Chaucer and the Authority of Language: The Politics and Poetics of the Vernacular in Late Medieval England

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The singularity of Chaucer's poetry—it's marked difference from everything which came before (and after) it—is perhaps the most well-worn commonplace in the history of Chaucer studies. Many factors have been offered as explanations of this singularity: Chaucer's wide reading, his acquaintance with French and Italian poets, his introduction and subsequent mastery of the iambic line. Yet Chaucer's choice of English for his poetry, arguably his most revolutionary gesture, has seldom been remarked on, and its larger significance is all too often lost in the analysis of the minutiae of his verse.¹ One of the few scholars to emphasize this point was the late R. H. Robbins, who observed with his characteristic pithiness that,

Middle English itself, by its very existence, advocated dissent... to break away from Latin or French and use English was a major act of rebellion... the vernacular destroyed the intellectual and political control of the aristocrats of church and state.²

Despite the manifold political implications of Robbins's observation, his point has not been pursued, even by those who have explicitly sought to foreground the political and social aspects of Chaucer's poetry. Just what kind of "control" did the aristocracy exercise through its use of Latin and French? What were the specific interrelations between power and modes of discourse in late fourteenth-century England? What were the relations between literacy, gender and so-
social class? And, finally, what implications might these social and linguistic relationships have for our reading of Chaucer’s poetry?

This paper endeavors to explore these questions through a close examination of some of the social dynamics of language in late medieval Europe, particularly England in the latter part of the fourteenth century. In order to examine the separable but closely interrelated questions of literacy, linguality, social relations, and poetic practice, I will deal with them one at a time and in that order, postponing a specific discussion of Chaucer’s vernacular poetics until the latter part of the paper. There is, I should emphasize from the outset, a tremendous amount of work to be done in this area, and while much that is suggestive in Chaucer’s case has been done by non-Chaucerians, our understanding of the complex interrelations of literacy and social practice during the late Middle Ages—precisely the period where they were changing most rapidly—is still rather limited.

Of all Chaucer’s histories, the one which has most resisted being written is the history of Chaucer’s own relation to the written itself. We ourselves are living through the decline of written textuality as the alphabetic text today is exceeded (and in many places superseded) by media whose symbolic economies depend upon visual and aural components to carry a great portion of the meaning they bear. The later Middle Ages, in contrast, had become almost inebriated with the illusion of presence and permanence which the written word lent to a world that was in other ways disturbingly erratic and temporary. In some ways, the centrality of the written work was built into Christianity from its earliest days, when the gospels and letters of the Apostles were first brought together into a synoptic holy text. The Middle Ages had preserved and perpetuated this textual tradition through copying and commentary. Yet so long as literacy remained bounded by monastic and cathedral walls, its power to transform and restructure society was limited. Outside of the Church and the aristocracy, the primary currency of the first millennium was still the spoken word.

Increasingly, however, the written text came to be relied upon to codify and make permanent the legal and social relations of lord and vassal, land-right and custom. At the same time, clerical writers began to develop a fuller sense of the centrality of written language in the elucidation and codification of theological traditions. Brian Stock has shown in detail the way in which, while “performative acts in language remained verbal … they were increasingly contextualized by writing in a manner that implied shared values, assumptions, and modes of explanation.” Other studies, such as M. T. Clanchy’s From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307, are equally valuable for what they tell us about the change in social practices which echoed the changes in intellectual circles. Clanchy’s concern is primarily with legal documents, and the ways in which, during the period of his study, they came increasingly to be employed as the sole means of establishing property or other feudal rights, supplanting and eventually displacing the oral testimony of witnesses (and of symbolic objects as well).

These concurrent changes produced a profound shift in the established modalities of academic, social, and legal practices. The trade guilds, whose organization depended upon the literacy of (at least) key guild members, began keeping their own written records, often retaining a clerk or chaplain to assist in managing both secular and religious affairs. The legal profession, through the Inns of Court, began to produce its own literate professionals independently of the universities; there was also an increase in the number of small grammar schools, which offered a rudimentary education to those who could afford it. Yet peasants, small farmers, and day laborers remained outside the pale of literate social relations. For them, to interact with written authority was to enter into a discourse whose rules were unknown and unintelligible, and which they could neither contest nor control.

Some symptoms of this latter problem had grown egregious by Chaucer’s day, both the summons of the Summoner and the pardon of the pardoner were retailed to a public who could not read them, what matter that the name on the summons was someone else’s, or that the pardon stipulated terms that were never in fact enacted (such as contrition or penance)? The strength of popular resentment against the power of such written documents may be gauged at least partly by the “Peasant’s Revolt” of 1381, books and “tallies” [the wooden sticks upon which taxes were reckoned] were frequent victims of rebel outrage. Shakespeare’s Jack Cade (whose character owes more to the chronicle accounts of the 1381 rising than that of 1450), provides a convenient [and accurate] statement of this ressentiment:

Is not this a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent Lambe should be made Parchment; that Parchment, being scribed ore, should vn doc a man. Some say the Bee stings, but I say, 'tis the Bees waxe; for I did but seale once to a thing, and I was never my own man since.
The increasing importance of literacy also had subtler effects which cut across social classes and institutions. Here, while bearing in mind that most European cultures had long since moved beyond any kind of purely oral culture, it may be useful to pause to review Walter J. Ong’s “psychodynamics” of orality, and contrast them with the characteristics of written discourse in a more thoroughly textualized society. Ong argues that the discourse of “primary” oral cultures [cultures which have never known a written system, or been forced to interact with it] is “aggregative rather than analytic,” that it is “redundant or copious,” that it is “conservative” of its own traditions, and that it is “situational rather than abstract.” Oral discourse, because it evaporates as soon as it is produced, relies upon internal and collective memory for its continuity, and upon formulaic structures for its internal coherence and memorability.

Written discourse, in contrast, is at its root a retentive activity; it seeks to endure and succeed—even to the point where the context which gave it shape is altered, destroyed, or forgotten. It is analytic, progressive [in that it relies upon direct reference to written records of what has gone before], objectively distanced, and capable of abstracting itself and its terms. It is, in short, every Platonist’s dream and nightmare, for even though Plato rejected writing [as he feared it would lead to the destruction of memory], he relied upon it to perpetuate and reproduce his very sayings. Written language gave Platonic ideals a concrete embodiment, to the multiplicity of signa, there answered the defining power of the signatum. Just as importantly, for the legal and social systems of an increasingly mercantile Europe, writing provided the apparatus necessary to manage complex accounts, shifting modes of land use, tenancy, and property, as well as to regulate the system of debts, obligations, and taxation which drove the wheels of war and commerce.

Yet in England, there is a further dimension to literacy in this period that is more frequently overlooked, and that is the specific relations between literacy, linguality—language[s] of use—and social status. Latin brought with it a number of ideological and social guarantees that were crucial to the authority of Church and State. It was, furthermore, a learned language, taught chiefly in organized schools through the use of established grammatical formulae, as opposed to the vernacular, which Dante defined as “that [speech] which we learn without any rules in imitating our nurse.” Latin learning was limited almost entirely to men of the gentry and aristocracy, and disseminated primarily at institutions affiliated with the Church. At the most privileged level of intellectual society, all academic discourse was conducted in Latin, and a university degree secured its bearers’ indoctrination in a thousand years of Church teaching. Through its monopoly on education, the Church not only provided itself with priests, but supplied the State with well-nigh all of its administrators and officers, and it guaranteed orthodoxy by itself claiming exclusive jurisdiction over the literate through benefit of clergy.

Thus Latin not only served as the means of transmission of state and ecclesiastical power, but also secured the discursive limits of that power. The conjunction between language and power was particularly pronounced in England, for English had only recently superseded French as the daily language of social relations among the gentry and aristocracy. A tripartite system was in effect, with each language delimiting specific class and gender boundaries: English, learned by nearly all women and men as their first language, followed by Latin, taught almost exclusively to men (and then only to men of the upper social echelons), and serving as the primary discourse of Church and State business, and French, which still held considerable status as the speech of diplomacy, courtly romance and gentilissee, and was also the language of the law courts and many domestic records (such as Gaunt’s “household” book). French, unlike Latin, was frequently spoken by women of the gentry and nobility, or by those who sought to emulate them (such as Chaucer’s_Princess._

Latin had always, so far as the mediævals were aware, had a written form; indeed it owed its persistence over centuries of linguistic change to the stability of written discourse. As Ong in another context remarks:

Because the “high” language, Latin, had become a foreign tongue to all its users, the native, oral tongue of no one any longer, unknown to anyone who could not write it, it evoked a textual world even when it was spoken.9

Ong elsewhere uses the term “grapholect” for such a language, underlining the point that to know such a language was to write it. English, on the other hand, while it had a written form, was still primarily a spoken language, most of whose users were illiterate. It was furthermore, as all vernaculars, an “unruly” tongue in a double sense: not only did it lack a codified set of grammatical and orthographical rules, but as the language of the peasantry and laboring classes it was threateningly associated with rumor, riot, and rebellion.
During Chaucer's lifetime the threat to the established order posed by vernacular literacy was constantly growing. Its forms were twofold: as a skill that was increasingly disseminated among a growing mercantile and professional class, it threatened the old literate hegemony, Robbins's "aristocrats of church and state." Yet perhaps most troubling of all was the use of English as a political weapon by Wycliff and his Oxford allies. The early Wycliffites deliberately preached in English in order to stir up anti-fraternal sentiments among the laity, and sought to further support their cause by translating the Bible itself into English. The emphasis they placed on this translation (itself thoroughly orthodox) may be regarded as another symptom of the way the written word had come to be regarded as the point of reference for everything else—in this case, even for the justification of the Church itself.

Yet in addition to the fears which the upper classes associated with the rise of the vernacular, it is vital to comprehend the value those same classes placed on their "own" languages. What were the social effects of the privilege accorded Latin and French, and the corresponding lack of privilege accorded English? And why was it that English, even as it became fashionable in the latter part of the fourteenth century, remained a problematic language, a language which would have to wait nearly a century and a half before it could receive the license and sanction of church and state? The answers to these questions may be found in a careful archaeology of the linguistic and political discourses of the period.

We have already seen that the privilege of Latin was linked to its status as the official grapholect of the Church and (though less completely) the State. Its power depended not only upon the knowledge which it codified and conferred, but in the way that the limits of competence in this knowledge corresponded to the limits of power, and sealed the boundaries of its discursive formation. As Foucault observes in his "Discourse on Language":

There is, I believe, a third group of rules serving to control discourse. Here, we are no longer dealing with the mastery of the powers contained within discourse, nor with averting the hazards of its appearance; it is more a question of determining the conditions under which it may be employed, of imposing a certain number of rules upon those individuals who employ it, thus denying access to everyone else. This amounts to a rarefaction among speaking subjects: none may enter into dis-

Foucault here is thinking of latter-day disciplines and the institutions which certify their knowledge, but his analysis is equally applicable to that institution among institutions, the medieval Church. The Church's use of Latin as the sole legitimate vehicle in which to transmit and embody its teachings, indeed amounted to a "rarefaction among speaking subjects." For those outside the Church, it was not so much a question of being oppressed by the Church's practices, but of being excluded from the speaking subjectivity which constituted the Church itself. The role of the parishoners was to listen, and that of the parish clergy was to translate Church doctrine into a form suitable for popular consumption.

This is precisely the institutional function of the church, as delineated by the anti-heretical chronicler Henry Knighton, and indeed it is just this function which the English language usurps:

This master John Wyclif translated the gospel, which Christ had entrusted to clerks and to the doctors of this church so that they might minister it conveniently to the laity and meaner people according to the needs of the time and the requirement of the listeners in their hunger of mind; he translated it from Latin into English, not the angelic [in Anglicam, non angelicam] idiom.¹¹

"According to the needs of the time and the requirement of the listeners in their hunger of mind" (secundum temporis, exigentiam et personarum indigentiam, cum mentis eorum esurie)—this phrase defines the exegetical function of the Church, ever coming between its own internal authority (the Latin Bible) and the appetites of its parishoners.

Such an exegetical function is inherent indeed in any discourse which constitutes itself as a doctrine. For doctrines, as Foucault observes, function differently from disciplines:

Doctrinal adherence ... involves both speaker and the spoken, the one through the other. The speaking subject is involved through, and as a result of, the spoken, as is demonstrated by the rules of exclusion ... questions of heresy and unorthodoxy in no way arise out of fanatical exaggeration of doctrinal mech-
anisms; they are a fundamental part of them. But conversely, doctrine involves the utterances of speakers in the sense that doctrine is, permanently, the sign, the manifestation and the instrument of a prior adherence—adherence to a class, to a social or racial status, to a nationality.\(^\text{12}\)

In this way the Latin of the Church marked the linkage of its exegetical function with the affiliation of its interests with those of the gentry and aristocracy. In social terms, this linkage was often familial as well, in a society where rank depended upon primogeniture, eldest sons held the noble titles, and younger sons [such as Thomas Arundel] went into the Church. With the interest of the dominant classes thus guaranteed, it was no wonder that the common theme of many a sermon of the day was the exhortation to obedience.

The translation of Latin into English was not by itself a heretical act—so long as it was contained by the power-structures of the Church. Many orthodox parsons translated scripture passages into English ex tempore as part of their regular sermons without incurring the wrath of their superiors. For such translations maintained the boundaries of discourse; as spoken discourse, they could not be retained and referred to except in memory, and few if any of the parishioners could verify their accuracy. They were quite at the mercy of the translator, just as Dame Pertelote is at the mercy of Chauntecleer when he “translates” *mulier est hominis confusio* as “Woman is mannes joye and al his bliss” [CT VII, 3164–66].\(^\text{13}\)

To commit an English translation to writing, however—as the Wycliffites did with the Bible—was to open it to interrogation, and to subject it to questions of consistency, intent, and application. Hoccleve’s parody of the encounter of naive readers with the problems of Scripture is instructive:

\begin{quote}
Oure fadrers olde & modres lyued wel,
And taughte hir children as hem self taught were
Of holy chirche & axid nat adel
‘Why stant this word here? and ‘why this word there?’
‘Why spake god thus and seith thus elles where?’
‘Why did he this wyse and mighte han do thus?’\(^\text{14}\)
\end{quote}

Such interrogation was to be at the core of Lollard education throughout the latter part of the fourteenth century and well into the fifteenth. Lollard preachers even encouraged their congregation to mull over the text of their sermons by leaving a copy behind them.\(^\text{15}\)

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It is furthermore crucial to realize that the perceived danger of the Wycliffite translation of the Bible was not only that it violated the distinction between authorized Latin and unauthorized English, but that it stripped the Bible, both of the heap of commentary of which the Glossa Ordinaria was but a small sample, as also of the psychological distance which written discourse guaranteed. No wonder, then, that inquisitors such as the Abbot of St. Alban’s, stressed the danger of the *reading aloud* of English texts: “... there is neither let nor moderation of these injuries [of heresy] because of the ownership and reading aloud [possessio et lectura] of books which are written in our vulgar tongue.”\(^\text{16}\)

The particular kinds of reading practices that evolved from the Wycliffite position were also a result of their new attitude towards the written word. It was no accident that the Lollard heresies tended to spring from literal readings of passages which the doctors of the church had labored for centuries to read figuratively, developing in the process a complex series of hermeneutic protocols which insulated the holy text from misinterpretation. The importance of such a move for the institutional church was noted as early as Augustine, who regarded the literal reading of scripture as the wellspring of the Manichean heresy from which he only gradually freed himself. He credits the teaching of St. Ambrose [based upon Paul’s well-known exhortation]:

\begin{quote}
et tamquam regulam diligentissime commendaret, saepe in popularibus sermonibus suis dicentem Ambrosium laetus audiebam: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, cum ea, quae ad litteram perversitatem docere videbantur ... spiritualiter aperi- ret ... (Confessiones VI.iv)\(^\text{17}\)
\end{quote}

[I heard with joy that in his sermons to the public Ambrose most diligently and frequently recommended to them the text: The Letter kills, but the spirit gives life; while he spiritually laid open to us those things which, when taken literally, appear to teach perverse doctrines.]

Ironically, it was to be the lettered language, Latin, which would come to stand as the prime guarantee of a non-literal reading; in its glosses and canonical dogmas, the Church carefully insulated itself against the danger of literal readings. English and other vernaculars, lacking any such tradition, and primarily existing as day-to-day discourse, invited literalistic readings of all texts. This different linguis-
tic resonance, if I may so use the word, resulted in the collapse of hermeneutic protocols which had taken centuries to develop. The Lollards, to take only a prominent example, read that Christ commanded his followers never to swear oaths—and they interpreted this to mean that they should swear no oaths. In an instant was undone the longstanding tacit support which the Church had lent to the State, in the use of religious oaths to authenticate spoken and written testimony.

English thus became associated by its advocates with the immediacy and literality of the divine text—and by its critics [for the same reasons] with a dangerous tendency towards naive reading which missed the larger allegorical point. One result of this debate was to further the association between English and non-aristocratic, anti-authoritarian values. To use English was, as Robbins perceived, by itself a movement away from authority and towards a more popular discourse. Some writers, such as Gower, deliberately avoided this dangerous conjunction—one reason, perhaps, why he chose to write *Vox Clamantis* in Latin. Yet Chaucer was quick to discern the special resonance of English as the speech of commerce, household relations, and oral tales. In many ways, it could be argued that the perceptible newness of what we regard, anachronistically, as Chaucer’s realism is not such a new set of conventions [for indeed little, except perhaps the Wife of Bath’s Prologue, is wholly new in its narrative structures] but a new kind of immediacy granted to the literate middle-classes by a literature written in their own speech of daily usage.

Chaucer’s numerous variations of the *dicæologia* trope, in many of which he links his shortcomings to those of his language, may suggestively be read as oblique comments on the status of English itself. In the *Squire’s Tale*, for instance, the demurral of the Squire belies what may be read as the double meaning of *tongue*:

But for to telle you al hir beaute
It lyth nat in my tonge, n’yn my konnyng,
I dar nat undertake so heigh a thyng.
Myn English eek is insufficient. [V. 34–37]

While this plaint is fairly standard in Chaucer [and in other vernacular poetry as well], the difference foregrounded here is not merely rhetorical, but also suggests a specific contrast between the complex and highly mannered rhetorical conventions and vocabularies of French romances and the [comparatively] narrow and unsophis-

ticated rhetorical range of native English. Significantly, this is one of the earliest instances of “insufficient” in English, and thus is itself the mark of a borrowing made to fill a lack. The tale the Squire retails—a melange of folk-motifs, Mandeville’s Travels, and other miscellaneous episodes, retold in a florid manner—may be read as a satire on the discursive *dissonance* that results from the translation of romance conventions for an English-speaking audience.

Chaucer himself, for the most part, wrote in genres, such as the dream-vision and the romance, whose traditions were primarily continental, and whose audience for the most part was familiar with French examples of a like nature. And yet there was a transgression here, too; French romance was the discursive sign and practice of the aristocracy, or of those, like Chaucer’s Prioress, who wished to emulate the status of nobility (although such emulation was but a *contrete* of status). The emergent middle class, as Paul Strohm has argued, constituted in a sense a “fourth estate,” a class whose primary language was English, not French.¹⁸ For this class of readers [to which Chaucer, although himself well-versed in many languages, belonged], Chaucer’s poetry provided a fashionable literature of their own, where the narrative elements of the French romances were “carried over” [the literal meaning of *translatio*] into the speech of their daily household life.

In a suggestive and seldom noted comment in the prologue to the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Chaucer outlines for his son the reasons for his choice of English for this treatise:

This tretis, divided in 5 partes, wol I shewe the under full light reules and naked wordes in English, for Latyn canst thou yit but small, my litel sone. But natheth suffise to these trewe conclusions in English as well as sufficth to these noble clerkes Grekes these same conclusions in Grek, and to Arabiens in Arabik, and to Jewes in Hebrew, and to Latyn folk in Latyn, whiche Layn folk had hem first out of othere diverse langages, and written them in her owne tonge, that is to seyn, in Latyn . . . And preye God save the king, that is lord of this langage, and alle that him feith berith and obeith, everich in his degre, the more and the lasse. [25–36, 56–59]

There is much to unpack here regarding Chaucer’s assumptions about the relation between language, nationality, and science. English words are “naked,” not simply because they wear no foreign
or academic "dress," but also, I would suggest, because they possess the psychological immediacy of a primary, household language of daily use. "Litel Lowys," only ten years old, stands on the threshold of the worldly tongue of Latin, but as yet needs to be addressed in the domestic tongue, the speech of women and children. That others would most readily understand their own "national" and by implication natural tongues only follows, though it is worth noting here that Chaucer in citing Hebrew, exhibits a rare awareness (for his day) of the importance of linguistic unity for post-diapora Jews, and also an awareness that religion and tribal identity, not merely the settled nationhood of the emerging European states, were tied up into the matter of "runes."

A curious and related slippage is his association of Latin with "Latyn folke"—since it would be far more unusual (and more fitting to the series of parallels) to cite the Roman Empire. It would seem, since Chaucer clearly expects his own son to progress in Latin learning, that "Latyn folke" must include those in the Church and the universities who used Latin as their lingua franca. The implied linguistic imperialism of Latin, which takes the texts of other languages and makes them its own through writing, is perhaps also worth noting. Just as the various national and tribal languages are absorbed by translation into Latin, so "Litel Lowys" will be absorbed into the broader intellectual community by his eventual mastery of Latin.

Chaucer's association of English with both the King and with England as a nation is (although the first recorded instance of this trope) a latter-day observation of a change that had been underway for some time, and through which indeed he had made his poet's reputation. Most especially during the prolonged wars with France, it seemed less and less tenable to sustain the enemy's language—French—as the language of status. English was thus gaining momentum as the primary language even of noble households, and it had a growing foothold in official usages as well. At least one of Edward's sons, John of Gaunt, thought English was good enough for the law courts, and he wrote a bill (ironically itself written in French) to make his preference official in 1362–63. As a further fortification of his nationalistic stance, Gaunt the same year retained an Oxford scholar of noted ability—John Wyclif himself—to argue before Parliament against Urban V's claim to suzerainty over England. The arrival of English as a legitimate discourse thus coincided with the beginnings of a more clearly defined English nationalism.

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The argument for the English law bill was that many of those who pleaded in court, particularly poor plaintiffs, no longer understood the proceedings. While it might seem an unusual gesture for a powerful aristocrat to favor a measure that would chiefly benefit the socially disenfranchised, Gaunt was in fact not quite so altruistic. The principal problem here was that the law had always grounded itself in its ability to summon and bind the citizenry; to the extent that it was conducted in a language many of them did not understand, it had difficulty intelligibly to them as its subjects. Furthermore, as English was the language of the new mercantile middle-class, it was in the interests of this class that they have fair representation in court. Gaunt needed the backing of the London merchants, at least, to assist him in financing his and his father's military excursions abroad. Thus linguistic nationalism, bound with the increased power of London and other mercantile centers, gave the English law court bill the support it needed.

Gaunt's household itself evidently placed an unusual emphasis on English. This may have been due to Gaunt himself, but it was also a result of his many connections in the mercantile world of London, connections which drew into his service, among many others of lesser distinction, a young page by the name of Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer's earliest poems have been lost, though there is some suggestion they may have been written in French. Yet his earliest surviving work is The Book of the Duchess, written for Gaunt either at, or a few years following, the death of his wife, the duchess Blanche (through whom, it might be noted here, Gaunt had gained the Lancastrian estates which made him the wealthiest noble in all England). Whether it was written at some specific commission from Gaunt is immaterial; Chaucer would never have gained his reputation as a poet by failing to know the tastes even of potential patrons, and he wrote this poem in English (though following French models, in places, rather closely).

In the poem to Book II of the House of Fame (aside from The Book of the Duchess, Chaucer's earliest extant work), Chaucer explicitly invokes his audience in linguistic terms: "Now herkeneth every maner man / That English understondge can" (509–10). Clearly, this is not only a trope, but also an explicit acknowledgement that the audience for English poetry was distinct from that of French or Italian verse. Coming from a poet who had already (in likelihood) given over a considerable amount of time to a translation of the Romance of the Rose, it carries additional weight; the market for such a trans-
lation would have been slight if the collective audience for courtly literature did not to some degree extend beyond those who knew French.

It is nonetheless worth observing that a considerable part of Chaucer's poetic output consisted similarly of translations and redactions of texts already available to those literate in Latin or French. For those whose literacy was limited to English (or even for those who had French, but little Latin), the delight of Chaucer did not consist in the way in which he altered or teased out his sources, which were closed books to them. On the contrary, it depended on the impact that Chaucer's poems had as "newe thynge," as commodities heretofore unavailable at the market. While it is true perhaps that for Chaucer's primary audiences at court, the translations would be welcomed as supplements to the originals, the audience of the fifteenth century, far broader and increasingly provincial, knew no others; their demand indeed was for more of the same (a demand which poets like Lydgate diligently attempted to supply).

Chaucer's vernacular poetry indeed also linked him politically with other vernacular literatures and their patrons. Anne of Bohemia, Richard's queen and a highly visible and popular figure at court, was a strong patron of vernacular writings; she herself owned a heteroglot Gospel that included a version in her native tongue. It is fairly well established that Chaucer wrote *The Legend of Good Women* at her request, or at least with her in mind, since it is explicitly directed to her place of residence. Yet Anne's patronage was political as much as poetical; it was in all probability through her entourage that Wyclif's teachings were transmitted to Bohemia, where despite the failure of Jan Hus they were to stew for over a century, returning to England by way of Luther to spur on the Reformation.

The question of Chaucer's sexual politics also rests largely on his status as a vernacular poet, who because he wrote in a language more accessible to women had to be answerable to them as an audience. Recent studies have insisted that there were few women among Chaucer's readers; Donald R. Howard repeats this dubious claim in his Chaucer biography, citing a study based on an examination of court rolls. Indeed, the court rolls of Richard II show few women, but for that matter they show few minor children either; the absence of women on these rolls tells us little about the actual attendance at Richard's court, but much about the political disempowerment of women.

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The argument could be mounted from internal evidence—Chaucer's many disclaimers of women's wrath; his strange contra-moral to the *Troylus* ("eth war of men") and the Legend itself, which is largely an act of textual penance performed for women readers and hearers. The social alignment of women as patrons and readers of vernacular texts, a factor common to most late medieval European cultures, is yet a more persuasive argument. Yet the instance of Anne of Bohemia and other documented women readers of Chaucer is stronger still, I think, as it can be documented extensively from the 1380s through the Reformation.

Anne, as Chaucer's premier woman patron, provides a striking example of the manner in which church politics, courtly manners, and the question of vernacular reading were densely interdeterminate. Wyclif himself, in a tract written c. 1383 (shortly after Anne's arrival in London) used her gospels as a weapon against those who would ban English Bible translations:

It is lawful for the noble queen of England the sister of the Emperor to have the gospel written in three languages, that is in Czech and in German and in Latin; and it would savor of the pride of Lucifer to call her a heretic for such reason as this! And since the Germans wish in this matter reasonably to defend their own tongue, so ought the English to defend theirs.22

Wyclif's argument was echoed by his patron Gaunt, and the Lollard tracts made use of Arundel's funeral oration for Anne (at which he praised her for her study and learning) as an *exemplum* of the value of vernacular scriptures. Arundel, no doubt, was infuriated by such a use of his words; he vehemently opposed vernacular scriptures, and himself most likely considered Anne's gospels a special case (on account of her social status), as he went to the trouble of issuing her a license to use them.

Chaucer's position here, as a purveyor of vernacular poetry to a queen whose devotion and interest in vernacular writings were at the center of religious dispute, certainly associates him—especially when considered alongside his well-known acquaintance with several of the "Lollard Knights" of Richard's court— with the Lollard party.23 The association of Lollard with the threat of *women reading* was early and continuous; Knighton in his *Chronicle* declares that Wyclif, by translating Scripture, has made it available to women, and
compares this to “casting pearls before swine”, Hoccleve gives this sentiment poetic form in his poem against Oldcastle: “Some wom-men eke, thogh hir wit be thynne / Wele argumentes make in holy Writ.”

Anne herself was only the first of a long line of women readers; at first, like Anne, most were of aristocratic status, but by the latter part of the fifteenth century many were of gentry or even mercantile rank. A browse through Volume I of Manley and Rickert easily yields over eleven women who have left their names in manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*. It is impossible in some cases to determine if the names are those of owners, borrowers, or indeed if they are autographs; dating is also imperfect. Yet there are a number of fairly solid cases: Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, owned a *Canterbury Tales* manuscript; Elizabeth Hampden’s name or initials are found in numerous places in Harley 7335; Annes Constable was willed a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* in 1471; and Cecelia, wife of John, Lord Welles, owned a *Canterbury Tales* manuscript.

The number of literate women throughout this period nonetheless remained small, though it increased gradually (along with that of men) throughout the fifteenth century. The Lollard movement also continued to produce rudimentary literates, including women, but after a wave of persecutions in the early 1400s, it subsided to a scattered population of mostly rural believers. Nonetheless, there is documentary evidence of at least one Lollard community which owned a Chaucer text; in 1464 one John Baron was arrested on suspicion of heresy, and confessed to owning a number of vernacular texts, including the *Canterbury Tales*. If anything, the suspicion with which ecclesiastical authorities viewed any vernacular text (at least, in non-aristocratic hands) grew throughout the period; it remained for the Reformation to valorize both the Lollard heretics and Chaucer as canon-father, into whose collected works were grafted a number of Lollard poems and tracts, most significantly the so-called “Plowman’s Tale.”

It could be said that it took a century for English to become either as dangerous or as powerful as its detractors and advocates imagined it. Chaucer’s texts played a central role in this transformation, and yet (outside of limited circles) the implications of his texts, too, were deferred. The emergence of a substantial literate reading public was gradual, and was not substantial until the eighteenth century; long before that, Chaucer’s English had become its own kind of antique dialect, in need of a glossary and elaborate notes. Yet the place secured by Chaucer’s texts—as the first volume of such common and inexpensive sets as *Bell’s British Poets*—remained distinct from the reading tastes of university-educated upperclass audiences, who continued to prefer classical writers and their English imitators; when national schooling for all classes did come along, so did a canon of English authors. The odd double mission as such anti-panegyricists as F. J. Furnivall, who taught Chaucer and the Pearl poet to his students at the London Working Men’s College, is only comprehensible in light of the continuing association between linguality and social class.

So what do these sundry vicissitudes of the vernacular mean for our reading Chaucer today? First of all, in a broad sense, they require that we set aside our own bias in favor of English as a “native” or “natural” tongue, and begin to explore the ways in which the nativity and naturalness of *any* language (but in particular the European vernaculars) is socially constructed. This further necessitates that we see Chaucer (and, for that matter, the Pearl Poet and Langland as well) as writing from within a kind of *oppositional* language—a language not that affiliated or associated with the authorized discourses of Church and Court. Consequently, we can no longer see the audience of Chaucer’s poetry as being unproblematically aristocratic—although there were certainly many aristocrats who favored the use of English—but as extending beyond the aristocracy into the emergent mercantile middle-class and even beyond. Finally, we must realize the way in which Chaucer’s use of English opened his texts to a new audience of women and men of the mercantile class, most of whom were monolingual English speakers (and readers/writers). That some of these audiences of Chaucer’s tales only come into full fruition decades or even centuries after his death should not prompt us to set aside the clear implications of the use of English, most of which were already evident in the political and religious debates of Chaucer’s own lifetime.

Just as importantly, however, we need to be attentive to the special *resonance* which English had for its various readers, and to the way in which its *lack* of an extensive written tradition lent it a strong anti-traditional flavor, a sense of newness which was still perceptible in Spenser’s day (though Spenser had the advantage of being able to claim Chaucer as an ‘ancient’ precursor). We are, as the inheritors and critical conservators of a lengthy tradition of “English Literature,” at a profound disadvantage when attempting to reconstruct the historical problematic of a language which was just emerging.
into its own. The strangeness, the uncanniness of such a position is something which every student of Chaucer needs continually to bear in mind.

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NOTES

1. It was remarked on, however, by Bennett Schaeber, to whom I owe my interest in the question of the vernacular. See his dissertation, "The Lettered Body: Chaucer in the Place of Analysis" [Brown University, Ph.D., 1987].


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25. For these owners, see Manley and Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940], I, 468 (for Margaret Beaumont), p. 236 for Hanse Crane, pp. 618-19 for Cecilia Welles, in the case of Anne Constable, see Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, I, 56.

26. Baron was one of a community of Lollard heretics in Aigmundesham, Buckinghamshire, whose landlord, Edmund Brudenell, was probably one of the early owners of the Cardigan manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*. Baron, along with several other suspected heretics, was brought before Bishop Chedworth of Lincoln in 1464, to whom he confessed:

I confesse that I haue iij Englishsh bookes oon of the lyff of oure lady of Adam and Eve and of other seremones the myrror of Synners and the myrror of Matrimony, the secondes bookes of Tales of Cantebury. The iij booke of a play of Seint diocese.

[Lincoln Archives Office, REG 20 [Chedworth], fol. 62v.]