, 5206), and even during the scene of Virginia's sacrifice Rome is mentioned (VII, 5266). This does not mean, however, that Gower leaves the story's Roman setting intact and slavishly follows his source. Rather, as Larry Scanlon has pointed out, Gower de-historicises it in order to bring it in line with the central concern of the education of princes in Book VII, a process that is most apparent in the elevation of Apius to governor/king.[351] But the fact remains, that Gower does not completely erase the story's original Roman context. Gower takes the Virginia story out of its narrative setting in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* but at the same time stresses that it is *not* a tale that can be taken away from the geographical setting of Rome. Taking into account Gower's general concern with the educational value of the past that runs through the *Confessio* and is such an all-encompassing concern in the *Vox*, the 'Tale of Virginia' becomes an illustration of how narrative material from the past can be transposed into the present while still leaving its identity as a tale from the past largely intact.

This emphasis on the past-ness of the tale is illustrated by the fact that Gower's elevation of Apius to the status of king does not link him directly to Richard II. Gower explicitly states that Apius 'yaf for his brother the sentence' (VII, 5224) complicating such a clear connection with Richard, who, of course, did not have any siblings. In line with his concern in *Confessio* VII as a whole with the 'voluntary restraint of [the king's] awesome, potentially absolute power'[352] Gower

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[351] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 294-5.
[352] Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 286.

presents Apius as a general, bad example of kingship. In this respect, Gower's elevation of Apius effectively medievalises Livy's story by harmonising the tale with the medieval system of government. This general interest in kingship also informs Genius's address to rulers at the end of the tale:

> And thus thunchaste was chastised,
> Wherof thei myhte ben avised
> That sholden afterward governe,
> And be this evidence lerne,
> How it is good a king eschuie
> The lust of vice and vertu suie. (VII, 5301-6)

Rather than being applicable solely to one individual king, this is an explicit reminder to all medieval kings 'who sholden afterward governe' that they should use this evidence from the past and turn away from sin in favour of virtue. Given the interlocking foci on personal and political kingship in the *Confessio*, this ties in with Gower's poetics of the past insofar as it highlights the educational value of a story such as Virginia's within the present.

It is significant that Gower completely erases the republican tenor of Livy's version. He does not deny that the Romans 'have here wrongfull king deposed' (VII, 5295), but, as Diane Watt argues, the tale 'is about the overthrow of a tyrant but not about a revolution, about deposition but not about republicanism.'[353] Nevertheless, Judith Ferster illustrates that in combination with the frequent invocation of 'comun conseil' throughout the tale that is significant for Gower's historical context, the reference to the deposition conjures up the spectre of 'the deposition of Edward II and the threats of deposition against Edward III.'[354] In addition, the issue of deposition was one of the main elements of the Appellants' attack on Richard in 1387. According to Walsingham, Knighton, and the *Westminster Chronicle*, the five lords explicitly threatened Richard with deposition

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[353] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 125.
[354] Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 120-1.

when they entered the tower on 30 December.[355] The chronicle of Whalley Abbey in Lancashire even suggests that the Appellants *did* depose Richard, but then had to reinstate him, because they could not agree on whether Henry of Derby or the Duke of Gloucester should succeed him.[356] The deposition of Apius in Gower's tale thus reinscribes the short-term deposition of Richard II into the discourse of the time, and the choice *not* to describe Apius' replacement implies that Gower regards the deposition of a tyrant as fair and just, but is aware of the danger of an ensuing power vacuum if that tyrant is not replaced by a new, more virtuous king.

In contrast to Gower's tale, Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* all but erases the original Roman context of the story. The only possible clue to the story's position within the historical development of the Roman polis is the opening reference to Livy, for whom this aspect is paramount. But, as we have seen in the previous section, Livy as a source for the *Physician's Tale* is then relegated to the sidelines, and not even the *Roman de la Rose* is used as a prominent source for the tale. In fact, I doubt that we should read the *Physician's Tale* as an explicitly Roman tale that 'rules out any appeal to Christian doctrine.'[357] The Physician's attempt to escape from the limiting influence of his sources throughout his tale de-historicises the tale in a way that goes far beyond that found in Gower's 'Tale of Virginia,' in the process strengthening its ties with Chaucer's socio-political context as well as with the narrative context of the Physician. Essentially, Chaucer's Physician only uses the Virginia story as a loosely defined basis for his discussion of the need for

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[355] Knighton, *Knighton's Chronicle 1337-1396*, 424-6; Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana*, ed. H. T. Riley, 2 vols., *Rolls Series* (1863-4), ii, 172; Hector and Harvey, eds., *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394*, 226-8.

[356] For a discussion of this issue, see Saul, *Richard II*, 188-91; Anthony Goodman, *A Loyal Conspiracy: The Lords Appellant Under Richard II* (London: Routledge, 1971), 32-3; Anthony Tuck, *Richard II and the English Nobility* (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 119.

[357] Robert Worth Frank Jr., 'The *Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos,' in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 143-58 (152).

proper guardianship of both children and the state.

In addition to the erasure of the Roman setting of the tale, Chaucer's movement away from the political aspects of his source material has prompted several critics to deny the possibility of a political reading of the *Physician's Tale*. For example, Anne Middleton argues that the absence of the 'political force of public pressure' means that Chaucer's tale 'loses its historical dimension.'[358] Sheila Delany similarly states that the main shortcoming of Chaucer's version is the fact that he erases the socio-political aspects of his source material and then fails to supply an adequate substitute that would make up for the loss of focus and coherence caused by this erasure.[359] These comments are certainly valid, but I hesitate to deny the *Physician's Tale* a political thrust. The fact that the Physician takes the story out of its original Roman context and makes it into a commodity to be traded within the context of the story-telling competition of the *Canterbury Tales* reminds us of works such as the *House of Fame* and the *Tale of Melibee* in which Chaucer similarly stresses the readerly appropriation of old texts and stories. Instead of looking for an overarching political agenda comparable to those of Livy and de Meun, we should examine the Physician's narrative foci in his tale if we want to gain a better understanding of the tale's politics.

The Physician's version of the Virginia story is, as Delany points out, 'generally conceded to be one of Chaucer's least interesting and least successful efforts: flat characters [and] a rather incompetent narrative flawed by irrelevant digressions.'[360] Certainly, on a purely aesthetic level, Chaucer can do a lot better than he does in the *Physician's Tale*, but I would argue that not all of the digressions in the tale are actually irrelevant, if we take the tale's politics into

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[358] Anne Middleton, 'The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs: 'Ensamples Mo Than Ten' as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*,' *The Chaucer Review* 8 (1973): 9-32 (11).

[359] Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis,' 47.

[360] Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis,' 47.

account. Essentially, the Physician promotes Virginia to the centre of his narrative, motivating many of his digressions. Furthermore, the tale's focus on Virginia offers an explanation for the Physician's erasure of the social upheaval that results in the overthrow of Apius at the end of Livy's and de Meun's versions. Because the Physician is primarily concerned to relate Virginia's fate, he does not have to expand his narrative on Apius any more than is strictly necessary for our understanding of Virginia's sacrifice. The erasure of the revolt that removes Apius from power is less a sign of an impasse arising from 'the intersection of Chaucer's own social views with those of his sources,'[361] than it is an indicator for his new found focus on Virginia's fate. Essentially, Apius serves the Physician to highlight the effects a corrupt ruler can have on innocent bystanders such as Virginia.

In addition, the centrality of Virginia in the *Physician's Tale* is important for our understanding of the Physician's reference to the importance of proper guardianship of children, which, when read in combination with the earlier discussion of nature, effectively establishes a context for the tale.[362] After the long excursus on Virginia's external and internal qualities, he stresses the role of 'maistresses' (VI, 72) who look after children 'To teche hem vertu looke that ye ne slake.' (VI, 82). In a tale that eventually has a father kill his faultless daughter, this seems strangely at odds with the narrative matter. The Physician's remarks are not meant to be applied solely to Virginia and her father but to the guardians of other children who are, in all probability, not as virtuous as Virginia. A few lines later, the Physician addresses parents:

> Ye fadres and ye moodres eek also,
> Though ye han children, be it oon or moo,
> Youre is the charge of al hir surviance,
> Whil that they been under youre governaunce.

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[361] Delany, 'Politics and Paralysis,' 47.

[362] Barry Windeatt, 'Literary Structures in Chaucer,' in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 195-212 (197).

> Beth war, if by ensemple of youre lyvynge,
> Or by youre negligence in chastisynge,
> That they ne perisse. (VI, 93-9)

The Physician here bridges the divide between the private sphere of raising children and the public sphere of political governance. This link possibly also connects the *Physician's Tale* to the *Melibee*, especially if we accept Lee Patterson's argument that the latter might have been written for the education of children.[363] Considering the emphasis in the *Melibee* on the proper use of authoritative sources and past knowledge within the present, the Physician's retelling of the Virginia story thus constitutes an equally significant contribution to the use and interpretation of the past within the present.

In fact, the Physician's discussion of proper guardianship of children should be read in combination with medieval discussions of kingship. The view of the body politic as a mirror image of the actual human body was common in the Middle Ages, and we have already seen how Gower utilises the image in his *Vox*. The Physician's discussion of guardians and children picks up on the link between the body politic and the human body, even if Chaucer does not discuss kingship directly, but rather focuses on Virginia. However, the discussion of the education of children in the passage quoted above hints at a possible solution to the problems posed by the Physician's disfiguring of his source material. Parents are asked to lead by good example and to chastise when necessary, and from this it is not too big an interpretive leap to the reliance of the medieval body politic on a functioning royal head, who would also lead by good example and intervene if the other members of the body threaten to go astray. However, the passage takes on the relevance on kingship only *after* we have left the narrative confines of the tale and

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[363] Lee Patterson, '"What Man Artow?": Authorial Self-Definition in *The Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*,' *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117-75 (149-51).

looked at the wider discussion of kingship that was going on at the time. I would argue that María Bullón-Fernández' observation that the father-daughter relationship in Gower's tale represents the monarch's obligations toward his state can be better applied to Chaucer's tale than it can to Gower's.[364] In Chaucer's tale, Virginius is offered as a negative example of kingship who reigns supreme in his private sphere, and his failure to protect Virginia from Apius' aggression echoes the constant criticism of Richard II's conduct of affairs of state.

Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* is thus concerned with kingship, but does not directly allude to it in the narrative. The focus on Virginia takes our attention away from Apius' corruption, and Chaucer completely erases the political context of his source material. But he also inserts elements into the narrative that should be read as indicating a concern with kingship and English politics that has usually gone unnoticed in readings of the tale. The discussion of proper guardianship of children and the implied connection to governance of the body politic clearly situates the *Physician's Tale* within its socio-political context. There is a link between the bad guardianship of Virginia in Chaucer's tale and the effects of Richard II's guardianship of the English body politic. Having no children of his own Richard II should, in theory, devote himself even more emphatically to guarding his realm properly, and the emphasis on Apius' corruption together with Virginius' even more catastrophic guardianship of his daughter effectively critique Richard's commitment to and conduct of his royal appointment. Gower's 'Tale of Virginia' does, in contrast, offer a commentary on medieval kingship and the need for and dangers of deposition, but not specifically on the kingship of Richard II. The fact that Gower leaves the original focus of the source stories on Apius' corruption of

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[364] María Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower's Confessio Amantis: Authority, Family, State, and Writing* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 145-57. For a critical view of this in relation to the 'Tale of Virginia', see Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 123-4.

justice intact indicates that he is especially interested in the interaction between a king and his subjects, and in this, the 'Tale of Virginia' does not stand out from its narrative context of *Confessio* VII, where we find a constant focus on the duties and necessary virtues of a king and the dismal results if these are lacking.

Virginia and the Body of History

Judging solely on the basis of their politics, the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' are consistent with Chaucer's and Gower's other works. The focus on the importance of proper guardianship in the *Physician's Tale* matches the veiled engagement with the socio-political context of Ricardian England that we find in Chaucer's works in general. Gower's 'Tale of Virginia', on the other hand, is fully integrated into the narrative context of the *Confessio*, and by extension also of Gower's other works. As such, it clearly engages with the politics of Ricardian England, but the focus is on England rather than Richard II in particular, an element that is particularly apparent in the revised versions of the poem that are explicitly written for 'Engelondes sake' (Prol. 24). To conclude this chapter, I want to examine the Virginia story in the light of the appropriation of the past within the temporal and political confines of the present as a central concern of the works by Chaucer and Gower. Virginia and her story are, in effect, metonyms for the body of history, and her treatment throughout these two tales, especially her eventual sacrifice, are especially significant for an analysis of the treatment of the past in both writers' works.

Given the tragic fate that befalls Virginia, it is no surprise most feminist readings of the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' place her at the centre of their argument. As Linda Lomperis states, 'in privileging the metaphysical at the expense of the physical, critics of the *Physician's Tale* behave in the same manner

as Virginius: they, like him, respond to the tale's representation of bodily considerations by effectively cutting them off.' As a counterpoint, Lomperis urges a reading of the tale as 'both a complex embodiment of and politically charged commentary on various social forces in its late medieval British environment.'[365] She goes on to compare the struggle to control Virginia on the marriage market with that experienced by a few high-level women roughly contemporary to Chaucer, most notably Joan of Kent. A similar socio-political reading is central to Robin L. Bott's comparison between the *Physician's Tale* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, emphasising the exchange value with which women were invested in the patriarchal society of late medieval and Early Modern England. In this context, Virginius is said to sacrifice his daughter once his patriarchal control over her is threatened by Apius who, as political ruler, assumes the right to invade the private sphere in which Virginius reigns.[366] María Bullón-Fernández follows a similar line of argument in relation to the 'Tale of Virginia.' Acknowledging that the tale 'explores the limits of kingly authority,' but suggesting that it 'is also about the limits of a father's authority over his daughter,' she argues that the main conflict in the tale is that 'between Virginia's father's prerogative over his family, and Apius' political power as king, a power he tries to use to obtain Virginia.'[367] These three examples illustrate how a critical focus on Virginia can be combined with socio-political issues such as kingship and patriarchal assumptions about familial authority.

The combination of kingly and patriarchal authority is important for a reading of Virginia as a member of the body of history within the discussion of history's authority that I pursue in this study. As Bott states, 'the idea that women function as objects of exchange between men is now commonplace among

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[365] Lomperis, 'Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices,' 21-2.
[366] Bott, 'Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation.'
[367] Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters*, 145-8.

scholars,'[368] and we have seen that Chaucer and Gower view history and authoritative writings from the past as invested with a similar exchange value. Just as Virginia as a metonym for all women in ancient and medieval cultures is passed and contested between Virginius, Ilicius and Apius, so authoritative sources and accounts of the past are passed on and contested between writers like Chaucer and Gower who have to appropriate them for their own purposes within the present. Re-writing Virginia's story, Chaucer and Gower exert their symbolic control over this particular element of the flow of exchanges that governs literary tradition, and Virginia's eventual sacrifice illustrates the extent to which Virginia and her story threaten to escape from this symbolic control.

The *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' have to be read alongside the other female figures we have encountered throughout this study. Gower's description of London (or New Troy) as a lonely and vulnerable widow comes to mind, although, of course, Gower merely invests the city with feminine qualities, rather than concerning himself with an actual or even fictional woman.[369] Closer to the point, we should remember Chaucer's treatment of the Dido story in Book One of the *House of Fame*, where he illustrates that it is the duty of a conscientious reader to invest a story that exists in several, contradictory versions with new value. The two examples that exhibit the closest similarities with Virginia are doubtless Criseyde and Helen. From the beginning of Chaucer's *Troilus*, Criseyde is painfully aware of her own vulnerability after her father has left Troy, and eventually neither the patriarchal Hector nor the love-smitten Troilus can prevent her from being traded for Antenor. Beyond the earthly, human sphere, Helen becomes an exchange

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[368] Bott, 'Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation,' 190. See also Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,' in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R.R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.

[369] For a discussion of Gower's treatment in the *Vox* of London as a defenseless widow, see Federico, *New Troy*, 7-18. See above, p. 145.

object between Paris and Venus, and it is certainly pertinent that Gower all but ignores Helen's fate by transforming a tale of rape into an exemplum of sacrilege.

Although neither Chaucer nor Gower explicitly use the story of Virginia as a meditation on the writing and treatment of history, we should consider the applications of Virginia and her story as part of history in both tales. Given its place in the *Confessio*, the 'Tale of Virginia' certainly proposes to heal the ills of Gower's present via a recourse to the past, and in the *Physician's Tale* we find a similar emphasis in the form of the lessons that guardians of children in the present are supposed to draw from the Physician's retelling of the story of Virginia. In this respect, we should take note of the fact that both writers focus on the power struggle between Virginius, Apius and (in Gower's version) Ilicius over Virginia. There is, in fact, a multi-directional power struggle in both tales. Had Apius not noticed Virginia, her father's patriarchal control over her would not have been threatened, and she would quite simply have been passed on as her father pleased,[370] a fact that is all but ignored in Chaucer's version due to the erasure of Ilicius from the story. Apius' invasion of Virginius' private sphere then prompts the latter to assert his right to resist the public power of Apius that, ironically, results in the sacrifice of his only child, the symbol of his patriarchal power. In a sense, Chaucer and Gower, as writers and readers, join this power struggle, asserting their own authorial power over the story as a whole.

This kind of power struggle is mirrored not only in literary rewritings of the past but also in political discourse, where access to knowledge of the past was especially important. The acute sense of danger Gower exhibits in his account of the attempts by the rebels of 1381 to assert perceived ancient rights against the upper social strata illustrates how easily an attack on the social system could be

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[370] Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters*, 149.

mounted.[371] Chaucer's treatment of the Troy myth is also important in this regard. As we have seen, already in the *House of Fame* he presents the Trojan poets/historians as a viciously heterogeneous group that is engaged in a constant, inconclusive struggle as to who holds the key and has the ability to tell the story correctly.[372] In his *Troilus*, Chaucer then picks up on the currency of the myth of British Trojan origins and utilises it in a wide-ranging critique of medieval historiography and Ricardian politics. The dealing with and writing of history is at least indirectly relevant for one's position within the political discourse of any given time.

With regard to Virginia as a member of the body of history, her eventual sacrifice in both tales has special significance. In both tales, she is sacrificed in order that her own and her father's reputations stay intact. As Virginius says in Gower's version:

> 'Lo, take hire ther, thou wrongfull king,
> For me is levere upon this thing
> To be the fader of a Maide,
> Thogh she be ded, than if men saide
> That in hir lif she were shamed
> And I therof were evele named.' (VII, 5247-52)

Virginius clearly sees the shaming of his daughter as a threat to his future reputation and tries to safeguard his personal history from this contamination. Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* works from a similar assumption, as Virginius' address to his daughter towards the end of the tale illustrates:

> 'Doghter,' quod he, 'Virginia, by thy name,
> ther ben two weyes, outher deeth or shame,
> That thou most suffre; allas, that I was bore!
> For nevere thou deservest wherfore
> To dyen with a swerd or with a knyf.
> O deere doghter, endere of my lyf,
> Which i have fostred up with swich plesaunce
> That thou were nevere out of my remembraunce!' (VI, 213-20)

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[371] See above, chapter one.
[372] See above, p. 97.

But interestingly, Chaucer's Physician also implies that Virginius, by sacrificing his daughter and asserting his position of patriarchal power, also taints his reputation. The early address to guardians of children and the prolonged scene at the end when Virginius is effectively shown to commit a premeditated murder implicate him within the context of bad guardianship that Chaucer's Physician criticises. Essentially, Chaucer's Virginius tries but fails in the last instance to achieve for Virginia and himself what Criseyde cannot achieve for herself in Chaucer's *Troilus*: he cannot save the woman's reputation.

In Gower's tale, Virginia represents a significant part of history insofar as she is the main motivating factor behind Apius' attempt to misuse the power invested in him by the Roman people. In this respect, it is significant that Apius starts to desire Virginia after her fame 'which goth up and doun, / To Claudius kam in his Ere' (VII, 5140-1), changing the focus on his seeing Virginia that is mentioned in the other versions. The image of Virginia's fame going 'up and doun' reminds us of Chaucer's *House of Fame*, where utterances first climb up to the House of Rumour, being nurtured before moving on to Fame's court from where they are blown out of the window and down to earth again. Virginius tries to counter the threat to his patriarchal power over his daughter and symbolic control over his family's history by cutting off the element of the social exchange that Apius wants to make his own. As a historical text that is read by her father, Apius and subsequent writers of her story, Virginia could, in theory, be owned by all parties involved. However, the struggle between the patriarch (Virginius) and the king (Apius) illustrates that, once competing social actors become involved, a memorised text cannot become the property of the reader without invalidating the original author's ownership, as Mary Carruthers argues in relation to medieval

mnemonic techniques.[373] If Virginia's text were alienated from her father by Apius, then Virginius' own text would be altered beyond recognition, because he sees his reputation jeopardised by the threat on Virginia's moral integrity.

Chaucer's *Physician's Tale*, on the other hand, is more concerned with escaping from the symbolic control of its sources than with the power struggle that is raging in the Virginia story itself. Whereas Gower effectively retells the story as a part of history in its own right, Chaucer's Physician chooses to use Virginia and her story as an integral part of a new narrative that attempts to make his tale relevant for his primary concern with the education of and guardianship over children. As a member of the body of history, Virginia is used by the Physician to authorise his address to all those who have to guard charges, be they children or the body politic. In this sense, Chaucer and his Physician become participants in the power struggle for Virginia. Apius wants to take her from her father by force; Virginius rather selfishly decides that his daughter has to be sacrificed for his own and Rome's history's sake; and throughout his tale, the Physician implies that he would rather be able to change the course of this particular stretch of history for the better. This is an instance where the narrator clashes with tradition, history and authoritative sources insofar as he eventually has to succumb to the contingencies of the story, just as Chaucer and his narrator, in the last instance, are not able to avert the tragic ending prescribed in the sources for his *Troilus*. In the *Physician's Tale*, however, the Physician does not provide an ending that echoes that found in his sources, but rather chooses to stress Virginius' deliberation, substituting a premeditated murder for what used to be—and still is in Gower's tale—an instinctive reaction to a threat to Virginius' honour and patriarchal authority. Thus, the Physician illustrates that even if history cannot be fully rewritten, it can still be re-interpreted.

The most significant difference between Chaucer's and Gower's version of

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[373] Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 168-70.

the story in relation to their treatment of Virginia as a member of the body of history is contained in the specific ways in which Virginia is eventually killed. In Chaucer's tale, having informed his daughter of his decision, Virginius

> [...] with ful sorweful herte and wil,
> Hir heed of smoot, and by the top it hente,
> And to the juge he gan it to presente,
> As he sat yet in doom in consistorie. (VI, 254-7)

Virginius here decapitates his daughter and carries her cut-off head from his private sphere into the public realm, where the corrupt judge, Apius, is still holding court. This is significant for Chaucer's treatment of history in two distinct ways. Chaucer has Virginius effectively fragment Virginia's body—and by extension that of history—and then takes her head as the most clearly identifiable signifier for his daughter from his private sphere to the public arena of Apius' court. As Chaucer emphasises throughout his works, history is not a structurally intact body of discourse but rather a set of fragments that have to be interpreted by the mind of the private individual before a new account can be taken to the public sphere. Just as Virginius' act of decapitation signifies his assertion of the right of control over his daughter, a reader and writer of texts has to accept that the right to interpret texts necessarily entails a frightening degree of sacrifice.

In Gower's 'Tale of Virginia,' on the other hand, all the action takes place in the public space of the court. Listening to Apius' verdict together with his daughter, Gower's Virginius takes action and

> A naked swerd he pulleth oute,
> The which amonges al the route
> He threste through his dowhter side, (VII, 5243-5)

It is noteworthy that Gower, in sacrificing his Virginia, does not present her body as disfigured but leaves it structurally intact. Rather than cutting Virginia's body in half, Gower's Virginius pierces her torso's side standing in stark contrast to the

sacrifice in Chaucer's version. There is, of course, strongly sexual imagery at work here. As Watt states, 'if Virginius cannot control to whom he gives his daughter's virginity he will take it himself.'[374] Virginius' sword effectively becomes Gower's poetic imagination with which he takes physical possession of the body of history. The death of Virginia represents the rupture in historical development that is already apparent in the juxtaposition of past and present in the *Vox*. However, the setting of the scene in the town square emphasises the very public nature of Gower's poetry, stressing the need for a poet to appropriate the past in a way that, while acknowledging its death, strives to make history an integral part of the semi-public sphere of poetry.

Conclusion

The *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' re-tell the Virginia story in ways that highlight Chaucer's and Gower's different strategies of source appropriation. While Gower is content with relatively minor alterations that bring his tale in line with his general concern with kingship and the state of English society in the late fourteenth century, both in the *Confessio* and in his other works, Chaucer is at pains to assert his independence from the overwhelming influence of authoritative sources. However, the further his Physician advances into his narrative and the further he distances himself from his authoritative forbears, the more it becomes apparent that in the last instance, even the *Physician's Tale* cannot fully change the traditional ending of the story and must be content with giving the ending a new dimension by describing Virginius' sacrifice of his daughter as premeditated. The differences in the appropriation of sources in the two tales also inform their politics. Gower effectively takes over much of Livy's original political focus, and his

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[374] Watt, *Amoral Gower*, 123.

alterations mainly function to take the story out of its original republican context and to weave it seamlessly into both the narrative context of the *Confessio* and the socio-political context of Ricardian England. Chaucer, on the other hand, strips the traditional Virginia story of practically all of its socio-political dimension and only implicitly supplies a substitute in his address to guardians of children. Striving to assert his independence from his sources, Chaucer's Physician has to change the politics of his source material to an emphasis on proper guardianship of children, and by extension of the body politic.

With regard to the theories and uses of history that I have examined throughout this study, the differences in the treatment of Virginia we find in the two tales are highly significant. We have seen that Chaucer tends to focus on the contradictions between sources, stressing the fact that history and tradition are inherently disjunctive, rendering any attempt to arrive at a final, stable account of the past from the vantage point of the present impossible. Gower, on the other hand, tends to acknowledge contradiction and the need for re-interpretations, but he has a much stronger tendency than his contemporary and friend to use sources in a way that makes them integral parts of his own literary output. In other words, authoritative sources for Chaucer and Gower are comparable to kingship and virginity as objects of social exchange. In this context, it is telling that Chaucer decapitates Virginia, whereas Gower kills her by having Virginius stab her through the side. The different treatments of Virginia and her story in the *Physician's Tale* and the 'Tale of Virginia' are metonymic for Chaucer's and Gower's poetics and politics of the past as I have examined them in the previous chapters. Chaucer effectively fragments the body of history whereas Gower acknowledges its death but nonetheless takes possession of its remains, illustrated by the sexual imagery contained in Virginius' stabbing of his daughter.

Conclusion

The readings I offer in this study illustrate the validity of poetics of the past as a critical focus for our understanding of Chaucer's and Gower's politics of the present. Like many of their contemporaries, Chaucer and Gower were acutely aware of the need to forge an independent literary voice from the available pool of authorities from the past, and their use and appropriation of these authorities is significant not only for the rise of the vernacular as literary language but also for our understanding of Ricardian poetics and the cultural context in which Chaucer and Gower lived and worked. Before I outline possible extensions to the frame of this study, I want to briefly retrace the argument of the previous six chapters.

The first chapter of this study places Gower's *Vox Clamantis* in relation to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', especially the image of the angel of history. This chapter picks up Gower's oft-noted and scrutinised account of the Rising of 1381 as well as his heavy reliance on lines and passages taken from older, more authoritative texts. In the *Vox*, Gower is obsessed with division and strive, between the rebels of 1381 and other social strata as well as between his own original lines and those he borrows from other texts. This focus on division and conflict is echoed in this chapter by the comparison between Gower's text and Benjamin's angel of history. Like Gower, Benjamin perceived a heavily chaotic tendency in historical development, but as this chapter illustrates, Gower strives to revert this development and reorder the chaos of time in order to revert to an idealised past. However, in the last instance, this endeavour is condemned to failure, a fact that is illustrated not only by the events of 1381 Gower so graphically describes, but also by his constant reminders that the present has been almost irreversibly severed from its cultural past. Although Gower does not develop a fully fledged theory of historical development in the *Vox*, reading his use of older sources

within the volatile climate of early Ricardian England through the lens of Benjamin's 'Theses' is a useful starting point for the analysis of Gower's poetics of the past and politics of the present that I put forward in the subsequent chapters of this study.

Since Chaucer does not engage as directly and forcefully with his political context as Gower, the second chapter of this study focuses on his treatment of literary and social authority in general. It opens with a brief discussion of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, a text that has occasionally been regarded as a direct response to Book One of Gower's *Vox*, but when freed from this rather limited frame of intertextual reference has much to offer for our understanding of Chaucer's view of authority. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic intertextuality serves to focus this chapter's attention on the way in which Chaucer engages old texts as well as the discursive interaction of social agents. The beast fable of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* focuses our attention on the ways in which Chauntecleer and Pertelote strive to assert their authority over each other via recourse to venerated authoritative sources and their individual interpretations of them. But for a fuller understanding of Chaucer's views on authority, we have to turn our attention to the *House of Fame*, a text that is obsessed with discursive authority and the implications of using past authorities within any given present. This is then built upon in the *Parliament of Fowls*, where the fictitious bird parliament highlights the need for discursive appropriation of authority in social and political situations. Especially when juxtaposed with Gower's poetics as discussed in the previous chapter, the discussion of literary and social authority in Chaucer's dreams stresses the fact that Chaucer follows a much more performative, unstable and open-ended strategy of appropriating the past, within both literary and social discourse of the present.

The following two chapters analyse Chaucer's and Gower's different treatments of the story of Troy against the backdrop of the myth of British Trojan

origins instigated by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and enjoying a resurgence in popularity in Ricardian England. The chapter on Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* reads the poem as both a critique of medieval historiography and a forceful, albeit indirect, intervention in the heated political climate of the second half of the 1380s. My reading of Chaucer's *Troilus* in this chapter focuses on the question of historical repetition, with a twentieth-century view on the issue provided by Julian Barnes' *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*. Chaucer juxtaposes cyclical and teleological timescales in order to highlight the inability of his fictionalised Trojans to read their situation properly, making decisions that contribute to the tragic fall of their city. Given the fact that London was often referred to as New Troy (not least by Chaucer's friend John Gower), this focus on the Trojans' doomed situation should be read as a mirror image for Chaucer's own contemporaries who, in addition to regarding themselves as the Trojans' heirs, found themselves constantly threatened by Scottish and French armies. Essentially, Chaucer uses his Trojan poem to meditate on the possibility for human action and agency within a presumably predestined providential view of history that relies on a *translatio imperii* it inherited from Virgil. In this sense, *Troilus and Criseyde* provides us with valuable insights into the ways in which Chaucer utilises the past and its writings within the immediate present of Ricardian England.

In contrast to Chaucer, Gower does not devote a whole prolonged narrative to Troy as a theme, but rather scatters Trojan references across the first book of the *Vox* and a selection of Trojan tales across the whole length of the *Confessio Amantis*. Taking its cue from Jacques Derrida's concept of inheritance always carrying with it a certain responsibility, this chapter argues that Gower acknowledges the presence and cultural currency of the myth of British Trojan origins, using it to highlight the fact that his contemporaries do not fulfil the responsibility involved in being Troy's medieval heirs. Having set up this frame of

reference in the *Vox*, Gower then moves on to include a number of Trojan tales in his *Confessio* that focus on the build-up and aftermath of the siege of Troy, highlighting those instances where human error of judgement leads to the fall of Troy and the tumultuous aftermath of the siege. As only one among many ancient and more contemporary thematic foci in the *Confessio*, Troy should not be seen as primary key to the meaning of this most complex of Gower's poems, but given the importance of Troy in Ricardian England and the fact that Chaucer devotes his longest single-topic poem to the subject, we should not underestimate its importance within the frame of Gower's poetics and politics. This chapter illustrates that Gower utilises Troy as a powerful element in his programme of appropriating the past for his present politics, highlighting the gap between the flawed but idealised past of Troy and the even more flawed present of Ricardian England.

The final two chapters of this study move beyond the use of the past mainly for purposes of poetics, focussing on the ways in which Chaucer and Gower conceive of themselves as writers advising princes and other rulers. The penultimate chapter offers a side-by-side reading of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* and Book VII of Gower's *Confessio*, two texts that have frequently been described as members of the body of advice for princes literature. The interpretive focus of this chapter is provided by Friedrich Nietzsche's architect of the future and his emphasis on the need to know the past and the present in any attempt to shape and influence the future. This chapter illustrates that, building upon the discussions of their poetics of the past as put forward in the preceding chapters, Chaucer and Gower are uniquely aware of this need to know the past and present when participating in political discourse. Chaucer's *Melibee* confronts its readers with a dialogic situation in which two speakers try to win the upper hand by putting a vast array of authoritative sources through the filter of their interpretive agency, stressing the need for readerly interpretation in any attempt to understand the past's bearing on

the present and the future. Gower's *Confessio* VII, on the other hand, present its readers with only one speaker (Genius) who has already interpreted and, most importantly, organised the knowledge he inherits from his cultural past. Such a comparison of both writers' poetics and politics emphasises the fact that both acknowledge the inherently unstable character of discursive knowledge. Essentially, Gower argues for a strong interpretive agency that can propose to succeed in making sense of the past for its own political purpose in the present, while Chaucer refuses to offer such a strong position, relishing instead the possibility to offer two (and more) conflicting views that are engaged in a dialogue and leaving the search for a solution to his audience.

The final chapter focuses on Chaucer's and Gower's treatments of the Virginia story as a case study for their appropriating of the past within the Ricardian present. As one of several stories that both writers incorporated into their literary oeuvres, the Virginia story offers valuable insights into the minor and major differences in their poetics and politics. The twentieth-century anecdote in this chapter is provided by Jean Baudrillard's concept of sacrificial regicide and its relation to the symbolic control of a social group, and my reading parallels this with Chaucer's and Gower's self-positioning in relation to their source material as well as the treatment and sacrifice of Virginia in their poems. The comparison of Chaucer's and Gower's versions of the poem illustrates that Gower adapts the poem quite specifically to his contemporary context, whereas Chaucer's alterations are much more generally geared towards Ricardian England. This highlights the differences in both writers' texts that I have outlined in the preceding chapters, showing that even if he does not intervene directly in contemporary politics, Chaucer is nonetheless constantly bringing the writings of the past he incorporates in his texts forward into his present. In this sense, the sacrifice of Virginia in both poems is especially significant. Her beheading in Chaucer's and her stabbing in

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Gower's text illustrate that Chaucer sees the past and its writings as highly fragmented (just as Virginia's body is fragmented in the end) whereas Gower subscribes to a more appropriative way of dealing with the past, underlined by the highly sexual imagery in his poem, with Virginius stabbing his daughter with his phallic sword.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate that Chaucer and Gower pursue distinct strategies of appropriating the past and its writings for their poetical and political purposes in the Ricardian present. Throughout his literary career, and especially in the texts studied here, Gower is preoccupied with the loss of a wholeness of meaning that he envisages as the key to an idealised and all but irretrievably lost originary past. However, this study has shown that despite the fragmentation and division ripe in his own time, Gower is at pains to formulate clear and unambiguous statements in his poetry. Still, given that his own present has lost the wholeness of meaning of the past, these statements must remain linked to their specific poetical moments. Read within the context of the poetics of the past that I analyse in these chapters, any contradictions found in Gower's poetry, especially in the *Confessio*, do not mean that his poetics and politics are flawed and contradictory, but rather that he acknowledges the cultural division and fragmented knowledge while still attempting to interpret the past within the present in ways that are coherent within specific moments albeit not within his historical present as a whole.

Chaucer's works, however, show a poet who eschews the kind of unambiguous statements Gower so eagerly pursues. The texts studied in the chapters of the present study illustrate that Chaucer partakes in the continuing discursive reconstruction of the past within the present that prompts Gower to lament the loss of a wholeness of meaning. It has long been a critical commonplace that Chaucer is not one for direct political commentary, a view I subscribe to. But

even if he does not intervene directly in the politics of his time, this does not mean that Chaucer does not possess a unique awareness of the nature of political discourse and the position of the individual within it. In fact, the readings proposed here illustrate that the poet's awareness of discursive ambiguity is at the very core of Chaucer's poetics and politics. Poems such as the *House of Fame* highlight Chaucer's awareness of the absence of any kind of fixed authority, both in literature and beyond, and we should place this awareness at the centre of our critical readings of Chaucer's works. Chaucer does not offer fixed moral or political solutions, but rather urges his audience to realise the potential as well as the limitations of the discursive construction of meaning, stressing fragmentation and dialogue where Gower emphasises division and singular authority.

The author's reading practices are a key element in the readings of Chaucer's and Gower's works as presented here insofar as their poetics of the past depend on the ways in which they read, interpret, and appropriate that past for their own literary purposes within the present. As I state in my introductory chapter, such an awareness of reading practices across time is vital for my self-definition as a critic and reader, and I am convinced that our current (post)modern culture depends on a fragmentation, flattening, and reconstruction of the past that echoes or is prefigured in Chaucer's and Gower's poetry. In this sense, I am following Carolyn Dinshaw in making the past and present touch,[375] but focussing on reading practices across time instead of sexual categories. This study, then, views Chaucer and Gower as two of 'hem that writen ous tofore' (*Confessio*, Prol., 1), but simultaneously attempts a reading of their poetry that proposes to understand their poetry within our own present, just as Chaucer and Gower are reading and appropriating their cultural past within their present. Indeed, in the proem to the second book of his *Troilus*, Chaucer shows a clear awareness of such a combination

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[375] Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 2.

of timelessness and change:

> Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge
> Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes tho
> That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge
> Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so,
> And spedde as wel in love as men now do;
> Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages,
> In sondry londes, sondry ben usages. (II, 22-28)

Different usages indeed, as this study has shown. Just as Chaucer's and Gower's poetry might strike the (post)modern reader as 'wonder nyce and straunge' so their source material seems to have been strange and alien for their contemporary audience. Only through the poetics of the past that I have examined in these chapters can the writings of the past become meaningful within the present. And this applies just as much to us as readers of medieval literature as it does to medieval writers as readers and heirs of older literary and cultural discourses.

Finally, this kind of reading not only applies to the texts studied here, but is applicable to other texts. It has, for example, long been recognised that fifteenth-century writers such as Hoccleve and Lydgate are heavily indebted to Chaucer, and there is a recent trend to widen the critical focus to include Gower as an additional influence on these writers. Diane Watt is currently investigating Hoccleve's and Lydgate's debts to Gower,[376] and critics such as Maura Nolan and Nicholas Perkins examine the ways in which these two fifteenth-century writers appropriate the past (including Ricardian writers) for their literary-political project in their present.[377] These are important steps on the way to a better understanding of the poetics of the past and the politics of the present in medieval literature, and should initiate examinations of Lydgate's and Hoccleve's writings with regard to their debts to

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[376] Diane Watt, 'John Gower,' in *The Cambridge Guide to Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry Scanlon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

[377] Maura B. Nolan, 'The Art of History Writing: Lydgate's Serpent of Division,' *Speculum* 78 (2003): 99-127; Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes: Counsel and Constraint* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).

Chaucer and Gower and their uses of the past along the lines of the present study. In this way, the connections that I have forged between Chaucer, Gower and their forebears, as well as between my reading practices and theirs would be extended beyond the relative confines of the works of these two Ricardian writers.

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