The Middle Ages

Before the Norman Conquest

Beowulf

Students are often intrigued to learn that the author of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, J. R. R. Tolkien, was a medievalist who drew inspiration from Beowulf for his fictions. In fact, his classic article, “Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics” (1936), which insists on the poem’s aesthetic coherence, set the tone for criticism of the poem for almost fifty years. Such coherence is rather elusive to first-time readers, students and professors alike, and much ingenuity has gone into demonstrating it. Fred C. Robinson argues that despite its disconnected appearance, the poem implies meaning through its juxtaposition of its most minute parts: “the compounds, the grammatical appositions, the metrical line with its apposed hemistichs” (Beowulf and the Appositive Style, [1985], 24–25).

The view of Beowulf as a highly-wrought work of art would seem to presuppose a literate and self-conscious poet. The literacy of the Beowulf-poet, however, was challenged by the proponents of the “oral-formulaic” theory adapted from Homeric studies, which held that the poem was orally composed by an illiterate bard or “scop,” who would have had neither the learning nor leisure to strive for literary effects. Although much controversy raged between proponents of these two views in the 1960s and ’70s, it is now generally agreed to have been a false dichotomy: a poem can be formulaic without having been orally composed, and therefore can have been artistically shaped by a literate poet.

Nevertheless, an understanding of Beowulf’s oral background can help students to understand many of its most puzzling aspects. Its structural use of alliteration, which Tim Murphy’s translation captures brilliantly, would have been a mnemonic aid to a poet who performed, if he did not compose, orally. Students should understand the poem as being orally performed, to an audience of aristocrats or clerics; they should experience it themselves, preferably in Old English; Tim Murphy reads the poem’s concluding dirge, both in Anglo-Saxon and in his translation, on our audio CD. Finally, the poem’s oral origins help to explain its digressive, non-linear style, the feature that students find most difficult.

Whatever the origins of Beowulf’s digressive style, there are a number of fruitful ways to analyze it. New Critics have shown the relevance of apparent digressions to the main thread of the narrative, by way of comparison and contrast or foreshadowing and echo. The visual art of the period also provides stylistic analogies. John Leyerle shows that the poem’s interwoven strands of narrative can be
understood as “the visual analogue of the interlace designs common in Anglo-Saxon art,” particularly in manuscript illumination, metalwork, and stone carving (rpt. in R. D. Fulk, ed., *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, [1991], 146). His illustrations include the gold belt buckle from the Sutton Hoo ship burial and the so-called carpet pages from the Lindisfarne Gospels. More recently, recognition of the mutual influence of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon art suggests that the patterns in the Ardagh chalice (color plate 3) and the Book of Kells are equally relevant examples of the “Insular” or “Hiberno-Saxon” interlace style (see p. 10).

Another aspect of *Beowulf* which causes confusion for students is its apparently conflicting references to Christianity and paganism. Scholarly discussion of this has ranged from the earlier contention that the Christian “coloring” contaminates the pagan Germanic purity of the epic to the argument that the poem is a full-fledged Christian allegory, with the hero either a figure of Christ or a deeply flawed materialist, unaware of the transience of earthly wealth and glory. At present, the poem is most often seen as thoroughly Christian, but literal rather than allegorical, with the poet looking back with regret at his pagan ancestors of centuries earlier, admiring their nobility while recognizing their ultimate damnation.

Although the New Critical tendency to resolve the contradictions in *Beowulf* is useful for teaching, it has been recently questioned by critics influenced by post-structuralism, who see it as imposing more coherence on the poem than is actually there. Rather than look for balance and closure in the poem, they stress its anomalies and discontinuities, as well as the social and historical context in which it was produced. Gillian Overing, in *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (1990), links the poem’s non-linear style to “the irresolution and dynamism of the deconstructionist free play of textual elements” and suggests teaching students to deconstruct the binary, hierarchical oppositions in the poem, such as Christian and pagan, good and bad, weak and strong. In the process of challenging formalist readings of the poem, some critics are returning to earlier approaches such as philology and literary history. Teachers may want to stress the poem’s status as a product of a manuscript culture, starting with the miracle of its survival in The British Library manuscript Cotton Vitellius A. xv, and the difficulty of deciphering it through the burn marks. Its manuscript context points to an interest in tales of the exotic and the monstrous on the part of the compiler and his audience. Joseph Harris argues that *Beowulf* itself is an anthology of genres like the *Canterbury Tales*, reflecting the poet’s reading of earlier literature. A recognition that the poem contains “genealogical verse, a creation hymn, elegies, a lament, a heroic lay, a praise poem, historical poems, a flying, gnomic verse, a sermon, and perhaps less formal oral genres,” then, should serve as an antidote to fixation on the poem’s “unity” (in Fulk, 236).

A recent approach to *Beowulf* which takes social context into account is feminist criticism. Critics may disagree as to whether the women are presented as heroic or victimized, but they all agree that the role of women is important to the poem. Overing, among others, discusses their status as “peaceweavers,” which she sees as mere objects of exchange: “the system of masculine alliance allows women
to signify in a system of apparent exchange, but there is no place for them outside this chain of signification; they must be continually translated by and into the masculine economy" (p. xxiii). Both male and female students are often drawn to the feminist approach because it addresses the way female experience is slighted in this most masculine of epics.

*Beowulf* can be effectively taught with other works in a medieval literature course or a British literature survey. In the Old English period, it can be linked not only with such heroic Christian works as *Judith* and *The Dream of the Rood*, but also with *The Wanderer*, whose concentration on the dark side of heroic violence links it to *Beowulf’s* elegiac passages, such as the elegy of the “last survivor.” *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *The Wife’s Lament*, elegies which focus specifically on the effect of such violence on women, can illuminate such doomed women as Wealththeow and Frawaru, as well as the tragic Hildesburh.

In the Early Modern period, two major works which offer comparison with *Beowulf* are *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*, both of which criticize the heroic code. *Hamlet*, which derives in part from a Germanic heroic legend recorded in the twelfth-century Saxo Grammaticus’ *Historia Danica*, can be read as the story of a Renaissance university student resisting an injunction to fulfill a pre-Christian code of blood vengeance. In *Paradise Lost*, the tension is between Renaissance Christian values and the ancient Greek heroic code, represented by Satan, who mouths the sentiments of Achilles. Although *Beowulf* also criticizes the code of vengeance, it does so with considerably more ambivalence.

While *Beowulf* is less likely to be taught with twentieth-century works than with medieval and Renaissance ones, familiarity with them can serve as a useful point of comparison for upper-level English majors. Experience with Woolf’s or Joyce’s “stream-of-consciousness” technique might incline students to patience with *Beowulf’s* non-linear style. Students might also be interested to know that Joyce makes a connection between his narrative technique and Insular manuscript style when he writes of the *Book of Kells*, “some of the big initial letters which swing right across a page have the essential quality of a chapter of *Ulysses*. Indeed, you can compare much of my work to the intricate illuminations.”

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**The Táin bó Cúailnge**

For all the challenge of its antiquity and alien culture, *The Táin* speaks easily to modern readers in its evocation of epic battle, heroic achievement, struggle for social prestige, and tragically divided loyalties. Yet *The Táin* may be most useful in the classroom as a moment in which to reconsider our acquired expectations of “literature,” and to explore the encounter of orality and literacy. And in its celebration of pagan society and its series of influential women, it offers a kind of epic strikingly different from the elegiac, largely male-dominated world of *Beowulf*.

**Origins: Pagan Tale and Clerical Transmission**  The selections of *The Táin* in this anthology are translated from a version (“Recension II”) first written down in the
early twelfth century, in the “Book of Leinster.” That manuscript contains a fascinating collection including ecclesiastical texts, as well as secular material such as the story discussed in the editorial headnote, and an Irish translation of a Trojan War narrative attributed to “Dares the Phrygian.” It reflects the extent to which vernacular, secular culture in Ireland, whose stories often carried distant echoes of a pagan past, had achieved a rapprochement with Christian institutions and the technology of writing that they had promoted.

The rapprochement of pagan and Christian cultures developed across the centuries as the church encountered a long-established and socially prestigious class of native scholars, some of whom entered clerical orders; and it aided the survival of a large body of ancient traditional learning, mostly derived from oral sources, that embraces law, mythology, and epic such as The Táin. Ambivalence toward native Irish culture remained, though, nicely implied in this quote from the late eighth-century Martyrology of Oengus: “Paganism has been destroyed though it was splendid and far flung.” Consider too the double closing to The Táin. Despite this final note, the tale itself is fully engaged in its pagan, secular world. This might be contrasted with the echoes of the Old Testament in Beowulf, and its persistently elegiac regret for a world long lost.

The Táin derives from stories of gods, heroic cattle raids, and symbolic beasts that stretch back perhaps as far as the early centuries A.D., orally transmitted by generations of the Irish learned class. Some scholars think that an early, now lost version of The Táin may have been copied even in the seventh century during a flurry of vernacular writing prompted by a period of plague and social upheaval. It has had a huge influence on later Irish literature, both topically and in exaggerations of the highly adjectival, somewhat florid style of “Recension II.”

The Táin bó Cuailnge

The Keeper of the Tales The hero Fergus (discussed below) is at once a warrior and poet/prophet in The Táin, which only reflects how important was the class of men and women who preserved and transmitted the stories and social lore of medieval Ireland. Their place is made explicit in a passage from an eighth-century legal collection, the Senchas Már (“The Great Old Knowledge”):

The Senchas of the men of Ireland, what has sustained it? The joint memory of the old men, transmission from one ear to another, the chanting of the filid, supplementation from the law of the letter, strengthening from the law of nature, for these are the three rocks on which are based the judgments of the world.

This provides a nice framework for discussion of the emerging position of writing in a still largely oral culture. It is difficult to re-imagine today a society in which the tale-teller had so eminent a place. In a society finely attuned to public pride and shame, the fili’s praise recorded and upheld a king’s prestige, but equally, his satire and malediction had the power to undo it.

The filid are tale-tellers, keepers of cultural memory and hence social order; to call them poets inadequately conveys the range of their roles. Indeed, most medieval Irish tales that survive through writing are largely in prose, with poetry used at mo-
ments of great emotion, prophecy, or eulogy. At the same time, “Recension II” may be influenced by writing (and by the declining need for strict memorization) in its occasionally florid style, tending to pile up synonymous or almost synonymous nouns and adjectives. Nonetheless, The Táin retains many elements of its oral background: formulae, dialogues formalized through repetition and refrain, key phrases repeated verbatim (like the boasts of Ailill and Medb), structurally identical descriptions of warbands and their leaders.

**Epic and Heroism** The Táin has epic force both in its evocation of military glory and in its historical reach and geographical breadth, covering much of the northern half of Ireland. The lists and apparent digressions that are equally part of its epic reach, though, can frustrate students. One might sketch out the epic genre first as a kind of oral encyclopedia, with catalogs of genealogy, geography, battle cohorts, etc. Narrative aside, what bodies of knowledge get raised as the story proceeds? Consider Medb’s genealogy or her brief summary of her courtship, the review of a king’s property, the catalogs of the Connacht and Ulster forces, or the verbal map of the march toward Ulster. These lists and apparent digressions can then be understood as part of the way The Táin draws together a system of values and knowledge for a whole society, a project even more ambitious than its narrative.

The narrative itself has epic dimension, as two great alliances slowly move toward a climactic battle. The Táin, however, is unlike many epics of race or empire that students may know (like the Iliad and Aeneid), in the ambitions that animate it. The Táin is an epic of raid, not of territorial expansionism or a whole people’s might. Its tribal kings, whose highest claim is to dominate a province, gain their prestige by the control of movable wealth, especially cattle, and by triumphing in combats that are highly ritualized, though often mortal. Narrative discontinuities, like the shift from a competition between Ailill and Medb to their joint foray against Ulster, make richer (if not clearer) sense seen as an anatomy of the sources of power and glory in early Irish society.

The impulse to create a long, more or less continuous and self-contained narrative, though, may also reflect influences that arrived in Ireland through writing and the church. Before the Carolingian revival on the continent, Ireland was the center of clerical learning in northern Europe, including study of Latin secular literature. As noted above, the “Book of Leinster” contains a story of the Trojan War in Irish; and in the period that produced “Recension II” clerical scholars were also retelling Virgil’s Aeneid and Statius’s Thebaid in Irish. The latter, with its story of military alliances and strife between close relatives, could have been particularly resonant for an audience of The Táin.

**Cú Chulainn** Individual heroic figures, though, both men and women, provide the crucial focus for The Táin’s sense of glory, and for a poignancy that sometimes borders on the tragic. Chief among these is Cú Chulainn. Consider the complex and multiple sources of his power. It certainly includes magic in weapons like the gá buida, and superhuman strength, but also (in episodes not included here) arcane knowledge of taboos and writing, and diplomatic skill in negotiating a series
of single encounters. Cú Chulainn first enters with his description by the woman poet, Feidelm. Feidelm’s poem emphasizes Cú Chulainn’s youth and beauty, but also mentions the monstrous transformation that comes upon “the distorted one” in his battle rage.

Cú Chulainn compares interestingly to other large or heroic figures in epic. Like Beowulf he protects a weakened realm; but like Grendel too he is at moments monstrous, capable of uncontrolled violence. His powers in battle are often compared to those of Achilles. Like Hercules, he has qualities of the trickster (and, elsewhere, an enormous sexual appetite), yet lapses into excess and frenzy. His emphatic boyishness, and the Ulstermen’s slow recovery from their torpor, may link him to a seasonal god of the returning year. Whatever remnants of pagan divinity may reside in his character, though, Cú Chulainn’s appeal is thoroughly human. This may be clearest when he is badly wounded, physically restrained from battle, and calls upon his charioteer, who gives him news of the conflict in a series of dialogues that are at once highly formalized and very intimate (“friend Láeg,” “little Cú”). Yet note how this same narrative strand ends when Cú Chulainn bursts his restraints with an explosive force that literally alters the landscape.

Cú Chulainn is a continuous presence in Irish legend and literature, increasingly a unifying national hero as Irish resistance to British colonialism grew. He appears in many retellings of ancient legend produced during the Irish Renaissance (by Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats, for instance). This adoption of an Ulster hero by the entire Irish Republic is reflected in the statue of Cú Chulainn, commemorating the Easter Uprising of 1916, now in the General Post Office in Dublin. Frank McCourt treats Cú Chulainn worship more humorously in his recent memoire Angela’s Ashes.

Medb Equally powerful is Medb, the queen of Connacht who sparks the entire conflict as she seeks to equal her husband’s wealth by obtaining the Brown Bull of Cooley. She and other women such as Feidelm dominate many episodes in The Táin. Medb echoes an Irish goddess of sovereignty through whose power Ailill became king of Connacht. She is often seen purely as an amoral figure, a source of conflict both military and sexual, stemming from her semi-divine origin. What about her motivation, then, of achieving equal status with Ailill?

Medb’s ambition, while extravagant, is coherent with the position of some women, especially heiresses, in the clan society of early medieval Ireland. While women had little status in the highly developed system of law, they did have inheritance rights within the clan, especially in the absence of a son (as in Medb’s case). Further, social prestige and power within marriage were closely connected to wealth, primarily estimated in terms of cattle. So the somewhat comic “pillow talk” with which “Recension II” opens is also a scene of Medb laying serious claim to equal power in the marriage, which she is then unable to prove through equal possessions. Medb’s sexual history has a considerable political logic as well. As the ex-wife of the Ulster king Conchobor, she may reflect the shift of dynastic power toward the kings of Connacht; her affair with the war-
rior poet Fergus is crucial to retaining his allegiance; and she offers her body (and other rewards) to the owner of the Brown Bull of Cooley before she resorts to armed force.

Fergus  Perhaps the most complex heroic figure in *The Táin* is Fergus mac Róig. In some ways a secondary character, Fergus is at once a warrior and poet-prophet, and an exile with poignantly divided loyalties. Once king of Ulster, Fergus was deposed and then further betrayed by his clansman Conchobor. He fled to Connacht and entered the clientship and service of Ailill, whom he serves both as a fighter and an interpreter of mysteries. The events of the *Táin* are a slow crisis of loyalties for Fergus, torn between the bonds of clan and clientship. As was the case with Medb, this enacts, on a heroic scale, a real conflict inherent in the ordering of early medieval society in Ireland. Finally Fergus encounters his own foster-son, Cú Chulainn. That bond of family triumphs, Fergus turns from the battle, and Medb’s allies from beyond Connacht go with him. To an extent, then, the epic turns on this moment of Fergus recalling the profound emotional links of fosterage, even within a clan whose leader has betrayed him.

Geography and Nature  *The Táin* has a rich sense of geography, and of places becoming saturated with meaning from the events that occur upon them. In legend, Ireland was divided into five provinces ruled by high kings: Ulster in the northeast, and (counter-clockwise) Connacht, Munster in the south and Leinster in the southeast, with Meath—politically a somewhat vague area—toward the center. These provincial divisions correspond more to notions of cosmic order, and legends of prehistoric settlement, than to historical reality. Both centers and boundaries take on great symbolic importance. Cú Chulainn’s heroism is established as he protects the borders of Ulster; and then the climactic battle of *The Táin* occurs toward the center of the island, in Meath between the rivers Shannon and Boyne. The human story subsides as Medb’s forces retreat into Connacht, only to be followed by a sort of coda in which the two great bulls fight and the loser’s body is deposited in pieces across Ireland. One episode after another results in the naming of a place, as if the story itself called the places into being.

Natural beings too are perceived, though unsentimentally, as agents of power and beauty, from the bulls (possibly an echo of bull-worship), to the natural forces by which the Ulster army is described, to the painstaking descriptions of Feidelm and Cú Chulainn. Totemic animals are present, too, as in the very name of Cú Chulainn, “the Hound of Culann,” given him as a boy when he had miraculously killed the savage watchdog of Culann and then volunteered to guard Culann’s property in its place.

Epic and Social Order  We already noted that the epic enfolds certain norms of social order in early medieval Ireland (many of which survived into the era of “Recension II”), and thus validates them through heroic exemplars and antiquity; clientship, the links of wealth and rank, prestige gained through combat. It also explores tensions inherent within that social order, such as the conflict between clientship and clan loyalty. *The Táin* is dense with such occasions.
Early Irish social order was almost entirely rural, organized by kinship groups or chieftoms, as many as 150 at the beginning of the Christian era, with no larger political structure except for a vague idea of high kings. Each such tuath was headed by a petty king, chosen by election (aided by force) among any men related within four generations to an earlier king. The king gained followers, even from beyond his clan, by entering into client relationships, usually through the loan of cattle in exchange for services and the ultimate return of the loan. The power of the king hence resided in his cattle, and was increased either through clientship or cattle raiding. This system of wealth and military prestige is enacted in The Táin, especially in the crisis of rank in the comparison of Medb’s and Ailill’s cattle, and the extended raid that ensues.

This however is only the core of a range of ways that society is modelled within the epic. Others include fosterage, the bride-price, a marital system much broader and more flexible than that sponsored by the church, and the complex obligations of guest and host. If The Táin enfolds much of its pre-Christian mythic past, it also uses the glamor of heroism and legend to underwrite social power in its own era.

**Early Irish Verse**

For all their cultural distance, the early medieval Irish poems selected here speak to us in very direct ways in their wit, affection, and rueful longing for times and people lost. I have found, too, that their directness and relative brevity make a good change for students who have just weathered *Beowulf* or the *Táin*. Except for “The Old Woman of Beare,” all are short enough to read in class. This is useful since, as I suggest below, each of these poems offers a rich context and comparison for texts from much different places and times in the Middle Ages.

While they are a wide-ranging group, several of these poems can be approached as versions of elegy, “Findabair Remembers Fróech” speaking for erotic loss (and the sheer beauty of Fróech), and “A Grave Marked with Ogam” coming from the tradition of heroic lament. Each offers a version of solitude, looking back at two kinds of joyous companionship. Combining all these themes, and much more, “The Old Woman of Beare” is one of the most powerful and unflinching evocations of old age and mortality in any language. The fearfulness of the survivor can be compared with that in the Old English “The Wanderer” (pp. 150–53) and Taliesin’s “The War-Band’s Return” (pp. 148–49).

By contrast, solitude can be a pleasure in other poems here that are linked by their fascination with the written word: its acquisition, the technology of its transmission, and the challenge of its interpretation. “To Crinog” has aspects of riddle. Crinog is at once the poet’s former lover, a wise crone, and a chaste friend, but in all forms she is a teacher. Taken all together, her attributes suggest she is a book, perhaps a primer or prayer book, which were often the same thing. Yet even tough manuscript books can fall apart; both the poet and the book face their mortality at the poem’s end. “A Grave Marked with Ogam” and “Writing in the Wood” feature two kinds of writing, in stone and on parchment. And “Pangur
“The Cat” plays on the delights of the difficult, the skill of unwrapping a textual problem, like the cat on its hunt. The pleasure these poems take in indirection and technical skill bears comparison with the Anglo-Latin and Anglo-Saxon riddles later in this volume.

The episodes from The Voyage of Máel Dúin (here in their slightly cryptic, evocative verse form) offer a Christianized version of a long tradition of secular narratives of miraculous voyages. The encounters with the uncanny compare effectively with those in Arthurian works in this anthology, especially Marie de France’s Lanval, which Marie explicitly claims to have come from the Celtic world of the Breton lai. At the same time, Máel Dúin receives a kind of moral test and education in the course of his quest, comparable to that received by Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

The longest and richest of these early Irish poems is “The Old Woman of Beare.” The challenge and beauty of the poem lies in the unresolved complexity of the speaker. She is one of a powerful group of female figures and voices in medieval Irish literature, among them the woman warrior Medb and the poet Feidhelm in the Táin, or the elegiac Findabair and the multifaceted Crinog in this group. Not unlike Crinog, the Old Woman of Beare moves (in her memory at least) through youth and old age, secular sexuality and sacred prayer. She seems to have encountered generations of splendid and generous heroes; and indeed she derives in part from female sovereignty figures, whose sexual favors at once gave power to a new king and rejuvenated themselves. Yet she is insistently mortal and decrepit in this version, squarely facing a religious life she does not truly want and a Christian death that saves, yet comes too soon. Even in her decline, the Old Woman connects herself to a whole created world: seasons, tides, sap, the "stricken oak" (l. 100), arms, bones, skin, and hair. She is decrepit but insistently physical, bodied. Never married, and long abandoned by the men of her past, the Old Woman nonetheless praises them in comparison with the self-serving courtiers of the present. “The Old Woman of Beare” is a wonderful poem to read in combination with two other solitary female voices from very different cultural settings, the speaker of the Anglo-Saxon “The Wife’s Lament” (pp. 153–55) and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath (pp. 337–64). And she combines in one figure the wife and the crone whom Gawain encounters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Finally, note that “Pangur the Cat” is translated by the distinguished contemporary Irish poet Eavan Boland. It reads interestingly with Boland’s own work. Her own title for the translation is “From the Irish of Pangur Ban,” as if the original speaker were the cat (“Ban”) itself. It is a playful version of the many serious ways in which Boland explores the voices of people and issues often left silent.

Judith

As the poem which immediately follows Beowulf in the unique manuscript, Judith has most often invited comparison with that poem, particularly by critics concerned to stress Beowulf’s Christian nature. As a heroic narrative with a warrior
hero who triumphs over the enemies of God, Judith gives support to reading the
pagan Beowulf in that way. Critical approaches to Judith itself have often gone be-
yond its literal celebration of Old Testament Hebrew heroism to a more allegori-
cal interpretation. They have used its putative sources—the Book of Judith in the
Vulgate Bible and Latin commentaries on it—to interpret the heroine’s victory as
that of the Church over the devil or of female chastity over lust.

Recently, however, many critics have tended to stress the poem’s literal
meaning rather than its timeless Christian significance, placing it in its histor-
ical context, whether political or feminist. According to these views, the poem
reflects the resistance of the Christian Anglo-Saxons to the invading pagan
Danes in the tenth century, and was perhaps even written to inspire rebellion
against them (see Alexandra Hennesy Olsen, “Inversion and Political Purpose
in the Old English Judith,” English Studies, 63 [1982], 289–90). Judith is seen as
a symbolic depiction of the contemporary ethnic and religious conflicts which
are more literally expressed in the Battle of Maldon, the poetic account of the
doomed struggle of a band of Anglo-Saxons against the Danes. The poem can
thus remind students that in this early period Britain was colonized and in-
vaded rather than colonizing; it can be instructively read, in volume I, with
“Perspectives: Ethnic and Religious Encounters,” which includes King Alfred,
Ohthere, and Bede, and in volume II, with the postcolonial works of Conrad
and Forster.

The feminist approach intersects with the political in focusing on Holofernes'
attempt to use rape as a method of humiliating and intimidating the enemy.
Karma Lochrie sees the poet’s replacement of the Vulgate’s reference to
Holofernes’ desire with the statement that he “meant to defile the noble lady with
filth and with pollution” as the exposure of the patriarchal violence inherent in a
warrior society: “Carnal desire proves to be a function not only of Holofernes’
pride and drunkenness, but of a masculine warrior economy bound by a homoso-
cial network and a code of violence that does not always succeed in masking the
sexual aggression it sublimates” (“Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Politics of War
in the Old English Judith,” Class and Gender in Early English Literature, ed. Britton
J. Harwood and Gillian Overing, [1994], 8). She argues that poet implicates the
Anglo-Saxons themselves, and not just the Assyrians and the Danes, in this use of
sexual violence as an instrument of war.

Students often find Judith, with its strong female hero, refreshing after Beowulf,
with its focus on masculine heroic behavior. Those who come to the course with
expectations formed by feminist theory or the works of nineteenth and twentieth-
century women writers, however, often have difficulty in seeing that Judith is not
acting on her own but is rather empowered by God’s grace. It is useful to point out
to them that while actual Anglo-Saxon women of the aristocracy wielded more
power than most fictional depictions of them—such as Hrothgar’s queen
Wealhtheow and her daughter Freawaru in Beowulf, or the anonymous speakers of
Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament—they generally did so as religious leaders,
such as abbess Hilda of Whitby, rather than as independent secular figures. (See
Christine Fell, Women in Anglo-Saxon England, [1986]).
When taught following *Beowulf* and *Judith* in a two-semester survey course, *The Dream of the Rood* effectively rounds out a first view of Old English heroic poetry. It also leads naturally into a study of the three elegies included in the volume—*The Wanderer, Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *The Wife's Lament*—and suggests connections with the Anglo-Latin and Old English riddles.

*The Dream of the Rood*’s affinities with heroic poetry are particularly striking. Students familiar with the depiction of the suffering Christ in the late Middle Ages will be surprised by the way in which the poet transforms Christ into a bold Germanic hero. It can be seen from *Judith* that Old English poets were drawn to the subject matter of the Old Testament, which is not surprising given its focus on the history of a tribal warrior people. The New Testament, however, has little to inspire heroic narrative, and *The Dream of the Rood* has been traced to no exact biblical source. Widely regarded as the finest poem on the Crucifixion in English, it may have been inspired by contemporary theological controversies over the humanity versus the divinity of Christ; it certainly achieves an almost perfect balance between these two aspects. In this it can be contrasted with a Middle English lyric on the Crucifixion included in this volume, *Jesus, My Sweet Lover*, which exemplifies the late medieval tendency to humanize—even sentimentalize—Christ’s Passion (see J. A. Burrow, “An Approach to *The Dream of the Rood*,” *Old English Literature: Twenty-Two Analytical Essays*, ed. Martin Stevens and Jerome Mandel, [1968], 254–56).

Although the heroic treatment of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood* reflects the early medieval view of Christ generally, the poet gives it a particularly Anglo-Saxon resonance by employing the specific language and conventions of Old English poetry. He describes Christ as a Germanic warrior girding himself for battle, like *Beowulf*. The Cross presents itself “as a loyal retainer in the epic mode, with the ironic reversal that it must acquiesce and even assist in its Lord’s death, unable through its own command to aid or avenge him” (Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature*, [1986], 196). Finally, the poet envisions heaven, in the manner of Old English poets, as a feast in a mead hall.

*The Dream of the Rood* has affinities not only with *Beowulf* and *Judith*, but also with the Old English elegies, to the extent that the dreamer presents himself as an exile longing to join his friends in the home of “the high Father.” In addition, as an inanimate object granted speech, the Cross recalls the speaking objects in Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles, several of which also recount their origin as plants or trees. The poem can be contrasted with such Middle English treatments of the Passion as Julian of Norwich’s mystical *Book of Showings* and the Crucifixion lyric mentioned above, which portray Christ in the suffering rather than the heroic vein. A dramatic exception, however, is *Piers Plowman* (B. passus 18), which presents Christ as a knight going to joust with the devil for the right to human souls. A poem of similar length that bears comparison is William Dunbar’s late medieval Easter hymn *Done is a battel*.

Finally, the rich use of Christian paradox in *The Dream of the Rood* (e.g., “I saw the God of Hosts stretched on the rack”) suggests comparisons with the Holy
Sonnets of John Donne, whose tension, irony, and paradox so fascinated the New Critics. His Sonnet 2 ("Oh my black soul! Now thou art summoned"), on the pilgrim-speaker’s longing for release from wretchedness, and Sonnet 9 ("What if this present were the world’s last night") on the Crucifixion, are particularly relevant.

Perspectives

Ethnic and Religious Encounters

All the texts included in this perspectives section concern the emergence of the idea of Englishness, an English people, and an English nation, with the rather varied implications of those phrases. In millennial America they are unlikely to be read as preliminary ventures toward Great Nationhood or a prehistory for empire, although the life of King Alfred and the works of Bede have both been exploited that way with varying degrees of subtlety. (Rule Britannia, almost an imperial hymn, was first performed in Alfred: A Masque, [1740].)

Still, it is good to emphasize how tentative are the notions laid out here; how differently they approach communal identity (through language, class, religion, as well as race); how their working categories often contradict one another; and how they construct identity by marking off “others” through distinctions that use ethnicity but do not end there. One might locate some moment in each entry along a gamut (admittedly fuzzy) of tribe, race, and nation. Even if discussion centers on this area, however, these passages are only pieces of bigger texts that often have rather different primary objectives, like Bede’s slow and measured exploration of history within the scheme of salvation. They also bring students into contact with some key moments in earlier English history that continue to echo in the minds and texts of writers working when nationhood and empire were indeed powerful concepts.

The interactions, production, and power of language provide an independent issue, richly present in these excerpts but only sometimes germane to the construction of identity by ethnicity and religion. Literacy and illiteracy, the claims of Latin and vernacular, books as mere records or talismanic objects, and the magical force of words (in contexts both pagan and Christian), all have their moments here. Students might be asked to gather instances. Together, they can be connected to similar convergences of issues in The Táin, The Dream of the Rood, and later medieval literature.

Bede

Bede’s gift for storytelling, his economy and pacing, are clear in these passages. He has a terrific sense of the image or scene that will pull in the reader: Edwin’s counsellor and his poignant image of a sparrow flying through the mead hall, Imma’s bonds repeatedly loosed, Caedmon’s dream in the cow byre. The emotional pull (even sentimentality) of his stories, though, should not mask their considerable complexity.
In each of the three incidents here, Bede shows us a key moment in cultural transformation or encounter, not through didactic moralizing (a historiographical habit we do encounter in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) but through a series of implicit and explicit positions of speakers and audiences. Sometimes these are pretty straightforward, as when King Edwin hears from a warrior noble, a pagan priest, and a Christian missionary. The strategy is more complex when the positions are implicit in a range of audiences for any one event or linguistic moment. Coifi has an audience first of wavering king and nobles, then of common people (who think he’s gone crazy), and always of Bede’s Christian listeners. This compares to the implicit audiences of Beowulf (pagans within the tale, Christians now hearing it in England), or even the doubled responses to an Old Testament poem like Judith which has shifting implications seen from the old law or the new. Caedmon too shifts audiences within his story: first his angelic visitor, then his fellow lay brothers and the reeve, finally the abbess Hild herself and an audience of monks. And Imma’s story of loosing from bonds is at the center of a tangle of verbal powers and audiences: a mass for a soul that gets literalized by loosing Imma’s restraints, and is then confused (from a pagan perspective) as verbal magic.

For all the uncertainty about the relations between language and the new Christian faith, each story shows a stable sense of class hierarchy. In the story of Edwin’s conversion, Bede puts one of his most moving similes into the mouth of a pagan nobleman; the argument for conversion of his priest Coifi is very different in tone and self-interest. The impression of Coifi’s madness results from a breach of class behavior. Note too the wholesale conversion of Edwin’s nobles, and the more limited change by his commoners; the unifying community of Christendom arrives here from the top down. The pagan gesith who holds Imma prisoner may wholly misunderstand the powers behind the loosing of the bonds, but noble identity seems to be transparent between religious faiths, and he sees right through Imma’s effort to appear a peasant. (The gesith proves his own nobility, and respect for words, by honoring a promise not to injure Imma.) And in addition to his holiness, Caedmon shifts rank, from a laboring lay brother to a monk in holy orders.

Language and its modes of transmission add still another angle to these moments in the making of a Christian “English People.” Edwin is converted not just by the fulfillment of a prophetic dream, but also by the eloquence of his counselors and Paulinus. Caedmon moves into the “learned” monastic community, but does he ever become literate? How does he learn the biblical stories he retells so powerfully in Anglo-Saxon verse? What does this suggest about Latin and vernacular in religious life as Bede imagines Hild’s monastery? What motivates Bede’s apology for his Latin translation of Caedmon’s poem? Caedmon’s divine gift isn’t literacy or Latin, but singing in the inherited vernacular in such a way as to make it sacred. Consider Caedmon’s song of the origin of things in contrast to the song of the scop in Beowulf about the same subject. Caedmon’s other subjects echo the creation of a corpus of Anglo-Saxon biblical poetry, such as Judith and The Dream of the Rood.

Imma’s loosing from his chains promotes a suggestive sequence of reactions to language: a Christian readership is invited to see it as the impact of the new faith,
and especially of the Latin mass; Imma’s captor takes it to be the result of pagan "loosing spells." Is there a certain ironic humor in the scenes of misdirected masses, meant to free Imma’s soul, but in fact undoing his literal bonds? Why the detail about the name of his brother the priest (Tunna) and Tunnacæstir? A Christian myth now stands behind a place-name, in ways comparable to the pagan myths of place in The Táin.

Bishop Asser

The very presence of the Welshman Asser at Alfred’s court has a certain paradox. Alfred hoped to restore to the Anglo-Saxons the glory of a somewhat mythicized pre-Viking past, including its Latin learning. Because of the state of education south of the Humber, though, Alfred had to import teachers from Wales and from the continent. Further, however, Asser wrote his Life of King Alfred in part for a Welsh audience, which may suggest participation in a project of state-building based on geographical contiguity, not race or language. In fact by the time he wrote the Life, Welsh leaders had submitted to Alfred.

Asser was a serious biographer although his own Latin is awkward. He used written sources like The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for Alfred’s earlier years, and he knew continental models of laudatory biography like Einhard’s Life of Charlemagne. (Alfred himself was connected to Carolingian kingdoms through his mother.) At moments, though, he is more a praise poet in the tradition of Taliesin, whose work was certainly circulating in Asser’s native tongue. The intimate scenes of a dependent court around Alfred especially invite comparison to Taliesin’s evocation of royal glory yoked to a powerful emotional bond.

Asser marks Alfred as a king by a series of more or less conventional attributes: his good looks and the universal affection he gained as a boy, his love of books and wish to overcome illiteracy (very like Einhard’s Charlemagne), his hunting skills, patronage of craftsmen, and support of religion. Alfred establishes that kingship as a fighter, though, in a series of conflicts and final triumphs against the Viking invaders, which culminate in their conversion and expulsion into the Danelaw in the northeast.

Kingship and ethnicity thus might appear to converge nicely. Asser makes the situation more complex, however. For Asser, religious practice becomes the fundamental ethnic divide; his Alfred makes a nation against "assaults of the heathen." Compare this to Bede where complex religious differences seem not to have affected other kinds of ethnic coherence between Imma and his imprisoner. Further, Asser implies a royal court that embraces many races, even beyond those of the court scholars, and thus probably many languages. He sees Alfred’s vernacular reading as specific to his Saxon race, but not as part of a boundary of participation in the state. Asser even aligns literacy and faith. It was the heathen invaders that prevented young Alfred from getting a better education, although Alfred’s love of “Saxon poems” is a key sign of his youthful promise.

The story of Alfred memorizing poems in exchange for the promise of a book locates him in a crossing place of oral and written culture comparable to Caedmon and the mixed linguistic heritage of vernacular poetry and Latin literacy. (Indeed,
from this perspective their real difference is one of class, not faith or talents.) Compare too the story of how the “whole Táin” was recovered (see the headnote), and how that elides books and oral transmission. Alfred desires the book as an icon, not for its words but the beauty of its decorated initial.

**King Alfred**

*Preface to Pastoral Care*

Asser’s preoccupations, especially his elision of Christianity and ethnicity, contrast significantly with Alfred’s own justification in translating *Pastoral Care*. Alfred constructs his alignment of ethnicity and kingdom from two perspectives, history and language. First, he invokes a nostalgic regard for the glories of an unspecified past he wants to emulate. Second, he wants to restore learning to a people among whom Latin has steeply declined, through the medium of Anglo-Saxon, “the language which we can all understand.” Who make up that “all,” at a court populated, Asser told us, by many nations? This evocation of a somewhat homogenized “Anglo-Saxon” people is echoed in charters of about the same time, in which Alfred is styled “king of the Anglo-Saxons.”

At the same time, the idea of translation links Alfred’s realm to other great nations of the past, moving in a roughly westward direction. This movement of learning and power (*translatio studii, translatio imperii*), with its implications of a chosen people and justification of empire, will be very important in the more secular history writing of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and throughout Arthurian tradition, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ironically, it will be invoked by the spokesmen of the Anglo-Saxons’ conquerors, the Normans.

**Ohthere**

The report of Ohthere’s journeys records a rather different encounter, not only with the “exotic” peoples of northern Scandinavia, but also between Alfred’s Anglo-Saxons and their own geographical past. Even while he was fighting Viking insurgents, Alfred also maintained trade ties with other Scandinavians, and brought some to his court. Ohthere is one of these, and his travels are introduced almost like a report on tribal groups of varying levels of primitiveness. There is little concern with religious practice here, but with the geography of far northern Scandinavia and with the region’s languages, social habits, settlement patterns, and trade. Ohthere’s own society is an object of curiosity, too, and his story includes details about farming and the measure of wealth in his own country. The emphasis on deer herds suggests the difficulty Ohthere had in explaining concepts of wealth based primarily on moveable possessions, not land. (This may be compared to wealth in *The Táin*.) Alfred also seems interested in aspects of his people’s historical identity and their origins around the Baltic, accessible through the memory of a Norwegian trader—an interest consistent with the intense, even elegiac nostalgia of *Beowulf*.

**The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**

If King Alfred promoted the idea of a language to link all Anglo-Saxons, the *Chronicle* helped that occur. Initially distributed to a number of monasteries (as
were some of Alfred’s translations), the Chronicle was extended at some of them, right up to the Norman Conquest in 1066, and in a few cases even beyond that date. This passage reflects an achieved sense of ethnic nationhood in its uncomplicated assumption of the “English people” who oppose Harold of Norway and William of Normandy. Nowhere is the tone of loss and lamentation at the fall of Anglo-Saxon kingship more acute than here. The Chronicle depicts Harold moving feverishly between an old enemy, the Norwegians (who had maintained close relations between their own country and the Danelaw), and the new invaders, the Normans. Yet the Chronicle, especially in these passages, also adopts a much wider perspective of divine disfavor, cosmic signs, and punishment for “the sins of the people.” It sees the Normans as an alien invading force, but even more as God’s punishment for Anglo-Saxon corruption. The latter notion echoes historiographical ideas developed out of biblical narrative, but used more recently by Welsh historians explaining the triumphant incursions of the Anglo-Saxons themselves. Both in biblical history and in notions of translatio imperii, a people could lose their favored status. This excerpt of the Chronicle ends with an appeal not to nationhood but to the will of God.

**Taliesin**

One job of poetry in the oral tradition is to preserve its culture’s whole knowledge, especially the history and legends that generate social identity, in the absence of written texts. This can generate a sort of literary superabundance (from the perspective of an audience accustomed to books) involving catalogs and digressions whose presence has more an encyclopedic than an immediately narrative relevance. Aspects of this were noted in Beowulf and The Táin. On the other hand, such a cohesive culture creates an audience well informed about its great communal stories. This also allows the poet to work in forms of extreme economy, using only the most glancing references to the narrative setting of a poem. This resource of an orally derived poetry is found in Anglo-Saxon laments like The Wanderer and The Wife’s Lament, but is even more extreme in the emotionally charged narrative allusiveness of Taliesin.

Militant heroes on the order of Beowulf, Cú Chulainn, Uriën and Owain dominate this oral tradition, but poets themselves are charismatic figures, especially in Celtic culture where their talents are also linked to prophecy and even verbal magic. Fidhelm in The Táin provides a good instance, as does the warrior poet Fergus mac Róig. So it is not surprising that Taliesin himself becomes the focus of tales of marvel in later Welsh culture, nor that a growing group of poems are attached to the prestige of his name.

Taliesin celebrates cattle raids that recall The Táín in The War Band’s Return, but in the very next stanza he evokes the fragility of a realm so dependent on warrior kings, and imagines the disaster of his king’s death. This fearful glance toward dispersal and isolation invites comparison with the Anglo-Saxon elegies as well as with a number of moments in Beowulf where celebration is inter-
rupted by the poet’s reminder that it is soon to be followed by disaster. The poem’s final stanza at once insists on Urien’s power and registers (in the repetition of “foes”) how it is challenged on every side. Taliesin’s sense of glory in the prospect of defeat is not purely conventional; the Welsh kingdoms of the northwest were in fact being slowly swallowed up by the Irish to the north and Angles to the east and south.

Taliesin uses powerful repetition (note “gaiety” and “riches” in the poem Urien Yrechwydd), but also meaningful omission, as when he describes only the results of warfare in the final stanza of The Battle of Argoed Llwyfain. The ravens here typify his power with very brief visual images. This same technique has its high point in Lament for Owain Son of Urien, when it switches from the “sleep” of easy triumph to that of death. This poem also displays Taliesin’s quicksilver shifts of tone, possible only in poetry of such economy, in the unresolved moves from Christian consolation to heroic ferocity and back again.

**The Wanderer**

In the past there has been much controversy as to the relation between the pagan and Christian elements in *The Wanderer*: was it composed by a Christian poet, or by a pagan poet and later reworked by a Christian one? (It is unlikely that it was ever purely pagan, given that writing was not introduced to England until the Christian conversion.) Anne L. Klink gives a succinct summary of criticism on this subject, including the exegetical reading of D. W. Robertson, Jr. (The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study [1992], 30–35). The debate offers an opportunity to talk about the tensions between exegetical and literal or historical interpretations which have later relevance to the work of Chaucer.

In fact, most contemporary students have difficulty appreciating poetry which recommends stoicism of any kind, whether pagan or Christian, and so teaching *The Wanderer* poses something of a challenge. This is perhaps best met by comparing the poem to other works, primarily from the Old English period, but also from Middle English and later. To this end seeing the poem’s structure as divided into the three sections of exile, the ruin, and the *ubi sunt* motif can be helpful. In the opening section about exile, *The Wanderer* can be compared to the elegiac elements of *Beowulf*, a poem which, for all its celebration of heroic values, reminds us of the loss which follows from their violence (this is clearest in the endless tribal warfare presented through digressions in the second half of the poem). *The Wanderer* explicitly laments that loss, as the exiled speaker longs for his lord, his companions, and the mead hall. Lyric portions of *Beowulf* that can be compared with *The Wanderer* include Hrothgar’s “sermon” warning Beowulf against pride in his youthful prowess, and the so-called “elegy of the last survivor,” who buries useless treasure in the dragon’s cave. In addition, the dreamer’s presentation of himself as an exiled Germanic warrior in *The Dream of the Rood* bears comparison with the voice of the exile in *The Wanderer*.

The section of the poem where the speaker reflects on ruins,
old walls stand, tugged at by winds
and hung with hoar-frost, buildings in decay.
The wine-halls crumble, lords lie dead,

Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament

Male-voiced elegies like The Wanderer are the norm of exile poetry, expressing the dark side of heroic experience—the painful loss of the joys of the hall with the warrior band that is the predictable consequence of tribal warfare. Female-voiced elegies reflect a double exile, from the ties between men in the comitatus as well as from lover or husband. These women are not agents but objects of exchange with the role of “peace-weaver and mourner for the dead produced by feud,” being “part of the treasure dispensed by the victorious ruler” (Helen T. Bennet, “Exile and the Semiosis of Gender in Old English Elegies,” *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian Overing, [1994], 45). In suffering the pain of separation, the speakers of Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament may be compared to the doomed Freawaru, Hrothgar’s daughter, and the tragic Hildesburh in Beowulf.

The importance of the female voice in these elegies has long been recognized. (Some earlier editors, however, tried to efface it by emending the feminine endings on some of the adjectives, reading the poems as conventional elegies spoken by an exiled warrior.) It should be stressed, however, that these poems were more likely written by men constructing a female persona than by women. Marilyn Desmond has suggested that they may nevertheless be added to the female canon, arguing that in cases of anonymity, voice rather than authorship should be the determining factor (“The Voice of Exile: Feminist Literary History and the Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Elegy,” *Critical Inquiry*, 16 [1990], 572–90). Certainly Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament can be compared with the anonymous Middle English laments on pregnancy and rejection (such as The Wily Clerk and Joly Jankin), and later poems written by women themselves, such as Mary Wroth, Aphra Behn, and Anne Finch.

The feminist approach to this material is rather new, for students of Old English literature have been skeptical of literary theory of any kind until recently. (Roy Liuzza characterizes the approach generally as asserting “I am Woman, let me read...
The Wife’s Lament. But in fact, several theoretical approaches in recent years have challenged the earlier new critical, oral-formulaic, and exegetical concerns. (See the preface to Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe, ed., Old English Shorter Poems: Basic Readings, [1994].) Like feminist criticism, many of the new approaches attempt to restore Old English poetry to its social context. One of these is the study of manuscript context, which seeks to gain insight into the work through the tastes of the compiler.

The female elegies are a particularly good place in which to practice such critical modes, as well as the more traditional ones of close reading and philology. Because of their short length, they enable a close attention to the text which is difficult with a longer narrative like Beowulf. Starting a British Literature survey course with these poems, together with The Wanderer and the riddles, lets the teacher raise these issues at the outset while at the same time allowing students to finish Beowulf.

One might expect students to be engaged by the feminist implications of Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament. What is surprising, though, is that they are also drawn to the very ambiguity which so frustrates editors, translators, and critics. As with Emily Dickinson’s poems, they seem to relish the liberty offered by so many gaps in the text. Wulf and Eadwacer is so cryptic that it was earlier thought to be one of the riddles, which it in fact precedes in the Exeter Book. While some things are clear from the translation in this anthology (by Kevin Crossley-Holland)—Wulf is the speaker’s lover, by whom she has a child, Eadwacer is her husband, and she has lost her lover and may lose her child—much else remains murky. The ambiguities may be explored by giving students a photocopy of the original Old English (see Anne L. Klinck, The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study, [1992], 92, also useful for its introductions and notes) and another translation (perhaps S. A. J. Bradley, Anglo-Saxon Poetry, [1982], useful because it follows the order of the manuscripts). One question of translation concerns the repeated phrase “on threat” (lines 2 and 7), which Crossley-Holland translates “with a troop”:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{verbatim}
Wulf is on one island, I on another,
a fastness that island, a fen-prison.
Fierce men roam there, on that island;
they’ll tear him to pieces if he comes with a troop.
\end{verbatim}
\end{footnotesize}

Bradley, however, translates “on threat” as “under subjugation”:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{verbatim}
Wulf is on one Island; I am on another. That island
is secure, surrounded by a fen. There are deadly cruel
men on the island; they want to destroy him if he comes
under subjugation.
\end{verbatim}
\end{footnotesize}

Depending on which translation is chosen, the line “They will kill him if he comes on threat” means that Wulf will either threaten or be subject to violence. Either way, the exercise is a good way to illustrate Old English and problems of interpretation to students who don’t know the language.
Even more than *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife’s Lament* is a teachable text, perhaps as much because of its riddling qualities as its female voice. The speaker tells of her husband’s departure, his kinsmen’s fomenting enmity between them, and her husband’s ordering her into a friendless exile. Again with photocopies of Klinck’s text and Bradley’s translation, students can be shown a difficult crux. At the end of the poem, Crossley-Holland translates a passage as follows:

> Young men must always be serious in mind
> and stout-hearted; they must hide
> their heartaches, that host of constant sorrows
> behind a smiling face. . . .

This appears to be a general statement with particular application to the speaker’s husband, with whose sorrows she sympathizes. There is an alternative reading of the passage as a curse, however, aimed at a young man, not previously mentioned, who has implicitly caused the couple harm:

> For ever shall that youth remain melancholy of mind and
> painful the brooding of the heart. He shall sustain, as
> well as his benign demeanour, anxiety too in his breast
> and the welter of incessant griefs.
> (Bradley, 385)

If we translate the subjunctive *scyle* in “A scyle geong mon wesan geomormod” (line 42) as “may a particular young man know mental anguish,” the speaker is certainly wishing ill luck on someone. Thus, *The Wife’s Lament*, which has been called “perhaps the ‘hottest’ text” among the lesser studied Old English poems, can be used to show students who will never study the language the value of old-fashioned philology.

### Riddles

The riddles from the Anglo-Saxon period reflect many spheres of activity—agricultural, domestic, and sexual—which are generally ignored in the more canonical genres of Old English poetry. Of those selected here, however, all but one deal with literary activity, playing on the power of writing or the miracle of books. They reflect the high level of Christian scholarship in England and Ireland before the Norman Conquest. (See also the image of St. John the Evangelist with the tools of a scribe, the pen and the book, from the *Book of Kells* on the cover of this volume.)

Students’ love of deciphering should draw them to the intricacies of the Anglo-Latin riddles of Aldhelm. The “seventeen sisters” are the alphabet, while the “six bastard brothers” are the letters h, k, q, x, y, z, which are regarded as illegitimate because not native to the Latin alphabet. For more detailed correspondences, see

The Old English Riddles from the Exeter Book are doubtless aimed at the same elite literate audience as the Latin ones, and reflect similar philosophical concerns. The answers to the speakers’ implicit questions “what am I?” here include a Bible, a bookworm, and a reed pen. The sense of awe at the technology of writing in these riddles is remarkable. In the riddle whose answer is “A hand writing,” the poet moves from four earthbound creatures to the image of the quill pen to evoke the freedom of a bird in flight:

I watched four curious creatures
travelling together; their tracks were swart,
each imprint very black. The bird’s support
moved swiftly; it flew in the air,
dived under the wave.

The marked respect for the process of writing in such riddles contrasts sharply with later medieval observations on the technologies of writing and printing. Students might compare Chaucer’s despair, 400 some years later, at the incompetence of his copyist (in To His Scribe Adam), or, even more remarkably, William Caxton’s relative indifference, in his Preface to Malory’s Morte Darthur, to the print technology which less than fifty years later Rabelais was to recognize as revolutionary.

The last riddle to be discussed reveals one aspect of human activity notably repressed in Old English literature—sexuality. The Exeter Book is known for its “double-entendre” riddles which offer simultaneously a prim and a pornographic solution. (See Craig Williamson, trans., A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs, [1982], 22.) The “onion/penis” riddle included here has a nearly perfect form, because almost every detail points to two possible solutions. Part of the riddle’s charm comes from the fact that the onion-picker, “a good-looking girl, the doughty daughter of some churl” is presented as attractive, though of middling status.

Other double-entendre riddles are neither so consistent in their corresponding details, nor so positive about sexuality. Many treat it as characteristic of the lower classes and of ethnic outsiders, as described in John W. Tanke’s “Wonfax wale: Ideology and Figuration in the Sexual Riddles of the Exeter Book” (Class and Gender in Early English Literature: Intersections, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian Overing, [1994], 31–32). Students interested in pursuing such riddles further may also consult Anne Harleman Stewart, “Double Entendre in the Old English Riddles,” Lore and Language 3 (1983), 39–52.
After the Norman Conquest

The Arthurian Myth in History and Romance

Ask any classroom of undergraduates who Etiocles was, or even Hercules or Alexander the Great, and we are likely to get responses that are hesitant, fuzzy, and uncertain about the broader legendary context of each name. Ask about biblical characters, Old Testament or New, and there may be more answers, but usually from particular communities of believers, and their reactions are likely to be somewhat constricted by inherited religious interpretations. Ask that same class about Guinevere or Lancelot or Morgan, though: students speak right up, better informed, with some sense of how the names connect in narrative, and unhindered either by the inhibiting prestige of classical antiquity or the constraints of their varied orthodoxies.

Of all our great inherited story clusters in western culture, the Arthurian tradition remains the most vital, widespread in popular as well as “high” culture, and thus among the easiest legends through which to reach back to its very different manifestations in a distant past. Now as in the Middle Ages, the Arthurian myth has room for a free play of response among its audiences and its users. This puts right in the teacher’s hands a wonderful energy and ease that can help carry students, at any level, to the challenges of medieval English literary culture.

The selections in the following two sections show the Arthurian legend emerging in a range of key genres—history and heroic narrative, letters, and several versions of romance—across three centuries. They also provide a setting in which to examine the tremendous flexibility of the tradition and its exploitation by a series of cultural and political agents who make efforts (never fully resolved) to define and underwrite their social and religious visions through an ancient national hero who is widely admired, but not universally nor absolutely so. Further versions and reactions to the Arthurian legend also appear in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale and the series of ironic references in his Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

Before his story attains an elaborated narrative coherence in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthur does appear widely in Celtic sources such as the Welsh Mabinogion and in those Latin chronicles that concern themselves with the surviving British communities after the departure of the Romans. Students whose interest goes beyond the very brief sketch in the editorial headnote can be directed to the first three sections of The Romance of Arthur, (ed. James J. Wilhelm [1994]), which also provides further bibliography. For these and other topics, too, they should know about The New Arthurian Encyclopedia (ed. Norris J. Lacy, (1991)).

It’s good to keep reminding students of the changing cultural and historical settings in which these texts operate, and the many roles that Arthur and characters around him play therein. The Arthur of the Welsh retains (as in the Mabinogion) strong elements of sacral, semi-divine kingship. He brings young warriors into his cohort through ritual actions, and battles totemic beasts that carry at least some
echoes of pagan gods. In the early Latin chronicles, some of this remains in Arthur’s high kingship, but he is increasingly a figure of political and military resistance to post-Roman incursions. Geoffrey of Monmouth uses both the uncanny and the stories of British resistance around Arthur, but draws him into international settings of world history, Roman and European empire, and the more local tensions between Celtic and Mediterranean cultures, and Welsh and Norman powers. English kings like Henry II, Edward I, and Edward III invoke Arthur (through history and imitation) to buttress their own royal claims and ambitions, yet a poet like Marie de France (probably connected to the court of Henry II) uses a minor Arthurian episode to evoke a very different reaction to royal power, and to make place for dominant women, eroticism and the uncanny. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, whatever its extraordinary craft and its connections to surviving Celtic culture, also implies the ambitions and anxieties of a traditional chivalric class under great pressure in its own time, the fourteenth century. At about the same time (and using an analogous tale) Chaucer’s Wife of Bath uses the Arthurian court to deliver a protest against the violence and bias supporting that same chivalric ideal. And Malory works under the pressures of extended civil war that darkly echoes the eruptions of strife in Arthur’s Britain. New ethnic, cultural, and political settings make constantly new demands on these materials.

Despite the protean vitality of the Arthurian tradition, it is also a good idea to keep reminding students of two qualifications. First, there has been continuous doubt and debate about the very existence of a historical “Arthur” with anything like the attributes he quickly attracted in the tradition. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s encyclopedic gathering of Celtic Arthurian material was met by dismissive skepticism (even outrage) in his own time. Does this limit, or enhance, Arthur’s potential roles in cultural imagination? Second, in “literature” narrowly defined, the Arthurian legend bulks smaller in England than in France, with its enormous outpouring of verse narratives and prose cycles in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. By the later Middle Ages, the materials of secular story had been codified as the three “matters”: the Matter of Troy (or Rome, and embracing a wide range of classical story), the Matter of France (Charlemagne and his twelve peers, including Roland), and the Matter of Britain (Arthur and his knights); the Arthurian legend was only one of these, and not always pre-eminent. Nonetheless, as a king on British soil with lingering echoes of the divine and uncanny, he invited a remarkable range of uses—to encode social order, faith, and private psychology—as no other legendary figure did.

PERSPECTIVES

Arthurian Myth in the History of Britain

This section provides several looks at the story of Arthur as used in fairly immediate contexts of supporting dynastic power. It also asks students to look at history, topography, and the formal letter as self-conscious literary genres. The section thus
can also be used to challenge and broaden received notions of what makes up “literature” in cultural settings not immediately our own.

Geoffrey of Monmouth

In his History, Geoffrey links the Celtic myths of King Arthur and his followers to an equally ancient myth that England was founded by descendants of the survivors of Troy, and makes his combined, largely fictive but enormously appealing work available to an Anglo-Norman audience by writing it in Latin.

Feudal tenure, the centralization of power, and the establishment of bureaucracy were the worldly means by which the Norman and Angevin rulers established their power in the generations after 1066. They also, however, exploited a subtler mode of influence in the ideological underpinnings of history and literature produced under their patronage. The early Norman conquerors had promoted narratives of their ancestral founder Rollo, like the Roman de Rou. Geoffrey of Monmouth dedicated his History of the Kings of England to Robert Duke of Gloucester, uncle of the future Henry II. Soon after, Henry’s Angevin court was supporting the “romances of antiquity,” poems again in French that narrate the story of Troy (the Roman de Troie) and its aftermath (Roman d’Enéas), thus creating a secular typology for the Normans and their westward conquest of England.

Geoffrey of Monmouth himself led a mixed Celtic-English life. He is linked by name and geographical information to the area of Monmouth, though he may actually be Breton in family background. Geoffrey’s name also appears, though, on legal documents around Oxford in the second quarter of the twelfth century. The title he uses in some of those charters, “Magister,” suggests an elevated role in the intellectually active schools that were the forerunners of the university. Geoffrey was thus in an unusual but certainly not unique position to mediate between Celtic traditions and the Latin learning of the schools, and between the local culture of his upbringing and the international, Mediterranean-derived studies of classical and patristic literature. It may be this double affiliation that led Geoffrey to imagine a dialogue of Celtic and Norman perspectives in his History. If he makes the Anglo-Saxons God’s instruments in punishing the sins of the Britons, he also makes them scapegoats, unwanted intruders; the focus of hostility on them creates a space in which to imagine ethnic conciliation with the Normans.

Language provides Geoffrey’s most daring gesture in his construction of a British historiographical perspective. By basing his story on a “very ancient book written in the British language,” he inverts the usual hierarchy of prestige among Latin and the vernaculars. Whether that book was real or fictive, the “British language” here is seen as an ancient tongue, an alternate focus of historical inquiry. He presses this point further, later on, when he explains that the language of Brutus and his followers was Trojan or “crooked Greek,” and the origin of Welsh.

As noted above, references and episodes about King Arthur had been circulating in Welsh and Breton culture for generations before Geoffrey’s day. An “ancient book” could well have come into his hands, but it probably would have offered disconnected pieces of Arthurian story in the form of quasi-mythic episodes, genealogies, and king-lists, the genres of Celtic narrative. It was almost
certainly Geoffrey’s own inspiration to combine these materials in a linear story, linked with the Trojan origins of Britain, and exploiting the style and themes of history writing which was among the most distinguished genres in twelfth-century England. Geoffrey wrote a broadly conceived history of ethnic glory; corruption (especially illicit erotic desire) and declining power; divine punishment through human agents, and the vague promise of redemption. He lends weight and coherence to the events of his story by aligning them with the chronology of ancient and biblical history. His repeated emphasis on the disaster of political infidelity and division must have struck deep chords in an England mired in civil strife in the 1130s.

Note the details of Brutus’s voyage to Albion. Geography and other details recapitulate, invert, and undo the Greek triumph over Troy; they then widely overlap Aeneas’s wanderings, echoing the glamor of Brutus’s great-grandfather and the founder of the Roman empire. Consider also the original name of London, “New Troy,” Geoffrey dramatically re-centers England in the context of ancient history. He makes it part of the Trojan diaspora and potentially an imperial counter-balance to Rome. He also provides it with a heroic, exiled founder like that of the Romans.

Centuries later, Arthur is born from a lineage that involves both British kings and a Roman imperial family, the Constantines. But Geoffrey’s Arthur is more than a bearer of genealogy. He is a fully delineated epic and heroic figure, combining single combat and personal leadership of a national force. His later career also involves telling links to the Normans: Arthur seeks territorial expansion on the continent, and settles retainers in Anjou (Kay) and Normandy (Bedivere)—an inverse prehistory of the Norman conquest. This also helps produce, nonetheless, a legend in which the Norman conquest is a return to a place of genealogical origin, exactly the claim that Virgil makes for Aeneas’s right to inhabit Latium.

Women and erotic desire play a key role in the History, but students will need to discard expectations of courtly love play. Arthur’s life begins and ends with transgression of the marriage bed: Uther’s adultery with Ygerna, and Mordred’s with Guinevere. In this respect, Geoffrey still occupies the world of early Welsh stories, where women are taken, and (except maybe Guinevere) mortal women lack will. Uther’s desire for Ygerna is specifically physical. His lovesickness can be cured not by her affection but by the possession of her body. Ygerna lives happily with Uther after he kills her husband, though he pays for his transgression with a lingering illness. Arthur chooses Guinevere because of her Roman lineage. Is there anything like romantic love or emotional eroticism in the History?

Another area in which Geoffrey’s imagination inhabits Celtic traditions is his depiction of Merlin, the prophet and magician. Like priests and some poets (such as Taliesin) in Celtic myth, Merlin can shape-shift. And like the high poets of early Wales and Ireland, he can mock and criticize his king with impunity. But even his magic serves Geoffrey’s broader themes. Stonehenge, which Merlin magically transports from Ireland, is assembled as a memorial to dead heroes in the British struggle against the Saxons. As in The Táin, myth lends significance to a place surviving in the writer’s time. The episode is typical of Geoffrey’s double reach, rewrit-
ing a very ancient site as a symbolic space of the Arthurian line, but also drawing the even more ancient and uncanny ambience of Celtic tradition into his story.

**Gerald of Wales**

Beginning even before Geoffrey of Monmouth, Arthurian legend has a common thread of the unknowable, undiscoverable body of Arthur, or sometimes of his tomb. It is easy to see how this theme was attracted into parallels with the life of Christ. Both stories derive from a myth of immortality, a never-quite-lost savior of an oppressed people, and the promise of his return. Whatever hope this gave the Welsh, it also made Arthur not a forerunner but a potential opponent for the Norman and Angevin kings. The episode of Henry II helping the monks of Glastonbury uncover the true tomb and authentic body of Arthur is a cunning moment in the political co-optation of a powerful legend. The tomb, which was a sign of marvel and uncertainty in Arthur’s end, here provides ocular and textual proof of his death. Note how carefully Gerald sets up his story as opposed to “legends.” Yet the uncovering of the “real” body retains its evocative mystery, only now under the patronage of Henry and (not coincidentally) to the considerable benefit of the abbey, which writes itself ever more firmly into Arthurian myth.

**Edward I**

Edward’s silences in this letter are as interesting as his claims. He doesn’t grapple with the absence of documents to back his story of ancient lordship, giving just a vague assertion of “other evidence.” Edward uses Geoffrey of Monmouth’s narrative of the Trojan origins of England. What details get left out? Why? Unnerving details about irregular marriage, patricide, and exile simply disappear. Edward’s letter does tell the story of the division of the island among Brutus’ three sons, but adds the crucial detail of Locrine retaining “royal dignity” as first born. He thus deploys the Trojan myth to underwrite primogeniture and an ancient claim to the overlordship of Scotland.

The Scots’ reply, reported second-hand to Edward by his agents at the Papal court, is a dazzling piece of legal critique and counter-mythology. The Scots begin with the issue of the textual sources of power. What will dominate? Traditional tales, oral and written, or the non-narrative force of charter and bureaucratic record? Just in case their audience feels some attraction for foundation myth, the Scots offer their own. They answer a narrative of fathers, and English claims of primogeniture, with a story of female foundation and clan-like partition of land among several heirs. Scota comes to Scotland via Ireland—is hers also implicitly a more Celtic foundation than that of the Trojan Britons?

**Marie de France**

from Lais

Marie de France’s *Lanval* marks a distinct shift in tone and theme from the “historical” Arthurian materials. Yet Marie’s originality, and the complexity that lurks
behind her restrained style, seem to emerge best by being taught in comparison with Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales.

Prologue

The Prologue to the Lais is intriguing quite on its own, as a statement by a poet in contact both with the Latin classical tradition and with tales emerging into French and English literary culture from the Celtic vernaculars. Why tell us about her abandoned translations of classical story? Is Marie leveling the respective importance of texts derived from the institutional learning of the church-sponsored schools and those from the more popular and oral performances she has heard? Compare this with the linguistic moves in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Dedication.

What kind of independence does Marie imply for the composer or translator? Note the way her attention shifts from a responsibility for spreading the word of God to just spreading words. Does the notion of textual obscurity give a certain power to the reader as well? Is Marie willing (or even eager) “to speak quite obscurely” herself?

Marie’s prologue could be part of a more ambitious look at how medieval writers take positions in regard to older cultures, both Latin and Celtic and, in later medieval England, French. This might include King Alfred’s Preface to Pastoral Care, Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Dedication, the opening stanzas of Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls, Caxton’s Prologue to Malory’s Morte Darthur, and the copyist’s comments in The Tale of Taliesin.

Lanval

Marie’s innovativeness is clearest when she is compared to her rough contemporary Gerald and to her predecessor by about a generation, Geoffrey of Monmouth. All have links to the highest levels of the royal court, all tell Arthurian stories. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Marie de France draws explicitly from a Celtic-language tradition, although Marie’s source is explicitly Breton and oral. One might compare the quite different audiences implicit in their emphasis on written vs. oral sources and their divergent target languages, Latin and French. Mostly men, or women? Mostly lay people, or clerics?

Discussion might begin by considering the space for alternate, even dissenting perspectives, that Marie creates by these choices. Oral attribution frees her from textual control and the kinds of critique Geoffrey had indeed met. The decision to tell only a brief incident separates her from the broader historical perspectives of Geoffrey’s search for beginnings, or Gerald’s search for endings (or even from the broad historical reach implied by the Trojan references that open and close Sir Gawain and the Green Knight). What else does Marie’s narrower focus allow her to bring into her lai?

Social Setting The complex implications of Marie’s laconic style and story of fairy marvelous may be clearer if approached through the realistic social and political setting within which she situates these events. Marie’s Angevin audience would recognize the setting of territorial battle, the poverty that could result from ambition
at court and, later on, details of legal procedure. Unlike the Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes, Marie does not begin with a court held in peaceful celebration and in conscious pursuit of some marvel. Instead her lai is set in a brief respite from war, when Arthur is battling an invasion of Scots and Picts. Even Lanval’s plight is socially sited, almost banal. Lanval’s initial social isolation does not result from any lack of noble birth or martial bravery; he just hasn’t enough money. The episode of courtly eroticism and adulterous intrigue grows out of this setting, as does Lanval’s contact with the Celtic otherworld. Both elements imply powerful counterforces to the imperial aims, economic hierarchy, and militant order of Arthur’s world.

Paradoxically, the instant when the fairy world and the Arthurian realm briefly cross one another occurs in the context of a highly formalized legal procedure coherent with practices in the reign of Henry II. Indeed, this period produced one of the first detailed texts on legal procedure, The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of the Realm of England Commonly Called Glanvill (ed. C. D. G. Hall, [1965]). There is a formal accusation; Arthur consults with a baronial court; Lanval is free pending trial in exchange for pledges; and witnesses are demanded in court. In particular, an Angevin audience would recognize, in the murmurs of Arthur’s barons, a sense of how the strict rituals of legal procedure can serve to mask wrongdoing. Arthur is to some degree trapped within the very legal structures that underpin his power. The fairy mistress, when she does arrive, is at once an irrefutable witness and a sort of mounted champion in one alternative to court procedure, the trial by battle.

Fairy World  From his isolation within public society and from the city of Carlisle, Lanval retreats to the less stable and morally uncertain world of the field and the streamsid. The sudden emergence of the fairy world, and the magical lady’s reappearance at Arthur’s court, produce the powerful attraction of the lai. Part of Marie’s resonance, however, derives from her extreme economy in introducing these elements, the deft but almost laconic flatness with which she sets out her narrative. Yet Marie’s imagery is distinctly enriched and concrete at moments that open into the fairy world: Lanval’s trembling horse, the ladies with their golden basins and towels, the luxurious tent of the fairy mistress, even the dark marble stone from which Lanval vaults behind her onto her horse.

The setting of the streamsid boundary is reminiscent of moments in much earlier Celtic literature where women of uncanny beauty and power suddenly emerge as if from nowhere, for instance the appearance of Feidelm in The Táin. Other details echo the Celtic otherworld, such as the ritual washing after which Lanval can move into this new realm. Yet Marie also leaves open the possibility that the fairy world is an interior state. The ladies approach in what could be Lanval’s dream. His lady promises to be with him “when you want,” and apparently anywhere—perhaps in his imagination?

The world of Lanval’s fairy mistress, though, is also an elaborate mirror world to that of Arthur’s court. It is a world in which superabundant wealth is linked to eroticism, not militant conquest; and a world in which a woman’s loyalty is endangered by a man’s transgression of his oath, whereas Arthur’s loyalty to the mar-
riage bed is endangered by Guinevere’s adulterous desire. The counter-world of Lanval’s lady echoes but inverts regal symbols of the Arthurian frame: the eagle on her tent, her ermine and purple cloak, her lavish gifts which all reward obedience to love, not the feudal tie.

**Knighthood, Women, and Sexuality**  Historicizing versions of the Arthurian story tended to emphasize strong kingship, powerful knights, and Arthur’s preoccupations with territorial battle and the maintenance of aristocratic order. In Geoffrey of Monmouth, women and romance play a very small role, and even marvels and prophecy tend to be linked with national destiny. By contrast, while strong men like Gawain and Yvain are not absent in Marie de France, neither are they central to her tale. Can we even speak of a “hero” in *Lanval*? Lanval himself is rather passive, compared to knights of either the histories or later romances. Unlike many heroes of Arthurian romance, he has no specific ambition or quest to fulfill. Instead, he and the focus of the *lai* move from a public setting and imperial ambition to private erotic fulfillment and a very different realm of being.

Compared to the relatively passive mortal women in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Marie de France’s Guinevere stands out in bold relief. She is not an attractive character, but she has a powerful will of her own. Her desires imply a private erotic existence which she is willing to lead outside the marriage bed. Guinevere’s power in *Lanval*, however, is not especially subversive of the broader social order. Unlike Geoffrey’s Guinevere, whose affair with Mordred undoes Arthur’s campaign of continental empire and finally his insular realm, Marie’s Guinevere is relatively harmless, operating within the canons of social order, through a cunning manipulation of legal procedures.

The scene of courtly ritual play in which Guinevere approaches Lanval lies somewhere between the world of Arthurian militancy and the rural haven of the fairy mistress. Can it be seen as a context where Arthurian order and the erotic power of the fairy lady may dangerously mix? When rejected by Lanval, Guinevere accuses him of homosexuality. This makes sexuality a central issue, as it might interrupt the order of Arthur’s public world. It is an accusation sufficiently threatening to knightly identity that it alone pushes Lanval to betray his promise of secrecy to his fairy mistress.

*Lanval* ends with the knight’s return to the mysterious place that has been the space of magic and female power in prior tradition. Lanval abjures the Arthurian court, apparently forever. Are we asked to view this in a negative or positive light? And does Lanval’s departure really transform the Arthurian realm? Or rather, has the fairy lady been accommodated simply as a witness leading to Lanval’s exoneration within an unaltered legal structure?

**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**

**Romance and Chivalric Ideals** The outlines of the genre we loosely call romance emerged in Arthurian narratives and retellings of classical story, in French
and Anglo-Norman verse of the middle and later decades of the twelfth century. Their name derives from their use of the romance vernacular, as opposed to Latin. What draws these highly varied works into a related group is their exploration of complex individual consciousness through narratorial comment, through interior monologue and dialogue, and through a kind of projection of the psyche upon the landscape. The romance hero, in quest or flight, often encounters a series of versions of the self—sometimes a “version” of his own reputation. (Consider Gawain’s assertion “I am not he,” line 1242 and Bercilak’s “You are not Gawain the glorious,” line 2270.) Equally he may meet up with some form of the other (especially in an erotic partner) who may either help achieve the quester’s ambitions or subvert the quester’s identity and social position.

Romance helped create, as much as it reflected, the cultural ideals of chivalry. Growing out of ancient social realities of the male battle cohort, chivalry celebrated the armed knight but also placed his militancy within more controlled structures such as the tournament. In the thirteenth century and after, these were increasingly theatricalized and ritualistic; in literature, arms and tournament often carried symbolic weight, as seen in Gawain’s shield in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (hereafter SGGK). The social ideals of chivalric loyalty had their private counterpart in the conventions of courtly love (again often highly ritualized and artificial), and spiritual counterpart in religious chivalry. This was expressed not just in the knight’s individual faith but also in the ideals of crusade and the religious orders of knighthood like the Templars. If courtly love was often thought to elevate the knight, though, its adulterous implications clearly transgressed Christian faith; romances variously skirted or thematized this conflict. All these concepts had a highly variable and sometimes tangential relation to political reality, yet such was their power that they could be exploited for political ends. In the fourteenth century, for instance, kings across Europe sponsored chivalric orders in efforts to shift chivalric loyalty from local magnates to the crown. (The motto of Edward III’s Order of the Garter is invoked at the end of SGGK.)

Romance is also typically concerned with the ways that the individual relates to social order, often moving from episodes of alienation or conflict to a restored harmony. Typically, too, it involves an adventure, especially a quest into the unknown or uncanny, that takes the hero away from an initial social setting, into a private confrontation or crisis (be it erotic, martial, or spiritual), and then returns him to that initial setting. Both hero and society are usually altered—improved or compromised—by these events.

Social Setting. It is exactly because of the double reach it shares with the most ambitious romances—toward the private crisis but also toward its societal implications—that SGGK is so powerful and challenging a text. Its poetic structure is so finished as to seem separate from mundane events, yet it was written (according to scholars’ best guesses) during the later fourteenth century in the midst of royal and baronial crises in which the Trojan and Arthurian legends were again being exercised.

Troy and Arthur were inextricably mixed into political ambitions. Both Edward III and Richard II had interest in models of strong kingship and invoked
their legendary Trojan and Arthurian genealogy. Edward III had refounded a Round Table in 1344 (but hadn’t carried through). The French prose Brut, virtually a national chronicle that greatly expands on Geoffrey of Monmouth, was translated into English in the later fourteenth century and was enormously popular. The Mortimer family, who had royal ambitions, owned the “Wigmore Manuscript,” which includes a Latin Brut and a genealogy linking Brutus, Arthur, and themselves. Middle English versions of the Troy story were written in alliterative verse, in the same general time and area that produced SGGK, and likely for the same provincial courts, which were rather conservative and loyal to the crown. And Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his Troilus and Criseyde, an episode of the Troy story, while working within the government of Richard II.

While SGGK is a celebration of Christian chivalry, its celebration is perhaps overdetermined because of the real stresses that the abstract notion of chivalry was facing in the later fourteenth century. By this time, some urban merchants had grown richer than knights, and mercantile families had risen into the aristocracy. The older model of aristocratic power based on provincial land tenure was shifting as nobles around the king became more like a paid bureaucracy. The military importance of the mounted knight was declining under new military technology that enhanced the effectiveness of archers on foot.

**Regionalism and Alliterative Form** The alliterative meter which is SGGK’s most distinguishing poetic feature is the great form of traditional heroic narratives in the second half of the fourteenth century. Like several other heroic tales in alliterative verse, it is associated with the northwest midlands—Cheshire and Lancashire, precisely the areas whose nobles came into the favor and patronage of Richard II during his repeated conflicts with the southern magnates after 1385. Cheshire nobles in his retinue moved back and forth to London (and the continent) as a result, which opened up lines of cultural mobility between the urban center and their provincial courts. And Richard and his retinue spent periods in the midlands. At the same time, English as a literary language was on the rise in Richard’s reign. These elements, combined with Richard’s own interest in history and imperial genealogy, provide a possible political setting for SGGK’s yearning if fragile idealism and its exploration of courtly behavior. It has even been suggested that the poem’s locales and themes involve some echo of Richard’s famous Christmas Court at Lichfield in 1398–99.

**Celtic Elements** This regional aspect involves another cluster of associations in SGGK. The territory between Chester, Wirral and North Wales was very well-known to the Gawain poet, as is clear in the geography of Gawain’s wanderings (esp. lines 691 and after). The poem derives to some degree, then, from the culturally permeable border lands between the English and the Welsh. It was a multilingual area, including Welsh speakers who used English and vice versa, and (as everywhere in England) users of surviving specialized kinds of French, such as that of the law courts. Gawain’s alliterative meter derives from English models, but it has other features of metrics and form, rhyme, assonance, and repetition of key words, which also have correspondences in Welsh poetry. These bear comparison
with the Welsh-influenced “Harley lyrics” such as Alisoun included in this anthology. (For more details and bibliography, consult Jeffrey Hunstman, “The Celtic Heritage of SGGK,” Miriam Y. Miller and Jane Chance, ed., Approaches to Teaching SGGK, [1986], 177–81; it contains several other fine essays.) Celtic influences are especially dense in the description of the Green Knight himself; “in fact, the dyn glas ‘grey-green man’ is a familiar figure of Welsh folklore, the pivotal winter figure who represents simultaneously the dying of the old year and . . . the birth of the new” (Hunstman, 180). And of course, “Morgan the Goddess” is a figure from pre-Christian Celtic myth.

Form, Balance, and Pedagogy  Exquisite as they are, the formal symmetries and highly accomplished craft of SGGK offer temptations to the critic that it may be well to resist, or leave behind at some point in classroom discussion. So elaborate are the poem’s mirrorings, repetitions, and inversions—structural as well as thematic—that they may tempt the reader permanently into the New Critical stance of unresolvable ambiguity.

Discussion might start by laying out the poem’s structural densities. Explore repetition at the level of key words: accord, contract, covenant, game; adorn, array; knot, lock, bind/bound; leap, hurtle; figure, sign, blazon. Unpack some of the numerical associations. Consider the brilliant balancing and pacing of Bercilak’s three hunts and the Lady’s three love dialogues with Gawain.

Approached these ways, the poem is indeed a monument to its own artifice, a celebration of its craft. In this respect it has been rightly compared to the metaphorical cut-paper castle in the description of Bercilak’s own castle (lines 801–02). That metaphor is only one in a sequence of narrative celebrations of craft that are also worth pausing over: the decoration of the Green Knight’s garb, even of his weapon, the arming of Gawain, the elaborate ritual of Bercilak’s hunt, the almost equally formalized rules of love-play between Gawain and the Lady. Even highly emblematic description, though, is balanced by lively movement; Bercilak’s gothic castle, metaphorized as cut paper, is followed by Bercilak himself, nervily leaping about to make Gawain at home and honor his presence.

Even these celebrations of the achievements of human craft and social ritual, though, have their inverses in the natural world within the poem. Death itself makes an early and frightening appearance in the agreement to exchange ax blows; and the lapse of time through the seasons, beautiful but transient, occupies one of the poem’s most moving moments. The world of nature, beyond the reach of human artifice, becomes ever more frightening, raw, and abandoned as Gawain approaches his second meeting with the Green Knight.

These elements are certainly crucial to a poem that asserts its own craft (it is “fashioned featly,” line 33); moreover, they provide pedagogically elegant ways to articulate the poem’s complexities and formal dexterity. Yet it is also important to investigate SGGK’s narrative loose ends, unresolved themes, and anxious gaps and silences. So after considering the elements of “formal perfection,” the brilliant pacing and the sheer narrative engagement of the tale, one might (as the editorial
headnote hints) begin to read backward in a way more alert to other elements that the poem equally includes.

**Felix Brutus, Bliss and Blunder** The pressure on an idealizing reading of the poem is probably greatest at the very points where its circularity is most emphatic, in the references to Troy and Brutus with which it begins and ends. That same circular echo also insists upon a kind of broad-scale history on the model of Geoffrey of Monmouth, in which British glory is repeatedly compromised by British sin and decadence, and in which Arthur’s reign (for all its splendor) is only a brief British revival against encroaching invaders. Further, the poet seems to present Aeneas as a compromised dynastic founder, a betrayer of his own city. Hence any betrayal among Arthur and his knights has an implicit genealogical foundation, and an un-nerving place in a bigger story of national rise and decline. The poem’s internal narrative of a youthful and idealistic Arthurian court receives a dramatically broader, and darker, historical perspective at these moments.

**Asymmetry, Loose Ends, Thematic Threads** Upon further examination, indeed, some of the poem’s symmetries and mirrorings are more apparent than real; at key places, images and narrative remain significantly imbalanced or unresolved. There is, as suggested in the headnote, a female-centered narrative that emerges retrospectively after Gawain’s second encounter with the Green Knight. This is important, but does not counterbalance the longer narrative of martial adventure and knightly quest. Bercilak’s revelation of Morgan’s identity and the prior cause of the story scarcely rewrites the impression and reflections of male Christian chivalry that a reader has gained up to this point. Similarly, the green girdle and the pentangle, neatly as they carry mirrored concepts, are not symmetrical signs. SGGK also presses at its limits by ironizing certain key, even formulaic terms at carefully chosen moments. What is the impact of “Gawain the good” when he is about to accept the green girdle?

Some of this asymmetry, and the thematic issues it raises, emerge in a comparison of the courts of Arthur and the lord later identified as Bercilak. Bercilak is explicitly more mature than Arthur, and his court appears more sophisticated and challenging, though it also proves to be more seductive and dangerous. This may be because Bercilak’s court (which turns out to be really Morgan’s) seems to be more in touch with aspects of mortality that Arthur’s court, in this poem, leaves aside: women appear in extreme old age as well as youthful beauty, and the hunt is as violent as it is ritualized. Yet the forces of mortality and creaturely excess, while more apparent at Bercilak’s court, are also controlled. Both the Green Knight and Bercilak, for all their size and power, are proportioned and orderly, bigger than life but never monstrous.

Other symmetries seem to raise questions by their very neatness. As they have agreed, Bercilak and Gawain exchange winnings after each of three hunts. Bercilak gives Gawain his day’s quarry; Gawain responds with the kisses he has received from the Lady. The kiss, by itself, has no particular erotic valence, except for the covenant that they exchange exactly their winnings. Does Gawain transmit exactly the explicitly romantic kiss he had received (in a rather static and feminized posture) from the
Lady? Here the narrative is so attentive to its ritual that the reader is left to wonder at the apparently melting boundaries between chivalric male bonding and sexual exchange. Is Gawain’s perfect knighthood the only quarry, or also his manhood?

Repeatedly, the poem’s somewhat brittle formalism and depiction of social lightness give way to deeply engaging and disturbing themes. The courtly games of Arthur’s New Year suddenly turn into the Green Knight’s mortal “game” (line 273) of ax blows. This in turn takes up language of covenant, whose fulfillment offers a serious challenge to the self-image of the Arthurian court. And again, the game-covenant at Bercilak’s court turns into the deepest challenge to Gawain’s “truth.” Gawain begins by playing out a courtly ritual, but finds himself painfully balancing obligations to his host and to the Lady. The elaborate love-play in which Gawain half-heartedly engages in turn produces the deepest temptation, and the one he does not resist: the temptation to be alive. (Bercilak’s most appealing line may be “you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame,” 2368.) When Gawain accepts the green girdle from the Lady, then holds it back in the third exchange with Bercilak, he enacts one of the poem’s asymmetries, the unbound knot by which we grasp the poem’s serious issues. Another emerges with the incompletely explained identity of “Morgan the Goddess” and her plot against Guenevere, discussed in the headnote. The rage Gawain feels when his failing is known, and his misogynist diatribe (lines 2413 ff.) carry these asymmetries further.

Does, finally, Arthur succeed in reintegrating the “loose end” opened by Gawain’s adventure? If the girdle is, as the poet says, a “sign of excess” (line 2433), is it successfully restrained? Can the reader react to the laughter and game of the Arthurian court with the same delight as before? Can the reader choose between the poem’s claims as a heroic romance and a moral fable?

**Sir Thomas Malory**

*Le Morte D’Arthur*

The plot and elegiac tone of the Arthurian legend in English literature, from the late Middle Ages until today, was largely created by Sir Thomas Malory. Prince Arthur’s fleeting appearances in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* derive partly from Malory’s episodes of Arthur’s youth and initial military successes; Malorian names are used by John Milton when he mentions the legend. *Le Morte Darthur* (hereafter MD) became significantly influential again in the early nineteenth century, when it was reprinted in the wave of late romantic medievalism led by Sir Walter Scott and Robert Southey, and in the Victorian period when it was retold in numerous versions. The most prominent was Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1859–85) from which three episodes appear in the second volume of this anthology, as does William Morris’s *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858). Malory and his Victorian followers were in turn mined (or parodied) in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions like Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King* (1958), and their theatrical and cinematic progeny. Malory remains among the most widely read of medieval
authors; continuing popular and scholarly interest is reflected in many critical studies, most recently the excellent collection, *A Companion to Malory* (ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards, [1996]).

The persistently elegiac, even apocalyptic tone we encounter in Tennyson's *Idylls* was not a Victorian invention. Malory's version, as suggested by its very title, is colored throughout by an awareness of the inevitable fragility of Arthur's world, which sometimes seems engaged in a communal push toward death. Malory's vision of the Round Table features brief moments of exquisite unity and knightly harmony, but they are always hedged by potential strife and violence, and by an increasingly explicit sense of the moral compromises by which Arthur assembles and preserves his court.

**Malory's Life** There is a near consensus among scholars that Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revell was the jailed knight who wrote *MD*. This Thomas Malory began his adult life as a solid citizen of the provincial gentry, married to the daughter of another landowning family; he was a member of Parliament by 1445. In the early 1450s, though, Malory crossed the somewhat hazy line between local influence and local brigandage, perhaps responding to hostilities among the great ducal families and enjoying the protection of the Duke of York. His life thereafter was caught up in the disorder and political divisions of the Wars of the Roses. He was repeatedly arrested, for theft and rape among other accusations, though his long imprisonment without trial after 1452 probably resulted from being on the wrong side of power shifts. He was freed when the Yorkists invaded in 1460, and spent some years at liberty. Soon, however, Malory transferred his loyalties to the Lancastrians and was jailed again by the later 1460s, when he most likely wrote the *MD*. He was freed in late 1470 when the Lancastrians returned to power, and died soon after.

It is a paradox worth considering that Malory seems to have led the life of narrow self-interest, occasional violence, and unstable loyalty that he eloquently laments in Arthur's court, especially among the minor knights whose social place had analogies to his own. In the later episodes of *MD*, the greater knights fall away—dead, exiled, disaffected, or in holy orders—and key events turn increasingly on secondary figures, like Sir Pinel and Patrise in “The Poisoned Apple,” or Lucan and Bedivere in “The Day of Destiny.”

**The Political Context** It can be reductionist to pursue too neat an analogy between *MD* and affairs in later fifteenth-century England. Nonetheless, students should be alert to the great disorder and shifts of influence that came with the weak king Henry VI and the Wars of the Roses. Also, as Felicity Riddy has recently stressed (“Contextualizing *MD*: Empire and Civil War,” *A Companion*, 55–73), these events closely followed the final loss of England’s lucrative (and violently-held) colonial territories in France, which had been regained in the brief military glory of Henry V. The noble and administrative class not only lost income from these setbacks, but even in Henry V’s earlier triumphs they witnessed their military obsolescence as the yeoman archers became more and more lethal in combat. If the increasingly apocalyptic tone of *MD* is specific to Malory’s version of the Arthurian legend, the explosive pressure on a paradigm of noble existence had real echoes in
his own world: civil strife, the hostilities of two great clans, weak kingship, and especially the diffusion of power downward upon ever lesser figures.

**Style**  
MD is a long work by modern standards, but it is brief in comparison to the French prose romances that were Malory's major source. The energy and engagement of his work can be traced in good part to two elements. First, despite his frequent and respectful references to "the book," Malory was very free with his sources. Malory moves his narrative along at a faster pace than most of the French versions he used, especially trimming off much of their explanations of uncanny events and their moralizing sermons. This pacing sometimes creates an almost dizzying sequence of events, banal or uncanny, whose unnerving similarities are thereby laid bare even while their mystery remains intact.

Second, Malory used a simple but rhythmically powerful prose style that derives from early English prose but also uses effects from the alliterative poems he clearly knew. (For more discussion, see Jeremy Smith, “Language and Style in Malory,” A Companion, 97–113.) Malory generally uses a “paratactic” sentence structure, its independent clauses linked by simple conjunctions, and without the implicit explanatory logic of subordinate clauses. Events and speeches are set out, but much is left for the reader to connect. Sentences achieve a density and rhythmic drive through Malory’s persistent use of repetition and, especially at moments of high emotion, alliteration: "’What sawest thou there?’ said the king. ’Sir,’ he said, ’I saw nothing but waters wap and waves wan’" ("The Day of Destiny"). Thematically key words pile up with an insistence that can be almost independent of narrative; students can be urged to trace a few such lines of repetition.

**Caxton’s Prologue**

In Caxton’s Prologue to his first printing of MD, print rears its ugly head, and with it comes a new kind of textual commerce, and an interesting social strategy by the maker and purveyor of books. Caxton’s Prologue is not unlike a jacket blurb today, using the words of persons of prestige (usually highly edited) to promote the appeal or social utility of the merchandise. Note Caxton’s insistence on the “noble and dyuers gentylmen” who press him to publish a full Arthurian narrative. It is through this elite, in indirect discourse, that Caxton argues the historical reality of Arthur. In his own voice, further, Caxton makes an implicit nationalist argument for his book: the French in one direction and Welsh in another have all the stories of Arthur, but the English “nowher nye alle.” Caxton will supply the lack, though he does even this under the favor and correction of both lords and gentlemen. This insistence on a double audience is telling in a period of hierarchical distinctions between nobles and gentry. Does the London bookseller, with his considerable mercantile clientele, echo some yearning to join that higher class?

**The Miracle of Galahad**

Galahad’s vision of the grail in this episode is almost redundantly represented in terms of the Eucharist, the mass as a repetition of the Last Supper (note also the
twelve knights at Corbenic), and the transubstantiation of the wafer into the body of Christ. Other transformations are also taking place, though. Secular objects and agents are insistently sacramental. A bloody spear, so often seen in earlier knightly combats, here becomes part of the grail symbolism. The unity of the Round Table is superseded by a different meal and unity on another plane. In a swift sequence of encounters, Galahad’s touch cools fires and heat that elsewhere are Malory’s images of chivalric rage and battle. Similarly, Galahad heals a series of wounds or illnesses, but thereby frees their sufferers to die and leave this world, rather than rejoin it. The symbolic structure of the tale makes these all holy deaths into movements toward eternal life, but the sobriety of Malory’s description also gives the impression of a tale thick with death and the wish for death. Corpses and burials litter its narrative landscape. Galahad’s transforming touch, presented with little of the Christian exegesis of the French sources, also seems to undo structures that elsewhere uphold the Arthurian world. The one link he holds to, and that he encounters in almost breathless repetition, is the relation of father and son. Galahad’s last words recall his father Lancelot, and attempt to call him from his entanglement in the world, his passion for Guinevere. Finally, Bors returns to Camelot, and his story to the court enacts his frequent role as mediator among forces greater than he. The writing of his story in “great books” is another in a series of occasions in the later episodes when Malory’s own project is mirrored poignantly within his text.

The Poisoned Apple

The religious grail quest has been a disaster for the secular Round Table, and Bors returns to a mere “remnant” of the prior company. The surviving characters seem stuck in this diminished world, though, playing out old passions and hostilities with a sense of exhausted inevitability, banal but tragic. Lancelot retains some impression of his brief vision of the grail and the warning of his son Galahad, yet he takes up with Guinevere nonetheless, resuming an affair that we now witness only in a spiteful, weary argument. Their love has exactly the heat Galahad elsewhere extinguished. They try to keep it “privy” (a significantly repeated term), but the disembodied voices and sacred writings of the grail quest are now replaced by mutterings, gossip, and an unconvincing effort to preserve outward appearances.

This episode explores once again, more sadly than ever, a paradox at the center of MD: that desire for Guinevere is what keeps Arthur’s best knight at court, yet that desire undermines the codes and cohesion of the court. Public celebration of the Round Table is only possible in silence about the affair, but sacred and profane revelation (Grail and gossip) place that silence under impossible strain. Petty, secondary hostilities begin to drive the plot. Something like open talk occurs only in private, as in the scene of Arthur and Guinevere alone, where Arthur seems to connive to retain Lancelot’s service. Even here, though, they use the coded dialogue of a long marital truce.

Lancelot’s return and triumph in a trial by battle is arranged again by Bors. Lancelot tries to limit scandal by stipulating that no mention of Guinevere be
made on the tomb of Sir Patrise. Yet a report of the false accusation appears there nonetheless, told in an indirect discourse that melts indistinguishably into Malory’s own narrative voice. Voices are abroad that will bring down Arthur’s realm.

**The Day of Destiny**

The episode in which the text of *MD* finally enacts its title is itself littered with texts of death: fake letters announcing Arthur’s death, tombs, inscriptions, tales of death, and most poignantly Gawain’s letter, his dying effort. Here death converges with the very making of a text, and that death letter repeats, almost verbatim, the immediately preceding narrative paragraph. Malory folds his own cultural work into the final unravelling of the aristocratic model.

“The Day of Destiny” also sees the final conflict between feudal loyalty to Arthur and loyalty to clan, as Gawain seeks vengeance for Lancelot’s killing of his kinsmen. Arthur’s absence while prosecuting that kinship vendetta provides Mordred with the chance to seek the tale’s most impacted bond of kinship: to supplant his incestuous father on the throne and in the bed of his stepmother, and to kill off (first by the fake letters, then in fact) his father. To some degree, however, this replicates the royal usurpation of a marriage bed (and murder of its rightful occupant) by which Arthur was born.

Throughout this final episode, the abandonment of the secular world witnessed in the grail quest is repeated, as one public character after another abjures the world, to become a hermit, a nun, or a man suspended near death on an unknown island. These changes carry little of the grail quest’s sense of unification with an invisible world, however. Rather, they seem to be the nadir of the slow dispersal of central power and the chivalric paradigm under the pressure of conflicting and unstable loyalty.

Other mundane worlds are glimpsed in this final episode, however, and deserve attention. Sir Lucan reports the pillaging of knightly bodies in the moonlight after the battle. It is a chilling scene, but also one of the very few appearances of commoners in *MD*. A never-acknowledged source of Arthurian wealth recovers it, however repulsively, at the very close of the tale. In another strangely anomalous detail, Guinevere escapes Mordred by going to London on a fictive errand to buy her wedding needs. The world of mercantile activity opens, in a phrase, onto the death-throes of chivalry.

These two elements have converged in the literary past, for instance, when the mercantile Wife of Bath told a tale of a common girl raped by an Arthurian knight. And this moment may be considered, in turn, along with the conflict of values between Gawain and his guide (the sole presence of a servant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), when the guide tries to convince Gawain to flee his second encounter with the Green Knight. Together, they imply another perspective and position in the totalizing, if moving, value systems of the Arthurian legend.
G e o f f r e y C h a u c e r

The Chaucer industry—editions, scholarship, criticism, pedagogy—stretches back in a continuous tradition of nearly six hundred years. It can be said to start within a decade or so of Chaucer’s death, with the production of luxury copies like the famous Ellesmere manuscript. (See the portrait of Chaucer from this manuscript, p. 281.) This already began to institutionalize Chaucer as a “great writer” and, in such beautiful manuscripts, to reserve him for the consumption of an elite audience. Contemporary writers went about a related project by imitating aspects of Chaucer’s style, notably John Lydgate in a series of historical and moral works written under the patronage of King Henry V. Few writers since Virgil and Dante (both of whom Chaucer emulated) have been so swiftly made the unimpeachable objects of reverential study and imitation.

Ever since then, a range of audiences has appropriated Chaucer’s prestige as an element, sometimes even a voice, of their interests and preoccupations, always aided by the still astonishing variety of ideas and attitudes implicit in his works. Chaucer has thus been an icon for royalty, democracy, the protestant reformation, even (in his skeptical vein) the Enlightenment. One after another, social and intellectual communities have registered their arrival on the textual and especially the academic scene by a usually reverent laying of hands on the Chaucerian text.

Appropriations of this sort should not be seen as perversions or crude exploitation of the Chaucerian text. Rather, it is how a literary community makes obeisance to a particularly layered and resonant body of work, and it is among the best reasons to continue the undeniable efforts involved in laying our own hands on books as linguistically and culturally distant as Chaucer’s. For all the difficulty of the work, happily, the very fact of our continual grappling with Chaucer across the centuries has helped construct the many continuities of human experience through which we can still find links with his world.

The last couple of decades of critical and scholarly work around Chaucer make this a particularly challenging moment, but equally a very rich moment, in which to be reading him. Most of the major critical theories of the past three decades have generated important new statements on Chaucer. Some have been particularly fruitful or resonant because, for all their newness, they have encountered materials in earlier criticism or in medieval culture itself already engaged with their preoccupations. This is perhaps truest of deconstructive readings, whose play with polysemy has important precedents in medieval theories of interpretation, both the prescriptive notion of four-fold Biblical exegesis, and the much looser explorations of twelfth-century commentators like William of Conches and Bernard Silvestris.

The great critical deposit of the decades after mid-century has a continuing and important role in readings of Chaucer that go on today. The New Critics brought a fine-grained detail to their reading of Chaucer’s poetry which remains profitable, not only in the classroom, but equally in the focus it gives to current readings in very different modes. For all their emphasis on the poetic text as a self-contained unit, comprehensible (and best enjoyed) independent of its historical setting, the New Critics also pressed readings of Chaucer past a divide that had opened be-
tween philological and related research, and literary “appreciation.” It is not surprising that E. Talbot Donaldson, the great exponent of New Critical readings of Chaucer, trained a leading New Historicism Chaucerian, Lee Patterson.

One danger of bringing only the critic’s fine ear to the reading of an early text, is that the critic may find largely him- or herself therein. And the Chaucer who emerges from some New Critical readings—liberal-minded, genial, open to change—can sound today like an enlightened voice of the 1950s or ’60s. That Chaucer is generous-minded toward women, but sometimes (like those same liberal circles) rather condescending too.

An alternative, and in some ways a corrective, to this approach grew up in the same years in the exegetical or “patristic” criticism of Chaucer most often associated with the work of D. W. Robertson. The patristic school wished to read Chaucer as his contemporaries might have done; the model of medieval reading they used toward that end was the allegorical approach to interpreting the Bible, begun by the Fathers of the Church and developed (with less system and more variety than Robertsonians usually registered) at various times in the Middle Ages. This opened up a very rich body of medieval thought for Chaucerians, but a narrow one nonetheless, a view of dogma and social order that was conservative even in the medieval period. In the hands of flexible and complex readers, such as Robert Kaske, the patristic approach produced rich interpretations, nicely embedded in at least one important arena of medieval culture. Used by lesser minds, the results can be mechanical and often seem to support a sentimental and highly conservative, hierarchical view of the medieval past.

Recent scholars have used analogous procedures with more varied results. A great deal of research has been done on habits of secular reading in the schools of the Middle Ages, such as Alastair Minnis’s Medieval Theory of Authorship (1988). This and related work in turn has been applied to Chaucer as a writer well in touch with the universities, as in Ann W. Astell’s recent Chaucer and the Universe of Learning. Another approach to how Chaucer’s near-contemporaries might have read him, in a more immediate and concrete way, is through study of medieval manuscripts of his work, and how they compare to contemporary copies of other texts. (One resource of this “codicological” approach is suggested in the entry on the Wife of Bath’s Tale.)

The better-known critical theories of the past decades—deconstructive, psychoanalytic, Marxist, feminist, New Historicism—are all currently in use by some of our most learned and brilliant Chaucerians. What generates much of the current richness of Chaucer studies is the extent to which these approaches speak to one another and borrow from one another. The tone of armed encampments that surrounded a great deal of literary criticism in, say, the 1970s, has largely dissipated in favor of an eclectic but theoretically self-aware posture among Chaucerians. Peter G. Beidler’s recent collection of essays on the Wife of Bath (1996), with introductory essays by Ross Murfin, offers students and teachers an accessible first look at these theoretical approaches.

So for instance the work of H. Marshall Leicester (The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the “Canterbury Tales,” [1990]) draws both from decon-
struction and from post-Lacanian psychology. The “New Historicism” practiced by Lee Patterson is also informed by deconstruction’s challenge to the idea of a natural, self-contained subject (Chaucer and the Subject of History, [1991]). Marxists like David Aers include gender in their analyses of class and alienation, profiting from the perspectives of feminism (Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing, [1992]). The influential feminist work of Carolyn Dinshaw equally draws on psychoanalytic and historicist perspectives (Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics, [1989]).

If the challenge of critical theory is rewarded with a stimulating array of readings, merely reading the Chaucerian text is a great challenge for most college students. The decision to present Chaucer in Middle English in this anthology, in a text only modestly regularized, was taken after considerable thought. In fact, Chaucer’s English is very much more like our own than is that of many of his contemporaries, because he wrote in the London dialect that was also used by the government bureaucracy, and soon in print. His English has become ours, and if it is taught by starting with those continuities, a well-glossed text like that given here can become readable without great difficulty. Middle English can be a nice equalizer in class, too. Students who have English as a second language often find themselves deciphering Chaucer’s English better than their peers who are accustomed to read English more transparently. Reading out loud helps a lot; so does spending some time making sure that the class is clear about the plot, then (of course) working through the syntax and vocabulary of brief passages. The selections from the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales on our audio CD provide a lively guide to the sound of Chaucer’s verse. Students should also be urged to consult a good new CD-ROM, Chaucer: Life and Times (Primary Sources Media, [1995]). It provides a full text (from the Riverside edition) with pull-down glosses and notes; more important, the entire text is also in audio form, pronounced with accurate Middle English and (in some tales) considerable drama. Students can thus read as they listen—a more medieval practice than silent reading anyway—and use the audio for cues on syntax.

The Parliament of Fowls

The opening line of Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls (hereafter PF) almost makes us expect a self-reflexive poem about poetry itself (“the craft”); the second line suggests the theme of state—“craft” (“the conqueringe”). Only line 4 reveals Chaucer’s announced topic: “Al this mene I by Love . . .” Even then, the very nature of Love (craft or conquest? dreadful or joyous?) slides around fascinatingly for the rest of the poem. And the PF turns out in fact to be about all three topics: poetry, the polity, and the many forms of divine, romantic, and sexual love. The poem also proves to be densely self-reflexive after all: a new book written about a dream of (earthly) love that comes to the narrator after he reads about (cosmic) love in a visionary dream written in an ancient book.

For all the resonances created by this mirroring structure, though, it is important to help students respond as well to the very worldly, realistic touches that fill the PF and animate its rich but rather traditional themes. In the poem’s speaker,
Chaucer continues to refine and elaborate the somewhat fuzzy-minded, owlish narrator he had already used in his earlier *Book of the Duchess*. This character again knows the world mostly through books, but even his indirect quest for knowledge suggests a somewhat random, passive reader, picking up volumes almost by habit ("Of usage") and without fixed intent ("what for lust and what for lore," line 15), a seeker of bookish wisdom who remains unsatisfied but uncertain of just what he's looking for. In the end, though, this very range of reading provides the background for the poem's daring—and playful—combination of cosmic speculation and rarefied courtly artifice, even if the narrator leaves the poem only dimly aware of what complexity he has just encountered.

**Book, Dream, Experience**  The poem achieves its density and its play through the interpenetration and mutual questioning of book, dream, and experience. One always qualifies or comments on the other. The narrator encounters Scipio’s visionary dream of the cosmos and its analogies to the state in his book "write with lettres olde" (line 19). His own dream of Venus’ temple contains conventional personifications from the bookish courtly love tradition. Nature’s parliament, in the same dream, features “natural” birds whose talk sounds increasingly like a debate of social classes in contemporary London, though the narrator has compared the whole scene to a famous book, Alan of Lille’s *Complaint of Nature* (line 316). Nature and the search for generative sexuality comment on the frustrated love in Venus’s temple, yet the tercel eagles speak the language of courtly love.

**Occasion**  The *PF* has a place in literary history as among the first (and possibly the very first) in the tradition of Valentine’s Day poems. It may well be an “occasional” poem in a more interesting and thematically relevant sense, though. The counsellors of young King Richard II were actively seeking a politically advantageous wife for him in the later 1370s. The search went slowly. In 1380 negotiations began for an alliance with Anne of Bohemia, daughter of Emperor Charles IV. There were other suitors, though, and before a deal was struck, the future King Charles VI also made a bid for her hand. Richard was finally betrothed to Anne on May 3, 1381, and they married the following January. It has often been proposed that the debate of the tercel eagles for the love of the formel plays on this diplomatic competition to marry Anne, even down to the claim of the third eagle (lines 470–76) that while he may not (like the dauphin Charles) have been the longest in her pursuit, he can still love her as well as any. The year’s delay may reflect the period of diplomatic activity before the match was settled.

**Common Profit**  The *PF* as a whole could certainly speak to a young king like Richard, already engaged with the arts at a sophisticated level, just at the age of romantic yearning and enormous physical desire, yet still under instruction in the work of the prince and the state. The poem returns again and again to the theme of “commune profit” (lines 47, 75) and the good of the group—the idea, that is, of the polity. *The Dream of Scipio*, through which this topic enters the poem, is the closing section of Cicero’s *De Re Publica*, and itself involves the running of the state. Such “commune profit,” here and elsewhere in the poem, occurs within a hi-
erarchy, authorized and naturalized by the vision of the cosmos. The poem and its voices (and possibly the social perspective of its royal or any other reader) is suddenly expanded in the debate of the birds, but the debate ends with them paired “By evene accord” (line 668) and the closing roundel recapitulates in form and sound the “musik and melodye” of the spheres (line 62).

**Medieval Traditions and Literary Backgrounds** Anthologies too often edit out that side of Chaucer’s career that does not look toward later literature, especially the rise of the bourgeois narrative that has been loosely connected with certain speakers in the *Canterbury Tales*. The *PF* is included in this anthology for its inherent appeal, but equally because it carries a whole range of older forms and themes that Chaucer helped bring into later English literature. At the same time, it suggests Chaucer’s extraordinary powers of synthesizing continental traditions, yet innovating with a genuinely new colloquial tone from his own vernacular. To that extent, and especially in the debate of the birds, it also looks forward to the multiple voices and social perspectives that lend such energy to the *Canterbury Tales*. And the *PF* has an important influence on a whole Early Modern tradition of allegorical and political poetry, especially Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.

Most prominently, the poem draws on traditions of dream vision stretching back to antiquity. Its main narrative draws heavily on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century French dream visions. From these poems comes the slightly feverish garden of desire, populated by an almost allegorical set of love’s agents and postulants, and the often rather arcane *demande d’amour*, a question regarding priority or propriety within the ever more elaborate conventions of courtly love. The earlier *Book of the Duchess* was almost a pastiche of such poems. By the time of the *PF*, though, Chaucer’s range of reading and his ambitions as a writer were drawing in two other important textual traditions. First, contemporary Italian literature has an impact here. Study of Boccaccio and his poems in ottava rima (a stanza of eight 10-syllable lines) probably helped Chaucer realize the narrative resources of the related rime royal stanza; further, the temple of Venus in *PF* lifts elements rather directly from Boccaccio’s *Teseida*. And while the garden of *PF* echoes the French *Romance of the Rose* (which Chaucer had translated into Middle English), the fearful inscription on the gate seems to recall the gate of Dante’s *Inferno*. Further implications of this double tradition are explored in fine essays by Piero Boitani and David Wallace in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Boitani and Jill Mann (1986).

It is from Chaucer’s reading in a still earlier tradition, though, that the *PF* gains much of its philosophical resonance, its musings on statecraft and occasional echoes of neoplatonic cosmology. Chaucer was deeply engaged by texts and intellectual preoccupations surviving from the twelfth century. Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* was a favorite text of that era, always accompanied by the fifth-century commentary of Macrobius, which included long discussions of dream theory, the order of the cosmos and its reflection in the symbolism of number. Further commentaries were added in the twelfth century (especially by the influential William of Conches); this in turn influenced philosophical poets like Bernard Silvestris and Alan of Lille; and all these texts continued to circulate in England into the four-
teenth century. One useful area of discussion is which of these two dream traditions carries more weight in the PF.

**Love and the State** The narrator’s move from reading in classical cosmology to the dream garden continues to startle readers. There is no reason to think it was not meant to, but a connection starts to emerge if students are reminded of the medieval commonplace that the universe itself was created by an outpouring of divine love. Consider, too, that it is the Roman general Scipio who brings the hesitant dreamer to the gate of the poem’s love-garden and then pushes him in. In this perspective—formed by Plato’s *Timaeus*, Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, and their medieval commentaries—love is the force that binds the individually warring elements of the universe, and generates from them the kind of harmony that Scipio hears during his cosmic journey. And that model becomes part of medieval notions both of human love and of the state. (For a fuller discussion, consult Paul Beekman Taylor’s recent *Chaucer’s Chain of Love*, [1996].) This helps account for the PF’s move from a text on the state, through a vision of courtly love, and into a love debate among birds that seem increasingly like members of a fractious human society.

Within the garden, love is by turns delightful, animating all nature, and then threatening, sterile. This begins with the unnerving double inscription on the garden gate. It is a good image to keep in mind; students often divide Venus’s temple and Nature’s hill into neat units, but it is important that they are in the same dream and same garden. The temple of Venus and its allegory of courtly love is only paces from Nature’s fecund hill and the mating birds. The garden seems initially an earthly paradise, emulating the harmony—the “ravishing sweetnesse” (line 198)—of the spheres. But this soon gives way to the unfulfilled arousal of Priapus, and the superheated and frustrated atmosphere of Venus’s temple with its sighing lovers. The gorgeous artifice of the temple only mirrors sterility. Yet the tragic lovers depicted on its walls (lines 284 ff.) are key figures from ancient history, particularly the Trojan war and its aftermath, which gave rise in turn to the legendary origins of Britain. A more immediate kind of England enters later in the colloquial debate of the birds.

The dream can well be approached through its obvious divisions, but its richness emerges best when connections between those moments are explored. This becomes quite clear when key words and images are tracked across the entire poem: number; accord, harmony, and noise; birds and fish; noble, cherl; array. These and others carry issues from the love garden and temple to Nature’s hill and the debate of the birds. Consider how quickly the placid description of “noble goddesse Nature” gives way to the noise of the birds. (Is the adjective moral, or political?) Chaucer plays nicely in here with details that pull the reader between literal birds and figures of social class. Even noble Nature has trouble with her polity; the order of love choices she initially envisions is soon undone by strife, interruptions, and dismissive interjections like the duck’s wonderful “Ye, queke” (line 594). Is the hierarchy of birds only social, or does it also echo the cosmic hierarchy of Scipio’s vision, and at the same time compromise it as an image of the state? Note too the snobbery and mu-
tual hostility from one class of birds toward another, and the slightly snivelling tone of the respectful turtledove (“oon the unworthieste,” line 512).

Chaucer’s attention to the voices and perspectives of a range of social classes, though, can be given too prominent a place in our reading of the poem. For all the colloquial chatter of the birds, with their non-aristocratic voices and attitudes, the parliament ends with the birds drawing themselves back into a harmony that suggests the music of the spheres, using the traditional lyric form and explicitly French tune of a roundel. To the small extent that the PF is working as a mirror for princes (or for one particular prince), it investigates social variety and disruption only to pull those elements back into a celebratory harmony.

**Female Voices: Turtledove, Goose, and Formel Eagle** Finally, and as a turn toward the *Canterbury Tales*, one might spend time discussing the gender of voices in the PF. Powerful women are frequent presences in dream vision poems, often controlling the *demande d’amour*. But their power is specific to the courtly love context of most such poems. Chaucer begins at that point in the PF, with conventional figures like Venus (who is silent anyway) and Nature. With the parliament of birds, though, several highly characterized and occasionally obstreperous female voices come into play, and bespeak a social posture that extends beyond the dream. It is interesting to consider the convergence of such voices (prominently the turtledove and goose) and the entry of Middle English colloquialism. At the same time, as Elaine Tuttle Hansen has pointed out in an intriguing reading of the poem, the formel’s delay, her very refusal to speak and her choice not to choose a mate, focus power on her. (See “Female Indecision and Indifference in the PF,” *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, [1992], 108–40.) And her year’s delay extends the liminal moment of female influence and choice, both within the conventions of courtly poetry (that usually seeks a solution) and the social negotiations of marriage. This aspect of the PF looks forward significantly to the convergences of gender, class, and vernacular voice in the *Canterbury Tales*.

**The Canterbury Tales**

**The General Prologue**

The clearly fragmentary nature of the *Canterbury Tales* poses problems of interpretation that have tempted many critics to construct unifying schemes. The most influential of these has been the exegetical approach, which sees the pilgrimage as directed to the New Jerusalem as much as to Canterbury. To support this Augustinian view, D. W. Robertson, Jr. leans heavily on the General Prologue, which establishes the pilgrimage frame, and on the prologue to the Parson’s Tale, which promises to show the way to “thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” (*A Preface to Chaucer*, [1962], 373).

Readers of various theoretical persuasions, however, have found this view reductionist. New Critics such as E. Talbot Donaldson point out that such a moralistic reading misses Chaucer’s irony and complexity. Glending Olson, in *Literature*
as Recreation in the Later Middle Ages (1982) questions Robertson on historical grounds, reminding us that there was a medieval theory justifying the use of literature for pleasure, as well as for instruction. He argues that the serious purpose of the pilgrimage (the “outer frame” of the Canterbury Tales) is balanced by the playful purpose of the story telling contest (the “inner frame”), which has been generally overlooked (156). For Olson, too, the General Prologue looms large, for it is here that the Host, Harry Bailey, most clearly articulates his view of the importance of pleasure in literature. While later on he appears naive or philistine in his insistence that pilgrims tell tales of “mirth,” here the Host expresses a more balanced Horatian ideal of pleasure and profit, as he stipulates that the winner of the prize supper will be the pilgrim who tells “tales of most sentence and best solas.” While the Host’s aesthetic ideals will prove to be at odds with the puritanical ones of the Parson which conclude the Canterbury Tales, the fact that they have a precedent in the medieval theories of literature as recreation gives them a measure of credibility (Olson 157).

Historically oriented critics who view the Canterbury Tales in its social context, such as Stephen Knight, David Aers, and Lee Patterson, have also taken issue with Robertson’s view that the ideal of hierarchy was universally accepted in the Middle Ages. In a recent article David Wallace speaks for all of them when he writes of Chaucer’s struggle “to assess the possibilities of a complex, urbanizing, aggressive, post-bastard feudal society” (“In Flaundres,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 19 [1997], 84). The historical critic who has particularly focused on the General Prologue is Jill Mann, in Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Class and the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales (1973). She shows how Chaucer draws on the criticism in Estates Satire of all three estates—the nobility, the clergy, and the commons—for failing to perform their proper function.

Such satire is particularly sharp in the case of the clergy. The Prologue reflects the increasing insistence of the laity on a role in religion, an insistence exemplified by John Wycliffe, who challenged the efficacy of the Eucharist and the necessity of the priesthood as an intermediary between God and human beings. While not a follower of Wycliffe, Chaucer shares his objection to the hypocrisy of many of the orders of the Church, particularly that of the friars. The fraternal orders, the first of which was founded in the twelfth century as part of a reformist movement, claimed that they begged because they had given up property in imitation of Christ’s apostles, but by the end of the fourteenth century they had in fact amassed a great deal of wealth.

While Mann shows Chaucer’s debts to Estates Satire, she also shows how he goes beyond the genre with the ironic technique of the naïve narrator. By refusing to dwell on the harm that his immoral pilgrims do—as when the friar and the pardoner lead unsuspecting souls to damnation with their empty absolutions and fake relics—this narrator appears to accept all the pilgrims at their own flattering estimation, leaving the readers themselves to supply the judgment. This becomes especially clear at moments when the narrator transmits a pilgrim’s views in indirect discourse, but then slides into near-quotation, is if his voice (and mind!) were
being taken over by that pilgrim; the effect is particularly egregious in the portrait of the Monk, lines 177–88.

E. T. Donaldson’s influential distinction between “Chaucer the pilgrim”—an ironic literary persona—and “Chaucer the poet” (Speaking of Chaucer, [1970], 1–12) has been questioned, but clearly the sophisticated author of the Canterbury Tales could hardly have been as naive as he appears. It should be pointed out that the self-deprecating narrator is in fact part of a well-worn medieval literary convention, used by Boethius, Dante, and Christine de Pizan, among others.

Questions about narrators pertain not only to Chaucer the pilgrim, but also to the pilgrim narrators of each of the tales, enough of which are included in this anthology to explore their relation to the portraits of the pilgrims in the General Prologue. The influential theory of a consistent dramatic appropriateness of tales to tellers formulated by George Lyman Kittredge (Chaucer and his Poetry, 1915 [rpt. 1970]), it should be pointed out, has been somewhat discredited. Nonetheless, students can appreciate such relationships when they do pertain. For instance, the General Prologue’s portrait of the Miller as a teller of “harlotries” is confirmed by his tale, and its reference to the Wife of Bath’s boldness and deafness is dramatized and explained by her own prologue. (Inconsistencies also reward discussion, however, such as the fact the Prologue’s detail of the Wife’s clothmaking—of interest to feminist critics as a source of financial independence for a middle-class woman—is omitted from her own prologue. There, she attributes her wealth instead to inheritances from her husbands.) The Pardoner’s portrait as a scoundrel in the General Prologue is particularly well-suited both to his prologue, in which he boasts of his skill at cheating his audiences, and to his tale, a gripping account of the punishment of greed, which concludes with his offer to sell absolution to the pilgrims themselves. It is equally intriguing, though, to consider occasions when Chaucer did not suit the teller to the tale: the virtually faceless Nun’s priest—mentioned in the General Prologue simply as one of “prestes three” accompanying the Prioress—tells one of the most brilliant tales of all.

The Miller’s Tale

Nicholas has just grabbed Alison by the crotch and she, for the moment, is having none of it: “Do way youre handes, for your curteisy!” (line 179). This is not just a key turn in the fabliau structure of the Miller’s Tale, but equally a comic high point in the tale’s extended parody of the verbal conventions of courtly love. In turn, it is a particularly sly part of the Miller’s broader attack on the values of the aristocratic class who were the cultural consumers of courtly love.

Although the tale contains no explicit reference to contemporary political conflict among the classes, scholars point out the considerable if still obscure place that millers had in the discourse of the Peasants’ Revolt. (See the fine discussion in Lee W. Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History, [1991], 254–58.) The famous letters of John Ball, a leader of the revolt, refer to an allegorical miller (see “Piers Plowman in Its Time: the Rising of 1381”). And millers were important through-
out late medieval rural society as the first agent in the transformation of crops into goods, a crucial link then between farm and town.

Certainly Chaucer's Miller is openly eager to challenge hierarchy and social order within the confines of the pilgrimage community. He usurps the order of speakers that the Host is trying to stage-manage, and thereby alters the social meaning of tale telling. In one shout he imports values of verbal skill (his are immense) and liveliness in several senses, and displaces the Host's emerging plan of tale telling linked to social eminence and the archaic model of the three estates. (This point can be supported by turning to the General Prologue portrait of the Miller; note the implicit class challenge of carrying a sword and buckler, line 560.)

If the Miller's interruption generates a slippage among narrative orders in the pilgrimage fiction (loud voice versus social rank) it also opens a gap in the conventions of transmission of the textual product, the tales themselves. Chaucer has opened the Tales as a mammoth exercise of memory, repeating the tales he heard, implicitly out loud before a (presumably courtly) audience: "What sholde I more sayn...?" his narrator asks, line 59. But now, seemingly shocked at the prospect of a "cherles tale," he urges modest readers, "Turne over the leef, and chese another tale" (line 69) in what must suddenly be conceived as a book.

The story itself, further, is a perfect example of strains between a teller and tale: how could a man as drunk as the Miller claims to be still manage a story so layered yet economical? It is brilliantly paced, full of brief and telling characterization that occasionally slows into beautifully managed description, especially of the body and dress of Alison.

The Miller's tale is a fabliau, with its typical plot of sexual competition and cuckoldry (and what genteel critics used to call "the nether kiss"), and its punning on terms like "queinte," "hende," and "privee." He thus uses a genre "of" the bourgeois—but does that mean "about" or "controlled by"? If we see it as a genre consciously manipulated by an artisan like the Miller, it invites celebration of the brilliant response with which he "quits" the class and worldview of the knight. If however the genre is seen as an aristocratic property, the audience can react with condescension toward the churls therein depicted. The narrator's ambivalence about even repeating the tale reflects some of this potential instability of reception.

Along with its complex internal plot, the tale also manages to parody the plot of the Knight's Tale. There, in a similar love triangle, two captive knights compete (finally in a tournament) for the attention of a young noblewoman whom initially they have not even met, and wait years for her favor. The Knight's lady, Emelye, is almost entirely passive; her one expressed wish (spoken only in prayer) is to have neither man, and that wish is denied.

The Miller's squabbling suitors parallel this romantic competition nicely, yet they couldn't be more different from the Knight's lovers. Nicholas spouts a bit of courtly vocabulary ("For derne love of thee, lemmian, I spille," line 170) then grabs what he wants. Absalon's aping of courtship is more elaborate, but deflated by his very narcissism and apparent effeminacy. The tale's most powerful answer to the Knight, though, is the character of Alison. Her description draws in vast areas of
plant and animal life, both domesticated and wild, through metaphor and analogy, overwhelming the conventional lily-and-rose beauty of Emelye.

But, feminist critics have wondered, is there a person residing in so global a range of reference? Can Alison be claimed as an agent in the tale, or is she rather an icon first of old John’s wealth (note her costly clothing and her purse), and then of the broader social competition among men? Note how thickly bound up she is in all that restrictive clothing. On the other hand, consider how effectively she handles Nicholas’ sexual approach, and how she sets up the conditions of any future sexual gift.

The figure of Alison engages a web of biblical reference in the tale. The situation of a young wife married to an old carpenter echoes the Nativity story, and Nicholas dupes old John with a tale of Noah’s flood repeating itself. But this is particularly a version of Christian story and action as practiced within urban culture: attendance at liturgical celebrations, and civic productions of biblical dramas such as Noah, the Nativity, or the play of Herod in which Absolon acts (line 276). There are also quieter but equally emphatic echoes of the Song of Songs and other Old Testament imagery. This network of reference has invited some reductionist allegorical readings of the tale, but also subtler comments on the exploration of human and Christian love that at some points seems continuous in the tale. With old John tucked up in the attic, awaiting a second flood, Nicholas and Alison make love

Til that the belle of Laudes gan to ringe,
And freres in the chauncel gone seinge. (lines 547–48)

The tale’s close is Saturnalian: pitch darkness, the hot coulter, the explosion of boundaries between attic and bedroom, private house and communal gaze. Along with the laughter here, a strain of male sexual violence and injury also emerges: John’s arm broken, Nicholas’s ass burnt by the traditionally phallic coulter. On the one hand, Alison is the one uninjured character at the end of the tale; on the other she does seem to be dealt out of a scene of violent physical (and comic) exchange among men. Indeed, even Absolon’s effeminate delicacy seems effaced by his rage and his odd negotiation with the blacksmith. For all the tale’s aim of filling up the limited perspective and erotic desiccation of the Knight’s Tale, and for all its laughter, the Miller’s Tale also closes with the violent underpinnings of male competition laid, literally, bare.

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale

Dame Alison of Bath is a central focus of recent Chaucer criticism, yet (for all her garrulous sociability) a solitary and somewhat isolated figure in the pilgrimage community. There are two other women travelling to Canterbury, the Prioress and “Another Nonne,” but both are in holy orders. So the Wife of Bath alone speaks for women in the secular world, in marriage, and in the unstable, socially striving mercantile class. The General Prologue portrait is one of Chaucer’s great character sketches, exploiting traditional associations with dress, physiognomy, and social
conduct. Her comically fashionable hat (as big as a shield, the narrator says) and her sharp spurs challenge male chivalry; her repeated widowhood challenges some notions of marriage; and her red face and hose suggest a bold sexuality that threatens the model of male erotic aggression. (These same details of her dress also underwrite associations made by some patristic critics between the Wife and the biblical Whore of Babylon.) The Wife is an eager participant, even a competitor, in the rituals of public culture. She attends mass often, but wants to be first in line at the offering. And she is an inveterate traveller on pilgrimages, a habit she has in common with historical women interested in aspects of the religious life, like Margery Kempe.

The Prologue

The Wife of Bath’s Prologue is long and dense, spanning many episodes of her past. It is useful first to set out its main moments and interlocutors: the lengthy debate with an unidentified clergyman about a sixth husband, and the further clerical issues that accompany the debate; the three old husbands lumped into a single story (why?); the brief mention of her fourth husband the reveller; and the closing tale of her battle and peace with Jankyn. This is autobiography presented as a series of arguments with men in different kinds of authority, and suggests the way that Alison has created herself in constant battle with various male discourses. The question this leaves is whether she triumphs in that combat and creates a self that is her own; or whether, rather, she is trapped inescapably among versions of womanhood already present in those discourses. Recent criticism from several theoretical perspectives is selected and lucidly introduced in The Wife of Bath, ed. Peter G. Beidler (1996); the collection includes a well-glossed text and the editor’s discussion of “Biographical and Historical Contexts.”

The Wife’s Prologue and Tale have been the object of a great deal of very productive critical research and reflection, especially by feminist scholars, in recent decades. For two major statements, see Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Politics, (1989), chapter 4, and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender, (1992), chapter 2. Assessments of the Wife vary widely, nonetheless. Is she to be approached as a positive model of economic independence and a degree of self-determination? Or is Alison a kind of unhappy warning of the unavoidable costs of self-creation? Responses are based partly on the critic’s estimate of Chaucer himself, and the degree of independence from the more conservative values of the era that is attributed to him. These estimates have also been informed by deconstructionism, with its lively attention to the limits imposed on verbal self-creation (authorial or personal) by the ideologies always embedded within language.

Consider Barrie Ruth Strauss’s telling comment on the Wife’s Prologue: “Her insertion of addresses to women inside addresses to men exposes the major requirement of phallocentrism—that masculine discourse enclose feminine discourse” (“The Subversive Discourse of the Wife of Bath: Phallocentric Discourse and the Imprisonment of Criticism,” English Literary History 55 [1988], 531). One might add the question, what women? The Prologue speaks to “wise wives,” but there aren’t any others in the pilgrimage; and the Wife recalls her old gossip Alisoun, but she’s now dead (“God have hir soule!”). The Wife does seem haunted
by her male opponents; she can’t stop arguing with them. She finally burns her last husband’s book of misogynist texts, but many readers would recognize scraps from those very texts in the Wife’s own story, especially in her manipulation of her first three husbands.

Jankyn’s “book of wicked wives” is almost a fetish object of male power over the Wife: literacy. The Wife’s own talk is thick with textual references, but they are often partial or slightly wrong; and they are just the kind of material that could be held in memory from the public culture of liturgy, sermons, and biblical drama that the Wife enjoyed. By contrast, Jankyn has a stable book with which to torment her. Yet the Wife’s body itself is repeatedly figured as a text, a document authenticated with “sainte Venus seel” on it (line 610), or a book that Jankyn can “glose” (line 515) both sexually and textually. This textual struggle over control of the book and the body provides the climax of the Wife’s Prologue.

Another way of approaching these issues of pilgrim voices, gender, and textual power is to look at the manuscript setting of the Prologue. If facsimiles of the Ellesmere Manuscript (ed. Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens, [1997]) or the Hengwrt Manuscript (ed. Paul Ruggiers et al, [1979]) are available, show students one of the heavily glossed pages of the Wife’s Prologue. The glosses provide, to a medieval reader of these manuscripts, the sources of much of the Prologue in the very Latin misogynist texts listed in Jankyn’s book. So while the Wife is (orally) asserting her independence and triumphs, the book is (textually) asserting the priority and continuity of a hostile tradition. This displacement of opposition onto the glossed page leads back to the double conventions of poetry in Chaucer’s time—at once a performed medium and one available for private reading in a book.

Critical focus on the Wife as a woman and a merchant has obscured an equally important and poignant aspect of her situation: mortality. The Wife of Bath experiences age (and, well past forty, the prospect of old age) with a humorous resignation that is very appealing. See especially her very moving speech, “I have had my world as in my time,” lines 475–85. At the same time, she seems utterly disconnected from any of the comforts of the church or its promise of a life beyond the body.

**The Tale**  If the Wife’s Prologue asserts her position against a series of clerics and husbands, her Tale is a brilliant counter-version of a great bearer of aristocratic male values, the Arthurian tradition. She reverses a pattern of conventions encountered in the texts in “Arthurian Romance.” Instead of a Guinevere who manipulates law as an instrument of unjust vengeance (as in Marie de France’s *Lanval*), the queen of the Wife’s Tale only seeks to have punishment come from the injured gender. The Wife’s Arthurian knight (“chivalrous” only in the technical sense of “mounted”) is a common rapist. Not only do women control most of the plot, further, but the central women—the raped girl and the crone—are commoners. The tale also explores the further irony that the discourse of true “gentillesse” comes from the mouth of the low-class crone. The knight’s submission to the crone, and her miraculous transformation into a young lady both beautiful and faithful, mark the Wife’s entry into a fantasy as
complete as any in earlier Arthurian romance. But at least it is a fantasy for the pleasure of a female teller.

**Franklin’s Tale**

If they come to the Franklin’s Tale immediately after an encounter with the Wife of Bath, students should be informed of the earlier view that the Wife’s Prologue initiates a group of four tales debating the question of rulership in marriage: those of the Wife, the Clerk, and the Merchant, and the Franklin. The Franklin’s Tale was once read as Chaucer’s ultimate resolution of the issue, a call for the relinquishing of sovereignty on the part of both husband and wife. As R. E. Kaske pointed out thirty years ago, however, this interpretation was based on the Franklin’s stated ideals about marriage (ll. 53–70), rather than on the events of the tale, which show Dorigen, faced with the obligation to honor her rash promise to commit adultery, behaving like a child in need of wise guidance from her husband Arveragus (“Chaucer’s Marriage Group,” in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost [1973]). More recently, feminist critics have rejected the argument that the Franklin’s Tale portrays an ideal of marriage based on equality even more forcefully. Elaine Tuttle Hansen in the final chapter of *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (1992) sees Dorigen’s being handed back and forth between men—the husband who insists that she keep her promise and the suitor who releases her from it—as an explicit affirmation of male homosocial bonds based on the exchange of women. Susan Crane, in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (1994), points out that Dorigen is constrained by the tale’s genre—romance—which in its focus on courtship serves to limit female choice.

In addition to marriage, the issue of *gentilesse*—nobility—has received much attention from critics of the tale, being the quality for which the three men in the tale compete. The Suitor Aurelius, explaining to the clerk he employed as a magician why he failed to enjoy Dorigen’s love, he says that though her husband had insisted out of “gentilesse” (l. 887) that Dorigen keep her promise, he himself, out of pity, sent her back again. The fact that each men had behaved “gentilly” (l. 900) to the other inspires the magician’s own act of generosity, that of releasing Aurelius from his debt, an act he explicitly attributes to class ambition:

> Thou art a squire, and he is a knight.
> But God forbede...
> But if a clerk could do a gentil dede,
> As well as any of you... (ll. 901–04).

The sentiment that nobility is based on deeds rather than birth was frequently expressed at the time, when the bourgeoisie was attempting to acquire a voice, and formulate an ideology. While much has been said of the appropriateness of the idea to the Franklin, as a wealthy landholder possibly insecure about his status, this view is marred by dependence on a “roadside drama” theory of the relation of tale to teller. Perhaps more convincing is the tale’s appropriateness to Chaucer...
himself, as a member of the upper bourgeoisie who nevertheless had extensive dealings with the aristocracy, and even royalty. (For further discussion by a historian, see Nigel Saul, “Chaucer and Gentility” in *Chaucer’s England*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt [1992]).

A useful work to teach with the Franklin’s Tale is the other Chaucerian romance included in the anthology, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*. It too deals with issues of gender and class, but because it shows women, uncharacteristically, as holding all the power, its emphasis is different. The knight in the *Wife’s* tale, like Dorigen, faces an unwanted sexual encounter because of a blind promise: he must marry the old crone to whom he is obligated for saving his life. Since his death sentence had been for rape, however, there is some appropriateness to his lighter punishment, in contrast to the undeserved nature of Dorigen’s obligation.

The *Wife of Bath’s Tale* also treats the theme of *gentillesse* in a way that illuminates the Franklin’s Tale. The wedding night “pillow sermon” with which the old crone seeks to console the knight about her age, ugliness, and low class status makes explicit the concept of nobility that is only implicit in the Franklin’s Tale. Scorning the *gentillesse* that is descended from old wealth, she says, in a pointed reference to the knight’s crime, that one often sees “a lorde’s sone do shame and vilainy” (1157) and that “vilaines sinful deedes maken a churl” (l.1164). Ultimately, she argues, “gentilesse cometh fro God allone” (l.1167), as she cites Dante’s statements on the subject in the *Convivio*.

Finally, students should be reminded that Chaucer treats the issues of gender and class with his characteristic humor in the Franklin’s Tale. The account of the heroine’s recitation of chaste suicides from antiquity (concluding with “thus plained Dorigen a daye or twayne,/ purposing evere that she wolde deye,” l.750) is amusing from the perspective of fourteenth-century England, where few women killed themselves to preserve their honor. And the anomaly of the magician negotiating the cost of his services to Aurelius with mercantile exactitude (“lasse than a thousand pound he wolde nat have,” l.516) reminds us that by Chaucer’s time money, rather than magic (or gentility), made the world go ’round.

The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale

Chaucer’s Pardoner has exercised a creepy fascination on his audiences from the moment of the Canterbury pilgrimage to the reader of the late twentieth century. In that fascination lies his power, both as an agent in the church of his day and in Chaucer’s text. The Pardoner moves along a fine and wavering boundary between the great force of language and its rhetorical underpinnings; by delineating that boundary he threatens to undermine the efficacy of clerical language and of the tale-telling project. The Pardoner is the *Tales*’ great (and perhaps tragic) de-mystifier.

Scholars have expended a great deal of learning and effort trying to establish the Pardoner’s exact physical status and his sexual relation to the Summoner who bears his singing a “stif burdoun.” (For a full discussion, see Monica McAlpine, “The Pardoner’s Homosexuality and How It Matters,” *PMLA* 95, [1980], 8–22.)
he a man born without testicles, or a eunuch, or a hermaphrodite (like the hare and goat to which he is compared)? This discussion is important, but to a degree it misses the point. The fascination with the Pardoner, as with any figure of extreme physiological difference, is largely generated by what is unknown, unasked, unspeakable. “What is he?” is probably a question asked (silently) as eagerly by the pilgrims as it is (loquaciously) by modern critics.

Just as important, and connected to physiognomy in the General Prologue portrait, is the sheer amount of stuff with which he has laden himself: clothes, pilgrim badges, pardons, fake relics. This only adds to the spectacle of the Pardoner, further exaggerated by his high but piercing voice. If this is freakish, it also has a certain pathos, like his efforts at fashionable dress. There emerges a sense of a compulsive and internally divided wish to be part of a group from which he will always be divided by physiology, by sexual practice, and equally by the self-isolation of the con man from his victims. Yet the Pardoner also exploits the fascinated gaze of this and his other publics, connecting the fascination caused by physiognomy to his verbal skill in holding their attention. (Regarding the Pardoner’s isolation, see the superb and deeply involved discussion by Donald Howard in The Idea of the Canterbury Tales [1976], esp. 342–45.)

The Pardoner raises the religious question of whether true faith and salvation can derive from a corrupt clergy. Equally, though, he lays bare the rhetorical schemes by which the institutional church raises the money on which it has (like the hospital for which he works) become dependent. The Pardoner’s prologue, and the tale he attaches thereto, are presented as a sample of his professional skill in sermonizing. They correspond neatly to the structure of many medieval sermons, which are elaborated commentaries on biblical passages (such as radix malorum est cupiditas), usually following a loose rhetorical division: (1) theme, (2) protheme, a further introduction, (3) dilatation, the fuller exposition of the text, (4) exemplum, an illustrative anecdote, (5) peroration or “application” of the exemplum, and (6) a closing formula. Parts 1, 4, and 5 are clearly present in the Pardoner’s discourse, and perhaps 6.

The Pardoner’s cynical exposition of his technique here is further exaggerated by two parody masses. He turns the pilgrims’ road-side stopping place into the church-like setting for his sermon, but first he announces

at this ale-stake
I wol bothe drinke and eten of a cake.

Later, the rioters celebrate their riches and the murder of their companion, by consuming the wine poisoned by their victim when he was sent to fetch “breed and win ful prively.”

The Pardoner’s rhetorical force is fully equal to the attention his looks draw to him. His eerie tale of the three rioters is full of powerful and creepy episodes, that hold our attention exactly because (like his own body) they are evocative yet resist full explanation: the passing corpse, the bizarre exegetical mistake through which the rioters set out to find the person “Death,” the old man encountered at a stile,
the crooked way and the gold. The tale moves seamlessly from its “realistic” opening into an almost allegorical story.

The final ploy of the Pardoner’s sermon is so daring that it may almost be inviting exposure: he asks for contributions. Harry Bailey responds with a degree of rage whose own excess may stem less from the Pardoner’s religious cynicism than from his disentanglement of Harry’s earlier equations of verbal and virile prowess. The Host reacts by speaking out loud exactly the absence which has so fascinated and silenced the rest of the pilgrims: that the Pardoner’s “collonds”—testicles—are as phony as his relics. By naming the lack that had given the Pardoner such eerie power, the Host also silences him.

The kiss (intended to be a sort of “kiss of peace”) imposed by the Knight at the very close of the tale rewards careful discussion. It is at once layered with paradox and emptied of meaning. It is the invitation to kiss the Pardoner’s relics that invites the Host’s explosion; the Host suggests that would be more like kissing the Pardoner’s ass; yet that in turn raises the homoerotic kissing and sexual practice implied by the General Prologue. On top of all this the Knight tries to impose a kiss of social concord. Is it possible? Is any symbolic practice possible after the multiple exposures of the Pardoner’s Tale?

The Nun’s Priest’s Prologue and Tale

**Prologue**

Given the Knight’s urgent will to repair rifts in the pilgrimage community at the end of the Pardoner’s Tale, it is worth discussing his decision to interrupt the Monk’s Tale. In a sense, the Monk has told a series of tales, lugubrious and very much alike, under the general rubric of tragedy. This he defines in the most reductionist sense of the fall of men in good places, for reasons the Monk scarcely pauses to distinguish, with no hope of restoring their fortunes. It is a notion of genre the Knight summarizes in three lines, urging instead stories of “joye and greet solas” (lines 5–8). Is his alternate formula any more complex, though?

The Host, always respectful of social hierarchy, is almost too eager to agree with the big man and share in his authority. The Host repeats the Knight’s terms but shifts his complaint: the Monk is putting him to sleep. When the Monk refuses Harry’s request of a hunting tale, the Host turns instead to the Nun’s Priest. His social coding continues; to the Knight and even the Monk, he used the respectful “Ye” and “you,” but for the Nun’s Priest uses the familiar form “thou.” (Note the form of the second person that Harry uses at the end of the tale. What has led to the change? How else does the Host register his new respect for the Nun’s Priest?)

**The Tale**

No other story among the Canterbury Tales exploits the echoes and possibilities of the frame tale as densely and playfully as does this. It is framed not only by the pilgrimage contest, but also by the domestic world of the widow and her cottage that surrounds the farmyard; and that yard and its events in turn frame Chauntecleer’s three exempla defending his theory of dreams. The first of these innermost tales is about pilgrims, and thus mirrors the outermost.
Animal fable provides the initial genre from which the Nun’s Priest plays. This was a widespread and popular form in the high and later Middle Ages, especially in school texts. Part of its appeal lay in the idea of reading on two levels at once, animal and human, or literal and moral. Chaucer explores this delightfully, in the jarring but funny movement back and forth between worlds of animal and human reference. Consider the nice moment when Chauntecleer’s hens are said to be his sisters (typical in a domestic flock) “and his paramours” (line 102).

Upon this easily recognizable generic ground, the Nun’s Priest adds an extraordinary range of generic and topical reference, pushing the little story of a rooster into ever bolder (or wilfully preposterous) extremes. The Nun’s Priest makes the story an occasion for reflection on serious issues of the day: dream theory of course, but also free will and predestination, pride and flattery, and Boethian issues of contentment versus worldly goods. As events heat up and the rhetoric builds, it begins to suggest epic in details like the prophetic dream, the armed pursuit, the epic apostrophe and epic simile, and the use of long catalogues. Explicit comparisons are made between Chauntecleer’s fall and the fall of Troy and Carthage. The language of tragedy enters, too, clearly parodying the Monk’s Tale. Romance is evoked in terms like Chauntecleer’s “aventure” (line 420) as well as references to stories like the “Book of Launcelot de Lake” (line 446). The gap between literal topic and referential language gets greater and greater, funnier and funnier, until the seams threaten to split, the whole thing burst open—which is exactly what happens in the plot.

Such gaps, of course, are the stuff of animal fable, bringing dissimilar things together. The Nun’s Priest offers a very gentle social critique through his restrained use of the language of noble food and architecture in the description of the widow’s cottage and life, which is extended by the far more exaggerated entry of the language of courtly love with Chauntecleer and Pertelote. Such modest social parody shifts to a more gendered analysis in the differing dictions of rooster and hen: his polysyllables vs. her monosyllables, Romance vs. Germanic diction (e.g., lines 201–07). Consider too the different cultural deposits from which their speeches draw. Pertelote uses medical precept, wives’ tales, and reference to the quite elementary “Cato.” Chauntecleer draws in arcane dream lore, saints’ lives, and other men “more of auctoritee” (line 209).

Chauntecleer uses the language of courtly love as a source of power over his spouse. His merely decorative use of French and Latinate terms, citation of “auctoritee,” his frequent use of enjambed lines and elaborate syntax, all signal man at his most culturally pretentious. This is most marked in his false translation of Latin. His style, though, is not primarily an expression of pomposity (for he is a brave beast) but rather an enactment of his power and learning as a means of exercising control in a world which has just been threatened. Like storytelling generally, Chauntecleer’s language is a means of reorganizing a world that resists our logic and desires. Such language as a means of access to bravery and control is doubled by Chauntecleer’s sexual desire. He faces any terror to show his love and virility to Pertelote.

The garden setting also takes on ever richer resonance as the story proceeds. It is first a chicken yard, but in Pertelote’s prescriptions it soon takes on aspects of the medicinal garden. And it becomes a medieval love garden, by implication,
when Chauntecleer starts invoking the language of courtly love. This in turn inevitably includes echoes of the garden of Eden. That association is enhanced by the red-and-black enemy who penetrates the garden and destroys (if only temporarily) the happy world of the man and wife who live there, through his powers of verbal persuasion.

The fox’s rhetoric, and Chauntecleer’s rhetoric of condescension, are only the starting places for an ever more parodic and self-reflexive rhetoric as the rooster’s temptation and fall occur. The Nun’s Priest uses the figure of apostrophe to address “destinee” and Venus who aided Chauntecleer’s fall, and apostrophizes the rhetorician Geoffrey of Vinsauf for his skill in lamenting the death of Richard the Lion-Hearted. This hyperbole sets the stage for an inverse move of language into inarticulate shouts and yells, when the widow and all the barnyard animals set out to rescue Chauntecleer.

It is in this passage (lines 628–30) that the Nun’s Priest makes a brief but much-discussed reference to human shouts, and murder, in the Peasants’ Revolt. Following the tale’s reference to historical cataclysm in ancient Troy, Arthurian and then Plantagenet England, the extreme concision of the reference is all the more interesting. Is this to be taken as a kind of anxious evasion? Or does it suggest a mild courtly indifference (by Chaucer himself) or clerical indifference (by the Nun’s Priest)? It is relevant here to distinguish the job of this priest, serving a community of nuns, from the local parish work of the Parson, described in the General Prologue.

The Nun’s Priest describes Chauntecleer’s salvation from the fox as a turn of Fortune. But does Fortune have anything to do with it? Or rather does Chauntecleer use his tongue to get himself out of the fix that his tongue got him into? He uses the fox’s own trick, guiling the beguiler. He escapes the dangers and temptations of this world through his own wit and craftiness. The pursuit is gaudy but irrelevant.

The frequent moral interpretations attached to animal fables have invited explicit moral, even allegorical readings of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, particularly by patristic critics. Chauntecleer has been interpreted as a priest figure tempted by the devil in the form of the fox. Certainly there are enough details (as in the visual description of the fox) to invite some symbolic reaction. Yet much of the referential reach of the poem goes unregarded in such a reading. Nonetheless, the Nun’s Priest begins to close his tale with a traditional and often-cited formulation of moral and allegorical reading, “Taketh the moralitee . . .” (line 674). Is this to be taken as the Nun’s Priest’s instruction on reading? Is it the only instruction? How seriously we take it has something to do with how firmly we draw a line dividing the tale (with its constant ironizing even of the most serious references), from the Nun’s Priest’s comments on that tale. If that line is very clear, then this may solicit a highly moralized reading. If it is unstable, could the Nun’s Priest be voicing these commonplaces with the same sort of raised eyebrow he used in regard to the commonplaces about rhetoric or about Troy and Arthur? The value of such irony is that the reader can explore uncertainty without being forced to repudiate the story or rhetorical posture under scrutiny, or even the “moralitee.” As is clear throughout the tale, one can parody what one also enjoys, even loves.
The Parson’s Tale

Introduction  The exegetical interpretation that the entire Canterbury pilgrimage is directed to the New Jerusalem leans heavily on the Parson’s offer in his prologue to show the pilgrims the way to “thilke parfit glorious pilgrimage / That highte Jerusalem celestial” (D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer, [1962], 373). According to this view, the Parson, as the ideal pilgrim, has moral authority and speaks for Chaucer. Other critics, however, have dissented, regarding the Parson as a fictional character who is treated ironically. His long treatise on penance, by his own account devoid of any poetic ornament, violates the Host’s injunction to the pilgrims not to bore the pilgrims by preaching. By disdaining to tell a “fable,” the Parson not only refuses to play by the rules of the tale-telling contest, but shows that he “confuses fiction with falsehood” (Gabriel Josopivici, The World and the Book, [1971]).

From the Tale: Remedy for the Sin of Lechery  While elaborate attempts have been made to demonstrate parallels between The Parson’s Tale and specific Canterbury tales, these are in reality the chance correspondences one might expect when an exhaustive manual of sin and an encyclopedic account of human behavior are linked. (See E. T. Donaldson, Speaking of Chaucer, [1970], 164–74.) Nevertheless, the portion excerpted here throws some light on the tales’ treatment of the ideal relationship of men and women in marriage, a theme of many of the tales. The Parson suggests marriage as the primary remedy for the sin of lechery, although he gives the avoidance of sleeping late its due. Woman’s status in marriage is explained by the history of her creation in a much more subtle way than the stereotype of “Adam’s Rib” would suggest. God made her neither from Adam’s head (lest she rule over him in “maistrye”) nor from his foot (lest she “be holden too lowe, for she can nat paciently suffre”) but from his rib, so that she should be “felawe unto man.”

This apparent statement of equality between the sexes, with its echoes of the concerns with “maistrie” in marriage which the Wife of Bath introduces in her Prologue, should be read in the context of what follows, however. For the Parson goes on to say that the woman should be subject to her husband, and that while married she “hath noon auctoritee to swere ne to bere witnesse withoute leve of hir housbonde that is hir lord.” In fact, both views were considered orthodox in Chaucer’s time: that a husband should treat his wife kindly because she was his companion, and that she should be subject to his rule.

One can see connections with some of the other Canterbury tales in the Parson’s distinctions among the various reasons for sex between married people, and the degrees of sinfulness they entail. The first and second reasons—the engendering children and the “yielding the debt” of their bodies—are laudable, but the third—to avoid lechery—is a venial sin, and the fourth—“for amorous love . . . to accomplice thilke brenning delit”—a deadly one. By that calculation, two of Chaucer’s most engaging characters are damned: the Wife of Bath’s claim that “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye” will not save her, for she admits to enjoying sex and makes no mention of having had children, and
Chauntecleer’s making love to his hens “more for delit than world to multiplye” is a deadly sin.

After reading even a short passage from the Parson’s Tale, students might notice that, for all his moral rectitude, the Parson’s tale is rather boring. And if they compare him with that other preacher, the Pardoner, they will be faced with the ironic contrast between a good man who tells a bad tale and a bad man who tells a good one, reflecting the vexed question of the relation between morals and esthetics which hovers over the Canterbury Tales as a whole.

Chaucer’s Retraction

Even those critics most skeptical of Robertson’s judgment of the individual tales tend to agree that The Parson’s Prologue and Chaucer’s retraction, and even his tale, should be taken straight. According to Alfred David, the retraction “is a deeply moving statement of the limitations of art,” and of the difficulty in justifying literature for its own sake in a chaotic and corrupt world (The Strumpet Muse, [1976], 238). He sees the tension as transcending Christianity, having been expressed by Plato, Virgil, and Kafka, among others. Many, if not most, critics agree with the view that Chaucer is serious about abandoning the world of experience for the spiritual world, but students have great difficulty in accepting this. They often insist that he was insincere, making a cynical deathbed repentance. Nor are they convinced by being told retractions were common in medieval poems with any erotic content, such as Andreas Capellanus’s De amore or Chaucer’s earlier Troilus and Criseyde, for they see these too as ironic. But irony, in the end, may be too easy an explanation of the contradictions of writers from the past who frustrate us.

To His Scribe Adam and Complaint to His Purse

In To His Scribe Adam, Chaucer ruefully wishes a skin disease on a copyist who has failed to reproduce his words as he intended them. Now he must correct the manuscript himself, in a laborious process of rubbing and scraping the old ink off the parchment, in preparation for rewriting. In their volume of the Chaucer Variorum, George Pace and Alfred David point out the “poetic justice of the threatened curse on Adam’s head,” in that “he will have to scratch his scalp just as Chaucer had to scratch out Adam’s mistakes” (Geoffrey Chaucer, The Minor Poems [1982], 26). While the poem is decidedly playful, it also points to a serious concern that Chaucer had for the transmission of his works to posterity, a concern endemic to writers in a manuscript culture.

The critical history of this lyric can give students insight into the range of interpretive stances—from the literal to the exegetical to the feminist—from which Chaucer can be approached. For the echoes of the first Adam in the scribe’s name have tempted several critics to move beyond the literal interpretation mentioned above to read the poem as a Christian allegory. R. E. Kaske, for instance, sees the scribe as an Adam whose fallen workmanship mars the creation of Chaucer, who stands in the relationship of God to his literary work.
While such exegetical criticism, which affirms traditional gender hierarchy and attributes the Fall to Eve, would seem to be antithetical to feminist criticism, Carolyn Dinshaw actually relies on it in her analysis of To His Scribe Adam, the epigraph to her book Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics (1989). In her project of illuminating “the varied and nuanced uses of gendered models of literary activity in Chaucer’s works” (9) she cites Kaske and engages in similar allegorizing activity as she describes To His Scribe Adam as illustrative of Chaucer’s complex relation to patriarchal language. Ringing changes on the poem’s final word, “rape,” which she translates as the modern “rape” as well as the more commonly glossed meaning, “haste,” she argues that Chaucer presents himself as simultaneously rapist, with respect to the parchment, and rape victim, with respect to Adam, who violates his own work with his fallen language (10). Following the medieval tradition of pen as phallus, she argues that this word “points out that literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine” (9).

While students may find Dinshaw’s own glossing overingenious, they should be reminded that she too starts with a recognition of the poem’s literal meaning. It reminds us that “literary production in the late fourteenth century is a social enterprise” and that Chaucer “is unavoidably dependent on the copyist for the accurate transmission, and indeed, the very intelligibility of his works” (3). Students might want to compare To His Scribe Adam, which makes such self-conscious reference to the conditions of a manuscript culture, to the riddles on the technology of writing from the Anglo-Saxon period. Chaucer’s poem can be seen to resemble them more in its awareness of the medium, than in the judgment of it, however. For while the Anglo-Saxon authors, clerics in a culture that has only recently embraced literacy, marvel at the power and novelty of writing, the secular Chaucer, writing at the end of the Middle Ages, laments the corruptibility of the medium and its practitioners’ incompetence.

The second Chaucerian lyric, Complaint to His Purse, illustrates another constraint on authors in the Middle Ages—their dependence on patrons. (See Richard F. Green, Poets and Princepleasers, [1980]). Chaucer is thought to have written his first major poem, the Book of the Duchess (1369–72) at the request of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, in commemoration of the death of his wife Blanch, and to a lesser extent he wrote for patrons as his career progressed. Complaint to His Purse, however, reflects his dependence on patronage as a civil servant rather than a poet. In 1399, the last year of his life, Chaucer faced the accession of a new king—Henry IV—after many years of depending on his predecessor, Richard II, for a pension. There is no record of Chaucer having sent this poem or of Henry having responded to it, although Henry did augment the earlier pension within the year.

This poem combines two conventional genres, the French begging poem and the love complaint, in a particularly witty way. To explore Chaucer’s technique of
parody, students might enjoy comparing it to some of Chaucer’s other humorous twists on the courtly love complaint. Examples might be the speeches of the aristocratic birds in the *Parliament of Fowls* and of Chauntecleer in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale, and of Absolon in the Miller’s Tale.

Both *To His Scribe Adam* and *Complaint to His Purse*, finally, reveal Chaucer’s sophisticated awareness of the constraints on authorship under which he worked, whether material or economic.

**William Langland**

*Piers Plowman*

*Piers Plowman* is an exceptionally open, polysemous text, in several senses. First, despite fierce editorial efforts in the past three decades, the text itself remains a debated issue. Langland’s poem swiftly gained popularity with a range of audiences, and its many manuscript copies—over fifty survive—were not always produced with much discipline. Second, Langland himself was constantly altering his text, through at least four major revises. (The selections here are translated from the B-text, written in the years before the Rising of 1381.) These revisions went on while earlier versions were being copied, and many manuscripts of one text also have portions copied from another. Further, Langland’s use of protean and overlapping symbolic and allegorical characters, as well as his mysterious prophecies, have invited various emphases and interpretations, and have been appropriated by highly interested textual communities: the leaders of the Rising of 1381 for instance, and later on agents of the Protestant reformation. Langland still invites eager but often conflicting interpretations.

**The Identity of “Will”**  William Langland’s “identity” (a problematic term here) has been constructed mostly from hints and word-plays within his poems, such as “I have lyved in londe . . . my name is Longe Wille” (*passus* 15, line 152). He refers to the Malvern Hills in the southwest, and various districts in and around London, especially Cornhill, a poor district. And he mentions more glancingly his marginal work as a comforter in the homes of various patrons (which perhaps involved his own poetry), as well as professional mourner, praying for the dead. He also says he begs. A picture emerges of a man in a liminal world between clergy and laity, poor but educated, finding unstable and ill-paid employment, and involved in a life-long exploration of how social order should operate and how a Christian should live within it.

Do these elements derive from a historical person, though, or do they rather produce a largely fictive narrative “I” who is a character in a visionary fiction? The name “Will” carries moral overtones, and is an aspect of the dominant Aristotelian psychology of the later Middle Ages. Chaucer, we have seen, creates a rather bumbling and bewildered narrator, clearly distinct from the courtier bureaucrat known in his extensive life records. One note in an early manuscript of *Piers Plowman*, however, does suggest parallels, at least, between the persona Langland and the poet:
It is known that Stacy de Rokayle the father of William de Langlond was generous and lived in Shipton under Wichwood, holding from the lord Le Spenser in the county of Oxford. The aforesaid William made the book that is called Piers Ploughman.
(Translated in *The World of Piers Plowman*, ed. Jeanne Krochalis and Edward Peters, [1975], xi.)

A poet who has spent time in the west country around Malvern Hills might well choose to use the alliterative meter that was popular there (and used, to the north, by the Gawain-poet); yet an audience in London might explain why the poem avoids the kind of regional dialect found in Gawain and other chivalric narratives in alliterative verse. Despite the allegorical mode that seems archaic to modern readers, the poem’s persona corresponds intriguingly to romantic and later notions of the poet as an eccentric genius, speaking from the social margin, and living in poverty (even, as the narrator acknowledges, wearing odd clothes).

One reason that Langland’s dreamer so engages us is that he so often implicates himself in the very failures and social practices he castigates. So his initial panorama of society in the Prologue attacks the unstable and phony hermits who go off on pilgrimage (line 53 ff.) But he has already portrayed himself “In the habit of a hermit unholy of works” (line 3), travelling in quest of wonders. He depicts Meed as a figure of sexual license and financial corruption, but also acknowledges that he is “ravished” by her dress and adornments (2.17).

**Langland and Chaucer** The careers of Chaucer and Langland thus seem to overlap both in time and place, though they lived in very different social worlds and worked in largely different poetic traditions. Scholars still wonder if they knew each other’s work; certainly they compare interestingly at moments such as the social panoramas of the Prologues to *Piers Plowman* and the *Canterbury Tales*. The audiences of *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer may have overlapped at certain points, such as educated readers of the upper merchant class and some religiously serious members of the lower reaches of the court. Otherwise their apparent audiences largely diverged; Chaucer was taken up by aristocrats and their supporters, and Langland seems to have appealed to clerical and modest mercantile readers. The figure of Piers Plowman was invoked by key figures in the Rising of 1381 (see “John Ball’s Second Letter” in “Piers Plowman in Its Time”), and by the “Lollard” followers of the religious reformer (later declared a heretic) John Wycliffe. Both appropriations overlook the complexities and deep conservatism that is clear in the B-text; certainly Langland’s revisions and expansions in the C-text (after 1381) suggest that he wanted to distinguish his position clearly from the Lollards and the 1381 rebels.

**Genres and Traditions** Both the great appeal and the great frustrations of *Piers Plowman* derive from the variety of genres within which it operates, often moving among several simultaneously. Langland seems always to have been more concerned to pursue his twin social and spiritual concerns than to stay within any one generic framework. The outermost structure of the poem is a dream vision, though
that generic setting fades in and out of our attention. It can be very important when, as at the start of passus 18, the narrator consciously seeks sleep as an escape from the mundane world and an access to vision. (Langland's use of this highly traditional form invites comparison with The Dream of the Rood, Caedmon's dream in Bede, Chaucer's Parliament of Fowls, and Arthur's dream in Malory."

At the same time, the dreamer's encounters with the workings (or failures) of secular society regularly partake of satire and social complaint, which in turn give rise sometimes to passages of apocalyptic prophecy. The social world within a private dream is only one example, among many, of how Langland's poem tries to yoke together questions about the workings of public order and about the role and fate of the individual soul. Toward the latter end, he also borrows from the genre of the penitential manual, and from pilgrimage narrative internalized as private journey. Even the romance motif of a quest to discover or achieve personal identity may inform the persistent wandering of the narrator and his first dream vision. As a poem of pilgrimage and wandering, Piers Plowman has links as well to travel narratives; indeed in five of its manuscripts the poem appears along with Mandeville's Travels.

Both in the dream quest, and in the social encounters that emerge within it, Langland repeatedly exploits the varied resources of allegory. Allegory in the poem, though, is a strategic and highly flexible tool. To seek a single, continuing allegorical story or theme, is to invite frustration in the reader. Instead, Langland uses allegory as a form so naturalized and continuous with more "realistic" modes, that he slips easily among allegorical kinds, often playing with several at once. So in passus 18, the "human" dreamer watches four allegorical women derived from a line in the Psalms; these reflect typological thinking, in which moments in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New. They then converse with an abstract personification "Book," and finally all fall silent and watch (with the dreamer) Christ arrive as an allegorical knight and rescue historical characters from hell.

Piers Plowman is so peppered with Latin phrases, and sometimes brief passages, that at times it is almost a macaronic poem. (For an example of that form, see "The Course of Revolt" in "Piers Plowman in Its Time.") These phrases derive from Latin poetry and from the liturgy, but most often from the Bible. The many ways that the biblical passages relate to the surrounding vernacular poem suggest Langland's deep acquaintance with traditions of four-fold exegesis: literal, allegorical (dogma and belief in this world), moral (action in this world), and anagogical (eternity, life beyond this world). Biblical quotations are hubs around which episodes often develop. So are individual allegorical characters, who may seem initially to close off or resolve an issue, but whose presence often sparks a more troubled and complex reaction in the dreamer. For instance, Hunger enters in passus 6 to force "wasters" to work in Piers' half-acre; but his presence in turn leads Piers to think about how to deal with those who still will not, or who cannot, work. And this in turn opens the reality of want even among those who do work.

**Langland in His Time**  Langland's double preoccupations, as well as his mixture of dream, spiritual quest, and social satire, have led to a persistent divide in critical attention. Is the poem best approached in terms of moral behavior within a so-
cial structure set in current history? Or is it more truly a private quest, informed by secular history only in so far as that history points toward an apocalyptic end in which all people come under divine judgment? Critics often acknowledge both questions, but tend to concentrate on one or the other, as may be inevitable in a poem of such size and range. The historical setting of the poem, and its dense references to local places and recent events, have made it an exciting arena for the work of historicist and Marxist critics in recent decades. Two recent collections offer fine examples of these approaches: Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds. Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship, ed. Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, (1997), and The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture, ed. David Aers and Lynn Staley, (1996).

Even if they are to be approached carefully, within the literary context of complaint, satire, and moral polemic, current social problems do bulk large in Piers Plowman. Weak kings and weak knights, corrupt officials and lazy peasants, indulgent clerics and their opponents, all come into play. The plagues and the shrunken labor market that resulted get their mention, and the early sections of the poem are deeply concerned with the changing place of the peasantry, and official efforts to legislate social stability in the face of that change. Again and again, the dreamer invokes conservative social models like the theory of the three estates, only to find them abandoned or inadequate to the social interactions he witnesses. The poem’s central focus on a plowman engages the very classes where social competition, social change, and resistance to both, were being played out most openly and angrily in Langland’s time. How effectively he reflected the tenor of his era becomes clear in the adoption of his chief character in the discourse of the Rising of 1381; how that is not the end of his aims is equally clear in the laborious revisions that adoption seems to have sparked.

The Prologue  It works very well to teach this along with the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. Both offer a social panorama, though in contrasting settings of the visionary “field full of folk” and the “realistic” tavern in Southwark.

From what posture does the narrator begin his journey? Is this initially a serious quest? What sort of “wonders” is he after? Given the many disguisings and fakery later on, how should we react to a narrator taking on a costume and a somewhat false identity? Note the “romance” language of magic and marvel, and the site of the dream by a stream, a frequent boundary with the uncanny, as in Marie’s Lanval or even the second encounter with the Green Knight in Sir Gawain. The initial geography of the dream—the secular world, but bracketed by heaven and hell—is almost an emblem for the dual preoccupations of the rest of the poem.

Explore the swift and effective (if sometimes confusing) shifts in tone, mode, and address. A literal and “realistic” figure (e.g. the Pardoner) will suddenly engage in allegorical action (lines 74–75). Or the dreamer will shift from general address suddenly to “you” (lines 76). Or attention will move from a complex personified figure like “Lewte” to a narrative allegory like the rats and mice. Consider how these shifts correspond to modern notions of the associational logic of dreams.
The opening and closing scenes of the classes and their work have an engaging energy. Despite their mutual echoes, they seem also to shift from the allegorical landscape of the beginning to a more specifically urban scene at the end. Along with the corrupt and false clerics (lines 40 ff.) who mirror one aspect of the narrator, note also the minstrels and “word jugglers” (line 35) who correspond to another of his roles. Compare the friars here (lines 58 ff.) with the depiction of the Friar in Chaucer’s General Prologue, especially their self-serving biblical exegesis; also the Pardoner in both.

The arrival of the king brings another of the estates into play, but also introduces the theme of national governance. Here, as often when he considers upper levels of government, Langland becomes a little vague, relying on quite traditional tripartite formulas, especially the three estates, and notions like “common profit” (also encountered in Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls). The lunatic clerk opens up more complex debate on the king and his role. He is the kind of marginal figure Langland often invokes, whose perspective reveals the limits of a prior model.

The story of the rats and mice may reflect baronial resistance to royal authority, but belling the cat doesn’t involve any overthrow; rather it is a strategy to avoid wrath. Note how the narrator pulls away from interpreting the passage: an allegory so transparent can involve danger.

**Passus 2**

This *passus* opens with the dreamer in dialogue with Lady Holy Church, seeking grace but also a knowledge of “the false.” She turns his attention to Lady Meed, then fades from the scene. If Meed begins (from Holy Church’s perspective) as a personification of “the false,” her implications swiftly become more complex and morally uncertain. She figures the role of money in an economy where cash was replacing the older ties of feudal and communal obligation; she is a relative of the king. As the story of Meed’s marriage emerges, she becomes less of a moral agent, more a source of power whose users need to be chosen well. Efforts to determine her proper spouse carry with them a whole frame of legal reference, including the corruptibility of the justice system. The scene again shifts (as in the Prologue) from the unspecified dream place to the seat of royal justice at Westminster in London, and the wonderful visual spectacle of justice officers figured as horses, with Meed, her suitor False, and others riding on them.

Meed is a yet more complex figure, though. She also refers to Alice Perrers, the avaricious mistress of the aging King Edward III. Her red clothing has been taken to signify the biblical Whore of Babylon. At the same time, as Clare Lees has recently pointed out (in *Class and Gender in Early English Literature*, ed. Britton J. Harwood and Gillian Overing, [1994]), Meed’s gender requires close attention. She is desired by practically all men, including the dreamer, though she is described in terms of her costly array rather than her body. And for all the bad influences attributed to her, Meed has little agency in the *passus*; she is carried from one suitor or judge to another as others decide who should best control her.

**Passus 5**

In this *passus* the seven deadly sins (and related characters) display themselves in a tavern scene, and repent their wrongs in a confession of Repentaunce, a
priest. The passage quoted here describes in colorful terms the confession of the particularly unsavory figure of “Glutton.”

Passus 6  This passus introduces the figure of Piers the Plowman, who will take on more and more resonance in the rest of the poem, until Christ, as an allegorical knight, jousts with death in Piers’s arms in passus 18. It opens with the repentant sinners crying for grace to seek Saint Truth. They do not know how to find the way, but a plowman suddenly says he knows Truth well and gives them instructions and serves as their guide. Rather than the class of knights ordering society, it is the plowman who sets various agents to work along traditional lines of the three estates, and expresses his class’s willingness to support the knights and clergy.

The narrative of repentance and the quest for Saint Truth, though, quickly give way under social pressures recognizably specific to Langland’s time. The deadly sins return to some of their practices such as sloth, informed now by references to the rising expectations of peasants in the shrunken labor market after the Black Death. Equally the passus registers the oppressive legislation by which landowners tried to limit wages (“the statute,” line 320).

Piers tries to mediate between these social forces. Knighthood is of no help to him, being too involved in good manners to enforce its own laws. Piers calls instead on the figure of Hunger, who gets people to work but then embodies a complicating factor of real want even among those who work.

The prophetic passage with which the passus ends pulls the poem into its occasional apocalyptic mode. Its general tone of foreboding may be more important than any specific prediction.

Passus 18  After much wandering and a period of wakefulness, the narrator again seeks sleep—but as an access to vision, or as an escape from the world? There follows a dense interweaving of Will’s dream and the Easter narrative and its liturgy. Christ appears under a series of allegorical guises: as the Samaritan, as a knight in the arms of Piers, as a trickster beguiling the great beguiler, Satan. Repeatedly, though, at high points of the Easter story (Longinus at the Crucifixion, the Harrowing of Hell), the allegorical structure fades away into simple narrative.

The entire passus also uses the public culture of drama. At one point the dreamer looks from a window with Faith, as urban magnates looked at dramatic stagings of the Passion. There he listens to Faith’s anti-Semitic diatribe, similar to attitudes found in the mystery plays and in images like that of Christ’s tormentors in Winchester Psalter, color plate 5. When the dreamer withdraws in fear from the Crucifixion, he comes to another implicit stage setting, “He descended into hell.” Here he draws into the shadows and witnesses another dialogue, between four allegorical women drawn from the Psalms. (Note how these allegorical figures offer different vantages, narrow and broad perspectives: Faith’s close view of the trial and crucifixion, the four “wenches” and whole picture of Christ’s conception, life, and death.) They in turn become the audience for a dialogue in hell, Christ shattering hell’s gates, and his extraordinary (and doctrinally daring) speech promising to bring “all men’s souls” out of hell at the Last Judgment. The four women then carol until Easter dawn.
This visionary episode, with its layers of allegorical audiences and dramatic spectacle, does not lead the dreamer to some elevated state. Rather, it ends with him waking into a domestic setting, calling his family to the universally available medium of human contact with the divine: church liturgy and the participatory acts of the Easter Service.

**Piers Plowman and Its Time: The Rising of 1381** Despite its only incremental long-term effects, the Rising of 1381 must have seemed almost apocalyptic to London merchants and magnates at the time. It is an event difficult to imagine in contemporary America on quite such a scale, but students might be invited to recall the riots that followed the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles, with their public disorder, burnings, and initially disorganized official response. The rioters had a comparable sense of righteous wrath and justice gone wrong, and a similar uncertainty about just who needed chastisement; the 1381 rebels, however, seem to have had a more elaborate (if highly plastic) program for change.

Are the reactions printed below, for all their variety, "subjective" in the sense of individual? Or do they rather reflect the interests and preoccupations of a particular group or class?

As noted earlier, Langland seems to have revised *Piers Plowman* after 1381, to distinguish his social complaint from that of the rebels. But in the earlier B-text, he had identified many of the social and ecclesiastical failures which the rebels also attacked. Despite the more complex position Langland did take, and despite the conservatism of much of his reaction, it is a useful exercise to pursue a "rebel reading" of Langland. Indeed, even some conservative elements in Langland would themselves have struck responsive chords with the commoners in 1381, such as his idealistic faith in the king. Both Langland and the rebels made him a figure above nobles, divinely ordained and a true friend of commoners.

All these texts focus, positively or negatively, on the phenomenon of peasants using various forms of public and written expression. John Ball uses overt references to a widely known and learned poem, *Piers Plowman*, and *The Anonimalle Chronicle* minutely records Wat Tyler's articulate if disrespectful dialogue with King Richard. At the same time, the *Chronicle* laments the more general "hideous cries and horrible tumult" of the commoners beheading foreigners. The rebels are even less human when the aldermen surround them "like sheep." In "The Course of Revolt" the rebels are "laddes lowde" who merely "schowte" (lines 17, 29). And Gower allegorizes them wholesale as beasts, whose sole speaker is a jackdaw, a bird that only mimics language. This is the treatment of the rebels as subhuman that informs the reference to them killing Flemings in Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale.


**The Anonimalle Chronicle** This passage centers on the Tower, the seat of royal authority in London, and a series of public confrontations between King Richard and the rebels at the borders of the city. The almost apocalyptic mood is
emphasized by two different scenes when the king watches great secular and ecclesiastical houses burning, and in the writer’s prediction of divine vengeance on the rebels. (The rebels attack church property as much as that of aristocrats; compare Langland’s complaints, persistently divided between clerical and lay power.)

It is significant, however, that the *Chronicle* does not look to the traditional sources of royal force, the armed aristocrats, for action in the revolt. Note how the king’s noble counselors are repeatedly depicted as confused, ineffectual, even (after Smithfield) cowardly. This bears comparison with the knight’s useless intervention against Waster’s laziness in *Piers Plowman* (6.159–70). Consider too the role of the mayor and armed aldermen—citizens, not noblemen—in the critical meeting of Richard and the rebels. Where do the chronicler’s sympathies lie? Is there another sort of anti-aristocratic perspective at work here? (In this regard, too, consider Richard’s unrecorded but long interview with the anchorite. Why emphasize it?)

These episodes from the *Chronicle* are wonderfully depicted, with a great sense of detail and the setting of scenes, such as the detail of a “wicked woman” raising the alarm and preventing the Archbishop’s escape from the Tower, or the herald having to read the king’s bill to the commons from an old chair. There is also a poignant sense of invoking ancient rituals, especially ecclesiastical, to resist disorder. Note the public procession from Westminster Abbey to greet the king, or the performance of the liturgy from which the Archbishop of Canterbury is dragged to his beheading. (This detail may consciously echo the martyrdom of Sudbury’s predecessor, Thomas Becket, during mass at Canterbury.)

These moving but ineffectual ceremonies contrast sharply with the disordered encounters of King Richard and Wat Tyler at Mile End and Smithfield. Tyler is depicted as willfully insulting in speech and gesture. (The commons as a group, though, all kneel to the king.) Tyler’s demands keep increasing; the king accedes, and the chronicler gives no hint here of how swiftly Richard will disavow all his promises and turn on the rebels. Indeed, the violence at Smithfield is attributed to no group, noble or common, but to individuals at the edge of each: Tyler and the king’s valet from Kent.

Here and elsewhere in reports of the Rising, language and the written record are the objects of great but ambivalent attention. The rebels want a charter of their freedoms, on the one hand, but they also reject the king’s first bill, then seek out and kill anyone who could write the kind of official writs that had brought such burdens of taxation upon them. The rebels are in turn hostile then naïve in their trust of documents. They demand the physical presence and voice of the king at Smithfield, but accept his use of the very language of charters (“confirm and grant”). The chronicler himself implies considerable cynicism in Richard’s manipulation of documents; Richard’s first “bill” rewrites the Rising as a “desire to see and maintain their king,” and he has a whole series of charters copied in an effort to appease the rebels. (His authentication of the bill with his signet seal is another invocation of traditional, but here insincere, ritual.) This bears comparison with Langland’s emphasis on charters in the Lady Meed episode, or the corruption of letters by Mordred in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. By contrast, writing is never thematized in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Can this be related to that poem’s general cultural conservatism?
John Ball’s First and Second Letter  Beyond the clear echoes of Langland here, the poems use the tone and diction of the kind of prophetic passages found in *Piers Plowman* elsewhere. The rebels’ ambivalent preoccupation with written language is discussed above. These poems and letters may be more significant for their efforts to appropriate written documents to the aims of the rebels, than for their specific content. For recent discussion, see articles by Richard Firth Green and Susan Crane in *Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (1992), 176–221.

The Course of Revolt  As with *The Anonimalle Chronicle*, the social alignment of *The Course of Revolt* is not immediately clear. The poem acknowledges the grievances of the commons under the poll tax, and speaks with them as “vs alle,” prophesying vengeance; yet it calls the murdered treasurer, Sir Robert Hales, “that dowghty knyght” (line 33). The mixed Latin and English lines imply a fairly educated audience, though the English lines have sense without the Latin. What about the “Kyng” (lines 3, 45)? Can a poet positioned in sympathy both to king and commons be compared to the attitudes of the chronicler? If the rebels are nonetheless “foles” (line 13), is there any positive agent in the poem? Compare this troubled but unstable perspective to Langland’s shifting sympathies and complaints. Who is the final agent the poem calls upon?

John Gower, The Voice of One Crying  Gower’s tone in *Vox Clamantis* is clearer and more persistently hostile to the rebels than the selections above. He simplifies the class affiliations of the rebels, making them all peasants, and grouping all freemen with the nobles. Gower’s text does not register the rebels as human, allegorizing them first as domestic animals then as wild beasts. Wat Tyler is not just a jackdaw but explicitly an agent of Satan, leading a hellish cloud to London. Further, the false rhetoric of the daw has an audience incapable of anything but mass response.

Gower’s attack on plowmen contrasts almost entirely with Langland’s more nuanced and complex picture of laboring society and its ills. Just as Tyler was defined in the absolute moral terms of the devil, so the proper role of peasants is assumed to be ordained by God, and immutable. Like Tyler, the resistant peasant is attracted into the wild animal world by comparison with a fox. Yet Gower’s wish for a restored past is not very different from the desire of the peasants for a restored strong kingship and equal justice. Both project the social order they desire on a nostalgic myth of a better past.

**Mystical Writings**

For all their specialized language and eager search for a more immediate experience of divinity, these texts also connect to dominant themes and motifs in vernacular literature, religious and secular, of the later Middle Ages. Indeed, the “Middle English Mystics” make a less coherent group than their traditional title among scholars would imply. Rolle combines his ecstatic style with strong pastoral aims; *The Cloud of Unknowing* comes from an ancient Neoplatonic tradition; while
Julian of Norwich uses her visions only as the basis for a quite complex speculative theology. They have parallels to other literatures in the widespread idea of quest, pilgrimage as a means thereto, and interior transformation through contact with mysterious agencies. This is found not just in specifically religious literature, but in the Arthurian Grail quest and other romances. Langland’s elaborate, semi-dramatic narrative of the Passion is echoed by Dame Julian’s vision of the Crucifixion. And the metaphorical aspects of Langland’s Will, as a mental quality and quester, are present in The Cloud’s discussion of the soul and its role in mystical attainment. Behind even Chaucer’s humor and deft social critique, let us remember, is the deeply serious model of pilgrimage and the spiritual accomplishment—the quest for the heavenly Jerusalem—it symbolizes.


Julian of Norwich

Dame Julian of Norwich is an important figure in Middle English theology and mysticism. Equally, though, she is a major player in a movement among women across Europe to experience a more immediate and responsive religious faith (often within an even broader urge toward “affective piety”), and to find a verbal medium by which to communicate those and other experiences. This created considerable anxiety among the traditional controllers of language and of social and religious dogma.

Dame Julian, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, and Margery Kempe work very well when taught as a group of female voices within these movements right around the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One might begin, though, with a detail in The Anonomelle Chronicle, where a “wicked woman” among the 1381 rebels raises an alarm and prevents the Archbishop of Canterbury’s escape from the Tower. Though the Wife of Bath is Chaucer’s fiction, and Dame Julian and Kempe historical people, all three (and the wicked woman) leave behind a textual record through some medium of male language, both by using amanuenses and by necessarily negotiating with a whole language whose underlying ideology is (at best) ambivalent toward women. (Such problematic mediation of “female” perspective is found again in “women’s songs” among the Middle English lyrics.)

One might discuss their connections of religious quest within domestic settings or secular quest in the context of religious action; their different strategies of language; differences of mobility and stability; their dialogue or negotiation with male agents of clerical authority; their apparent birth into the mercantile or mod-
est gentry class; the connections of all three to kinds of public culture (liturgy, sermons, drama); and the imagery of marriage and domestic experience in all three. (In most of these regards, the three resonate intriguingly with the writing of the religious enthusiast Rebecca Jackson, a free African-American in Philadelphia before the Civil War. She too was from a modest bourgeois family, struggled with illiteracy, and experienced visionary dreams dense with domestic imagery.)

Dame Julian created a place for her spiritual ambitions, and a degree of social power, by choosing the life of an anchorite, which avoided traditional critiques of women’s mobility and love of public display. (See just such accusations in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue.) For all their enclosure and modest life, though, anchorites gained a certain prestige thereby. Consider the report, in The Anonimalle Chronicle that Richard II made confession and talked with an anchorite right in the crisis of the Rising of 1381.

Julian explicitly calls herself “unlettered” (chapter 2), although whatever that means it did not preclude access to a wide variety of texts. Within what we might call her empowering humility, Julian uses two very daring linguistic strategies. First, her meditations are not centrally on Bible texts; rather, she uses her own early visions as “texts” for exegesis that went on for decades (such as her meditation on the “little thing” in her hand, chapter 5). Second, she imports the specific setting of traditional female experience in her class—household, wifehood, motherhood—as the fundamental metaphors of her religious thinking. From these she produces what Nicholas Watson rightly calls a “vernacular theology” (“Visions of Inclusion,” 146).

Dame Julian’s wish for “bodily sight” of the Passion is coherent with later medieval affective piety, and with visual representations of Christ as the Man of Sorrows. Her desire to experience an illness close to death literalizes ideas of dying to this life, found in monastic vows and in mystical texts. Conversely, the three wounds she desires are metaphorized as contrition, compassion, and longing for God. Julian deflects possible critique of these ambitions by acknowledging their eccentricity, leaving her wishes in the will of God, and by repeatedly asserting her orthodoxy. This deflection by reference to a male agent is persistent in Julian’s early visions, as when her curate’s crucifix stimulates her bodily vision of the Passion (chapter 4). This is balanced by her vision of the Virgin Mary and her “created littleness,” later seen “high and noble and glorious” (chapter 23). (A similarly double vision of Mary appears in Middle English lyrics devoted to her.)

The extreme physicality of some of Julian’s visions can be startling. Along with her compassion for Christ’s complete suffering, she also separates his body and wounds into discrete units, which become sites for theological meditation. This is elaborated in her sight of the wound in Christ’s side (chapter 24) as a space for the salvation of all mankind. She also controls rhetoric nicely at key points, by the building up of repeated phrases, such as Christ’s “I am he . . . ” in chapter 26, or the famous lines, Christ’s response to Julian’s long meditation on sin and its origin in chapter 27, “but all will be well.” It is typical of Julian to place this expansive rhetoric in the mouth of Christ, not her own.

From this bodily vision and the domestic imagery of her meditations, Dame Julian constructs a theology of widespread salvation, rather than a program for in-
dissipation. She is emphatic that her visions do not privilege her, and that the fruit of her exegesis does not depart from the dogma any Christian learns in church. She is writing not just for contemplatives, but for all believers. Chapters 60 and 61 especially explore Christ and humanity, and God and humanity, through a detailed narrative of mother’s love: gestation, birth, nourishment, protection and chastisement. Breast-feeding, for instance, becomes the image for Mother Jesus and the Eucharist. Following traditions of polysemy in Biblical exegesis, Julian will move a single image toward a number of ends. The breast itself thus suggests the Eucharist, but elsewhere Christ’s spear wound, and Holy Church. Gender is fluid, however; Julian’s maternal imagery leads her reader into an ever richer sense of the implications of Christ’s statement, “I am he whom you love.” From the specifically gendered and hierarchicalized love of man for woman (a trope from the Song of Songs, spiritualized by centuries of Christian commentary), Julian expands the belovedness of Christ to include varieties of love within a family, especially love for the mother. The convergent languages of love and faith are also seen in many Middle English religious lyrics.


**COMPANION READINGS**

**Richard Rolle**

Richard Rolle was enormously popular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and his works survive in as many as five hundred manuscripts. Rolle explores the major themes that appear in mystical tradition, but uses characteristic imagery of warmth, sweetness, and song. He also borrows freely and quite openly from the Song of Songs (especially in imagery of thirst and longing) and the Psalms (for ideas of praise and song).

Rolle did not work in the immediate milieu of his contemporary John Wycliffe (though both were Oxford-trained) and the school of Bible translators who worked under Wycliffe’s inspiration. Nevertheless, Rolle’s call for an eager exile from the goods of the world was enthusiastically taken up by Wycliffe and his “Lollard” followers after Rolle’s death. In fact, he is hostile to the involved questions and logic of university theology. And he does not reach toward (and even seems to deny) the highest aspirations to spiritual union found in some continental models such as Bernard of Clairvaux.

Rolle is an approachable writer in his emphatically personalized voice and in his very inconsistencies. The images of heat and sweetness particularly reflect Rolle’s shifts of attention, sometimes between metaphorical and (apparently) literal language, from “real warmth” to “as if a real fire.” And the text itself enact Rolle’s warning about slipping back into the concerns of the world. Repeatedly, his
own memory of past wrongs (by himself or others) generates an episode of divided, sometimes still angry response.

Like many clerics going back as early as St. Jerome, Rolle had a deeply ambivalent attitude toward women. On the one hand, many of his English works were composed for the direction of recluses and nuns, among whom may have been his own sister; on the other hand he invokes traditional misogynist associations of women with instability and excess. By contrast, Rolle tends to imagine mystical accomplishment in terms of male action. In the story of his own spiritual awakening and withdrawal from the world Rolle speaks of “doughty warriors.”

Compare the bodily experience of the divine here with the more intellectual approach in The Cloud, its avoidance of imagery of bodily desire. Rolle's imagery of food and drink is distinct from that in Dame Julian, linked more to the Eucharist than to Julian's domestic experience. Rolle's memories are usually warnings, calls from a world he wants to (and cannot) leave behind. Julian by contrast uses the memory of her visions almost as a text for exegesis. Compare too Rolle's initial spiritual experience in a chapel, Julian's in her family home, and Margery Kempe's often in public spaces such as cathedrals or roads.

The Cloud of Unknowing

This text uses ideas and imagery of neoplatonic Christianity going back to the so-called pseudo-Dionysius and his translator and commentator John Scotus Eriugena. This tradition moved into the high and later Middle Ages through the Victorines in Paris, who in turn had daughter houses and texts distributed in England. Hugh of St. Victor was widely read in England and Andrew of St. Victor spent years there as an abbot.

From this long-established mystical tradition, The Cloud of Unknowing creates a voice of restraint, calling for submission to authority even in private spiritual growth. It echoes ecclesiastical anxiety about undirected mysticism, lay access to the mysteries of faith, and any religious experience registered at the level of bodily sensation. The author connects the “false ingenuity” of interior quest to dangers of devilish deception. The dominant figure of the cloud and waiting in darkness avoids pleasurable senses like heat and taste, for the more abstract notions of light and dark. The Cloud is far more troubled and explicit than Rolle or Dame Julian about the limits of worldly language in expressing spiritual experience.

Note the persistently hortatory tone, and dependence on imperative verbs. The author works through instruction and warning, and avoids private experience. His emphasis on the great difficulties of spiritual progress may specifically counter Rolle’s assurances of the ease with which the yearning Christian may achieve some experience of spiritual warmth and sweetness. Indeed he emphasizes forgetting as a prerequisite to contact with the divine, quite differently from either Rolle or Julian of Norwich. And he links spiritual improvement explicitly to the work of the whole church, since it aids all souls, even those in purgatory.

The Cloud’s negative account of a soul wavering between the divine and “memories of things done and undone,” is comparable to the very experiences
Rolle reports. Given the accompanying imagery of fire, this could even be a direct critique of Rolle and admonition to his followers. It offers explicit warning, if not about Rolle himself, then about the sensory experience of spiritual elevation Rolle describes.

**Medieval Cycle Drama**

Forms of play and public culture (a better term than “popular culture” in this context) were influential shapers of medieval experience, both sacred and secular. At a number of such cultural sites, the line between enactment and awesome transformation becomes highly porous. Clearest at the altar where the priest’s words summon the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ, this porosity is less mysterious but present in the public performance of a poem, with the inevitable ventriloquism of voices that entails. Medieval public culture involved many mobile rituals in which one group’s space and identifying objects moved temporarily into another’s: secular events like formalized jousts and tournaments; royal entries into cities, often accompanied with recitations, music, tableaux vivants; and religious processions out of the church and into the spaces of commerce and production.

The great Middle English biblical dramas enacting the story of creation, fall, and salvation, were developed in the thriving but contentious towns of the East Midlands and north, that had been greatly enriched in the fourteenth century by trade (particularly with the Netherlands and Flanders) and especially by the export of wool. The mercantile bourgeoisie formed much of its identity by participating in a network of guilds, both religious (for the establishment of chantries and prayers for members’ souls after death) and secular (for members of various crafts and trades). These guilds were only one site of contact, and strife, between the lay bourgeois and the clergy; their encounters were also more ritually enacted in the many public religious processions that moved from the parish churches and cathedrals into the settings of urban trade and manufacture. Public sermons had a similar, and even more hierarchicalized, impact.

Ritual processions were especially elaborate at the Feast of Corpus Christi, sixty days after Easter and close to the summer solstice, and this early summer holiday became a frequent occasion for the production of “mystery plays,” a title derived from the continent and the Latin *mysterium*, referring to the trades or crafts organized in guilds. In medieval England, they were often called Corpus Christi plays, for the church holiday with which many were associated. These productions were a dense site of communal identity and contest; the urban craft guilds (and probably rural religious guilds) financed production and often supplied staging and actors directly, while the texts show every sign of coming from clerical hands. A particularly intense notion of identity is implicit in the spectacle of craftsmen and other workers of medieval England watching their opposite numbers in biblical history, and sometimes seeing one of their own guildsmen playing such a theatrical role.
The Second Play of the Shepherds

Especially in the work of the “Wakefield Master” who wrote, or revised from an earlier form, The Second Play of the Shepherds, the professional pride and discontent of contemporary laborers fold into the drama of salvation. (The play has its name because it began as an alternate play to the one already available—Alia eorum den they manuscript says, “another of the same.”) The Wakefield Master, almost certainly a cleric, was a brilliant and innovative dramatist. He depicts complex and changeable characters in vigorous, colloquial dialogue, rich in proverbial interjections, and more “naturalistic” (if also less awesome) than was attempted in earlier drama like the York Cycle, and he engages these characters in evolving relationships that imply a past and a world beyond the play. This accomplishment is the more impressive in that the Wakefield Master uses a challenging nine-line stanza. He is not only a good poet, though. The play is theatrically brilliant; its scenes flow nicely together (in settings that lie close together on the stage), at once structured and related by repeated motifs like song, sleep, challenges at doorways, disguise and recognition.

The famous grumbling of the shepherds as the play opens, and Mak’s hunger later on, are intriguingly similar to some of the laborers’ grievances in the Rebellion of 1381, and to social satire widespread throughout the later Middle Ages. In addition to the hostile forces of nature (in which the audience would recognize the inheritance of Adam and the fall), the shepherds lament the bondage of servile tenure, marriage, and serving men of their own class. They complain about taxes and oppression by “gentlery men.” Yet Shepherds I and II, for all their complaining, are not outside the system of oppressive service, as they abuse their own servant Daw. Hunger is present throughout the play.

That the shepherds voice their “moan” need not mean, however, that the play supports any rebellion on their part. Their complaints and violence disappear in the face of the Nativity of Christ, and they are drawn into a socially and musically harmonious expression of praise; their economic and class hostility turns to charity. The subversive comedy of the magician and sheep-stealer Mak is similarly attracted into a parodic echo of the Nativity by the end of the play. In both ways, the play ultimately draws these potentially subversive expressions into normative actions of faith.

This effect is only one aspect of the play’s complex and subtle use of figural and typological thinking. In its narrow meaning as applied to biblical commentary, typological interpretation approached Old Testament events as historically real, but also as precedents or prefigurations that would only be fulfilled by events in the New Testament, especially the Incarnation of Christ. As Adam of St. Victor commented on Hebrews 10:10: “The Old Law is a shadow of future things.” This kind of typological thought is frequently reflected in Langland’s Piers Plowman and in lyrics like Adam Lay Ibounden. It was so influential a way of looking at history, though, that typology sometimes shaped extra-biblical legend and even views of secular history. One might even consider a kind of reverse typology, in which a person (say a shepherd) takes on his fullest significance as he participates, or witnesses the enactment of a prototype in sacred history.
The implications of an extended typology are most elaborately developed in The Second Play of the Shepherds in the scenes of Mak disguising his stolen ram as a newborn, swaddled baby and its discovery by the three shepherds. This extraordinary scene uses slapstick comedy at once to figure and to parody the transcendent events of the Nativity that, in the economy of the play, are occurring simultaneously. The scene at Mak’s house of course neatly doubles the Nativity scene with the Lamb of God: the beast swaddled between Mak and Gill is replaced by baby Jesus swaddled between two beasts. But the binding of the ram further draws in the iconology of the Passion, and Mak’s wife swearing to eat the sheep/baby if she’s tricked the shepherds also parodically forecasts the Eucharist.

The Shepherds (with their symbolic link to the iconology of Christ as good shepherd, e.g. the Book of Luke 15:3–7) are the mediators between the audience (whose social stresses they reflect) and the transcendent history of the Nativity (in which they participate). They move repeatedly from conflict to harmony, both social and musical, a kind of middle ground between the comic disputatious household (and bad singing) of Mak, and the Holy Family and singing of the angels. Their decision to toss Mak in a blanket (game as punishment) rather than deliver him to his death as a sheep-stealer is the act of charity that qualifies the shepherds for the angelic message that follows. Indeed the stanzas in which they make their modest gifts to the infant savior, with the refrain of “Hail!”, provide the dramatic gesture that makes the baby into a holy icon.

These stanzas are also a high point in the Wakefield Master’s craft, with their tense yoking together of highly referential and idiomatic language. The density of reference within humble and literal objects in the play is especially touching in this scene, in the gifts of the shepherds: cherries, a bird, and a toy ball. These are modest, but cherries appear in a number of legends of the Annunciation, the bird implies both the ascent of mankind with the Incarnation and the dove of the Holy Spirit, and the tennis ball may suggest an orb, symbol of the kingdom of heaven. Together the three gifts echo Christ’s sacrificial humanity, spiritual primacy, and lordship.

Mak is certainly the most complex and resonant character in the drama. His unruliness and preference for theft over work suggest the hostile portraits of some peasants found in writers like Langland and certain chroniclers of the Rebellion of 1381. Mak is more eloquent about his plight than the wordy shepherds, for instance when he identifies himself as “a man that walks on the moor, / And has not all his will!” (lines 196–97). As both a role-player within the drama (pretending to be a yeoman of the king and feigning a southern accent) and a magician, he links ritual magic and theatricality. Mak is more broadly a speaker for the non-Christian uncanny in his efforts to explain the monstrous “child” evoking a range of folk belief: the child is bewitched, or a changeling switched by elves. This is not inconsistent with the redemptive structure of the play, in which Mak may be seen as a comic anti-Christ (named “Sir Guile” by his wife and having a “horned lad” as his child), replaced by the higher “magic” of the Incarnation.

The play’s convergence of secular and sacred, and its exploitation of typology, are further supported by its conscious juggling of time schemes. Time collapses in the overt anachronisms of the shepherds’ and Mak’s speeches, calling on Mary and
the Passion, and swearing by martyred saints, before they even witness the Nativity (e.g. "By him that died for us all"). This can be compared to the penetrability, or near disappearance of time in the Eucharist, where the body of Christ is present among the faithful. The play invokes a related overlap of places, Bethlehem and Britain, in the first shepherd’s dream—"I thought we had laid us full near England"—and elsewhere. In such a context, could local and contemporary figures like the shepherds seem almost to enact, not merely mimic, the revelation of their forebears a millennium and a half earlier?

The Second Play of the Shepherds has attracted a large body of scholarship and critical interpretation; the collections by Beadle and Emmerson listed in the Bibliography give a good first look at the range of approaches. Earlier writing focussed on the play’s links to typological thinking and contemporary iconology. Research has also interested itself in the socioeconomic setting of the plays in the urban public culture of the later Middle Ages. The material thus uncovered (much of it collected and edited in the Records of Early English Drama series, 1981-ongoing), though little is of direct relevance to the Wakefield Cycle, has provided a springboard for New Historicist critics, interested in the place of the plays in the wider drama of urban public culture. Feminist readers have been exploring the analogies between the characters of Gill and the Virgin Mary, and their connections to female speakers in other vernacular works like those of Chaucer and Langland.

The York Play of the Crucifixion

Like the Wakefield Master who wrote in a similar milieu of prosperous northern English towns, the “York Realist” was an inspired dramatic artist. His Crucifixion, though from a different cycle, when read with the Second Play of the Shepherds can give students a sense of the span of Christian history covered by the Corpus Christi plays (See Clifford Davison, From Creation to Doom: The York Cycle of Mystery Plays [1984]). Both plays present fallen human beings—the shepherds and Christ's torturers, respectively—with whom the audience can initially identify, but whose errors in misunderstanding Christ's message are revealed at the end. Students may be intrigued by the use of the blasphemous in both plays, and disturbed by the grotesqueness of the torture in the Crucifixion. Teachers might point out that according to Lawrence Clopper, the clerical authors included the grotesque elements in the cycle plays not to be subversive, but to co-opt the festive celebrations of the populace for sacred purposes ("English Drama: From Ungodly Ludi to Sacred Play," Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature [1999], p. 748).

The brutality of the portrayal of the crucifixion has often been explained as a reflection of the late medieval focus on Christ’s suffering humanity, as opposed to His divine power. A similar expression of affective piety can be seen in the mystical and meditative works in this anthology, such as the writings of Julian of Norwich (e.g., when she sees herself as being drawn through Christ’s wound) and the Middle English lyrics on the crucifixion (e.g., “Jesus, my Sweet Lover”). Nevertheless, as Ruth Evans has pointed out, the York Crucifixion lacks the nur-
turing feminine characteristics often associated with the late medieval view of Christ that Carolyn Bynum has identified in *Jesus as Mother* (1982). Evans argues that the suffering of Christ in this play is in fact masculine and heroic, in the tradition of the Germanic warrior giving his life for his people, as in the Old English *Dream of the Rood*. She views Christ’s silence in response to the taunts of his torturers not as passive and feminine, but restrained and stoic, emanating from a knowledge of power (“Body Politics: Engendering Medieval Cycle Drama,” *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson [1994]).

The heroic and dignified image of Christ is enhanced by the poem’s highly alliterative style, a feature the York Realist is known to have added in his revision. For alliterative poetry from Old English times to the early sixteenth century was associated with epic subject matter, as in the fourteenth-century alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The alliteration helps to focus on Christ’s power rather than his suffering in this play, much as it does in the more military passages recounting his Harrowing of Hell, such as *Passus 18* of *Piers Plowman* and William Dunbar’s “Done is a Battell” (in addition to the *Dream of the Rood*).

Many critics have commented on the balance between the depictions of the suffering “Gothic” and the heroic “Romanesque” Christ in the York Crucifixion. Clifford Davidson draws explicit art historical parallels to this dichotomy (“The Realism of the York Realist and the York Passion,” *Speculum*, 50 [1975], 270–83). It might be helpful to show students visual depictions of the crucifixion, starting in this anthology with the passion scenes from the Winchester Psalter (color plate 5), and the image taken from “On the Passion of our Lord” (p. 515). (The double image of the Annunciation to the Shepherds and the Nativity from the *Holkham Bible Picture Book* [color plate 7] can similarly serve to illustrate the Second Play of the Shepherds).

**Vernacular Religion and Repression**

The challenge of teaching the materials gathered here is to press beyond their usefulness as cultural and historical background, and show students their literary merit and their critical role in the complex rise of Middle English. These are indeed important backgrounds: they contextualize the urban piety of the Corpus Christi cycle plays, the social and religious paranoia that led to much of the harassment of Margery Kempe, the critique of morally lax clergy in Langland and parts of the *Canterbury Tales*. They are equally important, though, as examples of translation, sermons, argumentative prose, and (no doubt heavily mediated) spoken word.

These texts also greatly complicate any simple account of “the rise of Middle English” as a single, centralized, or unimpeded climb to preeminence. Certainly, by the last quarter of the fourteenth century, we encounter a group of poets writing in English who enjoy the favor and patronage of the aristocratic magnates and royal court: Chaucer, John Gower, John Lydgate, and others. There was much else going on, though. Further away from London, the prose translator John
Trevisa worked for Thomas, Lord Berkeley in the southwest Midlands. Alliterative poetry was produced by writers from the west Midlands and north, including the very popular work of William Langland (who lived in London and whose readership stretched across England), and some of the cycle plays from mercantile northern cities like York and Wakefield. Alliterative poetry splits across classes as well, however; the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* apparently wrote for an aristocratic (but also pious) household in the area around Chester. In an era of strong regional dialects, some of this writing sounded strange in the ears (or minds) of distant readers.

Further, when the expressivity and broadened readership of Middle English came to serve the aims of religious dissent (which was also perceived as social dissent), as in some of the texts here, it was the object of official anxiety then official condemnation, even judicial murder as many Lollard preachers learned. In this regard, it is worth pausing with students over the passage from Henry Knighton quoted on page 515, and noting how his anxious hostility spreads across classes, educational levels, and gender. (This passage again becomes relevant when students encounter the hostility toward the very orthodox Margery Kempe, partly because she was a woman doing so.) On the other hand, those same authorities promoted certain kinds of (uncritical) devotional writing for laymen in Middle English, like that of Nicholas Love. The Lollards had stolen a march on the church, though, partly because they so often used the widely comprehensible “Central Midlands Standard” dialect. The popularity of their efforts, even in the face of ultimate official condemnation, is reflected in the 240 (or more) surviving manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible. This compares with 82 or 83 surviving *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts, and about 56 of *Piers Plowman*.

Altogether, this work of translation, vernacular religious writing, and debate over its value helped push Middle English prose to higher levels of flexibility, syntactic and rhetorical resources, and intellectual and theological nuance. The fruits of this process are seen in the rich imagery, moving cadences, and theological reach of Middle English mystics such as Julian of Norwich. The practices of oral preaching and debate also lie behind the prompt and (when necessary) highly organized responses of Margery Kempe in her many and sometimes dangerous moments of public confrontation and clerical questioning.

The Wycliffite translation from the Book of John is austerely restrained and carefully non-Latinate in its vocabulary. This contributes to the measured repetition that is part of its aural impact. The imagery of the good shepherd echoes in many directions across Middle English literature, perhaps most famously in the description of the hard-working Parson in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* (“He was a shepherd and nought a mercenarye,” l. 516). Some further (or perceived) connection to the religious language movements represented in this section may be seen in the Parson’s offer to tell a “merye tale in prose.” The Wycliffite sermon based on this passage in John is similarly restrained; it is traditional in form if not in content. It works by going carefully through the biblical text and using it to criticize clerical abuses in the established church. Its emotional height-
ening derives again from conscious repetition of phrases and from alliteration. Chaucer’s Pardoner, as seen in the General Prologue and the tale, has comparable concerns for the salvation or perdition of laymen in the afterlife. By contrast, the sermon’s attack on clerical wealth can be read against Chaucer’s portraits of the Prioress and Monk.

John Mirk’s sermon, on a passage in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, is very different in tone and method, but also represents a widespread form of sermon. Mirk is out to entertain as well as instruct his audience. He leaves the text of the Bible passage behind rather quickly, and makes his points by appeal to popular sayings and, especially, by telling a good secular story, an exemplum, to drive home his point. Mirk tells his story with great relish; indeed it threatens to swamp the putative purpose of the sermon. His tale especially pulls on his imagination as he casts the wealthy lady as the villain; the knight is no worse than handsome and ambitious. (Interestingly, it is only another tale-teller, a harper, who keeps the knight’s castle safe on the long-delayed day of vengeance, and it is only the harper who survives its conflagration.) This may be the sort of thing Chaucer’s Parson refers to when he reproaches those who “tellen fables,” in his Prologue l. 35. And it just the kind of sermon that Chaucer’s Pardoner tells, cynically aware of how very effective it can be. Langland does something not dissimilar, though, in Passus 18 of Piers Plowman, when he introduces Christ as a knight on a quest. Nicholas Love is similarly interested in using drama and concrete detail to draw the attention (and meditation) of his readers. The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ combines biblical narrative with a good deal of legendary material to create an emotive, even sentimental picture of scenes from the life of Christ. And the simple but eloquent morals he draws from these scenes urge his readers to fairly passive virtues that do not threaten the status quo: poverty, meekness, and bodily penance.

The Statute “On Burning the Heretic” reflects the real anxiety that the Wycliffites were causing in official circles. It elides religious dissent and political subversion. And the Confession of Hawisia Moone of Loddon gives a glimpse of what the religious and political powers feared. It is worth asking, though, whether this is a straightforward “true report,” or a heavily prompted confession by a frightened woman willing to feed the authorities what they wanted. Much of the specificity does suggest, though, the extent to which serious religious dialogue was occurring at the level of rural villages, and how a network of preachers spread the Lollard word. Moone’s somewhat reductive recital of Lollard tenets can be recalled when students read Margery Kempe. Kempe eagerly pursues a whole list of practices condemned by the Lollards. This makes even more interesting (and perhaps paranoid) the frequent accusation that Kempe herself is a Lollard, and it suggests how any religious deviance or outspokenness was subject to such attack.

It is just this atmosphere of nervous official condescension to lay piety, and fearful attacks on many acts of religious dialogue, that informs the two orthodox defenses of writing and reading religious works in the vernacular. Many writers of clear orthodoxy nonetheless continued to support the idea of biblical reading in
English and its interpretation by laymen, as we see in “Preaching and Teaching in the Vernacular” and The Holy Prophet David Saith. Yet the first writer expresses real anxiety about the dangers he faces for holding such opinions, and appeals to a lay patron, not a powerful cleric, for protection.

Margery Kempe

If one measure of literary achievement is the capacity of a text to arouse passionate response, positive or negative, then Margery Kempe produced a great book; and the public expressions of her religious attainments that preceded that book for decades, judged by the same measure, had a similar greatness. No other single medieval text has enjoyed a level of engaged appropriation and reaction in the second half of the twentieth century equal to The Book of Margery Kempe.

Both in fifteenth-century Lynn and in twentieth-century scholarship, Kempe generated strikingly similar and similarly polar reactions. Is she a genuine holy woman (however eccentric), or is she a megalomaniac, almost a self-deceiving fraud? Students of mysticism have tended—more in their tone than their explicit judgments—to favor the latter position; more recently, feminist scholars have tended at least to accept Kempe’s claims of religious experience at face value, and celebrate her achievement of a female voice and position (however limited) within the highly patriarchal hierarchies of the late medieval clerisy. Either view has seemed to focus more on exegesis and judgment of Kempe’s personality than of her book. But recent readers have tried to move past these dichotomies and the pattern of dismissal or celebration. Instead, they see her book as the complex and divided product of a setting in which competitive secular ambition and religious accomplishment, bodily experience and mystical knowing, disruptive expression and clerical approval, cannot be disembedded one from the other. Particularly intriguing instances of such an approach are found in Sarah Beckwith, Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings, (1993), chapter 4, and in Nicholas Watson, “The Middle English Mystics,” in The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, ed. David Wallace (1999).

Since the rediscovery of her book in 1934, Margery Kempe has usually been studied in the context of the Middle English mystics (a category that is itself rather recent). Kempe clearly sought the kinds of direct, affective contact with the love and sufferings of Christ seen in Richard Rolle and the initial visions of Julian of Norwich. The mode by which she pursued these ends, though, was markedly different from Rolle or Julian; far from the persistent inwardness of private prayer and meditation, Kempe exercised several kinds of mobility. She expended tremendous energy negotiating with her husband and with ecclesiastical authorities to achieve a mobility within the hierarchies of marriage and clerisy, seeking abstinence from the conjugal debt of sex and from certain foods, and requesting to wear special clothes and receive weekly Eucharist. But she particularly enacted her religious quest through mobility of place. Kempe repeated her contacts with the
Passion by engaging in pilgrimage, visiting both the site of its original occurrence and sites of its imitation by vision and martyrdom.

The late medieval clergy was increasingly threatened by the extent of unsupervised religious quest, unregulated lay preaching, and unorthodox or heterodox speculation within its own ranks. It reacted in a range of manners, from open-spirited negotiation (which Kempe occasionally encounters) to repressive hostility (probably more widespread). One result of this was Archbishop Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409, which made illegal any theological speculation in the vernacular.

What produced perhaps the most trouble for Kempe, though, was her need (and, it appears, choice) to express her links with the Passion in highly public fashion, through her tears and sobbing roars, long before that expression painstakingly took the form of her book. (Even that book can be viewed as a crucial site of negotiated mobility, from oral expression to written, through protracted dealings with two priest scribes.) Where the site of Julian’s speculation was the internal memory of her early vision of Christ’s body, the principal site of Kempe’s religious contact was her own mobile and usually public body.

Kempe’s intensely somatic religious experience was not unique in her time. Her theatricalizing extends but is not wholly different from the public ritual and dramas of late medieval civic culture, in which she lived: costume, role playing, emotive experience of the joys of the Virgin or sufferings of Christ. Public religious rituals especially developed around the feast of Corpus Christi, a holiday that commemorates the last supper and Eucharist with which Kempe’s religious expression is so closely identified. She describes her weeping reaction to a Corpus Christi procession in a chapter not included here (chapter 45). Many such events of public religious ritual come into the book, such as the great scene of Margery and John at Bridlington as they return from Corpus Christi day at York, and thus probably having seen the mystery plays there. In such plays Kempe would witness a melding of secular class strife and divine visitation comparable to her own unresolved mixture of life in and beyond the mundane world. Such themes are found in The Second Play of the Shepherds in this anthology.

What was radical in Kempe’s relation to these public, emotive, and somatic expressions of faith was her persistent denial of a line between herself as audience and as actor. Repeatedly, in local ecclesiastical events or on pilgrimage, Kempe’s expressivity makes herself the object of the public gaze and (to a degree that never satisfies her hopes) of public veneration. This behavior also radically inverts the usual role of the traveller. Rather than seeking in the foreign place (or the local holy site) some experience of marvel or the uncanny, Margery Kempe repeatedly makes herself the object of that wondering (or repelled) gaze. If her body at times registers and replicates the sufferings of Christ, it also seems to absorb and perform the holy marvels of exotic place.

The theatricality and persistence of her religious expression enraged many in Margery Kempe’s own time, and their reactions in turn are folded into elements of betrayal, mockery, and abandonment that underwrite her program of imitation of Christ. Kempe’s mobility extends even to selfhood. (She is also dressed as a fool.
and mocked—a scene often enacted in passion plays; she rides into Jerusalem on a donkey; finally she stretches her arms wide and writhes on Calvary.) So intense is her identification with the life and sufferings of Christ, so easily is it triggered by place, memory, or analogy, that Kempe’s very body moves past imitation and virtually becomes Christ’s body. As the Book progresses, the line between representation and literal presence of Christ to her senses, or even between analogy and literal presence (as in the infants and young boys over whom she weeps in Rome) is ever more permeable.

Yet it is exactly the will to such expression that gave Kempe her disruptive power, clear in her own time and little diminished today. The actual content of her visions and meditations is orthodox and very much in the tradition of such predecessors as Richard Rolle, whose work Kempe names in the Book. If Julian’s safety lay in her stable enclosure and rhetoric of humility, Kempe’s lay in her doctrinal conservatism and the detail with which she could, when pressed, articulate it under clerical scrutiny. Notwithstanding the spectacle of her piety and her insistence that she communicated directly with Christ, Kempe eagerly sought approval and authority from persons within the ecclesiastical establishment: from bishops and archbishops, mystical friars, and Julian of Norwich herself. Nevertheless, that very approval was sought by repeatedly travelling beyond the traditional geography of clerical authority, the parish. And the acceptance she often gained thereby provided Kempe with an even greater tool of disruption (or, just as unnerving, a greater alternative) to priestly religion, the authority of her intimate, direct “dalliance” with the three persons of the Trinity, especially the Son.

Middle English Lyrics

The many languages spoken and written in the British Isles from the thirteenth century on introduced a wealth of poetic traditions, and inspired a linguistic self-consciousness and a taste for word play that greatly enriched the Middle English lyric. The intricate rhyme schemes, alliteration, consonance, and assonance of two of the Harley lyrics included here, Spring and Alisoun, are thought to have been influenced by the highly sophisticated technique of medieval Welsh poets, since the Harley manuscript was compiled in Hereford, near the Welsh border. (See G. L. Brook’s introduction to The Harley Lyrics, [1956], 1–26). Students might want to compare the poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym, whose translator tries to convey these features in modern English.

Middle English itself is so rich in homonyms that it provides an opportunity for word play, whether sacred or profane. The famous lyric I Sing of a Maiden praises the Virgin Mary as being “makeles”—which can be translated as “spotless” (from the Latin macula), “matchless,” or “without a mate” (both from the Old English gemæca, “equal” or “mate”). Far from being seen as frivolous, in the Middle Ages such punning was thought to reveal profound spiritual correspondences between word and thing, as Walter Ong has shown. (See Stephen Manning, “On ‘I
Ambiguous language is also used for humorous purposes in several of the Middle English lyrics. Church Latin or Greek—priestly code languages which the laity could not understand—are often shown as being used to deceive women. In the satirical *Abuse of Women*, a series of stanzas in mock praise of women—ostensibly denying the negative stereotypes familiar from Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*—are punctuated by a refrain whose Latin portion reveals the speaker’s real assessment: “Of all creatures women be best: / Cuius contrarium verum est.” Liturgical Greek is used for the purpose of seduction in a more dramatic situation in *Job Jankin*, by a clerk whose refrain—*Kyrie Eleison*—the female speaker takes to refer to her own name, Alison. Only at the end of the lyric does she reveal her pregnancy, and with it a new understanding of the refrain—“Lord have mercy upon us.” Such love of word play, whether spiritual or humorous, recalls Langland’s play on the names “Piers” and “Will,” as well as Chaucer’s flattering interpretation of Eve’s guilt—*mulier est hominis confusio*—in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* and his puns on “hende” and “privitee” in the *Miller’s Tale*.

**Secular Love Lyrics**

Middle English lyrics play with generic as well as verbal ambiguity. The imagery shared between the secular and religious lyrics is so pervasive that the distinction between them is often considered arbitrary. Both genres, in fact, are highly conventional, and of interest for the way they manipulate traditional motifs. The love lyrics’ application of language appropriate to the worship of the Virgin Mary to the earthly lady give them a generally idealistic rather than sensual tone. The love complaint *Alisoun*, for instance, is hardly a seduction poem in the manner being able to love his lady (“An hendy hap ich habbe ihent!”), asserts its divine origin (“Ichot from hevene it is me sent”), and only at the end makes a timid request for her to listen to his plea: (“Herkne to my roun!”). In *Spring*, the speaker is even less direct in his address to his lady, for the most part celebrating the burgeoning of nature—the flowering of the meadow and the mating of animals—and only at the end contrasting it with the disdainful behavior of women:

*Wormes woweth under cloude,*  
*Wimmen waxeth wounder proude.*

[Worms woo under the soil,  
Women grow wondrously proud.]

While it has been suggested that the reference to the worms’ wooing is a subtle reminder to the lady of the inevitable decay of her own flesh (Manning, 271), it hardly has the coercive force of the graphic “worms shall try that long-preserved virginity” in Marvell’s *To his Coy Mistress*, the most famous of the Renaissance and seventeenth-century poems to revive the “carpe diem” rhetoric of the Ovidian love tradition.
Women’s Songs

Greater cynicism is to be found, surprisingly, in the Middle English “women’s songs” that express a female perspective on courtship. Students may be disappointed to learn that such lyrics were most likely written by men, and project a male idea of a woman’s feelings. They tend to be more narrative than male-voiced lyrics, perhaps because they describe not the anticipation of sex, but its frequent consequences for the woman—desertion and pregnancy. The response these lyrics invite is more often ironic than sympathetic, suggesting that the audience as well as the authors were male (See John F. Plummer, “Woman’s Song in Middle English and its European Backgrounds,” ed. John F. Plummer, Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Woman’s Song, [1981], 135–54). This is particularly true of women’s songs in which the seducers are clerics—a group well-known for their cleverness and immorality. The speaker who laments her pregnancy in The Wily Clerk is impressed by her seducer’s “gramery,” translated as “magic”, but carrying echoes of grammatica, one of the arts of the trivium which lay people found arcane. In the lyric Joly Jankin discussed above, both the clerk’s play on Kyrie eleison as the speaker’s name and the witty tone of the poem in general tend to distance the emotion in her cry, “Christ fro schame me schilde, / . . . alas, I go with childe!” The entire narrative has a tone of the fabliau, and recalls Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale in particular: the stock country woman’s name (Alison), the courtship in church (Absolon), the successful clerical seducer (Nicholas). Such overtones suggest that these laments are not to be taken seriously, but ironically, at the woman’s expense.

Religious Lyrics

In Middle English, the religious lyric is closely connected to the secular lyric, and can hardly be understood apart from it. Most obviously, as we shall see, it employs the language and imagery of courtly love poetry. But beyond that, poems in praise of Mary can be seen as inversely related to antifeminist lyrics and, occasionally, parodic of women’s songs. Mariolatry—the worship of Mary as the one virtuous woman—reflects implicitly on all other women. In Adam lay ibounden, the assertion that the fall was fortunate rests on the assumption that Eve’s fault was repaired by Mary’s excellence in bearing the son of God:

Ne hadde the appil take ben,
The appil taken ben,
Ne hadde never our lady
A ben hevene quen.

Like the writings of Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, and the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Marian lyrics are indebted to the mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux, who worshipped Mary with the allegorized language of the Song of Songs. In praise of Mary states that no other woman is “so fair, so shene, so rudy, so bright,” and begs Mary, “swete Levedy, . . . have mercy of thine knight” in lan-
language that recalls courtly lovers appealing to their ladies’ mercy for more physical favors. Arguably the best of the poems to Mary in Middle English, *I Sing of a Maiden* describes the Incarnation in terms of Christ’s courtship of her: He is said to have approached her “bower,” and she to have graciously “chosen” him as her son. This nativity poem then concludes with the classic paradox of Mary as “moder and maiden.”

Yet another poem in praise of Mary almost crosses the line into blasphemy as it plays with the idea that Mary is just another pregnant girl, explaining her plight. The male speaker tells of overhearing a maiden confess, “I am with child this tide,” leading us to expect a lament such as *The Wily Clerk*. But we soon learn that this is a different situation altogether: the child’s father is “ghostly” and embraced her “without dispit or mock.” The maiden is rejoicing in her condition, and the refrain, “Nowel! nowel! nowel!” tells us that this is a nativity poem. Its use of sacred parody might be compared to the similar treatment of the nativity in *The Second Play of the Shepherds*.

Poems in praise of Christ use the language of the secular love lyric as much as those to Mary. The fact that *Sweet Jesus, King of Bliss* is preserved in the Harley manuscript, in the company of the love songs *Spring* and *Alisoun*, underscores the fact that the same audience might enjoy both genres. The speaker confesses that he is happily in bondage (“How swete beth thy love-bonde”) and begs Jesus to draw him with his “love-cordes.” More poignantly, in the shorter love song, *Jesus, My Sweet Lover*, the speaker identifies with Christ in his suffering on the cross, and asks that His love be fixed as firmly in his heart “As was the sphere into thine herte, / Whon thou soffredest deth for me.” The imagery is almost masochistic, suggesting comparison with Donne’s Holy Sonnet 10, *Batter my Heart, three-personed God*. (Teaching the two together can show students that Donne’s erotic imagery is not so unusual as might appear, but has roots in medieval mysticism).

One final religious lyric takes a different tack, turning from love of Mary or Christ to the repellent subject of death. *Contempt of the World* is an *ubi sunt* poem that shows only passing regret for the worldly pleasures which must be relinquished. The speaker gloats that those who enjoyed wealth and pleasure on earth, “the riche levedies in here bour, / that wereden gold in here tressour,” will suffer eternal damnation:

> Here paradis hy nomen here,  
> And now they liyen in helle ifere;  
> The fuir it brennes evere.

His grim moral to the reader is to suffer pain on earth so as to earn the rewards of heaven. Students are likely to resist this poem, because, in sermon fashion, it urges an ascetic rejection of worldly goods. (See Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages*, [1968]). It poses problems similar to those of Chaucer’s Parson’s Prologue and Retraction to the *Canterbury Tales*, with their ascetic rejection of poetry.
Taught in survey courses covering the Middle Ages through the eighteenth century, Middle English lyrics can be used to illustrate major shifts in the attitudes of the English with regard to the status of women, love, and religion. One approach would be to trace male-voiced love poems from the anonymous Middle English lyrics through Dafydd, Shakespeare, Donne, and Marvell. A study of woman’s songs comparing Wulf and Eadwacer and The Wife’s Lament with poems in Middle English would demonstrate the uniqueness of the first two as Old English love poems in a woman’s voice, and contrast their dignity with the banality of the Middle English pregnancy laments. Furthermore, the difference between such anonymous women’s songs and poems actually written by women—Mary Wroth, Aphra Behn, and Anne Finch, for instance—would be promising to explore. In addition, one might read pairs of male and female-voiced lyrics in Middle English—such as My lefe is faren in a londe and Alisoun with A Forsaken Maid’s Lament and The Wily Clerk—as backdrop to a famous matched pair, written by two men: Marlowe’s Passionate Shepherd to His Love and Raleigh’s Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd.

Insight into attitudes toward sex and word play in two different periods can be gained from comparing two double-entendre poems: the Old English “Onion/Penis” riddle, and the Middle English I have a Noble Cock.

Religious poetry has a much longer tradition in English than love poetry, and it too has seen historical change. Since the worship of Mary developed only in the twelfth century and waned after the Reformation, the Marian lyrics included in this volume are primarily from the Middle English period. Poems devoted to Christ, however, have a much longer tradition. The Crucifixion, in particular, is imagined splendidly in The Dream of the Rood, Now Goeth Sun under Wood, Dunbar’s Donne is a Battell, and Donne’s Holy Sonnet 9 (What if this present were the world’s last night?), all in ways reflective of their time.

The Tale of Taliesin

The Tale of Taliesin is a passage from Elis Grufydd’s world chronicle. Written in the mid-sixteenth century, the text translated here is from a seventeenth-century manuscript in the National Library of Wales, but it was still being copied in the eighteenth century. One part of the tale’s fascination is the way it invites us to rethink divisions in the cultural history of the British Isles that have largely been constructed from a specifically English perspective. In the setting of King Maelgwn’s court, in the concept of the poet, and a range of mythic references, the tale reaches back to Celtic traditions thriving before the arrival of the Angles and Saxons. The forms of the poems continue practices that are pre-Norman. And yet the story was being retold with obvious relish (if with some rationalist doubt) long into the Early Modern era. It enacts the extraordinary continuity of texts and traditions in Wales, which has telling parallels in Ireland. The tradition is not ossified or archaic, though. Grufydd brings his Taliesin very much into his own time, not least by repeated assertions of a written source—a gesture by which he creates a useful distance from any narrative elements that challenge his sense of reason or orthodoxy.
Celtic Myth and Tradition  The figure of Gwion Bach/Taliesin comes from very early Welsh tradition, and reflects Celtic notions of poets as inheritors of priestly functions and keepers both of ethnic history and arcane mysteries. This can be compared to the prophetic poets Fergus and Feidelm in The Táin. As Patrick Ford writes, “The practice of poetry among the Celts had explicitly magical overtones, and the poet was understood to have supernatural and divinatory powers.” (Ford provides a fine survey of the background of Celtic belief and the role of priest-poets, in the introduction to his edition, Ystoria Taliesin [1992].) As holder of his culture’s whole learning and prophet of its future, the poet transcends time and place, and is heir or reincarnation of other great prophet-poets such as Merlin. Taliesin thus knows simultaneous events in other places (like Elphin’s imprisonment), and when he reveals himself to King Maelgwn, he claims to have been present from the Creation onward and links himself not just to poets but also to angels.

Taliesin’s magical birth, from a womb-like leather basket carried by the sea, is similar to stories of Merlin. His reincarnation from Gwion Bach draws upon a series of images of magical knowledge in Celtic myth: the salmon of wisdom, the three drops of knowledge, the magical cauldron. Taliesin reincarnates other modes of being as well as other poets: he has been a seed, is reborn through a hen, and comes from the sea in place of salmon. This is a way of literalizing (even allegorizing) the poet’s learning, but also relates to pre-Christian Celtic beliefs in the transmigration of souls. Other aspects of the poet-prophet that emerge in the tale derive from a belief in the magical power of words, which can be exercised but must also be protected by habits of riddling and obscurity. Taliesin’s song looses Elphin’s fetters—just the sort of loosening spell that the gesith wonders about in Bede’s story of Imma. One might compare how Bede moves verbal magic into an explicitly Christian context.

The poet’s power with words has specific social functions. Taliesin sings the origin of the human race, in a performance that invites comparison to the scop’s song of origin in Beowulf, and Bede’s story of Caedmon. His praises of the king are not mere reports; they actually help call royal glory into being. Yet panegyric has a flip side in satire. The poet’s attack can undo the pride of a king or, in this tale, literally silence unworthy competing bards.

Synthesis with Other Myths and Cultures  As imagined in this tale, Taliesin’s reach goes far past the echo of ancient Celtic tradition, and links the Welsh to an extraordinary range of other peoples and cultures. This reproduces within the narrative the synthetic processes by which Welsh culture in particular managed to remain vital across centuries, even under great economic and political pressures. Taliesin operates in an explicitly polylingual culture, calling on poets and heralds to work in Latin, French, Welsh, and English. He expands the learning he demands of the bard to encompass the traditions that have by now infiltrated Welsh culture. His claim to knowledge beyond the bounds of place and time carefully enfolds the Christian universe and its quasi-magical figures (John the Prophet, the Cherubim), and classical heroes like Alexander the Great. His song of human origins links the Welsh to the survivors of Troy, an idea that had spread widely through the influence of another Welshman, Geoffrey of Monmouth.
Current Issues of Court Life and Money  For all his enactment of magic and learning, Grufydd's Taliesin moves in a court full of piquantly realistic detail. Consider his first poem, Elphin's Consolation. Taliesin begins to unwrap his wondrous powers, but is careful too to promise Elphin "Riches better than three score." The frame of the whole tale is Elphin's impoverishment by court life and being cut off financially by his father, a provincial squire. The situation is like that in Marie de France's Lanval. (Other developments—the return to court favor through wealth, the dangerous boast, magical protection—can also be compared to Lanval.) The salmon weir later links to the magical salmon of Celtic myth, but enters here strictly as an issue of economics, supporting Elphin's aristocratic ambition at court. Does the praise of Maelgwn by his courtiers derive from the world of panegyric, or is it empty flattery? Elphin's certainty that the finger with his ring is not his wife's borrows from very old tales, but is also a careful articulation of class as reflected in even the smallest part of the body. Finally, Taliesin silences the king's bards at just the moment when they present themselves for largess, and thus takes away their financial reward too.

Dafydd ap Gwilym

Writing in Welsh from the Celtic Fringe of the British Isles, Dafydd ap Gwilym is fellow to William Dunbar and Robert Henryson, although they wrote in the Northern English dialect of Middle Scots. He also looks back to the tradition of the early Welsh poet Taliesin, represented in the fictional Tale of Taliesin from Elis Grufydd's world chronicle. In this, Dafydd is heir to an exalted, almost sacred concept of the role of the poet. (See Patrick Sims-Williams, "Dafydd ap Gwilym and Celtic Literature," Medieval Literature: The European Inheritance, ed. Boris Ford, [1983], 313.) Dafydd in fact domesticates this tradition, retaining its exacting standards of craftsmanship, but substituting an ironic poetic persona for the bardic voice. For while Taliesin was a figure from the oral past, Dafydd was formed by a highly literate European lyric tradition. (See Helen Fulton, Dafydd ap Gwilym and the European Context, [1989].) Strangely enough, the poet to whom Dafydd is most often compared, his near-contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer, is not an influence at all, nor is Middle English poetry in general. Resemblances are due primarily to shared European influences.

Lyric genres from the continental European tradition provided Dafydd with models to play with and to personalize through reference to his own life. For instance, in Aubade, he takes the traditional dawn song, in which the lovers lament parting, and invests humor into it with the man's indifference to getting caught. After spending the night with his lover Gwen, he observes that

Something started going wrong,
The edge of dawn’s despotic veil
Showed at the eastern window-pale
And there it was, the morning light!
Gwen was seized with a fearful fright,
Became an apparition, cried
“Get up, go now with God, go hide!

His contribution to the aubade is his use of elaborate poetic comparisons known in Welsh as dyfalu, such as “dawn’s despotic veil.” These resemble John Donne’s poetic conceits, such as his figuring the sun as an old busybody in The Sun Rising, one of the finest aubades in English. For more on this form, see Jonathan Saville, The Medieval Erotic Alba: Structure as Meaning, (1972).

Dafydd rings changes on other lyric genres as well. In Winter, he inverts the reverdie, or spring poem, investing it with local significance:

Across North Wales
The snowflakes wander,
A swarm of white bees.

And in The Ruin, he gives personal meaning to the ubi sunt poem with the memory of a tryst. Looking at an abandoned house, the speaker says,

Nothing but a hovel now
Between moorland and meadow,
Once the owners saw in you
A comely cottage, bright, new.

Even while making an elegiac observation about the transience of life, he stops to recall moments of love:

Life is illusion and grief;
A tile whirls off, as a leaf
Or a lath goes sailing, high
In the keening of kite-kill cry.
Could it be, our couch once stood
Sturdily under that wood?

The topos of the ruin has a long tradition in Celtic, as well as Old and Middle English poetry; students might want to contrast Dafydd’s palpable love of this world with the asceticism in the Old English The Wanderer.

The Girls of Llanbadarn personalizes not so much a genre as a topos from Roman literature that persists in later Christian European poetry—the pursuit of young women in a public place. Ovid in his Art of Love suggests the Roman theater as a promising locale; for Dafydd it is his local church in Llanbadarn, a town outside Aberystwyth:

Every single Sunday, I,
Llanbadarn can testify,
Go to church and take my stand
With my plumed hat in my hand,
Make my reverence to the altar,
Find the right page in my psalter,
Turn my back on holy God,
Face the girls, and wink, and nod.

In contrast to some of his boasting poems, this one confesses that his only reward is
to be laughed at. His lack of guilt about pursuing love in church is striking; on the
whole, Dafydd is less moralistic than Dunbar and Henryson, and even than Chaucer.

Dafydd’s personal touch is also seen in One Saving Place, which describes his
search through Wales to find his beloved Morvith:

There at last I made the bed
For my Morvith, my moon-maid,
Underneath the dark leaf-cloak
Woven by saplings of an oak.

The Morvith (Morfudd) who is frequently named in his love poems was a real
woman; her husband, “the little hunchback” mentioned in a document of the
time, is the “Hateful Husband” in the poem of that name (Sims-Williams, 306).
Though Dafydd excoriates him in terms he could have borrowed from Ovid, he
places him in a contemporary Welsh setting. The husband is a spoilsport, who
fails to respond to love or to the pleasures of spring:

I know he hates play:
The greenwood in May,
The birds’ roundelay
Are not for him.
The cuckoo, I know,
He’d never allow
To sing on his bough,
Light on his limb.

Dafydd alludes to the cuckoo, traditional harbinger of spring (see the Middle
English Cuckoo song, Sumer is icumen in), to refer to his own adulterous situation.

Finally, in the Tale of a Wayside Inn, Dafydd experiments with a narrative genre,
the fabliau. He departs from the usual format, however, in telling the story in the
first person, and thus creating a comic persona for himself. He describes an ill-
fated assignation in the inn, where instead of the young woman, he finds three
Englishmen in the bedroom:

For, by some outrageous miss,
What I got was not a kiss,
But a stubble-whiskered cheek
And a triple whiskey-reek,
Not one Englishman, but three,
(What a Holy Trinity!)
Diccon, ‘Enry, Jerk-off Jack,
Each one pillowed on his pack.

As he clumsily makes his retreat, he prays to Christ to save him from harm, showing little concern for the sinful intent of his enterprise:

So I clasped my crucifix,
Jesu, Jesu, Jesu dear,
Don't let people catch me here!

Though he expresses regret that he had “only God's” love that night, the speaker humorously prays that He will help “mend my wicked ways.”

Teaching Dafydd in English translation, while it entails a loss, has the advantage of allowing students to sample his oeuvre without linguistic hurdles. He can easily be presented in the contexts mentioned above, particularly those focusing on Celtic background and literary genre. Though he wrote in the fourteenth century, Dafydd has certain resemblances to Elizabethan and seventeenth-century English poets, who had a more developed sense of poetic identity than most Middle English ones. His literary self-consciousness may have been sharpened by the Welsh treatise on poetry of Father Einion, which in some ways resembles Renaissance English arts of poetry (Sims-Williams, 307). In a course with an emphasis on form, Dafydd’s dyfalu can be compared with Donne’s conceits and the metaphors in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

William Dunbar

Like the Scottish Henryson and the Welsh Dafydd ap Gwilym, Dunbar worked in the so-called Celtic Fringe, the northern and western edges of the British Isles which were less Anglicized than other parts. Unlike Dafydd, however, both Dunbar and Henryson wrote in a language—Middle Scots—which was not Celtic, but a northern dialect of Middle English. (It has been suggested that Gaelic was an influence on Middle Scots, but this has not been proven, and the Scots poets of the time refer to their language as “Inglis” so as to distinguish it from Gaelic.) While students often find Dunbar’s language difficult, his poetry is worth teaching in the original, for it allows them to experience his virtuoso style first-hand. On our audio CD, Patrick Deer gives a riotous rendition of In Secret Place This Hyndir Nycht. Dunbar has a colloquial Middle Scots diction which he augments with ornamental alliteration, with a musical and often onomatopoeic effect. (For a helpful analysis of Dunbar’s poetics, see Denton Fox, “The Scottish Chaucerians,” Chaucer and Chaucerians, ed. D. S. Brewer, [1967], 179–87.)

In the Lament for the Makers, Dunbar takes the traditional genre of complaint on the transience of earthly things and infuses it with a new sense of self-con-
sciousness about poetic identity. After speaking about Death’s implacability to people in general—he spares “no lord for his piscence, / na clerk for his intelligence”—he moves on to his primary subject, poets:

I se that makaris among the laif
Playis heir ther pageant, syne gois to graif;
Sparit is nocht ther faculte:
Timor mortis conturbat me.

He balances the conventional warning against pride typical of the ubi sunt poem with a sense of affection for the poets he admires, past and present. First on the list is “the noble Chaucer of makaris flour,” whom he and the other Scottish Chaucerians revered for bringing continental rhetorical sophistication into English poetry.

In addition to three southern English poets (Lydgate and Gower as well as Chaucer), Dunbar pays homage to his northern English and Middle Scots precursors, many of them unknown to us today. Some of these, like the Clerk of Tranent, author of the Anteris of Gaweane, may have written in the alliterative style which flourished in the north of England and in Scotland long after it had died out in the south, and in which Dunbar proved himself a master, with his bawdy tour de force, the Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo. (See Thorlac Turville-Petre, The Alliterative Revival, [1977], 115–21.) Dunbar’s inclusion of twenty northern and Scottish poets suggests a self-conscious regional, and even national pride, especially in the case of the two authors of epics recounting resistance against England, John Barbour (the Bruce, ca. 1376) and Blind Harry (W Wallace, ca. 1475).

If the Latin refrain of Lament for the Makers, (Timor mortis conturbat me), from the Office of the Dead, underscores the somber message of the poem, that of Done is a Battell, (Surrexit dominus de sepulchro), from the liturgy for Easter morning, conveys a contrasting mood of joy. It draws from the account in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus of the harrowing of hell—Christ’s freeing of the Old Testament souls to go to heaven—in portraying a triumphant Christ as military hero victorious over Satan. The ornamental alliteration recalls heroic poetry in the alliterative tradition, from The Dream of the Rood, to the fourteenth-century Alliterative Morte Arthure, to Piers Plowman B-text passus 18, with its account of Christ as a knight jousting against Satan for human souls:

Dungin is the deidly dragon Lucifer,
The crewall serpent with the mortall stang,
The auld kene tegir with his teith on char.

One strategy for teaching religious lyrics is to group them thematically and chronologically, matching a series of ubi sunt poems like The Wanderer, Contempt of the World, Dunbar’s The Lament for the Makers, and Dafydd’s The Ruin, with a series on the Crucifixion and Resurrection, like The Dream of the Rood, Done is a Battell, and metaphysical poems from the Renaissance (like Donne’s Holy Sonnets 6 and 9 and Herbert’s Easter).
Proving Dunbar’s extraordinary range of genres and modes, *In Secreit Place* this Hyndir Nycht takes a 180-degree turn from the preceding two poems, being a bawdy satire in the manner of Chaucer’s fabliaux. One suspects that he found Chaucer as much an influence in satire and parody as in the more respectable area of “rhetoric” that he explicitly acknowledges. In this poem Dunbar adapts to his own purposes continental lyric genres which Chaucer had already naturalized. He parodies the chanson d’aventure, in which the speaker overhears a lament or a conversation between two lovers, opening in courtly fashion with the man complaining about the woman’s aloofness: “I can of you get confort nane / how lang will you with danger dell?” It soon becomes clear from the lover’s ugly appearance, his explicit language (her lovely white neck makes his “quhillieillie” rise), and the woman’s willingness, that they are not courtly at all. We are reminded of Nicholas and Alison in Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, a more attractive, but equally speedy, couple. (Dunbar’s woman’s giggle—“Tehe”—suggests that there may have been actual influence from the tale.)

In addition to the chanson d’aventure, *In Secreit Place* parodies the genre of woman’s song within the dialogue. In analyzing Dunbar’s more extensive account of woman’s voice in the *Tua Marriit Wemen and the Wedo*, Maureen Fries argues that Dunbar’s treatment of sexually willing or voracious women was antifeminist, used for the purposes of satire (“The ‘Other’ Voice: Woman’s Song, its Satire, and its Transcendence in Late Medieval British Literature,” *Vox Feminae: Studies in Medieval Women’s Song*, ed. John F. Plummer, [1981], 164).

**Robert Henryson**

Robene and Makyne

Henryson earns his reputation as a “Scottish Chaucerian” in *Robene and Makyne* by parodying courtly modes and genres. The discussion of courtly love sentiments by rustics resembles the use of courtly language by chickens in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale (a poem to which Henryson was indebted in his adaptation of the Aesopian Fable, *The Cock and the Fox*). When Makyne tries to teach Robene the “ABCs” of love, she echoes the conventional attributes of the courtly lover in Pertelote’s instructions to her henpecked husband Chauntecleer as to what women want:

Be heynd, courtas and fair of feir,
Wyse, hardy and fre;
So that no denger do the deir,
Quhat dule in derr thow dre, . . .
Be patient and previe.

This wording also recalls Chaucer’s use of courtly language for parodic purposes in the Miller’s Tale. The adjectives “heyn” (gentle) and “previe” (discreet) echo the epithets applied in that work to Nicholas as a courtly lover, which are made humorous by the speed of his courtship. And Makyne’s claim that she will die if
she doesn’t gain Robene’s love—“Dowtless but dreid I de”—echoes Nicholas’s protestation to Alison.

In addition to courtly language generally, Robene and Makyne parodies a number of lyric genres. As in Dunbar’s In Secret Place this Hyndir Nycht, it follows the pattern of the chanson d’aventure in which the narrator recounts a conversation overheard between two lovers. More significantly, it recasts the genre of pastourelle, in which a man of higher status or education tries to seduce a shepherdess, with or without success. The effects are amusing here, first because the genders are reversed in the seduction, with Makyne pursuing the bashful and uncomprehending shepherd Robene, and second because the pastourelle, well represented in Goliardic and troubadour poetry, is given a contemporary and local twist through allusions to the British wool industry. When Makyne makes her suggestion, Robene is too worried that his sheep will wander off to respond: “Peraventure my scheip ma gang besyd / quhill we haif liggit full neir.” In an update of Andreas Capellanus’s twelfth-century observation that love is unsuited to peasants because they lack leisure, Henryson seems to be poking fun at the work ethic of his middle-class audience. Students might want to compare this treatment with the satirical reflection of the sheep-raising economy in The Second Play of the Shepherds, where the shepherds visiting the infant Christ are rendered in contemporary fifteenth-century English terms.

Finally, Makyne’s strong voice in the dialogue suggests affinities with the genre of woman’s song. But although students may be drawn to her portrayal as a strong woman who boldly offers her love and her virginity (“and thow sall haif my hairet all hail, / ek and my madinheid”), they should consider that Henryson may actually be antifeminist, satirizing Makyne in the manner of poems like The Abuse of Women and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Prologue. (See Maureen Fries in Vox Feminae, 164.)

In addition to the poems mentioned above, Robene and Makyne can be taught with a famous matched pair highly indebted to the pastourelle tradition, Marlowe’s Passionate Shepherd to his Love, and Raleigh’s Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd. Further, Henryson’s depiction of a bashful male shrinking from a sexually forward woman can be contrasted with a woman poet’s depiction of a similar topic, Aphra Behn’s The Disappointment. This could be an occasion for discussing the issue of woman’s voice in male- and female-authored poetry.

**Late Medieval Allegory**

Despite its immense popularity in the Middle Ages, allegory was generally held in low regard from the Romantic period into the twentieth century. Its appeal has revived somewhat, however, under the influence of modernists like Joyce and Kafka, and more recently, of magic realists like Marquez, Morrison, and Rushdie, all of whose work at times calls for an allegorical interpretation. Those students coming to late medieval allegory after experience with such writers might be more receptive to the mode than their fellows in the past. Nonetheless, allegory can be hard to grasp, even the simplest kind, personification allegory. Usually defined as “ex-
tended metaphor,” it can also be explained as a narrative whose meaning consistently operates on a level other than the literal.

The purpose of allegory in the later Middle Ages was generally to make abstract concepts concrete and therefore understandable to a wide audience. It employed a number of recurrent images to convey spiritual truths, among them the journey, the interior battle, and the building. These tropes have a long literary tradition: Prudentius’ fourth-century *Psychomachia*, which conveyed the battle between personified vices and virtues in epic terms, Fulgentius’ sixth-century commentary on the *Aeneid*, which allegorized the poem as a spiritual journey, and Bishop Grosseteste’s thirteenth-century *Chasteau d’Amour*, which popularized the metaphor of the besieged castle as a figure for assailed virtue. Another prominent trope, the female guide who enlightens the narrator, goes back at least to Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* in the sixth-century.

The three works in this section make use of many of the tropes mentioned above—the journey, the spiritual struggle, the building, and the female guide. Lydgate’s *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* combines all four, as the pilgrim, journeying to the New Jerusalem, is assailed by the Seven Deadly Sins, and defended and instructed by the lady Grace Dieu. The overall effect is rather wooden, however, giving some indication of the features that have given allegory a bad name. The morality play *Mankind*, in contrast, adapts the spiritual struggle in a much more dynamic way, as the colorful vices Mischief, Nowadays, New Guise, and Nought contend with the Priest Mercy for the eponymous hero’s soul. Finally, Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* uses three female guides—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—to comfort the heroine in her despair over the negative way that women have been portrayed in classical and Christian traditions, and to urge her to construct an allegorical building—a walled city—in their honor.

A great deal of work has been published on medieval allegory, some of it extending to the Early Modern period. Rosamond Tuve’s classic *Allegorical Imagery: Some Medieval Books and Their Posterity* (1966) is exhaustive. It is strong on the late antique and medieval French traditions, including such allegories as Guillaume Deguileville’s *Pélerinage de la vie humaine* (the source of Lydgate’s *Pilgrimage*) and *Le Roman de la rose*, even though her purpose is to show the influence of such works on Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Carolynn Van Dyke offers a clear overview of allegory, paying particular attention to the popular tradition, with chapters on the morality play (including *Mankind*) and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*; she too ends with the *Faerie Queene* (*The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory* [1985]). Finally, Maureen Quilligan, in *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité des Dames* (1991), while touching on the earlier tradition of medieval allegory, is far more theoretical than the other two, providing a nuanced feminist analysis of Christine’s work.

The texts in this section, then, look both backward and forward, to the medieval and Early Modern periods, having affinities with both *Piers Plowman* and the *Faerie Queene*. They thus lend themselves to being taught in either a Middle English literature course or in the first half of a two-semester survey of British literature.
John Lydgate
from Pilgrimage of the Life of Man

By contrast with the troubled and fractious debates about vernacular religious texts and translations during his time, Lydgate’s texts mostly present an unruffled, morally conservative surface. Lydgate calmly (if, one wonders sometimes, swiftly) translates the sturdy allegorical imagery of pilgrimage, mirror, heavenly city, and ship. A good bit of this will be invoked (in some ways more radically) by Christine de Pizan. The failures that threaten the ship of religion, in this selection, are conservative: failures to observe the old ways, especially the rituals of the church; young folk “Keep not the observances / That were made by folks old...” (p. 600, ll. 36–37).

At the same time, Lydgate’s work is also a vital part of the complex growth of Middle English as a dominant force in the cultural life of England. His work is not as crucial, perhaps, as the Wycliffite translation of the Bible, but Lydgate nonetheless brought a tremendous amount of medieval Continental culture, both Latin and French, to English readership. He was very much on the side of the central authorities, but he played an important role in the making of English as both a cultural and political force. Lydgate sees himself as an heir, perhaps the heir, to Chaucer, but he tames Chaucer a good bit, and makes the Chaucerian legacy more palatable to his nervous Lancastrian patrons.

Mankind

Everyman, the twentieth century’s favorite morality play, is in fact not the most typically medieval; it is too reserved, psychological, and focused on the individual hero. Much more typical is Mankind, a farcical comedy with allegorical figures contesting for the hero’s soul. While its difficult language and scatological subject matter makes it a challenge to teach, the effort is worth it, especially in a course on medieval English literature in which students have already developed their Middle English skills by reading Chaucer. Its language is a mixture of pompous Latinate English (and Latin) and an irreverent colloquial English that undercuts and parodies it. The language, in fact, is essential to the play’s meaning, serving to focus the conflict between the Christian truth expressed by the self-righteous priest Mercy and the human carnality expressed by vice figures: Mischief, the three characters representing the world (Nowadays, New-Guise, and Nought), and the devil Titivillus.

Because of its earthy humor and puncturing of authority, Mankind is likely to have a strong appeal to students. The play opens with Mercy’s pedantic and abstract 44-line sermon, first surveying man’s fall and Christ’s redemption, and then urging the audience to mend their ways:

O soverence, I biseche yow your condicions to rectifie,
Ande with humilite and reverence to have a remocioun
To this blissye prince that owr nature doth glorifie,
That ye may be participable of His Retribucion. (11.13–16).
Mercy is eventually interrupted by Mischief, however, who scorns his “predica-
cion,” and is soon joined by New-Guise, Nowadays, and Nought, who begin to en-
gage in slapstick comedy. When Mercy proudly announces “‘Mercy’ is my name by
denominacion./ I conseive ye have but a lyttl favour in my communicacion,” New-
Guise replies, “yowr body is full of Englisch Laten!” (ll.122–24). To Nowadays’ sud-
den interruption, New-Guise snaps, “Osculare fundamentum!” [kiss my ass] (l.142), in
a parody of Mercy’s Latinate speech. The play is full of this sort of irreverent and scat-
ological word play; it moves beyond the merely verbal, however, when a character ap-
parently defecates on stage (ll.782–86). Most critics see the low comedy as challeng-
ing Church authority ultimately to affirm it. Students could be reminded of the
similar burlesque elements in Chaucer’s Miller’s Tale, and asked how they function
in a Christian morality play as opposed to in a fabliau.

*Mankind*’s use of offensive language and behavior to make a serious point is in-
debted to medieval sermon technique, which used grotesque realism in a way that
often seems indecorous to modern readers. Preachers used concrete examples,
such as the disgusting “Glutton” confessing his sins in *Piers Plowman*, to illustrate
abstract moral principles to an unlettered audience, and the seduction of *Mankind*
by New-Guise, Nowadays, and Nought can be seen as illustrating Mercy’s opening
warning against “thingys transitorye” (l.30). (For the influence of sermon tech-
nique in it, see Michael R. Kelley, *Flamboyant Drama: A Study of the Castle of
Perseverance, Mankind, and Wisdom* [1979]).

Most critics agree that by the end of *Mankind* the hierarchy that has been in-
verted is restored, and Mercy has the last word: “Your body is your enemy. Let him
not have his will!” (l. 897; see, for instance, Carolynn Van Dyke, *The Fiction of
Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory* [1985]). The audience,
after having been seduced by the antics of the vice figures, is, predictably, made to
realize their error. Some commentators, however, have paid special attention to
the subversive message within the play’s orthodox frame, looking at the social con-
ditions referred to in the play. Victor I. Scherb has discussed *Mankind*’s profession
as a farmer as not only a timeless reminder of the laboring Adam, but a contem-
porary social reference, reflecting labor unrest in East Anglia. While for some
members of the audience he might have a positive spiritual meaning, recalling the
peasant hero *Piers Plowman*, for others he might be an alarming specter of rebel-
lion (*Staging Faith: East Anglian Drama in the Later Middle Ages* [2001]). While
Scherb asserts that the author was fundamentally conservative, giving temporary
rein to license while still enclosing it within Mercy’s sermon, he suggests that the
play might not be able to contain the subversive elements on any given perfor-
ance. Even more skeptical of the play’s ability to contain social disruption is John
Watkins, who sees *Mankind*’s association of the vices with novelty—a distinct de-
parture from the typical morality play—as a reflection of anxiety about new oppor-
tunities for social mobility (“The Allegorical Theatre: Moralities, Interludes, and
Protestant Drama,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* [1999]).

Although allegory as a mode, with its focus on abstract truths supporting the
existing social order, tends to be conservative, the nature of *Mankind* is slippery
enough to call such conservatism into question. Students might be asked to con-
sider the normative or subversive message of the other allegorical readings included in the anthology. In the section devoted to Late Medieval Allegory, Lydgate’s *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* is extremely conservative, while Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* supports the feudal status quo at the same time that it criticizes patriarchy. The earlier section on “*Piers Plowman* in Its Time” shows that Langland’s allegorical criticism of specific social abuses, though conservative, was misunderstood by many of his contemporary readers.

*Mankind* offers important insights into the development of the Elizabethan theater. David M. Bevington argues that it was the first example of professional drama in England, as illustrated by the characters’ taking up a collection from the audience (lI.457–59; *From Mankind to Marlowe* [1962]). Furthermore, it seems to have had a socially mixed audience similar to Shakespeare’s over a century later, as reflected in Mercy’s address to both “ye soverens that sitt and ye brothern that stonde right uppe” (l.29). The play’s loose structure and scatological language also illustrate the pre-Shakespearean dramatic tradition that observed neither Aristotelian unities nor classical levels of style. It would be useful to teach *Mankind* with a number of Elizabethan plays, starting with Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus*, whose Mephistophilis is descended from Titivillus, and which became tragedy upon dropping the morality play’s happy ending. Shakespeare’s plays could be selected for a variety of purposes. The buffoonery of the clowns and fools in his tragedies can be traced to *Mankind*’s vice figures, as can the evil of Iago, while Richard III can be seen as the vice figure merged with its human protagonist. There are also significant parallels between the foregrounding of the theater in *Mankind* and Shakespeare’s self-conscious depictions of it, whether in the performance of Bottom and his company in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Hamlet’s negotiation with the traveling players. Finally, a course that used *Mankind*, *Dr. Faustus*, and some Shakespeare plays to explore the development of Elizabethan drama might include Ben Jonson’s *Alchemist* as an example of the contrasting classical tradition.

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**Christine de Pizan**

from *Book of the City of Ladies*

First, the hard part: Brian Anslay’s English is a challenge to the reader, just like the complex, Latin-influenced syntax of Christine de Pizan’s French original. We have modernized spelling, added a good bit of punctuation, and glossed generously. Students seem to have an easier time if they read out loud; the syntax emerges more clearly. Most find it’s worth the effort, because Christine provides such an intriguing (if finally ambivalent) critique of textual misogyny. We think it’s also worth it because Brian Anslay provides a good example of Early Modern English prose, and because his translation represents the kind of bridges that link the medieval and Early Modern eras. (If you want to move more quickly, there is a readable modern English translation by Earl Jeffrey Richards.)

Then the more fun part: Christine’s narrative suggests the ways that the most traditional allegorical vision can be dramatic, effective, truly innovative in its ar-
gument. Christine does this by dramatizing the scene so well, with telling details of gesture like leaning on the arm of her chair, the movement of her head, and the initially fearful hesitancy of her speech, the laughter of the ladies in response. The allegorical lady as wise counselor goes back at least to Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* (as does the imagery of blindness and renewed sight), but Christine makes her ladies vivid in the clear-headed logic they practice on her. And the building of a symbolic city is equally traditional, but Christine’s city—a defensive place for women of virtue, where they can respect themselves and create their own literary heritage—is very new.

At the heart of Christine’s argument is a confrontation already dramatically introduced by Chaucer’s Wife of Bath: experience vs. authority. The emotional crisis that sets up the entire vision is the clash between Christine’s direct knowledge of the goodness of most women she knows, and the persistent misogyny she encounters in the books in her library. The deeply “bookish” three ladies who come to her aid suggest three main strategies: Christine should trust her own perceptions; remember that even textual authorities often disagree; and when necessary, ignore the author’s hostile intent and interpret texts in ways favorable to women.

Despite these traditional allegorical structures, Christine makes the vision very personal. There is a sense of special election in the ladies’ choice of her to carry out their work. At the same time, Christine finds herself repeatedly tugged into tropes and comparisons with male action. Sometimes this is glorious, as when her work as a mason is compared to God building paradise, the New Jerusalem. At other times, it is more troubling. In her initial self-loathing, Christine wishes she had been born a man. Even as builder of a city for ladies, she is compared to an armed chivalric champion and defender of maligned women.

This sense that heroic roles end up being male (or cross-gendered) is interesting to compare, again, to the Wife of Bath, who similarly finds herself borrowing male rhetorical gestures of boast and aggression. Like the Wife, Christine finds herself talking back to male authority, and reconfiguring it to new ends, more favorable to her gender. Both women willfully choose to read and interpret selectively—to “translate” male-dominated traditions to new ends. And though they occupy very different ends of a wide spectrum, Christine and the Alison of Bath are both parts of a new world of the urban, bourgeois business woman who must make her own way in the world, especially when widowed.

Given all this innovation at the intellectual level, it is also important to emphasize that Christine’s social positions seem distinctly conservative. Her city will be ruled by the Virgin Mary, a figure of grace and dignity, but also of meek obedience to male will. Christine ends her work by turning to wives, virgins, and widows. She tells wives to suffer their subjection to their husbands, since freedom can lead to sin. Virgins should protect their chastity, which seems very prone to masculine temptation. Widows should be meek. In that regard, Christine would surely get her own backtalk from the Wife of Bath.