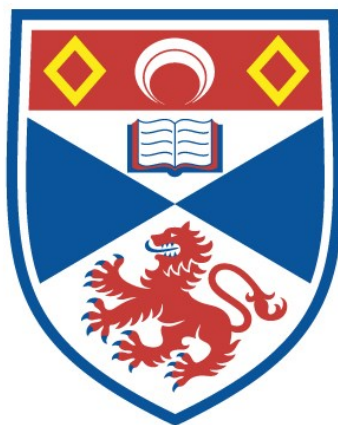


**My litel suffisaunce: humility and its compatriots in  
Middle English literature**

Joseph Ickowski

A thesis submitted for the degree of MPhil  
at the  
University of St Andrews



2024

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## **Abstract**

Tropes of humility are as ubiquitous in the literature of Medieval Europe as they are understudied in the modern academic literature. While many individual examples are dealt with frequently, a comprehensive investigation of them in the vernacular of Later Medieval England does not yet exist. This study aims to provide that.

Tropes of humility in this period are varied and polyphonic, a single, clear assertion of their function is impossible. Nor are clear categories easily drawn, as the formal varieties and rhetorical styles of these tropes blend smoothly into each other. Instead of attempting to provide either of these things, this study provides a broad survey of functions which these tropes served. In particular, this study is concerned with the ways authors used tropes of humility to engage with, navigate, and express notions of authority, authorship, and power.

Broadly speaking, tropes of humility served as a flexible and powerful tool throughout the Later Middle Ages for dealing with the complex power structures authors found themselves in. Though they took repetitive forms, these forms should not be seen as a lack of thought or creativity. Instead, they should be understood as medieval authors themselves understood them: As set texts to be modified and deployed thoughtfully and creatively, to achieve one's particular ends in specific circumstances.

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## Acknowledgements

As with any work of this length, there are too many people to thank them all specifically here. As such, I am profoundly grateful for the variety of kind, caring, and lovely people who have surrounded me throughout this entire process. I could not have done it without them.

Specifically, I must thank my advisor, Ian Johnson, not only for his intellectual guidance but for his unfailing patience and kindness over this process. Writing a thesis while struggling with both mental health challenges and a global pandemic was profoundly difficult. I could not have done it without his forbearance and support.

I am grateful to all my family, who have been as supportive of my academic endeavors as it is possible to be. From not asking me “what are you going to do with that degree?” to putting *The Idea of the Vernacular* under the Christmas tree for me, their support has been essential to this process. Particular thanks are due to my father, Tim Schoettle, who, in addition to providing valuable proofreading, provided the inspiration both for my interest in academia generally, and paradox specifically. My mother, Melissa Schoettle, has also been both a massive source of support and a sounding board for my ideas.

I also want to thank Professor Rhiannon Purdie, who was the first medieval specialist I ever studied with. It was her advice that led me to this program and this topic. It was one of the seminal moments of my academic life when I asked her how I could pursue both my interest in literary theory and the Middle Ages, and she directed me to the field of medieval literary theory.

Lastly, I am profoundly thankful for my friends, who, despite the difficulties of the pandemic, brought joy and support to my life over the last two years. My friend Wren Mitchell, who was my pandemic bubble-mate, was particularly essential. Human contact was in short supply during this maddening year, and their company helped me stay sane.

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## Introduction

This study began with a simple observation: Medieval English writers are very prone to formulaic displays of humility, self-criticism, and literary anxiety, and a solid explanation for the practice did not seem to exist in the literature. In many cases, scholars were happy to stipulate that a particular example of the trope in work they were studying was ironic, or in other ways contained meaning beyond mere rote repetition. Unfortunately, these claims were almost always limited to specific examples, and all too often framed their particular literary subject as different from the wider mass of medieval writers, who supposedly *were* merely repeating a trope.

This study will instead attempt to provide a broader overview of these tropes and their functions within Medieval English literature, starting from the assumption that a trope does not endure for centuries merely as a result of rote imitation of one's literary forbearers. A complete history of these tropes is beyond the scope of a master's thesis, and this study will not attempt to provide one. Instead, what I will be attempting to do is a deep dive on the employment of these tropes in the vernacular literature of Later Medieval England, so we can see, in practice, how these tropes were employed.

With all that said, before getting into some of the details, it is worth discussing some of the academic literature that provides the theoretical underpinnings to this study, as well as some of the previous attempts in the literature to cover these tropes. It is important to note here with regards to several of these works (which will be noted as we go through) that while this thesis takes something of a formalist close reading and primary source focused approach, the underlying theoretical basis that will be established in this introduction undergirds everything that will be done here, even in places where nothing specific enough to be cited is present. Much



of the intellectual work of this thesis is in applying the theoretical framework that will be established here to a broad set of primary sources and seeing what arises from that, rather than attempting to blaze new theoretical or historical trails.

To begin with the most essential set of texts, the works of Alastair Minnis, particularly his seminal *Medieval Theory of Authorship* are essential to this study. Firstly, the historical sketch of the concept of *auctoritas* and authorship early in the work is essential to understanding tropes of humility. Two things are essential here: First, to be authoritative, to have *auctoritas*, a work must be accurate, in the sense that it conforms to the fundamental Christian truth.

Secondly, auctorial status was, at least in theory, heavily cordoned off, and nearly inaccessible to most writers.<sup>1</sup> There was a broad, general sense that *auctores* were, by definition, ancient, and that contemporary writers were “standing on the shoulders of giants.”<sup>2</sup> Even insofar as the literal human author was acknowledged, it was essential to the authoritative system that the literal human *auctor* be aligned with and guided by the ultimate *auctor*, God.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, there was variance both through time and between thinkers about the degree to which the human and divine authors were the cause of their relative text—and Minnis, importantly identifies a shift toward attributing more causal agency to the human author as time went on—but the fundamental need for both was consistent throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>

This is essential, because it provides multiple specifically medieval reasons why anxiety about textual production would be present in medieval texts. Firstly, the pervasive sense of the world grown old, that people had been wiser and more moral in the past than in the present could

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<sup>1</sup> Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, Middle Ages Series, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-112.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-117.

produce a lack of confidence in even the most authorized writer.<sup>5</sup> As much as, say, a contemporary bishop might possess all the qualities necessary to be authoritative in theory, he would still likely see himself as less worthy of *auctoritas* than those who had gone before. Second, even this limited and diminished authority was theoretically inaccessible to anyone outside the higher rungs of clerical and political power. While literary practice, is, as we will see, much more fraught, within this basic articulation, original, valuable literary and intellectual production should be limited to an exceptionally small clique of authorized men. Most of the texts we will investigate here were not written by people in those positions, which necessitated strategies for the navigation of, and at times resistance to, these authoritative structures. Tropes of humility served effectively in this role.

Importantly, in both *Medieval Theory of Authorship* and the later *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*, Minnis complicates this strict authoritative structure by illustrating just how contested authoritative discourse really was.<sup>6</sup> We see in the former how authors outside of the academic commentary sphere appropriated the language of academic commentary to expand the bounds of the literary, including by self-glossing in a way that suggested their own authority. The latter deals with a few different internal tensions within authoritative discourse. The first is that while the traditional structures of authority exclude most people *a priori*, the doctrine that an immoral preacher can be an effective in giving sermons and sacraments pushes against that *a priori* exclusion.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, if an immoral preacher can tell a moral tale because of God working through him, that suggests that the process of producing an

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to the discussion of “standing on the shoulders of giants” cited above, see C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, particularly “Earth and Her Inhabitants” and James M. Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature*.

<sup>6</sup> Minnis, Alastair, *Fallible Authors: Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> *Fallible Authors*, pp. 1-97.

authoritative text is somewhat speaker agnostic and does not require specific authorization. This is important in and of itself because it potentially expands the scope for authoritative discourse, as Minnis illustrates, with Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* providing a solid case for the value of her own story, despite both her sex and her personal immorality (within medieval moral frameworks).<sup>8</sup>

It is also a useful guide here because it illustrates how tensions within orthodox doctrine can allow for potentially heterodox or even radical outcomes. That is to say, from a piece of extremely orthodox doctrine (that an immoral priest can give valid sacraments), rejected by many Wycliffites as well as later Protestants, Chaucer produces an argument for a much more expansive view of authority than is itself orthodox.<sup>9</sup> This is important for our purposes, because it shows that the navigation of these strict structures of authority does not require or entail resistance to them or rejection of them. That is not to say that there is no resistance to authority within the texts in this study, only that heresy is not a necessary condition to push for authorization that one might not normally have. This is relevant for humility because much of its potential as a rhetorical tool comes from exactly this sort of tension: Christianity is a religion where, very explicitly, "the last will be first and the first will be last," but Medieval Christianity was also the ideological basis for a largely authoritarian and highly stratified society. Specifically in terms of the literary culture, as we have seen, literary authority was not widely available in theory, but this sort of doctrinal tension allowed people to present a moral case for the value of their words, paradoxically, by denigrating themselves.

David Lawton, who we will also discuss when covering previous writing on humility tropes, also provides important theoretical underpinning to this work in his *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities*. Lawton explicitly positions his work as a

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<sup>8</sup> *Fallible Authors*, pp. 246-348.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 246-348.

counterbalance to the focus on textual authority that resulted from *Medieval Theory of Authorship* and other works, which is useful to us here as we discuss the way *auctoritas* could be navigated.<sup>10</sup> Lawton argues that voice can convey resistance to authority, particularly censorious authority, and importantly claims that the practice of revoicing set texts is essential to the shift to the vernacular.<sup>11</sup> These set texts are what Lawton describes as “public interiorities.” He writes “Public interiorities are pieces of language—as speech or text—which already exist before they are revoiced by a new user... They evoke or confer a subject position—resignation before Fortune, for example, or courage in face of persecution, or precepts for personal conduct—which is available to others, who may use and interpret it differently... They are a common stock, and so rhetorically commonplace, but they invite, and I argue are used to express, a response to their potential for interiority; their revoicing then gains resonance from the fact that they are shared.”<sup>12</sup> Several aspects of this track on nicely to tropes of humility.

While they are not, typically, direct quotations, the rhetoric of literary humility is consistent enough that it can be reasonably understood as a set of preexisting texts. We can identify a number of specific subtypes within this broader class, such as Marian invocations or protestations of poetic incapacity that are consistent across texts. They form a collection of tropes and topoi that writers can revoice to fit their particular situation and to speak to their subjective experience. This may be expanding Lawton’s definition slightly, adding in networks of tropes that behave similarly to quotations alongside actual, literal quotation, but it is useful to this study nevertheless.

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<sup>10</sup> David Lawton, *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature: Public Interiorities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature*, pp. 5, 83-102.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Also essential to this study is the sense that this process of restating and refiguring public texts is a deeply creative and intellectually adventurous endeavor. This is a useful corrective not only to the sometimes-stifling objectivity of the authoritative sphere, but also to a longstanding misreading of this kind of tropological repetition. We will discuss later E. R. Curtius' writings on the humility topos, but it, along with the rest of Curtius' oeuvre, displays a low opinion of the literary value of this sort of revoicing, something Curtius shared with many of his predecessors (dating back as far as Petrarch) and contemporaries, and inspired in many of his successors.<sup>13</sup> Lawton, by contrast emphasizes the richness of the revoicing of set texts, emphasizing the way they allow for the publication of individual subjectivity, while still, by nature of their own commonness, remaining intersubjective.<sup>14</sup>

Next, briefly, is Richard Firth Green's *A Crisis of Truth*, largely for how it illustrates the capacious nature of the medieval understanding of truth. *Auctoritas* is deeply tied in with truthfulness and accuracy, but it is essential not to limit this to our modern, scientific understanding of truth as something like "accuracy/correspondence." The word "truth" also covered legal pledges, one's personal character and reliability, and the underlying facts of the Christian narrative.<sup>15</sup> This broader definition provides further contemporary explanation for the broadness of the humility tradition, even in works that would not initially seem connected to the intellectual milieu of academic commentators Minnis highlights. Medieval truth (and therefore *auctoritas*) was totalizing, containing within it one's faith (both as an individual and as a part of

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<sup>13</sup> C. Stephen Jaeger, "Ernst Robert Curtius: A Medievalist's Contempt for the Middle Ages", *Viator*, 47.2 (2016), pp. 367–79.

Theodore E. Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'", *Speculum*, 17.2 (1942), pp. 226–42.

<sup>14</sup> *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature*, pp. 61-82. Special note should be given to the description of Usk's *Testament of Love*, a text we will discuss in Chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 8-40.

the universal church), one's personal character, and the health of the broader community as well as intellectual accuracy. As we will see throughout Chapter 1, which deals largely with confessional rhetoric and humility, and in the beginning of Chapter 2, which deals with Hoccleve's *Series*, the pressure to defend one's words and works as at least within the acceptable bounds of *auctoritas*, if not as authoritative themselves could, come from internal concern about one's moral or spiritual wellbeing, or about one's standing in the social world, and so on. That is to say, it is not merely authoritative censorship, but the broader pressure of a culture of truth that makes navigation of authority so essential to literary production.

Last in our theoretical scaffolding is Rita Copeland's *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages*. The density of Copeland's work defies easy summary, but several of her observations about the practice of translation are also relevant to tropes of humility. Firstly, her observation that the practice of vernacular translation was more a practice of displacement and appropriation of previous authorities as it was a practice of service to them chimes well with what this thesis has to say about the practice of humility.<sup>16</sup>

When discussing the intersection of roles of *compiler* and translator in the *Ovide moralisé*, Copeland writes "The power of the *compiler* lies in the way he can retreat behind the *ipsissima verba* of the texts and conceal the very control he exerts as the orchestrator of *auctoritates*"<sup>17</sup> This "retreat behind" one's sources is one of the crucial tactics in exerting authority while denying it, something we will see in everything from *The Canterbury Tales* to Gavin Douglas' translation of the *Aeneid* that ends this text. This process, laundering a claim to

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<sup>16</sup>Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 11, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 87-150.

<sup>17</sup> Copeland, pp. 117-118.

authority by proclaiming one's service to a previous *auctor*, is one of the most straightforward and effective ways by which humility could be employed to justify the production of a text.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, Copeland's argument that the exegetical process of vernacular translation—particularly when those translations engage with previous vernacular exegeses/translations of the given text—displaces Latinity and replaces it with an exegetical community in the vernacular is useful to remember in certain sections of Chapter 2.<sup>19</sup> That chapter focuses on the use of humility in the building of horizontal communities, broadly construed. Specifically, practices of correction and (at least theoretical) mutual glossing help to broadly authorize the vernacular scholarly community. This practice of translation, with its (misleading) performance of subjugation to a previous *auctor* similarly contributes to the image of a self-contained and self-policing vernacular literary community. The twin practices of humility, placing oneself under correction and correcting others supposedly on behalf of/as an act of service to an *auctor*, are essential to this process of community formation.

Third and lastly, Copeland details how what she describes as “secondary translation,” which, instead of merely appropriating and refiguring the *auctoritas* of previous texts, seeks to use the rhetoric and practice of exegesis to construct new ideas and academic discourse within the vernacular.<sup>20</sup> The specific forms of humility play a role within this broader construction, because many of the exegetical forms that are used to authorize rhetorical invention are, ultimately, tropes of humility, (re)used to justify rhetorical invention. Also notable is her description of Gower's purpose in the *Confessio Amantis*, which reimages the vernacular as a

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<sup>18</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 3, Gavin Douglas displays an interesting reversal of this move. By claiming not to translate word for word, but instead to accurately communicate the *sententia* of the *Aeneid*, Douglas cloaks his own invention and control by claiming to have produced a transparent window through which the original meaning can be clearly observed.

<sup>19</sup> Copeland, pp. 115-126.

<sup>20</sup> Copeland, pp. 179-220.

unifying and utilitarian format, which allows for the utility of a text to be broadly shared with the community.<sup>21</sup> That is to say, it allows the writer to be a better servant to his community, a concept which will be explored further in Chapter 2.

With that theoretical basis for this work now established, it is time to turn to the unfortunately sparse literature on tropes of humility themselves. The earliest work in English I have found thus far is in translations of E. R. Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, which contains an excursus on the subject. While this section is useful in that it puts a name to this set of literary forms, is unfortunately limited in its ability to describe them. Curtius' stated purpose in the excursus is to eliminate the term "humility formula," because he associates it with an explanation for a variety of humility practices that ultimately traces them back to Paul.<sup>22</sup> Curtius dismisses this Pauline origin, and thus, Christian influence on humility practice generally. I am entirely agnostic on his historical argument regarding Pauline influence, but the discussion of *auctoritas* and truth thus far renders it irrelevant, especially when combined with the discussion of confession and the Fourth Council of the Lateran that will come in Chapter 1. These particularly medieval elements provide sufficient explanation in themselves for Christian influence on the rhetoric of humility. Curtius claims to "furnish a warning against making the Middle Ages more Christian or more pious than it was," but in practice what he does is completely ignore any potential for original ideological influence in Medieval Christendom and treat medieval authors as mere rote repeaters of their classical predecessors.<sup>23</sup> Curtius is not wrong that classical rhetoric and tropes of humility were essential in the formation of the medieval aspect, but he errs critically in not seeing the ways in which the particularly medieval,

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<sup>21</sup> Copeland, pp. 202-220.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 407-410

<sup>23</sup> Curtius, p. 412.



both secular and religious, influences them as well. That said, one will understand my deep frustration that this excursus is cited in *The Riverside Chaucer* as an explanation for some of Chaucer's employment of humility tropes. If this thesis has any wider effect, I hope it is in the removal and replacement of that citation in future any future editions (especially those aimed at a general or undergraduate audience) so that it can no longer mislead almost every new student of Chaucer.

Before we move on from this, it is worth mentioning that this failure to identify the unifying ideological framework of humility also leads Curtius to misclassify tropes of humility. He draws bright line distinctions between various humility tropes, which he names "devotional formula," "submission formula," and "protestation of incapacity." He does so because he sees clear distinctions in the classical sources of each of these rhetorical moves, and therefore, as he has explicitly rejected Christian influence and implicitly rejected medieval originality, he must treat the medieval forms as clearly distinct as well. This study does not extensively engage with this classification system, but I hope that the preceding theoretical section and the main body of this work show that tropes of humility form a complex, overlapping, multivocal, and ideologically interconnected system, rather than distinct, disconnected units of rhetoric.

A useful follow-up to this is Julius Schwietering's response to some of Curtius' criticisms of his work in an article entitled "The Origins of the Medieval Humility Formula."<sup>24</sup> Schwietering's focus is on Middle High German poetry and its relationship to Latin predecessors, much of which is beyond the scope of this thesis, which is Anglo-centric, largely due to time and length constraints. Still, his contention that medieval humility is fundamentally rooted in prayer, and that even poetic incapacity should be taken as a result of sin is well taken.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Julius Schwietering, "The Origins of the Medieval Humility Formula", *PMLA*, 69.5 (1954), pp. 1279–91.

<sup>25</sup> Schwietering, pp. 1279-1285.

However, at least in the case of English manifestations of these tropes, Schwietering's account is probably a bit too focused on devotion. Contemporary secular politics and relationships, as well as pagan classical influences should be taken seriously as contributors to the forms and functions of humility topoi, at least in their Later Medieval English manifestations.

Several decades later, David Lawton produced a more adroit and nuanced investigation of these tropes, though it was limited in tropological scope to "dullness" and limited temporally to Fifteenth Century England.<sup>26</sup> Most important to us is his identification of the fact that "The guise of dullness in the English fifteenth century, then, has many strands, and it is probably a mistake to examine any of them in isolation."<sup>27</sup> This observation is even more true for the more expansive concept of humility and the longer time-frame examined in this study. Lawton's explanation of the political utility of dullness in the unstable political climate of England in the fifteenth century is also informative.<sup>28</sup>

Where I disagree most substantially with Lawton's article is in its evaluation of the sincerity of the dullness formulation. He writes that "On the immediate social level, it is almost always disingenuous."<sup>29</sup> I will not dispute that many of the examples of this trope are disingenuous, indeed, at the end of this introduction we will look at what I consider to be a relatively generic example of a humility trope that does seem so. However, and more will be said about this in Chapter 1, given the broad influences of genuine religious and specifically confessional practice on tropes of humility, I am unwilling to say that they are disingenuous in the main.

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<sup>26</sup> David Lawton, "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century", *ELH*, 54.4 (1987), pp. 761–99.

<sup>27</sup> "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century", p. 770.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 774-794.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 770.

I will, regrettably, have to give rather short shrift to Anita Obermeier's *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*.<sup>30</sup> I came upon it shockingly late in this study, and as such, it had a limited influence on my thinking, and my opinions on it have not had time to fully develop. What I can say with confidence is it provides a much more complete accounting of the historical development of humility tropes than this work is able to, and it engages specifically with the gendered aspects of the humility tradition in a way this work simply did not have the space to, to my chagrin. I have, throughout this work, focused mostly on the contemporary medieval and English roots of humility discourse, and while I tend to deemphasize some of the classical roots Obermeier's work focuses on, it is extremely useful to have that historical work already done, as a preemptive correction.

Lastly is a work that is outside of the medieval period, but which nonetheless provided important guidance in my early conception of these tropes of humility. Patricia Pender, writing specifically about Early Modern English women, provides a comprehensive accounting of how tropes of humility were employed by those women in strategic and creative ways to navigate the literary obstacles placed in their path by a misogynistic culture.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, as David Lawton shows, identifiable tropes of humility did not sharply change as the medieval became the modern, there was instead substantial continuity in use and utility.<sup>32</sup> While one should be careful not to overemphasize continuity, I think it is fair to assume that at least some of the rhetoric Pender identifies can be safely read back onto later medieval women's writing, as well as humility rhetoric broadly. While many of the specific doctrinal disputes and methods of control

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<sup>30</sup> Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages*, Internationale Forschungen Zur Allgemeinen Und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 32 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Pender, *Early Modern Women's Writing and The Rhetoric of Modesty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-35.

<sup>32</sup> "Dullness and the Fifteenth Century", pp. 787-790.

were different, both medieval and early modern women had to navigate a highly misogynistic literary culture that, by default, treated masculinity and authority as near synonyms.

With that survey now completed, I will provide a brief structural sketch of the thesis, provide a short reading of a Chaucerian humility device to provide us with a baseline, and then move on to the main body of the argument. Chapter 1: Confessing Inadequacy explores the confessional aspects of humility tropes, as well as the ways confessional humility bleeds over into petitionary discourse. It also highlights the contemporary medieval understanding that rhetorical flexibility, the modification and combination of various genres and rhetorical modes, was essential to navigating vertical power relationships, both secular and spiritual. Where the first chapter explores the employment of humility in vertical relationships, Chapter 2: Justifying a Community looks at ways humility was employed to imagine, create, defend and improve more horizontal communities. These can range from the small circles of London intellectuals Hoccleve's *Series* engages with to the broader community of the realm Gower imagines in the *Confessio Amantis*. Chapter 3: Gavin Douglas' Assertive Humility employs the work done in the two preceding chapters to provide an extended reading of the prologues to Douglas' *Eneados*, exploring both the ways he employs familiar tropes and the ways in which he modifies and innovates on them to create a confident and assertive show of authority.

At its root, this study aims to show that humility tropes were a flexible, durable tool for the navigation of and, at times, appropriation of literary and cultural authority. Despite their apparent rotteness, medieval authors could and did employ them in a variety of ways and styles to suit their specific literary needs. This polyphony makes humility tropes hard to speak of generally, even within the confines of vernacular literature in Britain during the Late Middle Ages, but it also gestures at a broader point about medieval creativity and imagination. Modern

critics have all too often seen the employment of well-worn tropes as the sign of literary weakness or failure, but if we meet the medieval on its own terms, this sort of modification of tropes is at the heart of literary invention.

That said, let us now, briefly, turn to Chaucer's envoi in the "Complaint of Venus"

Princes, receyveth this compleynt in gre,  
 Unto your excelent benignite  
 Direct after my litel suffisaunce.  
 For elde, that in my spirit dulleth me,  
 Hath of endyting al the subtilte  
 WeI nygh bereft out of my remembraunce,  
 And eke to me it ys a gret penaunce,  
 Syth rym in Englissh hath such skarsete,  
 To folowe word by word the curiosite  
 Of Graunson, flour of hem that make in Fraunce.<sup>33</sup>

First, let us note the ironic humor of the last three lines. Chaucer claims that English lacks rhymes, making his work more difficult, and he has already told his audience that age has diminished his rhetorical powers. All the more interesting then, that, as the editors of *The Idea of The Vernacular* note, Chaucer employs an unusually elaborate and extended rhyme scheme in this very passage, one more complex and difficult than the standard ballade rhyme scheme his *auctor* employed.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Complaint of Venus" in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry Benson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), ll. 73-82. All following citations of Chaucer will be from this edition, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>34</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 28.

In addition to the humorous undermining of his source, we see other patterns that will appear in later examples. By calling on the “excellent benigne” of his princely audience, Chaucer suggests that a friendly reading is an act of Christian virtue. We see also the framing of writing as an act of “penaunce,” likely ironic in this particular context, but something that appears more seriously in both Chaucer and many of the other writers we will study. Lastly, in showing up Graunson’s rhyme scheme, Chaucer not only invites comparison with his *auctor*, with favorable results for Chaucer personally, he also compares their two vernaculars, similarly reversing the traditional hierarchy of French and English by displaying English’s capacity as an aesthetic language. While Chaucer’s employment of such a wide array of humility tropes is particularly dense and smoothly integrated, he is not at all unique. As we will see, this sort of rhetorical complexity and tropological overlapping was the norm, not a deviation from it

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## Chapter 1

### Confessing Inadequacy: Humility as Devotional Practice

E.R. Curtius, in his excursus on medieval humility tropes, largely rejected devotional (and specifically Pauline) origins, preferring to place their origins in classical rhetoric and in patterns of submission in ancient kingship.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether Paul's humility formulae influenced medieval authors, it is clear that devotional practice—particularly confessional rhetoric—did influence the deployment of humility tropes in medieval English literature. Certainly, when discussing medieval humility topoi, it is easy to see them as confessions, in the modern sense. They contain protestations of inadequacy, of literary dullness, and of sinfulness, and petitions from authors to God and supposed superiors to correct their flaws and mistakes. What is slightly more difficult to see, but no less important, is that many of these tropes are confessional along medieval lines, that is, they could be understood as a specific devotional practice, not merely as empty secular rhetoric.

While devotional practice and confession would, in the medieval mind, have been ends in themselves, we will also see that confessional literary humility was a flexible rhetorical tool, allowing medieval authors to navigate a broad range of compositional and cultural challenges. In particular, humility and confession were essential to navigating concepts of literary authority. Alastair Minnis' work has detailed both how essential the concept of *auctoritas* was to the process of medieval composition, but it also makes clear that a very narrow subset of the population could claim *auctoritas* with any kind of confidence. As we will see, humility could be

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<sup>1</sup> Curtius, pp. 407-413.

authorizing, though this paper will speak more of “navigating authority” than “authorizing,” because the employment of humility in response to authoritative structures varied greatly.

That confession, and lay religiosity in general, played more of a role in medieval life and literature after the Fourth Lateran Council than before is not a new observation, nor is it new to suggest that this change coincides with (and partially caused) the rise of vernacular literacy and literature in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Indeed, a recent chapter explores specifically how the rise of popular confession influenced medieval English literature, identifying several important moments of confession which also include humility tropes.<sup>2</sup> Several of Larson’s examples will be discussed later, but the theoretical grounding she elaborates is also useful here.

*Auctoritas*, at least theoretically, sharply limits access to literary speech. One is authoritative if authorized either by God or by antiquity, neither of which would be available to most medieval Europeans, or even most literate ones. In contrast, confession was “occasion when every adult Christian was required to speak, and, most interestingly, to speak about themselves and their relationship to their social surroundings.”<sup>3</sup> Confession could, therefore, serve as a justification for literary speech acts, as well as helping to deflect blame or criticism for mistakes. Certainly, confession was typically oral rather than literary, but that distinction is hardly a bright line in medieval texts, and the rise in vernacular written material driven by the Fourth Lateran Council could only have further blurred it.

Part of the way confessional rhetoric (and associated humility tropes) created this space for self-expression is by creating what David Lawton calls “public interiorities,” which he defined as “pieces of language—as speech or text—which already exist before they are revoiced

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Larson, “Confessing Something New,” in *Literary Echoes of the Fourth Lateran Council in England and France 1215-1405*, ed. by Maureen Boulton, *Papers in Mediaeval Studies*, 31 (Toronto, ON: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2019), pp. 229–29

<sup>3</sup> Larson, p. 236.



by a new user.”<sup>4</sup> I am perhaps pushing Professor Lawton’s definition out a shade, as the topoi to which we are referring are not fixed texts, nor is confession, but there is still reason to think the category is a useful one. Confessional manuals created “structures such as the seven deadly sins [which] served as mental checklists during confession.”<sup>5</sup> Confessional manuals, then, are meant to create a shared “text” which can be revoiced by the confessor and priest to create a personalized experience of confession. Likewise, humility topoi represent a relatively small and consistent body of textual forms that attain a variety of meanings depending on changes in authorial voice, circumstance, and wording.

Lawton’s “public interiorities” concept is important here because it, and its partner in his work, voice, are framed as and provide a useful counterpoint to the discourse around authority that frames much of this study. Particularly of note here is his points in “Voice after Arundel,” where he points out that the intensification of authoritative censorship prompted experimentation in mixed-voice texts, a sort of talking around the censorship that he compares to the poetry of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> More specifically, he mentions Margery Kempe’s book’s interactions with Arundel’s policies as “scrupulous obedience to them even as it violates their spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in some sense, Margery’s textual obedience to orthodoxy on women’s preaching violates the spirit of that orthodoxy: she presents a public text and a public figure, granted one defending orthodoxy, even as she denies public preaching. More broadly, this same factor is something that must inform all discourse on textual humility: any protestation that a text is not authorized, not good enough, and so on, must be belied or at least complicated by the fact that the text exists, the voice has spoken.

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<sup>4</sup> *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature*, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Larson, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature*, pp. 83-102.

<sup>7</sup> *Voice in Later Medieval English Literature*, p. 84.

Central to this sort of navigation of Orthodoxy is a rhetorical flexibility that Wendy Larson identifies in her chapter mentioned earlier, when discussing Hoccleve.<sup>8</sup> Hoccleve, she writes, goes through the steps of confession, but then turns and “uses that admission as the basis for reshaping himself as a moral advisor to his social superior.”<sup>9</sup> Larson explains in detail how Hoccleve invokes and plays with confessional and petitionary discourse; Hoccleve, according to her, does much the same as Lawton saw Margery Kemp doing: following the forms of confession scrupulously, but violating their spirit.<sup>10</sup> Importantly, tropes of humility are a key tool in his arsenal as he threads his various needles.

Early in his text, Hoccleve sets up his central weakness, and it is a familiar one: old age, youthful sins, and the resulting penury have left him weakened and unhealthy. He writes “And now my body empty is, and bare/ Of ioie and ful of seekly heuynesse/Al poor of ese and ryche of euel fare.”<sup>11</sup> Both old age and poverty are typical humility devices, Chaucer, for example, employs the former to explain supposed poetic ineptitude in his “Complaint of Venus,” and he and others employ protestations of poverty frequently in various begging poems, several of which we will explore later. Hoccleve, however, uses this fairly typical beginning as an anchor point as he moves rapidly between several types of discourse, as suits his needs. Initially, it provides a *causa scribendi* for the written confession. Hoccleve’s aged state forces him to confess to health, and his past sins are, of course, the reason why he must confess.

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<sup>8</sup> Larson, pp. 256–268.

<sup>9</sup> Larson, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> Larson, pp. 258–263.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, “La Male Regle de T. Hoccleve”, in *My Compleinte’ and Other Poems*, ed. by Roger Ellis, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), ll. 14–16. All future citations of Hoccleve are in this edition unless otherwise noted.

Next, one of the sins Hoccleve attributes to himself, his vulnerability to flattery, provides the impetus for his first foray into social criticism. After detailing the ways others flattered him into mistakes, he writes:

Men setteþ nat by trouthe nowadays.  
 Men love it nat. Men wole it nat cherice.  
 And yit is trouthe best at all assayes.  
 When þat fals fauel, soustenour of vice,  
 Nat wite shal how hir to cheuyce,  
 Ful Boldely shal trouth hir heed vp bere.  
 Lordes, lest fauel yow fro wele tryce,  
 No lenger souffre hir nestlen in your ere.<sup>12</sup>

Hoccleve's own personal experience with sin transitions neatly into broader social criticism, as well as specific advice for his audience. He was vulnerable to lies and flattery, but he argues that very few contemporary people are any better than he was. What was previously his own personal mistake (which he implies he has learned from) is now a failing of contemporary men, which he feels comfortable, at least briefly, expounding on, before returning to his own sinfulness. While his later shifts into advising are couched in a shift to petitionary rhetoric, as Larson describes, here he uses the confession as a place to slip in advice to social superiors, his audience of "Lordes."

Later in the same poem, Larson identifies another maneuver, in which a claim of incapacity is a key player. Having confessed to being a spendthrift, Hoccleve again advises his audience not to repeat his mistakes, then seems to realize that this is not a helpful message if he

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<sup>12</sup> Hoccleve, ll. 281-288.

wants his petition for pay to be successful.<sup>13</sup> While his undercutting of himself here is less typical than his earlier confessional move (He simply chastises himself for rambling on and then changes the subject), it serves as an easy and quick way to get out of a rhetorical jam. Hoccleve then seems to gesture at all this posturing by citing rhetorical flexibility as a key skill of a petitioner or penitent.<sup>14</sup> He writes

Whoso him shapith mercy for to craue  
His lesson moot recorde in sundry wyse  
And while my breeth may in my body waue,  
To recorde it vnnethe I may souffyse.<sup>15</sup>

This passage illustrates several key points of this study. First, Hoccleve draws together three major genres of humility tropes in four lines: confession, petition, and authorial incapacity. The context so far, and the usage of “mercy” suggest confessional discourse, but the context also makes clear the mercy he seeks is on behalf of his “poore purs and peynes stronge,” rather than for his sins, bringing in the petitionary discourse as well.<sup>16</sup> Then, when describing the “lesson” he has to teach (his request for funds), he uses a statement of incapacity to suggest its weight and scale. Hoccleve claims he will never, as long as he lives, properly be able to write up his requests. In fact, the unit of time he uses “while my breeth...” can be taken to mean that there literally is not enough breath in his body for the “sundry wyse” he must express himself. Coming at the tail end of a 450-line poem, the suggestion that he has not even come close to fully expressing himself adds a hefty weight to his request.

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<sup>13</sup> Larson, p. 263.

<sup>14</sup> Larson, pp. 263–265.

<sup>15</sup> Hoccleve, ll. 397–400.

<sup>16</sup> Hoccleve, l. 395.

Perhaps more importantly, the main conceit of this study is that humility is a rhetorically flexible and powerful tool, and here, Hoccleve not only demonstrates that rhetorical flexibility by drawing on several different types of discourse, but specifically names it, saying that anyone who craves mercy “His lesson moot recorde in sundry wyse.” If a petitioner or penitent wants to get the benefit they desire, they must “recorde” in a variety of different styles, as Hoccleve does so effectively here. Also interesting is the refiguration of begging/petitioning/confessing as teaching/preaching (the use of “breath” later blurs the already blurry medieval lines between oral and written discourse). The petition is conceived of a lesson, making the petitioner at least a teacher (as Hoccleve is at the beginning of this text), but “lessoun” certainly also has religious aspects as well, potentially referring to a scripture, sermon, or other set text. It is not certain that this is the aspect in which Hoccleve is choosing to use the word, but that is because, at this point, the genre boundaries are so blurry. Blurry, that is, because Hoccleve blurred them, because he believed it helped him get the things he wanted and needed.

This rhetorical flexibility can be seen again, in a more clearly devotional context, in the “Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale.”<sup>17</sup> While *the Canterbury Tales* themselves are certainly an experiment in genre flexibility, here the rhetorical flexibility returns to Lawton’s concept of public interiorities. The rhetorical problem the nun needs to solve is this the presenting of an exemplum to a public group seems to clearly qualify as teaching in the public sphere, something she is not allowed to do.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, by presenting a saint’s life, rather than a personal vision or divine experience, she avoids the easiest path for a woman to do something akin to preaching. Women’s religious knowledge was seen largely as revelatory, a potential complement to priestly

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that Wendy Larson’s main Chaucerian text in her chapter on confession, “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale” shares a fragment with this tale. Perhaps Chaucer was considering a confessional sub-theme?

<sup>18</sup> Alastair Minnis, ‘Religious Roles: Public and Private’, in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c.1100-c.1500*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Rosalynn Voaden, (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2011), pp. 47–52.

doctrinal knowledge, but a fundamentally different kind of knowing.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, when these revelations were committed to text, it was generally seen as necessary to have a male intermediary, not just for scribal purposes, but to effectively filter revelatory knowledge into textual authority.<sup>20</sup> Returning to public interiorities, by reciting an exemplum, a set text, the nun not only appears to be preaching, she also has an opportunity to reimagine and recontextualize the text in a way that serves her purpose, while still maintaining the intersubjective experience of sharing a well-known text with an audience. Both are important for our purposes here, and humility is a key function in both acts.

The second nun begins with one of the seven deadly sins, describing “The ministre and the norice unto vices/ Which that men clepe in Englissch Ydelnesse.”<sup>21</sup> By beginning with one of the seven deadly sins, the nun encourages us to see this as preaching. The schema of naming specific sins, and then speaking about how they should be combatted is a common one in such contexts, particularly within the seven deadly sins framework, which brings us to the first instance of humility.

Because, the nun says, idleness is such as scourge, she has engaged in the “faithful bisynesse” of translating the legend of St. Cecilia into English.<sup>22</sup> At first, this seems like a typical Chaucerian dodge, avoiding a thorny question of authorship by identifying as a mere translator or compiler, but the framing of this work as “bisynesse” turns out to be rather provocative. Catherine Sanok, pointing out that St. Cecilia is praised for her “bisynesse” by both the Nun, later in the tale, and by Pope Urban, argues that this introduction “establishes the Second Nun's

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<sup>19</sup> John Coakley, ‘Women’s Textual Authority and the Collaboration of Clerics’, in *Medieval Holy Women in the Christian Tradition, c.1100-c.1500*, ed. by Minnis and Voaden, (Turnhout: Brepols 2011), pp. 85–89.

<sup>20</sup> Coakley pp. 90–95. As Coakley establishes, this process was complex and dialogic, and women often sought and maintained degrees of authorial control. The control and censorious power of the institutional church should not be overstated.

<sup>21</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘The Second Nun’s Prologue and Tale’, ll. 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Second Nun’s Prologue’, ll. 24-26.

performance as an ethical imitation of the legend she tells.”<sup>23</sup> This is important, not just because the typically Chaucerian disclaimer can be read here as paralleling the nun with a saint, but also because of *what* work St. Cecilia did. After she is left for dead, the tale goes,

The Cristen Folk, which that aboute hire were  
 With sheetes had the blood ful faire yhent.  
 Thre days lyved she in this torment,  
 And nevere cessed hem the faith to teche  
 That she had fostred; hem she gan to preche.<sup>24</sup>

The final line seems to leave little room for doubt here, St. Cecilia’s “work” is preaching. This is further reinforced by the proposed audience for this preaching was “The Cristen Folk, which that aboute hire were,” does not seem to be a particularly limited audience. What can be said is the space in which she preached (her home, where she was executed) could be construed as private, and the usage of “fostred” might suggest the sort of maternal mentoring that was acceptable. Yet the fact remains, Chaucer uses the word preach, and at the very least, by making “The Cristen Folk” and the people “that she had fostered” synonymous, the tale expands the circle of female teaching far wider than it typically would be.

This would not be particularly provocative on its own, such tales allowed for exemplary saints to push against gender boundaries without being seen as changing anything for the normal, everyday Christians who heard them. The provocative thing is that this is the work of the saint who is being explicitly morally paralleled by the anonymous, and (for Chaucer) contemporary

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<sup>23</sup> Catherine Sanok, *Her Life Historical: Exemplarity and Female Saints’ Lives in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp 168-170.

<sup>24</sup> “The Second Nun’s Tale”, ll. 535-539.

second nun. She is not a heroic figure from centuries past, she is, in the conceit of the tales *right there, right now*, preaching to the pilgrims, a collected public.

To return to the public interiorities concept, the nun's tale certainly qualifies as the sort of communal set text Lawton was discussing, sourced from the *Legenda Aurea*, the tale of St. Cecilia is firmly within the bounds of orthodox content. What makes it interesting, and potentially controversial, is the person voicing it (a nun), the way that person ties the saint's practice to her own performance of devotion, and the public context in which the text is voiced. As elsewhere in Chaucer, humility is an essential tool in this rhetorical process.

The Nun, as discussed, never claims authorship herself, rather claiming to be a mere translator, though, it should be noted that Chaucer often used translation as a tool for rhetorical invention.<sup>25</sup> She also draws on other forms of humility discourse to reinforce and justify her practice, harkening us back to Hoccleve's "sundry wyse." The most obvious is the Marian invocation, that comes just after the introduction to the tale. After invoking Mary, she describes herself as "Me, flemed wrecche, in this desert of galle," and this sinfulness, and the need for Mary's aid is the reason for this petition in the first place. Even though she is an "unworthy sone of Eve," she asks Mary to "accepte my bileve."<sup>26</sup> This last is particularly interesting: some critics have interpreted this as evidence that the text was not intended for a female speaker, this is, ultimately, unconvincing.<sup>27</sup> Sturges, instead, sees the Marian invocation, present in both the Prioress's and the Second Nun's prologues, as a sort of invocation to a particularly appropriate muse for nun's writing.<sup>28</sup> This is particularly worth comparing with Gavin Douglas' call on Mary

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<sup>25</sup> Copeland, pp. 184-202.

<sup>26</sup> "The Second Nun's Prologue", ll. 58-63.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Sturges, "'The Canterbury Tales' Women Narrators: Three Traditions of Female Authority", *Modern Language Studies*, 13.2 (1983), p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Sturges, pp. 48-51.



as a muse, discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis. While both share the usage of Mary as a Christian muse, and elements of confessional discourse, the particular emphasis on Mary's virginity and on the "cloistre blisful of [her] sydis" seems particularly appropriate for a nun's voice.<sup>29</sup> Also notable for our purposes is the description of Mary as "Thow humble, and heigh over every creature," which demonstrates explicitly the kind of paradoxical elevation through virtuous humility that appears in many texts throughout this study.<sup>30</sup>

The last interesting aspect of humility comes at the end of the prologue, where the nun asks her audience for correction, a trope Chaucer employs elsewhere, but which takes on a slightly different significance here. Daniel Wakelin identifies the usage of the same trope at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* as "a sly boast," but also suggests that the putting of oneself under correction was an evocation of "the powerful religious and political institutions which pursued moral and textual amendment."<sup>31</sup> We can see a bit of both here, certainly in the context of the Marian invocation and the serious and orthodox saint's tale that follows, it makes sense to read the request for correction as a serious mobilization of the forces Wakelin describes. To request correction was to suggest that one was in dialogue with a broader, authoritative communities, something we will discuss in Chapter 2. However, as far as boasting is concerned, there remains the declaration that from the nuns "For bothe have I the wordes and sentence" of the original text, which could simply be indicating physical possession of the manuscript. This does not seem to be the case though because of the Nun's claim that she "folwen hire [Cecilia's] legend," which supposes a certain amount of textual fidelity.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the Nun is claiming, as Wakelin

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<sup>29</sup> "The Second Nun's Prologue", l. 43.

<sup>30</sup> "The Second Nun's Prologue", l. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 32-33.

<sup>32</sup> "The Second Nun's Prologue", ll. 81-83.

says Chaucer is in *Troilus and Criseyde*, that only an educated reader could find anything amiss.<sup>33</sup>

All that being said, caveats are in order. This is still Chaucer's text, and the Second Nun is a character in it. Chaucer, having already denied his culpability for what is spoken earlier in the text, is relatively free to engage in free play with potentially heterodox points of view, but that same freedom might not be available to other writers in other authorial positions.<sup>34</sup> Both of these factors make the Second Nun's use of humility tropes difficult to generalize in any way, particularly onto real women's religious or authorial practice. Still, we see several important commonalities with Hoccleve in *La Male Regle*. First, the employment of several different forms of humility throughout the introduction: Taking the position of translator rather than author, invoking Mary as a Christian muse, confessional self-effacement within that invocation, and submitting the final work for correction. Second, is the particular import of confessional rhetoric in devotional texts, or in texts where the authors' moral state may be in question. While the other humility devices are important, the fundamental shift comes within the *Invocacio ad Mariam*, itself an inherently a confessional space due to Mary's key role as an intercessor for the sinful. The Nun moves from asking Mary to accept her faith despite her sinfulness to defining the presentation of her text as a holy work, without which "feith is dead." At the very least, this justifies the work, but it even gestures at making it a penitential act, a work to remedy the nun's sinful faith, as well as to remedy idleness in the broader community.

We see similar confessional elements in a female authored text, the *Book of Margery Kempe*, which places a great deal of emphasis on penitential rhetoric, almost to the exclusion of

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<sup>33</sup> Wakelin, p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Though, Chaucer does ultimately seem to take back this denial by claiming responsibility for the work in his "Retraction", something we will come back to later in this chapter.

the other techniques we have seen. We also see, with that rhetoric, emphasis on the paradoxical nature of humility within Christian thought, illustrated in our last text by describing the Virgin Mary as “Thow humble, and heigh over every creature” and ultimately rooted in the gospels, where Jesus says in the Kingdom of Heaven “there shulen be the last men the firste and the firste men the last.”<sup>35</sup> That said, the more limited selection of humility tropes should not be taken as an exception to the importance of flexibility. Instead of a wide variety of tropes, Margery focuses in on confessional rhetoric, but deploys it in subtly varied ways to help navigate the various authoritative structures in which she finds herself.

The sinful state of humanity and the miraculous nature of Christ’s mercy are foregrounded in the very first moments of the text, where Margery writes

Here begynnyth a schort tretys and a comfortabyl for synful wrecchys, wherein thei may have gretsolas and comfort to hem and undyrstondyn the hy and unspecabyl mercy of ower sovereyn Savyowr Cryst Jhesu, whos name be worschepd and magnyfyed wythowten ende, that now in ower days to us unworthy deyneth to exercysen hys nobeley and hys goodnesse.<sup>36</sup>

The proposed audience is the wretched and the sinful, already suggesting that Margery will not be adopting one strategy of humility from the Second Nun, the submission to the audience for correction. However as was discussed earlier, the male transcriber was thought to provide a degree of *correctio*.<sup>37</sup> The text, however, is framed by the mercy of Christ, and, conversely, the unworthiness of both the audience and the writer to receive that mercy. The framing of the book

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<sup>35</sup> *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal books.* trans. by John Wycliffe, ed. by Josiah Forshall and Frederick Madden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1850), Matthew 20.16.

<sup>36</sup> Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS Middle English Texts, 1996), ll. 1-5.

<sup>37</sup> Coakley, pp. 90-95.

as a comfort, rather than a book of teaching (even though it does seem to aspire to be that, to some extent), reinforces this positioning of the audience as on the same level as Margery. Author and reader are sinful beings, who need to be comforted by God's love.

Having thus started this way, Margery is brought forth as the subject under the term "a synful caytyf," and we are told how Christ changed her life by

...havyng pety and compassyon of hys handwerke  
and hys creatur turnyd helth into sekenesse, prosperyté into adversyté, worshep into repref, and love into hatered. Thus alle this thyngys turnyng up so down, this creatur whych many yerys had gon wyl and evyr ben unstable was parfythly drawen and steryd to entren the wey of hy perfeccyon.<sup>38</sup>

Here, the theme of reversal, "turnyng up so down," becomes explicit within the confession Margery is making. Christ, because of his mercy, causes a great deal of earthly harm to Margery, which remedies the unsteadiness in the faith that she had identified as a fault earlier. Christ himself, Margery claims, see her sins and assigns her penance, becoming, in effect, her confessor. This direct access to the mercy of Christ is, in some sense, the thesis of Margery's book. As with other holy women, it is what allows her to explore a devotional space which was typically closed off to her, and it appears first in a direct relationship of confessor and penitent. Furthermore, it is Margery's own sinfulness that makes this text miraculous: Christ brings about in her a "wondyrful chawngyng," which would, of course, not be possible if she had been holy in the first place.<sup>39</sup> The text can be comforting for sinful wretches because it is written about someone who was once a sinful wretch herself. Of course, Margery does not say and cannot say that being a "synful caytyf" is only in her past, but she can and does say that Christ worked a

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<sup>38</sup> Kempe, ll. 10, 15-19.

<sup>39</sup> Kempe, l. 28.

change in her and leaves the audience to assume what she means. This miraculous changing helps to obviate potential concerns about authorship and authority: the text is being authored by a supposedly sinful woman because it *has to be* to exist in the form it does. It would not be miraculous otherwise.

Margery also employs this penitential reversal to defend herself preemptively from criticism, saying “Thei that beforne had worshepd her sythen ful scharply reprevyd her; her kynred and thei that had ben frendys wer now hyr most enmys”<sup>40</sup> Knowing that she faces a great deal of popular hostility throughout her narrative, Margery frames this hostility as part of the penitential process. Just as her health had been turned to sickness, her friends had been made into enemies, making their reproof a gift of God rather than valid criticism. Later in the text, Margery’s survival of this hostility is again imagined as a sign of God’s grace, for after her expulsion from the church at Canterbury under accusations of Lollardy, Christ says to her “It wer unpossibyl to the to suffyr the scornys and despytes that thow schalt have ne were only my grace supportyng the.”<sup>41</sup> The people in the church demand a confession of her, interrogating her as to her orthodoxy, but they receive no admission of sin. Margery, the text claims, is protected from this unjust confessional authority by her divine confessor.

When considered in this light, this is rather bold on Margery’s part, and it also raises an interesting rhetorical strategy within the text. There are a great number of specific incidents, such as this, that suggest Margery’s spiritual power, such as when she functionally acts as the confessor to the monk who dislikes her, whereas gestures at humility are often less specific, but woven regularly throughout the text, the most common being the referral to Margery by

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<sup>40</sup> Kempe, ll. 26-28.

<sup>41</sup> Kempe, ll. 672-673.

demeaning terms like “this creatur.”<sup>42</sup> Still, even those displays of spiritual power are limited by humility, she, of course, does not survive persecution by herself, but through “only my [Christ’s] grace. The essential internal conflict between low/high and sacred/profane allows Margery to both perform acts of great confidence and faith, such as confronting a hostile priest as a laywoman, but also requires her to be self-effacing to a near extravagant degree.

Yet, this confidence does have limits: Margery may, through her particular service, place herself above her audience and her peers and make herself a counselor or confessor to the lower clergy, but she maintains, for the most part, a traditional confessional relationship with the episcopacy. Particularly notable here is the incident in London, which juxtaposes these two relationships rather nicely. A laywoman confronts Margery, and says of her that she would “belyn a fagot to bren the wyth,” and while the text indicates that this is unreasonable, I think it is useful to take a moment step back and recognize that this woman has approached Margery in church and told her that she would gladly murder her.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of circumstances, that must have been quite shocking, and it certainly helps to justify her low opinion of her fellow layfolk.

In contrast, Margery’s encounter with Arundel, a man of fearsome reputation, is quite tame. She greets him, honors him, makes a request, and it is granted.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the request she is granted is a measure of control (in the text, literally, “auctoryté”) over her confession, that is, she is able to choose the priest to whom she confesses, and she is able to confess every Sunday, a far more regular confession than was mandated under Fourth Lateran. Much like her relationship with Christ, Margery does not presume to demand anything, but she does end up getting what she wants anyway. She then submits herself to questioning by

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<sup>42</sup> We should also note again here, that in referring to herself this way, Margery is not putting herself below her audience, but at a level with them at best. The text is *for* sinful wretches, so the author is not below them.

<sup>43</sup> Kempe, ll. 823-827.

<sup>44</sup> Kempe, ll. 827-832.

the Archbishop regarding the authenticity of her weeping and visions, he finds “no defawt therin.”<sup>45</sup> This is a pattern throughout *The Book*: Margery is only willing to submit herself to the highest orders of the Church hierarchy (Bishops, Archbishops, and Christ himself), and when she does, her outlook is invariably approved. Margery’s rare complete submission, then, serves to justify and empower the authority which she constantly suggests she has, but studiously avoids claiming.

Many of the things in this section seem contradictory. Margery elevates herself by denigrating herself, Christ heals her by afflicting her, she gains authorization from Arundel through submission. Fundamentally, this takes place because she is utilizing the inherent paradox in Christian thought around vertical power relations and virtuousness generally to navigate the structures in which she lives. Margery cannot authorize herself, but if denigration is authorizing, then she can denigrate herself in pursuit of that authority. This may seem somewhat self-interested, but I am reminded of an important point made by Chris Wickham regarding the relationship between secular self-interest and religious belief: both motives are present and inextricable in nearly all circumstances. Medieval people were both true believers *and* self-interested at times. Margery’s confidence in herself should be understood in the context of that sincere belief.<sup>46</sup>

Lastly, Margery is an example of why this study prefers to speak of navigating authority, rather than resisting it. While surviving accusations of heresy from mobs and the judgments from many lower clergymen does, at times seem like resistance, it is her profound commitment to orthodoxy that helps protect her. Any defiance she shows clergy stops cold when she reaches the episcopacy, and she is fully authorized only by the action of that episcopacy. All that is to say,

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<sup>45</sup> Kempe, ll. 838-839.

<sup>46</sup> Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 20-21.

while Margery, personally, pushes against aspects of the authoritative apparatus to pursue her spiritual goals, she is ultimately committed to the justness and reification of that authority.

In an intriguing contrast, Osbern Bokenham, in his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* avoids suggesting his own *personal* authority or morality but argues that his text is nonetheless authoritative. The narrator says of himself that he is “an Austyn frere,” which would, theoretically, give him a solid claim to be an authorized writer, but then refuses to give any more biographical information on the account that “the unwurthyne/ Bothe of hys persone and eek his name/ Myht make the werk to be put in blame.”<sup>47</sup> He then deploys a series of typical metaphors, such as the separation of the wheat from the chaff, of gold from the earth, and so on, to explain that his work should not be judged on account of his sins, and that people should separate out the goodness of his story from his personal sins. While these metaphors and similar ones (the nut and the nut-meat, etc.) are typical, this deployment of them is not. Typically, they gesture at either the exegetical act of finding *sententia* within apparently non-educational narrative, or at the extraction of meaning despite the poor rhetorical skill of the author. While Bokenham does mention his poor rhetorical skill as a problem, the real focus here is on his moral failings and reputation, which he is imploring his audience to overlook.

What Bokenham does here is in some ways the inverse of Margery’s performance of humility, and the atypical employment of metaphor is key to it. While Margery employs her personal connection with god and the inherent sanctity it implies to navigate the authority of the church, Bokenham is mobilizing that authority to cover over his own supposed moral deficits.

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<sup>47</sup> Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. by Ian Johnson, in *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor and Ruth Evans, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press), ll. 32-36



While sometimes controversial, it was the dominant orthodox view that an ordained priest could perform the sacraments and preach effectively while in a state of mortal sin.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, it is sensible that a sinful monk could still produce a valuable text. Bokenham's rewritten metaphors invoke this doctrine, making acceptance of his text an act of orthodoxy and closing it off from criticism based on his failings.

Bokenham further invokes confession says to his audience

I you beseche, frend, right enterly,  
That ye vouchesaf for me to preye  
Onto thys virgyn, that ere I deye,  
Thorgh her merytys I may purchase  
Of my mislevyng a pardounn of grace.<sup>49</sup>

Though does not give a comprehensive account of his sins, as one ought to in a confession, he indicates his sinfulness, and frames the writing as an act of public penance. He directly solicits prayers for mercy from his audience and is also engaging in an act of devotion to the saint which he hopes will intervene on his behalf. He earlier frames the writing as an act of charity to his patron, but this other motive is perhaps compatible. Charity is often a penitential act, and there are numerous examples of donations given on the condition that prayers are said on the behalf of donors. This request for prayers for mercy, directed at the supposed receivers of Bokenham's charity seems to mirror those acts.

Humility, then, serves multiple purposes within this introduction. First, it protects Bokenham from criticism by (at least implicitly) invoking the orthodox doctrine that a sinful priest can still provide the sacraments and preach effectively. Second, it quite literally provides

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<sup>48</sup> *Fallible Authors*, pp. 40-54.

<sup>49</sup> Bokenham, ll. 228-232.

the causes for writing, as his devotion to his patron and the miraculous mercy of St. Margeret, which he ends the poem by appealing to, are what drives him to write in the first place. The flexibility of humility is again demonstrated: aside from the presence of confessional discourse, Bokenham's process is almost diametrically opposed to Margery's, and he also reinvents several common metaphors to help accomplish his goals.

Chaucer, in his similarly titled *The Legend of Good Women* also employs a confessional framing, though the direction of his narrator's penitence is more secular, directed at the God of Love.<sup>50</sup> The narrator's motive for writing is explicitly penitential, and the frame narrative follows (or appropriates?) standard patterns of penitence before God, though with interesting twists. The God of Love lists the narrator's crimes and indicates that a serious punishment is due to him. Then, Alceste, Love's queen, filling the role of Mary, intervenes and petitions The God of Love for a lighter sentence to be placed on the narrator. The penance he is assigned, of course, is for him to write the *Legend of Good Women*.

Interestingly, though, the narrator is not immediately a humble penitent. While he is grateful for the intervention that spared him, he says "But truly I wende, as in this cas,/ Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas."<sup>51</sup> He rejects that he is guilty of the crimes he has been accused of, which perhaps points to a difference between this and more clearly devotional works: the Court of Love can be challenged in its judgment (and indeed, Alceste does not argue that the God Love is correct, only that "Love ne wol nat countrepleted be/ In right ne wrong").<sup>52</sup> Still, in the end, the narrator accepts the penance, and after realizing who it was who set it, performs an

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<sup>50</sup> Though, as we will see with the *Confessio Amantis*, the direction of confession to the God of Love does not necessarily preclude moral or devotional aspects to the writing, and it would be a mistake to consider these works *entirely* secular.

<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 452-453.

<sup>52</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 466-467.

elaborate praise to Alceste, which makes her “wex red for shame,” proving her humility and virtue.<sup>53</sup>

Now all this may seem somewhat detached from the more clearly devotional or moral works that we have dealt with thus far, but several things need to be considered. As we have seen, confessional rhetoric is a flexible thing, and novelty and creativity in its use should be expected. Furthermore, there are several factors to consider that complicate the picture of this as a purely secular text. The first is, of course, the very usage of confessional models which has been described. Second, to borrow from the Aristotelian prologue, the final cause of the text is ultimately the telling of moral stories. The God of Love is angry with the narrator because he has spoken only of immoral women, and he and his queen want moral stories told instead, a common complain levied at Chaucer and other vernacular poets by more religiously minded authors. In addition, Chaucer would be engaging in a common practice by drawing Christian morals from Pagan lives. Certainly, this would not be completely uncontroversial, but it would hardly be radical either. Perhaps most importantly, it is important to note that the confessional frame narrative is not a standalone thing, but a frame within a frame.

The text begins with a meditation on literary authority and knowledge of the afterlife: “A thousand sythes have I herd men telle/That there is joye in hevene and peyne in hell,” certainly a strange place to begin for a purely secular text.<sup>54</sup> The narrator’s answer to the epistemic problem he presents in those two lines is *auctoritas*: people should believe in the Christian truth because

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<sup>53</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, l. 523.

<sup>54</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 1-2. The moral weight of this opening is perhaps a bit stronger in the G prologue, used here, than in the F prologue, due to the usage of “sythes” instead of “times,” implying that the men who “telle” are telling moral truths, not just repeating the same things over and over.

old, wise doctrine says it is true. He says, “And to the doctryne of these olde wyse/ Yeven credence, in every skylful wyse.”<sup>55</sup> He also says of himself that

And as for me, though my wit be lyte,  
On bokes for to rede I me delyte.  
And in myn herte have hem in reverence,  
And to hem yeve swich lust and swich credence<sup>56</sup>

So, having just framed old books as the true source of Christian doctrine, here the narrator’s humility “tho my wit be lyte” serves to illustrate his devotion to old book and stories, and thus to Christian truth.

There is then an interesting interlude, where the Narrator forsakes his books and goes out because of the beauty of May, saying “Farwel my stodye as lastynge this season,” and yet, this passage represents less of a break from what came before than it seems.<sup>57</sup> The narrator continues to employ humility topoi in a way that gesture at the doing of academic and devotional work. When he speaks of the daisies he encounters on his journey, he employs a very similar rhetoric of inexpressibility when describing how they are “Fulfyld of vertu and of alle honor” to what Frick identifies in the Prioress’s prologue.<sup>58</sup> The Prioress says of Mary that “thy bountee, thy magnificence/ Ther maay no tonge expresse in no science,” and later proclaims that “My konnyng is so wayk, O blisful Queene/ For to declare thy grete worthynesse,” both very typical humility motifs when approaching the divine.<sup>59</sup> The narrator, similarly, says of the daisies “Fayn wolde I preysen, if I coude arygt;/ but wo is me, it lyth not in my myght.”<sup>60</sup> Now, it would be too

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<sup>55</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll.19-20.

<sup>56</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 29-32

<sup>57</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, l. 39.

<sup>58</sup> Donald Fritz, “The Prioress’s Avowal of Ineptitude”, *The Chaucer Review*, 9 (1974), pp. 166-181.

<sup>59</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Prologue of the Prioresses’ Tale”, ll. 475-476, 481-482.

<sup>60</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 59-60.

strong of a claim to simply say that these two moments are rhetorically identical. It is certainly true that Chaucer would have regarded Mary as of a much higher order than the beauty of nature, but this description still blurs the line between the secular and the sacred, particularly when it is put in the academic/devotional context of the rest of the introduction.

The next passage employs a rather typical humility metaphor describing the relationship between the modern writer and old books, with the narrator, after the rhetorical corn has been gathered and processed, coming along and “glenynge here and there.”<sup>61</sup> In this case, the humility is complicated by the fact that he is not referring to the general old books of the earlier prologue, but rather to the specific debate poetry surrounding the flower and the leaf, to which he professes neutrality, because he wishes to tell an older tale, from “er swich strif was begonne.”<sup>62</sup> This, in fact, leads us directly back to the discussion of old authorities, which makes it rather hard to reflect back on the narrator’s separation of study and spring and take it entirely seriously. Within the interlude, the reader is treated to devotional and disputational topoi, and after two motifs (the daisies and the corn), is lead directly back into the world of authoritative books.

Just before the story begins, the narrator tells us that his purpose in telling the tale is “to yeve credence/ To bokes olde and don hem reverence,” but he also says that he will be telling “many a story, or ells of many a geste.”<sup>63</sup> The last time the narrator spoke of authoritative books, it was clearly in the context of academic or theological works, but now there seems to be a certain slippage in the reference to “olde books.” Now it seems narrative storytelling, about secular/courtly matters, “gestes” are included in the category. Indeed, the narrator plans to tell

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<sup>61</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 61-64.

<sup>62</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 70-80. This is a very Chaucerian way of employing humility topoi, and though it is not strictly tied to devotionality, it should be noted here. Chaucer sets up a supposedly superior authority, who he follows behind, picking up the leftovers of their literary corn, but then proceeds to profess neutrality in the conflict which these authorities participate in because he has an older (more authoritative) story to tell.

<sup>63</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 81-87.

these stories “as autors seyn,” making it clear that we are still within the realm of authoritative texts as far as he is concerned, even if he has pulled a genre sleight of hand.<sup>64</sup>

After this, the text returns to May, to the dream vision, and moves to the meeting with the God of Love discussed earlier. The journey getting there is a bit messy, as the narrator begins in the world of scholarship, ducks briefly out to smell the flowers, then returns to authoritative discourse for eight lines before beginning the framing dream vision proper. That dream vision itself invokes devotional models of confession, though it frames them oddly. The penitent does not acknowledge his sin, but accepts the penance nonetheless, and agrees to create a text that is very much like, but is not a collection of saint’s lives.

It is the narrator’s humility that guides the reader through this slippage: first he is simply giving credit to authors, then he is performing penance at the behest of the God of Love, and yet the end result is that the narrator is tasked with creating an original work of moral significance, the essence of *auctoritas*. What we see is, in a way, the reverse of Hoccleve. Where Hoccleve mixed genres to make his act of humility more effective, Chaucer mixes the wide variety of humility tropes to move smoothly between several seemingly different genres and levels of ethical significance.

All this is, again, not to say that this is a purely or even primarily devotional work. However, what this does display is a great deal of formal slippage in this prologue, between moral, academic, and romantic writings, and humility is often a crucial part of that slippage, is flexible rhetorical tool for establishing virtue and authority. This also provides another example

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<sup>64</sup> “As autors seyn” also leads to an interesting ambiguity: is the narrator *repeating* authoritative texts, as the authors say them, quoting word for word, as Chaucer often claims to do with his sources or is he telling the tale like an author would, that is, as an author himself?

of how Chaucer's relationship with authority and with the moral importance of his works is almost always playful and ambiguous.

Almost always, however, is not always, which brings us to the final text of this study, Chaucer's "Retraction." Certainly, an ambiguous text, but not a playful one. The "Retraction" has inspired tremendous critical disagreement, and while I think the humility lens elaborated thus far can be exegetically useful here, I think it is important to stipulate what this does *not* do. I do not propose to have any particular insight into Chaucer's mental state or intention in writing the text. As we have seen, the underlying intent of humility is a complicated, difficult thing. Earnest humility and self-interested mobilization of humility tropes look very similar from a 600 year remove. Instead, what will be attempted here is to use the established context to inform a more formalist reading of the text itself: in the context of medieval confession and humility, what is it *doing*?

The first section of the retraction should, at this point, seem somewhat familiar.

Now I preye to hem all that herkne this little tretys or rede, that if there be any thyng in it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse./ And if ther be any thyng that displeaseth hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonyng and nat to my wyl, that would ful fayn have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng./ For oure book seith, "Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine," and that is myn entent.<sup>65</sup>

Chaucer, here, seems to be employing a several tropes we have seen before. Similarly to Bokenham, he employs doctrine (this time a quote from scripture) to try to place the

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<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve", ll. 1081-1085.

responsibility for reading his text properly on his audience, rather than taking the blame for the fruits of his “unkonyngē.” They are to find the useful things in his text, that which is “for our doctrine,” and when they find something they dislike, they are to place the blame on Chaucer’s lack of wisdom and skill, rather than a corrupt will. Indeed, Chaucer claims, he has always intended for his work to be for “oure doctrine,” even if he has sometimes failed.

All this would be fairly typical, another redeployment of humility tropes to dodge responsibility for a text, except for what follows. Chaucer straightforwardly disavows a huge chunk of his literary output, dismissing them all as “worldly vanities” for which he begs God’s forgiveness. He then lists his few exceptions he does not retract, writes a few more lines of praise, and then *The Canterbury Tales* are over.

The amount of play with confessional rhetoric we have seen thus far, from Chaucer himself as well as others, renders this all the more stark. Just a few lines earlier, it seemed as if we were in the same realm of maneuverability and cleverness, where faults can be covered over and audiences manipulated, and then, all at once, we are not. What is useful in unpicking this is the fact that all of the confessional rhetoric has been formally incomplete. Confession is fundamentally dialogic, but every text we have investigated has only a single speaker. Usually, this has not presented a problem: For Margery and Hoccleve, their use of confessional rhetoric was to describe past sins, already repented of and amended, as a way of morally authorizing themselves later. The second nun and Bokenham both gesture at their sinfulness, but only in general terms, to lead into some other point. With Chaucer, who in the present of this text is attempting to confess and amend specific sins, we feel the lack of the confessor’s side of the dialogue acutely. What was the process by which he came to the decision that his past works were sinful and needed to be amended in this way? What in particular did he find fault with, and



what did he see as “fore oure doctrine?” All of these questions are unanswerable, and mean, I think that this text must remain forever open. With the confession formally incomplete, we can never fully understand it.

What is notable as well is in this moment, where actual, proper confession is imminent, the flexibility of confessional rhetoric seems to drop away. It is interesting, and useful to see the ways in which the flexibility of this rhetoric allowed writers to do things that might not have been fully allowed by the authoritative structures of knowledge and truth they lived with, but that flexibility is not unlimited. As we discussed earlier with Margery, there is no reason to think Chaucer’s faith was not sincere, and thus, attempts to completely remove genuine concern for the state of his soul from the text seem misguided. At what seems to be the end of his literary process, in the moment of confessing his sins, that sincere belief exerted an authority that could not be bent or avoided.

## Chapter 2

### Justifying a Community: Humility as a Social Practice

Navigating the vertical political/authoritative relationships described in the last chapters is perhaps the most intuitive use of humility topoi, but it is not the only one. Humility could be a useful tool for building and justifying more horizontal literary communities. Imagined audiences to whom writers deferred were frequently portrayed as groups of peers engaged in dialogue. Furthermore, humility topoi could be used to defend or explain writing in English in the first place, and English was frequently understood as the more plain, humble, broad or straightforward in the trilingual climate of later medieval England. In both cases, humility could be a useful tool for building communities and for navigating complex social situations within a literary framework.

As in the first chapter, tropes of humility in this context are widely varied and highly flexible, in both form and aim, so general claims are difficult, but this chapter will focus on three main ends: First, the building and maintenance of a social community of writers, readers, and intellectuals. Second, the imagining of a broader, more universal community that was at least affected by, if not necessarily an audience to, literary production. Thirdly, the construction of a particularly *national* community, defined by shared vernacular. The second and third purpose in particular are deeply tied in with vernacularity, which is an important part of what distinguishes humility tropes in this study from a broader tradition of humility rhetoric inherited from the Greek and Latin classics.

As in Chapter 1, Hoccleve seems to be a natural place to start, because his *Series*, much like *Male Regle* gives as a particularly transparent look at the literary process, and how it

engages with Hoccleve's social world. Hoccleve is, even more than the earlier generation of English poets, enmeshed in the growing literary and bureaucratic circles in London, and his *Series* is deeply concerned with his relationship with this wider social circle. The *Series*, furthermore, begins with a deep sense of social isolation, and a desire to rectify this through literary production. Importantly, the window into Hoccleve's literary process shows a distinctly collaborative approach, as the text dramatizes the exchange between Hoccleve and his Friend, and specifically shows how tropes of humility function within that literary argument.

Hoccleve makes explicit that his diminished social standing after his bout of mental illness is what is driving his complaint. After describing his grief at his isolation in the prologue, he writes

The greef abowte mym herte so swal  
 And bolned euear to and to so sore,  
 That nedis oute I muste therewithal.  
 I thougt I nolde keep it cloos no more,  
 Ne lete it in me for to olde and hore,  
 And for to preue I cam of a womman  
 I braste oute on þe morowe and þus bigan.<sup>1</sup>

It seems almost reductive to talk about this and the complaint that follows in terms of tropes or topoi, as Hoccleve is clearly deeply emotional as he writes those words. Still, this section draws on several important patterns. It echoes the Aristotelian prologue, particularly detailing here the efficient and final causes of the work.<sup>2</sup> The efficient cause is Hoccleve himself, but, as many medieval authors do, he portrays himself as compelled or forced to write the text by

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, "My Compleinte", ll. 29-35.

<sup>2</sup> See *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, pp. 27-29 for the use of this prologue type in medieval texts.

circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, though, while most of those cases the compulsion is external, usually enforced by a patron, here it is largely internal, caused by Hoccleve's own "grief" at how he is being treated by his community. Insofar as there is an external cause, it comes from social pressure, rather than the (ultimately) violent coercive power of a superior. Still, this employment of compulsion as a cause for writing serves the same purpose as it does in other texts: justifying the act of authorship by one who would not traditionally possess *auctoritas*.

Hoccleve also details his final cause here, when he says that he writes "for to preue I cam of a womman." That is, he writes this text in an attempt to assert his basic humanity. In theory, this lower final bar also helps to justify the text: Hoccleve has framed the text as a complaint, a petition, a text with a short-term goal rather than an authoritative statement for the ages. We see later, however, that this does not entirely last, and, much as Chaucer does in *Legend of Good Women*, Hoccleve is pulling a bit of a genre bait and switch. Still, we see how humility is employed to shape the discussion of causes to explain a text that is not typically authoritative.

Moving on to the main body of the complaint, we see deployment of a more conventional display of humility, though one that is still informed by the emotional urgency of the text.

I mene, to commvne of thingis mene,  
 For I am but rȳt lewde, douteles  
 And ignoraunte. My kunnyng is ful lene.  
 ȳit homely reasoun knowe I neueretheles  
 Not hope I founden be so resounlees  
 As men demen. Marie, Christ forbede!

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Chaucer's narrator in *The Legend of Good Women*, David Lindsay's "Answer to the Kingis Flyting," or as we will discuss in Chapter 3, Gavin Douglas in the prologues to his *Aeneidos*.

I can no more. Preue may the dede.<sup>4</sup>

These are familiar terms, but in context it is hard to see them as merely rote or tropological. “Marie, Christ forbede!” is more of an oath than the standard invocation of the divine before speaking, even without the added punctuation. The object is the same, invoking God and Mary for support in a time of personal and literary need, but the brief declaration adds an urgency not found in longer invocations.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Hoccleve engages in typical self-critique about his lack of wit, but he also draws on the framework of “lene cunning” but “homely reason” to argue that his supposed lack of book learning does not mean he is witless (Thomas Usk, who we will discuss later in this chapter, draws a similar distinction, though in his case it is between complex rhetoric and simple truth). Specifically, Hoccleve is claiming that despite his supposed lack of learned knowledge (He is “lewide” and “ignoraunte”) he does not lack in mental faculties, which is what matters to him given his purpose. Plenty of people who “cam of a woman” are ignorant, but having the inherent ability to reason is essential to Hoccleve’s concept of his own personhood.

This supposed witlessness is anchored by the phrase “as men demen,” which makes it clear that this is not hypothetical scorn, as it usually is in these topoi, but real social isolation which Hoccleve hopes to combat. By changing the audience’s scorn from a future hypothetical to something that has already happened and is still happening, Hoccleve rewrites this standard trope into something immediately relevant to his life and circumstances.

Hoccleve’s plan to combat his reduced reputation seems odd, at first, since he plans to write a book, and yet he writes “I can no more. Preue may the dede.” “I can no more” seems to

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<sup>4</sup> “My Compleinte”, ll. 218-224.

<sup>5</sup> It is briefly worth noting that oaths like this are an interesting parallel to the humility tropes discussed in this text. By nature, oaths are rote, set texts, but this roteness, the fact that everyone knows them, and their ability to be rapidly and instinctually deployed in response to circumstance is exactly what gives them their impact.

mean “I cannot speak of this anymore” but if that is the case, why does Hoccleve choose writing as the “dede” to “preve” his reason? Hoccleve, given his initial intention is to translate “Learn to Die,” seems to be leaning on *auctoritas* to prove his sanity, that is, he wishes to translate a text of value, something with *sententia*, and present it to his community and prove that he has, at least “homely reason.” The word he uses for the writing process is “comunynge,” implying a communal dialogue, even before the appearance of the Friend.

He also emphasizes the adjective “mene” by employing its homograph as the main verb of the first quoted line, which is interesting given the wide range of meanings available for the adjectival “mene.” Limiting us to just the relevant definitions, the MED says that mene can be defined as “Shared by all, common,” with regards to people “inferior in rank; of low rank or status, poor,” and with regards to things, particularly learning, “inferior, unremarkable, second rate” but also potentially “In a middle state between two extremes” or “of middle rank.”<sup>6</sup> Hoccleve thus opens up an intriguingly ambiguous space with regards to his *materia*, in that he could be talking either about lowly things, common things, or things relating to the social middle. The self-criticism that follows certainly suggests the lowly interpretation, but even if we accept that, Hoccleve has at least sown the seeds for his social recovery by suggesting he will discourse on things of value to the community.

Even with regards to this low/middling *materia*, Hoccleve does not claim outright to be an *auctor*, only that he has basic reason, but he places himself in the same rhetorical framework as his authoritative predecessors while refashioning the humility trope to refer to his specific social isolation, rather than a generalized lack of intellect. That is to say, it was perfectly normal

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<sup>6</sup> “Mēne, adj.(1)&(2)” in *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1952-2001.) Online edition in Middle English Compendium. Ed. Frances McSparran, et al.. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library, 2000-2018.) <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>>.

within his literary community (anchored, of course, by Chaucer) to portray oneself as merely a translator or compiler. Chaucer, despite all his protestations in that direction, was nonetheless regarded within the community of English writers as an *auctor*. This is all the more important given Hoccleve's efforts both to cement that status for Chaucer, and to, by doing so, position himself as an inheritor.<sup>7</sup> In the context of a literary community self-consciously aware of how Chaucer defined himself as an author, the claim to be a mere translator cannot be taken literally.

The importance of this authorial position shows up again in the "Dialogue", this time when the friend argues that Hoccleve should not publish his complaint, saying "If þou be wiis of that matter ho./ Reherse þou it not ne it awake./ Keep al that cloos for thin honours sake."<sup>8</sup> In short, the friend fears that the "Complaint" will worsen Hoccleve's standing, and tells him that if he *were* wise, he would not make the text public because people have forgotten Hoccleve's illness, and he need not remind everyone of it.

Hoccleve responds in similar terms to those we saw in the "Complaint", saying "thowghe I be lewde/ I not so fere-for the dote;/ I wott wat men have seyde/ and seyne of me."<sup>9</sup> This time, humility is deployed to argue that while Hoccleve may be "lewde" he is socially aware, and can judge his status in his community. He further accuses his friend of exegetical failure, saying of his complaint "if ye toke hede/ it makethe mention/ that men of me speke/ in myne audiene."<sup>10</sup> Hoccleve gestures here at a Chaucerian role that he claims explicitly later in the same text, the humble reporter, who merely accurately reports what others have said in his presence, rather than inventing something new, implicitly contrasting himself favorably with his Friend, who he accuses of not remembering something he has said just moments ago.

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<sup>7</sup> John Bowers, "Thomas Hoccleve and the Politics of Tradition", *The Chaucer Review*, 36.4 (2002), pp. 352–69.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, "A Dialogue", ll. 29-35.

<sup>9</sup> "A Dialogue", ll. 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> "A Dialogue", ll. 43-44.

This argument over the reading of Hoccleve's text and over a broader "reading" of their social context and probable textual reception provides a good place to segue into the work of Ethan Knapp, who argues that the series reveals a particular kind of bureaucratic collaboration, the exchange, copying and editing of documents which, by the end, have no single clear author.<sup>11</sup> While this sort of collaboration is by no means unheard of in other contexts, this particular social world does provide a solid explanation for the unusual dramatization of the collaborative process. Certainly, submissions for correction and other gestures at collaborative writing do occur regularly in medieval texts, as we will discuss later, but rarely if ever do we find such a detailed account of the process.

Knapp, however, errs a bit by describing the result of this process, particularly the argument between Hoccleve and his friend over publication as textually open, without a defined winner.<sup>12</sup> The first and most obvious difficulty is the same one that problematizes all humility topoi in medieval literature: the text exists, Hoccleve *did* choose to continue his work, write the rest of the series and publish it. Knapp is correct that Hoccleve faces a difficult epistemological problem, the identification of his madness or sanity, and the mirror anecdote in particular is a powerful demonstration of that problem, but it is not at all clear that the text treats this issue as impossible to solve.

From a modern epistemological standpoint, it certainly seems that way, but the solution Hoccleve poses is much the same as the one Chaucer's narrator proposes to a similar problem in the prologue of *The Legend of Good Women*. For Chaucer's narrator, the problem is that Heaven and Hell have never been observed, for "There ne is non that dwelleth in this contre/ that eyther

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<sup>11</sup> Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001) pp. 181-183.

<sup>12</sup> Knapp, pp. 165-170.



hath in helle or hevene ybe,” whereas for Hoccleve it is that he cannot determine the state of his mind, because he cannot centerlessly observe it.<sup>13</sup> The proposed solution, in both cases, is the same, however: *Auctoritas* provides the centerless, objective truth necessary to answer both questions. For Chaucer’s narrator, the truth can be found in old books, and Hoccleve similarly grounds his hope for social redemption in the production of a meaningful text, as we saw earlier. Furthermore, his argument with his Friend is clearly couched, on both sides, in the exegesis of his own text, as we have seen, and in the quotation and interpretation of various authorities.

Hoccleve argues that his friend should defer to Tullius and Solomon, who say “that frendship verray/ Endurith euere” and “Ones freend/and holde euere there vp-on.”<sup>14</sup> To strengthen this argument, he relies on a quick gesture of humility, reminding his friend that, regarding Solomon’s works “yee knowe it bet than I by many fold.”<sup>15</sup> There are, he claims “Auctoritees an heep, kowde I yow tell” but he will defer only because of lack of time.<sup>16</sup> His friend’s behavior in their relationship, Hoccleve argues, is dictated by authoritative texts that they share in the study of, and, as someone who supposedly knows them better, Hoccleve’s friend has all the more reason to follow their instructions. Hoccleve’s friend clearly does not disagree with this fundamental argumentative strategy, because he responds that “Salomon bit/afir conseil do;/ And good it is/ conforme thee ther-to.”<sup>17</sup> He poses a different interpretation of their problem from the same authority, but fundamentally his argument too rests on *auctoritas* as the solution to their disagreement.

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<sup>13</sup> “The Legend of Good Women” ll. 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, “A Dialogue” ll. 344-345, 353.

<sup>15</sup> “A Dialogue”, l. 352.

<sup>16</sup> “A Dialogue”, l. 360.

<sup>17</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 391-392.

If authority is the chosen tool of argumentation, it is humility that finally ends the argument. Hoccleve promises his friend “I nat medle of matires grete/ Ther-to nat strecche may myn intellect; I neuere yit was brent with studies hete;/Let no man holde me ther-in suspect.”<sup>18</sup> Hoccleve, as he promised his audience earlier in the “Complaint” will deal with “things mene” rather than “matieres grete.” Humility functions here as a social lubricant, allowing Hoccleve to end the argument without either winning it or conceding much of anything. As we have seen before, declarations of limited or low subject matter are fairly common, and rarely seem to actually restrain authorial practice. The Friend, apparently satisfied, concedes the point and, as we see later, even helps with Hoccleve’s writing.

Indeed, a few stanzas later, Hoccleve uses another declaration of humility to practically compel his friend to help. After explaining who he is writing for, Hoccleve declares he will not choose his subject matter without his friend’s help. The friend initially refuses, and Hoccleve replies “No, cerrtein freend/as now no cheuissance/Can I; your conseil is to me holsum; As I trust in yow, mynystreth me sum.”<sup>19</sup> After insisting earlier that Hoccleve needed to listen to council, because Solomon said so, the Friend can hardly now refuse to give council once requested. Humility drove the text’s creation, allowed Hoccleve to escape one argument and now allows him to get the advice he actually wants.

What follows is, in many ways, a rewriting of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. We saw earlier how Hoccleve dealt with a similar epistemological problem as the Chaucer did in the outer frame, but now we see a return of the narrative of the inner frame. Hoccleve’s past anti-feminist writings have angered his audience, and he must now, the friend tells him, write a new text to redress the anger of his female readers. The difference here is that

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<sup>18</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 498-501.

<sup>19</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 621-623.

while in *The Legend* this problem is framed penitentially throughout, which Chaucer answering for his supposed crimes before the God of Love, here the impetus is directly social.<sup>20</sup> Hoccleve is “in hir reproof” because “mochil thyng haast thou write,/ That they nat foryeue haue/ ne foryite.”<sup>21</sup> Hoccleve’s Friend does maintain a penitential framework initially, arguing that Hoccleve should do this “Syn now the holy seson is of lente/ In which it sit euery man him repent,” but at no point in the following depiction of Hoccleve’s supposed crimes does the Friend point to anything morally wrong that Hoccleve has done, nor does he argue that anything Hoccleve said is incorrect.<sup>22</sup> Instead, he merely argues that what Hoccleve has written has opened him up to social scorn, and he should thus write a new text to rectify the problem.

Hoccleve, as Chaucer did, denies he has done anything wrong, and does so in terms nearly identical to Chaucer’s authorial posture in *The Canterbury Tales*. He says to his friend “Considereth/ther-of/was I noon Auctor;/ I nas in that cas/ but a reportour/Of folks tales/as they seide/ I wroot;/ I nat affirmed it on hem/ god woot.”<sup>23</sup> Hoccleve argues, just as the Chaucer pilgrim does, that he was merely a reporter of the tales he told, and if they were distasteful, he cannot be held liable for what others said. In addition, he again argues with his Friend’s exegesis, saying “The book concludith for hem/is no nay,/ Vertuously/ my good freend/ dooth it nat?”<sup>24</sup> Both of these arguments are perfectly reasonable, and are within the paradigm of argumentation that Hoccleve and his Friend established earlier, but this time his humble posture and exegetical arguments are ineffective. The Friend insists “Syn it displesith hem/ amendes make.”<sup>25</sup> What he seems to be saying is that regardless of Hoccleve’s authorial status, his

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<sup>20</sup> It is entirely possible Chaucer’s God of Love is merely making figurative real indignation on the part of Chaucer’s female audience. Either way, Hoccleve chooses to make it explicit.

<sup>21</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 671-672.

<sup>22</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 662-663.

<sup>23</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 761-763.

<sup>24</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 779-780.

<sup>25</sup> “A Dialogue”, ll. 786.

broader audience has established a reading of both Hoccleve and his text that cannot be changed by this sort of technical argumentation. Hoccleve must, if he wishes to recover his social standing, write the text in praise of women. It is hard not to think of Alceste's warning to Chaucer's narrator that "Love ne wol nat contrepleted be/ In right ne wrong;"<sup>26</sup> Humility is, as we have seen, a powerful social tool, but the technical, tropological humility and the invocation of *auctoritas*, the friend suggests, have limited power outside the immediate social circle of literary men.<sup>27</sup>

This imagined, sophisticated audience, and the contrasts that are drawn between it and a supposed broader, less educated public are essentially tied in with a type of humility trope we have yet to discuss in detail but should now: The submission for correction. This section draws heavily on Heather Blatt's excellent chapter on the subject, which, more broadly, inspired this entire chapter, though it has grown beyond the submission for correction.<sup>28</sup> Blatt argues that the submission for correction represents an attempt at authorial control over reading practices, either to encourage or discourage corrective engagement with the text, as well as to shape the particulars of who could and could not correct.<sup>29</sup> However, she also argues that submissions for correction can involve an outsourcing of moral and intellectual agency to the reader, as they communicate an obligation on the reader's part to not be led astray by mistakes, but rather to actively find and correct them.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 476-477.

<sup>27</sup> Whether we believe the point that these other, mostly female readers are less sophisticated is another matter entirely (one on which I and I imagine most modern critics would be inclined to disagree with Hoccleve's depiction), but it is what the text argues about its audience.

<sup>28</sup> Heather Blatt, *Participatory Reading in Late-Medieval England* (Manchester University Press: Manchester, 2018), pp. 27-61.

<sup>29</sup> Blatt, pp. 27-37.

<sup>30</sup> Blatt, pp. 33-40. It is worth noting that while not a submission for correction, Chaucer places a similar agency onto the reader in his retraction, where he apologizes for texts only insofar as they "soonen unto sin" and calls on the reader to read his texts selectively and pick out only that which is of value.

Before engaging with some examples, I also want to discuss two important points put forward by Daniel Wakelin. Firstly, that correction, even at a very minute level, was a common feature of medieval textual production, and one that should not be seen as merely rote, but instead as an important intellectual exercise.<sup>31</sup> Second, he specifically points out that to put oneself “‘vnder correccioun’ evokes the powerful religious and political institutions which pursued moral and textual amendment.”<sup>32</sup> This is broadly true, but in the passage that follows, it is important for our purposes that rather than gesturing up at vertical power structures, Chaucer reaches out to specific members of his literary community.

O moral Gower, this book I directe  
 To the and to the, philosophical Strode,  
 To vouchen sauf, ther need is, to correct,  
 Of youre benignites and zeles good.<sup>33</sup>

Chaucer specifically asks his chosen editors to “vouchen sauf” the book and its contents; he is drawing on the suggestion that they *have* edited the text to authorize it. Moreover, as Wakelin notes, Chaucer’s usage of this trope here and elsewhere probably inspired its more extensive use in later English works.<sup>34</sup> In other words, by providing an authoritative example for this practice, Chaucer reinforced the broader authority of the literary circles he wrote in, as later authors (notably, Hoccleve, as we saw earlier) mobilized humility in ways that were explicitly reminiscent of Chaucer. Therefore, we see in this request for emendation both the authorizing of a text and the reinforcement of the literary community as a source of authority.

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<sup>31</sup> Wakelin, pp. 19-42. As Wakelin lays out, *Correctio* is another example of something in medieval writing which, like humility topoi, has been taken as rote and uninteresting, but which is actually an important literary phenomenon.

<sup>32</sup> Wakelin, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ll. 1856-1859.

<sup>34</sup> Blatt, pp. 28-33.

The anonymous author of *The Prik of Conscience* does something similar. The author begins with a very standard apology for his poor writing, saying:

Alle if I be of symple kunnyng.  
 Bot I pray yhou alle par charité  
 That this tretice wil here or se  
 Yhe haf me excused at this tyme  
 If yhe fynde default in the ryme<sup>35</sup>

All of this appears quite formulaic, the poet is not very intelligent, therefore his audience needs to interpret his work with charity and excuse the faults they find therein. It is slightly interesting, in that, like Chaucer in “The Complaint of Venus” and Gavin Douglas in his prologues, it turns the friendly reading of this text into a Christian virtue, but it otherwise would not merit comment if not for the slightly unusual turn it takes.

The author goes on to write “For I rek nought thogh the ryme be rude/ If the maters tharof be gude.”<sup>36</sup> This reframes this request for charitable reading substantially, as it is now made clear that the writer is requesting charitable reading from his audience only regarding formal or artistic limitations, limitations which he does not, in the end, care about. The “mater”, the actual significance of the work, is not up for criticism from the main body of the audience.

The next lines only solidify this exclusion.

And if any man that es clerk  
 Can fynde any errour in this werk

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<sup>35</sup> James Morey ed., *Prik of Conscience*, Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2012), ll. 9580-9584.

<sup>36</sup> *Prik of Conscience*, ll. 9585-9586.

I pray hym do me that favour  
 That he wille amende that errour,<sup>37</sup>

The text remains open for criticism, but now only from a “rightwyse lered man.” This standard request for emendation humility trope has now transformed into a clear assertion of *auctoritas*. Other men in positions of learning and power may critique the text, but the overall audience is excluded. Their critical abilities are explicitly limited to craft, and the author makes clear that he does not place any significance on craft. (This is a distinction we will see later in *Usk*.) Humility, here, is just as capable of strengthening authoritative structures as it is of resisting them, particularly in a devotional context, and it creates a similar barrier between communities of learned writers and the broader audience to the one Hoccleve draws at the end of his dialogue.

In many of these examples, we see a fairly small imagined community. Even in the *Prik of Conscience*, the excluded audience is still imagined as experiencing the text as a personal aide to moral improvement. Gower, in his *Confessio Amantis*, took a broader view of the social role of the author, and imagines his audience more broadly as a consequence. Hoccleve’s *Series* is intensely personal and concerned with the social role of authorship on a micro level. Gower, as his introduction makes clear, believes in a broad role for the author as a creator and preserver of social wisdom and as a keeper of the social order. Humility, on both linguistic and personal levels, is a key part of this project for Gower, justifying, as it does, his subject matter and stylistic choices.

Within the first ten lines of the *Confessio*, Gower makes clear his vision of an author’s purpose, writing

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<sup>37</sup> *Prik of Conscience*, ll. 9587-9590.

Forthi good is that we also  
 In oure tyme among ous hier  
 Do wryte of newe som matiere,  
 Essampled of these olde wyse.<sup>38</sup>

Gower's "we" and "oure" here are clearly intended broadly, considering the broad social survey that follows in the prologue. That is to say, writers exist for the good of the entirety of society and play an important role in preserving the social order. Gower's idea of contemporary writers, though, is perhaps even more humble than the "standing on the shoulders of giants" approach many other poets employ. For Gower, contemporary writers only "wryte of new" on material that has already been "Essampled," they do not create new "matiere" from whole cloth.

Rephrasing and repurposing the works of the "old wyse" for modern times is, therefore, the fundamental task of contemporary writers. However, Gower does not quite seem to reduce himself to a "compiler" as Chaucer does. The "we also...hier" seems to imply that contemporary writers are at least the same sort of thing as older writers.

The editors of the TEAMS volume point out that the gloss for line 22 at one point describes Gower's work as *compilauit*, and later shifts to *compleuit*, shifting his role from compiler to composer, perhaps, along with the earlier point, pointing to a middle ground for contemporary authors, who are not quite "olde wyse," but also not Chaucerian rude compliers.

Gower goes on to argue that a particular style and language are suited to this task. Gower claims to mix "lust" and "lore" because too much lore "dulleth ofte a mannes wit," making them

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<sup>38</sup>John Gower, "Prologue" in *Confessio Amantis*, Vol. 1, ed. by Russell A. Peck and Andrew Galloway, Middle English Texts Series, 2. ed (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), ll. 4-7. All future citations are from this edition.



less likely to listen and learn. This is not a humility trope per se, but the argument seems to be that the mixing of low with high is literarily useful, particularly when attempting to reach a broad audience. Since Gower's stated mission is the betterment of society broadly constructed, this supposedly more lowly style serves a critical purpose.

So too does his choice of a less prestigious language for the main body of the text. Gower alludes to English's lower status, saying that he chose English "for that few men endite" in it.<sup>39</sup> The need for an English moral text is, at least partially, due to the fact that other authors have not written in English. Furthermore, Gower says that he writes in English for "Engelondes sake" in "The yer sextenthe of Kyng Richard," implicitly tying together language, nation, and monarch.<sup>40</sup> Gower, at least implicitly, seems to make a similar argument to one Thomas Usk makes, saying that what England needs most is English texts. The language, furthermore, is "oure English," fundamentally identifying English with the community that Gower argued earlier writers are here to serve. The broadness of English, therefore, makes it an essential tool for the literary work that Gower argues is the duty of contemporary writers.

Gower goes on to pair his next humility trope with a description of how the world's decline has caused him to write this particular text. After describing how things once were and warning that the memory of such times would be lost without writing, he says

Thus I, which am a burel clerk,  
 Purpose for to wryte a bok  
 After the world that whilom tok  
 Long tyme in olde daies passed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Prologue", l. 22.

<sup>40</sup> "Prologue", ll. 24-25. Gower seems to walk this back in the later version, with the changes implying that he was only using Richard's reign as a dating method, this change only highlights the political importance of this passage.

<sup>41</sup> "Prologue", ll 52-55.

The decline in the world creates a need for him, a supposedly lowly member of society, to write something new to preserve the memory of a better, more moral past. Gower seems to parallel his age and infirmity with the “world grown old” introduction more broadly, seeming to make the case that he is somewhat of the moment; he is less than his predecessors, just as his community is.

Even as he parallels other writers, however, by alluding to age, lowness and infirmity, he seems confident in the moral purpose of his text, saying

To wryte and do my businesse,  
That in som part, so as I gesse,  
The wyse man mai ben avised.  
For this prologe is so assised  
That it to wisdom al belongeth.<sup>42</sup>

He does not, at least here, request forbearance or argue that his work needs to be read in a particular way. The prologue “to wisdom al belongeth,” specifically because of the way it is “assised.” Gower’s own composition, he claims, firmly sets the work as a wise and useful one and reading this confidence back it is clear that “mai ben avised” means something more like “can/will be advised” than “might be advised”. Men will learn from the text, Gower seems to say, if they are wise and read it. This confidence also, perhaps, retroactively justifies Gower’s choice of a more “lewd” style and the English language. If he is this confident in the moral value of his texts, it makes sense to employ a less prestigious style if it means more people can read it. Other authors, like Henryson, make more elaborate defenses of the moral value of their poetic style, but for Gower, it seems more like his “businesse,” his day-to-day work, rather than a

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<sup>42</sup> “Prologue”, ll. 63-67.

radical stylistic choice. A humbler method is, here, socially useful, and so he chooses to employ it.

This “world grown old” metaphor seems to provide the cause for the text as well as for Gower’s writing of it. The final passage, the relation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, makes the stakes clear; the apocalypse is coming, and therefore reform is urgently needed. Gower’s personal humility, the confessional frame, the moral decline illustrated in the first sections of the prologue and the apocalyptic framing of the final section are all intimately connected. One essential sign of this connection, particularly between the linguistic project and apocalypse, is the word Gower chooses to describe the state of the world: “The world stant evere upon debat.”<sup>43</sup> The TEAMS edition glosses “upon debat” as “in turmoil,” which is perfectly correct, but this does elide a sense of *conflict*, which is important here. That that conflict is specifically linguistic conflict is even more important: Gower has already illustrated that he thinks this work is an important moral corrective for a degraded society, but here it also becomes clear that he views this text as part of an apocalyptic conflict. The need to contribute to the “debat” over the world’s fate provides urgent motivation for the creation of a moral work.

This may seem rather extreme for a text that comfortably claims to mix “lust” and “lore,” but the connection of apocalypse and reform has a long history, going back at least to Pope Gregory and the Crusades.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, this specific line of thought was present and active among the English clergy in at least the thirteenth century, after Fourth Lateran, and it is unsurprising to see Gower pick it up in the turbulent climate of late fourteenth century England.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “Prologue”, l. 566.

<sup>44</sup> Jay Rubenstein, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream: The Crusades, Apocalyptic Prophecy, and the End of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 7-20.

<sup>45</sup> Philippa Hoskin, *Robert Grosseteste and the 13th-Century Diocese of Lincoln: An English Bishop’s Pastoral Vision, Later Medieval Europe*, volume 19 (Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 2019), pp. 21-47.

The Latin commentary to the beginning of the dream reinforces the ties between this apocalyptic message and the importance of love going forward: Gower writes “Like an image of man do the ages of the world vary, and nothing but the love of God stands firm.”<sup>46</sup> While obviously romantic love is the centerpiece of the *Confessio*, its framing, both internally as a complete, schematized confession and in the prologue, never allow it to be entirely separated from Divine love, exactly as Gower says he plans to do in the opening text. Gower also illustrates how this romantic love can be connected to the broader social issues he describes:

The man, as telleth the clergie,  
Is as a world in his partie,  
And whan this litel world mistorneth,  
The grete world al overtorneth.<sup>47</sup>

Gower cites “the clergie” to support the argument that humans are a microcosm of the world at large and cites this internal division as the cause of the larger problems with the world.

Importantly, the use of the singular “the man” rather than “men” suggests that this microcosmic conflict is not just interpersonal, but intrapersonal. Individual moral failing, this seems to suggest, is the ultimate root cause of this division. This aspect is magnified when it is taken into account that the King is at least partially the intended audience for the *Confessio*. This concept of the human as a microcosm for the world becomes much more literal in the context of a political theory that saw the moral virtue of a king and the health of his kingdom as essentially intertwined.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Prologue”, Latin verse v.

<sup>47</sup> “Prologue”, ll 944-947.

<sup>48</sup> Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

This, of course, makes the confessional mode all the more sensible. The proper corrective for individual moral failings is, of course, confession and penitence. Confession, in particular, is obviously foregrounded here, as it is the more natural literary practice, embodied in a wide array of confessional manuals and many other vernacular works.<sup>49</sup> This confession brings us back to Gower's own humility: there is some profound complexity in the position he chooses for himself. He, in a famous twist, names himself as the penitent lover in the final book, placing him in the role of humble penitent. We saw in Chapter 1 the ways in which humble, confessional rhetoric could serve as genuine devotional practice, while also being an authorizing strategy. Here, at least within the internal narrative, confession is literally the cause of text: Venus tells Amans: "In aunter if thou live,/ Mi will is ferst that thou be schrive;."<sup>50</sup> Amans' life is in doubt, and while it seems this confession may weigh on the ultimate decision of the court of love, a last confession before death is also something Amans presumably wants, if things should go against him.

Yet, Gower also positions himself in other ways that, of course, suggest authority. Most notably, of course, is his self-commentary, unusual in English works.<sup>51</sup> Minnis suggests that the lack of powerful top-down authorizing and supportive forces is behind the lack of commentary on the vernacular in English, and while Gower's work predates Arundel's *Constitutions*, which brought official force down (to some extent, at least) against vernacular authority, the vision of England he portrays is certainly not one that is a stable source for authorizing support.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Larson, pp. 229-243.

<sup>50</sup> Gower, ll. 189-190.

<sup>51</sup> Alastair Minnis "Absent Glosses: A Crisis of Vernacular Commentary in Late-Medieval England?", *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 20.1 (2003), pp. 1-17.

<sup>52</sup> "Absent Glosses", pp. 10-14.

Yet Gower produces these commentaries and does so in a rather complex manner. Eleanor Johnson notes that the complexity and challenge of Gower's Latin commentative poetry illustrates the "prosaic" nature of English, its ability to clearly and concisely reproduce truth, while, in counterpoint, the simple clarifications of the prose commentary designate English as an artful language that requires summarization.<sup>53</sup> It suggests, after all, that a "literate," that is, a Latin-reading person, could require help understanding an English text. Both of these practices, while countervailing and complex, are ultimately authorizing, suggesting that Gower's text is valuable both artistically and in terms of *sententia*, that he has successfully blended "lust" and "lore" within the Middle English text.

Johnson, also, importantly for our study, argues that the ethical and personal framing of the confession is ultimately what allows Gower to couch his political and social criticism in safe terms, giving him the safety to gloss himself.<sup>54</sup> In personal terms, Gower's character, after the reveal, is made out to be old, impotent, and no threat to anyone. In ethical terms, the framing of the confession suggests that any mistakes the audience may have made, the author has also made, which creates a situation where "the ethical accountability that could fall too squarely on the shoulders of a royal reader is distributed instead between him and his hero-narrator-author."<sup>55</sup> That is to say, in this study's terms, the practices of personal humility (aged, infirm, important) and ethical humility (confessing sinner) protect the author from potentially censorious authority.

I would also suggest, if we consider a slightly broader audience, as Gower seems to in his opening passages, the ethical humility would still make the criticism easier to take from a peer or even a superior. Gower-as-character's willingness to make public what is, normally private

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<sup>53</sup> Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago, I: The University of Chicago Press, 2013) pp. 188-192.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, pp. 200-201.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 200-201.

(confession) might make the didacticism of Gower-as-author less direct and more easily received. In addition, paradoxically, this public performance of confession may also be, to some extent, authorizing. By establishing that he has performed confession for the sins he has committed, in a complete and schematized way, Gower suggests that he has ethically progressed enough to use himself as an *exemplum* for the moral development of others. Humility, thus, is both a defensive gesture against censure and an authorizing act.

Let us conclude with Gower's farewell to the book, which follows many of the patterns we have observed thus far.

And now to speke as in final,  
 Touchende that y undirtok  
 In Englesch for to make a book  
 Which stant betwene ernest and game,  
 I have it maad as thilke same  
 Which axe for to ben excusid,  
 And that my bok be nought refusid  
 Of lered men, whanne thei it se,  
 For lak of curiosité:  
 For thilke scole of eloquence  
 Belongith nought to my science,  
 Uppon the forme of rethorike  
 My wordis for to peinte and pike,  
 As Tullius som tyme wrot.  
 Bot this y knowe and this y wot,

That y have do my trewe peyne  
 With rude wordis and with pleyne,  
 In al that evere y couthe and myghte,  
 This bok to write as y behighte,  
 So as siknesse it soffre wolde;  
 And also for my daies olde,  
 That y am feble and impotent,  
 I wot nought how the world ys went.  
 So preye y to my lordis alle  
 Now in myn age, how so befalle,  
 That y mot stonden in here grace;  
 For though me lacke to purchace  
 Here worthi thonk as by decerte,  
 Yit the symplesse of my poverté  
 Desireth for to do plesance  
 To hem undir whos governance  
 I hope siker to abide.<sup>56</sup>

There are several variations on this familiar theme we should observe: while Gower engages in the familiar claim that he lacks rhetorical ability, he does not engage in a submission for correction. Indeed, he says “I have it maad as thilke same,” he has accomplished his goal and has completed the writing process. He requests his audience’s forbearance, but not their correction. The need for that forbearance is completely limited to rhetoric, Gower asserts that “this y knowe

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<sup>56</sup> Gower, “Book 8”, ll. 3106-3137



and this y wot,” that he has written with “my trewe peyne” the text that he promised in the prologue. “Trewe” could be merely in the sense of “virtuous” or “trustworthy,” but in the context of a moral text it seems more likely that it is meant in the obvious sense: the text is “trewe,” that is, containing valuable and accurate moral instruction. It seems clear that, as far as the ethical content is concerned, “Moral Gower” is confident in his text.

We see here explicitly some of the protestations of age that Johnson alludes to as a protection against royal censure. Gower describes himself as “feble and impotent” and one who “wot nought how the world ys went.” This is posited as a reason why the audience should regard his text sympathetically, but it also reinforces the sense that Gower is not a political threat. Not only is he politically impotent, he claims he does not understand what is going on in the world. He doubles doubt on this request for sympathy, by alluding to his “poverte,” though in an interesting way. While he attests to not being able to gain the good opinion of the audience by “decerte,” that is, by his own merits, he describes this process as a “purchace” which is contrasted against his “poverte.” It is unclear to me precisely what Gower means by this framing, but it is oddly transactional for a discussion of literary merit. Either way, Gower seems to embrace the posture of the humble servant, who merely wants to provide what guidance he can to those in power. That said, while it may not be intentional, Gower’s claim that he addresses his work to “To hem undir whos governance/ I hope siker to abide” provides an implicit threat to a later monarch who might ignore his work. After all, Gower is no longer abiding under a previous, supposedly immoral monarch.

Gower’s alliance of the vernacular with the health of the national community was not unique, though many other authors took a more nationalistic bent. Mark Taylor argues in “Aultre Manier de Language” that the Baronial revolt and associated resistance to the French speaking

Crown played a substantial role in the rebirth of English as a prestige language.<sup>57</sup> Specifically, he argues that, because they were attempting to enforce an active politics of community/*communitas*, English became a useful political tool as the “common language” of the people the revolt attempted to unite and activate against a French speaking monarchy and elite allies.<sup>58</sup> Other scholarship is more skeptical of such sharp divides, with Thorlac Turville-Petre arguing that “Nationalist polemics sets up a scheme of languages in conflict. Latin is for clerics; French is the language of the noble descendants of the Norman oppressors; English is the language of the people of the nation. This formulation has a specific and limited purpose: that of associating English with England,” and that “there was no such clear-cut linguistic divide.”<sup>59</sup>

For our purposes here, however, whether such polemic was an accurate description of the linguistic state of England does not particularly matter. What is clear, both from the texts Taylor handles and from other texts we will discuss here, is that the status of English (and potentially Scots) as a common or lewd tongue was seen by a variety of authors as useful in creating or activating a national community, and as we have seen, the needs of that community could, in turn, authorize the creation of texts.

Taylor points to a pair of sections, one of which will be stylistically familiar to us: After stating that he wishes to “of Engelond/ þe ristness telle,” Layamon makes a great show of the various authorities he drew upon to create the text. Importantly, he uses an “Englisca boc; þa makede Seint Beda,” one “on Latin; þ makede Seinte Albin” and then he “leide þer amidden” another bok “þa makede a Frenchis cleric.” Taylor argues that the important thing is that all these

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<sup>57</sup> Mark Taylor, “Aultre Manier de Language: English Usage as a Political Act in Thirteenth-Century England”, in *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and Its Neighbours*, ed. by Christopher Kleinhenz and Keith Busby, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe, v. 20 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 107–26.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, pp. 111-115.

<sup>59</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 181.

traditions, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Norman, and Anglo-Latin are merged to create something “*Anglen*,” and also points to the focus on Layamon’s travels throughout the *leode* might serve as an appeal to a common/communal authority.<sup>60</sup>

There is an interesting facet to how these authorities are framed, though. The English authority, Bede, is presented first, and then the Latin authority is presented second, in a parallel structure. The French text is later, “*leide þer amidden*,” laid among them, as if the English and Latin texts already existed together, and the French text was an interjection. This potential inferiority of the French authority is backed up by the attribution. Both the English and the Latin texts are attributed to saints, whereas the author of the French text is merely “a Frenchis clerc who “*wel coup* written.” Now, all of these attributions are *correct*, but given that Layamon, firstly, is not being particularly truthful with his choice of sources, and secondly created the earlier parallel structure that highlighted the sainthood of his other two, it seems like a choice to diminish the French *auctor*.

The second passage Taylor uses is perhaps of less use to this study of humility topoi, but it does provide some useful context. Layamon’s account of the various names of London, Layton argues, highlights that “foreigners are ignorant of the land, its peoples and traditions.”<sup>61</sup> Once again, however, Layamon seems to single out French speakers. Of the Saxon conquerors, he merely says “*Seoððen comen Sæxsce men & Lunden heo cleopeden*” but of the Normans come “*mid heore nið-craften*.” They bring malice, and harm the people. This provides additional evidence for the earlier sense that the French speakers are being singled out even in supposedly even-handed portrayals, but this passage is also interesting in that it ground the good of the people in the common and popular names of places. It is not a humility trope as such, but it is

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<sup>60</sup> Taylor, p. 123.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, p. 124.

interesting for our purposes that Layamon grounds the common good in the vernacular names of the land.

This tension with French in particular can be found in much later texts as well, notably in the prologue to Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love*. After pointing out that many English writers chose to write in either Latin or French, he singles out French for particular criticism.

“But certes, there ben some [that] speken their poysye-mater in Frenche, of whiche speche the Frenchemen have as good a fantasye as we have in heryng of Frenchemennes Englysshe. And many termes ther ben in Englysshe whiche unneth we Englysshmen onnen declare the knowlegynge. How shulde than a Frencheman borne suche termes cone jumpere in his mater, but as the jay chatereth Englyssh. Right so, trewly, the understanding of Engysshmen wol not stretche to the privy termes in Frenche, whatsoever we bosten of straunge language. Let than clerkes endyten in Latyn, for they have the propertie of science, and the knowynge in that facultie; and lette Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shew our fantassyes in suche words as we lerneden of our dames tonge.”<sup>62</sup>

Usk begins by centering his criticism of Englishmen who write in French not just in humility but in humiliation. Frenchmen have “good a fantasye” at the expense of Englishmen who write in French, he says, and this is compared to the fun Englishmen have “heryng of Frenchemennes Englysshe.” Usk seems to be reminding his readers of an inside joke, that they laugh at Frenchmen behind their backs, and pointing out that when they write in French, Englishmen open themselves up to the same mockery.

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<sup>62</sup> Thomas Usk, ‘The Testament of Love: Prologue’, in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne et. al. (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), pp. 28–34, ll. 19-29.

Secondly, Usk questions the ability of language learning to duplicate a native speaker's ability. He points out that there are some words which "unneth we Englysshmen onnen declare the knowlegynge," that even native speakers understand only with difficulty. French speakers, therefore, will only be able to use those terms as "the jay chatereth Englyssh." Knowing this limitation of French speakers, English speakers should understand that they will always have the same limitations in French, and claims otherwise are mere boasting. Usk therefore proposes that Latin should be shared among clerics who "have the propertie of science" necessary to understand it, and that everyone else should speak their "dames tonge."

"Suche words as we lerneden of our dames tonge" is also interesting, particularly in the context of Usk's earlier arguments for his stylistic choices. Usk displays a similar humility when claiming that, while he cannot write particularly well "rude words and boystous percen the herte of the herer to the inrest poynte, and planten there the sentence of thynges."<sup>63</sup> Humble and common words, he argues, convey the truth most effectively. He then opens the paragraph in which he critiques French writing by critiquing writers who "peynten with colours ryche," as well. The two arguments parallel each other, those who are boastful or who elaborate their language do not communicate effectively. Those who speak "rude words" in their "dames tongue" do.

Usk, like Layamon, seems to have a particular case against French, rather than Latin. Latin is, for Usk, the language of "clerkes," it seems almost to be the natural or native tongue for such men, in his schema. Usk does not do as Dante does and try to refigure the vernacular as a prestige language over Latin, but his humble posture is still a clear effort to authorize his writing.

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<sup>63</sup> Usk, ll. 5-6.

“Clerkes” are a small, contained category, everyone else, Usk argues, should write in the vernacular, because it is the humblest, and therefore the truest tongue.

Before moving on, especially in the context of recent appropriations of medieval culture and symbols by modern extreme nationalists, we should discuss briefly the echoes this kind of rhetoric has in modern politics.<sup>64</sup> It has been common in the rhetoric of many nationalist politicians in the modern era to assert that they are talking “straight” or “plainly” in contrast to (often foreign) elites, who cannot be trusted.<sup>65</sup> That is not to say that we should read this technique back onto Usk and others, only that assertion that one is speaking “plainly” has been an enduringly successful tool in building a nationalist community in opposition to a group of “outsiders.”

With that said, we have seen here how humility can function flexibly as a tool to help an author in positioning an audience, engaging with criticism, and influencing politics. Again, we see also the flexibility and endurance of this kind of rhetoric, serving authors in a variety of social positions with a variety of literary goals. We will see many of these forms, particularly the nationalist variants (though also some modified submissions for correction), in the final chapter, exploring Gavin Douglas’ prologues.

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<sup>64</sup> Lawrence Goodman, ‘Jousting With the Alt-Right’, *Brandeis Magazine* <<https://www.brandeis.edu/magazine/2019/winter/featured-stories/alt-right.html>> [accessed 23 June 2021]

<sup>65</sup>Mark Thompson, ‘Opinion | Trump and the Dark History of Straight Talk’, *The New York Times*, 27 August 2016, section Opinion <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/opinion/sunday/trump-and-the-dark-history-of-straight-talk.html>> [accessed 23 June 2021]

### Chapter 3

## Gavin Douglas' Assertive Humility

The Prologues to Gavin Douglas' *Eneados* provide a useful place to end this study of humility topoi. Douglas' Prologues are a varied set of introductions and employ many of the forms of humility we have discussed so far, along with many of the elements this study has identified as companions to humility, in exactly the sort of interlocking and multipurpose structure this study has shown across medieval English literature. Many of Douglas' flourishes of humility are typical, but he also displays substantial originality, showing that even after centuries of use and reuse, there were still new things that could be done with old forms.

Lois Ebin sees in Douglas' prologue narrator an abandonment of "Lydgatian self-effacement and humility" and of "the naïve role of Chaucerian narrators."<sup>1</sup> As to that first claim, I hope that by this point it is established that self-effacement and humility are not especially Lydgatian (or even fifteenth century), but, even so, if this rejection is real, what is the point of studying Douglas here? It is true that Douglas seems, at times, extremely confident about the value and quality of his translation, something that fits poorly with much of the genuine humility that is, at times, present earlier in this study. This, however, is exactly the point. Douglas still draws on many of the rhetorical forms of humility, and on many of the confederates of humility we have seen here, but he weaves them together in such a way that they produce a powerful and, at times, aggressive argument for the authority of his text.

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Ebin, "The Role of the Narrator in the Prologues to Gavin Douglas's "Eneados", *The Chaucer Review*, 14.4 (1980), pp. 354.

The first thing of note is just how many kinds of authority Douglas draws upon throughout his prologues. The first, of course, is Virgil, “of Latyn poetis prynce.”<sup>2</sup> Douglas, throughout the text, uses his ostensible closeness to the *sententia* of Virgil’s text as the principal authority on which the translation is based. Second is a modern patron, “My special gud Lord Henry, Lord Sanct Clair,” who provides the impetus for the translation project.<sup>3</sup> Without him, Douglas claims, he would never have dared translate Virgil. Third, though his citation is rather backhanded, is Chaucer, “principal poet but peir,” who, despite his faults “fresch endite throu Albion iland braid.”<sup>4</sup> Fourth, are the various pagan gods and muses Douglas invokes (and whose invocation he defends in detail). The fifth, and, appropriately, last authority to be mentioned in the first prologue, is God himself, accompanied the second time by Mary. Divine authority/authorization is particularly important to the prelate Douglas, who deploys both preaching and theological disputation as authorizing modes within the prologues.

Deferral to Virgil, and close alignment with him, is the principle authorizing claim of the *Eneados*, and it thus begins with a particularly elaborate praise of Virgil, taking up the first 30 lines of the prologue. This elaborate paean is followed by a familiar humility topos:

My waverand wyt, my cunning febill at all  
 my mynd mysty, thir may nocht myss a fall  
 Stra for thys ignorant blabryng inperfyte  
 Besyde thy polyst termys redymyte.  
 And nethless with support and correctioun  
 For natural lufe and friendely affectioun

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas, Gavin, “Incipit Prologus,” *Virgil’s Aeneid, Translated into Scottish Verse by Gavin Douglas* Vol II, ed. by David Coldwell, (Scottish Texts Society, 1957) l. 3. All future citations are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, l. 86.

<sup>4</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 339, 343.



...

I wald in my rurall wlgar gross

Wryte sum savoryng of thyne Eneados.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer length of this section, more than 70 lines, belies its claim about the limitations of both its author and its language, particularly as it follows the already extended praise of Virgil. It is hard to believe Gavin Douglas when he says he does not know enough words to properly translate Virgil when he spills more ink deferring to him and describing that deferral than almost any of his predecessors. Would someone with “cunning febill” come up with three separate ways of saying “feeble cunning” in two lines? Indeed, the last line quoted here seems to undercut the message as well, with “savoryng” seeming to imply that some of the flavor of the original survives the translation, whatever Douglas may say later about following only the *sententia*.

We see here also the raising of “support and correctioun” as a key part of the literary process, but it is past tense, already completed. Douglas does not, at least here, ask for any sort of help or correction from his readers. When he next raises the subject of correction, it is not to open the text up to it but to close it off from the corrections of those who lack the necessary knowledge to correct it. Douglas writes

Syne I defend and forbiddis euery wight

That can nocht spell thar Pater Noster rycht

Fortill correct or 3it amend Virgill

Or the translator blame in hys wlgar stile.<sup>6</sup>

This echoes the closing off we saw in the *Prik of Conscience*, but with several key differences: First, no invitation to the learned reader follows. It is implied that someone who could “spell thar

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<sup>5</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll.31-44.

<sup>6</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 283-286

Pater Noster rycht" *could* critique the text, but Douglas does not ask for it. Furthermore, the *Prik* at least allows the unlearned reader to critique the rhetoric, whereas here they are forbidden to "the translator blam in hys wlgar stile."

Furthermore, contained within the last two lines is a confident assertion that Douglas has translated the *sententia* correctly. Correction and emendation, if they are found necessary in while reading, are due to Virgil, not Douglas, who can only be blamed for the "stile." Douglas will later fiercely defend Virgil's *sententia*, and as we have seen his protestations about rhetoric ring hollow. Between those two factors, even this narrow window for correction seems closed, as Douglas suggests in the first lines of the prologue. The text is sententious, and any failings of Virgil are not something Douglas, a "mere translator" can correct. The form of the submission for correction is clearly here, but the humility is not.

A few lines later, the critique of poor rhetoric is also foreclosed. Douglas writes

Though thyn engyne be eleuate and hie,  
 Than forto write all ways at liberte.  
 Gif I had nocht be to a boundis constrenyt  
 Of my bad wyt perchance I couth haue fenyt  
 In ryme a ragment twyss als curyus  
 Bot nocht be twenty part so sentencyus.<sup>7</sup>

Douglas, unusually, directly addresses the reader, praising them, but backhandedly. Their minds (and writing) may be "eluate and hie" but their rhetorical superiority is only because they write "at liberte," i.e. without the difficulty of translation. He further leaves it ambiguous whether his "ragment twyss als curyus" would be twice what *he* has written or twice as curious as the work

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<sup>7</sup> "Incipit prologus", ll. 291-296.

of the readers he addresses. The typical protestation of “bad wyt” (which is another new way of saying this same thing) here seems to denigrate the value of the “ragments” being produced. If a poor writer can do it well, then it cannot be a particularly important or skill-intensive process.

Just as Douglas uses the form of the submission for correction as a way of narrowing his critical audience into near nonexistence, he uses his devotion to Virgil as a rhetorical weapon against other translators. Speaking of Caxton, Douglas claims “I red his wark with harmys at my hart/That syk a buke but sentens or engine/Suldbe inttitillit eftir the poet dyvyne.”<sup>8</sup> Such is Douglas rhetorical devotion to Virgil that he is personally pained by the fact that Caxton produced poor translation, which justifies the long and harsh criticism Douglas levels at Caxton. Indeed, he portrays his critique as an obligation, saying that after reading Caxton’s work he was “constrenyt to flyt,” drawing on Scottish flyting tradition to explain his aggressive tone, and suggesting it is a matter of personal or family honor. This sits nicely alongside Douglas’ comments about how he would not have attempted a translation of Virgil except for Lord Henry’s influence, and to many other similar protestations. By locating the impetus for writing in an obligation to a superior that cannot be refused, the writing is justified.

Faalty to Virgil also allows Douglas to criticize a genuine authority, Chaucer. Unlike Virgil, who gets explicit and full-throated praise at the start of the poem, the first word of Chaucer’s invocation qualifies him. “Thought venerable Chucer” Douglas begins, and then lavishes praise in a parenthetical clause for several lines, before continuing the main thread “In his legend of notabill ladies said/That he couth follow word by word Virgill,/wisar than I may fail in lakar style.”<sup>9</sup> Again, we see the forms of humility, devotional praise of a legendary author, and the insistence that one’s predecessors are superior, and yet, the close following of

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<sup>8</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 145-147.

<sup>9</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 339-346.

Virgil's *sententia* allows Douglas to criticize Chaucer, to bring him under correction, as a literary peer. Indeed, Douglas turns the next section into an exegetical performance, using a description of the limited words in English (another humility topos) as an excuse to demonstrate his academic knowledge of translation. The two *auctores* are, in some sense, set against each other, and Virgil's higher rank allows Douglas to criticize Chaucer as his proxy. Douglas, indeed, makes this explicit, saying

For as he [Chaucer] standis beneth Virgill in gre,  
 Vnder hym alsfer I grant my self to be.  
 And natheless into some place, quha kend it  
 My mastir Chauser gretly Virgill offendit.<sup>10</sup>

It reads almost like a syllogism: Chaucer is as below Virgil as Douglas is below Chaucer, so since they are both Douglas' "mastir" he can offer criticism, in his capacity as servant of the higher one. Yet, between these two critiques of contemporary poets, Douglas does the same to Virgil himself. Briefly, when describing some of the supernatural events in Virgil, which might be less than plausible to a Christian audience, he says "I will nocht say all Virgill beynd als trew."<sup>11</sup> It's clear Virgil's paganism and the ways that affect the text are the concern here, because all of the examples he cites to justify Virgil are scriptural, effectively blocking such a critique. Even as he defends Virgil, though, he has put a chink in the armor of his *auctoritas*, reminding the reader that he is a pagan and therefore his work may not be *entirely* true.

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<sup>10</sup> "Incipit Prologus", ll. 407-410.

<sup>11</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 213.

Douglas reinforces this subtle undercutting as he finishes up his critique of Chaucer's Virgil translation, when he says "Thou prynce of poetis, I the mercy cry."<sup>12</sup> The subject is ambiguous, the lines immediately before suggest he means Chaucer, and the phrase "prynce of poetis" suggests that he is asking Virgil for forgiveness, since he referred to Virgil earlier as "poetis prince" and "king of poetis" earlier in the text.<sup>13</sup> It is, in fact, neither, as Douglas reveals he means God. The ambiguity seems intentional, as he writes "I meyn thou Kyng of Kyngis, Lord Etern."<sup>14</sup> The "I meyn" suggests that he *knows* his meaning is ambiguous and has left it as such intentionally. Specifically, he uses this as an opportunity to remind his audience that God is not just supreme ruler but supreme writer, "prynce of poetis" as well as "Kyng of Kyngis." There is an intentional moment of disjunction, where the reader, who would have expected a mortal poet to be cited as the greatest poetical *auctor* is reminded that it is actually God, and also that God and Mary serve as Douglas's ultimate muse.

It is notable, too, that this invocation of God comes not just in a moment of humility but in a moment of penance. Douglas, as we saw with other writers in Chapter 1, seems to view the penitential mode as the natural one for the invocation of divine aid and authority in writing. Douglas frames what follows as a petition, requesting of God "thou be my muse, my gydar and laid stern."<sup>15</sup> This is a request, a petition, but it is not phrased as question. Douglas does not ask if God will do what he asks, he simply asks that it be done. Here, it seems, Douglas is, without saying it, mobilizing his office as a cleric to authorize the text. He, more than anyone not of the cloth, has a *right* to ask this of God and to cite God as his *auctor*. Having already reminded us of the limitations of pagans, we are also reminded here that Douglas is calling upon the greatest

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<sup>12</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 452.

<sup>13</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 3, 315.

<sup>14</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 453.

<sup>15</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 454.

*auctor*. We have also seen, as with Virgil and Chaucer, that the servant of a greater *auctor* has the right to criticize a lower *auctor* who is still above the servant. Thus, Douglas implies, he has the right to critique Virgil in cases where he needs to.

Douglas, in this same section, invokes Mary as a muse, and leans more into that comparison than he did with God himself. With God, while he is asked to be “my muse, my gydar and laid stern,” the emphasis is on God as *auctor*, and the language, as we discussed, implies a comparison between him and Chaucer or Virgil. Mary, however, is called upon instead of “Calliope, nor payane goddis wild” who “May do to me na thing bot harm”.<sup>16</sup> Mary’s virtuous mildness is compared to the wildness of the Pagan muses, and her mode of inspiration is maternal nourishment. Douglas compares the aid he requests to “The sweit liquour of thy pappis quhite” which “Fosterit that Prynce, that hevynly Orpheus/ Grond of all gude, our Saluyour Ihesus.”<sup>17</sup> This model again asserts the superiority of Douglas’s inspiration to that of Pagan writers, Mary is “mild” rather than “wild” and Christ, the “hevynly Orpheus” she nourished, certainly bettered the pagan original, being a crucial part of the salvation of all souls from hell, rather than failing to bring back a single lover from Hades. The mode of this superiority also chimes well with the way Douglas positions himself as an author. The harmful wildness of the muses evokes the passionate, ultimately destructive love rhetoric present in the Orpheus story, or perhaps in Troilus’s song in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. As we have seen, Douglas denies rhetorical ability, and focuses on his ability to produce a sententious text, one that is, in short, spiritually nourishing. This is not quite humility as we have seen it, but it is aligned: the mild,

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<sup>16</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll 458-459.

<sup>17</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 468-470. (Nourishing sweet liquor may also be a reference to Chaucer’s General Prologue, which might provoke a favorable contrast between the nourishment of nature Chaucer references and this holy nourishment)

nourishing care of a Christian text is juxtaposed against the rhetorical wildness of the Pagan muses.

The rejection of classical inspiration here might seem odd, but I believe the Orpheus metaphor is useful here. Christ is, obviously, superior to Orpheus, but by using Orpheus as a Christ metaphor, Douglas suggests that the Orpheus narrative contains some useful resonance with the Christian truth, which can still be drawn on rhetorically.

Douglas' use of Mary here also suggests a penitential framework. Mary is described as having "nevir 3it na synfull lyst refus/ Quhilik the besoch deuotly for supple."<sup>18</sup> Douglas is perhaps drawing on the conception of Mary that Carolyn Walker-Bynum describes, where she granted her "mercy toward even the wicked who superstitiously revered her."<sup>19</sup> By invoking this complete unconditionality of Mary's aid, Douglas, at least potentially, places himself very low indeed. Yet, this description is also, in even stronger terms than the petition to God discussed above, a statement of certainty that the requested aid *will be received*. Furthermore, the aid in question is, as we saw earlier, compared with the milk provided by Mary to Christ, who Douglas imagines not just as an *auctor* but a poet, Orpheus. This section is a perfect example of the complex movements of humility, authorization and even self-aggrandization in Douglas's text. He places himself in the role of penitent and petitioner, but also suggests that his requests for aid will be granted, and asserts the fundamental superiority of his muse over historical ones, particularly those of his main *auctor*, Virgil. He positions himself as a child being nourished, but in a way that metaphorically mirrors Christ.

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<sup>18</sup> "Incipit Prologus", ll. 464-465.

<sup>19</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 262.

After this invocation of God and Mary, Douglas finally returns to Virgil, asking him too for forgiveness for his mistakes. Interestingly, though, Douglas requests Virgil forgive him “Sen thou was bot a mortal man sum tyme.”<sup>20</sup> Unlike the previous requests for forgiveness, which rested on the holiness of those called upon, Douglas asks Virgil to show mercy because he too was mortal, and thus, himself, committed errors. God and Mary, it seems, will forgive Douglas because of their superior holiness, but Virgil should because he is, more or less, a peer. Douglas also returns to the notion that his unlearned state makes his writing trustworthy, writing “thocht I be lewit, my leill hart can nocht fenze/I sall the follow ; suld I tharfor haue blame./ Quha can do bettir, sa furth in Goddis name”<sup>21</sup> Douglas’ loyalty to Virgil, his “leill hart,” is a compensation for his supposed lack of learning, but, conversely, Douglas’s “lewit”-ness seems to justify the claim that he “can nocht fenze.” He claims, in short, to be too simple to fabricate things.

This loyalty to the text is once again used as a defense; Douglas rhetorically asked “quha can do bettir” than a close translation, which he has provided. Douglas does claim that he

schrynk nocht anys correkkit for tobe  
 With ony wight grundit on cherite,  
 And glaidly wald I baith inquire and leir  
 And till ilke cunnand wight la to myne eyr,<sup>22</sup>

but this is conditional, and somewhat undercut by what follows. Compare this to Chaucer in the Complaint of Venus who asks “Princes, receyveth this compleynt in gre,/Unto your excelent benignite.”<sup>23</sup> Chaucer *requests* charitable reading, and suggests that it will come because of the “benignite” of his audience. Douglas, by contrast, will *only* listen to a “wight grundit on cherite.”

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<sup>20</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, l. 474.

<sup>21</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 476-479.

<sup>22</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 479-482.

<sup>23</sup> “The Complaint of Venus”, ll. 73-74.



Gerald Kinneavy points out that it is a consistent feature of Douglas' prologues to demand a thorough, careful reading of his work, but here Douglas goes slightly further.<sup>24</sup> By demanding charitable reading, Douglas suggests that only grievous or obvious errors are open to correction, and that possible misunderstandings should be interpreted in the best possible light. He thus offloads much of the rhetorical responsibility onto the reader, claiming that they should correct their own reading, rather than his writing.

After these few lines offering a conditional opening for correction, Douglas spends the next twenty enumerating the various kinds of correction he will not accept. He writes "But laith me war but owther offens or cryme/ Ane brimell body suld intertrike my ryme."<sup>25</sup> Douglas fears that even without "owther offens or cryme" ignorant readers will interfere with his text, which, perhaps, justifies his limitations on who can edit his work, at least in his mind. He then lists a variety of mistakes that others will say he made, that he varied the text, that he ruined the text, that he never read Virgil in the first place, or that translation will leave Virgil worse than Douglas found him in the Latin original, or that the Latin original was good enough. Douglas rejects all of these, claiming that it has come to a point in the prologue where he must "schift the werst our scor," that is, do away with the worst arguments.<sup>26</sup> The usage of "werst" does lead to some interesting ambiguity, where it is unclear if Douglas means "deal with the most difficult" or "dismiss the least credible" arguments, though in either case, the rhetorical result is beneficial. The former suggests he has dealt with the most challenging problems and no more needs to be said, and the latter suggests that these serious allegations are easily dismissed. Either reading is

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<sup>24</sup> Gerald Kinneavy, 'An Analytical Approach to Literature in the Late Middle Ages: The "Prologues" of Gavin Douglas', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 75.1 (1974), pp. 126–42.

<sup>25</sup> "Incipit Prologus", ll. 483–484.

<sup>26</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 490.

favorable to Douglas, and the ambiguity suggests that even the strongest arguments are easily dismissed.

In dismissing these arguments, Douglas returns to a familiar pattern, accepting (rhetorically, at least) the possibility that his rhetoric may not be up to Virgil's, but limiting criticism regarding the *sententia* of the translated text. Douglas writes

Gyf I haue falzeit, baldly reprufe my ryme  
 Bot first, I pray 3ow, grape the mater cleyn,  
 Reproche me nocht quhill the wark be ourseyn  
 Beis not ourstudyus to spy a moyt in myne e,  
 That in 3our awyn a ferry boyt can nocht se,  
 And do to me as 3he wald be done to.<sup>27</sup>

Criticism of Douglas' rhyme can be done "baldly," with confidence, but only by those who have done the reading, and "grape the mater cleyn." Until the entire work has been "ourseyn," examined in detail, no valid criticism can be leveled against Douglas. Serious criticism, for Douglas, requires extensive engagement with the text and a real effort to grasp the significance of the text, its "mater," rather than just rhetorical complaints.

Douglas also draws on a pair of scriptural precedents from the Sermon on the Mount to further limit criticism. The "mote in myne eye" metaphor is useful to Douglas, as it warns against judgment and criticism, but he makes a few interesting choices in his translation. Firstly, he describes the judgment as being "ourstudyus", making the metaphor more clearly applicable to the literary context when compared to the verb in the vulgate, "vides," which is merely seeing. Second, and perhaps more interestingly, Douglas translates "trabem," beam, as "ferry boyt."

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<sup>27</sup> "Incipit Prologus", ll. 496-501.

Lewis & Short's dictionary notes that the usage of *trabs* to mean "boat" metaphorically was common, but this translation is uncommon in this context. Wycliff's Bible uses beam, as does Henry VIII's Great Bible. Douglas' change playfully exaggerates the faults of his critics even further, and also happens to rhyme with "moyt," a subtle display of his ability to work rhyme and figure into his translations while maintaining the meaning. This quotation, along with the second (the Golden Rule), frames criticism of Douglas' work as contrary to Christian morals and suggests that any mistakes are merely a "moyt," minor and easily overlooked. The first prologue ends, then, not with a submission for correction, but with such strict limitations on correction that it seems clear that no correction is, in fact, welcome. As we have seen, and as we will see, many of the forms of humility previously discussed were present, in great numbers and in substantial length, but the final effect is to produce a strong argument for the authoritative nature of Douglas' translation.

Douglas's second prologue returns to the earlier theme that his close following of Virgil is what guides the text, though in a somewhat modified form. He opens

Dyrk beyn my muse, with dolorus armony  
 Melpomene, on the wald clerkis call  
 Fortill compyle this dedly tragedy  
 Twitching of Troy the subuersioun and fall;  
 Bot sen I follow the poete principall  
 Quhat nedis purches fenzeit termys new?  
 God grant me grace hym dyngly to ensew!<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> "The Prolouge of the Secund Buke", ll. 1-7.

The first line could be taken as merely referring to the sadness of the tragedy, but Douglas has previously used “dyrk” as an adjective describing the difficult poetry that hid the *sententia* of Virgil’s text.<sup>29</sup> Here, then, it speaks to not only the tragedy, but the difficulty of Douglas’ translation. Yet, he also uses this as a way to gesture at the superiority of his work to past efforts: other “clerkes” have called on Melpomene for guidance as they compile the story of Troy’s fall, but Douglas has little need for her “dolorus armony.” Since he “follow the poete principall,” he has no need to work hard to create “fenzeit termys.” The other compilers, Douglas suggests, were creating false rhetoric, whereas he, following Virgil (And perhaps God?), has no need for such things.

He also emphasizes the uniqueness of his translation: the tale of Troy, he points out, is sung “wydequhar our all,” that is, everywhere, but his translation is different. “Bot Followand Virgil, gif my wit war abill/ Ane other wyss now salt that bell berong/ Than euer was tofor hard in our tong.”<sup>30</sup> Douglas maintains the rhetorical posture of doubt in his own abilities “gif my wit war abill,” but the focus of the clause is that this telling of Troy’s story is unique. Because he is following Virgil, the bell, the song of Troy (rhymed with tong/berong, further emphasizing the importance of this new translation) is being told in a way it never has been before. This is almost necessarily a judgement on all past versions of the Troy story, and certainly another (at least indirect) shot at Caxton specifically. It obviously is not literally the case that this story was never “tofor hard in our tong,” but the “other wyss,” is, of course, the faithfulness to Virgil we have already heard so much about. Douglas is staking out the claim that this is the first *real* translation of the *Aeneid*, though his mention of other clerks who “compyle this dedly tragedy” suggests his criticism extends to the compilers (notably Chaucer) who have modified and retold parts of the

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<sup>29</sup> “Incipit Prologus” l. 193.

<sup>30</sup> “The Prolouge of the Secund Buke”, ll. 10-12.

story in the past, not just poor translators like Caxton. Douglas ends with a summon to ladies, knights, and wise men to listen to the story, and then as the last part of his audience names “dyyssavouris” who must “reid heir 3our proper art.”<sup>31</sup> Again, at the end of the Prologue Douglas confidently declares his book the “proper art,” in contrast to the compilers who use the “fenzeit termys new” Douglas rejects. The second prologue, more so even than the first, makes explicit that Douglas believes this to be *the* definitive telling of the story of Troy in English/Scots, bar none.

In the third prologue, the first thing of interest to us is a quick protestation of dullness in line 11. It is mostly unremarkable in itself, but it is more clearly undercut by its context than any other example so far. The first stanza of the prologue is an elaborate praise of Cynthia, the moon, showing off both Douglas' poetic skill and his knowledge of classical literature. Douglas also maintains the common framing that he “most” write in spite of his dullness, which he invoked earlier when discussing his patron.

This prologue also features an extended use of battle and physical violence as a metaphor for dealing with Douglas and (potentially) Virgil's critics. This study has often claimed that humility is used to “defend” a work from potential criticism, but this is the most explicit imagining of rhetoric as defending against attacks that we have seen. Douglas first introduces these critics by saying of the Greek legends, “I dreid men clepe thame fablis now on days;/ Tharfor wald God I had thar erys to pull/Mysknawis the creid, and threpis otheris forvayis”<sup>32</sup> These critics are imagined as ignorant, perhaps even childish, since Douglas wishes to pull their ears. They are ignorant not only of Greek myths, but also of “the creid,” basic Christian doctrine, and, despite their ignorance, they argue with others, and they do so “forvayis,” erring.

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<sup>31</sup> “The Prologue of the Secund Buke”, ll. 15-19.

<sup>32</sup> “The Proloug of the Thryd Buke”, ll. 16-19.

Douglas says he cares nothing for the opinions of these critics

Incaiss thai bark, I compt it nevir a myte;  
 Quha kan not hald thar piece ar fre to flyte;  
 Chide quhil thar hedis ryf and and hals worth hayss  
 Weyn thai to murdryss me with thar dispyte?<sup>33</sup>

This contempt for his potential critics is of a piece with the extreme narrowing of the submission for correction we saw in the first prologue. It is clear here, and throughout the prologues, that Douglas thinks very little of people who have bad things to say about his work. Here we also see the alignment of rhetorical violence against Douglas's text ("bark" and "flyte,") with physical violence against Douglas ("to murdryss me"). This metaphor is extended when Douglas considers that his critics might be aiming at Virgil, rather than him.

Or is it Virgill quham thame list bakbyte?  
 His armour wald thai perss? Quhar is the place?  
 He dows na dynt of polax, swerd, nor mace.<sup>34</sup>

Again, rhetorical violence, "bakbyte," is made into literal violence. Virgil is imagined as armored, defended by his *auctoritas* so strongly that he does not have to fear any attack, even from weapons of war. What is not quite explicit, but seems clear, is that this invulnerability extends to Douglas, insofar as he follows Virgil, and as we have seen, Douglas is confident that he does so very closely.

Douglas thus dismisses these critics, telling them

Deym as 3he list that kan not demyng weill;  
 And gentill curtass redaris of gude 3eill

<sup>33</sup> "The Proloug of the Thryd Buke", ll. 19-22.

<sup>34</sup> "The Proloug of the Thryd Buke", ll. 23-25.

I 3ow beseik to geven aduertenss<sup>35</sup>

Douglas maintains the wise and foolish readers distinction we see often in submissions for corrections, but he inverts it here. Bad readers are free to criticize as they like, but their criticism is to be ignored and dismissed. Good readers, by contrast, are to give “adwertenss,” with their “gude 3eill.” Douglas wants them to adhere to the text, to read it closely and with devotion, but not for the purpose of finding error in it. Indeed, he admits that he may have made errors, but he repeats his expectation that his audience overlook them, writing that the text contains

Realmys and landis, quharof I haue na feill

Bot as I follow Virgill in sentens ;

Few knawis all thir costis sa far hens ;

To pike thame up perchance 3our eyes suld reill—

Thus aucht thar nane blame me for small offens<sup>36</sup>

What is interesting about this section is the specific example of ignorance, rather than a general proclamation. It is not *mere* rhetoric that Douglas has not been to all of the places described in the *Aeneid*, it is certainly true, yet it functions similarly to other humility topoi. Because of the knowledge of his *auctor*, Douglas' work has value, and he also suggests that his audience can do no better, and thus they should not criticize him for minor mistakes. Douglas then ends the prologue with an image of himself and the audience on a shared “barge,” sailing through the storms of hell, guided by the Virgin Mary. This prologue thus positions the virtuous part of the audience as Douglas' allies on this difficult journey, part of a team avoiding the “storm of temptatioun,” while any critics are mere fools who cannot threaten Douglas, much less Virgil.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “The Proloug of the Thryd Buke”, ll. 28-30.

<sup>36</sup> “The Proloug of the Thryd Buke”, ll. 32-36.

<sup>37</sup> “The Proloug of the Thryd Buke”, l. 43.

The next prologue of interest to this study is the fifth, where Douglas further meditates on the difficulty of Virgil's style. After three stanzas on the virtues of pleasance and joy, during which he quotes another Virgil text, the *Eclogues*, Douglas writes

The hie wysdome and maist profund engine  
 Of myne author Virgile, poete dyvyne  
 To comprehend, makis me almaist forvay  
 So crafty wrocht hys wark is, lyne by lyne.  
 Tharon aucht na man irk, compleyn nor quhryne.  
 For quhy? He altyrris hy style sa mony way,  
 Now dreid, now stryf, now lufe, now wa, now play,  
 Langeir in murnyng, now in melody,  
 To satyfy ilk wightis fantasy;<sup>38</sup>

Douglas portrays himself as struggling with Virgil's poetic skill, but here again he maintains that, despite the difficulty of Vergil's style, he only "almaist forvay." He has not *actually* misrepresented Virgil, and he has only nearly done so because of the brilliance of Virgil's writing. Here also we get an even more explicit denial of any right to criticize, "Tharon aucht na man irk, compleyn nor quryne." Douglas is saying that no one should criticize *his* translation, because it is so hard to comprehend Virgil, and he describes doing so as whining ("quhryne" in Scots perhaps even carries the sense of animalistic behavior).

This passage, despite highly praising Virgil, also portrays his rhetorical skill as a challenge to reading for *sententia*. Rhetoric may "satyfy ilk wightis fantasy," but it apparently obscures meaning, even in such a great poet. Elsewhere in Douglas, and in other works like

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<sup>38</sup> "The Proloug of the Fyft Buke", ll. 28-36.



Henryson's *Fabilis*, we get a more positive case for the intellectual usefulness of poetic beauty, but here it seems only to be a source of difficulty. Douglas, despite his love for Virgil, does seem to interpret his rhetorical skill as obscuring his *sententia* at times, and it implies a kind of superiority of Douglas' supposedly unlyrical translation: the *sententia* may be clearer in Douglas' "braid and plane" language, beyond just the advantage of reading in ones' native tongue.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Douglas ends the prologue (after a digression to criticize Caxton further) by pointing out the fickleness of earthly happiness, writing "Sen erdly plesour endis oft with sorrow, we se,/ As in this buke nane exemplys 3e want."<sup>40</sup> Faced with this fickleness, Douglas turns to God, and petitions

Lord, our prottector to all trastis in the  
 Bot quham na thing is worthy nor pyssant  
 To ws thy grace and als gret mercy grant,  
 So forto wend by temporal blyness  
 That our eternal ioy be nocht the less!<sup>41</sup>

Everyone "trastis" in God, unlike worldly things, which are not "worthy nor pyssant" of God. Furthermore, Douglas asks for grace and mercy "forto wend by temporal blyness," literally to go by or past temporal happiness, for the sake of eternal reward. This contrasts, at first glance, with some of the more confident invocations of God that have gone before, but notably it comes on the heels of a rejection of Persephone and Victory, and serves to contrast with both the praise of pleasure that begins the stanza and with the *auctor* associated with it, Virgil. Here again, Douglas

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<sup>39</sup> "Incipit Prologus", l. 110.

<sup>40</sup> "The Proloug of the Fyft Buke", ll. 62-63. Douglas does not draw a clear allegory between earthly joy and rhetorical pleasure, but the springtime setting of the opening lines of this prologue certainly have that resonance, and the sudden shift between earthly joy and rhetorical skill in the third and fourth stanza also suggest it.

<sup>41</sup> "The Proloug of the Fyft Buke", ll. 64-68.

seems to be asserting the primacy of God as the supreme auctor, subtly reminding us of Virgil's lesser status.

On this note, the sixth prologue has little in the way of direct humility, but is worth discussing because it is one of the most detailed extant accounts of the importance and functioning of non-Christian *auctoritas*. Douglas begins with another poetic invocation, this time of Pluto, before turning to his potential critics again, writing "Quhat weyns fulys this saxt buke be bot iapis/ Al ful of leys or ald ydolatryis?"<sup>42</sup> This may be the work of "fulys", but he intends to take it seriously, and the prologue reads like an academic disputation, quoting from a variety of *auctors* to defend Virgil's *sententia*.

Indeed, Douglas' first move after asserting that "Virgil is ful of sentence our all quhare" is to point to an authoritative commentary that details that *sententia*, that of Servius.<sup>43</sup> He then argues that Virgil accurately describes the nature of mankind, "baith lif and dead" and even "eftir thar death," and posits an interpretation of Virgil's afterlife that lines up with the Catholic afterlife. All of that said, Douglas then makes a point that illustrates the necessarily complicated relationship of a pagan text with a Christian audience.

And, thought our faith neid nane authorizing  
Of gentiles bukis, nor by sik heathin sparkis  
3it Virgil writis mony iust clauss conding,  
Strengthening our beleve, to confound payan warkis.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "The Proloug of the Saxt Buke", ll. 9-10.

<sup>43</sup> "The Proloug of the Saxt Buke", ll. 26-27. It is unclear which version of the Servius commentary Douglas used, but the expanded commentary was widespread and Christianized, and would be useful to Douglas at this point, allowing him to assert the antiquity of *Christian* interpretation of Virgil.

<sup>44</sup> "The Proloug of the Saxt Buke", ll. 57-60.

The first two lines qualify Douglas' praise of Virgil: Christian audiences do not "neid" pagan works to authorize the faith (with the implication being that Christian works *are* necessary) but that does not mean Virgil is not useful. The second two lines then argue that Virgil's work, despite his personal paganism, is ultimately in support of the Christian narrative, and indeed, serves "to confound payan warkis." Douglas seems not to see any difficulty between this claim and his promise to follow Virgil's *sententia* entirely, but there is a tension here. Douglas is displacing the pagan-ness of the original, at least through his commentary if not through the translation itself. By asserting both that he has followed Virgil's *sententia* exactly and that the work produced aids Christian teaching, he necessarily erases the pagan intentions of a pre-Christian *auctor*.<sup>45</sup> We see this further with his explication of the Pagan gods, where he writes

Quhom cal I Pluto and Sibilla Cumane,  
 Hark ; for I wil na fals goddis wirschepe.  
 Sibilla, til interpret properly  
 Is clepit a maid of goddis secret preve  
 That hes the spiret divine of prophecy.  
 Quha bettir may Sibilla namyt be  
 Than may the gloryus moder and madyn fre,  
 Quhilk of hir natur consavit Criste, and buyr  
 All haill the mysteris of the Trinite,  
 And maist excellent wark had vnder cure?<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This moment, along with the arguments for moral sermons from immoral men detailed in Minnis' *Fallible Authors*, illustrates a sort of "functional formalism" which is a necessary byproduct of those views. The intention of the human author of the sermon or book is made irrelevant by the intervention of the ultimate *auctor*, God. Thus, a sort of formalist examination of the text alone is necessary to figure out and backfill whatever God's purpose for the work was.

<sup>46</sup> "The Proloug of the Saxt Buke", in 135-144.

The first two sentences are particularly illustrative, because what matters to them is Douglas's interpretation, because he "wil na fals goddis wirschepe." To some extent, Virgil is erased here, and Douglas tasks himself with translating not just the language, but also the Pagan Gods into Christian figures. We are told that "interpret properly," the Sibyls are clearly the Virgin Mary, but what is the sense of "properly?" Insofar as the *Eneados* is interpreted as a history, or really in the literal sense generally, this cannot be so, and yet, Douglas is perfectly content with ascribing a metaphorical meaning that Virgil could not have, personally, known. Why? The last two lines are illustrative. They refer to Mary's mysterious conception of Christ, but the "maist excellent wark" could also refer to the *Aeneid* itself. God, in short, "had vnder cure" that "wark" and allowed for it to be intellectually conceived despite it being impossible. This does not displace Virgil's authorship in Douglas' mind, any more than Mary can be displaced from the birth of Christ, but it does complicate their relationship somewhat. Douglas is asserting both the ultimate authorship of his God, and also his authority, as a Christian translator, to extract that meaning from the text. This exegetical performance is the culmination of the move we saw in the first prologue, where Douglas seems to be about to appeal to Virgil, but instead turns to God as "prynce of poetis," as Douglas reminds the audience that, whatever Virgil's importance and usefulness, God is the supreme author, and Douglas serves him, giving him interpretive power over Virgil, when necessary.

The seventh prologue is something of a genre shift, returning to the nature visions and pagan metaphors of a dream vision text.<sup>47</sup> After dwelling for some time on the winter, in a long sequence of alliterative rhyming couplets, the narrative zooms in on a sleeping Douglas, who,

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<sup>47</sup> It is notable that Douglas identifies the various modes of Vigil as a sign of his rhetorical skill, and also demonstrates a variety of modes in his prologues, both in terms of genre and in terms of rhyme and meter, despite denying his own ability to do just that. Compare to Hoccleve's discussion of rhetorical flexibility in *La Male Regle*.

after he awakes and looks about his home, "seand Virgill on a lettron stand," his translation unfinished.<sup>48</sup> This section is not particularly unusual, as beginning a prologue with an extended meditation on the natural world and then zooming down to the poet to narrate the beginning of the work is extremely conventional.

The two things that are unusual are, first, the timing, Douglas is not beginning his poem, but restarting his labor from the middle, and second, the particular way he dramatizes poetic labor. The timing, the dreariness of the natural scene, and the language surrounding the restart of Douglas's work make it seem difficult, even frustrating. He writes that he picked up a pen

Fortil perform the poet grave and sad,  
 Quham sa fer furth or than begun I had,  
 And wolx ennoyt sum deill in my hart  
 That restit oncompleit sa gret a part.<sup>49</sup>

Douglas is "ennoyt" by the amount of work left to do in his translation, which could simply mean "vexed" or "troubled," but the modern sense of "annoyed" is present in Older Scots as well. Either way, this dramatization backs up Douglas' earlier assertions of the difficulty of translating Virgil, and provides a less glamorous view of poetic labor than we are sometimes accustomed to in these nature prologues.

Just following this, Douglas writes "And to my self I said: 'In gud effect/Thou mon draw furth, the 3ok lyis on thy neck.'"<sup>50</sup> He imagines himself as a beast of burden, plowing at a field, though this metaphor also contains religious significance, as Christ describes learning from him as a "Yoke." Douglas also asserts that he had lost focus on the work, saying "For byssyness,

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<sup>48</sup> "The Proloug of the Sevynt Buke", l. 143.

<sup>49</sup> "The Proloug of the Sevynt Buke", ll. 145-148.

<sup>50</sup> "The Proloug of the Sevynt Buke", ll. 149-150.

quhilk occurrit on case/ Ourvoluyt I this volume, lay a space."<sup>51</sup> This moment is rather striking for its realism, Douglas has simply been busy, and has not managed to complete as much of his translation as he would have liked. However, there is some artifice to it, as Douglas himself shows in the envoi he, uniquely, gives to this prologue.

Explicit tristis prologus

Quharof the altar says thus:

Thys proloug smellis new cum furth of hell,

And, as our buk begouth hys weirfar tell,

So weill according dewly ben annex

Thou drery preambill, with a bludy text.<sup>52</sup>

Douglas identifies the next section as being "bludy" and about "weirfar," and therefore feels that a "drery preambill" suits the narrative that is to come. Douglas is described as "altar" a variant of "Autour," and he describes the creation of the prologue as a creative effort to match the tone of the coming translation, and insofar as good authorship is to "describe/ the stait of man," Douglas does that with unusual realism.<sup>53</sup> Douglas uses a display of his poetic difficulties and his distractibility to also display his authorship, his ability to craft a suitable narrative prologue to the work that follows. His supposed failings are, therefore, dramatized into a narrative of authorial success and skill, paired with a display of rhetorical ability, which this prologue certainly is.

Moving on to the Eighth Prologue, we find a rather odd text, which nonetheless has some items of interest for us. Douglas breaks with the style of the rest of his prologues and of his translation and writes an alliterative and much more obscurely Scottish text, containing a fair

<sup>51</sup> "The Proloug of the Sevynt Buke", ll. 153-154.

<sup>52</sup> "The Proloug of the Sevynt Buke", ll. 162-164.

<sup>53</sup> "The Proloug of the Saxt Buke", ll. 33-34.

number of words not attested to anywhere else in the Scottish corpus. The text dramatizes an dream vision encounter between Douglas and a “selcouth seg,” who decries the moral failings, and particularly the material greed of the contemporary world, and then challenges Douglas himself, accusing him of sloth and questioning the value of his (unfinished) Eneados. S. Melissa Winders argues that the text, unusually for Douglas, adopts a Langlandian mode, and uses that mode to pose some interesting questions about the authoritative/virtuous vernacular.<sup>54</sup> Winders identifies a practice in Douglas' prologues, which we have also seen in this study, of bifurcating the audience between the virtuous readers who will receive his vernacular translation properly, and an ignorant, immoral, brutish or childish population of critics, who “can nocht spell thar Pater Noster rycht.” Winders argues that the eight prologue destabilizes this distinction, to some degree, by presenting a critic who fits many of those negative descriptors, but who cannot be, and is not, dismissed as easily as Douglas does his other critics. Indeed, Winders writes that the Seg, in presenting his text “insistently propounds another mode of writing that lays claim to the same serious concerns as Douglas's project, the legitimacy and social function of poetry and the translation of learning for a lay audience, and his book looks like an overly vernacularized version of Douglas's.”<sup>55</sup>

There are several things about this rhetorical turn that are intriguing for our purposes. Firstly, there is the literal plot, in which both society and Douglas, personally and professionally, are put under correction by what the text presents as a rather unseemly character. Douglas does not accept the criticism of his own work, (and, according to Winders, marshals Langlandesque

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<sup>54</sup> S. Melissa Winders, “‘Bad, Harsk Spech and Lewit Barbur Tong’: Gavin Douglas's Langlandian Prologue”, *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 25 (2011), pp. 137–59.

<sup>55</sup> Winders, p. 158.

defenses of the morality and social value of his book) but the broader social criticisms of the Seg are typical ones, comparable, say, to Gower's lament for the state of England in the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*. Leading with this lends a certain moral credibility (might we ever say authority?) to the Seg's argument, something Douglas, as we have seen, rarely lends to his intellectual opponents.

Second, if we take seriously the allusions to Langland, it is worth speaking briefly about the moral force behind characters like the Seg. Douglas, Winders points out, groups Langland along with a large number of other "popular" texts in his *Palice of Honour*, one of which is the much shorter and simpler *Tale of Ralph the Collier*, which is a useful Scottish example here.<sup>56</sup>

The fundamental point of *Ralph* is demonstrating a moral value to Ralph's lowness.

Charlemagne, when he is struck by Ralph, comments that he "never in my lyfe thus-gait leird."

He is reflecting incredulity, certainly, but the use of "leird" and Charlemagne's subsequent

actions (inviting Ralph to court, making him a knight, etc.) suggest a particular moral value to

Ralph's simplicity. This is aligned with a trend documented elsewhere in Douglas, and in other

texts we have seen, such as Usk's *Testament of Love*, which suggest that claims of simplicity and

plain speech justify the truthfulness of their texts (Compare Douglas' claim he "can nocht fenze."

in the first prologue). By drawing on this literary tradition, Douglas puts a certain credibility into

the mouth of the critical Seg.

Third is the matter of the style itself. Winders argues that the prologue proposes an

alternative English tradition, in tension, if not in conflict, with Douglas' own. What is interesting

about this is that the prologue performs this very thing in stylistic terms, presenting an alternative

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<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that Douglas' alliterative meter has more in common with other Scottish texts like *Ralph Collier* or *Gologras and Gawain*, which share the 13-line stanza ended by four shortened lines, than with *Piers Plowman*.



poetic form to the entire rest of the *Eneados*. Indeed, because the poem is so dominated by the Seg's speech, it seems as though his rough manner of speaking has taken over, displacing the narrator's typical style, which further lends credibility to the Seg's contesting of Douglas' work. Yet there is a countervailing force here: Douglas, in the first prologue, identifies Virgil's ability to vary his style in ways that make the *sententia* more difficult to understand as one of the key signs of his poetical ability. By writing a prologue in a completely different style and substantially different syntax, Douglas performs the traits of virtuosity he himself identifies, and demonstrates his mastery over the "rough" alterative style that critiques him.

Douglas' claim, at the end of the Prologue that "Thys was bot feynt fantasy, in faith, that I feill" makes me a touch skeptical about treating this prologue as a deep refiguring of the authoritative structures of middle English poetry, but it is still intriguing, nonetheless.<sup>57</sup> There are, as we have discussed, elements of the Seg's discourse that are authorizing, and he is given more room to speak his criticism than any other potential opponent of Douglas, but this is perhaps because of the formal point noted earlier. By allowing the character of the Seg to speak extensively, Douglas displays his own literary skill. This is further reinforced by the fact that this is the most formally complete and traditional of the dream visions in Douglas' prologues. The seventh prologue, for example draws on dream vision elements, but does not, in plot terms, actually involve a dream on Douglas' part. The eighth prologue, however, includes a brief introductory frame ("Of dreflyng and dremys quat dow it to endite?/For as I leynt in a ley in Lent this last night"), a series of incidents within the dream (The initial "Seg's complaint" the "Dialogue" in which the narrator and the Seg argue over the worth of their creations, and then the rather odd "dyke" full of disappearing coins) and then an awakening and short meditation on

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<sup>57</sup> "The Proloug of the Aucht Buke", l. 175.

the content of the dream.<sup>58</sup> If nothing else, this formal completeness emphasizes the technical skill of the author, while the Langlandian critique of society and Douglas' poetry at the very least provides a convenient excuse to show off.

The ninth prologue begins by showing off another new rhetorical mode, this time, the opening stanzas take the form of a sermon, which, among other things, opens up a discussion of the utility and importance of "the ryall style." While later on, Douglas returns to the rhetorical position of humility, it is interesting that he chooses to begin this prologue in the most authoritative style he is capable of. The previous prologue questioned, to some extent, the value of the *Eneados* project, but now Douglas writes

Thir lusty warkis of hie nobility  
 Agilyte dyd wryte of worthy clerkis  
 And tharin merkis wysdome, vtilyte  
 Na vilyte, nor sic onthryfty sperkis;  
 Scurilyte is bot for doggis at barkis,  
 Quha tharto harkis fallys in fragilyte.<sup>59</sup>

From the metaphorical pulpit, Douglas asserts that works in high style contain "vtilyte," almost completely obviating the Seg's accusations in the last prologue. Furthermore, if the previous prologue somewhat undercut the distinction between high and low literature, this prologue reasserts it from a much more epistemically confident position. It is in the work of "hie nobility" and "worthy clerkis" where "wysdome" and "vtilyte" are found, whereas "Scurilyte," lower speech, is beastly, "for doggis at barkis."

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<sup>58</sup> "The Proloug of the Aucht Buke", ll. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> "The Proloug of the Nynth Buke", ll. 1-6.

The interesting development in this prologue, though, is that Douglas seems to clarify that the distinction is stylistic within a language, not a necessary feature of particular tongues. Drawing a metaphor from Virgil, Douglas quotes "'Gyf we discryve the wodis, the treis,' quod he, 'suld conform to that manis dignyte/Quahmto our wark we direct and endyte.'" He then goes on to say that

Full litill it wald delyte  
 To write of scroggis, broym, haddir or rammale  
 The lawrer, cedr or the palm triumphale  
 Ar mar ganand for nobillis of estait.<sup>60</sup>

Douglas does not entirely do away with the Latin/Vernacular distinction here, the plants he chooses to represent low style are Scottish undergrowth, while the plants he uses to describe high style are Mediterranean ones. Yet, he names them, and discourses on their value in the vernacular (in a sense, transplanting them), suggesting that the vernacular can be elevated to a style appropriate for "nobillis of estait."

Douglas then returns to the humility forms we are familiar with, reminding his audience

Gyf ocht be weill, thank Virgil and nocht me;  
 Quhar ocht is bad, gays myss, or owt of gre  
 My lewytnes, I grant, hess all the wyte,  
 Kouth not ensew hys ornat fresh endite,  
 Bot, with fuylhardy curage malapert,  
 Schupe to enterprit, and dyd, perchance pervery,  
 Thys maist renownyt prynce of poetry—

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<sup>60</sup> "The Proloug of the Nynth Buke", ll. 36-39.

Quhar I sa dyd, mea culpa I cry.<sup>61</sup>

All of this is familiar to us by now, though it is interesting to see here the melding of three separate strands of discourse we have identified. This prologue is highly concerned with style, and not being able to reproduce “hys fresh endite” is placed alongside concerns about misrepresenting *sententia*, and both mistakes are placed in a penitential framework: if Douglas has gone wrong in either way, he cries “mea culpa.”

In addition to this synthesis of many of the strands of humility we have discussed, we do see a few interesting new additions. Douglas, after (conditionally) repenting for his mistakes, tells of a proverb he feels is appropriate to the situation.

“The blak crow thinkis hyr awin byrdis quhite;”

Sa faris with me, bew shirris, will 3e hark,

Can nocht persave a falt in all my wark,

Affectioun sa far my rayson blyndis<sup>62</sup>

Douglas tells us that he is now incapable of proper self-editing, he loves his work too much. It is interesting, now that he metaphorizes his own work as mothering, to think back to his request for Mary's aid in the first prologue, that she help him in his writing as she nursed Christ with her “pappis quhite.” As noted then, Mary was often imagined as Douglas imagines himself here, too consumed with irrational love to recognize the faults in those she aided. That is to say, even the flaw Douglas identifies in himself here identifies him with a kind of virtuousness.

The other bit of novelty is how Douglas treats the submission for correction that follows this passage. Douglas writes “Quhar I mysknaw myne errour, quha it fydis/ For cheryte amendis

<sup>61</sup> “The Proloug of the Nynth Buke”, ll. 69-76.

<sup>62</sup> “The Proloug of the Nynth Buke”, ll. 78-81.

it, gentil wight," which, at first glance seems *more* traditional than his other submissions.<sup>63</sup>

Douglas unconditionally requests aid, and frames that aid as "cheryte," but what follows is quite different. Douglas continues, "Syne pardon me, sat sa far in my lycht,/ And I sal help to smor your falt, leif broder;/ Thus, vail que vail, ilk gude deid helpis other."<sup>64</sup> Douglas, here, imagines the submission for correction as part of a charitable quid pro quo, others will help him, and he, in turn, will help them. The "gentil wight" is also his "leif broder," that is their relationship is entirely horizontal. Douglas does not imagine his amenders to be any wiser or more capable than him, merely more objective on his own particular work. All that said, Douglas then turns to tell us that, because he has his "wark addressyt and dycht," that is, prepared it and put it in good order, and because he writes on the matters of importance that he described in his sermon, he will redouble his efforts. "The mar glaidly I sal enfors my stile/ Amd fp jys saik do sharp my pen all new."<sup>65</sup> Douglas leaves his readers with this image, again suggesting martial metaphors, "dycht" in particular suggesting that the preparation his is doing is like that of a knight before battle, an appropriate metaphor given his suggested audience and style. Whatever the previous humility, then, we are left again on a confident note.

The prologue of Douglas' tenth book begins in the form of an extended statement of faith. Douglas proceeds through a description of the trinity, which seems to be an extension and commentary on the Nicæan creed. Douglas draws on much of the technical terminology of the creeds in his description, for example, emphasizing that Christ is "engenderis" (from the creed's *génitum*) from God the Father, and then repeating that God the Father "not makis, creates, bot engenderis") God the Son. Pricilla Bawcutt suggests that this part of the text may have been a

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<sup>63</sup> "The Proloug of the Nynth Buke", ll. 82-83.

<sup>64</sup> "The Proloug of the Nynth Buke", ll. 84-86.

<sup>65</sup> "The Proloug of the Nynth Buke", ll. 87, 92-93.

separate devotional poem which Douglas chose to include as a prologue, but in addition to the linkage she suggests (which will be discussed shortly), this section also reinforces Douglas as an authoritative *commentator*.<sup>66</sup>

As in Prologue IX, Douglas is teaching, despite the rhetorical mode being ostensibly a prayer directed at God (“Thou renewar of kynd that creat all”), rather than a sermon directed at the audience.<sup>67</sup> We can, however, see this when Douglas draws on two different metaphors to explicate the tripartite nature of God. In the first case, he draws on the old philosophical concept of the tripartite powers of the soul, and then in the second he metaphorizes as the tripartite nature of a fire, flame/light/heat. This second metaphor is particularly interesting for our purposes, because Douglas describes what he is doing as “Grosly, the sammyn purposse to conclude,” in comparison to the traditional philosophical metaphor. This employment of a rougher, but more accessible metaphor speaks to the broader purpose of the poem: to explicate the trinity to an audience not necessarily familiar with the technical theology. This comprehensibility justifies the “grossness” of the metaphor, just as the accessibility of his translated Virgil justifies Douglas’s (at least purportedly) lesser version of the text.

In addition, the need for this “gross” metaphor reinforces a notion that Douglas brings up later in the text: the fundamental unknowability and inexpressibility of God. Douglas writes

Considir thy raison is so febill and lyte,  
And hys knowlage profund and infynyte,  
Considir quhou he is onmensurabill:

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<sup>66</sup> Priscilla Bawcutt, *Gavin Douglas: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1976), p. 173.

<sup>67</sup> “Incipit prologus libri decimi”, l. 2.

Hym, as he is, to know thou art not habill;  
 It sufficis the beleif thy creid perfyte.<sup>68</sup>

and then one stanza later

O Lord, the ways beyn investigabill!  
 Sweit Lord, thy self is sa inestimabill,  
 I can write nocht bot wondris of thy mycht,  
 That lawyt sa far thy maieste and hyght  
 Tobe born man intill ane oxis stabill.<sup>69</sup>

These are not precisely the humility topoi we have seen so far, but they do express some of the underlying theology of humility that contributes to the success and durability of, at least, the devotional humility tropes we have discussed, though, as I hope has become clear so far, those tropes are not a separable from the secular ones as past literature has suggested.

Douglas, in the first stanza, directs the lack of knowledge at the audience, saying that “thy raison” is lacking, though it should be noted that he has described himself in this way before.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, the feebleness of the audience’s reason seems to be relative to the size of the problem: the audience “art not habill” to know God because he is “onmensurabill,” a universal point that applies to Douglas as well as his audience. Certainly, as Douglas demonstrates here, he does more than “beleif thy creid perfyte,” but it is useful to him both to demonstrate that knowledge and to point out that “febill” wit can still be sufficient.

The immeasurability leads nicely into the second stanza, where Douglas refocuses on the fundamental inexpressibility of God. Whereas the last one began on the “febill” and “lyte” wit of

<sup>68</sup> “Incipit prologus libri decimi”, ll. 91-95.

<sup>69</sup> “Incipit prologus libri decimi”, ll. 101-105.

<sup>70</sup> “Incipit Prologus”, ll. 31-38 is one example, which uses both “febill” and “lyte.”

the audience, this stanza is addressed to God (this audience switching creates the genre slippage between preaching and prayer) and emphasizes how Douglas himself cannot write of “nocht bot wondris of thy mycht.” God is “investigabill” and “inestimabill”, and this incomprehensible greatness is compared to both Douglas' inability to write about it and to the humility of Christ's incarnation and birth.

Donald Fritz argues that this sort of statement of inexpressibility is meant to gesture at deep theoretical problems with discussing the divine in art.<sup>71</sup> Particularly, he argues it gestures at the broad impossibility of language to effectively communicate the divine, and the necessity of using metaphor as one of the only tools that can come close. We see this, of course, with Douglas' usage both a philosophical metaphor of the soul and with his “gross” physical metaphor of the flame, both imperfect efforts to communicate the nature of the Trinity. However, it should be noted that the humility *itself* is also an attempt to communicate this fact: Douglas engages in a bit of negative theology, describing god by describing his inability to be described: he is “onmensurabill,” “investigabill,” and “inestimabill.” All of this is, itself, intended to emphasize and provide scale for the humility of the Incarnation, itself, something of a translation: literally putting God in human terms. Frick distinguishes between this sort of inexpressibility and the secular poetic humility topoi, but I think at this point it is clear that no bright-line separation can be made there. Textually, this translation of the *Aeneid* is exactly the sort of secular, humanist work where you would expect *not* to find this sort of devotional expression of incapacity, but here it is.

Douglas uses the last thirty lines to affect a transition between these apparently disparate themes.<sup>72</sup> He transitions his praise poem into an invocation similar to the one in his first

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<sup>71</sup> Fritz, pp. 166–81.

<sup>72</sup> Bawcutt, p. 174.



prologue, this time, much more explicitly stating the supremacy of God as his Christian muse to the pagan ones. Virgil will “hald his mawmentis to him self,” though Douglas says he will continue to “write as myne autour does.”<sup>73</sup> Douglas does not reject Virgil’s *auctoritas*, but in the process of praising the divine he cordons it off even more firmly. Bawcutt also notes an interesting rhetorical flourish that emphasizes this: Douglas repurposes Virgillian praises of Jupiter to describe God, and then ends the transition by contrasting the order and comity of the Christian God’s heaven with the conflict and discord Virgil describes at the beginning of the next section.<sup>74</sup> Douglas ends, then, by using the inexpressibility of God to (mildly) critique and firmly restrict his *auctor*’s power: Virgil’s work may be sententious, but he is clearly incorrect in his depiction of heavenly matters.

This respectful conflict with Virgil leads us to Douglas’ last prologue, which presents us a much more dramatic and acrimonious confrontation. It should not be surprising that Maphaeus Vegius’ supplemental thirteenth book causes Douglas some difficulties. Throughout all of the prologues we have looked at, the clear, justificatory thread was that Virgil was a valuable and sententious *auctor* and that Douglas was, for the first time, faithfully translating him into the vernacular. Time and again, Douglas returns to his closeness to Virgil to defend and justify his work, but the inclusion of this chapter at least potentially undercuts that message. Thus, this prologue has a great deal of work to do to justify the inclusion of a chapter Douglas knows to be inauthentic, when authentic presentation of Virgil is the whole point of his work.

Douglas begins this dramatized conversation humbly, but displays the way humble politeness can nonetheless be insulting. After being challenged by the dream vision Vegius, Douglas says

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<sup>73</sup> “Incipit prologus libri decimi”, ll. 153, 155.

<sup>74</sup> Bawcutt, p. 174.

Fader, gif I haue done 3ou ony offens,  
 I sall amend, gif it lysis in my mycht:  
 Bot suythfastly, gyf I haue perfyte sycht,  
 Onto my doym, I, saw 3ou nevir ayr,  
 Fayn wald wyt quhen, on quhat wyss, or quhar,  
 Aganyst 3ou trespassit ocht haue I.<sup>75</sup>

Douglas is polite and deferential, even (potentially) penitential, but his politeness has a sting to it: Douglas does not recognize Vegius, which Vegius clearly takes as an insult. Certainly, this request for identification is also present in Henryson's vision of Aesop in the *Fabilis*, which Bawcutt identifies as the most relevant precedent, but it is subtly different there. Henryson asks Aesop to identify himself, but at least recognizes him as someone of importance, and responds to his greeting appropriately ("With reverence I salusit him agane"), and he never directly denies knowledge of him. Indeed, the editor notes that it seems more like Henryson is asking him to identify himself for the audience than asking who he is for his own sake.

Douglas, by contrast, is polite, but not reverential, and explicitly denies having any idea who Vegius is. Vegius, in contrast to Aesop, who fully identifies himself without reservation, seems to take Douglas' request as an insult. Using the familiar "thou" in response to Douglas' respectful "3ou" (and in contrast again to Aesop, who calls Henryson only "my sone"), Vegius says "Knawis thou not Mapheus Vegius, the poet/ That onto Virgillis lusty bukis sweit/ The thretteyn buke ekit Eneadan?" It is hard to read this without echoes of the modern "don't you have any idea who I am?" This professed ignorance is particularly striking given how thoroughly

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<sup>75</sup> "Proloug of the Threttene Buk", ll. 90-95.

Douglas has gone out of his way to display his learnedness in the past, and the snub, therefore, is sharper than it might otherwise have been.

After Vegius' explanation of his supposed crimes, Douglas responds

Mastir," I said, "I heir weill quhat zhe say,  
 And in this cace of perdon I zou pray,  
 Not that I haue zou ony thing offendit,  
 Bot rathir that I haue my tyme mysspendit,  
 So lang on Virgillis volume forto stair,  
 And laid on syde full mony grave mater,  
 That, wald I now write in that treti mor,  
 Quhat suld folk deym bot all my tyme forlor?  
 Als, syndry haldis, fader, trastis me,  
 zou buke ekit but ony necessite,  
 As to the text accordyng neuer a deill,  
 Mair than langis to the cart the fift quheil<sup>76</sup>

Douglas maintains a humble posture, but the content of his response is sharply critical of Vegius. In the first place, while he asks for pardon, he denies that he "haue zou ony thing offendit." His only crime, he says is spending too long on Virgil (emphasizing again how hard he worked on the preceding chapters) and neglecting his other affairs ("mony grave mater") which now place demands on him that he cannot avoid, lest "folk deym bot all my tyme forlor." Douglas is penitential, but even the thing he apologizes for seems to be a virtue. Working hard on a text that he has repeatedly insisted is important and sententious is hardly a thing to apologize for, and the

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<sup>76</sup> "Proloug of the Threttene Buk", ll. 107-118.

fact that he is willing to do so for Virgil but not for Vegius makes clear how valuable he thinks the newer text is.

Douglas, having used the apology to conceal this insult, defers to others to make direct criticism of Vegius. We are told that “syndry haldis” the following opinion, not that Douglas does. Those unnamed many hold that the text is not necessary, and thus Douglas has committed no crime by excluding it. In both cases, Douglas appeals to a broader, communal judgment, rather than his own opinion. If he writes Vegius' text, people will *think* he “mysspendit” his time, and “syndry” do not think it a useful text. Confronted with an accusative *auctor* (or, at least, author), Douglas, in some sense, relies on a submission for correction as a defense. Rather than asking for correction of a new work, he relies on potential correction of his own actions, and extant correction of Vegius' text.

Vegius poses a counterargument, but this is not what convinces Douglas to finally write the text.

Len me a fourteyn nycht, how evir it be,  
 Or, be the faderis sawle me gat,” quod he,  
 “Thou salt dier by that evir thou Virgill knew.”  
 And, with that word, doun of the sete me drew,  
 Syne to me with hys club he maid a braid,  
 And twenty rowtis apoun my riggyng laid,  
 Quhill, “Deo, Deo, mercy,” dyd I cry,<sup>77</sup>

Douglas is instead convinced to write by threat and by physical violence. What to make of this interlude? It certainly is not uncommon for medieval writers to claim they would not have

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<sup>77</sup> “Proloug of the Threttene Buk”, ll. 143-139.

written a text unless forced to, and Douglas himself attests in the first prologue he would not have taken up the translation of Virgil if not for the urging of “My special gud Lord Henry, Lord Sanct Clair.” Yet this depiction of being forced to write is unusually literal, and explicitly violent. It is notable, too, that it is not a patron forcing Douglas to write, but a supposed *auctor*, who should not have to resort to physical violence to promote his own text. It is interesting, here, to think back to Douglas' depiction of popular opinion in his third prologue, where he says of his critics.

Or is it Virgill quham thame list bakbyte?

His armour wald thai perss? Quhar is the place?

He dowtis na dynt of polax, swerd, nor mace<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps, given this past case of imagining public criticism as physical violence, that is what is being depicted here. Vegius' text was common enough to be expected in a medieval translation of Virgil, so perhaps the beating is a metaphor for the complaints Douglas received for not initially including the text. Either way, it seems likely that some outside force compelled him to include it, for the deep reservations he puts in his own mouth are never satisfactorily resolved. Far from being affected, this particular claim of compulsion seems to be legitimate, though, through a humble position, Douglas is able to slip in something of a flyting against Vegius nonetheless.

This notion of criticism as violence leads nicely into the final framing materials of Douglas' translation. At first, the final dedication seems fairly standard. Douglas says to his patron

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<sup>78</sup> “The Proloug of the Thryd Buke”, ll. 23-25.

Ressave gude will, quhar that my cunnyng falys,  
 And gyf within this volume ocht avalys,  
 Or is onto 3our plesour aggreabill,  
 Than is my laubour sum thyng profytabill.

This is all fairly standard dedication stuff, ground Douglas has tread before, with the only difference being that rather than a general address to the audience to read generously, Douglas asks it only of his patron. Where it changes is in the following sentences

Quhar I offendit, or mysteris correctioun,  
 Vndir 3our salfgard and protectioun  
 I me submyt; 3he be my scheld and defens  
 Aganys corruppit tungis violens,  
 Can nocht amend, and 3it a falt wald spy:  
 Quhen thai bakbayte, quhen evir thai clepe and cry,  
 Gyf neyd beys, for 3our kynysman and clerk  
 Than I protest 3e ansuer, and for 3our wark.<sup>79</sup>

Douglas, rather than request correction for potential errors, expects his patron to, in return for his service in translating the text, protect him from the criticism of others. Again, he imagines this critical audience as “corruppit tungis” who do “violens” from which he requires a “scheld and defens.” The patron relationship is reimagined here as an idealized fuedo-vassilic relationship (and Douglas, additionally, emphasizes he is his patron’s kinsmen), where, in exchange for the provision of this text, Douglas’s patron is obligated to protect him from hostile interpreters. Indeed, Douglas seems to disavow ownership of the text entirely, his patron must “ansuer” for

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<sup>79</sup> “The translatar direkkis hys buk”, ll. 9-17.

*his* work. Ownership of the text seems to have been passed with its completion, and therefore so has the obligation to argue for the text. Here again, we see the foreclosing of criticism. Douglas' critics "can nocht amend," they are incapable of improving the text they criticize, and Douglas' friendly audience is expected to "ressave gude will" and be a "scheld and defens," rather than providing feedback or improvement to the text.

Douglas then writes

Gyf thai speir quhy I dyd this buke translait,  
 zhe war the causs tharof, full weill ze wait;  
 zhe cawsyt me this volume to endyte,  
 Quharthrow I haue wrocht myself syk dispyte,  
 Perpetualy be chydit with ilk knak,  
 Full weill I knaw, and mokkyt behynd my bak.<sup>80</sup>

Douglas does not believe his wider potential audience can be trusted, and indeed, seems to think they have it out for him personally. In contrast to his conclusion, where he suggests that his work will make him remembered well forever, here he seems to think that, at least as long as he lives, he will be the subject of vicious mockery, giving the (slightly dramatic) impression that he has martyred his reputation for the sake of this work. Yet, here he also continues to deflect responsibility. Alluding to the technical terminology of the Aristotelian prologue, Douglas reminds his patron twice over that *he* was the real cause of the text, not Douglas himself. Given that, Douglas suggests, his patron has to take responsibility for the public reception of the text, and the defense of their reputation. This is a deployment of petitionary discourse we have not seen before: typically, the authors we have seen have portrayed the responsibilities of their

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<sup>80</sup> "The translatar direkkis hys buk", ll. 17-22.

patron as merely favorable reception. Douglas expects that, but he also expects his patron to actively defend the text and Douglas' reputation.

As we have seen before with his extended praised of Virgil, this patronage relationship is further expounded, at much greater length than in other texts we have investigated.

For 3ou maid I this buke, my Lord, I grant,  
 Nowder for pryce, det, reward nor supple,  
 Bot for 3our tendir request and amyte,  
 Kyndness of blude grundyt in natural law.  
 I am na cayk fydlar, full weill 3e knaw;  
 No thing is myne quhilk sall not 3owris be,  
 Gyf it afferis for 3owr nobilyte;  
 And of 3our moblys and all other geir  
 3he will me serve siclyke, I haue na weir.<sup>81</sup>

Douglas specifically denies having written the book in exchange for payment, comparing those who do to a “cayk-fydlar” (a rather obscure word, but clearly a low-ranking cheat or scoundrel). This is an interesting companion to the “complaint to purse” genre, because while later lines make it clear Douglas is *actually* asking for payment, he is in a position to make a much softer and more qualified ask. As a powerful (and presumably wealthy) bishop, Douglas is able to frame this as a patron-client relationship, but still as one between near peers, who can pay each other in “amyte,” “kyndness of blude” and whatever “afferis for 3owr nobilyte.” This elaborate declining of payment, then, allows Douglas to assert his superior status to his fellow,

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<sup>81</sup> “The translatar direkkis hys buk”, ll. 72-80.



less well-off poets, because he, unlike them, can afford to undertake a massive task like the translation of the *Aeneid* with no promise of pay and only a hope for consideration.

Douglas also, towards the end of his dedication, brings to a conclusion both the emphasis on the hard labor of translation and the incapacity of his critics.

Quha wenys I say thir wordis bot invane,  
 Lat thame assay als lang laubour agane,  
 And translait Ovid, as I haue Virgill;  
 Perchans that wark sall occupy thame a quhile:  
 3it haue I hard oft said be men na clerkis,  
 Tyll idyll folk full lycht beyn lukand warkis<sup>82</sup>

This passage ties up a few different threads. The exhortation to “assay al slang laubour agane” echoes and strengthens Douglas’ frequent commands not to criticize the book until one has finished it. Now, at the end, Douglas maintains that anyone who has criticism should read it again, or at least “assay” how much labor it took to produce such a work. Douglas also amplifies his accusation that his critics could not match his work by laying out a specific challenge. They should undertake to translate Ovid’s work as Douglas has Virgil, and then they can criticize his writing. Douglas is perfectly willing to admit he may have made errors, he says as much in this dedication, but he contrasts that with a complete unwillingness to accept criticism.

Douglas brings the work (very nearly) to a close, with a final critique of his own critics, and, at its conclusion, he repurposes another trope we have seen before: the “go little book” envoi.

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<sup>82</sup> “The translatar direkkis hys buk”, ll. 111-116.

Go, wlgar Virgill, to euery churlych wight  
 Say, I avow thou art translatit rycht,  
 Beseyk all nobillys the corect and amend,  
 Beys not afferyt tocum in prysaris sycht;  
 The nedis nocht to aschame of the lycht,  
 For I haue brocht thy purpos to gud end:  
 Now salt thou with euery gentill Scot be kend,  
 And to onletterit folk be red on hight,  
 That erst was bot with clerkis comprehend.<sup>83</sup>

This, again, mirrors the form of past envois, but substantially modifies the rhetoric. Firstly, this “wlgar Virgill” is to attest that its writer “avow thou art translatit rycht,” rather than to kiss the steps where past *auctors* have walked, as Chaucer requests *Troilus and Criseyde* do. He does, here, finally, offer a fairly clear submission for correction, though it is limited to “nobillys.” Later lines, perhaps, provide an answer to why he feels this need. Douglas imagines his audience broadly, not just as “euery gentill Scot,” who can read the text, but he also imagines it as being read aloud to “onletterit folk.” He also suggests in the dedication that his text will be useful to grammar masters to teach in schools. All of this, perhaps, partially explains why Douglas so thoroughly restricts his critical audience: he imagines an extremely broad audience for his text, but only wishes to receive criticism from a very narrow few he considers peers. Even when he requests criticism from them, though, Douglas maintains, despite the humble forms, a solid confidence. In addition to avowing his translation is correct, he encourages his book to seek out “prysaris” to be evaluated because “The nedis nocht to aschame of the lycht.” Douglas thus

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<sup>83</sup> “Ane exclamatioun aganyst detractouris”, ll. 37-45.

finishes as he began, by repurposing the humble forms typical of medieval literature into statements of supreme confidence.

This rewriting of the humility topos is a good place to end this study, because it highlights two important facts about them that this study has attempted to demonstrate. Firstly, they are, by nature, a flexible tool that can be employed by a variety of authors to a variety of ends. Second, while they are useful in navigating power structures and asserting authority one might not normally possess, they should not be seen as inherently resistant to authority. Douglas, here, employs the discourse of humility to sternly proclaim his literary authority, and as a wealthy bishop, it is hard to see this as doing anything but reinforcing authoritative power structures. Still, it is also worth noting that this increased confidence is something that progresses out of engagement with a prior vernacular discourse; Douglas is as confident as he is because he has a vernacular *auctor* (Chaucer) to appeal to, and a vernacular fool to correct (Caxton). Douglas' supreme confidence, then, points to a shift in the attitude toward vernacular humility as authors in the vernacular became more confident in their ability and community.

### **Conclusion**

It has been my assertion throughout that humility tropes were profoundly varied and flexible, which makes a final summary rather difficult, but that variety is the essential point of this study. Humility tropes are too frequently treated as rote recitals, and when addressed in the texts of particular “great” authors, are all too often explained as an exceptional variation on what is, in its normal form, a thoughtless repetition of an empty text. If there is one through line in the text is that humility has *purpose*. Its relationship to authority varies, even within a single text, as we saw in the case of Margery Kempe, who used humility to undercut some authorities and reinforce others, but it almost invariably *has* a relationship.

If there is a singular point to this study, it is that the reframing, reforging, and reworking of known literary elements, be they small tropes or whole stories, was an essential part of medieval literary creativity. From Hoccleve wrestling with his social isolation and existential dread, to Chaucer blazing new literary paths, to Margery and other women pushing into religious spaces that were cordoned off from them, all of the authors we have seen here deployed humility in thoughtful, intelligent ways that served their particular literary needs. Further, they made adjustments, some slight, some radical, to the form of humility tropes as they did so, to best fit their particular situation. This study was necessarily limited by the length of a master's thesis, but I believe this sort of refiguring of tropes can provide fertile ground for research into medieval aesthetics broadly, as a counter to our post-romantic tendency to value originality over creative reuse.

Humility tropes are of particular interest because in addition to being an example of this creative reuse, they are critical to enabling it. Creative revoicing of the type David Lawton describes requires new voices, and, as we have seen, humility was a key part of navigating what were notionally very strict rules on who could speak, and when they could speak. We have far

more texts about far more subjects and from far more authors than would be allowed to speak under the strictest interpretations of *auctoritas* and authoritative discourse. Humility served as a key cog in the intellectual justifications and defenses of those texts that pushed the boundaries, because it, itself, was so fundamentally orthodox. This can feel a bit like talking in circles, but paradox is going to be an essential component of an ideological structure that enforces strict hierarchy and asserts that “the last will be first and the first will be last.” Medieval Christianity did just that.

This study is far from complete; It studies only English and Scottish texts from the Later Middle Age, and only a subset of those. One subject it did not have time to address at all is variations between vernaculars. Certainly, at first glance, Dante's confidence in the value of the vernacular in *De vulgari eloquentia* could provide an intriguing contrast, for example. Also sadly struck from the plan was an entire chapter on the deployment of humility by religious women. I particularly wished to include a letter from Hildegard of Bingen to Bernard of Clairvaux, in which she humbly implores him to authenticate a vision (in which she saw that he was a particularly wise and holy man). Unfortunately, despite being a masterful example of humility authorizing itself (Bernard, I think, was unlikely to doubt such a vision) there was no home for it in an otherwise exclusively anglophone study. I hope to fit it in to a future, more complete examination. In the end, far from being rote and uninspired, the medieval deployment of humility tropes was deep and complex enough that one could devote more than thirty-five thousand words to it and still only scratch the surface.



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