

THE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH BEGGING POEM

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FOREWORD

This study will examine in some detail the purposes and practices of medieval English begging poetry. A begging poem, loosely defined, is a short poem that makes a request for compensation in the form of money or goods and implicitly or explicitly identifies the supplicant as well as the party to whom the request is directed. At the outset, let me emphasize that the preceding (loose) definition is not a first attempt at defining a genre. Begging poems tend to be sufficiently dissimilar in style and technique to militate against the formulation of an organic critical construct complete with genesis, evolution, and characteristic forms and content. In fact, poems that beg can perhaps be more comprehensively understood if we consider poetic begging as a trope, the use of embellished language as an enabling medium rather than as a generic marker.

Although no overarching theory will be specified, my analysis suggests that there is a consistent and productive methodology for studying this peculiar industry. The foundation upon which my analysis will be built is the relationship between poet and patron. It is clear that the typical medieval poet needed patronage of some kind if he intended to support himself, even in part, with his art. Thus, our

study of begging poetry takes us straight to the heart of a process, an exchange, that was essential to the production of a very significant proportion of medieval poetry. By focusing upon the social contract prevailing between poet and patron, then building upon this foundation by recourse to the literary, historical, anthropological, and other resources available to us, we can gain a more thorough understanding of the way in which the business of poetry was transacted in England in the Middle Ages. At the outset, we will recognize that our approach is not particularly reusable or portable. Each poet (and sometimes, each poem as well) must be considered in the light of the circumstances pertaining to its inspiration, composition, and dissemination.

Although all of our sample poems present a request, implicit or explicit, for compensation of some sort on behalf of the poet and, perhaps, others, the sheer variety of the poems suggests the expedience of keeping our approach eclectic and our definitions simple. Aside from the request for compensation, the poems have little in common. Some of them identify, implicitly or otherwise, the party to whom they are addressed, as well as the supplicant poet; others do not. There are, moreover, no clear rules regarding the form of the begging poem. Forms often employed by begging poets, such as the *ballade* in the case of the later examples, certainly do not mark a work as a begging poem. The Old English begging poems, similarly, were written according to the same rules that govern the rest of Anglo-Saxon poetry; like the late-medieval poems, their style seems to contribute little that is specific to our understanding of the genre. Tellingly, some of the begging poems are openly humorous, while others are almost pious in tone, a range that is demonstrated even within the oeuvre of a single poet.

Though often remarked upon, medieval English begging poetry has not been analyzed in much detail. The poems I shall consider have often been studied in other contexts, with only passing mention of their status as begging poems.¹ In light of our formulation of begging as a trope rather than a genre, this discovery is not a surprising one. We shall consider poems that are exclusively dedicated to begging, as well as longer poems that may devote more or less significant passages to the business of begging but nevertheless foreground other concerns. The main focus of this study will be short poems entirely devoted to the purpose of begging, although we will have occasion to mention longer works as well.

As suggested above, we shall explore the begging poems in an eclectic fashion. The very diversity of our sample texts necessitates such an approach. However, the relationship between poet and patron forms a unifying thread. Out of this relationship grows a narrative, a blend of fact and fiction that reveals how the poem came to be written and what it accomplished. Since the boundaries of such a narrative are difficult to define and obviously vary from subject to subject, I will structure the discussion with several important considerations. First, the identities of poet and patron must be explored. Second, the social and political milieux in which the cast of characters moves is exploited to further illuminate our narrative. Finally, we must examine the poems on a line-by-line level, as specimens of the poet's craft, with an eye both to illuminating their meaning and to shedding yet more light on the facts of the poet's relationship with his master.

First, then, we will attempt to identify the patron and the poet, either implicitly or explicitly. When a narrator does not name himself,

we assume that the poet is playing the role, and in some cases we will even be able to say, with some certainty, that the poet represents his own interests. There may be co-petitioners as well, who may or may not be named. Things are a bit more difficult in the case of the patron. Initially, we will be forced to satisfy ourselves with attempting to extrapolate what sort of person the patron might have been. As we move forward in time and the historical record becomes more complete, patrons can sometimes be identified with certainty.

Second, we will examine the relationship between poet and patron. This relationship may be based upon something as ordinary as the poet's day-to-day employment in the service of his patron or as potentially extraordinary as service at court. In other cases, in which there is no relationship yet and no attempt is made to recover a debt, the poet uses his skills to win employment and the promise of future rewards. Ideally, as we consider the relationship between poet and patron we will gain a much clearer perception of the circumstances under which a wide range of medieval poetry, not just the begging poems, came to be written.

Finally, we will analyze each poem with an eye to illuminating how well it achieves its goals as a begging poem. Although we will be able to determine with a good degree of certainty, in a few cases, whether or not payment was actually received, that will not be among our criteria. Rather, we will seek to identify how each poet expresses and identifies his relationship with his patron, remarking upon the commonalities that we discover in the process. Each of the poets we will discuss, for instance, is very aware of the distance between himself and his patron, however original his expression of this gap may

be, and each expresses, or at least promises, fealty of some kind. In some cases, one may even get the feeling that the success of the poem in some way depends on the poet's bowing exactly low enough to appropriately express his subservience, aside from whatever other art he must bring to bear to achieve his goal.

Our sample texts cover a significant range of medieval English poetry, from both a chronological and stylistic perspective. The Old English begging poems *Deor* and *Widsith* are discussed in Chapter One. The approaches we will follow in later chapters do not all apply in this one since, first of all, we are unable to identify either the poet or the patron with any certainty. The poems are presumed to have been named for their creators, although, in the case of *Widsith*, which can be translated "long journey," the name is so closely related to the poem's subject matter that one is reluctant to posit *Widsith's* historical existence. Aside from this, *Widsith* appears to be a character in the poem himself, which forces us to posit an additional level of indirection in our identification of him. There is no compelling reason to believe that an individual named *Deor* ever existed either. The identities of the patrons are problematic as well. *Deor* only implies the existence of a patron, although he does vilify *Widsith's* patron, *Eormanric*, who is identified by one critic as "one of the most legendarily tyrannical kings who ever lived" (Brown 1989, 284). However, the name *Eormanric* appears a number of times in *Widsith*, manifestly referring to more than one individual.

With so little to start on, the difficulty of elucidating the relationship between poet and patron seems insuperable. However, since Old English poetry has a place in the Germanic oral tradition, and thus

reflects the innately conservative social and institutional values of its practitioners, we can make general statements about the sort of person Deor's and Widsith's patrons might have been, even if we are still unable to link them to specific historical figures. As we will see, the Germanic oral tradition is often quite emphatic in its stipulations regarding the proper behavior of both lords and their dependents. Therefore, we will examine the Old English poems' rhetorical agendas through the lens of the oral tradition that gave rise to them.

Ironically, then, the very poems with which we begin our chronological examination of the medieval English begging poem may be the most resistant to our methods. Although we can make a number of important and plausible statements about how the Old English poems perform their function, we are unable to draw the kind of personal, hands-on picture that is ultimately our goal. As we move forward in time, however, we find a body of well-executed begging poetry by poets whose names we know and patrons who sometimes loom large in the history of the time. Although there are still informational gaps, the later medieval scene stands out in comparatively sharp relief.

In Chapter Two, we take a leap across four centuries from the end of the first millennium to the end of the Middle Ages. Chaucer's well-known lyric "Chaucer's Complaint to His Purse" occupies the first half of the discussion, John Lydgate's "Letter to Gloucester" the second. There are a number of reasons for considering Chaucer and Lydgate in a chapter together. First and foremost, we will be considering only a single poem by each man. However, we must not forget that Lydgate is perhaps best, if not most accurately, known as an imitator of Chaucer.²

That he was at least inspired is certain, but the artistic debt that Lydgate owes Chaucer for the "Letter to Gloucester" is not as comprehensive as a first glance might suggest. More importantly, the circumstances under which Chaucer and Lydgate worked were so radically different that they almost present a study in opposites.

The organizing structure within which Chaucer did service to the king was called an *affinity*. An affinity's members were persons of status who made a vow of compensated service to the king or some other person sufficiently wealthy and influential to fulfill his end of the bargain. At one time Chaucer worked within the Duke of Lancaster's affinity, composing a narrative poem called *The Book of the Duchess* along with his other duties and apparently receiving an annuity for it temporarily. Later, Chaucer belonged to Richard II's affinity. When Henry IV usurped Richard's throne in 1399, Chaucer probably had little choice but to forget his allegiance to Richard and hitch his wagon to Henry's star.

Although it appears that Chaucer may have used the "Complaint to His Purse" to assist in collecting debts more than once, the best-supported case stars Henry IV as patron. Chaucer's official duties probably brought him into intermittent contact with Henry or his retinue over a period of twenty years or more, but their relationship changed abruptly when Henry deposed Richard II, forcing all those who had been close to Richard, including Chaucer, to rethink their priorities. The great wealth of critical literature on Chaucer includes, of course, a considerable amount of speculation regarding exactly how well Chaucer managed the transition. Although scholars have pretty well satisfied themselves as to the nature of the debt that

occasioned Chaucer's submission of the "Complaint" (an unpaid annuity), the fact that Chaucer served Richard II faithfully and well for more than two decades has given rise, particularly in recent criticism, to some frankly sinister speculation regarding why Chaucer may have felt pressured to send the "Complaint" to Henry and what Henry's ultimate response, beyond his partial payment of the debt, might have been.³

About the methodology of the "Complaint," which has been written about extensively, little will be said. Most of the discussion centers upon the envoy that accompanies the poem. Despite the envoy's brevity, recent criticism has shown that it can be picked apart in ways that are quite revealing of doubts that might have plagued Chaucer regarding the manner of King Richard's deposition and eventual death. In addition to this very intriguing evidence, indications that Henry was interested in attracting poets to his retinue lead to speculation that Chaucer's submission, an afterthought of a ballade accompanied by a very brief envoy, would have looked pale indeed in comparison to the robust and voluminous efforts of others. Of necessity, we will explore in some detail the circumstances surrounding the Lancastrian usurpation of the English throne, as well as relevant details of Chaucer's relationships with Richard and Henry.

After the high drama associated with Chaucer's "Complaint to His Purse," Lydgate's "Letter to Gloucester" may seem mundane indeed. Although a popular poet in his own age, over time Lydgate's reputation has diminished to the extent that we often find him subjected to ridicule. In fact, although recent critical opinion has begun to take Lydgate more seriously,⁴ negative critical attitudes prevented an accurate assessment of his work for a matter of decades, so it will be

to our advantage to give some consideration to the ups and downs of Lydgate's reputation. Nevertheless, his career does provide some interesting contrasts to Chaucer's. Whereas Chaucer moved freely among the nobility, holding a variety of positions over the course of his life, Lydgate joined the church early and never left. Whatever obligations Lydgate may have had directly to the church, it is clear that the lion's share of his time was spent writing verse. Like Chaucer, Lydgate had connections among the nobility, including Chaucer's son, Thomas, and his wife. His most illustrious patron, however, was Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, brother to King Henry V. As we shall see, Humphrey was such a learned student of the arts that his relationship with Lydgate often seems to have taken the form of collaboration rather than patronage.

As Chaucer does in the "Complaint," Lydgate personifies his purse, but aside from that very superficial resemblance Lydgate's own artistic propensities rule the day. The "Letter to Gloucester" exhibits Lydgate's habit of reflexively heaping up images and archaisms, a practice that lends the poem a paratactic, "blocky" feel. One of Lydgate's motivating axioms seems to have been that superfluity and surfeit, a heaping-up of ornament, are to be equated with quality, what Derek Pearsall has referred to, not entirely seriously, as "a *de luxe* version of Chaucer" (1990, 44). Nevertheless, recent critics of Lydgate have shown a predilection for viewing the old monk anew. Since his popularity in his own time is a matter of record, these critics seem to have adopted the view that an understanding of the tastes that found a standard in Lydgate can inform and perhaps reform our own appreciation.⁴

Thomas Hoccleve, the topic of Chapter Three, was the most prolific

writer of begging poems we shall discuss, if the surviving manuscript evidence is a reliable guide. Our discussion centers upon four of Hoccleve's short poems that beg in a dedicated and straightforward way. In addition to these four poems, however, much of the rest of Hoccleve's work almost obsessively reflects what Robert J. Meyer-Lee has described as "the centrality of the petitionary form in the production of his literary persona" (2001, 174). The prologue to Hoccleve's most ambitious poem, *The Regiment of Princes*, which purports to be a book of advice to kings, is guided by the spectre of debt, anticipation of the poet's imminent reduction to a state of beggary, and the slender but fervent hope for the timely largess of some just, generous, noble person.

There is enough of Hoccleve left in the historical record to allow us to construct a fairly substantial summary of his life, particularly of his employment at the Office of the Privy Seal, where he worked for about forty years. Also among the poet's life-records are documents detailing sums owed to him and records of their payment. With his flair for what Meyer-Lee calls "mendicant poetics" (2007, 8), Hoccleve naturally wrote begging poems to assist in recovering the sums due. The patrons he addressed came from a variety of walks of life, from the king down to one John Carpenter, the town clerk of London.

It is the very variety of Hoccleve's addressees that shapes his mastery of the begging poem. In each poem, Hoccleve is able to clearly establish the relative social distance between himself and his patron, and to speak from his position in a carefully tailored and persuasive way. Hoccleve effortlessly adapts his instrument to his audience, from his formal, almost icy address to the king to the easy familiarity of

his poem to Henry Somer, and demonstrates an extraordinary expressive range. In order to orient ourselves to the very class-conscious world of Hoccleve and his patrons, as well as to better understand the relationship that obtained between them, we will devote considerable space to a recounting of his life and, particularly, his work.

As a group, the eight poems that share the central focus of this study display a range that almost belies their numbers. Do they tell us more than they seem to? They certainly provide more than simple evidence of a transaction. They reveal much about the way the business of poetry was done in medieval England, particularly near the end of the period. Admittedly, our approach is an eclectic one. We must draw upon the materials of literature, history, anthropology, and other disciplines. However, poetry's public life during the middle ages was very robust, so a consciousness of poetry, even a dependence upon it, finds its way into the considerations of most of these disciplines.⁵

CHAPTER ONE

THE OLD ENGLISH BEGGING POEM

Of all the poems to be discussed, the Old English specimens are the most foreign in terms of both language and prosody. They are the product of a culture and world-view far removed from our own, as well as from the other poems we will discuss. At its best, Old English poetry is driven by an intense emotionalism, whether agonistic despair or transcendent joy, a legacy of its Germanic roots and of the reality of life in first-millennium Britain, which was fraught with a seemingly endless series of often violent successes and reversals. The oral traditional nature of much of the poetry, a long history of manuscript plundering (in England and elsewhere), and the very turbulent history of Anglo-Saxon England, not to mention the vicissitudes of the millennium gone by since then, virtually assured that the body of poetry remaining to us would be small and often in a fragmented, damaged condition. Although the existing Old English poetic corpus can be no more than a fragment of the total poetic output of the period, written or uttered, it nevertheless displays an extraordinary variety and a marked predilection for reworking and reshaping longstanding values, meanings, and forms to meet new needs and expectations while,

ironically, demonstrating a pervasive stylistic conservatism.¹

Since we have limited knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the creation and dissemination of these poems, much less of the identities of the poets and patrons involved, we will have to content ourselves with a consideration of types rather than individuals. However, we can say a good bit about the general contours of the sort of relationship that obtained between poets and patrons in Anglo-Saxon times based on anthropological and historical evidence as well as on the poetry itself. With this knowledge, it will be easier to attack the more specialized and controversial job of explaining *how* the poems were composed, what sort of people might have composed them, and why it was deemed desirable or necessary to compose them in the first place. Then we can take a look at the poems themselves and get an idea of what and how they mean, including, especially, how they beg.

The Anglo-Saxon era encompasses roughly the first half of English medieval history, coeval with the Old English linguistic period, which begins traditionally with the Anglo-Saxon "invasion" of 449 and ends around 1100, about a generation after the Norman Conquest.² At the beginning of this period, the Roman Empire was contracting as a result of the barbarian incursions of the fifth century. The Empire's subjects in Britain, grouped under the rubric "Britons," were primarily of Celtic descent, but present also were Germanic peoples, including the Angles and Saxons, some of whom may have come to Britain as soldiers in the Roman army, others as part of a more general migration.³ When the Romans left Britain around 410 C.E., these Germanic folk began arriving in increasing numbers and ultimately moved in permanently. The cultural exchange between the newcomers and the inhabitants must have been

complex. Although it may be tempting to think of the Germanic peoples that spread their culture throughout Europe, including England, as a single cultural entity, such a characterization would be of limited help in describing them. The early Germans known to the Romans were spread out over a huge geographic area covering present-day Europe, western Russia, and the Near East, and as a consequence there was much variety in their customs and lifeways as well as in the languages they spoke, although all of the latter are now commonly grouped under the wide-ranging family designated "Germanic" (Todd 1992, Introduction). We could speculate at length on the identities of these peoples, but, as historian Malcolm Todd has warned, "[a]ll that is reasonably certain is that a member of a German tribe, when asked about his or her affiliations, would have answered 'Langobard,' 'Vandal,' 'Frisian,' or 'Goth,' not 'Germanus'" (1992, 9). The peoples who settled in England, characterized by historians as Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, among others, should be understood to contain subgroups that designated themselves by different names. Although significant cultural commonalities remain among the various groups, this localization of identity and, consequently, of authority will play an important role as we discuss the cultural underpinnings of the begging poems.

There was a certain amount of continuity between Germanic culture and the Celtic lifeways with which it merged, particularly in the systems of kinship and service that characterized both.⁴ The Germanic peoples, however different, were certainly not completely alien to the Celts. Nevertheless, whatever similarities that might have existed were insufficient to smoothe the transition from Romano-Celtic to Anglo-Saxon authority. The transformation of Roman Britain into England was

full of bitter conflicts and serpentine alliances; it was a time of sweeping cultural and political change and both the growth and diminution of knowledge. Historian C. Warren Hollister writes of the departure of the Romans and the creation of England in a regretful, almost elegiac tone:

Insofar as any land can lose its past, Britain had lost hers, and the history of Anglo-Saxon England begins with a virtual *tabula rasa*. A new language superseded the old; German heathenism took the place of British Christianity; the square Celtic fields gave way to the long strip fields of the Anglo-Saxons; the Celtic family farm was replaced, for the most part, by the Anglo-Saxon village community; and Romano-British town life vanished altogether. In a word, Britain was transformed into "Angle-Land," or England. (1966, 23)

Anglo-Saxon England was a long way from political unification. Much of the period's history remains shrouded in mystery; there is simply not a sufficient quantity of information available to us, at our far remove, to allow more than tentative speculations regarding any number of key events and trends (Abels 1988, Introduction). The prevailing picture is one of many, often contesting centers of power, a consequence of the very nature of Germanic tribal culture. Around the sixth or seventh century, according to James, so-called "super-kingdoms," amalgamations of smaller sub-kingdoms, began to assert their power. At times the various kingdoms were required to cooperate with

each other, which they did, more or less successfully. This state of affairs could and often did disintegrate into bickering and even open warfare as kings were overthrown and sub-kings were replaced.⁵

Ironically, the endless dissent and jockeying for power that made England's path to nationhood rocky also made its ultimate success possible. The ancient and extremely durable bonds of lordship and kinship were central to this transformation. Anglo-Saxon life was lived at the local level and organized around the activities of the lord, be he a king or vassal to a king, and those who did his bidding. The highly idealistic social code governing this arrangement, which was almost universally acknowledged if not always practiced, was one of Anglo-Saxon poetry's organizing principles. Under this system, an ancestor of the highly romanticized cult of chivalry, elected kings might use their influence to pass on their domains to their sons, but it was not out of the question for an interloper to utilize his own talents to supplant the heir apparent. Personal charisma and bravery, as well as wealth, which was transitory and marked for immediate redistribution, were of paramount importance in determining the very hierarchical social and political pecking order. A lord's most trusted retainers, who were the primary beneficiaries of his generosity and often also his blood kinsmen, were expected to follow him into the jaws of death if necessary, and they sometimes did. Violations of this order were not unheard of, but major instances, such as the betrayal of a lord by his retainers, were viewed with outrage and horror. These deeply felt values have the force of law in the Anglo-Saxon poetic corpus.⁶

The close union of lord and retainers was termed the *comitatus* by

Roman commentators and formed the core political unit controlling early Anglo-Saxon society.⁷ The importance of the interaction between a lord and his retainers and of the exchange of treasure for services rendered is difficult to overstate. Although some scholars use the term *comitatus* interchangeably with "retinue" or the less familiar German *Gefolgschaft*, the first usage has gathered such a wealth of connotations and implications from its specific application to Germanic culture that I will use it rather than the comparatively generic "retinue."

It is worthwhile to make explicit at this point that the social norms that guided this turbulent society and which form the basis of the following discussion are derived here from the poetry itself. For students of literature, this approach is both a blessing and a curse: the object of our study and the resources that inform us about it are one and the same. That fact lends a blush of circularity to our endeavors. Clearly, our approach does not constitute traditional historiography, and we have not yet made clear whether or not the poetry should even be considered a reliable source for the sort of information we seek. In his consideration of the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon*, which describes an actual battle that occurred in 991, historian Richard Abels has suggested that

it is one thing to acknowledge *The Battle of Maldon* to be a piece of imaginative literature, a work of art rather than of history, and quite another to dismiss it completely as a source for the period.... Even granting the poet's deliberate archaism and his addiction to

literary conventions, it is more than likely that the poem presents an idealized, but essentially accurate, portrayal of an early eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon host, one that would not have struck its audience as too far removed from the reality they knew. (1988, 147)

The fact that the poem's version of reality is "idealized" is exactly what makes it interesting to us. The portrayals of right behavior, noble fealty, and lordly propriety found in *Maldon* and elsewhere give us a baseline on which to posit exactly what the Anglo-Saxon poet expected of his patron and vice versa.

The conceptualization of the *comitatus* that will be employed in this chapter is of the most traditional, uncomplicated, idealized sort, i.e., that retainers do service and their lord rewards them. Although much important and insightful work has been done in recent years to illuminate the complexities of the relationship between lords and their retainers in Anglo-Saxon England, and the revelation of those complexities in the poetry of the period,⁸ the poems that we shall consider in this chapter make only the most routine assumptions about the obligations binding lord and retainers.

The *comitatus* was a recursive phenomenon. The king and his circle of trusted retainers comprised a *comitatus*, and each of those retainers in turn might support his own *comitatus*, and so on. The lord's most trusted underlings belonged to a group termed the *dugub*, and up-and-coming individuals who were younger and had less experience belonged to the *geogub*. The lord's sponsorship of his own children, the children of his retainers, and whomever else he might choose to support as a

gesture of magnanimity allowed the *geogub* to grow and endure.⁹ The case of Beowulf is worth considering. We take Beowulf as a guide because the poem bearing his name is a main source of insight into Anglo-Saxon custom, belief, and ritual, however idealized. Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, was married to King Hrethel's daughter. When Beowulf was seven, King Hrethel sponsored him:

Ic wæs syfanwintre	þa mec sinca baldor,
freawine folca	æt minum fæder genam;
heold mec ond hæfde	Hreðel cyning,
geaf me sinc ond symbel,	sibbe gemunde. (ll. 2428-31)

[I was seven years old when King Hrethel, the ruler of treasure, lordly friend of the people, took me from my father, held and protected me, gave me treasure and entertainment, was mindful of kinship.]

Beowulf, of course, went on to serve as the trusted retainer of a number of kings and eventually himself became king of the Geats.

The tribal nature of the *comitatus* was given expression by the interrelationships exemplified above. Marriages, births, and adoptions created ties of blood and emotion that were a far cry from the often temporary bonds that united lords and their retainers in the days of Chaucer, Lydgate, and Hoccleve. Monetary rewards were important under both systems, but the symbolic character of such rewards appears to have been more important during Anglo-Saxon times, if the frequency and heartfelt feeling with which the poetry dwells on such matters is any indication. Nevertheless, Malcolm Todd warns us that the health of the *comitatus* ultimately depended on the lord's military success. However

deep the ties of kinship might be, if a lord could not provide an opportunity for glory and its consequent rewards -- sustenance and survival, at least -- one *comitatus* might ultimately wither away while another, more successful one grew at its expense (1992, 31-32).

Thus, as *Beowulf* makes explicit by repetition, both in the quote above and elsewhere in the poem, treasure was everything. With treasure in whatever form, be it land or jewels or rings or weapons or armor or feasting, the lord rewarded loyal service and, more importantly, made men worthy. Taking *Beowulf* again as a guide, it can be said with little exaggeration that treasure itself was merely a means to an end, however lavishly it might be exhibited. The lord bestowed treasure upon retainers of note, who in turn distributed it to those who had performed services for them. The rewarding of treasure, as emphasized so clearly in *Beowulf*, served to endow men with renown as well as wealth, and it was renown that strengthened the *comitatus*. Men of worth were always welcome in the lord's circle of retainers, and were apt to win even more renown with their combined efforts, which made the gifts larger, the entertainment more lavish.

The happy side of life in the *comitatus*, then, as we can see, was characterized by bright treasure, feasting, song, and comradeship, all of which were the bounty of the lord. The unhappy side quite simply consisted of the death or disappearance of the lord and the perquisites he provided. According to Anne L. Klinck,

In the close-knit tribal society depicted by Old English poetry, separation from the person or persons to whom one belongs deprives [one] not only of companionship but of one's entire

function in the world. One's lord, whether liege-lord or husband, and friends, that is "loved ones," "kin," provide an enveloping security. Thus, the sense of separation which in a modern setting might arise from a multiplicity of situations characteristically takes the form of exile. (1992, 225-26)

The contrasting of exile and belonging, of light and dark, is one of the most prominent motifs in Anglo-Saxon poetry, and is the primary expressive mode in what are traditionally termed the "elegies."¹⁰

Aside from the alien social milieu from which it sprang, the Old English poetic corpus is also quite foreign to us in terms of both language and artistic origins. At its best, as in *Beowulf*, the poetry controls and conveys the passions and excesses of its materials with an artistry that is flexibly rigorous. The oxymoronic flavor of this assertion is actually apropos. The fact that only around thirty thousand lines of prosodically consistent Old English poetry have survived does not limit the extraordinary range of its subject matter and voice. It may be that the very range of the poetry has been responsible for many of the misunderstandings and conflicts arising from its study. Such a large number of often contradictory cultural referents are interwoven and conflated in the poems that, in the past, scholars have formed interpretive camps based on the major points of conflict. Using the historical and cultural background of the poetry as a frame of reference, we can gain insight into some of the most fundamental differences of opinion and perhaps arrive at a satisfactory portrayal of the ideological imperatives of this very foreign poetry.

Scholars have put forth a variety of paradigms with which to explain Old English poetry, and much lively and often contentious debate has resulted. One of the central tensions in efforts to explain Old English poetry has arisen from the varying emphases on the comparative orality or literacy of the texts under consideration. Of course, this formulation is far too simplistic to do justice to the complexity of what is at issue, but it does provide us with a point of departure. Orality and literacy, which we will initially represent as paradigms in conflict, will ultimately be recognized as endpoints on a spectrum.

It is obvious that much Old English poetry derives its subject matter from the literary tradition: bible stories, hagiographies, and the like. Critics like Huppé (1959) have emphasized the close correlation between certain Latin texts and corresponding or analogous Old English texts with an eye to explaining the latter as an outgrowth of the former, in terms of both subject matter and style. An alternative viewpoint, however, explains the Old English poems as participants in an oral tradition, with a set of imperatives quite different in most respects from that of the literary Latin tradition. Partisans of this viewpoint have suggested that the poems are outgrowths, if not outright examples, of oral traditional song, perhaps even transcribed from performance and dependent for their form and content on the pagan tradition from which they sprang (O'Keefe 1990, 8-14).

Scholars who have emphasized the literary qualities of Old English poetry, often understood as religiosity, have typically favored the image of the poet as an inspired and very literate cleric composing

verse with pen and paper and with the texts of the Latin fathers either borne in mind or open before him.¹¹ These critics see Old English poetry as an outgrowth or appendage of the tradition that gave us scholars and writers such as Alcuin and Bede. Articles and books by a number of influential scholars have promulgated this viewpoint. Interestingly enough, the focus of their studies has often been *Beowulf*, arguably one of the most "pagan" of Old English poems and shaped, as we have seen, by its emphasis on typically Anglo-Saxon concerns like the proper interaction of lords and retainers (Huppé 1984). There are only a few unambiguously biblical nods in the poem; in one of them, the monster Grendel is depicted as the kindred of Cain, forsworn by the "Scyppend [creator]" (l. 106), in this context undoubtedly the Judaeo-Christian deity. In fact, references to ruling powers that may be translated as "Lord" or "lord," depending on the reader's desire to defend or refute the religious component, are ubiquitous in the poem. There is ultimately little in the content of *Beowulf* to suggest that its concerns are primarily Christian.¹² I, for one, do not support the contention that *Beowulf* is shaped to any great extent by religious concerns, although religious elements -- often mere references or name-dropping, as we have seen -- are undeniably present. On the other hand, a large body of Christian verse does exist to which the methods of critics who emphasize the bookish element can be more or less effectively applied; one need only consider *tours de force* like the Old English *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and *Andreas* to be satisfied of this.

In fact, formulating the oral/literate debate as a dichotomy may have done more to hinder our understanding of Old English verse than to advance it. We will certainly gain less by weighing the relative

proportions of presumptively opposite qualities than we will by evaluating the complexities of their admixture. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe did pioneering work in this regard in her 1990 study *Visible Song*, which "sets out to examine one aspect in the growth of literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and its evidence in the manuscript records of Old English verse" (1990, ix). O'Keefe's comparison of decidedly literary Latin texts and contemporary Old English manuscripts suggests that the Old English tradition had an oral basis and was still in the process of becoming literary. For instance, Latin poetry was carefully lineated, while Old English verse was written down in a "run-on" style, without similar attempts to visually reflect stylistic and formal components (1990, 1-22). O'Keefe very judiciously sums up her findings:

The conditions "orality" and "literacy" are the endpoints on a continuum through which the technology of writing affects and modifies human perception. The immediate consequence of such a definition is that it admits the possibility that residual orality might be encoded in early manuscripts. Indeed, considerations of the character of written Old English, the graphic conventions of the manuscripts of both Latin and Old English poetry, and the psychology of reading together suggest that such is the case. (1990, 13)

A. N. Doane substantially concurs with O'Keefe's findings, with strong emphasis on the influence of oral performance, whether more or less prevalent, on Old English poetic texts, especially *Beowulf*, which

is his sample text. A scribe working in the period of transition between orality and literacy would have carried a sensitivity to performance with him, in effect setting down his own performance on the page. As Doane writes,

The traditions of vernacular poetry remained primarily oral, even after long centuries of writing had modified those traditions. Scribes who wrote what they saw, also heard what they wrote. The scribe's writing, linked to the past by memory and the exemplar and embedded in the present by the scribe's intentional activities, was a performance of a specialized kind, which in its physicality and uniqueness is an analog to oral performance. (2003, 63)

In confirmation of the remarks of both O'Keefe and Doane, our sample Old English poems can both be explained as the products of mixed influences. In particular, though, we will be interested in the oral traditional influence, particularly its social value system, which provides the foundation on which we will attempt to base our understanding of the interaction of poet and patron in early medieval England, as well as a key to understanding how the poems beg.

Students of oral traditions believe that early Germanic verse, as well as descendants like the poems in the Old English canon, is part of a tradition analogous to those of the ancient Greeks and modern South Slavic singers, which were first studied in detail by Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord.¹³ Poems that arise from an oral tradition are, initially at least, composed without benefit of techniques commonly

associated with literary production, such as extended reflection and revision prior to delivery. Composition of a "purely" oral traditional work takes place in the presence of an audience, as the work is performed. It should not be surprising that one of the central concerns of students of oral traditional poetry is the act of composition, including the artistic and performative contexts in which composition takes place.¹⁴

In order for an oral tradition to function, poet and audience must share some fund of knowledge and experience. In the case of the Germanic tradition, as we shall see, common touchstones are figures both historical and fictional, as well as the patterned phraseology that attaches to them in the form of epithets, characteristic activities, and the like.¹⁵ For an oral traditional audience, a brief reference can function as a metonymic trigger evocative of a whole series of remembered associations. For instance, when the *Deor*-poet very briefly mentions King Theodric (ll. 18-20), his audience would be prepared to recall whatever they knew about the very famous Theodric, utilizing their knowledge of the tradition and its catalog of memories. Thus, the mere mention of Theodric's name calls up associations with his deeds, which can then either be rehearsed in detail by the performer or left to be filled in by the audience.

In the Old English oral tradition, the poet or, in the words of Albert Lord (1960), the singer of tales, is called a *scop*. As I have indicated, audience and *scop* interact on the basis of a shared non-literate tradition that includes knowledge of both the stories in the corpus and the mechanisms of their telling. Since the stories are part of the shared memories of audience and *scop*, it is the *scop's* job to

redact them with a careful attentiveness to his audience's responses, which will guide him in the progress of his performance. The performance is fluid and situational, enabled by the relative emphases placed on episodes rather than by any slavish attention to the general pattern of the narrative. The poet uses learned phrases, scenes, and situations to move the story along at his own pace, perhaps increasing the narrative tempo as the audience's attention lags, stopping to dwell on a detail or scene when they are focused with him. Since both poet and audience are well versed in the details of the story, the telling is everything; those characteristic occasions when the poet homes in on a narrative detail and lavishes his verbal powers upon it are key. Thus, compositional decisions regarding the story as a whole are subordinated to the give-and-take between performer and audience; an encouraging response may encourage a decision to pursue details that during another performance might be unwarranted. In fact, most of the Old English canon's finest moments come during these lingering moments of description and expansion, whatever the subject of the moment may be: the splendor of treasure, a ring-prowed ship riding the whale's road, a hero's death, the approach of a hero (or monster), the suffering of those left behind. The ubiquity of such diversions tells us a good deal about the preferences of the audience and also contributes to the marked parataxis of form characteristic of oral traditional art with its succession of characteristic scenes and details.¹⁶

Modern audiences who have absorbed the niceties of literary narrative transition often find the pacing of traditional narratives rather jarring at first and, if they are not familiar with the

tradition as a whole, may also wonder what the motivation for various digressions and asides might be. Krapp and Dobbie, the editors of Volume III of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, in which *Widsith* appears, found the poem "very uneven both in contents and style" and complained that *Widsith's* catalogs of his journeys "seem to have been inserted at random, without very close attention to their appropriateness or to the smoothness of the transitions" (1932, xliii). The traditional, non-literate features of oral poetry account for most of the difficulties that literate audiences have with it. First, the paratactic quality we have noted (Ong 1982, 37-38) may create a general impression of disjointedness or lack of forward progress, as the reaction of Krapp and Dobbie exemplifies. However, the process of lining up one seemingly disparate element after another is central to the oral traditional approach to poetry, and quite necessary to the audience's comprehension. Aural reception of poetry requires what might be termed a localized approach, with the emphasis on what is happening here and now in the poem, what Ong describes as the "situational rather than abstract" emphasis of oral poetry (1982, 49ff.). References and allusions to other parts of the poem become problematic. Edward B. Irving notes that scholars trained in the usual modern literary approaches to interpretation

saw nothing amiss in pointing out the fine appropriateness of an ironic allusion in line 1752 to a word used earlier in line 8. No listening audience could ever have registered such a connection, and it is certain no performing poet used to the ways of oral poetry

would have bothered to set one up, even granting that he could have remembered it himself when the right time came. (1989, 13)¹⁷

Related to this narrative "disjointedness" is the common complaint regarding the perceived repetitiousness of oral poetry. Such recurrence is necessary, again because of the paratactic and aggregative nature of the poetry and the metonymic imperative that enables audiences to create whole strings of associations from mere phrases. Moreover, in the most obvious cases of repetition, in which, for instance, a character is described by a lengthy series of epithets, it should be noted that the epithets are not merely repetitions but serve to expand and complement the description as a whole.¹⁸

Fred C. Robinson has denominated this tendency toward repetition and reinforcement the "appositive style" (1985). According to Robinson, the appositive style

occupies a middle ground between grammar and style, between syntax and narrative method. Appositions and appositive style are the automatic means by which an Old English poet proceeds from thought to thought. They can be simultaneously transitional, nominalizing and emphasizing as they bring out by suggestion the complex meanings of events, motifs, and words.

(80)

In order to demonstrate what Robinson is getting at, we should strike the word "repetition" in the first sentence of this paragraph and

replace it with the term preferred in Old English studies, "variation" (1985, 3). The reason for performing this substitution is simple. The word "repetition" can be seen as implying that the multiplication of epithets in reference to *Beowulf* serves a merely ornamental purpose. In the course of his short volume *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (1985), Robinson suggests that the words, phrases, and narrative blocks that structure *Beowulf* are meant not only to reinforce meaning but to provide additional layers of meaning.

The very persistence of the forms and techniques of Germanic oral traditional poetry through time bears witness to their power and to the conservatism of the tradition (Ong 1982, 41-42). Aside from a few notable exceptions, the Old English canon displays a remarkable prosodic consistency. The fact that we cannot date most Old English poems with a very useful degree of accuracy only emphasizes this point. The persistence of oral traditional forms into literate times underscores the strength of the tradition and illustrates the very gradual nature of the transformation.¹⁹ Nevertheless, we must heed the remarks of O'Keeffe and Doane cited above and reemphasize that the Old English poems that remain to us are the products of the collision, the amalgamation, of two extraordinarily powerful forces.²⁰

This description is not a rigorously detailed one, but it does give a feel for what oral composition encompasses. The scenes and situations that move the poetry paratactically from one narrative moment to the next are termed "themes" in Parry-Lord theory and are, in Lord's words, "the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song" (1960, 68). The grouping of ideas is a central compositional impetus in both long and short poems

in the Old English canon. The creation of themes is facilitated by the use of "formulas," defined by Parry as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea" (qtd. in Lord 1960, 30). We will explore formulaic language in our discussion of the Old English begging poems, but let it suffice at present to note that formulaic patterns recur with variations and as such are recognizable to the well-versed audience; they provide that audience with a bold emphasis when skillfully utilized, as evidenced even in presentday classroom readings of the poems in the original language.

Perhaps it is surprising that the Old English scribes were so successful at managing, and particularly at balancing, their varied skills. It is very clear, however, that their apparently opposing influences were both accommodated and utilized quite naturally. In fact, examples of the Anglo-Saxon flair for brilliant and vivid synthesis abound. To consider one example, *The Dream of the Rood*, one of the most popular and omnipresent of Old English poems, is also one of the most intense and eloquent compositions in the canon; it depicts Christ at Calvary as a young Germanic warrior (*geong hæleð*, l. 39a) who stoutheartedly mounts the cross (ll. 39-41).²¹ Clearly, this poem occupies a place somewhere in the spectrum between orality and literacy, but a lively debate would probably ensue if we attempted to determine exactly which end it tended toward.

As we have seen, what survives of Old English poetry was ultimately the work, at least in part, of a literate individual working with pen and paper and almost certainly affiliated with the Church, although such an affiliation does not necessarily mean the individual

imported his religious impulses into any given redaction. During the Anglo-Saxon period the Church had an effective monopoly on literacy despite the efforts of visionaries like King Alfred (fl. ninth century), who enthusiastically supported scholarship and literacy (Wormald 1975, 113). Clerical redactors were apparently, on the whole, faithful to their originals, whether oral or written, and made little use of their Latin training. Gabrielle Knappe has warned that we "should indeed be careful about attributing rhetorical features of Old English... texts to a direct influence of the *ars bene dicendi* because, generally speaking, there are no indications that scholars in Anglo-Saxon England (c. 700-1066) studied this discipline" (1997, 6). Since oral traditional techniques continued to be used as the transition was made from orality to literacy, we have no way of determining exactly how much of any given Old English poem was composed with pen in hand and how much was the transcription, remembrance, or re-creation of orally delivered works. As Larry D. Benson has asserted, Old English poets

could and did write heavily formulaic verse
and... could do so pen in hand... not because
the demands of the meter or the pressures of
oral composition prevent the poet from pausing
to select some more suitable phrase but because
this phrase *is* suitable, is part of a poetic
diction that is clearly oral in origin but that
is now just as clearly a literary convention.
(1966, 339)

We know even less about hypothetical Anglo-Saxon singers of tales

who composed in performance than we do about the literate individuals who created the manuscripts, although there has been much speculation. Donald K. Fry has asserted that "sung narratives seem to have formed the main entertainment of all levels of Anglo-Saxon society from king to cowherd" (1974, 233). Fry cites the story of that best-known of all Anglo-Saxon poets, Caedmon, the lowly functionary who reputedly composed the short religious piece that bears his name. The poem appears in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in a Latin version, presumably a translation from the Old English, although twelve copies of the manuscript include back-translations into Old English either in the margin or at the bottom of the page (Fry 1974, 228). According to Bede's story, when a sacred passage was read to him Caedmon would go home, returning the next day with a poem paraphrasing the passage. Fry offers the opinion that Caedmon worked out his poems on his own, perhaps memorizing them before his performances (1974, 231). That Caedmon was more gifted than the typical part-time poet seems clear, but his preoccupations and efforts were probably not unusual, although if the volume of poetry remaining to us is any indication the transcription of such efforts was uncommon. The popularity of performed narratives among Germanic folk and their English descendants attested to by Fry is certainly well-documented; it was already established in the time of Tacitus, and the old story of Alcuin, who complained that the monks occupied themselves with heroic verse rather than holier things, offers additional support. J. Opland has quite reasonably suggested that there were professional Anglo-Saxon singers as well as uncounted imitators with less training (1971, 176).

The complexity of oral traditional poetry suggests that there must

have been some sort of learning process by which the tricks of the trade were transmitted. Since we have no way of recovering the details of how an Old English poet learned his art, an example from another oral tradition may provide us with insights. In the second chapter of his classic study *The Singer of Tales*, Albert B. Lord provides a fascinating description of the learning process of the Yugoslavian singers who were the subject of his and Milman Parry's studies in the nineteen thirties. This process might be called training but for the fact that, from our twenty-first century perspective, such training would be viewed as almost hopelessly ad hoc. According to Lord, the two prerequisites for becoming an oral traditional singer are "illiteracy and the desire to gain proficiency in singing epic poetry" (1960, 20). The first qualification is necessary not only for the poet but for his audience as well, for, as Lord states, societies in which literacy becomes prevalent turn to books for their stories (1960, 20). The second qualification is one that has been integral to artistic apprenticeship since art was born. What eventually places gifted artists in a class by themselves is, in large part, the degree to which they are consumed not only by art but by their determination to create their own art. It is not an unreasonable extrapolation to suggest that illiteracy and desire have been prerequisite to the successful development of virtually all oral traditional poets, Anglo-Saxon included.

Once the desire is there, the process can begin. According to Lord, there are three steps in the training of an oral poet (1960, 21-29). First, the neophyte sits and listens while others sing, absorbing the formulas, themes, and story patterns. At some point the passive

listener becomes a tentative performer, the second stage in the process, and finally, in the third, a full-fledged performer who works before a critical audience. The testimony of Še o Koli , one of Parry and Lord's informants, may reflect an experience very much like that of the Anglo-Saxon lyricist Cædmon. Še o recalls the performances of oral poets of an evening either at his own home or that of a neighbor. Such occasions were opportunities for absorbing the fundamentals of his art.

The next day when I was with the flock [Še o says], I would put the song together, word for word, without the gusle [a stringed instrument used to accompany the performance], but I would sing it from memory, word for word, just as the singer had sung it.... Then I learned gradually to finger the instrument, and to fit the fingering to the words, and my fingers obeyed me better and better.... I didn't sing among the men until I had perfected the song, but only among the young fellows in my circle... not in front of my elders and betters. (Lord 1960, 21)

Among the South Slavic poets observed by Parry and Lord, professional poets were usually beggars and, according to Lord, "were not very good singers" (1960, 18). Non-professionals, on the other hand, came from all levels of society and represented the best of the singers Parry and Lord studied. However, the differences between Serbo-Croatian and Anglo-Saxon social realities necessitate a more detailed consideration. While there were almost surely considerable numbers of itinerant Anglo-Saxon singers of tales, professionals between jobs, as

well as innumerable semi-pros and amateurs like Cædmon, there were also, judging from the evidence of poems like *Deor*, some poets who found prestige and ample remuneration as well as a fairly permanent livelihood, perhaps with the local lord or with a king if they were very talented and lucky.

It is reasonable to suppose that professional singers spent varying percentages of their time actually engaged in singing, and it is likely that the most successful singers counted singing as only one of a variety of related skills. As we shall see in Chapters Two and Three, poets of later centuries were multitalented. Since a singer's artistic accomplishments advertised his verbal dexterity, he could naturally also be of use in the role of spokesman, a role that could be fulfilled either in speech or song. Certainly in a place as subject to recurrent strife and shortages as Anglo-Saxon England, only a wealthy lord could have afforded a *scop* who did nothing but sing, so most *scopas* who found a patron probably fulfilled additional functions as retainers to their lords, whether as warriors, advisers, or servants. Other, less fortunate poets, whether amateurs or not, had to support themselves as they could and were heard when the opportunity presented itself.

There is little direct evidence to indicate exactly how much prestige the professional Anglo-Saxon poet might have enjoyed. Norman Eliason argues that "[h]owever prevalent or lavish royal generosity may actually have been... we cannot assume it was commonly extended to *scops*" (1966, 192). Eliason offers no support for his position, and although no documentary evidence of the *scop*'s status exists outside of the poetry, there are a number of good reasons for questioning his

assumption. While not every *scop* enjoyed wide fame and wealth, it is quite likely that whatever fame and wealth he acquired were awarded for all his services, as described above. An individual of talent and utility would have enjoyed considerable favor with his lord and been rewarded for his very real services, an example of the *quid pro quo* that held the *comitatus* together. The *scop's* function as a propagandist deserves emphasis as well. A noble who housed a fine singer of tales at his court was in possession of a valuable commodity. The dropping of well-known names is a commonplace of heroic verse, as we shall see in our discussion of *Widsith* and *Deor*, and a *scop's* linking of his master's name with those of the immortal honored would surely have been desirable. As both entertainer and officer in possession of his lord's ear, a full-fledged and vital member of the *comitatus*, the enterprising *scop's* position, contrary to Eliason's claims, could have been an enviable one indeed, with plenty of job security. In *Beowulf*, when the monster, Grendel, lurks outside the great hall, Heorot, his savage and jealous heart is rent by "hearpan sweg, / swutol sang scopes [the music of the harp, the sweet song of the *scop*]" (ll. 89b-90a). Grendel's suffering has its root in his recognition of the *scop's* activity as an emblem of all that is right and harmonious in Heorot. The complex integration of the poet into his environment and his consequent importance seem clear, even given the fact that the most eloquent testimony we have in support of this contention is his own.

In fact, some of the most vivid characters we encounter in Old English poetry are the *scopas* themselves, particularly in the elegies and the begging poems. The elegies, for instance, almost always employ the first person and sometimes even identify the narrator as a *scop* or,

at the very least, a person capable of song. "Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan," begins *The Seafarer* (l. 1). "I can recite a true lay about myself."²² Deor and Widsith, the personalities associated with our two begging poems, stand out among the characters peopling Old English verse, first because they have names, which is not a usual feature of the shorter poems, particularly the elegies, and second because the poems bearing their names stand out as significant poetic achievements even in a canon marked by quality.

Our two Old English begging poems, like all the other poems in the canon save *Caedmon's Hymn* and one of the riddles, appear only once in contemporary manuscripts. The magnificent gathering called *The Exeter Book* contains, besides *Deor* and *Widsith*, a significant proportion of the best Old English verse that remains to us. The book, which was added to the Exeter Cathedral collection by Leofric, Bishop of Exeter from 1050 until 1072, was probably created some eighty years previously in the late tenth century, and suffered a long history of abuse, seeing service both as a cutting board and as a coaster for a carelessly handled beer mug. The poems to which we now turn our attention, however, exist in relatively unblemished folios and thus are available to us in a form that requires much less conjecture than those works featured in damaged portions of the book.²³

The form and technique of *Widsith* are typical of many of the shorter Old English poems: an introductory section is followed by the main body of the poem, then a brief gnomic conclusion. These demarcations may be more or less obvious in the majority of the shorter poems, but in *Widsith* they are very apparent indeed since they are reinforced by an apparently arithmetic symmetry. The basic structure of

the poem is as follows: a nine-line prologue, Widsith's speech (ll. 10-134), and a nine-line epilogue. Kemp Malone, editor of the standard edition of the poem, divides Widsith's speech into three fitts, each of which contains a *thula*, an Icelandic philological term meaning "metrical name list" (1962, 27), with the names given in descending order of importance. Additionally, Eliason identifies introductory and concluding elements in Widsith's speech, ll. 10-13 and ll. 131-34, respectively, lending even greater strength and complexity to the symmetry of the poem's structure (1966, 185). To summarize the poem's contents briefly, in the prologue Widsith himself is presented to us. In his speech he discourses at length but in little detail of his travels through many lands and his service to a multitude of prominent kings. The epilogue is a gnomic reflection on honor and right behavior.

The rigorous symmetry of the form of *Widsith*, with its emphasis on multiples of threes, presents an interesting conundrum. One could say that the nine-line (three times three) introduction and conclusion and the three fitts of the poem's main body constitute a design so regular and visually pleasing that it must be the product of a literate sensibility. Although this viewpoint does possess certain attractions, and seems reasonable, the evidence of the manuscript with its run-on presentation does not appear to support it. Nevertheless, in the context of Old English poetry, where orality and literacy live as one, it may not be unreasonable to suggest that the literate visual sense, which prizes symmetry, may have, in the case of *Widsith*, impressed itself upon the poet. As we shall see, similar suggestions can be made regarding *Deor*.

The poem's prologue introduces the title character in the third

person, marking the poet as sympathetic with, but distinct from, Widsith. The passage begins with a flourish of traditional phraseology:

Widsið maðelode, wordhord onleac,
 se þe monna mæst mægþa ofer eorþan,
 folca geondferde; oft he on flette geþah
 mynelicne maþpum. (ll. 1-4a)

[Widsith spoke, unlocked his wordhoard, he who,
 among men, fared the most through the nations of
 people throughout the earth; often, on the floor
 of the hall, he received various treasures.]

The first half-line, or hemistich, is one of the most common formulas in the Old English oral traditional lexicon. It appears in cases of direct address no fewer than twenty-six times in *Beowulf* alone and is a commonality in virtually all of the Old English narrative poems.²⁴

Before Widsith speaks, however, we are diverted to a description of him, conveyed in high heroic style but with a difference. References to heroes, particularly in *Beowulf*, are frequently couched in superlatives. In *Beowulf*, for instance, the first of many examples of this tendency appears within two hundred lines of the poem's beginning. Beowulf, arriving to help Hrothgar get rid of Grendel, is described idiomatically:

se wæs moncynnes mægenes strengest
 on þam dæg þyesses lifes,
 æpele ond eacen. (ll. 196-98a)

[He was, of mankind, the greatest in might in
 that day of this life, noble and huge.]

The difference in the description of Widsith, of course, is that,

rather than being touted for his strength, his great achievement is the extent of his travels, in the course of which he has been rewarded with treasure for his services as *scop*. The poet has modified a traditional commonplace in a way that connects Widsith, and himself by extension, with the heroic tradition. The rest of the prologue tells us of Widsith's journey with his friend Ealhild to the court of King Eormannic. Having described our hero and placed him at the court of a well-known king, "[o]ngan þa worn sprecan [he began then to say many things]" (l. 9b).

In nine brief lines, then, the poet has presented Widsith in unambiguously heroic terms. In addition, he has utilized language and techniques that identify himself as a person familiar with Old English poetic principles. Any listener familiar with such poetry will recognize the formulaic language and will also be struck by the cleverness of Widsith's claim to fame: his extensive travels. Why the latter quality is important to the poet's marketing stratagem will become apparent as we explore the body of the speech.

In the opening lines of his speech, Widsith begins working his way to the point by commenting, for the first of several times, on the behavior appropriate to a lord:

Fela ic monna gefrægn	mægþum wealdan!
Sceal þeodna gehwylc	þeawum lifgan,
eorl æfter oþrum	eðle rædan,
se þe his þeodenstol	geþeon wile.
þara wæs Hwala	hwile selast,
ond Alexandreas	ealra ricost
monna cynnes,	ond he mæst geþah

þara þe ic ofer foldan gefrægn hæbbe.

[I have heard of many men ruling nations! Each of princes, one noble as well as the next, ought to live according to the customs, ought to rule the homeland according to the customs, he who wishes his princely throne to thrive. Of those Hwala was for a while the best, and Alexander was the richest of all mankind, and he thrived the most of those I have heard of throughout the world.] (ll. 10-17)

Widsith's injunctions regarding proper behavior are, of course, given added weight by the extent of his travels as well as by his dropping of names. Hwala has not been identified, but Alexander was renowned in the Middle Ages for his liberality,²⁵ a key characteristic of a successful and honorable lord.

After this passage begins the first of Widsith's *thulas*, which gives a listing of rulers and peoples among whom Widsith has served. Interestingly, the second name Widsith drops in this catalog is that of Eormanric, ruler of the Goths (l. 18b). The choice is telling because, of course, the prologue has already placed Widsith at the court of Eormanric the "Hreðcyning" (l. 7a). Although the identification of Eormanric the Hrethcyning with Eormanric of the Goths is uncertain, the power of names among a people who loved to drop them is self-evident. Widsith follows the first *thula* with some commentary on the noble behavior of various kings, and concludes the *fitt* with these lines:

Swa ic geondferde fela fremda londa
geond ginne grund. godes ond yfles

þær ic cunnade cnosle bidæled,
 freomægum feor folgade wide.
 Forþon ic mæg singan and secgan spell,
 mænan fore mengo in meoduhealle
 hu me cynegode cystum dohten.

[So I fared through many a strange land
 throughout the wide earth. There, divided from
 my homeland, far from my free kinsmen, I knew
 good and evil, served widely. Therefore, I can
 sing and tell a tale, can say, before the
 multitude in the mead hall, how kingly ones
 honored me with the choicest things.] (ll. 50-
 56)

Again, Widsith takes the opportunity to emphasize the extent of his travels, during the course of which he has seen both good behavior and bad, implying at the same time that it is his knowledge of the difference between the two that gives him the ability to tell true tales about the rewards given him by right-minded nobles. Also of interest is the fact that he has done so once again in good oral traditional form, evoking the omnipresent theme of exile with the reference to his separation from his homeland.

The second *thula* commences at line 57 and features a catalog of peoples among whom Widsith has sojourned. Widsith again provides asides indicating the rewards he has been given for his services, which are described in more detail this time; the added detail functions to convey a greater sense of the splendor of the gifts. Again Eormanric's name is dropped.

Ond ic wæs mid Eormanrice	ealle þrage,
þær me Gotena cyning	gode dohte;
se me beag forgeaf,	burgwarena fruma,
on þam siex hund wæs	smætes goldes,
gescyred sceatta	scillingrime;
þone ic Eadgilse	on æht sealde,
minum hleodryhtne,	þa ic to ham bicwom,
leofum to læne,	þæs þe he me lond forgeaf,
mines fæder eþel,	frea Myringa.

[And I was with Eormanric a long while, where the king of the Goths enriched me nobly; the first of fortress-dwellers gave me a ring, bright treasure in which was six hundred shillings' worth of pure gold; I gave that to my lord Eadgils, the lord of the Myrings, as a reward for the dear ones when I came home, for which he gave me land, the homeland of my father.] (ll. 88-95)

It should be apparent that in these lines Widsith is developing even further the ideal of the *comitatus* with his description of Eormric's hospitality. The joy in the hall that drove Grendel wild is clearly exemplified here. In terms of his underlying project, the selling of his services, there could be no better way to convince a potential employer of his worthiness and of the positive contribution he would make to the general well-being. Since he understands how society works, he will presumably play by the rules, as he has in the course of his travels. Even so great a king as Eormanric has recognized his solid

qualities and rewarded him magnificently for them.

In the following lines the other half of Widsith's message is driven home for the last time before the epilogue.

Ond me þa Eahhild	oþerne forgeaf,
dryhtcwen duguþe,	dohtor Eadwines.
Hyre lof lengde	geond londa fela,
þonne ic be songe	secgan sceolde
hwær ic under swegle	selast wisse
goldhrodene cwen	giefte bryttian.
Ðonne wit Scilling	sciran reorde
for uncrum sigedryhtne	song ahofen,
hlude bi hearpan	hleoþor swinsade,
þonne monige men,	modum wlance,
wordum sprecaþ,	þa þe wel cuþan,
þæt hi næfre song	sellan ne hyrdon.

[And then Eahhild, daughter of Eadwin, troop-queen to the *dugub*, gave me something else. Her renown reached to many lands when I said with song where I knew the best queen under the skies to give gold-adorned treasures. When Scilling and I lifted up song with a shining voice for our lord (the music soared, loud, around the harp), then many men, steadfast in their judgment, said with words, those who knew how to well, that they never heard a better song.] (ll. 97-108)

Here Widsith expatiates further upon his reputation, this time

specifically as a singer. With typical Anglo-Saxon fondness for superlatives, Widsith is portrayed as not only a good singer, but quite simply the best.

Widsith's recommendation of himself is particularly interesting for its attention to the daughter of Eadwin, her gifts, and his claim to have made her famous with his song. According to historian C. P. Wormald, there is reason to believe that in the early Middle Ages there was antipathy among Germanic societies toward Roman learning and even literacy itself. The warrior class, Wormald states, believed education to be a softening influence, and

there is reason to suppose that, throughout much of the period, women were often better educated than men. Laywomen are surprisingly prominent as the owners, dedicatees, even authors, of books, and as the decisive influence upon the education of their families. It would seem that the gentler skills in which women were trained were not so antipathetic to the pursuit of letters as the warfare and hunting that dominated male adolescence. (1975, 98)

Women who were interested in learning were also likely to be interested in song, particularly when sung by a *scop* who drops names that would be familiar to a learned person, including that of Alexander, whose exploits were later disseminated in romance form, and those of peoples like the Israelites, the Hebrews, and the Egyptians (ll. 82-83), who of course played familiar roles in stories known to Christians and to the learned. For Widsith, women would have been targets just as worthy of

his pitch as men.

The third and shortest *thula* contains the names of the rulers whom Widsith sought out on his journeys, completing the pattern begun in the first and second *thulas*, which dealt with names of leaders and their peoples and with names of peoples, respectively. He sums up as follows:

Swa ic þæt symle onfand on þære feringe,
 þæt se biþ leofast londbuendum
 se þe him god syleð gumena rice
 to gehealdenne, þenden he her leofað.

[So I always discovered in that wayfaring that
 the one most beloved to land-dwellers is he who
 gives them goods to maintain the kingdom of men
 while he lives here.] (ll. 131-34)

One more reminder that a good ruler is a generous ruler is certainly a fitting way for Widsith to conclude his speech, and in all standard editions of the poem the quotation marks delimiting his utterance close here.

Although the structure of the poem, prologue followed by speech followed by epilogue, is a critical commonplace in *Widsith* scholarship, it is clear that the nine lines of the epilogue follow organically from what has gone before and fit nicely into the logical progression of Widsith's utterances.

Swa scriþende gesceapum hweorfað
 gleomen gumena geond grunda fela,
 þearfe secgað, þoncword sprecaþ,
 simle suð opþe norð sumne gemetað
 gydda gleawne, geofum unhneawne,

se þe fore duguþe wile dom aræran,
 eorlscipe æfnan, oþþæt eal scæceð,
 leoht ont lif somod; lof se gewyrceð,
 hafað under heofonum heahfæstne dom.

[So, moving about according to fate, gleemen of men go through many lands, speak as necessary, say words of thanks; always, south or north, they meet a certain one, knowledgeable of songs, not niggardly in his gifts, who wishes to build a reputation before the *duguþ*, to behave like a noble man until everything fades away, light and life together; he garners praise, has a high and lasting reputation under the heavens.] (ll. 135-43)

The gnomic mode of this passage would have been quite familiar to an audience steeped in Germanic oral tradition, as well as to one familiar with the homiletic techniques of preachers. With his adoption of this mode, which was reserved for philosophical speculation, the poet provides his strongest definition of what a lord, or potential patron in Widsith's case, should do if he wishes to have a good reputation and go down in memory as someone who served his people well. It is not surprising in a body of poetry as given to agonistic fatalism as the Old English corpus that Widsith's injunctions should be framed in terms of mortality.²⁶

How well has Widsith accomplished his task of marketing himself to potential patrons? Of course, a certain portion of our judgment must be written off as subjectivity, but we can see that he has covered most of

the bases. Most importantly, he has allied himself firmly with Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition in his use of the traditional verse form with its freight of formulaic language. In doing so, he has shown himself well-versed in the nature of the *comitatus*: the provision of service by retainers who are rewarded for their efforts. He has also provided ample evidence in the three fitts of his speech that he has deep knowledge of the traditions from which Anglo-Saxon poetry springs. The three *thulas* provide an exhaustive cataloguing of both oral traditional and learned figures, from Offa and Eormanric to the Israelites and Hebrews. If the poet has knowledge of all these characters and the stories associated with them, which his name-dropping implies, he has a large and varied repertoire indeed, in fact nothing less than the poetic tradition he shares with his audience.²⁷

It is worth considering whether or not the poem makes a request for remuneration. This question requires more than yes or no as answer, but I do not believe it stretches a point unduly to suggest that the numerous strong hints the poem gives concerning what a good lord does when he encounters a fine *scop* will get us across this hurdle. Finally, the party to whom the request is directed remains implicit in *Widsith*; the potential patron is any qualified person who happens to be listening. We hit a snag, however, when we attempt to establish the explicit or implicit identification of the suppliant, which is to be expected given the traditional milieu and the absence of any confirming historical evidence.

W. H. French, who gave the first detailed interpretation of *Widsith* as a begging poem in an article published in 1945, initiated an approach to the problem. It was apparent to French

that the writer was a *scop*; that his learning was merely professional; that his object in displaying it was not to teach or to construct a rhapsody on heroic themes; that far from being in retirement, he was striving to remain in active service; and that his ultimate aim in composing the poem or in reciting it subsequently was to interest a patron in supporting him. (623)

The question remains, however, of the nature of the relationship between the poet who created *Widsith* and the character *Widsith* whose utterances make up the bulk of the poem.

Norman E. Eliason approaches the problem by asking where "truth" leaves off and "fiction" begins. According to Eliason, the element of truth is embodied by the "real" poet who created prologue and epilogue, and *Widsith* and his speech together comprise the fictional element.

Because the prologue indicates that, in the account which follows, it is not the poet who is speaking but another person, a *scop* named *Widsith*, the prologue seems to be a useful or even necessary structural device and is now accepted as such without serious qualms. The fictitious *scop* depicted there, however, is conspicuously at variance with the poet in the main body of the poem. The latter, by telling of travels extending over four centuries, is a man of incredible longevity. The *scop* depicted in

the prologue is not. (1966, 186)

Eliason's comment is relevant. The poet, a "normal" person, puts his poem into the mouth of a person decidedly not normal, far-traveled Widsith, who has marched across both time and space. That the poet would use such a device is not surprising in the context of Old English poetry, which is heavily freighted with extremes and superlatives. By way of example, consider Beowulf once again, that "lofgeornost" (l. 3182b) man, the one readiest for praise in every situation.

W. H. French suggests that the *Widsith*-poet, the creator of the prologue and epilogue, "presented his thoughts through the mouth of a fictitious *scop*, the Far-Traveller, who should personify the whole craft of minstrelsy" (1945, 623), i.e., Widsith. "The difficulty in chronology," French goes on, "disappears at once if the names are taken as a catalogue of the tales the poet can tell" (1945, 628). Robert Creed moves us along in the integration of Widsith and *Widsith*-poet with his assertion that "[t]he poet who sang the prologue and epilogue became himself Ermanaric's Widsith even as he sang in Anglo-Saxon England centuries after Ermanaric's death" (1975, 384).

The extent to which Widsith and *Widsith*-poet can be identified with each other is important to our understanding of how the poem begs. Does the poem's effectiveness at begging suffer as a result of its indirect speech? If, as has been suggested by Krapp and Dobbie, "the original poem grew under the hands of successive revisers and interpolators" (1932, xliv), we could simply attempt to repair the damage by excising the prologue and possibly the epilogue as well, although the gnomic mode of the latter makes it tempting to explain it as part of Widsith's speech. The remains would comprise a poem that we

could still identify, according to our definition, as a begging poem. However, since the single remaining text of the poem has prologue and epilogue in addition to Widsith's speech, such an editorial decision would be purely hypothetical and consequently difficult if not impossible to defend. Perhaps *Widsith* is indeed a very oral traditional poem, complete with *thulas*, formulaic language, name-dropping, and other traditional appurtenances, with skillful additions by a later redactor who added the prologue, possibly the epilogue, and may have inserted biblical and classical references. That redactor's primary emphasis would have been on narrative, a nearly ubiquitous impulse in Old English poetry, which he implemented by turning a begging poem into a poem about a *scop* of indeterminate age who sings a begging poem.

These suggestions, though not unreasonable, are unnecessary. Creed's suggestion that Widsith is an extension of the poet is to the point. The *Widsith*-poet needs Widsith the character, for he is intent on creating a narrative that his audience will recognize and respond to. In order to put his words into Widsith's mouth he must construct a dramatic framework, beginning with the prologue's skillful and direct evocation of heroic song. In addition, the poet deflects the onus of beggary from himself to Widsith, although the persistence with which the message that good poets should be magnificently rewarded is reiterated functions to prevent its being lost upon any audience. No excisions are necessary to improve the poem's accessibility, and indeed would result in the loss of most of its artful complexity. As it stands, *Widsith* is a clever and skillfully constructed poem, subtle in its execution but vivid and memorable in its language.

At first glance, the Old English *Deor* seems to offer us far fewer

interpretive difficulties. Despite a long and contentious struggle to arrive at a suitable text and translation of the poem, there has always been general agreement that a person named *Deor*, fictional or real, is the narrative voice of the poem and that he provides us with five examples of misfortune in the world, capped with a summary of his own misfortune. At the end of each of these five sections and the concluding summary is a refrain, "þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg," literally "it passed in respect to that; so it can in respect to this," perhaps a bit more intelligibly (if loosely) translated as "that passed away; so can this." Given the presence of the refrain, which is unique in Old English poetry,²⁸ there has been a strong inclination on the parts of various critics to view the six sections of the poem as stanzas or, more correctly, strophes since they vary in length. This analysis is born out in part by the manuscript evidence; each of the sections begins with a large capital letter and ends with a notation resembling ":7." The apparent familiarity of this form is, ironically, one of the things that sets it apart from the mass of Old English poetry. Despite its uniqueness, *Deor* is a full and unambiguous participant in the traditions embodied by the rest of the canon, as we shall see.²⁹

The creator of *Deor*, like many good traditional poets, was driven by the narrative impulse. His five examples of misfortune are traditional set-pieces. He opens with an account of the misfortunes of *Welund*, the smith of the gods.

Welund him be wurman	wræces cunnade,
anhydig eorl,	earfoþa dreag;
hæfde him to gesipþe	sorge ond longap,

wintercealdne wræce, wean oft onfond,
 sibban hine Niðhad on nede legde,
 swoncre seonobende on syllan monn.
 Þæs ofereode; þisses swa mæg!

[By his damascened sword, Welund gained
 knowledge of exile, a share of hardships, the
 resolute earl, had as his companion sorrow and
 longing, freezing winter exile, often discovered
 woe after Nithhad laid him in chains, supple
 sinew-bonds on the better man. That passed away;
 so can this!] (ll. 1-7)

The story of Welund is well-documented in Germanic myth. Welund, captured by Nithhad and forced into service, was hamstrung at the insistence of Nithhad's queen. He later escaped, killing Nithhad's two sons and ravishing his daughter, Beaduhild.³⁰

The second tale of misfortune is the story of this same Beaduhild. Once again, the recounting is brief since the poet relies on his audience's familiarity with the story to flesh out the details.

Beadohilde ne wæs her broþra deaþ
 on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfra þing,
 þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde
 þæt heo eacen wæs; æfre ne meahte
 þriste geþencan hu ymb þæt sceolde.
 Þæs ofereode; þiesses swa mæg!

[The death of her brothers was not, to
 Beaduhild, as painful to her heart as her own
 predicament, that she had clearly perceived that

she was pregnant; she was never able, without
 fear, to consider what she ought to do about
 that. That passed away; so can this!] (ll. 8-13)

The mention of a woman invites us to once again suggest that the poet's potential patrons might have included women. This possibility is only strengthened by the fact that the next tale in the poet's catalog of woe is that of another woman.

The poem's third section has been the source of a great deal of critical argument, not all of it strictly polite. The efforts of the eminent scholar Kemp Malone in arriving at a working text and translation of the poem have been instrumental in resolving most issues,³¹ but once again the very brevity of the poet's reference, along with a variety of textual difficulties,³² has given rise to volumes of speculation.

We þæt Mæðhilde	monge gefrugnon:
wurdon grundlease	Geates frige,
þæt hi seo sorglufu	slæp' ealle binom.
þæs ofereode;	þiesses swa mæg!

[We have heard about the moans of Mathhilde:
 that the laments of Geat's woman were endless,
 that love-sorrow deprived her entirely of sleep.

That passed away; so can this!] (ll. 14-17)

The next section provides a transition from private woes to more public ones; its account is the briefest in the poem, and in fact no explicit reference is made to suffering of any kind. Acquaintance with the tradition is mandatory if we are to proceed by any means other than inference to an understanding of the hardships to which the poet refers.

ðeodric ahte þritig wintra
 Mæringa burg. þæt wæs monegum cup.
 þæs ofereode; þiesses swa mæg!

[Theodoric ruled the stronghold of the Mærings
 for thirty winters. That was known to many. That
 passed away; so can this!] (ll. 18-20)

The very economy and subsequent difficulty of these lines has drawn attention to them as a possible centerpiece of the poem, a detail that I will pursue in more depth below. There is good reason to believe that the Theodric in question was the king of the Ostrogoths, who ruled Ravenna around the turn of the sixth century and was responsible for the deaths of the philosopher Boethius and Pope John. P. J. Frankis notes that both the Latin-Christian and Anglo-Saxon records are "reasonably informative on the subject of Theodric" (1962, 162) and that there is good reason to believe that he had a considerable reputation as a villain in those traditions (1962, 162-64).

The fifth example of misfortune is one that affects whole peoples rather than individuals.

We geascodan Eormanrices
 wylfenne geþoht; ahte wide folc
 Gotena rices. þæt wæs grim cyning.
 Sæt secg monig sorgum gebunden,
 wean on wenan, wyscte geneahhe
 þæt þæs cynerices ofercumen wære.
 þæs ofereode; þiesses swa mæg!

[We learned by asking about the wolfish thought
 of Eormanric; he ruled widely the people of the

kingdom of the Goths. That was a fierce king.
 Many a man sat, bound by sorrows, woeful in his
 expectations, wished certainly that that kingdom
 might be overcome. That passed away; so can
 this!] (ll. 21-27)

The description of Eormanric is telling. Characterized by "wolfish thought," he is the antitype of the good lord. L Whitbread accurately notes that "Eormanric's thought is 'wolfish' because he acted contrary to the spirit of the *comitatus*, the heroic fellowship binding lord and warrior: he broke faith with his people and retainers" (1942, 369). Despite the fact that we are not given details regarding Eormanric's misbehavior, it is clear from this reference that no good can attach to it.

Having sketched out his catalog of woe, the poet turns to his own story. These are the lines that most clearly, if circumstantially, indicate to us that *Deor* is in fact a begging poem.

Siteð sorgcearig	sælum bidæled,
on sefan sweorceð,	sylfum þinceð
þæt sy endeleas	earfoða deal.
Mæg þonne geþencan	þæt geond þas woruld
witig drygten	wendeþ geneahhe,
eorle monegum	are gesceawað,
wislicne blæd,	sumum weana dæl.
þæt ic bi me sylfum	secgan wille,
þæt ic hwile wæs	Heodeninga scop,
dryhtne dyre;	me wæs Deor noma.
Ahte ic fela wintra	folgað tilne,

holdne hlaford, oþþæt Heorrenda nu,
 leoðcræftig monn, londryht geþah
 þæt me eorla hleo ær gesealde.
 Þæs ofereode; þiesses swa mæg!

[The sorrowful one sits, separated from joys,
 becomes dark in spirit; it seems to him that his
 portion of hardships might be endless. It may
 then seem that the wise lord changes often,
 shows grace to many noble men, certain glory, to
 others a portion of woes. I wish to say about
 myself that I was the *scop* of the Heodenings for
 a long time, of the dear lord. Deor was my name.
 I had a good position for many winters, a loyal
 lord, until now, [when] Heorrenda, that man
 skilled in song, received the land-right that
 the protector of earls previously gave me. That
 passed away; so can this!] (ll. 28-42)

With these lines in mind, particularly the last four before the final refrain, our job would seem to be at an end. We have seen the *scop* display his knowledge of the tradition with his references to Welund, Beaduhild, and the rest, references couched in the usual traditional language. In fact, I believe that we do have sufficient evidence on a bare reading of the poem to say that, whether or not *Deor* ever actually served as a begging poem, its contents and approach clearly identify it as a very good candidate. To leave our inquiry at that, however, would be to ignore the multivalent referentiality that the poem evokes for us and, more importantly, for its original audience

as well.

The refrain has been the impetus for most modern critical discussion of the poem. One can only imagine the elation of critics who recognized in *Deor*, mistakenly I think, a close affinity with more recent stanzaic poetry. The difficulties occasioned by this approach are manifold. Most prominently, the poet's gnomic reflections prior to the recounting of his own situation (ll. 28-34) have led critics to suppose that this passage is an unfortunate interpolation by a later hand, unfortunate because it introduces an oversized stanza, interrupts the poem's catalog of woes, and blasts the pattern of exemplum and refrain. If the only motivation we have for regarding the gnomic passage as unwanted baggage is its disruption of an expected pattern, we must rethink our approach.

I contend that the structure and approach of *Deor* is not, for the most part, unexpected. Much as we might wish to ally the poem with later, more familiar ones, *Deor* unerringly utilizes traditional forms. As John Miles Foley has noted in his outline of the poem's oral traditional character, "whoever composed 'Deor' could speak the poetic register fluently" (1999, 264). The poet utilizes tried-and-true formulaic language to express the poem's dominating mode of exile and torment, familiar to us from the analysis of *Widsith* above. Welund "wræces cunnade [gained knowledge of exile]" (l. 1) and endured "wintercealdne wræce [freezing winter exile]" (l. 4). "Likewise," Foley suggests, "Beaduhild's unwanted pregnancy and the stigma that accompanies it also reflect *Deor's* expulsion from society" (1999, 266). The story of Maethild, who was fated to die by drowning but who, in one recounting of the story, is ultimately saved, again draws attention

to the torment of the poet and provides as well some hope of amelioration of his difficulties. Foley suggests that we might explain the reference to Theodric, probably the Ostrogothic king of Ravenna, by noting that it "seems to represent a period during which he was separated from his original, proper kingdom" (1999, 266), and is the most radically telescoped of the lot, requiring the listener to possess knowledge of its metonymic referent. The final reference, concerning Eormanric, is less difficult. Since the poem's emphasis is on hardship and exile, our attention is naturally drawn not to Eormanric but rather to the people he ruled and caused to suffer.

Although I have emphasized the traditional language and motifs that unify the poem, a number of critics have chosen to take the matter further, concentrating on interconnections between the stanzas that seem to violate the oral traditional agenda.³³ One well-known example of this approach is put forth by James L. Boren, who seeks "to interpret the poem's subtleties of structure and allusion in terms of a governing aesthetic design" (1975, 276). Boren takes as his starting point an analysis of the lengths of the various stanzas, noting that they decrease in length through the stanza that refers to Theodric and then expand in length through the end of the poem. "The effect of this variation in stanza length," writes Boren, "is to focus attention upon the Theodoric stanza as the sections progressively narrow from [minus the stanza] six lines to only two and then widen to an account of six lines and the concluding long stanza" (1975, 266). Although Boren claims that the audience's apprehension of the poem is reinforced "both aurally and visually" by this arrangement, his insistence on the poem's perceived visual symmetry effectively removes us from the oral

traditional milieu and transports us to the realm of literacy with its emphasis on the printed text, the layout of words on the page. The notion that a listening audience, the norm in both literate and non-literate assemblages, would have attached great attention to the relative length of the sections is difficult to endorse.

In response to Boren's argument, it is worthwhile to note that although our manuscript texts of *Deor* and the rest of the Old English canon are undoubtedly the work of more or less bookish redactors, the nature of the poetry they committed to paper was overwhelmingly oral traditional in nature and has no reliance on textual lineation, which is not present in the manuscripts and is largely irrelevant in the context of performance or public reading. Vernacular poetry that relies on line counts and the semantic interaction of components such as strophes to achieve its meaning is the product of a later age. It may ultimately be helpful in this regard to abandon our conceptualization of the poem's various sections as stanzas, which unfailingly brings literate perceptions to bear on an orally derived poem.

If we view the poem as the product of Germanic oral tradition, we are first of all to de-emphasize any analytic interaction among the poem's sections. Certainly, *Deor* is short enough that cross-references among sections would cause little difficulty for any audience, but in terms of the poem's thrust and movement, the sections seem to be related only by their common preoccupation with misfortune, be it exile, a pregnancy, or the sorrows of love.³⁴ As Ong has pointed out, orally based expression is "additive rather than subordinative" (1982, 37). Independent pieces of a whole are laid end to end to achieve a cumulative effect. We can see this tendency embodied in the poet's

construction of *Deor*. He opens with the story of Welund, well-known in Germanic myth and still popular long after Christianity came to the fore, and continues naturally with the suffering of Beaduhild. The third section opens with the formulaic language "We... gefrugnon [We heard that...]" (l. 14), a commonplace of Old English heroic verse; the best-known instance is contained in the opening lines of *Beowulf*. This language, says Foley, "provides a signal that the subject is changing" (1999, 268). We are given no such signal in the *Theodric* section of the poem, but can fall back on the knowledge that this section, though the cause of some consternation to critics on account of its brevity, would have been understood at once by an audience participating in the tradition. The same holds true for the *Eormanric* section. When the poet begins his gnomic utterance at line 28, another transition is understood to be underway. As noted above, many Old English poems end with such utterances. However, the *Deor*-poet takes the very effective and original step of tacking his own tale onto what would, under normal circumstances, comprise the end of the poem, thus isolating and emphasizing it, a necessary step if the purpose of his efforts, the sale of his services, is to be understood.

Our poet, then, although working well within the bounds of his poetic tradition, shows a powerful ability to shape and extend that tradition to his own ends. A further example of his originality is contained in the *Eormanric* stanza. In reference to *Eormanric*, the poet declaims, "Þæt wæs grim cyning [That was a fierce king]" (l. 23). I quote from Foley at length:

While on the surface it may seem a redundant or
superfluous annotation, this phrase has deep

poetic resonance in Old English verse.

Syntactically independent of what surrounds it and virtually proverbial in its structure and meaning, the customary and positive version -- "that was an excellent king" (*þæt wæs god cyning*) -- certifies the person to whom it is applied as an effective leader who fulfills the Anglo-Saxon ideal of reciprocity toward faithful subjects. Along with variations like "that was a wise/true/noble/peerless king," it slots figures as diverse as Scyld Scefing and Hrothgar (in *Beowulf*), Beowulf himself, Guthhere (in *Widsith*), and the Christian God in the classic profile of staunch defender and wise provider. Imagine how ironically this *sēma* functions when all of the cherished values associated with the ideal king, epitomized in the proverbial phrase, are summarily overturned in an excoriation of Eormanric's malfeasance. (1999, 268-69)

There is reason to believe that the poet's debt to his tradition does not end here. In a groundbreaking article published in 1964, Morton W. Bloomfield pointed out that *Deor* has similarities in form and language to the Anglo-Saxon charms. Although I do not support Bloomfield's suggestion that *Deor* might be a "Christianized charm against any kind of misfortune due to social or personal relations," I find his less specific alternative, that the poem is "influenced by the charm form and meant to suggest its prototype" (535) more provocative.

Although I will not describe charms in detail here, it is sufficient to note that, according to Bloomfield, charms typically contain elements in which the reciter tells a story, "the incidents of which are appropriate and have reference to what he wishes to do or obtain" (1964, 538). We can find an analog to this component in *Deor* in the evocation of despair and hardship and his statement that he is without a position, implying that he would like to have one. Additionally, the use of "a kind of proportionate analogy" in the charms is embodied by their use of the form "as X (the... event or events in the past), so Y (the hope for similar outcome in the present)" (1964, 538), a construction clearly evident in *Deor's* refrain. Is it possible that the poet utilized the charm genre in this way to shape his audience's understanding? The notion is an attractive one since it bears further witness to the poet's originality and talent, but must remain mere speculation.

Although we have placed the poem firmly within Germanic oral tradition, we must not forget that its ultimate redactor existed within a mixed tradition of orality and literacy. The scholarly appurtenances of Christianity were available to him, as well as the materials of Germanic oral tradition. His acquaintance with the tribulations and accomplishments of Boethius has been a question of concern to critics for decades.³⁵ In Kiernan's opinion, "[t]here is without question, in terms of general theme, a close connection between Boethius and *Deor*" (1978, 337). This connection is one of the motivating factors in James L. Boren's interpretation, which relies on the assumed "centrality of the Theodoric stanza" (1975, 266). If we construe Theodric as Theodric of the Ostrogoths, as do most critics, including Boren, we might agree

that "an allusion to a tyrant famous for his persecution of Boethius is especially appropriate to the pivotal section of the poem, for the *Consolation of Philosophy* offers a philosophical pattern analogous to the one being presented in *Deor*" (1975, 270).

The great popularity of Boethius's *Consolation* in England during Anglo-Saxon times and later is a matter of record; King Alfred, that redoubtable champion of learning, has been credited with translating the work, not unexpectedly giving his English sensibilities free rein as he did so.³⁶ Murray F. Markland compares the translations of one important passage. Markland gives the following translation of the Latin version, in which Fortune speaks to Boethius:

And if thou esteemest not thyself fortunate
because those things which seemed joyful are
past, there is no cause why thou shouldst think
thyself miserable, since those things which thou
now takest to be sorrowful do pass. (1968, 2)

In Alfred's version, the words are spoken not by Fortune but by a character of his own devising, Christian Wisdom:

If thou now sayest, that thou are not happy,
because thou hast not the temporary honors and
the enjoyments which thou formerly hadst, still
thou art not unhappy: for the sorrows wherein
thou now art, will in like manner pass away, as
thou sayest the enjoyments formerly did. (1968,
2)

The Anglo-Saxon sensibility stands out clearly in the differences between the two translations. The abstract Latin reference to "those

things which seemed joyful" is converted into more concrete terms by Alfred: "temporary honors and... enjoyments." This approach reflects the Anglo-Saxon tendency to focus upon things close to the human lifeworld and events. Similarly, the Latin version's "there is no cause why thou shouldst think thyself miserable" is transformed into the much more direct and concrete "still thou art not unhappy."³⁷ Alfred draws reflexively upon both his Christian and Germanic heritages.

Although it is difficult to disagree with Markland's statement that "[t]he parallels with *Deor* are inescapable" (1968, 2), there is little ground for seeking a line-by-line correspondence between the *Consolation* and *Deor*.³⁸ Alfred's translation reveals his reaction to the text. In typical Anglo-Saxon fashion he conceptualizes Boethius's ruminations on misfortune in terms of exile and the "temporary honors and... enjoyments" of existence. From this point of view, not only does *Deor* parallel Boethius; so also do *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Beowulf*, and a considerable share of the rest of the Old English canon.

Given the popularity of the *Consolation*, we must not discount the possibility that the poet had an acquaintance with it, but we are not on firm ground if we cite such familiarity as prerequisite to the poem's composition. Despite this reservation, it is clear that Boethius's *Consolation*, with its heartfelt exploration of adversity, reveals a mind-set that effectively reflects the Anglo-Saxon concern with the hardships and misfortune of exile, a fact that goes a long way toward explaining his enduring popularity among medieval English audiences. Although we can not establish the extent of Boethius's influence on *Deor*, it seems reasonable to suggest that the *Consolation*, with its freight of sentiments dear to the Anglo-Saxon heart, is

exactly the sort of work that would have facilitated the confluence of oral and literate currents in early medieval English culture.

Our goal has been the construction of a narrative that describes how the Old English *Widsith* and *Deor* beg. Although we recognize that Old English poetry is a combination of the underlying oral tradition and emergent literacy, our description of the relationship between poet and patron relies most heavily upon our understanding of oral poets, or *scopas*, and speculations regarding how they might have made their livings. The relationship between patron and poet, of course, was found to be quite similar to that between lord and retainer, of which it is in fact a special case. The comparison is a natural one, given the poets' use of heroic language in their verse. In selling themselves, the poets work mostly with samples of their art, although *Deor* abandons even this much subtlety and recounts his own story, detailing the humiliating loss of his former position to a man who was better at what he did.

Our analysis has, of necessity, made extensive use of types. Individuals, other than unknown quantities labeled *Widsith* and *Deor*, are unknown to us. Since the poetry is so centrally concerned with ideals, we have extracted those ideals from the poetry itself and used them to explain the relationship between the exemplary lord and his retainer, along with its characteristic expression, the bestowal of treasure in exchange for service. Although the narrative has no closure and we will never know whether these petitions were favored or not, we have provided some evidence along the way to suggest that they may have been at least worthy.

CHAPTER TWO
CHAUCER AND LYDGATE

Although we have some knowledge of the lives of Chaucer and Lydgate, we would certainly like to know more. Despite this perceived dearth of data, however, we have a whole universe of information about these two poets compared to what we know about the anonymous creators of *Deor* and *Widsith*. In our consideration of the Old English poems we were forced to stick to generalities concerning the relationships that subsist between poet and patron and poet and audience. We lacked sufficient information to specify in more than a general way how that relationship maps to the poem's genesis and meaning. In the cases of the Chaucer and Lydgate samples, however, we have poems whose recipients we can identify. It becomes possible to discuss in a comparatively specific way the relationship between poet and patron and the effect that relationship has on the style and content of the poetic product.

As in Chapter One, we shall give an overview of the relationships that subsisted between lords and retainers during Chaucer's and Lydgate's professional lives. Since the role of poetry in Chaucer's career is very different from its role in Lydgate's, we will give close

attention to the circumstances under which both poets labored as we examine first Chaucer's and then Lydgate's experiences and reputations. The great advantage of knowing the identities of both poets and patrons will be most fully realized when we examine the sometimes complex and resonant meanings suggested by the details of these relationships. The timing of the poems' composition and transmission is important and, especially in Chaucer's case, revealing.

Of course, much changed in the world between the Anglo-Saxon period and the second half of the fourteenth century, when Chaucer was active and Lydgate was beginning his long career. The pace of change seems to have been brisk during Chaucer's lifetime; in fact, his career has been used to exemplify the complexity of a system in a lively state of flux.¹ The changes that overcame England between the period when *Deor* and *Widsith* were composed and the time of Chaucer, Lydgate, and Hoccleve may be a matter of degree rather than quality. By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period the *comitatus*, with its land- and treasure-based system of rewards, probably no longer existed except as an ideal, and it may, in fact, not have existed when *Deor* and *Widsith* were composed. During the Victorian period, historical orthodoxy dictated that, when the Normans invaded in 1066, they brought with them a socioeconomic system usually represented by a simplistic pyramid model. In this model, called land-based feudalism, the king resides at the top. Just beneath him are the nobles, who receive grants of land and use it to obligate individuals from the gentry, who are in the third tier, on down to the peasants, who subsist at the bottom by means of backbreaking, poorly compensated labor.² By the end of the fourteenth century the land-based feudalism that had presumably subsisted for

centuries had been replaced, to a significant extent, by a much more flexible money-and-gift-based system designated "bastard feudalism."³ Mainstream scholars like Charles Plummer, who coined the term in 1885, lauded the "purity" of land-based feudalism and decried the outlawry spawned by bastard feudalism, which enabled lords to gather armies bent on dissident purposes merely by virtue of the fact that they had the requisite cash, which in later times facilitated excesses like the Wars of the Roses (Hicks 1995, 14-15).

Hicks (1995, 19-21) provides an account of how changes in our understanding of feudalism came about. One of the first tenets of the orthodoxy to be decisively overturned was the notion that land-based feudalism was somehow "purer" than cash-enabled, or bastard, feudalism. Scholars have brought forward conclusive evidence to support the contention that the king, as well as many of the lords beneath him who supported retinues of their own, always had a greater need for retainers than could be satisfied by the assemblies permanently attached to them. Evidence has been adduced that, as early as the eleventh century, funds generated by the so-called *scutage*, a fee collected from retainers in compensation for shortfalls in troop levies, were being used to hire free agents to reduce the shortfall. According to Hicks, the last king to rely heavily on feudal military commitments was Edward I (1239-1307), who was still forced to hire additional men to swell his ranks (1995, 21). In view of these facts, we might well question whether or not land-based feudalism ever really existed, and would have to reply that, if it did, it probably never existed in the pure form envisioned by Plummer and his colleagues. Thus, whether bastard feudalism always existed to some degree or arose

as a reaction to land-based feudalism, it was firmly in place by the time of Chaucer and Lydgate; social relationships had been reshaped and, to some extent, redefined.

The new set of interconnected relationships engendered by bastard feudalism has been designated an *affinity*. A new term was needed because the new social structure was a non-territorial one, in contrast to the traditions of land-based feudalism. The twofold basis of the affinity consisted of personality and finance. The component of personality was made up primarily of influence both political and social. If, for example the gentry in a given area understood that a certain magnate had the influence necessary to improve their lives, they would, naturally, seek alliances with him. In addition to influence, the magnate needed ready cash with which to reward his supporters; it was, of course, this cash that endowed him with political and social influence in the first place, and assigned him his position in the larger hierarchy.⁴

Interestingly enough, although the affinity relied more on cash than land for its successful operation, its members typically resided either on or near land controlled by their lords or their lords' associates, who headed affinities of their own (Carpenter 1980, 517). In Warwickshire, for example, almost everyone of any standing belonged to the affinity of one lord or another. After all, as Christine Carpenter notes, "only the unimportant would be without a lord" (Carpenter 1980, 515). Sometimes individuals belonged to more than one affinity; given the complex influence of geography upon authority, this multiple membership must have been desirable if not a matter of necessity (Carpenter 1980, 517-18). The affinity encouraged cohesion

among its members and defined the social relationships that prevailed among them. The strength and durability of the bonds of the affinity are emphasized by Carpenter:

It was this complex interweaving of personal and public affairs which must have given such a strong degree of permanence to the affinities, for a change in political allegiance involved a substantial reorientation of a man's social life as well as a dangerous loss of trusted associates.⁵

The Lancastrian affinity headed by John of Gaunt is a relevant model for the social structures within which Chaucer worked. Chaucer knew Gaunt for the better part of his life, and may have met him during the Christmas season of 1357, according to Howard (1987, 39) and Pearsall (1992, 35). Chaucer received a lifetime annuity of ten pounds from Gaunt in 1374, probably as a token of appreciation for *The Book of the Duchess* (Howard 1987, 208). According to Hicks, Gaunt's affinity was not really a typical one, at least in part on account of its very large size (Hicks 1995, 28). However, in consideration of Chaucer's long association with Gaunt and his family, and of the fact that the affinity of the king, whoever he might be, was the largest of all, Gaunt's affinity is a suitable example.⁶ Historian Simon Walker focuses his highly detailed study of the Lancastrian affinity on Gaunt's organization, emphasizing its structure, cost, and composition. According to Walker, the members of Gaunt's retinue can be categorized, in large part, as household attendants, indentured retainers, or estate officials.⁷ The cost of the affinity was variable, depending in large

part on whether or not Gaunt, who had a variety of overseas interests of his own in addition to those of the king, was at war. During times of peace, the affinity shed indentured retainers who were involved in the prosecution of warfare, with the exception of those who might fulfill other functions. In large part, however, war governed the composition and economics of the affinity (Walker 1990, 39, 42). On a dozen occasions between 1359 and 1394 Gaunt mobilized armies ranging in size from four hundred to three thousand men in the service of both his own interests and those of the king (Walker 1990, 40-41). The cost of maintaining such a force was obviously astronomical, especially if insufficient plunder were available to maintain it or, worse yet, if it were defeated in battle and held for ransom. Those individuals who earned their livelihoods exclusively or primarily through their association with Gaunt were adequately if not always generously paid, and the awarding of the most sought-after stipends was always preceded by a period of service and association before the relationship was made official. In addition to the stipends, though, the wording of Gaunt's indenture of retainer, whether for the duration of a war or more long term, was quite effective in the recourse it offered Gaunt in the event of a retainer's coming up short on his obligations. Typically, the punishment was the withholding of the stipend (Walker 1990, 42-46). The sheer numbers of men available for service as indentured retainers assured that lords like Gaunt would have ample pools of talented labor from which to choose. Membership in multiple affinities appears to have been less common among Gaunt's retainers than among the Beauchamps' in Warwickshire. Gaunt's indentures stipulated that he expected exclusive service, although the stipulation was not always respected (Walker 1990,

46). It should be emphasized that most of the service performed for Gaunt was military in nature (Walker 1990, 42), which required a different type and quantity of service than peacetime duties, which were "on the whole, light" (Walker 1990, 81). Nevertheless, we must not assume that exclusive, or almost-exclusive, service necessarily implies a loyalty beyond compensation. As Walker puts it, "It was the iron law of supply and demand, not a residual feudal loyalty, that kept the Lancastrian affinity stable in its membership" (1990, 109).

This brief sketch of the changes that came over English economics and society in the centuries between the presumed heyday of Widsith and the life of Chaucer is a fairly high-level one, and is colored by a certain amount of necessary speculation on account of the inevitable gaps in the historical record. The street-level reality of the time appears to have been considerably messier. Strohm's assertion that "we have sometimes tended to regard 'feudalism' as a more orderly system than it ever was" (1989, 3) smacks of understatement, as we have seen. However, the cash system did not introduce as great an increase in mobility as we might expect. Bonds between lords and retainers tended to be durable, and not just for the recipients of the largess;⁸ recall, for example, the lifetime annuity of ten pounds that Gaunt granted Chaucer for *The Book of the Duchess* (Howard 1987, 208). The general trend described by Strohm is one of a flattening of the hierarchy as individuals were hired on a temporary basis or moved from magnate to magnate in search of greater rewards. The world became less hierarchical in nature, and more horizontal. With the advantage of hindsight, it appears that medieval social life became more complex with the increase in social mobility and the rise of a more or less

independent merchant and business class (Strohm 1989, 1-23). Strohm has characterized this new, more fluid system: "The king or magnate was situated not (as in a hierarchy) at the *apex* of the affinity but at its *center*, with followers arrayed around him in a series of concentric circles, widening out to less and less defined forms of interdependency" (Strohm's italics) (1989, 25).

By the time of Chaucer, and Lydgate after him, then, the relationships characteristic of land-based medieval feudalism, with its system of binding, long-term contracts, were fast becoming a thing of the past. Agreements of long standing, based upon grants of land and various kinds of treasure and privilege, certainly had not disappeared by Chaucer's time, but they had been replaced, to a significant extent, by more fluid, shorter-term arrangements based largely on cash and "gifts" of moveable goods. Chaucer's employment was similar, in a general way, to the kind of employment we know today: he performed an appointed task and was periodically compensated for it. His employment as controller of customs, for example, amounted to what we might recognize as a day job, although it was also, more than likely, a "sweetheart job," as Norman Cantor has characterized it (Cantor 2001, 58).

Since numerous biographies of Chaucer are extant, both in and out of print, I will not rehash the broad details of Chaucer's life.⁹ However, I will devote considerable attention to the circumstances under which "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse" was written. To that end, it is helpful to begin with an overview of Chaucer's relations with his patrons, leading up to the transition that was thrust upon him at the end of the fourteenth century when Henry IV

mounted a successful coup against Richard II, creating a new order in which large numbers of people, Chaucer and, to a much lesser extent, Lydgate among them, had to give some hard thought to how their loyalties would be realigned.

Chaucer's position -- or perhaps the more accurate designation is *status* -- was known as esquire *en service*, meaning that he had acquired the rank of esquire through diplomatic or household service rather than through the practice of arms (Strohm 1989, 13). When Chaucer became an esquire *en service* the rank of esquire had just "gained access to gentility" and service was still in the process of becoming a pathway by which one might achieve the rank of esquire (Strohm 1989, 11). Ironically, perhaps, it is evident that Chaucer would probably never have achieved prosperity by writing poetry. According to Strohm,

Patronage based on his literary accomplishments seems not to have been a major factor in Chaucer's civil career.... [M]ost of the facts of his civil career are comprehensible in terms of strictly non-literary talents and exertions. Chaucer's poetry fosters an impression of separation between his public and literary lives. (2003, 4)

For the most part, payment was made to him in his capacity as an esquire *en service*. In Chaucer's case, the delegated responsibilities included diplomatic service. Chaucer must have been particularly in demand in view of his manifest intelligence and education, including his knowledge of English, French, Italian, and Latin. Strohm notes that courtly entertainers such as jongleurs, minstrels, and the like were

anachronistic by the time of Richard II's reign, and that Chaucer was far too valuable in other capacities to be relegated to the status of an entertainer (Strohman 1989, 22; Strohman 2003, 4).

In his seminal work *Poets and Princepleasers*, Richard Firth Green confirms the gradual displacement of the minstrel by the educated court poet who was "a full-fledged retainer." "The court minstrel of one generation has become the court poet of the next" (1980, 105). By the end of the fourteenth century, the transition was substantially complete. "There can be little doubt," writes Green, "that when the records of this period refer to minstrels they are describing professional musicians" (1980, 105). Terry Jones and his co-authors concur, emphasizing their contention that the decline of minstrelsy was paralleled by a change in court culture under Richard II as well:

The minstrel who recited or sang a well-known poem from memory became outmoded in the new court culture. The modern monarch wished to establish his own tastes and his own reputation as a man of letters. He needed to stake out his own intellectual territory as clearly as he did the boundaries of his state, and this he did by commissioning new works from highly accomplished and intellectual writers whom he often retained in his circle. (2003, 19-20)

There is some evidence to suggest that this trend toward a higher level of literary sophistication at court was aided by Richard's interest in things cultural and by his de-emphasizing of his predecessors' militaristic preoccupations, particularly in connection with the

ongoing war with France, in favor of what Michael J. Bennett has termed "higher cultivation."¹⁰

Chaucer had dealings with English monarchs from Edward III through Henry IV, as well as magnates like Henry's father, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, but we have only indirect evidence that he wrote poetry for any of these individuals. In the case of Richard II, as Patricia Eberle notes,

Any attempt to... establish a connection between individual works and the policies or literary tastes of Richard II himself is forced to confront the scarcity of direct evidence for royal patronage of those literary works most highly valued today. Literary historians who have addressed this problem have all been faced with the same conundrum: very few of the literary works surviving from Richard's reign can be shown to be directly connected with royal patronage, and very few of the works directly connected with royal patronage would be regarded today as literary. (1999, 231-32)

To this characterization we can add Pearsall's comment that Chaucer's "job at the customs, with its stipulation that Chaucer must keep the records in his own hand, might well have stopped a lesser man from writing poetry altogether" (1992, 180). Could it be that Chaucer's representation of his literary activities in the second book of *The House of Fame* is accurate? Chaucer labors at his "day job" and indulges his hobby when he gets home:

For when thy labour doon al ys,
 And has mad alle thy rekenynges,
 In stede of reste and neue thynges
 Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon,
 And, also domb as any stoon,
 Thou sittest at another book
 Tyl fully daswed ys thy look;
 And lyvest thus as an heremyte,
 Although thyn abstynence ys lyte. (652-60)

Although this passage, which may or may not be a self-portrait, is convincing to anyone acquainted with the tribulations of underpaid authors who must do their work on their own time, it is still difficult to understand how Chaucer could have marshaled the endurance to compose such a large quantity of first-rate poetry without being afforded a substantial amount of uninterrupted time for reflection and writing. V. J. Scattergood's contention that, despite the lack of evidence for direct patronage, "the circumstances for the production and dissemination of literature were obviously not unfavorable" (1983, 41) can set us on the road to discovering the circumstances under which a poet might thrive under the aegis of the court. Richard Firth Green's characterization of the circumstances under which fourteenth-century court poets wrote should also be considered:

If the court did not employ professional poets,
 it is not clear that the opposite position, that
 poetry was an avocation rather than a vocation,
 provides us with a satisfactory alternative
 explanation. The number of poets employed in the

familia regis cannot be dismissed as an historical accident; the rituals of literary commission, dedication, and presentation cannot have been quite meaningless. Obviously literature in the court occupied some kind of ill-defined no man's land somewhere between a job and a hobby. (1980, 12)

It seems clear that writers like Chaucer were encouraged to write, but that their literary work was, if not absolutely sidelined, subordinated to their other duties.

Chaucer's connection with the Ricardian affinity offers useful insights into the nature of his relationships with his patrons and reveals some of the prejudices literary scholars have exhibited regarding those relationships. Chaucer's conjectural loyalty, or equally conjectural lack thereof, to Richard and the royal household has aroused considerable controversy, partly on account of Richard's power struggle with the Lords Appellant during the second half of the 1380s. The competition ultimately became violent, and in December of 1387 forces sympathetic to Richard were neutralized by Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, in the skirmish at Radcot Bridge. When the Lords Appellant singled out their enemies and began to punish them, a number of individuals who were friends or colleagues of Chaucer, and also loyal to Richard, were executed.¹¹ Strohm writes that "Although some historians have shown no reluctance to treat Chaucer as a member of the royal party or Ricardian faction, Chaucerians have been reluctant to draw that conclusion" (1989, 26), although that reluctance is difficult to justify in light of the historical evidence. Strohm

writes:

This prevailing reluctance to imagine Chaucer as factionally committed may be a consequence of having met him primarily on a literary ground. Those who have experienced his broad-mindedness and capacity to entertain alternatives within the compass of his writings have been reluctant to imagine that he could ever commit himself to a single political perspective. But Chaucer's factional alignment need not be considered an embarrassment to his qualities of balance or good sense. As a person of his time and as a professional courtier and civil servant, he had no choice but to participate in factional politics. (1989, 26)

As we have seen in the above remarks pertaining to bastard feudalism and the affinity, multiple allegiances in the form of multiple affinity memberships were not unheard of, and membership in affinities was very pragmatic in nature. Chaucer, of course, was John of Gaunt's annuitant while employed by Edward III and, later, Richard II.¹² Derek Pearsall may ultimately give us the best perspective on Chaucer's situation at the end of the tumultuous 1380s:

It was at this point, one might say, that he reaped the reward for having kept his poetry free from overt political commitment and out of the arena of warring political factions. Whatever he had done with his public career, he

had sacrificed nothing in his poetry to the demands of court patronage. He had remained polite and non-committal about everything in public and political life, affirmed no special allegiance to the king or any affinity, and avoided anything that might be construed as an allusion. (1992, 209)

Although Pearsall may be correct, in a general sense, in describing Chaucer's work as being "free from overt political commitment," it is almost certainly incorrect to suggest that things political are unrepresented. Terry Jones (2003, 59) and Paul Strohm (1989, 50-51), for example, have commented on the political concerns expressed in the lyric "Lak of Stedfastnesse." Nevertheless, as we have seen and shall emphasize further, Chaucer appears to have been remarkably adept at managing his relationships with his employers.

In regard to our study of "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse," of course, the most relevant of Chaucer's patrons is Henry IV, to whom at least some of the copies of the "Complaint" were connected by means of the poem's envoy. Henry is of special interest in the history of England as well as in the history of Chaucer because of his dramatic seizure of Richard II's throne in 1399. A brief sketch of these events is essential to our understanding of the circumstances of the "Complaint"'s genesis and transmission. As a consequence of differences and hostilities generated by the affair of the Appellants during the 1380s, Richard exiled Henry, then Earl of Hereford, for a period of ten years. Henry accepted his punishment, but once he was abroad Richard extended the period of banishment from ten years to life. This move was

certainly a politically questionable one, given Henry's ongoing popularity, which had already been inflated by the sympathetic response to his original sentence. Hard upon the heels of Richard's harsh edict, Henry's father, the now-elderly John of Gaunt, died after a short illness. To make matters worse, Richard took advantage of the opportunity afforded by Gaunt's death to freeze Henry's inheritance until such time as Henry returned to England, which would now presumably never happen, leaving Henry with little apparent choice but to return to England and attempt to recover his property. Although there continued to be considerable sympathy for Henry's cause, the process by which he seized power -- which resulted, perhaps inevitably, in Richard's death -- was viewed with some trepidation even by his supporters, some of whom saw the transition as usurpation rather than lawful deposition. Even Henry's son, the illustrious Henry V, hero of the stunning defeat of the French at Agincourt, was unable to permanently turn the tide. Richard's deposition continued to have repercussions and led more or less directly to the fifteenth-century War of the Roses.¹³

Henry's quest to legitimize his ascent to the throne included the enlistment of the literary forces available to him, and Paul Strohm cites circumstantial evidence of "the presence of programmatic elements behind Henry's relations with writers of the day" (1992, 35). One suspects that there was little coercion involved in this program; Chaucer, for instance, was presumably aware of the consequences of expressing his loyalties in writing, and would perhaps have aligned himself with Henry as a matter of necessity if not of choice. Although he had been Richard's man for over twenty years, he had to have been

aware of the course that events were taking as Henry completed his takeover, just as his contemporaries were. Thomas Hoccleve, as we shall see in Chapter Three, was an unabashed supporter of the Lancastrian claim to the throne and wrote more than one poem that supported his position. John Gower, whose name is often mentioned in tandem with Chaucer's, also jumped on the bandwagon; his 385-line poem "In Praise of Peace" enthusiastically endorses Henry (and castigates Richard) from its opening stanza:

O worthi noble kyng, Henry the ferthe,
 In whom the glade fortune is befall
 The people to governe uppon this erthe,
 God hath the chose in comfort of ous alle;
 The worschipe of this lond, which was doun falle,
 Now stant upriht thurgh grace of thi goodnesse,
 Which every man is holde forto blesse. (ll. 1-7)

Whether Gower was as enthusiastic a Lancastrian partisan as he seems to have been or was simply an extremely energetic sycophant is a question that cannot be answered definitively. However, Yeager writes that

In Gower... Henry had a workhorse. His poetic effort became prolific in Henry's behalf immediately (or so it seems) upon Henry's taking power. It is usually thought that between 29 September 1399 and the end of Henry's second year as king, in 1401, Gower produced the so-called "laureate group": two shorter Latin poems, "Rex celi deus" and "O recolende," and one ("H. aquile pullus") very brief, of four

Latin lines; the 385-line Middle English "To King Henry the Fourth, In Praise of Peace" [see the quote above]; as well as the Latin *Cronica Tripertita*, 1055 lines of Ovidian elegiacs on Henry's "glorious revolution" and the fall of Richard; and two dedicatory Anglo-Norman balades (*Cinkante Balades* I and II). In addition, Gower possibly commissioned copies of his Middle English *Confessio Amantis*, newly re-dedicated to Henry and revised by the removal of all complimentary allusions to Richard II. (401)

In addition to Hoccleve and Gower, Henry may also have sought the literary services of Christine de Pisan. Strohm recounts the story of how Henry took Christine's son "into his own household and sent two 'notables hommes' to gain her assent and to invite her to come to England herself" (1992, 35). Although Henry's actions may fall short of actual hostage-taking, his seriousness about gaining literary support for his endeavors is strongly supported by the evidence.

It may be that the "Complaint to His Purse" is Chaucer's entry in the campaign to curry favor with the new monarch. However, in view of Chaucer's long relationship with John of Gaunt, Henry's father, it is necessary to qualify this assertion. There can be little doubt that Henry knew Chaucer at least by reputation. Given the shotgun approach Henry adopted to cement support for his seizure of the throne, succinctly documented in Paul Strohm's landmark essay "Saving the Appearances: Chaucer's *Purse* and the Fabrication of the Lancastrian Claim" (1992, 21-34), it seems likely that if Chaucer didn't approach

Henry, Henry very well may have approached Chaucer (1992, 34-36). It is also conceivable that the poem represents an attempt on Chaucer's part to cement his changed relationship with Henry. Drawing our attention to Chaucer's practical side, R. F. Yeager offers the additional suggestion that Chaucer, long accustomed to the ways of the fourteenth-century English bureaucracy, "knew better than most how quickly government money runs out, especially in uncertain times, and made his way to the head of the line" (2005, 377) with his presentation of the "Complaint." In effect, according to this analysis, the poem would serve double duty, both securing Chaucer his annuity and ingratiating him to Henry.¹⁴

Compared to the scholarship on the other begging poems considered in this study, which ranges from scant to nonexistent, a number of interpretations of the "Complaint"'s genesis and afterlife exist. If we go back in time and follow the lead of Chaucer biographer Marchette Chute, writing in the 1940s, the task of ascertaining the "Complaint"'s history ends quickly. According to Chute, "It is not likely that Chaucer was begging the king for money" (Chute 1946, 320). Chute believes that "the *Complaint to his Purse* is a parody on courtly love. It is an authentic love complaint.... But here he parodies the whole race of complaints.... No poet had ever treated the sacred subject of finances like this before" (Chute 1946, 320). In short, the poem exists as nothing more than a parody, divorced from its apparent functional existence as a begging poem. Chute's first statement, which casts doubt on Chaucer's apparent reason for writing the poem, may raise eyebrows. For what other reason would Chaucer decide to write such a poem? Certainly, the "Complaint" might have arisen from a playful exercise on Chaucer's part, and he might even have envisioned the piece as a satire

on acquisitiveness or, perhaps, on the activities of his poetic contemporaries,¹⁵ but these suggestions do not seem particularly helpful when we remember that the poem was eventually expanded by the addition of an envoy that was clearly addressed to Henry and then, we assume, actually transmitted to him. It is worthwhile to note, however, that, for at least some of Richard's literary beneficiaries, the transition to Henry's patronage was relatively painless (see Chapter Three) and Chaucer probably would have received payment whether or not he presented Henry with the "Complaint." It seems likelier, though, particularly in light of Chaucer's composition of the envoy, that Henry indeed received the poem, whether or not it swayed his decision in favor of Chaucer.

Both Howard and Pearsall, writing decades after Chute but agreeing with him on a key point, suggest that, although Chaucer may have dug the poem out of storage and presented it to the king as a clever way of getting his annuity paid, he probably did not write it with the intention of using it for its manifest purpose (Howard 1987, 485; Pearsall 1992, 274). In part, I think, these eminent scholars are being practical and open-minded in their suggestion that Chaucer might not have written the poem as a matter of financial necessity, but I suspect that they are also attempting, consciously or not, to preserve a bit of Chaucer's dignity for him, although we may not agree that dignity is what is at stake. Another, possibly even more interesting, variation on the story is that the poem was on file and Chaucer, needing his annuity money, wrote and appended the envoy and then presented the whole package to the king.

In their edition of the short poems, Pace and David enrich the

debate with their recounting of the manuscript evidence: "There is some question whether the ballade proper may be older than the Envoy. A Shirley manuscript refers to the Envoy as 'A supplicacioun to Kyng Richard,' and half the manuscripts lack the Envoy" (1982, 122-23). This evidence suggests that, as opposed to writing the poem as a simple exercise in parody, Chaucer may well have written it in response to a financial need whose circumstances were transformed by Henry IV's accession to the throne. Andrew J. Finnel has argued vociferously against the suggestion that Chaucer wrote the poem and then switched envoys to suit his needs; he dismisses the Shirley manuscript's denomination, "A supplicacioun to Kyng Richard," as "an absurd, possibly senile mistake" (1973, 155), and may be right, "given how obviously the envoy seems to refer to Henry" (Yeager 2005, 378-79). Finnel attempts to defuse speculation regarding Chaucer's putative game of "musical envoys":

Some critics... entertain the possibility that Chaucer wrote the stanzas of "Purse" as a begging poem to Richard and merely added the envoy when he needed funds from Henry. This proposition is, for one, distasteful. These critics would have Chaucer a poetical chameleon, a sycophant, a foul-weather patriot who could easily shift allegiances and praise a rival monarch in his turn when it was financially expedient. (1973, 154-55)

I will not attempt to settle this controversy here. However, the intimation by Finnel that critics should avoid evaluations of Chaucer

the man that prove "distasteful" needs to be addressed, if only briefly, and I leave the topic with the reminder that history is replete with examples of persons who did laudable things as well as not-so-laudable ones. As we have seen, Chaucer was nothing if not pragmatic; with that in mind, it seems unnecessarily idealistic to suggest that he was incapable of acting on his own behalf. Any "infraction" he might have committed in readdressing the "Complaint" seems very, very trivial, and certainly need not be interpreted as evidence of a fundamental baseness of character.

R. F. Yeager has noted the surge of scholarship pertaining to Chaucer's "Complaint" beginning in the last decade of the twentieth century. "If, like people, poems can have remarkable decades, then surely 'To His Purse' has had one since 1992" (2005, 373). Yeager's own contribution to the discussion, submitted five years into the present century, is an exceptionally thought-provoking one. Yeager has suggested a number of interesting possibilities regarding the life history of Chaucer's "Complaint," among them the hypothesis that one of the early manuscripts of the poem, *sans* envoy, may have been sent to Richard.

The problem posed by Richard's extraordinary grants of £10 in 1393... just when Chaucer could clearly use it, and his protection of 1398 (again, in the nick of time), is that no trace of any petition by Chaucer for either favor survives. Not that this in itself is surprising, given normal survival rates of medieval documents. But it does seem unlikely that

Richard would have acted in such timely ways
 without some sort of urging from Chaucer -- and
 it makes one wonder: could either of these have
 been the occasion of the first version of "To
 His Purse," *sans envoy*? (2005, 381)

Although Yeager's suggestion is a fascinating one, it does require us to explain the existence of the poem's versions *avec envoy* addressed to Henry. Clearly, financial matters were occupying Chaucer's time when Henry IV came to power a number of years after the date when Yeager posits Chaucer might have sent the poem to Richard, even if the circumstances created only the expectation of unmanageable debt rather than the reality.¹⁶ If we allow ourselves to bypass any prejudices that might be inflamed by the suggestion that an artist with an imagination as bountiful as Chaucer's would let one poem do double duty,¹⁷ we can allow for the possibility that Yeager may be onto something. Having succeeded with the "Complaint" the first time, could it be that Chaucer elected to use it again, this time to petition Henry?

One argument that has been posited in favor of a Ricardian provenance for the "Complaint" involves its apparent references to Richard.

Now voucheth sauf this day or hyt be nyght
 That I of yow the blisful sovne may here
 Or see your colour lyke the sonne bryght
 That of yelownesse hadde neuer pere
 Ye be my lyfe ye be myn hertys stere
 Quene of comfort and of good companye
 Beth heuy ayeyne or elles moote I dye (ll. 8-14)

"One of Richard's badges," writes Terry Jones, "was the sun in splendour, and his hair was yellow or red -- so that Richard was frequently associated with the sun.... And of course 'hertys stere' refers to Richard's other badge -- the white hart" (2003, 179). Jones's reading of the "sonne bryght" seems to be justified; it is supported, at least in part, by his citation of similar references in the description of the God of Love in the F prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*: "His gilte heer was crowned with a sonne / Insteade of gold, for hevynesse and wyghte" (ll. 230-31). The connection of "hert" in line 12 with Richard's badge is, if correct, certainly oblique. A significant caveat in regard to considering this passage as an evocation of Richard arises because Chaucer's purse is consistently depicted as female, his "lady dere" (l. 2). Of course, whether Jones is on the mark or not, the poem could conceivably have been sent to Richard as well as to Henry. Yeager encourages us to remain open to a variety of possibilities in this regard, noting that

every proposed stemma of "To His Purse" includes manuscripts with and without envoy, in arbitrary chronological relationship. No clean line of generation that would explain the manuscripts with and without envoy as breaking off from a seminal scribal mistake is evident. This leaves open the possibility that the ballade was written for Richard, and the envoy later for Henry. It also suggests another explanation: that some scribes chose to omit the envoy from some manuscripts, for reasons still to be

considered. (2005, 387)

Whether or not Chaucer was recycling old material, it is now generally accepted that he indeed sent the poem to Henry with the appropriately engineered envoy. The most recent scholarship, that of Jones et al. and Yeager in particular, tends to put the lion's share of the emphasis on the poem's envoy rather than on the three stanzas of the "Complaint" itself. Aside from the supposed references to Richard, there is little about the poem proper that merits our lingering attention; it is fairly conventional in nature, a trifle in comparison to Chaucer's more widely-read works, although it is imbued with his humor and linguistic dexterity. The envoy, however, is very important to Jones and Yeager, and to us, for it is the envoy that gives us clues regarding how the piece worked as a begging poem, as well as to the relationship between Chaucer and Henry. I would hasten to add, however, that, rather than shedding brilliant and conclusive light on that relationship, the envoy can be read in a variety of ways, some of them mutually exclusive. All readings become problematic in view of the difficulty of deciphering exactly the circumstances under which Henry came to power and, more particularly, the reaction of his subjects to his assumption of the throne. The problem is even further complicated by the fact that "[f]or centuries the popular view of Richard has been determined by Shakespeare's play" (Taylor 1999, 15), which was informed by Shakespeare's reading of the fourteenth-century chronicles, at second hand, in Holinshed. This hijacking of history by art is, of course, not the only difficulty we face. John Taylor writes:

One problem which immediately confronts us in
 considering the image of Richard in the

chronicle sources, is the possible rewriting of these accounts after 1399, and the propagandistic intention of certain of the writings. Are the majority of Richard II chronicles simply a form of Lancastrian propaganda, written after the revolution, containing the "second thoughts" of writers about the king, and unlikely therefore to show much sympathy or understanding of Richard?

(1999, 16)

The fundamental divide we face is the view of Henry, on the one hand, as the man who saved the English people from Richard's tyranny and, on the other, as an opportunist who overthrew England's rightful king.

Although the viewpoint we adopt regarding the nature of Henry's accession becomes very important in light of the most recent criticism of the poem, particularly that of Jones and Yeager, traditional views of the poem are comparatively unaffected by the circumstances under which Chaucer seems to have delivered it. In this version, the transition from Richard II to Henry IV was relatively painless, perhaps even happy. The "Complaint" is a straightforward begging poem, written by Chaucer under conditions of financial hardship and delivered to Henry with the expectation that payment would be delivered without question.¹⁸ Jay Ruud's rather typical version of the poetic transaction runs thus:

Chaucer had known Henry all the king's life. He was certainly aware of Henry's tastes. It was a fortunate circumstance for Chaucer that the

poet's temperament, which would not permit him to write a straightforward begging poem, fit well with the literary taste of the new king. Henry apparently enjoyed such outlandish wit as the addressing of a love poem to a purse, and that sort of poem Chaucer was only too willing to provide. (1992, 133)

This passage deserves comment. Most importantly, although Chaucer had indeed known Henry for years, so had Richard, and our assumption that Chaucer would be greeted amiably on account of long acquaintance does not appear to rest on particularly solid ground. Chaucer was Richard's man, and had been for over twenty years; it seems only reasonable to assume that Henry might have viewed Chaucer with more than a little suspicion. A second, allied point regards Henry's sense of humor. It has been noted by historian K. B. McFarlane that Henry's personality seems to have changed when he assumed the throne. Although such a change would not be a surprising one, it deserves comment. "In the 1390s,..." writes McFarlane, Henry "was worshipped as the conventional hero of chivalry" (1972, 37). However, when Henry landed at the mouth of the Humber and began his conquest of Richard's domain he is said to have become cold-blooded and calculating, certainly quite unchivalric qualities (McFarlane 1972, 9). According to this point of view, the personality described by Ruud is that of the young Henry, the subject rather than the king. More recent scholarship, particularly that of Yeager, rejects this rather rosy version of events and posits that, although the transition to Henry's rule may have been comparatively easy for Hoccleve, as we shall see in Chapter Three, the experience of

Chaucer, who was a member of the court and much closer to Richard than Hoccleve, was probably not so simple.

Much of the lack of conclusiveness about Chaucer's relationship with Henry arises from the "Complaint"'s envoy, which Ruud does not explicitly address in the passage quoted above.

O conquerour of Brutes albyon
 Whiche that by lygne and free eleccion
 Been verray kynge this song to yow I sende
 And ye that mowen alle oure harmes amende
 Have mynde vpon my supplicacion (ll. 22-26)

A first reading of the envoy suggests that Chaucer is currying favor with the new king by endorsing the legitimacy of his accession; Henry is not just any monarch, but "verray kynge." However, a closer examination reveals that Chaucer's endorsement of Henry's kingship may not be as uncomplicated as a "straight" reading assumes. Chaucer appears to endorse Henry's right to the throne on the basis of three of Henry's arguments on his own behalf: his right by conquest (as the "conquerour of Brutes albyon"), his position in the royal "lygne," and his "free eleccion" by general acclaim.

The reference to "Brutes albyon" may cut both ways. The story of Brutus and the Trojans' subjugation of Britain is contained in a version that would have been known to both Chaucer and the king, that of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1966, 53-74). The story of how the giants got to Britain in the first place is not covered by Geoffrey; however, it can be found in a late thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman poem, *Des Grantz Geanz*. The story was included in the Anglo-Norman *Brut* and "was a commonplace part of 'Brutes Albyon' by

the late fourteenth century." Both Chaucer and the king would have known the story (Yeager 2005, 393-94). According to Yeager, aside from magnifying Brutus's achievement in overcoming the giants, the reference also "serves as a dark reminder of how truly terrible things were in pre-Brutean Britain, and therefore of what horrors might await should history regress, and chaos come again" (2005, 394). Yeager also asserts that

Syntactically the words insist, not on the continuation of civilization, but on its overthrow; nor is the thought that *Richard* might be Brutus if Henry is the *conqueror* of Albion especially attractive, particularly given the political stakes in 1400 -- although the suggestion is clearly present in Chaucer's poem. (Yeager's italics) (2005, 394)

If Chaucer's reference to Henry as the conqueror of Brutus's Albion is indeed meant as a veiled subversion of Henry's claim to the throne, it is fairly well veiled. It is not at all difficult to imagine Henry's pleasure at seeing his grand exploit connected metaphorically to Britain's illustrious beginnings. However, we must bear in mind that Henry's petition to be recognized as a conqueror was flatly turned down by Sir William Thirnyng, Chief Justice of Common Pleas, when the matter was brought before the courts (McFarlane 1972, 54).

Chaucer's second point in his apparent endorsement of Henry's accession is contained in the assertion that Henry is king "by lygne," i.e., that he is next in line to the throne. This claim was based on Henry's descent from Henry III through Edmund Crouchback. Henry claimed

that Edmund, a cripple, was passed over in favor of the man who became Edward I. This misrepresentation, first put forth in 1377, was revived by Henry IV in 1399 (McFarlane 1972, 54). In fact, the commonly accepted heir to Richard's throne was Edmund, Earl of March (McFarlane 1972, 52). The rightful line of succession was so well established that, as Strohm suggests, Henry's assertions to the contrary may have been the source of some embarrassment to his supporters (Strohm 1992, 28). Thus, it appears that there is at least the possibility that Chaucer's reference to Henry's claims of right by lineage is meant to undercut the legitimacy of his accession rather than reinforce it.

Thirdly, Chaucer states that Henry's accession is by "free election." On 30 September 1399, Henry appeared before an assembly at the Great Hall at Westminster, where, by general acclaim, he was endorsed as the new king. However, as McFarlane writes, Henry "did not want to owe his throne to Parliament," although "he may have desired to obtain the acceptance by Parliament of his *right* to the throne" (McFarlane's italics). Furthermore, "too many doubted whether that assembly was a Parliament for him to be satisfied" (1972, 55). It seems that Chaucer's assertion that Henry was king of England by "free election" was as questionable as the notion that he was next in line to the throne.

However much Henry and his followers may have doctored the records to prove that he was no usurper, the series of rebellions attendant upon his accession to the throne is a matter of record. Yeager quotes a contemporary account of a heated exchange between the Franciscan friar, Roger Frisby, and the new king. Henry says,

"I haue not vsurpid the croune, but I was chosen

therto by eleccioun." The maister ansuerde, "The eleccioun is noughte, livyng the trewe and lawful possessour, and yf he be ded, he is ded be you, and yf he be ded be you, ye haue lost all the righte and title that ye myght haue to the crowne." Thanne saide the kyng to him, "Be myn hed thou shalt lese thyne hed." (2005, 398)

Of this exchange, Yeager writes, "One has to wonder, faced with such examples, *who* in England believed the Lancastrian farce of 'eleccion'" (Yeager's italics) (2005, 398). Henry certainly knew better, and it is reasonable to assume that Chaucer did as well.

Yeager, who believes that the envoy to the "Complaint" reveals a subversive agenda on Chaucer's part, adds another very interesting point. Modern editors of the poem, in keeping with practices followed with Chaucer's other works, have provided heavy emendation in the form of, among other things, punctuation. Yeager suggests that if we look at the poem the way Henry almost certainly did, we must assume that he read it without punctuation, as it is presented in the quote above, which is from Pace and David's edition. For instance, in Benson's widely used edition of the poem, the envoy is presented thus:

O conquerour of Brutes Albyon,
Which that by lyne and free eleccion
Been verray kyng, this song to yow I sende,
And ye, that mowen alle oure harmes amende,
Have mynde upon my supplicacion.

Yeager suggests that we should look at the poem without punctuation and suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is not just one stop, the

one at the end of the stanza, but two, the first appearing at the end of the third line. If we adopt this interpretation, it is conceivable that the last two lines may be addressed to someone other than Henry. The sense of the stanza may thus be radically transmogrified. In light of the very quixotic nature of any hope that existed for a rollback of Henry's progress, we might suppose that, in this alternative reading, the last two lines are addressed to God (Yeager 2005, 412-13).

Finally, it is worthwhile to consider Chaucer's response to what we have indicated may have been Henry's call for support from, in addition to Chaucer, Christine de Pisan and John Gower. As we have seen, Christine proved wiler than the king and retired to France with her son, secure from Henry's machinations. Gower responded in the directly opposite way, leveraging his long-standing connection with the House of Lancaster (Yeager 2005, 400) and producing a large quantity of poetry supportive of Henry's accession. In contrast, Chaucer's submission of a brief ballade with five-line envoy must have seemed halfhearted indeed. The insult may even have been deepened by the fact that there is nothing in the "Complaint" or the envoy that even faintly smacks of disapproval of Richard or his policies. Henry's response seems to have possessed the properties of both a carrot and a stick. Chaucer was awarded an increase of forty marks per annum on his annuity; however, in addition to the ten pounds he received at once, he got only five pounds toward payment of the rest in the king's next remittance (Howard 1987, 486).

In view of the brutal nature of Henry's overthrow of Richard, it seems appropriate to at least express doubt that Chaucer's response, in the form of "The Complaint to His Purse," was unambiguously supportive

of Henry. As we have seen, Chaucer had connections with the Ricardian court going back twenty-two years and had thrived under its aegis. Paul Strohm has expressed reservations of his own regarding Chaucer's position on the usurpation, especially in regard to the expectation that he might castigate Richard for his behavior or policies. Strohm writes,

For Chaucer... suddenly to embrace extensive accounts of malfeasance [a la Gower] or outrageous fabrications about Richard's resignation *hillari vultu*, while his former monarch yet lived, would have demonstrated a degree of opportunism and inconsistency foreign to his nature as we otherwise know it. (1992, 32-33)

As I have suggested, forming opinions about the quality of Chaucer's character based on the values presumably expressed in his verse, whether to suggest that his ethical foundation was sterling or less than admirable, is a dicey business. Nevertheless, under the present circumstances, and given the rather loud questioning of Henry's legitimacy as a monarch, it seems that Chaucer would have had to stoop pretty low to perform the kind of about-face that Strohm describes. If the "Complaint" provides evidence of Chaucer's unwillingness to support Henry, we can be certain that such reluctance could have had a combination of undesirable results. Yeager takes a particularly somber view of the situation:

We do assume... that the envoy at least of "To His Purse" is Chaucer's last poetic utterance.

One hopes (against all odds, perhaps) that the reason wasn't Henry's unexpected ability to read too keenly between the lines of what may be the poet's most ironic, most subtle, but least successful poem. (414)

In his popular study *Who Murdered Chaucer?*, Terry Jones and his colleagues, including Yeager, go so far as to speculate on who might have murdered Chaucer once his disaffection became a matter of record, though they admit, as they must, that their suspicions can never be proven (2003, 359-60).

When Chaucer died, John Lydgate was about thirty years of age. Despite the debt Lydgate apparently owed to Chaucer's poetry, his career took a markedly different path. In fact, Lydgate may have more in common with Thomas Hoccleve, who will be discussed in Chapter Three, than with Chaucer. Both Lydgate and Hoccleve are self-conscious literary descendants of Chaucer, mentioning him repeatedly in their work and crediting him with being the greatest practitioner of English vernacular verse.¹⁹ In his poem "The Flooure of Curtesy," Lydgate extols Chaucer and in the process, with a rhetorical flourish familiar from Chaucer's poetry, belittles his own poetic talents:

Euer as I can surprise in myn herte
 Always with feare, betwyxt drede and shame,
 Leste out of lose any worde asterte
 In this metre to make it seme lame;
 Chaucer is deed, that had suche a name
 Of fayre makyng, that, without[en] wene,
 Fayrest in our tonge, as the laurer grene.

We may assay for to countrefete
 His gay[e] style, but it wyl not be;
 The welle is drie, with the lycoure swete,
 Bothe of Clys and of Caliope;

And, first of al, I wol excuse me.... (ll. 232-43)²⁰

In this passage, Lydgate simultaneously endorses Chaucer as his master and establishes his own separate, apparently inferior, identity. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Hoccleve performs a very similar act of endorsement and self-identification in his prologue to *The Regiment of Princes*. Although Lydgate and Hoccleve, as poets, have at least as many similarities as differences, both have been identified as "Chaucerians," a category that has been subject to more denigration than valorization in the past.²¹

Lydgate's debt to Chaucer is demonstrated both by the various mentions of his master in his verse and by the unambiguous echoes in Lydgate's poetry of Chaucer's style and, in many cases, his very words. In his 1970 study of Lydgate, Pearsall prefaces several pages tracing verbal parallels (1970, 51-58) with the assertion that "Lydgate's debt to Chaucer is enormous. From him he took his style, his verse-forms, his metre, and many of the genres in which he wrote" (1970, 49). In his influential study *Medieval to Renaissance in English Literature*, A. C. Spearing acknowledges Lydgate's imitation of Chaucer but concludes, rather oddly, that "the more Lydgate imitates Chaucer, the less... he can be like him" (1985, 70). The gist of Spearing's conclusion is contained, I believe, in the conviction that, although Lydgate imitates Chaucer, he can never be like him because Chaucer is so much better.

"Lydgate is doomed to imitate Chaucer," Simpson writes, "but equally doomed to fail in the attempt" (2002, 43).

Simpson is quite helpful in getting us past a potentially crippling preoccupation with Lydgate's artistic inadequacy, and provides insight into the nature of Lydgate's "imitation" in the process, offering the judgment that "almost none of Lydgate's works is directly imitative of Chaucer: those poems that do relate to Chaucer's do so with more powerful strategies in mind than slavish imitation" (2002, 50). As we shall see, Lydgate's begging poem, the so-called "Letter to Gloucester," is a very good example of a poem that draws superficially upon Chaucerian materials without the kind of word-for-word "plagiarism" documented by Pearsall.

Unlike either Chaucer or Hoccleve, Lydgate actually appears to have been paid for writing poetry. Robert J. Meyer-Lee writes that

Chaucer and Hoccleve received annuities earlier, but these were *prima facie* for their work as civil servants rather than as poets. Because the work Lydgate performed for the crown, as far as we know, consisted solely of his verse, it seems fair to assume that his long-awaited annuity was a belated recognition of his decades-long service as poet to Lancastrian kings and princes. (Meyer-Lee 2006, 36-37)

The wide distribution of Lydgate's poetry in his own lifetime, as well as the absolutely spectacular quantity of verse he produced, served to solidify a reputation that, over time, grew to exceed Chaucer's, at least temporarily. As is the case with Hoccleve, there has been

speculation that Lydgate knew Chaucer, although there is no way to prove such assertions, tempting though they may be. Whether or not Lydgate ever met Chaucer, we can be absolutely certain that he knew the great poet's work well.²²

We know a significant amount about Lydgate's life, in part because of his association with the monastery at Bury St. Edmunds.²³ He was born, around 1370, to parents of peasant stock, and was, according to Ebin, noticed by a monastery official who arranged a place for him at Bury St. Edmunds (1985, 1). By the time Lydgate showed up, around 1385, the monastery had already been in operation for hundreds of years. An abbey was founded on the site in 633 by King Sigebert, and in 903 the bones of King Edmund were brought there. The monastery that provided a home for Lydgate was founded during the reign of King Canute, in honor of King Edmund of East Anglia, and was consecrated as a Benedictine abbey in 1032. The buildings and grounds underwent a long series of additions and reconstructions during the course of its history. Despite the presentday stereotypical and largely erroneous conception of monasteries as cloistered refuges dedicated to private contemplation, Bury St. Edmunds, like similar important monasteries of its day -- St. Albans, for example -- was quite the opposite. The monastery was not a shuttered retreat, but rather an important nexus of religious, political, and social thought. Abbot Samson (abbot 1182-1210), a friend of both Henry II and Richard I, was one of the most activist of the monastery's abbots, involving himself in royal policy and even going so far as to play a role in the raising of Richard I's ransom when he was taken prisoner in Germany. Later, the monastery played a role in the conflict between King John and the nobility that led to the signing of

the Magna Carta. In Lydgate's own day, Henry VI paid a visit of some months, remarkable only for its length.²⁴

Aside from the benefits of fairly vigorous social interaction, Bury St. Edmunds also possessed one of the most extensive libraries in England, housing around two thousand volumes. Most of the volumes were probably works of patristic literature, volumes of sermons, and the like, but also present were secular volumes, including Roman writers like Cicero, Virgil, and Ovid (Ebin 1985, 6-7; Pearsall 1970, 32-33). There is speculation regarding what English works might have found their way to the library at Bury St. Edmunds, and these considerations gain interest on account of Pearsall's observation that the English works of medieval writer Richard Rolle were absent, but the Latin ones were present (1970, 33). "It may be that English books passed through the hands of the monastery," writes Pearsall, "but were regarded as ephemera" (1970, 33). Lydgate, as one of the monastery's most illustrious inhabitants, certainly had full access to the library's contents, and Schirmer suggests that Lydgate may have had his own study area with desk, or *scriptoriolum*, in the library (1961, 13-14).

One of the only sources we have recounting Lydgate's early life is his "autobiographical" poem "Testament," probably written near the end of his life (Ebin 1985, 3; Pearsall 1970, 294), though even here we must be careful not to confuse the conventions of medieval poetry with what may be actual scenes from the poet's boyhood, and do well to keep the word "autobiographical" in quotation marks, following Pearsall's example (1970, 295). Indeed, a full ninety-seven of the poem's one hundred eighteen stanzas are given over to a lengthy paean to spring, an equally long-winded address to Jesus, an appeal for mercy on the

poet, and a detailed imagining of the torments suffered by Christ in order to redeem mankind. Inserted two thirds of the way through this text are the twenty-one stanzas devoted to Lydgate's "autobiography." During the first fourteen years of his life, he was "Loth to lerne, loued no besynesse, / Saue pley or merth" (ll. 616-17). In keeping with his lack of desire to learn, he "had in custome to come to skole late, / Nat for to lerne but for a contenance" (628-29). Worse, he stole apples and grapes (ll. 638-42) and was "Redier cheristones for to telle / Than gon to chirche, or here the sacryng belle" (647-48). Even after Lydgate joined the church he could not apply himself to his responsibilities.

Entryng this tyme into relygioun,
 Onto the plowe I put forth myne hond,
 A yere complete made my professioun,
 Consideryng litel charge of thilke bond,
 Of perfeccioun ful gode exaample I fond,
 Ther techyng good, in me was all the lake,
 With Lothes wyf I loked often abak. (ll. 670-76)

Finally, at the end of his childhood, just before he turned fifteen, Lydgate saw a vision that changed his life.

Myd of a cloyster, depicte vpon a wall,
 I savgh a crucifyx, whos woundes were not smalle,
 With this word "vide," wrete there besyde,
 Behold my mekenesse, O child, and leve thy pryde. (743-46)

Conventional though they may be, these are the only words we have from Lydgate that give any insight into his early life. Unfortunately, the *Testament* sheds very little helpful light on Lydgate, although it does

elicit a certain amount of interest when compared to Hoccleve's account of his own misspent youth, "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve," which shall be discussed in Chapter Three.

According to Schirmer's account (1961, 8-23), Lydgate's advancement through the church's orders was steady. He arrived at Bury St. Edmunds around 1385 as a novice. By early 1389 he was ordained in the lowest of the four orders, *ad omnes ordines*. By the end of that year he was elevated to subdeacon. In 1393 he was raised to deacon, and in 1397 was ordained a priest. He may have attended Oxford after completion of his studies at Bury, as was common for young scholars from the monastery, and would have stayed at Gloucester Hall, which was where the Benedictines sent their young scholars. Here, per Schirmer, "[h]e acquired the usual instruction in theology, had a sound knowledge of Latin, and mastered French" (1961, 22). According to the great Reformation bibliographer John Bale, Lydgate did postgraduate work in Paris and Padua, but Simpson offers a convincing argument in support of his contention that Bale's notes on Lydgate are largely "spurious" (2002, 39).

One fact of which we can be certain is that Lydgate had ongoing access to a fairly large pool of potential patrons. As Schirmer notes, Lydgate must have come into contact with noblemen who had literary interests, for, as we know, in Norfolk and Suffolk patronage on a provincial scale flourished with extreme vigor. Most of Lydgate's works owe their origin to a commission. (1961, 23)

Given what we know about the environment at Bury St. Edmunds and about

Lydgate's sterling reputation as a poet during his own time and the century that followed, we might even go so far as to suppose that Lydgate had audiences with Henry V, who, as Prince of Wales, wrote the abbot of Bury asking him to give Lydgate leave to continue his studies at Oxford (Pearsall 1970, 29), and perhaps also with Henry VI when the twelve-year-old monarch was staying there during winter and spring of 1433-34. The most important of Lydgate's patrons, and the one to whom Lydgate's sole begging poem is addressed, is Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, Henry V's brother and bibliophile extraordinaire, whom I shall discuss in more detail below.

In addition to his contacts with the nobility, Lydgate seems to have had friends and patrons also among the gentry -- or the "rising bourgeoisie," as Janet Wilson terms them (1975, 25) -- an interesting development in an environment in which literary patronage had long been the more or less exclusive province of the nobility and even an expression of royal power. With the change in patronage came a change in taste. Wilson believes that the new taste can be described mainly as a liking for realism, which "can be seen as a precursor of renaissance values in fifteenth-century England" (1975, 25). Pearsall also takes note of the change, and provides what I believe is a more credible account of its nature.

What we witness in the fifteenth century is not a decline, but a change of temper, or, to be more precise, a reassertion of orthodoxy. Moral earnestness, love of platitude and generalisation, a sober preoccupation with practical and ethical issues (often combined

with a taste for the extravagantly picturesque
 and the decorative) -- these are the
 characteristic marks of fifteenth-century
 literature, and it is in these terms that
 Chaucer is absorbed and refined. (1970, 68)

Schirmer anticipates Pearsall's viewpoint to some degree, arguing for a conservative rather than a revolutionary motivation for the change in taste (1961, 35-37).

Although taste may have taken a step backward rather than forward, it appears that the reasons for which poems were commissioned may have changed also, if only a little. As we shall see in our discussion below of Humphrey of Gloucester, one of Lydgate's most important patrons, the nobility commissioned works for political, or even propagandistic, purposes.²⁵ Aside from such noble patrons, however, Lydgate "also wrote... for a lay public who could afford to commission... poems" (Wilson 1975, 26). According to Schirmer, there may also have been an element of *nouveau riche* social climbing involved in patronage by the gentry as well: "The lower gentry were eager to embellish with all manner of outward show marriages arranged on a highly commercial basis" (1961, 38). Certainly, commissioning poems by Lydgate for the occasion would constitute "outward show."

According to Schirmer, Geoffrey Chaucer's son Thomas, a wealthy Oxfordshire gentleman whose diplomatic career parallels, in some respects, that of his father, was the center of a circle of friends that included more than one of Lydgate's patrons, including Thomas himself and his daughter, Alice, along with Humphrey of Gloucester, who was a regular visitor to Chaucer's estate (1961, 59-61). Lydgate wrote

two poems commemorating Thomas's departure on the king's business, "My Lady Dere," which presents Thomas's viewpoint, and "On the Departing of Thomas Chaucer," which details his lady's response to his leavetaking. If these were commissioned poems, the circumstances surrounding the commissions must have been interesting. In any event, these poems provide us with an interesting glimpse of the sort of relationships that might have prevailed between Lydgate and his patrons, and the way that poetic commissions might have come about.

The first poem, "My Lady Dere," is accompanied in the manuscript by a notation describing it as an "[a]lmerous balade by Lydegate made at departyng of Thomas Chauciers on þe kynges ambassade into Fraunce" (Lydgate 1911, 420). There is no other reference to either Chaucer or the manifest motivation for writing the poem; it is, in fact, a simple love-lament bemoaning the lover's separation from his lady, written in fourteen stanzas followed by a brief envoy. Each of the stanzas, which are not connected to the others by either a common theme or narrative thread, provides a perspective on the dolorousness of the lover's separation, for example:

What is a fische out of the see,
 For alle his scales siluer sheene,
 But ded anoon, as man may se?
 Or in ryuers crystal clene,
 Pyke, baþe, or tenche with ffynnes grene,
 Out of þe water whane þey appere?
 Þus death darteþe myn herte kene
 Þer I seo naught my lady dere. (ll. 65-72)

If we can trust the manuscript notation identifying this poem as being

connected to one of Chaucer's diplomatic missions, we might speculate that the poem was commissioned by Chaucer, who may have presented or read it to his wife, Maude, upon departure.

"On the Departing of Thomas Chaucer" is also accompanied by a manuscript notation: "Balade made by Lydgate at þe Departyng of Thomas Chaucyer on Ambassade in-to France" (Lydgate 1911, 657). Like "My Lady Dere," this poem is a short one, consisting of eleven stanzas. However, in contrast to the more generic, inspecific qualities of "My Lady Dere," the present poem includes apostrophes to various deities and individuals, as well as explicit mention of Chaucer's name, as in the first stanza:

O þow Lucyna, qwene and empyresse
 Of waters alle, and of floodes rage,
 And cleped art lady and goddesse
 Of iorneyng and fortunate passage,
 Governe and guye by grace þe vyage,
 Þowe Heuenly Qweene, sith I of herte prey
 My maystre Chaucyer goodely to convey. (ll. 1-7)

In addition to Lucyna, Lydgate invokes one member of Chaucer's circle, William Moleyns, by name. Moleyns's estate, Stoke Poges, was only a few miles from Chaucer's (Schirmer 1961, 60):

And gentyl Molyng, myn owen lord so der,
 Lytel merveylye þoughe þow sighe and pleyne;
 Now forgone þin owen pleyng feere,
 I wot right wel, hit is to þe gret peyne.
 But haue good hope soone for to atteyne
 Þin hertis blisse agayne, and þat right sone,

Or four tymes echaunged be þe mone. (ll. 43-49)

Although there is no reason to distrust the manuscript notation in the case of this poem, since its connection to actual historical figures is manifest, we can not be certain of the details of its commission, or if, in fact, it was commissioned at all. However, in light of my speculations regarding the hiring of Lydgate to write "My Lady Dere," it is tempting to suppose that this poem might have been commissioned by Chaucer's wife, Maude, to honor him on the occasion of his departure. Alternatively, though certainly less romantically, it may be that, since Moleyns's name is mentioned, it was he who commissioned the work.

Schirmer (1961, 232-34) speculates on the network of associations that Lydgate may have been part of as a result of his association with the Chaucers. Alice, Thomas Chaucer's daughter, whom Schirmer describes as "Lydgate's most active and faithful patroness" (1961, 232-33), married William de la Pole, later Duke of Suffolk. Whether or not Suffolk was ever a patron of Lydgate's, he was certainly a part of the Chaucers' circle of friends. In 1436, more than twenty years after his capture at the Battle of Agincourt, the French nobleman and poet Charles d'Orléans was entrusted to Suffolk's custody. According to Schirmer, Charles

knew English, owned a manuscript by Chaucer, frequented Alice Chaucer's house, and carried on a correspondence in gallant courtly verse with the ladies who taught him English. William de la Pole was an active member of this poetic coterie.... It is not impossible that Lydgate

may have met Charles.... (1961, 234)

Although there is no documentary evidence to confirm Schirmer's speculation, it is hard to deny the likelihood that two recognized poets moving in the same intellectual circle would eventually meet.

Of the many patrons who commissioned works by Lydgate during the course of his long life, probably the most important was Humphrey of Gloucester, brother of Henry V. After Henry's death in 1422, when his infant son was less than a year old, Gloucester ruled as Protector of England. Gloucester was one of the great patrons of the literary arts in England during the fifteenth century; he also had a deep interest in Italian literature, and sponsored translations of many Continental works into English.²⁶ Lydgate received a substantial share of these commissions. According to Jennifer Summit, interaction between Lydgate and Humphrey did not end during the process of composition. In fact, it may be that Lydgate and his patron were more like collaborators than hireling and employer. Summit's principle example is the process that shaped Lydgate's longest poem, *The Fall of Princes*:

Humphrey not only commissioned the work but actively involved himself in its production, lending Lydgate books to use as sources and custom-ordering the envoys that constitute its most medievalizing feature. Indeed, the poem everywhere registers Humphrey's influence, as he repeatedly interjected himself into the writing process and apparently kept constant check on its progress, playing the role less of distant patron than of collaborator. (2006, 208)

Years in the writing, and followed by a decade of comparative inactivity culminating in the poet's death, it may well be that Lydgate, and perhaps Humphrey as well, regarded *The Fall of Princes* as the crowning achievement of an illustrious career.

According to a narrative first assembled by Eleanor P. Hammond nearly a hundred years ago (1927, 174) and followed by Schirmer (1961, 215-16) and Pearsall (1970, 227-30) in their book-length studies of Lydgate, the "Letter to Gloucester" was written as a consequence of work on *The Fall of Princes*. The common thread of both Schirmer's and Pearsall's versions states that sometime during the composition of the second book of *The Fall of Princes* Lydgate came to feel either that poverty was knocking on his door or, perhaps, that the task at hand was larger than he had envisioned. The upshot was simple: he needed more money. Schirmer's version emphasizes the latter scenario, asserting that "Lydgate groaned under the weight of the advice given him by his patron and revenged himself by sending him" (1961, 215) the "Letter to Gloucester." Pearsall prefers the alternative version, claiming that "Gloucester's promises were wearing thin" (1970, 228), implying, of course, that Gloucester was delinquent in his payments. It must be emphasized that these versions of how the "Letter to Gloucester" came about are highly speculative. At any rate, both scholars agree that payment was eventually made. Schirmer writes that "Duke Humphrey was so delighted [with the "Letter to Gloucester"] that he granted the poet's request in a generous manner" (1961, 216). With the caveat that in order to embrace his account we must first "accept [Eleanor P.] Hammond's interpretation of events" (1970, 228), Pearsall repeats the story of the genesis of Lydgate's begging poem and adds that "it

produced immediate results" (1970, 228). The story does have a certain logic, perhaps even credibility, in light of these four lines from the prologue to Book III of *The Fall of Princes*:

A, how it is an hertli rejoisying
 To serve a prynce that list to advertise
 Of ther servauntis the feithful just menyng,
 And list considre to guerdone ther servise. (III, 78-81).

We should probably temper our understanding of this story with the knowledge that, whoever his patrons might have been, Lydgate always enjoyed the support of the church and was therefore unlikely to have had any serious brushes with real poverty.

We have no evidence that Lydgate ever saw a copy of "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse;" this is no great tragedy, since Lydgate's poem owes practically nothing to Chaucer. The fact that Lydgate addresses his purse is probably not enough, given the fact that, as we shall see, Hoccleve does the same thing in his poem "La Mal Regle." However, there are similarities. Like Chaucer's purse, for instance, Lydgate's is given human characteristics, is in fact transformed into a human, but the similarity between the poems pretty much ends there. Given Lydgate's obvious and self-avowed debt to Chaucer, it may seem to stretch the bounds of credibility to suggest that Lydgate conceived his "Letter to Gloucester" without even a single nod to his master; however, the differences between the two poems is apparent from the opening stanza, and it is clear that Lydgate's poem is the more conventional one.

The differences between Lydgate's poem and Chaucer's are, perhaps, more apparent than their similarities. Unlike Chaucer's poem, which

finds its focus in the parody of the courtly ballade, Lydgate's has a more paratactic feel, moving from one conceit to the next in an additive way. Also, not surprisingly, Lydgate the priest's purse is male, in contrast to Chaucer's "lady dere" (l. 2). There is no obvious reason why Lydgate made this decision, although it is probably a good one since it avoids the entanglements a "lady purse" would naturally introduce, which would doubtless require that some observation of the conventions of love poetry be observed; this, manifestly, is not Lydgate's project.

Lydgate opens with the kind of abject supplication that we will see frequently in the discussion of Hoccleve's begging poems in Chapter Three, but which is present only in very muted form in the envoy to Chaucer's "Complaint."

Riht myhty prynce, and it be your wille,
 Conscende leiser for to take,
 To seen the content of this lital bille,
 Which whan I wrot, myn hand I felte quake. (ll. 1-4)

Here, like Hoccleve, Lydgate prostrates himself as he addresses the poem's recipient. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that Lydgate's hand was actually quaking as he addressed Humphrey, but if, as we have seen Schirmer and Pearsall claim, Lydgate wrote the poem in reaction to his increased work load as opposed to any real need for funds, he may indeed have approached the project with some trepidation. However, it becomes clear in a few lines that Lydgate's quaking hand does not reflect his anxiety at supplicating the powerful Duke Humphrey, but his overpowering concern for the health of his purse. Indeed, the purse's condition appears to be terminal, for the poet is

in mourning weeds: "Tokne of mornynge, weryd clothys blake" (l. 5).²⁷

Initially, we are informed that the purse is sick:

... my purs was falle in gret rerage,
 Lynyng outward, his guttys wer out shake,
 Only for lak of plate and of coinage. (ll. 6-8).

Having established the poem's premise, Lydgate moves on, in the second stanza, to an account of his quest for help. First, he visits leeches and apothecaries in quest of a cure for his purse's ailment.

I souhte leechys for a restoratiff,
 In whom I fond no consolacioun,
 Appotecaryes for a confortatiff,
 Dragge nor dya was noon in Bury toun;
 Botme of his stomak was tournyd vp-so-doun,
 A laxatif did hym so gret outrage,
 Made hym slendre by a consumpcioun,
 Only for lak of plate and of coignage. (ll. 9-16)

In the third and fourth stanzas Lydgate continues his cataloguing of cures, but moves from unsuccessful ones to those that would restore his purse if only they were available. In doing so, he transitions from his presentation of "human" cures -- restoratives, laxatives, and the like -- to the sort of cures more appropriate for a distressed purse. In the third stanza, the coins that might provide succor are stranded by ebb-tide aboard their golden, red-sailed ship:

Ship was ther noon, nor seilis reed of hewe,
 The wynd froward to make hem ther to londe,
 The flood was passyd, and sodeynly of newe,
 A lowh gronde-ebbe was faste by the stronde;

No maryneer durste take on honde,
 To caste an ankir for streihtnesse of passage,
 The custom skars as folk may vndirstonde,
 Only for lak of plate and of coignage. (ll. 17-24)

Although this little narrative is of a piece with the imagery of the poem, its departure from the approach of the first two stanzas may strike some readers as a rather rude break in the piece's focus. Manifestly, focus of this sort is not of any particular importance to Lydgate, who proceeds in the fourth stanza, in paratactic fashion, with another lamentation regarding the scarcity of restorative cash:

Ther was no tokne sent down from the Tour,
 As any gossomer the countirpeys was liht;
 A ffretynge etyk causyd his langour
 By a cotidian which heeld hym day and nyht;
 Sol and Luna were clypsyd of ther liht,
 Ther was no cros, nor preent of no visage,
 His lynyng dirk, ther wer no platys briht,
 Only for lak and scarsete of coignage. (ll. 25-32)

Here we are swept off to the Tower mint, where the gossamer-light counterweight used to weigh precious metal measures out no restorative bounty. "Sol and Luna," gold and silver, are nowhere to be found, nor are the monarch's face or the cross, found, respectively, on the obverse and reverse sides of the coin, to be found. The purse's fever continues unabated.

In the final two stanzas before the envoy, Lydgate again changes his tactics and adopts the imagery of hunger.

Harde to likke hony out of a marbil stoon,

For ther is nouthir licour nor moisture;
 An earnest grote, whan it is dronke and goon,
 Bargeyn of marchauntys, stant in aventure. (ll. 33-36)

In the sixth stanza Lydgate "corrects" the image, stating that what his purse needs is "nat sugre-plate" (l. 41); gold is the required cordial. In an interesting bit of conflation in the last lines of the sixth stanza, Lydgate and his purse appear to become one and the same.

Gold is a cordial, gladdest confeccioun,
 A-geyn etiques of oold consumpcioun,
 Aurum potable for folk ferre ronne in age,
 In quynt-essence best restauracioun
 With siluer plate, enprentyd with coignage. (ll. 44-48)

Is the forty-something Lydgate a man "ferre ronne in age," or is this simply another description of his purse? The suspicion that Lydgate is referring to himself may be strengthened in these lines from the envoy, in which Lydgate defends the presumed brazenness of his request:

A drye tisyk makith oold men ful feynt;
 Reediest weye to renewe ther corage,
 Is a fressh dragge, of no spycis meynt,
 But of a briht plate, enprentyd with coignage. (ll. 53-56)

McCracken glosses the first line of this quotation thus: "an old man's need excuses you" (Lydgate 1911, 667).

As in Chaucer's "Complaint," the poem's envoy invites us to step back from the performance and consider its original motivation, although Lydgate does not use this method to address his patron directly; instead, he addresses the poem:

O seely bille, why art thu nat ashamyd,

So malapertly to shewe out thy constreynt?

But pouert hath so nyh thy tonne attamyd

That nichil habet is cause of thy compleynt. (ll. 49-52)

The poem's unabashed presentation of its message is carried on to the second and final stanza of the envoy, providing an answer to its initial question:

Thu mayst afferme, as for thyn excus,

Thy bareyn soyl is sool and solitarie;

Of cros nor pyl ther is no reclus,

Preent nor impressioun in al thy seyntuarie. (ll. 57-60)

In straightforward fashion, and without flattering his patron in the rather measured way adopted by Chaucer, Lydgate uses the envoy and this central conceit to restate his request. The success or failure of the poem must rest on its clever artistry rather than on any overtly sycophantic appeal for largess.

The differences between Chaucer's poem and Lydgate's are hardly surprising; most can be explained by the differences in social status between Chaucer and Lydgate or by the differences between their respective addressees. As a member of Richard's court, and as one who was presumably on his way to becoming a fixture in Henry's, Chaucer would naturally have been associated with the cult of chivalry that prevailed during the reign of Edward III and which was continued in Richard II's, although without the emphasis on real-life warfare that characterized Edward's practice (Jones 2003, 10). Thus, it is not surprising that Chaucer submitted to Henry a seemingly effortless parody of courtly love. Lydgate, on the other hand, represented the church. Although it would certainly be incorrect to suggest that the

wide-ranging Lydgate never adopted a courtly stance,²⁸ the approach he adopted in the "Letter to Gloucester" is arguably the one we might more naturally expect from a priest steering clear of the potentially compromising concerns of courtly poetry, depending as it does on Lydgate's apparent knowledge of the apothecary's practice and on the skillful and clever managing of seemingly unrelated conceits like the stranded ship and the Tower Mint, both of which contain stocks of (unavailable) coins. It is important to remember as well the character of Lydgate's patron, Humphrey, whose own considerable learning and love of knowledge make Lydgate's choice of approach seem a very natural one.

As we have seen in Lydgate's case, and as we shall see again in our study of Hoccleve, the so-called "Chaucerian" poets cannot justifiably be represented as slavish imitators of Chaucer, although they certainly participate enthusiastically in the vernacular tradition that they see as having begun with Chaucer. Aside from this insight into the functioning of poetic tradition in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, we have also acquired a greater insight into how late-medieval poets use their poems to beg. Of course, since our resources are more plentiful in the cases of Chaucer and Lydgate than in the Old English tradition, we can say a great deal more about how begging poems came to be written and disseminated. In particular, we have gained insight into how poetic transactions were handled in two prominent medieval milieux, the court and the church. Now, with our investigation of Hoccleve's begging poems, we shall see how begging was handled in a third milieu, that of the secular clerk.

CHAPTER THREE

HOCCLEVE: CONVENTION AND INVENTION

Hoccleve may be the most versatile of the medieval English begging poets whose work has survived, based on the available manuscript remains. Not only did Hoccleve, as nearly as we can determine, write more begging poems than Chaucer, Lydgate, or any other medieval English poet whom we know by name; he also explored the genre most thoroughly. Like all of the other poets we have discussed, Hoccleve hung his begging lyrics on the framework of the relationship between patron and petitioner. Style as well as content are affected. Since he wrote begging poems for a wide variety of patrons, his utilization of the language of station, of formal respect versus familiarity, is equally varied. His patrons include illustrious figures, such as Henry V and the Lord Chancellor, as well as lesser ones like Master John Carpenter and Henry Somer. Hoccleve, as we shall see, played his game very astutely and, as the historical evidence reveals, successfully. As is the case with Chaucer, it is difficult to determine exactly how popular Hoccleve might have been in his own time, although the number of extant copies of *The Regiment of Princes* suggests that he enjoyed a certain amount of popularity in circles where books were passed around and read.

In an effort to get at the nature of Hoccleve's very original, even perhaps unique, art, it is necessary to approach the task from the standpoint of history as well as of literature. Thus, we will consider not only the salient details of Hoccleve's life, but his literary afterlife as well, the process by which he has been transformed from a historical footnote to a serious and even respected poetic talent. Also, in order to gain a more thorough understanding of Hoccleve's employment of the petitionary mode we will briefly consider two of his most important poems, *The Regiment of Princes* and "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve." Having accomplished these tasks, we can then take a look at the four begging poems that are the focus of our study.

In modern times, Hoccleve's reputation has been decidedly less flattering than it apparently was in his own day. Even by the standards of his first and most important editor, he was a failure as a poet. From the beginnings of modern Hoccleve criticism, which was born in the late nineteenth century when the first complete editions of his work were published, until well into the twentieth century Hoccleve's verse has been given short shrift by a substantial majority of critics. Ironically, the same scholars who have reviled his work nevertheless eagerly read it on account of the insights it provides into the experiences of a fifteenth-century bureaucrat.¹ Although the lack of appreciation has been, belatedly, corrected, even the scholars who changed the way we look at Hoccleve's poetry have shown a decided tendency toward discussing his personal and professional life in preference to his poetic achievement. This tendency arises not from any particular wealth of material regarding the poet's life, although a significant amount of confirming evidence does exist, but from the fact

that Hoccleve dwells on the details of his own life more frankly and at greater length than perhaps any other medieval English poet. He left us a significant amount of vivid, often moving verse that reveals not only the most private elements of his personal life but also the stresses associated with his work in the Office of the Privy Seal. These materials are the stuff of what could be loosely termed Hoccleve's "verse autobiography," an oeuvre consisting of poetic forms ranging from the confessional to the lament to the "advice to princes" or *Fürstenspiegel* genre exemplified in his best-known work, *The Regiment of Princes*, to the begging poem, of which he composed several.²

Hoccleve is the most thoroughly practiced of our begging poets. As Robert J. Meyer-Lee puts it, in a bit of understatement, "a number of critics have called attention to the centrality of the petitionary form in the production of his literary persona" (2001, 174). Reading through the two slender volumes that house Hoccleve's work today, one cannot help but be struck by the nagging persistence of his requests for compensation and complaints about impending poverty, as well as by the sheer size of the canvas on which he often paints. The prologue to *The Regiment of Princes*, for example, is a highly developed and beautifully realized begging "epic" that runs in excess of two thousand lines; the prologue is written in the form of a dialogue between Hoccleve himself and an ancient beggar. Although, because of its length and most obvious generic affinities, the prologue does not fit our working definition of a begging poem, it quite obviously begs and is thus relevant to an understanding of Hoccleve's poetic persona and of the personal concerns that manifestly often led him to write in the first place. Likewise, the shorter poem "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve" provides vivid glimpses

of Hoccleve's daily life, opinions, and work; the opening and concluding sections of this poem comprise a request for compensation. It is clear that we must speak of Hoccleve not only as a writer of poems that beg but, following Meyer-Lee, as a writer who had a distinct predilection for what we might term the "petitionary mode," the use of begging in the service of a larger project (2007, 88-123).

Hoccleve was born in 1366, or possibly 1367, the year of Richard II's birth; went to work at the Privy Seal around 1387; and died in 1426, eleven years after Henry V's much-lauded victory over the French at Agincourt and four years after the king's death. As we can see, some of the most shattering events in England's history occurred while he was alive and writing: the usurpation of the throne by Henry IV, which was discussed in detail in Chapter Two, Henry V's victorious interlude, and the decline into civil war that followed.³ Hoccleve was an astute student of his times, and utilized events to his advantage. In part because of the controversy surrounding Henry IV's usurpation of the English throne at the end of the fourteenth century, a controversy that continued well into the fifteenth century, poetry took on an even more important political role than it had had in the past.⁴ Hoccleve saw his opportunity and threw in his lot with Henry. He wrote a poem critical of Sir John Oldcastle, a Lollard knight, in support of Henry's program of religious orthodoxy, and *The Regiment of Princes* displays unambiguously pro-Lancastrian prejudices.⁵

Hoccleve's hard-won and much-belated reputation as an original and important poet reflects, in part, the fact that the literary product of fifteenth-century England has not enjoyed the same allure as its politics and warfare. Indeed, fifteenth-century English poetry has

often been criticized for being deficient in quality, interest, and intellect. Since before the time of the scholar, fantasist, and religious pundit C. S. Lewis, who famously derided medieval English literature in general,⁶ a reputation for what amounts almost to fecklessness has attached itself to poets like Lydgate and Hoccleve. Lydgate, as we saw in Chapter Two, has frequently been viewed as a poet whose verbal abundance serves merely to construct a flimsy gilt edifice. Hoccleve has suffered at least as much, having been characterized as everything from a sycophantic proponent of the status quo to a bumbling, inept poet whose work is awash in febrile attempts to excuse or negate his excesses. Almost every aspect of his work and life, from his versification to his intellectual preoccupations to his personal behavior, has at one time or another been seen as at least deficient, at best deserving of preservation only as an inartistic artefact of an intellectually challenged age that mercifully, finally, gave way to the riches of the Renaissance. Even F. J. Furnivall, who produced the first complete edition of Hoccleve for his Early English Text Society in 1892, found Hoccleve lacking in the sort of "manly" characteristics an Edwardian gentleman might naturally wish to discover in him.⁷ Like the numerous scholars who have followed his lead, Furnivall valued Hoccleve far more for the wealth of historical material he provided than for the quality of his art, although he does remark that Hoccleve's "chief merit... is that he was the honourer and pupil of Chaucer" (xxx).

Furnivall is remembered as one of the most talented and productive of the many talented and productive independent scholars who devoted their energies to the popularization and preservation of medieval and

Renaissance literature during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and his views have had a persistent influence.⁸ He was the founding editor of the Early English Text Society, whose series of scholarly editions of early literature remains one of the most important contributions to medieval studies ever undertaken, with editions still appearing regularly. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Furnivall's long scholarly life is that most of his work was done with neither remuneration nor academic affiliation. Furnivall, like so many scholars who followed him, seized upon Hoccleve the man quite a bit more enthusiastically than Hoccleve the poet. For the robust and outgoing Furnivall, Hoccleve, often somber, often complaining, became something of a preoccupation. The majority of the forty-four pages of prefatory notes to his edition of Hoccleve's so-called minor poems is devoted to the facts of Hoccleve's life: his famously misspent youth, his long and productive employment at the Office of the Privy Seal, his annuity, and his evident struggle to maintain his mental stability, which may have degenerated into insanity, at least temporarily. Furnivall addresses many points that have garnered more or less attention from other critics over the years, and he is not afraid to proceed in a provocative if often highly imaginative way. Exploring the subject of Hoccleve's putative relationship with Chaucer, for instance, Furnivall quotes this stanza from *The Regiment of Princes*:

O, maister deere, and fadir reuerent!
 Mi maister Chaucer, flour of eloquence,
 Mirour of fructuous entendement,
 O vniuersel fadir in science!
 Allas! þat þou thyn excellent prudence,

In þi bed mortel mightist naght by-qwethe;

What eiled deth? allas! Why wold he sle the? (ll. 1961-67)

Furnivall, that bold if occasionally haphazard scholar, writes of these lines, "I think we may fairly conclude... that Hoccleve was either with Chaucer when he died, or saw him on his 'bed mortel' just before his death" (xxxii). Few presentday Hoccleve scholars would hazard an assertion as definitive as this one on such thin evidence,⁹ especially given the fact that only two stanzas further on Hoccleve bemoans, in similarly laudatory words, the death of one of Chaucer's most prominent contemporaries, John Gower.¹⁰ On the other hand, few would deny that some of Furnivall's key conclusions and their own coincide in significant ways; in particular, Furnivall's low opinion of Hoccleve's poetic gift has persisted.

Malcolm Richardson has stated that "among other things, the unfortunate poet Thomas Hoccleve is that most characteristic modern literary figure, the little man who tries unsuccessfully to maneuver in a bureaucracy designed to crush him" (1986, 313). Richardson goes on to supply a definition, one of many extant, of what has long been a crux of Hoccleve scholarship. "While Hoccleve's poetry is almost certainly not as feeble as F. J. Furnivall led several generations to believe," he writes, "we assuredly read Hoccleve chiefly for the autobiographical details he so carefully includes" (1986, 313). In a similar vein, Alain Renoir has written that Hoccleve

devotes so much attention to current events and to his own grievances [in the prologue to *The Regiment of Princes*] that he neglects these theoretical aspects of the conduct of rulers

which might have appealed to the Renaissance. It is probably for this reason that his work was never printed until the nineteenth century and that its popularity died with its author. (1967, 136)

Despite the harshness of his judgment, Renoir's identification of Hoccleve's "grievances" as "his own" betrays the assumption that Hoccleve's depiction of himself is a factual, perhaps even unadorned one. This assumption -- and its denial -- is another defining element of much Hoccleve criticism, as we shall see.

Stephen Medcalf is more optimistic than Richardson and Renoir in his assessment of Hoccleve's poetry and of fifteenth-century English poetry in general. He is of the opinion that "some sort of assurance in handling symbolism and allegory does wane" (1981, 41) by the time of Hoccleve's career. However, in place of this "assurance" "comes something striking that is to do with the author's presence in his works" (1981, 40-41). While earlier poets like Chaucer, Langland, and Gower

are present in their works for the most part obliquely or comically, idealized or allegorized: the self not felt as flowing out, but seen as from outside.... Thomas Hoccleve, Margery Kempe, James I of Scotland, John Audelay and even those who add to the cycle plays in this age seem much more present in their own selves and emotions. (1981, 42)

There has been fairly general agreement that Hoccleve's presence in his

poetry is of a more well-defined or "realistic" sort -- "warts and all," as the saying goes -- than the comparatively oblique and conventional appearances of Chaucer or Langland in their own respective works.

It is tempting to credit Hoccleve with a break with tradition. His apparent reliance on the circumstances of his own life in matters of form and subject matter seems to partake of the personalized, confessional register that we associate with literature of a later time. We must not forget, however, that it is a commonplace that the work of medieval poets is very conventional and pragmatic in nature. The demands of medieval patronage gave rise to a poetry that was written to order and often didactic, and even poetry that was written for sale rather than purchased in advance partakes of these qualities, as is apparently true in the case of at least one of Hoccleve's poems, *The Regiment of Princes* (Knapp 2001, 80-81). To a culture steeped in comparatively personal, even confessional literature, as our own has been for the larger part of the past two hundred years and more, medieval literature may seem more enlivened by individualism than it did to its contemporary audience. The sort of unifying persona or organizing intelligence that we may perceive in works such as *Piers Plowman* or *Troilus and Criseyde*, that more or less vague impression of a resident intelligence that we identify as Langland or Chaucer, or perhaps their shades, is resoundingly apparent in Hoccleve's work. His presence is not a mere sensibility but a character with a biography. Medcalf argues that in the work of poets like Hoccleve we can discern the first stirrings of the personalized, confessional literature that we associate with works from the Renaissance onward.¹¹ Characterizations

such as this, which stand upon the unsteady and often suspect ground of our assumptions regarding literary evolution, lend a definite cachet to Hoccleve studies: our subject is transformed from a less-than-first-rate poet and minor government functionary into a soldier in the vanguard of England's literary future. Whether this judgment is valid in whole or in part will not be pursued, but we can say with assurance that, however resonant Hoccleve's work may be for us on a more subjective level, he is a poet governed by medieval literary conventions, one of which is that the poet's life may be reconstructed or written from scratch in order to conform to those conventions. Clearly, caution is required.

The efforts of long-time students of Hoccleve such as Jerome Mitchell and J. A. Burrow, who were among the first to recognize in Hoccleve a unique and innovative talent, have provided a seedbed for recent reappraisals.¹² Not only has the volume of scholarship increased, but the very way we look at Hoccleve has also, not surprisingly, changed. He has been transformed from Furnivall's bumbling, harried beggar into a master of policy both poetic and political, as well as an astute recorder of bureaucratic life in fifteenth-century England. How did this change in perceptions come about? Historian Norman F. Cantor suggests quite plausibly that scholars of every age have embraced subjects that they could use as a lens through which to view their own times more clearly; the sociopolitical disintegration that plagued Germany following World War I, for instance, prompted a vigorous interest in the German heroic age and a longing for the strong leadership demonstrated by its leading characters, a preoccupation whose ultimate results are familiar to us all (1991, 1). Could some

similar phenomenon be responsible for the blossoming of Hoccleve scholarship? Hoccleve, as we shall see, was a minor functionary who lived in an age of burgeoning bureaucracy. Today we live in a world shaped by bureaucracy as well, the effects of which have been a subject of interest since long before the appearance of William H. Whyte's defining 1956 study, *The Organization Man*. Hoccleve's life and employment, which are an indispensable part of his poetic materials, are vividly familiar and believable to us. He was an ordinary man whose life was defined, in a more than incidental way, by where he worked and lived. Although it may be tempting to establish our own, modern bond with Hoccleve, such a step cannot be taken without first acknowledging that, however familiar the details of his life may appear to be, speculation about those putative facts has fueled studies since the days of Furnivall.

Ironically, perhaps, in view of his manifestly miserable reputation in the centuries following his death, Hoccleve achieved considerable success as a poet during his lifetime. Forty-three copies of his most popular work, *The Regiment of Princes*, have survived, a large number by any measure and more than enough to establish the poem's wide popularity (Knapp 2001, 78n2; Perkins 2001, 1-2). However, between the end of the fifteenth century and the appearance of Furnivall's editions in the late nineteenth, references to his work are infrequent (Mitchell 1968, Appendix), although a collection of some of the short poems was compiled by G. Mason in 1796, and in 1860 T. Wright produced the first scholarly edition of *The Regiment of Princes* (J. A. Burrow 1994, 242). It was not until 1892, when Furnivall's editions were published, that Hoccleve scholarship began its slow growth into an

industry. Indispensable textual and manuscript work, which concentrated on both the texts of Hoccleve's poems and the scattering of records pertaining to his life, paved the way for scholarly criticism of the poetry itself (Mitchell 1968, Appendix). A steady trickle of studies gradually established Hoccleve as a talent worthy of attention.

Regrettably, the trickle remained just that, with Jerome Mitchell's 1968 volume the only book-length study extant until 2001, when Ethan Knapp's very substantial and much-needed reappraisal, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, appeared, with its eclectic analysis of, among other things, the role of the penitential and petitionary modes (2001, 36ff.). Knapp's publication was actually the culmination of a decade or more of enthusiastic and often inspired work by a wide variety of scholars. As a result of these new studies, Hoccleve has been established as a fascinating if "slippery" autobiographer and literary genealogist, as well as a master of literary voice-throwing and genre manipulation.¹³

In nearly all studies, however, Hoccleve's life and opinions and their recital in his poetry are of central interest. Indeed, the majority of writers on Hoccleve have given voice to a preoccupation with the "life" of Hoccleve in virtual preference to the poetry, as we saw in the cases of Furnivall and Richardson. The essential incompleteness of such assessments is self-evident: poetry is not an especially faithful record of history and provides a notoriously impressionistic record of beliefs and opinions. However, time and again Hoccleve's life is the focus of his poetry; he uses it as an explanatory or balancing device as well as to convey the circumstances and objectives attendant upon the poems' composition. The famous "Mal Regle de T. Hoccleve," for instance, devotes the majority of its 448

lines to a recounting of the poet's misspent youth (admittedly a simplification of the poem's adroit and complex maneuverings, which we shall discuss in more detail later). In the lengthy *Regiment of Princes* Hoccleve prefaces his advice to Prince Hal with a prologue that consumes fully a third of the work's total bulk, tracing a dialog between Hoccleve *in propria persona* and an aged almsman; Hoccleve becomes a *de facto* character in his own fiction. Finally, in the so-called *Series*, the capstone to Hoccleve's long career as a poet, he uses an account of his battle with mental instability and his ensuing conversation with a concerned friend to introduce and unify the stories and moralizations that follow. Ultimately, it may be most useful to consider the sort of autobiography that Hoccleve practiced as not of a single kind and in only a few instances akin to the limited, stereotypical conceptualization of autobiography as recollection or mere recounting of facts.

The skill with which Hoccleve depicts the details of his life, however, is not the only reason for the lively scholarly interest in his biography. Aside from the various official documents pertaining to Hoccleve that I have already mentioned, most of them concerned with financial matters, a number of manuscripts in the poet's hand are extant, including copies both of his own works and those of Chaucer, Gower, and others (Perkins 2001, 157, 164). But even if none of these sources existed, we would still know a good deal about the bare facts of Hoccleve's existence simply because he worked in the Office of the Privy Seal of England for some forty years in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Privy Seal was the office in which official state documents were produced: summonses, warrants, and,

especially, letters (Brown 1971, 260-61). The Office was not in the highest tier of England's administrative hierarchy since it obviously was subservient to those entities that depended upon it for a steady flow of documents, such as the offices of Chancery and Exchequer, as well as the king himself (J. A. Burrow 1994, 191). However, clerks in the Office of the Privy Seal were more apt than many another member of the English bureaucracy to enjoy secure and lifelong employment (Brown 1971, 265). Hoccleve's own case is instructive. Over the course of his forty years at the Office of the Privy Seal, the English crown passed from Richard II to Henry IV, who deposed Richard in a sequence of events whose repercussions were being felt a century and more later, and thence to Henry V, whose own troublesome accession was redeemed two years afterward by his spectacularly lucky -- some, including Henry, said miraculous -- victory over the French at Agincourt. During this period, Hoccleve enjoyed ever-increasing annuities and financial favors from his superiors, with virtually no interruption in his employment (J. A. Burrow 1994, 197-99). The position was, in more ways than one, a plum. Over and above the rather phenomenal job security, clerks of the Privy Seal were often commissioned to accompany the king and his retinue on those diplomatic errands requiring the presence of the Seal, just one of many opportunities a clerk would have had to make the acquaintance of men of wealth and power (J. A. Burrow 1994, 194-95; Brown 1971, 265). Such highly successful men provided opportunities for temporary work, paid as well as unpaid (with the implication of future payment or preferment held in abeyance), and they also enjoyed reputations as patrons of the arts, a fact that Hoccleve may have capitalized upon.

Although the clerks of the Privy Seal may not have lived in the upper stratosphere of English bureaucratic life, it is clear that they enjoyed considerable esteem and quite sufficient remuneration for their efforts. Clerks were usually commoners. Most were not university graduates, and in fact those who had degrees were generally passing through the Office of the Privy Seal on their way to even better things. Literacy was a requirement, of course, as well as knowledge of Latin and French, the languages in which the bulk of documents were composed, even in Hoccleve's day, when the Lancastrian kings worked to establish English as the tongue of record. Many of the clerks had pursued their educations, like Hoccleve, in hope of perhaps eventually being granted a benefice or some similar advancement, and more than one of them was. Significantly, only a few clerks were employed by the Office of the Privy Seal at any one time. A. L. Brown estimates that perhaps four to six experienced clerks were usually present, as well as an equal number of less experienced clerks, who were sometimes assigned as trainees to the more experienced ones (1971, 261-62). Their offices were in Westminster, at the heart of administrative life, and they were housed in a common hostel at the expense of the Keeper of the Privy Seal.¹⁴

Thomas Hoccleve came to the Office of the Privy Seal in 1387, presumably having arrived in London some years before from his putative point of origin in Hockliffe, Bedfordshire, approximately fifty miles northwest of London (J. A. Burrow 1994, 190). He was about twenty years of age at the time of his employment. In *The Regiment of Princes* Hoccleve, ever generous with the details of his life, provides an illuminating account of what his labors at the Privy Seal were like,

comparing his lot with that of other laborers.

This artificers se I day be day,
 In þe hotteste of al hir bysynesse
 Talken and syng, and make game and play,
 And forth hir labour passith with gladnesse;
 But we labour in trauaillous stilnesse;
 We stowpe and stare vpon þe shepes skyn,
 And keepe must our song and wordes in. (ll. 1009-15)

Somber though this depiction may be, it is clear that Hoccleve's life was, to an astonishing degree, shaped by his employment. For a modern worker, the effect of living in a hostel with one's co-workers is fairly obvious: one must live the job night as well as day. We cannot infer Hoccleve's feelings from our own, but the record of his employment bears out his depiction of himself as, at the very least, a dedicated and able co-worker and employee, although he was very aware of the limited power his post gave him. As his poetry makes clear, his identity, both public and private, was that of a clerk of the Privy Seal. In *The Regiment of Princes* Hoccleve bemoans his dread of the day when he can no longer go to work and must leave the clerks' hostel and retire to a "poore cote" (l. 940). Hoccleve emphasizes the almost obsessive extent of his concerns regarding his annuity, even going so far as to assert that when he can no longer rely on his payments from the Office of the Privy Seal he will kill himself (ll. 1807-13).

Ethan Knapp has noted that Hoccleve was active as a clerk in the Office of the Privy Seal when the job was transitioning from a clerical position, filled by representatives of the Church, to a secular one, evidence of the slow diminution of the Church's traditional monopoly on

literacy (2001, 20ff.). Clearly, it was necessary for the new, more secular breed of clerks to network more inventively than would have been necessary for one who was supported by the vast hierarchy of the Church. To that end, Hoccleve developed and marketed his very distinctive poetic talent, transforming his life experiences as he forced them into conventional forms illuminated and enlivened by a variety of distinct, and distinctly Hocclevian, voices. Despite his apparent success in marketing himself, this lack of what might be termed a "safety net," the Church as a resource to fall back upon, was, as we shall see, the source of a considerable burden of formulaic, melancholic apprehension on Hoccleve's part.

The subject of annuities and other payments is a popular one with Hoccleve, and, to the delight of both historians and students of literature, we can tentatively date more than one of his poems based on the documentary evidence of these payments that is still available to us.¹⁵ Hoccleve and his fellows were paid annuities rather than salaries (Brown 1971, 265). By the time of Henry IV's accession in 1399, records show that Hoccleve's annuity was worth ten pounds, which was increased to a benefice without cure of souls worth twenty pounds per annum in 1409. The allowances were paid in two installments, at Michaelmas and Easter. As we have seen in the case of Chaucer, the installments were not always paid on time. Hoccleve fared better than most in this regard, but the late payment of annuities was nevertheless a frequent source of poetic inspiration. Clerks who were paid well but infrequently were bound to seek other sources of income, despite perquisites of supplemental remuneration at special times of the year, such as Christmas, when fine cloth was issued for the making of robes,

and on special occasions such as a royal marriage or the accession of a new monarch. In 1401, Hoccleve applied for and received a supplemental payment for himself and seven others in the Privy Seal in appreciation of the hard work they had put in since the installation of Henry IV as monarch in 1399.¹⁶ Other opportunities to earn extra cash were available, but there were obvious risks involved in a system in which services were often performed on a verbal promise (Brown 1971, 269). In the prologue to *The Regiment of Princes* Hoccleve describes how Privy Seal clerks were often taken advantage of by emissaries of great men who contracted them for work, pocketing the money themselves and telling their lords that the clerks had been compensated.

But a wyght haue any cause to sue
 To vs, som lordes man schal vndertake
 To sue it out; & þat þat is vs due
 For oure labour, hym deyneþ vs nat take;
 He seiþ, his lord to þanke vs wole he make;
 It touchiþ hym, it is a man of his;
 Where þe reuers of þat, god wot, sooþ is.

His letter he takiþ, and forþ goþ his way,
 And byddep vs to dowten vs no thyng,
 His lord schal þanken vs an oper day;
 And if we han to sue to þe kyng,
 His lord may þere haue al his askyng;
 We schal be sped, as fer as pat oure bille
 Wole specifie þe effecte of oure wille. (ll. 1499-1512)

It seems likely that this sort of skullduggery was the exception rather

than the rule (Brown 1971, 269), but Hoccleve's decision to set these lines down may be another example of his willingness to speak out on behalf of himself and his colleagues to assure that they got their due, an interesting refutation of the deferential, retiring persona he frequently adopts in his begging lyrics. As late payment of annuities became commonplace under the cash-strapped Lancastrians, the extra income available in the form of these contract jobs may have been necessary to avoid repeated clashes with creditors, which Hoccleve refers to more than once in his begging poems, as we shall see.

Hoccleve's extracurricular labors involved, as we have noted, the production of manuscripts on commission, general scribal work, and, of course, the writing of poetry. These labors, paid and unpaid alike, served to cement a bond of service between Hoccleve and his clients, and it seems to have been a very durable one. His forty years of service at the Office of the Privy Seal were capped, near their end, by Hoccleve's compilation of his *Formulary*, a massive compendium of templates, forms, useful phrases and the like, all in French or Latin, for the day-to-day use of the clerks. Part phrase book and part exemplar, Hoccleve's *Formulary* has been called the best of its time by A. L. Brown (1971, 260), and it is evidence of the comprehensiveness of Hoccleve's understanding of his job. Although Hoccleve appears never to have risen above the position of an established clerk at the Privy Seal, he clearly made a good many friends and performed a great many services, and his life appears to have been, overall, a comfortable one. In addition to his benefice, he was awarded a corrody, or lodging rights, at Hayling Priory; he probably converted it into cash, which was more than likely the intent of its grantor (Brown 1971, 267; J. A.

Burrow 1994, 197). We know that Hoccleve was alive in March of 1426, but a document from May of the same year grants the priory corrody to a party named Alice Penfold and specifies that he is deceased; he was probably fifty-nine or sixty years of age at the time of his death (J. A. Burrow 1994, 217).

As we have noted, Hoccleve's own account of his life bears out much of the independent evidence we have of his activities. In "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve" we have one of the fullest accounts of his activities, and his recollection of walks through London and his acquaintance with those who gathered at Westminster Gate match other descriptions of the period (Mitchell 1968, 10-13). The rest of the narrative, however, must be accepted on faith and, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its tone and the degree and type of detail, it usually is.¹⁷ Hoccleve adopts his most personable and confiding voice and guides us through the misspent days of his past, recalling his debauches in the taverns, his pleasure at being termed a gentleman by those who benefitted from his drunken largess, his acceptance of a kiss from the girls but no more on account of his modesty. The purpose of the poem, however, does not appear to be to recount these details of Hoccleve's life except insofar as they serve the larger purpose of presenting his petition to Lord Fournival for payment of overdue funds, a petition prepared for by the poem's opening invocation to the goddess Health with its woeful depiction of the health of both Hoccleve and his purse, and fulfilled by the closing address to Lord Fournival. The mention of Lord Fournival, along with a note appended to the Huntington manuscript by Hoccleve, have been used to date the poem to the early years of the fifteenth century, probably between late 1404 and early

1407 (J. A. Burrow 1994, 201-02).

All in all, the scenes Hoccleve depicts are not unusual ones, either in life or in the literature of the fifteenth-century, in England and elsewhere. As J. A. Burrow has noted in regard to this conventionality, the whole form and content of "La Male Regle" appears to be based upon French forms of the period, as exemplified, for instance, by the poetry of Eustache Deschamps, with which Hoccleve was probably familiar (1997, 45-46). Eva A. Thornley (1967) also argues for the conventionality of the poem, but treats it as a parody of the penitential lyric. In her view, Hoccleve neatly inverts the customary form by presenting himself as a character scarcely worthy of indulgence as a penitent. More recently, Penelope B. R. Doob has generalized Thornley's arguments to present Hoccleve almost exclusively as a poet of convention and warns that to accept any of his accounts as autobiographical would be to overstep evidentiary boundaries in an unnecessary and incautious way (1974, 213, 226). When we contrast the arguments of Doob with the approach of Furnivall, who practically ignored the petitionary aspect of the poem and focused on the autobiographical and historical information Hoccleve provides, we illuminate a central crux in our understanding of Hoccleve as autobiographer.

One of the most important treatments to date of Hoccleve as autobiographer is J. A. Burrow's 1982 Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy, later published as "Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve." Burrow acknowledges that Hoccleve is a very conventional poet, one who is well aware of the popular forms of his day: the ballade, the mirror for

princes or *Fürstenspiegel*, the complaint, and, of course, the begging poem. He practices these forms with skill and talent, and actively places himself in the pantheon of English poets, although his modesty, conventional or not, forces him to claim a spot only in the outer sphere, far from the splendor of his idol, Chaucer, an act of what Burrow terms "self-depreciation" that "is itself eminently Chaucerian" (1982, 387). In his most powerful work Hoccleve weds this manifestly self-conscious artistry to a disarming, almost improvisational presentation of himself; as Burrow notes, "there are some cases, Hoccleve's included, where interest in the poetry is actually inseparable from interest in the man" (1982, 390). But how accurate are these scattered fragments of Hoccleve's autobiography? As we have seen, there is ample documentary evidence to support many of the details Hoccleve provides, annuities and their amounts and dates of payment, when past due, and so forth. But what about the vivid personality that shows through in the verse? Is this Thomas Hoccleve's straightforward attempt to give an account of himself, or a medieval stock character? The polarization illustrated by the critical differences of opinion concerning Hoccleve's two seemingly disparate preoccupations, the life he lived and the one he wrote about, moves Burrow to write with some passion of a misperception that he dubs the "conventional fallacy."

Victims of the [conventional fallacy] combine a learned and sophisticated awareness of literary convention with an apparently naïve and reductive notion of what real life is like - naïve and reductive, because they talk as if non-literary experience were not itself shaped

by conventions. Of course, everyone knows that it *is*; but the knowledge seems to desert medievalists when they argue that the conventional character of a text proves that it has no autobiographical content. (Burrow's italics) (1982, 394)

Burrow suggests that it is possible for us to have our cake and eat it too. From this point of view, the persona that shapes Hoccleve's poems is not "the purely literary, dramatic, or fictive utterances of the authorial persona, the 'I of the poem,' the narrator, and so on" (1982, 395); it is Hoccleve himself, or at least some more or less shadowy part of him.

In my view, Burrow's arguments are convincing. By adopting his interpretation, we are in fact adopting the viewpoint of recent Hoccleve scholars, who assume the presence of the "real" Hoccleve, tempered by convention, in the poems, from the begging lyrics to "Le Male Regle" to the *Regiment* and, especially, the *Series*. Whatever conventions the poems may embody or violate, the sometimes uneasy coexistence of Hoccleve the poet and Hoccleve the character usually becomes the topic of conversation. For instance, Robert J. Meyer-Lee observes that critics such as Knapp have "sought to locate" Hoccleve's "proleptically postmodern self-representation in the confluence of literary precedent and the demands of his Lancastrian historical moment" (2001, 174). Meyer-Lee locates one pathway to resolution in "the centrality of the petitionary form in the production of his literary persona" (2001, 174). Ultimately, however, it is Hoccleve himself who becomes the center of attention as Meyer-Lee charts "the

hypothetical contours of Hoccleve's consciousness" (2001, 175).

Although a project to establish the veracity of more than a tiny fraction of Hoccleve's autobiographical passages would surely verge on the quixotic, the demonstrated power of those passages to claim the close attention of readers deserves comment. What evidence is there that the autobiographical passages are "accurate"? The "evidence" provided by Hoccleve's references to his temporary madness in "The Complaint of Thomas Hoccleve," for instance, has proven especially convincing. One may find Hoccleve's exposition of his struggle with mental instability so heartfelt and plainly and realistically delineated that to dismiss it as "mere" convention is a repugnant proposition. This belief in no way precludes, as Burrow notes, the very obvious employment of conventions, whether those pertaining to the penitential lyric, the begging poem, or some other form. However, the effectiveness of much of Hoccleve's poetry, his petitions for compensation and relief in particular, seems to be achieved by the realization on the part of friends and patrons that it is not some fictive persona speaking but Thomas Hoccleve, indigent and in dire need of succor. Hoccleve, who eventually married when he realized that his ambitions in regard to the Church were never to be realized, knew that in order to support himself he needed contacts, acquaintances, and patrons, people who would remember him when there were jobs to be done. To this end, he substitutes himself in place of a purely conventional persona, using the details of his own life easily and naturally where more or less trite formulas might have served a less venturesome poet. A more conventional characterization such as Langland's Gloton in *Piers Plowman* (ll. 304-91), though certainly remarkable enough in its own

right, serves to illustrate just how effectively the wastrel of "La Male Regle" transcends convention. Hoccleve writes of himself with self-deprecating humor, portraying himself as a hanger-on mistaken for a gentleman.

Where was a gretter maister eek than y,
 Or bet aqweyntid at Westmynstre yate,
 Among the tauernerres namely,
 And Cooke whan I cam eerly or late?
 I pynchid nat at hem in myn acate,
 But paiede hem as þat they axe wolde;
 Wherefore I was the welcomere algate,
 And for 'a verray gentil man' y-holde. (ll. 177-84)

Burrow writes that "Hoccleve entirely lacked his master Chaucer's ability to speak in voices other than his own.... This poet's skills lay... in the articulation of his own voice" (1982, 402).

Burrow identifies three main "roles" adopted by Hoccleve: "the good citizen, the friend or colleague, and (most important) the dependant or petitioner" (1982, 403), each of which we shall see again when we examine the begging lyrics. Hoccleve the good citizen is a dogged affirmer of the status quo in all regards, a stance that may indicate his own point of view, but is more likely a deliberate ploy to curry the (continued) patronage and favor of the House of Lancaster and its supporters. His outcries against Lollardy are a vivid example of Good Citizen Hoccleve's concerns. The Lancastrian kings were, we know, strong supporters of religious orthodoxy. In the years before the accession of Henry IV, comparatively little attention was paid to the phenomenon of Lollardy. John Wycliffe, Lollardy's ideological founder

and an associate of no less a personage than John of Gaunt, spoke in the Parliament, and men involved in the highest circles of the government openly expressed Lollard beliefs (MacFarlane 1952). This was not to be the case during the reigns of Henry IV and his firstborn son. In *The Regiment of Princes*, written in 1410 or 1411, during the final years of Henry IV's rule, Hoccleve writes with grisly satisfaction of the burning of the heretic John Badby (ll. 281-87), and in his "Address to Sir John Oldcastle, 1415" he rolls out argument after argument in defense of the Church's very existence. In a particularly intense passage he defends the Church's use of images.

Right as a spectacle helpith feeble sighte,
 Whan a man on the book redith or writ,
 And causith him to see bet than he mighte,
 In which spectacle his sighte nat abit,
 But gooth thurgh & on the book restith it:
 The same may men of ymages seye,
 Thogh the ymage nat the seint be yit

The sighte ys myngith to the seint to preye. (ll. 417-24)

No pronouncement could be more orthodox. However opportunistic Hoccleve's motivations may have been, we have no particular reason to doubt that he firmly endorsed his own words. Here and elsewhere in the poem, Hoccleve refuses to compromise in his insistence on moral rectitude, which he unfailingly identifies with conformity to the established rules of the "true" church, a view shared by his lord, then Prince of Wales and later Henry V, King of England.¹⁸

Hoccleve the friend or colleague is most poignantly evident in the first two sections of the *Series*. The first section, "Thomas Hoccleve's

Complaint," describes Hoccleve's derangement, poignantly revealing his shame and sorrow at the reaction of his friends and acquaintances to his obvious instability, feelings which only grow when their suspicions continue after he has recovered.

...for though that my wit were home come agayne,
 men wolde it not so vnderstond or take;
 with me to deale hadden they dysdayne;
 a ryotows person I was and forsake;
 myn olde ffrindshipe was all ovarshake;
 no wyte with me lyst make daliance;
 the worlde me made a straunge continance,

which that myne herte sore gan tormente
 for ofte whan I in westmynster halle,
 and eke in london amonge the prese wente,
 I se the chere abaten and apalle
 of them that weren wonte me for to calle
 to companye her heed they caste a-wrye,
 when I them mette as they not me sye. (ll. 64-77)

Hoccleve is a stranger in his old haunts, particularly the Office of the Privy Seal at Westminster, a reference that harkens back to his humorous reference to his employment at Westminster in "La Male Regle." Sure that he has recovered from his illness, he stands in front of the mirror practicing what we might term "expressions supporting a diagnosis of sanity" to ward off presumptions of madness that could be triggered by an unguarded expression.

And in my chamber at home when I was

my selfe alone I in this wyse wrowght:
 I streight vnto my myrrowr and my glas,
 to loke how that me of my chere thoughte,
 yf any other were it than it owghte;
 for fayne wolde I yf it had not be right,
 amendyd it to my kunynge and myght. (ll. 155-61)

Although the second section of the Series may be a more overt example of Hoccleve as friend or colleague, in this very powerful first section the relationship is more direct, for it is the reader in whom Hoccleve seems to confide, unburdening himself of the anguish that has ruled his life.

As a literary genealogist, Hoccleve reflects some of the same concerns as Lydgate. He apostrophizes the memory of his "maister Chaucer" with three lengthy passages in the *The Regiment of Princes* alone, eulogizing his model even as he demeans himself as too dull-witted to grasp the subtler points of the master's lessons.¹⁹ We have seen Hoccleve's portrayal of Chaucer upon his death bed, a passage that led Furnivall to conclude that Hoccleve and Chaucer were well-acquainted and that Hoccleve was, no doubt, present at Chaucer's death-vigil. However, as of now, the most that critical opinion will allow is that, as a very young man, Hoccleve may have been acquainted, however slightly, with Chaucer. Since Hoccleve did not begin work at the Privy seal until 1387, it seems highly unlikely that Hoccleve knew Chaucer before the last decade or so of Chaucer's life. The controversy over how well Hoccleve knew Chaucer, however, is a bit ironic in view of how dissimilar the poems of the two men are. Chaucer is remembered in large part as a writer of narrative poetry. Hoccleve really only had one

brush with narrative poetry, in the *Series*. We can never be too sure exactly who Chaucer is or what sort of person he might have been. Hoccleve, however, seems tangible, a being made of flesh. It is certainly true that Hoccleve practiced many of the same forms as Chaucer, such as the rhyme royal stanza and the ballade form, both of which Chaucer utilized masterfully, and Mitchell believes that Hoccleve's metrical practices follow Chaucer's as well, but the same could be said of any of the so-called Chaucerians, English and Scottish, who wrote in the century or so after Chaucer, Lydgate being the most prominent example (Brewer 1966). Interestingly, Mitchell, one of the premier Hoccleve scholars, posits that the autobiography in Hoccleve's work was genuine, but discounts the notion that those elements concerning Chaucer have any veracity, suggesting instead that they are of conventional provenance, the sort of thing that marked the work of all the "Chaucerian" poets (1966; 1967). There is no particular reason to suppose that Hoccleve never met Chaucer. Although he was a young man during the period in which his path might conceivably have crossed Chaucer's, roughly from the late 1380s until 1400, there is no reason to doubt that Chaucer's network might have included, perhaps at one or two removes, a young clerk at the Privy Seal. It is certainly beyond debate that both Hoccleve and Chaucer frequently took on tasks that put them in the presence of consortia of rich and powerful men, so it is reasonable to posit that they might have met, or at least been in the same company, on one or more occasions.

Whatever the nature of his relationship with Chaucer might have been - admiring imitator or friend - Hoccleve dropped the great poet's name in more or less conventional ways. Hoccleve establishes for his

predecessor an *auctoritas* that is understood to transfer its substance to those who invoke it, just as Chaucer partook of the *auctoritas* of Dante, Boccaccio, and others. It is worth mentioning that the choice of Chaucer as artistic icon is an auspicious one; in the conventional view, Chaucer's work glorifies the English tongue, and, by extension, England. In *The Regiment of Princes*, Hoccleve writes of Chaucer's death:

But weylaway! so is myn herte wo,
That the honour of englyssh tonge is deed,
Of which I wont was han consail and reed....

O deth! þou didest naght harme singuleer,
In slaghtere of him; but al þis land it smertith;
But nathelees, yit has þou no power
His name sle; his hy vertu astertith
Vnslayn fro þe, which ay vs lyfly hertyth,
With bookes of his ornat endytyng,
That is to al þis land enlumynyng. (ll. 1958-60, 1968-74)

It is probably too bold to suggest that the invocation of Chaucer is a patriotic act. However, the *Regiment* was written for Prince Hal, as the poem itself attests, and the very Englishness of Hoccleve's tribute would have appealed to the prince, who, like his father, searched unremittingly for means by which to unite his subjects behind him and his house (Seward 1987, 37-38).

Another very striking example of Hoccleve's utilization of Chaucer is also contained in *The Regiment of Princes*. Near the end of the fourteenth section of the poem, whose purpose is "to trete how to a kyng / It nedeful is to do by consail ay," this stanza appears:

Al-pogh his lyfe be queynt, þe resemblaunce
 Of him hap in me so fressh lyflynesse,
 Þat, to putte othir men in remembraunce
 Of his persone, I haue heere his lyknesse
 Do make, to þis ende in sothfastnesse,
 Þat þei þat haue of him lest þought & mynde,
 By þis paynture may ageyn him fynde. (ll. 4992-98)

Next to this passage, in BL MS Harley 4866, reproduced in color in Perkins's book on the *Regiment* (2001, Plate 2), is a beautifully executed miniature of Chaucer. In one hand he holds a rosary, an emblem associating him unambiguously with the orthodox Church; with the other he points at the passage reproduced above. Although the illustration apparently originally appeared in a number of the deluxe manuscripts of the poem, it has been cut out of every copy in which it appeared except Harley 4866 (Perkins 2001, 157-59). The manuscript reveals an expressive dimension of Hoccleve's poetry that is difficult to experience in printed editions. As John Burrow has suggested, the relationship between a reader and a handwritten manuscript is distinct from that between a reader and a printed book. The "illusion" of personal participation in the text, writes Burrow, "would have been easier for the author and stronger for the reader at a time when books were handwritten" (1984, 263).

In summary, Hoccleve emerges as perhaps our most illuminating, even forthright example of a begging poet. His activities occur in comparative sunlight; the workings of the machinery that connects him to his patrons is perfectly visible, both in his poetry and in the documentary evidence. Using our knowledge of Hoccleve and his

methodology, we can now articulate the confluence of autobiography and convention that informs his begging poems. In doing so, we shall see that Hoccleve's work is both petition and political act, a delineation of the more or less asymmetrical relationship between the patron or, more exactly, the addressee, and his dedicated agent. Before proceeding to the begging lyrics themselves, it will be useful to give some consideration to what has been previously referred to as the "petitionary mode" as it appears in two of Hoccleve's most famous works, "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve" and the prologue to *The Regiment of Princes*. Having completed this brief analysis, we will move on to the short lyrics.

"La Male Regle" has long drawn the attention of historians on account of its autobiographical element. A. L. Brown does not name the poem in his discussion of Hoccleve's poetry, but he nevertheless exemplifies Hoccleve's work with a brief recounting of the contents of "La Male Regle." "Hoccleve's own story," writes Brown, "is that... for a time [he] enjoyed a fast life, spending his money freely, drinking in the Paul's Head tavern, chatting up the girls there, and so on" (1971, 270). In addition to its autobiographical element, "La Male Regle" also exemplifies Hoccleve's handling of the petitionary mode. The poem opens with an apostrophe to Health:

O precious tresor incomparable!
 O ground & rote of prosperitee!
 O excellent richesse commendable
 Abouen alle þat in erthe be!
 Who may susteene thyn aduersitee?
 What wight may him auante of worldly welthe,

But if he fully stande in grace of thee,
 Eerthely god piler of lyf thow helthe? (ll. 1-8)

Again and again Hoccleve emphasizes the connection between health and wealth, a reinforcement of his characteristic petition for money. In the first four lines of the stanza alone, Hoccleve compares health to wealth at least three times, and hammers the point home by using the obvious "welthe/helthe" rhyme in the sixth and eighth lines as he denies the possibility of health without wealth.

In the fourth stanza Hoccleve again makes a direct connection between health and prosperity, although at this point the prosperity in question is the metaphorical bounty associated with good health.

But I haue herd men seye longe ago,
 'Prosperitee is blynd & see ne may':
 And verifie I can wel it is so;
 For I my self put haue it in assay.
 Whan I was weel kowde I considere it? nay!
 But what me longed aftir nouelrie,
 As yeeres yonge yernen day by day;
 And now my smert accusith my folie. (ll. 33-40)

We will not explore the specifics of Hoccleve's youthful dissipation, which we have mentioned previously in passing, but recommend them to the interested reader. Having completed his recounting, Hoccleve warns his readers:

Now lat this smert, warnynge to thee be;
 And if thow maist heere-aftir be releued
 Of body and purs so thow gye thee
 By wit þat thow no more thus be greeued. (385-88)

Preparing us for what is to come, Hoccleve makes specific mention of his purse; this is not unexpected since we have seen Hoccleve equate health and even life with monetary prosperity before, as, for instance, when he tells the old almsman in the prologue that if he becomes destitute he will commit suicide. The connection becomes explicit a few lines further on, at the end of one final address to Health:

My body and purs been at ones seeke;
 And for hem bothe I to thyn hy noblesse,
 As humblely as þat I can byseeke

With herte vnfeyned reewe on our distresse! (ll. 409-12)

Of course, Health can fix the problems created by Hoccleve's erstwhile lack of temperance, but in order to resolve the related problem of poverty Hoccleve asks Health to intercede on his behalf with Lord Furnival, that he "þat now is tresoreer, / From thyn Hynesse haue a tokne or tweye / To paie me þat due is for this yeer" (ll. 418-20). In the final three lines of the poem, Hoccleve once again makes explicit the interdependence of health and coin. "By coyn, I gete may swich medecyne / As may myn hurtes alle, þat me greeue, / Exyle cleene & voide me of pyne" (ll. 446-48).

Although "La Male Regle" employs begging as only one of a variety of tropes, it is clear that the concluding stanzas beg, with Hoccleve adopting the role of petitioner. In its insistence on the connection between health and prosperity, the poem parallels the sample from Lydgate that we analyzed in the previous chapter and, less explicitly, Chaucer's "Complaint" as well. In the case of Lydgate's "Letter to Gloucester," the health of the purse itself was at issue, whereas Hoccleve defers personifying his purse and complains about his own

health instead. More importantly, unlike Chaucer and Lydgate, Hoccleve does not introduce a level of indirection by representing his purse or some other entity as the needy party; always, the one in need is Hoccleve himself, or himself in concert with his friends and coworkers. We can only speculate as to why Hoccleve opts for this approach; the personal and artistic imperatives involved resist analysis. However, harking back to Burrow's characterization of Hoccleve as a poet who always spoke in his own voice, and bearing in mind that Hoccleve is a central presence in most of his best poetry, the reasons may become clearer. The result is an immediacy and intimacy that sets Hoccleve apart from other poets working during his lifetime.

Hoccleve's begging in the prologue to *The Regiment of Princes* is more complex. For one thing, whereas it is comparatively easy to isolate the petitionary mode in "La Male Regle," it is not such a simple matter when we consider the prologue's long, rambling dialogue between Hoccleve and the elderly beggar. Larry Scanlon has argued that the prologue actually blends two genres, the begging poem and the *Fürstenspiegel*, or mirror of princes (1990, 216), although we might question whether the two operate in tandem or simultaneously. In addition to the begging poem and mirror of princes, there is also a significant autobiographical component, as usual. In this case, however, in distinction to the use of autobiographical elements in "La Male Regle," Hoccleve uses himself as a character in a very conventional format, the debate. Hoccleve's presence is unambiguous; in fact, he even gives his name. Although we will not go into detail in regard to the complex blending of genres in the prologue, it is worth noting that many of the qualities believed to be desirable in a prince

are commonly invoked in both the begging poem and mirror of princes genres. For instance, princely liberality is commonly praised.²⁰

Hoccleve's begging in the prologue to the *Regiment* is comprehensive. From the first stanzas we find ourselves on very familiar ground. Hoccleve explores one of his favorite tropes here, describing the mental torment occasioned by his reflections on his lack of financial stability: "And thus vnsikir of my smal lyfloode, / Thought leyd on me full many an hevy loode" (ll. 41-42). This preoccupation with effective stewardship of body and purse is, by now, familiar to us. Also unsurprising is Hoccleve's extended disquisition on his annuity, in which he acknowledges Henry's liberality in granting the annuity but laments its non-payment.

In the schequer, he of his special grace,
 Hath to me grauntid an annuitee
 Of xx mark, while I haue lyues space.
 Mighte I ay paid ben of þat duetee,
 It schulde stonde wel ynow with me;
 But paiement is hard to gete adayes;
 And þat me put in many foule affrayes. (ll. 820-26)

Scanlon's (1990) skillful reading of the prologue reassures us that the interlacing of *Fürstenspiegel* and begging poem does not engender the kind of imaginal incongruity that we might expect, and reminds us that Hoccleve's positioning of himself in relation to the prince is ultimately conventional and hence "appropriate."

The positioning of the poet relative to the prince in the prologue is important to us because in the begging poems the positioning of the petitioner relative to the petitioned is directly analogous and is

handled in a very similar way: only the tropes are necessarily different. Hoccleve's precise awareness of this relationship is conveyed eloquently by an illustration in the Arundel 38 manuscript of the *Regiment*. Nicholas Perkins writes that

[t]he placement and function of the presentation scene in Arundel 38 are intriguing. It does not appear at the beginning of the poem, as is normally the case with such scenes, but after the Dialogue with the Old Man. The picture thus forms an important division between the apparently spoken Dialogue and the formal written treatise addressed to the Prince, a division that in other manuscripts of the poem is often marked by a large initial or new page. (2001, 115)

In the Hoccleve manuscript, the poet is presented as unambiguously subservient to the Prince; he is, in fact, on his knees.²¹

Having examined Hoccleve's personal and artistic background and preoccupations, as well as his mastery and frequent utilization of the petitionary mode, we can now move on to a discussion of the lyrics that devote themselves exclusively to begging. The particular poems we shall discuss are the "Balade to Henry V, For Money," "Balade to My Lord the Chancellor," "Balade to My Maister Carpenter", and "Balade and Rowndel to Maister Somer." As is apparent from the titles, all of these works are written in the ballade form. In its English manifestation, the ballade was not a particularly well-defined form, and in fact the term "ballade" often seems to be merely a euphemism for "short poem."

Hoccleve's experience with the form was shaped by his familiarity with Chaucer's work and, perhaps even more importantly, the French writers of ballades, with whose work Hoccleve was certainly familiar.²² Hoccleve seems to have admired Chaucer's shorter works; he mentions them on more than one occasion. Although none of the begging poems we shall discuss contain direct references to Chaucer, Hoccleve's ballades have a certain Chaucerian flavor, running the gamut from eloquent solemnity to effervescent humor. The ordering of the poems in the discussion reflects the relative social distance between petitioner and petitioned. The "Balade to Henry V, For Money" is directed at the king, and there is, of course, no one whom Hoccleve might petition who is further removed from him in terms of the social hierarchy. The other three poems are addressed to figures who are lower on the totem pole than Henry, and illustrate progressively greater degrees of familiarity, as we might expect.

The "Balade to Henry V, For Money" is, in some respects, the most conventional of the poems we shall discuss. The poem, written with the rhetorical throttle on maximum, opens with the most conventional expressions of fealty to the king and clearly reveals Hoccleve in his preferred role as humble petitioner:

Victorious Kyng, our lord ful gracious,
 We, humble lige men to your hynesse,
 Meekly byseechen yow (o kyng pitous!)
 Tendre pitee haue on our sharp distresse;
 For, but the flood of your rial largesse
 Flowe vp on vs gold hath vs in swich hate,
 Pat of his loue and cheertee the scantnesse

Wole arte vs three to trotte vn-to Newgate. (ll. 1-8) Hoccleve first, and thus foremost, acknowledges the king's success in war,²³ and in the other half of the first line balances Henry's prowess in battle with a suggestion of his "gracious" fulfillment of his duties as the supreme secular authority. Use of the word "gracious" is quite politic since it implies that the benefits showered upon the king's grateful subjects are provided "by the king's grace." We also see here the interpenetration of secular and religious forms referred to by Larry Scanlon.

Secular literature needed to differentiate itself from the discourse of the Church without directly challenging ecclesiastical authority. In the figure of the king, secular writers found a single, central source of authority analogous to the figure of God in ecclesiastical discourse and yet fully secular. (1990, 217)

The king, like God, graciously dispenses largess. However, we should re-emphasize Scanlon's carefully-worded assertion that the king's function is "analogous" to that of God. Hoccleve employs high-flown language and figures of speech that could just as easily be addressed to God as to the king. In other words, the analogy is direct.

After this brief apostrophe, Hoccleve reveals his purpose. Interestingly, the petition is not just on his own behalf; it originates with "We, humble lige men to your hynesse." Typically, as we have seen, begging poems are submitted by the humble and usually nameless "I," the subject prostrating himself before his merciful and, more importantly, generous lord. Relentlessly, Hoccleve hammers home

the purpose of the request, alliteratively tying the "humble" supplicants to the king's gracious "hynesse." "Meekly" they "byseechen" their "king pitous," and with the fourth line bow even lower with the veritable *cri de coeur*, "Tendre pitee haue on our sharp distresse." Here, again, we see the appropriation of the materials of religious discourse in the service of rhetoric, re-emphasizing, as the poem does throughout, the inestimable distance between petitioner and petitioned.

Furnivall's effective punctuation of the stanza emphasizes its rhetorical balance. Hoccleve weighs the potential relief provided by the king's largess with the dreadful consequences should he withhold it. In an odd flourish, Hoccleve seems to conflate the king's gold and the king himself, personifying gold in general and endowing it with the ability to hate debtors like Hoccleve and his co-supplicants. Should the gold withhold its "loue and cheertee," much as a disapproving monarch might withhold such favors, its "scantnesse" will land the supplicants in Newgate Prison, a very kingly prerogative. The interpenetration of monarch and medium of exchange is never brought to completion, but the suggestive interlacing of metaphor and personification leaves the strong impression that gold and the king, and the king's very largess as well, are all functioning parts of the same social organism, as indeed they are.

In the second stanza of the poem, Hoccleve steps back from the ornate intensity of the first. Although the language is still formal, it becomes progressively less lofty as the poet states his purpose.

Benigne lige lord! o hauene & yate
 Of our confort! let your hy worthynesse
 Oure indigence softne & abate!

In yow lyth al yee may our greef redresse!
 The somme þat we in our bill expresse,
 Is nat excessif ne outrageous;
 Our long seruice also berith wnesse,
 We han for it be ful laborious. (ll. 9-16)

The progression from the description of the king as "hauene & yate / Of our confort" to the comparatively uninflected language of the last four lines of the stanza bear witness to Hoccleve's expertise at blending genres, which we have encountered in our brief discussion of *The Regiment of Princes*. Perhaps equally impressive is the poet's ability to create effective transitions in the service of clarifying his purpose.

Along with additional conventional contrasting of the king's "worthynesse" and the petitioners' "indigence," which we have come to expect, Hoccleve, ever conscious of rhetorical and linguistic balance, weighs his reference to Newgate in the first stanza against his depiction of Henry as "hauene and yate [haven and gate]." The confinement associated with the king's gated haven is of a benign sort, and the words "hauene and yate" strongly suggest a sort of earthly heaven, a place having far more in common with a benevolent protective embrace than the shame and squalor of confinement in Newgate. "In yow lyth al yee may our greef redresse!" Hoccleve concludes the first half of the stanza, once again employing language that is highly evocative of devotional forms that are still regularly employed in worship. The king is the sole source of succor in this difficult set of earthly circumstances and effectively becomes God writ small.

In the second half of this stanza, Hoccleve reveals something

about the real-life circumstances of the poem and explains, implicitly, the reason why it was not necessary to name the petitioners. "The somme þat we in our bill expresse," writes Hoccleve, "Is nat excessif ne outrageous." One would, perhaps, like to believe that this poem accompanied an invoice for the king's perusal; that is certainly the implication. The document would doubtless have been executed by Hoccleve, with or without the assistance of his fellow petitioners, and we presume he presented the document and poem to a representative of the king.²⁴ Obviously, no mention of the petitioners' names is strictly necessary since they appear in the accompanying document. In the space of two stanzas, Hoccleve has taken us from the most formal and high-flown language to a direct, unadorned statement of mission. These two sides of Hoccleve, poet and professional, are seldom presented in such high relief as they are here. After a stanza and a half of rhetorical pyrotechnics, he states quite simply and straightforwardly that the fee is reasonable and the petitioners have earned it.

Having wound down his rhetorical language over the course of the first two stanzas, Hoccleve ramps it up again in the third and final stanza, re-emphasizing the petitioners' long service.

O lige lord, þat han be plenteuous
 Vn-to your Liges of your grace algate,
 Styntith nat now for to be bounteous
 To vs, your seruantz of the olde date!
 God woot we han been ay, eerly & late,
 Louyinge lige men to your noblesse.
 Lat nat the strook of indigence vs mate,
 O worthy Prince! mirour of prowessse! (ll. 17-24)

As we have seen, the clerks of the Privy Seal were careerists virtually to a man, and most of them enjoyed long tenures in their posts, Hoccleve himself being perhaps the best example, with forty years on the job, so there is no exaggeration in Hoccleve's assertions that the petitioners are "seruantz of the olde date" who have supported the king "ay, eerly & late." More importantly, though, the petitioners' service has not only been long, but valuable as well; they are "[l]ovyinge lige men." Hoccleve's strongly worded appeal makes the king's role equally clear: Henry is to demonstrate his "noblesse," to, in a word, do his duty to his loving liegemen. Hoccleve ends on a complimentary note, denominating the king a "mirour of prowesse," which harkens back to his initial epithet, "Victorious," creating a neat bookend as well as emphasizing the poem's symmetrical structure.

Aside from being perhaps the most conventional of the four begging poems we will discuss, the ballade to Henry is also executed with the boldest strokes. The asymmetry of the relationship between petitioners and petitioned is marked with very formal and high-flown language, and although good feelings flow in both directions, there is never any doubt that the king is on his throne and the petitioners are on their knees. However, Hoccleve is not only a petitioner; as we have seen, he and his co-petitioners are also good citizens. Since the poem conducts business with the king, the emphasis on good citizenship is hardly surprising, and is found elsewhere in Hoccleve's oeuvre.²⁵

In the second begging poem we shall discuss, "Balade to My Lord the Chancellor," the relationship between Hoccleve and his addressee is almost as asymmetrical as the one we found in "Balade to Henry V, For Money," although the rhetorical approach is markedly different from

that of the latter poem. It is uncertain to whom the poem is addressed, but if Furnivall's dating of the poem to around 1405 is correct, the addressee may be Henry Beaufort, who served as Lord Chancellor three times during Hoccleve's life, once as the Bishop of Lincoln and twice as Bishop of Winchester. It is tempting to select Beaufort as the likeliest target of Hoccleve's petition, given his close family connections to the House of Lancaster. He was half-brother to Henry IV, uncle to Henry V, although his relations with the latter were often strained. Perhaps more importantly, his sister was the recipient of an autograph copy of the poems later published in Furnivall's edition of Hoccleve's minor poems, now preserved as DUL MS Cosin V.III.9 Thomas Hoccleve 1421 x 1426. However, J. A. Burrow makes a convincing case for Thomas Langley as recipient of the poem. Langley succeeded Beaufort as Lord Chancellor immediately after serving as Keeper of the Privy Seal, and Hoccleve's reference to himself in the poem as "your Clerc" gives weight to Burrow's claim (1994, 203). Even if the addressee is neither Langley nor Beaufort, we know that the Lords Chancellor of England during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were usually clergymen. Like Beaufort, who became Bishop of Lincoln at the relatively tender age of twenty-four, these men were careerists who enjoyed substantial influence and power in both church and government. An awareness of the nature of his target guides Hoccleve's hand in "Balade to My Lord the Chancellor," where direct speech and a comparatively muted tone replace the highly colored, even bombastic, language of the petition to Henry V.

Fadir in god, benigne and reuerent,

My lord the Chancellor with al humblesse

I, your seruant at your commandement,
 Byseeche vn-to your excellent noblesse,
 þat my patente bere may witesse
 that myne arrerages been granted me:
 Right as your staf your warant wole expresse
 Byseeche I, y, yow so my patente be. (ll. 1-8)

Here, Hoccleve's tone is indeed subdued. The language is painstakingly humble, as we might expect in a poem addressing a church figure rather than a secular authority like the king; there is clearly less space given to sheer effusive praise than in the petition to Henry V. There is also a comparative calmness and an almost total avoidance of figurative language, with the key words designating the Lord Chancellor's qualities being "benigne and reuerent," restrained indeed when compared to the linguistic pyrotechnics rolled out for the king in the "Balade to Henry V." The stanza flows very quickly, a quality emphasized by Furnivall's judicious punctuation, and the lack of adornment renders it cool, even cold, as it works its way to its subdued conclusion. Although the same subservient language that we observed in the petition to Henry V is here ("byseeche," for instance, appears twice), Hoccleve's presentation of his request is terse, succinct, even faintly legalistic; he presents the evidence and requests the Lord Chancellor's intercession.

In the poem's second stanza, Hoccleve adopts a more personal tone, one that might even be construed as humorous, or at least winsome. Though more personal, the tone is again regulated by a straightforwardness perhaps best reflected by Hoccleve's reference to his "poore symplesse."

I truste in yow for euere or this han yee
 Be my good lord and now to stynte I gesse,
 Applied is nat your benignitee,
 Specially syn my poore symplesse
 Nat hath offendid your hy worthynesse
 Wityngly; but myn herte is euere bent
 To sheete at yow good wil in soothfastnesse,
 Ther-in am I ful hoot & ful feruent. (ll. 9-16)

Hoccleve prostrates himself, though his prostration is mediated by his own qualifying language. He reminds his lord that he has never, to his knowledge, offended him, and if he has he certainly wasn't aware of it. His heart is always inclined toward sentiments of good will toward the Chancellor; in that regard, in fact, he is "ful hoot & ful feruent."

Again in the third stanza Hoccleve's approach is a measured one. Hoccleve addresses the Lord Chancellor as one cloaked in magnificence, using much the same language as that employed in the ballade to Henry V, but undercuts that magnificence on an almost line-by-line basis with a series of decidedly informal exclamations and qualifications that seem to hint at a familiarity that cannot have subsisted between the Chancellor, in his official role, and Hoccleve.

O my lord gracious, wys, and prudent!
 To me, your Clerc beeth of your grace free!
 Let see now cacce a lust and a talent
 Me to haue in your faouour & cheertee.
 Ther-on wayte I I wayte on your bountee,
 That to so manye han shewid gentillesse.
 Let me no stepchyld been for I am he

That hope haue in yow, confort & gladnesse. (ll. 17-24)

Although the language is more muted here than in the ballade to Henry, Hoccleve promotes the characterization of the Chancellor as a figure of irresistible authority, in much the same way that Henry V's elevated status was delineated. The Chancellor is "gracious, wys, and prudent," words that could be used equally fittingly to describe the king. The analogy between royalty and the divine may be intensified by Hoccleve's designation of himself as "your Clerc," but it is worth recalling at this point that the recipient of the poem may have been Thomas Langley, a former Keeper of the Privy Seal, in which case Hoccleve's designation has a very literal, if double-edged, provenance. We need not abandon our original reading of the line as an expression of the recipient as analog for God, however, although the line acquires an additional shade or facet of meaning.

In the third stanza, Hoccleve seems to undercut the language of station that guides the first and second stanzas. He hopes that the Lord Chancellor may "cacce a lust and a talent" to shower favor upon Hoccleve, a decidedly colloquial formulation. The glossary accompanying the *Minor Poems* suggests that "lust" and "talent" are synonymous, with "talent" deriving from the Old French *talant* [desire], but the Biblical connotations are apparent, if tenuously applied. "Lat me no stepchyld been," he importunes the Lord Chancellor. If Hoccleve's lord is a god, then Hoccleve wishes to be perceived as a true child of that god. The vigor and inventiveness of the language of the third stanza gives us reason to reconsider the almost non-committal tone of the second stanza. In light of what the third stanza accomplishes, the second functions almost as a feint, a drawing back before delivery of the

telling blow, perhaps exemplary of that "slipperiness" that sometimes troubled Furnivall.

Of the begging poems we include in our discussion, this one is perhaps the freest of autobiographical references. Although a number of official documents record payments to Hoccleve, there is no sure way to identify any of them with specific poems. More importantly, however, Hoccleve makes no mention of any of the particulars of his own life and work, as he does elsewhere, other than his rather oblique reference to himself as the Lord Chancellor's "Clerc." Hoccleve is a comparatively anonymous being in his petitions to both the king and Lord Chancellor, just one fish in a vast sea. Any subject of the king might conceivably petition him, and much the same holds true for the Lord Chancellor. More to the point however, is the reduction of the petitioner to a status so low as to be anonymous, appropriate indeed when emphasizing the vast gulf separating petitioner and petitioned in this case. Hoccleve once again displays his very sensitive gauging of social distance, an important tool in constructing a decorous address to one unequal in social status.

It seems self-evident that the language and style of the poem to the Lord Chancellor constructs a relationship that, while expressive of social distance and redolent with respect, is less vehement in its elevation of its recipient than the poem to Henry V. The colloquial, though multi-edged, turns of phrase that mark the Lord Chancellor's poem are not found in the lyric to Henry V. Although it would almost certainly be overzealous to suggest that Hoccleve wrote his begging poems with an eye to some virtual organization chart dictating the level of address to adopt, there are clear and measurable differences

in the tone and degree of deference Hoccleve adopts. Hoccleve, ever painstaking in the formulation of the relationship between petitioner and petitioned, presents the recipient as possessing a basic humility that the poem to Henry does not convey. Marking the Lord Chancellor as a man of god from the first line, "Fadir in god, benigne and reuerent," Hoccleve consistently applies comparatively muted language that marks his recipient not only as a superior but as one who, in his role as a high-ranking member of the Church, must also maintain an aura of humility consistent with his religious function.

In both of the poems we have discussed thus far the relationship between Hoccleve and his addressee has been a more or less conventional example of the petition. Both the king and the Lord Chancellor are perceived as distant, even more or less ethereal beings that display a considerable measure of grace simply by acknowledging the abject poet's poor attempt at communication. Prostration before the magnificence of the lord is evidenced clearly, though differentially, in both examples. In the other two begging poems we shall discuss, the relationship between petitioner and petitioned is radically different, in terms of both the nature and status of the men addressed and the relationship Hoccleve depicts between himself and them. The differences we have noted between the address to Henry V and the Lord Chancellor's poem will be reinforced and reemphasized.

The third poem we shall consider, the "Balade to My Maister Carpenter," is addressed to one John Carpenter, the town clerk of London. However, the poem was very probably not written for Carpenter. Only one manuscript of the poem is extant, and J. A. Burrow reports that "the poem was first addressed to some other likely mediator, for

the name Carpenter is squeezed in over an erasure... and the metre of the line in which it occurs requires not three but two syllables" (1994, 204). Moreover, the poem's brusque tone would probably be inappropriate if the recipient were Carpenter. Although certainly not on the same level with the king or the Lord Chancellor, the position of Town Clerk, or Secretary, of London was no mean office. Carpenter apparently did quite well for himself, and became a patron of the arts later in life, sponsoring a painting of the Dance of Death complemented by verses by Lydgate (Knapp 2001, 85).

In the "Balade to My Maister Carpenter" we see a self-portrait of Hoccleve that is seldom repeated in the poems. He demonstrates a boisterous humor and colloquial effervescence that is also evident, but in a distanced and comparatively critical way, in "Le Male Regle." The source of Hoccleve's financial woes is different in this case as well; rather than requesting the payment of an annuity or, in the case of the Lord Chancellor, the exertion of influence to force the payment of sums due, Hoccleve here requests assistance in the payment of his creditors.

See heer, my maister Carpenter, I yow preye,
 How many challenges ageyn me be;
 And I may nat deliure hem by no weye,
 So me werreyeth coyne scarsetee,
 That ny Cousin is to necessitee.
 For why, vn-to yow seeke I for refut,
 Which þat of confort am ny destitut. (ll. 1-8)

Hoccleve's language is informal, even conversational, a quality we have not seen thus far in the begging poems. The first line of the poem reflects an almost symmetrical relationship, and the directness of the

language is nothing short of friendly; indeed, we here see Hoccleve for the first time in the role of friend formulated by J. A. Burrow. Most noteworthy, in the context of our discussion thus far, is the absence of "holy" or similarly elevated language. It is clear that Carpenter is not an analog for the figure of God, as, we have argued, Henry and the Lord Chancellor are.

Despite the evident informality of the poem, however, there is sufficient reason to believe that its intent was quite serious. Internal evidence reveals that it was accompanied, like the poem to Henry V, by another document, a statement of accounts of some sort. "Tho men whos names I aboue expresse, / Fayn wolden þat they and I euene were" (ll. 8-9). Another factor that should mitigate the temptation to read too much into the poem's affability is the fact, mentioned above, that Carpenter's name is written in over an erasure in the title and inserted into the first line of the poem, disrupting the meter.²⁶ We should also recall that Hoccleve, although generous with what appear to be autobiographical nuggets, was a poet governed as well by convention. As Judith Ferster has cautioned, we should be "leery of taking his autobiographical claims literally" since he "had a tendency to shape his life for the purpose of his arguments" (1996, 139).

Much of the language of the poem to Carpenter recalls lines we have seen elsewhere. One of Hoccleve's favorite tropes, that of the sleeplessness occasioned by his state of indebtedness, which we have seen in the prologue to the *Regiment*, appears in the third stanza, where Hoccleve bemoans the inflexibility of his creditors.

And therefore, as faire as I can & may,
With aspen herte I preye hem abyde,

And me respyte to sum lenger day.
 Some of hem grante and some of hem seyn "nay!"
 And I so sore aye dreede an aftir clap,
 That it me reueth many a sleep & nap. (ll. 16-21)

Perhaps more telling, however, are the differences between the way Hoccleve positions himself in relation to Carpenter and analogous positionings in the poems to the king and the Lord Chancellor. Although we can say with considerable certainty that Hoccleve was not Carpenter's social equal, Hoccleve's avoidance of the kind of elevated language he employs in the poem to the king, for instance, in which Hoccleve and his confederates "[m]eekly byseechen" the "kyng pitous" to "[t]endre pitee haue on our sharp distresse" (ll. 3, 4), is telling. In fact, nowhere in the poem to Carpenter does Hoccleve explicitly state his social position relative to Carpenter's or to his creditors'. Indeed, his debt is a legal matter and has nothing to do directly with social position. Carpenter's assistance is manifestly a favor. The final stanza illustrates these points.

If þat it lykid vnto your goodnesse,
 To be betwixt [hem] and me, swich a mene
 As þat I mighte kept be fro duresse!
 Myn heuy thoghtes wolde it voide clene.
 As your good plesance is this thyng demene!
 How wel þat yee doon & how soone also,
 I suffre may in qwenchyng of my wo. (ll. 22-28)

Whether or not Carpenter's action is a "favor" to Hoccleve may be rendered moot by the striking familiarity with which Hoccleve ends his request: the promptness and skill with which Carpenter resolves the

situation will determine how soon Hoccleve's woe ends. These words would certainly be radically out of place in the context of a petition to either the king or the Lord Chancellor, where they would be regarded as overly familiar, perhaps insultingly so.

The last poem that we shall consider, "Balade and Rowndel to Maister Somer," reveals Hoccleve at his most playful. Although a good deal of social distance still prevails between Hoccleve and Somer, who was made Baron of the Exchequer in 1408,²⁷ they were members of the same dinner club, the so-called Court of Good Company, and so, manifestly, socialized together, although almost certainly on an asymmetrical basis. Hoccleve provides clues regarding the relationship, betraying a seemingly casual friendliness as well as deference: "Glad cheerid Somer to your gouvernaille / And grace we submitte al our willynge" (ll. 9-10). Indeed, the airy familiarity of Hoccleve's tone is apparent from the first stanza as he puns on Somer's name.

The Sonne, with his bemes of brightnesse,
 To man so kyndly is, & norisshynge,
 Pat lakkyng it day nere but dirknesse:
 To day he yeueth his enlumynyng,
 And causith al fruyt for to wexe & sprynge:
 Now, syn pat sonne may so moche auail,
 And moost with Somer is his soiournynge,
 That sesoun bonteuous we wole assaill. (ll. 1-8)

Here, as elsewhere, the language is informal, and, as in the poem to Carpenter, the language is devoid of the kind of transcendently laudatory language that marks the poems to the king and the Lord Chancellor. Indeed, the poem is dominated by its central conceit, the

warmth and kindness of Somer/summer and the bounty of harvest that follows it.

Aftir your good lust, be the sesonynge
 Of our fruytes this laste Mighelmesse,
 The tyme of yeer was of our seed ynnynge,
 The lak of which is our greet heuynesse. (ll. 13-16)

The crux of the figure lies in these four lines, of course. Summer has given way to the time of "seed ynnynge," but there is, unfortunately, no harvest to gather. Playing again upon the seasonal conceit, Hoccleve hopes that Somer will "[n]ow yeue vs cause ageyn this cristemesse / For to be glad" (ll. 19-20)

As in the poems to the king and to Carpenter, Hoccleve has co-petitioners and he names them:

We, your seruantes, Hoccleue & Baillay,
 Hethe & Offorde, yow beseeche & preye,
 "Haastith our heruest as soone as yee may!" (ll. 25-27)

He then continues, as in the others poems, with a description of the suffering caused by the nonpayment of the men's salaries. However, in this very carefully conceived and executed poem, the description of woe gives way almost at once to a return to the celebration that will ensue when payment is received.

For fere of stormes our wit is aweye;
 Were our seed Inned wel we mighten pleye,
 And vs desporte & synge & make game,
 And yit this rowndel shul we synge & seye
 In trust of yow & honour of your name. (ll. 28-32)

In this case, the poem is accompanied not by an invoice or statement of

accounts but by another poem, designated, in the manuscript, a "Rowndel, or Chanceon to Somer".²⁸ In the round, Hoccleve again reminds Somer of the request for payment, though in a tone so lighthearted and affectionate that the message is almost obliterated, retained only in the reference to Christmas, by which time, as Hoccleve has indicated before, he and his co-workers would like to receive payment.

To heuy folk of thee the remembraunce
Is salue & oynement to hir seeknesse.

For why we thus shul synge in Cristemesse.... (ll. 38-40)

Another poem written around this time,²⁹ "The Court of Good Company, To H. Somer," is worth mentioning in connection with the "Balade and Rowndel." Here the relationship between Hoccleve and Somer is made specific and we see the Hoccleve that Stephen Medcalf has described as a "clubbable London clerk of literary leanings" (1981, 127). Hoccleve addresses Somer warmly: "Worsshipful sir, and our freend special, / And felawe, in this cas we calle yow" (ll. 1-2). Hoccleve addresses various matters pertaining to the Court of Good Company's activities and then, in the last few stanzas, a familiar side of the poet emerges. Reminding Somer that it is his duty to provide dinner at the get-together scheduled for the next Thursday (ll. 50-56), Hoccleve writes, "We yow nat holde auysid in swich wyse / As for to make vs destitut, þat day, / Of our dyner" (ll. 57-59), assuring Somer that "We trusten in your wys experience" (l. 68). Here, for the first time, is evidence apparently supporting our speculations regarding the relationship between Hoccleve and an individual who served as a patron, or at least a supporter. We must, of course, ask ourselves exactly how much of "The Court of Good Company" itself is guided by observance of

poetic convention, but the arc we have drawn from the highly subservient relationship described in the ballade to Henry to the familiar, even congenial, language of the petition to Somer tends to support our conclusions regarding Hoccleve's use of the language of station in portraying his relationships with the parties whom he petitions.

Hoccleve provides us with the largest body of begging poetry by a single identifiable medieval English poet. The poems give us the best clue as to how English poets of the late middle ages went about framing their requests, and, in particular, how they portrayed their relationships with the recipients of their petitions. In addition to this comparatively bountiful evidence, a significant proportion of the rest of Hoccleve's oeuvre also employs techniques common to the begging poems, as we have seen in the examples of "La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve" and the prologue to *The Regiment of Princes*. However, we have also seen that we must exercise a considerable degree of caution in drawing conclusions about the begging poems and their historical provenance since there remains a significant amount of controversy regarding exactly how conventional a poet Hoccleve was. In this chapter we have followed the middle path, which is justified by the remarkable individualism of Hoccleve the poet. It seems unlikely, from our far remove, at any rate, that the Hoccleve of the *Series*, who laments his struggle to return to his former life after his bout of mental instability, could be wholly the product of convention. Nevertheless, his work stands out as a unique achievement in medieval English poetry, one that both partakes of tradition and breaks new ground, a long-standing attribute of noteworthy literature.

AFTERWORD

In the mildly polemical introduction to his *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, the second volume of the mammoth *Oxford English Literary History*, James Simpson details the processes that enabled him to put a handle, however provisional, on the very concept of literary history. Simpson recounts some of the compromises he was forced to make in the course of his labors. During the planning stages, as he contemplated possible approaches to his subject, he was compelled to consider the consequences of choosing one. How many important and worthwhile perspectives would become irrelevant as a result? "Work on this book," writes Simpson, "has convinced me of the profoundly contingent nature of historical writing" (2002, 3).

Our choice of topic for this study -- the begging trope in medieval English poetry, with emphasis on short forms -- has provided us with a challenge directly opposite to Simpson's. Rather than taking history as our subject and then attempting to contain and control it by adopting a particular perspective, we took in hand a phenomenon that displays no overt signs of organic growth, of genesis or evolution -- in short, with no particular grounding in chronology -- and considered a variety of influences that impact it. Among these influences were the

circumstances of the times in which the poems were written, in social, political and cultural terms. When possible, we also utilized the records pertaining to the poets and their patrons. To the extent possible, we have related the techniques employed in the poems' composition to our account of their genesis.

For a very simple reason, this approach to understanding the begging trope in medieval poetry is an appropriate one. Poems that beg, as we have described them, are directly and unambiguously engaged in the circumstances that beget them. Although they may be steeped in convention, they are the product of real transactions between real people, and in the most well-documented cases, such as Hoccleve's, we have even been able to describe the documents that bear witness to the transaction. Thus, our approach displays a certain lack of malleability when we attempt to mold it into pure theory. Nevertheless, to attempt to discuss poems that beg without recourse to a description of the circumstances of their composition is to disengage ourselves, at least partially, from our recognition that the poems, in fact, beg.

Aside from our curiosity regarding the genesis and outcome of these transactions, we have indulged an interest in how the business of poetry was conducted in medieval England. Of necessity, we have cast a wide net, drawing on historical and anthropological sources as well as literary ones. Although we have complained frequently about the lack of evidence on which to base our conclusions regarding medieval poetry, the theoretical boundlessness of our approach makes clear that, at least in one sense, our sources of information are potentially boundless. We can draw upon any source of information that sheds light upon the lives of poets and their patrons, the circumstances of their

times, the character of the societies in which they lived, or the literary preconceptions that guided them.

From our modern standpoint, it may cheapen the poems to give undue consideration to why they were written. Manifestly, they were written to stimulate payment, whether of a debt or a potential salary. When we ask the same question about a love poem, the answer may seem more edifying: the poem was written to celebrate the poet's love, and to share with us, or arouse in us, feelings of sympathy, whether identity or pity. Although the experience of being owed money may be as common as that of being in love, in a society polarized by attitudes regarding materialism the commission of collection notices to verse stands in danger of being dismissed as at best superficial, at worst sycophantic, grasping. Nevertheless, I would suggest that questions about why a particular begging poem was written, and curiosity about the events surrounding its composition and outcome, are natural. In any event, we should ask questions about the begging poems even if only because they are, at their best, too ingenious to be written off simply as poetic invoices.

Of course, the reasons for the writing of any particular poem may be legion, but in the case of the begging poems we find some of the poet's more mundane answers in the poems. The clarity of Hoccleve's requests, for instance, is manifest. As we have seen, he is even capable of providing a list of petitioners' names in the lines of his verse. He also identifies, either by name or title, the patrons who owe him and his friends. Hoccleve's patrons provide answers as well because they kept records of the debt and also, in some cases, the payment. But does Hoccleve's well-documented groveling cheapen the value we place on

his verse? I submit that it should not, although I maintain an awareness of the attitude that poetry should be concerned with loftier things.

If the begging poems seem to be the product of sensibilities very different from our own, it is perhaps incumbent upon us to acknowledge that they are the product of such sensibilities. Not only medieval sensibilities were different; so was the perception of the value and uses of poetry. Particularly at the end of the medieval period, poetry had a far greater presence and currency in public life and society in general than it does now. As V. J. Scattergood (1971) has made abundantly clear, poetry was a viable and vibrant means of communication during the later medieval period, especially during the fifteenth century, when Lydgate and Hoccleve were active. It is clear that poems that beg would participate robustly in any tradition in which poetry is a deadly serious business.

NOTES

Foreword

1. Consider, for example, the voluminous and varied scholarship on the Old English *Widsith* and the comparative dearth of studies characterizing it as a begging poem, the most prominent of which are discussed in Chapter One. See also, e.g., Knapp, who discusses Hoccleve's begging poems in the context of penitential verse (2001, 37-43).

2. Although Hoccleve is also frequently denominated a "Chaucerian" (Brewer 1966) his contribution to the begging genre is sufficient to require a chapter of his own.

3. See, e.g., Jones et al. 2003, Yeager 2005.

4. See, e.g., Scanlon and Simpson 2006.

5. Scattergood's *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* is a classic study of the public role of poetry during the late medieval period. More recently, Robert J. Meyer-Lee has written, "This is a poetry directly motivated by and pervasively meditative on its moment in history, a poetry highly conscious of being both a public intervention in the social, political, and religious turmoil of its

time, and the inauguration of a vernacular literary tradition" (2007, 5).

Chapter One: The Old English Begging Poem

1. Regarding the consistency of Old English verse, Foley notes that "alliterative half-lines, with characteristic stress-patterns and other internal structures, underlie all of the extant 30,000 lines of the poetry" (2003, 91).

2. See, e.g., Pyles and Algeo 1982, 98ff.

3. Edward James (2001) describes Roman recruitment of Germanic soldiers (48-49). James also provides a succinct account of Anglo-Saxon migrations into Britain as well as Gaul beginning around the middle of the fifth century (109-10).

4. See Chadwick 1971, Chapter 5; Todd 1982, esp. Chapter 2.

5. See James 2001, 118-19, and Abels, who writes, "A seventh- or eighth-century king most often came to his throne through violence or through the threat of violence, and kept his crown by warding off domestic and foreign rivals" (1988, 12).

6. See Whitelock 1968, 31-33; Abels 1988, Chapter 1.

7. During the period, the *comitatus* as we recognize it in the poetry appears to have become a relic. Abels (1988, Chapter 2) details the growth of bookland tenure, which tied individuals and families permanently to specified allotments of land, in distinction to the earlier *fyrð* system (Abels 1988, Chapter 1), which specified non-hereditary grants of land. Obviously, this change made it potentially more difficult to concentrate land in the hands of those who best served the lord's interests.

8. See, e.g., Hill (1995; 2000).

9. See, e.g., Abels 1988, 30.

10. The Old English *Wanderer* provides an extended and eloquent evocation of the grief, despair, and physical isolation that rules a warrior separated from lord and comrades and the comforts of the communal hall.

[G]emon he selesecgas ond sincþege,
 hu hine on geoguðe his goldwine
 wenede to wiste: wyn eal gedreas. (ll. 34-36)

[He remembers the men of the hall and treasure-giving, how his gold-friend accustomed him to the feast in his youth: the glory all faded.]

11. For a sampling of criticism that emphasizes the bookishness of key Old English poems, see Goldsmith 1960, 1970, 1991; Halverson 1966; Huppé 1959, 1984; Kaske 1958; McNamee 1991; Phillipotts 1991; and Stanley 1975. George Hardin Brown (1986) makes a very evenhanded case for the quality of Old English religious verse. For a viewpoint that emphasizes the pagan roots of the poetry, see Moorman 1967.

12. Huppé (1984) offers perhaps the best and most comprehensive reading of *Beowulf* as a religious poem.

13. For a compact overview of the history and nature of the theory of oral composition, see Foley 1988.

14. See Lord 1960, 13ff.

15. These concepts will be expanded upon below. For an extended development, see Lord 1960, Chapters 3, 4.

16. For an account of the dynamics of composition, see Lord 1960, Chapter 5. Although Lord's presentation is based on his experiences in

eastern Europe, it is fair to assume that Old English poetry was composed under similar circumstances. For a description of the additive and aggregative nature of oral traditional verse, see Ong 1982, 37-39.

17. It is worth mentioning that idiomatic words and phrases, or words and phrases with recognized impact within the tradition, could provide an exception to Irving's very reasonable analysis.

18. See Ong on the "redundancy" of oral traditional verse (1982, 39-41). Brodeur (1952, Chapter 2) also investigates the "repetitive" quality of Old English verse. See also Robinson 1985.

19. The existence of the poems in manuscript is no help in dating them since date of composition and manuscript date are not necessarily related. While historical evidence may establish a date before which the poem could not have been composed, as in the case of *The Battle of Maldon*, which recounts a historical event, we are not so fortunate in the case of most of the poems. Additionally, Whitelock notes that linguistic evidence based on phonetic changes in the Old English language is of little assistance either since we must allow for the possible perpetuation of archaic forms in the poetry (1949, 81-82).

20. The Old English poetic corpus represents a tradition in transition from orality to literacy. Foley notes that, in the interest of accuracy, works whose provenance is speculative should be regarded as "oral-derived" rather than oral (1990, 5). More recently, Foley has suggested

thinking of oral poetry as a spectrum
encompassing a number of typical forms: (1) oral
performance, (2) voiced texts (composed in
writing but specifically for live performance),

(3) voices from the past (ancient and medieval poetry of uncertain origins but composed in an oral traditional style), and (4) written oral poetry (composed in writing and never intended for performance, although written in an oral traditional style). (2003, 79-80)

21. The text of the poem is included in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* in *The Vercelli Book* volume, edited by Krapp, pp. 61-65.

22. For a text of the poem, see Klinck 1992, 79-83.

23. See Krapp and Dobbie 1932, ix-xvi.

24. See also Robinson, p. 54.

25. See French 1945, 628n24.

26. Ong discusses the agonistic tone common to oral traditional productions (1982, 43-45).

27. It is worthwhile here to bear in mind Ong's (1982) assertion that oral traditional poetry is "close to the human lifeworld" (42-43) and "situational rather than abstract" (49ff.).

28. The perceived grammatical peculiarities of the refrain have been the source of lively critical discussion, and many studies of *Deor* devote significant space to the issue. For four discussions centering upon the refrain, see Markland 1972-73, Banerjee 1984, Harris 1987, and Erickson 1977. Harris provides evidence that the refrain may be a proverb or saying.

Frankis claims that *Wulf and Eadwacer* has a refrain as well (1962, 172), as do, e.g., Klinck (1992, 48) and Krapp and Dobbie (1932, lvi), although it only occurs twice, irregularly, in the poem. The interpretive difficulties occasioned by the apparently fragmentary

nature of the poem as well as by its (suggestive?) position just before the riddles in the *Exeter Book*, have yet to be resolved. For a summary of these difficulties see Klinck 1992, 47-49. For a text of the poem, see Klinck 1992, 92.

29. For further background on *Deor* and the critical cruces it presents, see Klinck's discussion (1992, 43-46).

30. L. Whitbread has offered the opinion that the reference to "supple sinew-bonds" is in fact a reference to the crippling of Welund (1956). He states that the physical binding of Welund did not occur, but his evidence is tenuous. In Malone's note on Welund and Beaduhild, the summary of a Scandinavian tale about Welund includes his binding, which occurred prior to his being hamstrung (1966, 4-5). See also Kaske 1963 for notes on anthropological considerations relevant to the words "be wurman."

31. See especially Malone's fourth edition of *Deor* (1966), which provides a partial recounting of the process by which his final text was assembled, Stephens 1969, and Whitbread (1940; 1943; 1947; 1963).

32. See Eliason 1965; Kiernan 1975; Malone (1937; 1942; 1966); Whitbread 1941; and Norman 1937.

33. In addition to Boren, whose argument is summarized below, Jerome Mandel has offered the opinion that *Deor* functions as an educational tool utilizing exemplum and refrain. According to Mandel, "Deor does far more than catalogue the adversity suffered by others. There is, in the poem, a sliding scale of complexity and meaning, of purpose and teaching that fascinates and compels" (1977, 9).

34. As long ago as 1942, Kemp Malone noted that "the subject matter of each section is peculiar to that section.... Each section is

complete and self-sufficient, capable of standing alone as an independent poem" (1942, 2). Frankis partially supports this view. The *Deor*-poet, he suggests, "sees these two episodes [Welund and Beaduhild] not as part of a logical sequence of events (cause and effect), but simply as separate examples of human suffering" (1962, 166).

35. As early as 1911, Lawrence described *Deor* as "a veritable *Consolatio Philosophiae* of minstrelsy" (23). Tuggle differs, stating that "*Deor* cannot rightly be considered a Boethian poem" (1977, 240).

36. It is reasonable to suppose the Alfred was "responsible for" the translation of Boethius, among other similar projects (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 29), whether or not he actually set pen to paper. Of course, the translation begins thus: "King Alfred was the translator of this book: he turned it from Latin into English, as it now stands before you" (Keynes and Lapidge 1983, 131).

37. For a critique of Markland's treatment and translation of Boethius, see Bolton 1972.

38. See Whitbread 1970.

Chapter 2: Chaucer and Lydgate

1. See, e.g., Strohm 1989, pp. 1-46.

2. See Hicks 1995, 12-14.

3. In characteristically lucid fashion, Simon Walker outlines the major positions in the debate on bastard feudalism in his essay "Lordship and Lawlessness in the Palatinate of Lancaster":

While earlier writers had no doubt that the emergence of magnate affinities -- bands of men

bound to a lord by an indenture of retainer and a money fee rather than by a heritable fief in land -- in the early fourteenth century had destructive consequences for the quality of public order, their unfavorable judgments have now been largely replaced by a more sympathetic account of the workings of magnate lordship, which portrays the medieval affinity as neither an aberration nor a degeneration from the arrangements of an earlier age, but, rather, the logical successor to them. The creation of this consensus represents, however, only the first stage in the effort to reach a proper understanding of the mechanics of lordship in later medieval England, for it raises a number of secondary questions that have yet to be resolved. (2006, 17)

The debate on bastard feudalism seems to have grown more contentious over time, as Michael Hicks's very helpful overview amply demonstrates (see, e.g., the summary in Chapter One, 1-42). K. B. McFarlane's "Bastard Feudalism" is still a classic source and the seed from which almost all subsequent scholarship has grown. In *Social Chaucer*, Paul Strohm discusses bastard feudalism in the context of Chaucer's career and art. For a high-level distillation of some of the more recent salient issues, see Coss, "Bastard Feudalism Revised," and the response in Carpenter and Crouch, "Debate: Bastard Feudalism Revised," followed by Coss' rejoinder, "Bastard Feudalism Revised:

Reply."

4. Hicks (1995) provides a good overview of the affinity and its reliance on political influence and cash (104-08). He also provides data on the bastard feudal aristocracy (5-12). Admission to the various levels of the aristocracy "came to be granted only to those capable of living at the appropriate style and by the fourteenth century promotion to the higher ranks of the peerage presupposed the attainment of the qualifying income" (6).

5. Christine Carpenter 1980, 524. Although Carpenter's study analyzes an affinity in Warwickshire, the processes and consequences she describes are very similar to those of other affinities described by other scholars. "There is no reason to suppose," she writes, "that Beauchamp's affinity was in any way uncharacteristic except that it was perhaps better led than most" (1980, 514). For purposes of comparison, see Simon Walker's *The Lancastrian Affinity*, a now-classic treatment of an affinity to which Chaucer belonged.

6. Some refining of our assertion of the similarities between Richard II's affinity and John of Gaunt's may be desirable. According to Simon Walker, "although the Lancastrian household was relatively fixed in its organization, it was, in comparison with the king's, surprisingly fluid in membership.... These changes in membership reflected the changing emphases of John of Gaunt's policy" (1990, 12).

Also per Walker,

the size of Lancaster's household helps to put into perspective some of the more extravagant contemporary claims about his political and dynastic ambitions. Although commensurate with

his dignity as a prince of the royal blood, his establishment never remotely rivalled the king's household in numbers and was clearly never intended to do so.... Although the duke's household... grew in size between 1381 and the early 1390s, the expansion was on nothing like the scale seen in the royal household and was far from uniform. (1990, 13)

7. See Walker 1990, 8. Basing his conclusions on a survey of the work of medieval, Renaissance, and Restoration scholars, Michael Hicks has suggested a classification with six categories, including household retainers, tenants, officers and counselors, so-called extraordinary (noble) retainers, liveried retainers, and servants and well-wishers (1995, 43-68).

8. Simon Walker provides a richly detailed account of the cohesion of the Lancastrian affinity (1990, 81-116). Christine Carpenter comments at length on the "strong degree of permanence in all the Warwickshire affinities" (1980, 518). In a slight departure, Chris Given-Wilson posits a more fluid situation, citing instances in which retainers withdrew their backing when they disagreed with their lord (1987, 82-83). Given-Wilson writes, "There was no question of blind loyalty... even to the greatest of magnates. Magnates were just as dependent on their followers as their followers were on them" (1987, 83).

9. Among others, see Chute 1946, Howard 1987, Pearsall 1992, and, most recently, Ackroyd 2004.

10. See Bennett 1992, 9. For an account of the apparent sea change

at court during Richard II's reign, see Bennett 1992, 9-10, and Jones et al. 2003, 9-18.

11. For an account of the conflict between Richard II and the Lords Appellant, see especially Saul 1997, 176-204.

12. Chaucer was an esquire in Edward III's service beginning in 1367 (Pearsall 1992, 47-48), began doing service in the household of Richard when he assumed the throne on Edward's death in 1377 (Howard 1987, 222ff.), and received an annuity from John of Gaunt from 1374 through 1380, according to records cited by Walker (1990, 266).

13. For helpful accounts of these events, see Saul 1997, 394-434, and Seward 1987, 1-12.

14. Strohm (1992, 36) and Dillon (2000, 254) both address this possibility.

15. Terry Jones writes, "Without the envoy, it looks much... like a number of other poems written at about the same time by various poets, all of which are similarly humorous treatments of money" (2003, 178).

16. Yeager has written that Chaucer's debts and the litigation being pursued against him, "rather than being evidence of Chaucer's improvidence, may indicate instead his skill at staying solvent during dry periods of non-payment by the crown, which under Richard were frequent" (2005, 375).

17. Yeager notes, quite believably, that "Penning a fresh ballade -- or half-a-dozen -- scarcely seems a daunting task for Chaucer" (2005, 388).

18. Examples of what we might term "mainstream" responses to Chaucer's complaints can be found in a good number of sources. Donald

Howard writes that "While the poem is a classic example of a court poet telling a monarch what he wants to hear, Chaucer was probably satisfied that he believed what he said" (1987, 486). Of the envoy, Pearsall writes, "The astuteness and tactfulness of the compliment is hardly less skilful than the witty punning of the *Complaint* itself" (1992, 274). Sumner Ferris substantially concurs with Howard and Pearsall, writing of the poem's "tactfulness of tone" and asserting that Chaucer "flattered his King" (1974, 215-16).

19. For more on Hoccleve's literary relationship with Chaucer, see Chapter Three.

20. All quotations from Lydgate are from the two volumes of *The Minor Poems*, edited by MacCracken, unless otherwise noted.

21. For an examination of Hoccleve, Lydgate, and others from the perspective of the "Chaucerian" category, see Pearsall 1966.

22. Pearsall writes, "Whether he actually knew Chaucer personally is a matter of doubt, and critics on the whole have tended to reject the possibility" (1970, 63).

23. There are a number of sources that offer more or less complete accounts of Lydgate's life. Walter F. Schirmer's study, published in 1961, is still frequently cited. Also see Pearsall 1970 and Ebin 1985.

24. See Ebin 1985, esp. p. 5. See also Schirmer 1961, 8-23.

25. We must be cautious in ascribing propagandistic motivations to either Lydgate or his patrons, according to Scott-Morgan Straker (2006). Straker urges adoption of a stricter definition of propaganda than is commonly applied by commentators on Lydgate's poetic agenda, and makes a convincing argument that a number of Lydgate's short lyrics that have been seen as propagandistic in nature may actually be veiled

warnings to their patrons.

26. Summit includes an overview of Humphrey, his library, and his relationship with Lydgate, as does Pearsall (1970, 223-30). A more comprehensive account is given by Vickers in his biography of Humphrey.

27. Pearsall silently amends McCracken's version, inserting a pronoun: "Tokne of mornyng, *I weryd clothys blake*" (1970 228) (italics mine).

28. See, for example, "The Complaint of the Black Knight" in Volume 2 of McCracken's edition of the minor poems.

29. Ebin (1985) quotes Feylde and Hawes (140), and also provides a useful summary of Lydgate's immediate literary afterlife (139-42). In this regard see also Pearsall's *John Lydgate*, 1-4, which provides more details on Lydgate's tumble from popularity after the sixteenth century. John J. Thompson's (2001) fascinating and detailed study of Lydgate's publication and reception in the sixteenth century, "Reading Lydgate in Post-Reformation England," is also noteworthy.

Chapter 3: Hoccleve: Convention and Invention

1. For an overview of Hoccleve's reputation over time, see below pp. 126ff. See Knapp 2001, 17ff., for a characterization of Hoccleve's importance to historians of medieval bureaucracy.

2. A handful of biographical treatises on Hoccleve exist, as well as any number of references ranging from a paragraph to several pages in surveys of medieval and fifteenth-century literature (see especially, in the latter regard, J. A. Burrow 1982 and Bennett 1947). Among the most useful are Jerome Mitchell's 1968 study, *Thomas*

Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic. Mitchell gets, and deserves, credit for keeping a lonely flame burning for Hoccleve studies, and it is substantially thanks to his work that the ongoing renaissance in Hoccleve scholarship exists. Mitchell's work has aged fairly well and contains a wealth of information that is still valuable, although Ethan Knapp has a slightly different view (2001, 9).

From the veritable prehistory of Hoccleve studies comes the lively, entertaining, often overdrawn portrait of Hoccleve contained in Furnivall's foreword to his edition of the so-called minor poems, originally published in 1892.

Most recently, in 1994, J. A. Burrow contributed a succinct, very up-to-date, and valuable study entitled simply *Hoccleve*, with the emphasis primarily on Hoccleve's life.

I have made use of all these sources and others, including A. L. Brown 1971, Mitchell (1966; 1967), Reeves 1974, Richardson 1986, and Schulz 1937. When there are disagreements regarding, particularly, key dates and chronology I have used J. A. Burrow's 1994 study, the most recent, to resolve the dilemma when possible.

3. General histories of the period include details of what is merely glossed here. See, e.g., Seward (1978; 1987) and Barker 2005.

4. For a detailed exploration, see V. J. Scattergood's 1971 study *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century*. See also Strohm (1998; 1999).

5. The "Address to Sir John Oldcastle," with its detailed condemnation of Lollardy, is found in Furnivall's edition of the minor poems. Of Henry's religious orthodoxy, Seward writes, "His piety was certainly too conventional for the Lollards" (1987, 42). In reference

to *The Regiment of Princes*, Larry Scanlon notes that "Hoccleve effectively settles the question of dynastic rights by treating it as if it were already settled" (1990, 232).

6. In his book *The Discarded Image* Lewis wrote: "The typical vice [of medieval literature], as we all know, is dulness; sheer, unabashed, prolonged dulness, where the author does not seem to be even trying to interest us" (1964, 204).

7. In his foreword to the minor poems Furnivall demeans Hoccleve as "too much of a coward... to play football or any other rough game" (xxxv), although the poet does have "the merit of recognizing his weakness, his folly, and his cowardice" (xxxviii).

8. Details of Furnivall's life can be found in William Benzie's (1983) lively and illuminating biography.

9. One exception is Derek Pearsall, who has written, without caveat or qualification, that Hoccleve "knew Chaucer personally" (1966, 222).

10. See Charles R. Blyth's "Thomas Hoccleve's Other Master." Mitchell's (1966; 1968, Chapter 6) comments are also illuminating.

11. See Medcalf's (1981) informed and fascinating discourse on literary traditions and our expectations regarding them in his essay "On Reading Books from a Half-Alien Culture."

12. Mitchell's services in the revitalization of Hoccleve's reputation have been mentioned. John Burrow, who has called Hoccleve "an interesting and underrated writer" (1982, 41), also deserves credit.

13. In addition to Knapp's study, Charles R. Blyth's 1999 edition of *The Regiment of Princes* and Nicholas Perkins's book-length analysis of the *Regiment* are particularly noteworthy. Goldie 1999, Meyer-Lee

2001, and Epstein 2003 (180-93) are relevant as well.

14. See particularly J. A. Burrow 1994 and A. L. Brown 1971. Other relevant sources include Mitchell (1967; 1968), J. A. Burrow 2001, Reeves 1974, and Richardson 1986.

15. These documents are reproduced in Furnivall's edition of the minor poems and in an appendix to J. A. Burrow's 1994 biography of Hoccleve. Reeves (1974) devotes substantial space to a discussion of Hoccleve's annuities, his comments on non-payment in the poetry, and the supporting documentary evidence.

16. See especially A. L. Brown 1971, 265-69, and J. A. Burrow 1994, 199-201.

17. Assumptions regarding the veracity and intentions of Hoccleve's "autobiographical" passages are abundant in the critical literature. For example, A. L. Brown comments, "A remarkable feature of his poems... is that they contain a quite unusual amount of autobiographical material" (1971, 270). In discussing sources of information on Hoccleve's life, J. A. Burrow writes that a "second source of information is Hoccleve's poetry itself," but adds this caveat: "Admittedly, these autobiographical passages are not above suspicion" (1994, 189). More recently, Knapp has argued that Hoccleve's "work occupies a curious middle ground between gossip and autobiography" (2001, 18).

18. For discussions of Lollardy and related matters, see especially Aston 1960. See also Perkins (2001, 136-37). Knapp's discussion of the "Address to Oldcastle" as a work of propaganda is also useful (2001, 137ff.).

19. For the referenced passages, see Furnivall's editions of *The*

Regiment of Princes (ll. 1958-74, 2073-2107, and 4978-98) and the *Minor Poems* (pp. xxx-xxxiv). For Hoccleve's praise of Chaucer at his own expense, see especially ll. 2073-79.

20. See Pearsall (1994, 386), for a fairly complete catalogue of the qualities deemed desirable in a good prince.

21. Perkins (2001, Plate 1) provides a beautiful full-color reproduction of the Hoccleve illustration.

22. See, e.g., John Burrow 1997.

23. In the editorial apparatus accompanying his edition of the *Minor Poems* Furnivall uses the denomination of a "victorious" Henry to date the poem to 1415 or 1416, shortly after the overwhelming victory over the French at Agincourt (Hoccleve 1970, xxi). Since Henry is referred to as "Kyng," we can support Furnivall's supposition so far as to agree that the poem must have been written sometime after Henry's coronation.

24. Among the documents pertaining to Hoccleve that survive are a number recording the payment of annuities, salaries, etc., found in the "Appendix of Hoccleve Documents" accompanying Furnivall's edition of the *Minor Poems* (1970, li-lxxii). Although our ability to determine the success of any given petition is as accurate as our ability to determine the poem's date, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Hoccleve must have had some success in his petitions.

25. See, for example, Hoccleve's "Address to Sir John Oldcastle" in the *Minor Poems* for an example of this tendency.

26. There is a certain amount of danger in making too much of the metrical disruption occasioned by the inclusion of Carpenter's name in the first line. Scholarship on Hoccleve, Lydgate, and other fifteenth-

century "Chaucerians" is rife with speculation, justifications, and imprecations regarding the alleged irregularity of meter. In regard to Hoccleve, Mitchell's analysis of Hoccleve's meter in Chapter Four of *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic* is probably still the best place to begin (1968, 97-109). One might justifiably question whether the erasure in the title is as consequential as J. A. Burrow, for one, has made it (1994, 204).

27. See Furnivall's edition of the minor poems, 59n1.

28. This designation is reproduced in Furnivall's edition of the minor poems on page 60.

29. Furnivall gives the "Balade and Rowndel" a date of c. 1407 (Hoccleve 1970, 59), with "The Court of Good Company" assigned a provenance of sometime in 1410 or later (Hoccleve 1970, xiiin1).

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