THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF

ENGLISH POETRY

EDITED BY

MICHAEL O'NEILL

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ENGLISH POETRY

Poetry written in English is uniquely powerful and suggestive in its capacity to surprise, unsettle, shock, console and move. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* offers sparklingly fresh and dynamic readings of an extraordinary range of poets and poems from *Beowulf* to Alice Oswald. An international team of experts explores how poets in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland use language and to what effect, examining questions of form, tone and voice; they comment, too, on how formal choices are inflected by the poet's time and place. *The Cambridge History of English Poetry* is the most comprehensive and authoritative history of the field from Anglo-Saxon times to the present. It traces patterns of continuity, transformation, transition and development. Covering a remarkable array of poets and poems, and featuring an extensive bibliography, the scope and depth of this major work of reference make it required reading for anyone interested in poetry.

MICHAEL O'NEILL is Professor of English at Durham University. He has published widely on poetry and is a published poet himself. His recent publications include *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American and Irish Poetry* (2007) and *Wheel* (2008), a collection of poems.

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Note

Line numbers for poetry are normally supplied when they are available. Occasionally page numbers are supplied instead. Where line numbers are not available, as is the case with much twentieth-century poetry, the reader is referred to the relevant edition or volume.

Introduction

MICHAEL O'NEILL

Scope and approach

'And Question five is, God help us, what is my definition of Poetry?' So Dylan Thomas wrote in 1951 in response to conundrums posed by a student. Among his answers is a reminder of 'the mystery of having been moved by words',[1] a 'mystery', not a mystification, to which subsequent pages in this volume bear witness, and which coexists with poetry's ability to provide greater clarification of the human condition. The poet, writes Yeats, 'is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power'.[2] The phrasing here may be consciously on its stilts, its affirmations unashamedly ready to disconcert, even to embarrass, but Yeats comes close to smoking out the essence of the hold possessed by poets over their readers.

The poets discussed in this *Cambridge History of English Poetry* often exercise ways of making 'nature ... intelligible' that add to their readers' sense of 'creative power'. Milton using word-play, paradox and affecting rhythmic intensity to overcome mortality in *Lycidas* as he describes his drowned fellow poet as having 'sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of him that walked the waves' (lines 172–3); Coleridge making personification a means of mesmerically conveying tragic futility at the close of the reversed sonnet 'Work without Hope'; Ted Hughes inventively exploiting rhyme and line-endings to evoke how 'a black- / Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly' in 'Wind' (lines 15–16): the three examples give a taste of how English poetry embodies and irradiates 'creative power'.[3]

The present book is, in one of its central aspects, a robust if never simply uncritical celebration of that 'creative power'. It provides a literary-historical account of English poetry from Anglo-Saxon writings to the present. Principally the *History* deals with narrative and lyric poetry and does not include poetic drama written for the stage. Thus, Shakespeare's sonnets and

narrative poems are included, but not his plays, except briefly. However, English poetry contains many fine poems which exploit possibilities associated with drama, even though they are not intended primarily for the stage: again, there are other dramatic works, which, though intended for the stage, have ended up mainly as texts experienced through private reading. Works such as Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, therefore, as well as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and *The Cenci*, are discussed.

Some guiding principles are at work. First, contributors have been asked to highlight the formal and aesthetic features of poetry. 'Formal and aesthetic' is meant to draw attention to the fact that this is a history of poetry, and that 'poetry' involves artistic uses of language, as, indeed, many of the poets discussed in the volume insist. One subsidiary topic running through the volume is the discussion by poets in their poems of the nature of poetry. Contributors have been asked to explore ways in which poets use form, taking that term in its widest sense to include all aspects of poetry considered as an art: uses of genres; handling of metre, structure, image, metaphor, echo and allusion; deployment of diction, idiom, ambiguity; tone and mood. Multiple threads run through the volume as a consequence. If one stays solely with the question of echoes and allusions, one might note how subtle resonances link poets as various as Pope, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Hill with Milton; how Yeats's *ottava rima* stanzas connect to and contrast with the same verse form's function in Byron; and how T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a mosaic of generic fragments and owes its power partly to the way in which it summons up, in however frustrated or ironic a manner, previous poetic styles.

Second, contributors have been asked to write in terms that are historical as well as literary, though it is *literary* history that is placed to the fore. There will be many occasions where literary history requires reference to the political and social history of the period in which poets are composing, and due attention is given to the intersection between these histories. That formal choices may reflect political, social, historical and gender preoccupations is clear.

The fifty-three chapters are centred on authors: sometimes on single authors, sometimes on authors considered as groups. The *History* departs from the practice of many literary histories[4] by singling out in a few chapters particular works at the heart of an understanding of English poetry. Sympathetic though the *History* is to the claims of the non-canonical, the purpose of the *History* is less to offer a critique of a supposedly inflexible canon than to give an overview of English poetry that is alert to continuity and

change. Since the work is a 'history', it often considers works that many readers of poetry in their own and succeeding ages have regarded as particularly significant. But it is alive to the argument that what makes a text canonical is precisely its openness to various modes of reading, and it is aware of the fact that the notion of the 'canonical' is always shifting, always provisional. 'Literary history' is always a contentious and contested enterprise, raising questions about the validity of groupings and periodisation. The notion of 'transition', the passage from one era to another, is crucial for the *History* and is continually explored in its pages.

Above all, contributors have been asked to write with first-hand consideration and depth. The watchword for contributors and the volume has been 'attention': sustained, unremitting attention to the implications and meanings of verbal structures artistically shaped by poets. The poems themselves have been allowed to generate through their language appropriate frames of reference. So the *History* has much sympathy with Paul Muldoon's dual view that 'We know that no poem may be read as a completely discrete construct . . . but we also know that part of the function of the poem is to present a construct that is *relatively* free-standing, to create a *relatively* squared-off stand of timber on the plain.'[5] Contributors have been invited to demonstrate, implicitly or explicitly, knowledge of relevant reception history, but never at the expense of independent response.

The *History* is a history of 'English' rather than 'British' or 'Irish' poetry: it focuses on poets writing in English in the political structure currently termed the United Kingdom, though there has been some fluidity here and a recognition of the shifting political definitions of 'English' and 'British' over the centuries. The *History* certainly makes no attempt to cover all poetry written in English. In practice, purity of principle has been hard to follow and may not, for good reasons, be wholly desirable. Thus, there is a chapter on Imagism in which the American poet Ezra Pound features, because of his centrality to English poetry in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; a similar reason explains the inclusion of Sylvia Plath.

An evident principle of structure is chronological, tracking the time-line that runs from *Beowulf* through to, say, Alice Oswald. Closely linked with that principle is a geographical emphasis, stronger in some chapters than others, that attends to the importance of place and space in English poetry: the regionality of 'English' poetry features throughout the volume, including questions thrown up by what John Kerrigan calls 'the current devolutionary process'.[6]

Contents: brief description

Chapter 1 describes major trends and achievements in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The legacy of Anglo-Saxon poetry (in, for example, Pound's *Cantos*, the early work of Auden or Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*) indicates its continuing relevance, and anticipates the volume's emphasis on patterns of continuity and discontinuity. Chapter 2 discusses the productions of the *Gawain*-poet, especially *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in relation to the Alliterative Revival of the late fourteenth century, the significance of courtly poetry and the awareness and use of French Arthurian romances. Chapter 3 maps and contextualises poetry written around and during the reign of Richard II (1377–99), an era which has been central to the development of subsequent English poetry. Chapter 4 is the first chapter to explore a single work, here *Piers Plowman*, a major poem of medieval English literature. Chapter 5 also explores in detail individual works, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, two of the finest poems in the language. Chapter 6 discusses the literary phenomenon of medieval literature in Scotland, literature written in Scots English in the Lowlands of Scotland.

Chapter 7 considers major poets of the sixteenth century, writing during the reign of Henry VIII (1509–47), and studies, in particular, the work of three poets: Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey. Chapter 8 concentrates on the literary productions of Spenser, especially *The Faerie Queene*. Chapter 9 takes up the story of the sonnet begun in chapter 7, focusing principally on sonnet sequences by Sidney and Shakespeare, though it also consider other major Elizabethan sonnet-writers (especially Spenser and Drayton) and explores lyrics written by poets such as Campion. Chapter 10 examines the narrative verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

Chapter 11 considers the major poets writing in the first part of the seventeenth century, during the reign of James I (1603–25): John Donne and Ben Jonson. Discussion of the work of Wroth, Lanyer, Drummond, Herrick, Carew and King is also offered. The basis for the chapter division between this and the following chapter is essentially chronological (though Herbert is placed in the next chapter because of his influence on Vaughan). Chapter 12 examines the poetry of other major lyric poets of the seventeenth century, focusing, in particular, on religious poetry produced in the period. Figures considered include Herbert, Vaughan, Cowley, Marvell, Crashaw and Philips. Chapters 13 and 14 are devoted to the career of one of the greatest poets in the language, Milton. The first considers his shorter poems, the second *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

Chapter 15 addresses the generation of poets associated with the period following the Restoration of Charles II, especially Dryden, Behn and others. Chapter 16 is given over to readings of three major poems by Dryden, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Religio Laici* and *The Hind and the Panther*, to allow the contributor to dwell more fully than was possible in chapter 15 on Dryden's poetic achievement as exemplified by three of his major works. Chapter 17 focuses on Swift; chapter 18 on Pope and Samuel Johnson; chapter 19 on eighteenth-century women poets; chapter 20 on the longer eighteenth-century poem (by Akenside, Thomson, Young, Cowper and others); and chapter 21 on eighteenth-century lyric poetry (written by such authors as Gray, Collins, Smart, Joseph Warton, Thomas Warton, Macpherson, Chatterton and Burns).

Chapter 22 offers an overview of English Romantic poetry. Chapter 23 looks at Blake's major lyric poems, especially in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and his prophetic poems. Chapter 24 studies shorter poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, especially *Lyrical Ballads*. Chapter 25 focuses on Wordsworth's two major long poems, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. Chapter 26 examines the work of Hunt, Byron and Moore, and chapter 27 looks at Byron's *Don Juan*, one of the greatest (and funniest) long poems in the language. Chapter 28 analyses the work of Shelley and Keats. Chapter 29 looks at 'third-generation Romantic poetry', in particular the poetry of Beddoes, Clare, Darley, Hemans and Landon. Chapter 30 looks more specifically at poetry by Romantic-era women poets.

Chapter 31 provides an overview of Victorian poetry, before subsequent chapters address the work of individual poets (32 on Tennyson, 33 on Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 34 on Emily Brontë, Arnold and Clough, 35 on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne and 36 on Christina Rossetti and Hopkins). Chapter 37 looks at later Victorian poets (including James Thomson, Symons, Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Housman) and chapter 38 looks at a further grouping of such poets (including Davidson, Kipling, 'Michael Field' [Katherine Harris Bradley and Edith Cooper], Eugene Lee-Hamilton, Augusta Webster and May Kendall).

Chapter 39 supplies an overview of Modernist and Modern poetry; chapter 40 explores the work of Hardy and Mew. Chapter 41 is on Yeats, chapter 42 is on Imagism and chapter 43 is on T. S. Eliot. Chapter 44 looks at the achievement of First World War poets, including Owen, Rosenberg and Sassoon, while chapter 45 explores the thirties poetry produced by Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice and Spender. Chapter 46 investigates the work of Dylan Thomas and other poets of the 1940s.

Consideration of poetry after 1945 begins with a chapter (47) on Larkin and the Movement, which is followed by a discussion of three twentieth-century women poets – Riding, Stevie Smith and Plath (chapter 48) – and by accounts of Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney (49), Geoffrey Hill (50), poets from Northern Ireland (Mahon, Muldoon, McGuckian and Carson) and from the Republic of Ireland (Boland and others) (51), and by two chapters on poetry since 1980 (52 and 53).

Inevitably there will be lacunae, but the volume as a whole is intended to stimulate renewed interest in the history of English poetry, to narrate its developments and changes, to trace and explore its linguistic, generic and formal achievements and transformations and to offer illuminating accounts of a multitude of significant poems and poets.

Notes

1. Dylan Thomas, 'Notes on the Art of Poetry', in James Scully (ed.), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (London: Fontana, 1966), pp. 201, 202.
2. 'A General Introduction for My Work', *The Oxford Authors: W. B. Yeats*, ed. Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 379.
3. These poems are quoted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, seventh edition, general ed. M. H. Abrams, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 2000).
4. Valuable predecessors of the present volume include George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1923) and Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, in association with Chatto and Windus, 1962). Many notable anthologies of English poetry have also undoubtedly shaped the editorial decisions informing this book.
5. Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures in Poetry* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 171.
6. John Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603–1717* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 2.

Chapter 1

Old English poetry

BERNARD O'DONOGHUE

Old English poetry is a somewhat improbable recent success story, in an era when formal study of classical literature and even the study of modern languages have been in decline in England. The most prominent success was Seamus Heaney's verse translation of *Beowulf* in 1999, a volume which won prizes in competition not only with other poetry books but with books in all literary categories. Important as the positive reception of Heaney's marvellous translation was, it was not a sole cause of the new popularity of Old English poetry. His book was also a confirmation of the popularity of this poetry with English poets dating back to the Victorian period and strengthening amongst Modernist poets in the earlier twentieth century.[1] Heaney's predecessors here include Longfellow, Hopkins, Auden, Pound and Edwin Morgan. Some Old English poems, such as *The Wanderer*,[2] *The Seafarer* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* are amongst the most widely translated items in the twentieth century. There have been a number of attempts to identify what quality it was that commended these poems so much to the modern taste, in particular to that of the Modernists; a recurrent phrase is 'the power of the half-stated'. Auden's enthusiasm is much quoted: 'I was spellbound. This poetry, I knew, was going to be my dish . . . Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry have been one of my strongest, most lasting influences.'[3] In the main part of this essay I want to concentrate on what Auden might mean by 'influences', trying to describe what qualities in Old English poetry were found useful and expressive for writers in English of later periods.

Hopkins had famously said in 1882 that the Anglo-Saxon language 'is a vastly superior thing to what we have now', and another crucial part of my intention here will be to suggest what it was in the poetry that Hopkins thought was superior.[4] The popularity of the poetry amongst modern writers is all the more notable when we recall how precarious its survival was. Chaucer could not read Old English; when the language and literature began to be studied again in the late sixteenth century, it all had to be done

more or less from scratch.[5] The first attested reference to *Beowulf*, by George Hickes in 1700, is to tell his collaborator Humfrey Wanley that he can't find any trace of it.[6] It would be hard to exaggerate how precarious this survival was, and how spectacular its scholarly recuperation. One of the most effective introductions to the condition of that literature bears the ominous title 'The Lost Literature of Medieval England',[7] in which R. W. Chambers argued that the relative lack of overlap in the surviving texts (very little of the poetry is attested in more than one manuscript) suggests that what we have is the tip of a generic iceberg.

Yet, despite this paucity (there are only about 30,000 lines of Old English poetry altogether: some single Middle English poems have as many) and the precariousness of its survival, in one of the most authoritative accounts of the literature Stanley Greenfield says, 'Anglo-Saxon prose and poetry are the major literary achievement of the early Middle Ages. In no other medieval vernacular language does such a hoard of verbal treasures exist for such an extended period (*c*.700–1100) . . . If we had more of what must have been an even greater original creation, our wonder would grow in proportion.'[8] Naturally, in this chapter my attention will be on the principal surviving texts, but the fact that they occur in a major literary and cultural corpus must be emphasised first, if only because of the discredited but not quite forgotten notion of 'the Dark Ages'.[9] Greenfield's grand claim is even more remarkable in view of the late development of scholarly attention to the literature after its beginnings in the late sixteenth century. Tom Shippey's authoritative introduction to the Critical Heritage volume on *Beowulf* gives striking evidence of the late development of any kind of understanding of even this most canonical of Old English poetic works.[10]

The survival of Old English poetry, precarious as it was, is mostly owed to its preservation in four great manuscript collections (for which the neutral word 'codex' is usually used because at least some of them are gatherings of separate materials). When the general project of editing the poetry was undertaken for Columbia University Press by G. P. Krapp and E. V. Dobbie in the 1930s, these four codices were supplemented by two other volumes, *The Paris Psalter* and *The Meters of Boethius*, as *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* (hereafter *ASPR*) volume v, and a sixth volume of *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, containing items (including the historically based poems *The Battle of Brunanburh* and *The Battle of Maldon*) which did not occur in the four principal codices.[11] Outside of the four major volumes of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* then, there are some poems, including *Maldon*, whose survival was even more fortuitous. The major four codices are the Junius manuscript

(*ASPR* 1 – sometimes called 'the Caedmon manuscript'), the Vercelli Book (*ASPR* 2), the Exeter Book (*ASPR* 3) and *Beowulf* and *Judith* (*ASPR* 4 – sometimes called 'the *Beowulf* manuscript' or 'the *Judith* manuscript'). The six monumental editions of the *ASPR*, published between 1931 and 1953, are beyond the scholarly and economic compass of general poetry readers, but as a method of referencing the major manuscripts and their contents they remain definitive, so I will begin by describing their contents, as an introduction to the subjects and themes of the poetry, and as a way of embracing the principal texts. After using these major collections as an introduction to the poetry, I will end by summarising briefly the texts and techniques which led modern writers like Hopkins and Auden to make such high claims for this poetry and its language.

Considering the contents of the first four codices one by one is not an entirely satisfactory way of introducing their poetic materials; it will become obvious that there are more logical thematic and generic ways of looking at them. For example, Greenfield and Calder (*A New Critical History of Old English Literature*) have separate chapters devoted to poems dealing with Christ and to those dealing with Old Testament subjects, though this cuts across the four collections. Godden and Lapidge[12] assign chapters to their contributors along the same lines. Wrenn[13] gives prominence to the one named poet, Cynewulf, and thereafter organises the poems on thematic and generic grounds: lyric, heroic, elegiac. Alexander[14] does something similar, foregrounding what he sees (not unpersuasively) as the most attractive genres for the modern reader: riddle, elegy and heroic poetry – the last category in order to accommodate *Beowulf* and *Maldon*. Swanton,[15] in the rather quaint fashion of his era, uses impressionistic rather than descriptive chapter titles: 'Until the Dragon Comes', and 'The Ruin of Time', for example. O'Brien O'Keeffe[16] breaks away from both the codex-defined corpus and the attempts to define by subject or theme, by assigning to her contributors a series of critical approaches. Pulsiano and Treharne[17] and their team of contributors organise the material on grounds of theme and provenance. Shippey remains a good, critically alert introduction to the poetic corpus as a whole.

Before outlining the contents of the four codices, one wider general issue of categorisation should be raised. There has been some vigorous debate as to whether the corpus of Old English poetry is entirely religious. An important, and unusual, feature of the history of Old English poetry and its survival arises here. If any of the surviving poetry can be seen as secular and pre-Christian, its distant historical content is 'the fund of common narrative material associated with the Teutonic Migration Period (fourth to sixth centuries)'.[18] The

complicating factor is that all the major surviving manuscript evidence dates from around the year 1000, long after the events (if we can call them anything so concrete) they deal with. It goes without saying that any poetry worthy of the name, religious or not, will draw on the natural world for its imagery, and Old English poetry often does so with unforgettable success. But was the objective of this poetry invariably to promote religious – and therefore, in its era, Christian – feeling and understanding? The question is pointedly raised by the different emphases in two major discussions: Greenfield's chapter 6 is called 'Secular Heroic Poetry', but in his important book *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (1975), Eric Stanley argued that the corpus's only religious or ethical perspective is Christian. The poems which are solely heroic (*Deor* and*Widsith* for example) are not founded on some alternative 'pagan' morality. Stanley suggests that the old view that there was some pre-Christian secular heroic ethic in the literature was largely attributable to nineteenth-century German antiquaries, intent on constructing textual evidence for a distinctive Germanic-Teutonic past.

But to return to the corpus as included in the first four *ASPR* volumes: the first is an edition of Oxford Bodleian Library, Junius 11, assembled in the 1650s by the German-Dutch antiquary Franciscus Junius and given by him to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, where it still is. The principal poetic items in that manuscript are *Genesis A* and *B*, *Exodus*, *Daniel* and *Christ and Satan*. The Old Testament predominance is evident and earlier scholars thought – and hoped – that these poems might be the very poems written by the first attested English poet, the monk Caedmon, whose miraculous receiving of the poetic vocation was so spellbindingly described by Bede in his *History of the English Church and People*. After an angel had prompted this Whitby cowherd to sing, 'he sang of the creation of the world and of the origin of the human race and the whole narrative of Genesis, concerning the going out from Egypt of the Israelites and their entry into the land of promise'.[19] In fact the poems in the manuscript are very different both from each other and from the suggestion of Biblical paraphrase in this story. Although *Exodus* has attracted a good deal of modern scholarly attention, prompted by an impressive modern edition by Peter Lucas (1994), the subject of most critical discussion here has been *Genesis B*, lines 235–851 of the original poem traditionally called *Genesis*.[20] This section, dated to the mid ninth century rather than the (speculative) date of 700 for the rest of the poem (thereafter called *Genesis A*), is thought to be based on a Continental Saxon original. Most strikingly it features a vivid presentation of Satan which has provoked comparison with Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, a comparison which was reinforced by the speculation that Milton might have

been in contact with Junius, the owner of the codex, in London. The idea that the Bible-based poems of the Junius Manuscript are the work of Caedmon and that *Genesis B* might warrant the title 'Caedmonian Genesis' has long been abandoned; nowadays it is believed that the only thing that can be assigned to Caedmon is the nine-line 'Hymn' of creation, interpolated by Bede into his Latin *Historia*. Still, 'The Fall of the Angels' was one of the pieces of Old English found most exciting by Auden, and its figure of Satan, 'se ofermoda cyning, þe ær wæs engla scynost' ('the over-proud king who formerly was the brightest of angels') retains its compulsion for the modern reader.

ASPR 2, the Vercelli Book, has the most curious history of the great Old English codices. Discovered in Vercelli in North Italy in 1822 by a German lawyer, Friedrich Blume, criticism of it, as with the Junius Manuscript, has traditionally been dominated by attention to a single poem, *The Dream of the Rood*, a poem that has been greeted (by Helen Gardner, for example) as one of the greatest religious poems in the English language. The poem has a significant interest too in terms of its textual history. Though, as I have said, most of the surviving Old English poetry was written down around the year 1000, even when it is concerned with events several centuries earlier, a passage corresponding closely to a section of *The Dream of the Rood* is found in runes on the Ruthwell Cross in southern Scotland, a monument conjecturally dated to the period 670–750 (though to somewhat later dates too). The Vercelli Book as a whole is lacking in thematic coherence compared to the other codices. I will return later (in connection with the Exeter Book Riddles) to describe the imaginative brilliance of the verbal symbolism in *The Dream of the Rood*. For the poetry reader, the other significant contents in the book are *Andreas* and two poems by Cynewulf, the only known named poet in Old English, genuinely identified by his signature in runes at the end of four poems. The two poems by him here are *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*. The latter, dealing with the finding of the Cross by St Helena, is related to *The Dream of the Rood* by the centrality of the Cross.[21]

The quality which made Hopkins think Old English poetry was a vastly superior thing to what we have now was its language: not surprising from a poet whose poetic language is seen as a crucial factor in his distinction. This linguistic excellence can be illustrated from many places in Old English poetry: from *Beowulf* or *The Dream of the Rood*, for example. But when we turn to the third of the four major volumes in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, the Exeter Book, we encounter strikingly the quality that has principally appealed to the twentieth century from the Modernists onwards. This is a thematic rather than a linguistic feature: the wonderfully evoked elegiac note which has been so valued and practised in twentieth-century poetry.[22] This theme is most

celebratedly prominent in the Exeter Book, the 'micela boc' already present in Exeter in the eleventh century in the time of Bishop Leofric, and dated on codicological and literary evidence to the decade 965–75.[23] And, although Auden famously responded too to the heroic-laconic spirit in Old English and Old Norse writings, it is also the elegiac note that made him confident that this poetry would be his 'dish'. The note is also prominent in *Beowulf*, of course: Tolkien memorably called the bulk of the great poem 'in a sense . . . the prelude to a dirge'.[24] In describing the great so-called 'elegies' of the Exeter Book – *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament* and *Wulf and Eadwacer*, all of which are among the texts most commonly translated into modern English poetry – some caution is called for. Since the early nineteenth century, when the poems were first named by their editors of the Romantic period, modern concerns and preferences were found mirror-imaged in the early poetry, and sometimes they sound like items in a Schubert song-cycle.[25] To take the most obvious example, *The Wanderer*, the title translates the word 'eardstapa' (line 6) aptly enough; but the first word used to refer to the poem's protagonist in the opening line is 'anhaga', the 'sole-thinker'. The poem therefore might have more naturally been called 'The Recluse', a title which would take the poem's subject nearer to the religious canon rather than to a secular one for which there is little evidence.

There has been a good deal of inconclusive debate about which poems precisely can be included in the category of elegy, or indeed whether it constitutes a category at all. However, this is no more true of this category than at the borders of any genre as discussed, say, by Todorov: the medieval romance is an obvious parallel. There are at least four poems in the Exeter Book which are universally agreed to have enough in common for them to be regarded as part of the genre of elegy: pre-eminent amongst them are *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the pairing that first came to major notice in the nineteenth century and which since then has been a standard presence in the canon of English poetry.[26] Increasingly, *The Ruin* and *The Wife's Lament* have been seen as central members of the elegiac group (nowadays *Wulf and Eadwacer* has been an equally common inclusion in the group, though perhaps with less justification, I will suggest). Other poems and parts of poems, both in the Exeter Book and outside it, are generically similar too, principally in their shared concern with transience. Two famous episodes from *Beowulf* fit here: the celebrated 'Lay of the Last Retainer' (again, also known by less lyrically romantic titles such as 'The Lament of the Last Survivor'), lines 2244–70 of the poem, and Beowulf's account of the misery of King Hrethel, one of whose sons killed another, an 'offence . . . beyond redress, a wrongfooting / of the

heart's affections'.[27] The Hrethel passage is followed by one of the great set-piece elegies in the poem, the comparison with 'the misery felt by an old man / who has lived to see his son's body / swing on the gallows'.[28] Within the Exeter Book itself, the poems *Deor* and *The Husband's Message* are often added to the group of elegies, though there are other genres (heroic poem and riddle respectively) to which they might equally well be assigned.[29] Stanley Greenfield extended the group to 'nine (ten?)' by adding further items from The Exeter Book: *The Riming Poem* and the poem or poems – one or two, according to editorial division – which have been titled *Resignation (A and B)*[30] or *The Exile's Prayer*.[31] Muir, somewhat unhelpfully, calls the poem *Contrition (A and B)* without cross-reference in his contents, though his notes are the best succinct account of the poem's critical treatment in the modern era.[32]

The order in which Greenfield considers the poems is a useful guide both to their prominence in the modern era and to their degree of Christianisation. *The Ruin* is an eloquent reflection – the term for it since the early nineteenth century would be 'gothic' – on transience, prompted by the state of a decayed city, probably Bath. We might borrow the terminology once used for the chronological categorisation of epic (though of course we have no textual evidence for this periodisation): we could call *The Ruin* primary elegy, as an unadorned reflection on the tragedy of transience; *The Wanderer* would be secondary elegy, centring on the same tragedy but with book-ends of Christian consolation at the start and end of the poem; and *The Seafarer* would be tertiary, or applied elegy, where, despite the powerful evocativeness of the description of nature and of the desolation of life at sea, the argument is always under the control of a Christian allegorist from the moment that it is declared that everyone has to be concerned for his seafaring ('his saefore') as to 'what his lord will do to him' (lines 42–3).

But this is to push categorisation too far, failing to allow these great poems their independence or to acknowledge their difference from each other. As all commentators have noted, what the poems do have in common is a pattern well described by Shippey as 'Wisdom and Experience'. The poems' opening sections are typically powerful descriptions of worldly hardship:

Hægl scurum fleag –
þær ic ne hyrde butan hlimman sæ,
iscaldne wæg. Hwilum ylfete song
dyde ic me to gomene ganetes hleoþor
ond huilpan sweg fore hleahtor wera,
mæw singende fore medodrince.

(*The Seafarer*, lines 17–22)

(Hail flew in showers. There I heard nothing but the sea booming, the ice-cold wave. At times I took my pleasure in the swan's song, the gannet's scream and the curlew's music rather than the laughter of people, the gull's singing in place of mead-drinking.)[33]

I will return to the poetic felicities of this – the contrastive echo of 'hleoþor/hleahtor' (scream/laughter), for example – at the end of the chapter, when I consider Old English poetics in general. What we might note for now is that this passage, which to us tends to read as a romantic or 'sublime' evocation of nature, in its era is an evocation of the misery of exclusion from the society of the hall-gathering: one of the most powerful recurrent themes of the culture. By the end of the poem, the wisdom of Christian consolation is totally vindicated, expressed through a paraphrase of the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (lines 106–7) and ending with the wording of the *Gloria Patri* ('thanks be to the holy one . . . the eternal lord, for ever and ever. Amen').

To the modern taste, the less reconciled consolatory conclusion of *The Wanderer* is more powerful. True, the poem also moves to its conclusion with the Beatitudes again ('it is well for him who seeks favour and comfort from the father in the heavens'), but what stays with the reader is the magnificent rhetoric of the *ubi sunt* passage, which equals Villon:

Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?
Hwær cwom symbla gesetu? Hwær sindon seledreamas?
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!
Eala þeodnes þrym! Hu seo þrag gewat,
genap under nihthelm, swa heo no wære! (lines 92–6)

(Where has the steed gone? Where the rider? Where has the treasure-giver gone? Where the place of feasting? Where are the joys of hall? Alas the bright cup! Alas the armoured warrior! Alas the lord's power! How the time has passed, grown dark under the cover of night as if it had never been!)

It should be said that, even if it is this dark note that has been found so appealing in the era of the elegy of the past 200 years, part of the satisfaction of reading these poems lies in the elegant balance of story and moral.

I have mentioned already how the power of the half-stated in these poems was found so appealing to the early twentieth-century Modernists, with their mystique of doubt and fragmentation. Two poems manifest this particularly. The first is *The Wife's Lament*, a poem which is again founded on the experience–wisdom model, but in which the experience is so cryptically expressed and in such a compressed form that it is not clear exactly what the consolation is for. The poem begins almost identically to *The Seafarer* with

the protagonist's claim that they (in this case she) are recounting their own experience and exploiting the common figure of journey ('siþ') as experience:

> Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre,
> minre sylfre siþ.

(I compose this song about myself in my sorrow, of my own experience.)

This woman's lament – possibly a voice from the grave and thus a 'revenant' of the kind much favoured by the Modernists – also ends with a Sermon on the Mount motif, 'Woe is he who . . .' But here the separation from 'min freond' retains its unconsoled power to the end. This 'friend' or 'lord' seems somehow to be implicated in responsibility for the woman's isolation and his own, where he sits 'under stanhlifle storme behrimed' ('under a stone cliff, frosted by the storm', line 48; a location which we know from a famous passage in *Beowulf* has an infernal association).

Even more mysterious is the situation so memorably evoked in the poem traditionally named *Wulf and Eadwacer*. This also seems to be a woman's poem – the category of medieval poems referred to as *frauenlieder* in German, so not unparalleled – and a narrative can be speculatively constructed from its hauntingly baffling opening line:

> Leodum is minum swylce him mon lac gife.

(It is as if someone should give a commemorative gift to my people),

to its equally evocative but uncertain moralising end:

> Þæt mon eaþe tosliteð þætte næfre gesomnad wæs –
> uncer giedd geador.

(That can easily be separated which was never joined together – the song of the two of us together.)

The romantic story that has been speculatively constructed is that the woman speaker is the wife of one Eadwacer, addressed in the lines before the concluding moral, and that her lover is Wulf, addressed in a remarkable apostrophe at the mid-point of the poem, 'Wulf, min Wulf!' Of the poems called elegy, this is the one that has least in common formally or thematically with the others, and indeed has the least claim to be termed an 'elegy' at all.[34] It has, like *Deor*, a refrain ('Ungelic is us ': 'it is not like that for us'), and no suggestion of a transience theme or any religious interpretation. Its closest connection is with *The Wife's Lament*, through the woman speaker and the suggestion of enforced separation and isolation.

Like another of the poems in the expanded elegy group, *The Husband's Message* (so called out of an excessive desire for balance on the part of the early editors, who wanted to link it with the very dissimilar *Wife's Lament*), the poems in the Exeter Book with which *Wulf and Eadwacer* has most in common are the groups of Riddles. The domination of the critical discussion of the 'micela boc' by the elegies has to some extent recently been modified by interest in these accomplished poems, with their significant classical parallels.[35] There is a significant overlap between the two categories, in fact; Greenfield and Calder's chapter before the one on elegy is entitled 'Lore and Wisdom', and, as Shippey's chapter title of his elegy discussion 'Wisdom and Experience' suggests, parts of the elegies might well be included under that heading. Greenfield and Calder deal with the Riddles in that chapter, as well as with several other varieties of 'wisdom literature': three series of *Maxims, Precepts*, a *Homiletic Fragment* and so on.

I am directing attention to the Riddles, though, not only because of their modern popularity. They are also one of the fundamental poetic genres in Old English, employing a kind of word-play that also underlies, as we will see, *The Dream of the Rood*. Furthermore, they represent an undeniable connection with classical literature and with the Latin writing of Aldhelm in the Anglo-Saxon period itself. Above all, they have a wit and verbal ingenuity which represent a major achievement in their own right. Their subjects cover a wide range of subjects, both religious and profane (to the point of indecency); often the wit consists precisely in the gap between the two. One of the most often-quoted of them, 'Moððe word fræt', is a good example of the operation of metaphorical style and resonance in these poems:

Moððe word fræt. Me þæt þuhte
wrætlicu wyrd, þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn,
þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes,
þeof in þystro, þrymfæstne cwide
ond þæs strangan staþol. Stælgiest ne wæs
wihte þy gleawra, þe he þam wordum swealg.

(Riddle 47, lines 1–6)

(A moth ate words. That seemed to me an amazing event when I heard of that marvel, that the worm – a thief in the darkness – swallowed the poem of one of mankind, his powerful saying and its strong subject. The thieving visitor was not the least the wiser for swallowing the words.)

First of all, this works excellently as a riddle; the curious story fills with meaning when the reader realises the solution: a bookworm. The way the

poem moves from the literal operation of the noted event (a bookworm eating a manuscript: itself, of course, a minor crisis in the era when expensive vellum was the material of books) to the metaphorical reflection that this consuming of text does not lead to any increase in wisdom, sophisticated enough as that is, is only the beginning of the poem's meaning. It is also about reading: an inattentive reader, whether reading aloud or to themselves, may take the words on board without registering the meaning. This reader-theory interpretation reminds us to be cautious about patronising the works that develop from an oral tradition. It is not only the verbal form of the poem that is sophisticated; the understanding of literature here is also advanced.

Of the Old English poems that draw on the riddling tradition (I have already noted the links with it in the crypticism of *Wulf and Eadwacer* and possibly *The Husband's Message*), the most impressive is *The Dream of the Rood*, in the Vercelli Book. The poem begins with the report of a visionary dream, experienced in the middle of the night when 'reordberend' ('voice-bearers') are asleep and silent. The object seen is a wonderful tree, the 'brightest of beams'. We know from the Exeter Book that there was a tradition of Cross-riddles,[36] so the identity of this tree is not in doubt well before it is identified as the 'rood' (the specifically theological word for Christ's Cross) at line 44 ('Rod wæs ic aræred': 'as a cross I was raised up'). But the more important and poetically productive quality of the riddles that the poem draws on is the dazzling and profound use of imagery.

There is a striking use of this characteristic play of imagery early in the poem. The Cross of the vision is described as 'beama beorhtost' ('brightest of beams'): already in Old English the word 'beam' has a secondary sense of 'ray of light' as well as the primary 'plank of wood', so a constructive choice of interpretation is already offered.[37] The vision is then described in a strange conceit: 'Eall þæt beacen wæs / begoten mid golde' ('All that sign/beacon was suffused/soaked through with gold', lines 6–7). The word 'begoten' seems to belong particularly to contexts of suffusion by liquid (as in the later sense of begetting), so it seems mysterious to apply it to the appearance of the Cross. Can something look soaked *through* with gold: with a metal which can only be laid on its surface? But this metaphysical mystery is resolved forty lines later when the speaking Cross says that it was all soaked with blood, 'begoten of þæs guman sidan' ('shed from the man's side', line 49). This more idiomatic, liquid-related application of the participle 'shed/ poured/suffused' is a retrospective identification and explanation of why the surface of the Cross was soaked with gold: the gold is a symbolic representation of the blood of Christ.

By an identical process of metaphorical substitution, in lines 13–14 of the poem the dreamer describes himself as 'synnum fah, / forwundod mid wommum' ('guilty/stained/adorned with sins, / wounded/pierced through with stains/blemishes'). How can a blemish – a word that means a superficial mark on the skin – wound or pierce *through*? Again, much later in the poem, the answer is provided by the repetition of the descriptive participle: the Cross describes itself as 'mid strælum forwundod' ('wounded or pierced through with shafts/arrows', line 62). The literal description again comes later to explain the puzzle of the earlier conceit, this time to make the symbolic identification of arrows and sins.

There is not room here to develop the extraordinary web of symbolism on which *The Dream of the Rood* is constructed, to show how the complex of meanings all serve the same dualist theological paradox. A non-speaking thing – the Cross – is endowed with the power of speech while 'reordberend' ('voice-bearers') are asleep and therefore speechless. The poem is a classic instance of the impossibility of translation (suggested by the need to give alternatives in the translations) because so much of its terminology is founded on contradictions and paradoxes, representing the triumph and tragedy of the crucifixion. The word 'fah' (quoted from line 14 above) recurs in the poem, to exploit its homonymic possibilities; helplessly but accurately, Mitchell and Robinson gloss the word as 'stained, guilty, outcast', but in brackets as 'decorated'. This is entirely in keeping with the paradoxical status of the event as tragic but also a cause for rejoicing; but what single modern English word can express that? At a famous point in the poem the Cross says that after the death of Christ the men began to make a tomb, 'beornas on banan gesyhðe' ('men in the sight of the slayer', line 66). When the Cross refers to itself as Christ's killer (the modern descendant of 'bana' is 'bane', and the Old English term seems no less pejorative), how can we represent the word?

If it is difficult to suggest in a brief essay how the dualist complexities of this poem operate, it is even more difficult to give a short account of *Beowulf*, incomparably the largest achievement in Old English poetry, in a satisfactory way.[38] It shares the fourth of the *ASPR* volumes with the poem *Judith* (itself perhaps the greatest of the Biblical-heroic poems in Old English)[39] and some lesser items. A consideration of *Beowulf* amongst the poems in Old English might start with thematic links to other texts: of things I have mentioned already, Tolkien's observation that it is 'a long prelude to a dirge' clearly links it with the elegiac, as do the passages on 'the last retainer' and the tragically bereaved father. The 'power of the half-stated' admired in the elegies is nowhere more impressive than in the mysterious and tragic opening of the

poem's Finnsburh's episode (whose independence Heaney aptly acknowledges by using a different verse form for it in his translation). Without preamble King Hroþgar's 'scop', his court-poet, launches into the story of Hildeburh, the queen at the tragic centre of the war between her husband and brother:

> Nalles holinga Hoces dohtor
> meotodsceaft bemearn, syþþan morgen com,
> ða heo under swegle geseon meahte
> morþor-bealo maga, þær heo ær mæste heold
> worolde wynne.[40]

(By no means without cause did the daughter of Hoc lament her fate, when morning came and she could see under the sky the murder-feud of kinsmen, where before she had most enjoyed joy in the world.)

Although its manuscript dates, like the other major codices, from about the year 1000, *Beowulf* is the foundational case of Old English poetic style, for the same kinds of reason that Homer's work became the foundation-stone of Greek poetic rhetoric, which in turn became the model for Western poetics in general. Even in a short extract like the one I have just quoted, the principal poetic features are evident: the alliterative scheme on dominant word-roots with its ringing consonants ('meotod-', '-mearn', 'morgen' in line 1077), which was what Hopkins admired so much in his definition of 'sprung rhythm'; the noun–noun compounds which give such solidity to the word-formation ('meotodsceaft', 'morþor-bealo'); the figure of variation which has been seen as the essential device in the stately narrative pacing of Old English, by which – as most famously in the terms for God in Caedmon's Hymn – different terms are used to refer to the same subject (here 'Hildeburh' in the previous sentence, line 1071, 'Hoces dohtor', 'heo', in apposition to each other). One of the best books on the poetics of *Beowulf* sees apposition and duality as the founding principle of Old English poetic language: the morphological units build into compound words, the words into half-lines, the half-lines into full lines and the lines into units of sense.[41] This structuring principle has been taken a stage further, to demonstrate that the units of narrative – what might by analogy be called verse paragraphs – often start and end with the same details. For example, the Finnsburh episode just quoted begins by saying that there was a 'gid oft wrecen' ('a recitation often performed', line 1065) and ends 'Leoð wæs oft asungen / gleo-mannes gyd' ('A song was often sung, a glee-man's recitation', lines 1159–60). Similarly, the arming of Beowulf before his encounter with Grendel's mother begins 'Gyrede hine Beowulf / eorl-gewædum' ('Beowulf dressed himself in nobleman-arms', lines 1441–2), and

ends 'syþþan he hine to guðe gegyred hæfde' ('when he had dressed himself for battle', line 1472).

This concentration on the poetics of the poem, brief as it is, is guilty of a further inadequacy in failing to deal both with the overall design of *Beowulf* and with the powerful set-pieces of epic-heroic literature throughout, from the opening description of Scyld Scefing's ship-burial[42] to the Wagnerian conclusion with Beowulf's own immolation. Neither is there room to describe in detail Hroþgar's account of the infernal landscape by Grendel's mere with its Tartarean iconography, reported by the locals, the 'londbuende':

> Hie dygel lond
> warigeað, wulf-hleoþu, windige næssas,
> frecne fen-gelad, ðær fyrgen-stream
> under næssa genipu niþer gewiteð,
> flod under foldan. (lines 1357–61)

(They [the Grendel family] occupy a hidden land, wolf-slopes and windblown crags, a dangerous fen-path, where the mountain-stream travels downwards under the darkness of the cliffs, a river under the ground.)

Other great moments are the Song of Creation, the 'swutol song scopes' ('the clear song of the court-poet', lines 90ff.), translated separately by Heaney as 'The Fragment'.[43]

Beowulf of course also connects with the tradition of heroic poetry in Old English, mostly but not entirely Biblical. The most celebrated of the heroic poems (if it really is that) is *The Battle of Maldon*, edited in *ASPR* 6, whose preservation is even more precarious than the *Beowulf* manuscript's survival of the Cotton Fire at Ashburnham House in 1731. The manuscript containing *Maldon* was burned, so the poem's survival is owed to a transcript made by one David Casley a few years before the fire. The poem is famous for its ringing voicing of the spirit of heroic loyalty by Byrhtwold (not otherwise known), after the death of his leader Byrhtnoð in this tactically disastrous defeat of the English by the Vikings in 991:

> Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
> mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað.[44]

(Spirit must be the harder, heart the braver, determination must be the more, as our number lessens.)

Maldon was probably written soon after the event, though of course we can't know, in the case of a poem surviving from an early eighteenth-century copy. In

poetic terms, it is far from the finest example of Old English poetics, marked by a rather prosaic style, despite the interest of its subject which has caused it to be read as a – perhaps artificial – last rallying cry of the English in the generation before the Scandinavian domination of the country became complete.

With Old English poetry we are not just encountering a new poetic, founded on an unfamiliar version of the elegiac (*Beowulf* as Tolkien's 'prelude to a dirge'), or a set of formalities which are strikingly new to us: variation, alliterative patterns and the rest, forcefully effective as those are. Neither is it just a matter of Hopkins's 'vastly superior thing': the monosyllabic and consonantal force of the language, so brilliantly and unliterally captured in Pound's *Seafarer*: 'siþas secgan', 'speak of journeys', represented as 'journey's jargon'. Perhaps more important than any of these are the ways in which this poetry *is* familiar:[45] the Metaphysical figure for hailstones in *The Seafarer* as 'corna caldast', 'coldest of corn'; the Villonesque wistfulness in *The Wanderer*'s apostrophe to the 'bright cup': 'Eala beorht bune!'; above all the intricate dualist symbolism of *The Dream of the Rood*. Through these qualities Old English poetry has a place in a tradition of verbal wit and poetic imagination that is familiar to readers of poetry from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth and the twentieth, and for which no special pleading or allowances have to be made. It is probably futile to propose some enduring spirit in English poetry that survived the huge change in the language after the Conquest, as James Fenton says. But it is tempting to claim, after all, a continuity greater than that controversially proposed by Thomas Kinsella for Irish literature in the modern period: a continuity that witnesses 'a notable and venerable literary tradition . . . as it survives a change of vernacular'.[46]

Notes

1. See Chris Jones, *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
2. Throughout the chapter, I will italicise the titles of the individual poems for consistency. Many of them have been edited separately in the Methuen series of Old English texts, several later published by Exeter University Press.
3. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1963), pp. 41–2.
4. *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. C. C. Abbott (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 163.
5. For a discussion of when Old English was intelligible or otherwise, see R. D. Fulk and Christopher Cain, *A History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 'Conclusion', pp. 225ff.
6. Kenneth Sisam, 'Humfrey Wanley', in *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 276.

7. R. W. Chambers, 'The Lost Literature of Medieval England', originally published in *The Library*, Fourth Series, 5:4 (March 1925). Reprinted in J. B. Bessinger and S. J. Kahrl (eds.), *Essential Articles for the Study of Old English Poetry* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968), pp. 3–26.
8. Stanley B. Greenfield and Daniel G. Calder, *A New Critical History of Old English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p. 1. First edition by Greenfield alone, containing this passage, 1965.
9. 'The Dark Ages' received their literary death-blow from the great work of Ernst R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books; London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953; originally published in German in 1948). Curtius established the unsurprising truth that medieval literature, far from being a new start *ex nihilo*, was firmly rooted in the late Latin classics. Peter Dronke has built powerfully in several books on Curtius's foundations. Also see Michael Lapidge, 'The Anglo-Latin Background', in Greenfield and Calder, *New Critical History*, pp. 5–37. It is worth remembering too, when stressing the paucity of Old English poetry, that it comprised less than 9 per cent of the surviving written corpus; there is a large volume of Old English prose which survived in the literary history more successfully than the poetry.
10. T. A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1972). A useful brief outline of the history of the poetry in its own time is the Introduction to Fulk and Cain (eds.), *History of Old English Literature*.
11. G. P. Krapp and E. V. Dobbie (eds.), *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–53).
12. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
13. C. L. Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature* (London: Harrap, 1967).
14. Michael Alexander, *The First Poems in English* (London: Penguin, 2008).
15. Michael Swanton, *English Literature before Chaucer* (London: Longman, 1987).
16. K. O'Brien O'Keeffe, *Reading Old English Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
17. Phillip Pulsiano and Elaine Treharne (eds.), *A Companion to Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
18. Greenfield and Calder, *New Critical History*, p. 134.
19. Translation quoted from Wrenn, *Study of Old English Literature*, p. 94.
20. 'The Fall of the Angels' was the very successful title given by Henry Sweet to the extract he included in his *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1876, much revised and reprinted). The often inspired titles given by Sweet are hardly less important than the names devised by the editors of the Romantic period. See, for example, Geoffrey Hill's adoption of one of Sweet's headings for his celebrated poetry collection *Mercian Hymns*.
21. The short discussion of the relations between the two versions in the 1934 Methuen edition of *The Dream of the Rood* by Dickins and Ross remains a good statement of the case (*The Dream of the Rood*, eds. Bruce Dickins and Alan S. C.

Ross, London: Methuen, 1963, pp. 1–19). The authoritative modern commentator is Éamon Ó Carragáin: see his *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of The 'Dream of the Rood' Tradition* (London: The British Library; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

22. See for example Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
23. Bernard J. Muir (ed.), *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), vol. I, p. I.
24. J. R. R. Tolkien, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics'. This was the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy in 1936, but it remains much the most suggestive and thought-provoking short introduction to *Beowulf*. Quoted here from *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), p. 31.
25. This also applies to the familiar but, when we think about it, strange title, *The Dream of the Rood*, which might more neutrally but less evocatively be called – as it was for some time – 'The Vision of the Cross'.
26. It is a pity, and surprising, that James Fenton in his admirable *Introduction to English Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2002) excludes this poetry on the grounds that he finds no 'continuity between the traditions of Anglo-Saxon poetry and those established in English poetry by the time of, say, Shakespeare' (p. 1). This is regrettable both because it excludes from his consideration some unquestionably inspiring poems in English and because it blurs the connections between the poetics of Old English and some modern practitioners who drew directly on it, like Auden and Pound.
27. *Beowulf*, lines 2441–2, in Seamus Heaney's version (London: Faber and Faber, 1999). Like a few other passages from *Beowulf*, Heaney has also drawn on this for a section in a separate poem (*Electric Light*, London: Faber, 2001), pp. 62–3.
28. Heaney, *Beowulf*, lines 2444–6.
29. There are several excellent brief accounts of the elegies: for example Shippey, *Old English Verse*, ch. 3; Christine Fell's 'Perceptions of Transience' (ch. 10 in Godden and Lapidge, *Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*); and ch. 12, 'Elegiac Poetry', in Greenfield and Calder, *New Critical History*.
30. Greenfield and Calder, *New Critical History*, p. 280.
31. Fell, 'Perceptions of Transience', p. 172.
32. Muir (ed.), *Exeter Anthology*, vol. I, pp. 339–43; vol. II, pp. 630–5.
33. The extracts from the Exeter Book here are mostly taken from Muir's edition, with occasional modified punctuation; the plain translations are mine. There are, however, excellent, readily available translations of Old English poetry, both into plain modern prose (R. K. Gordon, *Anglo Saxon Verse* (London: Everyman, 1926); S. A. J. Bradley, *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Everyman, 1982)), and into verse (Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber,

1970), Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Alexander, *The First Poems in English*). Gordon has particular significance for the subject of this chapter as the version of the poetry with which Auden seems to have been most familiar. See John Fuller, *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970).

34. The Exeter Book's first modern editor and translator B. L. Thorpe (London, 1842) called it Riddle 1, famously saying 'Of this I can make no sense, nor am I able to arrange the verses' (p. 527).
35. A convenient modern translation is Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Exeter Book Riddles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, revised edition 1993). A full edition is Craig Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977). It should be noted of course that as well as the various shorter poems, the Exeter Book also contains several significant longer religious works which bring its contents closer to the first two *ASPR* volumes: *The Passion of St Juliana*, the two lives of *St Guthlac* (*A* and *B*) and two major poems about Christ, *Christ in Judgement* and *The Ascension*.
36. See especially number 55 (Muir (ed.), *Exeter Anthology*, p. 327). For a translation, see Crossley-Holland, *Anglo-Saxon World*, p. 59. Alexander, who is the best translator of the Riddles, has not included this in *First Poems in English*, though it is in his full translation in *Old English Riddles: From the Exeter Book*, revised edition (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2007).
37. I am quoting from the version of the poem in Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*, seventh edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 268–75, because some of their restoration of manuscript readings seem preferable to the emendations made in some earlier editions.
38. There are some good brief introductions: Tolkien, 'The Monsters and the Critics'; Shippey's *Old English Verse*; Heather O'Donoghue's introduction to Kevin Crossley-Holland's *Anglo-Saxon World*. Heaney's introduction to his translation is, amongst other things, a moving reading of the poem's tragic politics for the modern age. There are many crucial critical treatments of *Beowulf* since the late nineteenth century: Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to 'Beowulf'* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003); T. A. Shippey and Andreas Haarder, *Beowulf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1998); R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (eds.), *A 'Beowulf' Handbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). The time-honoured edition is by Fr. Klaeber (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1922); there is an excellent modern working edition by George Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) which glosses all the main words in the margin. The most attractive unannotated way of encountering the poem is the Norton 2000 text of Heaney's translation, set parallel to the Wrenn and Bolton original (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1988).
39. *Judith* also deserves far more extensive treatment than is possible here. Like *Maldon*, it is truncated at the start and there has been some inconclusive debate about how much is missing. It has a vivid and ironic style, and its treatment of Holofernes has been seen as part of a 'monsters' theme which was proposed

(not very persuasively) as a common element in the items in the manuscript. There is an excellent modern edition by Mark Griffiths (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997).

40. *'Beowulf' and 'The Fight at Finnsburgh'*, ed. Fr. Klaeber, third edition (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1950), lines 1076–80.
41. F. C. Robinson, *'Beowulf' and the Appositive Style* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985). Other good accounts of the poetics of *Beowulf* and other Old English poetry are B. C. Raw, *The Art and Background of Old English Poetry* (London: Arnold, 1978); Bruce Mitchell, *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); G. A. Lester, *The Language of Old and Middle English Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1996), chs. 4 and 5. I have not discussed the ancient matter of the 'oral-formulaic' nature of the poetry, believing that in the restricted space available it was more constructive to deal with its distinction as major written material.
42. See Heaney, 'A Ship of Death', *The Haw Lantern* (London: Faber, 1987), p. 20.
43. Heaney, 'The Fragment', *Electric Light*, p. 57.
44. *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon (London: Methuen, 1949), lines 312–13.
45. For a model for the simultaneous appreciation of the familiar and 'alterity' in medieval literature, cf. H. R. Jauss, 'The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature', *New Literary History*, 10:2 (Winter 1979), pp. 181–227. Though he is writing about the later medieval period, Jauss's essay is an immensely enlightening introduction to the reading process for earlier European literature.
46. *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, ed. Thomas Kinsella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xxvii.

Chapter 2

The *Gawain*-poet and medieval romance

CORINNE SAUNDERS

The romance genre

Romance, the most influential genre of imaginative writing in the Middle Ages, at once looks back to the tradition of epic poetry and forward to the genre of the novel. While prose romances developed in the thirteenth century, poetry was the traditional mode of romance, and there exists an immensely diverse collection of verse narratives. The earliest French romances retold classical epics while reflecting new cultural interest in chivalry, courtliness and the individual: thus the focus of the twelfth-century *Roman d'Eneas* was the love of Dido and Aeneas. Thebes, Troy and the exploits of Alexander offered popular story matter, and romance writers took up earlier twelfth-century *chansons de geste* to treat the heroes of French history. A more courtly type of romance also developed, which drew on the 'matter of Britain', Celtic folk material, and in particular, on legends of King Arthur and the Round Table. In the later twelfth century, the *lais* of Marie de France, written in sophisticated Anglo-Norman octosyllabic couplets for a highly refined audience and treating intense moments of rarefied emotion, were balanced by the extended and complex verse narratives of Chrétien de Troyes, which developed the pattern of quest and adventure in the context of the knight-hero's journey to self-realisation. These and the many French romances of the thirteenth century, along with a sophisticated tradition of lyric poetry, provided the substance of courtly entertainment in England, and in the fourteenth century French poets such as Froissart, Machaut and Deschamps shaped an international court culture in which poetry played a prominent role.

English romances, which began to be written in the late thirteenth century, occupied a rather different space. Not only were English romanciers using a highly developed mode and a storehouse of familiar conventions, applicable to a whole range of subject matters, but also they were writing for audiences

who did not necessarily read French, and whose interest was in works that were more 'popular' than courtly: in particular, the country gentry and the new merchant class. The earliest English romances employ a four-stress couplet based on the French octosyllabic couplet. Tail-rhyme romances, with stanzas using the repetition of a shorter line rhyme after at least two longer rhyming lines, were swiftly developed, and may reflect the desire to create an English form amenable to memorisation and recitation. The flowering of alliterative poetry in the fourteenth century offered new possibilities for romance writers, and the various forms of romance were sustained through to the fifteenth century. Romances refer repeatedly to minstrels, audiences and music, and although it is unlikely that they were composed orally, they were certainly read aloud as well as privately, perhaps with musical accompaniment. This is a genre treating an archaic, stylised world, always already past, yet also a genre that can speak immediately and urgently to the present, engaging with contemporary themes and moral issues. English romance adds to classical, French and Celtic subject matters English history, as for instance the extended and long-lived dynastic romances of *Beves of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*, and romances of the greenwood such as *Gamelyn*, which underpin legends of Robin Hood. Classification by subject, however, may suggest too many similarities within a disparate group of texts while ignoring parallels between groups. Motifs, or, as Helen Cooper has recently termed them, 'memes', echo through the genre, forming the backbone of romance: exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, pagan and Christian.[1] Romances offer escapism and frequently open on to an exotic or in some way aggrandised world, whether of faery or Charlemagne's France, but they also allow for social comment, exploration of gender and relationships, and engagement with the deep structures of human existence, sometimes through a dream-like interweaving of fantasy and reality.

Two of the earliest known English works, *King Horn* (*c*.1225) and *Havelok the Dane* (*c*.1275), both translating Anglo-Norman romances, provide strikingly different versions of exile and return stories. *Horn* is set in a timeless romance world, in which the hero fights three symbolic battles against the pagans; his journeys across the sea are ritualised through the repetition of the lines, 'the see bigan to flowe / And Horn child to rowe'.[2] *Havelok*, by contrast, exploits material realism, for example, of the noble Havelok labouring as a porter carrying 'a carte-lode / Of sedges [cuttle-fish], laxes, of plaices brode, / Of grete laumprees, and of eles', or winning a shot-putting competition.[3] Both, however, treat the themes of love and arranged marriage with immediacy and empathy, and the princess Rymenhild's passion for Horn is described with

notable frankness: 'heo luvede so Horn child / That negh heo gan wexe wild [she nearly went mad]' (lines 255–6). A third early romance, *Sir Orfeo*, is very different, reworking the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice as a Breton *lai* of faery. This work exploits a range of literary motifs in the sinister vision of the Queen, Heurodis, as she sleeps within her orchard; its enactment in her self-mutilation and then actual taking by the King of Faery; Orfeo's exile and life as a Wild Man; and his journey into the eerie world of the Un-dead, a 'fair cuntray' recalling 'the proude court of paradis', the inhabitants of which are frozen in various positions of violent death.[4] The happy ending of this version affirms the power of love, 'trouthe' and good government.

It is no surprise that this diverse, flexible mode, reliant on convention yet open to sophisticated and original individual treatment, also appealed to the imagination of the great English writers of the later fourteenth century. This period, marked by prolonged war with France, growth of the merchant class and a new sense of nationhood, saw the adoption of English in law, government and schools, and correspondingly, the development of sophisticated, courtly writing in English, including the original, self-conscious and learned works of Chaucer and Gower.

The *Gawain*-poet

Alongside these named poets stands the anonymous *Gawain*-poet, whose verse narratives, in particular *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, are now among the most renowned of the Middle Ages, although in their time they can have been very little known. Like Langland's *Piers Plowman*, they belong to the alliterative tradition of the second half of the fourteenth century, but by contrast to some fifty manuscripts of Langland's writings (and some forty each of Chaucer's and Gower's), there is only one manuscript of these poems. The loss of that in the Cotton Library fire would have changed as dramatically the canon of Middle English poetry as the loss of *Beowulf* would that of Anglo-Saxon poetry. The manuscript itself is far from *de luxe*, and its twelve illustrations are primitive. It seems most likely that the poet was a cleric, perhaps in minor orders, writing for a small aristocratic household in the north-west Midlands; his dialect is that of Staffordshire. The alliterative tradition was particularly strong in the north and west of England, and was used for both romance and religious writing, as is demonstrated by the roughly contemporaneous but very different alliterative poems, the *Morte Arthure* and *Wynner and Waster*, a dream vision in which Edward III intervenes to end the battle between the pope and friars, who win wealth, and the noble

and warrior classes, who spend it. Poems within this mode hint tantalisingly at the continuation of the oral-formulaic, alliterative form of Anglo-Saxon poetry. *Sir Gawain* plays on this idea in its first stanza by identifying the story as an ancient tale that the narrator has heard 'in toun', which he will set down in alliterative verse, 'In stori stif and stronge, / With lel letteres loken, / In londe so has ben longe'. [5] Yet while the *Gawain*-poet engages consciously with English popular tradition, his work is also learned and literary, and is informed by a sophisticated knowledge of classical and Biblical writing, and Continental literature, including Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as the great twelfth- and thirteenth-century French romances.

As might befit a clerical writer, three of the poems accompanying *Sir Gawain* are explicitly religious in subject: *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Pearl*. An alliterative saint's life, *St Erkenwald*, composed in a very similar dialect, may also be this poet's work.[6] In its Arthurian and secular subject matter, *Sir Gawain* is puzzlingly different, although the similarities of poetic style and language are so notable that a single authorship for the four poems seems certain. All are structured in ways that reflect a heightened interest in formal and numerical patterns. *St Erkenwald*, for example, neatly divides into two parts of 176 long lines (each perhaps intended as 44 four-line stanzas). Both *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* have 101 stanzas, and employ complicated verse forms; *Pearl* also uses a sophisticated scheme of rhyme and concatenation. The choice of the number 101 may be intended to gesture precisely through its slight imperfection towards the perfect number 100 (the number of cantos in Dante's *Divine Comedy*), and the line ratios of the sequence of the four poems may be analysed to produce the 'Divine Proportion', a continuous ratio leading to the infinite. The total number of lines of *Pearl*, 1212, is numerically significant: the product of its digits is reflected in the wall of the Heavenly Jerusalem, 144 cubits high, and in the 144,000 brides of Christ; the city has twelve foundations, gates and types of gem, and is 12,000 square furlongs. This poem, like *Sir Gawain* and like the endless circle of the pearl, is circular in form, the opening line echoed at the end. [7] Such features may be implied by the 'fayre formes' (line 3) of speech described by the poet at the start of *Cleanness*. The mathematical perfection of poetry seems for him to have presented a means of perfecting fallen language and approaching the subject of the divine. Yet this highly crafted and complex poetry is also immediately vibrant. The alliterative line provides the possibility of richly detailed and highly crafted description, dramatic narrative and dialogue, witty play and comedy, and moral and spiritual instruction. The poet was as ready to draw on dialect and colloquial terms as on the vocabulary of high-flown literary or archaic English, French

and Norse: his poems include many unique words and usages, their vocabulary reminiscent of the poetic beauty of Old English, with its specialised treasure-chest of words and metaphors. Perhaps most striking is their ambiguity: they are experimental, edgy and questioning on all levels, moving in and out of convention, even while their formal and thematic aspects are tightly woven together.

All address the subjects of sin, virtue and heavenly reward: *St Erkenwald* treats justice; *Cleanness* offers three Biblical examples of the punishment of uncleanness: the stories of the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah and Belshazzar's Feast; *Patience* probes that virtue through the story of Jonah. *Pearl* interweaves Biblical material and romance in a vision of the heavenly kingdom elaborated by the Dreamer's lost child. The pearl, image of spiritual perfection, also figures in *Cleanness* (lines 1113–32), and in *Sir Gawain* (lines 2364–5). *Sir Gawain* probes the virtues of chastity, loyalty and humility in the context of the chivalric ideal. The poems emphasise the difficulty of spiritual perfection and obedience, and the sometimes incomprehensible, apparently unfair ways of a God who may be fiercely punitive of the sinful. Yet this is also a courteous God whose qualities coincide with the chivalric ideal. The poet's interest in spiritual chivalry underpins his creative use of the romance form.

Cleanness and *Patience* take imaginative narrative in directions very different from romance, but they clearly demonstrate the poet's inventiveness. *Cleanness* commences with brief but vivid accounts of uncleanness and especially 'fylthe of the flesch' (line 202): the fall of the angels, 'hurled into helle-hole as the hyve swarmes' (line 223) within a 'styngande [stinging] storme' (line 225); the Fall of man 'thrugh the egging of Eve' (line 241); the angels' engendering of giants 'with her japes ille [evil tricks]' (line 272). They are complemented by a description of the 'mukel mangerye [great banquet]' (line 52) of the wedding feast at which the poor and weak replace the ungrateful rich (Matthew 2:1–14; Luke 14:16–24), here complete with bulls, boars, fatted fowls, pen-fed poultry, partridges, swans and cranes. Such delight in opulent detail is typical: the feast is rivalled later in the descriptions of Babylon and of Belshazzar's palace, musicians and ornately decorated, exotic dishes. Most extended is the description of the treasures fashioned by Solomon and stolen from the temple of Jerusalem, with their precious metals, gems and skilful shaping. Like the ornate craft of the poems themselves, their art reflects and venerates the Creator.

Divine power is vividly realised in *Cleanness*. The narrative of the Flood, which God wakens 'to wasch alle the worlde' (line 323), revels in the violence of the storm, evoked with sometimes onomatopoeic realism: 'Mony clustered

clowde clef alle in clowtes [shreds], / Torent uch a rayn ryfte [each rain-rift tore open] and rusched to the urthe' (lines 367–8). The violence and absence of mercy in God's punishment of 'peple that he hated' (line 396) inspire fear, but there is humour too in the colloquial description of the animals on the ark, 'throly thrublande [impatiently jostling] in thronge' (line 504). Differently remarkable is the frank physical detail of the poet's discussion of sodomy, characterised as the worst of sins: 'Uch male mas [makes] his mach a man as hymselven, / And fylter folyly in fere [join together wantonly] on femmales wyse [in the manner of women]' (lines 695–6). The idea of the 'unkynde' (unnatural), which perverts God's creation, is a crucial aspect of the poet's understanding of sin. Sodomy is contrasted, again with striking explicitness, to natural, heterosexual love as God himself praises his creation of 'the play of paramores' (line 700), than which, when pursued privately and 'honestly' (line 705), 'Welnyghe pure Paradys moght preve no better' (line 704). The extremity of corruption is reflected in the violence of God's punishment: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is imagined as a dreadful volcanic eruption of sulphuric smoke, fiery rain and earthquake. The poem also exploits the sinister, most strikingly in the eerie appearance of a wristless hand and pen at Belshazzar's Feast, 'That was grysly and gret, and grymly he wrytes' (line 1534). The horror of violence is not avoided: we are left with the stark image of Belshazzar in his bed 'beten to dethe, / That bothe his blod and his brayn blende on the clothes' (lines 1788–9).

The tone of *Patience* is similarly mixed: comedy is exploited in the image of the fearful Jonah slumbering ('sloberande he routes [snores]', line 186) through the storm, and the animated dialogue of the sailors who cast lots to discover the sinner. The use of vibrant, robust material description, which can readily shift from horror to humour, is most of all apparent in the description of the 'wylde walterande [wallowing] whal' (line 247), from his jaws so huge that they render Jonah a mere mote in a minster door (line 268), to his slimy gills and a hall-like 'stomak that stank as the devel' (line 274). Yet the angry deeps of the sea are also wonderfully opened out in Jonah's confession: 'I have greved my God and gulty am founden' (line 210), and his prayer, which draws directly on the words of the Biblical Jonah to characterise the plight of man: 'I am wrapped in water to my wo stoundes [pangs]; / The abyme byndes the body that I byde inne' (lines 317–18). The poetry looks forward to Cowper's some 500 years later in 'The Castaway', and perhaps also to Hopkins's use of sprung rhythm to characterise 'the dark night of the soul'. The difficulty of faith in an unjust world is most acutely rendered in the seemingly wanton destruction of the beautiful woodbine shaped by God to adorn Jonah's arbour,

but as suddenly 'Al welwed [shrivelled] and wasted' (line 475) in the withering sunlight. The poet vividly realises both Jonah's innocent delight and bitter anger, but cunningly turns the meaning inside out, so that Jonah's distress at the destruction of an object he has not created functions to explain God's wish to preserve even the sinners of Nineveh, for all men are God's handiwork. Although all may seem dark to the sufferer, 'Lorde, colde was his cumfort, and God's care huge!' (line 264), yet there is a benign care in the workings of Providence that merits resistance to despair: 'pacience is a nobel poynt, thagh hit displese ofte' (line 531). The poem articulates compellingly the invisibility of that providential pattern to man and hence the difficulty of faith.

Sir Gawain and the questioning of romance

Although *Sir Gawain* is so different in its subject matter and tone, its stylistic and thematic qualities resonate with these poems: the emphasis on virtue, the interweaving of symbol and narrative, the vivid realism, dialogue and drama, and the emphasis on the incomprehensibility of the human predicament. The poet makes sophisticated use of and playfully undercuts the conventions and ideals of romance. His interest in structure is again clear: as well as following the demands of the alliterative form, each stanza (of variable length) ends with four rhymed lines of three beats, a 'bob and wheel', used to conclude paragraphs in something of the way that Shakespeare employs rhymed couplets at the end of scenes. The poem is divided into four 'fitts' and follows the cycle of the year, ending where it began. The number three recurs, including in the three strands of the story. The central strand, that of the beheading game, may be traced to the twelfth-century Irish tale of Cuchulainn; the poet is most likely to have known the version in the first continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*, told in relation to the knight Carados. A temptation story not unlike that used in the poem also occurs in several forms with various protagonists, including French *Gauvain*-romances.[8] The tale of a contract and exchange of winnings is found in several Latin versions.

Gawain himself enjoys a long-standing and mixed literary history. His name occurs in the earliest Welsh Arthurian poems, among lists of heroes fighting alongside Arthur. As well as his prowess, however, Gawain's reputation for learning, elegant discourse and courtesy is repeatedly noted. In Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, he is a foil to the naive hero, but whereas Perceval gains spiritual understanding, Gawain remains caught within secular knighthood, and in the thirteenth-century *Queste del Saint Graal*, he is unable to set aside his secular ideals to undertake penance and abstinence. A series of French

romances builds on Gawain's secular reputation to depict him as womaniser. In a continuation of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, a beautiful maiden informs Gawain that she has long loved him, confirming his identity by comparing his face to an embroidered picture, and surrendering her body to him; in other versions Gawain must successfully pass a test such as escaping a magical sword to win the lady. Not all are positive: in one Gawain is abandoned by the lady; in another, when he discovers the lady intends to kill him, he takes her knife and rapes her. Gawain's name, then, is associated not simply with courtesy but also with a more active, potentially aggressive sexuality, an association recalled by the Lady in *Sir Gawain*, 'Ye ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkthe, yif yow lykes' (line 1496). The poem takes up and challenges the motifs of worldliness, courtesy, testing and seduction traditionally associated with its hero.

The poet also had English models, which until Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* tended to treat Gawain more positively. In the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain figures as the central warrior-hero, closer to Brutus, Roland or Beowulf than to his chivalric namesakes. This poem draws on English Arthurian chronicle, and is particularly striking for its realism: the rich depiction of Arthur's great feast, the geographically precise detail of his campaign on the Continent and most of all the descriptions of warfare. Gawain figures as the great epic hero, defying the Emperor Lucius, defeating the noble Priamus in single combat and overcoming the Saracen multitude with his few knights. As Arthur presses on in his imperialistic initiative, however, the poem raises questions concerning the limits of pride and ambition, and the destructiveness of war. The narrative is nowhere more masterful than in the account of the death of Gawain. He ventures in to the shore by galley while Arthur's ships wait offshore, and his few knights perform heroic feats against thousands, but he is eventually betrayed:

> His hand slipped and slode o-slant on the mailes
> And the tother [Mordred] slely slinges him under;
> With a trenchand knife the traitour him hittes
> Through the helm and the hed on high on the brain;
> And thus Sir Gawain is gone, the good man of armes.[9]

For a moment, even Mordred weeps. The passage captures the vivid, realistic mode of the poem, the violence of warfare and the fragility of human life, as one slip of the hand brings about the fall of the great knight. The tragic sense of loss recalls the *Battle of Maldon*: as in the case of Byrhtnoth, it is precisely Gawain's extreme heroism that is his downfall, yet that inspires the listener or reader and shapes the high drama and human impact of the poem.

Sir Gawain is much more obviously a romance, but it too insists on questioning ideals as the poet interweaves fantasy and reality, pagan and Christian, human and otherworld. The narrative is set at Christmas as the knights and ladies of the Arthurian court celebrate at Camelot, perhaps having forgotten the deeper significance of Christmas, although in this poem no didactic meaning is certain. The Green Knight's demand for a 'Crystemas gomen [game]' (line 283) is as ambiguous as his appearance, which evokes a range of natural and supernatural possibilities and is realised in strikingly material terms. His size, luxuriant hair and beard, violation of courtly behaviour by riding into the court, armed with an axe rather than a sword, and his rude challenge, 'What, is this Arthures hous?' (line 309), all place him as an outsider, a force of nature representative of the hostile world beyond the court. Yet his wild appearance is countered by his shapely limbs, ornate costume and fashionably ornamented horse. Most remarkable of all, both man and horse are 'overal enker [intense] grene' (line 150) – the detail dramatically concealed until the final line of the stanza. The poet revels in the strangeness of the colour, combining natural and artificial metaphors, 'such a hwe lach [take] / As growe grene as the gres and grener hit semed, / Then grene aumayl [enamel] on golde glowande bryghter' (lines 234–6), just as the Green Knight combines savagery and sophistication. The variety of terms used emphasises the difficulty of interpreting this supernatural phenomenon: he seems an 'aghlich mayster [awesome creature]' (line 136), 'half etayn [giant] in erde [earth]' (line 140), 'he ferde as freke were fade [he behaved like an elvish man]' (line 149), and the court is awestruck and silenced by this 'mervayle' (line 233), thinking it 'fantoum and fayryye' (line 240); later they characterise it as theatrical illusion. The poet exploits the horror and menace of the Green Knight's power over death itself in the account of the graphic beheading, the grotesque depiction of the court kicking around the head and finally the image of the torso holding up the 'lufly' (line 433), still-speaking head, to ride away 'runyschly [outlandishly]' (line 432) laughing. This triumph of life over death chillingly enacts the associations of Christmas, which not only celebrates the hope for salvation and resurrection made flesh in Christ, but also coincides with the pagan feast of the Midwinter Solstice marking the hope for regeneration of the seasons, symbolised by the burning of the Yule log.

The second fitt opens with a grand rhetorical pageant of the seasonal cycle, through 'crabbed Lentoun' (line 502) to 'the sesoun of somer wyth the soft wyndes, / Quen Zeferus syfles hymself on sedes and erbes' (lines 516–17), to the tempests of autumn, 'Wrothe [angry] wynde of the welkyn wrasteles [wrestles] with the sunne' (line 525), ending with Gawain's recollection of his

'anious [arduous] voyage' (line 535). This Gawain is anxious and reflective, and his resignation to fate, 'Of destinés derf and dere [harsh and gentle] / What may mon do bot fonde [try]' (lines 564–5), recalls the emphasis of Anglo-Saxon poetry. Gawain's shield, decorated with the Pentangle and with the image of Mary on the inside, symbolises the interwoven spiritual and secular virtues that must protect the knight against the unknown. The journey itself is especially remarkable in its precise, localised realism. Whereas conventional romance description tends to be limited to dark, deep or fair forests, Gawain's voyage takes him through the actual landscape of Britain: North Wales, Anglesey, Holyhead and the 'wyldrenesse of Wyrale' (line 701), towards the area from which the poem seems to originate, suggesting that the poet is playing a complex game of recognition with his audience. In a whirlwind parody of the romance hero's quest, Gawain fights with enemies at every ford, the traditional place of challenge, and with dragons, wolves, wild men, bulls, bears, boars and giants. Thus the normal subject matter of romance is turned inside out, relegated to less than a stanza. In a final twist, Gawain's worst enemy is none of these conventional opponents, but instead the English climate, evoked with a realism that recalls *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer*:

> For werre wrathed [battle troubled] hym not so much, that wynter was wors,
> When the colde cler water fro the cloudes schadde,
> And fres er hit [froze before it] falle myght to the fale [pale] erthe.
> Ner slayn wyth the slete he sleped in his yrnes [irons]
> Mo nyghtes then innoghe in naked rokkes,
> Ther as claterande [clattering] fro the crest the colde borne rennes [runs],
> And henged heghe [hung high] over his hede in hard ysse-ikkles.
>
> (lines 726–32)

Like the later descriptions of the winter weather in which Gawain sets out to the Green Chapel, the poetry seems peculiarly, tangibly English.

The depiction of the castle at which Gawain finally arrives, Hautdesert, again merges romance and realism. It appears suddenly, in the manner of the Grail Castle that its name, 'High Wasteland', evokes, apparently in answer to Gawain's prayer on Christmas Eve, shimmering and seemingly 'pared out of papure' (line 802). Yet it is also a highly fashionable medieval barbican, complete with towers and turrets, ornamented and painted pinnacles, and chalk-white chimneys. Its rituals are Christian, but it is also a place of temptation and heightened material delight, focused in the surpassing beauty of Bertilak's lady. Here Gawain is cocooned in a feminised world, sleeping on in his luxurious bed while Bertilak rises early to hunt. The lady's advances are explicit,

'Ye ar welcum to my cors / Yowre awen won [pleasure] to wale [take]' (lines 1237–8), and the comedy of the bedroom scenes is situated partly in Gawain's desire elegantly to escape her wiles, rather than to enact the force she seems to suggest. At the same time, the poet emphasises Gawain's genuine sexual temptation, and his need for the protection of the Virgin: 'Gret perile bitwene hem stod' (line 1768). In balancing the demands of chastity, courtesy to his host's wife and loyalty to his host, Gawain's Christian virtue is set against his reputation as celebrated courtly lover, and the different facets of chivalry, spiritual and secular, are shown to coexist uncomfortably. Gawain survives the test of chastity but his integrity and faith are less sure: he accepts and conceals the lady's protective girdle, a secular symbol more resonant of pagan binding magic than of the Christian virtues of the Pentangle.

The peculiar menace of Gawain's test is heightened by the interwoven narrative of Bertilak's hunts of deer, boar and fox, which recall the violence of the beheading scene in their graphic images of chase, capture, death and dismemberment. But this is highly artistic violence: the poet draws on a medieval hunting treatise to offer elaborate instruction in the courtly art of venery. The repeated images of imprisonment used by the Lady parallel the vocabulary of the hunt, and the prey of the third day, the sly fox, may be seen as a counterpart for Gawain, who that day deceitfully keeps the Lady's gift, but this meaning is never made explicit. Rather, the narrator misleads his audience, claiming that Gawain is so 'clene' (line 1884) after making his confession that the morrow might be Judgment Day.

The final fitt returns ominously to the winter world outside: Gawain tosses and turns as 'The snawe snitered ful snart, that snayped the wylde; / The werbelande wynde wapped fro the hyghe [The snow showered very swiftly; it stung the wild animals; / The shrill wind struck from the high ground]' (lines 2003–4). His journey to the Green Chapel is evoked with equal realism: the bare boughs, raging streams, cliffs 'ther clenges [clings] the colde' (line 2078), and drizzling mist on moor and mountain that seems to give each hill 'a myst hakel [cape of mist] huge' (line 2081). The Green Chapel is in some ways anticlimactic, 'nobot an olde cave' (line 2182) by a boiling spring and waterfall, but also ominous, and with its 'balw berw [smooth barrow]' (line 2172) perhaps may be identified as a pagan burial site, associated with demonic magic. The poet's mastery of suspenseful, onomatopoeic realism is most evident in the sound of the Green Knight sharpening his axe, 'What! hit wharred [whirred] and whette [rasped], as water at a mulne [mill]. / What! hit rusched and ronge [rang], rawthe [horrid] to here' (lines 2203–4). Suspense is taken to new heights with the two feints, while Gawain's severed flesh and gushing blood at the

third blow make real the threat to his life. The green girdle proves not to have been what it seemed: rather than offering magical protection, it is a mark of sin, the 'falssyng' (line 2378) that has taught Gawain cowardice and disloyalty. Yet although Gawain sees himself as having failed to live up to the perfection of the Pentangle, Bertilak commends his virtue and presents him with the girdle, which the court will wear as a badge of honour. Gawain has learned the one Christian virtue he lacked, humility; he has also acquired a new kind of knowledge, linked to experience, worldliness and imperfection, and symbolised by the non-Christian emblem of the girdle. We are left with questions concerning the possibility of reconciling secular and sacred, the value of chivalric ideals and most of all, the motivation of the Green Knight. Is he to be read as demonic tempter, divine arbiter and confessor, force of wild nature, faery knight or, as he states, the servant of Gawain's own aunt, Morgan le Fay, his shape shifted through her magical arts of illusion? The problem of interpretation opens on to the problem of individual perception and being in the world, and the poem ends in enigmas rather than answers.

Pearl and the sublimation of romance

Where *Sir Gawain* is witty and urbane in its ambiguity, *Pearl* is visionary and contemplative. The intricate and jewel-like effect created by its complex language and structure is fitting to a work that engages with some of the most enduringly difficult questions of human existence. Early readers were divided as to whether *Pearl* was a deeply personal elegy for a dead child or an allegory designed to teach the doctrine of salvation, but both elements are crucial: the poem moves between universal and personal; it is shifting, multifaceted and self-conscious. The structures of romance are again employed, but are merged with other conventions, in particular those of the dream vision and of mystical writing.

The courtly dream vision, with its setting of the springtime garden, use of allegorical figures and theme of secular love, finds its origins in the *Roman de la Rose*, begun by Guillaume de Lorris and completed by Jean de Meun, and was adapted by a long sequence of later poets, including Machaut, Froissart and Chaucer. *Pearl*'s opening depiction of an enclosed garden immediately suggests this genre, and fittingly, the narrator's reference to 'luf-daungere' [love-danger, love-sickness, line 11] establishes a context of *fin' amors* or 'courtly love'. The convention is elaborated as the narrator falls to the ground, the desolation of his heart enacted physically in his swoon-like sleep. Yet this is a garden with a difference, a garden not in springtime but in the ripeness of late

summer, looking towards winter, and the images of decaying fruits and flowers and of the lost pearl evoke the ideas of death and the grave.

Correspondingly, the narrator's dream does not lead into a courtly love vision, but is directly associated with God's grace. The poem thus also situates itself within an ancient, more serious genre of dream-vision, employed in the Bible, Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, as well as in the Old English *Dream of the Rood* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*. At the same time, the poet continues to exploit the motifs and language of romance as the spirit of the dreamer goes 'in aventure' (line 64), on a quest. The extraordinary, haunting evocation of a visionary world both depends on and transforms romance conventions, using the conventional motif of the earthly paradise, but making strange the beauty and riches of nature. The cliffs are of crystal; the trunks of the trees are 'blwe as ble [colour] of Ynde' (line 76), their leaves silver; the river bed is set with exotic gems; and precious pearls crunch beneath the Dreamer's feet. The Dreamer longs to cross the river to enter what seem to him to be the pleasure gardens of some great house, and when the Pearl Maiden appears she is a fitting inhabitant for such a place, her characteristics and costume those of the ideal romance lady. The narrator's dread and bliss at seeing her accord with the conventions of 'courtly love'. Yet, in one of the most striking oppositions of the poem, the joyless jeweller's lost pearl proves also to be a 'faunt' (line 161), a child, who is 'nerre then aunte or nece' (line 233); later we learn that she has lived less than two years. The confusion between child and lady is central to the poem, for the lesson of the Pearl Maiden's metamorphosis is the most difficult that the Dreamer must learn: she no longer belongs to him but to Christ.

The gradual process of the Dreamer's recognition, and the surreptitious hints at the Maiden's identity, are typical of the riddling quality of *Pearl*. The poem unfolds through a series of questions and answers concerning the enigmas of divine logic. The transient human world where roses flower and fade is countered by the brilliant, celestial sphere where no sun and moon are necessary and where the permanence of eternal life is expressed through the unchanging gems and metals of its landscape. Yet the very otherness of this world renders it difficult and often obscure, and the unsatisfying quality of some of the Pearl Maiden's explanations seems to gesture towards the ineffability of the divine. The Dreamer expresses comprehensible human feelings of confusion and doubt as he enters into a topsy-turvy dialogue where his child has become a divine instructress. Like *Patience*, the poem creates an uneasy sense that the bumbling efforts of men within this temporal world may be laughable to God. Again the questions central to the book of Job

are asked, concerning the nature of a God who causes what seems needless suffering, and whose teachings are often paradoxical. Appropriately, the Pearl Maiden exploits the rhetorical modes of paradox and metaphor. Figurative, especially courtly, language plays a key role in explaining the inexplicable, but at the same time the use of highly sensual, sometimes secular images to elaborate sacred ideas and themes creates a strange tension.

The Dreamer faces one apparently illogical answer after another. He learns that, though young, his daughter is Christ's queen – but along with Mary there are 144,000 queens. The images of the bride and bridegroom, marital bliss, unity, love and possession are typical of the language of mystical literature, but do not normally describe young children, and the Dreamer's objection seems reasonable: it is 'to dere a date [too exalted a point]' (line 492). The parable of the workers who come late to the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16) allows the Pearl Maiden to explain how those who die young may be saved without undergoing the process of Christian teaching: 'innoghe of grace has innocent' (line 625). The highly intricate, interwoven quality of her argument becomes apparent as one topic, usually represented by one symbolic and repeated word, leads directly on to the next. Thus the discussion of the spotless, sinless quality of children brings the Pearl Maiden to the heart of her theological narrative, the subject of the kingdom of heaven. The linking words of fitt XIII, 'mascelles' (spotless) and its near double 'makelles' (matchless), a word-play typical of the poem, become the two key qualities in the story of the perfect and peerless pearl for which the jeweller sells all his worldly goods (Matthew 13:45–6). The pearl is the kingdom of heaven: 'hit is wemles [spotless], clene, and clere, / And endeles rounde, and blythe of mode' (lines 737–8). The symbol resonates through the poem both figuratively and literally, written into landscape, costume and appearance.

The Pearl Maiden's description of her marriage to Christ, the Lamb, exploits the courtly language of love: he is her 'dere destyné' (line 757); she is his 'lemman [beloved] swete' (line 763); he calls her out of 'bonerté' (line 762), the courtly quality of generosity or bounty, and bestows on her the courtly virtue of 'bewté' (line 765). The use of French terms heightens the courtly ethos, and the images are strikingly, paradoxically sensual: the maiden leaves this 'wete' (line 761) world for the glittering heavenly one, and the Lamb's blood washes her clean, pure and white. In her depiction of the New Jerusalem (based on Revelation 14:1–5 and 21:1–22.5), the brides are dressed in their wedding garments, and Christ is depicted as the chivalric lover and ideal knight, 'In Jerusalem was my lemman slayn' (line 805), who sacrifices himself to the blows of 'boyes bolde' (line 806). Chivalry is invested with a new

spirituality, manifested in Christ's loving sacrifice for mankind. The Dreamer responds comically by asking whether Jerusalem is not in the land of Judea, yet despite himself tumbles through the argument to attain the vision of the heavenly city. The poet links the stanzas describing the city with the name of St John, emphasising his Biblical authority, but considerably embellishes the details found in Revelation. The precious stones and metals of the walls and streets, and the gates of pearl, recall and fulfil the promise of the gems, gold, silver and crystal of the start.

The pearl takes on another level of meaning with the depiction of the Lamb himself, in clothing the semblance of 'praysed perles' (line 1112): the linking word 'delyt' (fitt XIX) points up the experience of heavenly bliss. The Dreamer's wonder and horror at the sight of the Lamb's wound, and of the blood spurting from his side, is replaced by more personal delight as he suddenly glimpses his 'lyttel quene' (line 1147) amongst the company of brides. As love-longing overcomes him, he leaps into the river, only to wake in the garden once more, alone and in sorrow. Yet if his dream vision has revivified and re-enacted his loss, it has also offered consolation in showing the happiness and transformation of his lost pearl. In the Dreamer's concluding prayer, the image of the pearl is extended to his own soul: 'He [Christ] gef uus to be his homly hyne [servants] / Ande precious perles unto his pay [pleasure]' (lines 1211–12). As with the other poems, however, there are no easy answers, but only the uneasy consolation of faith. The poem is deeply engaged with the difficulty of that faith, and with the gap between human and divine logic. Yet it also offers a visionary interlude that illuminates with its strange, otherworldly dream-light 'thys doel-doungoun [dungeon of sorrow]' (line 1187) of earthly life.

The enduring appeal of the *Gawain*-poet's works, and particularly of *Sir Gawain*, is affirmed by the remarkable number of writers who have tried their hands at modernisation of his work. Several acknowledge their debt to Ezra Pound, whose versions of Anglo-Saxon poems offer a kind of model, and whose treatise, *The Spirit of Romance*, engages with the intensity and influence of the genre. J. R. R. Tolkien not only produced the definitive edition of *Sir Gawain*, but also engaged over many years in translating the poem, its archaic, richly detailed style recalling that of *The Lord of the Rings*. Marie Borroff's remarkably fluent translations aimed to follow the verbal art of the originals in a more modern mode. Sustained interest is evident in the work of Ted Hughes, whose *Wodwo* (1967) plays on the Green Man legend, and who also translated sections of *Sir Gawain*. More recently, the extraordinary dramatic and visual potential of the poem led Harrison Birtwistle to create his opera *Gawain!*, using a verse libretto by David Harsent that places the enchantress

Morgan le Fay at the centre of the narrative, and employing ballet and mime.[10] Such works reflect a wider creative engagement with medieval poetry, particularly striking in Seamus Heaney's work, which includes translations of *Beowulf* and Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. In the last ten years, poets from Britain, America and Australia have translated *Sir Gawain*. Keith Harrison emulates the stress pattern of sections of *Four Quartets* in his attempt to convey in alliterative verse 'a rattling good story'.[11] Bernard O'Donoghue celebrates the English 'sprung rhythm' that appealed so strongly to Hopkins, Auden and Heaney. For W. S. Merwin, it is that 'spirit of romance', the Celtic mystery of *Sir Gawain*, that is crucial: his forceful, fluent translation attempts most of all to retain the movement and life of the poem. Simon Armitage writes persuasively of the need for 'a poetic response', both retaining the alliterative art of the original and translating its spirit. Armitage presents the translator as following the example of the *Gawain*-poet, who has 'set himself a series of rules, then consciously and conspicuously gone about bending them'.[12] Perhaps it is precisely that balance between artifice and adventure that has appealed so strongly to modern poets.

Notes

1. Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3.
2. *King Horn*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (1966; Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), pp. 15–54, lines 121–2.
3. *Havelok the Dane*, in Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, pp. 55–129, lines 895–97.
4. *Sir Orfeo*, in Sands (ed.), *Middle English Verse Romances*, pp. 185–200, lines 327, 352.
5. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A. C. Cawley and J. J. Anderson, Everyman Classics (London: Dent–Everyman's Library, 1976), pp. 159–254, lines 34–6. Subsequent references to the works of the *Gawain*-poet are from this edition, which modernises archaic letter-forms, and are cited by line number. For a full scholarly edition, see *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: 'Pearl', 'Cleanness', 'Patience', 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, fifth edition, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2007). Includes prose translation on CD-ROM.
6. *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are found in London, British Library, MS Cotton Nero A.x, dated to the last quarter of the fourteenth century (the twelve illustrations are contemporaneous or slightly later); *St Erkenwald* is preserved in London, British Library, MS Harley 2250, dated to 1477.

7. See Victor Watts's discussion in his *Pearl. A Modernised Version of the Middle English Poem*, ed. Corinne Saunders and David Fuller, intro. Kathleen Raine (London: Enitharmon, 2005), p. 8.
8. See further Elisabeth Brewer's anthology, *'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight': Sources and Analogues*, Arthurian Studies 27 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1973, 1992) and Ad Putter, *'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).
9. *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, in Larry D. Benson (ed.), *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English 'Stanzaic Morte Arthur' and Alliterative 'Morte Arthure'*, Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (1974; Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), pp. 115–238, lines 3854–8.
10. On Birtwhistle's opera (libretto by David Harsent, 1991) see further Barry Windeatt, 'Sir Gawain at the *fin de siècle*: Novel and Opera', in Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (eds.), *A Companion to the 'Gawain'-Poet*, Arthurian Studies 38 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 373–83.
11. Keith Harrison (trans.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, intro. and annotated Helen Cooper, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxxix.
12. Simon Armitage (trans.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber, 2007), p. xii.

Chapter 3

Late fourteenth-century poetry (Chaucer, Gower, Langland and their legacy)

WENDY SCASE

Dryden's description of Chaucer as the 'Father of English Poetry' and Puttenham's demarcation of late fourteenth-century English poetry as a 'first age' have had varied fortunes in recent histories of poetry.[1] Although Chaucer's sobriquet was roundly defended on the occasion of his sexcentenary, the 'age of Chaucer' and 'Ricardian poetry', key terms for the New Critics, have yielded to more varied and nuanced periodisations.[2] However, there remain indisputable grounds for regarding the contribution of Chaucer and certain of his contemporaries as foundational in the history of English poetry, and for viewing the late fourteenth century as a distinctive and crucial literary period. Late fourteenth-century England produced the first English poetry that has continued to be read, and responded to, throughout all subsequent periods. We have incontrovertible evidence that the poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower and the author of *Piers Plowman* (whom, following tradition, I shall call William Langland), all composed in the last three, perhaps four, decades of the fourteenth century, has never since fallen out of sight. This chapter outlines the opportunities and constraints that attended the making of poetry in English in the later fourteenth century, and explores the ways in which Chaucer, Gower and Langland responded to them. The final section of the chapter briefly turns to the legacy of these poets and the story of how they first became recognised as founders of a tradition of English poetry.

Several models of composition were available to and valued in late fourteenth-century England. None of these models was English. The metres and figures of the classical poets were transmitted as part of education in grammar and rhetoric. Schoolboys were required to compose Latin verse on set themes in prescribed metres. Valorised models of vernacular composition were available in French and Italian. The nobility and their servants moved in a multilingual environment where French was the language of polite intercourse, diplomacy and letters. War, diplomacy and marriage were among the

circumstances that provided for the dissemination of French poetry in England. Richard II, born and brought up in Bordeaux until the age of four (1371), almost certainly spoke French as his first language, and he read French – 'very well' according to Jean Froissart, who presented him with a book of his verse in French in 1395.[3] Richard does not seem to have been an active patron of poets, but several English nobles and courtiers are known to have read French poetry or at least possessed books that included it.[4]

Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio were internationally acclaimed as vernacular poets, being invested as laureates both in Italy and beyond. French provided access to these illustrious Italian writers, sometimes in turn through the medium of Latin.[5] *De obedientia ac fide uxoria mythologiae*, Petrarch's story of Griselda the patient wife that is the source of Chaucer's Clerk's Tale, was a translation from Boccaccio's version of the story in *The Decameron*. It is thought that Chaucer knew the Latin text, but that he also made use of a French translation of it.[6] Lydgate based his *Fall of Princes*, a translation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*, on a French translation by Laurent de Premierfait.[7] But there were also means of direct contact between Italian poetry and English readers. Contact with Italian culture and society, and hence with the Tuscan poets, was facilitated by trade, pilgrimage, education and dealings at the papal court.[8] Knowledge of Latin and French must have permitted reasonably easy access to the Tuscan vernaculars.

An extensive corpus of verse composed in English before the later fourteenth century survives (much more must have been lost). But this poetry was not to be found in the schoolroom, nor in monastic libraries, nor in the university lecture halls, nor in the private libraries of the nobility. It offered no models for emulation, nor named poets for imitation. Much of it was explicitly targeted at audiences who could not understand Latin or French. A large amount of the surviving material answered to the needs of the Church for resources to teach congregations (and perhaps less educated priests) and to celebrate sacraments and feasts. Saints' lives, exemplary tales, homiletic and biblical material were translated or adapted from French (including Anglo-Norman) or Latin originals into rhyming syllabic metres and gathered into huge collections such as the *South English Legendary* (*c*.1270–85), the *Ormulum* (*c*.1200), the *Cursor Mundi* (*c*.1300) and the *Northern Homily Cycle* (before 1300).[9] Teaching associated with the sacrament of penance was transmitted in exempla collections such as *Handlyng Synne* by Robert Mannyng of Brunne (*c*.1300), while teaching on this world and the next was provided in texts such as the popular *Prick of Conscience* (before *c*.1350).[10] History, valuable for its edifying examples of good and bad governance and as a source of legal memory and precedent, was transmitted in verse translations such as Layamon's *Brut*, a

rendering of Wace's *Roman de Brut* in informal alliterative long lines written in the Worcester diocese *c.*1200–25, and Robert Mannyng's *Chronicle* (before 1338), translated from the Anglo-Norman *Chronicle* of Pierre de Langtoft.[11] By translating into English, clerics provided edifying material to supplement (or supplant) popular English verse narratives and songs. Relative to the clerical translation, very little of the latter kind of material survives to this day, and it was apparently little recorded in manuscript even in its day. Short lyric poems, satires and romances in English were not, on the whole, regarded as useful resources that warranted systematic copying in manuscripts. Generally they survived in more haphazard ways. The famous lyric 'Sumer is icumen in', for example, survives with the music of the Latin hymn to whose tune it was to be sung.[12] Other lyrics survive because resourceful preachers saw them as memorable material that would catch their congregations' attention and give them a way of remembering religious teaching.[13]

While the vast majority of English verse dating before the later fourteenth century testifies to its status as material targeted at monolingual, and probably predominantly illiterate, audiences, some exceptions provide us with evidence of attempts to experiment with English as a medium for self-conscious poetic art. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, an anonymous 1,794-line poem in octosyllabic couplets (probably *c.*1272), explores poetics in a debate about the 'songs' of the two protagonists that alludes extensively to learned literary sources. Failing to resolve their debate, the two birds agree to put their quarrel to one Master Nicholas, an authority who 'diht [composes] & writ mani wisdom'.[14] The octosyllabics of this poem recall the metre of many French poems, though they are characteristically handled in a loose and lively way. Other poets set themselves demanding formal challenges of a different kind. 'Annot and John', for example, praises the lady Ann with tropes recommended by the rhetoricians. She is compared favourably with precious stones, flowers, birds, medicines and romance heroines in five ten-line stanzas, each of which rhymes aaaaaaaabb. In addition to needing eight rhymes on one sound in each stanza, the poet also alliterates each line, extending the alliteration over two lines in lines 8–9 of each stanza, bridging the a and b rhymes, as for example in a stanza in which the poet riddles on his lady's name:

> hire nome is in a note of þe nyhtegale;
> In an note is hire nome – nempneþ it non!
> Whose ryht redeþ roune to Iohon.[15]

Here the poet combines the disciplines of rhyme and alliteration with a riddle on the names of the lady and the poet himself.

A few exceptional manuscripts testify both to some frequency for verses that foreground poetic accomplishment in English and to a taste for and high valuation of such material among audiences. 'Annot and John' survives with many similarly ambitious love lyrics in London, British Library, Harley MS 2253, an anthology of French, Latin and English materials made in Shropshire around 1340.[16] The English poems are associated on dialect grounds with several different regions of England.[17] This suggests that poetic experiments of this kind may have been widespread, and that there were means by which they could be transmitted. Their copying in a single volume alongside French and Latin materials shows that they were accorded literary status and perhaps that they appealed to the tastes of cultivated readers.

Another important anthology of vernacular poetry dating from this period is Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS 19.2.1, the Auchinleck manuscript.[18] Narrative texts predominate, including saints' lives and religious legends (for example, stanzaic lives of Saints Margaret and Katherine, and the *Life of Adam and Eve* in octosyllabic couplets), and romances (for example, the stanzaic *Sir Beves of Hamtoun*, *Lay le Freine* in octosyllabic couplets and *Guy of Warwick* in couplets and in a stanzaic form). There are also examples of estates satire (*The Simonie)*, debates on secular and religious subjects (*The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Debate between the Body and the Soul*) and exemplary tales (*The Seven Sages of Rome*). The Auchinleck manuscript is thought to have been copied in London in the 1330s. It appears to be a 'commercial production', copied by several scribes under the supervision of an editor to fulfil the order of a purchaser.[19] Despite some uncertainty about the precise means of production, it is fairly safe to conclude that English poetry of the kinds in the manuscript was sought after and valued enough by readers and audiences to repay commercial production and even, perhaps, some financial speculation.

Many of the texts in MS Harley 2253 and in the Auchinleck manuscript do not occur anywhere else, and many occur in only one or two other witnesses. It must have been difficult to obtain exemplars for copying, and there was clearly no established means of written transmission of English poetry. The variety and discontinuities of production traditions must reflect patchy and discontinuous enthusiasm for this material among readers and patrons. Where relatively large numbers of manuscripts survive, they are usually of texts in whose dissemination the Church had an interest, such as the *South English Legendary* and the *Prick of Conscience*. Dissemination was inhibited too by the existence of regional varieties of English, and the lack of agreed standards of written representation of the language. Some texts were

'translated' from one regional dialect to another, for example, the Biblical history the *Cursor Mundi* is shown by rhyme and other linguistic evidence to have originally been composed in northern English, but manuscripts of the text in other dialects survive.[20] Those texts which did achieve some distribution, such as the lyrical meditation on the Passion 'Quanne hic se on rode', can evince enormous variety of spelling, vocabulary and morphology.[21] Such variations meant that written texts had limited comprehensibility beyond the region in which they were copied, even perhaps beyond the scribe and the circle around him familiar with the systems he used or developed, and dissemination would (and demonstrably did) involve much miscomprehension and error. There were sporadic attempts to standardise. One early, extreme example is the *Ormulum*, for which the poet-scribe developed a spelling system that indicated the lengths of vowels (perhaps to assist readers not familiar with the language).[22] That no accepted standard morphology or orthography was developed reflected, and in turn perpetuated, the low status of English as a medium for poetry.

We have seen that the models of excellence available to late fourteenth-century poets were written in Latin, French and Italian. The history of English poetry before the later fourteenth century includes experiments with self-conscious composition, attempts to create systems of spelling and morphology and some interest in collecting material into manuscripts that could serve as exemplars for copyists, models for poets and resources for readers. For a variety of reasons, however, these experiments remained just that. English poetry did not provide models for emulation or a sense of tradition in which an ambitious poet might work. The next section of this chapter examines the ways in which Chaucer, Gower and Langland responded to these circumstances.

One of Chaucer's most characteristic ways of tackling his relation with these models, negative and positive, is by indicating his own shortcomings in relation to the French and Latin examples and his links with 'lewed' ('unlettered/ignorant/lay') English composition. His invocation to the Muses at the beginning of Book 2 of *The House of Fame* to help him 'to endite [compose] and ryme' (*House of Fame*, line 520) is soon followed by the eagle's comically deflating explanation for why the dreaming poet has been snatched up into his claws: Jupiter has taken pity on him for serving Venus and Cupid without reward:

> And never-the-lesse hast set thy wit –
> Although that in thy hed ful lyte is –
> To make bookys, songes, dytees,
> In ryme or elles in cadence,

As thou best canst, in reverence
Of Love and of hys servantes eke,
That have hys servyse soght, and seke;
And peynest the to preyse hys art,
Although thou haddest never part.

(*House of Fame*, lines 620–8)

The poet has 'done his best' to compose love poetry, but, the eagle goes on to say, he has had no personal experience of the art of love, instead spending his time in his study reading and composing. The eagle views him as a 'lewed' (line 866) interlocutor who requires simple explanations in simple language (lines 853–64).

This inadequate Chaucer who fails to measure up as a poet is of course the product of a performance that is simultaneously comic and accomplished, and it is in his complex relation with the traditions of insular and continental poetry that he finds his subject. Chaucer's many well-known inflections of this poetic persona – the narrator of *Troilus*, the dreamers in the *Parliament of Fowls* and the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the dim-witted pilgrim-poet of *The Canterbury Tales* – provide many opportunities for him to ironise his relation with those whom his society considered poets. In every case Chaucer makes virtuoso poetry out of his affected distance from his society's literary models and standards.

Chaucer's metrical choices precisely reflect his uncomfortable positioning between the vernacular and his French, Latin and Italian models. Throughout his work he experiments ambitiously with a variety of demanding metres and verse forms. In the envoy to his 'Complaint of Venus', a short poem based on three French ballades by Oton de Grandson, he apologises for the shortcomings of his adaptation, blaming them on the difficulty of finding rhymes in English, as well as the intellectual infirmities of old age:

For elde, that in my spirit dulleth me,
Hath of endyting al the subtilte
Wel 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.

('Complaint of Venus', lines 76–82)

He has, however, set himself a particularly exacting discipline here, in each three-stanza section restricting himself to two rhymes only. His apology draws attention to his achievement as measured against Grandson. That he aimed

for a reputation for composing in the most challenging Continental forms is attested by his work (the roundel at the end of the *Parliament of Fowls*, and the many ballades). We may have lost some of his experiments in challenging verse-forms. In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Alceste claims that the poet-figure's works include 'balades, roundels, virelayes' (F, line 423), though no virelays by Chaucer are now extant.

If Chaucer's translation of the *Roman de la Rose* is apprentice work aimed at experimenting with finding appropriate English verse-forms for celebrated models, as early as the *House of Fame* the poet was self-consciously measuring his verse against illustrious models. The invocation at the beginning of the third book of *The House of Fame* illustrates this well:

> O God of science and of lyght,
> Appollo, thurgh thy grete myght,
> This lytel laste bok thou gye!
> Nat that I wilne, for maistrye,
> Here art poetical be shewed,
> But for the rym ys lyght and lewed,
> Yit make hyt sumwhat agreable,
> Though som vers fayle in a sillable;
> And that I do no diligence
> To shewe craft, but o sentence.
>
> (*House of Fame*, lines 1091–100)

Here Chaucer is imitating Dante's invocation of Apollo in the *Paradiso* at the same time that he disclaims his own poetic ambitions, aiming only for his 'lewed' rhyme to be 'sumwhat agreable'. But the reference to 'lewed' properties and departures from strict syllable counting may also suggest that he is aiming to accommodate the French octosyllabic metre to the English language; he aspires not only to emulate, but to innovate. Perhaps he refers to his freedom with inflexional endings such as '-e' to create a fluid and responsive medium.[23] His most celebrated and historically significant innovation in versification, however, is his development of the iambic pentameter, the line later used in blank verse and Augustan heroic couplets, both in rhyme royal stanzas (for example, *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Parliament of Fowls*) and in the rhyming couplets of many of *The Canterbury Tales*. The typical Chaucerian poetic voice, in which the disciplines of versification are enlivened with the illusion of colloquial, natural English speech, is most in evidence when he is using this metre.

Chaucer is aware of native verse-forms, but is uniformly disparaging of them.[24] In *The Canterbury Tales*, he allocates snatches of English love lyric to

the disreputable Pardoner ('Com hider, love, to me'; General Prologue, line 672), and the absurd cockerel Chauntecleer and his hen ('My lief is faren in londe!'; Nun's Priest's Tale, line 2879). The six-line stanza of Sir Thopas hilariously parodies the jogging rhythms and banal rhymes of the stanzaic romances such as those found in the Auchinleck manuscript, prompting the Host to cry out for release from the torture with a rounding dismissal of the pilgrim Chaucer's 'lewednesse' and 'rym dogerel':

> 'By God,' quod he, 'for pleynly, at a word,
> Thy drasty rymyng is nat worth a toord!
> Thou doost noght elles but despendest tyme.
> Sire, at o word, thou shalt no lenger ryme.'
> (Sir Thopas, end link, lines 929–32)

Chaucer also distances himself from the alliterative long line, both by means of his own practice and more directly. After Sir Thopas, the Host proposes some alternative forms for Chaucer's tale:

> 'Lat se wher thou kanst tellen aught in geeste,
> Or telle in prose somwhat, at the leeste,
> In which ther be som murthe or som doctryne.'
> (Sir Thopas, end link, lines 933–5)

'In geeste' probably refers to the alliterative metre found in, for example, the late fourteenth-century *Morte Arthure*. Faced with these alternatives, Chaucer turns to prose. Later, the Parson makes the same choice, claiming that he 'kan nat geeste "rum, ram, ruf," by lettre', but that he also disapproves of 'rym' (Parson's Prologue, lines 43–4).

John Gower emulated French and Latin models by composing his own poems in those languages. In his Latin poem the *Vox Clamantis* (*c*.1385), he borrows freely from classical works, such as Ovid's *Heroides*, combining lines and fragments of lines and adapting them to fashion his attack on the estates of society.[25] He emulated French models in two Anglo-Norman ballade sequences, the *Cinkante Ballades* (*c*.1374), and a *Traitié* for married lovers (*c*.1398), and in the *Mirour de l'Omme* (1376–8), which is part estates satire, part manual of vices and virtues.[26] Like French poets such as Guillaume de Deguileville, who transformed the allegory of the *Roman de la Rose* into pious Christian teaching, Gower adapts the forms and genres of courtly poetry, replacing secular love with religious love. The metrical regularity of his French verse, especially the octosyllabic couplets of the *Mirour*, contrasts with the freedom (or technical shortcomings, as he may have thought) of Anglo-Norman and English octosyllabics. He seems to have aimed to outdo his models by maintaining a strict

syllable count and rhyme scheme and combining them with the natural stresses of his vocabulary, as in these lines where he anticipates possible objections to his satire on the mendicant friars:

> Mais s'aucun m'en soit au travers,
> Et las sentence de mes vers
> Voldra blamer de malvuillance,
> Pour ce que je ne suy pas clers,
> Vestu de sanguin ne de pers,
> Ainz ai vestu la raye mance,
> Poy sai latin, poy sai romance,
> Mais la commune tesmoignance
> Du poeple m'ad fait tout apers
> A dire, que de fole errance
> Les clercs dont vous ay fait parlance
> Encore sont ils plus divers.
>
> (*Mirour de l'Omme*, lines 21769–80)

Gower here invokes the authority of common talk against possible objections to his verses. The two instances of 'mais' here are rather difficult to construe, suggesting that he may have inserted them to maintain the syllable count and stress patterns of the lines, demonstrating his knowledge of 'romance' 'parlance'.[27]

Gower seems to have had similar ambitions for his English verse. He was one of the last poets to use octosyllabic couplets for a lengthy English work on a serious subject. His use of this metre in the *Confessio Amantis* (*c*.1386–93) was not simply traditional, however. In the prologue he announces that his work will be innovative in two ways:

> Bot for men sein, and soth it is,
> That who that al of wisdom writ,
> It dulleth ofte a mannes wit
> To him that schal it aldai rede,
> For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
> I wolde go the middel weie
> And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
> Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore
>
> . . .
>
> And for that fewe men endite
> In oure englissh, I thenke make
> A bok for Engelondes sake,
> The yer sextenthe of kyng Richard.
>
> ('Prologue', lines 12–19, 22–5) [28]

Since books of unrelieved moral teaching are dull, he will attempt to write something that combines courtly desire ('lust') and moral teaching, and, because few have attempted serious composition in English, he will do so.

Like the works of Chaucer and Gower, *Piers Plowman* has a complex relation with Latin, French and English poetry. Structured as a series of visions in which the dreamer, Will, progresses uncertainly towards knowledge of how to save his soul, the poem is everywhere informed by the architecture and devices of the French allegorical love vision in its moralised iterations. Early in the poem the dreamer is 'ravysshed' by a vision of a lady:

> I loked on my left half as the Lady me taughte,
> And was war of a womman wonderliche yclothed–
> Purfiled with pelure, the pureste on erthe,
> Ycorouned with a coroune, the Kyng hath noon bettre.
> Fetisliche hire fyngres were fretted with gold wyr,
> And thereon rede rubies as rede as any gleede,
> And diamaundes of derrest pris and double manere saphires,
> Orientals and ewages envenymes to destroye.
> Hir robe was ful riche, of reed scarlet engreyned,
> With ribanes of reed gold and of riche stones. (II.7–16)[29]

Will's vision of the lady is informed by the tropes of love poetry – the superlatives and the medicinal stones recalling 'Annot and John' – but his enticement by this vision is immediately exposed as sinful by Holy Church. The vision of the lady is Holy Church's response to his request to be taught 'by som craft to knowe the false' (line 4) and the lovely lady is her example of 'mede', the bribery and corruption which lead men away from her.

Langland is also aware of Latin poetic models. Later in the poem Will's curmudgeonly guide Anima complains of a collapse of moral and intellectual standards in society, including education:

> Grammer, the ground of al, bigileth now children:
> For is noon of thise newe clerkes – whoso nymeth hede –
> That kan versifye faire ne formaliche enditen,
> Ne naught oon among an hundred that an auctour kan construwe,
> Ne rede a lettre in any langage but in Latyn or in Englissh. (XV.370–4)

Today's educated people ('newe clerkes') fail to teach children to read Latin, and themselves are unlearned in the crafts of versifying and formal composition, while (it is implied) fewer than one in a hundred can construe in French.

Although *Piers Plowman* is suffused with the vocabulary and tropes of French love vision poetry, the metre of the poem is not in the tradition of

rhymed syllabic verse. Langland's choice is the alliterative long line, the metre described by Chaucer's Parson as 'rum, ram, ruf'. The basic unit is the line; it may comprise any number of syllables, and does not rhyme, but it must have two halves, each with at least one stressed syllable, divided by a caesura and linked by alliteration, with at least two alliterating syllables in the first half and one in the second.[30] Because Old English poetry was also written in alliterative lines, much critical energy has been expended on trying to trace lines of transmission from the Old English line to the long line of the later Middle English poets. The later fourteenth- and fifteenth-century corpus has often been seen as evidence of an 'alliterative revival' which is backward-looking, conservative, provincial and associated with some kind of English nationalism. However, the origins and development of the metrical models used by the poets remain unclear.[31] I would suggest that it may be more fruitful to regard the alliterative long-line corpus as an experiment in improving English poetry that precisely parallels those conducted by the poets who opted for syllabic metres. Whereas Chaucer and Gower experimented with reproducing the technical achievements of the French poets in English, Langland seeks to find an equivalent of the 'fair versifying' of the clerks with the alliterative long line.

The speech of Peace provides a good example of how Langland's verse relates to Latin models:

> Thanne pipede Pees of poesie a note:
> '*Clarior est solito post maxima nebula phebus;*
> *Post inimicicias clarior est et amor.*
> 'After sharpest shoures,' quod Pees, 'most shene is the sonne;
> Is no weder warmer than after watry cloudes;
> Ne no love levere, ne lever frendes
> Than after werre and wo, whan love and pees ben maistres . . .'
>
> (XVIII.410–14)

Peace quotes Latin verses ('poesie') from the *Liber Parabolorum* of Alanus de Insulis (a school text), then translates the chiastic construction of the two Latin lines ('clarior . . . post . . . post . . . clarior') into two pairs of four long lines: 'after sharpest shoures . . . after watry cloudes', amplifying and transforming the comparative into a superlative, 'clarior' becoming 'sharpest' and 'Clarior est . . . amor', being rendered 'no love levere, ne lever frendes'. So skilful is Langland's adaptation of Latin material in the alliterative metre that we are only now coming to recognise that many of his lines in fact have Latin sources.[32] Elsewhere, Langland brings Latin models in relation to English poetry by incorporating snippets of Latin into the metrical pattern and even

the syntax of the English lines, as in this example from Peace's speech a little earlier in passus XVIII:

> 'Love, that is my lemman, swiche lettres me sente
> That Mercy, my suster, and I mankynde sholde save,
> And that God hath forgyve and graunted me, Pees, and Mercy
> To be mannes meynpernour for everemoore after.
> Lo, here the patente!' quod Pees, '*In pace in idipsum*,
> And that this dede shal dure, *dormiam et requiescam*.' (XVIII.181–6)

Here a line from a psalm (Psalms 4:9) serves as the second halves of two alliterative long lines, the words of the psalm becoming the title of the letters that authorise Peace and Mercy to save mankind.[33] Langland incorporates material from Latin texts and uses them as if they were English.

Langland's poetic art occupies an edgy, uneasy position between vernacular, secular models and discourses endorsed by the Church. The energetic disciplines of Langland's poetry are pointed up by the negative example of the figure of Sloth. Awakened from a sound sleep by Repentance, Sloth confesses that he is familiar with secular narratives ('rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre', V.396) but not with religious poetry. He cannot read saints' lives, nor texts of canon law, nor construe the Psalms and teach them to his parishioners (V.416–22). Yet Langland does not align his poetry with the models of composition endorsed by the Church. In a famous passage, 'Imaginatyf' castigates the Dreamer for wasting time 'meddling' with 'makynges' when he could be saying prayers:

> 'And David in the Sauter seith, of swiche that loveth Jesus,
> "*Virga tua et baculus tuus, ipsa me consolata sunt*:
> Although thow strike me with thi staf, with stikke or with yerde,
> It is but murthe as for me to amende my soule."
> And thow medlest thee with makynges – and myghtest go seye thi Sauter,
> And bidde for hem that yyveth thee breed; for ther are bokes ynowe
> To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe,
> And prechours to preve what it is, of manye a peire freres.' (XII.13–19)

Will excuses his 'making' (a 'maker' being a much humbler figure than a 'poet') as a kind of solace (XII.22). Langland translates 'virga tua' with 'thi staf', and it is tempting to think that he cites this psalter verse because he is concerned about the part played by the 'staves' of the English alliterative line in the salvation of souls.[34]

The interest in metrical experiment that we have observed in all three poets is associated with a wider concern to 'improve' English as a vehicle for

composition. Vocabulary was considered to be one area for improvement. Attempts to translate texts of learning into English were often made in the medium of prose. The great prose translation projects of the period include the Wycliffite Bible, the *Brut*, Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and John Trevisa's translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*. Poets contributed to this project, their metrical models and ambitions presenting them with particularly challenging problems to solve. Chaucer meets the challenges of 'scarcity of rhyme' in English by drawing on Latinate vocabulary that had come into English through French. For example, one of the rhymes in the first ballade of the 'Complaint of Venus' is on words with the suffix '-aunce': 'pleasaunce', 'remembraunce', 'governaunce', 'avaunce', 'suffisaunce', 'contenaunce'. The alliterative poet required a wide range of synonyms to alliterate on different sounds. For example, Langland deploys several synonyms for 'knight' in the passage where Christ is imagined as a knight jousting when he has his side pierced by Longeus. Christ is referred to as 'prikiere' (xviii.25), 'knyght and kynges sone' (xviii.76), and 'champion chivaler, chief knyght' (xviii.99), and Longeus is referred to as 'knyght' (xviii.78) and 'blynde bacheler' (xviii.85).

Chaucer and Gower both distance themselves from the vocabulary associated with English syllabic verse. Chaucer registers disdain for vocabulary such as 'derne', 'gent', 'hende' and 'lemman' by allocating such terms to lower-class and morally repugnant characters.[35] For example, the pretentious and love-lorn parish clerk Absolon calls to Alison, 'Lemman, thy grace, and sweete bryd, thyn oore!' (Miller's Tale, line 3726), only to be rewarded with a kiss that is decidedly discourteous. In Sir Thopas, Chaucer parodies the formulas of stanzaic romance, the conventional 'Listen, lords!' opening line becoming increasingly absurd until it reaches its final iteration, 'Now holde youre mouth, *par charitee*' (Sir Thopas, line 891). John Burrow proposes that Gower similarly tries to exclude such vocabulary from his English verse, though not in as thorough a way as Chaucer.[36] Langland does not exclude such vocabulary from his lexis, though he does insist on adapting it to his moral and religious purposes. Holy Church accuses Lady Meed, for example, of having spoken ill of 'Leautee', her (Holy Church's) 'lemman' (ii.21).

All three poets experiment with lexical sets associated with learned discourses. In the tale of Nactanabus, a story of a king who passes off sorcery as prophecy, Gower adds colour to his sources by describing how the king makes use of his 'Astellabre' (Book 6, line 1890, 'astrolabe'):

> He loketh his equacions
> And ek the constellacions,

He loketh the conjunccions,
He loketh the recepcions,
His signe, his houre, his ascendent,
And drawth fortune of his assent . . .
(Book 6, lines 1959–64)[37]

The specialised astrological terms used here are echoed by the description of the scientific paraphernalia to be found in the room of Chaucer's trickster Nicholas:

His Almageste, and bookes grete and smale,
His astrelabie, longynge for his art,
His augrym stones layen faire apart . . .
(Miller's Tale, lines 3208–10)

If Chaucer and Gower call such learned discourse under suspicion, even as they demonstrate that it can be used in English poetry, Langland's Dame Study leaves Will in no doubt about the deceiving properties of 'Astronomye', 'Geometry and Geomesie', 'sorcerie', and 'Alkenamye' (x.207–12):

'Alle thise sciences I myself sotilede and ordeynede,
Founded hem formest folk to deceyve.' (x.214–15)

Langland's diction positions his verse in relation both to Latin clerical discourses and to other late fourteenth-century alliterative poems. The poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example, displays a dazzling command of the specialised vocabularies associated with polite living, deploying lexical sets associated with the arts of peace and war, such as hunting, armour, feasting and polite conversation. In many cases he draws on French-derived words, but he also uses other sources of vocabulary, such as Scandinavian topographical terms. As we have seen with the examples of the descriptions of Meed as a courtly lady and Christ as a knight, Langland redeploys 'courtly' vocabulary – whether fashionable or not – within an insistently moral and religious framework, and although he experiments with vernacularising clerical discourse, these specialised vocabularies remain problematic for him.

While ambitious poets might strive to improve the metres and vocabulary of English poetry, there was rather less that they could do about the problems of dialectal variety and scribal practice that threatened the comprehension, transmission and preservation of their works. *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer's most sustained investigation of the enticing yet unstable properties of love, finishes with Chaucer's famous lament about those same properties in the English language:

And for ther is so gret diversite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge . . .

(*Troilus and Criseyde*, v.1793–6)

There is some evidence, however, that later fourteenth-century poetry was associated with the first attempts to remedy the situation. Chaucer's characteristic spellings seem to have been preserved by scribes, even when different and increasingly standardised usages were becoming the norm in official and legal documents. This suggests that Chaucer's characteristic spellings had developed some kind of authority, and that early scribes applied a notion of 'correctness' when copying his works.[38] Something similar is observable in the early manuscripts of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Gower's idiolect is distinctive, including some elements typical of Kent and some of Suffolk.[39] Manuscripts of the *Confessio* seem to have been produced to a standard format, and scribes respected Gower's characteristic spellings and morphology.[40] By contrast, the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* are extremely diverse in format, readings and language. However, similar processes appear to have been at work. There are scribal corrections in the manuscripts, collation of various manuscripts to establish the text and scribal repair of faulty alliteration, while an 'editor' may have contributed to the production of the C-version of the poem.[41]

Even as new production processes and standards were being developed for the making of books of the new English poetry, great resource was being invested in the production of manuscripts of traditional verse. The example par excellence is the Vernon manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. poet.a.1, a huge collection of edifying material, most of it Middle English verse, made for the benefit of pious lay readers in the final decade of the fourteenth century.[42] This manuscript includes saints' legends, homilies, exempla, prayers and devotional lyrics, biblical story, miracles and the A-version of *Piers Plowman* (the version that lacks the theologically troubling later sequences), but no Chaucer or Gower or other contemporary art poetry. Yet it was made no more than a decade, perhaps less, before the earliest surviving manuscripts of Chaucer and Gower were produced, and its physical magnificence and high standards of production testify to the investment of huge resources of time and funds in its making. Viewing this project, as its date requires us to do, alongside the poetic experiments of Chaucer, Gower and Langland, it appears as an alternative contribution to the improvement of English poetry. It brings together a vast quantity of material, comprising a

huge resource of traditional Middle English poetry and translated material whose purposes were to transmit clerical instruction to the laity.

All of these projects are implicitly informed by awareness, not only of the vernacular's opportunities as a medium for serious poetry, but also of its dangers. With the calls of John Wyclif, convicted of heresy in 1382, and his followers the Lollards (or Wycliffites) for access to the Bible in English and their questioning of clerical textual practices, English lost its status as a medium that could communicate largely as the authorities chose, and became palpably a medium that could foment heresy and insurrection – perhaps, authorities feared, on the scale of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.[43] Wycliffite literature and the approach to traditional English verse in the Vernon manuscript are two poles with which the experiments of Chaucer, Gower and Langland are in tension. The Wycliffites sought to improve English by developing a vernacular prose capable of giving unmediated access to scripture, rejecting what they saw as the misleading traditions of vernacular verse narrative. The Vernon manuscript offered a massive corpus of material in precisely that tradition of vernacular poetry as a resource for the transmission of clerical learning to the 'lewed'.[44] The edgy stylistic choices of Chaucer, Gower and Langland, are all, in their own ways, experiments in making a new future for English poetry.

All three poets immediately attracted imitators. *Piers Plowman* was imitated in a number of alliterative works on religious and political topics.[45] Chaucer was imitated by Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate, both of whom explicitly emulated their predecessor and lamented their shortcomings in comparison to their master. In the Prologue to his *Siege of Thebes* Lydgate imitates the opening of *The Canterbury Tales* and represents himself as another of the pilgrims called upon to tell a tale.[46] In his *Regiment of Princes*, Hoccleve pays tribute to Chaucer, praising him for embellishing the English language and claiming to have received guidance from him:

> 'But weleway, so ys myn hert wo,
> That the honour of Englyssch tong is deed,
> Of which I wont was han consail and reed.
> 'O mayster dere and fadir reuerent,
> My mayster Chaucer, flour of eloquence . . .'
>
> (lines 1958–62)[47]

Death may have slain Chaucer, but his books live on; Gower, likewise his 'master', is also dead ('Hastow nouȝt eeke my mayster Gower slayn, / Whos vertu I am insufficient / For to descryue?', lines 1970–7).

This is the beginning of a tradition of understanding of Chaucer's and Gower's importance that continued in the fifteenth century and over

succeeding centuries.[48] Gower's reputation rested in part on Chaucer's dedication of *Troilus* to him, and in part on his own efforts to establish a reputation.[49] In the case of Langland, we cannot seek for tributes to a named poet, for it is not until the sixteenth century that we find John Bale referring to a William (or Robert) Langland, while Spenser still refers to the poet only as 'the Pilgrim that the Ploughman playde a whyle'.[50] The extent to which the numerous ploughman texts of the sixteenth century are tributes to the poem, and the meanings and circulation of the poem before its first printing by Robert Crowley in the mid sixteenth century, are matters of some debate.[51] The systematic study of the reception of the poem after Crowley is only just beginning.[52] The impact of *Piers Plowman* is one chapter in the history of English poetry which remains to be written.

Notes

1. See Dryden's 'Fables Ancient and Modern' (preface), in *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 528; George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), Book 1, chapter 31, p. 60.
2. Helen Cooper, '600 Years Dead: Chaucer's Deserved Reputation as "the Father of English Poetry"', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 October 2000. Works in the tradition of New Criticism include J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the 'Gawain' Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971) and Charles Muscatine, *Poetry and Crisis in the Age of Chaucer* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1972). Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (eds.), *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006) challenges the paradigm.
3. Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 12–13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 360.
5. Michael Hanly, 'Courtiers and Poets: An International Network of Literary Exchange in Late Fourteenth-Century Italy, France, and England', *Viator*, 28 (1997), pp. 305–32.
6. *The Riverside Chaucer* ed. L. D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 884 (note by Warren S. Ginsberg). All citations of Chaucer's works in this chapter refer to this edition.
7. Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bio-bibliography* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1997), pp. 32–3.
8. Hanly, 'Courtiers and Poets', p. 332.
9. Manfred Görlach, *The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, n.s. 6 (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1974), p. 38; R. Holt (ed.), *The Ormulum with the Notes and Glossary of R. M. White*, 2 vols.

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878); Saara Nevanlinna (ed.), *The Northern Homily Cycle: The Expanded Version in MSS Harley 4196 and Cotton Tiberius E vii* (Helsinki: Société Néophilologique, 1972), Part 1, pp. 124–7; John J. Thompson, *The Cursor Mundi: Poem, Texts and Contexts*, Medium Ævum Monographs, n.s. 19 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1998).

10. Robert Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Idelle Sullens, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Binhampton, NY: Binhampton University Press, 1983); Robert E. Lewis and Angus McIntosh, *A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of the Prick of Conscience*, Medium Ævum Monographs, n.s. 12 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 1982).
11. Judith Weiss and Rosamund Allen (eds.), *Wace and Lawman: The Life of King Arthur* (London: J. M. Dent, 1997), p. xxxiv; Robert Mannyng, *The Chronicle*, ed. Idelle Sullens, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Binhampton, NY: Binhampton University Press, 1996).
12. London, British Library, Harley MS 978, fol. 11v.
13. Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
14. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. Eric Stanley, second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), line 1756. For the date see Neil Cartlidge, 'The Date of the *Owl and the Nightingale*', *Medium Ævum*, 63 (1996), pp. 230–47.
15. *The Harley Lyrics*, ed. G. L. Brook, fourth edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), pp. 31–2, lines 28–30; my punctuation; I translate: 'Her name is in a note [song-sound] of the nightingale: in "a note" is her name – do not speak it! Whoever reads [the line] correctly, whisper [the answer] to John.'
16. Carter Revard, 'Scribe and Provenance', in Susanna Fein (ed.), *Studies in the Harley Manuscript: The Scribes, Contents, and Social Contexts of British Library MS Harley 2253* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2000), pp. 21–109.
17. Frances McSparran, 'The Language of the English Poems: The Harley Scribe and his Exemplars', in Fein (ed.), *Studies in the Harley Manuscript*, pp. 391–426.
18. *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, ed. David Burnley and Alison Wiggins, National Library of Scotland, 2003, version 1.2. www.nls.uk/auchinleck/, accessed 26 March 2008.
19. *Ibid*. www.nls.uk/auchinleck/editorial/history.html.
20. Thompson, *The Cursor Mundi*, pp. 50–6.
21. For transcriptions see *Wessex Parallel WebTexts*, ed. Bella Millett, English, School of Humanities, University of Southampton www.soton.ac.uk/~wpwt/mouvance/melyric/MElyric.htm, accessed 26 March 2008.
22. R. W. Burchfield, 'The Language and Orthography of the *Ormulum* MS', *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 55 (1956), pp. 56–87 (p. 69).
23. Norman Davis, 'Versification', in Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. xxxviii- xli.
24. Cf. Wendy Scase, 'The English Background', in Steve Ellis (ed.), *Chaucer: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 275ff.
25. R. F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 48–60.

26. *The Complete Works of John Gower: The French Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899).
27. 'If anyone is in dispute with me and would accuse my verse of malevolence, because I am not a cleric dressed in red or purple, but I am dressed in striped sleeves, and I know little Latin and little French, rather, the common testimony of the people has made me say everything openly which is that, concerning the foolish error of the clergy of which I have discoursed to you, they are more perverse than I have said.' Macaulay could find only about twenty lines in all of Gower's work which were not metrically correct (*ibid*., p. xliv).
28. *The Complete Works of John Gower: The English Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901). Some MSS have a dedication to Richard instead of 'A bok for Engelondes sake'.
29. All quotations from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, new edition (London: J. M. Dent, 1987).
30. See the summary of types of line, *ibid*., pp. 359–60.
31. See Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Alliterative Revival* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1977), David Lawton (ed.), *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982) and Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). Recent challenges to the revival narrative include Ralph Hanna, 'Alliterative Poetry', in David Wallace (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 488–512.
32. Traugott Lawlor, 'Langland Translating', paper presented at the Fourth International Conference for the Study of *Piers Plowman*, University of Pennsylvania, 17–19 May 2007.
33. For analysis of Langland's macaronic verse see A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), pp. 93–102.
34. *Middle English Dictionary*, *staf* (n.) 2(b) 'a line of verse'. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/, accessed 10 April 2008.
35. E. T. Donaldson, *Speaking of Chaucer* (London: Athlone, 1970), pp. 13–29.
36. John Burrow, 'Gower's Poetic Styles', in Siân Echard (ed.), *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 239–50 (pp. 243–5).
37. Macaulay (ed.), *The Complete Works of John Gower: The English Works* (p. 520) notes that 'the astrological terms in these lines are due to Gower'.
38. Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 16–35.
39. Jeremy J. Smith, 'John Gower and London English', in Echard (ed.), *A Companion to Gower*, pp. 61–72 (pp. 62–3).
40. Derek Pearsall, 'The Manuscripts and Illustrations of Gower's Work', in Echard (ed.), *A Companion to Gower*, pp. 73–97 (p. 80); J. J. Smith, 'Linguistic Features of Some Fifteenth-Century English Manuscripts', in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1983), pp. 104–12.

41. Wendy Scase, 'Two *Piers Plowman* C-Text Interpolations: Evidence for a Second Textual Tradition', *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 34 (1987), pp. 456–63; *Piers Plowman: The C Version*, ed. George Kane and George Russell (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 83.
42. *The Vernon Manuscript: A Digital Facsimile Edition*, ed. Wendy Scase (Oxford: Bodleian Library, forthcoming).
43. Margaret Aston, 'Lollardy and Sedition, 1381–1431' (1960), reprinted in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon, 1984), pp. 1–48, and 'Wyclif and the Vernacular' (1987), reprinted in *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350–1600* (London: Hambledon, 1993), pp. 27–72; Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 390–445.
44. Cf. N. F. Blake, 'The Vernon Manuscript: Its Contents and Organisation', in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *Studies in the Vernon Manuscript* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), pp. 45–59 (pp. 58–9).
45. Helen Barr (ed.), *The Piers Plowman Tradition* (London: J. M. Dent, 1993).
46. *Lydgate's Siege of Thebes*, ed. Axel Erdmann and Eilert Ekwall, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, extra series 108, 125 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911, 1930).
47. M. C. Seymour (ed.), *Selections from Hoccleve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).
48. Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1925).
49. Derek Pearsall, 'The Gower Tradition', in A. J. Minnis (ed.), *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 179–97.
50. Anne Middleton, 'Introduction: The Critical Heritage', in J. A. Alford (ed.), *A Companion to Piers Plowman* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 1–25 (p. 6).
51. Anne Hudson, 'Epilogue: The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*', in Alford (ed.), *A Companion to Piers Plowman* , pp. 251–66.
52. Sarah A. Kelen, *Langland's Early Modern Identities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) demonstrates the rich materials available for study of this area.

Chapter 4

Langland: *Piers Plowman*

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In 1550 *The Vision of Piers Plowman* was published (without author's name) by the Protestant printer and controversialist Robert Crowley, and reprinted twice in the same year. Langland's great poem had previously been known only in manuscript copies, and as a product of a non-courtly tradition never interested William Caxton, who printed the works of Chaucer, Gower and Malory (1478; 1483; 1485). The first literary critics to notice it were William Webbe (1586), who thought the poet's 'dooinges . . . somewhat harshe and obscure' but judged him 'a very pithy writer' and George Puttenham (1589), who found his 'termes . . . hard and obscure', offering 'litle pleasure'.[1] Though read by Spenser, Marlowe and possibly Shakespeare, *Piers Plowman* sank from sight until Thomas Warton's *History of English Poetry* (1774–81). Warton found the poet's 'extremely perplexed' manner such as to 'disgust the reader with obscurities' but ascribed to the 'imposed constraint' of the alliterative metre his 'constant and necessary departure from the natural and obvious forms of expression'.[2] The poem's arresting first lines, which Warton quotes, hardly bear this out, however; and though Langland is not as linguistically accessible as Chaucer or Gower, his 'terms' will hardly seem 'hard' by comparison with the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

If Langland's poetry is 'difficult', this is due not to his language but his thought, his disconcertingly labile use of allegory and his unexpected and (at times) startling imagery, which contrasts strongly with the 'illustrative' mode typical of medieval writing. In his famous description of divine love (B-version, Passus I.148–58), heterogeneous conceits tumble forth, catching the light of semi-understanding before rolling into the shadow of semi-mystery. Love is a medicine, a spice, the plant of peace, the most precious virtue; heavy, it falls out of heaven, but after 'eating' earth grows light as a lime-tree leaf; it is easy to carry but sharp enough to penetrate chinks in armour or the walls of a fortified city. Langland's 'obscurity' here derives from the 'medling' or 'mingling' in his poetic figures of natural associations and learned tropes from patristic writings on the Incarnation:[3]

For hevene myghte nat holden it, so was it hevy of hymselve,
Til it hadde of the erthe eten his fille.
And whan it hadde of this fold [ground] flesh and blood taken,
Was nevere leef upon lynde lighter therafter,
And portatif [portable] and persaunt [piercing] as the point of a nedle,
That myghte non armure it lette ne none heighe walles (I.153–8)[4]

In some ways, this condensed and elliptical writing anticipates King Lear's tirade against corruption in law:

Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold,
And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.
(*King Lear*, 4.6.164–7)[5]

But whether or not Shakespeare is directly echoing Langland,[6] what they share is an imaginative excitement generated from the rapid juxtaposition of contraries. Shakespeare sees the wealthy man in fine attire as impregnable to the force of Justice, while a poor man in coarse clothes is exposed to the smallest accusation; of two opponents armed for jousting, one is protected by gilt armour, the other vulnerable in rags. His bold opposition of poor and wealthy criminal (both personified by one word, 'sin') discloses to analysis that *gilt* armour connotes 'bribery', and 'plate' collocated with 'gold' suggests 'gold plate' as well as 'gilt plating', an object of monetary more than symbolic value. The metaphoric tension between justice's lance and the 'pigmy's straw' is higher than that between rags and furs, but recalls the tension between Langland's 'needle' (a little thing like the straw) and 'armour' / 'high walls'. While both writers' images are electric with paradox, the medieval poet's figures have a further theological dimension; starting as literal, they pass into the wholly figurative, soliciting the reader's attentive interest. We are made to think how a material needle that could slip between the narrow openings in armour could never penetrate bonded masonry; yet the divine power of love can 'pierce' man's soul, however strongly defended. Despite evident differences, both poets offer not 'What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'[7] but 'What (if e'er thought) was ne'er at all expressed'.

One might reasonably wonder why the extraordinary qualities of Langland's poetry drew little comment from its early students. Thomas Whitaker, who edited the C-text of *Piers Plowman* in 1813, and Thomas Wright, whose edition of the B-text appeared in 1848, were antiquarian scholars interested in the poem especially as a document of medieval history

and culture. Walter Skeat, who first edited the A, B and C versions, had the prime task of glossing and explaining rather than analysing its poetic qualities, which he profoundly admired (Skeat knew much of the poem by heart). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was the poem's moral and religious 'message' that attracted most attention, and only as late as 1936 did C. S. Lewis recognise as 'truly exceptional about Langland . . . the kind, and the degree, of his poetic imagination', an 'intellectual imagination' that displayed (as in the 'Incarnation' passage) a 'power of rendering imaginable what before was only intelligible' unsurpassed even by Dante.[8] Less perceptive, however, is the same critic's assertion that Langland lacks Chaucer's variety and 'fine sense of language'.[9] Only Shakespeare among English poets does possess such variety; but properly to appreciate Langland's language we should relate him not to the lyric tradition that runs from Chaucer to Tennyson but to that of more dramatic poets like Wyatt, Donne, Browning and Hopkins. For, while not aiming at smoothness of versification and elegance of diction, Langland pursued his own kind of 'fineness'. This is evident in the way he controls the timbre of his lexis, varies the pace of his pausing alliterative line and exploits enjambment and deferred stress to create his distinctive union of metrical tension and speech-like immediacy.

What Langland's poetry does not display is Chaucer's 'divine fluidity of movement',[10] which appears to be what Lewis understood by 'fineness':

> And as the newe abaysed [suddenly frightened] nyghtyngale,
> That stynteth [ceases] first whan she bygynneth to synge,
> Whan that she hereth any herde tale [shepherd speak],
> Or in the hegges any wyght stirynge
> And after siker doth [makes] hire vois out rynge,
> Right so Criseyde, whan hire drede stente [ceased],
> Opned hire herte and tolde hym hire entente.[11]

Here, alliterating the iambically accented words enhances the pentameter line's fluid movement, while a similar melodic purpose motivates the assonantal -'yn'- patterning in lines 2 and 3, and the deferred full and 'rich' rhymes ('wyght' in line 4 with 'nyght' in line 1; 'herte' in line 7 with 'herde' in line 3), features that operate in concert with the three feminine end-rhymes. Chaucer's rhyme-royal stanza combines lexical amplitude with metrical ease to foster a leisurely expansiveness of syntax, enfolding sub-clause within clause ('That . . . Whan that . . . And after . . . whan'), while postponing the main verb so as not to lessen the conclusive force of the final assonating 'Opned . . . tolde'.

Whereas Chaucer's verse is 'fine' in the precise sense of 'possessing courtly refinement and elegance', Langland's staple manner exemplifies a

proto-Shakespearean preference for 'working' the semantic force of non-lexical words, as in the passage describing Haukin the Waferer's lechery in Passus XIII (a powerful contrast with that on divine love discussed earlier):

> For ech a maide that he mette, he made hire a signe
> Semynge to synneward, and somtyme he gan taste
> Aboute the mouth or bynethe bigynneth to grope,
> Til eitheres wille wexeth kene [sharp], and to the werke yeden,
> As wel fasting dayes and Fridaies and forboden [prohibited] nyghtes,
> And as lef in Lente as out of Lente, alle tymes yliche –
> Swiche werkes with hem were nevere out of seson –
> Til thei myghte na moore . . . (B XIII.345–52)

Read slowly and with expression, this evidences a sense of language different from Chaucer's but equally fine, without which Langland could not count as the 'very great poet' Lewis calls him.[12] Unlike Chaucer's, Langland's melodic patterns, illustrated in his favourite device of pararhyme joining 'maide' to 'made', 'Semynge' to 'somtyme' and 'wille' to 'wel', are functionally secondary. For his verse (like Shakespeare's) is fundamentally dramatic, driving across the line-ends to a combined syntactico-semantic climax in 'myghte na moore'. Although only two verses run over, their impetus suggests an actor speaking to an audience; for Langlandian 'fineness' relates essentially to a movement of feeling that parallels the movement of thought. This is borne out by the need for complex editorial punctuation (as in the dash in the penultimate line) to bring out the colloquial naturalness of the writing.

Lewis is right about Langland's 'intellectual imagination' but mistaken that this is attained 'by thought rather than by sense' (here meaning 'sensuousness').[13] For in the variety of Langland's poetry illustrated here – and he has more 'variety' than Lewis allows – the most important aspect is not the visual but, as often in Donne, the 'kinetic'. The man and woman's sexual agitation is brilliantly evoked through a verse-mimesis of the stages by which 'eitheres wille wexeth kene': without specifying Haukin's 'signe', the poet implies its lascivious character by chiming the word with 'synne' in a glide of sibilants across the first and second lines. But Langland's melodic assonantal pattern, as deliberate as that formed by pararhyme, remains secondary to the alliteratively linked stress-pattern seen in -'tyme' and 'taste' (the latter verb run on with the assonating 'aboute' and 'mouth'). This last pattern repeats with mounting intensity in 'bigynneth to grope', a phrase marking the penultimate stage of the inevitable act of coition, with -'gynneth' now ironically rhyme-echoing 'synne'. At the end, the 'melodic' pattern of liquid consonants in 'And as *l*ef in *L*ente as out of *L*ente, alle tymes y*l*iche' is unexpectedly subordinated

to the dramatic pattern (here coinciding with metrical accents) formed by the non-lexical vowel-staves 'in' and 'out' of the a-verse and the key-stave 'alle' in the b-verse. In the muscular deliberateness of such typical Langlandian lines, every word, whether lexical or grammatical, is made to pull its weight.

Three critics in 1962 turned from considering Langland's structure, themes and religious thought towards the details of his poetic achievement. Elizabeth Salter devoted a long chapter to his 'Art'; John Lawlor illuminated his imagery; and Nevill Coghill showed how Langland manipulated Latin and English lexical elements to generate the 'sublimity' Lewis had recognised but not analysed.[14] These studies began to answer the criticism that Langland 'hardly makes his poetry into a poem'. [15] That even specialists continued to suspect this might be true is clear from a revealing correlative admission nearly thirty years later (by a pupil of Lewis's sensitive to Langland's verbal and phrasal repetition) that he has 'long passages of sense – excellence of matter and meaning – which only rarely deviate into poetry'.[16] But as 'New Criticism' lit up the dusky vaults of medieval poetry, a bright beam directed by John Burrow upon the Second Vision in 1965 revealed Langland's capacity to achieve locally an 'Aristotelean' unity akin to Chaucer's or the *Gawain*-poet's.[17] In the same year P. M. Kean explored the allusive depths of the 'Incarnation' passage in her essay 'Langland on the Incarnation'; and the mode of analysis pioneered in R. E. Kaske's 1951 essay on the poet's figurative expressions[18] received fruitful development in Ben Smith's full-length study of his images of charity.[19]

Interest in Langland's poetry did not completely ebb as a new wave of interest in his content and context surged up.[20] Two decades after the last study mentioned, 'Langland's poetic art' found a champion[21]; and the thematic and structural significance of the poet's word-play received detailed scrutiny two years later from M. C. Davlin (1989).[22] But while growing scholarly enthusiasm was signalled by the publication of the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* (1989), that journal's twenty-two volumes to date contain only a handful of articles on metre or metaphor, and almost none on poetic language. The importance of all three aspects is certainly presupposed by the methods and aims of modern editors. But while the latter may be thought to have a vested interest in Langland's artistic excellence, other specialists have maintained that he suffered from a 'compulsion to tinker'[23] or 'felt uncompelled to ensure the accuracy of his text' but 'placed his credence in a copyist, whose work he shows no sign of having supervised and corrected'.[24] As Chaucer's 'Wordes' to his own scribe bear out, medieval poets were obliged to endure copyists' failure to reproduce their texts faithfully. But to go by Langland's tart

comments on miscopied legal documents, he must have wanted *his* scribes to 'write trewe' after his 'makynge'[25] and protested if they 'parcelles overskip-ped' or 'ma[de] any defaute' (XI.305–8) in his meaning and metre 'witynge and wilfully' (XIX.374). This 'maker' took his art seriously enough to defend it (with subtle obliquity) against Imaginatif's attacks in Passus XII (lines 22, 27), where his dream-persona Will calls 'makynge' both his 'solace' and his 'work'.[26]

If *Piers Plowman* really contains 'a wider variety of fine poetry than any other work from the English Middle Ages',[27] its failure to occupy as central a place in our literature as *Troilus* or *Sir Gawain* may be due in part to its indeterminate genre. Religious poetry that is also satire is a potentially indigestible mix, since satire arises out of (and seeks to arouse) contempt, disgust and hatred of its object, while Christian writing leans towards love and forgiveness. But arguably the strong tension between these emotional poles may account for some of the poem's unique power. Modern readers also find difficult its troubled preoccupation with justice and mercy, knowledge and salvation, a preoccupation concentrated in the Third Vision (Passus VIII–XIV).[28] Earlier scholars from Skeat to Bennett accordingly limited their student editions to the first two visions, forming the so-called '*Visio*'. But while this opening section ends in a notoriously problematic scene, the Tearing of Truth's Pardon, it undoubtedly contains some of Langland's sharpest social satire and liveliest allegory. And here lies a third difficulty affecting the poem's appeal today. For despite the efforts of Elizabeth Salter, John Lawlor, John Burrow, David Aers and Priscilla Martin (who even formulates and answers 'Objections to Allegory'), the allegorical mode still seems to many (in Webbe's dismissive phrase) 'harshe and obscure'.[29] And since Langland dis-plays less frequently than Chaucer or the *Gawain*-poet the realism or symbol-ism preferred today (though occasionally using both), the best way to defend his work might be to challenge directly Puttenham's assertion that in poetic allegory there is 'litle pleasure'. We may start with no less an authority than the 'symbolist-realist' author of *The Waste Land*, who confronted the *general* modern 'prejudice against allegory' in his 1929 essay on Dante, claiming for this method 'very great advantages' and judging it 'not a device to enable the uninspired to write verses, but really a mental habit, which when raised to the point of genius can make a great poet'.[30] Eliot stressed further that 'Dante's attempt is to make us see what he saw' (something that realist writers, in a different way, also do) and that 'he employs . . . very few metaphors, for allegory and metaphor do not get on well together'.[31] Eliot's last point has especial relevance for readers who see in Shakespeare and the Metaphysicals

the quintessentially poetic; he argues that to appreciate Dante's greatness, we must not require great poetry to be exuberantly metaphorical.

However, compared with the *Commedia*, the supreme medieval allegory, *Piers Plowman* falls victim to a *particular* modern prejudice against which Eliot's defence of Dante cannot readily be adopted. For unlike Dante, making us 'see what he saw' is not his chief aim (notwithstanding such statements as 'Ac I shal seye as I saugh' at v 22); and this is because his method reflects a somewhat different 'mental habit'. Dante's Hell is an actual place, with a precisely realised topography, which also stands for the spiritual condition of the damned. Moreover, the occupants of the *Commedia*'s three regions are mainly human (or sometimes superhuman) beings, not personifications of abstract ideas. Dante writes mostly symbol allegory, in which his literal narratives have a symbolic meaning. But Langland, like the *Roman de la Rose* before him and Morality drama that followed him (and drew on his work), uses 'personification allegory'.[32] Meed, Hunger and Thought, though given words to speak or actions to perform, personify the abstract ideas their names denote. Their interaction with other personified figures, as R. W. Frank pointed out, is accordingly *literal* not symbolic. This is, admittedly, to simplify, for personification allegory is not Langland's exclusive mode. He produces memorable symbol allegory in his 'wilderness' with its tower on a hilltop, its second tower in a low valley and its field full of folk between them (Prologue 11–17), our interpretation of these images depending on their traditional use as symbols of Heaven, Hell and Middle-Earth. Langland also employs a 'figural allegory' related to the mode of Bible interpretation called typology, which discerned a reciprocal relationship of prefigurement and fulfilment between types and antitypes (whether events or persons or things) in the Old and New Testaments.[33] In this variety, the 'actants' or 'generators of action in any given narrative'[34] simultaneously exist on a historical level and personify concepts. Examples in Passus xvii–xviii are Abraham/Faith, Moses/*Spes* and, in a more complex way, the Samaritan/Jesus; while at xviii.10 and xix.6 Piers himself, uniquely combining literal and symbolic significations, becomes a 'retro-type'[35] of Christ, the ideal of charity that he imitates and fulfils. Symbol and personification allegory are 'medled' in Passus xiii, where Haukin as a literal Wafer-Seller can interact with a Knight, Conscience and a Pilgrim-Hermit, Patience, but as a personification of 'Active Life', with the Knight and the Pilgrim-Hermit as personifications of respectively a mental faculty and a moral virtue. More broadly, Langland's poetry reflects a 'sacramental' attitude towards the whole creation, from the four elements that make up the material world to the living creatures that fill it and the 'earthly honest things' (xix.94)

made by men.[36] All of these are able to function as vessels of religious meaning, because for Langland nature brings news of God to eyes and ears that are ready to receive it. This attitude may affront another modern prejudice if it is taken (or mistaken) as an issue of belief. But the relevant question is not whether the poem's religious ideas are objectively true so much as whether the poet enables his reader to experience what it would feel like if they *were* true. For Langland, one suspects, 'realisation' of religious truth may have been inseparably bound up with the capacity of poetry to 'realise' experience.

To a large extent, it is not the diversity of Langland's figurative methods[37] so much as his bold 'medling' of them that (like his 'medling' of religious and satirical modes) can perplex even readers who 'buy into' the Modernist *mélange* of realism and symbolism in *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses*. Such readers' perplexity may stem from inappropriate expectations based on acquaintance with Spenser or Bunyan. For *Piers Plowman* not only has a complex structure of eight dream-visions (with two further embedded 'inner' dreams) and a wide thematic range (as indicated by the Prologue's panoramic opening vision), it is also more emotionally concentrated than *The Faerie Queene* (1589–96) and more intellectually daunting than *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), both of which may be enjoyed on the literal level as stories before being interpreted as allegories. Langland requires readiness to see the allegorical mode stretched to its limits, alertness to its narrative and 'generic' surprises, and imaginative resilience to engage sympathetically with the disclosures and enigmas thrown up in a series of frustratingly inconclusive dream encounters. These encounters sometimes seem less like those of Bunyan's Pilgrim than those of Carroll's Alice: the character 'Book' may remind us of Humpty Dumpty, or Conscience's Dinner of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Langlandian allegory is both less simply constituted and less clearly organised than that of an early Morality play like *The Castle of Perseverance* (*c*.1420–5), which derives from the Prudentian *Psychomachia* tradition.[38] *Piers Plowman* at times recalls the preaching tradition in the ways it develops its major theological themes;[39] but its one formal 'sermon' (at v.13–60) is delivered by a personified Reason to 'al the reaume' (v.11), while its wider audience (like that of Death in the Morality play *Everyman* (1520)) is 'all mankind'. Moreover, as a 'medling' of moral instruction and direct speech (v. 35–40, 42–7, 49, 52–9) halfway between homily and treatise, its primary purpose is dramatic – to arouse 'repentaunce' in the 'wille' of the folk (v.60–1). Again, Holy Church's long speech (i.12–209) is a rich medley of exposition and admonition, provoked by Will's initial request for clarification of the 'mountaigne', 'merke dale' and 'feld ful of folk' (i.11),

and articulated in response to his six subsequent questions at I.45, 59–60, 73–4, 83–4, 138–9 and II.4. But while this crucial discourse offers a ground-plan for the entire poem,[40] setting the parameters for the cosmic battle between Truth and Wrong (God and the Devil) and emphasising the central importance of Christ's Incarnation, it does not presage a systematic development as does Canto I of the *Inferno* in relation to Dante's three successive *cantiche* of the world after death. For Holy Church's answer to Will's fourth question (lines 83–4), how he shall save his soul ('By pursuing Truth'), only begets a fifth question (about where Truth is to be found); and her reply to this prompts not the expected 'What *is* Truth?' but the (dramatically more promising) 'Teach me some means to recognise *the False*' (II.4).

If ever any work attempted 'by indirections' to 'find directions out', *Piers Plowman* is that work. Will's request to be *shown* 'the False' is adroitly used to effect a generic transition from religious poetry to social satire, via a thematic transition from transcendent Truth to this-worldly Reward. The connecting link between these two key ideas is that between the moral meanings of Truth and Meed. Next, since the answer Will receives comes not as words but as vision and action (Langland here aiming to make us 'see as he saw'), the poem is enabled to move back to the topical issue of political influence broached in the Prologue's Fable of the Rats and Mice. But possibly the real reason why Holy Church's answer is shown (ambiguously) and not stated (unequivocally) may be that spiritual education *has* to proceed in 'successive zig-zags' instead of following 'a straight, linear scheme'.[41] Moreover, the theological matters that now begin to be raised will sometimes be resolved not through the 'actants' reaching reasoned agreement but by one of them performing an unexpected action that propels both Dreamer and reader in another direction. When, towards the end of the Second Vision, a priest incredulously 'construes' the Pardon sent from Truth, Piers does not demand further explanation but tears the document 'atweyne' (VII.115), shunting Dreamer and reader off the direct path to Truth laid down in Piers's 'signpost-allegory' at V.560–629. The answer to Will's fourth question ('By pursuing Truth') has now become 'By doing well' because, according to Truth's Pardon, '*qui bona egerunt ibunt in vitam eternam* "Do wel" . . . and God shal haue thi soule' (VII. 110*a*, 112); but this answer only provokes him to ask 'What *is* Do-well?' (VIII.5, 13). Again, in the Fourth Vision, when the guests at Conscience's dinner become heated about this same question, Conscience's 'answer' takes the form of a curt farewell and sudden departure with Patience as his companion, 'pilgrymes as it were' (XIII.216). Finally, in the second inner dream, when Will, warned by Piers to question no more about the Trinity,

asks instead to taste the fruits of the Tree of Charity, Piers 'answers' by shaking the tree vigorously, with dramatic results: 'For evere as thei dropped adoun, the devel was redy, / And gadrede hem alle togideres' (XVI.79–80). Whereupon the poem, with another abrupt zig-zag, embarks on its dazzlingly unconventional re-telling of Christ's Passion and death, a supremely dramatic answer to the overwhelming question of evil.

Even when a Langlandian *dialogus* (the name several manuscripts give the poem), does develop, it advances asymmetrically and is not unified by the unimpassioned reciprocity of the university *disputatio* but fissured by misunderstandings, warnings or threats. An apparently naive request for necessary information may receive only a mild rebuke, as when Will asks Conscience why Jesus is called 'Christ (XIX.25–6). But in the Dreamer's encounters with friars, the intellectual elite of the day, the tone quickly grows sharp. At the opening of the Third Vision, he is informed by two Franciscans that the 'Dowell' he is seeking lives with them (i.e. is found in the mendicant way of life). But when Will 'disputes' this, using the syllogistic form of which these '*maistres freres*' (Prologue 62) are master, their response (in the form of a simple parable) draws from him a provocative disavowal of the 'natural capacity' ('kynde knowing') to comprehend it (VIII.57). In another incident, the Dreamer's 'big issue' is, why do friars hear confessions and bury the dead rather than baptise infants, devoting themselves to two potentially lucrative sacramental rites rather than to one that offers no gain but is essential for salvation? Will accuses his confessor of wanting him to agree to be buried in the convent cemetery so that he can pick up the funeral dues, and perhaps a legacy (XI.63–83). But Langland allows the friar no chance to reply; instead, he brings on the forthright Lewtee (perhaps personifying his 'ideal' audience of truth-loving men), who laughingly encourages the scowling Dreamer 'To reden it in retorik to arate dedly synne' (XI.102). This kind of narrative 'abruption' could well qualify as one of those 'dooinges' that Webbe and Puttenham found 'harshe and obscure', but (like the one at XVI.79) it undeniably generates dramatic tension. Presumably, therefore, engaging his readers' interest and emotions was as important a motive for Langland as advancing a moral and religious lesson in sweetly lucid 'termes'. His *main* purpose may even have been to show what it is like to think about salvation, not to say what to think about salvation. Or the truth may be simply that Langland understood, like the fifteenth-century Morality playwrights later, how drama could help to make learning more effectual.

Whereas the confessor incident occurs in the first inner dream, Will's 'disputation' with the Friars Minor forms one of two longer 'waking episodes'

(the other opens Passus xx). It ends with him wandering in a literal 'wildernesse' (viii.63) that corresponds to the (not quite literal) 'wildernesse' of Prologue 12 which, unlike Spenser's Wood of Error (*Faerie Queene* i.i), resembles the real English terrain of uncultivated land bordered by forest, though without precise geographical location. Yet as the Vision Two wilderness imperceptibly grows out of the more 'Dantean' wilderness of the Prologue, it transpires that Will's emerging dream encounter (with 'Thought') is designed to precipitate a passionate struggle to escape from its 'maze' (i.6) of uncertainty. The struggle, that is, will be enacted in the Dreamer's mind, as he doggedly endeavours to reason with himself. Though as yet without the 'kynde knowynge' of Dowel that he desires (viii.110), Will now declares not that he can't 'conceyve' (grasp) his interlocutor's words, but that he dislikes their 'savour' (line 109). In *this* pilgrim's progress the issue is to become less and less one of 'cognition' than of 'affect', and the learner's resistance to teaching will be seen as a product of temperament and personality even more than intellect and rational will. Will's painful struggle doesn't prove fruitless, however: it leads him to a wise instructor, 'Wit', who not only personifies the quest for moral understanding, but whose wife, Study, signifies the moral discipline of effortful desire.[42]

Will's succeeding encounters – with Fortune, Clergy, Scripture, Lewtee, Reason and Imaginatif – all occur in the poem's 'long middle', within an inner dream extending from xi.6 to xi.404. They are initiated and concluded by Latin rebukes ('harshe' but, to Will, *not* 'obscure') from Scripture and Reason respectively: '*Multi multa sciunt* . . .' ('Many know much but do not know themselves') and '*Nemo sine crimine vivit*' ('No one lives without blame'). The words '*Multi*' and '*Nemo*' 'bracket' 400 lines of deeply felt argument about whether right action is both necessary and sufficient for salvation, which (despite the case for the literary appeal of 'thinking in poetry' made by Burrow)[43] even educated medieval readers may have found hard going. However, as if anticipating the problem, Langland inserted between the two phases of this dense debate an idyllic vision of creation from the Mountain of Middle-Earth (xi.326–67). Through its intermedled 'Blisse and bale' (xi.332) gleam intimations of the Earthly Paradise, Will's report of how 'Kynde . . . nempned me by my name, and bad me nymen hede' (xi.321–2) audibly echoing God's invitation to Adam to summon the animals and name them (Genesis 2:19–20). Set almost at *Piers Plowman*'s 'sovereign mid-point',[44] it poignantly suggests 'the beginning / In Eden garden';[45] but Will's dramatic mood-change on witnessing the discrepancy between animal temperance and human excess immediately evokes 'the blight man was born for'[46] and inflames him to 'rebuke' Reason (xi. 372) for man's exile from the happy state

(his very anger a symptom of his fallenness). The heat of their exchanges only dissipates after Will abruptly awakes from his inner dream and his consciousness ascends to the containing 'outer' dream, where an unnamed 'oon' asks *him* the original question 'What is Dowel?' to which (too late) he has realised the 'affective' answer: 'To se muche and suffre moore' (XI.410). Interestingly, it is this last interlocutor of Vision Three, Imaginatif, who implies the Middle-Earth/Paradise analogy, when he compares Will's lapse from reasonableness with Adam's original fall through 'pride and presumption' (XI.421) and urges him to think of the vexed problem of evil as something more in the nature of a mystery.

Such a proposal to 'feed his mind' with 'wise passiveness' looks forward, in certain respects, to Wordsworth's.[47] But while the unstated assumptions of the theological debate must be set in their medieval context, the real originality of Langland's vision of nature should not be overlooked. What he is inviting us to consider is how the 'unreasonable' acts of 'man and his make' (XI.370) might look from the point of view of God. For the poem's creator emphatically ascribes to the Creator of nature a positive desire to see as much as can be seen and endure/tolerate more than man ever can. Reason's pregnantly punning words 'Who suffreth moore than God?' (XI.387) express in effect what Peace, one of the Four Daughters of God, will claim later in Vision Five as the breathtaking reason for the Incarnation:

> Forthi God, of his goodnesse, the firste gome [man] Adam,
> Sette hym in solace and in sovereyn murthe [supreme joy];
> And siththe he *suffred* [allowed] hym synne, sorwe to feele –
> To wite what wele was, kyndeliche [directly] to knowe it.
> And after, God auntrede [ventured] himself and took Adames kynde
> To wite what he hath suffred in thre sundry places . . . (XVIII.217–22)

There is a profound lesson in this scene for the artist as well as for the receptive reader.

If the Middle-Earth passage (XI.326–67) attempts to 'make us see what he saw', it equally exemplifies his 'rendering imaginable what before was only intelligible'. But no less striking than these forty lines' ten variants of the word 'see' (such as 'beheld', 'toke kepe') are its terms describing the effect of visionary seeing, wonder ('merveille', 'selcouthe'). For just as Peace's account of the Incarnation highlights God's 'adventurous' desire to '*know* properly' (XVIII.208) what human suffering is (where Holy Church had emphasised *love* as its chief motive), so Will's vision of Middle-Earth focuses on the two ways in which (in Geoffrey Hill's phrase) 'landscape is like revelation'.[48] These too

concern cognition and will, knowing and doing. For beholding attentively the variety and harmony that landscape 'reveals' may help man understand how to 'suffer' evil patiently; and reflecting on the behaviour of non-human creatures may assist him to work out the connection between right action and good art. Will is therefore shown to 'marvel' not only at how, after mating, the beasts 'Medled noght with hir makes' (XI.143) but also at how they 'made nestes' (line 343), displaying greater skill than 'wright' or 'mason' (lines 348–9). Langlandian nature does not foster man's moral life through beauty and fear (as in Wordsworth) but teaches him 'by ensaumples to knowe . . . Kynde . . . to lovye' (XI.324–5). Its specific lesson is that to follow reason rather than sensuality might empower Will both to overcome the *concupiscencia carnis* afflicting him at the start of his inner dream (XI.17–21) and to make (poetic composition) with a tempered mastery like that of the 'wonderful foweles' (line 328) who 'medle noght with hir makes' after mating. Such a reading of this important passage is not meant to privilege impulses from vernal woods over the moral teachings of the sages. For as Langland would have known, the Biblical sage Solomon had warned (as clearly as would Wordsworth) against the meddling intellect, and taught temperance and prudence from the ways of nature: 'Thou art ensnared with the words of thy mouth, and caught with thy own words . . . Go to the ant . . . and consider her ways, and learn wisdom . . . Which, although she hath no guide . . . provideth her meat . . . in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest' (Proverbs 6:2, 6–8). The Middle-Earth scene's serene interval near the poem's centre holds but a moment; and ironically, it is meddling intellect that alters Will's mood to vexation at discovering 'That Reson rewarded [watched over] and ruled alle beestes / *Save* man and his make' (XI.368–9). Like his counterpart the Wafer-Seller in Vision Four, whose 'cote of cristendome' (XIII.274), a metonym for his soul, will be found soiled with every vice, Will learns the hard truth of how 'hard it is . . . to lyve and to do synne'. Though seeing clearly how 'Synne seweth us evere' (XIV.322–3) he cannot yet see further, with Julian of Norwich, that though 'Synne is behovely . . . alle maner of thynge shalle be wele'.[49] Will's pastoral vision of 'fleckede fetheres of fele colours' (XI.329) appears but a fugitive consolatory recollection of paradise lost when he looks on the unseemly 'moles and spottes' that have 'bidropped' the conscience of his alter ego Haukyn (XIII.315, 321). His bright memory of 'the sonne and the see and the sond' (XI.326) brings only anguish; for paradise cannot be regained. But it may be restored, if God 'aunters' himself by taking 'Adams kynde'.

Like the protagonist in the contemporary dream-vision poem *Pearl*, Will the believer aches for lost innocence: for baptismal purity, for the Church's

pristine communal life. Will the maker, however, knows that he must rest content with 'perfection in imperfection', understanding his artistic vocation in accord with the teaching of St Gregory the Great that man grows perfect only through becoming 'spiritual in his flesh' (*carne spiritualis*).[50] If final perfection belongs to God, whose creative plan needs for its fulfilment the suffering of the individual and of mankind as a whole through the plotted course of 'Salvation History', poetry cannot (any more than history) remain unsullied by the 'foule plottes' (XIII.318) of political machination, greed, hypocrisy and lust. It must both embrace man's bodiliness and strive to liberate him from 'the body of this death' (Romans 7:24). Such a conviction produces in *Piers Plowman* at the level of both macrostructure (allegory) and microstructure (versification, word-play and metaphor), its distinctively 'medled' quality. Langland eschews an uninterruptedly high or low register, favouring a plain middle style like the Latin Bible's *sermo humilis*. But he is, above all, the great exponent of a mode that mixes tones and feelings usually kept apart by Chaucer, Gower and (if less often) the author of *Gawain* and *Pearl*. His coarsest episodes are 'flecked' with the sublime, his ostensibly heroic scenes 'moled' with racy humour.[51] This mode might be aptly called the 'medieval grotesque', if St Bernard's classic (but unfriendly) characterisation of the grotesque as *formosa deformitas* ('fair misfeature') can be thought of positively, as a kind of beauty rather than a kind of ugliness.[52]

To take an extreme example, the viscerally 'realistic' tavern scene in Passus V,[53] which seems to offer 'litle pleasure' in Puttenham's conventional sense:

> He pissed a potel in a *Paternoster*-while,
> And blew his rounde ruwet [trumpet] at his ruggebones [backbone's] ende,
> That al that herde that horne helde hir nose after
> And wished it hadde ben wexed [polished] with a wispe of firses [furze]
> (V.342–5)

Here Langland's yoking together of heterogeneous images (Glutton's pissing with the Lord's Prayer, his malodorous fart with doomsday's trumpet) by its grotesque 'medling' of discrepant experiences and ideas magnifies the drunkard's debauch to something bizarrely beautiful, rather as do the Elder Bruegel's paintings of Flemish peasant life. Another example is Will's complaint, towards the end of the poem, that old age has made him deaf, toothless and impotent:

> of the wo that I was inne my wif hadde ruthe,
> And wished wel witterly that I were in hevene.
> For the lyme [member] that she loved me fore . . .

. . .
I ne myghte in no manere maken it at hir wille.
So Elde and he[o] it hadden forbeten [enfeebled] (xx.193–8)

Satire could not get more mordant without becoming morbid; yet Langland's humour, though 'odd, grotesque and wild' is free of Swift's angry self-disgust.[54] Will may fear that his wife wishes him dead (so that she can marry someone more lusty?), yet she wants him 'in hevene', feels 'ruthe' for his 'wo'. And this collocation of high terms with harsh serves to moderate the speaker's animus, while hinting ruefully that if *he* is no longer 'hir wille', then *she* (as well as Elde) has made it so! Since for Langland, fallen 'man and his make' live necessarily against reason, man's endeavour of art can at best express yearning for what can never be regained, only recalled. So *Piers Plowman* offers neither the noble pity of Wordsworth's 'Ruined Cottage' nor the unalloyed loathing of Swift's 'Beautiful Young Nymph'; its pathos and irony, as in Hamlet's ideal of 'blood and judgement' (3.3.69), are always 'co-medled'.

Turning, finally, from the poem's grossest moments to its grandest, we find even a passage 'armed' in near-unbroken loftiness, Christ's great vindication speech at the Harrowing of Hell, admitting through a 'chink' a piercing needle-point of grotesque humour. In these soaring verses Langland's 'medled' macaronic high style generates deep theological resonances against which the high notes of the corporeal shrill out sharp.

For I that am lord of lif, love is my drynke,
And for that drynke today, I deide upon erthe.
I faught so, me thursteth yet, for mannes soule sake;
May no drynke me moiste, ne my thurst slake,
Til the vendage falle [grape-harvest take place] in the vale of Josaphat,
That I drynke right ripe must [wine from ripe grapes], *resureccio mortuorum*.
And thanne shal I come as a kyng, crouned, with aungeles,
And have out of helle alle menne soules.
Fendes and fendekynes [fiendlings] bifore me shul stande . . . (xviii.366–74)

This is an inspired elaboration of the Biblical sublime of Genesis and St John – firm, clear and nobly simple. The ritualised repetitions of 'drynke' and 'mannes soule(s)' are heightened by cross-caesural assonance and pararhyme ('today/deide'; 'falle/vale'; 'lif/love'; 'helle/alle') and a surprising end-rhyme at lines 368 to 369; the potent extended metaphor culminates at line 371 in a sonorous credal Latin gloss ('the resurrection of the dead') on the 'harsh' but not 'obscure' vernacular 'must'. Here is religious poetry that need not fear

comparison with Dante, possessing in full Arnold's 'two superiorities' of 'high poetic truth and seriousness' and 'a high poetic stamp of diction and movement'.[55] But Arnold – and it may be a measure of his limitation as a critic – would not have endured what only Langland could have done: introduce in so exalted a context the natural (but not obvious) coinage 'fendekyn'. For if 'ruthe' and 'hevene' in the passage on Will's impotence make one think of the *lacrimae rerum*, 'fendekyn' suggests a correlative *risus rerum*: a laughter on the far side of 'derknesse and drede' (XVI.85), 'deep down things',[56] assuring that all manner of things shall indeed be well.

Notes

1. It is not mentioned in Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie* (1583, printed 1595). The citations from Webbe, Puttenham and Sidney are all to be found in Gregory Smith (ed.), *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1904), vol. I, p. 242 and vol. II, p. 65.
2. Thomas Warton, *History of English Poetry* (London, 1774–81), section VIII, p. 177.
3. P. M. Kean, 'Langland on the Incarnation', *Review of English Studies*, 15 (1964), pp. 241–61.
4. All Langland quotations are from my Everyman B-text, (*The Vision of Piers Plowman*, second edition (London: Dent, 1995)).
5. *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951).
6. See Haukin's words in XIII.28: 'And fewe *robes* I fonge or *furrede gownes*'.
7. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, line 298, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: Dent, 1969), p. 65.
8. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 160.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
10. Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series*, ed. S. R. Littlewood (1888; London: Macmillan, 1958), p. 17.
11. *Troilus and Criseyde* III.1233–9, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
12. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 161.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
14. E. Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962); J. Lawlor, *Piers Plowman: An Essay in Criticism* (London: Edward Arnold 1962); N. Coghill, 'God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke: Some Notes on Langland's Kind of Poetry,' *English and Medieval Studies Presented to J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. N. Davis and C. L. Wrenn (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), reprinted in *The Collected Papers of Nevill Coghill*, ed. D. Gray (Brighton: Harvester, 1988), pp. 199–217.
15. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, p. 160.
16. A. C. Spearing, 'The Art of Preaching and *Piers Plowman*', in *Criticism and Medieval Poetry*, second edition (London: Arnold, 1972), pp. 107–34 (p. 127).

Spearing's allusion to Dryden's strictures on Shadwell (*Mac Flecknoe*, line 20) is not exactly complimentary to Langland.

17. See J. A. Burrow, 'The Action of Langland's Second Vision', *Essays in Criticism*, 15 (1965), pp. 247–68.
18. See P. M. Kean, 'Langland on the Incarnation', *Review of English Studies*, 15 (1964), pp. 241–61; R. E. Kaske, 'The Use of Simple Figures of Speech in *Piers Plowman* B', *Studies in Philology*, 48 (1951), pp. 571–600.
19. B. H. Smith, *Traditional Imagery of Charity* in *'Piers Plowman'* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966).
20. The thematic focus is prominent in James Simpson's widely used *Piers Plowman: An Introduction to the B-Text* (London: Longman, 1990), by contrast with Salter's thirty years previously.
21. A. V. C. Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker: Langland's Poetic Art* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987).
22. M. C. Davlin, *A Game of Heuene: Word Play and the Meaning of 'Piers Plowman'* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1989).
23. L. Warner, 'The Ur-B *Piers Plowman* and the Earliest Production of C and B', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 16 (2002), pp. 3–39, (p. 12).
24. R. W. Hanna, 'On the Versions of *Piers Plowman*,' in *Pursuing History: ME Manuscripts and their Texts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 203–43 (p. 226). This is incorrect. The unusually error-free state of the text of B XVI is probably due to the poet's having rubbed and scraped this portion of the (otherwise very corrupt) archetypal source of the extant B-text manuscripts. See further the discussion in my *Piers Plowman: A Parallel-Text Edition* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), p. 125.
25. 'Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn', *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 650, line 4.
26. See Schmidt, *The Clerkly Maker*, pp. 14–19.
27. E. Salter, *Piers Plowman: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 1.
28. These passus are discussed in a major recent thematic study by N. Zeeman, *'Piers Plowman' and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
29. See, as well as the article by Burrow cited in note 17, D. Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1975) and P. Martin, *Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
30. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, third edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 243.
31. *Ibid*. Eliot understands by 'metaphor' verbal tropes not large-scale structural figures.
32. It is the defence of works of this type, from the *Romance of the Rose* to *The Faerie Queene*, that C. S. Lewis undertook in *The Allegory of Love*. On the now standard distinction between the two types see R. W. Frank, 'The Art of Reading Medieval Personification-Allegory', *English Literary History*, 20 (1953), pp. 237–50.
33. *Piers Plowman*, ed. E. Salter and D. Pearsall (London: Arnold, 1967), pp. 20–8; Simpson, *Introduction*, pp. 191–200.

34. Simpson, *Introduction*, p. 14.
35. I owe this useful term to Professor Alan Deyermond.
36. A. V. C. Schmidt, *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. xxxviii-xl, and 'Elementary Images in the Samaritan Episode of *Piers Plowman*', *Essays in Criticism*, 56 (2006), pp. 303–23 (pp. 307–12).
37. Salter, *Introduction*, pp. 65–81; Aers, *Piers Plowman and Christian Allegory*, pp. 71– 109.
38. Lewis, *Allegory of Love*, pp. 66–73.
39. See Spearing, 'The Art of Preaching and *Piers Plowman*'.
40. R. E. Kaske, 'Holy Church's Speech and the Structure of *Piers Plowman*', in B. Rowland (ed.), *Chaucer and Middle English: Studies in Honour of R. H. Robbins* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), pp. 320–7.
41. J. C. Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines on Ambiguity and their Place in Langland's Poetics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), p. 140.
42. Zeeman, *'Piers Plowman'*, pp. 119–31.
43. J. A. Burrow, *Thinking in Poetry: Three Medieval Examples* (London: Birkbeck College, 1993).
44. A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 127.
45. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring', in *Poems*, ed. W. H. Gardner, third edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 71.
46. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', in *Poems*, p. 94.
47. 'Expostulation and Reply', lines 23–4, in *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. T. Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), p. 481.
48. *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, section 5, in Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 188.
49. *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1978), vol. II, p. 405.
50. See C. Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 188–9.
51. Coghill, 'God's Wenches and the Light that Spoke' pp. 199–217.
52. St Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apologia*, XII.29, in *Opera Omnia* (Patrologia Latina 182: 916A).
53. An episode remembered by his most original Tudor admirer John Skelton in *The Tunnynge of Elynour Rummynge* (1517).
54. Jonathan Swift, 'To Mr Delany', line 25, in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Pat Rogers (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
55. Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', p. 13.
56. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'God's Grandeur', in *Poems*, p. 70.

Chapter 5

Chauncer: *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*

LAURA VARNAM

In Book II of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Pandarus sets out for Criseyde's house to persuade her to reciprocate Troilus's love, the narrator declares: 'Now Janus, god of entree, thow hym gyde!'[1] Janus, the Roman god of entrances and exits, was commonly depicted with two faces, one looking forward and one looking back, an image which is suggestive of the poetic technique of Geoffrey Chaucer. He is a poet who hovers on the threshold, glancing back at the landscape of his literary forebears, but looking determinedly forward into his own poetic House of Fame. Centuries later, when William Blake painted the Canterbury Pilgrims, he placed Chaucer, 'the great poetical observer of men', at the far right of the picture enclosed in the gothic archway of the Tabard Inn, about to set forth on the road ahead of him.[2] Blake saw in *The Canterbury Tales* 'characters which compose all ages and nations'; they represented the 'physiognomies . . . of universal human life'.[3] But in the fourteenth century Chaucer was venturing into new and potentially treacherous territory. He brought together characters and genres which had not shared the same poetic space before and he stretched the linguistic potential of the vernacular to its limits. Yet his apprenticeship for his role as 'Father of English Poetry', as Dryden was famously to dub him, began with dream visions in which he used contemporary dream theory such as Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* to explore what it meant to be an English poet.[4]

In *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls* Chaucer's dreamers wander in the gardens and forests of medieval tradition. In *The Book of the Duchess* the bumbling dreamer interrogates the Man in Black's lament for his lady, raising questions about the efficacy of poetry and its role in memorialising the dead. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, the dreamer's vision of the courtly birds who do not choose a mate leaves him unsatisfied and reaching for his books in the hope that with further reading he will 'fare / The bet' (lines 698–9). But in *The House of Fame*, the aptly named 'Geoffrey' leaves the Temple of Venus

through a wicket gate only to be confronted with an arid desert, an image of poetic sterility, rather than a garden of love in the manner of the *Roman de la Rose*. The dream-vision landscape is unpredictable and bewildering, but 'Geoffrey' is saved by an eagle who transports him to the House of Fame. The vision of classical *auctours* like caryatids bearing up the fame of the great story matters is no consolation to the dreamer poet, however. 'No wight', he declares, shall 'have my name in honde / I wot myself best how y stonde' (lines 1877–8), and he abandons the House of Fame with its arbitrary goddess and put-upon poets for the dynamism and energy of the House of Rumour. Never still, the House of Rumour spins 'as swyft as thought' (line 1924) and has 'of entrees as fele as of leves ben in trees' (lines 1945–6). The House of Rumour reflects Chaucer's mature poetics in its multiple entrances and exits. There is no single dominant perspective and when a 'tydyng' enters the House and passes amongst the crowd, each teller of the tale 'gan somewhat for to eche / To this tydynge', remaking it in their own image (line 2065–6). The stories which Chaucer takes as the basis for his greatest works, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*, fare similarly. He 'eches' them with his own style but he refuses to be the 'man of gret auctorite' (*The House of Fame*, line 2158) who determines their ultimate meaning.

Troilus and Criseyde

Chaucer's achievement in *Troilus and Criseyde* was to expand the significance of the narrative of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato* by the introduction of more sophisticated characterisation and broader, more philosophical themes. Whereas Boccaccio used the story to fulfil personal ambitions in love by addressing it to his lady, for Chaucer it provided the raw material for an investigation of matters as diverse as literary authority, free will and predestination, love and war. In *Troilus*, Chaucer creates a narrator so uncomfortable with the implications of his material that he oscillates between comedy and tragedy, myth and history, romance and farce almost to the point of poetic breakdown. The narrator's conscious acknowledgment of Troilus's 'double sorwe' from the opening line of the poem and his attempts to stave off the inevitable recognition of Criseyde's guilt mean that the poem, like Troilus, is 'sterelees withinne a boot . . . bitwixen wyndes two' (I.416–17). Doubling is an important poetic technique in *Troilus* and Chaucer alerts us to the double nature of language when Diomede glosses the word 'ambages' (ambiguities):

And but if Calkas lede us with ambages –
That is to seyn, with double wordes slye,
Swiche as men clepen a word with two visages –
Ye shal wel knowen that I naught ne lie. (v.897–900)

Diomede's use of the word 'slye' here suggests that 'ambages' are intentionally ambiguous. Indeed, we might think of the entire poem as a text which intentionally presents 'two visages': the comedic visage of the love affair and the tragic visage of Criseyde's betrayal.

This poetics of dyads characterises the presentation of Criseyde. Chaucer frequently uses rhyme to reveal Criseyde's two visages, especially the pairing of 'entente' and 'mente'. Criseyde always means what she says but due to the reader's foreknowledge of the betrayal, her words are often read ironically. In Book iv, for example, the reader cannot help but see the ironic implications of her hyperbolic oaths to be true to Troilus ('Attropos my thred of lif tobreste / If I be fals!' iv.1546–7). When she shows the first signs of transferring her affections from Troilus to Diomede, she declares:

I say nat therfore that I wol yow love,
N'y say nat nay; but in conclusioun,
I mene wel, by God that sit above! (v.1002–4)

The complexity of the double negatives reveals Criseyde's subterfuge – she will indeed not say 'nay' to Diomede – and her attempted obfuscation collapses as she concludes feebly that she means well. Criseyde's meaning well is perhaps her tragedy. She truly means to 'mene wel' and if she were judged according to the economics of The Friar's Tale where intention is all, she would be saved. But Chaucer's Criseyde lives in the present moment as she herself, in Chaucer's insightful addition to the *Filostrato*, confesses:

Prudence, allas, oon of thyne eyen thre
Me lakked alwey, er that I come here!
On tyme ypassed wel remembred me,
And present tyme ek koud ich wel ise,
But future tyme, er I was in the snare,
Koude I nat sen; that causeth now my care. (v.744–9)

Criseyde, ensnared in her own narrative, is blind to future events, unlike the reader, whose foreknowledge pounces on every linguistic slip she makes. In Book iii when she declares 'in thought ne dede untrewe / To Troilus was nevere yet Criseyde' (lines 1053–4; cf. lines 839–40), it is the almost insignificant qualifier 'yet' which stands out. The narrator employs the imagery of sight

again at the end of the poem when Criseyde finally determines to transfer her love to Diomede:

> But syn I se ther is no bettre way,
> And that to late is now for me to rewe,
> To Diomede algate I wol be trewe. (v.1069–71)

Criseyde's attempt to excuse herself – she can *see* no other way to proceed – is undermined by the 'rewe' / 'trewe' rhyme which has been associated with her love and fidelity to Troilus throughout the poem. The transfer of affections is too neat. In the following stanza Criseyde appears to abdicate responsibility for her actions when she comments: 'but al shal passe; and thus I take my leve' (line 1085). But Criseyde's resignation to what she sees as her fate ultimately cannot negate her active choice to forsake Troilus for Diomede.

At the heart of the consummation scene in Book III, Troilus compares Criseyde's visage to a text: 'Though ther be mercy writen in your cheere, / God woot the text ful hard is, soth, to fynde!' (lines 1356–7). Troilus's interpretative struggle is one which many, if not all, critics of the poem share. Chaucer's Criseyde is a far more complex and textured character than Boccaccio's Criseida, with a heightened awareness of her literary fame. Chaucer translates her from a lively, sensuous, but ultimately fickle woman into a character who is at once playful and reticent, fearful and calculating, faithful and tragically changeable. Unlike any medieval writer before him, he creates a semblance of psychological realism so compelling that some modern critics have even confessed themselves in love with her. But Chaucer also introduces a Boethian reading of her character through the use of vocabulary deliberately borrowed from the description of Fortune in *The Consolation of Philosophy* which prompts an assessment of her role in the poem in more philosophical terms. For all that she is 'tendre-herted', Criseyde is also 'slydyng of corage' (v.825). Her constancy, like Fortune's, is in her changeability, and we feel that she slides towards her betrayal of Troilus uncontrollably but inevitably: 'Troilus and Troie town / Shal knotteles thorughout hire herte slide' (v.768–9). The word 'slide' is associated with Fortune in the *Consolation* when Lady Philosophy persuades Boethius to forsake Fortune and her ways: 'Why suffrestow that slydynge Fortune turneth so grete enterchaungynges of thynges?' (*Boece* I, metrum 5, lines 35–6). The linguistic association between Criseyde and Fortune demonstrates Chaucer's immersion in the language and imagery of the *Consolation* when he was composing *Troilus* and, moreover, the sophistication of his interweaving of philosophy and narrative. Chaucer applies Boethius's discussion of free will to the dramatic situation of the

love affair, but in the pagan context of Troy, the characters are necessarily limited in their understanding due to their lack of Christian revelation. This is most evident in Troilus's soliloquy in Book IV where, despite the references to 'God' in the singular, there is no Christian consolation to remedy his complaint. Unlike Boethius, Troilus is unable to reconcile the omniscience of God with the operation of free will by appealing to Providence, and he therefore reverts to his pagan fatalism, concluding that 'thus to be lorn, it is my destinee' (IV.959). This limited perspective is also evident in Troilus's attitude to Fortune:

> Fortune, allas the while!
> What have I don? What have I thus agylt?
> How myghtestow for rowthe me bigyle?
> Is ther no grace, and shal I thus be spilt?
> Shal thus Criseyde awey, for that thow wilt?
> Allas, how maistow in thyn herte fynde
> To ben to me thus cruwel and unkynde? (IV.260–6)

Troilus addresses Fortune as a goddess and his use of the word 'unkynde' demonstrates his fundamental misunderstanding of Fortune. While her behaviour seems cruel to Troilus, Fortune is not in fact being 'unkynde', that is, 'unnatural'. It is in her very nature to turn her wheel. Notions of grace and guilt do not apply to Fortune. But Troilus does not have Lady Philosophy to remind him that 'yif Fortune bygan to dwelle stable, she cessede thanne to be Fortune' (II Prosa 2). The narrator is complicit in Troilus's attitude, however, as he structures the poem on the turn of Fortune's wheel as a way of side-stepping Criseyde's betrayal. In the Proem to Book IV, the narrator attributes Troilus's impending sorrow to the actions of Fortune:

> From Troilus she gan hire brighte face
> Awey to writhe, and tok of hym non heede,
> But caste hym clene out of his lady grace,
> And on hire whiel she sette up Diomede. (IV.8–11)

In the Proem the narrator also links the fall of Troilus to the fall of Troy itself. He describes Fortune as a 'traitour comune' (IV.5), and 'comune' in Middle English means both common to all and pertaining to a whole community (cf. 'comune profyt', 'comune good'). This definition is pertinent because although the narrator claims that Fortune betrays everyone equally, his use of the word also reminds us that like Troilus, the city of Troy is also destined to fall from Fortune's wheel. Fortune has not only 'bigyled' Troilus ('little Troy'), she will be a 'traitour' to the community of Troy. The

fate of Troilus and Criseyde is a metonym for the fate of Troy itself. In the opening stanzas of the poem the narrator reports Calkas's prophecy that 'Troie sholde destroied be' (I.68) and as Fortune's wheel begins to turn for Troilus at the beginning of Book IV, the destruction of Troy is similarly foregrounded with a description of the Greek host besieging the city and the capture of the Trojan prisoners which will lead to the exchanging of Criseyde (IV.29–56).

Whereas for Boccaccio the Trojan War was merely background material for the main plot, for Chaucer it provided both an additional poetic vocabulary and a contemporary political resonance. In the early part of the poem, Chaucer describes Troilus's wooing of Criseyde in military terms. When Criseyde sees Troilus from her window, for example, his 'manhod and his pyne / Made love withinne hire for to myne' (II.676–7). The verb 'mynen' means to undermine fortifications by tunnelling or to make entry into a besieged place, and here Criseyde's body becomes a battleground, a citadel under siege from Troilus. In the fourteenth century, the association between the besieged city and the female body had an additional political charge, however. By the time Chaucer was writing, the trope of London as New Troy was well established and in his *Vox Clamantis*, John Gower compared the city of London under siege from the 1381 rebels to a powerless widow, rather like Criseyde at the beginning of *Troilus*.[5] The image of London as New Troy was ambiguous. It was both a symbol of glorious empire, figuring London as 'þe metropol and þe mayster-toun' according to the contemporary hagiography *St Erkenwald*, and a sign of destruction, betrayal and internal divisions.[6] Chaucer's Troy with its 'noyse of peple . . . as breme as blase of strawe iset on-fire' (IV.183–4) could not help but invoke contemporary London, besieged and burned by rebels, under threat from French invasion and with a king whose royal power had been fundamentally undermined, if not temporarily usurped, by the Lords Appellant. Fortune was not the only 'traitour commune' in the fourteenth-century city.

Chaucer frequently employs references to classical myths to enrich his narrative and create interpretative complexity. One of the symbols which he employs most effectively throughout his oeuvre is the nightingale, and at the beginning of Book II, Pandarus, in typical May morning fashion, is awoken by birdsong:

> The swalwe Proigne, with a sorowful lay,
> Whan morwen com, gan make hire waymentynge
> Whi she forshapen was; and evere lay
> Pandare abedde, half in a slomberynge,

> Til she so neigh hym made hire cheterynge
> How Tereus gan forth hire suster take,
> That with the noyse of hire he gan awake. (lines 64–70)

Procne and her sister refer to the legend in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Procne's husband Tereus raped and mutilated Philomela, cutting out her tongue, and the two sisters took their revenge by killing Procne's children and serving them to Tereus in a ghoulish cannibalistic feast. The three were then metamorphosed, Procne into a swallow, Tereus into a hoopoe and Philomela into that most courtly of birds, the nightingale. Procne sings to Pandarus: 'Remembryng hym his errand was to doone / From Troilus, and ek his grete emprise' (lines 72–3). That Procne's song should remind Pandarus of his promise to help Troilus by wooing Criseyde on his behalf is ominous. The tale behind her 'cheterynge' introduces a disturbing violence to the May morning scene but yet more portentous is the association which is established here, and later in Book II, of Criseyde with Philomela. Procne sings of how her sister 'forshapen was' and on more than one occasion in the poem, the verb 'shapen' is employed by Pandarus of his 'grete emprise' to bring the lovers together (e.g. II.1363). The word also collocates with destiny when Troilus sends his first letter to Criseyde: 'Lettre, a blisful destine / The shapyn is: my lady shal the see' (II.1091–2). Criseyde is malleable, pliable, she can be shaped to the destiny which Pandarus and Troilus have designed for her, but she could become 'forshapen', or misshapen, as a result. Indeed, in the *Ovide Moralisé* (a Christian moralisation of the *Metamorphoses*) Philomela transforms into precisely the same literary type as Criseyde herself: 'amour decevable et faillie' ('deceitful and failing love'). Symbol of 'li delit vain et muable' ('vain and changing delight'),[7] the nightingale sings Criseyde to sleep after she has experienced the first pangs of love for Troilus:

> A nyghtyngale, upon a cedre grene,
> Under the chambre wal ther as she ley,
> Ful loude song ayein the moone shene,
> Peraunter in his briddes wise a lay
> Of love, that made hire herte fressh and gay,
> That herkned she so longe in good entente,
> Til at the laste the dede slep hire hente. (II.918–24)

Chaucer does not make the Philomela reference explicit here (in fact the bird is a male nightingale) but the 'dede slep' which overtakes Criseyde as she listens to his lay inspires a vision of physical, Ovidian, violence:

> And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette
> How that an egle fethered whit as bon,
> Under hire brest his longe clawes sette,
> And out hire herte he rente, and that anon,
> And did his herte into hire brest to gon –
> Of which she nought agroos, ne nothyng smerte –
> And forth he fleigh, with herte left for herte. (II. 925–31)

The dream, another of Chaucer's additions to the *Filostrato*, focuses on that key symbol of the poem, the heart. The eagle is a royal bird and thus represents Troilus, but it is also a bird of prey whose predatory power rips through the stanza and Criseyde's body. It rends out her heart with its long claws and although she 'nought agroos, ne nothyng smerte', the threat of pain remains and in the very moment of physical consummation in Book III, the birds of prey are again circling: 'What myghte or may the sely larke seye, / Whan that the sperhauk hath it in his foot?' (III.1191–2). The lark neither 'myghte or may' speak against the sparrowhawk; all possibility of future struggle is closed down by the alternative modalities of the rhetorical question. The cycle of Ovidian imagery is then completed immediately after the consummation, when Criseyde is directly compared to a nightingale:

> And as the newe abaysed nyghtyngale,
> That stynteth first whan she bygynnyth to synge,
> Whan that she hereth any herde tale,
> Or in the hegges any wyght stirynge,
> And after siker doth hire vois out rynge,
> Right so Criseyde, whan hire drede stente,
> Opned hire herte and tolde hym hire entente. (III.1233–9)

Criseyde finally opens her heart to Troilus, but the sense of foreboding is heightened as the nightingale image places her in a forest, startled and fearful of figures stirring in the hedgerows, telling tales.

At the end of Chaucer's own tale, the narrator famously dismisses his book to pay homage at the steps of poetry:

> Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
> Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
> So sende myght to make in som comedye!
> But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,
> But subgit be to alle poesye;
> And kis the steppes where thow seest pace
> Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (V.1786–92)

The narrator's plea is both an example of the modesty topos – he is a 'makere' not an 'auctour' and his 'litel' book must pay homage to 'alle poesye' – and a sly hint that the story is not over until the Trojan sings, or in this case, laughs. The requested comedy duly arrives when Troilus is killed on the battlefield, ascends to the eighth sphere and laughs at 'this litel spot of erthe' and all its woe (line 1814). Yet there is something not entirely satisfactory about this sudden consolation and attempt to diminish the 'litel tragedye' of Criseyde's betrayal. Troilus's laugh conceals a pejorative rhetoric: he 'dampned al oure werk that foloweth so / The blynde lust, the which that may nat laste' (lines 1823–4). 'Blynde lust' is contrasted with the 'hevenyssh melodie' of the spheres (line 1813), but the reader, who like the narrator retains the image of Criseyde graven in his heart, will remember how she first appears in Book I, 'so aungelik' that

> lik a thing inmortal semed she,
> As doth an hevenyssh perfit creature,
> That down were sent in scornynge of nature. (lines 102–5)

Although by the end of the poem 'morwe' rhymes with 'sorowe', this does not negate the coupling of 'joie' and 'Troie' which formed the poem's heart.

In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer created characters, especially Criseyde, who would attract and provoke both readers and writers for years to come. The Middle Scots poet Robert Henryson, for example, penned *The Testament of Cresseid* (which for many years was often mistaken as Chaucer's sixth book of *Troilus*) in which the narrator attempts to further excuse the 'hevenyssh' heroine. He provocatively asks:

> Quha wait gif all that Chauceir wrait was trew?
> Nor I wait nocht gif this narratioun
> Be authoreist, or fenyeit of the new
> Be sum poeit, throw his inventioun
> Maid to report the lamentatioun
> And wofull end of this lustie Creisseid,
> And quhat distres scho thoillit, and quhat deid.[8]

Chaucer's achievement in *Troilus* was to enable this question to be asked. Where previously Criseyde had been a type of the faithless woman, now she was a locus for philosophical and moral debate. Questions had replaced assumptions, and in *Troilus*, affection and empathy had overcome accusation. Sympathy for Criseyde still weighed uncomfortably with the fact that we cannot wholly excuse her, but both narrator and reader are able to declare, nonetheless, that 'men seyn – *I not* – that she yaf him hir herte' (V.1050).

The Canterbury Tales

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer is the 'elvyssh' pilgrim at the edge of the picture who looks back to the Tabard Inn and forwards to Canterbury, the terrestrial Jerusalem (VII.704). His story collection is celebrated for its tellers and their tales, 'diverse folk, diversely they seyde'(I.3857). Chaucer embraces diversity of character, genre, theme and language, and it is this inclusivity and receptiveness to a variety of critical readings which ensures his continued place in the canon. Charles Muscatine characterised Chaucer's poetics in *The Canterbury Tales* as a 'mixed style': his ability to move freely between high rhetoric and proverbial wisdom, realistic portraiture and traditional iconography, and to allow such juxtapositions to coexist as a reflection upon the infinite variety which the world has to offer.[9] 'Here', as Dryden states, 'is God's plenty.'[10] Even The Knight's Tale, the most traditional of Chaucer's tales stylistically, has room for a variety of expression, from Arcite's rhetorical *exclamatio* 'allas, the deeth! allas, myn Emelye!' to his unpretentious image of their struggle like 'the houndes for the boon' (I.2773, 1177).

The use of such familiar or homely imagery is characteristic of Chaucer's lightness of touch in the *Tales*. The Wife of Bath is 'joly as a pye', the Cook's Perkyn Revelour is 'gaillard' as a 'goldfynch in the shawe', and the Summoner's Friar 'chirketh as a sparwe' (III.456, I.4367, III.1804). The Pardoner has little concern if his flock's 'soules goon a-blakeberyed' and the Host declares that Chaucer the pilgrim is 'a popet in an arm t'enbrace / For any womman, smal and fair of face' (VI.406, VII.701–2). But Chaucer is not afraid to confront the darker side of mankind, as witnessed by the Monk's tale of the starving Ugolino whose children urge him to 'ete the flessh upon us two' and the Knight's 'derke ymaginyng' of 'the smylere with the knyf under the cloke' in the Temple of Mars (VII.2450, I.1999). Chaucer also creates a more subtle tension in the *Tales* by employing language and imagery which, like Criseyde, encourages multiple interpretations. The portrait of the Prioress in the General Prologue, for example, combines the diction of the courtly lady with the iconography of the female religious, concluding with the ambiguous image of a brooch inscribed *amor vincit omnia* hanging from her rosary beads. The Prioress can 'countrefete cheere / Of court' but the reader is left wondering if this is the extent of her imitation (I.139–40).

In the tales themselves Chaucer creates a 'hochepot' of voices with their own individual styles (VII.1258): the Wife of Bath is characterised by her force of argument, the Canon's Yeoman by his 'termes' of alchemy, the Parson by his sober prose, and in the General Prologue the narrator declares his

intention to 'reherce as ny as evere he kan / Everich a word' that the pilgrims speak (I.732–3). This assertion of verisimilitude gives the narrator a protean quality as he performs the various voices of the company. Even in the Prologue their voices filter through his ostensibly impartial portraits to create a multivocal narrative perspective. In his explanation of the Monk's refusal to stay in the cloister, for example, he adopts the Monk's own argument, concluding 'Let Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!' (I.188). The portrait of the Monk is constructed out of anti-monastic discourses which satirised monks for their lavish lifestyles and refusal to remain enclosed, but by the late Middle Ages monasteries had become important economic centres and the divide between monks' secular and spiritual existences was no longer so rigid. When the narrator imitates the Monk's voice and asks 'How shal the world be served?' there is a recognition of the social reality behind the satire (I.187).

This layering of voices, progressing inwards from the narrator in the outer frame rather like a Chinese box, is the source of much of the complexity and multiplicity of the *Tales*, and the narrator's repeated 'ernest and game' (I.3186)/ 'sentence and solaas' (I.798) dyads invite, indeed insist upon, the reader's critical engagement in the tale-telling competition. Chaucer's juxtaposition of language from different registers and genres within the same tale also forces the reader to assess the validity of the narrator's claim in the General Prologue that 'the wordes moote be cosyn to the deede' (I.742). When the pilgrims violate this dictum, the result is often comic, Chauntecleer the cockerel in The Nun's Priest's Tale being described as 'roial, as a prince is in his halle', for example (VII.3184), but the statement also conceals a more tricksy intention. The word 'cosyn' is more than a signifier of familial relationship, it also relates to the verb 'cosyn': to cheat or defraud. If language has the potential to defraud its subject matter, poetry becomes implicated in matters of ethical choice, and the creation of 'sentence and solaas' is no longer a literary game without consequences. Chaucer's irreverence is never far away – he is after all a poet who rhymes 'word' with 'toord' (VII.929–30) – but the philosophical implications of his discussion of language are clear: poetic choice is always fraught with conflict and ambiguity and as the *House of Fame* testifies, there may be no 'man of gret auctorite' to provide a stable interpretation.

In the course of the tales Chaucer tests out the capabilities of the vernacular by re-registering words in different narrative contexts and destabilising the boundaries of genre. When the Miller bursts on to the scene at the end of The Knight's Tale he declares: 'I wol telle a legende and a lyf / Bothe of a carpenter and of his wyf' (I.3141–2). The juxtaposition of the genre markers 'legende and lyf' with 'carpenter and wyf' hoodwinks the reader into thinking that the

Miller is going to tell a religious tale (the most famous carpenter and wife being of course Mary and Joseph) but the fabliau which follows disrupts our horizon of expectations. It is, as Chaucer the pilgrim is quick to point out, a 'cherles tale' (I.3169). But in the hands of Chaucer the poet, the cuckolded husband and the adulterous lovers are still available for religious commentary. Nicholas, for example, sings a hymn on the annunciation (*angelus ad virginem*), introducing a profane association with the angel Gabriel (II.3216). In The Merchant's Tale, however, the conflation of secular and religious is less wholesome when decrepit husband January lures May into his lascivious garden of earthly pleasures with the poetry of the Song of Songs: 'The gardyn is enclosed al aboute; / Com forth, my white spouse!' (IV.2143–4) His 'lewed wordes' (IV.2149) also have the effect of stripping away the religious commentary with which the Song's sensuous imagery had been legitimised in the Middle Ages and again raising the question of what constitutes the right, or appropriate, reading of poetic texts.

Chaucer often juxtaposes images and lexis from different hermeneutic spheres in this way and allows them to speak to each other. The climax of Nicholas and Alisoun's affair in The Miller's Tale is a pertinent example:

> Ther was the revel and the melodye;
> And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
> In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
> Til that the belle of laudes gan to rynge,
> And freres in the chauncel gone to synge. (I.3652–6)

The lovers' bedroom and the friars' chancel are not present as dialectical opposites; there is as much 'melodye' in the former as the latter. The activities of lovemaking and singing are contained within separate couplets but their proximity allows each to engage with and reflect upon the other, but without moral judgment. Chaucer's use of irony also operates in this passage. Nine lines earlier the cuckolded husband John has fallen asleep after hanging up the tubs which will ostensibly save them from the flood and here his 'wery bisynesse' (line 3643) makes way for the lovers' 'bisynesse of myrthe and of solas'. Chaucer often centres his irony upon a particular word which reappears throughout the tales and which functions as a nexus of competing interpretations. In The Second Nun's Tale, 'bisynesse' signifies spiritual virtue for both St Cecilia and the Second Nun, who declares in her prologue:

> And for to putte us fro swich ydelnesse,
> That cause is of so greet confusioun,
> I have heer doon my feithful bisynesse
> After the legende in translacioun. (VIII.22–5)

Here 'bisynesse' is a remedy for its rhyme-word 'ydelnesse', but as the Pardoner's Prologue demonstrates, not all 'bisynesse' is God's work:

> Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
> That it is joye to se my bisynesse.
> Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
> Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free
> To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.
> For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,
> And nothyng for correccioun of synne. (VI.398–404)

The Pardoner's 'bisyness' will lead to his own 'cursednesse' and potentially to the damnation of his flock. He is the opposite of the Parson, who strives to 'drawen folk to hevene by his fairnesse, / By good ensample, this was his bisynesse' (I.519–20). Contemporary debates about the role of the clergy as a conduit to salvation centred upon the relationship between ecclesiastical office and personal virtue. 'For if a preest be foul, on whom we truste', the narrator declares in the General Prologue, 'no wonder is a lewed man to ruste' (I.501–2).

Free will, personal virtue and the efficacy of language are major themes throughout Chaucer's work and here they coalesce around another keyword of both the *Tales* and *Troilus*: 'entente'. The Pardoner's 'entente' is 'for to wynne'. His fellow pilgrim, the Wife of Bath, confesses that her 'entente' is 'for to pleye' (III.192). But lurking behind both declared intentions are far more complex relationships between the teller and the tale. When the Wife of Bath declares that she went on pilgrimage because she did not know 'wher my grace / Was shapen for to be, or in what place' (III.553–4), the reader is aware that her concept of 'grace' is inherently secular and that, as entertaining as her Prologue is, the place in which the Wife is destined to complete her life's journey might be a place of damnation. The Pardoner boasts that he can make 'oother folk . . . repente' despite it not being his 'principal entente' (VI.430–1) but he neglects to foresee that his confession of avarice will hinder the pilgrims' desire to buy his relics at the end of the tale. The rhyme of 'entente' and 'repente' strikes a discordant note coming from the Pardoner.

In *Troilus* Criseyde declared that 'th'entente is al' (V.1630), and through the repeated use of this word throughout the *Tales*, Chaucer foregrounds the effect of the teller upon the tale. In The Manciple's Tale, Chaucer takes this theme to its logical conclusion and calls into question the relationship between poetry and truth. In the tale, Apollo, the god of Poetry, is compared to Amphioun, who walled the city of Thebes with his song (IX.117). Poetry has the power to raise walls and encompass communities, but as Apollo discovers, language which is unregulated and uncontrolled also has the power to

destroy. Apollo teaches his crow to 'countrefete the speche of every man' (line 134) and the violent outcome of this act is anticipated when the crow's song is compared to the nightingale (line 136). Apollo's wife commits adultery and so the crow addresses him: 'cokkow! cokkow! cokkow!' (line 243). The onomatopoeic quality of the word as an imitation of birdsong both conceals and heightens its double meaning: Apollo is a cuckold. The crow explains:

> 'Phebus', quod he, 'for al thy worthynesse,
> For al thy beautee and thy gentilesse,
> For al thy song and al thy mynstralcye,
> For al thy waityng, blered is thyn ye
> With oon of litel reputacioun
> Noght worth to thee, as in comparisoun,
> The montance of a gnat, so moote I thryve!
> For on thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swyve.' (lines 248–55)

The crow's rhetoric, for one who is only able to 'countrefete' human speech, is masterful. In the first half of the speech he employs anaphora and the lexis of courtly virtue to contrast sharply with the fabliau's punchline: 'on thy bed thy wyf I saugh hym swyve'. The crow emphasises the fact that despite the wife and bed being Phebus's possessions, '*thy* bed *thy* wyf', he has been cuckolded, and the low-register verb 'swyve' is delayed to the end of the line for maximum impact. The use of this word is not a casual expletive, however, given the Manciple's earlier statement that 'the word moot nede accorde with the dede' (line 208). The crow follows this dictum to the letter when he chooses the appropriate verb for the wife's adulterous action. Apollo refuses to believe the crow, calling him a 'false theef' and a 'traytour' (lines 270, 92) but arguably it is the manner of the tale-telling rather than the tale itself that causes Apollo's violent reaction and murder of his wife. The importance of lexical choice could not be clearer. For the god of Poetry it is the difference between life and death, and as a logical extension of the cuckoldry of this literary figurehead, the Manciple ventriloquises his mother's advice to be 'noon auctour newe / Of tidynges, *wheither they been false or trewe*' (lines 359–60). Not only has the relationship between language and truth been called into question, but poetry itself has been accused of murder and silence is to be its punishment.

The rest of course was not silence. Chaucer's retraction (x.1081–92) expresses the desire to withdraw works such as *The Canterbury Tales* which 'sownen into synne' (x.1090), but this sudden confession of moral responsibility and the desire for penitence can scarcely be taken seriously, coming from a poet who has exploited the potential for language to 'cosyn' its readers.