Authorship, Imitation, and Refusal
in Late-Medieval England

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Modern scholarship has focused on the historical foundations of medieval authorship in exegesis and pedagogy. These two sources show how texts and authors were framed externally within a dynamic literary culture in the high and late Middle Ages. Authorship functioned internally as well, as a condition of literary meaning that complements the conditions of intelligibility within Latin and vernacular literary systems. To understand the internal dynamic of authorship, we need to supplement exegesis and pedagogy with an understanding of imitation and resistance. Imitation traditionally forms character and style from canonical models, and it provides a means to compose equivalents to canonical models by reproducing, rewriting, and reimagining them. At the same time, it generates an impossible demand for authorship – an original copy that remains subordinate to its source. For this reason, resistance emerges as the necessary correlate of imitation. In late-medieval England, John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, poets recognized as authors by their contemporaries and by each other, demonstrate the productive reciprocity of imitation and resistance. Gower builds an edifice of authorship around his works and poetic career yet writes himself out of his most ambitious literary project at the end of the *Confessio Amantis* and then refuses his own dismissal in a sequence of minor works. Chaucer punctuates his repeated gestures toward authorship with equally insistent denials and omissions. These occasions for refusing authorship are by no means identical, but they point toward an alternative history of authorship that recognizes its contingency and continual renegotiation.

Medieval authorship emerged as a field of inquiry some three decades ago, grounded in exegesis and pedagogy and concerned with the influence of Latin traditions on European vernaculars. Exegesis gave a working taxonomy of authorial roles and functions within medieval textual production (scribe, commentator, compiler, and author). It also furnished a conceptual framework, the idea of the author as a secondary efficient cause, an instrument within aesthetic creation, in comparison and relation to a divine Author (Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship* 94-103). Pedagogy emphasized the informing influence of curriculum and teaching, which established the conditions for writing through the study of canonical authors (Copeland 37-86). Within pedagogy, the possibilities of imaginative expression and the tasks of ordinary writing were already radically shaped by authors and the institution of authorship. In addition, the traditions of school commentary commonly located meaning outside language in the domain of ethics, to which canonical texts were subordinated. Exegesis and pedagogy operated in their own disciplinary and historical contexts from late Antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period, as other contributions in this volume demonstrate. It would be an error to minimize the complexities within those traditions. Exegesis and pedagogy take a distinct historical configuration, however, as they move from pan-European Latin academic culture to the vernacular. In modern accounts of authorship, the vernacular is the ground on which medieval literary theory makes compelling claims to critical attention, for it is there that the institutional conventions of authorship become visible as an influence exerted on a national literature within a narrative of cultural translation and identity.

The disciplinary history of medieval authorship falls outside the scope of my discussion. I want instead to revisit some of the foundational investments of the topic. For late-medieval English literature, I shall argue, the way we have constructed authorship has done much to explain the external framing of texts and writers within a dynamic literary culture. But how does authorship function internally, not as a condition of writing but as a part of its meaning? To address that question, I want to propose a second set of terms – imitation and refusal – to complement exegesis and pedagogy as sources for describing medieval authorship.

Authorship, in the account I propose, functions dialectically through imitation and refusal. Medieval writers adapted the systems and techniques of exegesis and pedagogy, and engaged the canonical works whose schemes were originally designed to explain, stabilize, and regulate as models of discourse and forms of cultural authority. Their adaptations, formal and substantive, encompass two major facets of imitation: the formation of character and style from established models and

the practice of composing equivalents to canonical works. Situated within grammar and rhetoric, these two facets overlap significantly – the poet imitating a masterwork necessarily stands in relation to the master who confers his *auctoritas* by serving as the locus to which responsibility for the work can be traced. As a practice, imitation functions as invention by reproducing, revising, and reimagining canonical sources. At the same time, it tacitly makes an impossible demand that serves as a boundary condition of invention: imitation aspires to produce an original copy that rivals yet remains subordinate to its models. For this reason, refusal is a corollary rather than a denial or cancellation of authorship, and it differs from the classical *recusatio*, the stylized rejection of a poetic topic or patron. As I use the term, refusal is a literary strategy that relocates authorship within a new set of terms, as a possibility strategically denied in favor of other possibilities of invention. Refusal thus repositions authors and their works with respect to literary canons, institutions, and tradition. As a gesture of difference, it also points toward the stakes of authorship in the domains of society, politics, and culture. John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer, poets who recognized authorship in each other as "moral Gower" (*Troilus and Criseyde* 5.1856) and Venus's "owne clerk" (*Confessio Amantis* 8.2954*) and who were recognized as authors in a European literary context (Jenkins, Moreno), allow us to map some of the formulations of authorship in late-medieval England.

I

The foundational concerns with exegesis, pedagogy, and the vernacular have allowed scholars to contextualize medieval authorship and to place textual production in specific historical moments, with often significant afterlives in literary culture. The current body of work has added important nuances and qualifications. We recognize, for instance, that "authorship" in the singular is a rubric of convenience, a shorthand, to designate "authorships" in the plural. We know that such "authorships" were negotiated and thereby determined within complex social networks of tradition, patronage, gender, and reception, including translation and other forms of textual reconfiguration (Burrow 30). The role of compiler, shared by religious and secular writers, involves critical judgment and discrimination as well as a gathering of sources (Paulmier-Foucart 147-50). Even "the vernacular" is a term now open to critical rethinking. It represents not just a demotic language but a position within a hierarchy of knowledge and cultural prestige and social power. On this view, French has a large claim to be a "classical" language in England and elsewhere in Europe, serving as it does as a medium to transmit the

works of authors. Alternatively, we might regard medieval Latin, follow-
ing Alastair Minnis's recent suggestion (*Translations of Authority* 11), as a
vernacular or at least as a second language native to no one but required
by literate communities for professional communication as well as liter-
ary composition. Within the vernacular, we can document the rise of
literary canons organized by authors as well as poetic forms from the
twelfth century onwards, and we can trace the independence of the ver-
nacular from classical sources in the late Middle Ages (*Cambridge History*
422-71). In addition, textual studies have brought into consideration the
roles of material production, layout, and visual representation within
authorship. The bibliographical code applied to late-medieval texts
frames authorship as significantly as do prologues, marginal glosses, and
other apparatus. The material text remains an important link between
manuscript culture and early printed books.

   These qualifications – and others – would clarify but do not, I think,
drastically change the formulation of authorship that emerges from the
foundational sources in exegesis and pedagogy and from the interest in
tracing those sources forward into European vernaculars. The double
grounding in commentary implies that authorship depends on reading as
both a guided discipline and a realm of ingenuity and unrehearsed dis-
covery. Reading, in turn, depends on institutions (schools, circles, estab-
lished protocols for exchange and distribution) which mediate between
texts and audiences, including those who may be primarily auditors. Fur-
ther, as promulgated by reading and the institutions of literacy, author-
ship is retrospective and even retroactive. If early modern authorship
generates a triumphal narrative of self-fashioning and poetic ambition
that looks forward to a writer's assertion of his or her place within an
emerging tradition, usually a national tradition, medieval authorship
plots a somewhat different route to a similar destination: to be an author
is to be regarded as such, to be situated within a textual succession im-
bued with cultural prestige – in other words, to realize the prospect of
securing a place in a past.[1] For late-medieval writers, authorship oper-
ates within a logic that requires something like a middle verb, such as
Eustache Deschamps expresses when he numbers Geoffrey Chaucer,
translator of the *Roman de la rose*, among "ceuls qui font pour eulx auc-
torisier" ("those who compose in order to create authority for them-
selves").[2]

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[1] Renaissance literary studies offer differing teleologies for authorship: subjectivity in the
case of Greenblatt, tradition for Greene, literary careers for Helgerson and Cheney, and
monarchy and power for Montrose.

[2] Deschamps's phrase "ceuls qui font pour eulx auctorisier" has a reflexive sense (Jen-
kins 275) that has generated considerable commentary. Toynbee translates the phrase as

As a critical practice, the study of medieval authorship draws not only on the theory and content but – equally important – on the explanatory power of its historical sources. The appeal of authorship as an interpretive tool stems from the promise that we might discover or adapt a language of criticism for medieval texts from the critical idiom and hermeneutic categories of their own period. The conventions of medieval authorship thereby warrant interpretation by providing "a literary role and a literary form" available to medieval vernacular writers and recoverable by modern readers and critics (Minnis, *Medieval Theory* 191). At the same time, they privilege a certain kind of knowledge about texts. Medieval authorship has as its main explanatory task the mapping of a literary system onto vernacular works.[3] To be sure, no Middle English author rivals Dante's use of the formal apparatus of authorial commentary and textual divisions in the *Vita nuova*, his "more mature" ("più virilmente si trattasse") analyses of *canzoni* in the *Convivio* (1.1.16), the "introductory" discussion of the "Letter to Can Grande della Scala" offered "sub lectoris officio" (13.13) or the self-reflexive passages of the *Commedia*. But in the oddly discontinuous history of post-Conquest literature, English writers consciously appropriate the frameworks and expository forms of commentary. These appropriations are complex exchanges between learned traditions and vernacular practice, and they demonstrate, particularly in writers like Langland, a resistance as well as subordination to academic theory (Middleton, Hanna).

By most accounts, an engagement with authorial conventions is fairly extensive in England after the mid-fourteenth century (Minnis, *Cambridge History* 423). But there is evidence that writers incorporated the apparatus of commentary in earlier texts. The *Ormulum*, the most novel and eccentric of early Middle English texts (c. 1150-80), it has been argued (Mancho), incorporates the academic prologue adapted from Aristotle's four causes, while fashioning its literary form as a commentary in which the author adds his words to God's words in order to fill and

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"those who make [i.e. are 'makers,' poets] in order to be considered authorities [i.e. to get a reputation]" or alternatively "'in order to authorise them' – i.e., you, Chaucer, have asked for 'plants' for them in order thereby to give them reputation, such a request from you being in itself a title to fame. The interpretation given above, however, seems the simpler" (432). Wimsatt translates, "those who write for posterity" (*Chaucer and the Poems of "Ch"* 82). Butterfield renders the phrase, "those who create authority for themselves" (145). Toynbee 432 notes that "ceuls qui font" is translated literally by Chaucer in the "Complaint of Venus" and applied to the French poet Oton de Granson, "flour of hem that make in Fraunce" (line 82).

[3] Dante's "Letter to Can Grande" analyzes the *Commedia* under the terms of a double form – *forma tractatus* and *forma tractandi* (9.26-27); see Hollander 29 for the influence of Dante's language on Guido da Pisa and Boccaccio.

clarify them. Laȝamon (fl. 1200) describes his practice as a compiler, setting his sources before him, choosing the truer words, and making three books – the Old English translation of Bede, a Latin copy of Bede's *Historia*, and Wace's *Roman de Brut* – into one. His overwhelming reliance on Wace only highlights the claim to be a compiler as a bid for authorship. The author of *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300) presents his universal history as a translation undertaken on behalf of a nation: "For þe loue of Inglis lede, / Inglis lede of Ingland" (lines 234-5). The prologue shared by *Sir Orfeo* (c. 1300) and "Lay le Freine" catalogues the *materia* and the mode of presentation for the Breton lay – all this preserved, we are told, in writing for a reading audience and confirmed by the authority of "clerkes" (line 2). Middle English religious, devotional, didactic, and educational works drew extensively on sources shared with literary and imaginative works. Indeed, the expansion of "literature" as a term to encompass a broad field of textual production is one tenet of medieval authorship studies (Wogan-Browne 3-4). In the religious sphere, Osbern Bokenham's account of the "what" and "why" of his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* employs the academic prologue as purposefully as does Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* in the realm of moral philosophy (Mitchell 57). For writers like Richard Rolle and Reginald Pecock, the protocols of authorship may have offered some measure of defense or ideological cover against imputations of heresy (Wogan-Brown 246, 99).

Besides an external framing, however, authorship also provides an internal signature; it functions as part of the formal order of texts, hence a part of their symbolic meaning. For religious and didactic works, particularly those translated from Latin sources and composed under various forms of patronage, introductory frames go a long way toward conveying their imaginative scope. Robert Mannyng claims his authorship under the twin sanctions of translation and patronage for the purpose of salvation: "For lewed men y vndyr toke / On englyssh tonge to make þis boke" to divert them from the "talys & rymys" (*Hanglyng Synn* lines 44-46) of games, feasts, and taverns that could otherwise lead them to sin and folly. But it is in works of literary ambition that we find authorship staged in some of its most intriguing and evocative forms. Gower and Chaucer represent important examples of what we might call "the fiction of authorship." Authorship reveals itself in the shifting ratios of imitation and refusal that surround Gower's work in framing devices and paratexts and that permeate Chaucer's as an internal signature.

II

John Gower is arguably the paradigmatic author in late-medieval England. The formal conventions of authorship are fully mobilized to support and sustain this role. All Gower's major works and many others besides are marked by the expository device of rubrics, which signal the divisions of his *materia* and foreground the conceptual effort that has gone into organizing them – that is, to treating his matter as the commentaries describe the *modus tractatus*. The *Confessio Amantis* employs two prologues to situate Gower's poem, one in the introductory portion to the work which takes previous authors and books as the topic of its exordium and the other at the beginning of Book I, which seems to announce a shift in matter from social commentary to love. Besides rubrics and marginal glosses, introductory Latin verses punctuate the divisions of his subject matter to show its structural order and articulation. In recent years, Gower's modern interpreters have emphasized that the textual apparatus serves to interrogate rather than impose the authority of commentary, just as ethics designates in Gower a domain of moral reflection and not merely a program of overt didacticism (Echard 19-20).

Gower draws on authors and discursive forms in both classical and vernacular canons for his poems – dreams visions, penitentials, encyclopedic compilations, chronicle history and didactic works, Latin and vernacular epic, French romances and lyrics. Ovid is a major source for the exemplary narratives of the *Confessio Amantis* and for the language and phrasing of the *Vox Clamantis*, which at times resembles an Ovidian cento with lines resituated with no concern for the original context (Yeager 48-62). Gower shares a dozen tales with Chaucer in a poetic rivalry that finally confounds any effort to define lines of influence. Moreover, Gower's poetic career reflects not just an awareness of authorial conventions and borrowings but a sustained and continually renewed performance of authorship. Gower presents himself as the author of a unified corpus held together by a consistent thematic program derived from the ethical framing of poetry in the commentary traditions. His corpus lays claim to the literary terrain of late-medieval England, ranging over the three principal languages of composition – Latin, French, and Middle English.

The colophon "Quia unusquisque," presumably written by Gower though appearing in various positions among manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis* and *Vox Clamantis*, brings his works and poetic languages together in a virtuoso reckoning of authorship. The piece credits Gower with having produced three books "for the purpose of bringing instruction to the attention of others" ("doctrine causa compositos ad aliorum

noticiam"), and describes the French *Mirour de l'omme*, Latin *Vox Clamantis*, and Middle English *Confessio Amantis* in their order of composition. Gower borrows here from the general framework of commentary tradition to report a standardized Latin title for each work (the *Mirour* is the *Speculum Meditantis*) and to specify the material of the works, the divisions of the material, the mode of treatment, and the utility.

Gower's description of his corpus in "Quia unusquisque" is highly selective in its inclusions and emphases (*Minor Latin Works* 71). Accordingly, the *Mirour* is a poem on virtues and vices and social estates, though it clearly evolved in the process of composition to include other material, notably a life of the Virgin. The *Vox* is described in the colophon from the retrospect of Richard II's fall but omits mention of the allegorical dream vision of the Rising of 1381 that Gower later appended as the first book of the poem. The *Confessio Amantis* is cast first as a poem of princely instruction but then one mostly about love and the foolish passions of lovers, along the lines of school commentaries on Ovid's elegiac poems. The aim of Gower's colophon, however, is not to give a full descriptive account but to insist on the coherence of his canon, hence his authorial project. Gower is an ethical poet addressing the moral, social, and political order and instructing both princes and lovers in self-governance. The critical importance lies not just in the themes of Gower's authorship but in the systemization. Gower frames a reading of his corpus through the analytical and descriptive categories that confer the literary dignity of authorship. He makes his work an object of commentary, a virtual requirement of authorship.

The Latin poem "Eneidos Bucolis," which follows Gower's colophon in five manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*, directly applies these conventions to Gower. The poem is credited to "a certain Philosopher" ("quidam Philosophus") writing on the imagined occasion of Gower's completing three books. It is located, in effect, at the fictional moment of his consolidating his poetic canon, an event, as we shall see, that Gower refuses. G. C. Macaulay surmised that the philosopher might be Ralph Strode, the co-dedicatee with "moral Gower" of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (*Complete Works* 4: 419); alternatively, Robert F. Yeager has suggested that Gower himself might have penned these lines of commendation and commemoration as part of a campaign of authorial self-presentation (*Minor Latin Works* 83-6). The poet, whether friend or convenient fiction, makes the dramatic move of equating Gower's three little books (*libelli*) with the three books (*libri*) that won Vergil honor over other poets and secured him praise as an author in the schools. The poem does not work out specific correspondences between Gower's poems and Vergil's corpus. Nor does it suggest that there is a program of writing in the compositional sequence of Gower's poems

that would match the progress through pastoral, georgic, and epic that late-classical commentators imagined as a literary *cursus honorum*, a model of an authorial career. Simply put, Gower's corpus matches up with Vergil's oeuvre because each writer has composed three major works.

The poem's authorial ambitions lie in exploiting the contrasts that this numerical correspondence secures. Thus Rome praises Vergil, but England is the beneficiary of Gower's turn to serious topics. Vergil writes in one tongue to have his work appreciated by Italians, whereas Gower writes in three in order to achieve a "scola lata," a wider learning among men. Vergil astounds Roman ears with vanities, while Gower's writing glows for Christians and secures him praise in heaven. These comparisons do not suggest the equivalence of the two poets through formal emulation; they propose instead that Gower surpasses Vergil because he is a national and Christian poet. The philosopher's poem is concerned as much with *translatio* – the relocation of ascribed cultural values – as with praise and commendation. It sets out an elegant logical proportion that highlights telling differences in scale: Vergil is to a city (Rome) and a region (Italy) as Gower is to a nation (England) and a spiritual community (Christendom). As an author, Gower has the equivalent works to imitate Vergil's corpus, and as an imitator – belated yet rivalrous – he surpasses Vergil by having salvation history on his side.

The quatrain "Quem cinxere," written again by a "certain philosopher," celebrates the completion of the *Confessio Amantis* in similar authorial terms. Gower's finished poem, articulated in its structural divisions, has a counterpart in the English nation filled with praise that sings (in a reminiscence of Vergil) Gower's poetry in its different regions: "Per loca discreta canit Anglia laude repleta" ("filled with praise / England, throughout many regions, recites your joyous poetry"). Gower enacts three authorial roles here as "Carminis Athleta satirus . . . sive Poeta" ("Master of verse, satirist – or poet"). Macaulay takes "satirus Poeta" together so that Gower is a competitive performer or skilled champion of verse and a satiric poet. Whatever the construction, the encomiastic demand is for full praise with the same transcendence that marks Gower's historical and spiritual advantage over Vergil: "Sit laus completa quo gloria stat sine meta" ("May praise be full where glory stand without end").

Gower's ambition to be seen as an author stands out clearly, then, in his paratexts and appropriations of conventions from the traditions of commentary. Gower claims a position as a moralist and wise man, prophet and "public writer." He moves between and among the authorial designations of *scriptor* (*Complete Works* 4: 313), *compositor* (*Complete Works* 4: 3) and even *orator* (*Complete Works* 4:14). In probably the most

overt example, Gower explains that Amans, his protagonist in the *Confessio Amantis*, is a literary persona adopted by the author. The relevant phrasing occurs in his gloss near the beginning of Book I of the *Confessio*: "fingens se auctor esse Amantem" (I.59 gloss). What proves remarkable about the passage is not that Gower assumes a persona, much less the persona of a lover as narrator, as in the *Roman de la rose,* but that his gloss takes it for granted that being an *auctor* is the poet's uncontroversial identity. Authorship is the norm against which he assumes the fictitious role of Venus's largely unsuccessful and finally superfluous and superannuated follower.[4]

Gower's agility in overplaying the conventional role of lover while quietly claiming in the margin to be an *auctor* demonstrates some of the working principles of medieval authorship. Authorship is a concept always under negotiation for late-medieval English writers. It is a contingency within writing, not an external condition to be achieved and held once and for all. In this particular instance, the elegantly smuggled claim to be an *auctor* stands out by contrast with the role Gower assumed in the *Vox Clamantis*. At the beginning of the *Vox*, explaining his authorial intent, Gower is the *compositor*, "compiler," of a horrific dream of rebellious peasants transformed to monsters (*Complete Works* 4:3). He confirms the role at the end, while claiming that the authorizing source of his poem is a spirit that infused his verses while he was dreaming: "Hos ego compegi versos, quos fuerat in me / Spiritus in sompnis" ("I have compiled these verses, which a spirit uttered within me during my sleep" [7.1443-4]). From this, he goes on to make an apparent disavowal of authorship: "Hec set vt auctor ego non scripsi metra libello" ("But I, as an author, have not set down these lines in a book" [7.1445]). He is instead passing along what he has heard as something to be read ("Que tamen audiui trado legenda tibi"). And what he has heard are the voices of the people ("voces plebis" [7.1448]). As a prophetic writer, he has invoked the authority that proverbially stands next to God's: "Quod scripsi plebis vox est" ("What I have set down is the voice of the people" [7.1469]).[5] The compiler, who gathers from other sources but presumably adds nothing of his own, thus writes himself into his own text as the instrumental means, the efficient cause, of an authority far beyond any powers he can invoke on his own.

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[4] Minnis, "Authors in Love," reads Gower's person in the context of medieval tradition. Meecham-Jones sees the passage as a formal device that places Gower both inside and outside his work.

[5] Gower returns to this trope in the *Confessio Amantis*, appealing to "The comun vois" (Pro 125).

The contingency of authorship in Gower is apparent throughout the intricate narrative framing of the *Confessio Amantis*. An authorial Gower speaks in the Prologue, first in Latin and then in English. His initial topos is poetic modesty, but his underlying gesture is Ovidian and ironic: "minimus ipse minora canam" ("I, least of all, sing things all the lesser" [Pro 2]). The turn toward less lofty subjects (*minora*) is Ovid's self-inaugurating claim at the opening of the *Amores*. If Gower follows his turn from a higher topic (epic for Ovid, social commentary for Gower), he does not follow the reduction in scale, producing instead an encyclopedic work holding to "the middel weie" (Pro 17) between lust and lure while shifting its final cause from being a book for "king Richardes sake" (Pro 24*) to being one for "Engelondes sake" (Pro 24) in later recensions. The role of imitation is crucial within this figuration of authorship. Gower states that books are the remains of authors, a means of recovering their embodied teaching (Pro 1-3). Imitation provides access to this pedagogy for moderns who "wryte of newe som matiere, / Essampled of these olde wyse" (Pro 6-7). As happens so often in Gower and Chaucer, simple language conveys enormous subtlety – in this case, the impossible demand at the heart of imitation. To write "of newe som matiere" is to write "new, for the first time" and to write received materials "anew, afresh, again" (MED, s.v. *neue* [n.]). Such writing is by definition poetic imitation; it is "Essampled" in the dual sense of setting a precedent or exemplifying (MED, s.v. *exaumplen*[b], citing this passage). In other words, it is constrained in its contents (as example) and in its mode of presentation (as precedent). The sources for imitation likewise divide for Gower between authors and the works that stand for them in time: "these olde wyse" refers to "these wise men of olde" and to old books.[6]

The authorial Gower of the Prologue adopts a persona in Amans who recounts the dream vision and suffers Venus's dismissal. But he also has a double in Genius, who serves as the focal point for narrative imitation. Genius enacts this authorial role by continually marking his *exempla* as stories appropriated from elsewhere, from a broad canon of uncontroversial wisdom. His authorizing gesture is typically to present them as a form of quotation: the illustrative "tales" Genius recounts for Amans are drawn from "cronique" or poets or "bokes"; some are "a tale in poesie" (4.1039). His formula for introducing narrative is "I finde" or "I finde write" (4.2324, 4.2927). Genius thus absorbs the be-

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[6] Macaulay, *Complete Works* 2:457, cites the "Traitié selonc les auctours pour essampler les amantz marietz" 15.1.4: "Pour essampler les autres du present"; Peck glosses, "wise [men/books]."

latedness of imitation as a strategy of authorship, and he takes on the work of translation as one dimension of authorship.

The translated and invented stories that Genius offers are notable for their narrative fidelity to their sources. The Ovidian tales, in particular, tend to present the complete stories in the *Metamorphoses* and other poems. The readings Genius makes and the marginal glosses that accompany the narratives indicate, however, that Genius's authorship, like the meaning of his tales, is open and contested rather than settled. The fidelity of narrative imitation and the authorial relocations of exemplarity and moralization exist in a tension that reflects the nature of the literary. Furthermore, the contingency of authorship becomes visible within the dream frame, as Amans resists the commentary Genius brings to his *exempla*. For example, in the discussion of arms and love, a central concern of medieval vernacular literatures and chivalric culture, Amans challenges Genius's link between continual martial prowess and a lover's desire: "be londe and ek be Schipe / He mot travaile for worschipe" (4.1627-8). Amans's counter example to this armed erotic vigilance is Achilles, who sets aside his arms for Polyxene: "A man of armes mai him reste / Somtime in hope for the beste" (4. 1703-4). Here Amans swerves from narrative fidelity to omit the conclusion of the story: in the medieval master narrative of Troy, Achilles dies by ambush and his son Pyrrhus wreaks terrible vengeance on Polyxene for his father's treacherous death. In doing so, Amans reveals, at one level, his limited perspective as a penitent and thus his need for Genius's instruction on sloth; at another, he confirms a corollary of authorial rewriting as imitation — namely, the expectation that readers will recognize the lacunae and silences. Imitation that goes undetected misses its mark, which is to be recognized as a form of secondary creation (Greene 28-53).

Gower's strategies of imitation are simultaneously overt and sophisticated gestures toward the textual conventions of authorship. His elaborately staged abandonment of authorship at the end of the *Confessio Amantis* — a refusal generated inside the fiction of his text but moving into authorial performance — is no less complex than his framing and introductory strategies. Venus dismisses John Gower from her court with the injunction to pray for peace and directs him, "go ther vertu moral duelleth, / Wher ben thi bokes, as men telleth, / Whiche of long time thou hast write" (8.2925-7). Released from love and implicitly separated from the persona of Amans, Gower is returned to his literary canon and to the moral and social topics he ostensibly abandoned in Book I of the *Confessio*. Even in the differing Ricardian and Lancastrian versions of the poem, addressed respectively to the king and to the nation, a sense of closure seems evident in the passage. Moving through

his literary *cursus*, Gower has reached, in Venus's injunction to prayer, a Christian equivalent to the final stage of a pagan career, which is philosophical retirement.[7]

Gower's refusal to accept these terms and the closure he has so carefully devised is expressed by performing the conventions of authorship. Such performance is in one sense a repetition. The Latin poem "Quicquid homo scribat," extant in three versions and following Gower's *Chronica Tripertita*, balances an authorial recusal (*excusacio*) with the undiminished will to write: "Ultra posse nichil, quamvis michi velle remansit" ("I can do nothing beyond what is possible, though my will has remained" [*Minor Latin Works* 46-7]). At the end of the *Confessio*, Gower imitates his own tripartite canon in the service of this refusal. He composes a corresponding sequence of minor works ranging again over three languages – the English poem "In Praise of Peace," the French "Traitié selonc les auctours pour essampler les amantz marietz" and the "Cinkante Balades," and a group of Latin poems, including the "laureate" pieces praising Henry IV. In his last poems, he has positioned the canonical Gower as the *auctor* to emulate through the answering corpus of minor works.

III

Chaucer's gestures of authorship provide a counterpoint to the norms of authorship that Gower represents in late-medieval England. Like Gower as well as Machaut, Deschamps, and Christine de Pisan, Chaucer has a precise sense of his poetic canon. The summaries made in the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the headlink to the Man of Law's Tale, and the Retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales* are structured accounts of a literary corpus and not a mere listing of works. The *Legend* highlights Chaucer's translation of the *Rose* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, his narratives in praise of love, "other holynesse," (F422), and lyric compositions. A similar canon appears in the Retraction, which invokes the Pauline commonplace of the commentary tradition that all that is written is written for our doctrine (Romans 15:4). The Retraction divides works between translations and narratives of worldly vanities, secular lyrics, and the translations of Boethius and religious texts. Within the dramatic frame of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Man of Law accuses Chaucer of exercising a monopoly on tales, particularly Ovidian materials, of the

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[7] The source for a fourth phase in a poetic career is the life of Vergil attributed to Suetonius ("De poetis") and included in Donatus: "ut reliqua vita tantum philosophiae vacaret" (Suetonius 2: 476).

kind that appears in the *Legend*, where courtly poets have used up all the
good words of poetic *sentement*. Unlike Gower's paratexts, however,
Chaucer's poetic reckonings are made under fictional pressure. The *Legend* moots the question, in Cupid's accusation and Alceste's defense, of
Chaucer's heresy and apostasy against love, the informing topic of
courtly literary discourse. The Retraction is written as a formal apologia,
whatever its relation to the ending of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Man of
Law contrasts the Ovidian Chaucer of complaint with the wider range
of topics available to him; he has in mind specifically the tales of incest,
the stories of Canacee and Apollonius of Tyr, which Gower presents in
the *Confessio Amantis* as complicating studies of the doctrine of natural
love.

As the three poetic catalogues suggest, authorship is an issue internal
to Chaucer's writing throughout his career, and it operates repeatedly
through imitation. We have probably lost any French lyrics that Chaucer
wrote, if they are not the poems in fixed forms ascribed to "Ch." But we
have Chaucer's narrative inauguration at the beginning of the *Book of the
Duchess*, in which he imitates and rewrites Jean Froissart's exordium on
melancholy before moving on to adapt the form of Machaut's lyrico-
narrative *dits amoureux*. The dream visions, I have argued elsewhere, are a
sophisticated meditation on poetry and poetics, and authorship figures
prominently as both a position to sustain writing and a critique of what
writing can convey outside its own order of knowledge. The *Legend*
promotes a "world of autours" (G 308) in the longest extant sample of
Chaucer revision, and this world explicitly coordinates pagan and Chris-
tian narratives in a single, stabilized "matere" (G 309) centered on virtu-
ous women. The *Canterbury Tales* frames its narrative project not just
through the metaphor of pilgrimage but also through the conceit of imi-
tation. To "telle a tale after a man" (GP I.731), as the pilgrim-narrator
proposes to do, implies a two-fold imitation. As in pedagogy, it requires
the re-creation of character and style through the imitation of a
speaker's language. As in commentary, it locates a juridical authority, by
which imitated speakers are the authors who bear responsibility for their
creations, even perverse responsibility: "The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe
wel this. / So was the Reve eek and othere mo" (I.3183-4). The advice
of the Manciple's dame, pointing the moral of his tale of Phoebus and
the crow, fully ventriloquizes this sense of authorship as exposure and
liability for the source of speech: "be noon auctour newe / Of tidynges,
wheither they been false or trewe" (IX.359-60).

The *Tales* embody authorship in fictional characters situated in a
richly imagined social world, a temporary, consensual community analo-
gous in its artifice to those operating in the contemporary historical do-
main of social performance. Behind this strategy lies an even more radi-

cal experiment with imitation. In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer had effectively reached one limit of authorial fiction by claiming Lollius as an invented *auctor*. Lollius is named as author in passages that bracket the poem's action with Troilus's infatuation with Criseyde (1.394) and his incontrovertible discovery of her betrayal (5.1653), he is designated as the narrator's Latin source rather than the courtly model of "sentement" (2.13-14), and he is evoked continually in the poem as "myn auctour." Lollius serves practically as a screen figure to obscure Boccaccio, Chaucer's immediate literary source, but his function reaches beyond disguising vernacular imitation. Winthrop Wetherbee argues that Lollius "fragments" classical tradition by emphasizing "only the tragic or destructive aspects of mythic history" (25). John Fleming sees him as an instrument of Chaucer's "deep classicism" and "antique authority" (xiii), a "pseudo-antique original" that allows a Christian perspective on pagan love (192). Barry Windeatt contends that Lollius shows the extent to which Chaucer dramatizes or fictionalizes his sources (37) by standing in the last position in "successive fabrications of authority" (44) within the medieval Troy story. Unlike his textual predecessors, however, Lollius underwrites an imitation of authorship itself. A citation without a referent, he makes possible the fictional reproduction of classical authority, as he does as one of the textual pillars bearing up the Troy story in the *House of Fame* (line 1468). For Chaucerian imitation, he is a source drawn from and signifying the very condition of textuality.

Refusal, the complement of imitation, figures even more prominently for Chaucer's authorship than it does for Gower's normalized practice. The deferrals and incompleteness of the dream visions reveal those poems as works that frustrate the conventions of narrative closure in order to create a poetic copy never fully measured against their generic models in Machaut and never fully contextualized in a social framework of authorial performance and patronage. The *Canterbury Tales* stage literal authorial refusal in the interruptions of the Host to end "Sir Thopas" and of the Knight to end the Monk's tragedies, works that represent vernacular and classical canons respectively. Two notable moments suggest that Chaucer's vernacular authorship defines itself most clearly by refusal when it comes up against classical authority.

In the *House of Fame*, Chaucer brings authorship, imitation, and refusal together in a remarkable gesture. Rehearsing his progress through the "sondry stages" (line 122) of the visual images in Venus's glass temple, the poem's dreamer-narrator comes to the episode in the *Aeneid* in which Vergil's hero's proves himself a "traytour" (line 267) to love if not to empire and destiny by abandoning Dido. Dido begins an extended complaint whose source, we are told, lies in the singularity of the narrator's dream. The narrator asserts, "Non other auctour alegge I"

(line 314). *Auctour*, as the Manciple reminds us, has a primary sense of someone to whom responsibility can be traced and a further sense, especially pertinent here, of a maker or creator of a work.[8] The complaint that the dreamer-narrator reports is a vastly overdetermined instance of imitation. The narrator produces a counterpart to Vergil's canonical text by exploiting its imaginative possibilities, tacit as well as overt. Chaucer's poem recasts what Dido says internally in the *Aeneid* (4.534-52) — what she formulates within herself ("secum") and ponders in her heart ("corde") — as a formal, public utterance conveyed in a recognized medieval genre, a lover's complaint.

The narrator refuses Vergil's authority not just by claiming Dido's words as his own but, more important, by renegotiating how his account stands in relation to its classical model. His refusal is at base a lyric recontextualization of his source. It requires, moreover, a second and competing act of imitation, which is the turn to Ovid's *Heroides* as a poetic model to situate Vergil's heroic narrative rhetorically within the imagined anguish of its female victim. Chaucer thereby creates an original copy from an authorial persona, not an *auctor*. The inventional quality becomes apparent at the end of the episode, in the aporia of the poet's citing sources that he does not elaborate. Though the trope is one common signature of Chaucer's authorship, it serves in this case to delineate the singularity of his imitation. Those who would know "alle the wordes that she seyde" are directed to the sources: "Rede Virgile in Eneydos / Or the Epistle of Ovyde" (378-9). Vergil and Ovid record, however, what Dido says later in the *Aeneid*, as she curses the Trojans and prepares to die. Invoking no other authority but the narrator's dream, Chaucer exploits the radical possibility of an authorship grounded in fiction.

Near the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, in a stanza of preemptive closure (one of several at the end of the poem), Chaucer writes a justly famous envoi that returns to the question of vernacular fiction and classical authority. The narrator-poet seemingly positions his book within the epic tradition represented by the classical authors:

> But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesye;
> And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace.   (5.1789-92)

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[8] Minnis, *Oxford Guides* 247, summarizes the scholarship and stresses the primary legal sense of responsibility over the literary sense of a creator. MED, s.v. *auctour*, distinguishes the maker (1a) from the source (2a) but notes the overlap between the senses in literary usage (2b).

Chaucer's envoi removes the poem from one kind of imitation at the same time that it directs it toward another. If "makyng" signifies the act of writing or composing, which Chaucer typically claims as his sphere of artistry, this passage marks the abandonment of technical rivalry and thus a turn away from one major resource for imitation, the emulation of style. If it refers to love poems, as it subsequently does in the *Legend of Good Women*, which addresses "Ye lovers that kan make of sentement" (F 69), Chaucer removes the *Troilus* from the practice of the courtly amateur and that of the professional writing for a patron. In either case, he dramatically raises the stakes of authorship here. Chaucer locates his book wholly within a poetics of imitation. Its subjugation to "poesye" shifts the focus of authorship from artisanal execution to a broader effort of conception. With that shift come, as Wetherbee points out, "a concern with universal values and a recognition of the authority of poetic tradition as a repository of these values" (226).

Chaucer's allusions in the passage chart a genealogy of authorship. Editors note that the roster of poets roughly duplicates the list cited at the end of Boccaccio's *Filocolo*, though the order of citation differs. Boccaccio, addressing his work as its author ("tuo autore" [5.97]), makes his lady the destination of the book's journey, the authorizing power to which the book is subject, and he makes Dante an object of reverence placed beyond emulation. He imagines, however, precisely the literary context that Chaucer seeks to escape by removing his book from the practices of courtly imitation and subjecting it instead to "poesye." It is Dante, Boccaccio's own authorial source, who provides the richer and more telling context of authorship. Scholarship has generally minimized the overlap between Dante's list of poets and Chaucer's, but the correspondences repay consideration as a vital intertext (Schless 143, Windeatt 155, 306).

In canto 4 of the *Inferno*, Dante encounters the "bella scola" comprising Homer, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan, who welcome Vergil's return to their company with him. Their welcome is a figural preface to Dante's induction as the sixth member of the company, which also completes a *translatio* from Greek to Latin to vernacular poets.[9] Commentators from the fourteenth century onwards have defended Dante's bold inclusion of himself among the great poets of Antiquity. Albert Ascoli rightly observes that Dante claims a place here as a poet, not an author (68). Yet

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[9] In his commentary, Pietro Alighieri notes that Dante's inclusion in the group depends on his elevation as a poet. In *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.6.7, Dante lists Vergil, Ovid, and Statius as examples of the supreme level of poetic construction. *Vita nuova* 25.9, in a discussion of apostrophe, mentions the same classical poets as *Inferno* 4, adding Dante and Guido Cavalcanti as moderns.

commentary confirms the larger bid for authorship, for an *auctor* is a writer who generates commentary about his work, and Dante had already classified himself as the "poet of rectitude" in his survey of the great topics of the illustrious vernacular (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.2.9) and directly applied the machinery of exegesis to his *canzoni* in the *Convivio*. Less overt but perhaps more daring is the suggestion that follows from Dante's numbering himself among the great poets of Antiquity. As the greetings for Vergil make clear, the poets are shades. Vergil is greeted as "l'altissimo poeta" (4.80), but it is his shade that returns from the mission that Beatrice has given him: "l'ombra sua torna" (4.81). Those who greet him are "grand' ombre" (4.83). From the earliest commentators onwards, "ombra" has been glossed as "anima" (Guido da Pisa, Francesco da Buti). Dante, meanwhile, is not a shade but a substance, an embodied soul, as other characters in the *Commedia* remark, and he will realize the Vergilian project within Christian history. Just as Statius takes over for Vergil near the end of the *Purgatorio*, Dante completes the historical trajectory of ancient poetry and gives it substance. As Ascoli reminds us, Dante both levels and elevates the status of poets within the "bella scola" so that he remains "at once last and least and last and best" (313).

Chaucer evokes this scene in an act of imitation and invention based on rewriting his intertext from the *Commedia*. He changes the personnel of the "bella scola" by replacing Horace with Statius in order to present a catalogue of epic poets.[10] He reveals Dante's textual source in Statius for the theme of literary deference. Statius ends the *Thebaid* with an envoi directing the poem not to rival the *Aeneid* but to follow it at a distance and honor its footsteps: "nec tu divinam Aeneida tempta, / sed longe sequere et vestigia semper adora" [12.816-17]). The trope of following is itself an echo of the *Aeneid* (2.711) in Aeneas's instruction that Creusa follow in his footsteps as they leave Troy.[11] It became a commonplace in medieval poetics for composing by reinventing the silences of earlier texts, as in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Documentum*: "ne sequamur vestigia verborum" ("let us not trace the footsteps of the words" [Faral 309]). Chaucer writes the key elements of the passage back into his stanza, capturing the ambivalence of imitation in shifts of tone. He directs his poem not to emulate courtly writing rather than the unreachable model of Vergilian epic. He follows epic at a distance by situating a

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[10] In *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.6.7, Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, and Statius comprise the models of the highest achievement in poetic construction.

[11] Dominik points out that the Vergilian intertext shifts the relation of original and imitation from master and epigone to the cultural model of husband and wife (517). It also suggests that some measure of loss resides within authorial deference.

love story in the temporal and compositional interim before Trojan history realizes a catastrophic fate already set in motion. He makes the Statian rite of poetic deference concrete and even comic by directing his book to kiss the steps where the epic poets leave their *vestigia*, their footprints and their traces.

The object of this deference is understood as literary space – the locus of imitation and invention within which the epic poets develop their *materia*. Indeed, the variant reading of Chaucer's text – arguably the authorial reading – directs the book to the steps "where as thow seest space / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace" (*Troilus & Criseyde* 556). "Space" is the *durior lectio*: it directly translates Italian "spaziare" (to range) and so describes exactly the actions of Dante and the rest of the "bella scola" as they move through a landscape in Limbo populated by literary and philosophical topics.[12] Chaucer's stanza thus places his poem in close relation to the literary tradition Dante joins as a poet, but it asserts a separation and distance, which is the domain of Chaucer's own authorship – subordinate but defiant in its difference.

<div style="text-align:center">IV</div>

Authorship, as the examples of Gower and Chaucer suggest, is a powerful but complicated tool for understanding literary culture in late-medieval England. Its stabilizing conventions and external forms come under pressure as vernacular writers at once imitate the *auctores* and refuse their authority. The fictions of authorship elaborated in vernacular works offer, in effect, a set of hermeneutic corrections for using medieval literary theory to explain medieval works. Authorship functions within them through contrast and difference. It is the structure of a relation to a past that cannot be realized. It is as well a negotiation whose aim is to appropriate a measure of cultural power from the vexed and impossible project of literary emulation. The genius of the trope of authorship lies in the exploitation of belatedness and subordination, for it is the contingency of writing that grants late-medieval poets the possibility of their work.

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[12] Singleton suggests that the castle the poets enter is probably best understood as the Castle of Fame (2: 64).

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