

Counterfeit Correspondences: Documentary Manipulations and Textual Consciousness in Gloucester's Confession and *The Man of Law's Tale**

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. . . a text can be powerful without being true.

Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*

I. Gloucester's Confession /Donegild's Letters

In the parliament of September 1397, Richard II sought revenge against the Lord Appellants who had humiliated him during the Merciless Parliament of 1388.¹ By 1397, the king's political situation was quite

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reversed from that of 1388, when he was still young and inexperienced. The position of Richard II was immeasurably stronger than it had been ten years ago, whereas the three senior Appellants, Richard FitzAlan earl of Arundel, Thomas Beauchamp earl of Warwick, and Thomas Woodstock duke of Gloucester, were politically marginalized as the king had gradually established his authority and assumed full control of the government. The time for revenge had come. On 10 July, 1397, Richard II arrested the lords without warning and put them on trial in parliament two month later. The pardons of the Lord Appellants were repealed; Arundel was tried for treason and finally beheaded; Warwick was banished for life to the Isle of Man. Gloucester, who had been imprisoned in Calais, was already dead by the time he was ordered to appear. The cause and the exact date of his death remain unknown; contemporary chroniclers generally agreed that the duke had been murdered and that the king himself had been deeply involved in the crime.² Gloucester was posthumously condemned for treason; and a document was presented to justify the sentence.

This document, allegedly made by the duke himself before his death, is Gloucester's own confession of various offences he had committed during the struggle between the king and the Lord Appellants. According to Walsingham and the monk of Evesham, on 8 September 1397, Richard II ordered William Rickhill, a justice of the Common Bench, to go to Calais for an interview with the duke (Given-Wilson 54-63 and 70-77). Rickhill

¹ My account of the historical events in 1388 is greatly indebted to Matthew Giancarlo's "Murder, Lies, and Storytelling" 76-112 and Nigel Saul's *Richard II* 366-404. See also Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles of the Revolution* 54-83 and J. Tait, "Did Richard II Murder the Duke of Gloucester?" 193-216.

² The author of *Continuatio Eulogii* claims that Richard II himself ordered Thomas Mowbray, the earl of Nottingham, "under threat of death," to kill the duke. The earl went to Calais and some of his followers "secretly and wickedly suffocated the duke by smothering him with a featherbed, letting it be known that he had died of natural causes" (371-9). The details of the duke's death by featherbed were publicly divulged in the Parliament of October 1399. See Given-Wilson 15 and 65.

arrived at Calais castle at eight a.m., explained his commission to the duke, and told him that if there was anything he wished to say to the king, he should put it in writing. When Rickhill returned at 9 p.m. of the same day, the duke gave his written confession to Rickhill, "with his own hands" after reading it out "in person" (Given-Wilson 82). The confession was delivered to the king on 16 September, and then read out by Rickhill himself before parliament. Here the duke confessed that he had slandered the king and assented to the making of a commission to restrain the king's freedom and usurp royal power; he also confessed his armed procession into the king's presence, interception and unauthorized opening of royal letters, and countenancing of the other Lord Appellants' plan to depose the king.

I began this essay with a discussion of Gloucester's confession since the ways that Richard exploited this written document offer an important historical context for understanding political appropriation of written authority implicated in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. One of numerous documents produced during the remarkable period between the Merciless Parliament of 1388 and the final deposition and death of Richard II in 1400, Gloucester's confession marks a complete shift in political power during the Revenge Parliament of 1397. Of interest here, however, is not so much the content of Gloucester's confession or its historical significance, but the ways in which the king used this document to serve his purposes. When writing this statement, the duke seemed to have in mind Richard's proclamation on July 15 that the three lords had been arrested because of warnings of a plot against him and not for their actions during the Merciless Parliament of 1388. The king stated that he had ordered their arrests because of the "great number of extortions, oppressions, grievances etc. committed against the king and people, and for other offences against the king's majesty, . . . and not for the assemblies and riding" during the uprising of 1387 and 1388 (*Calendar* 208; Given-Wilson 73). Richard's relations with the Lord Appellants had become tense by the spring and early summer of 1397,

when rumors of treasonous plots circulated. The plot could have been fabricated by the king to exact revenge on the lords since no evidence was submitted in the parliament to charge them with treason. If there had been no plot, however, Richard had every reason to suspect that there might be one; and the duke was aware of the king's suspicion. At one point in the confession the duke denied his involvement in any treasonous plots since he had reconciled with the king at Langley in 1388, when the king, in the presence of many lords gathered in the chapel of his manor at Langley, had "willingly and entirely" issued charters of pardon to the duke for any offences which he might have been said to have committed against the king's person, and had promised that he would never try on that account to condemn or harm him (Given-Wilson 81). By asserting his innocence in "recent offenses" (Given-Wilson 73), the duke might have attempted to save his life.

Gloucester did not realize, however, that what Richard wanted was neither the truth nor his repentance. The king desperately needed evidence to justify his indictment against the duke and solidify his claim to Gloucester's forfeited estates and holdings. The duke's appearance in Parliament had to be avoided at all costs since his eloquence might make a favorable impression on his listeners. By securing and then manipulating the written confession, Richard could accomplish his end while conveniently silencing the voice of the duke. Richard removed the duke's claim of innocence in "recent offenses" along with another part of the confession that recounted the duke's regret for his earlier crimes. When reading the confession before the parliament, Rickhill also left out the parts in which the duke pled for mercy and claimed his loyalty to the king (Given-Wilson 82) in order that the document could emphasize the duke's treacherous actions.

The historical incident of 1397, particularly Gloucester's confession that he intercepted the kings' letters, opened them "against his leave"

(Given-Wilson 81), and used them to threaten him, is strongly reminiscent of the episode in *The Man of Law's Tale*, in which Donegild intercepts and forges royal letters. Enraged at her son Alla's marriage to a "strange creature" (697-700) and conversion to Christianity, Donegild conspires to destroy Custance by intercepting and forging letters.³ While Alla is away campaigning against the Scots, Custance gives birth to a beautiful son, Mauricius. The king's constable sends a joyful message informing his lord of the birth of a prince, but Donegild intercepts the message while the king's messenger sleeps, intoxicated with the drinks she has offered. The counterfeit letter informs the king that the child is a "horrible feendly creature" (751) and that his mother has turned out to be an elf. Donegild's story is a fiction, a falsified version of what really happened. But her written message is still powerful enough to make Alla believe in its sincerity. Donegild again intercepts the king's reply to the constable that he will keep the child if such a birth is God's will and sends instead a counterfeit one commanding banishment of the prince and his mother. Donegild's desire to appropriate power through manipulations of language is presented in a highly political context. For instance, the Man of Law uses in his commentary on her act of forgery such words as "tirannye" (779) and "traitorie" (781), emphasizing the potential of her actions for political subversion. Donegild knows how written texts could be manipulated as a powerful political instrument.

Contemporary chronicles attest to frequent interception and unauthorized opening of royal letters during the reign of Richard. In 1387, Gloucester and the other Lord Appellants seized Richard's diplomatic letters to France to accuse him of wanting to call on the French king for their destruction. The king's private correspondences were not secure either; according to Adam of Usk, Robert de Vere, one of the five "traitors"

³ All of the quotations from Chaucer's works in this paper are from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

accused of treason by the three Lord Appellants in 1387, fled to Cheshire with royal letters to raise an army on behalf of the king (Adam 11). When de Vere was defeated at Radcot Bridge, Richard's letters urging him to provide means against the Lord Appellants fell into the hands of the opponents and were shown to the king at the Tower of London, to which Richard had retreated after the defeat. Just as Richard did with Gloucester's confession, the Lords used these letters for political purposes during the Merciless Parliament to accuse the king with threats of deposition and to charge de Vere with treason (Saul 189; *The Westminster Chronicle* 266-8; Walsingham 169). The Lord Appellants' interception of royal letters and Richard II's use of Gloucester's confession offer strong subtexts to Donegild's crime.

A direct link between Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale* cannot be established since Chaucer scarcely mentions any current historical event in this poem. Even the exact date of this tale's composition is uncertain: although earlier scholars believed *The Man of Law's Tale* was an early composition, most scholars now agree that Chaucer's use of Innocent III's *De miseria* and of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* in the tale indicates its composition around 1390 to 1394-95. A composition date of 1395 makes it difficult to claim that *The Man of Law's Tale*, particularly the scene in which Donegild intercepts and forges royal letters, was modeled after a historical event that took place in 1397.

But the use—or abuse—of written documents figures prominently in records about late fourteenth-century political struggles (Jesse Gellrich, *Discourse* 151-53). John of Gaunt, for instance, forged a chronicle in order to claim his son Henry as the legitimate successor to the childless king. Gaunt concocted a story that Edmund Crouchback, the second son of Henry III, was in fact his first son and the legitimate heir but was held back in favor of the future Edward I because of his crooked back. Gaunt also claimed that Henry III created Edmund the duke of Lancaster and

planned that his heirs should reign after Edward I. The duke of Lancaster was the great-grandfather of Duchess Blanche, Gaunt's wife and Henry IV's mother. Hence, the legitimacy of Henry IV's claim to the throne. In order to authenticate his story, Gaunt placed the forged chronicle in abbeys and monasteries and submitted it to the parliament of 1394. The whole story was a fabrication, but Gaunt's deeds suggest that he was keenly aware of the power of written words in constituting truth (Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow* 77-78; *England's Empty Throne* 3-6).

Another example comes from the articles of Richard's deposition in 1399, which illustrate Richard's understanding of the value of written record. Most of the accusations of Richard in the articles focus on how the king had arrogated the written law of the land to exploit his people. Not only had Richard destroyed "the rolls of the records" for his own benefit but also altered the rolls of Parliament and issued "sealed documents," commonly referred to as "blank charters," to confiscate his people's goods for himself (Green 245; Given-Wilson 172-184). As one of many instances of documentary manipulations that constituted a distinctive feature of Ricardian England, Gloucester's confession strongly resonates with Donegild's intercepting and counterfeiting of royal letters.

Scholars have attempted to historicize *The Man of Law's Tale*, but not many of them have considered the question of writing and written authority. Don-John Dugas, for examples, locates the tale in the context of Richard II's reign and reads this story as a narrative about the basis for the monarch's right to rule, told by one of the twelve highest-ranking legal experts in England (27-43). Medieval "Orientalism" is the topic of Susan Schibanoff's essay, in which she argues that the Man of Law tells the story of the Muslims in order to facilitate the creation of Christian fraternity (59-96). Unlike Schibanoff, who examines medieval marginalization of the "Other," Sarah Stanbury focuses on Rome, the center of power, to show how the tale condemns Rome for its role in trafficking relics and

indulgences ("Rome" 119). While the Man of Law's profession does not get much attention from Dugas, Schibanoff, and Stanbury even when they discuss the relationship between the tale and the teller, law is an important subject in Maura Nolan's essay, in which she asserts the suitability of the tale and the teller, pointing to the confrontation between legal and poetic discourses in the Introduction to the tale (136-53).

This paper also considers the implications of law in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and attempts to contextualize the work in order to explain the connection between the teller and the tale. My main concern, however, is the ways in which *The Man of Law's Tale* bears witness to the increased importance of writing as well as the problems caused by the ambiguous status of writing in the process of the cultural change that happened in late fourteenth-century England. My reading of *The Man of Law's Tale* first demonstrates how tightly the Man of Law's performance is constructed around the importance of writing and documents. My discussions of the tale's references to writing illuminate textual mentality of the narrator deeply invested in written culture. Since the Man of Law himself is a master of documentation, he understands anxieties and tensions attending the circulation of writing and documents. Exploring these anxieties, I argue that this tale repeats the skepticism about written authority and concerns about the circulation of written texts that Chaucer often expresses in his works such as *The House of Fame*, *The Legend of Good Women*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and his short poem, "Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn." My conclusion poses this question: Why of all the tales in the *Canterbury Tales* did Chaucer choose to introduce this kind of skepticism in *The Man of Law's Tale*? I seek an answer to the question in the narrator's profession as a serjeant-of-law as well as Chaucer's relationship to Rickhill and other members of contemporary legal circles. That lawyers were involved in both Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale* is not a mere coincidence. If Gloucester's confession is a tale narrated by Richard

II's justice Rickhill, *The Man of Law's Tale* is a story narrated by a lawyer equally well practiced in handling documents. Documentary manipulations, fears of interception, suspicions of forgery, and treason are all implicated in both narratives recited by these men of law. This paper maintains that Chaucer's close connections with contemporary legal circles as well as his personal experience in the government made him keenly aware that important political events during the reign of Richard II seriously questioned the authority of written documents.

II. The Man of Law, "War and Wys": Medieval Lawyers and their Textual Culture

M. T. Clanchy writes that late medieval forgers were not "occasional deviants on the peripheries of legal practice" (249) but experts well established at the center of literary and intellectual culture. Clanchy's analysis of medieval forgery explains how appropriately Chaucer assigns the episode of Donegild's forgery to the mouth of the Man of Law, one of the most literate narrators in the *Canterbury Tales*. Donegild's unusual act of letter-writing has attracted the attention of several Chaucerians, who have shown their interest in women's practice of writing and their involvement in literary culture. In her study of Chaucerian women's letters, for example, Stanbury describes Donegild as Chaucer's most "enigmatic letter-writing woman" ("Women's Letters" 283). Whereas in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer takes a voyeuristic look at the closed spaces within which women read and write their love letters, in *The Man of Law's Tale* Chaucer neither shows us the space from which Donegild writes nor explains her motives. The letter produced from this invisible space, which Stanbury identifies as the mother's incestuous desire for her son, becomes a source of horror ("Women's Letters" 284-85).⁴ Stanbury

correctly points to anxieties and tensions circulating around letter writing and female autonomy in private space. But her discussion fails to recognize the difference between Donegild's letters and those of other Chaucerian women writers. Whereas May and Criseyde write love letters expressing each writer's own desire and private thoughts, the letters that Donegild forges are public documents containing important information on national affairs. The letter from the constable to the king transmits news about the birth of a prince, while the king's letter to the constable conveys a royal command to protect Custance and her son until he returns to the kingdom. Furthermore, Donegild's forged letters have evidentiary value. When Alla returns from war and asks for Custance and her child, the constable tells him that they were expelled as the king had ordered, submitting the royal letter as evidence. The constable's mention of the "seel" (882) illustrates the narrator's legal knowledge that the seal of the king guarantees the authority of his words. The constable also claims his own innocence by emphasizing that he just followed what his lord commanded through the letter, in other words, an official document. When the counterfeit letter is presented, Alla discovers the offender by identifying the hand that wrote it. The king kills his own mother without giving her a chance to confess or defend herself since the letter itself serves as clear material evidence of her crime.

A comparison between Chaucer's and John Gower's version of the tale of Custance (or Constance in Gower's tale) demonstrates the Man of Law's fastidiousness about documents. Unlike Chaucer's version, which emphasizes legal procedures and value of documentary evidence, John Gower's version shows that the king relies on an oral confession to

⁴ For another study of Chaucerian women writers, see Jennifer Summit 23-59. Summit argues that women writers in Chaucer's poems represent the status of Chaucer as a vernacular writer disrupting the authority of the classical canon. Summit's discussion of Chaucerian women writers, however, does not include Donegild.

discover the truth. Forged letters also appear in Gower's version, but his tale does not underscore their evidentiary value. No mention of the "seal" appears when the chamberlain gives the counterfeit letter to the king: "The letter schewed, rad it is, / Which thei forsaken eueridel" (1252-3). The procedure of discovering the hand is also missing in Gower's tale of Constance. Instead, the king reads the letter and immediately suspects treason.

Chaucer's emphasis on the documentary value of the letters in *The Man of Law's Tale* seems deliberate, especially when we consider that the narrator of this tale is a lawyer whose social position is closely associated with documentary evidence and written culture. In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer portrays the Man of Law as a master of documentary manipulation (Jill Mann 87-89). His portrait apparently repeats the same satiric attacks on lawyers' avarice and corruption common in medieval estates satires: lawyers are arrogant and illegally amass wealth; they despise the poor and establish new laws in order to oppress their neighbors. Praising the Man of Law a "greet purchasour" (318), Chaucer also mentions that the Man of Law receives many "fees and robes" (317). But as Mann observes, the details that Chaucer borrowed from other estates satires do not have the traditional censures against the vices of lawyers (87-89). For instance, the narrator of the *General Prologue* refers to the Man of Law's "purchasing" as evidence of his professional skill, not of corruption. He never specifies whether the pilgrim lawyer is acting for his client or for himself. Rather, the narrator offers the lawyer's "fees and robes" as evidence of his excellent professional knowledge since the Man of Law receives them for his "science and heigh renoun" (316). The praise for the Man of Law's flawless writing of writs and amazing memory all reveals the naïve narrator's admiration for this pilgrim's pre-eminence as an authority on writing and documentation.

Chaucer's portrait of the Man of Law represents that of medieval

lawyers in general and the “textual community” (Brian Stock 522) that they formed in late medieval England.⁵ The legal profession was a growth industry of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Brigette Vale 91-102; Maurice Keen 15-16; M. M. Postan 175); the growing popularity of the legal profession as a career in late medieval society demanded the establishment of institutions that could provide aspiring students with the legal training required for various positions in the government. These institutions of legal education promoted lay literacy based on English, while contributing to the emergence of cultivated readers who began to use literacy beyond their professional activities (M. B. Parkes 555; Keen 235-7; E. W. Ives 181-217).⁶ According to Parkes, for instance, the manuscripts compiled by a Berkshire lawyer in 1260 contain materials that indicate the lawyer’s interest in vernacular literature; the manuscripts include the Anglo-Norman story *Horn*, Robert Grossteste’s *Le chateau d’amour*, *The Fables* of Marie de France, and Guillaume le Clerc’s *Bestiary*, as well as various legal documents (Parkes 562). Studies about late medieval lawyers’ book ownership also show the growing involvement of the legal profession with contemporary literary culture. Medieval lawyers were eager advocates of humanist learning, as well as patrons of art and literature (Geoffrey Lester 200-217; C. E. Moreton 338-46; Ives 182). Chaucer might have worked within the circle of lawyers, who had part of their education at one of the Inns of Court.⁷ Although Chaucer’s education in the Inns of Court

⁵ Stock defines “textual community” as a group of people whose social activities are centered around texts. Neither do the texts in question have to be something written down nor the people literate.

⁶ J. R. Maddicott observes that the reign of Edward I saw a weakening of the boundaries that had separated justices from lay society. No longer were the justices “clerks” since laymen had begun to fill this position with their skill as pleaders (24).

⁷ Joseph Allen Hornsby objects to the suggestion that the Inns of Court in Chaucer’s time provided any legal education; he argues that until the early fifteenth century the Inns functioned as mere residences for practicing lawyers during the court term

has not been conclusively established, many biographical facts, such as his relationship with contemporary legal circles and his career as a legal official, indicate his familiarity with legal procedures and the written culture of medieval lawyers, justices, and legal scribes. Even the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* are highly suggestive of a close connection between Chaucer and Chancery as Ian Doyle and Parkes identify the hands that wrote both Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts as those of Chancery scribes (163-210). This group of lay people who “gained their livelihood by writing” (Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice 65) and were profoundly affected by the dissemination of literate habits of mind provided the cultural context in which *The Man of Law’s Tale* was produced.

III. Textual Mentality in *The Man of Law’s Tale*

Chaucer’s intention to introduce the textual and written culture of the Man of Law is apparent from the beginning of Fragment II, which opens with a calculation of time by the Host. Announcing that a “fourth part” (17) of the day is already gone, the Host urges the pilgrims to resume the tale-telling game without wasting any more time. According to Walter Ong,

and that only gradually did they evolve into places where young men went to live and learn law (7-20). Whether the lawyers of the fourteenth century received the same kind of education offered in the Inns of Court during the fifteenth century is not clear; however, evidence suggests that a developed taste for vernacular literature existed among lawyers even from the thirteenth century. For details on Chaucer’s legal education and its connection to the Inns of Court, see Hornsby 20-31. The Inns of Court functioned as important centers for dramatic performances during the fifteenth century. Although no record that testifies to performances of drama in the Inns during the fourteenth century exists, an entry included in the records of Furnivall’s Inn, indicating that a dramatic performance was held in 1407, the year when the records began, suggests the possibility of earlier dramatic performances in Furnivall’s Inn during the fourteenth century (D. S. Bland, 263).

the practice of calculating time emerged primarily with the advent of written culture; before writing was deeply interiorized, people did not feel themselves situated every moment of their lives in abstract computed time (98).⁸ Just as writing reconstitutes in visual space an originally spoken word, the calendar visualizes abstract time (Ong 123). Not only this reference to the calculation of time but also the whole opening passages show that this unlearned Host interprets natural phenomena in intellectual terms. The sense of artificiality at the beginning of the Fragment II contrasts to the natural world in which the *General Prologue* begins.

Lee Patterson compares *The Man of Law's Tale* to *The Knight's Tale* and finds in the former a new beginning with which the narrator attempts to reconstruct the hierarchical order that has been threatened by the Miller and then totally collapsed by the Cook (280-81).⁹ The comparison between *The Knight's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale* is apt since in all of the manuscripts except for one *The Man of Law's Tale* consistently follows Fragment I (Helen Cooper 126).¹⁰ I also detect something initiatory about *The Man of Law's Tale* that can be compared to *The Knight's Tale*. The Knight's class identity is defined by his ideas of love, honor, chivalry, and knighthood; his story of Theseus, Arcite, and Palamoun reveals the Knight's nostalgia for a past in which such ideals could flourish. Whereas the Knight summons a world that has become obsolete compared to the realities of

⁸ According to Aron Ja. Gurevich, mechanical clocks were invented in the late thirteenth century in response to a mercantile need for a precise way to measure smaller time intervals; consequently, "theological time" was replaced by "technological time." Clocks were installed in the towers of the city hall and cathedrals in London between 1326 and 1335 (278).

⁹ As for the initiatory nature of *The Man of Law's Tale*, see also Derek Pearsall 286 and Schibanoff 59-61.

¹⁰ The one exception is Hengwrt manuscript. The tale appears at a later point in Hengwrt, which has misplaced quires (Fragment D, the latter part of the Fragment B², and Fragment H) between *The Cook's Tale* and *The Man of Law's Tale* (Ralph Hanna III 64-84).

fourteenth-century England, the Man of Law introduces a new world with a different system of values in which textuality, literacy, and legal knowledge hold hegemony over the Knight's world of chivalric ideals. Literacy is a "technology of the mind," a special skill cultivated by learning how to write and read. Individuals who have acquired the skill in writing are members of a unique class, which sharply divides itself from other social groups with little or no training in the written word (Gellrich, *Discourse* 5). Throughout his performance in the Introduction and the tale proper, the Man of Law professes that he belongs to this new world of professional learning.¹¹

The Man of Law's textual mentality is displayed from the beginning of his speech. When asked by the host to "[acquit] ... [his] biheeste" (37) by telling a tale, the Man of Law assents to the request, replying that he has no intention of breaking the "forward (promise)" (40) since his "text" (45) says so. But instead of telling his tale right away, the Man of Law offers his commentary on Chaucer's works. His description of *The Seintes Legende of Cupide* suggests that he must have known Chaucer's works not from listening but from reading the author's texts as he says that "if he [Chaucer] have noght seyde hem ["thrifty" tales]" in one book, he wrote

¹¹ The beginning of the tale proper, different from its sources and analogues, is also designed to present the vision of a new world. While Gower's and Trivet's tales of Custance begin with an introduction of the virtuous heroine, *The Man of Law's Tale* opens up with a group of Syrian merchants, who traffic in news as well as commodities. According to Jürgen Habermas, the establishment of a postal system among merchant guilds began from the fourteenth century, when the expansion of trade required more frequent and exact information about distant events (16). David Wallace also notes the importance of "novelle," the equivalent of the Middle English "tidynges," observing that news and information were essential for the functioning of the medieval Florentine merchant economy (201-202). On the role of merchants and trade networks in the transmission of news during the Middle Ages, see Eleanor A Congdon, 157-171. The information exchanged among merchants played an important role for the advancement of their secular power as well. The beginning of *The Man of Law's Tale* marks the emergence of merchants as a political power and the corresponding change in the social order.

them “in another” (51-52). In his commentary on Chaucer’s work, the Man of Law again uses the word “writeth” (“But certainly no word ne writeth he / Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee, / That loved hir owene brother sinfully” (77-79)) and observes that the story of Apollonius of Tyre is a “horrible” tale “for to rede” (84). Chaucer, the Man of Law concludes, would never “write” such “unkynde abhomynacions” in his works. By emphasizing the Man of Law’s familiarity with written texts, Chaucer introduces the themes of written culture and documentary manipulations that appear prominently in the tale proper. Critics have often noted that the Man of Law’s account of Chaucer’s work is designed to undercut the Man of Law’s claim to an exceptional memory, since the Man of Law’s list of good women does not match with that of the *Legend of Good Women* as we have it. Shoaf, for instance, claims that the Man of Law’s catalogue of Cupid’s saints is designed to satirize the “punctilious lawyer who, on the verge of telling a tale of the ultimate proper, commits an error on a subject,” which he still pretends to know well about (“Circulation” 289).¹² The disparity between *The Legend of Good Women* and the Man of Law’s account of it seems intentional since it introduces Chaucer’s skepticism about the stability of a written text; it is susceptible to manipulation and misunderstanding, and the author has no control over the ways in which his texts are represented to the reader.

The Man of Law’s notorious claim in the Introduction that he will “speke in prose” (96) should also be considered in the context of the narrator’s textuality. Although before telling the tale the Man of Law promises to “speke in prose” (96), both the prologue and the tale of Custance are written in rime royal stanzas:

¹² Another explanation of this disparity is that the Introduction to *The Man of Law’s Tale* was written while *The Legend of Good Women* was still in progress. For the discussion of this problem, see the explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer* 854.

But of my tale how shal I doon this day?
 Me were looth be likned, douteless,
 To Muses that men clepe Pierides
Methamorphosios woot what I mene;
 But natheless, I recche noght a bene
 Though I come after hym with hawebake.
 I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make. (90-96)

Although the Man of Law's Introduction, Prologue and the tale proper appear together consistently in most of the extant manuscripts, their relationship to each other seems to have been problematic to critics.¹³ A. S. G. Edwards attempts to solve this problem by claiming that the word "prose" might mean verse under certain conditions (469-70); hence, no gap between the Introduction and the tale proper. Observing that reading *The Man of Law's Tale* can be a trial much like Constance's, however, Carolyn Dinshaw points to the Man of Law's promise of a prose narrative as an epitome of his performance's "numerous contradictions, [and] gaps" (88). Most critics have tended to the view that the reference to "prose" (96) indicates a prose tale was originally to follow, possibly *The Tale of Melibee*. But Ralph Elliott believes in the relevance between the Introduction and the tale proper and maintains that "I speke in prose" means "I normally speak in prose," by focusing on the medieval grammar of the sentence (96). Tauno Mustanoja agrees with Ralph Elliott's explanation that in Middle English the present tense often refers to habitual actions, while the future began to be indicated by auxiliaries such as "wol" (854). I support Elliott's and Mustanoja's claims that "I speke in prose" is exactly what Chaucer meant. But rather than focusing on grammar, I seek to explore what

¹³ For a recent criticism on the question of the narrator and the inconsistencies of the three parts of the text, see Gania Barlow 397-98. Barlow maintains that the textual failings call attention to "the activity of narration, forming a layered meditation on the possibilities and dangers of narrative authority" (397).

Chaucer means by adding the latter part of line 96: "And lat him rymes make." The gap between "prose" and "rymes" connotes the Man of Law's perception that his narrative to the pilgrims will eventually be presented in a written form by the poet Geoffrey Chaucer. The Man of Law is only an amateur storyteller, one of the "Pierides" (92) metamorphosed into magpies for challenging the muses to a singing contest. The Man of Law compares himself to the daughters of Pierus—i.e. a magpie—and Chaucer to the Muses. The tale he can present to the pilgrims is only a "hawebake" (95), a poor dish, since Chaucer has already told about "loveris up and doun / Mo than Ovide made of mencion / In his Epistoles" (53-55). He is only an amateur storyteller, but he knows when he tells his tale in prose, his unskilled tale will be written down and transmitted by Geoffrey the narrator and then Chaucer the poet in well-crafted rime royal stanzas. The Man of Law's "lat him rymes make" points to the distance between the voice of telling and the text of record; the Man of Law understands that his tale will be ultimately preserved and circulated as a text.

The textual mentality is found throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Although the immediate audience of the tales are the pilgrims, the book as a whole addresses both listeners and readers as shown in the Prologue to *The Miller's Tale*. After warning the readers about the Miller's churlish tale that he is about to rehearse, Geoffrey the narrator recommends that they choose a better tale simply by turning pages. As Donald Howard states, the idea that readers can select the tale "by turning over the leaf" shows the "bookness," more precisely "paperiness" of the *Canterbury Tales* (65-66).

The Man of Law's Tale is the place where such "bookness" of the *Canterbury Tales* is the most conspicuous. *The Man of Law's Tale* particularly abounds in authorial images: scenes of Alla and Donegild reading and writing privately in their own rooms could be Chaucer's projection of his self-image as a solitary author; the Constable and Alla communicate in writing, just as Chaucer attempts a written communication with a reader

through his own books. The division of chapters is another indication that the tale belongs to written culture. The tale of Custance is divided into four parts, with the beginning and the ending of each chapter clearly marked by "Explicit" and "Sequitur." According to Paul Saenger, changes in the format of fourteenth-century manuscripts happened simultaneously with the spread of silent private reading. Oral reading had usually involved a continuous reading of a text from beginning to end; but the growth of written culture from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries introduced subdivisions and colored paragraph marks that isolate units of intellectual content (258-261).

The narrator's effort to control the tale, thereby presenting it as the product of a learned author is a salient feature of the Man of Law's performance; he constantly summarizes, comments, and explains at every important moment. For instance, when Custance has to leave Rome to be wedded to the Sowdan of Surrye, the narrator, using the theory of judicial astronomy, explains that the position of the heavenly bodies was unfavorable at the time of her departure: "Infortunat ascendent tortuous, / Of which the lord is helpeles falle, allas, / Out of his angle into the derkeste hous! / O Mars, o Atazir, as in this cas! / O fieble moone, unhappy been thy pass! / Thou knytttest thee ther thou art nat receyved; / Ther thou were weel, fro thennes artow weyved" (302-8). Also in Part I, enraged at her son's marriage and conversion to Christianity, the mother of the Sowdan determines to protect her own religion by destroying the Christians that accompanied Custance. The Sowdanesse summons her council and plans to kill Custance during a wedding banquet. The Man of Law's comments on her treacherous acts in the next two stanzas clearly show his intention to guide the responses of his readers. He calls the Sowdanesse a "Virago" (359), "Semyrame the secounde" (359), and "serpent under femynnytee" (360). The Man of Law's effort to present his narrative as a literate product is found again in the Epilogue to this tale.

When the Man of Law finishes his tale, the Host praises the tale and asks the Parson, another “learned” person, to continue the game of tale-telling: “This was a thrifty tale for the nones! / Sir Parisshe Prest,” quod he, “for Goddes bones, / Telle us a tale, as was thi forward yore. / I se wel that ye lerned men in lord / Can moche good” (1165-9). The textual mentality embedded in this “lerned” man’s performance cannot be explained apart from what had been happening in English society from the twelfth century.

IV. Written Culture and Its Literary Implications

According to Clanchy, English royal government extended its use of writing, and this in turn forced English people to participate in literacy (231). The spread of literacy was slow and unsteady, but the power of writing to transform intellectual, bureaucratic, and legal institutions increased. Already in 1300 the English were remarkably document-minded, as laymen began to convey property to each other by charter and even serfs were familiar with documents (Clanchy 231; C. F. Briggs 403).¹⁴ With the proliferation of written documents and the consequent growth of literacy, however, came skepticism and “demystification” about written texts (Richard Firth Green 283). It is true that after 1066 the increase in the number of forgeries undermined social belief in written evidence as one of the most reliable vehicles for truth. The extensive forgery that stifled the growth of literacy in the eleventh century, however, contributed eventually to the development of the literacy and literate mentality in English government and law during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (Green 283; O’Brien 11-15). Both Gloucester’s confession and *The Man of*

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the growth of documentary culture in late medieval England, see my papers, “The Paston Letters” 144-150 and “*Domus Dedaly*” 217-226.

Law's Tale show similar, complicated responses to the growth of documentary culture in late medieval England; while they both reveal dependence on and belief in writing and written documents, they show that documents could be easily manipulated on the basis of that trust in writing; and the danger of manipulation becomes the source of distrust in the efficacy of documents and written forms of communication. The intercepting and forging of letters in *The Man of Law's Tale* reveal anxieties surrounding the spread of literacy and the consequent growth of written communication in fourteenth-century England.

The dangers of abuse implicated in documentary culture have particular significance for Chaucer, whose works often reveal the author's concerns about problems inherent in the circulation of his own literary texts. For instance, in "Chaucers Wordes Unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn," the poet warns the scribe against miscopying his manuscripts.¹⁵ While this poem ascribes the unreliability of textual transmission to the careless transcription by the "negligent" (7) and hasty scribe, Chaucer's other poems ascribe it to his unknown readers, who might misunderstand his works. For instance, the invocation in Book V of *Troilus and Criseyde* shows that Chaucer is uncertain how his texts would be received by readers: "And for ther is so gret diversite / In English and in writing of oure tonge, / So prey I God

¹⁵ Adam the scribe has been identified as Adam Pinkhurst, to whom scholars ascribe the hand that appears in *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde* as well as both Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts (Linne R. Mooney 97). Adam Pinkhurst had an affiliation with the Mercer's Company and worked as a writer of court letters in London; he is also believed to be the hand that copied the Mercers' petition of 1388 against the former mayor of London, Sir Nicholas Brember (Mooney 97-101). Whether Adam Pinkhurst actually transcribed Hengwrt or Ellesmere manuscripts has not been confirmed yet, most scholars agree that the scribe whose hand appears in the manuscripts of Chaucer's works was not a professional literary copyist but worked mainly as an administrative or legal writer (Mooney 104; Doyle and Parkes xxi). The legal connection of Chaucer's scribe insinuates the influence of legal writing in the development of Chaucer's poetics as well as his idea of textual instability.

that non myswrite the, / Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge; / And red wherso thow be, or elles songe, / That thow be understonde, God I biseche" (1793-99). Chaucer's ambition about his "bok" entering the realm of "poesy" (1790) and standing next to "Virgile, Ovid, Omer, Lucan, and Stace" (1792) is accompanied by certain anxieties whether they are about the diversity of "tonge" (dialects) or misinterpretation of the reader.

Cultural anxieties about documentary manipulation and Chaucer's fear of textual instability might explain his skepticism about the authority of old books that the author often expresses in his shorter poems. As Gellrich has noted, Chaucer refuses to give a straightforward validation of meaning in old books (*Idea of the Book* 25). In the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, the "bookish" narrator of this poem asserts that we have to believe in what the old books say since there is no way to prove whether they are true or false: "And yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren were of remembraunce the keye. / Wel ought us thane honouren and beleve/ These bokes, there we han noon other preve" (Prologue, F-text, 25-29). The affirmation of written authority betrays a certain sense of resignation or doubt on the narrator's part. This sense gets stronger as the narrator's reverence for the old book is immediately countered by his love of nature. At the beginning of the Prologue, the narrator says that many people tell that "ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle" and that he cannot but believe in them since no man can prove it "by assay" (9). But the joy from seeing the "faire and fresshe" (55) blooms of a daisy is a real one that the narrator himself can feel and experience. The narrator's confidence in the validity of his own immediate experience contrasts to his reluctant trust in the "autoritees" (G-Text, 83).¹⁶

¹⁶ Chaucer's doubts about the veracity of old books and written authority are also found in the *House of Fame*, particularly in the narrator's account of his dreams about "Dydo and Eneas" in Book I. The narrator refers to Virgil and Ovid as the authorities for this story of Dido, while the two poets' different interpretations of the same narrative have significant bearings for the issue of textual manipulation.

That the Man of Law mentions the *Legend of Good Women*, out of all of Chaucer's books, suggests a thematic link between the scene of documentary manipulation in *The Man of Law's Tale* and Chaucer's doubt about written authority in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*. Chaucer often describes books as "a delight, a faith, and a passion full of reverence" (Piero Boitani 40). Chaucer's poems, such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, begin and end with a mention of books. The poet had ignored the real world around him and his neighbors until he started composing *The Canterbury Tales*. The poet's exposure to documentary culture, however, might have shown him that a written text is susceptible to falsification and that it is easy to misrepresent reality; then finally in *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer began to question his earlier belief in the absolute truth of textual knowledge.

Shoaf asserts that *The Man of Law's Tale* is for Chaucer an occasion to consider the "circulation and corruption of media" (*Chaucer's Body* 29); Custance stands for "constancy itself," which is immune to the "finitude of writing" (Shoaf, "Circulation" 293). Women were often associated with the "surface of the text" (Dinshaw 21) in medieval patristic writings. From the beginning of the tale, Custance is presented as a text, circulated and interpreted without any consideration of her desires and wishes. The first time we hear about her is from the Syrian merchants who transmit the story of Custance to the Sowdan of Surrye. The merchants' report transforms Custance into a story, a report, and tidings. She is a text that circulates away from the author's hand and returns home "unwemmed" (924) as if answering to the wishes of the Man of Law, the narrator of her tale, and of Chaucer. The poet's fear of circulation and consequent corruption is historically inscribed. Contemporary practices of documentary manipulation that culminated in Richard II's abuse of Gloucester's

For a critical work on this theme in the *House of Fame*, see Sheila Delany 48-57.

confession taught Chaucer that written communication was unstable and susceptible to abuse.

V. Conclusion: Fiction and History

Why then of all the tales in the *Canterbury Tales* did Chaucer advance an extended critique of documentary culture in *The Man of Law's Tale*? What is the relationship between Chaucer and the Man of Law as the narrator? The origin of an Anglo-Norman word *narratio*, explained by Clanchy, offers a glimpse of the connection between law and literature. From Anglo-Saxon England, the legal pleading made by the "narrator or *conteur*" on the litigant's behalf had been called a "tale," which is translated to *narratio* in Latin or to *conte* in French; and the pleadings were narrated not in Latin but romance words (Clanchy 221):

The "narrator" was thus a "romancer" a professional teller of tales in the vernacular, but his "tales" were legal pleadings and not romances in the modern sense. Yet in origin the technique of the legal narrator was probably similar to that of his namesake, the Singer of Tales, studied by Milman Parry and A. B. Lord. A narrator, whether of common law pleadings or of epic and romance, had originally reconstructed his tale in due form on the basis of a few remembered formulas. He was a professional oral remembrancer, very necessary before law and literature were committed to writing. (221-22)

The roles of an advocate and a poet underwent a similar process of change. Written narrative began to replace oral pleadings by the 1300s, about the time when vernacular poets attempted to transform themselves from minstrels to "authors" (Clanchy 222). The strong affinity between the roles of an "advocate" and a "poet" in late medieval society suggests a part of the environment in which Chaucer imposes an authorial image on the Man

of Law and introduces in *The Man of Law's Prologue* the most significant meta-critical comments on his own work.

More important, a link between the Man of Law and Chaucer the poet is found in the actions of William Rickhill, who presented the duke of Gloucester's confession to the parliament. The parliamentary roll of 1399 recounts how Richard modified Gloucester's confession to support his accusation against him:

In the said parliament held at Westminster in the twenty-first year (1397), the portion of the said articles [Gloucester's confession] that pleased the king were read, and the portion of the said articles that were opposed to the intent and the purpose of the king were not read, nor known. And in addition to this, the portion of the said articles that were to the intent and purpose of the said king were proclaimed in each county of England, and that the said duke had confessed and known the said articles, so proclaimed, before William Rickhill, justice.¹⁷

At the time of his meeting with the duke, Rickhill cautioned him to have a copy of the document for his own records. When finally delivering the confession to the king, Rickhill asked for an official copy in case the document might be "altered or amended, or its contents damaged or erased" (Given-Wilson 222-23). Rickhill's request is comprehensible since each of the four extant copies of the confession tells a different version of the event (Giancarlo 82-83). His precautions were in vain since the king was determined to abuse the document. Rickhill's requests indicating his awareness that written documents could no longer claim the authority and truth once believed to reside in written texts reverberate with Chaucer's concerns about the transmission of his own manuscripts.

Important in both Gloucester's confession and Donegild's counterfeit

¹⁷ *Rotuli Parliamentorum* 432. I use Giancarlo's translation in "Murder, Lies, and Storytelling" 87.

letters is the whole notion that written documents are unstable and susceptible to falsification. Both Donegild's letters and the duke's confession expose the instability of a written document and its "fictionality" (Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow* 6), the inextricable intermingling of truth and falsehood. Strohm writes that every text, whether literary or historical, is basically "fabrication or fictional narrative that reflects the ideology, desire, and aspiration of the writer himself"; documents should be treated "less as records of events than as interpretations of events, inevitably reliant to one degree or another upon invention and fictional device" (*Hochon's Arrow* 4-6). In the willful disinformation of contemporary historical narratives, Chaucer found an emblem of writing and textual transmission in general. In other words, Gloucester's confession and Richard II's distortion of the document during its parliamentary reading serve as a social context in which Chaucer produced and circulated his works. The anxieties surrounding the proliferation of documents and the increased use of written communication in this period are all implicated in the counterfeit letters of Donegild.

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K C I

ABSTRACT**Counterfeit Correspondences:
Documentary Manipulations and Textual Consciousness in
Gloucester's Confession and *The Man of Law's Tale*****Hyunyang Lim**

Discussing Thomas Woodstock duke of Gloucester's Confession, written in 1397, and Donegild's counterfeit letters in *The Man of Law's Tale*, this essay explores Chaucer's reservations about the reliability of written documents. Noting that lawyers are involved in both Gloucester's confession and *The Man of Law's Tale*, this paper examines problems of written documents implicated in both narratives, such as documentary manipulations, fears of interception, and suspicions of forgery. I suggest that Chaucer's close connections with contemporary legal circles made him understand that political events during the reign of Richard II questioned the status of written texts as an instrument of validating action. Despite an obvious connection between the Man of Law and the legal profession, *The Man of Law's Tale* has never been studied in terms of the literate mentality of late medieval lawyers. This paper analyzes how tightly the Man of Law's performance is constructed around references to writing and documents in order to reveal the textual mentality of the narrator deeply invested in written culture. As a master of documentation, the Man of Law understands anxieties and tensions attending the circulation of writing. While exploring these anxieties, this paper illuminates how *The Man of Law's Tale* reiterates Chaucer's skepticism about written authority and his concerns about the circulation of written texts that the poet has often expressed in his shorter poems.

Key Words | Chaucer, *The Man of Law's Tale*, Donegild, forgery, Gloucester's Confession, written culture, legal profession

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