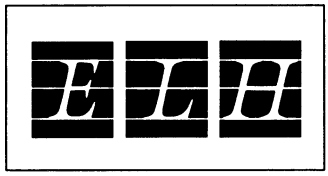

CHAUCER'S *FORMER AGE* AND THE FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ANTHROPOLOGY OF CRAFT: THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF A PREMODERNIST LYRIC

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The two medieval copies of *The Former Age* that have come down to us suggest that the work could be framed in at least two ways during the half-century after Chaucer: in an extraordinary Boethian *vademecum*, complete with a stately Latin text of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Latin glosses, and Chaucer's *Boece*, where *The Former Age* appears along with Chaucer's *Fortune*; and as part of a smaller, elegant collection of sapiential and historical poems, suggesting a pious, courtly or civic commission and readership. This latter collection includes a translation of Cato's distichs and a series of poems, many by Lydgate, offering specific historical complaint, such as the Duchess of Gloucester's lament about being deprived of her dowry; an unquiet spirit from Augustine of Canterbury's times warning against not paying tithes; and two narrators' quandaries about choosing between various religious and secular professions.[1] *The Former Age* seems at home in both contexts. On the one hand, it solicits the philosophical attention and linguistic and literary expertise of a highly educated readership; on the other, it defines for a wider and more typically "courtly" and vernacular readership a set of social ideals from the primitive past in contrast to contemporary decadence and social abuses.

As Seth Lerer has recently demonstrated, Chaucer's poetry often sets forth the elemental terms of its fifteenth-century reception, of divergent or even contradictory kinds, through which the concerns of his later redactors and communities of interpretation are articulated.[2] But it has not been made entirely clear what original contexts can most productively be aligned with this vivid, brief, and slightly

fragmentary or incomplete lyric, whose contrasts between present and past, or rather modernity and premodernity—for this past is defined predominately by what it is *not yet*—make insistent claims on its contemporary world. Where did its strongest contemporary social meanings lie, and in what contexts can we best appreciate its literary and ethical achievements? The work is clearly much more than a translation of Beothius's fifth metron of book two—as the inclusion of a prose translation of that metron next to it in the *Boece* manuscript acknowledges; and it need not have been written at the same time as the *Boece*, that is, in the early 1380s, for the copy of *Fortune* in the same manuscript includes an allusion to a circumstance obtaining only after 1390, when Richard II could make gifts only by permission of a special council. Chaucer's *ABC* is often found in copies of its source, Deguilleville's *Pelerinaige de la vie humaine*; a similar fifteenth-century "locating" of *The Former Age* within its main source does not necessarily provide an original *locus in quo*—although George Pace's and Alfred David's argument that it does is ingenious—still less a definitive *terminus ante quem*.[3]

Scholars have frequently praised Chaucer's poem for its realism and detail, and for its rhetorical elaboration of the fallen, present world in comparison to its sources, which include Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Jean de Meun's portion of the *Roman de la Rose*. Chaucer's divergences from these suggest contemporary meanings at every point. Thus to John Norton-Smith, Chaucer's closing discussion of Nimrod and other kinds of royal oppression not mentioned in Boethius, such as tyrannical taxation, alludes to the tyranny of Richard II in his final years; to L. O. Purdon, Chaucer's reference to the late-medieval cloth-dyeing materials of "mader, welde, or wood" that were "unknown" in the former age invokes, by its contemporary specificity and along with the oblique description of modern ocean-trade, fourteenth-century abuses of dyers and of trade-struggles between English and Flemish cloth merchants—a significant context indeed in the increasingly competitive wool-trade of the period.[4]

Alignments with other pertinent late-fourteenth-century social conflicts and abuses can and should be multiplied. But the goal of contextualizing narrative can, and should, also draw on wider and more pervasive issues and cultural concerns, even while continuing to pursue the specific political and social implications of their appearance. In Gabrielle Spiegel's suggestive formulation, the "social logic" of a text can best be sought by linking its narratological or discursive features with the political and ideological contexts wherein

the work is situated.[5] One might begin such an inquiry into *The Former Age* by noting that the feature of the poem that most highlights the vivid contemporary social detail all critics have noted, and thereby makes the poem's execution most part of its theme, is the specific kind of post-lapsarian consciousness that the narrator of the poem both describes and embodies. Boethius's lyric mentions the ignorance of the golden age only once, his predecessor Ovid once also and their later adapter Jean de Meun not at all: "They had not learned to mix / Wine with clear honey; / Nor to dye shining silken stuffs / With Tyrian purple."[6] Chaucer's *Former Age* defines every aspect of the first age in terms of ignorance, making modern practical or technical knowledge the measure of historical change: "*Unknowen* was the quern and ek the melle" (*F*, 6); "No man *yit knew* the forwes of his lond" (*F*, 12); "No mader, welde or wood no litestere / *Ne knewe*" (*F*, 17–18); "No flesh *ne wiste* offence of egge or spere; / No coyn *ne knew* man which was fals or trewe" (*F*, 19–20); "No trompes for the werres folk *ne knew*, / Ne toures heye and walles rounde and square" (*F*, 23–24); "ne doun of fetheres ne no bleched shete / Was *kid* to hem" (*F*, 45–46).

In this emphasis, Chaucer's lyric offers an essentially secular view of the mechanism of historical change, as Arthur B. Ferguson has recently observed of its Renaissance counterparts, which he calls the "cave myth."[7] What revelation there is in Chaucer's lyric is technological and experiential, implicitly producing the various modern professions and estates as the consequences of invention and discovery, spawning new realms of knowledge as the first forms of professionalism and specialized, "applied" learning. The lyric constitutes in this sense a companion–piece—even a prologue—to the *General Prologue*, whose narrator incessantly asserts the special cunning that each contemporary profession generates and demands; the phrase "as he ful wel koude" or phrases like it appear in nearly every portrait of the *General Prologue*'s survey, often as points of powerful irony.[8] In his concentration on this in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer indeed contributed a new feature to the traditional genre of estates satire: an elaboration of "the knowledge and skills that each profession calls for," "the special knowledge which [each character] commands and towards which we can adopt only a layman's attitude," as Jill Mann observes.[9] More broadly located in Chaucer's *oeuvre*, this emphasis on practical or "applied" knowledge in *The Former Age* coheres with Chaucer's anxious yet fascinated engagement with what Lee Patterson has defined as the mode of consciousness most characteristic of

modernity: "a disenchanted rationalism eager to dominate the natural world," an emerging cultural value or episteme of "technology *as an ideology.*" Among Chaucerian scholars, Patterson has most directly and deeply considered such an ideology or pervasive cultural outlook, situating the Canon's Yeoman's Tale as among Chaucer's furthest and perhaps latest engagements with it.[10] Solely on the basis of its concentrated intensity in exploring such an outlook, *The Former Age* might also deserve being placed among Chaucer's furthest and latest negotiations with "applied" knowledge *"as an ideology,"* what he defines in this lyric as the characteristic mode of modern consciousness as well as social life.

While the elusive points of view of Chaucer's narrators of "tales" have been closely and frequently considered, these aspects of the narrators of the lyrics have undeservedly been less so.[11] In implied social location, *The Former Age*'s narrator stands equidistant from modern agrarian workers who, he states, have been "forpampred" with such inventions as private hand-mills (evoking one of the explosive issues of the Rising of 1381 as well as the pervasive late-medieval tension between seigneurial or monastic control of peasant labor and independent peasant production), merchants who quicken tastes for "outlandish ware," knights who go to war for "profit," and finally "Thise tyraunts" who hunger for whole cities and countries.[12] By the oblique inversion of a series of contrasts between modernism and premodernism, the lyric traces the outlines of an entire modern estates satire, one that leaves, by implication, secularly but not simply professionally or narrowly learned individuals—that is, individuals like Chaucer himself—in the most authoritative position to order and judge this chaos of self-serving, worldly *technai*.

Yet the narrator's expression of this viewpoint displays not just a fallen world but the habits of a fallen mind, even as the poem recounts humanity's fall into practical and technical invention and learning. The intellectual innocence of the former age is implicitly contrasted not only to the present as a whole but also to the narrator's heavy burden of technical and vocational knowledge which unfolds at every occasion, and which includes his knowledge of how to wield rhetoric, producing a pervasive, self-indicting irony that has not been sufficiently appreciated.[13] Thus the description of the former people's diet reveals the historical distance and decadence of a speaker who, quite naturally for the fourteenth century, defines this food as "swich pounage," "such pig fodder"; so too, he describes the early people's habits of preparing grain with urbane snobbery, or

at least in a manner calculated to lure his contemporary readers to experience an access of such snobbery:

> They ne were nat forpampred with outrage.
> Unknowen was the quern and ek the melle;
> They eten mast, hawes, and swich pounage,
> And dronken water of the colde welle.
>
> Yit nas the ground nat wounded with the plough,
> But corn up-sprong, unsowe of mannes hond,
> The which they gnodded and eete nat half ynough.
>
> (*F*, 5–11)

As A. V. C. Schmidt notes, "nat half ynough" indirectly condemns the excesses of the present;[14] so too and more subtly, "gnodden," a wittily vulgar verb that Chaucer uses only here, describing some primitive technique of rubbing or grinding, or perhaps simply gnawing corn straight from the stalk, illuminates the distance that the modern consciousness recounting this golden age possesses from such earlier modes of production and consumption.

The precise measure of such double-edged irony in the poem's rhetorical complexity, aureate diction, and detailed professional knowledge and nomenclature is elusive. I shall argue that its force—both its literary properties and its social and political implications—can be fully appreciated only in relation to a contemporary context of discussion about the decadent nature of contemporary uses of knowledge, a politically and socially charged context that critical discussions of the poem, and indeed of Chaucer's poetics, have so far not investigated.

Surveys of vocational or "practical" knowledge were common in the Middle Ages, although before the later fourteenth century usually in a more laudatory than condemning vein. So pertinent is this tradition to how Chaucer has changed Boethius's lyric that some contact with the tradition should be considered among the sources, direct or indirect, of Chaucer's poem. "What wonderful—one might say stupefying—advances has human industry made in the arts of weaving and building, of agriculture and navigation!" St. Augustine declared at the end of the *City of God*, in a eulogy to the rational capacities God has given us:

> How skilful the contrivances for catching, killing, or taming wild beasts! And for the injury of men, also, how many kinds of poisons, weapons, engines of destruction, have been invented,

> while for the preservation or restoration of health the appliances and remedies are infinite! To provoke appetite and please the palate, what a variety of seasonings have been concocted! To express and gain entrance for thoughts, what a multitude and variety of signs there are, among which speaking and writing hold the first place![15]

In the highly Aristotelian academic contexts of the thirteenth century and beyond, such modes of "mechanical" knowledge were ordered, systematized, and their purposes rendered more unequivocably praiseworthy—for Augustine's paean also registers his sense of the sins as well as virtues that such capacities make possible ("for the injury of men"; "to provoke appetite"; even "to express and gain entrance for thoughts" may not be strictly laudatory, given Augustine's pervasive uneasiness about intellectual pride and rhetorical facility). By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Boethius's description of Philosophia's dress, in tatters between Theorica and Practica, became a *locus classicus* for more sanguine scholastic presentations of the *ordo scientiarum*.[16] For scholastic writers, such knowledge—whose highest levels were, by no coincidence, defined as those taught in their own universities—was regarded as a treasure that could help return humankind to a near-perfect state. Vincent of Beauvais, using Augustine's comments as both preface and organizing guide, presented no critical comments in his survey of weaving, dyeing, jewelry, architecture, smithing, weapon-making, military arts, theatrical entertainment, wine-making, shipbuilding, sailing, trade, hunting, and plowing. Even while discussing alchemy, he only briefly considers whether it was "true" or "false."[17]

Such laudatory presentations of practical, "craft" knowledge emerged from the twelfth century on, perhaps, as Jacques Le Goff suggests, as part of the church's humane response, "affected by the evolution of public opinion," to the needs for social and spiritual legitimacy by a laity increasingly using such crafts and defining its professions around them. As George Ovitt notes, however, the hierarchy in these scholastic taxonomies of crafts and labor, from mechanical to spiritual forms, can also be seen to justify and deepen the religious orders' separation of their own professional labors from the "mechanical arts," constituting a division of labor and of intellectual spheres that reified the social distance between "intellectual" and "mechanical" arts, however much the latter were praised.[18]

Whatever the social logic of these positive presentations of the mechanical arts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they are not

in any case the direct views of the laborers so-described or their civic employers, as Steven Epstein salutarily reminds us. The evidence of civic labor contracts and legislation that Epstein surveys suggests no single outlook among those creating professional specialization and wage labor but instead predictable social differences in outlook, namely, "the necessity of work among the journeymen and apprentices" on the one hand, and "the relish with which masters and merchants created the new methods and institutions that produced sustained economic growth," on the other.[19]

When complaints against the lucrative professionalizing of knowledge do appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they are intensively focused only on the higher realms of intellectual labor, especially law and medicine; here, proximity to those generating the criticism—in kind of labor rather than simply physical nearness—seems to have bred the harshest criticisms. For instance, in the course of defining the ideal terms in which clerics might receive payments for teaching, canonists and exegetes were the first to mount criticisms against "selling God's gift of knowledge," a charge directed against those who were professional scholars and teachers like themselves, and seeking not to abolish the practice but simply to draw fine lines between appropriate and inappropriate concepts of it (payment for the *labor* of teaching was acceptable; payment for the *commodity* of knowledge, God's gift, was not).[20] The tradition of complaints and satire against lawyers on the same basis is similarly, at first at least, a product of the intellectual culture and institutions that produced lawyers.[21] Whether these attacks on the abuses of "applied" knowledge so close to the professions of the writers themselves should be considered what Freud called "the narcissicim of minor differences," or what Stanley Fish describes as the anti-professionalism at the heart of professionalism, the criticisms succeeded in generating a pejorative definition of "applied" knowledge when such pursuits approached the intellectual occupations of their critics.[22]

The situation was analogous when late-medieval urban and courtly writers wrote of the practices of crafts and professions as forms of intellectual labor from which their own modes of labor, as literary "makers" and, often, as other administrative and professional functionaries, were not removed by any vast distance.[23] Their descriptions of other urban and courtly arts and professions are often in some measure investigations into perverse uses of knowledge, on the part of those who, like Chaucer, inhabited and contributed to a world

in which knowledge was put visibly and often novelly to professional or vocational uses.[24] Chaucer's French courtly contemporary, Eustace Deschamps, for instance, also elaborating Boethius's "golden age," declared, "L'age premier fut ignorant," while the seventh [current] age was malicious, iniquitous, indolent, inconsistent, lazy, disloyal, and covetous, since it would not acknowledge those with virtue and learning—a gain of something more than ignorance but less than the ability to recognize and reward truly learned individuals like Deschamps himself. "Prince," his envoy concludes, "there is no knowledge except for evil and deceit."[25] An adjacent *balade* states that nowadays all the seven arts are "Fondé sur pure convoitise," since those possessing such arts take trouble mostly to calculate silver.[26]

At about the same time in England, in the midst of a sermon preached in the late 1380s lauding the proper labor of each social sphere, the sometime Merton scholar Thomas Wimbledon focused special criticism on those who directed their children and relatives to intellectual training with more immediately practical and remunerative goals than the moral and religious instruction that Wimbledon himself strove to carry out:

> Why . . . setten men here sones oþer here cosynus to scole? Wheþer for to gete hem grete auauncementis oþer to make hem þe betere to knowen how þey shulden serue God? . . . Why y praye ȝow putteþ men here sones raþer to lawe syuyl and to þe kyngis court to writen lettres or writis þan to philosophie oþer deuinite but for þey hopen þat þyse ocupacions shuld be euere menis to make hem grete in the world.[27]

Such origins of modern professionalistic, bureaucratic society may appear to us linked to middle-class, capitalist, and democratic political culture; yet it is crucial to recognize the diverse political and social charges these issues could carry in a period when a "middle class" political culture did not exist. As in the preceding centuries, social and institutional circumstance and point of view fundamentally shaped where and how such increasingly wide-spread criticisms of "practical" applications of knowledge were directed. Fourteenth-century criticisms of vocational or professionalized knowledge could be used to condemn, or defend, the authority of the clergy; such criticisms could be used to attack, or support, the absolute power of kings.

Thus John Wyclif's *De statu innocencie*, tentatively dated 1377, emphasizes the universally "rational" but "mechanically" and voca-

tionally innocent state of Edenic humanity in order, ultimately, to condemn the "lazy" and superfluous estate of the modern clergy.[28] Early humanity knew all the theory of the arts but none of the practice: they did not need agriculture or any mechanical arts since abundant fruits and vegetables would exist. Humanity also did not need the liberal arts such as logic, language and grammar, since it had been instructed by God to speak the natural language, Hebrew, and it did not need study in criminal or civil law. But while the first people slept "quiete et regulariter" (compare Chaucer's "in parfit quiete" . . . "in seurtee they slepte" [*F*, 44, 46]), God would grant them "informative dreams," and they would by this effortless means know all the theory of the seven arts plus medicine. Only with the Fall did humankind have to labor to learn the practice of these arts, and by this change much of the original theory, including the universal knowledge of Hebrew, was fragmented (*T*, 495–97).

In this last point about the rise of "mechanical" arts in postlapsarian humanity lies the principle for, perhaps even the direct or indirect source of, Chaucer's comparison of practical knowledge of the present against that of the furthest past. But Chaucer's work draws no positive political conclusion. Wyclif's prehistorical account, in contrast, ends earnestly and unself-critically with his pervasive agenda to deny modern ecclesiastical authority any right to temporal possessions or power: since labor in paradise was never fatiguing or tedious but included wandering and contemplation of creation along with reasonable governance of the lower animals, his treatise states, this shows that God hates laziness; and thus the narrow spiritual duties of the modern clergy show how their estate has degenerated, by accepting a professional duty to be lazy prohibited by God (*T*, 529). That Wyclif was not only a member of the clergy but an absentee holder of several benefices—a "pluralist," if a poorly endowed one—never impinges on his argument; and there is no trace of historical humility when he proudly referred in his treatise to his own response "when I was in the logic school" to a question on whether beasts in paradise would die, although such training in logic is a sure sign of his fallen condition according to his own proposition (*T*, 511).[29]

Wyclif's treatise may or may not have found its way into Chaucer's circles. A schematic popularization of Wyclif's thought, however, was made notoriously public near the end of Richard II's reign. The "Twelve Conclusions" crudely summarize many of the basic historical premises of Wyclif's *De statu innocencie*; in 1395 they were

posted in English on the doors of Westminster Hall and St. Paul's Cathedral. Some of the Conclusions were said by one late-fourteenth century academic to have been circulated "*ab olim*" ("for a long time"), while the "Twelve Conclusions" conclude by stating that "þese materis . . . ben in another book longli declarid, and manie othere mo al in oure langage," although that book has not come to light.[30]

I am not insisting that Chaucer's *Former Age* was written with either Wyclif's Latin work or the "Twelve Conclusions" in view, although both are possible. Rather, I argue only that, although the general tradition is old, the works present different responses to a newly broadened and intensified contemporary perception and discussion of practical and vocational uses of knowledge, perceived as an acutely modern corruption of learning that—depending on the point of view and social and professional location of the writer—appears to be in the service of clerical deception, mercenary individualism, or authoritarian power and presumption. A "premodernist" critique of "modern" corruptions of learning offered a highly mobile discourse in the volatile political, ecclesiological, and social debates of the fourteenth century. If Wimbledon's sermon attacks the worldly individualism of lawyers, courtiers, and royal administrators, the "Conclusions" and *De statu innocencie* attack abuses of knowledge primarily manifested by the clergy. The "Conclusions" attack the clergy especially for the historical decadence of their understanding, from their downfall into materialist greed after the Constantine Donation to their historically deluded worship of the instruments of Jesus' death ("for if þe rode tre, naylis, and þe spere and þe coroune of God schulde ben so holiche worchipid, þanne were Iudas lippis, qwoso mythte hem gete, a wondir gret relyk" [*C*, 105–8]). The tenth "Conclusion," however, opens its concerns out beyond the clergy to inveigh against "manslaute be batayle" as a deadly sin, and more particularly the ability of great lords to buy pardons from the church for killing for profit "in fer londis" (*C*, 149). And the twelfth and last "Conclusion" condemns certain kinds of "mechanical" knowledge, declaring that "goldsmethis and armoreris and alle manere craftis nout nedful to man . . . schulde ben distroyed for þe encres of uertu" (*C*, 168–70). The work concludes by reversing Wyclif's historical perspective on fallen knowledge, claiming that such crafts were necessary only "in þe elde lawe" while "þe newe testament hath voydid þese and manie others" (*C*, 171). The Edenic past is thus recast as an agenda for an apostolic moment yet to come, when

corrupt professional learning of all kinds might be destroyed or transcended by "þe encres of uertu."

Chaucer's *Former Age*, as is well known, departs from any known source to state, "Unforged was the hauberk and the plate" (*F*, 49), and to deliver its final, bitter condemnation of modern "Doublenesse, and tresoun, and envye, / Poyson, manslawhtre, and modre in sondry wyse" (*F*, 62–63). Whether these deliberately support Wyclif's treatise or the "Twelve Conclusions," or merely parallel or anticipate them, cannot be known. What is clear is that Chaucer's work avoids the positive political claims of either Wyclif's treatise or its popularized forms like the "Conclusions." Indeed, in the context of all such earnest proposals for social revolution and the obliteration of corrupt, practical and professional knowledge, Chaucer's poem's self-indicting features become more pointed. It ends not with a demand for ecclesiastical and social reform based on "þe perfectiun of þe firste begynningge" (*C*, 177), but with a despairing description of the "doublenesse" to which all society, and indeed all intellect, is now subject, leading readers, perhaps especially the educated, expert wielders of specialized knowledge, into a consideration of their shared fallen circumstances and fallen consciousness.

Chaucer's work thus defuses the political agenda of reformist works like the "Twelve Conclusions." Yet if *The Former Age* resists reformist or revolutionary optimisim, it also offers a rebuttal to those who would deny reformers like the Lollards the trenchancy of their disenchanted vision of history. This is clear when *The Former Age* is considered next to another late-fourteenth-century courtly work, a response to the "Twelve Conclusions" written in 1396. The *Liber* of the Dominican Roger Dymmok, written by the son of one and the brother of another court Champion of England and presented to Richard II upon his return from Ireland, works out in careful detail the entire historical logic of the Church and its powers, quoting in English each of the "Conclusions" before paraphrasing and rebutting them in Latin. This work presents a macronic texture that resembles the early, "Boethian" manuscript of *The Former Age*, assuming on the part of its audience a similar degree of Latin literacy and learning as well as a similar interest in English writings, however charged with political and social suspicion Dymmok's form of such interest might be.[31]

For by a close but peculiar exegesis, Dymmok's work explicates the "Twelve Conclusions" as implicitly anti-royalist as well as anti-ecclesiastic. None of the "Conclusions" overtly attacks the king—

indeed the chronicler, Thomas Walsingham, declared that some of the king's own chamber knights were responsible for writing the "Conclusions," and the second "Conclusion" implies that the king should be more powerful than bishops, who give "crownis in caracteris in stede of whyte hartys," the latter the livery symbol of Richard II (*C*, 23).[32] But in rebutting the "Conclusions," Dymmok took the opportunity to show how defending practical uses of learning can also mean defending the king's absolute power. Refuting the "Conclusion" against goldsmiths and armorers, for instance, Dymmok argued that the excess such crafts produced was necessary for those of high rank to present themselves as more powerful than their subjects, and he added that these arts were especially needful because they allowed kings to construct noble buildings to display their opulence, and reveal "how high such rulers stand above the populace both in wisdom and power," terrifying the people so that they would never think they could prevail over them.[33] The further implication of such a response to the twelfth "conclusion," of course, would also be that the king's interests depended on the "wisdom" of counsellors like Dymmok who could help the king erect such a citadel of terror.

In 1396 Dymmok's manifesto might be relatively tolerable to a courtly audience; by 1398, when Richard had acted on Dymmok's principles of monarchy—building himself into a menacingly autocratic position, relying on a small group of trusted advisers, and using flimsy legal constructions to depredate many communities and nobles, such as his "questions to the judges" first produced in 1387 and repeated to construct the case of treason against the Lords Appellant in 1397—such sentiments would have a disturbing ring indeed.[34] Arguing that Chaucer's lyric was written at this late point in the poet's life, John Norton-Smith has suggested that Chaucer's conclusion to *The Former Age* refers directly to these final years of Richard's reign:

> Yit was not Jupiter the likerous,
> That first was fader of delicacye,
> Come in this world; ne Nembrot, desirous
> To regne, had nat maad his toures hye.
> Allas, allas, now may men wepe and crye!
>
> (*F*, 56–60)

In the context not just of Richard's abuses of power but also of Dymmok's justification of building terrifying royal structures (*edificia principum*; compare Chaucer's "toures hye"), in whose construction

professional skills and autocratic royal powers would be combined, Chaucer's words would carry sharper point, attacking not just tyranny but practical and professional knowledge in service to tyranny and, by further implication, attacking courtly apologists like Dymmok who used their learning to justify such power—who built, as it were, its ideological bastions.[35]

Whatever its relation to these works might be, in treating such implications of "applied" and specialized learning Chaucer's work would have sustained neither the Lollards' nostalgia and idealism nor Dymmok's grim claims for its political benefits. Chaucer's politics of practical learning extended the logic but evaded the political conclusions of both extremes in the late fourteenth century. His work thereby epitomizes the range of consciousness perhaps most difficult to delineate in the later Middle Ages: not subsumable to a specific ideological agenda like the Lollards but participating in many of their points of view, and created, indeed, out of a similar "disenchanted" perspective on which late-medieval urban and courtly professionalism and anti-professionalism alike were based.

For similar reasons, *The Former Age* does not rest entirely easily within either of its two fifteenth-century manuscript settings, the one emphatically defining a learned and Latinate context, the other a primarily vernacular setting of direct advice and complaint. On the one hand, as noted above, the "Boethian" manuscript roughly resembles Dymmok's macronic work and perhaps even speaks to a fifteenth-century extension of the same kind of learned courtly audience, clerical and non-clerical, whose authority and social position were intertwined with the Latin traditions from which they contemplated and explicated vernacular writings. Such an investment in the power of learning Chaucer's lyric manifestly challenges and laments. On the other hand, the contents of the vernacular manuscript of complaints and moral advice—with its two translations of Cato's moral *Distichs*, Lydgate's warning on not paying tithes in "The Legend of St. Austin at Compton" and Lydgate's complaint about women's fashions in "A dyte of womenhis hornys"—imply a faith in the efficacy of complaint and social advice and instruction that is altogether lacking from *The Former Age,* where redemption from a history that has shaped and generated one's historical vision, even one's diction, remains far to seek.

The latter vernacular manuscript, however, does contain a work with some similarities to *The Former Age* in theme and in unstability of satire and self-satire, although to note the similarities also serves

to emphasize the softening and sentimentalizing that these features underwent in the fifteenth-century, with its wider civic literary audiences.[36] The short work, "Alas, *quid eligam ignoro*" ("I know not what I should choose"—only this refrain is in Latin), is a whimsical complaint about the difficulties of choosing a profession, presenting soliloquies of first one then another speaker who irresolutely weigh what learning they should acquire and hence what profession they should choose, poised between adopting a religious rule, becoming a canon or a civil lawyer, training to be a doctor or a notary. The outcome is inconclusive—the two narrators agree simply to complain together—and the poem displays throughout a near-Goliardic laziness of both narrators of this work (most likely by Lydgate, since the writer's "blak cote" is obliquely mentioned in the envoy, although the author is not identified in the manuscript). Yet the poem offers a version, albeit a weak and comically inflected one, of the tightly wound and self-indicting ironies about professional and applied knowledge in *The Former Age*:

> ffor whan I was determined fyrst to go to scole
> It was to me ryght lothe by cause of castigacion
> ȝit me thowght ageynward elles shuld I be a fole
> Which to all my frendes shuld be diffamacion
> Thus toward and froward I had persuasion
> Vtterly vnknowyng the best for me to do
> Wherefore thus I said havyng noo consolacion
> Alas / *Quid eligam ignoro*.[37]

The only answer in this poem, when the narrators agree to complain together, is shared irresolution and shared anti-professionalism; such a posture of collective, anti-professional contemporary self-consciousness is implicitly generated in the *Former Age* ("Allas, allas, now may men wepe and crye! / For in oure dayes nis but covetyse" [*F*, 60–61]), but never so blandly endorsed in Chaucer's poem as a "solution." Yet as the late-fourteenth-century's debates about the practical applications of knowledge reveal, so this mid-fifteenth-century poem helps us see that Chaucer's poem takes up and hones to a uniquely sharp edge the ironies of a learned satire of specialized learning, while pointing toward the potential for community and participation in this precarious critical outlook.

Thus even if the sequence of late fourteenth-century texts I have surveyed do not closely contextualize Chaucer's lyric—even if it was not a response to Dymmok's response to the Lollards' adaptation of Wyclif—this context still reveals how the lyric spoke to the issue of

the powers and the dangers of professionalism and applied learning being elaborated and embraced in many different quarters in Chaucer's period and, with less sense of disturbance, during the half century beyond. The intricacies and implications of Chaucer's ironies and self-ironies in *The Former Age*, elusive as their furthest reaches remain, are most visible when pursued out to these polemical, literary and social horizons, leading back to a vibrantly learned and darkly self-conscious poem, and to the untraditional, secular, but not revolutionary social callings of Chaucer and a significant number of his late-medieval readers.[38]

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NOTES

[1] For descriptions of the manuscripts at Cambridge, University Library (MSS Ii.3.21 and Hh.4.12), see *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, 5 vols. (Cambridge: Syndics of the Univ. Press, 1856), 3:292–95, 424–45. The English sections of the first part of Ii.3.21 have been transcribed and printed in *Chaucer's 'Boece,' Englisht from Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii Philosophiæ Consolationis Libri Quinque*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, The Chaucer Society Publications 75 (London: N. Trübner and Co., 1886). Most of the poems in Hh.4.12, many by Lydgate, have been printed from this manuscript or others; for publication information see Carleton Brown and Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1943), hereafter *IMEV*, and Rossell Hope Robbins and John L. Cutler, *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965), hereafter *Supp.*, as indicated: Benedict Burgh, translations of the "Liber Catonis" (*IMEV* 854 and 3955); Lydgate, "Stans puer ad mensam" (*IMEV* 2233 and *Supp.*); Lydgate, "Legend of St. Austin at Compton" (*IMEV* 1875 and *Supp.*); *The Former Age*; Richard Rolle, "Quia amore langueo" (*IMEV* 4056, where this manuscript is erroneously identified as "Hh.1.12"); Lydgate, "Hors, Goose and Shepe" (*IMEV* 658 and *Supp.*); Lydgate, "Fabula duorum mercatorum" (*IMEV* 1481 and *Supp.*); Lydgate, "Chorle and Bird" (*IMEV* 2784 and *Supp.*); Lydgate, "Consulo quisque eris" (*IMEV* 1294); Lydgate, "A dyte of womenhis hornys" (*IMEV* 2625); "In cruce sum pro te" (fragment of a verse from the *Fasciculus Morum*; see *IMEV* 2689); Lydgate, "Midsomer Rose" (*IMEV* 1865 and *Supp.*); "The Instability of Man in this Life" (*IMEV* 3504 and *Supp.*; this copy not listed); "The Lamentacioun of the Duchess of Gloucester" (*IMEV* 3720); "Alas, *Quid eligam ignoro*" (*IMEV* 655 and *Supp.*); *The Parliament of Fowls*. The penultimate poem, "Alas, *Quid eligam ignoro*," is discussed below.

[2] Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).

[3] George B. Pace, "The True Text of 'The Former Age,'" *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 363–67; *The Minor Poems, Part I*, vol. 5 of *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Pace and Alfred Davis (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 91–97. Six copies of the *ABC* are found in the prose translation of Deguilleville's *Pelerinaige de la vie humaine*: see *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 1185. All citations of

Chaucer that I present are from this edition; *The Former Age* is hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line, and abbreviated *F*.

[4] John Norton-Smith, "Chaucer's *Etas Prima*," *Medium Ævum* 32 (1963): 117–24; L. O. Purdon, "Chaucer's Use of *Woad* in *The Former Age*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 25 (1989): 216–19.

[5] Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 65 (1990): 59–86. Of course, this rubric merely identifies a procedure whose principles, broadly understood, are prevalent in much current literary criticism of late-medieval materials.

[6] "Non Bacchica munera norant / Liquido confundere melle / Nec lucida vellera Serum / Tyrio miscere veneno" (*De consolatione philosophiae*, bk. 2, metron 5, lines 6–9, from *Boethius: The Theological Tractates, The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978], 206); Ovid's one reference to such ignorance is as follows: "nullaque mortales praeter sua litora norant" ["men knew no shores except their own"] (*Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. Frank Justus Miller, 2 vols. [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971], 1:8, book 1, line 96); compare *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1966), 2:4–6, lines 8325–424.

[7] Arthur B. Ferguson, *Utter Antiquity: Perceptions of Prehistory in Renaissance England* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), 61–83.

[8] See, *inter alia*, *General Prologue*, lines 94–5, 106, 130, 210–11, 257–58, 325–27, 382, 401–4, 417–18, 476, 490, 562, 594–96, 602, 608, 610–12, 642, 652, 691–92, 709–14.

[9] Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Complaint and the* General Prologue *to the* Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), 12, 13. Note Mann's important statement: "there is nothing [in the previous tradition of estates satire] like Chaucer's continued insistence on the assembly of skills, duties and jargon that characterises an estate . . . Chaucer is concerned to develop certain implications of the estates form—its stress on specialisation, on the skills, duties and values which separate one class of society from another—rather than remain content with its traditional aims of moral criticism" (15).

[10] Lee Patterson, "Perpetual Motion: Alchemy and the Technology of the Self," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 15 (1993): 25–57, quotations at 55 and 52. In a seminal discussion of Chaucer's "voices" as loci of interactions between subjects and institutional structures, H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., has more briefly and broadly defined the period's acknowledgement of the human agency behind all cultural structures and institutions (*The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990], 26–28).

[11] For important discussions of the narrator of the *General Prologue*, see especially E. Talbot Donaldson, "Chaucer the Pilgrim," in *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1983): 1–12; Mann, 17–37; and Leicester, 383–417; for a trenchant discussion of the characteristics of Chaucer's narrators, but like the others excluding the lyrics, see David Lawton, *Chaucer's Narrators* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985). Some useful discussions of the implications of the lyrics' "voices," emphasizing the increasing individuation of their speakers and the increasing specificity of the lyrics' demonstrations of their "universal" truths (but thereby implying a chronology to fit these theses), are scattered through Jay Ruud's *"Many a Song and Many a Leccherous Lay": Tradition and Individuality in Chaucer's*

Lyric Poetry, Garland Studies in Medieval Poetry 6 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992), esp., 3–25, 99–100, 185–86.

[12] On hand-mills as a point of social tension between peasants and lords in the fourteenth century, and finally as the focus of rebellion at St. Albans in 1381, see Marc Bloch, "The Advent and Triumph of the Watermill," in *Land and Work in Medieval Europe: Selected Essays*, trans, J. E. Anderson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1967), 136–68, esp. 156–69; also Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics 27 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 158–92.

[13] See the important essay by A. V. C. Schmidt, "Chaucer and the Golden Age," *Essays in Criticism* 26 (1976): 99–115, which, however, dismisses any possibility of irony in the poem (113).

[14] Schmidt, 106.

[15] *De civitate Dei*, 22.24, in *The City of God by Saint Augustine*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), 852.

[16] Thus William of Conches takes Boethius's passage as implying a student's progress from basic practical knowledge up to the most theoretical, theology; William of Aragon takes it as referring to the ranking of knowledge from grammar to theology: see A. J. Minnis, "Aspects of the Medieval French and English Traditions of the *De Consolationis Philosophiae*, in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 320; on medieval commentary on this Boethian locus see also Michael Evans, "Allegorical Women and Practical Men: The Iconography of the *Artes* Reconsidered," in *Medieval Women*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 320–21. For a select history of categorizations of the "mechanical arts," see George Ovitt, Jr., *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1987), 107–36.

[17] *Speculum doctrinale*, 11.1, ptd. in *Speculum quadruplex, sive speculum maius: Naturale, doctrinale, morale, historiale* (Douai, 1624), vol. 2, cols. 993–1072.

[18] Jacques Le Goff, "Trades and Professions as Represented in Medieval Confessors' Manuals," and "Labor, Techniques, and Craftsmen in the Value Systems of the Early Middle Ages (Fifth to Tenth Centuries)," in *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1982), 71–86 and 107–21, esp. 83–86 and 114–21; quotation at 117; Ovitt, 137–63, esp. 163.

[19] Steven A. Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), 186–90.

[20] Gaines Post, Kimon Giocarinis, and Richard Kay, "The Medieval Heritage of a Humanistic Ideal: 'Scientia donum Dei est, unde vendi non potest,'" *Traditio* 11 (1955): 195–234.

[21] See Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (1978; Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), ch. 9, esp. 225–33.

[22] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), ch. 5, 68; also *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1951), ch. 6, 53–56; Stanley Fish, "Anti-Professionalism," *New Literary History* 17 (1985): 89–108; also "Being Interdisciplinary is So Very Hard to Do," in *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and it's a Good Thing, Too* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994): 231–42.

[23] A fundamental study of the administrative careers of Chaucer and some of his poetic contemporaries is T. F. Tout's "Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century," *Speculum* 4 (1929): 365–89; important recent studies that treat the issue of the careers and immediate social contexts of late fourteenth-century poets are Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980), and Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

[24] Mann draws some parallels on this focus in estates satire between Chaucer and Langland (164). I explore further aspects of Gower's and Langland's relations to professionalistic or "applied" knowledge in "Gower in his Most Learned Role and the Peasants' Revolt of 1381," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993 for 1990), 329–47; and "*Piers Plowman* and the Schools," *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 6 (1992): 89–107.

[25] Eustache Deschamps, *Oeuvres complètes*, Société des anciens textes Français, 11 vols. (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot et Cie., 1887), *Balade* 936, 5:147.

[26] Deschamps, *Balade* 937, 5:148–50.

[27] *Wimbledon's Sermon: Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue: A Middle English Sermon of the Fourteenth Century*, ed. Ione Kemp Knight (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1967), 72–73.

[28] John Wyclif, *Tractatus de mandatis divinis, Tractatus de statu innocencie*, ed. Johann Loserth and F. D. Matthew (London: Wyclif Society, 1922); for the date, see xxxi–xxxii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page, and abbreviated *T*.

[29] On Wyclif's benefices, see K. B. McFarlane, *John Wycliffe and the Beginnings of English Nonconformity* (London: English Universities Press, Ltd., 1952), 25–31; A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 3:2103–4.

[30] For a critical text and discussion of the "Conclusions," see Anne Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), 24–29 with notes on 150–55; this quotation at lines 173–75. Hereafter passages from this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text by line, and abbreviated *C*. For the evidence that some of the "Conclusions" might have circulated earlier (*ab olim*), see Margaret Harvey, *Solutions to the Schism: A Study of Some English Attitudes, 1378–1409*, Kirchengeschichtliche Quellen und Studien 12 (Eos: Verlag der Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 1983), 74.

[31] H. S. Cronin, ed., *Rogeri Dymmok Liber contra XII errores et hereses Lollardorum*, Wyclif Society (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1922).

[32] See Henry Thomas Riley, ed., *Historia Anglicana*, Rolls Series 28:1 (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864), 2:216; Hudson, 151–52.

[33] "Et quod hoc competit talibus dominis, qui populum habent gubernare, ostendit Philosophus (VI *Politicorum*), ad incuciendum metum populis, ne nimis faciliter insurgant contra suos superiores. Cum enim talia subtilia et fɔrcia populi et pulcra prospiciunt edificia principum, ipsos opulentos et industrios reputabunt, et tantum in potencia et sapiencia populum excellere, quod inpossible reputabunt contra eos preualere" ("And that this [building towering and sumptuous buildings for themselves] is suitable for such lords who have a people to govern, the Philosopher shows [*Politics*, book 6], [stating that it is] for inciting fear in the people, lest they far too easily rebel against their superiors. For when the people look up at such subtle and strong and beautiful edifices of princes, they deem that

those princes are rich and capable, and so much do [the princes] tower over the people in power and wisdom, that [the people] judge it impossible to prevail against them") (Dymmok, 293–94).

[34] See esp. Anthony Tuck, *Richard II and the English Nobility* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974): 187–225; May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century: 1307–1399*, Oxford History of England 5 (1959; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991): 488–97.

[35] It should, however, be noted that the common claim that Richard used "blank charters" to pillage the entire realm, which Norton-Smith invokes (124), has been shown to be an exaggeration, although Richard's actual economic depredations were not very far from this: the counties of London and sixteen other counties in the south-east were required to appoint proctors who "sealed charters on behalf of their counties submitting themselves and their goods to the king's pleasure, giving him *carte blanche* to do what he wished to them" (Tuck, 197).

[36] On this aspect of Chaucer's fifteenth-century reception see Lerer, esp. chs. 1–3, and Paul Strohm's essay, "Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience and the Narrowing of the 'Chaucer Tradition,'" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 4 (1982): 3–32.

[37] Printed in *Cambridge Middle English Lyrics*, ed. Henry A. Person, rev. ed. (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1962), 41–49, lines 17–24.

[38] An early version of this essay was presented at the 1994 meeting of the New Chaucer Society Convention in Dublin, Ireland, in a session organized by Alfred David; a later version was presented at the University of Western Ontario, 2 March 1996. I am grateful to the organizers and audiences of both occasions, and to Winthrop Wetherbee and the readers of *ELH* for their trenchant comments.