Introduction: the forms of public culture

In a world governed by Fortune, kings are especially at risk. On August 31, 1422 Henry V died at Vincennes, south of Paris, at the age of thirty-five, only nine years after he had ascended to the throne. Those years had been marked by a string of military successes, culminating in the Treaty of Troyes, which established Henry as the heir to the French throne and placed France under English rule. His premature death punctured the illusion of invincibility he had perpetuated throughout his reign, reminding his subjects of the vulnerability of the great and creating a void at the very center of the realm. Henry V's legacy to his nine-month-old son was either a curse or a blessing; the years of the minority were either the finest hour of the Lancastrian regime – proof positive of its legitimacy and authority – or a prelude to the dark days of civil war and internecine strife to come. Whatever the ultimate verdict on the success or failure of the minority, it cannot be disputed that the death of Henry V produced an extreme challenge to Lancastrian authority, one that would have to be met in the arena of culture as well as politics if the reign of Henry VI was to succeed. This book begins with a very basic question: what happened to forms of cultural expression after the death of Henry V and the accession of his infant son?

It might be said, quite simply, that what happened was John Lydgate. Already known as an able promoter of English and regnal interests from his work for Henry V, especially the massive *Troy Book*, Lydgate produced during the years of the minority – what Derek Pearsall has called his "laureate" period – a whole series of texts designed to bolster and support the authority of the child on the throne.[1] These texts have typically been read as expressions of the Lancastrian penchant for self-promotion; the regime during the minority experimented with a wide

variety of forms of propaganda, including coins, pictorial images, royal spectacles, and written texts.[2] Indeed, some of them are quite straightforward advertisements for Henrican kingship. But not all. This book focuses centrally on a series of Lydgate's works that defy attempts to categorize (and thus dismiss) them as superficial and occasional, ranging from a tract written immediately after the death of Henry V, *Serpent of Division*, to performance texts – a series of mummings and disguisings – to verses written to memorialize a lavish royal entry, Henry VI's return to London from France in 1432. Each of the texts I discuss here simultaneously demands to be read in topical terms, as a meditation on or negotiation of the problem of sovereignty during the minority, and resists topicality by asserting its status as a distinctively literary object, characterized by excess, ambiguity, and an overt concern for its own status as part of a poetic tradition.

Readers of medieval English poetry will find the latter characteristics familiar. Chaucer has long been recognized as a poet whose texts resist simple contextual readings by countering the topical with such tactics as dialogism, polysemy, irony, and the like. Even Lydgate has been increasingly acknowledged as a complex and skilful practitioner of Chaucerian poetics in such works as *Troy Book*, the *Siege of Thebes*, and the *Fall of Princes*. But the works under consideration here, each of which was written for a particular occasion or commission, do not at first glance appear to fit the Chaucerian model; each wears its topicality on its sleeve, proclaiming first and foremost that it is an instrumental text, written to perform a function and to respond to the particular historical conditions of the minority. *Serpent of Division* directly addresses the problems of conciliar government and the dangers of "division" among "lordes and prynces of renowne." The mummings and disguisings are all specifically crafted for performance before audiences comprised of England's ruling elites, both aristocratic and mercantile; all address questions of governance, right rule, and sovereignty. Lydgate's verses memorializing the 1432 entry of Henry VI seem on the surface simply to report on what happened as a way of glorifying both the king and the patron of the piece, the Mayor of London. Overall, the immediate impression given by these texts is one of simplicity, directness, and didacticism; each seems like a tissue of late medieval convention and platitude rendered interesting to the critic only by the unique circumstances of minority rule.

But what is striking about the texts I consider here is the degree to which, even as they proclaim their instrumentality, they indulge in literary practices that seem inimical to the ends of propaganda. To take one example, in the "Disguising at London" Lydgate presents his audience with a moralized allegory of Fortune and the four cardinal virtues. The lesson seems obvious: resist the vagaries of Fortune by embracing virtue. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that the text is both a very complex meditation on the philosophical problem of contingency, and a multilayered response to both Latin and vernacular source texts. Were Lydgate a pure propagandist, he would eschew this kind of intertextuality in favor of didacticism. But he does not, nor is the "Disguising at London" the only example of his embrace of formal complexity in a purportedly instrumental text; it is in fact *more* likely that Lydgatean propaganda will challenge its consumers by invoking literary traditions and exploring philosophical problems than otherwise. The question is not (as it so often has been in Lydgate criticism) one of poetic quality or competence. Rather, we must ask why, at a moment of distinct historical crisis, Lydgate turned to complex forms of literary discourse rather than to purely functional modes such as consolation, exhortation, or exaltation.

It is the argument of this book that Lydgate, spurred on by a strong sense of crisis, remade the forms of public culture available to him, and did so in a counterintuitive way that challenges our assumptions about propaganda – not only the Lancastrian propaganda of the minority, but also instrumental texts more generally. As I have suggested, Lydgate's occasional texts are distinctly literary – by which I mean semantically dense, self-referential, allusive, and above all, Chaucerian – and in making them so, he systematically undermines their ability to exalt or console in any straightforward way. By translating the poetic and literary techniques he has learned from Chaucer into new media, especially spectacle, Lydgate creates uniquely hybrid texts, part reassuring moralisms or praise, part literary works in search of educated and savvy readers. These readers find densely layered texts seeking imaginary and symbolic resolutions to critical cultural problems and contradictions.

In identifying these works as "public" texts, I am making a double reference, first to their external status as representations of

performances or spectacles – a simple reference to the fact that these texts commemorate public occasions – and second, and more importantly, to the imaginary public that each text constructs and solicits. There is a good argument to be made that the publicness of Lydgate's performance texts is fundamentally in doubt; after all, no corroborating record exists to prove that his mummings and disguisings were performed, and it is not even clear that Lydgate witnessed the royal entry of 1432 before writing his verses. *Serpent of Division*, moreover, is written for a single patron and specifically designed to be read, not enacted. But whether or not concrete evidence of performance can be found, what is most important to recognize about all of the texts I describe here is their distinctive consciousness of their own public status, and their powerful tendency to *imagine* their audience as a public rather than as an inchoate group of readers or viewers. This sense of what a "public" might be emerges in part out of the work of Lydgate's vernacular predecessors, especially Chaucer and Gower. In the late fourteenth century, Anne Middleton has argued, "public poetry" developed as a special kind of discourse, "experientially based, vernacular, simple, pious but practical, active . . . [an] essentially high-minded secularism."[3] This idea of the "public" is essentially bound up with notions like "common profit," notions expressed by poets such as Chaucer and Gower, "interpreter[s] of the common world."[4] The "public culture" I am describing here is intimately related to this "public poetry" – as I will show, Lydgate returns again and again to both Gower and Chaucer – but it is also quite different, produced by a dramatically different historical situation and responding to a changed political landscape. Paradoxically, though I am arguing that Lydgate ultimately sought to expand the audience for Chaucerian writing, the "public" imagined by the texts described in this book is quite small, comprised of the king and his household, nobles, and the London elite.[5] What transforms this group of readers and viewers into a "public," however, is the way in which these texts combine didacticism – moral exhortation and pedagogical instruction – with a clear sense that their audience *represents* the only public that matters: the ruling elite. Instead of broad notions of "common profit," we find exercises in persuasion, designed to assert the sovereignty of the youthful king, as well as attempts at consolation for those still mourning his father's death.

This change in the definition of the "public" marks an important historical shift, a turn away from a Chaucerian vision of the social whole as variegated, multiple, and inclusive, and toward an understanding of the social totality as hierarchical and exclusive, organized around a notion of "representativeness" that starts with the king as the head of the body of the realm. This shift produces the paradoxical effect of a simultaneous narrowing and broadening of the audience; Lydgate seems at times to be introducing Chaucerian poetics to new groups of readers and listeners, while at other moments it becomes clear that the "public" he addresses is in fact very small. This paradox requires that we distinguish between historical audiences (readers and viewers) and imaginary audiences, those to whom texts are fictionally addressed. For the most part, Lydgate's fictional audiences are limited to aristocrats and the London elite; there is nothing in his occasional works resembling the diverse social whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. In this sense, his poetry is narrower and more limited than Chaucer's. At the same time, however, Chaucer wrote for the court or a small circle of readers, while Lydgate was actively fulfilling commissions from both inside and outside the court, using Chaucerian tropes, characters, and rhyme schemes to provide poetry for Mercers, Goldsmiths, mayor, and citizens.[6] Understanding the public culture of the minority, then, means understanding precisely what "public" means at any given moment; it may be the London crowds in 1432, or it may be a tiny group of lords and princes understood by Lydgate to represent the realm in its totality.

LYDGATE'S PUBLIC

David Lawton has argued that the fifteenth century saw the construction of a "public sphere," which was "parallel to and connected with the structures of power," one in which modes of discourse were developed that expressed common notions of the social good.[7] Such a public sphere was, like Lydgate's imaginary audiences, fictional rather than real, a distinction also made by John Watts; as he suggests, "a public that is literally and actually in communication with a wide group of people is surely a different beast from a public that is simply idealised as collective."[8] In fact, over the course of the fourteenth and early fifteenth

centuries the "real" public was growing, coming to include more people with a "common stock of political expectations and languages."[9] As this growth occurred, it inevitably created circumstances in which the lower social orders sought to gain access to a public voice and public status; the Rising of 1381 bears strong witness to this process. Watts suggests that after an initial – and shocked – period of openness at the end of Richard II's reign and at the beginning of the Lancastrian regime, lay authorities sought to redefine the "common" voice to exclude precisely those groups that had laid claim to the term in the first place. As he states, "The public permeated medieval elites; indeed, the communitarian aspects of its diction troubled the very distinctions that enabled their public power."[10] Here we see precisely that process of narrowing and broadening that is the legacy of the Chaucer tradition: more people are inexorably drawn into the public, even as those in power seek to restrict and limit the membership of that group, paradoxically by producing a discourse of openness, "common profit" and representativeness. This paradox creates a very deep, very difficult cultural contradiction that we see Lydgate attempting to negotiate and articulate as he moves from persuading "wyse governours" in *Serpent of Division* to addressing mayor and city in his 1432 verses.

The key to grasping how this contradiction works during the minority, particularly in relation to the death of Henry V, is the idea of "representation," the notion that a person or a group can stand in for the realm and for everyone in it. In his history of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas describes how, in feudal culture

> it was no accident that the attributes of lordship, such as the ducal seal, were called "public"; not by accident did the English king enjoy "publicness" – for lordship was something publicly represented. This *publicness* (or *publicity*) *of representation* was not constituted as a social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather it was something like a status attribute . . . representation pretended to make something invisible visible through the public presence of the person of the lord.[11]

The idea of *representation*, the notion that the king literally embodied the realm, was a crucial one during the minority, when it was deployed precisely to compensate for the absence of an adult king. What Watts's analysis shows is that in England this idea is historically specific; it was

very deliberately embraced by the ruling elite as a counter to a more participatory idea of governance shared between king and people that was beginning to emerge.[12] In Habermas's terms, that is, the "public sphere" had begun to emerge as a meaningful category, so much so that it met with powerful resistance by elites committed to the "representativeness" of the king. Lydgate's writing during the minority is thus caught between conflicting historical imperatives. On the one hand, the inexorable emergence of a broader public sphere resulted in a wider audience for elite forms of cultural expression like Chaucerian poetry. The Lancastrian regime, afflicted with the Achilles heel of a child-king, had to surrender to this broader notion of the public in order to make sure that the representativeness of the king remained intact – hence, its enormous commitment to propaganda. At the same time, the Lancastrians were especially devoted to the hierarchical idea of the king as the embodiment of the realm, an idea that insisted that "publicness" be limited and representative rather than expansive and inclusive. As a result, when we see Lydgate simultaneously addressing new audiences and limiting his address to a tiny elite, we see a poet caught up in a larger historical shift and its local and specific manifestations. Lydgate's mummings, disguisings, and the 1432 verses confirm that this notion of representation permeated the culture of the minority; what they also reveal is the extent to which Lydgate's redeployment of traditional forms worked to undermine its efficacy. In the mercantile mummings, for example, what we find is the substitution of the mayor for the king: the aura that Habermas describes as surrounding the king in a structure of representation is granted by Lydgate to another figure of authority. Such a displacement is necessarily a very delicate operation, something even more evident in the 1432 verses, in which king and mayor compete for aura. Judging from the final stanzas of the poem, which address Mayor John Wells, the young king lost the battle.

What enables Lydgate to make this change is the manipulation of form: the cultural form of the mumming, the poetic form of the envoy, the social and political form of the royal entry, even the generic form of the exemplum, all of which he adopts, transforms, and invests with new meaning. This use of form both asserts and shatters what Habermas calls "the publicness of representation." The rift between real and imaginary publics described by Watts is continually traversed and

crossed in this process, as Lydgate both reaches outward – to merchants, for example – and retrenches, here embodying the aura of representation in the king, there investing in the mayor, but never allowing it to stand still. He cannot, for that aura is itself a shifting and mobile category during the minority, embodied by the child-king, but also, and inevitably, still vested in the spectral presence of his father.

One of the most important features of form – including ritual form, dramatic form, and literary form, all elements of the set of texts I discuss in this book – is its resistance to linear chronology, its tendency to persist over time in relatively stable fashion, and to forge links between radically different historical moments. Form itself, then, is always already anachronistic by its very nature, investing it with a paradoxical freedom; it escapes the straightjacket of strict topicality and one-to-one causality. Of course, at the same time an essential feature of form is precisely its confining quality, the way in which it limits the range of possible actions and interpretations in relation to history and experience. As a result, those moments at which forms are altered, invested with new content and thereby reshaped, become extremely significant. In relation to the texts considered in this book, historical change – typically understood as the operation of contingency in time – provokes a response in which form (compilation, for example, or an exemplum, or the generic form of tragedy, or even the ritual of mumming before the king) is activated as a way of providing generic stability in the face of historical uncertainty. In the process, it is subjected to the intense pressure of radical contingency and thereby remade, sometimes with surprising results. Understanding those results depends upon reading the texts at hand very carefully, looking for those moments at which "function" becomes inadequate as a category of explanation, those instances of critical breakdown in the face of textual excess.

Let me emphasize, however, that the "excess" I am describing is not the sheer deconstructive excess of some forms of poststructuralism; it is not a principle of generalized linguistic indeterminacy or multivalence. Nor is it the willed effect of a poet *intending* to obfuscate, to equivocate, or to otherwise veil his texts from interpretation. And finally, it is not a side effect of repression, intolerance, or censorship. All of these are factors to be considered, and indeed have some part to play in an analysis of the texts in question, as my readings will show. But none

of these factors taken singly (or even together) can account for the complex interplay of history, textuality, and form that distinguishes the writing of the minority, especially when the question of periodization, or diachrony, is raised. It is a curious effect of all of the works I consider here that each poses some challenge to literary history as written. Each carries with it a certain futurity, an anticipation of aesthetic developments to come, even as every text declares its conventionality and "medievalism." *Serpent of Division* is unusual among Middle English texts for its focus on Rome and Caesar. Lydgate's mummings anticipate the interludes and masques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. His disguisings forge a link between the categories of "tragedy" and "comedy" and dramatic performance that would not be fully articulated until much later. When Lydgate identified a royal entry as a "triumph" in 1432, he made a link between medieval processions and Roman practice that was nearly unprecedented in English writing, but that would become standard in Renaissance civic display. All of these instances disrupt strictly periodizing rationales, making the future seem to be present in artifacts of the past. Nor is it satisfactory to see this body of writing as a moment of origination, an embryonic version of later developments. Paul Strohm has called this phenomenon "unruly diachrony," a moment at which the residual and the emergent collide to produce oddly asynchronous texts, both ancient and modern at once.[13] It is "unruly diachrony" that governs the ambiguous status of the "public," "publicness," and the "public sphere" during the minority. Such ambiguities constitute the epicenter of historicity, the place where history itself – subject, of course, to form – is forged and transmitted. It should be clear by now that when I use the term "*historicity*," I do not mean "facts" or "events" (names, dates, battles, trials), though the nuts and bolts of history are critical to my reading. Rather, I mean to signal a temporal phenomenon that becomes legible only at certain moments and under certain conditions, one in which the forms that structure experience (both individual and collective) are subjected to intense stresses by catastrophe or crisis. The death of Henry V constituted one such crisis, and it is my argument here that in responding to that catastrophe, Lydgate (largely unintentionally) began to construct new forms out of old. These moments of change, these instances in which contingency rends diachronic narratives of development (both literary

history and the history of the public) by exposing their falsities, form the subject of this book in the broadest sense.

THE LANCASTRIAN THESIS

Whatever the differences among critics regarding specific texts and their implications, historicist readings of early fifteenth-century poetry are almost universally driven by what might be called the "Lancastrian thesis." In its mildest form, this thesis simply asserts, in good historicist fashion, that context matters – and that an historical event of the magnitude of Richard II's deposition must necessarily be reflected in the kind and nature of poetic representations of events. This turn to political history accounts for the "remedievalizing" of poetry after Chaucer by asserting the power of the social, broadly speaking, in relation to the cultural. As a result, much of the work on Lydgate, and a dominant strain in fifteenth-century studies, is historicism of a specific kind. It focuses on politics in an old-fashioned sense, on the activities of those in power and the major events that affected the kingdom. It is right to do so. As Lawton has argued, fifteenth-century poets used the trope of "dullness" to engage in serious social critique, whose goal was the production of "continuity and unity" at the very center of the realm, in the face of "instability and 'dyuisioun.' "[14] The major literary productions of the early fifteenth century were thus devoted to articulating and defending a notion of sovereign power as uniform, monolithic, and hegemonic; poetry was understood to be precisely the medium through which the powerful should seek self-representation. At the same time, the particular context for this poetry – provided by the Lancastrian usurpation and subsequent need to consolidate and legitimate monarchical power – necessarily thwarted the attempts of poets to erase difference in favor of unity, to substitute an idealized portrait of kingship and the realm for the divided and fractured reality.

One of the most powerful versions of this thesis has been articulated by Paul Strohm. In tracing the effects of the deposition of Richard II on the cultural productions of the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, Strohm argues that the usurpation created a dangerous absence at the heart of the realm, an "empty throne" that the Lancastrians continually