# 1

# Authorship

*The author-based emphasis of early Middle English criticism. The displacement of the author by New Criticism. Historical enquiry and changing models of authorship: Derek Pearsall on Lydgate. Medieval literary theory and authorship: Alastair Minnis on Chaucer. Textual criticism and authorship: Tim William Machan on Henryson.*

We can gain an initial picture of the diversity and richness of Middle English literary criticism by considering some of the contrasting approaches taken to the question of authorship. Important critical work has explored various dimensions of medieval authorship, thereby intervening in some enduring critical questions. Is biographical information admissible as literary evidence? Is authorial intention recoverable and, if so, is it always relevant to literary interpretation? Should the medieval writer be regarded as an historical presence inhering in the text, a rhetorical construct or a 'function of discourse'?

In much of the earliest medieval scholarship the question of authorship was central and the shared conception of 'the author' generally unproblematic. Many of the literary investigations of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars were focused upon the attribution of anonymous works to *known* authors, the uncovering of further biographical information about those authors, and the location of literary works in precise contexts. Author-identification conferred status on a text. Thus a 1904 survey of Middle English literature authored some of the anonymous lyrics upon the poet of *The Owl and the Nightingale*: 'the question arises, whether some of the religious lyrics . . . did not come from the hand of the same poet. We lack materials for a decisive answer.'[1] Likewise, for a long time, almost the entire corpus of the anonymous Middle English alliterative verse tradition was ascribed by scholars to mysterious Scottish poet 'Huchoun' on the slender basis of a cryptic late-medieval allusion. Next to nothing was known about any such writer; nothing

material was gained by the identification. But the historicist temper of scholarship at this time meant that Middle English studies drew validation from attributing anonymous texts to historical authors.

The author-based emphasis of this earlier phase of criticism might often blur the line between fact and speculation. A 1914 portrait of the poet Laȝamon shows this trend:

> [Laȝamon's] charming preface exhibits the character of the author in unmistakable wise. A simple-hearted man, we observe, tender and devout, a sincere booklover, an honest scholar, a faithful son. Evidently Layamon worked not for promotion or favour, not at the instigation of a patron in power, but for the love of learning, for his people's good. His office was to read the service in a little country church, and in this retirement he found hours of leisure, which he improved for study.[2]

The search for the authors behind some of the most cherished Middle English works dominated early scholarship. Attempts to unmask the poet or poets behind the alliterative *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Purity*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were a case in point. Osgood raised speculation on authorial identity in his 1906 edition of *Pearl*;[3] the following year Gollancz linked the poems with Chaucer's contemporary Ralph Strode.[4] In 1928 Cargill and Schlauch presented new candidates John Donne (no relation of the Renaissance poet) and John Prat, two secular clerks officiating in a noble household in the reign of Edward III,[5] while in 1932 Chapman proposed an Augustinian friar based in fourteenth-century York, one John of Erghome.[6] Though concern with author-identification would lessen in the second half of the century, Davenport's 1978 study of 'the *Gawain*-poet' makes clear just how central the notion of common authorship has proved to be to the critical reception of the four poems: 'Though the *Gawain*-poet may not have existed, it has proved necessary to invent him.'[7]

It was a similar story in early scholarship on chief Middle English Arthurian, Sir Thomas Malory. Until the late nineteenth century, little more

> But though he be nameless, the poet's personality and background are so vividly impressed on his work that one may be forgiven the somewhat hazardous task of attempting to evolve an account of his earlier life from mere conjecture and inference. Such an attempt, though fanciful, at all events serves to link together certain facts and impressions, and with this reservation cannot but prove helpful. If documentary evidence is ever discovered, hypothetical conjecture will no doubt be put to a very severe test.[8]

**1921:** Israel Gollancz speculates on the author behind the *Pearl* poems.

was known of the author of *Le Morte Darthur* than is indicated in William Caxton's preface to his 1485 edition of the text. In the 1890s, however, the independent researches of Oskar Sommer and George Lyman Kittredge, a figure who would dominate this early phase of scholarship, unearthed the biography of one Sir Thomas Malory of Newbold Revel, Warwickshire.[9] Shortly afterwards, Martin identified a second Thomas Malory, this one hailing from Huntingdonshire.[10] Which, if either, was our Arthurian? Heated debate would follow through the twenties (Chambers, 1922; Hicks, 1928; Vinaver, 1929),[11] thirties (Baugh, 1933)[12] through to the sixties when William Matthews's *Ill-framed Knight* proposed yet another identification for the author of the *Morte*.[13] Benson's 1976 study remained tentative, avoiding 'making any assumptions about Malory's life',[14] and as late as 1987 R. M. Lumiansky declared the case still open: 'as things now stand we cannot give a sure answer to the question, Who was our Sir Thomas Malory?'[15] Only in the mid-1990s would P. J. C. Field's persuasive espousal of the Newbold Revel Thomas appear to seal the case – for now at least.[16]

By contrast, under the influence of the Anglo-American New Criticism that first entered literary studies in the 1930s and 1940s, authorship slipped down the critical agenda. For New Critics, authorial intention was irrecoverable, extrinsic to a text's artistic integrity and irrelevant to critical analysis. To base a critical case on authorial intention was to commit 'the intentional fallacy' in W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley's influential phrase.[17] The influence of this critical approach registered in the field of medieval studies in a variety of ways, not least in the fresh impetus given to study of the *anonymous* tradition. It was in this critical phase that the anonymous works of 'the *Pearl*-poet' were studied anew: no longer distracted by the search for an historical figure on whom to author the poems, criticism might now focus on the craftsmanship of the texts, their rich symbolism, characterization and textual form. And with the sidelining of 'the author' came the emergence of 'the narrator'. Today, most critical discussion of Chaucer's *General Prologue* or of *Pearl* would take as read the significance and centrality of the respective narrator figures. In reality, 'Chaucer the pilgrim' and 'the Pearl-dreamer' arrived in critical discourse only fifty odd years ago, placed there by E. Talbot Donaldson and Charles Moorman respectively:

**NEW CRITICISM AND AUTHORSHIP**

- *E. Talbot Donaldson* (1954): I think it time that [Chaucer the Pilgrim] was rescued from the comparatively dull record of history and put back into his poem. He is not really Chaucer the poet . . .[18]
- *Charles Moorman* (1955): I would suggest that the quickest way to come to the heart of the poem would be to waive entirely all questions of allegory and symbolism and to concentrate not upon the figure of the girl but upon that of the narrator.[19]

While New Criticism displaced the author, later theorists were to pronounce that author dead (the structuralist polemic of Barthes) or to recast the author as a constructed and provisional category rather than a stable historical presence (the post-structuralist contention of Foucault). Such theories of authorship were of deep importance across literary studies, though it seemed some particular ramifications followed for medieval studies. Since so many medieval texts are anonymous, and the biographical record for even the known authors relatively sketchy, a 'dead' or absent author could seem particularly pertinent.

Our own categories and models for authorship do not often overlap with what can be deduced from Middle English terminology and practice. The relatively rare word *writere* in Middle English is as likely to indicate the scribe as the composer of a literary work; the term *poet* is not in widespread use before the fourteenth century . . . Contemporary understandings of authorship often revolve around either the notion of individual genius (derived from the Romantic conception of the 'artist') or that of property rights over a text (as expressed in laws governing copyright or plagiarism). Authorship in the Middle Ages was more likely understood as participation in an intellectually and morally authoritative tradition, within which . . . a writer might fill one of several roles, copying, modifying, or translating, as well as composing.[20]

**1999:** Reflections on medieval authorship in the landmark volume, *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. Wogan-Browne, Watson, Taylor and Evans.

HISTORICISM AND AUTHORSHIP    Some of the most valuable and enduring criticism on the topic has emphasized the historical conditions impinging upon the practice and understanding of medieval authorship. In the pre-copyright age of manuscript culture, where derivative and well-worn stories were cherished above new-fangled (what we would call 'original') fictions, authorial roles were conceived along different lines. C. S. Lewis made this point memorably in *The Discarded Image* of 1964:

I doubt if [medieval audiences] would have understood our demand for originality or valued those works in their own age which were original any more on that account. If you had asked Laʒamon or Chaucer 'Why do you not make up a brand-new story of your own?' I think they might have replied (in effect) 'Surely we are not yet reduced to that?'[21]

Hand in hand with this prizing of tradition over invention comes a less-elevated notion of the literary artist in medieval theories of authorship. Some of the most important critical studies of the anonymous literature of the

Middle English period have emphasized this different conception of the author, as in Rosemary Woolf's 1968 study of the religious lyrics:

> In the Middle Ages the writers of religious lyrics were not thought of as men with keener powers of observation and with greater sensibility than others, only as more learned and more articulate. The worth of a poem was guaranteed, not by the dignity of the author, but by the dignity of the source that he used. Since this attitude is reflected in the style and feeling, it must also become ours, even though it is counter to modern literary preconceptions. For, whereas in studying later poetry we justifiably search for an author with a distinctive cast of mind and sensibility, in treating the medieval lyric we must consider a way of thought and a particular emotional bias that was not peculiar to one man but that for centuries characterized medieval devotion.[22]

A central current of Middle English criticism thus stresses the conceptual and material differences between modern and medieval notions of authorship. One such historically relative view is set out in our first extract where Derek Pearsall considers the question of medieval authorship through the case-study of prolific fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate. The extract restores the historical context of Lydgate's poetry. It stresses the prevailing notions of authorship available to a poet of his day and maintains that these should inform our modern critical reception of his work. Not the post-Romantic distiller of experience, nor the *poeta vates* of classical literary theory, Lydgate is described by Pearsall more as a material craftsman, moulding poetic matter in accordance with traditional and inherited forms.

Pearsall's historical approach to the question of authorship sets out to account for the wide discrepancy between Lydgate's reputation in his own day (he was widely read: a high-status writer with royal patronage) and his general reputation today (he's little read: most literary histories have him as a rather pious and prolix moralizer). A dialogic dimension thus defines the extract as Pearsall reveals conceptions of authorship and poetic theory to be shifting, provisional and protean.

## Extract from Derek Pearsall, 'John Lydgate: The Critical Approach', in *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp. 4–10.

[. . .] Certain things should be admitted straightaway. One is that Lydgate is unusually prolific. Something like 145,000 lines of verse are attributed to him, twice as much as Shakespeare, three times as much as Chaucer, and there can

be no sense in which this works to his advantage. No one who wrote so much can be anything but a hack, we may think, and protect ourselves from what looks like an unrewarding task by simply dismissing the man and his work as unworthy of our attention. This is a defensive reaction, and an easy one, offering plentiful opportunity for witty gibes at the poet's expense. Behind it, however, lie a whole series of unreasoned assumptions about the nature of poetry. Poetry, it is assumed, is the distillation of experience, the precious record of moments of heightened perception, moments which can, possibly, be induced in the act of poetic creation, but which are bound to be rare. There is only so much heightened perception to go round, and a handful of exquisite lyrics or a slim volume of verse are the best guarantee that a poet has had some share in it. This fastidious notion of poetry, which partially accounts for its valetudinarian state now, may be sharply contrasted with the rude health of the medieval, indeed pre-Romantic view that poetry is different only in form and style, not in kind, from other forms of discourse. Poetry must therefore be much more comprehensively defined for the Middle Ages, and for Lydgate, whom I shall take in this book to be himself a comprehensive definition of the Middle Ages. Lydgate's work includes very little that would nowadays be accommodated in poetic form, perhaps only 'a handful of lyrics'. For the modern equivalents of other poems, we should have to look in history-books, encyclopaedias, the Complete Family Doctor, devotional manuals, books of etiquette, souvenir programmes, collections of maxims. Above all – and this is the significant point – we should have to look in the novel, the modern 'hold-all'. The immense bulk of Lydgate's work, therefore, is in itself significant, apart from its physically deterrent quality, only as a mark of changing fashions and attitudes to poetry.

   Having said this, one is of course aware of the limitations of this kind of historical relativism. The historical approach, in this case the attempt to understand a much wider concept of poetry in the fifteenth century, is no more than an approach. It offers an explanation of literature in the light of history, but not as history; and the explanation only serves to prepare the mind for understanding. Lydgate's vast output is a historically explicable phenomenon, but it remains true that, although all of his poems engage our interest (as the ways of a man with words in poetry always command interest), some of them are more interesting than others, not because they are more 'poetic', but because they deal with subjects that are intrinsically more important. That Lydgate should have written a 'Treatise for Laundresses'[1] is a salutary and salubrious reminder of the comprehensiveness of his range in poetry, but to give it more weight than that would be quaint antiquarianism. What one would like to establish is a picture of Lydgate as a highly professional and skilful craftsman in a wide range of related literary arts, capable of turning his hand to an epithalamion as well as an epic, an exposition of the Mass as well as a satire on

women's fashions in headgear, working like a mason or a sculptor or a mural-painter, not like a *poeta vates*.[a] For him, poetry is a public art, its existence conditioned and determined by outer needs and pressures, not by inner ones. In this sense, all his poetry is occasional poetry. Writing of a Romantic poet, one would be tempted to create, even if there were no extant chronological evidence, a chronological structure in which each poem was so placed as to illustrate the growth of the poet's mind, or some mythical prototype of it. The pressures would be recognised as inward, a struggle towards self-expression. Problems (such as Byron's) of which self to express, might need more sophisticated handling, but would still tend to be evaluated in terms of the accuracy and intensity of the response to inward pressures. It is not profitable to study a medieval poet like Lydgate in this way – fortunately so, for we lack much of the chronological evidence we should need. There is development in his writing, but it is a development of style, or rather the development of new styles, not of poetic personality. Lydgate's personality is a matter for curiosity only, for it is of the supremest irrelevance to the understanding of his poetry. Every mask he puts on is a well-worn medieval one, and it is well to recognise these masks for what they are, otherwise we may find ourselves interpreting poems like the *Testament* as personal documents. The coherence of his work as a whole is to be found, not in terms of its relation to his inner self or to any concept of the self-realising individual consciousness, but in terms of its relation to the total structure of the medieval world, that is, the world of universally received values, traditions, attitudes, as well as, and more significantly than, the world of 'real life'.

These generalisations about Lydgate are aimed at medieval poetry in general, ill-advisedly, it may seem, in view of the many qualifications one would need to make in connection with Chaucer. Chaucer's personality is obviously interesting to us, and in a significant literary way, not out of mere curiosity. His playing off of real against assumed attitudes constitutes one of his characteristic signatures, and he talks about himself and provokes interest in himself far more than other medieval poets. Chaucer, in fact [. . .] is not a very representative medieval poet – any more than Shakespeare is a representative Elizabethan dramatist. However, he remains a medieval poet, and the above reservations are over-scrupulous if they suggest any regard for the romantic-biographical interpretation of Chaucer's work, in which his poetry, dated or undated, may be stretched on a Procrustean bed of the 'three periods',[b] and made to fit some fashionable theory as to the growth of realism or the emancipation from rhetoric. So tenacious is the hold of this literary biography that works like the *Clerk's Tale*, for which there is little evidence as to precise date,

[a]  poet, bard.
[b]  Early Chaucer criticism divided his works into the French, Italian and English periods.

are assigned, because of their 'non-realistic' qualities, to an early period, thus completing and strengthening the circle of hypotheses.

There is one further point to make about Lydgate's prolific output. I have suggested that this needs understanding as a historical phenomenon, as a mark of the wider scope of poetry in his time, and qualified this suggestion by drawing attention to the fact that some poems will be intrinsically more interesting, by virtue of their subject-matter, than others. It is also true, obviously, that sometimes he will write less well than at others, when his attention and interest is not fully engaged. Every craftsman has his off-days, when his mind is not on his job – perhaps because he did not fancy the job in the first place. The historical approach is not intended to blanket discrimination between the better and the worse, though it should try to ensure that the discrimination is properly based. The bad poems are bad, not because of their subject, but because of what Lydgate does, or fails to do with them. The *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* stretches to 26,000 lines, but fails because at no time does Lydgate attempt to shape, control or master his material; he merely goes through the motions of versifying in the most mechanical manner possible. Clearing the ground of rubbish like this will help us to see and examine what is truly representative and intrinsically worthwhile. It is on these poems that judgment must be based. The first task is to understand what Lydgate is trying to do, and for this every discipline, every kind of historical information, is relevant. Understanding can then inform judgment on the good and the less good.

Two further charges against Lydgate, apart from that of having written so much, can be considered in their wider implications in order to establish this historical reorientation. They are the two most deadly weapons in the critical armoury – that he is prolix, and that he is dull. Prolixity is certainly a characteristic feature of Lydgate's style. No poet can mark time with such profuse demonstrations of energy, can so readily make twenty words do the work of one. Sometimes it is difficult to slow down the processes of the mind to the breathless snail's pace of his verse. Yet it would be fair to recognise that prolixity (sometimes due to diffuseness of syntax) is deliberately cultivated by Lydgate. Translating the Prologue to the *Fall of Princes*, he says, following Laurent de Premierfait:

> For a story which is nat pleynli told,
> But constreynyd undir woordes fewe
> For lak of trouthe, wher thei be newe or old,
> Men bi report kan nat the mater shewe;
> These ookis grete be nat doun ihewe
> First at a stroke, but bi long processe,
> Nor longe stories a woord may not expresse.[2]

Of course, like most of Lydgate's comments on style and the art of poetry, this is a formula, and one could set beside it numerous equally stereotyped formulae in which he asserts that his main design is to 'eschewe prolixite'.[3] Both attitudes may be traced back to the rhetoricians of the twelfth century, who set side by side their recommendations for 'amplification' and 'abbreviation'.[4] But in them, as in Lydgate, abbreviation is of little more than formal interest, and is totally swamped in amplification, the governing principle in medieval stylistics. In academic theory, a poem essentially provides a theme for amplification, and the prize goes to the man who can go on saying the same thing longest without repeating himself – *varius sit et tamen idem*.[a5] Academic theory is one thing, of course, and poetic practice is another. Obviously poems leap the confines of the rhetorical exercise, but the school-training in amplification which Lydgate and every other educated medieval poet would have received must have exerted a powerful and lasting influence on their style. It would not be unprofitable, for instance, to make a study of Chaucer's *Troilus* as an *amplificatio* of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, paying particular attention to the use of devices such as exclamation, apostrophe and description, all listed by Geoffrey among the forms of amplification. In these and other ways Chaucer gives the story its rich and full-bodied quality, its wholeness or *integritas*.[6] Amplification is still the basis of sixteenth century poetic, under the name of *copie* or copiousness,[7] and Shakespeare, though he mocks *copie* in Touchstone,[8] still uses its machinery to construct long speeches.

In Lydgate, we may assume, rhetorical precept coincided happily with a natural tendency to prolixity, and no doubt reinforced it. It is not difficult to recognise his natural verbosity in this stanza:

> The rounde dropis of the smothe reyn,
> Which that discende and falle from aloffte
> On stonys harde, at eye as it is seyn,
> Perceth ther hardnesse with ther fallyng offte,
> Al-be in touchyng, water is but soffte;
> The percyng causid be force nor puissaunce
> But of fallyng be long contynuaunce.
> (*Fall*, II, 106–12)

But we must recognise, too, that Lydgate is consciously writing according to accepted canons of taste, and that his deliberate unfolding of 'Constant dripping wears away a stone' is as skilful in its own way as the aphorism itself in another way. And though Lydgate is by nature long-winded, he knows when this kind of elaborate tautology is not appropriate, and can write in a com-

[a] let it be different and yet the same.

paratively abbreviated, aphoristic style, as in the series of short moralistic poems with gnomic refrains,[9] or in the fable of the *Churl and the Bird*. Lydgate's expansiveness clearly forms part of a deliberate poetic style.

It looks perverse to us, though, and again, if we are not to assume some gigantic aberration on the part of the Middle Ages, it is necessary to reshape our minds to the major change of taste which has taken place in attitudes to poetry. Poetry is now admired for its economy of expression, its compression, compactness and intensity. Every line must be packed with significant imagery, every rift loaded with ore. Eliot's dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, *il miglior fabbro*, records his debt to the better craftsman, whose skill enabled him to unburden the poem of the conventional paraphernalia of linguistic communication, and to boil it down to its essence. Syntax itself is something of a handicap, in this view of poetry. Small wonder, then, that medieval poetry, Chaucer included, is found to be diffuse,[10] and that the search for fine lines is unrewarding. Any that one prises out of Chaucer – 'Singest with vois memorial in the shade'[11] – are fortuitous and uncharacteristic, and Eleanor Hammond's attempt at a *florilegium*[a] of fine lines in Lydgate[12] is a strange lapse of understanding and taste in a great scholar. Medieval poetry characteristically produces its effects over longer stretches, the stanza or the verse-paragraph, and the comparatively free metrical systems of alliterative verse, even Chaucer's verse, are designed to operate over longer passages, not in single lines. Associated with this tendency, are a relaxed kind of syntax and a wide use of free-running paratactic constructions which make translation of medieval verse into modern logical units so difficult.

All these features, of course, have to do with something else, as well as being the general consequences of a particular poetic theory. They are the features of verse composed for oral delivery. Amplification, tautology, diffuseness of sense and looseness of syntax, are not only acceptable but desirable to the listening audience, which has no opportunity to linger over close-packed lines, and which will welcome as well as recognise the familiar phrase.[13] Every medieval poet has a store of tags and formulae which he will use to establish this pattern of communication. Some have nothing else, perhaps, while others, like Chaucer, have such leisured control over the medium that they can afford to uncoil the formulae into new and ambiguous contexts. But for the most part the stereotyped nature of medieval poetic expression is better referred to conditions of delivery than to lack of 'originality', in its prevailing form a largely modern concept. It is not necessary to suggest that Lydgate's poems were habitually read aloud to a listening audience, though there is evidence in plenty in the fifteenth century for the persistence of this method of publica-

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[a] anthology.

tion, alongside even more evidence for the growth of the habit of private reading.[14] The argument need only assume that the stylistic traditions of orally delivered verse were more tenacious than the conditions which produced them.

The revolution in reading habits produced by the invention of printing is one clue to the shift in attitude we have been discussing, and to the growth of a non-rhetorical poetic which finds Lydgate's prolixity excessively burdensome. I talked a moment ago of the difficulty of accommodating the mind to the leisurely processes of Lydgate's verse, but the mind referred to was of course an exceptional mind, the modern mind, trained to incredibly specialised kinds of short-cutting and short-circuiting of perception by generations of print-culture.[15] It may seem ridiculous to suggest that there might be value in training the mind to move more slowly, but a flexible attitude to the possibility is probably better than the assumption that things have never been better. Intensity is one standard of judgment for poetry, but not the only one.

Comparisons of medieval with modern poetic theory can help us with some of our problems of recovery, by illustrating to us the limited and relative application of such theories, and the inadequacy of assuming that any one of them is right, absolutely. Sometimes, though, the comparisons reveal such totally opposed points of view that one seems to be comparing not different manifestations of the same thing but different things. As has been said, poetry occupied the central literary position in the Middle Ages; it could be regarded as the highest form of discourse, but it existed also as the workaday form, the tool to which the professional craftsman naturally stretched his hand for a story, a treatise, a political pamphlet. Literary prose remained the specialised medium, though one sees its range being extended in the later fifteenth century, in the work of Malory, and Caxton's ambitious translations. The situation was already changing, and it is now changed completely. Poetry is now highly specialised, the property of an élite; the central literary position is occupied by the novel. The growth of the novel to accommodate virtually every kind of literary experience provides the major literary development of the last two centuries. Many of these kinds of experience have been taken over from poetry – historical and didactic interests, for instance – and it might be said therefore that we should be prepared to transfer to earlier poetry some of the appetites now satisfied by the novel, and in particular appetite itself. Novels are so much the staple of our literary diet that we hardly notice we are reading them, and we certainly do not find it necessary as we begin to read always to summon our faculties for a major literary experience. Some novels are more important than others, of course, but so are some medieval poems. The point is that the natural literary element in which we move is the novel,

whereas in the fifteenth century it was verse. Lydgate's diffuseness and prolixity should therefore be referred, for a standard of comparison, to the diffuseness and prolixity of eighteenth and nineteenth century prose fiction, of Richardson, Scott, Dickens and Thackeray. Voluminousness is their natural condition, and to ask for them to be briefer would be to ask for them not to be.

## Notes

1   *Minor Poems*, ed. H. N. MacCracken, Part II (EETS, OS 192, 1934), p. 723.

2   *Fall of Princes*, I, 92–8.

3   For example, *Fall*, II, 2565.

4   For instance, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in his *Poetria Nova*; Evrard the German, *Laborintus*; John of Garland, *Poetria*. See E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIe et du XIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1923), pp. 218, 348, 380.

5   Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *Poetria Nova*, 225: in Faral, *Les arts poétiques*, p. 204.

6   See G. T. Shepherd, 'Troilus and Criseyde', in D. S. Brewer (ed.), *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966, pp. 65–87), pp. 77–81.

7   One of the most widely used text-books in the sixteenth century was Erasmus's *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*, of which there were sixty editions between 1512 and 1536: see T. W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*, 2 vols (Urbana, IL, 1944), I, 99; II, 176.

8   *As You Like It*, V. i. 52.

9   *Minor Poems*, ed. MacCracken, Part II, pp. 744–847.

10   See A. C. Spearing, *Criticism and Medieval Poetry* (London: Edward Arnold, 1964), pp. 16–18.

11   *Anelida*, 18, quoted by C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study of Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 201. Matthew Arnold's choice (in 'The Study of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, second series) is 'O martyr souded in virginitee', from 'The Prioress's Tale', *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), VII, 579.

12   Eleanor P. Hammond (ed.), *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1927), pp. 81–2.

13   K. Sisam (ed.) *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), p. xxxix. The standard works on this subject are H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945); Ruth Crosby, 'Oral Delivery in the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 11 (1936), 88–110, and 'Chaucer and the Custom of Oral Delivery', *Speculum* 13 (1938), 413–32.

14   See H. S. Bennett, 'The Author and his Public in the 14th and 15th Centuries', *Essays and Studies* 23 (1937), 7–24.

15   There is much on this subject, and a great many other subjects, in H. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

Pearsall's sympathetic approach to Lydgate takes its place in a wide body
of criticism on the English and Scottish Chaucerians, those various poets,
Hoccleve, Lydgate and Henryson among them, who set out to imitate
Chaucerian writing and even to augment the Chaucerian canon in the century
following his death in 1400. As work on these figures has increased (Brewer
on Chaucerians in 1966; Gray on Henryson in 1979; Burrow on Hoccleve
in 1994, for example),[23] so has an awareness that the establishment of Chaucer
as 'founding father' of English poetry took place early in the critical reception
of his work. Seth Lehrer's 1993 study *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining
the Author in Late Medieval England* draws on Foucauldian conceptions of
'the author' to describe the startling extent of Chaucer's influence upon his
followers:

> The construction of the author according to a social ideology carries with it
> . . . a set of implications for all those who would write after his example. As
> Foucault points out, there is perhaps an unavoidable sense of genealogy to
> authorship, one that I think may help explain the maintenance of 'father
> Chaucer' for the fifteenth century . . . Rephrased in Foucault's terms, all fif-
> teenth-century poetry remained 'within the field of discourse' Chaucer had
> initiated. To put it more bluntly, we might say that to be a poet in the fifteenth
> century was by necessity to be a Chaucerian.[24]

How did 'father Chaucer' conceive of his own poetic art? Our second
extract takes up the issue. Since Alastair Minnis's foundational 1984
study *Medieval Theory of Authorship* many scholars have been inclined to
consider Chaucer's poetic method in the light of the scholastic literary theory
of his own day. Drawn from this study, the following extract shows how many
of the most immediate models of medieval authorial practice available
to Chaucer were those displayed in the scholastic Latin compendiums
and compilations put together by such figures as Vincent of Beauvais,
Bartholomew the Englishman and Brunetto Latini. As these names indicate,
Minnis places the authorship question in a European context, Christian
Latinity forming the bridge between insular and continental authorial prac-
tice. Rather than seeking to apply modern literary theory to medieval texts,
Minnis's approach draws upon this body of medieval literary theory to explore
Chaucer's conception of his own authorial role. In our extract, Minnis
describes the role of medieval *compilator* or compiler, a role distinct from *auctor*
or author, to illuminate Chaucer's sophisticated authorial stance in the
*Canterbury Tales*. In a critical approach that aims to draw closer to the histor-
ical reception of Chaucer's work in his own time, Minnis argues that in the
practice of the medieval compilers, Chaucer discovered both 'a literary role and
a literary form'.

# Extract from Alastair Minnis, 'Literary Theory and Literary Practice', in *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), pp. 198–203.

[. . .] We are now in a position to examine the role of 'rehearsing' compiler which Chaucer assumed in the *Canterbury Tales*, wherein the fictitious narrative of a pilgrimage to Canterbury provides the rationale for the compilation. As compiler, Chaucer proposes to 'rehearse' the words of other men as accurately as he can, without being responsible for what they say:

> But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,[a]
> Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
> To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
> Ne thogh I speke hir wordes proprely.
> For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
> Whoso[b] shal telle a tale after a man,
> He moot *reherce* as ny[c] as evere he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,[d]
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe . . .
> Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
> Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
> Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde.
> My wit is short, ye may wel understonde.
> (General Prologue, lines 725–46; italics mine)

The idiom in which this self-depreciation is couched displays the influence of the compiler's stock disavowal of responsibility. One may compare Vincent's[e] remark, 'I added little, or almost nothing, of my own', or Ashenden's[f] expressed desire 'to compile sentences, adding nothing out of my own head' or, indeed,

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[a] don't ascribe it to my boorishness.
[b] whoever.
[c] nearly.
[d] uncouthly and freely.
[e] Vincent of Beauvais.
[f] John Ashenden, compiler of a fourteenth-century reference book on astrology.

Chaucer's own protestation that his *Treatise on the Astrolabe* was not 'founden of my labour or of myn engyn'. In the General Prologue, Chaucer the compiler seems to be protesting that he has not 'founden' the *Canterbury Tales* 'of my labour or of myn engyn'.

As compiler, Chaucer cannot be held responsible for, for example, the words of the churlish Miller:

> . . . this Millere
> He nolde[a] his wordes for no man forbere,
> But tolde his cherles tale in his manere.
> M'athynketh[b] that I shal *reherce* it heere.
> (I, lines 3167–70; italics mine)

What he is doing, in the technical sense, is 'rehearsing' the *materia* ('mateere') of the pilgrims; the *intentio* ('entente') of the compiler is stated to be a good one:

> . . . demeth[c] nat that I seye
> Of yvel *entente*, but for I moot[d] *reherce*
> Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
> Or elles falsen[e] som of my mateere.
> (I, lines 3172–5; italics mine)

A reporter deserves neither thanks nor blame for what he repeats without fabrication or alteration: 'Blameth nat me . . .'.

But, of course, many medieval compilers were accustomed to including something out of their own heads, of adding some personal assertion to their reportage. Vincent appeared in his *Speculum maius*[f] as the *auctor*; Ralph Higden indicated personal assertions within his work by the initial 'R'; in the passages marked with his name, the more aggressive John Trevisa delivered his own opinions and sometimes criticised his sources. The most ostensibly personal assertions of Chaucer the pilgrim are the two tales he tells, namely, Sir Thopas and Melibee.

Chaucer's sense of combining and organising diverse materials may owe something to the compilers' theory and practice of *ordinatio partium*. The major medieval compilations were compendious, containing *materiae* to cater

[a] would not.
[b] I think.
[c] judge.
[d] must.
[e] misrepresent.
[f] *Greatest Mirror*.

for a wide range of demands and tastes. Vincent of Beauvais prided himself on the amount of diverse materials he had managed to include in his *Speculum maius*.[1] Brunetto Latini explained that his *Trésor* combined both teaching and delight:

> This book is called 'Treasury'. For, just like the lord who wishes in one small place to collect something of great worth, not only for his delight, but to increase his power and protect his position in both war and peace, places in it the most valuable things and the most precious jewels that he can, to the best of his ability; just so is the body of this book compiled from wisdom, as one which is drawn from all the parts of philosophy concisely into one digest.[2]

Brunetto's practice may have influenced Gower's conception of the scope of his *Confessio amantis*, which comprises both 'lust' and 'lore':[a] certainly, the Latin commentary stresses the point that Gower compiled extracts from chronicles, histories and the sayings of the (pagan) philosophers and poets.[3] When Higden described the *ordinatio* of his *Polychronicon*,[b] he explained how he had taken various things from various sources and had reorganised them in accordance with new principles.[4] His fifteenth-century translator renders the relevant passage as follows: 'In whom alle things excerpte of oþer men ar broken in to smalle membres, but concorporate here liniamentally; thynges of disporte be admixte with saddenes, and dictes ethnicalle to thynges religious, that the ordre of the processe may be obserued . . .'[5]

In the *Canterbury Tales* also, 'thynges of disporte be admixte with saddenes, and dictes ethnicalle to thynges religious'. Chaucer aimed at being compendious, at providing 'Tales of best sentence and most solaas', 'cherles tales' and noble tales, 'myrie' tales and 'fructuous' tales, pagan tales and Christian tales.[6] When the host stops Chaucer the pilgrim from completing the Tale of Thopas, he urges him to tell something 'in which ther be som murthe or som doctryne' (VII, line 935), making it clear that different standards apply to different types of tale. The major reference-books of the day may be regarded as having provided the general precedents for the combinations of 'murthe' and 'doctrine', of 'lust' and 'lore', practised by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales* and, indeed, by Gower in the *Confessio amantis* and Jean de Meun in the *Roman de la Rose*.

Of course, the nature of Chaucer's diverse *materiae* is not identical with the nature of the diverse *materiae* of a compiler like, for example, Vincent of Beauvais.[7] The point is rather that both writers drew on a common corpus of literary theory; they described their different diversities in a similar way. Moreover, Vincent 'ordinated' materials in relation to chapters, books and *tituli*, whereas Chaucer 'ordinated' materials in relation to tales and tellers; both

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[a]   entertainment and instruction.
[b]   *Universal History*.

writers shared basic principles of hierarchical or 'encapsulating' structure.[8] It is as if Chaucer derived certain principles of order from compilations and from the explanations of *ordinatio* which accompanied them, principles which he chose to apply in his own way.

Moreover, Chaucer and Vincent (among other compilers) shared the principle of the reader's freedom of choice (*lectoris arbitrium*). In the case of Vincent, this means that the reader can isolate and believe whatever things he wishes to believe: no attempt has been made to force the *auctores* to speak with one voice, and it is up to the reader to make his own choice from the discordant *auctoritates* offered to him.[9] Chaucer also is interested in the freedom of the reader. If a reader does not want a tale like the Miller's Tale, there are many other types of 'mateere' on offer:

> . . . whoso list it [the Miller's Tale] nat yheere,
> Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
> For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
> Of storial[a] thyng that toucheth gentillesse,[b]
> And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
>
> <div align="right">(I, lines 3176–80)</div>

The common principle involved is that a compiler is not responsible for his reader's understanding of any part of the *materia*, for any effect which the *materia* may have on him and, indeed, for any error or sin into which the *materia* may lead a reader. 'Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys', warns Chaucer; 'Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame' (I, lines 3181, 3185).

But perhaps the most intriguing facet of Chaucer's exploitation of the principles of *compilatio* is the way in which he seems to have transferred the compiler's technique of authenticating sources to his 'sources', the Canterbury pilgrims. All the major compilers habitually authenticated their sources by stating that the 'rehearsed' words were the proper words of their *auctores*, and by carefully assigning the extracted *auctoritates* to their respective *auctores*. Likewise, Chaucer has his narrator explain that the words he 'rehearses' are the proper words of the fictitious pilgrims. In order to 'speke hir wordes proprely', he must give 'everich a word' that each pilgrim uttered, 'al speke he never so rudeliche and large' (General Prologue, lines 729–34). The 'wordes' of a churl like the Miller are proper to the Miller, who

> . . . nolde[c] his wordes for no man forbere,
> But tolde his cherles tale in his manere . . .
> The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this;

---

[a] historical.
[b] nobility.
[c] would not.

> So was the Reve eek and othere mo,
> And harlotrie[a] they tolden bothe two.
>> (I, lines 3167–84)

The device of organising diverse *materiae* by distributing them amongst diverse fictional characters was not new: we have already noted its use by Jean de Meun. What was new was the kind of attention paid to what the fictional characters said.

Chaucer's professed concern for the *ipsissima verba*[b] of his pilgrims seems to parallel the concern of a compiler like Vincent of Beauvais for the actual words of his *auctores*. For example, in the first chapter of his *apologia*, Vincent complains bitterly about textual corruptions in manuscripts, which make it difficult to understand the authors' meanings and, indeed, to know which *auctor* is responsible for whatever *sententia*.[c] [10] Moreover, he feels obliged to point out that he has used not the *originalia* of Aristotle but collections of 'flowers' extracted from the *originalia* by brother friars who could not always follow the order of the words in Aristotle's text, although in every case they tried to follow the meaning.[11] Merely to preserve the meaning is not good enough for Chaucer the compiler, who is determined to preserve the proper words of each pilgrim without 'feigning' anything or adding 'wordes newe':

> Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
> He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
> Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
> Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
> Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
> He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
> He moot as wel seye o word as another.
>> (General Prologue, lines 731–8)

In sum, it may be argued that Chaucer treats his fictional characters with the respect that the Latin compilers had reserved for their *auctores*. The 'lewd compilator' has become the compiler of the 'lewd'. [. . .]

### Notes

1   See especially 'Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum maius*, *apologia totius operis*', cap. iv, ed. A. D. v. den Brincken, 'Geschichtsbetrachtung bei Vencenz von Beauvais', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*', 34 (1978), 469–70.

[a] bawdy talk.
[b] words themselves.
[c] short moral statement.

2 Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres de Tresor*, ed. F. J. Carmody (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1948), p. 16.

3 See the gloss pr. G. C. McCaulay (ed.), *The English Works of John Gower* (EETS, ES 81, 82 [1900–1]), i, 3–4. For the argument that Brunetto Latini influenced Gower, see ibid., ii, 522; cf. H. C. Mainzer, 'A Study of the Sources of the *Confessio amantis* of John Gower', unpublished DPhil thesis (Oxford University, 1967), esp. pp. 38–40.

4 *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden: together with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*, ed. C. Babington and J. R. Lumby (London, 1865–86), i, 16.

5 Ibid., i, 17.

6 For these quotations see *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), I, lines 798, 3169; VII, line 964; X, line 46 (cf. VII, lines 2790–817).

7 But there is some overlap: see P. Aiken, 'Vincent of Beauvais and Dame Pertelote's Knowledge of Medicine', *Speculum* 10 (1935), 281–7; 'The Summoner's Malady', *Studies in Philology* 33 (1936), 40–4; 'Vincent of Beauvais and the Green Yeoman's Lecture on Demonology', *Studies in Philology* 35 (1938), 1–9; 'Chaucer's Legend of Cleopatra and the *Speculum historidle*', *Speculum* 13 (1938), 232–6; 'Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's *Monk's Tale*', *Speculum* 17 (1942), 56–68; 'Vincent of Beauvais and Chaucer's Knowledge of Alchemy', *Studies in Philology* 41 (1944), 371–89.

8 For the idea of 'encapsulating' structure, cf. J. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* (London, 1971), pp. 57–68, 86, 92.

9 *Apologia totius operis*, cap. viii (ed. v. den Brincken, p. 477).

10 Ibid., cap. i (pp. 465–6).

11 Ibid., cap. x (pp. 479–80).

Authors and their meanings are also central concerns of a further branch of Middle English studies – textual criticism. Rooted in the study of medieval manuscripts and early printed books, Middle English textual criticism aims to recover, often from complex textual traditions, the words that authors originally wrote. Textual critics set out to discriminate authorial readings from scribal readings and to establish the 'best' text among variant manuscript versions. Growing initially out of biblical scholarship, Middle English textual criticism has increasingly evolved editorial principles suited to the study of medieval texts. High-profile debates over how best to edit the multiple texts of such works as Langland's *Piers Plowman* have led to a growing awareness that editorial choices are also *interpretative* and *evaluative* choices. The roles of textual critic and literary critic are closely allied. As the 1992 collaborative volume *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism* put it:

> [T]he words on the modern printed page bear an indeterminate relation to what the author originally wrote. Worse still, it may be impossible ever to discover what the author originally wrote – and worst of all, it may be that conventions

TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND AUTHORSHIP

of text production in the medieval period render the concept of an original, authorial text simply irrelevant.[25]

Among the aims of textual criticism, then, is the attempt to move towards a form of reception of the medieval work that is more in line with the experience of the work's primary audience or audiences. The challenge this poses can be substantial: in an important work of textual criticism, Ralph Hanna III points out how, even in the case of so central a writer as Chaucer, the authorial picture that emerges from modern printed editions is far removed from the one we would glean if presented only with medieval manuscripts:

> [M]odern forms of reception differ from either Chaucerian holograph or fifteenth-century manuscripts. We typically consume Chaucer through a single-volume *The Works of . . .* edition, and such a book addresses a professional necessity that is ours and neither the author's nor scribes'. For the evidence shows that, whatever Chaucer thought of his own authoriality, he was remarkably negligent about 'publishing' and made no effort at collecting a *Works*.[26]

Drawn from another work of textual criticism, our final extract is focused upon late fifteenth-century Scottish author Robert Henryson. In discussing Henryson's 'Fable of the Lion and the Mouse', Tim William Machan draws attention to a further model of authorship current in the late Middle Ages, that of the 'maker'. In the wider study from which the extract is drawn, Machan aims to define the key concepts of 'author', 'work' and 'text' with reference to 'the discourse of medieval manuscripts' rather than any extrinsic body of literary theory, medieval or modern. In our extract, the discussion turns to the question of authorship and authority as Machan studies the fable's staging of an encounter between Henryson himself and his esteemed forebear Aesop: classical *auctor* meets vernacular maker.

## Extract from Tim William Machan, 'Authority', in *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), pp. 126–31.

[. . .] The late Middle English contest over vernacular authority is perhaps clearest in the *Moral Fables* of Robert Henryson,[1] for there, in the fable of *The Lion and the Mouse*, it is dramatized. This is the seventh fable of the thirteen in the collection,[2] and by this point Henryson has effected two important emphases in the collection. First, having announced his interest in literary authority in the Prologue, he has gradually and self-consciously begun to

assert his own rhetorical importance in the tales he tells. For example, in the *Moralitas*[a] to *The Sheep and the Dog*, which precedes *The Lion and the Mouse*, he claims to have been a viewer of, a participant in, the events he narrates (1282–5). And second, he has gradually shifted the focus of his concern from the foolishness of one cock (in the first fable) to the issue of God's presence in this world (in the sixth). Given its subject and this emphasis on Henryson's rhetorical significance in his own moralizing poem, then, the seventh fable can profitably be examined for the way its rhetoric mediates the late medieval conflict over authority.

*The Lion and the Mouse* opens with [a] cluster of literary conceits and devices: In a 'ioly sweit seasoun'[b] (1321) of late spring, early summer the narrator 'rais[c] and put all sleuth[d] and sleip asyde' to go to 'ane wod . . . allone but gyde'[e] (1326–27), where he confronts a *locus amoenus*[f] in which he has a dream. While such a cluster emphasizes Henryson's self-consciousness as a narrator, it is also in this overtly, even overdetermined metatextual context that Aesop appears. In the ancient poet the Scots writer confronts both the specific writer of whom he claims to be only a translator and also, more generally, one of the genuine *auctores* of medieval culture.[3] Even though Aesop was an *auctor* considered especially valuable for adolescents, the meeting itself thus has the potential to be emblematic of a broader meeting between *auctores* and *makers*. In this regard, it is noteworthy that such a meeting between maker and *auctor* is unprecedented in the Aesopic tradition in general and in the *Moral Fables* in particular. Furthermore, even in comparison to generally similar encounters, such as that between Dante and Vergil or Gavin Douglas and Mapheus Vegius, Henryson's experience is distinguished by the rhetorical and thematic complexity with which the encounter is treated.

That this meeting between maker and *auctor* is in fact representing larger cultural issues becomes more apparent when, after Aesop appears, he is described as the very emblem of the conventional poet:

> Ane[g] roll off paper in his hand he bair,
> And swannis pen[h] stikand vnder his eir,
> Ane inkhorne, with ane prettie gilt pennair,[i]
> Ane bag off silk, all at his belt he weir.
>
> (1356–9)

[a] Moral epilogue.
[b] jolly sweet season.
[c] rose.
[d] sloth.
[e] a wood . . . without a guide.
[f] beautiful place.
[g] A.
[h] quill pen.
[i] gilded penholder.

This is not the misshapen Aesop of legend but a distinguished, imperious figure 'with ane feirful face' (1361).[4] There is thus an immediate contrast between the ancient writer, who confidently advances towards Henryson ('he come ane sturdie pace' [1362]), and Henryson himself, who is still reclining 'amang thir bewis bene'[a] (1346). Significantly, Aesop speaks first (1363) and sits down *beside* Henryson (1366), thereby both imaging his superiority once again but also implying a certain familiarity with the Scots writer. The language here is especially striking in this regard. Aesop's first words are 'God speid, my *sone*' (1363, emphasis added), and that 'word' (1364) is not only pleasing to Henryson but also well known ('couth') to him. Whether the intended meaning of *word* is 'utterance' or 'single lexical item', the implication is that Henryson has customarily viewed Aesop as his figurative father, the name with which he initially addresses him ('Welcome, father' [1366]) and which he later reprises with a reference to Aesop's 'fatherheid' (1399); in turn, throughout the Prologue Aesop refers to Henryson as his 'sone' (1370, 1382, 1388). To be sure, such language might be used between any social or ecclesiastical superior and subordinate, but the wider cultural context here implies a more specific application: Henryson affirms Aesop as his figurative father in the sense that the genuine auctores are the fathers of the vernacular makers and nascent authors. Indeed, if the Scots poet presents the ancient as his father, he also regards him as his 'maister' (1367, 1377, 1384), and throughout the dialogue Henryson's language is deferential and includes both rhetorical concessions (e.g., 'Displeis ʒow not' [1367]) and the invariable use of the honorific plural pronouns 'ʒe' and 'ʒow'. Furthermore, the syntax he uses to phrase his final request to Aesop is as elaborately circumspect as that used either by Beowulf or by Sir Gawain for their own respective famous requests:

> 'ʒit,[b] gentill schir,'[c] said I, 'for my requeist,
> Not to displeis ʒour fatherheid, I pray,
> Vnder the figure off ane brutall beist,
> Ane morall fabill ʒe wald denʒe[d] to say.'
> (1398–1401)[5]

Given the profound respect that Henryson evinces for Aesop, it is perhaps not surprising that he conducts himself as an innocent by asking Aesop to declare his 'birth . . . facultye, and name' (1368). It is surprising, however, that Aesop reveals his 'winning is in heuin for ay' (1374), inasmuch as the historical Aesop was unambiguously pagan. But in converting Aesop to a Chris-

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[a]  pleasant boughs.
[b]  Yet.
[c]  Sir.
[d]  deign.

tian now residing in Heaven, Henryson eliminates the one potentially complicating aspect of his author's background and in effect provides, through Aesop's eventual acquiescence to Henryson's demands, divine confirmation of the theoretical positions he here dramatizes. It is also perhaps surprising that Henryson should now, after he himself has clearly recognized the 'fairest man that euer befoir' (1348) he saw and after this 'man' has clearly identified himself (1370–6), additionally demand that Aesop clarify his literary accomplishments in order to confirm his identity. Yet Henryson thereby forces himself (and the reader) to pause and consider the qualities and accomplishments of this representative *auctor*, and Henryson's questions thus further the discussion of literary authority in the passage:

> 'Ar ȝe not he that all thir fabillis wrate,[a]
> Quhilk in effect, suppois[b] thay fenȝeit be,
> Ar full off prudence and moralitie?'
>                                                     (1379–81)[6]

When Henryson asks Aesop for a composition that meets one set of criteria put forth in the Prologue to the *Moral Fables* – that the work be both rhetorically pleasing ('ane prettie fabill' [1386]) and ethically beneficial ('Concludand with ane gude moralitie' [1387]) – Aesop refuses. But he does so not because the composition Henryson requests is theoretically impossible – not because poetry cannot be simultaneously rhetorical and ethical – nor because it is impertinent for a maker to make such a demand of an auctor but because, in Aesop's words, '"quhat[c] is it worth to tell ane fenȝeit taill, / Quhen[d] haly preiching may na thing auaill?"' (1389–90). As Aesop elaborates this view (1391–7), it becomes clear that from his now-divine perspective the corruption and decadence of the world have rendered useless his ethical 'taillis' if not ethical instruction itself. Despite what would seem to be the unchangeable and irrefutable nature of his position, however, the narrator does in fact persuade him to tell a tale, not by the cogency of any further arguments but simply by the power of his own rhetoric. As a result, during the course of the dialogue Henryson moves from passivity, when he remains reclining to meet Aesop, to activity, when he is not silenced by Aesop's objections but is in fact able to silence them through rhetoric.

In this regard, it seems especially significant that the fable Aesop tells is *The Lion and the Mouse*, for this fable and its *Moralitas* offer the most explicit political and social commentary in all of the *Moral Fables*.[7] Henryson may well

[a]  that wrote all these fables.
[b]  although.
[c]  what.
[d]  when.

be 'cautious' in having Aesop tell this traditional story of a mouse that, having been freed by a lion, in turn releases the lion from a net in which it has been trapped.[8] But in view of the way that the Prologue to the fable foregrounds the issue of literary authority, another motivation for this particular tale at this particular point in the *Moral Fables* is possible. In telling a fable that is moralized as an account of the ideal social balance between king and commons, Henryson, through Aesop, confidently assumes what would become the Renaissance role of the adviser to and supporter of a prince.[9] It is this role that Aesop, in his final paternal and authorial gesture, explicitly transfers to the vernacular poet:

> My fair child,
> Perswaid the kirkmen ythandly to pray[a]
> That tressoun of this cuntrie be exyld,
> And iustice[b] regne, and lordis keip thair fay[c]
> Vnto thair souerane lord baith nycht and day.
> (1615–19)

As rhetorical representations of larger cultural concerns, Henryson's unique dialogue with Aesop and the subsequent telling of *The Lion and the Mouse* thus enact a usurpation of authorial voice and authority by a vernacular writer. Up to this point in the *Moral Fables* Henryson has feigned to be merely a translator, passing on the text of an auctor. By drawing Aesop into a narrative that purports to be the translated text of Aesop, Henryson renders Aesop and his work part of the fiction and, consequently, undermines the authority that is imputed to him as an auctor and the efficient cause of the fables. Moreover, in silencing Aesop's objections and evidently compelling him to tell a story and in relying on rhetoric alone to achieve this end, Henryson appropriates for himself the dominant, authoritative role in the dialogue. Having usurped the rhetorical voice of his auctor – that is, authorship – Henryson thus by extension usurps his responsibility for the *Fables* – his authoritativeness. Moreover, since Aesop tells a fable of social criticism and since Aesop's composition is exposed as the production of Henryson himself, the Scots poet also assumes Aesop's ability to make ethical utterances that have authorization. What Henryson dramatizes, in effect, is the birth of the vernacular author whose father is literary authority and whose mother is vernacular language ('mother toung' [31]). The *Moral Fables* is thereby in part a poem motivated by cultural and linguistic anxieties over the status of vernacular writers. In order

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[a]  Persuade the ecclesiastics to pray constantly.
[b]  justice.
[c]  faith.

to replace Aesop, his father figure, Henryson first needs to legitimate a familial connection between the Antique or patristic fathers and the vernacular sons. But of necessity, for Henryson's rhetorical resolution of the conflict over authority to make sense, it requires a cultural context in which the issue is not yet resolved. Indeed, this attempt at legitimation, which would not receive broad institutional support in England for at least another hundred years, only serves to confirm the fact that the authority of the vernacular writer was still, in the late fifteenth century, a contested issue.[10]

## Notes

1   Denton Fox (ed.), *The Poems of Robert Henryson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).
2   My discussion supports the arguments that assert that the order of the fables in the Bassandyne print is Henryson's. See Fox, *Poems*, pp. lxxv–lxxxi. A detailed discussion of the relevant issues lies outside the scope of my argument, though I would like to note that the 'literary' evidence marshaled in support of the textual evidence of Bassandyne does not at all seem to me inadmissible or beside the point; indeed, such evidence has long been used in arguments about the intended order of the *Canterbury Tales*. The agreement of this evidence seems formidable: It is the Bassandyne order in which Howard Roerecke has demonstrated thematic coherence and symmetrical patterning ('The Integrity and Symmetry of Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*', unpublished dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1969), George D. Gopen the aesthetic complexity of three 'simultaneously functional symmetries' ('The Essential Seriousness of Robert Henryson's *Moral Fables*: A Study is Structure', *Studies in Philology* 82 [1985], 42–59), and A. C. Spearing an artful utilization of the sovereign midpoint. As Spearing notes, 'It seems unlikely that an organization so ingenious in itself and so appropriate to the meaning of the central tale and of the whole series could have occurred by chance' ('Central and Displaced Sovereignty in Three Medieval Poems', *Review of English Studies* n.s. 33 [1982], 256). While it is possible that a later redactor and not Henryson himself is responsible for the order, I would argue that such a redactor would have had to have had a more sophisticated understanding of authorship and literary structure than Henryson. And then even if this were the case, this understanding remains a significant statement of vernacular medieval aesthetics.
3   On Aesop as an auctor, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Pantheon, 1953), pp. 49–50, and Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), p. 161.
4   In Caxton's translation of Rinuccio's *Life*, e.g., Aesop 'had a grete hede / large vysage / longe Iowes / sharp eyen / a short necke / corbe backed / grete bely / grete legges / and large feet' (Caxton, *Caxton's Aesop*, ed. R. T. Lenaghan [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967], p. 27).

5    See *Beowulf*, 426–32, and *Sir Gawain*, 343–7 (see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkein and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn, rev. N. Davis [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967]).

6    In the *Inferno*, in what is perhaps the *locus classicus* of confrontations between vernacular writers and auctores, Dante also demands the identity of the figure he meets. But there it is clear that Dante, unlike Henryson, does not in fact recognize the figure. It also may be noted that though Dante, like Henryson, is deferential to his auctor, he never challenges and overrules him the way the Scots poet does; when Vergil leaves Dante in the Earthly Paradise, it is because the Latin poet himself recognizes the limitations of his knowledge. See *Inferno* 1.61–87 and *Purgatorio* 27.127–43. Similarly, in the prologue to his translation of Mapheus Vegius's thirteenth book of the *Aeneid*, Gavin Douglas ('Threttene Buik of Eneados', in Anne Cox Brinton (ed.), *Maphaeus Vegius and his Thirteenth Book of The Aeneid* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1930]) asks about the identity of the auctor he meets because he does not know who he is – 'I saw ʒou nevir ayr.' This meeting, however, is presented comically – Vegius beats the Scots poet 'twenty rowtis apoun [his] rigging' because of Douglas's reluctance to translate the thirteenth book – though Douglas is nonetheless deferential to his auctor and acts according to his wishes.

7    Critics have interpreted Henryson's rendition of 'The Lion and the Mouse' in a variety of ways, though they all agree on the political nature of the piece. See, for example, Matthew P. McDiarmid, *Robert Henryson* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981), pp. 15–16; Spearing, 'Central and Displaced Sovereignty', pp. 254–6; Denton Fox, 'The Coherence of Henryson's Work', in Robert Yeager (ed.), *Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984), p. 277; C. David Benson, 'O Moral Henryson', in Robert Yeager (ed.), *Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984), p. 227; and George D. Gopen (ed.), *The Moral Fables of Aesop* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), p. 22.

8    So Robert L. Kindrick asserts in *Robert Henryson* (Boston, MA: Twayne, 1979), p. 105.

9    See Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature in the English Court in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

10   See further Tim William Machan 'Robert Henryson and Father Aesop: Authority in the *Moral Fables*', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990), 193–214.

## Further Reading

For a different take on the question of medieval authorship, see Anne Middleton, 'William Langland's "Kynde Name": Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-century England', in Lee Patterson (ed.), *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 15–81. Roland Barthes' essay on 'The Death of the Author' can be found in his *Image–Music–Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp.

142–8, and Michel Foucault's 'What is an Author?', in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 196–210. Criticism on Thomas Hoccleve has shown that 'autobiographical poetry' in Middle English, though rare, was not an impossibility: J. A. Burrow, 'Autobiographical Poetry in the Middle Ages: The Case of Thomas Hoccleve', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982), 389–412, and Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes: Counsel and Constraint* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001).

## Chapter Notes

1   Bernhard Ten Brink, *History of English Literature*, trans. Horace M. Kennedy (London: George Bell and Sons, 1904), p. 218.
2   William Henry Schofield, *English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer* (London: Macmillan, 1914), pp. 350–1.
3   C. G. Osgood (ed.), *Pearl* (Boston: Heath and Co., 1906).
4   Israel Gollancz, '*Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain*', in A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (eds), *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), pp. 320–34 (p. 332).
5   O. Cargill and M. Schlauch, '*The Pearl* and its Jeweller', *PMLA* 43 (1928), 105–23.
6   Coolidge Otis Chapman, 'The Authorship of *The Pearl*', *PMLA* 47 (1932), 346–53.
7   W. A. Davenport, *The Art of the Gawain-poet* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), p. 1.
8   Israel Gollancz (ed.), *Pearl: An English Poem of the Fourteenth Century* (London: The Medieval Library, 1921), pp. xl–xli.
9   H. Oskar Sommer (ed.), *Le Morte Darthur* (London, 1889–91), Vol. II, pp. 1–2; George Lyman Kittredge, 'Who was Sir Thomas Malory?', *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature* 5 (1896–7), 85–106.
10   Alfred T. Martin, 'Sir Thomas Malory', *Athenaeum* 30 (1897), 353–4; 'The Identity of the Author of *Le Morte Darthur*', *Archaeologica* 56 (1898), 165–77.
11   E. K. Chambers, *Sir Thomas Malory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922); Edward Hicks, *Sir Thomas Malory, his Turbulent Career* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928); Eugène Vinaver, *Malory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), Appendix I.
12   A. C. Baugh, 'Documenting Sir Thomas Malory', *Speculum* 8 (1933), 1–29.
13   William Matthews, *The Ill-framed Knight: A Skeptical Inquiry into the Identity of Sir Thomas Malory* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966).
14   Larry D. Benson, *Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. ix.
15   R. M. Lumiansky, 'Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, 1947–1987: Author, Title, Text', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 878–97 (883).
16   P. J. C. Field, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Malory* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993).

17   Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay first appeared in W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

18   E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Chaucer the Pilgrim', *PMLA* 69 (1954), 928–36 (928).

19   Charles Moorman, 'The Role of the Narrator in *Pearl*', *Modern Philology* 80 (1955), 73–81 (74).

20   Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans (eds), *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999), pp. 4–5.

21   C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 211.

22   Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 5–6.

23   Derek Brewer (ed.), *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966); Douglas Gray, *Robert Henryson* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979); John Burrow, *Thomas Hoccleve, Authors of the Middle Ages 4* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994).

24   Seth Lehrer, *Chaucer and his Readers: Imagining the Author in Late Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 11.

25   Alastair Minnis and Charlotte Brewer (eds), *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), p. x.

26   Ralph Hanna III, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 176.