PARLIAMENT AND LITERATURE IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Parliament and Literature in Late Medieval England investigates the relationship between the development of parliament and the practice of English poetry in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. During this period, the bureaucratic political culture of parliamentarians, clerks, and scribes overlapped with the artistic practice of major poets like Chaucer, Gower, and Langland, all of whom had strong ties to parliament. Matthew Giancarlo investigates these poets together in the specific context of parliamentary events and controversies, as well as in the broader environment of changing constitutional ideas. Two chapters provide new analyses of the parliamentary ideologies that developed from the thirteenth century onward, and four chapters investigate the parliamentary aspects of each poet, as well as the later Lancastrian imitators of Langland. This study demonstrates the importance of the changing parliamentary environs of late medieval England and their centrality to the early growth of English narrative and lyric forms.

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For Krista,
sine qua non

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Preface

The basic argument of this study is simple and can be simply stated. The last quarter of the fourteenth century and the first decades of the fifteenth – from about 1376 to 1414 – was a period of fundamental importance for the development of both the English parliament and English literature. These developments are related, and this study investigates that relationship. Each in their own way, the growth of parliament and the development of poetry have motivated intense study. The intersection of the two, despite their especially close contact during the later English middle ages, has largely been ignored.[1] What I undertake here is to treat them together, and to do so proceeding from the premise that, as it has been put recently, "textual practices do not exist within a social vacuum. [They] are produced by, and themselves sustain, particular social and political formations."[2] I pursue this operative principle in its softer and less deterministic (but no less substantive) form. That is, my point will not be to argue that parliament "made" the literature of the period or that the literature made parliament. Either proposition would be unreasonable, and in any event their relatedness is not one of direct historical causality. Nor will parliaments in literature (artistic renderings of the political body and practice of parliament) be the sole focus of inquiry, although they are key to this study. Rather, these two hallmark institutions of British culture, parliament and literature, are connected as important elements in a mutually informing and mutually dependent set of discursive and textual practices. They came into contact in a time and setting when *parlement*, as "discussion" and "deliberation," was becoming critical for both literary and political life. The same men whose identities and institutional activities were integral to parliament were also audience to the remarkable changes and new styles of poetry practiced by Langland,

[1] Notable exceptions include Pieper, "Das *Parlament* in der me. Literatur"; Strohm, "The Textual Environment of Chaucer's 'Lak of Stedfastnesse'"; Steiner, "Commonalty and Literary Form."
[2] Simpson, "The Other Book of Troy: Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae* in Fourteenth and Fifteenth-Century England," 401.

Chaucer, and Gower. These artists, in turn, had extensive parliamentary connections. But as close as these social spheres were, it is in the broader and overlapping concerns of both political and artistic practice – anxieties about voice, representation, and the vision of a cohesive community in a fractured world – that we find this era's more fundamental connection of poetry to parliament. In a way that had not been seen before and would not be repeated after, imaginative literature and parliamentary politics were mutually expressive of the same cultural moment. That moment, which was characterized by a particular desire for (and the particular dangers of) speaking "with one voice," is the wider context in which this historiographical narrative is set, and for which it provides a unique perspective.

My hope is that this study will find interest among both literary and historical scholars, as its subjects and texts are equally important to both. Recent exemplary studies have blurred the lines between these disciplines, and it is from these that I take my cue. My focus is primarily on imaginative or "high" literature, also in the hope, as Janet Coleman puts it, of reaching "a happy medium between reading the imaginative literature as mere sources of social history . . . [and] according to standards of literary judgment."[3] At the same time, the long tradition of research on English constitutional and parliamentary history provides constant guidance, as well as a rigorous model for approaching parliament's influence on the literary writing of the age of Chaucer. Bringing these two fields into dialogue would be, it seems to me, sufficient justification for an inquiry of this sort. The impetus for that dialogue is made stronger by the apparent need for literary scholars to have a useful digest of historical work on parliament, not just for the decades that are the main focus but for the longer period from about the thirteenth to the early fifteenth centuries. This, therefore, provides the most general aspect of the tripartite subject matter of this book: an investigation of the specific historical and literary influences of the English parliament during the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, especially during the reign of Richard II, which "saw the medieval parliament as much involved in political action as at any time in its history"[4]; a related inquiry into the issues of representation and voice, and the literary-political practices motivated by them; and some consideration of the historiographical significance of it all, from a later perspective which includes us as participants in this long political and cultural tradition.

[3] Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350–1400*, 46.
[4] Taylor, *English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century*, 209.

Acknowledgments

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My deepest debt is to my wife, Krista, and to my entire family, for their love and support. Thank you.

Abbreviations and textual note

Brinton, *Sermons*	*The Sermons of Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester*
Butt	Ronald Butt, *A History of Parliament: The Middle Ages*
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
Guisborough	*The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough*
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
Modus	*Modus Tenendi Parliamentum*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
Powell and Wallis	J. Enoch Powell and Keith Wallis, *The House of Lords in the Middle Ages*
PROME	*The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*
RP	*Rotuli Parliamentorum*

* * *

Since this study was begun, new editions of key texts have become available and electronic media continue to improve our scholarly resources. While many citations have been updated from previously published material, I have retained the older standard references to the eighteenth-century edition of the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (*RP*) instead of adopting what will certainly become the new standard, the *Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* (*PROME*). Because most of my research was conducted before the publication of *PROME* in 2005, and because the older *RP* provides some petitionary texts that have been omitted from the newer edition, I have maintained the original citations. Where possible, these have been cross-checked with the new *PROME* CD-ROM edition.