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Lydgate's Kneeling Retraction: The *Testament* as a Literary Palinode

SEBASTIAN SOBECKI

ABSTRACT: This article maintains that John Lydgate's *Testament* is not a rejection of his secular career but a literary palinode that attempts to impress a sense of coherence onto a diverse body of work. As the language of conversion, the repetitive litaneutical code at the end of the poem is vindicated by the earlier performance of poetic bravado. Lydgate's textual piety, which I show to be indebted to the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, is paradoxically sustained by the displacement of prior secular forms. In a central gesture, the kneeling monk-poet presents his life's work to God, who acts as his patron. Finally, I demonstrate that manuscript illuminations depicting a kneeling Lydgate confirm the reception of such a pose as simultaneously pious yet secular.

The *Testament of Dan John Lydgate*, which survives in sixteen manuscripts and in one inscription, is a poem of some 800 lines, broken down into five movements that deploy rhyme royal for the second and fourth parts, and octave stanzas for the remainder.¹ Written toward the end of John Lydgate's life, the autobiographical *Testament* offers a uniquely retrospective angle on

Fiona Somerset's thoughtful comments on an earlier draft have greatly improved this essay. I am also grateful to the editors of *The Chaucer Review* and the two anonymous referees for their helpful suggestions. A version of this article was presented in Leiden in December 2012, and I thank Alasdair MacDonald for his incisive question about Chaucer's *Retraction*.

1. The manuscripts are listed in the *Digital Index of Middle English Verse*, ed. Linne R. Mooney, Daniel W. Mosser, and Elizabeth Solopova (www.dimev.net). Certain parts of the poem, in particular Parts 1 and 5, circulated independently. This is also the case with the stanzas in John Clopton's chantry chapel at Long Melford, which are limited to Part 5. On these fragments, see Shannon Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform in Fifteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, U.K., 2010), 117–20; and Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1995).

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the poet's work.² At the center of the poem is Lydgate's kneeling persona, steeped in prayer and mindful of his advanced age:

I, that am falle in age,
Gretly feblysshed of old infirmite,
.....
Age is crope In, calleth me to my grave,
To make rekenyng how I my tyme haue spent.
(197–98, 217–18)³

Substantial parts of the *Testament* reflect on Lydgate's youth (Parts 2, 4) and the narrator's subsequent reconciliation with his religious life (Parts 3, 5).

The critical response to the *Testament* has been overshadowed by Lydgate's longer poems. During the last two decades, however, readers have begun to turn to this work as part of a wider surge of interest in Lydgate's writings. In a first significant treatment of the *Testament*, Julia Boffey has shown the work to be indebted to the literary convention of the testamentary poem.⁴ She sees the work as a careful combination of "fervently devotional and . . . more reflective, ostensibly autobiographical" elements.⁵ These autobiographical features occasionally invite comparisons with similar passages in other works. Specifically, the parallels between Lydgate's account of his misspent youth in the *Testament* and Thomas Hoccleve's less than earnest narrative of his misrule in *Le Male Regle* court generalizations about the shared conventions of moralizing poetry. Yet while the ironic exploitation of Hoccleve's youth looks like a trap set for readers unaware of the intentional fallacy, there is no such distancing tone in Lydgate's *Testament*.⁶ James Simpson sees in the *Testament* a manifestly documentary work that is marked by a movement

2. The generally accepted late dating of the *Testament* is based on the self-referential remarks to old age in the poem. Similar references are contained in "On De Profundis," "An Exposition of the Pater Noster," and the "Prayer in Old Age" (W. H. E. Sweet, "Lydgate's Retraction and 'his resorte to his religyoun,'" in Vincent Gillespie and Kantik Ghosh, eds., *After Arundel: Religious Writing in Fifteenth-Century England* [Turnhout, 2011], 243–59, at 251). Derek Pearsall, too, places this poem among Lydgate's final years, between 1441 and 1449, by accepting the narrator as the "ageing poet" (*John Lydgate (1371–1449)* [Victoria, B.C., 1997]), 13, 39. Pearsall regards the references to Lydgate's youth as formulaic but generally accurate in detail (13), confirming the biographical information in the poem as plausible.

3. The *Testament*, in *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry N. MacCracken, vol. 1, EETS e.s. 107 (London, 1911). All subsequent references to the *Testament* are to this edition.

4. Julia Boffey, "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament," *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 41–56.

5. Boffey, "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament," 48.

6. The fundamental differences between these two poems were first discussed by Jerome Mitchell, *Thomas Hoccleve: A Study in Early Fifteenth-Century English Poetic* (Urbana, 1968), 5, 8–9.

from the secular text to the spiritual image, producing a document “in which Christ deletes Lydgate’s biography.”⁷ This idea has been taken up by Ruth Nisse, for whom the gradual replacement of the narratorial “I” with “Jesu” marks Lydgate’s “self-erasure” toward the end of the poem.⁸ A broader sense of self-erasure informs W. H. E. Sweet’s reading of the *Testament* as the centerpiece in a retraction that extends over a number of Lydgate’s late poems. Sweet follows Fiona Somerset’s appeal to cross-examine Lydgate’s “religious” and “secular” oeuvres, but he interprets the resulting retraction at face value as “a rejection of Lydgate’s own secular and laureate poems,” suggesting that the poet “revolted against” the writing of “pagan histories.”⁹ Thus, the *Testament* has come to be seen as a genuine attempt by Lydgate either to remove himself from the poem in a textual exercise of piety or to retract his secular writings at the end of his extraordinarily productive literary career.

Yet such a radical break with his narratorial self is uncharacteristic of Lydgate’s writing; if anything, it is precisely the Lydgate persona as a pious, kneeling petitioner that moves into the foreground of the poem. Looking back at his literary career—if Lydgate’s choices in terms of scope, tone, genre, and subject matter are anything to go by—then holism and inclusivity emerge as paradigmatic in his life as a writer. For self-erasure to work in the final section of the *Testament*, Lydgate should have avoided writing himself into the poem in the first place. No amount of self-deletion at the end of the text can erase the Lydgate persona from the *Testament*: all the attention paid to his youth and to showcasing his poetry in the rhyme royal stanzas remains fixed both on the page and in the memory of the reader. In order to delete Lydgate from the poem, one would need to delete the sections concerned with him. Such a fragmented reading of the poem has been attempted, as is brought out by the stanzas from the *Testament* that were painted around the cornice of John Clopton’s chantry chapel at Long Melford.¹⁰ But to achieve this effect, the text first requires dismembering. Nisse perceptively notes that the *Testament* is remarkable for what it omits, but I do not think that the elision of Lydgate’s public life from the poem amounts to a dismissal of the active portion of his life: if Lydgate had wished to distance himself from his

7. James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution, 1350–1547* (Oxford, 2002), 456.

8. Ruth Nisse, “Was It Not Routhe to Se?” in Larry Scanlon and James Simpson, eds., *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England* (Notre Dame, 2006), 279–98, at 293.

9. Fiona Somerset, “Hard Is With Seyntis for to Make Affray,” in Scanlon and Simpson, eds., *John Lydgate*, 258–78, at 258; and Sweet, “Lydgate’s Retraction,” 359.

10. Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 117–20; Gibson, *The Theatre of Devotion*; and J. B. Trapp, “Verses by Lydgate at Long Melford,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 6 (1955): 1–11.

younger worldly alter ego, then why is so much of the poem written in rhyme royal and in the established conventions of his aureate style?

Because Lydgate restricts his allusions to Chaucer to passages dedicated to his own misspent youth, the *Testament* appears to deny secular poetic language the power to capture profound religious experience. I will suggest, however, that the absence of secular forms and allusions in those sections of the poem that portray the kneeling poet-narrator encourage us to read the *Testament* as a literary palinode rather than a genuine rejection of Lydgate's secular and laureate career. I shall argue, therefore, that Lydgate's *male regle* has made possible his spiritual writing at the end of the poem, since the compelling nature of the underlying prayer scene relies on the prior enactment of what has by now become Lydgate's traditional poetic diction. The resulting language of the final section of the poem—a pared-down, highly repetitive litaneutical code—cannot therefore exist by itself. Rather, as the language of conversion, it is dependent on and vindicated by the prior performance of poetic bravado. In short, the poem is a literary palinode that attempts to impress a sense of coherence onto a body of work so diverse that it defies available literary categorization. Central to the poem's palinodal function is the central gesture of the kneeling poet-narrator who presents his life's work to his patron, God.

Because the *Testament* was written toward the end of Lydgate's life and because the poem appears to provide a set of self-reflective comments on Lydgate's work, any discussion of this text bears directly on the evaluation of his oeuvre. The sheer volume of Lydgate's poetry carries with it a catholic range of literary expressions that explodes available frameworks. Given the trans-canonical scope of Lydgate's oeuvre, the secular aesthetic and political configurations denoted by "Chaucerian" and "Lancastrian," respectively, fall short of explaining such a vast corpus. Although much of Lydgate's work is indebted to Chaucer, much is also independently inspired by Italian and French models, as Stephanie Kamath has recently shown.¹¹ Similarly, many of Lydgate's texts seek out public and political spheres, whereas many others are at home in traditionally religious forms and modes that have no antecedent in the extant repertoire of Chaucer. Long ignored, this capacious body of religious writing has led a number of readers to reevaluate Lydgate as a spiritual writer: Andrew Cole speaks of "Lydgate the theologian," and Shannon Gayk astutely notes that "even a cursory examination of Lydgate's religious writing reveals him to be as much 'vernacular theologian' as courtly poet laureate."¹² I suggest that the

11. Stephanie A. Viereck Gibbs Kamath, "John Lydgate and the Curse of Genius," *Chaucer Review* 45 (2010): 32–58.

12. Andrew Cole, *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (Cambridge, U.K., 2008), 131–52; and Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 86.

fruitful tension between the often conflicting demands of the secular and the religious, as recorded in the palinodal *Testament*, offers a unique yet apt conceptual framework for future explorations of the entire body of Lydgate's work.

The significance of this poem for the contemporary reception of Lydgate's oeuvre is brought out by the prominent treatment the *Testament* receives in a number of manuscripts that collect Lydgate's poetry. As Boffey has shown, the poem is the first item in Cambridge, Jesus College MS 56, whereas it has been bound in as a separate item in Leiden, Leiden University MS Vossius 9.¹³ In London, British Library MS Harley 2255, the heading "Testamentum Johannis lidgate nobilis poete" (fol. 47r) emphasizes his poetic reputation, and Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 683 may connect the *Testament* to the poet's perhaps recent death: "Here begynneth the prologe of damp John / lydgatys testament monk of Bury. On whos / sowle I beseche Jhesu haue mercy" (fol. 88r).¹⁴

Secular Traditions and Religious Devotion

For much of its duration, in the learned references to Dante and Chaucer, and, perhaps most clearly, in the many allusions to classical myth, the *Testament* acknowledges, celebrates even, the very literary nature of Lydgate's poetry.¹⁵ During Lydgate's account of the Harrowing of Hell, Christ is said to have rescued "soules many a peyre / Maugre Cerberus and all his cruelte" (109–10). Here, the presence of Cerberus aligns Christ's descent into Hell with Aeneas's or Orpheus's journeys to the Underworld. Later, the poem confirms this pairing of Christ and Orpheus when it extols Jesus's name:

Our strong Sampson, þat strangled the lyoun,
Our lord, our makere, & oure creatoure,
And be his passioun fro deth our redemptour,
Our Orphevs that from captiuyte
Fette Erudice to his celestiall tour,
To whom alle creatures bowe shall ther kne.
(155–60)

13. Boffey, "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament," 50.

14. Boffey, "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament," 50.

15. Discussions of the *Testament's* religious significance generally do not draw attention to the frequency of such references. Sweet discusses allusions to pagan material in the *Testament* and in some of Lydgate's other late poems but reads these poems as rejecting such concepts ("Lydgate's Retraction").

In echoing the long-standing conflation of Christ with Orpheus—a conflation that reaches back to the very beginnings of Christianity—Lydgate opts for a sanitized and therefore accepted Christian use of a classical myth. In this context of conventional Christian allegory, “Erudice,” who is delivered by Orpheus to his “celestiall tour,” becomes the Christian soul, resting securely in heaven. But Lydgate was aware of the ambiguity of Orpheus’s achievement, for, in the *Fall of Princes*, Lydgate’s Orpheus is doomed:

But Orpheus, fadir off armonye,
 Thouhte Erudice, which was his wiff, so fair,
 For hir sake he felte he muste deie,
 Because that he, whan he made his repair,
 Off hir [in] trouthe enbracid nothyng but hair.
 Thus he lost hire, there is no mor to seyne.
 (I.5818–23)¹⁶

The demise of Lydgate’s Orpheus in the *Fall of Princes* is sealed when his blissful youth is contrasted with suffering and death at the hands of women in later life:

How Orpheus endured in his lyue
 Ioie entirmedlid with aduersite;
 In his youthe whan he dede wyue
 He felte in wedlok ful gret felicite,
 His worldli blisse meynt with duplicite,
 As Fortune hir chaungis gan deuyde,
 Which from al vertu be set ful ferr a-side.
 (I.5881–87)

Nor is it likely that Lydgate forgot about the biblical motif of a wife who looks back at a place of no hope only to turn to stone, for he employs a reference to Lot’s wife glancing back at Sodom: commenting on the lack of enthusiasm for his religious vocation as a young man in the *Testament*, he recollects that “With Lothes wyf I loked often abak” (676).

16. *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols., EETS e.s. 121–24 (London, 1924–27). Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited by book and line number.

In the languid spring opening starting at stanza 37, the reader encounters “Phebus,” “Aurora,” and “Zepherus,” and the psalmic prayer to Christ later in the poem has the Lydgate persona pray for deliverance:

That worldly wawes with ther mortall deluge
 Ne drowne me nat in the dredfull dongeoun,
 Where Caribdes hath domynacioun,
 And Circes syngeth songes of disturbaunce.
 (537–40)

His vain life as a young monk who simply went through the motions made him into “the image of Pygmalion” (696). Is he praying to be rescued from the secular world, we may ask? After all, he speaks of “worldly wawes.” A provisional answer is provided a little later: “To veyn fables I did myn eres dresse, / Fals detraccioun among was to me swete” (721–22). The picaresque account of Lydgate’s riotous youth, taking up stanzas 31–56, is cast in a matching tone and lexis, replete with clear borrowings from the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, as has been noted by a number of readers:¹⁷

The yeres passed of my tender youthe
 Of my fresshe Age sered the grennesse,
 Lust appalled, the experience is kouthe,
 The onweldy Ioyntes starked with rudenesse,
 The cloudy sight mysted with dirkenesse,
 Without redresse, recure, or amendes,
 To me of death han brought in the kalendes.
 (241–47)

Echoes of the *Canterbury Tales* are perhaps strongest in Lydgate’s ensuing description of spring, which is based on the first eleven lines of the *General Prologue*:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
 The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
 And bathed every veyne in swich licour
 Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

17. See, for instance, Nisse, “Was It Not Routhe to Se?” 291–92, and, more fully, Sweet, “Lydgate’s Retraction,” 347ff.

Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
 Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
 The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
 Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
 And smale foweles maken melodye,
 That slepen al the nyght with open ye
 (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages).

(I 1–11)¹⁸

In what marks the difference between Chaucer's writing and Lydgate's aureate style, the later poet spreads his allusions to Chaucer's brief passage over the space of almost fifty lines of the *Testament*: "The bavme vpreysed most souereyne and entere, / Out of the rote doth naturally ascende / With new lyffre, the bareyne soil tamende" (280–82), "prikkes fressh corages" (297), and "Zepherus with his blastes sote / Enspireth ver with newe buddes grene" (325–26). In effect, this passage becomes Lydgate's most elaborate variation on the beginning of the *General Prologue*, even when compared to the *Legend of Dan Joos* or the Prologue to the *Siege of Thebes*.¹⁹ This point cannot be overstated: the description of spring in the *Testament* continues for a further seventy lines until, as with line 12 of the *General Prologue* ("Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages"), Lydgate introduces the concept of pilgrimage as a metaphor: "Our dwellyng here is but a pilgrymage" (394). Perhaps Lydgate's use of the *Canterbury Tales* in the *Testament* runs deeper still: the almost verbatim use in line 297 ("So priketh hem nature in hir corages") sets an expectation for a religious shift in the subsequent line ("thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages"), but Lydgate's audience has to wait almost one hundred lines for such a turn. Some of Lydgate's readers must have been familiar with Chaucer's subversive pairing of "corages" with "pilgrimages": if, in the *Canterbury Tales*, the mating birds of the secular spring opening undermine the sincerity behind the desire to undertake penitential journeys, thus paving the way for the estates satire that is about to unfold, then Lydgate's suspension to line 394 of a religious counterweight to "corages" renders this spiritual lacuna awkward.

Formally speaking, of course, the use of rhyme royal in Parts 2 and 4 appears to upset the piety of the *Testament*: rhyme royal is Lydgate's preferred

18. All citations of Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

19. Lydgate's use of GP in the *Legend of Dan Joos* and the *Siege of Thebes* has been treated by Amanda Leff, "Lydgate Rewrites Chaucer: The *General Prologue* Revisited," *Chaucer Review* 46 (2012): 472–79.

choice throughout his oeuvre, and this stanza form predominates in his secular works. Whether Lydgate follows Chaucer or whether he wishes to depart from the earlier poet by using Chaucer's stanza form is not material here because, as Lois Ebin has shown, the aureate Chaucerian-Lydgatian style had gradually become associated with Lydgate by this stage of his career.²⁰ And the deployment of rhyme royal in the *Testament* clearly evokes Lydgate's aureate poetry: the account of his irreverent youth and his allusions to Chaucer are confined to the rhyme royal sections of the poem. As with the opening of Hoccleve's *My Complainte*, the allusions to Chaucer and to his own works are too overt and too numerous to be listed here, but they accompany the Lydgate persona's transition from unreformed youth to repentant narrator. The language of the sequence and the secular rhyme royal format, all the while, retain their aureate and literary character.

And so, the extensive use of conventional stylistics throughout the poem and the consistent deployment of classical allusions undermine any attempt by the narrator to successfully displace Lydgate's life as a poet. How is the reader to distinguish between appropriate and "veyn" uses of myth, between Orpheus, Eurydice, and Cerberus, on the one hand, and Charybdis, Circe, and Pygmalion, on the other? In some instances, Orpheus prefigures Christ; in others, the Lydgate persona slips into the guise of Pygmalion or Odysseus, harassed by Circe and Charybdis, while the former nimbleness of Lydgate's "fresshe Age" has been made rigid by his "onweldy Ioyntes." These classical allusions and aureate passages belong to and are shaped by those parts of Lydgate's life that have been left out of this poem. Their form and language, however, have been retained.

No such invocations of classical myth and secular sentiments have found their way into the last section of the poem, Part 5. When the visual and devotional sequence begins at line 754, Lydgate has expended exactly one hundred stanzas on his past life.²¹ This final part of the poem, marked by plain diction and paratactic syntax, differs sharply from what has come before:

Behold the paynemes of whom that I was take,
Behold the cordes with whiche þat I was bounde,

20. Dunbar calls him "Ludgate aureate" in *The Goldyn Targe* (line 262); see Lois A. Ebin, "The Theme of Poetry in Dunbar's 'Goldyn Targe,'" *Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 147–59, at 154. The point is reinforced by Sweet ("Lydgate's Retraction," 347–48).

21. Though likely to be a coincidence, this is the exact amount of cantos in Dante's equally biographically inspired *Divine Comedy*. See Charles S. Singleton, "The Poet's Number at the Center," *Modern Language Notes* 8 (1965): 1–10, at 4.

Behold the Armoures which made my herte to quake,
 Beholde the gardeyn in which þat I was founde,
 Behold how Iudas toke xxx^{ti} pens rounde,
 Beholde his tresoun, beholde his couetyse.
 Behold how I with [many a] mortall wounde,
 Was like a lambe offred in sacrifice.

(762–69)

Sustained anaphora and syntactic parallelism are defining attributes of litanies,²² and these rhetorical devices tend to generate the affective quality characteristic of litaneutical forms. More specifically, the repetition of the exhortative “Behold” in Part 5 (used almost forty times in the next thirteen stanzas) and the frequency of the name “Jesus” in Parts 1 and 3 are elements commonly found in devotions to the Holy Name of Jesus.²³

Officially recognized during the Second Council of Lyon in 1274, such devotions became particularly widespread in fifteenth-century England where they were adapted as a liturgical rite.²⁴ To use the injunction “behold,” as Lydgate’s persona does, is to invite the audience to visualize the setting:

For every Middle English poem that calls for its hearers to listen—
 “lysteth,” or “herkneth”—another begins with the injunction to
 look—“beholde,” “looke,” “see,” or even “lo, here.” These poems call
 for a kind of “looking” in the mind, for their readers’ imaginative
 engagement with visual forms and spatial structures.²⁵

22. Although focused on pre-Conquest materials, Michael Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Litanies of the Saints* (Woodbridge, 1991), remains the fullest discussion of English litanies. See also Nigel Morgan’s work on English litanies (at the time of writing, only the first volume, *English Monastic Litanies of the Saints after 1100. Volume I, Abbotsbury-Peterborough* [Woodbridge, 2012], has been published).

23. On the significance of the word “behold” in the poem’s visual setting, see Gayk, *Image, Text, and Religious Reform*, 115–16. The convention “behold and see” is discussed by David Mills, “‘Look at Me When I’m Speaking to You’: The Behold and See Convention in Medieval Drama,” *Medieval English Theatre* 7 (1985): 4–12.

24. Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2007), 179–80; Richard W. Pfaff, *New Liturgical Feasts in Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1970), 77n7; Catherine A. Carsley, “Devotion to the Holy Name: Late Medieval Piety in England,” *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 53 (1992): 156–72; Denis Renevey, “The Name Poured Out,” in J. Hogg, ed., *The Mystical Tradition and the Carthusians* (Salzburg, 1996), 127–47; and Denis Renevey, “Name Above Names’: The Devotion to the Name of Jesus from Richard Rolle to Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection I*,” in Marion Glasscoe, ed., *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland, and Wales (Exeter Symposium VI)* (Cambridge, U.K., 1999), 103–21.

25. Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 122.

The spatial structure Lydgate envisages throughout the poem is that of the kneeling poet-narrator before Christ. As a quintessentially affective and submissive gesture,²⁶ kneeling permits Lydgate already in the first part of the *Testament* to balance the poem's textual nature with a physical and performative dimension. The first thirty stanzas of the poem, constituting Part 1, repeat Christ's name and end in the same emphatic "kne," merging linguistic with physical devotion:

Ther is no speche nor language can remembre,
 Lettre, syllable, nor word that may expresse,
 Though into tungen were turned euery membre
 Of man, to telle the excellent noblesse,
 Of blessed Iesu, which of his gret mekenesse,
 List suffre deth to make his servant fre;
 Now merciful lesu, for thyn hygh goodnesse,
 Haue mercy on alle that bowe to the her kne!

(57–64)

No linguistic system can encompass "Jesus," just as no component of such a system ("Lettre, syllable, nor word") can articulate the semantic remit of the divine name. And even if our sole purpose were to be articulatory agents ("into tungen were turned euery membre / Of man"), the poem suggests, we would still fail in this task. In line with the incarnational theology of the devotions to the Name of Jesus, it is not language but the reified speech act, the physical name of Christ on parchment, that figures as an object of devotion and becomes the spiritual catalyst for this form of devotion. Brantley explains that

The name of Jesus, honored by visual embellishment and decoration, becomes in these prayers as much picture as word. The name exists precisely at the intersection of textual and visual experience, where holy words become "objects" meaningful beyond their transparent, grammatical sense, and their manifestation in monograms and pictures, often unvoiceable, is imbued with the power to work miracles. For late medieval Christians, no word is more efficacious, "does" more in an Austinian sense, than the Holy Name of Jesus.²⁷

26. Richard C. Trexler, "Legitimizing Prayer Gestures in the Twelfth Century: The *De penitentia* of Peter the Chanter," *History and Anthropology* 1 (1984): 97–126; and Jean Claude Schmitt, "Between Text and Image: The Prayer Gestures of Saint Dominic," *History and Anthropology* 1 (1984): 127–62.

27. Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 179.

The manuscripts containing Lydgate's poem do not necessarily include the extravagant pictures and monograms of Jesus's name found in typical devotions to the Holy Name, but there are attempts in the layout of the *Testament* visibly to distinguish instances of the name. One manuscript, London, British Library Royal 18.D.II, gives each instance of "jhesu" in Part 3 in red ink.²⁸ Although not as ornately as in typical devotions to the Name of Jesus, stanzas 22 and 23 of the *Testament* perform Jesus's name, creating not so much an anagram as a spelling-out of "Jesus" in a vertical sequence:

I in Iesu sette for iocunditas,
 Gynnyng & grounde of all gostly gladnesse,
 E. next in ordre is eternitas,
 Tokene and signe of eternall bryghtnesse,
 S sette for sanitas, socour ageyn sekenesse,
 V. for vbertas, of spirituall plente,
 S for suauitas, from whom comyth all suetnesse,
 To them that knele to Iesu on there kne.

I in lesu, is ioye that neuere shall ende,
 E signyfieth euerlastyng suffisaunce,
 S our sauacioun when we shall hens wende;
 V. his fyve woundes, þat made vs acquietaunce,
 Fro Sathanes myght thurgh his meke sufferaunce,
 S for the sacrament, which ech day we may se,
 In forme of bred, to saue vs fro myschaunce,
 Whan we devoutly receyue it on our kne.

(169–84)

This is not an aural experience, but a visual one: the vertically spelled name of Jesus cannot be heard; it must be seen. Jesus's name, invoked a staggering 85 times in this poem, amounts to a protective charm: "Once the invocation is accomplished, the speaker is protected, just as the pronouncement of a couple performed in the marriage ceremony is followed by certain social and legal effects."²⁹ The written name of Jesus, in other words, becomes a contact relic. Lydgate's *Testament* assigns precisely this function to the name:

28. Fols. 2v–3v. The manuscript, which lacks Part 1, was "commissioned between 1455 and 1469 by Herbert, first earl of Pembroke" (Alexandra Gillespie, *Print Culture and the Medieval Author: Chaucer, Lydgate, and Their Books, 1473–1557* [Oxford, 2006], 37).

29. Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, 179.

And vndir supporte, Iesu, of thy fauour.
 Or I passe hens, this hoolly myn entent,
 To make Iesu to be chief surveieur,
 Of my laste wille sette in my testament,
 Whiche of myself am Insufficient
 To rekene or counte, but mercy & piete
 Be preferryd, or thou do Iugement,
 To alle that calle to Iesu on ther kne.

(209–16)

Once the written name of Jesus is recorded in pen and ink, it becomes a signature, authorizing and underwriting Lydgate's will in this documentary passage. The poem is now a legal testament, with Jesus's signature turning him into its main executor, or "chief surveieur."³⁰ Rob Lutton points to the

abundance of marginalia indicating devotion to the name of Jesus, in particular, use of the holy monogram or the name of Jesus itself, not just in religious manuscripts but in letters, wills, charters, accounts and other administrative documents from the late fourteenth century.³¹

Such authorizing uses of Jesus's name and "signature" transcend the already fluid boundaries of practices associated with the devotion to the Name of Jesus and extend especially to legal practice in charters and, crucially, wills. Thus, when Lydgate writes that "Iesu" is his "chief surveieur," the *Testament* inserts itself into the emerging broad tradition of writing influenced by the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus. I do not wish to classify this poem among the devotions to the Holy Name, for such a firm category may not have existed:

It is probably futile to attempt to define clear boundaries between those works centred on the holy name and the larger body of Christocentric devotional literature in late medieval England. In fact, it is doubtful that it would be possible to define the common features of those literary representations that we might want to describe as being associated with the holy name.³²

30. Simpson has emphasized the documentary nature of this poem (*Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 455).

31. Rob Lutton, "Love This Name That Is IHC": Vernacular Prayers, Hymns and Lyrics to the Holy Name of Jesus in Pre-Reformation England," in Elizabeth Salter and Helen Wicker, eds., *Vernacularity in England and Wales, c. 1300–1550* (Turnhout, 2011), 119–45, at 130.

32. Lutton, "Love This Name That Is IHC," 120.

Lutton adds, however, that “devotion to the holy name had a vital and increasingly significant basis in popular vernacular text, speech and song in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”³³ Lydgate’s *Testament* clearly intersects with this development, and the performative character of Part 5—and especially its survival in Clopton’s chantry chapel at Long Melford—points to the potential liturgical uses of this poem, not least because the devotion to the Holy Name started as a votive mass before it became “a generally recognised regular feast” in the fifteenth century.³⁴ It is worth noting that London, British Library MS Arundel 285, which contains Part 5 of the *Testament* among twenty other Christocentric and Marian prayers and lyrics, also includes a popular four-line devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus (*NIMEV* 1703 / *DIMEV* 2840). Furthermore, the first forty-four stanzas of the *Testament* are contained in London, British Library MS Additional 34193, a collection of mostly Christocentric hymns and prayers.

Lydgate’s Kneeling Pose

This devotional staging of Lydgate’s piety is unsettled, however, by the prior performance of his poetic skill in the many learned allusions to Antiquity, in the overt borrowings from Chaucer’s writings, as well as in his own aureate style in the two interwoven rhyme royal sections. Perhaps the duality of Lydgate’s written output that is circumscribed by his laureate poetry and his religious verse—a duality never fully reconciled—provides a conceptual frame of reference that allows us to explore his texts without incessant recourse to Chaucer. Unlike Sweet, I stress duality rather than dichotomy, for we cannot assume that Lydgate wished to distance himself from his public writings, or, rather, from his laureate persona, even in the *Testament*.³⁵ What this poem seems to be suggesting is that the courtly mold in which he wrote so many of his works *can* coexist with genuine expressions of devotion.³⁶ Lydgate’s language of personal devotion, which I have shown to be indebted to the tradition of the devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, is thus paradoxically sustained

33. Lutton, “Love This Name That Is IHC,” 121.

34. Lutton, “Love This Name That Is IHC,” 123.

35. Sweet, “Lydgate’s Retraction,” 343–45.

36. In this point, I depart from Sweet, who maintains that “Lydgate signals an awareness of the limitations of this language and its ability to convey religious lessons” (“Lydgate’s Retraction,” 350). It would be worth examining whether Lydgate’s stripped religious language in this poem is an attempt to construct a vernacular alternative to Lollard textuality.

by the displacement of a prior secular code, a displacement that requires that which has been removed from the poem to remain in the reader's memory.

In the *Testament*, Lydgate establishes the terms of his own reception. Here, the Benedictine poet makes arrangements for his literary as well as his spiritual afterlife. This simultaneity allows us to glean how he would like to be read by others: Lydgate wants to be remembered as a pious monk, but one who could write like no other, and who could straddle religious and secular domains. Thus, I argue that his piety takes the shape of the kneeling monk-poet in a deliberate conflation of devotional kneeling and the genuflection performed before a sovereign.

It is the final envoy to the *Fall of Princes* that most clearly prefigures, I believe, Lydgate's kneeling pose in the *Testament*, as if these two works—the early and ambitious *Fall of Princes* and the final poetic expression in the personal *Testament*—were meant to bookend Lydgate's prolific career:

And, for my part, of oon hert abidyng,
 Void of chaung and mutabilite,
 I do presente this book with hand shaking,
 Of hool affeccoun knelyng on my kne,
 Praying the Lord, the Lord oon, too & thre,
 Whos magnificence no clerk can comprehende,
 To sende you miht, grace and prosperite
 Euer in vertu tencresen & ascende.

(IX.3597–604)

In the *Testament*, too, we witness the poet-narrator on his knees halfway through the poem, only this time the book to be presented is his life's work: "Mekely kneling, Iesu, in thy presence, / I me to purpose to gynne with prayere" (410–11).³⁷ The prayer he offers is a text, not an oral expression of devotion. This becomes clear in the final, and most visual, section of the poem, entitled *Vide* ("Behold"), which is preceded by a stanza that reminds the reader that what follows is an ekphrastic vignette and therefore, ultimately, a text:

The which word, whan I dyd vndirstond,
 In my last age takyng the sentence,
 Theron remembryng, my penne I toke in honde,
 Gan to wryte with humble reuerence,

37. Of course, throughout Part 1 the narrator is also kneeling.

On this word, "vide," with humble diligence,
 In remembraunce of Crystes passioun,
 This litel dite, this compilacioun.

(747–53)

In a gestural and iconographic conflation of devotional kneeling and the secular genuflexion before a patron, the kneeling Lydgate presents Christ with a book.

And there is no shortage of manuscripts—possibly either authorized by Lydgate or produced at Bury shortly after his death—that represent a kneeling Lydgate: at least six witnesses of works as diverse as the lives of *Saints Edmund and Fremund*, the *Book of Troy*, and the *Fall of Princes* depict a kneeling Lydgate. These are London, British Library Harley 2278, fols. 6r and 9r (Figs. 1 and 2, respectively); London, British Library Harley 1766, fol. 5r (Fig. 3); London, British Library Yates Thompson 47, fol. 4r (Fig. 4); Manchester, John Rylands Library English 1, fol. 1r (Fig. 5); Oxford, Bodleian Library Digby 232, fol. 1r (Fig. 6); Oxford, Bodleian Library Ashmole 46, fol. 1r (Fig. 7); and the McGill fragment of the *Fall of Princes*, Montreal, McGill University Libraries 143, fol. 4r (Fig. 8). The iconography of the kneeling monk-poet as set out during his lifetime, though not necessarily under his direction, in Harley 2278 and Digby 232 continued to influence the next generation of illuminated manuscripts produced at Bury. This tradition, I argue, shows the extent to which Bury's monks directed Lydgate's reception after his death in a manner consistent with pictorial and textual representations produced during his lifetime. These visual interpretations of the writer, therefore, suggest that his early readers fully understood Lydgate's poetic identity as religious *and* secular.

Harley 2278, which contains the metrical lives of *Saints Edmund and Fremund*, is a superb presentation copy for Henry VI, produced in Bury St. Edmunds between 1434 and 1439.³⁸ William Curteys, abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. Edmund, Bury St. Edmunds, commissioned the book as a gift for Henry VI.³⁹ The manuscript is remarkable for a number of reasons,

38. The text has been recently reedited in Anthony Bale and A. S. G. Edwards, eds., *John Lydgate's Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund and the Extra Miracles of St Edmund* (Heidelberg, 2009). Edwards has also published a facsimile edition of Harley 2278: *The Life of St Edmund, King and Martyr: John Lydgate's Illustrated Verse Life Presented to Henry VI: A Facsimile of British Library MS Harley 2278* (London, 2004).

39. Sonja Drimmer, "Picturing the King or Picturing the Saint: Two Miniature Programmes for Lydgate's Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund," in Sue Powell and Emma Cayley, eds., *Manuscripts and Printed Books in Europe, 1350–1550: Packaging, Presentation and Consumption* (Exeter, 2013), 48–67, at 49; and Edwards, *The Life of St Edmund*, 1–3.

FIG. 1 London, British Library MS Harley 2278, fol. 6r. © The British Library Board.

FIG. 2 London, British Library MS Harley 2278, fol. 9r. © The British Library Board.

not least because it is the best exponent of what Alexandra Gillespie calls the “Bury style of book illumination.”⁴⁰ Harley 2278, probably produced under Lydgate’s supervision,⁴¹ contains not one but two miniatures featuring a kneeling Lydgate. First, on fol. 6r, the poet Lydgate is seen kneeling as he presents his book to the boy-king Henry (Fig. 1), and, later, the monk Lydgate is kneeling before Edmund’s shrine on fol. 9r (Fig. 2).⁴² In her trenchant analysis of the iconography of Harley 2278, Sonja Drimmer demonstrates that this manuscript “encourages Henry to envision himself as Edmund and to match both the monarchic and saintly ideals he embodies.”⁴³ But the parallel kneeling scenes do not only equate Henry with Edmund; Lydgate is displaying the same form of devotion to the saint and to the secular ruler by kneeling in front of both. Elsewhere in her argument, when discussing Yates Thompson 47, Drimmer draws attention to the significance of the type of kneeling: one knee before a worldly patron, but two before God.⁴⁴ John Burrow has shown

40. Gillespie, *Print Culture*, 39.

41. “The original presentation copy of SS Edmund and Fremund, BL Harley 2278, is one of the few manuscripts that survives that was certainly made in Lydgate’s lifetime and in his ambit at Bury” (Gillespie, *Print Culture*, 43).

42. The apparent youth of Henry corroborates the dating of the manuscript between 1434 and 1439.

43. Drimmer, “Picturing the King,” 52. Drimmer shows how the presentation scene on fol. 6r is connected to Edmund’s coronation scene on fol. 31r (62–63).

44. Drimmer, “Picturing the King,” 64.

FIG. 3 *London, British Library MS Harley 1766, fol. 5r.* © The British Library Board.

FIG. 4 London, British Library MS Yates Thompson 47, fol. 4r. © The British Library Board.

FIG. 5 Manchester, John Rylands Library MS English 1, fol. 1r. Reproduced by courtesy of the University Librarian and Director, The John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester.

FIG. 6 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 232, fol. 1r. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

FIG. 7 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 46, fol. 1r. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

that there is some support for this distinction,⁴⁵ but I would like to point out that, on fol. 6r in Harley 2278, where the poet is kneeling before the king, the artist has clearly made an effort to contour both of Lydgate's kneeling legs under his habit (Fig. 1). Just as kneeling on both legs before Henry turns the king into a saint, so the fact that there is no distinction in Lydgate's manner of kneeling in these two illuminations collapses the distinction between worldly and spiritual iconography. The secular and the religious pose have become one in a Lydgatean gesture.

The afterlife of this "Bury style" of illumination continues in manuscripts that were produced at Bury in the generation after Lydgate's death. Gillespie has shown that *Edmund and Fremund* in Yates Thompson 47 and Ashmole 46, as well as the two copies of the *Fall of Princes* in Harley 1766 and the McGill fragment, were written by the same scribe, who is also associated with Bury.⁴⁶

45. *Dives and Pauper*: "To God men shuldyn knelyn wyt bothe knees in tokene þat in hym is al oure principal helpe, but to man only wyt þe to [one] knee" (Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper*, vol. 1, EETS o.s. 275 [London, 1976], 106). See also *The Boke of Curtasye*: "Be curtayse to God, and knele down / On bothe knees with grete devocioun. / To mon þou shalle knele opon þe ton, / The toþer to þy self þou halde alon" (Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, EETS o.s. 32 [London, 1868], 182–83 [lines 163–66]). Both are quoted by John Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge, U.K., 2002), 19–25. Burrow adds, however, that kneeling on both knees is the more common form. On the use of both knees in prayer, see Jean Claude Schmitt, *La raison des gestes dans l'occident médiéval* (Paris, 1990), 295, 300, 306.

46. Gillespie, *Print Culture*, 38–39.

FIG. 8 Montreal, McGill University Libraries MS 143, fol. 4r. Reproduced by permission of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal.

The indebtedness of Yates Thompson 47 to Harley 2278, discussed by Kathleen Scott but more fully developed by Drimmer,⁴⁷ reveals the shared provenance of these manuscripts and the continuation of a particular illumination style that may have been “authorized” by Lydgate. Harley 1766 (*Fall of Princes*; Fig. 3) and Yates Thompson 47 (Fig. 4) show Lydgate kneeling on both knees before Saint Edmund, whereas he is kneeling before Henry’s father, Henry V, in two copies of the *Troy Book*—John Rylands Library English 1 (Fig. 5) and Bodleian Library Digby 232 (Fig. 6)—as well as in the McGill fragment of the *Fall of Princes* (Fig. 8).⁴⁸ Most interesting here is Digby 232, which features Lydgate kneeling before Henry V on both legs (unlike the McGill fragment, which clearly shows him kneeling on one leg only): unsurprisingly, Digby 232 was copied during Lydgate’s lifetime, between 1420 and 1430.⁴⁹

Not only can Lydgatean kneeling turn Henry VI into a saint, but a kneeling Lydgate can also transform Saint Edmund into Henry’s royal father: in

47. Kathleen L. Scott, “Lydgate’s Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund: A Newly Located Manuscript in Arundel Castle,” *Viator* 13 (1982): 335–66, at 358–59; and Drimmer, “Picturing the King,” *passim*.

48. The John Rylands Library manuscript was influenced by the “Bury style” (Gillespie, *Print Culture*, 37). Daniel Wakelin notes that Harley 1766 “plausibly . . . reflects the special involvement of Lydgate” (*Humanism, Reading, and English Literature, 1430–1530* [Oxford, 2007], 40), but since the same scribe was involved in the production of London, British Library MS Yates Thompson 47, which Drimmer convincingly dates to “between 1461 and 1465” (56), then this scribe was either old when producing Yates Thompson 47 or, more probably, Harley 1766 was written after Lydgate’s lifetime.

49. Gillespie, *Print Culture*, 37.

Ashmole 46, fol. 1r (*Edmund and Fremund*; Fig. 7), and Harley 1766, fol. 5r (*Fall of Princes*; Fig. 3), Edmund is enthroned, donning the same ermine and blue gown worn by Henry V in the McGill *Fall of Princes* and in the Digby *Troy Book*.⁵⁰ Whether Lydgate is kneeling on both knees in a spiritual fashion before a secular ruler (as in Harley 2278) or whether he is representing Saint Edmund in the regal attire of Henry V, these manuscripts appear to have made an effort to reconcile the religious and secular dimensions of Lydgate's identity as a monk-poet.

Kneeling was part of a complex "gestural dialogue in accordance with fixed social rules: kneeling demanded a specific reaction."⁵¹ Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger notes the structural affinity between secular and spiritual genuflection:

Genuflection or kneeling is a symbolic gesture of self-abasement, generally with the intention of obtaining mercy—in the act of penance before God, in the act of submission, *deditio*, before a temporal ruler. It is clear that a close structural affinity exists between the political ritual of apology upon one's bended knee and the Christian ritual of remorse, repentance, and absolution, even that both rituals occasionally formed an inseparable unity.⁵²

The deferential act of *deditio*, or submission, by the kneeling person demanded of the ruler that he act in accordance with mercy and magnanimity. "The social logic of these procedures," adds Stollberg-Rilinger, "followed not least from the analogy of penance before God and absolution from sins."⁵³ The staged nature of this process leads her to conclude that all such instances of genuflection were essentially public performances and, thus, fiction. Stollberg-Rilinger concentrates on the influence of the religious pose on secular kneeling, but, given the pervasive use of genuflection in social contexts, the staged nature of secular kneeling must have created an expectation of mercy in religious contexts. If, therefore, in secular contexts "the ritual's effect of creating

50. Drimmer has analyzed a further representation of Edmund enthroned in Yates Thompson 47, fol. 1r, which does not include any supplicants. This figural absence, argues Drimmer, "is a lacuna meant for the reader/viewer to fill" ("Picturing the King," 59).

51. Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, "Kneeling before God, Kneeling before the Emperor: The Transformation of a Ritual During the Confessional Conflict in Germany," in Nils Holger Petersen, Eyolf Østrem, and Andreas Bückler, eds., *Resonances: Historical Essays on Continuity and Change* (Turnhout, 2011), 149–72, at 150.

52. Stollberg-Rilinger, "Kneeling before God," 149.

53. Stollberg-Rilinger, "Kneeling before God," 151.

obligation was achieved without reference to the inner conviction of the one who performed it,” then something similar must hold true in instances where the believer *is seen* to be kneeling before God. In other words, when Lydgate represents himself in a kneeling pose, he is not only showing the outer signs of remorse, but he is vindicating his life and his work by expecting forgiveness and acceptance. Whether he is kneeling before the saint or before the king, or both, Lydgate may have chosen this as the pose in which he wanted to be seen (and read) throughout his career and, particularly, at the end of life.

The *Testament*, therefore, is both an outer and an inner gesture that shows the kneeling Lydgate to be offering his “litel dite,” his “compilacioun,” to Christ. As an inner gesture, the poem throws open the conflicting expectations of public service and spiritual devotion; as an outer gesture, the kneeling pose attempts to reconcile the poet’s literary career with his calling—simultaneously expecting forgiveness for his sins as a Christian and acceptance of his life’s work as a poet. Lydgate’s self-interpretation as a conflicted monk-poet, therefore, establishes a new framework for conceptualizing his work as an ambitious yet ultimately unrealized project of splicing two lives and thus reconciling two literary domains. And even as he rejects his worldly self in the outer gesture of kneeling, the aureate verses of much of the *Testament*—his inner literary conviction—show that he wants to have it both ways.

Retractions and Palinodes

In the end, the success of the *Testament* and, surely, most narrative poems, lies not in one particular section but in the work in its entirety. What precedent is there, after all, for a writer urging his or her audience—in earnest—to discard in terms of content and form a portion of what they have just read? There is Chaucer’s well-known *Retraction*, of course, which continues the tradition of such mock-remorseful palinodes.⁵⁴ It is generally agreed that the *Retraction*, which circulated with those manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* that contain the *Parson’s Tale*, may have been the original ending devised by Chaucer for his cycle of tales, even though the *Retraction* probably also circulated

54. For important discussions of *Retr*, see Jason Michael Herman, “Intention, Utility, and Chaucer’s *Retraction*,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Arizona, 2009; James McNelis, “Parallel Manuscript Readings in the *CT Retraction* and Edward of Norwich’s *Master of Game*,” *Chaucer Review* 36 (2001): 87–90; Anita Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism in the European Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1999), 203–20; Matthew C. Wolfe, “Placing Chaucer’s ‘Retraction’ for a Reception of Closure,” *Chaucer Review* 33 (1999): 427–31; Peter Travis, “Deconstructing Chaucer’s *Retraction*,” *Exemplaria* 3 (1991): 135–58; and Robert Boenig, “Taking Leave: Chaucer’s *Retraction* and the Ways of Affirmation and Negation,” *Studia Mystica* 12 (1989): 21–28.

independently in stand-alone copies of the *Parson's Tale*.⁵⁵ There is less agreement, however, on whether Chaucer was sincere in his closing words. Many readers find it difficult to reconcile the literary palinode, usually placed at the end of a single work, with Chaucer's attempt to include all of his writings in the *Retraction*.⁵⁶ Such readings, however, do not fully acknowledge the interplay between the content and its material context. By binding the closing words together with the *Canterbury Tales*, the *Retraction* performs its paradoxical service of transmitting in manuscript a text rejected by its writer. In other words, the distancing tone of a palinode, however comprehensive or penitential, is silenced by the simultaneous presence of the physical manuscript.

And such retractions need not be limited to a single text: one analogue to Chaucer's authorial humility in his *Retraction* provides a remarkably complete model for Lydgate's *Testament*: the probably authentic *Le Testament* by Jean de Meun, which, to my knowledge, has not been directly associated with Lydgate's poem.⁵⁷ Of the 116 surviving copies of de Meun's *Le Testament* (1291–95), one exemplar, London, British Library MS Royal 19.B.XII,⁵⁸ carries the fifteenth-century inscriptions of Nicholas Upton, who enjoyed Duke Humfrey's patronage at the same time as Lydgate.⁵⁹ And just as Chaucer's *Retraction* was placed at the end of manuscripts containing the *Canterbury Tales*, de Meun's *Testament* was often bound together with copies of the *Roman de la Rose* as a literary palinode: this is certainly the case with Nicholas Upton's manuscript as well as with two of the most celebrated copies of de Meun's *Testament*: the

55. This question has been investigated by Herman, "Intention." Challenges to the established view have come from Charles A. Owen Jr., "What the Manuscripts Tell Us about the Parson's Tale," *Medium Ævum* 63 (1994): 239–49; and Miceál Vaughan, "Creating Comfortable Boundaries: Scribes, Editors, and the Invention of the Parson's Tale," in Thomas A. Prendergast and Barbara Kline, eds., *Rewriting Chaucer: Culture, Authority, and the Idea of the Authentic Text, 1400–1602* (Columbus, Oh., 1999), 45–90, although both "concede that the textual evidence . . . is heavily in favour of the Parson's Tale and Retraction as Chaucer's original ending" (Herman, "Intention," 19). However, both Owen and Vaughan have demonstrated that *Retr* circulated separately with *ParsT*.

56. This specificity of *Retr* has been pointed out by Benson in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 22.

57. On the poem, see the introduction in Silvia Buzzetti Gallarati, *Le Testament maistre Jehan de Meun: Un caso letterario* (Alessandria, 1989). The similarity in the works' common titles, *Le Testament de Maistre Jehan de Meung* and *The Testament of Dan John Lydgate*, is of course no indicator of influence, as these titles varied from manuscript to manuscript. Anita Obermeier points to de Meun's *Le Testament* in her treatment of Chaucer's *Retr*, in Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II* (Cambridge, U.K., 2005), 775–808, at 780.

58. A second copy is contained in London, British Library MS Royal 19.A.iv, also a fifteenth-century manuscript (James P. Carley, *The Libraries of Henry VIII* [London, 2000], 121). Other copies held in British libraries are listed in Silvia Buzzetti Gallarati, "Nota bibliografica sulla tradizione manoscritta del Testament di Jean de Meun 1," *Revue Romane* 13 (1978): 3–33, at 23–26. For the total number of manuscript copies, see Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing* (Chicago, 1995), 201.

59. Boffey, "Lydgate, Henryson, and the Literary Testament," 41n3.

sumptuously illuminated copies in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal 3339, and Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève fr. 178. De Meun's palinode is an altogether closer analogue to Lydgate's poem because, unlike Chaucer's *Retraction*, the French poet makes youth central to his argument. The opening sequence of de Meun's *Testament* already contains the references to "the youthful literary error" and "the wish to atone with this *Testament*":⁶⁰

J'ay fait en ma jeunesse mains dits par vanité
 Ou maintes gens se sont pluseurs fois delité
 Or m'en doint Dieux un faire par vraie charité
 Pour amender les autres qui peu m'ont proufité.

Bien doit estre escusez jeune cuer en jeunesse
 Quant Diex li donne grace d'estre viel en viellesce;
 Mais moult est granz vertus et tres haute noblesce
 Quant cuer en jeune aage a meurté s'adresce.

Maiz li uns et maint autre sont de si grant durté
 Qu'en nul estat ne veulent venir a meurté,
 Ainz se sont a jeunesse si joint et ahurté
 Com se de touzjours vivre eussent seurté.

(5–16)

In my youth, it is true, I composed a number of works which regularly gave pleasure to a variety of people; may God now allow me to compose one out of real charity to make up for those others which have profited me little.

A young heart in its youth deserves forgiveness when by God's grace it becomes mature in maturity, but it is a signal virtue and most noble act when a heart strives for maturity while still young.

But there are many who are so obdurate that at no point in their career do they wish to achieve maturity, but are attached to youth as if they were sure of living for ever.⁶¹

60. Obermeier, *The History and Anatomy of Auctorial Self-Criticism*, 124.

61. Text and translation are taken from Tony Hunt, *Villon's Last Will: Language and Authority in the Testament* (Oxford, 1996), 22.

Although Lydgate's tone is more personal and less didactic than de Meun's, the English poet also bemoans the follies of his own youth before asking for forgiveness. In Part 2, after thirty-two rhyme royal stanzas dedicated to youth and spring, Lydgate turns to himself:

And for my part, I can remembre weell
 Whan I was gladdest in that fresshe sesoun,
 Lyke brotel glasse, not stable nor like stell,
 Fer out of harre, wilde of condicioun,
 Ful geryssh, and voyde of all resoun,
 Lyk a phane, ay turnyng to and fro,
 Or like an orloge whan the peys is goo.

Youe to onthryfte and dissolucioun,
 Stode onbrydeled of all gouernaunce,
 Whiche remembryng, be meke confessyoun,
 Now with my potent to fynde allegeaunce,
 Of olde surfetes, contrite with repentaunce,
 To the lesu, I make my passage,
 Rehersyng trespaces don in my tender age.

(395–408)

De Meun's "jeune cuer" receives fuller treatment in Lydgate's string of analogies (397–401), whereas the French writer's frequently used "jeunesce" finds its equivalent in "tender age" (408) in this passage, and in "tender youthe" and "fresshe Age" elsewhere (241–42). Likewise, as if written in response to the conventions laid out by de Meun, Lydgate's appeal to God's grace and forgiveness follows immediately and takes on the form of kneeling:

But to directe be grace my matere,
 Mekely knelyng, lesu, in thy presence,
 I me purpose to gynne with prayere,
 Vnder thi mercyfull fructuous influence,
 So thou lesu of thy benevolence,
 To my requestes be mercyfull attendaunce,
 Graunt or I deye, shryft, hosel, repentaunce.

(409–15)

I do not argue that Lydgate modelled his *Testament* on de Meun's poem, although the English poet might very plausibly have seen Upton's copy or one

of the manuscripts in circulation, but I wish to show that the movement from the misspent youth of a writer to religious contrition is ultimately a formal device, closely allied to the literary retraction as shaped by de Meun's *Testament*.

Most significantly, there is a crucial codicological dimension to Lydgate's palinode: since virtually all of the surviving manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* that include the complete *Parson's Tale* also contain the *Retraction*,⁶² it is likely that Lydgate would have seen Chaucer's palinode. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that he also may have encountered de Meun's retraction in a similar position in Upton's manuscript or in another copy of the *Roman de la Rose*. As a reader of manuscripts, therefore, Lydgate would have experienced the palinode as a device that physically transmits the very work that it textually rejects.

If the *Testament* is indeed an attempt by Lydgate to close his poetic career with a retraction, then he makes sure that his poetic talents are not overlooked. In other words, the *Testament* is not an attempt to reject his laureate past but to assign a place to it in an ultimately pious narrative. His use of aureate style and rhyme royal conventions connects the piety of the final sequence with the affected humility invoked in so many of his own envoys and colophons, where the writer asks the reader's forgiveness for errors and omissions.⁶³ By drawing on and evaluating his own body of work in a single text that is not binary but dualistic—the structure of which is encoded in the enmeshing of octave and rhyme royal sections—Lydgate's *Testament* takes the place of such an authorial palinode, casting his own life as text and presenting it to its ultimate reader—God. Perhaps the fruitful tension between the secular and the religious offers a new conceptual framework for future explorations of the Monk of Bury: the interweaving of his religious vocation and the often conflicting demands of secular patrons characterize the *Testament* and, with hindsight, much of Lydgate's literary production, as Lydgatean.

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62. Herman, "Intention," 19; and John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., *The Text of The Canterbury Tales Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols. (Chicago, 1940), 2:471–72.

63. See, for instance, John Lydgate, *The Siege of Thebes*, ed. Robert A. Edwards (Kalamazoo, 2001), 150 (lines 4709–16); John Lydgate, *Saint Austin at Compton*, c. 1420–40, in E. G. Whatley, A. Thompson, and R. Upchurch, eds., *Saints' Lives in Middle English Collections* (Kalamazoo, 2004), 224–37, at 237 (lines 403–8); John Lydgate, *The Temple of Glass*, ed. J. Allan Mitchell (Kalamazoo, 2007), 53 (lines 1393–1403); and John Lydgate, *Lydgate's Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols., EETS s.s. 97, 103, 106, 126 (London, 1906–35), 3:879 (Envoy, lines 92–99).