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Writing over eighty years ago, John M. Manly posed the questions that have shaped scholarly debate over the nature and extent of Chaucer’s debt to medieval rhetoric ever since: “What . . . was medieval rhetoric? Who were its principal authorities in Chaucer’s time? And what use did Chaucer make of methods and doctrines unmistakably due to the rhetoricians?”¹ In his answer to the first question, Manly restricted medieval rhetoric to a set of formal precepts that fell into three categories: “(1) arrangement or organization; (2) amplification and abbreviation; (3) style and its ornaments.”² Especially among the generation immediately following the 1926 publication of Manly’s landmark essay, that definition prevailed and shaped many subsequent studies devoted to identifying the various rhetorical figures employed in Chaucer’s poetry.

Those who wrote such studies also accepted Manly’s answer to his second basic question: the principal sources of rhetorical doctrine for Chaucer and his contemporaries were the Latin textbooks composed in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries by Matthew of Vendôme, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and others, several of which were made available in modern printed editions by Edmond Faral only two years before Manly explored their influence on Chaucer.³ Often referred to as *artes poetiae*, these are treatises on general composition, a genre that Douglas Kelly has designated more precisely as “arts of poetry and prose.”⁴ The most

² Ibid., 99. Under the first category, Manly has in mind chiefly instruction on how to begin and end a composition (see 99–101).
popular among the arts of poetry and prose, Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova* (1200–1202, revised up to c. 1215), survives in more than two hundred manuscript copies and is cited twice by Chaucer.5

Manly's answer to his third question was that Chaucer made extensive use of the formal techniques he had learned from Geoffrey of Vinsauf and his fellow rhetoricians but distanced himself from this kind of artifice as he matured as a poet: "To any student of his technique, Chaucer's development reveals itself unmistakably, not as progress from crude, untrained native power to a style and method polished by fuller acquaintance with rhetorical precepts and more sophisticated models, but rather as a process of gradual release from the astonishingly artificial and sophisticated art with which he began and the gradual replacement of formal rhetorical devices by methods of comparison based upon close observation of life and the exercise of the creative imagination."6 Since the 1960s, scholars have taken issue with the "unmistakably" in Manly's formulation in order to document the ways in which Chaucer's artistic success came not despite but *by means of* his "rhetorical" poetics. Leading the way was Robert O. Payne, whose 1963 book *The Key of Remembrance* remains the most comprehensive and nuanced appreciation of Chaucer's creative experimentation with the rhetorical conception of poetry anatomi- zed in the arts of poetry and prose and embodied in previous literary works, both Latin and vernacular, that belong to the tradition they epitomized.7 More recent scholarship has expanded the scope of inquiry beyond the formalistic elements of structure and style to include, for example, the construction of rhetorical ethos,8 argument from the attri-

5 On the reception of the *Poetria nova* (*PN*), see especially Marjorie Curry Woods, *Classroom Commentaries: Teaching the "Poetria nova" Across Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010). Manly puts special emphasis on Geoffrey of Vinsauf and his masterpiece: "Every educated man [in Chaucer's fourteenth-century audience] remembered Master Gaufred and some perhaps knew by heart his famous lamentation [of King Richard I (*PN* 368–430)], for the *Nova Poetria* was one of the principal text-books on rhetoric and was studied in the schools with a zeal devoted perhaps to few modern school books" ("Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," 96).

6 Manly, "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians," 97.


butes of persons,9 and persuasion through careful attention to audience and occasion (kairos) in Chaucer’s works.10 Rita Copeland’s studies of Chaucerian rhetoric as both a metadiscourse and a conceptual scheme for textual production have been especially important in this ongoing effort to broaden and deepen our understanding of rhetoric as it shapes and informs Chaucer’s work.11

Also in the 1960s, James J. Murphy assailed another of Manly’s confident claims, namely, that the rhetorical “methods and doctrines” employed by Chaucer were “unmistakably due to the rhetoricians” and, therefore, what Manly had defined as “medieval rhetoric” could have reached Chaucer only through the arts of poetry and prose by Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf. In his 1964 essay “A New Look at Chaucer and the Rhetoricians,” Murphy argued that “there is very little evidence of an active rhetorical tradition in fourteenth-century England” and that the evidence cited to support the influence of the arts of poetry and prose on Chaucer’s works could just as easily be used to demonstrate influence by any number of other, more readily available works, particularly those used to teach grammar.12

The assumption, usually unstated, behind the position Murphy sought to refute is that Chaucer would have encountered the arts of poetry and prose as a schoolboy, while acquiring basic literacy in Latin at a grammar school in the late 1340s and early 1350s.13 As long as one equates medieval rhetoric with stylistic elaboration and ornamentation,

11 For an excellent overview that synthesizes her own with other recent scholarship, see Rita Copeland, “Chaucer and Rhetoric,” in The Yale Companion to Chaucer, ed. Seth Lerer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 122–43.
13 In the most recent scholarly biography, Derek Pearsall says that Chaucer probably was sent to a nearby grammar school to learn Latin but adds that his education in a noble household was more important than his formal education: The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 29–34 (“Chaucer’s Education; Chaucer’s Latin”). Donald R. Howard, in his own slightly earlier biography, also indicates that Chaucer would have been sent to a grammar school in his neighborhood at around age seven but is more willing to speculate about what he might have learned there: Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World (New York: Dutton, 1987), 19–27 (“Early Education”). Howard includes “rhetoric” among the subjects regularly taught in the grammar schools and singles out the Poetria nova as a textbook used for such instruction (26).
in particular with rules for producing the figures of speech and thought, as most earlier scholars had done, it is difficult not to assume that Chaucer learned the basics of "rhetoric" at some point between the ages of seven and fourteen. Proceeding from that assumption, Murphy was right to point out that those stylistic precepts were not the exclusive property of the arts of poetry and prose. The pedagogical materials and methods of those treatises had been in use for centuries, many of the sources dating from antiquity, before Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf synthesized and adapted them into a teachable system tailored to contemporary needs. Even if Chaucer learned to use the "colours of rethorik" chiefly through his formal education in Latin—rather than through imitation of vernacular poetry, for example—he could have found the necessary information in standard grammar textbooks such as the *Doctrinale* by Alexander of Villa Dei and the *Graecismus* by Évraard of Bethune, and even in encyclopedic works such as the *Catholicon* by John Balbus of Genoa.\(^\text{14}\) Without explicit attribution or clear verbal echoes, it is impossible to trace Chaucer’s use of conventional stylistic ornament to a specific textbook or even a specific type of textbook among the many potential sources that would have been available to his grammar-school teachers.

Chaucer did provide such evidence of his debt to the *Poetria nova*, by translating a brief passage from it in *Troilus and Criseyde* and citing its author by name in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Unlike Murphy, I count these explicit references as demonstrating Chaucer’s familiarity with Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s most famous treatise and as increasing the likelihood that he knew other rhetorical treatises as well. However, the new evidence that I will offer strongly suggests that in quoting and citing the *Poetria nova*, Chaucer was not evoking memories of the elementary exercises that he, along with the members of his audience, had practiced as children in grammar school.\(^\text{15}\) More likely, Chaucer was reacting to a body of newly recovered rhetorical texts that included the *Poetria nova*, along

\(^\text{14}\) Murphy correctly notes the widespread availability of the grammatical textbooks ("New Look," 3–5, 16–18); but the encyclopedists were cited just as frequently by medieval English grammar teachers.

\(^\text{15}\) An example of a recent study that seems to conflate the *Poetria nova*, or at least the part of it that Chaucer cites in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, with the elementary exercises of the grammar-school classroom is Peter W. Travis, *Disseminal Chaucer: Rereading "The Nun's Priest's Tale"* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), chap. 2: "The Nun's Priest's Tale as Grammar School Primer, Menippean Parody, and Ars Poetica," 51–117 (PN 368–430 is discussed on 84–92).
THE OXFORD RENAISSANCE OF ANGLO-LATIN RHETORIC

with other arts of poetry and prose and probably some of the ancient treatises and the commentaries on them. The rediscovery of such texts was part of a broader “renaissance” of rhetoric, centered on Oxford, that began in the second half of the fourteenth century and lasted through at least the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Chaucer’s encounter with this new burst of intellectual and pedagogical activity as an already mature poet, in the 1380s, immediately transformed his awareness of and attitude toward rhetoric as a discipline and continued to have an impact on his poetry for the remainder of his career.

It is no mere coincidence that the Poetria nova is the one art of poetry and prose to which Chaucer explicitly refers. Both within and beyond England, Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s art of rhetorical composition in 2,121 Latin hexameters was by far the best known, most frequently copied and excerpted, and most influential example of its genre. From England alone, at least thirty-three manuscripts preserve all or part of the treatise.16 Ten of these English copies were produced during the first half of the thirteenth century, within a generation or so of Geoffrey’s composing the work.17 By the latter half of the thirteenth century, however, the number of copies produced—or at least the number preserved—falls off dramatically. Only three English copies survive from the rest of the thirteenth century,18 and only a single copy survives from the beginning of the fourteenth century.19 Not one English copy of the Poetria nova survives from the middle of the fourteenth century, the period when Chaucer would have attended grammar school. However, clear signs of a strong and lasting revival of interest appear toward the end of the century. No fewer than fourteen copies of the Poetria nova can be dated

17 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 406; Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.29 and MS R.3.51; Glasgow, Hunterian Library, MS Hunterian V.8.14; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Add. A.44 (excerpt), MS Bodley 636 (excerpt), MS Digby 104, MS Laud misc. 515, and MS Rawlinson C.552 (excerpt); York, Minster Library, MS XVI.Q.14.
18 Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.14.22; London, British Library, MS Egerton 2261 and MS Harley 3775.
to the period encompassing the last decades of the fourteenth century and the first decades of the fifteenth century.20

Chaucer’s best chance of reading the Poetria nova is thus likely to have come in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, when fresh copies once again became readily available in England after a century or more of severely diminished production. Of course, he could have read a thirteenth-century copy or a more nearly contemporary copy made on the Continent, where production of Poetria nova manuscripts continued unabated or even—in parts of central Europe and Italy—increased during the fourteenth century.21 When all of the relevant evidence is considered, however, it seems far more likely that Chaucer would have encountered the Poetria nova in the 1380s, in the context of a more comprehensive, deliberate recovery of older rhetorical materials by English scholars, many of whom drew on those materials to compile new treatises on rhetoric.

The distinctive chronology of the English manuscripts containing the Poetria nova holds true for every one of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century arts of poetry and prose that circulated in England. Although the total number of exemplars is much smaller for any given treatise than it is for the Poetria nova, the uniformity of the cumulative record appears to indicate a sudden and marked interest in the genre that was well under way by the end of the fourteenth century. The pattern is particularly clear in two prose treatises that survive chiefly or solely in manuscripts written in England. Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s textbook in prose, the Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi, which he must have completed shortly before the death of King Richard I in

20 Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Stiftung preussischer Kulturbesitz, MS Lat. qu. 515; Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 764; Durham Cathedral, Dean and Chapter Library, MS C.IV.23; Durham, University Library, MS Cosin V.v.2; London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra B.vi and MS Cotton Titus A.xx (excerpts); Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263 and MS 276; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 496 (excerpts), MS Digby 64, and MS Selden Supra 65; Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 144; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, MS nouv. acq. lat. 699; Worcester Cathedral, Chapter Library, MS Q.79. The remaining five copies date from the fifteenth century: London, British Library, MS Royal 12.B.xvii (excerpt) and MS Royal 12.E.xi; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 832 (excerpt) and MS Laud misc. 707; Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 132.

21 For a list of the manuscripts known to contain the Poetria nova, see Woods, Classroom Commentaries, 289–307. Chaucer could have secured a fresh copy while traveling in Italy as an adult, for example, but is unlikely to have encountered one while studying grammar as a child.
1199, is preserved in two thirteenth-century English manuscripts and three English manuscripts that range in date from the early to the mid-fifteenth century. The chronological distribution of the four English manuscripts that contain the *De arte versificatoria et modo dictandi* (1215–16) by Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s English contemporary Gervase of Melkley is almost identical: one copy dates from the early thirteenth century, while the remaining three copies are from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. Even a work that was written in France, Matthew of Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* (before c. 1175), exhibits a similar pattern in its English circulation, albeit with an imbalance favoring the earlier rather than the later phase of copying. Of the nine manuscript copies that may be of English provenance, six are from the thirteenth century (most of them from the first half of the century) and three are from the late fourteenth or the early fifteenth century. Finally, there is no evidence that the *Parisiana poetria* (c. 1220; revised 1231–35) by John of Garland, an Englishman who spent his teaching career in France, circulated in England before the last quarter of the fourteenth century. While none of the six surviving manuscript copies on which Traugott Lawler based his critical edition is obviously Eng-


23 Early thirteenth century: Glasgow, Hunterian Library, MS Hunterian V.8.14; fourteenth/fifteenth century: Douai, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 764; Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263 and MS 276.

24 Franco Munari lists nineteen manuscripts containing all or part of the *Ars versificatoria*, in *Mathei Vindocinensis Opera*, vol. 1: *Catalogo dei manoscritti* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1977): #30, 37, 43, 47, 50, 51, 60, 61, 70, 77, 79, 83, 87, 92, 101, 105, 110, 124, 126. As many as nine of these are from England, including six that date from the thirteenth century: Durham Cathedral, Dean and Chapter Library, MS B.III.33; Glasgow, Hunterian Library, MS Hunterian V.8.14 (formerly 511); London, British Library, MS Add. 23892; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Misc. Latin D 15 (excerpts); Warminster (Wilts.), Library of the Marquess of Bath, MS Longleat 27 (excerpts); and York, Minster Library, MS XVI.Q.14 (excerpts). Three date from the second half of the fourteenth century through the first half of the fifteenth century: London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus A.xx (excerpts), and Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263 and MS 276.
lish, at least one copy of the Parisiana poetria was in England by 1389. The work is cited in several English manuscripts from the first half of the fifteenth century, and it is a major source for several chapters of the anonymous English rhetorical treatise known as Tria sunt, which probably was compiled near the end of the fourteenth century. In this case, the quest to recover twelfth- and thirteenth-century arts of poetry and prose may well have extended across the Channel.

Arts of poetry and prose were not the only examples of older "rhetorical" texts that were sought out for renewed study in their own right and for reuse as sources for new textbooks in England during the second half of the fourteenth century. The revival also encompassed the literary texts that were cited as models by the authors of the arts of poetry and prose. These included both the classical poetry of antiquity and the classicizing Latin poetry of the twelfth century, as well as prose texts deemed worthy of imitation. Copies of such works often appear together with the arts of poetry and prose or with newly composed rhetoric textbooks in English manuscripts of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. There is also evidence to suggest that new attention was paid to the ancient rhetorical treatises, in particular Cicero’s De inventione and the anonymous Rhetorica ad Herennium, which in the Middle Ages was attributed to Cicero. For example, early in the fifteenth century, Hugh Legat, a Benedictine monk who had studied at Oxford, brought together twelfth-century copies of the De inventione and Rhetorica ad Herennium belonging to his house of St. Albans, arranged to have them newly rebound, and proclaimed the


26 The only thirteenth-century art of poetry and prose that seems to have escaped the fourteenth-century English dragnet entirely is the Laborintus (after 1213; before 1280) by Eberhard the German. It survives in more than forty manuscript copies, second only to the Poetria nova, but its circulation apparently was limited almost exclusively to the German-speaking regions of central Europe.

fact of having done so on the flyleaf of the codex (London, British Library, MS Harley 2624). Evidence of a different sort comes from the *Tria sunt*, whose compiler appears to have consulted the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* directly when defining and illustrating the rhetorical figures and an even wider range of ancient and medieval sources, including the *De inventione*, in treating the attributes of persons and actions.\(^{28}\)

The prominent role that Oxford-trained Benedictine monks played in the fourteenth-century renaissance of rhetoric extended beyond collecting and recopying older, often neglected texts. Hugh Legat of St. Albans also wrote a commentary on John of Hauville’s *Architrenius*, and other Benedictines contributed commentaries, *accessus*, and glosses to rhetorical texts and literary texts employed in teaching rhetoric.\(^{29}\) Benedictines also were among those who created new rhetorical treatises from the older texts that they or their fellow monks had rescued from obscurity. An especially good example is Thomas Merke, a Benedictine monk of Westminster Abbey, who wrote the *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis* (“A Rule for Modern and Familiar [Prose] Composition”) around 1390, probably while resident at Oxford.\(^{30}\) One of the more popular among the new textbooks, Merke’s letter-writing handbook (*ars dictandi*) survives in eleven English manuscripts, most of them from the early fifteenth century.\(^{31}\) It is divided into three parts, consisting of brief


\(^{31}\) Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 55; Dublin, Trinity College, MS 424 and MS 427; Lincoln, Cathedral, Chapter Library, MS 237; London, British Library, MS Additional 24361 and MS Harley 5398; Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263; Oxford, Bodleian Li-
introductory remarks followed by more extended treatments of the “essential” and the “accidental” parts of a letter:

1. Prologue and definitions
2. Essential parts of a letter:
   a. greeting (*salutatio*)
   b. introduction (*exordium*)
   c. statement of facts (*narratio*)
   d. request (*petitio*)
   e. conclusion (*conclusio*)
3. Accidental parts of a letter:
   a. rhythmical clause endings (*cursus*)
   b. rhetorical figures (*colores rhetorici*)
   c. stylistic variation through changes in a key word (*conversio*)
   d. stylistic variation through modifying a key word with other words (*determinatio*)
   e. stylistic faults (*vitia*)

The contents of Merke’s *ars dictandi* illustrate several characteristic features of the rhetoric textbooks produced in the course of the Oxford-centered revival.

Most of the other new rhetoric textbooks are anonymous and cannot be dated so precisely, but at least three of them probably were composed during Chaucer’s lifetime, since the earliest copies are written in English hands from around the turn of the fifteenth century. Two of these also show signs of Benedictine authorship. *Tria sunt*, a new art of poetry and prose that is among the most comprehensive works in this genre, was almost certainly composed by a Benedictine monk, probably at Oxford, in the late fourteenth century.32 Preserved in thirteen English manuscripts, it was at least as popular as Merke’s contemporary *ars dictandi*.33


33 The earliest copies (s. xiv/xv) are in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.14.22; Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 764; London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra B.vi; Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263. All of the other copies are from the fifteenth century, mainly its first few decades: Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Stiftung preussischer Kulturbesitz, MS Lat. qu. 515; Cambridge, Pembroke College, MS 287; Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College, MS 56; Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 55; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 147, MS Laud misc. 707; MS Rawlinson D.893 (one leaf from what probably was a complete copy), and MS Selden Supra 65; Worcester Cathedral, Chapter Library,
In all copies it is divided into the same sixteen chapters, usually provided with descriptive headings that vary little from one copy to another:

1. On natural and artificial beginnings and the eight methods for artificial beginnings.
2. On the continuation of the subject matter and transitional expressions.
3. On the eight ways of generating and lengthening the subject matter and about the technique for composing letters.

**MS Q.79.** While this article was in press I discovered two further copies, in Ferrara, Biblioteca comunale Ariostea, MS Classe II.206 (s. xiv), and Bologna, Biblioteca comunale dell’Archiginnasio, MS A.163 (s. xv).

**34 These headings or capitula are repeated as part of Chapter 16, at the very end of the Tria sunt, here quoted from the base text for my edition (Worcester Cathedral, Chapter Library, MS Q.79, fol. 158r–v).**
4. On the seven ways of shortening the subject matter and about how to decide which verbal ornaments to use in adorning a given subject matter.

5. On the ten kinds of “transumption” [metaphorical language], by means of which one produces “ornamented difficulty” and reveals the weightiness of what one has written.

6. On matters that concern all verbal ornamentation and on the words that provide the best ornamentation.

7. On “ornamented facility” [nonmetaphorical figures] and on “determination” [qualifying one word with another], which is the principal seasoning of style, and on the colors of words and thoughts.

8. On the functional categories into which all of the colors can be sorted and how the “figures” correspond to the “colors.”

9. On the art of discovering ornamented words that enable one to beautify every uncouth expression with “fresh flowers.”

10. On developing an original subject matter.

11. On developing a familiar subject matter.

12. On the attributes of persons and actions, by means of which one provides the characteristic details that are suited to a particular subject matter.

13. On the “poetic” and the “modern” styles and their characteristics.

14. On the six chief faults to be avoided in any kind of composition.

15. On the genres of discourse and the varieties of poetic compositions.

16. On conclusions and how they should be produced.

A third rhetorical treatise is preserved in four English manuscripts from the fourteenth through the early fifteenth centuries, where it is called both Floridi dictaminis compendium (“Compendium of Flowery [Prose] Composition”) and Compendium artis dictatorie (“Compendium of the Art of [Prose] Composition”). 35 In a copy that belonged to Benedictine monks who studied at Canterbury College, Oxford, it is said to have been composed by “a certain monk of S.” 36 Each of the

35 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 65 (s. xv in.); Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263 (s. xiv/xv); Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 358 (s. xiv); Douai, Bibliotheque municipale, MS 764 (s. xiv/xv).

36 MS Selden Supra 65, fol. 134r: “Explicit compendium artis dictatorie compositum [MS: composito] a quodam monacho de S. anno domini Millesimo lxiiij etc.” The date in the explicit (1064) cannot be accurate, since the treatise cites several works from the thirteenth century. Perhaps it is a corruption of 1364, which fits the evidence better.
six chapters into which it is divided is provided with a descriptive heading:37

1. On the parts of a composition and their order.
2. On the beginnings, divisions, and endings of sentences.
3. On the faults to be avoided.
4. The ornamentation of words.
5. The ornaments of thoughts.
6. The proper method of oral delivery.

While the *Tria sunt* and the *Compendium artis dictatorie* vary little in structure and contents from one copy to another, the same is not true of my final example. In the two fullest copies, it contains five parts, and in one of these the scribe has given it the title *Forma dictandi* (“A Model for Composing [Prose or Letters]”); but its constituent parts appear separately or in various combinations in English manuscripts of the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, suggesting that it is more purely a compendium than the other three textbooks in the sample group.38 The sequence of parts in the two “complete” copies is as follows:

1. General prologue; Prose rhythm (*cursus*) A
2. Prose rhythm B
3. Divisions of a sentence (*distinctiones*)
4. The colors of rhetoric in order (*colores rhetorici seriatim*)
5. In praise of Bartholomew (*ad laudem Bartholomei*)

37 The translated portions of the rubrics, from the copy in MS Selden Supra 65, are: de dictacionis partibus et ordine (fol. 126v); de clausurarum principiis, scissuris et terminis (127r); de viciis euitandis (128r); ornatum verborum (129r); sentenciarum ornamenta (131r); modum debitum proferendi (132v).

38 The complete copies (both s. xiv/xv) are in London, British Library, MS Harley 3224 (with title) and Oxford, Balliol College, MS 263. A third manuscript contemporary with these (Douai, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 764) begins with the final leaf of what may have been a complete copy. Other English manuscripts that contain a majority of the parts, in sequence, are London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra B.vi (s. xiv/xv; parts 1, 3–4); MS Cotton Nero A.iv (s. xiv; parts 2–4 [imperf.]); and MS Harley 3300 (s. xv; parts 1–4 [imperf.]). Parts 4 and 5 occur together in a thirteenth-century English manuscript (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.14.40) and widely separated from one another in a fourteenth-century English manuscript (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 358). Another English manuscript of the fourteenth century (Oxford, Magdalen College, MS Lat. 6) contains an incomplete copy of Part 4. Part 1 occurs alone in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 310 (s. xiv ex.), and Part 3 and a version of Part 2 occur separately and in reverse order in MS Bodley 832 (s. xv).
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The *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis*, the *Tria sunt*, the *Compendium artis dictatorie*, and the *Forma dictandi* are almost certainly not the only textbooks that were produced as a direct result of the renaissance of rhetoric that began in the second half of the fourteenth century. Some such works inevitably will have been lost, while others may have been written within Chaucer’s lifetime but survive only in later copies. As will be evident from the lists of their contents, the treatises for which there is strong evidence of fourteenth-century circulation share certain emphases that shed light on the concerns of those who were responsible for the renewed interest in rhetoric and which may help to explain Chaucer’s interest in the results of their labors.

These four treatises have one shared feature that is not obvious from their tables of contents. Each draws principally if not exclusively on sources that are more than a century older. In his *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis*, Thomas Merke combines material on the theory of letters and the “essential” parts of a letter from the *Summa dictaminis* (c. 1228–29) by Guido Faba and the *Ars dictandi* (1208–1209) by Thomas of Capua with still more extensive borrowings from Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* (s. xii in.) and *Poetria nova* (s. xiii in.), on natural and artificial order, amplification and abbreviation, and all of the “accidental” parts of a letter except prose rhythm. The contemporary *Tria sunt* is equally dependent on sources from the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries for most of its contents. It quotes at length not only from Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* and *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* (probably a later version [s. xiii in.] that has not survived), but also from the arts of poetry and prose by Matthew of Vendôme (*Ars versificatoria*; s. xii ex.) and Gervase of Melkley (*De arte versificatoria et modo dictandi*; s. xiii in.), as well as from “rhetorical” poets of the same vintage, most notably Alan of Lille (*De planctu Naturae, Anticlaudianus*). When the compiler ventures beyond such sources, it generally is to cite the ancient rhetorical texts,

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59 The *Compilacio de arte dictandi* by Master John of Briggis, to cite only one example, could have been composed as early as 1380, when its probable author’s name begins to appear in the records of Merton College, Oxford. However, the single extant copy was made during the first half of the fifteenth century (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 52). For a discussion and edition of this work, see Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics*, 88–104.

40 Merke’s treatment of rhythmical clause endings (*cursus*) derives from a text found in several late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English manuscripts, including copies of the anonymous *Forma dictandi* (it is what I have called “Prose rhythm A” in Part 1). See Camargo, *Medieval Rhetorics*, 146 (note to lines 514–54).
such as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Horace’s *Ars poetica*, that were major sources for the arts of poetry and prose, as well as the classical poetry on which the classicizing verse of Alan of Lille and his contemporaries was modeled. Were it not for a few scattered quotations and references to later works, the *Tria sunt* could as easily have been composed in the early thirteenth century as in the late fourteenth century. Although much shorter and more tightly organized than the *Tria sunt*, the *Compendium artis dictatoriae* is still more eclectic in the sources it claims, if not those it actually uses. The treatise opens with a list of sources that includes Cicero, Aristotle, Quintilian, Isidore [of Seville], and Marbod [of Rennes] and concludes with a list of twelfth- and thirteenth-century letter collections, by Peter of Vinea, Richard of Pophis, and Peter of Blois, that exemplify the epistolary eloquence that it seeks to inculcate. Like the other three textbooks, the *Forma dictandi* contains a substantial amount of much earlier, newly recovered rhetorical materials, but, unlike them, its adaptation of those materials to contemporary needs is limited to their juxtaposition with more recently composed materials. It is not impossible that the compiler of the *Forma dictandi* was the author of one or more of the initial three parts of the textbook, none of which is attested before the fourteenth century; but the remaining two parts probably were written as companion pieces during the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, since they are preserved together in an English manuscript written early in the thirteenth century, and were not linked to the other three parts until late in the fourteenth century.

Even in his simple act of assembling what were originally at least three and possibly five discrete texts, the compiler of the *Forma dictandi* exemplifies another important tendency of the fourteenth-century English “rhetoricians”: when searching out and incorporating source materials, they liked to juxtapose and compare different authorities on topics of particular interest. Thus, the first two parts of the *Forma dictandi* offer contrasting treatments of the *cursus*, and the *Compendium artis dictatoriae* compares sources on major topics such as the rhetorical figures (chapters 4 and 5) and the rules governing oral delivery (Chapter 6). Juxtaposition and comparison are most pervasive in the *Tria sunt*, with its multifaceted and comprehensive treatment of the rhetorical figures from a variety of angles based on sources that range from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, through five different arts of poetry and prose, to the late antique and early medieval grammarians and encyclopedists (see chapters 5–8 and 10–12). The use of different combinations of sources seems to have

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helped each of the teachers who composed such textbooks to establish his unique niche within what would have been a crowded field in the schools at Oxford during the late fourteenth century, and the desire to gain a competitive advantage by using sources not available elsewhere must have been a strong incentive for recovering rhetorical texts, such as the arts of poetry and prose, that had languished in libraries for generations. This drive to differentiate is evident even when two authors used the same authority to treat a given topic. Both Thomas Merke and the compiler of the *Tria sunt* made extensive use of Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* and *Poetria nova*, for example, but Merke adapted Geoffrey’s teaching on artificial and natural order and on amplification and abbreviation to create his own schemes for epistolary *exordia* and *narrationes*, respectively, while the compiler of the *Tria sunt* based his epistolary doctrine on what must have been a rare copy of the revised *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi*, which contained a discussion of letters found nowhere else.

Besides their use of newly rediscovered source materials in novel combinations, the rhetorical textbooks written in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries share several areas of emphasis. Chief among these is letter writing, whether the textbook in question is a dedicated treatise on the subject (i.e., an *ars dictandi*), such as Merke’s *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis*, or is closer in scope and emphasis to the earlier arts of poetry and prose, as are the *Tria sunt* and, on a smaller scale, the *Compendium artis dictatoriae*, or is somewhere in between, as is the *Forma dictandi*. In the *Tria sunt*, letters are treated in some detail as a special instance of amplification, in an appendix to the third chapter,41 they are discussed briefly in the fifteenth chapter, as one of several types of rhetorically constructed texts; and examples of epistolary conclusions are provided in the sixteenth chapter. The first chapter of the *Compendium artis dictatoriae* is devoted to the parts of a letter, which the author, in keeping with his classicizing tendencies, equates with the six parts of an oration (*exordium, narratio, divisio, confirmatio, confutatio, conclusio*) rather than the standard five parts of a medieval letter (*salutatio, exor-

The second chapter takes up the most distinctive elements of epistolary style, the rhythmic cadences of the *cursus* and the division of sentences into their constituent segments, called *distinctiones* (comma, colon, and period), with cross-references to the discussion of letter parts in Chapter 1. The *cursus* and *distinctiones* are also the subjects of parts 1–3 of the *Forma dictandi*, a textbook that is concerned almost exclusively with matters of style.

The subject of the remaining two parts of the *Forma dictandi*—the figures or “colors” of rhetoric—is a second area of emphasis in all four of the textbooks under consideration. Like the corresponding sections of the *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis* (Part 3.b), *Tria sunt* (chapters 5 and 7), and *Compendium artis dictatoriae* (chapters 4 and 5), Part 4 of the *Forma dictandi* contains definitions and illustrations of the *colores*. In Part 5, the figures of speech are used in the exact order of their treatment in Book 4 of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* to produce a rhetorical encomium of an archdeacon named Bartholomew. Examples of the same technique—probably the basis of a classroom exercise—also appear in Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* (figures of speech: lines 1098–1217; figures of thought: lines 1280–1527), which is exactly contemporary with the earliest surviving copy of what became parts 4 and 5 of the *Forma dictandi* (s. xiii in.).

A third shared emphasis, oral performance, overlaps in interesting ways with the other two. This topic is most explicit in the *Compendium artis dictatoriae*, which devotes the last of its six chapters to the theory and practice of oral performance. Many of its contents are paraphrased from the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and concern the need to match one’s manner of delivery to the level of style one employs (the subdued, the moderate, or the grand); but the author also includes specific instructions on performing epistolary texts whose style is based on the *cursus* and the *distinctiones*. These remarks are a reminder that both the *cursus* and

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42 As part of a larger project on the rhetorical figures, I have completed a preliminary edition of the texts in question, titled “Colores rhetorici seriati” and “Magister Bernentinus ad laudem Bartholomei” in the earliest manuscript copy.

and the *distinctiones* are auditory techniques whose effects are fully realized only in oral performance. Thus, in devoting significant space to these topics, both Merke’s *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis* (Part 3.a) and the anonymous *Forma dictandi* (parts 1–3) implicitly share the emphasis of the *Compendium artis dictatorie* on oral performance. Only the *Tria sunt* fails to emphasize speaking or reading aloud to the same extent. While the two model letters in the appendix to Chapter 3 are composed in accordance with the rules of the *cursus* and *distinctiones*, the treatise lacks any explicit treatment of the *distinctiones* and includes the *cursus* among several types of prose rhythm described and illustrated in the short Chapter 13. Nonetheless, *Tria sunt* does consider in some detail what amount to auditory effects; for example, in its teaching on the figures of speech (Chapter 7), whose special relevance to letters composed in the “Gregorian” style is noted in Chapter 13. Another topic that the *Tria sunt* shares with several other contemporary textbooks, the vices of style, also reveals an underlying presumption of oral performance. Many of the stylistic faults identified in the *Tria sunt* (Chapter 14), the *Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis* (Part 3.e), and the *Compendium artis dictatorie* (Chapter 3) are auditory defects that impede the pleasure and/or comprehension of listeners rather than readers.

The relative neglect of a topic emphasized elsewhere, such as the rarely explicit treatment of oral performance in the *Tria sunt*, could actually have been a deliberate response to the simultaneous circulation of so many new and old rhetorical treatises in late fourteenth-century Oxford. As was shown earlier, one response to the competition was to innovate, by finding new source materials or by creating a novel synthesis from materials already in use; but another could have been to focus on certain topics while de-emphasizing others, secure in the knowledge that those who wished to study them would have no shortage of alternatives. The manuscripts recording the Oxford renaissance of rhetoric offer clear evidence that it was in fact a common practice to copy two or more
textbooks together, a good indication that those who created and used such codices recognized and valued the complementarity of their contents. The thirteenth-century English manuscripts containing arts of poetry and prose rarely follow the same pattern, though they do include one exceptionally rich anthology of textbooks and school poetry; but during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, it became normal to copy or bind several rhetoric textbooks together, as evidenced by at least a dozen English examples from this period.

By the last quarter of the fourteenth century a significant revival of rhetoric was under way, as Englishmen dusted off old copies of rhetorical texts, made new copies of some of them, and composed or compiled textbooks combining older with more recent doctrine on the colores rhetorici, oral delivery, and especially letter writing, all of which they frequently gathered into larger collections. The provision of multiple perspectives on topics of special interest, which privileges critical analy-

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sis over mechanical imitation, the Oxford provenance of the new textbooks and many of the most important manuscripts, and the marked emphasis on novel approaches to letter writing are features that are more suited to intermediate and advanced students than to elementary students and further suggest that at its height the English renaissance of rhetoric was motivated by intellectual curiosity as well as pedagogical necessity.

What had sparked this revival whose traces are so abundant in the manuscript record? At least part of the answer should be sought among the many Benedictine monks who played such a prominent role as collectors, scribes, compilers, and authors of the rhetorical texts that define it. In particular, it seems significant that the revival of rhetoric coincides precisely with a dramatic increase in the numbers of Benedictines at Oxford during the second half of the fourteenth century. Pope Benedict XII’s bull *Summi magistri*, issued in 1336, included the provision that each of the English monasteries should send at least one monk to study at the university. Larger houses were required to send one out of every twenty monks. The effects of these new regulations became evident over time, for example, in the founding of two new Benedictine colleges at Oxford—Canterbury College (1361) and Durham College (1381)—to help relieve the pressure on Gloucester College, which had housed scholar monks since 1283. The goal of the student monks was to progress as quickly as possible to the higher faculties of theology and canon law in order to spend as little time as possible away from the monastic community, but this goal conflicted with the university’s requirement that a lengthy arts course be completed first. The monks who tried to circumvent this requirement by devising their own substitute for the university arts course would have ransacked their libraries for relevant materials, in the process very likely rediscovering rhetorical texts that had remained unread and all but forgotten for a century or more. The activities of one such Benedictine, Hugh Legat of St. Albans, have been mentioned already. There is also evidence of student monks carrying manuscripts containing rhetorical texts between their mother houses and the monastic colleges at Oxford, where they had the potential to have an impact on a broader spectrum of scholars.47

47 Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College MS 56, which belonged to monks who studied at Durham College, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Selden Supra 65, which belonged to monks who studied at Canterbury College, are two good examples. In addition to Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance*, and Camargo, “Rhetoricians in Black,” on the Benedictines at Oxford, see also R. B. Dobson, “The Religious Orders 1370–1540,” in *The
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Even if the monks' wish to bypass normal curricular requirements was instrumental in setting the revival of rhetoric in motion, building and sustaining that revival through at least the first quarter of the fifteenth century depended on creating broader interest in the subject. In fact, the topics that are foregrounded in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century textbooks reveal some of the ways in which rhetorical treatises would have benefited a wide range of Oxford scholars. The ability to compose official letters was a necessity for anyone taking on significant administrative duties in a monastery, an episcopal chancery, or a secular context. The rhetorical art of letter writing (ars dictaminis) had developed to meet a growing need for clerks with this skill, and Oxford had come to be the preeminent center for such instruction in England. By the mid-fourteenth century, practical training in the composition of letters and other quasi-epistolary documents was offered primarily by specialists operating on the margins of the university, as part of what has been called the "business course," which had evolved over several generations. The letter-writing textbooks created by the business teachers were short on rhetorical theory and long on models to imitate, and the grammar masters who worked within the university quickly seized the opportunity to exploit the newly recovered rhetorical materials in competing textbooks that reversed those proportions. They typically situated letters within a more general theory of composition, brought the full range of stylics to bear on their composition, and incorporated at most only a few model letters. Whether in a true ars dictandi such as Thomas Merke's Formula moderni et usitati dictaminis or an art of poetry and prose such as the Tria sunt, the success of their approach extended well beyond the confines of the Benedictine community and of Oxford itself, helping to spread the effects of the rhetorical renaissance throughout England.

The emphasis on oral performance in connection with letters also was a contributing factor to the broader impact of the Oxford rhetorical

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renaissance. All medieval writers of official letters understood that they were composing for the ear as much as for the eye, but explicit acknowledgment of that fact was especially rare in the more formulaic textbooks that competed with the new varieties produced at Oxford during the last quarter of the fourteenth century. One consequence of a fresh look at sources such as the Rhetorica ad Herennium and even the Poetria nova was increased attention to oral delivery as a component of rhetoric in general and letters in particular. Awareness of oral performance as a component of epistolary rhetoric is fully explicit in the Compendium artis dictatorie. The practical relevance of speaking skills for a practitioner of letter writing is made especially clear in another ars dictandi that belongs to the same tradition but took its present form in the first decades of the fifteenth century rather than the last decades of the fourteenth century. The first part of this anonymous treatise, in which the general principles of letter writing are set forth, is a personification allegory in which Queen Rhetoric presides over her court with the assistance of her secretary the Nightingale. Most of this introduction is devoted to the aural dimensions of the ars dictaminis—the cursus and the distinctiones—the components of which are represented as court functionaries who are summoned to present oral reports to the monarch. A different bird performs each cadence of the cursus, referred to as a “song,” while the more theoretical points are made in formal speeches by the Nightingale and her fellow officers the chancellor Comma, the treasurer Colon, and the almoner Period.49 Here the rules governing oral performance of letters are personified in roles that mirror those of their intended practitioners.

Oral delivery was an important concern for other, more historically and geographically specific reasons in Oxford during the late fourteenth century. The controversy over John Wyclif’s ideas, centered at Oxford, gave rise to a substantial body of polemical literature, especially in the form of sermons but also including letters and other forms of propaganda. Oxford monks were important participants in the campaign against the Wycliffite heresy, a fact that gave practical relevance to their interest in the rhetoric of oral performance.50 Mishtooni Bose notes that

50 Patrick J. Horner compares fourteenth-century with fifteenth-century Benedictine preaching against Lollardy in “The King Taught Us the Lesson: Benedictine Support for Henry V’s Suppression of the Lollards,” Medieval Studies 52 (1990): 190–220. In the context of her broader survey of opposition to Lollardy, Mishtooni Bose discusses or mentions briefly the preaching and other propaganda of the Benedictines Nicholas Rad-
academic writers increasingly recognized real danger in the potential appeal of Wyclif’s ideas to a broader public beyond the academy: “[I]t was increasing concern for the way in which Wyclif’s arguments might play in the wider world, rather than disagreement simply with his arguments, that fuelled the opposition to him.” As public controversialists, in other words, they needed rhetorical skill both in oral performance and in audience assessment to counter the rhetorical effects of their opponents’ arguments.

The concern with delivery can be detected even in the emphasis on the “colors” in the rhetorical textbooks of the Oxford renaissance. The figures of speech, the ones whose effects depend more on sound than on sense, are the colors that are described most consistently and illustrated most profusely in the works of the rhetoricians. If knowledge of the figures was essential for the production of “performable” texts, it was equally essential for the interpretation of authoritative and artfully constructed texts. The classical and classicizing poems that were rediscovered along with the rhetorical treatises could not be analyzed properly and understood fully without this knowledge. With their exhaustive catalogues, definitions, and illustrations of the figures, the Rhetorica ad Herennium and the medieval rhetorical treatises that drew upon and supplemented it were thus a precious resource for the study of such texts, and their direct influence can be traced in the commentaries and glosses of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century students and teachers. A treatise such as the Tria sunt simultaneously functioned as a manual for rhetorical composition and a reference guide for rhetorical exegesis, which it often illustrated through commentary on excerpts from ancient poets and highly rhetorical twelfth-century poets as well as appropriation of extracts from earlier commentaries on classical texts. In the milieu that


produced and sustained interest in the *Tria sunt* and treatises like it, imitation and interpretation, textual production and textual analysis, were complementary activities that drew considerable energy from the Latin rhetorical texts that were recovered, recopied, and repurposed by Chaucer's English contemporaries.

Among those contemporaries, Thomas Merke is the best example of how an ambitious and talented monk could translate this renewed study and teaching of rhetoric into a career that took him far beyond the schools of Oxford and the Benedictine community. In 1397, less than a decade after he had composed his treatise on letter writing at Oxford, Merke was consecrated as bishop of Carlisle. He also belonged to the inner circle of advisers to King Richard II, in whose company he was captured by Henry Bolingbroke, the future King Henry IV, in 1399. While few monks rose to the same level of involvement in secular politics as Merke, many combined a strong interest in the theory and practice of rhetoric with direct engagement in the major political and theological controversies of the day. An excellent example from the generation following Merke's is John Whethamstede, who studied at Oxford in the first decade of the fifteenth century and, as abbot of St. Albans, continued to pursue his "literary" interests even as he dealt with the Wycliffite heresy and the Wars of the Roses. If these and other Benedictines found the newly revived rhetoric so useful both within and beyond the cloister, it seems likely that at least some of their fellow Englishmen, laymen included, would have recognized its value as well.


Born around 1342, Chaucer would have completed his early training in Latin grammar long before this Anglo-Latin renaissance could have influenced his teachers directly and probably even before it developed any real momentum. This is not to rule out indirect influence from some of the rhetorical sources that were about to be recovered and repurposed. By Chaucer’s day, the contents of the arts of poetry and prose by Matthew of Vendôme and Geoffrey of Vinsauf are likely to have been absorbed into standard teaching materials and practices, even if the treatises themselves no longer were readily available. In this attenuated and probably anonymous form they could well have been used by Chaucer’s grammar-school teachers. But it is not until the 1380s that Chaucer shows signs of firsthand acquaintance with Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s Poetria nova, at a time when that work and other rhetorical treatises contemporary with and much older than it were still being rediscovered and were beginning to generate the new treatises described above. It was this “second wave” of their reception in England and the intellectual energy it generated that shaped Chaucer’s explicit response to rhetoric in his own works. His encounter with “rethorike” as a newly reinvigorated discipline whose theory and practice were the subject of lively interest at England’s premier center of higher education sparked a noticeable shift toward a deeper and more complex engagement with rhetorical doctrines and techniques.

A sophisticated and cosmopolitan poet and civil servant with close personal connections to the intellectual, political, and social elites of late fourteenth-century England, Chaucer could hardly have missed the broader impact of the renaissance of rhetoric under way at Oxford. Whether he knew Simon Southerey, Thomas Merke, or other monk rhetoricians personally, he certainly had direct access to intellectual developments at Oxford through friends such as Ralph Strode, a one-time fellow of Merton College, to whom he dedicated Troilus and Criseyde. The same ideas were current in learned circles with strong Oxford connections, both in Chaucer’s native London and in the larger monastic houses located nearby, such as St. Albans.54 Whether from scholars who studied and taught at Oxford or a still larger group of writers and intellectuals with ties to Oxford, Chaucer would have had ready access to

both the newly recovered and the newly composed rhetorical texts, as well as any scholarly debates about the nature and purpose of rhetoric.

Clear signs of Chaucer’s enhanced awareness of and intensified interest in rhetoric, complete with direct quotation of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and references to other authorities on the subject, first appear in *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem that he probably began in the early 1380s and completed by about 1386. Earlier works such as *The Book of the Duchess* and *The Parliament of Fowls* have been described as “rhetorical” largely on the basis of their abundant use of the figures that are defined and illustrated in *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Book 4, and in most medieval arts of poetry and prose; but as Murphy and Payne correctly observe, Chaucer could have learned how to employ figural language from many sources, ranging from elementary school texts to the vernacular poetry that was his immediate model. As Payne and Copeland, in particular, have demonstrated, Chaucer’s poetics were rhetorical in other ways as well, and his propensity for reflecting on his poetic craft already pervades these early poems. While rhetorical theory provides concepts and terminology that are useful for analyzing the early poems, however, Chaucer nowhere avails himself of these resources, not even in his most metapoetic moments.

The only passage from the early poems that comes close to invoking rhetoric does so only to exclude it through comparison to something better. The Black Knight’s catalogue of Lady White’s many virtues includes her “goodly, softe speche,” which he praises by saying, “Of eloquence was never founde / So swete a sownynge facounde.” “Eloquence” is not the same thing as “rhetoric,” to be sure, and whatever Chaucer meant by the term, his interest is in the natural beauty of the lady’s speech that surpasses any sweetness of sound that eloquence may achieve, presumably through learned artifice.

In *The House of Fame*, a work that Chaucer could have written any

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time between 1374 and 1386, rhetoric is more explicitly elided, but in a more ironic key. The word “rethorike” appears only once in this poem, when the loquacious eagle asks “Geffrey” whether he has been speaking

Withoute any subtilite
Of speche, or gret prolixite
Of termes of philosophie,
Of figures of poetrie,
Or colours of rethorike?
(855–59)

Here the “colours of rethorike” are invoked only as one of several kinds of “hard langage” (861) that are not being used. In fact, the eagle’s speech has been filled with “figures” and “colours,” especially those involving repetition, which he employs even in his rhetorical question. But the allusion to rhetoric is fleeting and superficial, the use of the colores rhetorici dismissed as but one among other potential sources of prolix and obscure discourse. If Chaucer wrote The House of Fame before the early 1380s, then this passage might count as further evidence of his not yet having felt the effects of the rhetorical revival; but even if he wrote it later, perhaps even shortly after he completed Troilus and Criseyde, its satire is one of several characteristic dimensions of Chaucer’s complex response to rhetoric.

The relative indifference to rhetoric in the earliest poems stands in sharp contrast to the explicit engagement with rhetoric in Troilus and Criseyde and many of the works that followed it. Payne has said that “the kind of criticism practiced in the rhetorical manuals [he has just mentioned Geoffrey of Vinsauf] will yield a more satisfactory analysis of Troilus and Criseyde than of any other major Chaucerian piece,” and I would argue that this is due in no small part to the freshness of Chaucer’s encounter with a newly available body of rhetorical texts and the richer conception of rhetoric that they offered.


58 Payne, Key of Remembrance, 173. He goes on to say of Chaucer: “We know that he read and weighed critically the treatises themselves” (175); but he does not say when he thinks Chaucer might have studied them.
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Chaucer’s heightened awareness of rhetoric is especially evident in his decision to refashion one of Boccaccio’s central characters as a skilled, self-conscious rhetorician who approaches the task of seducing his niece Criseyde on behalf of his friend Troilus as a problem of rhetorical invention. Having learned the source of Troilus’s sorrow and promised to provide a remedy, Pandarus leaves his friend:

And went his wey, thenkyng of this materere,  
And how he best myghte hire biseche of grace,  
And fynde a tyme thereto, and a place.  
For everi wight that hath an hous to founde  
Ne renneth naught the werk for to bygynne  
With rakel hond, but he wol bide a stounde,  
And sende his hertes line out fro withinne  
Aldirfirst his purpos for to wynne.  
Al this Pandare in his herte thoughte,  
And cast his werk ful wisely or he wroughte.  
(I.1062–71)

Here Chaucer not only recognizes that rhetoric encompasses more than attractive artifice but also cites as his authority one of the chief sources that mediated the discipline’s renewed prominence in England. The metaphor in which the narrator compares Pandarus’s careful forethought to a builder’s mental blueprint (lines 1065–69) renders into English the very words that Geoffrey of Vinsauf used to describe the first stage of rhetorical invention early in the Poetria nova:

Si quis habet fundare domum, non currit ad actum  
Impetuosa manus: intrinseca linea cordis  
Praemetitur opus . . .  
(PN, 43–45)

While others have noted the unacknowledged citation of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and invoked this passage as evidence for Chaucer’s interest in rhetoric, less attention has been paid to the pervasive and complex engagement with rhetorical argumentation that it signals. As Pandarus turns careful forethought, the first stage of rhetorical invention, into purposeful action in the unfolding narrative, Chaucer continues to draw on rhetorical precepts that were not previously part of his repertoire and that were to be found in some of the rhetorical manuals he is likely to
have encountered at the very moment when he was reconceiving and complicating the character of the willing go-between. We are allowed to glimpse the inventive process in action on several occasions, as when Pandarus tells himself that the indirect approach (*insinuatio*) will be most persuasive even as he tells Criseyde that he will use no "subtyl art" (II.255–73). Pandarus is marked explicitly as a practicing *rhetor* in other ways as well, for example, in his ability and willingness to argue *in utramque partem* on issues such as fortune and fidelity in love (cf. III.1618–38 and IV.380–427). He even takes on the role of rhetoric teacher, most literally when he plays the *dictator* to give Troilus a brief lesson in how to compose an effective love letter (II.1002–8, 1023–43).

Letter writing was one of the characteristic emphases of the revival of rhetoric at Oxford, and Chaucer exploited the conventions of the *ars dictaminis* in *Troilus and Criseyde* to lay the foundations for what developed into an important genre in the Middle English literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: the verse love epistle. Equally revealing about Chaucer's knowledge of rhetorical studies at Oxford is a passage from the *Canterbury Tales* in which the Host instructs the Clerk of Oxenford on stylistic decorum even as he reminds us why an Oxford scholar would have found it useful to acquire proficiency in letter writing:

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Telle us som murie thyng of avantures.
Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye.
(IV.15–20)
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The Host's plea for plain speech underscores his own social class and his lack of formal education. Part of Chaucer's point here is that even a

59 Cf. also Diomede's reflections on how best to woo Criseyde away from her Trojan love (V.92–105). In the speech in which she tries to persuade Troilus that she can leave Troy and still return (IV.1264–1414), Criseyde includes references to her rhetorical strategy (e.g., lines 1282–95) and bases a key part of her argument on the attributes of persons (lines 1368–1400), an element of classical rhetoric that received special emphasis in medieval teaching on rhetorical invention.

London innkeeper who is a relative ignoramus in academic matters knows that one goes to Oxford to learn how to compose the elaborately artificial (and to him incomprehensible) documents employed in royal correspondence. It was not for the scholastic study “Of Aristotle and his philosophie” (I.295), but for the recently revived study of rhetoric that Oxford was known to every bleary-eyed man and barber in late fourteenth-century England.

The association between rhetorical training, the use of figure-intensive “high style,” and service to kings is reiterated in The Nun’s Priest’s Tale, where Chaucer apostrophizes Geoffrey of Vinsauf by name in order to lament his own inability to match the Latin rhetorician’s mastery of the figure apostrophe:

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,  
That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn  
With shot, compleynedest his deeth so soore,  
Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,  
The Friday for to chide, as diden ye?  
For on a Friday, soothly, slayn was he.  
Thanne wolde I shewe yow how that I koude pleyne  
For Chauntecleres drede and for his peyne.  

(VII.3347–54)

Chaucer refers here to what was Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s most famous poem, a lament for King Richard I in a series of apostrophes to Normandy, Friday, the soldier who shot the fatal arrow, Death, Nature, and God, which was included as an example of amplification in the Poetria nova (lines 368–430) but also circulated separately. The reference to Geoffrey of Vinsauf as “maister” and the double emphasis on learning (“sentence,’’ “loore”), not to mention the fact that the allusion is a digression (another method of amplification: PN 527–53) in the form of an apostrophe within a series of apostrophes that also functions as a digression, indicates that Chaucer invokes the poem not as an independent historical artifact that was copied into certain chronicles but rather in the context of the thirteenth-century art of poetry and prose that had been given new currency through the contemporary revival of rhetoric.61

In passages such as these, we may glimpse behind Chaucer’s characteristic irony the practical perspective of a court poet who earned his living as a bureaucrat in the king’s service, as he assessed and absorbed the rhetorical lore newly emanating from Oxford. When he actually represents a practicing courtier, in *The Squire’s Tale*, Chaucer has his narrator draw explicit attention to the value of training in rhetoric and specifically in oral delivery to the performance of a courtier’s duties, in this case duties of an ambassador that Chaucer had performed himself on more than one occasion. The knight who delivers gifts and an accompanying message to the royal court of King Cambysusan perfectly matches his gestures to his language as the art of rhetoric teaches one to do: “Accordaunt to his wordes was his cheere, / As techeth art of speche hem that it leere” (V.103–4). His language (“speech”) and gestures (“contenaunce”), which could not be bettered even by the epitome of courtly eloquence, “Gawayn” (89–97), far exceed the capacities of the Squire, who admits that he “kan nat sowne his stile” (105) and must content himself with conveying “that . . . he mente” (108). Although apparently not trained in rhetoric himself, the Squire does not make the distinction between natural and artificial eloquence that the Black Knight seemed to make, at least in the case of his lady love. In applying the inexpressibility topos to descriptions of noble persons and customs, for example, he invokes the trained rhetorician and the hypersophisticated nobleman as seemingly interchangeable standards for supreme eloquence. To describe the beauty of Canacee would require a “rethor excellent” who “koude his colours longynge for that art” (38–39), while the elegant feast celebrating Cambysusan’s birthday could be described properly only by the ultimate courtly connoisseur, “Launcelot” (287). Perhaps it is no coincidence that the only two examples of amplification through description offered in the *Poetria nova* (554–667) are on the same topics singled out by the Squire as beyond his capabilities: an extended description of a beautiful woman and one of a royal feast. Chaucer might not have needed these precise epideictic skills in his ser-

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12–14, believes that Chaucer would have been more likely to encounter the lament as an independent poem than as part of the *Poetria nova*. If this were so, however, Chaucer would have had no particular reason to associate this example of apostrophe with digression, as he clearly does in the passage from *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. According to the *Poetria nova* (lines 219–689), amplification is achieved by eight methods: repeating the same meaning in different words, circumlocution, comparison, apostrophe, personification, digression, description, and opposition.
vice to the court, but he surely would have valued the ability to read aloud and elaborate on an official letter, perhaps one whose elegant language he had a hand in drafting, in the presence of a powerful lord and his entourage.

While Chaucer recognized that skill in writing letters, employing figural language, and speaking in public could help advance the career of a royal servant, he also realized that knowledge of rhetoric could be abused. He was not an academic, and we should not expect him to juxtapose different authorities on rhetoric as the Oxford masters did. However, he does provide multiple perspectives on exactly the aspects of rhetoric that were emphasized in the contemporary revival. For example, he can use highly figured language with little apparent irony when the genre demands it, as he does in the chivalric epic that is *The Knight’s Tale*; but he also can draw attention to the way such language often masks dubious intent with a pleasing appearance, as when he has Crisneyde refer to her uncle Pandarus’s artful *insinuatio* as a “paynted proces” (II.424) calculated to undermine her virtue. In between these extremes, Chaucer can use the Franklin’s professed ignorance of the rhetorical figures, or “colours of rethoryk” (V.726), to help characterize an upwardly aspiring country gentleman’s struggle to position himself with respect to the aristocracy:

> But, sires, by cause I am a burel man,  
> At my bigynnynge first I yow biseche,  
> Have me excused of my rude speche.  
> I lerned nevere rethorik, certeyn;  
> Thyng that I speke, it moot be bare and pleyn.  
> I sleep nevere on the Mount of Pernaso,  
> Ne lerned Marcus Tullius Scithero.  
> Colours ne knowe I none, withouten drede,  
> But swiche colours as growen in the mede,  
> Or elles swiche as men dye or peynte.  
> Colours of rethoryk been to me queynte;  
> My spirit feeleth noght of swich mateere.

(V.716–27)

The Squire also observes that the courtly ambassador “with a manly voys seide his message, / . . . Withouten vice of silable or of lettre” (V.99, 101), certainly indicating that his language was grammatically correct and free of barbarism but perhaps also suggesting that he spoke from a prepared text written in the romance equivalent of the *cursus*.

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The Franklin’s preemptive apology recalls his effusive, if qualified, flattery of the Squire’s “gentilesse,” especially his age-appropriate “eloquence” (V.673–81), and perhaps is meant to elevate that flattery to its sincerest form through imitation. If so, the Franklin is imitating far too literally the Squire’s polite (if all-too-accurate) disclaimers of rhetorical knowledge and ability. He belabors what should be passed over lightly, even to the point of showing off his awareness that the supreme authority on the “colours of rethoryk,” about which he supposedly knows nothing, is Cicero (as the reputed author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*). Also like the Squire, his apologies do not stop him from using the colors frequently, ostentatiously, and less than expertly. Perhaps his mangling of Cicero’s name as “Scithero” is meant to signal that while he may have dipped into some of the recently recovered rhetoric textbooks, his mastery of their contents is limited.63 The desire to flatter by imitating and the eagerness to display one’s superficial book learning also can be seen in the Franklin’s response to one of the Squire’s least successful rhetorical displays, the aborted circumlocution couched in cosmological allegory that is all we have of the third part of his incomplete tale (V.671–72). The Franklin recognizes the rhetorical device well enough to imitate it but apparently has not understood the rules sufficiently well to realize that the figure does not include the pedagogical gloss that would have accompanied it in a schoolbook:

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Til that the brighte sonne loste his hewe;  
For th’orisonte hath rete the sonne his lyght—  
This is as muche to seye as it was nyght—  
(V.1016–18)64
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Frequent reuse of examples to illustrate the figures makes it difficult to prove direct influence from a particular textbook, but the Franklin had in mind something like the following example of circumlocution, from Chapter 9 of the anonymous *Tria sunt*:

63 The Franklin’s use of the full name “Marcus Tullius Scithero” (V.722), rather than the medieval schoolmen’s more typical “Tully,” is a further sign that he is trying to impress even as he feigns humility.

64 Cf. *Troilus and Criseyde* II.904–5 (the sun), which Payne interprets as sending up the excesses of the rhetoricians’ “stylistic prescriptions” (“Chaucer and the Art of Rhetoric,” 49–50). Chaucer used similar stylistic techniques repeatedly in *TC*, Book V—e.g., lines 274–80 (dawn), 1016–20 (sunset), 1107–10 (sunrise)—but minus the gloss and with no apparent parodic intent or effect.
Veritatem splendide producit [circumlocutio], ut in Virgilio:
Et iam prima novo spargebat lumine terras
Titanis croceum linquens Aurora cubile. (Aen. 4.584–85: Tithoni)
Ut sit sensus: “Iam diescebat”

When the Franklin apologized for his “rude speche,” he inadvertently but appropriately aligned himself with the unformed grammar-school boys (rudibus) who were the least knowledgeable among the intended users of the textbooks that treated the colors of rhetoric.

While he often mocks the misuse of figural language with playful irony, Chaucer is more troubled by the misuse of oral delivery, another characteristic concern of the Oxford rhetoricians. The ability to move listeners to action by means of voice and gesture is both a powerful and a morally ambivalent rhetorical tool, and Chaucer acknowledges its dangerous appeal with darker and deeper irony. The most self-conscious and, by his own account, the most accomplished performer among the pilgrims is also the most immoral, and this deceiving Pardoner delights in describing his enthusiastic manipulation of voice and gesture to enthral his audience of rustic dupes:65

“Lordynges,” quod he, “in chirches whan I preche,
I peyne me to han an hauteyn speche,
And rynge it out as round as gooth a belle,
For I kan al by rote that I telle.

... “Thanne peyne I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And est and west upon the peple I bekke,
As dooth a dowve sittynge on a berne.
Myne handes and my tonge goon so yerne
That it is joye to se my bisynesse.”

(VI.329–32, 395–99)

A different sort of irony may be at work in Chaucer’s representation of the Pardoner’s opposite, a speaker whose subject matter is so uniform and whose oral delivery is so monotonous that the Host orders him to

liven up his performance so that his listeners will not lose consciousness and risk falling from their horses into the mud:

“Ye,” quod oure Hooste, “by Seint Poules belle! 
Ye seye right sooth; this Monk he clappeth lowde.

‘Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse! 
Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye. 
Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye, 
For therinne is ther no despert ne game. 
Wherfore, sire Monk, daun Piers by youre name, 
I pray yow hertely telle us somwhat elles; 
For sikerly, nere clynkyng of youre belles 
That on youre bridel hange on every syde, 
By hevene kyng that for us alle dyde, 
I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep, 
Althogh the slough had never been so deep; 
Thanne hadde your tale al be toold in veyn. 
For certeinely, as that thise clerkes seyn, 
Whereas a man may have noon audience, 
Nought helpeth it to tellen his sentence.’”

(VII.2780–81, 2788–2802)

As the Host concludes, if no one is listening, your wisdom has no effect. For those members of Chaucer’s audience who were aware of the rhetorical revival under way in Oxford, the ignorant Host’s rhetoric lesson concealed a sly joke. The speaker whose rhetorical shortcomings the Host chides is none other than a worldly monk who prides himself on his classical learning (VII.1971–82). Chaucer not only engages all the key topics of the contemporary renaissance of rhetoric in his poetry but also, in this particular passage, indicates the group most responsible for the revived interest in the theory and practice of rhetoric, even as he ironically suggests that not every member of the monastic community will have paid proper attention to his rhetoric lessons.66

66 This article has benefited from the responses of those who heard versions presented at Siena, Bologna, Oxford, and Bristol. I wish to thank the members of those audiences for their questions and comments, especially James Clark and Laura Ashe, from whom I have happily borrowed insights about the English Benedictines and the Franklin’s literalism, respectively. My greatest debt is to Rita Copeland, who read the article before and after it was submitted for publication, each time suggesting new ways to clarify and strengthen its argument.