CHAUCER, GOWER AND THE INVENTION OF HISTORY

A Thesis in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

Late fourteenth-century English writers of history and poetry understood rhetorical invention in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, as a formalized process for creating and organizing written discourse, invention was the central principle for medieval thinking about textual composition. On the other hand, invention was a kind of historical act in its own right, a “deed” constitutive of history. Invention offered a procedure by which particular chroniclers shaped their texts and, through them, their understanding of past events. Invention became a part of the topical material chroniclers treated as their subject matter, and it presented a historical problem as serious as any other political or social issue. For English poets, invention likewise offered a structural framework for creating imaginative discourse. The creative potential of understanding invention at once as a textual and historical concept, though, receives its fullest treatment in the poetic exchanges of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, two late-century English writers who take historical invention itself as a topic for narrative poetry. They do so by sharing historical topics in their inventions and by engaging each other’s inventions in their poetry. Gower’s poetry presents a dominant authorial persona whose poetics impose inventional control over the disparate narratives of history. Gower attempts to refigure his literary opus as a series of poetic res gestae, transforming poetic works into events constitutive of English history in order to rejuvenate English culture. Chaucer’s later poetry critiques Gower’s poetics both directly and indirectly, destabilizing Gower’s model without offering a suitable replacement. Chaucer suggests the futility of poetry as a means of holistically rejuvenating supposed cultural decay, and he rejects Gower’s construction of a dominating authorial persona. The texts of these chroniclers and poets
help demonstrate how invention shaped simultaneously a way of understanding the past and an emergent English poetic tradition.
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Introduction

Invention as a Historical Concept

Late fourteenth-century English writers of history and poetry understood rhetorical invention in two distinct but related ways. On the one hand, as a formalized process for creating and organizing written discourse, invention was the central principle for medieval thinking about textual composition. On the other hand, invention was a kind of historical act in its own right, a “deed” constitutive of history. Invention offered a procedure by which particular chroniclers shaped their texts and, through them, their understanding of past events. For English poets, invention likewise offered a structural framework for creating imaginative discourse. The creative potential of understanding invention at once as a textual and historical concept, though, receives its fullest treatment in the poetic exchanges of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, two late-century English writers who take historical invention itself as a topic for narrative poetry. They do so by sharing historical topics in their inventions and by engaging each other’s inventions in their poetry. Gower and Chaucer, however, offer competing versions of the concept we might term the “invention of history.” The differences reveal a larger dissonance between these poets’ formulations of the purpose of poetry in England at the end of the century.

By “invention of history” I refer to the late fourteenth-century understanding of inventio as both a meta-textual process of composition and as a historical event to be understood in its own right. This dual formulation resonates with some of the more common understandings of invention with regard to historical writing. First, the invention
of history refers to the generation of narratives from historical topics, the use of rhetorical procedures and individual imagination to “flesh out,” develop, and reshape res gestae into instructive, illustrative, or aesthetically compelling narratives. So, for example, chroniclers and historians invent history based on res gestae, as when, for example, William of Malmesbury invents the eloquent Latin speech that William the Conqueror delivers to his armies during the invasion of England. In his fourteenth-century chronicle, Henry Knighton invents original poetry and inserts it into his historical narrative in order to elaborate on the scope and severity of Lollardy in England. Likewise, Chaucer amplifies an event of Roman history by inventing an additional lyric lament voiced by the Carthaginian queen Dido as she imagines her future fame after Aeneas abandons her to sail in search of Latin shores. Chaucer uses the topic of Dido and Aeneas to invent a new literary utterance, producing original poetry that artfully develops and re-imagines a particular historical instance.

Second, the invention of history suggests also an overt effort by a writer to produce a social, political, or spiritual teleology in which the cumulative narration of instructive res gestae forms an overarching sense of historical “truth.” That is, the invention of history refers to the generation of propaganda that rewrites history from the perspective of the winners, however nuanced and complex that propaganda may be. So, for example, monastic chroniclers of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 write from the point of view of those threatened by the rebels’ actions. They invent a vicious mob of rebels from events occurring in London, from the monks’ own moralizations about the third estate, and finally from the fact that the Revolt was ultimately quelled. Gower’s Vox Clamantis invents a version of the Revolt in a related manner, creating an unforgiving allegorical
narrative out of the series of events. The intensive project of Henry Derby’s legitimation as King Henry IV includes literary efforts by both Gower and Chaucer that fold recent political events into a grander narrative of English royal history. Chaucer, in his complaint to his purse, characterizes Henry as “conqueror of Brutes Albyon, / Which that by lyne and free eleccion / Been verray kyng” (22-24), parroting Henry’s own tripartite claims to the throne.¹

Third, the invention of history suggests efforts by writers to question dominant cultural ideologies by deconstructing, refuting, or otherwise complicating accepted historical narratives. The Westminster chronicler, for example, includes two narratives of the Merciless Parliament of 1388, the second of which uses the Abbey’s prerogative to grant sanctuary to wanted criminals as a way of questioning the machinations of the Lords Appellant. Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* invents a Trojan narrative in order to call into question the cultural value of connecting England to the fall of Troy, and the *Knight’s Tale* uses ostensibly historical personages like Theseus to critique fourteenth-century English notions of chivalry and the power structures it supports. Even if such poetic inventions do not directly attack the legitimacy of a historical narrative or a concentration of political power, they do, as much modern criticism has shown, suggest the weaknesses and paradoxes of such histories.

A rubric such as “the invention of history” certainly includes each of these specific categories of historical invention, manifested in both poetic and chronicle productions of the late fourteenth century. Yet in these same texts, the invention of history is not only a formal process for generating narratives out of topical *res gestae* but also a historical topic to be addressed as such in its own right. Chroniclers use invention
to structure narratives of past events, but they also thematize the process of invention, making it constitutive of the materia they treat as their subject matter. These chronicles demonstrate that inventio itself presented a historical problem as serious as any of the political, social, or spiritual issues raised in the treatment of historical events. For Thomas Walsingham and Henry Knighton, for example, the inventional practices of the Lollards were a historical problem that demanded as much attention as heretical theological views. John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer shared this conceptualization of invention and recognized in it a device for defining and presenting their own poetic projects. Gower’s poetry presents an authorial persona whose poetics impose inventional control over the disparate narratives of history. Chaucer critiques Gower’s poetics both directly and indirectly, destabilizing Gower’s model without necessarily suggesting a suitable replacement. The texts of these chroniclers and poets help demonstrate how inventio shaped a way of understanding the past and an emergent English poetic tradition.

The invention of history, then, refers to the self-aware, meta-textual practice by which writers apply the process of poetic invention to historical materials, and by which they take this process as an inventional topic in its own right. An imaginative process, a means of narrative analysis, and ultimately a literary device for articulating authorial goals for poetics—the invention of history uses the narrative characteristics of history as models for inventional action and as the means of imagining poetic productions as constitutive of culture, of fitting poetry into a larger field of historical understanding. The following chapters trace the importance and dynamism of inventio as a topical component of formal chronicle narratives in late fourteenth-century England. They then demonstrate how Gower imagined and attempted to establish his multilingual poetic
corpus as a kind of historical narrative in its own right. Finally, they examine Chaucer’s specific engagement with and critique of Gower’s authoritative model.

**Reading for Invention in Late Medieval English Literature**

Three separate areas of study are important for understanding fully the invention of history in late fourteenth-century England: medieval rhetoric, grammar, and rhetorical poetics; fourteenth-century English chronicle and history writing; and the branch of literary criticism that studies the poetry of Gower and especially Chaucer from a cultural materialist or New Historicist perspective.

While a rich body of scholarship maps the history of medieval rhetoric and grammar, “rhetorical” readings of medieval English literary texts are few and generally taxonomic. Until recently, they tend to focus on locating in medieval poetry the rhetorical tropes and traditions taught in twelfth- and thirteenth-century rhetorics, grammars, and artes poeticae, or they emphasize over late medieval English poetry the rhetorical and grammatical tradition of which that poetry is a part. After J. M. Manly’s 1929 lecture on “Chaucer and the Rhetoricians” pointed out instances of Chaucer’s rhetorical awareness, Robert O. Payne offered the first sustained study of the Chaucer’s rhetorical poetics.² In doing so he refocused study on the rhetorical aspects of English vernacular poetry and demonstrated the importance of not dismissing rhetoric based on taste or critical tradition. For Payne, Chaucer’s achievement in his “good” poetry can be traced to the fusion of his use of rhetorical dispositio with his characteristic authorial irony. Chaucer presents his poetics not as a fixed system of representation or rhetorical arrangement but rather as a series of unsolved problems. Irony and conflict characterize Chaucer’s rewriting of
earlier narratives, Payne argues, and demonstrate Chaucer grounding a poetics in rhetorical *dispositio* and *elocutio*, arrangement and style. Payne, however, emphasizes the disappearance of *inventio* from the regimen of medieval poetics, a viewpoint that until only very recently informed criticism on medieval rhetoric and rhetorical poetics.³

Fifteen years after Payne’s book, Douglas Kelly demonstrated the rhetorical formulation of medieval French poetry.⁴ In his study Kelly maps the similarities between the medieval concepts of *imaginatio* and rhetorical *inventio*, but he focuses on amplification as the key principle of the adaptation of imagination and rhetorical invention in French court poetry. In the same year, James J. Murphy’s collection of essays, a follow-up to his foundational text, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*, on the tripartite structure of medieval rhetorical education, treated Middle English poetry in only two of its six essays on the subject.⁵ Alistair Minnis has demonstrated how the poetry of Chaucer and Gower emerged from the *accessus ad auctores* tradition, and he analyzes the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales* for their late-medieval, English manifestations of literary authorship.⁶ Robert R. Edwards, in his study of *ratio* and invention, argues that rhetorical and poetic treatises were composed with particular audiences in mind, and that any use of these treatises must remember that they do not represent a standard, blanket schematic for interpreting the poetry they prescribe.⁷ Edwards’ analysis of *inventio* in the *artes poeticae* and in English and French poetry offers a nuanced application of preceptive grammars and rhetoric to literary texts, especially with regard to medieval conceptualization of narrative and the treatment of invention as a meta-topic. J. Stephen Russell’s study of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *trivium* also offers a sustained engagement, especially with regard to the *Man of Law’s*
Tale, but its focus ultimately turns to Chaucer’s interest in logic, dialectic, and
grammar—especially the significance of an Aristotelian method of categorization—rather
than rhetoric or invention. While it does not treat specifically the poetry of Chaucer and
Gower, Mary Carruthers’s work on medieval conceptualizations of artificial memory and
habits of thought is exceptionally useful in showing how the nature of memory and the
processes of thinking are, at their heart, rhetorical and invention in nature. Indeed, as
Carruthers shows, even the orator’s art of memory was really the art of invention.

Particularly influential in tracing how medieval rhetoric recaptured the praxis of
its Roman ancestry, and furthermore how this process culminates in the poetry of
Chaucer and Gower, is the magisterial work of Rita Copeland, who provides correlative
models for the interpretation of late medieval English poetry in rhetorical and
grammatical terms. Copeland traces the emergence of English literary practice out of
the Augustinian exegetical tradition, and she demonstrates clearly how rhetorical,
grammatical, and exegetical thought informed the poetics of Chaucer and Gower.
Copeland’s work is vital for showing clearly how grammar and rhetoric were folded into
one another in the medieval tradition so that the act of hermeneutic interpretation became
in fact the act of invention. She shows how Chaucer and Gower use this principle of
hermeneutic invention as a means of legitimating English vernacular discourse over Latin
auctores—essentially by interpreting itself in lieu of the auctores—in order to invent text.
Any subsequent study of invention or rhetorical poetics is deeply indebted to Copeland’s
work. My own study moves a step further, demonstrating how the “action” of translation-
become-invention was also a res of historical significance. Moreover, my study shows
how Chaucer’s depiction of the invention of history is in large part a response to Gower’s
conceptualization of the process.\textsuperscript{11}

The rhetorical investigation of medieval poetry has also focused on the political and the politics of culture, both particular instances of the medieval transformation of rhetorical praxis. Ann W. Astell has recently mapped out how rhetorical and, in particular, invention, structures in late medieval English writing allow for the construction of political allegories that would have resonated with specific audiences.\textsuperscript{12} Helen Barr likewise traces the rhetorical manipulation of available late medieval discourses in order to show how language, social structures, and social behavior construct one another.\textsuperscript{13} Emily Steiner’s recent work charting the relationship between legal rhetoric, “documentary culture,” and poetry in late medieval England demonstrates how legal texts helped constitute a vocabulary for thinking about both “poetic form and cultural practice.”\textsuperscript{14} Steiner shows that charters were particularly important to this process, as “the very language of charters can be interpreted as the rhetorical transformation of will into act.”\textsuperscript{15} “Documentary culture” for Steiner links material and textual forms, that is the document itself and its internal rhetoric, to individual subjectivity, since they embody will and deal in ethical behavior.

Two recent collections of essays, dedicated respectively to Robert O. Payne and John O. Ward, have likewise begun to reopen and reevaluate the discussion of invention in medieval literature and culture.\textsuperscript{16} In 2004, Scott D. Troyan edited a collection of essays that confronts scholarship’s taxonomic problem head on. In it, he calls for a reevaluation of how critics use rhetoric to interpret medieval poetry, calling such studies “more explanatory than interpretive, more prescriptive than descriptive.”\textsuperscript{17} Troyan argues that as the \textit{ars poetica} developed, writers focused less on macrocosmic issues and more on
microcosmic details when composing texts. As he puts it,

The residue of such invention subliminally shapes the manner in which the
text constitutes or, perhaps more appropriately, reconstitutes meaning in
the mind of the audience. Shifting the focus of topics toward the micro-
level creates a greater sense of allowing the details to tell the story. Just as
in life, invention becomes a string of more or less random events that
requires the audience to supply the connections.¹⁸

Troyan’s call for a new approach to the study of medieval rhetorical poetics and his focus
on the “micro-level” “events” that constitute poetic invention lay the groundwork for the
study of historical invention I wish to pursue here.

In a celebratory essay on “Chaucer and Rhetoric” in the new Yale companion to
Chaucer, Rita Copeland summarizes rhetoric as nothing less than a “master discourse”
for “thinking and constructing experience,” identity, representation, and history.¹⁹ As
Copeland puts it, “we operate through the rhetoric of history, in all of its limitations of
mutability and contingency, and in all of its technical effects of selection, arrangement,
and ordering, retrospectively defining cause and effect.”²⁰ Copeland’s essay reveals the
real stakes of studying the rhetorical dynamics of late medieval English literature.

Scholarship making similar “rhetorical” inquiries into medieval English
historiography, however, almost exclusively treats the High Middle Ages. This focus is
due in large part to the rhetorical zeal and eloquence demonstrated by historians of the
twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially William of Malmesbury and John of
Salisbury. John O. Ward demonstrates how John of Salisbury disguised his rhetoric to
present opinion as truth, how William of Malmesbury linked his history to eloquence,
and, most significantly, how the rhetorical performance attributed to Pope Urban’s speech at Clermont actually colored modern historians’ analyses of the causes of the First Crusade. Gabriele Speigel also confines most of her analysis to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and argues that historiography’s project is rhetorical only in so far as it attempts to persuade readers toward ethical action through instructive example. Speigel’s larger project, however, does the vital service of showing how the “social logic” of medieval historiography justifies engaging it as a form of literature. Ruth Morse demonstrates how rhetoric constituted a “pervasive” but “intangible” “habit” of understanding the relationship between words and the world. A common rhetorical education provided the system of relations that writers and readers used to situate a text within a larger structure of understanding. Reading for the rhetoric of history, Morse demonstrates the presence in historiography of cultural truths that operate independently from paradigms of historical accuracy and instead are defined by rhetorical construction. While her study thus addresses the roles of verisimilitude and probability in the formation of a sense of history, the broad scope of her study—early medieval to early modern Europe—does not allow it to account for the particular inventional needs of specific chroniclers writing in specific historical moments. Chris Given-Wilson’s recent study likewise surveys a broad range of medieval historiography. Given-Wilson approaches chronicles thematically but also tracks the development of medieval history writing, demonstrating how late-medieval historiographical processes in England differ from those of earlier centuries. His work does much to reveal the variety of historiography in late medieval England, and I draw on this survey more fully in Chapter 2.

“History” in recent literary criticism on Chaucer typically refers to the fluctuating
political or social situations surrounding the author, the historical developments that helped created those situations, and the corollaries of those situations in imagined antiquity. History in this sense refers to the social space central to cultural materialist and New Historicism readings and may be more correctly termed “political” or “social imaginary.” Lee Patterson’s work in materialist history on Chaucer has been foundational in this respect. Patterson’s rich contextualization of Chaucer’s poetry charts in particular the development of individual subjectivity from within the immediate historical conditions represented poetically in Chaucer. For Chaucer, “history” ultimately refers to a kind of medieval class-consciousness, with different tiers of English society privy to different modes of historical understanding and the construction of individual subjectivity. When Patterson addresses a Chaucerian sense of history, however, he ultimately locates the impetus for poetic invention in the recursive narrative structure of the story of Thebes, itself inextricably entrenched in a late fourteenth-century political imagination bound up with the story of Troy.

Paul Strohm’s analysis of the representation of social relationships in Chaucer’s later poetry postulates how an emergent matrix of “horizontally arrayed, communal, secular” relationships began to counter traditional hierarchical models. Poetry thus becomes an imaginative field for social speculation and representation. Similarly, for David Wallace, “associational forms” indicative of medieval English guildhall culture, combined with analogues and opposites in Italian socio-political spheres, define a political source of invention for Chaucer’s poetry. Similar interest among literary critics in medieval history writing has sought to uncover political subjectivities in historical agents who are traditionally marginalized. Strohm’s work on “the social imagination of
fourteenth-century texts” reads against the dominant narratives of English historical
documents, including legal depositions and political poetry, in order to discover
alternative tendencies, attitudes, and behaviors that have otherwise been silenced in
traditional critical approaches to medieval English history. Stephen Justice has also
attempted to recover the marginalized voices of the people involved in the losing side of
the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. These critical objectives have their origins in the literary
applications of the New Historicism, which positions literary texts within a wider field of
political discourse in order to chart the formation of interiority against a grid of
institutional ideology, power, and control.

Recent scholarship on how Chaucer and Gower treat “history” as material for
poetic invention typically examines exemplary narratives, which are only a specific
component—and often, a specific form—of history writing. In what remains one of the
most influential and important studies of medieval exemplary narrative, Larry Scanlon
addresses this historical form in terms of institutional power and control, arguing that the
Chaucerian tradition of exemplary writing works to reappropriate Church authority for
lay power. In her study of medieval exempla, Elizabeth Allen broadens the field of
inquiry to include audience reaction to medieval moral narratives, and she shows that
Middle English exemplary narratives “often call into question the very efforts of
generalization and application that lie at the heart of their own didactic aims.” Her work
thus examines the effectiveness of the persuasive ends of rhetorical narrative, and it
demonstrates the principle of self-critique inherent in the Middle English exemplary
form. With specific reference to Chaucer and Gower, J. Allan Mitchell also approaches
exempla from the rhetorical perspective of audience engagement and asserts that arguing
from exempla requires the active intellect of readers who must “read for the moral” in
texts and make an “improvisatory decision about the applicability of one or more cases to
lived experience.” Mitchell’s goal is to overturn traditional monolithic and teleological
understandings of the rhetoric of medieval ethics that deny medieval readers an agency
necessary for the operation of ethical texts. Though its discussion is limited to the ethical
use value of exemplary narratives, Mitchell’s text nevertheless demonstrates that forms of
invention—in this case, a kind of ethical reader-response theory—operate in even the
most didactic texts.

My own study builds on the work of these and other scholars. It differs, however,
first by focusing on the process of invention, as derived from classical rhetorical theory
and the medieval *ars poetica*. Second, I examine “history” as an imaginative concept
inherently related to late-medieval thinking about invention, rather than as the immediate
social and political environment that both contained and produced Gower, Chaucer, and
their texts, or as a corollary of class-consciousness. Third, and most significant, I take up
both Gower and Chaucer, and I argue that their understandings of the invention of history
are shaped by their own poetic exchanges with each other. In this study, I hope to expand
scholarship on medieval rhetorical poetics by examining how the invention of history
generated a particular kind of narrative of the past. Furthermore, I hope to understand
how two of the fourteenth century’s most prolific English poets used the invention of
history as a method of formulating and presenting their own poetic projects.

My first chapter looks more closely at the two key terms of my title, invention and
history, describing the state of thinking about *inventio* in fourteenth-century England. It
shows that the medieval understanding of invention helped develop a sense of historicity
as a part of learning how to write poetry. The *ars poetica* tradition taught student writers not only the rhetorical methods by which to generate text but also ways to cultivate an individual sense of history as a prerequisite for the invention of poetry or prose. Examining these early treatises sets the stage for a closer examination of some late-century chronicles, and how the dual conceptualization of invention shapes the poetic experiments of Gower and Chaucer.

Chapter 2 traces the invention of history in fourteenth-century chronicles by showing how medieval chroniclers take invention as a co-subject with historical event. It focuses on four chronicles: Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon* (1360s; translated into English by John Trevisa in the 1380s), one of the most popular chronicles of the fourteenth century; two of its late-century continuations, the chronicles of Henry Knighton (c. 1379-96) and of Westminster (1380s-1397); and the *Chronica maiora* of Thomas Walsingham (first version completed by 1400), who also drew on Higden’s work. This chapter shows how Higden’s text and its English version as translated by John Trevisa organize history not around exclusively legendary, Christian, or political ideologies, but the process of invention itself. Examining the chronicles of Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, and the monks of Westminster, it shows how the discursive nature of certain events (the Lollard heresy and the Merciless Parliament, in particular) requires focus on the processes of invention as a historical topic. It furthermore demonstrates how, in the Westminster chronicle especially, chroniclers produce narratives that turn the persuasive goals of invention inward, presenting historical events as the endpoints of the chronicles’ own rhetorical arrangements.

Turning toward the literary engagements of the invention of history, I argue in
Chapter 3 that John Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* (1377, 1381) narrates a profound inability to invent poetry based on historical material. Gower uses this staged failure of invention to dramatize the emergence of an authoritative poetic persona. This persona becomes the figure to which his career-long poetic program of cultural restoration is inherently connected. Gower’s later chronicle poem, the *Cronica Tripertita* (c. 1400), continues the historico-poetic project begun in the *Vox*. The *Cronica* expands that project’s field of reference to incorporate Gower’s own career-long revision process of his major poetry as literary *res gestae*. As he constructs his own literary canon, he transforms his poetic achievements into historical events.

Chapter 4 argues that Gower’s English poem, the *Confessio Amantis* (1390), thematizes invention and history to explore the efficacy of his own poetic program. In the poem, Gower challenges the central principle that taking old stories from the past can be used to stabilize and restore a chaotic present moment. He presents this larger project metaphorically in his narratives throughout the *Confessio*. He furthermore dramatizes the act of invention and constructs narratives that figuratively treat invention and history. He then inserts these inventional moments into the narratives of the *Confessio* in order to create a poem that seems to have the restorative potential to transform English history.

The final two chapters turn to Chaucer’s severe critique of Gower’s poetic models. Chapter 5 argues that Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale* (c. 1390) destabilizes Gower’s historical poetics in two ways. First, the headlink of the tale critiques Gower’s formulation of his poetry as historical events and the idea of representing poetic achievement in terms of chronicle narrative. Second, the *Tale* itself draws on the Roman poet Lucan, whose epic, the *Pharsalia*, presents a poetics of destructive causality. Chaucer
uses Lucan to show that the investigation of history as a means of inventing poetry to restore a fallen present is itself a destructive process and cannot result in the kind of renewal Gower’s poem sets out to achieve.

Finally, Chapter 6 argues that the Monk’s Tale (c. 1386) offers a negative version of Gower’s invention of history. The Monk’s tragedies reverse the process of inventio and postulate res gestae, historical events, as the end products of poetic invention, rather than using res gestae as topics or “inspiration” for poetic invention. The Monk’s backward process again critiques Gower’s historical poetics, but Chaucer’s tale also offers a bleak formulation of the late-medieval habit of viewing invention as a historical act. The Monk’s Tale ultimately works to prevent a deeper understanding of both history and invention, and it ends with the refusal to continue with either.

The treatment of invention as a kind of historical deed by fourteenth-century chroniclers and the poetic interchanges of Gower and Chaucer have their origins in the most basic techniques for teaching composition in the Middle Ages. The ars poetica tradition provided writers with the theoretical and practical frameworks for producing text, but ars poetica treatises also worked to generate a sense of history in their readers as the primary component of invention. In the following chapter, I will show how the invention of history plays a crucial part in even the most rudimentary writing practices.

Notes

1 All quotations from Chaucer’s works will be from The Riverside Chaucer, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

2 Manly, “Chaucer and the Rhetoricians,” Warton Lecture on English Poetry 17 (London:
Oxford University Press, 1929); Payne, The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer’s Poetics (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1963). A series of important articles also surveys and evaluates the nature of the ars poetica tradition in England in the Middle Ages, which I cite below.

3 For Payne, p. 43, the medieval “revision” of the classical system of rhetoric “shows first of all the tremendous decrease in importance of that component which the modern critic would probably consider the most transferable from rhetoric to poetic—*inventio*.” Invention is replaced by “Tradition itself—both as meaningful historical pattern or accurate literary constructs by previous observers, and as workable analyses of means” (46). Douglas Kelly and others have since argued that *inventio* did not so much disappear in the Middle Ages as was understood differently. I treat their important work below.


Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). See also Minnis, *The Medieval Theory of Authorship*, who traces the emergence of late medieval English poetry from the *accessus ad auctores* tradition. Minnis demonstrates the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Canterbury Tales* to be derived from this tradition. Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), also situates late medieval poetry within an academic and commentary tradition. Allen argues that medieval poetry was considered a branch of ethics since it dealt with human behavior.

Copeland, *Rhetoric*, p. 168, shows that the textual turn of *inventio* involves interpreting material that has already been discovered, rather than discovering “a pre-linguistic *res,*” something that has not already been uttered in some form. As I hope to show, the act of invention becomes not merely the hermeneutical equivalent of the praxis of classical rhetoric, but a kind of historical event in its own right.

Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). See especially Astell’s first chapter in which she analyzes the rhetorical tradition in order to track the operation of allegorical writing; see also her discussion of *materia* with special reference to Chaucer, Gower, and Langland (32-38), as well as her brief discussion of Geoffrey of Vinsauf (33-34, 38). Astell’s earlier work, *Chaucer and the*
Universe of Learning (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), situates the Canterbury Tales within an emergent clerical realm of thought. See Chapter 5 below of my study for Astell’s reading of the Monk’s Tale.


15 Steiner, p. 23. The bulk of Steiner’s study is concerned with Piers Plowman and Lollard rhetoric.


18 Troyan, p. 232.


20 Copeland, “Chaucer and Rhetoric,” p. 133. Interestingly, Copeland’s chapter makes little mention of inventio, except to eloquently describe it as “the conceptual spinal cord of rhetorical theory,” in her list of the rhetorical canons (124).

21 Ward, “Some Principles of Rhetorical Historiography in the Twelfth Century,” in
Classical Rhetoric and Medieval Historiography, ed. Ernst Breisach (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute, 1985), pp.103-65. This important collection is one of the few significant engagements with the rhetoric of medieval history. See also Paivi Mehtonen, Old Concepts and New Poetics: Historia, Argumentum, and Fabula in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996), p. 63.


25 See Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); and Patterson, Temporal Circumstances: Form and History in the Canterbury Tales (New York: Palgrave, 2006), which collects and reprints several important essays.


29 Justice, Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381 (Los Angeles: University of
California Press, 1994). Patterson’s *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), in its effort to revitalize the historicist approach to the study of medieval literature, famously demonstrates the construction of a modern understanding of Chaucer from vying attempts by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scholars attempting to rescue a variously modern, “democratic” Chaucer from a decidedly non-democratic Middle Ages. Patterson’s formulations, however, owe much to their Cold War context; indeed, his discussion of human values can perhaps best be understood as an implied contrast to a totalitarian, Soviet subjectivity. Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), deconstructs the critical tradition of men reading Chaucer—particularly Robertson and Donaldson—and thus addresses the crucial component of the histories of gender and sexuality missing from Patterson’s treatment of those critics.


31 Allen, *False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), p. 3.


33 I engage the important work of these critics more fully in the chapters that follow.

34 Walsingham considered his chronicle to be a continuation of the work done by his somewhat distant predecessor Matthew Paris. Walsingham did, however, use one of the continuations of the *Polychronicon* as a source for the retrospective section of the
Chapter 1

History and Invention in the Medieval Ars Poetica

By the fourteenth century, theories of inventio and textual composition were well developed. Formal rhetorical instruction in the Middle Ages existed in three main forms, the arts of preaching, letter-writing, and poetry.¹ The key instructive texts on rhetorical invention throughout the Middle Ages were derived from Cicero’s “rhetorics”—the de Inventione and the Rhetorica ad Herennium, which was attributed to him—both of which taught the nature, purpose, and mechanics of rhetorical composition. Invenzione meant invention from topics, “for that is the name given by Aristotle to the ‘regions,’ as it were, from which arguments are drawn.”² In general, invention proceeded from persona and negotium, that is, from persons and their conduct—their actions and the events that surround them.³ Intended originally for the creation of forensic arguments to be used in Roman law courts, Ciceronian invention provided a framework onto which medieval writers grafted a method for poetic invention. The resulting model blended the interpretive practices of medieval grammar with the inventional decisions, structures, and ornamentation of rhetoric. The narrative of this disciplinary merger interlocks with the narrative of Roman jurisprudence’s replacement by literary history—specifically the texts of, commentaries on, and interpretive tradition surrounding the auctores.⁴

The definition of “rhetoric” as part of the trivium and its development in the context of grammar, logic, and scholasticism are the focus of a veritable canon of scholarship on medieval rhetoric.⁵ The “preceptive” tradition of the ars poetica of the
High Middle Ages constitutes the theoretical and practical nexus of rhetoric, grammar, and poetic composition, and contemporary scholarship on the *ars poetica* has likewise become canonical. Representative of the *ars poetica* tradition are Matthew of Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* (1175), Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* (after 1213) and *Poetria nova* (1200-15)—the most popular and widely disseminated of the *artes*—and John of Garland’s *Parisiana Poetria* (1220-35)—significant for its attempt to unify the arts of writing poetry and prose in a single instructional text. The *artes poeticae* are characterized by constant reference to *auctores*, the extensive listing of figurative devices available for poetic composition, and regular practice at composition.

Despite their apparent emphasis on the post-*inventio* components of poetic composition, especially arrangement and style, these treatises actually reconceptualize the process of invention, in part by their incorporation of twelfth-century neoplatonic theory. Douglas Kelly has carefully mapped this process of “evolution” and demonstrates how invention in the *artes poeticae* is understood in neoplatonic terms. Invention is a kind of imagination, “the mental faculty that permits the artist to realize the ‘archetypal’ conception” that he imitates in his poetry. “Imagination is the projection in the mind, and thence into matter, of the artist’s conception of the work to be written.” Thus, “in the last analysis, all *materiae* may be seen to derive from a single, simple word or thema, like God’s word in Creation.” As Kelly shows, the *ars poetica* tradition merges the universal and the particular, the theory and the craft, in its own genealogy. It treats poetic invention as a constituent part of the Chartrian notion of poetic creation as akin to God’s and Nature’s creation of the world. While the neoplatonic elements of High Medieval poetic
theory provided a universalizing schema for the relationship of the writer, the work, and all of Creation, the actual execution of the work was nevertheless grounded in the workaday process of reading and imitating the texts of the auctores.¹¹ Training in poetic composition was thus the result, as Kelly summarizes it, of “a traditional program of education founded on close reading of the authors, study of the principles and techniques of composition, and highly specialized exercises in composing set pieces illustrating principles and techniques as these were enunciated in commentaries and glosses on the standard authors and treatises.”¹²

Studying this routine of interpretation and imitation reveals the intricate connection in the artes poeticae between invention and history. The artes’ overt relationship to history can be traced to Cicero’s fundamental definition of narratio on which the compositional logic of the artes is based.¹³ Cicero explains that history—historia, or “an account of actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our own age”—is a subdivision of expositio, along with argumentum (“a fictitious narrative which nevertheless could have occurred”) and fabula (“a narrative in which the events are not true and have no verisimilitude”).¹⁴ General compositional theory shared a common hermeneutical approach with medieval historiographical practice, as Kelly shows:

Historiography calls for the careful study and imitation of predecessors both great and small—from Sallust to the pseudo-Dares and -Dictys—and for the application of principles of composition taught in the arts of poetry and prose. . . . The rhetoric of the arts of poetry and prose is the same as that often used by medieval historians in Latin and the vernaculars when they evaluated historical data for purposes of praise or blame.¹⁵
The understanding and formal practice—the ars—inventio has theoretical and procedural links to both poetic and historiographic composition. The method of inventional instruction was analogous to the ethical instruction of history: precepts boiled out from historical stories work within the mind of the individual to create a virtuous subject who could make ethical choices in a social world. The same principle applied to the artistic figures used by the auctores. A student studied these texts not to copy but to imitate—a practice interested in the formation of poetic identity and self-development as well as technical reproduction. The relationship embodies a complex reciprocity at the instant when the theoretical becomes the practical. Not merely is historia a kind of narrative; historia is a necessary component of the invention of any kind of narrative.

The medieval artes poeticae inherited the concerns about the potential truth claims for narrative that were inherent in the Ciceronian tradition, and they laid out ways that historia differed from other types of narration. Unlike the other subdivisions of expositio, historia alone is a true narrative. Categorical distinctions between fabula and argumentum are based on grades of verisimilitude. Robert R. Edwards and Päivi Mehtonen have done careful work in extracting the differences between historia and the other narrative forms as they are treated variously throughout the ars poetica tradition, and I draw heavily here on their analyses. Geoffrey of Vinsauf and John of Garland each address the generic definition of historia and its relationship to composition. Geoffrey treats history as a type of narrative composition and argues, following Isidore, that poets should render eloquently the events of history. Geoffrey aims for elegant verisimilitude: quoting Alan of Lille, he maintains that histories and fables can be intermixed, “so that, from an effective combination of diverse elements in their narrative, a more elegant
picture may emerge.” The notion has its origins in Horace’s *Ars poetica* in which Horace praises Homer for his ability to assimilate historical truth with poetic invention, and to do so in a way that is both accordant to his own poetic strengths and willing to pass over effectively the aspects of the *materia* he desires to skip.19

The blurring of generic boundaries becomes less a matter of taste and ability and more a component of theory for John of Garland. As Edwards shows, John constructs a genealogy of verisimilitude and poetry, emphasizing how the structural logic inherent in narration fastens historical meaning even to such untruthful fictions as *fabulae*. We can see in John how the notion of the “historical” itself functions as a stand-in for “narrative” if only because any narrative construction has a “historical aspect,” a claim to truth through its structural ability to represent “the shape of human experience.”20 The mimetic upshot here is the ability of an invented narrative structure to simulate reality by establishing its own rules and sticking to them, and this too is a Horatian concept.21 Citing Edwards, Mehtonen carefully shows how John’s understanding of historical discourse is remarkable for its emphasis on order and structure. Historical narratives include the rhetorical devices of *propositio*, *invocatio*, and *narratio*, and these devices can be traced in particular to the authoritative *auctores* of antiquity.22 “The simple theory of structure, then,” Mehtonen writes, “establishes a close bond between the notions of *historia*, authority and poetry in general. The structural matters are inseparable from the medieval respectability of *historia* and ‘true deeds.’ ”23 John suggests the use of a specific device to enforce structural verisimilitude. The writer, he teaches, “should use the rhetorical figure called Transition (*transicio*), a figure whereby the mind of the listener, with the aid of the preceding narration, understands what its to come.”24 The business of
John’s *transicio*, as Mehtonen shows, is to introduce under the heading *historia* “a lesson in the art of making coherent and continuous narratives,” thus avoiding the “vice,” or error, of sloppy transitions and ineffective narrative organization. The solid construction of a well-crafted narrative thus suggests the verisimilitude of historical truth. John’s *transicio*, then, looks forward not only to the “futura” of the next textual component to be narrated, but also to the “futura” of subsequent *gestae*. He folds together the acts of poetic invention and historical imagination.

The relation of structural integrity to eventual verisimilitude demonstrates the circular generic logic of *historia*: matter is only properly “historical” when it concerns “events remote from the recollection of our own age,” and when it is worth preserving in memory for the purposes of ethical instruction. History itself may be generically difficult to pin down, but one knows it when one sees it: it has ethical merit and temporal distance—hence, persuasive power. Indeed, this is what separates the writers that the *artes poeticae* work to produce from the *auctores* they cite as models. Ancients like Virgil and Lucan were *auctores* because time and tradition had demonstrated their works to be ethically instructive, and because these poets’ own compositional acts occurred beyond the reach of modern memory. Because this temporal distance was evidenced by the vast amounts of textual commentary that accompanied the *auctores*, even “modern” writers like Alan of Lille could be considered *auctores* because of the nature of their *materia* and the commentary that surrounded their texts.

Similarly, in terms of the disciplinary definitions of Roman rhetoric, the act of reading and writing these *auctores* and their commentaries resulted in a kind of “action” that was something more than simply textual interpretation. As Copeland succinctly puts
it, interpretation became productive action, and understanding took on “the character of event” as “the power of cognition and explanation unite[d] with the power of application.” The work of Kelly, Edwards, and Mehtonen shows how in the *ars poetica* tradition, invention always involved a historical aspect, and the work of Copeland demonstrates how compositional acts become, in rhetorical terms at least, “events” on par with the practical ends of Roman oratory. I want to show next how the *artes poeticae* participate in the cultivation of an individual sense of history expressed in terms of poetic invention. The medieval treatises on poetry writing enact these historical aspects in their teaching of the *ars poetica* by conflating the specific, individuated needs of student writers with the larger issues of invention and history they are meant to elucidate.

**Teaching a Sense of History in the Artes Poeticae**

Through their function as teaching texts, the *artes poeticae* instruct students in the cultivation of a sense of history as part of invention. This process works by implicating a student’s classroom experience with the thematic and abstract aspects of the principles being taught. Matthew of Vendôme, for example, makes clear that not only the act of reading the *auctores* results in ethical subject formation; learning the craft of composition itself produces similar results. In part four of his treatise, concerning the *executio materiae*, Matthew explains how the practice of poetic composition leads to virtue through practice: “The admission of error prompts forgiveness, avoidance of cover-up eludes arrogance, the submission to blame assures correction.” Matthew’s program builds an ethical subject (and a hearty work ethic) by conveying not only the ethically valuable matter of the *auctores*, but also its own process of poetic composition.
Geoffrey of Vinsauf goes so far as to synthesize the experience of students with the matter. In the *Poetria nova*, Geoffrey carefully explicates ways of beginning new poems. Proverbs and exempla, he says, are two of the most prestigious ways to start a poem after the matter has been selected; they elevate low beginnings because they illustrate a general truth and indicate the direction of the narrative. They are “superior” [“major”] ways of beginning a piece because they have “the sanction of time” [“maturior aetas”] as the *auctores* themselves do. In other words, they demonstrate an ethical blueprint and the basic structural design of the poem on the page, before it even starts. Moreover, Geoffrey personifies proverbs as he introduces them to his students, making the rhetorical device into a willful entity who occupies a textual position analogous to that of the student-writer. As he describes it, the proverb,

while prizing the charm of the unusual, may not concentrate its attention on the particular subject, but refuse, as if in disdain, to remain within its bosom. Let it take a stand above the given subject, but look with direct glance towards it. Let it say nothing directly about the subject, but derive its inspiration therefrom.

Geoffrey transforms the proverb from an organizational and inventional tool into a rhetorical figure that also represents the precarious relationship of the would-be writer to poetic material and relevant *auctores*. The proverb is analogous to what the student aspires to be, even to the point that it “derive[s] its inspiration” [“cogitet inde”]—with *cogitare*’s resonances of both imagination and intentionality—from the same *materia* that the student desires to treat. Yet, unlike the student-poet, the proverb embodies and performs full inventional autonomy. Geoffrey’s figuration of the proverb forecasts a
model of authorship currently unavailable to the student but that exists nevertheless as potential, a somewhat vaguer rendering of the neoplatonic house-building simile that frames the entire Poetria nova. If Matthew explicitly shows the ethical value of the act of composition, then Geoffrey shows that the rendered materia itself shares the cultural and textual position of the composer.

John of Garland takes an approach opposite to Geoffrey’s artful synthesis: he crystallizes the relationship of the proverb to the student-writer by dissecting it in prose, exposing its invention origins, and offering copious examples. “A proverb,” John writes, “is a brief statement, moral in purpose, setting forth what is good or what is bad in an important matter.” Proverbs can be drawn

from natural things, as when similitudes are drawn from plants, stones, animate or inanimate things. Other proverbs are taken from moral truths, when verses or aphorisms are cited from classical authors, as, “A man is either the slave or the master of his money”. . . Proverbs can be invented [inueniri] from praise, from blame, from similitude, from the nature of the subject at issue, and from the character of the persons involved. Proverbs can be invented from a persona, from negotium, and from the physical, textual, and social worlds in which both exist. While Geoffrey personifies proverbs, making their relationship to his reader and to the process of composition poetic material in itself, John clinically dictates how to link proverbs specifically to the material they treat. A writer is to search for a proverb to begin, John writes, and he can then more fully incorporate it into his narratio by using the conjunction “cum” (“since”). If John’s elaboration on proverbs loses the eloquence of Geoffrey’s presentation, it does so only to link more
explicitly the craft of composition to the specific aspects of life familiar to the everyday practices of his students.

In fact, John’s efforts to relate the general ethical value and instruction of the auctores to the lived reality of the thirteenth century characterize his entire treatise. What tends to be dismissed as shoddy craftsmanship or poor organization on his part can perhaps more accurately be attributed to this pedagogical motivation.\(^{36}\) In essence, John applies the general and distant principles of the auctores to the immediate present using the vocabulary of artistic craft, and he links this social application to the openly professed individual agency of a writer. He relates, for example, Virgil’s triple style to the commonplace of the medieval estates:

Three kinds of characters ought to be considered here, according to the three types of men, which are courtiers, city dwellers, and peasants. Courtiers are those who dwell in or frequent courts, such as the Holy Father, cardinals, legates, archbishops, bishops, and their subordinates, such as archdeacons, deans, officials, masters, scholars; also emperors, kings, marquises, and dukes. City dwellers are count, provost, and the whole range of people who live in the city. Peasants are those who live in the country, such as hunters, farmers, vine dressers, fowlers. According to these three types of men, Virgil invented a triple style, which will be dealt with later.\(^{37}\)

As Kelly is careful to point out, these acts of descriptio are undoubtedly acts of inventio. Descriptio “is a medieval term for topical invention—specifically that kind of topical invention that invents the circumstances of persons and things (personae and negotia).”\(^{38}\)
Invention from persons is articulated as individual choices made over binary sets: kings rule well or badly, prelates are contemplative or idle, citizens support the republic or waste it. John, in line with other treatises in the tradition, presents no middle way in between, and *inventio* becomes in large part a series of yes-or-no choices to be made by an individual.

John’s emphasis, however, is on the choice, and as Copeland notes, the act of interpretation can itself become like an event. John, however, does not figure this “eventuality” abstractly; he focuses this transformation of interpretation into event to a singularity, to the individual writer. The instructions to students make the practice of *inventio* something that exists in the mind, in texts, and finally in the present moment. *Inventio* becomes a kind of prudent action, but a prudent action in which ethical context is superseded by the creation of a historical narrative made up of a genealogy of similar actions, represented in both textual form and in the individual writer’s own sense of history.

This experiential component drives John’s method. For example, as he describes his overly elaborate and highly impractical graphical system for organizing memory for the purpose of invention, John attempts to apply the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*’s model of artificial memory to the needs of his students. When inventing, he writes, “we should select what we are going to say with the support of the Art of Remembering, which is essential for poets organizing their material. So, following Cicero, we should put aside in our minds some vacant spot, in a place [*loco*] which is neither too hazy nor too bright, because these qualities are inimical to memory and selection.” This *locus* turns out to be not only a place in the mind, but also a chart divided into three columns that is supposed
to aid students in remembering how to invent. The first column consists of the *persona* for topical invention, the courtiers, city dwellers, and peasants familiar from John’s discussion of Virgil’s three styles. “If any word falls from the mouth of the teacher which means anything which pertains to any one of the three kinds of persons mentioned,” John writes, “there it will be, for later inventing and selecting.” The words will be in the *locus* of the chart and the chart in the *locus* of the mind. The second column of this chart contains examples and sayings and facts from the authors, and the teachers from whom we heard them, and the books in which we have read them. If memory should fail us on some point, we must then call to mind the time, be it vivid or hazy, when we learned it, the place in which, the teacher from whom, his dress, his gestures, the books in which we studied it, the page—was it white or dark?—the position on the page and the colors of the letters; because all these will lead to the things that we want to remember and select.

The third column contains the raw material from languages, etymologies, sounds, voices, and other explanations, and the *res naturalis*, all of which can be used to trigger the memory of words.

As Lawler and Carruthers note, John’s schema for memory alters the classical model he would have known from the pseudo-Cicero *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which advises would-be orators to imagine settings and situations that will aid in recall. John removes the abstract elements of these settings and relocates *locus* squarely to the classroom. He transforms imagined settings into the real, lived memory of a student’s
classroom experience and thus synthesizes the scholastic model with the classical system originally used for composing orations. While John’s three-columned chart seems haphazard when compared either to its elaborate classical model or a modern notion of utility, it nevertheless combines the social and the textual through the individual—or, at least, typological—remembered experience of the student. The three columns organize respectively the social divisions of society (the three kinds of people); the authorial world (full of books and teachers in an actual classroom setting); and the textual and physical worlds, conflated so that “natural things” like plants and animals can signify textual concepts. John transfers the classical system of artificial memory to a locus that at once is performed and textualized in the pages of the treatise and likewise anchored in historicity. In effect, his model of composition requires the careful cultivation of a detailed personal history: a kind of biography formulated typologically, which here exists simply for invention. John merges the materia of personal history—page color, clothing, the sound of someone’s voice—with the materia required for invention.

John here to some extent theorizes intentio, what Carruthers efficiently describes as “the coloration or attitude we have toward an experience, on the basis of which we have determined to ‘hook’ it into the linked chains of our ‘places’ ” of memory. John not only teaches students how to remember artificially; he also teaches them to compose a kind of chronicle in their minds that incorporates textual authority, written activity, and personal experience into a chain of gestae, not merely a chain of loci. That is, what students are remembering are not so much mental places, but real places where they themselves performed actions that were not limited simply to textual interpretation and invention. In essence, John demands that the students compose history as a means of
remembering for invention and selection.

*Historia* in the *ars poetica* tradition, then, is a discursive formulation of past events that include old *res gestae*; true *res gestae*; ethically instructive *res gestae*; and structurally coherent *res gestae*. Furthermore, the *ars poetica* advice for actually performing the writing is essentially a guide for inserting one’s self into this historical structure. In Geoffrey of Vinsauf, proverbs become like the writer that the student aspires to be. Geoffrey’s personification figures the student as someone who looks to the past and to the future. His figure casts the discursive pattern for the composition of narrative history onto any compositional action by the student because it figures the student writer in a future position in which he has already mastered the skills he is now only being taught. From this future position, the proverb-student looks back on the course of his instruction as both *res gestae* and as a narrative construction. Thus, the *historia* is both his past lived experience through which he arrived at this imagined future moment, and the textual record of that course of action. Likewise, the memory exercises and advice of John of Garland present a more concrete and less figurative representation of this same historical process. The memorial work indicated by his complex chart conflates the *res gestae* and historical *narratio* of both past events and past writers. It then requires that the student recall his own, commonplace, everyday practices from his own recollection of “personal” *res gestae* in order to recall the *materia* from which he can invent through selection.

The result is the cultivation not only of a “sense of history,” a historistic sense of place between the related fields of experiential and textual experience, but also a kind of chronicle narrative of that process. The act of learning to write poetry involves
recognizing historical narratives and imagining writing into those narratives, but it also involves imagining a future (as demonstrated by Geoffrey’s proverbs or John’s transitions) in which this entire process will have become history, both as res gestae performed by the writer, and a textual record of those res gestae. Invention is imagination and selection; it is the action produced by the individual poet making choices through a sense of history; and it is the historical narrative of those choices, that course of development.

How then was this process treated in late medieval chronicle and poetic compositions? To what extent are these inventional techniques applicable to historical chronicles, especially to those most noted for their compilatio structure? Furthermore, what can examining the invention of history in chronicles reveal about the compositional practices of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer? In the following chapter, I turn to the Polychronicon, one of the most popular chronicles in fourteenth-century England, and several of its continuations in order to demonstrate the role of invention in organizing both ancient and more recent historical events. In these chronicles, invention is not merely a means of producing text; invention is also a historical topic to be treated by chroniclers.

**Notes**


2 “sic enim appellatae ab Aristotele sunt eae quasi sedes e quibus argumenta promuntur.”


6 For a definition of the “Preceptive Tradition” in which past discourse can be studied in order to create future discourse, see Murphy, “Rhetoric in Fourteenth-Century Oxford,” p. 1. The “canon” of ars poetria texts was established by Edmond Faral, Les Arts Poétiques du xxᵉ et du xxiiie siècle (Paris: Champion, 1924), and also includes the later works of Gervais of Melkley and Eberhard of Germany. For a comprehensive treatment of the artes as a genre, see Kelly, Arts of Poetry and Prose. Mehtonen traces the development of the Ciceronian definition of expositio through the ars poetica tradition. Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages, provides summaries of each work. See also Kelly “The Scope of the Treatment of Composition in the Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Arts of Poetry,” Speculum 41 (1966): 261-78; Kelly, “Theory of Composition in Medieval Narrative Poetry and Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Poetry Nova,” Medieval Studies 31 (1969): 117-48; Purcell; and Troyan.

7 As Kelly, Arts of Poetry, p. 47, shows, Matthew's was essentially the first “formal treatise on verse or prose composition,” and there are no stand-alone treatises “of
significance for composition after Eberhard the German or John of Garland.”


9 Kelly, *Arts of Poetry*, p. 65. See also Curtius, pp. 296-97, for the relationship of *ingenium* to invention.

10 Kelly, *Arts of Poetry*, p. 67. See also Purcell, who argues that this reconceptualization of invention is characterized by an inward turn that accompanies the movement from oral to literate discourse. He notes in particular of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* that “invention pervades the entire work,” and he goes so far as to suggest that Geoffrey’s treatise might be called “Inventio nova” (32-33, 73, 85). Purcell, p. 73, cites Marjorie Woods’s edition of an early commentary on Geoffrey of Vinsauf which confirms this viewpoint.

11 Copeland, pp. 158-63, notes that *ars poetica* treatises, especially John of Garland’s, demonstrate how invention was understood grammatically, how the process of inventing from circumstances was turned toward textual analysis. In the end, student-poets work like exegetes to create their texts. See Marjorie Curry Woods, “The Teaching of Poetic Composition in the Later Middle Ages,” in *A Short History of Writing Instruction From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, ed. James J. Murphy, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Hermagoras Press, 2001), pp. 123-43, for a survey of the pedagogical praxis of the *ars poetica*, especially for ways in which *ars poetica* authors and instructors would appeal particularly to young male students. See also See also Woods and Copeland, “Classroom and Confession,” in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 378-90. Kelly, *Arts of Poetry*, p. 91, conjures an image of the medieval magister that thoroughly invokes this
workaday notion: “The life that emerges from their [the treatises’] pages is that of the poorly paid, overworked schoolmaster constantly struggling with recalcitrant pupils, yet dependent on them and their parents for upkeep and adulation. The instruction is practical and pedestrian rather than theoretical or critical in the sense of Aristotle’s Poetics: they present traditional material in a traditional way—which for them was pedagogically most effective.”

12 Kelly, Arts of Poetry, pp. 43-44.

13 For Robert R. Edwards, Ratio and Invention: A Study of Medieval Lyric and Narrative (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1989), pp. 77-86, and Mehtonen, pp. 38-48, this Ciceronian origin is crucial in the understanding of poesis as a kind of knowledge. Ciceronian narratio also refers to the statement of facts in a case, a concept I treat more fully in Chapter 5 on Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale.

14 “Historia est gesta res, ab aetatis nostrae memoria remota;” “Argumentum est ficta res, quae tamen fieri potuit;” “Fabula est in qua nec verae nec veri similes res continentur,” 1.19.27.


16 See Kelly, Arts of Poetry, pp. 51 and 59.

17 See Mehtonen, pp. 63-67, for a discussion of medieval aspects of historia in relation to rhetoric.

18 Quoted from Mehtonen, pp. 68-69. This passage occurs in the unedited “long version” of Geoffrey’s Documentum, as found in MS Bodleian Library, Selden Supra 65, and MS Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 707. The quotation above is J. J. Sherridan’s translation of Alan of Lille, printed by Mehtonen on p. 69.

Edwards, p. 80. See also Morse, p. 86.


Mehtonen, pp. 74-76. Mehtonen, p. 76, also cites Ralph of Longchamp's discussion of *propositio*, *invocatio*, and *narratio* and shows how the same structures are indicative of *auctores* of the “modern” period, such as the Alan of Lille, a near-contemporary of John.

Mehtonen, p. 76. See also Morse, p. 7.

Quoted from Mehtonen, p. 73.

Mehtonen, p. 74.

Copeland, pp. 162-63, argues that John combines Cicero with Boethius’ circumstances, and he theorizes how the generation of text becomes the action once ascribed to classical rhetoric. The rhetorical circumstances describe not real things that happened (and from which legal arguments can be generated) but what is going to happen on the page, so to speak, through the process of invention by the author.

Mehtonen, pp. 65-66.

See Mehtonen, pp. 75-76. Walter Map uses the term “modernitas” to describe the century preceding his own historical moment. Modernity for Map becomes recent history.

Copeland, p. 20.

“Confessio transgressionis facit ad veniam, remotio velaminis devitat arrogantiam, concessio reprehensionis pollicetur emendationem,” 4.43, p. 102. The Latin text is found in Faral, pp. 109-93. The translation is from *Ars versificatoria*, trans. Roger P. Parr

31 The Latin text is found in Faral, pp. 197-262. The translation is from The Poetria nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), here 2.148-50; p. 20.

32 Novoque lepore

Materiae formam nolit meminisse, sed ejus

Abneget in gremio, quasi dedignata, sedere:

Supra thema datum sistat, sed spectet ad illud

Recta fronte; nihil dicat, sed cogitet inde

(2.129-33; p. 20).


34 “a naturalibus rebus, vt quando assumuntur similitudines ab herbis, a lapidibus, ab animates, ab inanimatis rebus. Quedam proverbia sumuntur a moralibus, quando versus et auctorum sententie propnuntur, ut ‘Imperat aut seruit collecta pecunia cuique.’ . . . Possunt proverbia inueniri a laude, a uituperio, a similitudine, a negocio rei, a personis ipsis” (1.161-69).

35 (1.184-86).

36 Lawler, pp. xviii-xix, attributes John’s “shortcomings” to the needs of his audience of younger students; see also p. 237. Purcell, p. 88, argues that John’s “meandering” treatise is due to its oral nature. Mary Carruthers, The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 123-25, calls
John’s account “garbled” and John himself “confused,” but she notes that from this mess emerges a system of memory useful to himself at least.

37 “Tria genera personarum hic debent considerari secundum tria genera hominum, que sunt curiales, ciuiles, rurales. Curiales sunt qui curiam tenet ac celebrant, ut Dominus Papa, cardinals, legati, archiepiscopi, episcopi, et eorum suffraganei, sicut archidiaconi, decani, officials, magisttri, scolares. Item, imperators, reges, marchiones, et duces. Ciuiles persone sunt consul, prepositus, et cetera persone in ciuitate habitants. Rurales sunt rura colentes, sicut uenatores, agricole, uinitores, aucupes. Secundum ista tria genera hominum inuenit Uirgilius stilum triplicem de quo postea docebitur” (1.124-34). John redraws the traditional social triumvirate by including scolares and ecclesiastics among the courtiers, but the model is still easily transferable, as it was over a century later when John Gower began his reconciliation of poetry with history in the Vox Clamantis.

38 Kelly, Arts of Poetry, p. 72. In this process, “the attributes—the proprietates, the colores operum, the epitheta, the personae attributa—define and delineate the quality of the person and the materia. The multiplication of attributes enhances the comprehensibility and credibility of the work, provided they remain representative, coherent, and consistent” (73).

39 John of Garland, 1.140-46.


41 Indeed, this movement is how critics have justified the study of the artes poeticae as precursors to the literary “genius” of writers like Chrétien or Chaucer. The true creative work of invention occurred in the mind of the writer, not in the pages of the treatise. See
John, for example, discusses inventing from the qualities of persons in a way that reflects prudent imagination: “With persons there is always a pair of alternatives; as with kings: to rule the kingdom well, or to tear the kingdom to pieces like a tyrant; with prelates: to pursue divine contemplation, or to idle about in secular affairs; with city dwellers: to carry on the business of the city, to strengthen the republic, or to squander it; with peasants, it means sweating over rural duties, or giving up” [In personis duo, ut in regibus: bene regnum regere, vel regnum tirannide dilacerare; in prelatis: divinæ contemplationi insistere, uel negociis secularibus ociari; in ciuilibus: urbis negocia tractare, rem publicam augere uel dissipare; in ruralibus, contingit circa ruralia desudare uel cessare] (1.140-46). The process in John of Garland and Geoffrey of Vinsauf is not exactly prudence, however—but it is the groundwork that leads to prudence, eventually made manifest in the invented narrative that proceeds from this mode of thought. For a helpful discussion of prudence as the goal of ethical reading, see Carruthers, p. 191.

Carruthers, p. 251, argues that John’s Wheel of Virgil was probably held in the students’ hands and manipulated physically. See also her summary of John’s system, pp. 123-26. For her broader survey of medieval adaptations of classical memory systems, see pp. 122-55.

“debemus eligere dicenda adminiculo artis memorandi, que poetis materiam ordinantibus est necessaria. Vnde secundum Tullium debemus in mente quamdam aream disponere, nec in loco nimis obscuro nec nimis claro, quia hec nouercantur memorie et electioni” (2.87-92).

“Si ab ore magistri proferatur aliqua dicito significans aliquid quod pertinet ad alienam...
trium personarum predictarum, ibi erit inuenienda et eligenda.” (2.95-98).

46 “exempla et dicta et facta autentica, et magistri a quibus audiuimus, et libri quos legimus. Si aliquid deciderit nobis a memoria, debemus recolere tempus clarum uel obscurum in quo didicimus, locum in quo, magistrum a quo, in quo habitu, in quo gestu, libros in quibus studuimus, paginam candidam uel nigram, disposiciones et colores litterarum; quia hec omnia introductiua erunt rerum memorandarum et nobis eligendarum” (2.99-105).


Chapter 2

The Invention of History in Fourteenth-Century Chronicles

Invention was the first step in a formal process of writing that included selecting and treating matter for composition; it was also a historical act in its own right. In this chapter I demonstrate how this double conceptualization of invention is present in fourteenth-century chronicles. I begin by cataloging some of the differences fourteenth-century English chronicles and those of earlier periods. Next, focusing on these chronicles themselves, I show how Ranulf Higden’s universal chronicle, the Polychronicon, and its English translation by John Trevisa, function as much as maps for topical invention as they do for historical understanding. I then turn to the late-century chronicles of Thomas Walsingham of St. Albans and Henry Knighton of St.Mary’s Leicester. These chronicles treat inventio as a res gesta on par with the political and social events they address. Finally, I show how the compilatio structure of the Westminster Chronicle actually turns the goal of rhetorical invention inward, ordering its narrative of the Merciless Parliament in a way that repositions the persuasive ends of rhetoric as the origin of the narrative. Like Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who not only tells his students how to invent but eloquently shows them through his poetry, these chronicles take up process and matter as two aspects of the same principle.
The Chronicles of Late Fourteenth-Century England

The invention of history resonates particularly in fourteenth-century English chronicles. The century’s reputation among modern scholars for rhetorically-significant historiography, however, has traditionally not been very high, especially when compared with the long twelfth-century “renaissance” that precedes it. Twelfth-century writers produced historical works not only of great eloquence; they also reinvented the older monastic view of history as continuous and unchanging by reading history by demonstrating its relevance to the immediate present. They also invented and disseminated the legends of King Arthur. Given the sweeping synthesis of twelfth-century historiography that incorporated history into the disciplinary embrace of logic and grammar, and that simultaneously maximized history’s potential for romance, and whose practitioners did so with equally sweeping authority, the years between Matthew Paris and the first appearance of Ranulf Higden’s Polychronicon seem in retrospect a period of decline.

The grand narrative of historiographical development in England is linked in part to the generic distinction between “chronicle” or “annal” and “history,” and to what the differences between these categories imply about the reasons for and means of writing history. Medieval classifications do not offer consistent definitions of either category, but Gervase of Canterbury establishes a commonplace (if problematic) binary: “histories” are rhetorically more dynamic than chronicles, which present the materia of the past without flourish and in chronological order. Modern critical opinion is similarly divided over the extent to which medieval historians would have known the difference between a history and a chronicle. More recent scholarship has redirected older critical narratives of the
gradual production of simple chronicles to complex histories toward a more complicated field in which different genres of history overlap and converge over time. Even so, the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries leave us wanting if we are looking for writers comparable to the early giants Bede, Gildas, and Nennius, the twelfth-century virtuosos William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntington, or the problematic cases of Geoffrey of Monmouth and his French and English versifiers. Modern scholarship shows that after the twelfth century, the focus on eloquence gives way to concentration on materia, and, as John O. Ward dramatically summarizes, the “great age of medieval historiography [that] flourished in the liminal, conflict-filled ‘pre-structural’ age” of the twelfth century vanished as that century came to a close. Ward’s characterization is accurate—but for more centuries than just the twelfth.

In generic terms, fourteenth-century history writing also existed in a kind of liminal state: historical writing of the period includes chronicles composed in three languages as well as letter collections, political poetry, and parliamentary descriptions. Chronicle accounts produced in the century include the verse and prose Brut chronicles and universal histories like Higden’s Polychronicon. By the end of the century, there was also an increase in works by monks and canons, a so-called monastic “resurgence” when compared to the twelfth century. There was a similar increase in secular and locally-focused chronicles, like the Anonimalle and London chronicles, and by the fifteenth century, most chronicles would be written by secular clerks. Increasing secularization accompanied increasing vernacularization. While the trend began in Anglo-Norman at the start of the century, it turned toward English, so that by the fifteenth century vernacular chronicles were written almost entirely in English. The fourteenth century is
significant for other transitional reasons as well. A vast increase in documentation and record keeping led to a general rise in literacy and generated increased sources for historical composition. Historical texts were generated also through the rumblings of an emergent but undefined English proto-nationalism. The general diffusion of a “documentary culture” would resonate in the fields of politics, historiography, and poetic composition. Thus, even before the heady days of political and cultural “crises” of the 1380s and 90s, fourteenth-century chronicle writing was distinct from that of earlier centuries, and not simply because its participants were in a state of decline.

Part of the “decline” in fourteenth-century chronicles can be attributed to the changing methods in which writers presented themselves in historical texts. The great post-Conquest histories by Henry of Huntington and William of Malmesbury, for example, looked to an English hierarchy of authoritative historians that included Gildas, Nenius, and especially Bede, as both sources and literary models for their own endeavors. Similar principles applied to vernacular historians of the period. As Peter Damian-Grint has shown, vernacular writers presented themselves as maistre, learned teachers based on Latin example and the grammatical tradition, to a point at which “emphasis on truthfulness probably has little to do with any interest in the theory of historiography, but is connected, rather, to the very practical question of authorization.” Writers’ efforts to demonstrate authority structured their truth claims and based the verisimilitude of their accounts on varying shades of authorial interjection. This approach to history writing as contributing to a canon of English historical writing—the literary history of history—does not distinctly define the methodology of chroniclers writing in the fourteenth century. The first English vernacular chronicles, for example, were translations of French
vernacular chronicles rather than original compositions or versifications of Latin prose texts, and whatever shadows of auctoritas their compilers cast were much different from those of the 1100s. The absence of authorial presence likewise makes it easier to dismiss any significant process of invention from fourteenth-century historiography: no rhetorical flourish means no noteworthy invention.

Difference, though, is hardly the same thing as absence. Historical and inventional authority, expressed either explicitly throughout the text by the chronicler or manifested more subtly through the words and deeds of historical personages, manifests itself much differently in fourteenth-century chronicle texts, from early vernacular histories like Robert Mannyng of Brunne’s *Chronicle*, to the later Latin chronicles of Thomas Walsingham and Henry Knighton. These chronicles root authority within the historical narrative itself. This inventional process allows for a mode of history writing that can accommodate the early and mid-century issues of writing a history of England against a Latin and Norman tradition, as well as the various cultural crises that characterize the 1380s and 1390s. In all these chronicles, the materia for invention becomes invented materia in a way uncharacteristic of the more celebrated chronicles of earlier periods to which fourteenth-century texts are so often compared.

In this chapter, I look at the very popular “universal chronicle,” the *Polychronicon*, and three of its continuations. I argue that inventio is formative in the compilation of these chronicles, that invention is often linked with the problematic nature of the events the chronicles relate, and that strategies of invention are in fact dramatized by the version of history put forth by the chronicles. It will become apparent, I hope, that this inventional direction begins in part in the special characterization of a sense of
history as a necessary component of invention, taught by the *artes poeticae*. While the invented narratives of history are not strict compositions of the kind treated in the *artes*, the construction of historical narratives in the fourteenth century may be construed as intertextual *compilatio* in one of its most conventional forms. Often, chroniclers simply inserted their sources’ text into their documents without the mediating work of rephrasing it in their own Latin or translating it into the vernacular. This tendency varied among chroniclers, and it has been linked by modern historians not to laziness or lack of skill, but to the nature of the matter they felt they had to incorporate. As Barbara F. Harvey puts it in the case of the *Westminster Chronicle*, the “formidable texts relating to the appointment of a continual council in November 1386 were too much for the Monk’s power of assimilation.”17 Yet the monk who compiled this section of the chronicle consciously invented a narrative of the events of 1386 through Richard’s struggle with the Appellants. A conscious program of rhetorical invention thus operates even in chronicles as “cut-and-pasted” as Westminster’s, and this program of invention can acquaint us with a sense of history particular to fourteenth-century English writers who felt the need to respond in some way to events of large cultural, perhaps even “national,” significance.

Invention is a social act as well as a textual one,18 and as the Westminster narrative indicates, one of the major “social” events that caused English chroniclers to change their discursive tactics was the interminable back-and-forth between Richard and his lords. While baronial disputes are in no way an innovation of the 1300s, their depictions by chroniclers of the time are. The exchanges are understood in chronicles as a lengthy narrative process. The fact that so many *res gestae* during the period are actually
series of discursive exchanges with profound civic and national consequences demanded a new method of historical invention different from those that had successfully narrated the valorous deeds of Edward III only a short time earlier.

The innovation is noticeable even when compared with Matthew Paris, the monastic English chronicler of the thirteenth century who is celebrated by modern scholars in ways not dissimilar to William Malmesbury’s or Henry of Huntington’s praise of Bede. The reason for such praise is that Matthew, like the historians of the twelfth century, established himself in his chronicle as an authoritative, organizational force in a way not found among the chronicles of monks and canons a century later. While this occurs explicitly in his Chronica maiora, it also operates at a subtler rhetorical level throughout the chronicle. For Matthew, the events of history are best understood as the results of actions taken by historical personages. The thirteenth-century disputes between crown and baron were also mainly rhetorical and discursive in nature. Matthew’s depiction emphasizes rhetorical agents in full control of speech that “cause” historical events to occur. Henry III was the prime example, and Matthew uses the king’s constant rhetorical actions and understanding of their subsequent political effects—his negotia—to shape the monarch’s persona. In Matthew’s chronicle Henry becomes a man marked by eloquence and rhetorical proficiency, and Matthew’s history remains the history of the deeds of kings. Matthew’s self-cultivated auctoritas extends even to his chronicle’s incorporation of the full texts of letters and official documents. Matthew includes them in order to stage disputative engagements between the major figures of history, as for example in the sustained epistolary debate between Emperor Frederick and Popes Gregory IX and Innocent IV.
The demonstration of historical authority, either stated explicitly throughout the text by the chronicler or conveyed more subtly through the words and deeds of historical personages, manifests itself much differently in the writings of Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, and the two monks of Westminster. It differs also from both the Latin and English versions of the *Polychronicon* on which these three chronicles are, at least in part, based. These chronicles root authority within the historical narrative itself. While the chroniclers clearly take political positions on historical issues and personages, their narratives nevertheless give the impression of emerging from the very protracted sequence of historical events they report. This impression arises in a variety of ways from chronicle to chronicle: Higden produces a historical narrative that mimics the organizational work of invention; Walsingham parries what he views to be the dangerous invitational strategies of the Lollards by narrating miraculous events that counter their rhetoric; and the monks of Westminster rearrange their primary materials to present a narrative of the Merciless Parliament that culminates in the *res gestae* that prompted the composition of the chronicle in the first place. These varying processes establish a mode of history writing that can accommodate the complicated and difficult events of the fourteenth century. The new mode of writing derives in part from the emphasis on *inventio* and topical selection that defines one of fourteenth-century England’s most popular chronicles, the *Polychronicon*.

**Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon***

One of the most copied chronicles of the fourteenth century, Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon* synthesizes biblical, legendary, and (to a lesser extent) near-contemporary
historical events into a single historical narrative. Higden’s text was in many ways unprecedented: never before in England had a chronicle of its kind covered so much ground so thoroughly, been as widely copied, nor inspired as many continuations.20 The books of the Polychronicon removed the need for many other versions of ancient history, simply because the chronicle was so massive, rich, and inclusive: a “supra-history or master genre,” as Emily Steiner calls it.21 As such, it inspired many continuations, and Steiner convincingly shows how Higden’s chronicle functioned not only as “a locus for formal invention,” but also as a basis for re-inventing ways of looking at contemporary political relations. This “radical historiography,” as she sees it, was especially palatable to writers like John Wyclif and William Langland, who found in Higden triggers for imagining alternatives to the dominant cultural myths of the late fourteenth century.22 While the Polychronicon was a powerful tool for inventing subversive political thought, the encyclopedic quality that made it so popular is in part traceable to the inventional practices that it enacts as part of its historical narrative.

Higden begins his chronicle traditionally enough with commonplace ideas about the value of history as a model for ethical behavior transmitted by the diligent work of writers: “In historico namque contextu chronographorum nobis diligentia delegato relucet clarus norma morum, forma vivendi, probitatis incentivum” [For in þe making and bookes of stories, þat is to vs i-sent and byqueþe by grete besynesse of þe writers of cronicles, blaseþ and schyneþ clerliche þe ri3t rule of þewes, ensemple of leuynge, clensynge of goodnes] (1.4-5).23 He establishes history’s even more fundamental purpose of battling forgetfulness: “novercante semper oblivione memoriae inimica” [for3etingnes all wy kypinge þe craft of a stepdamme, he is enemy of mynde] (1.4-5). To fight this
battle, especially when writing in an age of forgetfulness, history builds past events into monuments:

loquendi quoque tropi et schemata penitus deperirent. . . . Historia igitur, cum sit testis temporum, memoria vitae, nuncia vetustatis, dotes possidet praeminentes, suosque quam plurimum praegat professores. Historia namque quadam famæ immortalitate peritura renovat, fugitiva revocat, mortalia quodammodo perpetuat et conservat”

[nobilite and faire manere of spekynge were all i-lost. . . . For storie is wytnesse of tyme, mynde of lyf, messager of eldnesse; story weldeþ passyng doynges, storie putteþ forth hire professoures. Dedes þat wolde be lost storie ruleþ; dedes þat wolde flee out of mynde, storye clepeþ a3en; dedes þat wolde deie, storye depeþ hem euermore] (1.4-7).

While typical of medieval views of history, Higden’s description of history’s work does not focus only on acts of memorialization and preservation. History is, first and foremost, an organizer, a process that “fugitiva revocat”: any “dedes” that flee out of the memory, “storye clepeþ a3en.” History gathers together and organizes the stray pieces that might slip through culture’s net of memory. Trevisa’s English translation marks this organizing duty even more clearly. History writing “ruleþ” material that otherwise “wolde be lost,” and Trevisa’s term for this work—reulen—encapsulates senses of governing and controlling, but also of managing and putting something into its proper place. The expression has as much to do with history’s value as an instructor in moral behavior as it does with the work of the historian who, in Higden’s case, “ex variis
auctorum decerptum laboribus, de statu insulæ Britannicæ” [i-gadered of dyuerse booke, of þe staat of þe ylond of Britayne] (1.7). Higden makes no bones about being a compiler from other histories; even Virgil, had done it before him anyway. Higden, though, goes somewhat further, equating the organizing work of the compiler with historiography’s work of preservation and memorial-making.

Here Higden stages his real problem: the preponderance of histories. “Cujus negotii,” he writes, “velut Dædalini labyrinths, inextricabilem attendens intricationem, rogata sum veritus attemptare,” and Trevisa again tellingly expands in his translation: “Þoo toke I hede þat þis matir, as laborintus, Dedalus hous, hæp many halkes and hurnes, wonderful weis, wyndynges and wrynkelynges, þat wil no3t be unwarled, me schamed and dradde to fynde so grete and so gostliche a bone to graunte.” (1.8-9). Higden’s concern, despite Trevisa’s dramatics, is not the same as the concern Lee Patterson reads in book three of Chaucer’s House of Fame, where the worry over the inescapable regression of a “recursive secular history” stifles invention. Higden, instead, refers to the sheer number of sources he means to compile, the “materia numerum et auctoritatem” (1.8). Concerns about the materia of history give way to anxiety about the company a new English historian keeps: Higden, at least within the humility topos of his prologue, worries over his ability to speak eloquently and valuably amid so many better historians. In fact, though the Polychronicon rails against the vacuum of oblivion, the real problem is not a dearth of sources but a glut of them. The Polychronicon’s concern is not that history as a concept is recursive, entrapping, overpowering—at last, self-consuming and destructive. On the contrary, history is a well-worn path, and the work of a fourteenth-century English chronicler must lie in organizing the footprints for a new time and a new
readership. In Higden’s prologue, the gaping abyss of forgetfulness is a rhetorical device only, adding an elegant sense of urgency to the work of a compiler. More than that, though, the prologue recasts the traditional crisis of forgetfulness as a crisis of organization and, ultimately, of invention. Indeed, “post tantos tubicines,” after such great trumpeters, how can Higden be expected to organize his chronicle any better?

The answer comes in part through the way in which the *Polychronicon* responds to, or perhaps invents rhetorically, an audience that is not only interested in hearing moral lessons from a wealth of historical sources, but that also reads Higden’s chronicle as a sourcebook of invention. In essence, Higden transfers his own authorial characteristics—that of the humble compiler—to his audience, hoping that his work will, “ut arbitrór, non inutilem studiosis” (1.12). He hopes, that is, that his text will not be useless to the studious reader, whom he characterizes later as someone with the same intentions as his own—to compile the varied works of history together, and who simply lacks the vast library needed to do so (1.14). Higden’s chronicle is designed to simulate for a reader the invention of *electio*; it distills and consolidates the expanse of source material but ultimately leaves the choice of selection to its imagined auditor. The reader Higden’s prologue creates, then, is an inventor, an auditor who possesses the characteristics at once of one of John of Garland’s students and the author of the *Polychronicon.*

Appropriately, then, Higden describes his methodology in a way that satisfies the preconditions of his humility trope while fulfilling the goal of making his chronicle a source for topical invention. His text will be defined not by “sententiae subtilitas neque verborum venustats, sed devotionis sinceritas materiae militabit,” or, as Trevisa puts it,
not by “sotilte of sentence, noþer faire florischynge of wordes, but swetnesse of deuocion of þe matire [which] schal regne in þis book” (1.14-15). The Polychronicon is a beacon of materia, not eloquentia; of inventio, not elocutio. If the chronicle links history with moral instruction, it does so through a catalytic framework of invention shared at once by the author and his readers.

The Polychronicon maintains this method in practice, even to the point where the text’s value as a source for topical invention threatens to overshadow its usefulness as a source for moral instruction. When he compiles material from his vast array of sources, Higden regularly conflates irreconcilable evidence. Julius Caesar, for example, is said to be both the best administrator of the Roman republic and an implacable tyrant, and Alexander the Great receives no consistent treatment in the extensive sections dedicated to his life.27 Higden famously treats Geoffrey of Monmouth’s legends of Arthur, only to state how, “si Arthurus, sicut scribit Gaufridus, terdena regna acquisivit . . . cur omnes historici Romani, Franci, Saxonici tot insignia de tanto viro omiserunt, qui de minoribus viris tot minora retulerunt?” [if Arthor hadde i-wonne þretty kyngdoms . . . why lefte alle þe writers of stories of Romayns, Frenschemen, and Saxons, and speke no3t of so greet (dedes and of so greet) a victor, seþe þat þey tolde so moche and of so menye lasse men, and of wel lasse dedes?] (5.335). Yet, even as he expresses his doubts, he never comes to dismiss Geoffrey’s account, as William of Newburgh had two centuries earlier.28

Likewise, while presenting the history of Carthage’s founding by Dido, Higden very clearly states that the love affair between Aeneas and the queen could not have taken place historically. “Non ergo poterit ad litteram stare quod tradit Virgilius, et Phrygius Dares in historia sua de bello Trojano, quod scilicet Æneas vidit Didonem, cum Æneas
obierit ante fundationem Carthaginis, quam Dido fundavit, plus quam trecentis annis”

[Pan it may nou3t stonde þat Virgilius and Phrygius Dares in his storie of þe bataille of Troye seip, þat Eneas sih þat womman Dido, for Eneas was dede þre hondred 3ere and more or Cartage was i-founded þat Dido founded] (1.166-67). Yet Higden allows for the possibilities that the Aeneid may be talking about another Carthage, or even another Dido, while simultaneously maintaining Augustine’s assertion that wise men deny that Aeneas ever existed at all.29

The related histories of Carthage and Aeneas’ wanderings, as Higden renders them, function as arrays of topical possibility. He invokes the histories of Virgil and Dares as invented texts, legitimating his own text through them, while demonstrating that their dates must be incorrect, and while further leaving open the possibility that another, older Dido, or even a different Carthage, may be what the auctores were thinking of. Higden navigates the labyrinth of history by making the process of invention his way out, by laying down all his cards at once. He presents the Polychronicon as an inventional precursor to the materiae numera et auctoritatis of the histories and philosophical treatises he uses as sources. Furthermore, he justifies his methodology through the most resilient of proverbs: “Nam et apostolus non, ‘Quæcunque scripta sunt vera sunt,’ ait; sed, ‘Quæcunque scripta sunt, ad nostram doctrinam scripta sunt,’ inquit”; as Trevisa translates it, “For þe apostel seith nou3t, ‘All þat is write to oure lore is sooþ,’ but he seip ‘Al þat is i-write to oure lore it is i-write’” (I.18-19). Trevisa’s translation gets at the heart of Higden’s appropriation of Paul’s maxim: the value of history is not that it is true, but that it is written, and that as writing, it can be organized and directed for our learning. The Polychronicon, as Higden takes pains to show, is an instantiation of histories, not
history itself. It is “about” invention because it is designed to present not a single truth but loci of truth.

The *Polychronicon* takes invention itself as a topic and uses the resulting meta-process as both a structuring method and a way of presenting and understanding history as a function of invention. Higden’s method worked. The *Polychronicon* can in part be credited with the resurgence of monastic chronicle writing in the last quarter of the fourteenth century when monks and canons vigorously began continuations of Higden’s chronicle, as well as the radical political discourses identified by Steiner. But to what extent can this line of inquiry prove fruitful for late-fourteenth-century chronicles that modern scholars have traditionally found invaluable for situating late medieval English poetry in its historical context? Do similar structures and uses of invention mark the monastic chronicles that relate major social or political events beginning the 1380s? The answer, I think, is yes. More importantly, though, these later chronicles that smack so resoundingly of *compilatio* nevertheless demonstrate a similar emphasis on the relationship between invention and history. They also show how late medieval English social crises were recorded and treated with significant reference to the processes of formal invention.

**Continuations of Higden’s *Polychronicon***

Chronicle writing changed after Edward III’s reign. As Gransden notes, the focus on national conquests ceded space to events like the popular uprisings in 1381, the early instantiations of the Wyclifite and Lollard heresies, and, a few years later, the events leading up to the Merciless Parliament of 1388, not to mention international components
of change, including changing fortunes in the Hundred Years’ War or the reality of the bubonic plague.\textsuperscript{30} Chris Given-Wilson writes that while it was still possible to relate history in terms of crown-magnate relations, by the last quarter of the century, the commons played a more expanded role and added “a new dimension to English political history.”\textsuperscript{31} The social and structural significance of Parliament in particular had, by the end of the century, become part of “the public consciousness and historical literature of England to an extent that, twenty-five years earlier, could scarcely have been imagined.”\textsuperscript{32} Given-Wilson furthermore links this tendency, especially its echoes in historians like Higden, to the increasing belief that not merely royal genealogies had roots in the past, but so did an idea of the English nation.\textsuperscript{33} While the increased focus on parliament certainly reflected a sense of patriotism (if not exactly nationhood) in a post-Edward III environment, it also refigures significantly the \textit{materia} of chronicle composition. Andrew Galloway, for example, notes how the Merciless Parliament of 1388 was remarkable for the way it introduced unprecedented irregularities into parliamentary procedure and tradition.\textsuperscript{34} As parliamentary proceedings more and more became the stuff of history, historical matter was less \textit{res gestae} and more \textit{res verbi}, even as “legendary” chronicles like the prose Brut continued to be copied through the fifteenth century. Indeed, as Lynn Staley thoroughly shows, the reign of Richard II was the time of “an actual search for a language of power.”\textsuperscript{35}

Many chronicles of the period started life as continuations of Higden’s \textit{Polychronicon} and extended into the fifteenth century, when English historiography exploded into even more diverse forms.\textsuperscript{36} With the \textit{Polychronicon} covering the legendary history of Britain in a way that reconciled pagan and classical elements with a Biblical
time structure, all with reference to the history of England, writers could concentrate on
recording contemporary events within a few years of their occurrence without sacrificing
the universality that Higden’s text made so important. Three of these chronicles in
particular—those by Thomas Walsingham, Henry Knighton, and two monks at
Westminster, each begun to some degree as continuations of the Polychronicon—while
crafted through compilation, nevertheless demonstrate concerns with the relationship of
formal invention to the recording of history. In fact, because these chronicles are often
written in close context with the events they describe, they offer a particularly clear lens
for observing the relationship between materia and process.

Invention did of course take place explicitly in these chronicles in the form of
political propaganda. Walsingham, for example, at times a vitriolic opponent of John of
Gaunt’s person and policies, was forced to reconcile with the fact that, in the wake of the
gradual diminishment of Richard, Gaunt looked more and more like the man to lead the
realm. Walsingham makes his peace with his own chronicle account not merely by
removing some of the negative material already written about Gaunt. He does so also
within the textual environment of his chronicle, justifying his own change of heart toward
Gaunt by describing a similar change in the earl himself: Gaunt underwent a sudden
spiritual change that helped clear him—in Walsingham’s quasi-historical view, at least—
of his earlier qualities and actions. This propagandistic form of historical invention was,
of course, new neither in England nor Europe. It would intensify during the lead-up to the
eventual deposition of Richard, and it would continue in much more prolific and diverse
manners after Henry’s ascension and through the fifteenth century.

While offering opportunities for chroniclers to invent, such propaganda in itself is
not as revealing as the more elaborate ways chroniclers interpolated near-contemporary historical events and gave them a narrative shape that demonstrates as much a concern with the invention of historical texts as with either the propagandistic or verisimilar qualities of historical writing. On the whole, modern critics have tended to read the chronicles of Walsingham, Knighton, and the monks of Westminster for historical content rather than for their narrative qualities. These historical readings take into account both the propagandistic elements of the chronicles, as well as the way in which the chronicles have influenced our modern understanding of critical events of the fourteenth century. In terms of literary criticism, these readings have tended to set historical productions like the Westminster Chronicle beside literary productions like the later poetry of Gower and Chaucer in order to illustrate particular discursive truths about late-fourteenth-century ways of speaking and currents of political power. If, keeping the vital readings of such criticism in mind, we also read for invention, we discover not only how particular men responded to radical social events, but also how these chroniclers’ narratives make invention a part of the historical material to be recorded.

In these chronicles, issues of invention and discourse become historical problems to be treated because of their implication in important historical events. The Lollard heresy, the Peasants’ Revolt, and Richard’s struggle with the Appellants earn a large amount of space from chroniclers, first because they constitute historical problems unlike those faced by earlier English chroniclers, and second because they cast doubt on otherwise unchallenged cultural assumptions. Amid events of this nature, these chronicles tend to root authority within the historical narrative itself. They internalize invention within the historical narrative, rather than through explicit interjection or reference to
other historical sources (though both of these devices occur). This particular mode of
tory writing helps accommodate the difficult social and political events of the
fourteenth century, and it does so by making the process of invention part of the materia
of history.

**Walsingham, Knighton, and the Lollards**

In modern study, the Wyclifite and Lollard heresy has become a flashpoint of
social change and a nexus for examining the literary manifestations of those changes. The
political implications that led Knighton and Walsingham to link the Wyclifites with the
rioters of 1381 have likewise interested modern scholars, in part because the Lollard
movement generated early English vernacular texts which conflate issues of social power
and discursive dissemination. Lollard texts argue at once that the bible should be
translated into English and that translation should occur to benefit the poor laity. The
coaesing of social and discursive elements inherent in Lollard spirituality, teaching,
preaching, and rhetoric that are most interesting to modern literary critics were not lost on
their late medieval chroniclers. While agents of the Church exhausted much ink carefully
countering the theological claims of Wyclif and his followers, the interpretive
components of Lollard translation, education practices, and views on the authority of
written texts were also a focus of ecclesiastical attention. As Rita Copeland argues, the
Lollard attitude toward reading scripture led to a kind of pedagogy which held that the
literal sense was the only interpretive tool needed to understand scripture. The real
contest was over hermeneutical power, “the territorial difference between the high
analytic practice of hermeneutics and its long-debased opposite, elementary pedagogy.”
Paul Strohm suggests that Lollard discourse was itself the means by which Church authorities could trap so-called heretics and publicly demonstrate their beliefs to be foolish. Lollard heresy was evident in Lollard beliefs; but the danger of Lollardy at the social and historical levels was felt in the way Lollards understood and taught—in essence, in their processes of *inventio*.

Thomas Walsingham likewise addressed the theological implications of Lollard teachings, but he also concerned himself with the discursive threat Wyclif presented. Walsingham’s reports that Wyclif in 1377 moved rapidly from church to church in London to spread his message, for example, is considered by most scholars to be an exaggeration; it nevertheless demonstrates the chronicler’s concern with Wyclif’s ability to get his message out, as much as it does his concern with the theological implications of that message. Walsingham’s first entry for 1381 in his *Chronica maiora* relates the “condemned opinions” embraced by Wyclif, whom he calls in English “Wikkebeliue.” Walsingham spends very little time expounding on these *opiniones*, however, and instead asserts that “with such ravings he has led many astray into the same error.” Walsingham follows immediately with the “Dreadful deed of a knight against the body of Christ,” in which Laurence of St. Martin, seduced by Wyclif, steals a communion wafer, brings it home, and eats it with oysters, onions, and wine as if it were ordinary bread. Eventually, after discussing his performance of this *factum horribilis* with some clerics, the knight realizes the scope of his sin and does an equally sensational form of penance that requires him to erect in a public place a cross engraved with the narrative of his sin and to tell his story once a week to everyone in earshot, all while dressed only in his underwear.

Comparable stories of heretical views of the Eucharist, especially those
concerning English Jews, often involved doubters cutting the wafer and watching it bleed the blood of Christ. In Walsingham’s chronicle, however, the discursive threat of Wyclif’s preaching—not the true nature of the Eucharist—triggers invention. Given the Wyclifite take on the sacrament, the meta-inventional approach of Walsingham is the only one that can represent the events historically while also attacking their social and theological significance. Wyclif believed that the bread and wine were still bread and wine, even after transubstantiation; added to this earthly material was “the spiritual being of Christ.” The Eucharist was about meaning for Wyclif, not material composition, just as a statue was about representation rather than the material of which it was made, as he himself describes the phenomenon. The problem, then, was not simply heresy or ignorance, but the threat of the underlying materia of faith being rewritten, then disseminated through Wyclif’s wild rhetoric. To counter these preachings, Walsingham exaggerates their method of conveyance. The episode of the knight offers no miracle of the Eucharist; instead it presents a factum horribilis that qualifies as “miraculous” only at the level of invention: the episode actualizes Lollard rhetoric in the form of a narrative factum, and treats it like historical event. There is nothing inherently “wondrous” about the episode except for its narrative performance of the wild rhetoric of Wyclif’s teaching through the knight’s flamboyant desecration of the Eucharist. The knight is persuaded back to orthodoxy with words, not miracles, and the story itself—and its retelling in public—becomes the performative “proof” of Wyclif’s heresy.

This earthly, discursive resolution the chronicle takes to be convincing enough, because it addresses in historiographical narration Wyclif’s deeper hermeneutic investment in the nature of the Eucharist. But it also addresses the discursive means by
which this message was disseminated. Indeed, Walsingham’s narration of the event encapsulates the standard ecclesiastical critique of the substance of Lollard teaching. Attackers of Lollardy cited the emphasis on memorization as a means of learning and understanding scripture—a process which, in the eyes of the clergy, simulated wisdom in form, but not in content. Appropriately, the entry immediately following the story of the knight relates “The arrival of a cardinal in England who performed some marvelous deeds.” The *opera mirabilis* turns out to be the cardinal’s “miraculous” ability to sell papal indulgences for money. Walsingham positions these episodes at an important inventional moment in his chronicle and uses them to address the issue of discursive dissemination and its threat to orthodox English Christianity. He accomplishes this by framing narratives that are exaggerated inventions inspired by the Lollards’ own untamed rhetoric. At such moments, the materia selected from history is not heresy but invention, and the means of arrangement are likewise shaped by the inventional nature of that materia.

While the movement was itself variegated, Lollards were perceived by chroniclers as a single group. What they had in common was, as Hudson describes it, the sense of the “separation of the individual [who was] seen as having superior judgment in the matter [of faith], from the folly of the ordinary church.” Wyclif’s teachings “forced the individual Christian to make his own judgments.” This sense of individuality and individual judgment applied to the material side of faith as well. In terms of paying tithes, many Lollard texts argue, as Hudson notes, “that judgment rests with the individual layman”; unlike official Church policy, “most Lollard texts, even when they allow for the continuance of tithes, leave it to the judgment of the payer whether the recipient should
be the parish priest or the deserving poor.” This commonality, especially in terms of the publication of Lollard teachings in the late fourteenth century, illustrates a crisis of *inventio* as well as doctrine. If Lollard writings were infused with a sense of revolt that encouraged chroniclers to associate their writers with the insurgents of 1381, then that sense was grounded in an emphasis on personal choice. The terms of a Lollard character, at least in the eyes of opponents, were drawn with the same stylus that governed the fundamental principles of invention—the process of making choices in history.

The chronicle of John Knighton, a canon at St. Mary’s Leicester where the Lollard movement had its early rumblings and who had personal connections with some of Wyclif’s followers, demonstrates a concern with both the possibility of an informal Lollard “creed” unintentionally uniting various Lollard communities, and the inventional undertones that informed that it. Knighton’s account of the Lollards is detailed and lengthy, and it includes the only extant copies of both an official ecclesiastical condemnation of Wyclif and the English text of Wyclif’s own confessions. Knighton introduces Wyclif as a man “second to none in philosophy, and incomparable in scholastic learning.” But he quickly notes that Wyclif “strove to outshine the ability of others in the subtlety of learning, and the profundity of his reasoning, and to change their opinions.” Knighton’s Wyclif is defined by *opinio*, the term that envelopes at once the error of Lollard theology and efforts to persuade others to his way of thinking. Lollard rhetoric and its transmission most concerns Knighton, and he foregrounds these issues instead of those theological points, “which will appear in their place” later on. When Knighton describes the Wycliffites and Lollards, he emphasizes their unity not through belief but through their ability to be persuaded: “What must be believed, and can be
believed without ambiguity,” is that Wyclif “inspired them with a single style of speech, and a fervent desire to serve him.”60 Such dissemination was attributable to Wyclif himself, who “was powerful and effective in disputation over everyone, and was believed to be second to none in such debates, so even those most recently drawn into their sect showed themselves decisively eloquent, superior to all others in verbal plays and quibbles, pungent in speech, formidably articulate, pre-eminent in disputation, overbearing in disputatious evasion.”61 Lollards were by definition masters of rhetorical invention, in all its aspects, as well as of invention’s desired objectives. They were so savvy in spreading their message, in fact, that they presented their opinio as veritas, simply by labeling it as such. “And note,” Knighton writes, interrupting the Lollard tract he copies into his chronicle, “that the following are such things as they say by way of affirmation: “I am sure”, “It is truth that . . .”, “Without a doubt it is so.” 62 Equally doubtless is the definitive weight Knighton assigns to discourse as the root of Lollardy, the singular auctor of which is Wyclif himself, secundus nulli.

Knighton in particular targets the Lollard translation project to make the gospels available to the “personarum indigenciam,” or “needs of the individual” of the laity.63 He links this effort to larger historiographical contexts, both to the historiographical tradition in England and to prophecy, what in his chronicle and a Christian timeframe amounts to an apocalyptic history of the future. Knighton notes that Wycliff “translated from Latin into the language not of angels but of Englishmen,”64 reversing the impact of Gregory the Great’s famous pun comparing the Angles to angels, preserved as a truthful element of English history since its inclusion by Bede.65 He then cites the translation as fulfilling the prophecies of Guillaume de Saint-Amour, which relate the end of the sixth age and the
coming of the Antichrist. The marks of the coming apocalypse for Guillaume are all discursive and are applicable to the Lollards specifically. In their translation of the gospels, the Lollards have translated the evangelium Cristi into the dreaded evangelium eternum, “that is into the vulgar and common mother tongue, which laymen believe to be better and more worthy than the Latin tongue,” which Guillaume takes to be a sure sign of the end times. Knighton then returns to the present narrative of his chronicle, in which he conflates Blackfriars and the Oxford synod into a single definitive event at which Wyclif publicly defends his opiniones. But even before laying out Wyclif’s beliefs so that they might be refuted, Knighton again emphasizes the elements of discourse and transmission. Wycliff, he writes, abandoned reason and tried to assert that charges were being brought against him because of the lies and rumors of others: “And thus having thrown down the weapons not of divinity, but of vanity, Master John Wyclif fled to shelter under the wings of his mother discipline, to fine a refuge for escaping death, as he had been taught in his cradle by his mother in this wise.” The divinitas / vanitas wordplay conflates Wyclif’s person with his rhetoric, as well as with the derogatory reversal of Gregory’s pun in Bede, and it sets up the inventional focus that pervades Knighton’s relation of the events of Wyclif’s public defense. Moreover, it connects the inventional canons of Lollard history with the larger historiographical tradition of history writing in England. By reversing the meaning of Gregory’s pun—a kernel of historical truth that provides a textual trajectory for both the English people and the history texts written about them, and which comes from the most venerable of English historians—Knighton reverses the relationship between Latin, Englishness, Christianity, and historical destiny. His reversal of the pun and subsequent wordplay on divinitas / vanitas,
invalidate Lollard *inventio*. Knighton is thus able to assign a damning moral verdict to Wyclif’s teaching: it is vanity, not invention.

The Wyclifite moment presents a problem for the writing of history, and Knighton, like Walsingham, works to solve that problem in its own terms. After relating the public arguments which pit Wyclif against Church doctrine, he describes the miracle of the Eucharist witnessed and professed by Sir Cornelius Cloyne. During a performance of the sacrament, Cloyne sees the “tertia particula,” the “third part,” of the Eucharist in which the name of “Iesus” is written in “litteris carneis,” “letters of flesh.”\(^69\) The event offers incontrovertible proof against Wyclif’s central *opiniones* on the Eucharist because what Cloyne sees is in fact the “crudis et sanguineis,” the “raw and bloody” presence of Christ within the bread. Not only is Christ there in body and spirit, but also in flesh, as prescribed by the opening of John’s gospel. The next day at a large public sermon at St. Paul’s Cross, Cloyne “told the whole story in his own words, publicly and openly, in confirmation of our faith.”\(^70\) Cloyne’s public account becomes in Knighton a historical event that undermines Wyclif’s conclusions, not for its miraculous nature, but because it uses the same discursive techniques of Wyclif’s sermonizing.

In a similar reversal, Knighton presents a kind of anti-saint’s life through the popular story of the two Lollards Richard Waytestathe and William Smith, who, for want of firewood one cold night, burn a statue of St. Catherine outside Leicester. The episode, presented as historical, defies generic convention by offering no miracle and no illustration of the saint’s holiness. Waytestathe and Smith simply burn the statue, mocking the supposed divinity of saints and the Church’s valuation of sacred images. While it does not result in the confirmation of orthodox faith, the story does inspire poetic
invention in Knighton himself, who offers a short and apparently original poem recounting the episode while emphasizing the vain hedonism of the two Lollards. In the poem, Knighton describes the inability of any language or textual production to condemn or even to describe accurately “their deceits and their malice”: If all the world were parchment, and the trees one reed, The seas a pool of ink, and all mankind a mighty scribe, They would not serve to tell the wicked tale.

The historicity of Knighton’s brief snippet of verse is unmistakable. He offers it only after exclaiming that “if their [i.e. the Lollards’] condition had to be described, even if the mind could be steeled to write, neither the will nor reflection would be equal to the task, and even if all the languages of mankind were made one, it would not suffice to reveal their perversity and wickedness.” Knighton invokes the historical origin of language, the days before Babel, only to demonstrate the inability of such linguistic cohesiveness to aid the lone, mortal writer through the specific processes of invention—to prepare his mind to write, let alone even excogitare, to think out or reflect on the materia of invention. For Knighton, the Lollard threat is a res gesta that heralds the potential failure of both history and invention.

The Westminster Chronicle and the Merciless Parliament

The stakes in the fight against the Lollards were high. The social apocalypse that was for Knighton the imagined end of Lollardy had a living source in the Rising of 1381. This dark promise of social disintegration, though, was not restricted in the chronicles to the rustici or heretical priests. The increasing tension and ultimate violence between
Richard and his allies and the group of nobles known as the Appellants were also presented as having the potential of ending in the destruction of the realm. I turn for the final section of this chapter to the Westminster Chronicle’s lengthy narrative of the lead-up to and unfolding of the Merciless Parliament of 1388. The events of this period presented serious inventional issues for the monk writing at the abbey. The Westminster monk’s realignment of source material makes the rhetorical and argumentative structure of the narrative itself the causae of historical events, rather than using this material to explain or rationalize the actions of particular historical personages. The goal of rhetorical invention is ultimately persuasion—for Cicero, persuasion toward action; for Augustine, persuasion toward spiritual wisdom—and the nature of invention is selection through historically-informed choice. The Westminster monk’s chronicle reinscribes invention’s character and goal back into narration, and the result is the illusion of a historical narrative that seems to invent itself. It is, quite simply, the invention of history.

The Westminster Chronicle presents the history of the late 1380s as a series of important conversations that variously succeed and fail. The governing polemic of its history is familiar: order maintained through appropriate conversation between king and nobility is juxtaposed with disorder, chaos, and the destruction of the entire realm. The 1381 revolt—the event which opens the chronicle—functions as a representation of the real social consequences of failed conversation. Examples of this rhetorical binary litter the chronicle. The monk characterizes the disintegrating situation preceding the explosion of revolt in 1381 as a time of discursive failure: “it was at this moment, if ever, that “counsel perished from the wise.” In the autumn parliament of 1383, Richard resolves a dispute between potential counselors through his “verbis persuasibilibus,” and he bases
his rhetoric on the belief that “under the rule of the lords some mishap might occur which
the commons would ascribe to their negligence, and that the estates of the realm, thus
sundered, would be thrown into every kind of turmoil.” In the contentious spring
parliament of 1384, Gaunt assuages the king’s anger at the hostile and socially
apocalyptic rhetoric of the Earl of Arundel: he “broke the silence and delivered a speech
in which he skillfully glossed the earl’s remarks, so that the king’s anger was
assuaged.” The chronicle even includes an incident in which a cordwainer, allegedly
possessed by a devil, runs through London crying out for the citizenry to take arms
against the mayor. God, however, “unwilling that the emergence of serious sedition in the
densely populated city should lead, because of a single individual, to people’s destroying
one another,” made it so the man was destroyed instead of the order of the city. Like the
“miraculous” stories in Walsingham and Knighton, the historical upshot of this miracle of
divine intervention is resoundingly secular and publicly discursive: “On good advice the
mayor now set industriously to work to appease those he could of the city crafts which
were in conflict with each other.” As the examples continue, the structural framework
that organizes history in the chronicle becomes not merely the compilation of primary
sources—which it of course primarily is—but also a compilation of conversations that
drive historical events, res gestae reflected in res verbi.

One particularly climatic episode, which involves Richard’s alleged plot to kill
Gaunt in 1385, encapsulates the Chronicle’s larger narrative structure of verbal exchange.
“Untoward incidents are sometimes unavoidable,” the monk states as he begins his
narration of the episode. Fearing Gaunt “because of his great power, his admirable
judgment, and his brilliant mind,” Richard’s counselors advise that the king arrest and
kill the duke. Gaunt narrowly escapes and afterwards visits Richard in a secret nighttime expedition. Wearing armor for protection, Gaunt chastises the king for plotting to do in private what he as king could easily and legally do in public, and he emphasizes the serious administrative headaches such actions taken by a king would inevitably produce. The following council at Westminster makes Gaunt’s concerns a matter of state policy and raises the stakes of an isolated, rhetorical incident to the national level. Such actions by the king would weaken the laws of the land to the extent that the realm would erupt in “wrangles, disputes, brawls, strife and discord, and so on.” “It was in these or some such words” that the Archbishop of Canterbury warns the gathered lords that “crimes of this kind must therefore in the future be shunned, to prevent the decline of the realm, through these lawless courses, from becoming an unmistakable fact.” In the **Westminster Chronicle**’s narrative, the moral importance of history is much more immediate: these actions must be avoided to prevent the destruction of the realm. One only has to flip back a few leaves to 1381 to understand exactly why. When these sorts of events are taken as a narrative whole, the **Westminster Chronicle** becomes not only a chronicle of verbal exchanges but also a historical account of catastrophic events which do not actually occur, but which generate the events that did. The Chronicle’s narrative seems to spin out from the unwritten history of secular apocalypse with which it began. It powerfully figures the res verbi of history as res gestae: past discourse is grounded in imagined apocalypse, and unwritten event generates the events that “actually” occurred (because they are recorded).

The mix of civic and parliamentary components with apocalyptic rhetoric also marks the **Westminster Chronicle**’s difference from the chivalrous histories of Froissart.
If in Froissart’s *Chroniques*, the central “protagonists” of English and French history are chivalric code and shared aristocratic behavior, then for the Westminster monk the protagonist becomes the conversations themselves, and not the social principles those conversation are intended to illustrate. The *Westminster Chronicle*’s narrative works by positing successful exchange as the main method of avoiding social apocalypse, a view that in itself is a late medieval commonplace, and that has been long observed as one of the hallmarks of late medieval English poetry. In the chronicle, however, this binary becomes constitutive of historical structure, and social apocalypse is figured as a potential history. The internalization of invention into historical narrative works as an engine of history, figuring historiography as a narrative that invents itself.

The *Chronicle*’s record of the events leading up to and including the Merciless Parliament of 1388 particularly demonstrates this invention technique. The monk includes two different narratives of the same events, the first based on the “official” record of the Parliament Rolls, and the second based on his own eyewitness accounts and testimonials from those close to the action. Not only are there two different accounts, but each of these, especially the Parliament Roll version, is strategically fractured and rearranged by the chronicler. The chronicler’s own, “original” narrative of the Merciless Parliament begins after the account of the battle at Radcot Bridge and the arrival of the Lords Appellant in London, where they arrest those they accuse of treason, the confidants and advisors of Richard. He then stops his account and inserts verbatim the Parliament Roll text of the Lords’ Appeal, actually delivered later during the Merciless Parliament itself. Once he starts quoting his “official” source, he continues to relate all of its contents, which include the “Process” of the entire Parliament, the text of the Appeal, the
petitions of the Commons for various pardons, and the oaths of peace taken by all present at the conclusion of Parliament. The monk then includes some “extempore composition” to link his digression to the continuation of his narrative, and continues his own narrative exactly where he left it some thirteen folios earlier. This account does not differ factually from the official version, but it does emphasize different aspects of the narrative and includes elements omitted by the Roll, softening the pro-Appellant tone of the Roll account with tempered words about Richard’s behavior and emphasizing the institutional concerns of the abbey at Westminster. In essence, it invents and glosses the official narrative.

The official narrative begins with the full text of the Appeal put forth before the king and Parliament. While structurally a list of articles citing the lords’ grievances against the king’s preferred counselors, the Appeal is actually a miniature chronicle in its own right, one that relates a further slanted version of the events that have led up to the Parliament, and that puts the stakes of the Appeal in the familiar terms of successful discourse staving off national chaos. In Article 15, for example, the Appellants assert that the earlier parliament of 1386 conscripted permanent counsel to the king because it recognized the “imminent ruin of the king and the realm.” The Appeal continues with its narrative in Article 16, noting how, during the Parliament, Richard abandoned the proceedings to reside at Eltham, “against the ancient ordinances, customs, and liberties of parliament.” In Article 15, the danger is conversation versus ruin; in 16, this danger is compounded by the removal of the king, a starkly obvious precondition for communication and counsel. In Article 17, the threat of ruin, plus the absence of the king, morphs into an even more insidious danger: the usurpation of “the king’s mind [that is,
his volun
t, his will] through the wicked instigation and counsel of the said Alexander, etc., Robert de Vere, and all the other traitors." The hijacking of the king’s will—in Article 19, the abduction of “le purpos [du] le roy”, “the purpose (of) the king”—is turned against the entire realm, from the seignurs to the comune poeple, and causes them all to be a part of “the most grievous trouble, and the whole realm more over (disquieted), and the hearts of many withdrawn from the king, saving their allegiance.” The lack of counsel leads to a disturbance that envelopes every conceivable network in the realm, from the level of the nation to the individual hearts of its people, though it stops short of dissolving allegiances to the king. Stating its case against its enemies through the high stakes of its apocalyptic rhetoric, the Appellants’ appeal functions as a second chronicle, relating the history of Robert de Vere and Michael de la Pole and company’s kidnapping of the “purpos le roy” from Richard and reassigning it to themselves, to their own will and purpose, “the will and purpose of the aforesaid misfeasors and traitors.” The Appeal’s “history” shares with the Westminster Chronicle the counsel-versus-ruin binary that guides its narrative, and it demonstrates further how discourse itself becomes the protagonist of history.

At the conclusion of the Appeal, however, the monk directs readers back to an earlier section of his text (to pages 196-202 of Hector and Harvey’s edition), which relates, from the Roll, the accused traitors’ public justification of their actions and their assertion that the rulings of the 1386 parliament prescribing continuous counsel on Richard were illegal. The monk places this narrative first in his chronicle because its events chronologically predate the reading of the Appeal, even though the earlier narrative of the accused’s objections occur after the initial articles of the Appeal itself.
While maintaining a certain chronology, this narrative arrangement removes the possibility of dissent with the dominant narrative of the Lords Appellant. It also has the effect of making the resulting pro-Appellant stance a part of the narrative momentum of the chronicle overall. The *Westminster Chronicle*’s resulting narrative requires ultimately not that a reader refer to an earlier part of the Parliament Roll, but rather to an earlier part of English history—to the chronicle itself—in which these damning events took place. By locating these “past” events in the “present” of the Merciless Parliament’s proceedings, the *Westminster Chronicle*’s inventional arrangement makes its recorded history the only possible history after all. It internalizes *inventio* by relocating the “results” of the narrative—the Appeal read before Parliament—to an original moment.

The narrative arrangement of the *Chronicle* thus dances in step with the central justification of the Lords Appellant: that at the heart of aristocratic communication of the 1380s was an absence. In the Lords’ narrative, preserved in the Roll, this was the absence of appropriate counsel. In the *Westminster Chronicle*’s overall narrative, this was essentially the absence of inventional origin: there is no start to this history of the Merciless Parliament. It is a literal back-and-forth between various present moments. Structural meaning—verisimilitude, “truth,” or at least an accurate comprehension of how and why things occurred as they did—rests with the individual reader who must choose among causes.

We must not confuse this movement with destructive recursion: the *Chronicle* never allows that, and the potential history of social apocalypse only exists as justification for political conversation. The official version, in fact, culminates not in destruction but in the narration of choice. Nicholas Brembre, Simon Burley, and the
others among the accused, request permission to respond individually to each of the charges of treason made against them. Parliament denies the request, and the men are instead given the option of saying only “Coupable” or “Noun coupable” to everything at once. According to the Roll, all of the accused opt for a third, more ambiguously worded choice: “De rein coupable”—Guilty of nothing. The moment of climax of the Roll’s narrative of the Merciless Parliament is thus also the nexus of choice that lies at the heart of medieval invention. Brembre’s self-proposed option in fact proves so volatile that it causes some 305 lords, knights, and esquires to throw down their gauntlets and offer to prove his guilt through combat. Bloodshed is avoided, but the accused are nevertheless found guilty and executed. The Parliament narrative concludes, though, not with violence but finally with appropriate discourse: Richard causes all present to swear to peace, and his mandate includes a cross section of the population of the entire realm: “all the lords, as well temporal as spiritual, and all the knights of the shires, citizens of cities, and burgesses of boroughs that were come by writ to the parliament and also all other the knights and esquires present in the said parliament made the said oath upon the cross of Canterbury.” The oath—at least in the narrative, if not in reality—systematically undoes the pervasive threats of unrest and ruin across the realm.

The second narrative of the Chronicle follows immediately on the first. Not as tidy as the official version, the monk’s own additions include Richard’s defense of Brembre and Burley against treason, Tresilian’s, Brembre’s, and Usk’s executions, accusations against the bishop of Chichester, the international duties of the lords during the parliament, and, significantly, the “magnus rumor” about the Lollards. The most significant additions are the Appellants’ challenges to Westminster Abbey’s right to grant
sanctuary to accused criminals, a time-honored tradition that stands in the way of the Appellants trying and punishing their opponents. The first of these challenges comes with Simon Burley’s flight to the abbey to escape the wrath of the Lords. Richard offers a stalwart defense of Church rights, and the monk even stops himself from citing how “in so many earlier cases this king repeatedly interposed as a buckler of defence on behalf of the Church to safeguard her rights, but to avoid prolixity I omit them here.”102 At stake is not simply Westminster’s political sovereignty, but whether a traitor to the realm should be protected by the traditions of the realm that he (allegedly) seeks to destroy. The Appellants argue that such protection is paradoxical, and their reasoning participates in the rhetorical binary that organizes their version of events.103 They succeed, and Burley is taken from the abbey. The monk, though, does not leave the issue there and instead offers a second episode about Westminster’s right to grant sanctuary that expands the concerns about tradition beyond Appellant factionalism.104 This second case involves the loose lips of a clerk who gathers news for the Vatican about a vacant English benefice. In his message he includes what the Westminster monk views as needless opinio: the clerk, describing the political maneuvers he sees in Parliament, lambastes the actions of the Chancellor, and thus includes secret news of state. The contents of the letter are revealed while en route to Rome, and he is accused of treason. He takes sanctuary in Westminster, where the abbot tries to calm those who come to arrest him. They again invoke the apocalyptic rhetoric of the danger to the realm, but eventually concede to turn the clerk over to the abbot until Parliament can decide what is to be done.105

Lynn Staley is right in noting that the narratives of sanctuary allow the monk to talk about authority and tradition without directly mentioning the current political
The monk defends Westminster’s rights only through the words of Richard, and by doing so he invents a narrative that questions the authority of the official, Appellant version of events, without actually being treasonous or rebellious itself, and while using the same apocalyptic rhetoric that characterizes the Appeal. In context and tone, his narrative reflects devotion to king and tradition, but in form it reflects his chronicle’s larger narrative of 1386-88. To preserve the safety of the realm, the Appellants argue, “it would be better that there should not be left one stone in the sanctuary standing upon another than that it should shelter traitors of this kind who thus communicated state secrets to foreign parts.” The Westminster Chronicle figures the abbey as a microcosm for the tradition and security that the Appellants allege to protect. It gestures outward to a larger narrative of English history, addressing in its narrative broader concepts or tradition, security, and sovereignty. The monk’s narratives of sanctuary act as a kind of gloss on the larger narrative of 1380s politics, historicizing that narrative and making it more than the presentation of parliamentary documents or factional rhetoric. Yet its terms for doing so return readers to the self-propelling narrative of the Merciless Parliament. The monk’s narrative of sanctuary seizes as materia the rhetoric of potential social apocalypse, which itself functions as an invention engine that drives his overall narrative.

In this chapter I have argued that fourteenth-century chronicles treat invention when they treat history. The Polychronicon, in both its Latin and English versions, builds topical invention into its chronicle structure, organizing historical narratives around invention action. Later monastic and canonical chroniclers address social problems like
the Lollard heresy by attacking its discursive source as much as its radical theology and by presenting that discourse as historical event. They thematize invention and treat it as part of the materia of history. The Westminster Chronicle’s narratives of the Merciless Parliament internalize the endpoint of invention within the overall historical narrative and present problematic historical events as emerging from their own confusing causation. Invention is the means by which these chroniclers choose and give shape to their narratives; it is also part of the subject matter they treat.

The inventional aspect of chronicle narratives becomes a powerful thematic device for John Gower, who, over the course of his poetic career, wrote and revised his own versions of historical chronicles. The Vox Clamantis’ terrifying dream vision of the Peasants’ Revolt and the Cronica Tripertita’s pseudo-prophetic history of Richard’s deposition represent important moments in the trajectory of Gower’s opus. As I turn in Chapter 3 to the literary manifestations of the invention of history, I will show how Gower’s Latin works demonstrate that the invention of history as it functions in chronicle writing lies at the heart of Gower’s process of poetic invention.

Notes

1 C. Stephen Jaeger, “Pessimism in the Twelfth-Century ‘Renaissance,’” Speculum 78 (2003), pp. 1151-53, discusses the history and resonances of applying this term to the 1100s.


Monica Otter, Inventiones: Fiction and Referentiality in Twelfth-Century Historical
Writing (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), demonstrates the high level of inventional play and ingenuity present in twelfth-century histories.


See David Dumville, “What is a Chronicle?” in The Medieval Chronicle II, pp. 1-27, for a recent summary of how scholarly opinions have variously contributed to the creation of these narratives. Galloway’s recent summary of historiography in England also demonstrates the complexity of tracking the development of history writing after the Conquest.


8 In addition to Gransden, 2.1-193, see especially John Taylor, English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).


10 Given-Wilson, pp. 138-41.


13 See Emily Steiner, Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14 Charles Muscatine, Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972), pp. 14-15, defends his labeling of Chaucer’s age as an “age of ‘crisis’ ” based on actual historical happenings and “reliable testimony that a crisis was indeed felt.” The term has since been applied to a variety of readings of late medieval poetry and history.

16 Damian-Grint, pp. 151-68.


19 See, for example, Gransden, 1.356.

20 Emily Steiner, “Radical Historiography: Langland, Trevisa, and the Polychronicon,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 27 (2005): 171-211, summarizes the popularity and extensive dissemination of Higden’s chronicle; see especially pp. 174-75, notes 10-13. See also Gransden, Historical Writing in England, 2.43-44; 55; John Taylor, The Universal Chronicle of Ranulf Higden (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1966), pp. 2-3 and 81-104, for an analysis of Higden’s revisions and authorial control over versions of his text; and A. S. G. Edwards, “The Influence and Audience of the Polychronicon: Some Observations,” Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society 17 (1980): 113-19. The other widely popular late medieval English chronicle is the prose Brut. As Lister M. Matheson, The Prose Brut: The Development of a Middle English Chronicle (Tempe, Arizona: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1998), p. ix, shows, the Middle English versions of the prose Brut are extent in more witnesses than any other Middle English work, with the exception of English translations of the Bible. The Brut chronicles the so-called “legendary” history of Britain and begins with the arrival of Aeneas’ grandson, Brutus, to the island of Britain. For this study I have chosen to focus on the Polychronicon because its scope is even greater, including classical and biblical
history along with the “national” history of England. For a careful survey of the different versions, dissemination, and influence of this chronicle tradition from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, see Matheson, pp. 1-49. See also Readers and Writers of the Prose Brut, ed. William Marx and Raluca Radulescu, Trivium 36 (Lampeter, Wales: University of Wales, 2006).

21 Steiner, “Radical,” p. 175.


23 Higden’s Latin and Trevisa’s English translations are from Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis: Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century, ed. Churchill Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, 9 vol., Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores, 41 (London: Longman, 1865-1886). All references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by volume and page numbers. I present both Higden’s Latin and Trevisa’s English in order to demonstrate some of the ways in which the English itself expands on its Latin source.

24 Taylor, Universal, p. 48. Steiner, “Radical Historiography,” p. 177, notes how Higden “carefully shields his authorship by citing other auctores, at the same time that he registers himself as a compilator by marking his own opinions with a capital R.” For the difference between Higden’s and Trevisa’s emphasis on historical authorship, see Steiner, p. 189, n. 45.

25 Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 100. Patterson reads Higden and Trevisa’s translation in the context of Orosius, who represents his own method of history writing as resembling a woven
wickerwork, un navigable by any efforts to apply annalistic or chronological organization.

26 In demonstrating how John Wyclif and William Langland drew on the Polychronicon as a source for radical political discourse, Steiner also shows that the success of this strategy may not have been the success Higden himself might have envisioned.

27 See Taylor, Universal, pp. 40-44. When Caesar defeated Pompey, “Inde Romam rediens imperatorem se vocari fecit, ubi per tres annos et vii menses isolentius agere coepit contra consuetudines Romanæ libertatis” (3.41.204); but “nemo melius rempublicam administrasset” (3.42.214). For Alexander, see 3.27-30.


29 Higden again presents these same mixed sentiments when he repeats the story during the chapter on the wanderings of Aeneas, 2.26.433.

30 Gransden, Historical Writing, 2.162-63.

31 Given-Wilson, p. 174.

32 Given-Wilson, p. 177.

33 Given-Wilson, p. 180.


36 Gransden, Historical Writing 2. 157-60. Galloway, “Writing History,” p. 279, calls the fifteenth century “the age of ‘political’ history.”

37 The chronicles of Knighton and Westminster are continuations of the Polychronicon. Thomas Walsingham envisioned himself continuing the great histories of his predecessor at St. Albans, Matthew Paris. His first efforts at history writing, however, may have been the “continuation of Murimuth,” a continuation of Higden’s Polychronicon: see The St Albans Chronicle: The Chronica maiora of Thomas Walsingham I, 1376-1394, ed. John Taylor, Wendy R. Childs, and Leslie Watkiss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. lxi. All references to Walsingham’s chronicle will be to this edition. It may also be the case that, before embarking on the “independent chronicle . . . he wrote the first draft of what was to become the Chronica maiora (1376-9) as a further continuation of the Polychronicon” (lxi). Walsingham’s own chronicles were later attached to other Polychronicon continuations (lxi). See also lxvi. For a discussion of Thomas Walsingham’s innovations in history and literature, see James G. Clark, A Monastic Renaissance at St Albans: Thomas Walsingham and his Circle c. 1350-1440 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), pp. 176-208.

38 Walsingham excised and replaced his original account for 1376-77, the so-called “Scandalous Chronicle,” because of its harshness towards John of Gaunt. See pp. xxxiii, xxxvi.

39 This actually occurs twice in Walsingham’s chronicle, once in 1381 and again in 1389. See Gransden, 2.130, n. 79, and p. 138.

40 For several recent examples, see Staley; Galloway, “The Literature of 1388”; Richard Firth Green, A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia:


42 For a summary of the “synchronic” approach to the study of Lollardy, see Rita Copeland, Pedagogy, Intellectuals, and Dissent in the Later Middle Ages: Lollardy and Ideas of Learning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 4-7. See also pp. 40-41 for the importance of transmission as a key element of Lollard pedagogy. Hudson, pp. 192-94, notes that discussion and dialogue were parts of Lollard education.

43 As Hudson, pp. 45-58, notes, anti-Lollard treatises like those of William Rymington and William Wadford were concerned especially with countering points of Lollard theology rather than addressing Wyclif’s rhetoric in particular. Green argues, pp. 257-58, that the Lollard movement was a strong force in demystifying the power of written texts and further that “the very fabric of the heresy itself reflects an emergent literate consciousness” (282-83).


45 Strohm, England’s Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 34-40. For Strohm, the Lollard menace is depicted in “Lancastrian accounts” as in some way being allowed to
exist in order to be shown for its own foolishness. The structure of this subversion-
containment discourse is “joke-like” (32), and Strohm suggests ultimately that Lollards
were less threatening than the rhetoric of their oppressors might suggest (34). In fact, the
rhetoric of oppressing agents may have been what enabled radical punishments like
public burnings for heretics in the fifteenth century (36-40).

46 Hudson, pp. 65-66, in fact takes the 1377 date to be accurate, since Wyclif did not
preach in London as late as 1380 or 1381. See also Steven Justice, “Lollardy,” in
Wallace, Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature, p. 662.

47 Walsingham p. 402.


49 “Factum horribile militis de corpore Christi,” p. 404.

50 Hudson, pp. 282. Not all of Wyclif’s followers agreed with his position on the
Eucharist; see also Hudson, pp. 282-84. For a comparison of Wyclif’s teachings on the
Eucharist with those of Berengar of Tours, see Green, pp. 282-87. Strohm, England’s
Empty Throne, pp. 41-53 and 61-62, argues that the Eucharist debate was “thrust upon”
Lollards as a means of trapping them in an argument they could not win.

51 Copeland, pp. 9-10, for example, cites the Reginald Pecock’s attacks on Lollard
memorization practices.


53 Hudson, pp. 169 and 316. Staley, p. 100, notes that the Lollards’ emphasis on
individualism was attractive to Ricardian gentry. See Strohm, England’s Empty Throne,
pp. 36-37, for the origin of the label, “Lollardi,” and its appropriateness to fears of the
dissemination of Wyclif’s beliefs.
Knighton had ties with in particular with Philip Repingdon, also a canon at Leicester. See Geoffrey Martin, “Knighton’s Lollards,” in *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages*, Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, eds. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 32.

Hudson, p. 382, writes that she tends to agree with Knighton’s assessment of a common, binding, but unofficial set of beliefs unifying Lollards.

“in philosophia nulli reputabatur secundus, in scolasticis disciplinis incomparabilis.”


“que in suo loco pro parte patebunt,” p. 242.

“Quod credibile haberi potest. Nam credi absque ambiguitate potest”; “conformitate unius loquele cum ferreru disiderii in suum obsequium inspirauit,” p. 302.


“Nota ibi isti firmandis; nam sequela cuiuslibet dicti eorum talis erat: ‘I am sykur, It is soth’, uel sic, ‘Withoute doute, it is so,’” p. 436. The text Knighton uses is close to the Lollard tract, *The Twenty-five Articles*, a later Lollard text. See Martin’s note on p. 435.
63 Knighton, p. 242.

64 “transstulit de latino in Anglicam linguam non angelicam,” p. 242.


66 Knighton, pp. 244-48.

67 “id est uulgarem linguam et communem maternam et sic eternam, quia laicis reputatur melior et dignior quam lingua Latina,” p. 248.

68 “Sicque deiectis armis tocius non diuinitatis, ymmo uanitatis affugit, idem magister Iohannes Wyclif sub alas materne discipline pro refugio mortem euadendi quam a matre didicerat a cunis sub forma que sequitur,” p. 252.

69 Knighton, p. 262.

70 “presens narruit oratenu totum processum, publice et aperte ad confirmacionem fidei nostre,” p. 262.

71 Knighton, pp. 294-98.

72 “uersucias eorum atque maliciam,” p. 304.

73 “Si totum membrana solum, calamus nemus omne / Et Tetis incaustum, scriptor et / omnis homo, / Istorum facinus scribere non poterunt,” p. 306.

74 “si eius condiciones [i.e., the Lollards’] describi deberent, uel forte posset scribere
adesse mens tamen satisfacere uoluntati, nec excogitare ad plenum sufficeret, et lict omnium hominum lingue uerterentur in unam, eius peruersitatem retexere non ualeret et malignitatem promere,” p. 304.

75 See Staley for a discussion of how this language of aristocratic self-representation was itself in a state of crisis and transformation during the last half of Richard II’s reign.

76 “consilium maxime in tali temporis articulo perii a sapiente,” p. 8.

77 “sub dominorum regimine aliquid mali acciderit illorum negligencie communitas imputaret ac sic divisi status regni diversimode turbarentur,” p. 54.

78 “rupto silencio in suorum prolacione sermonum sagaciter dictum comitis interpretatus est, sic quod furor regis destitit mitigatus,” p. 68.

79 “noluit quod tanta sedicio in tam populosa civitate foret exorta ut pretextu unius persone unus forsan extingueret alium,” p. 64.

80 “Confestim major predictus sumpto sano consilio artes civitatis adinvicem discordantes quas potuit cum omni diligencia pacificavit,” p. 64.

81 “Cum vero infausta infortunia quandoque evitari non possint”; “propter ejus magnam potenciam, prudenciam commendabilem et suum ingenium tam preclarum semper timebant,” pp. 110-12.


83 “Ista verba sive consimilia”; “[i]gitur abstinendum est a talibus sceleribus in futurum ne propter hujsusmodi illicita deterioracio regni fieri manifeste contingat,” p. 116.

Walsingham also records these events in a much shorter version, though he emphasizes the dangers of the private dispute becoming a public one and argues, “iam timebatur affuturum quod communes diu affectuerant, discordia uidelicet inter magnates ac, per
hanc licenciam impune discursandi et grassandi, sicut olim quando communes non
principati sunt set debachati sunt” [the fear now was that the commons would achieve
what they had long desired, namely that out of the dispute between these two magnates
they would gain the freedom to roam about and plunder with impunity as they had done
once before when they were under no proper rule, and had caused havoc in the country],
p. 750.

84 Of course, the intended audience and training by the writers also differentiate this
monastic chronicle from Froissart’s.

85 See, for example, Harvey’s description of the change and maturation of Richard II over
the course of the chronicle, a change characterized mainly by his increasing ability to
deal discursively with challenges (lxxiii-lxxiv). The importance of conversation to
aristocratic and monarchic relations is of course a critical commonplace. For recent
readings that take political evidence in concert with literary works, see Staley and Green.

86 Galloway, “The Literature of 1388,” pp. 77-80, summarizes the narrative of the
chronicle and argues that for the Monk, the Church provides a more stable idea of order
than the workings of Parliament. Galloway also argues that the Monk’s account
emphasizes the insincerity of Richard’s professed distribution of pity and mercy.

87 Westminster Chronicle, pp. 234-36. For accounts of the proceedings of the Merciless
Parliament, see May McKisack, The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399 (Oxford: Clarendon
Appellant under Richard II (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971); and
Nigel Saul, Richard II (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 178-
91. Saul notes that the Westminster monk’s sources were probably close to Arundel.
Staley, pp. 108-10, compares the versions of the Westminster monk, Knighton, and Froissart.

88 *Westminster Chronicle*, pp. 280-306. This official version, like the sources the chronicler uses for most of the events of 1386-1388, is filled with pro-Appellant propaganda. Harvey, pp. xlix-liv, discusses the nature of the chronicler’s sources, describes the character of the parliament “Process,” and isolates several of the monk’s own interjections into the official narrative.


91 “perde du roy et du roiaume emynentz,” p. 250. As Harvey notes, p. 251, n. 2, the Appellants conflate the king’s orders to incite the citizens of London to kill the lords and their allies with the city’s actual preparations for possible French attacks in 1386.

92 “encountre les aunciens ordenances et custumez et libertes du parlement,” p. 252.

93 “la volunte le roy par malveis excitacion et conseill des ditz Alexandre etc., Robert de Veer, et toutz les autres traitours,” p. 252.

94 “le pluis grant trouble et tout le roiaume auxi et les coers des plusours retraictz du roy, sauivant lour ligiaunce,” p. 254.

95 A similar accusation is made in the articles of impeachment against Simon Burley, John Beauchamp, James Berners, and John Salisbury, each of whom, like the traitors discussed in the Appeal, is accused of causing the king “entendre come pur verite tantz des fauces choses” [to apprehend as truth so many false things], p. 270.

96 “la volunte et le purpos de les avantditz mesfesours et traitours,” p. 254.

97 For Staley, p. xi, this absence is characterized by Richard’s own search for a language
of self-representation. For Strohm, England’s Empty Throne, this absence will come back to haunt the Lancastrians as an “empty place” in history—Richard II’s deposition and murder—that would require complex discourses of legitimation.


100 “toutz les seignurs sibien temporelx come espirituelx et toutz les chivalers des countes, citezeins des citees, burgeys des burghes venuz au parlement par brief et auxint toutz autres chivalers et esquiers esteantz en le dit parlement firent le dit serement sur la croys de Canterbirs,” p. 290. See also Galloway, note 68 above.

101 Westminster Chronicle, pp. 310, 330; 312-14; 316; 316-18. Staley, pp. 105-108, argues that Knighton’s insertion of the anti-Lollard material into the context of the Merciless Parliament is designed to “offset” the “official” appeal of the Appellants with the more severe threat to the realm of the Lollards. But the Lollards’ actions parallel the Appellants.’ Knighton makes his theme that of authority, “and links it firmly to a picture of a king who acts with the advice and will of Parliament. He has, in effect, made a picture whose truth is ideological rather than actual.”

102 “[i]n multis enim casibus antea sicut nunc rex iste sepe pro ecclesia et tuicione suorum jurium clipeum defensionis object; que omnia hic propter prolixitatem omitto,” p. 328.

103 Westminster Chronicle, p. 325.


106 Staley, p. 110.

107 “melius fore quod non staret lapis super lapidem in prefato loco quam sic tales
proditoris forveret qui taliter secreta regni transmittebant ad exteram regiones,” p. 340.
Chapter 3

History and Poetic Career in
Gower’s Vox Clamantis and Cronica Tripertita

In John Gower’s major poetry, the invention of history is tied to his sustained effort to maintain the social and cultural relevance of his poetic project. The nature of that project was in some way to reshape the moral, ethical, and political makeup of an imagined English social community and, at the same time, to reshape the poetic means of successfully doing so.¹ Gower himself was the first to comment on the shape of that career-long project. His own fictionalized persona—appearing, for example, as it does receiving a commission to write the Confesso Amantis from Richard II on the Thames, or turning out to be the central protagonist of that poem, or witnessing first hand rebels storming London in 1381—fuses his poetry to a stylized figure of authorship. Similarly, the end matter included in manuscripts containing his major Latin and English poems outlines the poetic form and content of the poems and furthermore marks the poems as monuments of English literary culture.² Gower also solidified the connection between his poetry and his own authorship through external means: in his tomb in Southwark Cathedral, a life-size effigy of the author rests with its head cushioned by his three major books, the French Mirour de l’Ommme, the Latin Vox Clamantis, and the English Confessio Amantis. Throughout his career, both inside and outside of his art, Gower links his poetry to his authorial persona.

Gower facilitates this linkage by taking as a poetic topic the relationship of
invention to historical understanding, and this formula is vital to reading Gower’s major Latin poems, the *Vox Clamantis* and *Cronica Tripertita*. These poems, written respectively in the middle and end of his career, chronicle social and political upheaval in England, and they form one third of the literary cushion on which Gower eternally rests his head. They link Gower’s own poetic history with the history of England. Through these works, Gower presents his Latin poems as a kind of chronicle of his own poetic career.

**The History of a Career: Shaping the Reception of the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Cronica Tripertita***

The composition and revision history of Gower’s Latin estate satire, the *Vox Clamantis*, reflects an increasing interest in exploring the relationship of poetic invention to a sense of history. Gower revised and amended the poem continually over his career, and his additions are at times so significant that they have led to some dispute about what exactly constitutes the *Vox* proper. As we have it now in its final form, the poem consists of seven books. The first is a nightmarish dream vision that recounts in quasi-allegorical terms the events of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Books 2-6 form the bulk of the estate satire, in which Gower criticizes clergy, monks, knights, peasants, and lawyers. Book 6 also includes a short Mirror for Princes, advising the young Richard II directly on how to avoid vice, govern himself, and rule well. The final book recounts Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the Monster of Time, an anthropomorphic figure made of different metals representing the various ages of mankind. The dream was a favorite of Gower’s: he would use it again later in the Prologue to the *Confessio Amantis* in order to
emphasize the macrocosmic relationship of individual men to the world, the same use he makes of it in the *Vox*. This seven-book structure, however, does not appear to have been the original form of the poem, and Gower seems to have altered its shape in direct response to events of unprecedented historical significance. Analyzing Gower’s changes can help to illustrate exactly how sudden historical contingency may have translated into specific inventional decisions.

Maria Wickert, whose study of the poem remains one of the most thorough, maps out exactly how the *Vox* may have been composed over time and in response to historical eventualities. Wickert divides the poem into essentially two parts, the *Vox Clamantis*, which consists of the estate satire, and the *Visio*, which relates the dream vision of the Pesants’ Revolt and comprises Book 1 of the final version of the complete poem. Books 2-6 (and probably Book 7 as well) were most likely completed in their first version sometime after Richard’s ascension in 1377 and before the Great Schism of 1378, since Gower does not mention the papal rift in his critique of the clergy in an early version of the poem. More significantly, these books do not mention the Rising of 1381 in their discussion of peasants, an indicator that Gower had completed the majority of his estate satire before the rebellion. The *Visio* seems so much a reaction to current events and such a turn away from his original plan for the *Vox* that some critics have argued it must be considered a separate poem. The rift between the dream vision of the revolt and the rest of the estate satire has also been ascribed to the shocking nature of the events it describes; Gower, as R. F. Yeager argues, must have suddenly found himself “overtaken by events of the sort he had hoped, through his writing, to ward off.” Indeed, a *res gesta* like the Revolt, which itself calls into question the viability of estate satire as a genre,
demands an appropriately variegated poetic response.

The *Visio*, though, was only the first of two major additions Gower made to the *Vox*. The second, the *Cronica Tripertita*, a pro-Lancastrian account of the Merciless Parliament and Richard’s deposition written in the form of prophetic, moralizing chronicle, was added much later, sometime after 1399. The *Cronica* is appended to the end of the *Vox* in four of the ten extent manuscripts, but critics have been more divided in their opinions of the late chronicle’s relationship to the earlier estate satire and dream vision. Gower’s late-nineteenth-century editor G. C. Macaulay and mid-twentieth-century biographer John Hurt Fisher both argue that the *Cronica* and the *Vox* belong together and form a “unified commentary” on the fall of Richard, with the *Visio* forming a “prologue,” Book 7 and the Dream of Nebuchadnezzar a “midpoint,” and the *Cronica* an “epilogue.” Fisher, though, eventually concluded that, with respect to Gower’s larger philosophical and poetic project, the *Cronica* is an aberration, a specific exemplary narrative relating a specific episode that illustrates larger ethical principles. Others have noted its connection with the estate satire as a companion piece. Stockton calls the *Cronica* a “sequel” to the *Vox*, Frank Grady argues that it folds the Peasants’ Revolt into the larger propagandistic narrative of Lancastrian power, Echard sees the *Cronica* as the second half of a “political diptych” which includes the *Vox*, and Yeager is far more adamant that the *Cronica*, while related to the *Vox* in tone and overt political subject matter, is an inherently separate poem, introduced by Gower as such.

Despite its apparent propagandistic framework, Gower’s chronicle is remarkable for several reasons. For example, one of Gower’s last major poetic productions was not in fact the pro-Lancastrian revision of the *Confessio*; it was a chronicle. Furthermore,
Gower transferred the character of this final element of his Latin poem to the description of the Vox project as a whole. In a note appended to his later short poem, Quicquid homo scribat, dated 1402, in which Gower announces his failing eyesight and the conclusion of his poetic career, the author positions the Vox and Cronica at the intersection of his poetry, authorial persona, and historical event. “Note here in the end,” he writes, “how . . . according to the different turns of events I the author, though unworthy of authors, being long concerned especially over what was happening during this time in England, composed in a brief compendium various songs of essential reading concerning the various events that occurred.”

Echard is careful to point out how cautious we must be in assigning any particular stanza or rubric the status of Gower’s “last words.” The In fine note, whatever its exact compositional and chronological position, clearly demonstrates the intersection between poetry, history, and Gower’s literary representation of his own authorial persona as central to both understanding his poetics and, significantly, to understanding one of the last—if not the last—portraits he gives us of his poetic career. As Gower effectively retires—in poetic terms at least, if not in reality—he does so by calling attention to the historical works under his name and by characterizing his poetic career finally with these texts.

Why was it so important for Gower to lock the final form of his major Latin poem in the guise of history? Why the sustained effort not only to write a three-part chronicle, framing it as inherently connected to the Vox’s estate satire, but also to address the eventuality of the Peasants’ Revolt with the “chronicle” of the Visio? Indeed, why is Gower insistent in calling all three of these Latin poems chronicles when he summarizes the final shape of his career? The answer, I think, lies not merely in his effort to rewrite
history for a certain political end, nor in his attempt to add additional authority to Latin productions made by an English author. Labeling these texts as chronicles identifies their subject matter, but it also emphasizes that the social and political developments these poems analyze need to be understood in historical terms. Moreover, these poems also form a second history—that of Gower’s own poetic career—which operates alongside and within the narrative of res gestae as related by the poems. Gower shaped his poetic career not only as a monument of cultural authority, but also as a historical narrative of poetic res gestae in its own right. To illustrate Gower’s dynamic connection of poetic invention to history, I will address the two significant revisions that Gower made to the Vox in the order that he made them. I will argue that the Visio narrates the twin failures of poetic and historical understanding in a way that allows Gower to dramatize the emergence of an authoritative poetic persona, the figure to which his poetic program of cultural restoration is inherently connected. I will then demonstrate how the Cronica Tripertita continues the historico-poetic project begun in the Visio, but expands its field of view to include Gower’s own revision process as a kind of poetic history.

The Failure of History and Invention in the Vox Clamantis

The initial dream vision of the Vox Clamantis is undoubtedly a site of intense destabilization. It opens with Gower the narrator walking through the “second Paradise” that is England before the Rising. He falls asleep, only to be jarred awake by an inexplicable feeling of dread. Returning home, falling asleep a second time, and reflecting on past times and a fear of the future, he experiences his complete dream vision: he sees field workers transforming into beasts, marching into the streets of
London’s “New Troy,” and attacking the city and its inhabitants. Panicked at their murder of the Archbishop, he flees the city for harsh wilderness and is eventually rescued by a ship that is as once a sailing vessel and a kind of fortified tower. Onboard, he hears of the defeat of the rebellious peasants and the death of their leader, and he disembarks at the “Isle of Brutus,” a place whose diverse ethnic population is always divided against itself. Despairing yet again, Gower is calmed by a voice he hears that commands him to write down what he has dreamed. He wakes and does so.

Greatest attention has been paid to the significant social and political aspects of the dream vision’s destabilization, with particular emphasis given to the authority of the self-proclaimed “Voice of One Crying” which Gower had established in the original prologue to the Vox Clamantis—now Book 2. Gower claims to speak not with his own voice but with a common one: “As the honeycomb is gathered from the bud of various flowers and the sea shell is found and gathered from many a shore, so many different mouths have furnished me with [the matter of] this work; and my several visions are the reason for the book” (98). Later in Book 3, Gower says, “I write of present day evils [moderna mala] which the common voice [vox communis] of mankind [humana] outwardly complains of in this country [terra]” (114). The claim to speak with the vox communis for a greater social cause results in considerable friction when in 1381 a very different vox communis was heard in the streets of London. The Visio is political poetry, and Gower’s choice of poetic voice forms one of the poem’s central instabilities, as Stephen Justice and David Aers have argued. For Echard, concern about poetic voice in the Visio is only a small piece of a larger anxiety about the ability of poetic language to represent truth. Critics have also followed Fisher’s analysis that the Vox is “a poet-
philosopher’s meditation on the meaning of history,” namely, that “when order is not maintained, chaos ensues.”²⁰ A. G. Rigg and Edward S. Moore likewise note that Gower reworks history in the *Visio* and *Cronica* to suit his own particular political and poetic preferences.²¹ Andrew Galloway argues that the *Vox* ultimately demonstrates Gower’s concern about the instructional stability of exemplary narrative. The problem with exemplary history is, as Gower acknowledges, that it is too open: an example can be taken to mean almost anything.²²

The historical aspects of the *Visio*, however, are not limited only to the perceived breakdown between micro- and macrocosms, the simple rewriting of historical events to fit a particular political perspective, or even the inability of exemplary narrative to provide a road map to social stability. Nor is the narrative of the *Visio* simply a kaleidoscope of social terrors. The *Visio* presents a careful, narrative process through which Gower’s choice of historical res gestae allows him to stage the failure of his entire methodology, one based on the primary belief that “Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future” (49).²³ The dream he relates undermines that commonplace. In it, narratives of the past are not always useful for the restoration of the present, and a poetics that claims to be socially, politically, and culturally relevant, as the *Vox* does, automatically sets itself up for failure. Composed after the bulk of the estate satire to which it is attached as Book 1, the *Visio* takes the social instability of real-life rebellion and uses it as a means to address poetry’s imagined failure. Its topic is the social disruption caused by the Rising and the other accompanying micro- and macrocosmic repercussions; but it also takes as a topic the relationship of the *Visio* to the apparent inadequacy of an estate satire to induce social reform in a post-1381 environment. The
project of the *Visio* is to narrate the emergence of an authorial persona as the means of restructuring the poem’s inherent instability and of aligning the *res gestae* by the rebels with what is cast as the failed poetic history of the remaining six books of the *Vox*.

The *Visio* begins this project by chronicling the failure of textual authority as a means of comprehending significant historical events. As field workers transform before Gower’s eyes into asses, oxen, swine, dogs, cats, foxes, birds, flies, and frogs, he remarks how “they who had been men of reason before,” now “had the look of unreasoning brutes” (54). But the transformation does not end there: men who were now oxen, nevertheless “did not remember [their] own nature” as oxen (56), and the men who were changed into swine demonstrated how “Nature wandered so far from her regular course that a pig did not keep to the behavior of a pig, but rather of a wolf” (57). Gower does, like Thomas Walsingham, compare the rebels to animals—a common analogy which Chaucer also repeats in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. Gower’s transformed men, however, are all the more extraordinary and frightening because of the way they shirk the natural boundaries prescribed to the animals they become. As Gower explains of the second group of field workers who have slid into the allegorically-appropriate shapes of oxen, Nature then “forsook their transformed shapes and had caused the oxen to be like monsters” (56). The asses likewise grow horns on their heads, the Kentish swine breathe fire, and the flies grow the teeth of dogs. Gower is furthermore careful to emphasize how these metamorphoses outdo even those described by Ovid. What is more, none of the rebels is ever fully complete in his transformation. As Wickert notes, this ceaseless mutation allows Gower to indicate how the crisis permeates social understandings through even to the bedrock of Nature’s underlying organization.
Gower’s kinetic allegory ruptures the representational commonplace that renders the peasants as animals. While indisputably one-sided, hostile, and anti-vulgari, the Visio nevertheless refuses to boil out from historical events a tidy allegory of peasants-become-beasts, as in Chaucer’s aside in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale. If the rebels’ transformation is meant to form part of an exemplary narrative about social control, Gower robs that narrative of its base materials and referential stability. The mutations of the vulgari continue beyond an allegorical transformation that ought to be comfortable for its structural familiarity if not for its terrifying referent.

The Visio’s open-ended allegory only intensifies with Gower’s description of the rebels’ victims, the citizens of New Troy. Again, the figurative comparison at first seems secure: the “monsters” and “the fierce and mighty beast” that constitute the army of rebels prepares to march on the city, and, as for the Trojans of antiquity, for the Londoners “Everything was handed over; we unlocked our doors to the enemy and faith was kept only in faithless treason” (70). Yet, even when Gower portrays the nobles and prelates as the besieged citizens of a New Troy, what is truly remarkable about his dream is just how un-Trojan New Troy actually turns out to be. John of Gaunt and his palace the Savoy, for example, are not portrayed through Trojan analogues. Instead, Lancaster is the “longum castrum”—the “long camp” or army’s “march” which “did not know which path to take”—and the Savoy the “via salua”—the “safe way” which, as Gower writes, “burned fiercely in flames.” This punning figuration is the same method by which Gower introduces his own authorship of the Vox at the beginning of Book 1, and he uses similar figures to describe nobles later in the Cronica Tripertita. When Gower actually does render Londoners as Trojan, the comparison is quick, unsustained, and skin deep.
The Archbishop of Canterbury, for example, is only for a moment “the high priest Helenus, who served Troy’s Palladium at the altar” (72), before becoming another Thomas Becket, murdered in his church. The Visio does not root the un-Trojaness of New Troy in historical or literary differences, but rather in an allegorical equation which Gower intentionally leaves uneven. The Trojan invocation establishes an expectation to read London’s 1381 inhabitants against their classical analogues, and the failure to follow through presents instead a structural parallel of the unstable and ceaseless permutations of the rebel army. In fact, when the Visio does refer to literary differences between the stories of old and New Troy, they are similarly marked by an absence that reinforces the sense of terror in the dream. This time there is no Hector and no Troilus, and these days London’s suffering is far worse than that not only of Troy, but also of Carthage and Rome.

Social disintegration thus almost immediately gives way to the more fundamental breakdown of textual authority as a means of comprehending and internalizing present catastrophe. Textual deterioration comes to a head in the description of Archbishop Sudbury’s murder. Figuring him, as we have seen, first as a Trojan priest, then as another Thomas Becket, Gower the dreamer finally collapses on a heap of unsatisfactory allusions: “O who knows of such infamies in time past to be compared to the deeds which are mirrored in the Primate’s murder?” (74). Gower’s dream vision had begun because a non-localized dread had him pondering “on times past,” and in the first lines of the Vox’s prologue, Gower asserted the value of the Visio as a literary work was based on the fact that “Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future.” Now, however, with Sudbury’s blood fresh in his mind, the dreaming narrator reverses his stance
entirely: “For me, not so serious are deeds that were done before, but those things known in the present weigh down more heavily; for the harm I saw to be present now in my own time produces horrible acts of greater grief” (74). In this dream, texts of the past become useful not for authority, but for hyperbole. Gower registers the deficiency of their lessons not in terms of content but of degree. Events replace auctores as the authoritative signposts of historical meaning: “Even Nestor’s years do not know of the commission of such a crime” (74).

With the peasants storming London, the representational stakes become even higher as Gower’s description usurps the normal course of historical time from the standard bulwark of Christian apocalypse. The army of metamorphosed rebels approaching the city is in his eyes the descendents of Cain, but that army is immediately infiltrated by strands of classical myth. Ulysses’ men, transformed into pigs by Circe, are quick to join the biblical ranks: “The seven races which Cain himself fostered were reckoned as comrades there among the madmen. . . . Also, Ulysses’ companions, whom Circe had transformed long before, met and allied themselves with them. Now they wore the faces of men and now their transformed heads of wild beasts, and they had no power of reason” (66-67). Gower’s mingling of literary-historical traditions especially revokes the possibility of a purely Christian apocalypse, which, however traumatic and destructive, at least would possess structural certainty. As he describes the rebel army’s march on a partially-allegorized London, Gower purposely evacuates hermeneutic authority from two standard types of historical understanding: the secular historicism of the Trojan legend to which England was traditionally compared, and, more strikingly, the overarching framework of Christian temporality in which worldly destruction only
reveals a divine plan. Each historical element becomes a narrative component of the Visio, and each contributes to the undoing of traditional historical understandings of authority.

Both of these failings remain textual, however: they are figured through classical allusion, and they function at the allegorical level of the dream vision. However, Gower also uses the siege of New Troy to narrate the failure of experiential understanding alongside textual authority as a method of regulating meaning among chaotic present events. The citizens of New Troy are not allegorized, and their presentation as ordinary human victims of the monstrous vulgari increases the sense of fear in the poem as they “lay like sheep stretched out by the hand of death” (75).39 Gower describes them further by family relations, again to compound the terror of the dream: husbands perish, fathers and sons fall together, wives and grandfathers weep. “Everything was distressing, everything was full of anxious fear. Not knowing late at night what there might be in store for himself in the morning, everyone tearfully asked, ‘What way out is left for me?’” (78).40 Contrasted against the bloodthirsty army of mutated peasants whose ranks undo the basic principles of literary allegory and Christian historical progression, these ordinary men demonstrate how the failure of lived history is on par with the wreckage of literary authority, at least in the dream-fiction of Gower’s narrative. Those “old men,” he writes, “whom a lifetime had guided through a hundred years wept of the misfortunes which one day brought” (76).41 The unfolding of a tenuous present moment replaces textual and experiential authority: “Call to mind what will come,” the dreamer concedes as the lessons of precedent finally fail him, “and let the case of this time, having been heard, instruct all” (75).42 As Gower narrates the invasion of London, he emphasizes the
inability of the non-allegorized noblemen to read the aborted traditions of the textual histories of Troy and the apocalypse. He furthermore narrates their inability to use their own lived experience as an alternative means of historical understanding.

The narration of this double failure has an even more immediate referent than 1381: Gower’s estate satire itself. The original *Vox* treats “of how the state or order of the world consists of three estates. . . . Through their going astray, the misfortunes of the world befall us” (115). The *Visio*, then, would seem to narrate what the *Vox* warned about: his suspicions about socially-mobile ploughmen, and knights who could not enforce normal social boundaries, for example. The city in particular was a microcosm for this social arrangement, but its citizens do not fit perfectly into a traditional three-estate structure. Instead, their social roles are defined by mediation and negotiation as they interact with one another on daily business. For this reason, the social organization of a city is even more dependent on sustaining the mutual love Gower describes as essential to the whole of English society. The alternative is destruction: “Rome was head of the world for all time—at least when mutual love ruled the forum in the city,” and “Glory did not depart from Athens as long as its citizens, in harmony together, did not hate each other.” This unity failed, however: the internally divided Rome “instantly declined,” and Athens, following its internal schisms, “has not enjoyed any of its former greatness” (218-19). The chaos of the rebels invading the city provides the perfect opportunity to narrate the destruction of the cultural infrastructure necessary to perpetuate peaceful society. The scene he describes, however, not only recalls the destruction of social order, but also the means by which that social order can be recognized as such. The panic and disorientation is so great that “the woods were even frightened by the woods,
the fields by the fields, and city by city; one place did not know how to regard the other” (76). The terror of the scene transposes figurative Ovidian confusion into a specific social diagnosis: “Confused by the great terror of such sudden destruction, the nobility [genus ingenuum] scarcely knew whether its own class [genus] existed” (76). The pun on genus and ingenus intensifies the sense of panic at the fundamental levels of social construction. As Galloway argues, part of the project of the original Vox satire is to demonstrate how the “reality” of estates is determined in large part by knowledge and perception. The Visio narrative breaks apart the threads of that perception at a fundamental level. The confusion spreads outward to the point at which “Thus all orderliness departed in disorder, and an estate [status] does not know what it is to have an estate [statum] (78).

Because it turns on the inability to know what social boundaries are as they disintegrate, the Visio is not simply a poem that “tests” the estate-satire hypothesis of the Vox: the Visio can only do so by invalidating the literary and social structures the Vox trumpets. The scope of the Visio is the grander of the two. It envelopes literary failure along with social failure, and as such it incorporates the failings of Gower’s estate satire along with the experience of real social calamity. In doing so, it turns the liability of the Vox into an asset. The Visio frames the textual and the experiential into a common historical aspect, combining textual referent and remembered experience to form a variegated field of history that is adaptable to the individual man as well as to the realm as a whole. In other words, the Visio treats the Peasants’ Revolt as Gower would have found it. It was a social and political upheaval with no real historical equivalent in England, with what Gower narrates as unsatisfactory precedents in antiquity, and with
potentially irreversible consequences for the realm and its (wealthier) inhabitants. But it was also at once an event of incredible poetic significance for an author who had not yet put the finishing touches on a new estate critique. The Rising demanded that the literary terms with which estate poetry drew the allegorical and macrocosmic links between language and society be reexamined—simply because they were being ripped apart.

**Gower’s Authorial Persona and the Media Via**

The notion of poetic language unraveling alongside social boundaries is, of course, a fiction; Gower’s poem remains intact even if England’s social strata do not. My assertion of Gower’s authorial control comes not from an aesthetic judgment of style, but from the *materia* of the *Visio* itself. Gower’s narrative of control follows on the heels of a marauded London. In the narrative plot of the *Visio*, Gower flees London, relating, as we have seen, how “Omnia sollicit plena timoris erant,” [All things were full of anxious fear]. He immediately applies the same term, *sollicitatio*, “anxiety,” to himself, collapsing the character of the time and the place into his own authorial persona: “Hoc michi solliciti certissima causa timoris,” [This was to me the most certain cause of anxious fear] (I. 1373). Gower relates, “as if in his own person,” how he “ran away across alien fields and became a stranger in the wild woodlands” (79-80) and succumbed to a terrorizing paranoia and paralysis.\(^5\) The intellectual paralysis of his authorial persona stems from his persona’s narrated inability to reconcile a remembered or read-about past with present reality: to find one useless for the other. “Hic erat illa dies,” to borrow Gower’s phrase for the moment of the Revolt: this is that day, this the moment of literary and experiential failure, when Gower presents an authorial persona who is at once a victim of the Revolt.
and an exiled authorial persona who in the fiction of the narrative (if not the reality of composition) has been stripped textual assistance.51

Yet the *Visio* is littered with evidence of the very assistance Gower’s self-dramatization would seem to deny. The very words Gower uses to describe his exile are, appropriately, those of the exile poet, Ovid.52 “Panicky as a wild boar which a pack of dogs frightens by barking around it, I thought about withdrawing to very remote places. Ah, how many times did I falsely say I had chosen a safe hour, which was suitable for my undertaking!” (80).53 Gower incorporates such an enormous number of Ovidian quotations into these middle chapters and the *Vox* as a whole that critical reaction to his method has ranged from labeling Gower a remarkably informed plagiarist to slating him as the unique late-medieval English practitioner of cento.54 Whether or not Gower’s use of Ovid is actually a form of cento, his authoritative integration of Ovid into his poem, especially at a point in which he emphasizes the desperation of his exile, fills in the details of the authorial persona his poem presents. Indeed, Echard sees in Gower’s Ovidian patchwork a snapshot of the author’s central concern over the instability of Latin and, in fact, any poetic tongue: “This kind of doubleness—genuine anxiety with an equal conviction of access to authority—is what complicates for me the picture of Gower’s stance toward his own poetic language” (my emphasis).55 I agree with Echard’s larger argument that Latin can never become the language of rock-steady authority that decades worth of critics have seen it to be in Gower’s poetry, especially given the careful map of instability in Gower’s use of Latin that Echard draws. What strikes me in particular about her reading of Gower’s use of Ovid is the “genuine anxiety” which she sees illustrated there: for Echard, at this moment, Gower’s poetics are inextricable from his persona. Her
term “anxiety” is, as we have seen, Gower’s own. He uses it to describe both his persona and the historical moment experienced by that persona. Whether or not this anxiety is a genuine reflection of John Gower’s own uncertainty about writing poetry in late-medieval England, it most certainly is crucial to the narrative development and thematic progress of the *Visio, Sollicitatio* in fact becomes the binding agent of the literary and experiential aspects that are emphasized in the dream vision, unifying them by enveloping both into the fictive representation of his authorial persona.

His use of Ovid quotations functions similarly. Gower draws on the quotations from their fixed setting of cultural *auctoritas* and inserts them into a specific historical moment that is at once an actual moment characterized by *sollicitatio* and also a poetic topic, which, by its nature, demands the investigation of poetic invention. He pieces together strands of Ovid in a way that clearly demonstrates his competence as an author in the sense of the *ars poetica*; his expert redeployments of Ovidian texts fulfill the goals set out for students in twelfth- and thirteenth-century *artes poeticae*. As we have seen, for example in John of Garland’s complex memory charts, the combination of larger, external histories—like *res gestae*, or the literary tradition of the *auctores*—with the personal, experiential history of the would-be poet is the fulcrum of an individual writer’s relationship to literary history. It is this project of construction that Gower enactst through the narration of his exile. By piecing together strands of Ovid as he does, Gower demonstrates—perhaps even flaunts—his competence as a student of the *auctores*. But he then aligns those quotations to the specific historical moment of the 1381 Revolt, using them to define both that historical moment and his authorial persona in a single stroke. Ovid becomes the exilic catalyst for Gower’s fusion of literary and experiential history,
his twin topics throughout the Visio.

Not surprisingly, this complex recreation of the process of poetic invention, linked as it is to the histories of the Peasants’ Revolt and the flight of Gower the narrator, ultimately leads to Gower’s first expression of what would become the most enduring vision of his poetic project in the Confessio Amantis: the poetics of the middle way.57

Lost amid a forest of seemingly rootless Ovidian phrases, Gower invents authority from the referential darkness of 1381. And he does it in no ambiguous terms. “My steps wandered,” he writes, “and my lips were silent; my eye was struck with amazement and my ear was in pain; my heart trembled and my hair stood stiffly on end” (80).58 Then he explains, “Si qua parte michi magnis expediens foret ire, / Perstetit in media pes michi sepa via” [Even if it were more expedient for me to go somewhere, my foot often stood fixed in the middle way] (I. 1399-1400; p. 80). Here, in an earlier form in the Vox, the media via—the middle way—emerges from authorial sollicitatio. And, as in the Confessio, it becomes an organizing principle of authority. The moment of Gowerian exile as a result of unprecedented events becomes a careful exposition of the process of poetic invention. Gower posits his authorial persona at the fissure between historical reality and poetic invention, one whose narrated anxiety aligns his subject matter with his method, and allows for the emergence of a restorative poetics that will resolve the Visio while providing an appropriate introduction to the already-completed Vox Clamantis.

The resolution of the Visio comes about through the continued narration of the intersection between invention and history, this time as the author, rescued by the tower-ship and informed of the quelling of the revolt, returns home. The ship deposits him on a fortified island crowded with many different kinds of people. “This once used to be
called the Island of Brut, an exile,” one of the multitude tells him (92). The man describes the characteristics of the people Gower sees around him, calling them wild, cruel, fierce, and as yet unbound by a common love that, if it could be realized, would make them the worthiest people in the entire world. While alien to Gower in its people and geography, the island is characterized by a discord all too familiar, and one that Gower would attempt to resolve in his poetry throughout his career. The man gives Gower a historical explanation for the division: “Because these people sprang from different tribes, [the island] has faults of a varied nature. . . . This land, which bloodshed and slaughters always control, was born of a mixed stock.” Gower swoons again, but not before demanding to know why he has been saved from the waves only to be subject to bands of strangers “more turbulent than the sea itself.” When he awakens, he finds he is in the same place, but that all of the people have disappeared. A voice—again borrowing its words from Ovid—calms him and commands that he write down all he has seen.

The final episode of the Visio demonstrates that the discordant history of England has sown the seeds of contemporary discord that led to the Revolt in the first place. Gower’s vision of the inhabitants and their description in historical terms essentially re-invents the realm which Gower’s original estate satire had taken as its subject. His fictionalized status as an exile poet furthermore aligns him with the status of Britain as the product of an exiled Brutus. This final distillation does not so much work to make Gower into the figure of a “national” poet, rather than align the process of poetic invention with a version of British history that accounts for the contemporary discord in strikingly non-figurative terms. In a real sense for the Visio narrative, Gower’s cultural,
intellectual, and poetic journey ultimately leads him back home, and his resulting understanding of the terra of which he writes is grounded in a new knowledge historical development. What his trip to pan-historical Britain has shown him is that the process of historical progression that has led to the Revolt (in the narrative fiction of the dream at least) has likewise enabled him to develop the poetic method demanded of him by the voice. As Gower invents out of history in Book 1, he also addresses the mechanics of doing so and what is at stake—both poetically and historically—in such an endeavor. The Cronica Tripertita, Gower’s last addition to the sustained commentary on history and poetic invention that is the Vox-collection of poems, reverses the process of the Visio in a way that not merely creates a terrifying poetic representation of historical event, but that rewrites historical event itself.

Poetic Revision and History in the Cronica Tripertita

If the Visio represents a “poet-philosopher’s meditation on the meaning of history,” as Fisher suggests, then the Cronica represents a far more direct approach in which Gower writes an actual history. The poem parses Richard’s unfortunate kingship into three major episodes: the events leading up to and including the Merciless Parliament of 1388; Richard’s revenge on the Appellants in 1397; and Henry Derby’s return from exile and ultimate deposition of Richard in 1399. The Cronica is, first and foremost, a work of Lancastrian propaganda, which contorts Richard’s overthrow into a three-act divine comedy. The first part relates the “work of man,” detailing the Appellants’ quest for redress in parliament; the second the “work of hell,” describing how “the headstrong Richard” did not hesitate “to slay a kingdom’s just men . . . through
devious trickery”; and the third, “the work done in Christ,” who through Henry, worked to depose Richard (289). Gower’s summary in the Preface emphasizes the familiar ethical value of reading histories: “The man who is keenly discerning can learn wondrous things in it: what love is, and what wrath is; and finally there is this exclamation: ‘Love conquers all things’” (289). Passing propaganda off as moral instruction, the central project of the Cronica would appear to be the legitimation of Lancastrian kingship by transforming Richard’s fall into episodic exemplary history.

As in the Visio, however, Gower complicates any reading of the Cronica as a straight exemplum by troubling the kind of history his chronicle claims to represent. Part 1 identifies the source of his materia: “With this book as witness, the chronicle was written beforehand; it was spoken at another time, but it did not pass unheeded by the ear” (290). Gower claims to speak in line with a supernatural voice that also reflects the people of England whom Richard’s tyranny has oppressed, similar to the vox communis / vox dei formulation he gives the narrator of the Visio. While at the end of the Visio Gower describes how a divine voice instructed him to write down the events he witnessed, the Cronica purports to be written before the events it relates actually occurred. “Prophetic” chronicles were a commonplace of late medieval historiography, especially for commenting on political matters and the rise and fall of kings. But the Cronica, like the Visio, abandons the figurative devices it establishes before they are fully formed. At first, the Cronica would seem to adhere to the trappings of prophecy it introduces. In addition to framing historical events in ethical and moral terms, it names its protagonists and antagonists only symbolically. “If I do not refer directly to the right names of the nobles, I shall nevertheless report them disguisedly, in hidden form. Even if
I tend to write words which convey mysteries to your ears in the reading of them, those words nonetheless report the truth” (291). The Cronica would appear to sustain this device, rendering Gloucester as “the Swan,” Warwick as “the Bear,” and Northumberland as “the Northern Moon,” for example. Yet the marginal glosses which essentially function as chapter headings throughout the chronicle plainly and systematically reveal the names of the nobility he describes: “Note the names of the three aforesaid nobles, in a figure of speech: the Earl Marshall; the most valiant Earl of Derby; [and] the Earl of Northumberland, whose Badge was a crescent moon” (291). Gower’s marginal notes work like authoritative glosses, realizing the fiction of the Cronica as a found text that narrates future history and which was glossed later, once the predicted events came to fruition. In terms of Lancastrian propaganda, the Cronica makes the Visio into “an account of the of the disasters that culminate in the upheaval of 1399,” and “lend[s] current loyalty the persuasive force of long-held truth.” The pseudo-prophetic status of the Cronica, however, works beyond the level of political rhetoric. The Cronica becomes a chronicle representation of Gower’s own process of poetic revision.

Because it acts as prophecy, the Cronica expresses its vox dei authority in terms of its foreknowledge of history. That is, the chronicle is “divine” because of its intimate knowledge of history. That “divine” historical knowledge, however, has already been laid out in the original estate satire books of the Vox, all of which function as a kind of prehistory for the events of the Cronica. While this structure makes the whole narrative of social revolt and parliamentary action part of the same pro-Lancastrian grand narrative of legitimation, the structure bears even more greatly on Gower’s representation of his own poetic career. The historical origin for Gower’s poetry in the Cronica Tripertita refers
back to that poem’s own composition history. The inception date for the *Cronica*, 1387, is also the date at which the first full version of the *Vox* was probably completed, which included the *Visio* of Book 1 and the epistle to the young King Richard in Book 6. Fictionally, the source of materia in the *Cronica* is the vox of a people who are victims of discord, channeled through the voice of the divine. But that vox is also the *Vox Clamantis* itself, Gower’s voice, and the materia is not merely events that occurred after 1387, but that materia as it is expressed in Gower’s earlier poem. As the *Cronica* offers it, the history of England is paralleled in the history of Gower’s compositional practice. Gower’s project thus reaches far beyond the turn-of-the-century Lancastrian propaganda machine. Gower’s Latin project writes the very process of his poetic composition as the substance of English history.

With the *Visio*, Gower justified his estate satire even in light of the historical reality of the Peasants’ Revolt by demonstrating that one of the symptoms of widespread social disruption was the related issue of a breakdown in the normal poetic treatments of politics and history. As the hierarchy used to organize society fails, so does the poetic means of organizing history. With the *Cronica Tripertita*, Gower continues that project, and he sets his sights even higher. The *Cronica* links at a political level the project of Lancastrian legitimation with his own poetic legitimation. As Lynn Staley argues, Henry would probably have relied on Gower for political legitimation, and doubtless Gower would have relied on Henry as well. If the *Cronica* works as propaganda at all, however, it does so by investing the memory of past events with their depiction in the *Vox*. In other words, the historical content of the *Cronica* is as much about Gower’s own inventional process as it is about the fall of Richard. Gower uses the materia historiae for invention,
but he also makes the pre-existing *Vox* a part of that *materia*.

This circular process is not uncharacteristic of the events he describes; the *Westminster Chronicle*’s account of Richard’s struggle with his nobles presents a similarly circular route, as we have seen.\(^{74}\) In the *Westminster Chronicle*, history seems to propel itself, and the chronicle’s narrative to invent itself. Likewise, Gower’s Latin project appears to invent itself out of itself as much as out of historical matter. One of the key differences between Gower’s texts and the *Westminster Chronicle*, however, is that Gower’s final manifestation of this process occurs some fifteen years after he began his Latin project. His own view of his poetic career becomes yet another aspect of history which he takes as his subject at the end of the *Cronica*. Gower himself defines the nature and purpose of the *Vox*, describes its ultimate relationship with the *Cronica*, and inserts both poems into the larger portrait of his poetic career. The definition comes in the form of an authoritative colophon, referred to as the *Quia unusquisque*, appended to the end of manuscripts containing the *Vox* and the *Confessio*, and it describes the form and content of each of his major poems.

Like those poems, though, the *Quia unusquisque* underwent revision throughout Gower’s career, and it exists in two very different forms.\(^{75}\) The earlier version of the colophon, probably written around the time the so-called Ricardian version of the *Confessio* and completed ten years before the events described in the *Cronica*, makes the *Vox Clamantis* a document specifically about the Peasants’ Revolt:

> The second book, composed in the Latin language in hexameter and pentameter verses, treats of the astounding event which took place in England during the time of King Richard II in the fourth year of his reign,
when the lowly peasants violently revolted against the freemen and nobles of the realm. Nevertheless, pronouncing upon the innocence of the said lord the king as excusable in this matter because of his minor age, the book declares that the blame, because of which—and not through Fortune—such enormities take place among men, clearly lies elsewhere. And the name of this book, which is arranged in seven sections, is called the *Vox Clamantis*.\(^76\)

The later version, written sometime after 1399, is, as might be expected, not politically forgiving of Richard. It significantly revises both the *Vox* and that poem’s place in Gower’s canon:

The second book, metrically composed in the Latin language, treats of the various misfortunes occurring in England in the time of King Richard II. Whence, not only did the nobles and commons of the realm suffer torments, but even the most cruel king himself was finally laid low, falling because of his fault from on high into the pit which he had made. And the name of this book is called the *Vox Clamantis*.\(^77\)

While the earlier version emphasizes the *Visio* and excuses Richard on account of his young age, the later version accords with Gower’s shift away from Richard in favor of Henry Derby. In the revision of his career, popular discord, the Peasants’ Revolt, the Merciless Parliament, and the deposition of the king all become part of the same story—indeed, as over twenty years later, they must have seemed.\(^78\)

Two factors are striking here. First, as Gower revised his Latin poems, and ultimately the “official” portrait of his entire poetic career, he turned his eye increasingly
toward the historical. Not only do the events of the *Vox*, the *Visio*, and the *Cronica* fold into a single narrative continuum, the three separate poems themselves become historical texts, “chronicles,” as Gower himself refers to them. The focus of the colophons falls finally on a historical structure, exampled by Richard’s demise, which replaces political commentary and advice with an overwhelming sense of historical force. As Echard points out, however, the colophons also emphasize the poetic aspects of Gower’s works as they demonstrate him reshaping his *oeuvre*, and this is the second striking point about Gower’s career summary.79 Gower ultimately roots poetic authority not through his ability to use *auctores* or write Richard’s story in Latin, but instead as a part of English history. The Latin poems and revised colophons represent elements of a new historiographical narrative that takes as its subject both the history of Richard’s reign and the major Latin components of Gower’s poetic career. The final colophon shows Gower’s Latin corpus to be what the final addition of the *Cronica* forces it to be: a single chronicle that makes the boundaries between Gower’s poetry and English history indistinguishable.

I have argued that the *Vox Clamantis*, *Visio*, and *Cronica Tripertita*, all essential components of Gower’s Latin project, take as their subject the intersection of poetic invention and historical understanding. This intersection helps account for why, beyond surface-level generic and linguistic reasons, Gower considered these poems to be part of a single poetic effort. It furthermore grants issues of authorial self-representation and poetic authority—long held as critical centerpieces in Gower scholarship—a fuller resonance by placing them in a larger context, one which incorporates the patterns of narrative epistemology familiar from contemporary chronicle writing.
While this argument helps account for Gower’s Latin poems, it is not easily transferable to his most famous and popular poem, the English Confessio Amantis. In the following chapter, I will show how the middle way poetics, introduced in the Visio and developed fully in the Confessio, creates a differently nuanced program for the invention of history as a means of writing culturally relevant poetry. If the Vox and Cronica phrased the problem in terms of politics and historiography, the Confessio phrases it in the even more ambiguous terms of love, romance, and narrative process. While the pattern by which Gower establishes an authoritative poetic persona remains essentially unchanged, Gower’s English poem uses narrative development and trajectory—what Gower calls “process”—to stand in for the historical progression presented in his Latin works. The Confessio thematizes the history that the Vox and Cronica present as chronicle. This reconceptualization characterizes Gower’s transformation of the media via into the middel weie, and this is the authoritative model of the invention of history to which Chaucer would react.

Notes

1 That Gower’s work is directed toward such lofty and ethical ends has been a critical commonplace since Chaucer wrote his famous “moral” epithet for the poet at the end of Troilus and Criseyde. Important arguments for the moral and ethical completeness of Gower’s poetic career, especially the Confessio Amantis, are summarized in David Aers, “Reflections on Gower as ‘Sapiens in Ethics and Politics,” in Re-Visioning Gower, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, North Carolina: Pegasus Press, 1998), pp. 185-87. See also Siân Echard, “Gower’s ‘bokes of Latin’: Language, Politics, and Poetry,” Studies in the Age
of Chaucer 25 (2003), p. 126, n. 8 and p. 148, for additional critical context of Gower’s reception and a brief summary of labels assigned to Gower’s “sense of mission.” Aers himself argues against such a comprehensive ethical imperative and instead sees a paratactic quality in Gower’s poetry that allows him to represent several competing moral or ethical viewpoints in a single poetic work. For a summary of Gower’s career, see Winthrop Wetherbee, “John Gower,” in The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 589-609, especially 589-92. The overriding critical principle in recent Gower criticism has been the concept of authority, particularly in regard to Gower’s use of Latin as an authoritative language. Echard demonstrates that Gower’s use of Latin is not intended to establish unflinching authority, but rather to illustrate the instability of such seeming authority. See Echard, “With Carmen’s Help: Latin Authorities in the Confessio Amantis,” Studies in Philology 95 (1998): 1-40. Echard argues in “Gower’s ‘bokes of Latin’ ” that Gower did not imagine his Latin poetry as authoritative on account of its language, nor as a stepping-stone toward a more nuanced and complete expression of his project in the English language, a notion that has more to do with ideologies of post-medieval English nationalism and modern sentimentalism for the vernacular than with Gower’s actual practice. Echard’s article is also crucial for thinking about how Gower adjusted the shape of his oeuvre over the course of his career. Also addressing the issue of language, Tim William Machan, “Medieval Multilingualism and Gower’s Literary Practice,” Studies in Philology 103 (2006): 1-25, argues that Gower’s choices of language were not a cultural necessity but a literary strategy.

See Echard, “Last Words: Latin at the End of the Confessio Amantis,” in Interstices:
The most significant of these is the colophon that lists Gower’s three main poems, the *Mirour de l’Ommme*, the *Vox*, and the *Confessio*, which exists in three different revisions and is included in twenty-two copies of the *Confessio* and five of the ten extant copies of the *Vox*. This colophon, also called the *Quia vnumquisque*, will be discussed in more detail below. Other important end matter includes the *Explicit iste Liber* at the end of the *Confessio* which, in a revised version, praises Henry Derby; the *Quam cinxere*, which praises Gower’s achievement; and the *Eneidos Bucolis*, which ranks Gower above even Virgil, since the Roman poet only ever wrote in one language, and Gower wrote in three.

3 See Eve Salisbury, “Remembering Origins: Gower’s Monstrous Body Poetic,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, pp. 159-60, for a brief summary of different generic classifications assigned to Gower’s poem. Salisbury, drawing on definitions of “monstrous” from medieval sources like Isidore and contemporary theorists like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, argues that the *Vox* is itself “is a poetic monster precisely because it embodies” a wealth of different “sources to comment on fractious times” (179). Her argument is very useful for addressing how Gower’s widespread incorporation of different source texts allows him to comment on the social disruption chronicled in the *Vox*. My own argument about the transformation of the peasants and Gower’s use of “cento” takes a different approach.


6 Wickert, pp. 5-14, notes two redactions of the estate satire (that is, Books 2-6) exist, based upon varying degrees of blame assigned to Richard. These degrees of blame would manifest themselves more significantly in the Vox with the addition of the Cronica Tripertita, discussed more fully below. Fisher, pp. 103-104, argues that Gower was working on Books 2-5 at the same time that he was completing the Mirour de l’Oemme.

7 See Wickert, pp. 15-16.


9 Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), p. 204. For Yeager, “that Gower would ‘change his plan’ to comment directly on these events is less surprising than that he should stick unwaveringly to it as the chickens came home to roost.”
10 Wickert, p. 5.

11 Fisher, p. 115.


13 Gower also refers to the Visio as a chronicle in its incipit.


15 Echard, “Last Words,” pp. 109-11. Quicquid homo scribat, for example, is premature in announcing the end of Gower’s career; he would continue to produce poetry for years to come, though none of it on the scale of his three major poems. See Yeager’s notes to the poem in John Gower: The Minor Latin Works, p. 79.
“Lectus vt est variis florum de germine fauus,
Lectaque diuerso litore concha venit,
Sic michi diuersa tribuerunt hoc opus ora,
Et visus varii sunt michi causa libri.” (2.Pro.77-80)

“. . , humana que vox communis ad extra
Plangit in hac terra, scribo moderna mala.” (3. Pro.55-56).


See Echard, “Gower’s ‘bokes of Latin.’ ”

Fisher, p. 173.

Rigg and Moore, p. 162.

Galloway, p. 335. Galloway sees Gower’s sensitivity to this historical problem as a means of asserting his poetic authority, and it reflects his intentions to use knowledge as a means of upward mobility (336). See also Peck, pp. 159-62, who argues that Gower used
Nebuchadnezzar’s dream as much as he did because it combines apocalyptic history with exemplary history. The apocalyptic reigns in history under a divine plan while exemplary history allows for the possibility of correction for the future.

23 “Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri.” (1.Pro.1)

24 “Qui fuerant homines prius innate racionis, / Brutorum species irracionis habent” (1.177-78).

25 “. . . set bouis ipsum / Constat naturam non meminisse suam” (1.293-94); “Deuia natura sic errat ab ordine, mores / Porcus quod porci non habet, immo lupi” (1.319-20).

26 See Susan Crane, “The Writing Lesson of 1381,” in Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 208-209, for example, who addresses in part of her study of the efforts by medieval writers to silence the voice of the peasants; she notes that Gower resembles historians like Froissart by equating the rebels with beasts. Henry Knighton’s comparison is not as sustained as the others’, but he notes, for example, as the rebels destroy London houses, how “marvelous to relate, even the old and decrepit clambered over as agilely as if they had been rats, or were borne aloft by spirits,” Knighton’s Chronicle 1337-1396, ed. G. H. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 217.

27 “Sic transformatas formas natura reliquit, / Et monstris similes fecerat esse boues” (1.253-54).

28 “Nor,” for example, “when Diana was openly driven into exile from the city, did the dangerous beast which she sent to Athens to destroy the citizens offer such battles, nor were as many men laid low by it” as the dogs that Gower witnessed in England (60).

[“Bestia pestifera, nuper quam misit Athenas, / Destruat vt ciues, mota Diana palam /
Vrbis in exilium, neque talia bella paruit, / Bec sub ea tanti procubuere viri” (1.453-57).

Gower also refers in this chapter to Hecuba, Actaeon, and Geryon.

29 Wickert, pp. 33-36. See also Wetherbee, p. 596, who argues for a resemblance to Alan of Lille’s views of monstrous distortion.

30 “Belua vasta, ferox” (1.891); “Omnia traduntur, postes reseruimus hosti, / Et fit in infida prodicione fides” (1.903-904). The words are Ovid’s, from the Ars Amatoria.

3.577f. See Stockton, p. 356, n. 2. The particular significance of Gower’s use of Ovid throughout the Visio is discussed in detail below.


32 Gower introduces his authorship of the Visio with a transparent riddle: “If you should ask the name of the writer, look, the word lies hidden and entangled within three verses about it. Take the first feet from ‘Godfrey’ and add them to ‘John,’ and let ‘Wales’ join its initial to them. Leaving off its head, let ‘Ter’ furnish the other parts; and after such a line is arranged, the right sequence of the name is clear” (50). [“Scribentis nomen si queras, ecce loquela / Sub tribus implicita versibus inde latet. / Primos sume pedes Godefridi desque Iohanni, / Principiumque sui Wallia iungat eis: / Ter caput amittens det cetera membra, que tali / Carmine compositi nominis ordo patet” (1.Pro.19-24).]

33 “O qui palladium Troie seruabat ab ara, / Helenus Antistes” (1.1001).

34 “The battles of Thebes, Carthage, and Rome were not more filled with madness than these” (71). [“Prelia Thebarum, Cartaginis, illaque Rome / Non fuerant istis plena furore magis” (1.983-84).] Galloway, p. 336, notes how Gower is careful to emphasize the
differences between his narrative in the *Visio* and those of historical or religious texts.

For Galloway, Gower’s emphasis on difference is part of his status as a “modern,” “new man,” and is a characteristic of his quest to use wisdom as a means toward social mobility.

35 “O proba transacto quis tempore talia noulit, / Que necis in speculo presulis acta patent?” (1.1105-1106).

36 Non michi tam grauia sunt que prius acta frerunt,
    Set magis ad presens cogniciora grauant;
    Nam quod adesse meo iam vidi tempore dampnum
    Horrida maioris facta doloris habet. (1.1111-14)

37 “Tale patrasse malum non norunt Nestoris anni” (I. 1109).

38 Septem progenies, quas ipse Chaým generauit
    Cum furiis socii connumerantur ibi. . . .
    Conuenit eciam socii quos nuper Vluxis
    Mutauit Circes, et sociantur eis. (1.757-58; 779-80)

39 “Quique magis celebres fuerant hoc tempore ciues, / Sicut oues mortis procubuere manu” (1.1163-64).

40 . . . omnia luctus,
    Omnia solliciti plena temoris erant;
    Omnis habens lacrimas, “Quis me manet exitus?” inquit,
    Nescius ad mane que sibi sero foret. (1.1285-88)

41 “Annos per centum veteres quos duxerat etas, / Flebant de casu quem dedit vna dies” (1.1181-82).
“Venturi memores estote, que temporis huius / Casus inauditus instruat omne solum” (1.1145-46).

“Hic tractat qualiter status et ordo mundi in tribus consistit gradibus. . . . de quorum errore mundi infortunia nobis contingunt.” The description comes in the margin note to Chapter 1 of Book 3, Macaulay, p. 105. For Ruth Mohl, The Three Estates in Medieval and Renaissance Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1933), p. 28, “No more complete classification of feudal society, either continental or English, can be found than in the Vox Clamantis.” Mohl tracks Gower’s treatment of the estates throughout his works. See in particular pp. 27-31; 61-65; and 105-107.

Gower’s suspicions in Book 5 might even be taken to predict the revolt of 1381, or demonstrate that he wrote the text after it occurred. Macaulay and Stockton both contend, however, that had the revolt occurred before Gower had completed the book, he most certainly would have written more about it. His changes to the opening to Book 3 following the Great Schism of 1378 demonstrate his willingness to do so.

Roma caput mundi fuit omni tempore, saltem
Dum communis amor rexit in vrbe forum:
Set diuisa statim viduata recessit honore,
Eius et imperium perdidit omne decus.
Non honor Athenis decessit, dummodo ciues
Vnanimes odium non habuere simul;
Postea quando grauis vrbem diuisio spersit,
Ammodo de veteri sumpsit honore nichil. (5.1007-1016)

“A siluis silue, set ab aruis arua timescunt, / Vrbs et ab vrbe, locus nescit habere loca”
47 “Confusum tanto subite terrore ruine, / Vix genus ingenuum scit genus esse suum” (1.1197-98).

48 Galloway, pp. 329-30. Howard Kaminsky, “Estate, Nobility, and the Exhibition of Estate in the Later Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 684-709, demonstrates the medieval status as a condition was “a publicly, indeed legally established identity, in contrast to the purely sociocultural contingency of status today” (689). Kaminsky shows how the actual definition of particular estates was a matter of public debate. See pp. 700-702 for notable examples of this debate.

49 “Ordine retrogrado sic quilibet ordo recessit, / Nec status ipse sapit quid sit habere statum” (I. 1311-12). Stockton gives the above quoted translation, with my revisions, as an alternate. See p. 361, n. 21.

50 “Quasi in propria persona,” quoted from the marginal note at the beginning of Book 1, Chapter 16, Macaulay, p. 59. “Tuncque domum propriam linquens aliena per arua / Transcurri, que feris saltibus hospes eram” (1.1381-82).

51 Gower repeats the phrase seventeen times at the end of Chapter 8, after his lengthy description of the transformation of the peasants.

52 Wetherbee, p. 595, argues that Gower portrays both nobles and poets as outcasts “in a world which rejects their claim to status and authority,” and that in particular Gower’s allusions to the *Tristia* and Pontic epistles “convey the seeming hopelessness of his cultural exile.” For Galloway, p. 342, Gower’s is an intellectual exile as it is from the Court of Venus at the end of the *Confessio*, and is particularly Ovidian in this respect. Moreover, he notes, Gower may be unique in using Ovid in this respect in the Middle
Ages. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, pp. 239-40, sees Gower’s use of Ovid ultimately culminating in the framing of his English poetic voice. Gower got the idea of Arion from Ovid’s *Fasti*, and he is unique in Middle English in citing Arion as poetic persona. Ann W. Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 77-83, argues that Gower’s allusion to Arion refers also to the recent sighting of a dolphin in the Thames and would thus, when taken alongside the *Fasti*, would have been recognized as a veiled criticism of Richard as well as a symbol of poetic self-representation. For Salisbury, p. 168, the Ovid quotations establish “a temporal link to the festivities of the Roman Saturnalia, which, for Gower, empowers his carnivalesque discourse.”

53 Sicut aper, quem turba canum circumsona terret,
Territus extrema rebar adire loca.
Ha, quociens certam sum me mentitus habere
Horam, proposito que foret apta meo! (1.1395-98).

The quotations are from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Tristia*. See Macaulay, p. 377, and Stockton, p. 362.

54 Macaulay, p. xxxii, refers to Gower’s quotations of Ovid as “schoolboy plagiarism.” Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350-1400* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), p.126, also notes Gower’s “tendency to plagiarize unashamedly.” R. F. Yeager, “Did Gower Write Cento?” in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, edited by R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute, 1989), pp. 113-32, argues that Gower might have known the *Cento Virgilianus* of A. Faltonia Proba, both through the work’s popularity and through reference to her and the form in Isidore and Boccaccio. Salisbury builds on
Yeager’s cento thesis and argues that Gower’s accumulation of sources helps create the monstrous poetics that characterizes the Vox.


56 See Chapter 1.

57 In the prologue to Confessio, Gower is specific about his choice to “go the middel weie / And wryte a bok betwen the tweie” of “lust” and “lore.” The stakes are high, as he envisions the Confessio to speak to the future: “That it myhte in such a wyse, / Whan we ben dede and elleswhere, / Beleve to the worldes eere / In tyme comende after this” (Pro. 17-19; 8-11). Quoted from G. C. Macaulay, The English Works of John Gower, 2 vol. (London: Early English Texts Society, 1900), vol. 1. I address the relevance of the middle way poetics to Gower’s English project in greater detail in Chapter 4.

58 “Pes vagat osque silet, oculus stupet et dolet auris, / Cor timet et rigide diriguere come” (1.1393-94).

59 “‘Exulis hec dici nuper solet Insula Bruti’” (1.1963).

60 “‘Non magis esse probos ad finem solis ab ortu / Estimo, si populi mutuus esset amor’” (1.1981-82).


62 Nam quia gens variis hec est de gentibus orta,

   Errores varie condicionis habet . . .

   Hec humus est illa vario de germine nata,

   Quam cruor et cedes bellaque semper habet. (1.1967-68; 1977-78).

63 “. . . sunt ipso turbidiora mari” (1.1976).

64 “Opus humanum”; “Opus inferni est pacem turbare, iustosque regni interficere. Hoc
enim Ricardus capitosus dolosa circumvencione facere non timuit”; “Opus in Cristo.”

The description is quoted from the marginal glosses, Macaulay, p. 314.

65 “Vir qui bene sentit in isto / Scire potest mira, quid amor sit, quid sit et ira: / Est tamen hoc clamor, ‘Omnia vincit Amor’ ” (Incipit 5-7).


67 “Libro testante, state cronica scripta per ante; / Est alibi dicta, transit nec ab aure relict” (1.9-10). Grady, p. 209, argues that Gower uses this formulation to give his chronicle the appearance of an eyewitness account, thus lending additional authority to his text.

68 Gower equates the common voice with the voice of God explicitly in the Mirour: “Au vois commune est acordant / La vois de dieu” (12721-22). For Gower’s formulation of this equation in the Mirour, and its later application in the Vox when he uses it to speak against rural workers and peasants, see Aers, “Vox Populi,” p. 440. See also Coleman, p.
Si non directe procerum cognomina recte,

Hec tamen obscura referam, latitante figura:

Scribere que tendo si mistica verba legendo

Auribus apportant, verum tamen illa reportant. (1.45-58)


Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, 203. See also Grady. p. 208. Helen Barr, Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 72-73, notes Gower’s transparency in revealing the meaning of the heraldic figures he uses, and she argues that his “his use of well-known cognomens” is “a means to align himself with the authority of prophetic discourse, and as a consequence, to harness political authority to his work.” Gower’s omission of the white hart, the symbol for Richard, is a commentary on the king’s constant efforts to craft his public image.


See Chapter 2.

The earlier version appears only in manuscripts containing the first recension of the Confessio Amantis; the later, revised version appears in four manuscripts which contain both the Vox and the Cronica, and in one manuscript of the revised version of the Confessio. See Wickert, p. 5; and Echard, “Last Words,” pp. 104-107 and 113-15.
Secundus enim liber, sermone latino versibus exametri et pentametri compositus, tractat super illo mirabili eventu qui in Anglia tempore domini Regis Ricardi secundi anno regni sui quarto contigit, quando seruiles rustici impetuose contra nobiles et ingenuos regni insurrexerunt. Innocenciam tamen dicti domini Regis tunc minoris etatis cause indi excusabilem pronuncians, culpas aliunde, ex quibus et non a fortuna talia inter homines contingunt enormia euidencius declarat. Titulusque voluminis huius, cuius ordo Septem continet paginas, Vox Clamantis nominatur.” The Latin text is quoted from Wickert, pp. 4-5; the English translation is by Robert J. Meindl in the same volume.

Secundus enim liber sermone Latino metrice compositus tractat de variis infortuniis tempore regis Ricardi secundi in Anglia contingentibus: vnde non solum regni proceres et communes tormenta passi sunt, set et ipse crudelissimus rex, suis ex demeritis ab alto corruens, in foueam quam recit finaliter proiectus est. Nomenque voluminis huius Vox Clamantis intitulatur.” Quoted from Wickert, p. 3, translated by Meindl.

See note 71 above.

Chapter 4

Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and the Historical Poetics of the Middle Way

In his major Latin poetry, Gower addresses the relationship between history and invention directly by exploring it in terms of English political history. He presents the emergence of an authorial persona and his Latin project as *res gestae*, equating moments of poetic invention with historical deeds. His Latin poetry thus becomes a chronicle of poetic process as well as of historical events. The *Confessio Amantis* creates a similar chronicle narrative but in a much different register. Gower shifts his matter from English historiography to love, and he draws not on political and social events but on a wealth of “croniques” and books from “olde daies,” which, properly fashioned, can educate a readership whose cumulative ethical decisions can improve the present moment. Just as his Latin poems narrate the potential failure of history and invention, Gower’s major English poem also exposes and addresses a potential failure inherent in its methodology of using old texts to reshape a discordant present world. That problem is twofold. First, historical narratives can be corrupted in the process of transfer. Second, and more significant, the past as an imaginary construct can overpower the present; the weight of antiquity can become more of a burden than a restorative force. As he writes an English poem designed to repair the present, Gower also tests the efficacy of his project that has designs on so large a scale. The larger meta-narrative of the *Confessio* relates this process of verification.

That process begins in the Prologue, in which Gower, declaring his desire to
“wryte of newe som matiere” (Pr. 6), redefines the media via as the middel weie, a device for invention that allows Gower to dramatize the transformative work of the Confessio. The reformulation of his poetics enables Gower to enact the restoration in terms of his own narrative by slowly resolving the problems outlined above. The early tales of the Confessio present the potential failures inherent in the poem’s poetic method. The middle books of the poem continue this process as well as present restorative chronicles as part of the narrative of the Confessio. The final book then tests the poem’s overall program of restoration by using the theme of incest as a metaphor for the past’s destructive consumption of the present. The meta-narrative of the Confessio, then, ultimately emerges as a kind of “chronicle” that is historical in two respects. First, its matter is comprised of historical material pulled most often from historical texts, or “croniques.” Second, the Confessio’s chronicle of verification figures narrative process as an analogue of historical progression. The Confessio finally presents a history that imagines on a grand scale how an ethical poem might achieve the daunting project announced in its Prologue: the revitalization of a fallen present with a new kind of English vernacular poetics.

**Reading for Exemplarity in the Confessio Amantis**

Critical discussions of “history” in Gower’s major English poem are intractably anchored in discussions of exemplarity. The nexus of exemplary narrative in the Confessio is the individual subject, and the payoff for the investigation of this convergence is insight into how Gower hopes the Confessio will encourage the formation of an Aristotelian ethical subjectivity in readers, an interiority which cultivates virtue and
which enables readers to make correct decisions on a daily, case-by-case basis. The critical tradition of examining Gower’s construction of an Aristotelian ethical subjectivity spans several decades. Charles Runacres effectively reconciled the perceived dispute between artistic and ethical content of the *Confessio* by arguing that Gower’s middle way between *lust* and *lore* uses an Aristotelian system of ethics that is grounded in particulars rather than abstract moral didacticism. Gower achieves a “balance” between Aristotelian ethics and medieval exemplum theory, Runacres argues, by weaving together the *moralitas* and *expositio* of moral authorities with the particulars of *narracio* in exemplary narratives without allowing one to impede or restrict the other. For readers interested in ethics and exemplarity, Gower’s middle way aligns not only wisdom with pleasure, *sentence* with *solas*, but also the practicalities of ethical experience with more abstract morality.

Criticism has since moved on to examine how Gower’s narrative technique engages those particulars of ethical experience. Peter Nicholson argues that the *Confessio* goes so far as to establish “an ethics of human love”: love is a site for a nuanced and sophisticated ethical investigation. The poem’s “ambitious goal” is to define the parameters of virtuous human love. The poem emphasizes “individual acts” and “privileges the moral over the emotional.” For William Robins, Gower achieves ethical subject formation in readers through the generic convergence of romance and complaint on one hand, and exemplary narrative on the other. The *Confessio* sketches an “intersected subject” who is shown to be an autonomous individual caught between different narrative modes, each of which contributes to an understanding of his or her place in the world. The application is for the reader of Gower’s poem, who can see in this
intersected subject not a model to imitate, but a method of understanding the site he or she occupies. Subject formation is frequently a political process as well as a poetic and ethical one. As James Simpson argues, the Confessio narrates the formation of a whole or “ideal” subject through the process of “information”; that is, the poem shapes the interior of a listener toward some kind of realization of wholeness, defined in part by the seamless interconnectedness of ethics, politics, and the cosmos. Gower’s “ultimate aim,” however, is, like Alan of Lille’s, “not so much to represent the formation of the soul, but to enact that formation on the reader.” This enactment of ethical experience within the reader is the payoff identified in much recent scholarship on Gower’s exemplarity.

Kurt Olsson argues that any sort of personal, ethical realization can come only after the experience of growing old, as Amans/Gower does in the poem: old age enables the teleological requirement of assigning meaning to a life. For Olsson, this temporal process is a necessary component of both personal moral epiphany and the projection of that epiphany’s relevance to the reader. Experience in this regard is also the deployment of historical narratives into the realm of individual subjectivity, regardless of whether that subject is “ideal” or “intersected.” The work this deployment performs is very similar if not identical to the rhetorical work performed by exemplary narratives. Elizabeth Allen illustrates how the intersection of audience reception and exemplary narratives dynamically redefines the exemplum form in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Exemplarity is by its nature the genre that highlights the connection between author, text, and audience, and late-medieval writers call attention to the form itself by building into their exemplary narratives the reading, interpretation, and moralization of exempla by an audience. Moreover, writers work to excite the emotions of readers. As such, listening
to an example “does not lead to virtuous action; the very experience of exemplary discourse is itself a form of moral activity.”

Allen sees this process as constitutive of a “poetics of exemplarity”: “Medieval exemplary literature does not simply demand obedience but inquires into its own social benefit, examines its own poetic indeterminacy, and argues for its audiences’ moral freedom.”

Allen’s overarching point is that Gower calls on the reader to call authority into question, to use imagination, and to make a choice, locating truth not in textualized or generic authority but in the individual action of the reader.

J. Allen Mitchell emphasizes the casuistic aspect of this process, and he argues that Gower participates in a late medieval exemplary method that makes reading for the ethical a horizontal, as opposed to a hierarchical, activity.

In recent scholarship, the matters of politics, readership, and subject formation conjure the apparition of authority, a principle central to any discussion of exemplary narrative.

For Larry Scanlon, the exemplum is a narrative in which authority is rooted in the mechanics of narration. An exemplum “is a narrative enactment of cultural authority” because an exemplary narrative does not simply gloss the moral, it “establishes a form of authority” by invoking auctores and by narrating how a moral was enacted in history.

Scanlon sees the middle way as a poetic formulation that asserts lay authority over ecclesiastical.

Diane Watt reads the evidence differently, arguing that the Confessio, while political, is certainly not ethical, because “while it may warn against unreasonable conduct, it fails to give straightforward and coherent guidance about either how to govern or how to live one’s life.”

The final effect of this dislocation of ethics and disunity of structure Watt nevertheless assigns to the empowerment of the reader-subject. The “amoral” quality of the Confessio allows “the audience an imaginative participation in
and an aesthetic experience of the division of the world." To put Watt’s point somewhat differently, the *forma tractandi* of the *Confessio* distills a macrocosmic understanding of secular history and conveys it at the level of the individual.

As Gower describes it in the Prologue, the division of the world is the product of historical progression characterized by decline. Indeed, for Gower, “discord” is very much a synonym for the present moment (Pr. 121). As the comments of critics suggest, history sounds a steady drumbeat behind these discussions of ethics, politics, subjectivity, and exemplary narrative. Robins works to integrate historical understanding fully into the Aristotelian program of subject formation he sees operating in the *Confessio*. History, he argues, or more precisely, the “chronicle” narratives Gower cites explicitly throughout his poem, must be understood as literary genre. Any chronicle narrative becomes an “argument to be heard and interpreted at certain moments in an individual’s process of moral reflection.” As that process matures through the *Confessio*, chronicle as a narrative genre “withdraws from the poem as complaint-romance and exemplarity become the two predominant, incommensurable ways of conceiving such a personal experience of the world.” History as a literary type appears throughout the poem, but in Robins’ view, history is ultimately excised in order to make room for the expression of subjectivity through generic juxtaposition.

These readings rightly settle on the individual reader as the ultimate locus of intersection for Gower’s varying levels of moral and experiential verisimilitudes, and they mark that reader—either imagined among Gower’s audience, or dramatized in the poem’s fiction in the character of Amans—as the discernible endpoint of Gower’s restorative poetics. The larger narrative of the *Confessio*, however, is not merely one that
describes or provokes the formation of an ethical subjectivity, nor one that translates historia into an argumentative discourse by placing it in an explicitly exemplary context. The Confessio’s use of history is also its method for examining the efficacy of its poetic program. In other words, the poem’s examination of the uses of history precedes their ethical deployment into fictionalized or real audience members. To demonstrate the presence and function of this larger narrative, I want to look more closely at the poetics of the middle way as it is laid out in the Prologue. I then want to study the potentially transformative power of this poetics in the context of the Monster, or Statue of Time, the anthropomorphic image that Gower uses to represent the process of historical progression.

The Middle Way and the Monster of Time

When Gower introduced the media via in the Vox Clamantis, he did so at a moment of authorial crisis in which the attempt to narrate historical catastrophe resulted in the narrated emergence of poetic authority. The media via in that earlier poem functioned literally as the road in which the exiled Gower-persona found his foot stuck; it functioned metaphorically as the mental state of being trapped in a field of historical contingency. Most significantly, though, the media via functioned as an indicator of the poetic process by which he could fictionalize an authorial persona and introduce a Latin poetics capable of aligning and then repairing the twin ruptures of historical and literary precedent. The Confessio preserves this third sense of the middle way as a principle of poetic invention. In the Prologue, the middle of the road is the path between two kinds of narrative: “I wolde go the middel weie,” Gower writes, “And wryte a bok betwen the
tweie, / Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore” (17-19). Because it designates a process of poetic invention, however, the middle way becomes more than simply a description of range and register. Gower calls attention to the matter, invention, and persuasive purpose of the narratives he will select and record in the Confessio. As such, the middle way necessarily refers also to the implied (if not explicitly stated) relationship between topics of narrative invention and the mechanics of narrative process. Like the Vox, the Confessio makes this process a part of its narrative of ethical instruction.27 This meta-textual relationship allows Gower to present and then alleviate the potential failure of his poem’s historical poetics.

The process begins almost immediately in the Prologue, as Gower sets the stage for an abbreviated version of the estates satire material he had written for the Vox. The Prologue blames present discord for the sorry condition of the estates and emphasizes how the internalization of old stories at the level of the individual can restore institutional structures to their ancient strength. As he argues for the middle way as a means of accomplishing this task, Gower puns on “wyse” (wise books or wise men) and “wyse” (the ways or manners in which he will tell his narrative) twice: his text is “Essampled of these olde wyse / So that it myhte in such a wyse . . . / Belowe to the worldes eere” (7-10). A discussion “[o]f love, which doth many a wonder / And many a wys man hath put under,” describes the “wyse I thenke trete” (75-77). The dual sense of the term is preserved from the more explicit Ricardian Prologue, in which Gower states that he will “write in such a maner wise, / Which may be wisdom to the wise” (*83-*84). Such devices fuse topic—the discord that remembering the “wyse” will help repair—and the inventional process through which the repair will occur—the “wyse” in which the tales
will be told. At the point of its announcement, then, Gower’s “newe” narrative apparatus is already at work on page as it enacts what it prescribes.

Tracking Gower’s revisions between the two major versions of the Prologue illustrates more fully the designs this process has on social reality and offers a vivid example of the meta-textual work of the middle way. In the 1390 version dedicated to Richard, Gower expresses his desire to write the world anew through his poem. Repeating the punning technique he uses with “wyse,” Gower declares that he will write after the old world and “eek somdel after the newe, / I wol begynne for to newe” (*91-92). In the revised 1392 version, these lines become, “I thence for to touche als / The world which neweth every dai” (59-60). The version dedicated to Derby claims to become the reporter of renewal in the world rather than its instigator: the agent of change is now the world itself, whose “renewal” would have been instigated, fictionally at least, by the original version of the prologue. The revised version makes Gower’s text part of the world as well as part of the renewal, and in terms of the medieval understanding of the mind, it does craftier work. Taken in as an external sensory stimulus, Gower’s revised text—already charged with the intention “for to newe” of the original—carefully disguises itself as part of the world by seeming merely to report that world rather than to declare a conscious program of renewal. In other words, Gower’s revised Prologue positions itself within a changing world while remaining an instigator of change. It fictionalizes itself, locating its text and regenerative work within the materia it will relate. This is the redemptive and restorative power that Gower describes in the middle way. More than merely the intermingling of stories of lust and lore, Gower’s new poetic refers also to the mingling of inventional topic and narrative process, as well as the relevance of
this intermingling to historical understanding. It describes a specific program of narration that shapes both the text of the Confessio and, in an idealized form at least, the world in which it exists.

Gower’s representation of that disordered world shares the physical form of its readers. In the Prologue, Gower relates the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the Monster or Statue of Time, a story he had also included in a somewhat different form in Book 7 of the Vox. The Statue represents the discord of the present moment as the endpoint of a clear historical progression. “Like an image of man do the ages of the world vary,” Gower writes in the head note introducing Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, “and nothing besides the love of God stands firm.” Nebuchadnezzar relates his dream to Daniel, describing the image as a man with a head of gold, shoulders and arms of silver, belly of brass, legs of steel, and feet a mixture of steel and clay. In the feet, “The fieble meyned was with the stronge, / So myhte it wel noght stonde long” (Pro. 615-16). As James Dean argues, the Statue “symbolizes the larger world grown old but in a specifically human image.” Its anthropomorphic likeness “is an emblem of mankind’s original and continuing culpability for the world’s ‘health’ and for the mutations of empire.” Indeed, the image tightly links the macrocosmic world with the microcosmic. Nebuchadnezzar then dreams that

A gret ston from an hull on hyh
fel doun of sodein aventure
Upon the feet of this figure,
With which ston al tobroke was
Gold, selver, erthe, steil, and bras,
That al was into pouldre broght,
   And so forth torned into noght.

(618-24)
The great boulder’s destruction of the Statue describes the instability of temporal history and its ultimate destruction at the moment of the apocalypse.\textsuperscript{33} As Dean argues, the Statue’s destruction may even refer to the rejuvenated world that Gower hopes his poem will bring about.\textsuperscript{34} It is the Statue itself, though, and not it’s obliteration by the “gret ston,” which captured the imagination of illustrators of the \textit{Confessio}, and presumably its readers. Miniatures depicting the eerily humanoid Statue standing alone or, more frighteningly, looming over the bed of the sleeping Nebuchadnezzar, are included in the majority of illustrated manuscripts of the poem.\textsuperscript{35} While the boulder is present in some of the miniatures, the emphasis is clearly on the Statue itself.

The Statue, however, is more than an image of discord, political, moral, or otherwise. It also functions as an image of invention and history. As has often been noted, Nebuchadnezzar’s vision functions as an anthropomorphic \textit{forma tractatus} that aligns moral cosmology with an understanding of the historical progression of the world.\textsuperscript{36} It introduces both concepts structurally and only conveys their meaning simultaneously. Daniel’s reading of the statue parallels the project of reading the \textit{Confessio}, and the Statue itself becomes a figure of historical and interpretive authority in its own right. It represents at once an authoritative text that takes the form of a man. It depicts a poetics that is entrenched in a human form, and its narrative is singularly the story of historical progression. Essentially, the Statue works as an anthropomorphic, self-authoring chronicle. It furthermore presents its narrative of historical progression as a source for
topical invention. Each “metal” on the Statue stands for a particular age of secular history, each demands interpretation on the part of Daniel, and each serves as a historical topic for invention in the Confessio’s own narratives, since Gower draws on materia from all of these ages. Combining a historical poetics with an authorial persona—that is, fusing historical narrative with the authorial prerogative of narrative arrangement and presentation—the Statue becomes a portentous icon for the conflation of authorial persona and poetic method by which Gower first introduced the media via in the Vox.

Yet, as a representation of the discordant present world, the Statue also stands in for the very reality that Gower's poem intends to “newe.” In other words, the Statue represents both history and invention, and it represents also the necessary ability of each to inform the other.

As such, the Statue is an iconic representation of the larger transformative narrative of the Confessio, the narrative that imagines the poem as able to reshape a fallen contemporary moment. The Statue aligns the inventional work of the middle way with the historical understanding that first inspired it. Appropriately, though, the threatened destruction of this iconic beacon by the boulder suggests the tenuous nature of Gower’s historical poetics. How effective can this narrative strategy actually be? As they warn against the Seven Deadly Sins and provoke readers to ethical speculation, the narratives of the Confessio Amantis test this very point. In the tales of Book 1, Gower draws out the dual dynamic of the middle way in order to investigate the relationship of narrative invention to history. The first and last tales of Book 1 in particular illustrate how Gower maps the mechanics behind the poetics of the Confessio.
Pride and Narrative Process in the Tale of Mundus and Paulina

The very first tale of the Confessio to treat one of the Seven Deadly Sins is one of many pulled from “a cronique” (1.759), and its narrative inherently challenges the historical poetics forwarded in the Prologue. In the Tale of Mundus and Paulina, Mundus, a Roman knight, deceives a faithful wife, Paulina, by conspiring with two priests and pretending to be the pagan god Anubus. In this guise, Mundus “visits” Paulina one night in a sacred temple, rapes her, and then later finds his pride to be so great that he cannot keep the secret from her when he sees her in public. Paulina, realizing the trick, reports the deception to her husband, who, after consoling her, takes the matter to the authorities. The two priests, because they violated spiritual and civic trust of the community, are executed; Mundus, because he was the victim of love, a force beyond his control, is exiled from the city.

Criticism on the tale has focused on the scene of Mundus’ deception as a dark parody of the angel Gabriel bringing the word of God’s will to Mary in the Annunciation, as such calling explicit attention to the importance of words and their dissemination as the primary means of the Confessio’s project. Genius’ willingness to excuse Mundus of rape because of love sickness has also inspired commentary on how the confessor’s position in the court of Venus complicates his status as the chief disseminator of Gower’s narratives. For many critics, Genius’ leniency demonstrates the central crisis at the heart of Gower’s poetics, the tensions involved in balancing the poem’s movement between lust and lore. Genius establishes this inaugural “ensample” as a lesson about the danger of hypocrisy in love, and the Latin head note introducing the tale appropriately invokes language reminiscent of the middle way. The tale teaches that, because the corruptible
human senses of seeing and hearing provide a “larga via . . . ad antrum cordis” [a wide way to the cave of the heart], the paths that lead to the bewitchment of Mundus and the rape of Paulina are the very mechanisms of internalization by which Gower’s larger poem is supposed to inform and reform its reader. 39

It is no accident that the deception occurs at the central authoritative site in the tale. Mundus’ first step in enacting his “sleyhte” is inspired by the “temple of such auctorité, / To which with gret devocioun / The noble woomen of the toun,” including Paulina, go to offer their prayers to Isis, the goddess who introduced letters and agriculture to the Egyptians (797, 800-802). At the level of plot, this temple will become the location of the rape. But Gower’s description of this site as a structure of “such auctorité” links it again to the Latin head note that introduces Hypocrisy. The header describes the personified Ypocrisis as a man who “pios animos quamsepe ruit muliebres” through his duplicitous speech. Andrew Galloway’s translation of this line as “overwhelms pious, womanly souls”40 is underwritten by a more explicit comparison in the Latin, as Echard and Fanger make clear in their translation: “hurls down faithful women’s minds.”41 The vague Latin of the head note equates minds like Paulina’s with a metaphor that genders any soul victimized by hypocrisy as female. The Tale of Mundus and Paulina thus works as an allegory illustrating how sin enters the mind and victimizes the soul generally, and in particular how hypocrisy violates the minds and bodies of women. The tale itself, because one of its topics is the politics of narrative transfer, thus becomes a powerful metaphor resembling those deployed in the Vox Clamantis. The structural meaning of the metaphor itself is shown to be as unstable as the discursive issues it is meant to illuminate. What is more, the head note, the alleged authoritative
voice in the text of the Confessio, is the agent that inaugurates this instability. In this context, the temple “of such auctorité” becomes a structural analogue for the authorial apparatus of the Confessio: a symbol of authority acknowledged as such because of the discursive transactions which occur there. Gower shows Mundus to be an antagonist who is able to manipulate this central symbol of discursive authority. The first “sympathetic villain” of Gower’s tale collection, then, is a man able to exploit the workings of poetic authority for his own ends.

In what follows, Gower takes the tale beyond a simple conflation of the processes of sin with those of textual transmission and makes the writing of history one of the topics of the story. While the scene of Mundus’ rape of Paulina is heavy with overtones of the Annunciation, it also rewrites the Statue of Time from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, the iconic image which grounds Gower’s estates satire in the Prologue in a clear historical context. Paulina experiences Mundus’ visitation in a dream-like state, with her senses overloaded by what she thinks she sees. Mundus emerges with “such arraie upon him,” that it seems to Paulina’s “yhe / As thogh sche verrailiche syhe / God Anubus” (901-905). His getting in bed with her fully awakens Paulina, and “in wommanysshe dred / Sche wok and nyste what to rede” (913-14). Her reaction of not being able to “rede” what she sees is the same as Nebuchadnezzar’s, whose nightly visitor is also arrayed in various metals representing the ages of the world. Unable to understand what this visitation means, the king approaches Daniel and “preide him faire that he wolde / Arede what it tokne may” (Pro. 600-601). The dream-like mystery is not merely the result of Paulina only just waking up; the two priests whom Mundus bribed tell Paulina plainly that she “schalt take avisioun” of Anubus that night (845). They stack the interpretive
deck against her, erecting the structures of a dream vision that parallel the iconic dream of the Prologue. By parodying this foundational textual construct, the Tale of Mundus and Paulina then becomes a reciprocal version of the very process of narrative composition Gower announces earlier in the book.

The tale also integrates this historicizing principle into its plot. Not merely will the priests arrange a real-life dream vision for Paulina, they will also record it for posterity. They tell Paulina that Anubus commanded them “to bere hierof record” of the god’s intentions to her. In addition to justifying the subsequent apparition, their remark also implies the voyeuristic possibility that these two unscrupulous men plan on watching the rape as well as facilitating it (850). In the regimen of sin, this makes the priests as guilty of “mislooking” as Acteon, the hunter who spied Diana bathing and was torn apart by his own dogs as punishment. In terms of the historical poetics of the middle way, their perversion extends beyond allegorical morality and into the realm of historical documentation. “Bearing the record” in this sense perverts narratives of the past because it intentionally makes them false, and it presents an inventionally transgression more dangerous than even Mundus’ actions in the temple. Should the “record,” the “cronique,” of the temple be corrupted, then no amount of public cleansing of the kind with which this tale ends will be enough to cure the social ills of Mundus’ sin. The true record of the deed will be destroyed. In terms of poetic invention, the materia—or “matiere,” as Gower refers to it throughout his English poem—on which any such open, public airing-out of deception is based, is itself corrupted. Gower expresses this same concern the next time he uses the term “record,” in the tale of the Trojan Horse, which immediately follows. Here, the “colour of the pees” the Greeks make with their gift “schal ben of record,” that
is, not merely “tolden” but also written down as part of the historical materia of Troy (1113-16). The threat here is not merely error on the part of auditors; the threat is also the literal corruption of historical materia upon which any poet must draw for invention, long before the poem itself makes its way to the ethical interior of the reader.

Fortunately for Paulina and her husband, and indeed for all of Rome, the accurate record is revealed by none other than Mundus himself, whose lovesick pride prompts him to confess himself to Paulina the next day in a public street. His confession is coded, however. He says only that Paulina is so holy that “no mannes myht / Mai do that he [Anubus] hath do to nyht / Of thing which thou hast evere eschuied” (943-45). Paulina “herde his tale and bar it stille,” breaking down only later in the privacy of her home (952). Through his transparently veiled confession, Mundus again takes the role of Nebuchadnezzar’s statue, but he also interprets her dream for her. She then realizes what has happened and informs her husband, who takes his “sori plit” through the proper civic channels (989). The matter is then resolved openly and publicly: Mundus is exiled and the priests killed.

While the clean, civil resolution speaks to Gower’s utopian vision of ideal community, it nevertheless betrays a problem at the broader level of historical understanding. Gower makes it clear that both Paulina’s and her husband’s capacity to be duped in the first place must be attributed to the mentality of their historical age, to the section of steel on the body of Nebuchadnezzar’s Statue that represents the dominance of the Roman empire. Paulina’s divine experience was a “Thing which stod thanne upon believe,” a thing which “thanne,” at that time, was fully thought to be within the realm of experiential possibility. Gower links the fault of perception to a form of history; he makes
it a consequence of historical understanding. This temporal distance allows for the suspension of disbelief in the reader at the level of plot, but it also aligns Gower’s invention process with his materia. The emphasis on historical perception speaks to his poetics of recovery and restoration, and to a narrative process that tries to trump misinterpretation through its structure. It ultimately makes historical understanding—and not moral allegory—the basis of interpretation in the tale. The tale’s moral import and allegorical resonances are maintained only through the historical constructs on which the entire narrative apparatus of the Confessio is based. Finally, the Tale of Mundus and Paulina becomes an exemplary lesson for understanding not only Pride or Hypocrisy, but the place of history in narrative invention.

The Invention of History in The Tale of the Three Questions

Like the first tale, the final tale of Book 1 treats the intersection of poetic self-analysis with a historical understanding that is rendered at first metaphorically and then formally historical. The Tale of the Three Questions tells of a young king whose talent at solving riddles and logical problems is a source of great pride, and he regularly defeats those men of his kingdom whom he challenges to intellectual combat. Envious of the apparent mental alacrity of a particular knight, the king demands that this man provide the answers to three questions, under the penalty of death. The knight, clever, but unable to solve the king’s riddles, approaches his youngest daughter who is able to provide the answers. She presents them formally to the king, who releases the knight from his death sentence. The tale concludes with the king, at the daughter’s suggestion, granting an earldom to the knight, thus elevating the social status of the daughter so that the king
might make her his queen. The tale links together several narrative episodes that dispel Pride, introduce its counteracting virtue of Humility, and consequently produce a pleasing return to a sense of balance as the complexities of the narrative unfold into a happy resolution.45

The tale opens with an explicit conflation of history and invention. As before, this tale comes from “a cronique” (3059), but its matter originates in a more modern (nuper) historical period than previous exempla.46 It immediately introduces a king and a knight whose intellectual lives revolve around a sustained discursive contest. The knight can solve even the most complex “problemes and demandes eke” of the king: “To him was every thing so liht, / That also sone as he hem herde, / The kinges wordes he answerde” (3071, 3078-80). And the king, whose pride is the ostensive topic of the tale, is a man consumed not by sexual desire like Mundus, but by a form of overwhelming inventional desire. Envious of the knight’s riddle-solving ability, “The king began to studie and muse, / What strange matiere he myhte use / The knyhtes wittes to confounde” (3091-93). If Mundus conspires with dishonest priests to fulfill his sexual desire, the king spends his time searching materia for topical invention for the purpose of creating a riddle so complex that the mechanisms of invention are undetectable to anyone but the author himself. The emotional core of the tale, and for some readers the location of potential incest, occurs when the knight, unable to find an answer after he “caste his wit aboute” (3123), tells his concerns to his youngest daughter and acknowledges the danger not only to himself but also to her and the rest of their family: “The sorwe, dowhter, which I make,” he says, “Is noght al only for my sake, / Bot for thee bothe and for you alle” (3174-77). Their “privité” results privately in tempered consolation, but publicly, in the
court of the king, it becomes a “gret merveile on honde, / That he, which was so wys a knyht, / His lif upon so yong a wyht / Besette wolde in jeupartie” (3157, 3234-37). This public appearance is a “merveile” because it links high-level rhetorical and linguistic prowess with matters of life and death. As the king announces that “he wolde hire tale hiere,” he invites that spectacle of publicly dissected narration to unfold (3242).

The daughter quickly answers each of the questions in order. The first riddle asks what men most help even though it requires the least help; the answer is the earth. The second asks what is worth the most but costs the least for a man to keep; the answer is Humility, the counter-virtue to Pride, on which the tale turns. The final question asks the opposite, what is worth least yet costs the most to maintain; the answer is Pride. In this public, meta-textual question-and-answer session, Gower shows the king and the knight’s daughter to share the same inventional materia, Pride and Humility. The tale locates its pedagogical power in the replacement of allegorical examples of the sin of pride with a meta-textual discussion of how the sin of Pride and the virtue of Humility are consciously addressed as such by the agents of within the fiction. As Elizabeth Allen has shown, the dramatization of ethical debate within ethical poetry is one of the characteristics of late fourteenth-century English compositions of this kind. Gower relocates the extra-textual step of reader interpretation to the tale—not the frame tale of Genius and Amans, but to the Tale of the Three Questions itself. Where the tale stops being an exemplum against Pride, it starts being a narrative self-analysis.

 Appropriately, then, agents of the tale seize this meta-textual environment to reshape their own fictional surroundings and to comment further on the nature of narrative exchange. The daughter’s final words to the king appeal to his Pride, but only
with reference to his respect for narrative structures, and to his own sense of narrative futurity. She asks that “such grace and such justice / Ordeigne for me fader hiere, / That after this, whan men it hiere, / The world therof mai speke good” (3318-21). The king consents, but likewise in terms that speak to the daughter’s posterity. He releases her father and muses that if she were only “of such parage, / And that thi fader were a pier,” he would take her as his wife (3336-37). The daughter replies that as king he in fact has the very power to make this wish a reality. He does so, they marry, and the tale ends happily. The narrative expectation produced by the story is that the king will take this remarkable woman to be his queen, since her intellect clearly matches his and she demonstrates the social alacrity worthy of such a high social position. That is, her ability to negotiate at once the complex problematic of cryptic riddles and the cultural politics of public governance show her to possess the stuff that good rulers are made of in Gowerian tales. The tale momentarily hijacks that narrative trajectory by noting the social class constraints that prevent the expected resolution. So the king changes the rules of the game: he invents an earldom from an estate that “Was late falle into his hond,” so that the story may proceed as narrative convention demands (3355). The narrative here is thus about the rules of narrative, and the counterpunctal lust that accompanies this tale’s lore is the meta-textual delight that the king and the daughter knowingly share.

Even more remarkable, however, is that Gower does not conclude the tale with this perfect conflation of meta-textual sentence and solas. He realizes also the full resonance of the middle way by reinserting the pleasure and lesson of this narrative process explicitly into the paradigm of historical understanding. “And over this good is to wite,” Genius tells Amans at the conclusion of the tale,
In the cronique as it is write,
This noble king of whom I tolde
Of Spaine be tho daies olde
The kingdom hadde in governance,
And as the bok makth remembrance,
Alphonse was his propre name.

(3387-93)

Likewise, “The knyht also, if I schal name, / Danz Petro hihte, and as men telle, / His dowhter wyse Peronelle / Was cleped” (3394-97). Critics have linked this ceremony of naming to the subject formation of the tale’s protagonists. For Peck, the naming demonstrates that the characters put aside selfish concerns for the benefit of community and thus realize their “full moral dimensions.” For Donavin, the characters get names only at the end, “as if they must recognize themselves as types in the Annunciation before they can be identified.” The tale emphasizes not subjectivity, however, but historicity. The characters do not come into “their own” so much as the narrative becomes part of a larger historical understanding. What emerges from the tale is not individual subjectivity: it is chronicle narrative. Moreover, this chronicle narrative is not simply thematic; that is, it does not record as moral res gestae the careful processional record of a group of people whose interactive discourse moves them away from Pride and closer to an applicable ideal of practiced Humility. This is, rather, the “actual,” recent history of Spain. And, as Genius reminds Amans, its status as recent history is a “good” thing to remember. The tale constructs history out of the extended process of narrative play. Gower recalls the chronicle, assigns “real” names to people in the story, and then emphasizes the
construction of a nobility, a family line, a genealogical history, that emerges out of the meta-discourse of invention. The *forma tractatus* of the tale’s denunciation of Pride gives way to the tale’s *forma tractandi*, which reveals itself to be about narrative process and invention. Finally, all of this is reinscribed in the form a historical chronicle that fuses the expression of humility with the politics of narrative transfer, all within a specific historical context. Gower’s book on Pride concludes quite literally with the invention of history.

**Envy and History**

Gower continues to develop the thematic relationship of narrative invention to historical understanding in Book 2 of the *Confessio*, considered by Peck to be the “most historical” of the books of his poem. On one level, the discussion of Envy speaks to Gower’s political concerns. Peck calls Envy “the most politic of sins,” because of its unceasing preoccupation “with others’ domains.” The reward for the sinner is “territorial aggrandizement,” conquest and colonization, outcomes to be understood in political terms, but brought about through rhetorical and narrative means. Genius, however, introduces Envy not only in political but historical terms, as a sin that must be understood historically if it is to be avoided. This conceptualization of Envy allows him to continue the process of verification that characterizes the larger meta-narrative of the *Confessio*.

Presenting Envy historically, Genius argues that the sin

is the werste vice of alle,

Which of himself hath most malice.
For understande that every vice
Som cause hath, wherof it groweth,
Bot of Envie no man knoweth
Fro whenne he cam bot out of helle.

(2.3130-35)

Genius’ formulation emphasizes the ambiguous if infernal origins of the sin, but it also mandates that understanding Envy requires the investigation of causes. These causes must further be understood in the explicitly social context in which envy operates. Unlike pride, envy requires a second agent for it even to function as a sin. Indeed, the social component of envy accounts for Amans’ active participation in his confession in a manner not seen in Book 1’s discussion of Pride. When introduced to hypocrisy, Amans pleaded ignorance, but when Genius asks if Amans is guilty of Envy, he replies “Mi fader, ye, a thousand sithe” (17). Indeed, we learn a great deal more about Amans’ actions as a lover and as a teller of tales himself through his complicity in envious actions than we ever did through the tales of Book 1, most of which Amans seems to have found irrelevant to his case. Significantly, Amans borrows Genius’ language of causes to interrogate his personal complicity in envious thought and action. He feigns friendship with rival lovers, he says, “for tuo causes”: the first is to know which men “mispeke” of his lady; the second is that in telling her about it, he might earn her love (2005). Amans’ example and his own search for causes treat only the arena of love, but as Olsson and Nicholson have shown, Genius actively works to enlarge and extend the discussion of Envy outward to a larger sphere of experience that is not limited to the courtly play of lovers. The expansion of the discussion of Envy to broader terms, however, transforms
what could be read as a rhetorical examination of causes in a Ciceronian sense into a
search that involves larger stakes and origins that are not as easily defined. This
expansion concurs with what Götz Schmitz has seen as Gower’s elevation of the
discipline of rhetoric to the highest strata of moral philosophy. What begins with the
rhetorical investigation of causes quickly expands into a sweeping examination of Envy
that conflates poetic invention and historical understanding.

Gower presents the conflation immediately through Genius’ description of the
legal history of Envy:

Write in Civile this I finde:
Thogh it be noght the houndes kinde
To ete chaf, yit wol he werne
An oxe which comth to the berne,
Therof to taken eny fode.

(83-87)
The reference is to the so-called “Fusian canine law,” an aspect of civil law derived from
Roman jurisprudence, the “dog-law” reputation of which is based on a tradition of
misreading. The legal citation works well here because it allows Gower to conflate at a
single point the origins of society with poetic composition. As we have seen in high
medieval ars poetica, a proverb is one of the most commonly accepted ways to begin a
poem, and each informs the other in a relationship that parallels a poet’s experience of
narrative invention. This particular proverb propels the narrative of the Confessio into
its familiar process of exemplary dialogue, and it likewise calls attention to its own
function as an invention device. By fusing the formal techniques of poetic composition
with the discourses of civil law and Ciceronian civilization-formation, Genius’ civil proverb raises the stakes of the discussion of Envy to a level beyond the particular concerns of lovers to the meta-topic of the middle way’s historical poetics. A discussion of Envy reveals the tenuousness of the entire historical project of the Confessio.

As a sin, Envy itself is sustained by narrative transaction. Virtually all of the major tales of Book 2—Constance, Demetrius and Perseus, the False Bachelor, Pope Boniface—forward their plots through antagonists who tell false tales. Amans confesses that he too feigns counsel among his rivals in order to learn and thwart their plans. This kind of backbiting, though, carries with it a more fundamentally hermeneutical problem: Envy can give any narrative tale, regardless of context, a false sense of truth. “In this wise now a day,” Genius expounds, “many envious tale is stered, / Wher that it mai noght ben ansered; / Bot yit fulofte it is believed” (444-48). Amans himself compounds the hermeneutic consequences of Envy in a pun he does not seem to realize he incorporates into his confession: “I wolde swiche tales sprede / To my ladi, if that I myhte, / That I scholde al his [i.e. Amans’ rival] love unrihte” (504-506). “Unrihting” or upsetting his rival involves the “unwriting” of narrative. But this hermeneutic undoing carries with it larger historical resonance that prompts Genius to alter his typical method of education. When describing the sin of “Falssemblant,” for example, Genius uncharacteristically asserts that “it nedeth noght / To telle of olde ensamples oght; / For al dai in experience / A man mai se thilke evidence / Of faire wordes which he hiereth,” but which only conceal envious hate on the part of the duplicitous speaker (1897-1901). Genius’ change of tactics is based not so much on convenience and immediacy as a duplicity of his own. The larger problem is that one may view “olde ensamples,” historical narratives, as a
Consequently, Genius extracts examples not from chronicles or the writings of old philosophers but rather from the immediate present. Amans provides the evidence of Falssemblant at the level of the individual through his admitted dissimulation to his rivals in love; Genius provides the evidence at the societal level, where the sin is apparent most clearly in the duplicitous actions of Lombards, who neglect common profit for personal gain. They accomplish their goals by means of “a craft which cleped is Fa-crere,” the making of falsehoods, which “makth believe,” that is, establish false truths (2122, 2136). In the context of fa-crere, presentism provides the only safe point of reference since the vicissitudes of immediate experience can offer a safety zone not available to the systems of transmission on which the telling of historical narratives relies. As presented in these contexts, Envy becomes a sin that is about the mechanics of narrative transfer as they operate within an understanding of history. Envy and its subordinate sins provide the vocabulary for addressing these complex meta-textual realities, which are written into the middle way poetics of the entire Confessio. The tales of Book 2, then, confront these realities head-on by conflating narrative invention with historical understanding.

**History and Futurity in the Tales of Book 2**

If presentism marks Genius’ efforts to contain the larger implications that Envy has for the historical poetics of the Confessio, then a concern about futurity marks the historical tales he tells. The longest tale of Book 2, the Tale of Constance, illustrates this concern. As in Chaucer’s version, Gower’s tale relates how Constance, the daughter of the Roman emperor, is sent to the Sultan of Syria to be his wife. The Sultan’s mother,
unwilling to convert to Christianity, kills her son and his nobles and sets Constance adrift on the ocean. She lands in Northumbria where she meets and marries King Allee before his mother sets Constance and her newborn son adrift yet again. After many travels and much hardship, Constance and her family are eventually reunited in Rome. The long narrative progression of Constance’s wandering slowly dispels the machinations of the mothers, lifts what many readers have seen as the threat of incest, and aligns the social with the spiritual, the microcosmic with the macrocosmic, to produce a happy conclusion for a tale that functions as a versatile exemplum against a sin that detracts from both the state and the soul.64

As Nicholson has shown, Constance and her story were virtually unknown in England before their appearance in the Confessio. Gower extracted the narrative from Nicholas Trevet’s chronicles, and his narration of the story—more even than Trevet’s version—provided Chaucer with his source for the Man of Law’s Tale.65 Gower introduces Constance’s tale first as a “sawe,” that is, as a story, opinion, or more generally, any spoken discourse (588), and then again as a “cronique” (597), thus distilling the progression from narrative utterance to historical chronicle familiar from the conclusion of the Tale of the Three Questions. At the end of that tale, Gower assigned the anonymous protagonists names and identities and placed them at the beginning of a family line whose future manifested itself in present, fourteenth-century reality. The Tale of Constance presents a sense of futurity corrupted by Envy through its villains, the mothers of the Sultan and of King Allee. The Sultan’s mother, for example, is someone who “Was thanne alyve,” an expression that at once remarks on the historical moment (she was alive at this time) and puns on the extreme disgust she feels at her son’s
impending marriage to the Christian Constance: she was “alyve” with envy (645). She thinks to herself, “If it so is / Mi sone him wedde in this manere, / Than have I lost my joies hiere, / For myn astat schal so be lassed” (645-49). On the surface, her concern would seem to lie with her financial and social estate, but her words carry a secondary resonance that speaks to larger issues. Losing her “joies hiere” refers not only to present joys, but also to their heir, a potential grandson, the heir who will inherit not only her estate but her kingdom as a whole. Her concern is amplified by the Sultan’s own actions after his conversion to Christianity. His conversion is “recorded” (629); that is, it becomes not merely politically official, legal, and publicly recognized, but also a res gesta, a historical deed, the recording of which incorporates the authority of history into a political action. The mother’s concern, then, is not unlike the concern Genius prompts in readers of the Tale of Mundus and Paulina when the two priests act as the recorders of Paulina’s rape. Her thoughts are envious because they speak to historical concerns.

In an act of veiled transparency akin to Mundus’ confession, the Sultan’s mother folds the doubleness of Gower’s narrative technique into her own words to her son. “Mi sone,” she tells him, “I am be double weie / With al myn herte glad and blithe,” because he is converting to Christianity and also taking a beautiful young bride (656-57, my emphasis). Her feigned double joy openly masks a darker duplicity, which quickly manifests as the “Covine of deth” she organizes “behinde his bak” (676). The double weie of the sultan’s mother invokes the middel weie of the whole Confessio in general, and in particular the special historical and narrative anxieties inherently connected to discussions of Envy. To make the connection even more explicit, Gower repeats this key description of envy—the “double weie”—almost two thousand lines later in Book 2, as
Genius urges Amans to avoid Supplantation, a sin by which, through “secret work” [opus occultum], a man takes credit for another’s actions, or falsely steals his honor, reputation, or even social position and identity. Amans admits his guilt, saying that unless he can find “a seker weie,” he too would “ Worche after Supplantacioun” (2422-24). Genius recommends that Amans avoid the sin by a “double weie” that includes first ensuring that others love him, and second ensuring that he loves others. The openly false double weie of the sultan’s mother perverts Genius’ advice, preemptively using Genius’ own terms to do so, and offering only the appearance of mutual love. Contrary to the restorative and productive work of the middle way, the envy of the Sultan’s mother and her concern for her progeny result ironically in her willful destruction of her son, and, as a consequence, any potential grandsons. To avoid the corruption of her family line she destroys it in an act of Envy that is appropriately self-destructive.

The Sultan’s mother forms the first half of a further episodic doubling in the tale. Domilde, the Northumbrian queen and mother of Allee, has similar concerns about “eny heritage” to be claimed by the offspring of her son and a foreigner (1025). Her plan is only marginally less destructive. She generates a false record by intercepting messages sent to Allee, who is away at war. She rewrites them to say that the son Constance has borne is a monster. She likewise replaces Allee’s replies with false orders to expel Constance and her son, Moris, from the kingdom. Her plan succeeds in removing them both from Northumbria, but it does not anticipate the practicality of futurity very well: it does not envision Allee’s inevitable return home and discovery that he “Deceived thurgh his moder was” (1230). This is exactly what happens, and Allee punishes his mother after she fully confesses her actions by burning her alive before his eyes. The sentence of
public immolation structurally parallels the common vision shared by the men who earlier were forced to put Constance on a boat and exile her: “So gret a sorwe thei beginne, / As the here oghne moder sihen / Brent in a fyr before here yhen” (1046-48). The pairing of these images provides a remarkable topical synthesis. Allee’s command destroys his own past in the corporeal form of his mother, and it enacts in the form of public mandate and historical event the emotional experience of the Northumbrian people.

The apparition of “here oghne moder sihen / Bren in a fur before here yhen” links together narrative episodes in the Tale of Constance, but it also narrates the experience of a historically important event. Historical understanding becomes an intensely personal experience to be comprehended emotionally. Indeed, as James Dean has argued, this “personal” engagement of the past is an innovation by Chaucer and Gower. The process, though, is also the long-standing trademark of Gower’s historical poetic: he represented it through the sollicitatio of his authorial persona in the Vox Clamantis. Here, he replicates that process at the narrative level by setting older historical tales against more recent ones. He inserts the Tale of Boniface, relating the conspiracies by which a power-hungry cardinal propels himself to the top of the Church hierarchy, between the Roman tales of Constance and her precursor and namesake, Constantine. As Peck remarks, the Tale of Boniface moves exemplary narrative from romance (in Constance’s tale) to history, “to impress Amans with the farthest reaches of Envy as it infects real men, even men in the highest places.” More significantly, this “aura of history,” as Peck calls it, “effectively enables Gower to break directly into the lives of his audience without jeopardizing the framework of his fiction.” In other words, tales like Boniface’s, which
resonate with very recent large-scale events like the Schism, make the lessons of exemplary narrative “real” for fourteenth-century readers. Scanlon argues further that this incursion of reality demonstrates that all cultural authority (like the papacy) depends “on institutional and discursive processes of historical construction. Authority must be maintained, and largely produced, from within history.” The movement between tales in Book 2 narrates that moment of historical realization, however: making this realization about the nature of history is like watching your own mother burning in a fire before your eyes. The Tale of Boniface does not simply reveal the discursive origins of institutional authority, or bring the older examples of Envy closer to home, thrusting “romance” into “history.” The inclusion of Boniface’s story provides a meta-narrative of the links between these registers of historical understanding. It demonstrates the historical poetics of the middle way by requiring the mind of the reader to move between both historical periods, both metallic sections on the Statue of Time.

Appropriately, the immediacy of this exemplary experience becomes one of the topics of the tale itself. After he is deposed and imprisoned, Boniface, “for hunger bothe hise hondes / Eet of and deide—God wot how— / Of whom the wrytinge is yit now / Registred, as a man mai hiere” (3028-31). The “register” is “the lettre of his cronique / Proclaimed in the court of Rome, / Whereof the wise ensample nome” (3038-39). According to publicly read historical record, Boniface consumed his own hands while in prison. The Tale of Boniface presents a character who makes himself into an iconic reminder of the self-consumptive nature of Envy. His act of self-cannibalism literalizes the thematic images of maternal immolation from the preceding tale. It transforms what functioned as a structural link at the level of plot and as a metaphorical synthesis of
historical understanding and affective response into a single historical event that, because it speaks of present-day institutions like the papacy, resonates within living memory. It furthermore redirects the interpretation of Envy from moral understanding to historical. Envy is a morally self-destructive sin: “For ay the mor that he enviieth, / The more agein himself he plieth” (3145-46). In the Tale of Boniface, however, Gower does not treat this self-consumption in moral terms. Instead, he emphasizes its historicity through the extenuated public and historically “accurate” nature of the chronicle that reports the event.

The Tale of Constantine, which immediately follows Boniface and which concludes the book, synthesizes self-consumptive imagery with the inter-tale historical motion that characterizes Book 2. The tale reveals this historical motion to be regressive, and in doing so it fully represents Envy as a sin to be understood in historical terms. Constantine, emperor of a pre-Christian Rome, has leprosy, and his physicians recommend that he bathe in the blood of children to dispel his ailment. The emperor sends summons to the surrounding lands, ordering mothers to bring their children to Rome to be killed. Hearing the tremendous “noyse” of the wailing mothers and children, Constantine reconsiders his orders, remembers his lowly place in a macrocosmic universe, and instead of killing the children, he distributes his wealth among their families. The Christian teachings of Sylvester redirect Constantine’s charitable energies to the authoritative grid of Catholic doctrine, and the emperor subsequently orders the conversion of the whole of Rome. Unlike Boniface, Constantine engages in self-reflection that does not result in Pride and Envy but a change of view that allows the “savacioun” of his soul and of his people (3361).
As Peck has shown, Constantine’s tale illustrates how the workings of Charity undo the machinations of Envy, and it likewise paves the historical way for the tales of Constance and Boniface. Both tales, especially Boniface’s, represent Constantine’s future history while recalling the corruption of the renewal Constantine mandates for his empire. As Peck’s observation confirms, the compilation of tales in Book 2 forms a regressive loop of historical motion. These tales, taken together, assemble a network of historicity, the navigation of which enacts the historical poetics of the middle way and also represents how one narrative exemplum can retroactively invent another. The back-and-forth motion required by this narrative structure mimics the narrative politics of Envy, a sin that Genius argues must be understood historically, by investigating the processes by which one can explore its ultimately unknowable origins.

**Self-Consumptive Chronicles at the Center of the *Confessio Amantis***

The concerns about duplicity and historical narratives continue throughout the *Confessio*. At the center of his poem, however, Gower phrases these concerns in chronicle form. Books 4 and 5 counsel against Sloth and Avarice, but they also contain what have been considered digressions from the *forma tractatus* of the *Confessio*: chronicles that detail the separate histories of gentilesse, labor, and the world’s religions. These chronicles maintain the pattern of questioning the viability of the *Confessio*’s program of using historical narratives to revitalize the present.

Genius’s discussion of gentilesse and labor in Book 4 speaks to the *Confessio*’s historical poetics. Responding to Amans, who “wot in no weie / What gentilesce is for to seie,” Genius argues,
Upon this diffinicion,
The worldes constitucion
Hath set the name of gentilesse
Upon the fortune of richesse
Which of long time is falle in age.
Thanne is a man of hih lignage
After the forme, as thou miht hiere,
Bot nothing after the matiere.

(4.2202-12)

Genius’ themes are standard fare for descriptions of gentilesse. Yet, as Nicholson argues, Gower works to “remove ‘gentilesse’ from the world of romance”; Genius “presents his response soberly, straightforwardly, without any extravagance, and without resort to storytelling.” In addition to this standard but “straightforward” approach, Genius’ phrasing furthermore points to an intersection between narrative invention and a sense of history. Despite their clear connection to a more ordered past, those men today who can boast of “hih lignage” resemble the greatness of the past “After the forme . . . Bot nothing after the matiere.” The men of whom Genius speaks have a clear connection to the past; their “richesse” and status are the result of their positions at the ends of long historical (or, genealogical) narratives. The problem, however, is that while these historical narratives look authoritative—they have the “forme”—the narratives have nothing of substance. Genius’ term for this substance, “matiere,” is Gower's standard translation in the Confessio for materia, the stuff on which invention works and depends. Because it contrasts current gentility with the imagined ideal of the distant past, Gower’s
formulation is again traditional. But the hollowness of present-day gentilesse also
presents an image of unsuccessful historical narration: while claiming demonstrable,
historical ties to an idealized past, current men of “hih lignage” nevertheless demonstrate
that same historical narrative to be meaningless for constituting true gentility, that is,
being “riche and vertuous also” (4.2286).80

The failure of historical invention demonstrated by the sorry case of present-day
gentilesse compels Genius to narrate a restorative historical narrative. At the heart of the
Confessio, near the end of Book 4, Genius presents a history of labor. Introducing the
great intellectual discoveries of the past, Genius tells Amans

That if it were now to make

Thing which that thei ferst founden oute,

It sholde noght be brought about.

...

And for to drawe into memoire

Here names bothe and here histoire,

Upon the vertue of her dede

In sondri bokes thou miht rede.

(4.2350-62)

Genius then provides a chronicle of the history of labor that begins with Cham (Ham),
“which ferst the lettres fond / And wrote in Hebreu with his hond” (2397-98). The
chronicle continues with Cadmus, who “the lettres of Gregois [the Greeks] / Ferst made
upon his oghne chois” (2402-403), and it then moves on to a catalogue of men who “The
ferste were of enditours, / Of old cronique and ek auctours” (2411-12). The chronicle
continues with further inventions constitutive of civilization, including fishing nets, cloth-weaving, and mining, and culminating in the high arts of alchemy and philosophy. The “inventions” in Genius’ chronicle should be understood as such in the strictest sense.

Cham “fond” the first alphabet, Zenzis “fond” painting, Saturnus “fond the weie” of commerce and economic exchange (2397, 2421, 2447). These men “fond,” came upon, discovered—literally, “invented”—these arts. The fruits of these inventions, moreover, included further discoveries about invention: “Donat and Dindimus” founded “The ferste reule of scole, and thus, / How that Latin schal be componed / And in what wise it schal be soned” (2641-44), and at

thilke time at Rome also

Was Tullius with Cithero,

That writen upon Rethorike,

How that men schal the wordes pike

After the forme of eloquence,

Which is, men sein, a gret prudence.

(2647-52)

As Yeager argues, Gower’s history of labor is logocentric, organized around language and intellectual work. When paired with the ensuing history of alchemy, the applied practice of this logocentric tradition, which Genius presents next, the history of labor works as a virtue to counteract the present-day manifestation of Sloth. Because it is inherently meta-textual in this respect, the labor section speaks also to the “poetic history” of the Confessio itself, “the narrative of its own making”; this in turn looks to the conclusion of the entire poem.
history of invention designed to revivify the current fallen state of the world in which even a vital cultural component like *gentilesse*, which is understood and demonstrated in historical terms through “lignage,” has been shown to illustrate the potential irrelevance of historical understanding for personal and cultural restoration.

Genius’s chronicle of labor works to reconstruct a history of invention from within the very center of the poem. Its regenerative efforts, however, only call further attention to the potential inadequacy of historical narration to restore the present since the process of that narration, by its nature as a chronicle, must move further and further from a less-divided, idealized past and toward the present. This concern is figured in self-consumptive terms in the chronicles Gower inserts into Book 5 in which Genius details the histories of Avarice as a sin and the varying religions of the world. Avarice is characterized by the singular consumption of what had once been meant for an entire community. Avarice introduces war into human history and overturns the careful chronicle of labor Genius established in Book 4:

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And werre cam on every side
Which alle love leide aside
And of comun his propre made,
So that instede of schovele and spade
The scharpe swerd was take on honde.
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(5.13-17)

At Amans’s request, Genius offers a genealogy of pagan gods, who are noteworthy, it seems, for their tendency to murder their own family members. In the Egyptian tradition, for example, Typhon kills his brother, Osiris, and as Yeager notes, the Egyptian pantheon
is rooted in incest. The sense is intensified among the Greeks: Saturn, for example, habitually murders and devours his offspring: “Hise oghne children he to plihte, / And eet hem of his comun wone” (5.850-51). The goal of the history of religions is to allow Gower to dispel pagan beliefs and introduce Christianity as the path to truth. However, as Nicholson shows, the history of Avarice as a topic does not allow the Confessio to maintain the idealized image of a prelapsarian world for very long. Moreover, Gower’s dismissal of the gods of antiquity “takes the unprecedented step of dismissing his own fictions,” since it dismisses his materia for inventing tales for ethical instruction. Appropriately, Book 5’s tales about the Golden Fleece—those of Jason and Medea, and Phrixus and Helle—turn on the deaths of children. Similarly, two of the concluding tales of Book 6’s treatment of Gluttony ostensibly address witchcraft, but they also offer metaphorical accounts of the past catching up with their protagonists. Ulysses’ affair with Circe produces a son, Telegonus, who unwittingly kills his father. And Nectanabus’ son, Alexander the Great, begotten through deceit in a situation similar to Mundus’ rape of Paulina, later kills him by pushing him from a high wall.

By the time he reaches the final tale of the Confessio, Gower distills these concerns into a single thematic principle: incest. Incest is the topic Gower expelled when rewriting his sources in the Tale of Constance, and it is the referent girding Boniface’s eating himself to death, Constantine’s initial willingness to slaughter Roman children in order to bathe in their blood, and the self-consumptive chronicles of pagan religions that mark Book 5. Incest as a topic provides an effective metaphorical and thematic device for a variety of social and ethical concerns, including condemning behavior destructive at individual and social levels, articulating the relationship of the individual to the state or to
the divine, abandoning courtly love poetry for the contemplative, and demonstrating the dependency of cultural, political, familial, and authorial control on discursive constructions. Incest, however, also functions as a meta-topic; its destructive consumption of the future by the past introduces a narrative trajectory that runs counter to the historical poetics of the middle way. In the final tale of the Confessio, Gower addresses the meta-textual aspect of incest to reinforce the poetic method of his poem.

**Apollonius and the Invention of History**

The Tale of Apollonius in Book 8 presents Gower’s most thorough treatment of the invention of history through the thematic device of incest. The final and longest tale of the Confessio chronicles the wanderings of Apollonius, Prince of Tyre, and its narrative episodes recall many of the central lessons of the first seven books of Gower’s poem. The story begins as Apollonius works to solve the riddle of King Antiochus in order to win Antiochus’ daughter in marriage. The answer to the riddle, however, is Antiochus’ own veiled confession of his sexual relationship with his daughter. Apollonius, fearing death by the king’s hand, flees in exile. The remainder of the tale tells of Apollonius’ marriage, the birth of his daughter, and their various estrangements under the workings of Fortune, the likes of which are rivaled only by the Tale of Constance. Many years later, Apollonius is finally reunited with his family, and the incestuous relationship that began the story is at last worked out through the careful narrative progression of the tale.

In the tale, incest functions as a threat on the literal level of narrative plot (it destroys families and societies) and at the meta-narrative level by reversing the historical
poetics of the middle way: it thematically represents the destructive consumption of the present by the past. Intergenerational, father-daughter incest, essentialized by the discursive principle of the Riddle of Antiochus, introduces a dangerous narrative process that runs counter to the historical poetics of the middle way. Instead of the lore of ancient wise being recalled by individual readers who can internalize the past and apply it toward improving themselves and the present, the model offered by King Antiochus, who repeatedly and admittedly rapes his own daughter, represents the past consuming the present and its generative potential. Through the Apollonius story, Gower takes on both registers of this threat and enacts the restorative power of the middle way’s historical poetics by systematically “unrihting” the Riddle of Antiochus. He does so by taking narrative invention itself as his topic alongside incest, and then by inserting both topics into the framework of historical experience he outlines in the Prologue.

Appropriately, the tale begins with a conscious act of invention. Apollonius journeys to Antiochus’ kingdom to petition for the daughter’s hand in marriage. Before he can win her he, like all her other suitors, must correctly answer her father’s riddle:

> With felonie I am upbore,
> I ete and have it noght forbore
> Mi modres fleissh, whos housebonde
> Mi fader for to seche I fonde,
> Which is the Sone ek of my wif.

(8.405-09)

The penalty for an incorrect response is death, but Apollonius discovers the correct answer—though he refuses to offer it so plainly to the king, instead saying only that the
solution “toucheth al the privete / Betwen thin oghne childe and thee / And stant al hol upon you tuo” (425-27). The riddle refers not only to Antiochus’ secret but to Gower’s narrative technique. Solving a riddle is an act of reverse-invention. A linguistic puzzle constructed with full knowledge of a single answer, a riddle fails not when it is unsolvable, but when more than one solution can fulfill its propositions. Solving a riddle requires the simultaneous discovery of the topic of the riddle (what it was invented to conceal) and the original mechanisms of concealment. The Riddle of Antiochus is central to the “long process” of the tale (269), not only because its topic and method of representation mirror the sprawling narrative and potentially incestuous pairings that proceed it, but also because its functioning as a transparent riddle describing incest perverts the historical poetics of the Confessio.

At the structural level, the secret held between Antiochus and his daughter is thematically re-introduced and rewritten through two key episodes in the tale, first through the scenes in which Apollonius meets and marries his future wife, and second through the reunion between Apollonius and his daughter. In both cases Gower departs from his sources for the tale and amplifies the strategies of invention used to contract the inventional trajectory established by the riddle.

After washing up on a foreign shore like his narrative predecessor, Constance, Apollonius is taken into the court of King Artestrathes where the king sends his daughter to their guest with a harp and the imperative to please him. Gower alters his sources to describe Apollonius’s tutoring of Artestrathes’s daughter. While Gower made similar additions to the Tale of Constance, enlivening the chronicle account with moments of real intimacy, here his alterations emphasize the mechanics of poetic invention. When the
daughter “axeth hou him liketh” her playing,

“Ma dame, certes wel,” he seide,

“Bot if ye the mesure pleide
Which, if you list, I schal you liere,
It were a glad thing for to hiere.”

“Ha, lieve sire,” tho quod sche,

“Now tak the harpe and let me se
Of what mesure that ye mene.”

(766-73)

Instead of performing a dazzlingly elaborate pantomime for the king and court, as his sources’ Apollonii do, Gower’s Apollonius carefully teaches Artestrathes’s daughter how to hone her musical skill. Apollonius offers specific, technical instruction at the daughter’s request: “Now tak the harpe and let me se / Of what mesure that ye mene.” The passage narrates Apollonius’ emotional recovery through his exercise of poetic composition.92

At the end of her tutelage under Apollonius, the daughter demonstrates her ability with both the mechanics and purpose of narrative composition. Her fluency is obvious when she informs her father of her desire to wed Apollonius. Petitioned by three suitors, each of whom bears prepared statements summarizing “his name, his fader and his good” (877), Artestrathes allows his daughter to choose between them. In Gower’s sources, the daughter responds with a riddle, only indirectly asserting her desire to marry Apollonius. Writing cryptically in a note that she desires to marry only the shipwrecked man, she lets neither the king nor Apollonius in on her riddle and recreates the secrecy that marked
Antiochus’ kingship. Gower’s version is significantly different. In the Confessio, Artestrathes’s daughter immediately lets her father in on the secret. She writes to him:

The schame which is in a maide
With speche dar noght ben unloke,
Bot in writinge it mai be spoke;
So wryte I to you, fader, thus:
Bot if I have Appolinus,
Of al this world, what so betyde,
I wol non other man abide.
And certes if I of him faile,
I wot riht wel withoute faile
Ye schull for me be dowhterles.

(894-903)

Not at all restricted to the “harpe” and “mesure,” and written with the explicit purpose of making her will known, the daughter’s response effectively shuts down any possibility of literal incest and defends both her “wommanysshe schame” and her desire (855). Much like the Riddle of Antiochus, the nature of her inventional act determines what follows. Artestrathes subsequently tells the suitors his daughter’s intentions and informs Apollonius of her wishes. The results are a happy and procreative marriage and the absence of shadowy secrets.

The rewriting of the Riddle of Antiochus is made complete only much later through Apollonius’s own daughter, Thaise, whose literacy and education allow for both her well-being and her eventual reunion with her father. When he leaves his infant
daughter with Strangulio, Apollonius demands that “whan sche hath of age more, / That sche be set to bokes lore,” ensuring that the value he places on reading and narrative—what he demonstrated in the education of his wife—be passed on to his daughter (1299-1300). This is another of Gower’s additions to his sources.94 Years pass, and Thaise grows to adulthood. After a string of bad fortune the likes of which only her father (and Constance) had seen before, which includes being kidnapped by pirates and sold to a pimp, Thaise’s proficiency with inventional process saves her from harm. Forced to work as a prostitute, Thaise is preserved by her vocalized sorrow at the risk of her wommanyshe schame. Her laments thwart the efforts of the men hired to rape her, and she is subsequently made a teacher in a temple when it is revealed that no man will ever be able to have his way with her. Her success in this position shows her to have the same profound knowledge of process and narrative that rescued her father from his melancholy in the court of Artestrathes. Again, the narrative element of this part of the plot is Gower’s addition to his sources. In the Latin prose version of the story, Tarsia ensures her virginity by using her education for mere entertainment purposes.95 In Gower, Thaise establishes herself as a renowned teacher, educating women in the same curriculum with which her father taught her mother:

Now comen tho that comen wolde
Of wommen in her lusty youthe,
To hiere and se what thing sche couthe:
Sche can the wisdom of a clerk,
Sche can of every lusti werk
Which to a gentil womman longeth,
And some of hem sche underfongeth
To the Citole and to the Harpe,
And whom it liketh forto carpe
Proverbes and demandes slyhe,
An other such thei never syhe,
Which that science so wel tawhte.

(1480-91)
Thaise teaches the women how to cultivate both lyric (the citole and harpe) and
discursive (proverbes and demandes) compositional techniques. Moreover, her role as a
teacher and not as an entertainer demonstrates the knowledge of process and technique
behind the products of these arts. At the topical level, Thaise’s ability to learn and teach,
as well as her existence as the offspring of Apollonius and his wife, stop incest and break
the self-consumptive nature of Antiochus’s relationship with his daughter by engaging in
explicitly generative actions.

Gower refocuses Thaise’s invention abilities on the meta-narrative issues of his
tale in the climactic scene in the dark hold of Apollonius’s ship. The exiled king, again
melancholic, unknowingly sails to the kingdom where his daughter teaches and, in a
dramatized reenactment of the secretive work of the riddle, locks himself in the bowels of
his ship. The “wisdom of the toun” determines that Thaise, because of her learned
reputation, is the only person who can improve this king’s disposition and inform the city
of his story (1652). Apollonius’s condition is cured by his daughter’s expert control over
the curriculum of narrativity he had taught her mother and demanded she be taught. The
result is, as Kurt Olsson notes, a consolation of Boethian proportions. As Thaise runs
through a retinue of “many a lay,” “demandes strange,” “proverbe,” “probleme,” and finally “many soubtil question” (1670, 1677, 1681, 1683), what occurs in the hold of Apollonius’s ship is a commentary on Apollonius’s solving of Antiochus’s riddle. The “many soubtil question” Thaise asks are riddles. In the Latin sources, Tarsia asks riddle after riddle of Apollonius, and he answers each one correctly. Not until she attempts to push him into the sunlight does he, in reaction, throws her to the ground. At this point, she laments her bad fortune and cries out to God in her plight. Hearing the narrative of her complaint, Apollonius recognizes her as his daughter. Gower’s account again is significantly different from his sources. No lengthy catalogue of riddles precedes the recognition scene. Instead, what finally gets a reaction from Apollonius is his being faced with having to answer a literal riddle again in the midst of a puzzling and enigmatic kinde love that refigures the Riddle of Antiochus:

Non wiste of other hou it stod,

And yit the fader ate laste

His herte upon this maide caste,

That he hire loveth kindely,

And yit he wiste nevere why.

(1704-08)

As in the source, Thaise recounts the narrative of her life, but here she does so as an act of self-defense, not complaint. In fact, she orders Apollonius, “Avoi,” and resorts to the “game” of narrative that has so well protected her in the past (1696; 1714). Furthermore, the narrative she tells is complete. She delivers her entire story in ordine, from beginning to end, “Fro point to point,” and once she begins, she finds that she cannot stop until it is
completely related:

Fro point to point al sche him tolde,
That sche hath longe in herte holde,
And nevere dorste make hir mone
Bot only to this lord al one,
To whom hire herte can noght hele,
Torne it to wo, torne it to wele,
Torne it to good, torne it to harm.

(1725-31)

What occurs secretly in the hold of the ship explicitly rewrites the dark secrecy of the Riddle of Antiochus. Apollonius makes “such a joie as . . . Was nevere sen” (1733-34), and the king finds “newe grace, / So that out of his derke place / He goth him up into the liht, / And with him cam that swete wiht, / His doghter Thaise” (1739-43). The “joie” and “newe grace” completely undo the incestuous self-consumption signaled by the Riddle of Antiochus. This scene is not only a recapitulation of the theme of incest, as Scanlon argues; it is also a redevelopment of the originary narrative of the tale.99 For Bullón-Fernández, Thaise’s use of language displaces sexuality; it is exactly the lack of mutual language between Antiochus and his daughter that leads to incest.100 It is true that Thaise and Apollonius forge a line of communication that constructs a positive and alternate discourse from the one-sided incest narrative of Antiochus. More significantly, however, the emphasis on how they construct that line rewrites the transparently incestuous narrative of the riddle. This act of narrative development, because it links invention topic with process and results in a generative act at the level of both, achieves the
synthesis of the middle way and “unihts” the counter-narrative which threatens Gower’s project.

That sense of generation counters the riddle’s incestuous stifling. At its core, a riddle is the presentation of a specific case generalized to propositions, and a riddle-solver finds the particular that unlocks propositions. If, as I argued above, at the level of process, solving a riddle is an act of recovery, then at a topical level, it is an act of penetration and generation. This act is made particularly generative in the hold of Apollonius’s ship because the communication between Thaise and Apollonius positively reunites this father and daughter. Transferred through this relationship are the disciplines of invention, disciplines of intense emotional worth to the characters of the tale. As Robins argues, Thaise’s story moves her father “not because it offers an analogy to his own predicament, but because it is a part of his own story,” and Olsson sees Apollonius’s reaction to it as an erotic desire for reminiscence. The emphasis here, however, is not so much on psychoanalysis—repressed incestuous desire and knowledge Thais and Apollonius share about their relationship with each other—as on the anticipation of the transfer itself. If Apollonius is moved because he has been invited to become part of “his own story,” then his psychological recovery and thus the topical resolution of the tale are at last made complete through a real, staged, and non-metaphorical engagement with narrative. Apollonius and Thaise experience the same “aura” of historicity that characterizes Gower’s insertion of the Tale of Boniface in the middle of Book 2. They experience an awareness of historical immediacy, a sensation that they—like all those Confessio readers who recognize the historical immediacy of papal politics—are implicated in the historical narrative they have just exchanged. The scene in the hold of
Apollonius’ ship enacts as shared experience the historical poetics of the middle way itself.

Gower also explodes this historical poetic outward by placing the Riddle of Antiochus and its unrihting through the Tale of Apollonius in an expressly historical framework. Book 8 begins with a chronicle that tracks the development of incest as a concept through the history of civilization. As Archibald, Donavin, Scanlon, and Bullón-Fernández have noted, this chronicle reveals incest itself to be historically constructed: no single, universal doctrine of sin can be applied to incest across the entire history of man.

Incestuous relationships were a requirement for the procreation of the species, and, as Gower notes, were not forbidden until after the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ (8.68-70). But if in the current age of man incest of the type between fathers and daughters is expressly forbidden, the age itself is nevertheless characterized as incestuous. Gower’s incest chronicle again recalls Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the Statue of Time, the iconic symbol of both history and the experiential sense of its progression.

On the Statue, the current age is characterized as inherently discordant and cannibalistic:

Whan that the world divided is,
It moste algate fare amis,
For Erthe which is meyned with Stiel
Togedre may noght laste wiel,
Bot if that on that other waste;
So mot it nedes faile in haste.

(Pr. 644-50)

The image is one of discord, but it is also one of incest. Composed of both earth and
steel, the age can only sustain itself through self-consumption: “Togedre may noght laste wiel, / Bot if that on that other waste.” Gower’s term, wasten, simultaneously connotes utter destruction and complete consumption, and it also recalls Boniface wastinge his own hands, the Sultans’ mother wastinge her son, and Antiochus wastinge his daughter.

When Gower briefly offers the perspective of Antiochus’ daughter, the way he renders her interiority indicates her full awareness of the historical dynamics of her victimhood. Making “much worghe” within herself, Antiochus’s daughter laments the fact that she has lived to see “this ilke day! / Thing which me bodi ferst begat / Into this world, onliche that / Mi worldes worschipe hath bereft” (328-31). Gower’s construction of the daughter’s response differs from his sources. In his version, Antiochus’s daughter is particularly concerned by the fact that her origin has been transformed into her ending.103 What is more, her complaint, “this ilke day,” resounds with Gower’s own Latin from the Vox: “Hic erat ille dies,” “This was that day.”104 The incestuous act of her father not only brutally violates her before her wedding day—the point Gower’s sources are careful to emphasize—but also dramatizes the representation of the final age of man depicted in the legs and feet of the Statue of Time, as her “wylde fader thus devoureth / His oghne fleissh, which non socoureth,” (309-10). The daughter’s concern emphasizes the perpetrator of her rape over the rape itself, while at the same time dehumanizing him: “Thing which mi bodi ferst begat / Into this world, onliche that / Mi worldes worscipe hath bereft” (my emphasis). Her words connect the act of father-daughter incest with both the Prologue’s description of the ages of the world and with the incest timeline that introduces the tale. In Antiochus’ daughter, the tale transforms cultural history into a violently personal one. She represents an individual in whom not ethical meanings but
history and invention intersect.

A New “Cronique”

At the conclusion of the Confessio, Gower famously reveals the identity of Amans to be none other than his own fictionalized authorial persona, “John Gower.” And, in a parallel gesture of sweeping synthesis, Venus solves all of Gower’s love problems by telling him simply to “Remembre wel hou thou art old” (2439). The final narrative image of the Confessio seems to be an old Gower, clinging to his prayer beads and shuffling away to bury his head once more in the “old books” and “lore” with which he began. Gower’s transformation signals a shift from love to wisdom, and it represents metaphorically the teleological perspective needed to understand ethical meaning within a human lifespan. Venus’ solution also requires that Gower remember he is as much the product of a sense of historical progression as he is the inventor of a compilation of narrative examples of it.105

In actuality, however, the Confessio Amantis does not end with this image. Instead, it concludes with the Quam cinxere and the Quia vnuquisque, the letter from “a certain philosopher” (probably Gower himself) who labels Gower the poet of all England, and the authoritative catalogue of Gower’s poetic career discussed in Chapter 3. As Echard rightly notes,106 this Latin end matter becomes the textualized version of Gower’s tomb in Southwerk Cathedral, where an effigy of the author rests his head on three books containing his major poems. Despite its personalization of historical experience,107 the final image of Gower in the Confessio is not a man victimized by time, but one who stands outside of it, like the Statue of Time itself. It is a portrait of an author who
constantly revised his opus with an eye toward history to such an extent that he transformed his poetic career into a chronicle of poetic *res gestae*. The conclusion of the *Confessio*, then, does not only present readers with an experiential map for ethical decision-making; it also makes Gower’s whole literary career into an exemplary narrative. The textual Latin monuments at the end of the *Confessio* write into English literary history Gower’s authorial longevity. When read into the narrative framework of the *Confessio*, they re-inject into history the very ethical map that Gower’s poetry claims to derive from history. In other words, the *Confessio* invents the *materia* for the literary futurity it imagines. The *forma tractandi* of the *Confessio* thus extends beyond the confines of the page and taps into the larger historical narrative of poetic *res gestae* that characterize Gower’s literary output as a whole. Requiring the poem to mean in this way allows it to memorialize his poetic career and prescribe the invention material that future poets can draw upon. The *Confessio*’s *forma tractandi* becomes a literary chronicle that operates through the same mechanisms of history. The *Confessio* makes the work of historical excavation an invention process that is uniquely Gower’s own. His major English poem works to ensure that any subsequent poetics of ethical investigation must include Gower’s own poetic project.

In this chapter I have argued that the *Confessio Amantis* takes as its topics both the mechanics of narrative invention and the politics of historical understanding. The poem goes beyond the goals of generating ethical subjectivity in readers or providing political counsel to kings by formulating a “newe” poetic method, the “middel weie.” Gower uses his poem to put to the test his basic premise that stories from the past can
improve a discordant present, and he articulates that test meta-textually from within the Confessio itself. The result is the creation and representation of a powerful English poetics that works to establish the auctoritas of its inventor and to implicate itself within a larger sense of English historical understanding. As such, Gower’s is a powerful formulation of the invention of history, and it is this formulation that Chaucer engaged and challenged when he rewrote the poetry of his friend and contemporary. The most extensive case of Chaucer’s rewriting occurs in the Man of Law’s Tale. Examining that tale in the light of Gower’s historical poetics offers a glimpse of how Chaucer approaches the idea of historical understanding in the context of literary fame, all in the form of a conversation with a fellow poet, who “Was thanne alyve.” For Chaucer, Gower’s poetry offers an alternative approach to history, different from that of Dante, Petrarch, or Statius, and the Man of Law’s Tale presents a powerful critique of Gower’s innovative poetics.

Notes


3 Hugh White, “Division and Failure in Gower’s Confessio Amantis,” Neophilologus 72 (1988): 600-16, sees the poem to be a “failure” in different terms. He argues that the discord is reflected in the poem itself through the inability of the Confessio to reconcile nature and reason, and as such, “The poem can, in fact, be seen as ending in failure” (613).

4 All references to the Confessio Amantis are to The English Works of John Gower, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81, 82 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 2 vols. All references will be cited parenthetically in the text by book and line number.


6 Nicholson, Love and Ethics, quotations from p. 38 and p. 68.

7 Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 70.


11 Olsson, John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), p. 231. Quoting Olsson, Robins, pp. 174-75, refuses to combine corruption and telos into a happy resolution, arguing instead that Gower’s whole point is to represent these conflicting “temporal frameworks” struggling within the individual subject.

12 James Dean, “Time Past and Present in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale and Gower’s Confessio Amantis,” ELH 44 (1977): 401-18, notes that Gower is remarkable for rejuvenating the medieval commonplace of representing the aged state of the world through the form of a man: “Gower renews the commonplace by exposing his own complicity in the world’s degeneration and by offering himself as an example of immoderate loving” (410). Like Chaucer, Gower thus develops a “personal sensibility to define the relationship between present and past” (403).

13 Elizabeth Allen, False Fables and Exemplary Truth in Later Middle English Literature (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2005), p. 2.

14 Elizabeth Allen, False Fables, p. 16.


16 See Elizabeth Allen, pp. 64-72, especially p. 72. Analyzing Gower’s Tale of Virginia in Book 7, Allen argues that Gower pulls the tale from its historical confines in Livy in which authority is linked to the structural verisimilitudes offered by historia and instead relocates the narrative in the realm of marvel and fabula.

term “ensample” over exemplum, a term that carries a less ecclesiastically-bent meaning.

18 See Chapter 3 for a review of the critical tradition addressing Gower and authority.


20 Scanlon, Narrative, pp. 251-55.


22 Watt, p. 35.

23 The forma tractandi refers to the ways in which the style, technique, and execution of a text generates its meanings. For a discussion of the forma tractandi and its relationship to ethical knowledge through exempla, see Judson Boyce Allen, The Ethical Poetic of the Latter Middle Ages (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 73-74. For the scholastic tradition of the forma tractandi and its distinction from the forma tractatus, or formal structure of the text, see A. J. Minnis, Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages (London: Scholar Press, 1984), pp. 119-45 and 147-50.

24 For a survey of this trope across Gower’s three major poems, see James M. Dean, The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Medieval Academy of America, 1997), pp. 233-70.

25 Robins, p. 177.

26 As such, the Confessio’s meta-textual examination of the uses of history also allows it to image how it might transform a fallen, present world. This transformation and “world-making” power is somewhat different from that identified by Russell Peck, “The

Whereas Peck shows that the realities of the poem are ultimately fictions—“lies,” in fact—existing in the minds of Genius and Amans, I want to argue that Gower’s poem actually represents metaphorically how historical narratives inform its own poetic process.

27 The meta-textual qualities of the *Confessio* have been noticed before. See, for example, note 83 below.

28 Alexandra Hennessey Olsen, “Betwene Ernest and Game”: The Literary Artistry of the *Confessio Amantis* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp. 34-40, offers an excellent summary of the use and function of puns. Olsen, pp. 36-37, argues that punning on “wyse” contributes to the “lore” of the Prologue by aligning Gower’s text with the wisdom of past writers though the pun’s concentrated linguistic structure, 36-37.

29 Peck, “Phenomenology,” pp. 50-51, makes a similar argument about epistemological and ontological representations among late medieval authors, asserting “fourteenth-century fiction writers represent the potentialities of mental behavior theatrically through figura and the histrionics of oppositional dialogue.”

30 Dean, *World Grown Old*, pp. 257-58, notes that one of the characteristics of the “newe” world is its ability to renew the old.


See Peck’s summary in “John Gower and the Book of Daniel,” in John Gower: Recent Readings, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), pp. 159-60. Peck argues that Gower cites both Nebuchadnezzar stories from the book of Daniel in order to present two aspects of history: the Statue presents apocalyptic history; the transformation of the king into a beast “observes history as a perpetual sequence of exempla from which an individual, making right use of his critical abilities, can learn and improve himself through penitential acts” (161; see also 178-80).


See the descriptions in Jeremy Griffiths, “Confessio Amantis: The Poem and its Pictures,” in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments, 163-78; Richard K. Emmerson, “Reading Gower in a Manuscript Culture: Latin and English in Illustrated Manuscripts of the Confessio Amantis,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 21 (1999), pp. 167-70; Watt, pp. 109-10; and Joel Fredell, “Reading the Dream Miniature in the Confessio Amantis,” Medievalia et Humanistica, n.s. 22 (1995): 61-93, esp. pp. 62-63. Fredell reads the miniatures in the context of a fifteenth-century Lancastrian readership and argues that the Statue “may be understood as salvation history tyrant or royal exemplum for penitence in contemporary society, the statue as the embodiment of salvation history itself or contemporary society” (64-65).


See Patrick J. Gallacher, Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower’s

38 Simpson, pp. 157-59, argues that the scene does not make Genius a hypocrite but instead simply demonstrates that inconsistencies exist in the narrative. Hugh White, “The Sympathetic Villain in Confessio Amantis,” in Re-Visioning Gower, p. 232, reads Genius’ leniency as part of a larger “unreconciled distinctness” between “the desire to write moral lore and the drive to offer storial pleasure, lust.” Watt, pp. 100-103, describes the scene as a “glorious inconsistency” that enacts for the reader the division that characterizes the modern world (quotation from p. 100). For Peck, Kingship and Common Profit in Gower’s Confessio Amantis (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), pp. 41-44, the important points are that the diseased element of the community is removed through public debate and that Paulina and her husband’s marriage is stronger for the incident.

39 Macaulay, 2.43. The translation is Andrew Galloway’s from Peck, ed., 1.108, with my alterations.


42 Echard, “With Carmen’s Help: Latin Authorities in the Confessio Amantis,” Studies in Philology 95 (1998): 1-40, has shown that the Latin of the Confessio is not the blanket authority critics have long supposed it to be. Patricia Batchelor, “Feigned Truth and Exemplary Method in the Confessio Amantis,” in Re-Visioning Gower, pp. 1-15, examines the Latin apparatus in terms of medieval exemplarity.

43 The term is White’s, in “The Sympathetic Villain in Confessio Amantis.”

See for example R. F. Yeager, “John Gower and the Exemplum Form: Tale Models in the *Confessio Amantis*,” *Mediaevalia* 8 (1982), p. 330, and Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 140-44; see also Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, pp. 55-68. Gallacher, pp. 39-40, reads an allegorical significance to this transformation and sees the daughter’s imitation of Mary to be another of Gower’s rewritings of the Annunciation. As several critics have noted, the father-daughter relationship of the tale introduces a threat of potential incest, a theme Gower develops throughout the *Confessio*. Georgina Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, ELS Monograph Series No. 56 (Victoria, Canada: English Literary Studies, 1993), pp. 54-55, reads the potential for incest in the tale as a structural metaphor for the convergence of the mortal with the divine, and she notes in particular the sexualized portrait of the daughter as she is first introduced in the tale. María Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: Authority, Family, State, and Writing* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 68-74, notes that the daughter’s ability to speak eloquently both creates and dispels incestuous desire in the tale. Moreover, the daughter’s elevation to a higher social standing by the end of the tale, thanks to her own suggestion to the king, makes her a “redeeming daughter,” someone whose actions move the tale away from of incest while also not overturning the conventional social hierarchies to which incest is a threat. As I will argue in the final section of this chapter, incest in the *Confessio* is a thematic figure that allows Gower to conflate narrative self-analysis with an understanding of history in order to demonstrate how both work together to form a new kind of vernacular poetics.
The Latin rubric introducing the tale notes that Genius “dicit quod nuper quidam Rex famose prudencie cuidam militi suo super tribus questionibus” [says that in recent times a certain king, famous for his prudence, presented to a certain one of his knights a logical challenge comprising three questions], Macaulay, Vol. 1, p. 119. The translation is by Galloway, in Peck, ed., 1.24. Macaulay, 1:478, and Peck, ed. 1.323, note that no historical source for the tale has been found. Gower tells a condensed version of the story in the Mirour de l’Ommme, 12601-12.

Donavin, p. 55, notes that privité can also be a pun on genitals, which casts this moment of intellectual intimacy in a cloud of potential incest that never fully manifests.

Elizabeth Allen, False Fables.

Bullón-Fernández, pp. 71-72, emphasizes the daughter as taking control and “manipulating the humility topos,” demonstrating her own awareness of her connection to the Annunciation metaphor.

Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, p. 68.

Donavin, p. 63.

Peck, ed. 2.25.


Peck, “Phenomonology,” p. 60

Mitchell, pp. 74-75, argues for the “probative power of tale-telling” in his reading of Book 2’s Tale of the Travellers and the Angel (quotation from p. 74).

Peter Nicholson, Love and Ethics, pp. 154-59, outlines Amans’ answers to Genius in terms of “the familiar emotional and moral characteristics of a particular sort of lover” (quotation from p. 159).
57 See Olsson, p. 108; and Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 152. Nicholson later describes “one of the great lessons” of this expansion as the realization of “a broader universe of values by which all human actions must be weighed and that is so distant from the closed world of emotion in which Amans describes his experience” (176).

58 Schmitz, pp. 122-29. See also Mitchell, p. 75.

59 The Lex Fusia Canina, “Fusian canine law,” was originally Lex Fufia Caninia, and the misreading accounts for the “houndes” presence in a passage of civil law. Macaulay, 1.480, and Peck, ed., 2.328-29, explain the tradition of miscopying.

60 This formulation is Ciceronian, though Cicero is referring to eloquentia, not poetry. See de Inventione, 1.1-2, in de Inventione, de Optimo genere oratorum, Topica, edited and translated by H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949), rpt. 1968.

61 See Chapter 1.

62 Peck, “Phenomenology,” pp. 57-58, notes that Gower relocates the topical referent of Falssemblant from his source in the Roman de la Rose. Jean de Meun refers to the power struggles of academics at the University of Paris; “Gower’s Falssemblant is recontextualized in terms of an incipient capitalist economy” (57).


64 For many critics the mothers of the tale personify the larger social implications of the sin of Envy, from privileging of the self over common profit, to signifying the threat of incest that underwrites the tale. Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, p. 65, sees the mothers as detracting from common profit out of self interest. Donavin, pp. 44-45, notes
that Gower changes Trivet in order to emphasize that the sultan’s mother plots murder not to preserve her faith but because of jealousy for her estate. This plays into a larger tradition of “jealous mother-in-law” stories, and thus inserts the threat of incestuous desire into the tale. See also Arno Esch, “John Gower’s Narrative Art,” translated by Linda Barney Burke, in Gower’s Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology, p. 101.

Donavin, p. 46, argues that in the tale, “social order is subverted because of a latent romantic passion of a mother for her son. In the larger picture, Northumberland loses its queen; in the smaller, Allee loses his wife and baby son.” Winthrop Wetherbee, “Constance and the World in Chaucer and Gower,” in John Gower: Recent Readings, p. 67, argues that Gower uses incest “as a way of pointing to the importance of human culture in guiding and giving value to fallible natural impulse.” Bullón-Fernández, pp. 89-100, reads the father-daughter relationships as a metaphor for the State-Church relationship; Gower’s condemnation of incest is thus a condemnation of the “absolutist use of royal power” as it is in other tales, and it “points at the same time to the need to delimit those pretensions” toward “royalist reappropriation” (100).


See MED, definition 3 for this idiomatic meaning of “alyve.”

See MED for variant spellings of the Middle English heir, which include hier. See also Howard Kaminsky, “Estate, Nobility, and the Exhibition of Estate in the Later Middle

68 For a summary, see Peck, ed., 2.25-26.

69 The Tale of the False Bachelor in particular describes each of these through an extreme case of identity theft.


72 See Esch, p. 98.


74 Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, pp. 73-74.

75 Scanlon, Narrative, p. 267. This for Scanlon is also a component of Gower’s general espousal of lay authority throughout the Confessio.

76 For a reading of this self-consumption in terms of clerical power, see Scanlon, Narrative, p. 262.

77 See Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, p. 77; and Peck, ed., 2.26-27.

78 See Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, p. 161.

79 Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 232. Nicholson sees Genius’ gentilesse as “consist[ing] in the pursuit of virtue” (232). Olsson, pp. 127-29, sees it as constitutive of the virtuous otium demonstrated in Book 4 that provides “an especially enabling rest, re-creative in the enlarged sense of organizing the topics of confession and potentially the whole of the lover’s experience” (129).
Gentilesse is only one instance of this dilemma. The problem with gentilesse is also the problem with the modern Church, as Genius indicates in Book 5: “The schip which Peter hath to stiere, / The forme is kept, bot the matiere / Transformed is in other wise” (5.1871-73).

Peck’s gloss to “fond” in his recent edition emphasizes this meaning.

Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, pp. 164-68.

Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, pp. 169-70, quotations from p. 169. Olsson, pp. 128-29 and 145-56, also sees this moment looking forward to the conclusion of the Confessio.

The efforts of Genius’s history of labor will be duplicated in a political context in Book 7 as Genius ostensibly breaks from the forma tractatus of the Seven Deadly Sins to offer a treatise the Liberal Arts and political policy. Olsson, p. 121, sees Book 7 as extending Book 4’s history into a fully developed “program of study.” For Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 336, Book 7 indicates a “separate path” that rephrases the books which proceed it. Copeland locates in Book 7 the source of Gower’s auctoritas as he writes his poem into the academic tradition.

Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, pp. 174-75.

Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 257.

Nicholson, Love and Ethics, p. 299. Nicholson argues that Gower is able to acknowledge the falseness of the stories as well as their value as ethical examples: “The stories of the gods are true, and they are not” (302).

For traditional readings of incest as an intensified example of sin against both family and community, see Peck, Kingship and Common Profit, pp. 165-71, and C. David Benson, “Incest and Moral Poetry in Gower’s Confessio Amantis,” Chaucer Review 19
(1984): 100-109. For a discussion of how incest encourages Amans’s move from the realm of courtly love poetry to contemplative poetry, see Donavin, esp. chapters 2 and 3; Donavin, pp. 85-86, argues that Apollonius comes to realize spiritual desire, especially through his desire for Thaise; see also Nicholson, Love and Ethics, pp. 92-93. Scanlon, “The Riddle of Incest: John Gower and the Problem of Medieval Sexuality,” in Re-Visioning Gower, pp. 93-128, contextualizes Gower’s narrative of incest within a medieval historical frame, and places his discussion within the frames of psychoanalytic and feminist criticism, arguing that through the exemplary power of the Tale of Apollonius, Gower uses incest for political and penitential ends. Elizabeth Archibald, Incest and the Medieval Imagination (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), pp. 93-101, compares Gower’s version of the Apollonius story with classical and medieval contexts. Watt, Amoral Gower, pp. 127-48, examines the tale’s construction of gender and sexuality and its relation to the public perception of Richard II.

89 Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, p. 218.

90 For Bullón-Fernández, p. 60, the riddle speaks to the precariously discursive nature of patriarchal rule: it is Antiochus’ attempt to write a new kind of discourse, one that allows him to indulge his incestuous desire while at the same time not undermining the patriarchal power structures by committing that very act. For Watt, p. 130-31, the riddle’s grammatical confusion speaks of sexual and moral confusion, nudging its reader toward something inherently “perverse and unethical.” She argues that the riddle’s multiple allusions can only be understood “when considered in relation to the tale as a whole,” and ultimately point to the story’s absent mothers who haunt it. For a detailed breakdown of the riddle and Gower’s use of his Latin source, see D. Goolden, “Antiochus’s Riddle in

91 See Macaulay, 1:536-38, for a discussion of Gower’s sources. The main sources are the Latin prose Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri and the twelfth-century “Cronica de Apollonio” in Godfrey of Viterbo’s Pantheon. All references to the Historia Apollonii are to Elizabeth Archibald’s Latin text and English translation in Apollonius of Tyre, pp. 112-79.

92 The passage is also careful to point out the proper technique of composing medieval lyric in accordance with Augustinian notions of balance and proportion. While ostensibly about the composition of lyric, this initial training scene is a precursor to later episodes which emphasize fluency in the composition of narrative. In his De Musica, Augustine describes the necessity of proper balance and proportion of spiritually important music, essentially calling the discipline the art of measuring well. For a summary of Augustine’s key points, see Robert R. Edwards, Ratio and Invention: A Study of Medieval Lyric and Narrative (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1989), pp. xviii-xix and 6-8. Edwards clearly distinguishes the defining characteristics of medieval lyric and narrative. For a useful summary of these ideas, see the respective interchapters in Ratio and Invention.
In the Historia, “In quibus rescripserat filia sua: ‘Bone rex et pater optime, quoniam clementiae tuae indulgentia permittis mihi, dicam: illum volo coniugem naufragio patrimonio deceptum.’ ” [His daughter had written as follows: “Good king and best of fathers, since you graciously and indulgently give me permission, I will speak out: I want to marry the man who was cheated of his inheritance through shipwreck”], pp. 132-33.

In the Historia, Apollonius says only, “commendo vobis filiam meam: cum filia vestra nutriatur et eam cum bono et simplici animo suscipiatis atque patriae nomine eam cognominetis Tarsiam.” [I entrust my daughter to you, to be raised with your daughter. Bring her up honestly and simply, and name her Tarsia after your country], pp. 142-43.

“‘deinde plectro modulabor et hac arte ampliabo pecunias cotidie. . . .’ tanta populi adclamatio tatusque amor civitatis circa eam excrebruit, ut et viri et feminae cotidie ei multa conferrent.” [“Then shall I make music with a plectrum, and through this skill I shall make more money every day. . . .” so great was the people’s applause, so great was the citizens’ love for her, that both men and women gave her a lot of money every day], pp. 154-55.

Olsson, p. 218.

In the Historia, Tarsia questions her father with no fewer than ten riddles, ranging in subject matter from natural phenomena to everyday objects and mechanical devices, pp. 162-67.

In the Historia, Tarsia refuses to leave after Apollonius offers her gold. She “adprehendens lugubrem vestem eius ad lucem conabatur trahere. At ille impellens eam conruere fecit. Quae cum cecidisset, de naribus eius sanguis coepit egressi, et sedens
puella coepit flere et cum magno maerore dicere: ‘O ardua potestas caelorum, quae me
pateris innocentem tantis calamitibus ab ipsis cunabulis fatigare!’ ” [took hold of his
mourning clothes, and tried to drag him into the light. But he pushed her so that she fell
down. When she began to bleed from the nose. The girl sat down and began to cry, and
said in deep sorrow, “Relentless heavenly power, who allows an innocent girl to be
harassed from the cradle by so many disasters!”], pp. 166-67.


100 Bullón-Fernández, pp. 55-57.

101 Robins, p. 171; Olsson, p. 220.

102 See Elizabeth Archibald, Incest and the Medieval Imagination, pp. 26-52 and
Donavin, Chapter 2, for summaries of varying medieval definitions of incest and what
exactly constituted a crime. For Scanlon, “Riddle of Incest,” p. 108, Book 8’s history of
incest illustrates this variability, but works the multiplicity into a coherent narrative. For
Bullón-Fernández, p. 61, the expressly discursive nature of incest, demonstrated by its
constructed history in Book 8, makes it a particularly heinous crime against a patriarchic
society.

103 The Historia contains no such sense. After being raped, “Puella . . . stans dum miratur
scelestis patris impietatem, fluentem sanguinem coepit celare: sed guttae sanguinis in
pavimento ceciderunt.” [the girl stood astonished at the immorality of her wicked father.
She tried to hide the flow of blood: but drops of blood fell onto the floor], pp. 112-13.
Antiochus’ daughter describes her plight only in non-metaphoric reference to her father:
“ ‘Cara nutrix, si intellegis quod factum est: perit in me nomen patris. Itaque ne hoc
scelus genitoris mei patefaciam, mortis remedium mihi placet. Horreo, ne haec macula
gentibus innoteat.’” [Dear nurse . . . if you understand what has happened: for me the name of father has ceased to exist. So rather than reveal my parent’s crime, I prefer the solution of death. I shudder at the thought that this disgrace may become known to the people], pp. 112-115.

104 See Chapter 3.

105 Dean, World Grown Old, pp. 266-69, links Gower’s aged persona to the Statue of Time: like the present historical moment, division is caused by Amans’/Gower’s confusion, but ethical poetry can restore good health.


Chapter 5

The Rhetoric of History in Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale

In the previous chapter, I argued that Gower challenges the efficacy of his own poetic project of using old stories as a means of restoring a fallen present moment. Throughout the Confessio Amantis, Gower proves the value of his project by making his diagnostic part of the narrative of his poem. The Man of Law’s Tale represents Chaucer’s most direct engagement of Gower’s historical poetics. The tale relates chronicle material through a narrator whose vocation involves creating and verifying the authenticity of complex case narratives, and who introduces his tale by comparing a version of Chaucer’s canon to a version of Gower’s.¹ The headlink and tale take as their subject matter the issues of history, invention, authorship, and poetics on which Gower had thoroughly constructed his authorial persona and the portrait of his literary opus. Scholars have often compared and contrasted Chaucer’s tale of Custance with Gower’s story of Constance, but only recently have these comparisons moved beyond the demonstration of the superior complexity of Chaucer’s version over Gower’s in order to argue instead for Chaucer’s own recognition of Gower’s poetic complexity.² The Man of Law’s Tale illustrates an encounter not simply with Gower’s version of the narrative of Constance, but with the poetic project of the Confessio Amantis as a whole. It presents a complex and thorough critique of the formidable historical poetics of Gower.

Chaucer’s tale destabilizes the model of a historical poetics of the middel weie established in the Confessio and represented metaphorically there in the Tale of
Apollonius. Chaucer confronts Gower’s historical poetics on several fronts. First, the Introduction critiques the Gowerian notion of an authorial career. It questions the idea of a poetic corpus as historically resonant in the way Gower attempts to render it. Second, the Man of Law’s Tale, like the Confessio to which it responds, questions the efficacy of a culturally-restorative poetic project that overwhelmingly relies on narratives drawn from history. But Chaucer’s tale presents an ultimately negative view of this method, a view that stands in stark contrast to the more positive “unwriting” that Gower presents in his poem. Finally, Chaucer completes his critique of Gower’s historical poetics by making explicit references to the Roman poet Lucan in the Man of Law’s Tale. Lucan’s status as an auctor of antiquity would seem to fulfill the authorial paradigm advocated by Gower’s poetics, but Lucan’s epic, the Pharsalia, which details the self-consumptive conflict of the Roman Civil War, further stifles the restorative “unwriting” Gower proposes in the Confessio. The references to Lucan’s poem destabilize the concept of an author-centered historical poetics, even while they ostensibly seem to represent the presence of an authoritative poetic persona pulled from antiquity. The Man of Law’s Tale takes the same topics and themes as Gower’s long English poem but arranges them in a way that illustrates fundamental flaws in Gower’s historical poetics.

The Man of Law’s Introduction and Gower’s Opus

Chaucer’s challenge to Gower begins with the headlink. In its brief 133 lines, the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale reins in five massive themes: the measurement and passage of time, the discourse of law, the process of choosing topics for poetic invention, the politics of authorship and canon formation, and, finally, the emerging social reality of
a mercantile ethic. The Introduction begins with the Host warning that the day is already half over and, quoting Seneca, that “Los of catel may recovered be, / But los of tyme shendeth us” (27-28). He turns to the Man of Law and with an arsenal of legal jargon invites him to tell the next tale. The lawyer agrees, but laments that Chaucer, “in swich Englissh as he kan,” has already told more stories than even “Ovide made of mencioun.” He asks rhetorically, “What shoulde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde?” (49, 54, 56). He follows this complaint with a catalogue of Chaucerian tales that includes a reference to the Book of the Duchess and a list of suffering women that is itself a highly inaccurate tally of Chaucer’s works, since Chaucer did not compose all of the tales the Man of Law claims. The list, however, may include tales that might have been intended for the Legend of Good Women, the poem on which Chaucer would have been working around this time, and which may have been commissioned by Richard II via the same royal order that prompted Gower to write the Confessio Amantis. After referring derisively to Gower’s incest tales of Canacee and Apollonius, the Man of Law praises the accumulation of wealth by manipulating a treatise on Christian poverty, and then credits “riche marchauntz” with the ability to provide new matter for tales, despite the work of English poets like Chaucer (122).

While the Introduction does not mention Gower by name, the reference to the Confessio Amantis is nevertheless explicit. In mentioning Gower’s incest tales, the Man of Law decries their immorality and refuses to tell any further stories of the sort:

But certeinly no word ne writeth he
Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee,
That loved hir owene brother synfully—
Of swiche cursed stories I sey fy!—
Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus
Birafte his doghter of hir maydenhede,
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,
Whan he hir threw upon the pavement.
And therfore he, of ful avysement,
Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons
Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions,
Ne I wol noon reherce, if that I may.

(77-89)

For many critics, the explicitness of the Introduction’s reference to Gower matches an inherently high degree of misreading. In comparing Gower’s and Chaucer’s Constance tales, Winthrop Wetherbee argues that for all of his vitriol, the Man of Law essentially mislabels Gower’s incest narratives. Gower’s tales do not dwell on the sin, but instead “use the theme of incest as a way of pointing to the importance of human culture in guiding and giving value to fallible natural impulse.” Elizabeth Allen reminds us, however, that the introduction thoroughly criticizes both poets: Chaucer, it seems, cannot “differentiate among worthy old love stories, and Gower cannot recognize unworthy topics” like the “unkyne abhomynaciones” of incest narratives. Nevertheless, for Allen there is blame to be assigned in this characterization of Gower’s poetry, and, in line with the tradition of scholarship on the tale, that blame must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the Man of Law himself. The larger implications of the Man of Law’s
reading of Gower illustrate how he “refuses to see the ethical implications of Gower’s incest stories because he has an inkling that Gower’s ethics might challenge his moral stance.” Gower’s poetry is far more nuanced than his “moral” reputation implies, and the array of moral contingencies offered in the Confessio threatens the lawyer’s own self-fashioned role as a literary tyrant who wants to read a single fixed meaning into all of Gower’s poetry. As A. C. Spearing has recently shown, applying what seems to be the Man of Law’s own value judgments into Chaucer’s tale can result in our own somewhat dangerous misreading of the poem. Spearing’s solution is instead to demonstrate how the tale creates its own subjectivity internally and independently of the Man of Law’s supposed narration. Spearing’s argument, however, disregards in general the presence of the tale’s explicit narrator, the Man of Law, and specifically the self-referential Introduction that has clear connections with the tale itself.

Either pole is too extreme. On the one hand, to treat the Man of Law’s literary judgment of Gower’s incest narratives as a later and more nuanced instantiation of the “moral Gower” epigram from the Troilus, or to concede that any misreading falls squarely on the Man of Law himself, is to relegate a compelling and explicit reference to a contemporary English poet to the realm of an error most notable for its characterization of a fictional Canterbury pilgrim. On the other hand, to dismiss outright the role of the Man of Law as narrator is to replicate the very error of literary criticism that the Introduction forces into sharp focus. It is perhaps most useful to take Allen’s cue and read the reference to Canacee and Apollonius as synecdoche. Their larger referent, however, is not Gower’s supposed overt morality. Rather, the Introduction refers to the historical poetics that Gower narrates metaphorically and interrogates through his incest tales in the
Confessio Amantis. As I argued in the previous chapter, the father-daughter incest narrative of the Tale of Apollonius—the tale to which the Man of Law devotes the bulk of his literary critique—takes as a co-topic with incest the very narrative process of the Confessio in order to enact as narrative the poem’s historical poetics. Taken in concert with the Man of Law’s formulations of legal discourse, mercantilism, and Chaucer’s opus, the reference to Gower’s incest narratives opens into a complex and profound critique of the entire historical project of the Confessio.

The heart of the critique lies in the Man of Law’s presentation of Chaucer’s works. In his first act as a literary critic, the Man of Law notes that the most significant aspect of Chaucer’s poetry is its prolificacy. “I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn,” he says,

That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on rymyng craftily,
Hath seyd hem in swich Englissh as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyd hem, leve brother,
In o book, he hath seyd hem in another.
For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
Mo than Ovide made of mencioun
In his Episteles, that been ful olde.
What sholde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde?

(46-56)

The Man of Law then proceeds with an abridged version of Chaucer’s works. He notes
how Chaucer, “In youthe . . . made of Ceys and Alcione, / And sitten hath he spoken of everichone, / Thise noble wyves and thise loveris eke” (57-59). In what follows, the Man of Law lists the stories of the unfortunate protagonists of the Legend of Good Women. While the Man of Law’s list has notable omissions and inaccuracies, it nevertheless constructs Chaucer’s poetry as the product of a sustained literary career. “In youthe,” Chaucer produced the Book of the Duchess, “And sitten” he has written “of everichone”—and more even—of the tales of Ovid. Moreover, Chaucer’s reputation is widespread; he writes in English, “as knoweth many a man.” The Man of Law thus presents a portrait of Chaucer’s authorial output. This portrait, however, functions as more than merely a list of texts. When taken in context with the narrative profession of its speaker, the Man of Law, the list actually becomes a chronicle of literary output, and it subtly mocks the kind of chronicle that Gower worked to construct in his own major poetry.

The chronicle nature of Chaucer’s “canon” and its parody of Gower’s opus stem from the vocational duties of the Man of Law. The practice of law in late medieval England required ability in narration. As David Wallace has shown, the Man of Law is not merely the narrator of the Introduction; “narrator” would also have described his professional position when arguing a case in court. Narratio was ostensibly the presentation of the “facts” of a case, but narrators used fictions as part of their arguments. This tactic was expected and encouraged, especially since the details of a case were not attacked by opposing counsel. Instead, one attacked the fundamental premise of the argument rather than the details. For Wallace, the “narrator” connection indicates “some kinship” between a fictional lawyer and “Chaucer as a maker of fictions.” As
Warren Ginsberg has shown, that “kinship” might be described more accurately as rivalry. The Man of Law’s inaccurate catalogue of Chaucer’s stories illustrates Chaucer’s vocalization of the traditional competition between lawyers and poets, one going back to Horace, and including Ovid and Boccaccio. The generalized terms of the debate are simple. Lawyers get paid for their narratives. Poets do not, but they are instead meant to turn the thoughts of men toward higher things. What is worse, Ginsberg maintains, the Man of Law uses Chaucer’s own characteristic language of deference to ridicule him.¹⁵ These connections do more than illustrate differing registers of professional affinity, however. In presenting his list of Chaucer’s poetry, the Man of Law is actually presenting a kind of narratio. He enforces the list’s narrative characteristics by framing it in terms of Chaucer’s career: “In youthe,” “And sitthen.” As we shall see, this narratio shares strong and explicit ties with the generation of chronicle narrative.

This frame of legal narratio also lends a historical aspect to the list of Chaucer’s works. As recent criticism by Joseph E. Grennen, Elizabeth Fowler, Kathy Lavezzo, and Maura Nolan has shown, the law itself is a kind of world-making discourse on par with the power of poetic representation.¹⁶ The law becomes a discursive field in which to articulate or critique imperialist fantasy, challenge poetry for the right to represent the world (especially England), or test out how one set of customs and practices overpowers another in an international space. These arguments imply that the law’s definitional power comes from its cumulative worth. That is, law defines because it exists as a union of statue and practice. The accumulation of statutory discourse authorizes law, but the enactment of that accumulated statutory discourse within the real world makes it into a historical reality. A legal tradition, a legal precedent, is constructed through the
enactment of laws and the authority of written sources. “Law,” then, becomes “history” in a precise Ciceronian sense: practice makes it a narrative of actual events, of true things.17

This historical component, then, is a necessary criterion of the kind of narratives that the Man of Law would have invented in order to argue cases. These cases, especially those arguing for land rights, were genealogical narratives, and lawyers had to possess and articulate intimate knowledge of the exact genealogical paths of transfer in order to prevent being invalidated by court “counters,” or officers whose explicit duty was to probe for historiographic inaccuracies in these narratives.18 Because this work was so difficult and complex that only specialists could actually perform it, professional pleaders were able to charge a less skilled litigant for services rendered.19 In essence, the processes of historical narration were professionalized. The ability to construct stable family genealogies was crucial for holding on to family lands. Because the composition of that historical narrative was so difficult, and because the finished narrative would be scrutinized by pleaders for the other side, the writing of such genealogies was best left to those men who knew what they were doing. The Man of Law is careful to state that his knowledge of English law spans “from the tyme of King William” to the present (GP 324). While this range of knowledge was probably actually required by pleaders, it also simultaneously speaks to the “national” history of England, as it is preserved in chronicle record. John Fortescue, for example, advised would-be lawyers to spend their time studying chronicles as well as law.20 The description incorporates into its very nature the genealogy of Norman kings and the “modern,” that is, post-Conquest, history of England.21 The Man of Law makes the list of Chaucer’s poetic production into a kind of
mock plea, a historical genealogy. In other words, Chaucer’s lawyer transforms Chaucer’s “canon” into chronicle history, the very process that Gower’s Latin poetry works so hard to achieve poetically.

The Introduction’s chronicle achieves its parody of Gower’s historical poetics when the Man of Law characterizes the process of using narratives from the past to inform new poetic productions. The preface to his version of Chaucer’s canon also functions as a kind of backhanded compliment: Chaucer writes “lewedly,” “in swich English as he kan,” “And if he have noght seyd hem, leve brother / In o book, he hath seyd hem in another.” In short, Chaucer writes a lot, if lewdly. But the Man of Law’s derogatory summation also reveals a judgment on the value of using stories “Of olde tyme” to inform a new poetics. The Man of Law’s critique of Chaucer also imagines old tales to be finite in number. Put simply, the pool for topical invention is a limited resource, and Chaucer has used up all the best tales from the past. Indeed, this quantifying tendency has often been viewed by critics as indicative of the Man of Law’s commercialization of tale telling. As Laurel L. Hendrix puts it, the Introduction and Tale even threaten to reduce the entire Canterbury Tales’ endyting game to “a form of merchandising.”

The details in the Man of Law’s question, however, reveal an additional level of critique. The stories Chaucer tells are “Of olde tyme” and themselves are comparable to Ovid’s Heroides in that they are “ful olde.” The Man of Law’s concern is not with all tales—say, for example, Geoffrey’s encounter with an allegorical bird parliament, or his air journey in the clutches of a giant eagle—but with “olde” tales of the kind Gower mines for the Confessio. The further critique then becomes one of method: because the past is a well-traveled and limited resource for poetic invention, a historical
poetics is itself inventionally deficient in terms of imaginative possibility. A new English poetics based on pulling “olde” stories from the past is ultimately not sustainable because it is so quickly exhausted. The concern illustrated by the Man of Law’s critical lens is not about the process by which old stories need to be reshaped for the ethical needs of a contemporary audience, but rather that history itself is a limited resource. In the Man of Law’s reckoning, the primary step required in the process of inventio inherently weakens any sort of historical poetics.23

While the Man of Law critiques Chaucer by name, his line of argument actually attacks Gower’s entire poetics. As we have seen, Gower presents his historical poetics in two forms: first, as a chronicle that relates his own practice of poetic composition as res gestae, and second, as the use of “olde” stories to rejuvenate a discordant present. The Man of Law’s genealogy of Chaucer’s works critiques Gower’s historical poetics by showing that “olde” stories pulled from the past are actually nothing more than cases whose inventional potential has been exhausted. “What sholde I tellen hem,” the Man of Law says, referring to old stories, “syn they been tolde?” To make one’s point, one need not retell these old tales, but only refer to them as precedent. Characterizing a literary genealogy as the Man of Law does means dismissing the revisionary work that defines Gower’s entire middle way poetics. The Man of Law makes literary canons into fixed histories that merely record rather than invent.

Because the Introduction attacks Gower by attacking Chaucer, the Man of Law is not a literary representation of Gower himself, just as he is not a fictionalized version of Thomas Pynchbek, the “real-life” lawyer, contemporary with Chaucer.24 Instead, the Man of Law functions as a stand-in for the authoritative persona on which Gower’s self-
described middel weie poetics depends for its sustainability. The Man of Law becomes a bifurcated figure of authority and mediation. As Nolan argues, Chaucer’s lawyer is, unlike the pilgrims on the road to Canterbury who either assert authority or buck it, a mediating figure whose discourse “cuts across traditional social boundaries.”

J. Stephen Russell likewise reads the Man of Law as characterized finally by his middle rhetorical position: “In sum, we may say that the Man of Law’s Tale is an attempt to see rhetoric ideally, as mediating between commerce and righteousness,” despite the dangers of seeing one completely in terms of the other. As a figure of authoritative mediation, the Man of Law becomes a narrator who straddles the discourses of law, poetry, religion, and commerce in a way that nevertheless serves to bolster his own importance as the mediator.

The Man of Law’s Introduction, then, parodies the complexity of the authorial persona created by Gower’s own literary canon. It replaces the Gowerian figure of authority with a narrator whose inventional strategies run parallel to the historical poetics of the Confessio, but whose ends are not necessarily in line with those of Gower’s poem. The Man of Law, in fact, represents in this figuration a central discursive principle similar to the topic of incest, which Gower himself used to represent his method in the Tale of Apollonius: the generative movements of invention are turned back on themselves. The Man of Law’s Tale continues this trajectory, and it likewise locates this movement in a single, authorial presence. Chaucer inserts at the center of the Man of Law’s narrative the Roman auctor Lucan, whose epic poem about the Roman Civil War embodies at once the auctoritas of a “ful olde” poet and the incestuous narratives of self-consumption that the Confessio uses metaphorically to represent its poetics.
Lucanian Historical Poetics in the Man of Law’s Tale

The Man of Law’s Tale includes one of Chaucer’s five references to Lucan, whose epic the Pharsalia details the bloody conflict between Julius Caesar and Pompey Magnus. While we cannot be sure exactly how well Chaucer read Lucan, as Norman D. Hinton argues, Chaucer’s citation of Lucan in the Man of Law’s Tale resonates with both the tale’s specific plot episodes and its overall theme. Paul M. Clogan has remarked on the appropriateness of the reference in a tale so attuned to rhetorical performance, noting Lucan’s reputation among medieval and early modern writers as “the most rhetorical of Roman poets.” Indeed, for this reason Lucan’s poem was a staple of the medieval textual environment. As Eva Matthews Sanford has shown, the Pharsalia was widely used to teach students rhetoric and grammar, and young writers would have had to imitate and commit to memory passages from the Pharsalia. Lucan’s poem, however, is only as eloquent as it is brutal. It relates not only rhetorically formidable speeches by the likes of Cato, the great Roman orator and epitome of moderation; it also conveys the gruesome horror of Rome’s Civil War as it describes in detail the grisly deaths of thousands of men dying alongside the dream of the Republic. Its style and subject matter, then, fit comfortably with the Man of Law’s own narrative performance.

Indeed, the dual identity of the Pharsalia caused medieval commentators to struggle over the specific genre of Lucan’s poem. In accessus to Lucan’s work in manuscripts of the fourteenth century and later, debate exists about the nature of Lucan as “poeta et historiographus”; some argue that he is both, some that he is a poet, and some that he is a historian who does not follow the traditional format of history writing. Isidore, for example, notes that, “The function of poets is this, to transform things that
have actually taken place into other forms, modified with some grace by means of indirect representations. Whence Lucan on that account is not placed among the number of poets, because he is seen to have composed histories, not a poem.” Isidore briefly cites Lucan in order to provide a negative example for his own definition of poetry. Yet even the slightest glance at the Pharsalia demonstrates the difficulties inherent in Isidore’s classification. Sanford argues that these questions of classification were academic; Lucan’s real value to medieval commentators was the moralizing that could be performed on his text. In any case, the poem’s eloquent history of self-consumptive violence made it difficult for medieval commentators to classify.

It is precisely these qualities that make Chaucer’s choice of Lucan appropriate to the Man of Law’s Tale. Chaucer’s use of Lucan intensifies the tale’s critique of Gower, and it enables the tale to demonstrate how a historical poetics can potentially be destructive as well as restorative. First, Lucan’s poem shows that the very process of searching history for causes and examples is itself a harmful act. Second, Chaucer’s use of Lucan emphasizes how an understanding of historical causality is always ultimately confused by and conflated with the procedures of poetic representation. And finally, Lucan’s poem allows Chaucer to demonstrate how a centralized authorial persona cannot ultimately be an agent of positive transformation or restoration. Chaucer’s use of Lucan in the Man of Law’s Tale is not simply a cursory reference. The “ful olde” Roman epic pervades the tale and is a vital part of the tale’s critique of Gower’s historical poetics.

Chaucer’s specific reference to Lucan in the Man of Law’s Tale comes at a point far too appropriate to be merely ornamental. As Custance arrives in Syria to meet the Sowdan and take her place as his new wife, the Sowdan’s mother, “riche and gay,” meets
Custance at the port, and “Receyveth hire with also glad a cheere / As any mooder myghte hir doghter deere” (395-97). The reception is a sham, and at the ensuing feast the Sowdaness, in collusion with the Syrian nobility she has persuaded to her side, brutally murders all present, including her own son, leaving only Custance alive. Chaucer’s reference to Lucan frames the elaborate celebrations that will result, four stanzas later, in the mass slaughter of the “Sowdan and the Cristen everichone” (429). In a characteristic aside that functions as a prologue to this carnage, the narrator declares of Custance’s arrival:

Noght trowe I the triumpe of Julius
Of which that Lucan maketh swich a boost,
Was roialler ne moore curius
Than was th’assemblee of this blisful hoost.
But this scorioun, this wikked goost,
The Sowdanesse, for al hire flaternitye,
Caste under this ful mortally to stynge.

(400-406)

Like the rhetorical eloquence of Lucan’s poem, the elaborate, royal, and “curius” state reception of Custance frames a gruesome episode of bloodshed. Shortly, I will discuss the specific episode of Caesar’s return to Rome to which Chaucer refers, but first I want to emphasize the thematic importance of Lucan’s poetic topic, the civil war, with the plot and themes of Chaucer’s tale, specifically the self-consummptive theme of the Pharsalia and its emphasis on the inherent destructiveness of any kind of historical investigation.34

That the Man of Law’s Tale either conveys or works to contain incestuous themes
is a critical commonplace, and the opening lines of the Pharsalia signal the poem’s overall appropriateness for Chaucer’s tale:

Of war I sing, war worse than civil . . . and of legality conferred on crime;
I tell how an imperial people turned their victorious right hands against their own vitals; how kindred fought against kindred; how, when the compact of tyranny was shattered, all the forces of the shaken world contended to make mankind guilty. . . . What madness was this, my countrymen, what fierce orgy of slaughter?35

Lucan’s opening has distinct thematic parallels with the incest stories attacked by the Man of Law in his Introduction, with the theme of incest that is suppressed in his tale, and with the social repercussions of incest as they appear in Gower’s Tale of Apollonius.36 The “populumque potenter / In sua victori conversum viscera dextra,” that strong people who turned their victorious right hands against their own viscera, figure the Roman civil war in terms of violent self-destruction. This image also speaks specifically to the episode of the Sowdaness’s slaughter of her own son.37 Moreover, Lucan’s characterization of the war as wicked crimes, “sceleri,” granted the status of legality through the ritualized auspices of bellum civile, recalls the legality conferred on the Sowdaness’ civil slaughter, as well as the legality conferred upon incest by Antiochus.

Lucan’s first book also resonates with the Man of Law’s Tale’s concerns with historical causality and the reasons for human suffering. “My mind moves me to set forth the causes of these great events,” Lucan writes of the causae tantarum rerum that his poem will chronicle. It was the “Invida fatorum series,” the “chain of jealous fate,” that
triggered the war, Lucan writes, describing the contest between the poem’s protagonists. But he is quick to move past these sorts of epic causes and dig more deeply into the fabric of the Roman state which the war would tear apart. “Such were the motives of the leaders” [“ducibus causae”], “But among the people there were hidden causes of war [“sumerant sed publica belli semina”], the causes which have ever brought down ruin upon imperial races.” The idea of a people being inherently seeded with an underlying causality that eventually emerges to destroy the state, effectively consuming itself from the inside out, resonates with the search for origins that characterizes Gower’s discussion of Envy in the Confessio, the sin which prompts Genius’ rendition of the Constance story. The Man of Law’s own apostrophe on the wickedness of the Sowdaness combines the Lucanian causes of jealousy and deep-seeded evils inherent with the traditional “jealous mother-in-law” trope that governs destiny in Gower’s version of the tale:

O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!
Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!
O serpent under femynynytee,
Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!
O feyned womman, al that may confounde
Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!
O Sathan, evious syn thilke day
That thou were chaced from oure heritage,
Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way!
The apostrophe attempts to reduce the ensuing bloodshed at the feast to a single cause, an endemic jealousy that originates with Satan, who entrenches it within human history as an aspect of gender definition. The Man of Law locates the source of this “civil war” in Syria to the womanhood of the Sowdeness. But his own allusion to Lucan betrays the futility of such essentializing claims, because Lucan’s poem is careful to illustrate the complexity of causes of this kind of carnage.

Moreover, Lucan’s poem shows that the search for causes is complex and ultimately destructive. Book 5 of the Pharsalia, for example, narrates how priestesses of Apollo are essentially raped in order to bring into the physical world Delphic prophecies: “For, if the god enters the bosom of any, untimely death is her penalty, or her reward, for having received him; because the human frame is broken up by the sting and surge of that frenzy, and the stroke from heaven shatters the brittle life.” (247). Lucan narrates a specific case of prophetic rape and murder through Phemonoe, a priestess seized during her carefree walk through the woodlands in order to utter the words of Phoebus. Phemonoe attempts to escape, but “At last Apollo . . . forced his way into her body, driving out her former thoughts, and bidding her human nature to come forth and leave her heart at his disposal.” As Phoebus enters her, Phemonoe lurches about the cave, and her rape is narrated as a component of historical understanding: “All time is gathered up together: all the centuries crowd her breast and torture it; the endless chain of events is revealed; all the future struggles to the light: destiny contends with destiny, seeking to be uttered.” She reveals only a miniscule portion of this knowledge before “Apollo closed up her throat and cut short her tale.” The god then ensures that she not be able to read
the narrative of history which only moments before flowed through her. Before relinquishing control, “a darkness intervened. For Apollo poured Stygian Lethe into her inward parts, to snatch the secrets of heaven from her. Then the truth vanished from her bosom, and knowledge of the future went back to the tripods of the god; and down she fell, recovering with difficulty.”

Like Phoebus, Lucan’s narrative abandons Phemonoe at this point, but her experience with divine temporality and physical suffering resonate strongly in Chaucer’s tale. That she “Vixque refecta cadit,” falls down and scarcely recovers, recalls moments at the beginning and end of the Man of Law’s rhetorical performance. He notes at the conclusion of his summary of the Tale of Apollonius, for example, that it “is so horrible a tale for to rede / Whan he hir threw upon the pavement” (84-85), and he relates how Custance herself falls no less than four times in the tale. Custance, like Phemonoe, must suffer in order for the indefatigable chain of divine causality and historical progression to emerge however fragmented into the mortal world. This suffering brings about fractured narrative utterance, a brief episode in a larger chain of causality, which the prophesier acknowledges and believes in, but which she cannot see in its entirety.

Indeed, part of the destructiveness of scouring history in an effort to aid the present lies in the complexity and confusion inherent in such a process. In Book 6 of the Pharsalia, Pompey’s son journeys to the Thessalian witch, Erictho, in order to learn portents explaining future events. She explains to him the difficulties in trying to change a course of events as massive as the war:

If you had sought to alter a lesser decree of fate, it would have been easy, young man, to force the gods to any course of action at your desire. . . .
But in some cases the chain of causes comes down from the creation of the world [simul a prima descendit origine mundi / Causarum series], and all destinies suffer if it is sought to make a single change, and the same blow affects the whole of mankind.\textsuperscript{47}

The problem for mortals, Erictho explains, is not the weight of first causes, but the cumulative weight of the long, rhizomatic chains of causality stretching back to the origins of the world. The real revelation for young Pompeius is not one indefatigable cause, but the sheer number of causes that are knowable individually, but become unfathomable when viewed together. Indeed, in light of the events of the \textit{Pharsalia}, it seems that eventuality itself actually works to disguise causes and results. “Destiny is seeking a distant scene for the destruction of her innocent victim,” Lucan writes of his poem’s ostensible tragic hero, Pompey, who will be slain far away in Egypt, “not because the gods preferred to rob him of a tomb in his native land, but in mercy to Italy: let destiny hide that tragedy far away in a distant region, and let Roman soil be kept unstained by the blood of Rome’s darling Magnus.”\textsuperscript{48} In Lucan’s poem, the episodes of causality adhere to a kind of aesthetic vision, and the mingling of historical causes and poetic appropriateness results in confusion at the level of representation.

Despite a Christian context, a similar concern about causality marks the \textit{Man of Law’s Tale}, and critics have shown the narrator to come down on both sides of the Providence-versus-Fortune debate: the Man of Law is either characterized by his concern with short-term and materialistic goals and not the larger breadth of causes and effects in which divine Providence operates; or his tale works to separate harmful outcomes from divine causes, instead linking suffering to other, non-divine sources; or it in fact
represents both sides of the debate simultaneously, pitting a Fortune-concerned narrator against a divinely-attuned Custance. Indeed, in Chaucer’s tale the themes of mercantilism and law become mediating discourses as the tale works to represent the relation of these differing views of historical causality. The law, as Grennen argues, is a discourse that orientates the subject toward reality. The danger of this formula, however, is that what on the surface appears to be allegory actually turns out to be nothing more than one person’s specific point of view. The Man of Law’s Tale, as Grennen argues, “is better understood as the poet’s conception, in some ideal sense, of the psychological orientation of a lawyer toward the world and history, a demonstration of what happens to commonly received ideas and formulations when they are strained through the mind of a man trained in the law.” Hendrix has demonstrated that this discourse is not so conveniently distillable to the narrator of the tale, given the tale’s emphasis on mercantile discourse as well as law. The tale, in her view, becomes a reminder of the danger inherent in using metaphors of commerce to represent spiritual subjects: these metaphors “literaliz[e]” the workings of “grace and redemption,” and ultimately transform mysteries of faith into the mechanics of the market. As the critical tradition rightly suggests, the tale links comprehension of historical causality to means of representation.

The Man of Law’s Tale confronts this concern about causes most directly through its astrological readings. These readings, furthermore, allude to Lucan’s Pharsalia, and the Roman epic helps explain the disorder many critics have seen in the Man of Law’s somewhat skewed reading of the heavens. The tale presents its two astrological passages as Custance embarks from Rome for Syria. These passages are directed at both poles of Custance’s journey, the emperor of Rome and the Sowdan. In the first passage, the Man
of Law laments how the Sowdan’s desire for Custance will lead to his death, a fate written in the stars long before he was born:

Paraventure in thilke large book

Which that men clepe the hevene ywriten was

With sterres, whan that he [i.e., the Sowdan] his birthe took,

That he for love sholde han his deeth, alsa!

For in the sterres, clerer than is glas,

Is writen, God woot, whoso koude it rede,

The deeth of every man, withouten drede.

In sterres, many a wynter therbiforn,

Was writen the deeth of Ector, Achilles,

Of Pompei, Julius, er they were born;

The strif of Thebes; and of Ercules,

Of Sampson, Turnus, and of Socrates

The deeth; but mennes wittes ben so dulle

That no wight kan wel rede it atte fulle.

(190-203)

Hinton argues that the explicit reference to Pompey and Caesar in the catalogue alludes to the Pharsalia and is furthermore appropriate given the impending death of the Sowdan that the passage describes. As Chauncey Wood has shown, the passage is a paraphrase of Bernard Silvestris, but with a crucial difference: whereas Bernard links stellar movement with the will of God, the Man of Law’s Tale severs that link. The passage, as Wood puts it, “both echoes and falsifies its model” and puts the Man of Law “at a
loggerheads about celestial influence” with the more Boethian attitude of Bernard. The Man of Law’s reading betrays the Chartrian principles of mapping the heavens in order to understand divine providence because the reading concerns itself instead with earthly outcomes and immediate effects. As Jill Mann puts it, “The universe we see here is not a harmonious ordered whole; it is crooked, awry, at odds with itself, held together only by violence.” Mann’s “crooked” universe proves consistent in the Man of Law’s second astrological apostrophe. This time the Man of Law laments that Custance’s father, the Roman emperor, did not take note of the astrological signs before sending his daughter to

the Sowdan:

O firste moeyng! Cruel firmament,
With thy diurnal sweigh that crowdest ay
And hurlest al from est til occident
That naturelly wolde holde another way,
Thy crowdyng set the hevene in swich array
At the bigynnynge of this fiers viage,
That cruel Mars hath slayn this mariage.

Infortunat ascendent tortuous,
Of which the lord is helplees falle, allas,
Out of his angle into the derkeste hous!
O Mars, o atazir, as in this cas!
O fieble moone, unhappy been thy paas!
Thou knytttest thee ther thou art nat receyved;
Ther thou were weel, fro thennes artow weyved.
Imprudent Emperour of Rome, allas!
Was ther no philosophre in al thy toun?
Is no tyme bet than oother in swich cas?
Of viage is ther noon eleccioun,
Namely to folk of heigh condicioun?
Noght whan a roote is of a burthe yknowe?
Allas, we been to lewed or to slowe!

(295-315)

Wood concludes that the Man of Law’s reading of the heavens emphasizes death, and he maintains that this reading is far too concerned with the short-term, material effects of cosmic motion to be able to make the further connections either to long-term effects or the original, divine causes of Providence.\(^5\) One of the key lines of this passage, “O Mars, o atazir, as in this cas!” though vague in its reference to the problematic term “atazir,” nevertheless figures Mars as “the most influential planet here.”\(^6\) Furthermore, as Wood explains, Mars here is present in the same astrological house as Scorpio, a position that emphasizes death in the passage.\(^7\) We should also note with particular emphasis the peculiar terms by which the heavens are represented. The astral cause of the fierce journey of Custance is the twice-mentioned “crowding” of the heavens that characterizes in general the ripple effect caused by the First Moving, and in particular the course of events that will end so violently for the Sowdan. As Mann and Cooney show, the reading effectively assigns harm, not harmony, to the machinations of the \textit{Primum Mobile}.\(^8\)

While misaligned in terms of cosmic harmony, the Man of Law’s reading is perfectly aligned with astrology that begins the \textit{Pharsalia}. Indeed, what Wood takes to be
the Man of Law’s short-sighted misreading is in fact an allusion to Lucan’s poem. In the first book of the epic, Lucan narrates an astrological reading that attempts to divine at once the outcome of the impending war and the narrative trajectory of his own poem. The prophet, scholar, and astrologer Figulus, however, is able to offer little certainty in the very methodology by which those of his own school can interpret the future. Particularly alarming for Figulus is the position of Mars, which perverts the harmony of the sky. “But Mars,” Figulus asks, “what dreadful purpose has he, when he kindles the Scorpion menacing with fiery tail and scorches its claws? For the benign star of Jupiter is hidden deep in the West, the healthful planet Venus is dim, and Mercury’s swift motion is stayed; Mars alone lords it in heaven.”59 Just as it misaligns cosmic order in the Man of Law’s Tale, the position of Mars in Lucan’s text prevents the clear reading of the signs: “Either,” Figulus says, “this universe strays forever governed by no law, and the stars move to and fro with course unfixed; or else, if they are guided by destiny, speedy destruction is preparing for Rome and for mankind.”60 The object of study—the causae belli civilis, represented celestially by Mars—confuses the very method of investigation with an almost Foucauldian resiliency.

What is worse, Lucan conflates the villain of the Pharsalia, Caesar, whose appetite for conquest consumes the republic, with the astrological text by which the matter of his very poem can be read by its characters. At the outset of the epic, Lucan has already placed Caesar literally as the center of the astrological cosmos: “Every god will give place to you, and Nature will leave it to you to determine what deity you wish to be, and where to establish your universal throne.”61 Furthermore, Lucan remarks apostrophically to Caesar, “If you lean on any one part of boundless space
inmensī partem], the axle of the sphere will be weighed down; maintain therefore the equipoise of heaven by remaining at the centre of the system." Book 1 places Caesar at the heart of cosmos and thus also as part of the astrological text used by diviners as a map of historical causality. When Figulus comes to read this astral map, Caesar is already at its center: “This frenzy will last for many years,” Figulus prophesies, “and it is useless to pray Heaven that it may end: when peace comes, a tyrant will come with it.”

The “crowding” that the Man of Law sees occurring in the heavens of his tale resembles the crowding Caesar causes through his central position in the cosmos. His massive presence threatens to unbalance the very machinery through which the planets move: “crooked” universe indeed. The case of the heavens in Chaucer’s tale, then, has less to do with the motivations of the Man of Law as a psychological entity and more to do with the central interpretive position that his eloquent astrological reading allows him to occupy. The rhetorical flourish of his apostrophe impedes upon the accuracy of the reading, just as Caesar’s presence prevents straightforward astrological readings in Lucan’s poem. And in the fiction of Lucan’s poem, the trope of the great Caesar misaligning the heavens literally influences Figulus’ reading of those same heavens some 600 lines later. The Man of Law’s rhetoric likewise changes the fictionalized universe of the tale. If, as scholarship demonstrates, the legal and mercantile discourses of the Man of Law’s Tale are dangerous metaphors because they threaten to redefine what they are meant to illustrate, then the astrological readings in the tale show not merely how rhetoric can misrepresent causality, but also how eloquence becomes causality.

In a real sense for Custance and the Sowdan, the rhetoric of the reading causes, not merely describes or colors, events. In the Man of Law’s Tale, poetics changes the
historical materia that should be the impetus for invention. Any poetic production rewrites the past, but through its Lucanian astrological readings, the Man of Law’s Tale emphasizes how rhetorical eloquence rewrites the mechanics of causality, specifically as causality can be discerned from the movement of the planets. The emphasis, then, is not on a propagandistic or one-sided version of events, the teller-centered conclusion at which many readings of tale arrive. Instead, the tale becomes meta-commentary that narrates how poetic representation pathologically incurs on causality. Furthermore, the way the Man of Law’s Tale represents this process shows it to work appositionally to Gower’s, because it demonstrates not poetry’s ability to rewrite the present, but rather its ability to “unwrite” historical understanding.

At this point, the full resonance of Chaucer’s reference to the specific passage from Lucan becomes clear. In “the triumphe . . . Of which that Lucan maketh swich a boost,” the rhetorician-historian’s cosmological nexus, Caesar, marches on Rome. The triumph of Julius is not so blissful as the Man of Law’s allusion would wish, however. In the Lucanian passage to which Chaucer alludes, Rome’s citizens abandon the city when they learn of Caesar’s approach, and the climax of his homecoming is not a royal assembly but a squabble with the tribune Melletus before the doors of Rome’s treasury building. Metellus refuses to grant Caesar access to the treasury, and Caesar refuses to honor Metellus by killing him. Another tribune, Cotta, finally convinces Metellus to relinquish his claim, telling him, “When a people is held down by tyranny . . . freedom is destroyed by freedom of speech; but you keep the semblance of freedom if you acquiesce in each behest of the tyrant.”

As in the Man of Law’s Tale, the exchange of meaning (through Custance, for
example), is conflated with the exchange of wealth.\textsuperscript{68} When Metellus claims to be defending the republic by refusing Caesar access to the treasury, he conflates the libertas of Rome with its liberalitas. In this moment, with the conqueror at the gates, Roman citizenship is ultimately expressible only in terms of the dispersal of wealth. Money, and more specifically the manner of its exchange, is constitutive of Rome and Romans, in both their republican and tyrannical forms. As one medieval gloss on the passage succinctly puts it, “They fought for gold, not for the laws.”\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, Cotta’s counsel to Metellus quickly shifts its terms from exchange to causality: “Because we were conquered, we submitted to repeated acts of oppression; for our disgrace and ignoble fear there is but one excuse—that refusal was in no case possible.”\textsuperscript{70} Cotta justifies his advice by attempting to take shelter in oppressive reality. Caesar conquered Rome, and that event established a causarum series of “repeated acts of oppression” which made resistance impossible [“nullam potuisse negari”]. At the end of the scene, then, we are left with the argument that an unchangeable series of causes, whose origin lies with Caesar’s conquest, made it impossible for anyone besides the first mover of these causes, Caesar himself, to control the exchange of Rome’s wealth. In other words, the passage Chaucer cites in his tale is a passage in which oppressive causality extinguishes the possibility of exchange. Furthermore, the maintenance of identity or agency within that framework of oppression—what we might call “ethical subjectivity,” if we were discussing Gower’s Confessio—is, at least as Cotta phrases it, articulated by artful rhetoric masquerading as reason: Cotta and Metellus cannot resist, because if they could, they already would have, but they did not, so they will not. The episode replays the circular, incestuous poetics of causality that earlier had been expressed in astrological
terms.

Chaucer’s Lucanian allusions in the *Man of Law’s Tale* are thus complex and detailed. He alludes to Caesar’s homecoming and to an episode that demonstrates Caesar to be the center of discursive exchange and historical causality. He alludes also to Lucan’s placement of Caesar at the center of the astrological universe, which transfers those qualities to the historical world as a whole. Caesar crowds the heavens, and his jarring of astral bodies causes confusion in the poem’s seer, Figulus, who cannot read the stars with his usual clarity. The cumulative Lucanian reference in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, is, then, to borrow Astell’s phrase, to the idea of a First Mover who masquerades as a First Moving. 71 By assigning him to the center of the heavens at the start of his poem, Lucan makes Caesar the “cause” of the civil war, and, as a consequence, the cause of Lucan’s own poem, which takes that war as its matter for invention. The authorizing agent of the *Pharsalia* turns out not to be Lucan but Caesar.

This complex allusion to Lucan is what finally transforms Chaucer’s version of the tale of Constance into a powerful and pervasive critique of Gower’s historical poetics. First, Chaucer’s tale questions the ability of any narrative process to “unwrite” entrenched, paradoxical, and ultimately narrative problems such as the meta-textual issues that Gower addresses through the metaphor of incest. Through its Lucanian allusions, the *Man of Law’s Tale* shows the very process of that narrative investigation and unwriting to be destructive, not restorative. Second, Chaucer’s use of Lucan severely calls into question the authorial persona at the center of that poetics of unwriting. The authorial persona is not only an author who restricts meaning, as Allen and Shoaf have shown, but furthermore a conqueror whose tyranny is written into the first moving of a
chain of unavoidable causality. Finally, through the allusion Chaucer foregrounds a “real” auctor, Lucan, who writes poetry that in the medieval tradition cannot be easily classified as fully “eloquence” or fully “history”—fully lust or fully lore. Chaucer’s allusion to Lucan transforms the Man of Law’s Tale into a complex unwriting of an unwriting. The tale forwards a counter-poetics to the one Gower presents in the Confessio Amantis.

**Custance, Gower, and the Invention of History**

As the figure in the tale for both historical progression and poetic invention, Custance is central to this unwriting. The tale figures historical progression in terms of Christian conversion, and in the world of the tale, this progression occurs almost exclusively through Custance. Moreover, as Kolve has shown, Custance’s tale would have been understood by readers as “true” history, in the literal and allegorical senses of the term. Custance herself is the key to this understanding since she is both the agent and indicator of historical change in the tale. Her value as the nexus of historical representation and progression is characterized by suffering, and this manifestation of historical progress makes her a figure for poetic invention as well. The Man of Law uses Custance’s suffering as a topic for invention as he amplifies narrative episodes through eloquent apostrophes. What is more, Custance’s own utterances in the tale then mimic her narrator’s rhetoric in ways that emphasize the process of poetic invention. It is through this historical-inventional relationship that Chaucer most fully unwrites the careful program of historical poetics established by Gower.

Like the anguish of one of the prophetic priestesses of the temple of Apollo in
Lucan’s poem, Custance’s suffering also brings history—that is, Christian conversion—into the world, if in a less graphically literal way. In lieu of lurid pagan rituals, Chaucer’s tale mobilizes a hagiographic model in which suffering works to demonstrate God’s active presence in the mortal world. Addressing the causes for Custance’s suffering, the Man of Law makes this connection explicit:

上帝想要展示他的奇妙奇迹
在她身上，因为我们将看到他的力量工作；
基督，那与一切伤害三角，
通过某些方法，就像知道的教士，
死亡事情对明确的结局那是很暗的
为了人类的理解，因为我们的无知
没有知道他聪明的计划。

(477-83)

那证据的神的出现以一种历史上的记录通过Hermengyld的奇迹治疗一个盲人在Northumbria。一个秘密团体的成员在仍然异教徒的英格兰北部，一个“blinde Britoun”接近Custance和Hermengyld，因为他们在海滩上走“someres day” (545, 561)。Ignoreing Custance and appealing instead to Hermengyld, herself also a closeted Christian, he begs that she “yif me my sighte agayn” (562). Hermengyld hesitates, “Til Custance made her boold, and bad hire wirche / The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche” (566-67). Hermengyld cures the man’s blindness, and the miracle becomes an event of historical significance because it results in the immediate conversion of Hermengyld’s husband, the constable of the Northumbrian region where Custance found
herself shipwrecked. The narration of these events shows Custance to be at once the siphon and cipher for historical causality, a dual characteristic common among Christian saints. Custance’s presence causes these events only as much as it represents them figuratively in the tale. On the level of plot, she functions as the cause for the constable’s conversion, the Sowdan’s conversion, and the Sowdanesse’s crime. At the thematic or allegorical level, as the suffering Christian saint, Custance represents the salvational narrative that plays out from those causes. On one hand, Custance channels Christian determinism through her person. On the other hand, Custance herself is placed within the metaphorical channels of historical and spiritual progression, as the metaphor of a single ship tossed about in a wide sea so concisely demonstrates.76 In a manner unavailable to her Lucanian counterparts, Custance moves within history as much as history, in the form of Christian conversion, moves through her.

Custance’s embodiment of historical progression results in poetic invention. In his “dilatacioun” describing the preparations made by the Roman emperor to marry his daughter to the Sowdan, for example, the Man of Law gathers together in a sweeping rhetorical synthesis the enormous international players involved in the project. The treaties and ambassadors, the politics of negotiating at once with the Church, the Pope, and the “chivalrie” of peers of the empire, the politics of the conversion of the “baronage” of Syria, and the amassing of a “certein” sum of gold (“I noot what quantitee”): all are conflated by the narrator into a rhyming equivocation of historical causality and poetic utterance (235, 239, 242). “May no man tellen in a litel clause,” he says, “As was arrayed for so heigh a cause” (251-52, my emphasis). The Man of Law describes the difficulty of the inventional and dispositional processes of generating texts.
He condenses this wealth of historical causality into a single couplet that encloses the intricacies of narrative progression into a synthesizing rhetorical gesture.

Custance’s awareness of her middle position in this enormous chain of events also triggers invention in the Man of Law. Astell argues that Custance’s sufferings form competing narrative with the rhetorical flourishes of the Man of Law in order to satirize the genre. But even this counter-narrative is folded into the inventional acts of the Man of Law. After describing the enormous international preparations for Custance’s journey, the narrator imagines (and invents) Custance’s private thoughts at the moment when she is about to embark:

what wonder it is though she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tendrely hhire kepte,
And to be bounded under subjecioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun?

(267-71)

Extrapolating on this passage as a way of dismissing Custance’s concerns, the Man of Law concludes, “Housbondes been alle goode, and han ben yoore; / That knowen wyves; I dar sey yow na moore” (272-73). A sanctioned method of inventing from materia, the Man of Law’s proverb manages to enclose Custance further in the chain of historical causality, even while it generates poetic utterance from that process. As we have seen in Geoffrey of Vinsauf, using proverbs to begin poetic compositions refigures the relationship between a writer and his source material in terms of the inventional process itself. Like the writer who composes them, a proverb works to “take a stand above the
given subject, but look with direct glance towards it,” to “say nothing directly about the subject, but derive its inspiration therefrom.” The Man of Law’s proverb distills Custance’s trusting deference into two lines of poetry, while also holding true to the description of his tale’s husbands: both the Sowdan and Alla do not wish harm to Custance, Alla because he loves her, and the Sowdan because she will become his most valued commodity.

The Man of Law’s invention also speaks to the historical distance that proverbs themselves are designed to encapsulate into a pithy saying. “And han ben yoore,” the Man of Law remarks, indicating not only that wives have always known their husbands to have the best intentions for them, but also that, since Custance, this has been the case as well. This proverb, then, further entrenches Custance in a chain of historical causality that itself, as Dinshaw has shown, buttresses a dominant patriarchic power structure—

even while, by its very nature, the proverb heralds itself as a moment of concentrated poetic invention. Furthermore, Custance’s own vocalized acknowledgement to her father that “Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance” (286-87), presents again the Man of Law’s original proverb. The Man of Law narrates Custance’s worries about leaving Rome, he then distills and dismisses them into a proverb, and he finally reproduces that proverb through Custance herself. This is unquestionably a process through which patriarchy is created and maintained at the expense of a woman. Through the inventional politics of proverbs, Custance is at once invented from proverbial understanding and becomes the voice of that same process. She ventriloquizes the Man of Law’s synthesized understanding of his materia, and she then repeats it in a pseudo-proverbial utterance of her own. The tale makes Custance into a
figure for poetic invention, and in a process indicative of the tale’s own emphasis on the politics of exchange, it has her reinforce that role in her own words.

The tale’s generic blend of hagiography and romance—a “hagiographic romance,” as Clogan labels it—achieves this synthesis on a structural level and furthermore calls attention to the craft of that structure. Custance functions as a topic for rhetorical invention for the Man of Law, who invents from her circumstances of abject suffering by addressing questions about the plot of his narrative. In a series of rhetorical questions, the Man of Law simultaneously inserts explicit moments for topical invention into his narrative that questions the very processional nature of his narrative. After the Sowdanesse puts Custance on a boat and sends her out to sea, the Man of Law anticipates audience objections at the level of plot: “Men myghten asken why she was nat slayn / Eek at the feeste?” (470-71). Furthermore, “Where myghte this womman mete and drynke have / Thre yeer and moore” that she was at sea, and likewise, “How lasteth hire vitaille?” (498-99). He provides answers only in the form of further questions: “I answere to that demande agayn, / Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave?” and “Who kepte Jonas in the fisshes mawe / Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?” and “Who fedde the Egiecien Marie in the cave, / Or in desert? No wight but Crist, sanzaille” (473, 486-87, 500-501). The rhetorical effect is powerful and convincing, and it speaks to the Man of Law’s awareness of his tale as narrative performance for an audience.\(^{82}\) It also masks a procedural discrepancy that speaks to the tale’s relationship with Gower’s poetics. The questions are about narrative: Why didn’t the Sowdanesse just kill Custance? But the answers are about theme: Because Custance is meant to represent Christian patience in the face of worldly suffering. One does not satisfy as a response to the other, unless there
is a conflation in which the processes of poetic invention merge with the topics used to trigger that invention. This collapsing of theme and process is significant for two reasons. First, the collapse transforms moments of rhetorical invention through figures like apostrophes and rhetorical questions into moments of meta-textual commentary. Second, given the *Man of Law’s Introduction* and the explicit references to Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, that commentary is directed at the same historical poetics by which Gower investigates incest in his tales.

Because it fuses the mechanics of invention with a particular understanding of history, Custance’s poetic identity reflects in particular the historical poetics of the *Confessio Amantis*, especially the Tale of Apollonius, in which Gower most thoroughly interrogates his poem’s overall project. As we have seen, Gower inserts moments of explicit invention into the tale in order to resolve the problem that a poetics that relies too heavily on narratives of the past might actually consume the present rather than restore it. Like Gower’s concluding story, the *Man of Law’s Tale* builds in moments of explicit invention that refer meta-textually to the process of its own narrative. But instead of providing a restorative antidote for incestuous narrative structures as they do in the Apollonius story, similar moments of invention in the *Man of Law’s Tale* are themselves revealed to possess an incestuous structure. Like the figure of Custance herself, they are invented out of and within a single, predetermined narrative. Chaucer’s tale shows that no amount of narrative “unwriting” of this kind of narrative can successfully resolve the problems represented metaphorically by the theme of incest. The reason for this failure is the nature of the topic itself. Like the Roman civil war—a comparison that the tale makes explicit through its reference to Lucan—incest as a meta-poetic metaphor is too
entrenched in the narrative process that represents it. On the one hand, unwriting it relies on counter-narratives, themselves ultimately supplied from within the same narrative process. On the other hand, unwriting depends upon an authorial persona—Gower, or Custance—in a middle position. However, that position, the tale suggests, is always automatically compromised by the invention topic itself.

Shoaf has called the Man of Law’s Tale “a self-explicating, self-referential tautological allegory,” that, as such, shows itself to be about incest. But whereas Shoaf and others would assign this narrative structure to the selfish materialism or faulty reading practices of the Man of Law, the tale in fact makes a much richer, subtler, and ultimately more penetrating point. It rebukes the historical poetics on which Gower bases his literary project. We might conclude by looking at one last rhetorical aside that fully draws this connection. In yet another apostrophe, the Man of Law remarks on the abrupt drowning of a man who boards Custance’s ship with the intention of raping her: “O foule lust of luxurie, lo thyn ende!” (925). The Man of Law’s reference is not merely to lust, however, but to the “lust of luxurie.” Chaucer’s alteration of his Gowerian source gestures in fact toward the matter of Gower’s eighth book in the Confessio, the sin of Lechery (“Luxurie”), against which the Tale of Apollonius is meant to gird the reader. The particular lust referred to here is the general category of Lust itself, and the “ende” is both the would-be rapist’s death and the concluding tale of Gower’s poem, the culmination in the long self-chronicle of Gower’s poetic career. The allusion embodies all of the elements of Gower’s poetics that Chaucer questions in his tale: the use of historical material to unwrite destructive narrative structures; the ability of poetic invention to counteract these structures; and the poetic construction and placement of an
authorial persona in the “middle” of these narrative discourses who at once represents and is represented by them. Indeed, the Man of Law’s Tale ultimately illustrates the pitfalls of the Gowerian invention of history.

I have argued that Chaucer directly engages and critiques Gower’s historical poetics through the Man of Law’s Introduction and Tale. The headlink to the tale creates and then ridicules a “chronicle” of Chaucer’s own poetic works as a way of critiquing Gower’s efforts to transform his opus into a register of poetic res gestae. The tale’s complex allusions to Lucan’s Pharsalia furthermore suggest the futility of using a historical poetics to restore or rejuvenate the present. Chaucer’s incorporation of Lucan allows him to question both Gower’s narrative process in the Confessio and Gower’s construction of an authorial persona who occupies a middle position. Finally, the tale figures Custance as a symbol for the invention of history as a way of dramatizing these points of critique within the plot of the tale itself. The Man of Law’s Tale, then, represents Chaucer’s most direct encounter with and rebuke of the invention of history advocated by Gower. The final chapter of this study demonstrates how the Monk’s Tale continues Chaucer’s reaction to Gower’s historical poetics. Again drawing on Gowerian commonplaces like the Monster of Time, the tale of Chaucer’s Monk figures the invention of history as a process that ultimately stifles both poetic and historical discourse.
Notes


Chaucer’s works are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

4 See Raybin, pp. 65-68, for an analysis of this passage.

5 Cooper, p. 125, argues that during this period (1386-94), the “subject of female suffering . . . clearly occupied Chaucer’s mind.” For the idea that the Legend and Confessio were composed via an order from Richard, see John H. Fisher, John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 235.


7 Allen, p. 629.

8 Allen, p. 641.

9 Criticism on the Confessio has likewise lobbied for the complexity of Gower’s poetics, especially with regard to his traditional “moral” label. For a useful summary of this tradition, see Allen, n. 5.


12 Wallace, Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England
Wallace, pp. 203-204.

Wallace, p. 204.


Indeed, this process is what enables the patriarchal power structures which Carolyn Dinshaw has observed operating in the Man of Law’s Tale. See Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 89-95. The kind of historical narratives constructed by the Man of Law as part of his vocation enforced this patriarchal ideology. Grennen, p. 500, discusses the effect of the “rhetorical habit” of constantly thinking in legal terms on the Man of Law’s methods of perceiving reality.

For a useful summary of these duties, see Hornsby, pp. 118-25.

21 Norman England was understood by writers to be “modern.” Walter Map, in the *de Nugis Curialiam*, for example, sees his own historical moment as marked by *modernitas*. Less precisely, but no less convincingly, the nostalgia inherent in tales like The Man of Law’s or the Franklin’s requires a sense of present modernity against which to channel the nostalgic refashioning of history.

Furthermore, if the Man of Law’s formulation of inventional topics as a limited resource casts them as a kind of commodity to be imported, exported, bought, and exchanged, then it likewise reformulates Gower’s own critique of the conflation of mercantilism and discourse. For Gower, the Lombards, who “dwelle among ous here,” tell tales via “A craft which cleped is Fa-crere,” a kind of mercantile parody of tale-telling that results not in the reshaping of ethical subjectivity but rather in the construction of a false belief for the profit of the tellers at the expense of the listeners (2.2100, 2122).

For a summary of this tradition, beginning with J. M. Manly’s argument, see Hornsby, pp. 126-27.

Nolan, p. 152.

Russell, p. 137.

Edgar Finley Shannon, “Chaucer and Lucan’s Pharsalia,” Modern Philology 16 (1919), p. 113, cites Skeat, but notes only four of the five instances in which Chaucer names Lucan: House of Fame, Troilus and Criseyde, the Man of Law’s Tale, and the Monk’s Tale. The fifth occurs in Chaucer’s translation of Boethius, when Lady Philosophy cites Lucan as she teaches Boethius the difference between fixed and moveable things.

Hinton, “Lucan and the Man of Law’s Tale,” Papers on Language and Literature 17 (1981): 339-46. Hinton argues for the importance of reading Lucan’s poem in the context of the medieval commentaries that would have accompanied it, and he shows how these two types of discourse, poetry and commentary, may have informed Chaucer’s thinking about the narrative that became the Man of Law’s Tale.

University Press, 1991), pp. 116-17, notes that many medieval historians also took
structural cues from the *Pharsalia*.

31 Sanford, “Lucan and His Roman Critics,” pp. 238-39. See also Angus Fletcher, “The

32 Isidore, *Etymologies*, 8.7. The English translation is from Stephen A. Barney, W. J.
Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, *The Etymologies of Isiodore of Seville*

33 Sanford, “The Manuscripts of Lucan,” pp. 284-285, for Lucan’s value as an ethical
poet, a reading centered mainly on his depiction of Cato. See also Fletcher, p. 239.

34 Hinton, pp. 343-46, argues that Chaucer’s tale is informed by other larger themes in the
*Pharsalia*: images of the sea permeate Lucan’s poem; Pompey’s dream of Julia has links
to the Sowdan’s marriage to Custance; and Custance’s chastity is like Cato’s moderation.
The idea of self-destruction, however, bears an even more direct influence on the *Man of
Law’s Tale*.

35 Bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos,

Iusque datum sceleri canimus, populumque potentem

In sua victrici conversum viscera dextra,

Cognatasque acies, et rupto foedere regni

Certatum totis concussi viribus orbis

In commune nefas, infestisaue obvia signis

Signa, pares aquilas et pila minantia pilis.

Quis furor, o cives, quae tanta licentia ferri? (1.1-8).

Text and translation in *The Civil War (*Pharsalia*), J. D. Duff, ed. and trans. (Cambridge,

Hinton, p. 343, notes that the episodes from both poems demonstrate the overthrow of long-held traditions (Syria’s religious identity in the Man of Law’s Tale, and Roman military forces being forbidden to cross the Rubicon in the Pharsalia). He also notes how each prophesizes and ultimately fulfills the deaths of leader figures, the Sultan, Caesar, and Pompey. He notes as well how Cotta’s speech to Metellus, which I will come to shortly, parallels the Sowdaness’ appearance of Christian baptism.

“Fert animus causas tantarum expromere rerum,” (1.67, pp. 6-7).


See Chapter 4.

Nec voce negata
Cirrhaeae maerent vates, templique ruuntur
Iustitio. Nam si qua deus sub pectora venit,
Numinis aut poena est mors inmatura recepti
Aut pretium; quippe stimulo fluctuque furoris
Conpages humana labat, pulsusque deorum
Concutiunt fragiles animas (5.114-20, pp. 246-47).

[T]andemque potitus
Pectore Cirrhaeo non umquam plenior artus
Phoebados inrupit Paean mentemque priorem
Expulit atque hominem toto sibi cedere iussit
Pectore (5.165-69, pp. 250-51).

43 Venit aetas omnis in unam
Congeriem, miserumque premunt tot saecula pectus,
Tanta patet rerum series, atque omne futurum
Nititur in lucem, vocemque petentia fata
Luctantur (5.177-81, pp. 250-53).

44 “Cetera suppressit faucesque obstruxit Apollo” (5.197, pp. 252-53).

45 . . . mediae venere tenebrae.
Inmisit Stygiam Paean in viscera Lethen,
Quae raperet secreta deum. Tum pectore verum
Fugit, et ad Phoebi tripodas rediere futura,

46 Custance swoons or falls to the ground at 1058, 1104, and 1153. See Dinshaw, pp. 101-102.

47 “Si fata minor moveres,
Pronum erat, o iuvenis, quos velles” iniquit “in actus,
Invitos praebere deos
. . . .
At, simul a prima descendit origine mundi
Causarum series, atque omnia fata laborant
Si quicquam mutare velis, unoque sub ictu
Stat genus humanum” (6. 605-14, pp. 348-49).

Susan H. Braund’s translation of Lucan’s Civil War (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992),
emphasizes the accumulation of causes: “But when from the world’s first start has come
down / a chain of causes, when all the Fates are troubled / if you want to make a change .
. . Fortune is the stronger” (6.611-15).

48 Quaeritur indignae sedes longinque ruinae.
Non quia te superi patro privare sepulchro
Maluerint, Phariae busto damnantur harenae:
Parcitur Hesperiae: procul hoc et in orbe remoto
Abscondat Fortuna nefas, Romanaque tellus
Inmaculata sui servetur sanguine Magni (2.731-36, pp. 110-11).

49 See Kolve, Cooney, Astell, and Chauncey Wood, “Chaucer’s Man of Law as

50 Grennen, pp. 498, 500; quotation from pp. 508-509.

51 Hendrix, pp. 144 and 153. Hendrix, pp. 158-59, further argues that Custance’s efforts
to transcend these mercantile constraints are contained by the Man of Law’s rhetoric.

52 Hinton, p. 343.

53 Wood, pp. 162-64, quotations from pp. 162 and 163.

133. Olson, p. 101, argues that the Man of Law’s vision of royal absolutism leads him to
depict Providence as malevolent. R. E. Kaske, “Causality and Miracle: Philosophical
Perspectives in the Knight’s Tale and the Man of Law’s Tale,” in Traditions and
Innovations: Essays on British Literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, ed.
11-34, notes more generally the extent of Boethian additions to Chaucer’s source in
Trevet.

55 Wood, pp. 170-82.

56 Wood, p. 175.


58 See Cooney, p. 275. Mann calls the astrological reading “highly untraditional.”

59 Tu, qui flagrante minacem

Scorpion incendis cauda chelasque peruris,

Quid tantum, Gradive, paras? nam mitis in alto

Iuppiter occasu premitur, Venerisque salubre

Sidus hebet, motuque celer Cyllenius haeret,

Et caelum Mars solus habet (1.658-63, pp. 50-51).

60 “Aut hic errat,” ait “nulla cum lege per aevum

Mundus, et incerto discurrent sidera motu,

Aut, si fata movent, urbi generique paratur

Humano matura lues” (1.641-45, pp. 48-51).

61 “[T]ibi numine ab omni / Cedetur, iurisque tui natura relinquet, / Quis deus esse velis,

ubi regnum ponere mundi” (1.50-52, pp. 6-7).

62 “Aetheris innensi partem si presseris unam, / Sentiet axis onus. Librati pondera caeli / Orbe tene medio” (1.56-58, pp. 6-7).

63 “. . . multosque exibit in annos / Hic furator. Et superos quid prodest poscere finem? / Cum domino pax ista venit” (1.668-70, pp. 50-51).


Spearing’s own description of the Man of Law’s astrology as “poetry of tormented but
magnificent darkness” (731), perfectly describes Lucan’s poem as well.

Furthermore, this is not simply a matter of Chaucer pointing out what Peck has observed about Gower, that world-making is ultimately a form of lying. See Peck, “The Phenomenology of Make Believe in Gower’s Confessio Amantis,” in Re-Visioning Gower, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, North Carolina: Pegasus Press, 1998), pp. 49-66. Chaucer also points out here that even the mere search for causes can be harmful, that the common roots of wisdom and persuasion can be dangerous before they are applied ethically to or by readers. Thus, Chaucer critiques Gower’s poetry at the “pre-ethical” level, at the level of historical poetics.

Hinton, pp. 340-43, traces the medieval commentary tradition of Lucan and demonstrates ways in which Chaucer may have interpreted the events of Lucan’s poem.

“Libertas . . . populi, quem regna coercent, / Libertate perit; cuius servaveris umbram, / Si, quidquid iubeare, velis” (3.145-47, pp. 124-25). Hinton, p. 343, has noted the similarities between Cotta’s advice to feign allegiance and the Sowdaness and her co-conspirators’ false acceptance of the rite of baptism.

This is a critical commonplace in studies of the tale. See, for example, Shoaf, Hendrix, and Hanning.

Werner, p. 111. “pro auro pugnauere non pro legibus.” Latin on p. 91.

“Tot rebus iniquis / Paruimus victi; venia est haec sola pudoris / Degenerisque metus, nullam potuisse negari” (3.147-49, pp. 124-25).

Astell, p. 92.

Shoaf, “‘Unwemmed Custance,’” argues that the Man of Law works to restrict and contain notions of change, figuring himself and his poetic material as unerring, constant,
and impervious to change.

73 See, for example, Roger Ellis, Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 120 and 137.

74 In Kolve’s view, Chaucer “went to the Chroniques [of Trevet] precisely because it was a book of history, and . . . the story attracted him (as it had Trevet and Gower) because it not only concerned a chapter in the history of his own nation’s conversion to Christianity, but constituted part of an even larger true history—the spreading of the faith, the Christianization of Europe” (299).

75 Critics have noted the importance of Custance as a narrative nexus, as well as a mercantile and juridical nexus, in the tale. See especially Lavezzo, pp. 105-106; and for Custance’s narrative resonance in the context of the Marian tradition in England, see Teresa P. Reed, Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 37-39.

76 See Kolve. See also Raybin, pp. 80-81. Raybin’s article outlines the two historical versions of Custance, both within and outside of history.

77 See Astell, especially pp. 82-89. For other readings of the affective ends of rhetoric in the tale, see Bloomfield, and Mann, p. 140, for a counterargument to Bloomfield. See also Wurtele; Frank, Jr., pp. 46-48; Lawton, pp. 92-93; Clogan, pp. 224-26; and Russell, pp. 161-68.

78 Dinshaw, p. 107, reads the Man of Law’s proverbial expression as evidence of his inability to think, as it were, outside of the patriarchal box. Indeed, as Dinshaw argues, the Man of Law’s Tale sees any kind of female desire as a threat to patriarchal power structures.

80 Dinshaw, p. 102.

81 See Dinshaw, p. 112. Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 284, argues that the Man of Law’s Tale is about how “feminine virtue” is “brought into existence by male authority.”

82 For example, see Ellis, p. 161; and Lawton, pp. 92-93. Wurtele, pp. 585-86, addresses the effectiveness of the Man of Law’s *ratiocinatio*.


84 In Gower’s version, “This knyht withoute felaschipe / Hath take a bot and cam to schipe, / And thoughte of hire his lust to take” (2.1107-1109).
Chapter 6

Gower, Chaucer’s Monk, and the End of Invention

In the previous chapter I argued that the Man of Law’s Tale directly engages Gower’s poetic project. Through the tale, Chaucer critiques three aspects of the program of historical poetics that Gower had established in the Confessio Amantis: the use of the past to restore or rejuvenate the present, the ability of poetry to “unwrite” destructive narrative patterns, and the notion that a centralized authorial persona can effect restorative change through poetry. The Monk’s Tale continues Chaucer’s critique of Gower’s historical poetics, but makes it point less directly. Through the Monk’s prologue and tale, Chaucer engages not Gower’s poetry specifically, but Gower’s iconic image of the invention of history, the Statue of Time from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. While mimicking the invention work of Gower’s historical poetics, the Monk’s Tale redirects that work away from restoration and further invention and instead toward invention stagnation and, figuratively, the end of history.

The Monk’s Tale is unique among the Canterbury collection because it is made up of not one but seventeen separate narratives as well as the most detailed description of its own proposed genre, a twelve-line explanation of the content and form of “tragedie.” As the Monk presents it, this genre consists exclusively of terse historical narratives that relate the falls of great men and women from prosperity into wretchedness. The Monk pulls his seventeen narratives from the full spectrum of history: biblical, classical, and near-contemporary sources (the so-called “Modern Instances”) provide the materia, and
his tragedies thus include personages as diverse as Lucifer, Adam, Sampson, Nero, Caesar, Bernabò Visconti, and Ugolino of Pisa.\(^1\) The Monk, though, pares down extensively the often rich and complex narrative development that characterizes his sources’ versions of the stories, and he finally stops relating his tragedies only because the Knight and the Host demand he change the topic and mode of his narration.

Recent scholarship on the Monk’s Tale has undertaken the laborious task of recuperating the tale from a tradition of negative and overwhelmingly dismissive interpretations.\(^2\) These recuperative efforts have especially sought alternative explanations for the apparent lack of moralization in a tale that draws so explicitly on historical narrative. As Richard Neuse puts it, “the Monk seeks to banish from history the specters of a grand design,” removing the traditional armatures of meaning from history.\(^3\) The project of recuperation has produced a variety of secular morals to be drawn from the tale: a nuanced commentary on monastic worldliness and masculine authority; a blueprint for and prototype of Chaucerian tragedy; an indictment of political tyranny and the discursive support provided to that tyranny by the traditions of Italian humanism; and a careful commentary on the currents and eddies of Ricardian politics.\(^4\)

Critics have also turned to the meta-textual elements of the tale for an explanation of its apparent hermeneutic discrepancy. Lee Patterson has called the Monk’s Tale “immature discourse” because the tale appears in a fragment that is about authorial self-presentation in the Canterbury Tales.\(^5\) Ann W. Astell links the Monk’s discourse to a view of history, arguing that the Monk’s Tale represents a focus on the material causes of poetic composition, the “olde bookes” themselves, which serve as source material for poetic invention. Through the tale, Chaucer “weds the Monk’s reduction of art to materia
with the materialistic philosophy he espouses.” She further argues that the Monk likens himself to a Boethian image of destiny and not a more inclusive or authoritative concept such as Providence: “[T]he Monk’s tragedies are unmotivated by any sense of either human choice or divine purpose; instead they underscore the mechanical turning of Fortune’s wheel, the ‘cours’ of which no one can ‘withholde.’” Astell concludes finally that for the Monk “there is no final cause, no intentionality, only formless materia,” and that reading confirms her view that the Monk’s notion of history “exemplifies material causality.” Yet narrative development and inventional ingenuity are present in the tale, despite the fact that the tale’s terse narrative structure and interminable tragic slant would seem to suggest otherwise.

In fact, in its compilatio structure and pedagogical intentions, the Monk’s Tale employs the same historical approach as Gower’s Confessio, citing examples from history to educate readers in the present. The Monk’s tragedies, however, attempt to teach readers not the practicalities of ethical decision making, as the Confessio does, but rather the simple lesson to “Be war” of the fickleness of Fortune (1998). Furthermore, instead of containing the potential to restore a fallen present moment, the Monk’s short tales culminate in the termination of both a sense of historical progression and poetic invention. Ultimately, the Monk’s Tale presents a narrative process that reverses the standard trajectory of poetic invention from historical material. Instead of inventing poetry from historical topics or treating invention as a historical event and then using that conceptualization for further acts of invention, the Monk’s Tale pushes the logic of the invention of history to its extreme. The tale makes historical event itself the culminating act of poetic invention. It thus refigures Gower’s historical poetics by resulting not in
historical renewal but invention stagnation.

To demonstrate how the Monk’s Tale reformulates the invention of history and refigures Gower’s historical poetics, I will first discuss how the Monk’s definition of tragedy in his prologue demonstrates a particular understanding of history and invention. Second, I will show how the Monk’s first tragedy, the fall of Lucifer, enacts the theory of historical invention related in the prologue. Third, I will show how the Monk’s tragedies present images of invention only to remove their creative potential, and how this process differs between the classical and biblical narratives and the narratives of the “Modern Instances.” Finally, I will show how the Host’s discursive construction of the Monk and the Monk’s own narratives combine to portray him as a socialized refiguration of Gower’s Statue of Time. Taken collectively, the Monk’s tragedies reveal a complex program of historical invention that offers a profound critique of Gower’s poetic persona and project.

The Monk’s “certeyn storie” and Tragic History

The Monk’s Tale presents its genre, tragedie, at once as a form of historical understanding and of poetic invention. When called on for a tale by the Host, the Monk abandons his initial intention to relate to the pilgrims “the lyf of Seint Edward,” presumably a saint’s life valuable for both moral and historical instruction, and decides instead that,

first, tragedies wol I telle,

Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
The Monk’s definition of tragedy, as Henry Ansgar Kelly has thoroughly shown, is essentially derived from a gloss on a reference to tragedy in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which explains the term simply as the fall from prosperity to wretchedness. The Boethian source, however, joins a concert of other connotations for the term, many of which emphasize its historical nature. “Tragodie,” the Monk specifies, “is a certeyn storie”: that is, as Patterson notes, a certain kind of history. Kelly has shown that while Chaucer was unique (or nearly so) in his use and understanding of the concept of tragedy, and that most other writers before or during Chaucer’s career did not understand the concept of tragedy, late medieval English writers did equate tragedies with history. The Monk’s own emphasis on tragedy as a “certeyn” history emphasizes a kind of exclusiveness in the genre. The history of tragedy is a specific, localized, individuated view of the past, a view that separates this particular historical narrative from wider fields of meaning. Indeed, the narrative process of the Monk’s tragedies, as the Knight and Host in particular quickly come to realize, consists solely of the simple movement of the tragic transition itself, the fall from prosperity into wretchedness. As historical narratives, the tragedies are concerned less with explaining why or how history’s tragic falls occurred or their places in a larger historical field, and instead with maintaining with virtually no variation that these falls simply did occur.
The Monk also defines tragedy as a poetic form. Tragedies, the Monk says, 

ben versified communely

Of six feet, which men clepen exametron.

In prose eek been endited many oon,

And eek in meetre in many a sondry wyse.

(1978-81)

The Monk’s description of how one can compose tragedies in terms of verse or prose structure is so broad and inclusive that it renders his classification of textualized tragedy meaningless. Tragedies are “communely” found in hexameters, but “in prose eek” they can be found, “And eek in meetre in many a sondry wyse.” In other words, a tragedy can take any form at all in either verse or prose. The Monk thus establishes a stark contrast in his introduction to the genre. On the one hand, tragedies are concerned with only the most specific, localized, “certeyn” instances of a singular motion of historical progression, and on the other hand they can take any kind of written form imaginable. Tragedy is a certain kind of historical narrative that “olde bookes maken us memorie,” that is, that causes us to remember old stories we may have forgotten, or that creates (“makes”) in us a network of images and examples that constitutes memory. In both cases, tragedy is a genre incorporating a double movement: the first is the movement of narrative protagonists from prosperity to wretchedness; the other is the movement of tragic content of old books into memory, to the present experience of the reader.

As he presents them, the Monk’s tragedies would thus seem to offer an effective schema for conveying historical narratives to an audience. Tragedy itself would also seem to be in line with the exemplary narratives typical of this kind of historical
representation. Accordingly, many readers of the tale have slotted the Monk’s tragedies into a sub-genre of the moral exemplum.\textsuperscript{17} Such readings revolve around the notion that the Monk’s understanding of history through the genre of tragedy must be linked somehow to a moral or ethical understanding.

The \textit{Monk’s Tale}, however, operates apart from such paradigms. Indeed, the only consistent exemplary “lesson” taught by the Monk’s tragedies is that people inevitably fall from high estate to low. Tragedies, at least as the Monk invents them, provide a means of transporting narratives of the past into the present—to “maken memorie” from the stories of “olde books”—without the corresponding baggage of moral understanding.\textsuperscript{18} Tragedy preserves event, the narrative of movement, without the teleology of exemplary morality or the complexities of Boethian philosophy from which its definition was originally derived. Tragedy is a poetic means of representing the idea of historical progression whose only “meaning” is realized in the complete movement from prosperity to wretchedness. This meaning cannot be wholly related to a larger moral, ethical, or political referent; each tragedy takes its meaning from its own narrative process only.

Yet the \textit{Monk’s Tale} is filled with explicit references to moral, prudential, or ultimately misogynistic “causes” for the falls of its protagonists: Lucifer falls because of “his synne” (2002), Adam for “mysgovernaunce” (2012), Sampson and Hercules for trusting women, Nebuchadnezzar and Balthazar for pride, and the protagonists of the Modern Instances for various political reasons (explicitly stated or otherwise).\textsuperscript{19} The Monk never completely extinguishes ethics and morality from his narratives, nor does he merely dismiss their more complex moral meanings by simplifying the context of his
sources.\textsuperscript{20} The larger point of the Monk’s tragedies is that these moral causes are folded into the larger narrative of the tragic fall itself. Because they do not offer moralizations on each of the stories and instead merely list moral or ethical defects as part of a chain of events, the Monk’s tragedies present a view of history that preserves event in spite of its representation.

The Monk’s certain kind of history thus turns out to be “true” history, in a clinically Ciceronian sense. History, as Cicero describes it in the \textit{de Inventione}, is “an account of actual occurrences remote from the recollection of our own age.”\textsuperscript{21} The Monk’s narratives are “true” first because they happened, and second, because their truth is completely self-contained and self-apparent. That is, they are true because they adhere to the definition of tragedy the Monk establishes, which itself is defined through its historical resonances. The subject matter of these tragedies is not simply the material cause of their composition, the physical “olde bookes,” as Astell describes. Rather, the subject matter of the tragedies is the \textit{res gestae} contained in those “olde bookes,” the actual events behind their representation in the Monk’s sources. However readers—the Knight, Host, or modern literary critics—might wish to assign moral or spiritual deficiency in their teller, the tragedies themselves represent a new kind of historical narrative: they present a kind of history in the raw.

The \textit{Monk’s Tale} furthermore works to justify this view of historical representation through its own narration. Despite the presentation of this literally “trew and olde” version of history, the tale nevertheless also takes as its topic the process of poetic invention.\textsuperscript{22} While the tragedies would appear to present \textit{materia} with little or no real inventional development, they actually work to redefine the procedures of invention
by reversing their relationship with the historical events they represent. The cumulative effect of the tragedies of the Monk’s Tale is to present the sense of a historical event—a res gesta—as the endpoint of poetic invention rather than as the origin of invention. That is, instead of composing poetry that has been “inspired” by true events, the tale reverses the trajectory of this process and presents events as emerging from invention. In the end, the larger hermeneutic paradigm that comes to replace the Providential, moral, and ethical frames dismissed by the Monk’s view of history is a mechanical presentation of poetic invention. The individual tragedies work together to complete this reformulation of the invention of history, and the process begins with the Monk’s unusual first choice for his de casibus tale.

**Event from Invention in the Case of Lucifer**

The Monk’s first choice among the hundred or so tragedies he keeps in his mind is remarkable because it is the only tragic protagonist in the tale who is not a human being and is therefore untouchable by Fortune:

At Lucifer, though he an angel were

And nat a man, at hym wol I bigynne.

For though Fortune may noon angel dere,

From heigh degree yet fel he for his synne

Doun into helle, where he yet is inne.

O Lucifer, brightest of angels alle,

Now artow Sathanas, that mayst nat twynne

Out of miserie, in which that thou art falle.
As critics have rightly noted, the Monk’s provocative beginning establishes a kind of narrative archetype to which the rest of the tragedies adhere. Moreover, the archetype exists outside of human history. As Scanlon argues, this fact allows the Monk to establish a (dubious) link between his discursive construction of his particular view of history with a “cosmic” origin that preserves some kind of authority for the figure of Fortune. Yet, as the brief narrative makes very clear, Fortune “may noon angel dere,” and the Monk’s narrative further assigns the cause of Lucifer’s fall not to Fortune’s fickleness but very clearly to “his synne.” On the surface then, while the choice of Lucifer may seem odd in terms of the de casibus tradition, the mechanics of his fall are conventional.

Unconventional, though, is the narrative’s refusal to discuss the particulars of Lucifer’s experience. Though citing Lucifer’s vague and unspecified “synne” as the cause of his fall, the majority of the Monk’s inaugural tale concerns itself with the process of Lucifer’s tragedy, not with its moral cause. In terms of historical precedent, the first of the Monk’s tragedies establishes a view of history that overlooks causes—moral or otherwise—in favor of the simple teleology of progression. In other words, Lucifer’s fall is not an origin of the falls, as Scanlon notes, but neither does it pretend to be an origin. The link between Lucifer’s fall and the subsequent falls of human protagonists is not causal, nor does the Monk present Lucifer’s narrative as an effort to establish some kind of political authority. The fall of Lucifer works as an origin for the reformulation of historical invention that the Monk undertakes through his tale. Placing the tragedy of Lucifer first allows the Monk to begin the process by which he will show poetic invention to result in the generation of historical event.
If the case of Lucifer falls outside the scope of human history, it is nevertheless well within the scope of invention. The Monk uses this “original” case to play with notions of natural and artificial order as ways of inventing poetic compositions. The choice to begin with Lucifer in a chronicle of famous falls would indeed seem “natural.” That is, this fall seems appropriate because it adheres to the natural order of the Christian tradition. However, the Monk’s framing of his Lucifer narrative emphasizes its placement in the tale as artificial, not natural. The Monk sets up the expectation for a tale organized artificially in his opening apology:

Though I by ordre telle nat thys thynges . . .

After hir ages, as men writen fynde,

But tellyen som bifore and som bihynde,

As it now comth unto my remembrunce,

Have me excused of myn ignoraunce.

(1985-90)

The very first word of the first of the Monk’s tragedies further emphasizes the artificial order of his tale, even his tale’s treatment of Lucifer. “At Lucifer . . . wol I bigynne,” the Monk declares. The choice of preposition is important. Firstly, “At” renders Lucifer more than both a man and an angel. The preposition transforms Lucifer into a historical event, “at” which the Monk will begin his tale. Choosing Lucifer, in this sense, means choosing a point in time along a historical narrative. Announcing a beginning in this way implies the artificiality recommended by the *ars poetica* tradition. Secondly, “At” emphasizes the inventional aspect of the Monk’s construction because it formally registers his choice of Lucifer as an act of selection from a range of topical possibilities. This entire process
essentially shows invention incurring on history: in the Monk’s careful construction, artificial order becomes natural order.

At the same time, however, the fall of Lucifer is natural in that it represents the first instance in the Christian imagination of the narrative pattern of famous falls that the Monk intends to present. This is finally a complex and circular process, but its end result is the image of a historical event emerging as an endpoint of poetic invention. The Monk’s words call attention to the unusual nature of his choice: he will begin at Lucifer, “though he an angel were,” and “though Fortune may noon angel dere.” His words thus emphasize the inventional artifice of the case of Lucifer even while denying it. Furthermore, the Monk emphasizes the fact that Lucifer’s state of wretchedness is not over and past, as is the case with the rest of his tragic protagonists. “Now artow Sathanas,” the Monk announces, noting in his miniature apostrophe that the event of this fall still continues at this moment. This tragedy is not over: it is still happening, even “Now.” This first narrative is slight in detail and incisive in its treatment of the single occurrence of Lucifer’s fall. Yet in it the Monk carefully constructs a scaffolding of inventional references that attempts to render the event of Lucifer as the product of poetic invention.

As the tragedies progress, however, the inventional power of generating res gestae out of poetic invention is ultimately shown to result in inventional stagnation. The reason for this sense of stagnation is that any res gesta produced by invention throughout the Monk’s Tale is always the same res gesta. While this scarcity of narrative development has been assigned variously to the Monk’s poetic failings or to his efforts to establish himself in a position of “discursive authority,” it also indicates a drastic transformation
of the purpose and function of poetic invention. This transformation can be seen in the Monk’s longer narratives, in which the action of poetic invention only further emphasizes its own creative stagnation. In these narratives, the Monk uses methods of poetic invention sanctioned by the *ars poetica* tradition, and he furthermore thematizes the process of invention, taking it as a co-subject with his historical material. Yet all of this inventional potential results paradoxically in inventional stagnation.

**Inventional Stagnation in the Classical and Biblical Narratives**

In his first longer narrative, that of Sampson, the Monk begins by presenting a one-stanza “argument” of Sampson’s case, describing how the man who was once “to God Almyghty consercat” soon “slow hymself for wrecchednesse” (2017, 2022). Nine stanzas follow this summary, and they indeed seem to develop Sampson’s narrative by means of amplification. We learn the details of the state of Sampson’s prosperity, the specific conditions of his wretchedness, and even the particular manifestation of Fortune that brought about his downfall:

Unto his lemman Dalida he tolde
That in his heeris al his strengthe lay,
And falsly to his foomen she hym solde.
And slepynge in hir barm upon a day,
She made to clippe or shere his heres away,
And made his foomen al his craft espyen;
And whan that they hym foond in this array,
They bounde hum faste and putten out his yen.
At the end of the tragedy, the Monk moralizes on Sampson’s fall:

Beth war by this ensample oold and playn
That no men telle hir conseil til hir wyves
Of swich thyng as they wolde han secre fayn,
If that it touche hir lymes or hir lyves.

The tragedy of Sampson, then, fills out the “skeletal” framework established in the one-stanza narratives of Lucifer and Adam as well as its one-one-stanza summary argument. But the moment of Sampson’s fall, though it is amplified to expand the “moral” meaning of the narrative, nevertheless calls for its own inventional stagnation. The problem for Sampson, as the Monk puts it, is that Dalida “made his foomen al his craft espyen.” While ostensibly misogynistic in their moral, the Monk’s terms here also resonate with inventional implications. The nature of Dalida’s betrayal, that she “made,” dictacts in “playn” speech that she made Sampson’s foes to know his weakness. But the Monk’s term for this act, “made,” also implies Chaucer’s frequent word for poetic composition, the process of “makyng” poetry. His concluding moralization urges the prevention of such acts of “makyng” as much as it vilifies women as vindictive gossips.

Moreover, the object of weakness that Dalida “made” Sampson’s “foomen” “espyen,” is “al his craft.” The term, “craft,” denotes the trick or device behind his superhuman strength, but it is also a term that used to describe the art of poetic production. In the House of Fame, for example, the “craft” of Orpheus, Arion, and their Welsh bardic inheritors is able to “countrefeteth kynde,” or produce mimetic songs good
When the Monk amplifies the most important aspect of Sampson’s tragic narrative, he does so in order to hinder the proliferation of inventional acts: he makes the revelation of craft the center of Sampson’s downfall and death. Furthermore, the amplification that Dalida “made his foomen al his craft espyen” in no way suggests historical contingency or the possibility that the tragic falls the Monk narrates can subversively illustrate alternate histories or possibilities. The tragedy turns on its simultaneous treatment of poetic invention and historical progression, bending the one into the service of the other in a way that makes historical event the result of exposing the inventional procedures of “craft.”

The Monk continues to use terms that resonate with the craft of invention only to continue to bend them to his historical purpose. The tragedy of Hercules, which follows Sampson’s narrative, maintains the pattern of paradoxically using narrative amplification to create a sense of inventional stagnation. Hercules’ tragedy, however, intensifies the sense of stagnation by making the figure of Fortune herself the agent of invention. Fortune appears for the first time in the narrative of Hercules, explicitly as a historical force with a hand in the narrative trajectory of the tragedies. Hercules’s story parallels Sampson’s in that the “sovereyn conquerour” demonstrates his mightiness before the intervention of his “lemman,” Dianira, whose gift of a poisoned shirt destroys him (2095, 2119). As before, the Monk amplifies the conditions surrounding Hercules’ fall, arguing first that Dianira’s gift of the “envenymed” shirt made Hercules’ “flessh al from his bones falle” (2124, 2126). “But nathelees,” the Monk interjects, “somme clerkes hire excusen / By oon that highte Nessus, that it [the shirt] maked. / Be as be may, I wol hire noght accusen” (2127-29). The emphasis is not on the possibility of different
moralizations that can be taken from the tragedy. Indeed, such variations are irrelevant since they only indicate particular instances of the workings of Fortune—and for the Monk, all the workings of Fortune move toward a single historical occurrence.

The subsequent “moralizing” by the Monk makes this clear:

Lo, who may truste on Fortune any throwe?
For hym that folweth al this world of prees
Er he be war is ofte yleyd ful lowe.
Ful wys is he that kan hymselven knowe!
Beth war, for whan that Fortune list to glose,
Thanne wayteth she her man to overthrowe
By swich a wey as he wolde leest suppose.

(2136-42)

Fortune here tricks “her man” Hercules by bringing him down by the method that he least expects, but she also acts as the glossator on Hercules’ life. Scanlon has noted how the term, “glose,” demonstrates Fortune to be a discursive force that speaks to “the thoroughness of Fortune’s domination over human existence.”33 “Fortune is a gloss,” Scanlon writes, “the exchange of one discursive term for another, that manifests itself as unpredictably and disruptively as possible.”34 But Fortune is more than that. She is nothing less than a glossator.

In the tragedy of Hercules, Fortune emerges as the agent who causes historical change by glossing on the personal histories of her victims. In other words, her glossing on the “certain storie” of an individual protagonist results in the reproduction of a singular historical event. As the work of Rita Copeland has shown, acts of glossing and
translating were in the late Middle Ages indisputably also acts of rhetorical and poetic invention. The *Monk’s Tale* transfers historical and inventional agency to Fortune. Significant, however, is that despite the figuration of Fortune as a character in these tragic narratives, the *Monk’s Tale* does not transfer inventional agency to the person of an inventor, be that inventor Fortune or even the Monk himself. Instead, inventional agency is assigned to the very process of invention itself. And in the *Monk’s Tale*, inventional process is always historical process. The tragedy of Hercules presents multiple possibilities for the fall of its protagonist, but the narrative ultimately assigns all such moments of inventional contingency to Fortune herself. Invention, then, results again in the single event that constitutes human history.

The *Monk’s Tale* thus shows its meta-topic to be the stagnation of inventional process. Paradoxically, the Monk uses the sanctioned inventional process of amplification with this topic as well, offering a variety of instances that only demonstrate the same process of inventional stagnation. In the linked tragedies of Nebuchadnezzar and his son Balthazar, the Monk introduces competing inventional agents as the central components of his narrative. In these two tragedies, Daniel, who interprets dreams and the famous writing on the wall—essentially glossing texts for his royal employers—is shown to possess the inventional potential that ought to prevent tragic falls. Though opposed to the glossator Fortune, Daniel’s role in the tragedies only emphasizes further a sense of inventional stagnation.

The tale of Nebuchadnezzar is unique among the Monk’s narratives because of its apparently non-tragic conclusion. Nebuchadnezzar’s mightiness is grounded in his tyrannical vanity. As punishment, God transforms him into a beast, and then
relesayed hym a certeyn yeres,
And yaf hym wit, and thanne with many a teere
He thanked God, and evere his lyf in feere
Was he to doon amys or moore trespace.

(2177-80)

Robinson has called the stories of Nebuchadnezzar and his son, Balthazar, a “double tragedy,” since the moral epiphany of the first king does nothing to prevent the fall of the second. Even the fortunate fall of Nebuchadnezzar, however, presents no exception to the plot structure of the Monk’s tragedies. While Nebuchadnezzar’s fall from greatness causes him to devote the rest of his life to God, his tragedy still ends with his final fall into death: he knows God’s grace and might, but according to the narrative, that knowledge ends with death. He knows God, “Til that tyme he leyd was on his beere” (2181), at which point both Nebuchadnezzar’s knowledge and his narrative cease.

More significant, however, in the tragedy of Nebuchadnezzar the Monk introduces but then leaves unexplored key narratives from his biblical source. He says nothing beyond a brief mention of the Israelites, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refuse to worship the king’s “statue of gold” and are forced to be burned “in a fourneys, ful of flambes red,” only to defy physical law and emerge from the furnace unharmed (2158, 2163). The Monk leaves un-glossed a narrative valuable for its exemplary lesson on the power of faith and for its ability to demonstrate an alternative to the narrative trajectory of his tragedies. The Monk also leaves undeveloped the ability of Daniel to gloss on historical events in a way resembling Fortune and her own readiness “to glose.” Incorrectly listing Daniel among the Israelites castrated by Nebuchadnezzar, the Monk
notes that

Amonges othere Daniel was oon,
That was the wiseste child of everychon,
For he the dremes of the kyng expowned,
Whereas in Chaldeye clerk ne was ther noon
That wiste to what fyn his dremes sowned.

(2154-58)

The Monk neglects to mention any of the dreams Daniel reads for the king. These moments are significant because they present topics for invention that would normally resonate with the historical and moral goals of his narratives. They furthermore are moments that imply prolificacy and engendering, either literally in the case of Shadrach and company, or figuratively in the dissemination of texts in the case of Daniel’s prophetic glosses. The Monk, though, leaves these potential tales there, hanging in history.

In the second half of this “paired tragedy,” the Monk as narrator dramatizes the inventional potential of Daniel’s glossing. Neglected in Nebuchadnezzar’s tragedy, Daniel features prominently in the tragedy of the Babylonian king’s son, Balthazar. At the climax of Balthazar’s period of prosperitee, Daniel glosses the writing on the wall that foretells the impending fall and death of the king. It is Daniel—and not the Monk—who attributes the falls of both Balthazar and his father to their sin of neglecting God:

Eek thou, that art his sone, art proud also,
And knowest alle thys thynges verraily,
And art rebel to God, and art his foo.
Thou drank eek of his vessels boldely;
Thy wyf eek, and thy wenches, synfully
Dronke of the same vessels sondry wynys;
And heryest false goddes cursedly;
Therefore to thee yshapen ful greet pyne ys.
This hand was sent from God that on the wal
Wroot Mane, techel, phares, truste me;
Thy regne is doon; thou weyest noght at al.

(2223-33)

Daniel’s speech concludes with his interpretation, and the Monk’s narrative of the life of Balthazar ends as abruptly as it had begun: “And thilke same nyght this kyng was slawe, / And Darius occupieth his degree, / Thogh he therto hadde neither right ne lawe” (2236-38). Daniel’s role as glossator is overturned by the Monk himself, who passes over Daniel’s in-text moral glosses and instead assigns the causes of the entire two-part tragedy to Fortune. Finally the Monk concludes the tragedy by resorting again to proverb: friends made through Fortune are fickle, the Monk says, and “This proverbe is ful sooth and ful commune” (2246). Daniel functions as the hermeneutic link between the tales of Nebuchadnezzar and Balthazar, a link that the tale reveals to be even stronger than the familial and ostensibly generative link between father and son. Daniel’s inventional agency, however, is tempered by the Monk, who concludes with a stifling and reductive proverb, thus again staving off inventional potential even while calling attention to his proverbial construction, one of the most effective and powerful ways of beginning a new poetic composition. The double tragedy ends with the event of Balthazar’s fall, construed
by the invention of Fortune, and it culminates finally in a proverb that dismisses
invention rather than facilitating it.

Similar instances of inventional stagnation appear throughout the *Monk’s Tale*. In
the tragedy of Zenobia, for example, the Monk refers explicitly to the aborted beginnings
of his story by stating on two separate occasions within the narrative that he will begin to
treat his matter shortly. The tragedy of Nero shuts down any possibility of narrating the
act of advising the prince as Nero kills his old teacher and advisor Seneca. In the
Monk’s final tragedy, the king Croesus is hanged despite the prophetic reading that his
daughter offers him of his dream. In a sweeping narrative move reminiscent of
Balthazar’s tragedy, “Thus warned hym ful plat and ek ful pleyn / His doghter, which that
called was Phayne. / Anhanged was Cresus, the proude kyng” (2757-59). The tragedy of
Croesus yet again directs prophetic glossing toward a pre-established historical form,
emphasizing that historical event, not meaningful poetic utterance, is the result of the
craft of invention.

In the classical and biblical tragedies, the Monk builds on the precedent he
established with the narrative of Lucifer. These tragedies present historical events as the
endpoints of poetic invention, rather than as materia for the process of invention. The
Monk then paradoxically takes this inventional stagnation as a topic for poetic invention
and uses amplification to emphasize the lack of inventional potential. The *Monk’s Tale*
thus represents a careful and complex process that refigures the goals and methods of
poetic invention as it works to bring historical material back into the “memorie” of its
readers. The *Monk’s Tale* makes this refiguration even more explicit in its presentation of
the so-called “Modern Instances,” the tragic narratives of historical personages drawn
less from “olde bokes,” and more from recent cultural memory.

**Historical Stability in the Modern Instances**

In most manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Modern Instances of Peter of Castile, Peter of Cyprus, Bernabò Visconti, and Ugolino (“Hugelyn”) of Pisa appear in the middle of the Monk’s Tale, between the tragedies of Zenobia and Nero. The Ellesmere and its related manuscripts, however, place the Modern Instances at the very end of the Monk’s Tale, following the tragedy of Croesus. This textual crux has led to multiple interpretations of how the Monk treats modern history with respect to his classical and biblical cases. Critics have tended to view the modern instances as narratives that “destabilize” history. David Wallace, in perhaps the most influential recent study of the Monk’s Tale, sees in these tragedies the vicissitudes of recent history interrupting an array of classical examples that are more in line with the traditional cultural productions of Italian humanism. For Wallace, these narratives demonstrate Chaucer working, like Boccaccio, to destabilize the cultural assumptions propagated by humanist poets like Petrarch, whose poetry and self-created laureateship proved sympathetic to fourteenth-century despots. The Monk dramatizes the effect of this historical destabilization in the reaction of the Knight. Donald Fry argues the Modern Instances help explain the Knight’s interruption, since the Knight, as his portrait in the General Prologue indicates, had a professional connection with Peter of Cyprus, and his personal philosophy toward history, as indicated by his tale, is in stark contrast to the Monk’s. According to this line of argument, the emotional effect of the Monk’s modern tales cause pain in the Knight, who suddenly finds himself forced to rethink his own life
in terms of great men of the past. The Knight’s reaction demonstrates how the tale calls into question the historical assumptions we make to understand our places in history. The larger implication of this realization is that the nexuses of contemporary political power are not as universal or stable as they may seem, thus destabilizing history.

What the Modern Instances reveal, however, is not a destabilizing effect, but rather a potent and pervasive stabilizing effect. The tale enforces this sense of stability through its familiar process of inventional stagnation. In the modern cases of Pedro of Castile, Peter of Cyprus, and Bernabò Visconti, stagnation stabilizes history by regularizing it. These tragedies resemble the brief “arguments” that begin the tragedies of Sampson and Hercules. They spend little time detailing the mightiness of their protagonists, instead segueing mid-sentence to the description of their falls. One example is the tragedy of Peter of Cyprus, for example, in which some critics have located the impetus for the Knight’s interruption:

O worthy Petro, kyng of Cipre, also,
That Alisandre wan by heigh maistrie,
Ful many an hethen wroghstestow ful wo,
Of which thyne owene liges hadde envie,
And for no thyng but for thy chivalrie
They in they bed han slayn thee by the morwe.
Thus kan Fortune hir wheel governe and gye,
And out of joye brynge men to sorwe.
(2391-98)

There is little that is destabilizing about this tragedy. Peter is slain because of the envy of
his own men, and this action itself is again presented merely as a particular instantiation of the singular historical action of Fortune. Furthermore, the stanza does not illustrate a break between Peter’s death and the examples of classical tradition; the reference to Alexander the Great, who himself had long ago also conquered Cyprus, likewise met with a famously “tragic” end, pulled into wretchedness at the height of his prosperiety.

This sense of stability is the historical aspect of the inventional stagnation presented in the classical and biblical narratives, and it likewise works to demonstrate historical event as the endpoint of the process of poetic invention. Like the classical and biblical narratives of the Monk’s Tale, these short modern tragedies also engage in a process of amplification that paradoxically results in a sense of stagnation. In the first three Modern Instances, the process of amplification is not the production of more text as it is in Sampson’s or Hercules’ narratives, but rather an extension of the single fact of the tragic fall from classical and biblical precedent into contemporary historical understanding. The Modern Instances carry forward the sense of inventional stagnation that the earlier tragedies work to represent, but they do so in a way that emphasizes the historical aspect of that stagnation. In other words, the earlier tragedies’ stifling of invention here “results” in the presentation of modern examples that do not focus on issues of invention whatsoever, but instead present individual portraits of a singular historical process. These recent examples are not textual, since they exist not in olde bookes, but only in historical understanding. The meta-textual treatment of invention in the earlier tragedies here results in near-contemporary historical events.

The apparent exception to this pattern is the last of the Modern Instances, the tragedy of Hugelyn, which the Monk notes is from a distinctly poetic source, “the grete
poete of Ytaille / That highte Dant” (2460-61). Only the tragedy of Hugelyn, who in the
Inferno is punished for betrayal and gnaws at the head of one of his own betayers,
Archbishop Ruggiero, demonstrates narrative amplification of the type seen in the
biblical and classical narratives. Moreover, the Hugelyn episode is unquestionably the
most moving of the tragedies as it relates in detail the deaths of Hugelyn and “his litel
children thre,” the eldest of whom “scarsly fuf yeer was of age” (2411-12). For all its
pathos, the Monk’s version of Hugelyn’s story is devoid of any mention of either the
prosperity that precedes Hugelyn’s fall or the apparent guilt that registers a specific
instance of Fortune’s historical action. Amplification in the narrative centers instead on
the specific conditions of Hugelyn’s plummet into wretchedness. The tragedy begins
immediately with the description of the conditions of his fall: “Off the Erl Hugelyn of
Pyze the langour / Ther may no tonge tell for pitee” (2407-2408). After noting Hugelyn’s
grief at the death of his children, the narrative says simply that Hugelyn, “Himself,
despeired, ekk for hunger starf; / Thus ended is the myghty Erl of Pize. / From heigh
estaat Fortune awey hym carf” (2455-57).

The tragedy contains two treatments of the process of invention, one figurative
and the other literal. Figuratively, in a scene that dramatizes the potential consumption of
the future by the past, the narrative details how Hugelyn’s son, jailed along with his
father and also denied food, begs his progenitor to eat him and his brothers. “[E]te the
flessh upon us two,” his son tells his father. “Oure flessh thou yaf us, take oure flessh us
fro, / And ete ynogh” (2450-52). Literally, the Monk at the end of the narrative refers to
Dante, who not only told the tale of Hugelyn, but told it “Fro point to point,” and in “nat
o word wol he faille” (2462). Daniel Pinti has shown that the figurative consumption
scene of the tragedy suggests not so much the destructive consumption of one text by another, as the endless back-and-forth of the text-commentary tradition that would have informed how Chaucer interpreted the Comedia. Pinti reads the Monk’s reference to Dante ironically, arguing that Trecento commentaries, “which along with Dante’s poem itself together constituted the Comedy of fourteenth-century literary history, are the surest indication that even Dante could not narrate everything.” In Pinti’s view, the Monk’s Tale ironically opens up spaces for alternative interpretations of historical events.

As we have seen, however, the Monk’s chief glossator is Fortune herself, and any efforts to invent, be it from the biblical glossator Daniel, the “grete poete of Ytaille,” or even the politics of reading in the commentary tradition, are ultimately bent back to the teleological force of the Monk’s own definition of tragedy. While the reference to Dante could offer readers interpretive alternatives in terms of both historical understanding and poetic invention, the narrative structure of the Monk’s Tale actually locks out any such possibility. The Monk’s version, because of its terseness, presents itself as original, boiling away poetic speculation and presenting instead the processional truth at the heart of a story even as moving and complicated as Hugelyn’s. This version, in other words, is the “original,” the “trewe and olde” version of what happened in the case of Ugolino of Pisa. The Monk’s version thus presents itself as a kind of source for the “grete poete of Ytaille,” whose wordy narrative will not fail to convey a single detail as it invents on the event.

The Monk’s narrative is not a carving away of Dante, at least in the fiction of the tale. Instead, Dante’s narrative is shown to be a retroactive amplification of material presented by the Monk. But the meta-process revealed by the Monk’s tragedy of Hugelyn
does not demonstrate simply a slavish or obsessive devotion to material causes, as some have argued. The tragedy works out a careful process that introduces the possibilities of historical contingency and inventional potential, only to fold these possibilities backwards by demonstrating them to be the *materia* of invention itself. The nature of this *materia* is at once inventional—since it “results” in Dante’s cantos—and historical, since it emphasizes the events irrespective of moral or political cause. 

Because it specifically treats issues of poetic invention and historical understanding rather than simply overlooking them, ignoring them, or dismissing them, the tragedy of Hugelyn demonstrates a bleak stabilization of both history and invention, and it shows the former to be a result of the latter.

The individual tragedies of the *Monk’s Tale* demonstrate that the endpoint of the poetic invention is historical event itself and paradoxically a sense of inventional stagnation. This sense of stagnation has encouraged critics, the Knight and Host the first among them, to turn to the figure of the Monk as the center for meaning in the tale. This movement between the Monk’s tragedies and their teller reveals how the process of the *Monk’s Tale* ultimately critiques a Gowerian historical poetics. Like his narratives, the figure of the Monk becomes a conflicted site of potential invention and stagnation. He functions as a counter-Gowerian icon of historical progression, a socialized version of the Statue of Time, which Gower uses in his Latin and English poetry as a paradoxically stable image of instability. The combination of the Host’s rhetorical construction of the Monk and the Monk’s own tragic narratives demonstrates a Chaucerian response to one of Gower’s favorite symbols of the representation of his historical poetics.
Mighty Men and the Monster of Time

Linking the tragedies to their narrator, critics have long noted that the Monk himself experiences a metaphorical version of the falls of his tragic protagonists: he falls short of the monastic life to which he has sworn himself, or he fails in his ability to move his audience, or the arrangement of his tragedies indicates a kind of descent into Hell itself. Whatever his true “identity” may entail, an active process of reading by the Host creates the persona of the Monk. The Host essentially invents a historical context for the Monk: he imagines a name for him: “lord daun John, / Or daun Thomas, or elles daun Albon,” and finally, “Daun Piers” (1929-30). He guesses his station in the monastery: “Upon my feith, thou art som officer, / Som worthy sexteyn, or som celerer . . . thou art a maister whan thou art at hoom” (1935-38). And he creates the apparent conflict between the Monk’s virile appearance and his devotional vocation: “I pray to God, yeve hym confusion / That first thee broghte unto religioun! / Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright” (1942-44). All of this is the work of glossing and invention, not the labor of the reporting ironic observation, as, for example, is the case of the narration in the General Prologue. The Host has literally invented the Monk, using the pilgrim as the site for a kind of Ciceronian notatio.

The invention of a fictional character by another fictional character, the Host’s rhetorical “fantasies,” as Wallace refers to the process, resonate with a kind of historical understanding as well. The Host’s construction follows a Ciceronian hierarchy of narrative classification that builds up the Monk by alluding first to the lowest or most fictional form of narrative, fabula, and finally to the highest and “truest” form, historia. The names that the Host postulates for the Monk begin with one appropriate for fabulae:
“Daun John,” the name of the lecherous monk from the Shipman’s Tale whose sexual escapades form the central plot points of the fabliau. He moves next to “Daun Thomas,” a name that invokes Thomas à Becket but also St. Thomas the Apostle, whose reputation as the doubting apostle conjures the fictional-but-plausible narratives of argumentum, the second classification of Ciceronian narrative. The Host’s final postulated name, “Daun Albon,” resonates historically as much as it does ecclesiastically or spiritually. Saint Alban, martyred by pagans during the tumultuous conversion period of English history, functions as a kind of patron saint of England, a function institutionalized in his namesake, St. Albans, north of London. The Host’s construction of the Monk moves through a narrative hierarchy from fabula to historia, culminating with the type of narrative discourse to which the Monk’s genre of choice belongs.

But the Host immediately breaks down this narrative invention by glossing the same Ciceronian hierarchy he has just established. He introduces the possibility that the Monk, given his attractive physical characteristics, might be able to copulate despite his vows by sleeping with lay wives. He then laughingly apologizes for his suggestion, and calls it nothing more than a “game.” The movement of the Host’s verbal game disassembles the discursive hierarchy of fabula-to-historia that he had erected with his playful naming. The Host argues for the possibility of the Monk fulfilling what, given his looks, must be an overactive biological imperative, until finally ending his description with the confession that all of it has been nothing more than fabula, related in jest. The Host’s narration—and not the Monk’s “identity” itself, whatever that might be—simulates a fall in historical terms, because it reverses the Ciceronian hierarchy by turning his invention from allusions to historia back to a focus on the fabulae with which
he began, from the “olde and trewe” references of history to references designed to inspire the fictional spirit of “game.” Even before the Monk begins his tale, the Host has figured him as a conflation of both invention and history. The Host’s “game” locates this “fall”—from historia to fabula—in the single person and physical presence of the Monk.

The Monk himself continues this figuration in the introduction to his tale. As we have seen, the Monk’s apology for relating his tragedies out of their proper chronology emphasizes his own choice to organize his tale artificially rather than according to natural order. Because they are arranged artificially, out of their natural chronological order, the Monk focuses on the individual histories—the “certeyn storie[s]”—of each of the cases he relates. Historical progression as the Monk presents it is more effectively understood as enclosed within the persons of his protagonists, not in a larger chronicle narrative that might emerge had the tragedies been related in natural order. The emphasis on artificial order—even, as we have seen, in the problematic case of Lucifer—locates the historical meaning of his narratives not in a grand progression from biblical and classical ages through to Modern Instances, but instead in the individual persons of his tragic protagonists. Each individual mighty man or woman becomes a single anthropomorphicon of the only “trewe” historical narrative possible, the fall from prosperity to wretchedness.54

This complex figuration, achieved through the discursive work of both the Monk and the Host, links the Monk and his tale to Gower’s Statue of Time, the image that appears to the dreaming Nebuchadnezzar and is interpreted by Daniel. The Statue depicts the ages of man in the form of metals of decreasing value, from a head of gold to feet of steel and clay, and it stands ever on the verge of its own obliteration by a giant boulder.
The Statue, as we have seen, functions as a symbol for Gower’s historical poetics and for his fictionalized authorial persona, and it represents an inescapable historical trajectory that will conclude only with the end of history. As it textually and visually occupies the folios of the *Confessio*, the Statue of Time stands, like a mighty man, endlessly broadcasting the self-apparent hermeneutic truth of impending and unavoidable fall. Daniel carefully explicated the historical periods represented by the different metals that make up the Statue’s body, constructing its history for Nebuchadnezzar by relating its allegorical relationship to the history of the world. Daniel’s gloss essentially constructs a narrative of history for the king. Furthermore, the Statue’s anthropomorphic image, its elemental self-consumption, and its eventual destruction by the boulder, all indicate a forward-moving narrative progression that actually is history. Daniel’s invention, as it is presented in Gower’s poem, results in historical event: at a literal level of the narrative progression to the Statue’s destruction; at an allegorical level of the destruction of human history itself; and at a meta-poetic level as the introduction to the historical and memorial work the *Confessio Amantis* is meant to perform. Daniel as the Statue’s glossator makes the image “mean” historically for Nebuchadnezzar. His exegetical invention transforms a dream-text into historical event.

This, then, is the historical and inventional resonance of the figure of Chaucer’s Monk: his history is constructed and then unraveled by the Host’s introduction; each of his tragedies speaks as the Statue of Time means; and his unflappable narrative pattern posits historical event as the endpoint of poetic invention. His tragedies introduce moments of inventional potential only to collapse them unremittingly back to inescapable historical reality. The persona of the Monk anthropomorphizes the stagnant inventional
and historical model of his tragedies.\(^{57}\) Like Gower’s Statue of Time, the Monk stands as a figure of both poetic invention and historical understanding. He is created on the one hand by his own tragedies, representing along with the metals on the Statue of Time a singular historical process that cannot be countered or diverted. On the other hand, the figure of the Monk is created by the Host’s own act of glossing, which, like Daniel’s on Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, makes the figure of the Monk mean historically even as it functions as an act of invention.

The difference between the Monk and the Statue of Time is that while Gower’s Statue stands outside of time and is representative of it, the Monk stands firmly planted within time, as an element of a particular late-fourteenth-century English moment in which the necessary duality of someone like an outridere Monk can be made to signal and call into question anagogic cosmic meaning.\(^{58}\) This, then, is the real payoff of the necessary step of linking the Monk with his tragedies. The figure of the Monk is not simply a critique of Italian humanism, despotic governance, or the eddies of political power, but instead a living, breathing, possibly dissimulating, but ultimately non-allegorical example of what the Statue of Time might “actually” have looked like, were it to have lived in history. The Monk’s Tale thus most fully realizes the historical poetics of Gower’s Confessio Amantis by locating the invention of history within a realized (if fictional) “present” moment, the Canterbury pilgrimage. Unlike the Confessio, though, the work of the Monk’s inventions only serves to indicate the ineffectiveness of directing poetic invention toward the historical transformation of the present.

In the Monk’s Tale, narratives of the past do culminate in the invention of history—though not in the restoration of the present. Instead, they simply invent the very
historical event they narrate. The tale bends moments of inventional possibility back to the single historical process related by the tale, and it shows how standard procedures of invention such as amplification and narrative development only result in a sense of inventional stagnation when they are put in the service of history. Finally, the tale directs efforts to understand the tragedies—either philosophically or aesthetically, as represented by the critiques of Knight and Host respectively—back to the figure of the Monk himself, the figure of an author who stands midway between his tragic inventions and those of one of his readers, the Host. The Monk’s Tale ends, though, not with a promise of revisiting old books, but rather with a refusal to continue with the invention of either poetry or history.

**Notes**


2. For a review and analysis of such dismissals, as well as an assessment of the importance of the Monk’s Tale to the English vernacular tradition, see Larry Scanlon, Narrative.

4 For readings of the Monk’s Tale as an expression of the Monk’s ironic or at least bifurcated existence, see: Joella Owens Brown, “Chaucer’s Daun Piers: One Monk or Two?,” Criticism 6 (1964): 44-52; D. E. Berndt, “Monastic Acedia and Chaucer’s Characterization of Daun Piers,” Studies in Philology 68 (1971): 435-50, who attributes the differences between the Monk of the General Prologue and the Tale to monastic...


7 Astell, Chaucer and the Universe of Learning, pp. 191-92. The quotation cites line 1996 of the Monk’s Tale.

8 Astell, Chaucer and the Universe of Learning, pp. 192 and 191.

9 Scholarship on the tale has shown, in fact, that the Monk’s tragedies are not “formless,” but are connected to one another in several possible ways. For example, see Edward M. Socola, “Chaucer’s Development of Fortune in the Monk’s Tale,” JEGP 49 (1950): 159-71, who demonstrates a trajectory in the Monk’s presentation of Fortune that organizes the tale; and Strange, p. 170.
Kelly, p. 71, notes that the Monk’s introduction informs the pilgrims that “by taking precautions against falls, one may sometimes avoid or prevent them.” All quotations from Chaucer’s works are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and will be cited parenthetically within the text.

11 See Kelly, 50-65.

12 Patterson, p. 99, emphasizes the historical aspect of the Monk’s definition, and he also notes the difference between comedy and tragedy in the medieval perspective: “Tragedy deals with the world of public events—of history—in which the socially exalted enact their inevitable fate.”

13 Kelly, p. 39, argues in particular that Chaucer is unique in that he had a conception of the meaning of tragedy before he wrote tragedies, rather then applying that term to works after composition. In the *Polychronicon*, for example, Trevisa translates Higden’s term, *tragediea*, into “geste,” as Kelly, p. 41, notes. Trevisa also did not see a distinction between tragedy and comedy, as a comedy for him was “a song of gestes.”

14 For an analysis of the Monk’s narrative structure and the danger of that structure “becoming a state of mind,” see Ramazani, pp. 262-65.

15 As Strange, p. 171, puts it, “it is still the fall alone that fascinates this Monk.” Boitani, p. 51, argues that Chaucer may be the first medieval poet to link so closely tragedy and Fortune. Haas, p. 54, argues the opposite.

16 As Neuse, pp. 140-41, suggests, for the Monk history itself is a text.

17 For Godman, p. 291, the tale adheres to the “exemplary force, moral authority and historical veracity” of Boccaccio’s Latin works on which the *Monk’s Tale* is partially based, and Chaucer’s tale “makes these claims with a wryer, less ingenuous purpose than
Boccaccio’s.” For Scanlon, p. 215, the Monk’s Tale is an examination of exemplary narrative itself, and it represents “narrative exemplum in its most distilled form.” Scanlon argues that the Monk’s Tale is an effective machine at “producing moral authority from within history” (227), and that while the Monk’s “ecclesiastical identity . . . leaves no direct mark on his text” (220), the Monk nevertheless makes a “moral argument” and has a “moral point” (224). Winthrop Wetherbee, “The Context of the Monk’s Tale,” in Language and Style in English Literature: Essays in Honour of Michio Masui, ed. Michio Kawai (Hiroshima: English Research Association of Hiroshima, 1991), pp.161 and 167, argues that the Monk’s Tale is actually an “anti-de casibus,” because its tragedies rob the original stories “of the moral and historical complexities inherent in their biblical and classical sources,” but nevertheless that the Monk’s version of these narratives “dissipates their tragic power by contaminating it with arbitrary moralism, the pathos of popular religious literature, or the optimism and idealism of chivalric romance.” The tale, in other words, replaces complex morality with simple morality. For Wetherbee, one result of this “highly experimental work” is “to demonstrate how readily these characteristic medieval modes can distort or obfuscate social and political reality in the process of ‘interpreting’ it” (161). Another result of “the Monk’s bungling essays in tragedy is ironically to heighten our sense of the possibilities inherent in his tragic narratives, and invite us to exercise our own humanist inclinations for the purpose of enlarging their potential meaning” (169). Wetherbee’s reading faults the Monk’s narrative ability, but it suggests that the Monk’s terse tragedies offer moments for invention in the form of reader response. Wallace, pp. 330-31, makes a similar point in terms of the possible political meanings readers might have taken from the tragedies. On the contrary, as I hope to show
below, the Monk’s tragedies offer only the illusion of potential invention. Their narrative structure ultimately locks off any possibility of invention based on historical contingency.

18 Wetherbee, p. 164, sees a similar kind of movement in the Monk’s tragedies: it is Fortune who “will function at times as a sort of hermetic vessel in which the prince’s fall occurs in total isolation.”

19 Kelly, p. 71, offers a brief catalogue of the causes of the protagonists’ falls.

20 See Wetherbee in above note.


22 Critics have noted that the fusion of history with a literary genre is central to the Monk’s—and perhaps even Chaucer’s—understanding of tragedy. See Boitani, p. 56, and Neuse, pp. 140-41, and 193.

23 See, for example, Neuse, p. 193.

24 For Scanlon, p. 223, the structural similarity of Lucifer’s case to the falls of human history “remains as the only evidence available in purely temporal terms of the cosmic link between Lucifer’s fall and the process of human history. The story cannot provide the Monk with the central authority of an origin, but that is precisely the point. It distills the figural authority of Fortune to an irreducible doubleness, confirming at once its universality and its incompleteness.” Neuse, p. 193, argues that the fall of Lucifer “generically is not different” from the falls of the Monk’s mortal protagonists.

25 Scanlon, p. 222. Scanlon, p. 223, furthermore argues that the Monk’s narratives enforce the fall as “the normative form of change.” He ultimately assigns its significance
to the political and discursive authority established by the Monk as the teller: “The simplicity of the fall from high degree . . . gives it an immediate universality which becomes the surest sign of the Monk’s discursive authority” (222).

26 I borrow the useful term, “argument,” from Kelly’s description of the stanzaic summaries in the Monk’s Tale, p. 75.

27 The term, “skeletal,” I adapt from Wallace, p. 330, who describes the tale as “the shadow or skeleton of a text.”

28 See the MED, definitions 1 (strength) and 3, 5, and 9 (art and artistic productions).

29 House of Fame, ln. 1213. Similarly, the “craft” to which the dreaming narrator refers in the first line of the Parlement of Foules is ostensibly love, but its larger referent is poetic composition itself, the project which the waking dream intends to follow at the conclusion of his vision.

30 Wurtele, pp. 199-200, notes that the Monk passes over the riddle of the honeycomb and the bees, as well as Sampson’s song of praise after water springs forth from the jawbone of the ass. These are explicit moments of poetic invention suppressed by the tale.

31 Several critics have mapped how the Monk’s Tale’s presentation of Fortune evolves over the course of the tragedies. See Socola, Strange, Lepley, and Jensen cited above; Peter C. Braeger, “The Portrayals of Fortune in the Tales of the Monk’s Tale,” in Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in the Canterbury Tales, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 223-36, outlines the Monk’s changes to Fortune based on the needs of narrative plot.

32 See Socola, p. 164. Neuse, p. 187, notes that Fortune for the Monk is a “rhetoric” that
allows him to replace Providential teleology with a belief in human agency and choice (see also p. 199). Scanlon, pp. 224 and 225, calls Fortune “discursive” and that it points to “moral certainty,” points I will address more fully below.

33 Scanlon, p. 225.

34 Scanlon, p. 225. Scanlon, pp. 225-26, furthermore argues that “The intervention implicit in the beginnings [of these narratives] achieves its fullest prominence in the endings. The endings underline Fortune’s disruptive power by depicting misfortune at its most invasive . . . She deprives the most powerful of people even the simple control of their own bodies. The complete loss of personal autonomy drives home the essential uncontrollability of political power.” Ultimately, then, resistance to this narrative, as demonstrated by the Knight’s interruption of the Monk, only illustrates further the “instability” that “defines human history . . . The Knight’s resistance itself is a characteristic instance of that instability, for it is nothing less than the resistance of political power to textual authority.”

35 Fortune’s activity coincides with the process identified by Copeland by which medieval hermeneutical practices of scriptural exegesis gave way to inventio. See Copeland, Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), as well as my discussion in Chapter 1.

36 Ramanzani, pp. 267-68, observes how the Monk’s methods of amplification adhere to the principles outlined by Geoffrey of Vinsauf.

37 See Socola, p. 165.

38 Wurtele, pp. 196-98, carefully details the Monk’s “errors” in the Nebuchadnezzar
story.

39 Wurtele, p. 196-98, notes especially the Monk’s glaring omissions of “the miraculous passing of the ordeal set for the divinely favoured captives” who are thrown into the king’s furnace (196), and the “Providential proofs made visible in the story” (p. 198).

40 See also Jenson, p. 186

41 The Monk declares first that “now unto oure tale turne we,” and later that he will move “shortly of this storie for to trete” (2297, 2311).

42 Fortune speaks in the tragedy, exclaiming, “By God! I am to nyce / To sette a man that is fulfild of vice / In heigh degree, and emperour hym calle” (2522-25). Several critics have noted that the tale removes the possibility of the effective counsel of the prince. See Zatta, and Norsworthy, p. 321. Wetherbee, p. 164, notes how Chaucer’s tale emphasizes the failure of counsel introduced in the Roman de la Rose.

43 See Fry, Wallace, Jones, and Astell, “The Monk’s Tragical ‘Seint Edward.’”

44 Wallace, especially pp. 300-307, and 313-14. For Boccaccio, and by extension to Chaucer, the events of modern history are the only ones that can be treated independently from the humanist view of history. Wallace, p. 331, ultimately links this to Richard II and the fact that in the latter part of the century England did not possess the cultural infrastructure necessary to support tyranny. See also Astell, “The Monk’s Tragical St. Edward” pp. 402-405, who likewise argues that the Visconti episode in conjunction with the Monk’s mention of St. Edward links historical tyrants to Richard II. For the tale as a critique of humanism and in particular Petrarchan self-laureateship, see Haas, pp. 67-70. For Scanlon, p. 226, the tragedies as a whole point to the “instability” of human life.

45 Fry pp. 357-65. Fry is responding to R. E. Kaske, “The Knight’s Interruption of the
Monk’s Tale,” ELH 24 (1957): 249-68, who argues that the Knight interrupts because of the Monk’s distortion of Boethian philosophy. See also Jones.

46 Boitani, pp. 55-64, carefully catalogues the differences between Dante’s and Chaucer’s versions of the story. Chaucer’s Monk is far more interested in history than in “meta-history,” the interior personal and emotional experiences that resonate in Dante’s text. Boitani, p. 63, concludes that the reason for the differences is one of audience: Dante writes for Italy’s sophisticated elite, and Chaucer for pilgrims, courtiers, and merchants.

47 Daniel Pinti, “The Comedy of the Monk’s Tale: Chaucer’s Hugelyn and Early Commentary on Dante’s Ugolino,” Comparative Literature Studies 37 (2000), p. 290. This back-and-forth is not unrelated to the “chronological recursiveness that threatens to take the tale back to the very beginning of fallen history from which it started” (290).

48 Pinti, p. 290. Pinti, pp. 289-90, is also one who argues that the Monk’s Tale destabilizes history: he applies Wallace’s argument to literary history in the form of commentaries on Dante.

49 Neuse, p. 159, reads Chaucer’s version as the Monk’s realization that “God does not reveal himself in history.”

50 For Wallace, p. 312, “The narratives he tells . . . point to the logic of his own fall as a narrator.” Likewise, the tale itself “falls, or moves uncertainly, between its attempt to develop and sustain an elevated ‘heigh style’ that approximates humanist Latin and the pull of a narrative vernacular” (313). See also Norsworthy, p. 326, who argues that the Ellesmere order essentially narrates the Monk’s descent into Hell. Strange, p. 176, argues that the tale is “as fully realized as it ever could be,” and the Knight’s interruption prevents a tale which is itself about to fall from its full realization. Ramazani, p. 266,
notes that it is the Host who actually almost falls off his horse while nearly dozing off during the Monk’s tale.

51 Wallace, p. 309.

52 See, for example, the narrative in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 1.7.

53 For the Monk’s virility, see Wallace, pp. 310-11; and Sharp. For manliness as the central concept of the Monk’s description and his tales, see Olsson, pp. 7-9, 12, and 15. White, pp. 26-29, details how the Monk’s description emphasizes his lustiness.

54 Wallace, p. 330, referring to efforts to rewrite the narrative of Richard’s reign after his deposition and death, notes that “The moment of the fall will become the narrative telos of the life, prompting a rewriting of every earlier ‘accounte.’”

55 See Chapter 4.

56 Zatta, pp. 119-20, notes that the Statue of Time served as “an image of universal history in terms of the progressive political degradation of the world as universal monarchy declines into strife and division,” and that the Babylonian tyrants were “conventional symbols of the succession of world empires.” Zatta notes that these tyrants could be taken as a warning against Richard’s alleged tyrannical tendencies. See also Astell, “The Monk’s Tragical ‘Seint Edward.’”

57 Indeed, this figuration even assimilates the compositional history of the tale: Chaucer had written this short *de casibus* earlier in his career and only later assigned the tragedies to the Monk. The Monk’s tragic narratives actually predate their narrator. See Susan H. Cavanaugh’s notes in the *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 929; and Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 324-25.

58 Paul E. Beichner, “Daun Piers, Monk and Business Administrator,” *Speculum* 34
(1959): 611-19, describes in detail the duties of an outridere, and he argues that the Monk, much like Alison of Bath, is not necessarily a blanket critique of monastic worldliness. See also Laura F. Hodges, “A Reconsideration of the Monk’s Costume,” Chaucer Review 26 (1991-92): 133-46, for a careful demonstration of how the Monk’s dress is neither entirely condemning nor exonerating.
Coda

Chaucer, Lydgate, and the Invention of Literary History

The Monk’s Tale critiques Gower’s invention of history as a way of restoring a fallen or discordant present. Chaucer’s tale achieves its critique by transforming Gower’s iconic image of the invention of history into the Monk and locating that image within the fully-rendered historical moment of the Canterbury pilgrimage. By doing so, the Monk’s Tale locks both Chaucer’s and Gower’s inventions of history within the late fourteenth century, entrenching both poets’ historical conceptualization of inventio in a specific historical moment. That historicization would provide English poets of the generation following Gower and Chaucer with a new component of the invention of history: the beginnings of what they viewed to be an English literary tradition. Poets like John Lydgate drew upon the fourteenth-century sense of invention as a historical concept. Now, however, that concept also included “real” figures like Chaucer, who functioned as emblems simultaneously of English history and English poetic invention.

In The Siege of Thebes, Lydgate directly engages Chaucer’s invention of history. Lydgate’s tale provides the prehistory of the love affair of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily in Theseus’ Athens. His narrative continues even up to “the bygynnyng of the Knyghtys Tale,” as his “mayster Chaucer list endite,” relating the weeping of the Theban women whom Theseus encounters in the first of the Canterbury Tales (4524, 4501). The Siege of Thebes thus invents not only a history of Thebes but also the history of the Knight’s Tale, figuring Chaucer’s tale as a kind of subsequent amplification of the historical
material that Lydgate provides. More remarkable, however, is how Lydgate frames this prehistory. He fictionalizes himself as a Canterbury pilgrim, catching up with the travelers the night before they are about to make their return journey back from the shrine of Thomas à Becket. Lydgate invents his own Canterbury tale by imagining Chaucer’s poem as a historical narrative, with his “mayster Chaucer” as its chief chronicler.

The Siege of Thebes opens by invoking the reading experience of the Canterbury Tales. It imitates Chaucer’s panegyric of spring in its first lines, but then it moves into a kind of summary of the frametale. The time was “whan Canterbury talys” were “Complet and told at many sondry stage” (18-19), and Lydgate relates (somewhat imperfectly) a selection of those “sondry” stages via the interactions of the Cook, Miller, Reeve, Pardoner, and Friar. He emphasizes that this is a reading experience made possible by Chaucer, the “Floure of poetes thorughout al Bretyene” (40). Chaucer’s mastery in “rethorike and in eloquence” enables him to compose poetry that for Lydgate “never shal appallen in my mynde, / But alwey fressh ben in my memoyré” (42, 44-45). Despite his elaborate praise of Chaucer’s “sugrid mouth” and “crafty writinge” (52, 57), Lydgate locates the memorial staying power of Chaucer’s sweet rhetoric and eloquence not in aesthetic pleasure but in historical verisimilitude. Chaucer’s verse is remarkable because it is so historically accurate: Chaucer is “Chief registrer of this pilgrimage, / Al that was tolde forgetting noght at al” (49-50). As the “Chief registrer,” Chaucer, in Lydgate’s formulation, does not invent fiction in the Canterbury Tales. Instead, the Canterbury Tales is comprised of historical events that Chaucer “registers,” that he chronicles. Lydgate’s praise emphasizes Chaucer’s invention of history.

The fact that this history is fictional poses no problem for Lydgate’s narrative.
Lydgate plays along, fictionalizing himself and inserting himself into the history of the Canterbury pilgrimage:

And this whil that the pilgrymes leye
At Canterbury wel logged on and all,
I not in soth what I may it call—
Hap or fortune in conclusioun—
That me byfil to entren into toun
The holy seynt pleynly to visite . . .
My man toforn with a voide male,
Which of fortune took myn inne anon
Wher the pylgrymes were logged everichon.

(66-78)

Lydgate invents his own frame tale based on what he emphasizes as Chaucer’s invention of history. Moreover, he fictionalizes distinctly historical forces that have moved him to become part of the Canterbury pilgrimage: either “Hap” (happenstance) or “fortune” has positioned Lydgate in Chaucer’s sweetly wrought historical narrative. Lydgate’s usurpation of Chaucer’s frametale works seamlessly because of the way in which the Lancastrian poet emphasizes the Canterbury Tales as the eloquent product of the invention of history.

The historical element of Lydgate’s Canterbury frame marks its difference from other adaptations of the Tales, such as the extended Canterbury Interlude found in the Northumberland manuscript. Opening into the Merchant’s “Tale of Beryn,” the anonymous author of the Interlude, like Lydgate, imagines Chaucer’s pilgrims reaching
Canterbury, visiting the town, and preparing for their return trip. This extended fabliau narrative chiefly relates the frustrated attempts of the Pardoner to bed Kit, a barmaid at the hostelry in Canterbury. The Interlude thus transforms the frametale into a brief tale in itself, rather than taking Chaucer’s rendering of the Canterbury pilgrimage to be a historical account as *The Siege of Thebes* does. Lydgate, as we have seen, emphasizes a record of the events that is Chaucer’s rather than the narrative potential of those events. He furthermore provides his frame in order to introduce himself as a fellow poet among the pilgrims. The Interlude takes a different approach to history. The “Tale of Beryn,” relating the fortunes of its merchant-protagonist, begins and ends by stating that the author is translating a record of Roman history. The narrator’s source is a Roman “cronicul” (768), and the colophon emphasizes that the “Name of the author presenting the chronicle of Rome, and of the translator, is a son of the Church of St. Thomas.” The poet’s material for the tale claims to be both historical and Chaucerian, but his treatment of these elements differs greatly from Lydgate’s. For the “son of the Church of Thomas,” the *Canterbury Tales* provides a ready-made frame through which he can present Roman historical material. For Lydgate, the *Canterbury Tales* itself becomes historical material.

Lydgate’s tale thus gestures regularly toward its “sequel,” the *Knight’s Tale*, both through direct reference and by taking as one of its poetic topics a concern about the future. Directly referring to Chaucer’s tale, *The Siege of Thebes* ends exactly where the *Knight’s Tale* begins, bringing Lydgate’s historical invention up to the “present moment” of Chaucer’s fiction. The *Siege* also offers as part of its plot moments when historical personages are denied the knowledge of the future that Lydgate, Chaucer, and their audiences would have had. Oedipus, for example, is famously “ignoraunt” of the
historical consequences of his actions (640, 784). More dramatically, Amphiorax’s dazzling disappearance into the bowels of the earth gives pause to the whole host of Greeks:

For he that was wisest and koude most  
To serce and seke thorthout al the host,  
Amphiorax, whan that he lest wende,  
To helle is sonken and coude hym not diffende  
(To hym the tyme unknowen and unwist),  
In whom whilom was al the Grekis trist,  
Her hool confort, and her affiaunce.

(4077-83)

Lydgate blames Amphiorax’s witchcraft for his being consumed by the earth, but the poem’s real point lies in what this spectacular demise means for the understanding of historical eventuality. Not even the wisest of the Greeks, a man who could at times even see the future and whose knowledge was the “hool confort” of his countrymen, is able to anticipate every future event. Lydgate’s invention of history in *The Siege of Thebes* imagines protagonists speculating about historical uncertainty even as the tale itself looks forward to Chaucer’s poem. It takes as its topics the understanding of history, the process of poetic invention, and now also the historical invention of an English poet whose life was increasingly “remote from the recollection of our own age.”

Lydgate, the author-pilgrim of the tale, locates himself in a familiar position. Like one of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s proverbs, Lydgate stands apart from his poem while glancing back at it, looking backwards and forwards between his tale and the tale of
Chaucer, between his own invention and English literary history. Moreover, as the topical allusion at the very end of the *Siege* suggests, Lydgate looks back and forth between the “strif” at Thebes and the “Pees” with France secured by the Treaty of Troyes in 1420 (4691, 4703). Like Gower, Lydgate imagines the invention of history as having the potential to restore order and stability to a present historical moment. Also like Gower, Lydgate transforms his text from a poetic invention into a register of English history: the *Siege* culminates simultaneously in Chaucer’s narrative and in Henry V’s peace with France. Lydgate invents a new Canterbury tale by imagining invention historically, and the fifteenth-century understanding of the invention of history now also includes previous English inventors like the “Floure of poetes thorughout al Bretyene.”

Lydgate thus uses Chaucer as a device to legitimate and authorize his poetry and to bolster the cultural capital of the Lancastrian patron for whom he wrote. When he draws on Chaucer to imagine an English literary precedent for his inventions, Lydgate likewise draws on a larger English tradition of historical invention. This tradition has its origins in twelfth- and thirteenth-century *ars poetica* treatises that work to generate in readers a sense of history—an imaginative matrix in which the texts of the *auctores* intersect with the lived experience of student writers, understood as a kind of personal history. The historical conceptualization of invention also shaped history writing of the fourteenth century. Chroniclers focused on invention as a kind of foundational *res gesta* to be addressed in their narratives. These writers recognized *inventio* to be a historical deed in its own right, and they reacted to unprecedented social and cultural events by treating the inventional principles that underwrote those events.

In the fourteenth century, the invention of history received its fullest expression in
the poetic interchanges of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer. In his Latin project, Gower constructs a dominant authorial persona who works to align his poetry with a restorative program for English history. Gower’s texts attempt to refigure his literary opus as a series of poetic res gestae, transforming poetic utterances into events constitutive of English history. In his vernacular masterpiece, the Confessio Amantis, Gower challenges his own ambitious project, working to “unriht” the potentially stifling effect of drawing on historical narrative to restore a discordant present. He thus interrogates history and his own poetry in order to discover a common means of restoring both.

Gower’s project revolves around the pervasive presence of a controlling authorial persona, as his self-designed tomb in Southwerk Cathedral so clearly suggests. Chaucer reacts in particular to this authorial aspect of Gower’s poetics. In his most direct and complex engagement with Gower’s project, Chaucer revises a Gowerian narrative in the Man of Law’s Tale to suggest the futility of poetry as a means of holistically rejuvenating supposed cultural decay. Chaucer’s tale replaces Gower’s benevolent authorial persona with Lucan and Caesar. The tale thus exchanges an at least nominally restorative Gowerian poetics with the Pharsalia’s poetics of destructive causality. Chaucer’s tale suggests further that even the act of searching history for ways to transform the present is in itself a destructive process. In the Monk’s Tale, Chaucer continues his critique of Gower’s poetic project, this time refiguring Gower’s iconic Statue of Time as the Monk himself, removing Gower’s image from its extra-temporal and authoritative position of stasis and placing it squarely in a fully-rendered, fourteenth-century historical moment.

Gower’s efforts to transform history through poetry, by making the latter into the former, and Chaucer’s counter-efforts to reveal the futility of such a project, both
demonstrate the rich potential that the historical understanding of *inventio* held for English poetry. By the time Lydgate used the dual conceptualization of history to authorize his own poetry, *inventio* also included a new component: an English literary precedent for writers of the fifteenth century.

**Notes**


4 Lydgate does not cite Gower as a literary master in the way he cites Chaucer, but subsequent writers such as Osbern Bokenham and George Ashby would lump together Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate as a poetic collective to be revered for their rhetorical eloquence. The triumvirate provided writers with a shorthand for introducing an English literary precedent for their own work. When compared with Chaucer, Gower would come to be seen as an ancient relic far removed from the present, as noted by Caxton. See N. W. Gilroy-Scott, “John Gower’s Reputation: Literary Allusions from the Early Fifteenth
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