

Introduction

This book is a study of early English literary production. It is not a study of early English authorship, although it could easily be mistaken for one, for it focuses on six medieval and early modern poets who have often been identified as authors; it asks why these poets made the formal choices they did; it measures their claims to originality, creativity, and authority against the conventions of the literary traditions in which they wrote; and it situates their texts within the different intellectual, political, and historical currents that shaped their working lives. But where a study of authorship would offer a portrait of the great writer, whose autonomous genius is presumed to be the singular origin of great writing, this study has a different end. It aims to paint, not a portrait, but a landscape, one that puts before the eyes of the reader all the materials and labor, both imaginative and physical, that have produced the literary text. There is no author in this picture. Instead, there are makers, and materials, and the several energies that have brought them together: a distribution of the literary work across the landscape, instead of its concentration in the hands of a solitary figure.

If the distinction between “authorship” and “literary production” appears merely semantic to us, it would not have seemed so during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. This is because the word “author” carried great weight in the literary culture of that time. According to the Scholastics, as Alastair Minnis has observed, the *auctor* was a writer of the highest power and privilege. In contrast to the scribe (who copied the words of others), the compiler (who gathered the words of others), and the commentator (who explicated the words of others), the *auctor* alone was licensed to voice his views without reliance upon some pre-existing textual authority.¹ Only the *auctor*, as Bonaventure put it, could compose a text in which his own words formed “the principal part,” with the words of others “being annexed merely by way of confirmation.”² The scholastic model of authorship was thus hierarchical in its assignment of literary rights, in two respects. On the one hand, the *auctor* was the only participant in this

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system who could claim that his discourse proceeded from himself alone. He was, as Minnis puts it, the only writer who could assert the right to bring new texts, or at least new parts of texts, “into being.”³ But on the other, the *auctor* was also the sole figure allowed to appropriate the words of other discourses, and to bend those words to what Robert Edwards calls his “agency” and will.⁴ Originality and agency: these were the values that defined the work of the scholastic author and distinguished it from the labor of lesser writers.

The scholastic model of authorship has been durable in scholarship on late-medieval literary culture, and this is surely because in some contexts, it makes excellent sense. Certain academic philosophers, such as Thomas Aquinas or John Duns Scotus, can obviously be called *auctores*, and certain poets, such as Dante Alighieri, clearly sought to position themselves as literary *auctores* in turn.⁵ But when one moves out of the thirteenth century and into the fourteenth, and out of Latin and into the vernacular, the model works less well, for four reasons. First, much of the English literature to which it has been applied was written from the late fourteenth century onwards, after the dominance of Scholasticism had already begun to wane. Second, the model hails from a decidedly academic milieu, while most vernacular literature was written in cities, towns, cloisters, and courts. Third, the conventions and customs of early literature vary from place to place and language to language, and so it is unlikely that different vernacular writers understood their work in the terms of a single theory of writing – or at least, that they all understood that theory of writing in the same way. Did Geoffrey Chaucer and Eustache Deschamps believe they were *auctores*, in the specifically scholastic sense of the term? They certainly did not call themselves by that name, but by others, such as “faiseur,” “poete,” “makere,” and “translateur.”⁶ Fourth, and finally, the relationship of the Latin term *auctor* to the modern concept of authorship is by no means clear, for the word “authorship” appears in western vernaculars only at the turn of the eighteenth century. No doubt, medieval literary writers did many of the same things that modern authors do, but we risk a certain critical anachronism if do not inflect our accounts of early literary practice in light of the terms and tropes that premodern writers used to define it for themselves.

For all these reasons, this book will propose a different hermeneutic for the study of early English poetry, one that hinges, not upon the notion of “authorship,” but upon two other ideas drawn from premodern literary theory: “matter” and “making.” By “matter,” I refer to something close to what a modern writer would call the “source” or “content” of

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a piece of writing – but not exactly. This is because, in medieval Latin, Italian, French, and English literature alike, the word “matter” at once denoted the source of a literary text, the topic of that text, and the physical, conceptual, and historical materials out of which the text had been made. The word was thus more capacious than either “source” or “content,” and so it is best understood, as I explain below, as a relational term. By “making,” I refer to literary composition as it was conceptualized and practiced by western European poets at work in the courts of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. As we will see, English “making” in particular was grounded both in the precepts of classical rhetoric and in the practice of the French makers, or “faiseurs.”⁷ A maker began by finding a set of materials on which he proposed to work, and then disposed and ornamented those materials so that they took on a new shape and feel. The narrative could be reordered, or certain passages in the source could be expanded or compressed, or the diction, verse-form, rhyme, and meter of the original could be changed. In each case, however, these changes could only go so far, and they do not seem to have been understood, either by the makers or their readers, to represent the only form that the matter in question might take.⁸

In the broadest terms, this book will understand “authorship” as a product-oriented mode of writing, one wherein matter is given an authoritative and superseding form by a single, authoritative figure. It defines “making,” by contrast, as an ongoing process of labor, one wherein matter is continuously remade by many hands and for different contexts. The ideological differences and differing methodologies implied by these two attitudes towards writing may explain why the appeal of making is often to be found less in any projection of aesthetic autonomy than in the propulsive energies of the making process itself. Again and again, the poetry of the makers directs our eyes toward its formal and material debts – toward the pre-existing ideas, texts, contexts, and histories that it has reworked into some apparently new form. Again and again, it tells the story of its own becoming, through the attention it draws to the *ductus* of its composition, as Mary Carruthers might say, or through the narrative interest it displays in its own “formation,” as Kara Gaston puts it.⁹ In making, in other words, the literary product does not alienate itself from the history of its own production.¹⁰ It does not conceal the genesis of its materials, or its ties to its contexts, or the traces of the hands that have made it. Instead, it opens itself up to its readers, so that they might see what it was made from and how it was made.

Let’s begin with the term “matter.” When early writers refer to the “matere,” “materia,” “matter,” or “matiere” of a text, they typically have one

of three things in mind. The first is the words of the text, and by extension, the things that those words denote: plots, themes, characters, settings, and the like. This is what Middle English writers usually mean when they refer to “my matter” or “this matter,” or when they identify a certain text as the “matter” they plan to use as the basis for some new work. A second sense of “matter” persists in English to this day, and refers to the subject matter, or topic, that a text handles – the “matter” of a commonplace theme, such as anger or lust, or the “matter” of a well-known storytelling tradition, such as the “matter of Britain” or “matter of Troy.”¹¹ In its third and last sense, “matter” denotes what Aristotle terms the substratum of an individual thing: the underlying stuff in which the form of a particular inheres.¹² Geoffrey Chaucer uses the term in this sense when he writes that “mater apetiteth forme alwey,” as does Edmund Spenser when he envisions creation as a two-part process, one wherein each particular first gathers its “matter” from “Chaos” before it is then bound together with what he calls “forme and feature.”¹³

As Kellie Robertson has observed, these three senses of literary “matter” – textual, topical, and philosophical – have their roots in the Aristotelian culture of the later Middle Ages, and indeed in the philosophy of Aristotle himself, who did not shrink from stating that words, like all created things, should be understood as hylomorphic compounds of matter and form.¹⁴ Following this line of thought, literary critics working in the scholastic tradition often analyzed texts in relation to the four Aristotelian causes – the final, efficient, formal, and material cause – even though they did not always agree on what the material cause of a text might be.¹⁵ Geoffrey of Vinsauf, for example, sensibly suggests that the material cause of poetry is its words, which he likens to “mater hyle,” or “prime matter,” before it has been bonded with form.¹⁶ But other thinkers were more idiosyncratic in their definitions of literary matter, which they saw, alternately, as the topic a text proposed to treat, the things and persons that text represented, the events recounted in a narrative, or even the physical stuff – the “parchment [*pergamenum*] with marks [*notulis*] on it,” as Conrad of Hirsau flatly puts it – from which books were made.¹⁷

The scholastic tradition thus offers us little consensus on the question of what literature was understood to be made from, and this lack of consensus appears to have prompted two responses in the vernacular literary culture of premodern England. The first was to embrace the ambiguity latent within the term “matter,” and to play upon it to clever effect. Some early poets do this by analogizing their labor to more obviously physical kinds of work. Writing a text, they suggest, is akin to building a house; to molding clay upon a potter’s wheel; to impressing a shape upon a coin;

to plowing or harrowing a field; to framing materials within or upon a structure; or to winnowing wheat from chaff.¹⁸ Other poets prefer to joke about the purported physicality of language. Chaucer, for instance, pokes fun at friars – who were stereotypically thought to possess an enormous appetite for matters of the intellect and the belly alike – by punning upon the different sorts of matter into which the mendicants dipped their fingers at the table. “A flye and eek a frere,” he remarks, “wol falle in every dyssh and eek mateere.”¹⁹ Two hundred years later, Shakespeare’s Hamlet makes a similarly punning joke when Polonius happens to ask the prince what he’s reading.

HAMLET: “Words, words, words.”
 POLONIUS: “What is the matter, my lord?”
 HAMLET: “Between who?”
 POLONIUS: “I mean the matter that you read, my lord.”²⁰

“Matter,” here, could refer equally to the “words” that Hamlet mutters, to some topic or “matter” of concern, or to the book in Hamlet’s hands, itself composed of physical “matter,” and so the ambiguity of the term offers the prince ample room to dissemble at the old courtier’s expense.

Jokes and metaphors, then, are one way that early writers responded to the polysemy of “matter” as a term. Their other response was to subject it to intense literary-critical scrutiny, and especially, to subdivide the general category of “literary matter” into its particular types and kinds, usually on the basis of what they believed its genre, affect, or ontology to be. Once again, this drive to taxonomize the matter of literature likely stems from the prevailing Aristotelianism of late-medieval intellectual culture, wherein meaning was typically understood in essentializing rather than relational terms. A good example of this line of thought can be found in Chaucer’s translation of “maestos . . . modos” from the start of Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Here, Chaucer renders the Latin not as “grim modes” or “sad manners,” but as “sorrowful matere,” and so Boethius’s words are implicitly understood to be “sorrowful,” neither because they are sung in a melancholic style, nor because Boethius intended them to convey melancholy, but because their substance is held to be melancholic.²¹ Similarly essentializing points of view often led premodern writers to insist that different genres of literary matter demanded different kinds of formal treatment, or *formae tractandi*.²² Giles of Rome, for instance, claims that “moral mater,” the matter of “rethorik and the politik,” and “mathematik matir” all require a different “maner of processe,” or expository mode, and comments of this sort are ubiquitous in later English writing as well.²³

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We read of “perilous matter,” “virtuous matter,” and “historical matter,” of “holy matter” and of “hard matter,” each one possessing its own character and demanding – so we are told – its own, peculiar treatment.²⁴

By the late sixteenth century, early English literary culture had been shaped by more than two hundred years of this thinking, and it shows. Spenser and Sidney, for example, continue to taxonomize and classify the kinds of matter with which they work, and Shakespeare seems to have been especially fond of the many inflections that “matter” could carry. He uses it twenty-eight times in *Hamlet*, and in such a pointed way that the tragedy seems to produce, as Margaret Ferguson once put it, “a curious effect of materializing the word” itself.²⁵ The long history of the term and its wide range of uses, however, presents no small problem to scholars, because we cannot be certain, either on the whole or in the case of particular writers, whether the word “matter” meant the same thing to poets at work in different places and at different times; whether the matter of a word was held to be identical, or merely analogous, to the matter of a thought or the matter of a physical thing; or whether the character and power of certain types of matter were understood to stem from that matter’s source, from its topic, or from some mysterious force lodged in the very words themselves.

For all of these reasons, this book will follow Aristotle in arguing that “literary matter” is best understood as a relative term, one that designates whatever a given text was understood to be made out of.²⁶ To play upon the philosopher’s own example, the “matter” of a bronze statue of Apollo is, depending upon one’s point of view, the torso, head, legs, and arms that make up the god’s anthropomorphic figure; or the bronze out of which these *membra* have been forged; or the copper and tin out of which the bronze has been alloyed; or the matrices of atoms that serve as the substrata of the copper and tin.²⁷ In a similar way, the “matter” of Chaucer’s *Troilus* can be understood, variously, as the words out of which the poem’s clauses are constructed; or the ink and parchment in which the words have taken shape; or the literary sources from which the poem’s characters, plot, and themes are drawn; or even the ideas, feelings, and historical situations that shaped Chaucer, consciously and unconsciously, while he wrote his poem. Matter, in other words, is a term that only holds meaning when it is construed in relation to the form that a given thing possesses at a given time in its process of formation. It does not simply designate “physicality” or “materiality” in our colloquial sense of those words, but rather designates at once the elements out of which a thing has been made and the specific part of a thing in which its form is understood to inhere at a given moment, and which that form requires in order to persist. The word

“matter” is thus something of a catchall in early literary culture, because it can and often does refer to the several combinations of textual, physical, and conceptual materials from which a given text was understood to have been made. As one etymologically minded early critic remarks, “matter [*materia*] is that from which everything is made up [*unde constat quodlibet*], and this is where it gets its name: it is just like [*quasi*] the mother of all things [*mater rei*].”²⁸

“Matter,” then, was the blanket term that early English writers used to identify the set of diverse materials that they reworked into verse. “Making” was their word for this process of reworking. In the context of medieval philosophy and theology, “making” was often simply defined as the act of producing something out of pre-existing matter, as opposed to the act of creating something from thin air.²⁹ The Lombard, for instance, remarks that “creation [*creare*] is properly to make something out of nothing [*de nihilo aliquid facere*], while making [*facere*] is to produce something [*aliquid operari*] not purely from nothing but out of matter [*de materia*].”³⁰ In literary contexts, however, both the meaning and the range of practices associated with the term were more fluid. Some scholars, noting the similarity of English “making” to the work of the French *faiseurs*, have identified it as a relation of French courtly verse, one that draws attention “to its technical intricacy,” bases its “generic distinctions on prosody rather than content,” and makes use of “a polysemous discourse of riddles, *doubles entendres*, allegory, and allusion.”³¹ Others have pointed up the resonances between making and other modes of craftsmanship in premodern culture – by noting the kinship of poetic making with theories of the anthology, for instance, or by linking it to practices of manuscript production – while still others have understood it in light of views on generation and reproduction that were well-known in the theology, philosophy, and science of early Europe.³² Premodern definitions of the term are no less varied. In early English discussions of poetry, for instance, we find that “making” is now used as a term that broadly defines the labor of the poet; now as a term that designates literary technique as a particular kind of “craft”; now as a general term that describes how a writer should manipulate his “mateer”; and now as a term for grouping together a set of writers who worked during a specific literary-historical period.³³

As one might gather from this range of definitions, it is unlikely that a single, unified theory of “making” existed during the two-hundred years of writing between the reigns of Edward III and Elizabeth I. But the makers do adopt some common postures and make some of the same claims when they write about themselves and their work.³⁴ First, they often position

themselves as a mediating presence within the frame of their poems, after the manner of a storyteller. Where modern writers are sometimes said to represent the matter of their texts, premodern poets claim instead to mediate it – to “reherce” or “endite” their matter in new words, as they often say, for an audience of readers or listeners. Second, the makers often claim that their poems are compilations of pre-existing materials, rather than creations of the imagination.³⁵ They typically assert – to a degree that may or may not be convincing in any given case – that they’re not simply making things up. This resistance to overt fictionality may also align with their tendency to traffic in intellectual and moral authority, or the useful information and “counsel” that, as Walter Benjamin once observed, the storyteller may wish to convey to us.³⁶ Third, and finally, the makers often imply, or even state outright, that their poems are an imitation of something else, or some variation upon it. Indeed, these poets seem to have seen it as part of the literary game to invite their readers to compare what they read with its sources, models, and analogues – to hear “passa la nave mia colma d’ oblio” in one ear while they heard “my galy charged with forgetfulness” in the other. None of these techniques, of course, are wholly unique to early English literature, and they do not always account for what a particular maker is doing in a particular poem. But they do tend to recur in those moments where premodern court poets tell us what they wish or intend to do, and so we may accept them as a reasonable guide to the attitudes of the makers on the whole.

Mediation, compilation, and imitation: so much for “making” in theory. But how exactly was it practiced? To start, we might observe that the techniques of making recall those of classical oratory, and it was in fact a deeply rhetorical art, one that laid special stress upon the first three stages of rhetoric: invention, disposition, and elocution. Although no systematic Middle English treatise on making survives, we can get a good sense of how making and rhetoric are tied together if we examine the medieval Latin guides to the composition of verse. In these handbooks, which took direct inspiration from Ciceronian and pseudo-Ciceronian rhetoric, the process of writing poetry is usually divided into three stages.³⁷ First, the poet decides upon the particular matter that he will work with. Typically, this is what is what Rita Copeland has identified as “common matter,” or “*materia* that has previously been realized in some kind of linguistic form.”³⁸ Second, the poet reworks this matter so that its substance is preserved even while it takes on a new shape. A writer may rearrange the narrative order of the matter, abbreviate and amplify its different parts, and restructure it through division, provided that he does not obscure

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the overall subject or sense of the received matter.³⁹ Third, and finally, the poet adorns and embellishes the matter he has invented and disposed. He clothes it in figures, improves its diction, and orders its meters, all while paying close attention to the greater balance, effect, and feel of the new text that he has made. For as Matthew of Vendôme puts it, just as the “matter of a statue [*materia statuae*] is rough and not outstanding in value until polished [*expolita*] by an eager artist,” so too is the “matter of language [*verborum materia*] rough and awkward” until the writer adorns it with “some figure or trope or rhetorical color [*coloris rhetorici*].”⁴⁰

The *artes poetriae* exercised a considerable influence upon Middle English literary production, so much so that allusions to this three-stage method of writing often appear in English vernacular poetry from at least the mid-fourteenth century onwards – though instead of three stages, vernacular poets most often speak of two.⁴¹ The author of *Wynnere and Wastour*, for example, defines poetic labor both as the “mak[ing]” of “myrthes” and as the “fynd[ing]” of “matirs,” a procedure that involves the tying together, or “wroght[ing],” of old words to new forms.⁴² John Lydgate argues that poets “make and vnmake” pre-existing matter, first through its redispotion into some new narrative order, and then through its adornment with new figures.⁴³ Philip Sidney suggests that, in addition to honing one’s style through practice, there are “two principal parts,” or stages, to literary composition: first, the invention of “matter to be expressed by words,” and second, the making of “words to express the matter.”⁴⁴ And Ben Jonson argues, as late as the 1630s, that “to write well,” a poet must first “excogitate his matter,” and only after that move on to considerations of “what ought to be written, and after what manner,” and to what effect.⁴⁵

I will admit that “making” may seem too rude and mechanical to account for how compelling poetry comes into being, for it is a procedure that locates the origins of literature, not in some enrapturing moment of inspiration, but in the tactical arrangement of contingent materials that have been selected, and remade, to produce a specific effect. This is no doubt why many critics have, over the years, sought to distinguish “making” from “authorship,” a word that better connotes the sort of wonder and magic – the feeling of discovering a new world, as John Keats memorably put it – that post-romantic readers have come to expect from encounters with the literary. In these critical accounts, “making” is usually declared to be a lesser form of poetic activity, one that early poets held subordinate to true “authorship” or true “poetry.”⁴⁶ But the evidence for such a hierarchy of “making,” “poetry,” and “authorship” during the premodern period is very scant. For one thing, premodern writers typically use the word “maker”

as a term of praise or as a neutral term, and not as a term of denigration or condescension. For example, while Elizabethan critics certainly mark a distinction between “versifying” and “poetry,” they do so on the basis, not of literary technique, but of the character and source of the matter that the writer treats.⁴⁷ In the medieval period, in turn, a range of bibliographical evidence suggests that, even if they were not identical in sense, the categories of “maker,” “poet,” and “author” were often interchangeable in the minds of poets, scribes, and illuminators, and what is more, the techniques purportedly associated with authorship were rarely divided from those associated with making in discussions of medieval literary theory.⁴⁸ Indeed, the closest thing to a vernacular *ars poetica* that survives from the later Middle Ages, Deschamps’ *L’art de dictier*, defines its topic as “l’art de dictier et de fere” in its very first line, and Deschamps’ seeming ambivalence about the distinction between these two terms (“dictier” and “fere”) was echoed by his English contemporaries.⁴⁹ Chaucer, for example, does not differentiate his own “makyng” from the work of those writers who are also renowned for their “poesye,” and Lydgate suggests that the classical *auctores*, such as Ovid and Cicero, “compiled” their books in the same way that medieval makers do.⁵⁰ In approaching those rare cases where early English poets do make explicit claims to authorship, then, we should exercise some critical restraint. Chaucer calls himself the “auctour” of what he writes just once, immediately before he is carried up to the heavens by an eagle who lectures him on the principles of grammar.⁵¹

“Matter” and “making” were thus what Raymond Williams calls “keywords” in the early English literary system.⁵² On the one hand, the two terms marked out places in the field of cultural production where writers could find common ground with each other, and where their individual labors could be made legible in a shared idiom. On the other, they served as sites of contestation within that field – as places where these writers could argue with each other about the proper means, ends, and definition of literary work. The doubled role that the terms played in the production and reception of early literature certainly accounts for their prevalence in early English discussions of poetry, and for the varied way they were often defined in early literary theory. But how did these terms, and the notions of “matter” and “making” that they indicated, shape premodern literary practice?

This book proposes two answers to this question. First, it argues that late medieval and early modern court poets followed the same basic procedure when they sat down to write a poem. All differences of style, genre, and theme aside, both groups broadly held that the composition of literature