Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture

ETHAN KNAPP, SERIES EDITOR
List of Illustrations vii
List of Abbreviations ix
Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: The “Sotil Fourmes” of the Fifteenth Century
Kathleen Tonry 1

PART 1. THE MATERIALS OF FORM

1 Forms of Reading in the Book of Brome
Jessica Brantley 19

2 The Style of Humanist Latin Letters at the University of Oxford: On Thomas Chaundler and the Epistolae Academicae Oxon. (Registrum F)
Andrew Cole 40

PART 2. FORMS OF DEVOTION

3 Osbern Bokenham’s “englische boke”: Re-forming Holy Women
Karen A. Winstead 67

4 “Ete this book”: Literary Consumption and Poetic Invention in John Capgrave’s Life of Saint Katherine
Shannon Gayk 88

5 Jesus’ Voice: Dialogue and Late-Medieval Readers
Rebecca Krug 110

PART 3. REFORMING SKELTON

6 Conception Is a Blessing: Marian Devotion, Heresy, and the Literary in Skelton’s A Replycacion
Robert J. Meyer-Lee 133
Contents

7 Useless Mouths: Reformist Poetics in Audelay and Skelton
   MISHTOONI BOSE  159

8 Killing Authors: Skelton’s Dreadful Bowge of Courte
   JAMES SIMPSON  180

Bibliography  197
Contributors  213
Index  215
list of illustrations

CHAPTER 1

Figure 1.1. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 19v. Atypical layout with stage directions integrated into speech. 24

Figure 1.2. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 2v. Poem on fortune-telling with dice. 26

Figure 1.3. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 14v. Final page of Adrian and Epotys with devotional emblem. 27

Figure 1.4. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 15r. First page of Abraham and Isaac. 30

Figure 1.5. New Haven, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 [Book of Brome], f. 1r. “Man in merthe hath meser in mynd.” 32

CHAPTER 2

Figure 2.1. Oxford University Archives NEP/supra/Reg F [Registrum F], f. 65r 45

CHAPTER 6

Figure 6.1. San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library: Skelton’s A Replycation (printed by Richard Pynson, 1528), STC 22609, A1v. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. 144

Figure 6.2. San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library: Skelton’s A Replycation (printed by Richard Pynson, 1528), STC 22609, A2v. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. 145
List of Illustrations

Figure 6.3. San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library: Skelton’s *A Reply-cacion* (printed by Richard Pynson, 1528), STC 22609, B2v. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. 153

Figure 6.4. San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library: Skelton’s *A Reply-cacion* (printed by Richard Pynson, 1528), STC 22609, A1r. Reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California. 156
list of abbreviations

EETS  Early English Text Society
     e.s.  Extra Series
     o.s.  Original Series
     s.s.  Special Series
MED   Middle English Dictionary
OED   Oxford English Dictionary
PL    Patrologia Latina
This volume began, as many books do, with some casual but excited conversation; this particular one started after a typically witty and provocative paper at Kalamazoo by Steven Justice on new formalism. That the conversation has been extended and deepened, both over time and among so many of our colleagues, deserves at the very least this written record.

Our casual talk found its first formal platform in a series of three panels entitled “At the End of the Fifteenth Century,” delivered at the International Congress of Medieval Studies held at Kalamazoo. We are grateful to Steven Justice for his role as a remarkable respondent to those sessions. In addition to the contributors with essays in this volume, Amy Appleford, Lisa Cooper, Vincent Gillespie, and Susan Phillips all presented papers that moved our conversations forward and contributed to this volume in ways that are enmeshed in the notes, critical contexts, and scope of these essays.

As a collaborative project, this volume also benefited from the collegiality of both the editors’ institutions. At the University of Connecticut, we would like to thank C. David Benson, Frederick M. Biggs, Robert Hasenfratz and, although only honorary medievalists, Brian and Mary Lynch. At Indiana University we are especially grateful for the guidance of Patricia Clare Ingham. And while medievalists are famously collegial folk, the support and encouragement of Nicholas Watson and Daniel Wakelin deserve special mention. Finally, the influence and inspiration of our teacher, Maura Nolan, is everywhere in this volume. As a mentor, she has a talent for challenging her students to reform their thinking until the best ideas take form.
Acknowledgments

The editors at The Ohio State University Press, Malcolm Litchfield and Ethan Knapp, were supportive of and expertly guided this project from its earliest stages. We are also grateful to the press’s two anonymous readers, who contributed so many excellent comments to each of the essays. Our final thanks go to our contributors, for not only their fine essays, but also for their willingness to engage creatively with the theme of this collection.
This stanza from the third book of *Fall of Princes* appears as John Lydgate launches a defense for the value of poetic work alongside other intellectual professions, including logicians, philosophers, lawyers, and physicians. Until the last couplet the argument of these lines is obvious, even pedestrian: practitioners of various professions pursue predictable goals, or simply monetary gain. At the level of syntax, the stanza sets up a repeating pattern where subjects are linked to the present tense of a simple verb: logicians “deliyte,” as do philosophers; lawyers “reioyse”; physicians “trauayle.” Yet in those last two lines the verb is deferred to the very end, where it occurs in the more complicated form of a tran-

sitive infinitive, “to transfourme,” which demands that the reader return not to the “poetys,” but rather to the more unexpected “sotil fourme” as the new governing agent of the couplet.

Lydgate’s adjectival “sotil” indicates that which is exceptionally artful, skilled, or gracefully wrought; it is precisely this emphasis on the artfulness of poetic form that invites attention to Lydgate’s own exploration of form through a close reading of syntax, diction, and rhyme. And it is the emergence of form as an active agent, yoked and then transmuted by rhyme into the verb “transform,” that recasts poetic work not just as a specific kind of writing but as a language constantly in motion, animated by its consistent interaction with and reshaping of the “thynges” of the world. In turn, Lydgate’s “poetys”—here removed by syntax from the linear alignments of those other professions with their singular goals—both produce and are produced by the ongoing work of this “sotil fourme” of language.

Lydgate is an apt spokesman for a perspective on form that demonstrates both the familiarity and dissonance of a late-medieval poetic in relation to the critical strategies of literary studies. On the one hand, the uneven, disruptive, and sometimes awkward formal features of a stanza like the one above recall the long centuries of scholarly skepticism about Lydgate, centuries during which the field’s most prominent scholars each succeeded to a rather merry tradition of scolding Lydgate for writing such verse. The work of Lydgate has provided a kind of proving ground for formalist critiques of the fifteenth century, most of which are full-throated in their pessimism, while also attesting to the persistence of formalism itself in medieval scholarship.

Yet on the other hand, that same stanza’s articulation of form aligns surprisingly well with current critical directions, which emphasize the creative, energetic capacities of form at work within a generously configured aesthetic field: in short, form matters now, and it matters to histories material, discursive, and literary in the ways that it seems to have mattered for Lydgate as the very engine of “newe Invencion” itself. This replacement of formalism with an attention to form has been embraced in recent medieval scholarship, especially at the chronologically

2. MED, s.v. “sotil” especially 2c.


early and late parts of the field, but not without its own push-pull in relation to the broader disciplinary conversation, and not without Lydgate.

Medievalists’ recent explorations of form clearly align with what Susan Wolfson has termed “activist” investments. These investments draw deeply on Marxist—and more specifically, Adornoan—theories about the relation between aesthetics and the historical/cultural horizon; here “form” emerges as a dynamic force, a participant in the processes of history in ways that are, as Stephen Cohen has noted, “productive rather than merely reflective.” The priority of form in this mode of analysis is one that relies on the movements of history in dialectical engagement with the work of form, each in transformative tension with the other. Thus Maura Nolan argues, in her study of Lydgate, “that form—meaning those conventions through which experience is rendered legible and lent a significance that transcends the local (particular times and places)—constitutes the only genuinely historical category of analysis for the cultural critic, that it is only through grasping how form works in culture that we may come to understand the historicity of the past.” The work of form, then, relies on the work of the reader in detecting tensions and competing interpretations (what Adorno terms “contradictions”), and in this too, medieval scholarship and early poetic texts find fruitful alliance. D. Vance Smith, for example, demonstrates the ways in which medieval poets anticipated complex and intricate readings as these were “part of the communal experience of educated reading in the English Middle Ages, a reading for form that proceeded out of a common discipline and that ultimately formed the community of readers.” We have already seen this anticipation of a sophisticated readership in action: the stanza opening this essay offers itself up to close reading through the slight waver in its syntactic structure, a feature that pays back such attention by imaginatively reconfiguring the poetic arena in which such readerly work takes place.

But the medievalist turn to form also strikes a note of challenge. Christopher Cannon, whose work has pioneered the new emphasis on form especially in analyses of early Middle English texts, insists that “while English literature in all periods might benefit from such careful attention to form, this method is also uniquely valuable for the understanding of Middle English.” As Cannon traces


9. Christopher Cannon, “Form,” in Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle
back this singularity to the historical conditions of early texts, his subsequent readings imply that medieval literature provides a uniquely historicized accounting of form that carries with it genuinely new structuring dynamics between immaterial and material, between the literary and what he elsewhere terms the “grounds” of literature. Smith similarly works through a medieval interest in form (or more accurately, *forma*) that details the close exploration and ultimate reconciliation of the *forma tractandi* and *forma tractatus* as modes of thinking through the work of a text.¹⁰ These scholars, among others, situate medieval literature as a powerfully innovative corpus that offers up to the attentive reader often surprising configurations of the “literary” and the “thynges” of history, as discovered in the scrolling narrative of images embroidered on a tapestry, in the early-fourteenth-century experimentations with propositional language, and in fifteenth-century mumblings.¹¹

These interventions in the early part of our collective literary history not only insist on historicizing concepts of form, but also present alternative modalities of form that are crucial in emphasizing the often submerged pressures of medieval literature at work upon our literary histories. Close attention to the specific forms of individual medieval texts—in many cases, the sole extant copies—is a critique-in-practice of the notion that “new formalism” is, at its core, the recuperation of the “promises of new historicism,” as several authors of Renaissance-oriented essay collections have put it.¹² Instead, the uniqueness and the diversity of medieval literary forms suggests that the experimental, innovative energy of medieval poetics continues to work upon our literary histories in ways not always visible nor even traceable but nevertheless deeply influential.

The renewed critical attention to form has revealed, particularly in Lydgate

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¹¹. These examples are from work by Christopher Cannon in *The Grounds of English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), as well as D. Vance Smith and Maura Nolan, as cited above.

¹². Carol Levinson notes this tendency in her PMLA overview—see especially her summary of the “mixed bag” of new formalism (562). The claim on new formalism by early modern scholars is staked out quite boldly: see Stephen Cohen, “Between Form and Culture” (17–41), as well as Rasmussen’s introductory essay, “New Formalisms?” (1–14) and Richard Strier, “How Formalism Became a Dirty Word and Why We Can’t Do Without It” (207–15, esp. 213), all in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*. The pursuit of a “new formalism” out of the ashes of the new historicism—and as particularly germane to Renaissance studies and texts—is also writ large in the title and scope of the volume *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism*, ed. Stephen Cohen (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007). We should be wary of such a recovery unattended by skepticism, especially one that doesn’t revisit the periodizing premises of much new historicist work. David Matthews, for instance, reminds us that early modernists remain “quite comfortable” with the new historicist thesis about self-awareness, a comfort and familiarity that helps explain why the traffic between medieval and early modern studies tends to run in one chronological direction (that is, forward). See David Matthews, “The Medieval Invasion of Early Modern England,” *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008): 223–44. The distinctions made here between this Renaissance-centered recuperation and the recent medievalist turn to form seeks to avoid a recuperation of form that leaves intact the historical story of rupture, change and medieval difference.
scholarship, a rift between understandings of form as an aesthetic criterion or as a deeply historical expression. Lydgate’s own prominence in discussions of the fifteenth century reveals the tensions between competing formalisms. Derek Pearsall, for example, situates Lydgate as an index to the “exhaustions” and “self-contradictions” of the fifteenth century, underscoring as evidence the ways that Lydgate’s “verbosity, the inflation of his diction, the uneasiness of his syntax, and the unevenness of his metre are obstacles to pleasure.” As Larry Scanlon and James Simpson demonstrate in a joint essay, this kind of “aesthetic hostility” is typical of Lydgate scholarship and has defined Lydgate’s place in literary history for over a century, while also (in the way of formalism) situating him as a synecdochal key to a whole fifteenth-century poetic: Lydgate is often the dreadful flag-bearer for a dreadful century in literary history. The first full-length monograph on Lydgate after Pearsall’s study, Maura Nolan’s *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, begins a recuperation of Lydgate’s critical status precisely through re-historicizing his use of different literary forms. Nolan foregrounds the category of the literary, yet because she situates form and history as part of an integral dynamic, her study also organically moves into a revision of the political narratives (especially Lancastrianism) most frequently used to frame the fifteenth century. Nolan thus avers formalism in favor of a more dynamic picture of form at work through and with its specific historical horizons.

It is James Simpson’s work on the literary history of the fifteenth century that reveals most broadly both the productive entanglements of form with history, and Lydgate’s central role as the subject of pioneering studies in the fifteenth century. In his landmark *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, Simpson argues forcefully for a Lydgate who represents what he terms a “reformist” culture, one in which the discursive responses to change are registered by an emphasis on continuities, the strategies of *bricolage* and accretion, and features that disallow cultural monopoly while emphasizing complexity, dispersal, and juxtaposition—all features and strategies that recognize, in short, historicity. This strong revision of the historical discourse used to describe the “medieval” presents a capacious, plural context upon which the forms of literature work, and from which Simpson launches his own account of literary forms over the years 1350–1550. Although certainly not formalist, Simpson’s resituated literary history everywhere emphasizes the literary play of forms at the structural and stylistic level, and their cultural work

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Introduction

within the reformist/revolutionary historical modes that underwrite them. It is a recuperation of Lydgate that begins undoing formalist processes precisely by recapturing a sense of form as it engages with history.

And so it is John Lydgate who has become the field’s critical touchstone, the spur to a large-scale reevaluation of both aesthetics and history that has pulled the fifteenth century into the foreground of medieval literary scholarship. Few studies on the literature of the fifteenth century can proceed without acknowledging the role of Lydgate in provoking and producing that period’s current critical topos—form and reform—terms that describe not merely static poles but an unusually supple integration of both aesthetic and historical horizons. One effect of the emphasis on Lydgate has been a corresponding scholarly output weighted toward the reassessment of single authors writing in the first part of that century, locating the most detailed representations of the 1400s through the texts, writers, and contexts of its early decades.

Yet although the fifteenth century has been recuperated through representations and studies of Lydgate, Lydgate himself died before its midway point, and the decades of his greatest productivity had little in common with the cascade of dramatic, tumultuous events and changes that marked the middle and later 1400s. His death in 1449 occurred a tick before the printing press made its appearance in Mainz, Germany; by 1500, Lydgate’s work had appeared in twenty-four editions from the various presses of a native English industry. The year 1450 also saw Jack Cade’s rebellion in Kent, just one event in a series of political oscillations that included the beginning of what we now call the Wars of the Roses in 1455, the brief and awkward Readeption of Henry VI, Richard III’s usurpation, and the ascension of the Tudors. The span of the medieval now marches well past the Battle of Bosworth, of course; John Watts noted over a decade ago that the “hegemony of 1485 has been well and truly broken,” replaced by the thicker and more complex

16. See especially 62–67 for the careful construction of the move from a “reformist” cultural context into a wide-ranging discussion of literary form.

watershed of the 1530s.\textsuperscript{18} This elongation of the late medieval, however, leaves an even greater gap between the critically excavated early 1400s and the Reformation, a gap figured as an odd aporia around figures closest to the Reformation events. Influential \textit{literati} working right at the cusp of the period, like John Rastell, Alexander Barclay, Henry Medwall and Stephen Hawes, remain critical ciphers.\textsuperscript{19}

Even apart from these figures, whose very nearness to the concurrent discursive, theological, and historiographical ruptures of the Reformation might logically bracket their consideration, there is a substantial corpus of literature produced between the death of Lydgate and the Reformation—or even, to narrow the scope, between the middle and end of that century. Reginald Pecock was forced to recant his writings in 1457, but other religious writers, among them John Capgrave, Osbern Bokenham, and Henry Bradshaw, made important contributions that reflected the period’s considerable intellectual investments around religious writing. Those decades, too, span the careers of William Caxton, Thomas Malory, William Worcester, and George Ashby, and demonstrate a thriving interest in the genre of romance (\textit{Ipomedon}, for instance, was translated at different points in the latter years of the century into prose, stanzatic verse, and couplet versions). They also saw the production of manuscript records of the cycle plays, as well as the Robin Hood story cycles and the plays \textit{Mankind} and \textit{Everyman}. Lydgate stands at the beginning of a very, very long century, one marked by more questions than answers about aesthetic and historical continuity. Indeed, this long century is often uneasily compressed, not only into its first quarter, but into narratives that expect it either to anticipate the early modern or regressively turn back to the fourteenth century.

And so this volume now moves, if not entirely past Lydgate, at least beyond a Lydgatean fifteenth century. Shifting our perspective away from the early years of the century offers an alternative reading of the middle and late 1400s that discloses disruptions and contradictions among a diverse group of authors and texts. John Skelton, the Book of Brome, and the \textit{Fifteen Oes} all find their places here within what we hope is a provocatively untidy fifteenth century. This cultivated untidiness refuses the responsibilities of an overview or survey—although often present in the scope of individual chapters, missing here are extended discussions about print, romances, alliterative forms, political verse, or lyrics. As a whole, rather, this volume suggests a fifteenth century available through a series of nodal points—several rather than all of which are represented here.


\textsuperscript{19} Important discussions of these writers have been included in recent monographs, among them Robert Meyer-Lee, \textit{Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Daniel Wakelin, \textit{Humanism, Reading and English Literature, 1430–1530} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
This volume also offers a distinct approach to the pressures of periodization, looking neither to the past, towards a coherent narrative defining the century, nor forward to the Reformation. Several recent studies in late-medieval poetics press back against periodizing discourses by tracing continuities and finding points of connection, tradition and similarity that undo the artificial break instantiated by the revolutionary discourses of the 1530s; this book is meant to be a strong ally to that broader work.20 Concentrating on the work just prior to the Reformation, however, is another kind of challenge to periodicity. These essays lend more specific texture to the years directly before the Reformation, but do so with attention focused on local formal innovations that emerge—if only temporarily—free from narratives that arc toward an historiographical break. Together these chapters resist patterns and trajectories, privileging instead the many and diverse “sotil fourmes” at work across the fifteenth century.

II.

*Form and Reform* developed out of a series of three panels at the International Medieval Congress in 2007. The original title of that thread—“At the End of the Fifteenth Century”—grew into an exploration of the century that often did not span the last decades of the century but instead yielded a far richer and more interestingly extended sense of a century that took up points both earlier and later than we had expected. We gratefully took our cue from our original panelists as we shaped this volume: while extending the critical chronology of work in the fifteenth century, the chapters traverse the full length of the century with an emphasis on the middle and later years—a move that these essays together imply is both essential and essentially complicating for current claims about that century’s role in literary history.

The book is divided into three sections that read the categories of form and reform against different horizons: the first section reminds us of the various ways that the material text might revise our understanding of form; the following section revisits devotional writing within and beyond the context of reform; and the final section offers a series of perspectives on the work of John Skelton that each challenge and test notions of the fifteenth century in literary history. While these three sections are meant to foreground particular interests, this is also a project that has grown into a book through conversation and dialogue—at Kalamazoo, through individual correspondences, and with the broader field. Those conversa-

20. See Matthews, “The Medieval Invasion of Early Modern England,” for a comprehensive overview of this more recent work.
tions have left their traces in the several themes that tie these chapters together across the texts and approaches under consideration, and we would like to draw out four of these in brief.

Nearly all these chapters seem to be in tacit agreement with the argument advanced by Susan Wolfson (among others) for a thick, necessary link between close reading and a renewed attention to form. In these recent discipline-wide discussions, the Althusserian framework within which ideology emerges as form, and reading as a mode of production, has been tweaked, a little, to emphasize instead the more nimble ways reading discloses the ongoing work of form; reading thus participates in the interactionality of form, rather than simply revealing its ideological matrix.21

Reading across the fifteenth century emerges here not just as a practice with refreshed disciplinary privilege but as an historical category that is complex and diverse in its own right. “Reading” is often at work on multiple levels in these chapters: Brantley argues for an intertextual interpretive framework made possible by the material form of the book in conjunction with the material traces of that book’s readers; Cole corrects a longstanding critical misreading of a manuscript with close readings of first the script and then the genre of the letters found within that book; Gayk reveals fresh connections between reading and the processes of composition within the work of John Capgrave; and Simpson argues for an ethics of reading informing the fictive audience represented within Skelton’s Bowge of Courte, as well as the poem’s readers. These chapters also discover everywhere the close attention to form and nuanced reading that comprised the shared expectations of writers and readers in the 1400s—Krug demonstrates how dialogues in Jesus’ voice make available to readers a range of imaginative postures in relation to clerical and institutional authority, while Winstead traces the emergence of an “intellectual liberalism” in Osbern Bokenham that relies on an optimism and faith in the intellectual engagement of his lay readership. “Reading across the fifteenth century,” in short, is offered here as a subtitle and an important subtext in this volume.

Crucial to this collection, too, is a confidence in the capacity of form to return us to questions of institutional and literary authority which move beyond identifying patterns of resistance or subversion. Until recently, the literary history of the fifteenth century was written as a series of authoritative pressures working to produce a general cultural submissiveness—of Lydgate to Chaucer, of dissenters to ecclesiastical orthodoxy, of court poets to the Lancastrians. The resulting literary landscape was derivative, infantilized, or simply an adumbration of broader institutional powers. There have been plenty of correctives to this framework over the

21. See Wolfson, Reading for Form, and Levinson, “What is New Formalism?,” esp. 560 on the agency of the artwork. Also see Ellen Rooney, “Form and Contentment,” in Reading for Form, 45–47.
last decade and perhaps especially within the last five years; again, this volume is part of that work. These chapters, however, are most interested in the complicated interactions between various, and sometimes competing, modes and histories of authority. For example, both Meyer-Lee and Bose explore—albeit with different conclusions—the pressure of the ecclesiastical and political arenas on the literary forms taken up by Skelton. The play of ecclesiastical authority within the literary is reconfigured in the chapters by Winstead, Krug, and Gayk, who each offer models of writers appropriating and renewing ecclesiastical authority rather than dissenting from it. And the institutionality of literary authority itself is raised as a question rather than an assumption by Andrew Cole, who draws important connections between Latin humanism in England and the native intellectual currents that gave rise to a sense of the institutional place imagined for English poetry.

Traveling across these chapters is also a practice, a kindred approach to the texts of the fifteenth century, which suggests a further dimension to our title terms of form and reform. Both terms spread beyond the expected parameters of their use in current disciplinary discourse: form refers in these pages to the several levels of structure, style, genre and syntax, but our contributors also press beyond those textual features to insist on form as part of our consideration of the orthographical, the codicological, the reader’s trace, the image on the page, the metaphorical valences of language and books, the reforming of manuscript texts into print. Similarly “reform” points the way to reforming currents of orthodoxy, as well as to the alternately conservative and reforming practices of hagiographic and other devotional genres, and the intellectual currents of both reform and conservatism present in Oxford. Just as form and reform are terms that do not map comfortably onto the conceptual categories of text and context, the texts under consideration here—largely absent from or marginal to critical canons, like the Fifteen Oes, the Brome Abraham and Isaac play, the Oxford petitionary forms recorded in Registrum F, and Skelton’s “Ware the Hauke”—provoke a deliberate uneasiness that is useful, we suggest, in reimagining a century just emerging from the margins of periodizing discourses.

Our first section, “The Materials of Form,” is an argument in practice that an attention to form is not opposed to an interest in material culture; rather, as Douglas Bruster elsewhere reminds us, form itself might be most accurately understood as potentially material, materially produced, and/or materially productive. Indeed, nearly all of the essays in this volume invoke or rely upon a reading of material form: Meyer-Lee and Simpson both read their arguments through printed editions of Skelton’s work; the discovery of the Abbotsford manuscript enables Winstead’s astute reading of differences between that and the

earlier Arundel collection of *vitae*; and Gayk takes up the provocative alimentary metaphors of books consumed. We start the volume with two essays in particular that help foreground the role that material forms—compilations, books, and other material artifacts—play in fifteenth-century literary culture.

Jessica Brantley reads the specific material context of the Abraham and Isaac play in the commonplace manuscript known as the *Book of Brome*, framing a provocative analysis of the rubrications within the play against a broader argument about that text’s physical and interpretive relationship to its manuscript context. She identifies a “typological imaginary” accessible through the visual presentation of the play, a presentation shaped by readerly traces (mostly rubrications) that reveal a consistent engagement with the interpretive practices of typology, not only in the play but across several of the texts in the Brome manuscript. The performance of the Brome Abraham and Isaac, as Brantley puts it, is one that can be most productively understood as the “performance of interpretation” that foregrounds the role of the reader.

Andrew Cole’s essay focuses on the administrative letters in Registrum F housed in the University Archives of Oxford (edited as the *Epistolae academicae Oxon.*). In his fresh investigation of the epistles, Cole ultimately challenges several of the key assumptions about humanism in England, primarily that it was an imported, impoverished, and neglected movement. His provocative two-fold reading of form takes into account the material letterforms of Chaundler’s script and the petitionary form of the letters in the *registra*. His reading of these forms together builds a layered, specific argument about one book that branches out to think about affiliations with early-century and vernacular petitionary poetry, as well as resituates the petitionary genre as one that contains within itself the periodizing rhetoric of rebirth.

Considerations of religious writing in the fifteenth century have most frequently been posed against the context of orthodoxy and dissent, a historical backdrop that has seemed more urgent and, in many cases, more dramatic than the role this kind of writing may have played in its literary milieu. The essays in this second section, “Devotional Forms,” work to rebalance the conversation, suggesting that devotional writing of this period engaged with a variety of reformist (and conserving) traditions precisely through aesthetic innovation and experiment. Through close readings that emphasize genre, metaphor, and reading traditions, these chapters question what we thought we knew about the politics of hagiography, about the use of dialogue, about sweetness and the forms of devotional expression.

Karen Winstead offers a critical reappraisal of Osbern Bokenham in the wake of the Abbotsford manuscript discovery, identified as Bokenham’s lost *Legenda Aurea* by Simon Horobin in 2005. Moving between the Abbotsford saints’ lives and the *vitae* contained in the Arundel manuscript, Winstead establishes a new
Introduction

chronology as well as a new framework for understanding Bokenham’s engagement with the genre of hagiography. Three of the Abbotsford legends—those of Apollonia, Barbara, and Winifred—provide grounds for tracing Bokenham’s move toward an intellectual liberalism, a liberalism at once bold and experimental as it emerges through legends that treat the full intellectual range of women as scholars, students, teachers, and, most surprisingly, preachers. Winstead argues that Bokenham’s more mature, experimental use of hagiography reveals his optimistic reassessment of learning and reading as a singularly creative response to conservative ecclesiastical pressures surrounding the issue of lay religious instruction.

The vital energies of a lay readership also play a part in Gayk’s essay on Capgrave’s *Life of Saint Katherine*. Gayk offers a persuasive reading of what she terms Capgrave’s “aesthetic of sweetness,” ultimately suggesting that religious writing offers a corrective to our privileging of the more secular “aureate sweetness” that has long been considered the hallmark of fifteenth-century stylistics. Beginning with the alimentary metaphors that undergird Capgrave’s prologue to the *Life*—where a priest dreams of quite literally consuming a book, binding and all—Gayk moves outward to trace Capgrave’s own careful, sustained interest in a series of interlinking connections between hiddenness and plain-speaking, composition and reading, form and meaning. By moving through the multilayered metaphories of what it means to read (and write) sweet words, Gayk demonstrates how Capgrave’s acute awareness of “sweet” forms discloses writing as a joint production between reader and writer: Capgrave’s *Life* is a text unafraid to articulate at once a concern with readerly receptivity as well as the hard “hermeneutic labor” reading requires.

Krug’s chapter is the second in our collection to find critical traction in the performative aspects of texts meant to be read instead of staged—in this instance, scripted dialogues of Jesus’ voice. This understudied but important genre is common in texts across the later medieval literary corpus, as Krug reminds us, and she reads three examples composed largely for a female devotional audience: Margaret Beaufort’s *Imitation of Christ*, the Fifteen *Oes*, and Margery Kempe’s *Book*. Krug finds that dialogues open up a fictive, experiential space in which readers reexperience and potentially reexpress inscripted, authoritative language. These dialogues, however, cannot be read easily as part of a generalized narrative of empowerment or individuality; instead, Krug is careful to demonstrate the quite different relationships figured between readers and clerical/ecclesiastical authority embedded across these texts. The readerly dynamics made possible by these dialogues, though, suggest that writers engaged with this devotional form to signal a discrete mode of piety. Krug’s identification and initial analysis of this genre also continues to remind us that in religious as well as literary registers, the work of form and the work of reading were interdependent experiences.
By concluding with a group of essays in conversation about Skelton, this volume’s third and final section offers an alternative ending to the literary history of the fifteenth century—one that reads one of the most troublesome poets in the English canon against the provocations of form and reform as they work in the earlier chapters of this collection. Skelton traditionally serves as a watershed figure demarcating the medieval from Renaissance periods, but in this section he is a specifically fifteenth-century poet. What that means, however, is productively contested: Meyer-Lee argues for a distinct fifteenth-century literary culture, bookended by Lydgate and Skelton, which traces a trajectory of aureate poetics; Bose, on the other hand, proposes a more “Langlandian” echo that plays through the work of John Audelay before it ends in the dissolution and fragmentation of Skelton’s polyvocal verse; and Simpson explores the end of the Middle Ages, at least figuratively, in the “dreadful” death of the author as imagined in the Bowge of Courte. Among these competing claims on Skelton, though, is a shared interest in Skelton as a figure neither exemplary nor anomalous, but rather of a piece with the fifteenth-century appetite for innovation and experimentation, and thus well within the circumference of this volume’s interests.

Meyer-Lee brings us to the eve of the Reformation in his consideration of John Skelton’s A Replycacion against Certayne Yong Scolers Abjured of Late, which appeared from Pynson’s press in 1528. Looking back to Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady (1422) as a strong influence for Skelton’s poem, Meyer-Lee argues that what may first appear to be Skelton’s highly idiosyncratic Replycacion unfolds as a strikingly similar project to Lydgate’s, only one at once more witty and blunt, and, in a sense, turned inside out: if the Life is an orthodox Marian devotion that modulates at times into a defense of poetry and, more subtly, a polemic against early-fifteenth-century Lollardy, the Replycacion is a satiric attack on early sixteenth-century Lollard-like heresy that marshals both Marian orthodoxy and a defense of poetry to its cause. And yet this difference is, in an important respect, decisive: in the Life, the literary emerges metaphorically and its relation to political power is indirect; in contrast, while the defense of poetry in the Replycacion is explicit, learned, and impassioned, the literary itself devolves into, as Skelton puts it, “a privilege granted by the king.” This manifest royal instrumental-ity siphons off the hieratic aura upon which the poem’s claim for the literary depends, thereby marking the boundary of a characteristically fifteenth-century articulation of the literary and signifying one of the ways that we might say that the fifteenth century, considered as a distinct literary culture, ends.

The challenge of thinking any specific endpoint through Skelton is addressed in a different register by Bose, who emphasizes Skelton’s clerical status as she traces a narrative of competing tensions and paradoxes in the long tradition of the priest-poet through the fifteenth century. Beginning with a reflection on the clerical poet as bouche inutile, the “useless mouth,” Bose explores the reformist
context of Skelton’s work as one which makes explicit the contact between ecclesiastical and literary cultures, and thus the constant tension in the priest-poet’s situation between his “empowering vocation and his prophetic compulsions.” Bose’s path to Skelton thus leads not through Lydgate (or Chaucer) but through the “clerical” writers, Langland and Audelay. Traced along this path, the macaronic, polyvocal, and linguistically fragmented language of Skelton’s satires call into question the capacity of poetry to “do theology.” While the questions at the heart of Bose’s reading of Skelton are those posed by *Piers Plowman*—“What is poetry good for?” and “Can and should clerks be poets?”—the answers that Skelton formulates are, of course, quite different from Langland’s own: in this volume’s second consideration of the *Replycacion*, Bose reads Skelton as he “playfully guys the annihilation of institutions and hierarchies in order that it might come into being.” Bose’s reading thus offers a literary history that draws to a close through a loss of the poet’s ecclesiastical role.

Skelton’s inheritance and then dispersal of literary forms is taken up again in this collection’s final essay by James Simpson, who offers a close reading of the *Bowge of Courte* that situates Skelton as a poet who makes visible the dynamics of his moment from within the complex codes of his political and historical horizons, rather than being coded by them. The formal qualities of the poem—the noninteractive soliloquies of Drede’s interlocutors, the semantic limits of the allegorical figures themselves—reveal the terrifying “alienating quality of the non-communication” and produce the paranoia of the poet-narrator himself. Yet Simpson moves beyond a consideration of the narrator in this poem to implicate the reader as well, suggesting that for Skelton the categories of reader and author are mutually constitutive. It is a relationship that Simpson argues must be construed, finally, as an ethical one. And by positing ethics here, Simpson forcefully reaffirms authorial intention, suggesting that acts of reading are decisions taken by readers, “not something ineradicably there ‘in’ the text,” and that these decisions are choices “which bring an author into being.” It is only through this conscious acknowledgement of and turn toward the author that we might register the extraordinary ways Skelton finds to say “I cannot say anything.” Skelton, perhaps, both invites and refuses the idea of an “end” to the fifteenth century at all.

Although this volume was spurred by a chronological gap in our literary history, these essays nevertheless remain coy about mapping a full, or fully coherent, fifteenth century. The reassessments here prefer instead to highlight the local—the instance, the edition, the manuscript, the letter—and thus form and reform are terms that emerge as points of particularity. Yet the particular carries with it
a distinct energy that consistently teases and troubles the place of the fifteenth century within straitening, periodizing narratives. As Skelton might put it, the sum of the parts creates an “effecte energiall,” encouraging us to see the volume’s guiding terms as active participles, describing the continual processes of forming and reforming throughout the later fifteenth century.²³

²³. My thanks to Shannon Gayk and Daniel Wakelin for their helpful comments on this essay.
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Page references to illustrations are given in italics.

*Abraham and Isaac* (Book of Brome), 10–11, 19–25, 30–39

*Adrian and Epotys*, 22, 27, 28; devotional emblem, 36

alliterative verse, 7, 100, 108; mistaken for prose, 33; in Skeltonics, 143

Ambrose (Church Father), 68, 71

Anselm of Canterbury

 *Monastic Dialogue*, 110

anticlerical satire, 160, 161n9, 170–71, 177. See also Audelay: “Marcol and Solomon”; Skelton: *Ware the Hauke*

Aquinas, Thomas

 *De Regimine Principum*, 102n52

 *Summa Theologicae*, 138n17

*ars epistolandi*. See letter-writing

Arthur, Thomas, 143, 146–49, 157, 174

Arundel’s Constitutions, 55n52, 69, 140

Ashby, George, 7

Audelay, John, 13–14, 159–61, 166–72

“Marcol and Solomon” (*De concordia inter recortes fraters et rectores ecclesi*), 166–71

Augustine, 165, 174; rhetoric, 54–55, 92

*Confessions*, 54

*De Genesi ad litteram*, 94n24

aureation, 13, 88, 108, 136, 141–42, 151–54, 172; absence of, 91, 108; challenged, 172; Lydgate, use of term, 136. See also Hawes, Stephen; Lydgate, John; Skelton, John

authority, 118, 142, 155, 160; authorial, 162, 184; of characters, 194; divine, 138, 177; ecclesiastical, 10, 12, 123, 163, 165; figures, 64, 71, 194; by inscription, 112–15, 118; institutional, 64, 121; 170–71; literary, 9–10, 90, 100, 105, 133, 154, 157, 183–84, 195–96; political, 61n77, 155; to print, 155, 158; of Sarum rite, 164; of scripture, 71, 121. See also Skelton, John; Langland, William; Tutivillus

author, theories of, 181–85

Bakhtin, Michel, 113n11, 178

Barclay, Alexander, 7, 142

Barthes, Roland, 180, 182, 184–85, 196

Beaufort, Margaret, 112n6, 112n8, 113, 116n14, 117n14


Beauvais, Vincent de, 70

Bible: women lacking training in, 70; women scholars of, 12, 69, 75, 81–83, 87

Apocalypse (Revelation) 10:9–10, 95–96

Ezekiel 3:1–3, 95–96

Genesis 3:6, 94

Hebrews 5:12–14, 95n27

Isaiah 5:20, 168
Index

Jeremiah 15:16, 95
Matthew 11:28, 116–17
Psalm 33:9, 106
Psalm 44:2, 151
Psalm 108:21, 95
Psalm 118:103, 95
Psalm 118:105, 166
Bilney, Thomas: heresy, 143, 146–48, 174; Latimer converted by, 158; Lollard views, 18n39; punishment date, 148–49; rejection of laureate authority, 157
Boccaccio, Giovanni, 1
Bokenham, Osbern, 7, 67–89, 89, 108; intellectual liberalism, 9, 12; reappraisal of, 11–12
works of: Mappula Angliae, 68
works in Legenda aurea: Agatha, 67–68; Agnes, 67–68; Ambrose, 68; Anne, 67–68, 71; Apollonia, 12, 68–69, 79–80, 83, 85; Audrey, 68; Barbara, 12, 68–69, 82–83, 85–86; Cecilia, 68, 73, 76–78; Christine, 67–68; Claire of Assisi, 78; Dorothy, 67–68, 77; Elizabeth, 67–68, 71; Faith, 67–68; Katherine of Alexandria, 67–68, 70, 73–77, 84; Margaret, 67–68, 85; Martha, 78–79; Martina, 78, 81; Mary of Egypt, 68; Mary Magdalen, 67–73, 76–78, 84–85; Monica (Augustine’s mother), 78, 81–82; Paul the Hermit, 68; Priscilla, 78; Ursula, 67–68, 77; Vincent, 68; Winifred, 12, 68, 83–85
Book of Brome, 7, 10–11, 19–39; rubrication in, 29–39
books of hours, 104n58, 113
Bourchier, Isobel, 67, 78, 86
Bradshaw, Henry, 7
Bridget of Sweden
Fifteen Oes (traditional attribution), 112
Brut (prose), 33
Bury, John
Gladius Salmonis, 86

Cannon, Christopher, 3–4, 21, 137
Capgrave, John, 7, 9, 69, 86, 88–109; alliterative source, 92n15, 93; consumption as metaphor for reading, 90–99, 103–9; critical denigration of, 89–90, 108; Englishness, 88–89, 91–93, 100, 108; Eucharist, 106–7; internal vs. external, 94, 97–99, 107; literary form, 88–91, 93, 100, 105–8; literary invention, 90–91, 93, 99, 101–4; memory, 96–97, 100, 104; readerly reception, 90–92, 100, 104–9; reading linked with writing, 97, 99, 101–2, 104, 107; religious reform, 89–91, 105, 107; rhetoric of, 89–91; sweetness as aesthetic, 12, 89–91, 93, 105–6; sweetness in religious texts, 94–96; translation and hiddenness linked, 99–100, 103; translation practices, 90–93, 100, 107; vernacular theology, 90–92, 107
Life of Saint Katherine, 12, 73–74, 82, 88–109. See also dream visions: Life of Saint Katherine
Caxton, William, 7, 112n8, 113, 151, 155, 158
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 85n42, 106, 163, 194; as authority figure, 154; begging poems, 55; in contemporary collections, 22, 28; dream poem, 179; as exemplar, 9, 14, 93, 136, 141; hagiographer, 107–8; praise of, 136–39, 141, 154–55; rhyme royal use, 93, 107–8, 151
Canterbury Tales, 33: “Prioress’s Tale,” 151; Prologue to the “Summoner’s Tale,” 102n53; “Nun’s Priest’s Tale,” 163n16
House of Fame, 179
“Lak of Stedfastnesse,” 22
Parliament of Fowls, 179
Troilus and Criseyde, 151
Chaundler, Thomas, 40–64; chancellor, 43, 51, 61; life of, 41n4; letters, 11, 40–64; literary humanism, 44; modern criticism of, 44; scribal hands of, 42, 52–54
Chester cycle, 20, 34–35, 39
Christ. See Jesus
Christianity: doctrinal knowledge, 22, 74, 76–78, 83, 87; education, 69–87, 121–
Index

22; intellectualized, 69, 77, 82; natural reason, 85–87; religious practices, 121–22. See also orthodoxy; preaching; teaching; typology

Cicero, 43–44, 56n60, 63, 137, 162
De Inventione, Rhetorica ad Herennium, 63
De Oratore, 63
codicology. See form: material; manuscripts: codicology

confession, 125, 167, 168

Counter Reformation, 147

Cromwell, Thomas, 158

Dante (Alighieri), 93

David (biblical poet-king), 118, 152, 175–76

De Beauvoir, Simone
Les bouches inutiles, 159

Demosthenes, 56n60

Derrida, Jacques, 123n28, 124n29, 184
devotional works, 8, 10–12, 28n21; inclusion of images, 27–28, 36; for meditation, 25, 28; readers influence on, 113n11; reading of, 28; reformist, 11; sanctioned, 140; for women, 12. See also hagiography; Marian devotion
de Worde, Wynkyn
Bowge of Courte, 180, 182–83
Fifteen Oes reprint, 113
Margarey Kempe’s Book extract, 111, 125, 128
dialogue, 166, 174, 191–92; Bakhtin on, 113n11; literary form, 110–11. See also Jesus (Christ): dialogues with
drama, 7, 108; in Book of Brome, 19–39; typological reading, 37–38. See also performance
dream vision: Bowge of Courte, 180–96;
Chaucer, 179; Life of Saint Katherine, 12, 92–3, 98–100; Mary Magdalene, 72; Piers Plowman, 97n38

Edward III, 63n84
Elizabeth of York, 112n8, 113
eloquence: female, 69–70, 72, 75–84, 92, 103; rhetorical, 105, 108, 136, 139;

Tully (Cicero), 162
Erasmus, 57, 174, 176
Eucharist, 82, 106–7, 117–22, 163–64, 167–69. See also Jesus (Christ): body of
Eugene IV (Pope), 44, 52

Everyman, 7

Fifteen Oes, The, 7, 10, 12, 110–18, 128–29

Fifteen Signs of Doomsday, 22, 31
fifteenth century: dullness, 5, 40, 63, 108; English poetic development, 177; recuperation of, 5–6, 40, 89, 134, 160–61
Fish, Stanley, 152, 163, 187n17, 196n29
formalism, 2–3, 4n12, 5, 20, 21n7, 22, 178

Foucault, Michel, 124n29, 184

Foxe, John

Acts and Monuments, 147–48

Gascoigne, Thomas, 48n26, 165n19

Gillespie, Vincent, 90, 150–54, 175–76

Gilte Legende, 82

Glossa ordinaria, 151
goliardic verse, 161, 164

Gower, John, 85n42

Carmen super multiplici viciorum pestilencia, 141n26

Greenblatt, Stephen, 133–34

hagiography: politics of, 11; reformist, 69n6; rubrication of, 31; mixing of genres, 108. See also Capgrave, John; Bokenham, Osbern; Book of Brome

Hawes, Stephen, 7, 88, 142

Elizabeth of York, 112n8, 113

eloquence: female, 69–70, 72, 75–84, 92, 103; rhetorical, 105, 108, 136, 139;

Tully (Cicero), 162
Erasmus, 57, 174, 176
Eucharist, 82, 106–7, 117–22, 163–64, 167–69. See also Jesus (Christ): body of
Eugene IV (Pope), 44, 52

Everyman, 7

Fifteen Oes, The, 7, 10, 12, 110–18, 128–29

Fifteen Signs of Doomsday, 22, 31
fifteenth century: dullness, 5, 40, 63, 108; English poetic development, 177; recuperation of, 5–6, 40, 89, 134, 160–61
Fish, Stanley, 152, 163, 187n17, 196n29
formalism, 2–3, 4n12, 5, 20, 21n7, 22, 178

Foucault, Michel, 124n29, 184

Foxe, John

Acts and Monuments, 147–48

Gascoigne, Thomas, 48n26, 165n19

Gillespie, Vincent, 90, 150–54, 175–76

Gilte Legende, 82

Glossa ordinaria, 151
goliardic verse, 161, 164

Gower, John, 85n42

Carmen super multiplici viciorum pestilencia, 141n26

Greenblatt, Stephen, 133–34

hagiography: politics of, 11; reformist, 69n6; rubrication of, 31; mixing of genres, 108. See also Capgrave, John; Bokenham, Osbern; Book of Brome

Hawes, Stephen, 7, 88, 142
Henry V: English language advocacy, 139, 155n52; Lydgate, relations with, 140–42, 157

Henry VI, 6, 44

Henry VIII: conflict with church, 158; Skelton, relations with, 154–55, 158

Henryson, Robert
Moral Fables, 188

heresy: accusation of, 85, 140; anti-Marian, 134–35, 141, 143, 146–49; attacks on, 174; education as remedial, 69; juxtaposed with orthodoxy, 87, 89, 141, 164; literary consequences of, 158, 160–61; rebellion linked with, 141; vatic response to, 148–49, 154. See also Arthur, Thomas; Bilney Thomas; Lollardy; Lutherans; Pecock, Reginald; preaching: women; satire; Wycliffism

Hoccleve, Thomas: critical recuperation, 40, 88; begging poems, 55; self-reflection, 88
Regiment of Princes, 6n17


Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester; 42; contemporary praise of, 57; donations by, 49, 59; epistolary and petitionary correspondence, 42, 50n34, 55–56, 58, 61–62; proponent of humanism, 56, 58–59

idolatry: in A Replycacion, 146; in Life of Saint Catherine, 98
images: devotional, 27, 28, 36; performative, 28, 36
Ipomedon (Hue de Rotelande), 7

Jacobs de Voraigne
Legenda Aurea, 11, 68, 71, 74, 76, 78–79, 81

Jerome: authority figure, 81, 165, 174; book-eating, 96, 107; concern for poetics, 152; Paulinus, letter to, 151–52; praise of King David, 175–76

Jesus (Christ), 78, 80, 137–40; birth of, 73, 137, 141, 147; body of, 107, 114, 117–19, 138, 148, 164; conception of, 137–51, 146 148; death of, 34, 36, 71, 113, 128; dialogues with, 116–23, 125, 127–29; harrowing of hell, 152; imitation of, 116–18, 120–22; as lover/husband, 101, 106, 120; passion of, 28, 34–37, 76, 112–16; resurrection of, 38, 70, 128; voice of, 9, 12, 110–29; wounds of, 114–16. See also “Seven Words” of Christ

Katherine of Alexandria. See Bokenham: Katherine of Alexandria; Capgrave: Life of Saint Katherine

Kempe, Margery, 78–81, 97, 169; as aural reader, 112n6; hearing the divine, 125–29; married chastity, 126; pilgrimage, 126
Book, 12, 108, 110–11, 123–29

laity: clerical relations with, 161, 167, 169; deeds, 168; infantilization of, 90, 95n27; piety, 96; poets, 158; readers, 9, 12, 69, 91–92, 122; religious instruction, 12, 85–87, 89; women, 69, 81

Langland, William: diminished ecclesiastical authority, 160; influence, 13–14; Langlandianism, 161, 166, 170
Piers Plowman, 14, 21n6, 31, 33, 38, 97n38, 170, 186, 193

Latimer, Hugh, 158
laureate. See Skelton, John: laureate
Lerer, Seth, 2n4, 6n17, 88, 136n12
letter-writing: Anglo-Latin petitions at Oxford, 40–64; humanist hybrid scripts in, 40–45, 49–53; rhetoric in,
54–63; vernacular, 64; vernacular verse, relation to, 64
*Life of St. Margaret* (in Book of Brome), 22, 31
Lollardy: anti-Lollardy texts, 13, 139–42; as heresy, 13; ill-defined, 167; influence on literature, 160–61, 167; mediation of saints rejected, 141, 148; religious vernacular, 92n16, 139–40, reputed practices, 80; eucharist, 164
Love, Nicholas, 90, 95n27
*Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, 140–41
Luther, Martin, 147
Lutherans, 147–48
Lydgate, John: aureation, 88, 105, 136, 142, 151–52, 154, 172; relation to Chaucer, 9, 154; begging poems, 55; contemporary praise of, 85n42; critical denigration of, 2n3, 5, 40; critical recuperation of, 5–6, 40; death, 85; defense of poetry, 1; eloquence, 108; hagiographer, 69, 86, 93n20, 107–8; heresy threat, 134; as historical boundary, 7, 13, 158; laureate, 154; manuscripts, 33; Mariology, 13, 134, 136, 148–51; poetic form, 1–4; poetic legacy, 142n28; religious order, 134; Skelton, relation to, 151–52, 155, 157–58; vernacular theologies, 134
*Churl and the Bird*, 196n28
*A Defence of Holy Church*, 140
*Fall of Princes*, 1–2
verse translation of *Fifteen Oes*, 113
*Life of Our Lady*, 13, 134–42
*Pageant of Knowledge*, 22, 28–29
*Troy Book*, 106n62, 140.
*See also* Mary (Virgin): as analogy for poet; Henry V
lyric poetry, 7, 22, 28, 129, 161

Malory, Thomas, 7; Winchester MS, 33
Mandeville, John
*Travels*, 33
*Mankind*, 7, 173
manuscripts: annotation of, 38; codicology of, 10, 21–25, 29, 42, 45–48; paleography in, 42, 44–45, 48–54; rubrication of, 21, 25–39. *See also* images; scripts Abbotsford, Abbotsford House, Walter Scott Collection, Abbotsford MS (Bokenham legendary), 10–11, 68–69, 78–87
Cambridge, Jesus College MS, 63, 63
Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.2 (Trinity Gower MS), 48
Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.5, 53n43
Cambridge University Library MS Dd.i.17 (*Piers Plowman*), 31n26, 33, 38n46
Dublin, Trinity College MS 432, 19n2
London, British Library, MS Additional 37049, 28n21
London, British Library, MS Arundel 327 (Bokenham legendary), 11, 67–78, 80, 85–87
London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra C.iv (a letterbook of William Swan), 48n27
London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.VI, 63
London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus A.xxiv, 52n42
London, British Library, MS Harley 43 (Walton’s English *Boethius*), 52n42, 53n42
New Haven, CT, Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 365 (Book of Brome), 19, 24, 26–27, 30, 32
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Arch. Selden B. 23 (a letterbook of William Swan), 48
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 789, 63
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302 (Audelay’s anthology), 166
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. theo.e.33, 48n26
Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 201 (*Piers Plowman*), 31n26, 33
Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 43
Index

(Cicero’s *De Officiis*), 53n43
Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 54, 48n26
Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 84, 53n43
Oxford, New College MS 288, 51n36, 52n42, 53n43
Oxford, St. John’s College MS 17, 48n26
Oxford University Archives, NEP/supra/Reg.Aa, 53n43
Oxford University Archives, NEP/supra/Reg F (Registrum F/Epistolae academicae Oxon), 10–11, 40–45, 45, 46–64
San Marino, Huntington Library MS HM 1 (Towneley Plays), 29n22

Marcella (Mary Magdalene’s handmaiden), 79
Marian devotion, 13, 146. *See also* Lydgate, John: Mariology; Skelton, John: Marian devotion; heresy: anti-Marian
Martha. *See Bokenham, Osbern*
Mary Magdalene. *See Bokenham, Osbern*
Mary (the Virgin): birth of Christ, 137; conception of Christ, 137–38, 140; as analogy for poet, 137–39, 150–51, 154, 158, 176; grace, 138; mediator, 139, 141; orthodox positions on, 13, 140–43, 161; rejection of Marian agency, 141, 146–49
Medwall, Henry, 7
Melton, Robert, 21–23
More, Thomas, 53
*Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, 174
*Letter to Dorp*, 175
*Mum and Sothsegger*, 101–2, 186–87, 193

Netter, Thomas
*Doctrinale*, 166
new formalism, 2–4
new historicism, 3n6, 4, 135
Nolan, Maura, 3, 4n11, 5, 6n17, 43

*Orchard of Syon*, 97
Origen of Alexandria, 82–83
orthodoxy, 87, 164; broad-minded, 178; dissonant, 178; dissent to, 11, 89; ecclesiastical, 9; enforcers of, 147; hagiography as a defense of, 69; reforming, 10; vatic defender of, 148, 163, 177; vernacular reclamation, 90. *See also* Lollardy

Ovid, 106
*Ars amatoria*, 150n44
*Fasti*, 150n44

Oxford, University of: fifteenth-century descriptions of, 54–56, 58–60, 61; history, 54–62; humanist letters, 40–66; intellectual currents, 10; translation debate, 55n52. *See also* manuscripts

Pearl, 36
Pearsall, Derek, 5, 108n67, 139–40, 134n6, 166n21
Pecock, Reginald, 7, 69, 85–87, 165
performance, 11, 21, 23, 25, 28–29, 31, 34, 38–39. *See also* reading
periodization, 8, 10, 14–15, 43–44, 59–60
Peter of Celle, 102
Peter (Saint), 72–73
petitionary genres, 10–11, letters, 41–43, 54–64; rhetoric in, 55, 61, 63; vernacular language, 63–64; verse, 11, 55, 137–38
Petrarch, Francesco, 53n44, 57, 137
*Pierce the Plowman’s Crede*, 102n53
plain style. *See* Capgrave, John: literary form
Plato, 43, 58n70, 133
*Poeta theologus*. *See* Skelton, John: as poet
priest
political verse, 7, 10, 14, 88, 108, 134, 142, 150n42, 157–58; satire, 182
prayer, 118, 120, 168; as dialogue, 112–16; by Mary, 72; miracles through, 77, 84; neglect of, 172; written, 110. *See also* Lollardy: mediation of saints rejected preaching, 69, 85–86; female saints, 12, 69–73, 76–81, 84; heretical, 146; Pauline restriction against women, 70,
Index

80–81. See also Pecock, Reginald
prophetic: anti-clerical, 167; biblical, 95; eating as prerequisite for, 95; of King David, 176; of vatic poets, 158; reformist poem, 171
pseudo-Bonaventura
Meditationes Vitae Christi, 140–41
Pynson, Richard, (printer) 13, 143, 144, 145, 147, 152, 153, 155–56, 158
Rastell, John, 7
Reader-response Criticism, 114n12, 184, 196n29
reading, 101: consolation through, 122–25; contemplative, 96; as imaginative performance, 123; as mode of production, 9; praelection, 12, 23, 25, 28–29, 31, 34, 39; practices, 21; performative, 28, 39; in private, 39; women, 112n6, 112n8. See also Capgrave, John; devotional works
reception, 105
Reformation, 7–8, 13, 158, 174n42
Registrum F/Epistolae academicae Oxon. See manuscripts; Oxford University Archives, NEP supra/Reg F
rhyme royal: alliterative verse combined with, 93, 100; aureate, 142, 151–52; Chaucerian and Lydgateian legacy, 93, 107, 108, 151–52; Englishness, 108; Skeltonics combined with, 176
rhetoric: masters of, 75, 136–37; texts in England, 63. See also Augustine; aureation; Capgrave, John; Cicero; eloquence; letter-writing; Lydgate; petitionary genres
Richard III (King), 6
Robin Hood cycles, 7
Rolle, Richard
Meditations on the Passion, 102
romance, 7, 108
satire; court, 182, 187–89, 196n29; reformist, 171; Skelton, attack on heresy using, 13, 142–43, 163; tradition of, 178; Tutivillus as metaphor for, 173. See also Skelton, John; Lollardy; anti-clerical satire; political verse; reform scholasticism, 43–44, 61, 174
scripts. See Chaundler: scribal hands; letter-writing: humanist hybrid scripts; manuscript: paleography in scripture. See Bible
Scotus, 58, 174
Seneca, 102, 104, 189
“Seven Words” of Christ, 113–16
Sever, Henry (Chancellor of Oxford), 44, 46, 50, 61
Shakespeare, William
Henry V, 102
Simpson, James: 5–6, 9–10, 13–14, 158n58, 160, 161n9, 162, 167, 180–96
Agent Garnesche, 161–62
Bowge of Courte, 9, 13–14, 162, 180–96
Collyn Clout, 154n48, 167, 172–73, 187, 192

221
Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell, 151, 154, 179
A Replycacion, 13–14, 133–37, 142–43, 144–45, 145–52, 153, 154–58
Speke Parott, 170–71, 173, 176, 192
Upon the Dolorous Dethe, 142
Ware the Hauke, 10, 162–166, 171, 174, 176–78
See also Skeltonic verse; rhyme royal; Henry VIII; Wolsey (Cardinal)
Skeltonic verse, 135, 154, 162, 164–65, 175–76, 179
Smith, D. Vance, 3–4, 21n6, 109n72
Spenser, Edmund, 179

teaching: Christian 69, 84, 87, 102, 122; humanists, 61; women, 12, 76–77
Towneley Plays, 29n22
translation, 68, 90–93, 151–52; connection to discovery, 99–101, 103; as degradation, 173; of learning, 58–59; reformist, 91; vernacular, 68, 90, 110, 112–13, 141, 151–52, 173. See also

Oxford University: translation debate;
Capgrave, John: translation practices
Tully. See Cicero
Tutivillus, 162, 172–74
typological interpretation, 10, 35, 39; of Abraham and Isaac, 35–39
vates, vatic poet; Mary as, 139n18. See also Skelton, John: vatic

Watson, Nicholas, 55n52, 91n13, 93, 95n27, 100nn47–49, 123–24n29
Weiss, Roberto, 40–44, 51n38, 54–55, 62
Wolfson, Susan, 3, 9, 21n7
Wolsey, Thomas (Cardinal), 155, 157–58, 174
Woolf, Rosemary, 25n19, 34, 36
Worcester, William, 7
Wyatt, Thomas
“Stand whoso list, upon the slipper toppe,” 189
Wycliffism. See Lollardy

Yimaginatif (in Piers Plowman), 159–61