Introduction

The woodcut on the cover of this book stands as frontispiece to the earliest surviving print of John Skelton’s *The Bouge of Courte* (c. 1499). This may not be its first association with courtly duplicity, since it was likely attached around 1495 to a Wynkyn de Worde edition of Caxton’s *Historye of Reynart the Foxe*.\(^1\) Bruyn the bear is delivering to the elusive Reynart a summons to the court of Noble the lion. The bear’s jaws are clenched in a grin that we are not quite sure how to read. Slavering sycophancy? The *Schadenfreude* of the messenger bearing bad news, or his repressed anger at a thankless and doomed task? Predatory instinct, servile resentment or sadistic enjoyment? Meanwhile, Reynart sits above and aloof, amid the “hooles” and “secrète chaumbres” of his lair of Maleperduys.\(^2\) Perhaps he is relishing his iconographic resemblance to the monarch in a scene of poet-to-patron dedication, but his closed bodily surface (no bared teeth) still harbors a certain inscrutability. At the center is the sealed royal summons tendered by Bruyn, an executive document whose effects are deflected, not least across the textual tradition itself.\(^3\) Renart pleads delay with the fiction that he hungers for (in the original) or has surfeited on (Caxton and his Dutch source) honey. Bruyn, of course, cannot resist the bait, with disastrous consequences. This scene, in which a sealed royal and official text shifts appetite, object and consequence along a chain of identities, provides an apt threshold both to Skelton’s poem and to this book.\(^4\)

The poets who figure in these pages all spent some part of their lives writing at the royal courts of England and Scotland between 1485, when Henry VII ascended the English throne, and 1528, when the minority of James V came to an end in Scotland. In addition to Skelton, they include Stephen Hawes, Alexander Barclay and Bernard André to the south of the border, and Gavin Douglas and William Dunbar to its north.\(^5\) Both the courts and the poets have elicited lively attention, particularly with regard to the larger narratives that look back across the historiographically familiar divide of 1485. This has allowed me to focus more narrowly on
my subject here: the forms of poetic identity generated in a cluster of works, in response to the multiple sources of authority that surround these authors. Such sources include monarchs and courts, and genres and texts, both vernacular and classical. I also take it as axiomatic that “authority” and “court” are unstable categories answered by unstable texts, which means that we glimpse the selves enunciated in these poems in—or as— their own unmaking. The poet’s position in history and culture is visible as displaced, other (allos)—as, we might say, always allegorized. It offers itself to our reading through genre, or rather through a mixture of genres, some of them the expressions of that capacious discourse, the writing of fin amour. In such cases the discursively stable is recurrently disturbed, and versions of narratorial identity are exposed to especial risk.

The term court offers, as historians are quick to point out, some epistemological problems of its own. Walter Map, comically baffled at his inability to define it, notoriously has recourse to Augustine’s words on human alienation in time:

“In time I exist, and of time I speak,” said Augustine: and added, “What time is I know not.” In a like spirit of perplexity I may say that in the court I exist and of the court I speak, and what the court is, God knows, I know not. I do know however that the court is not time; but temporal it is, changeable and various, space-bound and wandering, never continuing in one state.

Over eight centuries later, Map’s words still seem to exert a shaping force on the medieval court’s literary-historical reception. For historians of England, attempts to place the court in time have unsurprisingly raised questions of identity and origin. Can the court be restricted to “the spatial confines of . . . royal palaces,” and if so, how does it relate to proximate worlds? If the court as royal household is itinerant, what to make of its claims to place? At what historical point can we properly situate the emergence of a royal court, or an ideology of courtierly behavior or court service? For students of literature, the main issue is highlighted by Map’s observation that the court “is not time; but temporal” (“non est tempus; temporalis quidem est”). Is the court noun or adjective, a political institution with a firm location in history or a term describing a loose collection of attitudes and values hard to confine to a specific epoch? How can we really define the connections between historical courts and “courtly” culture? As the very existence of such questions indicates, the court of our imagining is inescapably multiple: political institution, symbolic focus, literary trope.
Several of the poems discussed here (Skelton’s _Bowge of Courte_, Speke Parott and _The Garlande of Laurell_, Dunbar’s _The Thrissill and the Rois_ and _The Goldyn Targe_, Douglas’s _The Palice of Honour_) have in critical response caught up the label of allegory, largely because of their reliance on personification. All foreground elaborate degrees of formalization, or indeed formal breakdown. André’s _Vita Henrici Septimi_, with its poetic elements, and Barclay’s _Eclogues_ bring the estranging effects of unfamiliar classicizing paradigms. Dunbar’s petitionary poems, often regarded as his most “personal,” are in some ways, as I shall aim to show, his most figurative. These poets work within a political structure dominated by the monarch: a “real” historical being, but one surrounded by a vast symbolic panoply that extends and alters being. They are also situated in a network of forces that at once sustains and exceeds the specific pressures of court politics, and which is registered in their poems through the entitlement to discursive authority asserted by certain literary genres.14 This authority is in turn disseminated by differing technologies, since the notion of “the court” at this juncture does not restrict literary production to scribal practice or to a narrow coterie of readers within a royal household; most of the poets I have named were associated with the medium of print and its reconfigurations of readership.15

My own intervention aims to highlight the necessary obliquity that allegory introduces into self-presentation. Nearly three decades ago now, Stephen Greenblatt memorably recreated the “self-fashioning” of three figures, More, Tyndale and Wyatt, whose lives overlapped with those of the poets I discuss here. The richness of Greenblatt’s depictions of his subjects, in which lives and writings alike participate in the status of “theatre,” stems in large part from the documentary evidence left by their highly public careers.16 With the exception of Douglas, little is known of the lives of the poets discussed here. Moreover, their poems use highly conventional modes – if often in explosively eclectic combinations – and as a result resist decoding for topical and biographical reference, working hard to refuse history a way in. The catchphrase that language speaks the subject, not the subject language, becomes for the reader of these texts a matter of practical fact; they represent a relation between text and history that is less a theatrical than a secretive one.

Medievalists have long been familiar with Medvedev and Bakhtin’s contention that the world beyond a text is not directly “reflected” in it, but enters it by way of “refraction” through an ideological environment, in a passage characterized by indirection. Less attention, perhaps, has been paid to their supporting claim that a crucial contributor to this refraction is genre: “Every significant genre is a complex system of means and methods
for the conscious control and finalization of reality.”

In an aside – that most revealing of rhetorical gestures – they suggest that genre is a psychological rather than an exclusively literary category, a medium in operation before the word ever appears on the page: “human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality.”

Genre, then, both “refracts” the real and becomes the scene on which it is displayed. This suggests another paradigm of psychic functioning that also entails a connection running along crooked and tortuous routes, the Freudian notion of Verschiebung or displacement. The term denotes in Freud’s earlier writings the process by which “ideas which originally had only a weak charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally intensely cathected” – that is, charged with psychic energy – “and at last attain enough strength to enable them to force an entry into consciousness.”

The idea, present both in Bakhtin and Medvedev and in Freud, that an energy at once psychic, semantic and ideological is displaced from a secret site to an open one – for Freud, of course, the unconscious is “ein anderer Schauplatz” or “other (or different) scene (or stage)” – immediately suggests a correspondence with the figure of allegory. Indeed, it is the indirection traditionally ascribed to allegory that seems to lie behind Puttenham’s description of “the Courtly figure Allegoria, which is when we speake one thing and thinke another, and that our wordes and our meanings meete not.” Puttenham’s allegory is a figure “which for his duplicitie we call the figure of Fals Semblant or Dissimulation,” and the allusion to the Roman de la Rose at first suggests an ethical critique of allegory’s dissembling. But Puttenham’s portrayal of the figure becomes itself increasingly shifting and elusive: “But properly & in his principall vertue Allegoria is when we do speake in sence translatiue and wrested from the owne signification, neuerthelesse applied to another not altogether contrary, but haung much conueniencie with it.”

The rhetoric of this passage resonates markedly with Freud’s theory of displacement. Just as the obscure roads from one idea to another, apparently impassable, are nevertheless smoothed in Freudian displacement by a chain of associations, so the violence of “wresting” occurs side by side with a basic congruency, a “conueniencie” between meanings “not altogether contrary.”

These terminological considerations will return in the course of the book as a whole, but my aim in this introduction is to bring them into the necessary historical frame. The patterns I describe are most readily visible in depictions of late-medieval literary patronage, and accordingly I first examine several such depictions from the period between 1390 and 1485, attending in particular to the psychosocial dimension of patronage, but
embedding it in national-cultural difference and institutional location. In contrast to the noble and especially the royal patron, on whom the “symbolics of blood” confers an a priori sublimity, the poet’s body is subjected to age and decay – even as he is also possessed of a slippery, changeful being that negates all claim to a secure and stable self. The subject is thus rather a flow, or a lack, than a fixed essence – “non est tempus; temporalis quidem est” – and it finds a virtual, if alienated, coherence in the figure of the patron. What emerges is a pattern of identification, in which the poetic subject seeks to model itself on “authorities,” in particular, but not exclusively, those furnished by patron and literary precursor. Its endeavors to do so are attached to a repertoire of fleeting mediations, ranging from the textual and rhetorical (style, allusion, representation of person) to the social and cultural (status, gender).

While the workings of identification are readily recognizable from a psychoanalytic perspective, I also suggest that identification here receives its own late-medieval theorization in the literature of counsel, particularly royal counsel. My reading of the fashion in which this occurs complements current critical perspectives on fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century poetry, but with a difference. I finally outline the elaborations of monarchic style and material medium that towards the end of the century alter literary practice.
 dynasty. Some of the most compelling work on these poets’ historical place – on Lydgate’s monastic allegiance, or Hoccleve’s bureaucratic identity – has gone hand in hand with assertions that these figures are covert but unmistakable dissenters from a proposed Lancastrian status quo. Not all commentary has taken this line. Paul Strohm argues for a poetry which assumes its dullness “with respect to the affective trajectories of its own desire,” a trajectory thwarted by the contradictory mandates imposed by its sponsors. In Robert Meyer-Lee’s recent narrative of poetry and power, the conditions of post-Lancastrian patronage compel the poet to negotiate a tightrope between the roles of “laureate” and “beggar” embodied in Lydgate and Hoccleve. My own account emphasizes the inevitable breakdown written into even the most adroit fifteenth-century poet’s performance of identity, a staging cast by the poet’s own figurative language.

In Gower’s Confessio Amantis, the revelation of the lover-narrator Amans’s advanced age has justly been described as the poem’s “dramatic masterstroke.” In the first recension’s epilogue, that same aging body then enters an explicitly encomiastic register, as it is drawn into the sphere of the royal figure of Richard II, who has the undiminishing power of his badge, the sun:

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The Sonne is evere briht and fair,
Withinne himself and noght empeired:
Althogh the weder be despeired
The hed planete is not to wite. (viii, 3010*-13*)
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The body of the subject Gower, by contrast, shows the depredations of time:

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As I which in subjeccioun
Stonde under the proteccioun,
And mai miselven not bewelde,
What for seknesse and what for elde,
Which I receyve of goddes grace. (viii, 3039*-43*)
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This body, of course, has already been attached by Venus to Gower’s own name (viii, 2908), and the “feble and old” poet still summons up the courage to dedicate his book “to the worschipe of mi king” (viii, 3070*-71*). We may ask how far Gower’s authorship of “a bok for king Richardes sake” (Prologue, 24*) answered a genuine royal request; we may skeptically compare his professions of Ricardian allegiance to Richard II with his subsequent dedicatory shift to Henry IV; we may assume the passage to be a veridical representation of the relative ages of young king and old poet. Literal considerations alone, however, cannot account for the regularity and the
degree of detail with which this scene is repeated throughout the fifteenth century in England. The subject’s body, feeble or old or indigent, is counterpoised to the glorified body of a patron who is beyond such constraints. In the Gower instance, the idealization of the patron withdraws a particularity that is left clinging to the poet in the text by a signature and by enclosure within a wasting natural body. The rhetorically exalted patron, however, is also commutable. Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke are constructed as interchangeable patrons, and it is the elevation of the patron that frees the poem as commodity.

After Chaucer’s death, powerful patrons share such scenes with the evocation of authoritative literary ancestors. In The Regement of Princes, in 1410, a Hoccleve worried by money and passing years is caught between two figures of considerable discursive weight, Henry, Prince of Wales and Geoffrey Chaucer. The dead Chaucer figures as personal friend to the poet, but also as culturally powerful symbolic father, whose authority underwrites a Lancastrian dynasty of questionable legitimacy, a royal policy directed against heresy, and a literary and political privileging of the vernacular with strong nationalist overtones. Lydgate’s numerous prologues and envoys similarly convey a debility in the face both of mighty patrons and of Chaucer. In The Fall of Princes, the powerless author oscillates between the “prynce ful myhti off puissaunce” (1, 373) Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and Chaucer, the “cheeff poete off Breteyne” (1, 247). The beginning of Book iii presents a Lydgate old (“in stal crokid age,” 65), poor and bereft of “witt” (58), helped to continue on his “pilgrimage” of translation by “Mi lordis fredam and bounteuous largesse” (74). In Book ii, the dead Chaucer halts the translator about to tackle the story of Lucrece in his tracks: “it were but veyn / Thyng seid be hym to write it newe ageyn” (1000–1). However, the living patron urges him onward: “my lord bad I sholde abide, / By good auys at leiser to translate / The doolful processe off hir pitous fate” (1006–8). Here, the patron’s word is shown to endow a hesitant poet, evidently afraid to emulate Chaucer, with the desire to proceed. The inclusion of this staged vacillation dramatizes the multiple authorities that speak through and across the text. The “chapitle of þe gouernance of Poetis” (iii, 3837–871) begs the “welle of fredam” Gloucester to help a poet “Oppressid with pouert” (3865, 3869). Whatever the level of literal truth here, the recurrence of such statements suggests that the real economy at work is once again a representational one; the poet’s age and poverty point contras-

1430s are not only functional interventions in his translation of Laurent de
Premierfait, but integral to the poem. Similarly, John Shirley’s jokes about Lydgate’s poverty do not comment on the poet’s actual situation so much as recognize a subject-position adopted in his work and wittily set it in further circulation, where it may become part of Lydgate’s commercial reputation. In The Fall, this ceaseless succession of images, of presences that take on body and then recede, inform a poetic subject constantly unstable and identifications that fail to hold their place.

In John Walton’s translation of Boethius’s Consolation of Philosophy, evidently written before 1410, such fluctuations begin with violence. Here, the translator’s modesty, his “Insuffiance of cunning” and “Defaut of language and of eloquence,” are an inertia forcibly interrupted by the Countess of Berkeley’s command that he translate: “ʒoure heste hap done me violence” (i). Female patronal violence, too, is compounded by an avowed inability to match the labors of Gower or Chaucer (“I to þeym in makyng am vnmete,” 5). This sets the stage for a brief and muted contest between Walton and one of his renowned predecessors, who takes on the danger of the figured patroness. If Chaucer as a model is inimitable, he is also immoral; the prospect of translating Boethius evidently recalls Troilus and Criseyde, to whose classicizing and amatory agenda Walton is resistant. He has no desire to engage with “þese olde poysees derk” (6) or “Towhette now le dartes of cupide” (7), and will pray to God rather than to Tisiphone, Allecto or Megara (8) for success in his enterprise. Yet this insertion of a clerical, anti-Chaucerian frame – a reclamation, we might say, of the Consolation from its more ambiguous presence in the Troilus – has by the end of Walton’s prologue changed obedience to a patron’s peremptory command into a religious “obseruance,” performed, he now tells the Countess, “in reuerence of youre worthinesse . . . In wil to do ʒour seruice and plesance” (9). In this rhetoric of transcendence, the literary precursor is left behind for identification with a higher authority and a patroness’s “violent” bidding is transformed into reverent and willing service.

In several instances, the miniature narratives implied in such addresses to patrons extend across a larger canvas, as the flawed subject is moved into a position of imaginary stability and coherence through encounters with a patronal surrogate, or the sudden intervention, in some form, of an author or authoritative text. This is the case in the entire prologue of Hoccleve’s Regement of Princes; in a progress akin to that of Walton’s prologue, the poet’s dialogue with an old almsman, in some ways figuring a patron, leads by way of a strategically placed allusion to Chaucer to Hoccleve’s remaking as a subject ready to signify on behalf of his lord. The dialogue in Book viii of Lydgate’s Fall of Princes between Boccaccio, by this stage clearly a
stand-in for the exhausted poet Lydgate (“My lymys feeble, crokid & feynt for age, / Cast in a dreed, for dulnesse of corage,” viii, 18–19) and a spectral Petrarch (“the laureat poete,” viii, 61) who emboldens him anew, repeats the same process.

We find a similar scene in the Secrees of Old Filisoffres, begun by Lydgate and completed after the latter’s death (c. 1449) by Benet Burgh. Derek Pearsall has suggested that Burgh, Lydgate’s admirer, reorganized the Lydgate text bequeathed him towards a mortal conclusion, with Lydgate’s own comparison of the four seasons to the life of man (“To our foure Ages / the sesouns wel applied; / deth al consumyth / which may nat be denyed,” 1490–91). After this “morallite” (1485), the rubricator, perhaps Burgh, continues: “Here dyed this translator and nobil poete: and the yonge folowere gan his prologe on this wise.” Lydgate is caught at the very moment of his translation into an auctor, as death borders on resurrection.

The “yonge folowere” then begins his endeavors to occupy the space left by his dead precursor with a spectacular profession of modesty, which certainly gives ample occasion for talk of anxiety of influence. Fourteen stanzas address a patron, possibly Henry VI, at whose command the translation was completed,

\[
\text{The dulnesse of my penne / yow besechyng tenlumyne} \\
\text{Which am nat / aqueynted / with the musys nyne (1497–98)}
\]

The latter half-line supplies a refrain for the stanzas, which ultimately turn to Lydgate, who of course was so “aqueynted” (1585).

The poet’s estimate of his own powers, as represented in the text, would appear to be at a low ebb at this point; his body here is grotesque, diminished, infantilized. He is the dwarf of chivalric romance, entering the lists where the knight should fight (1499–500); a mere child (1532), terrified by royal splendor:

\[
\text{of the persone / the magnificence Royal,} \\
\text{To whoom I wryte / in-to tremlyng cause me fal;} \\
\text{Of dirk ignoraunce / feryng the Engyne . . . (1558–60)}
\]

However, the tone suddenly changes as he once more addresses his patron, this time with a proverbial claim that “Ech tale is endyd / as it hath favour” (1585). He cannot continue without the word of his patron; if he can bring his tale to an end, it will be through another’s “favour,” not his own labors. The request for favor, however, involves the use of a proverb, and such sententious material is after all the stock-in-trade of counsel. The revision of Lydgate’s text enacts multiple forms of identification; it at once enables a
gesture of homage to a patron and inscribes Lydgate’s death into a moral schema that authenticates that gesture generically.

Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define identification as the psychological process “whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides.” It is, they add, “by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified.”45 My account above suggests that the poet is, in his rhetorical statements, “constituted and specified” through his differential relationship to patron and predecessor.46 Such performances of humility among fifteenth-century poets tend at present to be regarded as stalking-horses for a previously formed selfhood which then stages its own representations. We might rather say, however, that convention here is culturally constitutive and productive, providing positions from which subjects speak, and thus upholding certain relations of power. The poet’s postures of humility mark a double subjection, as he emerges as a twofold absence – a space where Chaucer (or Gower, or Lydgate) should be but is not, a potential conduit of the patron’s desire rather than a being possessed of desire.47

Two points will serve as a coda to this discussion. First, while poet may palpably fail to coincide with patron and precursor, such failures also appear at the most integral levels of language and style, and are adumbrated in Chaucer’s own work. In the prologue to Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, Harry Bailly urges the Clerk to

Tele us som murie thyng of aventures. Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures, Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write. (E, 15–18)48

His famous definition of the artes dictaminis reminds us that when fashioned to the ear of an imagined auditor high in the scale of social relations, the author’s discourse is itself elevated.49 Harry Bailly’s “heigh style” addressed to kings and governors was to become the dominant formal poetic model for Lydgate and his successors; in addressing a text to a powerful recipient, the poet’s words acquire what Bourdieu has called “symbolic capital.”50

The modest fifteenth-century poet’s version of such capital is a contradictory one. The amplitude of his syntax – and, as the century advanced, his elaborate aureate diction, derived chiefly from Lydgate – bespeak a symbolic capital that embodies the reflected glory of patron and poetic ancestor.51 However, his most reliable means of accruing interest on it is to declare