PROJECT MUSE®

"His guttys wer out shake": Illness and Indigence in
Lydgate's *Letter to Gloucester* and *Fabula duorum mercatorum*

Lisa H. Cooper

Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 30, 2008, pp. 303-334 (Article)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.0.0019>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/268763>

“His guttys wer out shake”:

Illness and Indigence in Lydgate’s *Letter to Gloucester* and *Fabula duorum mercatorum*

Lisa H. Cooper
University of Wisconsin–Madison

The term poetry . . . can be considered synonymous with expenditure; it in fact signifies, in the most precise way, creation by means of loss.

—Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure”

SOMETIME AFTER 1431, or so the generally accepted timeline has it, John Lydgate wrote to his patron Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and asked him for money. The monk and poet of Bury St. Edmunds had been, at Humphrey’s request, hard at work writing the *Fall of Princes*—the poem that would by 1438 become a nine-book encyclopedia of noble tragedy—and he found himself short of funds.¹ It was, he

I presented an early version of this project at the 2006 ACMRS conference “Poverty and Prosperity” at Arizona State University, and thank Mark Cruse for his hospitality and intellectual generosity there. I also owe thanks to Andrea Denny-Brown for spending time and energy on my work at the expense of her own, and I am very grateful to the two anonymous readers for *SAC* for their many helpful comments and suggestions. The greatest debt I have incurred in writing this essay is to Lynn Festa; her gift to me of many a brilliant insight significantly enriched what would have otherwise been a much more impoverished study.

¹My epigraph is from Georges Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 116–29; rpt. in *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 167–81, quotation on p. 171. For a review of Lydgate’s career, see Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449): A Bio-Bibliography*, English Literary Studies 71 (Victoria: University of Victoria, 1997); on the *Letter*, see p. 33. On the uncertain chronological relation of the *Letter* and *Fall*, see Eleanor Prescott Hammond, “Poet and Patron in the *Fall of Princes*: Lydgate and Humphrey of Gloucester,” *Anglia* 38 (1914): 131–36; and *John Lydgate: Poems*, ed. John Norton-Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 114–16. For the important corrective that nothing in the *Letter* explicitly suggests that Lydgate is asking for payment for the *Fall*, see Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 156. In this essay, I am concerned more with the *Letter* as a plea for payment per se rather than with its precise connection to the longer poem. On the more general “petitionary intention” of much fourteenth- and fifteenth-century autobiographical verse and the fictionalizing of that intention as a narrative

explained in the epistolary poem known as the *Letter to Gloucester*, a matter of life and death: without the duke's speedy attention and assistance, someone (or rather, as his poem suggested, *something*) would go the way of all flesh. "Riht myhty prynce, and it be your wille," he began,

Condescende leiser for to take
 To seen the content of this litil bille,
 Which whan I wrot, myn hand I felte quake.
 Tokyn of mornyng, weryd clothys blake,
 Cause my purs was falle in gret rerage,
 Lynyng outward, his guttys wer out shake,
 Oonly for lak of plate and of coignage.²

The humor of this situation—a poet dressed in mourning weeds for his sick wallet—is countered to some extent by the rather graphic image on which it depends, that of a purse-turned-body displayed to least advantage. Not just "lyght" like the bag addressed in "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse" (c. 1399–1400), or "seeke" from loss of "stuf," like that owned by the speaker of Hoccleve's "La Male Regle" (c. 1405–6), Lydgate's mortally ill purse has been turned inside-out, its "guttys" violently deprived of all content.³ The goal of this essay is likewise to

strategy, see J. A. Burrow, "The Poet as Petitioner," *SAC* 3 (1981): 61–75, quotation on p. 62.

²*The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II: Secular Poems*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS o.s. 192 (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), pp. 665–67, lines 1–8. All further quotations from the *Letter* will be from this edition, cited parenthetically by line number. The poem survives in seven manuscripts: London, British Library MS Harley 2255 (the basis for the EETS edition), MS Harley 2251, MS Additional 34360, MS Lansdowne 699; Leiden, University Library MS Vossius 9; Cambridge, Magdalene College MS Pepys 2011; and New York, Pierpont Morgan MS M.4.

³Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Complaint of Chaucer to His Purse," *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), line 3; Thomas Hoccleve, "La Male Regle," in *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall and I. Gollancz, 1892, rev. ed. Jerome Mitchell and A. I. Doyle, EETS e.s. 61 (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), lines 409, 349. All further quotations of these poets are from these editions. It is worth noting that Chaucer's "Purse" is unusual in his poetry for its personification of the object as a human being; in the *Canterbury Tales*, by contrast, bags and wallets never figure whole bodies, but only single body parts (see, for example, III.44b and VI.945). This is typical of Middle English generally, in whose anatomical lexicon "purse" most often refers to the scrotum (though Alison's "purs of lether" in *The Miller's Tale* [I.3250] and the "purs" of the wife in *The Shipman's Tale* [VII.248] are instead suggestive of the female genitalia). See *MED*, s.v. *purs(e)*, 4a; and Juhanni Norri, *Names of Body Parts in English, 1400–1500* (Tuusula: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1998), pp. 179, 229, 245, and 387. Chaucer's "Purse" was almost certainly a model for Lydgate's *Letter*, and the two are found together in three manuscripts:

"out shake" the *Letter* for all that its central bodily metaphor is worth (though hopefully less violently and with less tragic result), and to do so by reading it alongside another poem that Lydgate is believed to have composed in the same period, the *Fabula duorum mercatorum* [The Story of the Two Merchants].⁴ Before outlining my argument, it will be useful immediately to proffer a summary of both poems, acknowledging from the outset that at sixty-four lines arranged in eight stanzas, the *Letter* is much shorter than the *Fabula* (which runs to 910 lines in 130 stanzas), and that my description and subsequent analysis of the two works will by necessity be correspondingly weighted. But what may look in what follows like a focus on the details of the *Fabula* is not at all intended to imply the lesser significance of the *Letter*; instead, I hope the attention I pay the *Fabula* will allow us to see the details of the shorter poem afresh, and as participating in a discursive network that extends beyond the rather compact showcase in which they appear.

After its opening plea for attention, its reference to the writer's funereal attire, and its striking image of the gutted money-bag, in its second stanza the *Letter* relates the speaker's unsuccessful search for a doctor able to do something more with his treatment than further ravage the wallet. In the third through sixth stanzas, the financial crisis of poet and purse is elaborated by images of stalled ships that, lacking wind in their sails, cannot make land in the purse's empty harbor; of coins that never arrive from the mint; of weights or scales thrown out of balance; of the purse as a feverish patient; of eclipses and alchemical elements; and above all of the continued darkness and dryness plaguing the bag's inte-

British Library MS Harley 2251, MS Additional 34360, and Morgan MS M.4 (in which last codex they appear consecutively, with Lydgate's poem preceding Chaucer's [ffols. 75v-77]). Yet Hoccleve's description of the parallel suffering of his body and purse in "La Male Regle" is in fact a closer analogue (see lines 337-38, 349-50, 409, 446-48). On Chaucer's petition, see especially Paul Strohm, "Saving the Appearances: Chaucer's 'Purse' and the Fabrications of the Lancastrian Claim," chapter 4 of his *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 75-94; on Hoccleve's "La Male Regle," see Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), pp. 36-43.

⁴ MacCracken, ed., *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II*, pp. 486-516. All further references are to this edition by line number. For a more recent but unpublished edition, see Pamela Farvolden, "A Critical Edition of John Lydgate's *Fabula Duorum Mercatorum*" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Alberta, 1993). The *Fabula* is found in six manuscripts, five of which also contain the *Letter*: these are British Library MS Harley 2255 (the basis for the EETS edition), MS Harley 2251, MS Additional 34360, and MS Lansdowne 699, as well as Leiden, University Library MS Vossius 9 (the sixth, not containing the *Letter*, is Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poetry 32).

rior, which awaits the relief that only a bright influx of gold and silver can provide. The envoy of the last two stanzas briefly chastises the poem itself for its impertinence (“why art thou nat ashamyd, / So malapertly to shewe out thy constreynt?” [49–50]) but then relapses into lament, excusing its outspokenness on the metaphorical grounds of a poverty now figured as a drained barrel, a consumptive illness, a patch of barren soil, and finally as an empty sanctuary into which God is willed at the verses’ end to send salvation in the form of the “cleer soun of plate and of coynage” (64).

The more extended narrative of the *Fabula* originates in a widespread tale that first appeared in Western Europe in Petrus Alphonsus’s twelfth-century *Disciplina Clericalis* and remained popular through the early modern period. It is the story of two merchants, one from Egypt and the other from Baldac (in Syria), who, sight unseen, become close friends after each learns of the other’s outstanding reputation for honest dealing.⁵ Eventually, the Syrian merchant visits his friend in Egypt, where he falls desperately in love with his host’s fiancée. Unwilling to betray their friendship, he takes no action regarding the girl and so falls into a life-threatening lovesickness, a melancholy from which he is saved only when the Egyptian learns what has caused the illness and then cures the Syrian by giving him his beloved to wed, along with her dowry. The Syrian and his new wife return home, where they begin to live happily ever after. The Egyptian, however, now has some bad luck in his business affairs. Losing all his wealth, he finds himself destitute, and so decides to travel to Baldac to ask his friend for help. Upon arriving in Syria, he takes overnight shelter in a temple. That same evening, a murder is committed near where the impoverished man sleeps, and so

⁵See *The Scholar’s Guide: A Translation of the Twelfth-Century “Disciplina Clericalis” of Pedro Alfonso*, trans. Joseph Ramon Jones and John Esten Keller (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1969), pp. 38–41. As Robert Stretter observes, versions of the tale are also found in the *Alphabetum Narrationem* (#57), *Jacob’s Well* (chap. 13) and the *Gesta Romanorum* (#171) as well as *Decameron* 10.8 and Thomas Elyot’s *The Book Called the Governor* (II.12). See his “Rewriting Perfect Friendship in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and Lydgate’s *Fabula Duorum Mercatorum*,” *ChauR* 37 (2003): 234–52 (242). The two protagonists are merchants in the original narrative from the *Disciplina* as well as in the *Alphabetum*, *Jacob’s Well*, and Lydgate’s *Fabula*; in the others, they are either knights (the *Gesta*) or young noblemen (the *Decameron* and Elyot’s *Book*). Of those starring merchants, Lydgate’s is by far the most elaborate and the only version in verse; unless noted otherwise, the textual details I examine closely in what follows are entirely his. It is worth noting, however, that much of what I argue about the economic themes of the *Fabula* is in some sense latent in Petrus Alphonsus’s brief narrative and ripe for development along precisely the lines Lydgate chose more than three centuries later.

eager is he to die in order to escape his misery that he confesses falsely to the crime and is condemned to death. Just as the sentence is pronounced, however, the Syrian merchant passes by and recognizes his friend; to save him, he claims to have committed the murder himself. This generous deed moves the real killer to confess the truth to the watching crowd, the king pardons all three men, and the Syrian merchant divides all his wealth with the Egyptian in order to restore him to prosperity.

As can already be observed from these two summaries alone, despite their differing genres and disparate lengths the *Letter* and *Fabula* are structured by a remarkably similar series of inversions and (in the case of the *Letter*, implied or desired rather than actualized) reversals: health is overturned by illness and is then recovered, wealth disintegrates into penury and is then restored. To take note of the shared form and content of both poems, as I will do in some detail below, is to do something more than remark yet again upon Lydgate's penchant for recycling words and images across his extensive oeuvre. It is rather to see one of the ways that the most prominent English poet of the age negotiated in his verse the anxieties attendant upon two different forms of socioeconomic exchange—that of patronage, on the one hand, and commerce, on the other.⁶ My larger argument in what follows is that beyond their basic structural similarity, the verse petition and the longer romance operate as thematic or, better, as *economic* inversions of the other. By this I mean that in its attempt to manage the patron-client system of late medieval literary production in its speaker's best interest, the *Letter* affects a posture of commercialism: it implies by virtue of its predomi-

⁶The still-standard account of literary patronage in this period is Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*; see also Karl Julius Holzknacht, *Literary Patronage in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Collegiate Press, 1923; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1966). On what he calls Lydgate's "fables of patronage"—the genre into which the *Letter* might be said to fit—see Seth Lerer, "Writing Like the Clerk: Laureate Poets and the Aureate World," chapter 1 of his *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 22–56; quotation on p. 61. For the caveat that "a poetic output so enormous and varied [as Lydgate's] cannot adequately be explained in terms of patronage," see Paul Strohm, "Hoccleve, Lydgate, and the Lancastrian Court," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 640–61 (652). On the impact of printing upon patronage and the literary market, see Alison V. Scott, "Marketing the Gift: Jonson, Multiple Patronage, and Strategic Exchange," *Parergon* 20.2 (2003): 135–59, and her full-length study, *Selfish Gifts: The Politics of Exchange and English Courtly Literature, 1580–1628* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006).

nantly mercantile metaphors that the poet is *not* a petitioner caught in the subservient role of literary beggar, but instead a kind of maker and merchant rightfully owed payment for the goods he has provided a customer.⁷ By contrast, the *Fabula*—a tale starring two players skilled in just the sort of transactions toward which the *Letter* hopefully gestures—employs the language of courtly reciprocity to transform a commercial relationship into one reminiscent of patron and client (roles taken by each merchant in turn over the course of the tale's carefully balanced narrative).

In short, the two poems stand in chiasmic relation to each other: the *Letter* playfully but not unpointedly tries to refigure a patronage relation into a more explicit business transaction between poet and duke, while the *Fabula* attempts to refashion the commercial relations joining the merchants of its title into a set of affective bonds. The fact that neither of these moves is entirely successful—the payment requested by the *Letter* still looks somewhat like a gift hoped for from a patron, and the gifts between friends in the *Fabula* like payments made between business associates—speaks to the degree to which the two types of exchange were in practice always more related modes than distinct systems.⁸ By the later Middle Ages, aristocratic patronage had acquired something of a commercial veneer (including the phenomenon of contracted loyalty known as “bastard feudalism”),⁹ while large-scale commercial ventures—which for England had yet to extend into the Mediterranean and remained largely continental—could still frequently

⁷ As Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, p. 38, observes, the *Letter* “sets us squarely in the everyday practicalities of making a living”; more generally, though still in terms of aristocratic patronage rather than the kind of merchant culture I reference here, he observes that “[i]n Lydgate's poetics, the business of writing becomes writing about business” (p. 39; see also p. 52 on “the business of the poem” transacted in so many of Lydgate's envoys).

⁸ On the intertwining of gift and market economies in premodern Europe, see especially Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Valentin Groebner, *Liquid Assets, Dangerous Gifts: Presents and Politics at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002). Davis, for example, notes that what she too calls the “gift mode” can exist alongside and overlap with “the mode of sales—of market buying-and-selling” (p. 9); see also pp. 37, 43–46, and 129. I thank Rick Keyser for pointing me to these sources.

⁹ See Michael Hicks, *Bastard Feudalism* (New York: Longman, 1995), and his *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 141–63; see also R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 205–7.

depend on interpersonal ties.¹⁰ I should emphasize at this point that I am not claiming that Lydgate himself actually felt much genuine anxiety about the form or functioning of either system. Although he did not spend the entirety of his career in residence at Bury St. Edmunds, as a monk the poet was shielded from the threat of financial insecurity in ways that Chaucer, Gower, and Hoccleve were not (and even these secular poets, as J. A. Burrow has observed, made use of the petitionary form in a semifiictional fashion rather than in any strictly autobiographical sense).¹¹ It goes almost without saying that monasteries provided for the daily needs of their members, but it is worth remembering that Lydgate's home institution had long been one of the very richest establishments in England and so was even more certain of being able to do so than most, despite its abbot William Curteys's concerns over financial decline in the mid-1430s and his implementation of a budget designed to curtail expenses.¹² At the same time, in England by the fifteenth

¹⁰For an overview of the developments in European long-distance trade from the thirteenth through the fifteenth century, see Peter Spufford, *Power and Profit: The Merchant in Medieval Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002). On the entry of English merchants into the international marketplace on a large scale in the fourteenth century, see Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 42. While the volume of English international trade declined in the fifteenth century, the general decrease in population in the wake of the plague meant that the volume per capita actually increased, and demand for consumer goods of all kinds rose to new levels. On these trends, see Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850–1520* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 322–27, and Britnell, *Commercialisation*, pp. 155–64 and 169–71. On the fifteenth-century limitation of English trade to the Continent and the reliance of English merchants on informal agreements and bonds of trust, see Dyer, *Making a Living*, pp. 327–28; on those merchants' seeming preference for conducting international business in person even while others were relying increasingly on agents, see John Day, *The Medieval Market Economy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 171. On the way one late medieval merchant handbook personalizes such international transactions, see my "Urban Utterances: Merchants, Artisans, and the Alphabet in Caxton's *Dialogues in French and English*," *NML* 7 (2005): 127–61.

¹¹See Burrow, "The Poet as Petitioner," esp. 67–75. On the conjunction of financial difficulty, the petition form, and the representation of selfhood in the early fifteenth century, see Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, pp. 20–29. For the argument that Lydgate, while not fixed there, would have most frequently been in residence at Bury, see Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449)*, pp. 21–22.

¹²On the wealth of the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, including during the fifteenth century, see A. Goodwin, *The Abbey of St. Edmundsbury* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1931), esp. pp. 68–72, and Robert S. Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis: 1290–1539* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 73–84; on Curteys's reforms, see Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 98; on his abbacy, see Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate's "Fall of Princes": Narrative Tragedy in Its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 139–48.

century an increasingly lax implementation of the Benedictine Rule's prohibition against individual property meant that monks were generally allowed to hold income-producing benefices and to acquire semiprivate funds in the form of allowances, bequests, and pensions, all of which were nominally gifts but which frequently look much more like direct payments for services rendered, both to the monastery and to layfolk beyond its walls.¹³

Thus we should not be surprised to find Lydgate appearing as an active participant within the late medieval economy rather than observing its complexities from the sidelines. The evidence for the monk's many and varied commissions comes largely from within his poems themselves or else from rubrics added by John Shirley to his copies of them, and what reward Lydgate actually received in return for most of his compositions will probably remain unknown.¹⁴ Nevertheless, records of transactions that took place in the late 1430s testify directly to Lydgate's role as an economic player in and across monastic, courtly, and mercantile spheres. In 1438, he was paid by the abbot of St. Albans for the poem the *Life of St. Alban*, and in 1439 he was awarded a lifetime royal annuity from the customs at Ipswich (revised in 1440 to be drawn instead from the "Waytefee" in Norfolk and Suffolk). When problems arose with the initial payment of the annuity (perhaps, as Derek Pearsall suggests, because the original letters patent directed all the funds to Lydgate, causing some difficulty with Abbot Curteys over their impropriety vis-à-vis the Rule), Lydgate pursued the matter, writing Henry VI directly to ask him for a revised grant naming John Baret, a prominent citizen of Bury and the abbey's treasurer, as joint recipient. The king complied, and the poet then appears to have received payments without difficulty until his death in 1449.¹⁵ At the same time, though no record of payment for them has survived, Lydgate's commissions to

¹³David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England, Volume II: The End of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 170–74, 214, 240–44; as Knowles notes, records demonstrate that monks could also be paid wages directly by their superior for assorted tasks within the monastery (243). See also Barbara Harvey, *Living and Dying in England, 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 1–2, 153, 211.

¹⁴On Shirley's career, see Margaret Connolly, *John Shirley: Book Production and the Noble Household in Fifteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).

¹⁵On these payments and Lydgate's struggle to claim his annuity, see Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449)*, pp. 35–39, and Appendix, pp. 59–67, items #13–29.

produce mummings for the Mercers and Goldsmiths as well as other London poems like *The Legend of St. George* and *Bycorne and Chychevache* reveal his connections to and knowledge of urban merchant culture.¹⁶ The diversity of socioeconomic situations to which Lydgate was exposed may help us to make some sense of the way in both *Letter* and *Fabula* a sick or endangered body is saved (or in the case of the *Letter*, left suspended in the hope of imminent salvation) by interventions that are actually somewhat more appropriate to the other's governing financial scenario; Lydgate's ability to imagine a solution to the problems of the one in terms of the other suggests the extent of his own direct experience of the benefits and pitfalls of both patronage and commerce.¹⁷

Richard Firth Green has noted of the payment to Lydgate for the *Life of St. Alban* that it is the first made to an English poet explicitly for his verse.¹⁸ It is instructive to consider this fact in light of Georges Bataille's conception of poetry as a form of production that takes place at the expense of the poet, an idea toward which the epigraph to this essay has already gestured. In Bataille's romantic notion—and he himself admits

¹⁶Lydgate's connections to the Lancastrian court and to members of the aristocracy are well known. For a useful summary, see Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371–1449)*; on the mummings and London poems, see pp. 29 and 31. On Lydgate's ties to merchant culture and his poems for the London bourgeoisie, see Claire Sponsler, "Alien Nation: London's Aliens and Lydgate's Mummings for the Mercers and Goldsmiths," in *The Postcolonial Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), pp. 229–42; James Simpson, "The Energies of John Lydgate," in his *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 34–67, esp. pp. 57–60; Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. pp. 5–8, 22–23, and 71–119; C. David Benson, "Civic Lydgate: The Poet and London," and Maura Nolan, "The Performance of the Literary: Lydgate's Mummings," both in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, ed. Larry Scanlon and James Simpson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 147–68 and 169–206. See also the essays collected in *Lydgate Matters: Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), especially Claire Sponsler, "Lydgate and London's Public Culture" (pp. 13–33), Michelle R. Warren, "Lydgate, Lovelich, and London Letters" (pp. 113–38); Jennifer Floyd, "St. George and the 'Steyned Halle': Lydgate's Verse for the London Armourers" (pp. 139–64); and John M. Ganim, "Lydgate, London, and the Poetics of Exemption" (pp. 165–83). For a brief but insightful reading of the *Letter to Gloucester* along some of the same lines I pursue here, in the same volume see the afterword by D. Vance Smith, "Lydgate's Refrain: The Open When," pp. 185–95 (194–95).

¹⁷James Simpson makes a related point when he remarks on the "jurisdictional complexity of the institutions within which Lydgate worked" and the related "discursive variety" of his output ("The Energies of John Lydgate," p. 52).

¹⁸Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, pp. 156–57.

that his is an ideal, that “the word ‘poetry’ can only be appropriately applied to an extremely rare residue of what it commonly signifies”—such “poetic expenditure” is not financial but emotional, even spiritual: “for the rare human beings who have this element at their disposal . . . the function of representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it. It condemns him to the most disappointing forms of activity, to misery, to despair, to the pursuit of inconsistent shadows that provide nothing but vertigo or rage.”¹⁹ I will return to this idea at the end of this essay. For now, and despite the anachronism of juxtaposing Bataille’s image of literary poesis with the fifteenth-century situation of a poet who was (as far as we know) neither miserable nor despairing, let me remark that if in the *Fabula* we see Lydgate using the *trope* of misery and despair to literarily suggestive advantage, the *Letter* shows him using virtually the same mechanism in the hope of literal profit, or at least of fair recompense. It is, moreover, no accident that this poet—who, as Andrea Denny-Brown remarks, was a “tireless champion of measure in all things”²⁰—centers both the *Letter* and the *Fabula* on fig-

¹⁹Bataille, “The Notion of Expenditure,” p. 171. As Bruce Holsinger reminds us in “Para-Thomism: Bataille at Rheims,” chapter 1 of his *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 26–56 (see also appendix 1, Bataille’s own “Medieval French Literature, Chivalric Morals, and Poetry,” trans. Laurence Petit, pp. 204–20), Bataille was trained as a medievalist and was deeply cognizant of French medieval poetry. It is therefore tempting to wonder what he made of the kind of verse that, like Lydgate’s *Letter*, more or less overtly seeks economic reward. For Bataille, such begging-poems and passages (along with payments like those Lydgate received from his patrons and the institutions that they, and he, served) might easily have helped to confirm his view that most poetry, which “is hardly less debased than religion . . . has almost always been at the mercy of the great historical systems of appropriation.” “The Use-Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades),” *Visions of Excess*, pp. 99–102; rpt. in *The Bataille Reader*, pp. 147–64 (153). Holsinger, however, points out that in his *The Accursed Share*, Bataille characterizes the Middle Ages as a period of “limitless expenditure constantly in tension with the demands of religious asceticism and self-denial,” whose profligate impulses can be contrasted to the productive emphasis of capitalism (*The Premodern Condition*, pp. 44–45).

²⁰Andrea Denny-Brown, “Lydgate’s Golden Cows: Appetite and Avarice in *Bycorne* and *Chychevache*” *Lydgate Matters*, pp. 35–56 (46). Denny-Brown’s essay reveals the way Lydgate’s frequent turn to images of lack and plenty in *Bycorne* and in other works speaks to a wider and widely shared set of concerns in this period about the intersection, and potential contradiction, of moral and material economies. Indeed, as Seth Lerer has suggested to me, the placement of the *Fabula*’s action in the Middle East, while in keeping with the tale’s narrative tradition, is also suggestive regarding contemporary anxieties about the role played by profit-seeking English merchants in encouraging just the sort of consumer excess that Lydgate decries so explicitly elsewhere. The poem effectively converts the Eastern Other—so frequently represented in the medieval West as the epitome of the self-indulgent, accursed heathen—into a figure of Christian charity. It thus holds up these fictional foreign counterparts as moral exemplars, suggesting,

ures of plenitude, celebrated for their wholeness, and figures of lack, whose emptiness cries out to be filled. It is to exploring those images that I now turn.

The *Fabula* has always been read (that is, when it has been read at all) as a story about the triumph of male friendship over all obstacles. But the significance of this versified fable, like that of the *Letter*, springs less from its narrative of homosocial bonding than from its depiction of illness both physical and fiscal. It may at first seem like I am simply re-summarizing the *Fabula*'s plot when I insist on reviewing the way it portrays these ailments by way of a related nexus of images of scarcity and plenty; the poem is, after all, a tale of two merchants and their goods, and it is hard to imagine from where else its drama should come if not at least in part from the fact of their shared profession. Curiously, however, what limited scholarship exists on the fable has avoided the obvious in favor of tracing how Lydgate's story revisits and revises the love triangle of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*.²¹ This turn to the so-called father of English poetry to explain the work of one of his "sons" is an example in small of the critical phenomenon that has until very recently characterized Lydgate scholarship as a whole.²² But it is only when we take

however obliquely, that English (and so Christian) merchants ought to be all the more able than the *Fabula*'s spiritually untaught protagonists—whose generous acts can be understood as all the more remarkable, given their pagan status—to act with similar selflessness. The *Fabula*'s final words point in this direction, for there the narrator prays that "God . . . His grace sende, / That every freend to othir be as trewe, / As were thes marchauntis always iliche newe," and the poem's very last lines encourage its audience to join him in this socially and spiritually conscious appeal: "This is my desyr in al degrees of men: / That it so be, I pray you, seith 'Amen'" (906–10).

²¹See Pamela Farvolden, "'Love Can No Frenship': Erotic Triangles in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' and Lydgate's *Fabula duorum mercatorum*," in *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature*, ed. Muriel Whitaker (New York and London: Garland, 1995), pp. 21–44, and, more recently, Stretter, "Rewriting Perfect Friendship."

²²On the fifteenth century's construction of Chaucer as a father-figure, see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*; for a study of one example of Lydgate's self-positioning in this regard, see Daniel T. Kline, "Father Chaucer and the *Siege of Thebes*: Literary Paternity, Aggressive Difference, and the Prologue to Lydgate's Oedipal Canterbury Tale," *ChauR* 34 (1999): 217–35. For important examples of the current and ongoing revitalization of Lydgate studies, see the studies cited in note 16 above, as well as Mortimer, *John Lydgate's "Fall of Princes"*; Robert J. Meyer-Lee, *Poets and Power from Chaucer to Wyatt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 49–87; Claire Sponsler, "'Eating Lessons: Lydgate's 'Dietary' and Consumer Conduct,'" in *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clark (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 1–22; and Sponsler, "Text and Textile: Lydgate's Tapestry Poems," in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and Other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 19–34.

Lydgate on his own terms, removing him forcibly from the Chaucerian shade in which he himself often tried to stand, that the rich fullness—rather than barren emptiness—of his verse comes most clearly into view.

Take in this regard the *Fabula*'s neatly aligned opening description of both Egyptian merchant and Egyptian landscape, a longish passage in which human being and geographical territory mirror each other's bounty. The merchant is in fact said to be "bountevous" (3)—both virtuous and generous—while his homeland is annually made "plenteuous," or abundantly fertile, by the "ouerflowyd" Nile (30, 25). The Egyptian is likewise someone in whom "alle vertues . . . wern aggregat" and who is "[o]f vices voyd" (5–6), while in Egypt "mercymony," goods, are "ful reedy and ful copious" (31–32).²³ Both person and place, in other words, are veritable treasuries, of *goodness* on the one hand and of *goods* on the other. To this moral and mercantile surfeit we can compare the third stanza of the *Letter to Gloucester*, in which the lack of a financial "flood" into the poet's purse has halted the passage of ships (that is, gold nobles, stamped with the image of a ship in this period) and so made the speaker's "custom skars" (19, 23).²⁴ Equally dry, remarks a later stanza of the *Letter*, is a "marbil stoon" from which it is "harde to likke hony . . . / For ther is nouthir licour nor moisture" (33–34).²⁵ In the *Fabula*'s opening, we learn that Egypt too is generally dry, "desolat / Of cloude and reynes," but with the crucial difference that its land is reliably "irrigat" each year by the mighty river (22–24). Not so the dry ground of the *Letter*-writer's purse, which without fiscal watering remains but "bareyn soyl" that is "sool and solitarye" (58).²⁶

Although the Egyptian merchant of the *Fabula* is as ripe with goodness as his homeland from the poem's beginning, the promise of that

²³In addition to the possible moral valence of the setting (see note 20 above), Egypt's plenty was a commonplace. See, for example, the late fourteenth-century encyclopedia *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartolomeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, gen. ed. M. C. Seymour, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–88), 2:756, XV.liii: "And oneliche Nilus moistep þat londe and rennep þere aboute and makith it plenteuous with risynge and wexinge. And . . . [it] is so plenteuous of oper marchaundises and chaffare, þat it filleþ nyȝe alle þe worlde with nedeful marchaundises."

²⁴On the monetary allusion, see Hammond, "Poet and Patron," 127; Walter Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the Fifteenth Century*, trans. Ann E. Keep (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 216; *John Lydgate: Poems*, ed. Norton-Smith, 116 n. 17.

²⁵Compare the *Fabula*, which remarks that "to them, that han i-tastyd galle, / Mor aggregable is the hony soote" (127–28).

²⁶This is a financial solitude that the Egyptian merchant will himself experience firsthand when the wheel of his fiscal fortunes has turned and he finds that "'I pleye sool'" (*Fabula*, 551).

ethical ripeness is only brought to fruition—a metaphor I use deliberately, for the concept of fruitfulness suffuses the tale²⁷—when he and the merchant from Baldac, though “disseueryd by absence” (87) become so “ful . . . of oon accordement” that they are “[a]s oon in too and too in oon for euer” (96–97).²⁸ This bond is further strengthened when the two finally meet, and the Egyptian gives his friend free rein over his goods with the words:

“What so I haue, is platly in your myht.
I feffe [endow] you fully in al my good and riht.
Beth glad and wolcom: I can sey you no more.
Haue her myn hand for now and evirmore.”
(179–82)

As Jonathan Gil Harris has shown, English mercantile writing of the sixteenth century was to embrace the literary conventions of romance, a form of narrative appropriation that, he argues, “lent a fairytale veneer to the mercenary ambitions of mercantilism.”²⁹ A similar move is being made here in Lydgate’s poem, as the forms and figures of courtship, devotion, and promise step in to mask what in the fifteenth century could easily have been imagined as a much more impersonal and largely commercial relation.³⁰ In fact, it is worth noting that the poem, while consistently emphasizing the fact of its protagonists’ careers, never gives them the chance to become business partners. They are from the outset bound to each other “by report and by noon othir mene” (48), drawn together by a mutual “affeccioun” (88) founded on their moral similarity; as the narrator explains, “[t]weyne of o kynde togidre drawe neere” so that (in general as in this particular case) “[h]onour is weddyd vnto

²⁷ For example: “As for a norshyng, her frutys to fecunde, / With corn and greyn to make the lond habounde” (27–28); and “But weel is hym, that may the frute atteyne, / As whilom diden thes noble marchauntis tweyne” (132–33). That same fruit of prosperity, however, becomes later in the poem an example of the kind of wealth that can be lost should it become excessive: “yiff a tre with frut be ovirlade. . . . / Both braunche and bouh wol enclyne and fade. . . . / Right so it farith of fals felicitye, / That yif his weihte mesure do exceede, / Than of a fal gretly is to dreede” (610–16).

²⁸ For Stretter, these lines refer to the “proverbial one soul in two bodies” (“Rewriting Perfect Friendship,” 248).

²⁹ Jonathan Gil Harris, *Sick Economies: Drama, Mercantilism, and Disease in Shakespeare’s England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 12.

³⁰ In having the Egyptian “feffe” his friend (180), Lydgate does, however, allude to the more formal financial arrangements of both land transfers and marriage contracts. See *MED*, s.v. *feffen*, 1 and 3.

worthynesse" (73, 82). The imagery that here binds the merchants in loving friendship is not only proleptic of but in a sense also a prophylactic against the romantic love that will threaten to come between them. That is, the vocabulary of one-ness and likeness both anticipates the Syrian's attraction to and eventual union with the Egyptian's fiancée and simultaneously renders these events harmless by making the merchants' connection the primary one: the two men, after all, are here firmly "weddyd" to each other before they ever meet and well before the actual marriage takes place.³¹ Furthermore, what might in another context have become a flourishing commercial exchange is here made to look instead like an ideal gift economy, in which neither surplus nor lack is experienced on either side.³² The Egyptian and the Syrian apparently never exchange goods in a quest for profit, but rather share them out of a deeply equitable camaraderie:

By lond or se the good her chapmen carye
 Was entircomownyd by her bothys assent:
 Yiff oon hadde ouht plesaunt or necessarye,
 Vnto the tothir anoon he hath it sent.

(92–95)

Although the Syrian finally travels to Egypt not primarily to see his friend but rather "[f]or marchaundise, that was in that contre" (102), even the weather cooperates in the poem's program of subduing of the vagaries of commercial activity and allowing unobstructed courtship to blossom in its place. For in contrast to the "froward" [*unfavorable*] wind that in the *Letter* prevents golden ships from anchoring in the harbor of the speaker's purse (18), in the *Fabula* it is a "blisful wynd"—like many a helpful breeze in medieval romance—that "in-to [the Syrian's] seyl hath blowe / His ship to dryve" (104–5). And while a "skars" custom is the result of the contrary weather in the *Letter* (23), it is "no skarsete" but rather fullness of all kinds that greets the Syrian upon his arrival in Egypt, as we have already seen above in the Egyptian's welcoming of

³¹ On the relationship of the protagonist's formal pledges to the conventions of noble courtesy, see Farvolden, "'Love Can No Frenship,'" pp. 28–29 and 32–33.

³² For a thorough overview of theories of both forms of exchange and the difficulty (in both theory and practice) of actually disentangling the two (something the contortions of the *Letter* and the *Fabula* make clear as well), see John Frow, "Gift and Commodity," in his *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 102–217.

his friend (179–82) and again as the visitor is shown to his room and then to dinner:

Unto a chaumbre *ful* riche and weel arrayed
 Anoon he [the Egyptian] lad hym, which stood somewhat on heihte,
 And seide: "Freend, I am *ful* weel appayed,
 That I be grace of you have cauht a sihte;
For nothyng moore myn herte myte lihte;
 Wherfore wolcom, also God me save,
 Vn-to your owne, and to *al* that I have."

Of mete and drynk, deyntees and vitaille,
 Of divers wynes ther was *no skarsete*,
 Of straunge viaundys in sondry apparaille,
 That nevir afor was seen such roialte:
 To moore and lasse it snowyd doun plente.

(148–59; my emphasis)

In this passage the word "ful," most strictly an adverbial intensive meaning "very," contributes to the passage's overall impression of fullness both material and emotional; we are clearly to understand the Egyptian's home as a site not just of satisfactory completion but of repletion.³³

And yet the Syrian guest's "weel arrayed" room soon becomes the setting for a somber scene reminiscent of the deathbed scenario described with dark humor by the speaker of the *Letter to Gloucester*. The begging-poem's fourth stanza relates how the purse becomes increasingly ill as its financial distress continues:

Ther was no tokne sent doun from the Tour [*the Mint*],
 As any gossomer the countirpeys [*counterweight of a scale*] was liht;
 A ffretynge etyk [*wasting fever*] causyd his langour
 By a cotidian [*intermittent fever*] which heeld him day and nyght.

(25–28)

Likewise struck by the "infirmyte" of a "brennyng feuere," the sick Syrian takes to "a bed [that] in haste was maad ful softly" for him (201–2,

³³See *MED*, s.v. *ful* (adv.), 1 and 4. The passage's last line is clearly meant to evoke the largesse of Chaucer's Franklin, of whom the *General Prologue* relates that "[i]t snewed in his hous of mete and drynke" (l.345).

204), and there he languishes in terms that replicate the suffering of the purse in the begging-poem. For what next takes place, as the doctors are brought to the ailing man's room, is a scene of medical intervention that makes the body of the bed-ridden merchant look remarkably like the devastated pouch of the *Letter*. On that bag's behalf, Lydgate writes in the second stanza of the *Letter*, he "souhte leechys for a restoratiff" (9), but no doctor or apothecary could find a solution; indeed, ultimately the personified purse is even emptier than before, the "[b]otme of his stomak . . . tournyd vp-so-doun" by an overly effective "laxatif" that "[m]ade hym slendre by a consumpcioun" (13–15) even before the onset of the quotidian fever that begins ten lines later (25–28, quoted above).³⁴ Similarly, the doctors in the *Fabula* come prepared to turn the Syrian inside-out in order to discover the cause of his infirmity, bringing with them both "goode siropys to make dygestyues" and "[p]elotes [pills] expert for evacuatyues" (275–77). And because the doctors assume that the cause of the merchant's illness lies within, they look not just metaphorically but rather literally "[f]ul deepe" as they try "to serchen out the trouthe" (317): though they cannot actually open their patient up, they rely (as per standard medieval medical practice) on his body's excretions for their diagnosis, examining first his sweat and then his urine (270, 323–29).

The *Fabula* and *Letter* both reveal, to borrow another useful phrase from Harris's work on a later text (in this case, *The Merchant of Venice*), "the pathological underbelly of desire, whether romantic or commercial."³⁵ But unlike the distraught speaker of the *Letter*, who knows precisely what pathology has affected his purse, the Egyptian merchant and the "leechis many on" (267) whom he summons to his friend's sickbed are initially at a loss even to diagnose, let alone cure, the Syrian's illness. And in the poem's tracing of their frustrated search "to fynd out roote

³⁴It is this kind of laxative that a thirteenth-century Latin verse satirically recommends: "O vos bursae turgidae, Romam veniatis; / Romae viget physica bursis constipatis" ["O you swollen purses, come to Rome! / [A]t Rome there is effective medicine for constipated purses"] ("Song Upon the Times," *Thomas Wright's Political Songs of England*, ed. Peter Coss [1839; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], pp. 14–18, lines 59–60; my thanks to Andrea Denny-Brown for this reference. By contrast, Hoccleve claims in "La Male Regle" that the "coyn" for which he asks his sovereign will allow him to procure the "medecyne / As may myn hurtes alle, þat me greeue, / Exyle cleene / & voide me of pyne" (446–48); in fact, the passage is playfully ambiguous, suggesting that the coin itself may be the purgative. On these lines, see also Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse*, pp. 38–39.

³⁵Harris, *Sick Economies*, p. 11.

and rynde / Of what humour was causyd his dissesse" (271–72), we arrive at what is to my mind the most clever of Lydgate's verbal games in the *Fabula* in a passage—entirely of the English poet's devising—that mines medical treatises for what effectively become commercial puns. Reviewing humoral theory along with the attending doctors, the narrator describes all the ways in which the sick Syrian might have been suffering from some kind of "excesse" (290). The physicians discount "effymera," caused by too much food, or thought, or extreme temperature (288–94); "putrida," in which any humor "synneth in quantite" or whose "flowyng," unlike the Egyptian Nile, "is to plenteuous" and "excedith mesoure" (295–98); and two types of "sinochus," diagnosed, respectively, as either the excessive "quantite" or "qualite" of a single humor (299–303).³⁶ But as we readers of the poem already know, the Syrian does not need to be emptied by the purgatives that the doctors have brought, since what ails him is not a surplus in need of voiding but a *lack* in need of filling.³⁷

He has, in fact, what seems to be very much a merchant's disease, since what he requires is the "'maiden'" whom, he notes to himself, his friend has "'kept for his owne stoor'" (244). In other words, the Syrian, despite his joyful participation up to this point in the gift economy he has formed with his Egyptian friend, cannot help but consider the girl as a kind of commodity that was once freely available on the open market but is now, to his dismay, no longer in circulation.³⁸ To his still-

³⁶For a reading of this passage in the context of other didactic literature, see my "The Poetics of Practicality," *Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 491–505 (500–501). On the centrality of the humors to medieval medical theory and of phlebotomy and uroscopy to medieval medical practice, see Nancy G. Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 101–106, 124–25, 137–41, and Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Alan Sutton, 1995), pp. 33–36, 47, 59–68; on the English medical profession more broadly, see Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

³⁷In Lydgate's *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, by contrast, the "ryches and gret plente" that prevent wealthy men from entering heaven are compared to the "corruption of wyckyd humours & corrupt blood," a "suparfluyte" that must be drained for the sake of spiritual health (3 vols., ed. F. J. Furnivall and Katherine B. Locock, EETS e.s. 77, 83, 92 [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899–1904], lines 18304–13); see also lines 18355–59, in which poverty is described as the "medycyne and leche" that can lance the boil of "superfluyte". On the way Lydgate merges discourses of medicine and urban planning in his *Troy Book* to convey the importance of emptying both the city and the body politic of filth, see Paul Strohm, "Sovereignty and Sewage," *Lydgate Matters*, pp. 57–70.

³⁸See MED, s.v. *stor(e)*, (n. [1]), for the ways in which this term generally referred to movable goods.

mercantile mind, the girl is—like the goods the merchants exchanged earlier in the poem—a “necessarye” (94) for which he has nothing to recompense the Egyptian but his desire for her. And it is only once the physicians note this lack, signified by the “remys [*watery*], attenuat . . . ful thynne and wannyssh” quality of their patient’s urine that they realize the Syrian has “falle[n]” into the “malencolye” of lovesickness (321–26).³⁹ Although this malady is physically manifested by “aquosite . . . / Without substaunce” and “voyde . . . of colour” (327–28), the problem, as the poem now indicates, is caused not by depletion but by inflation: lovesickness is a disease that leads the sufferer improperly to “trowe a wight for love mor fayr or pure, / Than evir hym ordeyned hath God or nature” (342–43). Despite the fact that its root lies in a kind of morally suspect overvaluation, a “corrupcioun . . . / of thilke vertu callid estimatiff” (337–38), the remedy for lovesickness (at least in this poem) is not to be found in a measured reestimation of the beloved’s worth any more than it is in the “good siropys” and “precious poudrys” that the doctors come prepared to administer (275, 278). Rather, a cure lies only in attaining the unique object of desire that, as the poem is at pains to note, is one for which no substitute can be found. For though the Egyptian parades “alle the ladyes and maydenys of his hous” before his friend (372)—in a fashion that more closely resembles a display of wares from which the Syrian may choose a lover rather than an investigative lineup to discover the person he already loves—the sick man admits that he “‘may nat chesyn’” any but the one he has already chosen: “‘Ther is noon other, that I love can’” (410).

The commercial language that depicts the girl as accumulated property (“stoor,” 244) and the medical discourse of melancholy that portrays her as something whose value can be assessed and even overestimated figures the Egyptian’s fiancée more as commodity than person. By contrast (yet fully in line with the poem’s program of refig-

³⁹The examination of the patient’s urine also occurs in the *Disciplina Clericalis*, *Alphabetum Narrationem*, and *Jacob’s Well*, but without this level of detail. On lovesickness, see John Livingston Lowes, “The Lovers Maladye of Hereos,” *MP* 11 (1914): 491–546; Mary Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The Viaticum and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); and Marion A. Wells, *The Secret Wound: Love-Melancholy and Early Modern Romance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 22–44. Urine’s lack of color and its thinness was indeed taken to signify melancholy; as one medical text puts it, “If the urny shewe white and thynne, it sygnifieth malencoly, ffor malencoly is colde and drye” (London, Wellcome Library, Western MS 537, fols. 16r–16v; qtd. in Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society*, p. 48).

uring the impersonal international market as a familiar and affective domestic space), the language of love reinforces the kind of "private singularization" that, Igor Kopytoff notes, works to counter the impersonalizing force of commoditization.⁴⁰ The poem works hard to perform this kind of singularization, and it does so, somewhat paradoxically, by homing in on the girl's total possession of all desirable qualities. Capitalizing again on the double sense of "ful," it informs us that she is "[f]ul wys," "ful of honeste," "ful of affiaunce," and "ful war of governaunce" (379–80, 387, 389). But all this fullness never reaches the point of overflow since she is also "[i]n moral vertu mesuryd" (388) and is, in sum, a perfectly balanced entity: "In hir was nothyng, that nature myht amende" (392). Again, as conventional as this language may be, drawn as it is once more from the standard romance vocabulary of courtly love, what is remarkable is the way Lydgate's use of it plays so neatly against the trope of medical and mercantile emptiness that characterizes the lovelorn Syrian at this very same point in the poem. The girl, who is "hool of hir herte" (386), is what the merchant needs to become, as he himself will later say, "'hool and sound'" (434).

For if his urine is "voyde . . . of color," so too by extension is the merchant's unfulfilled heart a void that he is at first left "al sool" to lament in a similarly "voyded" room (219). This is a psychosomatic emptiness that, like Lydgate's purse in the *Letter*, needs to be filled. But while the writer of the *Letter* needs an immediate cash payment in a patronage system dominated—and as the poem works to suggest, problematically so—by the largely arbitrary nature of the gift, the commercially adept Syrian merchant, who at this point imagines that he could never repay his friend for the girl, instead *needs* precisely the kind of offering that, in Georg Simmel's terms, "is not occasioned by any gratitude" but rather by "spontaneous devotion to the other."⁴¹ The gift, as John Frow notes of Derrida's argument in *Given Time*, "is the opposite of and interrupts economy," and while for Derrida any return, even in the form of gratitude, cancels out the gift as such, the terms of the *Fabula* at this point in its narrative trajectory seem to suggest that this

⁴⁰ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64–91 (80).

⁴¹ Georg Simmel, "Faithfulness and Gratitude," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), p. 393; qtd. in Frow, "Gift and Commodity," p. 107.

moment represents just such another interruption in the two men's already more-than-exclusively-economic connection to each other.⁴² "To me," the generous Egyptian begs his sick friend, "'vnclouse the somme of your desyre,'" adding "'mystrust to lokke it vp fro me'" (361, 363).⁴³

The tenor (or, in metaphorical terms, the vehicle) of these encouraging words is yet another example of the way the *Fabula* tries to transfer the language of the market into the realm of the gift, for the mercantile vocabulary of containers, locks, and sums is deployed by the Egyptian (who earlier would "for no cost . . . spare / To haue restoores the sike to weelfare" [265–66]) with the exclusive aim of satisfying his friend's emotional needs. Opening under this friendly pressure his previously "closyd . . . wounde" and displaying the "bollyng" [*inflammation*] that "festrith" within (225, 227),⁴⁴ the Syrian in turn receives a double reward, or, more accurately, a double gift.⁴⁵ "I gyf hir the," the Egyptian says twice over of his decision to confer the girl upon his friend (420, 422; my emphasis). But just as important, or so it would seem given the stress the poem places on the matter, the Egyptian also volunteers to "'bere thexpence fully and costage'" of the marriage ceremony (425). The double generosity of this gesture—the gift of money as well as of the girl—highlights the degree to which the poem is trying to leave the concerns of the market behind; the Egyptian, at least at this point, gives "ful and hool" without expectation of return (421).⁴⁶ Tellingly, at this point the poet too claims his own "wante [of] witt" to describe all the

⁴²Frow, "Gift and Commodity," p. 107; his reference is to Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 12.

⁴³This line both looks back to and yet reverses the terms of enclosure with which the men's mutual affection is at first described, when "Love," which "berith the keye and also the cliket" serves as a "trewe porteer" that "lok[e]s" them inside each other's hearts (61–63).

⁴⁴On the hidden wound as an image of melancholic love, see Wells, *The Secret Wound*, pp. 70–74.

⁴⁵Here again we can use a comparison with the *Fabula* to see more clearly how the *Letter* tries to invert patronage into commerce. For while in the romance it will be an unasked-for gift from a fellow merchant that heals the Syrian, the *Letter*, playing on the double meaning of the term for both a medical recipe and a sum of money, directly asks Gloucester ("my Lord") to doctor the sick purse with "a receyt of plate and coynage" (39–40; my emphasis). See *MED*, s.v. *receit(e)*, 1 and 4.

⁴⁶Later, however, the Egyptian will decide to "preeve his freend at neede" and travel to Syria "for to make assay" (642–43). The poem's struggle to maintain his first gift as a perfect one given without hope of reciprocation is demonstrated in the very next stanza, when, having arrived at his destination, the Egyptian decides he would rather be "'ded . . . for shamfastnesse'" rather than "'shewe a poynt to hym [the Syrian] of my distresse'" (650–51).

"passaunt costys" and "purveiance" of the wedding feast (438, 435–36); the surplus, almost excessive, nature of the gift in turn seems to exceed the limits of his language, or at least excuses his turn to *occupatio*. But what Lydgate still manages to make clear is that the Egyptian has not only played a better doctor than the doctors by opening "the tonne / Of friendly triacle" on his friend's behalf,⁴⁷ but has also more than made good any loss sustained by the Syrian during his illness: "nevir I radde yit," the narrator comments, "O freend to a-nothir that so weel hath hym quit" (446–48).

The language of "quitting," of payback, now also takes on an authorially self-reflexive cast, for here Lydgate interrupts the tale to inform its readers that his own narrative debt to them, as incurred up to this point, has been discharged in full:

Off this mateer what shuld I write mor?
I wil entrete this processe forth in pleyn:
Hir and hir iowellys, hir richesse and hir stor
He hath hym youen, the stoory seith certeyn,
And hom with al repayred is ageyn
And lad hir with him, as was his freendys wyl,
Which cowde nat feyne his plesaunce to fulfyl.
(456–62)

Now that the Egyptian merchant has given ("youen") the girl and her goods ("hir richesse and . . . stor") to his friend—in another appearance of the verb "to give" that emphasizes the transaction as gift rather than commodity exchange—the poet can make claim to legitimate use of *occupatio*, implying in his "Off this mateer what shuld I write mor?" that there is nothing left to do but summarize the action so far "in pleyn."⁴⁸ At an earlier point the narrator, referring to the horror of any distance that separates "hem, that loven trewe," had cause to lament the "bitter

⁴⁷ In the *Letter*, by contrast, the "tonne" of the purse has been "attamyd" by poverty (51), which Hammond, "Poet and Patron," reads as a metaphor for piercing and exhausting (128). A vessel of metaphorical medicine appears later in the *Fabula* to represent the kind Egyptian's subsequent loss of fortune. The poem notes that while "[w]ho that wil entren to tamen of the sweete, / He mvst as weel taken his aventure / To taste in bittir, or he the vessel leete" (701–3), the Egyptian has "i-dronken at the fulle" of both and especially of the latter (the bitter), so much so that it has "maad his hed to dulle, / That he ne lest but litil lawh or smyle" (708–11).

⁴⁸ On marriage as a prime site of premodern gift exchange, see Davis, *The Gift*, pp. 27–29.

bale hangyng in ballaunce" (120, 124)—a phrase that, like the "count-irpeys" [*counterweight*] of the *Letter* (26), practically begs us to picture a merchant's scales.⁴⁹ Here, just slightly past the midpoint of the *Fabula*, both the emotional and narrative budgets have been brought into balance; all has been, to pun slightly, but I think not inappropriately, on the language of the passage above, "repayred" and "fulfyl[ed]" (460, 462).⁵⁰ But in the second part of the poem the narrator, to his own proclaimed distress, must return to considering the ever-present threat of imbalance in the market economy to which its protagonists also belong, and in which that which easily comes may also easily go (even while in the *Fabula*'s final analysis this problem, too, will be solved by a generous gift rather than by the ebb and flow of the market).

This threat of financial upset is one lived out in the *Letter to Gloucester* and the *Fabula* alike. In the *Letter*, Lydgate notes that "[a]n ernest grote, whan it is dronke and goon, / Bargeyn of marchauntys, stant in aventure" (35–36).⁵¹ Having spent freely in order to consume at will, the speaker now wryly joins his purse in the shared "adventure" of poverty: "My purs and I be callyd," he remarks, "to the lure / Off indigence, our stuff leyd in morgage" (37–38), a phrase recognizable as all the more fitting when we realize that in Middle English, *lure* can mean either an enticement *or* the open mouth of a bag.⁵² A similar fiscal and physically figured disaster overtakes the generous Egyptian merchant in the *Fabula*, for when Fortune spins her wheel so that, like the "vp-so-down" purse of the *Letter* (13), it too is "turned vp so down," he "is ffallen and plonget in povert / Thoruh vanysshynge of his possessioun" (520–22).

⁴⁹The concept of balance, present throughout the poem, appears explicitly at two other points within it: first, when the narrator reflects on the way friends share each other's pain, remarking that "[t]his is the ballaunce oonly of freendys riht" (216); and second, when the real killer steps forward and confesses to his crime in order to save the innocent Syrian, the justices are so amazed "[t]hat alle here wittis wer hangid in ballaunce" (833).

⁵⁰While the line "And hom with al repayred is ageyn" (460) clearly means "And with all [of the gifts he] returned home again" (see *MED*, s.v. *repatren*), *repayred* can also serve as the past participle of the verb meaning to fix or to restore to health (see *MED*, s.v. *reparen* [v. (3)]).

⁵¹Harris notes that the word "adventure" is doubly freighted by the late sixteenth century, connoting both "romance quest and commercial venture" (*Sick Economies*, p. 10); Lydgate's use here seems to confirm that the commercial connotation was already in play by the early fifteenth century.

⁵²It can also figure the open, voiding end of the human body's bag, its rectum. See *MED*, s.v. *lure*, and Jeremy J. Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter: Surgery, Chivalry, and the Body in the *Practica* of John Arderne," *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 137–72 (146).

This "vanysshynge" of commercial capital effects a corresponding loss of social prestige: the merchant, a "new Iob, i-cast in indigence," is quite suddenly "valyd adoun from hih degre / Ful many a steihr in-to wrechydnesse" (526, 542–43). He has been, that is, *valley*-ed, or brought low, but also, and quite literally, *de-valued*.⁵³ And the experience of that devaluation is something that, as another potential pun on Lydgate's part may suggest, the merchant himself can only understand in the commercial terms he knows best: "Hym thouhte," the same passage notes, "it was to hym a newe emprise" (539).⁵⁴

But while poverty may be a new business enterprise of sorts for the Egyptian, describing its somatic and psychic effects—the "languor" that results from the "infect of Fortune" (641, 672)⁵⁵—is something of an exercise in duplication, if not repetition, for Lydgate, who has the newly impoverished merchant employ images of physical hardship, of past plenitude, and of painful lack, all familiar from the *Letter to Gloucester*, to bemoan his changed state:

"Now hongir, thrust [*thirst*], vnkouth as vnto me,
Vnwarly sweth my passyd habundaunce.
Now cold, now nakyd in necessite
I walke aboute for my sustenaunce.
Whilom in plente and now al in grevaunce!
Allas, my fulle [*full moon*] is derkyd in-to wane,
With wynd forwhirlyd as is a mvant ffane [*weather vane*]."
(568–72)

⁵³"Value" in the sense of "the specific monetary value of a commodity" appears as a noun at least as early as 1303; as a verb meaning "to assess the monetary value of," it was in regular use—enough so as to appear in the *Rotuli Parliamentorum*—by 1439 (see *MED*, s.v. *valu(e)*, 1a[c], and s.v. *valuen*).

⁵⁴While the *MED*, s.v. *emprise*, does not indicate a possible commercial connotation of the term, whose primary meaning is "undertaking," the *OED*, s.v. *emprise*, notes two uses in the late fourteenth century (in Barbour's *The Bruce* and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*) that are inflected by a sense of value. Even if this kind of wordplay is not Lydgate's intention here, the fact that the Egyptian finds poverty to be a new "undertaking" implies that he is comparing it to his previously successful commercial activities.

⁵⁵The concepts of commerce and infection are returned to near the poem's end, when the poet reflects on the difficulty a king has in preventing treason in his realm: "Ful hard it were taccomplisshen his desyr / Or in his rewme *such a bargeyn dryve*: / *The aeyr infect*, the weder is nat cleer / Ne never ne shal, whil tresoun is so ryve" (862–65, my emphasis). For an interesting playing out of the concept of infection and its relationship to language and the body in the work of another late medieval poet, see R. Allen Shoaf, *Chaucer's Body: The Anxiety of Circulation in the "Canterbury Tales"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

The last two lines of this lament particularly recall the *Letter*, in which we have already seen a “froward” wind at work (18). Several lines later in that shorter work, playing on the alchemical terms for silver and gold, the poet comments upon the eclipse of “Sol and Luna” in his purse and its resultant “lynyng dirk” (29, 31), comparing the bag’s shadowy interior with the brightness of the coins it lacks.⁵⁶ So too in the *Fabula*, in the passage just quoted above, that which was once “fulle” has not so much dissipated as darkened (“derkyd”) into “wane.” This is a darkness that contrasts both with the light of the tale’s opening, where we learn that “no dirknesse of the nyht” can overcome the “beemys” of each merchant’s virtue (66–67), and also with the “liht of presence” that the Syrian is said to experience with joy when he first arrives in his friend’s homeland (119)—a light itself compared to the “blake nyht of sorwe” that characterizes absence (113).

The *Fabula*’s juxtaposition of darkness and light is but one of the several ways in which its poet reacts to the twinned tragedies of his tale. Thinking at the halfway point upon the mercantile ills he must describe in the “remenaunt” (518) of the fable (*remenaunt* being, of course, a term with its own financial connotations),⁵⁷ Lydgate comments of and to his own story that “It sitt the nat enlwmyned for to be / Of othir colour but oonly al of sable” (512–13).⁵⁸ Although the Egyptian merchant is anything but in the black, as we might say in our contemporary parlance, only black ink will do to tell his part of the story—if, that is, the poet can bear to keep moving his pen across the page. For like the love-struck merchant unable to speak his pain in the first half of the narrative, so now does the poet here claim that he is practically struck dumb with grief, petrified by a Medusa-like Fortune:

For verray dool I stond in iupartye:
Al merthe of makyng my mateer mot refuse.
Me in-to stoon transmwed hath Meduse

⁵⁶On the connection of this passage to Lydgate’s larger discourse of laureation (part of a brilliant reading of Lydgate’s play with the terms “laureate” and “aureate”), see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, pp. 38–39. Chaucer too hopes once again to see his purse-lady’s “colour lyk the sonne bryght / that of yelownesse hadde never pere” (“Purse,” lines 10–11).

⁵⁷See MED, s.v. *remenaunt*, 1c.

⁵⁸On Lydgate’s novel uses of the verb “enlummyne” in his poetry more generally, see Lois A. Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 22–24.

For verray stonyng of Fortunys fikylnesse,
That for the merveyle no woord I can expresse.
(500–504)

While this is the most exaggerated of his emotional responses to the "makyng" of his "mateer," it is neither the first nor the last time that the narrator of the *Fabula* alludes to his own pain and suffering. "Allas, for dool myn herte I feele bleede," he remarks just before the Syrian merchant falls sick (199); and "[m]yn herte bleedith, whan I therof endite" he claims of the woeful parting of the two friends (465). Just as the Egyptian merchant, as the poet puts it, hid "[n]othying" both "withyne and withoute" from his Syrian visitor (176–77), so too does Lydgate share with us the internal and external manifestations of his supposed emotional state, one whose symptoms, however clichéd, nevertheless also parallel those experienced by the characters in whom he invests his verbal energies (the generous Egyptian, for example, "[m]oornyng for absence . . . is lefft allone" when his friend and new wife depart [470]).⁵⁹

The heartfelt sorrows, and particularly the financial woes of the Egyptian merchant that the poet of the *Fabula* makes his own, are the same grievances that the speaker of the *Letter to Gloucester* shares with his impoverished purse. In fact, the pecuniary pain suffered by the Egyptian in the *Fabula* and by the purse in the *Letter* produce exactly the same physical result in their stories' scribe, as this juxtaposition of passages, one of which we have already seen above, reveals:

Riht myhty prince, and it be your wille,
Condescende leiser for to take
To seen the content of this litil bille,
Which whan I wrot, *myn hand I felte quake*.
(*Letter*, 1–4; my emphasis)

O seely marchaunt, *myn hand I feele quake*
To write thy woo in my translacioun;

⁵⁹On Hoccleve's own use of the phrase "within and withoute" in "Thomas Hoccleve's Complaint" to describe both interior self and exterior condition (290–93), see Stephen Metcalf, "Inner and Outer," in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Metcalf (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 108–71 (134–35). On Hoccleve's complaint poems as "occasions for . . . an incessant 'voiding,' 'vomiting,' and 'telling out' of the heart," see Jennifer E. Bryan, "Hoccleve, the Virgin, and the Politics of Complaint," *PMLA* 117 (2002): 1172–87 (1185).

Ful offte I weepe also for thy sake,
 For to beholde the revolucioun
 Of thy degree and transmutacioun.
 (*Fabula*, 589–93; my emphasis)

For the poet of the *Letter*, economic and corporeal distress go virtually hand in hand; for the writer of the *Fabula*, the mere contemplation of a fictional character's poverty has a literal, deleterious effect on the hand that pens the tale.⁶⁰ The poet of the *Fabula* attempts to ease his suffering by explaining, almost as if to himself, that ill Fortune is in fact a kind of bitter but ultimately efficacious medicinal draught (701–4). Yet as the end of both *Letter* and *Fabula* make perfectly clear, it is not in Fortune but rather in *fortune* that a cure is to be found. Money—that liquidity to which the *Letter* refers in its pun on the historical remedy of “aurum potabile” [*drinkable gold*] (46), itself reminiscent of the “gold in physik” of which Chaucer's Physician is so fond (I.443)—is the potion that will save both the poet and the Egyptian merchant.⁶¹

The role that money plays in the resolution (or, in the case of the *Letter*, the imagined resolution) of these two poems reveals once more, and perhaps most clearly, how the two works function as economic inversions of each other. In the *Fabula*, money—in the form of capital—forms the second half of the Syrian merchant's gift to his friend: after rescuing him from death, he then “to richesse restor[es] [him] ageyn”

⁶⁰The echo is briefly noted by Alessandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), p. 307. A similar image of pen in quaking hand appears in the Prologue to Book 3 of the *Fall of Princes*, just before the very lines about the writer's penury that have led scholars to connect the *Letter* to the *Fall*. The poet there claims that as he stood “[f]ul pale of cheer, astonyd in my look,” and considered the onerous duty of translation, “[m]yn hand gan tremble; my penne I felte quake” (45–46). The recognizably Lydgatean quality of the image is suggested by Benedict Burgh's adoption of it in his continuation of Lydgate's unfinished version of the *Secretum secretorum*, where Burgh claims in his prologue that the difficulty of the task and his own ignorance of the material “myn hand make to quake” (*Lydgate and Burgh's Secrees of Old Philosoffres*, ed. Robert Steele, EETS e.s. 66 [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894], line 1555).

⁶¹Trevisa's *On the Properties of Things* explains that gold has “vertue to . . . clense superfluites ygedred in bodyes” (Seymour, gen. ed., *Trevisa's Translation of Bartolomeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum*, 2:829, XVI.iv). On *aurum potabile* as a cure for various forms of lethargy (including lovesickness), see Lowes, “The Loveres Maladye,” p. 520. For examples of what he calls “portable cash”—gilded and silver-plated drinking vessels full of coins—given by the cities of Basel and Augsburg as gifts to noble visitors in the late fifteenth century, see Groebner, *Liquid Assets*, pp. 28–30, 68, and 141; quotation on p. 28.

(882). The Syrian thus returns in kind the Egyptian's earlier double gift of life (in the form of the girl who healed his fatal lovesickness) and of money (the cost of his wedding and the girl's dowry). But unlike the Egyptian's initial gift to the Syrian, this second gift of the Syrian to the Egyptian does not so much displace commercial concerns as reembrace them, since in effect the "richesse" to which he is "restored" will enable the Egyptian to again enter the market economy from which his losses had temporarily exiled him. For all its attempts to create a realm of the gift untroubled by the concerns of the market, then, the conclusion of the *Fabula* would seem to suggest that an escape from those concerns is never fully possible, and perhaps not even entirely desirable.

The verbal alchemy of the *Letter* turns money into metaphor in order to present itself, at least on the surface, as a gift from poet to patron. In the process, however, the poem subtly suggests the ways in which the patronage system is little more than a market in disguise. Most importantly, the emphasis the *Letter* gives to commercial and financial terminology implies that the system might function more effectively if its participants were to acknowledge its true form. For while the poem implies that a gift of gold will ease the purse's "compleynt" of "nichil habet" (52),⁶² the fact is that any gold turned over as a response to the "content of this litil bille" would almost automatically become less a gift than an explicit payment for services rendered—for, that is, the commodity that the poem, by virtue of its creative "bill[ing]" of its client, reveals itself to be.⁶³ Yet the poem's necessarily inconclusive ending, its very status as begging-poem whose author awaits a materially attentive response, suggests that—as for the merchants of the *Fabula*, for whom there is no real way out of the marketplace—so too for pa-

⁶²See also Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, pp. 38–39 and 205, and Smith, "Lydgate's Refrain," pp. 194–95. "Nichil habet," Norton-Smith notes, is a legal phrase referring to the "return made by the sheriff to the exchequer in cases where the party named in the writ had no goods upon which a levy could be made" (*John Lydgate: Poems*, 118 n. 52).

⁶³While a "bille" could be any kind of formal document or petition, by the early fifteenth century it was already acquiring today's still-current sense of a record of debt or expense. See *MED*, s.v. *bille*, 5. In a sense, however, the *Letter* obliquely maintains one traditional form of literary patron-client exchange, in which verbal praise is proffered in hope of eventual reward. The poem's many word-games are a kind of covert flattery of Gloucester, since they imply that he will be as quick to understand them as the poet has been clever to use them. See Scott, "Marketing," p. 140, on the way early modern patronage poems could similarly "function as gifts while aiming to induce diversified and competitive rewards."

tron-dependent poets is there no self-evident way out of the equally uncertain system upon which they are forced to rely.

At the end of the *Fabula*, Lydgate tells his readers “platly” that a “thyng weel preevyd” needs no repetition (897–98). At the end of the *Letter*, however, it is apparent that the “cleer soun of plate” (64) is one he would be glad to hear again; in fact, as D. Vance Smith observes, the sound of money already suggestively reverberates throughout the poem, since the word “coignage” ends the last line of each stanza.⁶⁴ As I noted above, some scholars have argued—though we will probably never know if they are right—that Humphrey of Gloucester answered Lydgate’s clever epistle with just such a sound, and that it was this gesture that earned the duke praise for largesse in the Prologue to Book 3 of the *Fall of Princes*. There, Lydgate claims to be looking back on an impoverished moment between his writing of the first two books of the poem and the next, a moment when his “purs [was] ay liht and void off coignage,” and when it experienced not just “[a]n ebbe off plente” but also “scarsete atte fulle.”⁶⁵ This oxymoronic but nonetheless painful condition, clearly reminiscent of the situation outlined in the *Letter*, lasted until Gloucester intervened “to make the wether fair,” as the poet recalls:

Mi lordis fredam and bounteuos largesse
 Into myn herte brouht in such gladnesse,
 That thoruh releuyng off his benygne grace,
 Fals Indigence list me no mor manace.

(*Fall of Princes*, 73–77)

In the fiction of the *Fabula*, grief, Lydgate claims, has briefly “clubbyd” the ink in his “penne” so that it refuses to flow (510). In the less fictional world of fifteenth-century literary patronage, as Lydgate suggests here in the *Fall of Princes*, it is not grief but rather the “ebbe” of princely “plente” that can quite literally stop ink from flowing, and only princely generosity of a “bounteuos” nature that can likewise start it up again. As celebratory of his patron’s “fredam and . . . largesse” as the passage

⁶⁴Smith, “Lydgate’s Refrain,” p. 195. Chaucer’s “Purse” likewise refers to his hope of hearing the “blisful soun” of his lady (line 9).

⁶⁵John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols., EETS e.s. 121, 122, 123, 124 (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), Book III, Prologue, line 69. All other references are to this edition.

may be, its metaphorical reference to the "wether" somewhat passive-aggressively hints at the problem with the patronage system of poetic production and reward in which the poet claims to find himself caught and which the *Letter* likewise subtly protests: namely, patronage's weatherlike arbitrariness and inconstancy, two faults that might be contrasted with the steadfast emotional and economic reciprocity that binds the two merchants of the *Fabula* from beginning to end of their story.

The "ebbe" and "scarsete" in this passage from the *Fall of Princes* should remind us, as well, of the cycles of drought and flood both monetary and meteorological in the *Letter* and the *Fabula*, even as they lead us to think further about the pecuniary cycles, however likewise performative, of Lydgate's own career. As the poet well knew, and as the Envoy to Book 9 of the *Fall of Princes* suggests—with its plea to be relieved once more of "cotidien" fever by "liberal largesse," of an "ebbe of froward skarsete" by a "spryng flood of gracious plente" and of "constreyned indigence" by "plentevous inffluence" (IX.3345–51)—the temporary reprieve of economic distress in a world governed by fickle Fortune (in all senses) or fickle friends is precisely that: temporary. What lasts, or so Lydgate suggests, is the *expression* of that distress, something that, as I have already argued above, the poet turns into a commodity in the *Letter* when he asks Gloucester to consider the "content of this litel bille" and—he implies—pay for its metaphorically full exploration of emptiness, its no-holds-barred exposure of the "lynnyng" of the poet's "outward" purse (3, 7).

Returning now to Bataille's remark that "representation engages the very life of the one who assumes it," we might say that this is precisely what the *Letter* also argues when it uses an empty, mortally ill money-bag as a figure for the impoverished versifier.⁶⁶ But as many a medieval poet before and after Lydgate suggested to his (or her) patron, literary representation—*pace* Bataille—might also be said to *preserve* the life of those who support it, since such representation memorializes them for posterity. To this familiar *topos* Lydgate, as a monk in a position to pray as well as write for his patrons, could add a further enticement, something of which he takes full advantage in his 1441 petition to Henry VI requesting a revision to the terms of his annuity. Referring in that docu-

⁶⁶Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," p. 171. Hoccleve's narrator in "La Male Regle" makes a similar move when he bemoans the fact that while his wallet is light from loss of stuffing ("my purs his stuf hath lore" [349]), his body, little more than a "Carkeis," is "repleet" with its own near-dead weight, its "heuynesse" (350).

ment to himself as “youre pouere and perpetuell oratour,” the poet seems to play on the way the formulaic term *oratour*, used in many similar documents from this period to refer to the petitioner, can also refer to “an eloquent speaker” and to “one who prays.”⁶⁷ Lydgate has already written eloquent speech—poetry—for Henry; in return for this new favor, as he promises the king, his “besecher” will “pray to God for you.”⁶⁸ The value of Henry’s return on this investment in the poet’s “wele and profite,” or so Lydgate’s admittedly conventional but still-meaningful closing salutation suggests, is incalculable: in exchange for money paid, as the new royal patent puts it, “annuatim . . . durante vita sua” (annually during his lifetime), the poet will help the king secure eternity.⁶⁹

Lydgate’s *own* eternity, in a literary sense, is due in large measure not to Henry VI’s interventions on his behalf, but rather to John Shirley, without whose efforts of copying and compiling a good deal of his corpus might not have survived. But Shirley’s intercessions—at least as we can observe them in the kalendars, or versified tables of contents, that he appended to his compilations of the works in what are now British Library MS Additional 16165 and MS Additional 29729—were not limited to establishing the poet’s afterlife in the canon of English literature. Probably composed in the mid-1430s, soon after Lydgate wrote both *Letter* and *Fabula*, the kalendars intervene in the here and now (or rather, the there and then) of the poet’s economic existence; they refer directly, but in strikingly dissimilar ways, to Lydgate’s active participation in systems of patronage and commerce, of getting gifts and spending money. In MS Additional 16165, Shirley apotheosizes “*Lydegate þe Munk cloped in blacke*” by claiming that “[i]n his makyng þer is no lacke” (81–82).⁷⁰ He then proposes that the poet should receive fullness

⁶⁷ MED, s.v. *oratour*. On the monastic exchange of prayer in return for wealth, see Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 66–67.

⁶⁸ Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1337–1449)*, Appendix #19, p. 62.

⁶⁹ Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1337–1449)*, Appendix #19, p. 62, and #20, p. 63.

⁷⁰ London, British Library MS Additional 16165, fols. 2–3, and MS Additional 29729, fols. 177v–179. My references to the kalendars are from Aage Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition* (1925; London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 453–60; another edition is “John Shirley: Two Versified Tables of Contents,” in *English Verse between Chaucer and Surrey*, ed. Eleanor Prescott Hammond (1927; New York: Octagon, 1965), pp. 191–97. On Shirley’s self-presentation in these verses, see Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers*, pp. 123–24, 129–33. On MS Additional 16165, see Connolly, *John Shirley*, pp. 27–51.

of another sort in recompense for the absence of absence, the lasting plenitude, that characterizes his verse:

And thankeþe daun Johan for his peyne
 Pat to plese gentyles is right feyne
 Boþe with his laboure and his goode
 God wolde of nobles he hade ful his hooode
 (83–86)

While reminiscent of the *Letter to Gloucester's* plea on its writer's behalf, this passage, unlike that poem, more closely adheres to the basic formula of patron-client exchange. Shirley here represents Lydgate as a willing, eager servant of the aristocracy, who aims "to plese gentyles" with his "laboure and . . . goode" and to whom is owed gratitude—not payment—in exchange for such service; after all, while the copyist demands that his readers thank the monk, he leaves to God the responsibility for rewarding him with a hoodful of gold.

The explicit hope that the Lord will provide is of course an implicit suggestion as to what form the thanks of *lords* should take, and in the end Shirley's remark is no less disingenuous than is the *Letter's* concluding wish that "God sende soone a . . . letuarye [*medicine*]" of "plate and coignage" (63–64).⁷¹ Nevertheless, the relative conventionality of this first passage is one against which Shirley's comments in MS Additional 29729 (preserved in John Stow's mid-sixteenth-century hand) must stand in stark relief. In that second kalendar, we are given a rather different picture of the poet who "aught well be solempnyse" by "all oure engelische nacion" (33, 32), but who has practically bankrupted himself in its service. "[F]or all his much konnyng," Shirley laments,

w^{ch} were gret tresore to a kynge
 I meane this lidgate munke dame [*daun*] John
 his nobles bene spent I leue ychon
 and eke his shylinges nyghe by
 his thred bare coule [*cowl*] woll not ly

⁷¹See *MED*, s.v. *letuari(e)*, on the way the word can refer to both a spiritual and a medical cure. Chaucer's Physician carries only the latter (I.426), but Lydgate is punning on the word's duality.

ellas ye lordes why nill ye se
and reward his pouerte

(37–44)⁷²

Like the “lynyng outward” of the *Letter*’s purse, here the “thred bare coule” of “this lidgate” exposes not only the poet’s supposed indigence but also the problems inherent to the systems of exchange in which he and his verse are implicated. These lines by Shirley construct the poet, in fact, much as this essay has argued that he used the *Letter* to construct himself: as someone caught between the rock of patronage and the hard place of the market (whose terrors we have seen him deflect in turn through the *Fabula*’s fiction of friendship). Having spent his “moche konnyng” on apparently unseeing “lordis” and his “nobles” and “shylinges” on himself, it is now Lydgate, rather than his purse, who for Shirley best figures the kind of “pouerte” that deserves “reward.” Where the *Letter* uses the language of commercial transaction to reveal (if not fully to change) the fraught nature of patronage, and the *Fabula* employs the ideal of the gift in an (incomplete) attempt to transform its professional protagonists into mutual patrons, Shirley’s two versions of Lydgate in the kalendars—as courtly servant in need of a gift, and as impoverished worker in need of payment—together celebrate the poet’s *making*, writ large, in just the sort of contradictory terms the monk would have well understood. Moreover, in the kalendar to MS Additional 29729, it is Lydgate *himself* who becomes the prized commodity whose value we have only just begun to reestimate. “[S]uche as he is,” Shirley declares, “haue we no mo” (36).

⁷²Green cites lines 37–40 of this passage as evidence of Lydgate’s (and other poets’) need for “financial recognition” by their patrons (*Poets and Princepleasers*, p. 167). On Stow’s copy, see Connolly, *John Shirley*, pp. 76–77; on this plea, which Connolly notes is unusual in having been made by Lydgate’s scribe rather than by the poet himself, see pp. 84–85. As is evident from my argument, I understand the verses as far more meaningful than does Connolly, who sees them as a monastic and literary joke; this is not to say, however, that I take them to be true in any literal sense.