CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Antagonistic Tradition

One well-regarded history of medieval English literature claims the fatherhood of Chaucer as the constitutive idea for the entire tradition. Another survey of fifteenth-century poetry assesses Chaucerian fatherhood as the disabling dynamic to account for the shortcomings of his literary progeny. And yet another book critiques the English brotherhood of writers and readers looking back to “congenial” Chaucer to find their own family resemblances.\(^1\) Different as their approaches are, each book accepts the historical fact of Chaucer as the father of English literature. My enquiry begins with the simple question why Geoffrey Chaucer—not William Langland—was granted the patriarchal position not described in exactly these words until John Dryden’s Preface to the \textit{Fables} (1700): “he is the Father of English Poetry.”\(^2\) Although Chaucer’s own concept of literary tradition suggests that he considered himself primarily an heir, not a begetter, the notion of a patrilineal inheritance deriving from him as a father figure was already formulated within a generation of his death when Thomas Hoccleve acknowledged Chaucer’s fatherhood in the famous commendation in \textit{The Regiment of Princes} (c. 1412): “Allas, my fadir from the world is go, / My worthy maistir Chaucer—him I meene.”\(^3\)

An explosion of English-language writings during the later fourteenth century can be attributed to a diversity of cultural and intellectual forces;\(^4\)
Chaucer and Langland

and A. I. Doyle’s legendary doctoral thesis, *A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English*, provides a magisterial appraisal of vernacular book-production exactly contemporary with Chaucer’s career but almost completely separate from his literary activities. Nonetheless, Hoccleve’s insistence upon Chaucer’s foundational position was continued throughout the fifteenth century by a series of literary heirs, most notably John Lydgate, who repeatedly named the poet and left no doubt that Chaucer—and Chaucer alone—originated the English poetic practices which these later writers worked to fortify as a self-conscious tradition.

Schooled by Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida, we recognize that literary genealogies necessarily depend upon stable origins that are not always fixed, unitary, or even factually real. Christopher Cannon provides one of the most theoretically informed accounts describing how the myth of the Chaucerian origin made itself true: “I think that Middle English written tradition existed in the plural and that this plurality profoundly qualifies Chaucer’s claim to have started anything.” Although the two fourteenth-century poets were roughly contemporary and their works have been valuably studied within a shared historical context, all evidence points to Langland holding the senior position with a poem rapidly disseminated and immediately influential. Helen Cooper has confirmed Coghill’s long-standing view that Chaucer himself read *Piers Plowman* during the 1380s and Langland’s poem informed his estate satire in the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales*, specifically his portrait of the Plowman. Frank Grady suggests that the intertextual relationship went back even further when Langland’s dream-poetry gave impetus to Chaucer’s own strange and unpredictable *House of Fame*, with its non-narrative discourse and formal habits of literary development that might otherwise have become normative.

A. C. Spearing corrects Harold Bloom’s historically short-sighted view that early authors such as Shakespeare belonged “to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness,” in order to trace the dynamics of the family romance in the fifteenth-century tradition following Chaucer. But the author of *The Book of the Duchess* had his own rebellions to stage. Since Langland shows no signs of reading Chaucer’s works, the direction of influence was entirely one way, with the anxiety felt exclusively on Chaucer’s part. Any dialogue that might have emerged between the two contemporary London poets devolved into a Chaucerian monologue. While Chaucer shows a half-humorous sense of competitiveness with his older colleague John Gower, his struggles with Langland come closer to Bloom’s sense that “strong poets make that history
by misreading one another so as to clear imaginative space for themselves”; real aggression resides at the heart of this antagonism between “major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death.”

Along with *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer’s *Troilus* had entered circulation among London’s reading circles during the mid-1380s—the text was quoted extensively by Thomas Usk in his *Testament of Love* about 1385—and *Troilus* somehow remained yoked with Langland’s work into the fifteenth century when the two long poems were copied together in HM 114 and both works were mentioned in the wills by Thomas Stotevyle (1459) and Sir Thomas Charleton (1465). As a result, the *Canterbury Tales* in the 1390s became Chaucer’s last best chance for engaging with Langland’s literary achievements and topical challenges while also rebelling against Langland’s kind of literature. Even Chaucer’s representation of himself as small and pudgy (*CT*, VII, 700–704) may have been meant to distinguish him from “long lean Will” Langland. The entire Chaucerian tradition would carry forward this burden of anxiety, repressed and neurotically expressed, into the fifteenth century.

My investigations suggest some important rewriting of the history of English literature at the close of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance as well as a revised sense of the origins of “English literature” as a cultural category inherited and then fixed by early print editors. Departing from prevailing accounts that privilege the Chaucerian tradition, my version of this story begins and ends with *Piers Plowman*. Langland’s work not only encouraged parallel underground practices but also established itself as a textual presence, really a cultural presence with practical social and political challenges, steadily affecting the development of the official and highly visible Chaucerian tradition in works such as Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes* and Lydgate’s *Troy Book*. In the literary firmament, Langland became the adjacent black hole whose gravitational field consistently determined the shape and luminosity of the bright star Chaucer.

Though his ascendancy as the father of English literature has established itself as the official story since the sixteenth century, Chaucer’s preeminence in this fabricated genealogy of national poets was by no means automatic or guaranteed. In terms of the literary timeline, the earliest complete version of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* in the B-text (1378–81) predates the composition *Troilus and Criseyde* (early 1380s) and the *Canterbury Tales* (1390–1400). Anticipating these achievements, Langland had already challenged the dominance of Latin and French writings by composing a long, serious, and widely read English poem—Middleton estimates that copies must have numbered in the hundreds by 1400—some years before Chaucer pursued similar
ambitions and more than a decade before their contemporary, Gower, composed his *Confessio Amantis* in English reportedly at the prompting of Richard II. Langland achieved historical priority since his work was actually read, quoted, copied, and imitated throughout the last decades of the fourteenth century, whereas there is little hard evidence that Chaucer's works had any wide readership even at court during his lifetime. Langland's first nineteenth-century editor staked this claim firmly: “As the era of these Visions is now ascertained to have preceded the great work of Chaucer by twenty years, the author must be considered the first English poet.” But this claim did not prevail in the history of English literature institutionalized later during the Victorian era.

As many as twenty manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* can be dated paleographically to the fourteenth century. This crude statistic by itself indicates that Langland's poem was copied and read by his contemporaries. On the other hand, the fact that no *Canterbury Tales* manuscript, with the possible exception of Hengwrt, can be confidently dated to the poet's lifetime suggests that his compositions did not circulate in significant numbers among his immediate contemporaries. The copies of *Troilus* and *Boece* mentioned in Chaucer's playful “Adam Scriveyn” were probably executed by the professional scribe now identified as Adam Pinkhurst, but these seem to have been private commissions as the poet's fair copies, not for presentation or circulation. Beverly Boyd has described what was probably also the piecemeal and confusing status of the *Canterbury Tales* when the work did enter circulation: “not known as a unit by Chaucer's public or by his friends, the materials existing separately or in clusters, sometimes in more than one version, borrowed back and forth by individuals in more than one attempt to put together a unified work.” If manuscripts provided the sole evidence for dating his literary career, Chaucer might today be classified as a fifteenth-century poet. Recent critical assessments confirm the implications of early work by Aage Brusendorff leading to the conclusion that Geoffrey Chaucer, as an English author, was very much manufactured as a cultural presence early during the century after his death. Recent attention to the “Ellesmere Chaucer” confirms the notion of a poetic identity constructed from later redactions of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The fundamental terms of the Chaucer tradition required structures that were linear, interlocking, and continuous. “Only continuity can guarantee that nature repeats itself,” Michel Foucault observed, “and that structure can, in consequence, become character.” Biblical commentators arguing
Introduction

with each other as they did in early fifteenth-century England, for example, become part of the character of a culture, because these differences of opinion take place within the bounds of cultural identity and indeed define the strict borders of that identity. Secular literary tradition formulates itself on the same template. Its scriptures are literary classics such as the *Canterbury Tales*, its exegetes are the professional readers such as Adam Pinkhurst, and its saints are the canonized authors such as Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate. Such a tradition's continuity and cohesiveness also exercised an exclusionary force.

The word *tradition* actually entered the English language in a largely pejorative sense during the later fourteenth century at almost exactly the moment when Langland and Chaucer were producing substantial poetic works that would contest the beginnings of an English literary tradition. The online *Middle English Dictionary* produces its earliest attestation from the Wyclifite Bible's translation of Mark 7:3 (“Pharisees waisschen ofte her hondis, holdinge the *tradiciouns* or statutis of eldere men”) and Colossians 2:8 (“Se þe that no man diseyue þou by philosofye and veyn fallace, or glouse falshed, vp the *tradicioun* of men”). The *OED* offers further insights into the term's earliest semantic valence by citing two passages from other Lollard writings as its first attestations, each protesting the claims of customary practice to justify self-serving ambitions.28 As critics of religious houses, John Wyclif’s followers proposed a return to original practices based upon scriptural authority as opposed to prevailing traditions that were clearly man-made. One Wyclifite tract complained how monasteries defended the practice of owning property on the basis of *tradition*—“a tradycion þat þei han hem-sijlfe made.” 29

The Carmelites, for example, had developed an elaborate historical fiction tracing their origins back to the prophets Elijah and Elisha, when they had in fact begun as hermits who settled on Mount Carmel only at the end of the twelfth century.30 Thus the word’s earliest appearance in vernacular writings came loaded with a sense of fictitious origins, artificial construction, and self-serving motives. It is therefore significant that the MED's second attestation comes from the Chaucerian poet John Lydgate, himself a member of a religious order, whose *Troy Book* (1412–20) offers a wholly positive sense in support of long-established practices:

For by techyng of al holy chirche,
De holy doctryne and *tradiciouns*,
We schal dispise swiche oppiniouns
Whiche of þe fende wer founde nat of late.
T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) made the now famous argument that a literary tradition repeatedly underwent revisions whenever a new talent came upon the scene.32 In the opening sentence of *The Chaucer Tradition* (1925), Brusendorff offered a similar notion of the malleability of cultural inheritance: “Tradition means the handing down of information in such a way that it is laid open to the influence of the successive generations through which it passes.”33 This view that authors were constantly subject to revaluation was memorably mocked by Northrop Frye when describing how literary reputations rise and fall on an imaginary stock exchange.34 “To say that Chaucer 'started a tradition' is to create that 'start' and that 'tradition' at a blow.”35 Championed by agents who included fifteenth-century Lancastrians deeply anxious about instability and change, the great fiction about *tradition* became its existence as a stable and unchanging fixture. Later Chaucerian poets committed their enterprises to continuing this Chaucer tradition in large part to exclude any competing founder such as Langland, much as Chaucer explicitly claimed the classical tradition of “Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace” (*Troilus* 5.1792) to obscure and elude his real debt to Boccaccio.36

The basic operation of any tradition involves transmitting something to the next generation, and this process enlists that power of patriarchal succession, literally from father to son, with heavy obligation imposed upon each new generation to respect what was handed down. Chaucer himself had an almost instinctive response to this structure of social regulation. The two pilgrims placed prominently at the beginning of his General Prologue are the Knight and the Squire, father and son, who graphically represent the social mechanism by which power and status are transmitted lineally.37 Near the conclusion of the Knight’s Tale, Duke Theseus imposes his own authoritative sense of well-regulated succession ordained by the First Mover.38 Central to this orderly worldview is the somber reminder that all things progressively decay from their original integrity—“Descendyng so til it be corruppable” (*CT*, I, 3010)—so that the best, the strongest, and the most authoritative “thyng” is located at the beginning of the sequence. True greatness resides in firstness.

Tradition’s strongest defense resides in its deeply conservative faith that everything was better in the distant past. As the prime beneficiary of this retrospective scheme in literary history, Chaucer himself undercut this proposition in his somberly witty lyric *The Former Age*. His ironic vision of primeval perfection entailed a whole host of privations such as no wine, no bread, no spices, no housing, no bedding, no metalwork, and no consumer goods—
since there was no money and there were no merchants. This “blissed folk” lived in caves, slept on the bare earth, drank cold water, and contented themselves with a diet of nuts and berries.39

Cultural agents who invoke tradition invariably rely upon the fiction of venerable age and time-tested authority. Eric Hobsbawm focuses on traditions such as those surrounding the British monarchy that attempt to establish continuity with a usable historical past: “Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”40 His prime example is the use of Gothic style for the nineteenth-century rebuilding of Parliament. Anthropologists investigating traditional societies tell much the same story. “Over and over, researchers in such societies have been told, ‘That is the way we have always done it,’ even when the specific custom may in some cases be shown to have been very recent in origin.”41 It takes only two generations to make anything traditional.42

Much more rapidly, Chaucer’s poetry was being promoted as traditional within two decades of his death. While seemingly hostile to change, tradition can therefore become an engine for innovation. For those constructing a vernacular tradition in the early fifteenth century, Chaucer would become installed as the literary “first mover” meant to generate succession and guarantee cultural continuity for the English nation. Because such traditions are constructed most frequently when rapid social and political transformations undercut the patterns for which prior traditions were designed—here the metropolitan literary traditions of romances, biblical texts, Anglo-French writings, and Langlandian poetry described by Ralph Hanna in London Literature, 1300–1380—Geoffrey Chaucer, however much honored as an innovator, became immediately more useful when viewed as the stable source of time-honored customs securely anchored in the Plantagenet past of John of Gaunt.

George Kane’s conjunction of Langland and Chaucer as the two dominant poets from fourteenth-century England found much to distinguish them: “Of the two Chaucer appears cosmopolitan, international, a time-spanner. By contrast Langland’s focus may seem narrow: no classical furniture or Roman ruins or hillsides in Lombardy here, but a bristling complex of theological and moral and spiritual cruces.”43 Viewing Chaucer’s differences from Langland as intentional, self-styled, and even strategic on the part of the author of the Canterbury Tales, I wish to examine their overlapping careers and particularly the later histories of manuscript production in order to
suggest dual posterities deriving from two writers who occupied the same geographical space (London) and the same historical span (1370s–90s). By retracing the well-worn paths from Medieval to Renaissance, I give ample regard to the Langlandian role in shaping this double tradition by tracking the public life of *Piers Plowman* from the text’s latest datable reference to the Normandy Campaign of 1360, to allusions in letters to the rebels of 1381, to anonymous works such as *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* and *Mum and the Sothsegger* inspired by Langland’s poem, and finally to Robert Crowley’s first printed edition as Protestant propaganda in 1550.

While the general outline of Langlandian history has become familiar from the work of many recent scholars, my investigation draws upon a wide variety of cultural materials—especially the numerous *Piers* manuscripts produced over the course of two centuries—to suggest that Langland’s poem retained much of its controversial potential, offering its title character for appropriation by Lollard sympathizers and, at other moments, becoming the target of antireformist suppression in the form of various literary police-actions. At a time when ecclesiastical authorities were rallying the loyalties of laymen, vernacular texts were also forced to choose sides, and Chaucer, whose jobs included various forms of civil service, had already produced literary texts that admirably served the orthodox ends of the traditionalists against the reformers.

James Simpson’s *Oxford English Literary History* has proposed a retrospective narrative that simplified and narrowed the category of “literature” as part of a sixteenth-century revolutionary campaign intent upon demolishing the prior order. Langland the reformist becomes Langland the cultural revolutionary in this extended Tudor narrative, although the ultimate advantage went (again) to the Chaucerian heritage with its coherent genealogy and cleanness of design. Instead of delineating the Chaucerian and Langlandian traditions separately so that the advantage would always automatically revert to the author of the *Canterbury Tales*, I propose studying the two in their mutual relationship, each necessary to configure the other, like the double helix of the DNA molecule. There is counterpose as well as intertwining, convergence as well as rivalry, redundancy as well as parts without apparent purpose in this double-track tradition. Chaucer and his followers such as Hoccleve were clearly aware of *Piers Plowman*, while Langland and his nameless successors seem largely innocent of Chaucer’s literary achievements until the Protestant era. Since the B-text of *Piers Plowman* was apparently composed in London and as many as a third of all manuscripts were copied in London, the two traditions of English literature competed in the same
arena of literary production, not region against region. As Ralph Hanna has described Langland’s antagonist presence, “this Otherness essentially occupies a space of consciousness, not of geography.”

Across this terrain of religious controversy and textual contests, the history of *Piers Plowman* proceeds not as a continuous strand but as a succession of isolated episodes, moments of contestation and accommodation in which the work operated in a number of ways under shifting conditions of disciplinary moves and countermoves. Sometimes subject to clerical franchise, sometimes resisting all manner of factional appropriation, and at still other times open to seizure by Lollard sympathizers, Langland’s poem was read, it was glossed, it was copied and recopied, and it offered itself as a model for religious and political satires such as *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede* (c. 1393) and *Richard the Redeless* (c. 1400) far more incendiary than the original work. Largely prosaic in its vernacular program of translation and tract production, Lollardy produced only a small body of English verse, nearly all of it Langlandian.

Chapter 2, “Beginnings,” establishes the year 1360 as the common starting point for my double narrative with a historical episode that linked both poets. The most recent datable event in *Piers Plowman* is the Normandy Campaign of 1360. Collapse of this military expedition brought a dispiriting end to the series of England’s military successes with famous victories at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356). Retreat into an insular isolationism provoked displeasure among the warriors who fought these battles, always with the expectation of personal renown and reward, while offering hope of solace to taxpayers who funded these expeditions without the prospect of direct personal gain. Langland’s poem reflects this withdrawal into narrower concerns with strictly English social and religious causes. These domestic themes would permanently mire his work in controversies over the abuses of pilgrimage, the corruption of the mendicant orders, the theology of salvation, and the mercenary motives for religious vocations—that is, those same issues increasingly associated with Lollard activists committed to “þe reformation of holi chirche of Yngelond.”

As a fluke of history, young Geoffrey Chaucer actually participated in the Normandy Campaign of 1360. One of the earliest life-records indicates he was taken prisoner and Edward III contributed £16 to his ransom. Like his subsequent career as a diplomat, Chaucer’s literary activities remained steadily internationalist in outlook. He vigorously engaged with French
cultural models from the outset of his poetic career, and from the 1380s onward he explored Italian literary works by Dante, Petrarch, and particularly Boccaccio in order to create an entirely new kind of English literature. As a result, his poetry cannily evaded direct comment upon the domestic controversies that became the hallmark of Langlandian poets. By casting himself as a player on the European stage, Chaucer also became available as the official literary representative of a newly emergent English nationalism that could be recognized only in this larger international context. Creation of the idea of a national culture became one of the preconditions for the exercise of state authority at home and Lancastrian ambitions for dominion overseas, specifically in Normandy.

In his touchstone study *Beginning*, Edward Said reminds us that no neat narrative continuity automatically emerges amid the jumbled events of national history: “A beginning immediately establishes relationships with works already existing, relationships of either continuity or antagonism or some mixture of both.” Recognition of this counterfeit deployment of Aristotelian cause-and-effect removes the privileged authority of an origin and repositions this power, as a written act, at an intentionally assigned *fons et origo*. Instead of describing some natural starting point, this historical account contrives some event as a point of departure that makes sense specifically in terms of its conclusion. Great explanatory power resides in the designation of a beginning.

Erich Auerbach had anticipated this critique when considering Modernism’s rejection of plot as the complete representation of any total chronological continuum. “Life has always long since begun,” he wrote, “and it is always still going on.” Therefore even a pristine origin, which seems as absolute as God’s creation or an individual’s birth, can be recognized as part of an artificial pattern, like the system of primogeniture, designed to justify certain ends in the grand scheme of dispersal and recovery. When Chaucer has the Nun’s Priest rewrite the biblical text from the opening of Genesis—“In principio / Mulier est hominis confusio” (*CT*, VII, 3163–64)—he rewrites human history as a vast chronicle of male downfalls through female contrivances. In the absence of an authentic origin, an author’s narrative demands some fictional consolidation. Every act of creation contains its own beginning in the intentional production of meaning. However random and contrived, a good beginning makes good narrative sense.

A story may lack an ending and even a middle, but it never lacks a beginning. “Call me Ishmael.” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” “All happy families are happy in the same way.” Nonetheless, Langland es-
established his problematic sense of a beginning in the well-known but deeply puzzling opening lines of *Piers Plowman*:

> In a somer sesoun, whanne softe was the sonne,  
> I shop me into shroudes as I a shep were,  
> In abite as an ermyte vnholy of werkis,  
> Wente wyde in þis world wondris to here.

These lines begin the A version. These lines also begin the B version without rewriting to resolve the issues that prompted continuing the poem. These lines are still used to begin the C version, again without major clarification.\(^57\) The omission of an expository prologue with formal instructions for negotiating the poem’s conceptual syntax (*forma tractatus*) established a troubling absence that Langland chose never to remedy, or rather tried to remedy only with the C-text *apologia* some five passus into the text.\(^58\) However brief in its lyric, antiromance mode, the prologue of a true *chanson d’aventure* goes somewhere because the author knows where he is heading, while Langland kept coming back to the same starting point as if constantly changing his mind about his poem’s contents without changing its opening lines.

After a first line so formulaic that it sounds like a cliché, Langland’s second line poses an immediate challenge on the basic level of meaning. What is a *shep*—a sheep or a shepherd? Is the narrator a hermit or only dressed like one? Is the protagonist “unholy of works” or would be unholy only if he really were a hermit?\(^59\) Circumstances prior to the first lines are required to understand these first lines, contrary to Aristotle’s declaration “a beginning is that which itself does not of necessity follow something else” (*Poetics* 7). Langland’s poem is immediately hobbled by the problem of “the lyf that ys lowable and leel to the soule” as one of the most hotly debated issues in late medieval culture. The ideal life preached by the Franciscans remained one of the central organizing discourses even while corrupt practices, such as Will’s vagabond existence, rendered this ideal livelihood as an absence marked by intense nostalgic longing.\(^60\)

D. Vance Smith’s *Book of the Incipit* offers perhaps the most sophisticated and insightful elaboration of Nietzsche, Foucault, Habermas, Derrida, and Said himself in a highly theorized interrogation of Langland’s compulsive practice of beginning again. Focusing upon institutional and dynastic needs for stable starting points, his chapter “Origo: Genealogy, Engenderment and Digression” epitomizes the argument that *Piers Plowman*, rather than showing a careless attitude toward its beginnings, becomes obsessed with rehearsing
these initiative gestures in its ten separate dream episodes. Since Langland’s injunctions to ethical action refuse to impose finality upon temporal priorities, any one of his dramatic ending-episodes such as Piers’s tearing of the Pardon immediately offers itself as a major new point of departure. As Middleton has suggested, the C-text apologia represents a late-career attempt at beginning all over again, five passus deep into his revised text, as a “primary confrontation with his powers and talents that formed and articulated the first intentions of the work” in an interpolated episode that also declares “his work finished—as finished as it will ever be.” By challenging the violence and divisiveness enacted by genealogical formation, Langland forfeited the obvious benefits that might have fallen to his work as patrimony within any later literary tradition deployed as continuity and lineal power.

This recursiveness is reflected in the internal movements of the poem throughout. Because Langland’s thinking is ruminative rather than narrative as Aristotelian cause-and-effect, his thoughts are structured by associative rather than architectural designs. “Piers has no plot not because nothing happens,” Mary Carruthers has observed, “but because nothing that does happen seems very much to affect anything else that happens.” Organization is modular instead of sequential or even spiral. The disrupted episode becomes Langland’s signature. There is little sense of narrative direction and almost no novelistic sense that things need to happen where they do, not earlier or later. The narrator Will remains as clueless about the direction of events as the reader. Despite an apparatus that divides the text into passus, spiritual progress becomes very much a matter of three steps forward, two steps back. Derek Pearsall has pointed out that nothing so much distinguishes Langland from his Lollard successors than this characteristic method of groping after the truth, qualifying, circling around, and returning again and again to difficult questions: “Lollards do not seek the truth—they know the truth.”

Speaking through the character Imaginatyf later in his career, Langland expresses ongoing skepticism about the knowability of any true beginning—“Was neuere creature vnder Crist þat knewe wel þe bygynnyng” (C. 14.159)—as the precondition for a coherent deployment of materials in his unending search for truth. Revising extensively in the middle stretches of the text, the poet could transpose sections so readily from B to different positions in C because these materials were seldom securely anchored. Over and over, Langland’s poem seems motivated by thematic repetitions that cause events—never fully “cause” and never exactly “events”—to circle back upon them-
selves for further examination rather than moving forward to some clear conclusion. This circularity frustrates any sense of logical concatenation and can create instead a sense of intellectual motion sickness.

Like his wayward series of eight disjointed dream-sequences, with two baffling dreams-within-dreams in B, the chronologies in all three standard versions of *Piers* are disrupted by a neglect of linear development. Anything could happen almost anywhere—or not. The retelling of the Crucifixion and Harrowing of Hell in B.18 assimilates the characters and events of sacred history, but then the account moves beyond narrative solidity into apocalyptic time. The poem ends *in medias res* at some vague midpoint where Christian history stops unfolding. The narrator himself remains in a liminal state of consciousness—“til I gan awake”—neither continuing his visionary experience nor re-entering the waking world to practice the lessons learned while dreaming. Not open-ended as an explicit invitation for future writers to continue the enterprise, the poem’s final action in which Conscience has been lulled into a state of complacency by Friar Flattery represents a great leap backward spiritually to the action of the second vision, where the penitential process went further and achieved more.66

The poem’s relentless synchronicity has its counterpart in its treatment of literary history, as if the only antecedent that Langland could imagine was himself, the author of the previous version of *Piers*. He shows none of Chaucer’s or Gower’s fascination with pagan mythology just as he demonstrates little acquaintance with classical literature as a learned syllabus. Of course he did have his poetic predecessors. *Piers* is affiliated with the native tradition of other alliterative poems such as *Wynneare and Wastoure* and Harley 2233’s “Song of the Husbandman,”67 yet the keenest anxiety of influence that Langland felt came from the influence of his own previous versions. Though intensely nostalgic for some imaginary past before the “pestilence tyme” (B.Pro.84), the poet infused *Piers* with a sense of literary history so nebulous about national history, so careless of its literary precedents, and so lacking in concern for its own posterity—reflected in the poet’s astonishing indifference to the vicissitudes of his work’s dispersal in a scribal culture—that his own position within the English tradition became a permanent problem. “Langland stands quite against the Chaucerian projective,” Hanna notes, “the imagination of a literary future.”68 Though his poem was included in CUL Dd.1.17’s enormous assemblage of historical writings, *Piers Plowman* represents what might now be termed contemporary history, maybe even a forerunner of “gonzo journalism,” with its outraged chronicling of a corrupt Christian community during the reader’s own day.
Like the text itself, its characters lack the discursive integrity of real beings with past lives and future ambitions. What did Lady Mede do as a girl? How will she live after her marriage plans have been thwarted? We can pose questions such as these about the Wife of Bath but not about Lady Mede. Like his allegorical characters, Langland constantly revised his own image as a vernacular writer, further destabilizing his position as an author with any firm placement in this nascent tradition. The distinction between poet and dream-narrator remains insoluble. As a literary figure, Langland had a career that also defies any clear charting of artistic development. The existence of the Z-text raises questions about the stability and boundaries of his canon. Recent studies have even questioned the basic order of his revisions, whether A then B and then C—or B then C and then A.

Rather than providing clarity, a modern parallel-text edition is more likely to bewilder the reader while actually misrepresenting the fluidity of the author’s revisions. It becomes impossible to grasp any consistent reasons for the poet’s additions, deletions, and transpositions of materials, as well as his obsessive fussiness with rewriting certain passages while leaving others untouched. Almost like Walsingham’s revisions of his monastic chronicles, each version of Langland’s poem can be viewed as an effort to keep pace with the rapidly changing drama of national life, while also attempting to avoid misprision and forestall misappropriation. He was constantly “spinning” the text in response to these events, taking particular care in the C-text to adjust theological notions banned as erroneous by the Blackfriars Council of 1382. Permanently embedded in contemporary controversies, *Piers Plowman* became a text pulled along by national events as they unfolded. Constantly renewing itself as a living text—so different from its exact contemporary *Troilus and Criseyde*, with its pleas for stability and constancy—*Piers Plowman* could never stake its claim as the stable starting point for any historical tradition.

By contrast, Chaucer was a master of beginnings that consistently demonstrated a clear sense of where the writer wanted to start, how he wished to present his characters and materials, and in what direction he intended each story to proceed. The importance of beginnings was reinforced by rhetorical treatises such as the *Poetria Nova*, by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose advice Chaucer paraphrases when he describes the start of Pandarus’s plotting in *Troilus and Criseyde* (1:1665–69). But Chaucer employed an instructional manual only to confirm his own appreciation of a story’s clear beginning. His habitual use of the opening word *Whilom* proclaims the starting point that confidently implies *in the beginning* as much as it expresses the sense of
once upon a time. The Knight's Tale begins “Whilom as olde stores tellen us” (CT, I, 859), the Miller's Tale begins “Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford” (I, 3187)—and so forth. Never does the poet show uncertainty in his opening lines even when playfully prattling at the start of Parliament of Fowls. To this day, one of the most famous beginnings in English literature remains the Chaucerian passage that high school students still memorize: “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote.”

Chaucer displays a similar sense of craftsmanship in shaping his literary career. When he wrote the Book of the Duchess and attached his first major poem to the occasion of the Duchess of Lancaster's death around 1368, Chaucer initiated a whole series of “new beginnings” anchored in precise moments in English history. He began adapting his literary genres from the French tradition of Guillaume de Machaut. He rendered the Latin legend of Ceyx and Halcyon derived ultimately from Ovid's Metamorphoses. And he began writing in an English poetic diction that self-consciously broke with the native tradition of “rum ram ruf,” disdained along with the alliterative poets, such as Langland, who are never even acknowledged in Chaucer's works. His neglect of these alliterative writers can no longer be attributed to their provincial isolation. Strong evidence indicates that both Langland and the Pearl Poet resided in the metropolis and their works circulated in London during Chaucer's lifetime.74

Storytelling and career planning are both related to a sense of narrative construction. Although translated from Deguileville's vast Pèlerinage de la vie humaine—perhaps very early as stated by Thomas Speght, perhaps very late as suggested by Terry Jones—Chaucer composes his ABC to the Virgin as a prayer with its stanzas arranged according to the order of the alphabet.75 Here the poet signaled his deep-down awareness of the artificial imposition of a sequence based upon some predetermined sense of how to begin: A, then B, then C, and so on. Many of Chaucer's narratives proceed upon the assumption that historical beginnings are similarly artificial in their determinations. The Knight narrates the opening chapter in the history of Western civilization in his account of the reign of Theseus. The chronicle of conflict between Athens and Thebes is connected through Diomede to the history of the Trojan War. The destruction of Troy and the escape of its refugees from Carthage connect not only with the foundation of Rome under Aeneas but also with the foundation of Britain under Brutus.76 The Man of Law's new beginning actually represents a continuation of this narrative in which the old Britons have their secret Christian practices legitimized by the arrival of Custance. And so on. Chaucer did more than write an abecedarian lyric to
Chaucer and Langland

the Virgin Mary. Through the course of his career, he constructed an abecedarian history of Western civilization leading to the emergence of British culture: A is for Athens, B is for Brutus, C is for Custance, and so on.77

Chaucer was haunted by an almost crushing sense of prior literary history but not narrowly native literary history.78 His gestures toward the past become remembrances tinged with mourning over the loss of books including those whose existence he himself suppressed.79 He acknowledged the Greek foundations of Homer, even though he had never seen a Greek text of *The Iliad* and could not have read it if shown a codex during his travels in northern Italy.80 He was intensely aware of the Latin tradition stemming from Virgil and Ovid, even though he routinely used French adaptations to assist his understanding of these classical works. His dream lore was derived explicitly from the late Roman writer Macrobius (fl. c. 400), and he translated *De Consolatio Philosophiae* by Boethius (d. 524). He acknowledged the authority of the later Latin writer Alanus de Insulis (d. c. 1202) and used materials derived from Guido delle Colonne’s *Historia Destructionis Troiae* (1287). He took the lead among Englishmen in venerating the works of the trecento Italian authors Dante and Petrarch. As a parallel phenomenon, the extraordinary compilation *Chaucer Life-Records* tells us that his own family history perfectly represented the pattern of transmitting inheritance from son to son, with only one heir in each generation.81 John Chaucer bequeathed to Geoffrey Chaucer, who bequeathed to Thomas Chaucer. In the cultivated London circles of the late fourteenth century, the poet Chaucer similarly positioned himself as the sole heir of the European literary legacy and hence the sole progenitor for an English tradition.82

Near the end of *Troilus*, Chaucer places himself in the succession of the great poets of antiquity (1:1792). In the *House of Fame*, he provided a similar roster of the six great writers who upheld the fame of Troy: Homer, Dares Phrygius, Dictys Cretensis, Lollius, Guido delle Colonne, and “Englyssh Gaufride” (1464–70). Osbern Bokenham referred to Chaucer as “Galfryd of Ynglond” and “Galfridus Anglicus” when commending his predecessor in his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*,83 and E. K. Rand long ago suggested that Chaucer was naming himself as the author of *Troilus*. Redating *House of Fame* to the late 1380s, Helen Cooper has revived this view of an authorial signature when the English Geoffrey Chaucer claimed his rightful place along with its weighty obligations.84 The dubious rewards of literary renown are chillingly dramatized in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, however, where Chaucer is accused on charges of “heresy” for what he had written in his Trojan epic *Troilus*.  

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When literature as a cultural category is defined in terms of dynastic inheritance, literary careers become no longer freestanding but understood in terms of succession and continuity. Each new writer constitutes a link in the chain of historical transmission, but only if he makes an effort to associate himself with past writers and to reach out to future ones. Chaucer's obsession with constructing a literary genealogy in which he figured as heir to prior achievements became one of his most strategic acts of history making. His literary allusions create a sense of adjacency that placed him next in line. He conceived of a continuum, then entered it. Jockeying for position in a race when Langland did not even recognize the nature of the competition, Chaucer cunningly situated himself to become patriarch for the English branch of that larger Continental family tree. Casting himself as sole English heir of European literature, Chaucer re-enacted the Trojan settlement of “Brutes Albion” to become the first inhabitant of an unpopulated literary realm. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth's barren Britain open for colonization, Chaucer's literary Britain had also been emptied of any native inhabitants. Along with the accumulated wealth of his clan, he also inherited the obligation of managing the family's holdings, which included many far-flung properties handed on from generation to generation. By making constant recourse to a usable past, his own works in turn became a poetic archive available to later writers. In nearly all of his major works, however, he depicted the founder's obligation as burdensome, time consuming, and even dangerous.

Masterful in his invention of beginnings, Chaucer created notorious problems with his endings. The Parson's Tale was not the conclusion that readers expected for the *Canterbury Tales*, for example. Many works simply have no endings, or they are left unfinished, or they show other signs of incompleteness. The *Romaunt of the Rose, The House of Fame, Anelida and Arcite, A Treatise on the Astrolabe, The Legend of Good Women,* and most famously the *Canterbury Tales* are unfinished. Within the *Canterbury Tales* itself, the Cook's Tale, the Squire's Tale, the Monk's Tale, and Chaucer's own Tale of Sir Thomas lack proper conclusions. Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* offered no support for this neglect of endings: “Let the conclusion, like a herald when the race is over, dismiss it honorably” (18). In a sense, nothing so clearly indicates the poet's sense of himself as founder of an ongoing tradition than his refusal to impose closure upon his literary projects. These unfinished works provided an open invitation for literary heirs to perform their filial duties by continuing the family business. It was a ploy that actually solidified Chaucer's executive position. The activities of a whole series of continuators such as John Lydgate, the *Beryn* Poet, Robert Henryson, and even William Shakespeare
Chaucer and Langland attest to the success of this strategy. Chaucer’s primacy as “the firste fynder of our fair langage”—to recall the precise terms of Hoccleve’s commendation—became the beginning of the ongoing story written by his successors. Endings became Lydgate’s peculiar strength, because he so clearly cast himself as the last surviving heir to this tradition in the fifteenth century.

Chapter 3, “Naming Names,” looks at the processes by which the English tradition formulated itself around a named author and did not—and could not as a genealogical program—accommodate an author whose name was withheld, suppressed, forgotten, and eventually unrecoverable by future generations of readers wanting to reconstruct that lost legacy. Since Chaucer is credited with doing so much to create a sense of personal selfhood in literature, one of my questions in this book asks why his invention as an English writer, along with the making of his literary canon, took place during the century after his death rather than during his lifetime.

The nineteenth-century French historian Ernest Renan long ago identified the twin processes for creating national self-consciousness: “‘The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things!’” Like national history, literary tradition also defines itself partly by what it forgets. Strategic amnesia constantly operates in the process of canon-formation by forcibly excluding authors and works in a process nicely described by Vance Smith: “The fiction that is implicit in the authoritative beginning is thus most crucially an act of forgetting, an obliterating of the extrinsic features that really authorize it or that undermine it, of the dispersed motives and unnatural violence that must be forgotten in creating a pure origin.” Though now viewed as founders, Langland and Chaucer actually arrived on the literary scene midway in a chronology stretching back to the eighth century when Cædmon was designated as the first-named English poet in Bede’s Ecclesiastical History. The monks who collected and preserved these books in their libraries continued to play a significant role in the creation of literary history as a legitimate cultural category, and monastic writers such as Ormm, Robert of Gloucester, Robert Mannyng, Dan Michael of Northgate, and Walter Hilton made signal contributions to the production of vernacular texts. Self-conscious of their own English-language tradition, alliterative poets almost always declared their reliance upon pre-existing accounts with phrases like “as þe boke
telles.95 These writers operated with a sense of continuity soon to be permanently disrupted.

English literary history suffered two major episodes of self-induced amnesia for periods prior to its now official foundation in the later fourteenth century. First, the cultural dislocations following the Norman Conquest had resulted in a massive forgetting of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition so that Bede’s first-named poet Cædmon, the self-naming Cynewulf, and the anonymous author of Beowulf—as well as the uncountable writers and texts lost through centuries of neglect—were denied their places in some continuous tradition of English poetry.96 Second, earlier works in Middle English such as Havelok the Dane, King Horn, Sir Orfeo, and The Owl and the Nightingale look to us like productions of scattered provincial locations such as Grimsby, Southampton, Winchester, and Guildford and therefore examples of a cottage industry that never cohered into an authentic literary movement.97 The Ormulum, Cursor Mundi, Northern Homilies, South English Legendary, Robert Mannyng’s Handlyng Synne, Michael of Northgate’s Ayenbite of Inwit and even the Prick of Conscience, along with the Ancene Wisse and the Katherine Group, also look like the inconsequential experiments of isolated clergymen. Even the poetical achievements of Harley 2253, Digby 86, and BL Add. 46919 (William Herebert’s religious verses) can be viewed as dead-end efforts because they found no obvious posterity.98 Since works such as the Short Metrical Chronicle, Laamon’s Brut, and Robert Mannyng’s Chronicle made effective claims upon English language and English history, this earlier period was not necessarily destined for cultural oblivion. Recent books by Thorlac Turville-Petre, Christopher Cannon, and Ralph Hanna attempt to resuscitate this earlier episode in Middle English literary history by acknowledging and then challenging the official start-up enterprise during the second half of the fourteenth century.99

Nor was the author of the Canterbury Tales entirely innocent of a neglect that verges upon suppression. The durability of this traditional beginning around 1350, accepted once again in the new Oxford English Literary History,100 can be attributed partly to Chaucer’s own refusal to acknowledge any Middle English poetry or any named poet prior to his own inaugural career. Although Sir Orfeo and the generous, wide-ranging contents of the Auchinleck manuscript were likely produced in London and known directly by Chaucer himself, he nonetheless failed to make explicit claims upon such works as native antecedents.101 Similarly, while aware of Piers Plowman and perhaps also Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as vernacular poems read by other Londoners, even by courtiers within the household of Richard II, Chaucer scrupulously
avoided acknowledging the contributions of any contemporary poet to the exuberant literary life of the metropolis, neglecting even his friend “moral Gower” except as a recipient charged with correcting *Troilus*. Before making a grand entrance, it was necessary for him to clear the stage.

While Chaucer was famous for preferring French and Italian sources, Langland was nearly as delinquent of prior English poetry except for passing allusions to popular works such as “rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre” (B.3.196). His alliterative versification could have claimed descent from venerable Anglo-Saxon practices, even if fourteenth-century readers would have struggled with understanding the Old English language. Kerby-Fulton notes that the poet of the A-text casts himself in the role of a Saxon *sopor*, and Langland himself makes an appeal to some venerable form of English when he argues for an earlier, more authentic meaning of the word *lollares*: “As by þe Engelisch of oure eldres, of olde mennes techynge” (C.9.214). Though he was also aware of Anglo-Saxon history when alluding to the famous episode of Pope Gregory sending missionaries led by St. Augustine of Canterbury (B.15.442–50), the poet did not assert this prestigious national lineage or even reflect upon this distinctive versification, as did the *Gawain* Poet with his “lul letteres loken.” A large enough body of fourteenth-century alliterative poetry survives for the designation of an English School, but Langland behaves as if he were the only writer pursuing a poetic craft so singular that he could hardly justify it as a legitimate occupation. He was the first English poet to compose a substantial work that achieved a truly nationwide readership, very different from the regional audiences achieved by other fourteenth-century alliterative works, but he gave no indication of appreciating his own exclusive position. While Chaucer wrote about, rewrote, wrote over, and wrote back to other literary works, Langland undertook a form of writing about the process of writing, writing as justification for writing, and writing as the pretext for further writing in his never-ending process of revising his one and only work.

Langland seems interested less in named poets than in the snatches of learned Latin texts that he gathered into his macaronic poem. The non-English accretions are not marginal glosses that have somehow intruded into the body of the text but really constitute main structural elements for organizing intellectually the allegory of the dream-narrative. While his relentless citation of learned authorities worked at justifying the status of this bilingual project, his addiction to Latin quotations had the side effect of compromising the Englishness of his poem while blurring the distinction between text and gloss, between the center and the margins. Morton Bloom-
field's famous assessment deserves citation one more time: “It is like reading a commentary on an unknown text.”\footnote{110} If Chaucer shows symptoms of Bloomian anxiety of influence when acknowledging his predecessors Virgil, Statius, and Dante—and especially when not acknowledging Boccaccio—Langland’s anxiety is largely self-contained in his struggles with the prior versions of his own poem, B coping with the inadequacies of A, and C wrestling with the seismic implications of B.\footnote{111} Instead of affiliating his poem with other literary texts, Langland consistently appropriated the discursive forms of legal documents such as Mede’s charter, Piers’s pardon, Hawkyn’s acquittance, Moses’s maundement, and Peace’s patent.\footnote{112} This centrality of documentary forms serves as important evidence of the poem’s immediate readership and perhaps even the poet’s own professional activities in London.\footnote{113}

Since the text of *Piers Plowman* is so conspicuously interlarded with Latin citations, its scholastic language made a credible bid for aligning the poem with the authoritative tradition of Latin writings and its author with the prestigious pedigree of *auctores*.\footnote{114} As a writer, however, Langland almost entirely lacked Chaucer’s sense of the bookishness of any literary works, including his own.\footnote{115} By absorbing so many textual ingredients while acknowledging so few, the proliferating versions of *Piers Plowman* had the power to saturate all available textual space and fill every textual niche—as evidenced by the wide variety of manuscript anthologies in which it survives—while losing much of the distinctiveness of its own literary identity in the process.

Seemingly oblivious to literary forebears such as Richard Rolle (d. 1349) with right of precedence as an English religious author,\footnote{116} Langland appears equally delinquent about his own claims as a named author upon subsequent literary history. His concentration upon the events of contemporary England excluded any abiding concern for posterity. Even the prophetic features in his writings disregard continuity with future events while urgently addressing the needs of his own present moment when he envisioned, as Wyclif did, the forces of the Antichrist already unleashed and requiring urgent measures for spiritual renewal.\footnote{117} He made no effective attempts at connecting his name to the work and may have actively obstructed efforts at identifying him as the writer responsible for *Piers Plowman*. When the figure Kynde awakens the dream narrator by calling his name—“And nempned me by my name” (B.11.321)—the poet teasingly omits including the name itself.

If not for a brief biographical note added to Trinity College Dublin MS 212 (D.4.1), we would have no concrete evidence for Langland’s full name, place of birth, and paternal connections.\footnote{118} The authorial inscriptions and anagrammatic wordplays so brilliantly discussed by Anne Middleton—
“I haue lyued in lond,” quod I, “my name is Longe Wille” (B.15.152)—look more like inside jokes intended for coterie readers, somewhat like the jibes that James le Palmer playfully directed at his fellow Exchequer clerks in *Omne Bonum*. These inscriptions probably contributed to some sophisticated program of self-personification lost upon the reading public after the poet’s death and the disappearance of his initial audience. To the extent that these signatures attested to Langland’s authorship, they were conspicuous failures.119

Five C-text manuscripts contain the following notation at the end of Passus 10: *Explicit visio Willelmi W. de Petro le Plouhman.*120 Otherwise the great majority of *Piers* manuscripts contain no attempt at authorial naming, and almost no effort was made at retrieving Langland’s full name before the sixteenth century. The blankness of the poet’s identity means that he could not be associated with prominent patrons, such as the Despensers perhaps, who occupied their own highly visible niches in national history. When copying a text that lacked the stabilizing force of a named author, scribes often felt free from the sort of authority that prevented their transcriptions from becoming acts of collaborative rewriting.121 Each copying job became a personalized effort at adjusting the poem’s contents to current circumstances and target audiences. To the frustration of modern editors, these textwriters went about the business of producing their own D-texts, E-texts, and F-texts of *Piers Plowman*, while the stabilizing authority of the author, always vague at best, exercised less control over their various combinations and permutations.

Hanna focuses upon a London readership as Langland’s first audience, simultaneously metropolitan and provincial, with legal interests understood specifically as royal legal service or parliamentary service and located in one of the great houses of the Strand.122 This readership sometimes overlapped with Chaucer’s audience during their lifetimes and into the middle of the next century, when their works appear together in wills drawn up for the Lincoln’s Inn lawyer Thomas Stotevyle in 1459 and Sir Thomas Charleton, a speaker of the House of Commons (d. 1465), who owned “an engelysche boke the whiche was called Troles . . . j of perse plowman, a nodr of Caunterbury tales.”123 The elusive name “Will Langland” was in all likelihood a pseudonym recognized as such by the original coterie who knew his real name, perhaps William Rochelle as indicated by the Dublin manuscript or William Wychwood as suggested by the five C manuscripts including HM 143 and Ilchester. The poem’s author therefore remained almost totally anonymous throughout subsequent generations and unavailable for acknowledgment even by his poetic followers, who were also nameless as they extended
his legacy in a long but spottily attested lineage of works such as *Pierce the Ploughman’s Crede*, *The Plowman’s Tale*, and *The Banckett of Iohan the Reve vnto Pers Ploughman.* It was the title character Piers the Plowman whose name bestowed coherence to a literary heritage begun ominously with John Ball’s letters to the rebels in 1381.

While Langland left a single anonymous poem in at least three unstable versions famously characterized as snapshots of a work forever in progress, Chaucer crafted solid literary monuments upon which he made sure his name would be inscribed, even if he felt no guarantee that his name would remain legible, like those names carved in ice and melted away in the *House of Fame* (1136–64). Deeply aware of prior European traditions and even the Petrarchan notion of a modern author’s address to posterity, Chaucer expressed ambivalence about his own role in serving the needs of any English posterity. Yet his concerns over a future readership steadily drew attention to issues that hardly registered with Langland. Near the end of *Troilus*, Chaucer launches his poem upon these uncertain paths of literary appreciation—“Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye”—where it would follow in the tracks of great epic poets such as Homer and Virgil. This is a bracing moment when a single writer parts company with the anonymous enterprise of earlier English poetry (rendered even more anonymous by Chaucer’s own steady neglect) and attempts inserting himself into the great tradition of named European authors.

But in the very next stanza of *Troilus*, the poet anguishes about the fortunes of a work composed in a national language so unstable that a future audience’s understandings could not be assured: “And for ther is so gret diversite / In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge” (*TC*, 5.1793–94). This rhetorical address to the book itself rather than to future readers signals the poet’s concerns for a work that he must surely have considered his masterpiece, substantial, serious, complete, and firmly linked to the centuries-long tradition of epic as well as tragic poetry. Yet when he comes to consider his own position in that tradition toward the end of the *House of Fame*, he professes a desire for anonymity: “Sufficeth me, as I were ded / That no wight have my name in honde” (*HF*, 1876–77). His plea for oblivion represents disingenuous posturing, of course, coming in a highly sophisticated reflection upon the question of literary fame and featuring a storyteller who explicitly names himself first as “Geffrey” (729) and even more grandly as “Englysssh Gaufride” (1464–70).

By contrast to Langland’s role as the perennial outsider, Chaucer’s Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* represents the dreamer explicitly as a court
poet and lists those titles that constituted the syllabus of a royal readership. As an early effort at securing this status, Chaucer's translation of the Roman de la Rose brought into courtly English the full sensibility of French poetry along with the psychology and value-laden imagery of aristocratic love. The Book of the Duchess commemorated the death of John of Gaunt's first wife, who was the source of the Lancastrian title as well as the family's enormous wealth. The Parliament of Fowls recalled the international negotiations leading to the marriage of Richard II with Anne of Bohemia. Troilus and Criseyde celebrated the youthful excesses as well as the intellectual pretensions of the Ricardian court during the 1380s, while these philosophical and antiquarian interests were also reflected in the poem's companion piece, Boece. Before they were converted into the Second Nun's Tale and the Knight's Tale, his Seynt Cecile provided a model for wedded virginity and The Love of Palamon and Arcite offered a paradigm for chivalric brotherhood. The chamber knight Sir John Clanvowe quoted from this latter work in his own The Boke of Cupide—which perhaps in turn provided Chaucer with the model for the God of Love as Richard II's fictional alter ego in the Prologue to the Legend—in a gesture that Steven Justice finds rich in significance: “Clanvowe's poem in effect renders Chaucer a classic, a body of work recognized as normative and publicly available, and it thereby, for the first time, implicitly identified a vernacular English tradition of literature.”

The fall of Richard II spelled the neglect, disintegration, and outright destruction of a great deal of the court culture that the king had fostered and Chaucer had contributed to. The Pearl Poet's work may represent a signal instance of this suppression, surviving in a single modest manuscript unrecognized for its literary importance before the nineteenth century, while its author remains shrouded in an anonymity unlikely to be dispelled. It is important to recognize that Chaucer's output, also linked to the Ricardian court, might have suffered a similar fate. There is a puzzling delay between Chaucer's death and the publication of his minor works, especially the shorter courtly works, and the scattered survival of the lyrics and dream-poems suggests precarious resources for preservation. Lost are The Book of the Lion, his translations of De Maria Magdalena and Innocent III's De Miseria Conditionis Humane, and the “many a song and many a lecherous lay” mentioned in Chaucer's Retraction and confirmed by Gower in his Confessio Amantis. The G Prologue of The Legend of Good Women, probably the version closest to the Ricardian court after 1394, survives in only a single manuscript. Copied around 1420, this sole surviving copy in Cambridge CUL Gg was produced during the same period when Henry V's official reconciliation with the dead
Richard II was dramatized by reburial of the deposed monarch in Westminster Abbey. As part of a larger program of cultural reclamation and dynastic legitimation, King Henry’s public respect for Richard II’s legacy contributed to reviving interest in the London-dialect poets whose careers had flourished in the last decades of the fourteenth century.

Having one’s name remembered after death had become one of the central obsessions of Christian culture at the end of the medieval period. Unlike the renunciation of funeral pomp expressed in the wills of his friends the Lollard knights—famously compared to the instructions for a humble burial in Piers the Plowman’s will—Chaucer’s burial in Westminster Abbey represented a clear bid for posthumous remembrance in a place of prime national visibility near the royal mausoleum of St. Edward the Confessor, Edward III, and Richard II. The tombs of his son Thomas and granddaughter Alice in the village church at Ewelme carry forward the family enterprise for ensuring remembrance of their names and persons. In 1437 Alice Chaucer and her husband, William de la Pole, went further, founding the Ewelme almshouse whose community served a chantry chapel offering prayers for the founders. As a pervasive cultural principle, this religious impulse could only have intensified a writer’s desire for posthumous remembrance of his literary identity. Meant to recall and retrace his career as a man of letters, Chaucer’s Retraction to the Canterbury Tales brilliantly fuses this double concern for the salvation of the soul through penance and the remembrance of his literary works catalogued in the manner of a bibliography. Gower’s tomb displays a similar doubleness of concern by including pious prayers for his soul, while the supine effigy’s head is pillowed by three books with their Latin titles clearly labeled in order of composition—Speculum Meditantis, Vox Clamantis, and Confessio Amantis—so that his burial site also served to advertise his identity as an author.

Chapter 4, “Piers Plowman and the Impulse to Antagonism,” examines how the fervent reformist intentions of Langland’s poem rendered the work subject to repeated appropriation during its author’s lifetime and for the two centuries afterwards, within cultural contexts in which the impulse for reform remained the single constant. Anne Middleton concluded her review of my book The Crisis of Will in “Piers Plowman” (1986) with a challenge for tracing this reception history: “In what climate, under what local and intense pressures, does such commonplace organic matter of moral culture transform itself into a new substance, seemingly more durable, brilliant, and