

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MAKING ENGLISH LOW: A HISTORY OF
LAUREATE POETICS, 1399-1616

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My dissertation analyzes lowbrow literary forms, tropes, and modes in the writings of three would-be laureates, writers who otherwise sought to align themselves with cultural and political authorities and who themselves aspired to national prominence: Thomas Hoccleve (*c.* 1367-1426), John Skelton (*c.* 1460-1529), and Ben Jonson (1572-1637). In so doing, my project proposes a new approach to early English laureateship. Previous studies assume that aspiration English writers fashioned their new mantles exclusively from high learning, refined verse, and the moral virtues of elite poetry. In the writings and self-fashionings that I analyze, however, these would-be laureates employed literary low culture to insert themselves into a prestigious, international lineage; they did so even while creating personas that were uniquely English. Previous studies have also neglected the development of early laureateship and nationalist poetics across the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. Examining the ways that cultural cachet—once the sole property of the elite—became accessible to popular audiences, my project accounts for and depends on a long view.

My first two chapters analyze writers whose idiosyncrasies have afforded them a marginal position in literary histories. In Chapter 1, I argue that Hoccleve channels Chaucer's Host, Harry Bailly, in the *Male Regle* and the *Series*. Like Harry, Hoccleve draws upon quotidian London experiences to create a uniquely English writerly voice worthy of laureate status. In Chapter 2, I argue that Skelton enshrine the poet's own fleeting historical experience in the *Garlande of Laurell* and *Phyllyp Sparowe* by employing contrasting prosodies to juxtapose the rhythms of tradition with his own demotic meter. I approach Ben Jonson along the path paved by his medieval precursors. In Chapter 3, I argue that in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson blends classical comic form with unwieldy city chatter, simultaneously investing the lowbrow with poetic authority and English laureateship with tavern noise. Like Hoccleve and Skelton, Jonson reappears as a product and producer not only of the local literary system to which he was immediately bound, but of a national culture, in no small measure lowbrow, at least two centuries in the making.

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by

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Introduction

Today, the title “English Poet Laureate” refers both to the poet’s official post and to the authorial persona that the poet takes up and refashions. The post itself was not instituted until 1668, when Charles II issued a patent to “nominate constitute declare and appoint” John Dryden as England’s first “Poet Laureate.”¹ But the laureate persona had been popping up in English literary writing for nearly three hundred years, having been imported from Italy in the fourteenth century. Long before an English monarch had constituted such an office, and so unhampered by formal obligations, early English writers were inventing and reinventing their own *ideas* of the laureate’s role. These were not always very precise and the title “poetic laureate” was not always claimed, because even writers who thought that they had, or could achieve, this status often focused on their other literary identities. Hence, although the idea of laureateship is difficult to nail down in early English writing, it did hold sway, perhaps all the more intriguingly because of its elusiveness.

Long before the English poet laureateship became official in 1668, it had coursed through nearly three hundred years of literary history. These years witnessed the widespread elevation of the English language and English-language literary writing; the introduction of print; the expansion of the book trade; the growth of an educated, literate readership; and increased and increasingly effective censorship. The idea of poet

¹ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 61.

² The criticism on this topic is extensive. For a snapshot of approaches, see the essays in the 2007 special

laureateship survived and even prospered amidst changes that rendered many other authorial identities (e.g. classical *auctor*, vernacular maker) unrecognizable or irrelevant, and that facilitated the emergence of new identities (e.g. sonneteer, professional playwright). To study English poet laureateship between 1399 and 1616 is thus to study a medieval and early modern continuity. Tracing an authorial role that traversed more than two centuries through a period traditionally separated into the categories “Middle Ages” and “Renaissance,” I join those critics who have been reexamining the usefulness of those categories and the viability of the border between them.²

Francesco Petrarch’s self-presentation as laureate loomed large over early conceptions of the role. Drawing on Petrarch, I define a *poet laureate* as an author who, on the one hand, transcends the particularities of time and place by participating in an ancient, international tradition of all laureates; and, on the other hand, assumes the role of a national spokesman by exemplifying the time and place of his coronation. To adapt Ben Jonson’s words about William Shakespeare, a poet laureate is “for all time” *and* “of an age.”³ If his authorial identity exists in both contexts, the laureate’s challenge is to bridge them.

In the texts that I study, the would-be laureates were not explicitly “writing England”—that is, they were not writing English chronicles, epics, or history plays, drawing maps of England or theorizing its law.⁴ Nonetheless, they “wrote” England implicitly by writing *themselves*. Between 1399 and 1616, to be such a laureate in

² The criticism on this topic is extensive. For a snapshot of approaches, see the essays in the 2007 special issue of *JMEMS* “Medieval/Renaissance: After Periodization,” edited by David Wallace and Jennifer Summit.

³ Jonson, “To the Memory of My Belovèd,” 43-44.

⁴ This expression is repeated by many scholars of early modern nationalism. For example, Hadfield, *Literature, Politics and National Identity*; Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*; McEachern, *Politics of English Nationhood*; Shrank, *Writing the Nation*.

England was to balance an authorial persona atop several tentative premises. The first was that England did merit having any poet laureate at all. This basic premise rested on others: that Englishness could be distinguished and expressed through cultural practices; that English-language literary writing could produce an appropriate cultural figurehead; and that at least some English writing, that of a laureate, could hold its own in a prestigious literary history that dated back to antiquity. Between 1399 and 1616, these premises were especially shaky.⁵ Could England be imagined as coherent culture? Could a would-be laureate epitomize and embody that culture? And could he elevate himself—and so England?

It will be apparent that these questions crisscross *high* and *low*, those normally-dichotomized categories of value at the ends of a spectrum of “subtle degrees and variations in a culture” that have “a special and often powerful charge.”⁶ Laureateship itself was patently *high*: the international, transhistorical laurel was a rare honor associated with literary giants like Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Petrarch; it linked preeminent Latin and vernacular literary authorities to the Ancients. But English was *low*: in comparison with French, Italian, and especially Latin, the English language and its literary culture were deemed common. This was especially true early in the period that I examine; but even after the introduction of print and the expansion of literacy, the English language and its literature still had to prove themselves on an international stage. Well into the seventeenth century, the common, low elements of English culture could be and often were taken to be among its definitive parts.

⁵ The critical consensus among medievalists is that Geoffrey Chaucer, writing at the end of the fourteenth century, knew none of them. I revisit these premises below. On Chaucer’s relation to the idea of the English nation, see Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*; Salter, “English International”; Simpson, “Chaucer as European Writer.”

⁶ Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 3.

I respond to this high/low duality at the heart of the early English laureateship by examining the ways that three would-be laureates—Thomas Hoccleve, John Skelton, and Ben Jonson—embraced it. The two works of scholarship to which this project is most indebted, Richard Helgerson’s *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* and Robert Meyer-Lee’s *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt*, approach the idea of laureateship as if it must, necessarily and *by definition*, suppress everything common, demotic, debased, or otherwise low. But in the works that I analyze, Hoccleve, Skelton, and Jonson did not follow this practice. In the writing and self-fashioning that I analyze, low forms, techniques, and modes were tools of choice that these writers employed to insert themselves into a prestigious, international lineage. Writing themselves low, these writers created a role that was thoroughly laureate and uniquely English.

Histories of Laureateship

The laureateship began before the period that I canvas, and it continued after it. In this section, I first discuss Petrarch’s mid-fourteenth-century laureateship, a position for which there was at the time no common English phrase, then the mid-17th century laureateship as it was understood by John Selden and John Dryden. In Dryden’s day, as in Petrarch’s, the idea of a *poet laureate* was rooted in and indicative of what Kathleen Davis has called the “ideological processes at work in imagining the nation.”⁷ It arose from the interaction between a long, ancient and international literary history and an awareness of a national community with its own literary history.

⁷ Davis, “National Writing,” 613.

When he orchestrated his 1341 coronation, Petrarch promoted an established role that had already connected the poet laureate to the community that crowned him. In the thirteenth century, the laurel crown and the title *poet laureate* had commemorated the university status “*laurea baccalaureus*,” which celebrated excellence in one or more of the seven liberal arts.⁸ The term was associated with what in vulgar Latin were known as *nationes*, “communities of immigrant scholars united by a common ‘native’ language and place of origin at various universities in western Europe.” The University of Paris, for instance, recognized the *nationes* of Picardy, Normandy, England, and Germany.⁹ It was under the auspices of such allied *nationes* that laurel crowns were awarded.¹⁰ Even if scholars studied and wrote in Latin, and perhaps even spoke in some combination of Latin and a variety of vernaculars, and even if the *nationes* were themselves “multifold and mutating,”¹¹ the laurel crown was associated with the cross border communities with which they identified themselves—communities, though still amorphous, defined by geography broadly construed.

Petrarch’s immediate Italian predecessors, however, had begun to plant their laurels in the soil, not of affiliated *nationes*, but of the immediate place and time of their coronations. When he was a child, Petrarch likely attended the December 3, 1315 Paduan ceremony at which Albertino Mussato was crowned, an event that the city’s elites fashioned into a decidedly civic affair: the ceremony took place at the city hall, and businesses were closed for the day so that all dwellers could take part in the festivities.¹² As a civic affair, Mussato’s laureation was a celebration not only of Mussato and his

⁸ Broadus, *Poets Laureate*, 13.

⁹ Kennedy, *Sites of Petrarchism*, 11.

¹⁰ Broadus, *Poets Laureate*, 13

¹¹ Weeda, “Ethnic Stereotyping,” 131.

¹² Wilkins, “Coronation of Petrarch,” 163-64.

status in Padua, but of *Padua* itself: his poet laureateship was the city's honor. This event surely influenced Giovanni del Virgilio, the Bolognese professor of literature who in 1318 invited the renowned Dante Alighieri to be crowned poet laureate in Bologna.¹³ Dante declined. Instead, he waited, fruitlessly, for his beloved Florence to make a similar offer, which it did only after Dante died.¹⁴ To Dante, the laurel would not only celebrate his fame as poet but also reaffirm his identity as Florentine.¹⁵ Like Mussato, Dante imagined laureateship bestowed by and honoring the city that conferred it.

In associating laureate coronation with place, its personal honor with a civic one, Mussato and Dante influence Petrarch's conception of the role. In the late 1330s, when he was in his mid-30s and early in his career as a writer, Petrarch solicited offers of coronation from both Roberto dei Bardi, Chancellor of the University of Paris, and from the Roman Senate.¹⁶ As he wrote in a letter to his powerful friend, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna, both institutions eventually acceded, and Petrarch received offers from both on the same day in late August 1340.¹⁷ Petrarch's ensuing dilemma, expressed in that letter to Colonna, maps the paths that his laureateship could have taken. On the one hand, he praises "[t]he charm and novelty" of the Sorbonne. A laureateship commemorated there would not only have been prestigious—the University of Paris was the most important academic institution in Europe—but it would have been quite new. On the other hand, Petrarch notes the "reverence for antiquity" that would be signaled by a coronation in

¹³ Ruud, *Critical Companion to Dante*, 16.

¹⁴ Wilkins, "Coronation of Petrarch," 164-65, and "Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and the Laurel Crown."

¹⁵ It is likely that the young Petrarch knew about Dante's wish even though he studiously avoided his predecessor's work; in fact, it is likely that he avoided the *Commedia* because he knew of Dante's laureate aspirations and did not want to be a mere competitor. In a letter to Giovanni Boccaccio, dated 1359, Petrarch remembers Dante's "desire for fame alone." In the same letter, Petrarch admits that as a young man, "I was afraid that if I should immerse myself in his [Dante's] words, or in those of any other man, I might unwillingly or unconsciously become an imitator"; "On Dante," 178-79.

¹⁶ Wilkins, "Coronation of Petrarch," 166-67

¹⁷ Petrarch, "Two Offers of Laureateship in a Day," 51.

Rome, a place that constituted what Petrarch calls “my fatherland.” Colonna’s response helped Petrarch to “decid[e] that the prestige of Rome was to be preferred to all else.”¹⁸ He held fast to his conviction even when King Robert invited him to be crowned in Naples, explaining that “my love for Rome was more mighty than the honorific instances of even so great a king.”¹⁹ To the emphasis on place with which Mussato and Dante imbued the once exclusively academic honor, Petrarch added ancient ancestry. Padua, Florence, Paris, and Naples—none of these cities could connect Petrarch to the ancient past as could Rome, where his laureateship obtained its true *auctoritas*.

Despite the fact the Petrarch was building on medieval traditions, he emphasizes the uniqueness of his coronation in his era. In his *Collatio laureationis*, the coronation oration, Petrarch explains his decision to come to Rome. Despite the general difficulty of writing poetry, personal fatigue, and the fact that poetry has fallen into disrepute, he wants to revive the laurel crown:

The honor of the Republic stirs my heart when I recall that in this very city of Rome—the capital of the world, as Cicero calls it—in this very Roman Capitol where we now are gathered, so many and such great poets, having attained to the highest and most illustrious mastery of their art, have received the laurel crown they had deserved, but that now this custom seems rather to have been lost than to have been merely laid aside, and not lost merely, but reduced to a matter of strange legendry, and discontinued for more than twelve hundred years. For we do not read that anyone has been decorated with this honor since the illustrious poet Statius, who flourished in the time of Domitian. I am moved also by the hope that,

¹⁸ Petrarch, “Epistle to Posterity,” 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

if God wills, I may renew in the now aged Republic a beauteous custom of its flourishing youth. (1245)

If he is referring to the way that recent poets had been honored, Petrarch is wrong that the laurel crown has been lost to history, “reduced to a matter of strange legendary,” as recent coronations had been explicitly civic affairs. But when he switches to the past tense to talk about Rome, he apparently imagines himself to be introducing (or to be re-introducing) the element of history. For Petrarch, to receive the laurel crown is to look backward. Earlier in the oration he names “Virgil, Varro, Ovid, Horace, and many others” (1244), and here he names Statius and again gestures to “so many and such great poets.” Petrarch imagines a whole pantheon of ancient laureates, a pantheon whose number exceeds even his ability to name them all. By sheer force of will, he will resurrect the ancient tradition into which he now would insert himself. Like the royal crown, the laurel crown marks a lineage that links laureate to laureate like beads on a chain.

But Petrarch’s conception of laureateship was also forward looking—and ambitiously so. Yes, Petrarch seeks fame; but he also wants to set a good example for poets and to restore “the honor of the Republic” (1245). Facing offers from Paris and Rome, Petrarch explains his choice:

I finally decided to come here—why, I ask you, if not for the very reason that Virgil gives, *Vicit amor patriae*. I was much moved also toward this decision by a certain affection and reverence for those ancient poets of excellent genius who flourished in this very city, who lived here, who are buried here [...] But whatever the cause, I trust that my coming, because of the novelty of the occasion if for no

other reason, may serve to bring some glory to this city, to the city whence I come, and to all of Italy. (1245)

Petrarch, like Mussato, is a conduit through which the city of Rome might celebrate itself. Petrarch received the poet's laurel crown, "to the great joy of the Romans who could attend the ceremony."²⁰ But for him, more than just the city of Rome was at stake. Whereas Dante felt compelled to choose between Florence and Bologna, Petrarch "assert[s] the sentimental claims of a specific place, a topographical location, a geopolitical site, to stand synecdochally for a larger whole."²¹ Since the third century BCE the name *Italia* had been used to describe the entire peninsula south of the Rubicon River, and the Roman Republic had united the several ethnic groups of the Gallo-Celts, Ligurians, Etruscans, Umbrians, Sabellians, Oscans, Latins, and the Greeks.²² Petrarch's account forges many interrelated rhetorical connections: it binds Petrarch and Virgil; Petrarch and fourteenth-century Rome; fourteenth-century Rome and Naples or Florence or both (depending on what Petrarch means by "the city whence I come"); fourteenth-century Rome and "all of Italy"; and finally fourteenth-century "Italy" and the ancient Roman Republic. It evinces what William J. Kennedy has described as "the tensile drift of local or regional identities toward a larger corporate whole."²³ If the oration is part of Petrarch's lifelong effort at "self-classicizing, of exempting texts [and thus their authors] from the erosions of time," Petrarch here attempts to do the same for "all of Italy."²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Kennedy, *Site of Petrarchism*, 36. Kennedy juxtaposes Petrarch's sentimentalizing of Rome here to his later abandonment of the city in favor of northern Italy.

²² Ibid., 9.

²³ Ibid., 4. Kennedy refers to the sixteenth century, but his outlines are useful for thinking about the earlier eras of Petrarch and Chaucer. On "Italy" in Petrarch's and Chaucer's days, see the same work, 8-15.

²⁴ Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 266.

Petrarchan poetic laureateship—the very phrase “lauriat poete”—makes its English-language debut in the *Prologue* to *The Clerk’s Tale*.²⁵ Although it is unlikely that Chaucer had specific knowledge of Petrarch’s coronation oration, his pilgrim Clerk echoes some of its key ideas.²⁶ The Clerk defines *poet laureateship* while introducing his tale’s supposed source, “Fraunceys Petrak”:

I wol yow telle a tale which that I
 Lerned at Padowe of a worthy clerk,
 As preved by his words and his werk
 He is now deed and nayled in his cheste;
 I prey to God so yeve his soule reste!
 Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
 Highte this clerk, whose rethorike sweete
 Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie,
 As Lynyan dide of philosophie,
 Or lawe, or oother art particuler;
 But Deeth, that wol nat suffer us dwellen heer,
 But as it were a twynklyng of an ye,
 Hem bothe hath slayn, and alle shul we dye.
 But forth to tellen of this worthy man
 That taughte me this tale, as I bigan,
 I seye that first with heigh stile he enditeth,

²⁵ All citations to Chaucer’s poetry refer to Benson’s edition, the *Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed.

²⁶ Wilkins believes the *Collatio* to have been lost for centuries, only to be rediscovered by Attilio Hortis and published in 1874. Thus, Chaucer probably did not have direct knowledge of Petrarch’s laureate coronation speech; Wilkins, “The Coronation.”

Er he the body of his tale writeth,
 A prohemye, in the which descryveth he
 Pemond and of Saluces the contree,
 And speketh of Apennyn, the hilles hye
 That been the boundes of West Lumbardye,
 And of Mount Vesulus in special,
 Where as the Poo out of a welle smal
 Taketh his firste spryngyng and his sours,
 That estward ay encresseth in his cours
 To Emeleward, to Ferrare, and Venyse,
 The which a long thyng were to devyse.
 And trewely, as to my juggement,
 Me thynketh it a thyng impertinent,
 Save that he wole conveyen his mateere;
 But this his tale, which that ye may here. (4.26-57)

Certainly, the Clerk's account of Petrarch's laureateship comports with the "heigh style" and personal honor. It also affirms the value of poetry itself—Petrarch's poetic achievement holds its own with "philosophie, / or lawe," two inarguably elite disciplines. The very mention of Petrarch's corpse—"deed and nayled in his cheste"—reminds the pilgrims and the reader that his cultural achievement will live on *post mortem*; after all, here it is being celebrated in this very prologue.

The Clerk also repeats Petrarch's appeal to nation. Translating Petrarch's brief "prohemye" to the Petrarch's story of Griselda, the Clerk gives us a map of the northern

portions of “al Ytaille” (the very “all Italy” of the *Collatio*), at once a geographical and cultural locale that is illuminated by Petrarch’s sweet rhetoric. The Clerk may apologize for his “impertinent” digression, but the author of this tale does not appear to be concerned. Taking his cue from Petrarch, Chaucer imbues laureateship with both personal and national pretensions.

But something else is going on here, and it has implicitly to do with a vision of a hybrid English laureateship. Rather than mention mighty Rome, the foundation of Petrarch’s laureate identity, the Clerk of the *Tales* scales things down to his supposedly personal meeting with the Italian poet. Whereas Petrarch discovered Virgil in ancient books and across millennia, the Clerk seems to have “lernerd” the tale of Griselda directly from the Italian poet’s mouth, perhaps at Petrarch’s home or a favorite meeting place in the smaller “Padowe,” a more humble, quotidian city in comparison to epic, ancient Rome. Petrarch famously walked through Rome in what he imagined to be the footsteps of his Roman predecessors. En route to Canterbury, not in Rome, the Clerk affiliates himself with this “lauriat poete”—by lessening the distance and history between them, by familiarizing Petrarch. As the poet laureateship passes from Italy into England, Chaucer uses the Clerk to make it low. Until it came completely under the monarch’s wing, creating poets into outright political partisans, English laureateship maintained a connection to lowbrow forms, genres, and modes. Sometimes playfully, fruitfully, or audaciously, those lowbrow components animated the English laureateship so long as the laureateship itself was open, flexible, and conducive to their influence.

By 1616, the concept of the laureateship had begun to find a local English habitation if not a name. The connection between King and Laureate was nearly made explicit when, that year, King James I awarded Ben Jonson a yearly pension of 100 marks “in consideracion of the good and acceptable service done and to be done vnto vs.”²⁷ Charles I renewed this pension in 1630 and raised Jonson’s stipend to £100, “in consideracon of the good and acceptable service donne vnto us and our said father by the said Beniamyn Iohnson and especially to incourage him to pceede in those services of his witt and penn [which] wee have enioyned vnto hym, and [which] wee expect.”²⁸ Notably, the payment, according to James and Charles, was awarded to Jonson because he, personally, pleased the king and because the king wanted to reward Jonson’s contribution—not because Jonson occupied an institutional office that came with certain obligations that were stipulated for him. Nonetheless, Jonson did outline the rough parameters of an institution—the vague “services of witt and penn”—that, by the 1630s, existed even without an occupant. For in 1638, the year that Jonson died, Charles granted William Davenant the same £100 “in consideraon of seruice heretofore done and hereafter to be done vnto vs.”²⁹ Davenant, we may therefore surmise, was Jonson’s successor in an office that by then existed independent of its occupant. When John Dryden filled in just six days after Davenant’s death, he assumed what was finally named the Office of the Poet Laureate. A literary persona was now enlisted in the service of the monarch.

²⁷ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 222. In 1590-91 Elizabeth I conferred a lifetime pension of £50 on Edmund Spenser, and the Catholic recusant Thomas Tresham referred to Spenser as “Poett Laurell.” Certainly the relationship between Spenser and the Elizabeth anticipated that of Jonson and James. Yet Spenser’s run was short-lived as he seems to have soured on the court and Queen not a year later. See Hadfield, “Spenser.”

²⁸ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 223. A mark was worth roughly two-thirds of a pound sterling, so Jonson got a 50% raise.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

The change from personal commendation to official post, begun in 1616 and advanced in the 1630s, was due in part to Jonson's good friend, the renowned historian John Selden. Selden examined the concept of the poet laureateship as part of his revised and significantly enlarged *Titles of Honor*. The original *Titles* was itself quite ambitious; and, for the 1631 revision, Selden surveyed even more material. His evidence, he says, has been "principally t[a]ken out of seuerall Autors that haue been writen of Parts of the Subject, out of the Histories of seuerall States and Ages, and out of their Constitutions and Customes."³⁰ That is, Selden read across genres, languages, and time periods. He contextualizes the laureateship among official titles that confer prestige, authority, and social aggrandizement, but that also entail specific duties and obligations. Like Petrarch nearly three hundred years earlier, Selden conceives of laureateship within an ancient, international system and within national communities. Selden, however, affiliates the laureateship with Europe's incipient nations far more coherently than even Petrarch does when he refers to "all of Italy." Selden's laureateship is not predominantly a recognition for imaginative writing; rather, it is a role sanctioned and defined by the powerful.

In this vein, Selden's laureateship, though more officially prestigious, is less potent than that of Petrarch, who conceived of his relation to "autoritie" as nearly that of an equal: "I presented myself there [in Naples] to that noblest of kings and philosophers, Robert, illustrious in his government and in literature. He is the only king of our times who has been a friend of learning and of virtue. I asked him to examine me according to his own lights [...] perhaps he reflected that the honor I sought redounded to his own credit, since I had chosen him from all mortal men to be my only qualified critic."³¹ Since

³⁰ Selden, *Titles of Honor* (1631), The Preface, [S]2v.

³¹ Petrarch, "Epistle to Posterity," 10.

it was the Roman Senate that awarded Petrarch the crown, Robert is nearly irrelevant to the poet's achievement. Petrarch seems to have run the show single-handedly: "I decided," "I presented myself," "I asked," "I had chosen." Even his evaluation by King Robert is preceded by his evaluation of Robert, Petrarch's "only qualified critic."

By contrast, Selden merges the medieval university degree with the role that Petrarch had outlined for himself, and subsumes both under the monarch's centralized political authority. Even his earliest history of the laureate emphasizes the role of the monarch. In ancient Rome, laureates were selected by the Emperor and "his assistant Judges" during the games of *Agon Capitolinus* and *Quinquatria*. Statius, Selden writes, was crowned laureate under Domitian in the late first century and, on the evidence of a gravestone, not long after the thirteen-year-old L. Velarius was crowned under Trajan. That ancient tradition, Selden tells us, ended in the age of the poet Ausonius (c. 310 – c. 395) because early Christians considered it an idolatrous practice. He defines the laureateship as the "custome of giuing Crowns of Laurell to Poets [...] as the Ensignes of the degree taken of Mastership in Poetrie, and that by Imperiall autoritie exercised either by the Emperors own hand, or by Counts Palatin, or by others that haue such delegate autoritie."³² Selden begins his history of the laureateship in the recent past, detailing a ceremony that honored the poet M. Johannes Paulus Crusius, who was granted "the Crown of Laurell" in Strasbourg in 1616 by Thomas Obrechtus, a Count Palatine who had acquired from Frederick II the authority to grant this honor.³³ According to Selden, Crusius composed and recited a Latin verse for the occasion, Obrechtus praised the art of poetry and Crusius in particular, Crusius swore allegiance to Frederick and to the Holy

³² Selden, *Titles of Honor* (1631), C3r.

³³ *Ibid.*, Cv-C3r.

Roman Empire, and Obrechtus crowned the poet. In this ceremony, the honor of the poet laureateship yokes worthy poet, poetry itself, prince, and empire. The poet laureateship, for Selden as for Petrarch, garners prestige and political power for its nations; but in Selden's account the hierarchy among those entities is more fully and expectedly articulated: the Emperor's deputy, Obrechtus, affirms the value of poetry, but the poet becomes a laureate only when he swears that he will write poetry on behalf of the Emperor.

Having reappeared in Holy Roman Empire in the twelfth century, and in the model of those "old Roman Emperros [sic]," Selden's version of the poet laureateship next migrated to England. Selden tells his English history of laureateship in reverse chronological order:

As fro[m] the vse of the old Empire, the later took the exa[m]ple of crowning Poets, so from that of the later, som vse of giuing the Laurel, was anciently receiued into England. Iohn Skelton had that title of Laureat vnder Henry the VIII. And in the same time Robert Whittington called himself Grammatica magister & Protuates Anglia, inflorentissima Oxoniensi Academia Laureatus. Vnder Edward the fourth, one Iohn Kay by the title of his humble Poet Lawreat, dedicates to him the siege of Rhodes in prose. But Iohn Gower, a famous Poet vnder Richard the II buried in S. Mary Oueries Church, hath his Statue Crowned with Iuy mixt with Roses.

Selden's passive construction, "was anciently receiued into England," suggests that it was the laurels that pursued Selden's nation, and England that finally accepted them. As the Holy Roman Empire took the laureateship from Ancient Rome, "so from" the Holy

Roman Empire England “receiued” it: the analogy elevates England by bestowing on Selden’s own homeland both a national literary history and an ancient and international lineage that bolsters that history. Selden gives the impression not only that England stands in the lineage that includes the two great empires, but that England has been standing in this lineage for nearly two centuries. What is more, Selden is careful to name a king with each of his laureates, so that his history of laureateship is England’s political history, too.

Selden tells his English history in reverse chronological order, constructing it backwards from the perspective of the present: Skelton after Whittington, Whittington after Kay, Kay after (possibly) Gower. All roads lead to England and to the present—to Ben Jonson—as well. Thus he has

by no vnseasonable digression, performed a promise to you my beloued BEN.
 IONSON. Your curious learning and iudgement may correct where I haue erred,
 and adde where my notes and memory haue left me short. You are / —omnia
 Carmina doctus / Et calles Mython plasmata & Historiam. / And so you both fully
 know what concernes it, and your singular Excellencie in the Art most eminently
 deserues it.”³⁴

Jonson’s appointment would resurrect English custom even as it enrolled England in the lineage of great powers. What Selden could do for his friend was provide laureateship with a legitimating history. In 1631, six years before Jonson’s death, Selden’s account

³⁴ Ibid., D2v-D3r. According to Rosenblatt, Selden’s Latin phrases here are quotations “of the praise by the early fourth-century poet Ausonius, in his *Commemoratio Professorum Burdigalensium* [*Poems Commemorating the Professors of Bordeaux*], of the Greek and Latin grammarians Crispus and Urbicus.” Rosenblatt translates: them, “learned in all the lore of poesy, and skilled alike in mythic fictions and in history”; *Renaissance England’s Chief Rabbi*, 52.

intimates that the imaginative possibilities for how a poet to use that history and for what a poet could do with the laureate role were both contracting.

Selden's laureate story comes to its fruition—and also its dead end—on April 13, 1668, when King Charles II's Lord Chamberlain issued a first-of-its-kind “warrant for a grant to John Dryden of the Office of Poet Laureate.”³⁵ When he finally issued a royal patent two years later, in 1670, Charles awarded Dryden an annuity of £200 and a butt of canary wine, “[i]n consideration of the many good and acceptable services [...] to vs heretofore done and performed” and for “the further & better encouragement of him.”³⁶ In the patent, Charles also conjoins the role of official poet with the role of official historiographer: “[wee] doe nominate constitute declare and appoint [Dryden]...our Poett Laureatt and Historiographer Royall.”³⁷ In affiliating the poet laureateship and the Office of the Historiographer Royal, Charles implicitly narrowed the former's scope so to serve his immediate interests. Several years earlier, James Howell had lobbied for the establishment of an English Historiographer Royal, arguing that “the prudentest and best policed nations” required such a position.³⁸ The historian who produced an official Caroline past would help Charles maintain the order that his reign had supposedly restored.³⁹ As the first official Historiographer Royal *and* Poet Laureate, then, Dryden would have been expected to produce both authoritative English history and authoritative

³⁵ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 60. No previous poet had received “such an appointment with such a title”; Broadus, *Laureateship*, iv.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Quoted in Ham, “Dryden as Historiographer-Royal,” 285.

³⁹ Although Howell lobbied for his own appointment to the post, and although he received a pension from the King, he was granted no title. Nonetheless, Howell seems to have taken it upon himself to write “political apologetics” or “history as validation of theory,” writes Ham; “Dryden as Historiographer-Royal,” 285. Ham lists several of Howell's histories: *His Majesties Royal Declaration* (1661), *Sway of the Sword* (1661), *Vindication of His Majesty* (1661), and *A Discours of Dunkirk with some Reflexes upon the late surrender thereof and A Discourse Concerning the Precedency of Kings* (1664). See also Saslow, “Dryden as Historiographer Royal.”

English poetry. His patent instructs him to use his “learneing & eminent abilityes” and “great Witt and elegant Style both in verse & prose” to support Charles’s nation. Whereas Petrarch imagined laureateship a parallel to kingship and cultural counterpoint to political authority, Charles subordinated the laurel to the royal crown.

Of course, Charles was anything but oblivious to the advantages that accrued to him by virtue of the fact the “new” Office of Poet Laureate had an illustrious history. His patent grants Dryden:

the rights Priviledges benefits and advantages therevnto belonging as fully and amply as Sir Geoffery Chaucer knight Sir John Gower Knight John Leland Esquire William Camden Esquire Benjamin Johnson Esquire James Howell Esquire Sir William Davenant Knight or any other person or persons haveing or exerciseing the Place or employment of Poet Laureat or Historiographer or either of them in the time of any of our Royall Progenitors.⁴⁰

No doubt Chaucer and Gower would have been pleased with their promotions to Poet Laureate as well as to “Knight,” just as Jonson would have appreciated his promotion to official Poet Laureate and to “Esquire.” Charles gives the impression that he is merely formalizing a role that has existed for almost three hundred years; but willy-nilly, this sentence is also an exercise in canon-formation. The patent’s lineage implies an unbroken tradition of English poets and historiographers, *and* a continuous, recognizable English literary culture dating back to at least the late-fourteenth century. What is more, the poets and historians constitute a tradition parallel to that of “our Royall Progenitors.” In this formulation, the office of the laureate is inextricable from, not just in tandem with, the history of the kings.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 61.

Poet laureates, official or not, have always interested in how they might serve their nation, and in the history of laureates who had served their own nations. Dryden's arrangement with King Charles worked for twenty years. When, after the revolution of 1688-89, England's first Poet Laureate refused to swear allegiance to William and Mary, he was divested of his post and replaced by Thomas Shadwell.⁴¹ Having lost the prestige that came with his royal appointment, Dryden decided to move away from what one critic calls "the rough and tumble of the contemporary scene" to seek out new ways to express "the true laurel, not the one bestowed by princes but the one earned by poets who stay true to their vocation."⁴² In his last decades, especially, Dryden reimagined himself in the pantheon of laureate poets who were not beholden to specific times and places. In three portraits from the 1690s, years after he had been divested of his official post, Dryden continued to have himself painted with a laurel crown. Still more to the point, he spent his last decade translating classics into modern English: Juvenal and Persius (1693), Virgil (1697), and *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), which featured translations of Homer, Ovid, Boccaccio, and Chaucer.⁴³ In these translations, Dryden built upon a history of poet laureates that rose above his specific time and place, yet still served the English nation. His vision required that he distinguish between a role rooted in his specific historical circumstance—Restoration England—and under the auspices of the monarch and a predominantly imaginative role that spanned eras.

As in the case of Petrarch, Dryden and his literary lineage are mutually constitutive: their coronations involve the creation of literary ancestries that, in turn, imbue the coronations themselves with significance, and the laureates with prestige. In

⁴¹ Hammond, "Dryden and the Laurel," 104.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 104 and 111.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104.

both instances, that prestige does not belong exclusively to the individual who wears the laurel crown but also to the wider community that he emblemizes, itself constructed at the coronation. Petrarch anticipated that he would set an example for laureates to come by creating (or recreating) the role itself. The formalization of the Office, the intrusion of political power upon it, marks the end of a dynamic authorial persona examined in this dissertation, one that had incorporated the low as an animating but risky source of poetic authority.

Making English Low

Understood as a national and historical phenomenon, the laureateship required the English vernacular. Between 1399 and 1616, many English writers were particularly alert to questions of how the vernacular could articulate, and could be used to create, an English nation. In the late thirteenth century, writers were already showing an interest in “the kind of *community* that writing in English could make or sustain.”⁴⁴ The English vernacular was already understood to be “the language of a particular people that makes meaning in a unique fashion.”⁴⁵ With the increased production of English texts during the fourteenth century and the linguistic standardization that accompanied it, “writers tried both to articulate their growing consciousness of the distinctiveness and coherence of English language and culture and to give the language a status closer to that of French or Latin.”⁴⁶ Slowly but surely, English came to be “seen as a natural language of a natural

⁴⁴ Evans et al., “Notion of Vernacular Theory,” 322.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 326. Davis, “National Writing,” discovers the connection between language and people in an even earlier English text, King Alfred of Wessex’s ninth-century *Prologue to the Pastoral Care*.

⁴⁶ Watson, “Politics,” 333.

community,” uniting “language, people, and land.”⁴⁷ This nationalization of English accelerated in the fifteenth century, when Lancastrian “language policy,” limited though it was, promoted English (against Anglo-Norman) in the governmental and literary milieus that could give it cultural capital.⁴⁸ By the time that William Caxton introduced the country to the printing press, English works and English translations of classical and foreign texts were not just common but in vogue.⁴⁹ In the wake of the separation from Rome and the new vernacular bible that accompanied it, Reformation writers in England discovered that “language [was] not solely a means of defining a nation: it was a means of creating one, overriding issues of blood or longstanding alliances by its ability, practically and rhetorically, to gather potentially disparate groups into one cohesive national community, using and understanding one tongue.”⁵⁰ Under Elizabeth, the status of English as a national language was taken for granted. By then, writes Paula Blank, it fell to English writers to “discriminate among versions of the language and to authorize preferred forms, to draw (and then, at times, deliberately to transgress) the borders that separate one dialect of English from another.”⁵¹ Vernacular writing engendered myriad disputes over what it should or could look like and do. It might be that in an intensely hierarchical society “a common language is never as common as it looks,” but that did

⁴⁷ Ibid., 335.

⁴⁸ Fisher, “Language Policy.” For a critique of Fisher’s argument, and an enumeration of its limitations with regard to the English government, see Dodd, “Spread of English.”

⁴⁹ Lerer, “William Caxton,” 724-25.

⁵⁰ Shrank, *Writing the Nation*, 17.

⁵¹ Blank, *Broken English*, 6. Blank in *Broken English* and Helgerson in *Forms of Nationhood* analyze this phenomenon during Elizabeth’s reign, but any earlier fifteenth or sixteenth-century reader of Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale* or the Parson’s disavowal of alliterative verse’s “rum, ram, raf” would have been familiar with “the difference of English” and choices of form and style.

not stop Spenser from imagining England as “a kingdom of our own language.”⁵²

Proliferating disagreements about English themselves testify to the overarching need throughout the early modern period to make the English vernacular work for a dizzying array of English men and women. From the national and nationalizing perspective of any given English laureate, writing in English of one sort or another was inescapable.

Understood as a transnational and transhistorical phenomenon, however, the laureateship eschewed the vernaculars. From Petrarch on, the decision to seek laureate prestige by writing poetry in *any* European national language was an unusual choice. Petrarch received the laurel crown in 1341 primarily on the basis of two then-unfinished Latin works: the *De viris illustribus* and the *Africa*, a collection of ancient Romans’ lives and an epic account of the Roman general Scipio Africanus Major.⁵³ True, Petrarch had written a few Italian sonnets by 1341; but no one, including Petrarch himself, believed that such trivia could or should merit a laurel crown. When Virgilio invited Dante to receive the honor in Bologna, for example, the professor made the offer contingent on Dante’s writing something new—anything new—in Latin. Petrarch would have been sympathetic to Virgilio’s demand. Criticizing Dante’s choice of the Italian vernacular for the *Commedia*, Petrarch explains that he regrets his own sonnets: he has been “outraged and revolted” by “popular mangling” of them, he explains.⁵⁴ Petrarch would not write serious work in the vernacular because he would not be judged “among fools in taverns and marketplaces.”⁵⁵ It was not at all odd for him to understand that in order to speak for

⁵² First quotation is from McEachern, *Poetics of English Nationhood*, 129. See also Fumerton, “Ben Jonson.” The second is Edmund Spenser, which is cited and discussed in Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 1-4.

⁵³ Regn and Huss, “Petrarch’s Rome.”

⁵⁴ Petrarch, “On Dante,” 179.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* See also Ganim, “Chaucer, Boccaccio.”

“all of Italy,” he should write in Latin. Selden’s expansive history confirmed that for nearly three hundred years after Petrarch, only English laureates turned their backs on Latin.

Collapsing distinctions between Dante’s *vulgari eloquentia* and the languages of “taverns and marketplaces,” Petrarch cast the Italian vernacular as a monolith that ought to be dismissed *in toto*—no fine distinctions were necessary. If the Italian vernacular was in disrepute, where did that leave *English*? Even though English soon became “a vernacular of value,”⁵⁶ its value as a language was unsurprisingly measured negatively against other languages, Latin not the least among them. Attempts to assert the legitimacy of English carried with them a nagging reminder of undistinguished status in comparison with laureate Latin or vernacular Italian and French. In Chaucer’s day, as James Simpson explains, “the literary language of the English vernacular [...] was itself a smaller ‘place’ whose identity was overshadowed by larger competitors, a linguistic ‘suburb’ beside the great linguistic ‘city’ of French, and within reach of the newly developing literary metropolis of Italian.”⁵⁷ Simpson’s metaphors of place map usefully onto early conceptions of laureateship: English is to French and Italian, as the Clerk’s Padua is to Petrarch’s Rome. As Mary Catherine Davidson explains, “[a]t the time when English was still primarily a spoken language and in status an unruly tongue, Anglophones inevitably addressed the fact that to write formally and seemingly exclusively in English meant begging pardon for such linguistic license.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Watson, “Politics,” 347.

⁵⁷ Simpson, “Nobody’s Man,” 59. See also Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*; Davidson, *Medievalism, Multilingualism*; and Salter, “English International.”

⁵⁸ Davidson, *Medievalism, Multilingualism*, 11.

Although the English language amassed cultural capital throughout the period canvased in this dissertation, Latin-use increased as well, as English was not seen to be capable of the most elite kinds of writing.⁵⁹ Aping Continental vernaculars and importing inkhorn words, even sixteenth-century writers “were dogged by insecurity about the status of their vernacular.”⁶⁰ When not “writing in Latin,” English poets and linguistic theorists were “showing how English can emulate Latin.”⁶¹ It took writers like Jonson (and Marlowe, Nashe, Shakespeare, among others) to wrestle with vernacular English, to fold its lowbrow elements into something hearty, supple, even eloquent. Even a seventeenth-century elitist like Jonson, who went to great pains to elevate the vernacular, could not shake the lowbrow elements of the English language. According to Thomas M. Greene, Jonson is “preeminent . . . in the history of English classicism because in a real sense he invented a classical idiom for his language [...] To be an English poet after he wrote was to command a finer, more various and sophisticated and style.”⁶² Or, as I will argue in Chapter 3, we might say that Jonson discovered that the classics themselves contained a demotic idiom. Despite diligent efforts to elevate his vernacular, Jonson still indulged prose comedies, works that captured the hurly-burly, multifaceted demotic of his day. This, I argue, is the key feature of one lowbrow strand of English laureate poetics.

Writers who were deeply engaged in issues of style and prestige had to confront the English language’s status. Both national and transnational cultural vectors drove English would-be laureates to study and experiment with the low. Predictably, the low

⁵⁹ Dodd, “Spread of English.”

⁶⁰ Shrank, *Writing the Nation*, 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶² Greene, *Light in Troy*, 273.

varied from writer to writer, text to text. In general, I agree with those scholars who see low-status forms, techniques, and modes—usually designated with the shorthand “popular culture”—as imaginative constructions produced by relatively elite and middling writers. In his influential *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke distinguishes between what he calls the “big tradition” (i.e. elite and exclusive) and the “little tradition” (i.e. popular and inclusive), and to each he attributes a distinct “a stock of genres” or “a stock of forms (schemata, motifs, themes, formulae).”⁶³ Burke’s work claims that specific cultural values attached permanently to specific genres or forms. Following Roger Chartier, Linda Woodbridge and Garret Sullivan argue to the contrary that “[w]hat marks popular culture as popular is not a set of textual attributes, but [the text’s] place in a high/low binarism in which the popular is that which the elite is not.”⁶⁴ It is not that certain genres and forms may simply be plucked out of high or low culture and employed in the other. Rather, writers and readers continuously reassign cultural values depending on how those forms and genres, practices and texts, are used. This view frees Burke’s original analysis from its constraining association of the low primarily with festive or folk culture. Nearly anything can be “low,” and each writer that I examine in this dissertation inherits and then reproduces a high/low binary; in each text, the would-be laureate negotiates the spectrum of high and low. For Hoccleve, the ho-hum details of daily London life and the individual’s small-bore anxieties are set against matters of state and high culture literary canons. For Skelton, a child’s emotional meanderings contrast with highbrow literary features such as Ovidian *blazon* and aureate diction. And for Jonson, raucous Plautine city-comedy contends with Horace’s decorous criticism. For the

⁶³ Burke, *Popular Culture*, 173.

⁶⁴ Woodbridge and Sullivan, “Popular culture,” 268; Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation.” See also Sponsler, “Culture as Appropriation”; and Lamb, *Popular Culture*, 1-23.

would-be laureates examined in this study, the ‘low’ consists of a set of tools—demotic language, debased personas, quotidian settings, discordant comedy—that they used to reevaluate the categories of high and low altogether. Woodbridge and Sullivan argue that “[t]he Renaissance posited a popular culture against which to define—and usually to exalt—high culture.”⁶⁵ The would-be laureates whom I study posit a low culture in order to exalt it.

In terms of social status, Hoccleve, Skelton, and Jonson were neither high nor low. They were literate in both English and the prestige languages of French (Hoccleve) and Latin (Hoccleve, Skelton, and Jonson), and they all had at least some access to political power, even if that access often felt painfully limited. Although they might be described most accurately as socially middling, the poet laureateship encouraged them all to conceive of themselves in binary terms. If they were elite writers relative to English men and women, they were non-elite on a laureate scale. This fact drove their literary experiments. In the texts that I study, these writers employ low literary forms, tropes, and modes that they inherited as such. Through the low, specifically, they assert their English laureate authority. For all three writers, this literary process—introducing the low so to build their laureate identities with it—posited and then solved the parallel problem that the *English* laureates faced as they looked to the pantheon of ancient and international poets with only the tools of their burgeoning but still inferior vernacular. By means of the low, they invented a laureateship that was uniquely their own.

Each of the would-be laureates that I examine creates his own version of laureateship and the low. In Chapter 1, I argue that Hoccleve develops his laureate vision from his reading of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Specifically, in the *Male Regle* (c. 1406)

⁶⁵ Woodbridge and Sullivan, “Popular culture,” 283.

and the *Series* (1420-21), Hoccleve channels Chaucer's loud-mouthed Host, Harry Bailly; Harry's deep connection to the urban neighborhood; and Harry's idiosyncratic interpretation of Chaucer the pilgrim's *Tale of Melibee*. Through the lens of the Host, Hoccleve imagines his predecessor and model, the real Chaucer, to be an elite yet familiar vernacular poet. In the *Male Regle* and the *Series*, Hoccleve departs from this model to transform his everyday experience around London into a writerly persona worthy of laureate status.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Skelton employs different prosodies to mediate classical influences and the lowbrow, demotic idiom; and it is through mediation that he invents his vision of a fleeting laureateship. In the *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell* (c. 1495-1523), Skelton uses refrains to iterate poetic form and the literary history embodied in it; in *Phyllyp Sparowe* (c. 1508, republished with additions in 1523), Skelton's short, rhyming skeltonics iterate the poet himself as a unique creative entity. Thus, in these two important works, Skelton juxtaposes the time of tradition with its sense of the past to the fleeting historical experience of John Skelton himself.

I approach Ben Jonson along the path paved by his medieval precursors, rereading Jonson and the English Renaissance literary system as important contributors to early laureateship but not sole creators of it. In Chapter 3, I argue that Jonson deploys his deep knowledge of Neo-classical literary theory and of Roman New Comedy when he writes his seemingly un-laureate *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Crisscrossing classical form and decorum with London city chatter, *Bartholomew Fair* simultaneously invests the lowbrow with poetic authority and English laureateship with the noise of the tavern. This play fits into a dynamic vision of laureateship of the kind forged by Hoccleve and

Skelton. Like Hoccleve and Skelton, Jonson reappears as a product and producer not only of the local literary system to which he was immediately bound, but of a national culture, in no small measure lowbrow, at least two centuries in the making.

Chapter 1: Thomas Hoccleve's Local Laureateship

Thomas Hoccleve was writing vernacular poetry in London in the first quarter of the fifteenth century, and he never occupied an official laureate post.⁶⁶ At that time, none existed. Instead, Hoccleve earned his living, primarily, as a clerk for the Office of the Privy Seal, drafting and copying formulaic petitions for the government at Westminster.⁶⁷ Although this work never brought financial security, Hoccleve's position at the Privy Seal did elevate him socially.⁶⁸ Hoccleve's literary skills and social aggrandizement attracted the notice of powerful patrons, including the allies of Prince Henry of Wales, who would become the second Lancastrian king, Henry V.⁶⁹ Thus, although he never occupied an official poetic office, Hoccleve did find his way to the center of English politics and culture.

In fact, his contributions to what John Fisher has called the Lancastrian "language policy" suggest that between 1411 and 1416 Hoccleve did experience what could be called an *unofficial* "laureate."⁷⁰ The first Lancastrian king, Henry IV, deposed Richard II in 1399. In the decade following this usurpation, the new dynasty faced a crisis of legitimacy in Parliament and among the English citizenry: although they physically

⁶⁶ Hoccleve's earliest extant work, *L'epistre de Cupide*, is dated 1402, and parts of the *Series*, were likely written in 1419-1421, five years before Hoccleve died; see Hoccleve, *L'Epistre*, line 476 and Ellis's note to "My Complente." See Tolmie, "The Professional," on Hoccleve's struggle to forge an identity—and earn a living—as a secular poet during the historical transition between "the economy of feudal promise" and the "cash economy" (368).

⁶⁷ On Hoccleve's bureaucratic work, see Knapp, "Bureaucratic Identity."

⁶⁸ Knapp, "Bureaucratic Identity," 359-65. By the end of Hoccleve's career, government clerks commonly referred to themselves as "gentlemen."

⁶⁹ See, for example, Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, Power*, 299-322.

⁷⁰ Among those to use this word in relation to Hoccleve are Knapp, "Thomas Hoccleve," 196; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, 90-91; Strohm, "Hoccleve," 640.

occupied the throne, the Lancastrians sought what Paul Strohm has described as “a symbolic enactment of their legitimacy persuasive enough to control the field of imaginative possibility.” But, Strohm has shown, they always contended “with their subjects’ limitless ability to imagine alternatives.”⁷¹ Recognizing the dynasty’s vulnerability, Henry IV’s son, Prince Henry of Wales, and Prince Henry’s allies sought other sources of authority—distinct from their own—with which to bolster the Lancastrians’ claim to the throne. To this end, as Fisher explains, the Lancastrians attempted to appeal to a common Englishness through the common language, and so, among other strategies, they commissioned English-language poetic texts.⁷² Hoccleve’s widely disseminated *Regement of Princes* (1410-11) is a prime example of such a text, and the Prince himself may have had a hand in its production.⁷³ The *Regement* is a 5463-line poem primarily in the *Fürstenspiegel* genre, an advice book that offers political council.⁷⁴ Additionally, Hoccleve wrote several shorter, explicitly political English poems in the few years following the publication of the *Regement*.⁷⁵ Hoccleve’s involvement with the dynasty led to the poet’s inclusion in an important series of author portraits that brought together Lancastrian spiritual, political, and cultural authorities.⁷⁶ His real, historical relationship to the Lancastrians may well have encouraged Hoccleve

⁷¹ Strohm, *England’s Empty Throne*, 2.

⁷² Fisher, “A Language Policy,” 84.

⁷³ Citations from the *Regement of Princes* refer to Blyth’s edition, *Thomas Hoccleve: the Regement of Princes*.

⁷⁴ The *Regement*, written at mid-career, survives in forty-three manuscripts, many more than any of Hoccleve’s other works, indicating that in its day and immediately afterwards it was the most-frequently copied and well-known of all of Hoccleve’s poems. See Blyth, introduction to *Thomas Hoccleve: The Regement of Princes*, para. 33. Indeed, the *Regement*’s fame is a function of its seminal place in the Lancastrian “language policy.” See also Lehr, “Hoccleve and the National Language”; Pearsall, “Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*”; and Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, Power*, 298-322.

⁷⁵ For an overview of the links between Hoccleve and the Lancastrians, see Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, 88-130.

⁷⁶ On the portraits, see Wright, “Author Portraits.”

to imagine a prestigious English poetic role, even to see himself as “the person of the sovereign displaced from the realm of power into the realm of letters,” as Robert Meyer-Lee has defined the fiction of the poet laureateship in the period.⁷⁷

Although he never does so directly, Hoccleve comes closest to articulating his vision of an English laureateship when, in the same *Regement*, he attributes such a role to his Ricardian predecessor, Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400).⁷⁸ This vision includes two facets, the first of which is a celebration of Chaucer’s poetic achievements. Over the course of the *Regement*, which contains an unusually lengthy, pseudo-autobiographical prologue and several tangents, the speaker, named “Hoccleve” (1864-65), delivers three eulogies to Chaucer: Chaucer is the “flour of eloquence, / Mirroure of fructuous entendement,” a “universel fadir in science” with “excellent prudence” (1962-65); Chaucer is “the honour of Englissh tonge” (1959), “[t]his landes verray tresor and richesse” (2081), “the first fyndere of our fair langage” (4980); and Chaucer is heir to no

⁷⁷ Meyer-Lee himself has shown that Hoccleve and his near contemporary John Lydgate were not simply peddling propaganda for the Lancastrians. Rather, these vernacular writers presented themselves as supportive of but distinct from the king; they were “parallel figure[s] of friendly *but untethered* poetic authority”; *Poets and Power*, 19 (my emphasis). But Meyer-Lee still assumes that both poets were nonetheless fixated on their relationship to the Lancastrians. According to Meyer-Lee, Hoccleve ultimately failed at Lydgate’s version of laureateship: where Lydgate successfully mystifies his dependence on the prince for his own poetic legitimation, writing himself as a permanently authoritative *vates*, Hoccleve constantly writes about money, emphasizing his status as a paid propagandist, a “kept laureate,” *Poets and Power*, 20. Recently, Jenni Nuttal has taken Meyer-Lee’s argument further: not only did Hoccleve *present* himself as untethered, she argues, but the poet wrote from a clerical and ecclesiastical position that was, in fact, independent of royal authority. Nuttal, however, challenges Hoccleve’s designation as a laureate at all. Nuttal argues that Hoccleve did not write *on behalf of* royal authority but wrote *about* royal authority, which was “a subject of interest for his audience.” Nuttal writes, “Hoccleve was not an official poet or proto-laureate, but rather, at least in some parts of his diverse literary career, a clerical commentator, occupying in verse a position analogous to that of a preacher, or a prayer-giver, advisor, or educator.” Nuttal goes too far in my view: there is no reason to conclude that “clerical commentator” and *laureate* are mutually exclusive positions—especially during a period when laureateship itself was predominantly a fiction.

⁷⁸ How Hoccleve understood and used Chaucer’s reputation is the subject of a whole subset of Hoccleve criticism. Key works include Bowers, “Thomas Hoccleve and the Politics of Tradition”; Burrow, “Hoccleve and Chaucer”; Carlson, “Thomas Hoccleve and the Chaucer Portrait”; Classen, “Hoccleve’s Independence from Chaucer”; Kamath, *Authority and First-Person Allegory*; Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse*; Krochalis, “Hoccleve’s Chaucer Portrait”; Machan, “Textual Authority”; Pearsall, “Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*”; and Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, Power*, 298-322.

lesser literary giants than “Tullius,” “Aristotle,” and “Virgile” (2085-90). In the early fifteenth-century, English language “makers” had not solidified English poetry’s place among culturally dominant Latin, French, and Italian literatures,⁷⁹ and so Hoccleve’s unequivocal celebration of Chaucer claims new status for an English poet. By placing his predecessor in a pantheon of classical *auctores*, Hoccleve also promotes English as cultural equal to Ancient Greek and Latin. Thus, Chaucer is an English poet worth honoring, and Chaucer’s poetry is a reason to honor English. Notably, Hoccleve imagines a poetic role that is more expansive than the role that Meyer-Lee supplies—“the person of the sovereign displaced from the realm of power into the realm of letters”—for Hoccleve’s makes an international, transhistorical claim for the English poet.

Hoccleve’s representation of Chaucer as would-be laureate includes a second facet: as he celebrates Chaucer’s achievements, Hoccleve also insists that Chaucer is familiar. In the *Regement*, terms such as “maister” (2078) and, especially, “fadir” (2078) evoke not only symbolic but also real, historical connection. We learn that the speaker, “Hoccleve,” was “aqweyntid” (1867) with Chaucer, whom he calls “best of any wight” (1868). Supposedly Chaucer lived so near to Hoccleve that the two could meet in person, around London, throughout the specific years of Hoccleve’s young adulthood: “And fadir Chaucer fayn wolde han me taght / But I was dul and lerned lyte or naght” (2078-79). Hoccleve proves his personal connection to Chaucer by including next to the third eulogistic passage a verisimilar portrait “to putte othir men in remembrance / Of [Chaucer’s] persone” (4994-95). While early fifteenth-century illuminators usually used symbols or tokens to represent noteworthy people, this portrait’s lifelike detail and

⁷⁹ On Chaucer and medieval “making,” see Olson, “Making and Poetry.” On the cultural value of English literature in late medieval Europe, see Elizabeth Salter, “Chaucer and Internationalism” and *English and International*; and Evans et al., “Notions of Vernacular Theory.”

realistic-seeming facial features are extraordinary for the time.⁸⁰ The speaker's insistence that he knows Chaucer personally is similarly unique, as none of Chaucer's other fifteenth-century poetic followers claim to have known the man whom only Hoccleve, before John Dryden in the eighteenth century, calls "fadir." According to Ethan Knapp, the *Regement's* speaker explicitly establishes a Chaucerian literary lineage and creates in Chaucer an "inheritable genius."⁸¹ By elevating Chaucer, by suggesting that Chaucer elevates English, and by positing a personal, even familial connection to Chaucer, Hoccleve promotes his own vernacular verse. Furthermore, to familiarize his predecessor is also to bring him into the fiction of the everyday, fifteenth-century London where both the real historical Thomas Hoccleve and Geoffrey Chaucer lived for at least a few years. Chaucer is a renowned poet and also a neighbor.

In this chapter, I argue that Hoccleve develops both facets of his laureate vision from his reading of Chaucer's poetry itself—namely, from his interpretation of a central character in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Host of the pilgrimage, Harry Bailly. That Hoccleve knew the *Canterbury Tales* is indisputable. He may have himself transcribed parts of the early Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts, and he may have even added some of his own lines and phrases to both.⁸² Additionally, critics have identified in Hoccleve's

⁸⁰ See Krochalis, "Hoccleve's Chaucer Portrait," for a full discussion of the novelty and the verisimilar portrait.

⁸¹ Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse*, 112.

⁸² In their study of early fifteenth-century manuscripts, Doyle and Parkes show that Hoccleve worked extensively alongside the medieval scrivener known as scribe B, who was largely responsible for the Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts. Moreover, according to David Mosser, there are enough "congruencies" between scribe F of the Hengwrt manuscript and Hoccleve's own holographs "to suspect very strongly" that scribe F is Hoccleve and, thus, that Hoccleve also added a few lines and words of his own invention to Hengwrt. Based on this evidence and the presence of certain Hocclevean words and themes, Lawton further suggests that Hoccleve not only worked on the Ellesmere manuscript, too, but added some small parts of his own invention, including the *Prologue* and *Epilogue* to the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Introduction* to the *Squire's Tale*, and the "textually problematic stanza" following the *Envoy* to the *Clerk's Tale*; see *Chaucer's Narrators*, 127-29, 129. On the earliest manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, see Mosser, "Hengwrt Chaucer Digital Facsimile"; Owen, Jr., *The Manuscripts*. On Scribe B, see Horobin,

works outright references to and echoes of the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the *Prioress's Tale*, the pilgrim Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.⁸³ Although these scholars have analyzed Hoccleve's debts to Chaucer, none have suggested that Chaucer influenced Hoccleve's often-noted "effect of realism," comprising the many poetic images that seem to record the historical Hoccleve's real life in the English city.⁸⁴ Whereas Chaucer's first-person speakers do not quite anticipate this aspect of Hoccleve's poetry, Harry Bailly does: the fictional Host is characterized by the details of his life in his urban neighborhood. His forceful emphasis on the English everyday and his interpretation of the pilgrim Chaucer's *Melibee* provided Hoccleve with a model for how a vernacular poet might intervene within a prestigious international literary tradition that would render him belated—and thus how Hoccleve could create in Chaucer a would-be poet laureateship that depends upon the poet's very Englishness.

This chapter includes four parts. First, I examine the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale* to argue that English vernacular makers, however elite they were in England, faced an obstacle to any role that resembled a proto-laureateship: from an international and transhistorical perspective, the English-language poet lacked cultural status. Second,

"Adam Pinkhurst, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the Hengwrt Manuscript"; Mooney, "Chaucer's Scribe"; and Roberts, "On Giving Scribe B a Name."

⁸³ Roger Ellis, "Chaucer, Christine de Pizan, and Hoccleve."

⁸⁴ Brown, "'Lo, Heer the Fourme,'" 2. The effect of realism has made the poet especially appealing to modern literary critics. That Hoccleve's poetry is driven by a unique, autobiographical voice that expresses, at least partly, Hoccleve's real-life historical experience is nearly a settled fact of Hoccleve scholarship and never, as far as I can tell, omitted from any discussion of that poetry. For a survey of critics interested in this issue, see Burrow, "Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture"; Burrow, "Hoccleve's *Series*"; Classen, "The Autobiographical Voice of Thomas Hoccleve"; Greetham, "Self-Referential Artifacts"; Patterson, "'What is me?'" and Sugito, "Rereading Hoccleve's *Series*." The "effect of realism" has been a boon to those critics who are interested in the materiality of fifteenth-century writing, as Hoccleve expounds on the time and labor expended on the writing task itself (Richardson, Malcolm, "Hoccleve in His Social Context"; and Watt, "'I this book shal make'"); the poet's dependence on money and so on the whims of wealthy patrons (Meyer-Lee, "Hoccleve and the Apprehension of Money"; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, 88-123; and Vines, "The Rehabilitation of Patronage"); and the particular concerns of writing to the prince (Bowers, "Thomas Hoccleve and the Politics of Tradition"; Hasler, "Hoccleve's Unregemented Body"; Patterson, "'What is me?'" and Simpson, "Nobody's Man").

drawing on the theory of Homi K. Bhabha, I argue that Harry Bailly's connection to the city and role as a reader of Chaucer models a way to interpret Chaucerian poetry that emphasizes its Englishness. Third, I argue that in the *Male Regle* Hoccleve develops the themes and ideas that Harry Bailly brings to bear on Chaucerian poetry to create the poem's aspirational but everyday first-person narrator. Fourth, I argue that in the frame narrative of the *Series*, Hoccleve represents his own vision of English poetic prestige that marries the poet's writerly persona to the everyday world of his fifteenth-century London. That Hoccleve is always talking about himself is not a quirk of his poetry but instead central to his would-be laureate vision.

The Man of Law's Chaucer

The *Canterbury Tales* represents two ways of interpreting Chaucer's legacy—a crucial issue for Hoccleve, who developed his own vision of laureateship out of his celebration and familiarization of his literary “fadir.” The first is contained in the Introduction to *The Man of Law's Tale*, the fifth tale in the collection. Before he begins his contribution to the game, the Man of Law tells about himself and, evidently, his knowledge of some of London's real-world contemporary vernacular makers. In a particularly metafictional passage, the Man of Law tells his fellow pilgrims about a poet named “Chaucer.” In this section, I argue that while he celebrates Chaucer and locates him within an international poetic tradition, the Man of Law also undercuts the standing of Chaucer and English-language poetry within that tradition.

The Man of Law is called upon to tell his tale, but before beginning, he wonders how he is to do so in the shadow of a poet named “Chaucer.” Despite his playful

complaints, the Man of Law insists that Chaucer deserves to be celebrated for his extensive English poetic making:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
 That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
 On metres and on rymyng craftily,
 Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
 Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man.
 And if he have not seyde hem, leve brother,
 In o book, he hath seyde hem in another.
 For he hath toold of loveris up and doun
 Mo than Ovide made of mencion
 In his Epistles, that been ful olde.

What sholde I tellen hem, syn they been tolde? (II.46-55)

At this point in the *Canterbury Tales*, we have met the fictional, pilgrim-narrator, the “I” of the *General Prologue* (20) who describes his fellow pilgrims and relays their tales and banter as he travels along with them. The Man of Law’s “Chaucer” is not this fellow pilgrim but rather a poet who exists only in one or another “book” (52), completely separate from the pilgrimage. This version of Chaucer evinces what Strohm has described as the historical Chaucer’s “heightened tendency [in the *Canterbury Tales*] to look beyond the present, to an audience of distant and future readers,”⁸⁵ readers who will never know the living man but only study his finished “volume” (60). Such a volume itself has the capacity to become “ful olde,” and the page is the surest place for the writer

⁸⁵ *Social Chaucer*, 65. See also Middleton, “Chaucer’s ‘New Men’.”

Chaucer to live on.⁸⁶ Indeed, the Man of Law elevates the poetry of “Chaucer” by locating that esteemed writer outside of the “right now” (46) of the pilgrimage altogether. This Chaucer’s sources and this Chaucer’s poetry are *both* lumped together in the vaguely defined past.

Although he does not say so explicitly, the Man of Law also links Chaucer to high-prestige French-language literature, from which the English-language poet may transfer cultural authority. By comparing Chaucer to “Ovide” and then enumerating the classical love stories that Chaucer has translated in the “Seintes Legende of Cupide” [*The Legend of Good Women*] (61),⁸⁷ the Man of Law places Chaucer within a network of elite French-language courtly makers.⁸⁸ An educated civil servant like Chaucer would have been steeped in French language and literature so that he likely imagined himself to be taking part in *its* tradition rather than in anything that he could have conceived of as English. As Ardis Butterfield explains, “the absence of linguistic jingoism in Chaucer comes [...] from realizing that English could never achieve cultural status in its own right without seeking to participate as fully as it could in the dominant *lingua franca* of French.”⁸⁹ The very existence of an “olde” tradition—one connecting French to the nearly mythic past—is made possible by the prestige that the “international” community

⁸⁶ The Man of Law’s Chaucer harkens back to a medieval commonplace that only dead *auctors* are true authorities. See Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, x.

⁸⁷ As critics have pointed out, some of the stories that the Man of Law names do not, in fact, appear therein, and the Man of Law omits others that do appear in the *Legend*. The Man of Law’s Introduction may have been written before the *Legend*, and the list may sketch out a plan (rather than a summary) drawn from Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*. See Brown, “The Man of Law’s Head-Link”; and David, “The Man of Law vs. Chaucer.”

⁸⁸ “Ovide,” in the late fourteenth century, does not merely recall Chaucer’s classical heritage. The name signals French and Anglo-Norman writers such as Guillaume de Machaut, Eustache Deschamps, and Jean Froissart, all of whom knew the ancient poet primarily “through the eyes of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun,” the writers of the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, “whose precedent is everywhere decisive”; see Lawton, *Chaucer’s Narrators*, 62. See also Benson, “Courtly Love and Chivalry”; Kamath, *Authority and First-Person Allegory*; Minnis, “Theorizing the *Rose*”; and Richards, introduction to *Debating the Roman de la Rose*.

⁸⁹ Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*, 274. See also Elizabeth Salter, “Chaucer and Internationalism.”

afforded French-language literature.⁹⁰ English participates in this tradition, as Butterfield asserts, “as fully as it could.”

Butterfield’s words seem to echo the Man of Law’s “in swich Engliſsh as he kan,” and both call attention to the cultural inferiority of Chaucer’s chosen language. Thus, Hoccleve would have encountered in the *Canterbury Tales* itself a representation of the obstacle to the English-language work’s own path to prestige: the reader of “Chaucer,” the Man of Law, understands his English predecessor in the context of a French-language tradition that marginalizes the English language. Although the poet Chaucer and the members of his social group may have regarded French as “the dominant *lingua franca*,” most English speakers would not have done so.⁹¹ While readers of French like Chaucer were in the upper echelons of late fourteenth-century society, where French was associated with high culture and power, the vast majority of English speakers knew little, if any, French. As Susan Crane explains, in England “French was the reverse of a *lingua franca*,” and the French language’s “hierarchizing function” is precisely why it survived.⁹² From the perspective of most of those on top of the hierarchy, English was at best a marred dialect of French, an indigenous language spoken by peripheral people.

⁹⁰ In fact, in accepting the laureate crown in Rome rather than at the Sorbonne, Petrarch attempted to pry cultural and so political dominance out of the hands of the French and impart it to the Italians. His decision testifies to French’s influence. See Richards, introduction to *Debating the Roman de la Rose*, xxi-xxxvi.

⁹¹ Butterfield’s use of the phrase “co-vernacular” to refer to French and English throughout her book could at times elide this fact. By insisting that fourteenth-century England had “co-vernaculars,” Butterfield draws attention to that culture’s complex linguistic situation, taking issue with some medievalists’ tendency to flatten the linguistic landscape by anachronistically emphasizing the importance of English and English only. But the assertion of “co-vernaculars” could imply that French and English somehow bore equal cultural status. The trouble likely arises from the fact that the term *vernacular* has “no consistent definition,” as Larry Scanlon explains; “Poet Laureates,” 220.

⁹² Crane, “Anglo-Norman Culture,” 48. See also Cannon, who distinguishes between the working knowledge of a few French words and the ability to immerse oneself in French literature, and who argues that “we can only use this phrase ‘the French of England’ to refer to the production and consumption of literature in England if we are prepared to accept the practices of an elite as equivalent to ‘England’ as a whole; “Class Distinction,” 55; see also Rothwell, “Trilingual England”; Stein, “Multilingualism”; and Wilson, “English and French in England.”

What is more, the historicist narrative that traces Chaucer's literary lineage back to its indistinct origins in "old tyme" renders English, even an aspirationally-highbrow English, belated. With only "swich Englissh as he kan," the Man of Law's Chaucer can only ever be an imperfect mimic of a French-language writer.

Although they both celebrate their predecessor, the Man of Law and the speaker of the Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* present different relationships to the poet Chaucer. In the Man of Law's estimation, Chaucer is not a medium for generating new verse; in fact, Chaucer is a dead end from whom the Man of Law must diverge: "I recche [care] nocht a bene [...] I speke in prose, and lat him [Chaucer] rymes make" (94-96). Hoccleve, to the contrary, neither confines Chaucer to books nor describes his predecessor as belated. According to the speaker of the *Regement of Princes*, Chaucer is the fountainhead of the English poetic tradition; he is a vernacular maker and even "fadir" to be emulated. The path from the Man of Law's version of Chaucer to Hoccleve's runs through the realistic images of everyday fifteenth-century London that Hoccleve develops from another of Chaucer's fictionalized readers—the *Canterbury Tale's* Host, Harry Bailly.

Harry Bailly's Chaucer

Harry Bailly would have been an appealing literary model for Hoccleve, as Harry is a reader of the *Canterbury Tales* and an arbiter of the poetry's value. As "governour" of the tale-telling game (*General Prologue* 813), the Host has the authority to judge each tale (805) and to declare victory for the pilgrim with "best sentence and most solas" [best moral teaching and most pleasure] (798). Yet the Host does not reserve this authority for final judgment only: he interjects himself sporadically throughout the frame of the *Tales*,

sometimes evaluating a tale's "sentence and solaaas," sometimes remarking on the pilgrims themselves, sometimes facilitating the game. While he does not show any awareness of the renowned poet celebrated by the Man of Law, Harry Bailly does meet another fictional version of Chaucer, the *Tales*'s pilgrim-narrator, who speaks in a first-person voice that encourages us to associate him with the work's author.⁹³ This version of Chaucer encounters the Host's direction in the *Canterbury Tales*'s seventh fragment. In his capacity as judge, Harry Bailly responds to the pilgrim-narrator's two tales, interrupting and disparaging the first, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and celebrating his second, the *Tale of Melibee*. In this section, I examine the significance of the Host's perspective on and judgment of the other pilgrims; his unsettling of distinct categories of highbrow and lowbrow literary value; and his connections to the medieval city. Contending that the Host's literary judgment *and* connection to the city *together* shape his interpretation of the pilgrim Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*. I further argue that Harry Bailly provides a model for how English successors like Hocceve could approach Chaucer's proto-laureate legacy: by emphasizing their own status as what post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha has called "in-between" readers.

The *Canterbury Tales*'s seventh fragment begins with an emphasis on the pilgrim-narrator's perspective. At the beginning of the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, that fictional version of Chaucer recounts, "Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se" (7.691-92). The pilgrims have just heard the Prioress's affecting tale, and these lines capture the group's "sobre" response. These lines also record the narrator's act of looking at the pilgrims and relay what the narrator "se[s]." Thus, they raise one of the *Canterbury Tales*'s most elusive problems. In the *General*

⁹³ Leicester, Jr.; "The Art of Impersonation."

Prologue, the pilgrim-narrator announces that he will introduce the other pilgrims and that he will “telle” us “al the condicion / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me” (1.38-39). Much critical discussion of the *General Prologue* has attempted, in effect, to untangle this last clause, “so as it semed me” and especially that last word.⁹⁴ How do we describe that “me” and how do we understand its relationship to the *Canterbury Tales*’s writer, Geoffrey Chaucer? How should the pilgrim-narrator’s impressions—what *seems* to him—influence *our* judgments of the pilgrims and, moreover, of their tales? At the conclusion of the *Prioress’s Tale*, the pilgrim-narrator Chaucer again reminds us that we see with his perspective. When the Host demands just a few lines later “What man artow?” (7.695), we listen with interest for the narrator’s response.⁹⁵

In this moment, Harry Bailly takes on the pilgrim-narrator’s role as the character that mediates the tales. Almost as soon as he asks the pilgrim-narrator who he is, Harry Bailly begins to answer his own question. His impressions—that “This were a popet in an arm t’enbrace / For any womman, smal and fair of face / He semeth elvyssh by his contenance / For unto no wight dooth he daliance” (701-04)—contain the *Canterbury Tales*’s most explicit description of its narrator—the *Host*’s description. Chaucer looks as if he were a baby; he seems like an elf—to the Host.⁹⁶ In fact, the act of redirecting focus toward Harry’s impressions, and away from the narrator Chaucer’s, is the main action of the *Prologue to Sir Thopas*, where the see-er/seen dynamic is flipped so that Chaucer, who elsewhere acts as our lens, becomes himself the object of analysis. The Host “at erst

⁹⁴ See, for example, Donaldson, “Chaucer the Pilgrim”; Farrell, “Hybrid Discourse in the *General Prologue*”; Kamath, *Authority and First-Person Allegory*; Lawton, *Chaucer’s Narrators*, especially 96-105; Leicester, Jr.; “The Art of Impersonation”; and Nolan, “‘A Poet Ther Was’.”

⁹⁵ See C. David Benson, “Their Telling Difference”; Lawton, “Chaucer’s Two Ways”; and Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’.”

⁹⁶ The *MED* lists three definitions for *popet* from Chaucer’s lifetime or before: 1) A youth, young girl, babe, or small person; 2) a wax figure used in necromancy; and 3) as surname; *Middle English Dictionary* (2014), s.v. “popet, *n.*” The first definition is traced to this very verse in the *Canterbury Tales*.

looked upon me” (694), the pilgrim-narrator recounts. After he “se[s]” (696) Chaucer, Harry beckons the pilgrims to approach, demanding that the others make Chaucer into a spectacle, that they become “war” (699) of him, that they “lat this man have place!” (698-99). Harry goads the other pilgrims, the pilgrims that we have gotten to know through the very the pilgrim-narrator’s lens, to look back at that narrator. As the elusive pilgrim-narrator is transformed into a tale-teller himself, the very narratorial powers that have placed him between us and the pilgrims are transferred to the Host. Thus, now readers must judge *Harry’s* version of Chaucer. Harry assumes a fictional role that real-life readers, like Hoccleve, don when they pick up the poet Chaucer’s text. Like Harry, Hoccleve develops his own version of “Chaucer”; and, like Harry, he uses his “Chaucer” to develop his own writerly authority.

Of course, Harry Bailly does not at first seem to be the kind of reader and literary judge that a poet with Hoccleve’s ambitions would want to emulate. Harry’s evaluative criteria seem to be constantly shifting, and so his responses to the pilgrims’ tales are often unpredictable. Although in the *General Prologue* the “governour” (813) calls for tales of both “best sentence *and* moost solas” (798), he often prefers delight and merriment to overt moralizations. For example, he asks the Clerk to avoid jargon and warns him not to preach “as freres doon in Lente [...] Ne that thy tale make us nat to slepe” and instead asks him to “[t]elle us som myrie tale [...] som murie thyng of adventures” (4.9-15).⁹⁷ Although the Host usually likes mirth, there are some merry tales that he does not like, and he never quite abandons his demand for “sentence.” The Host’s interaction with

⁹⁷ The Host’s general pursuit of mirth may have a basis in the *Roman de la Rose’s* character, Déduit (“Sir Mirthe” in the *Roman’s* Middle English translation); see Burnley, “Chaucer’s Host and Harry Bailly,” 214. Kendrick, “Linking the *Canterbury Tales*,” compares the merry Host to the joking and often ribald illustrations in Gothic books of hours.

the pilgrim Chaucer is an example of his readerly inconsistency: first, he asks Chaucer for “a tale of myrthe” (7.706), and then he interrupts Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas* to request another tale “[i]n which ther be some murthe *or* some doctrine” (935). He then sincerely appreciates Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee*, a tale supposedly so lacking in “solaas” that it may “mak[e] the teeth ache with boredom.”⁹⁸ The temptation has been to take the Host for a scatterbrained and obnoxious literary critic, one who is unable to judge the very “sentence” and “solas” for which he calls and one who is oblivious to—and unashamed of—his own critical shortcomings.⁹⁹

But Hoccleve would have seen in the Host’s unpredictable and seemingly confused judgments a useful literary device: the Host’s judgments are flexible, and, as such, they are conducive to the *Canterbury Tales*’s mix of genres, high and low. Harry Bailly’s very interpretive fickleness shapes the *Canterbury Tales*’s frame narrative: it allows the writer of the collection to experiment with a multitude of literary genres and rhetorical poses, turning the *Canterbury Tales* itself into a hybrid text.¹⁰⁰ It is unclear which tales Harry will dismiss and which he will celebrate, so the pilgrims take narrative risks. Susan E. Philips argues that the “overcurious” Host’s “idle talk”—his casual chit-chat with the pilgrims about their everyday lives—allows traditional authorities like the Bible and Ovid to rub up against lowbrow genres like the fabliau and the personal narrative, facilitating the emergence of hybrid stories.¹⁰¹ This flexibility would have appealed to a writer like Hoccleve, who himself mixes genres and literary value systems.

⁹⁸ Foster, “Has Anyone Here Read ‘Melibee’?,” 402.

⁹⁹ This view is widespread. For example, Dubs, “Harry Bailly: Chaucer’s Critic?”; Gaylord, “Sentence and Solaas in Fragment 7”; Lerer, “‘Now holde youre mouth’”; and Schleps, “‘Up Roos Oure Hoost.’”

¹⁰⁰ For views of the Host as a means by which new tales are generated, see Andreas, “‘Wordes Betwene’”; Philips, *Transforming Talk*; and Plummer, “‘Beth fructuous.’”

¹⁰¹ Philips, *Transforming Talk*, esp. 85-118.

Employing a narrator like the Host, Chaucer gave Hoccleve not only permission but encouragement to mix high and low himself, and so Chaucer gave Hoccleve a model on which to base his own writerly persona.

But Harry Bailly's example goes further: he calls into question the very rigidity of highbrow and lowbrow values systems themselves. One of his attitudes towards literary language, which derives in part from the highly-regarded *Roman de la Rose*, itself calls into question the division between elite and lowbrow. The clearest line of descent from the *Rose* appears in Fragment 6, where the Host confronts the Pardoner (919-957).¹⁰² Lashing out against the Pardoner's demand that he make an offering to fraudulent relics, the Host swears that he will cut off the Pardoner's "coillons" [testicles] (948-55). To substitute "coillons" for relics is, essentially, to translate the portion of the *Rose* in which Reason rejects courtly euphemisms. As Reason says in the *Rose*, "if, when I put names to things that you dare to criticize thus and blame, I had called testicles relics and had declared relics to be testicles, then you, who here criticize me and goad me on account of them, would reply that 'relics' was an ugly, base word. 'Testicles' is a good name and I like it."¹⁰³ In addition to emphasizing the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, Reason argues that, since it is indisputable that all of God's creations are good, speaking "properly" of them is good, too. "I made the words and I am certain that I never made anything base," she asserts. According to Reason, euphemism in which "the ladies of France" engage is mere obfuscation. The Host's outburst draws not only upon the words but also the argument of this citation, and it does so to justify and even indulge "bolde" English (*GP* 755), which only sounds like it belongs exclusively in the tavern. That the language in

¹⁰² Burnley, "Chaucer's Host and Harry Bailly," 214.

¹⁰³ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Romance of Rose*, ll. 7081-7152.

this exchange “aligns him stylistically with the unsophisticated world of popular poetry and of fabliau comedy”¹⁰⁴ and thematically with the *Rose* is crucial. The Host’s use of vulgarity is justified by highbrow tradition and an elite interpretation of English; it is an elite application of lowbrow language.

The flexibility around categories of literary high and low defines the Host’s critical attitude, too. Harry Bailly follows Reason’s “custom”—“I do not go out of my way for anyone when I want to say anything openly to the extent of speaking correctly,” she says—in his initial response to Chaucer’s first tale, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Having begun to answer the Host’s question, “What man artow?,” with the popular romance, Chaucer is boldly interrupted and insulted. “By God,” the Host rebukes Chaucer, “for pleynly at a word, / Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!” (7.929-30). Chastising Chaucer the pilgrim, the Host takes the opportunity to use the vulgar word *toord* and also excuses doing so by claiming that he speaks “pleynly.” He thus nicely distinguishes between Chaucer’s bad English verse and a legitimate use of a vulgar English word. While not refined themselves, words like *toord* used frankly—“properly” and “correctly”—could be supported, with a little creative interpretation, by Jean de Meun’s Reason. What is more, the Host’s call for plainness also recalls contemporary Middle English linguistic theory. Middle English writers imagined their language to be “marked by a certain crudity,” as “the ‘mother’ or ‘kynde’ [natural] tongue,” and as such they thought it could “*signify* clarity and open access.”¹⁰⁵ The very word “playne” was often

¹⁰⁴ Burnley, “Chaucer’s Host and Harry Bailly,” 209.

¹⁰⁵ Evans et al., “The Notion of Vernacular Theory,” 325-29.

associated with truth.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, some Middle English writers conceived of their language as “melting pot,” which could accept and transform obtuse terminology for new, clearer purposes.¹⁰⁷ The Host relies on both of these more widely held premises in his response to *Thopas*. Chastising Chaucer’s “lewedness,” the Host shows that he thinks that *some* English *can* be vulgar. But he makes a subtle distinction. By “pleynly” declaring *Thopas* not “worth a toord,” he implies that while English—especially his English—may be marked by “crudity,” that fact does not necessarily render it frivolous. Drawing on both contemporary English-language theory and linguistic theory from the dominant *fin amour* tradition, the Host shows us how to value his “bolde” speech, seeing it as at once vulgar and connected to dominant culture. His seemingly incoherent literary attitude is, in fact, characterized by a confusion of supposedly distinct value systems. This critical approach to English poetry in general and to the pilgrim Chaucer’s first tale would not have been lost on Hoccleve. In fact, Hoccleve’s deep knowledge of the *Canterbury Tales* necessarily included this critical attitude, one through which the *Canterbury Tales* presents Hoccleve’s most estimable English predecessor, Chaucer.

In addition to articulating this topsy-turvy relation to literary value, the Host’s other predominant characteristic is his connection to the medieval city. The “effect of realism” surrounds Harry Bailly so that he continuously reminds us of Greater London, and it is this characteristic that aligns him most obviously with Hoccleve. In the *General Prologue*, we learn that the Host works “[i]n Southwerk at this gentil hostelrye / That highte the Tabard, faste by the Belle” (*General Prologue* 718-19). Not only is Harry

¹⁰⁶ Evans et al. point to the particular example of Thomas Norton’s *Ordinal of Alchemy*, which posits that “playne and comon speche” can “shew the trouthe” whereas adorned Latin obscures it; “The Notion of Vernacular Theory,” 326.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

given a specific neighborhood, but his address is supplied for readers familiar with the Southwark stomping ground. In the prologue to his tale, the Monk recalls his night at the Tabard when he blames his drunkenness on “the ale of Southwerk” (I.3140), reminding us of the city even after the pilgrims have departed. The characterization of the Host becomes more specific and tied more tightly to the city when the Cook, also a Londoner, names him “Herry Bailly” (I.4358), a name that potentially connects the fictional “governour” to a late fourteenth-century innkeeper, “Henricus Baillif, Oystler.”¹⁰⁸ Nearly all of the background that is revealed about the Host defines his identity according to a particular place. Even the gendered descriptions—“of manhod him lakkede right naught” (GP 756)—evoke his thoroughly urban identity, by representing a “newly-competitive masculinity” that is indebted to his time, his social class, and his commercial livelihood.¹⁰⁹

The convergence of highbrow and lowbrow speech that is a mark of the Host’s voice also echoes that of actual, late-medieval London literati. The Host seems to be one of the fourteenth century’s urban “nouveau literary critic[s]”¹¹⁰ or one of the “new and influential bourgeois readers,” a part of what Elizabeth Salter has described as the “urban middle-class consumer market [that] started to demand more reading material in English.”¹¹¹ It is likely that these readers engaged in what they would have known as a traditionally elite poetic tradition. The late thirteenth and early fourteenth-century London *puy*, for example, followed the courtly francophone fashion, emphasizing

¹⁰⁸ Richardson explains that Chaucer’s model may have been a composite of all the “Baillys” operating as Southwark innkeepers at the end of the fourteenth century, as there is evidence for others; “Harry Bailly: Chaucer’s Innkeeper,” 329.

¹⁰⁹ Allen, “Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity,” 15. See also Legassie, “Chaucer’s Pardoner and the Host”; and Pugh, “Queering Harry Bailly.”

¹¹⁰ Dubs, “Harry Bailly: Chaucer’s Critic?,” 56.

¹¹¹ Elizabeth Salter, *English and International*, 240.

lyrics.¹¹² Although we have no evidence that any London *puy* met in Chaucer's lifetime, Cooper suggests that the Canterbury competition may be modeled on one:

[A] prince was appointed each year to head the *confrarie dou Pui* and sort out quarrels between its members. Some of its activities, like those of any parish fraternity or trade guild, were religious and devotional; but its distinguishing activity was the holding of an annual feast to which members were supposed to come armed with an original song, both words and music. If they did so, they got their dinner free, at the expense of the rest of the *compaignie*—the statutes use the same word for the society as Chaucer does for his association of pilgrims. The prince and his newly appointed successor would judge the songs.¹¹³

In fact, a London *puy* “demonstrates the existence of a sophisticated interest in and audience for poetry not just at court or among the aristocracy, but in [Chaucer's] immediate urban context.”¹¹⁴ It may be wrong to call Harry Bailly one of Chaucer's most sophisticated readers, a member of the “king's affinity” that made up the writer Chaucer's literary circle,¹¹⁵ but it is likewise incorrect to confine his judgment to the “the unsophisticated world of popular poetry and of fabliau comedy.” His blend of literary value systems seems to indicate that the Host himself lives between worlds, a unique blend of the *puy*'s “prince” and hosteler.

The Host's volatile idiom reflects the sort of discourse-shifting that one would have expected to find in medieval London; he is a product of the medieval city. Yet the intermingling of styles is not merely a literary technique, nor is it merely a marker of the

¹¹² Cooper, “London and Southwark Poetic Companies,” 111. See also Hanna, *London Literature*, esp. 1-43; and Sutton, “*Tumbling Bear*,” and “Merchants, Music, and Social Harmony.”

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹⁴ Cooper, “London and Southwark Poetic Companies,” 110.

¹¹⁵ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, esp. 24-46.

Host's role as comic, centrifugal force: rather, it is a literary representation, an embodiment, of the medieval city. Notably, Philips links the Host's "idle talk" to the specific problem of urban gossip. Indeed, the mixing, overlapping, border-crossing instability of Harry's frame narrative and Harry's voice itself parallels late fourteenth-century London. David Wallace has called this era's London a "discourse of fragments, discontinuities, and contradictions" and not a "single, unified site,"¹¹⁶ and it is precisely in this quality that Marion Turner recognizes the city's location in Chaucer's poetry:

London, for Chaucer and his contemporaries, was not a contained, culturally unified city. Instead, it was a more complicated and expansive location, encompassing court and suburbs as well as the City itself, a place of fluctuating, unfixed boundaries. This geographical diversity was paralleled by cultural diversity. The London that is refracted through late fourteenth-century texts, including those by Chaucer, is a place of cultural conflict, jostling rivalries, and incompatible interests. The city, then, cannot be found in Chaucer's poetry if one seeks a coherent space; rather, it emerges as a profoundly split and antagonistic location.¹¹⁷

Medieval London's winding city streets provided urban dwellers both borders and passageways, and the twists and turns of Harry Bailly's frame narrative both link the tales to each other and define the connections between them. The mixing of voices that happens in the frame narrative, driven by the Host's constantly shifting judgments, surely

¹¹⁶ Wallace, "Chaucer and the Absent City," 82 and 59. Evans and her fellow contributors to *Chaucer and the City* seek to rethink David Wallace's claim that Chaucer refuses to represent London because he sees it as a place of antagonism and discord. Evans, "The Production of Space."

¹¹⁷ Turner, "Greater London," 25.

evokes the city's array of languages and dialects.¹¹⁸ Indeed, the frame is as "expansive" and "ungovernable" as are Harry and medieval London.¹¹⁹ That Harry's decidedly urban and markedly English voice orchestrates it is fitting. The Host is one example of what Ruth Evans has called the "powerful *virtual* presence" of the medieval city in Chaucer's writing.¹²⁰ If, as Turner says, "Chaucer's sense of London is often most evocatively and suggestively expressed through atmosphere and tone rather than through explicit references,"¹²¹ then Harry's interpretive fickleness and confusion of literary value systems saturates the *Canterbury Tales* with the feeling of Harry's English city, too. Although the pilgrims leave the city at the end of the *General Prologue*, the Host's central role in their tale-telling game means that Greater London is "a powerful *virtual* presence" throughout the journey.

The veneer of realism that surrounds Harry Bailly, his connection to the "virtual city," and his association with the city's rhythms and structures make the Host a fruitful model for Hoccleve, who adapts each of these features, as I argue in the next section. Harry's central contribution to Hoccleve's vision of a laureate Chaucer, moreover, is the fact that he brings the English city to bear on his reading of the pilgrim-narrator's *Tale of Melibee*. Harry Bailly understands and judges the *Melibee* through the lens of that city experience.

In his introduction to the tale, Chaucer, the pilgrim-narrator, goes out of his way to distance *Melibee* from its Englishness; he aims to universalize his *Melibee* instead. After the Host derides Chaucer's first tale, the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, as trivial, poor-quality

¹¹⁸ See Butterfield, *Familiar Enemy*, esp. 203-15.

¹¹⁹ Page, "Concerning the Host," 10.

¹²⁰ Evans has called on critics "to refuse the critical game of hunt-the-London" and to explore other ways that the medieval city structures and colors Chaucer's works; "Production of Space," 56.

¹²¹ Turner, "Greater London," 36.

English poetry, that “doost nought elles but despendest tyme” (931), the pilgrim-narrator, Chaucer, tries again. As he introduces the *Melibee*, Chaucer asks the Host to disregard his “speche” (954) and “wordes” (959) and to pay attention, instead, to the “sentence” (961, 963) of the tale. Notably, the pilgrim Chaucer reverses the fealty to source that he articulates in the *General Prologue*, where he promises to report the other pilgrims’ tales verbatim and uses that promise to justify the tales’ often indecorous content and language. “Whoso shal telle a tale after a man, / He moot reherce as ny as evere he can / Everich a word [...] Or elles he moot telle his tale untrewe” (*GP* 731-35), he insists, following Cicero, in connecting “wordes” (i.e. form) with “the dede” (i.e. meaning) (742). In Fragment 7, to the contrary, the pilgrim-narrator *distinguishes* between “sentence” and “wordes” (959), excusing his and his sources’ “telling difference” (948). The evangelists all spoke the same immutable Truth, he explains, but they did so in different ways, so a teller might be excused for departing from his sources’ direct words, too. In effect, the pilgrim Chaucer attempts to remove not only the verse but the English from his *Melibee*: ignore my language, he tells the Host; disregard the “telling difference” that is inevitable in any “telling,” and certainly in any translated “telling.” “[S]wich English” as had rendered the writer Chaucer permanently belated in the Man of Law’s estimation ought here to be overlooked.

The *Melibee* itself is among the poet Chaucer’s most high-brow attempts at tale-telling, and its elite status seems to be particularly disconnected from the Host’s urban experience. The *Melibee* might be read as a European text: a translation of a French translation of a Latin source text, a serious work that gives the impression of belonging to the upper tiers of medieval society, and a catalogue of myriad proverbs and direct

quotations from the gamut of European *auctoritas*. At nearly a thousand lines, the prose *Melibee* is the second longest tale told on the Canterbury journey, a fact which has led some critics to regard it as a bore—and perhaps even an intentional bore that punishes the Host for interrupting Chaucer’s *Thopas*.¹²² *Melibee*, however, was one of the most widely-copied of all the tales in the fifteenth century.¹²³ Critics have read it as a meditation on the importance or limitations of literary “sentence,”¹²⁴ a learned treatise about how to understand and accept counsel in general,¹²⁵ or a mirror for princes aimed at Richard II, specifically.¹²⁶ After Melibee’s house is invaded and his wife and daughter wounded, Melibee receives counsel from “the grete congregacioun of folk”; and although some urge caution, other envious or flattering “younge folke” advise war. Melibee’s wife, Prudence, first suggests that Melibee evaluate his counselors’ motivations, and ultimately counsels Melibee to practice patience. If the Man of Law’s description aligns Chaucer with the highbrow tradition of courtly making—albeit making “in swich Englissh as he kan”—the choice to tell *Melibee* aims even higher: to write a treatise akin to classical “poesy.”¹²⁷

Nonetheless, Harry rejects the pilgrim Chaucer’s attempt to downplay the story’s Englishness and instead emphasizes it. The very fact of making *Melibee* English gives easy access to the likes of Harry Bailly, who responds by making the tale doubly so: he reads the text through his temporal and spatial experience of London:

¹²² For example, Foster, “Has Anyone Here Read ‘Melibee’?,”

¹²³ Owen, “The *Canterbury Tales*”; Manly and Rickert, *The Text of the ‘Canterbury Tales,’* 371-72; and Strohm, “Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience.”

¹²⁴ C. David Benson, “Their Telling Difference”; Lerer, “‘Now holde youre mouth’,” 181-202; and Olson, “A Reading of the ‘Thopas-Melibee’ Link.”

¹²⁵ Moore, “Apply Yourself.”

¹²⁶ Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 143; and Staley Johnson, “Inverse Counsel: Contexts for the ‘Melibee’.”

¹²⁷ Patterson, “‘What Man Artow?’” 117-75.

Whan ended was my tale of Melibee,
 And of Prudence and hire benignytee,
 Oure Hooste seyde, “As I am faithful man,
 And by the precious corpus Madrian,
 I hadde levere than a barel ale
 That Goodelief, my wyf, hadde herd this tale!
 For she nys no thing of swich pacience
 As was this Melibeus wyf Prudence. (1889-96)

The pilgrim-narrator Chaucer suggests that a reading of his tale should emphasize Prudence’s “benignytee”—a word that generally means good will and that bears the loftier connotations of God’s—or Richard II’s—grace and mercy. The Host’s initial language implies that he recognizes this highbrow register, as he responds in like manner: he swears by his own faithfulness to the generic Saint Madrian. In the very next breath, however, his “barel ale” brings us back to the temporal economy that governs business relations at the Tabard Inn. One line later, we are overhearing what sounds like an ongoing domestic squabble. Harry Bailly wishes that his wife had heard the tale of Prudence’s “pacience,” a spin on “benignytee” that better fits everyday marriage and bridges the highbrow European advice book—with the seeming endless proverbs and citations that tie it to ancient “olde tyme”—and Harry’s temporally-located reading of it. The pilgrim Chaucer asks the Host to distinguish between the tale’s “speche” and “sentence.” Unable to ignore the allegory, the vehicle by which that meaning can be known, the Host fills it with his own “sentence”—a thoroughly London meaning.

Post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha idea of culture's "in-between" subjects can help us to understand the significance of Harry's perspective. Bhabha's "in-between" are marginalized subjects who live in the border between the dominant, legitimized culture and their own local, everyday existence.¹²⁸ These subjects are neither *in* nor *outside* the dominant culture but are instead *in between*, experiencing it "locally" and in "the time of the day to day." Harry is "the outside of the inside" of highbrow culture, the culture that the Man of Law describes in his "Introduction" and that Hoccleve describes in his celebration of "fadir" Chaucer: a culture with a literary history reaching back to the ancient world and still centered in the courts and elite households of French-speaking Europe. Yet Harry's agency is "interstitial": it does not follow the inherited course of history but intervenes based on the logic of Harry's urban everyday, his Inn, his neighborhood, and his home. Like Bhabha's "in-between" subjects, Harry Bailly uses his local experience of place and the time to read Chaucer on his own terms.

Furthermore, since he describes a dialogic, dynamic relationship between privileged and peripheral voices within a shared culture, Bhabha can help us to appreciate the significance of Harry's reading of Chaucer, and of Hoccleve's subsequent adaptation of Harry's perspective and approach. Bhabha theorizes how marginalized subjects can disrupt binaries of supremacy and inferiority that confine them to perpetual subordination.¹²⁹ For Bhabha, "the fixed tablet of tradition"¹³⁰ defines a culture by giving

¹²⁸ I do not mean to dismiss medievalists' trenchant critiques of Bhabha's *modernity*, an idea that he borrows from Benedict Anderson. Anderson and then Bhabha wrongly define *modernity* against a totalizing, reductive version of the middle ages. Instead, I mean to emphasize other parts of Bhabha's thinking that can travel back in time quite profitably (and thus adding to medievalists' critiques). See Cohen, "Introduction: Midcolonial"; Dagenais and Greer, "Decolonizing the Middle Ages"; Davis, "National Writing in the Ninth Century"; Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, 12-21; Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism*; Holsinger, "Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies"; Ingham, introduction to *Postcolonial Moves*; and Lampert-Weissig, *Medieval Literature and Postcolonial Studies*.

¹²⁹ I draw on Bhabha's "Culture's In Between"; "Unsatisfied"; and *The Location of Culture*.

it a past and thus an identity; in the process of defining that culture, tradition necessarily excludes certain aspects that do not fit, “forgetting” them. Tradition justifies cultural and social subordination by assigning its subjects “temporal locations”—“contemporary,” for example, or “belated.” But there are means of resistance. Since a tradition has to be renewed continuously by its subjects (those people defined by it and who are responsible for performing it), those subjects on the periphery have an opportunity to disrupt the tradition by enacting a temporal “doubling.” They can meet that tradition with an “interstitial agency” that is, on the one hand, a necessary acceptance of that tradition’s temporal distinctions and, on the other, a performance that “iterates” it with a difference—based on “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life.”¹³¹ Marginalized subjects upset the tradition by interjecting their forgotten experience. Their “local” and “day-to-day” iterations, which are “out of time” because they traverse established temporal locations, fundamentally dislocate that tradition, denying it any pure, original identity. According to Bhabha, “[i]n restaging the past,” minority performances “introduc[e] other, incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition.”¹³² Bhabha explains how a “culture’s in between” inhabitants might “find their voice” within the framework of an authority that is not their own; how those marginalized subjects might even assert themselves within that framework, deploying their “partial culture” to construct “visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy: the outside of the inside: the part in the whole.”¹³³

¹³⁰Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 3.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³³ Bhabha, “Culture’s In Between,” 34.

The Host uses his interpretation of the *Melibee* to tell us about his life in London. Whatever *Melibee* was to Chaucer the pilgrim, it becomes in the *Canterbury Tales* a story about life in London. Harry gives us vivid details about his life in his neighborhood with his wife, Goodelief:

whan I bete my knaves
 She bryngeth me forth the grete clobbed staves,
 And crieth, “Slee the dogges everichoon,
 And brek hem, bothe bak and every boon!”
 And if that any neighebor of myne
 Wol nat in chirche to my weef enclyne,
 Or be so hardy to hire to trespace,
 Whan she comth hoom she rampeth in my face,
 And crieth “False coward, wreke they wyf!
 By corpus bones, I wol have thy knyf,
 And thou shalt have my distaf and go spynne!” [...]
 This is my lif, but if that I wol fighte;
 And out at dore anon I moot me dighte [...]
 I woot wel she wol do me slee som day
 Som neighebor, and thanne go my way [...]
 But lat us passe away fro this mateere. (1897-1923)

In under thirty lines, the Host tells a tale that begins with Chaucer’s text of *Melibee* but that quickly finds itself in the midst of the Host’s domestic affairs and marital turmoil; from there, it follows Goodelief to church, encounters either disdainful neighbors or

neighbors that Goodelief herself mistakes as dangerous, returns to the Host's "hoom," traverses the Host's emasculated body (he might as well trade in his "knyf"), predicts the hectic Southwark city streets, and speculates as to a future that might take Harry to his neighbors' houses and across his neighbors' bodies. "This is my lif," the Host says, and, indeed, we seem to get the full spectrum: what it is like to dwell in his body, in his marriage, in his home, in his parish, in his city. The Host's tale continually crosses the boundaries that separate these places; and it crosses the abstract categories of books and experience, between Chaucer's tale and Harry's "lif." Indeed, the Host depicts "a place of competition, suspicion, and fragmentation," what Turner has called the "defining characteristics of Chaucer's London."¹³⁴ By the time the Host asks us to "passe away fro this mateere," we realize that the matter—the substance—to which he refers is his own reading of the tale, his own tale.

The Host offers a gloss on the *Melibee* which is crucial to our interpretation of it. Criticism of this scene inspires the kind of contempt for the Host heretofore directed by the Host at Chaucer's *Thopas*. Seth Lerer's position is typical: "It would be no surprise to say that Harry Bailly mistakes the *Melibee*, much as he misreads nearly everything that comes his way" [...] The Host recasts [*Melibee*'s] paradigms to offer up not just a critique of the *Melibee* but a virtual rewriting of it."¹³⁵ This response *is* a rewriting, but that is the point. Harry's reading is a quintessential instance of Roger Chartier's "[c]ultural consumption," an interpretation that "is at the same time a form of production, which creates ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of those who

¹³⁴ Turner, "Greater London," 39.

¹³⁵ Lerer, "Now holde youre mouth," 197-198.

produce.”¹³⁶ Indeed, Harry uses the pilgrim Chaucer’s “sentence” to understand his own domestic and social strife. *Melibee* may draw from the well of *autoritas* and may trace its roots through French and Latin. Yet it is precisely this literary tradition that the Host ignores outright as he “quyte[s]” (1.3119) *Melibee* on his own terms. Harry Bailly’s response to the tale is a bridge, a way to move from straightforwardly elite literary culture of the fourteenth-century to London’s harried city streets. The wisdom and highbrow learning that Chaucer the pilgrim catalogued in the *Melibee* are difficult to recognize after Harry is through with them, and that is the risk of writing vernacular poetry for unpredictable readers like the Host. Analyzing what she refers to as “people-readers,” members of “newly literate groups,” Elisabeth Salter adds that among such readers, “there may be particular possibilities for creativity on the account of the relative lack of constraint by formal rules of grammar, syntax, and other elements of formal education.”¹³⁷

Whereas the Man of Law situates Chaucer in elite culture and in the prestigious literary tradition, the Host puts Chaucer’s stories, especially *Melibee*, into conversation with the day-to-day goings-on in his own neighborhood. Just as the *Miller’s Tale* forces us to reevaluate the *Knight’s Tale*, and so on over the course of the collection, so the tale of Goodelief supplements *Melibee*. Having read Harry Bailly’s tale, we see *Melibee* come into focus as a tale about London, too.¹³⁸ The Host evaluates the tales’ worth in the context of the pilgrimage’s—and life’s—fleeting time. Whereas the Man of Law acquiesces to French-cultural dominance, the Host entertains that high culture, only with

¹³⁶ Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation,” 234. Sponsler supplies a useful survey of four approaches to cultural as appropriation on which medievalists may fruitfully draw; “In Transit.”

¹³⁷ Elisabeth Salter, *Popular Reading in English*, 18.

¹³⁸ Turner, “Greater London,” 36-39.

a difference. If an English laureate could take a place in a transnational context, he does so by asserting his own quotidian experience of the English city. By relocating and evaluating Chaucer's verse in the outskirts of high culture, on the streets of the English city, the Host's response models a "hybrid" and "temporally disjunctive" strategy of intervention through which Hoccleve can recast English poetry's supposed belatedness.

"What man artow," Harry Bailly asks the pilgrim Chaucer at the beginning of Fragment 7. If the *Tale of Melibee* offers us some answer to the Host's question, it is only through a reading of the Host's response that we can glean it; if we want an answer, we have no choice but to listen carefully to the Southwark innkeeper's surprising response to the pilgrim Chaucer's tale.¹³⁹ Speaking generally about medieval authorship and the commentary often inscribed in the margins of the works of the prestigious *auctores*, A. J. Minnis posits:

[o]ne might go so far as to say that it is the original text together with its accompanying commentary (often, it must be remembered, written around the actual text in the manuscript margins) that should be regarded as the source [...]. How can one possibly begin to ascertain what a major writer like Dante or Chaucer is doing to his source-text unless one is aware of how that text had been expounded and elaborated in medieval scholarship of a kind readily available to (and often demonstrably consulted by) the writer concerned?¹⁴⁰

Harry's reading of Chaucer is another gloss—one inscribed in the frame of the *Canterbury Tales*. As we "passe away fro this mateere," we realize that Harry's tale does

¹³⁹ Another thread of criticism holds that the Host's response demonstrates that *Melibee*'s narrator "can produce neither aesthetic learning nor ethical learning for its audience"; Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Renaissance*, 134. This view generalizes the Host's response, dismissing it as plainly wrong, rather than listening carefully to what it is.

¹⁴⁰ Minnis, preface to *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, x.

not “despendest time,” but recasts it. That is, Harry’s experience vernacularizes the “ful olde” tradition that relegates the European-English writer to perpetual belatedness; it interjects it with the present moment of Harry’s life and “renegotiat[es]” the “times, terms, and traditions” by which Chaucer turns his “uncertain, passing contemporaneity into the signs of history.”¹⁴¹ In thinking through the question, “What man artow?” Hoccleve may have been listening to Harry’s answer, too. The author of the *Canterbury Tales* represents and aligns himself with the popular romance of the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the highbrow wisdom and ambition of the *Melibee*, and asks his future readers to consider what sort of writerly identity his association with those two tales produce. To interpret that identity, readers like Hoccleve must look through Harry’s lens and at the possibilities that it has produced. The route to English laureateship runs through the medieval city.

The Speaker of the *Male Regle*

In this section, I analyze Hoccleve’s *Male Regle* (1405-06), an early poem written several years before Hoccleve joined forces with the Lancastrians and before he began thinking seriously about any writerly role resembling an English laureateship. Of the handful of Hoccleve’s surviving early poems, this one is perhaps the most difficult to define generically.¹⁴² The 448-line poem begins with its first-person speaker lamenting

¹⁴¹ Bhabha, “Dissemination,” 223.

¹⁴² In his headnote to the poem, Hoccleve’s modern editor calls the *Male Regle* “a witty parody of the penitential lyric,” and also suggests that the poem shares elements with “Goliardic satire” and “petitionary poems by Deschamps”; in Hoccleve, *Male Regle*, 77. All citations to Hoccleve’s *Male Regle* and *Series* refer to Ellis’s edition. As I elaborate in this section, this categorization misses much of what is unique about the poem. Tolmie sees the generic ambiguity as a way of investing readers in the process of interpretation and in Hoccleve as a writer, allowing him to play various generic personas off against each other to “cobble together [a professional poetic self] in a sometimes inspired *bricolage*”; “The

that he has been abandoned by the “Eerthely god...helthe” (8) because he has misspent his youth and money. Over the poem’s course the speaker changes his rhetorical situation several times. After his initial plea to “helthe” (1-64), the speaker addresses “yowthe” (69), focusing on the dangers of hubris (65-88); he rails against “fauele [flattery]” (223) and warns the “folk of hy degree” (210) or “Lordes” (244) who may be especially susceptible to it (209-88); for the second time, he laments the loss of “helthe” (401-08); and, finally, he petitions “lord Fourneval” (417), the real-life treasurer of the royal Exchequer, who evidently owes the speaker money for work at the Privy Seal (409-48). Between these segments, over the course of roughly half the lines of the poem, the speaker addresses “thee” (385), a general reader who may learn from the speaker’s misfortune and to whom the speaker offers a detailed account of his misspent youth, filled with copious details of everyday life in fifteenth-century London. I propose that the *Male Regle* adapts the *Melibee*-Harry Bailly exchange: it marries a highbrow poem of counsel, with the speaker as exemplum, to a portrait of the everyday, “in-between” experience of medieval London. I argue that Hoccleve develops the subject position that Harry’s “in-between” reading makes available for him, and, so doing, creates a speaker whose very poetic authority depends upon his relationship to the time and place of early fifteenth-century London.

While lamenting his own fall from fortune, the speaker of the *Male Regle* offers himself as an exemplum. He strikes a conventional pose as a penitent, confessing his sins of “folie and imprudence” (62)—he has spent too much time and money at taverns—and lamenting the physical and financial hardships that these sins have wrought. For most of

Professional,” 355-56. Knapp sees the penitential lyric giving way to a new genre that Hoccleve himself invents: the petitionary poem; “Bureaucratic Identity”; and Meyer-Lee hears the voice of “Ricardian ‘public poetry’” as one among multiple in the *Male Regle*; *Poets and Power*, 97-107.

the poem, the speaker relates details from his period of misrule and extrapolates general advice from it about the related dangers of hubris, excess, and flattery. As the *Male Regle* opens, the speaker laments that for many years he had been well and without hardship (12), blessed by the “[e]rthely god, piler of lyf, thow helthe” (8), but he has since been “twynne[d]” (17) from such good fortune. After expressing ancient wisdom—that he has “herd men seye longe ago” that “Prosperitee is blynd” (33-34)—the speaker suggests that he is a prime example of that wisdom: “And verifie I can wel it is so, / For I myself put haue it in assay [to the proof]” (35-36). The speaker admits that it was his failure to heed counsel that has brought about his present sickness, and he generalizes that a similar refusal to heed advice is common among young men: “[n]o conseil wole [the youth] call” since “[h]is owne wit he deemeth best of all, / And fourth therwith he renneth brydillees (76-78). When he himself was young, the speaker implies, he did not know from whom to take counsel, and a similar trap lies waiting for his reader if that reader fails to heed the speaker’s example. As reiterated near its conclusion, this poem is in part meant as a “smert warnynge” (385) to any “thee” (385) who may be undergoing similar hardship (385-92). Like the pilgrim Chaucer’s *Melibee*, the *Male Regle* is framed as a teaching poem: its many details propose to help readers to recognize their own riot as such and to understand its consequences (385-92).

Although he addresses a general “thee” (385) for much of the poem, the speaker reveals his ambition by occasionally invoking specifically elite readers. Near the middle of the *Male Regle*, for instance, he remembers the boatmen who called him “maistir” (201). The speaker reveals that they had enticed him to spend coin on their services—shortcut rides across the Thames on cold winter nights—because they suspected,

correctly, that the speaker could be duped into believing that the act of spending lavishly confirmed his status as “a man for euere” (203).¹⁴³ Although in hindsight he recognizes the boatmen’s ploy, the speaker still does not reject the flattery but repurposes it, portraying his very susceptibility as evidence that he is like “the folk of hy degree” (210). The speaker generalizes that the elite have fallen victim, too, as when “the venym of faueles [flattery’s] tonge / Hath mortified [poisoned] hir [lords’] prosperitee / And brought hem in so sharp aduersitee” (210-13).¹⁴⁴ In this comparison, the boatmen are like “[m]any a seruent”; the speaker, the servants’ “lord” (217). The similarities between the speaker and the “folk of hy degree” authorize the speaker to advise them: “Lordes” (244) are among the *Male Regle*’s imagined readers, and the speaker makes explicit the poem’s function as a mirror for princes—an advice book for then King Henry IV or other elites—when he goes so far as to say that a “man treewe” ought to counsel his sovereign to “amende his gouernance” in a “sobre, treewe,” and “pleyn” manner (273-78). Thus, the speaker describes a privileged role for himself that purports to serve elite readers and those under their “gouernance.” This writerly stance recalls a similar posture in Chaucer the pilgrim’s *Tale of Melibee* and anticipates Hoccleve’s own persona in his explicitly Lancastrian *Regement of Princes*. Like Chaucer the pilgrim and the *Regement*’s Hoccleve, the speaker of the *Male Regle* implies that offering advice to the powerful is a valid and effective way to ennoble his writing and himself.

As the anecdote about the boatmen’s flattery suggests, the speaker’s functions as exemplum and advisor are inextricable from, and at times overwhelmed by, the many

¹⁴³ The anecdote evinces the peculiar intersection of cultural aggrandizement yet economic uncertainty at which the real-life Thomas Hoccleve found himself in the early fifteenth century, Knapp, “Bureaucratic Muse.”

¹⁴⁴ Lines like these have caused Lee Patterson to ask: is the *Male Regle* “a poem about Thomas Hoccleve or about Henry IV?”; Patterson, “‘What is me?’” 456

realistic images and details of the medieval city. Indeed, like Harry Bailly, the speaker of the *Male Regle* tells vivid details about his city life; and, as with Harry Bailly, the veneer of realism surrounds him. We read of the speaker enjoying the “sweet wyn” (145) and “wafres thikke” (146) with the rest of the “conpaignie” (146) at a tavern like the Host’s Tabard Inn (121-84).¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, the speaker asserts his own particularity and the particularity of the city of which he is a part.¹⁴⁶ “The outward signe of Bachus and his lure” (121), specifically “Poules Heed” (143) near “Westmynstre yate” (178), is where the speaker confesses he “ofte appeere / To talk of mirthe and to disporte and pleye” (143-44). Like Harry Bailly, the speaker the *Male Regle* has a “hoom,” where he journeys when it is finally time to leave the tavern, to “go [his] way [...] to the Priuee Seel” (188). There, he sees “Prentys and Arondel” (321), his two lazy roommates who usually drink themselves into such a stupor that they sleep past noon (321-26). The details, in their historical and spatial specificity, bring the fifteenth-century city to life. In the *Male Regle*, Hoccleve even intensifies the Host’s description of the local neighborhood—and especially the feeling of movement, of criss-crossing the city—by making palpable this particular moment and locale.

In the *Male Regle* Hoccleve creates a version of the *Melibee*-Host exchange that recalls both the genre of the *Melibee* and the Host’s response together. The *Canterbury Tales* portrays two distinct voices: the pilgrim Chaucer’s, as he narrates the tale “of Prudence and hire benignytee” to offer advice to the other pilgrims, and Harry Bailly’s “in between” response, asserting his right to read disjunctively as what Bhabha calls the

¹⁴⁵ Writing about the *Male Regle*, Tolmie calls “the tavern and its quid pro quo values [...] the explanatory center of this poem [...] the locus of the poem’s morality, the place where—in contradistinction to the court—people get what they pay for, and pay for what they get”; “The Professional,” 359-60.

¹⁴⁶ Patterson points out just how much emphasis Hoccleve puts on his own particularity throughout his canon; “‘What is me?’” 437-40.

“outside of the inside.” In the *Male Regle*, by contrast, there is only one speaker, and the Englishman and poet uses his own experience in the city to *offer* advice. The Host represents a city that threatens to confuse and even upend the pilgrim Chaucer’s elite writerly work. The *Male Regle* represents an experience of the city as itself a source of literary material. There is no writerly identity in this poem without it.

Yet while the speaker portrays that city as an inextricable feature of his personal story, he also depicts it as a place from which he has always been detached. The speaker says that he indulged in every sinful behavior that the city offered, but his anecdotes undercut that confession, revealing that the speaker kept his distance. Everyone at Paul’s Head knows him; none but he were “bet aqweyntid at Westmynstre yate, / Among the tauernerres namely / And cookes” (178-80). Recounting that these “freendes” tell the speaker to moderate his “misreule” and “lyte and lyte [little by little] to withdrawen it” (89-92), he gives the impression that he was the most indulgent of the lot. He buys wine and “wafres thicke” for the prostitutes that he meets at the tavern so “to wynne loue and thank,” but, he confesses, “[o]f loues aart yit touched I no deel” (152-53). He woos prostitutes that hardly require wooing, and then he demurs at the last instant, seemingly afraid to pursue “the deede” (157). The tavern was often rowdy, but the speaker divulges that “I was so ferd with any man to fighte, / Cloos kepte I me. No man durst I depraeue / But rownyngly [whisperingly] I spak, nothyng on highte [aloud]” (170-72). He departs the tavern alone and returns home alone despite lodging with two fellow rioters, “Prentys and Arondel” (321), who boldly stay out later and sleep in longer (323-26). From this description of the speaker’s experience, the *Male Regle*’s city seems to offer many opportunities for common revelry, but ultimately emerges as a fundamentally unsocial

place. Like Harry Bailly, the speaker of the *Male Regle* emphasizes his troubles with the other locals: the Host's discussions of his neighborhood, his parish, and his wife's petty arguments with her neighbors anticipate this speaker's uneasy daily encounters with the locals of Westminster and London. By highlighting his turbulent urban relationships and his fear that deeper trouble lies just around the corner, the speaker seems to revisit precisely Harry Bailly's version of late medieval London. Harry's experience is fundamentally topsy-turvy and antagonistic; and when the Host applies it to his reading of the *Melibee*, he re-presents and so unsettles the pilgrim Chaucer's moral teaching. In the *Male Regle* the speaker's experience of the city is the material for the tale itself. As that experience is, likewise, potentially volatile, it makes risky subject matter for Hoccleve's advice book, threatening to similarly upend the *Male Regle*'s would-be elite message—and messenger.

That urban experience even seems to intimidate the speaker as he attempts to craft it into the subject of the poem, and he demonstrates reluctance to express it. Just as he builds momentum on any one topic, the speaker interrupts himself with sentences and clauses that switch direction. Discussing his own experience, he admits, "I dar nat telle," and then turns to his advice, "Now wole I torne ageyn to my sentence" (137-60). Not one hundred lines later, the speaker's personal sins become the poem's main event, and he treats the counsel as if *it* were the tangent. "Be as be may," he says, referring to his warning against flattery, "no more of this as now / But to my misreule wole I refeere" (289-90). By the time he says "But to my purpos" (337), changing *back* to his counsel, it is clear that he is not confident about either of his purposes. He seems to worry that the details of city life are interfering with his teaching—or perhaps vice versa. Like the frame

of the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Male Regle* replicates the offbeat rhythms and disorganization of the medieval city. If London were “a place of fluctuating, unfixed boundaries,” Hoccleve’s generically unusual text mimics that incoherence, constantly tripping over itself and traversing its own, fleeting boundaries.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, the speaker’s evident ambivalence suggests that the city-like structure of the poem is something that he barely controls.

The speaker also fears that he has replicated the excesses of his city riots in the verses of the poem itself. Near the conclusion, he asks, “Ey, what is me, Pat to myself thus longe / Clappid haue I? I trowe Pat at I raue” (393-94). The question is addressed to himself, as is the entire *Male Regle*: he suggests that he has been ranting to himself—not to others who may heed his example—and that he has wasted time doing so. The speaker has changed directions several times throughout the poem, but these lines finally dismiss all of the *Male Regle*’s stated purposes. This poem has not advised any “Lorde” or “thee” about the dangers of excess and hubris. Its details about his city life have been but more examples of that excess.

The disavowal of the *Male Regle*’s ambitious purpose prepares the way for what is, three stanzas later, the poem’s surprise ending. Lines 401-08 speak directly to “O God! o helthe!” (401), and the following stanza (409-16) seem to address the god of Health, too. In it, the speaker asks the unnamed “hy noblesse” (410) to “[p]itee haue”(413) and to “[d]espente [...] a drope of thy largesse” (415). But the speaker

¹⁴⁷ Turner, “Greater London,” 25. Goldie, discussing Hoccleve’s *Series*, similarly posits that “Hoccleve is attempting to argue for a coherence of self in a space that is itself divided [...] This urban conflict, which is only marginally part of many fourteenth-century texts, is embodied in Hoccleve’s psychosomatic identity”; “Psychosomatic Illness,” 36-38.

abandons the rhetorical stance that he has developed throughout the poem and addresses the historical figure, Lord Furnivall, who was the real-life royal treasurer:

Lo, lat my lord the Fourneval, I preye,
 My noble lord þat now is tresoreer,
 From thyn hynesse haue a tokne or tweye
 To paie me þat due is for this yeer
 Of my yearly x li. in th'eschequer
 Nat but for Michel terme þat was last. (417-22)

Not only does the speaker introduce a new implied reader, but he creates a new version of himself. The “I” of line 417 is not the same “I” from the previous 416 lines. For most of the poem, the speaker presents himself as a one-time riotous youth or a reflective, wiser penitent. Despite the copious details of everyday life, these are conventional poses. From line 417, however, the speaker heightens the effect of realism so that there is no doubt—if there ever was—that readers ought to associate the “I” of line 417 with the poet, the historical Thomas Hoccleve. Readers learn only in this passage that Hoccleve still works for the royal government and has been waiting for his money. Even the time scheme changes. For the majority of the poem, the speaker discusses the unspecified past when the speaker was young. By invoking last year’s Michaelmas term (422) the speaker introduces a much more specific calendrical time. He recasts the nearly four hundred preceding lines much as Harry Bailly recasts the pilgrim Chaucer’s *Melibee*. Whereas Harry encourages the pilgrim Chaucer’s readers to interpret the highbrow *Melibee* through his quotidian experience, the new speaker, the historical Thomas Hoccleve, jettisons both highbrow ambitions and “in-between,” local perspective. In so doing,

Hoccleve abandons the complex writerly persona that he has spent the bulk of the *Male Regle* developing—a persona that had balanced, if precariously, the two voices that Hoccleve appropriated from the seventh fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*.

It would be a mistake to describe these lines, as Ellis does, as “[t]he real point of the poem,” as if the rest has been leading to them all along.¹⁴⁸ Rather, this final rhetorical pose—the speaker as an historical bureaucrat—is a retreat. Up until this point, the poem had represented a writerly persona that advises potentially elite readers and, while so doing, asserts of the value—or necessity—of representing everyday life in London. At the same time, the speaker reveals an uneasy relationship to the city: to undercut his own narrative is to show that he feels ambivalent about—if not outright afraid of—representing the city at all. The appropriation of Harry Bailly’s response was bold, but in these last lines the speaker gives up the effort altogether. In contrast, the persona of a clerk at the Privy Seal, begging for money, is straightforward and safe. Thomas Hoccleve signals that he knows his place. The elite and familiar writerly persona that Hoccleve imagines for his “fadir” Chaucer—Hoccleve’s vision of English laureateship—has begun to take shape, but, in the *Male Regle*, the poet ultimately balks.

¹⁴⁸ Hoccleve, *Male Regle*, n. 417. Compare another of Hoccleve’s begging poems: at thirty-two lines, *Mon Meistre H. Somer*, written in 1408, is a much shorter, more focused poem. *Mon Meistre H. Somer* opens by comparing the poem’s addressee, Chancellor of the Exchequer Henry Somer, to the summer season. Having established the summer/Somer conceit, the speaker of *Mon Meistre H. Somer* flatters Somer’s “friendly gentillesse” (17) and begs that he and his colleagues be paid for their work at the Privy Seal: “We, your seruants, Hoccleue and Baillay, / Hethe and Offorde, yow besseache and preye, / ‘Haastith our heruest as soone as yee may” (25-27). The singular purpose of the *Mon Meistre H. Somer* contrasts with the messier structure of the *Male Regle*, in which the speaker sometimes aims to educate his readers, sometimes to tell details of his urban environment, and sometimes both. Whereas the speaker of the former arrives at his begging point by the end of the second stanza, the speaker of the latter does not ask for the money directly and does not introduce his apparently intended reader, Lord Furnivall, until four stanzas from the poem’s conclusion.

The Thomas of the *Series*

Hoccleve wrote the five items that constitute the *Series* (1419-21) at the end of his career, after he had stopped working for the Lancastrians and so when his unofficial laureate period had passed. I argue above that early in his career, in the *Male Regle*, Hoccleve had begun to imagine a writerly persona that balances the poet's elite ambitions, on the one hand, and the quotidian experience of late medieval London, on the other; and in the middle of his career, in the *Regement of Princes*, he blends the two parts of this high-low dichotomy to create a pseudo-laureate Geoffrey Chaucer, the predecessor from whom Hoccleve sought to inherit a distinctly English poetic prestige. Hoccleve's work for the Lancastrians seems to have given him confidence: in the *Series* Hoccleve appropriates that pseudo-laureate persona for himself.

Like the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Series* is a framed collection: the first two items, "My Compleinte" and "A Dialoge" introduce the speaker and the situation that gives rise to the embedded poems. "My Compleinte" is a first-person account of the speaker's mental breakdown, recovery, and lingering social isolation. When "My Compleinte" begins, Thomas sits alone in his room, afraid to venture out. He recounts the following chronological events in the poem's "prolog" (1-35): he once suffered a bout of "sickness" (22); his social group ostracized him; he recovered physically but not socially; the autumn came and went; he started to suffer "the pouztful maladie [melancholy]" (21); and he began to write this work, which, as it unfolds, is revealed to be the same story in greater detail. The second item in the *Series*, "A Dialoge," depicts the speaker's discussion with his "Friend," which is loosely organized around how the speaker might reintegrate himself into society. The three embedded items are the "Fabula

de quadam imperatrice Romana,” or “The Tale of Jereslau’s Wife,” a translation from the late medieval *Gesta Romanorum*; the “Ars vtillissima sciendi mori,” or “Lerne to Dye,” a translation of the fourteenth-century *Horologium Sapientiae* II.ii; and “Fabula de quadam muliere mala,” or “The Tale of Jonathas,” another translation from the *Gesta Romanorum*. The *Series* revisits the frame narrative at the end of the two *Gesta Romanorum* translations: there, the speaker, “Thomas,” continues to talk to his “Friend” about his progress toward social reintegration. The first two items and the rest of the frame, I argue in this section, adapt and extend the *Melibee*-Harry Bailly exchange in order to join the speaker’s highbrow writerly identity—represented in the *Series* as his affiliation with powerful patrons and his participation in international *fin amour* poetry—to his urban experience. Not only does Hoccleve boldly revisit the simultaneously high and low writerly persona that he had abandoned at the end of the *Male Regle*, but he amplifies the version that he created for his predecessor Chaucer, too. In the *Series*, the speaker Thomas’s reintegration into the city requires that he assert an elite writerly role; and, conversely, that role depends upon his reintegration into the city.

As “My Compleinte” opens, the speaker seems to be even more disconnected from the city than was his counterpart in the *Male Regle*, and this disconnection actually bestows on the city an outsize presence in the speaker’s mind. Whereas that city intrudes on the *Melibee*, and proves too risky as literary source in the *Male Regle*, its very *absence* propels the *Series*’ frame narrative. In “My Compleinte,” as in the *Male Regle*, Hoccleve describes a vibrant city with familiar locations and neighbors. The speaker, Thomas, has heard gossip “whanne I in Westmynstir Halle, / And eke in Londoun, amonge the prees [crowd] went” (72-73). He acknowledges the “manie a wizt aboute me dwelling” (83),

and he recounts his journeys back and forth “fro Wesminstir” (183), where he meets his “felawis of the Priue Seel” (296). In the *Male Regle* Hoccleve presents a speaker who is lured by the pleasures of the city but never quite integrated into it. He riots, but at a distance. In “My Compleinte,” Hoccleve amplifies this isolation: Thomas does not carouse or even talk with his neighbors but rather hides from them altogether, observing their conversations and goings-on from the city’s margins. Finally, his social anxiety drives him from the urban community altogether—“Kepte I me cloos, and trussed me my weie [took myself off]” (145)—and he, “alone” (156) finally ends up “in [his] chaumbre at home” (155). From this room he fixates on his past and future experience of that outside world.

Thomas’s situation bears a complex but clear relation to the *Melibee*-Harry exchange around the problem of interpretation. As I discuss above, in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer the pilgrim seeks to distance his ambitious and elite *Melibee* from the language in which it is written; he aims to tell a universal tale like the Gospels. Despite Chaucer the pilgrim’s efforts, the Host virtually rewrites *Melibee* just as soon as Chaucer speaks its last word, interpreting it through his topsy-turvy experience of London. In the *Male Regle*, Thomas presents his past life in the city as itself a text for interpretation, a model of misspent youth to teach how not to act. In “My Compleinte,” Thomas’s past self is represented not on the other side of sickness, as in the *Male Regle*, but in the throes of it—at least, according to his neighbors:

Men seiden [said] I loked as a wilde steer,
 And so my looke aboute I gan to throwe [cast].
 Min heed [head] to hie, anothir seide, I beer [carried]:

‘Full bukkish [very much like a buck] is his brayn wel may I trowe [believe].’
 And seide the thridde, ‘And apt is [he is fit] in 3e rowe [company]
 To site of hem that a resounles reed [senseless piece of advice]
 Can 3eue [give]: no sadness [soundness] is in his heed.’
 Chaunged had I m[y] pas [pace], somme seiden eke [also],
 For here and there for3e stirte [started] I as a roo [roe],
 Noon abood [resting], noon areest [stopping], but al brainseke.
 Another spake and of me seide also,
 My feet weren ay wauynge [moving] to and fro,
 Whanne 3at I stonde shulde and wizt men talke,
 And pat myn yen [eyes] sou3ten [sought] euery halke [corner of the room]. (120-
 33)

In this passage and throughout “My Compleinte,” Thomas reduces the hubbub of the city to a crowd whispering around him and about him wherever he goes. The last time that he ventured out into the city, Thomas overheard neighbors as they gossiped about his body and his brain. They saw Thomas’s movements and drew conclusions about his mental health, and no matter how he acts Thomas fears that he cannot control their misreadings (137-43). He confides that his Westminster and London acquaintances distrust his sanity and refuse to accept him back into his former social circles. That very alienation drives the poem, as Thomas tries to understand how he might reintegrate himself into the urban social scene: “‘If that I not be sen amonge 3e prees [crowd], / Men deme [judge] wole that I myn heed hide, / And am wese than I am, it is no lees [lie]’” (191-93). Thomas worries that his self-imposed confinement will only lead his acquaintances to the most

negative conclusions: that Thomas *cannot* participate in the day-to-day life of the city. Without venturing out among the crowded streets, without representing himself there, Thomas is vulnerable to *mis*interpretation—in fact, he has already been its victim. The painful memories of being misread in the city, and the potential for misinterpretation to continue, consume his complaint poem. The speaker wants to relay his experience, to tell his tale, but like the pilgrim Chaucer he learns that readers are always potentially misreaders and have their own perspectives and agendas. Embedded in the *Canterbury Tales*'s seventh fragment, *Melibee* is inextricable from the Host's reading of it; and Thomas's identity is similarly dependent on his neighbors' interpretation of him. In order to represent himself and his writerly persona, Thomas needs the city dwellers—the likes of Harry Bailly—to read him correctly, and they are letting him down.

As the frame narrative of the *Series* progresses, Thomas seeks to control his neighbors' interpretations. He turns his experience into a literal text, the poem "My Compleinte," which he intends to share around town to set the record straight. The second item in the *Series*, "A Dialogue" begins just as Thomas finishes writing that poem. A "good frende" (8) visits, and Thomas reads it to him (17). To Thomas's surprise, his Friend advises him against circulating the poem "[a]monge þe peple" (24) and informs him that it is Thomas who is mistaken: about his sickness, the Friend says, "[m]en han forȝete [forgotten] it. It is oute of mynde" (30), and "I cannot finde / O [one] man to speke of it" (32-33). The Friend does not contest Thomas's desire to reintroduce himself textually and as a poet, but rather encourages Thomas to be thoughtful about just what writerly identity would be most conducive to social rehabilitation. In the *Melibee*-Harry Bailly exchange, the Host's specific, "in between" interpretation threatens to obscure the

highbrow purpose of the pilgrim Chaucer's *Melibee*; and in the *Male Regle* and the *Regement*, respectively, Hoccleve balances and abandons, and then blends the highbrow function of a would-be laureate and the quotidian experience of London. Departing from Chaucer and then over the course of his works, Hoccleve becomes more comfortable with the idea of the lowbrow, local city as a productive component of his would-be laureate vision. In "A Dialoge," Thomas and his Friend discuss how the poet might develop a prestigious poetic role that fits it.

Isolated, emotionally-wounded Thomas does not begin the conversation so open-minded to developing a productive relationship with the city. Having agreed to shelve "My Compleinte," Thomas considers the item that ultimately becomes the fourth in the *Series*, "Lerne to Die," a "meditation on last things," as Hoccleve's modern editor describes it.¹⁴⁹ The speaker, Thomas, gives notice to his Friend that "[i]n Latyn haue I seen a smal tretice, / Wiche Lerne for to Die callid is / a bettir restreint knowe I noon fro vice" (205-207). Thomas will labor over this treatise so that "my bodies gilte foule and vnclene," will be cleansed "sumwhat by translacioun" (215-16), and, in so doing, help "[m]any another wīzt [person]" (219). The purpose of writing "Lerne to Die" is personal repentance and edification for others; pursuing it, Thomas ignores his desire for social integration to focus on the more pressing issue of salvation, which lies beyond earthly time altogether. Thus, "Lerne to Die" seems a fitting rejoinder to "My Compleinte," which bemoans the mutability of fortune in the temporal order. Indeed, the notion of a translation on the most universal and timeless of subjects—death—contrasts with the parts of the *Series* that emphasize life in historically-specific early fifteenth-century London. When he has finished translating "Lerne to Die," he tells his Friend, "I neuere

¹⁴⁹ Headnote to Hoccleve, "Lerne to Die," p. 226.

Pinke / More in English after [to] be occupied" (239-40). Yet just as Thomas gestures that he would to look beyond temporal matters, his Friend drags him back in: "Abyde, and they purpos putte in respyt / Til þat right wel stablissed be thy brayn" (306-07). The Friend wants Thomas to build up psychological stamina before he embarks on exceptionally rigorous work, but he also reminds the poet that the dangers of falling into the "Þouȝtful maladie [melancholia]" ("My Compleinte," 21) include renewed ostracization. The Friend convinces Thomas that to resurrect both his literary reputation and social life, he must engage with the literary scene in London.

Several interrelated writerly roles emerge from the dialogue between Thomas and his Friend. First, the two friends decide that Thomas must rehabilitate himself as English writer who is affiliated with powerful patrons, and whose work for those patrons contributes to the general good. The Friend remembers the time not long ago, but surely before Thomas fell ill, "in the monthe of Septembre / Now last" (528-29), when Thomas had divulged to the Friend that he was "of a book [...] in dette" (532) to "my lord þat now is lieutenant, / My lord of Gloucester" (533-35), who will soon be coming home "[f]ro France" (543). He should have had a book by Thomas "many a day ago" (536); but, as Thomas admits, "seeknesse and vnlust and othir mo / Han be the causes of impediment" (537-38). The specific temporal scheme and location of this writing project contrast with the universality and timelessness of "Lerne to Die." This is not to say that writing for Prince Humphrey of Lancaster, Duke of Gloucester, and Henry V's youngest brother, is a lowbrow endeavor—to the contrary—but the Friend has certainly steered Thomas back to his specific cultural milieu. In imagining writing once more for patrons, Thomas recovers a key facet of the literary identity that he had built with the Lancastrians

during his unofficial laureate period. What is more, Thomas acknowledges that “[t]o cronicle [Gloucester’s] actes wer a good deede, / For they ensauple mighte and encourage / Ful many a man for to taken heede / How for to gouerne hem in the vsage / Of armes. It is a greet auantage / A man before him to haue a mirour, / Therin to see the path vnto honour” (603-09). Thomas indicates that the value of his poetry is to celebrate those, like Gloucester, who sit at the center of political and, in this case, military power, and to use that praise to edify “[f]ul many a man.” The conversation about Thomas’s desire to write for his elite reader recalls the *Regement*, *Male Regle*, and the *Melibee*. By articulating that he will write for “so noble a prince,” for “[s]o excellent, worthy and honourable” a patron (631-32), Thomas conveys his highbrow ambitions.

When Thomas and his Friend discuss just *what* the poet should write for Gloucester, they describe another elite persona: the *fin amour* poet who participates in an old, international French-language tradition. Searching for “good mateer and vertuous” (637), the Friend suggests that Thomas “wryte in honour and of preysynge [praising]” (673) of women. Such a book suits Gloucester’s “hy degree” (704), the Friend explains, as the prince will read for “desport and mirthe, in honestee / With ladyes to haue daliance” (705-06). A genre for and by the privileged, *fin amour* promises to elevate its participants. As the discussion unfolds, the Friend reminds Thomas that he has been involved in this tradition before: for Thomas to take up this genre is an act of repentance, since it seems that Thomas’s “epistle of Cypyde” (754) had offended these women in the past in his. In 1402, the historical Thomas Hoccleve translated French poet Christine de Pizan’s *Epistre au dieu d’amours*. According to the Friend, in the nearly twenty years that have intervened, women in elite coterie circles have been “swart wroth [black with

rage] and full euele apaid [not at all pleased]" (756) about his version. Not only does the presence of women's anger work conventionally to set in motion the male poet's misogyny, but Thomas's response to hearing of that anger adopts the precise writerly "I" of the highbrow tradition—the very same tradition in which the Man of Law attempts to locate Geoffrey Chaucer. Thomas runs through one standard antifeminist argument featured frequently in the "querelle du *Roman de la Rose*": he insists that he should not be responsible for the content of tales that he merely translates.¹⁵⁰ The poet who achieves fame by retelling old stories sometimes offensive and sometimes sympathetic to women is a role that dates back through Chaucer, his French predecessors, and, ultimately, to Ovid. In "A Dialog," Thomas and his Friend outline a straightforwardly highbrow poetic role: Thomas celebrates and advises a powerful English patron, he does so for the wider good, and he does so by donning an elite, international writerly persona. In other words, Thomas and his Friend transform the representation of the poet into a would-be laureate, and it is this transformation that justifies Thomas's social rehabilitation.

In "A Dialoge," the conventional literary pose that connects Thomas to the elite *fin amour* tradition also evokes an "effect of realism," full of quotidian details of everyday life.¹⁵¹ As I discuss above, when the Friend mentions the historical text, Thomas Hoccleve's *Epistre de Cupide*, he links the fictional Thomas directly to the historical Thomas Hoccleve. In that exchange, several versions of the poet coalesce: the "I" who strikes the conventional literary pose of outraged male; the historical author, Thomas Hoccleve, who has a literary canon behind him, including texts in the

¹⁵⁰ Minnis, "Theorizing the *Rose*."

¹⁵¹ The expression is Brown's, "Lo, Heer the Fourme," 2. It is fitting that in "A Dialoge," the Friend cites the "Wyf of Bathe" (694), an "auctrice" (694) in women's matters. The Wife of Bath would have been for Hoccleve a literary creation who also conveys the "effect of realism" not unlike those of the Host or Hoccleve.

straightforwardly highbrow French *fin amour* tradition; and the fictional and “in between” Englishman, Thomas, who has a personal life around London. Hoccleve balances his self-presentation as a highbrow poet and London neighbor for the next several stanzas as Thomas engages in another conventional, antifeminist literary rant: Thomas complains that since Eve was fooled by Satan when he was disguised as a snake, God has given women the power to crush all serpents’ heads. And if women have the power to crush the devil’s head, of course they also have the power to crush men’s heads (722-28). Thus, husbands ought not be ashamed, Thomas says, even if their wives emasculate them:

Thogh holy writ witesse and testifie

Men sholde of hem han dominacioun,

It is the reuers in probacioun [when put to the proof].

“Hange vp his hachet [cease from his labors] and sette him adoun [sit down],

For wommen wole assente in no maneere

Vnto þat point ne þat conclusioun. (733-738)

Striking a conventional literary pose, Thomas seems to be discussing women in general. Yet Thomas’s anger prompts his Friend to interrupt the outpouring of what were, essentially, antifeminist literary tropes. Interjecting “the effect of realism,” the Friend blurs the distinction from elite writerly persona and “in between” London denizen: “Thomas, how is it twixt thee and thy feere?” (739). In this moment, Hoccleve encourages his readers to rethink what they are reading: simultaneously Thomas is a literary trope in a highbrow genre and a specific husband in a marriage that is going through a rough

patch. He sounds like Harry Bailly, in fact, the downtrodden husband afflicted by Goodelief, who “rampeth in [his] face.”

“Wel, wel,” quod I, “what list yow therof heere? [does it please you to hear?]

My wyf mighte haue hokir [scorn] and greet desdeyn

If I sholde in swich cas pleye a soley[n] [so unsociable a part].” (740-42)

The Friend does not learn much about Thomas’s domestic affairs—ironically so, given Thomas’s impulse to over share elsewhere—but the coyness evinced in Thomas’s “Wel, wel” does suggest that there is a domestic story to which the Friend and Thomas’s readers are not privy. As the moment passes, Hoccleve’s readers are again reminded that, throughout most of “A Dialoge,” Thomas is neither only the highbrow poet, writing coterie poetry for his powerful patron, nor only a husband with marital troubles and nose-y neighbors. More than in the other examples that I have analyzed in this chapter—more than in the *Melibee*-Host exchange, the *Male Regle*, or even the *Regement*—Hoccleve blends the highbrow poet of international tradition and the local Londoner to create a distinctly English laureate vision. Hoccleve suggests that he knew the man Chaucer, that the two had spent time together in the late fourteenth century somewhere in London, but he does not provide this level of detail about laureate Chaucer’s quotidian life. As in the *Male Regle*, Hoccleve amplifies everyday details; but, unlike in the *Male Regle*, the city does not make Hoccleve balk. In “A Dialoge,” he embraces it and his place in it.

The city features again in the frame narrative that surrounds the *Series*’s third and fifth items, Thomas’s two translations of *Gesta Romanorum* tales. The first, “Jereslaus’s Wife”—an exemplum about a Roman Empress who is grossly mistreated by several men

while her husband is off in the Holy Land, and then is vindicated by their confessions—has no prologue but a substantial epilogue. Just as Thomas puts what he thinks are the finishing touches on his translation (952), his Friend stops by to check on his progress (953). Although he praises the translation, the Friend worries that Thomas has left it unfinished because he has omitted its “moralizynge” (964). Had Thomas not seen such an analysis in the Latin exemplar (965-66)? The discrepancy between Thomas’s version of this tale and the one the Friend recalls prompts the Friend to venture home to retrieve his copy:

“Hoom wole Y walke and retourne anoon—

Nat spare wol Y for so small trauaille—

And looke in my book. Ther Y shal nat faille

To fynde it. Of þat tale it is parcel,

For Y seen haue it ofte, and knowe it wel.”

He cam therwith, and it vnto me redde,

Leuyng it with me and hoom wente ageyn. (969-75)

Although the speaker, Thomas, does not leave his study over the course of the epilogue, readers do experience the city streets as the Friend criss-crosses from one “hoom” to another. The translation of “Jerelaus’s Wife” is incomplete without the moralization, and so the Friend’s journey helps to finish it. That translation with its moralization, which Thomas adds upon his Friend’s return (981-1069), brings to fruition Thomas’s highbrow writerly persona—it is the work that Thomas presents to Gloucester as his sample of elite and Latinate poetry—and so enables Thomas to rejoin London life. Furthermore, the moralization is a text that compares to the other important document featured in the

Series: “My Compleinte.” At the beginning of “A Dialoge,” Thomas reads “My Compleinte” to his Friend so that his Friend may interpret him correctly. Thomas recounts his social isolation, the frustration and even paralysis that he feels when he is misread, and his despair at the prospect of never finding his way back into the English city. Here, at the conclusion of “Jerelaus’s Wife,” the Friend reads a new text—the moralization, likewise instructions for interpretation—to Thomas. Symbolically, this text {the whole thing the tale and moralization?} replaces “My Compleinte” with an act of literary collaboration, a rekindled friendship, and a walk through London city streets. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Host, with his tale of Southwark life, *makes* room for the English city in what might have otherwise passed as a conventional, highbrow and even generically European text; here the tale-making takes place in its own niche within the established city—the social and physical topography that enables Thomas’s literary pursuits.

Thomas and his Friend talk once more in the frame that introduces the “Tale of Ionathas.” A translation from the *Gesta Romanorum*, the tale about a naïve youth routinely tricked by his deceitful love interest is the fifth and final item of the *Series*. Thomas admits that he had intended to conclude the *Series* with its fourth item, “Lerne to Dye” (1), but his Friend requests that Thomas “translate and make” (7) a tale that the Friend had read last Easter (4-5). The Friend at first pitches the tale because “[t]h’ensaumple of it to yong men might auaille, / And par cas [perhaps] cause hem riot to forber” (9-10). After considering the general good, the Friend reveals that he has a personal concern:

A sone haue Y xv yeer of age,

For whom it is, as wisly God m'amende [God help me]

þat Y desire into our langage

þat tale be translated, for sauage

And wylde is he and likly to foleye

In swich cas. Now helpe if thos maist, Y preye" (23-28).

The Friend hopes that his son will avoid the sinful, urban escapades, the very riot to which Thomas had succumbed in his youth. The components that Hoccleve adapts from the *Melibee*-Harry Bailly exchange and incorporates in the *Male Regle*, the *Regement*, and in the earlier parts of the *Series* are present in the Friend's request: Thomas is called upon to use his poetry to teach better "gouernaille [behavior]" (11), and that purpose is mixed with vivid details of life in the medieval city. Yet the Friend asks Thomas to create a work of fiction that advises not a prince but a younger version of Thomas himself. In earlier iterations of Hoccleve's writerly identity, it was the city that was dangerous, risky, even too intimidating. Here, that quotidian experience can meet the requirements of writer, reader, and subject matter.

I have argued that when Harry Bailly interprets Chaucer's *Melibee*, supplementing it with his own tale of Goodelief and the couple's Southwark neighborhood, he causes a temporal disruption in the highbrow literary history that otherwise would have rendered English works perpetually belated. The Host reads on his own terms and, so doing, founds a distinctly English laureate vision. Hoccleve, for his part, balances and then blends the two English laureate impulses—one that is elite, and another that is quotidian and local—to develop a singular laureate persona. The poet's relationship to the city, literary material, and his readers changes greatly over the course

of the *Male Regle* and the *Series* as different iterations of “Thomas” learn to accept and finally embrace his London experience.

Chapter 2: John Skelton's Temporal Laureateship

Chaucer introduced the word and concept of a Petrarchan *laureate poet* into the English language; and Thomas Hoccleve, after him, worked out a notion of what an English laureate poet might be—but ultimately stopped short of linking that notion with the title or person. By the middle of the fifteenth century the English language had gained considerable cultural cache, and the idea of an English-language poet laureate as spokesman for his era and as worthy ambassador to the pantheon of transhistorical, international laureates had come into view. An English laureate in the Petrarchan mold would codify both the relatively new literary culture's status as equal to its Italian and French counterparts and the English-language poet as an important asset to the crown. In this regard, as Robert Meyer-Lee has shown, John Lydgate was a trailblazer. Although he was the beneficiary of royal patronage, Lydgate “mystified” his relationship to his patrons, including the Lancastrians. He imagined himself as an analog to the crown, but one with literary independence, not simply a paid Lancastrian mouthpiece. Although he was never granted a poetic office and had no official status with the Lancastrians, Lydgate did use the term *laureate* to describe himself. He also created a model of elite poetics, based on a lineage imaginatively extending from Chaucer, upon which subsequent fifteenth century writers drew.¹⁵²

By the end of the fifteenth century this path to laureateship was not so clear cut. Henry VII had introduced new literary lineages to England and had reduced the

¹⁵² Flannery, *John Lydgate*; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*.

importance of Lydgatean poetics.¹⁵³ As Gordon Kipling has shown, Burgundian culture pervaded Henry VII's court.¹⁵⁴ The so-called blind poet, Frenchman and Latin-language writer Bernard André, whom Henry had brought with him from France and kept as his official poet, dominated the early Tudor poetic scene.¹⁵⁵ André and his Latin poetry cast a long shadow over contemporaries who tried to claim elite, English poetic status. As Robert Meyer-Lee observes, "by the early sixteenth century, such [laureate] posturing began to appear absurd for poets who failed to have a position, title, and academic degree similar to André's."¹⁵⁶ Thus, English language writers who aimed to be exemplary models for their era's poetics were forced back again into the imaginative, rather than the official, space of laureateship. The prospect of writing a laureate poetics in English was further away than ever.

John Skelton (c. 1463-1529), however, claimed three "titular identities"—*orator regius*, *vates*, and *poet laureate*—that testify to his own lofty aspirations.¹⁵⁷ The poet was obviously in high enough esteem that he worked for much of his life in the literary orbit of the court,¹⁵⁸ and he received praise from his contemporary, Erasmus.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, he did receive laureations at three universities, Oxford in 1488, Louvain in 1492, and

¹⁵³ Hasler, "Cultural Intersections," 65. As Hasler explains, the fifteenth century was dominated by the conflict of explicitly ambitious political and stylistic projects (i.e., development of an aureate diction to legitimize the Lancastrians and promote the nationalist vernacular) and the modesty topos. In the early Tudor period, by contrast, more Italians, French, and Flemish arrived at and around the court, so there appeared on the scene Latin poetry – "grex poetarum" – with different, European lineages. André's appointment in particular served to supplant an English Chaucerian lineage with a European one.

¹⁵⁴ Kipling, "Henry VII and the Origins of Tudor Patronage."

¹⁵⁵ Hasler, *Court Poetry*; Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*.

¹⁵⁶ Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power*, 175.

¹⁵⁷ Griffiths, *John Skelton*.

¹⁵⁸ But Henry VIII seems to have had a penchant for the lowbrow. See, for example, an anecdote that Henry once dressed up as Robin Hood to surprise Queen Catherine in Sponsler, "Culture as Appropriation." Henry's tastes should not be underestimated as a driving force behind Skelton's poetic decisions. Also see Skelton's flytings, authorized "[b]y the kynges most noble commaundment," *Agenst Garnesche* i.45.

¹⁵⁹ Erasmus wrote, "For he from Latium all the muses led / And taught them to speak English words instead / Of Latin; and with Skelton England tries / With Roman poets to contend the prize"; qtd. in Lowenstein, "Skelton's Triumph," 619.

Cambridge in 1493.¹⁶⁰ Those laureations were likely the original impetus for his *Garlande of Laurell*, a poem that Skelton seems to have revised over the course of his poetic career, from the 1480s until the 1520s.¹⁶¹

Nonetheless, Skelton was often regarded as something of a literary clown.¹⁶² One of Skelton's real world contemporaries and rivals, Alexander Barclay, levels an outright attack at the end of his *Shyp of Foblys* (1509), belittling Skelton's poetry and accusing the would-be laureate of cultural slumming:

I write no jeste ne tale of Robin Hode
 Nor sowe no sparkels ne sede of viciousness;
 Wisemen loue virtue, wylde people wantonnes;
 It longeth not to my scyence nor cunnyng
 For Phyllyp the Sparowe the Dirige to singe.¹⁶³

In part, the attack is directed at Skelton's poetry. By comparing it to Robin Hood, by calling it "vicious and "wanton," Barclay associates *Phyllyp Sparrowe* with misrule generally. Calling the poem "Phyllyp Sparowe the Dirige" draws attention to the carnivalesque mismatch between secular content (the sparrow) and liturgical form (the funeral dirge). In other part, however, the attack is directed at the poet himself, who is implicitly lumped in with "wylde" lovers of "wantonnes." While these words may refer directly to *Phyllyp Sparrowe*'s lewd passages, in this stanza, "wylde" and "wantonnes" also attack Skelton's lack of self-regulation in writing such passages: in contrast with the Barclay's "scyence or cunnyng," Skelton lacks the refinement that he ought to have

¹⁶⁰ Headnote to the *Garlande*, 477.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Griffiths, *John Skelton*.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 176.

acquired at university. Barclay again levels this personal attack in his *Eclogues* (1514) when he writes of Skelton that, “Then is he decked as Poet laureate, / When stinking Thrais made him her graduate’.”¹⁶⁴ Skelton’s lowbrow poetry is particularly offensive because Skelton himself claims to be elite. In the *Arte of Poesy* (1589), published seventy-nine years after the *Shyp of Folys*, George Puttenham echoes Barclay, summing up a version of Skelton’s Tudor reputation: Puttenham calls Skelton a “sharp satirist, but one with more railing and scoffery than became a poet laureate; such among the Greeks were called *pantomimi*, with us buffoons, altogether applying their wits to scurrilities and other ridiculous matters.”¹⁶⁵ Skelton, Puttenham says elsewhere, spelling out Barclay’s point, “usurp[s] the name of a poet laureate” and is rather “a rude railing rhymer and all his doings ridiculous.”¹⁶⁶ In the century following his death, Skelton had come to be defined not only by lowbrow elements in his verse, but also by the stark contrast between those elements and the lofty status that he claimed.¹⁶⁷

Just what was so offensively lowbrow about Skelton’s poetry? Why—despite numerous highbrow efforts such as the *Garlande of Laurell*, *The Bowge of Courte*, “A Lawde and Prayse Made for Our Sovereigne Lord and Kyng,” “Calliope,” and *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?*—was Skelton so swiftly and commonly associated only with lowbrow works? Surely, the *content* of some of his poetry came to play an outsize role in defining

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Puttenham, *The Art of English Poetry*, 150.

¹⁶⁶ Qtd. in Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority*, 158-59.

¹⁶⁷ For a fuller picture of Skelton’s multifaceted early modern reputation, see Griffiths’s final chapter in *John Skelton and Poetic Authority*. Jane Griffiths sees two posthumous versions of Skelton converging. On the one hand, his satire was viewed as proto-Protestant and so anti-Catholic, and so his style became associated with political protest, “the natural form for the voice of the people” (162), and the plain, native tradition. On the other hand, Skelton also came to be associated with entertainment, pastime, “frivolity or even scurrility” (170), a “jest-book hero” (174). It is possible, Griffiths concludes, “that his known opposition to Wolsey prompted stories of other kinds of rebellion against authority” such as in trickster tales. Both strands eventually merged, Griffiths argued, so that Skelton was regarded as generally and vaguely rebellious—that is, potentially subversive of ecclesiastic, secular, and literary authority. See also Lucy Munro, “Skeltonics: Jonson, Shakespeare, the Literary Past and Imagined Futures.”

his clownish reputation. Frequently, however, criticism of Skelton marries a discussion of that content to Skelton's signature *form*, the skeltonic, which Skelton's modern editor, Scattergood, defines as "short lines of two or three stresses, rhymed in anything from couplets to very long leashes and involving frequent use of alliteration and parallelism."¹⁶⁸

It is precisely the interplay of content and prosody that is crucial to a full understanding of Skelton's unique poetry. Jonathan Culler's recent work on lyric alerts us to how we must account for both narrator and prosody in general. The premise of his *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) is that lyric poetry contains a tension between "fictional" and "ritualistic" elements. The former category includes every facet of the poem that relates to a speaker and his situation: for example, who he is, what he wants, what motivates him, and what he does. The latter refers to the every *other* facet of the poem, categorized as "ritualistic" because these elements perpetually allow new readers to try on the poem's speaking voice, to locate the poem in "iterative time," which is Culler's updated version of what is usually called *the lyric present*. The formal dimensions of lyrics—the patterning of rhythm and rhyme, the repetition of stanza forms, and generally everything that lacks a mimetic or representational function—contribute to their ritualistic as opposed to fictional aspect, making them texts composed for *reperformance*.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Scattergood, *John Skelton*, 136. For example, according to the implicit and explicit presumptions of many Skeltonists, the quintessential skeltonic poem is *Elynour Rummynge*, which, not coincidentally, includes some of the lowest-brow content in Skelton's canon. Carnavalesque portraits of Elynour and her alehouse guests, mostly women, depict grotesque, leaky bodies, sinfully engaged. The meter in that poem, as Jane Griffiths in "'An Ende to an Olde Song,'" has analyzed epitomizes what we have come to call skeltonics—even though *Elynour Rummynge* (and most poems written in skeltonics) is comprised of its own unique version of that meter.

¹⁶⁹ Culler, *Theory*, 37. James Wimsatt, in "Rhyme/Reason," makes a similar point, using the concept of "musical sense" (22) rather than ritual or song. He posits that from Chaucer to the Renaissance, "independent significance of poetry's music never is subordinated" (22). Wimsatt explains that, after differential semantic systems have distinguished meaning, "words have 'leftover' a great body of sound

In this chapter, I argue that Skelton uses prosody to represent time. To that end, I take up the skeltonic line, but I do so in the context of another prosodic strategy, the antithesis of skeltonic refrains. Unlike skeltonics, refrains are organized, closed, and predictable. Culler's general remarks about poetry help us to see in refrains the strong potential for ritual by which the poem and readers together can enact a lyric present, what Culler reimagines as "iterative time." The first part of this chapter analyzes the incorporation of such a refrain in key moment in the *Garlande of Laurell*, a decision that enables Skelton to iterate not only the verses themselves but the English literary history that those verses contain. The second part of this chapter argues that whereas narrative is subordinated to iterative time in the *Garlande*, poems written in skeltonics subordinate narrative to a rhythm that cannot be anonymous, one that carries its original context and poet with it. In *Phyllyp Sparowe*, I show, it is *Skelton* that remains after sense is worked out; Skelton is the element that is the iterated component of his signature verse. And it is Skelton's fleeting, historical experience that *Phyllyp Sparowe* ultimately iterates.

Refrains in *The Garlande of Laurell*

Near the end of the dream vision that makes up nearly all of the *Garlande of Laurell*, the narrator recalls a "showte" (1508) so powerful that the "starry hevyn" seems to have "shoke," and the "grownde" seems to have "gronid and tremblid" (1508-09):

All orators and poetis, with other grete and smale, //

qualities that ordinary communication only marginally employs for rhetorical effect," and so, "[i]n ways beyond support of the sense, prosodic patterns in poetry capitalize on the leftover qualities that ordinary language neglects." This "musical sense" is an important way to think about the poetry of which Skelton would have been especially aware. (Skelton was a musician himself and apparently taught music, too. See W.R. Streitberger, "John Skelton: The Revels, Entertainments, and Plays at Court," 24, and John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, 369-79.)

A thowsande, thowsande, I trow, to my dome,

‘*Triumpha, triumpha!*’ they cryid all aboute.

Of trumpettis and clariouns the noyse went to Rome (1504-07).

The “showte” is the “laureat tryumphe” (217) that the narrator has sought since the beginning this narrative. Now that Occupation has fulfilled the Quene of Fame’s demand that “good recorde [...] be brought forth” (215-16) to prove Skelton Poeta’s deserving—Occupation has read out all of the titles included in the poet’s “boke of remembrauns” (1149)¹⁷⁰—Skelton Poeta receives his acclaim.

More than a celebration of the singular poet, however, the “showte” reminds us that the Skelton is part of a larger story that involves a pantheon of international and transhistorical laureates stretching back to the mythical past. The cries of the Latin word *triumpha*, its reverberations resounding as far as “Rome,” recall the ending of the original laureate myth, Ovid’s tale of Phoebus and Daphne, and complete a version of that story that the *Garlande* itself begins nearly 1200 lines earlier. That story’s reappearance and conclusion here, at the final, crucial moment of laureate triumph and at the end of the *Garlande*, suggest that it deserves more scholarly attention. Criticism has emphasized Skelton’s self-creating authority or his debt to his immediate English predecessors,¹⁷¹ but has overlooked Skelton’s attention to the larger context of his own laureateship. In his translation and extension of Ovid’s story, as I argue below, Skelton emphasizes what Jonathan Culler has called recently the “ritualistic” aspects of poetry, those that lend themselves to “iteration” and to “the possibility of making something happen in the

¹⁷⁰ The version of the *Garlande* that was printed in 1523 includes over 300 lines of such record (1170-1502). Skelton seems to have written the bulk of the text as a young man in the late 1480s, and he also seems to have revised it several times before its print publication in 1523.

¹⁷¹ Those critics who emphasize Skelton’s self-creating poetic authority in the *Garlande* include Hasler, *Court Poetry*; Griffiths, *John Skelton*; and Lerer, “At Chaucer’s Tomb.”

world.”¹⁷² Skelton transforms Ovid’s story so that he can claim—at least rhetorically—the “something” that is English laureateship.

The portion of Ovid’s myth that seems to have most interested Skelton is its denouement, from which comes Skelton’s word, “*triumpha*.” After Daphne has been transformed into a laurel tree, Ovid’s Phoebus invents what Lynn Enterline has described as a “triumph of interpretive dominion.”¹⁷³ Appropriating Daphne as his sign, the god prophesizes about her future:

cui deus ‘at quoniam coniunx mea non potes esse,
 arbor eris certe’ dixit ‘mea. semper habebunt
 te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae.
 tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta triumphum
 vox canet et visent longas Capitolia pompas.
 postibus Augustis eadem fidissima custos
 ante fores stabis mediamque tuebere quercum,
 utque meum intonsis caput est iuvenale capillis
 tu quoque perpetuos semper gere frondis honores.’ (557-65)

[To whom the god said, “but since you cannot be my wife, certainly you shall be my tree! Our hair, our lyres, and our quivers shall always bear you, O Laurel; you shall be present with the Latin leaders, when the joyful voice shall sing the triumph and the long processions shall visit the Capitol. A most faithful guardian of the portals of Augustus, too, you shall stand before the doors and protect the

¹⁷² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 37.

¹⁷³ Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*, 31-38.

central oak tree. And as my youthful head is with unshorn hair, you, also, always shall wear the perpetual, leafy honors.]¹⁷⁴

Ovid affirms the god's and laurel tree's shared, future permanence at the beginning of this description ("*semper* habebunt / te") and at its end ("tu...*semper* gere" these "*perpetuos*...hones"). Phoebus's emphasis on his own and Daphne's future permanence, in turn, frames the celebration of Augustus's power at the prophecy's center. Shifting from his own future experience of Daphne to the Latin leaders' experiences, Phoebus rhetorically collapses the temporal distance between mythical time and Ovid's historical era. Consequently, Ovid stands with Phoebus at the beginning of a perpetually victorious Roman history. Furthermore, Ovid describes that victory as collective. The laurel-crowned "duces" create one *continuous* ("longas ... pompas"), sustained Roman triumphal procession. Fittingly, Phoebus expresses "laeta...vox" in the singular. He depicts an image of a crowd not in a singular moment but a one united across eras. Extending into perpetuity, laureateship is a collective and ongoing honor that Phoebus has secured for Rome.

In transforming this passage, Skelton emphasizes, rather than elides, the distance between historical present and the mythical past. His borrowing begins at the point in the *Garlande* just after the Quene of Fame and Dame Pallas have finished debating whether Skelton Poeta ought to be admitted to Fame's court. To elevate Skelton and to place him in context of famous poets from the recent and distant past, Pallas asks to take stock of "[w]hat poetis we have at our retenewe" (238); she wants "[t]o se if Skelton wyll put hymselfe in prease / Among the thickeste of all the hole rowte" (239). Before readers encounter the other poets, however, they meet Phebus, who leads the parade. When

¹⁷⁴ My translation.

Phebus first appears in the *Garlande*, the main plot of the Ovidian story has come to a conclusion, and Daphne has already been transformed into the laurel. The narrator reminds readers about that story (290-94), while Phebus himself spends nearly the entirety of his appearance in the *Garlande*, twenty-two lines (296-317), lamenting his loss. Skelton comes back to Ovid's text as Phebus finally arrives at this decree:

'But sith I have lost now that I entended,
 And may not atteyne it by no medyacyon,
 Yet, in remembraunce of Daphnes transformacyon,
 All famous poetis ensuyng after me
 Shall were a garlande of the laurell tre' (318-22).

As Dan Breen has pointed out, Skelton's version of the *Apollo and Daphne* disregards entirely the political elements of Ovid's passage and "produces a myth of origins that signifies solely within a literary context."¹⁷⁵ It is "poetis" alone who "[s]hall were" the laurel crown. The reason that Skelton emphasizes the literary context is obvious enough—he is focused on the laureateship as a literary honor—but the effects of this change go beyond an elevation of Skelton's own art. Detaching Phebus's prophecy from its specifically Roman political context allows the post-Roman Skelton to claim the god as his heir, too. In expanding the potential places from which laureates hail, however, Skelton denies Daphne's transformation to be a collective and ongoing triumph, and he closes off latter-day laureates' bridge to Phebus and the god's personal experience. In Ovid's account, Daphne is no token but a real presence at latter-day triumphs ("aderis"). Skelton's god, in contrast, wants Daphne's transformation to be kept merely "in

¹⁷⁵ Breen, "Laureation and Identity," 352. Ovid's Apollo does mention his lyres, and so does introduce, albeit tangentially, the connection between the laurel leaves as crown and literary achievement. But certainly Ovid is not thinking about the laureateship as a literary honor exclusively or even directly.

remembrance.” To re-member is to reassemble, and Skelton thus reassembles Phebus’s past experience for the present. But to re-member is also to acknowledge implicitly that the god’s experience has been *dismembered* by its very historical distance. Even if one wears the laureate garland—“after” Phebus, in space *and* time—he is nonetheless disconnected from the moment of transformation. Whereas Ovid looks forward to continuing Roman triumphs, Skelton looks backwards to the laureateship’s originary moment.¹⁷⁶

By weakening the Ovidian Phoebus’s prophecy, Skelton emphasizes his and his contemporaries’ historical distance from the original laureate myth; by replacing a portion of that prophecy with a lyrical lamentation, however, Skelton also transforms the prophecy’s temporal orientation from the future to what Jonathan Culler describes as lyric’s “special now.” Broadly, Culler draws attention to the tension in poetry between “fictional speakers and representations of events,” on one hand, and, on the other, “song,” or everything that is *not* reducible to character and story, everything that “lacks mimetic or representational function.”¹⁷⁷ Drawing on the work of Roland Greene, Culler connects this latter category, song, to ritual. Ritual, Culler says, “captures first of all the principle of iterability—lyrics are constructed for repetition.” Thus, Culler revises our customary idea of the lyrical present: instead of a *constant* presence, *iterability* suggests a presence that happens *again and again*, what Culler describes elsewhere as “the ‘now’ in which,

¹⁷⁶ Breen contrasts Ovid and Skelton on a different point: Ovid presents Daphne’s transformation as a closed, final event, and Skelton presents it as open and ongoing. To make this point, Breen focuses on the *object* of remembrance: whereas Ovid’s Apollo wants subsequent laureates to remember his “definitive, dominant possession” of Daphne, and to wear the laurel as a celebration of conquest, Skelton’s Phebus wants them to remember the act of transformation itself, and in so doing to see that possession as “an impossibility” and the laurel, as “a spur to further labor”; “Laureation and Identity,” 354, 355.

¹⁷⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 122, 37.

for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur.”¹⁷⁸ He wants us to see iterable lyrics as scripts for performance, which future readers may themselves try out.¹⁷⁹

In this passage in the *Garlande*, Poeta Skelton has done the narrative work for Phebus: he tells Phebus’s story, providing readers with context for the lyric. Nearly all of Phebus’s direct discourse, however, participates in what Culler, borrowing from C.S. Lewis, calls “erotic liturgy.” With the exception of Daphne’s name in line 297 and four lines that describe Phebus’s personal attributes that I have omitted (310-13), Phebus’s words may be spoken sincerely by any future reader who has himself experienced lost love:

“O thoughtfull herte,’ was evermore his songe!

[...] ‘my derlynge, why do you me refuse?

Yet loke on me, that lovyd you have so longe,

Yet have compassyon upon my paynes stronge.

[...] //

[...]

‘O mercyles madame, hard is your constellacyon,

So close to kepe your cloyster virgynall,

Enhardid adymment the sement of your wall!

Alas, what ayle you to be so overthwhart,

To banysshe pyte out of a maydens harte? //

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 226.

¹⁷⁹ David Lawton has detected this iterative component in medieval “voice,” which he argues often produces “public interiorities.” We should understand the work of “the Orphic poet,” Lawton argues, “less as a text than as a score, a work that invites performance and is completed by it (except that it is never completed, as the sequence of performance remains open and indefinite). Such transferable capacity of performance, such unstable reproducibility, is the public work of voice; “Voice and Public Interiorities,” 306. Lawton has recently expanded on his work on poetic voice in the Middle Ages in *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities*.

[...]

But now to help myself I am not able.

[...]

Unto me; alas, that herbe nor gresse

The fervent axes of love can not repress! //

Oh fatall Fortune, what have I offended?

Odious Disdayne, why raist thou me on this facyon?

And may not atteyne it by no medyacyon” (296-319).

Skelton Poeta calls this “his”—Phebus’s—song, but not very much of the passage must be Phebus’s specifically. The present tense, as well as interrogative and imperative verbs in this stanza—“do,” “loke,” “have”—indicate that the “songe” is “evermore” even as Skelton has placed the god himself at a historical remove. The apostrophes in the passage—“O thoughtfull herte” (296), “O mercyles madame [goddess Diana]” (304), “O fatall Fortune” (316), “Odious Disdayne” (317)—are also conventional. As Culler argues, writing about apostrophe but making his broadest point about iteration, “[t]he bold wager of lyric apostrophe is that the lyric can displace a time of narrative, of past events reported, and place us in [...] the ‘now’ in which, for readers, a poetic event can repeatedly occur.”¹⁸⁰ Skelton’s translation of Ovidian Phe’s prophecy into lyric thus allows future readers, perhaps some who are themselves disappointed lovers, to step into Phebus’s voice—in *their* present tense. Skelton does not depict an unbroken “laeta...vox,” as Ovid does, but a past lamentation that is available for repetition. An “iterative,” rather than continuous, present tense serves Skelton’s purpose: although the

¹⁸⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 226.

temporal scheme admits that Phebus's story is long past, it also presents the possibility that latter-day, would-be laureates perform it again and again.

Despite leaving Phebus at this point in the *Garlande*, Skelton does not abandon Ovid's text.¹⁸¹ Instead, he returns to Ovid's sentence "tu ducibus Latiis aderis, cum laeta triumphum / vox canet et visent longas Capitolia pompas [you shall be present with the Latin leaders, when the joyful voice shall sing the triumph and the long processions shall visit the Capitol]." In this sentence, Ovid's Phoebus foretells future laureates, and in the segment in the *Garlande* that immediately follows Phebus's lamentation, lines 326 to 385, Skelton introduces a "longas...pompas" of his own, when enter the poets in Dame Pallas's "retenewe" (238). With this gesture, Skelton in effect fulfills Ovid's prophecy. Again, Culler's encouragement to focus on poetry's availability as "song," and, especially, "ritual" brings into view the significance of Skelton's poetic choices, for the ritualistic aspects of poetry in this section receive so much emphasis that that the segment itself turns into ritual. "Iterability," Culler says, is related to "a certain ceremoniousness, and the possibility of making something happen in the world (practitioners of rituals hope they will be efficacious)."¹⁸² As I argue below, Skelton's rendering of the long procession of laureates features such ceremoniousness, enabling the *Garlande* to "iterate" Phebus's original laureateship and thereby making it available to the community of laureates "ensuyng after" (321) the god and, ultimately, to Skelton himself.

Ceremonies and rituals are meant to be performed. The parade of laureates segment in the *Garden of Laurell* is particularly performative and, as such, among the most compelling pieces of evidence that the entire poem was written to be an actual

¹⁸¹ Breen has focused on Skelton's emphasis on Phebus's loss (as opposed to Ovid's emphasis on Phoebus's triumph).

¹⁸² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 122-23.

theatrical event.¹⁸³ For example, this parade of poets is crucial to Leigh Winser's theory that the *Garlande* is, in fact, a masque. Complete with "[a] murmur of mynstrels" (270), singing in "heavenly harmony" (274), this parade of poets would have provided an opportunity for the expected number of important men and women at court to disguise themselves as famous orators and poets.¹⁸⁴ As Winser notes, the parade of laureates is not Skelton's innovation: Petrarch, a notable precedent with perhaps the same Ovidian sentence in mind, included such a parade in the third part of his *Trionfo della Fama*; this Italian poem influenced much Tudor pageantry, and likely this piece of the *Garlande*, too.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, the *Garlande*'s parade seems to echo and expand part of John Lydgate's "Mumming for the Mercers of London," a performance piece that may have influenced Skelton in mode as well as in content.¹⁸⁶ Skelton's decision to turn Ovid's

¹⁸³ The *Garlande* seems likely to have been performed first at Sheriff Hutton Castle, Yorkshire, in May of 1495. See Scattergood's headnote to the *Garlande*, 476-77. See also W. R. Streitberger, "John Skelton: The Revels, Entertainments, and Plays at Court," for a persuasive case that Skelton very likely wrote multiple performance pieces that are extant but unattributed, or lost.

¹⁸⁴ According to Tudor chronicler Raphael Holinshed, the same number of masquers (thirty-eight) participated in a performance at a banquet at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520; and according to another Tudor chronicler, Edward Hall, nearly the same number (thirty-six) performed at a feast hosted by Wolsey in 1519. See Winser, "Garlande of Laurell," 56-57.

¹⁸⁵ Winser, "*Garlande*," n. 20.

¹⁸⁶ In Lydgate's mumming, Jupiter sends his messenger to accompany the mercers as they enter the city of London. On his way to the field by the Thames, the messenger passes Mount Parnassus, where "Bachus dwellethe besydes the ryver" (22). Lydgate's narrator pauses as the messenger rounds Parnassus to describe "the welle of Calyope" (15), from which drink "other famous rethorycyens, / And they that cleped been musycyens" (18-19), including "Tulius," "Macrobye," "Ovyde," "Virgilius," "Fraunceys Petrark," and "Johan Bocas" (29-33), all of whom, he tells us, "called weren poetes laureate" (35). In this segment of the *Garlande* Skelton, too, features Bacchus, and includes all six of the poets that Lydgate mentions and adds thirty-two more. Skelton includes more ancient authors—from Homer (329) to Terence and Plautus (353-54) to Boethius (359)—and more recent writers, such as Poggio Bracciolini, author of the well-known *Facetiae*, and Robert Gaguin, author of the 1497 *Compendium super Francorum Gestis*. On Bracciolini and Gaguin, see Scattergood's notes to lines 372-3 and 374-5 in Skelton, *Complete English Poems*, 482. Elsewhere in the *Garlande* Skelton brings a version of Lydgate's Parnassus to the Quene of Fame's court, complete with the Muses and a laurel tree (651-719).

It is certainly possible that Skelton knew Lydgate's mumming even though the mumming survives in only one manuscript, Trinity R.3.20. According to Margaret Connolly, John Shirley, serving Richard Beauchamp's household, likely compiled the manuscript in the early 1430s, and he likely kept the collection in his possession until he died in 1456. Soon after, the manuscript wound up in the hands of the so-called Hammond scribe, who was active in London between c. 1460-1485 and likely part of a professional scriptorium or workshop. Even after this scribe's death, Connolly explains, Trinity R.3.20

prophecy into performance—via Petrarch and, potentially, Lydgate—not only combines classic, Italian, and native English precursors; it makes Phoebus’s prophecy available as ritualistic “song.” Dame Pallas wants to “se if Skelton wyll put hymselfe in prease / Amonge the thickest of all the hole rowte” (239-40). Yet, despite a brief reminder of the “me” (375) that reports this parade, the section downplays Skelton Poeta’s first person voice, the “I” that last appears in line 325 and does not return again until 386. Hardly “*in prease*,” the narrator instead views the parade from a distance, “there” (344, 365, 373). In fact, the segment as a whole disrupts the forward progress of Skelton’ Poeta’s narrative. The voicing takes on an anonymous quality, and poetry seems less to be “representations of speeches by fictional characters,” and more to be “memorable writing to be received, reactivated, and repeated by readers.”¹⁸⁷

The emphasis on the ritualistic rather than the narrative qualities of poetry is underscored by the musical structure of strophe and refrain. The strophes in this segment, which are regularly contained in the first four lines of each seven-line stanza, include the names and achievements of some of the more prominent “poetis laureat” (324) that Skelton Poeta spots in Dame Pallas’s retinue. The narrator describes a poetic pantheon, made up of men from “many dyverse nacyons” (324) and multiple millennia. Despite

probably remained in London, becoming part of what has been called “the maze of crisscrossing fifteenth century texts” (qtd. 181). The manuscript next appears in the records in 1558, when historian and antiquarian John Stowe, in London, used it as a partial exemplar for his collected works of Lydgate. Skelton himself seems to have been circulating around London—and in bookmaking circles—in the early 1490s. In his preface to the 1490 *Eneydos*, William Caxton notes that he has asked Skelton “to ouersee and correcte this sayd booke. And taddresse and expowne where as shalle be founde faulte to theym that shale requyre it” (Caxton, *Prologues and Epilogues*, 109). And, of course, JS wrote for what Greg Walker has described as “interconnected reading communities” at court and in London for most of his career, “John Skelton and the Royal Court,” 6. See also Scattergood’s entry on Skelton in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. If it is plausible that Skelton was at least once in the same room as the manuscript that contained work by two men whom he regarded as his most important English predecessors, Lydgate and Chaucer, then it is likely that he would have seized the opportunity to open it up. Indeed, the similarities between the *Garlande* and the “Mumming for the Mercers of London” strongly suggest that he did.

¹⁸⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 36.

their differences, the strophes echo one another. The poets are bound together and each are contained within nearly the same version of these three lines:

But blessed Bacchus, the pleasant god of wyne,

Of closters engrosyd with his ruddy flotis

These orators and poetes refreshed their throtis. (334-36)¹⁸⁸

The second half of the first of these three lines changes in all but the second stanza in the segment (337-350), and the rest of these lines repeat verbatim. Bacchus, as one of these renditions of this refrain explicates, “was in their company” (355) in the wine that they drink together. If the strophes list some of the individuals who follow Phebus, the refrain describes the community that these poets constitute in their understated bacchanal, a group congregating to sip Bacchus’s red drops in unified celebration. John Hollander’s work on refrain usefully supplements that of Culler. On the “referential scale” that Hollander posits between “merely schematic” and “poetic” refrains, Skelton’s refrain here tends toward the former, mimicking “the medieval carol burden” in which “each occurrence [...] increases its redundancy, and tends to collapse it into an univocal sign (*That was all full of meaning; now meaning stops for a while and we all dance again.*)”¹⁸⁹ But to say that this refrain carries little meaning in its content is not to say that it is meaningless. Primarily if not “merely” schematic, Skelton’s refrain regarding the gathering of poets heightens the lyrical quality of this portion of the *Garlande*. Indeed, a

¹⁸⁸ These words are repeated with only small changes in lines 341-43, 348-50, 355-57, 362-64, 369-71, 376-79, and 383-85.

¹⁸⁹ Hollander, “Breaking into Song,” 74-75. “Poetic” refrains, by contrast, “trope the literalness of the repetition, by raising a central parabolic question for all textual refrain: *Does repeating something at intervals make it important, or less so?* Does statistical over-determination—the criterion of redundancy-as-predictability—apply to such repetitions, or rather the interpreter’s concept of over-determination as implying an increased weight of meaning?” Hollander, “Breaking into Song,” 75.

“nonmimetic, nonfictional, a distinctive linguistic event”¹⁹⁰ depends for its force on its subordination of narrative to ritual, meaning to music.

Additionally, this refrain’s music introduces a temporal scheme unlike that which governs most of the *Garlande*—one of iterative time.¹⁹¹ Again, Hollander’s and Culler’s frameworks are most useful in tandem. For Hollander, all refrains, even those that are “merely schematic,” trope time: “refrains *are*, and *have*, memories—of their prior strophes or stretches of text, of their own preoccurrences, and of their own genealogies in previous texts as well.”¹⁹² This refrain bridges strophes to create a laureate revelry that, in turn, joins poets from across eras and nations. In the process, it remembers the vivid scenes from literary precursors such as Petrarch’s *Trionfi* or Lydgate’s mumming. But what is more, this refrain also re-members, or reassembles, that original laureation. The voice that speaks the refrain belongs to no one in particular—and so, potentially, to everyone. As a poetic device, Culler posits, “refrain *disrupts narrative* and brings it back to the present of discourse,” inviting the reader to “repea[t] the ritualistic discourse.”¹⁹³

Culler’s phrase, “disrupts narrative,” points us toward something considerably more complicated than a simple hiatus in the dream vision’s forward momentum. Less a pause and more an amalgamation of temporalities, the refrain blends together the past-tense plot and the “iterative” present of song to ritualize the parade so that later enactors of it, like Skelton, may include themselves in Pallas’s retinue.¹⁹⁴ In Phebus’s lyric, Skelton ruptures the Ovidean connection between Phoebus’s “interpretive triumph” and

¹⁹⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 7.

¹⁹¹ Thus, it reminds us of poetry’s kinship and ancestry in magic charms; Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric*, chapter 6.

¹⁹² Hollander, “Breaking into Song,” 77.

¹⁹³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 23 (my emphasis).

¹⁹⁴ Heather Dubrow writes about the blending of tenses—past, present, and future—that lyric makes possible, “Anticipatory Amalgam.”

Ovid's cultural moment, thereby making that triumph available only for Ovid's fellow Romans. In this section, rather, readers or spectators in their own presents, those like Skelton who are themselves potential laureates, mingle together with past "orators and poetes," performing the laureate revelry together. The refrain returns, stanza after stanza, to bring laureates from across millennia to the same "now" of "iterative time." It *keeps* time, holding the section's song in temporal place, synchronizing what would otherwise be a fragmented laureate and cultural history. The entire segment is thus able to sublimate the historical separation between laureates from the past, and between these and present would-be laureates. Skelton emphasizes the ritualistic aspects of poetry, introducing an iterative refrain, because he seeks "the possibility of making something happen in the world": the "*Triumpha, triumpha*" at the dream vision's conclusion. This poetic song would revive the old laureateship for would-be, present-day successors.

"The concept of ritual," Culler explains, "encourages concentration on the formal properties of lyric utterance, from rhythm and rhyme to other sorts of linguistic patterning."¹⁹⁵ In this segment, the refrain works symbiotically with the *Garlande's* stanza form, which itself has the capacity to transcend ordinary narrative time. Any stanza, a symmetrical verse paragraph, contributes to what James I. Wimsatt has described as the "musical sense" of the poem to which it belongs: especially important in the medieval and early modern periods, stanzas provide "an organizational framework for the material qualities of sound" that are "left over" after semantic systems have distinguished meaning.¹⁹⁶ A deep appreciation for the "fixed music and numerical proportion" of stanzas stretches from Dante to Elizabethan literary theorists who, writing

¹⁹⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 122-23.

¹⁹⁶ James Wimsatt, "Rhyme/Reason," 22. Wimsatt posits that the "independent significance of poetry's music never is subordinated" from Chaucer through the Renaissance"; 22.

a few decades after Skelton, describe stanzas as “orderly and firm units, not ones that can fracture and splinter,” associated with “celestial harmony” and the capability of “restraining potential fluidity or even chaos.”¹⁹⁷ The long decasyllabic line may have given English poets the freedom to develop their thought and stories by making their poetry work more like our modern conception of prose; but, with its numerical proportions and bounded lines—an artifice, a heightened, even “celestial” orderliness—the stanza form acts as a check on that potential flexibility.¹⁹⁸ Skelton, who occasionally continues his thought across stanzas, thereby occasionally muddying the stanza form¹⁹⁹ in this segment chooses to bridle his poetry by means of the refrain. Each stanza in this segment terminates with a return to the anonymous group of laureates who are engaged in communal revelry. The refrain emphatically binds the verse paragraphs, heightening the “musical sense” for which the stanza is primarily responsible. In turn, the stanza form is itself accentuated.

Like refrains, stanzas remember, and the stanza that Skelton includes in the laureate parade and, in fact, in most of the *Garlande*, remembers a highbrow English literary history.²⁰⁰ The *Garlande* is primarily built of rhyme royale stanzas, each comprising seven long, decasyllabic lines that terminate in rhymes arranged in an *ABABBCC* pattern. Before it appeared in English poetry, the rhyme royale had long been

¹⁹⁷ On Dante, see Wimsatt, “Rhyme/Reason,” 35. Heather Dubrow analyzes remarks on lyric by Elizabethan theorists George Puttenham, George Gascoigne, and Michael Drayton; see Dubrow, “*Challenges of Orpheus*,” 168, 170, and 172.

¹⁹⁸ Woods, *Natural Emphasis*.

¹⁹⁹ He does this immediately following this section, for example: “As I ymagenyd, repayrid unto me, // Togeder in armes, as brethren, enbradisd [...]” (392-93).

²⁰⁰ Extending Hollander’s analysis, Dubrow sees a connection between refrains and stanzas in general, arguing that “refrains synecdochically figure the stanzas they terminate.” One chief similarity, she says, is the stanza’s ability to recall literary history: “[I]f, as Hollander demonstrates, refrains are allusive, drawing attention to previous refrains, one might add that stanzas are also typically metastanzaic, directing the reader’s attention to how both the poet at hand and others have used the form.” Dubrow, *Challenges of Orpheus*, 175.

associated with the kingship in what Martin Stevens has called “game tradition”: in some instances, the form was used in royal entry ceremonies, or in a literary game in which minstrels performed before real kings, or bourgeois guild members performed before a mock prince of the *puy*.²⁰¹ Chaucer is chiefly responsible for first developing the rhyme royale’s literary potential: he occasionally turned to this stanza to cue a “respectable” and “decorous” style—“thrifty” in the Man of Law’s description—even if he did not reserve it, rigidly or exclusively, for elite characters or works.²⁰² Stevens speculates that the rhyme royale’s association with kings and its orderliness both in sound and image on the page—it is “poetry of equal and symmetrical verse paragraphs”—likely influenced Chaucer.²⁰³ Over the next two centuries, Chaucer’s flexible application of the stanza was streamlined: Elizabethan literary theorist George Gascoigne explains that rhyme royal stanzas “seru[e] best for graue discourses,” directly linking it to the high English style.²⁰⁴ Writing in an era roughly halfway between those of Chaucer and Gascoigne, Skelton displays awareness of the stanza’s elite connotations in *Magnyfycence*, which employs a variety of meters but which reserves rhyme royale for speeches of the title character’s speech and the two characters who counterfeit it. Cloked Colusyon and Contrefet Countenance.²⁰⁵ If not quite Gascoigne’s “graue” form, Skelton’s rhyme royale stanza nonetheless remembers its elite English literary history and infuses the *Garlande* with that memory.

²⁰¹ Martin Stevens, “Royal Stanza,” 63-66. See also Dean, “Gower, Chaucer, and Rhyme Royale,” 255.

²⁰² Stevens, “Royal Stanza,” 71.

²⁰³ In contrast, the heroic couplet produced “unequal and ill-defined large units of rhetorical organization,” Stevens, “Royal Stanza,” 70. On the rhyme royale’s image, see Dean, “Gower, Chaucer, and Rhyme Royal,” 255.

²⁰⁴ These words are from George Gascoigne’s 1575 *Certain Notes of Instruction concerning the Making of Verse or Rime in English*, qtd. in Stevens, “Royal Stanza,” 62.

²⁰⁵ Stevens, “Royal Stanza,” 73.

In the *Garlande*'s laureate parade, the iterative refrain includes that memory, too. The refrain bounds each stanza, emphasizing the verse paragraph's completeness and integrity as a formal unit; the rhyme royale, its form pronounced by the refrain, in turn imbues the refrain with the cachet of English literary history that courses through it. Thus, the international laureate parade includes Skelton's English literary ancestry, too, even if it conspicuously omits the individual poets that make up that history. A particularly important element of the laureate ritual, the refrain links the highbrow English literary history and the international parade of past laureates who have come together in communal revelry to the present-day would-be laureates who may iterate both. This refrain, inextricable from the rhyme royale, has temporarily diverted the time of Skelton Poeta's narrative, displacing it with the continuing, iterative "now" of lyric articulation. Via the stanza, English literary history has the potential to move into that "now," too.

The narrator is nearly missing from the parade: the strophes enumerate "[t]heis orators and poetis" while Skelton Poeta is a potential participant only, and is barely present as a spectator.²⁰⁶ In the lines that immediately follow this segment, however, Skelton Poeta reasserts his voice, telling us that "I saw" (387) Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate; and that "I ymagenyd" (392) the English poets. As Skelton Poeta returns to his own story, he also articulates the story of English poetry, making explicit what had been embedded in the form implicitly. Skelton Poeta tells us that Gower "garnisshed our Englysshe rude" (387), Chaucer "nobly enterprysyd / How that our Englysshe myght fresshely be ennewed" (388-89), Lydgate "after them ensuyd" (390), and then the "brutid Britons of Brutus Albion" was "welny [...] loste" (405-06). Culler asks us to see a

²⁰⁶ The only trace of the narrator appears in line 375, when Robert Gaguin "frownyd on" him.

tension between poetry as narrative, on the one hand, and poetry as song, on the other. Both elements are always present—but not equally so. If in Phebus’s lyric lamentation and in the laureate parade the *Garlande* is pulled toward song, in this following segment we see narrative’s return to prominence.

Yet that return does not totally mute the *Garlande*’s song. Rather, like Phebus’s lamentation and the laureate parade, Skelton Poeta’s meeting with his predecessors is accompanied by a heightened lyricality as the narrator, assuming the role of humble heir to English poetry, leads another poetic song (ll. 400-441). Gower, Chaucer, and Lydgate serially speak one rhyme royale stanza to him; to each he replies with a stanza that concludes, in each instance, with a variation on these two lines: “For only the substance of that I entend, / Is glad to please, and loth to offend” (412-13).²⁰⁷ The words themselves imply that the semantic sense of this stanza hardly matters, is a mere formality, and this point is made again in different words in the second and third renditions, which both hark back to the first. The refrain emphasizes the ordered music of the rhyme royale, bringing each of Skelton Poeta’s strophes to conclusion. These bind the narrator to each of his forbears, and, consequently, those forbears to each other. Furthermore, if “refrains *are*, and *have*, memories,” as Hollander posits, that of Skelton Poeta recalls the refrain that organized the laureate parade, too. The narrator reminds us that Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate—who “wantid [...] the laurell” (397)—have no place in that parade. They may “brynge” Skelton Poeta “before the Quenes grace” (418-19), but cannot elevate him to

²⁰⁷ See also ““But what sholde I say? Ye wote what I entende, / Whiche glad am to please, and loth to offende”” (426-27) and “I am ells rebukyd of that I intende, / Which glad am to please, and lothe to offende” (440-41).

the laureateship.²⁰⁸ Instead, it is *Skelton Poeta* who elevates *them*. By singing a refrain that both highlights the stanzas' orderliness and closure, and that itself contains the strong potential for iteration, the narrator blends his and his predecessors' stories with the "iterative" present, and he creates a "song" for his English poetic history.

In the sections that I have been discussing, Skelton imagines a transhistorical laureate context that his poetic choices also embody. The narrative events—the parade of laureates and Skelton Poeta's meeting with Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate—tell of a literary past with which John Skelton contends and which enables his own poetic rise. This sequence's orderly rhyme royale stanzas, and the refrains that bind and bound them, turn this segment into a song set apart from the events of Skelton Poeta's narrative. Simultaneously, the rhyme royale stanzas and the refrains work together to gesture both backwards to a time before Skelton Poeta's story begins, and forwards to a time beyond the narrative's conclusion. The form connects the *Garlande* to the works of Skelton's English literary fathers; and the heightened lyricality that those stanzas and refrains together constitute emphasizes poetry's "song" and its potential availability for iteration for Skelton's readers. What is ritualized, as a result, is not merely the performance of this song but also the English literary history that this song contains.

This image of Skelton Poeta is markedly different from the one, lodged in real-world patronage relationships, that Skelton presents later in the *Garlande*. The change in the poet's self image is notably paralleled by formal changes. One of Skelton's most significant departures from rhyme royale occurs when the narrator enters the "goodly

²⁰⁸ Hasler has pointed out that "the fathers are not there to beget, but to stand by and applaud an act of self-creation"; *Court Poetry*, 83.

chamber of astate” (768), where he finds the Countess of Surrey and her ladies weaving him a garland and laurel crown.²⁰⁹ Occupacyon instructs Poeta Skelton to write a poem to each of these women, and she stresses that she wants Skelton at the top of his game: “[i]n goodly wordes plesauntly comrpysid,” in appeals “[o]rnatly pullysshid after your faculte,” and “[w]ith sentence fructuous and terms convenable [suitable to the partons’ degree]” (813, 816, 821). After sharpening his pen and beseeching Christ for guidance, Skelton proceeds with ten encomia (906-1085). The first four lyrics—to the Countess of Surrey, to Lady Elisabeth Howard, to Muriel Howard, and to Lady Anne Dacre—are written in rhyme royale stanza, with long, decasyllabic lines and the predictable rhyme scheme. These stanzas conclude with refrains and include Latinate vocabulary. The fifth lyric, to Margery Wentworth, gives way to the impulse to innovate. In that and the five lyrics following it—to Margaret Tylney, Jane Blennerhasset, Margaret Hussey, Gertrude Statham, and Isabel Knyght—Skelton Poeta experiments with poetic form, mixing shorter lines with various rhyme schemes, from the highly organized rhyme royale rhyme scheme in the lyric to Margaret Tylney to the less predictable rhyme scheme in the lyric to Margaret Hussey, where, despite the repeated refrain (lines 1004-007, 1019-1022, 1034-1037), rhyme leashes and even shorter lines together occasionally take on a life of their own, themselves encouraging *amplifcatio* (1011-018 and 1026-028). The vocabulary in some of these lyrics devolves at times into pure sound, as the when Skelton Poeta thus concludes his lyric to Isabell Pennell:

Dug, dug,

²⁰⁹ Skelton departs from the rhyme royal stanza at a few other places in the *Garlande*: in the prefatory material, in an excerpt from *Phyllyp Sparowe* (1261-1375, which quote the original poem, 1268-382), in a few macaronic lines (1453-1460 and 1468-69), and in the supplementary verses (1519ff). Skelton seems to have written parts of the *Garlande* in the early 1490s, in 1495 for its occasion, and still more in the early 1520s before its first printing.

Jug, jug,
 Good yere and good luk,
 With chuk, chuk, chuk, chuk. (1000-03)

Such poetry underscores “song” over sense, not in sublimation but in degradation.

If the ritualistic elements in the parade scene divert narrative time, the innovative forms in these poems seem to waste it. After the last lyric, Occupacyon intervenes:

Withdrawe your hande, the tyme passis fast.
 Set on your hede this laurell whiche is wrought.
 Here you not Eolus for you blowyth a blaste?
 I dare wele saye that ye and I be sought.
 Make no delay, for now ye must be brought
 Before my ladys grace, the Quene of Fame,
 Where ye must bravely answeere to your name. (1086-92)

Skelton, it seems, has been so engrossed in spinning out his encomia that he has missed Aeolus’s call to appear before the Queen of Fame. Skelton’s lyrics have eaten up his time to dally in the garden where Skelton was supposed to have found “[c]ontynuall comfort” (710). And so the poet dons the laurel crown quickly, unceremoniously, and rushes to leave. Despite herself having implored Skelton Poeta to write, Occupacyon, suggests that the act of writing itself can become an indulgence—a “delay”—and, ironically, can interfere with the poet’s laureate pursuits.

Skeltonics in *Phyllyp Sparowe*

The version of Skelton represented in this portion of the *Garlande*—a poet who lets himself get carried away with linguistic and formal experimentation—soon came to define the John Skelton known to his early readers. Skelton’s critics have usually focused their contempt on what has come to be known as his signature verse form, the skeltonics, which Skelton’s modern editor, Scattergood, defines as “short lines of two or three stresses, rhymed in anything from couplets to very long leashes and involving frequent use of alliteration and parallelism.”²¹⁰ In one of the most famous passages about the verse form, Skelton himself seems to acknowledge it to be lowbrow. Near the beginning of the long, satiric poem, *Collyn Clout*, the titular character and speaker of the poem pronounces:

For though my ryme be ragged,
 Tattered and jagged,
 Rudely rayne-beaten,
 Rusty and mothe-eaten,
 Yf ye take well thewith
 It hath in it some pyth. (53-58)

Collyn Clout’s sentiment is not unusual in a literary milieu that frequently drew upon the modesty *topos*: please excuse my poor poetry, he implores us, and look at the pithy message hidden within it. Because Collyn’s assessment of his verse is written in the

²¹⁰ Scattergood, *John Skelton*, 136. The poems that can be described as “skeltonic” themselves vary. Spina has critiqued the “unexamined assumption,” that “we must reconcile the meter of all skeltonic poems.” Spina and Jane Griffiths, in her essay “‘An Ende to an Olde Song’: Middle English Lyric and the Skeltonic,” have taken meter of *Elynour Rummyng*, with its short lines and rhyme leashes of inconsistent length, to be typical, although little in the rest of Skelton’s canon shares its exact characteristics. Take, for example, “Calliope,” which comprises short lines and organized stanzas (“Calliope” is arranged in *AAABAAAB* stanzas); and *Agaynst the Scottes*, which includes short *and* long lines, rhymed primarily in couplets.

skeltonic form, readers have assumed that it is the form to which Collyn Clout's list of derogatory descriptors refers. George Puttenham, in his 1588 *Arte of English Poesy*, concretized critical assessment of the skeltonics for hundreds of years to follow. He grouped skeltonics with "the over-busy and too speedy return of one manner of tune [that doth] too much annoy and, as it were, glut the ear." According to Puttenham, short lines and frequent rhymes ought to be used only by "small and popular musics," or sung by "tavern minstrels." Nonetheless, "[s]uch were the rhymes of Skelton," Puttenham says, as "[Skelton] used both short distances and short measures, pleasing only the popular ear. In our courtly maker we banish them utterly."²¹¹ In accusing the skeltonics of "glut[ting] the ear," Puttenham describes the act of reading this verse form as a primarily sensory experience. Railroaded by an onslaught of sound, a reader has not the time, say, to engage his or her intellect to ponder the rhyme, admire the alliteration, or even decipher and contemplate the kernel of wisdom that the poet wraps in his poetry. If the skeltonics do not require a sophisticated reader, then any person, elite or common, may have the same experience of them.

Modern readers have been making a version of this argument themselves. One of Scattergood's explanatory notes indicates how Puttenham's critique anticipates the modern appraisal of the allegedly lowbrow skeltonics. The note elaborates on two lines in *Magnyfycence*, in which Counterfet Countenance announces that he will "[i]n bastarde ryme, after the dogrell gyse, / Tell ... where of my name dothe ryse" (408 -09). On this point, Scattergood cites John Norton-Smith, who suggests that Counterfet Countenance's lines "may ... refer to Skelton's own characterization of his measure,"

²¹¹ Qtd. in Griffiths, *John Skelton*, 158-59.

the Skeltonic.”²¹² Following Norton-Smith, Scattergood further notes that, according to Puttenham, Colyn Clout’s descriptor, *ryme dogrell* signifies “that which observed ‘no rules at all.’”¹ Such lawlessness does seem to comport with Norton-Smith’s understanding of the skeltonics, which in the essay cited, he describes as being “sufficiently unserious” and as having a “childish playfulness” and a “demotic, subliterate, spontaneous quality.”²¹³ But Puttenham’s definition of *doggerel* in his 1589 *English Poesie* is hardly contemporary with Skelton’s *Magnyfycence* (c. 1519). The word *doggerel*’s more general, late fourteenth-century meaning—“poor, worthless,” according to the *Middle English Dictionary*—may still have been the dominant connotation. Counterfet Countenance may mean that his verse is purposely illegitimate, possessing a lineage but no status: that is, descended from the wrong line. Hence, an alternative analysis of Colyn Clout’s description points to a reevaluation of Skelton’s assessment of his own verse form as descending from a non-Chaucerian, non-elite poetic tradition—that is *if* Skelton means Counterfet Countenance’s lines to be a characterization of the skeltonic form.²¹⁴ But the bigger problem with Scattergood’s implicit endorsement of Norton-Smith’s reading is this: What evidence is there that Skelton thought of the skeltonics as “bastarde” or “dogrell” according to *any* meaning of those words? Norton-Smith and Scattergood lead us back to Puttenham, recalling the Elizabethan’s negative assessment of the skeltonics, put that assessment in the mouth of one of Skelton’s characters, and then attribute that character’s words to the poet, John Skelton. In fact,

²¹² Counterfet Countenance speaks in lines of four downbeats and between seven and ten syllables, arranged in seven-line stanzas that are each governed by a distinct rhyme leash—not what we typically mean when we say *skeltonics*.

²¹³ Norton-Smith, “The Origin of Skeltonics,” 57 and 58. More recently, Hasler, has called skeltonics “wild” and “promiscuous”; “Cultural Intersections,” 69.

²¹⁴ Such a reading would be complicated, however, by the fact that the *Canterbury Tales*’s Host describes Chaucer the Pilgrim’s verse as “dogerell.” So even “dogerell” has an elite lineage.

Scattergood's note tells us more about today's critical consensus of the skeltonics—we, like Puttenham, assume the meter to be vulgar—than it does about Skelton's attitude toward them. The discomfort that Scattergood reveals resides in the skeltonics' lack of ancestry and its meter's abandonment of rules.

But there is method to the skeltonics' madness. Rhythm, above all, is crucial to this verse form, which is purely accentual, organized by beat rather than by feet. The importance of rhythm to the skeltonics becomes especially clear if we consider the form's ancestry. There have been multiple critical explanations of its origins, and Skelton may well have developed this verse form from a combination of traditions.²¹⁵ The fact that Skelton himself had worked extensively with the English decasyllabic line suggests, however, makes Ian Donaldson's theory an appealing option: that “[s]keltonics are half-lines of balanced pentameters made to stand independently.”²¹⁶ In other words, to develop the skeltonics, Skelton bisected the long line that he had inherited from Chaucer and Lydgate. Here Susanne Woods's account of Chaucer's verse—those “balanced pentameters”—is helpful. According to Woods, Chaucer adapted *the length* of his poetic line from those of his French precursors, and *the rhythm* from the popular English four-stress alliterative verse. On the one hand, the long line, according to Woods, enabled the French poets and then Chaucer to craft verse that more closely approximated prose, providing them with flexibility to develop thought and story (what Culler would describe as “narrative”). On the other hand, an ear for the rhythm of the whole line and of the half-

²¹⁵ See Scattergood's overview of the range of critical explanations: Skelton may have derived his signature verse from the verse epistle present in East Anglia (Norton-Smith), from Anglo-Norman short-lined verse (Fitzroy Pyle), from Burgundian poets (Gordon L. Kipling), from Latin church music (Arthur Kinney), from Latin *reimposa* or rhymed Latin prose (William Nelson), or from Latin rhymed verse; Scattergood, *John Skelton*, 136-39.

²¹⁶ Donaldson, *Chaucer's Prosody*, 216. Also see Woods, *Natural Emphasis*, 33-37, for a discussion of the ways that Chaucer's poetry evinces “a continuing ear for the [rhythmic] movement of half-lines,” with emphasis in the middle and at the ends of this loosely iambic, decasyllabic verses, 33.

line allowed the alliterative poets and then Chaucer to control tempo (an element of Culler's "song"). In his decasyllabic, accentual verse, Chaucer tends to include four or five stresses, two or three before the caesura, and two or three after. According to Woods, the emphasis on syllables and rhythm together allowed Chaucer to slow down a line by using more stresses, or speed up a line by using fewer. (Woods observes that when there exists a lot of action in Chaucer's narrative poetry, there are fewer, usually three, accents in each line. More accents slow down the line, so he uses more, four, for downtimes.²¹⁷ Chaucer's rhythm thus supplements—serves—the story that he develops across the lines. With his skeltonics, Skelton takes the opposite approach: by halving this long line, he removes the very formal element that enabled development of thought and story, and as a consequence elevates the poetry's potential rhythm over thought, "song" over "narrative."

Another elemental feature of skeltonics is the form's heavy use of rhyme. In breaking the traditional long line at the hemistich, the skeltonics produce more line endings per word of verse—and thus generate more opportunities for end rhymes. So frequently encountered, those end rhymes direct readers' attention to the sound that the words produce and may even obscure the words' semantic sense altogether, even, as Griffiths observes about the especially unwieldy *Elynour Rummyng*, "substituting the momentum of the word play for the forward momentum of grammatical sense."²¹⁸ If rhyme in general can "resist the intelligence,"²¹⁹ as Culler suggests, the rapidly successive skeltonic rhymes seem at times designed to do so. Their emphasis on sound over sense focuses readers on other aspects of poetry's "song," too: namely, that

²¹⁷ Woods, *Natural Emphasis*, 36-37.

²¹⁸ Griffiths, "'An Ende to an Olde Song,'" 707.

²¹⁹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 184.

emphasis focuses readers back on the verses' potential rhythm, which Culler says may be especially strong in poetry "where language seems to be echoing itself, with words generated by their phonological resemblance to other words."²²⁰ The short lines of skeltonics have the effect of speeding up the poetry, pushing the reader from one line to the next as her eyes move down the page. At the same time, the short lines and end rhymes together introduce a constant repetition of closure, potentially slowing down the reader, stopping her at the end of every line. The short lines and end rhymes function together as a kind of a metronome, pushing us to the next terminal beat and recalling those terminal beats that came before. The frequent rhymes thus doubly accentuate the potential rhythm, interfering with and so subordinating the development of narrative that competes with song for prominence, and also loudly underscoring the poem's "musical sense."

The crucial element of the skeltonics, however, is this: although the form indicates a strong rhythm, that rhythm continually evades us. Indeed, the very hallmark of the skeltonic is the lack of certainty with which we approach the verses, the difficulty we have in pinning them down. Puttenham's sixteenth-century pronouncements and Scattergood and Norton-Smith's modern criticism both convey as much. Skeltonic are "short lines of two *or* three stresses, rhymed *in anything* from couplets to very long leashes and involving *frequent* use of alliteration and parallelism." We are pushed toward the next line but cannot be sure how its rhythm will usher us through it, as each next line will likely have two or three downbeats, but we cannot predict whether it will have two *or* three. That is, the skeltonics never quite become "metrical," a phenomenon that, according to Derek Attridge, happens when the regular rhythm is so strong that we expect

²²⁰ Ibid., 136.

the same continued regularity.²²¹ Skeltonic rhythm sometimes gathers steam and sometimes changes course. Additionally, skeltonic rhyme leashes may be short or long, but we do not know which we are experiencing until the leash itself ends; as soon as the leash ends, we are in the midst of another that is again unpredictable. Will what John Hollander has described as the “bridging, associating, linking function of rhyme” continue to propel the reader forward within a leash, or will the “marking, bounding, limiting function of rhyme” stop us as we enter a new leash?²²²

Take the opening of *Phyllyp Sparowe*, one of Skelton’s earliest skeltonic experiments. Introducing us to the sound of the poem, the opening lines showcase the tendency of skeltonics to both draw attention to and obfuscate its rhythm:

Pla ce bo,

Who is there, who?

Di le xi,

Dame Margery,

Fa, re, my, my. (1-5)

Readers, not auditors, must make some choice about how to allot beats in these lines, even if they are able to revisit that choice countless times. In the first and third lines, spaces break up the Latin words *placebo* and *dilexi*, words that Skelton has borrowed from the Vulgate’s Psalm 114, used in the opening antiphon of the Vespers of the Office of the Dead.²²³ According to Scattergood, the spaces evoke these verses’ “plainsong background”; that is, they remind readers how the words would have sounded when they

²²¹ Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*, 48-57.

²²² Hollander, *Vision and Resonance*, 118-19.

²²³ Brownlow provides a thorough analysis of the ways that Jane’s part in *Phyllyp Sparowe* (ll. 1-844) exactly follows this liturgical service; “‘The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe’ and the Liturgy.”

were sung in church.²²⁴ As such, the spaces provide some evidence about the line's rhythm: they suggest that each of the three syllables in *placebo* and *dilexi* receives one beat (to perceive a two-beat rhythm instead, although possible, would mean ignoring these spaces and the tri-syllabic Latin words). Does the three-beat rhythm work for the other lines in this opening stanza?

/ / /
Pla ce bo,

/ / /
 Who is there, who?

/ / /
Di le xi,

/ / /
 Dame Margery,

/ / / /
Fa, re, my, my. (1-5)

The second line could theoretically receive two *or* three beats (two, if we stress only *Who* and *who*), but its location between two, obviously three-beat lines encourages us to hear the same rhythm in it. Likewise, the fourth line's position, immediately after the third three-beat line, encourages us to hear three beats in it as well. By the fifth line, however, the three-beat rhythm falls apart as the *four* musical syllables, separated like *placebo* and *dilexi*, demand to be given one beat each. The following stanza and half of the next (6-22) are made up of lines that may plausibly be read with two *or* three beats each, but by line 23, "I wept and I wayled," we unequivocally hear two beats only. Do the unambiguous two beats in line 23 mean that the entire poem until this point ought to be read with two

²²⁴ Skelton, *Phyllyp Sparowe*, 1n.

beats per line? If so, how can we reconcile the rhythm of first five lines? Or has the rhythm simply changed?

Grappling with questions like these is a fundamental part of attuning one's ears to the skeltonics' unique poetic music. Two critics who have analyzed the form in depth arrive at opposing conclusions regarding the disorientation that seems to be central to a reader's experience of the form. Arguing against what she calls an "open reading" of the form's rhythm, Elaine Spina asserts, "the reader wants guidance":

The natural tendency, once the poet has established a rhythm, is to remain with it as long as possible. If the poet forces a new rhythm, and if he insists on it for another line or so, a new norm is established; the reader will want to stay with that; if he is thrust into continual crisis, he loses confidence as we do when we watch our feet descend a stair. Each new line then is faced with uncertainty. If we declare for an open reading, each line to be decided on its own merits, we are assuming the burden of so many alternatives that, short of special gifts, we constantly stumble as Skelton shows us we are out of step [...] In theory, this sort of effort should not be a prerequisite to read a poem. (667)

Spina suggests that to appreciate a skeltonic poem is, first, to decipher its specific rhythm so as to avoid continual "uncertainty." Deciphering that rhythm, however, means that a reader must engage in the kind of line-by-line scansion that Spina commendably performs in order to conclude, for example, that *Elynour Rummynge*—but not necessarily any other skeltonic poem—is to be read with two stresses per line with "as many as one-fifteenth of the lines irregular" and with "amazin[g] vari[ation] through the placement of

stress and the changing number of unstressed syllables.”²²⁵ Spina replaces one laborious “effort” with another: surely, a complex analysis such as hers is not a prerequisite for reading a skeltonic poem, either.

In her effort to master the skeltonics of *Elynour Rummynge*, Spina misses the ways that those skeltonics may be designed to resist the impulse to master the form’s challenging prosody. In her illuminating work on that subject, Jane Griffiths suggests that the key to understanding the skeltonics is to contrast them with poetic forms that are governed, more traditionally, by strategies that enact closure: organized rhyme schemes, stanzas, and grammatical sentences that are contained by the prosody. Against this foil, she sees in *Elynour Rummynge*’s enjambments, long rhyme leashes, disregard for stanzas, and preference for word play over grammatical sentence an “impatience with constraint,” a “lack of moderation,” and “linguistic chaos.”²²⁶ The skeltonic, she concludes, is a “rebellious form.”²²⁷ If Spina insists that we must decipher the overarching order of skeltonics or else be left with a chaotic reading experience, Griffiths posits that such chaos is central to the design and desired outcome of encountering Skelton’s idiosyncratic form.

There is a third option: although the skeltonics are not *regular*, they are in fact deliberately *organized*. Whereas regularity might help the reader to anticipate where she is headed, organization *without* regularity tips the balance of power to the poet. He controls the reader’s experience of the poem, pushing or pulling her through his verses. To read skeltonics is to be jerked around. Any number of stretches in *Phyllyp Sparowe* illustrate this point, as we see relatively long, three-beat lines with additional unstressed

²²⁵ Spina, “Skeltonic Meter,” 682-83.

²²⁶ Griffiths, ““An Ende to an Olde Song’,” 714 and 716.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 717.

syllables slowing the line and relatively short, two-beat lines with fewer unstressed syllables quickening it. A representative stanza can be found between lines 386 and 425. The first English line, “To wepe with me loke that ye come” (387), includes eight syllables (in fact, eight one-syllable words) and, most plausibly, three beats—on “wepe,” “loke,” and “come.” Immediately succeeding lines vary in the number of syllables that they contain, but they repeat this three-beat rhythm:

/ / /
 All maner of byrdes in your kind,
 / / /
 So none be left behynde.
 / / /
 To mornynge loke that ye fall
 / / /
 With dolorous songes funeral. (388-91)

At line 392, the rhythm switches to two-beats, a change that is pronounced by the grammatical and phonetic echo that connects them:

/ /
 Some to synge, and some to say,
 / /
 Some to wepe, and some to pray (392-93)

Lines 394-97 and 401-12 continue this two-beat rhythm; each line in these stretches contains between six and eight syllables. At lines 399-400 and 413-16, the pace momentarily quickens as the lines continue with two beats but contain fewer unstressed syllables:

/ /
 And Robyn Redbrest
 / /

He shall be the preest (399-400)

 / /
The crowe and the kyte;

 / /
The ravyn called Rolfe,

 / /
His playne songe to solfe;

 / /
The partryche, the quayle (413-16)

These metrical shifts create the effect of tumbling through the verse; the pace of reading accelerates as our eyes move quickly down the page. At line 417, the rhythm slows again, moving back to three beats across seven syllables: “The plover with us to wayle.” This stretch of verse sustains this rhythm but with a varying number of syllables per line. These skeltonic lines built a rhythmic energy in one direction; then they pivot seamlessly in a different direction, and then pivot again. The reader goes along for the ride.

To appreciate the skeltonics music, we must understand that rhythm may be a more potent governing system than meter, and may even be the means by which the poet conveys lived experience. Suzanne Woods suggests that “poetry is, among other things, a universal response to the problem of time, and lines of verse are a direct reflection and conceptualization of that response.”²²⁸ By this she means that rhythm enables “the repeatability of the artistic experience”.²²⁹

[B]y affecting tone and conveying a complex of attitudes and feelings [through his artistic voice], the poet directs not only the speech patterns of the poem but also the experience it enacts, so that a fictive or long-gone reality may be felt

²²⁸ Woods, *Natural Emphasis*, 12.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

along the pulse. Rhythm creates an experience from what would otherwise be simply a record.

Insofar as a poem is a record it serves the classical function of providing permanence through time by enduring in the memory of succeeding generations. Insofar as a poem provides a repeatable experience, experience which can in some sense be lived now, it approaches the eternal, which theologians have defined as infinite present.²³⁰

A traditional form like the rhyme royale stanza is a social language, a form in which many poets speak, and a way for them to communicate with each other and with their readers. Within the rhyme royale, or the loosely decasyllabic couplets, or any other established form, a poet can make decisions that affect the lines' rhythm. For example, he may disrupt the predicted pattern or change the anticipated emphases. Woods associates the traces of those decisions with a real historical, albeit momentary experience: "the pulse." Woods assumes that the poet is *primarily* engaged with the social meter that the poet's readers will recognize, and that he slips his own rhythms in the crevices of that meter.

As a verse form that is barely linked to the widely known vernacular meters from which it derives and with which it is in conversation, the skeltonics flips these priorities. The purely accentual, innovative "skeltonic" is mostly idiosyncratic rhythm, mostly Skelton's "pulse." If we apply Woods' compelling interpretation of rhythm, then the skeltonic is signature in more than name: the poet is attached to these formal experimentations, so that a future reader cannot take up the skeltonic without reiterating Skelton himself. *Skelton* is what is left over after sense is worked out; Skelton is the iterated component of his own signature verse. As such, the skeltonics bear a relationship

²³⁰ Ibid., 14.

to time opposite that of the choral rhyme royale of the *Garlande*. In the *Garlande*'s refrains, sense and narrative becomes anonymously ritualized in "iterative time."

Skeltonics, by contrast, demote sense and narrative in the face of a rhythm that cannot be anonymous, that carries its original context and poet with it. Thus, the words of the poem are an outward manifestation of a particular interiority—one that is English and singular. The seemingly lowliness of the skeltonics is not inherent but produced in the quotidian, momentary time that the form reenacts.

Skelton's early modern readers assumed the skeltonics to be lowbrow because Skelton often encourages his reader to think about character and verse form together; many of Skelton's most famous characters are themselves lowbrow in one way or another.²³¹ To consider form and speaker together, however, is not necessarily to regard them as interchangeable. The note to Scattergood's edition of *Magnyfycence* that I have discussed showcases Scattergood's and Norton-Smith's assumptions that Skelton himself thought his signature verse form was inherently lowbrow. In that same note, Scattergood directs us to "See *Collyn Clout*, 53-58," and without any further explanation. I discuss these lines above, too, noting that they are routinely taken as proof that Skelton thought ill of the skeltonics. Scattergood, however, overlooks *Collyn Clout*'s immediately preceding lines, which provide context for his negative words about his "ryme" (53):

And yf ye stande in doute

Who brought this ryme aboute,

²³¹ According to the implicit and explicit presumptions of many Skeltonists, the quintessential skeltonic poem is *Elynour Rummynges*, which, not coincidentally, is among Skelton's most lowbrow works. The poem provides a verbal portrait of Elynour and the guests, mostly women, who frequent her alehouse. The images are quintessentially carnivalesque: grotesque, leaky bodies, sinfully engaged. Scholars have in various ways connected the subject matter to the meter. It's difficult to assess the verse form as distinct from the narrators who don it, although that is what precisely we have to do in order to analyze it fairly.

My name is Collyn Cloute

I purpose to shake oute

All my connynge bagge,

Lyke a clerkely hagge. (47-52)

The speaker first names himself in line 49. *Collyn*, as Scattergood also notes, “derives from Latin *colonus* ‘farmer’,” and seems to have been used in fifteenth-century England generally to indicate “a person of humble birth”; the surname *Clout*, which means “rag” or “patch,” extends this characterization.²³² Why assume that Skelton steps out of character to discuss his own verse form at precisely the moment that the character asserts himself most directly? “[T]his ryme” is Collyn’s, and the description of it reflects back on Collyn. The lines that fall out of the beggar’s “connynge bagge” are themselves weathered. Skelton must have thought his own signature form was appropriate for a speaker as low as Collyn Clout, but this fact does not mean that Skelton did not also see the form as appropriate for highbrow subjects.

Phyllyp Sparowe offers not one but several voices. Those of Jane and the Laureate Poet are the most obvious;²³³ another voice speaks bits of the Vespers of the Office of the Dead, attributed to “Dame Margery,” supposedly a senior nun at St. Mary’s Carrow, where the historical Jane Scrope resided in the early sixteenth century.²³⁴ Skelton sporadically intersperses Dame Margery’s voice with Jane’s throughout the first part of *Phyllyp Sparowe* (1-844): Margery speaks the opening *Placebo* and *Dilexi*; the Psalms with their corresponding antiphons (64-66, 95-97, 143-45, 183-85, and 386); the canticle

²³² Skelton, *Phyllyp Sparowe*, 49n.

²³³ In line 1261, “Skelton, the Laureate Poet of Britain,” is finally identified as the speaker of “The Commendations,” 845ff.

²³⁴ Skelton, *Phyllyp Sparowe*, 4-9n.

Magnifat (243-45); and the concluding versicles and prayers (575-87).²³⁵ Several critics have explored the ways that these three voices interact with, complement, and even effect each other.²³⁶ Skelton's juggling of these three different voices allows *Phyllyp Sparowe*, according to F. W. Brownlow, to "continually inhabi[t] different, contrasted, even antithetical planes of reality."²³⁷ What no critic to my knowledge has done, however, is consider the voice that I have been attempting to identify in the second half of this chapter—the poet Skelton's voice, iterated in his signature skeltonics. Skelton reinvents the skeltonics and so himself in *Phyllyp Sparowe*. The voices of Jane and the Laureate Poet, both of which don this verse form and imbue it with competing values, allow Skelton to emerge as a double figure, iterated twice through his own signature form and capable of bridging the momentary and the transhistorical.

In the first 800 lines of *Phyllyp Sparowe*, the child-speaker, Jane, accentuates characteristics of the skeltonics that modern critics typically regard as low. Jane's voice is represented as plain and pure. As Stanley Fish has argued, readers realize that Jane is naïve when she does not recognize the sexual innuendo that pervades her anecdotes about her sparrow. Readers are in on the joke, however, and the gap in awareness between Jane and the reader underscores her immaturity. Eventually, she outright acknowledges her own simple-mindedness. She wants to compose an epitaph for Phyllyp's grave but doubts her literary ability:

But for I am a mayde,
 Tymerous, halfe afrayde,
 That never yet asayde

²³⁵ Brownlow, "'The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe' and the Liturgy," 8 and n. 7.

²³⁶ Kinney, *John Skelton*; Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry*; Brownlow, "'The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe.'"

²³⁷ Brownlow, "'The Boke of Phyllyp Sparowe,'" 16.

Of Elyconys well,

Where the muses dwell (607-11).

Jane is doubly lacking: being merely a “mayde” is itself a problem, but Jane is a “[t]ymerous” maid at that, one utterly unlearned in the literary arts. Her lack of confidence and learning encourages the reader to interpret her language as plain—even if it is not throughout quite as dull as she maintains.

Related to Jane’s professed dullness is the meandering quality of her lament. With the Office of the Dead’s Psalms and antiphons as touchstones, Jane loosely organizes her chant. Nonetheless, we cannot be certain where she is headed (and to where we are following her) as she moves from expressions of grief, to anecdotes about Phyllyp, to copious classical similes, to visions of a bird Mass, to an account of her own studies, to an evaluation of the English poets, and finally to her epitaph for Phyllyp. In the midst of the poem, the reader does not know for how long she will hold a train of thought, to what topic her thoughts will turn next, or if she is headed toward any conclusion whatsoever. As F. W. Brownlow explains, this errant monologue is Jane’s prerogative: Jane’s private devotion is an entirely “proper liturgical role”: “it was customary for lay people to use their primers for private devotion during the recitation of either the Office of the Dead or the Mass.”²³⁸ The effect of that meandering on the reader’s experience of the verse form heightens the sense of the skeltonics’ similar unpredictability. Even as a few Latin lines connect Jane’s personal, inner thoughts to the timeless liturgical song, their very presence simultaneously contrasts with the fleetingness of Jane’s experience. Likewise, those Latin words dwarf the English skeltonics.

²³⁸ Ibid., 10.

Jane joins this version of the skeltonics—created by her very donning of the form—to a lowbrow English literary tradition. The contrast with the laureate parade in the *Garlande* is illuminating. Whereas Phebus publically displays his group of renowned international writers and scholars, Jane encounters her local literary forbearers privately in books. She knows tales and fables that were popular by virtue of their being widely accessible: “the *Tales of Caunterbury* / Some sad storyes, some mery,” the tales of “Gawen, and Syr Guy,” of “the Golden Flece,” of “Arturs rounde table / With his knightes commendable,” of “Trystram,” of “Syr Lybius” (614-58). But Jane does not know the elite subjects: “Those poets of aunicyente, / They ar to diffuse for me” (767-68). The extent to which Jane associates her own language—expressed as simple, uncertain skeltonics—with elite subject matter is apparent as she transitions from titles and summaries to an analysis of the English language itself:

Our naturall tong is rude,
 And hard to be enneude
 With pullysshed termes lusty;
 Our language is so rusty,
 So cankered and so full
 Of frowardes, and so dull,
 That if I wolde apply
 To wryte onatly,
 I wot not where to fynd
 Termes to serve my mynde. (776-83)

She praises John Gower's "mater" (786) but not his "Englysh" (784). Chaucer's English, by contrast, is "plesaunt, easy and playne" (802), but obscured by new writers who "mar" (799) it. Lydgate writes "after an hyer rate" (805) but is "dyffuse" (806), difficult to understand. Folded into this prosody, Chaucer and his cohort are simultaneously represented as momentary and fleeting.

The arrival of a new speaker—the Laureate Poet (line 845)-- is accompanied by changes in the verse form so drastic that a reader may wonder if she is still reading skeltonics at all:

Beati im ma cul ati in via,

O gloriosa femina!

Now myne hole imagination

And studious medytacion

Is to take this commendacyon

In this consyderacion;

And under pacyent tolleracyon

Of that most goodly mayd

That *Placebo* hath sayd,

And for her sparrow prayd

In lamentable wyse. (845-55).

This new speaker, the Laureate Poet, elevates the form by stuffing its lines full of Latin. He has the opportunity to do so partly because Skelton handles the liturgical influence differently in this new section. Whereas "Jane's meditation is separate from the service it follows, although prompted by its various parts," the Laureate Poet "fashions a kind of

private ‘Office of Love’ by parodying the primer’s [i.e. the book of hours’] “Commendations of All Souls.”²³⁹ Up until her final epitaph, Jane speaks no Latin; her skeltonics are purely English. The Latin that does appear in the first 844 lines, from the Psalms and antiphons of the Office of the Dead, can be attributed to a completely different speaker, Dame Margery. If anything, the Latin in 1-844 underscores just how lowbrow English is. By contrast, the Laureate Poet himself appropriates the Latin lines that Skelton found in the “Commendations.” The Latin lines 845 and 846 at the opening of this first stanza are thus part of the Laureate Poet’s utterance, and the Laureate Poet packs his first five English lines with six-syllable Latinate words. By line 852, the lines begin to resemble the more familiar, shorter length skeltonic, and, by line 949, the he even speaks rapid, two-beat, four- or five-syllable lines. Rather than a break from the skeltonic, the elevation of the skeltonic in his opening stanza is another reinvention of it.

Importantly, the Laureate Poet’s portion of *Phyllyp Sparowe* is substantially more organized than Jane’s. Whereas Jane’s meandering lamentation leaves the reader in the sort of “continual crisis” that Spina associates with an “open reading” of the skeltonics, the Laureate Poet’s “Office of Love” incorporates the following part-English, part-Latin refrain:

For this most goodly floure,
 This blossome of fresshe couloure,
 So Jupiter me socour,
 She floryssheth new and new
 In bewte and vertew:
 Hac claritate gemina

²³⁹ Ibid., 9-10.

O gloriosa femina (893-99)²⁴⁰

This refrain has all the marks of the Laureate Poet's opening stanza, and it, too, contributes to the elevation of the skeltonic form. The English in lines 893-97, if not Latinate *per se*, emphasizes its Romance origins and depends on multi-syllable words that elongate the lines themselves. These English lines blend into the refrain's final Latin couplet, merging rather than contrasting the two languages; that couplet at its every occurrence in *Phyllyp Sparowe*, in turn, leads into the parts of Psalm 119 with which the Laureate Poet structures his entire section.²⁴¹ The refrain requires the reader to slow down, and so the tumbling sensation that Jane's skeltonics produce is replaced with what, for the form, approaches a leisurely reading experience. Additionally, the presence of the refrain throughout the Laureate Poet's entire section organizes the stretches brought together by the refrain—stretches that in another context would sound like Jane's meandering—into organized, bounded strophes. Consequently, the Laureate Poet *deemphasizes* the freewheeling aspects of the skeltonics, a form that had seemed so naturally to embody Jane's personal, immature, and fleeting experience. Not only has the Laureate Poet infused that form with highbrow genre of love poetry and with the timeless excerpts from the English books of hours, but he has recast it as ritual.

Jane's lowbrow skeltonics may have been supplanted in this second section, as we are presented with an entirely new speaker who elevates the form. What is not supplanted, however, are the skeltonics themselves or the poet who is iterated in them. Instead, the Laureate Poet's version of the form offers it up to readers as itself a ritual. If the *Garlande's* refrain subordinates narrative to ritual, meaning to music, the Laureate

²⁴⁰ Repeated in 989-95, 1022-28, 1054-60, 1083-89, 1107-13, 1136-42, 1161-67, 1185-91, 1208-14, and 1231-37.

²⁴¹ Brownlow, "The Boke of the Sparowe," 5.

Poet here uses this refrain to transform one music into another. Skelton's temporal experience is made highbrow, and it is for us to experience as such "along the pulse." Skelton uses his signature form to assert his own, idiosyncratic way forward as English laureate.

Chapter 3: Ben Jonson's Comic Laureateship

In 1616, Ben Jonson was at the height of his career. He published the *Works of Benjamin Jonson*, a magisterial folio that collects nearly all of the plays, poetry, court masques, and entertainments that he acknowledged as his own. By deploying the textual strategies that he had developed in his earlier quarto publications, Jonson exerted unprecedented control over his image.²⁴² As Richard C. Newton explains, the folio arrived on the literary scene “proclaiming [its] own completeness, aware of [its] own permanence, and creative of [its] own context.”²⁴³ It monumentalizes an elite author, showcasing Jonson’s skill, labor, classical learning,²⁴⁴ and ties to the literary circles of England’s elite coteries.²⁴⁵ Its prefaces and introductory matter implicitly and explicitly ask readers to distinguish Jonson by judging him, according to the highest classical standards, against his contemporaries. The ambition behind the *Works* was punctuated by James I’s gift in December of that year, an annual pension of 100 marks “in consideration of the good and acceptable service done and to be done vnto vs.”²⁴⁶ The

²⁴² Recent scholarship has confirmed that Jonson was extraordinarily involved in the folio’s production—even as that scholarship has tempered earlier, exaggerated accounts of Jonson’s role by attending also to the contributions of his printer and editor. See Bland, “William Stansby”; Butler, “Jonson’s Folio”; Donovan, “Jonson’s Texts”; Gants, “The 1616 Folio” and “Printing, Proofing, and Press-Correction”; and Loewenstein, *Possessive Authorship*, 182-210. For a diachronic account of “the absorption of many of the editor functions into that of the author,” which enabled Jonson’s self-presentation in the *Works*, see Burrow, “Fictions of Collaboration,” 190.

²⁴³ “(Re-)Invention of the Book,” 34.

²⁴⁴ The title page includes the figures of major classical genres (tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, satire, and pastoral); scenes from the history of ancient drama; and two Horatian mottos. See Donaldson, “Notes on the Title Page.”

²⁴⁵ Herendeen, “New Way”; and Ivic, “Ben Jonson and Manuscript Culture.”

²⁴⁶ Quoted in Broadus, *Laureateship*, 222.

folio and James's recognition together depict Jonson as singular "self-crowned," "self-creating" Stuart laureate,²⁴⁷ the version of Jonson that marks his reputation still today.²⁴⁸

Two texts were curiously omitted from the 1616 *Works*. The first was Jonson's translation of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, which Jonson left out despite having promised it "shortly" over a decade earlier.²⁴⁹ Jonson's so-called "critical manifesto" would have been the perfect opportunity to cement his relationship to the man he chose as his most important literary predecessor.²⁵⁰ An Augustan Roman who wrote satires, odes, and literary criticism, Horace rose from meager roots to prominence under powerful patronage.²⁵¹ His successful political maneuvering, self-advancement, and self-advertisement at the apex of Golden Age Rome encouraged later scholars, Jonson chief among them, to regard him as the quintessential literary laureate. Jonson's own rise to prominence is due in no small part to his styling himself on this model, and his "'dialogue' with Horace"²⁵² was multifarious, wide-ranging, and evolving.²⁵³ While

²⁴⁷ Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 101-84.

²⁴⁸ The folio is so important to our interpretation of Jonson that the editors of the recent *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* had explicitly to justify *not* deferring to it as copy-text in every instance; Bevington et al., general introduction, lxxviii-lxxxviii. Against this version of Jonson, see Bland, "Ben Jonson." Nonetheless, the folio's version of Jonsonian authorship has become something of a control against which to evaluate (and now reevaluate) his contemporaries' writerly identities—namely, Shakespeare's. See Cheney, *Shakespeare's Literary Authorship*, 21; Gregory, "The 'author's drift'"; and Meskill, "Tangled Thread." But see also Jeffrey Knapp, who reveals more ambiguity, *Shakespeare Only*, 67-76.

²⁴⁹ *Sejanus, His Fall*, To the Reader. On the omission of an English *Ars Poetica*, see Burrow, introduction to *Horace, Of His Art of Poetry*.

²⁵⁰ Stewart, "Jonson's criticism," 178. Dutton speculates that given its likely circulation among a coterie, "it may have seemed to Jonson indiscreet or unmannerly to break the circle of confederacy and confidentiality" by finally publishing it, *Ben Jonson*, 17. But Jonson's folio texts, prefaced by commendatory poems, letters, notes, and other introductory material, *all* give the impression that they belong to some such circle—that is precisely the way that they were designed to be printed.

²⁵¹ See Starr, "Horace and Augustus." Horace's patron was Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, Augustus's minister of internal affairs.

²⁵² Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, 7.

²⁵³ On Jonson and Horace, see Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates*, 110-17; Martindale, "Best Master"; Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*; Shelburne, "Ben Jonson's Horatian Theory"; Steggle, "Horace the Second"; and Pierce, "Ben Jonson's Horace." As early as 1600, his *Every Man Out of his Humour* appeared in print with two Horatian mottos on its title page; the next year, Jonson's *Poetaster*

some contemporaries, like fellow playwright Thomas Dekker, rejected Jonson's personal Horatian myth, most affirmed Jonson's imagined literary heredity. Henry Chettle, for one example, dubs Jonson the "English Horace"; Sir Thomas Smithes, for another, names him "oure elaborate English Horace [...] our Lawreat, worthy Benjamin."²⁵⁴ The inclusion of an English *Ars Poetica* in the folio—perhaps one supported by prefaces and notes to readers of the kind that Jonson appended to many of his works—could have only strengthened Jonson's Horatianism.

The second curiously omitted text was *Bartholomew Fair*, a comedy that was staged at least twice in 1614, once in a public theater and once at the Inns of Court before the King.²⁵⁵ Unlike other plays that Jonson had omitted from the folio, which Jonson disavowed because they caused him political trouble or because he could not claim sole authorship over them, *Bartholomew Fair* posed no threat and was known as Jonson's only. *Bartholomew Fair*'s most recent editor, John Creaser, rejects previous attempts to explain the play's exclusion: there was no room or time to include it in the folio (there was both); the play was not yet up to Jonson's high standards and had to be substantially revised (twenty years later, he still had not changed it much); Lady Elizabeth's Company would not release the play to Jonson (Jonson had maintained control of nearly all of his other plays); and Jonson thought the play was too unusual for the streamlined folio (all of his plays are unusual in one way or another).²⁵⁶ This careful process of elimination leads Creaser to conclude—still with a bit of trouble—that Jonson omitted *Bartholomew Fair*

featured a fictional Horace who doubled as a thinly veiled characterization of Jonson himself. Horatian allusions, imitations, and direct quotations pervade Jonson's verse, prose, plays, masques, and commentary

²⁵⁴ Chettle's quotation is from *Englandes Mourning Garment* (1603), and Smithes's, from *Voiage and Entertainment in Rushia* (1605), both quoted in Moulton, *Library of Literary Criticism*, 758. By contrast, Dekker in his *Satiromastix* (1602), satirized Horace and so Jonson. See also Steggle, "Horace the Second."

²⁵⁵ Creaser, "Bartholomew Fair: Stage History." Also, Teague, *Curious History*, 50.

²⁵⁶ Creaser, "Bartholomew Fair: Textual Essay."

because he could not figure out how to handle its dedication. The problem, Creaser speculates, was that since in performance *Bartholomew Fair*'s prologue and epilogue were addressed directly to the king, the play in print would have had to be dedicated to James, too. Following traditional decorum, Jonson could not have relegated a play dedicated to James to the back of the volume, where *Bartholomew Fair* would have fit (as the folio collects Jonson's plays chronologically). Of course, Jonson's masques are relegated to the back of the volume, and, as Creaser notes, they too could have been dedicated only to James. Jonson easily solved the masque problem, though, by including them in the folio with no dedication.

Though scholars have tried to account for these omissions, no speculation is definitive, and no explanation quite satisfies. Before we lump these two works with Jonson's countless other discarded poems and neglected dramas, we should remember that while neither the Horatian translation nor *Bartholomew Fair* was printed or authorized during Jonson's lifetime, both works continued to interest their author. Two versions of Jonson's English *Ars Poetica* survive, suggesting that Jonson continued to rethink and labor over it; and Jonson seems to have revisited *Bartholomew Fair* with the intention to include it in the second volume of his collected works, which he conceived much later, in the early 1630s.²⁵⁷ These two prized but unsettled works inhabit a peculiar Jonsonian limbo, a creative space where Jonson sidelined them just as he was using the 1616 *Works* to forcefully and clearly articulate one version of his laureateship.

One of these two works' obvious points-of-contact was dramatic comedy.

Although he explores this genre in both the *Ars Poetica* and *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson

²⁵⁷ Ibid. and "The 1631 Folio." A few presentation copies of the play were printed and circulated in 1631, but a falling-out with a "lewd printer,"²⁵⁷ stalled the second volume's publication until 1640-41, three years after Jonson's death. See also Happé, "The 1640-1 Folio."

seems to indicate contrasting, even contradictory, ideas about it. Modern scholars regarded the former as a veritable comic how-to, and commentators from C.H. Herford (“an undoubted relaxation of his dramatic technique”) to Creaser (“a comedy against comedies”) regard the latter as generically anomalous.²⁵⁸ In fact, in 1619 Jonson linked these two works omitted from the folio by placing them together in what seems planned to have been a folio supplement. Although this book is now lost, we know about its contents from the records of Jonson’s conversation with fellow poet William Drummond of Hawthornden, whom Jonson visited in Scotland that year. Drummond recorded the two men’s conversation in copious notes: “To me he read the preface of his *Art of Poesy*, upon Horace’s *Art of Poesy*, where he hath an apology of a play of his, *St Bartholomew’s Fair*. By Criticus is understood Donne. There is an epigram of Sir Edward Herbert’s before it. That [his *Art of Poesy*], he said, he had done in my Lord Aubigny’s house ten years since [ten year before he wrote *Bartholomew Fair*], anno 1604.”²⁵⁹ Whereas two printed copies of Jonson’s *Horace, Of the Art of Poetry* survive, at least one draft and the preface with its apology for *Bartholomew Fair* burned in the 1623 fire in Jonson’s library (lamented in his poem, “An Execration upon Vulcan”).²⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Drummond’s brief note, all that we have of the “apology,” is revealing: *Bartholomew Fair* apparently caused Jonson some trouble, since he felt that he needed to defend or at least further

²⁵⁸ Herford et al., 1:70; and Creaser, introduction, 259. The formal principles of *Bartholomew Fair* have been the topic of much criticism, and readers have yet to agree on whether Jonson revises, replaces, or rejects neoclassical rules. For arguments for alternative dramatic structures not based on those rules, see Hamel, “Order and Judgement”; Latham, “Form in *Bartholomew Fair*”; Levin, “Structure of *Bartholomew Fair*”; Martin, “Enormity and *Aurea Mediocritas*”; Robinson, “*Bartholomew Fair*: Comedy of vapours”; Salinger, “Crowd and Public”; and Townsend, *Apologie for Bartholomew Fayre*, 71-76.

²⁵⁹ *Informations to William Drummond*, lines 58-61. Since we know that Jonson wrote *Bartholomew Fair* in 1614 and so could not very well have written the preface in 1604, and that Jonson (obviously not Herbert) studied at his patrons’ estates between 1603 and 1605. What Jonson penned at “Lord Aubigny’s house” in 1604, must refer to Jonson’s “*Art of Poesy*, upon Horace’s *Art of Poesy*.” On Jonson’s time at his patrons’ estates, see Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 93 and 105-16.

²⁶⁰ Jonson, *Underwood* 43. See also Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 288.

explain it five years after its first performance; Jonson thought this play worthy of sharing space in a book with a poem by Sir Herbert, an important literary patron, and with a fictional John Donne, a representation of one of Stuart England's leading poets;²⁶¹ and Jonson connected *Bartholomew Fair* to Horace and to his English translation Horace's *Ars Poetica* specifically. As with the decision to exclude "his *Art of Poesy*, upon Horace's *Art of Poesy*" and *Bartholomew Fair* from the 1616 *Works*, however, much about this note remains a mystery. How would Jonson have used a translation of Horace to defend or otherwise explain *Bartholomew Fair*? Or, *vice versa*, how might Jonson have used *Bartholomew Fair* to demonstrate his mastery of Horace? Most important for this chapter, what can his thinking around both of these works and the connection between them tell us about his 1616 laureateship? How does that thinking point to *other* potential versions of laureateship?²⁶²

To answer these questions, I examine Jonson's changing but connected assumptions about comic drama: what it is, whence it came, who writes it, and why.²⁶³ These assumptions frequently intersect with Jonson's similarly changing attitude toward

²⁶¹ Lord Herbert's epigram survives:

Twas not enough, Ben Johnfon, to be thought
Of English Poets best, but to have brought
In greater state, to their acquaintance, one
So equal to himself and thee, that none
Might be thy second, while thy Glory is,
To be the Horace of our times and his.

In translating Horace, Jonson brought the ancient poet to seventeenth-century England, in turn bolstering the connection between himself and his literary precursor. No concrete evidence tells what Jonson would have meant by including the fictitious Donne, but I speculate below.

²⁶² Mardock also sees in *Bartholomew Fair* an alternative authorial ideal, one based not on the "textualizing strategies of the Folio" but on "an exploration of the authorial processes involved in producing theatrical space"; *Our Scene is London*, 97.

²⁶³ Of course, comic dramatist is but one of numerous aspects of Jonson's laureateship, a capacious role that also included tragic dramatist, poet, masque-writer, and scholar. Yet the role of comic dramatist deserves special attention because Jonson was especially intent on advertising it. The 1616 folio was the first post-classical book called "*Works*" to include any form of drama, and that book highlighted it, even adorning the title page with an illustration of a play wagon, an depiction of an ancient amphitheater, and allegorical representations of classical and Renaissance dramatic genres. Furthermore, although Jonson wrote both tragedies and comedies, in 1616 his success as dramatist owed chiefly to his comedies.

comic language, a chief concern of both Horace and *Bartholomew Fair*, and a concern that is central to Jonson's self-conception as laureate. Indeed, while Jonson inherits from the Elizabethans a host of ways to think about language, one is most relevant to Jonson's role as English spokesperson:

Elizabethan writers generally see language, based on custom and varying with changes in society, as an index of social history [...] During the sixteenth century, men learn to see language in their own image: human beings and their society are the cause of language; the history of language is one of continual renewal, as men restore with their wit what habit, time, and moral decadence take away. Many Elizabethan writers, wishing their language to serve as a model for their society, feel a responsibility to participate in this renewal.²⁶⁴

The laureate speaks for at least an imaginatively-coherent national voice that is, in turn, prestigious enough to enter into an international lineage of laureates representing other voices; it is the laureate who speaks for his country and who brings the voice of that country into a very old lineage. Throughout his dramatic canon, Jonson imagines his role as Horatian laureate through his use of language: what he does *with language*—how comic history tells him to use it, how his persona is warranted to use it, how the genre allows him to use it—is what he *does*.

As he interpreted and reinterpreted the *Ars Poetica*, however, Jonson invented an alternative version of laureateship based both on the writer's skillful linguistic control and on unwieldy social language; *Bartholomew Fair* stages the fastidious dramatist's most extensive experiment with ancient laws of comedy and language and with English

²⁶⁴ Donawerth, *Shakespeare*, 33, 37-38. Donawerth's entire first chapter provides an especially useful survey of sixteenth-century writers' classically-derived attitudes toward language, 13-55. See also de Grazia, "Shakespeare's View of Language."

“noise.”²⁶⁵ It voices what Paula Blank has described as the period’s many “Englishes” not primarily in competitive relation to the author’s pen,²⁶⁶ not merely as deficient or barbarous,²⁶⁷ and not only as splintering, and ultimately elusive,²⁶⁸ but as Jonson’s equal collaborators. Linguistically controlled *and* sprawling, classical *and* popular, this experiment neither succeeds nor fails, *per se*. Rather, it combusts into *an* expression of Jonson’s laureate ambition that challenges—but does not simply oppose—the straightforwardly highbrow values and the distinguished, autonomous author implicit in Jonson’s earlier work and in the *Works*. Ultimately, the play’s expression of what I call *comic laureateship* acknowledges both the laureate’s dependence on and power that he gets from popular “noise.”

Jonson, Comedy, and Horace *circa* 1599

Bartholomew Fair expresses a version of laureateship that Jonson imagined but did not master. Nonetheless, while the conclusions expressed by *Bartholomew Fair* are unusual, the interrelated literary concerns and questions that lead to them are not.

Elsewhere in his work, as in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson invents the playwright’s literary and social role by manipulating dramatic tradition and comedy’s generic conventions.²⁶⁹

In fact, *Bartholomew Fair*’s machinations come into view most clearly against the

²⁶⁵ *Bartholomew Fair*, Prologue, 3.

²⁶⁶ Blank, *Broken English*, 7-32.

²⁶⁷ Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 25-40; Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric*.

²⁶⁸ Fumerton, “Homely Accents”; McEachern, *Poetics of English Nationhood*, 83-137.

²⁶⁹ On Jonson’s use of comedy, see Danson, “Jonsonian Comedy”; Dutton, *Ben Jonson*; Farley-Hills, “Jonson and the neo-Classical Rules”; Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy*; Newton, ““Goe, quit ’hem all””; Rutter, “Patient Grissil and Jonsonian Satire”; and Watson, “*The Alchemist* and Jonson’s Conversion of Comedy.” On the ways that his contemporaries used comedy, see Hardin, “Encountering Plautus”; Harry Levin, “Notes toward a Definition of City Comedy”; Riehle, *Shakespeare, Plautus, and the Humanist Tradition*; and Salinger, *Shakespeare and the Traditions of Comedy*.

backdrop of Jonson's early work. To that end, this section analyzes the literary theory in *Every Man Out of His Humor* (acted, 1599; printed in quarto, 1600). That play critiques comic tradition; celebrates dramatic "license"; and prizes the unrestrained comic language of a totally "self-creating" dramatist. The singular, would-be laureate that emerges from this play purports to oppose both his own English culture *and* classical tradition.

In inventing "Comicall Satyre,"²⁷⁰ however, Jonson created an authorial role out of the materials that he found in his contemporary literary climate and its classical literary history. In coining this phrase, he appropriated what Lawrence Manley has called the "the laureate master-genre," the Elizabethan verse satire, which poets in the 1590s had taken up to distinguish themselves from lesser literary hacks and from the Elizabethan social types that they censored.²⁷¹ When, in 1599, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London outlawed verse satire, which was modeled on the poetry of Horace and Juvenal, Jonson and others moved the genre to the stage.²⁷² There, they presented "the whole form of Horatian satire, in which the satiric view takes us through a survey of folly and vice in recognisably familiar urban locations."²⁷³ Conveniently, verse satire and comedy were already believed to share a common ancestor.²⁷⁴ Verse satire, which we now know originally to have been a Roman genre, was typically regarded in the sixteenth century as having preceded Greek drama. The ancient Greek satyric plays, which we now know to have been lewd, raucous inversions of Greek tragedies, were widely regarded as

²⁷⁰ The title page to the quarto *Every Man Out* calls the play, "The Comicall Satyre of EVERY MAN OVT OF HIS HVMOR"; Jonson, *Every Man Out*, 249.

²⁷¹ Manley, *Literature and Culture*, 372. See also Baumlin, "Generic Contexts."

²⁷² McCabe contends that the bishops feared verse satires' and epigrams' potential political subversiveness, "Elizabethan Satire," 188. See also Bowers, "'I will write satires'."

²⁷³ Gibbons, *Ben Jonson*, 25. See also Moul, who shows how Jonson uses Horace to rewrite Juvenal; *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, 98-106.

²⁷⁴ De Smet, *Menippean Satire*.

the censors of wise men—the verse satirists’ predecessors—under the protection of satyrs’ costumes. Aelius Donatus’s history of the origins of drama, part of a fourth-century treatise on comedy, was attached to most sixteenth-century editions of ancient plays: “When the Athenians, the guardians of Attic propriety, wanted to rebuke anyone for an immoral life, they used to gather together from all sides, happily and eagerly, at the villages and crossroads. There they used to describe them publically and with proper names.”²⁷⁵ Common sixteenth-century literary history held that this *satyre*—the Renaissance spelling itself reflects the conflation of *satire* and *satyr*—was the original dramatic song from which evolved comedy and then tragedy.²⁷⁶ Jonson relies on the shared history of satire and comedy to distinguish *Every Man Out* as a newly-traditional kind of comedy and himself as a newly-traditional kind of dramatist.

He does so by degrading other comedies, which he paints as beholden to supposedly-hackneyed and impure generic conventions. *Every Man Out*’s two chatty chorus characters, Cordatus and Mitis, tell audience members how to interpret the fictional playwright’s, Asper’s, unusual dramatic choices. In the play’s Induction scene (ll. 225-55), Cordatus reveals that the play “’tis strange, and of a particular kind by itself, somewhat like the *Vetus Comædia*.” Mitis asks his informed companion if the playwright will “observe all the laws of comedy”: he is curious about “the equal division of it into acts and scenes, according to the Terentian manner; his true number of actors; the furnishing of the scene with Grex of chorus; and that the whole argument fall within compass of a day’s efficiency.” These laws, Mitis thinks, will make the play “authentic.”

²⁷⁵ Donatus, “On Comedy,” 46.

²⁷⁶ Renaissance readers relied on Horace, also, to smooth out the connection between “satyre” and comedy. In one of his own satires, for example, Horace compares Lucilius—his most important satiric influence—to the Old Comedy playwrights Aristophanes, Eupolis, and Cratinus, *Satires* 1.4.1-7.

Dismissing such concerns as “too nice observations,” Cordatus answers that perhaps the author would have had “some reason of obeying [the laws’] powers” if they “had been delivered us *ab initio*; and in their present virtue and perfection.” But, paraphrasing Donatus, Cordatus informs his stage partner, “that which we call *comoedia*, was at first nothing but a simple and continued [satyre], sung by one only person.”²⁷⁷ Cordatus offers a detailed history of comedy’s evolution that includes each comic playwright’s addition and subtraction of conventions “with all liberty, according to the elegancy and disposition of those times wherein they wrote”: the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth actors; the “property,” “natures,” and “names” of each character; and the prologues and choruses. Cordatus figures New Comedy’s conventions and distinct features not as powerful authenticators but as mere by-products of satyre’s long evolution. He imagines the playwright to be clearing away centuries of precepts that had come to obscure pure comic history. Finally, he exclaims, “I see not then but we should enjoy the same *licentia*, or free power, to illustrate and heighten our invention as they did; and not be tied to those strict and regular forms, which the niceness of a few—who are nothing but form—would thrust upon us.” He regards forms as burdens from which the comical satirist does well to free himself.

New Comedy’s distinct generic features, Cordatus’s “laws,” evince whimsical change of a kind that cheapens drama and degrades its connection to the original “satyre,” a connection that marks true authenticity. For Cordatus, each classical comic playwright—Susario, Epicharmus, Phormus, Chonides, Cratinus, Eupolis, Aristophanes, Menander, Philemon, Cecilius, Plautus, and Terence—alters comedy’s forms and

²⁷⁷ In modernizing the spelling, Martin unfortunately erases the spelling of “satyre” that conflated *satire* with *satyr*.

conventions and embeds them in the varying societies and cultures that produced them (“those times wherein [the playwrights] wrote”). In other words, those old playwrights kowtowed to their audiences’ “dispositions.” They and their implicit successors sixteenth-century hacks, are here raised so that they may be stamped out of Cordatus’s new literary history. Tied to “those times,” conventions and forms have obscured the original “satyre.” Dismissing these fleeting moments, Cordatus instead insists that the classical playwrights by example have permitted *Every Man Out*’s playwright “free power” to ignore or subvert convention as he sees fit. Unencumbered by both “laws” and “times,” the comical satirist’s writerly authority is conveniently extended to the fictional representation of *Every Man Out*’s playwright, Asper, and finally to Jonson, who would follow comedy “*ab Initio*,” from somewhere beyond literary history. Refiguring all of the New Comedy conventions as “*licentia*,” Cordatus’s “simple and continuous *satyre*” and the satirist, “at first,” rise above the social and cultural pressures and pitfalls of historical circumstance. Only from here can the preacher-playwright order the very society from which he has removed himself. Comical satire therefore constitutes a writerly persona that depends on “*licentia*,” divorced from classical comic lineage and from his own contemporary cultural. Cordatus snubs what he regards as lowbrow comic conventions to justify the playwright’s highbrow vocation.

In *Every Man Out*, Jonson distinguishes his own literary role by establishing an ostensibly new definition of *comedy*. By Act 3, Mitis, accustomed to the comic romances popular on the Elizabethan stage and a little slow catching on to Jonson’s new genre, still wonders why *Every Man Out* does not follow the typical script; he had expected a “cross-wooing” (3.1.410). Cordatus explains:

I would fain hear one of these autumn-judgements define once *quid sit comædia?*
 If he cannot, let him content himself with Cicero's definition (till he have strength
 to propose to himself a better), who would have a comedy to be *imitatio vitæ,*
speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis; a thing throughout pleasant and
 ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners. (3.1.412-17)

By attributing Mitis's expectations to "autumn-judgements"—i.e. "old fogeys" according to the play's modern editor—Cordatus implies that such expectations are passé, and the Latin rhetorical question, *quid sit comædia?* seems fresh by comparison.

Horace is not very far below the surface of *Every Man Out*'s literary theory. Cordatus, in fact, quotes not from Cicero, as he implies, but from Antonio Minturno's sixteenth-century *De Poeta*, "a great Renaissance clutterhole of literary theories."²⁷⁸ Minturno's definition of *comedy* combines Cicero's apocryphal explanation with other sources, among them the *Ars Poetica*. According to Horace,

[The poet] beares the bell in all respects
 who good with swéete doth mingle:
 Who can in delectable style
 good counsaile with him bring. (B3v)²⁷⁹

The Horatian satires behind Jonson's comical satirist and the Horatian words undergirding the last half of Cordatus's definition—"a thing throughout pleasant and ridiculous, and accommodated to the correction of manners"—support Jonson's self-image in *Every Man Out*: the "Comicall Satyre" builds on Horace the satirist and,

²⁷⁸ Herrick, *Comic Theory*, 83. Minturno, Herrick concludes, "tried to follow everybody and to include everything, and he almost succeeded," 83.

²⁷⁹ Quotations are from Thomas Drant's 1567 English translation, the only English translation of the *Ars Poetica* before Jonson's. Jonson himself quotes Horace's advice to "join their profit with their pleasure," *Every Man Out*, Induction, ll. 200.

namely, on Horace the corrector-of-manners; it likens playwrights to the original singers of “satyre,” figuring them as teachers or preachers who are imaginatively positioned in opposition to their fallen societies. The playwright emerges from this new genre forging his own way.

That new comical satirist speaks a language that is fittingly free—not merely licensed, but totally autonomous. Near the beginning of the play, Asper appears on stage to introduce his vocation. Buoyed by Cordatus’s history of comedy, Asper is “of an ingenious and free spirit” (Characters 2), “one whom no servile hope of gain or frosty apprehension of danger can make to be a parasite, either to time, place, or opinion” (3-4). The works burst forth extemporaneously:

Who is so patient of this impious world
That he can check his spirit or rein his tongue?
[...]
Who can behold such prodigies as these
And have his lips sealed up? Not I. (Induction 2-3, 10-11)

Against Cordatus’s allegation that “[i]t is in vain to spend” angry breath trying to reform society “[u]nless your breath had power / To melt the world and mold it new again” (46-48), Asper promises,

For these [attentive audience members], I’ll prodigally spend myself
And speak away my spirit into air;
For these, I’ll melt my brain into invention,
Coin new conceits, and hang my richest words
As polished jewels in their bounteous ears. (202-06)

This passage recalls John Donne's description of a playwright. In one verse satire, Jonson's friend compares a playwright's futile words to "pant[ing]" organ "bellows" that puff up "puppets" (figures sometimes attached to the top of organ pipes and animated by the bellows' wind), which, in Donne's simile, are like actors who "live" by the playwright's "laboured scenes."²⁸⁰ In Jonson's revision, the threat of dissipating labors, along with dissipating words, is immediately supplanted by the next metaphor, wherein the playwright's melting "brain" is rematerialized into "invention." Asper's comic "conceits" are "new[ly]" "coin[ed]," independent from forms and conventions, transformed into "jewels" out of only the raw material of the playwright's solitary "spirit." The writerly identity that emerges from *Every Man Out* arises from generic "licentia," which denies comic laws and literary history (even the classical literary history); it is supported by a definition of *comedy* that in its satirical stance explicitly opposes the rest of the playwright's society; and it is expressed in self-created, self-creating comic language. This writerly stance jibes with the version of Jonson's laureateship that we associate, at least on first impression, with the 1616 *Works*.²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ *Satyre 2*. Donne's point is that the playwright wastes his learning when he writes for the theater. The relevant lines, mocking the playwright, follow:

One (like a wretch which at bar judged as dead
 Yet prompts him which stands next and could not read,
 And saves his life) gives idiot actors means
 (Starving himself) to live by's laboured scenes,
 As in some organs puppets dance above
 And bellows pant below which them to move. (11-16)

In Donne's version, the playwright is the true fool: he is a capable man who "[s]tarv[es] himself" in an occupation that pays very little. Donne's verses recall Horace's *Satire 1.4.19-20*, in which the speaker censures the overly-prolific poet, Crispinus, by comparing his numerous verses to the wind that escapes the smith's goat-skin bellows.

²⁸¹ This is the impression, but the folio contains a great variety of works that together present a more complex picture. Analyzing the *Epigrams* and *The Forest*, the two collections of poetry in the folio, Sara van den Berg says, "The power of language transcends the poet's command of language" and "affim[s] a common language greater than his own," "Ben Jonson," 124.

Nonetheless, if *Every Man Out*'s literary theory "can be seen as a statement of [Jonson's] artistic credo" about the role of the dramatist and as "a response to a literary climate in which satire was both fashionable and prohibited,"²⁸² that theory comprises only one "statement" of a far-from-settled "artistic credo," and only one particular "response" to a changing "literary climate." *Every Man Out*'s vision of comic language grows out of a version of Horace that Jonson had already rethought by the time he staged *Poetaster* in the following year (acted 1601, printed in quarto, 1602). *Poetaster*, building on *Every Man Out*, *Cynthia's Revels* (acted 1600, printed in quarto, 1601), and several anti-Jonson satires,²⁸³ defends Jonson and the genre of comical satire itself.²⁸⁴ In the play's climatic scene, Horace, the "honest satyr" (5.3.332), purges the pompous speech of the titular poetaster, Crispinus, by administering a drug that makes Crispinus vomit up his pretentious words. The scene is a veritable sequel to anecdotes about "Crispinus" that are woven through Horace's *Satire 1.4*, anecdotes that help Jonson to articulate the playwright's materialized, profitable language in *Every Man Out*. The Crispinus of *Poetaster* is diagnosed as not having followed the proper, ancient models. As part of a "strict and wholesome diet" to regain his health, Jonson's Virgil advises Crispinus to refine his language, shunning "wild, outlandish terms / To stuff out a peculiar dialect" (486-87), and making his discourse "more sound and clear" (496). Much of Virgil's

²⁸² Rutter, "Patient Grissil," 287. See also Bednarz, Shakespeare and the Poets' War; Bowers, "I will write satires still"; Enck, "The Peace of the Poetomachia"; Fletcher, "Jonson's Satiric Comedy"; Gibbons, *Ben Jonson*; Kerins, "The Crafty Enchaunter"; and Steggle, "Horace the Second." On verse satire's influence on Jonson's non-dramatic poetry, see Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, 107-34; and Newton, "'Goe, quit 'hem all.'"

²⁸³ John Marston (?), *Histriomastix, or The Player Whipped* (1599); Marston, *Jack Drum's Entertainment* (1600); Marston, *What You Will* (1601); Thomas Dekker, *Satiromastix, or The Untrussing of the Humorous Poet* (1601).

²⁸⁴ Martindale, "Best Master," 54-58; Talbert, "Purpose and Technique."

speech, like the purging scene that precedes it, adapts Lucian's *Lexiphanes*.²⁸⁵ Jonson's Virgil, however, opens with a prescription that is a bit more specific about comedy than Lucian was and that draws from the English grammar school curriculum:²⁸⁶

Then come home

And taste a piece of Terence; suck his phrase

Instead of licorice. And at any hand

Shun Plautus and old Ennui; they are meats

Too harsh for a weak stomach. (5.3.476-80)

Virgil's advice implies that correct language comes not from within the poet himself, extemporaneously, but from his careful study and his discerning judgment. The prescription to study Terence but to "shun" Plautus is rooted in not only in Horace's advice in the *Ars Poetica* but on a whole tradition of sixteenth-century elaboration of that advice, which itself was far from settled, and into which Jonson has only begun to delve.

Jonson, Comedy, and Horace, 1603-1614

By 1603, Jonson had secured patrons, and so, for the next few years, had "both the leisure and the books" that he needed to get "up to date on the latest critical fashions."²⁸⁷ In *Every Man Out*, he appeals to Horace indirectly to answer three foundational questions: To what dramatic history does and should an English laureate belong? How should a serious comic dramatist define *comedy*? What language does a comic dramatist speak? Between 1605 and 1614, when he wrote *Bartholomew Fair*, the

²⁸⁵ *Poetaster*, 473-97n.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 473-97n.

²⁸⁷ Farley-Hills, "Jonson and the neo-Classical Rules," 153. See also Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 93, 105-16. Jonson's patrons during these years were Robert Townsend; then Robert Cotton; and then Esmé Stuart, Lord d'Aubigny.

studious Jonson reexamined these questions *and* Horace in light of new-to-him neo-Aristotelian theory. With Horace as touchstone, Jonson now takes up the “laws” that he had so quickly dismissed in *Every Man Out*; he concentrated on *how* to build a drama. Discovering in neo-Aristotelian criticism a host of theoretical and practical problems, Jonson surmised that he, the hard-working scholar-dramatist, must have the final word in interpreting and implementing those dramatic laws. This interpretive authority was particularly important when it came to the laws that could redefine appropriate comic *language*. As he homed in on these linguistic laws, Jonson encountered not critical certainty but more critical ambiguity: precisely the volatile critical context, I argue, that produced the drama of language at the heart of *Bartholomew Fair*.

The “latest critical fashions” were fit for Jonson’s intervention. They were commentaries that married Aristotle’s dramatic theory to familiar theories inherited from Horace and Cicero; and they were themselves born of a theoretical conundrum.²⁸⁸ The *Poetics* was translated into Latin in 1498, but scholars did not at first know how to reconcile Aristotle’s theory with their established paradigms. The familiar view, “play-as-rhetorical-event,”²⁸⁹ emphasized the dramatist’s duty to teach men and reform society. By contrast, the *Poetics* held that a play is above all “a species of poesis, ‘a made thing,’ a piece of fiction with a beginning, middle, and end, just as a painting has a foreground and a background and a statue has a top and a bottom.”²⁹⁰ This latter “play-as-object” view held that a play should be beautiful, and so it emphasized a play’s structure and the

²⁸⁸ On these commentaries, see Farley-Hills, “Jonson and the neo-Classical Rules”; Haugen, “Birth of Tragedy”; Javitch, “Assimilation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*”; Javitch, “Emergence of Poetic Genres”; Smith, *Ancient Scripts*, esp. 13-58; and Weinberg, “From Aristotle to Pseudo-Aristotle.”

²⁸⁹ Smith, *Ancient Scripts*, 37.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

audience's affective response:²⁹¹ “By what means can a poem of a given kind be made as beautiful as possible, so that it will produce the proper artistic effect?”²⁹² It was not until the middle of the sixteenth century, when Italian readers beginning with Francesco Robortello published their important commentaries on the unique qualities of tragedy and comedy, that scholars reconciled Aristotle's “made thing” with familiar rhetorical imperatives: in general, they concluded that only a *beautiful, well structured* play, defined by what they had hardened into Aristotelian precepts or “laws,” would first delight and then, perhaps, teach. Thus, while Aristotle *per se* did not disrupt sixteenth and early seventeenth-century dramatic theory, the introduction of neo-Aristotelian commentaries did imbue supposedly beautifying forms and conventions—what they invented as drama's “rules”—with new prestige. With enough knowledge and care, any modern playwright could write a classical tragedy or comedy—and he could do so without having to follow strictly one preeminent master.²⁹³

While he was either ignorant or dismissive of the neo-Aristotelian bent of criticism before 1603, by 1605 Jonson had reevaluated its dramatic laws and found in them a new source of dramatic prestige.²⁹⁴ In the note, “To the Readers,” that prefaces his first published tragedy, *Sejanus His Fall* (acted 1603, printed 1605), Jonson flaunts this learning: he has included, he says, “truth of argument” (an appropriate plot from history); “dignity of persons” (high-ranking characters); “gravity and height of elocution” (highbrow diction); and “fullness and frequency of sentence” (appropriate aphorisms) (12-14). Thus, Jonson dissociates himself from Cordatus's “license,” and instead links his

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² Weinberg, “From Aristotle to Pseudo-Aristotle,” 98.

²⁹³ Javitch, “Assimilation of Aristotle” and “Emergence of Poetic Genres.”

²⁹⁴ Farley-Hills, “Jonson and the neo-Classical Rules,” 153-54.

work with the criticism that endorsed literary rules.²⁹⁵ Whereas, in *Every Man Out*, Cordatus casts such laws as the unfortunate byproducts of generations of poets capitulating to their audiences, the learned Jonson of *Sejanus* ascribes these rules to rigorous study and careful dramatic construction. Instead of simply bypassing the history of ancient dramatists who adopt such conventions, as Cordatus does, Jonson lines up behind them. He realized that those laws and the history that they linked could, potentially, confer on drama the prestige that had been long associated with Aristotle.

From the start, however, the neo-Aristotelian laws confused Jonson's own ontology of drama and thus his conception of himself as a laureate dramatist: he stumbles on precisely the problem that Cordatus had lamented in *Every Man Out*, that in following these laws and joining the ancient lineage defined by their use, Jonson in fact exposes the differences in "times." Anticipating criticism that he has not followed every single dictum in *Sejanus*, Jonson justifies his choices:

[I]f it be objected that what I publish is no true poem in the strict laws of time, I confess it; as also in the want of a proper chorus, whose habit and moods are such, and so difficult, as not any whom I have seen since the ancients – no, not they who have most presently affected laws – have yet come in the way of. Nor is it needful, or almost possible, in these our times, and to such auditors as commonly things are presented, to observe the old state and splendour of dramatic poems, with preservation of any popular delight. (4-10)

The neo-Aristotelian "strict laws"—once created to free up sixteenth-century dramatists to write ancient plays without having to model themselves so strictly on a few authors—laws that could tie him to the "old state" of a prestigious past, also expose a fissure

²⁹⁵ Farley-Hills, "Jonson and the neo-Classical Rules."

between Jonson and the “ancients.” Indeed, the laws reveal the inevitable failure not only of Jonson but of all those “presently”: the “times” have changed. A dramatist who wants a distinguished reputation in his own day must choose neo-Aristotelian laws so to delight “such auditors as commonly things are presented.”

In *Sejanus*, this trouble sends Jonson right back to Horace and specifically to the *Ars Poetica*. “But of this,” he promises, “I shall take more seasonable cause to speak in my observations upon Horace his *Art of Poetry*, which, with the text translated, I intend shortly to publish” (10-12). This note announces Jonson’s proposed translation for the first time; it also suggests, for first time, that Jonson will use the translation to articulate his own dramatic theory. On the one hand, Jonson’s proposed appropriation of the *Ars Poetica* repeats previous neo-Aristotelian work. Horace’s *Ars Poetica* occupied an unusual and productive place in “the latest critical fashions”: the wide-ranging literary discussion yoked an ontology associated with one version of Horace, a satyr who instructed his audience on how best to live, with a critic who advised what conventions to follow best make a beautiful poem. It thus yoked together the “play-as-rhetorical-event” and “play-as-object.” On the other hand, Jonson, drawing on the text of his most important literary predecessor, promises his unique interpretation. In fact, Jonson’s unique interpretation is precisely the point. Although his “observations” upon the *Ars Poetica* were never published, the phrase “But of this” in *Sejanus*’s Note to the Reader hints that Jonson intends to use the *Ars Poetica* specifically to authorize himself as final judge over what is “needful” and “possible,” to have his own judgments bridge the prestige of the neo-Aristotelians’ dramatic past (“the old state and splendour of dramatic

poems”) with the demands of his present English culture (“the preservation of popular delight” among “such auditors as commonly things are presented”).

The “Note to the Reader” suggests that Jonson intended to use Horace in part to justify his poetic license.²⁹⁶ Doing so would not have been difficult, as Horace in the *Ars Poetica* often advises poets to use their own best judgment. In one relevant passage from Thomas Drant’s 1567 English translation, Horace advises against verbatim translation with the simple statement, “Thou shalt haue no regarde at all / word for word to oute lay” (A4r).²⁹⁷ Compare Jonson’s Horace, from an extant draft of Jonson’s own “extremely literal”²⁹⁸ translation that Jonson himself claims to have begun around the time that he wrote *Sejanus*. Jonson’s Horace extrapolates, “being a poet, thou mayst feign, create; / Not care, as though wouldst faithfully translate, / To render word for word” (189-91). Jonson restores Horace’s image of a slavish translator, and anti-type against which Jonson defines himself. The first of these lines, which, according to Jonson’s modern editor, “brings in a concern for creativity which is not explicit in Horace or his commentators,”²⁹⁹ is Jonson’s addition, fittingly *created* out of whole cloth. The line celebrates the poet’s imagination over any slavish deference to past models, a point that Jonson finds in Horace’s Latin and strengthens. When Jonson appeals only to what is

²⁹⁶ As Michael McCanles, D. Audell Shelburne, Richard Dutton and Victoria Moul have separately argued, the version of “Horace” that Jonson translated in his *Horace, upon His Art of Poesy* was “not of Horace in the abstract, but of *his* Horace,” Dutton, *Ben Jonson*, 13-21, 16. See also McCanles, *Jonsonian discriminations*, 89-90; Shelburne, “Ben Jonson’s Horatian Theory,” 22-59; and Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, 178-93. Moul, offering the most thorough reading of Jonson’s translation to date, accords with my own observations when she concludes that “Jonson’s translation speaks more clearly than the Latin itself of those Horatian themes with which Jonson is most consistently concerned: the poet’s freedom, his power and his grace,” 192.

²⁹⁷ Horace’s Latin: “Nec verbum verbo curabis reddere fidus / Interpres” (133-34), cited from the facing text reproduction in Jonson, *Horace, of the Art of Poetry*.

²⁹⁸ Burrow, introduction, 3.

²⁹⁹ *Horace, Of the Art of Poetry*, 189n. See also Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*.

“needful” and “possible” in *Sejanus*, it was likely that he looked to Horace to authorize his license.

Jonson also suggests that he intended to use Horace to endorse “the preservation of popular delight,” which only a hard-working scholar-dramatist—one who had *earned* his creative license—achieves. The “preservation of popular delight” is supported by Horace’s advice clearly expressed in Drant’s English *Ars Poetica*:

Not lore enough in Poesis,

let them be swéetlye fynde,

And let them leade to where them liste

the hearers plyante mynde. (A4r)³⁰⁰

Simply containing “lore” is not “enough”; a dramatic poem must slyly “leade” audience members’ manipulable “mynde[s]” with “swéetlye fynde” doctrine. Exhibiting mid-sixteenth-century scholars’ bias that regarded a “poem-as-rhetorical-event,” Drant translates Horace’s “pulchra” (99) as “lore” (i.e. teaching) thus introducing the idea of *instruction* into a Latin line about beauty and delight. In other words, whereas Horace says, to paraphrase, *It is not enough to be beautiful: a poem must delight*, Drant says, *It is not enough to supply lessons: a poem must delight*. Jonson, caught up on his neo-Aristotelian criticism, returns to Horace’s *beauty* and delight:

’Tis not enough th’elaborate muse affords

Her poems beauty, but a sweet delight

To work the hearers’ minds, still, to their plight. (140-42)

³⁰⁰ Horace’s Latin: “Non satis est pulchra esse poemata: dulchia sunt, / Et quocumque volent animum auditoris agunto” (99-100).

Like Horace in Latin, Jonson implies that beauty is a prerequisite for drama—“beauty” leads to delight—but that neither “beauty” nor “delight” exist for their sakes only; their purpose is to teach their auditors. This is Jonson’s neo-Aristotelian reading of Horace, with a twist: Jonson revises Drant’s “let them leade to where them liste” to the more active “work,” and adds “th’ elaborate muse,” which corresponds to nothing Latin. The now obsolete definition of *elaborate*—“Produced or accomplished by labour,” listed as the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s second definition—asserts that the playwright preserves delight purposefully, deliberately, and by the sweat of his own brow.³⁰¹ While Cordatus’s “license” hitches “comical satire” to the original “satyre”—removing both from the burdens of “times” (past and present) and their particular “elegancie[s] and disposition[s]”—this “work,” together with “feig[ning]” creativity, validates “the preservation” of “popular delight” in “these our times.” Jonson’s Horace advises the poet to attend to the qualitative laws that link him to literary history *and* to the delight that connects him to contemporary culture, whereby he might teach that culture.

When he returns to write a new comic “poem”³⁰²—no longer called “comical satyre”—Jonson emphasizes dramatic beauty and the work necessary to achieve it: *how* he makes his comic poems matter. In the Epistle that prefaces *Volpone, or The Fox* (1606), Jonson promises:

I shall raise the despised head of poetry again and, stripping her out of those rotten and base rags wherewith the times have adulterated her form, restore her to

³⁰¹ *OED Online* (June 2018), s.v. “elaborate, *adj.*” With “th’elaborate,” Jonson revises an earlier draft’s “the labouring”; Jonson, *Horace, Of the Art of Poetry*, 140n. We cannot date either draft, but Jonson probably had in mind the earlier “labouring” *circa* 1605.

³⁰² Dedication, l. 8, in Jonson, *Volpone*, pg. 25.

her primitive habit, feature, and majesty, and render her worthy to be embraced and kissed of all the great and master spirits of our world. (98-102)³⁰³

Compare Cordatus's assessment of the ugly *state* of comic writing, but contrast Cordatus's prescriptions: in *Every Man Out*, Asper will strip poetry still further—not to bring back ancient forms, but to discard them *and* to dismiss the current literary environment. In *Volpone*'s Epistle, Jonson claims that he will “restore” comic “poetry” to her “*primitive* habit, feature, and majesty” so that she is worth of “*our* world.” Yes, he will adhere to the “the principal end of poesy” (81)—that is, to teach—but he will do so by beautifying his poem for his contemporaries. Jonson promises to “reduce not only the ancient forms, but manners of the scene” (79-80). These ambitions reveal Jonson's alliance with neo-Aristotelian idea that a poem ought to be beautiful first, so to delight and so to teach. He subscribes to the “forms” and “manners” that prescribed just how to do so.

As in the Note to Reader in *Sejanus*, Jonson's *Volpone* Epistle implies that achieving ancient beauty depends upon choosing one's own authority—*what* one will read and *whom* one will follow—and, crucially for Jonson, the act of choosing matters at least as much as the specific choices. Jonson stresses his own agency in appealing to both laws and license:

And though my catastrophe may, in the strict rigour of comic law, meet with censure as turning back to my promise, I desire the learned and charitable critic to have so much faith in me to think it was done of industry [...] I took the more liberty—though not without some lines of example drawn even in the ancients

³⁰³ Cf. *Every Man in His Humour* (1601) 5.3.309-34, where Jonson cites the commonplace image of battered, impoverished female poetry, but does not apply it to drama specifically as he does in *Volpone*.

themselves, the goings-out of whose comedies are not always joyful, but oft-times the bawds, the servants, the rivals, yea, and the masters are mulcted; and fitly, it being the office of a comic poet to imitate justice and instruct to life, as well as purity of language or stir up gentle affections. To which, upon my next opportunity toward the examining and digesting of my notes, I shall speak more wealthily and pay the world a debt. (82-94)

As in the note that prefaces *Sejanus*, Jonson worries that his play will “meet with censure,” and he addresses those anticipated complaints with appeals to “industry” and “liberty.” This “liberty” is not the free-for-all of comic conventions for which Cordatus advocates in *Every Man Out*, but the freedom to make learned scholarly judgments about unclear dicta. There is something wanting in the received definition of “catastrophe,” Jonson implies, and so *he* must intervene. He vaguely gestures toward “some lines of example drawn even in the ancients themselves.” The very ambiguity of “drawn,” its grammatical subject obscured, conflates the variety of the places from which Jonson derives his license. Perhaps Jonson notes “examples” already “drawn” (i.e. made) by the ancient playwrights; or perhaps he knows learned critics, who have “drawn” (i.e. pulled together or delineated) those ancient plays into the “lines” that make up a viable dramatic lineage,³⁰⁴ or perhaps Jonson, himself, has studiously “drawn” (i.e. invented) these through-lines. If there exists a gulf between the prescribed rule for “catastrophe” and the observed “examples,” Jonson obfuscates his own strategy in bridging that gulf. In fact, Jonson’s appeal to his notes at the very end of this passage (92-94) suggests that he is still developing that strategy.

³⁰⁴ For example, John Creaser, in his edition of *Volpone*, traces these lines back to Julius Caesar Scaliger’s *Poetics* (1561). See Jonson, *Volpone*, The Epistle, 88-91n.

These very scholarly ambiguities that Jonson uncovers in the Epistle again drive Jonson back to Horace. When he claims to need the “opportunity” to “examin[e] and diges[t]” his “notes,” he likely alludes to his commentary on the *Ars Poetica*, the “debt” that he still owes “the world.”³⁰⁵ Specifically, he will use Horace to clarify “the office of a comic poet,” which he has rethought since he wrote *Every Man Out*. Here, that “office” serves “to imitate justice and instruct to life (91-92). Jonson asserts that a play must teach (the chief end of a dramatic ontology that views a “play-as-rhetorical-event”) as well as “stir up gentle affections” (the chief end of a dramatic ontology that views a “play-as-object”), the latter of which he seems to acknowledge as the default critical position. So that *Volpone* does both, he assures us that he follows Horace’s advice to navigate the neo-Aristotelian laws. But Jonson cannot yet tell *how* he will go about doing so.

In the midst of grappling with neo-Aristotelian theory and in light of his revived Horatian studies, Jonson slips in a third component of the definition of “the office of the comic poet”: “purity of language.” This idea looms large in Jonson’s canon.³⁰⁶ “[P]urity of language,” nestled between neo-Aristotelian drama’s two major imperatives, lacks a preceding verb, and curiously so given that Jonson revised the paragraph for the 1616 folio edition of the play and chose to leave this phrase untouched. If, as editor Richard

³⁰⁵ In his recent edition of *Volpone*, Richard Dutton notes, “Jonson doubtless alludes to his commentary on Horace’s *Art of Poetry*, announced in *Sej.* (1605) as ready for publication,” in Jonson, *Volpone*, The Epistle, 92-4n.

³⁰⁶ Especially as he became more “studious” (*Volpone*’s Epistle 76), Jonson encountered a wide array of classical and contemporary linguistic theory—too wide to possibly survey in this one chapter. Jonson’s commonplace book, *Discoveries*, contains notes—often nearly verbatim translations—on those theories, from Cicero’s to Juan Luis Vives’s, and Jonson’s judgments of other English writers’ language, the most famous of which proclaims that Shakespeare should have “blotted a thousand [lines]” (468-70). (The *Discoveries* is described by its recent editor as “a provocative and mysterious text,” one that provides “access to Jonson’s poetic mind”; Hutson, introduction, 483.) Drummond’s notes from conversations with Jonson similarly contain Jonson’s opinions of his contemporaries’ language. Jonson was working on an English grammar in the 1630s that he never finished.

Dutton suggests, “[s]ome verb such as ‘demonstrate’ is implied,”³⁰⁷ then “[to demonstrate] purity of language” is a third duty distinct but related to the other two. Its inclusion here and its seemingly purposeful vagueness raise a myriad of questions: To start, what *is* “purity of language” in comedy? Also, what is the point of demonstrating this language: to provide beauty for its own sake, to stir up gentle affections, to teach audience members how to refine their speech—or some combination of these goals? How does “purity of language” come to occupy so central a place in Jonson’s new definition of “the office of the comic poet”? And what does comic language have to do with Jonson’s greater office, England’s poet laureate—and specifically, England’s “Horatian” laureate?

Of all Horace’s views about words, verse, and poetry in general, his judgments on the ancient comic dramatist Plautus and specifically on Plautus’s comic language, would have been particularly relevant to Jonson’s new definition of “the office of the comic poet.” Horace positions Plautus at the intersection of comedy, Latin poetry, the Latin vernacular, and Rome’s history itself—as a negative exemplar.³⁰⁸ Horace invokes Plautus to criticize misguided, lazy reverence for bad playwrights. In one instance, Horace defends his contemporaries’ right to coin new words. The Latin language is always changing and we accept the words from long-dead writers, he says, so why not from recent writers, too? Horace subtly mocks Plautus and another comic playwright, Caecilius, both long-dead, who pale in comparison to Horace’s contemporaries, Virgil and Varius. Jonson translates:

What’s that thing

³⁰⁷ Jonson, The Epistle to *Volpone*, 92n.

³⁰⁸ See also Horace’s *Epistles II.1*: Horace mocks his own contemporaries for their celebration of Plautus’s slipshod playmaking. In one pun, Horace criticizes Plautus’s verse (his poetic feet) and Plautus’s sloppy appropriation of Greek models: “quam non astricto percurrat pulpita socco [How he runs about the stage in an untied comic shoe!]” (174, my translation).

A Roman to Caecilius will allow,
 Or Plautus, and in Virgil disavow,
 Or Varius? What am I now envied so
 If I can give some small increase? When, lo,
 Cato's and Ennius' tongues have lent much worth
 And wealth unto our language, and brought forth
 New names of things. (76-83)

Horace introduces Plautus's linguistic innovations and subtly mocks them as no great achievements. Elsewhere in the *Ars Poetica*, Horace mocks the judgments of Plautus's original audience:

Our ancestors did Plautus' numbers praise,
 And jests, and both to admiration raise
 Too patiently, that I not fondly say,
 If either you or I know the right way
 To part scurrility from wit, or can
 A lawful verse by th'ear or finger scan. (399-404)³⁰⁹

This passage ties Plautus's general sloppiness to his verse in particular: the broad censure of Plautus's low humor is bookended by two lines about Plautus's "numbers" and scansion, poetic technique that Jonson's Horace specifically calls *unlawful*. Plautus's overall comic achievement (or, rather, failure) is inextricable from his supposedly shoddy

³⁰⁹ Horace's Latin:

At nostri proavi Plautinos, et numerosi et
 Laudavere sales, nimium patienter utrumque,
 Ne dicam stulte, mirati; si modo ego, et vos
 Scimus inurbanum lepido seponere dicto,
 Legitimumque sonum digitis callemus, et aure. (280-84 [270-74]).

poetic language. Yet even while Plautus and his language are relics of the past, like “our ancestors,” they are also “Roman,” contributors to the great tradition of “our language.”

These passages from *Ars Poetica*—straightforward as they may seem—present Jonson with just the opportunity to demonstrate the hard scholarly work and discerning judgment that Horace himself had taught, for Horace’s verses on Plautus were mediated by neo-Aristotelian debates. Theorists who were elaborating and delineating qualitative prescriptions for different genres had come to depend increasingly on *Ars Poetica* to supplement what they saw as the insufficient *Poetics*, which lacked specifications for genres besides tragedy.³¹⁰ Even the first scholar to write a neo-Aristotelian treatise on comedy (1548), Francisco Robortello, cites both Donatus and Horace to supplement Aristotle, whose treatise on comedy, he says, “I suspect has been lost.”³¹¹ As Bernard Weinberg explains, “[t]he belief becomes current that Horace knew Aristotle’s work, used it as his source and guide, meant to do no more than paraphrase it in verse.”³¹² Some neo-Aristotelians even participated in “cultivation of parallelism,”³¹³ reading passages from Aristotle and Horace in tandem. Many of Horace’s comments on language apply broadly across genres, but those on *Plautus’s language* helped scholars to delineate and to prescribe appropriate rules specifically for *comic* language—one of their thorniest and most consequential points of contention. Jonson seems to have concurred that to be Horatian, especially a Horatian dramatist, was to be Aristotelian; and to be Aristotelian was to follow not only Horace’s broad advice about poetic license and discerning

³¹⁰ On the confusion of Horace with Aristotle, see Weinberg, *History*, 111-55.

³¹¹ Robortello, “On Comedy,” 239.

³¹² Weinberg, *History*, 152. So interpretations of the *Poetics* and *Ars Poetica* were dialectical: even while familiar theoretical paradigms inherited from Donatus, Horace, and Cicero subsumed early readings of the *Poetics*, neo-Aristotelian criticism of the *Poetics* shaped the new understanding of the *Ars Poetica*.

³¹³ Weinberg, *History*, 152.

judgment, but to follow Horace's specific prescriptions for comedy. But how? Jonson, who not only engaged with but sought out scholarly debates, who used the neo-Aristotelian debates to advertise his hard-wrought poetic license, was fit to pursue his own answers.

We might expect Jonson simply to agree with Horace and censure Plautus (as his Virgil does, more-or-less, at the end of *Poetaster*); and if he had, Plautus's contemporary, Terence, would have been his obvious model for so doing. Even before Robortello had established neo-classical rules for comedy, many scholars took Terence—whom Horace had *not* censored³¹⁴—as the exemplar of decorum and restraint.³¹⁵ Erasmus, for example, concludes, “Terence, for pure, terse Latinity has no rival.”³¹⁶ When Robortello elaborated rules for comedy, he hierarchized the formal elements, spelling out how the less important “diction” should support the more important “plot,” “character,” and “thought” [also known as “sentiment”] taken from everyday life; diction should do so by remaining “simple, easy, open, clear, familiar, and finally, taken from the common usage.”³¹⁷ The playwright was not only to ensure that each character had a discreet and appropriate idiolect, expressed in earnest and humble comic sentiment, but also that each spoke words chosen out of a very limited slice of the Latin vernacular. With Terence as

³¹⁴ Neo-Aristotelians treated Horace's passing comment on Terence in Epistle 2.1 as proof that Horace preferred Terence over Plautus. Horace, in fact, merely remarks that Romans unthinkingly regard Terence as best among the comic playwrights “for art” (59).

³¹⁵ Hardin, “Encountering Plautus”; Herrick, *Comic Theory*.

³¹⁶ Quoted in Herrick, *Comic Theory*, 214.

³¹⁷ Robortello, “On Comedy,” 237. Robortello laid the groundwork for the neo-Aristotelian studies to follow. He posited specifications for *plot*: “The right magnitude of a comic plot,” says Robortello, “is whatever is necessary to make plain the change and interchange of disturbances and quarrels. All the parts of the plot, indeed, ought to be so joined together that no part can be taken away or transplanted without ruining or disjoining the whole plot,” 232. He laid out rules for *character*: according to Robortello, the playwright's chosen characters should be appropriately common, clearly good or bad, true-to-type, and consistent through the drama. Finally, he prescribed conventions for *thought*: citing Aristotle, Robortello says that characters' thoughts should be expressed in a manner “simple,” “loose, plain by no means critical nor exemplifying searching inquiry, but more common and obvious,” 237.

exemplar, Robortello's successors took these prescriptions even further. For example, Gregor Wagner noticeably revises Robortello's list of adjectives when he describes Terence's comic diction:

This poet [Terence] is profitable for the polishing of language, for the unlearning of rudeness, for the wealth and abundance of words and sentiments, for the invention of arguments for every kind of cause, for providing the knack of both speaking and writing. His speech is delightful and fitted above all to the understanding of boys—plain, simple, clear, never having anything obscure or ostentatiously affected.³¹⁸

Referring to the “polishing of language” and to the “unlearning of rudeness,” Wagner implies that comic language, as Terence's, should be *better than* Robortello's “familiar” or “common.” Other scholars—especially those for whom plays were supposed to correct manners—took the subtle moral overtones associated with words like “pure” further, as when Lucio Olimpico Giraldi in 1566 writes that Terence “fled from lascivious and obscene words—even though he had before him Plautus, who was very lascivious.”³¹⁹ Terence was celebrated because he heeded the hierarchy of generic forms, thus controlling and refining his language so that he mastered (by extricating) the unwieldy and even “rude” aspects of his vernacular.

Within neo-Aristotelian criticism, Terence's language was an effective model precisely because it was *not* the language of Rome alone. Indeed, the sixteenth-century Terentians' conclusions oppose those of Cordatus's, that Terence's “too nice observations” evidence that he capitulated to his audience. As Terence's diction

³¹⁸ Quoted in Herrick, *Comic Theory*, 215. Wagner was introducing an edition of Terence's plays that was being advertised as a school text—thus, “fitted above all to the understanding of boys.”

³¹⁹ Quoted in Weinberg, *History of Literary Criticism*, 288.

conformed to drama's rules, any playwright—including any early modern playwright—could mimic it. Terence thus wrote in a comic language that could be repeated and transferred from time to time and, thus, could connect an early modern comic dramatist to the comedy of the ancients.³²⁰

While Jonson aligns his own neo-Aristotelian literary theory with the Terentians' *principles*—*Volpone*'s Prologue promises, “quick comedy, refined” (29)—the language comic of the plays themselves seldom match. The Letter to Readers that prefaces the *Alchemist* (1610), for one simple but typical example, calls for “polis[h]” and “composur[e],” but the play itself begins, “I fart at thee” (1.1.2). Jonson may have thought himself to be following decorum for the neo-Aristotelian law of “character”—a rogue ought to talk like a rogue, after all—but he is certainly not *simply* following the Terentians' advice for “diction,” and this hardly sounds like the “purity of language” toward which he gestures in the Epistle to *Volpone*.

Gently mocked by Horace and derided by the Terentians, Plautus offered Jonson another value system that included its own assessment of a language that was at once wider-reaching and less lawful. Writers both before and after Robortello celebrated Plautus for having captured the language of his time and place. Even for Plautine detractors, the connection between Plautus and his vernacular was strong. Andrea Navagero, for example, who says that “Plautus is somewhat crude” because he “uses certain harsh and obscure words,” admits that “people spoke that way then; [Plautus] could not use any other language than that of his age.”³²¹ Roger Ascham admits that

³²⁰ Javitch argues that even though the neo-Aristotelians' rules replaced the need for exemplary classical models, Terence never become anachronistic and thus continued to be a the model for comedy even after the rules were established, “Emergence of Poetic Genre Theory.”

³²¹ Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” 794.

Plautus's words were not "chosen so purlie, placed so orderly, and all his stuffe so neetlie packed up and wittely compassed in everie place,"³²² but yet,

for the purenesse of the Latin tong in Rome, whan Rome did most flourish in well doing, and so thereby in well speaking also, is soch a plentifull storehouse for common eloquence in meane matters and all private mens affaires, as the Latin tong for that respect hath not the like agayne. Whan I remember the worthy tyme of Roome, wherein Plautus did live, I must nedes honor the talke of that tyme, which we see Plautus doth use.³²³

Ascham's "purenesse of the Latin tong" opposes Erasmus's "pure, terse Latinity":

Plautus did not shun any parts of the "plentifull storehouse" of his vernacular, did not try to "refine" it, but simply took it as it was. These mid-sixteenth century commentators imagine Plautus's language to be Roman street talk; the Latin dramatist's writing portrays the "common eloquence" one would have encountered in quotidian exchanges. Ascham, more than Navagero, specifically uses Plautus's language in particular to praise the early history of Roman culture writ large. Tied inextricably to a very concrete moment in the "the tyme of Room" (Cordatus's "those times in which they lived"), that language passes through what is imagined as a very permeable boundary between play and its world. Terence's attention to the strictures of genre was repeatable—latter-day playwrights could mimic it and, thus, a literary history of dramatic poets could be built upon it. Plautus's language was tied not to the rules of genre but to the Roman everyday.

Plautus was also thought to have entered into a kind of dialogue with his vernacular, and thus his language is more influential than even his plays. He was often

³²² *Scholemaster*, 80.

³²³ *Ibid.*

said not to merely have captured his time and place—Rome on its ascent, at least from the sixteenth-century view—but to have enriched it, contributing to its later imperial triumphs. It was widely known that Cicero praised Plautus for achieving the greatest reputation among the Latin poets.³²⁴ Francesco Florida repeats the sentiment that Plautus documents his era—“The faults in the language are those of the early period in which he lived”—but goes beyond that sentiment, adding that Plautus “did the best service to the Roman tongue, in whose mouth we are certain that the Muses spoke, and whom no one I know surpasses in advancing the Latin tongue.”³²⁵ Hieronymus Gebwiler adds, “I don’t reject the comedies of Terence, but as Phoebus outshines the rest of the stars with high light, so Plautus does Terence by far with his Latinity.”³²⁶ Plautus’s language was not an achievement for drama only; it elevated the whole of Roman culture.

According to neo-Aristotelian theory, the comic playwright, like no other poet, is charged to employ the common tongue. This was no doubt a daunting and exciting responsibility in an era like Jonson’s that witnessed “the veritable explosion of new words,”³²⁷ an influx of printed texts, and an increasingly literate and literary population.³²⁸ Many of those new words were “deliberately introduced by writers seeking to enrich a language that they believed inadequate to express ideas, especially in fields previously dominated by Latin or Greek”³²⁹ or who were otherwise “in pursuit of linguistic distinction”³³⁰—Jonson chief among them. The sixteenth-century commentaries on Terence and Plautus— “the latest critical fashions” that accompanied any serious

³²⁴ Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” 792. See, for example, the first entry in the “Testimonia et elogia auctorum” to Plautus, *Comoediae XX*, F2r.

³²⁵ *Apologia* (1535), quoted in Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” 797.

³²⁶ Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” 794.

³²⁷ Blank, “Languages,” 145.

³²⁸ Charlton and Spufford, “Literacy, society and education,” 27-43.

³²⁹ Blank, “Languages,” 145. See also Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric*.

³³⁰ Blank, *Broken English*, 33-68, 38.

study of Horace and the neo-Aristotelian rules—provide Jonson with at least two ways to theorize the comic dramatist’s relationship to his era’s vernacular. The first, Terentian, featured the writer as the central, controlling figure carefully wielding his refined Latin language. It disconnected dramatic language from its historical culture and connected it supposedly to atemporal and thus transhistorical rules—that was the point.³³¹ The second, Plautine, featured an author at once more ambitious and more humble, who was intimately connected to a culture-wide linguistic system that belonged not only to the world of the play but to the emergent nation. Plautus was imagined as part of classical literary history but also apart from it: language use might not be the learned judgment of the best men, but the custom of all. In this view, far from “refining” it, Jonson could depend upon the “noise” of his era.

Imagined as the whole vernacular of ancient Rome, Plautine Latin complicates the way that we typically approach sixteenth and seventeenth-century classicism, especially Jonson’s. Critics tend to approach Renaissance linguistics through the premise of a Latin-English, ancient-modern opposition. Paula Blank’s historical assessment begins with this widely held view:

Until the middle of the seventeenth-century, there is a clear humanist consensus that Latin is superior to the vernaculars, aesthetically, spiritually, and socially; Latin is widely revered as a model of eloquence and grammatical rule, the way to sacred truths, a mark of literacy, education and social ascendancy. Classical Latin was regularly deemed a ‘perfect’ language, all the more for being a dead

³³¹ Javitch, “Emergence of Poetic Genre Theory.”

language, no longer subject to degenerative change. It was, and continued to be, the model for what might be achieved through the written word.³³²

Jenny C. Mann premises her recent account of Tudor grammar and rhetorical manuals on the basic fact that sixteenth-century English writers held a “reverence for classical Latin as the one true form of eloquent expression”; at the same time, they worried that their language was “deficient,” “barren,” or “barbarous.”³³³ Discussing Jonson specifically and, even more specifically, *Bartholomew Fair*, Peter Womack, contends:

[T]he comic corollary of Jonson’s linguistic classicism is a hypersensitive consciousness of the anarchic and unverifiable plurality of the vernacular. Living speech, speech as polymorphous social interaction, appears by the dry light of absolute Latin to be a monster, endlessly doubling, compartmentalizing, contradicting and parodying itself, travelling ever further outwards, in its illicit dynamism, from some pristine centre of truth and sense.³³⁴

Blank’s “dead language,” Mann’s “one true form,” and Womack’s “dry light of absolute Latin” assume that early modern scholars approached Latin and Roman literary culture as if both were settled, fixed monoliths. What is more, Latin-English, classical-popular oppositions tend to lead to readings of Jonson’s plays—and, namely, readings of *Bartholomew Fair*—that represent a rigid but false choice between scholarly and popular (i.e. *festive, carnivalesque, saternalian*) comedy.³³⁵ A cursory glance at his

³³² Blank, “Languages,” 142.

³³³ Mann, *Outlaw Rhetoric*, 2.

³³⁴ Peter Womack, *Ben Jonson*, 103. Stallybrass and White draw similar conclusions, *Politics and Poetics*, 70-71.

³³⁵ The same point holds for conclusions like Maus’s, that Jonson finally abandoned his *classicism*. As Maus describes it, Jonson eventually acknowledged “a fundamental discrepancy between moral [i.e. Roman moralists’] and theatrical, especially comic, values. Increasingly he tends to stress the pleasurable element in his comedy, allowing the decorum of the theatrical situation to prevail over the more austere and

posthumously-published commonplace book, *Discoveries* (1640), shows the range of approaches that Jonson took to studying, understanding, and developing his thoughts about the many Latin writers that he encountered. As I noted above, Jonson found plenty of ambiguities among ancient theories and examples; he occasionally even deferred to *the idea* of his myriad and conflicting notes rather than articulate one fixed position.

Drawing on a classical lineage that included Terence and Plautus, comedy could heed formal literary history *and* incorporate fully the specific time and place in which it is located. If Terence modeled the careful drawing of plots, the infusion of characters with linguistically-refined thoughts, and ultimately the bringing of contemporary drama in line with a classical literary history, Plautus provided Jonson and other writers with an image of Latin as a living language, subject to decay and growth, rushing in from and spilling out into the world beyond the tight confines of the play. Not only did a *Horatian* approach toward comic language include the possibility of either Terentian or Plautine value systems; in the hands classical scholar and popular playwright beholden to only his “elaborate muse,” discerning judgment, and creative license, it included the possibility of *joining* those value systems.

Cultural interest in the merits of Plautus and Terence seem to be rekindled around the time that Jonson was writing *Bartholomew Fair*. Key texts published in the same decade include German scholar Johann Philipp Pareus’s 1610 edition of Plautus’s plays. The volume’s title page features an image of the ancient playwright looking directly at the reader, dignified and wry, wearing a wreath of laurels. The volume includes a dedicatory letter declaring Plautus to be “the first of the Latin tongue and elegance, and

insistent pedagogical aims of the earlier plays”; Maus finally reads *Bartholomew Fair* as “an admission that the project is impossible”; *Ben Jonson*, 132.

also the most elegant artist of Latin words”;³³⁶ ancient and modern authorities celebrating Plautus,³³⁷ and a dissertation on Plautus’s life and works by Pareus himself, in which he takes on followers of Horace’s censure.³³⁸ There also appeared a 1610 reprint of Janus Dousa’s edition of Plautus (1587), Pareus’s 1614 *Lexicon Plautinum*, and Dutch scholar and esteemed librarian at the University of Leiden, Daniel Heinsius’s 1618 essay *Ad Horatij de Plauto & Terentio iudicium*.³³⁹ Responding to the Plautines, and contra Plautus, Heinsius’s *Ad Horatij de Plauto & Terentio iudicium* relies on neo-Aristotelian analysis of comic “plot,” “manners,” and “diction” to explain why Horace preferred Terence to Plautus (and thus why Terence is the superior comic dramatist),³⁴⁰ specifically pointing to the *Ars Poetica*’s critique of Plautus, “which has offended many.”³⁴¹ The Plautines’ defense and Heinsius’s response would have focused Jonson’s attention on the European-wide debate about how to evaluate and execute comic strengths and comic “laws.” If, since 1603, Jonson had encountered any critical issue around which “the wisest and best learned’ seem to be saying exactly the same thing,”³⁴² this was not it. Armed with Horace’s warrant to rely on “th’elaborate muse,” that “thou mayst feign, create,” Jonson was fit to find his own answers.

³³⁶ Pareus, “Epistola,” A3r. I use my own translation of Pareus’s Latin, “Plautus Latine linguae atque elegantiae princeps, & verborum latinorum elegantissimus artifex est.”

³³⁷ Of special note is the “poeta laureatus,” Theodorus Rhodius, who calls Plautus the “Musarum decima & Latine Siren. Plautus, *Comoediae XX*, B3r.

³³⁸ Pareus, “Dissertatio.”

³³⁹ Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” esp. 804-811.

³⁴⁰ Meter, *Literary Theories*, 97-136.

³⁴¹ My translation from the French and Latin, Heinsius, *Ad Horatij...iudicium*, 93.

³⁴² Maus, *Ben Jonson*, 48. Maus refers to the medieval and Renaissance commonplace that held that poetry should “teach and delight”; she says that Jonson “dearly loved” the sort of situation in which everyone agreed. I maintain (and hope to have shown) that it was precisely around this commonplace that many neo-Aristotelians disagreed both with previous scholars and with each other. The questions remained, *How should one follow the ancient laws in order to delight and teach? How should one use comic language to make the best comedy?*

We know, on the one hand, that Heinsius, with his anti-Plautine view, was especially important to Jonson. Of the two surviving drafts of Jonson's *Art of Poetry*, the earlier version translates the *Ars Poetica* in the order commonly accepted before 1610. Sometime between 1610 and 1623, when Jonson calls his *Art of Poetry* "All the old Venusine [...] lighted by the Stagirite,"³⁴³ it is likely that he had not only copied Heinsius's revised order but reread the *Ars Poetica* within the neo-Aristotelian critical vein to which Heinsius and so many others had already been contributing.³⁴⁴ Additionally, large portions of the literary theory that Jonson himself articulates in his posthumous *Discoveries* (1640) draw directly from later editions of Heinsius's major theoretical works, suggesting that Jonson wanted to show that he had studied his Dutch contemporary.³⁴⁵

On the other hand, we also have evidence that Jonson did not simply accept Horace's and Heinsius's negative assessment of Plautus. Jonson's unfinished *Discoveries* records another musing on Plautus's language, a "modes[t] testimony," by Lucius Aelius Stilo: "*Musas, si Latine loqui voluissent, Plautino sermone fuisse locuturas* [If the Muses wished to speak Latin, they would speak in the style of Plautus]. And that illustrious judgement by the most learned Marcus Varro of him, who pronounced him the prince of

³⁴³ "An Execration upon Vulcan," 89-90. Jonson recounts, first, how he had "made" the poetry of the Venesia-born Horace into English and, second, how he had used the writings of the Stagirite-born Aristotle to annotate these translations.

³⁴⁴ Herford and Simpson point out *Horace, of His Art of Poetry's* debt to Heinsius's first edition, *Ben Jonson*, 8: 299. Commentators before Heinsius—most notably the Italian Aristotelian, Antonio Riccobono—had noticed the text's sloppy order but had assumed that the meanderings fit the conversational nature of epistles. It seems, however, that "Heinsius [...] simply did not accept the casual structure of the epistolary genre but considered the *Epistula* a true *ars*, a scholarly treatise. He saw the casual structure of the letter as a corruption of an originally more systematic scheme," Meter, *Literary Theories*, 100-01.

³⁴⁵ Sellin, *Daniel Heinsius*, 147-63.

letters and elegancy of the Roman language” (1811-14).³⁴⁶ Jonson lifts Stilo’s praise of Plautus from a source text that couches it in disparagement: Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratorio*, 10.1.99, where Quintilian derides Latin comedy for failing to live up to Greek comedy.³⁴⁷ Jonson seems to suppress the negativity in order to celebrate the comic playwright’s eloquence. Varro’s statement was widely recorded in many editions of Plautus’s place and treatises, including in Pareus’s.³⁴⁸ Jonson still late in his life allowed for the possibility that Horace could be, if not wrong, at least differently understood. Horace’s advice to Jonson to use his own judgment, advice that Jonson both celebrated and worked hard to execute, could even lead him to question Horace’s assessment of neo-Aristotelian rules.

The publication of important editions was not the only event that would have focused Jonson’s attention on comic language: in 1613, merely months before he began work on *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson actually met with Heinsius. In the fall of 1612, Sir Walter Raleigh had asked Jonson to chaperone his son Wat’s grand tour abroad.³⁴⁹ Privileged young Englishmen like Wat customarily travelled to the Continent, where they could experience European culture and politics firsthand and, so doing, cap their humanist education. Raleigh’s decision to entrust his son to Jonson thus speaks to the latter’s reputation. By then, Jonson had transformed himself from a bricklayer into a scholarly playwright and one of Stuart England’s leading minds, and we can only assume that Jonson would have relished the opportunity to travel to the Continent. With Wat in

³⁴⁶ For the translation, see *Discoveries*, 1812n.

³⁴⁷ See *Discoveries*, 1810-14n.

³⁴⁸ Plautus, *Comoediae XX*, A3r. “Plautus Latine linguae atque elegantiae princeps, & verborum latinorum elegantissimus artifex est [...] Nam ‘Plautino Musas olim sermone prof[s?]-antes / Varro facit, cupiant si Latio ore loqui.’”

³⁴⁹ Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 188-91.

tow, he could finally complete his own humanist education. English classical scholar Thomas Farnaby, who had gotten wind of Jonson's upcoming trip, asked Jonson to stop at Leiden because Heinsius, chief librarian at the University there, had prominent connections and could procure for Farnaby a text that he needed.³⁵⁰ Jonson would have met Heinsius just as Heinsius was in his middle of his long comic inquiry that had begun as a footnote to his first edition of the *Ars Poetica* (1610) and that would culminate in 1618's *Ad Horatij de Plauto & Terentio iudicium*.³⁵¹ We cannot know what the two men discussed when they met. But given Heinsius's work and Jonson's interests, it is likely that Horace and the latest trends in neoclassical theory were on the agenda. Did Jonson use Heinsius as a sounding board for his thoughts on how to craft a classical comedy?

Jonson began to write *Bartholomew Fair* almost as soon as he returned to England.³⁵² This play is considered to be formally most uncharacteristic of Jonson,³⁵³ and critics who have analyzed Jonson's language in the play, even while considering Jonson's linguistic classicism, have tended to ignore Jonson's approach to ancient comic theory.³⁵⁴ The play's prose runs the gamut of stage dialects, each laden with its own peculiar style.

³⁵⁰ On Jonson and Heinsius, see McPherson, "Ben Jonson Meets Daniel Heinsius." Farnaby wanted Scriverius's emendations of Martial, and a tribute prefacing Farnaby's subsequent edition of Martial (1615) indicates that Jonson and Heinsius did indeed meet. On Heinsius's fame in England generally, see Sellin, *Daniel Heinsius*, 13-20.

³⁵¹ Meter, *Literary Theories*, 97-136. Heinsius's earlier *De tragoediae constitutione* (1610) mentions Plautus and Terence enough times to suggest that, by the time of its publication, Heinsius had also begun to think seriously about comedy. Indeed, his sustained foray into comic theory began as a long footnote in the 1610 edition of Horace's complete works that teased out the relative merits of Plautus and Terence as Horace judged them. Heinsius expanded this footnote when he published his second edition of Horace in 1612, and he continued to work on his argument until its culmination in his 1618 preface to his complete works of Terence.

³⁵² Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 191-95.

³⁵³ One editor succinctly reports that the "motley crowd is involved in a multiplicity of actions, none of which can be equivocally labelled as the most important [...] *Bartholomew Fair* is a play without a hero"; Hibbard, introduction to *Ben Jonson: Bartholomew Fair*. Many critics seek alternative dramatic structures. See Martin, "Enormity and *Aurea Mediocritas*"; Salingar, "Crowd and Public"; Hamel, "Order and Judgement"; Latham, "Form in *Bartholomew Fair*"; Levin, "Structure of *Bartholomew Fair*"; Robinson, "*Bartholomew Fair*: Comedy of vapours"; and Townsend, *Apologie for Bartholomew Fayre*, 71-76.

³⁵⁴ Barish, *Ben Jonson*; Bledsoe, "Function of Linguistic Enormity"; Martin, "Enormity"; Sackton, *Rhetoric*; van den Berg, "Ben Jonson";

Up close, that language appears to be the product of a series of individuated, meticulously-crafted linguist portraits, shaped into a coherent if complex comic plot, refined and controlled by the playwright.³⁵⁵ From a few steps away, however, those dialects and plot strands combine into one indistinguishable, crowded racket. From one perspective, Jonson heeds the Terentians' advice to "polis[h]" his language and follow age-old neo-Aristotelian law. From another, he mimics Plautus's connection to his specific time and place. Put differently, Jonson's "purity of language" in *Bartholomew Fair* merges the ideas behind Erasmus's "pure, terse Latinity" (exemplified by Terence) and Ascham's "pureness of the Latin tongue" (represented by Plautus). *Bartholomew Fair* thus presents comedy not merely as the province of a singular "self-crowned," "self-creating" Stuart laureate but as collaboration of the playwright's pen and the diverse and unwieldy voices of his London—that is to say, as an alternative, *comic* laureateship.

The Language of Comic Laureateship in *Bartholomew Fair*

The text of *Bartholomew Fair* that finally materialized in Jonson's posthumous 1640-1 folio includes the theatrical introductions from both 1614 performances. It begins with a Prologue to the King's Majesty that previews the play, announcing Jonson's artistic intentions, anticipating the play's frivolities, and warning James of the sounds to be heard ahead: "such language" (2) as belongs to the fair, "the zealous noise / Of your land's faction" (3-4).³⁵⁶ The word *noise* appears again in the Induction scene, where the Scrivener introduces "a new sufficient play called *Barthol'mew Fair*, merry and as full of

³⁵⁵ Barish, *Ben Jonson*.

³⁵⁶ According to Jonson's editor, "James had an aversion to crowds and noise," Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, Induction, 3n.

noise as sport” (61-61).³⁵⁷ Spectators (or readers) are about to be inundated by a veritable cacophony of city voices. And certainly, if *Bartholomew Fair* stages “Smithfield, the booth, and the pig-broth” (Induction 113), it does so with emphasis on the “language” that “somewhere savours” (112) of that filth. The playwright has taken a “special decorum” (119), and ceaseless, oftentimes gratuitous talking in this play replaces traditional narrative progressions. In lieu of those progressions, *Bartholomew Fair* stages a series of linguistic conflicts—among the Stage-keeper and the Book-Holder; the denizens of the fair; Grace and Winwife and Troubleall; and finally, the puppet show audience’s—that subject linguistic autonomy to linguistic community and, in so doing, convey an alternative version of Jonson’s writerly role. *Bartholomew Fair* is a drama of language in which every supposedly refined and refining voice is subject to the common tongue.

The Induction to the Stage opens by asking, in essence, who has the right to “author” a play about the Fair? Jonson presents himself in textual form in the Articles of Agreement, as an ostensibly closed, authoritative voice called “the author.” The author’s own speech is made up of sentences “drawn out in haste” (46) on a piece of paper read by the Scrivener and seemingly hidden from *Bartholomew Fair*’s spectators. Often, critics take these Articles of Agreement at face value. Jonathan Haynes, for examples, sees them as having “torn” the Fair “out of its social context and made into an object of art, and Jonson wants to be sure he audience sees the difference,” so to keep the “crowd” out of the “festive mode.”³⁵⁸ If so, then “the author” is the Terentian comic poet *par excellence*: having apparently disregarded the “Barthol’ mew birds” (10), he and his proxy, the Book-

³⁵⁷ *Noise* here may denote and definitely (at least) connotes, “Strife, contention; a quarrel,” according to the *OED*’s the fifth definition; *OED Online* (June 2018), s.v. “noise, *n.*”

³⁵⁸ Haynes, *Social Relations*, 130.

Holder, banish “rare discourse” (34) and the ruder parts of the Fair. Perhaps the Stage-Keeper is correct when he chastises the “master-poe[t] (20) for having only his “own absurd courses” (20).

Yet we might pause to consider what else the Stage-Keeper says; after all, Jonson gives him the first word. He belongs in the periphery of the theater and, if we are to believe the Book-Holder, the periphery of Jonson’s play, too. The Stage-Keeper reminisces “in plain English” (7) about his real Fair “experience” (23), and he notes that the playwright, for all his linguistic skill, botches the Fair’s true “humours” (9). Although the Book-Keeper, acting on the author’s behalf, claims to expel the Stage-Keeper, his “rare discourse” (34), and his “judgement” (37), he immediately confirms them: he derides the Stage-Keeper for “pretend[ing] to judgment” (42) but in the next breath admits to the audience, “*And yet he may, i’ the most o’ this matter, i’ faith, for the author hath writ it just to his meridian [mental capacities] and the scale of the grounded judgements here, his play-fellows in wit*” (42-44, my emphasis). The Stage-Keeper “may” offer up his opinions and experience because, the Book-Holder says, they have already been incorporated into the play. Not only is the “author” preceded by this Stage-Keeper. That Stage-Keeper, Plautus-like, brings in “rare discourse” from beyond the boundaries of the playwright’s “object of art,” indeed, from an old-fashioned English culture (recall that Horace chastised “our ancestors” for praising the similarly old-fashioned Plautus).

The dialogue between what can be broadly aligned with Terentian and Plautine ideas of decorum—a dialogue between two systems of comic values—continues to be a central trope of the play, staged again in the nearest thing *Bartholomew Fair* has to a

traditional New Comedy plot. Littlewit is a surprising harbinger of classical laws. As Act 1 opens, he struts across the stage pointing out banal verbal coincidences and celebrating his own accidental puns. “I do feel conceits coming upon me, more then I am able to turn tongue to” (1.1.24-25), Littlewit brags. His “device[s]” (6) bring to mind the real group of seventeen lawyers, scholars, and courtiers—including Jonson—who met in London taverns once monthly, to share and discuss literature and to exercise their wits.³⁵⁹

Littlewit himself invites the comparison when he attempts to distinguish himself from those whom he regards as mere “pretenders to wit: your Three Cranes, Miter, and Mermaid men” (34). In fact, it was the “Mermaid men” to whom Jonson read the puppet show’s first draft, and so Littlewit’s coming “affaire i’ the Fair,” a “puppet play of [his] own making” (1.5.115-16), alludes to Jonson’s own witty presentation. Jonson is famous not only for his scrupulous self-editing and his insistence that others do the same but for his ongoing engagement with the most current and rigorous scholarship. For Littlewit “to spin out these fine things still, and, like a silkworm, out of [him]self” is not “luck” (1.1.1-2), as he concludes, but amateurish impertinence.

The first character to appear on stage in the play proper, Littlewit has already delivered his puppet script to Leatherhead and now holds in his hand the key to the play’s Terentian plot: the marriage license. “A Pretty conceit, and worth the finding!” he extols. Littlewit reads the license that will unite “Master Barthol’ mew Cokes, of Harrow o’th’ Hill, i’ th’ County of Middlesex, Esquire,” and “Mistresse Grace Wellborn of the said place and county” (2-3) on “the four and twentieth of August! Bartholomew day!” (5-6), or, as Littlewit giddily proclaims, “Barthol’ mew upon Barthol’ mew!” (6).

³⁵⁹ Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 192-93. The group also included Inigo Jones, John Donne, and Robert Cotton.

Scholarship has overlooked *Bartholomew Fair*'s classical comic through-line. Indeed, the *dramatis personae* of *Bartholomew Fair* lists no fewer than thirty-six characters, more than in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist* combined, and many among this throng make for relatively prominent strands in the play's multiple and fraying threads of plot. Yet we need not look too closely to find the conventional New Comedy cast: Winwife's and Grace Wellborn's far from subtle names let us know immediately that the play will drive them toward marriage, which it in fact does. On one hand, the Fair is the stage for courtship, where the couple meet and make the decision to unite and also where the orders of marital business unfold: Cokes's marriage license is lifted, destroyed, and reassigned. On the other hand, the Fair's context and its secondary characters—the language of Jonson's time and place, his seventeenth-century London— everywhere threatens to overwhelm this decorum.

Littlewit's "[p]retty conceit"—his pun on the name "Bartholomew"—is something closer to the traditional New Comedy dilemma, a document that might be rewritten. Grace has been purchased as a ward by Justice Adam Overdo. She must marry Overdo's brother-in-law Bartholomew Cokes, as Overdo pleases, or she must pay Overdo the value of her land. Bartholomew Cokes need not appear onstage for us to know that he—unlearned and "almost spoiled" (1.4.57)—is an unfit hero. "Did you ever see a fellows face more accuse him for an ass?" asks Winwife, who immediately notice Grace's "restrained scorn" (1.5.39-40, 45). How will she circumvent the societal obstacles and absurdities that have bound her to this man? How will she get out of this marriage? *Bartholomew Fair* must unite the correct couple.

Over the course of the play, the marriage license passes from Littlewit to Humphrey Wasp (1.4.4-65), to Cokes (1.5.82), back to Wasp (3.5.187), to Ezechiel Edgeworth (4.4.88), and then finally to Quarlous (4.6.13). Much of the play's energy derives from this journey, which is facilitated even by the play's most riotous elements. In Act 3.5, for example, Cokes buys up the Fair's trinkets, a "ballad man" performs some of the quintessentially lowbrow songs, and a cutpurse dazzles his onstage audience and *Bartholomew Fair's* by routing Cokes. Although the scene is a *tour de force* of living language, popular "noise," its chief purpose is to enable the marriage license's progression. Edgeworth's skillful thievery inspires Quarlous to solicit the cutpurse to "do us [Quarlous and Winwife] a piece of service," to "get away that box [that holds the marriage license] from him [Wasp], and bring it us" (3.5.203-04). This scene leads directly to the rowdy vapours scene, but with a comic purpose. Edgeworth's accomplice, Knockem, asks his friends to "continue the vapours for a lift" (4.4.1-2). To play the game of vapours, the denizens of Smithfield "oppos[e] the last man that spoke, whether it concerned him or not." The battle of faux wit, lubricated by Ursula's ale, quickly devolves from bickering to quarrelling to outright violence. Though the riot seems to dissipate all traces of New Comedy, it actually pushes the "argument" along by distracting all of its participants so that the thieves can successfully lift Wasp's box (4.4.88). Supporters of Plautus and Terence alike believed that the more complicated were the threads of plots, the more impressive was the playwright who could weave them together and bring them to a fitting, logical resolution. Even with its endless tangents, *Bartholomew Fair's* marriage plot follows recognizably Terentian decorum.

Nonetheless, if this play stages Smithfield, it does so, above all, through its city speech. Heather C. Easterling has pointed out this fact recently, arguing further that, at the “heart” of *Bartholomew Fair*, “is an interest in theorizing the role of language as the central, material component of city life.”³⁶⁰ Easterling’s assertion rests on the widely-held premise, articulated by Jonas A. Barish, that *Bartholomew Fair*’s prose is “of realistic density uncommon even in Jonson.”³⁶¹ Jonson’s virtuosity in creating different stage voices is on full display in the vapours game, where it extends to Whit’s Irish, Northern’s Scots, Cutting’s roarer’s slang, Wasp’s hot-headed speech, Quarlous’s pretentious interventions, Mistress Overdo’s elitest objections, and the Watch’s authoritative demands. The critics who pay closest attention to the vapours, however, either dwell on it at the expense of *Bartholomew Fair*’s neoclassical comic form or they go so far as to dismiss the influence of the classics completely.³⁶²

This neat distinction between the symbolic polarities, “Latin” and “the vernacular,” collapses—indeed, smashes—the not-so-subtle variations that Jonson is surely at pains to draw *within* his vernacular, the sort of variations that Terence and Plautus themselves originate and upon which the seventeenth-century neoclassical scholars insisted. Throughout *Bartholomew Fair*, Barish has posited, each character has a peculiar linguistic tic that not only distinguishes one original speech pattern from another

³⁶⁰ Easterling, *Parsing the City*, 6.

³⁶¹ Barish, *Ben Jonson*, 188. See also Bledsoe’s analysis of the play’s “theme and tone” of “linguistic enormity,” “Function of Linguistic Enormity”; and Sackton’s account of the play’s jargon and hyperbole, *Rhetoric as Dramatic Language*.

³⁶² Those who ignore neoclassical form but acknowledge the influence of the classics more generally include Martin and Robinson; those who dismiss the classics include Womack and Bledsoe. Other critics see *order* in the vapours game: Easterling finds that “the vapours is not nonsense at all—studied carefully, the game proceeds via a logic that relies on, and delights in, the highly polysemic nature of many English words,” *Parsing the City*, 121; Paster points out that “[i]n order to participate in the game at all, each man must take turns, cooperate, and perhaps above all listen to one another; ordinary conversational deference and accommodation strategies may be stretched here almost beyond recognition, yet the structure of the game insists on contradiction as an intimately homosocial act, even among strangers,” *Humoring the Body*), 239-40.

but also uses those speech patterns to elaborate characters' individual strengths, shortcomings, feelings, and motivations.³⁶³ When the characters come together, their very distinct linguistic portraits are not only preserved but intensified. The Irish in Whit's "Yes, I *pre dee* now, let him mistake" (105) is more conspicuous when we hear Wasp, established in a different idiom, return "A *turd i'* your teeth, never *pre dee* me, for I will have nothing mistaken" (106-07, my emphasis); and Wasp's idiom is accentuated when Knockem immediately chimes "*Turd*, ha, *turd?*" (108). The least meaningful aspects of each sentence, the phrases that denote idiom—*pre dee*, *turd i' your teeth*—become the seminal playing pieces in the game of "opposing."

Missing from current readings of the vapours game and of the play's language more broadly is any acknowledgment that *Bartholomew Fair*'s distinct linguistic portraits, like its plot, are rooted in Terentian form. In neo-Aristotelian parlance, the term *manners* designates the extent to which a character speaks an idiolect that reveals key elements of his or her type. Characterization must reveal itself completely in these individuated linguistic portraits; and each portrait, and so each character, should be clearly and neatly distinct from the others. In England, the emphasis on comic manners overlapped with what Paula Blank calls "a new consciousness of linguistic difference within national borders."³⁶⁴ Prior to the last few decades of the sixteenth century, English linguists and poets primarily juxtaposed "English" with Latin or with the other Continental vernaculars. Starting around the 1570s, Blank explains, a new crop of linguists and poets began to elaborate competing "Englishes"; they concretized

³⁶³ Barish, *Ben Jonson*. Barish's study provides one thorough and complete account of Jonson's distinct linguistic portraits; its meticulous close reading moves from one character to another, from one to another individuated language system.

³⁶⁴ Blank, *Broken English*, 1.

distinctions among dialects. By the power of the playwright's controlling hand, these "Englishes" could rein in what Womack calls "the unverifiable plurality" of the vernacular or what Patricia Fumerton has defined as the language's "becoming-minoritarian," its splintering.³⁶⁵ By elucidating and defining "Englishes," the comic playwright can indulge a fantasy of total control over the vernacular. By providing a set of formal rules, comic "manners" gave neoclassical literary support to an emergent linguistics. Terence did this, too, and Horace praised him for it. The play's *copia* testifies to the unnerving yet thrilling realization that a modern nation could contain so many different parts. Manners linked the vernacular and the playwright's wielding of it to the Latin tradition.

Yet the vapours game—and *Bartholomew Fair* as a whole—often approaches pure "noise" (Prologue 3; Induction 62). Quarlous's fate is but one example of the play's seeming refusal to privilege one man's or woman's language over another's. While observing from the sidelines, Quarlous deems the vapours game a "belching of quarrel" (4.4.74). In so doing, he implicitly defines his idiom against the others': his words must sound sweeter than these audible pangs of indigestion. Quarlous positions himself as culturally "high," an outsider to the rude vapours and an insider to a learned speech community. He effectively carries on the work of social categorization in which he has been invested since the beginning of the play. He and Winwife have contrasted their own sophistication with the foolishness and loutishness of the other personalities. They come to Smithfield in general to witness "excellent creeping sport" (1.5.131-32), the absurdity

³⁶⁵ Fumerton, "Homely Accents." Fumerton draws on Deleuze and Guattari's account of the "'immanent process' of 'continuous variation' or 'a becoming-minor of the major language,'" adding that "[t]his seems especially true of the seventeenth century, with its increased sense of language's instability and variation, especially into native languages and dialects—and, of course, with a Scots-speaking king on the English throne"; 97-98.

of the other Londoners as they interact with each other. Holding himself aloof from the linguistic rumpus, Quarlous defines his position of social superiority—much as an earlier Jonson would have distinguished himself from the hacks and, even, audience members. But when the denizens of Smithfield notice that Quarlous is laughing at them (4.4.92-93), when they hear what Knockem recognizes as “too lofty” (100) vapours, they draw the gentleman into the game. Although Quarlous initially tries to resist, his “but” suggests that he will engage the vulgar language play:

QUARLOUS: Gentlemen, I do no play well at your game of vapours, I am not very good at it, but—

CUTTING: Do you hear, sir? I would speak with you in circle?

He draws a circle on the ground.

QUARLOUS: In circle, Sir? What would you with me in circle?

CUTTING: Can you lend me a piece, a Jacobus, in circle?

QUARLOUS: 'Slid, your circle will prove more costly than your vapours, then. Sir, no, I lend you none.

CUTTING: Your beard's not well turned up, Sir.

QUARLOUS: How, rascal? Are you playing with my beard? I'll break circle with you.

They draw all, and fight. (4.4.101-11)

Initially, Cutting's circle refers to the actual space in which he will parley with the new vapours contestant. Although the language game up until now has had no such core, Quarlous's own characterization of his linguistic superiority signals his belief that his vapours—now inside the circle—will become the game's dominant force; he will not

only play, but his voice will be central to the game. Yet as Quarlous enters Cutting's circle, questioning the game's new turn, Cutting plays on the word: *circle* is now the "Jacobus" for which Cutting bargains. What momentarily seemed a reorientation toward erudite language has once again dissolved into Cutting's, Knockem's, and Whit's (and Wasp's and Mistress Overdo's) linguistic free-for-all, in which everyone's language is differentiated, but no one's is prioritized.

But what of Winwife's and Grace's language? These characters have a privileged position in the comedy—their match structures it—yet they would prefer that they and their voices stay on the margins, apart from and above the linguistic riot. Like Quarlous, Winwife and Grace each claim from the outset that they stand apart from the crowd: they insist that their language gives them distinction. Grace voices a slight objection when Cokes first suggests that they go to the Fair. "Truly," she says, "I have no such fancy to the Fair, nor ambition to see it; there's none goes thither of any quality or fashion" (1.5.102-03). Cokes dismisses Grace's plea, and Quarlous immediately criticizes the "rogue" for "understand[ing] her language no better!" (107). She is forced to go, however, and, following her, Winwife and Quarlous set off for the Fair and so compromise their privilege as judging spectators. When Winwife entices Grace at the Fair, he picks up on cultural and linguistic distinctions, asking her, "But will you please to withdraw with us a little, and make them think they have lost you? I hope our manners ha' been such hitherto, and our language, as will give you no cause to doubt yourself in our company" (3.5.243-46). Dialect here figures directly as a mark of social stature and kinship, and Grace is to be included in their highbrow speech community. These characters themselves set their "manners" apart from the linguistic riot of the Fair, and

their marriage plot is en route to being a plot about the triumph of that highbrow language. By 3.5, Winwife and Quarlous have begun their competitive “proffering” (236), each attempting to court the young lady; in 4.3, they draw their swords in protestations of love (sd 1). To choose between Quarlous and Winwife, “equal and alike” (4.3.27), Grace devises a contest:

GRACE: [...] You shall write either of you, here, a word, or a name, what you like best – but of two or three syllables at most; and the next person that comes this way – because destiny has a high hand in business of this nature – I’ll demand, which of the two words he or she doth approve; and according to that sentence, fix my resolution and affection, without change.

QUARLOUS: Agreed, my word is conceived already.

WINWIFE: And mine shall be not be long creating after. [...]

QUARLOUS: [...] Well, my word is out of the *Arcadia* then: ‘Argalus.’

WINWIFE: And mine out of the play: ‘Palemon.’ (4.3.39-57)

It is no accident that this contest (4.3 and 4.5) surrounds the vapours scene of 4.4. Indeed, in one sense, the scheme Grace invents is nothing more than a highbrow vapours game. Grace demands each suitor reveal himself in a word that implicitly, if superficially, captures some essence of his character. *Argalus* and *Palemon* imply that Quarlous and Winwife are learned in culture and “correct” in language. But this scene does not merely rehash the vapours. As its Terentian plots twist and turn, *Bartholomew Fair* folds in outside voices, recasting self-proclaimed onlookers as participants in this central action. In this way, the “modern” Fair is woven into the very fabric of “ancient” comic courtship. Weaving a comic argument out of its characters’ manners, *Bartholomew Fair*, in fact,

fuses Terentian conventions, linking the play to both a long history of formal decorum and Stuart London's rich linguistic landscape. This game collapses the supposed elite and lowbrow qualities of New Comedy, at once refining everyday life and language, showcasing artistic decorum, and reveling in popular taste and vernacular vitality.

It is fitting that Grace's game should be judged at the whim of the dimwitted, single-minded Troubleall, who is "refined" *ad absurdum*, completely shut off from his society and essentially reduced to two words only: *Adam Overdo*. Apparently, Troubleall was relieved of his duties as officer "in the Court of Pie-powders" (4.1.43) at the Fair last year by Overdo, and since, he has been what Bristle calls "distracted" (4.1.42). He neurotically seeks Overdo's warrant for even the most inconsequential of actions, including his basic bodily functions. He must choose between Winwife's and Quarlous's words:

GRACE: Sir, here are two names written—

TROUBLEALL: Is 'Justice Overdo' one?

GRACE: How, Sir? I pray you, read 'hem to yourself – it is for a wager between these gentlemen – and with a stroke or any difference, mark which you approve best.

TROUBLEALL: They may be both worshipful names for aught I know, mistress, but 'Adam Overdo' had been worth three of 'hem, I assure you, in this place that's in plain English.

GRACE: This man amazes me! I pray you, like one of 'hem, sir.

TROUBLEALL: I do like him there that has the best warrant. Mistress, to save your longing – and multiply him – it may be this. [*He marks one of the names.*] (4.3.84-97)

As a result of Troubleall's choice, the character named "Winwife" wins a wife, underscoring for us readers the playwright's thorough, meticulous, and Terentian planning. Simultaneously, Troubleall is dragged into the linguistic whirlwind of *Bartholomew Fair* via the highbrow vapours game while Grace and Winwife, through their union, are pulled down into the ruder elements at the Fair.

In the Induction scene that precedes the play, "the author" informs audience members that they are to look, to listen, and to judge; in short, they are to fulfill the role that Winwife and Quarlous imagine for themselves when they set out for the Fair. Yet, as Quarlous finds himself absorbed into the vapours game and Winwife in Grace's, so the everyday voices of the disparate London spectators are folded into Jonson's play. Their "Englishes" permeate *Bartholomew Fair* and supply its only raw material. The author relies on the vernacular, and it is in melding those "Englishes" that he animates his comic voice.

The fifth act puppet show, finally, repeats the contest between Terentian linguistic decorum and Plautine living language in miniature. A "home-born projec[t]" (5.1.11), it is one without "too much learning" (12), according to puppet-master, Lantern Leatherhead.³⁶⁶ The plot of the show combines two Greek myths—"The Ancient Modern History of Hero and Leander, otherwise called *The Touchstone of True Love*" and "Damon and Pithias" (5.3.5-7)—and then translates those myths into what can only generously be called popular idiom. Because Littlewit, the puppet show's playwright,

³⁶⁶ Riggs, *Ben Jonson*, 193.

considers these classical stories “too learned and poetical for our audience” (84), he promises to “reduce” (88) the scripts “to a more familiar strain for our people” (89), to make it “a little easy and modern for the times” (92). So “Hellespont” becomes “our Thames here”; “Leander” is “a dyer’s son about Puddle Wharf”; “Hero” is “a wench o’ the Bankside”; “Cupid” is “metamorphosed himself into a drawer, and he strikes Hero in love, with a pint of sherry” (91-99). Despite proclaiming itself “Ancient” *and* “Modern,” the Littlewit-Leatherhead play is neither. The puppet play was perhaps a way for Jonson to satirize the disputes on transubstantiation that he had witnessed abroad,³⁶⁷ and it was almost definitely a way for him to satirize his masque-partner, Inigo Jones.³⁶⁸ Yet it also satirizes a superficial idea of ancient and modern comedy; this hodgepodge of old and new seems to be *Bartholomew Fair*’s very antithesis.

For the puppet show in fact parodies the linguistic values associated with both Terence *and* Plautus. It exaggerates Terentian linguistic artistic control, and it degrades Plautine common eloquence. To follow the neo-Aristotelian rules exemplified by Terence was to create characters rooted in refined speech; that is, to give characters “pure, terse” words that reveal their types. In the puppet show, the characters speak indistinguishable dialects not rooted in character but in the most debased demotic. Considered “a fine language” (5.4.131) only by the stupidest spectator, Cokes, the dialogue rehashes the same few vulgar English words over and over again—*whoremaster*, *knave*, *pimp*, *scab*, *slave*—and spits out such laughably vacuous lines as Puppet Leander’s opening “*Cole, Cole, old Cole*” (128) and “*Row, row, row, row, row, row*” (187). Far from Terentian, the puppet play’s “treble creaking” (5.5.61) conforms to a frequently repeated criticism of

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 190.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 193-94.

Plautus: although some in the Renaissance praised Plautus for preserving and enriching the best elements of his culture's living speech and for being the first to craft the rough Roman vernacular into a worthy literary language, detractors characterized Plautus's language as uncontrolled, unsophisticated, and unliterary. The parody mocks the supposedly "singular voice manifesting itself in histrionic multiplicity,"³⁶⁹ its "diminutive parody of authorship,"³⁷⁰ or the fact that Leatherhead purports to be "mouth of 'em all" (5.3.60). Not only do these phrases describe an exaggeration of the artistic control associated with refined Terentian comedy, especially given the puppets' deeply impoverished language, but they also parody the Induction scene's "Author."

If the Articles of Agreement present one dominant authorial voice that is ultimately dispersed in the many languages that he crafts, the puppet show presents a plurality of actors—numerous speaking subjects—ostensibly controlled by one voice: Leatherhead, "mouth of 'em all" (5.3.74), channels Littlewit's script. The ensuing dispute between the Rabbi and the puppet culminates in a joke about the puppets' nonexistent genitalia that humiliates Busy in particular. Critics tend to read the puppet play as a microcosm of the larger play; in the common view, the subhuman qualities of the human characters are accentuated by their proximity to the puppets.³⁷¹ To the contrary, when the puppet Dionysius lifts up his garments, we are reminded how very *not* human the wooden automaton is. The point, in my view, is not that the characters in *Bartholomew Fair* are all puppets; it is precisely that the characters are *not* puppets and that Jonson is *not* writing for the puppet theater; he's *not* quite "mouth of 'em all." Instead, despite his own refinement, Jonson writes with a living language for the social theater. He depends on the

³⁶⁹ Shershow, "'Mouth of 'hem All,'" 190.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁷¹ Barish, "Bartholomew Fair"; Bledsoe, "Function"; Shershow, "'Mouth of 'em All.'"

whole vernacular: in Plautine terms, he “could not use any other language than that of his age.”³⁷²

To revitalize Littlewit’s inept language—and Troubleall’s—Jonson again turns to Tarlton, who rose to fame on his wit. From the Induction scene, we know that the Stage-keeper’s real comic hero is no “Winwife,” defined by a role in the comedy’s plot and his restrained and proper manners, but “Tarlton” (28), master of improvisation.³⁷³ “There is a strong probability,” Tarlton’s biographer notes, “that the transference of his tavern style to the public theatres was Tarlton’s peculiar innovation as an actor and the basis of his extraordinary popularity.”³⁷⁴ This is the sort of vernacular—a “plain English”—that made neoclassical scholars both love and loath Plautus, and it is unlike Littlewit’s vapid, incessant punning. Performing “themes,” in which an audience member would suggest a topic for banter, Tarlton, “threatened with what looks like inevitable humiliation, the fool/clown suddenly turns the tables on his humiliators.”³⁷⁵ The play-within-the-play’s vitality develops from a fusion of Littlewit’s script, the audience members’ interjections, and Leatherhead’s improvisations—a mixture of voices.

The title page of *Bartholomew Fair* featured a quotation from Horace’s *Epistle 2.1*, “If he were still on earth, Democritus would laugh in scorn, for he would gaze at the audience more attentively than at the show itself, as offering him something more spectacular than the actor. As for the writers, however, he would reckon they were telling their tales to a deaf ass.”³⁷⁶ *Bartholomew Fair* is a play about an audience—a judging, talking audience that contests the supposed “mouth of ‘em all” and enriches it in the

³⁷² Navagero on Plautus, qtd. in Hardin, “Encountering Plautus,” 794.

³⁷³ Thomson, “Tarlton.”

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, Title-page 11-15n.

process. More specifically, *Bartholomew Fair* stages the spark of Terentian and Plautine language. Littlewit's puppet play and Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* enact a sort of "disputation" themselves on the question of whether a classical comedy can be "made [...] modern for our times" and "familiar [...] for our people" without being "reduced" and while remaining both thoroughly classical *and* thoroughly English. The puppet play and Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* are left to the performance, the spectators, and their participation in the playwright's role.

"Non aliena meo pressi pede"

Bartholomew Fair's linguistic energies can be traced to Jonson's experiments in *genre*. A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott explain, "each genre offers a window on the world: [...] each of the kinds makes available a perspective on the world, one which is inherited and variously renewed (or sometimes, of course, inherited but not renewed)."³⁷⁷ By calling his drama first *comical satire* and then, simply, *comedy*, Jonson signaled not only that he had renewed his perspective on his world, but that he renewed his perspective on his own role as dramatist, and that his world should renew its perspective on him.³⁷⁸ In *Every Man Out*, Asper prepares to "speak away his spirit into air" for the

³⁷⁷ A. D. Cousins and Alison V. Scott, introduction to *Ben Jonson and the Politics of Genre*, eds. A. D. Cousins and Alison Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 1-13, 1.

³⁷⁸ Rowe, Jr. suggests that seventeenth-century writers "share a common distrust of older forms and a reluctance to accept the notions of hierarchy and order which lie behind traditional genre systems." These writers did not renew or reinvent older forms so that they could make those forms speak to a new era, as sixteenth-century humanists had, but rejected them outright, searching instead for forms that could "embody feelings of uncertainty and confusion" that matched the zeitgeist. According to Rowe, New Comedy—defined chiefly by its conventional plot, "the conflict of generations, the thwarting of young love and its eventual consummation, the audience's approval of that union." is challenged by a host of playwrights, namely Thomas Middleton, but also John Marston, Shakespeare, and Jonson, *Thomas Middleton*, 3, 16-17. True, Jonson did not take up the "cross-wooings," and when he did, as with *Grace and Winwife*, the transactional nature of the union is emphasized above the strictly romantic. But I argue in this

benefit of attentive audience members who might profit from his satire. Above, I suggest that Asper responds to Donne's *Satyre 2*, in which the speaker censures the playwright for wasting words and labors, as organ pipes blow air into puppets. By the time that he wrote the *Alchemist* (1610), Jonson had subtly reinvented his role as comic dramatist: no longer is he the satyr who risks dissolution; now Jonson as writer creates the beautiful comic object that will delight his audience and, perhaps one day, inspire its reformation. That play's Prologue imagines London not as a society awaiting reform, but as the "matter" that the "comic write[r]" will shape to effect "mirth." In *Bartholomew Fair*, "[t]he fact that the puppets are not, after all, human, but mere wooden automatons" does not "accentuat[e] [...] the subhuman character of so much of what passes for human behavior at the Fair,"³⁷⁹ but rather underscores the difference between Littlewit and Leatherhead's ambitions and Jonson's.

Victoria Moul posits that "[t]o read Jonson's Horatianism well, we must reread Horace."³⁸⁰ But we cannot reread Horace without Jonson. During this period of intense study, Jonson began to translate Horace's *Ars Poetica*. I consider some of the theoretical context—some of the "latest critical fashions"—through which Jonson approached his literary predecessor and in light of which, I argue, he reinvented "*his* Horace." For Jonson, that did not mean to do slavishly what Horace advised in every instance. His best use of language according to Horace depended on his own scholarly work and hard-earned judgment. The ideas orbiting around the *Ars Poetica* concerning the neo-Aristotelian laws presented Jonson with a conservative Terentian view that would

chapter that Jonson does not approach tradition as such a complete, finished, reified thing to be upheld or rejected.

³⁷⁹ Barish, *Bartholomew Fair and Its Puppets*, 5.

³⁸⁰ Moul, *Jonson, Horace, and the Classical Tradition*, 11.

connect the laureate and playwright to his classical past but leave him disconnected from his common English time and place, and a more daring view, that would connect Jonson to that national culture. *Bartholomew Fair* plays these two perspectives off of one another. It mixes Terentian “refined” “art” with Plautus’s “common eloquence” to dramatize the classical poet’s collaboration with the popular vernacular. The point is to bridge the gap between the ancient and the modern—not simply to heed old forms but to interrogate them, to *use* the spark created from the friction of scholarly disagreement.

I began with the claim that the Jonsonian laureateship that we imagine today is understood largely through Jonson’s 1616 accomplishments. Together, conventional interpretations of the royal stipend and the folio hold that Jonson’s laureateship was necessarily elite and so necessarily opposed to common culture. The motto for *Every Man Out* is “non aliena meo pressi pede”; it “has Jonson, at the start of his stage career, assume the role of the mature Horace, looking back on the earlier achievements from a position of assured laureateship.”³⁸¹ In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson manages to go both where tradition has prescribed and where his culture did so on his own terms.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 99. Jonson quotes Horace’s *Epistles* 1.19.22.

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