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Late Medieval Benedictine Anxieties and the Politics of John Lydgate

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Abstract

In *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, James Simpson has argued that the many affiliations of John Lydgate (1370-1449) mitigate against the traditional critical portrayal of the poet as a mere Lancastrian propagandist. My dissertation explores the influence of Lydgate's major affiliation, his Benedictine monasticism, on his political work. I argue that the autonomy of the Benedictine order was already under siege a hundred years before the Tudor dissolution of the monasteries and that the resulting anxieties and remedial strategies of the Benedictine order could not help but have an impact on the work of a fifteenth-century Benedictine poet. I attempt to show that, far from being uniformly "pro-Lancastrian," Lydgate's political poetry (which comprises just about all of his secular work and much of his religious work) is often openly resistant to the main activities of the Lancastrian regime: the usurpation and murder of Richard II; the suppression of the alien priories and the taxation of the church; the invasion of Normandy and the continuation of the war in France after the Treaty of Troyes and the death of Henry V; and the encroachment of the Lancastrian hierarchical church—under the direction of a succession of powerful archbishops of Canterbury—on the autonomy of the religious orders, the monks in particular. I read Lydgate's works as a reflection of Benedictine policy that, more often than not, stands in opposition not only to the Lancastrian dynasty, but to the official hierarchy of the orthodox church in England, and I reconstruct the poet as a Benedictine spokesman very much in control of his own voice.

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Dr. Richard Firth Green, who by his own example taught future generations the meaning of the term "literary historicism," has done me a great honour to read my thesis as external examiner.

Thanks also to Dr. Nicholas Von Maltzahn who first accepted me into the Masters programme after a long exile from the halls of academe; to Dr. David Carlson whose provocative and engaging seminars on Chaucer and Langland taught me to challenge authority of all kinds and inspired me to explore the politics of the medieval church into which I was born and bred—a church whose authority still haunts me today; and to Dr. Geoffrey Rector who showed me the Middle Ages does not begin with Richard II, and that Malory did not invent the legend of King Arthur.

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The English church—like the church all over Europe—was divided and subdivided by factions who fought each other on one issue and joined on another, only to split apart when some new controversy presented itself. The effect of these shifting alliances and internecine fights was to make the church incapable of uniting against the greatest threat to its traditional understanding of itself. That threat in the sixteenth century was not heresy, but secular government.

(Marius, *Thomas More*, 253)

Introduction

Ac there shal come a kyng and confesse yow religiouses
 And bete yow as the bible telleth, for brekyng of youre reule
 And amende monyales, monkes, and chanouns
 And putten hem to her penaunce *ad pristinum statum ire*
 And barounes with erles beten hem, thorough Beatus virres techyng
 ...
 And thanne shal the abbot of Abyngdoun and all his issue for evere
 Have a knok of a kyng, and incurable the wounde.

(*Piers Plowman* B 10.314-24)

John Lydgate (1370-1449) was a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Bury St.

Edmunds. While this may seem like a commonplace observation, its implications for the understanding of Lydgate's poetry have never been adequately explored. In fact, one could make the observation (and some have) that Lydgate's pre-Reformation monasticism is at least one reason his work has been so badly denigrated over the years (Dane and Bessemyer). Joseph Ritson's vitriolic condemnation of Lydgate as "a voluminous, prosaick, and drivelling monk" (Schirmer 258) reflects a persistent anti-monastic bias that, even today, limits discussion of the poet's work. Lydgate's *oeuvre* has often been studied as the prolific output of a "monk of Bury," but seldom with any real attempt to understand what it meant to be a Benedictine monk in the early part of the fifteenth century, or how that particular profession, at that particular time, might have informed his writing. Even Alan Renoir, generally a defender of Lydgate, finds it convenient to concede from the outset (in the Lydgate bibliography in the *Manual of Writings in Middle English*), the following:

Regardless of the patron or the genre, [Lydgate's] work tends to express the kind of sentiments which we have come to associate with the established powers, and it expresses them often and without reservation: Holy Church is always right, and the Lollards deserve merciless repression; the King is all good, and his opponents would hurt the entire nation; England is perfect, and her enemies are despicable slanderers. (6.1810)

This characterization of Lydgate's politics is, unfortunately for Lydgate, the alpha and omega of most modern Lydgate studies, and it is an assessment that I will be refuting or qualifying at every stage of this dissertation. Contained within Renoir's summary are at least six of the most widely cherished scholarly assumptions about a poet who is much easier to ridicule than to read.¹

Renoir's "Holy Church" suggests a Robertsonian vision of medieval Catholicism, with its "quiet hierarchies" and uniform orthodoxy to which every Christian would adhere without question. It need hardly be stated that in Lydgate's day, "Holy Church" meant different things to different factions: to friars than to monks, to the regular clergy than to the diocesan clergy, to abbots than to bishops, to Carthusians than to Benedictines, to Archbishop Arundel than to the Lollard William Thorpe, to the English than to the French, to Pope Urban VI in Rome than to the anti-pope Clarence VII in Avignon, and indeed, to Chaucer than to Lydgate. All of these pairings, including the last, illustrate what are often diametrically opposed positions within the church.² As

¹Renoir's own study, *The Poetry of John Lydgate*, written in 1967 after a close reading of *Troy Book*, *Siege of Thebes*, and *Fall of Princes* projects quite a different view: that of a poet in transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who is not afraid to question the judgement of authority. In Renoir's reading of *Siege of Thebes*, for example, Lydgate emerges as an anti-war poet, critical of a ruler who shows more courage than prudence in leading a nation into a disastrous war (110-35).

²As many critics have noted, Chaucer's anticlericalism, while cutting across all segments of the church, is directed more against the regulars than the diocesans (Straker, "Deference and Difference," 6-8; Fleming, 1071). He particularly disliked friars, pillorying them in verse and possibly even pommeling them in the streets, if one can believe the legend. As a monk, Lydgate may have agreed with Chaucer about certain kinds of mendicants (though there is no trace of anti-fraternalism to be found in any of Lydgate's work), but he certainly takes exception to

for his defence of the king, Lydgate was a “Lancastrian” propagandist, to be sure—when it suited his purposes;³ when it did not, he was not averse to refuting official bellicose Lancastrian policy in poems as unambiguously pacifistic as they were anti-conquest.

That Lydgate is a Benedictine monk from the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds is, I argue, the most important statement one can make about his work. Modern Lydgate scholarship has been informed (as have we all) by a Whiggish, post-Reformation historiography that consciously or unconsciously attributes elements of superstition, narrow-mindedness, popery, idleness, and decadence to late medieval monasticism, a historiography that has suffered from a systemic Protestant bias since the Tudor commissioners first wrote their condemnatory visitation reports in preparation for the pillage of the monasteries. The most influential Lydgate scholars (Henry MacCracken, Walter Schirmer, Derek Pearsall) are all quite conscious of Lydgate’s monastic background (which they tend to regard as an intellectual liability), but they nevertheless ultimately depict Lydgate as a kind of freelance courtly hack whose monastic vocation exercises little restraint on his personal ambitions.⁴ I take exception to the tendency of twentieth-century

Chaucer’s portrayal of monks in his own prologue to *Siege of Thebes*.

³The term “Lancastrian” will likewise need further dissection. The Lancastrian regime was insecure and riddled with factions from start to finish; it is no easy task to define Lancastrian policy, particularly during the minority years of Henry VI.

⁴Both Schirmer and Pearsall discuss Lydgate’s monastic background (Pearsall at chapter length in *John Lydgate*) but their studies do not take the implications of that background into account.

literary criticism to refer to Lydgate as a “professional poet.”⁵ Lydgate as “princepleaser” is the dominant reading of Lydgate today, a reading that tells only part of the story.⁶

Though Lydgate may have received occasional commissions and gifts for his work, and despite his recurrent plea of poverty—which is, in his case, a rhetorical device related to the dullness topos so common among fifteenth-century poets (Lawton 762-69)—there is no evidence that Lydgate was ever driven “by the need for money,” as Pearsall claims (*John Lydgate* 294). Lydgate never earned his living writing poetry, and, unlike Chaucer, he was never completely dependent on the government for his livelihood. David Carlson has noted the degree of dependency that was Chaucer’s relationship to the Exchequer, a dependency that, however, stands in marked contrast to Lydgate, whose livelihood was always guaranteed by his order (*Chaucer’s Jobs*, Chapter 1). Lydgate’s prodigious output—its sheer massiveness perhaps the biggest deterrent to Lydgate scholarship—is due to the financial security provided by his abbey, not to the putative patronage of Henry V and his peers. Of course Lydgate’s poetry is often opportunistic, but there is nothing to suggest it was ever motivated by any personal financial concerns. “Professional” he certainly was, but writing was not his primary profession. Lydgate

⁵He was a “professional poet” only in the sense that Richard Firth Green describes his role: “He was employed by the court but not himself a member of it” (211). But Green assumes a level of servility and subservience in Lydgate that I argue is not at all characteristic of his work.

⁶And to be fair to Green, he applies the thesis to most of the poets of the day, not just to Lydgate. Green makes clear that Lydgate’s career as Lancastrian apologist is confined to the latter part of the 1420s, and that “his return to the cloister at Bury marks the virtual end of his role as a Lancastrian propagandist” (190). In any case, there is no denying that Lydgate was a “princepleaser.” Lydgate wrote primarily for the aristocracy, not usually for bourgeois audiences, and his work was certainly conditioned by aristocratic tastes—Green’s main thesis. The Lancastrians must have liked his work or it would not have been so greatly in demand. What I am contesting throughout this dissertation are the motives attributed to Lydgate, and the degree of his supposed complicity with the Lancastrian political agenda.

was a Benedictine monk, an ordained priest, and the monastic priesthood was his vocation; his first duty, as a Benedictine, was obedience to his abbot. As a monk of Bury, Lydgate enjoyed far more intellectual and financial independence than any of his contemporary poets, including Chaucer, Gower, and Hoccleve. In an age particularly sensitive to heterodoxy, he was authorized, as an orthodox priest, to lecture with impunity, and so long as his criticisms were directed at classical or historical figures, and only elliptically at contemporary authority, neither princes nor bishops would have cause to object. Though he complained when his aristocratic patrons, such as Humphrey, the duke of Gloucester, reneged on whatever financial agreement had been made between them, there is no evidence that Lydgate ever worked for himself and not for his abbey. The Benedictines offered Lydgate a form of academic tenure, a job for life; a series of supportive abbots provided him with an Oxford education, access to the best libraries in England, and the freedom to pursue a long and varied writing career, often outside the confines of the monastery precincts. There is no reason to suppose, however, that he was ever free from his abbot's direction. Lydgate was a monk who wrote poetry in the service of his order, not a professional princepleaser in the service of the court. The distinction is critical.

Next to the Vulgate Bible, the *Rule of St. Benedict* was probably the most important influence on Lydgate's life and writings. The *Rule* was the common bond of all the monastic orders, from the Black Monks for whom it was first written to the reform monks such as the Cluniacs, Cistercians, and Carthusians, who generally distinguished themselves by a more rigid interpretation of its *regulae*.⁷ As both a constitutional and spiritual guide, the *Rule* was the

⁷The *Rule* was often revisited by monastic reformers, many of whom broke away from the Benedictines to form new orders. The Benedictines themselves had adopted a number of supplementary rules, such as the *Regularis Concordia* under Dunstan and King Edgar (Knowles,

primary text-book for all novices; excerpts from the *Rule* were read to the community every day of a monk's life, on an annual cycle as food for meditation (Knowles, *Monastic Order in England*, 3-15). Though Benedict could not have foreseen, and obviously did not provide for, the exigencies imposed by the administration of vast estates—the development of the obediary system, for example, which necessarily exempted many of the supervisors from a good part of the daily prayer ritual of the conventual monks—the main business of the monasteries, even in the fifteenth century, was still prayer and meditation. On a purely pragmatic level, any monastery which did not follow the daily Office would soon find itself without the support and protection of its aristocratic benefactors, and, indeed, since the twelfth century the Benedictines had been feeling the pinch of competition provided by the stricter practices of the more austere orders, such as those of the Cistercians and Carthusians.

It is a fundamental claim of this study that, as a monk, Lydgate would be bound by the vow of absolute obedience to his abbot on which Benedict had based his Rule. The first eight chapters of the *Rule* deal explicitly with the relationship of the monks to their abbot. The Benedictine novice surrenders his will (but not his intellect) to his abbot in twelve degrees of humility. Obedience was then, and is today, a *sine qua non* for admission to a Benedictine abbey. Anyone curious about Lydgate's constant use of the modesty topos need look no further than the

Monastic Order, 31-46). As a result of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 under Pope Innocent III, the Benedictines voluntarily adopted a system of controls (imitative of the Cistercians) that would, among other legislation, make the individual monasteries subject to the visitation of Benedictine delegates who would report to elected presidents on the conduct of the individual monasteries. The abbot of Bury was one of the leaders in the execution of these controls (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 373).

Rule of St. Benedict for an explanation. In Benedict's schema, Lydgate was a craftsman. Chapter 57 has specific guidelines for craftsmen of the monastery:

Artifices si sunt in monasterio, cum omni humilitate faciant ipsas artes, si permiserit abbas. Quod si aliquis ex eis extollitur pro scientia artis suae, eo quod videatur aliquid conferre monasterio, hic talis erigatur ab ipse arte et denuo per eum non transeat, nisi forte humiliato ei iterum abbas jubeat.

If there be craftsmen in the monastery, let them practice their crafts with all humility, provided the Abbot give permission. But if any one of them becomes conceited over his skill in his craft, supposing that he is conferring a benefit on the monastery, let him be taken from his craft and no longer exercise it unless, after he has humbled himself, the Abbot again gives him permission. (McCann 128-29)

The fact that in a monastery the size of Bury St. Edmunds, the fifteenth-century abbot was no longer the *paterfamilias* as assumed in the *Rule*—that he lived a life quite separate from the conventual monks, and would be away on business much of the time, or that much of the abbot's authority would be delegated to a prior and possibly even sub-prior—does not alter the basic principle of absolute abbatial authority.⁸ The *Rule* encouraged private study and the pursuit of learning that leads to wisdom; the abbot was expected to take counsel from his learned senior monks. But each monastery bore the stamp of its abbot; any study of Lydgate's politics must, therefore, take into account the politics of his supervisor. Lydgate served under five abbots, three of whom—all Williams—were prominent figures who shaped his literary career: Cratfield, Exeter, and Curteys.⁹ Abbot Cratfield (1390-1415) was an able administrator who restored the abbey to financial stability after the plague and the Great Revolt of 1381 had caused much hardship. His

⁸At its peak, c.1200, Bury seems to have held positions for prior, sub-prior, and third-prior, as well as the offices of cellarer, kitchener, almoner, etc. (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 713).

⁹Lydgate joined the Benedictines under the abbacy of John Tymworth (1379-1389) and he died under the abbacy of William Babington.(1446-1453). See Arnold 3: xxii-xxxiii.

two-part register, the *Registrum Rubeum Vestiarii*, is a chronicle of disputes waged between the abbey and the bishops of Ely, Norwich, and Canterbury. Abbot Exeter (1415-29), though a much less competent administrator than either his predecessor or successor, was nevertheless elected president of the General Chapter of Black Monks (1420-23) and, even before that, was sufficiently esteemed by Henry V to be asked to serve as English delegate at the Council of Constance in 1417 (Elston 19; Pantin, *Documents* 2:134). Unfortunately, only fragments remain of Exeter's register, which was largely destroyed by fire.¹⁰

None of Lydgate's abbots, however, had the impact on the abbey that Curteys was to have, and none left behind the detailed records that he left: fifteen archival books in all, the most important of which are his registers, MSS Additional 14848 and 7096 (Thomson, *Archives*, 33-40; 135-39).¹¹ From the content of these registers, which include the abbot's own disciplinary constitutions, it is very clear that Curteys was a superior commanding officer and stern disciplinarian.¹² Those who have studied the abbot's life (Goodwin, Knowles, Elston) have been utterly convinced of Curteys's solid leadership abilities; all his biographers rank him alongside Baldwin and Samson as one of the three great abbots in the five-hundred-year history of Bury St.

¹⁰Excerpts of Exeter's register are bound together with a Cratfield register in MS Cotton Tiberius B. IX, fols 5-203. See Rodney Thomson, *Archives of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*, 135.

¹¹In general when citing manuscripts I will give only the collection name and number, and pagination if appropriate. Full details (place, library) will be given in the Bibliography.

¹²The abbot's constitutions are in MS Additional 7096 fols 202-211. Curteys was especially severe with certain monks who used their aristocratic connections to gain privileges in the monastery (university placement or promotion to monastic offices): "Each monk should argue neither yes nor no, should flee rather than embrace worldly honours, and always humbly obey the command of his superior, whom the monk has placed over his own head in the place of God" (Trans. Elston, 121; from MS Additional 7096, fol. 209v).

Edmunds. Rodney Thomson has called the period of Curteys's rule "the high-point of archival activity and expertise at Bury" (*Archives* 34). It would be a fundamental error to assume therefore, that Lydgate was ever acting entirely on his own behalf, especially during the 1420s and early 1430s, the years of Curteys's rule that coincided with the period of the poet's greatest political involvement. Because of the extended illness of Abbot Exeter, his predecessor, Curteys, actually took effective charge of the abbey as prior long before he was elected in 1429. As prior, Curteys seems to have been responsible for Lydgate's appointment to Hatfield Broad Oaks priory in 1423 and for the poet's trip to Paris in the company of Richard Beauchamp, the earl of Warwick; as abbot he was certainly responsible for Lydgate's return to the mother house and for all the literary work that Lydgate undertook in the 1430s.

Apart from his skills as an administrator and an archivist, Curteys was a remarkable political animal who worked tirelessly on behalf of his own abbey and for the Benedictine order in general. He understood the importance of public relations and propaganda in the welfare of the abbey. He had a firm grasp of the patronage system and the way in which it played out in East Anglia, and was careful to seek the protection of the most powerful men in the county, including the Beauchamps; the Beauforts, Thomas (duke of Exeter) and Henry (Cardinal Beaufort); the earl of Stafford (later the duke of Buckingham who married Anne Neville, a daughter of Joan Beaufort); and William de la Pole, the duke of Suffolk¹³—not to forget Henry VI himself, to whom Curteys became a good friend and mentor. Much of the patronage-seeking that has been attributed to Lydgate for reasons of personal gain was in reality a part of the abbot's strategy to

¹³Note that all of these patrons were solidly in the Beaufort camp, opposed to the continuation of war in France during the 1430s.

court the favour of powerful families as insurance against attacks by the abbey's enemies.¹⁴

While, for example, there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Lydgate's admiration of Chaucer, every tribute he pays to his poetic mentor is an indirect tribute to the Beauforts, first cousins of Thomas Chaucer. They are, however, not necessarily tributes to the Lancastrians in general, as the Lydgate-Chaucer relationship is often interpreted.

A second claim of this study is that Lydgate was a conscientious monk, not a free-wheeling apostate.¹⁵ His faith and allegiance is attested to throughout all his writings, religious and secular alike. He was associated with Bury St. Edmunds all his life, beginning at the Benedictine grammar school in Bury and followed by his early novitiate and ordination. His own "Testament" and his humorous self-portrait in *Siege of Thebes* which testify to a deeply abiding devotion to the monastic way of life, as well as the wording of his request for a return to the monastery at the peak of his fame as a poet, are all indications that Lydgate was a monk who took his vocation seriously.

My third claim is that there is something of a corporate Benedictine policy that applied in varying degrees to all Benedictine monasteries in England and in France. Unlike the Cluniacs or

¹⁴Perhaps the best illustration of the patronage system in East Anglia is Helen Castor's *Blood and Roses*, the story of the Pastons' rise to prominence and the difficulties they encountered in the defence of the title to their own property. In the absence of modern property deeds, property law had little to do with the exercise of justice and everything to do with protection and patronage.

¹⁵Any monk who left the abbey without the abbot's blessing (breaking his vows) was considered an apostate and was actually subject to arrest by the abbot. When John Wode left without permission, Curteys authorized the townspeople to "capture and arrest him, wherever he may be found, and if need be, throw him into prison, and bring him back to the monastery, either voluntarily or by force, calling if necessary on the secular arm" (Trans. Elston, 136; MS Additional 14848, fol. 159v).

Cistercians, the individual Benedictine monasteries did not report to a mother house, and individual abbots were free to run their own abbey as they wished, subject to the dictates of ancient tradition and the counsel of the senior conventual monks. Moreover, the politics of the individual abbeys were determined in part by their most important sponsors: St. Albans with the duke of Gloucester as patron was expected to be less vocal in its opposition to the Lancastrian usurpation and the war in France than Bury St. Edmunds, with the earl of Suffolk, the duke of Exeter, and Cardinal Beaufort as its patrons.¹⁶ Nevertheless, although autonomy is the dominant characteristic of medieval Benedictinism—each monastery had its own traditions that reflected the policies of its respective abbots—by the fifteenth century, there was in England a single Chapter self-regulated by the Benedictines, with elected presidents, regular conventions, and a system of visitations by Benedictine delegates to promote monastic discipline and some degree of uniformity. The full extent to which the pre-Reformation English Benedictines possessed a “juridical and corporate nature distinct from that of individual houses” is a matter of some debate among the modern Benedictines (Bennet 201). But there is general agreement that, from the Fourth Lateran Council on, the Benedictines were a “canonically organized body and the absolute independence and autonomy of the houses ceased, never to be resumed” (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 373-74). As attested to by the letters from the monks at the Council of Basel to the abbot of Bury (see Chapter 5), there was, at the very least, a strong feeling of solidarity amongst Benedictine abbots against their common foes. All Benedictine abbeys were united in their

¹⁶John of Gaunt and his Beaufort sons, Henry (later Cardinal Beaufort) and Thomas, duke of Exeter, became patrons of Bury St. Edmunds during the rule of William Cratfield (1390-1415); the Beauforts remained the most powerful patrons of the abbey during Curteys’s rule. The duke of Exeter was buried in the abbey in 1427, to which he left a generous bequest (Elston 20).

defence of the monastic order; their resistance to heresy, especially when that heresy posed a direct threat to their own livelihoods; and in their basic opposition to revolution and war on both moral and economic grounds.

If Lydgate's livelihood depended on his monastery, by the late fourteenth century that livelihood was threatened by a wide range of external forces. More than a hundred years before Henry VIII and his agent Thomas Cromwell set about to plunder and destroy the monasteries of England, the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, with its ancient liberties, privileges, and exemptions, was already under siege. Indeed, as one of the wealthiest, most privileged abbeys in England, Bury St. Edmunds was very much in the eye of the storm throughout most of Lydgate's lifetime. The attack by the townspeople on the monastery during the Great Revolt of 1381 (when Lydgate was a boy at the Benedictine grammar school)—an attack, which for different reasons, had the support and even, at times, the leadership of the local Franciscan friars and diocesan priests—only served to highlight the vulnerability of the monastery at a time when the Lollards were beginning to press for disendowment of the church and John Wycliffe was arguing for the total abolition of "private religions" (by which he meant monks and friars).¹⁷ But despite Lydgate's modern reputation for anti-Lollardy (as in the excerpt from Renoir, above), in 150,000 lines of poetry he rarely mentions the Lollards by name, and he never engages with them on theological grounds.¹⁸

¹⁷For a detailed account of the centuries-old conflict between the abbey and the townspeople in their struggle for municipal rights, see Gottfried, especially Chapter 6. For the dispute between the abbey and the Franciscans see Gottfried 220-21. For an earlier prolonged attack on the monastery in 1327, see Lobel, "A Detailed Account of the 1327 Rising."

¹⁸There are, of course, readings of everything from *Life of our Lady* (O'Sullivan) to the "Sotelties at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI" (Epstein) which interpret any statement of orthodoxy in the vernacular to be a refutation of Lollardy. But unlike Thomas Hoccleve, Thomas Walsingham, or Reginald Pecock (as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 2), Lydgate avoids any direct

The fact is, by 1395 the Lollards had become a problem for the state as a whole and were, by that time, the least of the Benedictines' worries. Long before Wycliffe (whose work, Lydgate, as an Oxford theology student, surely knew but does not mention), a much more significant body of educated opinion than the Lollards was hostile to the monastic order in England. The very *raison d'être* of the monastic life had been called into question by the friars who, in theory at least, unlike their spiritual rivals the monastic "possessioners," embraced a life of poverty and spiritual outreach and whose mendicant life-style, therefore, was a constant challenge to the older, more comfortable contemplative orders (Knowles, *Religious Orders* 2: 67-73). The monks proved themselves quite capable of holding their own in intellectual debate with the friars,¹⁹ but the edge of the attack grew somewhat sharper under the influence of Wycliffe, who in the early part of his career made common cause with the mendicants at Oxford. Wycliffe's call for disendowment of ecclesiastical property (that of monasteries in particular) was initially very favourably received by much of the nobility, including the house of Lancaster under John of Gaunt (McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings*, 74ff), and quite probably by Chaucer, the duke's brother-in-law, if we can judge by the anti-monastic satire in the *Canterbury Tales*.

engagement with Lollard dogma and often appears sympathetic to the Lollard call for reform (if not for disendowment) of the church, at least until 1428 when Lollard anxieties are raised by the Hussite rebellion (see Chapter 3, 185-86, below).

¹⁹See Knowles, *Religious Orders* 2: 61-73, for a discussion of the controversy between monks and friars in the fourteenth century. The monastic champions against the mendicants in England were Uthred of Boldon, Adam Easton, and Thomas Brunton—all Benedictine scholars. Thomas Walsingham, the St. Albans chronicler, never tires of accusing the friars of heresy, political conspiracy, and treason: "But nowadays the mendicants, in their envy of the landowners, justify the crimes of the nobles and also back up the common people in their wrongdoing, so that they approve the sins of both classes" (150).

In addition to the townspeople of Bury who wanted freedom from the often oppressive rule of the monastery, the Franciscan and Dominican theologians who were questioning the scriptural justification of monasticism, and the barons (such as the duke of York) who coveted the rich tracts of land that had been bequeathed to the monasteries by their ancestors, all across England, and at Bury in particular a more insidious and permanent threat to monastic autonomy had re-arisen in Lydgate's day. According to David Knowles, the English bishops had, for centuries, been particularly hostile to the Black Monks.²⁰ Since the first arrival of the Cistercians in 1120, the bishops had openly favoured the Cistercians, Carthusians, and Premonstratensians, over whom they could exercise more control; these newer orders lacked many of the legal exemptions claimed by the older monasteries on the basis of ancient royal and papal charters (Knowles, *Religious Orders* 3: 13-30).²¹ Throughout Lydgate's career, an episcopal attack was spearheaded by some of the most powerful prelates in the country, and was backed, if not instigated, by a succession of formidable archbishops of Canterbury: Chamberlain, Arundel, and Chichele. Bury St. Edmunds (or St. Edmundsbury, as it was often called) was one of only four monasteries still enjoying total exemption from episcopal visitation, a fiercely guarded privilege

²⁰Knowles's work is in many ways the cornerstone of this dissertation. See especially his *Monastic Order in England* (2nd ed., 1963) and *Religious Orders in England* (Vol. 2, 1961).

²¹As a form of self-discipline, these smaller reform orders (all originating from the Benedictines) voluntarily placed themselves under the protection and authority of the "Ordinarie" of the diocese (*Monastic Order* 209). Episcopal control of the newer orders in England may explain why Carthusians, such as Nicholas Love, sought the imprimatur of the archbishop for theological works in the vernacular, whereas the Benedictines did not. See, for example, the memorandum attached to several copies of Love's *Mirror*: "was presented in London by its compiler, N, to the Most Reverend Father and Lord in Christ, Lord Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, for inspection and due examination before it was freely communicated [...] for the edification of the faithful and the confutation of heretics and lollards" (Love xv).

(Knowles, *Religious Orders* 1: 277-79). Having survived a long history of nation-wide episcopal incursion into the administration of monastic property, Bury St. Edmunds was the fifth-ranked of twenty-six remaining “mitred” abbeys in England. A mitred abbey was one that had been granted royal and papal charters that guaranteed its independence and freedom from episcopal control. The abbot of a mitred abbey effectively enjoyed the same rank as bishop, and could wear the same pontificalia: mitre, ring, crozier and sandals (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 711). An exempt abbot could not ordain his own priests, but he could and did select the candidates, and it was only at his invitation that a bishop would perform the ordination ceremony, not necessarily the bishop of the local diocese. A mitred abbot was in no legal way subject to the authority of the local bishops, or even to the archbishops of Canterbury or York. More importantly, he was exempt from many ecclesiastical and secular taxes, and it was his prerogative to appropriate the tithes from parishes in his jurisdiction.²² He sat in the House of Lords, ran his own municipal courts, punished heretics, adulterers, and thieves, and granted sanctuary to anyone he chose to protect.

The abbot of Bury was landlord of a massive feudal estate, eight and a half hundreds in size, a third of the county of Suffolk (Arnold 1: xxvii; Knowles, “Essays”). His predecessors had always jealously guarded their liberties and had somehow managed, over the centuries, to fend off a series of attacks by rapacious bishops. Lydgate’s abbey was located in Suffolk, very close to the border of Norfolk and Cambridgeshire; in 1420, the monastery technically fell within the

²²Exemption from secular taxes had been granted by Eugenius III (1145-1153): “We hereby decree that the said place shall within its liberty be exempt from payment of all secular dues for ever, as was set forth in the record of King William” (Thompson, *Records*, 120). In practice, however, the extent to which the abbey was exempt from secular taxes depended on the ruling monarch. Under Henry V, the abbey paid a tenth of its revenue, and the abbot made additional “loans” to the crown; under Henry VI, the abbey’s taxes were gradually reduced to a pittance.

confines of the diocese of East Anglia. At great expense to the abbey, the monks had fought many a jurisdictional battle with their episcopal neighbours, the bishop of Ely and, especially, the bishop of Norwich, but had always emerged victorious, usually through recourse to royal or papal courts and to the seemingly iron-clad writs, charters, and bulls granted to them by kings and popes that dated all the way back to King Canute.

Until 1400, Bury St. Edmunds was considered a “royal foundation” (“Sithe he allone is ther roial foundour,” *Life of St. Edmund*, 1.169) and had enjoyed the protection and favour of the ruling monarch, but once Wycliffe had gained the attention of John of Gaunt, the Benedictines had good reason to fear Lancastrian ambitions.²³ The deposition of Richard II (a good friend to most of the Benedictines, patron of Westminster Abbey, and chief steward and protector of Bury St. Edmunds) by a murderous usurper whom the Benedictines could never in good conscience support;²⁴ a succession of disendowment petitions to parliament; the suppression of the alien

²³Chris Given-Wilson notes the warning of Richard II regarding Bolingbroke’s intentions towards the church: “According to Walsingham, when Sir William Bagot was brought to trial in the parliament of October 1399, he gave an account of a conversation in which, he said, the king had toyed with the idea of resigning his throne and handing over power to his cousin Rutland [...] Mowbray, also present, retorted that it would be more correct if he were to be replaced by Bolingbroke, not only because he was more closely related to Richard but ‘for many other reasons. This, Richard declared he would never do, because if Henry became king he would wish to destroy the church’ (*Chronicles of the Revolution* 17).

²⁴Whatever his failings, Richard II was well respected by the Benedictines as a man who defended the privileges of the church. Hence the lavish praise of the Westminster chronicler: “How this noble king reveres and loves God’s church! How sympathetically and anxiously he exerts himself to champion her liberties and preserve them!” (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, 64). Even the Benedictine monk of Evesham, who was openly critical of Richard II, conceded the king’s friendship to the Benedictines: “Nevertheless there are two things to be said in his favour: firstly that he favoured God’s church and churchmen, especially the black monks...” (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 242). See also the very sympathetic Cistercian views of Richard II in Given-Wilson’s *Chronicles of the Revolution* (94-98). However, the Abbey of St. Albans, whose succeeding abbots were open supporters of the new

priorities under Henry IV; the take-over of the Cluniac monasteries by the archbishop of Canterbury; and the final closure of the non-denized alien priorities under Archbishop Chichele and Henry V—were obvious causes for concern throughout the monastic communities.²⁵ Nor would the evident fact that Henry V openly favoured the Carthusians over the Benedictines²⁶—or the same monarch’s bothersome and ultimately futile attempt at Benedictine reform—have helped to assuage the anxieties of the Benedictines. The fate of the alien priorities in 1414, if not the annihilation of the powerful Templars a century earlier (1307-12),²⁷ presented the Benedictines

dynasty, may have been the one notable exception among Benedictine monasteries. Abbot John Moot (1396-1401) “had become closely (and perhaps covertly) associated with the critics of Richard II” (see David Preest’s introduction, Walsingham, 11); his successor William Heyworth was a Lancastrian placeman. An earlier recension of Walsingham’s chronicle, critical of John of Gaunt and sympathetic to Richard, was completely revised after the Lancastrians took power (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, 208).

²⁵Some of the alien priorities escaped closure by applying for English denizenship, shedding their French connections, and seeking the protection of the local bishop. The Lancastrian suppression of the alien priorities is downplayed by modern historians because the property tended to stay within the church. The fact that control effectively passed from abbots to bishops, has gone largely unnoticed. See articles by Alison K. McHardy, Marjorie Morgan, and Benjamin Thompson. Walsingham’s chronicle suggests that the author himself did not believe the alien monasteries were being confiscated for any other reason than the greed of the king’s men (Walsingham, 334-35).

²⁶Carthusian houses were generously endowed from the estates of the Benedictine and Cluniac alien priorities (E. Margaret Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England*, 212-45). Unlike the Benedictines, the Carthusians in England had always sought episcopal protection and remained loyal to the archbishop until their ultimate betrayal and martyrdom. Knowles sees the growth of the Carthusians in England as an aristocratic reaction to Wycliffian anti-monastic propaganda (*Religious Orders*, 2: 134). The Carthusians were very much in the debt of their founders, and were tightly controlled by bishop and king.

²⁷Although the Templars were a military order, they followed the Benedictine rule and took the same vows; it was Bernard of Clairvaux, a Cistercian, who helped them to gain their charter from the Pope at the Council of Troyes in 1129 and was a leading visionary for the order (Read 95-106). As powerful as the Templars were, both militarily and financially, they were completely annihilated in just five years. The primary motivation for their suppression was the

with a grim premonition of what could happen to any religious order that lacked royal or papal protection. To add to their worries, the authority of the other traditional protector of Benedictine privilege, the Pope (in Rome), had been seriously weakened by the 1378-1409 schism in the church; English and French Benedictines were forced by the schism into the difficult position of supporting opposing popes. A weakened papacy, moreover, would be less inclined to resist the bishops who were clamouring for more control of the religious orders.

Dependent as the monks were on the rental revenues of their farmland, the financial condition of Bury St. Edmunds deteriorated rapidly after the plague of 1348.²⁸ While still prior of Bury St. Edmunds under an aging and sickly abbot (William Exeter), William Curteys set out, in defence of the abbey, to balance the account books and to prepare his case against episcopal encroachment.²⁹ Elected abbot in 1429,³⁰ Curteys inherited a debt of well over £500 and a fiscal

greed of Philip IV of France, who was hugely in debt to the order; heresy was the pretext by which the ostentatiously pious Philip obtained papal approval for his attack. The Benedictines could not have failed to draw parallels to their own condition under Henry V.

²⁸Most English monasteries experienced financial difficulties after the plague, but the traditional view that the order as a whole went into financial and spiritual decline in the fifteenth century is now generally challenged by monastic historians. For the orthodox Protestant view of the dissolution of the monasteries, see J.A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, 3: 400-1. For a current review of the debate, see James G. Clark, ed. *Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England*, 3-33; Joan Greatrex, "After Knowles," 35-47.

²⁹For this account of Curteys's abbacy, I draw heavily on John William Elston's 1979 dissertation, which has proved invaluable to my entire thesis.

³⁰An important distinction between fifteenth-century abbots and bishops is that the abbots, despite the best efforts of kings and bishops, were usually elected by their communities (as prescribed in the *Rule*, ch. 64), whereas bishops were appointed, usually at the king's own pleasure. Monks at cathedral priories had long since lost the right to elect their ruling bishop. A common ruse of archbishop and king was to offer a bishopric to an abbot. His successors could then be appointed as bishops, and as such would answer to the secular hierarchy, and be more beholden to the provider of the benefice. For this reason, William the Conqueror and Archbishop

deficit that, left unattended, would force the sale of much of the monastery property and invite a takeover by the bishop of Norwich, with whom the previous Abbot Exeter had been embroiled in an acute jurisdictional battle. Backed by the archbishop of Canterbury, Alnwick, a member of the king's council, was intent upon moving his see to the much grander quarters at Bury and taking personal control of the monastery, as had happened at so many of the English monasteries after the Conquest³¹ and would later happen at St. Albans under Cardinal Wolsey, before the dissolution had even begun (Guy 111).

Abbot Curteys knew the autonomy of the abbey could not survive without the support of the Lancastrian government, the king in particular. Relations had been strained between the Benedictines and the Lancastrians under Henry IV and V, and Curteys was determined to change all that. One of his first steps, either in preparation for a legal battle with the bishops or as an archive for future abbots, was to begin compilation of a detailed register in which were gathered many of the important deeds, royal charters, and papal bulls that pertained to the exemption rights of the monastery. Soon after his appointment as abbot he recalled Lydgate to Bury from his post at Hatfield Broad Oak in Essex (Schirmer 91; Pearsall 160); he did so, I suggest, to recruit Lydgate for a different battle in a different political climate.

The Curteys register has been preserved (rather remarkably, given Tudor hostility to any documentation that defended monastic property rights) in two folio manuscripts in the British

Lanfranc had urged Abbot Baldwin of Bury "to accept episcopal office and make his abbey church the cathedral" (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 132). Baldwin refused.

³¹According to Knowles within fifty years of the Norman conquest the number of cathedral priories (former autonomous monasteries) had risen from three to ten, not always to the disadvantage of the monks, but often simply because the bishop coveted the larger church and revenue denied him by a wealthy monastery in his diocese (*Monastic Order* 131-33).

Library (MSS Additional 14848 and Additional 7096). While these registers should be of utmost interest to Lydgate scholars, they have, surprisingly, never been consulted in any detail in the context of Lydgate studies. The register has been analyzed very thoroughly by the historian John Elston, but Elston's focus is on Curteys, not Lydgate. The main preoccupation of the Curteys register is the fight for monastic autonomy, an issue central to the abbot's rendition of the *Vita et Passio Edmundi*, Curteys's own highly politicized prose version of the legend of St. Edmund, which is entered in the register and forms the basis of Lydgate's more famous versified presentation copy to Henry VI.³² In addition to the *Vita*, the Curteys register contains five long poems, in the vernacular, in carefully fashioned rhyme-royal stanzas, unmistakably by Lydgate.³³ These royal charters in verse, the *Cartae Versificatae*, as they are entered in the register, translate (with some poetic licence) the Latin charters granted to the abbey by Kings Canute, Hardecanute, Edward the Confessor, William the Conqueror, and Henry I. Four of the five English poems have been transcribed by the Victorian antiquarian Thomas Arnold in the *Memorials of St. Edmund's*

³²MS Harley 2278, a truly fine production, if executed at Bury as most scholars think it was, is the best evidence that "there were first rate artists [still] there in the fifteenth century." See Montague Rhodes James, *On the Abbey of S. Edmund at Bury*, 104. A facsimile of this manuscript, published by the British Library (2004) with an introduction by A. S. G. Edwards, is now readily accessible.

³³The vexed question of Lydgate's poorly established canon is one no study of Lydgate can avoid. Of the approximately 175,000 lines of poetry attributed to him over the years, there is unanimous agreement as to his authorship on some two-thirds. As support for my research, I have developed an internet-based database of Lydgate's complete works, the only complete collection of Lydgate in existence today: (<<http://ca.geocities.com/webber1409@rogers.com/lydgate.html>>). While still a work in progress, and making no claims to textual authoritativeness, the database serves as an electronic concordance to all the works, putative and otherwise, and in future will support stylometric testing (computer-assisted vocabulary and rhyme analyses in the investigation of authorship) of unconfirmed items such as the *Cartae Versificatae*.

Abbey, published in 1896. They have never been reprinted. The fifth, previously unpublished poem, consisting of eleven rhyme-royal, decasyllabic stanzas, is the final entry in a series of political verse, the purpose of which is to commemorate the royal charters granted to the abbey. It is, for the purposes of this thesis, a particularly fortunate discovery, because in it Lydgate deals quite explicitly with the contemporary conflicts over encroachments by the bishop of Norwich.

From their position in the manuscript, I argue that the *Cartae Versificatae* were written around the same time as the presentation copy of *Life of St. Edmund*, for the same audience, and for the same reason. The Latin charters, in combination with Lydgate's vernacular verse, were intended to put an end to any episcopal or baronial ambitions regarding Bury St. Edmunds. Subsequent entries in the abbot's register reveal how affectionate was the relationship between Henry VI and Abbot Curteys, whom the young king obviously regarded as a mentor. The abbot was successful in securing Lancastrian royal protection, as I shall demonstrate, and Lydgate's literary abilities played a huge part in the abbot's campaign.

Taking these little known *Cartae Versificatae* as a starting point for my research (and as the concluding chapter of my dissertation, which includes, in Appendix D, the first and only printed edition of the fifth *Carta*), I have sought to demonstrate that Lydgate's secular work is always written to serve the interests of his abbot and his order. The two volumes of the abbot's register (MS Additional 14848 in particular) are key to understanding the political affiliations of John Lydgate after 1429. Because of Curteys's successful project to win Lancastrian protection, the abbey was to prosper under the Lancastrians, and to hold its own throughout the remainder of the fifteenth century, despite finding itself on the wrong side of the Yorkists and Richard III.

My reading of Lydgate is thus a conscious departure from the mainstream of traditional Lydgate scholarship, a tradition which sees him, at best, as a faithful servant of the Lancastrian state, devoted to the court and thoroughly orthodox in all things secular and spiritual, and at worst, as a purveyor of Lancastrian lies and propaganda, either exceptionally stupid, or exceptionally duplicitous and hypocritical. My entire thesis will unabashedly turn on the question of intentionality;³⁴ Lydgate, unlike Chaucer, is generally quite forthright in his authorial purpose, and his political objectives are much easier to deduce. Though his intentions are necessarily constrained, his self-consciousness itself the product of larger historical and cultural forces beyond the capacity of any individual to grasp, Lydgate chooses to support or resist the will of the secular and ecclesiastical powers according to a consistent system of values that supersedes the influence of his patrons. It is my position that when Lydgate writes an anti-war tract, for example, it is because he intends to do so, not because his material gets the better of him. When he rails against the murder of kings he is not, as some critics would have it, insensitive or blissfully ignorant of what happened to Richard II in 1399 (Pearsall, "Apotheosis," 35). Recent studies, the most influential and comprehensive of which is Derek Pearsall's *John Lydgate* (1970), have been more respectful of his achievement than those of earlier generations (who were interested in his work for philological or codicological reasons, but belittled the work on literary

³⁴"Intentionality" has become a key issue in recent Lydgate criticism. See Scott-Morgan Straker, "Propaganda, Intentionality and the Lancastrian Lydgate"; James Simpson, "For al my body ... weith nat an unce," 132-3; and Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, 12-13. On the other hand, when Paul Strohm confidently asserts that "Lydgate is writing as fully as complicit a poem as he can, and it is the fissured and contradictory nature of his charge which again and again betrays him," he, too, is making assumptions about Lydgate's intentions, assumptions of complicity or collaboration ("John Lydgate and Jacque of Holland," 122).

grounds), but Lydgate is still very much a victim of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. For modern critics, as James Simpson has suggested (*Reform and Cultural Revolution* 45-50), he is still either a poor imitator of Chaucer who labours in vain under the anxiety of an influence he can neither escape nor emulate (Spearing), or a political lackey, a cog in the wheels of the great Lancastrian propaganda machine (Patterson, Strohm), or a typical representative of a dull and repressive age (Pearsall). For most of these critics he is an intellect in slow motion, an orthodox reactionary, or a Chaucer manqué. He is of interest at all because he is so typically medieval, so obviously conditioned by his class and his religion, so predictably subservient to his church and to his king.

My own intention is to re-present Lydgate as the author of his own page—not to treat him as a byproduct of an extended Lancastrian, or even Benedictine, propaganda campaign. He worked for the Benedictines because he *was* a Benedictine, not because he was coerced into writing for a cause he did not fully support or understand. I therefore view Lydgate as a protagonist in his own work—a star player in the Curteys project to secure royal protection for his monastery—not as a sycophantic stooge conned by the Lancastrians into helping them legitimate their dubious claims to power. In my own construction of the author, Lydgate is a deeply committed religious, a keenly intelligent, classically-educated diplomat who could mingle with nobility, even dabble in the writing of courtly love poetry, without compromising his fundamental monastic and spiritual values. It was Lydgate's duty under Abbot Curteys to court Lancastrian favour. There is no denying he wrote some Lancastrian propaganda (though much less than that with which he is generally credited) in exchange for Lancastrian protection for his abbey. He wrote mainly in verse form, sometimes using the "colours of rethorik" (aureate

diction) to make his teachings entertaining and memorable. But in his larger role as monk and priest, he did not hesitate to lecture his royal or ecclesiastical patrons. Lydgate's own view of his role as poet (for which see Ebin or Perkins) is as advisor, educator, illuminator, and philosopher-prophet, not as entertainer. His constant warning to his royal patrons was that "clerkis" (meaning monks) who write the history of the lives of princes have the final word. Ultimate hegemony is in the hands of the poet, not the patron:³⁵

For after deth clerkis lityl drede
 After desert for to bere witesse
 Nor of a tyraunt the truth to expresse
 As men disserue, with-oute excepcioun
 With lak or prys thei graunt hem her guerdoun.
 (*Troy Book*, Prologue. 184-88)

In recent years there has emerged a new wave of Lydgate revisionists (David Lawton, James Simpson, Scott Morgan Straker, Larry Scanlon, Maura Nolan, Nigel Mortimer *et al*) which tends to view his work more positively, as a complex and highly individualized manifestation of an essentially clerical rhetoric, a discourse which is, as often as not, oppositional to royal or aristocratic interests.³⁶ My hope is that, by examining in more detail the nature of that

³⁵Green makes the general point that fifteenth-century poets were beginning to see the advantage of selling their services as legend-makers or courtly biographers. And as Green points out, poets can bring either praise or blame to princes after their death. See Nicholas Perkins for a convincing illustration of the way in which Lydgate's advisory material is constantly "underpinned by the threat of a historical verdict on royal deeds" (178). Even if princes do not fear the judgement of God, they should at least be conscious that they will be judged by the chroniclers and the story-tellers after their death.

³⁶Strohm has characterized the debate between the two camps as irreconcilable "since it hinges on assumptions about Lydgate's private intentions" ("John Lydgate and Jacque of Holland" 115). The determination of Lydgate's political motives may well be an irreconcilable critical argument, but we have a better opportunity to understand Lydgate's intentions if we start with a given (Lydgate as Benedictine) rather than a projection (Lydgate as complicit Lancastrian). That said, I agree with Strohm that we must not "allow poets the final word on their

clerical, oppositional discourse, this thesis will contribute to the work of that new generation, while I freely acknowledge my enormous debt to the earlier Lydgate scholars, the views of whom I will often find it necessary to challenge.

Organization and Summary

The sheer volume of his output and the length of his career make Lydgate a very difficult poet to manage. To discuss Lydgate's politics without falling back on the inherited prejudices and sweeping generalizations that have determined so much of his literary reception is by necessity to engage with almost all of his secular poetry, and with a good deal of his religious work. In the following chapters I have tried to focus on those works that are most overtly politicized, but in fact there is little about Lydgate that is not political. By the word "political," I mean work that is written to influence contemporary power structures in a way that would serve the economic, legal, or religious interests of the author or his order. When the government of the day happens to be an illegitimate and insecure regime that is not particularly open to criticism or advice, a prudent monk who does not long for personal martyrdom must find other, more subtle ways to make his point. For Lydgate, the solution was to turn to the literature of antiquity (including fables and the lives of saints), which could be re-worked in translation to provide advice for contemporary rulers in the "mirror for princes" tradition. I have therefore bypassed almost entirely his early work, the dream visions, courtly love complaints, extended allegories, and romantic ballads (e.g. *Temple of Glas*; "Complaint of the Black Knight;" "Floure of

own motives, or even to suggest that they might know all that is to be known about their motives (115)" and I hope I have not done so.

Curtesy”) which are most imitative of Chaucer, and which suggest to me the imitations of an apprentice, possibly an Oxford student learning his forms and craft from the master but certainly not out to reform the authorities. These poems can be didactic and moralistic (and typically medieval, as Pearsall would say) but they are not what I think of as political, in that they do not seem to have been written in deliberate support of any Benedictine or Lancastrian agenda. Nor have I addressed Lydgate’s long spiritual allegory *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, a fairly literal translation of Guillaume de Deguilville’s earlier work, which Pearsall, in fine form, describes as “a raw, barren, arid waste of words” (*John Lydgate* 176), and in which Lydgate uncharacteristically resists the temptation provided by the material for moral or political digression. Had his final work, *Secrees of Old Philosoffres*, been completed at an earlier stage in his career, it might have been a source of rich political commentary, but Lydgate, an old man by the time of its writing, died while working on it; he had not yet reached the point in the translation which gives advice to kings, Lydgate’s favourite pastime. On the other hand, I have devoted as much time to the little known *Cartae Versificatae* as I have to *Troy Book* and other larger secular poems because these curious little translations of foundation charters, together with his longest hagiographical work, *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund*, reflect most directly on the political welfare of his abbey—always Lydgate’s first priority.³⁷

My arrangement of this study is largely chronological, an organization that must sometimes make assumptions about the dating of the Lydgate canon which cannot be proven

³⁷As Pearsall counters in his review of Simpson’s *Reform and Cultural Revolution*: “The problem with a book driven by a historical thesis is that the literary works that are most readily appropriated to the thesis will receive more attention than those of equal or greater significance” (“Apotheosis” 29).

from either internal or external evidence, and that occasionally (as in the dating of *Life of our Lady* or *Serpent of Division*) takes issue with commonly held positions. The problem of dating in Lydgate is as vexed as the problem of authorship, and, like authorship attributions, dates are often determined according to the dictates of a particular critical theory. Fortunately for a study of this nature, his most obviously political works are usually written around a particular event and can be fairly accurately dated from the context of the poem.

In Chapter 1, I refer to a “Ricardian Lydgate” to make the point that no poet so obviously afflicted with the scourge of poetry as Lydgate was would begin his writing at the age of thirty-four—despite the fact that 1404 is the earliest date that can be ascribed to any of his works, using both external and internal evidence. I consider the possibility that Lydgate may have had some direct dealings with his “maistir” Chaucer during the 1390s when Lydgate was still a student; that the older poet may have offered advice or assistance to an obvious admirer, either at Oxford where Lydgate appears to have spent at least eight years,³⁸ or at London, if Lydgate was ever permitted to make the journey during the Ricardian years. An arrangement of Lydgate’s references to Chaucer in chronological order (for which see Spurgeon) illustrates a master-apprentice relationship that dims with time, but in which the student never loses his respect for the mentor. But beyond its use as a chronological reference to the early work of the poet, the term “Ricardian Lydgate” is projected in conscious opposition to the more usual designation of “Lancastrian Lydgate”—to make the point that the Benedictines, for the most part, did not at first

³⁸While most of the Black Monks sent to Oxford by their abbey could expect to be there a minimum of eight years (Knowles, *Religious Orders* 2:14-28) Lydgate’s stay seems to have been extended by royal request (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 15). While monastic students at Oxford were not unsupervised, they obviously enjoyed liberties not available to the cloistered monks. It seems likely that much of Lydgate’s romantic poetry would have been written while a student.

support the new regime and were, on the contrary, often involved in subversive actions against the usurping monarch. To speak of Lydgate as “Lancastrian laureate” is thus to ignore the obvious problem of his own and his order’s general lack of support for the regime of Henry IV.

In Chapter 1, furthermore, I treat the critical explanation of a Benedictine monk’s extensive use of the English vernacular (a literary phenomenon that figures in a variety of interesting Lancastrian conspiracy theories) as another manifestation of what Maura Nolan has called the “Lancastrian thesis” (10-14). This all-purpose and critically convenient theory tends to credit a central bureaucracy—one actually riddled with civil unrest, perpetually fractious, illegitimate and insecure—with the early canonization of Chaucer, with the introduction of English as the national language, with the suppression of all vernacular theology of any interest whatsoever, with the invention of the Lollard bogey-man as a way of deflecting criticism away from an illegitimate regime, with the universal “dullness” of fifteenth-century literature,³⁹ and with a patronage system that controlled all writing in order to promote Lancastrian dynastic claims. While, admittedly, each of the individual components of the larger thesis presents a reasonable explanation for the causal relationships of Lancastrian history the net effect of all these theories of dynastic power is to marginalize Lydgate even further than did his earlier critics:⁴⁰ whereas before he was simply a drivelling monk, now he is a witless political cipher not

³⁹A dullness which David Lawton argues, in “Dullness in the Fifteenth Century,” is actually a form of cautious resistance, and, when understood as such, is anything but dull.

⁴⁰I use the term “Lancastrian thesis” in a broader sense than Nolan probably intended. Almost everyone would concede multiple tenets of the broader thesis. My objection is the extent to which power is attributed to a centralized Lancastrian dynasty, and the effect that attribution has on literary studies of Lancastrian poets, especially one who happens to be a Benedictine monk.

even responsible for his own drivel. As Nolan has pointed out, the Lancastrian thesis posits a powerful centralized regime which relocates agency from the poet to the state, but in so doing runs the risk of “mistaking one strategy of state power for the state itself” (13).

It is a rare study of Lydgate today that is not driven by the underlying assumption that most early fifteenth-century church literature—with the exception, perhaps, of the heterodox writings of the Lollards (but even Lollard sedition is sometimes seen as a Lancastrian fabrication)—is written in complete support of the Lancastrian regime and represents a *mariage de convenance* between church and dynasty. Given that assumption, the task of the critic is to find a way to expose the political collaboration of the author and to show how the text itself, the “hardworking” and deeply flawed offspring not of an individual, but of an illegitimate regime, creates “anxieties” and difficulties for its author. Not only does the Lancastrian thesis dictate a particular reading of the poet’s work, it tends to define his career, and to fashion his biography in accord with its own expectations. Theories of co-option and compliance are used to accept or reject works from the canon of the author, to date his works to suit arguments of patronage or politics, to force his poetic works into generic classifications that were never the writer’s intention, and to find, at all cost, royal or aristocratic patronage as the primary motivating force for their composition. In this formulation, a Benedictine monk is uprooted from his monastery and made to serve the interests of the government, rather than the order he has vowed to serve. Authorship attributions by close contemporaries are ignored, and manuscript evidence is disregarded if inconvenient. There is no allowance made for any form of quiet resistance, or for the possibility that a Benedictine affiliation might sometimes conflict with the interests of the dominant power structures.

As a deliberate counterpoint to this ubiquitous thesis of the all-consuming power of Lancastrian state apparatus, therefore, much of Chapter 1 is an exploration of an alternative hypothesis—one that argues (on some fairly extensive historical evidence) that the Benedictines were opposed to the deposition of Richard II, and concludes that, if they were, that opposition would most probably be reflected in the literary works of a Benedictine poet. Because of the lack of Lydgate material that can be confidently attributed to either the reign of Richard II or Henry IV, my dates for the works discussed in this chapter, including the poems of courtly love, *Isopes Fabules*, *Life of Our Lady*, and *Serpent of Division*, are somewhat tentative but counter earlier speculation that has since been accepted as fact (Humphrey's patronage of *Serpent of Division*, for example, or Henry V's of *Life of Our Lady*). In reading some of these works as political allegories, I run the further risk of reading too much into the work of a shrewd poet who is nothing if not careful about criticizing contemporary secular authority. I present these readings in the spirit of academic debate and as an introduction to subsequent chapters where I begin to feel myself on firmer canonical ground.

In Chapter 2, I examine Lydgate's attitude towards Henry V. I begin with the expectation that a pacifistic moralist might experience certain pangs of conscience when writing in support of an illegitimate sovereign whose foreign policy appears motivated more by the desire for expansion and personal fame than out of any consideration for the welfare of the body politic. If Lydgate is the poet-laureate of the Lancastrian regime, where, one might ask, are his tributes to the conquering hero's invasion of Normandy, including the legendary battle of Agincourt which the poet never once mentions? Lydgate's attitude to conquerors in general is never congratulatory, to say the least. Whatever purpose Henry V had in mind in the commissioning of

Troy Book, it could not have been the anti-war sermon ultimately delivered by Lydgate. There is, to be sure, some obligatory deference to Lydgate's illustrious patron in *Troy Book's* Prologue and Epilogue; Lydgate's critics have pounced on these, while ignoring the counter-thrust of the seldom-read thirty-odd-thousand lines of poetry which lie in between, the deliberate effect of which is to expose the folly of war for victor and vanquished alike. If there is an indirect commendation of the Treaty of Troyes, it is only because at the time of its signing, Lydgate, like so many of his compatriots, understandably confused it for a peace treaty, not as a blueprint for the continuation of an ultimately disastrous war. *Siege of Thebes* relentlessly amplifies the anti-war theme of his *Troy Book*. The *Siege* is in no obvious way constrained by the pressures of patronage, and is therefore much less ambiguous in its pacifist politics.

Apart from his criticism of Henry V's foreign policy, the poet seems to have shared the Benedictine apprehensions about the young king's intentions toward the monasteries. Whereas *Defence of Holy Church* has always been read as a Henrician anti-Lollard tract, an interpretation that gives rise to the common and thoroughly unjustified appellation of "Lollard-hating Lydgate," I offer a counter-reading. Henry V's arbitrary closure of the alien priories and his intended reform of the Benedictines suggest to me that Lydgate's defence of the church, which is to say, the defence of the monasteries, is directed against a force more immediately threatening than the hapless Lollards. Whereas a little religious dissent might be welcomed by the Benedictines as an opportunity to exercise their theological debating skills and to justify the existence of a religious order devoted to eternal vigilance, any perception of anti-monastic tyranny emanating from the king's own household would be a threat of another magnitude altogether.

In Chapter 3, I confront the works that are most troublesome for a thesis that seeks to acquit Lydgate of the charge of collaborative subordination to the Lancastrians. Lydgate's coronation poetry of the minority years of the 1420s openly endorses the concept of dual monarchy—an unrealistic claim to both the English and French thrones that was embedded in the Treaty of Troyes—that was to ensure the continuation of the war in France long after the death of the Treaty's primary author.⁴¹ It is during this decade, the minority years of Henry VI, that Lydgate's talents were most often for hire by government agents. The image of Lydgate as a freelance hack, a monk on the make, is derived from reading this shorter occasional poetry independently of his longer works, and without regard for Benedictine discipline. Any careful scrutiny of these poems will necessarily reveal a double-edge to the propaganda he wrote so freely in defence of the uncrowned dual monarch. On the one side, he does the work of the king's council, whose first task is to convince a war-weary nation that the attempt to forward the Lancastrian cause in France is worth the expense in money and in lives; on the other, he lobbies consistently for peace and good government, supporting the dual monarchy only because he still clings to the treaty signed at Troyes as the best hope of peace. Any reading of his work of this period must take into account a regal council fractured by the personal ambitions of its leaders, the dukes of Gloucester and Bedford, and Henry Beaufort, the king's great-uncle, an important

⁴¹As found in Rymer, *Foedera* 9:902, article 24: "...que les Deux Royaumes seront gouvernez, depuis ce temps que nostre dit Fils, ou aucun de se Hoirs, pervendra ou pervendront aus dits Royaumes, non divisement sous divers Roys pour un mesme temps, mais sous une mesme Personne, qui sera pour le temps Roys, et seigneur Soverain de l'un et de l'autre Royaume...". [It is agreed] that the two kingdoms shall be governed from the time that our said son [Henry V], or any of his heirs shall assume the said realms, not divided between different kings at the same time, but under one person, who shall in that time be king and sovereign lord of both kingdoms. (My translation.)

benefactor of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. It is work that demands compromise and no small amount of creative imagination to deny the legitimacy of the claim of the dauphin and the existence of a powerful French army already threatening the gates of Paris. Modern critics delight in unearthing the “cracks and fissures” in this material, but there is no need to look far to find these because, for the most part, Lydgate, ever didactic, has put them there, singling them out with rhetorical *nota bene* fingers for the edification of his benefactors, if not for the modern critic. His work of this period reflects a growing consciousness of the irony, vulnerability, and compromising nature of his position, and the pressures of the task may have precipitated a final retreat to the monastery after his “Triumphal Entry” celebration of the young king’s return from a disappointing coronation at Paris in 1432.

Chapter 3 also challenges the modern tendency to attribute everything Lydgate wrote after 1420 to the patronage and direction of the duke of Gloucester, and as a further corollary, to reject from the Lydgate canon any work remotely critical of Gloucester. I question the likelihood of this widely assumed poet-patron relationship, given Humphrey’s hawkish position on the war and his antagonism towards Bury St. Edmunds. I examine the poems Lydgate did write for Gloucester, the first an ironic endorsement of the duke’s upcoming marriage to the duchess of Hainault (a marriage with lethal political consequences for the English-Burgundian alliance) and the second an open rebuke of the “good duke’s” adultery and his abandonment of this same duchess, godmother to Henry VI. The unmistakable call for peace and unity that runs through all the official poems of this period may serve the interest of the state as a whole, but a negotiated peace with the dauphin was never Humphrey’s preference. These poems are written for the instruction

of English aristocratic audiences, not as popular propaganda, and certainly not to persuade French insurgents to embrace an English monarch.

The coronation poems, the mummings and the pageant poetry of this period are all somewhat mixed in their intent, illustrating a diversity of political affiliations outside the Lancastrian court. Certainly none can be said to endorse without question the foreign policy of a divisive royal council in the minority years. The chronology of some of these poems, particularly the mummings, becomes critical to the validity of the contextual arguments (mine and others) on which they are based. The “Mumming at Windsor,” for example, which sets the stage for the king’s coronation at Rheims after the dauphin had just been crowned there himself in 1429, raises the possibility of some deliberate political irony on Lydgate’s part. None of the poems from this period are completely devoid of strong threads of resistance apparent in the political advice that Lydgate addresses directly to the boy-king, but indirectly to his royal handlers, the king’s council.

Chapter 4 is an examination of the politics and advocacy of the pursuit of good government inherent in *Fall of Princes*. While a truly comprehensive reading of this immense work is beyond the scope of this study, I argue that the *Fall* provides the best overall statement of Lydgate’s own political views (to a great extent the views of his abbey) that are outlined in the work, not with any sharp focus, but dispersed like light through a gigantic prism. I contest the usual depiction of Lydgate as hack writer for the duke of Gloucester, or as the inert, pedantic translator of Boccaccio. *Fall of Princes* is a work of great originality that contains, within its many digressions from source (for information on which I rely heavily on Nigel Mortimer’s recent book-length study), a comprehensive outline of a mature poet’s theological, philosophical,

and political beliefs. Lydgate's own political philosophy as revealed in the *Fall*, a philosophy that places the onus for good government on the virtuous example of the individual ruler and which discounts the excuse of fortune for the failings of princes, constantly challenges its own source material, often contradicting Boccaccio and De Premierfait, the French translator of Boccaccio's original Latin prose. Though Lydgate may have set out to translate faithfully the spirit, if not the letter, of Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, he soon finds himself at odds with Boccaccio's relentless determinism and his model of theocratic kingship (divinely ordained kingship) that ultimately privileges monarchical over ecclesiastical authority and results not in the separation of church and state, but in the total submission of the spiritual to the secular (as in, for example, the late reign of Henry VIII). So insistent is Lydgate's opposition to Boccaccio's fatalism that he inserts narratives of his own (Constantine's conversion and Donation, for example) to show that the downfall of princes is not as inevitable as the turn of Fortune's wheel—providing that the prince lead a virtuous life and submit to the authority of the church in spiritual matters.

The local politics of Bury St. Edmunds is the focus of Chapter 5 because the autonomy of the abbey was very much at risk throughout the 1430s, and most of Lydgate's work was directed to the cause of its protection, not so much from an anticlerical laity as from the church hierarchy. During this period, in addition to the weighty *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate wrote the *Life of St. Edmund* and the little known *Cartae Versificatae*. These poems are written against a backdrop of episcopal interference in the affairs of the Benedictines, a bid for power that was being played out at the Council of Basel and in bishoprics all across England. More generally, however, under the persuasive influence of revisionist historians of the English Reformation (Scarisbrick, Haig,

Duffy), and revisionist historians of English monasticism (Pantin, Knowles, Clark,) I argue against a Whig historiography with its vision of a monastic academic culture in pre-Reformation decline. Benedictine anxieties in the late fourteenth century resulted in an outpouring of literary, historical, and archival writing, the main purpose of which was to defend the old order, the “*principes sacerdotum*” and to demonstrate, by example, the vitality of fifteenth-century Benedictine intellectual life.⁴² It is important to note that this activity was not by any means exclusive to Bury St. Edmunds, although, for obvious reasons, no other monastery could match the literary output of Lydgate’s abbey.⁴³ For better or for worse, Lydgate’s great body of work is a manifestation of a fifteenth-century Benedictine revival. His *Life of St. Edmund*, as copied in the magnificent MS Harley 2278, is the best extant illustrated production of fifteenth-century English verse and represents a major achievement, not just for the poet, but for his abbey. In their own ways, Abbot Curteys and John Lydgate were responding to a crisis shared by all the major monasteries at the beginning of the fifteenth century. It was a crisis generated, then as later, by the top levels of society, secular and ecclesiastic, and it was to this level that their response was directed. My study does not address the Reformation *per se*, but I do believe my conclusions will provide some small support for the Reformation revisionists who argue against the

⁴²“We are the princes of the priesthood and the masters of the people” was the rallying cry at gatherings of the General Chapter of the Benedictines (Clark, *Monastic Renaissance*, 253). With post-Reformation hindsight, I note the prophetic irony of Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*.

⁴³See for example, Rodney Thomson, *Archives of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*, on the sudden proliferation of archives during the Lydgate years: “These developments were not confined to Bury, but were taking part at many religious houses during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Indeed during the first half of the fifteenth century one can probably speak of a ‘movement’ of archival reorganization among English abbeys and cathedrals. The phenomenon has long been known to administrative historians, but remains undiscussed and unexplained” (40).

historiography of the English Reformation as a bottom-up revolution driven by an anticlerical laity.

Chapter 1: Ricardian Lydgate and the “Lancastrian Thesis”

O myȝti God, þat with þin inward loke
 Sest euery þing þoruȝ þin eternal myȝt,
 Whi wiltow nat of equite and riȝt
 Punishe & chastise so horrible a þing,
 And specialy þe mordre of a kyng?
 (*Troy Book* 5.1046-50)

When literary historians speak of Lydgate as “poet-apologist for the House of Lancaster,” they tend not to differentiate among his varying roles throughout the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, the minority years of Henry VI (during which the balance of power fluctuated between opposing factions headed by the duke of Gloucester, the duke of Bedford, and Cardinal Beaufort), and the troubled years of Henry VI up until the death of Lydgate in 1449. Derek Pearsall has noted that Lydgate’s work shows very little development over the years. But, whereas it is true that the poet’s core values are remarkably consistent, his practical politics do indeed reflect an evolutionary progression, if not towards an unqualified support of government policy, at least towards a realistic acknowledgement that the support of the Lancastrian court and nobility would be crucial to the welfare of the abbey. His work shows a clear and consistent chronological progression through the following political stages: a barely concealed resistance to the usurpation and tyrannous rule of Henry IV; an early distrust of Henry V’s attitudes towards ecclesiastical reform, combined with an objection in principle to his plunderous campaigns in Normandy; a posthumous idealization of Henry V’s defence of the church, mainly as an example for his son to follow; a brief period of open endorsement of the dual monarchy as a means to peace with France; an ideological alliance with the Beaufort/Suffolk faction against the hawkish policies of the duke of Gloucester in the late 1430s and early 1440s; and a genuine affection for

the pious, if incompetent Henry VI. Lydgate is inevitably co-opted by the Lancastrians, but his conscription is not an immediate process, his collaboration and complicity is not nearly as extensive as it has so often been assumed, and there is always, in Lydgate's work, a strong countervailing undercurrent to the pressures of patronage. If there is one consistent benchmark in Lydgate's evaluation of Lancastrian policy, it is the extent to which each successive ruling faction's foreign or domestic policy contributes to the promotion of justice, peace, and unity within the kingdom.

There is, nevertheless, a growing awareness in recent studies that Lydgate's political allegiances were not uniformly pro-Lancastrian, if such a term is meant to imply a consistent endorsement of all things Lancastrian over nearly fifty years of rule. Maura Nolan has noted the extent to which most studies of fifteenth century literature in general, and Lydgate criticism in particular, has been driven by what she has designated the "Lancastrian thesis," the two most sophisticated exponents of which have been the historicists Paul Strohm and Lee Patterson (*John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* 10-14).⁴⁴ The Lancastrian thesis, in its simplest form merely attempts to contextualize, quite reasonably in a good historicist tradition, literature written during the years of Lancastrian rule as products of that particular time and place in history. In its more extreme forms, however, there is a tendency to attribute inordinate power to the "Lancastrians" to the point where individual writers such as Lydgate or Hoccleve are consumed by this all-pervasive hegemony, as though Lancastrian power was so extensive as to

⁴⁴A good example of the Lancastrian thesis at work in literary history is Paul Strohm's contribution to the 1999 *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, "Hoccleve, Lydgate and the Lancastrian Court," which begins: "Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate staged their lives and careers in complex relation to the Lancastrian court, and were consciously and deliberately Lancastrian in their sympathies and proclivities" (640).

control the minds of all its subjects, clergy and laity alike. Lancastrian literature (that is to say, literature written while the Lancastrians were in power) is seen as a series of "symbolic enactments of Lancastrian legitimacy" controlled and produced at the will of those who hold power "as a means of suppressing the imaginary" (Nolan 11). Because the Lancastrian thesis tends to wrench all agency or intentionality away from the individual writers and relocate it in the hands of the government in power, in this case the Lancastrians, Lydgate's works, religious and secular, are merely "Lancastrian texts," either deliberate or unwitting reflections of the Lancastrian will to power. In this model, authorship is a collaboration between poet and patron, with the will of the patron as the dominating and controlling force; the poet is essentially a mouthpiece for Lancastrian ventriloquism and the reader in search of the truth must avoid the "contaminant of subjectivity" and look to what the text itself reveals through its "gaps and inconsistencies." These ambivalent texts, as Patterson or Strohm have argued, are often "at odds with themselves" despite their determined "aspiration to full complicity."⁴⁵

While having the advantage of rescuing Lydgate's work from its older confinement to a dull, reactionary, post-Chaucerian dark age, the Lancastrian thesis does so at the expense of reducing the poet to a subservient state agent, a performing seal for the Lancastrian circus. However, as James Simpson has suggested, any study of Lydgate's work must take into account a "diversity of affiliations," not just the patronage he supposedly enjoyed in the households of

⁴⁵ "Hoccleve's and Lydgate's aspiration to full complicity was unwavering, but the impossibility of Lancastrian requirements drove even the most resolutely loyal texts into a morass of embarrassing half-acknowledgments and debilitating self-contradictions. Continually at strife with its own professions, the Lancastrian text is above all a hardworking text, always striving but never succeeding in reconciling its placid surface with its external entanglements and its internal contradictions" (Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 195).

some high-ranking Lancastrians. Lydgate's first allegiance was to the Benedictines, his abbey, and his abbot; his political affiliations were therefore very much a reflection of Benedictine and Bury priorities. Lydgate was unarguably a Lancastrian propagandist when Lancastrian policy intersected with Benedictine interests. But when government policy or practice ran counter to the principles of Benedictine philosophy, or perhaps, more to the point, was not in the best economic interest of the order, Lydgate either remained silent or raised a voice of guarded opposition, sometimes in the middle of what appears to be a statement of overt endorsement.

Uncommissioned poetry is somewhat troublesome for the Lancastrian thesis because it opens the possibility of a literature that is more independent, less controlled. Thus all of Lydgate's secular work (and much of his religious work) is assumed to be either commissioned in advance or written on speculation with the hope of future advancement. In this formulation, *Siege of Thebes*, an obviously uncommissioned work, must somehow be Lancastrian propaganda in search of future patronage, despite its consistent anti-war theme and its politically inconvenient narrative. Some critics have even gone so far as to imagine Duke Humphrey as the intended recipient of *Siege of Thebes*;⁴⁶ with similar determination, the prose allegory, *Serpent of Division*, must have been "commissioned," and because it obviously would not have been commissioned by anyone associated with the guilt-ridden court of Henry IV (which could hardly be expected to have appreciated a work which warns of the dangers of civil war caused by the

⁴⁶See for example, M. C. Seymour, *Selections from Hoccleve*, xxx: "It is generally assumed that Lydgate wrote this work (which lacks date and dedication in the extant copies) for his own pleasure, but this view is untenable. No fifteenth-century English poet wrote at such length without a patron in mind; the work is a pendant to the *Troy Book*, completed for Henry V, and Gloucester as *custos anglie* (30 December 1419-1 February 1421) was the most important man in the realm during the king's absence; its hero Tydeus is compared to Gloucester in the *Epithalamium* 138-40."

rash actions of an ambitious conqueror), a later patron, one more convenient to the Lancastrian thesis must be found. Thus a colophon that dates the work at 1400 is completely ignored in favour of an optional, more convenient date of 1422, when Duke Humphrey (himself the very model of a serpent of division) could be duly nominated as patron, and the poet-patron relationship, so fundamental to the Lancastrian thesis, can be maintained at all costs. The underlying logic is that because Lydgate’s works were written by an orthodox Benedictine monk, and because the property-rich Benedictines, who had a personal interest in the suppression of the Lollards and their doctrine of disendowment, would have immediately jumped on the Lollard-persecuting, Lancastrian bandwagon, it follows that these works would have been written in support of the regime, if not at the request of the regime.⁴⁷

The biggest problem with the Lancastrian thesis, apart from the fact that it inadvertently perpetuates a Reformation bias against all monastic literature, is that it imagines a near-omnipotent centralized regime with a consistent set of policies and objectives. It also ascribes far too much intelligence, and too much effectiveness to a decentralized bureaucracy always on the verge of bankruptcy, a fractious administration barely capable of clinging to power in the first regime, vastly overextended in subsequent decades, ignominiously defeated in the Hundred Years War, and ultimately brought down by its own incompetence after plunging the nation into

⁴⁷See, for example, Patrick J. Horner, “The King Taught Us the Lesson: Benedictine Support for Henry V’s Suppression of the Lollards,” which articulates this theory most directly, and is often quoted in support of the “Lancastrian thesis” as applied to the supposed compliance of the Benedictines. See also Christopher Cannon in the influential *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*: “In the fifteenth century monasteries played an increasingly central role in helping to secure the dynastic claims of the Lancastrian regime, offering it the legitimacy that it needed above all else” (343). While I agree that there is evidence of Benedictine compliance after the coronation of Henry V, I suggest that there are severe limitations to this compliance that have not been adequately explored.

a bloody civil war. No one would deny that Lydgate’s work is shaped by the political and cultural forces that act upon any fifteenth-century writer, or that the patronage system limited the space that Lydgate could reserve for himself; but it is worth remembering that Lydgate was an educated man with a mind of his own, deeply-held religious convictions, and a financial backing that was, at least on its most direct level, independent of Lancastrian support. His unwavering loyalty to a Benedictine political agenda sometimes intersected with Lancastrian policy, certainly needed and sought Lancastrian protection, but was often at odds with the principle events of Lancastrian rule, the deposition and murder of a king, to begin with.

Though Lydgate undoubtedly wrote numerous religious and minor secular poems during the reign of Henry IV, none can be shown to have been commissioned, either by the king or by other members of the nobility, and there is simply no evidence that any were written as literary presentations for the purpose of courting further patronage. When Lydgate does work on contract for a high-powered patron, as in *Troy Book*, he usually gives the devil his due in a most unambiguous fashion (usually in an encomiastic prologue or epilogue), even while chipping away at the political platform he has been hired to reinforce. In one sense, Lydgate’s work was always underwritten by the monastery which he served all his life. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, then, if we are to look for patronage anywhere we should begin with the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. As an obedient monk, loyal to his abbot, it is most unlikely that Lydgate would undertake any work of a highly political nature that was not approved or recommended by his abbot.

Precisely because most of Lydgate’s early poetry is not “bespoke” it is very difficult to date most of it, but if we position his poetry on a time-line based on those dates that are known to

be accurate, we are drawn to the conclusion that much of the poetry that Lydgate wrote during his early years, including the reign of Henry IV, was, by default, religious or allegorical, intended either for a monastic audience or for local lay instruction. As might be expected of a young monk, Lydgate, unlike Chaucer, wrote very few courtly love poems for the entertainment of aristocratic audiences, and if any of these few were written during the reign of Henry IV, there is no indication that they circulated outside the monastery to a genteel audience (although several of these became popular enough later in his own lifetime). There is simply no manuscript evidence to support the older assumption that Lydgate wrote poetry for the court in his early career, and religious poetry in his later life.⁴⁸ Lydgate is never mentioned as a colleague of Scogan, Clanvowe, Gower, or Hoccleve, or any other court literati during this first Lancastrian period. The “monk of Bury” did no work for Henry IV directly, despite the fact that the prince of Wales had at least known of Lydgate during his Oxford years and obviously respected his abilities enough to commission him to write an “epic” when the prince himself was in a position to contract for literary services.⁴⁹ My contention is that Lydgate received no Lancastrian patronage

⁴⁸Significant Lydgate works that can be dated at all include: *Serpent of Division* (either 1400 or 1422); *Isopes Fabules* (1404); *Troy Book* (1412-20); *Siege of Thebes* (1421); *Guy of Warwick* (1425); *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man* (1426-28); the mummings and disguisings (1424-30); the coronation poems (1427-32); the *Legend of St. Margaret* (1429-1430); *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* (1434-35); *Cartae Versificatae* (1434-35); *Fall of Princes* (1431-38); *Life of St. Alban* (1439); *Secreta Secretorum* (1446-49).

⁴⁹We know from the Lydgate life records (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 56) that the prince of Wales wrote a letter to Lydgate’s abbot, William Cratfield, on Lydgate’s behalf in 1406, requesting that the poet be allowed to continue his studies at Oxford. But we need not make too much of this early connection to royalty. As Pearsall suggests (*John Lydgate* 31-32), the letter was written at the request of Richard Courtenay, then chancellor of Oxford. The question is not “What did Henry V want with Lydgate?” but “What was Courtenay’s intention?” We also know that Prince Henry was already gone from Oxford by 1403; he was granted sole command of the army against the Welsh in March 1403 and was pre-occupied with the uprising until 1408

during the reign of Henry IV and that he solicited none, because he did not approve (as I shall try to demonstrate from some of his early poetry) of a ruler who, whatever his provocations, probably murdered his king and cousin, stole his crown, put unprecedented power in the hands of the hierarchical church at the expense of the regulars, and was widely rumoured to harbour anticlerical sentiments and to favour ecclesiastical disendowment.⁵⁰ Any informed, conscientious religious would have had reservations about throwing his support behind a regicidal traitor who was not an immediate successor to the murdered king and was not even the heir-presumptive. If Lydgate is anywhere near as conservative a writer as he is depicted by his critics, how, one might ask, could he have possibly supported the Bolingbroke-Arundel *coup d'état*, at least in the first administration, when the peace and prosperity of the whole country was torn asunder as a result of one man's vengeful ambitions?

The fact that some of the monastic chroniclers of the day appear to reproduce the official account of Richard II's “voluntary abdication” is not compelling evidence of Benedictine approval. On the contrary, there is very clear evidence that the monasteries were coerced into revising existing chronicles to support Henry's claim to the throne. As Peter Heath points out, after the arrest of Richard II, all the abbeys were instructed to examine their chronicles and to

(Harriss, *Shaping the Nation*, 521).

⁵⁰See Peter McNiven, *Heresy and Politics in the Reign of Henry IV*. Even the Benedictine Thomas Walsingham, who was quickly co-opted as an apologist for the usurpation, occasionally expresses reservations about Henry IV's intentions towards the church, although he is very careful to blame the king's court which he believed had become a “breeding ground for heterodoxy” (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History* 157; Walsingham, 330; 334). Walsingham gives a very sympathetic account of the rebellious archbishop of York, betrayed and beheaded by the king in 1405; Scrope's execution would have confirmed the church's worst suspicions about the anticlerical intentions of the king (McNiven, 75-78; Walsingham, 338).

submit them to Henry for approval. A committee was established to review the chroniclers' handling of the king's deposition and Bolingbroke's claim to the throne. No monastery would dare submit a chronicle critical of the deposition (Heath 225; Sherborne 239). Immediately after the rise to power of Henry IV, St. Albans took the decision to suppress an earlier “scandalous chronicle” of Walsingham that had been particularly critical of John of Gaunt (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, 208). Walsingham's surviving chronicle is dependent “upon the handouts concocted by Henry and his supporters for their accounts of the deposition and usurpation” (Given-Wilson 72).⁵¹ According to Walter Bower, the 1440 author of the *Scotichronichon*, Henry IV burned the abbot of Glastonbury's chronicle because the abbot refused to remove a passage that declared the earl of March to be the rightful heir to the throne (Given-Wilson 72; 208).

Lydgate and the Literary Vernacular

Critical explanations for Lydgate's extensive use of the vernacular provide us with what is perhaps the clearest example of the Lancastrian thesis in practice. Despite the so-called “skarsete of ryme” in English about which Lydgate frequently complains,⁵² despite his own obvious fluency in Latin and French (with an apparent preference for translating verse from

⁵¹See Sayles for the original “concoctions” in Latin and French.

⁵²See, for example, *Troy Book* 2: 168; *Fall of Princes* 9: 3312. Lydgate is surely joking when he complains about rhyme scarcity. He managed to find approximately 75,000 rhymes in the course of his work, often doing so by borrowing from French or Latin. Many of these borrowings are now standard English.

French to English rather than from Latin to English);⁵³ despite a monastic culture in which Latin was still very much the language of official business (not just for liturgical or instructional purposes, but for all written communication); despite a church policy supported by canon and civil law that clung to Latin as the language of international communication; despite a court culture that still privileged French as the language of “courtoisie;” despite all of these restraining cultural and legal determinants, Lydgate still chose to write almost entirely in English. At least one literary historian, John Fisher, has tried to explain this phenomenon in terms of an official national language policy. Fisher imagines that while at Oxford, Henry V, Henry Beaufort, and John Lydgate were members of a putative social circle, and that Lydgate was subsequently conscripted and promoted as an exponent of a deliberate Lancastrian language policy, the purpose of which was to legitimate the succession through the use of vernacular poetry and the promotion of Chaucer’s works (Fisher 25).⁵⁴

While it is not my purpose to dispute Fisher’s claims with respect to a Lancastrian official language policy, but only his construction of Lydgate as an agent conscripted for that project, it is

⁵³As a source for translation, Lydgate preferred Marie de France over Romulus (*Isopes Fabules*); Laurent de Premierfait over Boccaccio (*Fall of Princes*); on the other hand, he preferred Guido’s Latin over St. Maure’s French (*Troy Book*). His source selections may not have been based on language alone, but all things being equal, he seems to have preferred to work from French.

⁵⁴If Henry V, a very determined monarch, wanted to make English the official national language, one wonders why he would not just pass a law to that effect, rather than enlist the help of an unknown poet. Fisher’s speculation is based on the letter from Henry V addressed to the abbot of Bury, note 49, above. The letter, incidently, is written in French, not English. Fisher’s theories have been influential and are reflected in the work of Paul Strohm, Lee Patterson, and others who argue for the complicity of Lydgate in Lancastrian legitimation strategies.

curious that if the Lancastrians were as officially committed to the promotion of English as Fisher and others speculate, that Henry V would commission his own *Gesta Henrici Quinti* in Latin⁵⁵ and Duke Humphrey would himself solicit major works in Latin in the 1430s, including the *Vita Henrici Quinti*, the official Lancastrian biography of Henry V, and the *Humfroidos*, a celebration in Latin hexameter verse of Humphrey’s own campaign in Flanders in 1435-1436. Nevertheless, my specific disagreement with Fisher’s general thesis is the way the theory seems to position Lydgate inevitably as a Lancastrian stooge, whose politics, like those of the Vicar of Bray, merely echo those of the regime in power. Where, for example, was Lydgate during the first Lancastrian regime? Apart from the letter from Henry V to Lydgate’s abbot, written most probably as a favour to Richard Courtenay, there is no evidence for Fisher’s suggestion that Lydgate, a poor monk from Bury St. Edmunds, would have been part of an illustrious royal circle at Oxford or anywhere else, and yet that speculation is critical to Fisher’s argument that it was at Oxford where the Lancastrian language policy was first conceived and Lydgate was chosen to be the “public relations agent” (33) for the promotion of Lancastrian Chaucer’s work. If repeated tributes mean anything, Lydgate admired Chaucer enormously; indeed, he pays homage to Chaucer in most of his major poems, commissioned or not. But frequent Chaucerian allusions do not necessarily reflect a Lancastrian policy to promote a poet who, whatever his marriage ties, was primarily associated with a Ricardian court, a royal household that was, incidently, far more supportive of the writing of poetry, English or French, than any of its Lancastrian counterparts. The Ricardian era is famous for its literary works in English but even some of its contemporary

⁵⁵There are four contemporaneous lives of Henry V, three in prose and one in verse. All are in Latin.

history, the continuation of the *Brut* from 1333 to 1377, for example, was written in English. The likelihood is that the so-called Lancastrian official language policy was a mere recognition of reality, and a continuation of a late Plantagenet trend. Regardless of the extent of his own personal involvement, the emancipation of English as a literary language certainly began with Richard II. As Chris Given-Wilson notes: “If the first two Lancastrian kings did indeed have a ‘language policy’ for England, they were ploughing an already deep furrow” (143).

If Chaucer was the vernacular poet-elect of the Lancastrians in general (not just the Beauforts), it is odd, as Pearsall points out, that “no catalogue of Gloucester’s books ever so much as mentions Chaucer” (*John Lydgate* 227). One could argue, on the other hand, that it was the Beaufort branch of the Lancastrian family that was eager to promote Chaucer, not so much for the language in which he wrote, or even for his skill as a poet, as for his marriage ties to a newly legitimated and extremely powerful family, one constantly at odds, as might be expected, with mainline “Lancastrians.” Both Lydgate and his abbey had close ties to the Beauforts, as I will show (see Chapter 3). It was, moreover, obviously very fashionable to tip the hat to Chaucer, a literary pioneer who had successfully adapted French and Italian poetic forms to English applications and led the way for generations of English poets. Lydgate did not inaugurate the custom of honouring Chaucer—Usk, Gower, Clanvowe, Scogan, the anonymous author of the *Courte of Sapyence*, and Deschamps were doing it too, and some of these before the Lancastrians took power⁵⁶—but he perpetuated it, and in so doing he appropriated the credibility of his earlier

⁵⁶See Carolyn Spurgeon 1:4,8,10,16; 3:16, and more recently, Carlson, *Chaucer’s Jobs*, (Chapter 3). Hoccleve did it too, but Lydgate was paying tribute to Chaucer long before Hoccleve. Literary history curiously positions Lydgate as a successor to Hoccleve. In fact Lydgate was the same age as Hoccleve and had probably written more poetry by 1405 than Hoccleve wrote in his entire lifetime.

contemporary for his own use as poets have always done. Chaucer was simply the first home-grown English poet to provide an alternative to the more traditional medieval modesty topos that typically appropriated Latin and French *auctors* to derive authority for the work in hand. There may well be some conscious or subconscious hostility in this appropriation (and Lydgate’s determination to write himself into *Siege of Thebes* does suggest a more than casual affiliation with Chaucer) but this fascination with a contemporary poet appears far too personal to attribute to a government strategy.⁵⁷

Nicholas Watson (“Censorship and Cultural Change”) offers a somewhat different application of the Lancastrian thesis when he argues for the repressive effects of the 1409 Arundellian Constitutions, not just on religious writing, but on fifteenth-century vernacular literature in general. Long before the promotion of the vernacular became official Lancastrian policy (if it ever did), however, Lydgate and many other poets were already writing in English under Richard II, and long after the repression of the vernacular in religious writing became the unofficial policy of the Lancastrian church, Lydgate happily wrote and continued to write in English. If *Life of Our Lady* was written after 1409, as most critics assume it was (though I

⁵⁷A related question one might ask is why Lydgate did not pay tribute to Gower. Was it because of Gower’s reputation as an anticlerical political opportunist who wasted no time in throwing in his lot with the Lancastrians? Lydgate certainly knew of Gower, whom he acknowledges only once, with faint praise, in *Fall of Princes*: “In moral mateer ful notable was Goweer” (9:3410). Larry Scanlon argues that Lydgate engages with Gower in his tale of Constantine for example, but the interaction, it should be noted, is one of silent correction, not direct dialogue (*Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 335-36). Though both poets use the St. Sylvestre legend as their source of the conversion narrative, Gower questions the wisdom of Constantine’s submission to the church, whereas Lydgate’s main point is that the Donation provides justification for the church’s temporal possessions.

suggest otherwise), it represents what is arguably some fairly complex “vernacular theology”⁵⁸ that seeks no approval from Arundel equivalent to that granted to Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*—a prose translation of the same original, the *Meditationes Vitae Christi*.⁵⁹ Conspicuously absent from all copies of Lydgate’s work is the archbishop’s imprimatur found at the beginning of Love’s *Mirror* (xv; 7).

The common explanation for the proliferation of Lydgate’s religious writing in English is that he wrote in a Latinate aureate verse in defiance of the Lollard taste for literary simplicity (Epstein 365; Pearsall, “Lydgate as Innovator,” 20)⁶⁰ and that his theology is so orthodox not even Arundel would raise an eyebrow at its dissemination. In fact, Lydgate rarely wrote in the extreme Latinate high style for which he is so often remembered, though he was never hesitant to borrow from Latin or French, generally for the more practical purposes of metre or rhyme. Moreover, Arundel’s constitutions specified that “No one from now on should translate any text of holy scripture on his own authority into the English language[...]under pain of excommunication, until that translation be approved by the local diocesan, or, if need be, by the provincial council [i.e., Arundel himself]” (Love xviii). Michael Sargent, editor of two recent editions of Love’s *Mirror*, notes that the regulations applied not just to direct translations of the

⁵⁸Whether or not *Life of Our Lady* is inspiring or challenging theology is, in any case, not the issue. If Love’s work required an imprimatur, then, according to the terms of the Constitutions, and to Watson’s own argument, so would Lydgate’s.

⁵⁹The two works by Lydgate and Love are somewhat similar, sharing a common source in broad outline if not in detail, although Lydgate’s work only covers the material of the first book of the *Meditationes* (and that very loosely indeed), the Monday devotions, whereas Love provides a complete and comparatively close translation.

⁶⁰For a closely related but more credible argument, see Carlson, “Whethamstede on Lollardy.”

scriptures, but “all theological literature of the type that would have been written in Latin heretofore” (Love xviii). In opposition to Watson’s reading, it could be argued that Arundel’s primary motivation for the passing of these laws was the assertion of his own authority and that of his bishops, not the repression of heresy. Lydgate’s failure to seek the requisite episcopal approval for his English religious verse, theological or otherwise, could not have pleased the archbishop, but in the absence of heresy, there was nothing Arundel could do about it. The Benedictines, quite obviously, did not recognize episcopal jurisdiction over Benedictine writing. I therefore raise the possibility that Lydgate wrote defiantly in the vernacular, deliberately without episcopal approval. He is alone among his Benedictine colleagues in adopting English as his written language, and although he must have been acutely aware of the Arundellian proscriptions of English for religious writing, he is as stubbornly persistent in choice of language for his religious poetry as he is for his secular verse. Margaret Deansely (making a somewhat different argument) has noted that Lydgate’s widely copied translations of the *Psalms*, for example, were an open breach of the Constitutions (321).

If nothing else, his extensive and pioneering use of literary English should be recognized as a sign that Lydgate wrote to suit himself; even under the sinister shadow of Arundellian law he felt free to exercise his poetry in the language he knew best, perhaps for no other reason than it was easier or more satisfying for him to write verse and prose in English than to write in Latin or French. If one must find a higher motive for his use of English than mere personal preference, a reformist zeal to reach the widest possible audience or the pride of nationality that is so evident in works such as *Troy Book* (Renoir, *Poetry*, 95-109) and *Fall of Princes* (see Chapter 4) might provide some easy alternatives to a deliberate Lancastrian strategy. But the simplest explanation

is just supply and demand. His work circulated widely and was very fashionable in his own lifetime. Whatever the other social and political determinants, during Chaucer's lifetime and after Chaucer's death there was clearly a demand among the educated classes, who generation by generation were losing their command of French, for non-alliterative, decasyllabic English verse of the type that Chaucer—not Langland, or the Pearl-Poet, or even Gower with his interminable octosyllabic couplets—had written. Lydgate gave the public what it wanted.

Life of Our Lady

Critical attempts to arrange Lydgate's undated works in chronological order have likewise often been driven as much by the Lancastrian thesis as by textual evidence. *Life of Our Lady*, a very popular work in its time, is extant in some forty-two manuscripts, with early prints by William Caxton, Robert Redman, and Charles Tame (Lauritis 1). Because of a widely copied rubric which states (with some minor variations): "This booke was compilede by Iohn Lidgate Monke of Bury at the excitation and styryng of our worschipfull prince kyng Harry the fifthe," the poem is automatically assumed to have been commissioned by Henry V, either in the last years of the reign of Henry IV when the prince dominated the king's council (Schick, MacCracken, Pearsall) or sometime towards the end of Henry V's reign (Lauritis *et al*). But as Henry MacCracken, Lydgate's first comprehensive bibliographer, and many others have noted, apart from the rubric there is no internal evidence whatsoever to suggest a commission by anyone or to date the poem with any degree of certainty. Not only is there no internal reference to any kind of a patron or dedicatee (other than the eulogy to Chaucer) as there is, for example, in *Life of St. Edmund*, compiled as a gift to Henry VI, or in *Troy Book*, which pays homage to its patron

within the work itself—*Life of Our Lady*, as a saint's *Vita*, or as a mirror of the life of Christ, does not even appear to have been finished. It ends with the Purification of Mary and a theological explanation of the Feast of Candlemas. Lydgate's work corresponds very loosely to the first section of Bonaventure's (or pseudo-Bonaventure's) *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, the meditations for Monday, but only for a few select passages does Bonaventure appear to be Lydgate's source. Though very widely distributed, none of the extant manuscripts have the appearance of a presentation copy. *Life of Our Lady* is much less a work of Marian hagiography than it is a work of devotional meditation most likely intended for use by the monks themselves. A better title for the work might have been "The Incarnation of Christ" because it focuses on some of Christianity's most profound theological questions: why the life and death of Christ was deemed necessary for the salvation of humanity, why the incarnation, and why the virgin birth.

Katherine O'Sullivan has noted similarities between Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* and Lydgate's poem, but the two works share nothing more than some overlapping content. O'Sullivan's essay ably demonstrates the sophistication of Lydgate's vernacular theology, but her article is yet another example of the forced application of the Lancastrian thesis to a text that, apart from its non-authorial rubric, makes no reference whatsoever to the Lancastrian regime: "Lydgate attempts to establish the authority and legitimacy of the Lancastrian court by reinforcing lineage and sovereignty in response to political and social anxieties found throughout the first decades of the fifteenth century" (171). It is not at all clear how the lineage and sovereignty of the Lancastrian court is an issue in *Life of Our Lady*. The fact that Lydgate addresses Mary as "queen," (thereby somehow associating the Virgin Mary with the Lancastrian court?) or the orthodox theology that O'Sullivan construes as evidence of an anti-

Lollard intent does not provide convincing support for her thesis. Nor does the fact that some close similarities between Lydgate's and Love's treatment of the "Four Daughters of God" allegory (Book 2:1-350), a popular medieval fable that describes the debate in the parliament of heaven between Mercy and Peace on the one side and Justice and Truth on the other—a debate over the salvation of man—in any way demonstrate that Lydgate's poem was written after Love's work; Love could have used Lydgate, or they could have used a common source. George Keiser has suggested that a particular group of *Life of Our Lady* manuscripts may be of Carthusian origin (153). If he is correct, the Carthusians were drawing on earlier, Benedictine manuscripts, and Love, a Carthusian, was likely drawing on *Life of Our Lady*, not the other way around. Certainly it is easier, on internal evidence, to place Love's work after 1410 than Lydgate's. Love translates all of Bonaventure's *Meditationes* while supplying his own meditations on the events of the life of the Holy Family, from which, for example, he is able to draw conclusions about the pride and foolishness of the Lollards who will not submit to the authority of the church; Lydgate follows the outline of Book 1 of the *Meditationes*, but his work is in no sense of the word a verse translation of either Love or Bonaventure. The question of source material for *Life of Our Lady* is in fact extremely complicated. The fullest study is contained in the introduction to the *Critical Edition* by Lauritis *et al* (57-182). The editors posit the possibility of a lost French original disappearing without a trace, the obvious objection to which is that, had such a source existed, it would have been at least as popular as *Life of Our Lady*, with a corresponding number of extant manuscripts. The conclusion that everyone steadfastly resists is that Lydgate composed his own work by pulling together a multitude of sources using the extensive resources of the Bury library, interpreting them in his own unique fashion.

But how, then, can we explain the rubric which recurs at the head of most of the manuscripts? Why is there no corresponding internal reference to royal patronage? One could argue that Lydgate did not wish to sully a devotional poem with references to mundane temporal matters, but he has no qualms about interrupting the narrative at the end of Book II with one of the longest and most plaintive tributes to Chaucer that he would ever make. One possibility is that the rubric is simply a mistake, a scribal conjecture that was made in the earliest extant copy of the poem and perpetuated in all those that follow. Another is that the rubric is an interpolation of a later Lancastrian scribe to give some credit to Henry V for the work. The Lancastrians (i.e., some scribe working for Henry V) may have found it advantageous to circulate a text of Marian devotion years after it was composed, as a way of demonstrating the piety of the king. The king's piety, strangely enough, was part of the official justification for the plunder of Normandy. Henry believed his war to be willed and sanctioned by God. Even assuming that the rubric is neither a mistake nor the deliberate interpolation of a Lancastrian scribe, the words "excitation and styryng" imply some degree of inspiration, but they do not necessarily imply a commission. Lydgate may merely have been moved to write a devotional poem by what he perceived to be the prince's own devotion to Mary, or if the Benedictines at Bury were interested in currying favour with the troublesome Henry V, they may have thought the king would like a copy of an earlier poem by Lydgate, and as a simple propaganda measure, they may have retroactively attributed inspiration to the ostentatiously pious Henry. There are many ways a poet can be "styred" to action, ranging from the slightest hint of princely encouragement to an outright royal commission. Critics intent on making *Life of Our Lady* a project initiated and funded by Henry V have almost always assumed the latter.

The unusual length, intensity and wording of the eulogy to Chaucer that interrupts the narrative at the end of Book II (with the image of him "that lieth now in his cheste") suggests three interesting possibilities: that the poem was composed immediately after the death of Chaucer (or that Chaucer died while the work was being written); that Lydgate was writing for some time before Chaucer's death; and that Chaucer was actively involved in Lydgate's early mentoring as a poet.⁶¹ If Lydgate learned his craft simply by reading Chaucer's work carefully, he could do so whether Chaucer were alive or dead. But if Lydgate actually knew Chaucer, and the latter had ever acted as critical advisor, the urgency of the lines I have italicized below makes more sense. In no other Lydgatean reference to Chaucer's death is there the expression of sorrow, or a prayer for the repose of his soul, such as we see here.

Wherefore no wondre, thof my hert pleyne
 Vpon his dethe, and for sorowe blede
 For want of hym, nowe in my grete nede
 That shulde alas, conveye and directe
And with his supporte, amende eke and corecte

*The wronge trace, of my rude penne
 There as I erre, and goo not lyne Right
 But for that he, ne may not me kenne
 I can no more, but with all my myght
 With all myne hert, and myne Inwarde sight
 Pray for hym, that liethe nowe in his cheste
 To god above, to yeve his saule goode reste
 (2.1644-55; my italics)⁶²*

⁶¹Yet Pearsall states somewhat dogmatically that the paths of the two poets "would not have crossed" (*Bio-Bibliography* 14).

⁶²The possibility of an earlier tutor-student relationship with Chaucer is further supported by lines in *Troy Book*:

And Chaucer now, allas is not alyve
 Me to reforme or to be my rede
 For lak of whom slougher is my spede

Precise dating of this poem cannot be determined. Because of the lines above, its *terminus a quo* is the death of Chaucer; its *terminus ad quem* is the death of Henry V, if there is any significance at all to the rubric that attributes inspiration to the king. The editors of the *Critical Edition* (Lauritis *et al*) have suggested a composition date as late as 1420, after Henry V's victorious return from France after the Treaty of Troyes, but on the dating question they are actually in the minority of critical opinion, and it does seem unlikely that Lydgate would produce two such substantial works as *Life of Our Lady* and *Siege of Thebes* in 1420-22, the years following the completion of *Troy Book*. Most critics prefer a date preceding the year Lydgate began *Troy Book*, sometime around 1409 to 1412. The possibility exists, however, that the poem was actually begun shortly after Chaucer's death, or was a work in progress interrupted by the untimely death of Lydgate's mentor, as the immediacy of the eulogy to Chaucer would suggest. The rubric could have made its first appearance at that time (if, for example, the prince's well-

(*Troy Book* 3: 550-53).

See also the lines (quoted by Pearsall as an argument against the acquaintanceship) which could actually be read as an argument in support thereof :

My maister Chaucer that founde ful many spot-
 Hym list nat pinche nor gruche at euery blot,
 Nor meue himself to parturbe his reste
 (I haue herde telle), but seide alewie the best,
 Suffring goodly of his gentilnes

Ful many thing embracid with rudnes (*Troy Book* 5.3521-26).

See also the dedication to Lydgate's "maister" in the "Churl and the Bird" (who, if Schick is right in dating the poem at 1398, could only be Chaucer):

Go, litel quaier! & recomaunde me
 Vnto my maister with humble affeccioun
 Beseche hym lowly, of mercy & pite,
 Of this rude making to have compassion.

(379-82).

known devotion to Mary had been any kind of an inspiration to Lydgate at Oxford), or sometime later, when the finished poem was actually handed over to a Lancastrian scribe. A composition date of 1401 is no more conjectural than 1409 or 1420, and better explains the intrusive Chaucer eulogy. The early date also explains the lack of any reference to royal patronage within the poem itself and the missing allusions to Henry V's victories in France (if, as Lauritis speculates, the poem was written in thanksgiving to Mary) and to the supposed patron's scourge of Lollardy. Moreover, the earlier date attribution accounts for Lydgate's time during the early years of Henry IV, a period to which only the *Isopes Fabules* has been ascribed.

If the poem was commissioned as a rebuke to Lollardy, it is odd that the work never addresses Lollard dogma even indirectly, and never refers to the most significant manifestation of the problem, the Oldcastle rebellion (if it was written after 1414), or makes any reference to the king as the scourge of heretics, or some such topical allusion. Love's *Mirror*, for example (written 1410?),⁶³ contains several direct refutations of Lollard dogma for which there is no such counterpart in Lydgate's *Life*. Apart from the obligatory tribute to his patron in *Troy Book*, one of the few compliments Lydgate ever pays to Henry V is due to the king's defence of the church against Lollardy, but even that compliment is not paid until after the king's death, during the coronation years when, because of the Hussite rebellion, the threat posed by Lollardy is no longer an academic debate. The only reference to heresy, other than one lengthy diatribe against those

⁶³A. I. Doyle warns against assuming that the date suggested by the imprimatur is the original composition date of Love's work. The work could have been in circulation before Arundel's constitutions, or it may not have been the first copy that was submitted for the archbishop's approbation ("Reflections of Some Manuscripts of Nicholas Love's *Myrrour of the Blessed Lyf of Jesu Christ*," 82-84). The same caution should be accorded *Life of Our Lady*. It is sometimes easier to date a particular manuscript than the composition of a work.

who would deny the Virgin Birth (2.911-31)—which doctrine, because of its scriptural basis, the Lollards never did dispute—is in the few scant lines cited below. Of course, the very subject matter of the poem, a devotional hymn to Mary that contains many biographical details derived from apocryphal literature and the church's oral tradition, could be construed as a rebuke to the Lollards, who would reject any legend that was not scripturally based. But it is just too convenient to interpret every expression of orthodox religion in the fifteenth century as a reaction to Lollardy. Lydgate has nothing to lose by attacking the Lollards outright (unless he suspects the king himself of harbouring Lollard sympathies), yet he never does. Any anti-heretical passages in the poem are, in fact, evasive, linked as they are with tyranny and robbery. The following three stanzas from Book IV describe the way in which Christ is made to suffer the pain of circumcision four times over through the sins of false witness, tyrants who rob the church, heretics, and tyrants who would make martyrs of the faithful:

Also in four manere, who-so can take hede,
 Criste in his chosen by gode inspection,
 Her in this worlde, with-oute any drede,
 Of newe he suffreth circumcision.
 The firste is made by fals detraction
 That kytteth away bothe frende and fame,
 And the shynyng, of her gode name.

The secunde is by fals tyrannye,
 Of suche that haue noo concyence at all,
But take the awaye by cursyd Robberye,
Vnrightfully, her godes temporall.
 And the thryde is, sothely most mortall:
 Of herytykes that falsely disobey
 To holy chirche and to our faythe verrey.

The fourt is made by effusion of blode,
 By tyrantes that the body slethe,
 When thay of malice ayayne the faythe be wode
 To execute her venyme vp by dethe,

To make marters yelden vp the brethe;
 Whome criste Ihesu, eternally in glorye,
 Ordeyned hath a palme of victorie.
 (4.78-99; my italics)

The curious association of circumcision with false witness, tyranny, and heresy appears to be a connection exclusive to Lydgate (as it does not occur in Love's *Mirror*, where circumcision is significant in that it is merely the first time that Christ will bleed for our sins: "This day oure Lord Jesus began to shede his precieuse blode for oure sake," 42.9). In Lydgate's lines quoted above, the burden of heresy is lain at the feet of tyrannical rulers, and those who would disendow or plunder the church are charged with tyranny and robbery, a metaphoric circumcision of the church (Lydgate's metaphor, not mine). He makes the same connection between heresy, tyranny and robbery in his *Defence of Holy Church* (see Chapter 2); and in his *Isopes Fabules*, false witness, robbery, and tyranny are major preoccupations of a work that was possibly written around the same time as *Life of Our Lady*.

The Chaucerian Poems of Courtly Love

The earliest poetry of Lydgate's that we can date with external evidence are his *Isopes Fabules*, which an attribution by John Shirley places in Oxford c.1404 (MS Trinity R.3.19, fol. 236).⁶⁴ But Lydgate was about thirty-four years old by that time, well into his mid-life by

⁶⁴Shirley is a notable London scribe, a contemporary of Lydgate who knew the poet or at least his work very well (they both did extensive work for Richard Beauchamp, for example) and compiled most of the poetic miscellanies to which we owe, either directly or indirectly through later derivations, the bulk of Lydgate's minor poetry. Shirley's rubrics and attributions, though not infallible, are generally considered the best external evidence of authorship and of chronological placement. In the face of an attribution by Shirley, the burden is on the modern scholar to prove Shirley wrong, an undertaking usually best avoided. For his life and work see Margaret Connolly, *John Shirley*.

medieval standards. Common sense dictates that Lydgate wrote a large portion of his total uncommissioned output before the age of thirty. He was not ordained until 1397, and there is no evidence in any of his life records that he strayed far from Bury St. Edmunds before then. But we do know the abbot of Bury had town houses in London, and if a younger Lydgate was ever permitted to accompany his abbot to the capital, it is not unreasonable to assume he would seek out the work of the London poets. He could very easily have encountered Chaucer either in Aldgate or at Chaucer's later residence at Westminster Abbey.⁶⁵ Lydgate could only have learned to imitate Chaucer's style through constant practice, and there is no reason to suppose that he did not begin that practice until he was thirty-four years of age. He may have written the bulk of his small body of courtly love poetry while still a student at Oxford, for no other reason than it was the popular poetic fashion of the day (just as an Elizabethan poet might begin the practice of poetry by writing sonnets). In his essay on the Lydgate canon (*Minor Poems* 1: v-lviii) MacCracken lists a handful of courtly love poems, some of which, such as "My Lady Dere," the poem written for Thomas Chaucer on his departure for France, were written after 1413. But the four most noteworthy of the love allegories, the "Complaint of the Black Knight," the "Floure of

⁶⁵John Stow, a sixteenth-century London antiquarian, notes town-houses belonging to the abbot of Bury in Bevis Marks, just east of St. Paul's (where the John Stow House is today), a five-minute walk from Chaucer's residence at Aldgate: "Then next is one great house large of roomes, fayre courts and garden plottes, sometimes pertayning [...]to the Abbots of Bury in Suffolk, and therefore called Buries Markes, corruptly Beuis markes" (1.146). See also the Curteys register, MS Additional 14848, fol. 82v. Chaucer had moved from Aldgate by 1386 (when Lydgate was sixteen), but as a one-time neighbour of the abbot in London, introductions could easily have been arranged. On Lydgate's association with London, see C. David Benson's "Civic Lydgate: The Poet and London." Benson cites a heading by Shirley which specifies that Lydgate wrote the poem *Virgo Mater Christi* "by night as he lay in his bedde at London" (149).

Curtesye," the *Temple of Glas*, and the unfinished *Reson and Sensuallyte*,⁶⁶ are the most "Chaucerian" in style of all Lydgate's poetry, and it would make sense to place these in his Ricardian or early Lancastrian years.⁶⁷ They are, in any case, decorative and ornamental entertainments for the leisure class, mere exercises in imitative versification, and of scant interest in a study of Lydgate's politics.⁶⁸ Taken together, they amount to a very small percentage of the overall Lydgatean output (less than two per cent), so it is obvious that Lydgate, whatever his talents in this regard, was not particularly interested in writing allegories and dream visions for the aristocracy once he had written enough to prove that he could do it.⁶⁹ Robert Meyer-Lee (40)

⁶⁶Authorship of *Resoun and Sensualite* has never been proven, but modern scholars see no reason to doubt John Stow's attribution to Lydgate. It has traditionally been dated between 1406 to 1412, but that date is an educated guess.

⁶⁷Schick places the "Complaint of the Black Knight," the "Floure of Courtesye," and the *Temple of Glas* at the turn of the century, and in that order (*Lydgate's Temple of Glas*, xcix-c). But the "Floure of Courtesye," a poem greatly admired by critics (so much so that MacCracken was loathe to attribute the authorship to Lydgate despite overwhelming internal and external evidence), is an early Lancastrian poem and contains what may be Lydgate's first tribute to the dead Chaucer (line 236). The *Temple of Glas* on the other hand, could very well be referring to a living contemporary, as the absence of any reference to his death and the casual use of the present tense would indicate ("as Chaucer tellith us," line 110). The "Black Knight" is a clear imitation of the *Book of the Duchess*, and may well be the earliest of these poems, as Schick says; it contains no reference to Chaucer, despite the close imitation of style, form, and content.

⁶⁸Which is not to deny that in one sense, all poetry is political; by writing ornamental poetry to entertain the ruling classes, a poet implicitly supports the status quo. Lydgate is no revolutionary. He believes in the "quiet hierarchies" of feudalism, bastard or otherwise. But he is acutely conscious of how easily power can be abused; his overtly political poetry seeks to reform, even as it endorses existing political structures. His courtly poetry tends to avoid all social issues beyond conventional moral allegory.

⁶⁹Richard Firth Green posits a more financial motivation: "his comparative neglect of this genre [*fin amour*] suggests that he did not find it in general a very lucrative one" (133).

cites a verse from Lydgate's "Balade at the Reverence of Our Lady" (MS Sloane 1212, fols.101r-102v), which suggests that the poet is somewhat jaded by the genre:

A thowsand storiis kowde I mo reherse
 Off olde poetis, touchynge this matere,
 How that Cupide the hertis gan to perse
 Off his seruantis, setting them affer;
 Lo here the fin of the errour and the weere!
 Lo here of loue the guerdoun and greuaunce
 That euyr with woo his seruantis doth avaunce!
 (1-7)

Lydgate's love allegories would perhaps be of more interest today in a historical study of literary taste. The Victorian antiquarians and the German philologists who took such an interest in Lydgate found these "imaginative writings" much to their liking in comparison to the "dry, monotonous translations spun out through thousands and thousands of lines in his later days" (Schick cxi). The literary reception of the "Complaint of the Black Knight," as a prime example, has certainly had its ups and downs. From the sixteenth century onward, critics thought that the poem had been written by Chaucer and raved about it until they learned that it was actually written by a Catholic monk named Lydgate.⁷⁰ Modern critics, too, at least until the recent ascendancy of the New Historicism in medieval literary studies, have uniformly preferred the courtly poems to the longer epic translations, presumably because Lydgate, when deliberately imitating Chaucer, is less didactic, less moralistic, less confrontational, and more in conformance with modern tastes in poetry. Pearsall finds these courtly poems to be "amongst Lydgate's most significant achievement" (*John Lydgate* 84) because they manifest the beneficial influence of

⁷⁰The poem was acclaimed, for example, as one of the best of Chaucer's shorter poems by John Dart, co-editor of a collected Chaucer in 1721 (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 85; Spurgeon 1:346).

Chaucer.⁷¹ But whatever the aesthetic merits of these poems, they are not representative of Lydgate in his preferred and more characteristic intent, which is to lecture his aristocratic audiences, not to praise them, nor to encourage their idle fantasies.⁷²

The fact that there are no major works of Lydgate that can be traced to the reign of Henry IV is not surprising, given that a poet does not usually begin his career with the translation of national epics. What is surprising, at least in the face of traditional Lydgate criticism, is how antagonistic to the new regime the works that can be confidently dated to the first decade of Lancastrian rule appear to be. But there is good reason to expect hostility toward the new regime from a Benedictine poet. Despite the revisionist histories of a few English chroniclers, most notably Thomas Walsingham of St. Albans, who represented a monastery with close ties to the murdered appellant, Thomas duke of Gloucester, the Benedictines in general were not supportive of the usurpation, and in some cases actively rebelled against the new government. Westminster Abbey, perhaps the most influential centre of Benedictine policy in England, was the birth-place of the Epiphany plot to overthrow Henry IV and an ongoing centre of rebellion in the first years of Lancastrian rule.⁷³ Bishop Merks, himself a Benedictine and former prior of Westminster, was implicated in the rising of the earls. The Benedictine abbeys in East Anglia were particularly active in the resistance to Bolingbroke. Some of Bury's neighbouring abbots, including St. John

⁷¹Pearsall notes: "It is interesting to see how Chaucerian imitation acts as spur to the often mechanical processes of Lydgate's mind" (*John Lydgate* 164).

⁷²On this point Lydgate may have something in common with Jean-Paul Sartre, whose justification for his early work, if memory serves, was that he "wanted to be literary in order to show the error of being literary."

⁷³See Harriss, *Shaping the Nation*, 493-94; Pearce, 123-28; Philip Morgan, 5-6; Heath, 239.

and St. Botholph in Colchester, Beeleigh, and St. Osyth, were implicated together with Maud de Vere, the countess of Oxford, in a plot to assist a French invasion along the coast of Essex and Suffolk (Philip Morgan 19). Letters were passed back and forth via the great Benedictine network. Although nothing much came of the charges, it was suspicion of exactly this kind of treasonous activity that led to the closing of the alien priories under both Henry IV and Henry V. Badges with the white hart, Richard's emblem, were widely distributed in the two counties (Wiley 1: 420-21; 2: 44-6).

Richard II was a major patron of Bury St. Edmunds; he had visited the monastery in 1383 with his new queen, Anne of Bohemia, and stayed for ten days (Arnold 3: xxxvii). Bury St. Edmunds does not seem to have been directly involved or implicated in any civil uprising against Henry IV, but there is one instance in which William Cratfield, Lydgate's abbot from 1390-1415, stood bail for a traitor who was arrested by civil authorities in Bury after returning from Scotland with news of the "living" King Richard (Wiley 1:420). Abbot Cratfield himself was named in a report made by two thieves at a trial in Huntingdon in 1405 as one of many Benedictine abbots and priors who had made funds available to support the Welsh rebellion (Heath 239). Also named were the abbots of Warden, Woburn, and Lavendon, and the priors of Huntingdon, Newham, Thetford and Ixford, most of which were in East Anglia. Nothing was ever proven, and the abbots were eventually exonerated, but the incident would certainly not have helped to improve early Lancastrian-Benedictine relations. Patrick Horner has argued that the Benedictines gradually came to embrace Henry V as a champion against the Lollard call for disendowment and did their best (as did Lydgate in a *Defence of Holy Church*) to move the king in that direction, but

there are strong indications that the Benedictines were severally troubled by the reign of Henry IV.

Isopes Fabules

In the case of Lydgate's *Fabules* the date is not so much in question as is the thematic unity and purpose of the collection. His seven Aesopic fables are traditionally listed as his earliest secular works, which, based on an attribution to a fragment by Shirley (MS Ashmole 59, fol. 24v), have been consistently dated to c.1405, when Lydgate was at Oxford. These early fables are concerned with the themes of tyrannical authority, the exploitation of the poor, the greed of the nobility, and the abuse of law by those whose only right to rule is through brute force; any fair reading of these poems will detect a strong suggestion of hostility to the regime under which they were written. Thus Edward Wheatley, who in his study *Medieval Aesop* introduces Lydgate as "the poet-apologist for Henry V and exemplar of the Lancastrian policies for the advancement of the English language," is surprised to find that Lydgate's fables betray "a Lydgate disenchanted with Henry IV"; as Wheatley notes, "if one attempted to historicize Lydgate's early poetry [...] one would be left with the conclusion that Lydgate's political sympathies after the dethronement of Richard II were not innately Lancastrian" (135).

Wheatley's reluctance to accept that very conclusion is perhaps understandable, given Lydgate's critical reputation. Topical allusions are always vague in Lydgate's work; critics tend to highlight those that appear to support the prevailing thesis (Lydgate as Lancastrian propagandist) while rejecting those that point in a different direction. Certainly Lydgate uses every rhetorical device known to medieval poets to protect himself, and it is therefore wise to proceed with caution when fishing for contemporary references in his work, but Lydgate himself is certainly not unaware of

the political potential of fables. As he writes in a later fable, "The Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep:"

Of many strange vncouth simylitude
 Poets of old, fablis have contryvid,
 Of Sheep, of Hors, of Gees, of bestis rude,
 Bi which ther wittis wer secretly apprevid
 Vndir covert tyrauntis eeke reprevid.
 (580-84)

According to Wheatley, Lydgate's version of the fables were probably derived from a compilation of Marie de France, one of any number of Romulus's Latin prose translations of the Greek, and possibly, in one case, Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* (125). Wheatley may be mistaken about Lydgate's debt to Chaucer if the date of Lydgate's fables is indeed 1405. But *Nun's Priest's Tale* notwithstanding, Lydgate, as I show in this chapter, departs from his analogues in sometimes radically different ways, often inverting the more obvious lesson of previous renditions to make a social or political point more consistent with his overall political agenda. Wheatley argues that Lydgate's primary source is Marie de France, and while there is strong evidence for her influence, her work is clearly not a "source" in the sense that Guido delle Colonne's *Historia* is the source of Lydgate's *Troy Book*. Lydgate's translation is in no sense a linear translation of Marie de France, or of any other recognizable source text in Latin or in French. These are tales he probably knew from grammar school; he sets out to re-tell them in the English vernacular in his own inimitable style, not to "translate" them, in the usual sense of the word. Nevertheless, the fables of Marie de France taken together with the widely circulating tales from Romulus (Marie de France's probable source) may be used as a point of comparison from which we can observe significant stylistic and topical departures in Lydgate's work.

Even to say that Lydgate had an overall theme in his fables is to accept Wheatley's argument that the fables are part of a unified collection (and reject Pearsall's, that they are not). Because they are extant in two manuscripts (MS Trinity R.3.19, and Harley 2251), both of which are derived from compilations of John Shirley, the former containing six fables and the latter, seven, arranged in a slightly different order, Pearsall discounts any conscious structure or unity (*John Lydgate* 193); Wheatley argues for a thematic unity or progression "through social concerns about self-government and larger issues of government" (128). It might seem pointless to argue about Lydgate's intended order if it was actually Shirley who decided what went where, but even if re-arranged in a completely random order, it is easy to spot the thematic unity inherent in these seven Aesopic tales, the same seven tales that, incidentally, begin Marie de France's collection.

Despite some interesting literary twists in the hands of competent writers, medieval Aesopic fables are didactic by definition. They typically present a brief, entertaining narrative, usually about animals (but sometimes about people), followed by a stanza or a brief paragraph, an *epimythium*. The perceived need to draw a distinct moral presupposes an unsophisticated audience that is dependent on the author to make a point that should be obvious. Most fables employ stock characters who usually bring to the narrative the character traits they are thought to possess in nature. Thus, lions represent royalty, foxes are cunning, wolves and birds of prey are ravenous and cruel, sheep and mice (representing the lower classes) are meek, gullible, and often just plain stupid, although sometimes these weaker creatures get to turn the tables on their oppressors. In the majority of these fables, it is the churlish creatures at the bottom of the social

structure who pay the price; the sympathies of the narrator are often, but of course not always, with the more powerful and predatory classes.

Lydgate's approach to fable-writing is considerably more confrontational, not just in the fables of Aesop but also in the "Debate of the Horse, Goose and Sheep" and the "Churl and the Bird." In all of these, his sympathies are clearly with the oppressed, not with the oppressor, though he is always evasive and elliptical in the way he addresses topical issues. In *Fables of Power*, Annabel Patterson has noted that Lydgate "established an English tradition of political fabling as a form of resistance to unjust power relations, which ran continuously alongside (or beneath) the more conventional and conservative notion that the content of fables was purely ethical" (47). Thus, Lydgate opens *Isopes Fabules* with a prologue that is in itself an apology for the humbleness of the subject matter and contains the inevitable modesty topos (without—perhaps significantly if we are looking for the influence of the *Nun's Priest's Tale*—the usual reference to Chaucer):

Vnder blak erþe byn precious stones founde,
 Ryche saphyres & charbuncles full ryall,
 And, who þat myneþ downe lowe in þe grounde,
 Of gold and syluer groweþ þe mynerall;
 Perlys whyte, clere and orientall
 Ben oft founde in muscle shellys blake,
 And out of fables gret wysdom may take.

For whyche I cast to folow þys poete
 And hys fables in Englyssh to translate,
 And, þough I haue no rethoryk swete,
 Haue me excusyd: I was born in Lydgate;
 Of Tullius garden I passyd nat þe gate,
 And cause, why: I had no lycence
 There to gadyr floures of elloquence.

(22-35)

In matters of form alone, Lydgate has already raised the bar a level higher than any of his sources. Lydgate's verse is rhyme royal, not the simpler octosyllabic couplet form of Marie de France or even the decasyllabic couplet form of the *Nun's Priest Tale* or the *Manciple's Tale*. The rhyme scheme is much more complicated; the metre, subject as it is to the tyranny of a more complex rhyme (ababbcc), is harder to maintain; and the seven-line stanzas impose structural demands on the narrative that the couplet form does not. When Lydgate writes in rhyme-royal, he is usually signaling a serious intent; for Lydgate, rhyme-royal is exactly that, a royal form for royal audiences; the subject matter may be simplistic, but Lydgate ensures that the educated audiences for which the fables are intended do not miss the point of the lecture. It is a basic form he learned from Chaucer, but not from Chaucer's fables, which are written in couplets. Like Lydgate, Robert Henryson later adopts the same form for his fables, but Henryson stays much closer to the traditional fable form with its brief narrative, followed by a discrete *epimythium* or *moralitas* in which the poet makes the meaning of the narrative clear. Lydgate is constantly injecting moral commentary into the narrative itself, instead of (like Henryson, presumably), "allowing the narrative to make its own way independently" (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 196). But this interwoven lecturing is Lydgate's chosen style, one from which he seldom departs. So intertwined is Lydgate's narrative with his moral that he rarely resorts to a formal *moralitas* at the end of the fable. Where there are headings such as "Lenuoy," "Consolatio," "Moralization," and so on, which signal a distinct final section recapitulating the moral(s) found in the narrative, they are usually put there by the scribe (or by modern editors, who seem to prefer the more traditional format).

The narrative of the first fable, its shell, is simple enough. A barnyard cock "of poettis callyd Chaunceleer"⁷⁴ after waking up the countryside with his crowing, as roosters are wont to do, jumps down off his perch one morning and begins digging in a dung-hill where he finds a precious stone, a jacinth. He recognizes its value, to others, but not to him. He is happy with his life just the way it is, so rather than disrupt it, he discards the jacinth and gets on with the serious labour of scratching his breakfast out of the dung-heap. After reducing the narrative to its base elements, one could interpret the allegory as a disciplinary lecture to the labouring classes, admonishing them to be content with their station in life and to leave the desire for gold and jewels to their more deserving betters—that is to say, as traditional propaganda written in support of class privilege. One might then be tempted to historicize the fable by referring to the Great Revolt of 1381, of which, as discussed earlier, the monastery at Bury St. Edmunds had been on the receiving end, and to which Lydgate, as a young grammar school student, was probably an eye-witness. Chanteclair's industriousness in rising early to do his duty is held up as an example to the lazy idle schemers (Lollards perhaps?) who descend from idleness, to robbery, and to the gallows at Tyburn. Such an interpretation is not implausible, but there are details in the poem that suggest that we should perhaps be taking a road less travelled. The virtue of "suffisaunce" may be the focus of this poem, but it soon becomes clear that "suffisaunce" is a virtue of which a lord stands more in need than any serf. Lydgate's lecture is not directed to the working class (unless, of course, the cap fits); on the contrary, like most of Lydgate's poetic homilies, it is addressed to the nobility, in a pattern we will see re-emerging in Lydgate's later poetry.

⁷⁴ The use of the common name Chanteclair is no good indication that Lydgate's source was Chaucer's, but the regality of the rooster is remarkably Chaucerian.

In the first place, the moral that Lydgate draws from this fable is the opposite of the traditional reading, a reading Lydgate must nevertheless have known well, since fables before Lydgate had always been packaged complete with a coda containing the author's explication. Traditionally, the tale of a cock finding a jacinth and rejecting it is the tale of a fool who cannot recognize the worth of something valuable even when he trips over it in a dung heap. In the traditional telling, it is a tale of philistinism, of pearls cast before swine; the jacinth is a metaphor for the truth to be found beneath a dirty surface, a metaphor for the fable form itself, the truth of which may be hard for churls to recognize. It is precisely for this reason that Aesop begins his fables with the cock and the jacinth. The protagonist in the traditional tale is always a fool.

Thus Marie de France's *epimythium*:

Altresi est de meinte gent,
 se tut ne vait a lur talent
 cume del coc e de la gemme.
 Veü l'avuns d'ume et de femme:
 bien ne honor niënt ne prisent;
 le pris pignent, le mielz despisent.

So it goes, as we have often seen
 with many people, both men and
 women. If everything does not go
 according to their wish, as with the
 rooster and the gem, they do not
 value good and honor at all but
 instead take the worst and scorn the
 best (Martin 34-5).

All renditions of the tale from Aesop to Henryson draw a similar moral to Marie de France's. But Lydgate has already dispensed with the traditional commonplace about truth buried in fables in the passage from the prologue that I have cited above; instead, he chooses to do something much more interesting with the tale. In the first place, his is a much nobler and entertaining rooster than Marie de France's:

The Cok of kynde haþe a crest rede
 Shape lyke a crowne, token of gret noblesse [...]
 With spores sharpe enarmyd for to fyght
 Lyke a champion iustly doþe attende

As a proud capten, hys broode for to defende.
(57-8; 69-70)

He is also a champion fighter and defender of the family interests. His cause is just, when he defends his family; he is an honourable fellow, chivalrous, virtuous, and pious, a champion of vice, and an example to all his flock:

In vertu strong & hardy as a lyon,
Stable as a geaunt, opon a grounde of troupe,
Ayene all vyces þe morall champion
And with þe entewnes of hys melodious soun
He yeueþ ensample, as he hys voyce doþ reyse,
Howe day & nyght we the lord shall preyse.
(93-8)

In short, Lydgate's chivalrous Chaunteclair is very much like Henry Bolingbroke, with one notable exception. Chaunteclair rejected the temptation of the jacinth when the opportunity presented itself, whereas Bolingbroke was unable to resist the temptation of the glittering crown of England. Lydgate makes the connection between jacinth and crown explicit with the line "Golde and stoness be for a kynges hede" (line 183). The main reason the noble Chaunteclair gives for resisting the jacinth, the value of which he knows full well, is that "Me lyst nat hewe chyppes aboue myn hede." The metaphor of hewing chips above one's head is a favourite one with Lydgate, and it always refers to the dangers, easily imagined, of swinging an ax upwards, beyond one's reach.⁷⁵ Jason, significantly, has prudent recourse to this metaphor in *Troy Book* when, despite the insult the Argonauts had received at the hands of the Trojans, he at first declines to wage war on Lamedon, King of Old Troy.

And it is not holsom a man to hewe

⁷⁵Lydgate turns the metaphor on himself as humble poet scarcely up to the task of relating the deeds of martyrs and saints in *Life of St. Edmund* 3:5-7.

Abouen his hed, whan it is ouere hiye
List the chippis wil fallen in his eye.
(*Troy Book* 1: 1230-32)

Whereas Marie de France's and Henryson's fables are a castigation of churls too stupid to recognize the truth when they see it, Lydgate's fable is a mirror for all the estates—princes, noblemen, and peasants alike—and given the date of its authorship, quite possibly a reminder to a certain avaricious Lancastrian knight who took the defence of his family one step too far, that material gain and even family honour is not worth the loss of one's immortal soul or the risk of civil war. Lydgate has rather ingeniously inverted the old tale for new purposes, perhaps to reach the usurper, perhaps not, and while managing to preserve the traditional moral along with his own, he introduces many of the themes that he will come back to again and again, not just in the remainder of his fables, but in his later secular work.

Lydgate's fable, politically topical or not, is all about moral choice, and his protagonist, far from being a dim-witted churl, is a champion of the prudent exercise of free will. Lydgate's rendition is not just a clever inversion of the traditional telling, it is a reproach to the older, more materialistic interpretation. Lydgate's famous propensity towards translation by amplification is his way of "amending old tales." One of his favourite themes is the responsibility of the individual in a world that often seems governed by random fortune and evil forces. The higher up the social scale we live, the more freedom we have to choose, and the more responsibility we have to choose wisely. In a study of the *Mirror* tradition in late-medieval—early-Renaissance literature, Paul Strohm has recently credited Lydgate in *Fall of Princes* with the innovative suggestion (for its time) "that men rather than Fortune create worldly destinies" (*Politique* 18). While I find this observation is absolutely critical to understanding Lydgate, I would qualify the

statement by adding that, typically, for Lydgate commoners do not create destinies, princes do. Lydgate does not deny agency to the individual at any level of society; indeed, it is a fundamental Christian obligation that all must exercise their free will to resist temptation and avoid sin, and in so doing seek salvation. But Lydgate is not naive. He implies by his fable that the lives of the common people, himself included, are determined by the moral decisions of the rich and the powerful. Thus rulers must act with prudence at all times, even sometimes at the expense of personal justice or honour, for the "profit" of the realm that depends on them. As Strohm points out, Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* had an enormous impact on the later mirrors for magistrates, whose princes encourage the reader to "inveigh against the possible untruthfulness of "slye writers"—thus reminding their reader of the necessity for vigilant and revisionary interpretation of received sources" (*Politique* 87). Lydgate, however, was exploring the idea that the individual can always choose to do right, and to some extent, make his or her own fortune, long before his *Fall of Princes*. The extent to which princes can determine their own fortunes is a matter for some ninety-thousand lines of later Lydgatean philosophical and political discourse, but for now he is content merely to introduce the topic. Chaunteclair refuses the jacinth because to take it up would be to upset the social equilibrium, for himself, for his wives, and for their broods, in the barnyard domain which is his fiefdom. Having the ability to exercise free choice means we cannot blame fortune when we choose badly:

And where fre choyse haþ hys liberte
 Cheseþ þe werst in earnest or in game,
 Who but hymself, þerof ys to blame?
 (208-10)

Subsequent fables in Lydgate's collection get progressively more political; unlike earlier and later collections of fables that most often serve to justify the inequalities of class, Lydgate's

sympathies are all with the poor and the oppressed. His preamble to the second fable, the tale of a ravenous wolf who slaughters a lamb, makes a clear connection between the lamb of the fable and the position of the poor of society in general:

Grete pykes þat swymme in large stewes
 Smaller fysshe most felly þey deuour
 Who haþe most myght þe febler gladly sewes
 The pore haþe few hys party to socour.
 (239-45)

Lydgate's wolf invokes a specious moral law and then proceeds to break it by murdering the helpless lamb. The lamb knows that, even though he is innocent of the wolf's charge (that the lamb is muddying the wolf's water), there is nothing he can say to defend himself, because the wolf has already determined to kill him and the wolf holds all the power. The lamb is pathetically astute, but neither his intelligence nor the justice of his cause can save him. Because might makes right (and keeps usurpers on their throne), the lamb knows the wolf will do exactly what he intends to do (kill and eat the lamb), regardless of the law:

I may nat chese: þe choyse to yow ys fall
 Hyt were but foly for me with yow to stryue
 Ye shall for me haue your desyres all.
 (281-84)

These lines could have come from the mouth of Richard II after his arrest by Henry Bolingbroke, but Lydgate is content to leave the moral on more general grounds as a castigation of tyranny in general.⁷⁶ He goes beyond the traditional fable by introducing a Christian moral that offers justice to the poor in the next world. But it is clear from the outraged tone he carries throughout the

⁷⁶For the common prophetic association of Richard II as "lamb" see Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 13.

narrative that does not accept the Boethian-Christian consolation as a completely satisfactory alternative to an unjust society:

The sely lamb ys spoylyd to the bones
 The wolf gob fre, whether hit be ryght or wrong.
 (323-24)

Lydgate's next few fables are similarly concerned with the treatment of the weaker members of society by those who are stronger, more ravenous, and cunning. In Lydgate's hands, they are tales of ingratitude, treachery, injustice, exploitation, abuse of the law, and, especially, tyranny. A frog preys on the good-natured hospitality of a mouse and is himself deceived and ultimately eaten by a kite, whereas the mouse escapes the same fate, not through any struggle of its own, but simply because it is not as fat as the frog. There is a sense of moral outrage in Lydgate's tale that is not nearly as explicit in the fable tradition from which it is derived. Marie de France's ironic fable of the mouse and the frog shows how the predator can very easily become the prey, but Lydgate finds it much more difficult to remain impartial. For him it is a tale of unpardonable ingratitude and treachery. This reluctance to preserve an ironic detachment from his material has earned Lydgate the opprobrium of modern critics, whereas Chaucer is admired for his tendency "to express no consistent views at all" (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 36). But for Lydgate, literature, like history, has value only to the extent that it can teach and reform. His teachings may be orthodox and they may be straight out of the "rule of St. Maure or St. Benoit," but no one can justifiably accuse Lydgate of avoiding moral or political issues.

In his fourth tale, Lydgate makes an even more explicit connection between the fable and the society in which he lives. He is enraged by the tale of a sheep who is taken to court by a dog over an alleged debt of a loaf of bread. The charge is entirely fraudulent, but the poor sheep is

unrepresented by council, and the dog brings his friends, the wolf and the kite, to swear false witness against the sheep. The judge makes a great show of observing the law but it is obvious that no justice is possible for the innocent sheep. The sheep is found guilty and ordered to surrender his fleece in payment for the loaf. He subsequently dies of the winter cold and is eaten by the three conspirators:

Thus in this world by extorcion veriliche
Poore folk be devoured alwey by the riche.
(636-37)

Lydgate's moral in this case is similar to Marie de France's, but Lydgate is never content to let the narrative or even the *moralitas* speak for itself. He devotes an additional thirteen stanzas to a curiously-placed discussion of the practice of perjury, and the reasons why it is such an abominable sin. Perjury, he says, is a form of treason against God because the perjurer uses the name of God in support of his cause the way a traitor might use "the kynges seale the people to begile" (692).⁷⁷ Lydgate is careful to generalize, but he is not content merely to warn the gullible against the wiles of the wicked. His purpose is to reform the wicked. His lecture, as always, is directed to those classes whose freedom of action is the greatest, and whose moral decisions have the greatest impact on their social inferiors. At the time of the *Fabules*, Henry IV's oath-breaking habits were already legendary: it was well known that he had perjured himself at Ravenspur (or Bridlington, or Doncaster) when he had first vowed he would not take the crown and again in the charges he brought against Richard at the deposition. He had secured Richard's surrender at

⁷⁷See Sherborne on Henry IV's very early use of the "kinges seale" to grant custody of the West March to Northumberland before Richard II had even been taken into custody. As Sherborne states: "this was *lèse-majesté*, a defiant usurpation of the regality by one who was acting as *de facto* ruler" (225).

Conwy by ordering Northumberland to swear to Richard that the king's life and crown would be spared (Biggs 234). One of the accusations against Bolingbroke by the rebels at Shrewsbury in 1403 was that he could not be trusted when he offered them amnesty, because he had already broken so many oaths.⁷⁸

Lydgate's final three fables are united in the theme of covetousness, the inevitable result of which is tyranny. Fable V is a tale of a wolf, who in his gluttony, chokes on a bone. No surgeon in the court is able to help the wolf. Finally, a crane with his long beak dares to reach down the wolf's throat and remove the bone. The wolf originally promises the crane a great reward but once the wolf is out of danger, he mockingly tells the crane that his reward is that he did not get eaten when his head was in the wolf's mouth. What sets this tale apart from the traditional telling (cf. Marie de France's fable) is its courtly setting, and the moral, which much more explicitly links the crane to the oppressed poor: "Thorow all the cort surgeons wer sought" (764). And so it is with tyrants everywhere, says Lydgate:

And semblably, makyng a fals excuse
 To pay theyr dewte wnto the poraile,
 Takyng ther service & labour to ther vse,
 [Gverdounles] to make them to travayle
 Yf they aught ax, tyrauntes them assayle,

⁷⁸The "Oath of Doncaster" in which Henry swore to Percy and the other lords that he was only interested in recovering his inheritances "and that our lord King Richard would remain king for the term of his life" is reproduced in Biggs, 186, from the chronicle of John Hardyng. See also J. W. Sherborne "Perjury and the Lancastrian Revolution" for a full discussion of Henry's many perjuries. The legend of Henry IV as an oath-breaker is passed down through the fifteenth-century chroniclers to Holinshed and Shakespeare:

I told him gently of our grievances,
 Of his oath-breaking; which he mended thus,
 By now forswearing that he is forsworn:
 (Shakespeare, *Henry IV. I*, 5:2)

And of malys constreyne them so for drede,
They not so hardy of them to ax ther mede.

The tyraunt hathe possesscions and riches,
The poure travelythe for meate, drynke, & fode,
The ryche dothe the laborar oppresse,
For his labour denyethe hym hys lyflode,
The lambe must suffre, the wolffes bene so wode;
A playne ensample declaryd how men done,
Shewde in the crane that plukkyd away be bone.
(799-812)

Fable VI deals with succession, and worries about the progeny of tyrants. One tyrant (in this case, the sun) is bad enough, but the people ought to beware his offspring who could bring a multiplication of tyranny. Henry IV had strong-minded sons, and the poor had reason to fear their constant demand for revenues. Once again, Lydgate's sympathies are with the oppressed poor:

Oon ageyn oon may make resistence,
Oon ageyn many, the conquest is vnkowth;
Nombere of tirauntis thurgh theyr violence
Pursweth the pore, both est and sowth;⁷⁹
Gredy wolfis, that comyn with open mowth,
Vpon a folde theyr nature can declare
By experience, whether they wil hurt or spare.
(918-24)

Fable VII is the old familiar one of the hound with the cheese in his mouth who sees his own reflection in the water. The hound is so greedy that he opens his mouth to get the reflected cheese and loses the cheese he is carrying. In the traditional telling, this tale is directed at the poor to teach them to be happy with what they have (again, the virtues of "suffisaunce").

Lydgate's tale speaks to world leaders, the Caesarian conqueror who does not know when to

⁷⁹The reference to "est and sowthe," instead of the usual contrast "north and south," is interesting, given that East Anglia was a centre of rebellion in the early years of the Lancastrian usurpation.

stop. Taken together with the first fable about the cock and the jacinth it neatly frames the fable series and provides unity and structure to the work as a whole:

By whiche exsample men may conceyve & lere,
 By experience prevyd in many place,
 Who all covetythe, faylyth offt in fere,
 One man allone may not all purchase,
 Nor in armys all the worlde embrace,
 A meane is best withe good governaunce,
 To them that be content withe suffisaunce.

(946-952)

Lydgate has in effect re-written all seven of fables, amended the form, and shifted the focus to make them lectures against the ravenous ruling class. Whether or not they reached the court of Henry IV, their rebellious theme suggests that they were not written to secure future commissions. He may have originally intended to re-work all the fables of Aesop, but he seems to have lost patience with the form, as he did with the courtly love poems. The last three fables are much shorter than the first four, and the last one, in particular, is a mere twenty-eight lines, a brevity not typical of Lydgate's engagement with his subject. As a result of the Lancastrian coup, the country was divided, the church was divided, the security and autonomy of the monasteries were endangered, draconian censorship laws were being passed, and civil war was breaking out everywhere. By 1405, Lydgate was ready for more politically-engaging undertakings than courtly love poems and beast fables. In fact, there is a case to be made that he was already engaging in extended political discourse as early as 1400 in his only known prose work, *Serpent of Division*.

Serpent of Division

The dating of *Serpent of Division*, which deals with the causes of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey that devastated Rome (and ultimately destroyed all the combatants), is one further instance of what I would call the tyranny of the Lancastrian thesis, a thesis that

relentlessly seeks out royal patronage for all early fifteenth-century literature and that, in its older manifestations (such as MacCracken’s introduction), has a tendency to make aesthetic judgements based on conformance to generic classifications that do not reflect the intentions of a medieval monk. The date of this work has been contested by scholars since Toulmin-Smith first set it at 1400, based on a colophon in MS Additional 48031A, fol. 175r: “Here endeth the cronycule of Julius Cesar Emperoure of Rome [toun?] specifying cause of the ruyne and destruccion of the same, and translated by me, Danne John Lidgate, Monke of Bury seint Edmund, the yere of our lord god MCCCC.” Although Schick too accepts this date (*Temple of Glas* cviii), MacCracken chooses to ignore the colophon. Instead, he opts for an alternate date of 1422, based on an end note on the same page, in the same manuscript, which refers to the first year of the reign of Henry VI: “The forseide division so to shewe I have remembred this forseid litill translacion. The moneth of Decembre the ffirste yere of oure souvereigne lorde that now ys king henry the vjte.” There is no easy way with which to reconcile two conflicting dates appearing on the same page when no other copy provides any date at all. If we reject the evidence of the first colophon, then we might just as easily call into question Lydgate’s authorship, the attribution for which the same colophon provides the only concrete evidence. The later date could perhaps be referring to Lydgate’s (or some scribe’s) revision of a work that was actually composed much earlier in the reign of Henry IV. In support of the 1422 date, MacCracken cites a somewhat unemotional reference to a deceased Chaucer, but in fact the reference as worded could just as easily have been directed to a Chaucer already dead for a year: “I may conclude with hym that was flowre of poetis in owre englisshe tonge & the firste that euer enluminede owre langage with flowres of Rethorike and of elloquence, I mene my maistere Chaucere” (65). The

case for finding a late Lancastrian patron for this prose work rests on evidence in the same manuscript (MS Additional 48031A), where the author indicates that *Serpent of Division* was written at the behest of “my moste worschipfull maistere and souereyne” (66). Other versions do not include “and souereyne.” Its insertion in this, the latest manuscript, may refer to a request by anyone on the king’s council or associated with the government that Lydgate reproduce an earlier work. MS Additional 48031A is the latest of the four manuscripts and in many ways the least reliable. For this reason, MacCracken himself prefers the Fitzwilliam codex (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS McClean 182) as his copy text, and only uses MS Additional 48031A to supplement the copy text where folios have been damaged. If the word “souereyne” is a later addition, as it appears to be, the “maistere” in the earlier copies could be referring to anyone Lydgate recognizes as an authority, including Lydgate’s own abbot, William Cratfield, or Chaucer himself. On the preceding page, Lydgate mis-quotes the *Monk’s Tale*, and then immediately refers to Chaucer (and in this case, a few lines below, it is most definitely Chaucer he means) as “my wise prudent maistere” (65). MacCracken and others (Nolan 65-66; Mortimer 79-82) speculate that the work was commissioned by Duke Humphrey, even though there is not a trace of evidence to link the work to him.⁸⁰ In 1422, Humphrey was fighting for sole control of the king’s council. He wanted to be regent, the highest authority in England. The story of an ambitious dictator who destroys Rome rather than be ruled by the Senate is hardly a work

⁸⁰The argument for Humphrey’s patronage is based in part on the poem that Lydgate wrote in 1422 ostensibly celebrating Gloucester’s approaching marriage to Jacqueline of Hainault. Some recent readings (including mine own in Chapter 3) suggest the poem is critical of the marriage, a marriage that was highly insulting to the duke of Burgundy and that jeopardized the alliance on which the English success in France depended. See especially Straker, “Propaganda,” 107-17.

Humphrey would pay to have written. If we must find a patron, the earl of Warwick, the boy-king's protector and commissioner of several important works that justified the king's dual coronation and his claim to the throne of France, would be a much stronger candidate than Duke Humphrey in 1422. Warwick was affiliated with the duke of Bedford and Henry Beaufort, not Humphrey.⁸¹ Based on its subject matter, a reproach to those who, like Humphrey, would divide the kingdom for their own gain, Humphrey would seem to be the least likely candidate to act as patron of such a work at any time in his life. Moreover, if *Fall of Princes* and other works that he did commission are a good indication of Humphrey's expectations, an endless succession of flattering references to his exalted generosity was the price of his patronage. There are no such encomia in *Serpent of Division*.

Nevertheless, MacCracken's 1422 dating is more convenient for a critical practice conditioned to attribute all literary work to the patronage system. Thus most modern critics tend to accept 1422 and the patronage of Humphrey (but not without some degree of anxiety about ignoring the colophon) in the interest of a thesis that demands a poet-patron dynamic.⁸² But there are dissenters: J. W. H. Atkins immediately objects to MacCracken's rejection of the colophon evidence in a persuasive review of MacCracken's 1911 edition, a review that should be revisited

⁸¹See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the poems commissioned by the Earl of Warwick during the 1420s.

⁸²Maura Nolan (64) and Nigel Mortimer (79-82) both trace the history of the date controversy in detail, acknowledge the obvious discrepancies, and then, somewhat arbitrarily, opt for 1422, a date that supports their own respective theses. Both assume that there is royal patronage for the work. But the possibility exists that the piece was *revived* in 1422 from an earlier composition, not begun at the request of Humphrey. It was the duke of Bedford who was more directly concerned with keeping the peace (between Humphrey and Henry Beaufort) in the early 1420s; Bedford, through the earl of Warwick, may have requested a copy of an earlier version.

closely before we jump to any conclusions about a composition date of 1422; N.F. Blake, who questions many of the commissions attributed to Lydgate, suggests that the “maistere” mentioned in the manuscript may have been a fiction associated with the medieval modesty topos (285-87); Alessandra Petrina, who has recently made a detailed study of Humphrey’s cultural endeavours, has great difficulty in accepting Humphrey—whose patronage activities did not begin until the 1430s—as sponsor of *Serpent of Division*: “the identification of the patron commissioning this work with Duke Humphrey is more the result of critical wishful thinking than based on specific proof” (291). I, too, see no reason to accept Humphrey, or anyone else outside the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds as the patron of this work, nor do I see any reason to reject the colophon of 1400, which has, at the very least, a fifty-percent chance of being correct. Once we accept the possibility that Lydgate was not beyond writing works of his own inspiration, that he was not a supporter of Henry IV, and that the poet, like everyone else in the kingdom, feared a civil war as a result of the usurpation, the authenticity of the colophon becomes more plausible. I therefore propose an alternative reading of the work as an uncommissioned moral history written in 1400 in reaction to the usurpation, although I recognize that the work has universal application and would be equally appropriate at any stage of Lydgate’s career from the reign of Richard II, to the death of Humphrey and the outbreak of civil war. As Atkins suggested almost a century ago, *Serpent of Division* could easily have been revived in 1422 to address a renewed climate of division caused by the death of Henry V, and such a revival might explain the date discrepancy on the later Yelverton manuscript.⁸³

⁸³Atkins’s concluding remarks are worth repeating: the Yelverton manuscript “shows modernising tendencies, a statement that is readily corroborated by a reference to the variant readings contained in the footnotes of [MacCracken’s] edition. The text of that particular MS,

Once critics have assumed a composition date of 1422 and a patron such as the duke of Gloucester, they begin to anticipate a certain genre in the making (an epic biography, for example); when the work falls short of their expectations, older critics, at least, will judge the work an aesthetic failure. MacCracken's main complaint about Lydgate's prose is that it lacks proportion, a common enough criticism where Lydgatean narrative is concerned.⁸⁴ But Schirmer demonstrates how MacCracken has misunderstood Lydgate's intentions regarding the writing of Roman history (84-85). MacCracken is concerned that the causes of the civil war outweigh the history of the war and that there are too many digressions from the main narrative. True enough, were the work a history or a biography in the modern sense, but as Schirmer points out, Lydgate does not set out to write a history or a *Vita*, but rather to write a political sermon that draws on classical antiquity for its exemplum. Schirmer calls it a "propagandist political tract" modelled on a sermon, and so it is, but it is not Lancastrian propaganda, it is Benedictine propaganda, in the "mirror for magistrates" tradition. Since Henry IV and his followers would be in no position to lecture others on the evils of civil discord, it can hardly have emanated from the Lancastrian

moreover, ends with the quotation 'I have remembered this foreseid littil translacion'; a statement which in its very wording seems to imply some process of revision. And lastly, it is at the end of this passage, which is peculiar to the Calthorpe [Yelverton] MS, that the year 1422 is substantially quoted; a date which must therefore be regarded as the date of a reproduction, while to the year 1400 must be assigned the original composition of the work" (254).

⁸⁴Even on MacCracken's terms, I would argue that his objections to Lydgate's meanderings are grossly exaggerated. Any brief structural analysis of *Serpent of Division* will find that in a sixteen page treatise (give or take a few moralistic interjections) there are only two main digressions from the main narrative, no more than about one page in total. The first 'digression' deals with the causes of civil war as derived from Lucan, and the second borrows an exemplum from Valerius (the metaphor of the tail of the horse) to show how there is strength in unity. To modern historians these may look like digressions, but to medieval moralists they are the main point of the narrative. From a preacher's perspective, it is always the historical narrative that is the digression from the main point of the sermon.

court if it was written in 1400, and for the same reason it can hardly have emanated from the household of the power-hungry Humphrey if it was written in 1422. It could, however, have issued forth from the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds at any time during Lydgate's career.

Serpent of Division is a driving narrative in rhythmical prose tracing the rise and fall of an ambitious tyrant who divides Rome and ultimately destroys the Republic. I choose here to read *Serpent of Division* as a topical allegory, a subtle reproach to Henry Bolingbroke who, in a just cause, has let his pride get the better of him and overstepped his bounds. In so doing, he has brought the nation to the brink of civil war and, if there is anything to be learned from history, the end result will be disastrous for all. The general thesis of *Serpent of Division* is quite simply that a kingdom divided against itself will not stand: "Every kingdom be divisioun is conveied to his distruccion" (50). For Lydgate, this is a universal law rooted in the Garden of Eden, where the serpent entered and caused division between God and Man. Division is the root of original sin; the serpent in the Garden first divides a woman from her husband and then effects a permanent division between humanity and God, a division that can only be healed by the sacrifice at Calvary. A kingdom united is a kingdom that will prosper, but a kingdom divided will collapse from within, by "*Ferro, Flamma & Fama*"—by the sword, by fire, and by famine in that order. This, in short, is the substance of Lydgate's sermon. He uses the rise and fall of Julius Caesar merely to illustrate this principle. As in his beast fables, the narrative is actually secondary to the sermon. All narrative details are carefully selected from a wide variety of sources to illustrate the moral.

Under the constant threat of Lancastrian censorship, the parallels between Julius Caesar and Henry IV are obviously not explicitly rendered, but if the work was indeed written in 1400

the new king could hardly have failed to see his reflection in this mirror for princes. Caesar is a man whom Lydgate greatly admires for his chivalry, his courage, and his eagerness to build civilizations rather than just to conquer for the sake of glory. The author’s sympathies are clearly with Caesar when the latter is exiled by the envious Pompey and the Senate who, together, fear Caesar’s ambitions “lest that Iulius wolde of presumpcious pride vsurpe by tirannie to take vppon him the lordschip and the domynacion of Rome” (52.17). Caesar’s cause is fundamentally just (as is Bolingbroke’s), but it is clear from Lydgate’s narrative that Caesar is a proud man who is uninterested in negotiating a settlement, even when he stands on the banks of the Rubicon with the balance of power in his hands. At this moment, an old soothsayer, who could be the voice of the author speaking to the king, cries out to Caesar: “Alas ye that haue be so longe frendis and so manly mayntened the honour of the Cite withdrawe youe foote and hastith not to faste but, lete good deliberance restreyne youre Reynes that hasti wilfulnes lede yow nat to confusion, not onely of youreselfe but into the originall ruyne of the Cite bi the habowndawnt schedynge of blod that is likely to sewe” (57.8).⁸⁵ Similarly, Caesar’s prayer to Jupiter before he marches on Rome conveys all the self-deception and denial of a Bolingbroke at Ravenspur:

...I as an humble soget to yowre deitee full lowly beseche you and requyre yow of equite & riȝt to be wellwillid and favourable goodnesse to fauwren and fortune þe hiȝe Emprise, the whiche of iuste title I purpose fynally for life or dethe thorowghe your fauwre to execute. And not as enemy nor rebell to Rome but as a trewe Citesyn and a previd knyȝt I caste me fully to perseuere, wiȝ condicion þat liche as I haue manly deservid I may be resceived, makynge a protestacion þat not as enemy but as ful frende and soget to Rome I woll be fownde stedefaste and trewe. Wherefore, ȝe myȝti and ye noble Senatowrs of Rome, I requere yow of riȝt þat ȝe nopynge arrette nor ascrive to my gilte þat I come wiȝ stronge and myȝti honde þat I entre þe bondis of yowre Imperiall fraunchise, makynge a full protestacioun þat onely wiȝ a clene concience and entrieked with none entente of luell menyng that I come to yow, of full purpose to be resceived as

⁸⁵All page references refer to MacCracken’s edited text, the only edition available.

for youre frende and not youre foo. Requirynge yow also to holdyn him whate so euer he be full enemy to your noble cite, þat of wille and entente labowrith to make discorde atwene vs tweyne, for so þat my meritorie gerdon whiche þat I haue in my conqueste lustely deservid be not denyed me I am and euer will bene for life or deþe a trewe knyȝt to þe Cite to my livis ende. (57.22-58.4)

This "frende and soget to Rome," allegedly wanting nothing more than his just deserts, then proceeds to storm the city, to slaughter the inhabitants and to steal the treasure from the Senate. He then takes upon himself the sole dictatorship of Rome; to consolidate his power, he wages war on Egypt and Africa, Spain, France and Greece, declaring himself Emperor, before he is finally murdered by the Senate. Lydgate makes his favourite point that the pursuit of justice through rebellion against the state can only lead to disastrous consequences—endless wars, and in the end, death to the conqueror. The writer speaks to rulers everywhere but, I suggest, to Lancastrian power in particular when he says:

And lete þe wise gouernours of every londe and region make a merowre in here mynde of þis manly man Iulius, and consideren in þer hertis þe contagious damages & þe importable harmes of devisioun, and lete hem seen avisely and take example how þe ambitious pride of Iulius, and þe fretynge envie of Pompeyus, and þe vnstwncheable gredy covetise of Marcus Crassus were chefe and primordially cause firste of here owne distruccioun execute and comlyssched bi cruell deþe, and not onely þat þese þre abhomynable vices were cause of here owne deþe, but occasion of many a þowsande oþer mo þan I can tell, the cite of Rome not onely made bare and bareyne of ther olde richesis and spoiled of here tresowre on þe too side, but destitute and desolate bi deþe of here knyȝthod on þe toþer side; whiche me semyth owȝte Inow suffise to ecmplifie whate hit is to begynne a werre, & specially to considre þe irrecuperable harmes of divisioun (65.25-66.3).

What is clear from this passage (which immediately follows the paraphrase from *The Monk's Tale*) is that Lydgate is not content to attribute the fall of Caesar to the inevitable revolution of the wheel of Fortune, as Chaucer's monk does. In a sense, Lydgate anticipates Shakespeare's Cassius who says "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves." Fortune plays a part in Lydgate tragedy, but it is not nearly as powerful a determinant as the

moral decisions that the great ones make, decisions that have consequences for all. The greed of Marcus Crassus, the envy of Pompey, and the pride of Caesar are the fundamental causes, not just of their own deaths, but the deaths of the many thousands who get dragged down through the vices and misjudgements of their leaders. *Serpent of Division* has much in common with Lydgate's *Fabules* and both can be read as quiet warnings, or subtle reproaches, to a government that has usurped the rightful ruler. If the 1400 date is correct for the former, and the work was not commissioned by Humphrey, precisely because these two works are not sponsored they represent Lydgate's political views with much less ambivalence than he is forced to adopt in his later, commissioned work. The patronage system will inevitably make its pressure felt on Lydgate's work, but at no point does he abandon the fundamental political and moral principles already established in these earlier texts.

Chapter 2: Anti-War Dissension under Henry V

And whils they afor þe Cite laye
 On euery cost they sent out to forraye
 Brente townes, thorpes and vilages
 With grete ravyn makyng theyr pillages
 Spoyle and robbe and broʒte hom vitaille
 And al maner soortes of bestaylle
 Shep and neet and in her cruel rage
 With houndes slowe al that was sauage.

(*Siege of Thebes* 3587-94)

And it is in order to avenge it [the battle of Baugé] more completely that the lord king is now fleecing everyone with any money rich or poor throughout the realm in readiness for his return to France in great force. Yet I fear, alas, that both the great men and the money of the kingdom will be miserably wasted on this enterprise. No wonder then, that the unbearable impositions being demanded from the people to this end are accompanied by dark—though private—mutterings and curses, and by hatred of such extortions; and I pray that my supreme lord may not in the end, like Julius, and Ahasuerus, and Alexander and Hector and Cyrus and Darius and Maccabeus, incur the sword of the Lord's fury.

(*Chronicle of Adam Usk*, 271)

The date Lydgate began work on his *Troy Book* for Henry V, 22 April 1412, marked a significant turning point in the Benedictine poet's career.⁸⁶ In accepting the commission, Lydgate must have known that henceforth his freedom to write would be necessarily compromised by his obligations to his patrons, in this case to the prince of Wales, soon to be king. Acceptance of the commission could only have been approved by Lydgate's abbot, William Cratfield, who determined that it was in the best interest of the monastery to allow Lydgate to work for an administration the legitimacy of which may still have been in doubt, but the immediate survival

⁸⁶It is a turning point which Lydgate seems to have anticipated. So momentous an event did he consider it to be that he uses astrological dating to record the precise date and time: 22 April 1412, at 4:00 p.m. (*Troy Book*, Prologue, lines 123-46). Note, however, Johnstone Parr's argument in "*Astronomical Dating for Some of Lydgate's Poems*" that the actual date may have been 3 November 1412.

no longer was. Whatever early reservations the Benedictines may have had about Lancastrian rule and its effect on the monasteries, by 1412 the succession was more or less assured and the Benedictines would undoubtedly have been looking for ways to influence the new government already emerging under the leadership of the prince of Wales. The young prince, however, was still a dark horse as far as his intentions toward the church were concerned. If there is any truth to the legend of his youthful dissipation (Fabyan 577), it would have been a cause of less concern than his subsequent ostentatious piety and association with known Lollards, such as Sir John Oldcastle.⁸⁷ Piety in the young monarch may have been regarded as an improvement on the religious indifference of Henry IV, but a reform-minded king partial to the more ascetic monastic orders such as the Carthusians and the Brigettines could present serious challenges to the Benedictines. The turbulent reign of Henry IV had been marked by the draconian legislation of Archbishop Arundel. Despite this legislation being directed against a movement that was fundamentally anti-monastic (the Lollards), the new law would nevertheless have been viewed as a two-edged sword by the monastic orders because of the unprecedented power it placed in the hands of the bishops at the expense of monastic autonomy. Apart from the prestige and possible financial benefits that would accrue to the abbey as a result of Lydgate's commission, Abbot Cratfield probably saw an opportunity to influence royal policy over the long term by authorizing Lydgate to translate the story of Troy. If such a strategy would involve some compromise, an

⁸⁷As Jeremy Catto notes: "Sir John Oldcastle, however, was certainly not isolated socially from other members of Prince Henry's circle, and both he and associates of the Lollard knights like Sir William Beauchamp were related to the highest nobility" (100). And further: "Undoubtedly there was still a Lollard party in 1413: among knights, Sir Thomas Cleyne of Drayton, Beauchamp and Oldcastle himself; among clerks, Cheyne's parson Thomas Drayton, Richard Wych, the correspondant of Hus, and two more recent Oxford scholars, Peter Payne and William Taylor" (Catto 113).

occasional exercise in royal panegyrics would have been seen by Lydgate as a small price to pay for the opportunity to guide the future monarch through the lessons of the *anciens romans* in a genre that would be fundamentally epic in form, loosely allegorical in method, and an advisory mirror for princes in intent. From 1412 onwards all of Lydgate's secular poetry, and a good deal of his religious poetry—no matter how directly it might at times seem to serve royal interests—would be written primarily to serve the political interests of the Benedictine order. The vast majority of his political output under Henry V and Henry VI, commissioned or uncommissioned, would represent, in one form or another, a mirror for princes in the defence of the orthodox church, and of fifteenth-century Benedictine monasticism in particular.

While Lydgate must have continued to write religious poetry and some occasional verse during the second decade of the fifteenth century, his works that can be confidently dated to the rule of Henry V are limited to *Troy Book*, *Siege of Thebes*, *Defence of Holy Church*, and a few poems dedicated to aristocratic friends or patrons such as Thomas Chaucer.⁸⁸ Although Lydgate is frequently mocked by critics for his prolixity and sycophancy, what is striking is how little he wrote for Henry V. Given the warrior-king's multiple campaigns and the military victories in France that culminated in the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, and given also the Lancastrian taste for military propaganda, one wonders why Lydgate did not write any triumphalist verse, despite the political pressures he must have been under to do so.⁸⁹ We look in vain to Lydgate for any

⁸⁸I have argued in Chapter 1 that *Life of Our Lady* was not in fact "commissioned" by Henry V, though a copy may have been presented to him; it could have been written a decade earlier.

⁸⁹For an example of the kind of triumphalist literature proffered by the diocesan clergy, (and probably expected of all who dared to write for Henry V), see the account of Agincourt and Henry V's subsequent reception in London in the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, 95-113. See also the

celebration of Henry V's famous victories at Harfleur, Agincourt, Caen, Rouen, or Meaux.

Lydgate does sometimes praise Henry V as a "conqueror" after his death, but almost always in the context of the "mighty prince's" role as protector of the church, and it is in this latter role that Henry V is projected as a role model to Henry VI. More often than not, when Lydgate uses the word "conqueror," as in the passage quoted below, it is with grave reservations. In Lydgate's view of history, conquerors were wont to resort to tyranny to maintain their acquired territories:

Men seyn ful ofte how that thouht is fre.
 For which eche prince, lord and gouvernour,
 And specialy euery Conquerour,
 Lat hym be war, for al his hegh noblesse,
 That bounte, fredom, plente, and largesse,
 Be on accord that they his brydel lede,
 Lest of his puple, whan he hath most nede,
 He be defrauded; whan he is but allone,
 Than is to late forto make his mone.

(*Siege of Thebes* 2700)

Patronage and Patronage Theory

Lydgate's initial link to the aristocratic community was probably through the Chaucer family: if not through Geoffrey himself, at least through Thomas, Geoffrey's son.⁹⁰ Lydgate's admiration for the older poet and his exceptional skills in imitating the style of his "master" made it somehow inevitable that Lydgate would have been associated with the Chaucer household from an early date, possibly the Oxford years. The Chaucer estate, obtained by marriage to Maude Burghersh in 1393, was in Ewelme, Oxfordshire, not far from Oxford where Lydgate was a

Augustinian poet John Audelay (*Poems of John Audelay*) for an example of the subservient conquest propaganda that Lydgate is often accused of writing, but never did (193).

⁹⁰It could also have been the Beauchamp family who first brought Lydgate to the attention of aristocratic circles. The Beauchamp family were high stewards to the abbey for thirty years. For a further discussion of Lydgate's Beaufort affiliation see Chapter 3, "Poems for the Duke."

student at the time of the elder Chaucer's death (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 161). It may have been Thomas Chaucer who brokered the *Troy Book* commission. In any case, poems such as "On the Departing of Thomas Chaucer" (*Minor Poems* 2: 657; MS Additional 16165, fols 248v-249v), probably written in 1414, or the accompanying "My Lady Dere" (*Minor Poems* 2: 420; fols 249v-251v) written to Thomas Chaucer's wife, are sprightly and charming without being fawning or moralistic, and, one imagines, would have been highly pleasing to their recipients. In a political study they are, like his dream allegories, of minor importance, but they display an urbane wit and a literary dexterity that should prepare us for the possibility of irony, parody, polysemy, and other subtle complexities not usually recognized in Lydgate in his subsequent politically commissioned works. If the hospitality which Lydgate refers to in the "Departing" (lines 22-42) is not wishful thinking on the poet's part, he must have been well-received in the younger Chaucer's household, possibly through an earlier association with Geoffrey Chaucer. While generally thought to be commissioned by aristocratic patrons (that is to say, bought and paid for, and therefore compromised), there is no reason why these poems could not have been written as small tokens of genuine gratitude and affection by a student monk grateful for the hospitality and encouragement he has been shown.

I am speculating here, as all patronage theory is necessarily speculative. In very few instances do we know the terms of the alleged commissions or anything about the real relationships between patrons and performers. In all of Lydgate's supposed commissions, there is only one documented record of payment (from Abbot Whethamstede for *Life of St. Alban*) and

one other semi-explicit reference to payment (*Fall of Princes* 3.71-77).⁹¹ Even in *Troy Book*, which he suggests was commissioned by Henry V, Lydgate speaks in the Envoy of “giving” the work to his king: “And for my part to the, as it is riyt / That gyf I hool as ferforthe as I can” (Envoy 80-1).⁹² A royal commission, in this sense, probably meant doing some work at the invitation of the king’s household in expectation of a reward at the time of presentation of a pleasing product. Richard Firth Green has noted that literary commissions were not paid by the Exchequer directly, but by the king’s Chamber, for which very few records survive; we are therefore left in the dark as to the real terms of any of Lydgate’s so-called commissions (5-7). We do not know whether the poet was ever contractually bound, and whether these contracts, if they existed, were solicited or unsolicited. Nor should we assume that any money received as gifts or as payment for contracted work went to the poet personally, and not to his abbey. The vow of poverty in the *Rule of St. Benedict* proscribes “private” ownership, and even if by the fifteenth century there were, in practice, many exceptions to the *Rule*, appearances would still have to be

⁹¹A (probably incomplete) list of Lydgate’s putative patrons includes (in alphabetical order): Isabella Beauchamp, Richard Beauchamp, Cardinal Beaufort, the duke of Bedford, the Bouchier family, Roullour Brys, Jankin Carpenter, Katherine of Valois, Charles VI, Alice Chaucer, Thomas Chaucer, a “citeseyn of London,” William Cotson, Abbot Cratfield, Abbot Curteys, the bishop of Exeter, the duke of Gloucester, the Guild of Armourers, the Guild of Goldsmiths, the Guild of Mercers, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI, John Welles (mayor of London), Lady Anne March, the earl of Salisbury, William de la Pole, Lady Sibille, Lady Anne Stafford, Lady Margaret Talbot, Abbot Whethamstede, and the dean of Windsor (Schirmer 296). One needs to distinguish between patronage and simple association. *Life of St. Edmund*, for example, was written as a gift for Henry VI, but it was not commissioned by him.

⁹²See Derek Pearsall (*Bio-Bibliography* 24) on the subject of rental revenue that may have been intended as a belated reward for Lydgate’s work on *Troy Book* after the death of Henry V.

maintained.⁹³ In all probability, any money earned by an individual monk for services rendered would be turned over to the abbey (just as it is among most religious orders today), and in Lydgate's case would be reimbursed in the form of an allowance befitting a senior monk of such high rank and renown, commensurate with his expenses.⁹⁴ There is no denying that monks received regular wages and that the obedientiaries received full salaries, as the abolishment of this practice was one of Henry V's proposed reforms. But despite their "graciae" (wages), the monks were somehow able to maintain the fiction of personal poverty and common ownership; the abbot of Bury's own income was over £1000 per year, but he would have argued that the money allotted to him was in keeping with his high station and responsibilities and actually belonged to the order.

⁹³Note, for example, how careful Lydgate is to present himself as a poor "thred-bar" religious in the Prologue to *Siege of Thebes* ("In a Cope of blak and not of grene"), in contrast to the opulence of Chaucer's monk. Shirley, in one of his own verses, perhaps in a jest derived from this passage, comments on Lydgate's "poverty":

Yet for all his much konnyng
 Which were gret tresore to a kynge—
 I meane this Lidgate, munke daune Iohn—
 His nobles bene spent, I leue ychon,
 And eke his shylynges nyghe by;
 His thred-bare coule woll not ly.
 Ellas! Ye lordes, why nill ye se,
 And reward his pouerte?
 (MS Additional 29729, fol. 178r; quoted in Schick, xcix)

⁹⁴We ought not to be led astray by Lydgate's complaint to his purse in *Fall of Princes* (3.3865-71), or by the solicitation in the contemporaneous "Letter to Gloucester," or imagine with Schirmer that "poverty and old age are close at hand" as he is writing this work (216). As David Lawton has shown, the poverty complaint is only one manifestation of the dullness topos; old age is another (762-69). Poverty complaints are a common rhetorical device, the purpose of which is to chide the patron, in as amusing and inoffensive way as possible, into honouring his or her financial obligations. Nowhere else in all of Lydgate's verse does he complain about payment, as Hoccleve does at every turn. Lydgate devoted some eight years to "Humphrey's" project; the poet (and the monastery which supported him throughout) were entitled to request payment from a tight-fisted patron.

And, finally, we have no idea how these so-called commissions were received by their patrons, although we may assume from the volume of his output that word of mouth was generally very kind to Lydgate. If we are to draw any conclusions as to Lydgate's supposed indebtedness to his patrons as a reflection of his political orientation, these are important questions to ask. At the very least let us acknowledge the possibility of other motives for his writing than the pursuit of personal financial reward: a compulsion to set words to rhyme, professional pride, a moral obligation to instruct and reform, a desire to celebrate the glory of God, or humble service to his abbey and his order. It bears repeating that Lydgate, unlike Chaucer and Hoccleve, was not a civil servant; he was a Benedictine monk.

Defence of Holy Church

Against yet another corollary to the Lancastrian thesis (that Lydgate was a rabid anti-Lollard and that he supported the Lancastrians because they persecuted heretics), I will argue that one work not funded by Lancastrian chamber accounts is Lydgate's *Defence of Holy Church*. As an orthodox monk Lydgate would obviously have had an instinctive aversion to any "new sects," particularly one which, like the Franciscans earlier in the fourteenth century, attacked monastic privilege as vehemently as did Lollardy. But whatever Lydgate's personal or professional feelings on the subject, his work as a whole reveals surprisingly few direct confrontations with specific Lollard tenets, apart from the call for ecclesiastical disendowment, which was not by any means an exclusively Lollard proposal.⁹⁵ There are four brief passages in his entire corpus in which he

⁹⁵This point was first made by Walter Schirmer in 1952: "In all Lydgate's voluminous works there are only a few lines of condemnation, and not a single satirical poem exclusively directed against Lollardy" (54). Later critics have automatically assumed the opposite: that Lydgate was a Lollard-hating monk. A complete list of Lollard references in Lydgate stands as follows: "Ballade to King Henry VI upon his Coronation," 82; *Fall of Princes*, 1.403, 5967; *Life*

actually mentions the Lollards by name (and all of these occur in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties when the Hussite rebellion in Bohemia, followed by the aborted rebellion of Jack Sharp in East Anglia, was to incite anti-Lollard hysteria in England), and nowhere does he engage in anti-Lollard debate, as his contemporaries Hoccleve and Walsingham do repeatedly and at great length. All Lydgate's Lollard references occur during the minority years of Henry VI, about the time Duke Humphrey was rounding up the usual suspects in the latest Lollard uprising. But the abortive rebellion of William Perkins, alias Jack Sharp, was ideologically an uprising of a whole new order of magnitude, the intent of which was not merely to attack the temporalities of the church, but to overthrow the king and his council (Heath 310). In the wake of the Hussite rebellion that had sparked a civil war in Bohemia, with another proposed rebellion so close to home, Lydgate might be excused an increase in anti-Lollard rhetoric. Both Walsingham and Hoccleve's anti-Lollard references occur much earlier. As early as 1378, Walsingham was complaining vociferously of the specific teachings of Wycliffe at Oxford (49-61); Hoccleve attacks Lollardy not just in his "Remonstrance to Oldcastle" but also in his *Regement of Princes*, in which he chides the Lollard Badby, who was burned at the stake in 1409 because he did not believe that the sacramental wafer transforms into Christ's body (lines 281-94). Lydgate does not seem interested in matters of Lollard doctrine. There are, of course, multiple references to heretics and heresy sprinkled throughout his work, but the vast majority of these are casually derived from his source material (references to the Arians, Pelagians, or Sabellians, for example). These

of St. Edmund, 1.1014; "Sotelties at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI," 13. They are all casual one-line references, with no elaboration of the kind for which Lydgate is so famous.

references never trigger a moral outburst or any kind of diversionary explication, as do other topics of much greater concern to Lydgate.⁹⁶

Lollard theological error *per se* was not Lydgate's preoccupation. Indeed, much of his own religious writing is scripturally-based, if to be scripturally-based is to be in accord with the Lollard approach to teaching. His moral dictates make constant reference to Biblical precedents, from both Old and New Testaments, and his unrelenting use of the vernacular for religious writing would seem to indicate some sympathy for Lollard vernacular translation projects as a way of spreading the Gospel.⁹⁷ Many of the Lollards were opposed to war and violence of any kind, and on that score alone Lydgate would have been very much in agreement.⁹⁸ There are numerous passages in his work, particularly those dealing with "covetesnous" among the (diocesan) clergy, which, were they to stand alone as anonymous fragments, would easily be mistaken for Lollard writings.⁹⁹ His resistance to episcopal authority may not have had the same origin as the Lollard

⁹⁶Almost all references to heresy or heretics in Lydgate's poetry are references to kings, either as bad or good models in their dealings with heretics. Good kings do not entertain heresy. The recommended prescription for unrepentant heretics appears to be exile, not death, in Lydgate. See *Fall of Princes*, 1:410; 8:307; 8:1099; 9:141; 9:558; *Life of St. Alban*, 4239.

⁹⁷Anne Hudson has called Lollardy "the heresy of the vernacular," but no English writer of the fifteenth-century wrote more vernacular religious poetry than Lydgate ("Lollardy: The English Heresy?" 283).

⁹⁸The tenth conclusion of the Lollard manifesto is that "manslaute be batayle" is "expres contrarious to the newe testament:" "The lawe of mercy that is the newe testament, forbad al mannslaute: *in euangelio dictum est antiquis, Non occides.*" Lydgate would agree wholeheartedly with this conclusion (Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, 28).

⁹⁹Certis, the rote & grounde of euerydel
Is couetise—who-so loke wel,—
Of whiche the greyne is so fer y-sowe,
That who-so list auarice knowe,
Amonge prestis he shal it rathest fynde;

resistance, but, for Lydgate, the episcopacy was nevertheless a common source of irritation. Though Lydgate would define the word differently than most Lollards, he was as opposed in principle to "idolatry" as Wycliffe.¹⁰⁰ His faith in the intermediary powers of Mary and the saints (a problem for some Lollard preachers but, I suppose, not for all)¹⁰¹ is evident in his religious writing, but these poems on the whole are devotional and not polemical in nature. Where his religious poetry does get polemical (as in *Life of St. Edmund* and other hagiographies), the polemics tend to be directed not so much against the Lollard support for disendowment as against predatory authorities with the power to make disendowment a reality. He never once mentions the Lollards in his unrelenting defence of church endowments. Throughout his work, Lydgate associates disendowment not so much with heresy as with tyranny, robbery, and treason against the King of Kings.

For ther-with-al thei be maked blynde
 To her estat, that thei may nat se.
 For, in sothnes, ther is no degre
 Gredier nor more ravynous
 Of worldly good, nor more coueitous
 Than prestis ben to cacche what thei may.

(*Troy Book* 4.5863-73)

¹⁰⁰See Lydgate's ambivalent treatment of "Bishop" Amphiorax in *Siege of Thebes*. Amphiorax is ultimately swallowed up by the earth and banished to Hell for idolatry. See also the long passage on idolatry in *Troy Book* (2.5480 ff.).

¹⁰¹It is not clear what the Lollard position was on the intermediary role of Mary and the saints. The Lollard manifesto of 1395 is opposed to the worship of relics, but is silent on the issue of devotion to saints. William Sawtry, the first Englishman to be burnt for heresy, was opposed to the worship of saints' things, but not devotion to saints' bodies. There does not seem to be any universal opposition among the Lollards to the recognition of the feast-days of saints, although many Lollard texts express disapproval of the cult of saints.

Lydgate's treatment of heresy may be usefully contrasted to Thomas Hoccleve's by a comparison of the former's *Defence of Holy Church* (1413/14) to the latter's "Remonstrance Against Oldcastle" (1415), both generally deemed to be anti-Lollard poems.¹⁰² To begin with Hoccleve, there is no question that his poem is not just a rebuke to John Oldcastle (who was in hiding at the time following his break from prison in October 1413 and the alleged uprising against his old friend and military companion Henry V in January 1414), but that it is an attack on Lollardy in general. The poem can be confidently dated to August 1415 by an external rubric and explicit topical references in the poem itself.¹⁰³ Ostensibly, Hoccleve's poem is a vituperative epistle to Oldcastle that urges him to break free from the "snare of heresie," to repent of his error, to submit to the spiritual authority of the bishops, and to seek the king's mercy. In effect, the poem is a vehicle for an itemized condemnation of the main tenets of Lollardy: a defence of the priesthood and the sacraments; a repudiation of lay theological learning and Bible study; a promotion of the authority of the Pope, the bishops, and the hierarchical church; and a mirror for princes and knights such as Oldcastle himself, whose responsibility it is to protect the church, not to attack it. Hoccleve must have been familiar with the Lollard manifesto of 1395 (or some variation thereof), because he specifically addresses most of its twelve articles (Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, 199-201). After an introductory call for repentance, he urges Oldcastle to make his confession and chastises him for rejecting "confessioun auriculeer" (lines 81 ff.) and the sacrament "of the Altar" (100) while carefully avoiding any theological

¹⁰²All quotations to Hoccleve's poem are from M.C. Seymour, ed., *Selections from Hoccleve*, 61-74.

¹⁰³ Lines 499-501 make it clear that the poem was finished after Henry landed near Harfleur in August of 1415 to begin his first campaign in France.

discourse about the theology of transubstantiation, a proscribed debate which would have violated Arundel's prohibition on writing on theological subjects in the vernacular. Hoccleve knows the dangers of meddling in the "doctryne of Crystes lawes" (138), which meddling must (by canon and civil law) be left to the bishops. Hoccleve is not about to attempt any theological arguments based on anything so dangerous as reason; as he concludes (and repeats again in the "Regiment of Princes"): "For if we mighte our feith by reson preeue/ We sholde no meryt of our feith haue" (141-42). Nowadays says Hoccleve, every "baillif or reeue or man of craft" thinks he can argue theology and even "lewed calates," thin-witted women, "wele argumentes make in holy writ!" (146). Knights in particular, he says, should find more appropriate reading than scripture:

Clymbe no more in holy writ so hie!
 Rede the storie of Lancelot de lake,
 Or Vegece of the aart of Chiualrie,
 The seege of Troie or Thebes thee applie.
 (194-97)

While this last line may sound like a plug for reading the forthcoming work of his rival for the laurel wreath, it may be a reflection of church policy to promote vernacular romance as an alternative to vernacular theology. Other Lollard objections to orthodox teaching, which Hoccleve not only denounces but actually tries to refute "by reson" (presumably because its discussion is not proscribed by Arundel), are the Lollard repudiations of pilgrimages, the use of images as devotional objects, and ecclesiastical ownership of temporal possessions. Pilgrimages are good for the soul if undertaken in a spirit of devotion (393-408); images are inspirational and can help in prayer, just as a pair of spectacles can help one to see the page one is trying to read (409-24); and (in an argument somewhat harder to follow) the church is entitled to its temporal possessions just as Christ was ministered to by angels after his sojourn in the desert (425-32). And, finally,

Hoccleve is presumably addressing the Lollard criticism of clerical celibacy when he accuses the Lollards of “fleshly lustes” and “aduoutrie” (369-76).

But of even greater concern to the poem than these individual objections to Lollardy is the need to defend the internal authority of the hierarchical church—the Pope, the bishops and diocesan priesthood in general—and to promote the external authority of the church over the state. These are two separate issues, the first of which would have been a cause of considerable unease to Lydgate given the ongoing friction between the regulars and the diocesans, and the second of which is a stand more generally in accord with Lydgate’s own position. In support of the first objective, Hoccleve cites the Roman emperor Theodosius, who after his earlier spiritual transgressions (which are much less heinous than Oldcastle’s), submitted to the authority of the bishop (49-60). For Hoccleve, the sacrament of confession signifies submission to the authority of the church in its priesthood (113-120). Furthermore, Hoccleve argues the orthodox position that a priest is still a priest even when in sin, and still, consequently, has the authority to celebrate Mass, hear confessions and to grant absolution (129-136; 321-36). In any case, says Hoccleve, no man (except a diocesan prelate) has the right to judge the state of another man’s soul. In support of the second objective, Hoccleve names a litany of emperors and kings who willingly submitted their temporal authority to the spiritual authority of the church. Of particular note (against a topical background of anti-Lollard legislation and heretic burning) is Hoccleve’s unqualified approval of Emperor Justinian, who passed laws forbidding any debate on theological matters:

The Cristen Emperour Justinian,
As it is writen who so list it see,
Made a lawe deffending euery man,
Of what condicion or what degree
That he were of nat sholde hardy be
For to despute of the feith openly;

And there vp on sundry peynes sette he,
That peril sholde eschued be therby.

(185-92)

Whether Hoccleve is invoking Justinian as a precedent for Arundel, he is certainly encouraging the government to undertake to defend the interests of the church by the continued persecution of Lollards. The real addressee of the poem is Henry V, not the fugitive Oldcastle, soon to be captured, hung, drawn, and quartered. One wonders whether Hoccleve, too, had doubts about Henry V's commitment to the eradication of Lollardy.¹⁰⁴

I include this passage on Hoccleve to contrast Lydgate's approach to the problems posed by Lollardy, and the latter's perception of what those problems are. While the date of *Defence of Holy Church* is much less certain than that of Hoccleve's poem, the two possibilities that have been put forward are c.1431 (Schirmer 134) and 1413/14 (Norton-Smith 150-51). If the date is 1431, the poem, if addressed to a ten-year old, lacks the paternalistic tones that are so common in Lydgate's poetry to the boy-king (the coronation poems in particular). For this reason, Schirmer posits Humphrey as the addressee, while admitting the invocation is hardly appropriate. On the other hand, the reference to the protector and defender "Off Cristus spouse douhtir of Syoun" (5-7) is reminiscent of the tribute Lydgate pays to Henry V in the "Ballade to King Henry VI Upon His Coronation": "At the gynnyng of his royal noblesse / Woyded al Cokil fer oute of Syon / Crystes spouse sette in stabulnesse" (*Minor Poems* 2: 628, 85-87). On the internal evidence of the

¹⁰⁴On Hoccleve's apprehensions that Henry may have been soft on Lollardy, see David Lawton, "Dullness," 764. See also, Hoccleve's poem on the re-internment of Richard II at Westminster Abbey, where he muses on the possibility that a king could be inclined to embrace Lollardy: "A king set in that wrong opinioun / Mighte of our feith be the subversioun" (*Minor Poems* 1: 48).

poem, I believe it to have been written in 1413/14 as a reflection of Benedictine concerns related to the threatened disendowment of the English monasteries and the actual disendowment of the alien priories. There is nothing in the poem to connect it with the Oldcastle uprising of January 1414. Paul Strohm has recently undertaken a textual analysis of documents related to the so-called uprising, and strongly supports the claims of the Reformation historians (Holinshed, Hall, Foxe) that the Oldcastle rebellion was very much a Lancastrian fabrication (*England's Empty Throne* 65-86). Whereas Hoccleve accepted the plot as a *fait accompli*, Lydgate never mentions Oldcastle, or the uprising, if he had even heard about it. Lydgate's poem raises the possibility that perhaps he himself saw through the Lancastrian manipulation of the spectre of Lollardy to serve Lancastrian political ends. Hoccleve's poem was triggered by the Oldcastle uprising (whatever it really was). The historical event motivating Lydgate's poem, I suggest, is not an outbreak of Lollard rebellion but the suppression of the alien priories by Henry V in 1414 in the wake of the disendowment petition by the Commons in 1407 at Westminster, supposedly resubmitted in 1413 at the Parliament of Leicester.¹⁰⁵

Lydgate's poem is unquestionably anti-disendowment, but only by association anti-Lollard. The two terms are not synonymous. Nowhere in the poem does Lydgate ever attack

¹⁰⁵The petition is transcribed in Kingsford, *Chronicles of London*, 65-66 (Julius B II fols 61v-63v). See also Fabyan, 578. I am taking the dates (about which there is much confusion among modern historians) from the chronicles themselves. According to Harriss, the Lollard petition (as it is now called) was presented in the 1410 parliament and was probably sponsored in the House of Lords by Oldcastle, who was arrested by Arundel shortly thereafter (*Shaping the Nation*, 392-93). It is significant, I believe, that the suppression of the alien monasteries took place in 1414, shortly after the Lollard petition to raid the English monasteries had made the case that such a program would bring the king an annuity of £20,000.

Lollard religious beliefs or even use the word “heresy” or “heretic.”¹⁰⁶ He acknowledges that disendowment is a doctrine of the “sectys newe” against whom he urges the king to defend the church, and he does certainly use these “sects” as a kind of buffer against which he can appear to be directing his anger, but he shows no interest whatsoever in debating or condemning any of their religious doctrines. Lydgate could not be more explicit about who exactly are “Goddys foon”:

Distroye hem tho, that falsely now werrey
Her own modir, to whome thai shulde obeye!

*And namely hem that of presumpcyoun
Dispraven hir, and hir ornamentes,
And therwithall of indignacioun
Withdrawe wolde hir rich paramente*³.
O prudent prynce! thynke what her entent is,
Who falsely the hooly church accuse,
For thay hemsilff the riches wolden use.
(125-33, emphasis added)

Clearly “Goddys foon” are the depraved despoilers of the church, and the poem is a political counter-attack, not a theological debate. Who, the poem asks (and never answers except by intimation), are these fiends who would dare to steal the church’s riches and use them for themselves? Lollards, perhaps, but more likely Lydgate’s culprits are the knights and even the bishops who were seeking to control or appropriate monastic lands for their own use. The Leicester Parliament of 1413, which passed a bill to suppress Lollardy, is, coincidentally, the same parliament that, in an earlier session, had rejected a re-cycled petition from the Commons to disendow the monasteries, and was about to pass a statute for the seizure of the alien priories

¹⁰⁶According to Desmond Seward, the Benedictine communities of Westminster, Shrewsbury, and Wenlock “had connived at Sir John Oldcastle’s escape, despite his heresy—almost certainly out of distaste for the Lancastrian usurpation” (44; 180).

(Marjorie Morgan 210). Prior to that parliament Henry had ceded to Arundel his power to persecute heretics, but the church authorities must have realized that he could just as easily lend to parliament his power to plunder the church. The traditional explanation for the suppression of the alien priories in 1414 (chronicled in Holinshed and dramatized in the opening scenes of Shakespeare's *Henry V*) is that Henry V was contemplating a massive disendowment of the church, until the wily bishops, led by Archbishop Chichele, offered him a justification for, and their blessing on, a war against France, a large sum of money to fund the campaign, and (not mentioned in Shakespeare) the alien priories as an alternative to any larger despoliation of the English church (James Atkin Wylie 1:386).¹⁰⁷ The popularizer of this theory seems to be Edward Hall—a Tudor chronicler with Reformation biases to be sure, but not necessarily wrong about the bishops' machinations.¹⁰⁸ In any case, the official church certainly seems to have made a Faustian pact with the king to prevent him acting on the disendowment petition. English monasteries were spared, but the alien priories in England were doomed. Modern historiography is hesitant to declare so straightforward a cause-and-effect relationship, mainly because it now seems apparent that Henry V had determined on an alliance with Burgundy and war with France even before his

¹⁰⁷Wylie misquotes the Tudor historian Edward Hall: "This bill [...] made the fat abbots to sweat; the proud priors to frown; the poor priors to curse; the silly nuns to weep; and indeed all her merchants to fear that Babel would down" (Hall 49).

¹⁰⁸Hall's account was probably derived from Fabyan's *New Chronicles* which seems to provide the first hint of a deal between Chichele and Henry V: "In fere wherof, lest the kynge wolde therunto gyue any comfortable audyence, as testyfyne some wryters, certayne bysshoppes and other hede men of the churche, put the kyng in mynde to clayme his ryght in Fraunce" (578). See Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, 120-21, on the derivation of the story probably first recorded about 1460 by Fabyan, a London mayor. Kingsford's point is that the interpretation of this parliament as a political *quid pro quo* is not just Tudor propaganda, because the idea had long been in circulation. Hall obviously embellished the story, even to the point of writing his own speech for Chichele, but Hall's narrative is nonetheless plausible.

coronation (Seward 51; Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*, 66-74). If the king needed the church's blessing he certainly got it from Chichele, but what role the suppression of the alien priories played in the negotiations with the bishops must remain a matter for speculation.

Lydgate's concern is not so much with heresy as it is with tyranny. *Defence of Holy Church* is a mirror for princes, but, unlike Hoccleve's poem, the images reflected in the mirror (Nebuchadnezzar, Saul, Antiochus, and Belshazzar) are not meant to be flattering. What these tyrants have in common is a predilection towards the oppression and robbery of the church. The poem ends with the direst of warnings about the ultimate fate of Antiochus and Belshazzar, tyrants who would dare to steal "the sacred Iewels from Goddis hooly hous:"

Remembre also for swich transgressioun
 What was the fyne of kyng Antiochus,
 That proudely tooke by extorsioun
 The sacred Iewels from Goddis hooly hous,
 Was he nat slawe, this tiraunt trecherous,
 With smale wormys hym fretyng manyfolde,
 Whan he fill down from his chare of golde?

What myght availe his pompe, or all his pride,
 Or all the gliteryng of his riche chare,
 In which that he so proudely did ride?
 The surquedye also of Baltasar
 Was it nat abatid or that he was war,
 In Babiloun, with a soden fall,
 Whan that the honde wrote upon the wall?

(134-47)

Defence of Holy Church is more a reproach to tyranny than to Lollardy, as explicitly critical of the conduct of a ruling monarch as a fifteenth-century poet would ever dare to be. After 1413, Henry V turned his attentions to France, executed Oldcastle, and continued to exploit fears of Lollardy in the interest of his own legitimation. In Lydgate's later admonishments to the boy-king Henry VI, the poet is able, with some justification, to hold up Henry V as a mirror for princes who would

defend the church against heresy. But in 1413, Henry V's reputation as defender of the church was by no means a sure thing.

Troy Book

Troy Book is Lydgate's first "epic," a loose but fairly faithful translation of Guido delle Coronne's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, a panegyric to his patron, as might be expected, but more importantly to this study, a mirror for princes in which Lydgate first begins to promulgate his ideology of kingship. Dual obligations to patron (Henry V) and to source (Guido) inevitably impose constraints on what, I argue, is the primary objective of the poem, to alert the prince to the catastrophic consequences of war in a work that appears on the surface to pay homage to Henry V, but actually undermines his intentions in a mode that is both anti-war and anti-epic. Many critical studies have proclaimed Lydgate "poet-laureate" to both Henry V and Henry VI, but *Troy Book* is the only work clearly commissioned from Lydgate by Henry V. By any standards it is a major accomplishment. It is undoubtedly this work that made his name as premier poet of the new regime and instilled in Lydgate the self-confidence and authority he would exercise in all his future works. *Troy Book* is a massive work (30,117 lines), second in length only to *Fall of Princes*. Until recently critics have focused on the panegyrics of the Prologue and Envoy to the almost total exclusion of the tragic unfolding of events and the catastrophic outcome (for Trojans and Greeks alike) of the actual narrative. "Laureate Lydgate" is the inevitable product of this selective reading; but "laureate Lydgate" is a critical construct that, in the case of *Troy Book*, an unyielding text can only with great difficulty be made to support.¹⁰⁹ If Henry V saw in the legend

¹⁰⁹In his introduction to the only modern text of *Troy Book: Selections*, Robert R. Edwards summarizes the majority opinion when he says: "To be sure, there are profound tensions and contradictions in *Troy Book*, but they grow out of the narrative that Lydgate

of Troy an opportunity to generate “official optimism” (Strohm, *England's Empty Throne*, 190) it was, as James Simpson has argued (“For al my body” 133), an “appallingly bad choice,” although had Lydgate been so inclined he could have found a way to make the story work in favour of the Lancastrians. From the Benedictine point of view, however, for an institution with so much to lose on both sides of the Channel through a destructive and wasteful war with France, the woeful story of Troy, especially Guido’s version, is the perfect choice.¹¹⁰ One assumes from the Prologue that the commission came from Henry, who obviously had his own strategic reasons for wanting the great epic of the Trojans (then believed to be the forefathers of the Britons) rendered into the English vernacular. But the original idea for the work may well have come from the Benedictines, just as the majority of government contracts today, however they may be written up in the final report, are the result of an idea pitched to the government by the consultants who are ultimately awarded the contract. Whether the idea for the translation originated from the household of Henry V or from the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds, we will never know, but there is no denying that the story of “the catastrophe that awaits the imprudent exercise of war” (Simpson “For all my body” 133) is a moral exemplum for monarchs that would have suited English and French

recounts and embellishes and not from a kind of authorial resistance. In its immediate historical context, the poem aims to affirm chivalric virtues, offer examples and moral precepts, and celebrate the national myth of Trojan origins” (9). A similar assessment can be found in the introduction to the only modern text of *Siege of Thebes*, by the same editor: “The narrative of *Siege of Thebes* thus calls into question the principles that it is supposedly designed to illustrate. As in *Troy Book* Lydgate finds that the informing values cannot contain the subversive power of the story” (11).

¹¹⁰Simpson identifies two traditions to the fifteenth-century legend of Troy. One is derived from Vergil and supports the right of conquest through appeal to genealogy; the other is from Guido, has clerical backing, and is anti-militaristic (“The Other Book of Troy”).

Benedictine purposes very well at a time when Henry V was already mobilizing for a war with France.¹¹¹

Lydgate's *anciens romans*, *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes*, have until recently received proportionately more critical attention than all the rest of Lydgate's works.¹¹² *Troy Book*, especially, is an unwieldy work that contains enough material to support almost any critical theory imaginable. Critics are as divided as to its genre as they are to its intent. Many analyses of the work focus on the Prologue to make points about Lydgate as a Lancastrian propagandist, but very few studies treat the work as a whole. The larger studies to date include those of Walter Schirmer, Alan Renoir, Derek Pearsall, C. David Benson, and most recently, Scott-Morgan Straker. These critics vary widely in their interpretations of the work. Schirmer and Renoir read the narrative as a medieval epic in a period of transition: they both detect isolated signposts pointing towards Renaissance humanism in Lydgate's treatment of antiquity. Pearsall rejects this notion entirely, insisting that *Troy Book* is quintessentially medieval in its outlook and form, and, in effect, a giant step backward from Chaucer's emancipating humanism. Benson argues that the work is conceived primarily as a classical history embellished by Lydgate didacticism and rhetoric, an assessment that Lydgate himself supports in the Prologue. Renoir sees the work as an attempt at a national epic. Only Straker finds in the work a conscious rebuke to Lancastrian foreign policy. Whatever their differences, what these critics (Straker excepted) share is an evaluation of the extent to which

¹¹¹See David Lawton, "Dullness," in which he discusses the pacifist policies of Richard II that Chaucer and his friends fully supported (780). In their support of peace, the Benedictines of Bury were Ricardians all the way.

¹¹²Very recently, however, at least one scholar has been examining *Fall of Princes*, a work previously neglected because of its prolixity and its repetitive theme, in more detail (Mortimer, *Fall of Princes*).

Lydgate fails in the production of an epic narrative. Pearsall is the most emphatic on this point: "The *Troy Book* is a homily first, an encyclopedia second, and an epic nowhere" (*John Lydgate* 129). *Troy Book* fails as an epic for all these writers, Pearsall especially, mainly because it contains too many digressions and amplifications of a moralistic or encyclopedic nature. There is no consistent theme (the wrath of Achilles, the wandering of Ulysses, or the founding of Rome, for example) and no central hero. Unlike the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, the classical gods have no role to play in Lydgate's history, and where the material requires their presence (e.g., the oracle at Delphi) they are usually treated as demons posing as gods, or as stars under which a man's fate may be adversely influenced and against which he must exercise utmost virtue to resist.

Although I do not disagree with Pearsall's witty assessment, I suggest that, not only is Lydgate not interested in writing a classical epic, it may well be his conscious intention to subvert the very form that his patron had expected him to write. The word "epic" is not part of Lydgate's recorded vocabulary, although the form itself was clearly known and understood by medieval and Anglo-Saxon poets alike. The "rules" for writing epics were laid down in the seventeenth century by Milton, Dryden, and others, not by medieval authors. Lydgate himself describes his *Troy Book* as a "story" (history) that happens to be a "tragidie," which "begynneth in prosperite / And endeth euer in aduersite," but never as a "romance," the medieval genre perhaps most closely associated with the Germanic and classical epic. Henry V may well have envisaged *Troy Book* as a tale of chivalry and valour, a romantic glorification of wars and battles whose kings would reflect the glory of the Lancastrian dynasty and whose heroes would be portrayed as models for the knights of the realm to emulate (Prologue 75-84), but, if so, Lydgate clearly did not share his patron's conception of the task at hand.

As Robert Edwards has stated in another context, “the Trojan foundational myth discredits the chivalric values it ostensibly defines and celebrates” (*Siege of Thebes* 9); Lydgate establishes a dichotomy between chivalric values and royal prudence from the beginning, an opposition he relentlessly exploits at the expense of Lancastrian aspirations. He no sooner dispenses with the mandatory tribute to his patron in the Prologue than he sets about to establish the ground rules for his translation. His work will be, above all, true in substance to its source, which Lydgate believed to be a true historical account, unlike the “lying” accounts of Homer and the other poets, who “Thorough veyn fables [...] han contrevd by false transumpcioun / To hyde trouthe falsely under cloude / And the sothe of malys for to schroude” (Prologue: 263-66). Homer’s transgression, apart from being biased in favour of the Greeks, is that he has falsified history in singing the praises of his heroes. Ovid and Vergil, too, have “closyd / Falsehede with trouthe, that maketh men ennosd / To whiche parte that thei shal hem holde” (Prologue 299-301). For Lydgate, these classical poets have fictionalized and idealized history, a romanticization that is, after all, what the epic does best. But Lydgate will not compromise what he understands as history; his source, Guido, has drawn from the “eye-witness” accounts of Dares and Dytes, and because their first translator, Cornelius “of Rome yborn” was a little too brief and had a tendency to leave out the all important (to Lydgate) causes and consequences of the wars, Lydgate will faithfully translate Guido, who was more true to the original accounts and who illumined the work of his predecessors “by crafte and cadence” with “many fresche colour / Of rethorik, and many riche flour / Of eloquence” (Prologue 364-5). Lydgate distinguishes between the embellishment of a work with rhetoric and other poetic devices (the purpose of which is to make the work more readable and memorable) on the one hand, and the deliberate distortion of history for the sake of

romance, or national pride (or Lancastrian propaganda) on the other. The problem for Lydgate was that his patron, like the host in the Prologue to *Siege of Thebes*, had somewhat different expectations and was no doubt anticipating a war-glorifying epic in which he and his armies could be flatteringly reflected in the portrait of all the great ancestral heroes who fought so valiantly at Troy.

How Lydgate managed to write anti-war propaganda while in the “employ” of Henry V, the most militaristic monarch in English history, is a fascinating study. To begin with, he invokes “Myghty Mars” as the “sovereyn and patrown” of “chevalry” (Prologue 7) and “of knyghthod lord” (Prologue 36). At first glance it seems that he is celebrating Mars, the god of war, and perhaps associating him with Henry V, an association that would no doubt flatter the patron. But Lydgate begins to undermine his own invocation by line 17 of the Prologue by casting doubt on the beneficence of Mars, the cause “Of werre and stryf in many sondry rewmys.” From this point on in the poem, any reference to Mars will be negative, if not downright condemnatory. His real Muses, Lydgate soon reveals, are not war deities, but Othea (goddess of prudence), Clyo (Muse of history), and Calliope (mother of Orpheus and Muse of epic poetry). If Mars is the lord of chivalry and knighthood, Lydgate will inevitably call his dominions into question as the evil influence of Mars begins to work itself out in *Troy Book*. The invocation to Mars at the beginning of the Prologue must be contrasted to a later invocation in Book 4 in which Mars is now the sovereign and patron, not of chivalry and knighthood, but of wild beasts, of envy, and discord. In this second long invocation to Mars (which is not found in Guido), Mars is not a god, but a “hatful sterre,” an emblematic source of hate, anger, envy, death, robbery, murder, treachery, and treason. The legacy of Mars is “Exile, werre, cheynes, and presoun / Proscripcioun and captiuite.” So venomous is the

influence of Mars that he is the very “serpent of discord” (4.4506). Mars and Satan are one and the same to Lydgate, as are most of the false gods the Romans worshiped. To medieval monks Roman gods are mere manifestations of Satan’s minions. If Robert J. Meyer-Lee is right when he argues that Mars is in some way “a marker for the prince” (45), then the question must be asked, with reference to the Book 4 invocation, is Mars still a marker for the prince who by this time is king of England and deeply embroiled in a dangerous war with France? If Mars is emblematic of Henry V (and there is a very clear suggestion that Henry, like Priam, is under the influence of Mars), then it is a bleak and sinister picture indeed that Lydgate paints of his own sovereign and patron. Because this second major invocation to Mars has been most often ignored by critics, I reproduce it in its entirety (Appendix B) to show how passionately Lydgate argues his case against the god of war as a suitable patron for the king of England (4.4440-4525).

This second invocation to Mars is unadulterated Lydgate: moralistic, digressive and prolix perhaps, but certainly not apologetic. The entire apostrophe, it should be noted, belongs to Lydgate and to Lydgate alone. These lines are not found in Guido, and they cannot be credited to Chaucer, although there is more than a faint echo of Chaucer’s description of the temple of Mars (*Knight’s Tale*). It is exactly the kind of passage that would be instinctively omitted by any editor of an abridged version of *Troy Book*, who would naturally prefer a narrative devoid of all such commentary.¹¹³ I insist that digressive material of this nature is quintessential Lydgate, central to his purpose, and should in fact be regarded with the utmost attention. C. David Benson acknowledges the second invocation and some of the other more blatantly anti-war sentiments

¹¹³The passage is omitted, for example, from Robert R. Edwards’s recent abridged edition of *Troy Book: Selections*.

expressed as explicit Lydgatean apostrophes, but argues that these exhortations are greatly offset by the narrative passages that exalt bravery, skill in battle, and chivalric pageantry, and (by implication) support the Lancastrian warmongers. Although many of these pro-chivalric passages can be explained by the material Lydgate more faithfully translates than he does in later works such as *Fall of Princes* (much of the apparent enthusiasm is already there in Guido), Benson is quite right to detect a Lydgatean admiration for chivalric pageantry and for certain knightly qualities such as manliness and courtliness. But there is often irony in Lydgate's depiction of chivalrous pageantry, as in the great assembly of the Trojans before the first pitched battle with the Greeks. In Guido, the women (Helen excepted, having witnessed the fall of Cythera at first hand), looking down from the walls of Troy, are impressed by this initial display of power and pomp, more reminiscent of a medieval tournament than the beginning of a catastrophic war. Lydgate translates Guido faithfully, except that in Lydgate's version the women are not comforted by the pageantry:¹¹⁴

Þe quene Eleyne, passyng fair to sene,
 Þe kynges douȝters, & goodly Pollycene,
 And many oþer, whiche of wommanhede
 In herte wern ful of besy drede,
 Inly a-gast, and of fere affrayed
 Whan þei behilde in þe feld displaid
 Þe brode baners—þat some of tendernes,
 Somme of loue, and somme of kyndenes,
 Pale and dredful for her lordis were;
 And somme her facis hydden eke for fere,
 Þat were nat bold to liften vp her siȝt
 To be-hold þe armure clere and briȝt,
 So gliteryng ageyn þe sonne schene—

¹¹⁴There is a touch of the irony of Pierre Bosquet in Lydgate's description of the women's response to the pageantry below the walls of Troy: "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

Her hertis tendre myȝte nat sustene;
And in her drede þus I lete hem dwelle.
(3.521-35)

Like the women of Troy, Lydgate is deeply distrustful of the trappings of war.

A perfect example of the noble and chivalric pageantry that Lydgate clearly does admire is the long expansive passage that marks the rebuilding of Troy by Priam (2.479-1066). Lydgate marvels at the industry of the Trojan workmen, and delights in the new Troy which represents all the best that civilization has to offer—architecture, feasts, tournaments, theatre, and music. Priam's sons, Hector, Paris, Deiphebus, Helenus, and Troilus are the bravest and the handsomest and the strongest of all men, the very flower of chivalry. (Priam also has thirty bastard sons, all of whom Guido names, but Lydgate, perhaps in the interest of decorum, does not acknowledge). This enthusiasm for great cities and the glories of civilization ought not to surprise us. Lydgate is no enemy to chivalric pageantry as long as it remains constructive. He goes to such lengths to depict the positive side of aristocratic splendour only to show how suddenly it can all be destroyed by one rash act, a vengeful and ill-conceived war. The chivalric code has a dark side for Lydgate. Chivalric honour demands revenge when there is an insult to family or nation: thus, Lamedon insults Jason, Jason responds with an attack on Troy; Lamedon responds with an attack on the Greeks; the Greeks respond with the sack of the old city and the rape of Hesione; Priam responds by sending Paris to lay waste the island of Cythera and to abduct Menelaus's wife; Agamemnon responds with the pillage and destruction of Tenedon; and so on, until Troy lies in flames and ashes and the Greeks are shadows of their former greatness. Eventually, the Romans, ancestors of the Trojans, will avenge themselves on the Greeks. Since both sides subscribe to the same code of revenge, the effect is an endless cycle of violence.

No sooner does Priam rebuild Troy than enters the serpent of discord. Priam's big mistake is to dedicate the new city to Mars (2.785-91). Rather than learn from the lesson of Lamedon, he begins to think of how best to exact revenge on the Greeks and restore Trojan and family honour. Guido is much more sympathetic than Lydgate to Priam's demand for revenge. Not only did the Greeks destroy old Troy, but they murdered Priam's father and brothers and carried off his sister Hesione, whose shame lives on. Lydgate certainly does not downplay the wrongs committed by the Greeks, but he is more conscious than Guido of Priam's imprudence in seeking revenge against a nation as powerful as the Greeks who, as a cautious Hector points out, "han in her subieccioun / Europ & Aufrik, with many regioun / Ful large & wyde, of knyythod most famus (2.2267-69). For Lydgate, nothing can justify jeopardizing the civilization he cherishes. Consider the applicability of the following Lydgatean digression (and this, too, is pure Lydgate) to the situation in England on the brink of war with France. This exhortation to Priam follows immediately after the re-building of Troy in Book 2:

But seye, Priam, what infelicité
 What new trouble, what hap, what destiné
 Or from above *what hateful influence*
Descendid is by unwar violence
 To meve the –þou canst not lyve in pes!
 What sodeyn sort, what fortune graceles,
 What chaunce unhappy, withoute avisenes
 What wilful lust, what fonnyd hardynes
 Han putte þi soule out of tranquillité
 To make þe wery of þy prosperité!
 Whi hast þou savour in bitter more þan swete
 Pat canst not lyve in pes nor in quyete?
 (2.1797-1808, emphasis added)

The "hateful influence" is, of course, Mars, or in Lydgate's religion, the serpent of discord—Satan. The mere substitution of the word "Henry" for the word "Priam" would make this a direct appeal

to the new king, written around the time of his first campaign in France. It is surely no coincidence that every word in this long exhortation (which runs on for almost a hundred more lines) is equally applicable, word for word, to both Henry and to Priam. But in case Henry fails to make the connection himself, Lydgate winds up the exhortation with an appeal to his readers, one of whom presumably would be his royal patron:

As ye may se be example of Priamus, [...]

þat be example þei may be war & lere,
 Of hasty lust or of volunte,
 To gynne a þing which in noun-surete
 Dependeth ay, as strif, werre, and debate;
 For in swiche pley vnwarly comeþ chek-mate;
 And harme y-done to late is to amende,
 Whos fyn is ofte other þan þei wende—
 In this story as ye schal after seen.
And late Priam alwey your merour ben,
 Hasty errour be tymes to correcte.
 For I anoon my poyntel wil directe,
 After þe maner of his tracis rude,
 Of þis story þe remnaunte to conclude.

(2.1879-1902, emphasis added)

Here is the poet as prophet, a voice in the wilderness, the Helenus or Cassandra of his day (to whose anti-war diatribes Lydgate allocates space far in excess of Guido), advising his patron to seek peace and avoid war at all costs. Lydgate appears to have seen his own role as a prophet-peacemaker, one whose job is not just to warn against the dangers of starting war, but to mourn, like Jeremiah, Ezechiel, or Daniel (4.7054-84), the consequences of war. In a later poem, "Praise of Peace" (*Minor Poems* 2: 787, 52-56), Lydgate clearly assigns the role of peacemaker to the poet:

Of thorny roseers pees gradrith out the flours,
 Makith the swerd to ruste of conquerours
 Provided by poeetys, nat slough nor reklees,
 And mediacioun of wise embassitours,
 The spere, maad blont, brought in love and pees.¹¹⁵

The allusion to Priam is not the conventional platitude of a princepleasing poet advising kings in general to be prudent and avoid rash deeds, “to do good and avoid evil,” as some critics have mockingly paraphrased Lydgate’s counselling. It is a precise (if allegorical) piece of political advice, freely offered with no qualifications, no apologies, no modesty topos, and no flattery at a time when such advice would have been as welcome to the king of England as criticism of the occupation of Iraq to the Bush administration. Lydgate is not even in agreement with the hierarchy of his own church in this respect.¹¹⁶ Let Priam be your mirror, he says (2.1898), and learn what happens to him and his kingdom as a result of his foolish pride. After watching his sons die one by one on the battlefield, after seeing his glorious Ilion in flames, Priam will be slaughtered in front of the altar of Apollo, betrayed by his closest advisors, Aeneas and Anthenor. Nothing could be more topical than a reference to Priam’s foolishness at the time when Book 2 was written.

¹¹⁵See also the many prophecies Lydgate makes regarding peace in the epilogue to *Troy Book* or *Siege of Thebes*, and the later prophecies of peace in the political poetry of the minority years such as the *Mumming at Eltham*: “For Mars that is most furyous and woode / Causer of stryff and desobeyssaunce / Shal cesse his malice” (29-31). These prophecies are more in the nature of prayers, but they are prayers intended for the ears of those who have the power to make peace a reality.

¹¹⁶For the manner in which the archbishops of Canterbury tried to orchestrate nation-wide support for the war, see W. R. Jones, “The English Church and Royal Propaganda during the Hundred Years War” and Alison K. McHardy, “Liturgy and Propaganda in the Diocese of Lincoln during the Hundred Years War.” See also Lydgate’s ultimately condemnatory treatment of Bishop Amphiorax for the latter’s collaboration and participation in the war against Thebes, discussed below under *Siege of Thebes*.

Typically, Lydgate's mirrors are not meant to flatter their beholders. While there are brief reflections of Henry in a wide range of characters from Jason to Hector (who each have their prudent and their rash moments), the only two explicit "mirrors" in *Troy Book* are Lamedon and Priam (2.84; 2.1898), both of whom see their kingdoms destroyed because they could not refrain from provoking wars with their ultimately superior adversaries. Alain Renoir has argued that *Troy Book* is a nationalist epic intended to associate the Britons with their ancestors the Trojans, and is one that persistently favours the Trojans over the Greeks (*Poetry of John Lydgate*, 96-101). While it is true that Lydgate shares Guido's bias in favour of the Trojans, he does not spare Trojan stupidity and deceitfulness in the cause of their own ruin. Apart from Priam's pride and lust for revenge, Paris's rash acts in destroying Cythera and, especially, abducting Helen instantly ruled out any possibility of a negotiated settlement with Greece. All of Priam's sons, including the chivalrous Hector and Troilus, are morally flawed. Priam's son-in-law Aeneas, who, according to medieval legend, is the forefather of all the European nations (Britain through Aeneas's great-grandson Brutus, *Troy Book* 1.829-34), is the greatest traitor of all, whom Queen Hecuba curses as "the final cause of oure destruccioun" (4.6448). If there was ever any intention on the part of Henry V to improve the image of the Lancastrian regime by associating it with its legendary Trojan ancestry, Lydgate's uncompromising dedication to "truth" in history must have been quite a disappointment.

Lydgate's own voice is most often heard in the highly rhetorical speeches that he inserts gratuitously into the translation, or when he inflates Guido's text (the higher the rhetoric, the more likely it is to be the voice of Lydgate himself). Two obvious examples of this are Priam's first cautionary speech against a rash war and the two remarkable speeches of Achilles (of all

characters) after his love for Polyxena begins to subdue his martial instincts (4.957-1134; 1806-96). Lydgate's treatment of Achilles, compared to Guido's, is highly telling. For Guido, Achilles is a figure of scorn who has allowed his lust for Polyxena to cloud his judgement and to feminize him, rendering him impotent as a warrior. Lydgate, by contrast, despite having rebuked Achilles at great length for the cowardly and unchivalric manner in which he murdered Hector, in Book 4 begins to depict Achilles as the voice of discretion and reason (despite Achilles's motives for wanting out). When Achilles first addresses the Greek assembly (4.957-1134), he argues against Agammenon and others (who by this time are sensing victory) that it is time to quit the war and go home to the wives and families whom they have abandoned for ten years; that the war was begun over a woman, an adulteress not worth the price that has been paid by the Greeks; that the Greek abduction of Hesione, Priam's sister, is revenge enough. Later in his rebuttal to Ulysses (4.1806-96), Achilles voices a class argument: that since the flower of Greek nobility, the aristocracy, is being annihilated by the war, the end result will be a Greece ruled by churls. Thus he complains to Ulysses:

In þis rage, furious and wood,
 Ful likly is þat al þe gentil blood
 Þoru3-out þe world shal distroied be;
 And rual folke—and þat wer gret pite—
 Shal han lordshipe & holy gouernaunce,
 And cherles eke, with sorwe & meschaunce,
 In euery lond shal lordis ben allone,
 When gentil-men slayen bene echone.
 (4.1847-54)

According to G. L. Harriss, the involvement of the nobility in the 1415 and 1417 campaigns of Henry V was greater than it had been since the reign of Edward III (*Henry V*, 40). Achilles voices a political conservatism not inconsistent with Lydgate's defence of chivalry and his admiration for

the benefits of high culture as described in the building of Troy. Lest Lydgate's illustrious patron be tempted to identify himself with the Greeks as victors, Lydgate devotes an entire fifth book to his proposition that to the victors do not necessarily go the spoils. Critics tend to be exasperated by Book 5, which they consider somewhat anti-climatic.¹¹⁷ But not only is the Guido material there to be translated, Book 5, for the most part, suits Lydgate's objective very well, and Lydgate's form (a non-linear narrative interrupted by moral digression) is appropriate to its purpose. If Book 4 recounted the terrible toll of the war on the Trojans, Book 5 is concerned with the catastrophic outcome for the Greeks.¹¹⁸ This final book is one long tale of internecine treachery and civil war (perhaps anticipating the civil wars that would follow the disastrous war with France). Nothing in Book 5 is more revealing of Lydgate's intentions than the way in which he inflates the casualty figures over his source material. Guido cites the number of men who merely participated in both sides in the war. Lydgate uses the same numbers, but treats them all as casualties, not merely participants:

Saue þis Dites maketh mencioun
 Of þe noumbre slayen at þe toun
 Lastinge þe sege, affermyng, out of drede,
 Eyȝte hundrid þousand & sixe wer þer dede
 On Grekis side, vpriȝt in þe felde;
 And as Dares also þere behelde,
 On Troye party in þe werre kene
 Six hundrid þousand seuenti & sixtene
 Were slayen þere—in Guydo ȝe may se.

¹¹⁷See for example, Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 143, on Book 5, which he claims "justifies all the worst that can be said about Lydgate's incompetence in narrative" (143).

¹¹⁸Of course there are examples of individual Greeks who eventually return home and regain their kingdoms, Diomedes and Ulysses as prime examples, but both these heroes are first made to suffer; almost without exception, the Greeks pay as high a price for the war as do the Trojans.

(5. 3341-49; cf. Guido 263)

Even before the Greeks can board their ships for the return voyage, their ranks are torn apart by envy and greed: Ulysses and Ajax Thelamon become engaged in a bitter dispute over one of the most notable spoils of war, the Palladium, which Ulysses had stolen from the temple before the final siege. The dispute ends in the secret murder of Thelamon (probably by Ulysses, with the collaboration of Agammenon and Menelaus), to be followed by the inevitable promise of revenge by Pirrus, son of Achilles. Book 5 continues with an account of the exile of the two Trojan traitors, Aeneas and Anthenor, from Troy. Lydgate's material may have been troublesome for his own purposes, because, according to legend, both of these traitors, though enduring multiple setbacks and suffering much hardship, inevitably land on their feet and become founders of new nations. Nevertheless, as Book 5 continues, on their return voyage the Greeks lose hundreds of ships and thousands of men to bad weather and to the treachery of King Naulus, who lights beacons on the rocks to steer Greek ships to their doom. Agamemnon escapes shipwreck, only to be murdered by his wife and her lover on his return home. His son Orestes takes revenge on his mother and then must pay for the matricide. Despite the rapidity with which Lydgate handles much of the material of Book 5, the murder of Agamemnon prompts one of his longest moral digressions in the highest rhetorical style he can muster. There is no equivalent passage in Guido. For Guido, the murder of Agamemnon is an anti-feminist harangue, a moral lesson against the sin of adultery and where it can lead. Lydgate does not condone the adultery, but his real concern is the regicide. The murder of a king brings "alyenatioun" and "fals successioun" (5.1139-40).

Critics have been divided on the intent of the following lines:

For whiche, allas! my penne I fele quake,

þat doth myn ynke blotten on my boke.
 O myȝti God, þat with þin inward loke
 Sest euery þing þoruȝ þin eternal myȝt,
 Whi wiltow nat of equite and riȝt
 Punishe & chastise so horrible a þing,
 And specialy þe mordre of a kyng?
 (5.1044-50)

If we consider that the murderers of Agamemnon are brutally punished for their crimes (Orestes slays his mother, cuts off her limbs and throws them to the wild animals; her lover Aegisthus is hung, drawn and quartered, as are all his retainers (5.1605 ff.), this cry for justice on the perpetrators seems somehow inappropriate when applied to Agamemnon's murderers. Derek Pearsall cites this passage as further evidence of Lydgate's insensitivity (*John Lydgate* 139), or as evidence that the poem could not possibly have had any intended topical relevance ("Apotheosis of John Lydgate" 35).¹¹⁹ I suggest that this passage is shrewdly calculated; it makes the political point that Lydgate wants to make, and pricks the conscience of a Lancastrian king, and yet it cannot be criticized by Henry V without an implicit admission of dynastic guilt. Whatever Henry's opinion of the passage, he would have no choice but to ignore it publicly or to risk the revival of old animosities. And it was written at a time during which Henry V was literally trying to bury the past by translating the bones of Richard II from Langley Abbey to Westminster Abbey (Strohm, "The Trouble with Richard"). While there is obviously nothing in the passage that points directly to the Lancastrian usurpation, there is no avoiding its political allusion.

¹¹⁹David Lawton has made the point that when Lydgate is writing "true to form" (in support of the regime), critics are quick to show how politically topical Lydgate can be, as in the allusion to the Treaty of Troyes at the end of *Siege of Thebes*. But when Lydgate appears to be bucking the trend, he is either apolitical or just plain naïve. Scott-Morgan Straker has noted: "Lydgate cannot be both propagandist and political innocent; in seeking to account for Lydgate's inconsistencies, critics have created one of their own" ("Rivalry and Reciprocity," 127).

After much suffering for his sins, Orestes eventually marries his cousin, the daughter of Menelaus, and both peace and legitimacy are restored. Orestes's marriage is one of several occurring towards the end of the final book that resolves civil differences and restores peace. The marriage of Henry to Katherine on 2 June 1420, which took place about the time in which Book 5 was finished, must have seemed to Lydgate the best hope of bringing peace to England and France. All England rejoiced as Henry brought his French bride home to London, but few realized that Henry's marriage to Katherine was undertaken mainly for the purpose of providing the excuse he needed for the continuation of the war into the rest of France.¹²⁰ There is a genuine note of hard-won optimism and support for the Lancastrian claim to the throne of France in the final Epilogue and in the envoy to Henry V (as so many critics have pointed out), but the lesson of Trojan/Greek history is that it will take much more than a *mariage de convenance* to overcome the deterministic cycle of violence and revenge that was put in motion by the murder of a king and an armed conquest of a neighbouring kingdom. Lydgate's optimism is, in any case, rooted more in the consolation of Christ than in an unrealistic treaty that disinherits the dauphin and guarantees ongoing French resistance to the English occupation of Normandy and Paris. C.T. Allmand points out that the Treaty of Troyes contained within it a further military commitment "to take the war

¹²⁰See Straker on Henry's marital intentions: "Henry treated marriage as a necessary concomitant to military activity, a means first to secure England's traditional territorial goals and later to extend these goals to include the entire kingdom. Although the rhetoric of peace surrounded the negotiations, the marriage formed part of a strategy whose objectives were anything but peaceful" ("Rivalry and Reciprocity," 123). Henry V had originally justified his invasion of Normandy on the basis of Edward II's marriage to Isabella, which liaison according to Lancastrian mythology, made all subsequent English kings the heir to the throne of France; the marriage to Katherine obviously made the claim to English sovereignty much more immediate—if only the dauphin would agree to his own disinheritance (and to certain death if he were to surrender).

into the very heartland of the enemy's kingdom" (*Lancastrian Normandy* 21). Parliamentary reports of the time reflect a fear that the inevitable continuation of the war would impose a continuous financial burden on the English. As Allmand notes, "The Treaty of Troyes presents us with the first evidence we have that the interests of the English crown and those of its subjects did not necessarily coincide" (22). *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes* express in verse many of the same frustrations expressed by the Commons in parliament or by Adam Usk, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter.¹²¹

Despite the consistent anti-war theme of the poem, Lydgate's envoy obviously provides some of the official propaganda that his patron would expect to see. All patronage demands compromise—royal patronage especially—and Lydgate's encomiastic envoy, though cloaked in ambiguity, as Straker has suggested ("Rivalry and Reciprocity, 144-47"), is the price he pays for the opportunity to publish and disseminate his greater message. But the Envoy is not his final word on the subject. No sooner does he finish *Troy Book* than he begins work on *Siege of Thebes*, an uncommissioned work that will be less compromised and more critical of Lancastrian foreign policy.

Siege of Thebes

The date of composition of *Siege of Thebes* is 1420-21, begun sometime after the completion of *Troy Book* (in 1420 by Lydgate's own dating) and finished after the Treaty of

¹²¹Usk's anger is probably due to the intolerable tax burden placed on clergy and laity alike by the war. The monasteries were certainly not exempt; in addition to the many tax grabs to which they were subjected, abbots were expected to lend money to the king. According to Peter Heath, "Well over a hundred abbots and priors were among the king's creditors" (284).

Troyes, to which there is a pointed allusion in the Epilogue (l.4703).¹²² Although attempts have been made recently to argue that the work may have been completed after Henry's death in order to address the fraternal divisions of the minority government (Simpson, "Dysemol daies," 15), it seems improbable that such a work would not contain a single reference to the premature death of the king (July 1422) or to the birth of his son (December 1421), from which events stems the resulting child-monarchy, the root cause of civil division for more than a decade.¹²³ Not only is there an echo of the Treaty of Troyes in the *Siege*, there is an astronomical reference in the Prologue that places the fictional Chaucerian pilgrimage that frames the work in April 1421. It may not be coincidental that a fictional pilgrimage date of 1421 coincides with Henry V's series of fund-raising pilgrimages to various shrines around England. While these trips may have served the interest of the pilgrimage business (of which the monasteries were major beneficiaries) by the example they set to the common people, the abbeys were expected to return the royal favour in the form of generous financial support for Henry's third campaign in France.¹²⁴

¹²²So important was the Treaty of Troyes to the abbey that Abbot Curteys had it copied, in full, into his register, MS Additional 14848 fols 103-5 (listed as "Concordat between Charles VI of France and Henry V of England" in Thomson, *Archives*, 136). The abbot's version, in Latin, differs from Charles VI's version (copied in Rymer, 9.895-904) only to the extent that it speaks for Henry and not for Charles. Walsingham, too, inserts portions of the text of the treaty into his chronicle (Walsingham, 435).

¹²³Some monkish graffitti scribbled in the lower margin of a Bury library manuscript provides an interesting Benedictine perspective on the boy-king (either Richard II or Henry VI), and on the archbishop (Chamberlain or Chichele): "Whanne child is king and cherl bissop and thral alderman, thanne is the folc wo." See James, *On the Abbey of S. Edmund at Bury*, 106.

¹²⁴Much of this support was in the form of "loans" to the king; in reality it was protection money, seldom repaid (Heath, 283-84). Adam of Usk described the king's fund-raising techniques as "the rending of every man throughout the realm, be he rich or poor."

If we are to look for political resonances in the work, therefore, we should focus on the events of the year 1421. That the Benedictines were seeking an even more convincing allegory than the fall of Troy to promote an end to the war with France may explain why *Siege of Thebes* was chosen as a translation project. The Treaty of Troyes, which supposedly ended the war in April 1420, had effectively changed nothing apart from formalizing the ignominious surrender of Charles VI, and, if anything, guaranteed future hostilities by dispossessing the dauphin and all the French nobles who had lost their lands to the English occupation of Normandy. The ink was scarcely dry on the treaty when Henry V marched on Sens (two days later), then on to Montereau (June 1420) and Melun (July), where he was to meet determined resistance until the final capitulation of the city in November 1420.¹²⁵ The Treaty was ratified at Paris in December 1420, but the English occupation of Paris did nothing to bring peace in France. Henry V returned to England in triumph with his new bride in January 1421; the main purpose of his return, apart from the propaganda benefit to be derived from the coronation of his queen, was to raise money for his third (and last) campaign. It was during this interlude on English soil that he was to learn of his first major setback in France with the death of his brother Thomas, duke of Clarence, in March, at Baugé. It was also during this English sojourn, on 5 May 1421, that Henry addressed an assembly of some four hundred Benedictines at Westminster to impose on them a series of inconvenient

¹²⁵Desmond Seward persuasively argues that Henry's campaigns in France were as much about looting as the seeking of justice. In this view he is supported by Thomas Walsingham, who is cynical about the English invasion forces, and by most of the French chroniclers (Seward, 204). For a somewhat more traditional interpretation of Henry's motives for the invasion of Normandy, see also Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy*; Barker, *Agincourt*; and Harriss, *Shaping the Nation*. For earlier English historians, such as Wile, Jacob, or McFarlane, the verdict is never in doubt: Henry V was "the greatest man that ever ruled England" (McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings*, 133).

reforms drafted most likely by a Carthusian prior, a former Benedictine. Though relatively innocuous, the proposed reforms had less to do with monastic spirituality than with royal prerogative; because of the dangerous precedent they would set (allowing a secular ruler to dictate policy to the fiercely independent Benedictine order), they were resented in principle, diplomatically resisted, and never enacted.¹²⁶ Two weeks later Henry departed with his armies for France to begin his third campaign. It is against the political background of an imminent, unpopular third campaign in France that Lydgate wrote his *Siege of Thebes* in 1421. To interpret *Siege of Thebes* as a celebration of Henry V's accomplishments is thus a complete misreading of the consistent anti-war polemics of the poem.

Lydgate's bold prologue, in which he actually writes himself into the *Canterbury Tales* by joining the pilgrimage at Canterbury and accepting the host's invitation to tell a "mery tale" has generated much critical attention (e.g., Patterson, Spearing, Strohm, Straker). Unlike the two *Ploughman Tales* and other continuation tales (Bowers, *Canterbury Tales*) that are spuriously attributed to Chaucer—in order, perhaps, to find a wider distribution for their political or religious polemics, or to appropriate Chaucer for a later Protestant cause—Lydgate's prologue could not be

¹²⁶Walsingham hints of treachery: "For various disloyal monks had informed the king's majesty that their abbots with their friends had wandered far from the pathway" (440). At the instigation of "false brethern" (Walsingham's term for the Carthusian prior of Mount Grace, an ex-Benedictine, and the bishop of Norwich), Henry ordered the abbot of Bury to convene a meeting of the Benedictines in 1421 at Westminster, at which he personally chided the order for abandoning its rule and imposed a number of reforms he wished to see enacted. The Benedictines agreed to form a committee, which was then divided into sub-committees, and so on (shades of *Yes Minister*). William Curteys was one of three monks from St. Edmunds on the committee, which gave due consideration to the king's "helpful" reform programme (Elston, 20-21; Pantin, *Documents*, 2:121). Soon after, Henry left for France, where he died of dysentery; his reforms were never implemented. For a summary account of Henry's proposals, see Knowles, *Religious Orders*, 2: 182-84. For a list of Henry's proposed reforms see Meyers, 4: 787-90. For the Benedictine resistance to the reforms, see Pantin, *Documents*, 2: 16-121.

more explicit in its statement of authorship. As an indication that Lydgate did not necessarily hang on every word his mentor wrote, Lydgate confuses some of Chaucer's characters: the Reeve, Cook, and Miller are drunk; the baldness of the Miller is ascribed to the Pardoner; the cherubin's face of the Summoner to the Pardoner; the Pardoner fights with the Friar instead of the Host; and so forth (Robert R. Edwards, *Siege*, 152). But more interesting is the recent theory that these inaccuracies are a deliberate challenge to Chaucer's authority (Ebin, Bowers, Straker). Lydgate obviously does remember Chaucer's well-fed, out-riding, bell-jingling monk; the pilgrim-monk of the *Siege of Thebes* is contrasted to such a poor representative of the Benedictine order. Straker has argued convincingly that Lydgate's purpose is to assert his clerical authority over the secular authority of the host, a symbolic patron ("Deference and Difference"). Lydgate would obviously wish to correct the negative impression made by Chaucer in his depiction of the monk. By way of contrast to Chaucer's, Lydgate's portrait of a monk depicts a dedicated, pious, and underfed servant of the church, respectful and demure, but far too assured of his own authority as cleric to allow himself to be bullied by the host. Chaucer's monk is not as villainous a churl as the Friar or the Pardoner, but he is a bad monk, and, even worse, he is a bad story-teller, whose tale gets rudely interrupted by the knight and mocked by the host. Lydgate's pilgrim-monk very clearly disobeys his fictional patron (who had ordered up a tale of "myrth or of gladnesse") by proceeding to relate the quintessential medieval tragedy, the fall of the house of Thebes, which was not quite what his host had in mind. In this respect, the pilgrim-Lydgate's relationship to the host bears many parallels to the poet-Lydgate's relationship to the patron of *Troy Book*, which Lydgate had just completed. Lydgate's autobiographical portrait is obviously intended as a defensive parry in

the propaganda war against the regular clergy, a war in which Chaucer and Lydgate were evidently on opposite sides of the ecclesiastical divide.

Two characteristics that marked the occupation of Normandy that are of particular relevance to the *Siege* are, first, the shortage of English funding for the expedition that resulted in an underpaid military with severe morale (and disciplinary) problems;¹²⁷ second, Henry V's ruthless policy of loot and burn (which served both to fund the campaign and to punish all resistance as a deterrent to would-be resisters), a policy which could not help but have an extremely deleterious effect on the finances of the Benedictine order in France, which order's main source of revenue depended on the agricultural proceeds from its land (Seward 159-69). Lydgate addresses the issue of underpayment of the troops in the example of King Adrastus, the leader of the Greeks:

For Adrastus prudently took hede
 Ful lik a kyng touching her *terme-day* [i.e. pay day]
 That they to-forne were served of her pay.
 He was so free hym list no thyng restreyn
 And no man had cause to compleyn
 For hunger, thrust, nor for Indygence.
 (3.2682-87)

However, it is not long after this passage that the Greeks begin to die of thirst and raid the land around Thebes to feed their ravenous armies. The passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter (*Siege* 3587-3600) is a reflection of Henry's scorched-earth policy in France. Quite apart from the morality of the war, the effect of Henry's campaigns on the monasteries in France, combined with

¹²⁷For a detailed discussion of the problems the English soldiers encountered in collecting payment for their service in the first campaign (Harfleur and Agincourt) see Barker, 362-66. Funding for subsequent campaigns would only get progressively worse.

his incessant demand for money from the monasteries in England, could not help but galvanize Benedictine resistance to the war. The monasteries were ideal billets for invading armies, offering shelter and protection to the soldiers.¹²⁸ For this reason, many surrounding monasteries and their lands were destroyed by the French citizens themselves before their retreat behind the city walls.¹²⁹

To a medieval audience, the destruction of Thebes was as historical an event as the fall of Troy, and only one generation removed (Tydeus, for example, is the father of Diomedes in Chaucer's *Troilus*).¹³⁰ Whereas Chaucer alludes to Thebes to provide an element of foreboding in the *Troilus* story, Lydgate recalls Thebes in the Prologue to *Troy Book* to add weight to his anti-war argument. He probably concluded after finishing *Troy Book*—the message of which was somewhat compromised in the end by obligations to his patron—that an uncommissioned history of Thebes, drawn from a selective compilation of sources rather than from one dominant source like Guido, would allow more freedom to develop his theme in a manner that could not be

¹²⁸For the monastic view of the effect of war on abbeys in both countries, see Walsingham 423-24. Walsingham, as usual, writes to influence government policy towards monastic property.

¹²⁹See for example John Page's "Siege of Rouen" (Gairdner 1-46). The poem is an "eye-witness" account of the siege and graphically illustrates its effect on the surrounding monasteries and countryside, much of which was owned by the monasteries. See Seward, 103, for a description of Henry V's use of monasteries outside Caen as headquarters and as a platform for his heaviest artillery. We owe the famous story of Henry V's hanging of the soldier who steals the pyx from the church to the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, written by his chaplain, the leading propagandist for his first campaign. But the French chroniclers render a different account.

¹³⁰According to David Anderson, Criseyde is actually the daughter of Argive (King Adastrus's daughter) and Calchas by a second marriage after the death of Polynices.

misconstrued.¹³¹ The Benedictine poet's message was simple: as Thebes went, so did Troy, and so could the *Troies Nouveaux*, London and Paris.

As in discussions of *Troy Book*, a common critical assessment of *Siege of Thebes* is that the material itself poses problems for the author, whose primary intent, it is usually assumed, is to write political propaganda for the Lancastrians. The disagreement among critics is always, at bottom, over critical interpretation of Lydgate's unstated motives. Robert R. Edwards's introduction to the most recent edition of *Siege of Thebes* summarizes and, to some extent, reinforces standard critical thinking: "The *Siege of Thebes* reflects the problem of the poetic authority and the political and ethical themes of Lydgate's poetic career in the 1420s, when he is writing as a Lancastrian propagandist and unofficial royal poet" (1). According to Edwards, Lydgate's additions to his source material "employ commonplaces" that the narrative itself "profoundly complicates" (4). In an extreme representation of this view, A.C. Spearing suggests that Lydgate may have read the *Knight's Tale* as an endorsement of war as a means to peace—and thus as an incomplete work in need of further amplification, presumably to drive home Chaucer's unstated moral that succession wars are justified when they are fought in the interest of "peace" (the standard Lancastrian line, but hardly the moral of either the *Knight's Tale* or *Siege of*

¹³¹Lydgate must have known and consulted Statius's grim *Thebiad*, a copy of which was in the Bury library. He pays his respects to Statius in *Troy Book*: "In grete Stace ye may reden al- / The fyre engendered by brotherly hatrede." But according to Erdmann and Ekwall, the first editors of Lydgate's *Siege*, the poet more likely worked from the *Roman de Edipus*, a medieval prose redaction of the Anglo-French *Roman de Thèbes*. Erdmann estimates that only two-thirds of his material would be derived from this source. The remainder was from the poet's imagination, or from related sources such as Chaucer, Seneca, Boccaccio, and others. Lydgate seems to have chosen his material very selectively; there is no known source that closely matches the narrative progression of his work, as Guido's source does *Troy Book*. Lydgate treats his sources with great elasticity in order to put forth a delicate argument.

Thebes).¹³² In a similar vein, Derek Pearsall concludes that Lydgate is the first poet writing in English to “fashion his poems as instruments of royal policy” (“Lydgate as Innovator” 15). Pearsall does not overlook the inescapable pacifist orientation of the poem, but neither does he assign any topical significance to it, other than to Lydgate’s oblique reference to the Treaty of Troyes at the end of the poem. In Pearsall’s view, one that is representative of a wide range of criticism, Lydgate is all for peace once peace becomes official policy. But despite the Treaty of Troyes, peace was never the short-term objective of Henry V, as subsequent events would show. Pearsall describes the *Siege* “as a celebration of Henry’s warlike prowess (in the person of Tydeus) and of his success in bringing about final peace with France.” Pearsall speaks for a generation of critics when he says that “insignificant monks with a taste for advancement do not ‘foist’ things upon those who have the power to make things very disagreeable to any who displease them; they write what they know will be acceptable” (“Lydgate as Innovator” 14). Later critics are more inclined to concede the resistant elements within the text itself, but for such theorists, these unruly elements only appear as “cracks in the pedestal” despite the best efforts of the author and his “patrons” to contain them or conscript them for official use.¹³³ While aiming for more critical objectivity, this approach, which supposedly allows the text to let slip secondary meanings and to undermine the primary intentions of the author, nevertheless begins with the assumption that Lydgate’s intentions are to affirm the supremacy and legitimacy of the

¹³²See Spearing, “Lydgate’s Canterbury Tale” 352. The *Gesta Henrici Quinti* represents Henry as wanting peace above everything else, as a reluctant conqueror forced by the demands of chivalry and justice to invade Normandy to regain his rightful inheritance.

¹³³See Lee Patterson, “Making Identities,” 97; Ambrisco and Strohm, “Succession and Sovereignty,” 53-54 (as noted in Straker, “Propaganda, Intentionality,” 100).

Lancastrian dynasty, and that these objectives will inevitably be confounded by the regime's own fundamental illegitimacy and its concomitant anxieties and insecurities.¹³⁴

Representative of this somewhat more ambivalent analysis of Lydgate's work, and the best medievalist example of a deconstructionist methodology that seeks to transcend the "dangerous contaminant" of subjectivity, is Lee Patterson's "Making Identities in Fifteenth-Century England: Henry V and John Lydgate." This article is intriguing because it confidently begins with the usual critical assumption that in this uncommissioned poem "Lydgate took it upon himself both to exemplify and to promote his role as the monastic supporter of Lancastrian rule, as worthy of becoming as he did, 'poet-propagandist to the Lancastrian dynasty'"(74)—and ends with the conclusion that "Lydgate's own skepticism toward his identity as a spokesman for Lancastrian interests" is discernible in the subtext of the *Siege* (93). Lydgate, it seems, has (perhaps subconsciously?) chosen a source text that could not help but subvert Lancastrian ambitions. In effect, Patterson provides us with two diametrically-opposed readings of the same poem. The one reading (which assumes Lydgate labours subserviently to write princepleasing propaganda) sees the *Siege* as an "admiring commentary" of the "recovery of a kingdom" through the hard-fought victories of a Tydean-like conqueror, and of the triumph of truth over duplicity—the English over the French. The second reading supposedly dispenses with any consideration of authorial intent and seeks out the subversive elements which lie dormant in the source material—a story of "fratricidal struggle that ends in bleak devastation" (96). Most interestingly, Patterson finds

¹³⁴As Strohm has argued: "Lydgate's aspiration to full complicity was unwavering, but the impossibility of Lancastrian requirements drove even the most resolutely loyal texts into a morass of embarrassing half-acknowledgements and debilitating self-contradictions" (*England's Empty Throne*, 195).

parallels between Lydgate's text and a contemporary sermon preached by a Benedictine monk, John Pauntley, immediately before Henry's departure for France in June 1421 (94). Standing directly in front of the king, Pauntley makes the bold statement that Henry's success has been owing to his protection of the "church" (meaning "monastic property") with the implied corollary that should such protection ever cease, Henry's fortunes might quickly take a turn for the worse. The Benedictine preacher then raises a curiously Lydgatean concern "about the dangers of chivalric achievement" and a complex rebuttal to Henry's assertion that the Benedictines are in need of his proposed reforms. According to Patterson, Lydgate's resistance to the bullying by the host in the Prologue is analogous to the subtle defiance of Pauntley's sermon: "Put simply, the Prologue to the *Siege* argues that the king's program to reform the Benedictines is both unwanted and unnecessary" (95). Given Patterson's original position regarding Lydgate's intentions, his startling conclusions are all the more compelling.

Despite this modern determination to see Lydgate as a somewhat ineffectual instrument of royal policy—even in an uncommissioned poem so patently anti-militaristic as *Siege of Thebes*—there is a critical counter-current that seems to have arisen out of the moral lessons of the poem itself (Aers, Allen) and has evolved to the point where there are strong arguments being made for conscious opposition on the part of a religious poet who sees his first duty not so much owing to his king, but to his God, or at the very least, to his religious order (Lawton, Simpson, Straker). Perhaps because of the *Siege's* relative brevity and uncommon (for Lydgate) manageability, literary and textual criticism of this particular work has always been a kind of

bellwether for the reception of Lydgate's works in general.¹³⁵ Some of these critics, Simpson and Straker in particular, in whose footsteps I happily follow, are now arguing that most of the resistant elements in the poem are intentional, and that Lydgate was consciously opposing many of the Lancastrian values and policies which earlier critics have accused him of defending: dynastic solidification, militarist imperialism in the guise of medieval chivalry, and the crushing of theological and scholarly debate. David Lawton has shown how Lydgate uses the modesty topos as a defensive posture in works that find complex ways to criticize or reform the regime. James Simpson argues that the counter-positions in the *Siege* and elsewhere in Lydgate's poetry are there not in spite of the author's intention but because of them: [*Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes*] "express consistent and reasoned opposition to both external and civil war" ("For al my body" 132). Straker shows how Lydgate resists the secular authority of the host, not just in the Prologue, but throughout the tale ("Deference and Difference"). *Siege of Thebes* has in many respects been the focus, if not the catalyst, of a wave of such revisionist readings, because the poem's defiant bleakness simply cannot be ignored. If Lydgate was really intent upon writing official propaganda to validate the Lancastrian dynasty, there are many stories more appropriate for him to tell than Statius's ghoulish *Thebiad*, the recent battle of Agincourt as one example. Some might argue that Lydgate was as bad at selecting suitable propaganda material as he supposedly was at imitating Chaucer, but somehow the *Siege* is just too problematic to explain away as another stumbling effort by an obtuse monk.

¹³⁵*Siege of Thebes* is unconventional for Lydgate in that it greatly abbreviates its source material. Statius's *Thebiad* is over ten thousand lines in length, as are the medieval redactions such as the *Roman de Thèbes* on which he drew. Prolivity is neither chronically endemic in Lydgate, nor exclusive to him.

In my own view (Lydgate as anti-militaristic Benedictine monk), there is no political ambiguity in the argument for peace that is Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*. The entire work is a homily against violence and war and only with the most stubborn determination can it be made to support any other interpretation.¹³⁶ The poem tells the tragic story of Oedipus who "cruelly" kills his father in a tournament, marries his mother, and is ultimately cast into a pit by his sons. These heinous crimes give rise to a war of succession between the two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices (England and France? France and England?), which ultimately results in the "destruction of Thebes" (the name Lydgate himself gives to the poem, as James Simpson has pointed out) and the annihilation of the entire nobility of the Greeks. The value and morality of war is debated throughout the poem with the argument overwhelmingly weighted in opposition. Not only are the armies on both sides slaughtered, all land around the city is trampled and pillaged to support the siege. All citizens are affected by "the venym and the violence / Of strif, of werre of contek and debat / That maketh londys bare and desolat" (3.4691-94). All that is left at the end of the siege are wailing, bare-footed widows and smouldering earth strewn with rotting corpses. If there is any note of "official optimism" in the final verses, it is expressed more as a hope that at last the current regime might come to its senses and seek to preserve the peace supposedly achieved by the Treaty of Troyes. But for Lydgate, here as at the end of *Troy Book*, the only genuine optimism stems from the consolation of Christianity, the poet's faith in the peace promised by a higher power than Henry

¹³⁶Book 2 contains a few semi-romantic interludes that Rosamund S. Allen believes are intended to give the story some appeal to a female audience: "If the *Siege* is a mirror for princes, it is a mirror for dowager queens, princesses and royal nannies as well" (129). Allen may intend irony here, but I take her observation at face value. *Siege of Thebes* is a mirror for everyone. War spares nobody, as Lydgate makes abundantly clear from the image of the Greek widows marching zombie-like to Thebes and later tearing down the walls with pickaxes and mallets; for Lydgate, it is the moral responsibility of all the estates, and both the sexes, to eschew war.

V, the “sovereyn lord of pes” (*Siege* 4705). Lydgate has no illusions about the power of any temporal monarch to guarantee a lasting truce.

Critics have often pointed out that Tydeus, a chivalric hero comparable in many ways to Hector of Troy, is projected as a model for Henry V, and I support this view. Tydeus is a noble, brave, selfless, and fearsome warlord who can win Agincourt-like battles against impossible odds (he single-handedly defeats the fifty knights that Eteocles sends to kill him). He is loyal and trustworthy and everything one might expect of a chivalric hero. But Tydeus is emblematic of the young and the reckless; his is the strongest voice in favour of the war, the outcome of which proves the irrationality of his values and ambitions. He has a family history of violence, having killed his brother, the murder of whom is the cause of his exile. He himself dies a purposeless death while driving too close to the walls of Thebes, not at the hands of another legendary hero, but from the arrow of an insignificant Theban warrior. Not for Tydeus is the death of a Homeric hero who chooses the fame of a valiant death over a long comfortable life in peaceful obscurity. Perhaps out of a sense of decorum, Lydgate does not emphasize the point that Tydeus ends his life gnawing on the head of his decapitated assailant, “polluting his jaws with living blood” (Stattius 8.751-66). Tydeus exits the story with a whimper, not a bang, and after his death is not mentioned again except when his widow (in some of Lydgate’s most emotional verse) seeks in vain to bury his rotting corpse:

Who can now weep, but Deyphylee
 Tydeus for she ne myghte se?
 Whoos constreyntys were so fel and kene
 That Adrastus myghte not sustene
 To beholde the ladyes so compleyne,
 Wisshing his here parted wer on tweyne.
 And 3it allas! Bothen eve and morowe,
 O thyng ther was that doubled al her sorowe,

That old Creon, father of felonye
 Ne wolde suffre thorgh his Tyrannye
 The dede bodies be buryed nowther brente,
 But with beestis and houndys to be rente.

(4485-96)

The consequence of Tydeus's much vaunted "chivalry" is that thousands of bodies are strewn around the battlefield of Thebes; the flower of Greek nobility is wiped out, along with the innocent citizens whom this same chivalrous nobility has destroyed. If Tydeus is meant to represent Henry V, his is a portrait of an irresponsible leader whose chivalric courage greatly outweighs his prudence and common sense. Ironically, Henry V did not even have the chivalric honour of death on the battlefield. Adam Usk's "sword of the Lord" was to strike in the form of dysentery within months of Lydgate's completion of the work (271).

Siege of Thebes is arguably the most daring and openly resistant of all Lydgate's works. It is not just anti-war in a general, non-agitative sense. One indication that Lydgate's narrative had topical relevance is his use of anachronism as a rhetorical device in *Siege of Thebes*. Beryl Smalley was probably the originator of the common belief that an indifference to anachronism is typical of medieval historiography (10) and a sure sign that medieval writers had no historical sense. James Simpson takes issue with this widely held position ("The Other Book of Troy" 421) pointing to Lydgate's description of the theatre in ancient Troy (*Troy Book* 2.860-926) and citing the care with which the poet avoids Christian expressions in the speech of pagan characters as proof of his concern for historical propriety, a propriety Lydgate is willing at times to sacrifice in the interests of his reformist agenda. Lydgate's undeniable anachronisms, I would argue, are not always born of indifference to, or ignorance of, history. He uses anachronism to make persuasive points about contemporary events. In *Siege of Thebes* and *Troy Book*, the armour worn by the

soldiers is clearly medieval (a fairly common anachronism and in itself not remarkable), as is the artillery used to shell the walls of Thebes (a truly rare anachronism); I suggest that the combined effect of these two anachronisms force a parallel between the ancient wars and Henry V's war in France. The actual siege of the city is undertaken under a hail of bombardment by cannon fire:

And as her foomen proudely hem assaylle
 Ful many Grek thorgh platys and thorgh maylle
 Was shette thorgh-out, pressyng at the wallys
 And betyn of with grete rounde ballys
 That her lay on and another 3onder.
 And the noyse, hydouser than thonder
 Of gonne-shot and of Arblastys ek
 So loude out-ronge that many worthy grek
 Ther lost his lyf; they wern on hem so felle.

(4309-17)

In the entire history of warfare up to 1420 there are very few wars in which artillery fire had figured prominently. One such was Prince Henry's suppression of the Welsh rebellion under Owen Glendower; another was in the prolonged sieges of the cities of France that led up to the Treaty of Troy. Lydgate's allusion to contemporary military tactics is unmistakable. Desmond Seward makes the interesting point that, whereas Henry V is usually remembered as the military genius who won Agincourt with pointed sticks and long-bows, his real innovation was his use of heavy artillery combined with tactics of starvation and scorched earth to subdue the great walled cities of Normandy (Seward 99; 188-89). Lydgate's anachronistic inclusion of artillery warfare, his elaborate detailing of medieval armour and battle tactics makes the parallel inescapable. It is not just any war Lydgate is questioning, it is *the* war, Henry's war. If Thebes was a disaster for the Greeks, so was the Lancastrian subjugation of Normandy for the English, which ultimately cost

the English not just Normandy but all their territories in France.¹³⁷ Both were unnecessary campaigns led by youthful megalomaniacs with the support of duplicitous churches, to be sure, but the Benedictines as a whole cannot be counted among the supporters. “Lo what it is for to gynne a werre,” Lydgate says in his Envoy (4630): all sides ultimately pay the price, “For in the werre is non excepcioun / Of hegh esat nor lowhe condicioun.”

The story of Bishop Amphiorax, which occupies more than 300 lines (2800-2997; 4022-4103; 4160-92) and is a huge amplification of the poet’s source material, is another example of Lydgate’s use of anachronism for topical purposes; his assignment of a bishop’s title to Amphiorax is clearly no accident. Through the practice of divination, Bishop Amphiorax is able to foretell not just the fall of Thebes but the simultaneous annihilation of the entire Greek nobility. Fearing to tell what he knows to be true, he runs and hides in a tower. His wife betrays him; he is dragged out of hiding and made to prophesy before parliament. King Adrastus stubbornly ignores his advice and makes the cowardly bishop accompany the troops into battle, presumably to provide some measure of ecclesiastical legitimation for the campaign. While Lydgate at first presents the bishop as a wiser, older man, like himself, a foil to the impetuous war party, he also presents him as a coward afraid to speak out against the war until forced to do so, and as one too easily coerced into supporting the campaign. Lydgate graphically records Amphiorax’s ultimate fall from grace as the earth opens and swallows up the bishop in front of the walls of Thebes.¹³⁸

¹³⁷The loss of all the French territories cannot be blamed on Henry V because we have no way of knowing what might have happened had he lived. But there is no denying that the occupation of Normandy gave rise to Joan of Arc and a national pride that eventually drove the English out of France, leaving nothing for the English to celebrate but the victory at Agincourt.

¹³⁸In Statius’s *Thebiad*, Amphiorax is a prophet-king, one who dies bravely and defiantly.

The very fact that Lydgate shows Amphiorax, a leader of the church, engaging in active battle may be a reflection of the hostility the Benedictines felt toward Henry V's writ to the archbishop of Canterbury in May 1415, which ordered all "able and fencible clergy, regular and secular, exempt and non exempt within liberties and without" to assemble and to arm themselves in preparation "for the defence of the realm and church and of the faith."¹³⁹ Amphiorax is succeeded by his protégé, Terdimus, who is actually mitred by the king (a symbolic enactment of clerical subservience to which Lydgate would be fundamentally opposed) and made another willing accomplice in an unnecessary and ultimately catastrophic war. The bishop's sins include divination, complicity, cowardice, and abdication of moral responsibility. The deliberate anachronism is a scathing indictment of the English episcopacy, one which any Lollard would have found appropriate.

If there is a hopeful message in the Envoy, with its topical allusion to the Treaty of Troyes (making a clear connection between the classical narrative and the ongoing war), it lies once again not so much in the terms of the Treaty, but in the consolation of Christ. Nevertheless, at this point in his career, Lydgate must have had some genuine hope that the marriage of Henry V and Katherine of Valois and the promise of dual monarchy would bring about a lasting peace in France. In the next regime, he was to offer his services in the support of the minority council and

¹³⁹See the *Calendar of Close Rolls: Henry V* 1: 213. Henry's intent was to raise a kind of home guard using an armed clergy, and no religious order was to be spared the call to muster. According to Juliet Barker, "contemporary legal opinion was divided many ways on the subject but it was generally accepted that clergymen could defend themselves if attacked" (129), but this outrageous breach of monastic autonomy could not have been well-received by the Benedictines. It is not known whether any of the Benedictines obeyed this call to arms, but it seems unlikely that Lydgate's abbey did.

the dual monarchy. The extent to which he would compromise the principles outlined in *Troy Book* and *Siege of Thebes* will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Collaboration and Resistance during the Minority Years

Al werre is dreedful, vertuous pees is good,
 Striff is hatful, pees douhtir of plesaunce,
 In Charlys tyme ther was shad gret blood,
 God sende vs pees twen Ynglond and Fraunce;
 Werre causith povert, pees causith habundaunce,
 And attween bothen for ther moor encrees,
 Withoute feynyng, fraude, or varyaunce,
 Twen al Cristen, Crist Ihesus send vs pees!
 ("Praise of Peace," 169-76)

When Henry V died of dysentery on 31 August 1422, his immediate bequest to his infant son was a *heriditas damnosa*, an impossible political and military legacy for his heirs to support,¹⁴⁰ although an outcome that now seems inevitable to all but the most jingoistic of English historians—the eventual loss of the occupied territories in France—may not have been so obvious to the members of the regency council who ruled England and France during the minority years of Henry VI. During the early years of conciliar rule the Lancastrians were, on the whole, committed to the “dual monarchy,” a burden that a series of successful military campaigns, the terms of the Treaty of Troyes, and the last will of Henry V had somehow elevated to the status of a sacred charge. Although there were many conflicting factions, with endless power struggles among members of the council—between the duke of Gloucester and his uncle Henry Beaufort in particular, and to a lesser extent between the two surviving brothers, the duke of Bedford and the duke of Gloucester—there was nevertheless a dynastic belief in the right of the English monarch to the throne of both England and France, and in the duty of the heirs of Henry V to carry out the mandate of his last will, to “stay the course” in France. Most Englishmen—Benedictines not

¹⁴⁰Even before the death of Henry V, his policy of settlement in Normandy was proving disastrous. See Seward, 159-69.

excepted—had come to see the military successes of Henry V as a divine endorsement of the English cause, and the marriage of Henry V to the daughter of Charles VI as confirmation of the legitimacy of the Lancastrian claim to the throne of France by making Henry VI the legal successor to his grandfather, Charles VI. More to the point, the conquest of Normandy had required a huge financial investment on the part of the English people. There would be little interest in abandoning any part of the conquered territory without the realization of some return on that investment. The counter-claim of the dauphin (at least before the rise of Joan of Arc had given some genuine spark to his resistance) was seen mainly as a minor obstacle that the English government sought to overcome by a strengthened diplomatic alliance with the Burgundians; by an “understanding” with the Emperor Sigismund; by English military might; by a policy of settlement that was arguably nothing less than one of extortion and pillage; and by a campaign of concerted royal propaganda.¹⁴¹

Not everyone, however, was in favour of continuing the war after the death of Henry V. The government was on the verge of bankruptcy and the regency council knew full well that in order to sustain the dual monarchy in the face of growing opposition from the dauphinist forces a great deal more money would have to be raised on both sides of the Channel. In the absence of mass media, the Lancastrians would use every means at their disposal to get the message out:

¹⁴¹For Bedford’s commitment to the war in France, see Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy* 24-49; for the regal council’s commitment to the dual monarchy, see Griffiths, 217-28. I am conscious of Scott-Morgan Straker’s objection to the use of the word propaganda in a medieval context in general, and in regard to Lydgate’s work in particular (“Propaganda, Intentionality and the Lancastrian Lydgate,” 101-6). I use the term more loosely. I would define Lancastrian verse propaganda as any poetic work commissioned by the Lancastrian government the purpose and effect of which was to promote, without reservation, the primary Lancastrian political aims: to defend the justice of the Lancastrian war in France and to support the Lancastrian claims to the throne of England and France.

speeches in parliament, sermons from the pulpit, chronicles, coinage, public spectacles (including two coronations and triumphal marches into London and Paris), wall paintings, pageants, and, most importantly from Lydgate's perspective, literary works, vernacular poetry in particular.¹⁴² As the best vernacular poet in the land, it would have been imprudent for Lydgate, the *de facto* poet-laureate at this point in his career, to refuse recruitment to the Lancastrian cause. Hoccleve's career as "laureate" effectively ended with his breakdown in 1416; he did write a short sequence of poems for Duke Humphrey's benefit in 1421 and 1422, but Hoccleve died in 1426, and it is questionable whether even he would have seen fit to support the cost of the dual monarchy, if we can judge by some of his earlier warnings in *The Regement of Princes*: "What kyng that dooth more excessif despenses / Than his land may to suffice or atteyne / Schal be destrued" (4404-06). When there was a need for an English poet to celebrate the double coronation, Lydgate was the only serious candidate.

As previously discussed, Benedictine influence had diminished under Henry V, a religious reformist who openly favoured the Carthusians and other monastic orders more directly subordinated to the official church hierarchy and to the king's own control. Whatever his personal views, Lydgate was surely pressured by Exeter or Curteys, his own abbot and prior at the time, to accept at least some of the commissions he was offered by the Lancastrians and to assume a *de facto* position as a kind of public relations agent for the monastery. Despite his monastic vocation, Lydgate could hardly have resisted the temptation for public recognition that these opportunities

¹⁴²For the means by which the Lancastrians projected the image of the dual monarchy at home and abroad, see Griffiths, "Propaganda and the Dual Monarchy," 217-28 and McKenna, "Henry VI of England and the Dual Monarchy: Aspects of Royal Political Propaganda, 1422-1432."

would provide, not just for himself, but for his abbey. His challenge would be to find a way to fulfill the terms of his commissions without compromising his personal convictions or his vows. This he did with an impressive display of diplomacy, in the course of which, he secured the patronage and protection of a wide range of powerful families, including the royal family of Henry VI, for the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds. To a considerable extent, however, the long-term effect of the relatively small body of political propaganda that Lydgate wrote for the Lancastrians, mainly during the minority years, has haunted his literary reputation ever since. Nevertheless, a close analysis of Lydgate's political poetry of the 1420s, the work from which so much of his reputation as a Lancastrian propagandist is ultimately derived, will reveal a curiously double-edged form of propaganda and suggest that Lydgate was much more in control of his own voice than most modern critics have been willing to acknowledge. Strong threads of resistance to Lancastrian hegemony are to be found even in the royally-commissioned poetry so obviously written in the service of a broader campaign aimed at the validation of an insecure dynasty. Lydgate never compromises on his pacifist views; all of his poetry, no matter how great the pressure of patronage, is ultimately a plea for peace between England and France, even during the 1420s when the Lancastrians were still committed, on the whole, to the continuation of the war.

Lydgate's whereabouts during the minority years of Henry VI are difficult to trace with precision. Certainly his involvement with the king's council and the nobility in general was greater during this period than at any other time in his monastic career. There is documented evidence of a lease of land made out to Sir Ralph Rochefort in 1423 to which Lydgate, on behalf of his monastery, was to receive a quarter of the rent (perhaps as belated compensation for his work on *Troy Book*). In fact, there is no record of Lydgate ever receiving any payment, and in

1424 Rochefort was granted “a lease for life free of rent” effectively annulling Lydgate’s portion of the rent revenue (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 24; 57). The lease of land was followed by an appointment as prior of Hatfield Priory, in Broad Oak Essex, in June 1423, a sinecure granted by his abbot, as Schirmer and Pearsall suggest, a reward for work well done in the service of Henry V, and an opportunity to do work for the regal council of Henry VI that might be of benefit to the abbey.¹⁴³ Lydgate’s responsibilities as prior did not interfere with his literary work because Hatfield Priory was little more than a cell (perhaps ten monks), a former alien priory that had been given over to the custody of the Benedictines of Bury under Edward III (Lowndes 30).

From John Shirley’s rubrics and the translations of French poems Lydgate wrote during this period, we know that the poet did not spend all his time at the priory and that he was in France from sometime in 1426 to late 1427. There he would have witnessed the devastation of the countryside and experienced at first hand the dangers posed by the dauphinist forces. Evidence for Lydgate in France is scanty, but several of Shirley’s rubrics suggest that Lydgate did some translation work for Richard Beauchamp, the earl of Warwick, in Paris.¹⁴⁴ Works generally

¹⁴³“John Lydgate [...] is named in a deed from John Clerk, Simon Doom, Richard Garden and Thomas Goos, by which they gave a quit-rent of fourpence to the priory charged on a tenement at Bush End. This is the only deed in which Prior Lydgate is named, and he appears in the court rolls as being fined for a trespass by his cattle, for not repairing a fence and not having a ditch secured. Amongst the witnesses to the above named deed is John Denham, Rector of Canfield, who is most probably the John Denham who succeeded John Lydgate as Prior” (Lowndes 30).

¹⁴⁴For the complete manuscript record (to date) of Lydgate’s sojourn in France, see Derek Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 25-27. In Lydgate’s envoy to the *Daunce of Machabree*, he himself claims to have been in France:

Out of the French I drough it of entent
 Not word by word but folowing in substaunce,
 And from Paris to Engelond it sent.

(665-67)

attributed to his French trip include his translation of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*, the *Daunce of Machabree*, and the *Title and Pedigree of Henry VI* (Mortimer 45). Poems written in honour of St. Denis indicate that Lydgate stayed at the famous Benedictine monastery just north of Paris, an institution strongly opposed to the Lancastrian occupation.¹⁴⁵ The dates of his French sojourn are largely conjectural, but it seems probable that Lydgate went to Paris under the protection of Warwick, whose official title at that time was "lieutenant for the field in the absence of the regent Bedford" (Schirmer 118). Bedford was in England from 5 December 1425 to 5 April 1427, so it is generally assumed that Lydgate, accompanying Warwick, was in France during roughly that same period, a little more than a year.¹⁴⁶ Warwick returned to England in March 1428 to assume a role as governor and tutor to Henry VI, but Lydgate must have returned earlier than Warwick in the protection of some other party. The "Mumming at Hertford" and the "New Year's Gift of an Eagle," both attributed by John Shirley to Lydgate, can be confidently dated to December 1427 and January 1428 respectively. As poet and probable co-deviser of these pageants, Lydgate would have been in attendance for their presentation at Hertford Castle (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 28). There is no evidence that he ever returned to France, as did Warwick, for the coronation of Henry VI.

¹⁴⁵Some Benedictine monks from St. Denis actually took up arms against the English (Seward 193).

¹⁴⁶Though the trip would be somewhat safer in 1426 than in 1430, an English monk would not want to make the dangerous journey to Paris without protection. In 1430, just a few years later, Warwick was to assume the task of safely transporting the young king to Paris for his second coronation. Mainly because of danger from the French armies, the king's journey from London to Paris took more than a year (Griffiths, 192-93).

Poems for the Duke

Even before the death of Henry V, Lydgate's diplomatic skills were tested by an assignment for the duke of Gloucester, regent of England during Henry V's absence in France in 1422. The duke apparently requested a poem celebrating his upcoming marriage to Jacqueline of Hainault. The marriage was fraught with controversy from the beginning and would ultimately prove disastrous for English-Burgundian relations. Jacqueline of Hainault had fled to England to escape her second husband, John of Brabant, who had mortgaged the territories (Hainault, Holland, and Zeeland) that his wife had inherited from her father to Philip the Good, the duke of Burgundy. Jacqueline was seeking English help to regain control of her lands from Burgundy, England's most important ally in the war against the French. At first Henry V welcomed her to the English court (Jacqueline was godmother to Henry VI), and his brother Humphrey, then thirty years old, sought her hand in marriage. The couple was somehow able to obtain an annulment for Jacqueline's previous marriage to Brabant from Pope Benedict XIII (a French-elected anti-pope whom England did not officially recognize). Henry V must have realized the danger the marriage could pose to the Anglo-Burgundian alliance, but it is not known whether he specifically forbade the nuptials.¹⁴⁷ With the news of Henry's sudden death, however, Humphrey wasted no time in arranging the marriage. It is not likely that Lydgate's poem was recited at the wedding reception, because the actual service took place amid a cloud of secrecy, probably in October, less than two

¹⁴⁷Given the importance that Henry V placed on the alliance with Burgundy, he could hardly have approved of his youngest brother's marriage to the enemy of his most important ally: "With the prophetic instinct of approaching death Henry besought his hearers to give no cause of offence to the Duke of Burgundy, and to repeat this warning to Gloucester" (Vickers 104). Humphrey's marriage would soon prove to be Bedford's worst nightmare. For a full account of Humphrey's foolish exploits in Hainault, see Vickers, 125-61.

months after the king's death. The poem addresses a future marriage, so Lydgate must have begun the work while Henry V was away in France in 1422, or immediately after his death in August of that year. What Lydgate thought about this dubious patronage opportunity we will never know, but, with Gloucester in power in England, it was an offer the poet could not refuse. "And I, as he that durst not withsey / Humbly his bidding did obey," Lydgate quips in a later poem commissioned by the earl of Warwick. Whatever his reason for writing it, the final product (*Minor Poems* 2: 601-8; MS Lambeth 84, fol. 201v) is a masterpiece of diplomacy. Even Derek Pearsall, who sees Lydgate's acceptance of such an explosive assignment as proof of the poet's political naiveté, concedes that "if it had to be done it is hard to know how it could have been done better" (*John Lydgate* 166). Given Jacqueline's alleged bigamy, the irony of the following lines is inescapable, and sets the ironic tone of the poem as a whole:

For noman may thordeynaunce eshcuwe,
 Things disposed by cours celestyal,
 Ner destenye to voyde nor remuwe,
 But oonly God þat lordshipeþe al;
 For thorughe His might moost imperyal,
 þeternal Lord, moost discrete and saage,
 He brought in first þordre of maryage.
 (22-28)

Scott-Morgan Straker ("Propaganda, Intentionality" 107-17) has peeled away the many layers of irony beneath the classical allusions in this poem.¹⁴⁸ While ostensibly celebrating the marriage as a way of uniting two kingdoms, with the lesson of the wedding of Henry V and Katherine de Valois as a contemporary example, the poem, in fact, questions the very assumption

¹⁴⁸For a counter-view that denies any deliberate irony but nevertheless detects many cracks and fissures in the "celebratory purpose" of the poem, see Strohm, "John Lydgate and Jacque of Holland."

that state marriages can bring peace, and implies the contrary. No contemporary who had recently read Lydgate's *Troy Book* or *Siege of Thebes* on the romantic follies of classical figures such as Paris, Troilus, Tydeus, or Aeneas could fail to detect at least a hint of irony in the association of the duke with these same deeply flawed heroes and their dangerous romantic attachments. The reference to Humphrey as the son of Mars ("This Martys sone and soobefastly his heyre," 155) so soon after the poet's lengthy diatribe against Mars in *Troy Book* (4.4440-4525) a signal to the reader to be alert to the ironic undertones of the poem. Similarly, the comparisons of the bride-to-be to Helen, Dido, Polyxena, and other classical *femmes fatales* (in Lydgate's renditions at least) are all double-edged, though Lydgate may well have been as bewitched by the duchess of Hainault as the rest of the English court seems to have been. The poem effectively damns with faint praise an imprudent marriage that could only mean trouble for England in the long term. Lydgate could not have known the full consequences of the marriage in 1422, but he was never so politically naive as to fail to perceive the risks the love-struck duke was running; the reference to blind Cupid in the first line of the poem is a political statement in its own right. Humphrey charged ahead in defiance of the council, and within weeks of the marriage the headstrong duke was invading territory that the duke of Burgundy now claimed as his own. The conflict between the two dukes would have destroyed the Anglo-Burgundian treaty had it not been for Bedford's diplomacy. After the death of Bedford in 1435, there was no hope for a Burgundian-English alliance that hinged on the mutual trust of the dukes of Gloucester and Burgundy.

Critics have generally projected a long-term, master-servant relationship between Humphrey and Lydgate (largely on the strength of this *epithalamium* and the only poem with any evidence of Humphrey's patronage, *Fall of Princes*) while postulating Humphrey's

commissioning of a wide range of works from *Serpent of Division* to *Siege of Thebes*, none of which can be easily imagined to serve the interests of the power-seeking duke of Gloucester during the 1420s. As a Benedictine diplomat, Lydgate's aristocratic affiliations during the 'twenties are extremely diverse, but his relationship with Humphrey was ambivalent in the 1420s, and minimal, at best, in the 'thirties. As Pearsall notes, the "cross-connections between these aristocratic families are endless, and the multiplication of literary contracts and commissions would be easy" (*John Lydgate* 168). If any one figure can be said to stand out as Lydgate's patron during the 1420s, it is Richard Beauchamp, the earl of Warwick, not the duke of Gloucester. The association with Warwick was probably through Thomas Chaucer, who accompanied Warwick to France during the previous decade on diplomatic missions involving Henry V's marriage and the Treaty of Troyes, but it is worth noting that after the deposition of Richard II, the Beauchamp family (William, younger brother of Thomas, then, later, Lady Abergavenny, William's widow) had acted as high stewards to the abbey for a full thirty years (1406-36) and that all of the Beauchamps, including Richard, were inducted as confreres (Elston 264-5).¹⁴⁹ During the early 'twenties, Lydgate wrote a selection of poems for the Beauchamp family, including "Guy of Warwick" (for Lady Talbot, Warwick's daughter) and the "Fifteen Joyes of Oure Lady" (for Isabella, Warwick's third wife).¹⁵⁰ When, in June 1428, Warwick assumed the role of governor to

¹⁴⁹For the complex genealogy that gave the Beauchamps the contested right to serve as high stewards to the abbey see R. Ian Jack.

¹⁵⁰One could argue that it was actually Lydgate, not Warwick who wrote Warwick's so-called virelai (MS Additional 16165, fols 245v-246) to Warwick's second wife Isabella (on Warwick's behalf, of course), were it not for John Shirley's attribution to Warwick (which attribution, in a Lydgate anthology, we ignore at our peril). See MacCracken, "The Earl of Warwick's Virelai."

the king, it became the earl's responsibility to groom the king for his future career, including the complex theatrics of the upcoming coronation ceremonies. In this capacity, it was most likely Warwick who commissioned the coronation poems from Lydgate, beginning in France with the *Title and Pedigree*, which Lydgate himself describes as a Warwick commission.¹⁵¹

Although in France Warwick generally reported to the duke of Bedford, by 1428, back in England, Warwick was firmly in the Beaufort camp, opposing Gloucester's bid for power on the council and defending his own territories against the duke's alliance with Lord Berkeley and the Mowbrays who were disputing Warwick's own claim to much of his first wife's inheritance (Carpenter). Lydgate was far too cautious to become personally involved in the feuds of such powerful families, but some degree of partisanship was unavoidable—especially since Warwick and Beaufort were major patrons of Bury St. Edmunds, whereas Gloucester was a patron of St Albans and often at odds with the abbot of Bury. Thomas Chaucer (first cousin to the Beauforts) and his sons-in-law—first the earl of Salisbury, and then William de la Pole, the duke of Suffolk (Alice Chaucer's second husband)—and Warwick, all patrons of Lydgate and his monastery, allied themselves with the Beaufort faction right from the beginning of the minority years, and well into the 'thirties and 'forties when it was Beaufort that stood for peace with France against the duke of Gloucester (Griffiths 28-50). Everything about these alliances suggests that Lydgate would have been personally, ideologically, and professionally predisposed towards the Beaufort faction, not

¹⁵¹ Gloucester was never, in fact, charged with the education and personal management of the king. The will of Henry V made it clear that Thomas Beaufort, duke of Exeter, would undertake the role of educator to Henry Windsor. When Exeter died in December 1426, the responsibility went to Warwick, not Gloucester (Petrina 129). The Beauforts jealously guarded the right to educate the king. The conflict between Humphrey and Henry Beaufort over custodial rights very nearly erupted into civil violence in October of 1425.

the Gloucester faction. These intricate political divisions must necessarily be taken into account when we discuss Lydgate's role as "Lancastrian propagandist."

Despite Lydgate's work for Gloucester in *Fall of Princes*, Duke Humphrey was no friend to Bury St. Edmunds. During the 1420s, when Humphrey was the dominant power in England and the abbey's main patrons, the Beauforts, were struggling for political survival, the abbey found itself at a legal disadvantage. In 1424, Humphrey had intervened on behalf of the abbot of Glastonbury against the abbot of Bury in a bitter dispute over the right-of-way to some rooms that the abbot of Bury had constructed for his students at Gloucester College in Oxford (Elston 146-48: MS Additional 14848, fol.73). The abbey's loss of its title to the manors of Wamford and Ickworth was due to the patronage of Gloucester in support of rival claimants.¹⁵² In the long and acrimonious battle between the bishop of Norwich and the abbot of Bury over jurisdictional rights, Gloucester was always an ardent supporter of his protégé, William Alnwick. Abbot Curteys lost many of his legal disputes to Bishop Alnwick, particularly during the late 1420s and early 'thirties when Gloucester, as lieutenant of England during the king's absence in France, was at the height of his power. Bury was viewed by Alnwick and Humphrey as a haven for the Norfolk Lollards who were fleeing persecution by the bishop, and in 1428 the bishop demanded the right to hold inquests in the town, despite the abbot's claim to exemption from episcopal jurisdiction. Curteys, then still prior of the abbey but acting on behalf of the ailing abbot, viewed any incursion into Bury as a threat to the ancient liberties of the monastery; he appealed to the abbey's own

¹⁵²The abbot wrote in his register (in the third person): "Abbot William Curteys saw that the fearsome power of certain lords and magnates of the realm was raging ever more violently against his church because of the monks' rightful claim to those manors." Curteys was here referring to Gloucester and his emerging political allies, the dukes of York and Norfolk (Elston, 248: MS Additional 14848, fol. 152).

patron, Cardinal Beaufort, who had just returned to England as papal legate but whose power in England and on the council was, at that time, greatly diminished. Despite the appeal to Beaufort, the Alnwick heresy inquests went ahead in Bury, largely due to support from Gloucester (Elston 346-53).¹⁵³ In 1436, the abbot again locked horns with the duke of Gloucester, this time in a dispute between the abbot and the duke's second wife, Eleanor Cobham, over property rights. Many of the abbey's tenants enjoyed the patronage of the duchess of Gloucester, who often intervened on behalf of her wards against the interests of the abbey (Elston 271-73).¹⁵⁴ Finally, Gloucester was arrested (and probably murdered) by Humphrey Stafford, a major patron of the abbey, in the town, in 1447. It is no coincidence that the arrest took place in Suffolk, the powerful duke of which was both Gloucester's worst enemy and the official protector of the abbey; suffice it to say that the arrest could not have been carried out in a location that did not share the Beaufort faction's anti-Gloucester sympathies, or for that matter, without the knowledge and tacit approval of the abbot, who was absolute lord within the town of Bury.¹⁵⁵ Gloucester's body was transported for burial from Bury to St. Albans, the abbey he had long patronized; there is, it would appear, no eulogy by Lydgate to mark the occasion.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³For Gloucester's patronage of Alnwick, see Lita-Rose Betcherman, "The Making of Bishops in the Lancastrian Period," 408-409.

¹⁵⁴See, for example, a letter, in English, from Eleanor Cobham to the abbot of Bury, dated 11 November 1436 (MS Additional 14848, fol. 311v.), which complains about the treatment of her client Nicholas Walpole at the hands of the abbot's bailiff.

¹⁵⁵It may be purely coincidental that, later in the same year of Gloucester's arrest, the king granted the abbey a charter confirming all the liberties within the banlieu and the franchise (Goodwin 73).

¹⁵⁶Someone did write an epitaph to Gloucester (MS Harley 2251, fols. 7r-8v), once generally attributed to Lydgate, but MacCracken excluded it from the Lydgate canon mainly because its tribute to Gloucester is so obviously restrained in its praise. Lydgate's authorship is

Even more troublesome for those who would construct a long-term servant-master relationship between Lydgate and Humphrey is the disturbing evidence that Lydgate wrote a sequel to "Gloucester's Approaching Marriage" in 1428, an outright rebuke to Humphrey for deserting his wife after his ambitions in the low countries were thwarted by Philip of Burgundy. The "Complaint for My Lady of Gloucester and Holland" (Cambridge MS Trinity R.3.20, fols. 363-67) brings accusations of witchcraft against Humphrey's new love, Eleanor Cobham, an attendant of Jacqueline of Hainault who was openly Humphrey's mistress by 1425, and who became his second wife in 1428, after Pope Martin V had conveniently declared Jacqueline's original marriage to Brabant to be valid and therefore annulled her marriage to Humphrey. The accusations of sorcery would come back to haunt the unfortunate Cobham, who was accused of treasonable necromancy in 1441, and Humphrey himself would never outlive his second wife's disgrace. The poem is remarkably prescient, predicting the fall of the usurper: "For whoo supplaunte the, of equytee / By processe shal supplanted be" (62-63). The final lines of the poem suggest a strong affection between the young king and his godmother "of highe and lowe to reken alle / Hir godsone affter hire dothe calle" (125-126). Henry V seems to have been himself bewitched by Jacqueline of Hainault to want her to stand as godmother to his son, the future king of England and France, in defiance of the duke of Burgundy.

not entirely out of the question, however. The metre and rhyme style is quite in keeping with other Lydgatean ballads with a recurring varied refrain. The Harley manuscript, in which the poem appears, is a copy of Shirley derivation, and, although the poem is not explicitly attributed to Lydgate by Shirley, the collection is, in effect, an important Lydgate anthology; Shirley's compilation suggests that he assumed it was by Lydgate. Whatever his political differences from his former patron, Lydgate would have at least respected Gloucester's intelligence and learning, and may have been the author of what is, after all, a rather subdued tribute to one who was once the most powerful man in England. For a discussion of the authorship of this poem, and a modern edition, see Rossell Hope Robbins, "An Epitaph for Duke Humphrey."

Derek Pearsall has proposed ejecting “The Complaint for My Lady of Gloucester” from the Lydgate canon because, as he argues, “It is wholly unlikely that Lydgate would write a poem critical of his patron’s personal conduct, and there is nothing in the style to argue for its authorship” (*John Lydgate* 166). But Lydgate is very careful not to accuse Humphrey directly of any personal wrongdoing (Lydgate only hints at the fact that the duke is living openly with his mistress while his wife, abandoned by Humphrey in Hainault, is kept prisoner by the duke of Burgundy). Humphrey is depicted as a victim of the sirens, or of sorcery; the duke himself may have found this excuse quite useful later on, when he sought to extricate himself from any treasonable association with Eleanor Cobham. Stylistically, the poem has many parallels to the *Temple of Glas* and to other complaints that Lydgate wrote earlier in his career. The four-stress beat is unusual for Lydgate, but not unknown (he uses it in “My Lady Dere,” the “Servant of Cupid Forsayken,” *Reson and Sensuallyte*, and in *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*). The poet may have found the more direct octosyllabic line, an atypical metre for Lydgate, more suitable to the reproachful tone of the poem.¹⁵⁷

A Solytarye, soore compleynyng,
 Sat weping by a water syde,
 Yeeris and dayes a wayting
 Which with good hope did ay abyde,
 On folke þat rowe or forby ryde,
 To here tyþinges in þeyre passage,
 Þat might his hertely sowowe aswage.

(1-7)

¹⁵⁷Either Lydgate or Shirley found the four-stress metre not to his liking. In MS Ashmole 59, a much later version, someone, author or scribe, has added words to most of the lines to expand the length. Thus “A Solytarye, soore compleynyng, / Sat weping by a water syde,” becomes “A solytarye ful sore compleyninge / Hevy sat weoping on a ryver syde” (Connolly 157). Connolly assumes Shirley made the changes, but it may have been Lydgate who updated his own work, which Shirley merely copied from a later version of the same poem.

The vocabulary, syntax, and rhyming pairs reflect Lydgate's style exactly. And, most importantly, there is Shirley's attribution to Lydgate in a running title in MS Trinity R.3.20 ("A Compleynte made by Lydegate")—compelling evidence that, *pace* Pearsall, is not negated by Shirley's own headnote (in a later Shirley copy, MS Ashmole 59, fol. 57r) that states the poem was written by a "Chapellayne of my lordes of Gloucestre Humfrey" (*Bio-Bibliography* 45). The word "chaplain" did not always have an official connotation, as Lydgate himself makes clear when he refers to his own abbot as "chaplain" to Henry VI ("Thabbot William his humble chapeleyn," *Life of St. Edmund* 1.188) or, as the abbot uses the term, to mean "your clerical servant," in his letters to the king (one example of which can be found in note 185, below, where all the monks are referred to as "your said chapleins"). More importantly, Ashmole 59 also features a marginal comment in Shirley's own handwriting that proclaims: "Lidegate daun Iohan." In the lines quoted above, the placement of Shirley's attribution opposite line 7 confirms that the solitary complainant weeping by the waterside is none other than Lydgate himself.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸It is interesting that Pearsall takes MacCracken to task for ejecting the "Hood of Green" from the canon when it is found in another Lydgate anthology, MS Harley 2255 (*John Lydgate* 77, printed in Halliwell, 199), bearing an attribution to Lydgate. MacCracken was shocked by the "obscenity" of the poem, refusing to believe that "such abominable filth" could have been written by a monk. The poem's raciness, such as it is, is obscured beneath an opaque layer of *double entendre*; indeed, it is difficult for a modern reader to explain how the apparently obscene trope even works. The "Hood of Green" does not begin to approach the outright bawdiness of other medieval anti-feminist satire, often written by monks, and Pearsall is quite right to insist the poem not be ejected from the canon on the basis of MacCracken's argument or because its style and subject matter is somewhat atypical of Lydgate. There is evidence in the Curteys register that the abbot actually enjoyed a good bawdy satire (see MS Additional 14848, fol. 98-99, where he inserts a sordid account of the sexual misconduct of the friars of Babwell, or folio 289v where he interrupts some weightier material with a ribald Chaucerian tale of a clerk named Nicolas who is caught in the act of adultery after St. Edmund apparently intervenes to cause the ceiling to collapse at an inopportune moment). As Pearsall rightly notes: "if external evidence is to be ignored when it does not suit us, it is difficult to know what is the point of bothering with it in the first place" (78).

On two separate occasions then, according to Shirley, it is the poet Lydgate who writes the petition on behalf of the “thre hundreþ thousand” (line 101) who think that the beloved Jacqueline has been unjustly treated. Eleanor Hammond has documented the case for Lydgate’s authorship, basing the attribution on a convincing combination of external and internal evidence.¹⁵⁹ One could postulate that Lydgate circulated the poem, perhaps anonymously, as a favour to the queen-mother, or to the king himself, Jacqueline’s sorrowful godson.¹⁶⁰ Lydgate naturally trod carefully in his criticism of the duke’s adultery, but he did, as usual, find a way. *Fall of Princes* (3.1149-1638), for example, contains an exceptionally long diatribe against adultery and lechery, which Lydgate carefully attributes to his source Boccaccio, but that is nevertheless mostly Lydgate’s own (see Chapter 4). Shirley’s double attribution of Lydgate’s authorship of this highly critical second poem to the duke of Gloucester, then, is as certain as any poem in the Lydgate canon not claimed by Lydgate himself. The “Complaint” provides compelling evidence that Lydgate’s relationship with Gloucester was never as subservient as critics have liked to believe, and serves as a warning that Lydgate’s compliance to a Lancastrian agenda, even in the 1420s, ought never be taken for granted.

¹⁵⁹Hammond addresses the apparent discrepancy of the term “chapelain” found in the later manuscript, Ashmole 59: “The term ‘chaplain of my lord of Gloucester’ may perhaps be a true statement of Lydgate’s relations to that prince, either at the time of writing this poem or during the translation of *Fall of Princes*. Or it is quite possible that the term is but a disguise, such as Lydgate hints at in the sixteenth stanza, and the poem an unsigned ‘round robin’ of the household to its absent mistress” (“Lydgate and the Duchess of Gloucester,” 398).

¹⁶⁰There is another poem written around this period that is often attributed to Lydgate, which contains what John Scattergood has suggested is a veiled allusion to Humphrey’s second folly, “Beware of Deceitful Women,” printed in Skeat, *Chaucerian and Other Pieces*. If Lydgate wrote the poem, a doubtful attribution at best, he may have been referring either to the duchess of Hainault or to Eleanor Cobham.

“Praise of Peace” and the “Mumming at Eltham.”

One work that has received scant attention in any assessment of Lydgate’s political poetry of the 1420s is “Praise of Peace” (MS Harley 2255, fols 21-25, “*explicit quod Lydgate*”), an impressive ballad consisting of twenty-four stanzas of eight lines. The poem seems to have been written for a Christmas celebration sometime after the death of Henry V, in honour of the young king and his recently widowed mother. It is written in the style of an occasional poem, possibly as a script for a pageant that might have been read at a royal festivity. Both Schirmer and Pearsall assume that the poem was written in the early 1420s. It has loose associations, by reference to the biblical mother and child, to another poem from this period, “Valentine to Her that Excelleth All” (*Minor Poems* 1: 304; MS Trinity R.3.20), which also contains an envoy to Queen Katherine. It is unlikely that the “Praise of Peace” would have been presented at Christmas 1422, only four months after the death of the king, with the queen still in mourning, but a date of Christmas 1423, 1424, or 1425 would certainly fit the internal circumstances of the poem.¹⁶¹ The poem is technically and thematically elaborate, and draws on the Psalms and the New Testament Christmas narrative to support what is ultimately a political statement. Its most striking feature is perhaps its varying refrain, which always ends in the word “peace”:

¹⁶¹The poem is undated by external evidence and could in fact have been written at anytime in Lydgate’s career after the death of Henry V: “The Fifte Henry preeved a good knyht” (line 177). Older scholars (e.g., Thomas Wright), tended to associate the poem with the Beaufort/Suffolk peace party of the 1440s, a not unreasonable assumption given its subject matter. Scattergood (102), Schirmer (88), and Pearsall (*John Lydgate* 163) favour the early 1420s on the same internal and circumstantial evidence on which I am relying. The poem appears in a Lydgate anthology, MS Harley 2255, a compilation by “the Hammond scribe,” a disciple of John Shirley, probably copied from a lost Shirley original and containing an attribution by Shirley (Connolly 180). Most poems in this anthology can be dated to the 1420s, none to the 1440s.

Mercy and Trouthe met on an hih mounteyn,
 Briht as the sonne with his beemys cleer
 Pees and Iusticia walkyng on the pleyn
 And with foure sustryn moost goodly of ther cheer
 List nat departe, nor severe in no maneer,
 Of oon accoord by vertuous encrees,
 Ioyned in Charite, pryncsesses moost enteer,
 Mercy and Trouthe, Rihtwisnesse and Pees.

(1-8)

The argument of the poem is a plea for peace, not just peace in general, but peace “twen Ynglond and Fraunce.” Peace is the result of prudence and mercy, or pity; the word *Pax* is composed of three letters that signify (in the Greek letters) prudence, authority, and Christ; there are different kinds of peace, the kind that comes from living a good life (stanza 4), or the kind that can be found through the contemplative life in a monastery (stanza 5); the promotion of peace is a responsibility of poets and of kings (stanza 7);¹⁶² only Christ can bring lasting peace, just as He brought peace to the world on the night He was born in Bethlehem; and so the monarch who would seek peace must seek Jesus Christ. But the peace that Christ brought at His birth was destroyed almost immediately by the tyranny of Herod. Tyrants are the enemies of peace. Discord began with Cain and Abel; the history of the world is the history of war right up until the present war between England and France, a war between brothers. (War is, unfortunately, the normal human condition, Lydgate implies, a legacy of Adam’s fall.) The war with Charles VI was a terrible calamity (see the passage quoted at the beginning of this chapter). Henry V was a chivalrous knight, granted, but now that he is dead, God grant us peace, the everlasting peace of Jesus Christ.

What is so fascinating about this poem is the way in which Lydgate uses religion as a kind

¹⁶²This pacifist role for poets is, incidently, similar to the role Lydgate assigns to prophets in the classical histories of Troy and Thebes.

of a shield to make a strong political statement, a commentary that on close analysis can only be interpreted as critical of the foreign policy of Henry V and of his militaristic brothers during the minority years of Henry VI. Lydgate is careful to mention the fact that Henry V “Sparyd nat to pursue his riht / His title of Fraunce and of Normandye” (179-80), but following, as it does, the stanza quoted at the beginning of this chapter, there is surely a trace of irony in the lines that allude to a monarch whose militaristic inclinations had always outweighed his prudence.

Lydgate’s reference to the bloodshed “in Charlys tyme” (171) is an indirect criticism of the man most responsible for that bloodshed: “Charlys tyme” is really just a safer way of saying “Henry’s time”; what is ironically implied is the futility of the quest that ended in that “good knyht’s” premature death. If Henry’s victories were interpreted by the English as a sign that the conquest of Normandy was the will of God, then the sudden death of the conqueror must likewise have been interpreted as a sign that it is time for the English to end hostilities “twene al Cristene.” There is, furthermore, a clear association between the Virgin and her son, the Prince of Peace, and between the widowed queen-mother and her son, a rightful heir who will be (the poet hopes) a monarch devoted to peace.

Closely related thematically to “Praise of Peace” is Lydgate’s first mumming, which he wrote for presentation to the infant king and his mother at the royal palace at Eltham, probably at Christmas 1425.¹⁶³ As Maura Nolan has explained, mummings were a traditional form of

¹⁶³Shirley’s rubric to MS Trinity R.3.20, fol. 37 reads: “Loo here begynneth a balade made by daun Iohn Lidegate at Eltham in Cristmasse, for a momyng tofore the kyng and the Qwene.” Henry VI and his mother seem to have spent Christmas at Eltham in 1425 and 1428 (Schirmer 101; Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 29; Nolan 114; Forbes 66). Either date is possible for the mumming, but I favour the earlier date because an innocuous mumming that dealt with the theme of peace and prosperity would have been easier to write in the years immediately following the Treaty of Troyes, when the dauphin’s supporters might still have been described by

Christmas entertainment, very popular during the reign of Richard II, but evidently out of favour during the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, perhaps because of the aborted plot on Henry IV's life that was to be executed under cover of a mumming in 1400¹⁶⁴ or because of the failed Lollard rebellion of 1414 in which a group of conspirators who were to be disguised as mummers were supposedly plotting to seize the royal family at Eltham while Oldcastle led an armed rebellion at St. Giles Fields (*Gesta Henrici Quinti* 7). In December 1417, a proclamation was issued in London "that no one shall go at night with a visor or false face, also that there shall be no mummyng during this Feast of Our Lord's nativity" (Riley, *Memorials of London and London Life*, 658). By 1418, mummings were strictly prohibited, although the prohibition was obviously lifted during the reign of Henry VI:

No manere persone, of what astate, degre, or condicioun þat euere he be, duryng þis holy tyme of Cristemes be so hardy in eny wyse to walk by nyght in eny manere mommyng, pleyes, enterludes, or eny oþer disgisynges with eny feynyd berdis, peyntid visers, diffourmyd or colourid visages in eny wyse, up peyne of emprisonement of her bodyes.

chroniclers as "youre rebelles wheche been now reklesse" (line 24). The *Chronicle of London* (MS Harley 566) refers to the citizens of Meaux, who put up such a strong resistance to Henry V after the Treaty of Troyes, as "rebelles" (Nicholas 108). Later in the same chronicle, the author refers to the opposing forces as the "Armynakes." The "Mumming at Eltham," with its renewed hope of peace, may have been prompted by Bedford's victory at Verneuil in 1424. By 1428 the "reckless rebels" had become a powerful army inspired by Joan of Arc and a young monarch about to be crowned at Rheims; the siege of Orléans was broken by "Frensshmen," not by "rebels" (Nicholas 116).

¹⁶⁴"This yere on the twelfth day after Cristemasse, the erle of Kent, the erle of Hunt, the lord Spenser, Sr. Rauf Lumley, and many other knyghtes and squyres were purposed to have slayn the kyng and hise children at Wyndesore, and thoo that helde with them be a mommynge" (Nicolas, *Chronicle of London from 1089 to 1483*, 86). However, the aborted plot does not seem to have put an end to mummings. There is evidence of another mumming at Eltham the very next Christmas (1415): "In this yere was here the emperor of Constantynoble: and the kyng helde his Christemasse at Eltham; and men of London maden a gret mommyng to hym of xij aldermen and there sones, for whiche they hadde gret thanke. And the same yere Sr William Sautre, prest, was degraded of his presthood, and brent in Smythefeld for an heretyk" (Nicolas 87).

(Nolan 79, from Riley, *Memorials*, 669)

The original form had a high potential for social disorder (as the assassination plots demonstrate), and, as so often happens, was appropriated and subverted by the authorities into a more subdued and civilized form of entertainment (Nolan 80). Conscious of the mumming protest tradition, Lydgate saw in the form an opportunity for influencing the authorities under the guise of holiday entertainment. The "Mumming at Eltham" (*Minor Poems*: 2: 672; MS Trinity R.3.20 fols 37-40) is so similar in theme to "Praise of Peace" that it may have been written as a companion piece, or even as one component of a larger entertainment which included both. In contrast to "Praise of Peace," the "Mumming at Eltham" is written in rhyme-royal verse and uses classical allusions (it is possibly the first dramatic presentation in English ever to employ a classical framework) instead of biblical references to deliver its message: peace means prosperity, "foulsome haboundaunce"; Bacchus, Juno, and Ceres bring tokens of wine, oil, and wheat in celebration of peace. Lydgate utters a wishful prophecy to the young monarch:

For Mars þat is most furyous and woode,
Causer of stryff and desobeysaunce,
Shal cesse his malice; and God þat is so goode,
Of vnytee shal sende al souffysaunce.
He ioyned þe hertes of England and of Fraunce,
Bassent of boope sent to your Hye Noblesse
Pees with youre lieges, plentee with gladnesse. (29-35)

Presumably, the spectre of Mars enters the pageant briefly and is driven away, in what, for Lydgate, is a consistent view of Mars as a god of false influence. The prophecy that Mars will "cesse his malice" (reminiscent of the epilogue to *Troy Book*) is framed more in the form of a prayer than a prophetic utterance. Whereas the varying refrain of "Praise of Peace" always ends in the word "peace," the varying refrain of the "Mumming" begins with the word "Peace," as in the

above stanza, a refrain that the poet repeats through the first seven stanzas addressed to the young king. If the "Mumming at Eltham" did indeed take place at Christmas 1425, the peace message may have been directed to Beaufort and Gloucester, whose public power struggle a few months earlier on London Bridge had very nearly plunged the nation into civil war (Wolffe 40).

Balancing the first seven stanzas addressed to the king are four stanzas addressed to his mother, each with the couplet refrain: "To you presenting, yif yowe list aduerte / Ay by encesse ioye and gladnesse of hert." The gifts presented to the queen-mother by the pageant are "pees, vnytee, plentee, and haboundaunce." Lydgate always associates peace with prosperity, war with poverty. For Lydgate, wars of conquest are not just immoral, they are bad economics: "Werre causith povert, pees causith haboundaunce" ("Praise of Peace" 173). The argument of the "Mumming" is that peace is a prerequisite to prosperity. In this, Lydgate reflects the concerns of a religious order whose livelihood mainly depends on its own agriculture or on the prosperity of its tenants, and the revenues of which are threatened by war. The envoy to the pageant incorporates both refrains, and the actors dressed as classical gods leave their gifts at the feet of the young monarch and his mother: peace, unity, plenty, and abundance.

These twin Christmas pieces illustrate Lydgate's basic technique for writing "royal propaganda" during the minority years. The poet's praise and good wishes for his patrons are always tempered by a subtle message intended to influence government policy. Sometimes that message contains a veiled criticism; sometimes it is merely suggestive of how things could be reformed or improved. The double function of Lydgate's propaganda is not just to educate the audience on behalf of the authorities (in fulfillment of whatever contractual arrangement was made with the patron), but to influence the authorities on behalf of the common people. For

Lydgate, the writing of royal propaganda is an opportunity that he consistently turns to the advantage of his monastic order. The poet seeks to affirm the power and legitimacy of the Lancastrians, at their behest, while reminding them that their power is contingent on the exercise of responsible and peaceful government. Lydgate was never opposed to royal prerogative or aristocratic privilege as such, providing that both the monarch and his magnates be cognizant of their responsibilities to the common people and to the church. He may have been deeply disturbed by the Lancastrian usurpation, but after the wedding of Henry V and Katherine de Valois, followed soon after by the death of Henry V and Charles VI, Lydgate accepted as a consequence of treaty the right of Henry VI to the throne of France. Thus in Lydgate's view it was Henry V's marriage to the daughter of Charles VI, not the conquest of Normandy, that gave Henry VI succession rights to France (though the Lancastrians consistently argued that those rights were a result of Edward II's marriage to Isabella, daughter of Philip I of France). Lydgate evidently accepted the Lancastrian propaganda that pronounced the dauphin illegitimate, and that asserted that the young Charles had forfeited whatever claim to the throne he might have had by his complicity in the murder of the duke of Burgundy. But never does Lydgate applaud Henry V's actual conquests (of which Katherine de Valois was a living embodiment) or defend his moral right to invade another Christian country even though Henry VI's claim to the throne is a cause for which the poet is, somewhat compromisingly (given his pacifist inclinations), willing to work. In the early 1420s Lydgate clung to the of the dual monarchy as the best hope for ending the violence between the two countries. Unity, for Lydgate, was imperative, and if the two realms could be united peacefully under one monarch, then Lydgate was all in favour of dual monarchy.

Coronation and Succession Propaganda

The overtly political poems of the late 1420s—*Title and Pedigree of Henry VI*, “Ballade on a New Year’s Gift of an Eagle,” “Prayer for King, Queen and People,” “Roundel for the Coronation of Henry VI,” “Ballade for the Coronation,” “Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI,” the “Mumming at Windsor,” and *King Henry VI’s Triumphal Entry into London*—all share two common purposes: to celebrate the occasion for which they were commissioned, and to lend support to Henry VI’s claim to the dual throne of England and France. Lydgate’s busiest period in the public eye was from 1426 to 1430—the only time in his career when he can, with some justification, be accused of outright complicity in the Lancastrian political agenda. Altogether the political poems of this period number no more than 1500 lines of poetry, approximately one-hundredth of Lydgate’s total output, but they are, nevertheless, the origin of the “laureate-Lydgate” construct that has driven most critical studies. As commemorative pieces they are appropriate to the occasions for which they were commissioned; they argue the case for dual monarchy, advising the king without indulging in excessive panegyrics (although the commissioners themselves would doubtless have preferred a little more flattery and a little less advice). None of the poems celebrate military victory in France; they say nothing directly of Henry V’s original justification for the war, a succession argument that must necessarily leap backwards over the Lancastrian usurpation to arrive at the claims of Edward III, but they do accept the marriage of Henry V to Katherine de Valois and the signatures on the Treaty of Troyes as justification for the English claim to the throne of France. Each poem contains the hope of peace, often expressed (against reality) as a *fait accompli*. The duke of Bedford had to beat a path to Paris to get the young king ordained in 1431 (Curry 36-49), and there was great fear back in England for the young king’s safety while he was in

France (Griffiths 192-93). The dauphin's armies under Joan of Arc forced the English to abandon the siege of Orléans in 1429, after which the French armies won a major victory at Patay and approached the gates of Paris. It was only the last-minute assistance provided by Cardinal Beaufort's crusader troops (originally gathered to subdue the Hussites in Bohemia) that saved Paris in 1429 (Griffiths 188). Henry VI's reception in Paris by the French had been embarrassingly lukewarm, a disappointment that prompted the lavish triumphal entry into London as a way of compensation. One can only imagine why the pacifist Lydgate would lend his pen to the support of a policy that virtually guaranteed further hostilities in France in the face of unrelenting opposition by the newly crowned King Charles VII. Like most other Englishmen, Lydgate may have deluded himself into thinking that the dual monarchy offered the best hope of peace between the two countries in the early 1420s, but, by late 1429, at the time of the Westminster coronation, it must have been obvious that the English claim to dominion of France was a medieval dream vision.¹⁶⁵ One explanation is that Lydgate was pressured by his abbot or by powerful Lancastrians (Warwick, or even Gloucester) into working for a cause in which he did not believe, but the sheer number of verses written around the time of the coronation suggests that Lydgate was a willing participant in, and may even have presided over, some of the events. Nevertheless, we ought not to read too much into these works as markers of Lydgate's personal political views. Coronation ceremonies in general are not so much an endorsement of the regime in power as they are a validation of an entire political system, in Lydgate's time a constitutional monarchy thought to be divinely ordained, and

¹⁶⁵On 7 May 1429, under the leadership of "La Pucelle," the French relieved Orléans, an English defeat that most historians regard as the major turning point in the war. On 18 June the French captured Patay (and the English commander John Talbot); on 17 July the dauphin was crowned Charles VII, king of France. By late 1429, the writing was on the wall for the English.

one that very few individuals, certainly not an orthodox monk from a privileged monastery, would be likely to call into serious question.

Although Lydgate's coronation poems deal with much the same thematic material (even to the point where some of the stanzas would be almost interchangeable from one poem to another), there are still strong threads of resistance apparent in the political advice that Lydgate cannot resist interweaving, ostensibly for the benefit of the boy-king, but indirectly addressed to the royal handlers, the king's council. Because the coronation poems are generally written to commemorate a precise historical event, they can usually be dated with some precision. *Title and Pedigree of Henry VI*, begun 28 July 1426, by astrological dating (Mortimer 44), is the first of these, and was written in French and English to prepare the case in advance for the dual coronation. Shirley's rubric at the beginning of the poem (MS Harley 7333, fols 31r-32v) is specific about authorship, commission, and place: "made by Lydgate Iohn the monke of Bury, at Parys, by the instaunce of my Lord of Warrewyk." As Straker has noted, Lydgate seems abnormally anxious in this poem to declare his subordination (and allegiance) to the earl of Warwick and the duke of Bedford, and to credit the wording to Laurence Calot, who wrote the original for the duke of Bedford a year earlier ("Propaganda, Intentionality" 117-9). The translated portion is framed by a prologue and epilogue that absolve Lydgate of any personal responsibility for the poem. Why Lydgate might have been reluctant to take responsibility for the contents of the poem is not clear because, apart from the reference to the illegitimacy of the dauphin's claim, the poem asserts nothing that Lydgate would not repeat under his own name in subsequent coronation poetry. Perhaps he was not yet comfortable with the idea of writing according to the dictates of such a transparent public relations project. Or perhaps he did not relish delving into the merits of the Lancastrian claim to the

sovereignty of France. In *Title and Pedigree* we find Lydgate's one and only reference to the dauphin, and that in the lines translated from Calot's original. The dauphin is the "absent presence" in all English propaganda in support of the dual monarchy, perhaps because it is easier to ignore him altogether than to refute his claim. But Calot is writing for a garrisoned Parisian audience in the middle of a civil war, for whom it would avail nothing to pretend the dauphin and his armies did not exist. The poem was written to accompany a common genealogical diagram which shows Henry VI descending from St. Louis on both sides of the family tree. The pictorial representation of the dual claim to succession neatly avoids the matter of the Lancastrian usurpation and the superior Yorkist claim to the throne, and obviously makes no reference whatsoever to the son of Charles VI. In any case, by distancing himself from the poem (as Straker has argued) Lydgate writes a piece that fails as propaganda because the poet refuses to make a "propagandistic claim of his own" (119).

With the sudden coronation of Charles VII at Rheims in July 1429, an immense symbolic enactment on the French side, it became imperative to expedite Henry VI's own coronation. A single coronation at Westminster would not suffice, however, for a double monarch. That the council had hoped to crown Henry VI at Rheims is evident from Lydgate's "Mumming at Windsor," a poem in fourteen rhyme-royal stanzas that attempts to demonstrate the legitimacy of the king's planned French coronation by allusion to the sacred ampoule and chrism that awaits the king at Rheims. Lydgate appropriates, for the occasion, the legend of King Clovis, who is converted by his wife, St. Clotilde, and who miraculously receives the golden ampoule and adopts the angelically given *fleur de lys* as his royal insignia at his baptism. Lydgate is ostensibly setting the stage for the sacred moment when Henry VI would be crowned king of France. Schirmer,

Pearsall, and Nolan all date the poem to Christmas 1429 (although no evidence is cited) but there is a logical problem with this dating. Even if Lydgate is unaware that Charles VII had just that year been crowned at Rheims, it is odd that the royal party would permit a pageant that could not help but remind everyone of the dauphin's recent anointment with the sacred oil of Clovis. And having just returned from doing government business in France, it is inconceivable that Lydgate would not have heard about the coronation of the dauphin. For this reason one might expect an earlier date, perhaps 1428, for the "Mumming at Windsor"; we know the king was at Eltham at Christmas 1425 and 1426, at Hertford in 1427, and quite possibly back at Eltham in 1428.¹⁶⁶ It would be odd, however, for Lydgate to be referring, in 1428, to the intended coronation at Rheims before the English coronation had even taken place.¹⁶⁷ On the other hand, if the Christmas 1429 dating is correct, as by the process of elimination it appears to be, the date raises the possibility that the poem is actually a sly piece of counter-propaganda intended to act as an inconvenient reminder that since the dauphin is now the anointed king of France, it might be prudent to negotiate a peace

¹⁶⁶The evidence for the young king's whereabouts at Christmas is as follows: in 1425 Henry VI was probably at Eltham because he was there in late October when the duke of Gloucester had tried in vain to wrest him away from Beaufort's custody (Wolffe, 40-1); at Christmas 1426 in Eltham "he was entertained by Jack Travail's London players" (Wolffe, 37); at Christmas 1427 "the John Travail players were again at Eltham" (Wolffe, 37), but Pearsall (*Bio-Bibliography*, 28) has shown that the king himself was at Hertford in 1427 for the *Mumming at Hertford* and the "New Year's Gift" (see also Forbes, 66-67). When Warwick took over the boy's education in June 1428 he designated Windsor as the official winter residence (Wolffe, 45) but according to Forbes there is evidence that the king was at Eltham for Christmas 1428 (66). Thus the king was probably at Windsor for Christmas 1429 where the "Mumming" took place. By Christmas 1430, the king was in France.

¹⁶⁷The first record of the council's intention to have the king crowned in France is, coincidentally, to be found in the Curteys register, dated 21 February 1430 (MS Additional 14848, fol. 76v). Thanks to the political acumen of Abbot Curteys, Bury St. Edmunds was never far out of the political loop.

treaty. We only know from Shirley's rubric that Lydgate wrote the poem for a Christmas pageant; we have no idea how it was received, or whether it was ever enacted. Regardless of when it was written, as a historical document it is hugely ironic. One can only speculate whether Lydgate intended the irony, but the poem is very difficult to explain in any other terms. As it happened, with the city of Rheims firmly under the control of the French, the king's handlers had to settle for a coronation in Paris—*sans* the sacred oil of Clovis, which they did not possess—and the event took almost two years to arrange, so dangerous was the journey to Paris for the king.

Lydgate did not attend Henry VI's coronation in Paris in December 1431 (or there would be verse to mark the occasion), but he did write a number of poems in commemoration of the Westminster coronation in November 1429. The first of these coronation poems is the "Ballade on a New Years Gift of an Eagle," dated 31 December 1427 by Pearsall, and although the poem does not allude, except perhaps through its symbolism, to the coronation, it is written in anticipation of the ceremony.¹⁶⁸ Pearsall's dating is supported by "a warrant for payment for jewels for New Year's gifts for 12 February 1428" (*Bio-Bibliography* 28). Rossell Hope Robbins, ignoring Shirley's rubric, mistakes the reference to the queen in the poem for Queen Margaret and dates the poem 1446, after the king's marriage, "about which time hopes for a prolonged peace between England and France increased" (258). But MS Trinity R.3.20 attests to Lydgate's authorship (and the queen-mother's presence) in Shirley's own hand: "This balade was gyven vn to the kyng Henry ye vj and to his moder the qweene Kateryne sitting at the mete vpon the yeris day in the Castell of Hertford made by Ledegate." What is intriguing about Robbins's comment is that, although he is

¹⁶⁸That the eagle was a Lancastrian coronation symbol is well established (Sandquist 330-44).

clearly mistaken about the date of the poem, he nevertheless interprets it as a petition for peace—an obvious reading—whereas other critics (working from a different set of imperatives) project it as a piece of nostalgia for the reign of Henry V, and, by implication, an endorsement of the duke of Bedford’s policy of further expansion in France (e.g., Schirmer 133).

Lydgate had apparently been asked to write verse to accompany the gift of an eagle, a gold signet ring, to the young king. In overall form and content there is little to distinguish this work from the “Mumming at Eltham” (both of which can be found together in the same two manuscripts, MS Trinity R.3.20 and MS Additional 29729),¹⁶⁹ in which the king and his mother were presented with gifts symbolizing peace and prosperity. It is only by chance that this poem is designated a “ballade” and not a mumming (or perhaps that the Eltham piece is designated a mumming and not a ballade). The New Year’s ballad consists of ten rhyme-royal stanzas with two repeating, slightly varying refrains, and an envoy. The first five stanzas are addressed to the king with a repeating refrain. The next five stanzas are addressed to the queen-mother and repeat a different refrain, “Helthe and welfare, ioye and prospertite.” The final stanza, the envoy, combines both refrains. This is precisely the formula that Lydgate had used earlier in his “Mumming at Eltham”; if the one is a mumming then clearly so is the other, although the “New Year’s Ballade” has never been discussed as such.

The gift of the eagle, highly symbolic to the Lancastrians and selected, no doubt, by the organizers of the event (Gloucester, or Warwick, or one or more of the council members), is intended to symbolize conquest and to hearken back to the glory days of Henry V, as Schirmer

¹⁶⁹On a textual note, MacCracken, *Minor Poems 2*: 672, gives the wrong location for the “Mumming at Eltham” in MS Additional 29729, which actually begins on fol.135v, not 132v.

suggests the poem does (133). The eagle was an important coronation symbol to the Lancastrians because of the “legend” (a Lancastrian fabrication) of the gold eagle that contained holy oil presented by the Virgin Mary to Thomas Becket. The holy oil was to be used in anointing the future kings of England, who were then to regain their lost lands of Normandy and Aquitaine. According to Lancastrian propaganda, the eagle went missing until Archbishop Arundel found it in the Tower of London just in time for the anointment of Henry IV (Barker 39). Henry IV was the first king to be anointed with the oil in fulfillment of the Virgin’s prophecy—a spiritual justification for the invasion of Normandy, the impact of which was lessened somewhat by the royal head lice uncovered in the anointing (Sandquist 330-344; Walsingham 312). While Lydgate dutifully conveys the theme of conquest in his refrain to the king’s verses, he nevertheless finds a way to make the eagle, ostensibly a symbol of the Lancastrian dynasty, a symbol of a greater king. The eagle is “of his nature fiers and corageous” and sacred to Jupiter, but Lydgate reminds the court of the legend of the eagle that brought the olive branch of peace at the nativity. In Christian biblical typology (Ezekiel 17), the eagle is, among other things, a symbol of Christ or (sometimes) St. John the Evangelist—that is, a symbol of a conquest of a completely different nature. In the verses to the queen, the eagle becomes an emblem of health and welfare, joy and prosperity, a harbinger of the cornucopia that would be the dividend of a lasting peace between England and France. If the poem is intended to remind the New Year’s court of Henry V and his conquests, it is remarkable that no mention is made of either. In this poem it is not difficult to see a cautious resistance to the task that Lydgate was assigned when asked to write verses that would accompany the gift of a eagle, a bird of prey, and a universal emblem of conquest. The organizers would doubtless have preferred a more militarist interpretation of the symbol, a more dramatic justification of their hawkish policy

in France. As he did in *Troy Book*, Lydgate found a way to subvert the intentions of his patrons, this time by imposing his own pacifist agenda on the New Year's festivities.

The second of the pre-coronation poems is a prayer for the safety of the royal family and the English people that was written shortly before the coronation in 1429. Although the prayer is standard fare for royal occasions, it nevertheless displays a level of anxiety that is, perhaps, itself an indicator of a growing awareness of an increasingly dangerous French resistance or, possibly, a reflection of anti-Lollard anxieties prompted by the Hussite rebellion in Bohemia (discussed later in this chapter). Lydgate's brief sojourn in France would have introduced him to the reality of the civil war in that country, a reality that he downplays but does not completely avoid in the coronation poems. The poem is written in twelve rhyme-royal stanzas, the first eight of which are prayers for the English people and the land. The remaining four stanzas are prayers for the royal family, Henry in particular, who is "Borne tenheryte the Regioun of Fraunce / By trew discent and by title of ryght" (60-61), but also for his mother and the regency council, "alle that labouren for hys enheritaunce / Bothe in this realme and in the grounde of Fraunce" (74-75). The final stanza contains the wish that the young king may be safely "corowned with worthy corownes tweyne, / First in this londe, and afterwarde in Fraunce" (80-81). The petition that the coronation may be allowed to take place "withoutte lettyng or any perturbaunce" (79) is a recognition of the precariousness of the dual monarchy.

The poems that celebrate the coronation at Westminster are all much the same thematically, although they take different forms for different parts of the ceremony. There is a brief "Roundel" that immediately follows the *Title and Pedigree* on the same folio (MS Harley 7333, fol. 30v; *Minor Poems* 2: 622) and that was probably sung at some point in the service. The roundel begins

with the assertion of a dual claim to the throne:

Rejoice ye reames of Englonde and of Fraunce
 A braunche þat sprung oute of the floure-de-lys
 Blode of Seint Edward and Seint Lowys
 God hath this day sent in Gouvernaunce.

(1-4)

As previously discussed, the genealogical tree is a motif common to many of these poems, occurring as the main subject in *Title and Pedigree of Henry VI* and an important trope in the “Roundel,” the “Ballade to King Henry VI upon his Coronation,” the “Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI,” the “Mumming at Windsor,” and *King Henry VI’s Triumphal Entry into London*. The trees symbolize a major preoccupation of the Lancastrians—the succession rights of Henry VI in England and France. But the “Soteltes at the Coronation Banquet of Henry VI” also includes a peculiar (considering the occasion) anti-Lollard verse, that reminds the young king that his father and the Emperor Sigismund were staunch defenders of the church and so, by implication, ought Henry VI to be. It is noteworthy that in all of the Lancastrian dynastic propaganda that he was supposed to have written in the reign of Henry VI, Lydgate never once extols the king’s father for his most obvious accomplishments, the conquest and subjugation of Normandy. On the prudent principle that if one cannot find something good to say about a person it is better to say nothing, Lydgate has very little to say about Henry V after his death (and nothing whatsoever to say about Henry IV). When forced by patronage commitments to include an encomium to Henry V, as in the “Sotelties” or in *Fall of Princes* (1.5954-67), Lydgate praises the former monarch’s accomplishments in defence of the church, not in the occupation of France.

During Henry V’s own lifetime, Lydgate was often skeptical of the king’s commitment to the defence of the monasteries (see Chapter 2), but, in his later instructional writings for Henry VI

the poet often exaggerates Henry V's role in defending the church in order to reconstruct him as a role model for his son, a defender of the faith. The reference in the "Soteltes" is the first, and one of the very few, specific allusions that Lydgate makes to Lollardy, a fact that suggests a growing Benedictine anxiety against the threat of Lollardy in England in 1428 in the wake of the Hussite revolt. The poem ends with a prayer to the Virgin, St. George, and St. Denis to keep the king safe, "Iustly to reigne in England and in Fraunce." The accompanying "Ballade to King Henry VI upon his Coronation" also takes the opportunity to remind the new king that his father was a defender of the church: "Shewe thy power and thy might to preove / Ageyns alle thoo that wolde the chirche greve" (36-7); and again, in the envoy, the poet admonishes the king: "Cherisse the Chirche with hoole affeccyou" (124).

The anti-heresy verses here and in the "Soteltes" no doubt reflect a concern that the English Lollards had been encouraged by the success of the Hussites in Bohemia (Holmes 735). In 1428, after a series of victories by the Hussites over attempts to subdue their rebellion against the Emperor Sigismund, Pope Martin V was preparing a crusade against the Hussite army. After Henry Beaufort became a cardinal in 1427 (an appointment that Henry V and Archbishop Chichele had fiercely opposed in 1417) he was made legate *a latere* in England and charged with the task of raising money and an army to lead the campaign against the Hussites. The politics of Beaufort's involvement in the Bohemian crusade, his hostile reception in England as papal legate, and his attempts to raise money and armies for a papal cause that conflicted with the demands of the regency council for the war in France are too complicated to explore here in detail, but I mention the campaign by a leading patron of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds as a possible explanation for the insertion of uncharacteristic anti-Lollard verses in Lydgate's coronation poetry. It is not

generally known, particularly in the context of Lydgate studies, that the register of Abbot Curteys contains a letter, from Bruges, in English, dated 9 March 1428, from Cardinal Beaufort to Henry VI. The letter requests support for a crusade against the Hussites (MS Additional 14848, fols 121-121v).¹⁷⁰ The fact that the abbot's register contains the only extant copy of this letter is an indication of just how close was the affiliation between Lydgate's abbot and Cardinal Beaufort, the principal opponent of the war with France. The Hussites had been influenced by the teachings of Wycliffe and his English disciple among the Bohemians, Peter Payne, so the English felt that they had a vested national interest in the outcome of the rebellion. If the Hussites could succeed in Bohemia, so the thinking went, what was to stop a similar outbreak of Lollardy in England? The more general effect of the Hussite rebellion on England was a marked increase in the persecution of Lollards in 1428 and 1429, a persecution that was led by the duke of Gloucester and his loyal supporter, the bishop of Norwich, William Alnwick, himself a member of the king's council. Alnwick's anti-Lollard activities were centred in Norfolk and Suffolk, and at Bury St. Edmunds in particular (MS Additional 14848, fols 109-111v; Elston 345-353). Lydgate's verse may have been influenced by the anti-Lollard campaign that was pressuring his own apparently tolerant abbot to take action against the heretics.

All stanzas in the "Ballade to King Henry VI," from the fifth to the last, are written to provide advice for princes. Even when Lydgate cites a list of ancient kings and emperors as mirrors for the newly crowned king, it is their wisdom (Solomon), their mercy (David), their nobility (Samson), their defence of the faith (Judas of Machabee), their "tranquillytee" (Caesar!), and not their militaristic accomplishments that are to be imitated. Given the refusal of the king's council to

¹⁷⁰Beaufort's letter is transcribed in Holmes, 727-28.

even consider negotiations with Charles VII at the time of the coronation, it is interesting that Lydgate would venture to admonish the king to “preferre the pees, eshcuwe werre and debate” (126). In a poem of eighteen stanzas, four are what might be called Lancastrian succession propaganda, whereas fourteen give advice to a young king that is, in reality, advice to the council. That advice is not just a moral commonplace, as Schirmer puts it: “to fear God and care for the Church, love peace and avoid war, show clemency and compassion towards the poor, and pay no heed to flatterers” (131). It is a general mirror for princes, to be sure, but it is also a very explicit warning to the government to end the war in France and to look to the protection of its church.

Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London

After the Westminster coronation in 1429, Lydgate wrote one last poem that could conceivably be described as “royalist succession propaganda,” although “civic propaganda” might be a more appropriate designation. *Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London* was written to commemorate the London civic pageant that welcomed the monarch of England and France on his “triumphant” return from what had been a disappointing coronation reception in Paris. The date of the procession was Thursday, 21 February 1432. At some 537 lines in length, in rhyme-royal stanzas for the most part, the poem ought to be considered one of Lydgate's major works. It exists in so many copies (Renoir and Benson list six complete copies, but there are numerous extracts and paraphrases embedded in later chronicles throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) that Pearsall has suggested it may have been written as a kind of souvenir program (*John Lydgate* 171). From the wording of the poem, it is clear that it was written sometime after the event, to fulfill a commission from the mayor of London, John Welles (and not, as is often assumed, from the Lancastrian court). It is, however, a retrospective description of a series of seven pageants and

surrounding events, not itself a script for a pageant. The *Triumphal Entry* is written in the past tense, from memory or notes or, more likely, as Kingsford and MacCracken have carefully established, from an account by John Carpenter, whose letter Lydgate seems to have relied on as a source document (Riley, *Munimenta Gildhallae*, 3: 457-64).¹⁷¹ The poem covers a period of three days (Thursday to Saturday) and discusses the weather on the day of the procession:

A tyme, I trowe, off God ffor hym provided,
 In alle the hevenes there was no clowde seyn,
 From other dayes that day was so devided,
 And ffraunchised ffrom mistes and ffrom Reyn.
 (15-18)

Henry VI's Triumphal Entry is justifiably treated as a contemporary chronicle by modern historians (Wolffe 63-4; Kingsford, *English Historical Literature*, 92-3). It is the direct source of later chronicles¹⁷² and jibes with contemporary London chronicles to the extent that it is incorporated verbatim in several different versions of the London chronicles c. 1435 (e.g., MS Cotton, Julius B II fols 89r-100v; transcribed in Kingsford, *Chronicles of London*, 97-116).

Lydgate's poem should be read not as a script for a pageant, but as an eye-witness account, at least, to the proceedings in St. Paul's and Westminster Abbey. It traces the ten-year-old king's long procession into London from Blackheath to Southwark, across London Bridge, to St. Paul's for a

¹⁷¹Carpenter was the London clerk who commissioned the *Daunce of Machabree* from Lydgate in 1427 (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 177). Henry MacCracken wrote a detailed article in 1911 ("King Henry's Triumphal Entry into London") which draws a close stanza-by-stanza comparison to Carpenter's source document. The article was curiously overlooked by most critics until Gordon Kipling's *Enter the King* (1998). MacCracken makes a convincing line-by-line case for Carpenter's letter as Lydgate's source document and argues against Lydgate as deviser of the pageants.

¹⁷²See, for example, Fabyan, *New Chronicles of England and France*, 603-7 and *Gregory's Chronicle* in Gairdner, 173-75.

“home-komyng” reception by the archbishop and a large contingent of church dignitaries, followed by a ceremony at Westminster Abbey in which the young king is burdened with the sceptre of St. Edmund and led by the abbot and the monks to the high altar. The king then retires to his palace at Westminster where he rests until Saturday, at which time he is presented with a gift of a thousand pounds of gold. Along the route the king is transported past seven pageants: 1) a tower at the gate of London Bridge on which was exhibited a giant to champion the kingdom; 2) three goddesses at the middle of the bridge, Nature, Grace, and Fortune, surrounded by their handmaidens who offer heavenly gifts; 3) Dame Sapience at St. Peter’s Square in Cornhill who offers the seven liberal arts and the allegorical gifts of knowledge and wisdom; 4) Dame Justicia offering justice and mercy; 5) Temperance and Measure, personifying the kingly virtues; 6) the twin lineages of Henry VI and the Christ-Child’s Jesse Tree at the approach to St. Paul’s; and, finally, 7) the heavenly kingdom itself at the steps to St. Paul’s.

Modern glosses have interpreted these pageants in a variety of ways. Glynne Wickham reads the poem as a symbolic contract between the king and his London citizens (1: 75). Richard Osberg agrees with this interpretation, but suggests that the poem transcends “the immediate aims of royalist [or civic] propaganda” and is in fact a messianic prophecy that links the entering king with Christ’s entry into Jerusalem (217). The overwhelming symbolism of the pageants thus imposes enormous responsibilities on a young monarch who is, by the power of suggestion, encouraged to live up to his messianic billing. The newly crowned boy-king is expected to bring in a reign of peace and justice to warring nations, with London’s prosperity as the hoped-for dividend. More recently, Gordon Kipling has explained the procession as a series of liturgical signs, each associated with “an entirely self-contained epiphany of Henry’s transcendent majesty” (143). For

Kipling, while the seven pageants “imaginatively transformed the streets of the medieval city into the geography of heaven”(143), each pageant is a self-contained epiphany, the most important of which is the sixth pageant which represents the two intertwined genealogical trees and their accompanying Jesse Tree. Thus for Kipling, too, the Jesse Tree has messianic implications, although Kipling interprets the pageants not as citations from scripture, but as liturgical signs to the people of London, more to do with Christ’s (and Henry’s) epiphany than with Christ’s nativity. One of Kipling’s casual observations illustrates just how consistently the pageants are in accord with Lydgate’s political beliefs, and why the poet would have been delighted to accept the commission from the mayor of London:

Despite all the explicitly imperial motives for Henry’s double coronation as King of two realms, the triumph has so far taken little interest in descrying the signs of a warrior-king in this son of Henry V. Only the porter at Bridge Gate has touched upon this theme with his oblique promise to sow confusion among Henry’s enemies. Otherwise the signs of Henry’s epiphany have been predominantly “domestic” ones. The city has been most anxious to see Henry as a master of more traditional arts of home rule. He is equipped with wisdom and justice instead of military prowess. This London triumph does not profess to see signs of a future conqueror in the child-king. The armour they bestow upon him will not serve to lead an army; rather, it merely invests him with the inner and spiritual qualities that he will need to be a good king to his people. (162)

Kipling’s account is an apt description of all of Lydgate’s coronation propaganda. The poet consistently de-emphasizes Henry’s militarist role in favour of a monarch who would bring peace and prosperity through the exercise of good judgement, prudence, meekness, piety—the cardinal virtues—and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

What, in fact, all these later critics have in common, is an understanding of the civic triumph, and Lydgate’s account of it, as a work of civic pride, not of royalist propaganda. Here Lydgate’s allegiance is not so much to the parade of Lancastrian nobility as it is to the people of London, their guilds in particular. The procession ostensibly celebrates the awesome majesty of the

king of two realms, but at the same time it contains strong elements of the “mirror for princes” genre, implicit in which is the king’s responsibility to the people. The giant who stands guard at the entrance to the bridge is symbolic of the common people who will defend the king’s rights—always providing the king is open to the message of the pageants that follow. The entire procession may be seen as a celebration of the symbiotic relationship that the citizens of London wish to enjoy with their king. Royal propaganda is thus fused with civic propaganda in the aspiration that the interests of the two parties can find common ground. The heavenly gifts that the city offers to its young monarch (apart from the thousand pounds of gold) are in reality not so much gifts bestowed as a catalogue of expectations for the young king’s future rule.

The poem ends with a majestic eulogy to the great city of London, its people, and its mayor. The work is not without patronage-induced prejudice, of course, as it was the mayor John Welles who commissioned the poem; its contractual purpose is to show the mayor and the city of London in the best possible light (as were the pageants themselves). The main objective of the poem is not so much to glorify Lancastrian accomplishments as it is to demonstrate the power and glory of the city of London as a counter-balance to royal power. London is presented as the “king’s chamber” and, while the city is eager to profess its loyalty, it is equally determined to impress upon Lancastrian royalty the idea that Londoners ought never to be taken for granted, a lesson King Henry VI will eventually learn the hard way. The poem is a commissioned work, to be sure, with all the obligations that such a commission might incur, but to dismiss the poem as just another piece of Lancastrian propaganda is to misrepresent the intention of both the author and his patrons (i.e., the London merchants), to ignore an important historical document, and to overlook yet another example of Lydgate’s Benedictine diplomacy.

Though the authorship of the poem is certainly his,¹⁷³ it is pure speculation to suggest, as several critics have done (Kingsford, *Chronicles of London*, 301; Schirmer 139; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 171) that Lydgate was the deviser or “director” of the tableaux and the scenes.¹⁷⁴ Had Lydgate directed the pageant, the poem would surely read as a script intended to accompany one or more of the visual projections along the way, as do his Christmas mummings and smaller pageants. Nor are the main elements of the procession, as described in the poem, new to London celebrations, as can be seen in the *Brut* account of Henry V’s procession into London after the battle of Agincourt.¹⁷⁵ Many of the props used in the pageants might even have been recycled from

¹⁷³Apart from the formal elements of the poem, including the poet’s choice of stanza, vocabulary, rhyme, and metre, everything about the poem, from its initial modesty topos to its gracious envoy, points to Lydgate as author. There is a colophon at the end of MS Cleopatra C IV, fols 38-48 that reads: “Here endeth þe makynge of þe comynge of þe out of ffraunce to Londoun, Be þe monk of Bury.” Lydgate’s authorship has never been in question. What has been debated is the poet’s role in the actual devising of the seven pageants.

¹⁷⁴The manner in which Lydgate’s role in the pageant has been exaggerated by critical speculation is indicative of the degree of dedication to the construction of Lydgate as the Joseph Goebbels of the Lancastrians. Thus Schirmer cites a brief conjecture by Kingsford, (*Chronicles of London*, 301) as authority for his assertion that “apparently Lydgate was responsible not only for this poem but also for devising and planning the tableaux and scenes described in these seventy-seven Chaucerian stanzas” (139). Pearsall takes the point even further: “This pageant, with its mixture of Biblical and classical learning and its strongly moral and hortatory purpose, is clearly the work of Lydgate, who is thus in the position of an artistic director, or ‘devisor,’ who writes his own souvenir programme” (*John Lydgate*, 171).

¹⁷⁵*The Brut* gives this account of Henry V’s reception after Agincourt:

And þan þe Meire of London and þe Aldermen and þe Schereffes, with alle þe worthi Comeners and craftis, comyn to þe Blake-Heth, welle and worthilye arayed to welcome our Kyng with dyuers melodye and þanke Allemighty god of his gracious victory þat he hadde schewed to hym. And so þe Kyng and his prysoners passyd forth by ham, til he com vnto Seint Thomas watryng; and þere mette with hym all þe Religious with precession, and welcomed hym; and so þe King come ridynge with his prysoners þriough þe cite of London, where þere was schewyd mony a faire syght at alle þe Condites and at þe Cros yn Chepe, as yn heuynly

the Agincourt reception, which was probably every bit as grand a celebration, but was not documented in anything like the level of detail that Carpenter and Lydgate bring to the task. The possibility exists that if Lydgate used a source document, as he appears to have done, he may not even have been in London during the event. He could, theoretically, have translated Carpenter's account into English verse at the request of the mayor of London, without ever leaving the monastery at Bury St. Edmunds. The form of the Latin source document is a letter (preserved in *Letter-Book K* at the Guildhall) from John Carpenter, addressed to a brother cleric, probably Lydgate himself (Kipling 142, n.59). Henry MacCracken has provided a detailed comparison of the poem to Carpenter's letter and shown stanza by stanza, through the likeness of phrasing, how closely Lydgate versified his source. Nevertheless, it is difficult to imagine that Lydgate, who had done so much to commemorate the English coronation events, would not be present at the king's return. Certainly his abbot would have been there (for an abbot to miss an event of such national importance would be a political *faux pas*);¹⁷⁶ and who better to accompany the abbot to London than Lydgate, a senior monk who was enjoying royal favour for his work on the coronation

aray, angelis, archaungelis, Patriarchus, prophetis, and virginis with dyuers melodies, sensyng and syngyng to welcome our King, and alle conditus rennyng wyne. And þe Kyng passyd forthe vnto Saint Paules; and þere met with hym xiiij Bischopes, reuersed and mitryd, with Censers to welcome þe King, and sungun for his gracious victori *Te Deum laudamus*. And there þe Kyng offred & roode forth to Westmynstre; and þe Maire toke leue of þe King, and rode hoom ayen. (Brie, 380).

Fabyan includes summary sketches of similar pageants for the reception of the Emperor Sigismund (581), and for the reception of Henry V and Katherine de Valois after their marriage (586). See also Lydgate's "Queen Margaret's Entry into London" (ed. Carlton Brown), discussed below in the Afterward.

¹⁷⁶We know that Abbot Curteys was in London for the parliament in May 1432 (Elston 555). He would have been there a little more than a month earlier to welcome home the king.

ceremonies? Lydgate's reliance on Carpenter is for the procession from Blackheath to St. Paul's, not for the reception in St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey, the details of which Carpenter does not include and may not have known. Moreover, Lydgate adds detail even to Carpenter's description of the pageants, as, for example, the very significant addition of Mercy, Grace, and Pity (lines 328-48) and an elaborate account of the fruit-laden trees (lines 349-62), which Carpenter omits. The additions suggest either that Lydgate was indeed present, or that the mayor of London had supplied him with additional material, perhaps for a second draft.

As always with Lydgate, his own concerns tend to be reflected most prominently in his departures from his source material. Unless the mayor specifically requested the addition of this material, we can assume it is there as Lydgate's own work. The ministrations of Mercy, Grace, and Pity provide for the king's benefit the wines of joy and plenty, temperance and good governance, comfort and consolation. These lines provide advice for princes; they list qualities Lydgate hopes to find in his ruler, and they are not found in Carpenter's letter:

The wyn of Mercy staunchith by nature
 The gredy thristis off cruel hastynesse,
 Grace with hire likour cristallyne and pure
 Deferrith vengauce off ffurious woodnesse,
 And Pitee blymsith the swerde off Rightwysnesse;
 Covenable welle, moste holsom off savour,
 Forto be tasted off euery governour.
 (335-341)

One explanation for Lydgate's detailed description of the fruit trees in the civic paradise which he depicts following his punning tribute to Mayor Welles (line 334), himself a grocer, is that the Grocer's Guild of London was a part sponsor of at least this particular pageant (Osberg 215). Similarly, the emphasis on wine flowing like water is a subtle reminder by the sponsoring wine-

merchants of the price that would be paid if the territories of Maine and Aquitaine were lost by further hostilities in France.¹⁷⁷ However, Lydgate's curious interpolation at this point in the verse raises the question of what Lydgate, a Benedictine monk had in common with London grocers and merchants. The short answer is that the merchants commissioned the works (see also Lydgate's "Mumming at London" and other mummings sponsored by London guildsmen) and Lydgate obliged. But I have repeatedly argued that Lydgate chose his commissions carefully, not for purposes of personal monetary gain, but to support a Benedictine political or economic agenda. What the Benedictines had in common with the tradesmen of London was a strong opposition to the war that was killing trade between England and her largest trading partner. Whether the Benedictines farmed their own land (and harvested their own wool) or profited from the industry of their tenants, the war was, quite simply, bad for business, as much for the great Benedictine landowners as for the merchants of London.¹⁷⁸

One instance of overt Lancastrian propaganda that does occur in the pageant (and hence in the poem) is the symbol of the Jesse Tree. Much has been made of this symbolism by modern critics (Osberg 217, Kipling 144-45, McKenna 161, Schirmer 142) but the most straightforward explanation is to be found in the work of the sixteenth-century chronicler, Edward Hall. Hall

¹⁷⁷London chronicles of that period contain references to the practice of adulterating wine, an effect of the interruption of wine importation from Aquitaine. See, for example, Riley, *Memorials of London*, 670-72.

¹⁷⁸By the fifteenth century, the Benedictines had generally abandoned all direct forms of agriculture in favour of a system that involved leasing their lands to tenant-farmers who might in turn then sublet portions of the leased land (Hare, "Monks as Landlords"). But the war with France hurt trade, causing economic hardship for the main traders, the merchants of London, and for their suppliers, the tenants of the Benedictines and of other great landlords of England. The only people to benefit from the war in France were the military purveyors and those who shared most directly in the pillage and settlement of Normandy.

reports a speech by Archbishop Chichele (supposedly made at the parliament of Leicester in 1413), the intention of which was to convince Henry V of his entitlement to the kingdom of France. The French had denied the claim of Edward III to the throne of France on the grounds that a female (Edward's mother, Isabella) could not inherit the throne. Chichele reportedly asks:

Is the realme of France more noble then the kyngdome of Iuda of whom Christ discended by a woman? When God sayed to Abraham that in one of his sede al nacions shuld be blessed, how came Christ of the sede of Abraham but onely by that immaculate Virgin his glorious mother? Likewise when the Prophet Michee said, thou tribe of Iuda art not the leaste of estimacion emongest the Princes of Iuda, for oute of the shal come a capitayne whiche shall rule and direct my people of Israel. Howe discended Christ from the rote of Jesse and howe was he duke and capitain of the Israelites, and how discended he of the line of Daud: But onely by his mother a pure virgin and a married wife. Beholde, by Goddes lawe, women shall inherite. (50)

The Jesse Tree thus becomes a powerful symbol of succession rights through a female line, supporting, as it does, not only the claim of Edward III to be the rightful heir to the throne of France because of his mother, Isabella, but also the inheritance of Henry VI through his mother, Katherine. That Lydgate appears to be somewhat disturbed by the symbolism, or at least feels the need to defend it, is very curious:

And why the Iesse was sette on that partye
 This was the cause in especyall
 For next to Paulis, I dar well specefye
 Is the partye moste chieff and princypall,
 Callyd off London the chirche cathederall
 Which ought of reson the devyse to excuse
 To alle that wolde ageyn yt ffroune or muse. (419-25)

It is almost as if Lydgate is countering criticism from certain unnamed quarters (Lollards? Londoners?) for the use of the sacred symbolism. Is he defending against an accusation of idolatry in the use of the Jesse Tree, or against the political symbolism of what the Jesse Tree represents: the association of the young king as the new Messiah, or Henry VI's alleged rights to the dual throne of

England and France? Does the criticism to which the poet refers in line 425 suggest a popular resistance to the concept of dual monarchy, and to the cost of the war in France to Londoners?

Whatever the explanation of this particular verse, it is a defence of a major emblem of the reign of Henry VI, and the very fact that such a defence was thought necessary is itself revealing. For all its ostensible patriotic fervour, the primary function of the poem is to express the hope of the people of London for their new monarch. The young king must have been flattered by the attention, but at the same time he could not help but apprehend the burden of responsibility he would soon be expected to assume. By this time in his career, Lydgate was a full-fledged supporter of Henry VI and the legitimacy of his succession. As a loyal Benedictine, he would do his utmost throughout the next decade to recruit the young king's protection and patronage for the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds.

Retreat

There is a significant lack of flattery of the king's current handlers in all of these political poems of the late 1420s, and certainly no mention of Gloucester who, as Protector in England, senior to Warwick, was ultimately responsible for the coronation ceremonies in Westminster, and who, after the Hainault fiasco, would have welcomed any bit of flattery the poet cared to send his way. In Lydgate's advice to princes his constant refrain is to "Eschuwe flaterye and adulacioun" (*Triumphal Entry* 140), so it would be inconsistent for the poet to over-indulge in the practice himself. Lydgate's public poetry is never obsequious or cloying, but always manages to find a way to suit the Benedictine political agenda. These aristocratic commissions have generally been interpreted as a personal undertaking, and Lydgate has been mocked for his worldliness and self-aggrandizement. Such an assessment, however, assumes that Lydgate was acting as a free agent mingling freely with the aristocracy, and moving around like Kipling's "cat that walks by himself."

This picture is simply not compatible with Chapter 67 of the *Rule of St. Benedict*, even at a time when the *Rule* was greatly relaxed in those articles dealing with monastic austerity.¹⁷⁹

If Lydgate's religious poetry teaches us anything about the writer, it is that he was a dedicated man of faith who embraced monasticism as the best way to seek personal salvation. Certainly his posting as prior to Hatfield Broad Oak increased his mobility, gave him more time to write, and probably made him more accessible to aristocratic patrons. But Lydgate was always a craftsman who worked for the abbey, and in Chapter 57 of the *Rule* there are explicit regulations to deal with the work and compensation of monastic craftsmen. There is no evidence to support the belief that Lydgate was not subject to the *Rule* in his most public period. The outburst of political poetry during the late 1420s is the result of obedience to his abbot and his order.

Sometime after the coronation, Lydgate was recalled to Bury by his newly elected abbot or he himself requested a return, as the life-record would suggest (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 58). The poet-monk may have been starting to feel somewhat world-weary after having tip-toed through the minefields of Lancastrian politics for the past decade. Or the decision may have been made for him by Abbot Curteys, who may have agreed that Lydgate needed to return for spiritual reasons, or perhaps simply because the abbot felt the poet could do more good for the abbey in Bury than in London.¹⁸⁰ Lydgate may have returned to the monastery because he felt his vocation was endangered by too much involvement in Lancastrian politics, or because he could no longer work so

¹⁷⁹“And let him be punished likewise who would presume to leave the enclosure of the monastery and go anywhere or do anything, however small, without an order from the Abbot” (*Rule of St. Benedict* 67).

¹⁸⁰Curteys did not take kindly to his monks leaving the monastery. For a full account of the way in which he exercised his authority over monks who left on bad terms or without his permission, see Elston, 125-37.

openly for a regime that was incapable of negotiating a peaceful ending to the fighting in France.

Whatever the reason, his career as a public poet effectively ended with the coronation poems. The

next decade would be devoted to the writing of poetry directly related not to the defence of the

Lancastrian dual monarchy, but to the defence of monastic autonomy. The one major work

commissioned by royalty would be *Fall of Princes*, for the duke of Gloucester, a work which was,

for Lydgate, a gloriously extended opportunity to do what he loved to do best: to remind princes of

their mortality.

Chapter 4: *Fall of Princes*: Paradise (not necessarily) Lost

The fall off pryncis, the cause weel out souht,
Cam off themsilff & off Fortune nouht.

Nor the sterris wer nothyng to wite,
Be ther meuyng nor be ther influence,
Nor that men sholde off riht the heuene atwite
For no froward worldli violence:
For this clerk ther concluded in sentence,
How men be vertu longe may contune
From hurt off sterris outhur off Fortune.

Ther owne desert is cheeff occasioun
Off the onhap, who-so taketh heede,
And ther demeritis onwarli put hem down,
Whan vicious liff doth ther bridil leede.
Cours off Fortune nor off the sterris rede
Hyndrith nothyng geyn ther felicite,
Sithe off fre chois thei haue ful liberte.
(FP 3.174-89)

Dysdeyneth nat to haue in remembraunce,
Ye be no goddys, ye be but men mortal;
(FP 9.3485-91)

If, as Addison joked, “a large book is a great evil,” Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* must be nothing less than diabolical. At 36,365 lines it enjoys the dubious distinction of being the longest work of verse in English, an immense chronology of tyrants, fools, and occasionally, innocent victims of evil. From Aaron to Zimri (in alphabetical order),¹⁸¹ from Adam to Jean II of France (in chronological order), its nine books form an exhaustive catalogue of the consequences of pride,

¹⁸¹Hence Pearsall’s observation that *Fall of Princes* could just as easily have been arranged in alphabetical order (*Old English and Middle English Poetry*, 231). But for Lydgate the fall of any prince is closely associated with Adam’s fall; the need for good government is rooted in human sinfulness. His arrangement, I would argue, is necessarily chronological, beginning with Adam for good reason, and ending with princes who embrace Christianity and submit to the church.

cupidity, stupidity, vanity, gluttony, wrath, lechery, and most of all, tyranny, the common vices of princes that inevitably bring about their ruin and, with them, the suffering of their subjects. While I agree with Pearsall that it would be an exaggeration to call Lydgate a “humanist” or even a “proto-humanist” (depending on how we define these terms)¹⁸² he certainly qualifies as a later associate of what Beryl Smalley has called “the classicising group,” a designation that “points to fondness for classical literature, history and myth, without suggesting that the group played any special part in the rise of humanism” (1). Philosophically and theologically, *Fall of Princes* is a medieval work, to be sure, a mind-numbing series of exempla, a mirror for princes, and a Benedictine monk’s sometimes sleep-inducing sermon on the seven deadly sins. The work nevertheless engages freely with ideas initiated by the proto-humanists such as Petrarch and Boccaccio and is informed by a vigorous study of many Latin classics.

Perhaps the most provocative of all these ideas is the ultimately political notion that individuals in positions of high authority are accountable not only to God and to their fellow rulers, but to the commonwealth of citizens, the body politic, for their actions. Lydgate regularly challenges the constant refrain of Boccaccio that it is the inevitable turn of Fortune’s wheel that brings about the downfall of princes. He argues repeatedly that Dame Fortune is a false goddess, a convenient excuse for bad behaviour by princes, an idol to be overthrown by Christian virtue—just as Pope Benefice replaced the false gods of the Pantheon with statues of the martyrs and Mary (*FP* 9.36-42). For Lydgate, the one antidote against the vicissitudes of fortune is responsible government

¹⁸²“Looking for signs of humanism in Lydgate is an unrewarding task, because the whole direction of his mind is medieval” (Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 15). But I suggest that “humanism” is a word of many meanings, like “renaissance.” Other critics, such as Schirmer, Renoir, and Scanlon, in particular, have detected transitional signposts in Lydgate’s work that point the way to the Renaissance.

made possible by the virtuous life of princes; the surest path to ruin is sinful abuse of power. Though Lydgate's source material may itself be sometimes highly resistant to any manifestation of royal self-determination, though inconsistencies may abound throughout the translated text (the reasons for which I shall try to explain), the poet remains, on the whole, committed to the proposition that princely virtue is its own reward, and that blind Fortune is essentially a chimera and an excuse, as is the belief in a destiny predetermined by the alignment of stars and planets. In this respect he departs from his primary sources, Boccaccio's Latin prose work *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*, and his more immediate source, Laurent de Premierfait's French prose translation, *Des Cas des Nobles Hommes et Femmes*. Though far too long, moralistic, and repetitive for twentieth-century taste, *Fall of Princes* is much more an adaptation than a translation in the modern sense, a work of great originality, "an extremely independent retelling" as Eleanor Hammond described it ("Poet and Patron" 122). As he did in *Troy Book* and other royal commissions, Lydgate finds ways to break free of the constraints of patronage and source material to fashion verse that is very much a statement of his own politics. The poet is never averse to challenging classical and medieval political theorists from Aristotle to John Wycliffe.

The Poet-Patron Relationship

Some earlier scholarship has positioned Lydgate in the household of Duke Humphrey at Greenwich dutifully submitting his work to the learned duke for correction. David Wallace's observation, to cite but one example, is typical of the general formulation of the Lydgate-Humphrey relationship: "Lydgate plainly falls victim to the contradiction at the heart of his enterprise: that of trying to write of past *viri illustres* while a contemporary 'myghty man' wields a pen and scraper at his side" (333). While Lydgate was undoubtedly conscious of the irony of writing about the tragic

fate of foolish princes for a potentate who by the time of the work's completion, if not before, was himself in danger of a great fall, there is every indication that the poet, perhaps cautioned by this awareness, actually preferred to keep the relationship with his patron at arm's length. Lydgate retired permanently to his abbey at Bury St. Edmunds before 1433. Before doing so, he seems to have accepted the commission from Duke Humphrey to begin translation of *Fall of Princes*; the petition to his prior at Hatfield for formal readmittance to the mother-house (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 58) may have been prompted, apart from the religious reasons suggested earlier, by the practical necessity of having ready access to one of the few libraries in England with sufficient resources to support this massive undertaking. Whatever Humphrey's motives in commissioning the work in the first place, the project was clearly a dream come true for Lydgate, an opportunity to engage, with royal and abbatial support, in his favorite pastime, the admonishment of the aristocracy. Shielded by the material itself—most of which was safely derived from antiquity and none of which ever touched directly on contemporary events—and by the dual filter of a French translation of a Latin original, Lydgate could chastise aristocratic audiences with impunity. At the same time he enjoyed the opportunity to learn and write biblical and classical "historie" while cautiously projecting his own political theory on an administration still very much engaged in a war to which he himself was adamantly opposed.

If Lydgate began the work in 1431, as he suggests by his reference to "Henry Sexte which is now in Fraunce" (1.375), he was already more than sixty years of age at the outset of the project, an undertaking not completed until 1438.¹⁸³ Whatever Lydgate's reason for returning to Bury, his abbot

¹⁸³Lydgate's EETS editors, Schick and Bergen, date the composition of the poem from 1431 to 1439. By 1439, Lydgate was working on *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus*, for which there is documented evidence of payment by Abbot Whethamstede of St. Albans (Pearsall, *Bio-*

would have welcomed back the abbey's most famous poet and provided him with all the resources he needed to bring yet more honour to Bury St. Edmunds. As his "official" patron (and I reiterate, it is clearly the abbot and not the duke of Gloucester who actually underwrote the real cost of the work), Humphrey seems to have taken some interest in the *Fall* at the outset of the project. After the completion of Book 2, however, the famously flighty duke was scarcely in the picture. Humphrey surfaces again in the epilogue to the final book, where Lydgate delicately strains to remind a reluctant sponsor of his obligation to contribute to the production costs of a work that occupied the better part of eight years and had originally been undertaken at the duke's own bidding. Although internal evidence would suggest that Humphrey made at least one interim payment after the completion of Book 2, there is not a speck of evidence of any further payment. Lydgate eventually received an annuity in 1439, not from Humphrey but from the government of Henry VI, "for good service to the king's father and uncles now deceased, to Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, and to the king, of ten marks a year" (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 36). There is no record of Lydgate doing any work for the king himself, but as Pearsall notes, "the phrasing of the grant may be the product of a bureaucratic desire for all-purpose inclusiveness, and be designed to make sure that any person in the royal administration, past or present, that Lydgate felt he had a claim on for services rendered would by this act be discharged of obligation" (36).

The real extent of Humphrey's patronage is difficult to determine, but the available evidence points to minor involvement in the project. Abbot Curteys kept extensive records of all the major events that affected the abbey during his tenure. Any visit by such an illustrious personage as the

Bibliography, 59). It is unlikely that the poet would have accepted Whethamstede's substantial commission (about three guineas) had he not finished *Fall of Princes*.

duke of Gloucester would not go unrecorded by the abbot. There is only one such record. It occurs in the Curteys register (MS Additional 14848, fol.128v) and can be dated to the winter of 1434 when Humphrey came to Bury in the retinue of the young king (by which time Lydgate may have been nearing completion of Book 2).¹⁸⁴ As discussed in Chapter 3, although an official protector of the neighbouring St. Albans, Humphrey was, on the whole, antagonistic to Bury St. Edmunds. As the political lines became more firmly drawn during the 1430s, the abbey naturally gravitated toward the peace party led by William de la Pole, the duke of Suffolk, Humphrey's arch-enemy and the abbey's main patron.¹⁸⁵ On the other hand, apart from his probable attendance at the triumphal entry of Henry VI to London in 1432, there is no evidence of Lydgate ever leaving the monastery after his final return to residence. Unless the sexagenarian Lydgate made frequent trips to London (a two-day journey in the best of weather) during the actual writing of the work, there was no opportunity for the kind of active involvement in the work's composition that critics have so often attributed to Humphrey. A strict disciplinarian, Abbot Curteys was not keen on his monks leaving the abbey, and was known to take punitive measures against monks who dared to leave without his permission (MS Additional 14848, fol. 159v; Elston 136-72).

The text itself offers a few clues as to the nature of the poet-patron relationship in the composition of *Fall of Princes*. Lydgate's prologue speaks of the "magnificence" (here meaning

¹⁸⁴Humphrey was enrolled as a confrere of the abbey in April 1434, along with Henry VI and most of his entourage (MS Additional 14848, fol.128v).

¹⁸⁵A letter from the abbot to the royal council dated October 1440 requests that the earl of Suffolk (soon to be a duke) be appointed under authority of the king's seal to act as protector of the abbey in legal disputes: "the Erle of Suffolk is a grete lord in the cuntre & goodly to your said monastery to whom your said chapeleins many times may have redy recurs: like it unto your lordships to yeve him in comaundement undir your grete seal to supporte, maynteyne & defend youre said monastery" (Heath, 327; Nicolas, *Proceedings*, 5: 124-25).

“generosity”) of his patron in glowing and optimistic terms, although it may have been a case of early wishful thinking on the poet’s part. Gloucester is designated as “lieftenant,” a title the duke held only in 1431 while Henry VI was in France for his coronation under the protection of Bedford, Beaufort, and Warwick. The duke is commended for his good government, his prudence, his relentless repression of heresy, his defence of the church, and, rather oddly, his determination to overcome personal sloth through scholarly activities:¹⁸⁶

His corage neuer doth appalle
To studie in bookis off antiquite,
Therin he hath so gret felicite
Vertuously hymself to ocupie,
Off vicious slouthe to haue the maistrie.
(FP 1. 395-399)

Noticeably lacking is any reference to Humphrey’s proudest achievements: his self-proclaimed heroism as exhibited at the siege of Harfleur, the battle of Agincourt, and the sieges of Cherbourg and Rouen (not to mention the embarrassing fiasco of Hainault).¹⁸⁷ Lydgate credits the idea for the

¹⁸⁶Sloth is not a characteristic typically associated with Humphrey, a man of boundless energies, but here Lydgate may have been making an oblique reference to the duke’s amorous adventures. Lydgate often associates sloth with adultery or “lecherie” in *Fall of Princes*, as in the example of Antiochus: “For cause of slouthe he leffte his cheualrie / Forsooke Mars & tooke hym to Cupide” (5.1499-1500).

¹⁸⁷For recognition of his supposed military prowess, Humphrey turned not to Lydgate (whom he had reason not to trust) but to Tito Frulovisi, to celebrate, in a work now known as the *Humfroidos*, the history of the duke’s eleven-day pillage of Flanders in 1436, after Radcliffe had done the dirty work of driving the duke of Burgundy out of Calais, and before Humphrey had even set sail from England. The quality of Frulovisi’s Latin hexameter verse has been sharply criticized. According to Roberto Weiss: “To call Frulovisi’s poem a mediocre piece of work would be fulsome flattery. [...] Not only is the composition of this poem both stilted and utterly devoid of poetic value, but even the rules of grammar are frequently outraged in it, while the order of words is often absurd. False quantities are by no means a rare feature in it, while its Latinity can be aptly described as fairly hideous” (“Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester,” 223). Gloucester was obviously less interested in the quality of the verse than in its content.

translation to Humphrey (a common ploy of government contractors then as now) and the poet dutifully defers to the superior judgement of the patron:

And with support off his magnificence,
Vndir the wyngis off his correccioun,
Thouh that I haue lak off eloquence,
I shal procede in this translacioun,
Fro me auoidyng al presumpcioun,
Lowli submyttyng eueri hour & space
Mi reud language to my lordis grace.
(FP 1.435-441)

These supposedly flattering lines are formulaic (am I alone in detecting a note of sarcasm?), the minimal acknowledgement that is always the patron's due, and that Humphrey, in particular, seems to have demanded as the price of his patronage, but they are not supported by further references in the work.¹⁸⁸ Flattery, in any case, is not necessarily a sign of servility; often it is the means by which a shrewd poet is able to manipulate the pompous object of his praise.

The second reference to Humphrey's intervention in the composition of the text occurs in the prologue to Book 2, where Lydgate reiterates the appellation of Humphrey as "myhti prynce, riht manli & riht wis" and credits this paragon of wisdom with the instigation of a suspiciously Lydgatean practice of writing a moral envoy at the end of every major tragedy:

This myhti prynce, riht manli & riht wis,
Gaff me charge in his prudent auys,

That I sholde in eueri tragedie,
Afftir the processe made mencioun,
At the eende sette a remedie,
With a lenvoie conueied be resoun,

¹⁸⁸The unknown compiler of the one other English work Humphrey is known to have commissioned (an anonymous translation of Palladius's *De Re Rustica*, a treatise on agriculture) was careful to highlight, with different coloured inks, all his glowing tributes to Humphrey (Petrina, 266-68).

And afftir that, with humble affecciou,
To noble pryncis lowli it directe,
Bi othres fallyng thei myht themsilff correcte.
(*FP* 2.146-154)

The “right manli” prince could hardly object to a rhetorical device that he himself supposedly instigated. But not only do the envoys summarize the moral of the tales, as Humphrey may have intended, they present some of the most directly critical commentary against the common behaviour of princes (Humphrey included) to be found anywhere in fifteenth-century literature. “Ye be no goddys, ye be but men mortal” (9.3486) is typical of the bluntly reproachful tone of these envoys. The insertion of periodic lectures addressed to princes is something a moralizing monk might very much like to do, but would, if prudent, never attempt without first securing the approval of his patron. Whether it was Lydgate’s or Humphrey’s idea to incorporate envoys into the translation, Lydgate is careful to document, within the poem itself, the duke’s approval for the poet’s frequent outspoken critiques of contemporary authority:

And I obeied his biddyng and plesaunce
Vnder support off his magnyficence,
As I coude, I gan my penne auaunce,
Al-be I was bareyn off eloquence.
(*FP* 2.155-158)

The single clear instance of intervention by the patron occurs in Book 2 in the tale of Lucretia. Where Lydgate appears determined to sidestep a delicate text that contains dangerous republican overtones (on the pretext that the tale had already been told by his master, Chaucer), Humphrey seems to have intervened, perhaps out of prurient interest (2.1002-1008), and insisted the tale of the rape be told. As a source-book for the text, since Boccaccio had passed over the tale of Lucretia at this point (though he would include it in Book 3), Humphrey seems to have made the

work of the Florentine humanist, Coluccio Salutati, available to Lydgate.¹⁸⁹

Folwyng the traxis off Collucyus,
Which wrot off hir a declamacioun
Most lamentable, most doolful, most pitous,
Wher he descryueth the dolerous tresoun
Off hir constreyned fals oppressioun,
Wrouht & compassid bi vnwar violence,
The liht ontroublid off hir cleer conscience.

(FP 2.1009-1013)

Humphrey's intervention is not helpful, as Nigel Mortimer points out (62), because Lydgate's careful avoidance of the republican politics of the story distorts the theme at hand (the downfall of proud tyrants) and renders redundant Boccaccio's later placement of the story. But apart from the premature interpolation of the tale of Lucretia's rape, and the duke's supposed request for moralizing envoys, there is no further evidence of the duke's involvement (helpful or otherwise) in the translation. All subsequent references point rather to the duke's disinterest and neglect of the project. Book 3 opens with an acknowledgement of what may have been the duke's only payment (3.71-77),¹⁹⁰ although later in this same book Lydgate will summon his best poverty topos to complain of a lack of financial support for the work (3.3865-71). From the end of Book 3 to the final envoy in Book 9 there is no mention of the duke, except by oblique reference to some of the adulterous princes in Lydgate's extended rants against the duke's favorite vice ("On immorality,"

¹⁸⁹Coluccio di Pierio di Salutati (1331-1406). See Mortimer, 69-72.

¹⁹⁰It is possible that Lydgate delivered the first two books to Humphrey in 1434 when the duke was at the abbey in the company of Henry VI. The opening to Book 3 suggests the resumption of the translation task after a long lay-off (during which time Lydgate was working on *Life of St. Edmund* and the *Cartae Versificatae*). Lydgate obviously would have given higher priority to the preparation of *Life of St. Edmund* for Henry VI. But if ever the duke had the time and opportunity to take an active interest in Lydgate's work, it was during his stay at the abbey in 1434.

3.1149-1638; “Charles of Anjou,” 9.1856-2048). The last address to the patron is another plea for payment, but it contains no acknowledgement of the duke’s support either as editor or supplier of texts or even as financial backer to the project:

Yit of Bachus seryd wer the vynes,
Off Mygdas touch the aureat lycour,
And of Iuno wellys crystallynes
Wer dried vp; ther fond I no favour [...]

Trustyng ageynward your liberal largesse,
Off this cotidien shal relevyn me,
Hope hath brought tydyng to recure myn accesse;
Afftir this ebbe of froward skarsete
Shal folwe a spryng flood of gracious plente,
To wasshe a-way be plentevous influence
Al ground ebbys of constreyned indigence.

(FP 9.3338-41; 3345-51)

The final envoy to Humphrey actually contains a velvet-fisted threat to the duke should he fail to honour his commitments. Writers have the power, Lydgate reminds him, as he reminded Henry V in *Troy Book* (Prologue 184-94), to make or break the reputation of princes:

As men dysserve, be record of wrytyng,
An expert thyng by old auctoryte,
Ye shal receyve your mede or your punysshying,
By egal peys of trouthe and equite.

(FP 9.3573-6)

Closely related to the financial complaints that occur in Book 3 and Book 9 is an independent and very clever begging letter (*Minor Poems* 2: 665; MS Harley 2255, fol. 45v) that Lydgate sent to Gloucester in search of payment for his work on the *Fall*. Perhaps because of Chaucer’s obvious influence on the style of this “Letter to Gloucester” critics have generally rated

the poem very highly, Pearsall calling it a “minor masterpiece.”¹⁹¹ Eleanor Hammond cites the interruption after Book 2, and Lydgate’s gratitude for receipt of payment at the beginning of Book 3, as evidence for dating the “Letter” early in the composition of the *Fall* and as further evidence that the witty complaint achieved its desired effect (“Poet and Patron” 136). Norton-Smith disputes this early date, arguing that the poem is another example of the duke’s niggardliness lamented so diplomatically by Lydgate at the end of the *Fall* (114-16). That the “Letter” was written seeking payment for work on the *Fall* is attested to by the title on one of the seven extant manuscripts (Cambridge, Magdalen, MS Pepys 2011, fol. 78r): “This is the lettre that daun Lidgate Monke of Bury sent to Humfrey duke of Gloucestre for making of Bochas.” Six of the seven manuscripts of the “Letter” include some variation that identifies Humphrey as the recipient and *Fall of Princes* as the cause. There is, however, internal evidence that the poem was written from the comfort of the abbey: there is no drug in the Bury apothecary for the disease of the poet’s purse (lines 11-12).¹⁹² The image of the starving poet that Lydgate conjures up in this letter is obviously rhetorical and ought not to be understood as a genuine plea of poverty.

As previously noted, at no point in the entire nine books is there any support or acknowledgement of the duke’s proudest boast during these years, his exploits at Calais and in Flanders.¹⁹³ Lydgate does not indicate what he thought of his patron’s behaviour in Flanders in

¹⁹¹Chaucer is the yardstick by which we tend to measure the quality of medieval verse. As James Simpson has remarked, Lydgate’s fate is to be admired only when he closely imitates Chaucer, and to suffer by comparison whenever he does (“Bulldozing the Middle Ages,” 226).

¹⁹²It is possible that Lydgate’s petition for money was a response to the abbot’s austerity budget of 1434 that followed the visit of the king and his entourage to Bury. See Elston, 86-88.

¹⁹³In fact there is an entry in the Curteys register (Additional 14848 fols 192v-193) which attributes the relief of Calais to Radcliffe, a Bury man, not to Humphrey. The entry “follows a

1436, but he certainly does not register his approval of a celebrated national event at a time when England was clearly losing the war in France: the vengeful rout of the duke of Burgundy that Humphrey was quite keen to pay Frulovisi to celebrate (Vickers 249; Petrina 136). Lydgate does seem to have been genuinely outraged by the treachery of Burgundy, who broke his oath of allegiance to Henry VI by making his own peace with Charles VII in the Treaty of Arras (1435), and thereby isolating England, destroying the wool trade between England and Flanders, and effectively dooming all hopes of an honourable peace. Lydgate laments Burgundy's betrayal in his "Ballade in Despyte of the Flemynge" (MS Lambeth 84, fol. 201v; *Minor Poems* 2: 600).¹⁹⁴

However, the full effect of the poem is to satirize the idiocy of all military actions (Burgundy's siege of Calais, as one example) that only serve to prolong the war. In this poem there is, significantly, no tribute to Humphrey, the leading spokesman against the peace treaty that the summit at Arras was supposed to achieve. The anger of the final verse, ostensibly directed against Burgundy, could be applied equally to Henry V's occupation of France and to the militarist mentality of politicians like Humphrey himself:

What hast thou wonne with al thy bysinesse
And alle thy tentys to Caleys caryed down
Thyn ordrynauncys, whiche cost gret rychesse
Bastyle and cartys of fagot gret foyssoun

series of privy seal letters requesting help for the defence of Calais" (Doig, 104).

¹⁹⁴Lydgate's authorship of this poem cannot be proven, but no one has ever seriously challenged MacCracken's original attribution. The style is Lydgate's, as is the anti-war message of the poem. The relief of Calais was, however, the one campaign which Lydgate's abbot appeared to support. The loss of Calais would have meant a lethal blow to the wool and cloth trade, as Henry VI points out in a letter to the abbot that requests financial and military support from the county of Suffolk; the king warns the abbot: "noon englissh man schal be souffred to selle noon english cloth at no marke withynne the lordschippes of the seid duc" (MS Additional 14848, fol. 191).

Of thy gounnys the dredful noyse and soun?
(33-37)

Nor is there any mention of Humphrey's contribution to the war in the contemporaneous "Debate of the Horse, Goose, and Sheep" (*Minor Poems* 2: 539; MS Lansdowne 699, fols 66v-78v), the most topical of all Lydgate's political poetry. The horse blames the wool-trade for Burgundy's betrayal at Calais in 1436 ("What but thi wolle was cause of all this striff?" 420) in a specious argument that the peace-loving sheep easily refutes. In Lydgate's hands, a simple fable traditionally intended to show the merits of the contributions of all workers in the commonwealth (the interdependency of all members of the body politic) becomes an anti-war satire that exposes the foolishness of Humphrey's own war-party through the horse's absurd justifications: What would be the point of making all these weapons if there were no more war (442-48)? How could knighthood prove itself without war (449-52)? If peace brings prosperity and wealth, and wealth gives rise to aggressive cupidity, it follows that peace is the cause of war, and war causes poverty; therefore war should constantly be waged to prevent war. The horse's logic is the logic of war-mongers everywhere: "I preve that pees is grond of all debat" (453).¹⁹⁵ Critics convinced of Lydgate's lack of a sense of humour have consistently missed the satire of this fable.¹⁹⁶

The hand of Humphrey in Lydgate's work is, therefore, much less significant than has

¹⁹⁵ Anne Hudson has found a similar dialogue in Lollard texts: "An imaginary defender of war asks what is the purpose of knights and their swords if not to fight. The answer is blunt: 'Lord! what honour falles to a knyght for he killes mony men?' –a hangman kills more than any knight; a butcher kills more beasts, and to better purpose–'and so it were better to mon to be bocher of bestis then to be bocher of his brether, for that is more vnkyndely!'" (*The Premature Reformation*, 369).

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 201: "The argument is really rather tangled here, which suggests that Lydgate is responsible for it."

generally been assumed. Nor, in general, was Humphrey as strong a patron of literature as was once believed. Modern studies of Humphrey, particularly Alesandra Petrina's *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, depict a less than ideal patron who pursued the humanities as partial compensation for thwarted political ambitions, but whose cultural interests were as flighty as his love affairs and his political convictions.

Humphrey's patronage was of dubious value to Lydgate; if anything, it was more of a hindrance than a help. Though the culturally ambitious duke may have instigated the work, the *Fall of Princes* was completed because of Lydgate's personal work ethic and because his monastery funded the project, not because of Gloucester's financial generosity or editorial contributions.

Lydgate's Political Theory

As discussed in my introduction, if it is a mistake to read Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* as a mere reflection of the overriding will of his patron, it is even more misleading to treat his work as a mindlessly inert translation of his source material. Lydgate quite clearly worked with Boccaccio's Latin text in addition to Premierfait's French translation (his primary source) and frequently interweaves additional material from the Vulgate, Ovid, Vergil, Seneca, Cicero, Chaucer, Gower, Josephus, and John of Salisbury—not to mention his own prodigious memory. The relationship of Lydgate's work to his sources has been extensively analyzed by his EETS editor, Henry Bergen (in Part IV) and, more recently, meticulously charted by Nigel Mortimer in his *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes* (278-95). Mortimer's book is the only full-length study to place his work firmly within the context of early fifteenth-century monasticism.

At a rough estimate, based on Bergen's and Mortimer's work, it is safe to say that at least

one-third of *Fall of Princes* is Lydgate's own (which is not to deny that much of it is derived, possibly even translated, from other sources).¹⁹⁷ Simply by focusing on the points of departure from his primary sources, it is possible to demonstrate that Lydgate's deviations, taken together, form a consistent political theory that reflects the poet's own moral concerns and the economic and political concerns of his order. Lydgate's departures from source, his interpolations and omissions, repeatedly demonstrate his own views on the nature of the ideal political community: his firm commitment to constitutional monarchy as the best form of government; his insistence on the higher spiritual authority of the church (as embodied in the Pope) over temporal secular authority; and his unwavering belief in the interdependence of all members of the body politic. He is resolutely opposed to the forceful deposition and execution of anointed kings (even when kings become tyrants) and to all manifestations of civil disobedience, whether by the king's barons or by the common people. On the other hand, he is much more concerned with the responsibilities of kingship than with its prerogatives. The king must be worthy of the loyalty of his subjects and must earn their trust. Though Lydgate would never counsel civil disobedience, he views "combat and divisoun" as the inevitable consequence of tyranny. From his privileged position as a monk in a wealthy monastery, he is himself, unlike his older contemporary Christine de Pisan, for example, economically if not physically immune to the vicissitudes of fortune and therefore, perhaps, less willing to acknowledge the contingency of the human condition. Yet he is acutely conscious of the transience and mutability of this life and the need for virtue and piety as shields against whatever

¹⁹⁷Consider that the prologues and envoys alone (which are for the most part Lydgate's own inventions) total more than 6000 lines of poetry. Lengthy sections such as Lydgate's satire on Boccaccio's anti-feminism, the conversion of Constantine, the destruction of Jerusalem (derived mostly from Josephus), and much of the legend of King Arthur, have no counterpart whatsoever in Boccaccio or *Premierfait*.

misfortune the future might bring. As might be expected, his political views are as fundamentally orthodox as his religious beliefs, but they are surprisingly sympathetic to the poor and to the mercantile classes and opposed to all forms of exploitation and oppression by those in power. In *Fall of Princes* Lydgate returns to the problem of poverty and to the obligation that the higher ranks of society have towards the less fortunate that he first raised as an issue in his early fables.¹⁹⁸

Characteristically of his era, Lydgate firmly believes in the Aristotelian ideal of government, a top-down polity of one, a benevolent and enlightened dictatorship constrained by the rule of law, parliament, and, especially, the church. Republicanism for Lydgate is an invitation to civil war, and democracy, rule by a fickle mob as in the last days of the Roman Republic, is a notion not to be entertained. Lydgate does not trust government to the uneducated masses, but he respects and values the contribution of the common people to the support of the body politic. Though firmly committed to the temporal authority of the king and to the belief that responsible monarchy is the best form of government, Lydgate's model system of government is a mediated monarchy, not a Hobbesian leviathan. In the first place, the king and his ministers must always respect the law, a law that cannot be changed at the whim of the ruling monarch. Kings must be subject to the church in spiritual matters and must always be conscious that even their temporal power is delegated to them, not directly by God as in Boccaccio's theocracy, but through the mediated authority of the church. Princes must be ready at all times to defend the church against heretics and thieves. It is the king's responsibility to protect the common people and to alleviate poverty in the kingdom. In order to be good rulers, princes must be well educated. They must listen

¹⁹⁸See also Lydgate's portrait of the ideal ruler and the emphasis he places on the treatment of the poor in his *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus*, 2.65-126.

to advice and be discerning enough to recognize flattery. Lydgate is a firm believer in the role of parliament and the king's council, which is to say, in government by a virtuous monarch who takes advice from his magnates, the landed aristocracy (including of course, the abbots and the bishops in the House of Lords).¹⁹⁹ Lydgate's opinion of the Commons is somewhat less enthusiastic than of the Lords (where his own abbot sat) but he never really makes the distinction between the two houses as Walsingham, an enthusiastic supporter of the Commons, does extensively and repeatedly (Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, 176). In Lydgate's model, the main responsibility of the common people, apart from doing the work assigned to them at birth or by authority, is to be loyal at all times, even to an unjust ruler. The greatest evil to befall a kingdom is civil war. Nor can wars between Christian countries ever be justified for purposes of revenge or expansion. Yet, despite his unrelenting criticism of his own government's foreign policy, Lydgate is a nationalist in an age of nascent nationalism, proud of his English heritage and always willing to defend his country against attacks from Italian or French writers with strong anti-English biases (Boccaccio and Premierfait, for example).²⁰⁰ In short, what is presented in *Fall of Princes* is a comprehensive, if somewhat scattered, political theory, as distinctive in its own way as the political theory of Christine de Pisan and ranging in scope beyond any of his English contemporary poets, including, I

¹⁹⁹Abbot Curteys, who attended most of the parliamentary sessions during his rule, obviously believed in the power of parliament (Elston 573).

²⁰⁰Compare, for example, Lydgate's narratives of English content with Boccaccio's anti-English originals: Constantine, 8.1170-1463 (ignored by Boccaccio); King Arthur, 8.2661-3206; Robert of Normandy and his brother Henry I, 9.1212-1309; and finally, John II of France, 9.3134-3238. Regarding this last, Lydgate is incensed by Boccaccio's "parcial wrytyng." See also Lydgate's glowing praise of English knighthood in his *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus*, 1.281-315, 610-630.

would argue, Chaucer, Hoccleve, or even Gower.

Lydgate's Body Politic

One of the most pervasive of the medieval political metaphors used to describe a functioning society is the body politic.²⁰¹ First elaborated at length by John of Salisbury in the *Policraticus* (Forhan and Nederman, *Medieval Political Theory* 37-53), the body politic is a favorite trope of Lydgate (as it was for Christine de Pisan before him) and one to which he often returns to make his point about the interdependency of the different members of society. His most extended use of the metaphor occurs in Book 2 (805-917).²⁰² After greatly expanding the biblical story of Rehoboam (1 Kings 12), the son of King Solomon who ignores the advice of his council in his dealings with the people and thereby loses their loyalty forever, Lydgate writes an envoy of his own on the follies of ignoring counsel and then proceeds to depart from his sources in a short chapter which his editor Bergen entitles "A Chapter on Good Government". Lydgate's Rehoboam not only ignores the advice of his elderly council, he prefers the advice of the young flatterers in court who encourage him to tax the people even more highly than Solomon had done. Because of Rehoboam's great injustices, the people rebel; consequently, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel are lost to the House of David forever, and Rehoboam is forsaken by God when the Egyptians storm Jerusalem. Lydgate draws on the Vulgate and Josephus to enhance the story; he uses the expanded narrative as an exemplum to illustrate the importance of the body politic.

²⁰¹The body politic was a recurrent metaphor throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a favorite of Shakespeare, but Lydgate was probably the first to explore its meaning in a literary work (Howard, 140-41). Gower and Chaucer prefer the model of the three estates.

²⁰²See also, *Life of St. Edmund* 1.940-69, written shortly after Book 2 of the *Fall*, for another extended use of the metaphor.

Lydgate's envoy to the story of Rehoboam stresses the need for a young monarch to prefer the advice of wise, elderly councillors over that of young, hot-headed flatterers. The importance of mature counsel is a theme that Lydgate had developed earlier in *Siege of Thebes* and *Troy Book* and would repeat many times in *Fall of Princes*. The extra attention he pays to this story and to its envoy suggests that he is counselling the newly-crowned Henry to pay more attention to the advice of the elderly members of his council, his great-uncle Beaufort in particular, than to the younger members of the council amongst whom may still, presumably, be counted Humphrey. He rejects Premierfait's translation of Boccaccio's most controversial text (Bergen, Part 4, 172-75), a text that was based on the *Policraticus* (8.20) and was used to justify the murder of tyrants by an oppressed people; instead, Lydgate uses the story of Rehoboam to develop his model of the body politic at length. Mortimer shows how Boccaccio's original text had been used by French writers such as Jean Petit to justify the murder of Louis, duke of Orleans, by Jean sans Peur, duke of Burgundy, in 1407. According to Mortimer (26-27), Jean Petit had drawn from a wide variety of writers, including John of Salisbury, to find support for his defence of Burgundy's tyrannicide. While Lydgate saw rebellion as the natural consequence of tyranny, he could not condone civil disobedience under any circumstances. In Lydgate's opinion, regardless of Rehoboam's behaviour towards his subjects, the ten tribes who rebelled did wrong to break away; the body politic is dismembered by civil uprisings.

The chapter to which the story of Rehoboam gives rise, Lydgate's "Chapter on Good Government," is important as a guide to Lydgate's own political views. Bergen (in Part IV, 175) first noted Lydgate's debt to John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (Books 5 and 6) for his chapter on good government (2. 805-917) and Larry Scanlon has examined at some length Lydgate's use of

the “corporate fiction” metaphor in *Fall of Princes*, pointing out that Lydgate differs from John of Salisbury’s treatment in the way in which he stresses the mutuality of the various parts of the body politic rather than its hierarchy. The poet privileges the clergy by placing them in the soul of the body, but insists that the authority of the clergy must be exemplary rather than absolutist, a point on which he is in agreement with Langland, Chaucer, and Gower. Unlike them, however, he carefully avoids any suggestion of anticlericalism (Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 337-39). Lydgate’s passage completely disregards both Boccaccio and Premierfait at this point in the narrative and he overlays their work with his own political theory.

Lydgate’s concern for the common people in *Fall of Princes* sets him apart from traditional renditions and interpretations of the corporate metaphor. Lydgate argues that the Nine Worthies owe their fame not just to chroniclers; these legendary conquerors would likewise be forgotten and fallen heroes had they not been able to retain the support of the common people: “Ther glorious palmes, yiff thei be weel peised / Be low labour off comouns was first reised” (825-26). The commons are the feet and the legs of the kingdom without whom, the king, no matter how worthy a ruler, could not stand. While princes are clearly the heads of the body, they must always take care to protect the feet, lest the feet let them down. The commoners must be treated with respect, the burden of their poverty relieved:

And as a bodi which that stant in helthe
Feelith no greff off no froward humours
So eueri comoun contynueth in gret welthe,
Which is demened with prudent gouernours,
That can appese debatis and errours,
The people keepe from al contrauersie,
Causyng ther weelfare tencrece & multeplie.

(FP 2.869-75)

For Lydgate, respect for the poor is not merely a matter of moral obligation, it is common sense for “prudent gouvernours,” the best protection against civil disobedience of the kind he himself must have experienced at first hand as a boy at the Bury grammar school. The obedience of the commons can never be taken for granted, yet without it the state cannot survive:

Obedience eek, as men may see,
Falsnesse exilith and al rebellioun;
For bi atempraunce, riht and equite
Stant the weelfare off eueri regeoun:
For the meeknesse and low subieccioun
Off comountes halt up the regalies
Off lordshepes & off all monarchies.

(*FP 2.554-60*)

Lydgate does not counsel forced obedience but urges princes to win the respect of the common people, whose loyalty, in Lydgate’s model, will then follow voluntarily:

And, no doubte, whan lordshepes off entent
Besi been the souereyn Lord to queeme,
To ther subiectis do rihtful iugement,
In conscience as riht and resoun deeme,
Than shal ther crowne and ther diadeeme
Vpon ther hed perseuere & fresshli shyne,
And make subiectis to her bidding enclyne.

(*FP 2. 561-67*)

Critical to the success of any kingdom is the labour of the common people. But for Lydgate, labour must be recognized and valued. Labour feeds the body politic; the ruler who despises his labourers courts disaster:

Folwyng vpon, off entent ful cleene,
Laboreris, as ye han herd deuised,
Shal this bodi bern up and susteene
As feet and leggis, which may nat be despised;
For trewe labour is iustli auctorised,
And ner the plouh vpholden be trauaile,

Off kynges, pryncis farweel al gouernaile.
(FP 2. 890-96)

Other parts of the body have important roles to play in Lydgate's body politic, including the knights and the armies, the hands and arms ("off difence") the responsibility of which is to protect the people from foreign invasions and to protect the church and the weaker members of society from oppression and exploitation. The magistrates and judges who dispense the law are the eyes and ears of the body and it is their responsibility "So egali the lawes to susteene / In ther werkis that noon error be seene" (860-61). Law (civil and canon) is of paramount importance and cannot be arbitrarily dissolved at the whim of the head.

As might be expected from a Benedictine monk, the church is the very soul and heart of the body politic:

This bodi must haue a soule off liff
To quyke the membris with gostli mociouns,
Which shal be maad off folk contempliff,
The cherche committed to ther pociounis,
Which bi ther hooli conuersaciouns
And good exaumples sholde as sterris shyne,
Be grace and vertu the peeple tenlumyne.

Vpon the liht off ther condiciouns,
Off this bodi dependith the weelfare;
For in ther techyng and predicaciouns
Thei sholde trouthe to hih & low declare,
And in ther office for no dreed ne spare
Vices correcte, lich as thei ar holde,
Sithe thei been heerdis off Cristes folde.

(FP 2. 876-89)

In placing the church at the soul of the body politic, Lydgate is drawing on a medieval philosophical tradition that dates back to Giles of Rome's *De Ecclesiastica Potestate* and assumes

the intrinsic superiority of the spiritual over the material (Tierney 193). His equation of the church with the soul also serves to remind his readers that, although the body will eventually die, the soul is immortal and, therefore, superior to the head of the body. Characteristically, Lydgate equates the church with the monasteries (“folk contempliff”) and somewhat gratuitously (at this point) defends the right of the church to its “pocessiouns.” It is the duty of the church to teach both “hiih & low” and not to fear to correct vices wherever they are. Lydgate’s departure from his source, in this case probably John of Salisbury, is most obvious in his depiction of the role of the church, a role that is somewhat downplayed in the *Policraticus* where it is generally subordinated to the head in governmental matters.²⁰³ The more conservative view of the role of the church in the body politic—and the expectation of Lancastrian princes—is that the church would buttress and legitimize the actions of the ruling monarch through appeals to religious doctrine and biblical precedents as, for example, did Arundel and the English church for Henry IV in his murderous usurpation or Chicele for Henry V in his invasion of France. For Lydgate, the spiritual authority of the church ought to effect a significant constraint on the king’s own exercise of power, not provide a rubber stamp for his worst excesses; while the king must support the church, the church must constrain the monarch. These ideas are consistent with a critique of the official church that runs throughout Lydgate’s historical verse. His final hostility toward “Bishop” Amphiorax (in *Siege of Thebes* and alluded to again in *FP* 1.3722), a church leader who knows the war is wrong but out of cowardice shirks his responsibility to speak out, is directed against his own contemporary church authorities

²⁰³John of Salisbury, however, asserts (in Book 4, Chapter 3) that the ruler accepts the sword of secular power from the hand of the church, “reserving spiritual authority for the papacy. The ruler is therefore a sort of minister of the priests and one who exercises those features of the sacred duties that seem an indignity in the hands of priests” (Forhan, *Medieval Political Theory* 33).

who know that war between Christian countries cannot be justified and who not only shirk their responsibility to advise the king but actually throw their support behind the campaign.

Mortimer devotes a complete chapter to Lydgate's handling of the jurisdictional divisions between church and state (95-152) and illustrates the way in which Lydgate consistently reworks his source material "to reinforce the dependence of the secular order on the spiritual" (104).

Mortimer examines the Lydgate narratives (although derived from source material, these all have a distinct Lydgatean orientation) that demonstrate support of the spiritual by the secular, together with those (more numerous) narratives that demonstrate persecution of the church by the secular rulers. The cases of Saul and Joas (*FP* 2.162-532) make the point that the secular rulers (Saul, Joas) owe their anointing to the spiritual order (Samuel, Joiada) even in pre-Christian societies; there is a voluntary transfer of authority from the spiritual to the temporal but ultimately all secular authority is derived from God through His agent, the church. "God makith kyngis and god kan kast hem doun," Lydgate pointedly remarks in a work written contemporaneously with *Fall of Princes*, *Life of St. Edmund* (1.256). Should kings abuse the authority granted to them by God, it is not Dame Fortune who will bring about their destruction, but a just God whose patience has run out. The care that Lydgate devotes to the anointment narratives is reminiscent of the coronation poetry he wrote for Henry VI a few years earlier. Lydgate's coronations, as Mortimer points out, take the form of a feudal "election" in which the witnesses and participants "form a legally constituted body who will legitimize the transfer of rightful authority which the [coronation] ritual is to enact" (101). God delegates authority to his temporal rulers through the prelates of the church.

Lydgate's body politic, then, is not simply the traditional hierarchical representation the purpose of which is to justify aristocratic privilege and keep the peasants in their place. He gives

dignity to the commons and importance to the church that elevates their status and their respective roles in society. In Lydgate's constitutional model the commons and the church become the interdependent checks and balances required to curb the ambitions of a monarch unwilling to govern himself. The prominence he gives to the constraining role of the church contrasts with its more modest role in the political theory of Christine de Pisan, for example, where, as Kate Langdon Forhan points out, "the king's role is to limit or control the church rather than for the church to constrain the king" (90). In privileging the authority of the spiritual over the secular, however, Lydgate is resisting a larger trend in English church-state relations that would eventually culminate in the Reformation, the submission of the English church to the English monarchy, the pillage of the monasteries, and a rise of absolutism under the Tudors such as had not been seen in England since the reign of William the Conqueror.

Fortune and Free Will

Boccaccio's main purpose in writing *De Casibus* seems to have been to warn contemporary princes by the example of fallen rulers that, no matter how powerful they think they are, they are not immune to the mutability of Fortune, so they should always live their lives as though their luck is about to run out.²⁰⁴ It is a message repeated, perhaps ironically, in Chaucer's "Monk's Tale," a tale that Lydgate had obviously read quite carefully. The cumulative effect of Boccaccio's tragic

²⁰⁴The only available English translation of the *De Casibus* is Louis Hall's abridgement, on which I have largely relied, ignoring Premierfait, the middleman, for the most part. Lydgate translated mostly from Premierfait (whose work is only accessible from Bergen's excerpts) and who was much less fatalistic than Boccaccio; but in all Lydgate's commentary his opinions are his own, and though he may have been influenced by Premierfait's modifications and may even have mis-read Boccaccio as a result, his dialogue is with Boccaccio, not Premierfait.

narratives is a philosophy in which just about everything that happens to the individual is determined by a fate that he or she is powerless to avoid. By the examples that Boccaccio tenders, moreover, it is clear that not only the wicked are at risk. Boccaccio's best advice to princes is to seek not to outwit Fortune, but rather to be conscious that all success is fleeting, and to avoid too much exposure by seeking to rise too high. In the face of a totally capricious fortune, the best one can do, Boethius-like, is to resign oneself to the inevitable operation of cause and effect, to accept the things that one cannot change, and seek the consolation of philosophy in the midst of a good life. Boccaccio's Fortune anticipates the Calvinistic God whose foreknowledge predetermines everything and precludes freedom of will, except that, whereas Calvin's God presumably has some kind of plan beyond the reach of reason alone, Fortune is blind and utterly capricious. Boccaccio is not openly fatalistic, of course (to profess as much would be heretical). He does occasionally protest that by Fortune he means God, but his narratives consistently demonstrate otherwise. At one point in his prologue to the first book of *De Casibus*, Boccaccio actually equates Fortune with God:

"Therefore I shall relate examples of what God or (speaking their own language) Fortune can teach them about those she raises up" (1). Later in his introduction he writes: "when our princes see these rulers, old and spent, prostrated by the judgement of God, they will recognize God's power, the shiftiness of Fortune, and their own insecurity" (2). Even though, as a Christian, Boccaccio probably sees *Fortuna* as a pagan representation of the Divine Will (or its manifestation), in his narratives he is content to ascribe the ruin of his subjects to the arbitrary spin of Fortune's wheel, and he conveys the impression of a man resigned to a life determined more by "the shiftiness of Fortune" than by God's judgement on the moral decisions of the individual. Boccaccio's determinism actually weakens the didactic value of *De Casibus*, and raises the question: if life is

governed by random forces anyway, what does it matter how princes live their lives? It is, as Mortimer has noted, “difficult to offer ethical counsel to anyone who wishes to avoid downfall if you have just provided an exemplum which attests to the irrational, ineluctable workings of an amoral force” (187). Boccaccio may not have recognized the paradox, but Lydgate certainly did.

A willingness to explain classical events in classical terms is perhaps one indication of the influence of early humanism (as the term is generally understood); if so, it is an influence to which Lydgate is not entirely immune, as we have seen in some of his pageants in which effigies of the gods (Bacchus, Venus, Mars) appear on stage without censure, and in *Troy Book* where the poet is wont, for the most part, to include the Roman pantheon in the narrative without feeling obliged to warn his Christian readers that these are merely pagan idols and ought not to be taken seriously. On the whole Lydgate’s approach to pagan deities is not much different from his treatment of allegorical figures (Prudence, Wisdom, Death, and so forth) and so at the outset of *Fall of Princes* he is quite content to use the conventional tropes of his source material as he recounts the capricious administrations of Lady Fortune. As he gets further into the translation, however, Lydgate’s theological training begins to kick in—sometimes to good literary advantage, sometimes not—until by the prologue to Book 2 he is no longer content to allow Boccaccio’s stoical acceptance of historical events to go unchallenged.

A basic assumption of medieval theology (and of Catholic theology even today) is that man has free will to choose between good and evil; without free will there can be no virtue and no vice, no praise and no blame, no sin and no redemption (Mortimer 178). As Mortimer points out, according to Thomas Aquinas, man’s freedom is largely undetermined, despite God’s foreknowledge of events. Foreknowledge for God is nothing more than the divine awareness of an

eternal present, not a prime directive that dictates the course of the future. When God does intervene in history, to punish the wicked or to rescue the innocent, what may sometimes seem like “shiftiness” is, to a good Benedictine, just another manifestation of God’s justice at work. That any accounts not settled in this life will be balanced in the next is an article of faith that allows the medieval Christian to accept without question the mysterious ways of the Almighty. Throughout much of the *Fall*, Lydgate uses Fortune as a synonym for Providence and is content to tell the story as he finds it; otherwise, when Fortune takes on an identity separate from Providence, he makes it clear that it is his foolish protagonists who have chosen, of their own free will, to worship the false goddess instead of the Christian god. But the poet is a Benedictine through and through and occasionally he feels compelled to intervene in Boccaccio’s narrative for purposes of theological clarification.

Mortimer has argued that, while Boccaccio leaves his princes to the mercy of a blind, malevolent, and essentially unjust Fortune, Lydgate, though somewhat more ambivalent, shares many of Boccaccio’s fatalistic tendencies and seeks to reconcile the vagaries of Fortune with personal responsibility:

Lydgate realizes that a denial of the power of arbitrary Fortune would quite evidently be problematic in a poem in which some figures *do* fall through no fault of their own. So, while his assimilation of misfortune into the terms of greed, ambition, and covetousness may strike us as a dubious philosophical tactic (and even as an unwarranted simplification of a complex nexus of issues), it nonetheless yields a coherent attempt to formulate the relationship between Fortune and ethical accountability. (194-5)

It is true that Lydgate is constantly engaging with, and finds hugely intriguing, the philosophical arguments about freedom of will and predestination in which, as an educated monk, he was well versed (he studied at Oxford less than ten years after Wycliffe). I suggest, however, that Lydgate

leaves no doubt, throughout *Fall of Princes*, where he stands. In the debate between the free-will advocates and the determinists Lydgate comes down solidly on the side of free-will, human agency, and personal, moral accountability. The Prologue to Book 2 is Lydgate's first unequivocal statement on the subject of erratic Fortune.²⁰⁵ I quote at length to show how emphatic Lydgate is:

Who folweth vertu lengest doth perseuere,
Be it in richesse, be it in pouerte;
Liht off trouthe his cleernesse kepith euere
Ageyn thassautis off al aduersite.
Vertu is cause off long prosperite;
And whan pryncis fro vertu doun declyne,
Ther fame is shroudid vndir the cliptik lyne.

For fals Fortune, which turneth as a ball,
Off vnwar chaunges thouh men hir wheel atwite,
It is nat she that pryncis gaff the fall,
But vicious lyuyng, pleynli to endite:
Thouh God aboue ful offte hem doth respite,
Longe abidith, and doth his grace sende
To this entent, thei sholde ther liff amende.

For ther weelfare and ther abidyng longe,
Who aduertisith, dependith nat on chaunce.
Good liff and vertu maketh hem to be stronge,
And hem assureth in long perseueraunce;
Vertu on Fortune maketh a diffiaunce,
That Fortune hath no domynacioun
Wher noble pryncis be gouerned be resoun.

But such as liste nat correctid be
Bexauple off othre fro vicious gouernaunce,
And fro ther vices list nat for to fle:
Yiff thei be troubled in ther hih puissaunce,
Thei arette it Fortunys variaunce,
Touchyng the giltes that thei deden vse,
Ther demerites ful falsli to excuse.

(*FP* 2.36-63)

²⁰⁵Lydgate's second extended statement on Fortune is the Prologue to Book 3, particularly in the parable of Andalus the black (see the lines quoted at the beginning of this chapter).

These quintessential Lydgatean stanzas are neither a translation nor an adaptation of Premierfait or Boccaccio. They are Lydgate's versified articulation of his own philosophy of personal (and royal) accountability, which is the foundation of all his political theory. The argument is continued at the beginning of Book 3 in the debate between Poverty and Fortune. For medieval philosophers, one way to avoid the turn of Fortune's wheel is to embrace poverty (as in Bob Dylan's modern song lyric, "when you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose"); hence, the allegorical dialectic. Lydgate retains the commonplace fable of his source material, but gives Poverty a much greater role. His handling of Andalus's "fable" of Poverty and Fortune (3.204-707) is arguably one of the finest passages in the *Fall*, as it succinctly and entertainingly presents the complex philosophical argument that lies at the heart of the work while neatly sidestepping some of the potentially embarrassing collateral issues it raises, particularly for a monk who has just finished complaining to his patron about his own poverty. For the Benedictines, Poverty with a capital "P" was a personification with some dangerous connotations, an ideal promoted by St. Francis (not to mention St. Benedict) and urged on the church, the religious orders in particular, by the mendicant friars who professed to take their vow more literally than did the "possessioners." Lydgate has no quarrel with princely wealth (or monastic property) provided it is not tainted with covetousness or niggardliness:

For whan fredam a prynce doth forsake,
And couetise put awei largesse,
And streihtnesse is into houshold take,
And negardship exilith ientillesse,
Than is withdrawe from ther hih noblesse
The peeplis herte; and, pleynli to deuse,
Off ther seruauntis farweel al good seruise.

(FP 3.372-8)

He avoids, at this point, the question of ecclesiastical wealth, perhaps because the issue is not addressed in his source material, but in later books he will come back to the questions raised by the parable. Poverty defeats Fortune in a wrestling match and, according to the bargain made between them, very cleverly forces her to agree that henceforth only fools will be deceived by “misfortune” into thinking that it is chance and not their own folly that has brought them down:

Thou shalt forgon thi dominacioun
To hyndre or harme any creature,
But onli foolis, which in thi myht assure.
Thei off ther foli may feele gret damage,
Nat off thi power, but off ther owne outrage.

(FP 3.640-4)

The above is an adroit versification of Boccaccio’s version, in which Poverty forces Fortune to agree that the latter would in future allow Good Fortune to wander freely but would keep Misfortune in chains. Only those foolish enough to seek Misfortune would have the power to release him or her. In the vast majority of Boccaccio’s stories, those who seek wealth or power or are merely born wealthy inadvertently seek misfortune and almost inevitably bring it upon themselves. Lydgate adds a theological coda to the fable that radically changes its original philosophical effect:

Such wilful wrechchis that hemsilff betake
To putte ther fredam in hir subieccioun,
Off God aboue the power thei forsake,
And hem submitte, ageynes al resoun,
Vnder Fortunis transmutacioun,
Ther liberte ful falsli for to thrall,
Namli whan thei a goddesse list hir call.

With a dirk myst off variacioun
Fortune hath cloudid ther cleer natural liht,
And ouershadwed ther discrecioun,
That thei be blent in ther inward siht

For to considre and to beholde ariht,
How God aboue put vnder mannys cure
Fre chois off good, his resoun to assure.
(FP 3.652-65)

For Lydgate, wealth or power is not necessarily at risk as long as the wealthy and the powerful do not trust their future to Fortune, forsaking the protection of God. “Wilful wrechchis” are blinded to their own power to control their fate through “fre chois” and the use of reason.

Lydgate uses a variety of techniques to correct the effect of Boccaccio’s determinism: the ascription of blame and enhancement of guilt; the construction of the blameless victim as a casualty of original sin and the vice of princes; and the insertion of redemptive elements in existing narratives or the complete interpolation of new narratives to reveal the presence of God’s redeeming grace. Where Boccaccio often narrates “tragedies” in which princes seem to fall victim to a random fortune, Lydgate will usually modify the story, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly, to ensure that blame is properly ascribed and that princely ruin is seen as the just, if sometimes harsh, desert that is owing to a sinful protagonist. While this may seem a “dubious philosophical tactic,” as Mortimer suggests, it is a philosophy that nevertheless works for Lydgate with his unshakeable faith in God’s ultimate justice. Boccaccio’s *Fortuna* is thus marginalized, if not obliterated entirely, in these stories, as Lydgate makes it clear that princes actually bring about their own downfalls by trying God’s patience and risking his wrath: Adam (1. 484-1001), Belshazzar (2.3494-3542),²⁰⁶ Nero (7.614-795), Holofernes (3.1555-61), Alexander (1.6252-86), and Saul (2.134-616), to name but a few. Although Alexander is more usually lauded as a conquering hero by medieval writers,

²⁰⁶Belshazzar, who stole the sacred vessels from Jerusalem and saw the writing on the wall, is one of Lydgate’s favorite whipping boys; his misdeeds are referenced several times in the *Fall*, in *Defence of Holy Church*, and in the “Thoroughfare of Woe.”

conquerors do not impress Lydgate, as we have seen so often in his earlier works. The poet contrasts Alexander to the philosopher Diogenes, who was content with what he had. Alexander (like Henry V), “endured but a short sesoun / For that he loued werre more than pes” (1.6268-9). Later, Alexander is contrasted to the philosopher Callisthenes, a philosopher-poet who was eventually tortured by Alexander for not complying with the tyrant’s request that he “remembre his actis marciall” and that he put “his palmys of knighthood in memorie,” and especially for Callisthenes’s refusal to defend the tyrant’s claim to divinity (4.1107-1449).²⁰⁷ To those whose fall is precipitated by their own tyranny could be added the vast majority of subjects whose fall is the result of other vices, whether it be pride, lust, jealousy, flattery, avariciousness, or ambitiousness. When Boccaccio does not lay blame on anyone but Fate, Lydgate usually takes it upon himself, either in the body of the narrative or in the trailing envoy, to expose the cause of princely ruin that is always, in one form or another, mortal sin. The fact that the protagonist was deceived by a traitor, or by a woman, or by Satan, is no excuse; a good ruler does not allow himself to fall victim to treachery or temptation. It is true that some of the stories, typically those derived from the fatalistic Greek myths such as those of Cadmus or Oedipus are left unaltered (particularly in Book 1) and Lydgate will sometimes even include an envoy with no greater lesson to extract than that princes in their prosperity should beware the wheel of Fortune. When his subjects are biblical or historical characters, however, Lydgate is never content to attribute the downfall of the protagonist to mere bad luck or to a curse at birth which predetermines the outcome regardless of the innocence of the character (Oedipus, for

²⁰⁷As Renoir points out, George Carey has called Lydgate’s portrait of Alexander “the most violent attack upon Alexander’s personality to appear in Northern Europe” (*Poetry of John Lydgate*, 72).

example).²⁰⁸ Even Caesar, whom he clearly admires, does not escape the judgement of Lydgate. In *Serpent of Division*, as in *Fall of Princes*, Caesar's sin is vaulting pride and ambition. When he crosses the Rubicon, he throws the nation into civil war and effectively destroys the Republic. His assassination is regrettable, but not without cause. Pagan rulers often fall not because they refuse to trust in God, but because they trust in idols—the false gods: Mars, Apollo, or Fortune herself. Biblical kings and medieval Christian kings who have experienced the benefit of divine revelation are never completely absolved of blame for their own demises, even if, like Samson, their only fault was to trust in a deceitful woman.

A second category that Mortimer singles out as an example of Lydgate's acceptance of blind fortune as a determining third party, a wildcard in a game of chance, is what might be termed the trope of the innocent victim. Zenobia, Dido, Lucretia and Jocasta, the countless women and children who suffer from the excesses of their husbands and fathers, the good men who suffer from the wickedness of their wives, and of course, whole civilizations such as Thebes, Troy and Rome that are wiped out through the folly of their rulers, are examples of this trope. Innocent victims these may well be, but they are never, in Lydgate's hands, the victims of a random fate. Lydgate's constant refrain is that princes are not just responsible for their own fortunes but for the well-being of their loved ones and their subjects. Lucretia is violated and dies as a result of Tarquin's tyranny and a code of honour that pre-dates the Christian condemnation of suicide. Caesar's ambition ultimately destroys the Republic of Rome. Troy falls because of the irresponsible actions of its rulers, especially Priam and Paris. Thebes is utterly wasted because of fraternal conflict. In

²⁰⁸Even Oedipus, who is entirely blameless in Boccaccio's narrative, does not escape censure in the interpolated envoy in which Lydgate notes that Oedipus is inclined to vice (1.3819-20).

Lydgate's doctrine, princes must act responsibly, not because they themselves are at risk (though he knows that an appeal to the self-interest of princes will always be more persuasive than one to altruistic motives) but because so many are dependent on them. The reality of the innocent victim is, for Lydgate, merely proof of the legacy of the original Fall. Adam's sin brings with it a heritage of suffering and sorrow as his sins are endlessly repeated by his heirs. But for Lydgate, neither the truly innocent nor the truly repentant are ever struck down arbitrarily, and justice awaits them in the next world, if not in this one.

The main difference between the philosophies of Lydgate and Boccaccio as manifested in their two works is the degree to which princes can control their fate by recourse to a virtuous life and, if they are Christians, by submission to the superior authority of the church. Whereas Boccaccio offers only taunts, and at best, the consolation of philosophy, Lydgate offers hope and redemption to his princely readers. A prince can shield himself against the worst that Fortune can throw against him (or, more correctly, in Lydgate's terms, against the justice of an angry God) by cultivating virtue. The virtues of utmost importance to Lydgate are not the traditional chivalric ones of manliness, courage, fortitude, glory, and honour. Lydgate distrusts chivalry and its cultural imperatives, which lead only to endless wars. Nor, even more surprisingly, is it the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that dominate Lydgate's moral instructions. For the man that would be king, Lydgate first counsels the very practical virtues of knowledge, judgement, fortitude, temperance, generosity, clemency, fairness, discernment, and, above all, prudence. Like Cicero, he appeals to rulers to be virtuous, because virtue is good insurance against calamity; a just and prudent rule is in the best self-interest of the ruler. To these Ciceronian virtues, Lydgate would add piety, meekness, and obedience to the will of God (as directed by the church). The good ruler must

know when to submit to the higher authority of God and must always submit to and defend his church.

Examples of the need for virtue abound in the *Fall*, but a few key narratives in particular serve to illustrate how Lydgate modifies his source material or interpolates completely new material to show how princes can avoid disaster. In the Old Testament, Gideon serves as an example of the meek whom the Lord exalts. The Roman king Hostilius, who is cured of leprosy after completing a medieval-style pilgrimage²⁰⁹ (another deliberate Lydgatean anachronism), Theodosius, whose penitence and submission to the church after his excommunication by Bishop Ambrose is an example for all Christian rulers (8. 2003-79), and Constantine, whose famous Donation and protection of the church make him Lydgate's ideal king (8.1171-1463)²¹⁰ are examples of Lydgatean adaptations intended not only to privilege the spiritual over the secular orders, as Mortimer suggests (104), but also to demonstrate the power of free will over the tyranny of a contingent fate. In Lydgate's hands these stories become narratives of redemption, not further exempla of princely ruin, to the point that Lydgate has been accused of fracturing the tragic unity of Boccaccio's *De Casibus* in departing from his sources. But Lydgate nevertheless preserves a unity of his own. His argument is not that ruin, like a bolt of lightning, can strike anyone at any time but that, if it does

²⁰⁹Lydgate's story of Hostilius is told in two parts (2.4292-4460; 3.740-56), interrupted by Lydgate's superb envoy to Rome and his even better parable of Poverty and Fortune (end of Book 2 and beginning of Book 3). Lydgate draws a most confusing moral to the narrative of Hostilius, as Hostilius's only offence is that he worships the wrong gods (and contracts leprosy as the price of his idolatry) but is cured, rather illogically, by making a medieval style pilgrimage to a temple that houses the same false gods. Lydgate's point here is that it is only when Hostilius submits to the "church" that he is able, temporarily at least, to avoid a hostile fate. Lydgate was not content to leave the Hostilius narrative incompletely told by Boccaccio in Book 2 because his source gives no obvious reason for the fall of the Roman king.

²¹⁰In other works, Constantine is eclipsed as a model ruler by Edmund in *Life of St. Edmund* (1435) and perhaps also by Alban in *Saint Albon and Amphibalus* (1439).

strike, its disastrous effects can be neutralized through obedience to the Divine Will.

When Boccaccio and Premierfait tell of the downfall of princes, their emphasis is on the tragedy that awaits these rulers, not the redemption that is possible for them through the exercise of pagan or Christian virtue. Lydgate is more interested in the possibility of redemption than the inevitability of failure. For this purpose, the most useful example from history is Constantine, whose story, to Lydgate's chagrin, Boccaccio pays short shrift mainly because it does not work as a tragic *casus* narrative:

Off this mateer stynte I wil awhile
And folwe myn owne strange oppynyoun,
Fro Constancius turne away my stile,
To his fadir make a digressioun,
Cause Bochas maketh but short menciou
Of Constantyn, which be record of clerkis,
Was so notable founde in al his werkis.

(FP 8.1169-76)

In fact, the entire chapter on Constantine (8.1170-1463) is, as Bergen points out, "interpolated by Lydgate, and has no counterpart in either Boccaccio or Laurence" (Part IV, 309). Constantine is a prince who, in meekness, submits his temporal authority to the church (in spiritual matters) and in return receives the blessing and protection of God, from whom all authority is ultimately derived. That Lydgate gives great emphasis to the narrative of the Donation of Constantine is not surprising, touching as it does on an issue of utmost importance to the Benedictines in the 1430s, the right of the church to the possession of its temporalities. Lydgate's chapter on Constantine may be read as a refutation of the criticisms of reformers such as Wycliffe, Hus, and the Spiritual Franciscan and Lollard preachers who railed against the wealth of the church. His position is compatible with that of Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, who at the Council of Constance (1414-1418)

wrote and lectured extensively on the effect of Constantine's endowment of the church.²¹¹ Although the Donation of Constantine itself was later exposed as a forgery by younger contemporaries of Lydgate, including Reginald Pecock (1393-1461), Lydgate obviously thought the document was genuine, as did Gerson. By Lydgate's own time the question of whether or not Constantine's generosity had been good for the church was keenly debated (Hudson, *The Premature Reformation*, 330-5; Pascoe 476; Smalley 194-95). Anticlericalists and reformers argued that once the church was granted buildings and land and other possessions of great wealth it broke with its apostolic traditions and became open to corruption and greed. A long-standing medieval legend, traceable at least as far back as Gerald of Wales, an early enemy of the Benedictines in England (Knowles, *Monastic Order*, 662-74), maintained that when Constantine first endowed the church a voice was heard in heaven proclaiming: "Today a deadly poison has been poured out upon the church of God" (Pascoe 476). Whether viewed positively or negatively, Constantine's intervention was seen by all as a major turning point in the history of the church, and the question was often posed, even by the orthodox, whether the post-Constantine church was true in spirit to its apostolic origins. Gerson takes a positive view of the Constantine endowments, arguing that the legitimization and endowment of the church, while obviously marking a major turning point in church history, made it possible for the church to survive and to grow. Gerson's conclusions are shared by Lydgate.

The first point Lydgate makes about Constantine is that he is a native-born Briton: "This myhti prince was born in Breteyne / So as the Brut pleynli doth vs lere" (8.1177-78). This national claim, though historically incorrect, lends weight to the authority Lydgate will allot to the legend of Constantine (and is one of many instances in the *Fall* of Lydgate's pride in his nationality). While

²¹¹For much of this material on Constantine I rely on Mortimer's account (108-15).

still a pagan, Constantine contracts leprosy and is promised a cure if he bathes in the blood of children. He accordingly proceeds to round up all the children of Italy, but when he hears the lamentations of their mothers he shows compassion and pity, sends the children home, and chooses to live with his disease rather than commit so horrific a crime. The pagan Constantine is rewarded for his compassion with a visit from the apostles Peter and Paul, who promise him a cure if he goes to Mount Serapti to be baptized by Pope Sylvester. The baptism cures his leprosy and Constantine is converted, immediately accepting all articles of the faith. In gratitude, his first act as a convert is to replace the baptismal font with one of gold and to adorn it with pearls and precious stones (8.1247-60). He then commissions other sacred objects of gold and, sparing no expense, rebuilds the Temple of Apollo as the Church of St. Peter. His next act is to destroy all the pagan idols, replacing them with statues of the saints. Finally, he passes into law the statutes that, taken together, were known as the Donation of Constantine:²¹² 1) that Christ who is “sothfast God and man” (a refutation of the Arian heresy) “be worsheped in euey regioun” on pain of death; 2) that anyone in the empire who blasphemes the name of Christ be put to death; 3) that anyone who oppresses a Christian would forfeit half of all his goods; 4) that the Pope henceforth have absolute dominion over all the prelates of the church, just as the king has lordship over all temporal lords; 5) that the church have the power to grant sanctuary to fugitives from justice; 6) that no man presume to build a church without permission of the bishop; and, finally, 7) that the tenth part of all royal revenues be appropriated annually for the building and administration of churches (8.1282-1337).

Following the seven statutes (issued, creation-like, over seven days) Lydgate further

²¹²Scanlon is surely mistaken when he remarks that Lydgate “represses only the Donation” from Gower’s account (336). Lines 1282-1337, Book 8, are the very terms of the Donation, and constitute the main thrust of Lydgate’s argument.

recounts the legend of Constantine's pilgrimage to Rome where he "[m]ade his confessioun in open audience," submitting all his power, of his own free will, to the service of the church:

The peeplis gladnesse was medlid with wepyng,
And ther weepyng was medlid with gladnesse,
To seen an emperour and so notable a kyng
Of his free chois shewe so gret meeknesse.
Heuynesse for passid old vengauce,
With newe reioisshyng of gostli repentaunce.

(FP 8.1373-79)

The emperor is thus reborn a Christian. Then, to honour the apostles, he builds a church on the ground where he lay and promises twenty shillings to any pauper who would volunteer to become a Christian. Finally, according to legend, Christ appears to Constantine and tells him to wear the cross on his banner and shield to assure himself of victory against his foes. Constantine obeys, and under the banner of the cross he defeats Maxence, his rival for the kingdom, becoming sole emperor. The most enduring legend of Constantine, his victorious campaigns against Maxence under Christ's banner, are downplayed by Lydgate, who is typically more impressed by the emperor's defence of the church than by his military successes.

In which estat he meyntened trouthe & riht,
Vpon al poore hauyng compassioun,
Duryng his tyme holde the beste kniht
That owher was in any regioun,
Of Cristes feith thymperial champioun,
Thoruh his noble knihtli magnificence
To alle Cristene protectour & diffence.

(FP 8.1436-42)

Constantine is clearly Lydgate's first choice as a mirror for princes. As the western emperor he is most noteworthy for his compassion towards the poor and his generosity towards the church, two top-ranking priorities for Lydgate. It is not clear what Lydgate is using as a source (Bergen

suggests the *Life of St. Sylvester* and the *Brut*; Scanlon suggests Gower) but he is clearly being selective in what he chooses to include and exclude in the legend of Constantine. There is an obvious emphasis on the emperor's precedent-setting endowments, his submission to the spiritual authority of the Pope, and the protection Constantine offers the church. The story of Constantine is a church-state narrative about jurisdictional authority that reflects some of the major concerns of the Benedictines during the 1430s. Related issues that strike closer to his own abbey are treated more directly in other works that Lydgate will write contemporaneously with *Fall of Princes: Life of St. Edmund*, the *Cartae Versificatae*, and *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus*.

Chapter 5: “*Judas non dormit*”: The Struggle with the Bishops

Quoniam revera, pater, Judas non dormit. Nam etsi episcopi, hujus operis promotoris, osculo blandi sermonis religiosi applaudant exterius, ipsos tamen, suorum bonorum et facultatem cupidine ducti, ad, ultimate, destructionis interitum, licet adhuc sub occulto, deducere elaborant. Nam nedum ista contra religiosos attemtarunt, sed et singulas ecclesiarum appropriationes conati sunt tollere ab eisdem. Est verum insuper, quod quia articuli, in forma qua vobis missi sunt, ad notitiam religiosorum venerant antequam propositi fuerant et publicati in consilio, dolor non modicus, immo maximus, inter episcopos exortus est, qui tamen laboribus non parcent, ut suum intentum in hac materia producere valeant ad effectum.

Because in truth, father, Judas does not sleep. For even if the bishops, whose works are here disclosed, applaud, on the surface, the discussions of the religious with a flattering kiss, however, led by greed for their own self-interest, are taking great pains to bring about our ultimate destruction—albeit, until now, in secret. But not only are they opposing the objectives of the religious orders, they are trying to take away our exemptions and church tithes. Besides, it is also true that the religious have discovered the articles in which form have been sent to you, before they were proposed and tabled in counsel; we expect from the bishops no small trouble; on the contrary we expect the greatest trouble from those who will stop at nothing to prevail effectively in these matters.

[Excerpt from a letter to Abbot William Curteys from John Fornesete, Benedictine monk at the Council of Basel, 14 June 1435].²¹³

Although Lydgate would spend most of the 1430s working on *Fall of Princes*, as a resident of Bury St. Edmunds and a senior monk (in his sixties) he could not avoid being drawn into the local political and legal battles that would occupy so much of his own abbot's time and energies throughout the decade. These legal conflicts were not, however, as might be imagined, against the Lollards, friars, or townspeople of Bury. By 1431, whatever threat the Lollards had presented to the monasteries, real or imaginary, was now effectively extinguished. The Oldcastle Rebellion of 1414, the Hussite civil war in Bohemia, a Lollard conspiracy in Kent in 1428, and the last of the Lollard uprisings led by William Perkins (alias Jack Sharpe) in 1431 in Abingdon had the unfortunate

²¹³ The text is from MS Additional 7096, fol.161r, the second volume of the Curteys register. The entire letter is transcribed in Arnold 3: 254-57. The translation is mine.

effect, for the Lollards at least, of forging a fatal connection in the public mind between religious reform and social anarchy.²¹⁴ Duke Humphrey’s suppression of the Perkins riot, combined with the Bishop of Norwich’s heresy trials, all but snuffed the life out of any active Lollard resistance in the fifteenth-century (Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition,” Catto 115). Along with the burning of Wycliffe’s bones and the scattering of his ashes in 1427 went any further official consideration (until Henry VIII came along) of his followers’ appeal for the disendowment of the church and the abolition of “private religions.”²¹⁵ The Wycliffite attack on the monks and friars, furthermore, had the unintended effect of causing these two traditional rivals to pull together against their common enemies.²¹⁶ And at Bury St. Edmunds, there had not been any serious trouble from the townspeople since 1381; by 1428 they enjoyed relatively cordial relations with the politically astute Abbot Curteys (Elston, Ch.14). Instead, as the excerpt from the letter, above, makes clear (“Judas non dormit”), the gravest threat to the English monasteries during the 1430s was coming from the highest powers of the church in England, Henry Chichele, the archbishop of Canterbury, and in East

²¹⁴The Perkins plot was based in Abingdon and featured an open attack on Abingdon Abbey. The authorities naturally made as much of the failed uprising as they possibly could: “It was alleged [the rebels] had planned to disendow the church after having removed such obstacles as the monarchy, the prelates and the secular lords.” Nine monasteries and three priories were supposedly targeted by the conspiracy, but then so were the royal uncles, the dukes of Norfolk and York, and the earl of Huntingdon (Heath 310).

²¹⁵Although Perkins had the temerity to present the Disendowment Bill as a supplication to Duke Humphrey in 1431 (MS Harley 3775, fols 120-21v, printed in Riley, *Munimenta*, 1: 453-56). Perkins was executed for treason at Abingdon (Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition,” 29).

²¹⁶A vicious anti-fraternal attack (much of it propagated, if not instigated, by the monks long before Wycliffe had fallen out with the friars at Oxford over the doctrine of transubstantiation) had taken its toll on the mendicants who, in the face of renewed hostility by Wycliffe, began to see that their best defence lay in association with, not in opposition to, the monastic orders. Before Wycliffe, the friars were fending off attacks by William of St. Amour, Richard Fitzralph, and the Benedictines, Uthred of Boldon and Adam Easton (Knowles, *Religious Orders*, 2: 61-73).

Anglia, William Alnwick, the bishop of Norwich.

Throughout the abbacy of William Curteys (1428-46), the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds was engaged in a series of bitter disputes with Archbishop Chichele, and more directly with Bishop Alnwick of Norwich, who were seeking jurisdiction over the monastery in an episcopal power-grab that was part of a larger movement in the church. Had these two formidable opponents succeeded in their attempt, monastic autonomy in Suffolk would have been a thing of the past, as it was at the priories of Ely and Norwich and other monasteries that had fallen prey to episcopal incursion and were now cathedral priories—with bishops, not abbots, in control.²¹⁷ For many years before the rule of Abbot Curteys, a succession of bishops of Ely had been contesting rights to the revenues from writs in villas belonging to Ely that happened to be situated within the Bury franchise. The dispute dragged on for about twenty-five years and was still not satisfactorily resolved in 1425. Abbot Curteys seems to have been able to convince Bishop Ailwyn of Ely to give up his claims, partly by the publication of King Stephen’s *Decreta* (see note 235, below) and the abbreviated *Vita et Passio S. Edmundi* (Arnold 3: 188-211), which he copied into his register. Much more troublesome for Curteys, however, was the conflict with Bishop Alnwick over the prosecution of heretics, the right to ordain the Benedictine priests within his own diocese, the collection of parochial revenues, and the arrest by the abbot of the bishop’s corrupt Archdeacon of Sudbury, to name but a few points of

²¹⁷On the other hand, had the bishop succeeded in moving his seat to Bury, the abbey church, as a cathedral, might still be standing today. One need only contrast the present-day sites of Bury and Glastonbury with Ely and Norwich to see what a difference the protection of a bishop could make to an abbey church, if not to the abbey itself, at the dissolution. Ironically, the much smaller church of St. James, reconstructed, is now the cathedral for the diocese of Suffolk. The great abbey church lies in ruins.

bitter public contention between the bishop and the abbot.²¹⁸ The bishop of Norwich, whose predecessors had often tried unsuccessfully to move their see to Bury,²¹⁹ resented being relegated to a subordinate role in the reception of the king and his entourage at Bury St. Edmunds in 1434, within what Bishop Alnwick considered to be his own jurisdiction. As confessor to the young king, a principal member of the king's council, and Keeper of the Privy Seal in Henry VI's minority years, Alnwick was a formidable opponent to Abbot Curteys. He was at loggerheads with Curteys and his immediate predecessor all the time he was bishop of Norwich (1426-1436). Both parties were no doubt acutely aware of the issues at stake, as their battles were being fought against a background of contemporary episcopal attacks on monastic exemptions at the long post-schism Council of Basel.²²⁰ Except perhaps for *Fall of Princes*, the bulk of Lydgate's work during the 1430s was written as part of a larger Benedictine propaganda campaign against the encroachment of English bishops, and all work of this period has as its primary objective the bolstering of Lancastrian support for the cause of the monasteries—Bury St. Edmunds in particular.

The bishops at the Council of Basel (1431-1449) had an agenda that went well beyond the assertion of conciliar rights in the face of a reactionary papacy. One stated objective of the Council

²¹⁸The best account of the Curteys-Alnwick conflict can be found in Elston, Chapters 11-12, most of it derived from the Curteys register. Various related Benedictine background issues, including this one, are discussed in Mortimer, 130-48.

²¹⁹The ancient feud between the abbots of Bury and the bishops of Norwich, which dates from before the time of William the Conqueror, is detailed in Yarrow, 24-62.

²²⁰See Crowder for selected documents from these councils. The Council of Basel is most famous for the contention between Pope and Council, its abolishment by Eugenius IV in 1436, its suspension of Eugenius IV in 1439, and its election of a new anti-pope, Felix V. It is less well known for its internal conflicts between the regulars and the diocesans. See Schofield, "England, the Pope, and the Council of Basel, 1435-1449," 248-78, for a detailed discussion of the English involvement at Basel.

of Basel was the reform of the administrative apparatus of the church, but in keeping with the power-seeking spirit of the Council the bishops saw “reform” as an opportunity to assume more control of the church regular, the friars and monks, and, in particular, the monasteries that were exempted from episcopal visitation. Arnold prints two very telling letters addressed to Abbot Curteys that relate to the episcopal threat to monastic autonomy. The first of these is from John Whethamstede, the abbot of St. Albans from 1420-1440, urging Curteys to send learned monks to the council to champion the monastic cause.²²¹ Written by a president of the English Chapter of the Benedictines in 1435, Whethamstede’s letter is most interesting because it shows how much he valued the theological scholarship resident at Bury, even though St. Albans’s own scholarly resources were certainly not lacking.²²² Walsingham and Whethamstede had both written detailed apologiae for the monastic life that drew on the *Speculum Cenobitarum* (1375), the seminal work in the field, which was of Bury origin and the model for the flurry of works to follow (Clark, *Monastic Renaissance*, 134). Whethamstede may have had in mind Andrew Aston; Aston was the hosteller at Bury who had written a strong defence of monasticism, “De Institutionibus Ecclesiasticorum Ordinum” in 1426 (Arnold 3: 145-51). In any case, the letter from one abbot to another expresses serious concerns that the Council is about to end with reform decisions that will be permanently

²²¹Additional 7096, fol. 161r; transcribed in Arnold 3: 252-53. Although the Council of Basel was to persist defiantly until the late 1440s, it was formally abolished by Pope Eugenius IV in 1436. Abbot Curteys, who had previously represented English interests at the Council of Constance, was preparing to go to Basel himself until the English delegations officially withdrew from the Council in 1435. Whethamstede’s letter is dated April 25; Schofield confidently sets the year at 1435 (“Second English Delegation,” 61).

²²²For the defence of monastic culture at St. Albans see Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St. Albans*, 254-57.

harmful to the monastic orders.”²²³

The second letter printed by Arnold (excerpted above), dated 14 June 1435 (Schofield, “Second English Delegation,” 61) and written from Basel by John Fornesete, a monk of Norwich (a cathedral priory under the direct rule of Bishop Alnwick), urges Abbot Curteys to send a delegation immediately to Basel to defend monastic interests against the encroachment of “traitorous” bishops. The fact that a letter from a monk of Norwich is sent to the abbot of Bury and not to Fornesete’s own prior (who reported to Bishop Alnwick), is particularly telling. Curteys records the letter in his register but not the attached proposals from the bishops. Also noteworthy in this letter is the suggestion of a conspiracy between the bishops and friars against monastic exemptions. According to Fornesete, the bishops were seeking more control over all the religious orders, friars and monks alike, but were claiming, at least, that they were prepared to leave the mendicants out of the fray if the friars agreed to support the bishops against the monks.

Nam quatuor ordinibus mendicantium, ne intentioni suae contradicerent, aut in contrarium laborarent aliis cum exemptis, promittendo juraverunt atque jurando promiserunt, quod eorum privilegiis non intenderent quovismodo in hoc negotio derogare.

Now to prevent the four orders of the mendicants from working with the other exempt religious against the intentions of the bishops, they have vowed to the mendicants that they have no intention of attacking their privileges in any way in this affair.²²⁴

²²³England later supported Pope Eugenius against the anti-pope Felix, who was appointed by the Council in 1439. As a postscript to all this, there is a fascinating letter (1441) in the Curteys register from Henry VI to the Abbot of Bury, outlining the king’s plans to send ambassadors in support of Eugenius and asking the abbot to be included (MS Additional 7096, fol. 124r; Arnold 3: 242). Abbot Curteys was obviously a man whose diplomatic abilities the king respected.

²²⁴MS Additional 7096, fol.161r, transcribed in Arnold 3: 254-57, and my translation. Fornesete’s letter is not the only evidence of an attack by the bishops at Basel on the exempt religious. Articles contained in MS Cleopatra, E III, fols 72-72v, include proposals against the exemptions of monks and friars alike: “Monastic exemptions were to be revoked or restricted; no religious or exempt person was to claim greater reverence than episcopal superiors; nor was any

Although, in general, there was no love lost between the bishops and the friars,²²⁵ they did, for a while, share common cause in their campaign against monastic liberties. At Bury St. Edmunds, the Franciscan friars had fought for years, often with episcopal and even papal support, for preaching and begging rights within the town of Bury, but the abbot had always steadfastly refused them, banishing the friars to Babwell, outside the town gates.²²⁶ The conflict had been aggravated during the Bury uprisings of 1327 and again in the Great Revolt of 1381 when some of the local Franciscans had supported the townspeople in their attack on the monastery (Lobel 215-31). By 1435, however, the friars and the monks were beginning to realize how vulnerable both of their institutions were against the predatory ambitions of the bishops. It is clear from Fornesete's letter that the friars did not trust the bishops at the Council, and once the bishops' reform articles were brought to the attention of the friars, the mendicants joined forces with the monastics to prevent any further episcopal encroachment on their own territory:

...quod dicti articuli non solum contra possessionatorum exemptiones, sed et mendicantium et omnium generaliter religiosorum, qui aliquas jurisdictiones habent in diocesis episcoporum privilegia laborent.

...because the said articles are not only against the exemption of the possessioners, but also against the privileges of the mendicants and all the religious in general who have any

such person to use pontificals or pronounce blessings upon the public in the presence of his bishop, unless with the latter's licence; members of the mendicant order were to be restricted in their hearing of confessions; it would be necessary for them first to obtain licences from the bishops of the dioceses and from the curates of the parishes in which they were; appropriations of parish churches were not generally to be permitted" (Schofield, "Second English Delegation," 60).

²²⁵See Knowles, "Religious Orders," 90-97. The friars had been under attack from bishops from about 1250. Their main point of contention was the canonical position of the friars in relation to the parish priest. Friars were seen as intruders on diocesan territory.

²²⁶The monastic documents that tell the story of the Benedictine-Franciscan dispute in Bury are transcribed in Arnold 2: 263-85.

jurisdictions in the dioceses of the bishops.²²⁷

One of the cherished myths of post-Reformation historiography is that English monasticism was “in decline” (which is to say, morally and culturally bankrupt and therefore deserving of dissolution) in the fifteenth century, a falsity stemming mainly from the visitation reports of Cromwell’s commissioners. Historians of monasticism from David Knowles to James Clark have shown that, far from being in decline, the monastic orders were actually experiencing a significant cultural (if not spiritual) revival following the ravages of the fourteenth-century plague. While Clark’s work is focused almost exclusively on St. Albans during the abbacy of the learned Whethamstede, I suggest that Bury St. Edmunds, under a less scholarly but more able administrator (Curteys), was experiencing a comparable revival of its own. Manifestations of this revival include the production of the illustrated life of St. Edmund (MS Harley 2278, the finest illustrated manuscript in English in the fifteenth century); the establishment of a library room or building at Bury St. Edmunds, Abbot Curteys’s unprecedented archival activity, and the bibliographic work of John Boston, an older contemporary of Lydgate and Curteys (James, *On the Abbey*, 41);²²⁸ Curteys’s financial support for the building of new rooms for Bury students at Gloucester College (Knowles,

²²⁷MS Additional 7096, fols 161v-162r; Arnold 3:257

²²⁸James provides convincing evidence that Curteys built a library, probably over the cloister, after the abbot had assembled and catalogued the abbey’s already large holdings (41). He estimates the collection at upwards of 2000 manuscripts, of which about 300 have survived. Two documents in the second volume of the Curteys register (MS Additional 7096) relate to the library (James, *On the Abbey*, 109-11). Folio 182v is Curteys’s dire warning to monks who would steal or deface books belonging to the library; fol. 192v is a further monition that all books belonging to the library must be returned within fifteen days. Not to be outdone by Bury, Abbot Whethamstede constructed a library at St. Albans in his second tenure, 1452-53 (41).

Religious Orders, 2: 14-28) and the increase in the number of Bury monks being sent to Oxford;²²⁹ the Bury hosteller, Andrew Aston’s defence of monasticism, “De Institutionibus Ecclesiasticorum Ordinum;” and a large part of Lydgate’s energetic poetic output. In this context, Lydgate’s English versifications during the 1430s, including *Fall of Princes*, may be viewed as Abbot Curteys’s directed response to the challenge posed by a wide array of external threats to the Benedictine order. Apart from *Fall of Princes* (which I have argued in Chapter 4 is much more a testament to Benedictine determination than to Lancastrian patronage), Lydgate’s contributions to his abbot’s campaign in the 1430s were mainly his *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* and the little known *Cartae Versificatae*, in many respects the most directly political of all Lydgate’s works.

Life of St. Edmund

Though we have no reason to doubt Lydgate’s religious sincerity, not all of his hagiographical and devotional material is written for purely spiritual reasons, as Lydgate himself would be the first to admit. Even his devotional verse directed to the saints often serves a discreet political purpose. His prayer “To St. Robert of Bury” contains a request to preserve the shrine and monastery “fro grevaunce” and to “kepe hem fro ruyne”; his prayers to St. Thomas of Canterbury, who “stood as a peeler for hooly chirchis right,” to be for the monks “ther support and chief help at ther neede”; his invocation to St. Denis to protect the monks of the Paris abbey and to “suffre hem haue no wrong”; and many other similar invocations, give expression to the anxieties of the Benedictines in the face of their own vulnerability and serve to remind detractors that the

²²⁹To provide for a good level of intellectual training, in 1336 the *Summi Magistri* of Boniface VIII prescribed that for every twenty monks in a monastery at least one be sent to university (Knowles, *Religious Orders*, 2: 3). Curteys regularly exceeded this quota; in 1441, for example, when there were less than sixty monks at Bury, there were five at Oxford (Elston 146; MS Additional 7096, fol. 127-127v).

Benedictines are well represented in heaven. Even more explicitly do Lydgate's hagiographies deal with concerns of utmost importance to the protection and well-being of the Benedictine order. The work he wrote for Abbot Whethamstede in 1439, *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus*, serves to authenticate the relics at St. Albans.²³⁰ The “Legend of St. Austen at Compton” (*Minor Poems* 1: 193) is a defence of the church's right to tithe but was prompted in part, as Pearsall suggests, not just by the attack of the Lollards against tithing in general, but by the proposal of the bishops at the Council of Basel to abolish the appropriations of tithes (*ecclesiarum appropriationes*) by the abbots instead of the bishops themselves (*Bio-Bibliography*, 36; see the excerpt from Fornesete's letter, above). And the “Legend of Seynt Gyle” (*Minor Poems* 1: 161), while ostensibly a direct invocation to a Benedictine abbot and saint, is in reality a defence of the contemplative life and of monastic independence from all “foreyn power”:

That thy menstre in Especyall
Fraunchised was for pleyn conclusioun,
From all maner Iuredyccyoun,
Of foreyn power be thyn holynesse,
Prelat nor prynce of no presumpcioun
Thy libertees nor fraunchise to oppresse. (315-20)

The propaganda value and political objectives of hagiography as a genre have long been recognized.²³¹ Many a patron-saint's death was politicized by monks in order to bring prestige and

²³⁰*St. Albon and St. Amphibalus* addresses indirectly some of the concerns important to Bury St. Edmunds—monastic independence, for example—but is more concerned with local issues such as the authentication of the relics of Alban and Amphibalus. The Abbey of St. Pantaleon in Cologne had claimed to hold the relics of St. Alban since the year 984 when the Empress Theophano had supposedly brought the relics to the monastery as a gift for the German church and people. Lydgate's work would later be revised to help refute the German counter-claim when the issue of relic ownership became a legal dispute in the reign of Henry VII (Reinecke 200).

²³¹The subject of hagiography as propaganda has been treated recently in book length by Simon Yarrow (*Saints and their Communities*), the extensive bibliography of which reveals how much coverage this topic has received. See also, for example, Somerset.

pilgrims to the monasteries in the sacred grounds of which the saints’ relics supposedly lay. As preposterous as some of these legends seem today, they were conceived and circulated for purposes of protection and financial patronage. It was a rare medieval king or baron who would risk incurring the wrath of a patron-saint believed by all to be still active in the defence of a monastery. Saints who were former kings were particularly useful to monasteries, if only for the example they set to contemporary princes; prospective royal patrons would be more likely to favour those abbeys with royal credentials (Bury, St. Albans, Glastonbury) with whom they could presumably relate. Moreover, since there were just not enough relics of the founding fathers, notably St. Benedict or St. Bernard, to go around, it became important to establish the merits of the monastery’s own patron-saint. Saints’ legends were constantly being embellished and upgraded to reflect the issues of primary concern to the monks at various times in their history.²³²

The *Life of St. Edmund King and Martyr*²³³ is, not to put too fine a point on it, a work of overt monastic propaganda, and although Lydgate no doubt believed his sources to be, on the whole, historically accurate, as a practitioner of the art he would know how these hagiographical legends could be “adjusted” to serve the contemporary political interests of the abbey.²³⁴ His own

²³²See Robert Zajkowski on the evolution of the legend of St. Edmund. Zajkowski shows how the legend was adapted by a series of monastic writers to address the political issues of the day.

²³³I am using the title of the A.S.G Edwards facsimile edition of MS Harley 2278, from which I have transcribed all citations directly. The poem has been edited by Carl Horstmann (1881) and even more loosely by Lord Hervey (1907), but exists in no modern edition. Line references refer to Horstmann’s edition, but folio numbers are also provided as a reference to Edwards’s facsimile.

²³⁴See, for example, James I. Miller Jr., who argues that Lydgate was working from a compendium of many earlier contributions to the legend. As Miller points out, “the liberties [Lydgate] takes with his source material show that he did not regard it all as sacred and unalterable fact” (61).

abbot, following in the footsteps of his great predecessors, Baldwin and Samson, had recently entered an abbreviated Latin prose version of the legend in his register (MS Additional 14848, fols 240-44) preceded by a compilation of the *Decreta* (decrees) compiled by King Stephen in 1150. Together, the *Decreta* and *Vita* are meant to validate the complete exemption of the monastery from episcopal control.²³⁵ It is documentation such as this that finally convinced the bishop of Ely to renounce all claims to Bury territory, to exempt the monastery from his own jurisdiction, and to concede full liberty to the monastery (J. R. Thompson 5-6). Thus, there is an undisguised purpose behind Curteys's *Vita et Passio*: the defence of monastic liberties. Lydgate's poem, which drew in part on his abbot's abridged version, continues and amplifies the abbot's theme. The poet's more memorable, versified, vernacular version, would be important as a source of publicity material for the shrine and abbey as a pilgrimage destination. In this respect, *Life of St. Edmund* is not unlike the glossy brochures in gift shops attached to abbey ruins and cathedrals all over England today. But for all St. Edmund's miraculous powers, the famous martyr, lying as he did somewhat off the beaten

²³⁵The *Decreta*, the introduction and complete text to Curteys's *Vita et Passio S. Edmundi* (MS Additional 14848, fols 239v-242v) are transcribed in Battely, 118-30:

Quia quidam voluntarie ignari, & male intelligentes, astruunt & affirmant, quod Monasterium S. Edmundi ante editionem sive compilationem Decretorum non fuit ab omni jurisdictione Episcopali exemptum, venerabilis Pater Willielmus Curteys martyrrium S. Edmundi compendiose compilatum hic inseri fecit. Post cujus Martyrii finem manifeste colligitur, quod R. Pater Ailwinus Elmanensis Episcopus Monasterium S. Edmundi exemit ab omni ejus jurisdictione, ac Successorum suorum, & plenissime libertati donavit.

Because certain people wilfully ignorant, and badly understanding, assert and affirm, that the monastery of St. Edmund before the publishing or the compilation of the *Decreta* was not exempt from all episcopal jurisdiction, the venerable Father William Curteys has inserted here, briefly, the compiled martyrdom of St. Edmund. After the end of which martyrdom it was so manifestly demonstrated, that the Reverend Father Ailwyn, Bishop of Ely exempted the liberty from all of his jurisdiction, and from that of his successors, and gave very generously thereto. (My translation)

track in Suffolk, could not hope to compete with St. Thomas of Canterbury or the well-placed St. Alban as a pilgrimage idol. Of far greater importance, in an age sometimes critical of pilgrimage, was the poem's value as testimony to a historic shrine worthy of royal patronage and protection. Influenced, no doubt, by his own contemporaneous work on *Fall of Princes*—in which the poet's main focus was an examination of the nature of kingship and good government—Lydgate recast the legend as yet another mirror for princes, in this case a mirror for a particular prince, the young King Henry VI, for whom the presentation copy, MS Harley 2278, was so meticulously composed.

Lydgate himself dates the poem to the occasion of Henry VI's prolonged stay at the abbey from Christmas 1433 to Easter 1434:

Whan sixte Herry in his estat roial
With his sceptre of Yngland and of France

Heeld at Bury the feste pryncipal
Of Cristemesse with ful gret habundance
And afir that list to haue plesance
As his consail gan for hym prouide
There in his place til hesterne forto a bide.

(1.137-43; fol. 7v)

The visit is carefully documented in the Curteys register.²³⁶ MS Harley 2278 was prepared to commemorate the occasion; its verse was written to entertain, educate, and influence the young king while he was at the abbey. While this royal visit has usually been treated as a major imposition on the hospitality of the abbey, as though the king and his entire retinue just dropped in unannounced and stayed for four months, it is far more likely that everything was arranged by the invitation of a very shrewd abbot, who saw in the visit an opportunity to promote the abbey to a captive audience,

²³⁶ MS Additional 14848, fols 128-128v. The account was transcribed from the abbot's register by Craven Ord in 1803.

influence the young king for the future, and secure the royal patronage that had been lost under Henry IV and Henry V.²³⁷

The *Life of St. Edmund* begins by associating the banner of St. Edmund with Henry VI.²³⁸ Edmund’s three crowns, which signify his martyrdom, his chastity, and his royalty, by a curious leap of Lydgatean logic, are made to prefigure the dual monarchy of Henry VI; the third crown awaits Henry in heaven (1.65-72; fol.2r). Thus Lydgate works hard to forge links between the two kings, Edmund and Henry, the patronage of both of whom the monastery welcomes. The monks offer the protection of their patron-saint (and by extension, Benedictine support for Henry’s claim to the dual monarchy) to the king whose protection they seek as a *quid pro quo*:

Hopyng ageynward the kyng shal for his sake
Been to that chirch diffence and protectour
And into his handis al her quarel take
To been ther sheeld and ther supportour
Sithe he allone is ther roial foundour
Them to releue ageyn al wordly shoures
Lyk as to forn dide his progenitoures.
(1.144-71; fol. 8r)

After establishing the connection between Edmund and Henry, Lydgate devotes the rest of Book 1 to drawing similarities between the two boy-kings: Edmund was crowned at Bury at the age of fifteen and his right to the throne was contested; Edmund was depicted as a paragon of virtue and wise rule who listened to his advisors—a model for the young king Henry to follow; Edmund was extremely generous to, and protective of, the church, and, somewhat anachronistically, did not

²³⁷The official decision to visit the abbey was taken by the king’s council at the parliament of November 1433 (Elston 56). Preliminary arrangements would have been made well before that.

²³⁸The troops of Henry II had fought the battle under this same banner at Forham (Miller, “Exploring a Medieval Saint’s Legend,” 63).

tolerate Lollards (“Lollardis that tyme fond in him no support,” 1.1014). “That church” (line 145, above) is Lydgate’s abbey. Whatever his artistic failings in this poem (the first two books of which are greatly admired by critics, the third condemned for its digressions), Lydgate cannot be accused of beating around the bush. The prologue very clearly states his intention: to win the ongoing support of the king for the abbey.

Book 2 relates the surrender and martyrdom of Edmund to the Danish invader Hingwar. In a major departure from all his source material (none of which makes pacifism a motive for Edmund’s surrender), it contains, among other political points emphasized by Lydgate, the clearest indication that Lydgate’s pacifism was not limited to wars between Christian countries. Edmund is no coward; he fights like a lion the first day against his foe but when, in the evening, he surveys the carnage on the field of battle, he concludes that the defence of the kingdom is not worth the price in blood. And he is not only concerned about Christian deaths. In fact, he worries more about the pagans who are killed because they have no hope of salvation when they die (1.396-413). St. Edmund takes a vow “Neuer his liff no blood to sheede” (1:413). When he finally surrenders not only himself but his kingdom to Hingwar he gives the reason for his surrender:

For worldly men jupartie lif and al,
Slen ther neyboures, only to gete good;
But goddis lawe forbit shedyng of blood.
(1.581)

Lydgate avoids the obvious problem of Edmund’s personal conversion to pacifism and his embrace of martyrdom: the kingdom is lost and the people are ravaged by the invading tyrant. But if King Edmund is constructed as a model for Henry VI, there is no mistaking the anti-war message of the second book however unwelcome it might have been to the king’s uncles. Similarly, St. Fremund, Edmund’s nephew and heir to the throne of East-Anglia, when beseeched (in Book 3) by his people

to wreak vengeance on Danish invaders, is reluctant to engage in warfare because he had undertaken “Teschewe werre and shedyng eek off blood” (3.72).

As discussed above, Lydgate’s abbot was engaged in a bitter dispute with Bishop Alnwick at the time of the king’s visit. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that all references to bishops in *Life of St. Edmund* are negative. In Book 2, Edmund seeks the advice of his bishop before surrendering to Hingwar. Only in Lydgate’s version does the bishop counsel outward compliance to Hingwar’s demand that Edmund renounce Christianity and worship the gods of the Danes. But Edmund, who “was not born to feyne” (2.544) rejects the bishop’s advice. Whenever a bishop is present in any of Lydgate’s source material, he advises Edmund to lay down his arms, but never to betray his faith (Whitelock, “Fact and Fiction,” 229). In Book 3, a bishop figures again, in a curious tale that would be incomprehensible without reference to a contemporary issue. Lydgate tells the story of eight thieves who break into the abbey church at night to steal the gold from St. Edmund’s shrine. The thieves are restrained and bound by the martyr himself. The next morning they are tried and hanged by the local bishop, Theodrede, who, for the rest of his life, “Hadde euer affter for that gret offence / Withinne hym-sylff remors off conscience” (3.1238-39). The bishop’s offence, though not explicit, was twofold: he violated both the sanctuary of the abbey church and the authority of the abbot, who alone had the legal right to try criminals within the town of Bury. These two infractions were matters of grave concern to the abbey at the time, because in 1428, Bishop Alnwick, citing the authority granted to him by Arundel’s constitutions, had arrested heretics who had sought sanctuary in Bury, had tried and executed them in the abbot’s own town, and in so doing had doubly violated the abbot’s jurisdiction (Elston 346; Welch 154-65). Another miracle is cited to rebuke a third bishop, the bishop of London, who attempted to appropriate the relics of the saint (then translated to

London as protection against a Viking invader) for deposit in St. Paul’s. The bishop was thwarted by Edmund, whose relics suddenly became as immovable “as a gret hill of ston” (3.1351). The bishop of London immediately saw the error of his ways, and the relics were returned to their shrine at Bury.

In fact, as recounted in the *Life*, Edmund’s miracles all have contemporary political relevance. Book 3 is actually divided into two parts: the first part tells the story of St. Fremund, Edmund’s nephew and heir; the second part, which seems at first glance somewhat irrelevant to the narrative of the life of Edmund, presents a well-chosen list of miracles that had been performed posthumously by the abbey’s patron-saint. All miracles selected for narrative treatment convey the same warning: the martyr protects his monastery against anyone who dares “to breke the franchise” of St. Edmund. Out of the hundreds of miracles attributed to the saint over the centuries, Lydgate’s selection of those that punish transgressors (not those that heal, protect pilgrims, or save men from drowning, for example) is itself a testament to the times. The most explicit example of a protection miracle is the tale of King Sven of Denmark, the father of King Canute, who by “wilful tyrannye” was oppressing the people of East Anglia, despoiling monasteries and burning churches (3.869). The tyrant imposed an onerous tax, the collection of which he pursued relentlessly, even to the point of violating the sanctuary of the monastery churches (3.903). The people of Bury prayed and made pilgrimages to their patron-saint for relief. Edmund appeared to a monk of Bury, the chaplain of the shrine, and commanded him to warn Sven:

That off my peeple he axe no truage
Ther ffranchise is to stonde I auantage
From all trybut and al exaccioun
Vunder the wynges off my proteccioun.
(3.970-74).

When Sven did not listen, the martyr himself, whose spirit in heaven was evidently no longer as pacifistic as it had been in life, appeared to the tyrant at night and ran a spear through his body. In this particular narrative, the Danes then returned to Denmark, leaving the East Anglians in peace, but it is an important part of the monastic historiography of Bury St. Edmunds that Sven’s son, King Canute, gave custody of the martyr’s bones to the monks, along with large grants of land, in atonement for his father’s sins. That story is told not in the *Life of St. Edmund*, but in a related series of poems that were also, I argue, prepared for the benefit of King Henry VI and his entourage: the *Cartae Versificatae*.

Cartae Versificatae

Lydgate’s five English *Cartae*, the versified charters of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, have been largely overlooked by Lydgate scholars.²³⁹ Schirmer and Pearsall merely note their existence without further examination (Schirmer 236; Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 25-26).²⁴⁰ These verse charters were first edited by Thomas Arnold, who transcribed the first four from the register of the abbot of Bury St. Edmunds (MS Additional 14848) in his *Memorials of St. Edmund’s Abbey*, but did not include the fifth charter of Henry I (Arnold 3: 215-37). Henry MacCracken, Lydgate’s first comprehensive bibliographer, lists all *Cartae Versificatae* as one item in his bibliography, but his

²³⁹Kathryn Lowe is about to rectify this oversight in a forthcoming article in *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, which contextualizes all five poems and discusses in detail the transmission of the manuscript texts of the charters on which the verses are based. I am grateful to Dr. Lowe for sending me a copy of the page proofs of her article.

²⁴⁰Schirmer’s assessment is typical of most critical commentary to date: “We can derive little pleasure from seeing the charters of Hardecnut, Edward the Confessor, William the Conqueror and others compressed or expanded into ballad stanzas; but charters in verse were nothing unusual in an age when even Latin grammar was written in rhyme” (236).

total line count (693 rather than 777) shows that he, too, overlooks the fifth charter (*Minor Poems* 1: xv). So little did MacCracken value these poems that he excludes them altogether from his collection of minor secular poetry. Modern bibliographies have inadvertently perpetuated Arnold's omission of the fifth charter (Renoir and Benson 1863-64, 2125; Boffey and Edwards 334).²⁴¹ Nevertheless, these versified charters are an integral part of Lydgate's work for the Benedictines during the 1430s and an important component of the Lydgate canon; not only do they serve stylistically as prime examples of Lydgate's East-Anglian orthography and metre, but they illustrate one of the major Benedictine political concerns informing his poetry from the deposition and murder of Richard II in 1399 until Lydgate's own death in 1449: the jurisdictional battle between the bishops and the abbots. Apart from their historical value, because the *Cartae Versificatae* were obviously prepared under Lydgate's own supervision in his own monastery, and because the folios in which they are found are the sole extant copies and probably a fair copy from Lydgate's own hand, they can be confidently studied as authoritative examples of Lydgate's prosody, relatively free of scribal interference. Moreover, the vocabulary, orthography and syntax of the poems can be assumed to represent Lydgate's own linguistic usage accurately, and can be studied in conjunction with the *Legend of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* as a reliable example of Lydgate's language, if not a representation of the East-Anglian dialect of the day.²⁴²

That the author of these versified charters is Lydgate hardly admits of dispute; certainly no

²⁴¹Renoir and Benson give brief annotations for the first four only. More recently, Boffey and Edwards list only the first four. There has been one recent, brief attempt to contextualize the *Cartae*, although Arnold's omission of the fifth charter still goes unnoticed (Mortimer 149-50).

²⁴²On this point, see Simon Horobin's chapter on Lydgate's language (125-30). Horobin concludes that Lydgate's dialect is essentially East Anglian, but that it shows a strong tendency towards the standard English then emerging in London circles.

scholar familiar with the bulk of Lydgate’s work (MacCracken, Schirmer, and Pearsall) has ever doubted Lydgate’s authorship. There is, to be sure, no scribal attribution, and the poet does not declare himself in any of the five poems. Nor does the manuscript’s own index (folios 1-19 in the modern foliation) mention either the poems or their author. But the verse charters are very definitely written in Lydgate’s place and time: Bury St. Edmunds in the mid-1430s. All works known to be by Lydgate that can be dated to the 1430s are, like the *Cartae*, in rhyme-royal stanzas: *Henry VI’s Triumphal March into London* (1432); *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* (1434-6); *Fall of Princes* (1431-1438); *Saint Albon and Saint Amphibalus* (1439). As MacCracken notes: “These [verses] are so absolutely in accord with Lydgate’s style, and their date so coincides with Lydgate’s other work of the kind for Curteys (see “On De Profundis”) that we must agree with Mr. Arnold in allowing Lydgate as the author. All tests of rhyme throughout agree in proving Lydgate’s authorship” (*Minor Poems* 1: xiii). There are, in particular, significant vocabulary and rhyme similarities between the *Cartae* and the contemporaneous *Life of St. Edmund*, a poem for which Lydgate does claim authorship.

Although a common scribe does not imply a common author, it is worth noting that not only is the handwriting consistent among the five *Cartae*, but that it also bears a close resemblance to the hand in the *Life of St. Edmund*.²⁴³ The main difference between the hands of the *Cartae* and the *Life* is the quality of the work, the latter being a presentation copy for Henry VI and one of the finest

²⁴³Elston notes that one of the scribes responsible for copying out the documents in MS Additional 14848 is Peter Werketon. Pointing to similarities in style and other markings, Elston reasons that Werketon is the scribe responsible for entering the *Cartae*, and may also be the scribe who copied out MS Harley 2278. As Elston notes, “the entries on these folios (for the period August 1434-June 1437) are accompanied by the repeated annotation ‘concordatum cum originale P Werketon’” (510).

illustrated manuscripts in English. The *Life* has capital letters for the initial letter of every line and tends not to use as many contractions as the *Cartae* (the ampersand is rare in the *Life*) but, otherwise, all orthography, letter forms, and contractions are remarkably similar—enough to suggest the work of a common scribe, or at least a common school.

As a group the *Cartae Versificatae* have been dated at c.1440 by MacCracken, a dating presumably based on a note by Arnold.²⁴⁴ Arnold’s dating is derived from the date of the last entries in MS Additional 14848, but a more likely composition date would be 1434. The two volumes of the Curteys register are not in strict chronological order because they include a wide range of archival material (bulls, treaties, contracts, rental agreements), but those documents that deal with contemporary affairs are clearly entered in a loose chronological order. Thus, the first folios of MS Additional 14848 deal with events of 1429 when the abbot first took office, and the final folios of that volume deal with events of early 1441.²⁴⁵ Even if the manuscript in which the poems are found is not a first draft, but a fair copy, as Rodney Thomson has suggested (*Archives* 135), the relative placement of the poems in the register indicates an earlier date than 1440 (Lowe 152 n.7). The *Cartae Versificatae* are framed in the manuscript by documents which can be dated in early 1435. Preceding the *Cartae*, for example, are folios 217-37, which contain a transcript of the trial of John Denston, the archdeacon of Sudbury, a trial conducted by the abbot of Bury that began in January

²⁴⁴See Arnold 3: 215: “It seems probable that the author of these versifications was Lydgate; they are quite in his manner, and no worse than a great deal of rhyme of which he was the undoubted author. The date of composition is about 1440.” Arnold’s condescension is typical of most nineteenth-century (and much twentieth-century) criticism of Lydgate.

²⁴⁵The chronological order of the manuscript is disturbed somewhat by the insertion of historical materials of contemporary interest, but on the whole there is an ascending date progression from 1429-1441 in MS Additional 14848. For example, fol. 24 gives the abbot’s oath of fealty (entered in Latin and French) to the king, upon his taking office in 1429. Folio 350v, the second last in the manuscript, presents two documents dated 4 February 1441.

1435. Following the *Cartae*, at fol. 283v, is a letter in English, from the countess of Stafford to Abbot Curteys dated 4 April (1435) seeking redress for the archdeacon’s rape of Alice Caly, a niece of one of her protegées, Elizabeth of Cappe. The year of the countess’s letter can be deduced from evidence in other documents related to the Denston affair, a narrative that John Elston has calculated occupies about ten per cent of the manuscript.²⁴⁶

The *Cartae*, like the *Life of St. Edmund*, may also have been intended for the ears of the royal visitor and were entered in the register for safekeeping after he departed, about the same time in which Harley 2278 was in preparation. Lydgate added an envoy to the first charter, *Carta Hardecanutis Regis*, which suggests that the versified charters were intended to be read aloud:

Now all the folk that *here* this chartre or see
Bethe wel wylled to save the lyberte
Of Hardecanute, king of grete excellence
In Seyynt Edmondis worschyp & reverence.²⁴⁷

One explanation for the verse charters in the abbot’s register is that they were first written on tablets or murals to support a pageant that was devised by Lydgate for the entertainment of the royal party. As discussed in Chapter 3, Lydgate had devised many similar mummings and pageants for the young king and his mother at Eltham (Christmas, 1425), at Hertford (New Year’s Eve, 1427), at Windsor (Christmas, 1429), and for the guildsmen and the mayor of London in the late 1420s. More recently, he had been commissioned by the mayor of London to translate a letter by John Carpenter that recorded the young king’s triumphal re-entry into London in February 1432, after the king’s

²⁴⁶Here, as elsewhere, I have made extensive use of John Elston’s study of William Curteys. Elston’s thorough inspection of the Curteys register has been most helpful in identifying and dating the contents of the Latin documents in these manuscripts.

²⁴⁷*Carta Hardecanutis Regis*, MS Additional 14848, fol. 251r (lines 253-256). All quotations from the versified charters have been edited from the manuscript, and follow the same editorial principles as used for the fifth charter, as outlined below (Appendix D).

disappointing second coronation at Paris (see Chapter 3). Similarly, Lydgate’s translation of the *Danse Macabre* (for John Carpenter) was “inscribed on the cloister walls of Pardon churchyard, attached to the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary at St. Paul’s” (Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 27). At some point in the 1430s, perhaps as a reaction to the Lollard denial of purgatory, Abbot Curteys requested a series of verses to be prepared by Lydgate to adorn the walls of the abbey church and to explain “why in especyall this psalme De Profundys / Ys seid for sowlys for ther purgacyoun” (MacCracken, *Minor Poems*, 1: 77, 51-52). Lydgate’s “*On De Profundis*” is, in effect, a defence of the doctrine of purgatory, and, by extension, a defence of monasticism (since one of the principal duties of monks was to pray for the souls of departed abbey benefactors):²⁴⁸

Off this processe to make no delayes
Breeffly complied of humble true entent,
Late charchyd in myn oold dayes
By William Curteys, which gaf comaundement
That I shulde graunte myn assent
Of that kyndrede make a memorial,
With De Profundis whan so that it be sent
At his chirche to hang it on the wal.
(161-68)

A likely form of entertainment for the royal guests would be a pageant depicting the history of the monastery and the life of its most illustrious saint, with the abbey’s charters prominently displayed as visual props.²⁴⁹ Certainly the versified charters were carefully constructed and, as Schirmer notes, “would have been an object of pride among [Lydgate’s] fellow monks” (236). As

²⁴⁸For the monastic role in the “birth of purgatory” in the twelfth century, see J. Le Goff, especially Chapter 5.

²⁴⁹According to Yarrow, “Already by the time of Baldwin’s death, the abbey kept a display board in the church with which it could more conveniently educate the people of the town about the life of their saint” (51).

charters that convey, in part, the history of the monastery, they serve the same theme and purpose as the *Life of St. Edmund*. All five verse charters, in fact, share a common purpose: at the request of Abbot Curteys, Lydgate rendered into vernacular verse the charters granted by Kings Canute, Hardecanute, Edward the Confessor, William the Conqueror, and Henry I (see Appendix D) to the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, respecting the property rights and numerous privileges of the abbey, asserting the abbey's absolute lordship over the eight and a half hundreds granted by Edward the Confessor, and, most importantly, proclaiming the abbey's freedom from the jurisdiction of the archbishop and the local bishops, the bishop of Norwich (then the bishop of East Anglia), in particular. Monastic charters rendered into verse are more memorable than Latin charters, and would be more likely to register with the young king and his coterie, whom they were intended to impress, than would their Latin originals. The charters chosen for translation into verse are carefully selected from hundreds of similar royal writs and charters in the possession of the monastery.²⁵⁰ All questions of authenticity aside, Canute and Hardecanute are chosen for their pre-Norman antiquity—Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror as much for the cachet associated with their names as for the generosity of the Confessor's grant to the abbey and the forcefulness of the Conqueror's confirmation. The final charter of Henry I bestows no new privileges on the abbey, but confirms the earlier charters and highlights contemporary issues of concern to the abbey—in particular, the abbot's right to try all legal cases originating within the four crosses marking the boundaries of the town.

All five charters reflect an overriding concern with ecclesiastical jurisdictional rights to the

²⁵⁰For the full range of these documents, see D.C. Douglas, *Feudal Documents From the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*.

extended franchise of Bury St. Edmunds. Collectively, they make the case that the monastery is to be free in perpetuity from any sort of interference from bishop or archbishop. Disputes with the local bishops and with the archbishop of Canterbury are a constantly recurring theme in the history of the abbey and the hagiography of its patron-saint. Abbot Baldwin, physician to Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror, fought many a legal battle against Bishop Herfast and his successor Herbert de Losinga, who were seeking to exercise their authority over the abbey and to appropriate it for their episcopal seat in Suffolk (Yarrow 24-62). Jocelin de Brakelond (1155-1202) records subsequent conflicts between his successive abbots, Hugh and Samson on the one hand, and the archbishop of Canterbury, or the Bishop of Ely, on the other. Abbot Hugh (a bad abbot) sent a letter to Rome and was even willing to strip St. Edmund's shrine of valuables to buy the Pope's grant of exemption from visitation by any bishop (Jocelin 6, 45-7, 117-19).²⁵¹ Hugh's successor, Samson, was able to obtain a letter from the Pope to the archbishop of Canterbury warning the latter that Bury St. Edmunds as an exempt church “was answerable to no legate, except a legate, *a latere*, sent by the pope himself” (Jocelin 74).

The abbey charters were carefully preserved to defend its constantly challenged exempt status. Canute's charter was of vital importance to the fifteenth-century monks of Bury, as a

²⁵¹Despite the ferocity with which Jocelin's abbots defended the abbey's autonomy, Jocelin, who had known the scourge of a bad abbot, was leery of the absolute power this exemption would bring:

[His fellow monks] did not perceive the dangerous potential of the privilege: that if any abbot should choose to run down the church's possessions and misgovern his convent, there would be no one to whom the community could complain concerning his misdeeds, for he would fear no bishop, archbishop or legate, and his immunity from punishment would encourage him in wrongdoing. (6)

Note that Jocelin was writing before the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, at which time the Benedictines adopted a policy of self-regulation.

plethora of *nota bene* hands and marginal notations in the Curteys register attest. Many of these markings occur in a document that examines the legalities of the Canute charter.²⁵² There were earlier charters, by the Anglo-Saxon king Edmund, for example, but these were somewhat troublesome to the monks and were often invoked by the bishop of Norwich, the abbot of Bury’s perpetual adversary, to make the claim that the shrine of St. Edmund was originally founded by the martyr’s namesake, Edmund. The bishop claimed that the shrine was initially given over to the custody of diocesan priests under the authority of their bishop, who later banished the priests, replacing them with Benedictine monks, in what was originally an episcopal priory. Bury’s foundation as priory or abbey, and whether the East Anglian See was originally at Bury, were the key points of contention.²⁵³ According to later Bury legend derived from William of Malmesbury (a Benedictine), Canute established monks at Bury in 1020 and on the advice of his bishops appointed Ufi as the first abbot (Licence 56). Canute’s charter formally takes the land from the diocesan clerics and grants it to the Benedictines. The abbot’s claim to exemption from episcopal interference thus hinged to a great extent on the authenticity of Canute’s charter.

²⁵²The document on the Canute charter occupies 10 folios beginning at fol. 262r, MS Additional 14848. The marginal notations could have been added later, of course, but the likelihood is that they were added to the Curteys register during the Curteys tenure, at the time the monastery foundations were, once again, a pressing political issue.

²⁵³Tom Licence has recently raised the possibility that the bishop’s claim may have had some validity. The earliest source of information, a short entry in the Bury Psalter against the years 1020-24, states that “Bishop Aelfwine established a rule for monks in St. Edmund’s minster” (55). A later account claims that the Bury convent, originally a priory reporting to a bishop, bribed King Harold I (who subsequently died of poison in “divine retribution” for his simony) to elevate its prior to the rank of abbot and break the dependency on the bishop. For other discussions of the Bury origins and the possibility that the East Anglian See was originally located at Bury, see Galbraith “The East Anglian See and the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds” and Gransden, “Legends and Traditions Concerning the Origins of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds.” See Richard Yates, *History and Antiquities of the Abbey of St. Edmund’s Bury*, 54-55, for a translation of King Edmund’s charter.

The authenticity of monastic charters, in general, was as big a problem for law courts in the Middle Ages as it is for modern historians. The wording of the originals was usually prepared by the beneficiaries—the monks themselves—for ratification by the king, who may not always have been aware of the full extent of the privileges being granted. And while monasteries took care to preserve their valuable muniments, the originals were often lost through fire or pillage. Copies were inevitably made, sometimes as deliberate forgeries to pass as originals, sometimes as confirmation documents that contained a few silent but significant modifications for the new king’s seal. The attestations at the end of each charter are important, because the testimony of the witnesses supposedly prove the validity of the event and prevent the king from being hoodwinked into offering more than he intended. Of the five Latin charters used for translation purposes by Lydgate, the first four, eleventh-century charters are, according to Alfred Hiatt, “of questionable authenticity, although their substance may be genuine enough” (57-61).²⁵⁴ The Anglo-Saxon “facsimile” versions of the Canute and Hardecanute charters appear to be of twelfth-century origin, Hiatt notes, but in order for twelfth-century monks to imitate Anglo-Saxon minuscule script and to write in passable Old English, there must have been some earlier copy on which these charters were based. The charters in MS Additional 14848 are, after all, only copies of charters supposedly issued in the eleventh century and not even Curteys would suggest they were the originals. For our purposes, all that really matters is the consistency with which the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds was able to convince the authorities of the authenticity of its documentation at a time when other monasteries were not always as successful. Given the obvious motivation for Tudor commissioners to destroy

²⁵⁴In addition to the account offered in Hiatt, the complex question of monastic forgery is discussed in Brooke, 100-20, who offers a defence of the practice.

these muniments, it is hardly surprising that most of the monastic charters extant today are not usually originals, but copies buried in larger manuscripts such as the Curteys register.

In any case, the Benedictines of Bury were obviously anxious to recognize Canute as the founder of the monastery. Canute’s charter is exceedingly generous.²⁵⁵ Should the English be called upon to pay Danegeld, the tenants of the abbey were to be taxed at a like rate for the compensation of the monastery. Fishing rights within the monastery boundaries were made over to the monks, along with a grant of four thousand eels a year. But more importantly, from Lydgate’s point of view, Canute granted full jurisdiction to the monastery, the town, and to all the surrounding territories to the Benedictines *in perpetuum*:

Fre from al daunger and jurediccioun,
To have ther lordeshippes and ther liberte,
And that no bysshop by none occasioun
Have interesse in no maner degre,
To intervpte ther tranquyllyte.
(*Carta Canuti Regis*, fol. 244r, lines 64-68)

And lest any bishop be tempted to move against the monastery, Canute’s charter includes a rhymed anathema:

Who that be hardy or presume of dysdeyne
For tatempte of fals presumpcioun
To set clerkis in that hous ageyne
Or change the statutys geyne myn entencioun,
Moste he incurre the indignacioun
Of god and me, eternally to dwelle
For his offence with fendys depe in helle.
(fol. 245r, lines 134-140)

²⁵⁵For the Anglo-Saxon version of Canute’s charter, see Kemble, 17. For the Latin version, see Kemble, 15. For a modern prose translation, see Hervey, *History of King Edmund*, 597.

Hardecanute’s versified charter deviates the furthest from its Latin source. After a typically Lydgatean philosophical preamble on the mutability of life (which makes a case for monastic endowments), Hardecanute’s charter confirms the main articles of Canute in no uncertain words:

This to mene, more pleynty to expresse,
Noon arshebisshop nor bysshop of this lond
Nor ther mynystres have noon interesse
To breke this fraunchyse subscribed with myn hond,
Nor noon officer, as ye shal vndyrstond,
Nor noon estat, usurpe in no degre
To breke ther fredam confermyd here by me;

Nor intercepte ther dominaciouns
Ageyn the monkys by vsurpacioun,
By no foreyne inquietacion,
On clerk on layman dwellyng in that towne,
Nor of no matere do execucioun,
Nor syng no masses, shortly in sentence,
But of the abbot he have afor licence.
(fol. 249r, lines 169-82)

Lydgate takes every opportunity to remind Henry VI why the endowment of monasteries is still a good spiritual investment:

Lat us first so for oure sylf provyde
And of vertue the sothfast tracys sewe
And on this purpos stedfastly abyde
The chirche of Crist feythfully to endewe
And in no wyse oure purpos nat remewe
But for to mynystre with good and with fraunchyse
To them that there devoutly do servyce.
(fol. 249r, lines 169-82)

Like his father before him, Hardecanute inflicts a curse on anyone who would be so bold as to challenge the liberties of the abbey: “that he be cursyd, perpetually to dwell / with the fals traytour Judas depe in helle” (195-96). Hardecanute, moreover, would levy an impossible fine of “xxx

talentys” of gold to be paid “unto the kyng withoute remyssioun” by anyone who dared to transgress this ordinance. Arnold points out that it was on the strength of this clause that, in 1345, Bishop Bateman of Norwich was ordered to pay the king thirty talents of gold (3: 227). And, as if to anticipate any future legal technicality, Lydgate pointedly adds (“*verba translatoris*” is written in the margin) that even though the bishop of East Anglia is now the bishop of Norwich, “the bisshopis in no wyse / shold nat of Seynt Edmond nat breke the fraunchyse” (237-78).

If the charters of Canute and Hardecanute established the Anglo-Saxon authority for the right of the monks to live in perpetuity without episcopal interference, it is a charter of Edward the Confessor that grants a coinage mint to the abbey, full freedom to elect its own abbot, and dominion over the eight and a half hundreds beyond the monastery walls, an extension of land previously owned by the disgraced Queen Emma. At the time of the Domesday book there were twenty-four hundreds in the entire county of Suffolk (*Victoria County History*); the monastery owned eight and a half of them outright (including the entire town of Bury). These hundreds are mostly contiguous and range from the south to the north of Suffolk.²⁵⁶ Over this vast tract of land (some 500 square miles, approximately one third of the county), the abbot of Bury was a feudal lord who enjoyed more exemption from secular or ecclesiastical interference than most bishops or earls (*Victoria County History, Suffolk*, 2:358; H.W.C. Davis, “Liberties” 418). Of the many charters that Edward the Confessor issued in favour of the monastery it is most extraordinary that the charter Lydgate chose to translate is the one that deals with exemption from episcopal jurisdiction, not the more

²⁵⁶The hundreds included Lackford, Thingow, Thedwardstre, Risbridge, Blackburne (two hundreds), Basbergh (two hundreds), and Cosford (a half-hundred).

generous one involving the enormous land grant.²⁵⁷ In the mid-1430s, the contentious issue for the Benedictines was evidently not so much the extent of territorial boundaries as it was ecclesiastical jurisdiction over those boundaries. For Lydgate’s purposes, the two most important stanzas from Edward the Confessor’s charter were the following:

That the monasterye and that hooly place
Schal nevyr here after enhabyted be,
But with monkys, whiche by goddis grace,
As I have ordeyned shal there have ther se,
So that no bysshop be noon auctorite,
Norfolk nor Suffolk, nouthur fer nor nere,
Schal within hem have lordschyp nor powere.[...]

And specially oo thyng I diffende,
That no bisshop be hardy in noo wyse
To take upon hym the Chirche to offende
Nor for tatempte ageyns ther fraunchyse,
But that ther fredam whiche I do here devyse
Stonde incorupt and hooly undevyded,
As my predecessours and I haue provyded.
(fol. 250r, lines 15-21; 64-70)

Similarly, William the Conqueror’s charter was selected from one of many pertaining to the rights and privileges of Bury St. Edmunds. It differs from the others in that it deals with a specific dispute involving Bishop Arfast (Herfast, bishop of East Anglia from 1070-1086) and Abbot Baldwyn. Citing the authority of the original charter by King Edmund (not the saint, of course), which had granted the care of the shrine to diocesan priests, Arfast threatened to move his see to the grander quarters at Bury.²⁵⁸ Abbot Baldwyn obtained a bull from Pope Alexander II that forbade the

²⁵⁷For a more detailed comparison of the two main charters of Edward the Confessor, see H.W.C. Davis, “Liberties,” 418.

²⁵⁸For a study of the original abbey church, see James, *On the Abbey of St. Edmund at Bury*, 114-212.

establishment of a bishop's see at Bury.²⁵⁹ Arfast pleaded his case before the king but was hopelessly out-finessed by the abbot and his portfolio of charters, bulls, and writs:

Togidre assemblyd in our corte royal,
by many a resoun seid for eche partye,
a day ordyned in especial,
where Bisshope Arfast gan sore allegge & crye
by elloquence his cause to magnefie,
but for he wanted witesse & wrytyng,
his cause was voyde & stood stede in no thyng.
(*Carta Willelmi Conquestoris*, fol. 252r, lines 29-35)

William's verdict was unequivocal. Bishop Arfast, though a personal friend of William the Conqueror, was soundly defeated:

And what bisshop that they list assigne
shal ordres make there by ther licence,
whoever gruchche ageyne it or maligne,
and by Kyng Knutis wyl and ful sentence,
and by Seynt Edwardis hooly provydenche,
the monkis there, as they han here devysed,
from bisshopis power for ever schal be fraunchised.
(64-70)

In no charter are the witnesses more important to Lydgate than in the charter of William the Conqueror. Lydgate makes it clear that the king's decision was agreed to by Lanfranc, the archbishop of Canterbury, and seconded by Thomas, archbishop of York, and a long list of other bishops, princes, earls, and ministers. The princely witnesses are Robert and Henry; William Rufus, *bête noir* to the Benedictines, is noticeably absent. Robert's mark on the document suggests the charter should probably be dated 1080, one of the few years Robert and Henry were together in England with their father. To add weight to his argument, Lydgate notes that three of the bishops

²⁵⁹Pope Alexander II's *privilegium* is printed in Arnold 1: 345 from MS Bodleian 297, fol. 370.

who signed the document, Lanfranc, Wulfstan, and Robert of Hereford, were later canonized by the church. Endorsement by these saintly bishops implied agreement by the hierarchical church to the ownership and autonomy of the monks.

The fifth charter of Henry I (see Appendix D) addresses some issues of particular concern to the Bury monks in the 1430s, including, as always, the right to exemption from episcopal control, the right to hold a market in Bury, and the right of the abbot to hold his own court. Henry I was a hero to the Benedictines because it was he who promised, in his well known coronation charter of 1100, to put a stop to the pillaging of the monasteries so common in the reign of his older brother William Rufus; it was also Henry I who began the tradition of royal pilgrimages to Bury St. Edmunds when he visited the monastery in 1132 to honour a vow made to St. Edmund, who saved him from a storm at sea. He remained devoted to St. Edmund for the rest of his life.²⁶⁰ There are extant copies of some thirty writs and charters by Henry I that pertain to Bury St. Edmunds, but the one selected by Lydgate for translation is the most comprehensive and the most often copied by the monks (Douglas 61-79). This particular charter recognized the pre-Norman, Anglo-Saxon laws of Canute and Edward the Confessor, thus supporting contemporary monastic claims as to the monastery's origins and tracing a continuation from Anglo-Saxon to Norman law.

In the political and social context of Lydgate's generation, why was it thought necessary to versify these charters, and what do they signify? As discussed in previous chapters, the Benedictines of Bury had all but lost the support of Lancastrian kings over their initial disapproval of Henry IV's accession and their lack of support for the war in France. They had recently witnessed an arbitrary

²⁶⁰Henry's own sons were not so fortunate; they drowned in a shipwreck while crossing the channel in 1120 (Hollister 109-10).

confiscation of alien priories that resulted in a transfer of monastic land to the bishops. They had “silently” endured the humiliation of Henry V’s attempt at the reform of their order. Arundel’s constitutions had rendered their ancient papal and royal liberties ineffective in the face of the bishop of Norwich’s determination to prosecute heretics within the town of Bury. The *Cartae Versificatae* were, therefore, part of the abbot’s personal campaign to re-establish royal support for the abbey. These *Cartae* ask the king, as Simon Yarrow so neatly put it in his discussion of the Bury monk Hermann’s earlier *Passio Edmundi*, “Can you afford to cancel the subscription your predecessors made to the cult of St. Edmund?” (52)

The Curteys-Alnwick conflict, in all its many manifestations, was eventually decided, largely on the strength of the Bury charters (as had been all such previous jurisdictional disputes), in favour of the abbot of Bury, but not without concessions being made to Bishop Alnwick, and not without aggravating a smouldering episcopal resentment against monastic privilege in general, a resentment that was to come back to haunt the Benedictines a century later. The issue of heresy was Curteys’s biggest challenge and it was one for which he found it necessary to cede significant control to the Lollard-hating bishop and to set, thereby, a dangerous precedent for the monastery. Bishop Alnwick did, in fact, try heretics in Bury from 1428-1430, and there was nothing Abbot Curteys could legally do to stop him. The bishop of Norwich, with the backing of the duke of Gloucester, claimed (and won) the right to prosecute heretics anywhere in his diocese, including the town of Bury; he based his case on the Arundellian anti-heresy statutes of 1401, 1409, and 1414 that placed all authority in the hands of the “diocesan” or the “ordinarie” of the place.²⁶¹ Arundel’s

²⁶¹The memoranda related to the bishop of Norwich’s incursion into Bury territory in 1428 (when Prior Curteys was acting on behalf of the dying Abbot Exeter) can be found in the Curteys register, MS Additional 14848, fols 109r-110r.

constitutions greatly enhanced the power of the bishops at the expense of abbatial authority; it was thus not only the Lollards who had cause to resent this legislation. Writing in the third person in his own register, Curteys laments that even a bull obtained from the new Pope Martin V could not deter the bishop from acting under English law:

That bull [from Martin V] would have been duly put into execution as required, had it not been for the fear of punishment for violating the royal statutes in favour of the bishops which had been published in the time of Henry IV and Henry V in their parliaments. (MS Additional 14848, fol. 261r. Trans. Elston 343)²⁶²

It is within this dark cloud of monastic anxiety that the Benedictines of Bury were seeking royal protection, a renewed confirmation of charter privileges from Henry VI at the time of his own extended pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Edmunds. Lydgate's *Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund* and the charter translations may be viewed as companion pieces in support of this objective. Given the utilitarian purpose of the *Cartae* and the dryness of the original documents, the metre, rhyme, and overall flow of the verse is smooth. To the Bury monks, the subject matter was critical, and the verses are rendered by Lydgate with great pride and attention to detail, even to the point of including the names of the charter witnesses in verse form.²⁶³ As translations they are, by Lydgate's normal standards (with the partial exception of Hardecanute's charter), concise and literal. Where there is any departure from the original document, as in the first stanza of the poem printed herein (Appendix D), it is usually to clarify the setting for the contemporary reader. Some few points of

²⁶²There is a letter “by the Kyng” (more likely by the duke of Gloucester as the king's protector in 1428) in the abbot's register (MS Additional 14848, fol. 102r-102v), addressed to the aldermen and burgesses of Bury, warning them to take precautions against outbreaks of Lollard rebellion. The implication of the letter is that the town of Bury under the jurisdiction of the abbot had been too lax in its pursuit of Lollardy.

²⁶³As previously suggested, these witnesses lend an aura of authenticity. Many of them are archbishops and bishops and would be cited in any ecclesiastical jurisdiction dispute. Lydgate's ability to set these to rhyme is indeed remarkable.

topical concern, such as the rights of the abbot's court in the tenth stanza of Henry I's charter, are amplifications of the original, but Lydgate is concerned with credibility and authenticity, and against such a shrewd opponent as Bishop Alnwick, would be careful not to open the abbey to a charge of forgery in such litigious times.

Afterward

This Royal corseynt, gloryous and notable
 To helpe his servauntys is nat wont to tarye,
 And can also in tyme ben vengable
 To them that been to his ffredam contrarye.
 ("Miracles of St. Edmund" 345-48)

O blyssed martir of mercy take good heed
 Save thy ffraunchyse, thynke on Bury toun!
 Suffre no tyraunt thy ffredam to assaylle
 Noon oppressour ageyn hem to maligne
 Thynk [how] thy spere greetly did avaylle
 Ageyn kyng Sweyn—a thyng notable & digne
 To be regestryd and shewyd for a signe
 Whoos tryannye was ful dere abought.
 (384-90)

Now lat vs alle with hertly conffidence
 Requere this martir to graunte thynges thre:
 With spere & arwe to stonde in our diffence
 Geyn them that caste to breke his liberte
 To save his chirche, his toun, and his cuntre,
 Mawgre alle thoo that in ony wyse
 Wolde interupte his royal dignite
 Be deregacioun doon to his ffraunchyse.
 (457-64)

As it turned out, the efforts of Curteys and Lydgate to restore good relations with the Lancastrian court were not in vain. We have seen, in Chapter 3, how Lydgate, in pursuit of, or in return for, Lancastrian support for his abbey, wrote numerous verses in support of Henry VI's claim to the dual monarchy of England and France, although he clearly did so in the interest of peace. The *Life of St. Edmund*, the *Cartae Versificatae*, and just about everything Lydgate wrote after 1430 are all part of the same cultural exchange and constitute a monastic strategy that was to pay dividends for the next hundred years. Henry VI repeatedly called on the abbot of Bury for financial and moral support in the dying war with France during the 1440s, and the abbot, though sympathetic to a

monarch for whom he obviously felt some affection, used all his powers of diplomacy to protect his own mini-shire from the burden of war taxation.²⁶⁴ The acceptance of Henry VI and his entire retinue into the lay fellowship of the abbey before the king's departure from Bury at Easter 1435 proved to be more than just a polite diplomatic exercise. The event signified a renewed interest in the abbey as a royal foundation and a commitment to patronage and privilege that would survive not only the turbulent reign of Henry VI but subsequent decades, in which the abbey would find itself on the wrong side of the civil war.²⁶⁵ In 1447, Henry VI produced a charter reconfirming all the earlier charters, and supporting the abbey against episcopal or baronial incursion (Arnold 3: 357-58). Curteys was probably the author of this document, although he died some months before it became official. The frequent terms of endearment in the royal correspondence to the abbey attest to the fact that the affection between the abbot and the king was mutual and long lasting.²⁶⁶ This first charter was followed two years later—in 1449, the year of Lydgate's death—by another extremely

²⁶⁴See, for example, MS Additional 14848, fol. 343, which contains a letter from Abbot Curteys to the Exchequer dated 5 June 1439 explaining why the religious and secular men of his shire are unable to provide the king with the money he has requested:

And the wealthy and prominent laymen give similar excuses. They say that their tenants are so impoverished that they can collect little or none of their rents or farms. And as many trustworthy and well-to-do men say, some tenants are so impoverished that for lack of food they often eat bread from oats and like brutish animals fill their stomachs with whatever food is set before them, not caring what it is. And so the rich and noble gentry lead a miserable life, thinking of the misery of their poor tenants. The merchants, moreover, who formally used to live from the commerce they carried on, now offer as their excuse the fact that they cannot trade overseas. (Trans. Elston 472).

²⁶⁵Edward IV issued a general pardon to the abbot and monks in 1462 (Arnold 3: xxxiv).

²⁶⁶See, for example, a typical salutation from the king, c.1444: "And forasmoche as it is not unknowen, that god hat endowed you with grete and notable discrecioun, and with grete credence and reputacioun, and also grete love and favoure of the people and duellers of your cuntree" (MS Additional 7096, fols 188r-188v).

generous charter “which freed the abbey of all aids to the king, in consideration of paying a fixed sum of forty marks a year” (*Victoria County History, Suffolk* 3:66). Lydgate, as we have seen, was awarded a pension of ten marks a year by the Exchequer in 1439, not, perhaps, too large a sum if we weigh his life expectancy at that point against his years of service to Humphrey alone, but an amount nevertheless representing one-quarter of the annual fee the abbey was required to pay the king after 1449 as a tax on all its vast revenues.

As for the feud with the bishops, Alnwick was awarded the greater Lincoln diocese in 1436; his much less political replacement, Thomas Brown, was, one supposes, no match for the shrewd Abbot Curteys. Fortunately for the religious orders, the bishops at the Council of Basel had bigger issues to deal with than the rollback of monastic exemption. Had the bishops succeeded in establishing the conciliar power they sought in opposition to the absolute power of the Pope, the monks and friars would have paid an immediate price. With the exception of some residual anti-episcopal bias in his later work, Lydgate let the matter drop, and that in itself may explain why the *Cartae Versificateae* are not extant outside of the Curteys register. Lydgate abhorred dissension within the church, as within the state, as between or among Christian countries, and probably came to see the monastic-episcopal dispute as a prime example of the “serpent of division” he so often warned against.

Nevertheless, if we can judge by some of Lydgate’s last poetry, Benedictine anxieties were never completely put to rest. On the feast-day honouring the translation of the relics of St. Edmund to the shrine at Bury (28 April 1444), there was a huge celebration at the abbey, because of a miracle that had just taken place in the town of Bury. Abbot Curteys ordered the sacristan to ring out the *Te Deum* on the bells of the church, and the townspeople all rejoiced and gave thanks to

their patron-saint in whose name the miracle was worked. A child had fallen into the river and, though given up for dead, a prayer to the town's patron-saint (not to underestimate the good sense of the woman who thought to turn the child upside down, draining the water from the girl's lungs and allowing her to breathe) brought the child back to life. Lydgate records the miracle, along with two others: one similarly involving a child who had fallen into the Thames in London a few centuries earlier on the actual Feast of St. Edmund, 20 November 1041, and who was miraculously saved by a passing boatman; and another involving a child who was given up for dead after being hit by an ox-cart and brought back to life through the intercession of St. Edmund on another of his many feast-days, July 8. The poem is not one of Lydgate's most artistic achievements and has consequently been ignored by his biographers. Carl Horstmann transcribed the poem as a kind of coda to the *Life of St. Edmund* (440-45), but it is important to note that it was written ten years after the *Life*. I find the poem interesting, not for the miracles it celebrates—although one could argue that the aging poet's ability to make rhyme royal verse out of such flimsy stuff as faith is sometimes made of is a miracle in itself—but for the central issues of the poem that the miracles are intended to illustrate, devotion to the saints and the protection that the saints can provide.

The poem which has been called the "Miracles of St. Edmund" is a late medieval justification for a belief in the intercession of the saints and martyrs. Lollard teachings, or increasing competition from the friars, were beginning to take their toll on the pilgrimage business (over which, in England, the monks enjoyed a virtual monopoly), and Lydgate devotes at least ten stanzas to the defence of the cult of the saints (lines 153-232). In the first place, he says, citing King David as an example, we are "comaundid be scrypture & wryting" (154) by God to "Calle to his seyntes in what we haue doo" (160). It requires no critical ingenuity to make the case that, here at least,

Lydgate seeks to correct the reformist charge that the orthodox church idolizes saints; he stresses that it is not the saints who perform miracles but the Lord himself, who, when his saints are invoked, works the miracles in honour of those who have served him well: "To seyntes, shryned or set in tabernacles / God hath mervaylles wrought many moo than oon"(167-68). God honours his saints by granting miracles in their names. The poem is Lydgate's contribution to a religious rebuttal against the Lollards and other detractors of the saints, but like the modern evolutionist who refuses to dignify creationist "science" with a public debate, Lydgate states only the orthodox position, without engaging directly with "Goddys foon," the enemies of the church. In so doing he documents for all posterity these latter-day miracles and thereby proves the efficacy of a devotion to St. Edmund.

The other purpose of the "Miracles of St. Edmund" is to remind all the enemies of the abbey that the martyred saint, who once struck dead the Danish invader Sweyn for interfering in the abbey's business, has not lost his touch. Thus the lines cited at the beginning of this chapter constitute a very stern warning "To them that been to his ffreedom contrarye." All those who "Wolde interupte his royal dignite / Be deregacioun doon to his ffraunchyse" (463-64) had better be careful, lest they inadvertently incur the wrath of St. Edmund. These warnings are very forceful and quite out of place in a poem that treats of miracles that save the lives of young children. They illustrate a consciousness of monastic vulnerability that does not seem to have been totally alleviated by the suppression of the Lollard rebellion in 1431. There is a writ in the Curteys register (MS Additional 14848, fols 328-328v) from the king to the abbot, that refers to a Lollard uprising in Kent, at which a small number of rebels had been arrested. The writ states that several of the rebels had escaped to Cambridgeshire or Suffolk and cautions the abbot to exercise due diligence and, presumably, to

arrest the men if they surface in his jurisdiction. The date of this particular writ is 5 June 1438 (Thomson, J. A. F., "A Lollard Rising in Kent"). The document is pertinent to this discussion if only to show that fears of violent Lollard uprisings were still prevalent in the late 1430s, long after the Oldcastle or Perkins rebellions had been put down. The "Miracles of St. Edmund" is ultimately a prayer for protection. Lydgate sensed that the abbey was still in some danger, and he calls for perpetual vigilance.

Proving that Lydgate is nothing if not consistent, his last truly political poem, the 1445 pageant for the entry of Margaret of Anjou into London, is one final, desperate plea for peace (MS Harley 3869; Brown, "Lydgate's Verses on Queen Margaret's Entry"). The authorship of the poem has never been established, but one would be hard-pressed to find any political verses more typical of Lydgate. Lines such as "Mars sette a side with alle hys cruelte / Whiche to longe hath troubled the Reawmes tweyne" (12-13) is pure Lydgate. The reconciliation of truth and mercy, justice and peace which Queen Margaret embodies, is a favourite Lydgatean allegory reminiscent of "Praise of Peace" and *Life of Our Lady*. To the evidence of metre, rhyme, vocabulary, and syntax we may add John Stow's attribution in the *Survey of London*: "At Paules gate of the generall resurrection and iudgement, with verses accordingly, all made by John Lydgate" (Brown 231). We know that Lydgate's abbot was an enthusiastic supporter of the marriage, so it follows that Lydgate would have the opportunity and the encouragement to write these verses in 1445. There is documented evidence that Abbot Curteys was invited to the royal wedding, as one might expect he would be, and it is easy to imagine that Lydgate accompanied him and wrote something to celebrate the queen's arrival in London (Arnold 1: 470). True to form, the aging poet takes the opportunity to press, one last time, for peace between the two countries. Noticeably missing in the verses to Queen

Margaret is any Lancastrian claim to the throne of France. By 1445, only a fool would have argued the case for the dual monarchy.

Unfortunately for the Benedictines, neither the legendary power of St. Edmund nor all the royal and papal charters that the abbey was so careful to preserve, whether authentic or forged, in prose or in verse, in Latin or in the vernacular, would finally prevail against the unrestrained power of Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII. Fifteenth-century Benedictine anxieties were obviously not unwarranted. Today St. Edmund's abbey lies in ruins; the descendants of the burghers who rose up against monastic feudalism in 1381 now play mini-golf over the "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." I am not just being sentimental. To speak of the dissolution of Bury St. Edmunds as a mere act of legislation is to gloss over one of the great sacrileges in the history of the English church. The abbey church was a magnificent structure, greater than Durham Cathedral (James 166). According to the bibliographer John Leland, at the time of the dissolution "it was one of the chief architectural glories in the kingdom" (Goodwin 75). It was demolished almost overnight, stone by stone. It is almost as if the Tudor authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, were determined to ensure that the Benedictines would never return to Bury. Other monastic churches such as St. Albans and Ely were preserved and are still in use as cathedrals today. As cathedral priories, these had the protection of the Tudor bishops; Bury St. Edmunds did not. As a crowning insult for the monks, the least of its three churches is now a cathedral—since 1914, the see of the bishop of St. Edmundsbury, the Suffolk diocese so often coveted by medieval bishops.

The dissolution of the monasteries can be read as the final chapter in the long-standing dispute between the English bishops and the English abbots. English historiography has tended to credit Henry VIII almost single-handedly for the pillage and destruction of the monasteries, while

the opportunism, collaboration, and betrayal of the English bishops has been almost completely overlooked. When the abbots finally did solicit episcopal support in their hour of need, it is no exaggeration to say, the bishops sold them out. Lydgate would not have been surprised.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A—Chronology of Important Dates²⁶⁷

Date	Lydgate's Life and Works	Historical Context
c. 1371	Born in Lydgate near Bury St. Edmunds	
c. 1377	Enters Benedictine grammar school in Bury	1381—Great Revolt—townspeople attack the monastery; prior is murdered; muniments destroyed
c. 1387	Profession of obedience to Abbot Tymworth	
1397	Ordained priest—Some romantic ballads and dream visions?	1399—Lancastrian coup d'état. murder of Richard II
1400-1408	At Oxford— <i>Isopes Fabules</i> ; <i>Serpent of Division</i> ? <i>Life of Our Lady</i> ? More ballads and dream visions?	1400—Chaucer dies; troubled reign of Henry IV; Benedictine involvement in civil unrest; 1406?—Letter from Henry V to Abbot Cratfield requesting extension at Oxford for Lydgate
1412-20	<i>Troy Book</i> ; 1413— <i>Defence of Holy Church</i> ; <i>Life of Our Lady</i> ? "Ballad for T. Chaucer"; 1415—election of new abbot, Exeter	April 1413—Coronation of Henry V; 1414—seizure of the alien priories; war preparations; 1415—first campaign (Harfleur, Agincourt); 1417—second campaign (Caen, Rouen); Anglo-Burgundian treaty; Council of Constance ends schism
1420-21	<i>Siege of Thebes</i>	April 1420—Treaty of Troyes; Henry V's wedding to Katherine; 1421—Henry V's proposed Benedictine reforms; heavy taxation, fund-raising pilgrimages; third campaign; December 1421—birth of Henry VI
1422	"On Gloucester's Approaching Marriage" (Oct. 1422); <i>Serpent of Division</i> ?	31 August 1422—Death of Henry V; October 1422—death of Charles VI (beginning of dual monarchy); Gloucester's invasion of Hainault
1423	"Praise of Peace"; June 1423—Lydgate appointed prior of Hatfield Broad Oak.	1424—Bedford's victory at Verneuil
1425	"Mumming at Eltham"; "Guy of Warwick"	Oct. 1425—Gloucester and Beaufort clash on London Bridge
1426-28	Lydgate in Paris. <i>Pilgrimage of the Life of Man</i> ; "Danse Macabre"; <i>Title and Pedigree of Henry VI</i> ; Christmas 1427— <i>Mumming at Hertford</i> ; 1 Jan 1429—"New Year's Gift of an Eagle"	Gloucester at height of power in England 1426-1432; Beaufort appointed Cardinal in 1427, then <i>legate a latere</i> to England
1428	"Complaint for My Lady of Gloucester"; William Curteys elected abbot;	Beaufort raises English army to fight the Hussites; Lollard arrests in Bury
1429	Christmas 1429—"Mumming at Windsor"	Defeat of English at Orléans; coronation of Charles VII at Rheims in July; coronation of Henry VI at Westminster in December 1429. Beaufort's anti-Hussite troops diverted to save Paris from the French

²⁶⁷Many of these dates are taken from Pearsall, *Bio-Bibliography*, 50-53.

1431-38	<i>Fall of Princes</i>	1431—coronation of Henry VI in Paris; 1431—Lollard plot in Abingdon
1432	<i>King Henry VI's Triumphant Entry into London.</i> Lydgate's permanent return to Bury	February 1432—Henry VI's return from Paris; Beaufort's power on the rise
1434	<i>Life of St. Edmund and St. Fremund; Cartae Versificatae;</i>	Visit of Henry VI to the Abbey; Council of Basel; disputes with the bishops
1435	Curteys's dispute with Alnwick aggravated by Council of Basel	Burgundian-French Treaty of Arras; death of Bedford.
1436	"Ballade in Despite of the Flemings"	Burgundian siege of Calais lifted by Humphrey, followed by pillage of Flanders. fall of Dieppe, Harfleur, etc.
1436-37	"Debate of the Horse, Goose and Sheep"	
1439	<i>St. Albon and St. Amphibalus;</i> Lydgate granted annuity of 10 marks <i>per annum</i>	
1440 x 1449	"De Profundis"; "Testament of Dan John Lydgate"; 1444—"Miracle Poems"; "Pageant for Margaret of Anjou"	1441—Eleanor Cobham convicted of treason. 1445—marriage of Henry VI to Margaret of Anjou
1447	Death of Abbot Curteys	Death of Gloucester at Bury; confirmation charter granted to Bury St. Edmunds; death of Beaufort
1449	<i>Secrees of Old Philisoffres;</i> Lydgate dies in late 1449.	

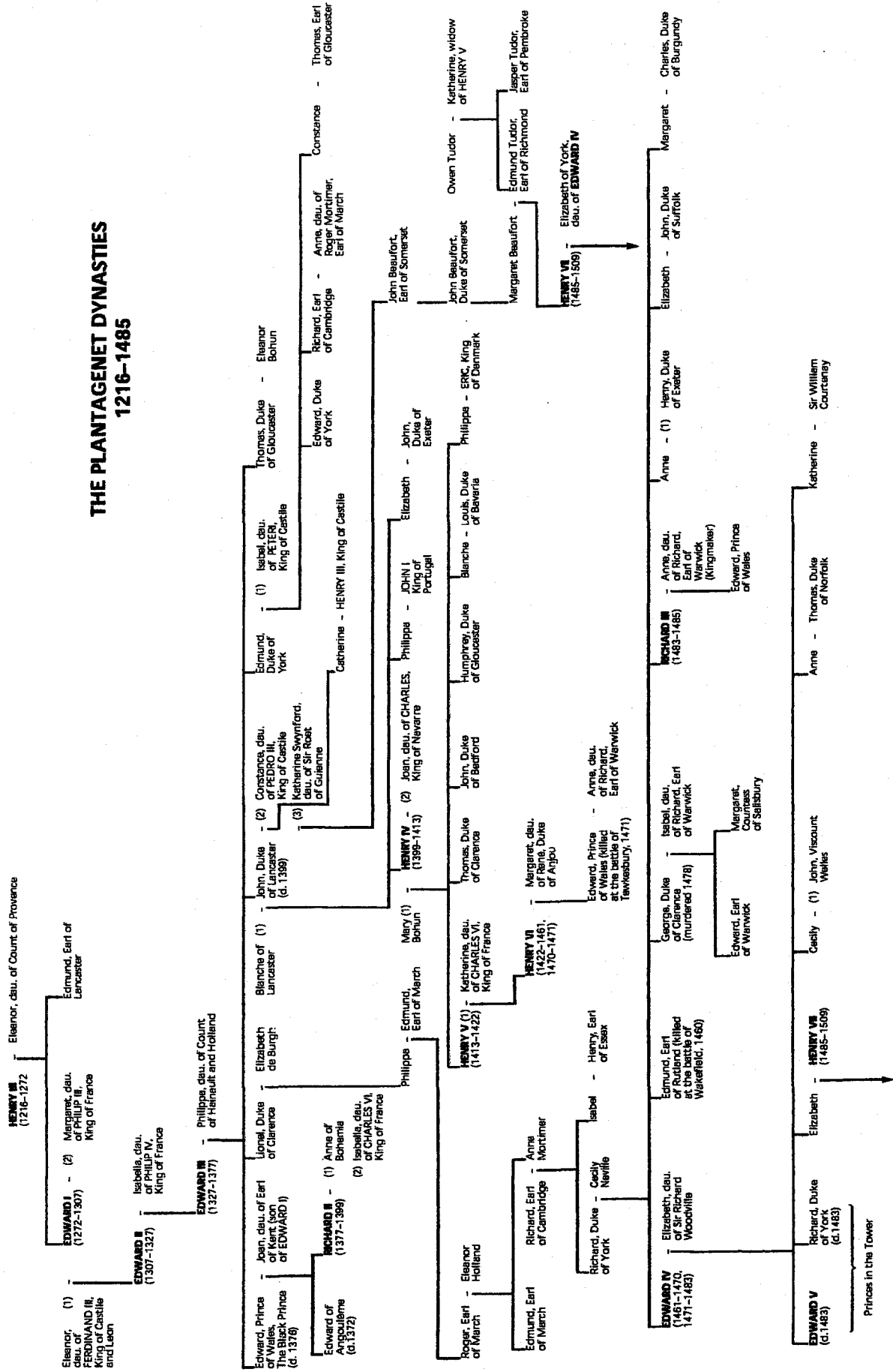
APPENDIX B—Invocation to Mars (*Troy Book 4.4440-4525*)

O cruel Mars, that hast made for to fyne
 Thoruy thin Ire al the worthi blood
 Of Troie, allas! why hastow ben so wood
 Ageynes hem, to slen her knyytes alle?
 Why hastow lete thi bitter venym falle
 On hem, allas, thou sterre infortunat!—
 With al the world to make hem at debat,
 O hatful sterre, hoot, combust, and drye,
 Fry, Irous, grounde of al envie,
 Hasty euere, ful of discencioun,
 And colerik of thi complexioun!
 In mordre and deth ay is thi delit,
 In takyng vengauce most thin appetit,
 First meuer of anger and of hate,
 Rote of contek, causyng to debate!
 In strif and murmur most is thi desyre,
 Ferful of loke as any wyldre fyre,
 And gastful euere of thi wode siyt!
 As any levene so flawmyng is thi liyt,
 Liche in twynklyng to the sparkis rede
 In grete fyres that abrod so sprede,
 Conswymyng ay be malencolye
 Hertis that ben enbracid with envie,
 Thi wrath is ay so fretyng & so kene!
 And causest men to be longe & lene,
 Consumpt, sklendre, broun & citryn hewed,
 Vnmerciable & riyt evele thewed,
 Wounder sleiyty and Engynyou, s,
 Compassyng and suspeciou, s,
 Trist and soleyn, & ful of hevines,
 And assentyng to al cursidnes—
 To awaityng, deth, and robbie,
 To mordre also, and to trecherie,
 With-oute remors of any conscience,
 So venymous is thin influence!—
 And helper art vn-to fals tresoun,—
 The hous of whom is the Scorpioun,
 And crowned art in the Capricorn,
 But in the Bole is thi kyngdam lorn;
 For ther-in is thi deiecciou, s,
 Thi power lost and domynacioun.
 And hast also in thi subiecciou
 Exile, werre, cheynes, and presoun,
 Proscripcioun and captiuite,—
 That for thi malys on Troye the cite,
 So wolde God, I koude chide a-riyt,
 That hast on hem kyd thi felle myyt,
 Of thi rancour hooly the outtraunce:

First on hem [for] to do vengauce
 With speris sharp & swerdes kene whet,
 An[d] now in prisoun tenclosen hem & shet,
 So vengably that thei dar nat oute,
 The Grekis felle ay liggyng hem aboute.
 Thei be nat holde in no maner wyse
 In thi temple to do sacrificyse,
 Nouthur with boles nor with bores wyldre,
 Nor with bestis that euere ben vnmylde,
 As tigres, beris, nor the wood lyoun,
 Of whiche thou art souereyn and patroun.
 Thei ar nat holde to do the brynston smoke
 On thin auteris, whiche art so felly wroke
 On hem, allas! & now yit, werst of alle,
 Thou hast shad out chef of al thi galle,
 Amonge hem silfe to bringe in tresoun,
 Feyned trouthe and symulacioun,
 To maken hertis amonge hem silfe deuide!
 Lo, how the serpent of discord can glyde
 Ful slyly in til he haue cauyt a place
 To voide away bothe hap and grace
 With his venym of dissencioun,
 Whan it is sprad in any regioun,
 In any comoun, borwe, [toun], or cite,
 Amongis men of hiye or lowe degre!
 For whan hertis in loue ben nat oon,
 Fare wel Fortune, her grace is clene a-noon:
 For wher Discord holdeth residence,
 It is wel wers than swerd or pestilence!
 For what is worse, outhur fer or nere,
 Than a foo that is famylyer?—
 For who may more harmen, yif hym liste,
 Than an enmye vp-on whom men triste?
 That to discryve, shortly in a clause,
 The verray rote and the trewe cause
 Of al meschef and confusioun
 In euery lond is dissencioun,
 And more perlous yif it be preve.
 Recorde I take on Troye the cyte,
 That fond Fortune frendly ay at nede,
 Til longe hid hate gan a-brood to sprede.
 For prudence, sothly, hath prouyded
 That a regne in hit silfe deuided
 Shal recurles tourne wilde and wast,
 And the dwellers desolat in hast:
 For Mars that is of envie lord
 Amonge hem silfe sowen hath discord,
 Ageyn the whiche may no socour be—

APPENDIX C - Lancastrian Genealogy

THE PLANTAGENET DYNASTIES
1216-1485



APPENDIX D—*Carta Regis Henrici Primi*

What follows is the fifth, hitherto un-printed charter of Henry I, the only one of the five not found in Arnold and never previously edited. The poem covers two pages (fol. 256v and 257r) laid out in verse, in brown ink, in a single column, forty-two lines per column, with no spaces between lines. The scribe's handwriting is a careful and consistent *anglicana*. The initial *H* in the first line is enlarged (in the same ink as the rest of the text). Otherwise there are no illuminations or markings of any kind in the margins except for paragraph marks, which precede the first line of each stanza and which I have rendered as stanza line breaks. The scribe capitalizes only the first word in each stanza and most, but not all, proper nouns.

In editing the text of *Carta Regis Henrici Primi*, modern capitalization (including the capitalization of each first initial in the line) and minimal punctuation has been introduced. Initial *ff* has been retained on words in mid-sentence, but rendered as *F* at the beginning of a line. The stanzas can usually be read as one long sentence with no enjambment between stanzas. The one exception to the enjambment rule occurs between the ninth and tenth stanzas, lines 63 and 64. Occasionally there are grammatical constructs that a modern editor would consider syntactical errors (typical of Lydgate) that cannot be amended without interfering with metre or rhyme.

Scribal orthography has been retained as closely as possible. Abbreviations have been silently expanded. In general, expansion decisions have been governed by the scribe's own usage when the same word is spelled out in full. Otherwise the presentation copy of *Life of St. Edmund* (MS Harley 2278), in which the scribe uses contraction symbols identical to those in the *Cartae* but does not contract as often, has been a useful guide, as have the other four *Cartae*. The final

syllable *-on* or *-ion* with a flourish has been expanded to *-oun* or *-ioun* respectively; *-oun* with flourish to *-oune*; the scribal *p* with a cross-bar through the tail of the *p* when it occurs before *r* has been rendered as *par* in *parfyt* as spelled out in *Carta Hardecamuti Regis* (stanza 7, fol. 248v), otherwise as *per*; the final *o* with a superscript has been rendered *-our*, as in *conquerour* (line 1). A final *h* with cross-bar has been rendered *he* as in *highe* (line 13). Abbreviations for *er* or *re*, signified by a scribal superscript, have been expanded as in the first word of line 3. The scribe uses ampersands consistently within a line but writes the word *and* in full at the start of a line (line 67 being the sole exception). All ampersands have been expanded to *and*. The letter *w* followed by a superscript *t* has been rendered as *with*. The scribe uses an odd form *whant* in line 77 to mean *whan*. The form does not appear in the other versified charters or in *Life of St. Edmund* (MS Harley 2278). The *MED* cites *whant* as an error for *whanne*, yet the scribe's final *t* is very clear, and I have therefore left it as he wrote it.

Carta Regis Henrici Primi

[fol. 255v]

Herry the sone of William conquerour,
 Brother also to William the secounde,
 After his fader the thyrd successour,
 Namyd the ffirst Herry—in cronycle it is founde—
 Meke and benygne in vertue ful habounde, 5
 Whiche to seynt Edmond of parfyt holynesse,
 Had grete deuocioun, this chartre berth witsesse.

For this ffirst Herry of ful yore agone,
 To the bisshop of Norwiche sente doune
 To his lordis and barons eurychoun, 10
 Of Suffolk, Norfolk there dwellyng envyroun:
 Helthe, welfare, and salutacioun—
 Wynnyng of herte bothe to highe and lowe
 That this oure chartre be openly rad and knowe.

First we comaunde and wyl that it so be 15
 That the cherche of oure foundacioun,
 Callid Edmondis Bury, stonde in his liberte-
 Abbot, couent, and borgeys of the toune,
 And al the dwelleris withoute excepcioun,
 To vse her fredam and hooly ther fraunchyse 20
 As Knutys chartre and Edwardis dothe devyse.

The same fredam kept in al thynges,
 As ther chartrys make clerly mencioum,
 Graunt and confermyd by thys ij worthy kynges,
 Hool and vnbroke lyk ther intencioun, 25
 We wil there be none interrupcioun;
 But as ther chartres remembre who can rede,
 We bidde and charge that they be kept in dede

We wyl there be founde there-in noo doute;
 But as the saide chartrys do expresse 30
 No kynges mynystre, withjnne nor withoute,
 Seculer nor spiritual, to haue noon interesse
 To hurte ther fredam, nor do hem no duresse-
 But such mynystre, to speke in wordis pleyne,
 As abbot [and] covent liketh to ordeyne. 35

We wyl also, thorgh al oure regioun,
 At ffeyres, marketes, where euer that it be,
 Men of the abbey and al folk of the towne,
 Where euer they gone to have this liberte:
 For to be quyit, and for to go tol fre, 40
 Withoute trouble or any forfeiture,
 Lyk as ther chartre remembrith by scripture.²⁶⁸

[fol. 256r]

And we comaunde and wyl that it be so,
 That al lordschepis fredam and dignytes
 Sokne of viij hundredis and of an half ther-to, 45

²⁶⁸Henry I granted to the abbey the privilege of holding a prolonged fair at St. Edmunds, to be held the week of the feast of St. James. But the biggest concession made by Henry I's charter was to grant to the townspeople of Bury "immunity from toll and custom in every fair and market throughout his dominions, including Normandy." See Davis, "Liberties of Bury St. Edmunds" 423.

Longgyng to thabbey with al ther libertes,
 And al the forfeys of highe and lowe degres,
 Which to the crowne shold longen of the kyng,
 Be to the Abbey by graunt of our wrytyng.

The whiche sookne, more pleynly to expresse, 50
 Whylom seynt Edward the holy blissed kyng
 Gaf to seynt Edmond perpetuel for almesse,
 As hool and ful in al manere thyng,
 As he it held, tyme of his livyng,
 And as we seynt his chartre of recorde, 55
 So we conferme it voyde of al discord.

And we wyl also, withoute excepcioun,
 Al the lordschepys, hool and in partye
 Of seynt Edmondis jurediccioun,
 Stonde in quyete, ful and perpetuely, 60
 Of scot, and gyld, and aydes set therby;
 Alle freholders, as oure graunt doth reporte,
 Within tho hundredis schal to ther court resorte,

In the abbotys moot ther causis for to plete.
 Who wil nat come schal restreyned be, 65
 Tyl he obeye and his malice lete—
 And by this fredam and this liberte,
 Fro sect, and shires, and customys to go fre
 Thorgh al Suffolk withoute disturbaunce—
 So as ther chartre remembrithe in substaunce. 70

A Arshebisshop of Canterbury present,²⁶⁹
 Mawre of Londoun bisshop bare vitnesse,²⁷⁰
 R of Salysbury bisshop gaf assent,²⁷¹

²⁶⁹The famous St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury. The reference hearkens back to a time when the Archbishop was still a reliable ally of the English monasteries.

²⁷⁰Maurice, Bishop of London (d.1107), who, during the exile of Anselm, crowned Henry I at Westminster on 5 August 1100 and later became his chancellor (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 37: 448).

²⁷¹Roger, Bishop of Salisbury (d.1139), one of Henry I's most trusted ministers, who served as regent of England during Henry's absence in Normandy, 1123-1126 (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 48: 713-14).

And R filz Hamond eke present in sothnesse,²⁷²
 And R Bigot for more sykernesse,²⁷³ 75
 And A Ver was at the grauntynge,²⁷⁴
 Whant it was selyd and confermyd by the kyng.

²⁷² Robert Fitz Hamon (d.1107), a loyal supporter of William Rufus and Henry I, benefactor to the abbies of Gloucester and Tewkesbury (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 47: 117-8).

²⁷³ Roger Bigod (d.1107), sheriff of Norfolk, a major landowner in Suffolk and principal royal advisor who is named on many of the writs of Henry I pertaining to Bury St. Edmunds. Bigod founded Thetford Abbey (1104) and was a patron of Norwich Cathedral priory (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 5:711).

²⁷⁴ Either Aubrey de Vere I or II. The former died in 1112, the latter in 1144. Both served as royal chamberlain, and the office remained in the family until 1703. De Vere II founded the alien priory of St. Melanie, Rennes at Hatfield Broadoak, Essex, over which, interestingly, John Lydgate was later to serve as prior from about 1423-27 (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 56: 278).

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London. British Library

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Additional 16165 (A Shirley manuscript containing a few poems by Lydgate, notably "Departing of Thomas Chaucer;" also contains Warwick's "Virelai,")

Additional 29729 ("Lydgate anthology; annotations by Stowe)

Additional 48031A (Yelverton, *Serpent of Division*)

Cotton Cleopatra E III (Articles from the Council of Basel)

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