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THE VOICE OF COMPLAINT:
A STUDY IN POLITICAL AND MORAL RHETORIC

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By
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1999

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ABSTRACT

The English poetry known as the "Complaint Against the Times" has been used in many historical and literary studies as a source of commonplace medieval attitudes and their public vocabulary. This study investigates how such poems, here renamed "political complaints," functioned to represent these attitudes and invigorate this vocabulary against a changing social landscape.

The introduction examines a complaint by a fourteenth-century abbot, John Whethamstede, to show the ability of the complaint to serve political ends. The alleged transparency and immediacy of complaint is challenged and found inadequate to account for such poems.

The first chapter establishes that the dramatic structure of this poetry is used to problematize its moral speech. Such poems as "How Goes This World About," "Now is England Perished," "The Orders of Cain," "Satire on the Consistory Courts," and "The Song of the Husbandman" demonstrate how narrative frames qualify the authority of the poem’s central speaker, or complainant, and provoke the audience to fill this gap.

Chapter 2 demonstrates how the political complaint prompts critique of other political rhetoric--such as the sermon ("Song on the Times"), the dream-vision ("Why I Can’t Be a Nun"), the debate ("Friar Daw’s Reply") and the prophecy ("Merlin’s Prophecy")--as part of this provocation.

The third chapter investigates Winner and Waster to show how the political complaint could be used to address prevalent real-world discourses of morality and
economics. It also considers the occasions on which this poem was recorded or edited to show how the poem’s critique of royal responsibility for public moral discourse appealed to medieval and modern readers.

The conclusion considers the historical value of these poems, and shows that they can still participate, if not transparently, in our understanding of the Middle Ages and of our own ethical relationship with this period.
Dedicated to Judith
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Lisa Kiser, for her unflagging support and encouragement while a reading project grew into a dissertation, and for her invaluable advice at every step.

I thank Nicholas Howe for energetically promoting the project’s contemporaneity and his many careful readings of the manuscript.

I am grateful to Alan Brown for his thought-provoking readings both of my work and of the poems themselves.
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PUBLICATIONS

1. Steven Owley, "Chaucer's 'Pardoner's Tale.'" Explicator 49.4 (Summer 1991): 204.

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English Language and Literature
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INTRODUCTION

'POLITICAL' COMPLAINT

The body of poetry known as the Complaint Against (or On) the Times\(^1\) has played essential roles in the modern study of medieval English literature and in the modern history of this period. These poems have been portrayed in today's scholarship as the sources of other, allegedly better poetic efforts, as historical markers of the great social movements of the middle ages and, conversely, as evidence of the constancy of the medieval ethos. Notwithstanding these important roles, such complaint remains a strangely obscure poetry within our studies, often used for scholarly ends but rarely considered on its own merits. When a group of medieval texts acts as an enabler for many different and perhaps incompatible modern projects, but is itself ignored, we may view its use with some interest, for such repression is likely to reveal a blindness in the disciplines that make use of it.

The discipline of late twentieth-century medieval studies is, according to R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols, marked by attention to its own history, to the relation of the scholar to his project, and to an identity between the concerns of the project and our cultural concerns ("Introduction" 2-3). In the broadest sense this project has always been so concerned; some of the older studies we will consider in this introduction are very open about their politics, and their authors were quite personally

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\(^1\) For a short introduction to this poetry, see R. H. Robbins, "Poems dealing with contemporary conditions," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500* 5: 1387.
involved—perhaps as only non-professional antiquarians could be—with the medieval
texts they treated. Now the scholarly medievalist can ground her work in her present
as well as in the distant past, and with as much candor as the antiquarian; the
"Complaint Against the Times" offers a great opportunity for these recent trends of
thought, and indeed, as we will see, it may even provide a particular test of them, for
this poetry is part of the very definition of "medieval England" for this century’s
medieval studies, historical and literary.

Such poetry can act also as a test of a new medievalism that has embraced "a
science not of things and deeds, but of discourses...an art, not of facts, but of
encodings of facts," (Vance 227) which has yet to really grapple with the place of
complaint in the "discursive matrix" (Vance 226) of medieval English literature.
Poems, when seen as instances of the constitution of the subject within the discourses
of culture, are windows to the ideological structures of power within it, and are
therefore "historical contestants and objects of contestation," capable both of historical
function and of having their historicity appropriated by different political groups.²
Steven Justice’s account of Langland’s attempts to recapture Piers Plowman from the
readings it gave up to the members of the Rising of 1381³ shows not only the

² Paul Strohm, Hochon’s Arrow 9. While I am adopting the position that such
attitudes are important to understanding this poetry, I have reservations about the
breadth of their claims. The philosophical underpinnings of such an analysis are, to my
mind, underrepresented by the scholars making use of the theory, as is the last fifty
years’ worth of work in linguistics (see Jackson, Poverty of Structuralism [1991], for a
polemic on the linguistic weaknesses of postmodernism.) I think that while—broadly-
speaking--postmodern historicism can define fairly clearly that "society" is a "vast
argumentative texture through which people construct their own reality" (Laclau, 79),
it cannot define what an argument is about with such clarity, nor can it clearly delineate
what it means by "people," when that requires identifying them specifically as parts of
precise and limited discursive networks. This problem is touched on in the concluding
chapter of this dissertation.

³ Writing and Rebellion. Some specific passages of this book will figure in the
first chapter.
susceptibility of political poetry to radically different interpretations—and so its potential to historicize and thus subject any moment to re-constitution—but also the poet's concern to reduce this susceptibility and control this potential. Such issues, historical and rhetorical, should now inform any approach to the Complaint Against the Times, to the extent that these anonymous and often undatable verses can be so approached. I am not altogether in sympathy with this "science" when it is writ large—it seems to me politically impotent and, because it is based on a holistic concept of language, fundamentally ahistorical, since no holistic theory of language can account for language learning (or the apprehension of any "discursive matrix") as it occurs in time—but I am not going to deny the revolutionary quality and usefulness of this historical analysis both within the circuit of medievalism and within my own thinking. This study would not be possible without it. I hope, by exploring a body of poems whose continued obscurity should be somewhat scandalous to today's medievalism, to work out for myself what limits the New Historicist and new medieval thinking will have for me, and to begin to discover what I might be able to add to the development of these movements. In the meantime I also hope that I can, as Paul Strohm has put it, "think historically in more than one vocabulary" ("Chaucer's Lollard Joke" 41).

Whatever the vocabulary we employ, the Complaint Against the Times challenges us to incorporate it anew. The premise of this study is that the first twenty lines of a relatively obscure medieval political poem—Winner and Waster—are vital to our modern understanding of that poem and also typical of an entire body of medieval literary work with which we have not yet fully engaged. Neither that poem, nor its poetic cousins, have yet to get their due from twentieth-century scholars. Indeed, the history of modern scholarship concerning the little-read Winner and Waster and that of the Complaint Against the Times is largely the same story of neglect caused by formal and historical principles that are due for revision.
Undertaking such revision may seem a heavy burden for a reading of one poem, but the following study culminating in Winner and Waster will be supported by readings of many other poems also fitting the category of the Complaint Against the Times. I hope to create more awareness of Winner and Waster's literary merit while not assigning the dry part of "source" or "background" to the other verse works. I also wish to advance the merits of these poems until they may converse in our journals and classrooms with more respected poetry of their time, such as that by Chaucer and Langland, to which such political complaint has traditionally acted only the aforesaid ancillary and dessicated roles.

The modern treatment of complaint has not come about through lack of examples. There are many medieval texts, verse and prose, that complain about social problems, and they do so in myriad forms, though the themes remain remarkably consistent from example to example. Complaint is the voice of Saint Jerome and of Bernard of Cluny's De Contemptu Mundi, of Langland and of Gower. It appears commonly in popular lyrics and sermons, in manuscript collections of verse and as graffiti, in crude end-stopped rhyme and as the most accomplished alliterative verse; as a rhetorical vehicle it appealed to Chaucer ("Lak of Stedfastnesse") and John Ball, to abbots and to kings. Chaucer wove its familiar themes into his Canterbury Tales characterizations, as Jill Mann has famously described in Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire. Altogether the Complaint Against the Times appears repeatedly over several centuries in the medieval period alone. There is therefore little hope in trying to contain every instance of complaint under any literary or historical category, although the history of such categorization reveals many attempts to do so.

Of the "several tautologies" currently bedeviling medieval studies, the first lies, according to R. Howard Bloch, "in the tendency to read the poetic work against the background of history that is itself based to some degree upon literary sources" ("The
Medieval Text" 100). This is an apt observation when it comes to the Complaint Against the Times, which in our studies has often been the evidence for this historical background. What is perhaps most interesting is that this poetry often seems to describe historical background as authoritatively as any chronicle; it quite self-consciously makes claims upon our historical understanding of its contemporary context, as in this example, by the John Whethamstede, fifteenth-century abbot.

Around 1440 this abbot presented himself on a trumped-up charge of neglecting the local bridges and, after his acquittal, commented upon his tribulations in verses that end a "chapter" in the chronicle of his abbacy:

Postquam, ut modo dicitur, anima Abbis, velut altera passer volucris, erepta erat de laqueo praeuentantium, laqueusque contritus fuerat, ac ipse per justitiam liberatus erat a malitia amulorum suorum, ad instal Argi alterius, hinc inde et circumquaque deflexit posterius suos oculos, et cum nusquam in omni genere hominum conspexisset statum aliquem, aut gradum, quin ita corruperat viam suam super terram, taliterque intentum haberet suum cogitatum ad malum, ut pro virtute vitium coleret, quasque naturae esset degeneris, brutaliter potius quam rationabiliter victitaret, solutus est mox in lacrymas, lacrymandoque potius quam laetificando, coepit concinere elegiacae sub hiis metris.

Inter carmineas cantandas, Clio, Camoenas,
Heu! cogor moestos hos resonare modos.
Heu! submersus peccati flumine magno
Emoritur, domino vivere vult vitio.
Heu! decus exspirat, heu! dedecus undique gyrat.
Heu! tranquilla quies exulat, atque fides.
Heu! quod habet mundus dolos, est dolor atque profundus,
Et quicquid patria lis sive litigia.
Heu! mel in ore gerunt, qui retro venena refundunt,
Inficit haec omnes putrida vae! species.
Heu! virtus vitio, lex liti, mos quoque mundo,
Servit, et indigenae nunc cedit gratia culpae.
Heu! modo quas coluit terras Astraea reliquit,
Fraus sibi successit, patriam pax, proh dolor! exit.
Heu! plebs in clerum, laicatus et in monachatum
Sic furit, ut stimulos exaspert Erinmys in ipsos.
Heu! clavam dipsa, mucronem bajulat hydra,
Regia sceptr a tigris, diadema simul ferus aspis.
Regales torques et inaures induit anguis,
Ac chlamydem byssi typici species basilisci.
Heu! causas milvus, tractatque negotia nisus,
Heu! praedam prendit leo, fallax upupa vendit;
Heu! baculus damum beat, et sandalia cervum,
Mitra sacrat cuculum, vel dedicat annulus hircum.
Heu! lupus agnelli, heu! vulpes praedicat ancis.
Heu! praesunt asiini, qui subsunt heu! crocodili.
Heu! sua natura mutat notissima jura.
Ars heu! fingit opus, vix est sine fraude colonus.
Heu! quod velle jubet ratio pro viribus implet,
Quod quoque posset rogat, pro jussu quisque receptat.
Heu! nunc qui colitur Deus est, sed debilitatis,
Qui modo legitur liber est, sed lubricitas.
Heu! protheatus homo, morum protheamine magno,
Fit fera, fit volucris, fit bestia, bellua, quivis.
Heu! status, heuque! gradus, heu! princeps, heu! populus,
Sic jam degenerant, ut mea metra ferunt.4

Afterwards, as it is said, the abbot’s soul, as if another speedy sparrow,
was freed from the noose of the claimants, and the noose was trodden
underfoot, and he himself by justice alone was freed from the envy of his
rivals, like another Argus he turned his eyes hither and yon. And when
nowhere in the entire human race could he find any rank, or grade, that
had not so corrupted its earthly course and so turned its views toward evil
as to follow vice in place of virtue and to be, so to speak, debased from
its nature, and to live brutally rather than rationally; the abbot at once
broke into tears, and, crying rather than joying, he begins to sing elegia-
cally in these lines.

Clio, among the Muses of song whom one must chant, Oh! I am forced to
so wind forth these sad measures. Oh! submerged in a great flood of evil,
likely to drown, a man is willing to live with sin’s tyranny. Oh woe!
virtue expires, oh! vice everywhere encircles. Ah! tranquil peace is an
exile, and loyalty. Ah! the deceits which the world has, that is a bound-
less anguish as well, and everywhere in the homeland there is lawsuit or
wrangling. Ah! they have honey in their mouths, who let flow venom
from their behinds, this foul drug—oh woe!—infests everyone. Ah! virtue
serves vice, law serves litigation, also morality serves the world, and
friendship now yields to home-grown guilt. Ah! now Astraea has
abandoned those lands she honored, and Fraud has succeeded her, while
peace—alas!—has left the land. Oh! there are commoners in the clergy,
and common quality rages in the habit of monks like the very goads of the
Furies themselves! Oh! the viper bears a cudgel, the hydra a sword, the
tigress a king’s sceptre, likewise the cruel snake bears a diadem. The ser-
pent wears kingly collars and earrings, and the symbolic linen cloak is the
disguise of basilisks. Oh! the "trustworthy" kite controls law and busi-
ness, Oh! the lion reaps the booty and the false hoopoe sells; Oh! the rod
beatifies the doe and the sandals the stag, the mitre sanctifies the cuckoo,
and the ring blesses the goat. Oh! the wolf preaches to the lambs, Ah!
and the fox preaches to the duck. Oh! the asses command, who are sub-

servient to the crocodiles. Oh! justice changes its own most notorious nature. Ah! artifice fakes work, even the farmer is hardly without deceit. Ah! What the will orders, calculation fulfills with all its might, what influence asks, everyone treats as an order. Oh! now he who is sought after is a god, but of frailty, and today he who is chosen is a book—of pornography. Oh! changeable man, the great shifting fool, becomes an animal, becomes an insect, a monster, whatever you wish. Oh! rank and oh! grade, Oh! prince, Oh! people! They are now becoming so degenerate, as my lines claim.5

Its poetic diction is typical of the classizing Latin Complaint Against the Times; it is sprinkled with "heu" and "proh dolor," and features alliterated vices and virtues set against each other in a short, exasperated burst of invective and lament. We can see an affinity with this macaronic poem on the Rising of 1381:

Savoy semely sette,
heu! funditus igne cadebat,
Arcadon there they bett,
et eos virtute premebat,
Deth was ther dewe dett,
qui captum quisque ferebat
(Wright, Political Poems and Songs 1: 226, 55-60).

The themes of Whethamstede's poem are typical of the Complaint Against the Times, as well; *Heu! decus exspirat, heu! dedecus undique gyrat* is the thematic core of such complaint poetry in miniature. Evil abounds, especially in the homeland, where the dissemblers and the vicious surround and drive out the good. Peace and Justice have abandoned the land; men are becoming monsters. Beyond the outrage and hyperbole is, perhaps, an implied apocalyptic theme; Astraea quits the land, but the Christian God cannot, and the Last Judgment will right what is clearly beyond the capacity of the mundane world to fix. However, the speaking voice of the poem eschews this supernatural comfort, overtly at least, for the lonely role of soothsayer, ending as it began with the triumph of evil and its own apparent defeat as a righteous citizen of the benighted patria.

5 *Annales* 2: 220-222.
So typical is this poem, in fact, that it begins to look as if it were trying very hard to be representative. For instance: "Heu!" is a common expletive in complaints of this type, and this one offers twenty-seven of them, excessive even for this extravagant style of poetry. It seems to work so hard at being a recitation of familiar sentiments that it hardly seems capable of any specific application at all. Many a Complaint Against the Times is like this, trading on the same worn observations, often the same verses, about poison tongues, extravagant dress or what-have-you, a general denunciation in search of an immediate target. Indeed, Joseph Keller extracted the abbot’s poem from the chronicle in order to explain the apparent imprecision of Complaint Against the Times poetry by imputing to the medieval mind a propensity to "detect universals in the particular," to allegorize reality constantly (Keller, 123). It is, in other words, so typical because it reflects a habit of mind that, while supposedly not so true of us, was, according to this modern view, fundamental and commonplace to the English people of the Middle Ages. With Keller’s observation in mind, we may see this poem to be an example of this hypothetical Medieval Mind at work. Although he has a personal gripe, and although he has escaped from the trap set for him by evil men, the experience causes Whethamstede to look outward, with sadness and Christian

6 The poem originates in the *Annales Monasterii S. Albani*, as written (allegedly) by the monk Johanne Amundesham, but it is not to be found in either volume of Thomas Wright’s *Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History, Composed During the Period from the Accession of Edw. III to that of Ric. III* (1861), as Keller’s note would have it. The *Annales*, edited by Henry Riley, were published in 1870 in two volumes; these books are approximately the same size and color as Wright’s two volumes.

7 John M. Ganim presents this idea as a creative problem:

...the dominant ideal of literary creation is that truth is already imbedded in a more or less fixed moral order and that the responsibility of the poet is to reveal that order...the purity of such a goal, adequate in many respects to didactic and sacred poetry, is in many more respects compromised by a literature that creates fictions of the secular world (11).
humility, and see his particular woes as symptomatic of much wider and more
important evils affecting the entire world. Within the medieval concept of history's
inexorable course toward apocalypse, a path of unremitting degeneracy, such
generalization as the abbot offers is akin to sympathy for all those who do not find
justice and must be willing to live in sin's tyranny--although the poem does not seem to
find such another victim in all the wide world.

In making his observation, Keller relies on a long tradition in the modern
literary study of such poetry that has characterized it as expressing the Zeitgeist of a
time best defined by its differences from our own. The ubiquity of this poetic type has
certainly lent support to this view; the Complaint Against the Times appealed to so
many different medieval poets on so many different occasions that it is rather easy to
imagine it speaking to an unchanging, metaphysical Medieval Mind that existed apart
from any of its particular incarnations. For Peter, the temporal axis is really all that
matters when it comes to the evaluation of complaint:

Complaint is not the direct product of a particular society that Satire often
is, but rather an abstract or conceptual tradition, with something of the
same durability that a general system of ethics has (59).

This statement is more than an analogy; it is an identification of poem and era, and it
has serious consequences for any qualitative analysis of the poetry that assumes its
accuracy. This identification explains why Peter finds complaint poems "nagging" and
dull, a kind of pious hiatus between Roman satirical literature and that of the
Renaissance, and why, although Peter's work remains valuable for its description of
common "complaint" themes and moods--not least because it demonstrates how
conventional and ubiquitous these themes were--his assessment of the genre is quite
unsympathetic. Identifying medieval Complaint closely with an idea of the general ethos of its time, he denies it the particularity, either in occasion or in authorship, that allows for anything more specific than a taxonomy of the genre "Complaint." Indeed, he reserves the very features of historical focus and individual voice for later in the book, when Satire is the subject. Thus for Peter the category "Satire" is problematic, as it is found only in particular examples that are every one contingent upon author and context, while Complaint exists primarily as an idealized genre outside historical particulars:

There is a straightforwardness about [Complaint] that is not found in Satire. Not only is the moral standard upon which the satirist relies usually a far more dusky and sometimes private affair than the clear, rigid Christianity of Complaint...but Satire...includes other things too--especially...the cast of mind of the satirist (54).

Peter goes on to distinguish between Complaint and Art itself (55-56), placing Complaint within the mundane realm of propaganda, or what Janet Coleman, from an entirely different historical perspective, would label "reportage" (67). We see in both terms the conclusion that these are working poems, meant to change the political environment through their moralist critique; this study will attempt to retain this point while maintaining the poetry in all its formulaic fictiveness.

Siegfried Wenzel, in the sixth chapter of his book on the early English lyric (1986), breaks the shorter, most general of the complaint types into formulae and traces the origins of a few poems; this structural study demonstrates the uniformity of the type through time, complementing Peter's thematic approach without the qualitative judgments.

A more historicized version of this same dichotomy is in Kirk Combe's "The New Voice of Political Dissent: the Transition from Complaint to Satire" (1995). Combe reads Peter as an advocate of the complaint poem's morality versus the satire's liveliness (92 n.5). He shows how the Complaint came out of favor in the seventeenth century, historicizing the modernist judgment that Peter provides simply as a modernist, but the attitude toward the poetry is not improved by the historical stance: "Instead of sniveling grievances and blurry hopes for amelioration [that characterize complaint], satire articulates direct action against wrongdoers" (77). Combe offers irony as the only vehicle out of complaint's tiresomeness (77).
Despite their apparent ahistoricity, marked by the use of transcendent, capitalized categories such as Satire and Art, Peter's judgments are in fact informed by a particular view of medieval history. This history is easy to identify with Keller's analysis, too; it is the so-called "monolithic" view, which describes an Age of Faith against which modernism defines its own senses of, among other things, the private individual and the ambiguities of his existence. According to this historical view, medieval English complaint literature is clear and rigid because its times believed in the clarity and rigidity of cosmic, Christian principles, and therefore the satirist's cast of mind is absent from such literature because the need for an individual to authorize critique is superfluous in medieval culture. This is the interpretive vantage from which Peter states that complaint "cannot afford to change" (59), because its change would amount to an undoing of Christian ethics and the world they defined. It is a deeply ironic historical vantage, and a dramatic irony at that, because it includes the awareness that the moral critique of the Complaint Against the Times, and indeed that represented by the Age of Faith itself, did not last, nor did the apocalypse the complaint often threatens ever come.

Modern faith in the Complaint Against the Times as excellent historical evidence of what was "popular medieval thought" has thrived under such attention. To some turn-of-the-century historians, these poems bespoke the protests of a "peasantry" under the yoke of their aristocratic masters and were composed as a plea for redress (Owst 216-217). While later scholars were more circumspect in how they used this evidence, the idea that the poems express "popular sympathy" or were a measure of "public esteem" continued to inform their treatment. Even recent writers occasionally slip into this assumption, as when John Ganim repeatedly associates

Chaucer's references to alliterative poetry with chthonic "public language" (Ganim "Noise," 72). These poems are often used as examples of the typical medieval reaction to events, a kind of grass-roots poll measuring "the people's" concerns against the actions of the individuals who ruled them; so R. H. Robbins notes that "While leading noblemen themselves were much aware of the need of the support of the commons...these poems reflect the attitude of the commons themselves" (Robbins xcx).

V. J. Scattergood's Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century is an example of the results this approach produces; it demonstrates that many Complaint Against the Times poems reflect the political issues of the time as these issues became crises. The poetry's public, characterized so generally, simply cannot be given a specific political role, and thus its poetic actions do not take part in politics beyond marking its movements.

A cursory look at Whethamstede's effort seems to support the idea that the complaint is one-dimensional and culturally redundant, a simple reflection of real action. Doubtless such verses as these figured in sermons that the abbot had heard and perhaps composed, lending the force of the pulpit to its rhetorical appeal, creating a kind of voiceless authority like that commonly attributed to homily or proverb. The poem's dramatic structure helps to encourage the view that it is only what it portrays; like the Psalms that it brings to mind--Ps. 35 and 55-59, for instance--it can function both as internal and external speech, as the muttering of an oppressed person to himself or as a public declamation against such oppression generally by this same person. These features lend the voice considerable consistency and make irony or ambiguity difficult to find within the verses' internal dramatic situation. It oozes single-minded sincerity. For instance, its speaking persona seems educated; the reference to Astraea and the debt of the whole poem to the Psalms--compare its venomous stings to the poisonous mouths of Ps. 57--demonstrate this clearly. However, neither this bookish
persona nor the Biblical allusions are stressed—in any sense of the word—enough to admit much dramatic interest in this character. Indeed, they are the clichés of monastic literature. Furthermore, the causal logic of the poem is straightforward; cunning and semblance create a world of litigation and calumny, so that the homeland is abandoned by Justice, which is succeeded by fraud and conflict.

Because of these features, there is little purchase for any transforming interpretation, and indeed it seems willful and anachronistic to seek such a reading. The poem’s theme of moral lament, its familiar contempt for the world, appears quite transparent and immediate, as is, perhaps, the implied Christian consolation, and it seems pointless to ask for some other purpose or motivation. Instead, we are left to examine the surface of the lines, where the chief points of interest are purely stylistic and rhetorical; we can consider, for example, whether the invoking of Astraea is meant to flatter the audience’s learning, whether it is a direct reflection of Walsingham’s classicism in the St. Albans Chronicle, and whether it renders the sentiment of the lines more memorable through its synthesis of classical and scriptural allusion. Worthy questions, but at first they seem unlikely to reveal the impulses behind its apparently superfluous composition; however sophisticated its approach, bewailing the world’s evil ways so conventionally would seem redundant if we take its speaking voice, as Keller does, to represent the audience’s own.

Many literary historians have been dissatisfied with noting reflections, because this passive role for the poems begs this question of motivation. Scattergood, for example, must conclude that the poems he has been studying cannot have had much actual political influence (376), a conjecture that can be attributed to the presuppositions of his procedure and that is at odds with his insistence that these political poets were brave to write them, since the very threat of punishment, indeed punishment itself, is proof of these poems’ political influence. These historians have
sought to identify a specific authoring class in order to create a coherent, activist political function for the "Complaint Against the Times." The "peasantry" is no longer a candidate, at least not in any simple sense. G. R. Owst, in his monumental *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, provided in 1933 the paradigm for another approach—previously suggested, but unpursued, by Bernhard Ten Brink and Thomas Wright—by attributing such complaints to a class of "literate" writers who were concerned with the moral welfare of the state. In Owst's work, these were friars originally, then common clerics and finally religious revolutionaries (221). For Owst, most of these poems were a friar's representation of what such politically marginal people would have said if they could "give voice to the sufferings and wrongs of the common people" (Owst 220). In this light, the Complaint Against the Times was courageous political action, strengthening the downtrodden and castigating their immoral masters, and so had the same function as the sermons from which it often borrowed so much of its rhetoric.\(^1\) More recent historians have stripped this vision of class struggle of those elements of class mysticism\(^2\) that inform its separation of cleric and "peasant," and are less ready to characterize literacy primarily as an attribute of the religious, or indeed to define medieval literacy as strictly—that is, as applicable only to those who had learned to read and write—as Owst does. Janet Coleman's *Medieval Readers and Writers* proposes that complaint poems were written by and for a "middle

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11 Peter was the first to challenge Owst's assertion that complaint was wholly indebted to homily by demonstrating that, in some cases, a complaint poem was the source of a homily or even an intermediary between two homilies composed at different times. This is a fundamentally important discovery that has gone largely ignored.

12 An example of Owst's mythology—"In the earlier days of Mendicant activity, then, we picture the brethren moving about freely among the dregs of society...stirred to indignation...so to ring in the era of redress from above as well as below" (Owst 220). Owst often writes as if the medieval writers could foresee the advent of the Reformation, indeed often as if the coming event was guiding their efforts in order to create itself.
class" of literate merchants, clerics, and civil servants. According to Coleman, this class needed to reconcile its emerging nationalist and individualist ethic with the "universal ethics" of the Church (15); this struggle produced a profound nostalgia and political conservatism in this class, expressed by a pious concern for the laborer-class from which this "middle class" had emerged and to which it remained closely tied. In Coleman’s sophisticated reading, the Complaint Against the Times juxtaposes depictions of actual social ills against the stylized convention of other poetic forms, including the romance, debate, dream-vision, and estates satire. She gives poetic innovation itself a political role, and poetic convention becomes the basis for experimentation that bespeaks desire for change.

There are lessons to be learned from this history of scholarly approaches. Owst and Coleman, speaking from the advantageous if mutually incompatible platforms provided by totalizing ideological apparatus—Owst has Protestant Christianity, and Coleman has Marxism—are able to engage the poems more completely than Scattergood, whose allegiance to an empirical approach to history limits his use of literary tools of interpretation and so also limits his ability to involve the poetry in his larger realist narrative of the historical events.

"Literary" questions of rhetorical context and audience can indeed lead past complaint’s perfect-seeming marriage of theme and context. We might ask what Whethamstede’s precise relation to his audience is, and why the poem was preserved in these Annales. Although neither of these questions has been pursued for these verses, the movement of scholarship toward a more historically informed position on the Complaint Against the Times generally is clear. In 1979 R. H. Nicholson attempted the most ambitious literary study of the Complaint Against the Times since Peter’s. Nicholson’s article attacks the idea that such poems are "historically descriptive," and essays to show that their "connection with reality is essentially rhetorical" (14-15);
however, Nicholson implies that this rhetorical connection is the effective historical reality, since the Complaint Against the Times was the culturally-determined "mode of perception" by which medieval English society characterized its own disorder. The poetry was, according to Nicholson, medieval English society's conception of its own *vox populi*, and the rhetorical vehicle through which that society expressed criticism of its own failings, though the actual sources of these failings was not analyzed by the limited moral critique of the verses. Such an approach marks the difference, as Stephen G. Nichols has put it, between *le dit* and *le dire* (31), between the said as an historical object and the saying as a rhetorical complex of contexts and intentions. If, following Nicholson's observations, we see complaint as a representation of "the people's voice"—as opposed to that voice itself, which is polyvocal and thus essentially, as Gower would put it, "noise"—we must admit that complaint poems had the potential to re-make their contemporary political landscape; therefore, they must be treated as once-effective political speech if they are to be understood by modern scholars.

Historians have largely ignored the idea that the Complaint Against the Times was a rhetorical effort at societal self-characterization that both expressed and concealed parts of the "people's voice." Instead, they have attempted to assign it to one portion or another of medieval society as that portion's immediate and transparent expression. Janet Coleman's designation of the "middle class" as both author and audience is a fascinating starting point for many of these poems, placing sincere sympathy for the oppressed laborers in the hearts of the very people who owned their land and purchased their servitude, but this relationship was, as we will see, very complex, and occasionally produced complaints that display a callous disregard for the people they supposedly champion. The convention appealed to kings, too, and often—as in our abbot's effort—appears in poems that were unconcerned with the travails of serfs and plowmen. Why, we should ask, would the Complaint Against the Times...
have been the rhetorical choice in any specific case, and what could the author have known of its other uses? It is clear that the Complaint Against the Times has qualities that suit it to various uses, and we would be wrong to assume that poems of this type were written and read without knowledge of these uses. The poetry's very ubiquity complicates any reading designed to identify a specific authoring class, since a mode that was available to all persons inevitably allowed multiple classes to speak, even when a particular class or social group is the intended audience.

Literary scholars, operating upon such historical bases, have failed to notice the formal experimentation in complaint that is obvious to the historian Coleman, much less considered the poetry as a part of the great social change of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Lee Patterson, writing, it should be said, about complaint in general, demonstrates this prejudice clearly:

Complaint is not merely ineffective...but an illegitimate attempt to change a world that will yield only to action. The poet's relation to the world is thus one of exclusion, even alienation: rather than participating, he stands to the side, claiming the privilege of irony because he lacks the efficiency of power. And again we touch one of the central issues of western thinking about literature; does writing have any effect upon the world, whether moral or practical, or is it simply ornament and compensation? (Patterson, "Writing" 57).

Patterson is forced to ask this question because he assumes that the isolated, powerless narrative voice of complaint poetry is that of the poet; therefore, the act of writing the poetry becomes itself subject to questions about efficacy, indeed becomes something other than a historical "action." Patterson would not make these assumptions about Chaucer's poetry, or that of any other canonical author, but complaint is here falling into its traditional, passive historical role, a tendency that is hard to resist. Much like

13 There are exceptions. Thomas H. Bestul's Satire and Allegory in Wynnerene and Wastoure explores that poem as a "composite of a number of well-known and widely used medieval genres" (24).
Peter before him, Patterson ignores the contexts that make a poem an action, thus consigning the poem to the never-was of illegitimate "attempt." In this light, this poetry will never be more to us than the tradition of literary history commonly portrays it to be: a sourcebook for Langland, a crude tradition with which Chaucer ironically toys, or the pathetic autocompensation of the powerless "dregs of society."

To remedy this situation, we must start where Peter and Patterson do, with a general description of the Complaint Against the Times; its sameness over time is its most obvious historical aspect. This study will assume, however, that these poems were written to be effective, and allow this assumption to guide the formal investigation. The study will also assume that Christian moral discourse, by virtue of its importance to medieval English culture, was contested over mightily, not only in the universities and royal courts, not only between Rome and Avignon, but also in the everyday contexts of individual subjects. This is not to make a democracy out of the period, but to recognize the superiority which the discourse of Christian ethics held as the guarantor of justice. This more complicated approach combines Nicholson’s understanding of the poetry as a process by which medieval society made itself and its ethics into rhetoric with Coleman’s point that this process must perforce have played a role in fourteenth-century English society’s evolution. As a first small step in this direction I will temporarily rename the Complaint Against the Times the political complaint, in hope of reflecting its potential to express many meanings and serve many purposes within and through the rich context of medieval society and its writings. "Political" in this case presents a more flexible and potentially particular application than "Complaint Against the Times," which partakes of the traditional view of the complaint as a passive marker of social change. I hope that this renaming will separate the poems at issue from the generic sameness of purpose and broad focus that the
former term implied; the naming is not meant to function beyond the confines of this study, and represents no attempt at characterizing another genre.

This study will concentrate on a smaller subset of this group, for if any coherent line of inquiry could hope to cover such vast ground I do not know it. Specifically, I will omit the complaints, like those of the Virgin or of the Cross, that feature a supernatural speaker, and those, as in Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, that provide advice for remedying the problems they identify. I hope to justify these restrictions by showing the unique possibilities of those poems that purposefully set aside the certainty that invoking God or some other authoritative source provides. The complaints I will address provoke more than they instruct.

The following chapters will investigate the political complaint in general and *Winner and Waster* in particular. The beginning of my study must be unapologetically formal, because the formal elements of political complaint are in fact all we have with which to begin; we will define the structure and rhetoric of the political complaint and its part in creating formal experimentation. The first of these chapters will explore the dramatic structure of such poetry, using poems as different as "How Goes This World About," "Now is England Perished," "The Orders of Cain," "Satire on the Consistory Courts," and "The Song of the Husbandman." It will demonstrate how complaint exploits narrative frames to qualify internal voices, thus both provoking and controlling authoritative responses. The second will demonstrate how the political complaint prompts critique of other political rhetoric—such as the sermon ("Song on the Times"), the dream-vision ("Why I Can’t Be a Nun"), the debate ("Friar Daw’s Reply") and the prophecy ("Merlin’s Prophecy")—as part of this provocation.

14 A subtle and informed examination of the advice motif is Judith Ferster’s *Fictions of Advice*. Gower gets individual treatment in the seventh chapter.
The third chapter will apply these lessons to *Winner and Waster*, perhaps the greatest and most experimental example of the type. This poem is used to identify and critique a discourse of economic morality promulgated, the poem proposes, by the king. The dramatic structure of the complaint is used to qualify the royal point-of-view, while the corrosive critical effect of complaint acts to demonstrate the emptiness of the "moral" arguments used to promote greed and profligacy in the populace. The result is modern and also typically medieval, for *Winner and Waster* finds the source of moral and economic discourse in politics, and proposes that social ills be cured through a return to the ideals of medieval kingship and a reimagining of medieval society by this supreme social interpreter.

These chapters will try to show the many uses to which medieval writers put the convention, exploiting its various features. Incidentally, they will also demonstrate the vigor and elemental power of this kind of poetry. Such exercise is warranted in the case of Whethamstede’s political complaint, which serves as an example of the multiple concerns and subtleties of the political complaint poem when it served as a vehicle for making history in its own time. In their place within the chronicle, these lines acquire a fuller range of purpose than they have within the pages of a journal or dissertation.15

The chronicle ascribes to Whethamstede much of the character of the poem’s voice; he is depicted as surveying the world, seeing it everywhere consumed by jealousy of rank and dissembling, and crying out in a jeremiad. I do not think that the

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15 The manuscript in which the Whethamstede chronicle occurs, Cotton Claudius D I, sandwiches it between a collection of about forty of his official letters and two short rental records from Thomas Ramrynge’s sixteenth-century Abbacy. The beginning of the chronicle is missing. The text is, according to editor Riley, unadorned and lacking substantive marginalia in all portions. The convention of ending each year with a poem reacting to it concludes with verses on Whethamstede’s resignation. MS Arundel (Mus. Brit. 32) contains a record of his expenses, including some handsome gifts to the judges ruling on Whethamstede’s various litigations.

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self-characterization implied by the chronicle fits the abbot; in fact, it offers an opportunity to critique this persona in terms of a historical representation of Whethamstede.

This passage is a preface to the poem, and anticipates it in many ways. It is the chronicle that first alerts the reader to the presence of the Psalms—"erepta erat de laqueo" echoes the Vulgate's Psalm 123—and that introduces the first classical reference by comparing the abbot to Argus. At least as much attention is paid to characterizing Whethamstede's state-of-mind as to recounting his observations, and in this the chronicle also augurs the poem's dramatic presentation of its speaker—it even alliterates one of the virtue/vice juxtapositions ("virtute vitium") it uses to depict the abbot's mind. Through imitating the poem's rhetoric, and through using this imitation to describe the poem's author, the chronicle encourages the reader to combine the historical Whethamstede and the fictional voice he created. In this way the chronicle implies that the poet is like the lonely, defeated, world-hating complainant of the poem. If we accept this portrayal, we will find that the Abbot is, as Keller portrayed him, an example of the modern tradition of the "Medieval Mind" and its impulse to morose moral generalizations.

That Whethamstede was content to allow himself to be absorbed into this topos, that he and his contemporaries saw history as a series of moral examples that broke down into conventional relationships, is undeniable; not only is it the common practice of his time, but the poem, as we will see, bears witness to his hand in promoting this very purpose. To conclude that he was therefore blind to the process and its potential uses to him is less supportable; this particular combination of history and poetry
provides an example of these multiple intentions playing themselves out in a single text.  

The chronicle reveals these purposes by providing space for criticism of the poetry's historical function. "Statum aliquem, aut gradum" anticipates a parallelism in the poem. Through this juxtaposition the chronicle emphasizes the history of the lament, reminding us that at the core of the general complaint about envy of earthly rank or place—"statum"—lies a struggle for power within the grades—"gradum"—of the Church bureaucracy governing the monastery, a struggle whose history has been plainly narrated by the rest of the chronicle. Whatever the truth of the accusations brought against Whethamstede—and they are plainly presented as false, though what are to us equally plain falsehoods of the abbot's have been presented elsewhere in the chronicle as the truth—they are important to the extent that they affect his authority.

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16 Intention, for my purposes, is a quality of an action that we attribute to it after the fact. Poems, like any other performance, do not so much reveal the historical author's intention as create an interpretive opportunity inclusive of the concept of intention. Readers familiar with Charles Altieri's *Act and Quality* (1981) will recognize its influence on this subject. Altieri's version of speech-act theory is inclusive of many interpretive procedures. His criticism of post-Saussurean analytics (214-237) remains important reading for students of literary theory.

17 It is possible—and this is pure, if informed, conjecture—that the accusation brought against the Abbot was instigated by one of Whethamstede's many enemies, the Abbot of Westminster. The bridge affair follows suddenly upon another accusation—brought by the Abbot of Westminster—into an alleged violation by Whethamstede's people of an area of land in dispute between the two abbeys, called appropriately "Nomannyslonde." The chronicle recounts quite a bit of legal harassment of this kind on all sides.

18 Particularly obvious is Whethamstede's altered version of King Offa's Charter of Foundation, offered in defense against the attempt by the Bishop of Norwich and Archbishop of York to end the Abbey's exemption in 1433. This Charter—originally forged, perhaps, during the thirteenth-century Abbacy of Matthew Paris, and now preserved in Cotton Nero D I—was spurious to begin with, and the Abbot interpolates freely for his immediate needs. It may be that this is the same document for which the lay folk were searching the Abbey during the Rising of 1381, expecting to find their hopes taking shape in its protean substance. See Stephen Justice, *Writing and Rebellion* 256-258, for an account of this episode; Justice is apparently unaware of the charter, though he ingeniously guesses that St. Alban's may have had one.
and thus the integrity of St. Alban's. By allowing the issue to emerge in this way, the
chronicle emphasizes the poetry as an act with political aspects and specific historical
reference; as a result the moral evaluation in the verses cannot escape its historical
specificity. It is possible, therefore, that the poem is not meant to do so, that the poem
in fact takes part in this struggle rather than merely accounting for it. The chronicle’s
effort at characterizing the abbot’s intention thus acquire the aspect of a critique of his
intention, since this contextualization brings to the fore issues of accuracy and
effectiveness.

This critique implies that the abbot may be less than completely sincere in his
self-portrayal. The chronicle makes it clear that justice alone has freed the abbot, in
contrast to the poem’s insistence that Justice is nowhere to be found. When we
consider this historical inconsistency, and then take account of the poem’s rhetorical
strategy, the verses appear almost reprehensible. The complainant’s despair at the evil
of the world and the almost angry words of David and Jeremiah that inform this
character tap powerful themes in the Christian faith. It is the voice of the just person,
beset by the world, able to cry out but unable to effect change; it waits upon God’s
judgment with impatience. This persona--its moral concern, its despair, its barely-
hidden jealousy and self-importance, its implicit challenge to God to right the world
and so justify its sacrifices--dramatizes the struggles of the Christian mind to reconcile
the world to its ideals. This emotional manipulation, the chronicle reminds us, is
ultimately about a minor squabble over the upkeep of bridges, conceived after the petty
battle was over and in the dull glory of a petty victory. The extremity of the lament is
therefore all out of measure to its cause; the potential for the abbot to appear as an
ineffectual, whining, almost comic figure is rather great. He won out, after all, and so
his portrayal of a world wherein *lex servit liti* sounds ungrateful as well as extravagant; he cries, we are reminded, rather than joys. The chronicle’s allusion to Psalm 123 reflects, perhaps, the proper words for a person in the abbot’s triumphant circumstances, and so criticizes the poem’s complaining approach.

Although such implications do not necessarily a significant meaning make, one aspect of the poem makes the presence of any discord at all quite remarkable; the poem must be designed for the chronicle and its author cognizant of the chronicle as the poem’s predestined context. When the abbot writes a poem historicizing an event of interest only to those for whom the monastery is a moral microcosm of the world, he is writing for the monks of St. Alban’s, those present and those to come; he knows where the poem will end up, if indeed he doesn’t cause it to be inscribed into the record himself. Therefore, the abbot must have included the chronicle in its compositional calculations, and the poem must create some of its effects through manipulating this context. This lament on the times portrays the abbot’s conclusions, drawn from an historical episode of administrative politics, and is meant to be the last word on it for the audience of chronicle-readers. In this circumstance, whenever the chronicle undermines the poem’s effort, however slightly, it has a fundamental effect on the poem’s meaning. With remarkable ease the chronicle’s rationalization of the poem’s historicity thus becomes a criticism of the poem’s politics and its author, even though such criticism may not be the first order of business.

The chronicle’s implied criticism of the poem as an effort at history-making is therefore most appropriate and worthy of attention. What kind of history is the poem trying to write? Certainly it is not a factual one, because the poem does not reflect the situation as it happened. We can see that the poem is not the direct expression of a man *in extremis*; indeed, the chronicle tells us that the abbot has already been torn free "by fairness" of the snare that his enemies had set for him by the time he goes about
observing the world and composing his complaint. It does not therefore require that we hold the poem to facts in order to find discord between the chronicle’s narrative and the dramatic situation in the poem; the difference between them lies in the rhetorical effort—the poem—of which the dramatics are part and whether this effort was appropriate to the abbot’s situation as the chronicle portrays it. It is not that the chronicle has some kind of intrinsic historical authority, but rather that the rationale of the monastery demands that the abbot’s account and the chronicle’s be in accord, which situation makes the chronicle an authoritative frame around the abbot’s acts.

The chronicle makes this rationale clear. The monastery is supposed to be steadfast, and its population of a singular mind and common purpose. Whethamstede, for example, banned the use of the first person singular pronoun within its walls, and spoke always in the communal "we." If editor Riley is correct and the abbot ghost-wrote Amundesham’s chronicle, it was probably in order to tell his story without pridefully breaking this communality. In such a rhetorical and ideological environment, his recollection of events should coincide with the other monks’ and with any text purporting to be theirs, such as "Amundesham’s" recollections.

This is the foundation upon which the poem fails to build a convincing image of its author, either psychologically or morally—the chronicle, by insisting on this purpose through promoting a correspondence between the poem’s speaker and Whethamstede, constructs a critique of the author’s effort based on this failure. However, this correspondence is only one part of the poetic performance, and not necessarily the most important; the chronicle may ignore the poem’s more effective historical meanings, meanings closely related to the abbot’s position and its prerogatives and therefore less subject to criticism. The abbot may write in order to demonstrate, not how he feels or felt, but how well his enemies fit into the dramatic milieu of the rhetorical convention—political complaint—he has chosen to comment on the history of the incident. The
verses act as half an analogy. The political situation reminds Whethamstede of a poetic convention in which a blameless man is surrounded by evil; at the cost of falling short in the complainant role, a role unfit to his station, if not to his innocence, he is able to paint his enemies as worldly masters of deceit. In a similar vein, the abbot may not be David, but the Psalmist's words carry the vitriol he wishes to pour out, are in fact the location of much of it:

In the evening, and at morning, and at midday, I will speak, and declare, and he will heare my voice

His wordes are made softer than oile: and the same are darts.

Al the day did they detest my words; against me, al their cogitations are unto evil.
They wil inhabit and keep secret: they will observe my heel.\(^1\) (Ps. 54.18, 54.22, 55.6-7).

The poem is at one level a finesse, designed to blacken others with a decorous passivity suited to an abbot; the political complaint's conventional apocalyptic theme and powerless persona mask the abbot's desires. The reader exploits only part of the poem, allowing the irrelevant portion—the ridiculous representation of the abbot—to lie quiet. Although his real-life power is hidden underneath the bushel of this helpless, plaintive persona, Whethamstede can be confident that his audience will understand what is significant and what is not in his poetic gesture; he can rely on the integrity of his position and on the order of which that position is part to allow the audience to "read past" the unfortunate portrayal of himself to that of his enemies, because the wholly conventional poem is universally applicable and thus does not require absolute correspondence to make meaning out of historical reality. Much like a proverb, this conventional expression is capable of a variety of meanings because its familiarity

\(^1\) Translations from the Vulgate will be based on the Douai text, Internet version.
allows for discrete application of any one of its parts; a proverb, or a complaint, is often less meaningful in itself than it is as a gesture by the speaker, as in "a stitch in time saves nine," which can be a palliative, a provocation, or even simply an example of proverbial speech, depending entirely on context.

Beyond this immediate political goal lies another, also drawn from the complaint's proverbial nature. Constructed passively and indirectly, the abbot's attack on his foes loses its political relevance over time, leaving behind only the conventional expression and its moralizing, generalizing rhetoric. Such an utterance is often not so much a carrier of voiceless authority that both speaker and listener respect as it is a signal of the speaker's assumption of authority and his desire to have the last word; its appearance signals the end of discussion, as its generalizing function ensures that the only proper response is another proverbial statement, a state of affairs that quickly becomes a meaningless stripping bare of the interlocutors' respective wills. Therefore, when a later reader encounters such rhetoric, he may respond to it as Keller and Owst do, by acceding to its moral and historical authority. Whethamstede's rhetorical act is, for later audiences, definitive of its place and time.

Similarly, the succeeding monks may understand what he had been doing with his poem or they may not, but its importance as a political act would have been long irrelevant to them; we cannot say the same for the historical self-image that the chronicle authoritatively builds and maintains for these members of St. Alban's. It presents the monastery as a place apart from the world and a vantage from which the world may be observed, and a place which offers an ideal model for the world as well. The decorum of the convention allows Whethamstede to have his immediate political
victory and his eternal dignity; we can see that he desired both. Indeed, the entire battle tends to fade in importance to the general message, exemplified by the poem, of the importance of maintaining the integrity of the monastery against all the destructive and jealous efforts of the outside world. The abbot and his opponents disappear behind this poetic flourish, almost taking the embarrassing unkindness that was brought into—"Inficit"—the ideal order of the monastery with them; the whole episode is abstracted into a demonstration of the primacy of this ideal. In this decorum, more than the rote morality of the verses, the poetry becomes a testimony—however selfish and flawed—to the ethics of Whethamstede's monastic society.

It is testimony, too, to the author's understanding of the purposes of historical writing and the historicity of this particular act. I take it that the poet could anticipate some of both the short-term and the long-term audiences possible to this poem; in his assumptions about who will be reading it, his ideological goals are refined, made clearer and simpler than they were in day-to-day circumstances, if for no other reason than that an assumed audience is a sub-set of the writer's experience. In the case of Whethamstede's poem, the ideological supposition of consequence includes an independent St. Albans that has withstood the attacks of the world for the betterment of those within it; Whethamstede is portrayed as one who has managed to stay the course in difficult circumstances, and an example to those who will also face the assaults of a wicked world. This desire to be recognized as having brought about the reader's comfortable situation—one so insulated that it allows for the contemplation of its own little history in depth and at length—is plainly enacted in the poem. The abbot

20 Concern with image is a theme of sorts in Whethamstede's writing. "On the Civil Wars" (Wright, Political Poems and Songs 258-266) records the end of the Wars of the Roses through the prism of the abbey's fortunes at the hands of the combatants. Throughout he is concerned with the dignity of the institution first.
apparently considered that the reputation of the Abbey and the integrity of its property, aspects allowing it to defend itself from the many forces attempting to incorporate it, would be a lasting concern of life there.

If we ask again what kind of history the poem writes, we find that it writes, at one completely authentic level, exactly the one Keller ascribes to it; it is an example of the pessimistic piety of the late Middle Ages and that time's cognitive habit of moral generalization, of seeing the eternal in the mundane. We also see, however, that the poem is aware of this exemplary process, and in performing it masks, not simply the "facts," but the potential for other moral analysis. The abbot shows a fine understanding of his poem's historical function within the chronicle and of the appropriate cultural commonplaces to use for his immediate, and his abbey’s long-term, benefit. We see a glimpse of other possibilities in the chronicle's play on the verse's rhetoric and the resulting critique of the author's motives.

I have defined what this political complaint is by what it does, as opposed to its overt themes. The poem's meaning, from this angle, is primarily that it is inscribed in the chronicle, which constitutes a privilege that only the abbot's verses could exercise; he was interested in it as an act that iterates his prerogatives, and it also serves in our reading as evidence of his responsibilities. This inscription constitutes the poem's performance; composing it was a perfunctory, academic exercise, and there is no evidence that it was ever read aloud. It is an expression both of his power over his opponents—who are never mentioned by name and are thus effaced from the official record of the abbot’s attention—and of his concern over the historical legacy of his abbey.

This little poem demonstrates the weakness of our modern assumption that medieval complaint represents the medieval people’s inability to participate directly in their society’s political flux; there is no retreat from political realities in this poem,
despite its conventionality and general moral approach. Yet in one sense, it is no error that today’s scholars have used complaints like the abbot’s as evidence of a time both more innocent than our own and irretrievably lost to us; looking at Whethamstede’s example, we can see that these poems explicitly subscribe to this nostalgic view of any past, and they promote it powerfully by giving this fictional past its own voice. Modern readings like Keller’s or Peter’s are quite sensitive, albeit simplistically and ironically, to the political complaint’s overt moral critique, looking back with simultaneous senses of nostalgia and condescension at a medieval audience—of our creation—that would respond straightforwardly to what history has proved a hopeless, if not naive, moral discourse. I do not wish to defend readings that take this tack, but rather to propose that the complaint elicited a similarly complex response from its contemporary audience, by presenting a naive narrator that spoke for a lost moral simplicity that could not be reconciled with that audience’s world and thus demanded investigation of the poem’s implicit morality, of le dire rather than le dit. The history of any political complaint’s modern reception may thus serve as a clue to reconstructing the medieval reception of the poems included in this dissertation.

I propose to show the potential within many political complaints for meanings that accompany its appeal to the common moral themes. Political complaint is an example of the malleability of conventional expression; it is not necessary to break a form to use it for radical political purposes, nor, as we will see, is innovation within a form necessarily the mark of revolutionary thought. The abbot’s work, one of the few political complaint poems for which we have an attested author, plainly shows that this convention was capable of serving the powerful as well as the underprivileged; there is

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21 This is the reaction William Empson ascribes to the audience of pastoral, and in this wide sense political complaint is also "pastoral."
nothing illegitimate or merely compensatory about the abbot's exercise of his muse for the substantial representation of his authority. In such verses we can see the mixture of purposes and concerns, and the negotiations between them, that make for fascinating performances of continual interest. Because of its conventional language, the political complaint could be appropriated by almost any group for exploitation; indeed, as we will see in the following chapters, the very same lines could work for both sides of an issue. The decisions made in creating or applying such verse therefore reveal more of the poet's awareness of the currents of power than a more specific, issue-oriented poem such as, for example, The Libel of English Policy.

The abbot's poem, in some ways, is not typical of those to be treated in this study. It represents the apex politics of the abbey hierarchy to which it is addressed; most of the complaints we will look at seem geared for broader audiences and seem to come from lower down the class scale. Most of the poems in this study do not have a specific historical context to act as a guide for inquiry, but will instead be studied occasionally, in other words within the context of the miscellanies and sermons in which they found permanent rest. More often, they will be read against the body of other political complaint poetry. That is as close as we can get to the historical circumstances of many of these poems; they force the modern reader to speculate upon their suitability for certain audiences, if they are to be treated historically at all.

This speculation will be based upon the dramatic structure of these poems, which will be used as a clue to the shape of their occasions; I will ask, "What kind of person in what situation does this poem serve or address?" and I will assume that this situation actually existed and could be apprehended by these people before the poem was assembled from the available discursive network. Thus appropriateness, the mother of appropriation, will comprise the main historical dimension of this study,
which will attempt to ascertain for several poems, many undatable, political possibilities appropriate to their formal and thematic features.

I am not willing to dismiss the question of whether such a reading strategy, and the entire idea of dramatic structure, is anachronistic for medieval poetry, though such a position is certainly available in the current discourse of medieval studies (Kendrick 118). We cannot doubt that medieval society believed in the universality and permanence of its ethics, and read in an ethically involved way that might cancel out full-blooded dramatic effects, as John Dagenias and Marianne Børch have recently described:

Medieval readers skim across the surface of the text. They miss, or are uninterested in, the riches we like to find there: [including] the text's dramatization of the conflict between desire and denial, natural impulses and social controls, love and death.

Medieval art founds unity not in character, but in doctrine, and defends itself on grounds of usefulness, that is, on its ability to convey...

I think that many twentieth-century Western people read this way as well; to my mind it is the moral wheat of something like Sylvester Stallone's First Blood, or any one of John Grisham's novels--another large body of literature that has not changed over many years--that enriches its rather flavorless chaff and explains its popularity. Modern readers often defend their forays into art on the basis of its--usually moral--utility. Shaggy-dog stories, and Sir Thopas, derive their humor from wearying this very faculty in their readers.

This similarity gives us one way of reaching back to this past, and it has been exercised, as the above passages from Dagenais and Børch demonstrate, to deny the possibility of a dramatic reading in our sense. However, the political complaint, as we

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have also seen, can be more than just didactic when it is in its immediate context, though once the moment of use is past complaint’s conventional didacticism is all that remains on the page. We cannot recapture these moments, but this very process provides a framework for a medieval sense of the dramatic. This historical pattern of usage is similar to the very largest pattern of medieval history; complaint places its audience within the Christian history of original innocence, degeneration, and redemptive apocalypse. Complaint is thus also a prophecy that portends the nearness of apocalypse. Judgment nears, and there can be no doubt that God’s standards will resemble those of the complainant. There is a sense of dread in complaint for the audience, therefore, because the medieval audience’s place in this arrangement is as a contributor to this degenerative progression. However, since the complaint portrays a situation that is worse than the present time really is, its rhetoric cannot sustain itself without the sense that there is good yet to be expressed. The thematic crux of most complaint is the struggle of the prophetic voice against the source of its own claim to relevance; that is, against the presumption that things really have gone too far. This rhetorical problem is like the modern demagogue’s problem of angering his constituency enough to get votes without causing it to abandon the voting process altogether in favor of fertilizer bombs; beneath such rhetoric must be the assumption that the audience does not feel that all is lost. True despair doesn’t compose this kind of poetry; this poem exhibits instead a conventional portrayal of despair, and it is to be found in every Complaint Against the Times. There is no urgency, no need for the poem if it is fulfilled.

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23 This "salvation history" is discussed in Morton W. Bloomfield’s *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse*. It is also part of what John Dagenais calls "The Larger Gloss" in the "Introduction" of his book on manuscript culture.
If the poem's despair is a portrayal, then so is its moral language. If its internal action is to be ethically judged, it must be as a hypothetical action, for it is precisely complaint's ethical applicability, or use, that is at question in its reception. Even unquestionable points of doctrine, as we will see in the next chapter, are sometimes attacked by political complaint, as if it were daring the reader to venture into its despairing vision in a kind of spiritual slumming. We thus have the makings of something very like dramatic voice, because the medieval reader must have negotiated the complaint's co-extensivity (Dagenais xvii) with his world. He or she found, I maintain, that they could not fit the complaint into their world. They had to look past it and acquire its language for themselves in order to benefit from it.

The concept of reform, and the reader's place as a reformer, is thus raised; but reform cannot take place by the agency of the complaining voice, which is particularly ineffective and even foolish. Political complaint thus acts as a preface to real moral work and stands as both prompt and foil for a more functional moral discourse.²⁴ The thrust of complaint is to discover in the audience the reasons that the apocalypse is not yet, and to find language for this explanation.

This study maintains that political complaint enables a pragmatic moral and political function for an idealistic, uncompromising moral language. Complaint acts to provoke translation between the language of Christian moral ideals, as they were expounded from Scripture, and the narratives of everyday life. It provides the metalanguage for this translation in the words it problematizes—"truth," "steadfastness," "doing best," "vice," "virtue." These are opened to new definitions, even while they are maintained to be unalterable. Only through such translation could

²⁴ Robert O. Payne's *The Key of Remembrance* discusses medieval poetry as a prompt for spiritual work, proposing that meditative rumination upon the text allows the audience's members to integrate a text's spiritual message into their lives.
such practices as Christian moneylending for profit, or Christian conspicuous consumption, be rationalized.

If I claim that my formal analysis is so enabled and justified, I must admit that such procedures as I have allowed leave plenty of room for error, and furthermore that I will doubtless find things in the complaint that would not have been expressed in the language of its day, or indeed of 200 years ago. I take this to be the point, as well as the weakness, of bothering to engage in such study. These poems are hardly dead letters; over the course of this dissertation I will explore this complex poetry in terms of the voices it produces and the social/political goals such poetry may promote. There is "literary" interest in many of them, too; the political complaint intermixes easily with other conventions, producing sometimes spectacular results, proofs of the political uses of poetic experimentation and of the craftiness in even these humble poems. In Winner and Waster, perhaps the greatest example of this type, the political complaint is a fundamental part of a poetic performance of great subtlety. In the conclusion, I will briefly reflect upon one of Chaucer’s political complaints, and consider also the theoretical implications of the approach to medieval poetry that I have taken; if the reader has the patience for it, the conclusion will return to abbot Whethamstede’s little poem in order to address one issue my approach raises.
CHAPTER 1
THE VOICE OF POLITICAL COMPLAINT

Political complaint is sometimes so thematically central to a poem’s meaning that I use the term to describe the poem itself, but this rhetoric cannot claim, despite its ancient lineage, to be a formally independent genre. As we will see over the next two chapters, political complaint is an approach to meaning, not a prescription for it, despite a remarkable uniformity from poem to poem and age to age. It often appears in the company or guise of established poetic forms, and so offers itself as a purposeful variant of these forms. This parodic function is best described, at least in the aggregate, as a consequence of the structural features of the political complaint poem; this chapter will establish a general structural description of political complaint in order to establish what may have made it attractive to so many disparate writers over centuries of social change. It goes without saying that this structure is not an inviolable law that exists somehow apart from the various instances in which political complaint has been enacted; it is part of an examination of effects apparent in a considerable number of poems using description terms whose limitations are clearly defined.

Political complaint existed in an environment of positive didactic poetry, homilies and proverbs, and is a structural variant of these. The difference between the proverb and the political complaint is not great, and in the case of one very popular proverbial rhetoric, the "Twelve Abuses," the former develops into something very akin to the latter. Indeed, the difference is small enough as to constitute a useful delimiter for the political complaint. In all its incarnations, the "Twelve Abuses"
demonstrates the divisive potential of proverbial rhetoric—a consequence of its reliance upon "voiceless," universal moral appeal—and the several different strategies employed by writers to temper this potential, culminating in Lydgate's authoritative confrontation with the Latin original. This last, consciously performative version approaches the dramatics of the planctus and Boethian complaint, and of the political complaint.

The first version of the "Twelve Abuses," the prose De duodecim abusiuis saeculi, ascribed variously and erroneously to Cyprian, Augustine, and Bede, but possibly based on vernacular Irish law, describes the absences that would send the age on the path to hell:


The passage divides society into types, then implicitly ascribes a single definitive virtue to each that, if missing, results in the end of justice. This catalog of lack results in a particularly pessimistic kind of exhortation; the false ascriptions that De duodecim abusiuis saeculi gathered to itself may help to ameliorate this pessimism by placing it in the mouth of a famous religious figure who himself represents the possibility of virtue and, through his historic role, tempers the anger of the passage with the concern of a good shepherd. It is thus made a warning, not an evaluation, and thereby implies that God's justice is not extinguished on earth, although each segment of society must not fail if this cosmic fairness is to continue.

25 Wenzel, Preachers 177, n. 8.
Ascription creates a single speaking "voice" for *De duodecim abusiuis saeculi*, but the faults catalogued are interrelated and function equally well as the intersecting voices of the various societal types represented. Indeed, since the verse may have originated in Irish vernacular law, it may reflect a rationale for the complex moral relations of its social milieu; for example, the youth may not feel that obedience is due to the impious old man, nor would the people have discipline when the bishop is negligent or the king iniquitous. This idea of interrelationship is plain in the 12th- and 13th-century commentary on this homily:

> Hwet is eure swa dusi and swa stuntlic swa is þet þe alde mon nule his mod to gode awendan mid gode huhte enne his leoman him cuþað þet he ne bið quic longe?

> What is so foolish and so stupid as the fact that the old man will not direct his heart to God with good intent, when his limbs show him that he has not long to live? (Morris, *Old English Homilies*, 109).

Foolishness is a social condition, tied up with the old man's role as respected elder, and implies the others' critical eyes. If *De duodecim abusiuis saeculi* is read as if it were a record of many voices, the need for the ascription to a saint becomes clear; the abuses, far from friendly corrections, are themselves divisive accusations. Only the mitigating paternalism of saintly advice can tame this angry language and create its mirror-image of a moral society. Ælfric changed the tone to one less heated:

> Ne sceal se wise mann beon butan godum weorn can ne se ealde ne beo buton æwfaestnysse ne se iunga ne beo butan gehyrsumnysse ne se welega ne beo butan ælmes-daðum ne wifmen ne beon butan sidefulnysse ne se hlaford ne beo leas on wordum ne nan cristen man ne sceal sceandlice flitan. Eft bið swið þwyrlc þæt ðearfa beo modig and forcuðlic hit bið þæt cyning beo unrihtwis eac bið swycle derigendlic þæt bisceop beo gymeleas and un-fremful bið þæt folc beo butan steora oðde butan æ him eallum to hearme.

The wise man must not be without good works nor the old be without piety
nor the young without obedience,  
nor the wealthy without charity,  
nor women without modesty,  
nor the lord be a liar  
nor the Christian man contentious.  
Also, it is very contrary that a poor man be proud,  
and it is bad that a king be unjust;  
it is very hurtful as well that a bishop be negligent,  
and it is unprofitable that the people have no governor,  
or law, for the harm of them all.
(Skeat, Ælfric's 291-92).

Ælfric's authorship lends a less divisive purpose to these lines, which take on the  
character of advice rather than lament. Like "Cyprian," he acts as an authoritative  
source that places this list of wrongs into his complete vision of social unity and so  
qualifies the anger and despair of the "Twelve Abuses." The piece remains voiceless in  
the sense that it assumes the audience's assent to its ideological call and requires no  
dramatics to work, but the ideal of a realized good society acts as a precondition to its  
apprehension.

The "Twelve Abuses" were subject to change or reduction, and these revisions  
proved popular as well, as in this example, to be found in the work of both manuscript  
compilers and modern editors. Rossell Hope Robbins (Historical Poems 144) named  
this version "Abuses of the Age, I":

Bissop lories,  Illiterate Bishop
Kyng redeles,  King indecisive
3ung man rechles,  Young man reckless
Old man witles,  Old man witless
Woman ssamles.  Woman shameless.
I swer bi heuen Kyng, I swear by heaven's King,
Þos be fiue liþer þing. Those are five evil things.

Here the divisive version is amplified into an oath. The last couplet translates,  
more or less, the last line of the pseudo-Cyprian's version, as well as its pessimism; the  
verse form made it easy to remember. This English version seems to stand apart from  
the others in introducing a speaker in its final couplet. In this case, however, the "I"  
serves no discernible narrative or authoritative function. Instead, it aids in the
memorization of the previous lines; the end couplet sums up and numbers the evil things, while the "I" allows for personal identification with its sentiments. This is a common device in general oaths, and in a way this poem is an oath, a pledge to a moral code that separates the righteous members of society from those that would destroy it.

The most obvious and safest place for such an oath is church. "Abuses of the Age, I" occurs in sermons, as well, and how it was adopted by medieval preachers provides an example both of its ability to stick in the mind and of its ideological properties. Siegfried Wenzel (Poets 178) translates one iteration in a late thirteenth-century Latin sermon thus (square brackets are Wenzel’s):

(The Blessed Virgin was) full of modesty, namely when [the gospel says of her] "she was troubled." Jerome: "It is characteristic of virgins to be troubled whenever a man enters." Notice that English [saying]: "Old man witless."

The preacher is alluding to the "Woman ssamles" line, of course, and must have known the poem in another order beginning with "Old man witless." He refers to "Abuses of the Age, I" as an "English [saying]" (illud Anglicum) and he expects it to be more ready-to-mind than the exegesis of Jerome. How it is used reflects the divisive potential of the "Twelve Abuses;" the Virgin was modest, unlike the women referred to by the saying. It is used to discriminate between virtue and evil, ideal and mundane. We can imagine the uses for such rhetoric outside a sermonic context, and there is at least one example; the poem’s appearance as a graffito on a church wall, whether intended for the parishioners or the churchmen, is perhaps an accusation meant to shake up the hypocrisy of people miming their way through the church routine, and a call to self-recognition for the righteous, too. The service indoors is thus made a litmus test of one’s contribution to the general well-being.

The graffito occurs on a pillar of Ridgewell Church, and is probably twelfth century. A picture of it appears in Pritchard (75).
No mere translation can expunge the social critique, the call to divisive judgment, of *De duodecim abusiuis*, though we have seen that its angry energy was borrowed and sometimes ameliorated by many authors. John Lydgate takes a different tack, giving a version of the Latin "original" and then his English gloss:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Goo forth, kyng, reule the by sapyence;} \\
\text{Bysshop, be able to mynystre doctryne;} \\
\text{Lord, to treu coungeyle yeue audyence;} \\
\text{Womanhed, to chastyte euer enclyne;} \\
\end{align*}
\]

.... (1-4).

Lydgate's verses answer the *De duodecim abusiuis saeculi*’s pessimistic and divisive aspects with an exhortation for each social type to "doo your parte, as ye ar ordeyned to" (14). The Latin’s cryptic prosody is set against singing rhymes; its presumption of failure is replaced with an affirmation of traditional roles. The Latin version’s distant, almost supernatural authority is usurped by the poem’s more immediate authorial presence, though this voice lacks the status to command the personages it addresses; instead, it is like a supplication to fate, hoping generally for good kings and literate bishops. Unlike the other versions, it is not directly or simply proverbial, but instead a performance of the proverb. We ask what it can mean because it has the ability to mean in different ways than the other inscriptions.

*De duodecim abusiuis saeculi* is an example of proverbial sayings and the kind of verse they produce, as well as an example of their political potential. The ability of such poetry to channel anger into discrimination and lend the appearance of moral force to political action is apparent in the use to which another "English saying," "Whan Adam delf and Eve span, / Who was then the gentilman?," a couplet originally about the sin of pride, was put by the revolutionaries in the Rising of 1381. Such verse is

27 Owst gives an example of the earlier "homiletic" verse (291); readers of Stephen Justice’s account of this verse’s life as a revolutionary text (102-117) will be amazed at the difference that the revolutionary purpose has wrought in it. The evolutionary process is clear in the metrical substitutions—"pride of man" is replaced, syllable for syllable, by "gentilman," showing the association of pride with the upper
meta-proverbial, like Lydgate's version of the "Twelve Abuses;" it is a performance of moral commonplaces for political purposes. Performances of this type were common. Bannokburn, for example, left the English in the throes of self-examination, and when the general defeat was blamed on a few traitors, it was done in moral language:

Quorum virus anglia tota toxicatur;
Vulgaris justitia sic et enervatur;
Regale judicium per hos offuscatur;
Ex hoc in exilium fides relegatur.
Victa jacet caritas, et virtus calcatur;
Viret ingratuitas, et fraus dominatur;
Quicquid in hiis finibus mali perpetratur,
Dictis proditoribus totum inputatur.

With whose venom all England is poisoned;
And so common justice is weakened;
Through these royal judgement is blinded;
And so faith is exiled.
Charity lies subdued, and virtue is trampled;
Ingratitude flourishes, and fraud dominates;
Whatever evil within these borders is perpetrated,
All is due to these aforesaid (traitors)
(Wright, *Political Songs* 264).

According to the poem, Bannokburn revealed the traitors, but the loss is presented as a symptom of the moral decline that these "Sathanœ satellites" have caused in the nation. The war is brought home, as the barons are urged to ferret out those among them who are traitors and to destroy them; essentially, it is a call for a purge, for which the moral analysis is propaganda and justification.

The poems I will treat in this study also exploit the power of homily and proverb in the political arena. We have already seen this in miniature with John Whethamstede's poem, which uses moral language to accomplish political goals. Like classes that many political verses make. Attacks on finery for the benefit of simpler folk became, over time, the vehicles for equating the finery of the superior classes with pride.
Lydgate's poem, these poems are proverbial performances, and except for their different purposes should be read with the same assumptions we would bring to a similar poem by Lydgate or Chaucer.

The dramatic aspect comes naturally to this kind of verse—that is, it isn't hard to imagine it as a dramatic verse—because closely-related types of poetry are also and plainly dramatic. One cousin of what I call "political complaint poems" is the planctus tradition of complaints by the Virgin, or Christ, or the Cross. Many complaint poems present their themes in the dramatic, pathetic fashion of the planctus, as in the poem Professor Kail named "God's Appeal to Man:"

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mannys loue y semed gore;} \\
\text{Pat loue was in myn herte sou\textsuperscript{st}.} \\
\text{Mannys loue sat me so sore,} \\
\text{Nas neuere bargayn derrere bou\textsuperscript{st}.} \\
\text{Man! is \textit{pe} laft no loue in store?} \\
\text{What is \textit{pe} cause \textit{pou} louest me nou\textsuperscript{st}?} \\
\text{Telle me \textit{zif} y my\textsuperscript{st} don more.} \\
\text{What is byhynd, \textit{pat} lakke \textit{pe} ou\textsuperscript{st}?} \quad (9-16).
\end{align*}
\]

Poems derived from this tradition have a richer dramatic palette than the relatively perfunctory one displayed in Lydgate's "Twelve Abuses." The above verses show this clearly; although God is speaking, and although the sentiments are clearly sincere, the questions are obviously rhetorical. Far from only a simple plea for love, these lines could as easily be a prelude to angry judgment, and in fact must be both. The language is simple, direct, and seems profound once its speaker is understood to be deliberately speaking for effect. The Marian planctus often go a step further and create a dramatic tension of a sort, by stressing her anguish in despite of her knowledge of the cosmic good her Son's death ensures.

\footnote{Kail 86-89.}
Such complaints read very much like one-half of a Boethian complaint-dialogue, like the conversation between Lady Philosophy and the prisoner in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The Boethian model uses a dramatic narrative structure that emphasizes the individual voice, much like the *plancus*, but it adds others.\(^{29}\) This structure allows for multifaceted, intense examinations of problems as they are demonstrated acting upon and being rationalized by the speakers in the poem; it also allows, of course, for irony and opens the door for revision based on internal contradictions. Boethius' Philosophy, for example, banishes the Muses, but her ironic status in this instance as a product of the poetic art, and the prisoner's refiguring of her in different human roles—nurse, for instance, in Chaucer's translation—allows us to evaluate her in ways that the "I" in "Abuses of the Age, I" does not support. Because she is a dramatic figure, we can even question her intention if we are so disposed, a kind of examination that *Duodecim abusiuis saeculi* resists because of its fundamental reliance on a religious authority that is merely "religious authority" without the mitigation that a speaking persona introduces. The Boethian dialogue allows the further step of considering the ways such figures of authority act in language to assume their places in our lives.

This is not to imply that such poems are overt challenges to authority, but simply to note that even invoking arguments for the *status quo* involve holding it up for evaluation, and that dramatizing such arguments increases this effect. It is the price

\(^{29}\) Boethian complaint is normally differentiated from others by virtue of its "intellectual" quality; Seth Lerer's *Boethius and Dialogue*, for instance, concerns itself entirely with the development of the prisoner's philosophical voice, which is the proper subject of a protreptic poem like *The Consolation of Philosophy*. As Lerer's title implies, engagement in a social discourse such as philosophy requires other voices that can interact and be subject to interpretation, and it is this dialogic style that makes a complaint "Boethian" for my purposes, though a broad philosophical bent, inherited from the classic philosophic dialogs of Plato, is the thematic marker (see Davenport for a study of Chaucer's complaint "styles," and pp. 4-5 for a brief look at Boethian dialogics).
one pays in deciding to play both sides of the argument. In the broadest sense, Boethian complaint is a useful model for understanding political complaint poems, for, as in the Consolation, complaint’s role in these poems is to present a plausible and serious critique that begs for resolution. The thrust of complaint is not resolution but endurance, the interpretive, normative ability to cope with and incorporate change into the ostensibly unchanging principles underlying our understanding of the world.

The political complaint poems treated in this study make the gnomic dramatic; they present received truth within a narrative structure—some resemble planctus-like monologues, some are conversations—that urges us to "place" this truth and define its relevance. This dramatic element, so obvious in all the examples I will use, has never been extensively explored as a contributor to the way the poems behave. "How Goes This World About" (Robbins 147-148) is a typical political complaint with a typical complainant:

As I me lend to a lend,
I herd a schepperde makyn a schowte;
he gronyd & seyde with sory syghyng,
A lord, how gos pis word a-bowte!

It gos ful wrong, ho-so it wyst:
a frend, ho may ken fro his foo?
to hom I may trewely trost,
In fayth, I fynde but fewe of ço!

Pe soeb, me pinkyt, if I xulde say,
trew frendys arn fewe, with-outhyn dowte;
alle half frendys, wo, wo worth hem ay.
A lord, how gos pis word a-bowte!

Alle half frendys, wo worth hem ay--
In wel, in wo, in hert, in bowth.
It must be so pat alle men say,
he was neuere good frend was wroj for nowth.

Now wel, now wo, now frend, now foo;
Now lef, now þef, now in, now out;
Now cum, now go, now to, now fro--
A lord, how gos pis word a-bowte!
The poem's fundamental effect and central voice is its dramatic speaker, the shepherd. It is plain that the poem castigates the world in general for falsehood and calumny, and that the shepherd is the vehicle for this message. He bewails the world's condition—in this case, its maelstrom of changing personal allegiances—in rudimentary terms that are within the grasp of a simple shepherd. It is possible that a personal difficulty is suggested as having provoked his general complaint; perhaps one of his own is angry at him "for nowth." But whatever his imagined motivations, when he contemplates the situation in wider terms, he becomes confused (stanza 5), and, finding that the heart of man is wicked, falls into despair ("pei gref me þus, I may not goo"). The shepherd calls upon God to stop these backbiters, but we leave him still bewailing the world's sorry progress, his prayer unfulfilled. The fundamental moods of his monologue are frustration and isolation; the shepherd may be right morally, but he is ineffectual and alone, surrounded by "half friends."

The poem is predicated on this sense of hopelessness; if the evils of backbiting were curable, the poem would not be so generally focused, so easily transportable. The entire world "goes" in this evil fashion, and no prayer is going to make any difference, not any prayer by this shepherd at any rate—he has the anguish of the planctus without its surety. His isolation is obvious, whether we envision him literally in lonely pastoral circumstances among sheep or figuratively in the pulpit before his flock of unheeding, backbiting parishioners. At one level, especially in the latter
reading, this poem portrays a crisis of faith in the face of unstoppable evil; it is pathetic.

Such a frustrated and ineffectual complainant, made marginal by his own moral outrage from a wicked world, is the central structural element of the political complaint motif, and assumes many different guises. The important feature of this political complaint speaker is not so much his social identity as his ethos of moral simplicity and political weakness. This ethos is evident even in those political complaints that eschew a character-narrator in favor of a simulation of direct address. "Now is England Perished" (Robbins 149-50) presents itself as an outpouring of indignation that includes nearly every common complaint theme to be found in John Peter’s catalog.  

Nowe is Englond perisshed in fight,  
With moche people & consciens light,  
Many knyghtes & lytyll myght,  
Many lawys & lytyll right;  

Lytyll cheritie & fayn to please,  
Many galantes & penylese,  
Great courtears & small wages,  
Many gentilmen & fewe pages;  

Short gownys & slyt sleuys,  
Wel besee & strong thevys;  
Great boost & gay clothis,  
Mark theym well, thei lak non othe.  

Many fals slawnders of riches,  
And yet pouerte apperith neuertheless;  
Many beades & fewe prayers,  
Many dettours & fewe good payers.  

Small festyng & lytyll penaunce,  
Thus all is turned in-to myschaunce,  
Extorcion, & moch Symony,  
fals couetys with periurye;  

With lechery & aduwetrye,  
ffayned frenship & ypocrisy e;  

30 These themes are gathered in Peter’s fourth chapter.
Also gyle on euery syde,
With murdre & much pride;

Great envy & wilfulnes,
With-out mercy or rightwysnes;
The cause is for lak of light,
That shuld be in the church of right.

This complainant's moral character and isolation appear in the sometimes random association of injustices that he sees "on every syde." The complainant mixes sins of religion and business, abuses of dress and of criminal law, personal and political faults, in a collage that dramatizes his frustration and bewilderment with the ubiquity of evil. "Now is England Perished" is entirely pessimistic, its complainant isolated by his own moral vision from the wicked world. In this it is indistinguishable from "How Goes This World About."

This narration is the political complaint poem's most crucial ingredient. Poems that feature the political complaint do not center simply around the so-called themes, or catalog of vices, but also on the drama of the complaining, on the struggle between complainant and world. The political complaint speaker may be focused on the world's ills, but the poem is also concerned with the consequences of the doomed moral contest that he—or more rarely, she—has undertaken.

This struggle takes place in the language of the complainant, where the futility of the conflict translates into futility of expression. While the complainant is always morally correct, his rhetoric often frustrates his theme. The shepherd of "How Goes This World About," for instance, wishes to castigate the world for its lack of friendliness, but the audience is immediately aware of the absurd simplification involved in this approach; his confusion indicates that his way of looking at the world is insufficient even for him. "Now is England Perished" boils society's ills down to the failing of only one Estate. Compare these with the speaker in "God's Complaint to Man," whose questions demonstrate authoritative comprehension of the relationship
they seek to define; the puzzled tone in that poem presents itself as wholly rhetorical. The bewilderment, the isolation, and the despair that mark the shepherd's words are absent from "God's Appeal to Man," in which the moral arrives, authoritatively, within the questions and through the central speaker.

The complainant in political complaint poems is a frustrated speaker as well as an ineffective moralist; indeed, eloquence--any command of rhetoric--is usually portrayed as a quality of the immoral majority. Political complaint poems often demonstrate the complainant's rhetorical simplicity by displaying the superior ability of his foes to speak the world's language, be they dishonest lawyers, corrupt clergymen, or money-wasting courtiers. Often their power relies upon deceptive use of language to promote their own interests over those of the commonweal; in the manner of the shepherd in "How Goes This World About," the average political complaint speaker often laments the glib tongues that his enemies use to honey over their evil deeds.

"The Orders of Cain" (Robbins 157-162)--circa 1382--is a political complaint that exploits this common theme/structure. It begins benignly enough, but the complainant's generosity lets the cat out of the bag:

\[
\text{Prest, ne monke, ne zit chanoun,} \\
\text{Ne no man of religioun,} \\
\text{Gyfen hem so to deuocioun} \\
\text{As done þes holy freres. (1-4).}
\]

The priest-friar comparison rarely goes in favor of the friar, and merely making it, especially with this charitable excess, is a signal that the audience is dealing with a sarcasm. Soon the complainant drops all pretense and begins a vigorous railing:

\[
\text{Were I a man þat hous helde,} \\
\text{If any woman wiþ me dwelde,} \\
\text{Þer is no frer bot he were gelde} \\
\text{shuld com with-In my wones (85-88).}
\]

The humorous vigor of the words belies the weakness of the speaker. As in our other examples, the central speaker of "The Orders of Cain" is another lone voice. When he
reveals himself near the poem's end to be a former aspirant who quit one month before his permanent induction, the confession lends a certain verisimilitude to the charges—which were, however, the standard clichés by 1382 and therefore did not require such proof—but it also makes this complainant another moral outcast, separated from the social order by his right-mindedness. The final image of the poem is of the complainant, having just cast off his robe, silently making his way through the town in the sight of the people—proof of his story, of course, but a remarkable portrait of his political muteness and isolation as well. There is an element of personal shame to his condemnations, and a sense of failure in his utterances. His silence is in reaction to his hopeless situation. This complainant is one speaker against many, better speakers. The friars are condemned, but they also come across as ubiquitous and extremely successful in performing wickedness, due to their powers of persuasion:

For if he gife a wyfe a knyfe
 at bot penys two,
 Worpe ten knyves, so mot I thryfe,
 he wyl haue er he go (69-73).

They are successful because they are well-spoken, and not only with wives and daughters. The friars speak against the other clergy, they sing paid masses for individuals combined with general masses, and they shrive the guilty, whatever the offense, for money; they are trading holy words for earthly pleasures:

of women sense of hert ful stable,
 With faire byhest and with fable
 þat can make þair heres chaungeable,
 and þair likynges fulfill

þai say that þai distroye synne,
 & þai mayntene men moste þer-Inne (77-80, 95-97).

Later in the poem, the complainant—with reference to the real-world problem of friars encroaching on the turf of the regular clergy—notes that they are so prosperous and so numerous that space is becoming scarce and some are acting as priests in order
to stake out a profitable pitch; all their prosperity is due to their rhetorical skill, in
despite of their actions:

Ful wysely can þai preche & say;
Bot as þai preche, no þing do þai (158-159).

The complainant's final defiant silence is punctuated only by a general curse that each
friar go to the devil. It is a fine show of indignation, but it does not balance the scales
of justice. The audience is directed by the complainant's accusations to consider it a
war of words, of moral rhetoric, and to recognize the complainant's weaknesses in this
kind of contest. His sarcasms only point out the successes of his foes, and his silence
is a surrender. The friars are presented as in control of the language of power, while
the complainant offers an example of the weakness of simple moral language in this
public discourse. In this way the poem portrays the failure of an individual who claims
to represent basic Christian morality and to cherish the ideal Christian state.

The complainant's isolation and political weakness may reflect the audience's;
he rails against an institution—in this case, the fraternal orders—that, in the real world
as in the poem, is almost immune to words, and certainly proof against the words
uttered by men with the social standing represented by the complainant. However, it is
obvious in this case that the complainant is not representative of the concerned party.
This everyman speaks the traditional criticisms of the regular clergy against the friars.
Complaints against friars by non-churchmen are rare, possibly for the same reasons that
the other clergy hated friars so; this complainant's situation is perhaps a reflection of
the failure of the regular clergy's own—to them—commonsense moral language with the
very "householders" (85) that the poem claims to address. If the intended audience is
truly householders, then we must ask why the monk or priest writing the poem would
put his message to them in the mouth of an angry, isolated, defeated speaker.

The stakes attendant on this strategy are high. The assumption of political com-
plaint that the language of faith will not change the world, and its demonstration that
the God-sanctioned system actually contributes to the spread of evil, opens the way for a critique of the entire political/social ethic. Fourteenth-century England was not a staid, safe political arena; the state was constantly demanding—through the compromises needed to get assent for increasing taxes—greater participation from its population in politics, international commerce, and law, and it got it, sometimes to its detriment. The friars are excellent examples of this changing reality; they combined the asceticism of the monks with the worldly activity of the regular clergy, an almost paradoxical position to the traditional view. The Lollards, of course, represented a threat to the entire system, and could make use of the rhetoric presented in our example as a part of their effort.

But revolutionary cultural critique is not the path such a poem encourages. The rhetorical stance of moral simplicity is powerful politics, but it is a stance only, not a portrayal of the reality of day-to-day morality. As its lamenting tone shows, complaint is a lost cause before it begins and is meant to be so; these days, we can hear the same tone from William Bennett, who nevertheless continues tirelessly. Furthermore, the complaint’s dramatic presentation makes an alternative possible through its qualifying structure, which allows the audience to read past the complainant’s ethos. Political complaint poems, as we have seen, are constructed to highlight the deficiencies of this

31 For instance, Edward III’s wool policies involved the voluntary participation of wool merchants, who invested into his bond schemes for hope of profit. His armies became, over time, largely composed of recruits convinced of the benefits of serving for pay and plunder. Both policies resulted in domestic problems over funding and attempts to weaken the king’s power, requiring compromises that increased the power of Parliament.

32 There is evidence that the manuscript compiler thought so, as this poem immediately follows a Wycliffite poem in Latin—named "On the Council of London" by editor Wright (Political Poems 253-263)—that uses the same strategy to abuse both friars and monks. There is no question that accusations like those in "The Orders of Cain" were incorporated into Lollard doctrine. This issue is touched on more explicitly in the next chapter.
central speaker, and often, through the introduction of other voices, they provide even more of the critical distance that enables constructive use of the complainant’s failures. In many complaint poems the drama of the complainant is qualified by narrative structures that isolate the complainant within a narrator’s performance.\(^3\) The complaint of the shepherd in "How Goes This World About" is introduced by another speaker who has been travelling some vague land on some unknown purpose:

\begin{quote}
As I me lend to a lend,
I herd a schepperde makyn a schowte (1-2).
\end{quote}

This sketchy narrative contains the song; while the shepherd takes center stage with his complaint, the audience cannot forget that his performance is only part of a larger story. Because it is second-hand, the shepherd’s voice is qualified by its inclusion within the other voice; the shepherd, strictly speaking, is not performing at all. Instead, the original speaker is presenting the shepherd’s complaint as a dramatic narrative, and the shepherd as "his" creation.

The framing speaker, that elemental feature of many types of poetry, is creative in that he is ostensibly responsible for fashioning the complaint, but beyond this creativity he has limited authoritative function. The line with which the framing speaker is introduced, "As I lend me to a lend," is manifestly formulaic and announces this speaker’s textuality. These words are also purposefully vague, further emphasizing their speaker’s structural and rhetorical purposes over any potential verisimilitude. This voice does not return to close the poem because its only aspect is that, like the audience’s, its experience includes more than the episode it presents. In this way the framing voice at once underlines the possibility that the shepherd’s rhetorical

\(^3\) Judith M. Davidoff has pointed out how common these "framing fictions" are in medieval poetry, and attempts to demonstrate the social—as opposed to the purely formal—dimensions such constructions might have had.
weaknesses are purposefully drawn while indicating that its own ethos is too limited to provide an interpretive tool for discovering this purpose; it also points out quite clearly that the ethos of the complaint is a rhetorical gesture. These limitations create an authoritative gap, a space, which the audience can fill by negotiating its own desires and expectations against the poem's narrative exemplum.

This space is sometimes widened through cruelty or class prejudice. The "Satire on the Consistory Courts" (Wright, Political Songs 155-59, Robbins 24-27) employs a lower-class narrator put upon by the complex, powerful and corrupt world. In the case of this poem, that world is the ecclesiastical court, which dealt with moral crimes and with criminal charges against the clergy. "Satire on the Consistory Courts" goes further than many political complaints in framing its narrator; in this poem, the audience is not merely reminded of the complainant's helplessness, but is invited to laugh at it, since the poem is patently a performance by another voice. Modern readers have misapprehended this poem as a straightforward narrative, as its editor Robbins' summary—"The poor peasant relates his appearance before a consistory court on charges of immorality" (Robbins 258)—reveals. In fact, once we expect it, it is easy to see that the entire narrative is in the subjunctive, as it were; the sufferings of the "peasant" are presented as a possibility were the speaker to be involved in such a situation.

3ef ich on molde mote wi^ a mai,
y shall falle hem byfore & lurnen huere lay
ant rewen alle huere redes

If I might on earth (be, go) with a maid,
I shall fall before them and learn their law [song?],
and regret all their counsels (4-6).

The crude, detailed and outraged description of the court and its venality that follows is therefore a purely hypothetical performance. The critical distance that the audience thus gains allows it to laugh at the fictional speaker-peasant while the fundamental
injustice at the consistory court is demonstrated. The complainant’s inflated language adds to the fun. When the man, cornered by his shrieking alleged consort, Magge (also known as Malle), speaks of "falling at the foot of his foes," the situation simply does not support the martial language. His hysterical protestations at the injustice—

ah me were leuere sonken y þe see,
In sor wiþouten syn

but I would rather be drowned in the sea,
in sorrow without sin (80-81)

--do not fit the sentence, which is to marry the woman. That the complainant’s point-of-view is coloring events is evident when he portrays Magge swearing by her falsehood (62) to the truth of her accusations.

The moral thrust of the poem does not come from the detailed recounting of a peasant’s suffering--his problem is quite hilarious, as it is presented--but rather from those bits and pieces of the narrative that seem true after the coloring has been filtered out. The court is venal and unjust, but the audience must detach itself from the ridiculous complainant in order to consider this; the consistory court must be defined and considered in a different, less simplistic manner. The nested narrative structure facilitates this detachment, for it allows the audience to propose another, more authoritative voice beyond that of the complainant. The silliness of the complainant provides a dramatic parallel to the narrative structure, further encouraging the audience’s detachment.

The outright presence of a framing narrator is unnecessary; most political complaints encourage a critical distance purely through the complainant’s character. They separate audience from complainant less cruelly, but just as surely. "London Lickpenney" (Robbins 130-134) features another befuddled "peasant" lost in the corrupt courts and markets of London. The complainant is a wide-eyed innocent who humbly travels from one bench to another, but gets nowhere in his suit because he is poor and
cannot grease the correct palms. Despite the serious injustice to him, he shows none of
the fire of the complainant in "Satire of the Consistory Courts"; the poem ends with a
prayer to Jesus to send some honest lawyers to London.

Despite its milder tone, "London Lickpenney" uses the same strategy of
isolation and invites the same condescension to this complainant from the audience that
other political complaints do. Our complainant begins his tale with a statement
guaranteed to raise a wry smile from the poem’s audience.

To London once my stepps I bent,
where trouth in no wyse should be faynt (1-2).

No audience for this poem, urban or rural, however charmed by this display of
innocence, is going to think highly of the social sophistication of the complainant.
London is, ironically and notoriously, the very place where truth is sure to be com­
pletely extinct; it is ridiculous to suppose that a rural person would think the opposite.
The audience watches the complainant on his petty adventure through the city--at one
point he gets his hood stolen, and later sees it hung up for sale--as if it were watching a
small child wandering in Times Square; he is alone "amonge the thronge," in danger
but also incongruous. It is only upon reflection that the audience regrets that such
simplicity, such country-bumpkin morality, cannot survive in London; yet it is plain
that it never will. As in the other poems, the moral simplicity of the complainant is
demonstrably ineffective in "London Lickpenney"; his prayer for Christ to send
"honest lawyers" is an ironic joke between audience and poem--at the complainant’s
expense--that demonstrates the limits of simple faith against earthly business and
implies that the complainant’s ignorance is not shared by its audience. That this social
satire can come so close to blasphemy--the joke depends upon the tacit understanding
that Christ can or will do no such thing, even should a good man pray for it--is an
indication of how close political complaint sometimes comes to attacking medieval
ethics altogether. This is a provocative poetry.
It is impossible to generalize about the meanings this structure could generate; the second part of this chapter will explore one political complaint that offers very specific historical context to guide a reading. However, we can make some surmises that are testable. It is plain that the political complaint poem attacks the moral authority of the complainant—ostensibly the center of its complaint rhetoric, in the tradition of the holy fool, the exiled prophet, and of course the speakers of other complaint types—in order to provoke an evaluation of the moral problem addressed in language more suited to the audience’s sense of propriety and material circumstances. This strategy can accommodate any number of simultaneous audiences, especially in a stratified society used to making value distinctions based on class, and offer different effects for each of them. Because the poem de-centers the complainant, and invites the audience to provide the new authoritative voice, the poet’s political goals can remain almost invisible, hidden in the premises of the complainant’s problems. The audience accepts them in the process of regulating the poem’s moral code; in other words, the move to closure and assimilation interpellates the listeners into a new subject position. "Song of the Husbandman," a relatively famous political complaint from the very beginning of the fourteenth century—and in the same manuscript as "Satire on the Consistory Courts"—demonstrates the breadth of influence that such poems could essay, and will be the focus of the rest of this chapter.

II

When Edward I needed money for campaigning in Scotland or France, he was obliged to get the approval of parliament for a tax, and nearly every attempt he made to circumvent this provision met with furious resistance and subsequent failure. His attempts in 1297 to seize the nation’s wool were not only tyrannical but embarrassing, as they provoked widespread defiance that required, on one occasion, a face-saving
denial from the king himself that he had ever authorized it. That same year he attempted to muster every owner of £20 worth of land for service in Flanders and could not get the cooperation of his own Constable and Marshal. It was estimated by the king's opponents in the "Remonstrances" of 1297 that the maltote on wool alone was approaching 20% of the value of the land that produced the wool. But it was Edward's extension of the prise to an almost national scope, and the appearance of corrupt, oppressive behavior on the part of the officials designated to collect it, that provoked the greatest outcry.

Both the "Remonstrances," which was publicly circulated, and De Tallagio non Concendendo, the document that incorporated the formal demands of the opposition nobles for the benefit of the king's negotiators, stressed the general burden of the king's taxes as opposed to their legality, and as such were not so much legal arguments as complaints designed to represent and appeal to the practical concerns of the land-owning subjects (Tuck 38-40). De Tallagio, for example, was carefully inclusive of "all free men," despite the largely aristocratic disputes motivating its authors, the earls Hereford and Norfolk. Edward's public replies, when not evasive and delaying, could not deny that he had imposed burdensome taxes, and instead sought to justify them by their necessity, an argument that is based ultimately upon the king's legal prerogative more than practicalities or any common sense concept of fairness; the relative weakness of this argument's popular appeal is obvious, whatever its legal and ideological strengths.

These strengths were enough for King Edward, who had by 1305 a papal bull to prove that he had been right all along, and whose principal enemies either had failed to outlive him or had been bullied into submission. However, the rift between the nobility and the crown that he had created was to prove fatal to his son, who faced almost exactly the same kind of political attack; the political/rhetorical strategy of the
king's enemies, adopting the complaints of the commons in order to gain support for their own goals, was the strongest available to them against a king who insisted on his ancient prerogative. In practical terms, this was only a strategy; while Lancaster, for example, became a popular martyr of sorts over his dogged efforts to maintain the Ordinances of 1311 controlling Edward II, he seemed to see them primarily as vehicles for influencing the king despite his circle of favorites, and the magnate-controlled government he led after Bannockburn taxed the population more than Edward II ever had. Indeed, by 1320, as Anthony Tuck (82-83) and many others have shown, the parliamentary commons--"the proctors of the clergy, knights of the shire, the citizens and burgesses," as the Modus Tenendi Parliamentum, a tract circa 1320, defined it--was beginning to seek its own voice, rather than relying solely upon the earls and barons to adopt its grievances. During the reign of the first Edward, however, there was no other way.

Poetry supporting either the king or his opponents appeared during this time, giving voice to the basic political stances of the factions. By far the most popular pro-government verse composed during the reign of Edward I was the martial poetry celebrating and promoting his military campaigns, the very cause of his monetary need. Such poems act as an extension of his position that he was acting always by necessity, in response to evil threats to his kingdom. A poem like the Latin "Song on the Scottish Wars" (Wright, Political Songs 160-179), from about 1298, not only shows the perfidiousness of the Scots, but by use of proverbial phrases makes their example general, thus serving as a warning to potential "traitors" at home and representing the king's political arguments succinctly: "Sit maledicta domus ubi quisque cliens dominatur!" (Cursed is the house in which every dependant is master!) (60). It portrays the king's brave soldiers as angry at their "detractors," no doubt by that term intending those who were complaining about the war's costs. Such men, it points out,
are simply envious and should be ignored by loyal people: "Te tamen non terreant dentes detractorum" (Do not let the detractors’ teeth terrify you) (7). The effectiveness of this poem—not to mention the tenacity of the Scots—is evidenced by its long tenure; with more proverbial additions, it continued its life into the fifteenth century.

The "Song on the Scottish Wars" compares the false loyalty oaths of the Scottish nobles to the wonderful lies of the poets—"Nam miranda canunt, sed non credenda, poetae"—in a comparison with many resonances, not least of which is the propagandistic value of poetry, with a glance at the verses of the king’s detractors in particular. These opposition poems are, on the whole, rarely so aggressive in their attacks on the government. The political environment was such that nearly any poem that addressed the plight of the poor or the evils of the world was bound to be "read" as anti-government; many of these poems quite clearly address the issues of purveyance and tax that characterized the reformists’ popular appeal, and so whatever their seeming meekness were participants in a brutal struggle. This environment allows for more hinting and soft-pedaling in these poems than would normally seem effective; with barons threatening civil war and making demands on the king, it was not necessary to attack the king directly in verse propaganda, nor even to propose a solution to the social problems described. The interrelated structure of medieval society—such, at least, was the ideal—and the plainly apparent power of the king made him and his government the lightning-rod of guilt. Even a general complaint on the nation’s status was essentially an attack on him; the bureaucratic conduit that sent power down to the tax collectors acting in the king’s name allowed anger to flow back toward London.

34 Judith Ferster demonstrates some of the rhetorical consequences of medieval self-censoring in the second chapter of *Fictions of Advice*. I hope that the environment that I have sketched out in this chapter for this poem shows the verses to be lacking any genuine reticence; rather, these verses comprise a dramatic presentation of the nobility’s rhetorical strategy.
This is the rhetorical environment in which a well-known— to us— political complaint, the early fourteenth-century (circa 1300) "Song of the Husbandman" (Wright, *Political Songs* 149-153; Robbins 7-9), was composed and circulated. The poem is remarkable for its use of realistic detail, its powerful and compact narration, and gritty pathos. The title, however, is misleading, because it presents us with an identification between author and narrator that is not supported by the poem's structural features. No study that I am aware of has pointed out that "Song of the Husbandman" employs a narrative structure wherein the husbandman-complainant does not address us directly, but rather through another speaker who is introduced in the first line:

\[
\text{Ich herde men vpo mold make muche mon,} \\
\text{hou he beþ itened of here tilyynge} \\
\text{gode 3eres & corn boþe beþ agon;} \\
\text{ne kepeþ here no sawe ne no songe synge.}
\]

I heard men upon the earth make much moan, about how their tillage is ruined
good years and crops both are gone
nor do they care for any proverb or any song (1-4).

The "men vpo molde" are the husbandmen, who begin with the fifth line to make their moan ("Nou we mote worke... "). The effect is to mark a clear difference in point-of-view between the original "Ich" and the suffering farmers, whom this speaker refers to as "they." It requires an unnecessary act of will on the audience's part to identify this first speaker with the second, husbandman-speaker, introduced in the sixth line ("mai ich no lengore lyue wiþ my lesinge"); it is simpler to read the poem as a complaint within a frame, as in the case of "How Goes This World About." The highly formulaic frame makes the husbandman-complainant decidedly fictional, and his

35 "Song of the Husbandman" is from MS. Harley 2253, as is "Satire on the Consistory Courts." The poem's attention to detail has excited comment on its--to modern sensibilities--emotive power from critics, though it has not been much analyzed aside from Turville-Petre's rhythmic commentary (*The Alliterative Revival* 19).
complaint a creation of another voice. As a result the details of the poem become
evidence of another voice's sensitive rhetorical choices as well as a report on the
laboring class' problems.

The speaker in the majority of the poem is, as the title implies, a husbandman,
representing a kind of medieval citizen very low on the power structure and grievously
overtaxed by the three Edwards. That social designation communicates at a stroke the
powerlessness, frustration, and simplicity of this political complaint narrator. The
husbandmen's plight is quite hopeless:

pus we carpe for the kyng, & carie ful colde,
    & wene forte keuere, & euer buñ a-cast;
whose haÝ eny god, hope he nout to holde,
    bote euer þe leuest we leose þalast.

Thus we call to the king, and are much grieved
and think to recover, and are ever cast down
whoso has any property, he may not hope to keep
but ever the dearest we lose in the end (9-12).

That repeated "euer" and the incantation of the alliterative line make losing seem
their eternal lot. The husbandmen have nowhere to turn, for the whole of influential
society is arrayed against them; their enemies include the actual collectors of tax
(haywards, beadles, bailiffs and woodwards), the king, barons, bondsmen, knights, and
clerics. These societal forces combine to check the husbandmen at every turn. Moral
decay on the part of the individuals in power has led to widespread and systematic
abuse of the ability to tax; the husbandmen are victims, ultimately, of "the equestrian's
[knight's] pride" as it is expressed through the sheriffs and beadles, who in turn depend
upon it for the satisfaction of their own greed. The entire system of corruption is self-
contained and self-sustaining, because it is a sinister mirror image of the ideal medieval
society, depending upon the qualities of well-defined class roles and communal
cooperation that medieval society believed were essential to a good society. "Baroun &
bonde, þe clerç & þe knyht" all have their part and their reward. Though the husband-
men are a group, they are as isolated by the world as is the shepherd in "How Goes This World About."

As in "How Goes This World About," the mood in "Song of the Husbandman" is one of frustration born of suffocated good will and arbitrary suffering. Roughly the second half of the poem concerns this situation's effect on the complainant specifically, as the poem shortens its focus from the "we" of a class to a single, wretched "y" who is overwhelmed with beadles and selling his seed-corn to meet the constant demands of the king. He details the story of his suffering at the hands of the beadles and their green wax, culminating in an exhausted statement of despair:

\begin{quote}
\begin{center}
\text{Jer wakene in \textit{\textit{be world wondred \& wee,}}}
\text{ase god in swynden anon as so forte swynke}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

There wakes in the world despair and woe, it's as well to die now as to work so (71-72).

This half of the poem has been celebrated as a rare instance of realism in medieval poetry (Oakden 2: 10), since the vivid account of how he is taxed and of the desperate measures he must go to in order to pay the taxes have been judged to be convincing (Dean, \textit{Medieval English Political Writings} 244), though they are perhaps not accurate so much as unsettlingly detailed, as we will see. The husbandman's ability to tell his tale in great detail without any anger is quite pathetic.

The essence of this character, like that of the shepherd in "How Goes This World About," is despair. The complainant's story fails to provide any resolution to the problems raised by the first part of the poem; instead, the story intensifies the mood of frustration and locates it in this voice. Despair is the effect of the complainant as well as his condition; while it can be argued that the litany of outrages the husbandman-narrator relates moves the audience to pity, pity in this case is born of the realization that reform is impossible. Because the political complaint describes a hopeless situation, it precludes the possibility of solution; the poem does not promote action, but
dramatizes the misery of one person whose simple desire for justice is overcome by a grasping world. Futility of action is a central theme in the poem; the complaint even provides its own counter-text in the form of the beadle’s gleefully-wielded writ, a "text" that expresses, were we to read it, the husbandman’s worldly value as fully as the husbandman does his own moral value. Both texts evaluate the husbandman, not in his traditional role, but in his identity as a hopeless victim.

Among these details are some lines of traditional general complaint:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{þus wil walkeþ in lond, & lawe is forlore} \\
&\text{þus wil walkeþ in lond, & wondred ys wene,} \\
&\text{falsshipe fatþeþ and marþeþ wyþ myht} \\
&\text{pat er werede robes, nou wereþ ragges} \quad (23, 31-32, 36).
\end{align*}
\]

These lines may be familiar enough to the audience to excite no particular attention, but the last is certainly odd in this context, as it is unlikely that the husbandmen ever wore robes. Men who could afford robes are apparently also being portrayed as suffering under the heavy taxation and the general willfulness that fats on the homeland. This line is a glance at the fortunes and the fears of the husbandman’s betters in the middle class—the proctors, knights, and burgesses, whose property was being taxed and who suffered monetarily through the prises and purveyance exacted from the land’s product.\textsuperscript{36} It is also a glance at the earls, whose own ability to profit by their tenants was reduced by royal taxation; the greatest concern of the earls was that Edward’s

\textsuperscript{36} It was a sign of the unpopularity of taxes that the job of collecting them was sometimes appointed to a man as an unofficial punishment (a trick employed by Abbot Whethamstede on at least one occasion), causing panic and lawsuits as the appointee attempted to wriggle out.
occasional privilege to tax movables might, through repetition, become a permanent and regular right.\textsuperscript{37}

The structural distance between narrator and husbandman is a signal of the class-based distortion informing the poem's basic conceit. Two perennial "middle class" worries are apparent in this poem. The first is hidden in the husbandman's selling of his seed-corn in order to meet the king's demand for silver:

\begin{quote}
\textit{to seche seluer to \textit{be kyng y mi seed solde,} \\
\textit{for\textit{\pounds} mi lond leye li\textit{p} \& leorne\textit{p} to slepe} (63-64).}
\end{quote}

The land becomes worthless by the agency of the king's taxes, because it lies fallow; in outlying areas, such land could easily go wild again.\textsuperscript{38} Poverty thus trickles up to the husbandman's betters, the actual owners of the land and consumers of the salable

\textsuperscript{37} My sources for information on taxation in this period are G. L. Harriss' \textit{King, Parliament, and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369} and S. K. Mitchell's \textit{Taxation in Medieval England}. The differences between them reflect the times in which they were written--Harriss examines tax "crises" while Mitchell's pre-1960's study takes a more evolutionary view of taxation and tax methodology.

\textsuperscript{38} Steven Justice (\textit{Writing and Rebellion} 135 n. 69) sees this passage as the core of the poem, which he re-names to the plural "Song of the Husbandmen." Because the husbandmen must sell their seed-corn, he reasons, everyone will starve in the coming year and so every class must be concerned.

However, we know that seed-corn was not an exhaustible commodity; it was bought as seed-corn, not as food, and communities regularly traded in it. Land went fallow because men would not work it, not because there was no seed to plant; sophisticated agrarians, medieval landowners were not fools, and it was they who doled out the seed-corn every planting. In fact, the weather could starve people quicker than taxation; Justice believes (\textit{Writing and Rebellion} 135) that the Husbandman's mention of storms (70) "negates the possibility of critique" because it equates the social problems with the intractable weather. He attributes this "limit" ultimately to the poem's "empirical cast of thought." Justice does not allow that terrible storms, which on more than one growing season induced nationwide suffering on a par with that of the plague, were seen as evidence of the nation's evil and God's resultant judgement upon it; this reading is made easy by the storms' mention at the very end of the poem, after the catalog of human evils. Naturally, the husbandman does not see this relationship, any more than he sees the larger ideological implications of the social evils he describes, but we should be able to provide these insights. To attribute an empirical cast to the poem's reformist aspect is anachronistic, and to claim that the poem does not offer social critique is evidence of a limited definition of what can be called social criticism.
produce. Even this cross-class problem is subject to some distortion from the hidden higher-class concerns. It is unlikely that a near-subsistence-level husbandman *circa* 1300—who had only a mare to his name—would be subject to any direct royal taxes beyond purveyance on foodstuffs. The second middle-class worry is over the burden that the poor represented to communities. The ability of a beggar to move, legally or not, created the potential for the poor to congregate, ruinously, in a town, concentrating the burdens of charity and of crime: "bus brede monie beggares bolde" (67) raises this concern. "Bolde," that is "socially burdensome" and "potentially

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39 The poorest were exempted from direct royal taxation on movables, following Aquinas' moral restrictions. Edward I's orders on this point were clear (Harriss 61 n2), and had precedent in similar proscriptions during Henry III's tax-heavy reign, from which there is documentary evidence—a chancery letter from 1225—of cease-and-desist orders directed against overzealous collectors (Mitchell 352-3). (We might consider this relatively disinterested evidence against the usual sources, such as chronicles by the tax-resisting clergy or anti-tax appeals.) Our husbandman has nothing, apart from his horse, to be assessed, as neither his home, nor even any cash he may have, is taxable; the clergy, in contrast, were often made to pay an income tax. Since he is plainly being assessed, and paying, as an individual, and not as part of a community that is fining or compounding on the tax, he cannot reasonably be expected to pay anything to the exchequer unless he were being assessed retroactively.

In this context it is worth noting that it was a *poll tax*—which under Richard II could amount to 1s. for even the very poorest person (Tuck 177)—that is often credited as the spark that set off the Rising of 1381, not any aid or grant, nor feudal tallage due to the long, nor any other revenue enhancement method used in Edward I's time. Manorial taxes, on the other hand, were a more regular and heavier burden. Stephen Justice (*Writing and Rebellion* 135 n.69) believes that "Song of the Husbandmen" *(sic)* completely ignores the manorial taxes that constituted the majority of the laborers' burden in favor of royal taxes only, indicating a self-interested middle-class perspective; Scattergood, however, notes (351-352) that the list of tax collectors includes both those who collected manorial and those who collected exchequer taxes. Whatever the case, the picture of the royal tax collectors demanding payment on an assessment against this husbandman is a rhetorical exaggeration of what would appear to have been a rational, if easily abused and unpopular, system of tax collection (Mitchell, 357). Indeed, the tax crisis of 1297 was in response to requests for aids on movables that were freely granted—the fear that sparked opposition was that such taxation would become obligatory through regularity, not that universal impoverishment was looming.
violent," is the important word in this context. ⁴⁰

The husbandman's plight, therefore, is partly symbolic of the "middle" class' related problems; rendered in such brutal detail, he attracts sympathy, but also functions to validate middle-class complaints. Actual husbandmen are ventriloquized into spokesmen for both classes at once, while the facts of the laborers' suffering are appropriated, perhaps to some extent manufactured, to represent middle class worries. There is accordingly a clear motivation to make the husbandman's suffering as horrific as possible, since the husbandman is a representative of two classes, one of which is participating in his degradation vicariously by making a sort of totem out of it.

This kind of rhetorical manipulation is clearly political action, blurring class lines—however reluctantly or imperfectly—in order to rhetorically marshal two parts of a class-ordered society against the government. Evidence to this point has pointed to the "middle class"—the burgesses, et cetera—as the most appropriate audience for this poem, and certainly this must be partially true. ⁴¹ However, as we have seen, the political influence even of the upper middle class was not large in 1300, not at least on issues of national policy—such as war—that had to do with the king's prerogative to tax. Furthermore, its theme of helplessness makes this poem a poor rallying cry for either the middle-class or the agricultural laborers. The poem advocates no action at all; the husbandman would rather die than work for nothing, and doesn't seem to consider

⁴⁰ Marjorie McIntosh has tracked the shift of language used to describe this kind of malfeasance.

⁴¹ This is, as has already been noted in the "Introduction," Janet Coleman's conclusion about poetry of this kind in Medieval Readers and Writers.
simply fleeing, becoming a highwayman, or marching on London. Tax victims are portrayed as good folk, helplessly and passively bewailing an inevitable fate.42

Why this pose or assumption of helplessness? It would seem to indicate pleading and put a damper on the aggrieved people’s potential anger. The poem portrays a speaker suppressed; however, note that if his needs were met, the husbandman would also be silent, a quiet participant in the economic system. The poem holds out to him no reward—and gives him voice to no desire—past a return to his old role and socioeconomic position, which the poem plainly describes to be "per-ase lutel ys" (13). The moral appeal of the poem is based on the alleviation of his suffering through the good-faith restoration of the social order; the "moral" thing to do is to stop the beadles and woodwards who escape punishment for their criminal misappropriations (60), cure the knights of their love of finery, and so remove the magnification of the king’s need by the needs of his officers. Morality is thus made a product of policy; it can be expressed through the system, whose just progress is its surest sign. Another poem, this from Edward II’s reign (Wright, Political Songs 323-345) makes this type of conservatism plain:

Ac were the king wel avised, and wolde worche bi skile,
Litel nede sholde he have swiche pore to pile;
Thurfte him noht seke tresor so fer, he mihte finde ner,
At justices, at shirreves, cheiturs, and chaunceler,
    and at les;
Swiche mihte finde him i-nouh, and late pore men have pes.

And bailiffs and bedeles under the shirreve,
Everich fondeth hu he may pore men most greve.
The pore men beth over al somouned on asise;

42 Scattergood notes this passivity and is at a loss to account for it, though he implies a connection between a proposed increase in poetic optimism and increasing political resistance in the fourteenth century (252-254).
And the riche sholen sitte at home, and ther wole silver rise to shon.
Godes curs moten hii have, but that be wel don!
(319-324, 337-342).

This poem displays the dampening effect as well. The attack on the king is blunted by an obvious device, common to political complaint poems, that the king somehow "doesn't know" what his officers are doing: "Ac if the king hit wiste, I trowe he wolde be wroth" (313). He is ill-advised, and needs only a word in his ear from someone with access. This is plainly disingenuous, yet it is also clear that in this kind of text a king is placed in a position to be influenced, not overthrown; the idea is to convince him to change his mind and pay attention to a problem that is, at the moment, of no interest to him. Government is often presented as a potential agent of positive change in political complaint poetry, indeed as the only agent. "Song of the Husbandman" is also of this mind, showing how the king is to blame precisely to the extent that he allows the beadle to escape justice: "For he may scape ant we aren ever caht" (58).

What use is this discourse? What space for subjects is determined in this poem? Where is the gap of authority that begs to be filled? We have seen that the husbandman, and by implication the middle class, are limited to traditional roles that allow for no voice, mimicking their position in Parliamentary discourse. We have also seen that "Song of the Husbandman" relies upon morality as a measuring stick of proper governance as well as a motivating appeal. Given that the poem presents a

43 This rhetoric, taken seriously as a proposition and used as a justification for political violence, was to help fuel and eventually undo the Rising of 1381, which famously concluded with the king’s bloody demonstration of just where his interests lay. In this light I cannot agree with James Holston ("Ranting" 198) that this "bad advisors" device actually functioned to protect reformers from the wrath of the government; instead, I think that it served as a pretext for indirect action against the king. Annabel Patterson, however, has proposed that there was a remarkable amount of tolerance for oppositional literature in Renaissance England, as long as it appeared to hide its motives sufficiently well. If we extend this to medieval England, we might see the "bad advisors" device as an example of such political decorum.
problem that, in real life, can be alleviated—and corrupt taxation must fall into this category—we should turn our attention to the scope of action it allows the earls, barons, and magnates, who translated "the voice of the people" into action when it suited their purposes. They had the king's ear, and the power—given an issue to gather around—to force him to act.

It is at first surprising that they are given relatively little room to act, but the very fluid power relationships at the highest level of the medieval hierarchy—Henry III's reign was a recent memory in 1300—demand care in how calls for the use of power are phrased. The conservatism of the poem—its goal is to make the world safe enough for the poorest workers to get on with their labor—mitigates the breadth of action for which it can call. So also does the moral motivation provided; the amorphousness of the general moral problem infesting the land, and the poem's implicit promise that tax reform is the cure for it, conspire to limit the meaning of action to tax reform alone, as well as to give such policy God's imprimatur. Far from a vague goad to action, or rabble-rousing, "Song of the Husbandman" is a careful attempt to motivate specific policy while keeping its enforcement from erupting into revolution.

It is, in fact, very similar to the strategy used by the barons to propagandize their own agendas, and it seems made to limit the implications of their claims. Even as De Tallagio non Concedendo claimed to represent all free men, so this poem extends the policies of the middle class to the poorest, relocating its desires in their needs, claiming the husbandmen. However, it does not simply reach down; it also reaches up, defining the good society in terms moral and conservative, creating a limit to what kinds of action can be said to represent the right desires of the people, from the lowest to the highest. "Song of the Husbandman" is not only elucidating a baronial policy, "reflecting" a social movement already in place, but the poem is also trying to shape the manner in which the policy was executed within the political struggle. It
ventriloquizes both the laborer and the magnate, applying moral interpretations that sought both to justify opposition to the government and to limit the baron’s actions by defining their motives. Such limits were in keeping with the conservatism of the parliamentary commons, who invariably called for simple adherence to Magna Carta, and with the barons’ historical reluctance, overcome years later with Edward II’s overthrow, to replace a monarch by force.

"Song of the Husbandman" shows that the political complaint motif was well-suited to portraying public wrongs, and structurally capable of including the magnate’s-eye-view within this portrayal. These dual purposes result, in a number of the cases at issue in this study, in a poetry that at once advocates and distances itself from the welfare of the laboring class, revealing the social regularities that inform its idea of reform.

Speaking in general terms, we may say that political complaint poems structurally reflect the "outsider" space from which absolutist moral rhetoric speaks; the critical and divisive potential of such rhetoric is dramatized in political complaint, exposing its weaknesses and threatening the "voiceless" authority of the ideological standards underlying gnomic statements. The appearance of political complaint indicates that such basic standards will be at issue in the poem; the proper reading is one that quiets this critique by redefining its issues from the moral to the political, from the realm of ideals to the realm of action. Political complaint provides, through the concepts it problematizes, the linguistic tools, or metalanguage if you will, through which this translation may be effected. In "Song of the Husbandman," the obligation of society to protect its lowest members becomes a proxy for the political issues and fears of another human stratum. In Winner and Waster, we will see the complaint introduced as a framing device to critique an entire moral and economic discourse, or complex, centering on the ultimately meaningless terms "Winner" and "Waster."
Such poems also reveal a sophisticated understanding of political rhetoric, an ability to make a voice heard by riding upon or assuming the political rhetoric of the powerful. Such awareness betrays knowledge of the appropriation of ideological commonplaces taking place in political discourse, and it thus demonstrates a critical stance toward political rhetoric of all stripes. The political complaint motif is therefore often the vehicle, by virtue of how it acts, for innovation and critique of other poetic motives and forms. The next chapter will investigate this critical aspect and its consequences for the political complaint as political action.

44 Paul Strohm reads Chaucer's political complaint, *Lak of Stedfastnesse*, within the "[con]textual environment" of Richard II's return to influence, demonstrating how its seeming generalities can acquire specific application in the "common environment of ideas" in which Richard's grab for power occurred (*Hochon's Arrow* 57-74). For Strohm, political success depends in part upon the effective use--"appropriation"--of ideological commonplaces, which he portrays as essentially unorganized and potentially in conflict except in the temporary networks that capable social actors--such as good poets--can construct of them (73). The second part of this idea has theoretical weaknesses--how ideological symbolic elements remain common and current without permanent relationships is one thorny problem, while the idea of a "common environment of ideas" is in danger of becoming another version of the Zeitgeist--but the first part is an influence on this chapter to the extent that it shows the rhetorical abilities and awareness of these political writers.
CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL COMPLAINT AS CRITICISM

Political complaint, by requiring that the audience redirect its ethical content, also requires critical activity of that audience; the complainant's failures spark an evaluative awareness that brings any rhetorical gesture in the poem under scrutiny. This chapter will consider the place of convention in such circumstances. Some political complaint poems, like "A Song on the Times" or "Why I Can't Be a Nun," assess current moral language in an attempt to revivify or reform it. Some, in the fashion of "Merlin's Prophecy," offer a critique so powerful as to obliterate a familiar convention, to great effect; others, such as "Friar Daw's Reply," allow critical language to reflect a political discourse's exhaustion. Such dynamic use of conventions is, I argue, essential to the effectiveness of these poems, whose meaning relies heavily on the familiar "body" of rhetoric that they inhabit.

The composition of this body requires some defense before my argument can begin. Many medieval poems were originally discovered in manuscript miscellanies or scrawled into the margins of other works, and have since been re-organized by modern scholars into specialized collections or stand-alone editions. As John Dagenais has demonstrated, this practice can be a detriment to our understanding of these poems, which in many cases provide a historical aspect only through their immediate textual circumstances. It has also tended to create canonical distortion, robbing some works of

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45 Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture. Steven Justice shows the benefits of paying attention to a manuscript's history in his short discourse on "the ax was sharp" (Writing and Rebellion 251-54).

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their potential currency in our age. Anonymous lyrics such as "Sumer is Icumen In" have been easily absorbed into our current culture as discrete poems; this is not true of most political complaint poems, which remain parts of large, heterogeneous collections, even in later twentieth century printings. Editors from Thomas Wright to James Dean have responded to the similarities of expression and means of expression between political complaint poems by placing them together, and while due attention to their historical circumstances has been paid, the overall impression such collections create is that the poems do not change much over the centuries and therefore do not participate actively in history.

This practice has not been entirely without benefit, however, for such modern miscellanies are in keeping with one way that the poetry works. The poems make meaning in part based on the ubiquity of their themes and modes; political complaints are meant to be received with a familiarity that modern editors have recreated through these collections and the notes that accompany them. Indeed, the manuscripts also seem on occasion to group these poems according to textual and thematic relationships not alien to modern sensibilities. For instance, Ms. Harley 913 contains a political complaint poem, entitled "A Song on the Times" by its modern editors, that shares common passages with another in the same manuscript, entitled "Sarmun," and with an exemplary parable common in sermons of the time. Since "A Song on the Times" plainly presupposes the existence of the other contexts for these lines, this complaint benefits from being grouped with these other poems.

The sermon context is quite obvious in this early fourteenth century poem (Wright Political Songs 195-205, Heuser 131-139), which illustrates its theme with a

46 Surely the oddest version of this poem occurs as a sort of march at the end of Hammer Studios' horror film The Wicker Man (1973).
fable that may have been common in sermons of the time. It even ends with a
sermonic peroration:

    Anurij god and holi chirch
    And 3ivep  he povir  pat habbiq nede,
    So god is wille 3e ssul wirche
    And iol of heven hab to mede,
    To whoch ioi us bring
    Iesus Crist, heuen king.
    Amen (193-199).

The poem begins as a complaint, with the usual suspects under examination:

    Whose  benchinb vp  pis carful lif,
    Ni3te and dai  pat we beq inne,
    So mooch we seep of sorow and strif,
    And lite  ber is of world is winne;
    Hate and wretb  ber is wel riue,
    And trew loue is ful  pinne;
    Men  pat be in heâqist liue
    Mest i-charged bep wib sinne (1-8).

The complainant indicts both the government and the church; the ministers allow
injustice to thrive, so long as they are bribed--

    Thos kingis ministris beth i-schend,
    To ri3t and law that ssold tak hede,
    Ad al the lond for t' amend,
    Of thos thevis hi taketh mede.
    Be the lafful man to deth i-bro3t,
    And his catel awei y-nom;
    Of his deth ne tellith hi nogt,
    Bot of har prei hi hab som (33-40).

--while the church allows itself to be cowed into ignoring the lord's crimes. It should,
instead, exert its influence to prevent their wrongs through threat of excommunication.

Note, with reference to "Song of the Husbandman," that the influence to be exercised
on the lords is moral and dependent on self-restraint:

    Holi cherch schold hold is ri3t
    For no eie no for no loue,
In another gesture that may remind us of "Song of the Husbandman," the hobler’s (horseman’s) victimization of husbandmen is singled out for specific ire:

And þos hoblurs namelich  
Pat husbond benimeþeri of grund—  
Men ne schold ham biri in non chirch,  
Bot cast ham vte as a hund  
(29-32).

As in other political complaints, the nature of the problems in "A Song on the Times" make solutions impossible, and the complainant is in despair:

Fals and liþer is þis lond,  
As al dai we mai ise:  
þer in is boþe hate and onde—  
Ich wene þat euer so wol be  
(9-12).

The fable that follows the complaint illustrates the power of bribery. This story may have been popular in sermons of the day (a version of it appears in John Bromyard’s fourteenth-century *Summa Praedicantium*¹⁸), but the complaint version exhibits differences from the sermonic version that bespeak purposeful rewriting.

The basic story remains almost the same. Lion, the king of beasts, having heard that Fox and Wolf have been stealing poultry and mutton, summons them into his presence. They are accompanied by an Ass who has been swept up by the dragnet. Fox and Wolf bribe the Lion with the results of their crimes, the Fox sending poultry and the Wolf mutton. The guiltless Ass, a vegetarian, sends nothing and, while the others plead their case, remains silent. Fox claims to have bought his victims, while Wolf owns up but throws himself on the king’s mercy as a fellow nobleman. Both are pardoned, the Wolf simply for acting "according to kind," a judgment that reflects back

⁴⁷ "Har" refers to Covetise and Un-right.

⁴⁸ *Summa Praedicantium*, "Correctio," 159.
upon his relation to the Lion. The Ass is found guilty of eating grass against his kind, an absurd judgment that shows the Lion to lack understanding of the herbivorous Ass—perhaps, we might guess, through lack of good counsel. The judgment is, in fact, according to the Lion's kind; he orders that the Ass' flesh and bones be torn asunder with an attention to detail—

\begin{verbatim}
Al his bonis 3e todraw,
Loke þat 3e noȝt lete!
And þat ich giue al for law
Pat his fleis be al ifrette (121-124)
\end{verbatim}

--that smacks of carnivorous relish.

This blood-thirsty judgment is the most obvious difference between this version and that used by preachers; in Bromyard's version, the Ass is scourged and put in chains, but not torn asunder. The carnivorous aspect of the story is less prominent in Bromyard, while in "A Song on the Times" it is a conspicuous theme. For instance, the Lion in the poem is bribed with the stolen animals, while Fox and Wolf's means in the Summa Praedicantium are less specific; recall also that the poem specifically refers to the victims of the king's ministers as "har prei" (40). If Bromyard's version is representative of the story as it was heard from the pulpit, the poem in MS Harley 913 is deliberately more brutal. At the end of this fabula, when the poem returns to the complaint with which it began, it has already implied that the king and his ministers are corrupt by nature and fundamentally exploitative; bribes (and citizens) are as food to them. It has likened government to predation, and compared the social hierarchy to what we would term the food chain, exploring the vicious side of the standard lion-king metaphor; this is quite different from simply complaining about the king's errors in judgment.

The poem then returns to the complaint. The complainant glosses the parable to mean that lawful men are "bound in pain" while influential thieves go free, because
pride, covetousness, and envy have conquered love, charity, and peace; evil men will soon compass a good man about. "Sarmun," the poem with which "A Song on the Times" shares these lines and others, is free of complaint; the thematic differences between these poems are great enough that common authorship cannot be ascribed. Comparing a similar selection from the closely-related "Sarmun" with this part of "Song" reveals further the difference between the versified sermon and the parody of that motif. (Similar passages are in bold type.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;Sarmun&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;A Song on the Times&quot;</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man is lif nis bot a schade, Nov he is and nov he nis; Loke hou he mei be glade, Po3 al þis world míst be his. Wold he þench, þe vnseli man, In to þis world whate he broȝte-- A stinkind felle ilappid þer an, Wel litil bettir þan rîȝt nostr.</td>
<td>Poȝ lafful man wold hold is lif In loue, in charite and in pes, Sone me ssul compas is lif, And þat in a litil res. Prude is maister and coueitise, Pe þrid broȝer men clippiþ ond: Nîȝt and dai he fondip iwisþe Lafful men to hab har lond. When erþ ha erþ igette And of erþe so hab inovȝ, Whan he is þer in istekke, Wo is him þat was in wouȝ! What is þe gode þat he sal hab, Oute of þis world whan he sal go? A wikid wede -- whi sold i gab? For he ne broȝt wiþ him no mo. Rîȝt as he com, he sal wend In wo and pine and poueret; Takip gode hede, mene, to ȝur end, For as i sigge, so hit sal be.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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49Heuser 131. Heuser is careful to point out that the lines these poems share do not necessarily indicate common authorship, but rather the proverbial popularity of the lines themselves. Sermons are the obvious and titular vehicle for promulgating them.
Mani man þenchit on is þoȝt,  
He nel noȝt leue his eir al bare,  
His eir sal fail and ber rìȝt noȝȝte  
And wast þe gode wel widewhare.  

Ich warne þe, for isold hit sal,  
Al þat ðou wan here wip pine,  
A broðin eir sal wast it al  
And be al ðeperis þat was þine.  

Nouþ siþ þat þe world nis noȝt  
And catel nis bot vanite,  
Haue [we] god in ur þoȝt  
And of þe catel be we fre.  

Anourþþ god and holi chirch  
And helþþ þai þat habiþ nede,  
So god is wiþ we sul wirch,  
Þe ioi of heuen hab to mede.  

What is þe ioi þat man sal hab,  
If his lif he speniþ wel?  
Soþ to sigge and noȝt to gab,  
Þer nis no tunge at hit mai tel.  

If i sal tel al þat i can,  
In holi boke as we can rede--  
Hit is a ioi þat fallit to man,  
Of hel pine he ne dar drede.  

Þe man þat mai to heuen com,  
Þe swete solas forto se,  
Seue siþis brìȝtir þan þe sun  
In heuen sal man is soule be.  

(153-200).  

It may be that neither of these poems has an original word in it;50 poems without  
recourse to new turns of phrase must content themselves with variations of tone and  
allusion in order to have expressive impact. The contrast between these two poem  
segments is exactly of this sort; it is not the words themselves, but the context of the  

50The "earth to earth" sections of these poems are reflected in two other poems  
included in W. Heuser's Die Kildare Gedichte, "Erthe" (176) and "Earth" (212); other  
parts may be equally ubiquitous.
words within and between the poems that enables both "Sarmun" and "Song on the Times" to make their very different statements. "Sarmun" puts the shared lines to work in a seamless fashion that, through its easy transitions and clear focus on the theme of worldly vanity, reflects the studied eloquence of an actual medieval sermon. The poem makes a proposition—"man is lif nis bot a schade"—and follows it with three proofs or corollaries: men leave the earth as poor as they came to it, their bodies are wicked and vile, and the treasures they leave behind will fall to waste. Therefore, it concludes, since the world is nothing, it is best to concentrate on good and so find freedom from the world's "catel." People exercise this conclusion by honoring God and church, and helping the needy. The poem concludes by extolling the joys of heaven that are the rewards of these good works. The tone of "Sarmun" is inclusive, assuming a shared set of values between speaker and audience. Indeed, "Sarmun" uses the first person plural in several places, encouraging the audience to share in the poem's attitudes toward God and in its reading of the "holi boke."

"Song" would seem to have a similar focus, but it is the differences that are most striking. Noting that evil men will soon compass a good man about, the poem condemns the worldliness of these evil men; words similar to those in "Sarmun" are used to show the emptiness of this greed and strife. However, in this case the message is placed in the context of systematic injustice and the triumph of these worldly men; after the example of the Lion, it is clear that the speaker cannot reconcile the success of evil with its futility. Therefore, while the passage demonstrates the cosmic irony of worldly success, it fails to transcend the mundane in the way "Sarmun" does.

Indeed, a worldly metaphor is extended to the supernatural in "Song"; good deeds are seen as part of a business "del" by which a man sets a price for his "sowle." A beggar receives a greedy man's crust of bread and passes judgment on both the man and any priest who would absolve him. Like the complainant's, the beggar's complaint
takes place within a hostile environment and so is muted—"in his heart"—private speech that cannot effect change. Priests did absolve evil men, and sing masses for them, all the time; the beggar's curse is powerless even though it is the voice of justice.

There is nothing novel about this vignette; a passage substantively like it appears in the "Hymn by Michael Kildare" from the same manuscript, wherein the rich man is warned that if a beggar is allowed to starve Christ will judge the rich man his murderer. However, in "Hymn" the beggar suffers without anger; he does not presume to judge or even curse the cold-hearted rich man:

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De pouer man bit uche sai
Gode of þe, and þou seiist ai:
"Begger, wend a deuil wai!
Pou deuist al mine ere."
Hungur-bitte he goth awai
Wip mani sorful tere (90-96).
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By contrast, in "Song" Christ's judgment is left implied, translated into the bitter, impotent anger of the ill-used beggar.

At this point "Song" breaks entirely from the model that Bromyard and "Sarmun" delineate and demonstrates the consequences for the complainant of his approach. The complainant draws the wrong conclusion; in contrast to the "Sarmun"-narrator, who turns away from earthly "catel," the complainant concludes that the wise person trusts no one. His angry warning to the audience to mistrust "unless you deal it with your own hand" is wholly mundane, a sneering capitulation to the principles of worldly dealings that combines his just outrage and powerlessness into a despairing sarcasm. The total effect of the poem is far from the smooth, reassuring logic of "Sarmun"; the sermonic passages are thrown haphazardly at the problem of greed, failing even the complainant, who is inescapably tied to earthly concerns despite his hatred of them. When the complainant turns to the lines about honoring God and Church, the transition from his former themes of isolation and rage is so abrupt that it
seems more an escape from the preceding hopelessness than a comforting conclusion. Even these final lines are changed to reflect the more aggressive, isolated tone of "Song"; they address the audience in the second person rather than the first.

A contemporary audience would have noticed the splintering of the sermon form in this poem. There can be no doubt that manipulation of the sermon was exciting rhetoric for some medieval audiences, for examples abound. We have already seen an example in "Whan Adam delf." Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" depends upon the audience's familiarity with the sermon-as-rhetoric--and its cognizance of what the Pardoner does with this rhetorical form--to be understood.\textsuperscript{51} As in the "Pardoner's Tale," the focus in "A Song on the Times" is as much on the consequences of the message for the complainant's cause as it is on the message itself. The result is an unstable tone, as the desperate core of the complainant's message wells up out of the convention of the sermonic form, brutalizing the exemplum and interrupting the moral generalizations at the close. The sermon was one of the most-studied, most-composed, and most-heard rhetorical forms in medieval society; it offers a comfortable predictability that "A Song on the Times" manipulates. The complainant's failed

\textsuperscript{51} The sermonic qualities, both present and lacking, of the Pardoner's address to his fellow pilgrims have been analyzed in depth by many scholars, and no summary is possible here. There is no doubt that it has many elements of a sermon, and indeed is presented as such by its fictional speaker. However, it is not constructed as Bromyard would have recommended, and this very formal looseness is a key to interpreting some of its meanings. For instance, such informality may indicate a street audience of bumpkins--as indeed the Pardoner claims--and criminals, those for whom formalities of all kinds were not necessary and for whom the magical "Christianity" and pardon-by-purchase morality of the Pardoner were attractive and, indeed, the only kinds of spirituality available. The Host's enraged reaction to the Pardoner's attempt, real or not, to sell him relics is both proof that the Pardoner is accusing him of being such a degraded person--see Patricia Kean (2: 104-5) for another version of the idea that Harry is being insulted--and that the accusation is pretty accurate. The "gentils" in the audience expected a ribaldry from the Pardoner, and despite his oratory's sermonisms it is still a ribaldry in the end, acted out for the amusement of his betters in a sense that they can accept, i.e. as a real happening between two low-lifes and not as a fictional commodity to be voluntarily sanctioned.
attempt to adopt this motif causes the audience to reconsider this moral rhetoric and the implications of its weaknesses. It is potentially a critique of the rhetorical strategy of "Sarmun" and sermonic rhetoric generally, which, for all its smooth logic, cannot speak to the earthly predicament of either the complainant or the audience. The complaint poem's stress on isolation—through the figures of the Ass, the corpse, the beggar, and, of course, the complainant—begs the need for a community of shared ethics, a condition that "Sarmun" assumes to be the case; the complainant's failure requires that this idea be made realistically powerful again within the context of the moment. It is clear, under these circumstances, why charity to the poor is given such stress in "Song," since it is the only way the poem leaves for a person to express an otherworldly consciousness. It is Christian virtue expressed within the confines of worldly business and in a way that requires no words.

The detachment necessary for this kind of critical experience is facilitated through the dramatic structure of the political complaint, which, as we have seen, presents a problematic central narrative. The internal drama of a political complaint like "Song on the Times" is a test of whatever other motives may be present; the question is whether any didactic motif can transcend or explain the political complaint's rhetoric of failure.

Ideologically speaking, this is often a gentle critique, because while last Wednesday's sermon may well be a political complaint's subject, there can be no doubt that, on the level of ideals, that sermon remains precious to the audience. If, taking the present example further, we understand the existence of "Song on the Times" as evidence that the rhetoric of "Sarmun" and its ilk was being reiterated without effect, then it is obvious that the latter's ability to represent the moral value-corpus was lost; the way in which this moral authority is expressed, and thereafter takes part in the audience's self-evaluation, must become different to match the changing world.
Tossing a coin to a beggar has a wider range of meanings after experiencing "Song on the Times" than it had previously; a coin is thrown more consciously than before to anger and fear as well as to faith and obligation. Tossed to some sort of religious identification, as well; the charitable "deel" between giver and needy, as defined in "Song on the Times," sidesteps the droning priest reciting his Bromyard for the beggar's unspoken-yet-fierce intercession. The charitable act thus becomes an act of political expression as well, paying God's tax rather than the king's. The very same ideals that "Sarmun" expresses assume, in "Song on the Times," new guises in a projected moral economy that is a moral metaphor of the audience's current political and economic experience.52

The poem is therefore a negotiation between old and new social circumstances, very likely those of the "middle class" audience identified by Janet Coleman as the complaint audience. The business metaphor of charity—a figure our middle-class Christian culture continues to use—and the class consciousness that looks for God's will in the poor beggar instead of the poor-but-socially-superior cleric both point to the specific viewpoint of the tradesman and the merchant. The theme of isolation may have had special meaning to the "middle class" as well, since the competition for the advancement of self and family separated them from their former communities, as

52 I do not wish to propose an idea of "progress" here; I am not describing the encroachment of the Reformation or the Modern in this change, but merely a negotiation between practical rationality—how things work—and ethical rationality—why they work—in a social structure that divides them in the way medieval society undoubtedly did. The change described is a mere reapportionment between two principles always in coexistence but rarely in accord, and can be easily reversed. Leroy Searle traces the institutionalization of this "quarrel" to Plato's Republic, arguing that its separation of "reason" and "passion" privileges one functionally equivalent rationale—the practical—over the other (870-871). Wesley Trimpi also calls for balance, contrasting (368-9) the "rhetorical" and "philosophical" intentions of literary theory and finding that any imbalance between them results in formalisms incapable of accounting for the relation between the artifact and the knowledge it represents.
Coleman notes (64), and from each other within their new communities. The splintering of the family unit caused by today's economics has brought about an analogous nostalgia, and nostalgic politics, in ourselves. As then, the vehicle of much of this yearning for unity is an image of the "simple" farmers and their ostensibly more communal identity.

It is possible, indeed unavoidable, to use these moments of negotiation to promote political purposes, to allow for or justify political change of all stripes. The political power, or function, of fictional literature is found in its ability to speculate freely, to propose without the consequences and limits of applying power, and to make these propositions "real" within the moment of apprehension. They present us, as Wittgenstein put it, with "forms of life." This function is not weakness or inaction; far to the contrary, it is an opportunity to shape the direction of power by delineating its goals and limits, its rationale, through the exemplary function of the literary performance. We have seen "Song of the Husbandman" doing this very thing, speaking for two classes and defining the nature of their struggles in a way that disarms

53 It is possible to see most fictional literature as basically propositional, as indeed speech-act theory holds to be the case with some speech. Perhaps the Platonic imitative and Aristotelean constitutive facets of a literary piece are both implied in a prior commitment to hypothesize about reality, a role that derives naturally from language's public nature. Literature's aesthetic elements may also derive from its propositional function and the communicative enhancement this function offers. Our pleasure in an instance of imitation, for instance, may proceed from apprehending its communication-enhancing and thought-extending possibilities; it is pleasure at the work's potential social value, and thus partakes of the joy of company.

54 The idea that literature functions as an example, and as a kind of hypothetical history and imaginative ground for future action, is familiar to any reader of medieval literature. It is the ostensible motive for Chaucer's "Retraction" to the Canterbury Tales, the very purpose of hagiographic narratives and, of course, of the sermonic exempla so hated by Wycliff. Modern incarnations include Shelley's idea of the poet-as-legislator, Frederic Jameson's concept of a cultural object's Utopian dimension--the "symbolic affirmation of a specific historical and class form of collective unity" (291)--and Charles Altieri's ongoing efforts to promote the exemplary value of the classics (Act and Quality, Canons and Consequences).
both save for their potential to enact the agenda of another, "middle" class mediating for them both. It offers useful rhetoric—the powerful imagery of the suffering laborer—in exchange for a political commitment to tax reform as the end-all of reform, as indeed a definition of Good Government.

It follows that the ability of political complaint to critique moral rhetoric makes it a powerful ideological tool, helping to sort out effective rhetoric and aid in the inevitable transition from one form of popular expression to another; the political complaint poem has its impact in political discourse through the rhetorical criticism it encourages from the audience. We should therefore expect it to reveal the ideological underpinnings of other rhetorical motives as it exposes their weaknesses. Most of all, we should expect it to attack the moral authority of such motives to represent the ideals for which they speak.

This effect on authority is plainest in instances where the political complaint appears with political prophecy. Pure political prophecy, such as "A Political Prophecy by the Dice" (Robbins 120)—

Euermore schall the [6] be the best cast on the dyce;
And [5] and [4] set al oone syde,
Then schal the name of the [6] spring vnder wyde.
ye schal haue a new king At a new parlement.
[6] schal vp and [1] schal vndur,
When dede men ryse that schal be moch wondur;
The rede rose and the floure-de-lyce, the lockes schal vnder,

—is a bit of rhetorical trickery, since it is social commentary posing as the symbolic, riddling communication of mystical authority. One version of this poem is glossed in the margins, where [1] is identified as the king, [6] as the commons, and [5] and [4] as the lords religious and secular, respectively. There are possibly two poems here, one a statement of the importance of a king supporting his people that ends at "parlement,"
which could have reference to any number of reformist episodes, and the second a warning, referring back perhaps to the 1381 Rising, of what happens when the people attempt to rule themselves.\textsuperscript{55} The ambiguity inherent in prophetic rhetoric keeps it available over time, long after its original purpose is spent—anyone, for instance, can be [2] and [3], even if we for argument’s sake accept a fixed definition for [1] and [6].\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, some cases, such as "The Cock in the North" (Robbins 115-117), show near-constant revision by many hands over many years in order to tweak them for new uses.\textsuperscript{57} In the presence of the political complaint motif, which lacks the difficult symbolism of prophecy, this topicality is lost and the rhetorical pose of prophecy becomes even more transparent. "Merlin’s Prophecy" (Robbins 121), from the very same manuscript page as "A Political Prophecy by the Dice" is such an amalgam.

\begin{quote}
When lordes wille is londes law,
    Prestes wylle trechery, and gyle hold soth saw,
    lechery callyd pryve solace,
    And robbery is hold no trespace—
    Then schal the lond of Albyon
torne in-to confusion!
\end{quote}

As prophecy, this is almost absurd; the conditions and the result are synonymous, and it lacks the mystical symbolism necessary to the prophecy motif. Unlike other prophecies, this poem remains firmly within the realm of the mundane; there are no formulaic wonders, such as hares on hearthstones or rising dead (as in "Prophecy by Scattergood’s version (359-360) skips two lines, effectively ending it at "vndur," then leaping to the last line, which results in his treating line seven as a statement of preference rather than a proposition to be logically paired with the rising of the dead in the (absent) eighth line.

\textsuperscript{56} [6] undergoes some transformation within the poem, however; it is plainly meant to represent both the commons as a body of individuals (2) \textit{and} as "the nation" (4, possibly 1).

\textsuperscript{57}Robbins, 309. Robbins’ notes on this poem detail its emendations and modern critics’ largely misguided attempts to ascribe some unity to it.
the Dice”) to provide a supernatural cachet. The poem is dominated instead by the topics and moral tone of political complaint.

These rhetorical compromises lay bare the prophecy form’s reliance on historical authority as part of its rhetorical effect; prophecy depends upon its provenance for authenticity. In this poem, however, the absence of mysticism makes Merlin an unnecessary rhetorical component, and so highlights the rhetorical pose. It is interesting in this regard that this particular prophecy is the one parodied in King Lear (III ii) when the Fool steals Merlin’s prophetic thunder: "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time." Perhaps Shakespeare was sensitive to the timeless ubiquity of the complaints within this prophecy, and to the merely rhetorical role that the ostensible prophetic authority plays in the poem’s reception. Indeed, the simple/wise Fool is a more appropriate speaker than is Merlin, because he is more along the lines of a traditional complaint speaker; by placing the words in his mouth, the play is simply emphasizing one motif over another.

Such an un-prophecy stands in stark contrast to the use of Merlin’s aegis in more specific political contexts. In 1401 Glyndwr attempted to recruit the Irish partly on the strength of Merlin’s prophecy that they would aid the Welsh and Scots against the English king; this legend had its roots in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s "Book of Merlin," the seventh book of the Historia Regum Britanniae, and had been disseminated through many texts, prosodic and poetic, translating local legends—such as

58 I do not wish to be prejudicial about the prophecy motif. The "dede men" rising, far from a mere formula, may also symbolize any number of things, for instance the idea of a past mistake or issue—perhaps the Rising—repeating itself in the present. So might other formulas, for instance hares on hearthstones, signifying a return of the domestic stone to its original wild state, attendant upon the destruction of civilization. In agrarian towns each hearthstone may have come from the field adjoining the village, and thus its original place was known. Removing such rock, and trees, is the first act of agrarian community-building, because it creates the field.

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the legend that Cadwaladr would return to free the Welsh--into a set of commonplaces that could be applied by political leaders. The prophecy allows a set of circumstances that otherwise might seem unlikely, such as the complete collapse and erasure of the English government as described by "Geoffrey of Monmouth's Prophecy" (Robbins 113-115):

Than by stryff & gret dyvysyon
Pat Englysshe peple schall falle Inne,
To endless hurte & fowle confusyon,
Pen dolefullie dedys schall be-gynne.

Then wolle resorte in-to pat londe
Pat were lorde ^erof off olde.
Per schall no^the be ^at may with-stonde
Hem, ^at yle to haue and holde (17-24).

This is a very broad political vision, based on racial differences and racial history. It is an expression of hope, a projection of desires that may well be "moral" in some aspects--the Welsh, for an example of needless repression, didn't get the official freedom to speak their own language publicly until the 1960's--but that here are expressed as authoritative certainties, sanctioned by the timeless supernatural, and so not morally significant. Such poems do not really move people to military action so much as bind them together socially against overwhelming power; the prophecy is an expression of group defiance, a heartener. We might note in this context that the poem just excerpted does not require a thing of the people, who need simply wait until the symbolic predictions play themselves out and the land reverts to them. In this, it is like many another political prophecy, including the Scots poem "When Rome is Removed" (Robbins 118-120) and the "Political Prophecy by the Dice." For such poems, an authoritative figure like Merlin is essential and means "keep the faith, for destiny is with you."

"Merlin's Prophecy" removes this faith for the despair of the complainant, whose adoption of the prophetic motif is a failure because moral order is presented as an immutable ideal whose violation leaves nothing to the future. Social wrongs--there
is little doubt that the conditions described are meant as observations of things as they are, not as they will be—by erasing the English nation, erase the framework in which "Merlin" operates as an authority. The sense of destiny embodied by Merlin is dispersed; the very idea of a historical nation with which to identify dissolves. The poem is itself an example, an enactment, of its theme, obliterating Merlin as the evils it addresses undo England.

Yet it is true that England still existed; there was an ongoing world that was not totally lost. The prophecy topos is thus also critiqued on the ground that its authority as political rhetoric is exhausted by its fulfillment. That is, the politics of prophetic critique only matters as long as the prophecy is not yet true; as either prediction or revelation, upon fulfillment prophecy loses its power to change reality and becomes merely descriptive of it. The present state of affairs, to borrow a term from Christian apologetics, overfulfills the prophecy; prophecy must then give way to the rhetoric of complaint, which nostalgically resurrects the betrayed past against the fallen present.

Dream-vision, like prophecy, relates a supernaturally sanctioned truth in a symbolic manner that requires authoritative interpretation, and like it is subject to the complaint critique of effectiveness. Dreams are still considered revelatory today, and were much-studied in the Middle Ages. The poem fragment "Why I Can’t Be a Nun" (Dean 227-246)—in which a young woman named Katerine, desiring to join a convent, is dissuaded by a dream in which Lady Experience shows her the moral decay that inhabits the convents—illustrates the effect that pairing dream-vision and complaint produces. As in the case of the prophecy, the complaint maintains the form of the dream-

59 The modern literary studies of medieval dream-vision, its theory and reception, are numerous. The most-cited general discussion remains A. C. Spearing's *Medieval Dream-Poetry*. J. Stephen Russell's *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* provides a postmodern look at the motif, as well as an updated bibliography.
vision while overturning its rhetorical foundation.

Dream-visions use what Russell calls a "modal shift between the phenomenal and the figural" in order to introduce the ambivalence, the gap, that requires interpretive exercise (English Dream Vision 198). This effect can be augmented by imputing motives to the dreamer that may be coloring the dream's revelation. Chaucer's House of Fame is perhaps the most elaborate, presenting a long and indeterminate discourse on dreams and their interpretation as a prelude to the dream itself, thus muddying permanently any comprehensive interpretation of the dream through the character of the dreamer, who may be pulling our leg at any level of the symbolism. For medieval readers, the mundane is not immediately the key to the ideal, as it often is in our psychology; most dream-visions operate to unlock the mundane with the ideal. Pearl is a famous example of this; the dreamer's bereavement has caused him to make a figure for her in the "real" world--the lost pearl--that the dream helps to interpret through its authoritative symbolism. Only Pearl the bride of Christ can interpret Pearl the dead loved one, and even then only through the authority that her status gives her to "deme" with "skyl." "Why I Can't Be a Nun" turns this relationship inside-out.

The poem "begins"--the very start of it is missing--with a mundane description of some emissaries on a mission to all the "nunryes" in every shire in England. A cynic would find the description of their going charged with innuendo:

Her hertys were alwey on her hyre,
And that scheude they wel in her workyng,
   For they were as ferfent as ony fyre
To execute her lordys byddyng.

And schortly to sey, no man abode
   That on thys erand schulde be sent.

And to eche of hem was geven grete hyre,
   And therefore they were so fervent
To seke owte nunryes in every schyre (5-10, 14-16).
When the men return to their master, the narrator's father, they report that the nuns "made us gode chere, / And youre desyre they wolle fulfylle" (30-31). That is a general "you," indicating that the nuns are generally eager to please, a situation that the men seemed to be aware of from the start, if their own fervency is any indication. Our narrator comes across an innocent to all this, but they are her words; the mystery to be unlocked, one we have seen in many complaints, is how these two levels of experience will become resolved.

Katherine's father informs her that he will not allow her to join a convent, despite the credit the desire does her, but does not explain his decision. She weeps, proclaims her true obedience to Jesus, and asks again to be allowed to join on this basis; her father laughs at this (50), and leaves her alone and unhappy. We know the source of his wry laughter, and are invited to join it at her expense; like him, we may be pleased at her devotion but unable to communicate the "truth" to her in her innocent state. She prays to God to keep her chaste, and to show her His will.

It is clear already that this poem is different from the dream-vision as defined by Pearl or Parlement of the Thre Ages, for where such poems begin with a benighted narrator whose worldly concerns blind him to eternal truths, we have here a devoted servant of God who is unable to interpret the world. She already has the child's faith that her elders wish for; what she lacks is the means to express it meaningfully in the world. She is, in fact, very like the "peasants" we have seen in other political

60 J. Stephen Russell considers the poignance of such narrators to be a function of their interpretive inferiority to the reader ("A Seme in the Integument" 173). They cannot see the convention, and so cannot explain the strangeness of those around them. In this case, of course, we are in the know in a way that does not require us to be "readers" of convention as such; as we will see, the convention will not hold up under the scrutiny of the complaint within it and the chief delight of the poem is the way it turns the convention on its head.
complaints, a person with no voice; her chastity robs her father of the ability to interact
with her. She simply laments and hopes for relief, finally falling asleep in her garden.

Rapunzel comes to mind—to mine, anyway; Katerine, trapped into an ignorant
virtue by her father, who can snigger with the emissaries but won’t let her in on the
secret, is left to appeal to another Father for guidance, and ends up coming to her own
aid through the mechanism of her dream. Interestingly, her mother is not in the
picture; what she wishes to know is the men’s secret and they cannot tell for propriety’s
sake. The dream fulfills the demands of propriety and gives her a "mother" at the
same time; she is visited, not by a handsome Prince, or God, but by a female figure
who calls to her:

   "Awake, dowghtyr myne,
   And to my talkyng take entent.
   To bryng thyne hert owte of pyne,
   And to comfort the, now have I ment (124-127).

It is not the Virgin; it is Lady Experience, whose teaching may not fail, who will set
Katerine’s heart at rest about this matter of the convents. In the usual dream-vision a
figure named Experience might actually be a villainous embodiment of sinful
knowledge along the lines of Worldly Wiseman.61 This poem, however, reverses this
idea, even having Katerine describe her sheltered life as a "carefulle way" that she can
escape only by experience (166-167). The careful way is usually the worldly life, "the
vale of tears," but in this poem the world is set up as the textbook of personal peace.

Now the complaint comes more to the fore, as the convent is revealed—in the
usual dream-vision fashion—to be the home of many personified vices, such as Dame
Lust and Dame Envy, who drive out Dame Charyte and don’t obey the Prioress.
Experience tells her that most of the nuns are feeble and "lewde," though not all--"for

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61 As Dean points out in his edition (229).
than hyt were harde" (315)—and leaves her in the garden where she had fallen asleep. She wakes and immediately sets her mind to what kind of governance she will use, since the convent is no longer an option; she wonders simultaneously how the nuns might be "amendyd."

Katerine’s concerns have turned away from herself to include others. She addresses the male audience in a remarkable passage:

> But here peraventure sum man wolde say,  
> And to hys conceyte so hyt schulde seme,  
> That I forsoke sone a perfyte way  
> For a fantasy or for a dreme.  
> For dreme was hyt none, ne fantasye,  
> Hyt was unto me a gratius mene (336-340).

The gap between the sexes remains. The men are ignorant of the full of the degraded convents; Katerine’s knowledge allows her the means to find a way between the perfect—but impossible?—way and the worldly existence that her father has decreed for her. The innocence her father found so pleasing has been replaced. What she has experienced is real, not only because it is true, but also because it is essentially not a dream. Katherine’s "dream" is a figure for her worldly experience. Her initial purity is born of inexperience; she leaves this maturation process wiser in the world, at which point the poem ceases to be a complaint and becomes an exhortation from Katherine on how women should live in the world, complete with historical examples.

By the end of her narrative, she is transformed into a different type of speaker, one who espouses practical social morality in the form of advice on decent clothing and deportment as opposed to the absolute perfection of cloistered virtue, and she is no longer a complainant. It has taken a transformation of the dream-vision motif to accomplish this; the political complaint motif nested within the dream invests it with the focus on mundane moral language that allows for actual moral work. The despair of the lament, the failure of morality it unveils, turns the vision from the personal and
the ideal—the mode of complaint, and of the dream-vision—to the social and the practical. The language is quite everyday, the morality figured in worldly images:

A fayre garlond of yve grene
Whyche hangeth at a taverne dore,
Hyt ys a false token as I wene,
But yf there be wyne gode and sewer
Ryght so but ye your vyces forbere,
And let alle lewde custom be broken,
So God me spede, I yow ensewer,
Ellys yowre habyte ys no trew token (358-365).

The nuns are told to look to the taverns for a moral example. More than lewd custom is broken with this language; Katerine’s experience is expanding to include more than her dream has ostensibly revealed, and she is deliberately turning the usual function of taverns in moral discourse inside-out. The dream is being overfulfilled before our eyes. She has fully become the persona behind her earlier self; worldly-wise and capable of satiric jabs like this one and those at the beginning of the poem. She has outgrown the dumbfounded complainant she once was. It is also plain that her new governance is morally robust, more engaged than previously; she takes upon herself to educate the nuns and all women, speaking where her father could not. She has become the narrator, providing an imaginary model for us through our identification with that worldly-wise persona. This identification matures into a realization of our own need to define a moral code within the world, and, incidentally, to reform the convents.

Not incidentally, she has broken free of the strictures placed upon her by her father. His pleasure at her previous innocence and devotion involved a simplification of her personality that robbed her of purpose and muted them both. As in "Song of the Husbandman," the perfect expression of the ideal is portrayed as a silence; neither Katerine’s desire nor her father’s forbidding of it contribute to any further speech. The common evaluation of the convents is similarly one-sided, leaving no room, as her experience teaches her, for the good that also happens there. For most, they are either
a "perfyt way" or irredeemably corrupt; for Katerine, an object of reform that stand as a metaphor for all women’s self-governance. By addressing these inexperienced, impractical moralists, Katerine creates a voice that breaks this silence and allows for practical participation of women in their own public rehabilitation through the fashioning of new public personae.

"Why I Can’t Be a Nun" is a dream-vision without a real dream; in this respect, it is a more revolutionary treatment of the convention than Chaucer’s House of Fame. Katerine is both dreamer and complainant, at first, and grows out of both roles; the critical aspect of the political complaint elements, specifically its theme that moral idealism is worldly weakness, transforms the dream-vision from a supernatural revelation to a figure for worldly experience, and makes morality a process of negotiation between ideals and life.

Debate is another rhetorical motif that is sometimes recast in the political complaint format in order to shift the moral paradigm. Popular in medieval poetry, debate is featured in such masterful poems as The Owl and the Nightingale and The Parliament of the Three Ages. The former is interesting because the birds’ contest has no resolution, a not uncommon formal variation in medieval debate poetry; such an ending begs the question of who has won the debate and thereby heightens the

62 This aspect of debate poetry is gone into most thoroughly in the work of Thomas L. Reed, Jr., culminating in Middle English Debate Poetry and the Aesthetics of Irresolution (1990). Reed’s approach is to see in these poems a dichotomy between the experiential agony of the poem’s "serious" dialectic and the recreational relief from same offered by its playful—with reference to the Bahktinian "carnivalesque"—refusal to resolve them. While this relationship takes place in time, and therefore is not a static dichotomy, nevertheless in Reed’s criticism it is spatially mapped out—as in the list of oppositions he offers early on (39)—and can therefore be said to be at heart a timeless psychological truism. Unlike Reed, I fail to find "benign good humor" in Wynner and Wastoure, as the next chapter shall demonstrate; either Reed’s dichotomy is pigeonholing some of his readings or I am a humorless drudge—probably both. His work on the medieval institutions that fostered debate and the history of literary representation of debate is very useful, bringing together many obscure strands of research.
The audience's awareness of the issues involved, which is quite a departure from the inevitable progress of such debate poems as "Jesus and the Masters of the Laws of the Jews." Political complaint-debates also depart from the expected, but they bypass the issues in order to focus on the rhetoric of the debate itself. This is accomplished by undermining the debate's premises, which provide the authority for its exercise. The audience cannot decide who has won or even what the debate is about; in political complaint-debates, the issue is false, the debate an exercise in language that reveals a lack of relevant issues between the combatants.

One fairly well-known example of such a "debate" is the prose-verse *diptych* formed of two texts, "Jack Upland" and "Friar Daw's Reply." "Jack Upland," a Wycliffite or Lollard prose attack on friars in the voice of a simple upcountry man, was written as many as thirty years before the alliterative "Friar Daw's Reply." "Jack Upland" was answered in prose, apparently quite seriously, in William Woodford's *Responsiones ad Quaestiones LXV* (Bodl. MS 703, fols. 41-75); "Friar Daw's Reply", which likely postdates Woodford's tract, pretends to be a similar point-by-point answer to peasant Jack's accusations, but with results that tend to qualify the entire debate.

"Jack Upland" begins as a complaint, noting that in an ideal society the lords, prelates, and commons are analogous to the power of the Father, wisdom of the Son, and enduring good will of the Holy Ghost, respectively. Antichrist, however, has overturned this right order, and the vices have displaced the virtues; the clergy are

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63 James Dean's printing of the two works, pp.115-203 of *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, is fully annotated (though without textual criticism) and most recent. Some of his comments on "Friar Daw's Reply" anticipate this analysis. It is actually a *triptich* if the poem "Upland's Rejoinder" is included; these lines are found in the margins of a "Daw" manuscript.

64 The vices replacing or conquering the virtues is a common theme in complaint poetry, descending from the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius. Joseph Keller proposes that it is a controlling theme in shorter complaints.
involved in public office and are selling the sacraments, the lords are fighting for more power than they can wield, and the commons are becoming "idle men of craft and marchauntis professid to falsness." Despite the persona of the simple farmer that it assumes, and the simple language it uses, it quickly becomes plain that "Jack Upland" is not going to play at despair; Jack is confident and his complaint is a mere prelude to reform. His complaint is both a glance back at the conditions that prompted his political attitude and a reference point for the change in the image of the simple peasant that "Jack Upland" enacts. There is no room for fictional losers in an ongoing revolutionary social program; the nudge toward ethical reevaluation that political complaint encourages is unnecessary for a Lollard, who intends to assert a more radical program.

This becomes plain as the complaint is quickly abandoned for the technicalities of antifraternal argument. The majority of "Jack Upland" follows this complaint with a series of contentious questions, directed by the complainant at the most heinous members of Antichrist's army--the friars. The addressee of this grilling does not answer, and, considering the questions, it is no wonder:

Frer, whi preche ye fais fab lis of freris and feined miraclys, and leven the Gospel that Crist bade preche and is moost holsum lore to bodi and to soule, and so also oure bileve bi whiche oonli we moste be save? (188-190).

The accusations are broad and unconnected with any specific instance of wrongdoing. The series ends with a challenge to the friar(s) to write an answer. Since the questions provide their own answers, the intent is not to invite debate, but rather to crow over the thoroughly unanswerable beating the friars have taken:

...geve Jacke an answere, and whanne ye asoilen that I have seide sadli in truthe, I schal asoile thee of thin ordre and save thee to hevene (332-334).

"Friar Daw's Reply" takes up this bad faith offer, and the result is cynical indeed. Taken together with the other half of the diptych, the result of this pairing is clear in
the titles; "Jack" is paired with "Daw," together creating a "jackdaw" whose chattering mimicry neither comprehends nor advances the issue.65

"Friar Daw's Reply" opens, like "Jack Upland", as another political complaint on the times; in that respect, the reply cannot be distinguished from the challenge. The complaint is generic, like Jack's, and purposefully so.

Who shal graunten to myn eyen a strong streme of teres
To wailen and to wypyn the sorwyng of synne?
For charite is chasid and flemed out of londe,
And every state stakerth, unstable in him-silfe (1-4).

Both sides of an issue, it demonstrates, can use this rhetoric.66 Whatever side the audience may favor, it is clear at this point that at least one side is merely posturing, and that bewailing the evils of the world is a backdrop against which any political position may be advanced. It also becomes apparent that the poem's focus is not only on the issues, but also and primarily on the way in which these issues are communicated. By placing two competing complaints against one another, the rhetorical criticism of each is brought to bear upon the other, creating a null argument wholly concerned with argument itself.

It is not long before the poem goes on the attack. Upland is accused of being "lewed," mislead in his ignorance into condemning the friars. Therefore, no learned friar will answer Jack, but rather one Friar Daw Topias, "lewed as a leke." A standard-seeming complainant, weak with words, thus takes the stage, but like Upland he is ill-suited to the role; he is rather amoral, a relativist in practice, and more con-

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65 James Dean has also noticed this. See his Six Ecclesiastical Satires (145-146) for another discussion of "Jack Upland" and "Friar Daw's Reply" as deliberately poor debate. Dean is willing to consider "Friar Daw's Reply" as a sincere answer to "Jack Upland" (146-147).

66 This particular quotation from Jeremiah (9:1) was used in other promendicant literature and may have been a favorite, connoting by itself the political leanings of the following text (see Szittyia 197).
cerned with the technicalities of the dispute than the values driving it. Like Upland, therefore, he is a parody of the familiar complainant-figure, part of a rhetorical effort that "looks through" the rhetoric of complaint. Rather than allowing the audience to react to the complainant's pathetic failure, "Friar Daw's Reply" forestalls it, using the complaint formula as a marker of the insincerity on both sides of the political issue. Daw is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the Lollard Jack's pretense to moral simplicity.

Daw's absurd voice speaks from this point forward, casting a shadow of incompetence and indignity over the debate. The poem's focus is on the rhetoric of the attack and specifically on Daw's blundering; the short-term victory over Jack, underlining his country ignorance, is won at the cost of degrading the issues and, in the person of Daw, degrading the friars themselves. It is one thing to say that "a fool could answer your accusations," but it is another to actually let a fool speak for you.

It is not that Daw's arguments are completely ineffective. He manages to score several points against Upland and the Wycliffites, but these are usually at the fraternal orders' cost as well. Some of Daw's arguments are obviously double-edged. In reply to Upland's accusation that the friars build great houses for themselves, and none for the poor, Daw upbraids Jack for not doing the same, leaving the accusation hanging over them both, though strictly speaking upcountry Jack is not in a position to build anything. Accused of being covetous, Daw weakly points out that the lords are even more so. The friar answers Jack's insidious questioning about which fraternal order is superior by claiming that all are really *one* order, but later on is quick to deflect blame toward the Carmelites over the practice of burying men in monk's robes. He then gives very questionable scriptural precedent for the practice, implicating himself after all.

Other arguments are simply absurd. Upland has complained that there are too many friars being made, a traditional attack that reflects the secular clergy's unease
about the Church’s lack of control over the fraternal orders. Jack claims that Twelve Apostles are enough for the whole world, just as four fingers and a thumb are enough for a hand. Daw’s reply is essentially a silly equivocation on "maad":

Jacke, thou weenest thou wynne lond but thou concludist thiself
Thous seist that God alle thingis hath maad in mesure, weighte, and noumbre,
And that every frere is sum thing thou maist not deny;
And thou seist freris ben maad ayens Goddis wille—
Than hath God maad sum thing that he wolde not make,
And so His sovereyne goodnesse is contrarious to Himselfe (817-822).

The third line, especially, invites the friar’s opponents to derisive laughter and free substitutions for "sum thing." Daw goes on to beg the question--and contradicts his own line of reasoning--by pointing out that there are too many priests as well. By the time he finally responds to the Wycliffite argument with a very nice turn on Jack’s simile of the fingers, he has already made a fool of himself and a travesty of the issue.

Friar Daw’s most effective attacks have nothing to do with theology at all; instead, in an exercise of rhetorical criticism, they dissect the character of Jack Upland, and the morally authoritative image of the "holy peasant" upon which this character is built. Daw tells Jack to grease his sheep under the tail (286), and chides him for his Wycliffite uniform of peasant grey (382), breaking down the spiritual image of the peasant with a realistic one and portraying Jack as a Wycliffite poseur who simply

67See Szittyia (222-223) for comment on the heritage of this accusation.

68Behind this arguing lies a long-standing and complex issue involving competing claims between the secular clergy and the friars to the inheritance of the Apostolic mission (See Szyttia, 47 and passim). Jack, in effect, allows the friars their claim to be modern apostles, then demands that they reduce their number to conform with the original twelve. The number of friars in England at the time "Jack Upland" was written was actually at a noticeable low, and the accusation may well have seemed ridiculous; however, following Archbishop FitzRalph’s equation of "numberlessness" with the friar’s lack of trackable livings, it could be said to make some sense within the technical tradition of the dispute. Daw, as usual, settles for the stalemate of common guilt.
wants what the friars already have. "Lewed" Daw is himself a parody of Upland’s simple, unlettered morality, and serves to dissect and undermine the rhetorical strategy of "Jack Upland" by showing it to be a pose. This critical stance is obvious when we compare "Friar Daw’s Reply" to "The Friar’s Answer" (Robbins 166-168), a Lollard poem that also damns the friars through their own complaining mouths:

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Allas! what schul we freris do,  
    Now lewed men kun holy writ?
Alle abowte wherre I go    
    Pei aposen me of it.

When I come into a schope
    for to say "in principio,"
Pei bidine me, "goo forj, lewed poppe!"
    & worche and & win my siluer so!

Yf y sae hit longo not
    ffor prestis to worche where þei go,
Pei leggen for hem holi writ
    And sein þat seint polle did soo.

Pus oure desseytis bene aspieede
    In þis maner & mani moo;
fewe men bedden vs abyde
    but hey fast þat we were goo.

If it goo forþe in þis maner,
    It wolde done vs muche gyle;
Men schul fynde vneþe a frer
    In englonde wiþin a whille (1-4, 13-20, 29-36).
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Plainly, this poem is in the spirit of "Jack Upland;" it works as a sort of lesson in how to attack friars when they beg at a shop, and it optimistically foresees a time when the friars will be driven out. The friar in this poem is not a fool, because the rally-the-troops optimism of the poem relies upon his sober evaluation of the effectiveness of the Wycliffite literacy campaign. "Friar Daw’s Reply," on the other hand, effectively speaks past this "Jack Upland"-ish rhetoric and encourages a cynical view of the public

69 The manuscript carries the marginal title "The fryers Complaynt" in a later hand (Robbins, 166, n.)
debate that spawned such texts; it underlines the empty rhetoric and bluster that prevents the problem's resolution. Daw’s reliance on *tu quoque*, with the result that both sides look like hypocrites, is evidence of this purpose. Furthermore, the poem critiques debate as a form of political problem-solving; the complaint element that serves as an insincere, formalistic precis in both poems reveals how technicalities had fossilized both side's thinking about the issues, rendering debate not only useless but harmful and exhausting. The cynicism of this debate demonstrates that debate itself is easily manipulated for any purpose, because debate does not transcend its initial terms.

In the case of this fraternal controversy, such cynicism was certainly well-founded. Archbishop FitzRalph’s part in the propaganda campaign that came to a head in 1357, his *Libellus*--a list of antifraternal accusations so broad as to be, in the words of his opponents, "nimis generalis obscurus et vagus incertus et indeterminatus" (Sztitya 130)--enjoyed wide circulation and influenced Wycliffite writings. It is therefore no wonder to see that "Jack Upland" takes a similarly vague approach and makes similar accusations. However, FitzRalph’s campaign ended in no decision, his case against the friars before the Avignon consistory unresolved. Such stalemate had characterized the fraternal controversy since its beginnings in the mid-thirteenth century. By the time of "Friar Daw’s Reply," the antifraternal issue was championed by the broadly anticlerical Lollards, whose extremism may have made either side of the debate unsavory to the politically careful citizen.

All the principal actors may have had reason to be unofficially weary of the issues. For the friars, especially, the entire struggle must have been frustrating; again and again, their attempts to enter into the war of words were stymied by their inability
to disseminate a point-of-view. FitzRalph’s *Libellus* was ubiquitous; neither theirs against him nor the works of apologists like Woodford had such success. Their campaign consisted of defensive documents that lacked any effective public appeal; we might imagine some cynicism to have crept into their outlook toward written responses to propaganda.

To the antifraternal forces, the friars must have seemed—after a hundred years and more of conflict—an immovable object, impervious to the most persuasive arguments, whether theological or pragmatic. We can imagine the effect of this situation on an ordinary cleric concerned with the age-old incursions of the friars, but wary of looking a Lollard by joining into the fray; he sees a more dangerous enemy aping some of his own opinions about the friars, and worse, turning some of these same arguments upon his own kind. He can hardly lash out at one without having to turn on the other, simultaneously.

Either case—the frustrated friar or the nervous priest—might make possible a poetical double-invective like "Friar Daw's Reply." So might other possible social actors; the *Canterbury Tales*’ description of its Friar Huberd shows that a mid-level secular bureaucrat like Chaucer was familiar with the more dramatic of the antifrateral themes, and also willing to paint their enemies—in the person of the Summoner—in unflattering colors; we cannot absolutely eliminate an "outsider" like Chaucer for author, either. It may be that the struggle itself had become the biggest enemy of all; its tired arguments, reiterated because no side could afford to drop the issue, and overshadowed by the Lollard controversies, may finally have spawned a Cold War-like cynicism in both sides and in the general populace.

70 We might compare this situation with the standard political complaint rhetoric that attributed golden tongues to the friars; on the large scale, this was hardly the case.
Such historical speculation is beyond the scope of this study, nor is it likely to find any textual evidence to support it beyond the occasional report of violence from the frustrated combatants; malaise does not inspire history-writing. Nevertheless, the critical aspect of the political complaint is clear in "Friar Daw's Reply," which, unlike "Song on the Times," does not seem designed to inspire a revivification of tired rhetoric so much as a desire to work free of it.

We have moved from the study of voices within rhetorical structure to that of rhetorical function within a societal structure; the implication of this movement is that society itself engages in constant evaluation of its own narratives and discourses. The poems in this chapter are alike in their critical function, but the ideological function of the criticism itself is dependant on circumstances and cannot be said to encourage any particular direction of change or to have any permanent stance versus the historical circumstances in which it reveals itself. "Merlin's Prophecy" dissolves history through an ahistorical idealism; "Friar Daw's Reply" displays the exhaustion of persons quite knowingly caught in the tyrannical grasp of historical obligations that constitute a considerable portion of their identities. "Song on the Times" and "Why I Can't Be a Nun" are attempts to refigure the ideological rhetoric of the time to allow for other voices—"Song on the Times" through stealthy co-option of language current in the politics of the time, and "Why I Can't Be a Nun" through critiquing a blindness in the current moral rhetoric and by providing an exemplary alternative.

If we find some of these positions preferable to others, we are demonstrating that even poems as old as these can elicit an ideological response, can still "inter-

71 There are some recorded statements of regret at the failure of the monks, friars, and secular clergy to come together against the Lollards because of their old feuds; however, this alliance against the heretical sect was in fact quite effective, and such comments will need further study to rise to the level of historical evidence.
pellate" us, or--more preferably to me--can still present an intelligible and valid set of possible subject-positions that we are free to try out as ideology itself shifts in the face of changing material circumstances. We may consider the way, for example, that "Why I Can't Be a Nun" proposes moral reform as a vehicle for freedom from the tyranny, not only of sin, but of absolutism, its language, and its attendant mundane disappointments. We may be intrigued at the parodic niceties that "Merlin's Prophecy" and "Song on the Times" use to break down specific rhetorical forms of moral-political language in order to revive the very ideals that these forms once helped to support. All these poems show a need for moral flexibility within an ideology of inflexible moral standards, through a clever device of bewailing the world's failure to live up to these standards in the voice of an imperfect speaker. No poem demonstrates this urge to reform ideological expression more clearly than "Friar Daw's Reply."

The standards are altered, because the world cannot be turned back any more than Merlin can return to say "I told you so." At the material level, history makes a necessity of the present. If there is a common theme to these various "political complaints," it is that each poem advocates some kind of engagement with the world, and so instigates a critical process by which moral ideals may be reacquainted with a world always overfulfilling their predicates. The next chapter will show a very sophisticated piece of moral criticism called Wynnere and Wastoure presenting a government's economic policy and its figuration in moral rhetoric, with an eye to the identities--the ways of engagement--this figuration allows its subjects.
CHAPTER 3
COMPLAINT AS PROLOGUE: WINNER AND WASTER

"Friar Daw's Reply" shows that the political complaint could attach the urgency of salvation history even to a sarcasm. In that poem complaint acts simply as a prelude to a rhetorical effort at defending hypocrisy. The complaint is a hypocritical pose. The complainant persona is quickly discarded for another, truer one; however, when this is done any effort at reforming the reader's moral landscape is also left behind. In contrast, the complainant of the seriously didactic "Why I Can't Be a Nun" is transcended, used to help define a more successful moral compass. This process stands as a model for how political complaint poetry was acted upon by its audience; its moral critique prompts the audience to redefine its morality in accordance with its actual circumstances. In both poems the complaining persona is shown to be a transitional stage; it is a very confining identity that must be escaped if there is to be any progress. I have proposed that translation is a good analogy for how this escape or transcendence is accomplished; the complaint problematizes the moral terms--for example the idea of what "perfection" in womanly behavior means--and thus allows these terms to find new significance within the audience's experience.

While many complaints do not offer any alternatives to the complainant's point-of-view, we have seen that some, as for example "Song of the Husbandman," direct the audience to a certain translation. "Why I Can't Be a Nun" offers three optional definitions of the perfect way, if you count the father's implied advocacy of secular insularity along with the religious insularity offered by the convents and the worldly decorum that Katerine eventually chooses. Political complaint can thus be used to sort
between the various subjectivities that life offers by subjecting their terms to its translating effect; one's political and ideological commitments are thus made malleable, and can be adjusted to circumstances. This can come very close to what we would call "discourse analysis," since the language by which a subjectivity is self-described can be interrogated by the complaint.

*Winner and Waster* is an example of such a poem. It is an alliterative political poem of the middle-to-late fourteenth century which has excited only occasional attention from historians, and is not a popular choice for the syllabi of literature classes. However, it has given rise to many politically committed interpretations from its modern readers, and this implies that it tends to prompt them, to lend itself to their languages. While few of these readings seem implausible, it is difficult to see how *Winner and Waster* could do all that has been attributed to it in its own time. This confusion is not formal or linguistic, despite the many genres interwoven within the poem and its occasional unique diction. Rather, it is one of historical reference; various bits of the poem have been considered as discrete metaphors for historical situations occurring during the years 1353-1370, the decades during which some portions of the poem may have been composed. The narrative of English history from 1353 to 1370 has thus repeatedly intersected with that of the poem in a way that has, according to the most recent scholarship, isolated the poem's formal aspects from its historical aspects.

Stephanie Trigg, in her review of critical treatment of this poem, has found it so divided in at least one respect:

> As far as *Wynnere and Wastoure* is concerned, readings governed by this desire for a coherent literary history [of the "alliterative revival"] or, indeed, to recuperate the poem for a particular critical method are more frequent than detailed readings of the poem itself (*Wynnere and Wastoure*, xlvi).
She can clearly differentiate between the literary and literary-historical work on Winner and Waster:

From this survey of representative criticism it is clear that the poem's literary history can be divided fairly evenly into two movements: an old style historicism concerned to determine the political, intellectual and stylistic contexts of the poem, and a formalist criticism that pays little heed to the poem's undoubted interest in the disparity between ethical theory and economic practice (xlvi).

These divisions are useful because they can help us to order the interplay of needs that has produced the various readings, but it will become clear both that Professor Trigg's dichotomies cannot hold for long and that her call for a detailed reading is a good start to remedying the confusion. Close attention to the product of both schools of interpretation reveals that the historical movement's readings are based on very questionable formal assumptions and the formal readings depend upon very restricted historical understandings. The result is that the introduction of any new historical context corrodes the poem's formal coherence, while formalist readings have become sidetracked into describing the structure of the various historical contexts rather than that of the poem. A reading that avoids these problems may well come to different conclusions about what ethical theory and economic practice are at stake in Winner and Waster.

Historical debate has mostly centered on the date of composition. Israel Gollancz was the first modern editor to interpret the only extant version of the poem, now cataloged as part of British Library Additional MS 31042. Robert Thornton, the

72 Pages xlii-xlvi of the introduction to her edition of the poem.

73 This manuscript, unfortunately mutilated and re-bound twice and so no longer in its original order or of its original length, includes many devotional and ethical works, including a poem beginning "Waste makes a kyngdome in nede" (known in this manuscript as "A louely Song of wysdome" and elsewhere as "The Proverbes of Salomone") and poems in Lydgate's style. The Parlement of the Thre Ages is also included, just before Wynnerere and Wastoure. Together these last comprise a quire that, by virtue of being extremely fragmented, cannot be reliably placed in any "reconstruction" of the original manuscript--about the only thing sure is that these two poems were
transcriber, copied the manuscript sometime between 1420 and 1468, the date of his death, so our dating of the poem is based entirely on internal historical references. As the only manuscript copy is apparently at least third-generation,\(^4\) it is difficult to date it on linguistic evidence.

Gollancz, however, precisely dated the poem, based on internal references that have since been repeatedly questioned, to the winter of 1352-3, and he edited the text in order to support this interpretation.\(^5\) It is, in his view, a topical satire of Edward III, his son and his policies during that winter; this conclusion has informed the most important work on the poem since Gollancz's time.\(^6\) The evidence is remarkably thin. For example, while there is no reasonable doubt that the poem refers to a contemporary in the same gathering. (For the latest authoritative discussion, incorporating earlier work, see Thompson, 33.)

\(^4\) Trigg, *Winner and Waster*, xix. Trigg's 1990 edition for the Early English Text Society is the basis for this study, supplanting Gollancz's edition of 1920. However, Warren Ginsberg's edition of 1992 provides a few alternate readings of the manuscript (39), indicating that even at the level of textual criticism there is still meaningful debate; as I will note later, at least one of Trigg's emendations is indicative of a desire to "correct" Gollancz's politics, a motive that can get in the way of making sense. See "Israel Gollancz's *Wynnere and Wastoure*: Political Satire or Editorial Politics?" for her insightful critique of his edition and, in effect, the motivation behind her own.

\(^5\) *A Good Short Debate Between Winner and Waster*, 3. The same year as Gollancz's edition came out, J.R. Hulbert was already questioning his conclusions, offering 1366 as a possible *terminus ad quem*. W. B. McColly's dissertation of 1953 not only places the poem's composition after 1353, but provides, following the lead of a short note by Jesse May Anderson ("A Note on the Date of *Winnere and Wastoure*"), a more local historical referent—the Chesire uprising of 1353—to act as compositional motivation. Elizabeth Salter has analyzed the weaknesses of Gollancz's historical analysis ("Timeliness") and David Lawton has placed its writing anterior to *Piers Plowman* ("Literary History and Scholarly Fancy"), reversing the usual assumption.

\(^6\) J. M. Steadman, "The Date of *Wynnere and Wastoure,*" also writes on the date of the poem, but does not substantially disagree with Gollancz. Very important work by Gardiner Stillwell and Thomas Bestul—both to be considered later in this chapter—assumes Gollancz to be generally correct, as indeed does Elizabeth Salter ("Timeliness"), despite her criticisms of many of his identifications.
of Edward III, Justice William Shareshull (lines 317-18), this reference does not fix a date for the poem. Animosity toward Shareshull lasted until his death, and that toward his legislation longer; even if we take the reference to him literally, and not as a figure for the policies he helped enact or the times he prospered in, we can only limit the terminus ad quem to 1370.77

The common thread in the scholarly debate about this poem's date is the assumption of single authorship, an assumption that historians and literary scholars can make but cannot substantiate about Winner and Waster. Indeed, the premises underlying this dating for an otherwise undocumented and anonymous poem of uncertain provenance are entirely ahistorical; they are based on ideas of formal wholeness that are imagined to govern all poetic composition, but that the fragmentary nature of the other entries in this very manuscript belie, at least as far as Thornton and his contemporaries go.78 Therefore it is impossible to decide, as is the universal

77 Shareshull was not only notorious for helping draft the Statute of Laborers of 1351 and the Treasons Statute of the following year, but also for his longevity, to the point that there were whisperings of witchcraft. His name may well have gathered some force of its own, far outliving the man; the problems his laws addressed, and those they caused, most certainly did. Whatever the case, the date of 1370 provides a terminus ad quem only for one line of one of Waster's several speeches.78 Formal shape is important to medieval writers at some point, and you need only look at the same Thornton manuscript's Cursor Mundi for an example both of the "openness" of the medieval formal sense and of a certain rationale governing medieval "editing." The section of this poem dealing with Christ's passion was unpopular, and often substitutions were made; Thornton's copy substitutes a fragment of the Northern Passion. However, between a colophon announcing the beginning of this new "boke" and the Passion lies a short lyric, also sometimes interpolated into the Cursor Mundi, "The Discourse between Christ and Man." In other copies, and logically, the "The Discourse" follows after the Passion. Thornton, apparently having some blank leaves to fill in the manuscript section dedicated to the Cursor Mundi, looked ahead in his exemplar and, finding an interpolated poem of suitable length, inserted it. This practice would seem chaotic by our standards, yet a formal sense remains, to be found in the choice of a complete poem of the correct length, rather than a mere smattering of lines, and in another Thortonian colophon, following the explicit for the "Discourse," that explains that the Passion will follow after this short poem, in the next section--folio proximo--of the manuscript. Full details are available in Thompson, 49-55.
presumption among modern readers, that the poem as we now have it was written by one author at one time; even if we assume that Thornton merely copied the poem, and did not purposefully amend or augment it, the possible dates of multiple authorship stretch from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth century. It may well be impossible to relate any coherence or order the poem may have to a specific set of parallel historical circumstances.

To interpret *Winner and Waster* with any defined historical focus, we are forced to abandon the single author ideal, and refocus on readerly motivations. Why, for instance, would Thornton care to copy a lengthy political poem—for his family’s use, according to all the evidence—whose satirical purpose had expended itself perhaps a hundred years earlier? He was not, if the manuscript is any testimony, an antiquarian, but a moralist. If *Winner and Waster* is a satire of a king, Richard II, Henry IV and Richard III also must be considered viable and simultaneous targets, whenever the poem’s first version was composed. If the poem is something else, or could be something else additionally if looked at a certain way, we might try to divine what Thornton and other known audiences may have seen in it. We might, indeed, look at Stephanie Trigg’s historical criticism of Gollancz’s edition to find what the poem had to say in the political conditions of 1920; since Trigg has shown that Gollancz was editing the poem in order to support his political enthusiasms, we have a modern example of *Winner and Waster* being adapted to its political times in the very text that attempts to fix it so exactly in history. Only a study that included the entire history of this poem’s recorded reception can justifiably reveal the aspects of it that might contribute to the history of the winter of 1352-53, if the poem is applicable to that relatively brief
period.\footnote{This would amount to another formalism, of course, this one a formalism of the structure of history; the idea that historical patterns of reception might be derived for a given poem in order to reveal relevant interpretive data for undocumented performances—that is, that the cultural conditions connected with a poem can be derived after the fact, using in part the poem itself—is difficult to maintain without a similarly transhistorical, thematized view of the historical period into which the poem is placed. A. Leigh DeNeef’s \textit{Traherne in Dialogue} attempts to avoid such formalism—to be found, according to DeNeef, even in the so-called “New Historicism”—by using ahistorical reading procedures to isolate and identify the pressures of narrative history on DeNeef’s reading (16). There are suprising practical resemblences between this position and that of the New Criticism, down even to DeNeef’s recommendation that the academy adopt an attitude of pluralism toward interpretation (276).}

The entire historical debate has been fundamentally about how to make a formal element of \textit{Winner and Waster} coherent within the context of single authorship. Dating has seemed so important because the heated debate between the two allegorical figures "Winner" and "Waster" cannot be precisely interpreted without some kind of limit on their possible referents. It is not that they are obscure; indeed, they are all too transparent, providing a wealth of incompatible referents. As different aspects of the historical narrative have been brought to bear on the allegory, its meaning has changed entirely.

Let us assume for the moment, following Gollancz, that the knights represent aspects of an English king’s policies. Do they simply show the king’s greed (Winner) and wastefulness (Waster) in a straightforward satire denoting the chaos of an exploitative government? Or, as Thomas Bestul (\textit{Satire and Allegory in Wynnere and Wastoure}) maintains, does the debate’s conduct indicate an implied Artistotelean order, using the debate between Avarice (Winner) and Prodigality (Waster) to recommend the unspoken mean of liberality? Does this Aristoteleanism further reflect, as David Starkey has demonstrated, the conflict between the Lord Chamberlain’s office (Waster) and that of the Lord Steward (Winner) as they represent the royal virtues of
magnificence and providence, which must be balanced to achieve the royally definitive mean of magnanimity? These interpretations, despite their evolutionary relationship, represent a complete interpretive turn-around; in the first and second case the king’s judgement, which concludes the poem, is evil and self-serving, while in the third it is a wise compromise, cleverly diffusing both evils—or both best intentions—for the common good.

Some readers have preferred to look to the rest of the population for allegorical referents, and the poem provides these, too, in bewildering abundance. As we will see, Winner identifies himself with the agriculturalists and merchants, and the poem encourages an identification of Waster with the English military men. However, Winner is potentially also the Pope, the lawyers, the friars, and perhaps several foreign trading partners. Waster is not simply the fighting men, but also the aristocracy that conducted the war with France and promoted "bastard feudalism" at home; additionally, he seems at once a petty knight, a gang leader, and a pimp. Yet the poem seems to delight in setting up all these possibilities only to strike them down within the rhetorical struggle of the debate. We will see that Winner seems determined to undermine Waster’s association with the aristocracy, stressing instead his less prestigious identification as a thief and gang leader. In the same vein, Waster quickly

80 No scholar has yet attempted an exegesis as to the meanings possible to the terms "winner" and "waster" in the late fourteenth century, as Peggy A. Knapp has for "thrift."

81 Stephen Medcalf points out that whatever the dispositions of Winner and Waster, they are not so much judged as transcended (28). This intuition is important, as it informs nearly every reading here considered, including my own, which puts forward the idea that the prologue provides the transcendant position to which the dialogue directs us.

82 Winner-as-Merchant was originally elaborated by Gardiner Stillwell, who points to Edward III’s dependence on merchants for war finance.
reduces Winner from Purse of the Nation to a single miserable miser. Eventually the exhausted knights themselves desire to be evaluated merely as vices, as if the burden of allegory was too much even for them.

Some modern readers, reacting to the indeterminacy of the allegory, and agreeing that nothing so clearly defined as a debate is going on in this poem, have sought a meaning—and created an historical context—implied by the failure of its allegorical terms. David V. Harrington, following John Gardner, has suggested that the poem is meant to spur the audience to make a new moral system that is more workable and realistic than that represented by the dichotomy of "Winner" and "Waster." The false dichotomy is proven wrong because it cannot be maintained in the narrative, so the reasoning goes. However, is the opposition in Winner and Waster meant to be a true representation of commonly used moral terms, as it would have to be if this effect were to work? If we pursue the lead of Bestul, Harrington, Gardner and Turville-Petre, we must conclude that "winner" and "waster" are words with established usage in the late fourteenth century. However, the poem does not allow any clear application of them; "winner," for instance, is usually a positive term—as it is in Piers Plowman—and therefore seems to exist in Winner and Waster as a deliberate negative variation on the usual meaning, rather than as a representation of common usage. Economic analyses based on such a transcendent analysis of the dichotomy

83 In Gardner's The Alliterative Morte Arthure, The Owl and the Nightengale and Five Other Middle English Poems and Harrington's "Indeterminacy in Winner and Waster and The Parliament of the Three Ages," respectively.

84 T. H. Bestul, Satire and Allegory in Winner and Waster. In "The Prologue of Wynneere and Wastoure," Turville-Petre takes the prologue quite at face value, binding it to the rest of the poem through a moralistic reading based on the combatants' lack of attention to the poor (27). His view that the complaint is an essential part of the poem is, of course, shared by this author.

85 Bestul can find no other direct use of "winner" as a pejorative term (18).
share similar difficulties. Lois Roney, following John Speirs, has proposed that the poem is designed to cause the audience to remodel their concept of international trade and transcend the false paradigm represented by "Winner" and "Waster." 86 We have no evidence, however, that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century economic discourse was this simple; Edward III, for example, was capable of very sophisticated monetary schemes, manipulating markets and the flow of money as adroitly as governmental power allowed. We cannot assume that these policies were simply the product of greed or prodigality, or that he just did whatever occurred to him, nor can we take it for granted that his subjects were unsophisticated on such matters. Quite the contrary, since their cooperation in his schemes was absolutely required. 87

This interpretive intractability has led recently to the view that the poet shows little control over his satiric terms and so allows the poem to dissipate into an implicit essay on the indeterminancy of its own allegory. Nicolas Jacobs and Stephanie Trigg have both concluded that the poet cannot sufficiently focus his allegory, confusing it with the personalities he has created to dramatize it; in other words, interpretive confusion over the allegory's historicity is laid at the door of the (singular) poet. 88

86 "Winner and Waster's 'Wise Words'" is a more elaborate and technical expansion of Speirs' economic take in Medieval English Poetry (277).

87 The most obvious example is the infamous Dordrecht bonds scheme of 1337, which traded wool for the right to ship duty-free or repayment from tax proceeds to be collected. While those who sought repayment were disappointed, the bond idea was not quite the disaster it is portrayed to be; wiser, long-term bond holders used the duty-free trade option to gain competitive advantage over other traders, so that by 1342 the disadvantaged merchants were complaining quite loudly about it (Waugh, 69).

88 Jacobs' article is very interesting, in that it proposes a very broad set of identifications for Waster and Winner, as representatives respectively of the older feudal and newer capitalistic societies. Such an identification requires logical consistency in its allegory, and Jacobs blames the poem when it fails on this score. Lois Roney's view of the poem as an economic treatise that emphasizes the circularity and circulation of wealth--a view that has cropped up repeatedly (see John Speirs)--has similar problems, requiring her to supply "missing" banners for Waster's army in order to round out an argumentative structure that, I will argue, isn't sincerely there. Trigg's opinion is stated in a more postmodern fashion, and is typified by the author as "deconstruc-
I think it unlikely that a poem so determinedly aware of its own rhetoric is the product of a confused poet. The opposition exploited in modern scholarly readings between *Winner and Waster*’s ethical and economic aspects has been misleading; in fact, they are not in opposition, nor can one claim precedence over the other. Modern criticism has made its most sustained progress with the moral and the political aspects of the poem as explored in the work of Gollancz, Bestul, and Starkey. This suggests, as I will show, that *Winner and Waster* is actually most concerned with the ethics of a politics that proposes that the discourses of public morality and economics are exclusive.

To make this interpretation, I shall follow Trigg’s advice and perform a detailed reading of the poem, starting with the political complaint "prologue" and following its effect from this initial position on the rest of the poem. From the very beginning, the poem encourages us to stand apart from its rhetorical drama and to inquire about the speaker and the speaker’s point-of-view; the political complaint "prologue" of the poem, specifically the structure of voices it introduces, is fundamental to understanding how the poem exploits its chaotic allegory of economic and moral identities. For while the voices of this poem multiply, and even threaten to destroy its narrative order, they do so for critical purposes that the complaint prologue delineates.

89 The poem’s rhetorical reflexivity has been read humorously. Jerry D. James finds the poem parodic of those conventions that might tend to lend dignity to the objects of its satire. The spirit of the poem, for James, is farcical, aligned with Wastoure’s carnivalesque outlook; we might compare this with David Harrington’s idea that such humorous chaos leads to a more sober assessment of the issues ("Indeterminacy").
The poem contains these voices within generic boundaries, primarily through the dramatic and critical framework introduced by the complaint prologue. *Winner and Waster* mixes genres effortlessly and meaningfully, maintaining the interpretive implications of each one—complaint, prophecy, dream-vision, "allegorical romance," debate—as the next is taken up. Each type frames and qualifies the next, and the poem reminds us of this narrative framework often enough for us to take the idea of narrative frame as a conscious part of the experience. The result is that the political issues of authority and viewpoint should concern our readings, and not only the allegorical reach of the poem out to its historical references.

Indeed, I will maintain that ideas of viewpoint and authority allow the poem to make its most important connection with its historical surroundings. By ascribing authority over the debate portion of the poem— as adjudicator, interpreter and creator— to its fictional king, the poem also locates its satirical target, implicitly claiming, I maintain, that the interpretive and creative functions of the poem-king are analogous to the political interpretations and political creations of any actual king. A king's interpretation of his subjects is portrayed as the source of their public identities, moral and economic; these identities serve to limit their interpretations of each other and themselves. *Winner and Waster*, in other words, describes the function of a fictional ideological discourse— in this case, a moral critique of economic practice— in terms of the medieval hierarchy. The king is portrayed as the only man who is aware of this power; all others are subject to it and reduced by it, however well they exploit it for themselves. In fact, this parallel between fictional and social structures is so powerful

90 "Allegorical romance" as a generic descriptor appears in Morton W. Bloomfield's *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (14). While the generic premise of this book is generally not accepted by critics, Bloomfield's terminology remains in use.
that the poem-king's voice and desires come to contest the interpretive place that the 
complainant commands, the former celebrating and the latter condemning the king's 
cynical manipulation of language and its divisive effect on his subjects.

Like *Piers Plowman*, *Winner and Waster* addresses the ethical problems of the 
mid-fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, especially those problems connected with 
the added wealth that increased international trade was bringing to the nation. Unlike 
Langland's poem, however, it remains more focused on the social issues and does not 
seek to resolve them within the psychology of spirituality, individual or communal.91 *Winner and Waster* claims instead the ability to identify who should settle them, and to 
propose a reason why they have not been so adjudicated.

I believe this purpose to be consistent with the complaint portion of the poem. 
Ultimately, *Winner and Waster* promotes the idea that the king must confer more with 
his subjects, and direct the nation's moral discourse accordingly, through just the kind 
of worldly engagement that we have seen the other poems promote. I consider the 
political conservatism of this interpretation to be appropriate to a historical period in 
which a bloody quasi-revolution was staged simply to get a king's attention. 
Furthermore, in ascribing this responsibility to the king, the poem places an exemplary 
burden on the royal person as well as requiring that royal power become subject to the 
multiple desires and needs of the nation. In this respect it is an ambitious political 
poem, verging on a poem of advice.

91 Questions about a relationship between *Winner and Waster* and *Piers Plow­
man* have come up in studies of the so-called "alliterative revival." Any reader of the 
former will note its relatively obscure vocabulary and intense alliteration, against which 
*Piers Plowman* assumes the role of a more urbane and natural alternative (John A. Bur­
row, "Audience"). *Winner and Waster* is thus usually assumed to precede Langland's 
poem. However, their positions may well be reversed, and despite some similarities 
these poems have little in common.
It is this idealistic sense of royalty's responsibility to the people—a sense common to the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and peculiar also to Gollancz's modern politics—that has directed both the medieval and modern audiences of Winner and Waster. I propose that this principle of government ethics encouraged Thornton to include this poem in his manuscript and also prompted Gollancz's reading.

Building the Complainant—Preparing to Evaluate

The "prologue" initiates a critical attitude in the audience through a dramatic presentation of the complainant’s failure to establish the personæ of prophet and of minstrel. Scrutiny is thus brought to bear on the complainant's implied claim to represent the viewpoint of the western rurality and on his last persona, the dreamer who narrates much of the rest of the poem. We are thus prepared to be critical of all the poem's actors.

The first thirty lines of Winner and Waster are a complaint against the times. Critical attention to these lines, even by readers very sensitive to the poem's other voices, reflects the fate of the political complaint poem in today's criticism generally; these few lines are often portrayed as the prologue to the rest, setting a mood or defining the moral purpose of the poem, but otherwise separate to its main business. In this regard Bestul's comments are revealing:

In the prologue to Wynnere and Wastoure, the poet sets the tone of the work, stating explicitly certain themes that are left for the reader to find by inference in the rest of the poem (56).

92 Judith Davidoff's Beginning Well, a book on genre and narrative structure in medieval verse, deals with the complaint portion in the short-hand fashion typical of modern scholars confronted with Winner and Waster:

The poem begins with a prologue of thirty lines inveighing against social decay and especially against the inroads of poetasters. The poem proper opens with the poet-narrator's account that he wandered in the west... (63).
Bestul is right about the function of the prologue, but his use of "the poet" is more laden with meaning than it seems. In Bestul's version, the prologue creates the poet's voice, which accrues authority through its use of the motives present in the prologue, despite Bestul's recognition that this complaint voice is not necessarily the poet (Satire and Allegory 58). This reading casts aside both the complainant-fiction and the structural consequences of this passage for the rest of the poem. Consigned to the historical poet, who perforce remains always a cipher, the themes boil down to apocalyptic foreboding and an implied sense of moral/political criticism, neither of which seem necessary as prologue to the "rest of the poem" as Bestul reads it.

However, few poems rely more upon the political complaint motif, or make more focused use of its themes. The complaint-prologue is not only essential to framing and understanding the dream-vision that follows it, but also anticipates the conduct and even the result of the debate. We have seen the political complaint motif used initially, in "Jackl Upland" and "Friar Daw's Reply," to introduce a dramatic voice and so alert the audience to the importance of moral speaking in the story to follow. This heightened rhetorical awareness is exploited to dissect rhetorical forms; in "Friar Daw's Reply," this criticism is even applied to the moral credibility of the complaint itself. Winner and Waster features a virtuoso use of the motif for exciting such rhetorical awareness.

The complaint begins with a look back to Britain's mythic beginnings. Israel Gollancz, in the commentary to his edition of Winner and Waster, simply notes the similar passages from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Alliterative Morte
Arthure without comment, and other modern readers have been content to do the same. However, the effect of the Arthure passage--

Thus endis kyng Arthure as auctors alegges,
That was Ectores kynne, the kyng son of Troye,
And of sir Pryamous, the prync, prayisede in erthe;
Fro thethyn broghte the Bretons all his bolde eldyrs
Into Bretayn the brode, as þe Bruyte tells (918-922).93

--is quite different from Winner and Waster's:

Sythen that Bretayne was biggede and Bruyttus it aughte
Thurgh the takynge of Troye with tresone within
There hathe selcouthes bene sene in seere kynges tymes
Bot neuer so many as nowe by the nyne dele (1-4).

The Arthure passage establishes both its hero's lineage and its own textual lineage in an appeal to the authority of history that at once ends the narrative and justifies its inscription in the first place. In Winner and Waster's opening lines, the historical reference is a gesture that serves primarily to indicate that the present time is extraordinary. Similarly, the tone shift between the first three lines and the fourth, from the stately rhythm of myth to the half-oaths of the colloquial-sounding tag, discards the authority of the written histories like the Brut for a less authoritative sense of history—the vague nostalgia of the complaint.94

Winner and Waster seems to have more in common with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in which the connection with England's beginnings and its uncommon nature is a controlling theme:

Sijen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye,
þe borg brittened and brent to brondez and askez,
þe tulk ðat þe trammes of tresoun þer wrogt,
Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe

93 This is Valerie Krishna's 1976 edition.

94 Jerry James (244-45) notes this tone alteration and explains it as a joke on the part of the poet at the expense of the "grand style." Certainly the historical element is given short shrift.
And fer ouer þe French flod Felix Brutus
On mony bonkkes ful brodde Bretayn he settez,
wyth wynne;
Where werre, and wrake, and wonder,
Bi syþez hatz wont þer-inne
And oft boþe blysse and blunder
Ful skete hatz skyfted synne.

Ande quen þis Bretayn watz bigged bi þis burn rych,
Bolde bredden þer-inne. baret þat lofden,
In mony turned tyme tene þat wroþten;
Mo ferlyes on þis folde han fallen here oft
Þen in any ober þat I wot, syn þat ilk tyme (1-4, 13-24).95

Treachery, according to Sir Gawain, finally produces a Britain that reflects both the noble and the ignoble elements of the classical past. Wonders are the result of the mixture of evil and good to which Britain's heritage dooms it, in the manner of original sin; therefore, no other place has so many. We can see the whole of Sir Gawain taking shape in this historical introduction, which prepares the audience for the magical romance and the moral themes to follow. The speaking voice is dramatically set against this portentous build-up; "he" tells us all this merely to support his contention that Britain is most marvelous of all, and he merely contends that to justify his choice of an Arthurian tale that he heard in town once. However, the introduction of a speaker is a sign that what is to follow is moral speech and the audience, eager to enjoy as well as approve, is pleased by the speaker's insistence that he is simply telling a story.

The tone of Winner and Waster is grimmer than the more even-handed Sir Gawain, which admits to both bliss and blunder; in the former poem treachery creates only unhappy selcouthes, and there are no thematic portents to work against the speaker's dismissal of historical precedent. Winner and Waster differs also from Sir

95 This is from the Norman Davis edition of 1968.
Gawain in its brevity, but not in its use of a dramatic speaker. The poem builds its speaking voice with further opinion on the causes of this rash of contemporary marvels, and this voice becomes more and more that of a complainant who is not the charming speaker of Sir Gawain at all:

For nowe alle es witt and wyles that we with delyn,  
Wyse words and slee and icheon wryeth othere.  
Dare neuer no westren wy while this werlde lasteth  
Send his sone southewarde to see ne to here  
That he ne schall holden byhynde when he hore eldes (5-9).

This is the same distrust of wrangling words that we have seen in the other political complaints; "wise" is twisted into a synonym of "sly." Language is the source of the selcouthes, because it is the vehicle by which good men-of-the-soil, the familiar pastoral victims, are confused and seduced by the world; wise heads starve in the west while the younger generation wastes in London. The complainant is fully developed as a dramatic device at this point, with a moral issue to elucidate and an antagonism to the world's busy language that acts to hinder his speaking. The dramatic speaker of Sir Gawain pleases because his seemingly ingenuous shallowness encourages the audience to enjoy the romance and extract the moral theme simultaneously; he trusts "lei lettres," and so do we. The complainant of Winner and Waster, on the other hand, insists on the slipperiness of words as the world uses them, and so encourages a more critical attitude toward his own performance; the criterion of effective moral speech is applied, not assumed as it is in Sir Gawain.

This passage also introduces regional and class politics into the mix, joining them to the theme of slippery words. London's population continued to grow over the latter half of the century, mostly through immigration from the countryside. While the figure of the upright "westren wy" who fears to let his son go to London is certainly part of the "righteous rurality" cliché that we have seen exploited in other political complaint poems, this spatial organization of virtue also hints at a place from which the
poem's criticism is emitted and understood, a place where word-twisting does not occur and where such verbal connivance is exposed. The land west of London—the poem's main dialect is West Midlands—becomes the ground upon which plain-speaking is based and consequently the implied staging-ground for the poem's criticism of the government.

The outcome of this criticism is determined by the critical rhetoric of political complaint. The speaker's attitude to words warns the audience of obscurity and contentiousness to come, describing not only the debate to follow, but the complaint prologue as well, for like other complainants, this one will fail to overcome his own rhetorical shortcomings. For instance, as the speaker moves from his analysis of England's moral decay to an apocalyptic warning, "wyse" is used for the second time, overwriting the previous, cynical meaning.

Forthi sayde was a sawe of Salomon the wyse,  
It hyeghte harde uppon honde, hope I no no industrial.  
When wawes waxen schall wilde and walles bene doun  
And hares appon herthe-stones schall hurcle in hire fourme  
And eke boyes of blode with boste and with pryde  
Schall wedde ladyes in londe and lede hem at will,  
Thene dredfull domesdaye it draweth neghe aftir.  
Bot whoso sadly wül see and the sothe telle  
Say it newley wül neghe or es neghe here (10-18).

"Wyse" here means a good kind of wisdom, but it is less powerful for being a tag—"Solomon the Wise" is a common medieval redundancy. The "sawe" itself, found in Thomas of Ercledoun's prophecies and elsewhere, is also conventional, to the point that it had become the object of satire, and the attribution to Solomon is patently wrong; the prophetic segment resembles neither the scriptural books attributed to Solomon nor the medieval "Proverys of Salamone," a version of which appears in the

96See Wright, *Reliquiae Antiquae* 1: 84. The poem on this page is known by the line that burlesques Ercledoun—"The hare and the harthestone hurtuld to-geydur" (12).
same manuscript as Winner and Waster. "Solomon" is given the stage for a moment only to spout cliché and alliterative-colloquial tags—"hope I no nother"—before the speaker returns to insist that the end truly appears near to anyone who will soberly look for the truth. The entire segment is abortive and lacks the very things, moral authority and rhetorical competence, that it sought to establish; it is apparent that the complainant, and not Solomon, is trotting out these Erlicedounisms. Like the second use of "wyse," the old saw is a gesture that lacks force and, if it attracts critical attention, bespeaks only its own rhetorical inadequacy.

This inadequacy is attributable to the complainant’s weaknesses as a speaker, especially his distrust of language. In exactly the same manner as "Merlin’s Prophecy," the complainant’s purpose subverts the prophecy motif, substituting the speaker’s persona for the alleged prophetic authority in an overt and clumsy display of rhetorical manipulation that parodies religious history. The issue of authority, and of our speaker’s lack of control over it, are only pointed up by his choice of prophetic mask. The real, historical situation may well be that Doomsday is approaching, or at least that the population shifts and social mobility caused by southern migration and the opportunities of war are re-making the world; the complainant simply does not have the tools to make this reality into effective speech, and the resulting attempt to speak casts away the scriptural authority of its own apocalyptic theme. In the end, the complainant must appeal to the audience’s inherent sense of dread—"whoso sadly will see and the sothe telle"—having been unable to manufacture his own compelling vision of it.

Thorlac Turville-Petre’s article on "The Prologue of Wynnere and Wastoure" points out that "A Louely Songe of Wysdome," located in the same manuscript, is elsewhere entitled "Pe Prouerbys of Salamone." The Thornton version of "Louely Songe" was edited by Karl Brunner.
According to the complainant, no one is even attempting to speak the truth, not even the masters of language:

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  Whylome were lordes in londe þat loued in thaire hertis
  To here makers of myrthes þat matirs couthe fynde
  And now es no frenchipe in fere bot fayntness of hert,
  Wyse words within þat wroghte were neuer
  Ne redde in no romance þat euer renke herde.
  Bot now a childe appon chere withowtten chyn-wedys
  þat neuer wroghte thurgh witt thies wordes togedire
  Fro he can jangle als a jaye and japes telle
  He schall be lenede and louede and lett of a while
  Wele more an þe man that made it hymseluen.
  Bot neuer þe lattere at the laste when leydis bene knawen;
  Werke witnesse wül bere who wirche kane beste (19-30).
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"Wyse" is used for the third time in this segment, this time unequivocally to describe moral speech, but, like the beggar’s words in "Song On the Times," this wisdom is locked within the heart, unexpressed to a world too contentious to listen. In its three appearances, "wyse" has demonstrated the great gap between its uses in the world—cynical or formulaic—and its ideal meaning, which has no place in the world but is the language only of the righteous heart. Even word-smiths no longer attempt to fashion anything in this language, not for public consumption at any rate.

Readers familiar with *Piers Plowman* will notice the parallels between its "Prologue"—specifically, lines 30-39—and this segment. The complainant of *Winner and Waster* makes a distinction between good makers and "janglers" that *Piers*

98 There is possibly a line missing after this one, or transposition of the next two lines, indicating scribal error. The difference if the next two lines are transposed is interesting, as it blurs the condemnation with a hint of jealousy, and indicates that the "japes" are the same as the "wise words." The difference lies in the purposes of the maker, an idea that is in line with the poem’s focus on authority.
*Plowman* subscribes to through its "C" revision, where the distinction is dropped.99 "Janglers" tell jokes, while true poets find matter in their creations; what's more, the shallow japer draws from and debases the original maker's material, and is applauded for it. The good makers were once popular, according to the nostalgic complainant; now both the young jokesters and the romances have displaced them. The minstrels of "whylome" thus join the western men in the ranks of those pushed aside and effectively silenced by evil men; the complainant's speech is by implication an example of this lost language, but it is therefore also an anachronism, like its speaker. The world, apparently, does not listen to matter anymore; its language, at least among the lords, is devoid of matter, and wit now serves will. "Werke" is another word with wide implications that is common to both poems; doing is the core of Christian living and doing best is a goal of profound significance that the apocalyptic overtones of "the laste when ledys bene knownen" underscores. The speaker is proposing the preponderance of "janglers" as a symptom; language has been pressed out of shape by power serving mere appetite, but original meaning will be restored by the authentic God.

In answer to this problem, the complainant seems to be implying that he is a "maker" of serious entertainments, like the poet-minstrels of old and unlike the writers of romances. This nostalgic self-characterization fits the complainant persona rather

99 Robertson and Huppé's exegetical reading of this passage in *Piers Plowman* demonstrates a relationship between historical analysis and ahistorical reading procedures. If we accept that the good minstrels are meant to represent "those who use the goods of the world properly for the worship of God" (22) we can see the extent of what the poem gives up when it collapses the distinction between good and bad songsters in version "C." This change has implications for both the poem's own status--Is it not also a "murthe" in the widest sense, and if not, what is it? Does the poem no longer accept the possibility of "joyful noise"?--and for its tone, which becomes correspondingly less sanguine about the possibility of good use of the world's contents. The change cries out for an explanation that patristic exegesis cannot account for, though we can thank this methodology for saving the passage from dismissal as a mere conventional attack on the speaker's poetic competition.
well, as it has the same combination of ethical purpose and anachronism. The lament that today's entertainers are mere janglers, without ability or moral content and yet prosperous, is also a typical political complaint scenario juxtaposing the evil nature of men with their mundane success. The final two lines are, in this light, a challenge to read what follows as an example of best work. However, this identification is not certain; the speaker never actually claims to be a minstrel, and the clumsiness of the rhetoric in preceding lines argues against it, undercutting this second attempt to assume authority as a speaker. If the complainant is attempting to so garland his personae, it is consistent to read it as a nostalgic attempt to recapture a lost art by one not disposed to be good at it.

Looking over the complaint prologue as a whole, we see that it has two movements, each describing the same theme of the moral decay of language, and each ending in an apocalyptic warning. Both feature attempts at moral rhetoric that fail; the first helps to fashion the standard personae of the verbally disadvantaged complainant, while the second demonstrates the complainant's doomed ambitions for his own speech as an antidote to the decay he sees all around. The prologue also features two appeals to historical authority, one to the spiritual history of biblical authority and the second to the nostalgic history of the minstrels; both appeals are undercut by the complainant's unconvincing performance.

Both movements prepare the audience to be sensitive to the relationship between speech and speaker. The complainant manipulates rhetorical conventions for effects that do not reflect "his" actual knowledge or social status. His clumsy and hackneyed attempts at expressing himself also reveal that his interpretive tools are inadequate to his purpose; like other political complaints, this one depicts a primarily moral mode of expression/interpretation struggling to deal with complicated social phenomena, in this case with a population shift and its economic consequences. Other speakers in the
poem will demonstrate far less benign interpretive shortcomings while working out these same phenomena; the prologue prepares the audience to be critical of these speakers precisely when they address moral issues. It also prepares them for an apocalyptic view of the world that defers justice to the end of time; action is already suspended until the Judgment, allowing for a distanced, evaluative point-of-view and judgments that partake of eternal criteria.

It is in this critical spirit that the audience is taken into the tale itself:

Bot I schall tell 3ow a tale hat me bytyde ones,
Als I went in the weste wandrynge myn one (31-32).

Unlike Jerry D. James ("Undercutting of Conventions" 246), I do not think the use of "bot" undercuts the complainant’s implicit claim that he can write best verse; this has been accomplished already. Instead, this transition establishes the difference between the tale’s provenance and the complainant’s; as early as 1300, "bytyde" could mean "befell" or "fell to," so the tale can be presented either as a dream the complainant had, or as a dream-vision poem that he heard, while out west among the righteous. In this light, the dream is an artifact of western, rural values and in that sense can be said to stand apart from the circumstances of the speaker at the moment of narration; the complainant is clearly not wandering the west now, but was once, when he heard or dreamt this tale. Therefore, the narrative that follows these lines is either a representation of values conventionally held to be alien to the London audience or an artifact of this western culture. It is therefore not important for being an account of

By "conventionally held" I mean that the audience holds this to be true according to the pastoral convention that the poem is exploiting. Obviously, you cannot even understand the "righteousness" of another without having mastery of the moral codes involved; placing them in the west chides the city dweller gently but also implies that the full appreciation of goodness is exercised only by a more sophisticated and morally leavened audience, i.e. urbanites. The range of effects available to such a construction is explored by William Empson in Some Versions of Pastoral.
the complainant's phenomenal experience, but rather for being his rhetorical
performance, to be judged as more or less fit to his purpose of giving voice to "matter"
within a southern and urban setting. The dreamer is therefore another mask, the
complainant's last attempt at representing his message and himself.

This transition from complainant to dreamer cannot be clean, because the
dreamer is a product of the complainant, whose every rhetorical effort is the subject of
analysis. We saw in the last chapter what happens to conventions like the dream-vision
when they are subjected to the rhetorical critique at the center of political complaint.
The poem will test this convention and find it wanting; what lesson might come from
the resulting rhetorical dissection will assert itself despite the complainant's
performance.

Dreaming the Royal Perspective

In the first part of the complainant's tale, *Winner and Waster* parodies the
dream-vision form to reveal the attitudes of the complainant peeking out from behind
his dreamer persona. The dreamer, assuming the vantage of the poem-king, brings the
complainant's ire into focus on this fictitious ruler. The poem will follow the
complaint pattern already established of making its message through the failure of the
complainant's rhetorical foray.

The tale begins with another convention, as the dreamer relates his stop at a
flowered riverbank where he lies down under a hawthorne tree; this is the *locus
amoenus* in which dream-visions traditionally start, the role Katerine's garden played in
"Why I Can't Be a Nun."^101 However, this beautiful place differs in one way from the

^101 The idea is engagingly used in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages*, which fea-
tures a *locus* that is explored for its full potential both descriptively and thematically
without recourse to obvious allegory. Common authorship between this poem and
*Winner and Waster* has been proposed, though the evidence is slim. One stylistic
similarity not often mentioned is that both poems share passages of great length--the
speech of Elde, and the debate between Winner and Waster--that mean at least in part
because they are so long.

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ideal—it is full of noise. The birds are quarreling, clamoring and breaking nuts with their bills, while the stream is splashing loudly. The inevitable nap is delayed by these conspiring sounds until it is "neghande nyghte." This pause is humorous, but its thematic significance is not clear until later in the poem, when the effect of the dreamer's surroundings becomes clear in the dream itself. We are left to contemplate the unexpected subjectivity of our dreamer's point-of-view; in a locus amoenus birds are always chattering, streams always babble, but this dreamer refuses to react as he might be expected to.

The dream itself reflects the dreamer's fractious napping-place, and creates another uncertainty. A mile-long plain, surrounded by earth-works, contains two armies prepared to do battle. Both are praying for the peace to last until the prince, "worthiere in witt than any wy ells," can come to arbitrate the dispute. It is clear that the fight itself would be disastrous, since the armies both wish to avoid it, and that avoiding it will be a matter of words, of "witt."102 "Witt" is ambiguous at this point in the poem, having figured in the complaint-prologue as a mark of the world's evil and obscure language, subject to will. If the prince is characterized by wit, he can prevent this battle justly or selfishly. The question is whether the prince, should he arrive, will display wit of one definition or the other.

102 The prayer is not merely a ritual preceding a duel or mock battle, as Trigg has suggested, since the messenger is to prevent the fighting, not simply adjudicate the winner; what ritual there is occurs in the debate between Winner and Waster that represents the conflict on the field. Similarly contra Trigg, R. W. V. Elliot's identification of the battlefield with a medieval theater (like that in the famous and improbable plan for The Castle of Perseverance) does not indicate that the parties are involved in a pageant; the article's thesis is an impressionistic extension of the poem's dramatic presentation and does not purport to show that the battle is a tournament in a realistic sense, but rather makes a natural association arising from the poet's dramatic purpose.
The prince is close by, and we are introduced to him in a cinematic, zoom-like effect. The dreamer’s attention immediately turns to a sumptuous tent, covered with English ornaments and emblazoned with the Motto of the Order of the Garter, that overlooks the battlefield from a precarious vantage on the top of a cliff. The dreamer recognizes the plainest significance of these tokens, exclaiming "Now the kyng of this kythe kepe hym oure lorde!" Beside the royal tent stands a man dressed as a wodewyse, or wild man, whose lambrequin bears the royal arms of England; this figure indicates a shift to the mannered and ritualized setting of the king’s court, the "natural" setting for this pseudo-savage, and to the perspective of the individual man, preparing us for the king’s presence. The minute description of the wild man’s headdress is important for its detail, as it readies the audience to interpret the clothing of the king, the prince for whom all are waiting.

This transition has not been much commented upon, but it is crucial; the poem has moved away from its broadest allegorical vision to a place topographically laid out to command the same view as before except for the royal tent. The point-of-view will be narrowed to the perspective of the court and of the individual—the king—who

103 "Besautens," the precise word for these ornaments, is a coin-like badge. Lois Roney has proposed that these are indeed coins, "no doubt" representations of the gold noble introduced by Edward III (1086). If this reading is right, we have an example of the "overdetermination" that confounds so much of the poem, as these badges symbolize both economic issues and, by being badges, social issues having to do with the political conflict over retinue. Is loyalty to this king loyalty also to his economic policy, and is commerce therefore a kind of fidelity? Does it reduce his magnificence to associate his position with coin, and does the coin indicate a loyalty on his part to avarice? Is there an actual difference between loyalty and the wealth that maintains it? Which is the source of the other?

104 Trigg puts both the Motto and this exclamation on the tent because she finds Gollancz’s attribution of the exclamation to the poet unsatisfactory. However, as an exclamation of the dreamer this line is not at all out of place. It is certainly unsatisfactory placed on the tent, which emendation constitutes a rather overzealous "correction" of Gollancz’s reading.
controls what the court means. Our dreamer will assume this vantage. What is seen from here cannot be objective, indeed it is plainly not at all natural, whatever the sharpness of the viewer’s eye.

Not that the dreamer’s interpretive eye is sharp to begin with, but his perspective is quite clearly undermined. Since the first mention of a prince, the poem has anticipated the king’s appearance; the advent of a knight familiar to the dreamer is further playful delay of the obvious. This moment of recognition and delay also displays the dreamer’s familiarity with the royal court and its members; he has become more and more a part of these surroundings. So it is surprising that the dreamer decides, at the very doorway of the tent, to await events (83-84), putting the big moment off still further. Then, as if his eyes had adjusted finally to the darkness of the tent, he becomes aware of the king. The king is so magnificent, seated on a silken bench and dressed so finely, that the dreamer’s offhand awareness of him—especially after all the portents—is absurd and borders on the disrespectful. This is an odd note for the dreamer, whose respect for the king is obvious, but it is in keeping with the complainant’s attitudes to the London court. We are encouraged thereby to consider the dreamer’s perceptions as subject to the complainant’s interpretation.

This qualification is born out in the next passage. The king’s clothes are described carefully by the dreamer, but he does not interpret them as we are being led to, indicating that he is not aware of the interpretive cues he has been giving us:

This kynge was comliche clade in kirtill and mantill,
Bery-brown was the bleaunt brouderde with fewlys,

105 Literary dreamers are often obtuse, of course, in order to let the satire play out in an ironic fashion. Chaucer’s House of Fame is an extreme example that loses satiric coherence as a result of its interpretive opacity; Pearl is less bizarre. Parlement of the Thre Ages implies no interpretive activity by its dreamer at all; the importance of his understanding to his cosmic welfare is underscored by the distant trump he hears at the end of the poem, but whether he has done so is left unsaid, to great pathetic effect.
The dreamer ignores the political and ethical significance of the king's clothes. The design features falcons, the royal birds, swooping down upon the fearful common birds; like "A Song on the Times," Winner and Waster portrays a predatory relationship between king and subjects. The lines leading up to this moment of sartorial symbolism have prepared the audience to "read" the king's clothing, while the dreamer has eyes only for the splendor of the needlework and the conspicuously aristocratic sport it portrays.\[106\]

106 The same could be said for the poem's critics, who have noticed the design but seem to miss this point. James (250) sees the passage as a satiric jab at a king who surrounds himself with "base creatures." Trigg (Wynner and Wastoure 23) thinks that the trembling may be an example of the cunning skill with which the king's robe is embroidered. Readers familiar with the Lion of "A Song on the Times" are less likely to overlook the predatory significance.
and is therefore unlikely to offer an alternative to the complainant’s paralyzing mistrust of language and moral pessimism.

Therefore, even at this early juncture, we can evaluate the complainant’s second essay at moral rhetoric, because it displays the same characteristics as his first. For example, we become aware that the *locus amoenus* is harsh and the dreamer’s reactions atypical because the complainant does not trust the conventional fiction, much as he did not trust the wise words of Solomon and substituted his own; since the little grove is the world as the complainant sees it, it must be disturbing, even if the convention demands that it be soporific. The dreamer’s off-hand discovery of the dream-king is similar manipulation, expressing the complainant’s disapproval of an English king, at the expense of dramatic continuity. Furthermore, we can anticipate that the dream-king is going to be witty in the evil sense, not only because this king is portrayed as an evil predator, but also because there is no other option within the complaint-colored world of wrangling words that the dream represents. We can expect the dream-vision, because it is so rich with actors, to go on some time longer than the prophetic or the minstrel-historical portions do, but the complainant’s bad faith in words—ultimately in his own enterprise, despite its good intentions—will bring it to the same unsatisfying end as his earlier efforts.

That it does not fail to satirize despite this collapse is due, not to the allegorical or moral logic of the poem, but to the poem’s justification of the complainant’s failure. *Winner and Waster* does not merely accuse its target of skillful use of wit for evil purposes, but actually becomes a demonstration of how a designedly divisive political discourse perpetuates his willfulness. The poem-king’s perspective, which the dreamer is sharing, will come to dominate the poem; we might as well say that the poem-king’s point-of-view has assumed the dreamer’s voice, for the dreamer’s narrative duties are diminished—if a plain, straightforward subjectivity can be said to be a duty of

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expression—throughout the rest of the poem. The complainant’s hatred of slippery words will be justified by their triumph over his own best effort at countering them.

The King’s Critique

As the dream-vision advances, the king’s perspective takes control of the narrative in the person of his messenger, who comments on the impending battle and its participants. The messenger’s analysis will bring forth an interpretation of the world’s troubles, fundamentally economic, that is eventually to be embodied by the knights Winner and Waster.

The king’s first deed is to send a knight-messenger to the valley to prevent the outbreak of fighting among the hovering armies. The messenger’s relationship with the king is complex; he is a young knight, but also "3apest of witte," a projection of the king’s cleverness with words and an extension of his will. This relationship is underlined by overtones of the king’s association with falconry, binding the knight to the royal person symbolically. The knight goes down to the river bank, the common site—as the poem has just told us—for hawking, where he prepares himself. His braided brown armor and the heraldic wings on his breast-plate further the metaphor of a bird of prey sent forth from the king’s hand. The messenger is the representation of the king, expressing the king’s mind in this situation; his interpretation and his voice will command this section of Winner and Waster.

Controversy exists over the possibility of a more precise identity for the knight/herald/messenger. Gollancz offers some rather desperate interpretations—some involving unlikely emendations—in order to identify the messenger as the Black Prince, and this has been widely accepted despite some well-researched and commonsense opposition (Salter 50-1, 53-4, and Trigg, Wynnere and Wastoure, notes to lines 83 and 117). In terms of the political and social themes of the poem it matters little whether the herald is identifiable, since his role is clearly that of royal mouthpiece. There is no convincing evidence to link him to the Black Prince at all, except that what is said in the poem could as easily apply to the Prince as to any other royal personage.
The messenger’s role allows him to take great license with the king’s instructions, and he embellishes and expands upon them. This messenger warns the potential combatants that they will forfeit eyes, life and property should they strike a single stroke, perhaps obliquely citing the Statute of Treasons of 1352 as precedent for these sanctions.\(^{108}\) He offers them the king’s pardon—this once—on the grounds of their ignorance of the law. Then, continuing his speech, he sizes up the great armies that are listening to him.

This long description (136-196) is one of several places in *Winner and Waster* in which the speaking voice is commonly ignored by modern readers.\(^{109}\) There can hardly be a situation that demands more attention to the question of "who speaks," however. The messenger is standing before the assembled armies, has their complete attention, and is trying to avoid a catastrophic war; at this critical juncture he decides to describe his audience to his audience, a bold and risky thing to do. Beyond the drama there is another reason to clearly identify the speaker, since this speech from the king’s mouthpiece will tell us much about the king’s interpretation of this conflict.

The messenger’s speech is marked by aristocratic worldliness expressed by mocking the people spread upon the field. One army is strange, an unlikely mélange of

\(^{108}\)Whether there is actually a reference to the Statute of Treasons in the phrase *his pese to disturb* has been debated—it is a very short and natural phrase to load with so much historical reference. Elizabeth Salter casts doubt on this reading as far as a literal interpretation of the law (41-3), but the later reference to Chief Justice Shareshull, the law’s drafter, has convinced some readers. The king’s own use of the Statute was not literal, as Trigg points out (*Wynner and Wastoure* 25-6). Even should the Statute itself not figure into the poem, a similar point of law is at issue. Indeed, other than dating the poem, nothing has ever been made of this identification, and it serves poorly as a dating device, since the law was enforced for decades.

\(^{109}\)Bestul, for instance, interprets the speech as ironic satire but ascribes its satiric purpose only to the poet (73), as does Lois Roney (1093). Jerry James gives the entire description to the *dreamer*, who is indistinguishable from the poet’s own voice (251-53).
Spanish, French, English, and Hanseatic people, all trading partners and therefore periodic mortal enemies; bemused, the herald describes them as "stuffede in stele strokes to dele," a decidedly unheroic turn of phrase. The Pope is there, under a banner representing his hated Papal bulls, and the lawyers, who should defend the law but are now absurdly outfitted for combat; the messenger wryly describes a lawyer as a man's friend "who sayled him never" in a contest of words, in contrast to their banner, which alludes to their lucrative part in the dissemination of writs. Like the lawyers', the friars' participation is portrayed by the messenger as ridiculous. He notes that the Franciscans "feightyn bot seldom," a sledgehammer understatement that applies to all the friars represented. The poem uses the cæsura to underline the absurdity of warring friars in the messenger's description of the Dominicans: "That was Domynyke this daye with dyntis to dele" (167). Whether the banners are themselves satirical is debatable. The real damage to the fictional friars' reputation is in their very presence and desire to fight for an earthly goal; their appearance on a battlefield is as embarrassing to them as it is to the lawyers. He continues embarrassing them by pointing out that their banners are silken, a fabric antithetical to their lifestyle. The messenger's comments are indictments, not merely observations; he is putting the screws to the parties that make up this unlikely army, because they represent a real danger to the kingdom through their use of "witt," in which the lawyers and friars excel (169-173):

\[
\text{And sythen the pope is so priste thies prechors to helpe} \\
\text{And Fraunceys with his folke es forced beside} \\
\text{And alle the ledis of the lande ledith thurgh witt}
\]

The lawyer's "bend of green" is thought to refer to the "green wax" used to seal writs (Trigg, *Wynmere and Wastoure*, page 27). The green wax motif is not as common as many writers on the subject have assumed, however, leaving this moment in the poem open to further research.
There es no man appon molde to machen þaym agayne
Ne gete no grace appon grounde vndir God hymseluen (169-179).

The messenger is aware of the influence, practically, of the friars’ claim to interpret
God’s word and administer God’s grace. That the poem’s friars turn this influence to
military and treasonous purposes is their disgrace.

This strange alliance is dependent on the transgression of proper roles. The
messenger passes a condemnatory judgment that hints at the cause of all this perversity:

I wote wele for wynnyng thay wentten fro home,
His purse weghethe full wele that wanne thaym all hedire (161-62).

Money is at work. If the various members of this army have anything in common, it is
their greed.

Much critical ink has been spilled on the brief description of the army opposing
this menagerie; the most inventive is Lois Roney’s, which re-constructs an entire set of
banners for this army (1094-95). What we have in the poem as it stands is a simple
description of a military force that emphasizes the fighting men’s willingness to kill
every man on the other side should even one stroke fall; the army, absurdly, is arrayed
to destroy its own populace and much of the rest of the world as well. The
messenger’s concern is obvious, since such a slaughter would be catastrophic, and the
passage is therefore sufficient even if it is not complete. Ever aware of his audience,
he announces this concern to create a sense of urgency and to get the parties to parley.

This brevity is not exclusively applied to the military men, however.
Immediately before these lines is another, equally brief description of the merchants
who have aligned themselves with the Pope, the lawyers and the friars, demonstrating
further that the messenger reveals something of his own--royal--agenda when he
interprets the crowds before him. Notice the concentration of "some" in this passage:

And other synes I seghe sett upon loftè,
Some witnesse of wolle and some of wyne tounnes,
Some of merchandes merkes so many and so thikke
That I ne wote in my witt for alle this werlde riche
Whatt segge vnder the sonne can the sowme rekken (188-192).

To the messenger, the merchants are notable for their numberlessness and their essential part in the international exchange of goods; wool was England's essential export, wine one of its two major imports, amounting to 20,000 tuns in 1300 alone.¹¹¹ Through the device of the banners, the messenger shows a particular concern for those goods that the king could politically manipulate; the "sowme" to be reckoned was not merely heads, but money. The point of sameness among the lawyers, the merchants, and the Church—not to mention the French and Hanseatic nations—is their incredible wealth, wealth that the king can exploit by tapping their transactions.

The fighting men, in deliberate and immediate contrast, show no wealth at all, merely the threat of mayhem upon the rest of society ranged against them. An army was the prime user of government money and the source, in peacetime, of armed gangs of highwaymen and the private retinues of petty lords.¹¹² Edward III, for example, wreaked havoc on the wool trade in order to finance his expeditions; he was generous with pardons for those who had served him overseas if they later became murderous at home. Therefore, this army represents both financial and legal burdens to the civilian population on the other side of the field; from the messenger's point of view an army is both the political tool—in war—and the legal headache—in peace—of the king, in addition to being a consumer of the massive wealth that the rest of society produces.

The messenger's disposition to interpret the situation in terms of the king's budgetary interests is made explicit in his call for parley:

¹¹¹Waugh, 59. The other major import was Flemish cloth.

¹¹²Waugh, 159. Stephanie Trigg's "deconstructive" article, "The Rhetoric of Excess in Winner and Waster," notes the implicit association of Waster with this "bastard feudalism" (196-197).
Forthi I bid 3ow bothe that thaym hedir broghte
That 3e wend with me are any wrake falle
To oure comely kyng that this kythe owethe
And fro he wiete wittirly where be wronge ristyth
Thare nowthir wye be wrothe to wirche als he demeth (197-201).

He anticipates two leaders, one on each side, and therefore he expects them to represent the sides as he has depicted them, as broadly-conceived economic interests pitted against one another. The assembled world responds accordingly; a large portion of Europe is represented on this field, and yet we get only two representatives, mere knights at that, and members of the king’s household. Such a response not only indicates that these knights are allegorical figures for more universal subjects, but also reminds us of the vantage point from which they become such figures. It is the interpretive eye of English royalty that gives this battle its shape and that conjures up these representatives. The king has "fed and fostered" them for decades; they are his chosen and cherished vehicles for understanding the affairs of the world, are examples of his "witt." By bringing these knights to the king, the messenger brings the king an interpretation of the problem that is already familiar to the royal mind.

So characterized, the king’s outlook is as reductive as the complainant’s; the difference between these voices is that the king is "wittirly," a master at manipulating language for his own interests. The inadequacy of these knights as representatives of their diverse constituencies is obvious on the face of it and will become even clearer as the poem progresses, but their shortcomings will serve their predatory king, who awaits the return of his messenger/falcon to see what he has caught. Before we see them, however, there is an interruption.
The People’s Perspective

In this portion of *Winner and Waster*, the complainant reasserts his position as minstrel-author through an interruption of what has become almost entirely the poem-king’s narrative. The dream-vision’s ostensible origins in the west are stressed to counter this royal perspective and take a critical perspective toward its products.

The poem is quick to offer this counterpoint to the king’s point of view. When the king welcomes his knights with a toast of wine, the dreamer takes vigorous part, blearing his eyes; at this moment of impaired understanding—marking the end of his absorption into the royal point-of-view that actually started back at the king’s pavilion—the dreamer suddenly gives way to another voice that calls for drink before the "werke" will proceed. This reaffirmation of the narrative frames around the dream reminds us of the complainant’s desire to create an example of "best wirche," like that made by the honest minstrels of old. The moment evokes a tavern or feasting-room setting, the ideal place for some honest mirth; in those circumstances it may have been considered entertaining to call for a round when the poem being recited suggests it, rather like modern drinking games centered on television shows. If extracting the necessary prompt was a bit of a stretch for the reciter, as it is later in the poem, it provided even more fun to the thirsty audience sympathetic to the minstrel’s parched throat.

Verisimilitude, however, is not the only effect of this interruption. The complainant has claimed that the poem originated in the rural west, where he either experienced it or heard it; he has implied that he is sympathetic to the "westren wy," if he is not himself one. The pause in the narrative is a reminder of the dream-vision’s ostensible original audience of rural westerners, the morally upright "regular folks" that so many of these poems exploit as pathetic figures. In this scenario the fictional king is presented as predatory and "wittirly" to a "real" rural audience that is sympathetic to this sort of political satire; the dream-vision is ostensibly a representation of the
commoners’ view. The taverns all over the west, it is implied by the complainant, are hosts to similar song and similar sympathies.

The rusticus we have seen before in political complaints, mainly as the narrator; in this case, however, there is an implied split between a king and a real rurality that is more specific in its political implications. The complainant refers to the king’s obligations to his people to rule wisely, and to the disobedience that marks an ineffective king. The simple understanding of the "peasant" is used as a barometer of the king’s wisdom, and so general unhappiness is a sign, not necessarily of impending revolution, but of God’s judgment upon the poor ruler. "On the Earthquake of 1382" (Wright, Political Poems 250-52) is quite clear on this point, making the Rising of 1381 into God’s warning:

Bifore, 3if men hedde haad a graas,  
Lorde mihte wonder weel  
Han let the rysing that ther was;  
But that God thouȝte ȝit sum del  
That lordes schulde his lordschup feel,  
And of heore lordschipe make hem bare (25-31).

The poem Wright names "On the Deposition of Richard II" (PPS 368-417) partakes of this idea, dramatizing the simple speaker’s critical position (half-lines are here as Wright prints them):

I had pete of his passion  
that prince was of Walis,  
and eke oure crowned kynge,  
tille Crist wolde no lenger:  
and as a lord to his liage,  
thouȝ I lite hade,  
alle myn hoofe herte was his,  
while he in helthe regnid.  
And ffor I wost not witterly  
what shoulde falle,  
whedir God wolde ȝev him  
grace sone to amende,  
to be oure gioure aȝeyn,  
or graunte it another,  
this made me to muse  
many tyme and ofte,
The limits of this speaker's fealty are plain. He attempts to influence his king by asserting God's ability to topple the ruler; within this greater sovereignty he can justify his assumption of an advisor's role. Richard's deposition is thus portrayed as an event that the rusticus could see coming all along, despite a lack of political wit that would have allowed him to foresee the particulars. Just such a critical function lies behind the Winner-and-Waster complainant's performance scenario; it is the true expression of the heart let loose in an angry satire.

In Winner and Waster, the sharpness of the complainant's criticism depends upon the picture of the king's "witt" that the debate between these knights reveals. The result is anticipated, however, by the dream's association with the complaint prologue; the false dichotomy of Winner and Waster that informs the king's political decisions will be revealed, like that described by Jack Upland and Friar Daw, to be a harmful irrelevancy.

**An Immoral Allegory**

The debate proceeds in complaint fashion, with the knights destroying their own cases as well as each others'. Both combatants use moral language to dismantle their opponent's pretentions to benign or useful political behavior and to obscure the actual issues between the knights' referents. Eventually, the complainant's pastoral motif will be appropriated, resulting in another interruption that reasserts his voice and role.

Although the debate is characterized by back-and-forth, tit-for-tat dialogue, it can be roughly divided into two parts, each dedicated to the defense of one of the
participants. In their defenses, Winner and Waster take on different allegorical significance or roles in order to excuse their moral deficiencies. Winner is the opening act, but it is plain from the start that all the participants are playing roles in a formal ritual. The king begins the debate by asking the two knights their names and their complaints, though he must know them all full well; Winner introduces both himself, and, in the first example of the close relationship between himself and his enemy, Waster as well. In this unfriendly introduction "witt" once again appears, undergoing a transformation much like that of "wyse" in the complaint prologue, although in this case the word goes from the ideal to the corrupt:

I hatt Wynner, a wy that alle this werlde helpis
For I lordes cane lere thurgh ledyng of witt.
Thoo þat spede fully will spare and spende not to grete,
Lyve appon littill-whattes I lufe hym the bettir.
Witt wiendes me with and wyses me faire,
Aye when gadir my gudes than glades myn hert
Bot this felle false thefe þat before þowe standes
Thynkes to strike or he styntt and stroye me for euer.
Alle at I wynn thurgh witt he wastes thurgh pryde,
I gedir, I glene and he lattys goo sone,
I pryke and I pryne and he the purse opynes (222-245).

As Stephanie Trigg has pointed out, "witt" changes from a synonym of "knowledge" to one of "guile" and finally to a word that can sit easily parallel to "pride." Like Friar Daw, Winner is adept at cutting his own throat while beating up on his opponent; outraged at Waster picking his purse, he reveals that he would prefer it sewed shut.

This purse image shows that for Winner, it is as if his money were the same as Waster's, and the rest of his attack on Waster shows the same tendency towards Waster's scarce goods:

Why hase this cayteffe no care how men corne sellen?
His londes liggen alle ley, his lomes aren solde,
Downn bene his dowfehowses, drye bene his poles.

113See Trigg's note on these lines, pp. 31-32 of her edition.
The deuyll wonder the wele he weldys at home
Bot hungere and heghe howses and howndes full kene.
A bronde at his bede-hede biddes he no noJ)er
Bot a cuttede capill to cayre with to his frendes.
Then will he boste with his brande and braundesche hym ofte,
This wikkede weryed thefe that Wastoure men calles,
That if he life may longe this lande will he stroye.
Forthi deme vs this daye for Drightyns loue in heuen
To fighte furthe with oure folke to owthire fey worthe (233-245).

Winner’s miserly envy accounts for this attitude to some extent, but there are other,
non-psychological reasons for this approach. The attack is on Waster, but it is not to
Waster; Winner’s audience is the king. Therefore, he shows how Waster’s lack of
proper husbandry harms the kingdom by reducing its supply of grain—an international
commodity that England both exported and imported—and, what is worse, leaves
Waster free to threaten both the land and Winner with his combat skills. Winner
identifies Waster with the highwaymen and petty lords that grew out of the war, exactly
as the messenger’s invocation of the Statute of Treasons did, and so plays on the king’s
concern with maintaining order.

Winner identifies himself as well; as a landowner and agriculturist, he is at once
holder of a purse and the purse, the source of the country’s wealth. Waster comes
across as a perversion of this thrifty idea and a thief of the landowner’s production.
Understood in this sense, Waster actually is getting into Winner’s purse through the
machinations of the king. The army is the beneficiary of the king’s taxation, and Win­
ner’s wealth is subject to the king’s taxes. The king is part of Winner’s problem; the
battle to the death that Winner proposes is the only way to solve it, since civil war
skirts around the king and his law, but the result would hardly be in Winner’s interests,
win or lose.

It is clear at this point in the poem that Winner is not so much debating Waster
as accusing him and complaining about him. The language of calumny and complaint
is moral language, and so Winner imputes a moral failing to Waster in conventional
terms, while wrapping himself in the opposite virtue. Thomas Bestul (1-23) is right that Waster is a personification of prodigality, but it is important to remember that he is Winner’s personification, created to shape the king’s understanding of both knights. This allegory of prodigality serves avarice in a plain demonstration of what the complainant called "wise words and sly."

Winner’s obvious greed makes him an easy target for Waster, whose opening speech (246-262) paints Winner as a lazy miser sleepless with worry over his amassed and useless wealth, with a glance at the *Book of Matthew*.

When thou haste waltered and went and wakede alle pe nyghte,
And iche a wy in this werlde that wonnes the abowte,
And hase werpede thy wyde howses full of wolle sakkes,
Stuffed are sterlynges vnder stelen bowndes.
Waht shoulde worthe of that wele if no waste come?
Some rote, some ruste some ratouns fede (248-253).

He advises Winner to pile up treasure in heaven by giving some of his treasure to the poor, before he is damned for his avarice; at the same time he equates his own wastefulness with the virtue of liberality. This short reply has won Waster some support from modern readers, but it is no better or worse than Winner’s effort. Moreover, it is not complete in itself, but prompts an exchange that will find Waster repeating Winner’s mistake by revealing too much of his own evil.

Winner’s reply (263-293) blames Waster for Winner’s greed— "Thou mellest of a mater thou madiste it thiseluen"—even excusing his own miserly sleeplessness because of Waster’s noisy night-long orgies. He continues that Waster spends Winner’s goods on "sturte and...stryfe," outfits his men lavishly and refuses to farm the lands his

114 6: 19-21

115 Jerry D. James finds Wastoure's arguments more favorably presented in the poem, as does Nicolas Jacobs (498).
forefathers left him, ignoring the need that winter's drought will bring. In the taverns, Waster's money is spent on liquor and women, including other men's wives—who, according to Winner, "wonnes about" the tavern in a deliberate echo of Waster's words describing Winner's few lingering servants—all paid for by selling off the woods and lands that Waster has inherited. Comparing his enemy to Cain—and thus himself to Abel—Winner demands that Waster teach his men to plow the fields before he suffers hell's pain.

Winner's allegations are unchanged; the same charges of spendthrift behavior, of bastard feudalism and latent rebellion are merely elaborated on in this speech, with drunkenness and debauchery thrown in. His aspiration is simply to demonstrate an equal facility with biblical reference and maintain the moral high ground; he is unable to directly answer Waster's accusations, but he draws the age-old contrast between the responsible household and its destroyer, the evil tavern. The situation is similar to that between "Friar Daw's Reply" and "Jack Upland," in that the conflict between complaints quickly devolves into a self-conscious exercise in rhetorical one-upmanship.

There may be a more realistic subtext. Perhaps Winner implies a causal relationship between Waster's refusal to work his own land and his leeching of Winner's goods, through means legal or illegal; in war, taxes take from Winner and give to Waster, who cannot till his fields, while in peace Waster's role as petty warlord makes plowing fields cost-ineffective and encourages stealing from Winner. Winner's call for plowing is not only a reference, clear enough in this context, to profitable husbandry and, in the Langlandian sense, to doing God's work on earth, but also an antiwar statement advocating a return to peaceful agrarian business. Winner desires that the army arranged against him beat their swords to plowshares and abandon the fighting that, in war or peace, costs him so dearly.
Whatever the subtext, the overt purpose of this passage is to press Waster into defending himself. Waster does this (294-323) by repeating his claim that riches should be given to the poor, and tries to paint his feasts as a mechanism for disseminating them—liberality, not libertinism. Winner’s hoarding, according to Waster, will benefit only his heirs and executors, whose charity will do Winner no good posthumously. Waster’s words on this subject are lifted from countless sermons, but his heart is far from pious; in his enthusiasm he reveals the greatest threat to the nation that he embodies:

Now wolde God that it were als I wisse couthe
That thou Wynner, thou wriche and Wanhope thi brothir
And eke ymbryne dayes and euenes of sayntes,
The Frydaye and his fere one the ferrere syde
Were drowmede in the depe see there neuer droghte come,
And dedly synn for thayre dede were endityde with twelue,
And thies beryns one the bynchys with bonets one lofte
That bene knowen and kydde for clerkes of the best,
Als gude als Arestotle or Austyn the wyse,
That alle schent were those schalkes and Scharshull itwiste
Pat saide I prikkede with powere his pese to distourbe.
Forthi, comely kynge that oure case heris,
Late vs swythe with oure swerdes swyngen togedirs... (308-320).

Flushed with his successful attack on Winner and angry at Winner’s reminder about the dry winter, Waster wishes for what amounts to a second Flood, and incidentally the indictment of any lawyers or judges that might blame Waster for his militant lifestyle. This is disastrous for Waster’s case before the king; he can hardly hope to win points by attacking Justice Shareshull, a very successful servant of the historical English crown who had a part in the same Treasons Statute to which the messenger had made reference, nor can Waster think the king would look unkindly upon his own judges or indeed on the observance of meatless Fridays and saint’s days. Waster is an outlaw, just as Winner had called him, whatever else he is. It is therefore not surprising that Waster’s most self-damaging argument ends, like Winner’s, in a call for immediate
combat, the only way that his desires, antithetical to the king’s needs, can come to fruition.

We can see by this point in the poem that no complex socio-economic issues are going to be solved, or even properly addressed, in this debate between Winner and Waster; the characters created by the allegory are simply too limited to allow for reasonable progress. It is common to criticize the debate between these knights for its poor conduct and repetitive *ad hominem* accusations, but this sort of criticism gives Winner and Waster more credit as characters than they deserve; both are entirely accurate in their conventional depiction of each other, since in this poem Winner and Waster are practically synonyms for their respective vices, and we cannot expect them to debate logically or defend the indefensible well. In this sense, *Winner and Waster* fits in well with the other moral poems in Thornton’s manuscript, and it may be that this was what attracted him to it. As an allegorical *contemptu mundi* poem, finding generally that Greed and Waste characterize the world and its inhabitants, the poem is capable of sparking considerable meditative and intellectual activity, as Bestul’s book elaborates. Furthermore, like the *Cursor Mundi* and *Parlement of the Thre Ages* to which it is bound, it functions as a way of ordering time, that is of understanding history as--in this case--a cycle of complementary evil behavior. In this fashion the debate imposes its rationale upon the poem’s historicity, lending a binary order to its many historical referents. In such a reading the coherence of these references with each other, the kind of thing one is looking for if one is concerned with dating the poem, is unimportant for a complete interpretation.

116 Bestul (73-78) provides the best exploration of this "debate" as a travesty of the type.
Despite its easy symmetry, I do not think that even a primarily moralist reader like Thornton would have been wholly satisfied with this interpretation. The problem lies in the application of the knight’s debate to their constituents, whose differences and desires are far more involved—through all the decades in which Winner and Waster existed—than this exchange of tirades can hope to portray. The king’s view of the world as a conflict over resources, his division of it into Winners and Wasters, ensures that only prodigality and avarice speak at all, which is insufficient to understanding the world. It is plainly harmful, too, encouraging both a competitive approach to goods and the backbiting that the two evil knights indulge in.

Nowhere is this backbiting, and its harmfulness, more obvious than in the next passage, dedicated to Waster’s defense. After Waster’s self-destruction, Winner presses home his own attack (325-365), directed at Waster’s pose as a liberal leader-of-men; his claim to nobility will be under attack for the rest of the poem. Inevitably, this will entail the invocation of standards for evaluating noble behavior that will suffer as they pass through the prism of the king’s allegory.

There is no charity involved in his opponent’s feasts as Winner depicts them. Winner notes that Waster’s little band of four or five has feasted as if they were kings—we can imagine Winner’s glance at the king accompanying these words—and he lingers at length over a description of its "daynthethes so many" in a mix of outrage and desire. Each man has food for six, and the results are figuratively described.

Iche a mese at a merke bytwen twa men
Pat sothe bot brynneth for bale 30ur bowells within.
Me tenyth at 30ur trompers, þay tounen so hegh
Pat iche a gome in þe gate goullynge may here.
þen wil þay say to þamselfe as þay samen ryden,
"þe hafe no myster of the helpe of þe heuen kyng."117

117 Quotation marks are mine.
Waster has no trumpeters among his meager four or five; the trumpeting that accompanies Waster's feasting is the flatulence of the overfed men. They are so loud that they can be heard in the street. Winner skillfully combines this unwholesome image, so damaging to Waster's lordly pose,\textsuperscript{118} with a reference to Matthew 6.2-3--

Therefore when thou dost an almes-dede, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites doe in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honoured of men;
Amen I say to you, they have recieved their reward.

--in order to undermine Waster's concept of conspicuous-consumption-as-charity.

Waster's hypocritical charity, heralded by a chorus of colons, excludes him from the "helpe" of God, since he has his repayment in his infamy and in the scorn of the people, especially anal-retentive Winner.

Winner completes his attack with a proverb that ironically provides the complainant, still playing minstrel, with an opportunity to call for drink.

Bot ones I herd in a haule of a herdmans tong,
"Better were meles many þan a mery nyghte."
And he þat wilnes of þis werke for to wete forthe
Full freschely and faste for here a fit endes (364-367).

This conjuring of a herdsman spouting proverbs in the tavern is Winner's attempt at the pastoral motif equating wisdom with the rural laborer. The herdsman's simple words are a rebuke to Waster, even though the herdsman himself would hardly fit in at such a high-level parley as this; Winner's ability to make this kind of pastoralism is more important than the words themselves, of course, since the rebuke is both obvious and plainly self-serving. However, the sudden break for drinks--seemingly inspired by

\textsuperscript{118} Chaucer's Summoner uses the fart for precisely this purpose in his tale, to deflate the presumption of a conniving friar. If Winner and Waster were written by such a major author, this more sophisticated joke would not have been overlooked by modern readers.
mention of the hall of the herdsman--is a reminder of the dream-vision's ostensible performance setting in a tavern or drinking-hall full of similar rural figures; Winner's insincere use of the motif is thus diverted to the complainant's more benign pastoralism. Disturbingly, the complainant's use of the motif is indistinguishable from Winner's in all but its ultimate intent, and indeed Winner's is more economical; the complainant is capable of portraying the pastoral motif used for evil purposes more easily than he can can use it himself, yet again demonstrating his lack of faith in such devices. His sudden reappearance therefore serves to reclaim his own rhetoric, and thus himself, from the scrutiny of his creation, with less than perfect results.

It is an important moment for the poem's critical aspect. Like the dreamer before him, the complainant at this point is almost absorbed by the thrust of the narrative, which, being a description of another point-of-view, shifts toward the perspective it describes. We will not hear from the complainant directly again; the poem plays itself out until the purposes of the king are completely revealed, keeping to the spirit of the complainant's prejudices but partaking of a portrayal of superior, successful "witt." It is fitting that the debate turns next to an analysis of the aristocracy as the king's dark allegorical glass reveals it.

The Allegory Dissolves

In this portion of Winner and Waster, the debate reaches its climax as Waster attempts to defend himself with an appeal to feudal economics, resulting in a critique of the concepts of service and nobility, which are reduced to necessity and wealth, respectively. Eventually, the case will devolve into a mere argument between vices, as Waster abandons his pretentions and both knights submit themselves to the king's judgement.

As if in answer to Winner's siding with the peasants, Waster turns to the aristocracy for his own allies. Waster's reply (368-391) turns from the present to the
future, where he envisions Winner hanging himself after God's gift of a plentiful harvest devalues Winner's hoarded grain; in this way he debunks Winner's feigned concern for thrift. Waster then turns to a political defense of his own lifestyle, excusing his waste and meager trickle-down charity on the basis of medieval social order:

Woldest þou hafe lordis to lyfe as laddes on fote,  
Prelates als prestes þat þe parischen þemes,  
Prowde marchandes of pris as peddlers in towne? (375-377).

The ancient principle of magnificence, or the outward show of greatness that commands respect and service, lies behind these words, as well as the vice of pride. Service, as Richard Starkey has pointed out, is a foundation of the medieval social system; Waster contends that the basis of service is scarcity:

If fewlis flye schold forthe and fongen be neuer  
And wild bestis in þe wodde wonne al þaire lyue  
And fisches flete in þe flode and ichone ete ðoper  
Ane henne at ane halpeny by halfe þeris ende;  
Schold not a ladde be in londe a lorde for to serue (384-388).

Conspicuous waste not only feeds the poor, but also keeps the lords comparatively rich—waste increases the scarcity, and therefore the price, of necessities—and so able to attract service; we may appreciate the symmetry of this reasoning, but it is morally vacuous and erodes the ideology of the medieval hierarchy, which ought to be based on principles less animal than hunger. To Waster's way of thinking, the poor's only hope to "win" is to find a waster willing to part with some "god morsell" from his wasteful table, and so they stay in harness. In the light of such reasoning, Winner's hoarding and fixation with maximum production is practically insurrection, devaluing goods—

119Richard Starkey explores the concept of magnificence using Winner and Waster and other works (255-56). Starkey is mostly dealing with fifteenth-century monarchs. Stephanie Trigg ("The Rhetoric of Excess"), building on Starkey's essay, explores the idea more specifically as a theme.
because he is not using them up— and encouraging independence. Hoarding produces excess, impoverishes the hoarder financially and undermines the king politically by eliminating the need to serve. Winner, sitting like a king in his well-stocked home and resisting his taxes, is doubtless Waster’s "Exhibit A" before the monarch.

Waster concludes that "Whoso wele schal wyn a wastour moste he fynde / For if it greeues one gome it glads ano^jer." Winner, he says, knows this full well. This line is sometimes cited as an example of Waster’s more even-handed approach to the conflict, but in context it is an absurdity, and its complete lack of a moral dimension may make us suspicious. Waster is claiming that the poor are "winners" when they receive scraps from his table, but receiving such phony charity is simply not winning, as Winner immediately points out:

...me wondirs in hert  
Of thies poure penyles men þat peloure will by,  
Sadills of sendale with sercles full riche (392-394).

Waster’s meager "charity" will not contribute to the wealth of the nation, nor will the poor ever contribute to Winner’s coffers. Waster’s point is therefore specious; the poor will never have the wealth necessary to acquire magnificence—rich saddles on expensive horses, for example— or avoid service. His argument is exposed as so much bogey-talk; indeed, we have already seen it in the opening complaint, when lads marrying ladies was one of "Solomon’s" prophecies, and it is no more convincing here.

Winner has no charity either, of course, so he can offer no alternative; instead, he tries to answer Waster’s implied charge of insurrectionist tendencies with an analysis of Waster’s loyalties. He is implacable in his desire to counter Waster’s assumption of magnificence:

Lesse þat ȝe wreteth ȝour wifes þaire willes to folowe  
ȝe sellyn wodd aftir wodde in a wale tyme,  
Bothe þe oke and þe assche and alle þat þer growes.  
þe spyres and þe Þonge spryng þe spare to ȝour children  
And saynte God wul graunt it his grace to grow at þe last

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For to schadewe your sones bot be schame es your ownn, 
Nedeles saue se be soyle for sell it se thynken (395-401).

Winner's argument is that Waster lets women control affairs, at the expense of sons, and so sponsors an insurrection of another sort; Waster's claim to magnificence is belied by his servitude to women. Lords and ladies like Waster have become trendy fools, slaves to fashion, while the wisdom of their forefathers is lost. Attached to this common medieval reproach is a conventional attack on the impractical long sleeves and ermine linings of expensive fashion, contrasted to the Virgin's poor "wedes." Waster's magnificence is simply "pompe and pride." Through his invocation of Mary, Winner sneeringly offers Waster another female leader whose simple clothing and unostentatious steed is the antithesis of the courtly model.

Winner's attack is successful, but it reveals that his definition of nobility is little different from Waster's, since both ideas are based on the wealth of the person so defined. Lords are "lordes in londe," ladies are "riche." His attack simply shifts the true sign of nobility from clothing and retinue to forest and money. Neither definition is morally or ideologically satisfactory; indeed, the very idea of nobility takes a beating in this exchange. It is a commonplace observation that the social hierarchy had been undergoing redefinition in the fourteenth century, and that the politics of the times had often defined nobility, at least at the level of knight and banneret, as a function of wealth. Edward III's need to raise funds and men for his wars had resulted in new

120It seems to me that line 414, "Als a cely symple wench pat neuer silke wroghte," belongs after line 420, which says of the Virgin "All bofe scho walt al bis werlde hir wedes wer pore." It is puzzling in its current position, but as 421 it is reminiscent of the only other use of "als" to mean "as if," "Als it were a rayled rode with ringses and stones" (342), another too-strong holy simile. The scribe has perhaps substituted this line for one now lost, then resumed at the proper place starting with 415; perhaps the vaguely antifeminist sexual crudity it expresses in its current position seemed better to the scribe in the context of Winner's diatribe. Occam's Razor precludes making this change, perhaps, but nevertheless I think it is very likely.
policies that had tended to undermine the barons' place in the mustering of forces; for
instance, on seven different occasions he pressed knighthood upon every man worth
£40 or more (Waugh, 126). The honor was often evaded or dropped by the pros-
ppective knight. Nor was this politics without attention to Waster-like conspicuous con-
sumption. The sumptuary laws sought to maintain the social hierarchy of clothing, an
important mark of rank in a society in which wealth was becoming more available to
those who did not have hereditary access to land. That these laws were commonly
flouted, despite their constant support from pulpit and poet, had much to do with their
tacit admission that social rank to some extent inheres in the clothing itself. Winner's
complaint may address certain material social trends, but the basis for this self-serving
analysis is this societal weakness revealed by the sumptuary laws. The poem implicitly
presents the Virgin, who "walt al þis werlde," as an example of nobility that, while
bestowed, is nevertheless permanent and innate, and thus a rebuke to Winner, Waster,
and the trend of the times to put a price or a time limit upon rank. *Piers Plowman*, in
the midst of a discussion about priests' salaries, demonstrates the opposite take on the
same issue, one perhaps more in line with the common sense of the time:

> For made neuere kynge no knyȝte but he hadde catel to spende,
> As bifel for a knȝte or fonde hym for his strengthe;
> It is a careful knȝte and of a caytyue kynges makynge,
> þat hath no londe ne lynage riche ne good loos of his handes (Passus XI
> 284-88).

This passage is Winner-like in its focus on the practicalities of knightly service, which
was quite expensive, and it is Waster-like in its emphasis on spending; either emphasis
reflects the fourteenth-century attitudes to such honors from the middle-class
perspective. It has nothing of the latent idealism of *Winner and Waster* on the same
topic.

Logically, the subject of nobility has reached its conclusion at this point in the
poem, but Waster goes on for several lines, returning to the broad moral attacks that
characterized the debate's beginning. It is as if, having worked its way up the heirarchy to the nobility, the poem's satiric allegory now divests itself of all reference to the actual. Waster's defense ends in a combination of chivalric echoes, Biblical reference and another critique of Winner-as-miser (423-455). He begins by asserting his ownership of what is his, essentially denying both the economic relationship that Winner has been declaring and his own doctrine that what glads one man must grieve another. There is a reason for this change; he is now defending himself against Winner's attack on his poor husbandry, and thereby shifting the focus from the debate on his magnificence:

...Dou Wynnerere, Dou wriche, me woundirs in hert
What hafe oure clothes coste b, caytef, to by
Pat doub schal birdes vpbrayd of baire bright wedis,
Sythen pat we vouchesauf pat be siluer payen (424-427).

Within this defense is an effective attack on Winner. In the context of this debate, when "birds/ladies" and "weeds/clothes" appear in the same line, the punning reference to a portion of the Sermon on the Mount, itself a rebuke to Winner, seems obvious:

Behold the fowles of the ayre, that they sow not, neither reape nor gather into barnes: and your heavenly father feedeth them. And for rayment why are you careful? Consider the lilies of the field how they grow: they labour not, neither do they spinne. But I say unto neither Salomon in all his glorie was arrayed as one of these (Mt. 6:26-29, Lk. 12:24-28).

According to Waster, Winner worries too much, and does not trust God to provide for him; we have already seen Winner's reply to this, however:

Pe spyres and pe zonge sprynge 3e spare to 3our children
And sayne God wü graunt it his grace to grow at þe last

Whether during the contest Waster "learns" that he must preserve Winner, as Lois Roney maintains (1092), is debatable. Waster uses the concept of interdependence merely to establish his right to squander and plunder, which is a far cry from understanding circular-flow economics. This line indicates that, like Winner, he is unwilling to consider the effect of his economic action on others. I take up the question of Waster's distinction between wealth in general and his particular wealth later in this chapter.
Waster's pious argument is a facade for his prodigality, just as Winner's concern for the future is a mask for his greed.

Waster further defends his expenditures through the chivalric code according to which the warrior's "lemman" reciprocates generosity by emboldening him to fight hard. This fair talk is darkened by the kind of brigandry at which Waster's men fight, not to mention the tavern-haunting "lemmans" they fight for. Continuing to play the proud lord, Waster states that his people please him all the more for being fair and proudly dressed; we already know that they are neither fair nor proud, not in Winner's eyes at least. The entire effort is more and more ridiculous, bespeaking a military ethic decaying in a peacetime environment.

This pose cannot last, and Waster finally must rely on a mere rationalization that at least he is not Winner. He contrasts his expenditure with Winner's imprisonment to worry; Winner is wasting his time, for he will never be happy, and Hell will be his reward. We have returned, yet again, to Winner the typical miser; we also get, almost simultaneously, Waster the typical spendthrift. Suddenly dropping the chivalric pretense, and again revealing the mundane motivation behind his high words, Waster maintains that a short, happy, promiscuous life is easiest and best. He calls upon the king to decide the contest—now clearly summed up as a choice between two simple vices—by separating the contestants. There is no choice, really; both should be banished from any righteous kingdom, and, as Thomas Bestul has demonstrated (16), liberality should be instituted. This is plainly a kingly virtue, best demonstrated and enforced by a king, who sets the tone for the nobility.

A Judgment Without Justice

In this last part of Winner and Waster, the king finally speaks, revealing his dependence on the discourse of winners and wasters for support of his own ambitions.
The entire conceit of the poem is against a virtuous solution to this conflict; after all, the cynical debate is the king's own creation. We should expect the king to serve himself in his decision (456-502), and we are not disappointed. The king sends "Aythere lede in a lond þer he es loued moste"—greedy Rome and debauched Cheapside in London. The satirical purpose is obvious here, but it is important to notice that it is the king who is the author of this satirical gesture. The king accepts that Rome and London are corrupt, and makes it policy that they should be so, institutionalizing their wickedness for his benefit. This judgment is therefore less than satire; it is a sarcasm, and an abdication from his kingly responsibility. If we suppose a fourteenth-century audience, with its economic and political self-interest tied to the king, and committed to the fierce doctrine of nationalism that bound ruler and ruled to a common myth of destiny,¹²² we can only then imagine the effect as the fictional representation of their ruler looks lovingly at the embodiments of Avarice and Anarchy before him, then dispatches them to a London and a Rome that he blithely accepts as cesspools of vice, all the while planning a future of war and its privations. If the accusations embedded in this story had any currency at all with such an audience, the poem is as strong an indictment as medieval verse could attempt.

However, there is more than moral allegory going on here. The king's dependence on Winner and Waster is also made clear. Both knights serve his interests, and he tries to save them both unchanged for the future. Winner is to go to the Pope in Rome, where he will soak in luxury, but the king enjoins him to return when he is sent for. Waster is to live in the Cheapside marketplace, where he will show every man

¹²² Nationalism was not new, of course, but its cultivation in the fifteenth century seems to have been very successful (Scattergood, Politics and Poetry, 41-42). Edward III consciously encouraged a national identity through his aping of Arthur's legend; he was adept at national politics in a way his forebears had not been, including his national recruitment campaign and his negotiations with the Parliament.
passing through—no matter how insignificant—how to spend his money on debauchery
until there is not a penny left. (At this point, we cannot but think of the western men’s
sons, going to London, never to return.) The king’s appetite is particularly hawkish;
his description of Waster’s feast recalls Winner’s description, except a different desire
is being half-expressed:

The herouns, þe hastelete þe henne wele to serue
Pe pertrikes, þe plouers þe oþer pulled byrddes
Pe albus, þe endes þe egretes dere (492-494).

It is the king at his most predatory.

The judgment is awash in irony, revealing that the king understands that the
debate has been pointless. The king recognizes their interdependence—"Pe more þou
wastis þi wele þe better þe Wynner lykes"—but this recognition dissolves the dichotomy
of winning and wasting that has been the center of the debate. This conclusion does
not seem to be lost on the king, whose solution denies this difference. The king asks
the combatants to change roles; Winner will waste the hoarded wealth of the Pope,
while Waster’s second-hand carousing and retail robbery will win the wealth of many
people for the London coffers.¹²³ Winner is enlisted to the king’s martial purposes
with promise of plunder and honors; his support of Waster is thus made into an
investment in the absolute winning of laying another land waste. In war, winning and
wasting are the same thing; interdependence gives way to ambiguity.

The utility of this allegory to the poem-king is obvious; imputing only evil
motives to his own people allows him to exploit them ruthlessly. Winner and Waster
deserve none of the consideration that their constituents, taken for themselves, would
demand. With such representatives, the merchants and farmers become merely sources

¹²³ There may be some satire of the merchant class implied here; it would
appear that the king considers Waster’s thieving to be at home in the Cheapside
markets. The Pope is portrayed as so plush that even Winner would waste there.
of wealth to be bled; the army becomes a consumer of wealth to be mollified, and the Church a rival for the booty of a rapacious public policy. Ethics are not a consideration in the management of vices, so unethical action becomes possible. Winner and Waster are not simply aspects of the poem-king's personality, or of his world, but of his policy. Through it the poem-king promotes a public discourse, represented by the debate, that reinforces his prejudices toward the merchants, warriors and clergy that make up his kingdom. By allowing this kind of back-biting rhetoric to flourish, the king keeps his victimized people accusing everyone but himself; yet he is the silent actor in all his two knights do and say.

The debate is largely nonsense, at once the symptom and political vehicle of an evil mind, but its resolution may not be, if we assume that the king does not take the debate's terms seriously but wishes his judgement to be effective policy for his own reasons. The hermeneutic pattern of debate is that it finds its significance in the judgment, even in ironic or perverse examples. So we may ask what the solution solves, and what problems it defines or redefines.

Once these questions are answered, it will turn out that neither economics nor morality truly concern the king at all. As we will see, it is no coincidence that the king's judgment accompanies his revelation of an upcoming war, nor that this war—more specifically, the arranging of its finance—serves to "solve" the problem between his knights.

The judgment's first reading of the debate cuts away the conflict's commercial trappings in favor of a focus on taxation. Commerce seems to be a preoccupation of the two knights, and wealth certainly attracts violence and political verbiage of the most tangled sort; on the basis of the poem's economic rhetoric, Lois Roney is willing to attribute singular and anachronistic economic understanding of the "flow" of wealth—"from land to consumers/producers and back to the land again" (1100)—to the poet.
Winner and Waster certainly concerns itself with the transience of land as a source of wealth, indeed further shows that wealth is only meaningful as it passes from one hand to another; however, in the poem these ideas are part of Waster's economics, an unlikely source for ideas that the poem is supposed to advocate. It is tax that makes Winner's money Waster's, that brings their wealth together, more so than business; Waster demonstrates a commercial interdependence, but we have seen that Winner is concerned with his purse, not his goods. Taxation reduces Winner's wealth, but in war's absence, Waster must get the same wealth through thievery or selling off his own property. So Winner desires that Waster become more like him, not for moral reasons, but in order to protect his own property from Waster's predations, legal and illegal. Recall that Waster's analogy to commerce is, like all his other analogies, self-serving deception; for instance, he claims that it does not cost Winner when he carouses, or buys fine clothes, but the money with which he does this is exacted from Winner, and then used by Waster to purchase goods from him, a losing situation no matter what the profit margin. In answer to this problem, the king enlists Winner in his war effort, to which Winner contributes primarily through taxation; the war is attractive either as a defensive measure against attack--France's looming threat was an oft-heard refrain of the government's, and a strong navy for controlling the English Channel is the first principle of the merchant-advocacy poem The Libel of English Policy--or as a potentially profitable investment. Waster, in war, will work to aid Winner's profiteering and relieve his own indebtedness; their differences will disappear.

124 May McKisak notes that "the wages and profits of war relieved the landlord from exclusive dependence on his farms" (259). The war is generally assumed to be popular with all classes, as it offered profit and advancement even to the lowest of its participants (253). No one has, to my knowledge, done a historical study aimed at discovering anti-war sentiment, though certainly there must have been some, if only among the very religious, the highly taxed, the families of the dead and maimed, and the politically contrary.
Tax is not the only problem that war lessens; it dissolves the moral issues as well. Waster’s lawlessness is exported in war, where he ravages foreign lands and takes his fortune from foreign winners. In this way continuous fighting relieves the homeland of its peacetime burden. The immense cost of war also makes hoarding and conspicuous consumption difficult, at least until the spoils roll in. The effect is to the nation’s benefit, on the political surface at least. Winner’s avarice moves overseas, to Rome, its perennial home in the minds of many fourteenth-century English; this relocation reflects propaganda—such as Edward III’s many complaints about papal provisions—aimed in part at lessening the laity’s anger over domestic taxes. Waster’s prodigality is limited to legal debaucherries—becoming part of the London economy—to the diminishment of its revolutionary and criminal potential.

The benefit of war, then, is that it temporarily assuages the social ills it originates; the judgment is therefore a political resolution at best. The king’s judgment does not resolve the many dilemmas that the poem has spelled out; rather, it simply puts them off. No other resolution is possible. We have seen that the debate’s issues are created by the point-of-view of the king, whose eye directs the dreamer’s sight to the extent that the dreamer is almost indistinguishable from it. It is not surprising, therefore, that the "solution" turns out to be consistent with the desire that causes the "problem." The amoral outlook that divides a nation into Winners and Wasters for purposes of financing a war—in the end, the king’s voracious desire to make war is the only active force at work in the dream-vision—creates terrible in-fighting and moral decay, evidenced by this rancorous debate. Far from a tract on advanced economic theory, or a plea for a more responsive moral discourse, the poem demonstrates the dumbing down of these concepts by a single-minded, cynical policy that willfully ignores both. *Winner and Waster* assumes that the audience is knowledgeable about these issues and aghast at the government’s treatment of them.
The "debate" is an exercise in the king's wise and sly manipulation of domestic politics through moral language, but it is also the complainant's expression; the complainant's mistrust of words finds its ultimate utterance in this hypocritical exchange of cynical accusations, in a debate that is no debate, an allegory that is no allegory, and in the person of the king who encourages such an insincere dialogue. The poem begs for some kind of good faith gesture that would strip away all the accusation and allow for concord, not between the false fronts of Winner and Waster, but between their constituents and the king. In economic interdependence, and in the needs of the poor, the poem perhaps offers different ways to consider the conflicts of the time; but it is clear that such ideas and such people are used within the milieu of Winner and Waster simply as rhetorical devices in aid of struggles for power. The result of such wrangling is evidenced by the complainant, whose representation of the rurality's opinion implies both the populace's disapproval of the discourse of the mighty, and, by implication, the potential weakness of this leadership and of its nation.

**Asserting an Ideal of Government**

The poem ends suddenly; it is possible that the complainant's voice returns briefly to wrap it up, but we will never know and speculation on this point is not useful.

There is no doubt, whatever the ending, that the complainant's attitude remains in force through the poem's various voices, specifically his distrust of language. The rest of Winner and Waster is a practical demonstration of this distrust. This poem fits into the pattern of complaint rather well; the inept complainant-speaker, the stealthy undermining of poetic conventions, and the skillfully-speaking enemy are all familiar elements. The sophisticated way in which the poem handles the complainant's attempt to wrestle with the world, letting his attitude show through his various creations, is shared, for instance, by "Why I Can't Be a Nun." As in that poem, the complainant's
attitude is justified by the progress of his creation. In *Winner and Waster*, we understand that the complainant’s pathetic ineptitude is a result of his mistrust of words, a position that the poem demonstrates to be wise. His failure to recapture the plain language that he remembers is proof of the world’s degeneration.

Complaint itself is the one of the forms most critiqued in this poem, as it was in "Friar Daw’s Reply" and "Why I Can’t Be a Nun." *Winner and Waster* are mimicking the complainant, even stealing his pastoralisms; the king is seen to benefit from complaint by determining its terms and capitalizing on its limited ability to propose specific change. Therefore, like the other complaints we have seen, *Winner and Waster* encourages us to rise above its complainant’s approach, and especially the king’s; it asks for a positive engagement with a true discourse surrounding royal finances and the effect of the war-effort on domestic affairs. More specifically, it blames the king for promulgating and maintaining a false sense of the world for his war effort; his mind has to be influenced in order for things to change. The entire vicious world-view is attributed to the royals; the true discourse is conservative, restoring "winner" to its former good meaning and removing the appellation "waster" from the army. Far from being a call for a more realistic economy, the poem desires a more idealistic one; it requires that certain members of the economy be treated with more good faith by the king.

We see, then, that its narrative structure mirrors its hierarchical political outlook, in that authoritative speech results in lesser actors speaking the same. The poem begins as a complaint, and the complaining persona acts through its creations, who reflect its needs and premises. The king, the poem proposes, has the same effect on his nation; the subjects act out the king’s analysis of them, are subjects of it. Conditions change only as these authorities see differently; all must wait "till the prynce come" to his (common)senses. The poem as we have it may end, therefore, on
the threshold of employing yet another poetic type—the poetry of advice, along the lines of "The Deposition of Richard II" or the "Mirror for Princes." We have seen such a transformation in "Why I Can't Be a Nun." We have a poem, that is, that appeals to one of the continuing preoccupations of its age—the need for the monarch to be responsive to those he governs, to take advice and act with the assent of his subjects, at least of some of them.

Returning to the academic debate that began this chapter, we can now reconsider the gap between "old-style historicism" and "formalist" criticism that Trigg identifies. The formalism and idealism of the Thornton/Bestul school may have discovered the principles by which the poem orders and narrates the historical references of the Gollancz/Trigg school. That is, *Winner and Waster*'s most important historical dimension may lie in the way it enlists historical references to affirm transhistorical ideals, and not in the precise time any of these references were added to it.

Perhaps for Thornton, and certainly for Gollancz, these references were malleable, discovered according to premises that made them relevant to the times these editors lived in. Thornton—probably—and Gollancz—certainly—edited the poem to make it conform more easily to their premises. However, the poem's hierarchical assumptions and movement toward the idealistic made it especially easy for both the medieval moralist and the modern historian to find what they needed in it. Gollancz certainly felt that the poem reflected upon his contemporary king's role as moral leader of the nation; Thornton, too, may have seen this same element, which brings together the themes of royal control and royal responsibility. In responding to this aspect, both editors were meeting *Winner and Waster* on its own terms.
CONCLUSION

I have proposed that the Complaint Against the Times, or "political complaint," uses its portrayal of despair to raise alarm at the weakness of moral principles, but that it also implies a critique of these moral principles. Its effect is to bring about a new formulation that makes them relevant, to shift these principles to new bases. It is therefore morally pragmatic and even progressive, despite its conservative ideology.

Some poems that use this kind of poetic structure draw upon the effects available through narrative layering to intensify the drama of the complaining, reflecting the world's turmoil in the microcosm of the complainant and his failed rhetorical efforts. The complainant's pathetic situation, played straight or for laughs, engenders a desire to reaffirm the ostensibly simple values that life constantly challenges; this is done by reformulating these principles in a way—and the way will depend on circumstances—that the complainant would not, we surmise, approve or even comprehend. In this way, the political complaint can either advocate a commonsense change toward the current de facto norm—as in "Why I Can't Be a Nun"—or serve as the justification of a reformulation that is contesting for influence, as in "Jack Upland."

The political complaint's critical function is apparent in the way these poems serve to critique moral rhetoric. Such poems often reverse or redirect the more common effects of the rhetorics that accompany the complaint: a dream-vision that advocates learning from everyday waking experience, for example, or a debate that reveals its own terms to be exhausted of their social relevance.

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Winner and Waster serves in this study as an accomplished example of these
dramatic and critical functions used to critique the king’s politics and the kind of moral
debate such politics encourage. In its concern for the king’s responsibilities, Winner
and Waster approaches becoming a poem of advice, a line that only "Why I Can’t Be a
Nun" and "Jack Upland" cross, of all the pieces here considered.

Political complaint, indeed, can be said to beg for advice, to complement it.
Two short Boethian poems of Chaucer’s, "Lak of Steadfastnesse" and "Truth," would
appear made to fit one another in precisely this fashion, the first being a Complaint on
the Times and the second an idealistic exhortation to withdraw from the world’s
"besinesse." Six manuscripts pair them, and in five of them "Lak of Steadfastnesse"
comes first. The contents are proverbial, the sentiments general, and the relationship
almost too pat to my modern taste; the answer to the engagement with the world that
"Lak of Steadfastnesse" portrays is, in "Truth," to withdraw from it altogether and
await the next world’s rewards. This philosophical conventionality is far less
interesting, though perhaps more beautiful, than the political aspects of these same
poems as expressed through their respective envoys to Richard II and de la Vache.\textsuperscript{125}
Despite the Boethian overtones, at base the change is rhetorical; the isolation of the
speaker is solved by redefining its terms from involuntary exile to moral independence.
The world’s lack of steadfastness between individuals is answered by advice to "Flee
from the prees and dwelle with sothfastnesse." Truthfulness lies in the heart alone, but
that is enough in "Truth"--one follows one’s own "gost" and need not strive against the
world. The complainant becomes the "pilgrim" on the road of conscience.

\textsuperscript{125} A good retrospective on the criticism of these poems is in Jay Ruud’s book,
which traces Chaucer’s shifting philosophical allegiances through his shorter poems.
That is the purpose of political complaint; to produce moral pilgrims whose individual negotiations might breathe new life into principles held to be inviolable. It is the space in which a certain individualistic, moral relativism of a uniquely medieval sort can be given its head; it prevents the principle of *contemptu mundi* from becoming too abstract and potentially irrelevant, as it certainly threatens to become in the philosophical complaints of Chaucer and Boethius, instead defining the "world" to which such a philosophical position must respond. We need only consider "Truth" without its envoy to de la Vache to see how much a specific focus adds to what would otherwise be an unremarkable abstraction. The same could be said of "Lak of Steadfastnesse" without its envoy to Richard; a truly "philosophical" complaint without specifics suffers from lack of application.126

Therefore, while the complaint may be ubiquitous, it was rarely if ever pursued for its own sake. Complaint was rhetoric available across classes and environments; supposedly cruder complaints do not represent a literary tradition from which something like "Lak of Steadfastnesse" is drawn or against which it is superimposed. For example, I have argued that "Jack Upland" and "Friar Daw's Reply" together indicate that the argument between the regular clergy and the friars had reached a complete and exhausting stalemate; we may also see a mark of this political logjam in the visceral, unprincipled hatred between Chaucer's Friar Huberd and the Summoner,

126 I am purposely using these poems as examples because they have had interpretive historical contexts provided them by modern historians on the basis of these envoys. Paul Strohm has investigated the political milieu of "Lak of Steadfastnesse," and concluded that it serves to support Richard, and so, of course, to ingratiate its author to the king (*Hochon's Arrow* 57-74). It is interesting that the Envoy to Richard argues for precisely the opposite reaction--political involvement with the world--that the sister-poem "Truth" counsels against.
who certainly seem to be beyond debating any theological issues. However, this seeming similarity in approach to a political issue is not a matter of literary interplay so much as social context; that is, Chaucer's take on the animosity may reflect the same social reality but it is not otherwise related to this more technically-oriented political complaint. It does, however, provide some support for the historical speculation we attributed to the social context of "Friar Daw's Reply."  

It is this kind of socio-historical function that has always attracted the most attention to political complaint, though this attention has been excessively focused on identifying authorship, rather than carefully reading the nuanced social critique beneath the complaining surface. I think that the future of scholarship about these poems lies in this historical role and in the application of more attentive modern readings. For example, it is plainly an oversimplification to read "Satire on the Consistory Courts" merely as a satirical/comical attack on the slovenly "peasant" by the clergy, as some have done in the name of historical accuracy. Nor is it right to read it as a first-

127 This has been the recognized undercurrent of their relationship for centuries. Jay Ruud has recently reevaluated the Summoner's tale as a carefully crafted criticism of friars on their own apostolic terms, in which light it resembles the technical politics of "Jack Upland."

128 There is some evidence that the anti-Lollard cause united the quarrelsome divisions of the Church in at least this endeavor, though there is some lamenting about old quarrels preventing cooperation. An article is forthcoming on the place of "Friar Daw's Reply" in the orthodox discourse of the early fifteenth century.

129 See George Kane, "Some Fourteenth-Century 'Political' Poems," for an attack on the idea that this poem is in any way critical of the consistory courts, mostly on the basis that it was written by a cleric (86-88). Kane believes that the complainant's accusations of corruption are meant to be indications--as some of his other points of his complaint most definitely are--of his ignorance and irascibility, the traditional faults of the peasantry in medieval literature. I do not think that the medieval class structure implied this kind of knee-jerk uniformity of opinion--they were social classes in a monarchy, not political parties in a republic--and there are similar accusations in Bromyard's sermon-book and in Langland, among other places, that are not meant as examples of stupidity. Kane's relatively conservative reading, in this same article, of John Ball's "letters" is interesting in contrast to that in Writing and Rebellion. His corrective interpretation of certain lines of Song of the Husbandman points out the narrative voice, and to that extent is like mine in emphasizing the poem's per-
person complaint by a justifiably aggrieved "peasant," as others have. Plainly it is not entirely either; we discover this by applying our formal presumptions upon the poem’s layered narrative voices. Once the effects are established, they provide guidelines to historical speculation about audience that attempt to discover attitudes, rather than prescribe them to an author. To whom would this mix of class-based condescension and conservative social activism appeal? Who would laugh at the ridiculous man to whom the consistory court ministers, and yet take the underlying moral jabs at the court to heart? The poem practically dares us to care about the complainant, and only through this charitable caring, perhaps itself only coming about in the aftermath of the cathartic laughter, do we see a kernel of reforming purpose. My guess is that neither the corrupt functionaries at the court nor the people with whom they dealt would be receptive to the poem’s approach. Clergy not so corrupted, however, would be capable of exactly this mix of responses, especially but not only those serving at a consistory court. The business of such medieval "social work"—we can only imagine the labor involved for the clergy in a time of seasonal starvation, rampant disease and violence—may have created a need for release in the form of cruel-humorous abuse of the clients, while the injustices done to these same parishioners in the courts—perhaps brought quite loudly to the local parson’s attention whenever they occurred—would be a cause for genuine professional concern. The net effect is to separate the issue of corruption from those it affects, allowing for a more idealistic and moralistic consideration of it without formative aspects.

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130 Scott Waugh reminds us that "ecclesiastical courts were not immune from private complaints about corruption or coercion nor from royal inquests into ministerial abuses" (207). Judges of the secular variety were occasionally imprisoned for their corruption, including one Sir John Willoughby, "accused 'by clamor of the people'" (McKisack, 205).
the distortions of class prejudice; it becomes intra-estate, not inter-estate.131

It is precisely because this message is so rhetorically complicated, and its job so extraordinary, that it finds its expression in poetry; the regular ecclesiasts could hear the direct, denunciatory approach regularly, if they wished to listen in on a friar or, worse yet, a Lollard sermonizing the populace.132 Their hearts may have been hardened to criticism from such sources, and to their echoes in the mouths of the folk in the pews and in the streets. But an anonymous poem that defused odium through laughter before it attempted to address the infamous effects of munera on the court would speak to them with no anger, and encourage relaxed contemplation.

I do not believe that there is a single recorded instance of such a poem making the slightest difference in any policies, or causing a change in attitudes. If we are to allow such texts an active historical role, they must acquire it in the same manner—infusion and implication within a hierarchical social structure—that they appear to have worked for it in their own time. Readings that do not seek such implications are simply not allowing these political poems to be political, nor, if poetry is supposed to be extraordinary speech about extraordinary ideas, leaving much room for them to be poems. There is much indeterminacy involved in this kind of speculative historical interpretation, but the poems may never provide surer evidence otherwise, and have much to offer if read with attention to admittedly modern theories of narrative structure and narrative authority. The question for the historically-minded scholar is whether it is proper to dismiss the resulting evidence on the basis of how it is uncovered; that a

131 Another possible audience are the officials of the secular courts, whose encroachment on the areas once exclusive to the ecclesiastical courts was a long-standing issue (Waugh 207).

132 Owst's book is replete with examples from the Dominican John Bromyard, and other sources. See especially pp. 222-3, 251-5, 341.
procedure is not theoretically historicist may pose no bar to its use for historical investigation, and indeed such a method has a valuable role as an ongoing corrective to historically-informed interpretations that may over-stress differences. If history is another narrative, part of the network of language that must itself be considered holistically, then its own pressure upon interpretation must be considered as warily as any other.

The current atmosphere in literature studies is one of just such pragmatic compromise between objective reading procedures conducted by individuals and postmodern theory that is designed to qualify—and, often, delegitimate—their results. I wish to examine one argument for continuing to so compromise and so initiate a dialogue over a single issue arising from the pragmatic use of textualist theory for historical investigation within an academic setting. Abbot Whethamstede, reflected in the dark glass of my own interpretive prejudices, will join in, and contribute, through his poem, an analysis of this issue. Whethamstede's very historical remoteness gives

Lee Patterson notes that "there is and will always be a positivist historicism ready to rush into any methodological vacuum with a preclusive interdiction against detailed and penetrating interpretation" (Negotiating, 113).

History-as-narrative is one of several topics explored by Hayden White, in essays collected in The Content of the Form. Paul Ricouer's move, as described by White, to interpret above the level of the sentence in order to find the symbolism of entire narratives, so making narrative the core element of our temporal conception, represents a move toward an ideal of mind analogous to those made by every modern theoretical writer mentioned in this chapter.

A. Leigh DeNeef (Traherne in Dialogue) demonstrates that since any contextual reading is based on an arbitrary definition of the context, this must itself be held apart from the reading if the text is to have its own influence and power on that context explored (1-19). No kind of compositional history-making over time is possible according to this scheme, and so DeNeef's concept of the dialogue as a means of making the past speak is to my mind ahistorical in that respect. Any kind of holism has this historical-compositional weakness, one I think ultimately intolerable to any historicist project.
him a useful amount of distance on our postmodern issues, and so paradoxically brings a fresh perspective to them.

Perhaps he is not so distant from some of us. We do not have to look very far to find a community of readers whose professional situation resembles that of the monks of St. Albans; we may ask Abbot Whethamstede’s poem, since it is a literary accomplishment in history-making, to provide insights about writing and reading history in an academic setting. It would seem, for example, difficult to separate ideology and agent in this poem as I have read it, or as Joseph Keller and indeed many traditional historians would read it; Whethamstede’s desire to disparage his enemies and promote his own historical image can be attributed to his allegiance to the monastery he officially represents, while his action—using his authority to place the poem into the chronicle—denotes the same ideological commitment. Would any self-promotion, any supposedly selfish exercise of his power, not inevitably support the organization of this power in which he existed and which he exploited? Ideology and desire, society and individual, would seem for this poem to be indistinguishable, rendering problematic the question of whether an historical agent’s desires and that agent’s contemporary ideology should be differentiated by interpreters. This kind of question has been an abiding concern in the writings of many literary historians. As Janet Levarie Smarr has put it:

Are the writers, at one extreme, conscious, freely willing, individually purposive and responsible agents, or, at the other extreme, merely nodes in a network of larger active forces that write, as it were, through them the way our body [sic] might express its sweat through its pores? (Smarr 7).

The elements of the mind/body problem that inhabit Smarr’s language only show how irreconcilable the difference is. Yet I do not think that this is primarily a theoretical problem, since strictly speaking there is no stable middle ground between the humanist tradition of the individual author/actor and the Foucaultian and Lacanian theories of the
subject that Smarr adopts as reference points;\textsuperscript{136} rather, it is a political issue, tied to the practical needs and concerns of academics, and as such it engenders pragmatic, politic responses:

Anyone wanting to be politically responsible needs a theory [including elements of both extreme conceptions of the writers]. This may look like framing the "truth" to suit one’s desires, but the alternative is to live with contradictions between one’s own theory and actions (Smarr 9).

Smarr demands a reconciliation between individualism and "Foucaultian" theory on the grounds that either alone is not realistic politics, which she both properly equates with "actions" and improperly separates from action through the phrase "politically responsible." An interpretive theory’s power to define "truthful" meaning must be applied in reference to the scholar’s politics/actions, according to Smarr; this is an ideologically and politically restricted approach to the problem, essentially a demand for a theoretical commitment that can inhabit, as the scholar does, a university and all the actions it entails.

Such a compromise has been eloquently defended already by Lee Patterson during a critique of New Historicism:

Of course, to propose the recuperation of humanism will inevitably be seen by many as simply the reaction of an offended liberalism. But if we cannot return to the transhistorical bourgeois individual...neither can we dispense with the category of individualism altogether. To deprive the human agent of any purchase upon the social whole is to signal the end of a politics we desperately need (Negotiating 72).

Patterson’s approach historicizes the concepts of the individual, the individual’s intentions, and the category of literature so that these categories can continue to be applied, in all their "waywardness...fitfulness...and complexity" (158). None of these are available except through interpretation, of course, and the readings that fill Negotiating

\textsuperscript{136} Both theorists are mentioned in Smarr’s article in authoritative roles. Foucault’s famous "What is an Author?" is the seminal document for the problem.
the Past are his pragmatic proofs. Nevertheless, as with Smarr, Patterson's legitimating reason given for so acting is not theoretical but political; obviously, these categories enable certain kinds of public speech that neither author wishes to be without.

Both Smarr and Patterson are in fact talking about values, and specifically justice, more than the individual ideal; I think that these commitments are obvious in Smarr's writing when it takes up the problem of truth correspondence and links it to politics:

To eliminate any notion of objective truth (even one that is never reachable) on behalf of the truths constructed by power is to construct, in turn, a politics with which we may not really want to live, a politics of might is right. It replaces a loving desire to understand the other (text or person) and to place oneself in a relationship of mutual influence, with a philosophy of arrogant exploitation as politically dangerous as the ethnocentrisms from which critics have been slowly struggling away (Smarr, 16 n. 2).

This passage shows concern for the foundations of a concept of justice. The two functional phrases here, the ones that actually matter and influence, are "objective truth" and "loving desire to understand the other," set in opposition to a politics that makes justice synonymous with power by equating what should be done with what can be done. The others are a little misleading. Politics, as we have already noted, are lived, not lived with, and the only way any political arrangement exists is in one's actions; one cannot take a position outside of it. The dichotomy between this "politics" and that of "mutual influence" is also misleading, since the same ideas of cultural relativism have, in the past, underwritten both arrogant ethnocentric exploitation and relationships of mutual influence; the difference is one of attitude, the very sense of justice that Smarr wishes to defend. It is important to eliminate these other ideas from this paragraph because they obscure that it is issues of interpretation, of truth and understanding, that inform its concern with justice.
We will first consider the idea, not obvious on the face of it, that "objective truth" or its pursuit ensures equitable interpretation. "Truths constructed by power," are, of course, meanings as far as interpretation is concerned, and so by resisting them with a category of objective truth Smarr is revealing a reliance on a long-standing empirical goal, a theory of meaning corresponding to a theory of objective truth. Smarr believes in the contingency of concepts of truth, but does not wish to let the idea of an absolute truth outside language games die, lest it take justice of a universal sort with it. This interpolation of objectivity into textualism is difficult to maintain, and no way is offered to pursue it. As a mere category, or goal, objective truth is hardly functional at all. The critique of this very idea is one of the foundation-stones of the theoretical conclusions Smarr wishes to modify; that is, poststructuralist theories are in part predicated on the problems of correspondence theories of truth and meaning, and it is on the basis of such problems that their critique of Western philosophy proceeds. Therefore, a synthesis between positivist theories of truth and poststructuralist theories of the historical text, of the type suggested by Smarr, seems impossible.

What has the Abbot to say about truth? Whethamstede's poem does not pretend to correspond to an objective empirical truth, much the contrary, yet it obviously makes truth-claims upon our interpretation of the events it describes. How it does this

137 A truth-correspondence test is simply not available, and one does not need to be a poststructuralist to see this. Willard Van Orman Quine critiqued the positivist correspondence test of meaning—that any sentence is ultimately reducible to a true or false statement about sensory experience—in his famous essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951). Quine was himself an empiricist, but he showed with considerable acuity that no statement was analytical, that is, no statement could be held to have a self-evident meaning, and so opened empiricist linguistic procedures to relativistic critique and to the possibility of indeterminacy.

The so-called "Frege Argument" (represented simply in Evnine, 136-137, 180-183) shows that the context "corresponds to the fact that" is truth-functional with any two co-extensive terms, and so cannot explain truth in terms of facts. Correspondence to facts cannot relate truth to knowledge.
must depend upon a theory of interpretation that does not include empirical truth analysis.

The Abbot comes into the conversation by invitation, as it were. Smarr invokes St. Augustine’s theory of interpretation and truth as an example of a now unavailable solution to the problems of interpreting others:

Augustine suggests that no human can ever communicate effectively with another except through the mediation of God in whom all are united. Hence he addressed his *Confessions* not to us but to God, who is, for Augustine, both its author and its reader, writing through Augustine’s mind and reading through ours. For those who do not share in his beliefs, language—words instead of the Word—must serve as the secularized locus of our imperfect encounters. (Smarr, 10)

I am going to assume that Whethamstede subscribed to this idea or a variation of it, and ask what problems it solves. Ideologically, or at least theoretically, Augustine is sceptical of language’s ability to communicate truth about the world, at least entirely. He assures the truth to-the-world of utterances by finding all true statements to be true-to-God, from whom the world and true statements flow. Postlapsarian man is a "liar," to Augustine, and absolute truth correspondence involves a deferral to an Ideal that constitutes the speaking mind and its objects, that is the source of all true reason and logic.138

Whethamstede’s poem, by bewailing truth’s loss and the slipperiness of words, would seem therefore superfluous, merely compensatory, subject to the criticism of uselessness that we saw Lee Patterson levelling in the Introduction of this study. The poem depicts a person encircled by evil, drowning in it; everyone is infected with false seeming, acting out of their station, in flux—words were once plain and fixed, beyond interpretation, but now are debased, relative to wills individual and corporate. No

138 Brian Stock (*Augustine the Reader*) describes Augustine as theoretically sceptical with regards the efficacy of interpretation, relying upon a "system of deferrals in which the authority of the text is removed from the reader’s control" (278).
interpretation is self-sufficient, no sentence analytical, in such circumstances; com-
munication has faltered between liars. The history informing this depiction of the
world is the Fall; mankind was right/complete/centered once, but now is none of these.
Yet the evil surrounds a prior good—represented immediately in the person of the
nostalgic narrator and ultimately in Christ—that eventually will be redeemed. The
poem is full of images depicting the infection of the once healthy and a change from
clarity and plainness to obfuscation and disguise; their force depends upon our
understanding that the one precedes and is different from the other:

Heu! modo quas coluit terras Astraea reliquit,
Fraus sibi successit, patriam pax, proh dolor!

False seeming depends on true seeming, and takes advantage of truth’s priority in inter-
pretation; it is, in the Augustinian tradition, portrayed as secondary to truth, a variation
on truth. The ideal of prelapsarian truth and language’s correspondence to it thus
enters into the text and maintains an authorizing, phantom presence; the poem therefore
serves to demonstrate the necessity of deferral to this metaphysical ideal for truth-
telling to withstand any kind of sceptical scrutiny. On this point, the poem and its
themes would seem extraneous.

However, because of its temporal element, Whethamstede’s verses also
demonstrate the mere priority of truth-telling in a very antisceptical sense. We can,
following along, map a historical pattern of perfection, fall and redemption, and the
corollary idea of prior truth, out over the whole history of mankind as medieval
Christian historians did, over a single "life" as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight does,
and we can map it out over a single act of speech or writing. This faith-first, truth-first
principle of medieval theology has implications for a theory of interpretation, for in

139 This is the well-known doctrine that evil is a corruption of being, to be found
in the De Moribus Manichaeorum, 6.8, among other places innumerable.
non-religious and interpretive terms, we may say that a speaking or writing act is held true as a necessary component of being interpreted. Truth is attached to the writer's act—we hold his or her writing to be true—as a corollary part of a necessary assumption about the basic sameness of that writer to ourselves and the writer's ability to address a reality that is at least partially intelligible to all parties.\textsuperscript{140} Whethamstede may well believe that truth lies outside of the world altogether, and he may be right about that, but in practice such words come to us, and out of him, with an assumption that he is truthful to a mutually understandable world—even a lie involves this assumption, so that a lie is implicitly defined as a lack, as it is for Augustine, of faith in "that according to which one lies" (On Christian Doctrine 36:40).\textsuperscript{141} This reliance on agreement is perhaps more obvious with this poem than with others, because the poem raises the intention to tell true as a theme: "...ut mea metra ferunt" (35).

Such a concept of truth—that truth does not authorize the interpretive result, but rather is a necessary concept in intelligibility—implies a take on meaning that stresses coherence relative to the text and its circumstances. The Abbot's interpretation of history, for example, is an application of a literary convention he saw as particularly

\textsuperscript{140} This idea is borrowed from the theory of "radical interpretation" and its adjuncts, advanced in several articles by Donald Davidson and collected in Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (1984). Davidson extends the so-called "Principle of Charity"—that we, as Simon Evnine puts it in his introductory book on Davidson's philosophy, must assume that the interpretee believes what we believe, or interpret in such a way that the interpretee's sentences held by her to be true turn out to be true according to us (Donald Davidson, 103). Indeed, Davidson points out that all interpretation requires this principle, and shows it underwriting the folk-psychological concepts of belief, desire, meaning and intentional action. His systematic philosophy includes a holistic approach to language and to the causal relations in which utterances are made; literature students looking for a place to begin might try the interview in Philosophy, Rhetoric, Literary Criticism: (Inter)views (9-35).

\textsuperscript{141} In this context note that Augustine, in On Christian Doctrine, precedes his book on the interpretation of signs with one on faith; one need not be a Christian to see the basic intuition underlying this arrangement.
appropriate to its circumstances; its meaning/content is a purely theoretical notion within its context of interpretation. Consider the poem's historically-conditioned concept of the individual; the poem is clearly meant to function—in its context—as the expression of one man, albeit a man with a remarkable amount of care for the Abbey as an institution that resists individual desire. In this way the poem is an example of the "category of the individual" functioning in an ideological/rhetorical environment that does not promote individualism as such; functioning as a vehicle, that is, for a lonely, vulnerable speaking that begs for assimilation. Whethamstede, as we have seen, was able to anticipate two possible contexts for his verses and attempted a poem that means differently in each, that creates the theoretical "Abbot Whethamstede" differently in each. This speculative writing implies a stance toward meaning-as-theoretical, as dependent upon circumstances. The circumstances and prejudices he shares with us are, happily, sufficient that we can interpret both meanings; we may find one more plausible than another, even more true, but the concept of truth involved in this judgment is not relative to the meanings we find.

It would therefore appear, with reference to Whethamstede's poem anyway, that Augustine's ideal of God as the source and destination of true speaking is not necessary to the pragmatic practice of interpretation. Indeed, in practical interpretive terms, this

142 Whethamstede's intolerance in matters smacking of individual expression is evidenced in his official grant of leave to one William, who, apparently for love of music, wished to migrate to Christ Church at Canterbury (Annales I 90-97). It took the intervention of Whethamstede's enemy the Archbishop of Canterbury to pry William free of the Abbey. The chronicle compares this William to Eve in a lengthy and tortured analogy to the Expulsion; the Abbot, using the plural voice, admonishes him on behalf of the entire Abbey for being "an ungracious son, and vexatious." One of the Abbey's rules under Whethamstede was that no brother may address another in the singular number (Annales I 114).

Yet a discourse of individualism was explored in medieval culture, and as early as the eleventh century (Morris). David Aers ("A Whisper in the Ear...") has pointed out that medieval literature had portrayed convincing "modern" individuals before the supposed birth of the concept around the time of Hamlet.
idealism acts in the opposite way that it is conceived; that is, in everyday terms
rationality and coherence are taken by Augustine to be a sign of participation in God's
ideal true order, and their lack a good sign that reinterpretation is needed.\textsuperscript{143} God is
peripheral to mutual understanding in the sense that any truth correspondence of any
sort is not necessary. Indeed, in "Friar Daw's Reply" and in Winner and Waster we
have dramatic examples of successful and pragmatic interpretive strategies that feature
internal coherence--within the poem-king's strategy, Winner needs Waster for self-
definition--but lack any respect for truth.

There is an underlying ethic to an interpretive theory with such a normative
bent, because the goal of an interpretive theory based on shared belief and coherence
meaning is agreement, not simply meaning. We moderns cannot pretend that attribut-
ing truth-telling does not entail certain expectations of rationality on which our attribu-
tions of believing, speaking and thinking rely;\textsuperscript{144} accordingly, when we discover "non-

\textsuperscript{143} So Augustine (On Christian Doctrine 2:32-35) maintains that man's
rationality is a consequence of the rational order of God's world generally. For him,
logic by itself reveals no truths, or at least not the Source of immutable truths, but truth
is always logical and rational, and so "a false premise should be led to its valid
inferences so that he whose error we wish to correct will abandon it when he sees that
the consequences to which it leads are to be rejected." Coherence with other inter-
pretations held true is a test of the truth of an interpretation (On Christian Doctrine
2:37).

A broader look at the role of rationality in the late medieval world-view is avail-
able in Paul Olson, chapter 10.

\textsuperscript{144} The literature of the period supports the very basic rationality of which I am
speaking, and not only in such philosophical works as Boethius' The Consolation of
Philosophy, in which the centrality of rationality is an overt theme. Whethamstede
seems to appeal to rationality overtly, but, more importantly, he exploits its basic ele-
ments. The poem portrays the loss of rationality (rationabilia) as evidence of
animality (brutaliter), a sentiment that the poem illustrates with the absurdity of
animals assuming human stations. This imagery is ideologically informed and cir-
cumscribed, based on a hierarchy of mankind over animals, but it is also based on a
simple paradox; that is, a statement that it is not believable for humans to be not-
humans. We may disagree with the premise that animals are not "human" on any num-
ber of fronts, but the belief in the untruth of paradox is shared and makes the poem
interpretable to us at a very basic level; the more complex ideological differences are
not insurmountable. It is the rational belief (against the truth-content of paradox), and
not the intention (to disparage), that we use to interpret in the first instance.
sense," we must be moved to interpret until we have sense, not to either abandon our precepts of sense or make an inscrutable object of the "text." Shared belief allows for the discovery of meaning; discovering meaning shifts belief, and shifting belief allows for the discovery of more meaning. This is the hermeneutic process that all political complaint poetry demands of its readers; it attempts to make a critique in order to prompt a re-interpretation of the self that effectively silences the critique. The dramatic presentation of an often foolish speaker makes a political complaint’s criticisms easier to read as an almost hypothetical problem, rather than one of self-defense, but it is a matter of self-defense nevertheless. In any case, both complainant and reader are in agreement on God’s truth, and differ only in whether it applies in the way the complainant wishes it to; the audience rejects the despairing interpretation offered by the complainant, the meaning, for another more appropriate, more just.

The sense of justice such an interpretive ethic supports is one of agreement, of sanction and reward based on a shared understanding of the crime or contribution of the person(s) judged, including the subject(s) of adjudication. This, for many, would be unacceptable in principle; for Whethamstede, who decries man’s changeable nature, such situational, relativistic justice is anathema and the very object of his fury. He would insist that God ultimately guarantees the soundness of postlapsarian law, however degraded it might be from the law in Edenic times, much as He does the truth. This idealism ensures that even testimony in an earthly court is ultimately responsible to God’s absolute senses of truth and justice, and that law can be applied consistently across social borders. It is of a piece with Augustine’s theory of truth-telling. It explains both Astraea’s former residence in England and her inevitable return.
How this move applies to Smarr's and Patterson's problems of truth and justice is perhaps obvious. It implies that a defensible concept of justice requires an idealist principle of mental content that can ensure the agreement of beliefs, language use, and other intentional states between interlocutors; coherence meanings and contingent truths can thus gain the force of correspondence. We see idealism of this sort at the center of Winner and Waster, where a communitarian concept of the body politic is proposed as a tonic against a bad-faith political discourse; the poem-king must charitably extend his trust to those he rules, must listen and be responsive to his people's views of the world, must indeed accept their sovereignty over their identities, if he wishes to be just. Such an idealism is also an element of Augustine's exegetics; the double-love of God and neighbor is the principle on which interpretation proceeds, not simply the goal of the interpretive process. Love is the vehicle that finds love in texts, because love is essential to the attribution of a truth-believing mind and so is a predicate to any communication of any truth at all. Love of God is thus the basis of earthly justice.

Indeed, Smarr seems to have made a similar idealistic move. By Whethamstede's lights we can reduce still further the functional terms in the above passage, dropping "objective truth," which will not do the job required of it, and leaving only "loving desire to understand the other." This notion, perhaps related to Heideggerian "care" in today's parlance, is not reducible, and has no/needs no justification, much like caritas. Loving desire seems to function as an ideal for Smarr, brushing aside truth in favor of itself as both the beginning and the end of interpretation, and as a fundamental element of mental content, since to reach out with love is to assume the

145 Adopting an attitude of love toward one's listeners is offered as a way of overcoming sceptical doubts about communication in De Catechizandis Rudibus 12.4-6. See Stock, Augustine the Reader 189.

146 The Catholic and Manichean Ways of Life 1.15.25.
proposition that there is love already. It is therefore not surprising that Smarr considers sexual intercourse to afford a moment of temporary communion between people (9). A post-Sartrean analysis of power is thus held in uneasy balance with a pre-Sartrean ideal of love.

Deciding whether we are happy with such a situation is, of course, the state in which political complaint poems always leave us. Whethamstede’s political complaint continues, even when it is applied to the critical problems of the late twentieth century, to function as a dramatic repository for our ethical concerns, as does Winner and Waster. All political complaint poems function in this fashion, challenging us to maintain the relevance of our moral language in the face of change.
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