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Robert J. Meyer-Lee
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Introduction: Laureates and beggars

This study, most fundamentally, investigates why the idea of the poet laureate becomes so important in much of the English poetry of the fifteenth century and delineates the consequences that the development of this idea have had for the shape of English literary history. The most central figure in this investigation is John Lydgate, self-proclaimed disciple of Chaucer and monk of Bury, and the object of study may succinctly be termed Lydgatean laureate poetics. But considered from a broader perspective this study also seeks to account for fifteenth-century English poetry more comprehensively than is usual by using the notion of the laureate as a lens for tracing the trajectory and vicissitudes, over the course of more than a century, of that branch of this poetry that self-consciously presents itself as an object of high culture. From this view, this study examines what happens between the two earliest English literary encounters with that most definitive of poets laureate, Francis Petrarch: Chaucer's translation of at least one of Petrarch's sonnets in the 1380s, and the next English rendering of Petrarch's Italian in the lyrics of Sir Thomas Wyatt, some 150 years later.

The possible literary historical narratives that these two moments imply are many, but interpretations have most often fallen into one of two camps: either these moments chart the emergence of the English Renaissance, or they speak of literary continuity rather than rupture, of Wyatt recovering what Chaucer initiated rather than beginning anew with the same material. In either case, the role of Petrarch is the same: he signifies a literary sophistication whose most striking achievement is not the notion of the laureateship for which he was so much responsible but rather his rendering of a complex lyric subjectivity — one that is at odds with itself, consumed with self-definition as poet, and pervasively associated with a real (that is to say, extraliterary), historically specific person. A typical argument from the first camp contends that, because Chaucer puts Petrarch's words into the mouth of Troilus, Chaucer

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remains a medieval poet, albeit one in command of a repertoire of psychological representation that exceeds that of most of his contemporaries. In the *Canticus Troili* (*Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.400–20), he uses Petrarch's lyric to lend the consequences of Troilus's first sighting of Criseyde both a narrative immediacy and subjective complexity, yet the character Troilus remains, finally, within the circumference of medieval romance. In contrast, because Wyatt speaks Petrarch's words as his own, in poems such as "Whoso List to Hounte" he is able to deploy the same literary effects toward the end of rendering his apparently actual psychological responses to real experiences. With Wyatt, this argument concludes, English poetry finally becomes a true vehicle of self-expression, in the sense of a historically specific author using it to represent his own – perhaps paradigmatic, but nevertheless unique – selfhood. But from the perspective of the other camp, one might dismiss this difference in the speakers of Petrarch's lines as merely generic. Chaucer's narrative poetry by convention adapts Petrarch's lyric to the point of view of one of its characters, while Wyatt's troubadour-like lyricism just as conventionally respeaks its source material from the point of view of its current singer. In this argument, both poets make English verse an instrument for rendering a complex subjectivity, and the difference between them is more one of generic predilection (and range) than epistemic change. Wyatt, in this view, possesses no more or less of a "Renaissance" understanding of interiority than does Chaucer.

The assumptions underlying both these opposing, but nevertheless commonplace, critical narratives are questionable in a number of respects, the most relevant for present purposes being the tale that they imply about what happens – or fails to happen – *between* Chaucer and Wyatt. This tale is the familiar one of the decadence of fifteenth-century English poetry, in which the efflorescence of the Ricardians rapidly decays into stale convention, moralistic tedium, and nostalgic paeans to one's poetic ancestors. Wyatt's accomplishments from this perspective appear, though perhaps related to Chaucer's, singularly unattached to those of his most immediate vernacular predecessors, and this perception creates a sense of spontaneous genius, whether one believes these accomplishments to be England's belated second chance at a Renaissance or a return, *mutatis mutandis*, to the creative energies of an earlier golden age of English verse. The present study, like recent others of the period, rejects this depiction of fifteenth-century poetry, seeing it as an inaccurate assessment of the period's literary sophistication. Moreover, a basic premise here is that, despite the recent critical revaluation of the

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period, the *lasting* accomplishments of its poets — the permanent effects that they have had on the English poetic tradition — remain largely obscured. This book takes these effects as its topic, exploring what they consist of and what historical factors conditioned their appearance. An overarching aim is to show that, in the interval between Chaucer and Wyatt, one encounters not an evolutionary dead end in literary history but the place where English poets first construct the poetics and poetic ideology that make Wyatt's accomplishments possible. Or, to put this more strongly, this book argues that poets in this period make the high-culture English literary tradition in some essential respects what it remains today, and therefore the specific character of and motivations behind this period's poetry continue to shape our understanding of what, ideally, poetry can do.

To those familiar with fifteenth-century poetry, my above comments on lyric subjectivity may seem out of step with the period's most disseminated works, such as John Lydgate's mammoth *roman antique*, the *Troy Book*. Yet behind the lyric poet's rendering of subjectivity lies the more basic task of constructing a first-person poetic speaker, and the nature of this speaker is a crucial concern for fifteenth-century poets. In particular, by absorbing the possibilities and consequences for authorial self-representation of Petrarch's laureate self-fashioning (much more so than his lyricism), their innovations in this regard become among their most important — and least recognized — contributions to English literary history. Most significantly, in the course of the fifteenth century the representation of the *author* as both first-person *speaker* and authoritative, historically specific *person* becomes a normative formal feature. In earlier English verse, these three subject positions — Chaucer the man, Chaucer the poet, and Chaucer the pilgrim, to cite the most famous Middle English example — are either kept isolated or in ambiguous play with one another. In the fifteenth century, in contrast, they are frequently conflated for the most central thematic purposes.

This literary strategy develops as a multifaceted response to specific historical pressures — one that adapts, among other things, the precedent of Petrarch and the achievements of the Ricardians to create a poetic answer to, foremost among other circumstances, the significantly altered relations between power and cultural production after 1400. An aspiring court poet, in the period inaugurated by Henry of Derby's seizure of the crown from Richard II, had no choice but somehow to negotiate these relations in his verse. In the fifteenth century, unlike the fourteenth or sixteenth, the most important poets wrote, at some point in their careers,

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under the direct auspices of a king, queen, or prince whose claim to the throne was, without exception, contested. The first-person speakers these poets constructed were a primary means of effecting this negotiation. Almost as a side effect, this strategy turns out to have great bearing on how, to what extent, and for what purposes these poets textualize their subjectivity.

This sort of authorial self-representation I call laureate self-construction, which is just one element, albeit the most central one, of a set of poetic strategies that I term laureate poetics. Throughout the period, alongside this poetics another mode of authorial self-representation and set of related strategies appear that at first glance seem diametrically opposite. This is the pose and the poetics of the beggar poet, which are not so much categorically different as inherent aspects of laureateship in both theory and practice. Laureate and beggar both involve strategic conflation of poetic subject positions – that is, in either case the poet appears as his concrete extraliterary self. The laureate signifies a positive, mutually affirming (if, in theory, arm's-length) relation to power, while the beggar stands as an expression of the actual conditions of subjection, and consequent will to resistance, that the practice of laureate poetics inevitably involves. The laureate pose signals the poet's co-option into the project of political legitimation and at the same time his desire to reconceive that project as something non-partisan and permanently valuable for all humanity. Conversely, the beggar pose signals both the poet's recognition of his role as an instrument of power and an individualized resistance that is in part conscious and in part the inevitable surfacing of his actual, ambivalent relationship with his patron. The laureate imagines poetry to possess an autonomous authority in service to the prince but not subservient to him; the beggar reveals the utter dependence that structures actual poetic practice. The laureate pretends to possess independence while being, in extreme cases, a patent propagandist; the beggar pretends to grovel when most opposing his own desires to those of his patron. Fifteenth-century sovereigns, by demanding, in effect, that their poets be laureates, also demanded that they be beggars. In the poetry of this period – and in the verse it influenced in subsequent ones – laureate and beggar are inevitable partners.

In using laureate poetics and its mendicant other as lenses through which to view in new detail the accomplishments of fifteenth-century English verse, I necessarily leave much else out of focus. With these lenses, my emphasis falls naturally on the relations between poets and

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patrons (rather than between poets and other possible audiences), and my readings tend to gravitate toward metapoetic passages, especially those found in prologues and epilogues. Nonetheless, the ideas and practices associated with laureate and beggar form a powerful means for understanding, on the one hand, the complex and far-reaching relation of this period's poetry to its historical context, and, on the other, the often surprising relations among this period's poets as well as with their predecessors and successors. Indeed, the poetics of laureate and beggar are in important ways the very places where these extrinsic and intrinsic histories of English poetry intersect, and thus in this book I pursue an investigation of poetic influence that is at the same time an examination of the forces that influence poetry. In the remainder of this introduction, I locate the place of this study in the context of recent criticism, more specifically delineate the body of verse that is my object, and provide an overview of subsequent chapters.

FIFTEENTH-CENTURY POETRY AND ITS CRITICS

No longer considered merely the wasteland through which one must pass to get from the medieval genius of Chaucer to the glories of the English Renaissance, fifteenth-century poetry has greatly benefited from the critical turn toward historicism of the past two decades. A small but growing number of monographs, collections of essays, and journal articles by some of the most prominent scholars of late medieval English literature have shown that the so-called "dull" poetry of this period is, if not always (to our ears) aesthetically pleasing, as rich with complexity as the historical moment in which it was written. The New Historical tenet that history and literature intersect in their shared textuality, by now relegated to the status of a commonplace in regard to other periods, has proven unusually productive when applied to the work of the poets writing in Chaucer's immediate wake. This is a poetry directly motivated by and pervasively meditative on its moment in history, a poetry highly conscious of being both a public intervention in the social, political, and religious turmoil of its time, and the inauguration of a vernacular literary tradition. Indeed, in the past, its lack of accomplishment has often been blamed on precisely these latter two conditions – its backdrop of historical turmoil and its precarious literary historical position. The assumptions were, first, that good poetry cannot be written in an era when so many Englishmen – including, and especially, kings – were dying at each other's hands, and, second, that the overwhelming

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precedent of Chaucer preempted the possibility of creative originality. With the aid of more recent scholarship, however, we are now better able to see in the fifteenth-century poets' conventional gestures a complicated — and, in many cases, creative — response to the bloodshed that surrounded them and the achievements of Chaucer and other Ricardians. As a result, we have a more nuanced understanding of both their literature and historical moment.

Nevertheless, in the renewed critical emphasis on history one often still encounters an apology for the Chaucerian poets. Seth Lerer, for example, begins his groundbreaking *Chaucer and His Readers* by announcing, "Chaucer creates the fictional persona of the subjugated reader/imitator and, in turn, the processes by which the fifteenth century propagates a literature based on versions of that persona."[1] The badness of fifteenth-century verse ("so bad that it is virtually unreadable" [p. 4]) is the function of a multifaceted response to Chaucer's poetry, the authority of which fifteenth-century poets create for the very purpose of subjugating themselves to it. As valuable as Lerer's study is, when reading through it one retains the feeling that fifteenth-century poetry is an unpleasant rite of passage, the necessary burden of a literary tradition's first appearance of genius, which can only be shaken off with the appearance of its second genius in the form of Skelton. In comparison, for Paul Strohm, another highly influential scholar of this period, the problem is not so much Chaucer as the internal contradictions that fifteenth-century poetry reproduces in its attempt to render a unified image of Lancastrian England: "Writing in the most precarious circumstances, on the threshold of the most internecine passage in English history, Hoccleve and Lydgate produced poems which stumble constantly and even obsessively into referential difficulties they cannot afford to acknowledge."[2] Replacing the aesthetic criteria of traditional criticism with historical double binds, Strohm believes fifteenth-century poems stumble not because of the ineptitude of their composers but because, given the nature of the authority they reflected, they could do nothing else.

In effect, Lerer's and Strohm's depictions of the poetry of this period are more sophisticated, penetrating, and — to a degree — generous versions of the earlier critiques that wished to explain away this poetry by reference to the dominance of Chaucer or the destabilizing effects of usurpation and civil war. Inasmuch as it would be an act of willful oversight not to recognize the undoubted influence of these factors, this present study follows in these critics' footsteps. Yet what distinguishes this study's aim and procedures from theirs is its interest in the

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genealogical effects of these factors. This book, through its examination of a continuous poetic tradition spanning Chaucer and Wyatt, describes what fifteenth-century poets do with the precedents of the Ricardians and the deeply troubled historical moment that not only differentiates their poetry from that of their predecessors and successors but also leaves a permanent mark on the character of the English poetic tradition. "We shall not understand Spenser," David Lawton has suggestively asserted, "unless we also understand that he is at least as Lydgatean as he is Chaucerian."[3] One of the aims of this study is to discover exactly why this is true.

LYDGATEAN AND HOCCLEVEAN POETRY

In referring to fifteenth-century poetry, I mean not all verse written in the period but that composed by the poets often referred to as Chaucerians. Yet even this more refined designation is both too broad — covering poets and poems not of immediate concern — and not meaningful enough, since the fact of Chaucer's influence tells us little about the actual character of the poetry. Another frequent label, "court poetry," says more about this character but is somewhat misleading. Few of the authors examined in subsequent chapters are courtiers and, while all possess some actual or desired relation to the English court, much of their verse they direct at a wider audience — in some cases, even wider than that of the aristocracy. To be as specific as possible, the poetry I examine is that English verse that contains implicit and often explicit claims to cultural ascendancy and that is written by an individual whose social identity is at least partially invested in the idea of being a poet in some relation to the English court. It is, in other words, that high-culture, proto-professional verse of which the few examples we find in English before the fifteenth century contrast starkly with the hundreds of thousands of lines we encounter in the several decades following Chaucer's death.

This poetry largely occurs in three distinct modes, which may be designated courtly, Lydgatean, and Hocclevean. The courtly mode (and again the root word "court" is not entirely accurate) in its best instances consists of a mixture of stoic philosophy and *fin' amor*. Its paradigmatic English precedent is *Troilus and Criseyde*, and fifteenth-century examples include the *Kingis Quair* of James I, Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*, and the lyrics of Charles d'Orléans.[4] The Lydgatean mode, as its label suggests, consists of that amalgam of secular, classicizing

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convention, pious moralism, and monastic encyclopedism that characterizes Lydgate's most ambitious works and that is imitated by his successors. Its most important fourteenth-century vernacular precedent is what Anne Middleton has described as Ricardian "public poetry," but, as we will see, it is both more encompassing and qualitatively different from this precedent.[5] It is the primary vessel of laureate poetics. The Hocclevean mode imbricates many features of Lydgateanism with those other features for which the poetry of Lydgate's contemporary Thomas Hoccleve is best known: autobiographical passages deployed with nuance and irony, and ambivalent meditations on the relationship between poet and actual or imagined patron. Its sources include Ricardian, goliardic, and contemporary French poetry, although, like its Lydgatean counterpart, it differs from its sources in substantial ways. It is the primary vessel of mendicant poetics.

In naming the latter two of these modes after particular poets, I do not mean to imply that they are exclusive to them. Both Hoccleve's and Lydgate's oeuvres, in fact, include verse in each of the three modes. Moreover, as I suggest above, Lydgateanism and Hoccleveanism are not mutually exclusive options but rather form a dialectical pair. Nevertheless, in the predominant characters of these two poets' works, we encounter distinct (if interdependent) responses to Ricardian precedent and fifteenth-century historical pressures. The poets' respective productions, not least because of their overlapping sets of royal patrons, become mutually implicated alternative models for how one may situate high-culture vernacular poetry in Lancastrian and early Tudor England.

Admittedly, however, to speak of Hoccleve and Lydgate as alternatives is a little misleading. By far the most dominant poet of the fifteenth century is Lydgate. His manuscripts — unlike, for example, Chaucer's — were widely disseminated in his lifetime; he was patronized by a broad spectrum of society, from royalty to gentry; and he was imitated and praised by name by a number of contemporary and successor poets, even into the seventeenth century. Although he left behind several instances of courtly poetry, the basic character of the bulk of his immense output is, in respect to English verse, quite novel. In sum, in this period the breadth and duration of Lydgate's influence is unmatched. For this reason, to understand fifteenth-century poetry is in many ways (if not, of course, in entirety) to understand how Lydgateanism arose from the possibilities opened up by the Ricardians. Most of this study I have therefore devoted to an investigation of the nature, significance, and evolution of Lydgatean laureate poetics. But by the same token, to understand Lydgateanism

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is also to discover why the less visible Hoccleveanism remains its persistent alter ego. In Hoccleveanism we encounter the primary expression for the tensions and paradoxes endemic to fifteenth-century proto-professional poetry — the flaws in its poetic ideology on which Lydgate expends great effort to conceal and to which his successors inevitably at times fall prey. The courtly mode, in comparison, is not as entangled in these particular problems. Although always present as an option, it does not distinguish the poetry of this period to the same degree. For this reason, the often sophisticated courtly productions of the fifteenth century — most prominently, that of Charles d'Orléans — enter my argument only as momentary points of contrast.

The characteristic features of Lydgatean poetry include, but are not limited to, an elevation of the vernacular by means of aureate diction and ornate rhetorical style to a status equivalent to Latin; generic affiliations with such monastic productions as encyclopedia, chronicle, saint's life, homily, and devotional lyric; an explicit embrace of politics; relentless moralism and traditionalism; and recurrent thematization of its own patronage. A central feature, as I have indicated, is the authorial pose as laureate. This pose draws from Ricardian and other precedents an intentional confusion of author-figure with first-person speaker, such that the "I" of a poem possesses a thematically active link to an individualized poet. Like the Ricardian "I," the Lydgatean "I" can be the sign of an individual subjectivity, the marker of an elusive controlling consciousness, or a personification of the moral perspective of the common man. But the Lydgatean "I" is also characteristically bound to a historically specific, extraliterary person who carries moral, spiritual, and cultural authority — a flesh-and-blood person who is simultaneously a personification of authority, a figure both as idealized and as historically concrete as the sovereign whom he addresses. The laureate pose — to define it in the most political terms — designates the person of the sovereign displaced from the realm of power into the realm of letters. Like the timeless and time-bound two bodies of the king, the pose points both to an abstract authorial role and to the historically specific occupant of that role. With this pose in place, all the other features of Lydgateanism receive the legitimating authority to which they also then contribute. What finally validates the presumption behind aureate diction, for example, is a person-centered authority signaled in the text by laureate self-representation. Because of this authority, and toward the end of maintaining and extending it, English may be raised to the status of Latin, chronicle to epic poem, and propaganda to cultural capital.

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This study follows Lydgate in naming this authorial pose the poet laureate. Lydgate's use of this term, though always only indirectly applied to himself, marks the beginning of a practice of English laureate self-representation that pervades the fifteenth century, reaches an evolutionary endpoint in Skelton, and reappears in modified form in Spenser, Jonson, and Milton – that is, in those early modern poets whom Richard Helgerson has described as "self-crowned laureates."[6] While the self-representational strategies of these later poets have, as Helgerson shows, much to do with their specific place within the "literary system" of their day, their understandings of the idea of the laureate do not fundamentally differ from Lydgate's. The multifaceted, mutually constitutive relationship between poet and sovereign that, for example, Louis Montrose has described in respect to Spenser and Queen Elizabeth has, as we will see, its earlier English instance in the relationship between Lydgate and Henry V.[7] Lerer speaks of his *Chaucer and His Readers* as "a gesture toward a prehistory of the laureate self-fashioning described by Helgerson" (5), and this description also aptly applies to the present study. But Lerer goes on to insist that "fifteenth-century poetics is the projection rather than enactment of laureate performance – a self-fashioning not of professional or amateur, but of the patronized and the subservient" (5). I argue instead that Lydgate's practice is indeed a laureate performance, the very first such successful performance in English. Rather than being a projection, Lydgate's poetry uses such a projection (onto Chaucer) in order to underwrite its own practice. Further, while Lydgate is indeed patronized and subservient, I argue that such subjection has always been, at least since Petrarch, an integral part of the notion and practice of the laureateship.[8] And it is precisely this subjection that is responsible for the Hocclevean beggar's inevitable surfacing as the laureate's counterpart.

I look briefly at the tensions within the *trecento* notion of the laureate in my first chapter. In subsequent chapters, I examine how these tensions affect the shape of English poetry in the period between Chaucer and Wyatt. Throughout, I emphasize the role of political power as the most prominent motivator of laureate poetics and prolific contributor to the contradictions within its practice. In fifteenth-century England, the ascendance of a high-culture vernacular tradition, with the poet laureate as a central conceit, cannot be separated from the ascendance of a series of kings with questionable claims to the throne: for the poets of this period, laureate self-construction finds its not-so-secret sharer in dynastic legitimation. In Chapter 1, I outline the differences between Ricardian

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