

**Literary Representations of History in Fourteenth Century England:  
Shared Technique and Divergent Practice in Chaucer and Langland**

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The idea of the relationships between Chaucer and Langland--or more generally, late fourteenth century English authors--has been a problem at least since J. A. Burrow's *Ricardian Poetry* appeared in 1971. He locates this lack of a sense of a norm for the period both in "the nature, the polycentricity, of the period itself" and also in the "posthumous fortunes so various" of the poets of this period. The differences are particularly visible between poems from the two different verse forms of the period: those verse forms, usually borrowed or adapted from continental poetry, thought of as London, courtly verse forms; and the alliterative line, usually associated with Northern or Northwestern poets, and treating religious or political matters rather than love.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances of their reception, coupled with real differences in content, form, and poetic and historical concerns, can make it difficult indeed to see similarities between these poets, particularly between Langland and Chaucer. There are obvious differences in concern and form. Langland wrote in the alliterative line while Chaucer adopted continental verse forms, both French and Italian.<sup>2</sup> *Piers Plowman* is clearly engaged with contemporary problems of political and religious thought, while Chaucer seems to be predominantly a love poet. Then too, the most obvious facts about these poets' readership show them to have moved in completely different circles. While Chaucer wrote poems at court, seemingly for patrons from the royal family, Langland was writing and revising the work that, whether he wished it or not, was the source for much of the language found in the letters John Ball wrote as a part of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. At the same time, the poems themselves share a number of techniques and concerns. Both poets write in the first person, both choose the

page 50

English vernacular, both utilize the dream frame, both make extensive and complicated use of allusion and citation, and both show an abiding interest in the work of poetry itself, and how it might best be accomplished.

Recent work on the audiences and reception of these two poets indicates that they shared much more than these techniques. In particular, the idea of the poets writing and moving in different circles seems to be mistaken. Langland and seems to have had a London audience; a circle of professional writers, scribes, and civil servants among whom his work circulated regularly.<sup>3</sup> This group of readers would have had access to goings-on at court, often in some detail; Langland himself probably had similar concerns and information. At the same time, the idea of Chaucer as a poet at court, with royal patrons, may be as much a function of his reception in the fifteenth century, and his own poetics, as it is a reflection of his actual status.<sup>4</sup> Often seen as poets writing in different parts of England, in wholly different genres and for completely different audiences, both Chaucer and Langland can instead be seen as London poets having access to some of the details of government and its workings and sharing similar audiences and readers. Modern critical responses perhaps exaggerate these poets' real differences in poetic style, temperament, and content. The idea of a shared audience is a potential corrective. It forces us to look for those things that may be common to the two poets, and may even provide some clues to the nature of these shared features.

If, in fact, the poets had a primary audience of civil servants and professional writers, both Chaucer and Langland may have shared a set of concerns with this audience that inevitably became part of the poets' subject matter. This group of readers and writers would have interest in and also access to political events of the day, including events at parliament and court, perhaps even quite detailed knowledge of these events. And one of the features that these two poets share is the deliberate inclusion of historical or political material in a fictional mode. This inclusion is, itself, a poetic technique of which both poets make deliberate use. The idea of historical content as *deliberate* poetic strategy is important; certainly all writing will reflect its context in one way or another. But this is not the accidental or incidental betrayal of information about the fourteenth century. Nor is it decorative or somehow extraneous to the main concerns and matter of the poems themselves. The history is not the *setting* for the events and the plot (as it would be in a romance novel involving pirates, for example); rather the subject matter of the works, their plot, is somehow history

itself. History itself is what is represented, just as it is in the academic prose narrative created by the historian.

This essay will explore this feature of Chaucer's and Langland's work as a poetic strategy by considering Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* and portions of Langland's *Piers Plowman*. I have chosen these two examples for the explicit nature of their historical content; each presents contemporary event in a way which is obvious and accessible to a modern audience. There are certainly many other possible examples of these poets' uses of history; in fact, the deliberate use of historical material is almost certainly one of the signal strategies

page 51

of Ricardian poetry in general. This is true both for other portions of these authors' works, and also for other poets of this period.<sup>5</sup> These two examples will reveal some of the patterns and possibilities for this feature of Ricardian poetry as a whole. Moreover, this strategy shows in miniature some of the general problems of Ricardian poetry: the difficulty of navigating similarity and difference originally proposed by Burrow. What emerges from this exploration is a description of the two poets' models for historical representation, and for representation as a whole as a part of fiction and history. But more than this, a comparison brings out the ways that each relates the particular to the general, the way that each thinks about theory and praxis and how they are connected. This relationship is, for both poets, an important problem; in each case, too, the poet's answers to the problem have important repercussions for his poetic, historical, and political thinking.

Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* is probably his first substantial composition. The poem was written about the death of John of Gaunt's first wife, Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, who died 12 September 1368.<sup>6</sup> Gaunt appears in the work in the fictional analog of the Black Knight--a character who is grieving the loss of his beloved, here referred to as "White," another fictional analog, to Blanche. The narrator, who undoubtedly bears some relationship to Chaucer himself, spends the bulk of the poem in conversation with the Black Knight, who must describe his lady's death several times, using several different literary modes and conventions, before the narrator understands what has happened.<sup>7</sup> His realization that White has died is what wakes the narrator from his dream and closes the poem. The most obvious explanation for the presence of Gaunt and of these events from his life in the narrative is that he was Chaucer's patron. Thus, whether the poem was commissioned, or whether Chaucer simply took the writing of it upon himself in the hopes of currying (further) favor, the interaction between the two fictional characters can--in these circumstances--be thought to reflect a relationship between the two historical men: Gaunt and Chaucer.

The new views of Chaucer's primary audience described above complicate the usual explanation for Gaunt's appearance in the poem, for if the work were not destined for Gaunt as patron or potential patron, the question of the historical content emerges anew. Without Gaunt as audience, the most obvious reason for including events from his life disappears, and there is seemingly no explanation for their prominent presence in the poem. Moreover, the poet-patron relationship itself seems to be depicted within the work, again without an analogous non-fictional situation; the appearance of this relationship is particularly puzzling. This situation is compounded by the evidence for dating the poem after 1371, and hence after Gaunt's second marriage.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the poem could have

page 52

been written as late as after 1374,<sup>9</sup> a time significantly removed from the events depicted.

Thinking of the representation of contemporary event as a literary strategy provides one answer to this problem. Seen as literary technique, the strategy itself is a kind of allusion: something borrowed from Chaucer's French sources. Moreover, Chaucer himself recognizes the practice as a technique and includes it deliberately in his writing. This is true both for the general case of historical content in the *Book of the Duchess*, and also specifically for those details that construct the narrator's relationship to the Black Knight as a poet-patron relationship. This set of details, then, does not so much reflect actual historical happening for Chaucer as it constitutes a *literary* discussion: a reworking of the ways in which this representation has been used before. Specifically, this poem makes extensive use of the work of Jean Froissart (a contemporary writer from Hainaut) and Guillaume de Machaut (a French writer from about a generation before Chaucer). He uses larger structures and stories--notably the Ovidian Seys and Alcione material--and also specific passages and lines, to the point of translating almost word for word from this French material.<sup>10</sup> Considerable work on the details of the relationship between these poets has been done, but the larger ideas of poet-patron relationship and historical representation sometimes disappear in a wealth of detail.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, a look at the

relationship between the *Book of the Duchess* and Machaut's *Dit de la fonteinne amoureuse* can begin to account for the historical content in general and the poet-patron relationship in particular.

The poet-patron relationship forms the heart of much of Machaut's poetry, particularly the *Dit de la fonteinne amoureuse*, which is the source for the Seys and Alcione material: a central structuring feature of the *Book of the Duchess*. In both poems, this material is presented as an analogy for the patron's love dilemma; in the Machaut it also works as a part of the picture of his political situation. Jean de Berry, who was the purchaser of one of Machaut's *de luxe* manuscripts of complete works, is represented within the *Fonteinne amoureuse* in much the same way that John of Gaunt is represented in the *Book of the Duchess*. Both narrators stumble across the patron figure as he speaks a complaint about the loss of his lady. Thus, just as the patron figure and the historical content are introduced, Chaucer also provides an explicit citation of one of his sources. This most obviously historical passage is also one of the most obviously allusive passages in the poem. The foregrounding of Machaut as source has two effects. First, it creates a mis-match between internal and external audience, a mis-match which is an important and deliberate part of the way that the *Book of the Duchess* works. It is one of the means by which the poem includes literary theory as part of its agenda. The way

page 53

that the internal audience relates to the external audience provides us with information also about how the fictional characters relate to the historical reality around them. Second, this open use of source material just at the point of the inclusion of historical content makes the representation of the event into a literary technique, effectively depoliticizing the poem.

If Chaucer's French models for the occasional poem write about historical events that concern their patrons, their final effect is not the same as Chaucer's. When these characters from the French material become the internal audience *in* the poem, their analogs are also the primary or intended extra-textual audience for the poem. Since Chaucer is not writing for a patron, this relationship between internal and external audience has changed.<sup>12</sup> The lack of an official patron who corresponds to a fictional audience internal to the text changes the character of the poem's model of historical representation. For Chaucer's French contemporaries, the external audience certainly included persons other than the patron only, such as other poets, or amateurs of literature, and almost certainly intentionally so. But so long as an additional primary audience is also the patron--a person who is concerned in the very historical and political events depicted-- that depiction must have a non-literary, explicitly political, engaged aspect. Chaucer, when he removes the patron--the historically and politically concerned party--from the poem's primary audience, also removes the necessity for that engaged aspect. The model for historical representation becomes purely literary and purely speculative. Representation becomes the sole key element; history itself is no longer an equal concern. If the occasional poem--combined with the dream frame--allows for a self-reflexivity about the problems of representing reality, in Chaucer this concern takes on a theoretical aspect which becomes so central to a poem like the *Book of the Duchess* that the occasion itself becomes secondary.

The secondary character of the event itself is the second difference between Chaucer and his source material. The event depicted in the *Book of the Duchess* is not really political, though it touches the life of a man who is important politically. Machaut's work, by contrast, implies a political alliance in the act of consolation; since he's imprisoned, comforting Jean de Berry implies solidarity *with* him and, and this is crucial, *against* his captors. The writing of the poem is a political act.<sup>13</sup> Chaucer's consolation for John of Gaunt, even if Gaunt had seen it, or been a primary audience, has no such implications. The event that causes the grief is the death of a wife, caused by the plague rather than a political enemy. The writing of this poem is *not* a political act, or, rather, it presents itself as an apolitical work; and I suspect that this is Chaucer's deliberate choice. Moreover, Chaucer accomplishes this removal of art from its historical

page 54

context most thoroughly in the very work that engages historical event most openly. This disjunction between the generic expectations of the poem itself, which involve the presence of an extra-textual patron, and the lack of a match between those expectations and the extra-textual situation tends to affirm the idea of context as separate from text, as a thing in itself. It also serves to confirm the poem's own status as fiction: a thing separate from the "real." If the distinction between text and context is indeed a false one, then it is an illusion that Chaucer needs and uses to get his

poetry to work in the apolitical way that it does.<sup>14</sup>

In short, Chaucer has made a tool for expressing the particular into an exploration of the general case. Historical event makes its way into this poem not because the event itself is somehow important, but in service of other questions. The poet-patron relationship is represented not as a fictional analog to an extant situation in Chaucer's own life, but as a literary convention, and imitable image. By stripping the technique of historical representation of its political content, he uses the representation of a particular event to construct a model for representation itself. This only works when the particular--and hence the political situation and the historical persons represented--is no longer the central concern. This privileging of representation as the thing about which theories are made is not what Langland does, though he, too, uses the same techniques. This representational model, it is worth noting, is not imported from an extant theory or theories; rather, Chaucer has begun to build his own theoretical level. Here, too, this is not what Langland does; *Piers Plowman* imports extant political models, placing them against each other and in relation to the particular case.

For Langland, if not for Chaucer, writing is a political act. And, when writing is a political act, then interpretation and representation are, or can also be, political acts. This difference between the two poets is obvious. But the implication of what they share--an explicit and deliberate concern with literary matters like writing, fictional representation, and interpretation--shows that this political character has specifically literary repercussions. And this is where Chaucer provides an informative context for Langland, just as much as Langland does for Chaucer: in both cases, the depiction of a historical event also includes a model for the representation itself. The historical event represented in the relevant section of *Piers Plowman* is related to the Good Parliament of 1376. One of the most often-narrated events of the fourteenth century,<sup>15</sup> this Parliament seems to have struck the imaginations of more authors than Langland. A move from Chaucer to Langland, then, also entails a move from writing that is mostly depoliticized to writing that is about one of the best known and most often retold events of the time. At the same time, however, Langland too makes significant claims about the relationship between the general and the specific. First, the general itself is problematized: Langland

page 55

imports a number of extant theoretical models into his poem, notably several competing models of kingship; but it is not simply a matter of choosing between them. Rather, their proximity to one another, as well as their relationship to practical, individual example, presents a questioning of their workings and usefulness. Second, the relationship between the general and the particular is itself questioned and problematized. This complication which starts in the political realm maps itself back onto Langland's literary practice. The workings of the person of Lady Meed show Langland's concern with representation itself in addition to political content.

The B-text conflict between Conscience and Lady Meed provides, among other things, a fictional analog to Alice Perrers and her impeachment by the Good Parliament of 1376.<sup>16</sup> This figure is set into a larger representation of the Good Parliament, notably in the B-text Prologue, including some explicit discussion of the question of absolute versus limited kingship. Though an examination of the whole of this material is well beyond the scope of this essay, it's important to know that the Lady Meed material is part of a larger narrative about the Good Parliament. The Prologue's Rat Parliament is related as fictional analog to the Good Parliament of 1376, Lady Meed is a fictional analog, sometimes, to Alice Perrers, and Conscience's examination of her is a second allusion to the Good Parliament, namely to her impeachment.

Reading Lady Meed works if we understand that she is represented simultaneously using two separate literary techniques: allegory and personification fiction.<sup>17</sup> The explicit historical allusion works only for the former of these two poetic strategies, allegory. Within Meed's presentation as personification, and before the issue of her as allegory even arises, there are internal inconsistencies in the way that she is portrayed. These inconsistencies come in her interactions with the other characters. The marriage images for Meed (and everyone else) don't match each other. First, it seems that she is to marry one and only one man, who will either be Fals or Conscience. But at the same time, any number of men can opt to marry her if they so choose. It seems to matter very much whom Lady Meed marries when it comes down to Fals versus Conscience. It matters, too, to the individual men who also might join themselves to her whether they marry her or not. Thus Meed has an ambiguous value, and an equally ambiguous status as a potential corrupter of her mate(s).

On the one hand (the individual-men-are-free-to-marry-or-avoid-her hand), Meed seems to *cause* the false witness, usury, lying, and other bad behavior that go on in her entourage and general vicinity. On the other hand (the important-choice-of-a-single-spouse hand), it seems that she could be managed somehow by a rational mate, like Conscience. Finally, Conscience seems to associate himself with that set of all men who may choose to marry her or not, since he claims to be totally disgusted by and hence unwilling to marry Lady Meed. This whole situation is confusing from a

page 56

narrative standpoint; it is also bad both for the state, and also for those individual souls who are led into matrimony with Meed. This confusion is reflected in *Piers Plowman* criticism as well. Critics sometimes interpret, or even translate, Meed as bribery; others have a more general idea of her as commerce or reward. Compare, for example, Anne Middleton's reading of the grammatical metaphor at Passus C, Book IV (335-409) with Margaret Amassian and James Sadowsky's interpretation of this same passage. Middleton reads the grammatical analogy--adjective versus substantive and direct versus indirect relative--as a condemnation of Meed not only by Conscience, but by Langland as well.<sup>18</sup> Ammassian and Sadowsky read this same passage with a much greater tolerance for Meed's potential positive meanings, going so far as to place Meed above Mercede since she is a reward given for love, rather than as a contracted payment for services rendered.<sup>19</sup>

Part of the difficulty comes from the word itself, which can take on either a positive or a negative meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Meed three separate ways; one has positive connotation, the other negative, and the third is value neutral: 1. That which is bestowed in requital of labour or service, or in consideration of (good or ill) desert; wages, hire; recompense, reward. 2. Reward dishonestly offered or accepted; corrupt gain; bribery. 3. Merit, excellence, worth.

There are fourteenth-century examples listed for each of these uses; thus it seems that the ambiguity is a contemporary one, and not a result of meaning changing over time. It would not be out-of-character for Langland to exploit this ambiguity. In fact, it is my contention that exploiting this ambiguity is *exactly* what Langland is doing. If the debate between Meed and Conscience is read without this ambiguity, the tendency is for the interpreter to agree with Conscience, to take his side against Lady Meed, and to assume that Langland has done likewise. Conscience becomes somehow the voice of the poet or the poem as a whole in this sense. The idea is that, since Conscience is what he's named, which is a good thing, while Meed is what she's named, which is a bad thing, Conscience is the spokesperson for the poet within the debate or dialogue between the two. Interpreters wishing to read the text this way find plenty of reinforcing evidence in Lady Meed's thoroughly detestable behavior at court. Moreover, this kind of reading is typical of how personification works on its simplest level. However, I think that Langland recognizes and foregrounds both the limits and the larger possibilities of personification as a literary technique. The recognition of its limits is, in fact, one of the ways that the poem finds the larger possibilities of the technique.<sup>20</sup>

The biggest problem with personification is *precisely that* things are named what they are. When, for example, Holi Church tells Will that the tower is Truth's, and that it's the place to go, this information does not really get us, or Will, anywhere. That is, we are no closer to knowing how to get to Truth, or what Truth might mean for us in the world of

page 57

particulars--of truths with a small "t"--even after Holi Church's long explanation. Will ends up frustrated with her, and she with him, precisely because the *way* that the tower is Truth is unhelpful. This is as much a self-aware comment about literary technique as it is about the form of true living. Langland has perceived, and shown quite clearly, the way that personification works when it is the dominant means of producing meaning in a text, especially in the context of Christian teaching for Christian audiences. Though ostensibly educational, doctrinal personification fiction does not present any new information; rather it reinforces and represents the already known ideas of Christian doctrine. The ideal reader would come away from the text not knowing any more than he did when he went to the text. Thus personification is not the appropriate technique for Will, or for Langland, to accomplish what he needs to.

A key reason why the limits of personification are crucial to this poem is that they are also the limits of the general case; that is of the theoretical level. For Langland, here in contrast to Chaucer, the theoretical level is not concerned only or primarily with literary and representative theory, but also with political and historical theory.<sup>21</sup> The limits of personification as a form of representation thus prove useful in defining the limits of these other theoretical, general

cases for thought. All that is accomplished in his work relating the particular to the general case applies both to literary technique and theory, like personification, and also to the limits of political and historical theory as well. This has ramifications for his act of representation itself. If Langland's needs concern working out the relationships between the theoretical case and the practical one, between the general case and the particular, personification is, *alone*, an inadequate literary strategy. The presence of more than one mode of representation solves this problem for him. At least, it provides him with a useful tool for thinking about it. His solution to his historical problem, then, is a thoroughly literary one: allegory.

Once Lady Meed is also Alice Perrers, two things happen. First, Langland adds a second poetic technique--allegory--by adding this second sense. Second, he moves from a general or speculative case to a particular one. This actually solves some (though not all) of the narrative difficulties created by Lady Meed which are described above. When Lady Meed is functioning as a general, personified case, she can be married by any number of men, including Conscience. While she is functioning as a particular, allegorical case, she is accused and examined by whoever Conscience is. Of course, there is still some slippage--in fact Langland relies on its presence--but this idea of two on-going techniques used for the same character and episode helps to straighten things out on a strictly narrative level. More to the point, the presence of two techniques also helps us to construct a model for historical representation in Langland, and for why it's there. The move from one technique to another also

page 58

involves a move from the particular case to the general, abstract, or theoretical. And this is one of the key reasons for Langland's inclusion of contemporary historical event. Working out the relationships between the general and the particular case is one of the great problems of his poem, and he is using a set of literary techniques to help, if not solve it, then at least to construct and present it as a problem. The mismatch caused by the use of these two literary techniques, and the consequent relationship created between the general and the particular case is a what gives the poem its meta-literary, speculative, or theoretical level, just as Chaucer's internal-external audience mismatch is what creates his. Moreover, and again as with Chaucer, this is almost certainly a deliberate choice on Langland's part.

Langland's model for historical representation is therefore, also a literary model. But his model is not, like Chaucer's, divorced from context. Speculative and theoretical mean something different for these two authors, though both have created poems that contain a speculative and theoretical level. Chaucer uses the literary techniques described, including historical representation, to explore issues that are purely literary and to separate the literary from the political sphere. It is probably no accident that Chaucer does not use personification as a literary technique. He creates a general, theoretical level in his poem without this technique and hence without engaging the specifically political or religious systems of abstract thought with which they were so often associated in his literary context. Langland uses the speculative and the theoretical, including those same systems of abstract political and religious thought, to explore extra-literary matters. It is no wonder that these two poems have been received differently, despite what the authors share.

Finally, this sheds some light on the different possible uses of a shared literary technique: the first-person narrator, who is also a poet, and related to the author in some way. The two different models of historical representation and its uses and value can be read onto this semi-fictionalized author figure. For Will, and probably also for Langland, the end goal of poetry, whether we are reading it or writing it, is right living, right religion, and right governance; particularly where right governance and right religion intersect--in matters of Meed, for example. For Chaucer, the end goal is right making. In the *Book of the Duchess*, we see that the idea that something can be theoretical and engaged does not preclude the possibility that something can look engaged and yet still be wholly theoretical. Langland, by contrast, cannot and does not consider right making as a separate issue unto itself, because *right* making must involve some of the other rights above; it's not separable as a discipline and exists only in conjunction with these others. This does not make him any less a poet or less concerned with poetry. It does, however, show us both a link between narrative mode and political content, and more than one model for exploiting this link in the vernacular literature of fourteenth century England.

## Notes

1. J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the 'Gawain' Poet* (London, 1971; rpt. 1992); the quotations in the text are from p. 4. Anne Middleton has adapted some of his terms, and the spirit of this inquiry, in her essay, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978), 94-114, as has Richard Firth Green, with radically different results, in *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, 1999).

2. It may be the case that even the difference in language may be somewhat overstated. Burrow notes (pp. 8-9) that editing practices routinely modernize Chaucer's and Gower's spelling and orthography; Langland and the other alliterative poets are not so updated: "The result of this and other divergences in the editorial handling of the manuscripts is that the texts of Gower and Chaucer are given a relatively modern appearance, while those of their contemporaries are left under the imputation of barbarism; and this in turn helps to perpetuate our essentially bifocal view of the period." Some of the "other divergences" are alluded to by John Fisher, "*Piers Plowman* and the Chancery Tradition," in *Medieval English*

*Studies presented to George Kane*, ed. Edward Donald Kennedy, Ronald Waldron, and Joseph S. Wittig (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 267-78. The details of these arguments are beyond the scope of this essay and outside my competence, but the issue helps to show the nature of the problem of Ricardian poetry or a Ricardian period.

3. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, "Langlandian Reading Circles and the Civil Service in London and Dublin, 1380-1427," *New Medieval Literatures* 1(1997), 59-83. Their work accounts for the sort of detailed knowledge of political event possessed by Langland and, one presumes, his readers.

4. See Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, 1993), especially chapters 1 and 4.

5. Langland makes abundant contemporary allusions, as the multiple and ongoing attempts to date the versions of his poem show. There is also the complicated problem of how the author's revisions of his work interact with events of the day, notably controversies over Wycliffite thinking and the events of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Chaucer's works, too, may have considerably more historical content than has been thought. Many of the shorter, lyric pieces engage contemporary political discourse; the *Prologue* to the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Parliament of Fowls* both depict contemporary events and persons, the *House of Fame* at the very least engages the language and modes of legal and judicial procedure, and recent work on the *Canterbury Tales*, such as that of David Wallace, has shown their potential political content. Finally, *Troilus and Criseyde* circulated with *Piers Plowman* in manuscripts. Other Ricardian poets made contemporary allusions, including Gower and the Gawain-poet. For an analysis of political content in a broad range of late medieval English writing, see Ann Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, 1999), pp. 117-37.

page 60

6. Because of some confusing evidence in the chronicle records, Blanche was thought for many years to have died on the 12 September 1369. This evidence was sorted out in 1974 by J. J. N. Palmer and confirmed by Sumner Ferris, though critics still sometimes give the later, incorrect date. See Edward I. Condren, "The Historical Context of the *Book of the Duchess*: A New Hypothesis," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1970), 195-212; J. J. N. Palmer, "The Historical Context of the *Book of the Duchess*: A Revision," *Chaucer Review* 8 (1974), 253-61; Condren, "Of Deaths and Duchesses and Scholars Coughing in Ink," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975), 87-95; Sumner Ferris, "John Stow and the Tomb of Blanche the Duchess," *Chaucer Review* (1983), 92-93.

7. For a detailed description of the way that Chaucer uses multiple sources in multiple modes, see Barbara Nolan, "The Art of Expropriation: Chaucer's Narrator in the *Book of the Duchess*" in *New Perspectives in Chaucer Criticism*, ed. Donald M. Rose (Norman, OK, 1981), pp. 203-22.

8. There are two good pieces of evidence for this. First, the signature moment at the end of the poem—the same section that links Gaunt to the Black Knight and Blanche to White—describes the Gaunt figure as a king. Gaunt was not a king until after his second marriage in 1371. In fact, he became a king as a result of his second marriage, to Constanza of Castille. Gaunt's new title, King of Castille and Leon, though disputed, was clearly important to him, and was also public knowledge; he issued coins showing his coat of arms quartered with those of Castille and Leon. For photos, see the plates to Sidney Armitage-Smith's biography, *John of Gaunt* (Westminster, 1904). For more on the signature moment, see Howard Schless, "A Dating for the *Book of the Duchess*: Line 1314," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1985), 273-76. The second piece of evidence is the poem's relationship to Froissart's *Dit dou Bleu Chevalier*, which latter poem concerns events from late in the year 1371. That there exists a relationship between the two poems is undisputed, though Wimsatt argues that the influence is of Chaucer on Froissart, rather than the other way around. See James I. Wimsatt, "The *Dit dou Bleu Chevalier*: Froissart's Imitation of Chaucer," *Mediaeval Studies* 34 (1972), 388-400. I find this unconvincing, given the relative status of the French and English vernaculars in this period, the wealth of other lines borrowed from Machaut's and Froissart's other works, and the signature lines from the *Book of the Duchess* mentioned above. Rather, Chaucer was almost certainly borrowing from the *Bleu Chevalier* here, confirming a date after 1371.

9. Gaunt returned to England in 1374, after a long continental campaign. In this year, he ordered an elaborate mass on the anniversary of Blanche's death, leading some to argue that the *Book of the Duchess* was commissioned for this occasion rather than written just after Blanche's death itself. See D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Historical Setting of Chaucer's *Book of*

page 61

*the Duchess*," in *Mediaeval Studies in Honor of Urban Tigner Holmes, Jr.* (Chapel Hill, 1965), pp. 169-95. While the possibility that the piece was commissioned is slim, it is worth reviving the possible date of composition. If nothing else, the anniversary mass, an elaborate and public event, would have reminded London dwellers, including both Chaucer and his audience, of the original event. For records of the anniversary mass itself. See N. B. Lewis, "The Anniversary Service for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, 12th September, 1374," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21(1937), 176-92.

10. Marc M. Pelen points out that about half of the lines of the *Book of the Duchess* are more or less translated from either Froissart or Machaut, "Machaut's Court of Love Narratives and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 11(1976), 128-55.

11. For comparative work on larger features of these poems, rather than source work focusing on individual lines, see Pelen, "Machaut's Court of Love" and Barton Palmer, *The Book of the Duchess and Fonteinne Amoureuse: Chaucer and Machaut Reconsidered*, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 7 (1980), 380-93. There are also two critics who have done book-length comparative studies, though both seem somewhat disappointed in the sources Chaucer has chosen; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley, 1957, rpt. 1973); and James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The French Background of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill, 1965) and *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries: Natural Music in the Fourteenth Century* (Toronto, 1991).

12. In addition to positive work on who Chaucer's audience may have been, there is also evidence about who it was *not*. We have known since the publication of James Hulbert's dissertation, *Chaucer's Official Life* (Menasha, WI, 1912) that Gaunt was not Chaucer's patron, and hence not his primary audience, if he was part of his audience at all. The more recent work on Chaucer's audience tends to confirm rather than contradict Hulbert's position. See Dieter Mehl, "The Audience of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Chaucer and Middle English Studies in Honour of Rossell Hope Robbins*, ed. Beryl Rowland (London, 1974), pp. 173-89, and Mehl, "Chaucer's Audience," *Leeds Studies in English* n. s. 10 (1978), 58-71. See also Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, 1989), and "Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience and the Narrowing of the 'Chaucer



Tradition," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 4 (1982), 3-32; and the special section of *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983), 137-81, *Chaucer's Audience: A Symposium*, which includes essays by Strohm, Richard Firth Green, R. T. Lenaghan, and Patricia J. Eberle.

13. For details of how the *Fonteinne amoureuse* might relate to its immediate political and economic context, see my essay, "The Patron in the Poem: Machaut's *Dit de la fonteinne amoureuse* in its Historical Context," forthcoming in *Romance Languages Annual* 11 (1999).

page 62

14. For work on political engagement, or the lack thereof, in Chaucer's life, see S. Sanderlin, "Chaucer and Ricardian Politics," *Chaucer Review* 22 (1988), 171-84, and Paul Strohm, "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, 1990), pp. 83-112. Strohm's comparison with Usk is particularly illuminating, as it shows how Chaucer does not write for an explicit political purpose, as Usk does routinely. In this view, while Chaucer's politics may be reflected in his poetics, particularly in a constant emphasis on dialogue and plurality, he differs fundamentally from a poet like Usk who understands writing as a political tool.

15. See George Holmes, *The Good Parliament* (Oxford, 1975). "The rich accounts of the few weeks of the parliament itself are therefore a fertile oasis. The surrounding area is rather thinly supplied with narrative evidence. The contrast is perplexing and the difficulty of interpretation arises partly from this" (p. 4).

16. Alice Perrers was King Edward II's mistress in the last years of his life. The relationship was a public one, or at least not particularly discreet, and involved economic and political concerns. Alice Perrers had an account with the exchequer, wore the dead queen's jewels in public, and was widely believed to have had an inappropriate influence on the king in matters of kingship. She was one of the small group of favorites impeached by the Commons in the Parliament of 1376 and was sent into exile. This Parliament's work was undone in the next year, and Alice returned to court and to Edward, but these events were nonetheless to stick in minds of English writers from poets to chroniclers. For arguments about the relationship of *Piers Plowman* to the events of 1376, see, in chronological order: Paul Franklin Baum, "The Fable of Belling the Cat," *Modern Language Notes* 34 (1999), 462-70; G. R. Owst, "The Angel and the 'Goliardeys' of Langland's Prologue," *Modern Language Review* 20 (1925), 270-79; Eleanor H. Kellogg, "Bishop Brinton and the Fable of the Rats," *PMLA* 50 (1935), 57-68; Bernard F. Huppé, "The A-Text of *Piers Plowman* and the Norman Wars," *PMLA* 54 (1939), 37-64; Huppé, "The Date of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*," *Studies in Philology* 38 (1941), 34-44; J. A. W. Bennett, "The Date of the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*," *Medium Aevum* 12 (1943), 55-64; Bennett, "The Date of the A-Text of *Piers Plowman*," *PMLA* 58 (1943), 566-72; Huppé, "The Authorship of the A and B Texts of *Piers Plowman*," *Speculum* 22 (1947), 578-620; E. Talbot Donaldson, *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and its Poet* (New Haven, 1949), chapter 4, "The Politics of the C-Reviser," pp. 85-120; Huppé, "*Piers Plowman*: The Date of the B-Text Reconsidered," *Studies in Philology* 46 (1949), 6-13; Elisabeth M. Orsten, "The Ambiguities in Langland's Rat Parliament," *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961), 216-39; and John

page 63

L. Seizer, "Topical Allegory in *Piers Plowman*: Lady Meed's B-Text Debate with Conscience," *Philological Quarterly* 59 (1980), 257-67.

17. I used personification fiction to describe that literary technique through which an idea or abstract concept is named and becomes a character in the narrative, e. g. Holy Church, Conscience, Hunger, Truth and so on. Allegory is a separate technique by means of which a second meaning is present in a text which makes narrative sense without that additional meaning. Allegory is often associated with oblique speech and with an explicit need for interpretation.

18. "Two Infinities: Grammatical Metaphor in *Piers Plowman*," *English Literary History* 39 (1972), 169-88. The relevant passage: "Meed, or bribery, is to 'measurable hire' as an adjective without appropriate syntactic markers is to a rightly declined one. Meed is not merely immoral behavior, 'poor usage,' but outside meaningful human discourse altogether: the point of the analogy is that there is literally no place in the Christian commune for Meed; her claims are not merely seductive, but, in the ideal body of the faith, unintelligible" (p. 184). Middleton certainly gives the better reading of the passage itself, but the idea that Conscience's attitudes are necessarily those of the poet or the poem as a whole is disputable. Meed is as much a personification as Conscience is; any ambiguity in the poem's marshaling of this technique would be present in both of these characters.

19. "Mede and Mercede: A Study of the Grammatical Metaphor in 'Piers Plowman' C: IV: 335-409," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971), 457-76. They may go a little too far, as their reading involves some juggling of the text's syntax (p. 465), where they reverse the analogy because Mede and Mercede is "far more euphonious than the reverse," attempting to prove that Langland chose the order of the terms of the analogy for aesthetic rather reasons rather than those of content. The larger point, however, is quite useful; namely that Meed is, at least potentially, both positive and negative, and that Lady Meed has therefore a dual nature (p. 459), "On the one hand, she is all society's ruin. . . . On the other hand, along with her unsavoury qualities, Lady Mede also represents God's just, loving reward to His faithful."

20. Meed is not the only character who works this way, both as a personification and as other things as well. The king, for example, can be a particular king, the king of England in general, or kingship, yet more generally. The narrator, too, seems to have this multiple existence. As he is named Will, he can be a faculty of the soul. But he can also be a faculty of a particular person's soul, like the narrator or the author, and the Christian name of a particular person, again, like the author or the narrator. Only the first of these meets both criteria for personification: abstract/general and unisemous. We also occasionally run across personifications whose names are so exaggerated that they are comical, such as Tomme Trewe-tonge-tel-me-no-tales- / Ne

page 64

lesynge-to-laughen-of-for-I loved-hem-nevere. / And set my sadel upon Suffre-til-I-se-my-tyme" (B-text, Passus IV, 18-20). These personifications are exaggerated, I think, to show how even the idea that one can just say what something is, and thus somehow make it clear, can be a problem. (I also think they are meant to be funny.) Meed, for example, could do with some qualifying terms if we are to know whether she's a good paying-someone-to-do-something or a bad paying-someone-to-do-something.

21. For this observation, see Anna Baldwin, *The Theme of Government in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge, 1981). She argues that, given a choice of several theories of government, Langland prefers absolute monarchy. I think, rather, that Langland sees all theories of government, and possibly