Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices

Sharon Fulton

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation analyzes the function of animal speakers in political poetry by William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Gower, and it claims that late fourteenth-century poets describe the marginalized voices of emerging politicians by using animal expressions and noises. These writers invent a playful yet earnest poetics of acknowledgment in comparing politicians’ calls to animal cries. In unveiling novel interpretations of Langland’s mouse, Chaucer’s goose, and Gower’s jay, I argue that the speeches of animals contribute to significant argumentative strains within several late fourteenth-century poems, which remain obscure if the reader ignores the signal contribution of the animal. Finally, I study the use of animal speech in the Lancastrian poem, Richard the Redeless, to understand the ways in which the anti-Ricardian regime appropriated this malleable animal imagery to pursue its own political agenda.
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Dedication:

To my mother who always says, “You’re Wonderful!” no matter what I do.
Introduction

“Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices,” argues that William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Gower took advantage of the complex literary and linguistic traditions associated with animal speakers to ape, analyze, and allegorize the emerging types of political discourse that appeared during the reign of Richard II. The convenient ability for animal speakers to suggest literary tradition even as bestial voices demonstrated the potential to introduce strange, new sounds into discourse made animals apt agents for describing the pioneering speakers who were starting to play crucial roles in political life at the end of the fourteenth century. In rendering animal speech, poets could dramatize the startling impact of new political voices without writing incendiary or revolutionary texts. Although scholars have tended to underestimate the serious political deliberation signaled by the presence of silly, humble, or unsavory animal upstarts in these poems, I argue that it is the meek, coarse, and recognizably bestial animal speakers who reveal the most novel and critical forms of political debate in this period.¹

My first chapter contends that Langland portrays a rodent parliamentary assembly debating the wisdom of curbing and belling a young cat in the Prologue of the B-Text of The Vision of Piers Plowman in order to question the English government’s prudence in crowning a boy as king. Given the political instability attending the rise of the ten year-old Richard II when he ascended to the English throne in 1377, remarking upon the danger of entrusting the realm to a young monarch would be a pointed political move.

¹ These views are especially popular among scholars commenting on the interjection of the lower fowl in The Parliament of Fowls and the graculus (or jay) in John Gower’s Vox Clamantis. This dissertation uncovers the appreciation (in the case of Chaucer) and grudging respect (in the case of Gower) revealed in the poems themselves towards these disturbing, outspoken animal characters.
Langland employs the famous “belling of the cat” fable as an authoritative and disarming source-text; parliamentarians become diminutive mice that complain about a kitten reigning instead of a cat. While the disturbing image of swarming, outspoken rodents insinuates that the king’s court and parliament were being infested by noisy and noisome hordes as the Commons gained power, the rational mouse advisor speaks with such lucidity that the poet also suggests that men of great intellect assembled in the lower levels of parliament. The natural predatory relationship between a cat and mouse alludes to the dangerous hierarchies embedded in the king’s government, and the mouse’s squeak epitomizes both the nuisance and sharp incisiveness of parliamentarians who braved giving advice to a cat-like king.

I extend this examination of the brash voices beginning to “cry” and “clamor” in parliament in my second chapter on Chaucer’s 1380s dream vision The Parliament of Fowls. Various species of birds symbolize the increasingly diverse social composition of parliament, and I argue that every bird’s speech denotes the political trend of private petitions being presented as relevant to the entire commonwealth. In critiquing the petitionary rhetorical technique by it saves declaring the common good advancing a private agenda, Chaucer reworks the genre of bird debate by illustrating the tension that arises between three members of the nobility who make competing claims. Despite their rhetorical flourishes, noble eagles ignore the welfare of the bird community as they pursue their own desires. The animalistic lower fowl famously interrupt the refined debate of their social superiors as they demand acknowledgement, and the poet implies that the noisy squawks of the lower fowl are shrewder assertions of common purpose. Moreover, Chaucer invests a goose with the skill of philosophical casuistry to suggest
that the lower class’s linguistic ability extends beyond a comic “quek”. Although the
goose is taunted mercilessly by the noble birds, the cleverness and persistence of her
remarks demonstrate the extent to which Chaucer recognizes the widening range of
parliamentary voices, which included those of mercantile representatives and burghers.
Chaucer also shows respect for the increasingly important role that the ‘mediocres’ and
common petitioners played late fourteenth-century politics in his portrait of the cuckoo.
The noble fowl decry the cuckoo as the immoral leech of society, but Chaucer refuses to
eject the bird from the assembly. This inclusive view of society suggests that a parliament
in which the opinions of every parliamentary speaker are given weight, but this vision
offers no assurances that the voices of either the noble or the lower fowl will effect
progressive resolutions.

Moving from the sheltered forum of the Commons where relatively well-to-do
parliamentarians spoke publicly to improve their own circumstances and sometimes those
of the community at large, my third chapter turns to the Rising of 1381. I leave the
comparatively modest outcry of the lower fowl to examine the speech of revolution that
inspired peasants, tradesmen, and commoners from all over England to shout out against
government corruption and taxation. In his frightened denunciation of this radical
populist movement, John Gower integrates motifs from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Peter
Riga’s *Aurora* to transform the protesters into a ravaging animal pack that overruns
London. Amidst derogatory portraits of the rebels as unthinking and crude beasts, Gower
uses the image of a jay that can mimic human speech patterns to render a negative but
nuanced portrait of the Wat Tyler, the rebels’ leader. The figure of the partially
acculturated bird that has flown from its cage provides an essential image to Gower in his
fear-mongering endeavor because it alludes to one of the largest mysteries associated with the rebellion – how did the rebel forces mount such a successful and targeted revolt? The jay attacks in a nearly human mode of speech, and the image implies Gower had the horrified realization after 1381 that laboring rustics could produce men intelligent and literate enough to overthrow the government. The jay’s clarion call changes men into beasts, and Gower fears that every authoritative personage and speaker (including the poet himself) is susceptible to the linguistic contagion of rabid, rebellious, and most of all animalistic language. Classical tomes and Biblical texts provide a salvific subtext during the horrifying metamorphosis of the afflicted dreamer, and Gower cannily organizes his poem so that reason-bound quotations from authoritative sources stand in opposition to every maddened rebel shout.

My fourth chapter turns from this mass rebellion to the political crisis of Richard II’s 1399 deposition. Although Gower used bird imagery to denounce his dreaded enemy Wat Tyler, the anonymous Lancastrian poet of Richard the Redeless appropriates the figure of the outspoken bird to defend Henry IV’s seizure of Richard’s crown. Just as Langland, Chaucer, and Gower employed animal speakers to express hitherto unheard voices arising from the political commune, Commons, and discontented local communities in the fourteenth century, early fifteenth-century poets who were sympathetic to the Lancastrian political agenda fashioned animal imagery to spread the message that Henry Bolingbroke had restored the voice of people. In Richard the Redeless’ elaborate array of animal images that evoke heraldry, bestiaries, and allegorical symbolism, one dominant political argument arises: the avian imagery associated with Henry IV promises the English people a bold new chance at protesting their economic
hardships, pleading judiciary cases, presenting their constituents’ views in Parliament, and, perhaps most importantly for the Lancastrian poet, decrying the abuses of Richard II and his followers. The open singing of birds promises a future in which political speech leads to social justice. In contrast to the avian symbolism associated with Henry, the hart livery of Richard II reminds readers of the oppressive silence that his retinue once inflicted upon the land by robbing, over-taxing, and abusing the common people while forcibly stifling their ability to voice any discontent.

By reviewing a selection of poems that creatively envisage different parts of Richard II’s reign, my dissertation reveals literary discourse reshaping and reimagining political discourse in a mutually informing way; moreover, it suggests the innovations that medieval writers crafted when speaking (or whispering) to power. Each poet scrutinizes the types of speech that arose in times of political upheaval during the reign of Richard II even as he considers the events themselves; as a result, my formal investigation of the uses of animal speech in the literature of late fourteenth-century England offers a new perspective on the political crises and outcries that troubled Richard II’s reign. The voices of animal characters reveal resistance to established modes of discourse as well as to reigning assumptions about political practice; these strange speakers acknowledge the rebellious opinions running through the populace. When animal political players voice their grievances, poets open the possibility for candid conversation, ideological meditation, and examination of the political and societal realities. The positive capacity of animals to encourage readers to listen to variant opinions, however, is always counterbalanced by the bestial stereotype that these speakers utter inarticulate grunts that disregard human reason. By expressing their
reservations about Richard’s young age, the government’s failure to prevent the rebellion of 1381, infighting nobles, the burgeoning influence of the lower classes, and the ultimate deposition of Richard himself in the relatively unthreatening but disconcertingly communicative squeaks, calls, and bellows of animal speakers, fourteenth-century writers decried England’s problems even as they raised new political voices.

The question that motivated this dissertation was “Why did so many late fourteenth-century poets discuss political issues using the sounds and songs of animals?” My initial postulation argued that literary animals allowed poets to distance readers from the contentious atmosphere of fourteenth century political life, thereby giving themselves the opportunity to make critical and contentious observations in the course of their poems. In this reasoning, I sought to build upon the insights of Judith Ferster and Kathryn Kerby-Fulton who pose the related arguments that medieval poets took advantage of rhetoric, such as language showing “due obeisance,” and generic conventions, like the dream vision, to insulate their works from governmental censure. As I studied Books Under Suspicion: Censorship and Tolerance of Revelatory Writing in Late Medieval England, however, I became particularly intrigued by Kerby-Fulton’s penetrating footnote: “Not only is there a suggestion that animals might be able to speak, but there’s the reality that men could often only speak through exempla (and animal exempla) to make their voices heard.” In noticing that “speaking animals” were subjects of interest in medieval literature and that animal exempla furnished an influential vehicle for emerging political voices, Kerby-Fulton prompted me to consider two major strands of academic

4 Kerby-Fulton 20.
inquiry together, one evaluating medieval attitudes towards animal sounds and one weighing the symbolism of animals in political literature. As a result of my research, I realized that references to the literal bellows and noises of animals facilitated the examination of political voices in late fourteenth-century poetry, and the utterances of animal characters reveal subtle and enigmatic secondary meanings despite their seemingly obvious, blunt character. The ambiguous sounds of animals provided poets with loaded metaphorical imagery, or auditory cues, that impelled contemporary readers to rethink their assumptions about the new and revolutionary political speakers who were emerging in the public forum. In the course of writing this dissertation, I endeavored to expand upon current academic interpretations of animal exempla and bestial characters in the political poems of the late fourteenth century by analyzing the signifying capacity and symbolic weight of animal vocal expressions.

Recent scholarship by Umberto Eco, Elizabeth Eva Leach, and Peter Travis\(^5\) recognizes the complicated treatment of animal sounds in a vast array of ancient and medieval philosophy, music, and poetry.\(^6\) In these works, animals emit inhuman sounds that convey intriguing, yet indeterminate meaning as philosophers and artists alike questioned the extent to which an animal could communicate. Eco’s article, “‘Latratus

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\(^6\) For example, while Leach analyzes Augustine’s *De musica* (1-4) and a number of songs from the late Middle Ages (108-74).
Canis’ or: The Dog’s Barking,” studies Aristotle’s, Boethius’, Aquinas’, and Abelard’s views on animal speech and observes,

Inside this same Aquinian framework, the latratus canis (the dog’s barking) changes position: it is as if in between the voces significativae naturaliter [voices signifying naturally], where the gemitus [wail of an infirmed man] stands, and the voces ad placitum [voices by convention], where spoken language stands, an intermediate zone were posed, where man produces – paralinguistically, we would say now – interjections and the dog barks.

In suggesting that Aquinas’ followers might have classified the dog’s bark alongside human interjections, Eco and his coauthors reveal the uncertainty created by everyday animals that seem to bark for a particular purpose. Along the same lines, Elizabeth Eva Leach discusses music theorists following Priscian who categorized animal sounds in intermediate categories; for example, Marchetto of Padua describes bird calls as irrational but recordable natural phenomena: “Nonarticulate and literate voice is that which cannot be understood and yet can be written down, like the ‘caw caw’ [or ‘cuckoo’] produced by birds. We are totally ignorant of the meaning of this utterance, even though we can write it down.” In observing that the significance of the bird’s utterance remains a mystery to mankind even as writers set it down for posterity, this music theorist comprehends the problematic status of a voice that may be heard, acknowledged, and ultimately

7 Eco 66-70
8 Eco 67 The article translates “ad placitum” as “by convention.”
9 Eco 69
10 Leach 36.
misapprehended. Birdsong is unintelligible to humans; nevertheless, medieval musicians found it worthy of study and emulation.¹¹

Understanding these enigmatic categorizations of animal noise sheds light on the popular technique of portraying political players as animals. Since animal utterance was regarded as an intriguing but indecipherable form of communication, allusions to animal speech convey equal parts curiosity and uncertainty about the message expressed by these dubious sounds. In placing the views of emerging political factions into the mouths of animal speakers, late medieval English writers were grappling with the realization that all sorts of men and women who had been ignored in the past had a great deal to contribute to the advancement of knowledge and the betterment of society. The articulating animal provided authors with a well-known image to impart their own doubts towards and growing awareness of the innovative speakers rising in parliament and the streets. Animal utterance dramatizes and scrutinizes the communicative potential of previously unheeded political voices.¹²

The technique of employing animal characters to disseminate potentially controversial political opinions succeeds because the idea of a communicating animal simultaneously seems plausible and impossible to the reader. In his 1925 work, Theory of Prose, Viktor Shklovsky describes the impact of the animal viewpoint in literature as one

¹¹ Leach discusses musicians who mimicked the natural beauty of birdsong although they considered birds to be irrational creatures (Leach 53).
¹² In a recent monograph, David Rollinson has even argued that the term commyncacyon was accruing new meanings in this period. John Trevisa uses the term in the late fourteenth century, and Rollinson notices that different spellings of the term refer to “talk,” “being talked about,” and “news and information” in the Cely letter written between 1472-1488. David Rollinson, The Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England’s Long Social Revolution, 1066-1649 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 139.
of “defamiliarization” and “enstrangement” due to the odd sensation of seeing through the eyes of a creature, such as a horse or a bird, that is intimately familiar in everyday life and yet inhuman. Although an animal lives beside humans, its perspective is radically foreign. Given this familiar foreignness, a reader will debate in what ways literary animals comment on human society as the inhuman perspective propels the reader into a fresh imaginative reality. In imbuing the dog’s bark and the bird’s song with meaning, sentience, and depth, late medieval poets imply that creatures from all walks of life could voice meaningful opinions crucial to political policymaking. Poets pointedly made the divisive question, “Should we listen to this man seriously in court?” an immediate corollary to the perplexing question, “Should we listen to this bird seriously?”, using the capacity of animal speakers to articulate the strangeness, familiarity, and merit in once unrecognized voices.

In analyzing the impact of animal utterance, bestial noise, and birdsong in poems that depict political bodies, I hope to make a contribution to the large field of academic literature interpreting the significance and symbolism of animals in late fourteenth-century political poetry. Contributors in this field debate the extent to which poets draw upon the natural animal world in composing their critiques of human society, and they seek to discern what medieval poems communicate about the relationship between

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14 Interspecies discourse is presented as suspicious, bewildering, and intriguing in the four poems under examination; moreover, the depiction of what kind of language is “standard” or “conventional” fluctuates from poem to poem. Most of the time, conventional languages are usually regarded as more obviously “human” than the non-standard, animal alternatives. In some cases, human characters present the conventional political viewpoints in human language. In other cases, animal characters speak in “standard” or “conventional” human languages, but their speeches are contrasted with the animalistic noise emitted by characters who seem more bestial. In the “belling of the cat” fable, for example, the mice interrupt a human conversation, bringing the perspective of a different species into a court assembly. In the Parliament of Fowls, however, many of the “standard” speakers are birds that draw upon human courtly conventions and tropes; it is the lower fowl, with their animalistic bird noises, that offer a non-standard perspective in this case.
human behavior and animal behavior. Recent critics such as Jill Mann have argued that animal “fable narrative is fundamentally and avowedly a fiction. It can therefore make no serious claim to reveal what animals and humans have in common,” but Mann also finds an intriguing “merging of the humans and the animal that makes it appropriate to speak of their ‘connaturality’” in The Owl and the Nightingale and The Parliament of Fowls. In pursuing my research, I have found studies exploring the ways in which medieval writers investigated commonalities between beasts and men influential to my own approach, and I have also found essays examining uses of animal imagery in descriptions of medieval political life essential to my work. Dorothy Yamamoto provided valuable theoretical guidance to understanding literary animals in observing, The animal world, indeed, is never simply ‘there’, unaffected by our own cultural enterprises. We are continually remaking it in our own image, and using it as a resource to speak about things that matter to us. We, at the centre, traffic with the periphery in all sorts of ways, and are certainly ready, when it suits our interests, to blur line and make barriers permeable.

Yamamoto’s insight that medieval writers readily blur the lines between the animal and the human as they advance their own cultural agendas informs my argument that late fourteenth-century poets play with the potential intelligibility and import of animal voices, thereby revealing their commentary on human political speech using strikingly familiar yet strange sounds. Edward Wheatley’s comparable argument that fables

16 Mann 168; 198-99. On 168, Mann cites p.193 of Peter Dronke’s Intellectuals and Poets in observing, “between the human and the animal, an underlying natural harmony…links the two.”
17 Yamamoto 13.
embarrass “readers into moral behavior by depicting animals who appear too human for our comfort”\(^\text{18}\) also motivated my argumentative strain that the nebulous relationship between humans and animals often portrayed in medieval literature prompts an uncomfortable sense of recognition in the reader. Just as Wheatley argues that animals prompt moral reflection, I contend that animals force readers to recognize new voices rising in society and the ethical concerns of diverse social groups.

As I plumbed the symbolic potential of animal characters in this poetry, I evaluated medieval theories assessing the relationship between humankind and animal-kind in the natural world. Hugh White’s \textit{Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition} offers a comprehensive analysis of the relative categorizations of animals and humans in various definitions of natural law, and these classification systems provided insight into the tendency of political writers to linger on theoretical correspondences between basic human nature and animal instinct.\(^\text{19}\) Even as philosophers hypothesized about the humans’ inherent relationship to animals, political writers used these inquiries to consider the kinship of seemingly dissimilar species of politicians. As I studied these philosophies on the natural world, Bruce Cowgill’s persuasive argument on the treatment of natural law in Chaucer’s \textit{Parliament of Fowls} informed my method of linking poems’ animal societies to the human political sphere. In observing “the general description of natural law does not separate [its] broader sense from that which refers specifically to man,” Cowgill contends, “Chaucer can symbolize the obstruction of justice in human society by creating a bird society in which the mating and procreative


processes are impeded.” References to a broad understanding of natural law, therefore, legitimize the poem’s premise that birds may discuss issues applicable to human society. This critical insight motivated my own view that natural law and naturalist classification systems inform poets’ tendencies to present animal characters as conduits for the contentious societal and political discussions of humans.

Even as these critical studies on natural law demonstrated the resemblance that medieval intellectuals detected between animals and humans, they also revealed the stark distinctions commonly drawn between rational humanity and irrational beastliness in the Middle Ages. In studying the popular belief that animals represented irrational and base impulses, I came to understand why the figure of the speaking animal could be used to obscure serious political commentaries even as it conveyed upstart opinions. A medieval poet could comfort himself with the thought that a majority of readers would discount animals as symbols of inanity since traditional definitions of natural law associated beasts with an absence of reason. In his influential study on the denigrating animalistic rhetoric used to describe the peasantry, for instance, Paul Freedman observes, “being

21 Hugh White, however, notes the ambiguity even infiltrated the clear-cut definitions of the irrational animal and the rational human imposed by scholastic scholars. He observes on page 8, “Natural Law…was held to provide moral guidance available in virtue of their rationality to all human beings, and what the content of that law was taken to be. However, one very important definition of Natural Law, a definition attributed to the Roman jurist Ulpian, associates it with animal behaviour rather than with human reason. This raises questions as to what behaviour is properly regarded as natural in human beings and whether certain kinds of behaviour which may be considered natural are also to be considered right. Ulpian’s definition and the way it and its ramifications were dealt with by scholastic commentators are discussed in [his chapter] ‘Human Nature, Animal Nature, and Ulpian’ and are discussed in “Nature, Sex, and the Discriminating of Natures’. It is in the area of sexuality that Ulpian’s definition is most challenging for moral orthodoxy, and scholastic commentary is much exercised over questions as to the naturalness of fornication, concubinage, and polygamy; these scholastic reflections are considered at some length. The scholastics discriminate between an animal nature and a rational nature in human beings which raises the question of whether one of these might be more natural…it was possible to take humanity’s non-rational, animal side as more fundamentally natural than the rational, so that ‘nature’ and ‘reason’ within the human being can be at odds.”
treated as less than human clashed with the dignity and equality, however minimal, conferred by being a Christian.”

The medieval reader had the ready option to interpret animals as satirical devices and actively distance himself from the uncertain and confusing atmosphere of fourteenth century of politics with a self-satisfied laugh. Animal speakers, therefore, offered medieval poets a complicated symbol for presenting marginal political views; animal speech disarmed readers even as it suggested that the animal’s voice might be making a significant contribution to political discourse.

In looking at recent scholarship that focuses on specific poetic animals that respond to political circumstances in late fourteenth-century England, Matthew Giancarlo offered influential interpretations of the “belling of the cat” fable, Parliament of Fowls, and Richard the Redeless in drawing a clear connection between speaking animals and rising parliamentary voices in the late fourteenth century. In arguing “the idea of a public voice emerges, experientially, as a very complex and fraught thing indeed, but is a complexity made more familiar, and more meaningful, with reference to the institutional form of parliament,” Giancarlo inspired my own reading of the emerging public voice that was being expressed experientially through the ambiguous utterances of animal

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22 Paul Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 1; 135-39. As White notices with Ulpian’s definition of Natural Law, Freedman argues that the decision to portray peasants as animals also connoted two possible meanings: “The bitter proverb of the peasants cuts two ways: it both recognizes how they were regarded by their superiors and protests their humanity against this dominant image…These images formed an extensive vocabulary of contempt, but at the same time they portrayed the peasant as closer to God than those who oppressed him. On the one hand, the peasant was lowly, even subhuman: ugly, dull-witted, coarse, materialistic, and cowardly. Such depictions did not simply present the supposed physical characteristics of rustics but explained their subordination, their separation from the rest of humanity. While nothing so elaborate as modern pseudobiological theories of inferiority existed, representations of the peasant as naturally lowly excused his relative lack of freedom and justified his exploitation…Finally, the nature of Christianity itself gave pause to the dominant elements of society: might the degradation of the peasantry bode a future reversal? Would God reward their meekness and implicit closeness to Him in the world to come?” (Freedman 1-2).

characters; in my thinking, I connected the complexity and familiarity that Giancarlo recognizes in the parliamentary form to the analogous complexity and familiarity found in medieval approaches to the animal voice. Another monograph that I found particularly inspiring when considering the role of animal speakers in political literature was Helen Barr’s *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England*, in which she argues, “writers recognized orders of discourse and could mobilize them to produce social commentary.” In pursuing this argument, Barr demonstrates the ways in which poets adapt and alter the popular symbolism associated with certain literary animals to convey novel political messages; in considering poetic animals as flexible social signifiers, I further developed my view that the voices and statements of animal characters deserve special consideration when considering political poems.

Not only does the inherent ambiguity associated with the animal voice, which could produce tantalizingly significant-seeming noise, prompt reflection in the Middle Ages, but the literary custom of adapting and altering well-known animal characters to promote diverse and sometimes contradictory political arguments enjoins readers to assess the significance of the speaking animals quite carefully. The sounds emitting from these seemingly irrational creatures could hold compelling lessons for the engaged citizen. Even the most biased and prejudiced authors recognized some sense in the bird’s call, the rebel’s cry, the dog’s bark, and the common parliamentarian’s plea. And the divisive and perplexing questions of whom or what should be attended seriously are met with the acknowledgment, “Well, yes, this man and this bird may have something important to say.” Late fourteenth-century poets reveal an open-minded willingness to

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record, render, and mingle the marginalized voices of new kinds of politicians by using animal expressions. These writers invent a careful, playful but still earnest poetics of acknowledgment.
Chapter One: The Mouse that Roared: Rodent Authority in Piers Plowman’s “Belling of the Cat” Fable

I. Introduction

The rats and mice who debate and offer advice in the “belling of the cat” fable that William Langland introduces into the Prologue of his B-text of The Vision of Piers Plowman most closely resemble socializing humans dressed up in animal garb. In this chapter, I ask why Langland integrates these bestial speakers at line 146 of the prologue despite the fact that the rest of the action takes place in a human society. The animal fable starts quite abruptly in the middle of a consultation between the human king, his advisors, and the general populace; it’s as if the rodents run between the feet of the human courtiers: “With that ran ther a route of ratones at ones/ And smale mees with hem: mo than a thousand.” Considering Langland’s provocative descriptions of human advisors whom he terms lunatics, buffoons, and otherworldly angels, a reader might assume that the fable will clarify the political message being endorsed by the poem; on the contrary, the animals only enhance the prologue’s strangeness and ambiguity. I argue that Langland uses rodent voices to offer an obscure but safe commentary on the political

26 P.B.Prol.146-147.
27 In employing the word “strange” to describe the sudden appearance of animals in a human society, I am drawing on the terms “defamiliarization” and “enstrangment” posed by the theorist Viktor Shklovsky to describe the literary method of presenting the animal viewpoint, as in his reading of Tolstoy’s Kholstomer. Since Tolstoy’s horse describes the seemingly ordinary objects of human society from an animal’s perspective, the objects are rendered unfamiliar in the eyes of the reader as well (Shklovsky 6-7).
controversies impacting court life at the time of the B-text. In dramatizing the speeches of animal characters, Langland intervenes in the contemporary debate over what role upstart voices play in parliamentary discourse.

Animal fables existed to offer moral instruction in the Middle Ages. In his recent work on the Aesopic tradition, Edward Wheatley explains that medieval hermeneutic theories “stress moral interpretation as fable’s raison d’être.” Animal fables were associated with instructional children’s literature from their inception, and these stories’ morals were also used by fourteenth-century preachers to appeal to the uneducated laity. Langland, however, uses the fable of the rats to complicate his political message rather than offer a clear moral. As the rodents debate, a fable, the traditional conveyance for simple morals, becomes loaded with inlaid criticisms against its ostensible moral. Several critics have argued that fables transformed throughout the medieval era to become more complex narratives in which several morals might arise simultaneously. For example, Elizabeth Allen questions, “To what extent do narratives qualify, or interrogate, rather than enact clear moral principles?” She begins to answer her own


29 Wheatley 51.

30 G.R. Owst has argued persuasively that the style and subject-matter of *Piers Plowman* derives from the sermons that were being preached from pulpits during the early- mid- fourteenth century. See G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c. 1350-1450* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965).

question by noticing that most scholars underestimate “Middle English literature’s ‘gnawing sensitivity’ to the differences between different versions of a given story, the inapplicability of stories to lived existence, and the dangers of audience misinterpretation.” In the case of the “belling of the cat” fable in *Piers Plowman*, the poem encourages the reader to consider multiple moral viewpoints by emphasizing the unsettling political lesson presented by a mouse pleading for his rodent comrades to accept unfair abuse from a malicious cat.

Several aspects of Langland’s presentation of this fable result in ambiguity. In suddenly switching from a human political allegory to an animal fable, the poet leaves the moral, narrative, and even ontological connections between the two scenes unclear. He also omits any exemplary or moral explanation from the fable’s conclusion, and the narrator asks readers to interpret the narrative for themselves. While medieval sermons were structured so that an audience would understand the ways in which the fable demonstrated the main argument, *Piers Plowman* inserts a fable without any guiding remarks. The mouse speaker does offer an authoritative opinion within the fable by advising his colleagues to suffer silently, but it’s not evident from the surrounding context whether the reader is meant to accept this judgment without reservation. The mouse’s moral argument becomes less convincing as he describes the torment that the cat inflicts upon the rodents’ diminutive bodies. This tension between the advisor’s words and the advisor’s person existed in the previous human scene. Even as the king’s advisors endorsed royal power, Langland made the reader doubt the suitability and mental acuity of these advisors. By putting the reader in the position of having to judge the advice as well as the advisor, these scenes convey the difficulty of taking any piece of advice at

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32 Allen 6, 10.
face value. The reader must grapple with the ramifications of an abused mouse (or subject) simply accepting the possibility of a violent death at the hands of a superior when attempting to understand the political message of Piers. The animal voice reveals the problematic power relations between an absolute monarch and his subjects who yearn for fair treatment.

The precise relationship between the rodents’ trouble and contemporary political circumstances isn’t explained, and the reader is left wondering in what ways these talking animals fit into the poem’s worldview. The surreal dream setting of The Vision of Piers Plowman prepares readers for an alternate reality that may or may not critique contemporary fourteenth-century English society, and the rats and mice provide an alternate take on the human society that has peopled the Prologue. These loquacious animals and the animal kingdom in which they reside provide a kind of literary “test laboratory” in which hypotheses, theories, and most importantly morals regarding the poem’s human society might be trialed.

II. Talking animals re-forming the society of Piers

By imbuing these strange rodents with speech, Langland scrutinizes the ability of the Parliamentary Commons, which the animals resemble, to communicate with the king. When the rodents cry out in a court peopled with humans at line 146, the fable’s talking animals come to symbolize the novelty and possible un-naturalness of certain classes speaking at all. If we look for the social commentary that Langland inserts via this animal interruption, the moral of the fable becomes more complex as the reader adjusts to the

33 See Kerby-Fulton 20-21.
perspectives of subjects who hail from the lower end of the social ladder and the food chain.

Interpreting the significance of these animals’ words seems particularly problematic at this point in the poem because the author has already depicted human language as untrustworthy and imprecise in lines 33 through 110, even challenging the reader to translate the commons’ Latin at line 144: “construe whoso wolde.” In his overview of human storytelling, preaching and most of all advising, Langland suggests the growing discordance, pervasive ambivalence, and perhaps even the gradual depreciation of human language. From the very beginning of the poem, we are told that fantasies, wise tales and sermons rarely propagate true or accurate knowledge.34 Instead of asserting that established authorities should be trusted, Langland encourages skepticism and analysis, persuading the reader to question the authority and words of any person who might be attempting to sway another.

This early lesson encourages the reader to evaluate the speeches given by the king’s counselors. C. David Benson has remarked, “No voice can be accepted uncritically in Piers…. Piers may indeed be “ideological” but it is not “didactic”….instead of direct preaching, its stories constantly generate ambivalence and discordance.”35 If we accept that Piers offers ambivalence instead of definite answers, the intertwining “coronation scene” and “belling of the cat” fable, which have always confused and confounded Piers

34 PP.B.Prol.36-48
35 C. David Benson, Public Piers Plowman: modern scholarship and late medieval English culture (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004) 103. Benson suggests that critics have been so anxious to ascribe authorial intention and authorial voice to various figures in Piers that readers have been slow to accept the text’s ambivalent (and unknowable) tone. Moreover, he asserts, “The poet is at least partially at fault when readers conclude that he is the one actually speaking behind the masks of his creations. The characters in Piers are not always given distinct voices” (Benson 102-03).
scholars,\textsuperscript{36} are doing the poem’s work. These scenes give readers the opportunity to compare advice from human and animal speakers, and this comparison reveals a critical appraisal of advisors who endorse the king’s leadership even as humbler subjects complain of abuses.

First, let’s assess the unusual human assembly comprised of a lunatic, a goliard, an angel, and the commons, which intimates that the human race\textsuperscript{37} provides variety in itself. The fact that Langland has chosen such a motley crew to advise the king puzzles any reader looking for a definite political stance. Why does a lunatic appear next to an angel, and how should we take the advice that is given by a goliard – a buffoon? Without taking the physical descriptions of each of the speakers into consideration for a moment, it would seem that each one offers enthusiastic advice for the future rule of the kingdom; for example, the lunatic extols, “Crist kepe thee, sire Kyng, and thi kyngrych,/ And lene thee lede this lond so leaute thee lovye,/ And for thi rightful fulying be rewarded in hevene!”\textsuperscript{38} The lunatic emphasizes two basic principles for the king to follow as he reigns—firstly, the king should remember that he is Christ’s man on earth; secondly, the king should lead well enough that \textit{leaute} (loyal, law-abiding subjects) should love the king.\textsuperscript{39} Given that the lunatic’s words reiterate commonplace political opinions of the

\textsuperscript{36} E Talbot Donaldson comments on this difficulty: “Perhaps no problem in Piers Plowman is more confused than that of the author’s (or authors’) political attitude. The confusion is twofold. In the first place, published accounts dealing with the poem as a whole give conflicting descriptions of the political sentiments it contains, so that we learn from one report that the author was a staunch democrat who reflected the more radical political thought of his time, and from another that he had no political opinions that would have offended the most rigorous royalist of the fourteenth century” (Donaldson 85).

\textsuperscript{37} Or in the case of the angel, whom I suppose isn’t a member of the human race, we might be considering supernatural human-like creatures.

\textsuperscript{38} PP.B.Prol.125-127.

\textsuperscript{39} What is \textit{leaute}? Schmidt glosses this term as “justice in society” or “law-abiding citizens” (Schmidt 412), but he also cites P.M. Kean “Love, Law, and \textit{Lewte} in Piers Plowman,” Review of English Studies: A Quarterly Journal of English Literature and the English Language, 15.59 (1964), in which the author posits that \textit{lewte} in Middle English can stand for virtue, for living well, in a wide sense...[as well as] “the Aristotelian virtue of Justice,” and Kean clarifies, “Aristotelian Justice...as it is defined in the section of the
time, why does Langland suggest that the speaker is not in control of his mental faculties? Rather than inserting obviously controversial beliefs into the prologue of the B-text, Langland structures this scene so that the reader encounters multiple definitions and endorsements of royal power even as he questions the suitability and sanity of the advisors.

By connecting several dubious human advisors who all offer unoriginal advice for ruling the kingdom, Langland fosters doubt, which emphasizes one of the great difficulties of being king. A good ruler must trust his judgment enough to recognize when valuable bits of wisdom hail from unappealing individuals. In addition, the king must assess if advisors are simply relying on traditional commonplaces instead of confronting him with their actual opinions. This disjunction between the advice and the advisor reappears when the goliard, “a gloton of wordes,” asserts that the king must be diligent in maintaining law. This character’s remarks imply that the king derives his power from his function (i.e. ruling): “Dum ‘rex’ a ‘regere’ dicatur nomen habere,/ Nomen habet sine re nisi studet iura tenere.”

The goliard, a character whose “gluttonous” description suggest (and almost dictate) an obsession with the literal letter, derives his opinion about kingship from examining the etymology of the word, rex, but what sort of man thrives on words alone? The Middle English Dictionary defines “goliardeis” as a “buffoon”;

*Nicomachean Ethics*... is ‘complete virtue, but not absolutely, but in relation to our neighbor.’(Kean 255-6). This notion that the king should rule the land so that citizens (who act justly towards others) will love him is commonplace in medieval political theory (Kean 250). Along these same lines, Anna Baldwin explains that the governmental ideal in the late Middle Ages was a “community [in which] every member of every class of ‘estate’ fulfilled his duties and respected other’s rights. Individually they obeyed God and their king, together they achieved unity and harmony.” Baldwin argues that this harmony between the king and his subject “was often characterized as ‘lewte’ (meaning loyalty) or ‘truth’ (in its sense of ‘troth’ or faithkeeping)”(Baldwin 5).

40 PP.B.Prol.141-142. Trans: “Inasmuch as a king has his name from (the fact of) being a ruler [ultimately the word rex is from regere ‘to rule’], he possesses the name (alone) without the reality unless he is zealous in maintaining the laws.”
however, the two other occurrences of the word in Middle English literature (in the works of Chaucer and Mannyng) link the “golairdeis” with “janglers” and “minstreis.” Is the goliard a buffoon due to his overzealous interest in the letter or his association with these dubious fiction-peddlers? Earlier in the prologue, Langland disparages “janglers” because they spread suspect and false information, but should readers align Langland’s portrait of the jangler with that of the goliard? The Middle English Dictionary’s definition of “goliardeis” as a “buffoon” is a bit dismissive, but it does convey the negative connotation Langland associates with people who deal too frequently and liberally with words. This goliard, however, does not posit an explicitly false argument—his words are not those of a buffoon despite the fact that they qualify the pronouncement of a presumably irreproachable character, the angel. The apparent wisdom contained in the goliard’s remarks may remind the reader of the paradoxical yet familiar literary figure of the “wise fool,” suggesting perhaps that an effective royal advisor must humble himself in order to be heard. In this case, the jangling yet astute goliard leads the way for the meek mice and rats who similarly offer incisive observations to the court. The content of the scene is something like a coronation, but rather than only being surrounded by dignitaries (like the angel), Langland’s king finds representatives of every class in attendance. The monarch must listen to them all. The scene places multiple declarations of support and unity (leaute) in the mouths of speakers who demonstrate infinite

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41 PP.B.Prol.35.
42 Middle English Dictionary, 18 December 2001, The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2001, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>. See goliardeis (n.) Also galiardeis, gulardous. [AF; cp. CF golïardois.]--- A buffoon.(c1387-95) Chaucer CT.Prol.(Manly-Rickert) A.560: He was a iangler and a goliardeys [vr. galiardeys]. a1400(c1303) Mannyng HS (Hrl 1701) 4702: A mynstralle, a gulardous, Come onys to a bysshopes hous. c1400(c1378) PPI.B (LdMisc 581) (MED). See also PP.B.Prol.139: Thanne greued hym a goliardeys, a glotoun of wordes.
43 E. Talbot Donaldson makes this case for this scene being a portrait of a coronation (Donaldson 85-120).
difference and indecipherability. The reader of *Piers*, like a new king, must judge whether or not he can truly trust any of these advisors.

At the end of the human scene, the commons cry out in Latin—an occurrence that almost certainly would never have happened in fourteenth-century England—and the strangeness of this event aptly introduces the unusual description of running rats and mice. Are the animals interacting with the human participants? Even after looking closely at the passage, this question is actually quite difficult to answer.

And thane gan al the commune crye in vers of Latyn
To the Kynges counseil – construe whoso wolde—
‘Precepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis!’
With that ran ther a route of ratons at ones
And smale mees with hem: mo than a thousand
Comen to a conseil for the commune profit;
For a cat of court cam whan hym liked
And overleep hem lightliche and laughte hem at his will,
And pleide with hem perillousli and possed hem aboute.\(^{44}\)

The temporal (or possibly causal) transition “with that” connects the commons’ declaration to the beginning of ‘belling of the cat’ fable, and the locational marker “ther” reinforces the impression that the commons and the rats may share the same space. Given these markers and the juxtaposition of the two lines, the cry of the commons seems to cause an infestation of rodents. But why would Langland suggest this correlation? The noise of the Commons (as well as the general body of common people) crying out was

\(^{44}\) PP.B.Prol.143-151.
associated with a kind of social chaos in the fourteenth century, and the rats and mice
enact the role of the lowest members of society suddenly infiltrating the court.

This type of social “crye” that begins the transition into the fable has recently
been linked to several examples of fourteenth-century political rhetoric. Emily Steiner
has discussed the relationship between commonalty and its resulting clamour, and she
observes “clamour produces a rhetoric about political collectivity at moment when
commonalty is under dispute; at moments, that is, when claims to collective
representation, consent, and agency are troubled by the social implication of those
claims.”45 The cry or the clamour of the commons; therefore, becomes a popular term in
parliamentary writings just as the Commons, which included members of lower rank than
those of the Lords, and other political collectives (like urban guilds for example) are
asserting their right to arbitrate matters of governmental policy. Langland uses this
“crying” rhetoric to describe his own community, which may refer to the Commons or to
the general body of the commonwealth—Langland leaves the identification of this
shouting crowd vague. Matthew Giancarlo attributes Langland’s polyphonic and chaotic
depictions of the social soundscape to the poet’s multifaceted understanding of
fourteenth-century English society: “Like Langland’s understanding of his contemporary
institutions, then, the idea of a public voice emerges, experientially, as a very complex
and fraught thing indeed.”46 I would add that Langland augments the usual “noise”
rhetoric that surrounds the common people in the fourteenth century by including animals
and animal speech as part of his portrayal. Like the “crye,” the disturbing image of

45 Emily Steiner, “Commonalty and Literary Form in the 1370s and 1380s,” New Medieval Literatures 6
(2003): 201. Steiner focuses on Gower’s *Vox clamantis*, chronicle accounts of the Good Parliament of
1376, and Thomas Usk’s ‘Appeal’ of Northampton (1384).
46 Giancarlo, “Piers Plowman” 170.
swarming rodents demonstrates that the court and perhaps the government in general have been infested by the noisiest and most noisome hoards.47

These rats and mice respond to the cries and concerns of the previous human scene because the poem asserts that the rodents “comen to a conseil for the commune profit” (ln148). By having the commons cry to the “Kynges counseil” in line 144 and reiterating the term “conseil” in line 148, the poem suggests that the rats and mice take up the parliamentary (or at least advisory) role within the court. Up until line 148, the possibility that the human allegory has expanded to include talking animals unsettles the expectations of the reader. Tzvetan Todorov describes the moment of “uncertainty” when a reader cannot decide whether she is grappling with natural or supernatural laws as “the very heart of the fantastic.” This reader “must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.”48 Langland manufactures this moment of uncertainty by connecting the two scenes with an action (the rodents running) rather than an explanatory moral; moreover, the poet makes it quite

47 Might this infestation be a joke at the expense of parliament? If we assume that crying “commune” in the previous scene refers to the general body of the common people, neither the parliamentary Commons nor the Lords have appeared in the course of the governmental procession that began in line 112, “Thanne kam ther a Kyng: Knyghthod hym ladde;/ Might of the communes made hym to regne.” To have the king’s parliamentary counseling body suddenly manifest itself as a rodent mass would seem to be an insult. Does this man to mouse dynamic give us glimpse of the poet’s view regarding the relative statures of the king and the parliament? Are the members of parliament no more than pests running between great men’s feet? The content of the fable itself, which encourages social inferiors to bend to the whims of their monarchs, would seem to encourage this reading. As a related argument in favor of this reading, Bishop Brunton originally inserted this fable into his sermon in order to admonish the Commons to act against Alice Perrers in the Good Parliament; by using the fable here in Piers Plowman, Langland was most certainly taking a satirical jab at the highly weakened stance Commons of the Bad Parliament, which took place just around the composition of the B-Text.

clear that the rats (like the human characters) have come for the purposes of counsel. The reader for a brief moment must imagine that the rats have overrun the king’s chamber.

III. A mouse’s eye-view of Piers’ England

This alarming image of vermin swarming the court becomes less intense, however, once the reader realizes that the poem has shifted from allegory to fable—once the rats and mice begin debating, they respond to the tyrannical “cat” instead of the discussion that took place between the king, goliard, lunatic, angel, and commune. While the conversation of the rats and mice is connected to the previous scene through the “with that” transition and the theme of counsel, the “belling of the cat” fable seems to take place in a world parallel to the prologue’s human world. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of the confusing moments it takes for the reader to realize that the genre and focus have shifted. And if these rats and mice emerged in response to commune’s cry to the “Kynges counsel,” why does this counseling body take on an animal form?

The rats comment on the problems afflicting human society as well as their own animal social order, and they lend a detached and uniquely mouse-like perspective to the problem of approaching and advising a dangerous superior. While the lunatic, angel, goliard, and commune all attempt to define the king as a godly, lawful, or beneficial figure, the mice simply see the cat as a predator. The role of the cat, unlike that of the king, doesn’t need to be defined because the natural relationship of a mouse and a cat is immediately obvious; consequently, the mice unlike their human counterparts aren’t
forced to declare their affiliation. Judith Ferster has detailed the “due obeisance” that marked the rhetoric of (human) advisors in the fourteenth-century, and while Langland has employed this kind of rhetoric in the scene with the lunatic and the other human advisors, he removes the need for this verbal posturing in the fable by painting the political relationship as an animal relationship.\textsuperscript{49} The rodents simply start discussing policy—it’s as if the commune that Langland tacitly criticized with the infestation imagery has momentarily found its own authoritative voice in these rodent bodies. Although being compared to rodents seems disparaging, it empowers the poem’s counselors to criticize the cat-tyrant and propose solutions to bad government.

It is typical of Langland’s ambiguous poetry that he uses an unflattering image to instill his “common” political players with the authority to denounce a powerful monarch—the clamor and chaos of running rodents resolve into an effective parliamentary-like session. The rodents actually debate alternative plans for dealing with the cat while the lunatic, goliard, and commune only reiterate their support for the ruler. The poet never says a word against the human king in the prologue, but the cat is killing mice. There is no doubt that these rodent-subjects are fighting for their livelihoods and lives, and their struggle provides some insight for any citizen who wants to defend his own happiness and interests against a despot’s self-serving reign. The animals provide a subtle critique of the acquiescent human speakers who have already appeared in the prologue.

The unsettling transition forces the reader to compare the benevolent human king with a murderous cat and the doting “commune” with an on-target, critical rodent council. Instead of accepting their lamentable position, the rodents ask themselves if there

\textsuperscript{49} Ferster 1-14.
is one of their number witty enough to withstand the cat’s will and improve their collective situation and social standing.\textsuperscript{50} The commons’ cry “\textit{Precepta Regis sunt nobis vincula legis}.”\textsuperscript{51} in view of the rodent council, can even be re-read both as dutifully obedient “your word is our law” and as desperate, “you’ve got us in chains.” The cry itself conveys the strange doubleness in Langland’s depiction of common speakers.\textsuperscript{52} This introduction of animal perspective not only encourages the reader to reconsider the prologue’s human society, but it also prepares the reader to encounter further tonal and generic shifts.

Close-reading this version of the fable only makes the reader more aware of its contradictions, which result in the possibility for diverse interpretations. In the context of \textit{Piers}, the rat and mouse assembly, which convenes for “commune profit,”\textsuperscript{53} gathers because a cat has been hurting his subjects: “For a cat of a court cam whan hym liked/And overleep hem lightliche and laughte hem at his wille.”\textsuperscript{54} The cat comes to court when he likes, and the adverb “lightliche” suggests that the cat enjoys lording over and snaring the rodents—he’s a cat playing with his prey. This predatory (and somewhat sadistic) behavior makes the rodents’ plight immediately sympathetic—they are coping with a superior who enjoys abusing them. When faced with this problem, a rat “moost

\textsuperscript{50} See PP B.Pro.152-157.
\textsuperscript{51} PP B.Pro.145: “The king’s bidding has for us the binding force of law”
\textsuperscript{52} For more on the ambiguous “doubleness” of this cry, see Nicole Lassahn who comments, “This passage comes from a part of the text often used to evaluate Langland’s political positions. Most often, it is read as evidence that Langland was a conservative. Yet the connection between this part of the poem and Langland’s political outlook is not clear. How, exactly, does this part of the poem indicate that Langland is conservative (or radical, or reformist) … the fact that it can be read in two conflicting ways suggests that our category ‘conservative’ is not working properly. Or, to put it another way, if two, mutually exclusive ideas can both be read as conservative, then this term does not do much as a heuristic, and is more likely to confuse than clarify the situation” (Lassahn 127-9). Also thanks to Susan Crane for her comments on this line.
\textsuperscript{53} PP B.Pro.148.
\textsuperscript{54} PP B.Pro.149-150.
renable of tonge” proposes that the rodent assembly act out to curb the cat’s murderous excesses: “reson me sheweth/ To bugge a belle of bras or of bright silver/ And knytten it on coler for oure commune profit/ And hangen it upon the cattes hals - thane here we mowen/ Wher he ryt or rest or rometh to pleye.” The rat counselor, unlike the commune in the previous scene, does not address the tyrant directly; instead, these rats and mice discuss the political situation without consulting any royal representative. This seclusion enables the rat to fearlessly list the cat’s transgressions and posit possible solutions, and this portrayal of a council meeting for the “commune profit” away from the ruler’s person suggests the growing power of public assemblies in political life. This convocation of mice and rats may have trouble resolving upon an effective method to curtail the cat, but its ability to assemble outside of the cat’s presence implies that subjected groups may form independent deliberative bodies.

The private meeting, however, also implies that the rodents don’t have the powerful creature’s ear; this meeting doubtlessly convenes in the cat’s absence for the protection of the participants. Their collective recognition that belling the cat would result in death confirms this sense of weakness: “Ther ne was raton in al the route, for al the reaume of France,/ That dorste have bounden the belle about the cattes nekke,/ Ne hangen it aboute his hals al Engelond to wynne,/ And helden hem unhardy and hir counseil feble,/ And leten hire laboure lost and al hire longe studie.” Every rodent is so frightened to hang the bell around the cat’s neck that they find their own counsel feeble, and their labor has been for naught. The rats and mice, nevertheless, commit a rebellious
act since they are presuming to decide the ruler’s future in his absence. The meeting itself could be held as treasonous, but Langland, unlike other tellers of this particular fable, never comments upon the rodents’ right to meet. This lack of narratorial sanction or condemnation leaves this aspect of the fable open to interpretation. While the species of the speaker (a rat) could certainly imply dismissive or critical attitude towards underground meetings as it has in other versions of the fable, a reader might also assume that Langland’s rodent subjects have every right to assemble and criticize their king. John Watts’ recent study “The Pressure of the Public on Later Medieval Politics” suggests that since the rodents “comen to a counseil for the commune profit” the group legitimately demands the attention of the leader, a cat in this case. Watts explains,

So it was that the terminology of ‘commons,’ ‘commune’ ‘community’ […] were] words so interlinked in usage and meaning that it makes little sense to separate them… It seems quite clear that, when Wat Tyler and his fellows called themselves ‘the trew commones’ in 1381, they were making a deliberately usurpationary assertion: that they were part of the ruling community of the realm, with all the

59 Cf. Odo of Cheriton. The Fables of Odo of Cheriton, John C. Jacobs (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985) 130. In Odo de Cheriton’s version of the “belling of the cat” fable, the poet uses the narrative to lampoon clerics and monks who rise up against a bishop or prior or abbot: “The rest of them reply, terrified, ‘Not I! Nor I either!!’ And it is this that men of lower station [minors] allow those higher up [majors] to live on and prevail over them.”
60 PP.B.Prol.148.
political rights and obligations felt by its upper-class participants.\textsuperscript{61}

Since the rodents associate themselves with the commons and the common profit they, much like Wat Tyler and the rebels, claim a place in the “ruling community of the realm.” But like the participants of the 1381 Rising who discovered that claiming the right to rule did not result in real change,\textsuperscript{62} the rodents realize the feebleness “hir counseil.” Since no one rodent will bell the cat, this weak community cannot act upon any claim to power.

Assuming that Langland does support the right to assemble, some critics have suggested that this section of Piers expresses its support of the Commons (with the rat speaker playing Peter de la Mare) and discontent with the officials at the end of Edward III’s reign (any of whom might be the cat).\textsuperscript{63} Although it is difficult to confirm the accuracy of these speculations that tie particular animal speakers to specific historical figures, the assembly portrayed in the fable bears a passing resemblance to the Parliamentary Commons. The fable certainly portrays a situation in which the characters themselves view assembly and deliberation as essential tools for self-preservation in a tyrannical regime.\textsuperscript{64} And the narrator’s endorsement of the next speaker, a mouse, suggests that this deliberative body legitimately tackles issues plaguing the country.


\textsuperscript{62} See my third chapter for more information of the Rising.

\textsuperscript{63} See Donaldson 115 or Schmidt 413 who respectively suggest that the cat could symbolize Edward III or John of Gaunt. I agree with Paul Strohm that the cat could signify any high-powered official at the end of Edward III’s reign. Strohm suggests that the cat could be Richard Lyons, the king’s financial agent, who was impeached and imprisoned along with Lord Latimer, the king’s chamberlain, during the “Good Parliament” of 1376.

\textsuperscript{64} As you will see, I do argue that the kitten symbolizes Richard II in the text. However, I take the citation of Eccl. 10:16 as the most compelling evidence that the kitten signifies Richard.
After the rats’ proposal to bell the cat is rejected, a mouse (that the narrator thinks “muche good kouthe”\textsuperscript{65}) argues,

Though we hadde ykilled the cat,\textsuperscript{66} yet sholde ther come another
To cracchen us and al oure kynde, though we cropen under benches.
Forthi I counseille al the commune to late the cat worthe,
And be we nevere so bolde the belle hym to shewe.
The while he caccheth conynges he coveiteth noght oure caroyne,
But fedeth hym al with venison; defame we hym nevere.\textsuperscript{67}

Given the righteous characterization of the speaker, this passage appears to be the moral of the fable, but analyzing the counterintuitive moment when a mouse argues in favor of his own oppression also undermines the fable’s ostensible message. Many critics have contended that this advice to let the cat indulge his desires as well as the mouse’s comment, “For hadde ye rat
es youre wille, ye kouthe noght rule yowselve,”\textsuperscript{68} prove that Langland supports the tyrannical cat and the cause of absolute monarchy. While I acknowledge that the (narrator-approved) mouse proposes to let the ruler mete out any justice that he sees fit, the text also casts some doubts upon the mouse’s motives and tactics. Essentially, the mouse argues that if the rodents encourage the cat to pursue other game like “conynges” and supply the cat-king with fancy meats or “fedeth hym al with

\textsuperscript{65} PP.B.Prol.182.

\textsuperscript{66} Paul Strohm makes the good point that this would be a “shockingly bald statement for the fourteenth-century. Nobody in 1381, for example, ever dreamed of killing the king” (Thanks to Paul Strohm for this comment on the Third Draft of this dissertation). The fact that the hypothetical situation posed by the mouse would not be on the minds of the poem’s contemporaries supports the argument that scholars should stop reading the fable as a close allegory for fourteenth-century rulers and leaders. The fable tackles the general issue of a subject’s duty to him/herself and to his country when a tyrannical leader helms the government. While it is tempting to read the fable against the events in the late fourteenth-century, Langland didn’t identify the cat as anyone in particular.

\textsuperscript{67} PP.B.Prol.185-190. Also see William Langland. \textit{Piers Plowman}: the prologue and passus I-VII of the B text as found in Bodleian MS. Laud Misc. 581, edited with notes and glossary by J. A. W. Bennett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 102, for possible interpretations of this line about the feast.

\textsuperscript{68} PP.B.Prol.201
venison,” the tyrant will leave them alone. This method of redirecting the cat’s energies towards other types of prey hardly curbs the tyrant’s murderous impulses, but it suggests that a self-concerned subject might not want the king to become too involved with domestic issues (like the proliferation of mice). How valuable is this advice? Encouraging the ruler to pursue “courtly” meats so that he ignores more homely pests may be another way of saying a tyrant causes the least amount of damage when he is focused on hunting and campaigning. This passage begs the question whether the subject or the king benefits more decidedly from the traditional separation of the commonalty from the ruling class. The practice of diverting the monarch by provisioning (or bribing) him with delicacies is scorned in other parts of Piers. The readers are meant to accept the mouse’s plan of action without any skepticism? Will this plan of action solve the problem or merely decrease the number of domestic slaughters and injustices?

After offering this piece of advice, “For better is a litel los than a long sorwe,” which encourages the council to accept that some mice (or subjects) should be sacrificed by the larger population in order to assure the continued presence of a stable (if murderous) ruler, the mouse speaker goes on to detail the travails brought about by having a young king. “For I herde my sire seyn, is seven yeer ypased,/ ‘Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge’./ That witnesseth Holy Writ, whoso wole it rede:/ Ve terre ubi puer est rex.” This passage, most especially the citation of Ecclesiastes 10:16, signals to the reader that the outwardly absolutist mouse (and fable) actually details the

69 The scene with Lady Meed (in Passuses II-IV) comes to mind most readily.
70 Nicole Lassahn has similar reservations about this scene as she notices, “All three of these possible plans – livery, distraction, and every rat for himself – protect some at the expense of others. All assume that someone has to get the short end of the stick, and none imagine a community where everyone is safe and happy. And hence none really solves the problem” (Lassahn 150).
71 PP.B.Prol.191.
72 PP.B.Prol.193-196.
problems with Richard II, the boy who ruled England in the time that the B-text was written. As in the scene with the lunatic and the human cohort, the reader must assess what an advisor is really saying. The fact that this advisor is not only outwardly supportive of the monarchy, but is also a non-threatening presence—he is a mouse after all—enables Langland to insert a critical insight about the contemporary political situation into the poem. Amusingly, even the mouse couches this piece of advice in rhetoric that distances the criticism from his person—he says that his mouse-father passed along this piece of wisdom about the social unrest brought about by young rulers seven years ago. And rather than simply relying upon the authority of his rodent progenitor, the mouse further distances himself from his own advice by relying on the auctoritas of the Bible.

The mouse, like his creator Langland, relies upon one of the most common methods of authorial self-protection. As Judith Ferster has noticed, “Writers had their own ways to shield themselves from the risks of criticizing kings. One way to evade the crime of compassing was to turn to classical and Biblical stories.” Langland, however, improves upon this technique by having the character within a well-known story turn to the Bible in order to voice concerns about having a young king—“Langland is, therefore at a triple remove: the author insulates his point first of all, by having a mouse spokesman, secondly by having the mouse say that he heard this advice seven years ago

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73 I feel that identifying an allegorical character as a historical person is appropriate in this context; since the phrase “Ve terre ubi puer est rex!” was viewed as a potential weapon against Richard II, which I will discuss later in this chapter, identifying the kitten as Richard seems inevitable.
74 PP.B.Prol,193-194: “For I herde my sire seyn, is seven yeer ypassed, / Ther the cat is a kitoun, the court is ful elenge.”
75 Ferster 38.
(hence conscientiously removing this advice from present-day), and thirdly by hearkening to Biblical authority." Langland, moreover, further dramatizes the difficulty of giving and judging good advice by quoting the tenth book of Ecclesiastes, which discusses the problems of advising a king and discerning wise men from fools—a theme that appears again and again in Langland’s prologue, particularly in the case of the perceptive goliard. Ecclesiastes 10:12-13, the verses leading up to passage that Langland’s mouse quotes, describe foolish advisors whose words result in “mischiefvous madness”: “The words of a wise man’s mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. The beginning of the words of his mouth are foolishness: and the end of his talk is mischiefvous madness.” This passage brings Langland’s lunatic to mind, and this impression that Ecclesiastes might have provided direction for Langland is strengthened as the next verse (Eccl. 10:14) describes a fool as “full of words” …much like the goliard. Whether or not Langland was thinking of Ecclesiastes the entire time he was composing the prologue, his observations about the pitfalls of listening to advisors echo Ecclesiastes’ pronouncements on the matter. The full quotation from Ecclesiastes 10:16, which authorizes the words of the mouse, reads, “Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child, and thy princes eat in the morning! Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for

76 The “seven yeer ypassed” could influence our dating of the B-text if we suppose that the mouse-father spoke when RII initially assumed the throne. Gwilym Dodd argues that the “seven years” detail aids the reader in identifying the kitten as Richard II: “This remark may have special significance because if the B-text was written in 1377 it would take us back to the year 1370 when Richard entered the direct line of royal succession after the death, in September of that year, of his elder brother Edward of Angoulême. At this point, of course, there was no prospect of minority rule, because the Black Prince was in good health, but Langland was writing with the benefit of hindsight, and the element of long-term foreboding adds greatly to the gravitas of the scene. This point also, of course, provides additional evidence in support of the dating of the B-text to the very beginning of Richard II’s reign”(Dodd 27).
77 Thanks to Paul Strohm for this comment on the Fourth Draft of this dissertation.
78 Eccl. 10-12-13.
79 Eccl. 10:14.
drunkenness.” In considering this oblique Biblical imagery, William P. Brown explains that verses sixteen and seventeen “convey two contrasting scenarios. Together, they illustrate the tie that binds the land’s welfare with the integrity of the royal office. The land flourishes when the king is of noble stock and stature, but it suffers when he is a mere servant (more accurately, “youth” na’ar; but c.f. 4:13-16). The unorthodox background of the king reflects unorthodox behavior in the royal court: the princes put on their lavish banquets in the morning, and the day of sober rule is ruined.” By having his mouse quote this passage of the Bible, Langland remarks upon the danger of Richard II becoming king at the age of ten in 1377—like a kitten, Richard II may attack his own commune (whom the mice and rats play in the fable) by administrating domestic laws unwisely rather than satisfying himself with appropriate pursuits like hunting and warfare (or the gamey fare of conies and venison). By comparing the cat who “is a kitoun” to the “youth” in Ecclesiastes, Langland implies that the kitten (or Richard II) lacks the maturity and perspicacity to prevent the regent, other nobles, and himself from feasting inappropriately. By combining the Biblical passage and the fable, Langland makes it clear that a young prince may not only behave like an immoderate drunkard but also act like a cat eating a mouse—a young king’s reckless actions have the potential to gnaw upon the kingdom and the bodies of his powerless subjects. Or to put it more bluntly, a

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80 Eccl. 10:16-17
82 PP.B.Prol.194.
83 Describing this scene Anthony Gross agrees, “For his playful cat the mice present the opportunity of a vicious game. In his gentler moods he would pounce on them and toss them up and down; if angered he would grip his victims between his paws and scratch and claw until life itself was loathsome to them. While this image might be considered too extreme to be taken as a paradigm for the relationship between the fourteenth-century monarchy and its subjects, there are persuasive reasons why the description should not be lightly dismissed.” See Anthony Gross, “Langland’s Rats: A moralist’s view of Parliament,”
young king (like a servant) is incapable of controlling other nobles or providing any security for the common people.

To understand this criticism of young Richard II’s government, the reader must interpret the fable in light of the Biblical passage. Langland has carefully veiled the critique within several levels of fiction; the author needed to use several distancing techniques partly in order to save his text from governmental censure. Most scholars speculate that the prologue of B-text was first composed around the “Good Parliament” of 1376—at this time, the political climate enabled relatively open discussion about the government, but it became increasingly dangerous to criticize Richard II after he took the crown in 1377. In her study on advice literature, Judith Ferster argues that Chaucer felt political pressure to suppress any text that could be read as a criticism of Richard II as he was writing The Tale of Melibee; as a result, he removed an occurrence of Ecclesiastes 10:16 from his translation of Renaud de Louens’ Le livre de Melibee et Prudence:

[Chaucer] did give us one clear indication that he knew the tale could have political reverberations and that he wanted to control them; he left out the proverb in his French source [“Et Salemon dit, Doulente la terre qui a enfant a seigneur,”] on how troublesome it is to have a child as a king. This deletion shows that Chaucer knew that the tale could be taken as a reference to Richard the Second’s accession to the throne when he was still a

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Parliamentary History 9:2 (1990): 286. See pp.292-93 for Gross’ examples when “the Commons [was] afraid that the King might be grievously moved against them.”
young boy. The deletion changes the French text to limit the interpretation of the tale.\textsuperscript{84}

Since Chaucer decided not to translate Ecclesiastes 10:16, it seems probable that alluding to a king’s youth (even by citing a Biblical passage) was not an acceptable practice among Ricardian loyalists. While Chaucer removed the citation of Ecclesiastes 10:16 from his translation of the French source, Langland actually added Ecclesiastes 10:16 to his version of the “belling of the cat” fable—no other versions of this fable contain the mouse’s speech about the problem of having a young king. Later, in the fifteenth century, there is a case in which a dissident uses the same verse from Ecclesiastes to criticize King Henry VI:

At an inquisition taken at Reading, who for a long while had been seeking to diminish the king’s dignity and who had subtly and traitorously sought to deprive him of his prosperity and rule by means of provoking discord and war in the kingdom between the king and his lieges, had on 13 April 1444 wished and desired the death of the king and the destruction of the kingdom. In the abbey church at Reading [Thomas] Kerver had quoted with approval to John Baynard, servant of the abbot, the sermon given by John Curtis, a Dominican, on Palm Sunday before the royal court at Abingdon. The text had apparently been ‘Woe to thee O land when thy

\textsuperscript{84} Ferster 92-93.
king is a child.’ Kerver had maliciously said that it would have been worth more than £100,000 to the kingdom had the king been dead the last twenty years.”

What is fascinating about this case is that the Dominican, John Curtis, who originally wrote the sermon discussing Ecclesiastes 10:16 did not intend it to be used as an incendiary text; instead the preacher willingly presented it before the royal court on one of most important feast days on the Christian calendar. Thomas Kerver, however, recognizes the critical potential of the Biblical text, and he quotes the sermon in order to present to idea of regicide.

Langland situates the quotation of Ecclesiastes 10:16 in such a way that both the royal-loyalist and the dissident interpretations of the text remain available. A reader with knowledge of Ecclesiastes would recognize that chapter ten and the bulk of Langland’s prologue advise all subjects to support the king despite his flaws, but Langland deliberately inserts the most contentious (and easily misinterpreted) part of chapter ten to make this point. By glossing the story of the Bible’s problematic youthful king as a kitten, the author takes great pains to dramatize those royal flaws but always within the safe structure of the fable with its distancing effect and animal concealments. After citing Ecclesiastes, the mouse declares, “And though it costned me catel, biknownen it I nolde./ But siffren as himself wolde [s]o doon as hym liketh--/Coupled and uncoupled to cacche what thei mowe./ Forthi each a wis wight I warne – wite wel his owne!”

The practice of a subject sacrificing his personal wealth (or catel) to save “his owne” (person? land?)

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86 PP.B.Prol.205-208.
household?) from the anger of the king may allude to the practice of unfair taxation by
the monarch. A king allowed to do whatever “hym liketh” at the expense of the people
(and the common profit) is in fact a description of a tyrant. In Passus XIX of *Piers
Plowman*, as Anna Baldwin has noticed, Conscience condemns this practice by insisting
“that [the king] should ask for such funds in order to help the nation defend itself from its
enemies…and not in order to bleed the nation dry…for his personal gratification….The
law cannot bow to his personal desires, or even to his personal needs.”

By having the mouse conclude his speech by emphasizing that every rodent should save its own skin,
the fable posits tyranny as the possible outcome of a group of subjects letting a king (or at
least a boy-king) have absolute rule of the land. While the mouse stresses that rodents
(or the commons) are unable to rule themselves without a king, his remarks also suggest
that the people will suffer greatly under the current king. Since Langland condemns this
kind of exploitation elsewhere in the poem, are readers meant to deem this outcome
acceptable?

The mouse’s conclusion, moreover, becomes a bit more perplexing since he uses
the phrase, “coupled and uncoupled.” J.A.W. Bennett comments, “Skeat translates
‘coupled and uncoupled’ as ‘held in or free’…but if the animal is held in it cannot run
after its prey, whereas the speaker is advising that [the cat] should be allowed to do so.”

While Bennett suggests that the reader translate this phrase as “jointly or severally” to
avoid this confusion, I believe that Skeat’s original interpretation is correct since
Langland employs the verb “uncoupled” using its “free” definition in line B.Prol.162-
163: “And somme colers of crafty work; uncoupled they wenden/ Bothe in wareyne and

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88 PP.B.Prol.196. “Ve terre ubi puer est rex!”
89 Bennett 102.
in waast where hem leve liketh.” The mouse, therefore, acknowledges (once again) the idea of “holding in” the monarch even as he speaks against this practice in the concluding lines.

Taken together, the potentially inflammatory complaints of the mouse and the very fact that Ecclesiastes 10:16 makes an appearance in the prologue create the potential for anti-Ricardian interpretations. Consequently, Langland took great pains to distance himself (and even his mouse) from the negative connotations of the verse by relying upon a well-known fable and the Bible to authorize his remarks. The last verse of Ecclesiastes’ book ten warns the reader about the danger of criticizing the king: “Curse not the king, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter.”90 Langland seems to have digested this lesson. Although Langland dares to insert a complaint about the difficulty of living in a realm that has a young king (or kitten), the author also understands that any criticism of Richard II will disseminate through rumor. His self-protective tactic of veiling his views about dangerous leaders and acquiescent counselors in quotations from the Bible and obviously fictional conceits such as talking animals removes a potentially provocative appraisal of the political climate from real-life fourteenth-century England to a rarified literary terrain. And so as the fable continues, Langland performs a tour de force of mitigation by integrating fictions-within-fictions and suggesting that the rats and mice who ran into the poem so suddenly may be as insubstantial as a dream.

Instead of offering an interpretation or a moral, which is the typical way to end an animal fable, the narrator asks his readers, “ye men that ben murye”, to “devyne” this

90 Eccl.10:20.
“metel”\(^{91}\) In this short line, Langland plays around with the generic implications of the prologue by conflating two ambiguous literary forms,\(^{92}\) the dream vision and the animal fable. In doing so, he confirms the need for convoluted frameworks when one dares to offer advice or insights about the king; moreover, this line suggests the brilliance of Langland’s own technique of placing a critical Biblical verse within a fable within a dream vision. By offering the responsibility of interpretation of the “metel” to the reader, Langland not only admits that the passage is difficult to decipher, but he also implies that there is more than one interpretation available. In his influential book *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco first acknowledges that all works of art are “open” to some degree because texts, paintings, pieces of music, etc. are all susceptible to unique interpretations by their audiences.\(^{93}\) Works that are significantly more “closed,” however, only make “a range of rigidly pre-established and ordained interpretive solutions” available, which “never allow the reader to move outside the strict control of the author,”\(^{94}\) while in more “open” works, “an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that the directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed in question.”\(^{95}\) 

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\(^{91}\) “What this metel bymeneth, ye men that ben murye,/ Devyne ye, for I ne dar, by deere God in hevene!” PP B. Prol. 209-210.

\(^{92}\) I should note that Langland also conflates the dream vision with the fable when he writes the infestation transition—by making the reader unsure of the generic terrain, Langland implies that these generic markers are nebulous.


“A work of art, therefore, is a complete and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced, organic whole, while at the same time consisting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself” (Eco 4).

\(^{94}\) Eco, *Open Work* 6.

\(^{95}\) Eco, *Open Work* 9.
The “directional centers,” or the interpretive keys and theoretical systems that a reader might use to unlock the meaning of the text of Piers are not exactly missing (the work depends on a Christian worldview), but various symbols, teachings, and perspectives from Christianity as well as political philosophy are constantly questioned even as they’re being employed. Piers as a whole, like the inlaid “belling of the cat” fable, encourages skepticism—readers are called upon to question definite interpretive solutions. Moreover, as an open work, Piers often employs language that Eco might term as chaosmos “that can be defined only in terms of its substantial ambiguity”\(^96\)—a good example of this ambiguous language occurs in B.I.148-158\(^97\) when Holy Church uses an “elliptical and allusive”\(^98\) series of images (such as treacle of heaven, spice, the plant of peace, the linden tree, and the point of the needle) to describe Truth and Love; P.M. Kean in her article “Langland on the Incarnation” remarks upon the difficulty of attaching definite meanings to these images and traces them to medical terminology, Biblical passages, classical texts, and vernacular poetry.\(^99\) Kean cautions that “to assume that Langland was thinking of one specific text together with one particular exegesis, and that his aim was to call this to the reader’s mind is, I believe to miss the point. He is, in fact using imagery which has arisen through the traditional association of groups of biblical texts. These were, in many cases, brought together in early Christian times—St. Paul is

\(^{96}\) Eco, *Open Work* 41-42. On this page, Eco details that “semantic plurality”, “a multiplicity of roots”, highly referential/suggestive symbols often characterize this chaosmos, or “plurivocal message”.

\(^{97}\) “For Truthe telleth that love is treacle of heavene;/ May no synne be on hym seene that that spice useth ./ And alle his werkes he wroughte with love as hym liste./ And also the plante of pees, moost precious of virtues:/ For hevene myghte nat holden it, so was it hevy of hymselve./ Til it hadde of the erthe eten his fille./ And whan it hadde of this fold flesh and blood taken./ Was nevere leef upon lynde lighter therafter./ And portative and persaunt as the point of a needle./ That myghte noon armure it lette ne none heighe walles.” *PP*. B.1.148-158.


often the forerunner—and the process results in an established imagery with complex associations which is at the disposal of every Christian writer [and reader] in the Middle Ages.”

The “belling of the cat” narrative similarly invites the reader to parse multivalent imagery. The famous fable had been associated with moral preaching as well as political oratory, which invite different interpretive methods. Once the reader parses the complex symbolism associated with the fable itself, Langland asks the reader to reconsider the animal tale alongside a particularly evocative and complex passage from Ecclesiastes.

Not only does this tendency of the text to combine images with “complex associations” that could be interpreted several ways urge readers to approach Piers as an “open” work, but Rosemarie P. McGerr has commented that B-text incites the reader to finish the poem (much as the narrator incites the reader to “finish” the “belling of the cat” fable) because it “ends with the implication that the revelation given in the dreamer’s experience is not yet complete: at XX. 380-85, Conscience announces his intent to become a pilgrim and search for Piers Plowman…Though Conscience’s decision suggests an end to the quest in the future, his loud cries to Grace for aid awaken the dreamer, and the poem ends abruptly without interpretive comment or expression of hope to counter the bleak picture of personal and social crisis that forms the final vision.”

In noticing Langland’s reluctance to provide any resolution to the end of the B-text as a whole, McGerr uncovers the interpretive challenge posed by Piers Plowman in refusing to make sense of scenes that depict social unrest. The reader must decide for himself

100 Kean, “Incarnation” 350.
whether a clear moral or solution exists, and the open-endedness of the poem may imply that the problem is irresolvable.

Later versions of the poem alter the “open” tone of the B-text in favor of a more explanatory approach. Not only did Langland make additions to the ending of the B-text in his composition of the C-text, but several contemporary readers also molded “new endings” and other amendments to Piers Plowman. Some Piers imitators (such as John But) approached the poem as a “closed” work with a definite author. Anne Middleton comments that But’s “good end” to the A-text is “not a scribal explicit but a tribute in kind, a ‘makyng’ about a making, an act of both literary criticism and literary imitation,”102 and she remarks that But is “fastidious in declaring his own name…and] equally careful to raise the status of his participation on Langland’s enterprise.”103 Since But endeavors to differentiate himself and his ending from “Langland” and Piers Plowman, this continuator strives to represent Piers Plowman as a completed (or “closed”) whole. Middleton notices, however, that But’s approach forces him to “add” resolution: “In ‘makying this end’…John But must resolve the ambiguities of this project, and to do so he must take the repeatedly proclaimed restitutive intent as final, and take the author at his word.”104 In erasing ambiguity from an ambiguous work, But dispenses with one of the dominant stylistic features of Piers, and in “taking the author at his word,” But misses Piers’ own injunctions to question authorities with ready answers.105

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103 Middleton 247.
104 Middleton 250.
105 Middleton, moreover, points out “For nearly six hundred years, all that most deeply dismays those determined to regard Piers Plowman as morally improving reading emanates from the thousand-volt mortal shocks administered by such moment as this [one with Conscience in the final passus]. John But, I suggest,
attempting to “close” the text, But has, somewhat ironically, highlighted its “open” features.

Given the conflicting messages within Piers, the consistent urgings of Piers to question texts and authorities, the confusing, multivalent language of Piers, the ambiguous ending of Piers, and the divergent interpretations of Piers by its contemporaries, I believe that it is appropriate to view the “belling of the cat” fable as a primer for the reader of Piers. At this early juncture in the text, Langland has already thrown down the creative and interpretive gauntlet for the willing reader, and this fable instructs its audience that every line holds the potential for multiple and even contradictory readings. In addition to challenging the reader, Langland is responding to the lurking danger of a court official taking exception to a written complaint against the young king by cloaking his commentary in fictional premises and narratives, and this early foray into controversial thought prepares the reader to encounter the critiques of the English government and religious institutions throughout the rest of Piers.

Quite impressively, Langland’s methods of hiding substantive criticism within the mouths of animals, combining several distancing levels of fiction and encouraging “open” reading practices appear to have saved this part of his poem from any major revisions. In addition these tactics seem to have prevented government and Church authorities from judging the poem too critically. Barbara Newman reminds modern readers, “potential heretics came to [the attention of medieval bishops and officials] only was such a reader, and it was through such reasoning that he became the admiring continuator who undertook—not only with his prayers but with a retrospective rereading of the value of the ‘profitable werkes’ to which he wrote a pious closure—to deliver the poet Langland from the dreadful logic of his represented pursuit and untimely ambush by the forces of mortality; the seamless grammar that links John But’s prayers to the terms of his rescue tends to confirm that they are the work of this second ‘maker’” (Middleton 254-255).
if their activities were sufficiently public and widespread to cause anxiety,” and she demonstrates visionary-allegorical genres “might protect even the most audacious theological writings.” Newman also points out, “that we don’t hear of Langland being personally persecuted, despite the role of Piers Plowman in the Rising of 1381.”

In response to Newman’s insights Kathryn Kerby-Fulton has responded, “What it is important to say, however, is that although many of these writers died in their beds, many of their followers did not. Many paid the ultimate price, and paid it excruciatingly. And these authors themselves must have had many anguished nights in their beds…Langland—who wrote under a pen name from all we can tell—likely withdrew from London (as the distribution of C manuscripts strongly suggests) and apparently engaged in a large-scale campaign of protective and polemical revision. No matter what his precise politics, he must have lived the rest of his life feeling anxious that something he had written caused men to die.”

Although Kerby-Fulton imagines the plight of poor William Langland somewhat melodramatically, her insight that he revised significant portions of the C-text to align with more conservative political views has been argued by Anna Baldwin as well.

The potentially inflammatory portions of the fable of the rats, however, remain unchanged in multiple C-text manuscripts. For example, in a number of British Library manuscripts, the Latin “Ve terre ubi puer est rex!” line stands out to the eyes of the

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108 It seems relevant that Langland started composing the more ‘open’ B-text before 1381. Anna Baldwin argues in The Theme of Government in Piers Plowman, the acts of ‘closure’ (around his support of absolutism) become apparent in the C-text, and so I wonder if both Langland and his contemporaries tried to lessen ambiguity as the political situation in England became more dangerous.
109 PP.B.Prol.196.
A late fourteenth-century manuscript, British Library, MS Additional 35157, provides a C-text in which all of the Latin passages including “Ve terre ubi puer est rex” are underlined in red ink, and a particularly intriguing manuscript from the early fifteenth century, British Library, MS Additional 34779, records the C-text of Piers in which line 206, “Ve terre ubi puer est rex,” not only appears in red ink but it also centered in the middle of the page in larger font. It’s very eye-catching. The scribal practice of emphasizing Latin lines by writing them in red ink accounts for this dazzling effect, and it seems reasonable to assume that Langland anticipated the textual consequence of writing the line in Latin—the red line pops out in the midst of black-inked, English-language fable. Ecclesiastes 10:16, which is actually tangential to the main theme of the mouse’s argument, becomes highlighted (literally) within the textual tradition of the poem. Langland may have hidden the quotation among several distancing levels of fiction, but he obviously hid Eccl. 10:16 in plain sight. This controversial quotation, however, is not removed from later versions of the B- or C-texts.¹¹¹

This lack of revision is quite striking given that significant portions of the B-text prologue and fable were changed as Langland devised the C-text. The C-text alters the mouse’s concluding lines by removing the troubling “coupled and uncoupled” phrase and inserting the idea (that appeared earlier in the speech in B-text) that rats and mice plague

¹¹⁰ For another example, in British Library Additional MS. 10.574, which is a conjoint manuscript from the fourteenth century, the scribe combines C Pr-II.128, AII.86-198, and BII-XX. In the marginalia by the beginning of the fable, the scribe writes, “Conseil of R(K?)a /tones and of /Mees A (flourish)” and all the Latin lines in the Prologue are underlined in red ink.

¹¹¹ This claim is true for the following manuscripts, which I have been able to look through:
men. As Skeat suggested in his reading of “coupled and uncoupled,” the phrase causes some doubt as to whether the cat should be held in or not. By removing the line, Langland erases this doubt. In addition, the author amends the strong “rats can’t rule themselves” sentiment to end of the C-text mouse’s speech:

And thow hit costed me catel, byknowen Y ne wolde,  
But soffre and sey nou[gh]t—and so is þe beste—  
Til þat mischief amende hem, þat many men chasteth.  
For many mannys malt we muys wolde distruye,  
And [y]e route of ratones, of reste men awake,  
Ne were þe cat of þe court and [y]onge kitones toward;  
For hadde [y] ratones [y]oure reik [y]e couthe nat reule [y]owsuluen.112

Instead of concluding his speech by arguing that every rodent should watch out for his own interests, the C-text mouse concludes by emphasizing the inability of rodents (or common people) to rule themselves. The final line of C-text promotes the need for a king rather than implying that the king is extorting goods and money from his subjects (as the B-text does). Moreover, the C-text mouse argues that subjects should say nothing because “mischief” will eventually “amende” the monarch. The C-text argues that a subject should not confront his king, but it also recognizes that a king should not behave according to his own desires without any reprimand. The C-text, therefore, calls upon the force of ‘mischief’ or chance (instead of the subject) to chasten the king. In addition, the C-text’s method of rendering the rodents as disgusting enemies to man in the conclusion prevents the reader from feeling sorry for the mouse who has to sacrifice his property (and possibly his life) to a greedy, dangerous cat.

C-text revisions all clarify the mouse’s argument that subjects have no right to complain or act out against a dangerous monarch; however, the verse from Ecclesiastes 10:16 remains in the C-text. Both the B-text and C-text mouse speakers qualify the line

112 PP.C.Prol.210-216.
by assuring their audiences: “Shal nevere the cat ne the kiton by my counsel be
greved.”

(And I should note that the C-text inserts this line directly after the Latin
quotation of Ecclesiastes 10:16 while the B-text presents this explanation five lines after
the quote appears.) This qualification, however, does not change the fact that the mouse
has compared the kitten (or the young king) to the drunken, harmful princes from the
Bible. Nor does it change the reality that Ecclesiastes 10:16 was recognized as a
potentially seditious verse by Ricardian and Lancastrian writers. The fact that Langland,
unlike Chaucer, retained this wholly unnecessary part of the mouse’s speech in his
comparatively “closed” C-text suggests that the author thought he could get away
keeping it.

Following the injunction of the narrator to interpret the “metel” of the outspoken
rat and mouse, the prologue fragments into calls and cries from an urban marketplace. A
“crye” of the “commune” preceded the fable, and an impenetrable polyphony of human
utterance follows it—“Cokes and hire knaves cryden, ‘Hote pies, hote!/ Goode gees and
drys, Go we dyne, go we!/ Taverners until hem tolden the same:/ ‘Whit wyn of Oseye
and wyn of Gascoigne,/ Of Ryn and of the Rochel, the roost to defie!’”—these shouts
sell, buy, and trade money, food, and drink, and the focused political discourse of the
animals fades away as an uproar of human consumption, greed, and busyness overtakes
the poem. In this din of human noise, the voices of common animals provide an appraisal

113 PP.B.Prol.203.
114 Paul Strohm has also noted that the two authors are “in very different degrees of indebtedness to the
crown, as well.” [Thanks to Paul Strohm for this comment on the Final Draft of this dissertation] Chaucer
may have felt a greater obligation to remove any criticisms of Richard from his text since he had held a
prominent position in the Ricardian court.
of human affairs that ultimately sounds more rational than most readers might initially expect.
Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices

Chapter Two: Political Birdsong in The Parliament of Fowls

I. Introduction

Just as William Langland calls upon rodent voices to articulate contentious political opinions and heartfelt complaints arising in a parliamentary assembly, Geoffrey Chaucer demonstrates a sensitive ear for the harmonies and dissonances of different kinds of political discourse as he assembles the multifarious and vocal bird flock that speaks at will and eventually flies away at the end of Parliament of Fowls.116 The diverse calls and distinct songs of these fowl convey the infinite possibilities of speech as well as the irrationality of any impulse to contain or suppress even a single voice as the poem proposes an inclusive vision of society in which representatives from the nobility as well as the lower ranks converse in the same forum. The striking feature that unites Chaucer’s birds into a single political body, however, is the poet’s perception that noble orators and lower class speakers share the common goals of gaining social ascendance and building political clout. In the late fourteenth century, the English Parliament was flooded with private and common petitions from an increasingly varied cross-section of society, and this political trend to present complaints and requests in the progressively public arena of the Commons provides the crucial correlative to Chaucer’s diverse, vociferous avian assembly.117 Outspoken citizens from different social levels exhibited eloquence on their


117 Marion Turner helpfully theorizes the relationship between England’s legal documentary culture, contemporary political conflicts, and Chaucer’s poetry, specifically in his House of Fame, “But by expressing these ideas in politically resonant language, by engaging with discourses also used in contemporary proclamations and petitions, and by writing such a poem in the midst of a maelstrom of
own behalf, and heated debate often resulted from the struggle for political recognition and favor.\textsuperscript{118} Petitioners recognized that an effective way to make their grievance or claim heard was to pose it as a common concern,\textsuperscript{119} and Chaucer both scrutinizes and satirizes a mock parliamentary body in which presenting a personal grievance in name of the common good is politically expedient. As all of the fowl sing, speak, or cackle for themselves, their discordant notes Inspire doubt whether a harmonious outcome is possible for this community. I would suggest however that Chaucer’s choice to present the petitioning parliamentarians as freely speaking birds connotes cautious optimism towards, if not a clear endorsement of, parliament’s changing social composition. The self-centered and complaining voices of \textit{Parliament of Fowls} join together in a dissonant chorus striving for some measure of harmony. It is doubtful whether harmony is possible, but it is posed as an ideal by the roundel at the conclusion of the poem.

The genre of Bird debate provided Chaucer the perfect idiom with which to present diverse and clashing parliamentary voices. Birdsong had become an object of interest in the later Middle Ages “because the poetic texts of a number of songs from this\textsuperscript{118} For more on the growing significance of petitions in the late fourteenth-century, see W. Mark Ormrod, “Introduction: Medieval Petitions in Context,” \textit{Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance}, eds. W. Mark Ormrod, Gwilym Dodd, and Anthony Musson (York: York Medieval Press, 2009) 2-3.\textsuperscript{119} Gwilym Dodd discusses the relationship of private petitions and common petitions at length: “common petitions were inextricably linked to private petitions and they form an important part of the story of how private interests continued to be represented in parliament over the course of the late medieval period.” (Gwilym Dodd, Justice and Grace: Private Petitioning and the English Parliament in the Late Middle Ages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 126-127). In a similar argument, W. Mark Ormrod observes, “The distinction between ‘private’ and ‘common’ was a fluctuating and sometimes contested one, since a number of different influences were at work in deciding what made a petition ‘common’” (W. Mark Ormrod, “Murmur, Clamour and Noise: Voicing Complaint and Remedy in Petitions to the English Crown, c.1300-c.1460,” \textit{Medieval Petitions: Grace and Grievance}, eds. W. Mark Ormrod, Gwilym Dodd, and Anthony Musson. York: York Medieval Press, 2009) 136-37).
time have their singers imitate birdsong or voice the speech of birds,”
and the ability of different species of birds to allegorize and intone the concerns of various humans produced a poetic mode in which new and argumentative parliamentary voices could be heard. Intelligent rhetoric and lofty sentiments are expressed by humble and refined fowl, and the nobles show the same capacity for self-absorption and sloth as every other bird. The ironic twist in the Parliament’s generous and hopeful social vision is that all the birds exhibit an almost genetic similarity in their shared foibles of ambition, arrogance, and self-centered rancor towards others. These mutual failings manifest in the different species and ranks, suggesting that people’s faults and petty impulses contribute to the formation of a community as much as any constructive or altruistic aspirations. As a result, even as the bird parliament provides a uniquely positive vision of a collective political body and some empathy for lower class speakers, Chaucer recognizes the many individual drives that sometimes prevent assemblies from accomplishing constructive goals for society as a whole. Although speakers may claim that they strive for the common good, personal goals tend to take precedence. The all-embracing optimism and nuanced pessimism of Chaucer’s social vision provides an open-minded commentary on the increasingly egalitarian and volatile disposition of English assemblages at the end of the fourteenth century, suggesting that listening to the shades of meaning in an individual politician’s clarion call, or a bird’s song, leads to a more complete understanding of society’s direction.

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120 Leach 3. In Leach’s discussion, she also specifies, “the imagery of the discussion of birdsong’s musicality is affected by the species of bird used, with each carrying moral and symbolic baggage of its own”(5).

121 In discussing the application of birdsong in musical and poetic practice, Leach comments, “Although it not material in the way that instruments are, birdsong is not immaterial either. Here it functions as a conceptual instrument – a metaphor, simile, or comparand – that enables writers and musicians to situate their own human musical practices, in particular their own vocal instrument, within a specific worldview”(Leach 4).
II. Adapting the Bird Debate Tradition

Earlier medieval bird debate poems, such as Florence et Blancheflor, Blancheflor et Florence, Melior et Ydoine, and La Messe des Oisius, provided an illustrative example of a debate in which different species argue for either a knight or a clerk. In this poem, the sparrow-hawk argues, “I say that knights are more courteous than clerks,” and the nightingale replies, “You are lying about that, Sir hawk. A knight will never know as much about delight and courtesy as the clerk who has a lover.”

Chaucer enlivens this traditional literary form by depicting the aristocracy as several individuals with different points of view and motivations splitting into factions; moreover, he offers the lower ranks similarly subtle treatment by gesturing towards verbal distinctions and divisions in his seed, water, and worm fowl. In Chaucer’s comprehensive and perceptive view of various speakers within a parliamentary body, the poet adapts the traditional bird debates’ interest in portraying and lampooning the idiomatic rhetoric of different social sets to create a rich, diverse political soundscape.

The discrete calls and speeches of Chaucer’s unique birds connote important distinctions in status and merit, and observing his subtle approach towards rhetoric and speech rewards the reader looking for a commentary on which kinds of parliamentarians, factions, and ranks may actually benefit the commonwealth, or if any of them do.

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122 See B.A. Windeatt, ed, Chaucer’s Dream Poetry: Sources and Analogues (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982). I should note that I intend to extend this study to other medieval debates poems.

Chaucer’s eventual challenge in adapting the early bird debates’ penchant for clearly defined estates rhetoric would be to bring the same amount of distinctiveness to the speeches of three different noble eagles and the myriad voices emerging from the increasingly influential and moneyed non-noble classes comprised of landowners, churchmen, and merchants. In his variation on a classic bird debate, Chaucer uses familiar tropes to make a subtle and timely political point. When nobles fight amongst themselves, the community is thrown into a state of chaos. The binary debates of the early poems set the nobility against the clergy in what amounted to harmless spats; in *Blancheflour et Florence* for example, the birds strike “with their wings as if with swords,” replacing steel with feathers. Instead of depicting a lightweight battle between noble and clerical rivals, Chaucer dramatizes the way an unsettled dispute between members of the noble class may invite the rancor of every subject in the kingdom. A droll battle scene cannot settle the problems that Chaucer raises; instead, it

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124 In describing the social composition of Parliament and petitioners, Gwilym Dodd remarks on the relatively high social standing and economic power of representatives in the Commons: “They were common petitions only insofar as they promoted the common interests of the political elite gathered in parliament; for large sections of the population who did not have access to parliament, such petitions almost certainly would have been regarded, for intents and purposes, as private petitions – petitions which promoted the interests of a narrow clique rather than of the people in general” (Dodd, *Justice and Grace* 142). In his footnote #56 to this claim, however, Dodd cites G.L. Harriss’ view in *King, Parliament and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369* (Oxford 1975) that there was a discernible change in the representative quality of the Commons’ agenda, from one that genuinely sought to defend the interests of the rural poor in the first half of the fourteenth century, to one much more geared to the propertied classes in the second half of the fourteenth century.” Nevertheless, Dodd also surveys the petitioners who did not fit into this category to “more accurately measure the reach of parliament, as a petitionary forum, into the various layers of late medieval society” (Dodd, *Justice and Grace* 206). He reviews the possible petitionary roles of “Peasants” on pp. 207-211; “Women” on pp. 211-215; and the “Nobility” on pp. 215-220.

125 Windeatt 99. (See the entire battle in “Le geste de Blancheflour et Florence” in Oulmont, Charles, ed. *Les débats du clerc et du chevalier dans la littérature poétique du Moyen-Age* Paris: Champion, 1911, pp.181-182; Ins.384-404. “L’alowe son gaunt au roi rent/ De prover ceo q’ele ad enpris/ Saunz fuer, ceo vous pelvis;/ … De mautalent sont assemblée/ Il entresaillirent delivrement,/ Morderent de bekes mult durement,/ Baterent des eles comme d’espeie/ Si tres felonessement/ Qe mult de pennes of le vent/ Volerent un arpent mesuree./ Mès l’alowe sailli plus haut:/ Le papegeai a cel assaut/ La ad pris e la ad jeus gettee/ A terre baas, e puis la prist/ Par la gorge saunz respit;/ Son contredire la ad poi eidee.”
seems as though the initial conflict between the three tercels could lead to widespread class warfare.

Unlike other bird debates that question which class loves more satisfactorily but still treat each class as homogenous or self-consistent, *Parliament of Fowls* implies the noble class (and the rest of the kingdom as a result) is thrown into confusion when different nobles are forced to compete for the same prize, the most desirable mate carrying with her promises of position and power. The formel has a choice of three lovers. She could choose the lover (and by implication the leader) who thinks only of his lady, an impulse that follows the traditional model of idealized chivalry. Chaucer complicates the straightforward chivalric standard of prior bird debates, however, by emphasizing the nobles’ often neglected duty to promote the common good in the first portions of *Parliament*. In portraying Africanus from Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* and later articulating the lower birds’ need for “comun spede,” Chaucer presents the philosophy that a parliamentary body should work for the common good, not just *attest* to work for the common good. Given these idealistic standards, the three tercels prove to be incompetent lovers and leaders. The troika engages in self-indulgent rhetorical grandstanding and ignores the needs of the impatient lower fowl as well as the formel herself. Since the other birds are anxious to fly away and propagate with as little delay as possible, the noble birds should put aside time-consuming chivalric customs of ornate speechmaking and chaste adoration for the sake of the community. The delay caused by the three eagles debating also suggests that an aristocracy rife with internal divisions threatens the commonwealth.
Chaucer gestures towards a political climate in which it was essential to differentiate competing nobles and discern where alliances lay. Lee Patterson has noted a similar impulse in the presentation of the maddeningly identical characters of Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight’s Tale* – in his analysis, he detects a critique of the traditional chivalric idea that a monolithic noble class existed despite the social and economic advancement of the commons (constituted of non-nobles like merchants and public servants) as well as the popularity of ideologies that looked to the welfare of the entire commonwealth. As Patterson explains, “It was noble culture’s inability to come to self-consciousness, to rewrite its own ideology in relation to socioeconomic change, that *The Knight’s Tale* records.”

*Parliament of Fowls* similarly records this shift in late fourteenth century values and social organization, but with a view to the whole of society instead of just the noble class. The poem demonstrates Chaucer’s self-conscious realization that dissimilar ideologies (like the ones symbolized by Africanus, Venus, and Nature), “birds” of every feather (nobles, clergy, landed gentry, non-nobles, merchants, etc.), and discourses (courty, parliamentary, legal, and even animal) vie for influence in a society where the “rigid barriers between each group” blur, but that every authority should be assessed and doubted equally.

III. Three Eagles

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127 But *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole does address the opinions and circumstances of many classes in society of course, and *The Knight’s Tale* is only the first tale in this series. In many ways, *Parliament of Fowls* develops the same themes and social scope that will appears in multiple story sequence of *The Canterbury Tales*.
Turning first to the debate of the three eagles, Chaucer imagines “competition and social distinction within the putatively unified nobility.” The language of the royal eagle and two lesser nobles draws on the traditions of chivalric rhetoric associated with the noble “estate” or rank; and while they pay lip service to parliament’s “common” project in their speeches, their ornate loquacity and protracted bickering also demonstrate their indifference to the other birds. This private competition between members of the nobility disregards the interests of the community even as the eagles exploit this public forum to resolve their dispute. As a historical corollary to the poem, Richard II found difficulty in consolidating support as powerful barons vied for preeminence in court by dividing into factions. Some powerful aristocrats worked to curb royal spending and taxation while others sanctioned all of the monarch’s decisions. The nobles separated into increasingly pugnacious groups, and parliament became the forum in which concerned nobles voiced their discontent or support of the current rule. English nobles

129 Thanks to Paul Strohm for this comment on the Third Draft of this dissertation.
130 Parliament of Fowls’ vision of a fluid society meeting in garrulous and candid public assemblies and accomplishing little provides a timely commentary on the parliamentary assemblies in the 1370s and 1380s. The members of the Good Parliament of 1376 introduced reforms to staunch the tide of royal spending and charge some of the government’s most powerful ministers for fiscal wrongdoings, but the almost immediate nullification of all these measures in the Bad Parliament of 1377 would hardly have instilled faith in the surety of political alliances, promises, and laws enacted in parliament. The group dynamics of parliament and advisory assemblies only led to minor or negligible changes in policy since the Appellants were unable to uphold the reforms and appeals of the Wonderful Parliament of 1386. The fractious forum of parliament allowed the king to reverse their mandate, and in 1389 Richard even dispensed with the constraints of council in order to enact his policies without impediment or complaint. And even more shocking for Chaucer, a member of Richard II’s court, would have been the sudden decision of the Appellants to execute the king’s intimate advisers in the Merciless Parliament of 1388 and Richard’s subsequent efforts to execute the Appellants during the 1390s. For more background on this subject see Nigel Saul, Richard II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) 19-20; Anthony Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility (London: Edward Arnold, 1973) 21, 23-4; Anthony Musson and W.M. Ormrod, The Evolution of English Justice: Law, Politics and Society in the Fourteenth Century (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1999) 106-07.
131 Dodd, Justice and Grace 219. Dodd notes that nobles presented petitions with more frequency during Richard II’s reign: “It is noticeable that in the 1370s the number of petitions from noblemen and women appears to increase markedly, and there is a similar surge during the minority years of Henry VI’s reign.” To support his argument Dodd cites, “SC 8/103/5101 (c.1377); 24/1190 (1425); PROME, parliament of 1426, item 19. (See http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/ for a database of Ancient
were increasingly eager to present their conflicts in public before parliament, and

Chaucer’s poem registers the need for these private cases to be redefined and presented as matters of communal concern. At the beginning of the debate, Nature appears to care for the whole community. She realizes that the time for every bird to woo is nigh and advises all the birds hurry up and get along with their lovemaking:

Foules, tak hed of my sentence, I preye,
And for youre ese, in fortheryng of youre nede,
As faste as I may speke, I wol yow speede.
Ye knowe wel how, Seynt Valentynes day,
by my statut and thorgh my governaunce,
Ye come for to cheese –and fle youre wey—
Youre makes, as I prike yow with plesaunce;
But natheles, my rightful ordenaunce
May I nat lete for al this world to wynne,
That he that is most is worthi shal begynne.132

Nature tries to make her speech brief in order to “further their” interests and let them fly away—this early indication that brevity in fact benefits the birds stands in direct contrast to the higher fowls’ lengthy speeches. Chaucer emphasizes that this lengthy private skirmish between the three noble suitors delays the communal purpose of this Valentine’s Day parliament to match all the birds with mates.

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132 PF 383-392

Petitions.) Dodd moreover observes that parliament became increasingly viewed as a forum in which nobles could present complaints against each other (218-20; 310-311). In their discussion of late fourteenth century impeachments, which were executed through the efforts of parliament, Anthony Musson and W.M. Ormrod also support the idea that parliament became viewed as a place where nobles could be censured. See Musson, The Evolution of English Justice 27-28.
Despite this need for speed, Nature requires the birds from the upper echelons of society to choose first, forcing the other classes to wait until the nobles have their say. Nature strives to be an enlightened leader worthy of the “sun” metaphor with which she is identified\textsuperscript{133} when she offers the eagles the opportunity to prove themselves, but can the hierarchical structure that Nature wishes to maintain endure the strain caused by an internally divided nobility? Had she simply paired off the eagles using her own discretion as supreme ruler, the eagles wouldn’t have been able to selfishly speak at length and delay others. Still the very fact that the nobles wish to present their cases before parliament, instead of privately to their sovereign, suggests that the eagles recognize the value of the public assembly, at least when it comes to pursuing their own ends. Nature herself acknowledges this problem in the language she uses to assess the difficulty; the connective conjunction “but natheles,” implies that promoting every bird’s interest and bowing to the demands of the hierarchy are incompatible activities. Nevertheless, Nature proclaims this “ordenaunce” as rightful. She is as just a leader as is possible. Nature acts blamelessly as an informed and moderate arbiter of justice; unfortunately, justice is impossible when the nobles are embroiled in conflicts and insensitive to the needs of the mass populace. The dictates of decorum and chivalric honor within the aristocracy trigger prolonged debates and fights when nobles of equal rank disagree with each other. No one wants to yield, and so even capable leaders are stymied. Infighting, therefore, prevents all members of the noble class from acting as beneficial leaders.

The royal tercel eagle begins to speak first since Nature designates him as “most worthy” because he is “the foul royal, above yow in degree/ The wyse an worthi, secr,

\textsuperscript{133} PF 298-299: “Tho was I war wher that ther sat a queene/ That, as of light the somer sonne shene.”
trew as stil,"\(^{134}\) and the narrator pays the eagle a subtle compliment in noticing that he "tariede noght."\(^{135}\) If this royal eagle intuits the need for short speeches, perhaps he is the natural leader of the commonwealth. In not tarrying and demonstrating a measure of appreciation for community’s wishes, he seems to grasp the importance of presenting his case as germane to the communal agenda. In the decorous address of the royal tercel eagle, Chaucer composes a concise speech that draws on all the necessary conventions of chivalric love but still respects a social hierarchy with Nature as the highest authority, the noble formel as its sovereign, and the lower fowl as essential constituents:

Unto my soverayn lady, and not my fere,

I chese, and chese with wil, and herte, and thought,

The formel on youre hond, so wel iwrought,

Whos I am al, and evere wol hire serve,

Do what hire lest, to do me lyve or sterve;

Besekynge hire merci and of grace,

And she that is may lady sovereign;

Or let me deye present in this place.

For certes, longe may I nat lyve in payne,

For in myn herte is korven every veyne.

Havynge reward only to my trouthe,

My deere herte, have on my som routhe.

\(^{134}\) PF 394-95.

\(^{135}\) PF 415.
And if that I be founde to hyre untrewe,
Disobeysaunt, or willful negligent,
Avantour, or in process love a newe,
I preye to yow rhis be my jugement:
That with these foules I be al torent,
That ilke dat that vere she me fynde
To hir untrewe, or in my gilt unkynde.

And syn that non loveth hire so wel as I,
Al be she nevere of love me behette,
Thanne oughte she be myn thoughg hire mercy,
For other bond can I non on hire knette.
Ne nevere for no wo ne shal I lette
To serven hire, how fer so that she wende;
Say what yow list, my tale is at an ende.”

The rhetorical arrangement of the royal eagle’s speech uses each stanza to recognize and pay obeisance to every member of the parliament, and the order in which the royal eagle arranges the hierarchy of the assembled body demonstrates his respect for the standing social order. In the first stanza, he addresses the formel as his “soverayn lady,” as a true chivalric lover ought, and he immediately asserts that she is not his “fere” or equal,

136 PF 416-441.
demonstrating his willingness to bow before her. Additionally, he observes that this exalted lady sits on Nature’s hand. Although royal, the eagle establishes his piety by acknowledging that it was her hand that “iwrought” the formel in all her perfection. He goes onto ask for the formel’s mercy, a common trope in chivalric rhetoric, and he asks her to show regard for his “trouthe” (or honor) and the woe of his “deere herte.” Having established Nature and then the formel as his superiors, the third stanza describes the punishments that his queen may inflict upon him if she finds him to be “untrewe.” For any treason or “unkindness,” which could be interpreted as unnatural behavior or actions against Nature, he prays “that with these foules I be al torent.” He gives the other birds the authority to literally rip him apart if he proves to be an untrue lover, implying that the assembled birds as well as the formel have the right to rebuke him if he commits what he considers to be a “self-annihilating crime.” By asking the other birds to be his executioners, he imagines himself in a relationship to the entire parliament, not just the formel, and this language suggests that the savvy bird understands the efficacy of appealing to the commune in a public forum. Moreover, the royal eagle chooses the punishment of dismemberment, evoking an image of a corporate body politic. He gives all the fowls the right to punish him if he proves unworthy of his noble mate. The royal eagle finds it politically effectual to position himself in relation to Nature, the formel, and then the commonwealth before bothering to define his rank among the noble eagles. It

137 There is a long literary and performance tradition in which mostly secular troubadours, trouvères, and stilnovisti Italian poets address their ladies using venerated love language. The chivalric courtier becomes the “servant” and worshiper of the Lady. The man is usually struck by his lady’s eyes, and he must lay himself at her mercy. Whether or not the lady reciprocates the lover’s feelings varies from poet to poet. A small selection of these poets include: Bernart de Ventadorn (c.1145-1180); Peire D’Alvernhe (fl.1150-120); Bertran de Born (~1140-1215); Thibaut de Champagne (1201-1253); Guido Guinizzelli (1230/40 – 1276); Guido Cavalcanti (1250/59 – 1300); Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

138 Thanks to Susan Crane for this comment on the Third Draft of this dissertation.

139 For a discussion of this popular image, see Ernst Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
isn’t till the last stanza when the royal eagle compares himself to the other suitors, and he simply asserts that no one loves the formel as well as he does. By claiming his own superiority within the noble class, the royal eagle provokes the other noble eagles’ outraged protests. Despite his sensitivity to the community as a whole, the factional politics within his class, unfortunately, have the ability to overturn the hierarchy that the royal eagle has outlined in such detail. Their squabbling ignores the preferences of Nature, places the formel (another noble) at the pinnacle of their concerns, and overlooks the essential placement of the commonwealth in the social structure. While the royal eagle may utilize the language of community to strengthen his case in the eyes of parliament, the eagles’ actions and prolonged performances upset this effort to represent a private concern as common to all.

As tercel eagles of the increasingly “lower (or less royal) kynde” attempt to outshine the first eagle, the speeches become less refined. The second eagle immediately rebuts the royal eagle’s last (not first, second, or third) point by objecting, “That shal nat be! / I love hire bet that ye don, by Seint John,/ Or at the leste I love hire as wel as ye,/ And lenger have served hire in my degree.” He replies angrily to the royal eagle’s assertion that he is the best lover among the nobles, and this indignation provokes the second eagle to call upon “Saint John” rather than Nature, the formel, or the other birds as his legitimating authority. The second eagle admits that even if he isn’t a superior lover to the royal eagle, he is at the very least his equal. This claim posits a serious political commentary. While the royal eagle opted to follow Nature’s traditional understanding of the social hierarchy – a useful position since he happens to be on top – the second eagle imagines a hierarchy in which eagles of different rank vie against each

\[140\] PF 450-53.
other. In presenting his case, he asserts that serving the formel for a long length of time “in his degree,” which isn’t royal, is a form of service that equals any attention given by a “royal” eagle. He argues that if the duration of love reveals the depth of attachment, “To me alone hadde be the guerdonyng.”141 By suggesting the formel’s love is a “gerdoun” or “reward,” the second eagle envisions this love contest in chivalric terms - in a competition (usually martial) for a lady, a knight fights another knight for the prize. In viewing the lady as a trophy however, the second eagle ignores the fact that the formel has a speaking voice and a choice; moreover, he imagines the other birds as spectators rather than as participants in this parliamentary session. Unlike the royal eagle who imagined his execution as dismemberment by the commonwealth, the second eagle simply asks “do me hangen by the hals!”142 for any transgression. A public hanging would certainly make him an example to unfaithful lovers. Indeed, all of the birds would witness his death, but the royal eagle’s dismemberment imagery suggested that the community would be involved in carrying out his death sentence. The second eagle may perceive the rhetorical importance of calling for witnesses to his love suit, but the royal eagle has more success in acknowledging and involving the community in the course of his speech.

Joining in this contest among noble eagles, the third eagle asks,

Now, sires, ye seen the lytel leyser here;
For every foul cryeth out to ben ago
Forth with his make, or whith his lady deere;
And ek Nature hireself ne wol not here,

141 PF 454-455
142 PF 458.
Initially improving upon the previous speech, the third eagle displays an acute awareness that Nature as well as the other birds are waiting for the nobles to conclude their speeches and courtship rituals, recognizing that there is “lytel leyser” for long oratory. This allusion to the fowls’ cries implies that this eagle is listening (or at least appreciates the importance of acknowledging his audience), and the sympathetic tone of the third eagle’s remarks threaten to destabilize the hierarchy that Nature wished to impose upon the volatile noble class. If the third eagle shows as much concern as the royal eagle for the future of the commonwealth, it casts some doubt onto the royal eagle’s claim of being the natural (or Nature’s) choice. But the third eagle is using this rhetoric that recognizes the “common good” as a blind; his ultimate resolution to speak his piece reveals his apathy toward the parliamentary community. It is his own sorrow, and not theirs, that most concerns him.

Of long servyse avaunte I me nothing;
But as possible is me to deye to-day
For wo as he that hath ben languysshyng
This twenty winter, and wel happen may;
A man may serven bet and more to pay
In half a yer, although it were no moore,
Than som man doth hath served ful yoore.

I seye not this by me, for I ne can

143 PF 464-469.
Don no servyse that may my lady plese;
But I dar seyn, I am hire treweste man
As to my dom, and faynest wolde hire ese.
At shorte words, til that deth me ses
I wol be heres, whether I wake or wynke,
And trewe in al that herte may bethynke. 144

The third eagle admits that he can’t boast of having served the formel as long as the other eagles – his actual “service” has only lasted for about half a year – but he asserts that the intensity of his passion makes him the best lover. He proclaims that his feelings are those of a lover who has suffered for twenty winters. And while he confesses that he can offer no service that would really please his lady, he argues that his courtship has as much validity as the love suits of the other eagles because he is the truest eagle. But how does one prove an intangible quality like intense emotion? He only posits “shorte wordes,” again attesting that his manner of speech is brief (hence beneficial to the other birds) when it turns out to be as lengthy as the other eagles’ speeches. 145 Instead of imagining the commonwealth ripping apart his body or being hanged by the neck, he says that he will be hers “till death may seize him.” He leaves the cause of his death vague, and he doesn’t offer to sacrifice himself for the formel’s sake. In neglecting to give up his life, he also fails to conceive a method of execution that calls on the community to either rend his body or witness his humiliation. Consequently, the plea falls short as a piece of

144 PF 470-483.
145 The royal eagles’ speech is 26 lines long, making it the most longest; the second eagle’s speech is 13 lines long; the third eagle competes with the royal eagle by speaking for 20 lines. The royal eagle is obviously the most eloquent speaker, using various figures to great effect, but it is ironic that the bird Nature posits as the natural leader also speaks for the longest amount of time, ignoring her injunction to speed up the proceedings. As I argue throughout this section, each eagle purports to speak for the common good (to varying extents) as he really pursues his own interest.
rhetorical persuasion because the eagle overlooks the symbolic importance of submitting
his future to the judgment of the lady and the crowd.

Chaucer’s narrator compliments the proclamations of love as gentle pleas, using
legal terminology to describe their rhetorical efforts, perhaps highlighting the
prescribed, formal character of petitionary language in parliament. His reaction to
these artful pleas, however, suggests why the speeches do not have the desired effect
upon either the reluctant formel or the company at large. Instead of substantiating the
eagles’ expressions of concern for the commonwealth by putting an end to tarrying, the
nobles’ speeches lengthen into a debate that continues for the rest of the day. In a telling
bit of rhetorical abbreviation by the narrator, it becomes clear that none of the eagles have
the ability to end this noble competition:

O al my lyf, syn that day I was born,
So gentil ple in love or other thing
Ne herde nevere no man me beforn—
Who that hadde leyser and connyng
For to reherse hire sere and hire spekyng;
And from the morwe gan this speche laste
Tyl dounward went the sonne wonder faste.

146 In the Explanatory Notes to Parliament of Fowls in The Riverside Chaucer, Charles Muscatine
comments on line 485’s use of the word “ple” defining it as “Appeal.” He argues, “the legal terminology is
continued in the next two stanzas.” He cites line 491’s use of the word “delyvered,” which he thinks is
“Probably a technical term for the dissolving of parliament.” He also argues that line 507’s “charge” is “a
frequent parliamentary word” (Charles Muscatine, “The Parliament of Fowls Explanatory Notes,” The
147 W. Mark Ormrod describes petitions as formal documents that were written by Chancery clerks to be
read out in parliament, and the words and narrative strategies were chosen quite deliberately to be
persuasive before the deliberating body (Ormrod, “Voicing Complaint” 143-45).
148 PF 470-490.
Chaucer’s statement that he simply doesn’t have the “leisure” or “cunning” to repeat their speeches makes the reader envisage the longest and most elaborate speeches imaginable. With this comment, Chaucer differentiates his own poetry from the leisurely activities of the nobility. Unlike the noble birds, the poet simply doesn’t have the time or inclination to rehearse the eagle’s protracted, if elegant, sentiments.

Unlike aristocrats who speak to little effect, Chaucer constructs a poem to critique parliamentary appeals that are ultimately unbenefficial to the commonwealth; if “the distinction between ‘private’ and ‘common’ was a fluctuating and sometimes contested one” in the presentation of petitions, Chaucer shows a preference for pleas that raise “specific issues that [have] wider implications for the realm and its government.” The decadence of nobles, the flourishes of aristocratic speech, and private exploitation of the communal court come under extreme scrutiny. Instead, he endorses ethical, community-minded behavior by hurrying along the narration when the self-promoting eagles dither.

In a pointed use of rhetorical occupatio, Chaucer abbreviates the debate by explaining that he doesn’t have the cunning to report the eagle’s sentiments; in fact, he criticizes aristocrats’ long, leisurely speeches by neglecting to reproduce them. As a result, he lampoons egotistical nobles who declaim at length when competing with other nobles and achieve little for the rest of the community. And the amusing suggestion that the eagles speak until sunset evokes a comic image of all of the birds, Nature, and the formel waiting around bored to tears. But this sunset also extinguishes Nature’s ambition to satisfy the entire assembly’s “nede” by quickly settling the conflict between the three suitors. The infighting nobles have caused her day to pass.

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149 Ormrod, “Voicing Complaint” 136.  
150 PF 384
IV. The Coarse Interjection: “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!”

The animalistic cries that the lower fowl use to protest the eagles’ dilatory speeches push the parliament’s discourse in a bold, new direction.

The goos, the cokkow, and the doke also

So cryede, “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!” hye,

That thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho.\(^{151}\)

The goose, cuckoo, and duck cluck and quack just like birds. Even as this avian language lampoons the rhetorical efforts of upstart politicians as ear-piercing noise, it cunningly demonstrates the oratorical prowess of small landowners, businessmen, and clerics\(^{152}\) who were buying enough land, making enough money, and gaining enough power to sit in the relatively new parliamentary institution of the Commons.\(^{153}\) The sudden “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!”\(^{154}\) of the lower fowl recreates the rhetoric of “murmur, clamour, and noise”\(^{155}\) that petitioners used at moments of social discord to articulate common purpose, and I argue that this animal utterance conveys the cultural disquiet that attended

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\(^{151}\) PF 498-500.

\(^{152}\) See Dodd, Justice and Grace Chapter 7, “Individual Petitioners”(200-241) and Chapter 8, “Petitions from Communities”(242-278). Giancarlo outlines the wide social range of petitioners to the Commons at the end of the fourteenth-century, and this may be the best context for understanding the lower fowls. He argues, “The process of submitting a bill before parliament, like submitting a bill or plea to any court of law, was therefore a practice open to a wide social range of participants, from the high nobility like de Burgh on down to the lower classes of free men and women, and even, as we shall see in Chapter Six, to ‘villeins’ challenging their status as unfree”(Giancarlo, Parliament 141).

\(^{153}\) In describing the MPs, who might resemble the lower fowl, making common petitions, W. Mark Ormrod writes, “From the 1320s and 1330s, the knights of the shires and burgesses who formed the elected element in Parliament and were coming increasingly to be known as ‘the Commons’ asserted the right to set before the crown schedules of ‘common’ petitions that were sometimes linked informally to grants and taxation and from which the crown chose certain complaints to form the basis of remedial legislation in formal statutes”(Ormrod, “Voicing Complaint” 136-37).

\(^{154}\) PF 499.

\(^{155}\) W. Mark Ormrod argues, “a discourse of ‘murmur, clamour and noise’ allowed both the parliamentary Commons and the crown to use aural metaphors as a means both of imagining and of constituting common political purpose”(Ormrod, “Voicing Complaint” 137).
this blunt terminology as different sorts of speakers\textsuperscript{156} insisted on pleading for their communities within the increasingly public forum of parliament.\textsuperscript{157}

In describing the counterintuitive discourse that establishes community with discontented onomatopoeic exclamations, Emily Steiner has observed the term “clamour” “constitutes common political purpose” as often as it designates discord in the parliamentary rolls:

Clamour produces a rhetoric about political collectivity at the moment when commonalty is under dispute; at moments, that is, when claims to collective representation, consent, and agency are troubled by the social implications of those claims. The parliamentary rolls use clamour to analyse the difficult relationship

\textsuperscript{156} See J.S. Roskell, \textit{House of Commons, 1386-1421} (Stroud: History of Parliament Trust, by Alan Sutton Publishing, 1992) 40, in which he surveys “the knights of the shires, citizens and burgesses elected to Parliament by local communities of countries and towns whose representation was demanded by the Crown.” Roskell depicts the Commons as a uniquely corporate and diverse political institution: “So far as the institutional development of Parliament is concerned, the corporate identity of the Commons was one of the main achievements of the 14\textsuperscript{th} century. In this formative period of the history of the Lower House, shire knights, citizens and burgesses had come to work habitually together... Admittedly, in our period gentry, merchants, and lawyers all shared a common designation: in the view of those who, if only elementarily sought to define the nature of contemporary society, they were lumped together as ‘mediocres.’ Only some of them were ‘middlemen’ in the modern economic sense of the word, but all were of the middling sort, standing far above the common people but well below the great ones of recognized superiority of social status, largely deriving from ancestry and their position in the Commons in Parliament: having been elected by their fellow gentry and other freemen they indirectly represented the interests of their class in general”(47-48).

\textsuperscript{157} In a complementary analysis of this moment, Peter Travis emphasizes the complexity of Chaucer’s onomatopoeic animal sounds when considered in tandem with contemporary medieval linguistic philosophy that tried to distinguish human \textit{vox} from animalistic \textit{sonus}, finding that animals often articulated in an indeterminate, intermediate register of language, or as Travis terms them “subsignificant noises”(Travis 241-42). In a related argument, Jill Mann argues, “the vice in the debate are self-evidently human voices, and the diverging views on love and sexuality that expressed are likewise human attitudes. Yet the effect of putting these views into the mouths of birds is not merely decorative, as it is (for example) when a nightingale argues that clerks make better lovers than knights. There is here a merging of the humans and the animal that makes it appropriate to speak of their ‘connaturality’”(Mann 198-99).
between collectivity and social status, and consequently to create or challenge commonalty as a political structure.\textsuperscript{158}

Private interests used the rhetoric of “clamour” to improve their individual social status and material circumstances even as they professed concern for the collective body; moreover, Steiner suggests that “clamour” was exploited when “commonalty” seemed particularly unstable. At a related moment in the poem, the avian parliament falls into discord as it becomes unclear whether the eagles’ self-centered rhetorical performances are hurting or helping the community, and the lower fowl employ the language of “clamour” to redefine commonalty, enter the debate, and present their own interests.\textsuperscript{159}

Chaucer registers the near-impossibility of communicating, deliberating effectively, or constituting a communal body when the presentation of petitions devolves into quarrels between political opponents – the private, selfish concerns motivating the language that promotes the “common good” almost ensure division and discord. But at the same time, debating an issue may inculcate a sense of community and purpose in an assembly full of rivals.

The undeniable succinctness of animal sounds provides an alternative to the protracted infighting of the three eagles, implying why the “common good” was articulated in the language of “clamour.” In hearing “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!” the first impression that strikes the reader’s ear is the extreme staccato of these sounds –

\textsuperscript{158} Steiner 201. As a side note, this moment is strikingly similar in tone to the disruptive moment when Langland’s rodents run into parliament. The key analogy between animal speech and clamor reappears.\textsuperscript{159} Giancarlo describes this moment similarly: “Here, when the story threatens to extend into a high-styled but very tedious exercise in courtly love-lyricism, the other classes of the assembly interrupt with an avian version of the \textit{murmur, cri \\& noyse} for which parliaments, especially the Commons, were notorious. Far from respecting the lofty “pletynge” of nobles, the common birds just want them to leave off and shut up, and they are not reticent in saying so. The scene is entirely foreign to the Parliament’s continental analogues in its inclusion of the lower orders, and it is unique in its focus on the procedural aspects of assembly formation” (Giancarlo, \textit{Parliament} 157-58).
these are indeed “shorte words.” Chaucer’s retains the same basic meter as he moves from noble voices to common ones, but the rapid-fire pace distinguishes the lower fowls’ retorts as quick and on point. Speed and brevity are the defining features of this conversation, and it should remind the readers of Nature’s initial promise: “As faste as I may speke, I wol yow speede.” Unlike the noble fowls who lose sight of the needs of the community at large, the fast rhythm of the lower fowls’ words remind everyone that this was supposed to be a quick session of parliament. While David Aers has contended the that “noise” and “murmurs” of Chaucer’s lower fowl “are no more than the imposition of particular interests as universal ones,” I argue that every speaker in the poem is guilty of this same rhetorical move. The tercels may voice private petitions to Nature, but they perform these speeches before the community at large, forcing everyone to listen to their arguments. Among the three eagles, the royal bird shows the most shrewdness in presenting his request in rhetoric that acknowledges the community, but he nevertheless ignores the other birds’ interests as the conflict between the eagles escalates. The only difference between the pleas of the higher and lower fowl, in fact, is that the humble birds are more effective at presenting their own positions as representative of the “common good” when they are given the floor. The threefold retort “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!” reveals the discontentment of three bird species at once, which perfectly suits the project of promoting a varied, yet single society.

This transition from the ineffectual monologues of the three eagles to the dialogue of the lower fowls introduces a populist poetic into this parliamentary community, and Chaucer emphasizes that effective counselors collaborate in reaching resolutions.

160 PF 385.
Dialogue advances the concerns of the general body more genuinely than the eagles’ passing, insubstantial references to the commonwealth; it impels all of the birds to declare their private requests in search of a communal direction. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that only the back-and-forth argumentation of dialogue can develop ideas:

An idea does not live in one’s isolated individual consciousness – if it remains there it degenerates and dies. An idea begins to live, i.e. to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expressions, and to give birth to new ideas only when it enters into genuine dialogical relationships with other ideas, the ideas of the other.¹⁶²

Just as Bakhtin believes in the importance of dialogue in the development of language as well as ideas, Chaucer demonstrates that government cannot function when individuals refuse to consider the perspectives and needs of others. The three unreciprocated love suits of the eagles may conform to the standards of courtly love, but these single-minded orations undermine the purported goal of the parliamentary assembly to couple every bird on Valentine’s Day. The love that the eagles profess for the formel “degenerates and dies” the longer they soliloquize – it lives in isolation, and love requires the response of the beloved in order for consummation to take place. Without dialogue, love (as an idea or an action) simply doesn’t live. It can’t come to fruition. This problematic absence of dialogue between the lover and beloved impacts the entire parliament. Since the eagles take too much time to proclaim monologues in a competition for the attention of the beloved, they ignore the desire of the company to fly away with their mates.

The barrenness of the three courtships incites the lower fowl to respond in the place of the formel. Commenting on this passage, Matthew Giancarlo notices that the lower fowl supplant the erotic discourse of the nobles with their political debate: “Thus Chaucer’s unique arrangement here probably reflects, obliquely, the contemporary development of the office of parliamentary speaker, as the ‘choice’ is shifted from the wooing of a marriage partner to the determination of a speaking voice or voices for the members of the community.”

Although they initially seem to be unruly, the lower fowl, in fact, offer legitimate suggestions for political rule and the eagle election. Giancarlo goes so far as to argue that the lower fowl may play the role of the “parliamentary speaker,” but I contend that it is the multiplicity of speaking voices that advances the parliament’s agenda. In the mating game, fast-paced dialogue supersedes love oration. In providing an alternative to courtly soliloquy, the poem “renews its verbal expressions” and the parliament resembles a functional deliberative body.

In addition to promoting brevity and shifting the discourse, Chaucer also uses the humble “quack” and “kokkow” of the lower fowl to remove the sting from his derogatory appraisal of upper class speech and politicking. The tendency of nobles to fight each other at the expense of the community is a sensitive subject in the late fourteenth century, and Chaucer defuses his critique of the noble birds by portraying the lower fowl as openly selfish.

In a humorous irony, the ear-splitting lower fowl deliver the poem’s

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163 Giancarlo, Parliament 159.
164 In discussing the threat of violence in parliament, Giancarlo observes, “It is worth emphasizing that during parliaments the threat of aristocratic violence was very real. In 1381 the dukes of Lancaster and Northumberland, John of Gaunt and Henry Percy, brought large armed retinues to parliament. Their personal conflict threatened to trigger a gang fight. In the same assembly a discussion about Gaunt’s sortie to Spain and Portugal tuned into a “grant disputison & alteracion.” (RP 3.98, 114; Butt, 377) In 1333 a fight broke out in parliament between the lords Zouche and Grey, and earlier in 1315 the rolls vaguely record that Hugh Despenser the Younger attacked someone in parliament. (Harriss, “The Formation of Parliament, 1272-1377,” 44; Fryde, Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 33; RP 1.352-3.) In 1388, when Nicolas
message of social responsibility as they plead for themselves. When the goose announces,
“But I can shape herof a remedie,/ And I wol seye my verdit fayre and swythe/ For water-
foul, whoso be wroth or blythe,” the bird not only reaches the verdict without any input
from the assembly, but also argues that she will represent the water fowl even if it makes
other birds unhappy. In this statement she frankly acknowledges that she is speaking for a
sectional interest. Unlike the dangerous infighting eagles, however, the goose wishes to
“remedy” the unfortunate situation, represent the waterfowl, and advance an agenda
commensurate with the needs of the community at large. The different eagles attest
concern for the community to pursue their individual ends; the goose publicly prioritizes
the needs of the waterfowl while still pursuing an agenda that benefits all. Likewise the
cuckoo asserts, “For I wol of myn owene au-
torite,/ For comune spede, take on the charge
now.” By claiming that he has authority in front of the great judge Nature, the cuckoo
challenges the power structure by prioritizing the rights of his own constituents and
associating his goal with the common good. This minor revolution, however, is
warranted. Although the eagles give time-consuming speeches, Nature protects the
courting rituals of the nobles and ignores the wishes of the majority. The goose and
cuckoo recognize that Nature’s decision to cater to the chivalric traditions of the noble

Brembre threw down his glove and offered to defend himself in combat against charges of treason,
chroniclers account that hundreds of gages were thrown I response in the parliament hall. (Butt, 397;
Westminster Chronicle 310-11; Favel, Historia 16.) there are other examples of threats and aristocratic
readiness to leave off discussion and fight, and it seems fair to assume that the normal gatherings of
parliaments were also occasions for the threat of feuds, personal vendettas, and violence (Butt, 508).
(Giancarlo, Parliament 159-60). And in his footnote #89 on page 160, Giancarlo writes, “Because the
conflict between Gloucester and Beaufort threatened to spill out into open violence, weapons were not
allowed in the great hall of the castle where parliament was held. Parliamentarians carried small wooden
clubs up their sleeves, but no violence is recorded to have taken place.” Also see my discussion of SC
8/221/11038 from 1397.
165 PF 502-04.
166 Thanks to Paul Strohm for this comment on the Third Draft of this dissertation.
167 PF 506-07.
claims to serve the community, Chaucer reveals that clamorous rhetoric endorsing the commonalty conceals private desire as often as it reveals honest communal concern.

V. A Divisive Noble Response

Chaucer implies the efficacy of “clamor” and “murmur” in a parliamentary setting by dramatizing the immediate reaction it prompts in the goddess Nature who resolves to “unbynde” the assembly from “this noyse.” She calls for all of the fowls’ constituencies to give their verdict on the matter, tacitly endorsing every bird’s right to deliver an opinion. The nobility responds with unaccustomed alacrity as a tercelet, a young male tercel akin to the three fighting eagles, urges the birds of ravine to resolve their debate decisively. This noble counselor comments, “For everych hath swich replicacioun/ That non by skilles may brought adoun./ I can not se that arguments avayle: Thanne semeth it there moste be batayle.”

The tercelet’s choice word “replicacioun” implies that the different pleas of the three suitors have equal merit, and none of them can be refuted by reason or other arguments. Theseus uses the same word to describe the terms of battle to the nearly identical knights Palamon and Arcite in [The Knight’s Tale].

As Lee Patterson explains, “Theseus aims throughout to bring Theban self-replication to a definitive end – the aim that his language constantly thematizes. When he discovers the
rivals fighting in the grove he prescribes the ‘short conclusion’ (1743) of immediate execution; persuaded to a more merciful course by the ladies, he then establishes the tournament as a ‘plat conclusioun,/ Withouten any replicacioun’ (1845-46).”¹⁷¹ In this context, “replication” describes verbal rambling, which the reader also encounters in the longwinded language of the three eagles. By recycling the tropes of the love lyric and chivalrous sentiment, the eagles only reproduce words, not baby chicks. They fail to benefit a society that desperately needs efficacious leadership and decision-making.

While subtle, yet crucial, dissimilarities emerged in effusive speeches of the three eagles, these traces of individuality vanish when the eagles all vote for battle. One is again reminded of Palamon and Arcite’s fight in the grove, “where the brutality of their struggle renders them indistinguishable.”¹⁷² The tercelet’s remark about battle has a similar impact upon the eagles – it excites all three suitors, and they respond with an enthusiastic and unanimous, “Al redy!”¹⁷³ The poem briefly threatens to veer into the trajectory of traditional bird debate poems that end with battles. Not only might this skirmish prove superior nobility (according the rules of chivalry), but it could permanently remove one (or more) of the contenders. In The Knight’s Tale, Theseus sought to solve the same problem of duplicate eligible nobles using this very method. Is it possible for Parliament of Fowls to reach a definite conclusion by staging a tournament? There is one crucial difference between Parliament of Fowls and more traditional poems like Blancheflor et Florence, Melior et Ydoine, and even Chaucer’s own Knight’s Tale; in these other poems, there is no suggestion that the nobles are fighting for an important position of power over other nobles. In the bird debate poems, nobles always vie with

¹⁷¹ Patterson 200.
¹⁷² Patterson 206. Also see KnT 1655-59.
¹⁷³ PF 540.
members of other classes. These earlier poems don’t even acknowledge that contention could arise from members of the same class—nobles, clerics, and commoners are simply seen as monolithic groups. While Chaucer does recognize the possibility of division among members of the noble class in The Knight’s Tale, Theseus, the duke, initially provides some stability by institutionalizing the longstanding battle between Palamon and Arcite within the confines of his amphitheater. None of these poetic debates stages a tournament or battle between nobles when a discernible leadership vacuum exists. Parliament’s portrayal of the infighting eagles threatens a complete rearrangement of power dynamics within the nobility, suggesting that a political crisis could result from “rivalries among self-assertive and easily affronted nobles.”

As soon as this disturbing implication arises, the noble advisor, the tercelet, shuts down the possibility for armed combat—in fact, he complains that they didn’t let him finish speaking. He would have never proposed this option:

‘Nay, sires,’ quod he, ‘if that I durste it seye,
Ye don me wrong, my tale is not ido!
For, sires –ne taketh not agref I preye –
It may not gon as ye wolde in this weye;
Oure is the voys that han the charge in honde,
And to the juges dom ye moten stonde.”

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174 As Lee Patterson observes, however, Theseus eventually becomes an example of “self-defeating authority”(198). He explains, “in Theseus’ ampietheater…forces will emerge to overwhelm Theseus, his world, and his authority….Endowed with the power to imagine his own gods, Theseus is nonetheless able to imagine only his own helplessness: power portrays itself as weakness”(224).
175 Patterson 188. Also see Tuck 96-98.
176 PF 541-546.
Chaucer carefully denies (through his advisor spokesbird) that he would even imagine a combat between important members of the aristocracy. Nature may endorse courtly conventions when she allows the noble fowl to declaim their love, but she fails to naturalize noble fin’amor within the parliamentary context because “the lower fowl reveal the violence and timewasting involved in these conventions.” The quintessential chivalric jousting match becomes unthinkable in a time when real class warfare could break out, and the notion of involving competing nobles in a high stakes battle is an anathema in a socially diverse parliamentary assembly. Despite the tercelet’s firm rejection of battle, however, an alarming vision of a noble feud leading to all-out civil war and treason lingers. If nobles of every ilk consider themselves rivals, how long until one of them tries to depose or supplant another? By creating an allegorical personification of Nature who offers every noble the chance to court the most desirable lady, Chaucer illustrates a dangerous society that tolerates factionalism in the noble class. Several historical petitions suggest that noble rivalries resulted in a tense parliamentary atmosphere; for example, in SC 8/221/11038 from 1397, John of Gaunt, Duke of Guyenne and Lancaster, Edmund of Langley, Duke of York and Henry of Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby petition the king to allow them “to assemble their people in order to come into the king’s presence, notwithstanding any earlier orders to the contrary.”

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177 Thanks to Susan Crane for this comment on the Third Draft of this dissertation.
178 The king’s endorsement of their petition specifies, “the king wills that the supplicants have pardon for them and their people for the muster they have made since 10 August and which they shall be at the next parliament, namely the Duke of Lancaster with 300 men at arms and 600 archers, the Duke of York with 100 men at arms and 200 archers, and the Earl of Derby with 200 men at arms and 400 archers in support of the king, and that they may levy the sum from the people for performing this order” (National Archives: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?Edoc_Id=7719047&queryType=1&resultCount=2452). In a similar vein, the petitions’ word choices often reveal the anger underlying the requests for aid. In 8/214/10668 from 1398, Robert de Haryngton (Harrington), knight, lord of Aldingham, “requests remedy since until recently he was seised and in peaceful possession of the manor of Millom because of the minority of Richard de Hodeleston,
number of the supporters that these nobles request to accompany them to the next
parliamentary session indicates the size of the armed bands who convened in the nobles’
demonstrations of strength before their peers. Noble vying could lead to violence in
parliament, a circumstance that threatens to topple the “natural” hierarchies and endanger
the future of the entire commonwealth.

The tercelet cautions against the eagles’ enthusiasm for battle by pointing out that
the confrontation might not achieve the desired result—he phrases this warning
obliquely, never mentioning the exact danger that such a battle could wreak, but this
practical appeal quiets the nobles. Instead of allowing the eagles to prove themselves
through a physical contest, the tercelet comments, “And of these thre she wot hirself, I
trowe,./ Which that he be, for it is light to knowe.” This advisor believes that the formel
already knows which eagle is worthy of her affections. In fact, the choice should be
obvious to any noble bird, and so the tercelet leaves it in the hands of the lady to decide
her own fate. Nature and this tercelet use similar strains of logic—it is so obvious to each
of them that the royal eagle should win out, but counting on the noble class to willingly
opt for the “natural leader” is becoming a risky assumption to make in light of the
internal power struggles that define this class. As Hugh White notices, “Nature’s
insistence on the formel’s liberty to choose…poses a double threat to what Reason would
recommend: the formel might make an unreasonable choice of partner or, as it proves to

which manor malefactors now occupy, after forcibly entering, expelling his servants, destroying goods
worth £200 and taking his tenants' rents” (National Archives:
http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-
result.asp?Edoc_Id=771818&queryType=1&resultcount=2452). The language of grievance doubtlessly
serves a calculated dramatic function in this formal petition, but it also suggests the extent to which
petitions relied on emotional appeals to justice and right.

179 PF 552-53.
be the case, might refuse to make a choice at all.”\footnote{White 239-40. See also Henry M. Leicester, “The Harmony of Chaucer’s Parlement: A Dissonant Voice,” Chaucer Review 9 (1974): 15-34.} As it turns out, the noble formel doesn’t show much concern for averting a mêlée within the ranks of the nobility; she prefers to assert her own individual desire as another privileged noble of the realm. Even as conflict threatens to rend the nobility into fighting factions, individuals high rank continue to pursue their own desires at the expense of their peers. The pursuit of individual desire, in fact, defines and divides the members of this social group.

VI. The Goose

When Nature calls for “a conseyl,” the lower fowl (who resemble petitioners as well as members of the Commons at different turns of the plot) presume that the goddess has requested their counsel. The waterfowl and worm fowl scramble to elect representatives. Critics like Giancarlo and Steiner have discussed the ways in which non-noble members of the commonalty spoke and advised freely, and in \textit{Parliament of Fowls}, Nature has provoked an immediate response.\footnote{Steiner, “Commonalty and Literary Form in the 1370s and 1380s”; Giancarlo \textit{“Piers Plowman, Parliament, and the Public Voice.”}} By seeking counsel from all levels of society, Nature recognizes the potential usefulness of every bird’s voice and opinion. If this free-for-all counseling session wasn’t Nature’s intention, she has already opened that can of worms, so to speak. When the waterfowl offer their advice, their deliberative style contrasts with the predatory birds’ method of appointing an all-powerful judge, the tercelet.

\begin{verse}
The water-foules han here hedes leid
Togedeye, and of a sort avysement,
\end{verse}
Whan everych hadde his large golee seyd,
They seyden sothly, al by oon assent,
How that the goos, with here facounde gent,
‘That so desyreth to pronounce oure nede,
Shal telle oure tales,’ and preyede, ‘God hire spede!’

The election process of the birds of ravine and the waterfowl differs significantly—while the narrator simply remarks that the tercelet was chosen by “plein eleccioun,” the electoral process of the geese and ducks is outlined thoroughly. They literally put their heads together to decide upon a unanimous verdict before putting forward their representative (who notably is a woman). This detail suggests that lower classes approached deliberation as a process of discovering common purpose. Nevertheless, the image of a group of cackling geese mocks this talkative assembly and its voting process even before the goose holds forth the verdict.

And for these water-foules tho began
The goos to speke, and in hire kakelynge
She seyde, “pes! How tak kep every man,
And herkeneth which a resoun I shal forth brynge!
My wit is sharp; I love no tarynge;

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182 PF 554-560.
183 PF 528.
184 Dodd also notes in his chapter on “Petitions from Communities,” that “Parliament was the natural environment in which communities could present their common grievances to the Crown. The particular advantage that petitioning held over the stricter and more rigid system of common-law procedure was quickly grasped by groups of people whose common circumstances encouraged them to adopt a collective identity in their representations to the Crown. Local communities had existed, and had thought of themselves in collective terms, long before parliament came to prominence, but the particular representative quality which parliament embodied undoubtedly provided fertile ground for the enhancement and crystallization of community identity” (Dodd, Justice and Grace 242).
I seye I rede hym, though he were my brother,

But she wol love hym, lat hym love another!\textsuperscript{185}

She speaks in “kakelynge,” again reminding the reader that this woman is not human. When the noble discourse of the earlier speeches fails, Chaucer assays a new, if lower, speech style, transforming common speech into the exclamations of animals. The poet uses animal sounds to critique the indecorous clamor and unsophisticated cries of assemblies made up “lower” men and women, but he also evokes a political tradition in which pragmatic, proverbial witticisms make timely points.\textsuperscript{186} Does the goose’s cackling make sense? Unlike the noble birds who consistently divert attention from their own goals, she cuts straight to the heart of the issue. Her wit is sharp; she doesn’t love tarrying. These lines stick out partially because they so clearly contradict the style of the upper class; the goose speaks in short, clear sound bites. Her pragmatic advice, “If she won’t love him, let him love another,” submits a sensible solution to the problem of the three suitors, and Chaucer suggests that this attitude belongs solely to the lower class. The sparrow-hawk’s response (“Lo, here a resoun of a goos!”) presents the nobles’ disdain for this rejection of a chivalric lover’s selfless loyalty. In a poem that teases apart the difficulty of adhering to the aristocratic mores when real social change is afoot, the hawk’s quick denunciation of the goose’s advice suggests the reluctance some nobles felt when encountering a changing kingdom in which the age-old traditions and privileges of the nobility were being scrutinized by an increasingly powerful and vociferous commons.

Instead of stopping to consider the goose’s position or her constituency’s needs, the sparrow-hawk scoffs at her for misunderstanding the traditions of noble courtship. As

\textsuperscript{185} PF 561-567.

\textsuperscript{186} I’m thinking of the epigrammatic style of Thomas Brinton, John Bromyard, and The Wife of Bath in particular.
he mocks her, however, he fails to recognize that the protracted mating rituals are endangering the welfare of the populace. If the lower fowl can’t mate until the upper fowl mate, then the water and worm fowl won’t be able to produce offspring, continue their family lines, or go about their lives.

“Lo, here a parfit resoun of a goos!”

Quod, the sperhauk; “Nevere mot she thee!

Lo, swich it is to have a tonge loos!

Now parde, fol, yit were it bet for the

Han holde thy pes than shewed thy nycete.

It lyth nat in his wit, ne in his wille,

But soth is seyd, ‘a fol can not be stille.’”187

In a funny reversal, the sparrow-hawk chastises the goose for having a loose tongue, and this criticism sends up the upper class’s ignorance that their long speeches are hurting the community as a whole. The sparrow-hawk, however, pays no heed to the lower fowls’ natural right to mate as much as the goose overlooks the demands of chivalric romance, and so he terms the goose’s pragmatism as “nycete.” This inability of the upper classes and the lower classes to understand each other’s social customs results in a rhetoric of derision, and Chaucer portrays, “the laughter aros of gentil foules alle.”188 This laughter tears the community apart.189 The upper fowl believe that the water and worm fowl are

187 PF 568-574.
188 PF 575.
189 In his analysis of the Miller’s and Reeve’s eruptive opinons, Lee Patterson makes a somewhat different claim about the relationship between threats to the social structure and subsequent responses that result in mockery or laughter: “The Miller’s peasant self-assertiveness is immediately registered as threatening, and the subsequent development of Fragment I serves to contain this threat by stigmatizing it as not merely disruptive of social order but destructive of its own holiday gaiety…The Host, championing the holiday spirit as long as it remains wholly without political force, will of course have none of it: not only is the Reeve’s self-aggrandizing sermonizing a waste of the time of which he claims to have so little, but it is
stupid and lustful while the lower fowl believe that the nobles are being willfully obstinate. Given the communication breakdown, Nature’s idealistic notion that the parliament will be able to resolve their problems through deliberation seems impossible.

This impasse in the parliament’s deliberations invites another commentary on the impossibility of monolithic authority in a kingdom where so many different parties compete for attention and power. The idealistic turtledove declares, “Nay, God forbade a lovere shuld chaunge!...For, though she deyede, I wolde non other make;/ I wol ben hires, til that the deth me take;”\textsuperscript{190} reiterating the expectation, familiar from troubadour poets who advocate the religion of love, that a lover should serve one lady or die from heartbreak. No compromise is possible, even if a compromise would benefit the community. Again the imposition of class-specific courtly values upon a diverse parliamentary assembly proffers an unrealistic political view. It isn’t likely that two of the competing eagles will accept defeat if chivalric code demands their deaths as a result, and the turtle presents the conflict as irresolvable despite the fact that he is speaking in a public forum striving for resolution. Like the eagles themselves, the turtledove maintains an outmoded set of beliefs. Unlike the goose who seeks a practical solution, the turtledove seems unwise when he demonstrates an implicit, naïve faith that the three nobles won’t shift their alliances if the formel chooses one instead of the other. The duck’s and goose’s frustrated replies confirm this impression:

“Wel bourded,” quod the doke, “by myn hat!

\textsuperscript{190} PF 582; 587-88.
That men shulde loven alwey causeles!
Who can a resoun fynde or wit in that?
Daunseth he murye that is myrtheles'
Who shulde recche of that is recheles?"
"Ye queke," seyde the goos, "ful wel and fayre!
There been mo sterres, God wot, than a payre!" 191

The duck responds to the romantic, impractical view posed by the turtledove by asking the pragmatic question why a lover should care about a lady who doesn’t care. He rejects the loyalty and self-denial that typify fin’amor, lambasting this belief system as unreasonable and witless. The goose endorses her comrade’s “fair quacks,” a Chaucerian noise that lampoons the animalistic duck while still connecting his words with onomatopoeic “communal” speech, and she exclaims a pithy bit of common wisdom about the number of stars in the sky. This star epigram may seem humble and homespun, but the stellar imagery recalls two invocations to the star of Venus that appear earlier in the poem as Chaucer explored the importance of working for the “common good.”

The goose’s emphasis on the multiplicity of stars strikes a key thematic chord because Chaucer creates a poem full of doubles and triples – again and again, there are multiple authorities, all of which seem to contradict each other. At the beginning of the visionary poem, Chaucer articulates love’s uncertain relationship to common profit by suggesting two alternative sources for the dream: Macrobius and Cytherea (Venus). The dreamer suspects that the dream manifests because he was reading Macrobius’ commentary on Cicero’s Dream of Scipio Africanus before bed, but he also praises the

191 PF 582; 586-87; 595.
star of Venus, which he also presumes inspired his dream. These two dissimilar authorities appear again when the dreamer imagines the commander Africanus pushing him through the gateway to Venus’s land; the reader must surmise (along with the confused Chaucerian dreamer) if the garden where Venus’s lovers cavort bears any relation to the Ciceronian vision of the ideal commonwealth. According to Cicero, citizens can only reach a “blissful place” through concerted work and effort, “And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse,” but Venus’s realm offers a corrupted version of this blissful place. The conflicting messages on Venus’s gate describe a “blysful place” as well as a barren desert where “nevere tre shal fruyt ne leves bere.” The question arises why Chaucer uses the same “blissful” phrase to describe Cicero’s concept of heaven as well as part of Venus’s twofold dominion. What is the relationship between the pursuit of “commune profit” and a quest for romantic love? In this loaded imagery, Chaucer insinuates that the acts of working on behalf of the community and loving an individual may both lead to a “blissful place,” but romantic love results in a barren sort of “bliss.” Analogously, the eagles’ romantic attachment to the formel may, in fact, lead to a barren “place” where every bird’s mating is delayed indefinitely. As the eagles stall the community at large, it appears as though the flying birds may “whirle aboute th’erthe alwey in peyne” like the suffering souls in Cicero’s Dream of Scipio. All of the fowl purport to work for the commonwealth, but the loving eagles’ rhetoric results in an empty form of “bliss.”

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192 PF 106-116.
193 See PF 48; 71-77, line 74 quoted.
194 PF 127; 137.
195 PF 80.
Noticing that authority is never presented as a monolithic source of power but rather as compromised entity that is often split into doubles or triples results in a perplexing and fruitful interpretive process. Prompting his reader to grapple with confounding authorities in the relatively safe sphere of literary interpretation, Chaucer replicates the frustration that a tactful citizen might experience when making any important choice. Whether it’s a lady choosing between three suitors, the Commons advising on the relative worth of one noble faction over another, or a poet looking for ideological guidance in both the traditions of love poetry and Ciceronian philosophy, Chaucer portrays the impossibility of finding a perfect lover, an unequivocally authoritative leader, or a completely sound political philosophy. By presenting one authoritative figure after another, *Parliament of Fowls* argues that the dream of one guiding star is elusive indeed.

When the goose exclaims, “There been mo sterres, God wot, than a payre!”, she puts her finger (or feather?) on a crucial theme of the text in insisting that there is more than one lady worth loving. In fact every lady in the bird community deserves love, according to the principle of common profit. Noticing the prevalence of stellar imagery throughout the poem also suggests that the eagles’ stubborn allegiance to “one star,” i.e. the formel, is shortsighted. By suggesting Macrobius and Cytherea are the twin sources of his dream, Chaucer renders the dominance of Venus’ star ambiguous. Describing the light of Nature’s sun surpassing the gleam of the Venus’s star emphasizes that more than one heavenly authority affects the characters’ behavior. In this perceptive allusion to the stars, the goose argues that multiple stars should catch a lover’s eye. Venus isn’t the

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196 PF 582; 586-87; 595.
197 PF 295-301
only star in the sky! The followers of Venus lead myopic lives in which they ignore everything except for the pleasure or pain of the given moment. By prolonging the period of courtship, the noble birds similarly pursue this narrow-minded course as dictated to them by chivalric tradition, but the goose suggests there are other options.

Although the goose is only referring to the noble eagles’ large range of choices when it comes to formels, the imagery implies that the lower fowl are also starting to notice that more than one authority has the ability to influence and rule this parliament. Just as the sun and the star of Venus are surrounded by other celestial bodies, there are several ideologies other than the old notions of courtly love, chivalric tradition, strict hierarchies, and the three estates available in the kingdom. In fact, when Nature opens the parliament by recognizing that each of the three eagles deserves a chance to compete for the most prestigious mate, she nearly operates according to a meritocratic model – she acknowledges the eminence of the royal bird without automatically deferring to his wishes. The poem, moreover, contrasts the self-aggrandizing language of individual nobles with the efficient, corporate language of commoners. This juxtaposition makes it clear that more than one voice impacts the rulings in this land. The goose’s capacity to reiterate an image so central to the philosophical musings of the poem implies that the lower class’s conceptual ability extends beyond a comic “quek.” Just as the stars fill the sky, the poem is saturated with multiple sources of authority. Scipio Africanus, Venus, and Nature stand together; the philosophy of “natural hierarchy” contends with the development of an increasingly meritocratic system; three noble eagles debate; the nobility and the common birds argue in the same parliamentary space. The classic divisions and hierarchies of the three estates model found in the early bird debate poems,
in which only knights and clerks were distinguished enough to speak, provide negligible
guidance in this complicated society where authority disperses in many different
directions. The absence of a lodestar creates confusion, and traditional guidance systems
like chivalric customs offer no aid.\(^{198}\) If the assembly ever hopes to move forward and fly
away, the birds must assess the contribution of every voice, even that of a lowly goose.

Given the absence of an authoritative figure to dictate policy, law, or judgment,
the distinctions between the upper and lower fowl blur as the birds exchange modes of
expression. In the fiery debate, the parliamentarians use each other’s jargon to refute
contentious points, and the disputants blend the traditional language of the nobility with
clamorous speech, developing a distinct parliamentary discourse. In response to the
goose’s observation that there are more than two of stars in the sky, the noble fowl hurl
abuse:

> “Now fy, cherl!” quod the gentil tercelet,
> “Out of the donghil cam that word ful right!
> Thow canst nat seen which thing is wel beset!
> Thow farst by love as oules don by light:
> The day hem blent, ful wel they se by nyght.
> Thy kynde is of so low a wretchednesse
> That what love is, thow canst nouther seen ne gesse.”\(^{199}\)

The tercelet refuses to acknowledge the logic of the goose’s remark; instead of
responding to the argument, which questions the extent to which the love for one person

\(^{198}\) For more information on the relationship between the late fourteenth century fascination with astrology
and the diminishment of chivalric traditions, see Lee Patterson’s intriguing discussion of this phenomenon
on pages 217-222. When considering this moment in *Parliament of Fowls*, it is especially useful to consider
Albertus Magnus’s views on astrology, which Patterson discusses on page 220.
\(^{199}\) PF 596-602.
(or star) should dominate behavior, the noble fowl mocks the goose’s social station. He places her in the “donghil,” stooping from the level of the stars to the level of the barnyard. In other words, he demands that she set aside the realm of philosophy and political discourse to return to the shit whence she came; by doing so, he begins to sound more like a lower fowl than the goose herself in favoring such a vulgar image. Instead of considering her eloquent plea for a practical, reasonable approach towards love and leadership, he retorts that the goose no more understands love than an owl appreciates daylight. But by suggesting that there is only one sun, or only one ascendant authority, when it comes to a lover’s choice, the tercelet overlooks the fact that multiple, contradictory influences impact any person’s decisions. The idea of a singular, guiding influence is presented as dubious throughout the poem, and the fact that the goose’s attempt at philosophy reiterates the poem’s perspective advances this humble bird as yet another authoritative source. Compared to the goose’s observation, the rash and crass reply of the tercelet sounds quite lowborn.

In his take on the difficulty of effective deliberation, Chaucer develops a surprisingly egalitarian approach to the upper and lower class language by coalescing the diverse speaking styles of his assembled fowl. Not only does he juxtapose the high tone of noble pleading with the déclassé and comic grumbles of humbler subjects, but the distinctive tenors of “high” and “low” begin to mix as the parliamentarians appropriate each other’s expressions to rebut specific talking points. Chaucer’s observation that different players in a heated debate will begin to exchange words and develop a unique amalgamated style suggests a politically attuned poet who observed assemblies in action.
VII. The Cuckoo

The cuckoo, the most reviled of the all the lower fowl due to his infamous reputation for greed and cuckoldry,²⁰⁰ complains about the length of the nobles’ courtship practices by suggesting all the eagles remain single if a clear choice is impossible: “Lat ech of hem be soley al here lyve!”²⁰¹ Although he is denounced as self-serving by the other birds, Nature stops the eagles from shouting abuse or throwing him out of the parliament. In truth, all of the birds serve their own interests, and the cuckoo merely acts as the stooge for every bird willing to sacrifice the community to accomplish his own mating goals. While Chaucer shows the unpopularity of this particular selfish parliamentarian, he is still accepted as part of the general body. To fully appreciate the dramatic statement that Chaucer makes in favor of community and communal deliberation by including the voice of the cuckoo amongst his birds, it helps to look at other poems in which the cuckoo is cast out. For example, the influential early fourteenth-century poem La Messe des Oisius et li Plais de Chanoneses et des Grises Nonains by Jean de Condé introduces the cuckoo into “mass” where birds are singing Love’s praises by emphasizing the hatred of the nightingale, who acts as officiating priest, for the offensive bird:

But there was a bird amongst them who greatly displeased the nightingale and, in everybody’s hearing, he ordered him to be quiet. It was the cuckoo, that bird of highly dubious parentage,
who has slandered so many a man. Whether he liked it or not, the cuckoo had to leave off singing, for the other birds chased after him and threatened him fiercely, so that he fled away in terror.\(^{202}\)

The cuckoo is ordered to be quiet in Condé’s poem by the nightingale, and suppressing the speech of a cuckoo is such a common trope that Chaucer will eventually use a similar image when composing *The Manciple’s Tale*.\(^{203}\) Like other cuckoos, Condé’s cuckoo’s parentage is suspect. The tendency of cuckoos to “lay eggs in the nests of other birds, and the young to eject the young of their hosts”\(^{204}\) casts doubt onto the offspring of other birds as well. Most importantly, the more distinguished birds threaten the cuckoo so fiercely that he flees the assembly.

When Chaucer’s cuckoo speaks, he undeniably proposes a solution to the three eagles’ debate that only serves his own interests. If he is allowed to have his own mate, he doesn’t care if any of other birds ever mate. By placing his reproductive needs before the desires of the nobles, he upends Nature’s hierarchy. As expected, the noble fowls rebut his comment with great emotion:

“Ye, have the glotoun fild inow his paunce,
Thanne are we wel!” seyde the merlioun;

“Thow mortherere of the heysonge on the braunche


\(^{203}\) *The Manciple Tale*’s crow sings, “Cokkow! Cokkow! Cokkow!” (“Manciple’s Tale,” *Riverside* ln.243). revealing Phoebus Apollo’s cuckoldry, he provokes Phoebus to slay his wife. Rather than blaming himself for his rash action, the tyrant turns around and condemns the crow: “Traïtour,” quod he, “with tongue of scorpion,/ Thous hast broght to my confusioun”(*MT* lns.271-72). The angry backlash of Phoebus Apollo demonstrates the dangers of an advisor speaking indiscreetly, especially to those in power. It doesn’t matter that the crow accurately informed his master; the bird is punished and lose his distinctive song.

\(^{204}\) Muscatine n.358, 1001. Muscatine cites that the story is alluded to in Pliny, Nat. hist. 10.23; Vincent of Beauvais, Spec. nat. 1.16.29.
That broughte the forth, thow reufullest glotoun!
Lyve thow solen, wormes corupcioun,
For no fors is of law of thy nature!
Go, lewed be thow whil the world may dure!"  

The nobles deride the cuckoo as a glutton, showing no awareness that their own self-centered behavior caused the problem in the first place, and they call upon all the stereotypes that distinguish cuckoos as the immoral leeches of society to make their point. They cry that his nature has made him this horrible, and it is brought about by “wormes corupcioun.” Because the cuckoo, a lower fowl, dares to display indifference to the needs of the nobles he ignores Nature’s commands, and this outrageous and unsettling voice threatens the destruction of communality by a new faction. While the debate between three noble eagles exposed the danger of inner-class warfare, which is frightening enough in the fourteenth century, the cuckoo’s opinion seems menacing because it implies that inter-class warfare may also loom on the horizon. While the cuckoo only wishes to go about his business without waiting for the noble eagles, his intransigence reveals a rebellious spirit. The image of a worm fowl, which might allude to a ‘mediocre’ parliamentarian who represents the interests of commoners and rustics that sweat in the dirt and mud of farmland and countryside far away from urban London, would strike fear into the heart of the average urban professional (Chaucer’s most likely readership).

The Rising of 1381 remained fresh in recent memory, and the cries

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205 PF 610-16.
206 Paul Strohm discusses the general composition and shifting character of Chaucer’s audience in Social Chaucer: “Starting with the assumption that Chaucer addressed much of his poetry to a circle of social equals and near-equals, I wish to give fair weight to a number of counterveiling considerations. We have, for one thing, already seen that the membership of this group was in constant flux and that it played a variable role in his life. To address such a group would have meant one thing in the 1360s and early 1370s, when he was very much a member of the court circle; a somewhat different thing in the period 1374-
emerging from a dissatisfied countryside still haunted contemporary literature.\textsuperscript{207} The fowl finally order him, “Go, lewed be thow whil the world may dure!” This “go” appears to be imperative, but before the nobles can break up the parliament Nature herself steps forward to curtail this societal rift.

Despite his allusions to the dangerous political climate, Chaucer maintains a relatively optimistic viewpoint by having Nature intervene on the cuckoo’s behalf, and she silences the increasingly threatening cries of the nobles who wish to silence the offensive bird and throw him out of parliament:

\begin{quote}
\textquote{Now pes, “ quod Nature, “I comaunde heer!}
\textquote{For I have herd al youre opynyoun,}
\textquote{And in effect yit be we nevere the neer.}\textsuperscript{208}
\end{quote}

At first it seems puzzling why Nature defends a bird who threatens the procreative and communication agendas that she herself established at the beginning of the poem by asserting the royal eagle’s right to speak first. Nature, however, supports every bird’s right to appear in an assembly and voice their opinions even as she admits that this deliberation has led nowhere. Nature protects every one of her creatures, including the cuckoo, and perhaps the nobles are correct in observing that Nature has made the cuckoo what he is. As an elucidating comparison, Jean de Condé observes that Nature, not Love, is the force that instills “low blood” in subjects like the cuckoo. Just as the birds are about

\textsuperscript{207} See my third chapter on John Gower’s \textit{Vox Clamantis}.

\textsuperscript{208} PF 617-19.
to massacre the unwelcome cuckoo for interrupting and sullying their glorious mass in honor of love, Venus reminds them that the cuckoo is only acting according to his nature:

They say they will really massacre him if they can get hold of him – they are very distressed at what he has done to them.

Venus says, ‘Let this rest: you cannot gain any honour from it – he is descended from bad blood, he is bad by his very nature. If he does evil, he acts according to his nature, and he usually does so. When his own mother, from whom he comes in the first place, finds the nest of another bird, she eats the eggs and lays there an egg of her own. And when the other bird finds it – as has often been tested – she sits on it in the nest and hatches it, and brings up the chick and cherishes it as if it were her own. But in this the fostering she provides rebounds bitterly upon herself, for the bird that she has raised ends up eating his foster mother. How could he then ever do good, that wretched bird of evil lineage, when he so wickedly rewards the good deed of her who gives him life and brings him up?\(^{209}\)

This terrifying image of a bird eating its own mother resonates with the theme of rebellious and violent subjects who show no consideration for the community in which they live. Should such a bird be protected? According to the Chaucer’s noble fowl, such ungrateful subjects deserve to be punished, shunned, and thrown out of the community. Nature, however, considers the cuckoo’s opinion along with all of the others, and she observes that none of the fowls have been particularly helpful in deciding the issue. As a

\(^{209}\) Windeatt 107-08.
consequence, the cuckoo is grouped with the other birds once more. Nature has made the
cuckoo too, and this inclusive view of society suggests that a parliament only functions
properly if the opinions and pleas of every petitioner are given consideration. While a
natural hierarchy exists, no subject falls outside of Nature’s compass.

VIII. A Hopeful Roundel

After all of this deliberation, dissension, and debate, Nature puts an end to this
parliamentary session that has dissolved into useless bickering, and she finally allows the
formel to settle the matter for herself: “But finally, this is my conclusioun,/ That she
hireself shal han hir eleccioun.” Chaucer only introduces a greater sense of
irresolution, however, when the formel delays making any decision. The poet implies that
this noble lady has even less concern for the commonwealth than the three eagles
demonstrated in giving their long speeches. When the formel pronounces, “Almyghty
queen, unto this yer be don,/ I axe respite for to avise me,/ And after th
at to have my
choys al fre,” she requests a year-long delay, which makes the three love orations seem
comparatively brief. The formel exclaims that she would rather die than pronounce her
final choice before the current assembly, preferring to extinguish her own life than to
bend to the wishes of others. Moreover, she states her intention to serve neither “Venus
ne Cupide.” While Venus’s realm certainly seemed like a suspect source of “bliss”
earlier in the poem, the formel shows no concern that her refusal to love may stymie the
communal body for an entire year. She loves none of the birds. While her bold refusal to
choose points to an impressive individualism in the lady, it also shows the incompatibility

\[210\] PF 620-21.
\[211\] PF 647-49.
\[212\] PF 652
of individual desire with communitarian goals. Although the lower fowl find mates, the assembly has failed to solve the problem of the three eagle suitors. Chaucer allegorizes the frequent ineffectiveness of parliamentary sessions in resolving conflicts between rival nobles; in fact, disputes between nobles often derailed parliament. Irresolution reigned in the English parliament; even when laws and statutes did pass in the 1370 and 1380s, they were often overturned in the very next parliamentary session. Most especially, members of the nobility pursued their own goals despite parliamentary intercession or deliberation, rendering it a barren institution.

Chaucer could end the poem on this bleak note, but Nature keeps “common profit” close to her heart despite the nobles’ selfishness. While infighting, narcissism, and factionalism often rendered parliamentary sessions futile, parliamentary representatives could still aid their constituents in the towns and country by presenting “common petitions” that effected useful laws for local communities as well as for the general populace. Nature ultimately decides to let all the birds, besides the three suitors, choose their mates: “Quod Nature, “heere is more to seye./ Thanne wolde I that these foules aweye,/ Ech with his make, for taryinge lengere heere!” Although the lower fowls’ mating rituals have been delayed until nightfall, they still fly away to copulate. Prolonged parliamentary deliberations cannot postpone the natural advancement of the country’s population forever, and the negative impact of the assembly is mitigated by the recognition that Nature will always take its/her course. The birds fulfill their annual ritual of singing to honor Nature upon Valentine’s Day:

But first were chosen foules for to synge,

As yer by yer was alwey hir usaunce

\[213\] PF 655-57.
To synge a roundel at here departynge,
To don Nature honour and plesaunce.
The note, I trowe, imaked was in Fraunce,
The words were swiche as ye may heer fynde,
The nexte vers, as I now have in mynde.\textsuperscript{214}

In showing the inevitability of the lower fowls’ mating and annual song despite the unproductive parliamentary meeting, Chaucer’s final images comment on the ultimate inefficacy of many parliamentary sessions. But the roundel itself symbolizes an optimistic view on vocal communal assemblies in suggesting the possibility of harmony despite the flock’s failure to find resolution. The rough bird squawks of the lower fowls’ “common” or “clamorous” petitionary tongue propelled the assembled fowl into a dialogue that produced a variegated communal speech through the medium of debate, and Chaucer dramatizes a more peaceful and elegant vocal mode that also brings together the registers of several different individuals. The stylistic disparity between the “Kek kek! Kokkow! Quek quek!” and the refined roundel from France also elucidates the vocal flexibility of the lower fowl who adopt a cultivated idiom when prompted by Nature. The lower fowl establish their facility with language as well as song, proving their value as members of the parliamentary community.

In converting birdsong to a human form of music, Chaucer suggests the growing rationality of parliament’s communal vocal efforts. In defining the distinction that medieval musical theorists made between human song and birdsong, Elizabeth Eva Leach explains, “The key feature that defines music in the Middle Ages is its expression of a

\textsuperscript{214} PF 673-679.
rationality, which human beings alone of all the sublunary animals also possess.”\textsuperscript{215} In singing this human roundel, the birds intimate that a rational principle has motivated Nature’s decision, and the song also connotes the wisdom inherent in assembling diverse voices into a choir of sorts. The image of bird singers performing a human composition, however, also signifies the ambiguous role that the parliamentary Commons continued to play in its first century of existence. When fourteenth-century musicians started “representing birdsong in human music,”\textsuperscript{216} they expressed the beauty of natural music through the reasoning faculties and vocal technique of human singers, rendering the purported “rationality” of the musical piece somewhat vague. In suggesting that his lucid birds can sing a human roundel, Chaucer renders the rationality of this final vocal expression even more ambiguous. Do the birds understand the song they’re singing? Likewise the Commons had not quite found a clear voice. Although it enjoyed more recognition by members of the aristocracy and \textit{mediocres} alike, the institution was still developing a coherent communal culture. It attracted and accepted the petitioners of different social ranks, but fluctuating definitions of “private” and “common” petitions made it unclear whether these pleas would ultimately benefit the kingdom.

As the birds sing the roundel’s refrain, “Now welcome, somer, with thy sonnes softe,/ That hast thes wintres wedres overshake,/ And driven away the longe nyghtes blake!”\textsuperscript{217}, the thrice repeated lyric promises that the sun (possibly symbolizing Nature) has dispelled the long night of winter (possibly associated with nocturnal imagery of

\textsuperscript{215} Leach 1.
\textsuperscript{216} Leach 4.
\textsuperscript{217} \textit{PF} 680-682; 685-86 (missing the last line); 690-92. The threefold repetition of the refrain within the roundel provides the poem’s last example of triple vocalization/articulation, and it’s worth noting that the missing line in 685-686 renders these seemingly identical lines distinct from each other, which makes them comparable to the seemingly identical but surprisingly distinctive eagles.
This seasonal imagery presages a bright future for the community and its communal vocal productions, but it still imagines nature, and perhaps parliamentary political life, as a cycle. The sun and the night claim dominance at different times, and the climate of this parliament may always fluctuate. The following lines juxtapose the fowls’ shouts with this hopeful sentiment: “And with shoutynge, whan the song was downe/ That foules maden at here flight awey.” After the propitious musical interlude, the shouting confirms that the birds are still a raucous, noisy group even if they are capable of a graceful note. The parliamentarians’ sounds still exist somewhere between the common tongue of onomatopoeic bird speech and the quasi-rational tone of their final roundel. Just as parliament itself struggles to convert personal legal complaints into a form of common law, the dissonant avian chorus strives for some sense of harmonious communication. It is doubtful whether harmony is possible, but it is posed as an ideal by the roundel sung by birds.

218 PF 295-301: “Whan I was come ayeyn into the place/ That I of spak, that was so sote and grene./ Forth welk I tho myselfen to solace./ Tho was I war wher that ther sata queene/ That, as of light the comer sonner shene/ Passeth the sterr, right over mesure/ She fayrer was than any creature.”

219 PF 693-94.
Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices

Chapter Three: John Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*: A Rebel Bird and a Poet’s Struggle against Animal Discourse

I. Introduction

In composing a denunciation of the 1381 Rising in *Vox Clamantis*, John Gower exploits the traditional belief that animal speech is unintelligible and irrational to denounce the rebels’ ultimatums as the unreasonable utterances of uneducated brutes; according to this view, humans (like the king, his advisors, and the poet himself) who use authoritative language imbued with reason and erudition have no kinship with or comprehension of rebel beasts who grunt incomprehensible noise. At key moments within this overarching diatribe however, Gower also offers some penetrating analyses of the rebels’ rallying methods, stirring rhetoric, and successful strategies by attributing more significance and depth to the animal voice. The literary figure of the talking animal enables this careful examination of the rebels’ speech. In exploring the possibility that the voices of these defiant animals carry semantic significance, Gower resembles Langland in his study of a rodent’s political opinion as well as Chaucer in his meditation on a vociferous bird parliament. Like other fourteenth-century thinkers who found a degree of intelligibility and intelligence in the dog’s bark and the bird’s song, Gower sometimes portrays a tentative affiliation between certain kinds of human speech and some unnervingly communicative animal utterances. Assessing the ambiguous significance of an animal’s cry becomes a ripe metaphor for debating the importance, strength, and

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221 See Introduction. I particularly have the work of Eco, Leach, and White in mind here.
intelligibility of revolutionary political voices. In this complicated meditation on the
Rising, the poet suggests the competing and contradictory ideas that the rebels’ shouts
offered no real alternative to the venerable languages of England and that the rebel
leaders’ demands posed a legitimate threat to the king’s laws and literary culture.

When Gower depicts a mob of rebels as beasts that roar, low, and bark with no
intelligibility whatsoever, the outcry certainly doesn’t proffer a genuine alternative to
Richard II’s authoritative laws or the poem’s own refined language. In proposing this
conservative view, Gower accords with other accounts of the rebellion that
wholeheartedly denounce the rebels’ actions as the sins of unreasonable men who were
doomed to fail.²²² By choosing to compare the rebels to animals, however, the poet
denies certain human beings the faculties of rational thought, speech, or action, which
begs the question of what separates man from beast. In Gower’s extreme portrayal of
savage revolt, anger and fear prompt sane men to abandon human language for an
animal’s cries. Intelligible speech and bestial utterance are exchangeable. As pseudo-
linguistic noise erupts from the population, England’s traditional languages of power

²²² Historical accounts and poetic renderings of the Rising of 1381 register terror and disbelief that the
rebels stifled and gagged the traditional languages of authority as they burned public documents, demanded
the institution of their own laws, and cajoled the king into offering pardons and letters of manumission. Not
only did this attack on authoritative language threaten the traditional power structure and governance of the
realm, but the value of writers who composed legal records, chronicles, and treatises was contested by
rebels who resented the linguistic barriers that Latin and scholarly allusions presented to the uneducated
majority of the populace. Late fourteenth-century chroniclers dramatized and criticized this resistance to
authoritative language by portraying the rebels’ voices as a cacophony of irate cries and brutish threats that
rallied the poor commoners of London, drowning out the king’s advisors and the king himself. See Thomas
The Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333 to 1381, from a ms. written at St. Mary’s abbey, York, and now in the
possession of Lieut.-Col. Sir William Inglis (Manchester University Press; London, New York, etc.,
Longmans, Green & Co., 1927); G.H. Martin, ed, Knighton’s Chronicle 1337-1396 (Oxford: Clarendon
Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); R.B. Dobson, ed. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381
(London: Macmillan, 1970); Jean Froissart, The Chronicles of England, France, Spain, and other places
Online Froissart, <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/, Besançon 865 76 r-v, f 2-222/f 2-222-1>,
Transcription.
seem threatened by an animalistic uproar. The inhuman insurgency spreads as a demonic jay (symbolizing Wat Tyler) rallies these frightening beasts with his own degenerate version of human language. As he cries out, the jay uses stylistic elements akin to the ones that appeared in the rebels’ vernacular letters and speeches, and Gower registers the persuasive, almost infectious, potential of literary efforts written in an alternative idiom. The bird, as a result, reminds readers that Gower’s cultured Latin is only one of the languages available for expressing political views.

The assumption that the authoritative languages commonly used in scholarly and legal enterprises will continue to dominate the English political scene, therefore, suffers a blow. But the extent of this upset is mitigated by Gower’s essential analogy between rebels and animals; the rebels’ discourse threatens the laws and languages of the official government as much as animal communication offers a real alternative to human language, which might have been viewed as a theoretical possibility in the Middle Ages but was still seen as a dubious proposition. The jay’s fleeting success at spreading his message, nevertheless, expresses grave concern about the uncertain post-1381 future of England. Law and written culture seem doomed when the poem’s patent linguistic master, Gower’s narrator, loses his humanity and becomes bestial. When the hyper articulate Gowerian dreamer succumbs to the riotous, animalistic forces menacing him and crosses over the species line to flail in the woods like the wild Nebuchadnezzar, the poet creates a terrifying allegory of the three days when educated Londoners capitulated to the belligerent rebel mob. The precariousness of a supposedly solid

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223 June 13th-15th, 1381
224 Close examination of the different renditions of the Smithfield interview in the Anonimalle Chronicle, Henry Knighton’s Chronicle, and Jean Froissart’s Chroniques also reveal this anxiety. The chroniclers consistently register discomfort with Richard’s leniency and capitulatory gestures, and they wonder at
social order becomes frightfully obvious as the poem sensationalizes the native bestiality and capriciousness of a common populace that stalks those in power. *Vox Clamantis* instills the fear that traditional authorities may be supplanted or irretrievably altered by the rustic and common populace, posing the disturbing idea that articulate and literary language could also be overcome by a wild and animalistic alternative. Order is restored at the conclusion of *Vox*, but the memory of a potent animal threat lingers.

II. An Overview of *Vox Clamantis*’ Linguistic Layers

The first book of John Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* reveals an increasingly fluid society in which common men like Wat Tyler gained voices, and the tense political climate of 1381 finds expression as different types of languages and voices struggle for ascendency and authority. Gower layers different modes of speech to create a multifaceted and troubling portrait of authoritative discourses and insurgent discourses shaping, misshaping, and constantly pressuring each other. Political strife is played out as a series of linguistic clashes.

For those unfamiliar with the linguistic depth of the poem, let me offer a brief outline of its communicating levels. Andrew Galloway has commented, “Gower’s *visio* defines both the peasants’ and Gower’s modes of knowledge, a principle that Gower for

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Richard tolerating the demands and insults of a rebel like Tyler. The linguistic exchange between the king and his commanding subject sensationalizes the king’s vulnerability to the violence and stratagems of a common man, and the chroniclers notice the ways language itself twists and transforms into an unrecognizable idiom as the powerful king panders to the assertive upstart. See Saul 71; Galbraith 147; Martin 218-220; Dobson 194-95; Froissart 255-61.

225 As a point of comparison, see Andrew Galloway’s argument, “This *visio* thus suggests a starting point or Gower’s meditations on how modes of knowledge and ways of understanding constitute sort of the reality of estates, social ‘conditions,’ and ways of life, whether the collective insanity of the peasants in 1381 or the identity and pursuits of Amans/John Gower.” In my argument, I agree with Galloway’s interpretation, but I further argue that these “modes of knowledge,” particularly different linguistic modes, shape and misshape each other. See Andrew Galloway, “Gower in his Most Learned Role and the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381,” *Mediavalia* 16 (1993): 329-330.
the first time in his *oeuvre* presents as having extraordinary value and power in defining and deforming communities and ways of life,”¹²²⁶ accurately describing the authoritative and plebeian types of knowledge and linguistic modes saturating the poem. Galloway’s insight that these modes “define” and “deform” communities explains the way Gower uses specific kinds of discourse to categorize particular sectors of society. As the poem continues, however, these modes of knowledge and speech also “deform” each other. The rebel speakers demonstrate some acquaintance with Gower’s educated rhetoric, and Gower fails in resisting the rebels’ brutish discourse, at least at the surface level of the text. This mutual influence, therefore, sheds doubt on Gower’s own device of linking specific linguistic hallmarks with particular sectors of society. In the course of the poem, the distinctions between “high” and “low” speech, authoritative and non-authoritative discourse, and, most intriguingly, human and animal utterance seem increasingly indistinct and permeable.

In the beginning of *Vox*, the linguistic markers of the elite and the humble seem clear. Gower initially invites a scholastic and educated audience by composing Latin verse.²²⁷ In contrast, the poet not only describes the rebels’ frightening cries as monstrous but he calls upon onomatopoetic animal noises to make his Latin sound like an English farmyard. These stark registers merge when he introduces Wat Tyler as a jay who speaks like a human; at this key moment, Gower mediates between the high Latin of his verse and the low growls of animal sounds by referring to the native Middle English alliterative

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¹²²⁶ Galloway 331.
²²⁷ Manuscript evidence also suggests that Gower exerted a great deal of authorial control over *Vox Clamantis* even as it was being copied in the scriptorium. G.C. Macaulay argues, Of the four manuscripts of the *Vox Clamantis* with other Latin poems, which have been referred to as contemporary with the author...They are proved to be original copies, not only by the handwriting of the text, which in each case is distinctly fourteenth century, but also by the fact that they all have toe author’s corrections written over erasure, and in several cases the same hand is recognizable throughout.” (G.C. Macaulay, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower: The Latin Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902) lix-lx).
style used by the rebels themselves. A vernacular poetic, therefore, symbolizes the strange, earthy voices entering London from the countryside, and it folds into Gower’s Latin verse. Then Gower dramatizes the impact of the rebels’ discourse upon his own authoritative speech by subjecting the dreamer to a metamorphosis; the character changes from a cultured poet with complete command over Latin to an inarticulate wild creature. So within the account of 1381, Gower advances several competing linguistic registers, but there are still other hidden communicating layers to *Vox*.

Gower incorporates a technique akin to one used in “cento” poetic compositions, which integrate lines from classical Latin poems seamlessly into the lines of fresh verses. Or as R. F. Yeager explains, “splicings from other sources [are] altered very slightly…and put to serve a meaning wholly new.” If a reader is unfamiliar with the source poems, she might not understand that any citations are being made. Only a reader with an exemplary education, keen ear, and perfect memory would notice the quotations scattered in the verse. By using this subtle technique, Gower further embellishes the interplay between authoritative and non-authoritative speech in his own verse. In noticing the unsettling impact of centonic technique on Gower’s portrayal of language, Eve Salisbury has argued, “By splicing fragments from these texts of the past into his own verse, the poet creates a discourse we might call carnivalesque since it relativises and

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228 For more information, see R.F. Yeager, "Did Gower Write Cento?,” *Studies in Medieval Culture* 26 (1989): 119. Also see Yeager’s a more elaborate version of the argument that Gower composed cento in the late 1300s in Robert F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: the search for a new Arion*. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1990) 53-60.

229 Galloway comments, “In social terms, it might be argued that such a sense of textual and contextual discrimination is an important feature for a highly trained administrator or, especially, legal clerk, for legal documents with the slightest error or discrepancy were rendered invalid in the later Middle Ages. Such a critical textual and historical consciousness is of course also the essence of Gower’s unique use of cento. At a micro-level, the details of Gower’s literary practice place him where the larger outlines of his social vision also place him: among the most important kinds of “new men” in the fourteenth century, those whose professional authority is acquired and maintained not simply by religious vocation, or by social tradition or family connection, but by knowledge. He would thus be precisely among the group that the peasants most severely attacked” (Galloway 336).
contradicts itself in a disguised double-voiced manner.\textsuperscript{230} This perception that cento “relativises and contradicts” discourse in a poem that already offers competing and intermingling human, half-human, and animal discourses forces readers to reassess the relative merit and value of different modes of speech.

For example, when the dreamer becomes an animal-like being and his speech descends from high Latin to an animalistic wail, Gower’s Latin insertion simultaneously calls for the erudite reader to recall pertinent sections from Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}. So even as the character of the dreamer seems to be descending the linguistic food chain from a human eloquence to a bestial cry, Gower concurrently invites readers with the highest levels of learning to remember and contextualize a line written in Golden Age Latin, which comments on the situation of the dreamer. To further baffle a reader looking for an authoritative commentary, this demanding “cento” insertion still uses animal imagery, thoroughly confusing the categories of “high” and “low” speech advanced earlier in \textit{Vox}.\textsuperscript{231} As the dreamer becomes a wild man, Gower asks the reader to remember the scene of Hecuba transforming into a dog. Moreover, the observant reader will notice the textual echoes from the Book of Daniel even as she recalls precise scenes from the Ovidian corpus.\textsuperscript{232} So Gower, in fact, demands comprehensive classical and

\textsuperscript{231} Andrew Galloway does a nice job of explaining the way the cento technique makes the reader aware of the ways the present moment fits into a larger awareness of the historical past. Galloway observes here, “But in one sense the use of cento in the \textit{visio} precisely create “history,” by providing the temporal depth of source texts against which attentive and knowledgeable readers can chart a range of possible historical correspondences and differences, while maintaining an awareness that the \textit{visio} is presenting a very specific historical circumstance and moment, occurring “\textit{quarto Ricardi regis in anno,/ Dum clamat mensem Iunius esse suum}” in the fourth year of King Richard, when June claims the month as its own,” as the work opens” (Galloway 332).
\textsuperscript{232} Eve Salisbury compares this tendency of the cento to link together different literary and philosophic traditions to the writing of history itself: “The \textit{centoist} operation links the Judeo-Christian tradition together to form continuity and unity where there is at the same time ideological and historical difference. It takes
Biblical knowledge in his audience while rendering the incoherent barks of a maddened
dog, forcing the reader to analyze the lowliest of snarls with careful attention. These vital
parallel moments of rarified literary reference and animal speech allude to startling and
heretofore unrecognized connections, congruities, and genetic similarities between the
speech modes of different kinds of creatures. Even as Wat Tyler exerts influence over the
dictates of the king, Gower demonstrates that invoking animal sounds can shape and
inform poetic language.  

By layering different modes of expression to produce a vivid sensory portrait of
1381, Gower portrays the enormous pressure that one form of rhetoric exerts upon
another. Careful comparisons of the rebels’ animalistic shrieks, the jay’s alarmingly
human clarion call, the narrator’s hybrid voice, and the erudite allusions of the poet
reveal the poet’s incisive analysis of the Rising’s complex political soundscape. By
expecting the reader to recognize and understand divergent registers and literary
references, Gower demands scholarly attention to detail even as he expects the reader to
notice the impact of animal rhetoric on authoritative speech. While the chroniclers
dramatize the impact of the rebels’ speech upon the king’s ability to command, Gower
deepens this portrait of influence and infection with his command of different
intermingling layers of language.

but a small intellectual leap to see that the same logic may be applied to the writing of history.” Salisbury elaborates, “Centonic texts teach us to listen to the voices of another place and time”(Salisbury 179-80).

233 As an interesting parallel argument, see Kim Zarins’ claim, “The repeated metamorphoses of different animals reinforce Gower’s link between the rebels’ physical metamorphoses and the metamorphoses of words through syllabic play…As a kind of language puzzle, the metamorphoses show the peasants taking a more active role in developing heads, feet, and bodies, which metaphorically make the peasants players with language just like Gower….the rebels are bewitchingly skilled masters of syllabic play, able to shift heads and feet of their opponents’ bodies and their own at need. Hybridity becomes their greatest weapon” (Kim Zarins, "From Head to Foot: Syllabic Play and Metamorphosis in Book I of Gower's Vox Clamantis,” Studies in Medieval Culture 46 (2007): 149-50).
III. Animalistic Rustica Proles

The first book of *Vox Clamantis* initially uses animal imagery to besmirch the humanity, rationality, and ethical character of Wat Tyler and his followers, and most scholars view the entire dream vision as a bold condemnation of the rebels of 1381. For example, Steven Justice describes *Vox Clamantis* as a “terrifying beast-dream,”²³⁴ and Eve Salisbury terms it “an allegorical beast fable that characterizes mob behavior as nature gone awry.”²³⁵ This common reading of the poem poses a convincing case; indeed, Gower begins his poem with a clear denunciation of rebel and animalistic speech before revealing a more nuanced view of both registers in the poem’s closing sections. Gower first invokes beasts to instill fear, and this fear eventually transforms into a terror that the poet has the capacity to become a beast too. In a perceptive argument, Justice observes:

> It is obvious how the revolt of 1381 threatened Gower’s project. A *populus*, a *plebs*, that complains loudly of social corruption, greed in high places, and misgovernment close about the king – as Gower and his *plebs* do – but in rustic tones, to demand radical reforms (which would put untitled landlords like Gower himself in some jeopardy), threatened to absorb and discredit the discourse of popular complaint by which he claimed cultural status as speaker for the *vox populi*. Their language was simply too like his, and both Gower’s political self-positioning and his poetic vocation were potential casualties of this likeness.²³⁶

²³⁶ Justice 211.
Justice rightly argues that Gower denounces the rebels’ rhetoric by comparing their pleas to animal grunts in order to distance his literary project from their rebellion; nevertheless, the similarities between the rebel animals and the poet grow more and more obvious. Gower imagines Wat Tyler as an ignominious *graculus* whose human-like voice spreads discord, and the strains of his dissonant cries reduce the dreamer to behaving like an inarticulate beast. In depicting both the rebel leader and his own persona morphing into “in-between,” hybrid creatures that exhibit human and animal characteristics, Gower admits the radical, transformative influence the rebels exerted over speech, law, and literature. Although Gower begins *Vox Clamantis* by mounting an attack on rebel speech, rendering it alien, animal, and entirely distinct from his own, the poet eventually cannot suppress the fact that these aspects of his linguistic style resemble the rebels’ speeches and literary productions in several vital ways. In analyzing the moments when Gower’s polemic adapts the languages of those he hoped to denounce, I argue that the poet’s diatribe against the insurgents is partially undermined by his accurate recreation of their linguistic mode, which drew on vernacular poetry as well as legal documents.

From the start, the poet readily recognizes the menace of the discontented populace, and he predicts that a major threat will come from the countryside even in the years prior to 1381. Gower composed the first book of *Vox Clamantis* after already completing books two through seven; it is generally accepted that he chose to add the first book because he wished to comment on the revolt that had just taken place in 1381.237 In book five Gower warns, “Unless it is struck down first, the peasant race

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237 Eric Stockton observes, “Books II-VII of Vox Clamantis were begun shortly after the completion of the author’s Mirour about 1378, for Gower finished these books before the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and he must have needed many months to write them. The revolt itself then moved him to write Book I, which is an account of it. Books II-VII (originally numbered I-VI, surely) comprise a critique of the three estates,
(rustica proles) strikes against freemen, no matter what nobility or worth they possess.”

In a passage accompanying this dire warning, Gower already envisions the rustica proles as an animal horde intimately connected to the land while simultaneously threatening England’s soil: “For just as the fox seeks his hole and enters it while the woods are echoing on every side of the hole, so does the servant of the plow, contrary to the law of the land, seek to make a fool of the land.”

The wild fox known for dishonesty and theft serves no purpose other than to fool men; these are the creatures filling England’s fields with their schemes for looting. Along these same lines, Gower observes that England has almost reached an apocalyptic state in book seven, and he warns men against the sins that threaten to doom them. What is fascinating about this warning is that Gower is already toying with the idea of animal metamorphosis that he will later use to describe the 1381 rebellion. Cautioning against the vices that inflict the populace of England, noble, clergy, and peasant alike, Gower outlines the ways in which

with almost unsparing attention to their wickedness. In the latter book all three estates are guilty of causing the world’s evils; in Book I the peasants alone are at fault….In addition, Macaulay discusses manuscript evidence indicating that Book I was added later, together with a few difficulties in accepting such a theory. (Macaulay IV, xxxi-xxxii and lxvii.) He also cites internal evidence for the separate composition of Book I with which it is hard to disagree: “The first book, with its detailed account of the Peasants’ revolt, though itself the most interesting part of the work, has certainly something of the character of an insertion. The plan of the remainder seems to be independent of it, though the date, June, 1381, which is found also in the Laud MS. [which does not contain Book I], ‘Contigit vt quarto Ricardi Regis in anno,/ Dum climat mensum Iunius esse suum,’ was doubtless intended to suggest that portentous event as the occasion of the review of society which the work contains. The prologue of the second book, which introduces the teaching of the vision with an invocation of God’s assistance, an apology for the deficiencies of the work, and an appeal to the goodwill of the readers, and concludes with a first announcement of the name of the succeeding poem, Vox Clamantis, would certainly be much more in place at the beginning of the whole work than here, after more than two thousand lines, and there is no difficulty in supposing that the author may have introduced the account of the Peasants’ revolt as an afterthought.” (Macaulay xxxii.) (Stockton, Eric W. ed. and transl, The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962) 12).

Stockton 209. “Nobile quicquid habent seu dignum, rustica proles/ Ledit in ingenuis, sit nisi lesa prius” (Macaulay 217) Book 5, Ch. 9, Ins. 607-608.

Stockton 209. “Sicut enim vulpis resonantibus vndique silius/ De fouea foueam querit et intra team, / Sic famulus sulci contrarius ammodo legi/ De patria patriam querit habere moram” (Macaulay 217) Bk. 5, ch. 9, Ins. 583-586.
sin transforms humans into animals, but he adds that humans that have changed into animals are monstrous:

And so the power of human reason perishes as if it were that of a beast, so long as vice governs the actions of the body. Now I should say that a man is an animal, as long as he lives in a condition of a brute beast’s. A nature ignorant of learning governs a beast, and it has no power of judgment or reason. Man therefore is worse than a beast when his will alone governs him contrary to nature. 240

In the pre-1381 drafts of Vox Clamantis “living in the condition of a brute beast’s” means being afflicted by cardinal sins such as lust and gluttony. When Gower appends the first book to Vox, he redefines the concept of “living in the condition of a brute beast” more literally as living the life of an uneducated, mean peasant working in the fields along with the donkeys, oxen, and swine, and he associates this literal debased condition with a desecration of the soul as the vision unfolds. 241 While the dangers of revolt, sin, and

240 Stockton 281. “Et sic bruta quasi perit humane racionis/ Virtus, dum vicium corporis acta regit./ Est homo nunc animal dicam, set non racionis,/ Dum viuit bruti condicione pari./ Nescia scripture brutum natura guernat,/ Iudicid arbitrium nec racionis habet:/ Est igitur brutis homo peior, quando voluntas/ Preter naturam sola gubernat eum.” (Macaulay 304) Book 7, Ch. 21, lns. 1171-1178.
241 Paul Freedman analyzes the transition from depicting sinners, particularly non-Christians who were considered alien, as beasts to depicting Christian peasants as beasts. Although it’s possible that a sinner could also be a peasant, in fact, the peasantry was often regarded as “natural,” hence in closer contact with God. The method of rendering a peasant as an animal, therefore, was an ambiguous proposition. Could a holy Christian also be a beast? Gower gets around this problem because a disobedient peasant gave up his dutiful posture (to his master as well as to God), and this intransigent peasant fit neatly into the beastly stereotype. Freedman explains the complex symbolism of negative imagery as he compares non-Christian and peasant population who suffered this stereotyping for different reasons: “The language of subordination was applied as well to many groups alien to Christian Europe in the Middle Ages. Some of the opprobrious language used for peasants spilled over into hostile characterizations of Jews, Muslims, heretics, lepers, and strange foreign peoples, including fantastastic ‘monstrous’ or ‘Plinian’ races thought to inhabit the East. All these could be regarded as unclean, dishonest, savage or cursed, and their religious, physical, or geographic differences viewed as fearsome. Peasant differed from these marginal or outcast peoples in three important respects, which made their representation as alien more problematic: they constituted an overwhelming majority of the European population; as their superiors acknowledged, they were necessary to feed the rest of society; and they were Christians. An array of unfavorable images indeed characterize peasants as debased, even subhuman, but these stereotypes were tempered by the fact that peasants were not ‘marginal’
apocalypse already lingered in Gower’s mind before 1381, they contorted into a
grotesque vision when his worst fears materialized and the rebels attacked.

In describing the revolt, Gower embellishes his own animal rhetoric while
building upon the popular criticism that the rebels behaved like animals as they raided the
streets of London. For while Thomas Walsingham writes, “Words could not be heard
among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep,
or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks”²⁴² describing the ruckus
spreading through the streets in a single line, Gower devotes the first book of Vox to
comparing the throngs to different animals and detailing their inhuman cries. The
dreamer exclaims, “And while my eyes gazed upon the crowds I was greatly amazed at
so much rowdiness, behold, the curse of God suddenly flashed upon them, and changing
their shapes, it had made them into wild beasts. They who had been men of reason before
had the look of unreasoning brutes. A different shape marked the different mobs and so
marked out each in its own form.”²⁴³ Gower uses animal metaphor to create an allegorical
dreamscape in which diverse beasts symbolizing peasants (or land-working serfs), bakers,

in the same way as outcast peoples, foreigners, or the destitute poor. As the largest segment of the Christian
population, the peasantry was a pervasive and familiar presence in the medieval European landscape and
this could hardly be viewed as alien in the same way as the teeming infidels of the immense non-European
world ‘out there,’ beyond the borders. Furthermore, to the extent that the peasants supported those placed
above them, they appeared dutiful and necessary. They fulfilled, perhaps reluctantly, the duties laid upon
them by the dominant model of society that saw it divided into functional orders: those who fight, those
who pray, and those who work. Finally, the nature of Christianity itself gave pause to the dominant
elements of society: might the degradation of the peasantry bode a future reversal? Would God reward their
meekness and implicit closeness to Him in the world to come?” (Freedman 2).

²⁴² Dobson 173
²⁴³ Stockton 54. “Dumque mei turbas oculi sic intuerentur, Miror et in tanta rusticitate magis, Ecce dei
subito maledicció fulsit in illos, Et mutans formas feceret esse fera. Qui fuerant hominess prius innae
racions, Brutorum species irracions habent, Diersas turmas diuersaque forma figurat, Quamlibet et propria
butchers, millers, stable hands, household servants among countless others rampage,\textsuperscript{244} despite Gower’s broad assertions that \textit{rustici} (peasants associated with field work) composed the rebel groups, the diversity of animals he includes suggests a rebel band that united people from many different professions.\textsuperscript{245} Like Walsingham,\textsuperscript{246} Gower specifies that the rebellion sprang from God’s curse in his initial description of the rebels’ physical transformation, but the poet turns the curse into a far more virulent denunciation by arguing that human reason itself has been eradicated. In book seven, he argues, “Man therefore is worse than a beast when his will alone governs him contrary to nature,”\textsuperscript{247} but his earlier attack on every member of the three estates has turned into a denunciation of the rebels alone.\textsuperscript{248}

\textsuperscript{244} Stockton 59-60. “Rupta cathena suum laxat abire canem/Carnificum grandes vidique venire molosos/Atque molendini nec manet ipse domi/ Nec stabulum veteres poterat retenere latrantes” (Macaulay 33) Bk.LCh.5, ln.400-03; “dicit murelegos, vt seruos domesticos” (Macaulay 34) Bk.1 Ch.6 Prol.

\textsuperscript{245} Rodeny Hilton, \textit{Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381} (New York: The Viking Press, 1973). Hilton writes, “The poet John Gower describes the rising in the first book of his \textit{Vox Clamantis}, using the familiar image of a dream, or rather, a nightmare. He presents the rebels exclusively as peasants \textit{seviles rustici, servile genus, rusticitas}. Walsingham, whose elaborate history has so much influenced subsequent interpretations, strongly emphasizes the peasant component, as one would expect of a monk from a landowning monastery whose rural tenants were as much involved in the rebellion as were the townsmen of St Albans itself.”(176) Despite Hilton’s own interpretation of Gower’s text as presenting the rebels as a homogenous group of rustic peasants, the poet’s decision to include several different animals associated with different tasks (and professions) implies a more all-encompassing view. Although Gower’s denunciation of the peasants appears several times, the diversity of the animal bands shouldn’t be discounted. For more on the heterogeneous composition of the rebel groups, Hilton ‘s analysis of indictments and escheators’ records argues for a diverse group of rebels: “We can only say, therefore, on the basis of the indictments, that among the many names of the accused, there is a fair scattering – perhaps almost a substantial minority – of persons with other than agricultural occupations. Apart from the clergy, who are worth considering separately, these are men who for the most part ply essential trades in any peasant society. Carpenters, sawyers, masons, cobblers, tailors, weavers, fullers, glovers, hosiers, skinners, bakers, butchers, innkeepers, cooks and a lime-burner are found in the Kentish indictments. Much the same is true in Essex, with the addition of a couple of glaziers; and similarly Suffolk, though here the occupational descriptions attached to names are fewer”(179).

\textsuperscript{246} Dobson 172

\textsuperscript{247} Stockton 281. “Est igitur brutis homo peior, quando voluntas/ Preter naturam sola gubernat eum.” (Macaulay 304) Book 7, Ch. 21, ln. 1177-78

\textsuperscript{248} In “John Gower’s \textit{Vox Clamantis} and the Medieval Idea of Place,” Kurt Olsson views Books I-VII as a gradual progression of argument; therefore, he reads the books in order rather than viewing Book I as an addition. I agree that Gower could’ve composed the first book with a larger argument in mind, but I still find it useful to read the first book as the last revision. In a vaguely neo-platonic reading, Olsson argues that Gower develops his denunciation of the rebels’ lack of reason into a criticism of England’s social hierarchy in general, and then he moves onto critiquing any soul that doesn’t turn to God. He writes, ‘This universal
By amplifying the rebels’ shrieks and bleats into a horrific cacophony, Gower intimates the terrified emotions of Londoners witnessing a three-day uprising, but these transformed animals also signify the poet’s awareness that the rebels are necessary to the existing social order. The economy of England couldn’t survive without the rebelling portion of the population, who hailed from diverse trades and occupations, just as farmers wouldn’t be able to produce food or clothes without animals. Gower recognizes that men like himself must subdue the most dangerous rebels without permanently alienating or harming all of their supporters, whom he considers to resemble domesticated animals in times of peace. In transformations involving asses, oxen, swine, dogs, cats, foxes, birds, flies, and frogs, he illustrates this dilemma by having the rebels who have just metamorphosed into domestic beasts of burden change into wilder, monstrous aberrations of nature. For example, the field hands who have just morphed into shrill, hee-hawing asses transform again into monsters resembling misshapen lions:

order, which embraces all time, frees the mind from time and in another sense frees it to reenter time. It is envisioned not by the bestial imagination, a faculty we use ‘when we diligently examine what may be good or evil for our future life.’ Such imagination – a power for envisioning place – orders our fear in the best way. No longer that affection by which the mind succumbs to powers that overrun the land and falls to confusion, no longer merely that affection which moves us to yield to the superior in a social hierarchy we may see as external, fear is now the affection by which we arrange our inner life by a sense of place, ordering the body to its superior, the soul and the soul to its superior, God. Such ordering is nothing less than the recovery of proper place, where ‘unaqueque res quiet’” (Kurt Olsson, “John Gower’s Vox Clamantis and the Medieval Idea of Place,” Studies in Philology 84. 2. (Spring 1987): 156).

Paul Freedman makes this argument in Images of the Medieval Peasant observing, “The peasants could be conceived as both necessary and bestial. This was linked to the imputed nature of their service: reluctant but productive, given a certain level of coercion. They could be held to resemble useful rather than threatening animals” (Freedman 148).

In describing the transformations in Book I of Vox, Kim Zarins comments, “But if the first book is ‘literary,’ it is strange literature. Rather than offering a factual, moment-by-moment account of the rebellion, Gower presents what Eve Salisbury playfully calls a ‘poetic Frankenstein,’ in which peasants in the form of domestic animals morph into monsters. [Salisbury “Remembering Origins” 160.] Kim Zarins emphasizes the horror that Gower wishes to evoke in the reader: “Framed like nothing so much as a B-type horror flick, the poem recounts how asses, oxen, dogs, cats, geese, and other animals turn nasty; they acquire horns, teeth, and various other fearsome appendages and then prey on defenseless people” (Zarins 144).
I saw the rebellious asses carried away by sudden revolt, and no one checked them by the bridle. For their vitals were filled with the raging of lions in search of their prey. The halter had no effect on their unruly heads, and the wandering asses jumped through all the fields. Indeed, their braying terrified all the citizens, as they loudly redoubled their usual “hee haw” again and again. The asses were violently wild and untamed, and each which had been useful lost its usefulness. They refused to carry sacks around the city any more and were unwilling to bend their backs under a heavy load. They did not care for the field grasses on the hillsides, but instead they now wanted greater delicacies. They drove others from their homes and wrongfully wanted to get the horses’ rightful place for themselves.251

As when Wat Tyler seizes Richard’s reins in Knighton’s Chronicle, ordinary power relations are overthrown when bridles and halters no longer control animals.252 The vision of asses leaping through fields like lions communicates the baffling incongruousness of the event, but Gower emphasizes the gravity of the situation by describing their disobedience and lack of usefulness. If no one wishes to carry the heavy loads, make cloth, farm food, or serve in households, there is no way that established

251 Stockton 54. “Elatos asinos subita nouitate rebelles/ Vidi, nec frenis quis moderavit eos;/ Viscera namque sua replete furore leonum/ Exititerant predas in repetendo suas./ Perdidit officum capitis sine lege capistrum,/ Dum saltant asini cuncta per arua vagi;/ Terruit en cunctus sua sternutacio ciues,/ Dum geminant solita voce frequenter yha./ Sunt onagrique rudes asini violenter, et omnis/ Que fuit utilitas utilitate caret./ Amplius ad villam saccos portare recusant,/ Nec curuare sua pondere dorsa volunt;/ Set neque rurales currant in montibus herbas,/ Ammodo set querunt deliciosa magis/ A domibus alios expelleunt, ius et equorum/ Iniuste cupiunt appropriare sibi.” (Macaulay 27) Book 1, Ch. 2, lns.183-198.

252 Henry Knighton writes, “When the king paused to consider these demands, Jakke Strawe approached the king and spoke threateningly to him, seizing the bridle of the king’s horse with unparalleled audacity.” (Dobson 185-86. “Cumque rex de huiusmodi concessione cum deliberacione tardaret, lakke Strawe proprius accedens et regem, uerbis. Minacioribus alloquens, frenum equi Regis, quo ausu nescio, manu arripuit” (Martin 218-220).
English society can survive. The sight of these asses demanding the same rights as nobles (or in this case the nobles’ horses) using a “hee haw,” or “yha,” sends the dreamer into a whorl of anxiety as he fears a future in which the distinctions between those who serve and those who rule have evaporated. Humble creatures have become savage, and intercession is required to make these farm animals return to their homes. In portraying everyday beasts that suddenly require taming, Gower’s poem offers an allegory that suggests why the chronicles presented Richard II as carefully reassuring the crowd. According to Walsingham, Richard calmed the rebels almost as if they were unsettled beasts at Smithfield; the king took them to a field, encouraged them to return home as soon as the monstrous Wat Tyler had been murdered:

        But the king, with marvelous presence of mind and courage for so young a man, spurred his horse towards the commons and rode around them, saying, ‘What is this, my men? What are you doing? Sure you do not wish to fire on your own king? Do not attack me and do not regret the death of that traitor and ruffian. For I will be your king, your captain and your leader. Follow me into that field where you can have all the things you would like to ask for.’

Only after the removal of “that traitor and ruffian” does Richard begin treating the commoners like his rightful subjects (or, as Gower might deem them, his biddable domestic beasts); up to that point, the angry mob resembled Tyler, who was always portrayed as an unmanageable brute. If Tyler had triumphed, what would have happened? Gower worries when London, the government, and particularly authoritative language come under attack. The horror of an unintelligible and ignorant “hee haw” supplanting

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253 Dobson 179
the written law code of England as well as the language Gower’s own poetry is almost beyond the poet’s wildest imaginings.

IV. *Vox fera, trux vultus, verissima mortis ymago*

Gower’s portrait of the monsters’ leader, Wat Tyler the Jackdaw (*graculus*), demonizes the rebels’ speech in showing that the evil bird only mimics the rudimentary sounds of human language without understanding its rational or ethical foundation. This mimicry poses a serious threat because it communicates due to its technical resemblance to human speech even as its underlying irrationality spreads a sinful message.\(^{254}\) In decrying the linguistic details of Tyler’s “mimicry” within the context of his own poem, Gower lambasts Tyler’s call-to-arms; nevertheless, the poet demonstrates the power of the rebel leader’s persuasive verbal style in dramatizing its impact upon the dreamer who transforms into a senseless, mute wild man.

\(^{254}\) In analyzing the unsettling mimicry of some animals, Susan M. Griffin offers a compelling argument why this animal mimicry is an apt metaphor for portraying strained political relationships: “Mimicry is, on the one hand, a mirror image that reveals the self and, on the other, a lesser version, a copy, of the self. Lesser also in that the copy must be imperfect to be recognizable as a copy. Hence the comic potential of animal speech, depicted repeatedly in cartoons and caricatures. Hence, I argue, its threatening nature as well. Animals repeat humans with an uncanny difference, creating a reflection that shatters the treasured wholeness of the personal and species image. The humanness of beasts unsettles, rather than reinforces, the integrity of humans….” In *Understudies*, these relations at times resemble the colonialist structure of imitation that Homi Bhabha calls mimicry, the “primitive” subject’s near-perfect imitation of the more civilized colonial master: the laughable pretension of a Babu’s pronouncements or, in a different register, the horror of a savage vampire passing as an English gentleman. Intended as a self-replication that confirms authority, mimicry instead introduces difference and hybridity. Our inferiors ape us, but in doing so they reveal us, not themselves” (Susan M. Griffin. “Understudies: Miming the Human,” *PMLA* 124.2. (March 2009): 514). In addition Dorothy Yamamoto offers information about the typical portrayal of magpies and jays in the bestiary tradition: “Not all bird repeat the same notes over and over again: another group produce sounds with at least some of the variety of human speech. Jays and magpies were often kept as pets: both birds naturally ‘chatter’ and can be taught to mimic certain words. However, there is never any sense behind what they are saying: they are simply copying what they have heard. Because their ‘speech’ is so clearly derivatve, it is often equated with varous kinds of discourse that writers wish to devalue. ‘Beleue nou(gh)t yn (th)e pyys cheteryng;' Hyt ys no trou(th)e, but fals beleuyng’, Robert Mannyng warns in Handlyng Synne, alluding to the bird’s role in popular superstition as the harbinger of important events, while the magpie appears as the spreader of malicious rumours in both The House of Fame and Troilus/and Criseyde. …Invoking the ‘speech’ of magpies and jays also means positing the existence of a ‘true’ speech which these mindless mimics fail to attain” (Yamamoto 50-51).
In his introduction of the dangerous bird, Gower admits that the *graculus* has been
“well instructed in the art of speaking,” presenting him as an intimidating fiend.

When this great multitude of monsters like wild beasts stood united, a
multitude like the sands of the sea, there appeared a Jackdaw, well
instructed in the art of speaking, which no cage could keep at home. While
all were looking on, this bird spread his wings and claimed to have top
rank, although he was unworthy. Just as the Devil placed in command
over the army of the lower worked, so this scoundrel was in charge of the
wicked mob. A harsh voice, a fierce expression, a very faithful likeness to
a death’s head – these things gave token of his appearance. He checked the
murmuring and all kept silent so that the sound from his mouth might be
better heard.255

The figure of the partially acculturated but uncaged bird provides an essential image to
Gower in his fear-mongering endeavor because it simultaneously occludes and alludes to
one of the largest mysteries associated with the rebellion – how did the rebel forces
mount such a successful and targeted revolt?256 The *graculus* attacks in a partially human

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255 Stockton 65. “Copia dum tanta monstrorum more ferarum/ Extitit vnita, sicut arena maris./ Graculus
vnus erat edoctus in arte loquendi./ Quem retinere domi nulla catasta potest./ Hic, licet indignus, cunctis
cernentibus, alis/ Expansis, primum clamat habere statum./ Prepositus baratri velut est demon legioni./ Sic
malus in vulgo prefuit iste malo./ Vox fera, trux vultus, verissima mortis ymago./ Eius in effigiem tanta
dedere notam./ Murmura compressit, tenuere silencia cuncti./ Eius vt auditus sit magus sonus.” (Macaulay
41) Book I, Ch. 9, ins.679-690.

256 Steven Justice observes, “Nicholas Brooks has shown that to coordinate events in Essex with those in
Kent, to select targets and arrange them so as to cover the ground (literal and metaphorical) that they
covered in the week before they marched on London, required of the rebels an organization that was neither
casual not improvised (“The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381,”
in H. Mayr Harting and R.I. Moore, eds., Studies in Medieval History Presented to R.C.H. Davies (London,
1985), 247-70. The planning shows that the ubiquitous references in indictments and commissions to
congregationes and conventicula did not derive from the authorities’ fear of unsponsored pacts and
assemblies alone. These “conventicles” obviously planned actions; but those actions show that there was
more than that. The importance attached to John Ball’s liberation from jail, Wat Tyler’s public demands,
and the letters themselves all bear witness to the importance of ideological works at the outset; and
mode of speech, and the image implies Gower had the horrified realization after 1381 that the working classes could produce men intelligent and literate enough to overthrow the government.\textsuperscript{257} The \textit{graculus} has been trained in the art of speaking well enough that his harsh voice and fierce expressions ring out above the bellows of the other animals.

Articulate squawks that sometimes seem eerily intelligible provide an apt metaphor for the comprehensibility of Tyler. The poet notices that a high level of organization went into the Rising, but he undermines the rebels’ efforts by suggesting that their words and proclamations only hold an uncanny resemblance to human speech. Gower associates these empty echoes with a deficiency in human decency, and he emphasizes Wat Tyler’s “moral corruption”\textsuperscript{258} and irrational mission by comparing him to “\textit{verissima mortis ymago}.” The bird’s words may betoken death, but the poet also admits that the \textit{graculus} leads and speaks with purpose. He “checks the murmuring”\textsuperscript{259} of the incensed crowd, a feat that no other authority figure achieves in the chronicles until Richard II steps forward after Tyler’s demise. And the bird’s speech bears some

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\textsuperscript{257}Commenting on this moment Craig E. Bertolet writes, “In making Tyler a jay, a bird that mimics human speech but not human reason, Gower provides a context to the irrational commands that Tyler dictates to the less clever portion of the populace who willingly follow him” (Craig E. Bertolet, “Fraud, Division, and Lies: John Gower and London,” \textit{Studies in Medieval Culture} 46 (2007): 61). The separation of speech from reason inspires all of Gower’s monster portraits. While the \textit{graculus} provides another example of an irrational speaker just as Bertolet suggests, the bird’s speech somewhat more sophisticated mode of expression and mastery of “art” probably alludes to a rebel leader with an education developed enough to understand some of the marking of Latin, institutional culture as well as the alliterative oral traditions. In any case, the jay’s is distinguishable from Gower’s other irrational animal utterances.


\textsuperscript{259}“Murmura compressit, tenuere silencia cuneci,/ Eius vt auditus sit magus sonus.” Book I, Ch. 9, lns.689-690
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resemblance to brusque demands that the chroniclers report Wat Tyler making before the king:

“O you low sort of wretches, which the world has subjugated for a long time by its law, look, now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freeman to get off their lands. Let all honor come to an end, let justice perish, and let no virtue that once existed endure further in the world. Let the law give over which used to hold us in check with its justice, and from here on let our court rule.”

While Gower denounces the *graculus* as a creature who monstrously transforms human language into a vehicle for his own mad mandates, the bird nevertheless demonstrates a mastery of rhetoric for the length of this short speech.

The rebels’ stance may be reprehensible to the author of *Vox Clamantis*, but the bird’s first statement regarding the redistribution of land closely resembles Tyler’s request that “all preserves of water, parks, and woods should be made common to all” in Knighton’s chronicle. The *graculus’* last statements, “Let the law give over…let our court rule,” imparts the rebels’ apparent mission “to erase the memory of manorial customs and duties…to vent rage over royal taxation…to undo serfdom and the accumulation of recently imposed service…[and] to protest corruption in the courts of justice.”

By offering these views, the *graculus* momentarily seizes control of the

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260 Stockton 65. “O seruiile genus miserorum, quos sibi mundus/ Subdedit a longo tempore lege sua,/ Iam venit ecce dies, qua rusticitas superabit,/ Ingenuosque suis coget abire locis./ Desinat omnis honor, periet ius, nullaque virtus,/ Que prius exiteterat, duret in orbe magis./ Subdere que dudum lex nos de iure solebat,/ Cesset, et vltcris curia nostra regat.” (Macaulay 41) Bk. I, Ch. 9, Ins.693-700.

261 Knighton’s Chronicle. See Dobson 185-186.

262 Justice includes all of these points as he reviews the critical history discussing why the rebels burned legal documents in the uprising. “Charles Petit-Dutallis thinks that the point of burning documents was to erase the memory of manorial customs and duties, and to vent rage over royal taxation; [Rodney] Hilton that it was to undo serfdom an the accumulation of recently imposed services; and J.R. Maddicott that it
narrative and offers a perspective distinct from the dreamer’s own. By recording a contrary ideological perspective in the graculus’ speech, Gower “opens up… a rural political culture whose ideology was not the ideology given it from above.” Gower’s vilification of Wat Tyler and his ambitions ironically results in the rebel’s outlook surviving in a written form; the inclusion of the graculus shows that the rebels had a well-articulated political ideology of their own.

By having the bird argue for an England with no honor, justice, or virtue, however, Gower warps the rebel leader’s message by again identifying him as a wholly unethical creature. As Crane comments, “This morally twisted speech is an exception to the utter wordlessness characteristic of the mob.” Even as the content of the graculus’ morally corrupt statements condemn Wat Tyler’s behavior and infamous speeches, the formal intricacies in the bird’s expressions unexpectedly lend the rebel leader a

263 Justice 7. When Justice makes this statement, he refers to Knighton’s inclusion of John Ball’s letters, which Justice believes is a slip up on the part of the chronicler. In his words, “Knighton slipped: and a whole world opens up, a rural political culture whose ideology was not only the ideology given it from above, whose deliberations were protected by the ignorance of its lords and can be discerned through the ignorance of its chroniclers.” Gower does not “slip up” quite as much as Knighton who included letters written in a distinct rural dialect. While Gower only includes Tyler’s perspective in one line of a short speech, the inclusion of the graculus admits that the rebels had a well-articulated political ideology of their own.

264 In a parallel argument, Steven Justice demonstrates the task of “erasing” the legacy of the rebels presented difficulty to the chroniclers recording the events of 1381. As Justice argues when discussing Walsingham’s and Knighton’s decisions to record John Ball’s letters, the chroniclers could not write off the rebels despite their best efforts: “But for the more traumatic effect of the rising, its memory and its forgetting, were more subtly marked in the mistakes and evasions that spot its record and the unattributed adjustments and revisions that reshaped literary and historiographical enterprises at the close of the fourteenth century…But this enterprise was marked, unwillingly, by those who most articulately denied it: by the chroniclers, Knighton and Walsingham, who recorded the six letters that have made the matter of this book. My first point my chapter concerned Knighton’s defensive strategy, in looking at letters and seeing speeches. But why did he put himself in the way of needing the defense in the first place? Why did he record the letters at all?” (Justice 194-95).

265 Crane 208.
compelling voice due to his informed interpretation of the law.\textsuperscript{266} The impact of this presentation of Tyler makes the upstart leader galvanizing. For a brief span, he comes across as a real threat to the realm.

Gower dramatizes the lawlessness (or perhaps more accurately, the frenzy attending the demand for an entirely new law) that the \textit{graculus}’ words inspire by adapting verbal idiosyncrasies akin to the ones found in the rebels’ letters, which survive in the chronicles of Walsingham and Knighton.\textsuperscript{267} Gower integrates the rebels’ distinctive vernacular jargon into his Latin verses when the avian Wat Tyler calls to individuals within the mob to do his bidding:\textsuperscript{268}

Wat calls, Tom comes to him, and Sim does not loiter behind. Bet and Gib order Hick to come at once. Col rages, whom Geff helps to do damage.

Will swears to join with them for mischief. Grigg grabs, while Daw roars

\textsuperscript{266} Working from the chronicles’ descriptions of the rebels destroying legal documents, scholars have demonstrated that the rebel leaders must have had a working knowledge of their government despite the chroniclers’ and poets’ assertions that they were an unthinking rabble. Discussing this very point, Susan Crane analyzes the rebels’ burning of law documents and demands for charters of manumission, and she concludes that the rebels must have been partially literate and familiar with the documents that controlled the governance of the land. Crane argues, “The widespread burning of documents suggests that to the rebels writing appeared innately to be an instrument of oppression,” and the rebels “[attempted] to appropriate writing as a means of control”(Crane 205-206). Steven Justice builds upon this observation by commenting, “The rebels burned documents with a specificity that shows their familiarity and competence with the forms of literate culture”(Justice 41).\textsuperscript{266} Moreover, Justice argues, “Writing itself – both the activity and the product – was at issue in [John Ball’s] letters: their composition and copying, recomposition and recopying were so many acts of assertive literacy,”(Justice 25)\textsuperscript{266} and most importantly, “when they successfully demanded charters of manumission from Richard II – their most significant and public attempt to rewrite the government of Britain – they showed a precise understanding of the forms and procedures of document and archive”(Justice 48).

\textsuperscript{267} See Justice for transcriptions of the letters.

\textsuperscript{268} Gower associates written, authoritative language with his dreamer and official culture, and so it makes sense that he would use traces of an alliterative, oral style to differentiate the rebel speaker. On the topic of the alliterative tradition being linked with oral culture, Derek Pearsall writes, “It is true, nevertheless, that the alliterative poems are characterized fairly consistently, though not aggressively, by the patter and transitions of the oral style – the marked pause, the promise to continue, the request for attention – and we may presume that they were designed and accustomed to be read aloud. The manner of address is as to a general and dispersed audience, and in this respect rather different from the intimate tone of address, as to a closed group, that is adopted by Chaucer in \textit{Troilus}.” (Derek Pearsall, “The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds,” \textit{Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays}, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 50).
and Hobb is their partner, and Lorkin intends no less to be in the thick of things. Hudd strikes while Tebb threatens those whom Judd tramples on. Jack tears down houses and kills men with his sword. Hogg brandishes his pomp, for with his noble bearing he thinks he is greater than any king. The prophet Ball teaches them; a malicious spirit has previously taught him, and he then constituted their deepest learning.\(^{269}\)

Gower lists a series of “lower class nicknames,”\(^{270}\) pairing acts of larceny and violence with a company of representative English ruffians. Andrew Galloway observes that these vernacular names “jarringly [intrude] into his Latin couplets,” and he goes on to argue that the rebels “deliberately deny any value in following tradition and or history” and “are thus seen to spring from no historically sanctified origins but rather a demonic source.”\(^{271}\)

David Aers goes even further by arguing that Gower inserts references to the English vernacular into his Latin verse in order to mock the rebels, citing Steven Justice’s opinion that Gower wished to demonstrate the inadequacy of the rebels’ speech and erase any memory of their cultural contribution or political acuity:

> Gower adds a joke that depends on clashing the vernacular against Latin, an effective symbol in the textual communities for which he wrote. Across the Latin verse he spreads distinctively plebian, English names; Watte, Thomme, Gymme, Bette, Gibbe, Hykke, Colle, Geffe, Wille, Grigge,

\(^{269}\) Stockton 67. “Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat,/ Bette que Gibbe simul Hykke venire iubent;/ Colle furit, quem Geffe iuuat, nocumenta parantes,/ Cum quibus ad damnum Wille coire vouet./ Grigge rapit, dum Dawe strepit, comes est quibus Hobbe,/ Lorkyn et in medio non minor esse putat;/ Hudd ferit, quos Iudde terit, dum Tebbe minatur,/ Iakke domos que viros vellit et ense necat;/ Hogge suam pompam vibrat, dum se putat omni/ Maiorem Rege nobilitate fore;/ Balle propheta docet, quem spiritus ante malignus/ Edocuit, que sua unc fuit alta scola.” (Macaulay 44) Book I, Ch. 11, Ins.783-794.

\(^{270}\) Stockton 354.

\(^{271}\) Galloway 333.
Dawe, Hobbe, Jorkyn…and the dreaded Balle. This may seem similar to the plebian names filling the pub of Beton the breweress in *Piers Plowman* (5.296-318).…Steven Justice has analysed these admirably, showing how the writer derides the English names as ‘unassimilable to the cultural language of political discourse,’ contributing to the way his poetry ‘erases any trace of verbal performance on the part of the rebels.’”

These explanations that Gower demonized, mocked, and erased the rebels’ verbal and literary performances by citing alliterative tropes in *Vox* tend to underplay the sober regard that Gower demonstrates in his accurate approximation of the rebels’ pseudo-Langlandian style and consequent denunciation of rebel speech.

Studying his oft-debated list of common names as a critical, but nonetheless thoughtful response to cultural and literary influences with which the rebels identified themselves offers a new perspective on Gower’s project. The poet comes forward as a scholar committed to depicting the linguistic phenomena (like the poetic tropes such as those found in *Piers Plowman*) that arose in the revolt despite his own prejudices favoring traditional and classical language. Like the chroniclers, Gower confirms the legitimacy of the colloquial threat by describing it in detail. His imitation of a Langlandian poetic (that the rebels also imitated) attests that the rebels’ linguistic modes surpassed inarticulate noise. A majority of Langland scholars, including Lawton, Middleton, Justice, and Aers, agree that the rebels appropriated stylistic elements from *Piers* as they devised the timbre of their letters.273 The eponymous character “Piers the

272 Aers 441. See also Justice Ch. 5, esp. 211-213.
273 Gower unquestionably distances the rebels from the classical Latin literature in this famous list of names, but the “demonic” (See Galloway 333) nature of the rebels’ source seems debatable considering this vernacular naming technique recalls the rebels’ adoption and adaptations of *Piers Plowman*. David Lawton
Ploughman” provides the most famous example of this distinct naming style, but Langland scatters lists of humble names throughout the poem.

writes, “It is the only alliterative poem that seems to have gained nationwide popularity, being extant in over fifty manuscripts.”(David Lawton, “Middle English Alliterative Poetry: An Introduction,” Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 10). Middleton adds, “Although each version may have had a different regional pattern of circulation, it can fairly be said that the poem attested by all three forms achieved a virtually nationwide distribution within a generation of their production” (Anne Middleton, “The Audience and Public of ‘Piers Plowman,’” Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 101). Helen Barr agrees, “The audience of Piers was wide; it was copied throughout the South and the Midlands, and found particular favour among the relatively humble clerics and members of the literate laity.” (Helen Barr, The Piers Plowman Tradition (London: J.M. Dent, 1993) 4). Gower grapples with the vital role Piers Plowman played within late fourteenth-century culture when he inserts his own vernacular list of names, which recalls Piers’ Passus 5.296-318 as Aers comments, as well as John Ball’s letters. Although Gower’s love or hatred of Langland’s popular masterwork is unclear, the list of vernacular names in Vox portrays the rebels’ appropriation of Piers as fiendish but remarkably effective.

The poet includes a list of the workmen sitting in the inn when allegorical personage Gluttony stops by for a drink:

Thanne goth Gloton in, and grete othes after.
Cesse the Souteresse sat on the benche,
Watte the Warner and his wif bothe,
Tymme the Tynkere and tweye of his [knav]es,
Hikke the Hakeneyman and Hugh the Nedlere,

Clarice of Cokkeslane and the Clerk of the chirche,
Sire Piers of Pridie and Pernele of Flaundres,
Dawe he Dykere, and a dozeyne othere---
A Ribibour, a Ratoner, a Rakiere of Chepe,

A Ropere, a Redyngkyng, and Rose the Dysshere,
Godefay of Garlkhithe and Griffyth the Walshe,
And [of] upholders an heep, erly by the morwe,

Geve Gloton with glad chere good ale to hanselle.

(PP. V.307-319).

274 In discussing the rebels’ appropriation of Piers Plowman, Anne Middleton explains, “In the best known contemporary reference to [Piers Plowman] – that of the dissident priest John Ball in 1381 – it is not a book but a watchword”(Middleton, “Audience and Public” 103). Helen Barr provides more evidence of the rebels’ appropriation of Piers Plowman by observing, “Under a variety of pseudonyms, [John Ball] sent letters to his confederates to rally to the cause. A number of phrases used within them refer to Piers and show knowledge of Piers beyond mere familiarity with its title. Alongside references to ‘Peres Ploughman’ are quotations of key phrases from the poem: John Schep’s letter bid the rebels to ‘dowelle and better, and fleth synne’ and ‘chastise welle Hobbe the robber’; Jakke Carter’s letter promises that he and Piers Ploughman will provide food; John Ball’s contrasts ‘trewthe with a catalogue of deadly sins, which, like the list in the A text of Piers, omits the mention of wrath. The name “Piers Plowman” and Langland’s signature naming technique became rhetorical touchstones for the rebels. Prevalent Christian names and ambiguous occupational tags hid the rebel leaders’ identities, but, as in Piers, a long list of names provides a sense of a large and unified mass of people – in the rebel letters, they all protest together. “So confused became fact and fiction that in the Dieulacres Abbey Chronicle, ‘Per Plowman’ is listed as one of the leaders of the Revolt”(Barr 4-5).
Gower imitates the Langlandian style, tone, and imagery of the rebel letters so well in his own derogatory version of a rebel letter\textsuperscript{275} that it becomes clear he studied the poetic register with interest. In reaction to the \textit{gracus\textsuperscript{276}}lus’ cries, “Grigg grabs, while Daw roars and Hobb is their partner.” Here, Gower demonstrates some familiarity with the content of the rebel letters even as he perverts their message. Instead of condemning “hobbe \textit{he robbere}” who places material possessions before the needs of the community as John Ball does,\textsuperscript{277} Gower’s \textit{gracus\textsuperscript{277}} incites “Hobb” to grab and roar like Grigg and Daw. Here Hobb indulges in \textit{raptus} rather than working as a symbol of the thievery that the rebels wished to avoid. Similarly, Gower’s line, “Will swears to join with them for

\textsuperscript{275} Here is an example of a rebel letter akin to one that Gower might have encountered while composing his satirical version. The letter of John Ball interpolated by Walsingham suggests the extent to which the rebels employed Langland’s naming convention:

\begin{verbatim}
Johon schep som tyme seynte marie prest of (y)ork. And now of colchestre. greteth wel johan nameless and johan (p)e mullere and johan carter and bidde(p) hem (p)at (p)e bee war of gyle in borough and stoned(p) [togiidere] in godes name. and bidde(p) Peres plou(ζ)man. go to his werk. and chastise wel hobbe (p)e robbere. and take(p) wi(p) (y)ow johan trewman and alle his felawes and no mo. and loke schappae (y)ou to on heued and no mo. johan (p)e mullere ha(p) ygrounde small (p)e kynges sone of heuene schal paye for al. be war or (y)be wo knowe(p) (y)our frend fro (your) foo. haueth ynow. & seith hoo. And do wel and better and fleth synne. And seke(p) pees and hold (y)ou (p)er inne. And so bidde(p) johan trewaman and alle his felawes (Justice 14-15).
\end{verbatim}

By evoking “Peres plou(ζ)man,” the letter identifies the men with honest work and entreats them to chastise “hobbe (p)e robbere,” a name that would fit easily into Langland’s description of the workers drinking with Gluttony.

\textsuperscript{276} The denunciation of thievery signals that a rebel rather than a chronicler wrote the letter because it associates rustic workers with a moral agenda. In his analysis of “hobbe (p)e robbere” on page 92, Steven Justice explains that the chroniclers never understood the lack of theft at the burning of the Savoy because they refused to recognize the rebels as having any ethics of behavior. Justice comments, “There is one aspect of the [burning of the Savoy] which the chroniclers patently do not understand, though they all record it: by common agreement and under severe discipline, nothing was stolen. The chroniclers witness all the more credibly to this fact for their difficulty in explaining it. To the Westminster chronicler, it was a ‘thing unaccustomed in our days’ (Justice 90-91). Justice clarifies, ‘To the Westminster chronicler, it was a ‘thing unaccustomed in our days,’” [and] …Walsingham, dismissing their restraint as public relations (“so that it would be clear to the commons of the realm that they did nothing from greed”), adds the valuable information that they made a proclamation ‘that no one, under pain of beheading, should presume to take anything found there to his or her own use.’ Knighton tells of a haplessly greedy rebel whom, found making off with a silver dish, into the fire, exclaiming, ‘We are men zealous for truth and justice, not thieves or brigands’”(91-92). The chroniclers consistently misunderstand the rebels’ claims to moral integrity as well as their self-restraint in the Savoy, and John Ball’s letters suggest that the leaders of the uprising held themselves to moral standards similar to the ones Langland promoted in \textit{Piers Plowman}. 

\textsuperscript{277} Book I, Ch. 11, Ins.787
mischief,"278 most likely critiques the rebels’ appropriation of *Piers Plowman*. While Will is certainly a common name, Will is also the protagonist of Langland’s poem. But for Gower, Will has inspired mischief rather than a noble cause. The rebels may have used *Piers* as a “watchword” to spread the communitarian and idealistic goals of the uprising, but Gower suggests that Langland’s poem merely provided an excuse for their real goal of mischief making. His distorted adaptation may emphasize the violent senselessness of the rebels’ communal activity, but he creates a portrait of that rebel community by employing the same listing and naming techniques as the vernacular writers he hoped to disparage. The poet himself articulates the strengths of the style even as he actively denounces this persuasive new demotic. It is somewhat ironic that the poet mimics the style of the rebels and Tyler, whom he imagines as a mimicking *graculus*, to such good effect that he records the rebels’ idiom for posterity. In denouncing a man whom he perceives as an animalistic thief of human language, Gower becomes a mimic like the *graculus*.

This skewed mimicry is especially noticeable when Gower finally denounces John Ball himself by writing, “The prophet Ball teaches them; a malicious spirit has previously taught him, and he then constituted their deepest learning.”279 Gower disparages the rebels’ vernacular style by contrasting it with the literary traditions associated with education, clerks, and scribes. As Gower differentiates the style of Ball’s letters from his own verse, however, the poet faithfully replicates a pseudo-Langlandian, style, “often associated with oral address,”280 that Ball himself might have used. The words of Wat Tyler and John Ball may lack the erudition and rationality of “*alta scola,*”

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278 Book I, Ch. 11, Ins.786
279 Book I, Ch. 11, Ins.793-94
280 Pearsall 50.
or the highest learning, but the rhetoric that successfully motivated a majority of the population to pursue a common goal, and the letters spread so widely that even opponents of the rebellion like Walsingham, Knighton, and Gower could quote them. Gower’s critique of this alternative literary mode is so systematic and informed that he exposes his own careful study of these “malicious” literary productions, and he twists words to formulate a morally corrupt version of the rebels’ vernacular letters. Gower accuses the *graculus* of mimicking and perverting the speech of others, but the poet indulges in the same behavior. The author, therefore, perpetrates the acts he deems less than rational even before the dreamer transforms into a wild man.

In assessing the extent to which Gower appreciated and feared the influential propaganda of Tyler and his rebels, it is also intriguing that the first line introducing the *graculus*, “Vox fera, trux vultus, verissima mortis ymago,” describes the bird in Latin while approximating the alliterative verse found in *Piers Plowman*. I would argue that just as the *graculus* uses his animalistic voice to articulate the words of man, bridging the divide between the languages of two species, Gower’s description of the frightening *graculus* straddles two literary traditions, the Latin scholarly tradition and the native poetic tradition inspired by *Piers Plowman*. The parroting bird, therefore, is a

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281 Book 1, Ch.9, ln.687.
282 Gower’s mixing of the two traditions makes some sense at a formal level because it appears that rhythmical composition styles in Latin *ars dictaminis* may have inspired or at least overlapped substantially English alliterative poetry in the fourteenth century. I believe that Gower draws on aspects of the alliterative tradition to describe Wat Tyler and the rebels specifically because of the probable influence of *Piers Plowman* within the rebels’ ranks. (See my discussion of Anne Middleton’s views on Langland’s audience.) In discussing the overlap between Latin prose and English alliterative traditions David Lawton points out, “Therefore there seems to be some evidence for a vernacular tradition of rhythmical composition adapting the style of the *ars dictaminis*, which antedates the period of *aa/ax* composition and continues more or less imperviously throughout it. If it is plausible to believe that clerkly alliterative writers supplemented native ingenuity and traditions with some recourse to Latin models, they would have encountered no shortage of dictaminal treatises in England (Lawton 16-17). For more on this topic Lawton offers a good analysis of Richard Rolle’s alliterative Latin on pages 17-19, which offers another parallel to Gower’s technique in describing the *graculus* Wat Tyler using alliteration. Lawton comments, “...but the
metaphor for Tyler’s remarkable facility for language acquisition and assimilation, and
Gower’s description of the bird alludes to the rebel leader’s linguistic approach. By
integrating alliteration into the *graculus’* portrait, Gower picks out the distinctive style
that constituted the rebels’ “art of speaking.” Gower suggests that the deathly Tyler
and his monstrous rebels used a linguistic stalking horse: knowledge of *Piers Plowman*
helped them to rally support, and a basic familiarity with Latin allowed them to propose
revisions to the contemporary law codes as well as target and burn specific legal
documents that harmed their cause. The rebel leader’s fluency in popular vernacular
poetry and the written Latin statutes of human government make the bird an adversary to
fear.

Gower’s condemnation of the rebels and their language conveys real alarm at the
changing linguistic and political scene. To alert educated readers to the enemy lurking at
the gates, Gower contextualizes the extreme threat that these animalistic commoners pose
to the body politic by referring to the image of the Trojan Horse. Just as the famous horse
disarmed the elders at Troy, the rebels’ animal bodies deceive Richard’s advisors in *Vox
Clamantis.* Gower compares the advisors’ initial reluctance to take the menacing rebels
seriously to the bad decisions made by the Trojans:

> Behold, even the old man Calchas, whose wisdom was greater than
everyone’s, then knew no course of action. Antenor did not know then by
what means to arrange peace treaties; instead the great frenzy destroyed all

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extraordinary degree to which the device is utilized in the Latin writings of Rolle and other English authors
surely has the force of a patriotic gesture” (Lawton 18). In Gower’s case it was a way to criticize his
country.

283 Stockton 65. “*Graculus unus erat edoctus in arte loquendi,*” Book I, Ch. 9, ln.681.
his efforts. No difference marked the worthy man from the foolish:

Thersites’ heart became the same as Diomedes. Gower uses this classical allusion to criticize advisors who fail to devise an effective plan of action when confronted with invasion. The inexplicable moment when the Trojans’ minds “wandered” fascinated Virgil, and Gower uses the famous frenzy of the Trojans to render the rebellion of 1381 epic as well as convey his own astonishment at the strange wandering of advisors’ minds. And perhaps most importantly, this allusion to the moment when the Trojan Horse passed through Troy’s gates elucidates the reasons for the failure of Richard’s advisors, such as Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury and chancellor of the realm, Sir Robert Hales, Master of the Hospital of St John and treasurer of the realm, and perhaps even John Gower. Just as Calchas and Antenor are

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284 Stockton 71. “Esse senem Calcas, cuius sapiencia maior/ Omnibus est, nullum tunc sapuisse modum:/ Anthenor ex pactis componere federa pacis/ Tune nequit, immo furor omne resoluit opus:/ A vercorde probum non tunc distancia nouit, Fit cor Tersitis et Diomedes idem” (Macaulay 49) Book I, Ch.13, lns.961-966.

285 Describing the moment when the Trojans accept the Trojan horse into the gates, Virgil blames both the gods and the strange wandering of the Trojan minds. “Had the outcome not/ been fated by the gods, and had our minds/ not wandered off, Laocoön would then/ have made our sword points foul the Argive den/ and, Troy, you would be standing yet and you,/ high fort of Priam, you would still survive” (Virgil, Aeneid, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1971) Book II, lns.75-80).

286 I’ll add however that by associating Richard’s advisors with the Trojans Gower is also complimenting a government that could be viewed as ruling a “New Troy.” For more on this idea, see Olsson 141-143. Olsson writes, “As the dream proceeds, in fact, Gower begins to defend the victims of the uprising more explicitly. He seems to take their side, for example, in his choice of metaphor to describe them: though not literally descended from Brut or his fellow voyagers, they are called Trojans, and through that name they might legitimately claim rights associated with the noble past of ‘newe Troy,’ indeed of the island as a whole”(141-42).

287 Incredulity and frustration mark Thomas Walsingham’s St. Albans Chronicle as they attempt to account for Richard’s failure to respond to the thousands of rebels that gathered outside London’s gates on June 13th, 1381, the first day of the rising. Steven Justice disparages Richard and his advisors in his description of this moment: “Richard, or his advisors, or all of them quailed and returned to their stronghold. Then—the consequences of this act would become clear over the next two days—the rebels moved toward London”(Justice 2). According to Thomas Walsingham’s St. Albans Chronicle, the rebels requested an audience with the king to voice their grievances before the worst of the violence began. In refusing to confront the enormous group of angry subjects, Richard and his men didn’t recognize the full extent of the threat that the rebels posed to the city of London and the sovereignty of the government. Authors detailing the events of the rising, nevertheless, resist portraying the king as too incompetent to recognize this danger. Walsingham blames the king’s advisors for the unforgivable folly of the government’s response, indicting Simon Sudbury, the archbishop of Canterbury and chancellor of the realm, as well as Sir Robert Hales,
blind to the soldiers hidden in the Trojan Horse, England’s leaders ignore the peril presented by the rebels because of their rustic and animalistic appearance. In both cases, the advisors underestimate their enemies because the invaders disguise their prowess and strength in the disarming form of an animal. The Achaeans, however, knowingly hid themselves to trick the Trojans. In contrast, the rebels’ “disguise” succeeded not because they planned the deception but because Richard’s noble advisors were blinded by their own prejudices.

According to Walsingham’s account, unwitting advisors like Hales and Sudbury misjudged the capacity of the peasants, lowborn men, and workers to mount an attack on London.²⁸⁸ Given that Gower spends the majority of *Vox Clamantis* exploiting this same prejudice by portraying the rebels as monstrous animals, it almost seems ironic that he includes this allusion to the Trojan War early in his poem. The deadly hollow horse proves that the most treacherous opponents use our biases against us, and it is unclear whether or not Gower acts with any more sagacity and insight than the elders of Troy. Gower cannot demonstrate his skills at advising English policy without condemning the threatening strategies of the rebels, but he resists ascribing political acumen to men whom he wishes to denounce. As a result, he oscillates between decrying the animalistic nature of the rebels, just as Richard’s advisors did as they urged the king against negotiating with the mobs growing outside London,²⁸⁹ and demonstrating that the rebels’ intelligent propaganda enabled them to control London’s streets for three days, assail government

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²⁸⁸ ibid.
²⁸⁹ ibid.
institutions, and behead the Archbishop of Canterbury. Without promulgating the rebels’ linguistic innovations, Gower must inform his readers of the capacity of “animal speech” to evolve past an onomatopoetic “moo” or “hee haw” into an enthralling language composed of Latin literacy and vernacular oratory.

Gower alludes to the difficulty of warning against a foe whom you would rather ignore or belittle in describing the invasion of Troy. The advisors’ failure to recognize the danger, tellingly, leads to a transformation in wise men. The worthy become foolish, and the glorious Diomedes becomes the same as the lowly Thersites. Just as the Achaean assailants surprised the unwitting Trojans by assuming a disarming form, the English rebels were able to storm London because they seemed unintelligible and low to those in power. Despite this prejudice, the poet bitterly demonstrates the disastrous consequences of the rebels’ rhetorical efforts by dramatizing the impact that rough, rustic speeches could have upon an elite, scholarly individual. To emphasize the viral potential of this new mode, Gower portrays the visceral influence that the rebels’ language exerts over the dreamer. He becomes an inarticulate and lowly wild man, and the sagacity of his own advice seems to be questioned by the poet himself, if fleetingly. The dreamer’s pained, transfigured body acknowledges the undeniable power of the rebellion, but it is a power that the poet actively resists.²⁹⁰

V. John Gower as animal rationale?

²⁹⁰ The ability of Gower the poet to grudgingly admit the undeniable magnetism and efficacy of the rebels’ assault and rhetoric saves Vox Clamantis from seeming obtuse like the unwise advisors of Troy whom he criticizes for being frenzied (furor). He uses the term of furor to describe the graculus Tyler at the end of the poem, and so avoiding the qualities of misapprehension and blindness fit into the overall schema of the text. In recognizing the rebels’ real potential to overthrow the bastions of authority, Gower strengthens his own effort to reestablish the traditional authoritative language and reputation of England.
In suffering under the influence of the *graculus*, the dreamer demonstrates the great power of Tyler’s commands while still offering a caution against succumbing to popular movements against the government. Gower sensationalizes the dangerous impact of rebellion in analogizing it to an irresistible madness afflicting the body. Just as mania may overwhelm an individual, insurrection overtakes the land.291 Gower’s dreamer laments: “As I saw things like these a ghastly fright (horror) seized me, and my life seemed almost deadly to me. The image of death (*mortis ymago*) constantly troubled my heart within, and it struck at my vitals like a sword.”292 The *mortis ymago* reappears to frighten the dreamer so thoroughly that even life seems deadly, and he runs into the wilderness to escape the contaminating violence and immorality overtaking London. *Mortis ymago* first described the skull of the *graculus* Tyler,293 and Gower develops this *ymago* in the scenes relating the tangible horrors of the rebellion (such as the pillaging of London’s courts) until this deathly image eventually strikes at Gower’s heart and mind. The symbol of the “*mortis ymago*” exerts great power as a critique of Wat Tyler and the rebels’ contagious madness because it is a reminder of death, or a *momento mori*,294 and Gower implies that the bird may be a harbinger of spiritual death as well as physical death. The poet, in all likelihood, compares the *graculus*’ skull to the image of death in order to suggest that Wat Tyler has no “rational soul.” Rationality and death are posed as

291 See Book I, Ch.15, Ins.1355-58.
292 Stockton 79. “Hec ita cum vidi, me luridus occupat horror,/ Et quasi mortifera stat michi vita mea; Semper in interius precoria mortis ymago/ Pungit, et vt gladius viscera tota mouet.” (Macaulay 59) Book I, Ch.16, Ins.1359-1362.
293 Book 1, Ch.9, ln.687.
294 Thanks to Eleanor Johnson for reminding me of the influential *momento mori* tradition. In her comment on this passage, she writes, “There’s a very robust imago mortis tradition, which is…likelier to be Gower’s immediate source and inspiration. Henry Suso, Thomas Hoccleve, dances of death, memento mori, that whole genre, seems a much likelier motivating force behind this image”(Johnson 2/20/12).
an oppositional pair in many accounts of 1381; Robert F. Yeager clarifies this symbolic relationship by explaining the significance of beheadings in depictions of the rebellion:

When chroniclers mention a death, the method is nearly always beheading\(^{295}\)…Once separated, both the body and the head cannot function naturally: this was Paul’s point in Ephesians when he chided the ‘members’ of the church (the hands, the eyes, the feet) for their disparateness; and it was the point John of Salisbury rendered more graphically present by vivifying the political anatomy with sides and internal organs. Precisely in that anatomical sense, rebellion to the chroniclers was an act of decapitation, a losing of the head made all the more loathsome because self-inflicted. The resultant image – the brute body amok excising its own head – lies behind and explains the omnipresent beheadings in the chroniclers’ accounts. For them, writing out of the interpretative scheme of the Pauline metaphor, beheading was the darkest mode of killing, the most horrific and monstrous….In the chroniclers’ hands the move is [simple]…Man in his natural shape reflects God’s image and, *mutatis mutandis*, God’s rational capacities. Irrational action – the definition of rebellion – is a denial of those capacities, and can be represented visually as a descent from human to animal.”\(^{296}\)

Gower takes these basic associations between death, the death of reason, and the sudden infestation of animal bodies, and he combines them into the singular figure of a bird’s skull that resembles the image of death. According to Gower, the rebel leader is only


\(^{296}\) Yeager “Body Politic” 155-56; 163.
motivated by the demands of the “inferior body,” and the complex symbolism of mortis ymago accords perfectly with Gower’s continual denunciations of the rebels as unreasoning animals.\(^{297}\) While the rebel leader may have recommended public policy like an abstract and educated thinker, Gower reveals that his language has been emptied of real meaning by his evil intentions.\(^{298}\)

As the bird’s vile message spreads, Londoners are driven to madness and sorrow by a disregard for rank,\(^{299}\) a “savage rage,” or ferox rabies, begins to infiltrate the city walls, bringing “strange evils.”\(^{300}\) In using the term rabies, Gower could be dredging up the famous associations to “the rage of dogs” described in Pliny, which could infect men.\(^{301}\) In comparing the rebels’ contempt for hierarchy as a kind of transmittable disease, Gower suggests that their rhetoric functions like the infectious bite of a mad dog rather than as a compelling logical argument. This extreme vilification of Tyler’s speech acknowledges its undeniable communicable quality but still manages to dismiss it as foam slathering from a mad dog’s mouth.

\(^{297}\) For example, Gower writes “Their asinine behavior, however, labeled them as stupid and wild, for they had no power of reason. And since I had seen the senseless creatures. I was much afraid, and my trusty foot took me no farther.” (Stockton 55) “Vt stolidos tamen atque rudes hos mos asininus/ Signabat, quod eis nit racionis erat:/ Et quia sic fatuos vidi timui magis ipsos,/ Nec debat vltierius pes michi fidus iter.” (Macaulay 28) Bk.I, Ch.2, Ins.237-40.

\(^{298}\) Aquinas also explains that the knowledge of good and evil is a basic component of voices declaring placitum (principle or belief), and this moral understanding separates the language of sentient humans from the barks of dogs, “The key difference between human language and the pseudo-language of the dog [consists in] the opposition between mere interjections and those devices (namely, words) by which human language is able to express, over and above feelings of joy and sorrow, abstractions concerning good and evil, just and unjust. Only through such abstractions does human language establish cultural institutions within human society – domum et civitatem – as distinct from the society of animals without such capacity” (Eco 69).

\(^{299}\) Gower shows the people of London ‘wailing everywhere:’ “We have lost everything…for no one in the city had any respect which his rank required”(Stockton 79). “Omnia perdidimus,” dicunt, quia nullus in vrbe,/ Quen status expectat, quicquid honoris habet.” (Macaulay 59) Bk. I, Ch. 15, Ins.1345-46.

\(^{300}\) “Hec et plura ferox rabies, que nullus ab ante/ Viderat, insolita fecit in vrbe mala” (Macaulay 59) Bk. I, Ch. 15, ln.1356. Stockton translates this phrase as “The savage lunacy brought about these and many other strange evils in the city, which no one had ever witnessed before” on page 79.

\(^{301}\) Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, A Latin Dictionary (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879) 1520. “Rabies.” Also the authors comment, “On account of its vibratory sound, resembling the snarling of a dog, r is called by Persius littera canina, Sat 1, 109; cf. Lucil. ap Charis. p.100. P.”
Upon the collapse of the city’s social order, the dreamer flees London to avoid physical death or beheading, which certainly threatened political players like Archbishop Simon Sudbury, but Gower suggests that he fears a death of the soul through depravity and irrationality even more keenly. The deathly image of the graculus’ skull comes to symbolize all the irrational sins and dark urges that besiege the vulnerable human soul, and fear itself becomes deadly. As Kurt Olsson explains, “Fear is the dreamer’s principal response to the events he witnesses. The sorrow and dejection, the recurrent guilt, and the eventual sense of release that allows him ‘joyfully [to] render songs of praise to God’ (I, 2082) are important too, but they are responses influenced by fear, his dominant affectus.” This fear causes Gower to lose his power to reason; consequently, the poet gradually loses the ability to articulate human language.

In narrating the physical and mental collapse of the dreamer, Gower dramatizes the terrifying impact of the graculus’ communicative pseudo-language, which simultaneously rallies the rebels, threatens traditional modes of speech, and spreads like an infection. The root of Gower’s incapacitation through the fear of mortis ymago must be traced back to the graculus, the verissima mortis ymago, and the poet worries as his body and mind become susceptible to the contagion of this evil creature. The dreamer cries,

Now mankind is coming to an end, since beasts and warfare had seized control of men, and since there was no justice in their laws. This was a most definite reason for anxious fear on my part and the beginning of a

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303 Olsson 146.
304 See the comment on Aquinas’ classification system in “‘Latratus Canis’ or: The Dog’s Barking.” (Eco 69).
worse fate for me. For since I had seen nobles yield to villeins in this way, there was no further hope of deliverance by fate.\textsuperscript{305}

According to Gower, mankind ends when beasts and warfare quash the established law code and impose laws that lack any justice. This forced imposition of an unfair lawcode proves that the rebels’ language lacks the capacity to express moral abstractions such as good and evil, their demands might as well be the howls and growls of beasts. These hollow growls will never provide an adequate substitute for England’s legislation, and it’s as if all human language loses the power to signify once Tyler empties the letter of the law of its traditional righteous meaning.\textsuperscript{306} The howls’ power to overwhelm noble, human discourse undermines humanity itself. If the established law cannot withstand an attack led by villeins and servants who speak like beasts, the nobility itself may not be strong enough to survive. Gower analogizes the humiliation of England’s noblemen to the extinction of the human race, and this species warfare may kill off Gower’s dreamer as well. He flees and loses his ability to articulate words voluntarily.\textsuperscript{307} As an ethical man, the dreamer is only left with the option of remaining silent as mad, bestial

\textsuperscript{305} Stockton 79. ‘Iam cadit ordo viri’;/ Bestia cum regimen hominum rapuisset et arma,/ Et quod nulla suis legibus equa forent,/ Hoc michi solliciti certissima causa timoris/ Exitit et sortis peior origo mee;/ Nam quia sic proceres vidi succumbere seruis,/ Spes magis in fatis nulla salutis erat.” (Macaulay 60) Bk. I, Ch. 16, Ins.1369-76.

\textsuperscript{306} According to Aquinas, human languages express a basic ethical awareness that enables the institution of domum et civitatem (home and citizenship/community). See Eco 69 and f.n.86.

\textsuperscript{307} Umberto and his coauthors write, “Does the dog mean when he says, or not? …It is clear that Abelard, in an Augustinian vein, is following the Stoic line of thought by distinguishing between signs which function on the basis of an inference (significantia) and words or pseudo-natural words which function on the basis of an intention of some sort (significativa). The same bark can act as a symptom in the case where the intentionality belongs to the interpreter and the event has not been instituted for the purpose of the interpretation, or as a naturally signifying utterance by which the dog expresses himself in order to constituere intellectum – to “get a point across.”(70) Although all of these philosophers strive to classify the dog’s bark along with verbal signs that carry more significance than the “accidental noises” (68) in nature, it is clear that losing the human ability to articulate “verba Scripturae” (69) or “nomen” (70) would be a major loss to the poet Gower.
languages sweep the land. He fears the land will be infected by Tyler’s speech and law code, but he has no means to protest once the languages of authority fail.

VI. The silent protests of John Gower

Gower’s troubling silence recalls the three days during the uprising when England’s leaders fell mute and accepted the rebels’ terms. In rendering this crisis, Gower dramatizes the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of authoritative language in the king as well as the dreamer. In the fourteenth chapter of Book I, Gower notices Richard’s enforced silence at the rebels’ execution of Simon Sudbury: “Priam could not save Helenus; rather, at that period of the King’s command, justice was silent (iura silent),” and this powerless silence lasts until “the deep cast up its monsters even to the King’s throne.” Here Gower refers to Richard, the boy king, as Priam, the ancient leader of Troy, in order to defend the England’s monarch from any criticism that he mishandled the situation due to his youth. To further dramatize the rebels’ theft of the king’s justice, command, seat of power, and voice without degrading Richard himself, Gower describes the silence attending the dreamer’s frightening transmutation from a linguistic master to an inarticulate beast. Gower ties his ordeals to those of the king and his advisors by presenting himself as the poet and prophet of England who writes about his experience to provide “fit examples for the future” of the country. In relating the narrative of his own degradation, Gower implies that every authoritative personage

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308 Along these same lines, Kurt Olsson comments, “Gower’s persona experiences what the chronicler Walsingham also found when he attempted a literal account of the revolt, only to discover significance or to achieve a meaningful ordo scribendi” (Olsson 145).


310 Stockton 86. “Regis et ad solium fert sua monstra fretum.” Bk.I, Ch.17, ln.1693.

311 Stockton 49. “Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri” (Macaulay 20) Book I, Prologue, ln.1.
briefly adopted the animals’ language and conceded to their demands in order to survive. By associating the loss of authority in England with the loss of his own voice, Gower sympathizes with the advisors and young monarch who quaked and conceded to the wishes of Tyler, and he imbues the scene with pathos by describing his own pain.  

In describing his desperate flight away from the city overrun with rebels, Gower asserts that madness adds wings to the dreamer’s feet. In running as if he’s flapping frenzied wings, the dreamer is analogized to a flightless bird. Gower uses these avian images to introduce the dreamer’s growing desperation as he wanders in banishment through the wood, and this imagery implies the dreamer’s fear may be triggering a transformation of sorts. In his fear, the dreamer comes to resemble a bird, and Gower insinuates that he may have fallen under the influence of graculus Tyler. The graculus sways and transfigures people with his fearful vision of England’s future, and it is fear that causes the dreamer to fly. The only question is how far the dreamer will fly away from civilization and humanity. Although poets often employ flying birds to evoke a sense of freedom, this flight into banishment reveals the dark fate of those forced to flee their homes without any assurance that order will be restored. In this terrifying vision of a sane man reduced to a primitive state by threats and violence, the dreamer’s own bodily senses revolt as he gropes for safety.

Tracing my weary steps along the upward path alone, I sought to find a safe road. Nevertheless fear of this great madness (rabiem) added wings to

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312 Kurt Olsson agrees, “As the dream proceeds, in fact, Gower comes to defend the victim of the uprising more explicitly.” (Olsson, Place 141) But I agree with Macaulay and Stockton that “the author takes care to guard readers against too personal an application of his description” (Stockton 362); instead Gower is creating a fictional vision to comment on the events of 1381. The passage is not autobiographical.

313 Robert F. Yeager writes, “the body and/or bodies consistently accompany political statements” in John Gower’s poetry. For more on Gower’s comparisons between bodies and politics, see Yeager, “Body Politic” 146.
my feet, and I was like a bird in my swift flight. So, wandering here and
there where chance led me as I went, I made a serious attempt for several
places. My steps wandered, and my lips were silent; my eye was struck
with amazement and my ear was in pain; my heart trembled and my hair
stood stiffly on end. Panicky as a wild boar which a pack of dogs frightens
by barking around it, I thought about withdrawing to very remote
places.\(^{314}\)

Fear drives out rationality, and Gower loses control over his faculties and body parts,
which rebel against him one by one. Mental and bodily disintegration push him towards
complete madness, again described as rabies, the mad rage of diseased dogs. At this
moment of supreme degradation, however, the poet inlays some of Vox’s most subtle and
astute literary references, deliberately appealing to the most educated members of his
audience to recognize his own mastery of rarefied literary language even as he portrays
intellectual and linguistic collapse. His centronic insertions comment on the dreamer’s
debasement by offering a series of counterexamples that provide an authoritative
contextual and stylistic rejoinder to the rhetoric with which the graculus infects the
populace.\(^{315}\)

The first book of Vox Clamantis seeks to demonize rebellion, the rebel leader,
and his rallying methods, and Gower’s literary references offer a fascinating riposte to the

\(^{314}\) Stockton 80. “Quesiui tutam solus habere viam: / Attamen ad tantam rabiem pedibus timor alas/ Addidit, 
et volucris in fugiendo fui. / Sic vagus hic et ibi, quo sors ducebat eumem, / Temptaui varia cum grauitate 
loca: / Pes vagat osque silet, oculus stupet et dolet auris, / Cor timet et rigide dirigere come. / Sicut aper, 
quem turba canum circumsona terret, / Territus extrema rebar adire loca.” (Macaulay 60) Bk.I, Ch.16, 
Ins.1388-1396.

\(^{315}\) I should mention that Gower uses the centonic insertions to provide a running commentary throughout
the first book of Vox, but I’d like to concentrate on their impact at this moment because these quotations do
particularly complex and defensive work at this juncture in the text. The subtext they provide completely
changes the import of the text itself.
graculus’ mesmerizing ability to invent a pseudo-linguistic register that mimics the voces ad placitum\textsuperscript{316} of humans who read Latin documents as well as Piers Plowman. In dramatizing the achievements of this bird, Gower tacitly acknowledges Tyler’s short-lived linguistic accomplishments even as he derides the rebel leader by associating him with the imago mortis, a kind of moral death. In this passage describing the moment of the graculus’ supposed supreme triumph over the authoritative figure of England’s poet, Gower’s concealed references outclass and exceed the graculus’, or Wat Tyler’s, talent at shaping different registers to exert his will. While the graculus demonstrates the capacity of “lower” creatures to mix their speech patterns with elite language to achieve their own agendas, Gower demonstrates the ability of established and authoritative texts to contain and manipulate dangerous animals; Gower recognizes animals and animalistic language as threatening beings that must be actively controlled. Every reference to an animal in this short passage – the bird, the boar, and the dogs – hails from a text by two masterful authors, Peter Riga and Ovid. Gower’s allusions not only rely on Biblical authority and classical verse, in contradistinction to Tyler’s come-lately contemporary demotic, but the excerpts provide exempla that critique Tyler’s behavior by illustrating heroic triumphs over tyrants and great monsters as well as by empathizing with fallen monarchs. A reader would require thorough knowledge of source texts’ content to understand the extent to which each quotation undercuts and reproaches Tyler’s assault on the government, the nobility, and language itself. Although the graculus appears to successfully conquer the dreamer at this juncture, the poet makes it clear to any savvy reader in the crucial subtext that the graculus is just another cruel usurper who tortures superior souls. For readers able to grasp the Latin quotations, Tyler shows the same capacity for slaughter and

\textsuperscript{316} See the Aquinas’ classification system outlined in Eco 69.
injustice as Abimelech who killed Gideon’s seventy sons. Like the chroniclers who portray Tyler as repellent as well as fearsomely influential when he converses with Richard at Smithfield, Gower emphasizes the rebels’ linguistic shortcomings even as he demonstrates the unfortunate but brief efficacy of the *graculus’* cursed and murderous speech.

The bird in swift flight to which Gower compares the fleeing dreamer in fact refers to Jotham, the son of Gideon in Judges. G.C. Macaulay and Paul E Beichner observe that Gower borrows the line, “*pedibus timor alas addidit et volucris in fugiendo fut*”317 from Peter Riga’s *Aurora*, a “popular verse...Scriptural paraphrase” of the Bible. According to Beichner, “Gower applied to himself a figure from *Aurora,*” a figure which Riga adapted from Judges 9:21: “*Post hec uerba fugit Ioatham; pedibus timor alas/ Addidit, et uolucris in fugiendo fuit.*”318 In original Biblical scene, Jotham entreats the

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317 Gower writes, “*Attamen ad tantam rabiem pedibus timor alas/ Addidit, et volucris in fugiendo fut*” at lines 1389-90 in describing the dreamer. (Macaulay 60; Stockton 1390.)

318 Compare these lines to Peter Riga, *Aurora Petri Rigae Biblia Versificata*, ed. Paul E. Beichner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) Ins.199-221, p.239. “*Post hec uerba fugit Ioatham; pedibus timor alas/ Addidit, et volucris in fugiendo fut.*”/Sermones Ioatham contextos scemate paucis/ Versibus enucleo, singula uerba, tibi/ Nuctio sancta Sacri Flatus signatur oliua;/ Vngit oliua foris, Spiritus intus altit./ Ficus in Hebraica plantata propaigne legem/ Signat fructiferam, si sacra uerba notes./ Est Christus uitis, uite pigmenta ministrans,/ Imbribus irrorans arida corda sacris./ Ramnus, qui pungit, laniat, dirumpit, aduncat,/ Est antichristus, quem replete omne malum;/ Ex ramno nascens uorat ignis ligna:/ malignos/ Ex antichristo crimina nata cremant. Ligna notant homines siluestres, igne perenni/ Dignos et reprobos ac ratione uagos. Non rannus pungens sed oliua uirens, sed odor/ Ficus, sed blanda uitis abhorret eos:/ Antichristus enim regit hos, nam Spiritus Almus./ Nam lex, nam Christus non dominatur eis./ Horum dona trium reprove mentes, aliene/ A cultu fidei, non meruere sibi./ Hic malus Abimelech rexit tribus Israel annis.” English translation by Caedmon R. Haas (2011) “After these words, Jotham fled; fear added wings/ To his feet and he was winged in fleeing./ The words about Jotham, hidden by style, I am examining/ in a few verses, word by word, for you/ The sacred union of sacred breath is signified by the olive tree/ The olive oils outside, the Spirit nourishes inside./ The fig tree, planted in Judea by a slip (a botanical technical term)/ signifies the fruit-bearing law, if you observe the sacred words/ Christ is the vine, supplying the colors of life;/ Sprinkling dry hearts with sacred storms./ The branch, which pricks, mangles, breaks, hooks/ is the antichrist which every evil fills;/ The fire growing from the branch devours the wood: crimes born from the/ antichrist burn up spiteful men (literally “bad wood”, malus + lignum)/ The woods denote wild/rural men, worthy of/ eternal fire and bad and wandering from reason./ Not the pricking branch, but the green olive, but the sweet-smelling/ fig tree, but the soft vine shrinks from them (those men)/ Indeed the antichrist rules them, for the nourishing Spirit/ For the law, for Christ, is not master over them./ Reject the gifts of these three, the minds, foreigner/ away from the cultivation of faith, are not deserving/ This bad Abimelech ruled Israel for three years.”
men of Shechem not to accept the lowborn usurper Abimelech as king over the holy Gideon’s legitimate son.319 The tonal resonances between the speeches of Jotham, who uses figurative language and parable to plea for his birthright,320 and John Gower, who employs similar literary techniques to argue against the usurper Tyler, connect the two scenes. While Jotham imagines a kingdom of trees submitting to brambles, Gower imagines men submitting to monstrous animals. These distinct images both symbolize the horror of being overwhelmed by an insuppressible evil, a connection that is illuminated by Riga’s interpretation of Jotham’s parable. Riga observes that the brambles, which he interprets as the antichrist, kindle a fire that burns up the woods,321 and he comments:

“Ligna notant homines siluestres, igne perenni/ Dignos et reprobos ac ratione uagos,” or

Also see Paul E. Beichner, “Gower’s Use of *Aurora* in *Vox Clamantis*.” Speculum 30.4 (Oct 1955): 583 and 588. On page 589 of this essay, Beichner makes a fascinating case for Gower’s allegorical and moralistic use of birds to be linked to Riga’s treatment of birds in *Aurora*: “As stated earlier, Gower does not borrow extensively from the Biblical paraphrases in the *Aurora*. Biblical matter with rhetorical or poetic development, however, does not make up the whole of Peter Riga’s work; allegorical interpretations of a moralistic tone are given in abundance. These interpretations or significations furnished Gower with the kind of matter he was seeking to implement his own moralizing, and many of the borrowings longer than a couplet are of this kind. For example, in a passage of slightly more than a hundred lines in “Leviticus” Peter Riga gave in the manner of a bestiary the natures and the significations of the twenty unclean birds which the Hebrews were forbidden to eat. Gower took, in whole or in part, the accounts of eleven of the birds, sometimes modifying the allegory to fit his context. The birds so used are the eagle, the mythical griffon, the kite, the vulture, the crow, the ostrich, the owl (noctua), the hawk, the screech-owl (bubo), the cormorant, and the bat. Since the passages are scattered, it was probably the utility of a particular significiation which determined Gower’s choice - a use of the Aurora which reminds one of the euphuistic use of Pliny in Elizabethan times. Thus Chapter xiv of Book VI (that the king should not wage war without a clearly just cause and that he should rule by love rather than fear) opens with the passage concerning the eagle and the griffon and then points a contrast in order to introduce the problem.” Also see f.n.#10 on this page: “10 The eagle and the griffon, "Lev.," 651-658 - F.C., VI, 985-992; the kite, 663-664 - VI, 101-102; the vulture, 671-674 - V, 537-540; the crow, 675-676, 679-682 - IV, 305-810; the ostrich, 683-688 - IV, 1059-1064; the owl, 689-692 - VI, 95-98; the hawk, 699-702 - VI, 719-722; the screech-owl, 708-710 - III, 1693-1700; the cormorant, 711-714 - III, 1587-1590; the bat, 751-756 - VI, 89-94.”


320 Jotham compares the men of Shechem to trees rather than animals, but the allegorical resonances between comparing a political situation to the natural world links the two works. For example, see Judges 9:8, “The trees once went forth to anoint a king over them; and they said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’”

321 Riga Ins. 209-211, translation by Caedmon R. Haas, 2011. “Ramnus, qui pungit, laniat, dirumpit, aduncat/ Est antichristus, quem replet omne malum;/ Ex ramno nascens uorat ignis ligna: malignos,” or “The branch, which pricks, mangles, breaks, hooks/ is the antichrist which every evil fills:/ The fire growing from the branch devours the wood.”
“The woods denote wild/rural men, worthy of eternal fire and condemnation and wandering from reason.”

Riga’s scorched, polluted wood signifies rustic men who wander from reason, a figuration that bears a striking resemblance to Gower’s wood, *saltus*, to which the afflicted dreamer flees. Wandering through the wild woodland similarly condemns the dreamer to irrationality. Gower’s rhetoric is legitimized even as his flight is rendered tragic by this association to the exiled Biblical hero. Notably, Jotham’s flight is not originally compared to a bird’s flight in the Bible, which simply states, “And Jotham ran away and fled.”

By referring to Riga’s unique rendition of Jotham’s story, Gower encourages his readers to interpret the dreamer’s flight through the woods using allegorical interpretive strategies akin to Riga’s typological reading style. The dreamer is no longer just a frightened man. He is a winged creature and a Christian hero beset by evil forces.

If the reader fails to recognize the source of centonic insertion, this frantic scene appears hopeless – the *graculus* wields the God-like power to shape England’s poet in his own horrific image. The *graculus*’ crying skull creates the *volucris*, an indefinite flying creature that doesn’t denote any specific species of bird and takes flight in panic. But for the reader who recognizes the allusion to Riga, Gower reverses this desperate imagery by alluding to Gideon’s eloquent son. Jotham, the defender of rightfully inherited rule, now becomes *volucris*, and this Biblical figure offers the corrective to the *graculus*’ dark language. The *graculus* molds human bodies into beastly shapes and destroys moral integrity; in contrast, Jotham, and by extension John Gower, causes a curse to fall upon

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323 Macaulay Bk. I, Ch. 16, Ins.1381-1382. “Tuncque domum proprium linquens aliena per aura/Transcurri, que feris saltibus hospes eram,” or “Then abandoning my own home, I ran away across alien fields and became a stranger in the wild woodlands.” (Stockton 80).
the heads of the usurper and his unrighteous followers. As Jotham flees in Judges 9:20-21, the overthrown heir declares, “let fire come out from Abimechem, and Bethmilo; and let fire come out from the citizens of Shechem, and from Bethmilo, and devour Abimelech.”\(^{325}\) This final curse comes to fruition as Judges concludes, and God fulfills Jotham’s prayer, “Thus god requited the crime of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers; and God also made all the wickedness of the men of Shechem fall back upon their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal (Gideon).”\(^{326}\) This fulfillment of this Biblical curse assures the erudite reader that God supports the rights of legitimate kings over the claims of violent upstarts, and Gower poses this defense of the royal (or more specifically a royal heir’s) prerogative at the moment in the text when the *graculus* (i.e. Tyler) is poised to destroy the dreamer. A curse will also fall upon the *graculus*, and Gower alludes to Tyler’s final defeat and curse even as he describes the dreamer’s ignominious transformation into an insensate being.

The dreamer’s bodily disintegration implies the damage that will be done to England if the *graculus* succeeds in rallying the commons and defeating the nobility. Gower inserts a terse description of his failing human body between the allusions to Riga’s bird and Ovid’s dogs and boar: “My steps wandered, and my lips were silent; my eye was struck with amazement and my ear was in pain; my heart trembled and my hair stood stiffly on end.”\(^{327}\) It’s as if the human form cannot maintain integrity once he flees into the woods. By rendering the dreamer’s deteriorating body parts at the critical

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\(^{325}\) Judges 9:20-21

\(^{326}\) Judges 9:56-57.

\(^{327}\) Macaulay Bk.I, Ch.16, Ins.1393-94 “Pes vagat osque silet, oculus stupet et dolet auris,/ Cor timet et rigide dirigere come.”
moment when he appears to be transforming into some kind of animal, Gower focuses on
the dissolution that results from societal disorder.

This list of body parts resembles the chroniclers’ and Gower’s other references to
the macro-microcosm of man, which compare the health of society to the vigor of a
sound human body. The breakdown of the individual causes social collapse. In
recording the beheadings witnessed during the Rising, the chroniclers drew a comparison
between corporeal breakdown and civil discord. In an elucidating parallel, Gower
“elaborates the macro-microcosm analogy [between a man’s body and the body politic]
in Vox Clamantis VII.637-716.” As he composed this seventh book of Vox before the
events of 1381 turned his attention to the first book’s dream vision, Gower was already
envisaging a single man as the representative of the whole of humanity on earth.
Although the poet does not transpose his own body into the position of the universal man
in this passage, he develops his philosophy that the personal failures of a man portend the
ruin of the world:

Man feels, hears, tastes, sees, and walks; hence man possesses a kind of
animal nature. Man also grows in height together with the trees; and by
virtue of his special quality he possesses existences in the manner of
stones. Thus man, who alone does everything, is a microcosm; and man
alone pays sacred devotion to God alone. The man who is pure in his own
right subjects the world to himself, and accordingly guides its

328 For more information on Gower’s renderings of the macro-microcosm of the body and the body politic
in his three major works, see James Simpson, Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s
Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 218,
fn.25. Simpson cites, “Confessio amantis, Prologue, 945-66; Vox clamantis VII.637-716; Mirour de
l’homme, lines 26869-940.”
330 Simpson 218.
circumstances for the better. If he is impure, however, he is injurious to
everything which pertains to the world, and redirects its whole fabric for
the worse. He rules his world by his own command as he wishes: If he is
good, it is good; if he is evil, it is evil. One who is microcosm brings the
greatest misfortune upon the world, if he falls because of guilty impurities,
he weighs heavily upon everything in the world, which is impaired by his
wickedness. But if one who is a microcosm worships the Omnipotent, he
is the source of everything pure in human affairs. If one who is a
microcosm meditates upon the laws of God, he will possess the great
kingdom of heaven for himself.”

In the first line of this excerpt from Book VII, Gower notices that man’s sensory faculties
imbue him with a kind of animal nature, or “Nature speciem fert animalis homo” could
also be translated as “hence man bears the outward appearance of animal nature.” The
graculus’ ability to hurt the dreamer at a physical level, therefore, accords with Gower’s
observation that all men possess bodies that render them susceptible to animal instincts,
or in this case, susceptible to blunt, animalistic, pseudo-linguistic demands. By referring
to other natural phenomena such as trees and stones, Gower then describes man’s
supersensory “special quality” that raises him to great heights and prolongs his existence.
The trees scrape the heavens, and the stones endure eternally. Mankind extends beyond

331 Stockton 268. “Sentit et audit homo, gustat, videt, ambulat, vnde/ Nature speciem fert animalis homo:/
Cum tamen arboribus homo crescit, et optinet esse/ In lapidum forma propietate sua:/ Sic minor est
mundus homo, qui fert singula solus,/ Soli solus homo dat sacra vota deo./ Est homo qui mundus de iure
suo sibi mundum/ Subdit, et in melius diriget inde status:/ Si tamen inmundus est, que sunt singula mundi/
Ledit, et in peius omne refundit opus:/ Vt vult ipse suum proprio regit ordine mundum,/ Si bonus ipse,
bonum, si malus ipse, malum./ Qui minor est mundus, fert mundo maxima damna./ Ex inmundiciis si
cadat ipse reus:/ Qui minor est mundus, so non inmunda recidiat, Cuncta suo mundi crimine lesa grauat:/
Qui minor est mundus homo, so colat omnipotentem./ Rebus in humanis singula munda parit:/ Qui minor
est mundus, si iura dei meditetur,/ Grande sibi regnum possidet ipse poli.” (Macaulay 289-90) Bk.VII,
Ch.8, Ins. 641-660.
the limited reach of his bodily senses when he manifests his lofty scale and eternal scope in venerating the sacred, and only languages that articulate *voces ad placitum* give man access to the divine.

In a *tour de force* of poetic layering, Gower mirrors this distinction between the animalistic and lofty capacities of mankind through the stylistic use of cento. The outwardly apparent features of his text illustrate the physical pain that the dreamer experiences as the *graculus* drives his senses to madness; at the unapparent centonic level of the text, Gower inserts subtle and authoritative allusions to the tragedies of Jotham and Hecuba, beleaguered nobles who lose their birthrights and kingdoms to cruel usurpers. Only a reader with the ability to access the “divine” or “rational” text beneath the outward layer proves himself to be worthy of being deemed a microcosm of the world. Only this reader reveals his sensitivity to conceptual as well as sensual discourse. In this way, Gower emphasizes that an educated and knowledgeable man, capable of seeing beyond the animalistic level, encapsulates the animal and the divine in his form, and this man is a microcosm, “*Sic minor est mundus homo,*” or small version of the world. As such, some men may impact the “whole fabric” of the world in their actions and choices.  

As a microcosm with the potential to “guide circumstances for the better” or redirect the world “for the worse,” a single influential man’s ethics have the potential to determine the ethical character of an entire society. To understand the political ramifications of the dreamer’s bodily dissolution in the first book of *Vox,* evaluating

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332 For the history of the *corpus mysticum,* which first designated the “Sacrament of the Alter,” but eventually came to mean “the Church as a body politic, or by transference, any body politic of the secular world,” see Kantorowicz 206. I cannot help but notice that the full-range of the metaphor is available since 1381 rebellion that Gower is describing takes place during the festival of Corpus Christi.
Gower’s definition of microcosm in conjunction with Aquinas’ characterization of the *corpus mysticum* demonstrates that the dreamer’s sensory meltdown allegorizes the breakdown of England itself. According to Aquinas’ carefully outlined model of the *corpus mysticum*, the king controls the other members of society just as the head controls the limbs and senses in a corporeal body; if the king’s justice fails, the corporate body becomes a mess of irreconcilable impulses and discordant voices. As Fortescue observes a century later in 1494, “The Law by which a *cetus hominum* is made into a *populus* resembles the nerves of the physical body; for just as the body is held together by nerves, so is the *corpus mysticum* [of the people] joined together and united into one by the Law,” and Ernst Kantorowicz adds “the body [is] incomplete without a head, the king.”³³³ Gower seems to be drawing on the political implications of this model as he turns the dreamer’s body into a metaphor for the *corpus mysticum*; England’s poet replaces the king as the head. Since the centonic allusions consistently compare the dreamer’s fleeing, hurting, hunted body to the vulnerable bodies of ancient kings and queens, Gower develops a close association between the poet’s body and a royal body. Once the insightful reader makes this association, the dreamer’s terror obscurely gestures towards lamentable situation of England’s Richard II as well.³³⁴ Gower’s rebelling senses symbolize that monstrous men of the *populus* have overthrown the head, that is to say, the language, judgment, and command centers of England. The poet’s body, like England itself, turns into an unfamiliar animal, an incomplete body lacking any of the powers of the head.

As the poet struggles through the woods shedding his reason and humanity, the

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³³³ Kantorowicz 224.
³³⁴ I might note that the chroniclers showed a similar disinclination to portray Richard as overtly weak.
rebels’ influence, infection, and deadly attack finds form in the image of barking dogs setting upon their quarry: “Panicky as a wild boar which a pack of dogs frightens by barking around it, I thought about withdrawing to very remote places.” These lines evoke an image associated with the aristocratic hunt. Susan Crane has observed, “The hounds' subordination reinforces the hunt's mimesis of a social and natural hierarchy” in the hunt à force, and here Gower reverses those hierarchies by forcing the dreamer, who should be riding atop a horse as a noble human, into the role of the boar. The incensed barking of dogs bursts forth as the only language available as Gower presents himself as a dumb beast. The dreamer has not only lost the power to utter in a vox ad placitum after being exposed to the graculus' demoralizing speeches, but he has even started losing the ability to use the animalistic pseudo-language of the senses. Just as his sensory faculties fail him, the dreamer’s body seems to be in danger of being torn apart and ripped to pieces by creatures that could never contemplate heaven or eternity.

335 Stockton 80. “Sicut aper, quem turba canum circumsona terret,/ Territus extrema rebar adire loca.” (Macaulay 60) Bk.I, Ch.16, Ins.1395.
336 Chaucer exploits this same image of dogs barking when alluding to the rebels of 1381 in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale. See NPT Ins.3375-3400, esp. Ins.3383-3388 & 3393-95: “Ran Colle oure dogge, and Talbot and Gerland,/ And Malkyn, with a dystaf in hir hand;/ Ran cow and calf, and eek the verray hogges,/ So fered for the berkyng of the dogges/ And shoutynf the men and wommen eek/ They ronnoe so hem thoughte hir herte breeke,” sound which are compared to the 1381 rebels: “So hydous was the noyse – a, benedictee! -/ Certes, he Jakke Straw and his meyne/ Ne made nevere shoutes half so shrille”(Riverside Chaucer 260).
338 As a fascinating comparison to Eco et al.'s work on the “Latratus Canis,” Crane notes the interspecies communication going on between dogs and humans during the hunt, “The hunt a force depends on cross-species communication between hounds and humans. Horn calls combine short and long notes with silences between. Twin's treatise consistently illustrates that both hounds and human hunters are instructed by horn calls. For example, if a hart being steered toward archers passes out of the boundaries set up in advance for his path, he would "blow in this manner: a mote and then repeat it, trorourourout, trorourourout, trorourourout... to bring near me the men who are all around the hunting field, and to call back the hounds who have passed beyond the boundary."27 From the other side, the treatises agree that the hounds' barks and bayings are meaningful to humans: "the good huntsman must know and listen for the cries and voices of his hounds, especially of the good and wise ones," Gaston recommends, so as to get information from them about what they are scenting” (Crane, “Hunt à Force” 72-73).
Even as dismemberment threatens the dreamer, however, an inlaid portrait of triumph predicts the rout of Tyler’s forces. Gower describes the hunting dogs assailing the boar by borrowing Ovid’s phrase, “Sicut aper, quem turba canum circumsona terret,” which the classical poet used to describe Perseus’ successful attack on the great sea monster in *Metamorphoses* IV.723. Why does Gower refer to the slaughter of an ancient beast as he describes the dreamer being hunted like a beast? Following the internal logic of the allusion, it appears as if Gower is comparing his boar-like dreamer to this sea monster; indeed, the dreamer has suffered a cruel blow. Rather than interpreting the boar literally as a sea monster, however, Gower leads the reader to associate this time of degradation, in which dreamer is hunted like a beast, with the crucial moment in Perseus’ victory. By including the allusion, Gower refers to a decisive victory over the bestial forces even as the dreamer seems to have fallen to a bestial state. In the darkest moment, victory emerges in the subtext.

Gower elaborates upon this intricate reversal of the dog and boar imagery as the dreamer descends into a painful state of mute exile. While Gower garners sympathy for Tyler’s noble victims by scattering references to abused, suffering monarchs throughout

339 Stockton 80. “Sicut aper, quem turba canum circumsona terret,/ Territus extrema rebar adire loca.” (Macaulay 60) Bk.I, Ch.16, Ins.1395-1396.
340 In this context, Perseus is saving Andromeda from the being sacrificed to the sea beast
341 In developing this connection between the slaying of the sea monster and the defeat of the animalistic forces plaguing England, Gower inserts three more references to Ovid’s story detailing Perseus’ triumphant battle (*Metamorphoses* IV.689 f., 706 f., 690) in the following books of *Vox*. See Stockton 87: “And in addition to this huge monster coming from the sea (*veniens inmensus belua ponto/ Eminet*), and at whose breath the billows roared, loomed up and plowed the waves (*velut nauis prefixus concita rostro/ Sulcat aquas*), just like a ship tipped with a sharp prow. And everything nearby dreaded it. The fierce creature was master of the wide sea under its breast (*latum sub pectore possidet equor*), and it demanded control of the seas, which it duly claimed as its own.” (Macaulay 69) Bk.I, Ch.18, Ins. 1717-1722: “Et super hoc veniens inmensus belua ponto/ Eminet, ex cuius naribus vnda tonat:/ Ipse velut nauis prefixus concita rostro/ Sulcat aquas, et eum cuncta propinqua timent:/ Ipse ferox latum sub pectore possidet equor,/ Et propriata sibi iura marina petit.” When this allusion to leviathan’s demise first appeared, the dreamer was prey, but Ovid’s line also foreshadowed the fact that a terrible beast would ultimately be vanquished. The reader knows that the monster will die from the first moment it roars from the billows to strike London, and by extension, the reader understands that Wat Tyler and the rebels will similarly suffer defeat.
his vivid description of the dreamer’s frustrating, cursed silence. In his flight from civilization and sanity, the dreamer adopts feral habits: “Driving off my hunger by means of acorns, I covered over my body with grass which had been mixed with leaves,” and he begins to resemble a “wild man” in the tradition of Nebuchadnezzar. This combination of desperation and isolation causes a disturbing onset of muteness.

*Then a fear quite like utter terror checked not only my rising tears but also the voice within me.* Pointing toward the sun’s light, I stretched out my arms, and I made signs of them, because of the fact that my tongue could not utter a sound. *And when the fierce, burning anger in my spirit had quite dried up my tears,* my sobbing clamored to have its turn next. My mind, which was inwardly much agitated by these misfortunes and was burdened with frightening things, shivered like the surface of the sea. The strange-colored wannahess of my face showed from without what lay hidden at the bottom of my teeming brain. Indeed, the trepidation and terror and the insane look upon my anxious face made me quite unrecognizable even to myself. While my mind was in an enfeebled state, the motion of my body, which in its leanness [scarcely] covered my bones, was painful; and my lips did not take delight in food. My human appearances now seeped

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342 Stockton 81. “Glande famem pellens mixta quoque frondibus herba/ Corpus ego texi” (Macauley 62) Bk. I Ch.16, Ins.1447-1448. Gower adapts this line from Metamorphoses XIV.214-216 when Achaemenides, one of Ulysses companions, is left behind on Polyphemus’ shore. In this passage he is hiding from the Cyclops.
taken away, and the pallor in my face betokened the grave.\textsuperscript{344}

This passage is startling in its pathos in that the dreamer’s body sheds its last traces of humanity, and his sudden incapacity to articulate any type of language deprives him of the ability to pray for his own salvation as he reaches out to the sun. (\textit{Brachia porrexi tendens ad lumina solis,/ Et, quod lingua nequit promere, signa ferunt.}) In his failed attempt at supplication to God, the dreamer bears a close resemblance to cursed Nebuchadnezzar in his loss of reason and human form. Robert F. Yeager observes the correspondence between Vox’s various beastly metamorphoses and Nebuchadnezzar’s “transformation for seven years into a wild ass in punishment for arrogance before the Lord,”\textsuperscript{345} commenting “as in Daniel, the shape-shifting comes as a curse from God for ignoring their God-given reason. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar, it is his blind arrogance which causes him to misapprehend his power as king, and to exceed his place thereby; and in the case of the rebels, it is once again an overstepping of boundaries and a claiming of power and autonomy not rightfully theirs which brings the curse and the transformation.”\textsuperscript{346} In this emotional scene from Vox, the rebels’ dangerous curse has become the dreamer’s own. After being infected and influenced by the immoral rhetoric of the overstepping rebel leader, the deathly graculus Wat Tyler who destroys reason,\textsuperscript{347}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{344} Stockton 81-82. “Tunc pariter lacrimas vocemque introrsus abortas,/ Extasis exemplo comprimit ipse metus./ Brachia porrexi tendens ad lumina solis,/ Et, quod lingua nequit promere, signa ferunt:/ Cumque ferus lacrimas animi siccauerat ardor,/ Singultus reliquas clamat habere vices./ Pallidiora gerens exhorruit equoris instar/ Multa per interius mens agitata malis;/ Discolor in facie macies monstrauerat extra,/ Que magis obstruere mentis ad yma latent:/ Nam pauor et terror, trepidoque insania vultu,/ Me magis ignotum constituere michi./ Dum mens egra fuit, dolet accio corporis, in quo/ Ossa tegit macies, nec iuuat ora cibus:/ Iam michi subducta facies humana videtur,/ Pallor et in vultu signa reportat humi” (Macaulay 62-63) Bk.I, Ch.16, lns.1469-1484.

\textsuperscript{345} Yeager, “Body Politic” 162.

\textsuperscript{346} ibid.

\textsuperscript{347} Penelope B.R. Doob explains further, “Morally, Nebuchadnezzar represents any sinner who destroys reason, the image of God, and thereby becomes bestial, mad, and an outcast; and he particularly represents the proud man and the tyrant” (Doob 69-70). Doob comes to this conclusion about the general uses of Nebuchadnezzar in literature by referring to Richard of Saint Victor’s \textit{De eruditione, PL} 196:1339: “As
the dreamer’s body starts to betoken the grave like those of the damned beasts hunting him. Like Tyler’s mad followers, he begins to resemble a speechless ass.

This startling amalgam of death, beastliness, and unanswered prayers presages the apocalyptic imagery that Gower develops in Book VII, which begins with a reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, when he details the torments that dead bodies will undergo at the end of days: “What does the proud dead man reply now? … The fact that he formerly knew the various kinds of tongues is of no advantage to the man who is silent, with his mouth mute in death.”

In addition, Gower later builds upon this haunting image of “the miserable but engaging beast raising its hooves and braying its appeal to God” when he renders Nebuchadnezzar’s portrait in *Confessio Amantis* Bk.I, lns.2989-3034.

He was tormented day and nyht,
Such was the hihe Goddes myht,
Til sevne yer an ende toke.
Upon himself thos gan he loke;
In stede of mete, gras, and stres,

much as you exalted yourself above other men in your arrogance, so far will you be cast down below other men because of your guilt, and your habitation shall be with beasts and wild animals. He is cast out from men and descends to live with beasts and animals who, forsaking the way of reason, lives henceforth irrationally, so that, living bestially and behaving like a wild animal, he is abandoned to complete carnality in the company of those who live bestially, and he is unrestrainedly given over to all kinds of cruelty in the company of those who love like wild animals.” Doob asserts that “Richard consistently advances a moral reading of Nebuchadnezzar’s life, and the moral interpretation printed in GO [Biblia sacra cum glossa ordinaria...et postilla Nicolai Lyrani. 7 vols. Paris, 1590.] 4:305, seems to be derived from Richard’s.”

(Doob 70 fn.17).

348 Stockton 270. “Quid modo respondet homo mortuus ille superbus?…Nil sibi quod genea linguarum nouterat olim/ Confert, qui muto mortuus ore silet” (Macauley 292) Bk.VII, Ch.9, lns.725 & 751-752. This section detailing the various Apocalyptic torments of dead and quite often bestial bodies in punishment for particular sins continues from Bk.VII, Ch.9.ln.717 – Bk.VII, Ch.15, ln.906.

349 Doob 89. Robert F. Yeager also cites Doob’s observation about the praying beast in “The Body Politic” on page 164, remarking that “in the early Vox, where Gower exonerates the boy-king Richard for his poor judgment in the hands of wicked men, the poet extends his monarch a second chance. In Daniel the prophet interprets the dream (another, not this time of the statue but of a tree, filled with birds acting appropriately like birds in a righteous nature, and significantly unlike the Satanic jaybird Gower makes Wat Tyler in the Vox) so that Nebuchadnezzar might learn to change before it is too late; and change he does, eventually, in lines which one reader, Penelope B.R. Doob, has seen as among Gower’ moving best – the image of the repentant ass, hoofs upraised in mute supplication to a God who at last relents to turn him back again to man, to rule in justice and in peace (CA I. 3022-39). Russell A. Peck also cites this passage in Doob; see Russell A. Peck, “John Gower and the Book of Daniel,” Studies in Medieval Culture 26 (1989): 171, fn.52.
In stede of handes, longe cles,
In stede of man a bestes lyke
He syh; and thanne he gan to syke
For cloth of gold and for perrie,
Which him was wont to magnefie.
Whan he behied his cote of heres,
He wepte and with ful woful teres
Up to the hevene he caste his chiere
Wepende, and thoghte in this manere;
Thogh he no wordes mythe winne,
Thus seide his herte and spak withinne:
“O mihti Godd, that al hast wroght
And al myht bringe agein to noght,
Now knowe I wel, bot al of Thee,
This world hath no prosperité.  
…
And thogh him lacke vois and speche,
He gan up with his feet areche,
And wailende in his bestly stevene
He made his pleignte unto the hevene.
He kneleth in his wise and braieth,
To seche merci and assaieth
His God, which made him noting strange,
Whan that he sith his pride change.
Anon as he was humble and tame,
He fond toward his God the same,
And in a twinklinge of a lok
His mannes forme agein he tok.  

Here, Nebuchadnezzar makes the same motion of casting up his “chiere,” or countenance, and reaching with his “feet” to the heavens while weeping, and the gesture connects Vox’s pitiful dreamer to Gower’s imaginative portrait of the proud Biblical king. In this passage from Confessio Amantis, Gower imparts Nebuchadnezzar’s prayer in which he blames himself for the sin of pride. As soon as the king repents and humbles himself, God immediately turns Nebuchadnezzar back into a man “in a twinklinge of a

\[351\] CA Bk.1, ins.3023-3034.
lok.\textsuperscript{352} In contrast, when \textit{Vox}'s dreamer appeals to God and confesses his sin by exclaiming, “Thou knowest, O God, that I am not making objections to Thy decrees. As long as Thou punishest, I shall suffer and confess that I deserved it,”\textsuperscript{353} Wisdom interjects, “You are not suffering this torment as due punishment, you are suffering the wrath of heaven. Do not be afraid, for every sorrow has an end.”\textsuperscript{354} As he considers this exculpation, the dreamer admits, “But granted that I was free from personal blame, my mind was conscious of the fact that there nevertheless was no hope of even doubtful safety.”\textsuperscript{355} The dreamer suffers due to the sinful behavior of others, but as Gower moves to reestablish cosmic order, he undermines the role of the \textit{graculus} and his followers in provoking this animalistic change in the populace.

Although the infection of the \textit{graculus} seemed to spring from the bird’s capacity for twisted mimicry and malicious disregard for the established law earlier in the poem, Gower ascribes less responsibility to the bird by writing that the torment expresses “the wrath of heaven” at England’s sinful lack of respect for order and general rebelliousness. The \textit{graculus} exerts power over the dreamer, but Gower reestablishes his own authority by explaining that the \textit{graculus’} influence spreads due to divine dictate. By interpreting the actions of the rebels as a punishment from God in the final sections of \textit{Vox}'s dream vision, the poet stops scrutinizing the rebels’ rhetorical strategies and plots, refusing to acknowledge that the Rising resulted from the effective policies of a discontented population. The rebels aren’t actors; they are puppets animated by the will of heaven.

\textsuperscript{352} C4 Bk.I, ln.3033.  
\textsuperscript{353} Stockton 83. “Ecce, deus, tu scis quia non tua fata recuso; Dum feris, en pacior que meruisse reor.” (Macaulay 64) Bk I, Ch.16, lns.1541-1542.  
\textsuperscript{354} Stockton 83. “Non merito penam pateris set numinis iram:/ Ne timeas, finem nam dolor omnis habet.” (Macaulay 64) Bk I, Ch.16, lns.1549-1550.  
\textsuperscript{355} Stockton 83. “Conscia mensque michi fuerat, culpe licet expers,/ Spes tamen ambigue nulla salutis adest.” (Macaulay 64) Bk I, Ch.16, lns.1553-1554.
Gower removes any traces of Wat Tyler’s humanity or achievement by positing this explanation. Instead of being portrayed as a thinking, calculating villain, the rebel leader is reduced to a cipher enacting divine commands. The dreamer has caught the rebels’ bestial disease at God’s behest, and the innocent dreamer initially forsakes hope. Despair at England’s wretched state temporarily prevents personal salvation. Immorality and pride sweep through a majority of the population, instead of through the breast of one arrogant king. In punishing the people, or the “body” of England, for an intransigent contempt for authority, the deity briefly allows the graculus to overturn “head” leaders who were guided by moral reason. As God castigates the land, authorities, like the dreamer, lose their minds as the country descends into headless, heedless madness; as a result, leaders suffer for the weak, nonsensical, and intransigent impulses in the populace.

To further dramatize the hopelessness of the stricken innocents, particularly royal victims, Gower heightens the tragedy of the dreamer’s descent into silence by describing his affective tears using an Ovidian allusion that revisits the familiar image of mad dogs. While hunting dogs illustrated the dreamer’s fear while subtly foreshadowing England’s eventual triumph over Tyler, this cunning reference to the same beasts offers a commentary on the desperate state of fallen monarchs just as the dreamer loses all linguistic skill. The poet describes his bestial silence and symptomatic tears by quoting salient lines from Ovid’s tale of Hecuba’s transformation into a raging dog from Metamorphoses XIII. The irony of Gower’s poetic that communicates stunned silence,

356 As an interesting aside, at the moment when the dreamer is forced into one of the traditional poses of affective piety (i.e. uncontrollable crying), the poet compares this silent, weeping wanderer to female characters. It’s almost as if the dreamer crosses gender lines into the traditional terrain of the affective female worshipper of God.

357 Macaulay reviews Gower’s adaptations and borrowings from Ovid on pp.377-78, and Stockton covers the same Ovidian source research on pp. 363-364.
failed authority, and disenfranchisement from civilized life is that his audience must have
a thorough knowledge of the Latin Ovidian corpus to understand the full extent of the
dreamer’s misery and speechlessness.\footnote{358}

In adapting Ovid’s descriptions to his own poem, Gower connects his own
agonized body to those of fallen monarchs, and the dreamer’s tears are analogized to the
tears of the Trojan queen mother. In destabilizing the gender of the dreamer by
associating him with an unhappy female monarch, the poet showcases his learned skills
as well as his sympathetic imagination at the moment when the dreamer’s understanding
supposedly breaks down.\footnote{359} Even as Gower’s text describes the paralysis that overcomes
his body during his period of exile, which self-consciously alludes to Ovid’s exile from
Rome,\footnote{360} his adaptation of Ovid completely reimagines the vociferous barking dogs from
lines 1395-96 by evoking the still moment before the shocking transformation of Hecuba,
the exiled queen of Troy.

\footnote{358} Eve Salisbury’s comment about cento’s capacity for stirring social protest may apply here – Gower
overturns his own imagery to rail against those who attack the king (and perhaps even the queen mother as
Walsingham suggests). Salisbury writes, “Gower’s cento techniques establish a carnivalesque discourse
invested not only with the rejuvenating effects of parodic laughter, but with the anger of social protest.”
(Salisbury, “Remembering Origins” 168).

\footnote{359} Gower uses veiled, complicated language to reveal the horrendous fate of Ovid’s famous queen, but his
remembrance of the stricken queen encourages sympathy for aristocratic victims in the rational, educated
reader. In this, Gower shows a certain kinship to Thomas Walsingham who movingly describes the
vulnerability of Richard’s mother, the queen, at the hands of the rebels. Walsingham sensationalizes the
invasion of the Tower as a kind of physical violation, and his special attention to the body of the queen
heightens the crime of the rebels. (Walsingham 424-425).

\footnote{360} Stockton argues that I.1467-68 is taken from Ovid, Ex Ponto. i.2.29 f, and I.1482 is taken from Tristia
III.8.28. In “Did Gower Write Cento?”, R.F. Yeager gives a great analysis of Gower’s detailed citations
from Ovid’s Ex Ponto and Tristia on pp.117-119. In brief, Yeager writes, “The context is as follows, from
Ex Ponto…The difference in meaning of the lines is, if anything, increased by viewing the contexts.
Comparison of the next two lines as they appear in the Vox Clamantis and in Ovid’s Tristia, where Gower
found them, yields the same results….Clearly, however Gower meant us to understand his fratres, it could
not correspond to the sense of the word in these Ovidian lines on which he drew so specifically. Similar
juxtaposition of the remaining borrowed verses in the foregoing example against their original contexts is
unnecessary to make the point here. Nor need we cite further composite passages to do so, though this is
quite possible: approximately one-third of the Vox Clamantis contains splicings from other sources, altered
very slightly in the manner of those just examined and put to serve a meaning wholly new.” In footnote 20
in addendum to this argument Yeager explains, “Other significant cento sections in the Vox Clamantis
include: Bk.III, ch.26 (primarily Peter Riga and Ovid); Bk. IV, lines 395-486 (primarily Alexander
Neckham); Bk. V, lines 957-76 (primarily Remedia Amoris); Bk.VI, lines 937-92 (primarily Peter Riga).
In this centonic allusion, “Then a fear quite like utter terror checked not only my rising tears but also the voice within me” *(Tunc pariter lacrimas vocemque introrsus abortas)*, Gower adapts Ovid’s line, “*et pariter vocem lacrimasque introrsus obor tas*,” or “Her voice was stifled; the tears were welling behind her eyes,” which describes Hecuba watching her dead son Polydorus wash onto the beach immediately before rage transforms her into a wild dog. By alluding to the moment of stunned silence before Hecuba’s metamorphosis, Gower draws on the tension of the moment before a person changes from human to beast. It is the “frozen” and “rigid” silence of a mother who has just witnessed the corpse her young son, “mangled with gaping wounds from the sword.” This shocked recognition that the last royal son of Troy has fallen due to forces beyond his control impels a bestial response, “As she opened her jaws in a vain attempt to give tongue, she barked.” The bark, once again, erupts at the moment when a human begins to behave like an animal, somewhere between rationality and complete madness. For Gower, human language cannot express or describe the irrational act of endangering a young king’s life. In his silent torment, the dreamer’s body wastes away until his human face “betokens the grave,” resembling yet another “*mortis ymago.*”

The dreamer trembles on the precipice of violent emotion, and he stands one step away from falling into the grave and submitting to the image of death. He eventually

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363 Ovid, Raeburn, Bk.XIII, lns.535-540.
364 Ovid, Raeburn, Bk.XIII, lns.568—569.
365 As an important side note, Gower also refers to Queen Althaea’s wracking decision whether or not kill her son Meleager after the hunt for the Calydonian boar in *Metamorphoses* VIII, and it develops the critical moment when the dreamer is compared to a boar. The line, “And when the fierce, burning anger in my spirit had quite dried up my tears” *(Cunque ferus lacrimas animi siecuaret ardor)* copies Ovid’s exact phrase (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 469) that describes Althaea’s emotional turmoil. The overwrought passion pulling the queen between murder and compassion here describes Gower’s struggling mind, which shivers like the surface of the sea.
laments, “So, wherever I looked there was nothing except the image of death (mortis
ymago), which I believe no man can bear. I often wished to die lest I should see any such
thing; or, I wished that I were safe from these monsters in the world. I decided I wanted
to die, since it is written ‘Death releases all things and frees them from present woe.’ ”

The image of death, the shape of the graculus’ skull, and the frightening specter of
Tyler’s demonic speech inspire a unresolvable conflict in the mind of the dreamer, and
this nightmare has been sent by God. The dreamer has the choice to live in a country that
has been cursed by beasts, or he can submit to death itself. Since he cannot release
himself from this sinful predicament through speech, confession, or prayer, death appears
to be the only escape. But even as the dreamer experiences this horror of inexpressibility,
Gower offers salvation and sympathy for England’s afflicted nobles by revealing a
rational, conservative, and divinely-sanctioned message to the reader who can see beyond
the outer layer of the text’s body.

VII. Recapturing language from the rebel leader

After the rebels seize the Tower, “where the gate would not close its bars, so that
its hall suffered the shame of an attacker,” Gower attests that it becomes “a Tower
divided like Babel with its tongues; a Tower like a ship of Tershish on the face of the
sea.” These clashing tongues and threatening waters heighten the dreamer’s suffering,

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366 Stockton 82. “Sic vbi respeti, nichil est nisi mortis ymago,/ Quam repute nullum tollere posse virum:
Sepe mori volui ne quicquid tale viderem,/ Seu quod ab hiis monstris tutus in orbe forem; Velle mori statui,
quia scibitur, ‘Omnia soluit/ Mors et ab instanti liberat ipsa malo.’” (Macaulay 64) Bk.I, Ch.16, Ins.1521-
1526.
367 Stockton 87. “Turris, vbi porta sibi seras ferre recusat, Quo partitur thalamus ingredientis onus”
(Macaulay 70) Bk I, Ch.18, Ins.1747-1748.
368 Stockton 88. “Turris diuisa linguis Babilonis ad instar,/ Turris, vt est nauis Tharsis in ore maris,”
(Macaulay 70) Bk I, Ch.18, Ins.1763-1764. For Babel, see Gen.11:1-9; For Ships of Tarshish, see Isa. 23:14
or Jonah 1:3.
and he awakes from his bestial stupor and begins meditating on his guilt. He begins to plead to the heavens after plumbing his heart’s images: “My heart remembered the crimes I had committed, so that the picture in my heart (cordis ymago) stimulated my prayers. There was not a saint whom my tongue did not pray to, for the portents of the sea boded destruction.”

Prompted by a different kind of image, those contained within his own penitent heart, he begs for mercy and forgiveness. The capacity of the dreamer to look inside his being, beyond the layer of the physical senses, offers his salvation. As he prays, he rearticulates the proper hierarchy of creation, reminding himself that God created fish, winged creatures, and animals.

O creator of the human race, Christ the Redeemer, without Whom there is nothing good on earth or nothing better, Thou spokest and all things were established in Thy name. Thou spokest and all things were established in Thy name. Thou gavest command, and instantly all things were manifestly created. And at Thy word the heavens were formed, and Thy spirit furnished every splendor for them. And through Thee the waters exist, and also their fixed boundary, and through Thee the fish exists and every species in the sea. Thou hast created every kind of winged creature (volucrum), and Thou hast given breath to the wind in its four directions. And being omnipotent, by Thy divine will Thou hast established the earth, which Thy provident order rendered stable. And all earth-born animals live because of Thee, and every reptile moves under Thy law (lege).

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369 Stockton 87. “Vt magis exacunt cordis ymago preces./ Non fuit ex sanctis quem non mea lingua precatur,/ Dum maris interitum preuia signa parant” (Macaulay 71) Bk I, Ch.18, 1787-1790.
Finally, man was made in Thine image (ymago tua) and that of Reason (racionis), so that he might be over all Thy handiwork.”

This prayer adapts the opening lines of Genesis to confirm that it is God, not the graculus, used the word to shape creatures in his image. It is God, not the graculus, who made the volucrum to which Gower compared the dreamer in his desperate flight. This prayer finally reestablishes the divine sovereignty to which Gower appealed when he reached to the heavens as a wild man; here, the poet confirms the supremacy of God’s law. The proper articulation of the Bible provides aid to the dreamer in the time of his most desperate need. Articulating the concept of a divinely-sanctioned hierarchy relieves the dreamer’s sinful despair and longing for death.

Gower portrays this orderly utterance, the very act of prayer, as impossible for the rebel leader. The graculus cannot prevent his own sacrifice by appealing to God; on the contrary, “Since he had taken to warfare in the shape of such a monster (ymagine monstri), the deluded peasant’s prayers (vota) were ineffectual. Since everything the gods wished was carried out, his cursed lot (sors maledicta) came to an end because of his follies (furii).” These furii, more properly translated as “frenzies” or “madnesses,” of the graculus ensure that his maledicta sors, which can also be translated as evil oracle or cursed prophecy, come to an end. Since the frenzy of his speech contradicts the orderly
hierarchy of proper prayer, Tyler, who is finally referred to a *colonus*, or farmer, at this final moment, loses any chance for redemption. How could an animal or a sensual beast be capable of plumbing the *cordis ymago*? The very nature of the pseudo-linguistic, animalistic creatures makes them incapable of this form of expression, which requires rational insight as well as the ability to understand the orderliness of God’s creation. By analogizing the rebels’ refusal to recognize the absolute authority of England’s laws to a rejection of God’s supreme design, Gower suggests that the figurative bestiality of the *graculus* points towards the literal monstrousness in Tyler. The rebel leader cannot plumb the depths of his heart or soul to illuminate right and wrong, and this incapacity leads to bestial actions. In depicting the rebels as beasts, therefore, Gower argues that an animalistic incapacity to access God’s will underpins their cries for reform. Only a beast would wish to reform the laws endorsed by God’s hierarchy.

The *graculus’* death, in fact, is ensured by the “thoughts” of the heart of William Walworth, and the rebel leader has no rejoinder or defense against an act committed from the heart. “There was a certain Mayor William whom a righteous spirit deeply moved in the thoughts of his heart (*spiritus in mente cordis ad alta mouet*). This man held the sword by which that proud Jay fell, and he made peace with it. A single bird perished so that a thousand thousand lived again, and the god stopped up the raging mouths of the sea.”372 The *ymagine monstri* must be sacrificed to reestablish the rationality in the hearts

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372 Stockton 90. “Vnus erat Maior Guillelmus, quem probitatis/ Spiritus in mente cordis ad alta mouet/ Iste tenens gladium quo graculus ille superbus/ Corruit, ex eo pacificauit opus. Vna peribat auis, quo milia mille reviuunt, Et furibunda deus obstruit ora maris.”
and minds of men. When God’s *benedicta* hand sacrifices the *graculus*, the storm calms.\(^{373}\)

In depicting a voice that descends from heaven to confirm the judgment and punishment of the *graculus*, Gower emphasizes that the final execution of Tyler was endorsed by God, and this divine sanction justifies Gower’s own scathing treatment of the man: “A voice from on high announced the fact that God had put aside His wrath for the time being. From the midst of the sky there was an utterance in a divine voice, and it spoke this to our ears, saying, “Now the time is fitting for Me, and behold, I proclaim My judgment with mercy.”\(^{374}\) The dreamer listens as God’s words confirm Gower’s own judgment of Tyler; in fact, this divine intervention renders any suggestion that the poet’s words may divert from the Truth as impossible. As the poem concludes, God’s voice restores the natural relationship between the spoken sign and its rational meaning, and language returns to a nearly Edenic state in which form is content. Divine intervention, therefore, cures the monstrous metamorphosis of form, both bodily and linguistic, portrayed in the poem.

When the enthralling face of death dies, Gower confirms that the source of the rebels’ power has vanished. Gower created this mocking and mimicking bird to convey the strengths of the rebels’ persuasive language, which drew on the techniques of popular poetry as well as the law code of England, but the verbal contagion, which once had the power to distort the dreamer’s rational faculties, is neutralized the moment its carrier

\(^{373}\) Stockton 90, “O blessed hand, that so plentifully provided the sacrificial offering for which the sea’s tempest grew quiet and subdued!” – “*O beneficta manus, tam sufficiens holocaustum./ Que dedit, vnde maris victa procella silet!*” (Macaulay 73-74) Bk. I, Ch. 19, Ins.1883-1884.
\(^{374}\) Stockton 90. “*Vocis ab excelsio protulit ista sonus;/ Aeris e medio diuina voce relatum/ Tunc erat et nostris auribus ista refert:/ Dixit, ‘Adhuc modicum restat michi tempus, et ecce/ Differo iudicium cum pietate meum.’*” (Macaulay 74) Bk.I, Ch.19, Ins.1888-1892.
perishes. While the bird’s words may have resembled human discourse, they only shrouded a bestial irrationality, ungodliness, and deadliness. By mimicking the rebels’ idiom within his collage of textual references and linguistic styles, Gower ironically proves himself to be a magpie poet as well. Like the rebel leader, Gower uses all the sources at his disposal to pose a formal riposte to rebellious speech as well as compose his own mandate to the people of England. The poet, however, reverses the rebel leader’s linguistic technique in one vital way. The *graculus* presented himself as a power to be feared; on the contrary, Gower’s poem often appears desperate and hopeless as the plot unfolds. Only Gower’s impressive array of learned lines from classical and Biblical masterworks create a confident, self-assured subtext. At a formal level, Gower urges the reader to read beyond the surface claims of any linguistic effort to see what lurks or shines beneath, and he maintains that the abilities to reason, reflect, and penetrate the true meaning of a word separate men from beasts.
Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices

Chapter Four: Richard the Redeless, and Birds Giving Voice to Lancastrian England

I. Introduction:
In the eventful decades of Richard II’s tumultuous reign, animal speech provided a rich metaphor for Langland, Chaucer, and Gower as they evaluated the new political voices that were rising from parliament and the streets. Studying the use of animal speech in the literature of late fourteenth-century England reveals the political crises and outcries that troubled Richard II’s reign. A mouse may squeak; a bird may sing out; a jay may screech; in all these cases, the animal provides the key image for late-fourteenth authors who recognized the uncomfortable fact that men without a clear or customary position in the social hierarchies of fourteenth-century England were making daring and influential political statements.

The trope of the speaking animal turned out to be an equally useful device for poets discussing Richard II’s deposition in 1399. Just as Langland, Chaucer, and Gower used animal portraiture to demonstrate the startling capacity of hitherto unheard sectors of society to express their grievances and opinions before the king, dramatizing the new voices arising from the political commune, Commons, and discontented local communities in the fourteenth century, early fifteenth-century poets who were

375 In support of this idea, Helen Barr who argues, “All of the poems in the Piers legacy bear witness to the emergent voice of those literate members of society who may have been excluded from key positions of sacred or secular authority, but who were keen in this time of flux and unrest that their voices be heard. In this, they, like Piers, take their place amongst the plethora of political poems which this increasingly literate age produced” (Barr, Piers Plowman Tradition 7).
376 See David Rollinson in A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England’s Long Social Revolution, 1066-1649 where he discusses the related terminology for articulating community and common language in the fourteenth century in his chapters, “The formation of a constitutional landscape, c.1159-1327” (63-109) and “the power of a common language” (119-84), arguing, “The word ‘commonalty’
sympathetic to the Lancastrian political agenda fashioned animal imagery to spread the message that Henry Bolingbroke had restored the voice of people.\textsuperscript{377} According to the anonymous poet of \textit{Richard the Redeless}, Ricardian favoritism and tyranny had silenced virtuous men, and the commune would be heard again under the reign of Henry IV. And so while fourteenth-century poets discovered that animal speech could symbolize and elucidate the vocal quality of men who were making novel contributions to political discourse, this fifteenth-century poet argued that unnaturally smothered, bird-like voices were once more issuing forth into the public forum. According to the \textit{Richard} poet, pleas and proposals could be heard again as Henry IV restored the courts and parliament, which Richard II and his retinue had undermined with their unresponsive policies and abusive behavior.

To remind readers of the injustices and indignities suffered under Richard II, the \textit{Richard} poet also employs animal symbolism to satirize a different kind of political creature, a dispossessed king and his discarded retinue. \textit{Richard the Redeless}, written around the time of Richard’s deposition in 1399,\textsuperscript{378} animates the king’s heraldic symbol

\textsuperscript{377} See Gwilym Dodd, “Changing Perspectives: Parliament, Poetry and the ‘Civil Service’ under Richard II and Henry IV,” \textit{Parliamentary History} 25.3 (2006): 318-19, in which he notes, “Firstly, in his bid for power Henry IV had deliberately set out to promote himself as a monarch who enjoyed the popular support and consent of the people. This inevitably had consequences for contemporary perceptions of parliament.”

\textsuperscript{378} Barr argues that the poem was written at least three months after the accession of Henry IV: “Richard was written later than Skeat, or Day and Steele, realized. The poem discusses issues arising from events during the reign of Richard II (1377-99). A reference to the Cirencester uprising in 1399-1400 (see not to ll.17) shows the poem was written at least three months after the accession of Henry IV”(Barr, \textit{Piers Plowman Tradition} 16). James M. Dean dates the work at c.1400 saying, “In the troubled moment after Henry of Lancaster’s deposition of Richard II, an unknown poet offered Richard retrospective – perhaps even posthumous – advice, composing, at the same time, a mirror for prince…The author expects that the advice he provides in his poetic treatise will help guide the kingdom in future years”(James M. Dean, \textit{Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger} (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000)
of the white hart to denounce Richard as an irresponsible, selfish despot. Harts rampage a visionary version of the English countryside and remind readers of Richard’s past abuses. As has been well attested, the author invests Richard’s heraldic emblem with attributes taken from bestiaries, creating a hybrid symbol that rests somewhere between a social and poetic signifier. Ascribing actions and words to the animal emblems of powerful men was a popular literary technique, and Richard’s heraldic animals, which were once markers of prestige, transform into risible monsters in the poetic world of Richard the Redeless. By converting emblems like the eagle and the hart into animal characters, the poet inscribes new critical meanings to eminent symbols of political power. In Richard’s elaborate array of animal images that evoke heraldry, bestiaries, and allegorical symbolism, one dominant political argument arises: the avian imagery associated with Henry IV promises the English people a bold new chance at protesting their economic hardships, pleading judiciary cases, presenting their constituents’ views in Parliament, and, perhaps most importantly for the Lancastrian poet, decrying the abuses of Richard II and his followers. The idealized figure of the Lancastrian eagle emphasizes the new

7) It is also worth noting that Barr later, in 2001’s Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England, revises the dating of the poem, asserting that it might have been written before Richard’s deposition: “In Passus I of Richard the narrator claims that he does not know whether Richard will be king again and writes him this book to ‘wissen him better’ (I.31). Throughout, the time references are unclear and inconsistent”(Barr, Socioliterary Practice 78). 379 On this point, Barr comments, “The poet capitalizes on the fact that the badges are all animals and describes recent events in a mode of narration close in tenor to beast fable. Plentiful use is made of the characteristic behavior of animals recorded in bestiaries: for instance, it is the nature of deer to feed on adders, but Richard and his deer pervert this ordinance by attacking instead a horse, bear and swan and thus bring about their own destruction (III.13-36). Throughout the poem, there are vignettes, proverbial phrases, uses of figurative language, and explicit statements which show how Henry, in contrast to Richard, complies with natural law”(Barr, Piers Plowman Tradition 20). Frank Grady also remarks on the popularity of the heraldic symbolism in the poetry of “The Generation of 1399,” writing “To judge by the evidence of contemporary poetry, heraldic allegory was all the rage in the last years of Richard II’s reign. In several poems of the era the duke of Gloucester, the earl of Arundel, and the earl of Warwick – Richard’s antagonists in 1388 and his victims in 1397 – are referred to by their respective cognizances of the Swan, the Horse, and the Bear”(Frank Grady, “The Generation of 1399,” The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England, eds. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002) 202).
government’s embrace of an oral and aural culture in which fledgling citizens’ “bills,” a dynamic homonymic pun, could communicate to parliament and the king. The open singing of birds promises a future in which political speech leads to its rational and natural object, social justice. In contrast to the avian symbolism associated with Henry, the hart livery of Richard II reminds readers of the oppressive silence that his retinue once inflicted upon the land by robbing, over-taxing, and abusing the common people while forcibly stifling their ability to voice any discontent.  

II. Lancastrian birds and vocal politics

At first glance, the poet’s use of animal imagery appears somewhat illogical and hodgepodge. The predominant tendency of the poet to compare Richard and his men to harts and Henry to birds of various kinds (particularly the eagle and the falcon) is complicated by the facts that Henry is at one point also the greyhound and one of the most illuminating passages in the work compares both kings to the same species of bird,  

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380 At 1.9-19 and 1.58-9, the poet lists Richard’s various abuses, and he emphasizes the fact that the king taxed the people unfairly while his men threatened the populace with violence. This combination of extortion and fear mongering angers the narrator.  
381 Richard 2.113. In an intriguing discussion on the significance of the greyhound, Dorothy Yamamoto refers to chroniclers, like Jean Froissart and Adam of Usk, who dramatize the deposition by relating tales about Richard’s faithful greyhound switching its allegiance to Henry IV. (See Froissart vi.369; The Chronicle of Adam of Usk 1377-1421, ed. and trans. C. Given-Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 86.) In her commentary on these stories, Yamamoto observes, “The greyhound may well have been one of Richard’s badges, along with the more familiar white hart…However, the heraldic greyhound was more securely identified with Bolingbroke, who, as we saw, appears in this role in [Richard the Redeless]” (Yamamoto 91-93). Moreover, in considering the possible ramifications in terming Henry a greyhound, it is useful to remember that the Gesta Romanorum includes a story where “a faithful greyhound” saves a child from a serpent. (See Early English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum, ed. Sidney J.H. Heritage (London: EETS N. Trübner and Co., 1879) 98-100.) The Richard-poet portrays Henry as a hunting falcon later in the poem, and the traditional pairing of the hunting dog and bird (as shown in the Gesta Romanorum) makes his decision to combine the image of the greyhound with the avian imagery associated with Henry throughout the rest of the poem comprehensible. The greyhound and the falcon work together to hunt down Ricardian loyalists, and they symbolize the rectitude of Henry’s claim over his Ricardian prey.
the partridge. In reviewing the symbolism suggested by these different species, however, a consistent argument concerning the righteousness of Henry’s responsive approach to governance arises. In the potentially confusing fable of the partridges, for example, the two kings are analogized to competing female birds, one the natural mother of a nest of chicks and the other a thief.

Off all billid breddis that the bough spareth,
The propirté of partriche to preise me lustith,
That in the comere seson whan sittinge nyeth,
That ich foule with his fere folwith his kynde,
This brid by a bank bildith his nest,
And heipeth his eiren, and hetith hem after.
And whane the dame hath ydo that to the dede longith,
And hopith for to hacche or hervest begynne,
Thanke cometh ther a congioun [villain] with a grey cote,
As not of his nolle as he the nest made,
Another proud partriche, and precyth to the nest,
And prevylich pirith till the dame passé,
And sesith on hir sete with hir sifte plumes,
And hoveth the eyren that the hue laide,
And with hir corps kevereth hem, till that they kenne,
And fostrith and fodith till fedris schewe,

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382 Helen Barr comments on this strange amalgam on bird images, “In the section describing the partridge, where poet comes close to tripping himself up over his own analogy, the poet tries to suggest that Richard was an unnatural mother of his children, usurping the place of their natural parent” (Helen Barr, “The Treatment of Natural Law in Richard the Redeless and Mum the Sothsegger,” Leeds Studies in English 23 (1992): 58).
And cotis of kynde hem kevere all aboughte.
But as sone as they styffé and that they steppe kunne,
Than cometh and crieth hir owen kynde dame,
And they folwith the vois at the frist note,
And leveth the lurker that hem er ladde,
For the schrewe schrapid to selde for her wombis,
That her lendys were lene and leved with hunger.
But than the dewe dineth hem swythe,
And fosstrith hem for the till they fle kunne."

Here, the author draws on bestiary lore that the partridge is a “perverted creature” who will “steal eggs of another female…and in spite of the cheat she does not get any good of it. For, when the young are hatched and hear the call of their real mother, they instinctively run away from the one who is brooding them and return to one who laid them.” In the context of the poem’s exemplum, Henry is the “kynde dame,” or natural mother, while Richard is the rapacious villain, or “congioun with a grey cote.” By designating Henry as the true mother of the chicks, the poet contends that the new monarch has assumed his natural role as leader to the English people. Helen Barr explains, “Almost always in Richard and Mum, ‘kynde,’ whether as a noun or an adjective, refers to the natural order or to properties innate in a species of nature.” Henry’s “true maternity,” or innate claim to the throne, is proven when the poet again uses “kynde” to describe the “cotis” of the chicks. Despite the presence of the false mother, the chicks’ “proper or natural” plumage reveals their kinship to the authentic

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385 | Barr, “Natural Law” 55.
mother Henry. This image of the “natural coat” resonates with the rest of the poem given Richard’s tactic of dispersing livery to his followers, and the poet argues here that the “natural coat” of the Lancastrians will become visible despite any efforts to hide it behind false feathers.

The poet expands upon this partridge allegory in devising the compelling argument that Henry’s receptive approach to leadership confirms his rightful claim to the English throne. As the just ruler, he listens to the people. Henry is the bird whose voice incites love and loyalty in her brood, so much so that the chicks “folwith the vois at the frist note,” proving that Richard, and not Henry, was the usurper. The voice of young Richard never fostered devotion in the hearts of his people, and Henry demonstrates an intrinsic ability to evoke supportive words and affectionate cries from the community. As in the hart and bird imagery that filters through the poem, this partridge allegory aligns Henry with liberated, natural communication and Richard with a stony silence.

In this avian explanation of the vocal quality that decides true and false motherhood, or true and false sovereignty, the poet contends that natural kingship fosters an honest, essentially instinctual, form of expression in the people, and he even implies that Henry is the biological parent of the English people due to the positive reaction his words, policies, and commands evoke in the populace. This claim regarding the correct tenor of political discourse elaborates upon the poet’s interest in the concepts of natural

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386 Along the same lines, Helen Barr argues that the poet uses this partridge analogy to emphasize Henry’s right to the throne, and she remarks upon the legal terminology associated with the “kynde” partridge. According to Barr, the terms ‘entrid’ (3.69) and ‘cometh and crieth’ (3.55) signify legal situations in which a rightful owner makes an official claim to his land. (See Helen Barr, Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994) 146-48.) The poet uses this combination of legal terminology and bestiary imagery to justify and naturalize Henry’s usurpation.
law and natural hierarchy that motivate the animalistic approach in the poem as a whole. As Barr has argued,

What links together the various episodes of Richard is an ethical vision based on the principle that if human beings follow reason rather than will, then they will behave in accordance with the rational principle discernible in all natural organisms and in the natural world as a whole. If individuals follow the principles of natural reason, then the state will also function harmoniously. It is a vision based ultimately on ideas of natural law.  

According to Barr’s view, animals provide an apt metaphor for discussing “the rational principle discernible in all natural organisms,” including the healthy body politic, because they are thought to respond instinctively to the harmonious laws of nature. An animal acting unnaturally, like a “perverted” partridge stealing another bird’s eggs in the lines above, therefore suggests that the rational and ethical underpinnings of nature’s domain have been abandoned. In a complementary reading to Barr’s excellent analysis of the poem’s alignment of an ethical concern for England’s plight under the reign of Richard II and the concept of a natural law, I argue that the anonymous poet portrays Henry’s acts of listening to the voices and opinions of the people as the rational, ethical behavior that proves Henry to be the natural leader of the commonwealth. To emphasize Henry’s aural sensitivity to the cries of the people, the poet denounces Richard’s unfortunate tendency to base decisions on wealth, rank, or visual cues, such as livery and fashion. The bird

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387 Barr discusses the poem’s interpretation of natural law in detail in her article, “The Treatment of Natural Law in Richard the Redeless and Mum the Sothsegger” where she gives several definitions and theories of natural law including the Roman Ulpian’s definition: “Natural law is a complex concept but at the root of all theories concerned with it is a definition formulated by the Roman jurist Ulpian: “ius natural est quod natura Omnia animalia docuit. [natural law is what nature has taught animals.]”(Barr “Natural Law” 48). For more on different definitions of natural law, see Barr, “Natural Law” 48-53.

388 ibid.
imagery associated with Henry throughout the poem identifies this king with auditory culture, and he soars forth as a nurturer who motivates the populace to sing, talk, and present their bills to the public. It is Henry’s interest in the common people’s voices that proves his rationality, unlike the poem’s obstinate, willful Richard who only listens to his well-dressed favorites, and the poet maintains that the receptive Lancastrian approach vindicates the usurpation. This sustained avian allegory seeks to render the vociferous propaganda of Henry IV’s reign as natural and legitimate.389

In glossing the bestiary fable of the two partridges, the narrator compares the “kynde” partridge to another avian version of Henry; the new king becomes an Eagle who enters England crying to his “kynde briddis,” or natural followers, assuming his lofty position in the country’s hierarchy as the creature who flies highest in the land. In On the Property of Things, the bestiarist Bartholomaeus Anglicus writes, “þe egle duelliþ siker and sauf in most hye place...Also þe egle is a foule þat sielde sittiþ abroode and sielde haþ brides and noryschþ and fedþ hire briddes.”390 Henry embodies several different species of birds as the poet describes distinct aspects of Henry’s behavior – he may be the nurturing mother or the ascendant ruler – but in every permutation, Henry

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389 The only suggestion that Henry’s rule may not be as “kynde” as the Lancastrian poet attests it to be is the double-edged symbolism of the partridge. In the logic of this bestiary analogy, Henry is also a “perverted” bird with the capacity to steal chicks. Barr also notes this problem with the partridge (Barr, Signes and Sothe 55).

390 See Anglicus Bartholomaeus, De Proprietatibus Rerum, trans. John Trevisa as On the Properties of Natural Things, ed. M. C. Seymour et al, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) I.603-04. Dorothy Yamamoto also provides a fascinating commentary on the lofty position of the eagle within the context of heraldry and personal badges; she notices that Richard (as well as Henry) claimed the eagle as his own. Yamamoto writes, “Eagles, in turn, gained extra prestige from their association with the Holy Roman Emperor, who ‘berith egle in token that he is hede and pryncypall of all men, as she is shefe and pryncypall of all byrdes’ [citing from Nicholas Upton’s De studio military, Bodl. MS Eng. Misc. d. 227, fo. 158 (v)](Yamamoto 80), and she notices, “Eagles appear upon Richard II’s robes in the Wilton Diptych”(Yamamoto 80, fn.25).
resembles this all-seeing, vigilant, and nourishing eagle.\textsuperscript{391} Like the partridge, the Eagle Henry nourishes his “kynde” flock by crying and calling out to them,\textsuperscript{392} and the birds hurry from the briars to complain of the abuses that they have suffered.

But the nedy nestlingis, what they the note herde,

Of the hende Egle, the heyer of hem all,

Their busked from the busches and breris that hem noyed,

And burnished her beekis and bent to-him-wardis,

And folowid him fersly to fighte for the wrongis;

They bablid with her billis, how thei bete were,

And tenyd with twiggis two and twenty yeris.\textsuperscript{393}

The “nestlingis” sing forth after suffering through the twenty-two years of Richard’s reign, and they burnish their beaks and bend towards the Eagle. In this perceptive image, the flocking birds use their mouths to fight against the wrongs of the land, and the poet demonstrates the close relationship between public outcry and political change. By turning their bills towards Henry’s galvanizing call to arms, the birds endorse the coup and the policies of the new regime.

As multiple birds (and bird species) call out the new word, the poet subtly indicates Henry’s wide influence by mentioning his impact on the heraldic emblems of “nobles executed, murdered or exiled in 1397 because of their complicity in events of

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{The only drawback in this otherwise positive eagle imagery is that Bartholomaeus specifies that the eagle is a hunter: “he[o] fleþ hirjest vpward and comeþ sodeynliche dounward whanne sche seþ a careyne oþir pray þat he[o] desirþ” (vol.1, 603-04). The reader may wonder who or what acts as the eagle’s “prey.” Like the image of the falcon/eagle hunting the kites, which I discuss below, this image suggests that the eagle (or Henry) must kill in order to nourish his flock. It implies that a “vocal and responsive government” comes at a price, and I would argue that the poet shows some awareness that the slaughter of the opposing Ricardian forces is that price.}
\footnote{“Herdist thou not with eeris how that I er telde/ How the Egle in the est entrid his owen,/ And cried and clepid after his owen kynde briddis” (Richard 3.68-72).}
\footnote{Richard 3.73-79.}
\end{footnotes}
1388 at the Merciless Parliament.”

Arundel’s horse, Gloucester’s swan, and Warwick’s bear transform due to Henry’s clarion cry, and the eagle becomes the savior of every beast in the kingdom. As various species break “out of bondage,” the heraldic creatures lament past abuses in distinctively animalistic, hence natural, ways, legitimizing the complaints hurled at Richard. In the cases of Arundel and Gloucester who have already been murdered, their supporters are able to mourn and articulate their grief. The “swymmers,” or water fowl, sigh over the swan’s death, and this vocal expression may remind readers that the “sweetness of music” that usually pours from the swan’s neck has been replaced with a sad issuance of air. These sighing swans are joined by “faire fowle...hevy for the hirte that the hors hadde.” Again, the poet signals that birds, symbols of the populace’s voice, may eulogize the passing of Arundel once the unnatural Ricardians flee.

For Warwick, the bear is released from banishment, and the creature seems almost bird-like in his emancipation.

To kepe the croune, as croncle tellith.

He blythid the beere and his bond braste,

And lethe him go at large, to lepe where he wolde.

But those all the berlingis brast out at ones,

Dean explains, “The horse is the Earl of Arundel, Richard Fitzalan, beheaded on Tower Hill, whose badge was a white horse…the swan is Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, murdered at Calais under the ostensible protection of Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk; and the bear is Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, exiled to the Isle of Man, whose badge was the black bear” (James M. Dean, Notes to Passus Tercius in Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000) 61). Than folwid they her fre fader, as good faith wolde, That he hem fede shulde and fostre forther, And bringe hem out of bondage that they were brought inne” (Richard 3.83-5).

“Thanne sighed the swymmers, for the swan failed, And folwid this faucon thoru feldus and tounes” (Richard 3.86-7).

White 118.

“With many faire fowle, though they feynte were, And hevy for the hirte that the hors hadde” (Richard 3.88-9).
As fayne at the foule that flieth on the skyes
That Bosse was unbounde and brouute to his owen.
They gaderid hem togedir on a grette roughte,
To helpe the heeris that had many wrongis;
They gaglide forth on the grene, for they greved were
That her frendis were falle thoru felouns castis.399

The poet evokes the authority of historical chronicles to legitimize his account of Henry freeing the bear as he seized the crown. The support of the bear ensures the future of the monarchy, and the poet depicts Warwick’s cooperation by alluding to a subtle alteration in ursine nature. Warwick’s followers, or bear cubs, run as eagerly as birds that fly in the skies: “But tho all the berlinigs brast out at ones,/ As fayne as the foule that flieth on the skyes.” The image of bears so happy that they resemble flying birds exudes a fantastical charm, but it also does the serious symbolic work of conveying the productive political alliance between the factions of Lancaster and Warwick. In addition to almost flying, the narrator relates that the bears gathered together in a great company and “gaglide,” or cackled, their grievances. The sound of this “gagelen” even evokes noisy geese.400 Like birds, the bears find their own distinctive voices due to Henry’s influence, and the rhetoric of complaint is naturalized once again as wild creatures burst from their bonds.401

In depicting the harts’ subjugation of the swans, horses, and caged bears as “clearly against kynde,” the poet emphasizes that Richard overturned the natural order of

399 Richard 3.93-102
400 MED: gagelen (v.) Also gagle, (error) glagle. “Of a goose: to cackle; -- also of birds [quot.: c1475]; of persons: ~ on, to jeer at (sb.))”
401 Throughout Richard, caged animals demonstrate the travesty of silencing subjects and true counselors. Helen Barr has remarked, “the encouragement of young counselors at court in preference to stalwart sages, is likened to a cow hopping in a cage (R.III.262)”(Barr, “Natural Law” 56). Using this absurd image, the poet mocks the young courtiers in Richard’s court who offered the king bad advice on important matters of the realm.
England when he perpetrated violence against his political enemies. In ordering executions and banishment, the king demonstrated that his regime had moved beyond any rational approach to governance, opting instead for an aggressive isolationism with the royal will and pet advisors dictating every policy. The poet alters, adapts, and even reverses certain bestiary accounts to dramatize Richard’s rejection of a clearheaded political strategy, as well as Henry’s ability to surpass and supplant the fallen king. Bestiaries usually emphasize the hart’s holy nature by describing its ongoing rivalry with the adder, which is analogized to a Christian’s combat with sin. When Richard’s harts attack bears and other beasts in Richard the Redeless, they abandon their time-honored role in the kingdom’s political hierarchy of counteracting the venom of the enemy.

This is clerlie hir kynde, coltis nat to greve,
Ne to hurlle with haras, ne hors well atamed,
Ne to stryve with swan, though it sholle werre,
Ne to bayten on the bere, ne bynde him nother,
Ne to wilne to woo that were hem ny sibbe,
Ne to liste for to loke that her alie bledde;
This was ageins kynde, as clerkis me tolde

Anaphora combines with alliteration to enumerate the myriad misdeeds of unnatural harts that “hurlle with haras,” “stryve with swan,” “bayten on the bere,” as well as wish

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402 The Richard-poet mentions this lore at lines 3.17-24, “Her kynde is to kevere if they cache myghth/Adders that harmen alle hende bestis:/ Thoru busschis and bromes this beste, of his kynde,/ Secheth and sercheth tho schrewed wormes/ That steloth on the stedis to stynge hem to deth./ And whanne it happeth the herte to hente the edder,/ He putyth him to pyn, as his pray asketh.” Also, see fn.57. In The Book of Beasts, the bestiarist writes, “Also, after snuffing up the devil-snake, i.e. after the perpetration of sin, they fun with Confession to Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the true fountain, and, drinking the precepts laid down by him, our Christians are renovated – the Old Age of Sin having been shed” (White 38-39). Susan Crane has also remarked on the fact that none of the poem’s hart are white like Richard’s emblem – this absence of “white” from the poem may intone the fact that Richard’s harts weren’t pure or holy.

403 Richard 3.26-32.
misfortune upon their kin and bleed their allies. These aggressive actions contradict the role that an attentive king would play in the idealized kingdom suggested by natural law. Rather than harangue his subjects, a natural king would foster harmony in all political relationships. An ecosystem or healthy body thrives when all of its constituent parts work together, and a government should pursue analogous synchronicity. By bookending this list of offenses with the concept of “kynde,” the poet contains Richard’s unnatural acts within this larger conceptual framework of natural law, or a law motivated by the pursuit of rational concord. Henry’s eagle seeks to restore this ideal.

The eagle frees the swans and bears to express themselves, but the bird’s most spectacular rescue liberates the harts’ own kin, the “rascaile” or young deer. In indulging the misbehavior of the fully-grown harts, or the fully-initiated retainers, Richard only succeeded in turning younger and weaker subjects against him. While the “rascaile” might have grown into loyal subjects, willing to wear the antlers of Richard’s livery, suppression and starvation prompted them to follow the eagle Henry instead. Like the false partridge who neglected to feed the chicks, the harts fail to heed cries of hunger from their own calves. In this context, ignoring the people’s pleas is tantamount to animals willfully starving their own offspring, and the poet visualizes Richard’s young deer roaring with hunger:

On rascaile that rorid with ribbis so lene,
For faughte of her fode and flateris stelen,
And evere with here wylis and wast ofte they hem annoyed,
That povere hem pricked full preyliche to pleyne,
But where, they ne wyste ne ho it wolde amend.
Thus ye derid hem unduly with droppis of anger,
And stonyed hem with stormes that stynted nevere,
But plucked and pulled hem anon to the skynnes,
That the fresinge frost freted to here hertis.
So whanne youre hauntelere-dere where all ytaken,
Was non of the rasskayle aredy full growe
To bere ony breme heed, as a best aughte,
So wyntris wedir hem wessh with the snowis,
With many derke mystis that maddid her eyne.
For well mowe ye wyttyn and so mowe we all,
That harde is the somer ther sonne schynesth nevere.
Ye fostrid and fodid a fewe of the best,
And leyde on hem lordschipe a l
eyne upon other,
And bereved the raskall that rith wolde their hadde,
And knoewe not the caris ne cursis that walkyd. 404

As the “rascaile” cry out due to their “ribbis so lene,” this passage demonstrates that Richard tormented the land when he failed to distinguish his subjects’ helpless wails from ambitious flattery. In describing the king’s deafness, the poet exploits alliterative meter to accentuate the egregiousness of Richard’s damaging indifference to sound. In the line, “That the fresinge frost freted to here hertis,” for example, the repeated “f” of the “freezing frost that frets” 405 articulates pain in triplicate, and the twice-spoken “h” on “here hertis” implies a troubling reflexive experience in which the harts’ hearts may be at

404 Richard 2.119-38.
405 MED: frēten (v.(1)) 1b Fig. To consume, swallow up; destroy.
stake. Similarly, the sibilance of subjects being “stoned by storms that never stopped” seems too obvious for any king to ignore. The vivid resonance of this poetic form stresses why Richard’s error is unforgiveable. By only fostering a few, the king devastates the species, ignoring the “caris” and “cursis” of those walk through the land unheeded, hurting, and hungry. If a proper, “kynde” kingdom most resembles nature in perfect harmony, then the Ricardian government passes through the land like a raging tempest, stoning, plucking, and pulling the skins of its vulnerable citizens with no discrimination whatsoever.

In response to this unnatural devastation, the eagle arrives to nurture and feed those barely surviving; this bird acts like the “kynde” mother in the partridge tale. But in this case, the eagle crosses the species-divide to provide care for the beleaguered “raskalls.”

This be the rotus youre raskall endured,
Tyll the blessed bredd brodid his wyngis
To covere hem from colde, as his kynde wolde.
Rith as the hous-hennes upon londe hacchen
And cherichen her chekonys fro chele of the winter,
Ryth so the hende Egle to eyere of hem all,
Hasteh him in hervest to hovyn his bryddis,
And besith him basely to breden hem feedrin,
Tyll her fre fedris be fulliche ypynned,
That they have wynge at her wyll to wonne upon hille;
For venym on the valeye hadde foule with hem fare,
Eagles don’t nurture other species’ offspring in the bestiaries, but this bird defies conventional “eagle nature” to “covere hem from colde” and shield the “raskell” from the storm. Here, the “blessed bredd” plays the role of the hart who is, in fact, known for protecting his young fawns in the bestiary tradition. As one bestiary reports about stags, “Nor do they bring forth their babies just anywhere, but they hide them with tender care, and, having tucked them up in some deep shrubbery or undergrowth, they admonish them with a stamp of the foot to keep hidden.” This reversal of the bestiary lore both empties the image of the hart of its symbolic significance and elevates the prestige of the eagle, so much so that the distinction between each animal’s natural and unnatural behavior becomes increasingly ambiguous as the two creatures interact and switch key traits. Stags are rendered wholly evil and “unkynede,” while the eagle takes on all the positive attributes of both species.

Even though the poet invokes natural law to legitimize Henry’s claim to the throne throughout the majority of Richard the Redeless, he also flouts bestiary tradition when defending the Lancastrian coup. In this passage, he explains away the strange image of an eagle “covering” a rascal by subtly shifting the species-type of the rascal population until the young deer appear avian. First, the poet compares the eagle to “hous-hennes” and the rascals to “chekonys” in an explanatory metaphor, seeking to naturalize and legitimize his eccentric adaptation of bestiary tradition by alluding to the behavior of birds. In the following lines, however, the poet explains, “Ryth so the hende Egle the eyere of hem all./ Hasteth him in hervest to hovyn his bryddis.” Who are these bryddis?

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406 Richard 2.140-51.
407 Susan Crane noticed the strangeness of this image in the notes to my last draft of this chapter.
408 White 39.
At first glance, it seems as though the rascals have suddenly transformed into “bryddis” under Henry’s care; has he “breden hem feedrin,” or mantled them with feathers, to replace the skins that they lost in winter? In another fantastic reworking of bestiary lore, the rascals seem to exchange their skins for feathers, perhaps symbolizing the act of the English people changing their allegiance and their livery in favor of Henry’s eagle. This transformation recalls Warwick’s bears who burst from their cages like freed birds; throughout the poem, Henry’s allies change into creatures who may join his flock.

This confusion between the inherent “natures” of stags and eagles lingers even after the “fre fedris be fulliche ypynned [fledged]” upon creatures who should naturally sprout antlers. It is the eagle, and not the hart, who finally removes “venym” from the land. The Ricardian hart loses the mastery of snakes attributed to stags in bestiaries, and the eagle takes over this role, supplanting every one of the stag’s natural duties. As a result of this expurgation, the poet argues that “truth” returns to the land. Skeat translates the confusing phrase, “Tyll trouthe the treacle telde somme her sothes,” as “Till Truth, the remedy (for slander), told her true tales to some,” and it would seem that the appearance of allegorical “Truth” validates the reversals and strange renderings of bestiary tradition. In choosing to adapt bestiary lore and redefine “kynde” behavior in several different species, truth emerges. Changing documented facts about the natural world in a poem that contends that the state should accord with “natural law” may undermine the poet’s own argument, but it also emphasizes his belief that signs of all

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409 The image of the baby partridge’s “cotis of kynde” underlying false feathers seems relevant here. But as an alternative reading, the line “hasteth him in hervest” could suggest that the eagle mantled his birds in the autumn before Richard’s harsh winter. Perhaps Henry had already “brooded over” and “mantled his birds with feathers” in preparation for the usurpation; by dressing his own forces, he readied himself to “cover” the rascals as well.

410 Dean 58.
kinds should be employed to spread “truth” and fight against Ricardian slander. Richard’s
retainers abused the English people by misusing the king’s “sign” and badge, and the
poet demonstrates a similar, if ironic, willingness to transmogrify imagery and
symbolism in his effort to restore truth to the land. In Richard the Redeless, a sign is
“natural” or “kynde” if it promulgates a rational, receptive, and, most of all, Lancastrian
approach to governance, not if it follows the precise definitions of naturalist texts like
bestiaries. The poet redefines “kynde” to accord with the Lancastrian project of endorsing
Henry’s claim that all of his actions resulted from listening to the voices and opinions of
the people. (Despite the poet’s attempt to justify the Lancastrians, however, Henry is only
listening to the pleas of anti-Ricardian citizens; as Skeat perceptively translates, “Truth
only tells her true tales to some.”) To put this idea in the context of Barr’s “natural law,”
the poet endorses Henry’s reign as rational, hence natural, because the new king claims to
follow the will of the people rather than his own will. According to this line of reasoning,
Henry’s decision to usurp the throne was the proper, natural reaction of a leader who
heard the people’s cries for help. It is the “truth” gleaned from Henry’s receptivity to and
encouragement of a vocal, auditory culture that validates every outlandish definition and
redefinition of “kynde” animal behavior.

The poet transforms language as well as natural imagery to depict Henry’s
widespread endeavor to liberate the people’s tongues so that they could sing out as freely
as birds. In turning again to lines 3.36 and 3.78, I wish to underline the way that the poet
connects the natural sounds issuing from birds’ bills to the presentation of bills in legal
proceedings and parliament in one of the poem’s many puns. At the beginning of the
bestiary-inflected account of the two partridges, the poet declares, “Off all billid breddis
that the bough spareth./ The propirte of partriche to preise me lustith,“⁴¹¹ specifying that
the tale will address one type of billed bird. Here, the narrator refers specifically to the
beak of the creature before beginning a story that emphasizes the importance of
recognizing a natural and nurturing voice. This tenuous connection gains semantic
importance when the image of a bird’s bill reappears at the crucial moment when the
nestlings ally themselves with Henry IV in the gloss on the partridge narrative: “And
burnisched her beekis and bent to-him-wardis,/ And folowid him fersly to fighte for the
wrongis;/ They bablid with her billis, how thei bete were.”⁴¹² As the birds turn their beaks
towards the Eagle Henry, they babble with their bills about how they were beaten by
Richard’s men. The seemingly animalistic attribute of the “bill,” in fact, alludes to a legal
mode of complaint at the very moment when the avian Henry returns vocality to political
life. In repeating the polysemous term “bill” when referring to the failures in the
Ricardian justice system later in the poem, the Richard poet signifies the centrality of
“bills,” that is natural mouthpieces as well as commoners’ legal bills of complaint, to the
Lancastrian government.

In scenes detailing the Ricardian rejection of commoners’ bills and requests for
justice, the poet tacitly highlights the righteousness in Henry’s promotion of a natural law
in which the sovereign responds to his people. In support of this idea, Matthew Giancarlo
has remarked on “the poem’s consistent concern with proper pleading and showing – and
with the legal procedures of right representation,”⁴¹³ and Gwylim Dodd argues that the
author of Richard the Redeless saw “parliament, and specifically the Commons, as the
kingdom's main hope for political, social and (in this case particularly) moral

⁴¹¹ Richard 3.36
⁴¹² Richard 3.76-78.
⁴¹³ Giancarlo, Parliament 234.
The status of “bills,” therefore, takes on a new important shade of political meaning once the poet begins reviewing the remarkable deafness of Ricardian loyalists. In ignoring the plight of the common man, these callous Ricardian courtiers emphasize the necessity of the leader who will attend to every bird, bill, and complainant.

In describing the abuses of Richard’s noblemen and deputies when riding through the countryside, the poet makes special mention of their disinclination to hear any bills or legal complaints of poor people who were unable to afford bribes:

Whanne reales remeveth and ridith thoru tounes,
And carieth overe contré ther communes dwelleth,
To preson the pillourz that overe the pore rennet;
For that evene in her weye if they well ride.
But yit ther is a foule faughte that I fynde ofte:
They prien aftter presentis or pleyntis ben yclepid,
And abateth all the billis of tho that noughth bringith
And ho-so grucche or grone ageins her grette willes
May lese her lyff lightly and no lesse weddis.  

The portrait of this “foule faughte [foul fault]” of the Ricardian justice system that tolerates officers who demand presents and “cancel all the legal accusations [billis] of those who bring nothing” comes under scrutiny, and the poet also denounces the Ricardian government’s disinterest in those who “grucche” or “grone,” implying that even the most lowborn and rancorous speech should be heard in the public forum. This willful disregard for the voices of the petitioners and plaintiffs incapable of buying justice

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414 Dodd, “Changing Perspectives” 302, 318.
415 Richard 3.301-309.
416 Dean 44.
provokes comment from one of the poem’s readers; James M. Dean notes that the marginalia of the Cambridge University Library MS L.l.iv.14, fols. 107b-119b manuscript reads “maytenance” next to line 309, which reads “May lese her lyff lightly and no lesse weddis.” In linking maintenance with the protest that “people will lose their lives all too easily and that pledges will do them no good,” the marginal note blames Richard’s men for these miscarriages of justice. Richard maintained a personal army of sworn swords, and Barr elaborates, “Crucial in Richard’s promulgation of his personal sign of the white hart was the distribution in the form of livery badges to his retainers.” In denoting loss of life and futile pledges as the consequences of Richard’s ill-administered “maytenance” practices, the reader marks his displeasure with Richard’s cronyism; similarly, the poet expresses a wish to “merke meytenourz with maces ichonne,” beating and ruining the arrogant men. In favoring a few chosen nobles over the rest of population, Richard denied humble men and women their natural right to present legitimate opinions and complaints in public.

Another key moment in the poem’s denunciation of Richard’s restriction on petitions, pleas, and “babble” comes in the description of an inoperative Ricardian

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417 Dean 69, note to line 309.
418 Dean 68, note to like 268.
419 Barr, Sociopolitical 65. Also Dean notes on p.55, “In 1390 Parliament passed the Statute of Livery and Maintenance outlawing private armies and their uniforms,” and he refers to Strohm’s discussion on the social implications of this statute in Strohm, Social Chaucer 18-19. On page 20, Strohm emphasizes that the distribution on livery and the practice of maintenance were not established on personal oaths as in earlier forms of fealty. He writes, “Lacking a secure basis for reward through land tenure, lacking the spiritual authority of the sworn oath, dependent on more subjective and less predictable perceptions of personal advantage, and frankly temporary in nature, these new association of lords and followers could not have rivaled in intensity those feudal bonds formed in simpler, agrarian times.” While it would have been impossible for Henry IV to reestablish the practice of sworn oaths, the post-deposition Lancastrian rhetoric emphasizing Henry’s sensitivity to aural/oral pleas could be invoking a simpler, past, and traditional practices of fealty.

420 As Susan Crane has pointed out, maintenance itself obviously continued into the Lancastrian era, as shown by the fact that Henry promotes the image of his eagle livery, and Warwick associates himself and his retainers with the bear badge. [Thanks to Susan Crane for this comment.]

421 Richard 268-69.
parliamentary session in Passus Four about which Matthew Giancarlo has observed, ‘As with the courts and the royal retinue, parliament is distorted by the king’s actions; the scene is generally held to be a thinly veiled portrait of the Shrewsbury parliament of 1398.” In this satirical portrait, the poet derides informers who tattle against good men who “babble for the best.”

And somme were tituleris and to the kyng wente,
And formed him of foes that good frendis weren,
That bablid for the best and no blame served
Of the kynge ne conceyll ne of the communes nother,
Ho-so toke good kepe to the culorum [meaning].

In this parliament where representatives do nothing for their shires, sup with ecclesiastics, sleep, mumble, wander blind and bereft of reason, the men who actually speak for a good cause only come under the derisive gazes of tattlers and an unsympathetic king. Skeat translates this line as “These went to the king, and informed him of foes, who were really friends and spoke for the best, and served no blame at all,” and his emphasis on the confusion between friend and foe demonstrates why good “babbling” will be ignored by the king who can’t distinguish the meaning of the languages used in his court.

In contrast to this inoperative Ricardian parliament, the poet dramatizes the ascendancy of the Lancastrian parliament by alluding to the popular image of a bird
Giancarlo argues, “The reference is almost certainly to the 1399 deposition parliament and the later proceedings against Richard’s supporters,” and the poet emphasizes that Richard’s men had to be routed out for this reformed parliament to come into being. In developing a case for Henry’s usurpation of the throne, the poet attempts to naturalize Henry’s executions of Sir John Bushy, Sir Henry Green, and Archbishop Richard le Scrope by portraying the new king as a falcon hunting three kites.

For venym on the valaeye hadde foule with hem fare,
Tyll trouthe the treacle telde somme her soothes.
Thus betrid this bred on bushes aboughte,
And gederid gomes on grene ther as they walkyd,
That all the schroff and schroup sondrid from other.

... Thus foulyd this faukyn on fyldis aboughte,
And caught of the kytes a cartffull at ones,
That rentis and robis with raveyn evere laughte.
Yit was not the fawcon full fed at his likynge,
For it cam him not of kynde kytes to love.
Than bated he boldeliche, as a brid wolde,
To plewme on his pray the pol fro the nekk

In this explanation of the political executions of Richard’s favorites, the poet scatters Bushy’s, Green’s, and Scrope’s surnames throughout the verse, specifying, “For it cam him not of kynde kytes to love.” By evoking the notion of “kynde” behavior, the poet renders what could be interpreted as a callous purge of Richard’s closest allies into the righteous implementation of natural law, and he reminds readers of the men’s (or kites’) past actions of seizing revenues and fine robes with “raveyn,” punning on the fact that

427 The bird parliament of course appears in several contemporary poems, most notably Geoffrey Chaucer’s Parliament of Fowls and John Clanwowe’s Boke of Cupide.
428 Giancarlo, Parliament 232.
429 Richard 2.150-154; 2.157-163.
they are birds of prey. In this reference to the kites’ nature, the poet follows bestiary tradition closely in that Bartholomaeus Anglicus similarly condemns kites for their cowardice and aggression towards weaker birds:

he is a rauyschinge foul and hardy among smale brides and coward and fereful among grette brides; and dredeþ ligge in wayte to take wilde brides, and lið ofte in waite to take [tame briddes and liþ ofte in waite to take] chekenes and to slee ham þat he fyndiþ vnwaar…And in (y)outh þere semeth no difference bitwene þe kite and oþir brides of pray, but þe longer he lyueþ, þe more he schewiþ þat his owne kynde is vnkynde.  

The striking denunciation that the kites’ “kynde is vnkynde” provides an ideal explanation why Richard’s “kites,” Bushy, Green, and Scrope, should be eliminated from the Lancastrians’ idealized version of a “natural” kingdom. Given the complex semantic range of “vnkynde,” the kites’ murder of unwary chicks signifies an unnatural, unkind, improper, and ungracious temperament.

Even if these “unnatural” scavengers upset the population with their violence towards “tame briddes,” the bestiary tradition also unsettles the poem’s contention that Henry’s “kynde” behavior aids and succors the abused people. In truth, Bartholomaeus Anglicus suggests that all predatory fowl act improperly when they attack smaller or weaker birds. The poet may seek to justify the falcon’s executions of Bushy, Green, and Scrope by asserting, “For it cam him not of kynde kytes to love,” but it is worth noting that Bartholomaeus criticizes these same brutal tendencies in the eagle, which is otherwise depicted as the “þe most liberal and fre of herte.”

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430 Bartholomaeus I.634-635.
431 Bartholomaeus I.602. Helen Barr argues that the poet uses bestiary lore to attempt to render Henry’s executions as natural events, and she also pairs Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ De Proprietatibus Rerum and Richard the Redeless when she contends, “But Henry’s regeneration of nature is not confined to acts of maternal kindness to those who have been afflicted. To those who have been the cause of suffering, he shows the other side of his nature. The routing of Richard’s followers is described in terms of the eagle going after his prey: “(y)it was not (th)e fawcon full fed at his likynge,/ For it came him not of kynde kytes
for the eagle is tempered by his observation that the noble bird “haþ summe propirtees lasse worthi to be ipraysed:”

he[o] is boolde and hardy and wrapful…And is enemye to innocent brides and foules and pursewiþ hem wiþ hire clawis and takeþ þe bridde and smythþ his hed wiþ hire byle. And haþ a swonynge voys and generalliche warnynge oþir foules, [for] in þe sight and heringe of þe egle alle foules of oþir kynde drediþ and also foules of pray. Therfore Plunyus saiþ þat þe gentil faaucoun and oþir suche foules vneþe takeþ prayes in þe day whanne he heriþ þe egle, and on cas þat is for greet drede.432

The eagle’s attacks terrorize the other “innocent” birds, and even the falcon dreads the eagle’s “swonynge voys” in this account. The image of frightened fowl dreading the eagle’s voice undermines the poet’s attempt to naturalize the kites’ deaths as the eagle’s own justice as well as the supposedly salvific power of the eagle’s call. The underlying inconsistency between the poet’s portrayal of the honorable killer falcon and his allusions to bestiary lore complicates the argument that Henry’s restoration of “natural law” benefits the kingdom. If avian nature compels “lasse worthi” acts and terrifying warnings, defending the Lancastrian claim to the throne by citing its “kynde” character results in an ambiguous portrait of the new leadership. Despite the Lancastrian cast of the poem, this ambiguity as well as the irony that Henry twists off the heads of three birds in order to

to loue”(II.160-61). The natural antipathy between kites and falcons is attested in beast lore. [See her footnote #56: “For the natural antipathy between kites/crows and eagles, see Bartholomaeus I.620-21 [on crows] and 631 [on the falcon]. Also see footnote # 51: “In Mum, 1054, the poet quotes the authority of ‘Bartholomew (th)e Bestiary’."] …[This natural antipathy] is used by / the poet to stress how Henry’s actions conformed to the laws which govern the natural world and to show that Henry’s return was profitable for the country. To justify Henry’s suppression of Richard’s followers, the poet resorts to the characteristically high flight of the eagle and its ability to see all that is happening beneath it: “And euere houed (th)e egle on hie on (th)e skyes./ And kenned clerliche as his kynde axith”(II.190-91)” (Barr “Natural Law” 58-59). In contrast, I argue that the bestiary tradition does not fully endorse the poet’s contention that Henry has every right as an eagle, or a falcon, to murder other birds. On the whole, the bestiarist has an ambiguous stance towards murder among birds.

432 Bartholomaeus I.605.
establish an avian and auditory government undermine the poet’s endorsement of the new regime, and these problematic discrepancies gesture towards the limitations in ascribing the violent behavior of one faction to natural instinct while condemning the vicious conduct of another faction as an unnatural travesty. The poet’s decision to legitimize Henry’s rule by referring to the bestiary tradition while simultaneously excising or reversing key elements of bestiary lore results in an uncertain sense of the naturalness inherent in Henry’s interpretation of “kynde” law. “Truth” gleaned from the people’s voices may motivate Henry’s behavior, but it is clear that Henry is not listening to the opposition’s cries. Voices such as those of the kites do not figure into the Lancastrian vision of an oral, auditory, receptive government.

Despite these inconsistencies in the presentation of Henry’s inherent “kyndeness,” the poet argues that the falcon’s hunt exposes the crimes of Richard’s retinue and liberates the tongues of the English people. After the hunt, a trial ensues as the culprits are brought before the eagle. This avian version of Henry rehearses the “blames” of the “lorell,” or the “wretch” Sir William Bagot, Sheriff of Leicestershire who aided the kite Scrope, before a bird parliament.434

And brought to the brydd and his blames rehersid
Prevyly at the parlement amonge all the peple.
Thus hawkyd this Egle and hoved above
That, as God wolde that governeth all thingis,
Ther nas kyte ne krowe that kareyne haunted,
That he ne with his lynage ne lovyd full sone

433 At this point, Skeat thinks that the poet is referring to Scrope’s crimes, and his execution did occur a few years later in 1405. Chronologically, it would make sense. Dean cites Skeat’s translation to lines 164-75: “The eagle was striving to seize his prey (Lord Scrope), that he might rend his head off; but the blear-eyed scoundrel (Bagot) who had stolen the treasurer’s bag, in which the spoils of the poor were often fastened tightly, made the falcon angry, and anxious that Bagot should be bound. But soon after, this wretch (lorell, viz. Bagot) who had led away this looby (Scrope) all the way over the forest and ford, fell, on account of his false deeds, into the domain belonging to Henry, and was caught and brought before him and publicly reproved”(Dean 59).
434 See Richard 2.164-75.
... And evere hoved the Egle on hie on the skyes,
And kenned clerliche, as his kynde axith,
Alle the prevy poyntis that the pies wroughth. 435

This court hearing occurs “prevyly” at the parliament among all the people/birds. Giancarlo notices the slippage between species in this line, commenting, “This chronicler’s style of writing momentarily forces the poet to drop out of the allegory and into catachresis, referring to ‘the peple’ instead of birds. In the background may be the model of Chaucer’s parliament of birds, but it is not developed.” 436 This mixed metaphor may indicate that Lancastrian parliamentarians didn’t always speak as freely as birds.

Although Henry seems to correct the egregious mismanagement of the Ricardian parliament (as satirized in Passus 4), the strange assertion that the accusations are read “privately among all the people” begs the question of who debated and sanctioned the executions of Richard’s cohort. Gwilym Dodd suggests that the institution of parliament was valued by Henry because it was filled with his own supporters, and the poem’s conception of a private/public forum supports the idea that “in parliament Henry was surrounded by friends and retainers who had a vested interest in upholding the Lancastrian dynasty. Henry saw parliament as an institution filled with his allies rather than with his enemies. He tolerated parliament, indeed Henry valued parliament, in a way that would have been quite alien to Richard II.” 437 This selective parliament of people/birds symbolizes Henry’s acceptance of parliamentary debate as opposed to Richard’s suppressive tactics, but it also stresses that the hunting Eagle “hoved above” the court. The poet elaborates this image by emphasizing that it is the natural behavior of an eagle, or King Henry IV, to oversee parliament and keep a careful eye on the strategems of his “pies.” In bestiaries, magpies usually connote talkative birds that “can

435 Richard 2.174-179; 2.190-192.
436 Giancarlo, Parliament 232.
437 Dodd, “Changing Perspectives” 320.
imitate words in a distinct voice like a man,” and the image hints that Henry is monitoring to all these voices very carefully. This royal supervision could hold a malevolent shade in suggesting that Henry is always watching, but it also plays into Lancastrian propaganda’s image of Henry as the attentive king who is always sensitive the voices of his followers. Dodd argues, “Henry IV had very publicly set himself up as the defender and champion of parliament's right to participate fully in the political affairs of the kingdom,” and the Richard poet suggests that the roles of defender and champion require constant vigilance on the part of the king. The Eagle is always hovering, watching, and listening, and the poet portrays this attentive royal behavior as the necessary corrective to the muffled words, silent cries, and deaf ministers of the Ricardian era.

III. Richard II and the downfall of visual signs, or the hart with no heart

Throughout Richard the Redeless, the Lancastrian poet impugns Richard II’s reign by defaming and denaturalizing the visual emblem of the white hart, an image originally used by Richard to emphasize the nobility, sanctity, and longevity of his temporal lordship – the poet reveals that this same badge eventually discredited any authority that the Ricardian royal voice might have once wielded. The symbolic white hart may have

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438 White 138
439 Dodd, “Changing Perspectives” 319.
440 In understanding the symbolic weight of Richard’s personal device of the white hart, we must look to the secular practice of hunting as well as the bestiaries’ spiritual interpretation of this beast. As the hart signifying the uniquely noble, aristocratic side of Richard’s persona, Susan Crane observes “the ritual features...of hunting [that] shape it into a powerful assertion of aristocratic superiority,” and the stag, or hart, is the preeminent beast in noble hunting.” (Crane, “Hunt à Force” 64-65). In this description of aristocratic hunting practices, the hart is red, and the symbolism of Richard’s white hart may allude its more spiritual, or pure, Christian connotations. In his Book of Beasts, White notes that bestiariats associate the tendency of stags to travel together when changing their feeding grounds with Christians making a blessed journey to God (White 38-39). Richard may have wanted to emphasize this communitarian/divine aspect of his royal persona in the badge that identified his retinue. In interpreting Richard’s decision to combine temporal and religious symbolism (especially in the Wilton Diptych that features a white hart
originated as Richard’s unique personal device, but as Susan Crane explains, “this very uniqueness, paradoxically, [made] badges a valuable currency for distribution to others.”

The poem’s account of the deposition portrays Richard’s retainers exploiting the king’s badge to perpetrate crimes and abuses against the common people; meanwhile, the king neglects to reprimand the illegal actions of the men misusing his personal insignia.

The poet never describes the hart as white, an omission that suggests the impure quality of the harts roaming the land.

According to the poet’s argument, Richard rendered his own official voice false when he allowed unworthy men to speak and act in his name. As a result, the people stopped respecting and responding to the call of their leader, much like the baby birds refusing to recognize the false mother. With so

Nigel E. Saul writes, “Whatever its inner meaning – and that still remains controversial – the subject-matter of the Wilton Diptych bears witness to the fusion of secular and religious ideas that is so vital to an understanding of Richard II’s kingship” (Nigel E. Saul, “Richard II’s Ideas of Kingship,” The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych, eds. Dillian Gordon, Lisa Monnas, and Caroline Elam (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997) 27). Nigel Morgan also argues that the white hart would have symbolized the longevity of Richard’s reign; he observes, “Richard and his circle may well have also taken over the contemporary French allegorical interpretations of some of these emblems, above all that of the white hart. As Michael Bath has shown, the white hart has widespread allegorical significance, above all through the legend of Caesar’s deer which resulted in the stag being seen as a symbol of the longevity of a dynasty. Both the Duc de Berry in his Sainte-Chapelle at Bourges and Charles V in the Palais de la Cité in Paris had statues of stags set up…The contemporary poet Eustache Deschamps in his allegorical political poems for Charles VI uses the image of the stag driving out marauders from the forest as an allegory of the monarch suppressing evil people in his kingdom. This contemporary French royal symbolism of the stag in some form was almost certainly known to Richard and his court whose French contacts and reading of French literature are well documented…The gestures of Saints Edmund and Edward pointing to Richard [in the Wilton Diptych] emphasize his close link with them, and this could be connected with the symbolism of the stag as the long-living dynasty.” (Nigel Morgan, “The Signification of the Banner in the Wilton Diptych,” The Regal Image of Richard II and the Wilton Diptych, eds. Dillian Gordon, Lisa Monnas, and Caroline Elam (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1997) 185-86).


Crane, Performance of Self 18. In addition, Crane comments, “Some stories may be lost, but the enigmatic quality of most mottos suggests that personal devices were often deliberately occulted. Rather than simply proclaiming the bearer’s identity, enigmatic signs work to mystify the aristocratic self by enlarging its signature but at the same time resisting close scrutiny” (Crane 17). She elaborates on the ways that badges functioned to unite lords with their retainers, noting that a badge’s significance is dispersed outward when it is given away (Crane, Performance of Self 19). Richard’s white hart became his royal signature, but the hart livery was so widespread and so misused throughout England that the “mystic” signature lost its inherent authority. By overlooking the ways in which his retainers exploited the unique imagery of the hart to line their pockets, Richard lost control of the symbolic import of his own device. The white hart seems to have emboldened Richard’s retainers to administer their own self-serving interpretations of the king’s law.

This argument is advanced several times in the poem. Also see Richard 2.53-68.

Thanks to Susan Crane for suggesting this idea in her comments to a previous draft of this chapter.
many abusive and false spokesmen speaking for the king, the royal voice stopped
signifying. The poet imagines retainers roaming throughout the land displaying the livery
on their breasts, speaking in the king’s name, and skinning the common people.

Thoru-out his lond in lengthe and in brede,
That ho-so had hobbled thoru holtes and tounes
Or ypassid the patthis ther the prynce dwellyd,
Or hertis or hyndis on hasselis brestis,
Or some lords lyveré that the lawe stried,
He shulde have ymette mo than ynowe.
For they acombrede the contré and many curse served,
And carped to the comounes with the kyngys mouthe,
Or with the lordis ther they belefte were,
That no renke shulde rise reson to schewe.
They plucked the plomayle from the pore skynnes,
And schewed her signes for men shulde drede
To axe ony mendis for her mysdedis.444

The poet explains that the king’s men “many curse served… And carped to the comounes
with the kyngys mouthe,” and this appropriation of the royal voice leads directly to the
suppression of legitimate legal complaints. The retainers felt emboldened to mete out
their own form of justice with no regard to the established law. Given that the king and
his royal representatives were unwilling to listen, the commune could no longer “rise,”
“schewe,” or “axe ony mendis,” preventing subjects from raising any objections against
Ricardian rule. In considering this communication failure, the poet again contrasts

444 Richard 2.24-34.
naturalized avian imagery, which connotes auditory leadership and free expression, with the visual sign of the hart that had been degraded by Richard’s retainers. When the king’s men misused the badge for their own selfish ends, the white hart ceased to symbolize the noble creature who “is among alle bestes most redy and wyse;” instead the beast prompts heedless, unnatural violence in the course of the poem. In this rendering of those who obstruct the common people’s pleas for justice, Richard’s retainers pluck plumage from the skins of the poor. The distressing image demonstrates the need for a protective figure to fly forth. In discriminating between the auditory and visual self-styling of the two monarchs, the poet also imbues the partridge narrative with another shade of meaning. The true mother bird must not simply show itself to her chicks, and by inference a king must not simply display himself (or his emblem) to people; instead, a true mother/leader calls to the birds and hears their calls in return.

If the poem’s pervasive bird imagery insists that Henry IV is restoring vocal legal culture to the English people after Richard’s unnaturally stifling regime, wordplay and puns, like the one on “billis,” constitute another weapon in the poet’s rhetorical arsenal. Puns themselves rely on the correct interpretation and reinterpretation of a word within its immediate context, playing with one word’s multiple meanings to suggest several connected ideas at once. And while puns amuse the reader with their clever doubled-edged connotations, they also force the reader to pay attention to the communicative power as well as the obfuscating potential of language. In the presentation of “billis,” we see Henry both feeding his chicks and responding to official petitions of the people. In counterpoint to this emphasis on Henry’s sensitivity to aural pleas, the poet also uses

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445 Bartholomaeus II.1177. Bartholomaeus writes, “Also libro viii”. Aristotil sei(th) (th)at he is among alle bestes most redy and wyse.”
446 In Signes and Sothe, Helen Barr agrees, “Some of Richard’s followers use physical speech which is inappropriate to their station. Those retainers, who wreak havoc by their lawless practice of maintenance to pervert the course of justice, prevent anyone speaking out against them. They ‘carped to the comounes with the kynghys mouthe’ (II 29). They speak with an authority that is not theirs to pronounce... The retainer’s illicit ventriloquism licences bribery and corruption” (Barr, Signes and Sothe 70).
puns to build a case against the elaborate and lavish visual culture promulgated by Richard, most famously rendered in the artistry of the Wilton Diptych.447

By punning on “hart” and “lyverey,” the poet connects Richard’s famous emblem of the white hart to his much criticized practice of maintenance as well as his cohort’s abuse of the English people. Helen Barr has written compelling analyses of the poem’s extensive punning in Signes and Sothe: Language in the Piers Plowman Tradition and Socioliterary Practice in Medieval England, and she argues that the puns not only reveal the “injurious” impact of Richard’s white hart badge but “also ‘telle the trouthe’ that this was but the outward sign of a much more deeply-seated political disarray and distortion.”448 The Richard poet makes puns an integral part of his polemic against deaf
and insensitive Ricardian culture, and this political-attuned wordplay demonstrates the complicated meanings that simple signs may hold for the average citizen. While the Ricardians might have associated the hart with aristocratic privilege, the discontented portions of the population only saw a heartless beast ravaging their homeland. In assessing the impact of these challenging puns, Helen Barr has argued, “the puns serve to strip away the carefully manufactured regal veneer of the white hart badge.” The hart becomes a hollow and insufficient substitute for the heart of a true subject – the piercing homophone alludes to the incapacity of Richard’s government to hear and distinguish important linguistic signs.

The poet reprimands Richard for placing his belief in those marked with the hart sign, ignoring “homeliche hertis.” In employing the hart/heart pun to reemphasize the necessity of true language, the poet introduces the allegorical personification of Reason. Reason encourages the narrator to “amend mischief” and “shield his sovereign from harms;” suddenly emboldened, the narrator emphasizes that the king should use caution when marking retainers with his livery.

451

Ony manere mysscheff that myghtte by amendyd,
Schewe that to thi sovereyne to schelde him from harmes;
For and he be blessed, the better thee betydyth
In tyme for to telle him for thi trewe herte.”
Now for to telle trouthe, this than me thynketh,
That no manere meytenour shulde merkis bere,

Ne have lordis lyveré the lawe to apeire,

Neither bragger ne boster, for no brymme wordis. 452

In heeding Reason, the narrator shows the sovereign the necessity of correcting unjust maintenance practices, and he advises the prince not to give lords livery who might damage the law. A subject with a “trewe herte” relies upon “trouthe” alone, and these qualities distinguish him from braggers and boasters. It builds a strong case against “meyntenour[s]” that bear marks, as well as the practice of livery itself. According to the poet, emblems and badges encourage falsification and posturing that can ultimately lead to a corruption of the royal voice, truth, and justice.

Along the same lines, a complicated pun on the term “lyverey” appears in a long denunciation of Richard’s “maintained” Cheshire guardsmen. In denouncing the false “pleadings” perpetrated by the “chyders of Chester,” 453 or the Cheshiremen who were members of Richard’s personal army, 454 the poet contends that Richard’s soldiers desecrated court proceedings with their false words and unfair judgments. In this passage, legitimate complaints, which should constitute the language of a plea court, are replaced by a striking combination of “feyned falshed,” visual signs, and brutality.

452 Richard 2.73-80, esp. 2.76.
453 Richard 317.
454 In the footnote to line 317 on page 69, Dean describes the Chester guard in detail in his footnotes to Richard. “The Chester guard constituted Richard’s personal army of archers who were noted for their arrogance and brutality. The chronicler Adam of Usk regards them as a ruthless gang who unwittingly contribute to Richard’s downfall: “the king, meanwhile, ever hastening to his fall, among the many burdens which he inflicted upon his realm also kept about him in his following four hundred supernumeraries from the county of Cheshire, men of the utmost depravity who went about doing as they wished, assaulting, beating, and plundering his subjects with impunity; wherever the king went, night and day, they stood guard over him, armed for war, committing adulteries, murders, and countless other crimes; yet so inordinately did the king favour them that he would not listen to anyone who complained about them, indeed he regarded such people with loathing; and this was the chief cause of his ruin. Here Dean cites, Usk 49. [In the bibliographic citation on p.18 of Dean’s edition, the editor comments, “Usk, a Welsh ecclesiastical lawyer hostile to Richard II, tells the story of Richard versus Henry of Lancaster in very similar terms to those of RiR and Mum.”] For more information of the Cheshire guards, see Barr Tradition 284, note to lines 317-50.
For chyders of Chester where chose many daies
To ben conceill for causis that in the court hangid,
And pledid pipoudris all menere pleynis.
They cared for no coyffes that men of court usyn,
But meved many maters that man never thoughte,
And feyned falshed, till they a fyne had,
And knewe no manere cause, as communes tolde.
Thei had non other signe to schewe the lawe
But a prevy pallette her pannes to kepe,
To hille here lewde heed in stede of an hove.
They constrewed quarellis to quenche the peple,
And pletid with pollaxis and poynis of swerdis,
And at the dome-gevynge drowe out the bladis,
And lente men lyverey of her longe battis.455

In attending the piepowder courts – the trials held on special occasions in local communities – Richard’s guardsmen interrupt and spoil the judicial proceedings of the common people.456 The fact that soldiers, and not legal professionals, act as the representatives of the king to offer counsel on matters vital to local communities suggests Richard’s negligence of his civic and legal responsibilities, especially given that the main shortcoming of these soldiers is their inability to listen or speak in their official capacities. The Cheshire guardsmen follow their own agenda without attending the people’s pleas, and they “meved many maters that man never thoughte,” ignoring the pertinent issues under discussion. Moreover, the Cheshiremen “concoct falsehoods” in

455 Richard 317-330.
456 As Dean explains, “the summary court of ‘Pie-Poudre’ – held at fairs and markets – was so called because those who attended the court had dusty feet. The author of RIR imagines that the Cheshire guard disrupts the already-corrupted proceedings with their intimidating presence” (Dean 69, note to line 319), and Barr comments, “The ironic use of legal diction shows that the Cheshiremen paid no heed at all to the due processes of the law and order…To please pipoudris for all pleynis…is tantamount to disregarding proper legal procedure altogether” (Barr, Tradition 285, notes to lines 318 & 319).
pursuit of a quick settlement.\textsuperscript{457} As Matthew Giancarlo notices, “the abuse is aligned with the itinerant royal courts that wrongly ‘abate the bills’ of plaintiffs. Force and legal corruption are co-implicated.”\textsuperscript{458} In establishing the egregious mismanagement of Ricardian legal hearings, which involve no aural or truthful oral efforts on the part of Richard’s men, the poet argues that empty visual signs and violence replaced proper procedure. As they “deliver” their judgments with poleaxes, swords, blades, and clubs, the poet depicts these local assemblies transforming into riotous brawls. W.W. Skeat translates the key line, “And lente men lyverey of her longe battis” as “And gave men the free experience of their long staves” because “To lend leverè is to deliver blows.”\textsuperscript{459} In a poem in which “lyverey” stands for the emblems that Richard distributed widely among his supporters and retainers, playing on the phrase to lend leverè explicitly ties the white hart livery to the image of a armed man “delivering blows” to a poor petitioner. According to the logic of this pun, the visual vocabulary of livery simultaneously inhibits oral communication as it provokes violence, resulting in an unnaturally tone-deaf, rash approach to governing the land.

As the poet recounts Richard’s ultimate downfall, he argues that the badges did not secure the loyalty of Richard’s retainers. The white hart livery only emboldened men to run recklessly and obliviously through the land without even marshaling them to the king’s cause. Although the white hart displayed the men’s fealty in the form of clothing, the poet claims that the king’s men shrank from naming Richard’s name during the days

\textsuperscript{457} Dean notes, “The implication is that the Cheshire guard raises such a ruckus in court with their false pleading that they bring about a final settlement, a fine, although that settlement is unjust.” (Dean 70, note to line 322.)

\textsuperscript{458} Giancarlo, Parliament 232-233. Giancarlo’s complete interpretation of this scene agrees with mine, as he also notices the important alignment of the guards’ unwillingness to hear the people’s plaints, their dependence on the king’s visual badge, and their willingness to resort to violence.

of the deposition, again belittling the worth of the visual sign:

    Bot moche now me merveilith and well may I in sothe,
    Of youre large lyverey to leodis aboughte
    That ye so goodliche gaf but if gile letted,
    As hertis yheedyd and hornyd of kynde,
    So ryff as they ronne your rewme thoru-oute,
    That non at youre need youre name wolde nempne
    In fersnesse ne in foltheed but faste fle awayward;
    And some stode astonyed and stared for drede,
    For eye of the Egle that our helpe brouute.
    And also in sothe the seson was paste
    For hertis yheedid so hy and so noble
    To make ony myrthe for mowtynge that nyghed.  

The poet expresses marvel at the fact that although many men wore the hart livery in the years leading up to his deposition, “non at your need youre name wolde nempne” when Richard lost the crown. The reluctance of Richard’s followers to speak for their king during a time of crisis supports the poet’s belief in the importance of oral communication between a monarch and his subjects. Unlike the Lancastrian eagle that encouraged bears to fly to freedom, the stags allegorize the flight of deserters. To naturalize this image, the poet argues that the harts’ season had passed, and he illustrates the molting, “mowtynge,” that afflicted the king’s men when Richard fell. Just as deer shed their antlers and coats in the natural course of the seasons, the poet implies that the retainers shed their livery

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460 See Strohm, Social Chaucer 20. Considering the implications of Strohm’s discussion on the differences between the practice of maintenance and traditional sworn oaths could be instructive here.
461 Richard 2.1-14
462 Also see Barr, Tradition 261, notes on 2.10-16.
upon the deposition. The poet laments later, “Thus were ye deceyved thoru youre
double hertis./ That nevere weren to truste, so God save my soule!” The double-hearted,
or we might say two-faced, harts were never trustworthy because the practice of livery
never assured their allegiance. The poet advises, “For legiance without love litill thinge
availith,” and the retainers only wore the livery to live a life of ease. They “walwed in
her wills forweyned in here youthe,” wallowing in their wills and pampered in their
youth, and they never took their oath seriously. Livery, like a coat, is easily shed, and the
poet places his faith into Henry IV’s oral culture, emphasizing the honesty and truth of
those who speak without fear of self-absorbed retainers.

Richard the Redeless promotes Henry IV’s government by suggesting that its
receptivity to the voices of the people renders all of Henry’s actions “kynde,” even if the
usurpation itself appeared brutal and unnatural. Moreover, the poem demonstrates that
Richard II’s insensitivity to the community’s cries and criticisms led to a corruption of
England’s natural laws, legitimizing any attempt to remove the poisonous presence of

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463 Elaborating upon this molting imagery Helen Barr writes, “The details of the deer’s reaction are drawn
directly from beast lore and used to suggest that is natural for these deer, that is the supporters of Richard,
to be frightened of Henry. Furthermore, the poet states that it was part of the natural cycle that these deer
should become powerless... This ‘mowtynge’ refers to the seasonal renewal of the deer’s horns.
Bartholomaeus describes how deer change their horns annually in spring and then, because they are
defenceless, hide themselves until their horns have re-grown. [Bartholomaeus, II.1176.fn.53]”(Barr,
“Natural Law” 57-58). She agrees that the deposition is portrayed as “the compulsion of natural change,”
hence naturalizing Henry’s claim to the throne.

464 Richard 2.111-12.

465 Barr also argues “duble” is a pun in commenting, “‘Duble’ refers to this double meaning. In one sense it
means ‘twice as much, great’ and alludes to the excessive granting of badges, an in another sense it means
‘false; deceitful.’ The juxtopoly of the line captures the essential truth that the excessive badges were
innately fraudulent and transformed loyalty into deceit. While the retainers exhibit the duplicity of signs,
and the excess of signer over the signified, the narrator’s critical use of polysemy demonstrates the
truthful use of double meaning”(Barr, “Signes and Sothe” 72).

466 Richard 1.24

467 Richard 1.27

468 For more on the poet’s denunciation of elaborate livery and clothing, see Richard 3.110-253 for a long
diatribe against the expensive clothing fashions that were popular in the Ricardian court. Also see Patricia
J. Eberle, “The Politics of Courtly Style at the Court of Richard II,” The Spirit of the Court, eds. Glyn S.
Richard. To these ends, the poet adapts avian, hence auditory, symbolism to associate Henry with every positive “natural” virtue available in the bestiary canon; in contrast, Richard’s white hart transforms into an empty visual symbol of depravity. The bestiaries’ noble hart changes into a monstrous, violent creature.
In attempting to answer the question “What part do animal voices play in the political literature of the late fourteenth century?” in the course writing this dissertation, I have been struck by the way three literary geniuses, Langland, Chaucer, and Gower, all composing in the 1370s and 1380s, used humble and sometimes unsavory animals to propose rebellious opinions and complicate the ideological arguments of their own masterworks. These lowly and meek figures, who so often symbolized the irrational and brute impulses of mankind in the Middle Ages, scurry and fly forth to upset any sense that the author, or his society, has reached a satisfactory approach to governance or political policy. The poets introduce naysayers in the form of “neigh-sayers,” so to speak, and animals sound out the underlying problems in the poems’ most authoritative and authorized claims.

By choosing to include these dissonant, inhuman voices, Langland, Chaucer, and Gower demonstrate dedication to presenting accurate accounts of late fourteenth-century political life, as they saw and heard it. Even the most dogmatic of the three poets, John Gower, who viewed the rise of Wat Tyler as a punishment from God, quietly acknowledges the accomplishments of the rebel leader. He took pains to examine the methods, verbal style, and opinions of a man whom he sought to defame. Gower transforms this man into a demonic jay in the course of the poem, but Tyler’s achievements survive the transfiguration intact.
The prejudice that animal utterance constitutes inarticulate noise may prevent some readers from noticing the even-handed and nuanced outlook conveyed by the inclusion these animal speakers, and the poets themselves may have been counting on this commonplace bias to mask, or at least to lessen the impact of, antagonistic and destabilizing opinions. In analyzing the statements, sentiments, and exclamations of animals in minute detail, I have striven to illuminate the political undercurrents surging against the edifice of each poem’s apparent sociopolitical stance. In so doing, I found it essential to explain the alternative approaches to interpreting animal sounds in the Middle Ages; if ancient and medieval philosophers perceived semantic worth in an animal’s cry, then it stands to reason that late fourteenth-century poets could expect some of their readers to attend the noises of fictional animals with curiosity and perhaps even with thoughtful inquisitiveness. For readers of any time, it is easy to overlook the discernment lurking in animals’ remarks as they squeak and cluck noisily, as Chaucer memorably complained, “thourgh myne eres the noyse wente tho,” but it is only through acknowledgment that a reader may understand the ways in which poets use animal voices to reveal the flaws, intricacies, and irreconcilabilities in human politics.

As I researched other scholars’ interpretations of these animal voices, I found that several important critics, such as Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Edward Wheatley, Matthew Giancarlo, and Helen Barr, agree that animals serve the important function of representing sociopolitical and moral views in these poets’ works, and my own critical approach builds upon their insights by taking the belief in the consequence of animal interjections quite seriously indeed. In reading, interpreting, and mulling over the significance of these animal voices, I started with the basic premise that the animals’
comments, caws, and howls should be unraveled and elucidated with the same care as the loftiest of textual treasures. In other words, every animal statement received the same grave attention as any Macrobian or Ciceronian interlude as I deciphered the poets’ moves of positioning and repositioning their political arguments. This attentive approach to the cackles of geese proved to be hugely profitable from a hermeneutic point of view; in the composition of each chapter, I uncovered new critical readings for key animal utterances. In unveiling novel interpretations of Langland’s mouse, Chaucer’s goose, and Gower’s jay, I argued that the speeches of animals contribute to significant argumentative strains within several late fourteenth-century poems, which remain obscure if the reader ignores the signal contribution of the animal.

The most significant finding that arose in my reading of the “belling of the cat” fable in the B-text of *Piers Plowman* resulted from comparing the mouse’s argument, which asserts that the rats should allow the cat to reign unimpeded because they are incapable of ruling themselves, with a troubling Latin citation of Ecclesiastes 10:16. In depicting the mouse as a vulnerable being who will suffer due to the cat’s keen appetite, Langland renders the mouse’s own advice dubious. Although the rats and mice may not be capable of ruling themselves without someone to curb their own worst behavior, depicted as destroying man’s malt and rending men’s clothes, Langland seeds doubt as to whether a kitten’s rule would be preferable. Eccl 10:16 stands out as a verse with connotations of sedition and resistance against monarchical rule, slipping an indirect criticism of Richard II’s early ascension to the throne into a poetic passage that apparently argues for the need of strong and undisputed rulers. The mouse’s intrinsic animal nature, therefore, prepares the reader to detect these complications within
Langland’s poem. It seems contradictory for a mouse to argue in favor of his own mistreatment, and the Latin quotation affirms this sense of doubt. Langland scholars have detected strains “pluralism” in Piers Plowman and this clever decision to combine an animal voice with a potentially inflammatory line from the Bible draws out the self-contradictory position of a subject who must flatter and support an untested and potentially abusive child-king. The poem may dramatize the coronation of a supreme ruler at this point in the Prologue, but the rodents’ sudden appearance seems to resist this celebration of absolutism. Even as the mouse advises that the rats must not attempt to “overlepe” the cat, the rats and mice overrun the court and undermine the proceedings with their own unique perspective on the difficulty of living with a creature with a dangerous amount of power.

Just as the mouse offers a contrary political opinion within the complicated literary devices of the Prologue of Pier Plowman’s B-text, Chaucer interweaves suggestive stellar images throughout the text of Parliament of Fowls, which ultimately contextualize the shrewd viewpoint of a humble goose. In delivering a curt epigram about the number of stars in the sky, the goose articulates one of the poem’s most difficult political lessons: multiple authorities may sway a person, as well as a political assembly, in various directions at once. Despite the fact that this meditation on the existence of multiple, clashing authorities manifests itself in the structure and content of the poem, Chaucer almost seems to be defying, or possibly daring, the reader to listen carefully to the goose’s noisy yet astute utterance. Not only does the poetic narrator denounce the cries of the lower fowl as ear-splitting noise, but also Chaucer ostensibly presents the

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eloquent noble eagles as the leaders of the assembly once Nature and the narrator endorse their cause. As a result of these authorial blinds, the acumen and insight of the goose surprises readers who assumed she was only a comic foil for the dominant eagles. For the reader willing to take all of the lower fowls’ exclamations, animal noises, and sentiments seriously, Chaucer’s pervasive argument sounds forth – diverse speakers direct contemporary political bodies to multiple, and sometimes contradictory, goals. The patently animal voices don’t exist to simply heighten the apparent beauty of the eagles’ more refined speeches; instead, it is the calls of these “low” animals that articulate and dramatize the most insightful commentary on fourteenth-century parliamentary assemblies.

In contrast to Chaucer who uses subtle literary techniques to convey the viewpoint that multiple voices impact political discourse, Gower’s literary machinations serve to counteract his own admissions that the persuasive speeches of the animalistic rebels managed to overwhelm and supplant rational rulers during the Rising of 1381. What is interesting about Gower’s poem is that despite his own abhorrence of the rebel project, he invests the animal voice of Wat Tyler with a measure of authority. Much of this authority springs from the rebels’ appropriation of Langland’s masterpiece Piers Plowman. While Gower portrays the stylistic and didactic influence of Piers in the rebellion, he only mocks the rebels’ use of the poem without commenting directly on native English poetic tradition associated with Piers. This vernacular, however, creates aural dissonance within the Latin poem, and Gower’s amazingly accurate approximation of the vernacular style acknowledges its strengths even as the poet critiques rebels who use this alliterative tradition as a rallying tool. In order to undercut the jay’s revolutionary message and
galvanizing oratory, Gower limns the text of *Vox Clamantis* with a learned subtext that cites classical and Biblical sources in order to provide a counterweight to the bestial and vernacular influences suffusing the main plot. A reader sensitive to the important role of animals within late fourteenth-century political poems will notice that Gower hides a tale of Tyler’s accomplishments within his diatribe. Tyler’s animal cry effectively gathers followers, and it even transforms the Gower’s narrator, a stand-in for the poet himself, into a wild man. The poem, therefore, acknowledges the great transformative power of animal opinions, which cannot be easily discounted once they are heard.

Tracing the startling impact of animal voices in the poems of three of the most important and influential poets of the late fourteenth century uncovers a somewhat paradoxical trend of stealthy acknowledgment. Like animal imagery itself, which quietly acknowledges the possibility of animal speech while promulgating the common assumption that animals symbolize the worst natural instincts in mankind, the poems cautiously acknowledge seditious and unpopular political viewpoints by obscurely gesturing towards their enormous impact on political life. In using animal representatives to voice the concerns of segments of the population who find no voice in political discourse through any other means, the poets demonstrate a willingness to record unacknowledged and underrepresented opinions for posterity, albeit by using complicated and fraught rhetoric.

This dissertation makes no claim to present a dialectical narrative in which past traditions grow, clash, and eventually produce a synthesis of ideas in the literary artworks of later centuries. In point of fact, I view the late fourteenth-century as a unique time in which major poets explored the political sphere with honest curiosity, and minority
opinions found obscure expression within their works through the medium of the animal voice. My examination of Richard the Redeless demonstrates the resolute unwillingness in an anonymous poet to convey the views of the fallen Ricardians after the king’s deposition; the poet opts instead to utilize animal rhetoric to bolster the Lancastrian claim that only Henry IV facilitates and loves free speech. As Richard pursues this argument, it fails to acknowledge Ricardian opinions even through covert use of the animal imagery, and the whole poem functions as a piece of political propaganda against Richard II.

Animal rhetoric akin to the sort that Gower used so memorably to denounce the rebels in the first book of Vox Clamantis eventually comes to dramatize the potentially dangerous figures of the Ricardians in Richard the Redeless. The anonymous poet transforms Richard II’s regal white hart into a symbol for wicked corruption in much the same way that Gower equated Tyler’s revolutionary rhetoric with the malignant cries of an evil jay. Since both the former king and the rebel leader were forcibly removed from power, these defeated political figures received similar literary treatment as poets sought to quash their legacies and bolster the prestige of the triumphant governments. In the years following the deposition, the ousted Richard had no acceptable place in the new Lancastrian government. Richard’s badges symbolized the government that Henry wished to overthrow and erase from memory; if the fallen king had lived, his very existence would have suggested a Ricardian alternative to Lancastrian rule. But whereas, even in the extreme case of the demonized graculus, Gower showed signs of admitting Tyler’s alternative viewpoint into the text (despite his unnatural status in the hierarchy of England’s legal system), the hart merely acts a cipher.\footnote{In Helen Barr’s reading of Richard 4.53-4, she emphasizes the troubling ramifications of having a cipher sitting in the poem’s depiction of Parliament: “In these lines from Richard, those who sit as a cipher corrupt}
symbol of its original meaning, negating its ability to voice the Ricardian perspective after the deposition. Paul Strohm has articulated the “emptiness” that characterizes Lancastrian cultural productions after the usurpation, in losing Richard, the consecrated king, the English government lost its “sacral center.” The absence of any Ricardian viewpoint in a poem that thematizes the importance of free expression is a notable example of this emptiness. Although the poem uses vivid animal imagery to give voice to the commoners and Lancastrian sympathizers who suffered under Richard II, no bird, hart, kite, or partridge ever articulates what the Ricardian view might have been during or after the deposition crisis. The hart may symbolize the uncrowned king’s former cultural status and extravagant tastes, but it doesn’t contribute a distinctive voice to the poem’s political discussion. The Lancastrian poet defies any sympathy for Ricardian supporters by mercilessly employing the tactic of depicting them as beasts who could

the whole system of signification, or communication, because they ‘no thing availith’. They stimie the computation for which the system of mathematics has been designed. Their individual and collective value remains ‘nought’! While they ought to enable the system to work in a mutually valuable fashion, they fail to bring value to the system by concentrating solely on their own empty significance”(Barr, Signs and Sothe 72-73). The corrupting influence of the cipher, or the symbol (like the hart) that has been divorced from signification, is a theme throughout the work. The white hart livery itself stops symbolizing Richard II in the course of the poem, and it has a corrupting influence in society.


In addition to completely silencing Ricardian voices while purporting to represent the whole community, Helen Barr notices that Lancastrian poems are far from radical because they lambast Richard’s reign after he had already been deposed. Rather than offer specific suggestions of how the Lancastrians will run the government in their supposedly new governing strategy, the poem only critiques the former regime. As she explains, “But assessing the social positioning of these texts is fraught with complications. It could be argued that in contesting the sign of the white hart, none of these oppositional texts is radical. The obliteration or revalorization of the badge takes place in texts written after Richard’s deposition. Moreover, none of these texts offers a new vision of a social polity. While the public tropes of Richard’s kingship are negotiated there is no narrative alternative offered to the figuring of kingship, either as a concept, or as an institution…In their chronicles of past misrule, present configurations of government remain unchallenged” (Barr, Sociopolitical 76).

On 320 of “Changing Perspective,” Dodd notes “Paul Strohm has argued that the Lancastrian regime was particularly sensitive to criticism and actively sought to quash it.” On this topic, Strohm writes, “These studies have revolved around a succession of remarkably amnesiac texts. These are texts which stand dumb in relation to the past, expending much labor and ingenuity in the service of forgetfulness. Such amnesia may be seen as a general condition of textuality itself, with no text reliable with regard to the whole truth of its origins. Yet the condition of forgetfulness attains unusual dimensions in the Lancastrian period, when the scandalous and disturbing circumstances of Henry IV’s accession gave everybody (except a few diehard Ricardians) so much to forget”(Strohm, England’s Empty Throne 198).
have cared for the populace but perversely refused to reason or listen. And in a questionable move considering the poem’s endorsement of “kynde” behavior, the eagle almost becomes supernatural as it is supersaturated with positive bestiary symbolism. In a historical irony, the humble figures of Langland’s rodent parliamentarian, Chaucer’s low goose, and Gower’s rebel *graculus* were accorded a measure of grudging respect when these authors imbued them with unique voices; in contrast, the once powerful Ricardians’ voices are completely smothered in *Richard the Redeless*. The Lancastrian regime that purported to restore the full range of the commune’s speaking voice systematically silenced any trace of opposition.

In concluding this dissertation, I find that the close examination of animal rhetoric has produced a nuanced analysis of the literary techniques that late fourteenth-century poets devised when articulating controversial opinions within their works, and the ambiguity inherent to medieval understandings of the animal voice produced multiple opportunities for poets to explore and express the viewpoints of subjects seeking representation, recognition, and justice without seriously undermining or diverting from political arguments that would be acceptable to the reigning authorities. The ambiguity that characterizes the utterances of the animals within the B-Text of *Piers Plowman*, *Parliament of Fowls*, and *Vox Clamantis* has made these characters’ sentiments and expressions into loci for critical interpretation, and I offer the idea that understanding and situating the political stance of an animal, however minor, silly, or depraved the creature may appear in the poets’ respective portrayals, is essential to comprehending the full complexity of the political arguments posed by each poem.

475 The inadvertent consequence of instilling the eagle with so many virtues is that the Lancastrian “natural” law appears somewhat contrived; in fact, the poet may have accidentally caused some reader to doubt the “truth” of his political message.
Langland, Chaucer, and Gower may present their animal characters differently, connoting varying opinions about the inherent significance of these inhuman creatures’ noises and utterances, but all three use animals to acknowledge perspectives and speaking-styles that might go unnoticed or unremarked otherwise. This dissertation examined a small sample of four key political poems in the hope of offering detailed analyses of different animal voices. This method has demonstrated that animal characters were used to acknowledge politicians, parliamentarians, and commoners who were making subversive claims in late fourteenth-century England. The deposition and death of Richard II, however, ushers in a new era when the political ambitions of the Lancastrian regime expel the ambiguity and complexity from the voices of literary animals. As a result, the dissertation demonstrates an important literary trend at a particular point in history when the Ricardian government produced social conflict and the sudden expression of previously unheard voices. In contrast, the Lancastrian author of Richard the Redeless did not use animal characters to record alternative viewpoints, suggesting that this poetics of acknowledgment ceased as Henry IV’s government sought to establish its political supremacy.

All four poems, including Richard the Redeless, demonstrate a plasticity of animal symbolism however, and they demonstrate the ability of literary animals to voice and represent multiple political viewpoints at once. Langland’s poem demonstrates empathy for its rats and mice even as it insinuates their collective role as the pests of parliament. Chaucer mocks the goose and lower fowl even as he imbues their statements with political pragmatism. Gower rejects the evil jay even as he marks down its clarion call for posterity. The Richard-poet must remind readers of the white hart’s former
grandeur and popularity in demonstrating its depravity and final downfall. By integrating animal sounds and utterances into these poems, each poet frees himself to make political arguments of sufficient complexity to signal, if obscurely, the internal conflicts that must have been rending governmental bodies and heaving in the hearts of the people. My final conclusion is that holding an animal metaphor to a singular interpretive meaning is like herding cats or caging birds, and late fourteenth-century poets clearly realized that there is something in the very nature of animal symbolism that resists univocal signification or definite interpretation. The ability of animal voices to articulate a multiplicity of variable and potential meanings – in theory and in literature – produces a poetic register subtle and contradictory enough to convey the divisive political climate of England in the late fourteenth century.
Animal Speech and Political Utterance: Articulating the Controversies of Late Fourteenth-Century England in Non-Human Voices

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