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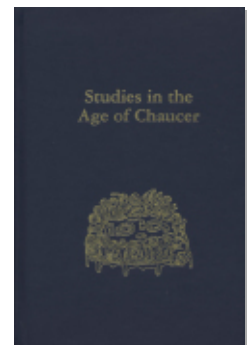
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Laboring in the God of Love's Garden: Chaucer's Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*

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ON 12 OCTOBER 1385, Chaucer was appointed to the commission of the peace in Kent. He served as a justice of the peace (JP) for the next four years, until being appointed Clerk of the King's Works in 1389. For Chaucer's biographers these years have always posed a problem; they are the middle of his poetic career, seemingly transitional years between his courtly dream vision poetry and the later frame tales. They are some of the best-documented years in terms of official records, yet they have provoked divergent interpretations in terms of their import for Chaucer both as a poet and as a Ricardian servant. For Donald Howard, the late 1380s were "the worst of times" when the poet traded a relatively secure urban existence for debt-ridden rustication. For Derek Pearsall, on the other hand, the Kent years provided a well-deserved respite from the poet's "arduous and thankless" activities as controller of customs as well as a necessary (and presumably welcome) distance from a court about to be thrown into disarray by the Appellant crisis.¹ Both biographies imply that Chaucer, politically astute as ever, chose to ride out these turbulent years in a Kent backwater rather than brave them in a neighborhood nearer Westminster. Both biographies also describe these years as dominated by Chaucer's single documented return to London in the fall of 1386, when he sat in the so-called "Wonderful

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¹ Donald Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1987), pp. 383–400; Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 202–9.

Parliament” and testified at the Scrope-Grosvenor trial. While these were certainly significant events for Chaucer, the parliament lasted only fifty-nine days, and his deposition before the magistrate only one.

This article explores these years in order both to modify our understanding of them as a “respite” from politically controversial issues of the day and to further our knowledge of how these years may have influenced Chaucer’s later writings. As a JP, Chaucer’s primary duty would have been the enforcement of highly controversial labor regulation. First introduced in 1349, these laws sought a legislative solution to the labor shortages and wage increases following in the wake of the plague. The laws fixed wages and prices at pre-plague rates and significantly restricted the movements of laborers; deeply resented by workers, they were blamed in part for the rebellion of 1381. It is to Chaucer’s tenure on the peace commission that most critics assign the writing of the prologues to the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales*, both works with a keen interest in how labor shapes identity. The opening section of this article analyzes the documentary evidence that links Chaucer to these labor laws, while subsequent sections explore how the enforcement of the labor ordinances necessarily shaped the “social imaginary” informing Chaucer’s work at this time, primarily the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*.²

It is no coincidence that concerns over work emerge as central to the narrator’s self-representation in the *Legend of Good Women*, where the God of Love stages an inquiry into the validity of the narrator’s work as a writer. In the G-version of the *Legend’s* Prologue, the poet-narrator himself raises the question of “the entent of my labour” (78), suggesting that work in general, and written work in particular, are subject to scrutiny here.³ The subsequent exchange between the narrator and the God of Love makes literary labor publicly visible in a way that it generally wasn’t in the late fourteenth century. The biographical effects produced in the Prologue—where the narrator “Geoffrey” (a poet who shares Chaucer’s *vita*) stages an inquiry into his own suspect work—encourage examination of the ways in which everyday medieval judicial machinery attempted to produce legible evidence of personal identity in

²I borrow the term “social imaginary” from Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), esp. pp. 1–9.

³All citations from Chaucer refer to Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3d ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

labor. For these reasons, I argue that the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* should be read as a significant literary statement about the late medieval controversy over labor, and thus should be considered a product of the same social and textual environments that produced dream visions like the C-version of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, a poem where the dream narrator is similarly asked to define (and defend) his intellectual labor.

Chaucer's trope of poet as accused laborer places his persona and his literary work as a writer of vernacular texts at the center of a dense network of debates characteristic of the late fourteenth century. This essay explores the unexpected scope of that network and the personal experiences from which they emanate and on which they can be seen to converge. My critical itinerary crosses the neighboring provinces of authorship, subjectivity, and the law; my ultimate aim, however, is to explain how procedures of self-justification—either before justices of the peace or the God of Love—forged intimate links among Chaucer's writings, his professional vocation, and a number of literary and social institutions.

As a member of the peace commission, Chaucer was neither merely a creature of statute enforcement nor was he, conversely, a fifth-column subverter of its framer's intentions. The hermeneutic difficulties Chaucer confronted in enforcing these labor laws—that of textualizing the identities of those accused of breaking the law—are the same ones foregrounded in the self-representations that distinguish his later poetry. The Prologue to the *Legend* invokes the biographical mode only to show the failure of Love as a Chaucerian biographer, but in doing so, it also shows us that lived experience is not reducible to texts, that textualized lives (whether literary or legal) can bear only an asymptotic relation to lives as they are led. The poem witnesses the fact that such problems of representation have consequences outside of the realm of the narrative, for if they signify in the God of Love's court, so too do they in the courts of royal justice.

Keeping the King's Peace

At the time of Chaucer's appointment, a JP served to try criminal cases (mostly felony and trespass) and to administer economic legislation.⁴

⁴For the documents relating to Chaucer's service on the peace commission, see Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 348–63. Chaucer served from October 1385 until, at the latest, 15 July 1389 as he is not named on the commission of the peace for Kent issued on that

From the 1360s onward, the number of criminal cases heard was decreasing while the number of economic cases was increasing. By the 1380s, the peace commission was the primary instrument for the enforcement of the 1349 Ordinance of Laborers as well as subsequent statutory initiatives; its quarter sessions were responsible for enforcing the articles of the statutes, which made work mandatory for all the landless able-bodied under sixty years of age and forbade workers from leaving employment before the end of their contracts. The legislation set maximum wages for agricultural laborers, while at the same time setting maximum prices that could be charged by artisans and other workmen for goods and services. The laws were thus a far-reaching mechanism for curtailing economic (and social) mobility for manual workers and artisans whose labor and goods would be in greater demand due to post-plague scarcity.⁵

While records have not survived from Chaucer's tenure on the Kent peace commission, we can say generally what types of cases would have come before Chaucer and his fellow justices.⁶ Contemporary peace sessions for the surrounding counties as well as the proceedings of other royal courts like Chancery and the King's Bench (which sometimes served as appellate courts) provide ample evidence of cases like those that would have been heard in Kent at this time. The peace commission on which Chaucer sat would have been charged with ensuring that Kentish artisans did not cheat their neighbors by charging extortionate prices or by tampering with weights and measures; it would also have ensured that Kentish manual laborers and household servants did not take excessive wages, refuse employment, or leave employment in search

date; this change is most probably attributable to his appointment three days earlier as Clerk of the King's Works. Chaucer's name is omitted from the commission dated 24 May 1386 but then included again in the commission dated 28 June 1386. It is unclear whether or not this omission was accidental or whether it indicates a short break in Chaucer's service.

⁵The argument of the next few paragraphs draws primarily on the pioneering work of Bertha Havens Putnam, whose books are the primary resource for documenting the changing duties of the peace commissions in relation to the labor statutes; see *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers during the First Decade After the Black Plague* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908) and *Proceedings Before the Justices of the Peace in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (London, 1938), esp. p. cxxx. Also useful is Thomas Skyrme, *History of the Justices of the Peace* (Chichester: Countrywise Press, 1994), esp. pp. 81–97.

⁶The only substantive consideration of Chaucer's time spent as a JP is Margaret Galway's "Geoffrey Chaucer, J.P. and M.P." *MLR* 36 (1941): 1–36. The article is less interested in Chaucer's duties as a JP than in Galway's contention that Chaucer acted as the king's steward in Eltham and Sheen during the time he was a JP in Kent.

of higher wages. In addition to labor regulation, the commission engaged in other types of social and criminal regulation: justices were responsible for guaranteeing that the citizens of Kent did not start fights in taverns, break into each other's homes, carry weapons with them, or hold unlawful conventicles.⁷

By the late 1370s, however, economic offenses charged under the labor statutes formed the vast majority of the cases heard in peace sessions.⁸ Agricultural workers (ploughmen, carters, shepherds, mowers) and household servants were among those occupations most frequently charged with trespass against the statutes. Such workers could expect vigorous prosecution, since the peace commission was composed in large part of landowners who had a vested interest in ensuring a stable (and cheap) labor pool. Workers who refused to take oaths of service as stipulated in the statutes were imprisoned or fined. The records from Essex peace sessions in the late 1370s are littered with references to common laborers described as "rebels" against local authorities for refusing work and then, perhaps more provocatively, refusing to justify themselves.⁹ These records suggest that even before the Uprising of 1381, recalcitrant agricultural laborers were being equated with rebellious subjects in the discourses of local peace sessions. The peace commission on which Chaucer sat could investigate not only workers who took higher wages but also the employers who paid them and, in some cases, even the sheriffs and other officials who were thought to be negligent in enforcing the labor laws.¹⁰ The peace commission's purview occasionally extended beyond the third estate as well: Gloucester peace commissions of the 1360s and 1370s tried stipendiary priests who were accused by parishioners of demanding excessive wages.¹¹ In these ways, the peace

⁷ On an individual justice's out-of-session duties, see Skyrme, *History*, pp. 84–85.

⁸ For example, 170 out of the 275 trespass indictments that appear on the Essex peace rolls for the years 1377 to 1379 are breaches of the Statutes of Laborers. See Elizabeth Furber, ed. *Essex Sessions of the Peace, 1351, 1377–1379*, Essex Archaeological Society, Occasional Publications, no. 3 (Colchester: Essex Archaeological Society, 1953).

⁹ Examples are common in Furber, *Essex Sessions of the Peace*: "item presentand quod Gilbertus Gougge de Storemere laborator est rebellis contra constabularios iurare nec iustificare [nolens]" (p. 158) or "item presentant quod Iohannes Hare (de Arkesden) est rebellis contra constabularios, nolens iurare secundum formam statuti" (p. 163).

¹⁰ In the late 1370s, an Essex peace commission found that the constables of Dunmow hundred had been negligent in making laborers swear to serve and take wages according to the statutes; see Furber, *Essex Sessions of the Peace*, p. 169.

¹¹ See E. G. Kimball, *Rolls of the Gloucestershire Sessions of the Peace, 1361–98*, Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, vol. 62 (1947), p. 12. See also Bertha Putnam, "Maximum wage-laws for priests after the black death, 1348–1381," *American Historical Review* 21 (1915–16): 12–32.

commissions allowed the gentry to impose their own values on the countryside through a legislative process that gave them wide latitude in dealing with local affairs.

One of the primary functions of the commission was what we might call the "textualization of identity." Criminal accusations against those who broke the peace had to be written up as bills during the peace sessions; these bills would then go before local juries who returned presentments on them. Letters patent had to be issued throughout the year for travelling laborers who wished to move from one village to another or to go on pilgrimage.¹² Similarly, both religious men and university clerks intending to travel and beg were required to carry letters attesting their status. Those lacking proper documentation were liable to be put in stocks or imprisoned until surety could be found. In these ways, the peace commission made the countryside legible by documenting the identity of various kinds of workers (lay and occasionally even ecclesiastic) and by articulating local grievances through the issuance of writs, a narrative process that allowed the gentry to designate false work as a potential political problem, not just a social one.

For Chaucer, the son of a London wine merchant, this appointment would have been socially prestigious, insofar as his fellow commissioners were chosen from among the magnates, lawyers, and gentry of the shire.¹³ Indeed, during the first few years of Chaucer's tenure, the peace commission was headed by Sir Simon Burley, Richard's tutor and beloved advisor, who, at the time of Chaucer's appointment, had recently been made a garter knight as well as constable of Dover Castle and warden of the Cinque Ports at Richard's behest.¹⁴ To the extent that

¹²While the practice of issuing letters patent for migrating laborers (containing the reason for travel and the date of return) was only written into law in the Cambridge Parliament of 1388 near the end of Chaucer's term as a JP, it seems likely that (as with much in the evolution of English law) this statute actually reflected existing practice rather than instituted new policy.

¹³The 1361 statutes decreed that the commission should include: "un Seigneur"; "ascuns sage de la ley"; and "trois ou quatre des meultz vauex du countee." Chaucer would have presumably fallen under this last rubric. Statute quoted in Putnam, *Proceedings*, p. lxxix.

¹⁴For a helpful overview of Chaucer's fellow justices, see Galway, "Geoffrey Chaucer," pp. 7–12. James Hulbert in *Chaucer's Official Life*, rpt. 1970 (New York: Phaeton Press, 1912) expresses skepticism about whether or not Chaucer would actually have met some of his fellow justices (particularly those of higher rank); Hulbert seems to imply that the office would have been merely "honorary" for them (p. 53). This skepticism seems unwarranted on several counts: first, during Chaucer's appointment as a JP, Simon Burley was part of the "quorum" of justices necessary for convening the peace commission; without Burley's presence, the commission could not do its work. Second, the Kent commission for the peace in 1386 appoints "the said Robert"—either Robert

"medieval people . . . experienced themselves as political subjects through the making and maintenance of associational forms," Chaucer's service would have involved him in a powerful form of late fourteenth-century political association.¹⁵ The associational form of the peace commission, like other forms of feudal governance and municipal regulation, enforced social norms through its collective actions. The gentry who served on these commissions tended to use this juridical power to shore up their own interests, not only in local affairs but also in the practice of a sort of identity politics with their social betters, the magnates with whom they served. Judicial historian Alan Harding believes that the ideological work done by the consolidation of these commissions in the late fourteenth century cannot be overstated:

The politics of justice had by 1381 opened two horizontal divides in society, not one; and when the gentry who protested against the maintenance of the great lords and the punitive exercise of royal justice were given jurisdiction of their own, they used it to mark themselves off from the common people by a line far more enduring and difficult to cross than that between gentry and *grantz*. The major fact of the development of fourteenth-century society was the growth of an aristocratic county community embracing both magnates and gentry, which formed in the indictments brought before sessions of oyer and terminer and of the peace its own image of a rebellious servant class.¹⁶

Belknap or Robert Tresilian (head of the court of Common Pleas and head of the King's Bench, respectively)—to be custodian of the rolls; presumably, they would have had to attend the sessions to attain the rolls. Finally, negative (though convincing) evidence, which I discuss in more detail below, appears in the form of the articles of impeachment against Burley, which accuse him of mishandling his duties on the commission and his followers of disrupting the commission's proceedings.

¹⁵See David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. xiv. Chaucer's appointment was "associational" in the medieval sense of this term insofar as he was appointed to an existing commission "de associacione" to fill a place made vacant by the death of Thomas Shardelowe, the king's chief steward in Kent. This appointment by association circumvented the usual (and slightly more public) system of appointment. Chaucer's appointment, it can be inferred, was solely at royal discretion. For the form of Chaucer's association as a justice, see Crow, ed., *Chaucer's Life-Records*, pp. 348–49. For complaints against appointment by association, see Putnam, *Proceedings*, pp. lxxvi–lxxx. There were sporadic attempts on the part of the Commons to see that the make-up of peace commissions was determined either through local election or was to be overseen by Parliament; these attempts were, in general, short-lived.

¹⁶*The Law Courts of Medieval England* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 180. According to Harding, the peace commissions (and the gentry who made them up) were given "authority to keep in order a peasant mass which was seen as essentially unruly and dangerous. . . . The sessions of the JPs replaced the manorial courts as a means of social control in proportion as the relationship of peasant to landlord changed from a legal subjection to a purely economic subjection. . . . The landlords succeeded in

That the parliamentary Commons (made up in large part by the gentry and men of law) repeatedly petitioned for an increase in the powers of the peace commissions is therefore unsurprising, since they also largely filled these commissions.¹⁷ Chaucer, as a *custodes pacis*, participated in a powerful social mechanism that attempted to demarcate more indelibly the line between what the 1381 rebels called the “true commons” and the Commons in Parliament.

While the peace commission was certainly an influential appointment, bringing Chaucer into contact with some of his most socially exalted neighbors, it was not without substantial hazards. Justices were frequently subject to threat or humiliation in the course of their duties, especially in their attempts to enforce the labor ordinances. In Ware, Hertfordshire, in the 1350s, a vicar and a hermit were accused of wandering the countryside proclaiming the labor statutes to be “falsely and wickedly made,” and encouraging laborers, artisans, and servants to charge “abnormal” wages. Moreover, the hermit (apparently a stout fellow despite his ascetic practices) was often to be found

carrying a long, thick stick, waylaying the king’s justices assigned to administer the aforesaid statute and ordinance in the county of Hertford, and horribly and savagely threatening their ministers and even themselves with death and mutilation and arson and other hideous and unspeakable evils, in breach of the king’s peace.¹⁸

The justices claimed to be so intimidated by the hermit’s threats to their persons and their property that they “were afraid to attend their sessions or to execute and uphold the provisions of the aforesaid ordinances and statutes.” Kent had a similarly tempestuous history of master-servant labor relations throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, primarily because its peasants had customarily been granted relatively large freedoms of villeinage, making the labor statutes appear all the more onerous, and, consequently, all the harder to enforce. No less a personage than the Archbishop of Canterbury was faced with frequent

maintaining their position, by obtaining the Statutes of Labourers and other economic legislation, which they enforced as justices of the peace” (118).

¹⁷Harding, *Law Courts*, argues that “the advocacy of local justices may have been the first conscious policy the commons had” (p. 95).

¹⁸G. O. Sayles, ed., *Select Cases in the Court of the King’s Bench under Edward III*, vol. 6, Selden Society 82 (London: Bernard Quaritch, 1965), pp. 110–11. On the physical dangers faced by the JPs, see Putnam, *Proceedings*, pp. cxi–cxii.

and sometimes intractable difficulties over labor from the mid-fourteenth century onwards.¹⁹ Prosecutions for labor violations in the decade before the 1381 Rising had been growing steadily, and this increase must have fueled peasant animosity against the justices.

Alan Harding has argued persuasively that it was primarily abuses in the judicial system, including abuses of the peace commissions charged with enforcing the Statutes of Labor, that lead to the events of 1381.²⁰ This assertion seems to be borne out by the fact that the names of Kentish JPs figured prominently on the rebels' list of those they wished to see executed, and, during the revolt, insurgents sacked and burned the homes of Kent JPs.²¹ The situation of resident justices (like Chaucer) in Kent after 1381 must have been particularly vulnerable, since Kent had been not only home to rebel leader Wat Tyler but also the site of the most intense rebel activity, and, in the wake of the rebellion, the most severe local prosecutions.²² Chaucer's fellow commissioners, Robert Tresilian and Robert Belknap, were instrumental in the prosecution of the rebels. In May 1381, a tax commission in Essex was set upon by angry villagers and sent packing empty-handed back to London. Belk-

¹⁹ Rents and services were refused on properties at Otford belonging to the Cathedral Priory of Canterbury in 1356 and then again in 1388. In 1367 at Northfleet (one of the principal demesne manors of the see's north coast), the archbishop's agents were unable to compel reaping services from all the tenants' holdings. In 1390, Archbishop Courtenay summoned tenants from Wingham to his palace for failing to perform carting duties. For details of these instances, see F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury: An Essay on Medieval Society* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), pp. 175, 189. Labor services in Kent, while generally light, were heavier on ecclesiastical properties; see R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory: A Study in Monastic Administration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), pp. 119–27. On labor unrest in Kent more generally, see R. H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 2d ed., *Studies in Economic and Social History* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 24, 40–41.

²⁰ Alan Harding, "The Revolt Against the Justices," in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds., *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 165–93. On the positions of the justices more generally, see J. R. Maddicott, *Law and Lordship: Royal Justices as Retainers in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century England*, Past and Present Supplement no. 4 (Oxford, 1978).

²¹ On the burning of houses belonging to William Topcliff in Maidstone and Thomas Shardelowe in Dartford, see Galway, "Geoffrey Chaucer," pp. 11–12. On the inclusion of Robert Belknap on the rebels' "hit list," see Harding, "Revolt," p. 183.

²² Nicholas Brooks, "The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381," in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore, eds., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R.H.C. Davis* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), pp. 252–55. For prosecution records relating to the Rising in Kent, see A. Réville and C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Le soulèvement des travailleurs d'Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898); W. E. Flaherty, "The Great Rebellion in Kent of 1381 Illustrated from the Public Records," *Archaeologia Cantiana* 3 (1860): 65–96; and W. E. Flaherty, "Sequel to the Great Rebellion in Kent of 1381," *Archaeologia Cantiana* 4 (1861): 67–86.

nap (then chief justice of the Common Pleas) was sent to Essex to inquire into the tax evasion fray, only to arrive at the mustering of 50,000 citizens who then proceeded to set buildings ablaze as a prologue to their angry march on London.²³ Belknap not only witnessed the birth of the Uprising of 1381, he was also present at its demise: on the day of Wat Tyler's death, he was given a commission to initiate judicial proceedings against the rebels. It was Tresilian's duty, as chief justice of the King's Bench at the time, to prosecute rebels in the eastern counties. He apparently carried out his duty with some relish: nineteen rebels were executed by hanging and another dozen by hanging and drawing.²⁴ The men with whom Chaucer served in the mid-1380s would have been well known in Kent as having little sympathy for those who left plow or parish.

During his time as a JP, Chaucer found himself enforcing some of the most unpopular legislation initiated in the second half of the fourteenth century, and doing it alongside some of the most unpopular men in Kent. Yet the dangers attendant on this peace commission were not confined to mere physical threats due to its unpopularity with local citizens; significant political risks attended the appointment as well. The particular instantiation of the commission on which Chaucer served was a virtual all-star cast of Ricardian favorites, including not only the king's favorite Simon Burley but also Tresilian and Belknap, former heads of the King's Bench and the Court of Common Pleas, respectively. Chaucer critics frequently congratulate their poet on his circumspection at this time (ostensibly evidenced by his withdrawal to Kent), comparing it favorably to his contemporary Usk's precipitous engagement with partisan politics (an engagement that would find Usk beheaded in 1388). Yet Chaucer's move to Kent and his acceptance of this appointment, rather than distancing himself from the Ricardian affinity, would actually have brought him into closer contact with many who had strong factional ties to the king.²⁵

²³ For a discussion of Belknap's involvement as reported by the *Anonimale* chronicler, see Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 57–58.

²⁴ Henry Knighton comments that Tresilian "went everywhere, and did great slaughter, sparing none . . . For anyone who appeared before him on that charge, whether justly or upon some accusation moved by hatred, was at once sentenced to death"; for details of Tresilian's reputed severity, see G. H. Martin, ed. and trans., *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337–1396* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 240–41.

²⁵ The most thorough discussion of Chaucer's relation to the court factionalism during this time is Paul Strohm, "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," in Lee Patterson, ed., *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380–1530* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 83–112. Strohm's argument differs from

Ricardian partisanship on a commission where (in most cases) the justices served at the king's pleasure is hardly striking. What *is* striking is the number of Chaucer's fellow justices who would be charged with treason while they were serving with Chaucer on the peace commission. The head of the commission, Sir Simon Burley—the most hated of Richard's councilors on account of his humble origins and subsequent rapid rise through royal favor—was eventually removed from office and imprisoned by the Lords Appellant.²⁶ The zealous prosecutors of the 1381 rebels, Tresilian and Belknap, would themselves be prosecuted for their active roles in supporting Richard's royal prerogative in the face of opposition from his nobles.²⁷ Tresilian and Burley were executed by the Lords Appellant in 1388; Belknap was exiled to Ireland for nearly a decade.²⁸ Because Chaucer escaped accusation in the 1388 Crisis that consumed his fellow commissioners does not mean we need credit him with extraordinary prescience or a conspicuous knack for surviving political upheavals. Perhaps Chaucer's narrow escape was attributable more to good luck than to political *nous*. Sometimes Fortuna simply smiles.

In any case, if Chaucer's appointment to the peace commission would have placed him closer to some of the major players in the political factionalism of the 1380s, it also would have placed him in a double role: he was licensed to ask how effectively laborers and artisans did their work while, at the same time, he watched as his fellow justices became objects of similar inquiry at the hands of the Lords Appellant. This appointment would have given Chaucer a sense of himself as a

mine, however, in that he sees the Kent years as the culmination of a "series of prudent adjustments" (p. 96) on Chaucer's part that insulated him from the worst of the Appellant Crisis that was to hit Westminster.

²⁶ Knighton, an avowedly Lancastrian chronicler, remarks cuttingly that Burley, a man worth only twenty marks through his own inheritance, came to be worth more than three thousand marks in just a few years in Richard's service; see Martin, *Chronicle of Henry Knighton*, pp. 500–501.

²⁷ For a chronology of the 1388 Crisis, See Anthony Goodman, *The Loyal Conspiracy: The Lords Appellant Under Richard II* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

²⁸ Other justices with whom Chaucer served had perilously close ties with the Ricardian faction: Hugh Fastolf was one of a coterie of wealthy merchants that included Nicholas Brembre, who was later executed by the Appellants. Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 30, points out that Fastolf was denounced to the 1386 Parliament on account of his complicity with Brembre. Two other JPs with whom Chaucer originally served had close connections to Richard's faction but later became aligned with the Appellant cause: John Cobham, who had been appointed one of Richard's councilors on his accession to the throne in 1377, and John Devereux, a garter knight and lord of Penshurst. On these justices, see the biographical sketches included in Galway, "Geoffrey Chaucer," p. 9.

particular kind of subject, an inquirer into the status of others, yet simultaneously aware of the precariousness of the line between subject and object of inquiry. The events of 1388 showed how easily the questioner could become the questioned, how little distance there turned out to be between the accusatory bills presented before Chaucer and his fellow justices and the articles of impeachment that would later be lodged against Burley, Belknap, and Tresilian, demanding that they, in turn, account for the manner in which they had conducted their own work.²⁹

Trespass and “Entent” in the *Legend of Good Women*

Clearly the years in Kent were neither time out of the Ricardian mind for the poet nor a respite from political controversy. Thus we should not be surprised to find that the narrative apparatus of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*—its formal and aesthetic choices—were informed by the strategies of labor regulation in postpandemic England. If the activities of the Kent peace commission and its members can serve as a contextualizing gloss on the *Legend*, so too the aesthetic staging of labor serves as commentary on the viability of enforcing this labor legislation. The forensic work of the peace commission demanded that laborers narrate their work in an unambivalent and legible fashion; if this narration was unconvincing, laborers were branded as recalcitrant or “rebellious.”

Just so, Chaucer’s narrator, unable or unwilling to reassure the God of Love as to the innocent intention behind his earlier literary work, is suspected of “renegat” tendencies in the G-Prologue. Chaucer’s self-presentation seems to reflect in some very direct ways the moment of its own production. Chaucer’s time as a JP could certainly have provided the emotional color of the Prologue—its sense of declarative yet imperiled selfhood, a contingent selfhood fired in the partisan politics of the 1380s. Yet Chaucer’s self-imagining here gains a cultural specificity that goes beyond mere autobiographical referentiality; this experience also provided a matrix for dilation on a number of social and ethical questions which Chaucer found most pressing: the relative values of truth and falsity; the dangers attendant on poetic work as vernacular “ma-

²⁹ While the charges against these figures were ultimately that of treason, this treasonous activity was explained as a mishandling of their governmental posts, essentially false labor. The articles of impeachment against Burley specifically mentioned false labor performed on the Kent peace commission. For the text of the article, see below, n. 59.

kyng"; the problem of justifying one's labor before various forms of authority.

The ways in which Chaucer poses these questions (and defends his own poetic work) point the reader beyond the poem's boundaries to a judicial world in which justifying one's own labor was becoming an increasingly necessary, if fraught, undertaking. While critics have remarked on the juridical overtones present in the God of Love's judgment on the poet, these discussions are generally restricted to exploring the influence of literary courts, like those found in Machaut's *Le Jugement dou Roy de Bebaingne*.³⁰ Yet the Prologue's interest in judgment (and, hence, juridical process) may draw as much on everyday medieval practice as on formal literary convention. A contemporary audience could not but hear legal overtones when Alceste and the God of Love discuss the poet's supposed wrongs. After summarizing Geoffrey's failure to write of good women despite the myriad sources that would have been available to him, Love sums up his lengthy diatribe against the poet somewhat irritably, "It nedyth nat al day thus for to endite" (G 310). Alceste then cautions Love not to judge the poet without due consideration: "Ye motyn herkenyn if he can repleye / Ageyns these poyntys that ȝe han to hym mevid" (G 319–20). She reminds Love that the poet may have "falsely be[en] acused" (F 350) since "al ne is nat gospel that is to yow pleynynd" (G 326).

This language would readily evoke the various courts, local and royal, that Chaucer's audience regularly attended, whether as justices, litigants, or spectators. These tribunals moved to indict through a several-stage process: petitions of wrongdoing ("plaints") were presented to justices in the form of either writs or bills; a list of accusations ("poyntys") were then drawn up which would have been put before a local jury to decide whether or not the complaints had merit to be heard; if they affirmed merit, then the complaint became an indictment and was formally presented at a session of the peace.³¹ Chaucer's language narrows

³⁰On the *Legend's* possible debt to literary "courts of love," see, for example, James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Poets* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), pp. 94–96. The only full-length monograph devoted to reading Chaucer's narratives in the context of fourteenth-century judicial practice, Joseph Allen Hornsby, *Chaucer and the Law* (Norman, Okla.: Pilgrim Books, 1988) gives Chaucer's time as a JP only two pages (pp. 24–25) and doesn't discuss the legal language in the Prologue to the *Legend* at all.

³¹On the process of the peace session, see Putnam, *Proceedings*, pp. ci–cii. For the relevant legal definitions of these terms, see S. M. Kuhn and J. Reidy, eds., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975–2001): s.v. *enditen* (v.) 4 (b) to bring to formal accusation against (someone); indict, prosecute; s.v. *meven*

the distance between the God of Love's court—itself a Ricardian royal affinity inhabited by Alceste and her ladies—and the court sessions held locally several times a year. If the God of Love's garden is a *locus amoenus*, it is equal parts *curia regis*.

The legal terminology used by Alceste and the God of Love culminates in a charge of "trespass" being lodged against the poet. Alceste first invokes the term when she asks the God of Love to have mercy on the poet, balancing the narrator's "honour" against the weight of "his trespass" (F 408; G 394). The poet repeats the allegation only to deny it: "But trewly I wende, as in this cas / Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas" (F 462–63; G 452–53). Alceste again repeats the charge when she sentences the poet to write about good women: "Now wol I seyn what penaunce thou shalt do / For they trespas" (F 479–80; G 469–70). The Prologue's legalese encourages us to understand the repeated use of the term "trespas" in its specific juridical sense—a violation of civil law—rather than in its more general sense of wrong or sinful behavior.³² Chaucer would have had significant experience in the prosecution of trespass cases as a JP, since writs of trespass brought all types of lesser injury cases before the king's justices.³³ That Chaucer would intend (and his audience hear) the technical sense of the term "trespas" is understandable insofar as offenses against the labor statutes—easily the most numerous cases heard in the local peace sessions—were tried as trespass cases.

(v.) 6. (c) *law*. To offer or present (a plea, legal argument); bring (a suit, an action), institute (proceedings); argue (a case); make (a plaint); also, raise or debate (ssth.) formally (in an administrative or legislative body); s.v. *pleinen* (v.) 2. To make a legal complaint or accusation; s.v. *pointe* (n.) 8. An accusation, a charge; one particular charge in a list of accusations.

³² See the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *trespas* (n.) 1.(a) Transgression or violation of civil law, a set of regulations, etc. punishable by civil authorities, officers of an organization, etc.; 1. (c) *law*. A legal procedure seeking redress for wrong. The term is used about labor accusations in a similar legal context in the *Romaunt of the Rose* (also attributed to Chaucer): "A myghty man, that can and may, / Shulde with his hond and body always, / Wynne hym his fode in laboring, / If he ne haue rent or sich a thing, / Although he be religious, / And God to serven curious. / Thus mot he don, or do trespas" (ll. 6573–79). Note that "penaunce" is also used here in its juridical, not its theological sense: s.v. *penaunce* 3. (a) Penalty, punishment; a judicial sentence.

³³ Modern jurisprudence would term medieval trespass suits—whether injuries to a plaintiff's person or his pocketbook—"civil" as opposed to "criminal" suits, and they would fall roughly at the level of "misdemeanor." Since medieval trespass cases were equally concerned with compensating the victim for injury as they were with punishing the accused, they allowed for more discussion of the type of "penaunce" to be imposed on the defendant than their modern counterparts do.

The specific trespass with which the God of Love charges Geoffrey concerns the performance of the poet's work:

And thow [art] my foo, and al my folk werreyest,
 And of myn olde servauntes thow mysseyest,
 And hynderest hem with thy translacioun,
 And lettest folk from hire devocioun
 To serve me, and holdest it folye
 To serve Love. Thou maist yt nat denye,
 For in pleyn text, withouten nede of glose,
 Thou hast translated the Romaunce of the Rose,
 That is an heresy ayeins my lawe,
 And makest wise folk fro me withdrawe.

(F 322–31; G 248–57)

Here Chaucer is accused of stealing Love's servants; ultimately, Alceste defends Geoffrey against charges of despoiling Love of his servants, arguing that the poet has been a faithful servant, "and furthred well your [i.e. Love's] lawe in his makynge" (F 413; G 399). Chaucer, a poet notoriously self-conscious about his own "making" (particularly in his later works), conspicuously foregrounds the question of his own poetic intention throughout the Prologue in a way not found elsewhere in his works (with the possible exception of the Retraction at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*).

The form that this self-consciousness about his work takes in the Prologue to the *Legend* differs significantly in the two extant versions, however.³⁴ In the earlier F-version, the poet bluntly claims the transpar-

³⁴Like the *Legend's* recent editors, Janet Cowen and George Kane, *The Legend of Good Women* (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1995), p. 140, I believe that the G-Prologue bears marks of authorial (as opposed to scribal) revision. While the arguments for dating the earlier version to the late 1380s and the later to ca. 1394–96 put forward by John Lowes are not all equally convincing, several differences between the two Prologues witness the aptness of this time frame: for example, G omits Alceste's order to present the poem to Queen Anne found at F 496–97 (a reference that would no longer be appreciated after her death in 1394); additionally, unlike F, G refers to the poet's aging (G 261–63, 315, and 400–401) and adds a translation of a sermon by Innocent III to the list of the poet's works (G 414–15). See John Lowes, "The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Considered in Its Chronological Relations," *PMLA* 20 (1905): 745–864, and "The Two Prologues to the *Legend of Good Women*: A New Text," in *Anniversary Papers by Colleagues and Pupils of George Lyman Kittredge* (Boston and London: Ginn and Co., 1913), pp. 95–104. While few critics have argued for the priority of the F-version, see Sheila Delaney, *The Naked Text: Chaucer's Legend of Good Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 34–43, for a recent instance.

ency of the intention behind his own labor while, in the revised G-version, the poet stages the intentionality of his work as a provocative problem connected with an ambivalent *entent*. In the earlier version, the poet asks lovers who know about “sentement” to “forthren me somewhat in my labour” (F 69–71). He then avers that his inspiration proceeds from his service to a flower, his “ladye souerayne” who is “the mays-tresse of my wyt.” He describes his labor as directly inspired by this authorizing figure:

My word, my werk ys knygt so in youre bond
That, as an harpe obeieth to the hond
And maketh it soune after his fyngerynge,
Ryght so mowe ye oute of myne herte bringe
Swich vois, ryght as yow lyst, to laughe or pleyne.
(F 89–93)

The initial appositive doubling of “word” and “werk” points to the interchangeability of these terms. The poet is an instrument through which his muse’s desires will be played out; poetic “word work” is here troped as a kind of musical ventriloquism. While Chaucer’s narrators often devolve authorial responsibility—to a pilgrim’s occasionally churlish “reality” in the *Canterbury Tales*, to the “Latin” of his ostensible source in *Troilus and Criseyde*—this passage insists on the mimetic quality of his own work in relation to the intentions of a patron or muse. Critics frequently contextualize Chaucer’s seemingly compulsive need to authorize his own work in relation to a community of old books and their authors. These deferrals of narrative responsibility (which litter Chaucer’s narrative poetry) certainly participate in a tradition of modesty topoi necessary for the writing of fiction in the later medieval period. However, these conventional-sounding preferences for *imitatio* over *inventio* take on added semantic force after the 1349 Ordinance of Laborers made the justification of one’s work a social, not just a literary, necessity.

In the G-version of the Prologue, the intention behind the narrator’s work is framed not through a process of mimesis but rather through one of alterity: the poet, no longer simply the muse’s automaton, can only describe the “entent” of his labor negatively.³⁵ His dilation on the

³⁵See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 19–20.

problem of poetic “makynge” stems from a question of pressing topicality in the 1380s: factionalism at court. The poet assumes an audience that already suspects him of factional intent, even as he claims ignorance of the courtly conflict between the parties of the flower and the leaf:

For trusteth wel, I ne have nat undertake
 As of the lef agayn the flour to make,
 Ne of the flour to make ageyn the lef,
 No more than of the corn agen the shef;
 For, as to me, is lefer non, ne lother.
 I am withholde yit with never nother;
 That nys nothyng the entent of my labour
 For this werk is al of another tonne,
 Of olde story, er swich strif was begonne.
 (G 71–80)

The poet here alludes to what was presumably a courtly ritual wherein one part of the royal household would wear the livery of the leaf while the other would choose the flower, each side arguing the superior qualities of its chosen sign.³⁶ This ritual enacts a carnivalesque form of court factionalism (like the inversion present in other medieval rituals, such as the boy bishop or liturgical parody), a game that (in Chaucer's time) would have domesticated the all-too-real factionalism of Richard's court. What is important here is not necessarily the specifics of the ritual behind this passage but rather that the poet disavows the politics of factionalism completely through a poetics of radical neutrality (“I don't serve either party; I don't know who does”) while simultaneously affirming that his own “makynge” has not incited discord between the two factions. In effect, the narrator claims to be the Switzerland of poetry. It is unsurprising that the G-prologue attaches its claims of poetic immunity to its discussion of the poet's literary intent since evidence of partisan “makynge” would have been all too evident in the recent past.

³⁶The passage on the flower and the leaf also appears in the F-version but there it is unconnected with the poet's work (F 188–96). For details on the debate between the parties of the flower and the leaf as May day ritual, see the introduction to D. A. Pearsall, ed., *The Floure and the Leafe and the Assembly of Ladies* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962). The followers of the leaf are usually the “chaste faithful and valorous” led by Diana, while the followers of the flower are the “idle and pleasure loving” led by Flora. The qualities assigned to leaf and flower vary from poet to poet, but the dominant allegory is clear enough: the party of the leaf represents “serious achievement and steadfastness” while the flower is associated with “idleness and frivolity.”

To avoid the perception of such “makyng” would presumably be to avoid the fate that claimed a write like Usk as well as Chaucer’s fellow justices on the peace commission.

In the later G-version, Chaucer claims that his motivation for writing is above such strife (lines 76–88):

That nys nothyng the entent of myn labour.
 For this werk is al of another tonne,
 Of old story, er swich strif was begonne.
 But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence
 To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
 Is for men shulde autoritees beleve,
 There as there lyth non othyr assay be preve.
 For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare,
 The naked text in English to declare
 Of manye a story, or elles of many a geste,
 As autours seyn; leveth hem if yow lest.

Bibliostalgia seems to be proposed as antidote to current factionalism: “don’t ask me, I read it in an old book.” Rather than a sign of Chaucer’s disengagement with current politics, or evidence of Chaucer’s vaunted “apoliticalness,” this disavowal witnesses a keen attention to the requisite terms for discussing one’s labor in the 1380s and 1390s. Circumspection is not to be equated with disengagement. This disavowal of the topicality of his poem—along with its displacement of authorial intent onto the reader in the last line—actually demonstrates its topicality. Similarly, the repetition of the term “entent” in this passage betrays its doubleness and duplicity; mimesis may here be counterfeiting. If, in the earlier F-version of the Prologue, the poet claims a stable authorial identity based on a transparent literary intention—the work’s motivation is identified with his master’s will—the G-version witnesses the difficulty in determining the “entent” behind any work and acknowledges that the labor of fiction-making is subject to a variety of hermeneutic abuses.

In openly assaying the possibility of his own “labor trespass,” Chaucer participates in a debate over intentionality and work that had become quite heated by the late fourteenth century, a debate that had implications for Chaucer’s political (as well as his poetic) life. The 1380s saw an increased interest in attempts to textualize internal intention alongside a growing conviction that it was possible to make legible a person’s

"entent" as it related to his or her daily actions. Rapidly multiplying treason accusations raised the question of intention as, for the first time, legal appeals could be based on an accused's intention rather than just his or her actions: for instance, the articles of impeachment against Burley and Tresilian accused them of "imagining" treason and injury to others even if they didn't actually commit it.³⁷ Previously "effect" was the watchword rather than "intention" in medieval jurisprudence: one could only be convicted on account of actions, not intentions.³⁸ Similarly, in the theological sphere, the problem of intention was at the heart of late fourteenth-century Wycliffite-inspired debates over whether or not a priest in mortal sin could administer the sacraments.³⁹

In the Prologue to the *Legend*, Chaucer repeatedly cites his own intention in defending himself from accusations that he has not worked well. Chaucer claims that the "entent of his labor" (G 78) is not to stir factionalism; rather, the poet claims that "myn entent is, or I fro yow fare, / The naked text in English to declare" (G 85–86).⁴⁰ Later in the Prologue, the poet attempts to justify his literary labor on the basis of his intention to edify lovers, explicitly denying the charge of trespass that his listeners are being urged to associate with poetic labor (F 462–74; G 452–64):

But trewly I wende, as in this cas,
Naught have agilt, ne doon to love trespas.

³⁷ On this new legal use of intention and imagination, see J. G. Bellamy, *The Law of Treason in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). For examples of how the 1388 articles of impeachment use this wording, see *Rotuli Parliamentorum: The Rolls of Parliament*, vol. 3 (London, 1783), pp. 228–45. (Hereafter cited as RP) Burly and Tresilian (among others) "conspireront & ymageront traierusement la Mort et Destruction de ceux que feuront affentantz a la fesance de la Commission et estatut faitz a darrein parlement" (article 8); they are similarly accused on account of "lour ditz tresons traierusement ymaginez" (article 10).

³⁸ Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 299–305, argues that an accused's intention was not generally considered in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century criminal and civil law. For the legal definitions of the term, see the MED, s.v. *entente* (n.) 7. *Law*. (a) A legal claim, a demand; (b) the provisions, substance, or essence of a contract, a law, a will; the meaning or purport of a document in the eyes of the law; s.v. *entencounr* (n.) 6. *Law*. The substance or provisions (of a document).

³⁹ On the frequency of this charge, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 314–17.

⁴⁰ Questions about "entent" surface strategically throughout Chaucer's later narrative poetry: it is central to an interpretation of Criseyde's motivations in *Troilus and Criseyde*; its appearance strifes the antifraternal exchanges throughout the *Canterbury Tales* (especially in the Pauline cast it finds in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and the Retraction).

For-why a trewe man, withouten drede,
 Hath nat to parten with a theves dede;
 Ne a trewe lover oght me not to blame
 Thogh that I speke a fals love som shame.
 They oghte rather with me for to holde
 For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde,
 Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
 Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
 To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce
 And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
 By swich ensample; this was my menyng.

The poet's recourse to exemplarity fails to convince Alceste who admonishes the poet to leave off arguing and to accept the "grace" that has been shown him. Alceste and the God of Love are ultimately unwilling to admit intention as a mitigating factor; writers (like others who commit trespasses or felonies) are responsible for the effects of their works regardless of the absence of *mens rea*. That the poet justifies his work on the grounds of truth and intentionality, and that it fails to convince so spectacularly, is indicative of the shaky footing these concepts find, not only in Chaucer's poetry, but in the contemporary social world in which it participates. If the poet cannot vindicate his labor, it is in part because intention, and hence identity, cannot be adequately textualized. True labor is not unequivocally affirmed here in the G-Prologue; rather, it is the problem attendant on determining true labor—of ever fully conveying or textualizing intention—that is witnessed.

Defending Women, Defending Writers

While the majority of *Legend* criticism has attempted to determine Chaucer's angle of approach to classical and medieval traditions of anti-feminist discourse as well as the contemporary *querelle de la Rose*,⁴¹ I am more interested in exploring the effects of conflating a "defense of

⁴¹ Readings of the Prologue in relation to the antifeminist tradition include Sheila Delany, "Rewriting Good Women: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts," in Julian Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch, eds., *Chaucer in the Eighties* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 75–92; Elaine Hansen Tuttle, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 82 (1983): 11–31; and Florence Percival, *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

women" with a defense of the poet's own work, particularly since neither defense quite convinces. Falsity in literary labor, like falsity in love, seems to be the norm in the *Legend of Good Women*. If the fourteenth-century *querelle des femmes* helped to revive debate over the intentions of classical antifeminist writers, it also raised questions about the role of authorial intention as well as the possibility of controlling the reception of either texts or acts.⁴² Moreover, the debate fanned controversy over how fiction as a representational enterprise was to be justified at all.

Lisa Kiser, one of the critics who has written most extensively and persuasively on the *Legend*, has provocatively observed that "the *Legend's* ostensible subject, love, is not its real subject at all."⁴³ Kiser identifies the poem's real subject as literature, specifically, "the usefulness of classical literature in a Christian world" (9). While I agree with Kiser that one of the narrator's interests is negotiating a medieval identity for classical stories, the poem's scope is not restricted to an exploration of the productive capacities of *imitatio*. The Prologue has multiple foci, juxtaposing love, labor, and literature. Through this insistent conjoining of seemingly unrelated topics, the Prologue can be said to operate in the appositive style: like the Anglo-Saxon poets, Chaucer created meaning through suggestive juxtaposition rather than discursive explication. If he fails to comment explicitly on their interrelations, this is less a poetic failing—a literary *non sequitur*—than an invitation for the reader to interpret these dislocations for him- or herself.

For Chaucer, love, labor, and literature were all cognate fields insofar as they were sites where the hermeneutic limits of truth could be, and were being, investigated at the end of the fourteenth century. Alceste's request that the narrator write a legendary about women "trewen in lovyng" and "false men that hem betrayen" not only assumes that "trouthe" can be adequately assessed in language, it witnesses how intimately epistemological and psychological questions were intertwined in topical debates of this period. Chaucer's dilation on truth in the Prologue engages not only scholastic or theological perspectives but also

⁴²For the *querelle de la Rose*, see E. Hicks, ed., *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (Paris: Chamion, 1977). Rita Copeland offers a compelling reading of the Prologue's repeated invocation of intentionality in relation to the academic tradition of *intentio auctoris*, particularly in relation to the medieval reception of Ovid's *Heroides*; see *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 186–97.

⁴³*Telling Classical Tales: Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 9.

social ones. The question of true value is not decidable through recourse solely to divine will or the authority of old books; the poet also draws on contemporary institutional and juridical definitions to help mediate available models of truth, whether in love, in literature or in labor.

At the time Chaucer was sitting on the peace commission and (presumably) working on the *Legend of Good Women*, he was involved in a literal, not just literary, *querelle de femmes*. This case, a contested labor violation, highlights the ways in which labor trespasses and fiction-making were related. Chaucer acted as surety for one Matilda Nemeg (or Nemghen), a domestic servant, who was charged with leaving the service of Maria Alconbury (Alkenburgh) of London before the end of the agreed-upon term. Her former employer claimed to have suffered injury to the tune of 20 marks as a consequence of Matilda's departure *contra formam ordinacionis*. Matilda appeared in person to contest the charge, and Chaucer acted as mainpernor on two separate occasions. As mainpernor, Chaucer offered his person, *corpus pro corpore* (according to the standard writ formula), as surety for Matilda's appearance at further appointed court dates. If Matilda failed to appear, Chaucer would be expected to appear himself and be amerced at the court's discretion. This case is complicated by the fact that Maria Alconbury filed a simultaneous suit against a clockmaker, John of Cologne, charging that he broke her close, took goods and chattels valued at 100 shillings, and abducted her servant, the foresaid Matilda.⁴⁴

While we know nothing of Chaucer's relationship with Matilda Nemeg, nor is the outcome of this process recorded (suggesting perhaps that a settlement was reached out of court), this case does allow us to see how the statutes' framers (and perhaps its enforcers) envisioned labor relations at the end of the fourteenth century. Behind all the labor statutes (and particularly those passed in 1388) lay a fear of the potential transgression of social boundaries; as such, these ordinances legally sanctioned inquiry into any actions that would produce labor or status instability. Maria Alconbury claimed that she had retained Matilda's services for the term of a year beginning on 23 June 1387 but that Maria had left on 15 October 1387. The 1349 Ordinance of Laborers stipulated that contracts should be yearly in an effort to keep wages down and to curtail workforce mobility, two factors that were felt to lead to increased

⁴⁴For the Latin text of the suit against Matilda Nemeg, see Martin, *Chaucer Life-Records*, pp. 289–90.

economic independence for workers. The case of Matilda Nemeg, along with the many others like it, while symptomatic of this anxiety over shifting economic resources, is also symptomatic of concerns about governance and social control that lay behind the continual reissuance and stricter enforcement of the labor laws; the assertion of one-year contracts was an attempt to guarantee that workers would be under the continual and direct governance of a single master (a stability and accountability reminiscent of the villeinage system that was increasingly threatened by the market economy).⁴⁵

That Matilda can herself be charged under the labor laws and simultaneously be the object of an action in which her employer claims compensation for the loss of her services, however, bespeaks the ideological conflict that marked the late medieval attitude towards labor. Matilda's employer can claim property rights over her (as if she were the equivalent of the "goods and chattels" also mentioned in the second suit), showing that laborers and their labor power were treated legally as quantifiable commodities. Yet at the same time Matilda, as part of the growing class of free wage earners who worked contractually, was seen to be an independent agent capable of negotiating the conditions of her work. We cannot know the extent to which justices of the peace as enforcers of the labor statutes shared the intentions of the statutes' framers. We can only assume from Chaucer's willingness to act as surety in the Matilda Nemeg case that, while he had experience enforcing the labor laws as a JP, he must also have had a sense of the limitations of these laws and their application.

Like the narrator of the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer knew what it was to be wrongly accused on account of one's work. If the *Legend of Good Women* offers a literary "defense of women," Chaucer's participation in Matilda's case offers a different kind of defense, though one no less concerned with the mechanics of narrative fictions. In fact, the judicial narratives that were the by-products of trespass cases like the one brought against Matilda foreground the often reciprocal relation that existed between the labor of making fictions—literary work such as that undertaken by the narrator—and the role played by fiction-making in

⁴⁵ For a discussion of master-servant relations as governed by the labor ordinances, see Madonna J. Hettinger, "Defining the Servant: Legal and Extra-Legal Terms of Employment in Fifteenth-Century England," in Allen Frantzen and Douglas Moffat, eds., *The Work of Work: Servitude, Slavery, and Labor in Medieval England* (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1994), pp. 206–28.

late fourteenth-century labor regulation. The role played by judicial fictions becomes clearer if we look more closely at the somewhat curious simultaneous action filed by Matilda's employer, Maria Alconbury, against John the Clockmaker. Maria had filed a writ of trespass charging that John's abduction of Matilda was committed *vi et armis* and *contra pacem regis*.⁴⁶ In order to be heard in a royal court, trespass cases ostensibly had to involve some violence "against the king's peace." When, over the course of the fourteenth century, trespass came to cover most economic legislation, this violence became more metaphysical than physical.⁴⁷

Originally the phrase *vi et armis* denoted precisely what it would seem to: that the trespass was committed with bows and arrows, knives, or swords, but in the second half of the fourteenth century the phrase started to appear in trespass cases where it is clear that no weapons were carried nor force used. For example, in 1358 a plaintiff alleged that the local chaplain had "with force and arms" ploughed twenty acres belonging to the plaintiff and already sown with grain. The case is clearly one of contested property ownership but this doesn't stop the plaintiff from employing the legal fiction that the ploughing was done *vi et armis, scilicet gladiis etc.* and *contra pacem {regis}*.⁴⁸ The physical impossibility of plowing while holding a sword doesn't enter into the case. Nor is it clear how ploughing could constitute a breach of the king's peace. These phrases appear in this case not because anyone believed that weapons were actually present in the field or that the king's interests were actually at risk, but because acts committed *vi et armis* and *contra pacem regis* would be heard by delegates of royal justice rather than by the local sheriff. Use of these phrases in this type of situation was, as Richard F. Green notes, "one of the more amusing legal fictions of the period."⁴⁹

⁴⁶PRO, CP 40/511 m. 333. The membrane is illegible near the right-hand margin but enough of the usual trespass formula is present to supply the rest.

⁴⁷S. F. C. Milsom, *Historical Foundations of the Common Law*, 2d ed. (London: Butterworths, 1981), p. 287, notes that it was a stretch to consider economic transgression as trespass—that is, direct and forcible breaches of the king's peace—but that is precisely the direction that juridical development took over the course of the fourteenth century.

⁴⁸Morris S. Arnold, ed., *Select Cases of Trespass from the King's Courts, 1307–1399*, vol. 2, Selden Society (London: Selden Society, 1987), p. 293.

⁴⁹Richard Firth Green, *Crisis of Truth*, p. 148. Legal historian S. F. C. Milsom, *Studies in the History of the Common Law* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), p. 85, notes that the second half of the fourteenth century saw a growing number of trespass cases that employed "fictitious" elements in their writs "which in truth contained no element of breach of the peace."

So why does *vi et armis* appear in Maria Alconbury's writ against John the Clockmaker? While it is possible that John had used force in the alleged theft, it doesn't necessarily imply that Maria's servant Matilda was carried away by John at knifepoint. In fact, when found in accusations alleging the breaking of a close and the carrying away of goods and chattel, the *vi et armis* formula frequently masks a simple dispute over property ownership where the plaintiff desires the case to be heard in a royal rather than a local court.⁵⁰ Thus these charges should be read not as the modern equivalent of armed robbery and kidnapping but rather as the stuff of small claims court. Medieval court records attest that even the peaceful hiring of a servant might be alleged to be forceful if it were against the master's will. Often such cases of "servant abduction" are merely cases of a defendant hiring away a servant whom they claimed was out of service and therefore hireable.⁵¹ We cannot know the circumstances of Matilda's departure. But it need not be the case that Matilda was violently kidnapped or that the king's peace was actually broken. More probable was a scenario in which Maria Alconbury disdained a local remedy for a labor dispute in hopes of a (more impartial? faster? perhaps more lucrative?) royal one and, to this end, her complaints most likely employed at least one type of legal fiction.

Labor statute prosecution (in the form of a narrativized trespass charge) was one type of ubiquitous late fourteenth-century "identity machine" that both employed fictions and produced them in the process of regulating late medieval subjects. Such trespass accusations asserted that a person's status could be known through a public testimony and recording of the intentions (true or false) behind his or her work (and,

⁵⁰ Milsom, *Studies*, pp. 78, 293, asserts that a mere wrongful entry would not normally be considered *contra pacem rege*—and thus would not be heard in a peace session or other royal court—unless *vi et armis* were alleged. Why would Maria prefer that her case be heard in a royal rather a local court? A number of reasons can be postulated: fear of local bias, a desire for a speedy process (rather than the occasionally torpid flow of local justice), or the possibility of a greater settlement. A common person, like Maria Alconbury, who had no direct ties to the king (and thus could not otherwise get her case heard before the king's justices) would have to resort to fiction to attain justice in the royal courts, a fiction contained in the charge of trespass *vi et armis*. We also have records of a 1385 case in Kent involving a breaking of a close and house and carrying away goods and chattels where these phrases clearly cover a nonviolent property dispute (Arnold, *Select Cases of Trespass*, pp. 395–96).

⁵¹ Milsom discusses a 1359 "servant abduction" case where trespass *vi et armis* is used in a similarly fictitious way (*Studies*, pp. 17–18; 82). For more of these cases, see the section on "abducting servants and villeins" in Morris, *Select Cases of Trespass*, pp. 99–106.

correlatively, that his or her identity would be fully present in this judicial interrogative setting). Such a process sought to stabilize identities (occasionally through resort to fiction) in the judicial records: Matilda was a false laborer; John a violent criminal; Maria a wronged employer.

Like labor statutes, the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* uses a charge of trespass to force the poet to justify his literary labor. When accused of falsity in labor, Matilda Nemeg had Geoffrey Chaucer acting as surety for her labor violation; when similarly accused, the Legend's narrator "Geoffrey" has the good woman Alceste acting as his surety. If the statutes Chaucer was charged with enforcing attempted to circumscribe the fluidity of social and professional identity, it was precisely this fluidity of identity, its inability to be circumscribed, that is evident both in the judicial records surrounding Matilda Nemeg and in the poetic apology found in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. The labor of fiction and the fictions of labor are brought together in these instances in ways that suggest how the textualizing procedures designed to make identity legible often disclosed more about the intention of the statutes' framers than about intentions of the laborers it was meant to survey. When, in the G-version, the God of Love demands to know why the poet has failed to write "of trewe wyves and of here labour" (306), Geoffrey may well have argued that this was a difficult task in a world where concepts of both truth and labor were under intense scrutiny and subject to frequent revision.

Dream Work and the Uses of Alterity

Piers Plowman and the *Legend of Good Women* are usually seen to be opposite poles of the dream vision axis: the former relentlessly didactic and moralizing, the latter courtly and insubstantial; the one overseen by God, the other by the God of Love. Far from being antithetical, the two share an interest in the complexities of justifying literary labor at a time when discourses about labor were becoming increasingly politicized. The choice of the vernacular dream vision frame also signals Chaucer's participation in a broader fourteenth-century current of social commentary, one usually associated with the poetics of the Alliterative Revival.

For fourteenth-century alliterative writers, the prophetic nature of the dream vision was not just a tool for legitimating otherwise unsubstantiated fictions about human nature, for allowing writers to tell lies

under the guise of revelation.⁵² Neither just a literary beard nor an instrument for intertextual play, the dream vision frame was the marker of serious topical and political poetry. In the second half of the fourteenth century, alliterative writers found the form to be ideologically suited to the task of discussing their own literary labor in the context of the wider question of what it meant “to labor truly.” The anonymous author of *Wynnyere and Wastoure* (ca. 1352–70), for instance, uses a dream setting as a platform from which to speak about the changing social role of the poet as well as the philosophical (and economic) dilemmas arising from the labor shortage following the recent outbreak of Black Plague. Seen as a part of this tradition, the Prologue to the *Legend* has less in common thematically with Chaucer’s own earlier continental-style courtly dream visions (like the *Parliament of Fowles* and the *Book of the Duchess*) and more in common with the insular alliterative dream vision tradition that produced texts like *Wynnyere and Wastoure* and *Piers Plowman*, a tradition that showed keen interest in the relation of the poet’s work to wider questions about the social value of labor.

The Prologue to the *Legend* has particularly strong affinities with the revised C-text of *Piers Plowman*, especially Passus 5, wherein the narrator must defend himself against charges that he has not worked well. Both the Prologue to the *Legend* and the C.5 episode find a poetic alter-ego—Chaucer’s “Geoffrey” and Langland’s “Will”—who, accused of falsity in labor, must consequently justify themselves before a personified authority figure—the God of Love, and Reason, respectively. Read allegorically, both C.5 and the Prologue articulate the divided subjectivity that the labor laws were capable of producing; at the same time, they show the difficulty of justifying vernacular writing as legitimate (and orthodox) work.

Both narrators are faced with skepticism not only about the intellectual labor that they perform but also the larger problem that literary labor often does not look like labor at all. In *Piers Plowman*, Will differ-

⁵²For the most extensive discussion of the development of the Latin dream vision tradition from its inception to its reception by medieval writers, see Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) concisely summarizes the Latin and French traditions and then shows how this tradition was adapted by English dream-writers. For other recent treatments of the form, see J. Stephen Russell, *The English Dream Vision: Anatomy of a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988) and Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

entiate between the “book” labor appropriate to his clerical status and the “knaues werkes,” or manual labor, appropriate to the third estate. He contends that his itinerant preaching is not to be confused with vagrancy nor his apostolic mendicancy with able-bodied begging (C.5.35–85). Anne Middleton has eloquently sketched the multiple ways in which Will’s self-representation in this passus responds to pressures exerted by the 1388 Statute of Laborers. Middleton compares Langland’s desire to assess the ethical merits of the writerly life with a similar impulse in Chaucer’s *Retractions* at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*, concluding that what Chaucer takes for granted—that a writer’s life is merely the sum of his works—Langland actively questions and, moreover, that Langland alone foregrounds “the continued incommensurabilities between conceptions of social and spiritual identity as performed and as textualized—and hence the anomalous standing of vernacular ‘literature’ itself.”⁵³ While Middleton is correct insofar as the *Retractions* go, Chaucer’s most intense engagement with these questions is to be found earlier in his poetic career, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*.

Both Langland and Chaucer use the dream vision frame as a space in which to contemplate narratorial (and narrative) reformation. Poems like *Pearl* demonstrate that the English dream vision was a popular (perhaps the most popular) vehicle for “reformation” narratives at the time Langland and Chaucer were writing. Yet ideas of both personal and political reform in England had, of course, become polarized in the wake of the 1381 Uprising and the 1382 condemnation of Wyclif’s writings and his Oxford adherents. The specter of Wyclif (and Lollardy) haunts the efforts of both narrators as they attempt to justify their vernacular literary labor, a dodgy enterprise in the post-1381 world where discourses of labor regulation and heresy prosecution were increasingly seen to be coextensive.⁵⁴ If one of Lollardy’s most conspicuous messages

⁵³ Anne Middleton, “Acts of Vagrancy: The C Version ‘Autobiography’ and the Statute of 1388,” in Steven Justice and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, eds., *Written Work: Langland, Labor, and Authorship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 213. Other considerations of *Piers* in relation to labor are found in Lawrence M. Clopper, “Need Men and Women Labor? Langland’s Wanderer and the Labor Ordinances,” in Barbara Hannawalt, ed., *Chaucer’s England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), pp. 110–29; and Derek Pearsall, “*Piers Plowman* and the Problem of Labour,” in James Bothwell, et al., eds., *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 123–32.

⁵⁴ The intersection of these juridical discourses as a poetic topos reflects the current political atmosphere, since the government pursued and prosecuted labor violators and

at this time was its desire for an English translation of the Bible—the so-called “naked text” of scripture—and if the vehicle for this message was seen to be the literate idlers—“lollers”—who spread their dissenting views in the vernacular, it is unsurprising to find Chaucer’s narrator facing charges of “heresy” on account of his translations of the “naked text”; even Alceste, the narrator’s advocate, claims to be unsure as to whether or not he is currently a “renegade” to Love’s law.⁵⁵ Langland’s Will is under no less suspicion (both within and outside the poem) as a “lewd loller” (C 5.4).⁵⁶ Chaucer and Langland stage their dream vision self-representations against a background of a vernacular increasingly pejorized as a vehicle for heresy in ecclesiastical discourse, and thus both episodes take their topical interrogatory cues from contemporary heresy inquisition, as well as from proceedings initiated under the labor statutes.

While C.5 and the Prologue to the *Legend* share an interest in labor, they are interested in the effects of labor regulation on different parts of the body politic. Langland’s narrator—whose self-description suggests that he is a cleric in minor orders—justifies intellectual labor in opposition to manual labor, while Chaucer’s dreamer defends his past literary labor against accusations of poetic malfeasance. Chaucer is not, like Langland, envisioning himself as the accused in a labor prosecution per se. Rather, he meditates on the problem of justifying one’s labor in the specific environment of the court. Chaucer and Langland differ to the extent that Langland’s inquiry explores the potential effects of the statutes on the lower orders of the clergy and on the workers of the third estate, while Chaucer demonstrates that fears about justifying one’s work were to be found in the court as well as in the churches and the fields.

suspected Lollards through many of the same mechanisms; see Chris Given-Wilson, “Labour in the Context of English Government,” in James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg, and W. M. Ormrod, eds., *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 85–100.

⁵⁵On the connection between Lollardy and the vernacular, see Anne Hudson, “Wyclif and the English Language,” in A. Kenny, ed., *Wyclif in His Times* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 85–103; and Margaret Aston, “Wyclif and the Vernacular,” in Anne Hudson and Michael Wilks, eds., *From Ockham to Wyclif*, Studies in Church History Subsidia 5 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 281–330. Like Sheila Delaney, *Naked Text*, pp. 115–23, I find Chaucer’s language in the Prologue to be resonant with the debate over Lollard Bible translation.

⁵⁶See Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anti-Clericalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 125–49.

If C.5 reimagines recent innovations in labor legislation (as Middleton convincingly argues), Chaucer's Prologue can be seen to respond to an increased need for a ready defense of one's past works against the shifting backdrop of partisan maneuverings in and around Richard's court. An *exemplum* of this need could easily be extracted from the cases of Chaucer's fellow justices Burley, Tresilian, and Belknap. In these instances, narratives of work in the form of accusations of treason easily became tools of political factionalism; as discussed above, this anxiety about work and factionalism is one that Chaucer raises in the Prologue. The 1380s saw an unprecedented rise of politically motivated accusations of treason, accusations that began to focus on the miscarrying of official duties rather than plotting against the king's person.⁵⁷ The 1384 case of John Northampton in London's convoluted mayoral politics provides one of the best known examples of how such narratives of false work (here in the form of articles of impeachment penned by Thomas Usk) could be transmuted into a death sentence for the accused.⁵⁸ The fates of Chaucer's fellow justices also show how easily one's work could be re-presented in a textual form that, while perhaps unrecognizable to the accused, could be read as a consistent and convincing narrative to a parliamentary body (especially one already pre-disposed to read in this manner). The articles of treason filed against Simon Burley by the Appellants alleged that, in addition to multiple acts of abrogating royal power for the pursuit of singular profit, Burley had misconducted his duties as head of the peace commission, had disturbed the due process of the law, and had prevented the other justices from conducting their duties.⁵⁹ In effect, Burley is accused of a labor offense, differing only in degree rather than in kind from the ones that the peace commission itself would have heard. This example suggests that the labor statutes

⁵⁷ According to Bellamy, *Law of Treason*, few treason cases appeared before the courts during the reign of Edward III, whereas "the reign of Richard II in contrast was of the utmost importance in the development of the law of treason" (pp. 108–9).

⁵⁸ For the text of Usk's appeal of Northampton, see R. W. Chambers and M. Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931).

⁵⁹ Article 15 in *RP*, vol. 3, p. 243: "Les ditz Simond . . . [and others] ount este commune destourbours de la ley qe la ley de la tere ne poet avoir son cours et plusours foitz ount destourbez les justices sergeantz et autres sages du ley par grevouse et haynouse manace et autrement si qe les jusices en lour juggementz et les sergeantz et autres sages du ley noseront pur doute ajugger pledeer faire ne user la ley solonc leffect dycelle pur pour de les ditz simond . . . [and the others] isint accrocheront a eux roial poair come les justices sergeantz et autres sages du ley savent monstreer et enfourmer pluis a plein."

affected the third estate—their ostensible object—but that their enforcement made available new models (models outside of traditional estates literature) for looking at all work critically and with a more exacting lens. In this way, the politically motivated charges of treason that flourished in the 1380s were oftentimes just as much of a “legal fiction” as those found in proceedings initiated under the labor statutes. What allowed these legal fictions to be perpetrated in part was the assumption (for legislative purposes) that identities were stable and therefore easily textualized, precisely the assumptions that C 5 of *Piers Plowman* and the G-prologue of the *Legend of Good Women* resist through their ambivalent treatment of the narrator's biographical details.

In both episodes, the biographical mode functions through alterity. What seems so disruptive to a modern audience—the alternation between familiar topicality (identifiable everyday legal and social practices) and fantasy (a dream setting populated by allegorical creatures like Love and Reason)—would arguably have seemed equally intrusive to a medieval audience. Like us, they would not necessarily assume a certain strain of poets to be narcoleptic floraphiliacs. The dream vision trades on this experience of alienation produced by the alternation between the familiar and the fantastic; it encourages a kind of doubleness of vision that allows the poem to work as a spectacular vehicle for topical commentary. In both *Piers Plowman* and the *Legend of Good Women*, the dream vision frame can be seen as the counterpart to spectacular (or metatheatrical) moments in medieval drama. An analogy from the *York Crucifixion* play is helpful here: when the soldier-carpenters ineptly crucifying Christ swear anachronistically “by the rood” or when Christ complains “they know not what they work,” the playwright intends his audience to hear (rather than overlook) the dissonance. Spectacle consciously resists verisimilitude in order to highlight the play's theological message. The disjunction between two orders of experience—the everyday represented in the carpenters' lackluster work and the transcendent—remains uncommented on by the text but demands the hermeneutic attention of the audience.

The dream vision as deployed by Chaucer and Langland similarly calls attention to its own discontinuities of time and space as a hermeneutic event. The “uncanniness” of the dream vision lies in its asymptotical (rather than identical) relation to the real world; it is this relation that licenses the dreamer to replay familiar social experiences or current political events in spectacular ways. When, for example, in the F-version

of the Prologue, the poet's fears for his own life are reinforced by the God of Love's threats (lines 278–81; 336–40) and Alceste feels the need to intercede on his behalf, the allegory evokes not only literary discomfort but the fraught political climate of the 1380s. Staging death sentences and intercessory mediation would have had politically topical resonances for Chaucer's London audience: in 1384, John Northampton was tried before the king on a charge of treason (the main evidence being Usk's testimony); after a summary trial, the king condemned him to death. The sentence was later remitted at the behest of the queen. This intercessory gesture resulted in a new trial for Northampton, which (once again) resulted in a death sentence that (once again) spurred queenly intercession. Northampton's sentence was ultimately commuted to life imprisonment. While the topicality of dream visions is never reducible to an outside "reality," the Prologue's death threats are spectacular: we see not only the God of Love's court but also a Ricardian affinity itself constituted by similar political turns behind the poem's narrative.⁶⁰

Finally, it is important that neither Geoffrey nor Will is particularly successful at defending their intellectual labor as valid work: Geoffrey must grudgingly accept the God of Love's sentence; Will submits himself to Reason's charge to live a more regulated and therefore more praiseworthy life. If most dream visions work on the principle of "alienation overcome"—as when the *Pearl*-dreamer comes to realize that his inordinate grief should be put aside in favor of faith in divine grace—the alienation of the dreamers in both *Piers Plowman* and the Prologue to the *Legend* is never wholly reconciled. Both poems are fascinated with the subject of reformed labor, yet neither can successfully perform a textual justification of narrativized labor nor fully enact the dreamer's reformation. Paradoxically, interrogating the validity of vernacular making results in a penitential reprieve in both poems which, in turn, only results in further vernacular making: Chaucer begins to document the "labor" of good women; Will, the members of the community who perform their work in good faith. Yet it is difficult to argue that Chau-

⁶⁰For the chronology of Northampton's condemnations and the queen's intercessions on his behalf, see Ruth Bird, *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London: Longmans, Green, 1949). It is perhaps telling that the death threats are omitted in the later G-version; after all, where Alceste successfully intervenes on Geoffrey's behalf, Richard was to petition unsuccessfully for the lives of Chaucer's fellow justices Burley and Tresilian in 1388.

cer's imposed "penance" has really been fulfilled by his ambiguous treatment of these women's stories. Likewise, the notoriously difficult ending of *Piers* (where the dark vision of Antichrist necessitates yet another pilgrimage) proves the earlier notions of reform endorsed in the poem to be merely contingent. Ultimately, we can conclude that neither Langland nor Chaucer uses the dream vision as a means to attain a transcendent truth about the necessity (or even possibility) of true labor. Instead both Chaucer and Langland use the form to comment on the instability of social identities and the problems attendant on trying to textualize them.

This reading of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* has placed Chaucer's poetic practice in the realm of everyday medieval practices of work to show that Chaucer, like Langland, was deeply imbricated in the controversial debate about what it meant not only to justify one's labor in the 1380s but to justify intellectual labor in the form of vernacular making, to disclose the possible dangers of declaring "the naked text in English" (G 86). If the Prologue encourages us to see (however hazily) Chaucer the poet behind "Geoffrey" the poet-narrator, it similarly encourages us to see contemporary labor inquiries behind Love's allegorical interrogation of Geoffrey's literary labor. The poem points out the problems that arise when people are reduced to texts, whether their own poetic texts, the "legends" of these (occasionally) good women, accusations of falsity in labor like those faced by Matilda Nemeg, or articles of impeachment that could potentially represent one's work in a politicized and partisan fashion. In this sense, the Prologue embodies many of the inchoate fears about written work—both the work of writing and the documentation of work—that kept turning Chaucer and his fictions toward and away from life. Critics of Chaucer face this problem as well, of course, since we too are left with only written testimonies that must signify for identities and labors of the past. But if Chaucer's Geoffrey is any guide, we must take seriously the representational challenges posed by any authoritative attempt to read one's inner "entent" in one's outer work.

