

## Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay *and the rhetoric of temporality*

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The Middle Ages is a retrospective invention, one that has less to do with the particular qualities of the period than with the agenda of those who seek to define it.<sup>1</sup> Recent attempts to dismantle the traditional disciplinary boundaries that separate medieval from Renaissance call attention to the fact that the temporal (or epochal) notion of a 'middle' that falls between the ancients and the moderns is a relatively recent production.<sup>2</sup> As James Simpson argues above, the tendency to define and delimit the medieval says more about the paradoxes and power struggles of the present than it does about the perfections or imperfections of the past. Nevertheless, certain features, assumptions and associations distinguish the Middle Ages long before there was a name for it. Robert Greene's *The Honourable Historie of Frier Bacon* (1594), known to us as *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, offers a near-comprehensive collection of popular images of the Middle Ages. Bringing together an idealised, bucolic world of milkmaids and county fairs, the grand pageantry of the royal court, and the dank, dark lairs of magician/scholars, the play presents a stereotypical, cardboard-cutout vision of the Middle Ages.

*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* portrays the medieval philosopher and scientist, Roger Bacon (1214–c. 1292), who lived during the reign of King Henry III (1216–72). The immensely learned Bacon, Doctor Mirabilis, and author of works on everything from gunpowder to magnetism, was familiar to educated Elizabethans. However, Greene engages little with Bacon's intellectual reputation. He follows instead the popular prose narrative, *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (c. 1555), which depicts Bacon as a common-or-garden-variety magician. Called upon to aid lovers in trouble, and trotted out for a competition with the Emperor of Germany's pet magician, Greene's Friar Bacon is a trivial comic figure. At its climax, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* dramatises the apocryphal story of the brazen head: a tale variously attached to the medieval philosophers Gerbert of Aurillac, Albertus Magnus (whose brazen head was broken by Thomas Aquinas),

and Robert Grosseteste.<sup>3</sup> Like the story of Faustus selling his soul to the devil, this failed experiment reflects the prevailing Reformation association of the Middle Ages with magic. In order to establish a sense of temporal and epochal break with the Middle Ages, the play characterises the friars, and, by extension, England's Catholic history, as superstitious, foolhardy and credulous. Friar Bacon's proto-Prosperian renunciation of magic at the end of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* engages prevailing notions of the right and proper historical evolution from medieval to modern, from Catholic to Protestant.

But this is not to say that *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* presents this as a good thing. To a cynic such as Greene, a text such as *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* would have seemed like a relic from the Dark Ages. Its ardently reformist impulse and clunky anti-clerical satire would have appeared as exceedingly earnest, even misguided, propaganda: as bomb shelter manuals or *Reefer Madness* appear to us today. At the same time that *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* charts the trajectory that Keith Thomas calls, famously, 'Religion and the Decline of Magic', it highlights what is lost with rigid distinctions between past and present, or medieval and Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> It resists at an imaginative level the flattening out of the Middle Ages that, Simpson argues, is the result of periodisation at a disciplinary level. As *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* reveals, the early modern is the birthplace not only for the idea of the Middle Ages, but also for its deconstruction. With its epigrammatic 'Time is, time was, time is past', Friar Bacon's exploding brass head expresses the enigma of history: impossible to fully control, understand, or contain, yet endlessly demanding formulation and definition.

## I

Friar Bacon has seen it all before. Prince Edward sends his friend Lacie to Fressingfield in disguise to woo, on his behalf, the damsel Margaret. Exchanging clothes with Rafe, his father's fool, Edward visits Friar Bacon, hoping he can cast a spell that will make Margaret love him. Thanks to his 'glass prospective', Friar Bacon sees right through Edward's costume. Recognising the prince's true identity, Bacon proceeds to inform him of what is really going on between Lacie and Margaret:

Edward, King Henries sonne and Prince of Wales,  
Thy foole disguisd cannot conceale thy self:  
. . . Els Frier Bacon had but little skill.

Thou comest in post from merrie Fressingfield,  
 Fast fancied to the keepers bonny lasse,  
 To crave some succour of the jolly frier:  
 And Lacie, Earle of Lincolne, hast thou left  
 To treat fair Margret to allow thy loves;  
 But friends are men, and love can baffle lords;  
 The earl both woos and courts her for himselfe.

(5.67-77)

Why is this brilliant Franciscan bothering with courtship and country lasses? A student of the best minds of Oxford and Paris, Roger Bacon is one of the most prolific and influential medieval thinkers.<sup>5</sup> Like Boethius and Thomas More, he is also one of the great prison writers. His unorthodox opinions, and, in particular, his views on the importance of studying classical philosophy, prompted Bonaventure to incarcerate him for twelve years. Upon his release, Pope Clement IV, who had heard of his great learning, asked him for a description of his work. Answering the pope's request, Bacon produced his major works, the *Opus Maius*, the *Opus Minus*, and the *Opus Tertium*. Buoyed, perhaps, by Clement's encouragement, Bacon then proceeded to criticise the church in such sharp terms that he was imprisoned once more, following which he wrote his *Compendium Studii Theologiae*, completed shortly before he died, c. 1292.

Greene's portrayal of Bacon engages his popular reputation as a magician. *The Famous Historie* constructs Bacon, serious polymath, as the buffoonish friar of medieval stereotype.<sup>6</sup> In its opening woodcut, which was taken up and used in subsequent editions of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (fig. 1), the sleeping friar represents negligence and lassitude: his study is trivialised by the musician with pipe and tabor, and by the book, abandoned on the desk, with its alchemical symbols casually displayed. As the literary *auto-da-fé* that concludes the treatise constitutes a final example of Bacon's foolishness, it also justifies the giddy destruction of the iconoclasts:<sup>7</sup>

I have found, that my knowledge hath beene a heavie burden, and hath kept downe my goode thoughts: but I will remove the cause, which are these Bookes: which I doe purpose here before you all to burne. They all intreated him to spare the bookes, because in them there were those things that after-ages might receive great benefit by. He would not hearken unto them, but threw them all into the fire, and in that flame burnt the greatest learning in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Bacon here provides the occasion for reformist dogma: the loss of medieval learning is blamed on the errant ways of the past; better simply to burn the books and start over.



Fig. 1 Robert Greene, *The Honourable Historie of Frier Bacon* (London, 1630), title page, showing woodcut drawn from *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (London: [c. 1555])

Whether they celebrate his work as a theologian and scientist, or ridicule his foolish inventions, Renaissance texts consistently treat Bacon in terms of his temporal affiliation with the Middle Ages. A 1530 edition of Bacon's medical writings, *This boke doth treat of the best waters Artyfycialles / and the vertues and properties of the same / mocche profitable for the poore sycke, set forth, by syr Roger Becon, freere*, opens with a woodcut of the friar

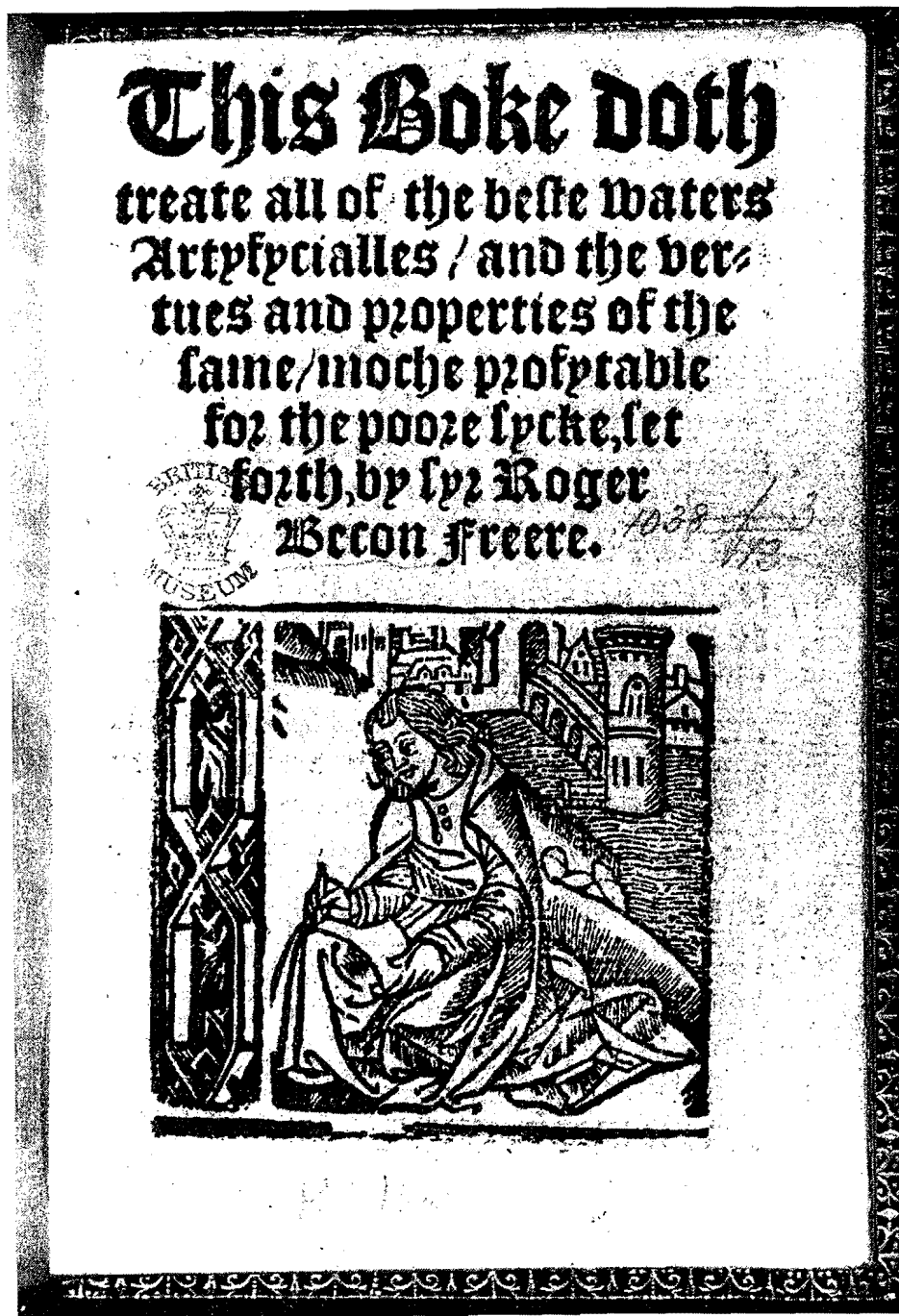


Fig. 2 *This boke doth treat of the best waters Artificiales / and the vertues and properties of the same / moche profitable for the poore sycke, set forth, by syr Roger Bacon, freere* [London, 1530], title page

kneeling, with a river and collegiate buildings in the background (fig. 2): an image of moral probity and religious devotion vastly different from the more famous woodcut. However, Bacon is regarded, not as emblematic of the limitations of the past, but instead as a man ahead of his time. The 1597

*Mirror of Alchemy* introduces the work of 'the thrice famous and learned Fryer, formerly a fellow of Martin [Merton] Colledge: and afterwards of Brasen-nose Colledge in Oxenford' as a source of wisdom and peace:

In times past the Philosophers spak: after diuers and sundrie manners throughout their writings, sith that as it were in a riddle and cloudie voyce, they haue left unto us a certaine most excellent and noble science, but altogether obscure, and without all hope utterly denied, and that not without good cause. Wherefore I would aduise thee, that aboue all other bookes, thou shouldest firmly fixe thy mind upon these seuen Chapters, conteining in them the transmutation of mettalls, and often call to minde the beginning, middle, and end of the same, wherein thou shalt finde such subtilitie, that thy mind shalbe fully contented therewith.<sup>9</sup>

This preface offers an almost typological structure for interpretation: what was concealed in the past ('in a riddle and cloudie voyce') is revealed in the present. What was not fully apprehended or put to the appropriate purpose in Bacon's day can be better understood under the current dispensation.

By the seventeenth century, the anti-Catholic sentiment that accompanies these discussions of Bacon attached to Bacon's contemporaries rather than to Bacon himself. Attributing his imprisonment to the jealousy and venality of his inferiors, the 1659 edition of Bacon's *Discoverie of the Miracles of Art, of Nature, and Magicke*, translated from a manuscript owned by John Dee, constructs Bacon as an opponent of the Catholic church:

'Twas the *Popes* smoak which made the eyes of that Age so sore, as they could not discern any open hearted and clear headed *soul* from an *heretical Phantasme*. The silly *Fryers* envying his too prying head, by their craft had almost got it off his shoulders. It's dangerous to be wiser than the multitude, for that unruly *Beast* will have every over-topping head to be lopped shorter, lest it plot, ruine, or stop the light, or shadow its extravagancies.<sup>10</sup>

Here, Bacon anticipates the Renaissance man: smarter, sharper than his cohort, individualistic. His association with necromancy, actually a Reformation invention, is attributed to silly medieval monks in retaliation of criticisms of the church:

he was a man both learned and subtil unto a miracle, and did such wonderful things by the help of *Mathematicks*, that by such as were envious and ignorant, he was accused of diabolical *Magick*, before Pope *Clement* the 4<sup>th</sup>, and for that cause was detained in prison by him for some time. (A5r)

In each case, Reformation superstition and prejudice are projected onto the medieval past: sixteenth-century fables about the medieval scientist as necromancer give way to anti-clerical stereotypes about the Middle Ages.

Thus, the project of recuperating Bacon's reputation by bringing his work to light and publishing it becomes the occasion to reclaim him from a mistaken and misguided past on behalf of the enlightened (and proto-Enlightenment) present. In the tradition of that other esteemed Bacon, the medieval magician becomes the Reformation scientist:

A Prejudicate eye much lessens the noblenesse of the Subject. *Bacons* name may bring at the first an inconvenience to the Book, but *Bacons* ingenuity will recompence it ere he be solidly read. This as an Apology is the usher to his other Workes, which may happily breath a more free Air hereafter, when once the World sees how clear he was, from loving Negromancy. (A2r-v)

Renaissance treatments of Bacon highlight his distance from the present: as magician or as misunderstood genius. Affiliated in tandem or in tension with a medieval past associated with magic, misunderstanding and superstition, he remains a figure of temporal break.

## II

Recognising that to engage Bacon is to engage his association with the Middle Ages, Greene uses Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay to reflect upon the mental and imaginative processes of periodisation itself. Responding to the intellectual gulf that separates Roger Bacon's body of work and the popular tradition that surrounds him, the play shows repeatedly how a stylised rendering of the past may be mistaken for an honest account of events. Greene achieves this by invoking the literary conventions of the past and present, only to undermine any sense of confidence in the idea of the period that they represent.

Recalling happy times in his friendship with Prince Edward, Lacie looks back to the medieval lyric world of the hunt:<sup>11</sup>

Why lookes my lord like to a troubled skie,  
When heavens bright shine is shadow'd with a fogge?  
Alate we ran the deere, and through the lawndes  
Stript with our naggies the loftie frolicke bucks  
That scudded fore the teasers like the wind:  
Nere was the deere of merry Fresingfield  
So lustily puld down by jolly mates,  
Nor shared the farmers such fat venison,  
So franckly dealt, this hundred yeares before;  
Nor have I seene my lord more frolicke in the chace;  
And now – changed to a melancholie dumpe? (I.I-II)



With images of its 'deere' 'lustily puld down by jolly mates', Fressingfield appears as an ideal place for the prince and his friend to both hunt and chase women. Invoking a lyric tradition associated with merriment and jollity, as well as the occasion for countless allegories of courtship and love, these early lines identify the Middle Ages with the happier times of the past (by contrast to the prince's present 'melancholie dumpe').

However, just as the medieval lyric tradition obfuscates the violence and brutality of the hunt, so, too, are Lacie's welcoming farmers and willing deer, eagerly hunted, so idealised as to be ridiculous. Moreover, the image of untroubled social divisions, with jolly mates happily sharing their flesh with the farmers, looks very different if we interpret the hunt for the 'deere' metaphorically, as an erotic pursuit. The idea of 'dear' country girls being chased and then lustily pulled down by merry hunters, who then 'share' them, suggests the rapaciousness of the aristocratic hunting pastime, while the idea of the bucks being 'stript' implies the farmers' ensuing sexual humiliation. Lacie's speech thus calls attention to how a traditional, inherited, poetic mode can set the terms for misunderstanding. Framing the play through nostalgia, it cautions the audience to adopt a critical perspective on this impulse.

For the Prince is in love. As he relates his own story, he throws the tension between frivolity and violence in Lacie's speech into relief: a girl once regarded as easy prey has become a person, with a name, a character, and a will of her own. Meeting the keeper's daughter has brought Edward's follies into sharp relief: one minute he is 'tossing of ale and milke in countrie cannes' (14), and the next, upon seeing the 'bonny damsel', he is falling 'straight . . . into his passions' (19). One minute he is participating in frivolous fun, and the next he is dreaming of marriage. Greene expresses the paradigm shift that takes place when the prince falls in love with Margaret by lifting Edward out of the medieval lyric and setting him down firmly in the symbolic world of the Renaissance sonnet sequence. The prince recalls:

She turnd her smock over her lilly armes,  
And divid them into milke to run her cheese;  
But, whiter than the milke, her cristall skin,  
Checked with lines of azur, made her blush  
That art or nature durst bring for compare.  
Ermsbie, if thou hadst seene, as I did note it well,  
How Bewtie plaid the huswife, how this girle,  
Like Lucrece, laid her fingers to the worke,  
Thou wouldst with Tarquine hazard Roome and all  
To win the lovely mayd of Fresingfield. (78-87)



The sight of the girl immersing her bare arms in milk to make cheese moves Edward erotically. While his allusion to the rape of Lucrece resonates with Lacie's sexually charged recollection of the hunt (even in love, Edward remains a hunter), his recollection as a whole translates a memory into an opportunity for rhetorical display.<sup>12</sup> Edward's account of Margaret's beauty, as contemporary as it is stylised, uses the classical past to turn the living, active milkmaid into a frozen paragon, an emblem of Renaissance beauty.

As the opening speeches of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* evoke a variety of literary modes, they cultivate a consciousness of historical difference. Highlighting the distinction between literary representations and lived reality, they foreground the limitations of any single reading or interpretation of an event. Greene shows medieval characters doing exactly what we might expect of them: Playing with country lasses? Careful: you'll fall in love with one of them. Trouble in love? Consult a magician! 'Why sirra Ned, weel ride to Oxford to Frier Bacon: oh, he is a brave scholler, sirra; they say he is a brave nigromancer, that he can make women of devils, and hee can juggle cats into costermongers' (93-6). However, he consistently thwarts the expectations of plot and character that he sets up. Before we find out that the girl in question is Margaret, her name has been used in Edward's *blazonne* ('her teethe are shelves of pretious Margarites'). The name 'Margaret' itself recalls the medieval French tradition of marguerite poetry, popularised by Chaucer in the *Legend of Good Women*, in which the pearl or daisy symbolises purity and simplicity.<sup>13</sup> Yet even as Margaret is embedded in literary convention, she is *sui generis*. Described making cheese and introduced with a bawdy pun as 'countrie Margaret' (1.119), even describing her own friends as 'countrie sluts' (3.9), Margaret possesses a frank, physical rusticity that pulls her outside of the frame of convention. Her conversation makes her even more impossible to categorise: 'Phoebus is blythe, and frolicke lookes from heaven, / As when he courted lovely Semele, / Swearing the pedlars shall have emptie packs, / If that fair wether may make chapmen buy' (3.13-16). Moving swiftly from the rarefied to the demotic, Margaret makes classical allusions that are quirky and imprecise: Semele was courted by Zeus, not Phoebus/Apollo. Yet these errors also imply individualism: aspiration and reading, as well as independence of mind and self-confidence.

Margaret's off-kilter classical allusions herald a freedom from literary models, enacting a kind of liberation from monolithic formulations of the past. When Edward renounces his claim on Margaret, giving her to Lacie (though she was his already), Margaret expresses her gratitude in the following terms: 'Margret, as milde and humble in her thoughts, / As was Aspatia unto Cirus selfe. / Yeelds thanks' (8.139-41). Aspatia (or Aspasia) was

the name given by Cyrus the Younger to the courtesan Milto of Phocaea, one of the least mild and humble figures in history.<sup>14</sup> According to Plutarch, Milto was proudly defiant when Cyrus acquired her as his concubine: at first she refused even to bathe. As he came to value her wisdom, Cyrus named her Aspasia, after the lover of Pericles. A *femme fatale*, known for her learning and rhetorical skills, Aspasia of Miletus is said to have discoursed with Socrates and Plato. A figure of oratory and dialogue, known also for sexual behaviour bordering on the scandalous, she appears in catalogues of famous women, such as Rachel Speght's *Mortalities Memorandum, with a dreame prefixed, imaginarie in manner* (1621): 'Aspatia was in Rheth'ricke so expert, / As that Duke Pericles of her did learne', and inspired Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*.<sup>15</sup> Margaret is not incorrect to associate herself with Aspasia, although 'milde and humble' are not the qualities that come to mind immediately. Like Cyrus's Aspasia, Margaret is beloved by more than one man (after Cyrus died Aspasia was taken by his brother, Artaxerxes II, who dedicated her as a priestess of Artemis to prevent her from being taken by his son, Darius, when he became King of Persia). Like Aspasia of Miletus, Margaret possesses distinctive rhetorical abilities and a knack for outshining her male counterparts. Nevertheless, at the same time that she invokes a paradigm of intelligent womanhood, Margaret, named for her purity, is aligning herself with one of the great courtesans of history. Classical allusion, like medieval lyric, calls into question our assumptions about the past: was Aspasia feisty or meek? Innocent or sexually knowing? And was Roger Bacon a magician or a philosopher? Offering an alternative reading of history, Margaret reveals how the past eludes our grasp, containing possibilities that transcend easy categorisation. As she weaves in and out of classical and medieval literature and transforms them in her own image, Margaret ultimately appears like no one so much as herself.

Although Lacie succeeds in stealing Margaret from Edward, he breaks up with her by means of a brutal letter. Here Margaret is scripted as Patient Griselda, a humanist ideal of feminine submission celebrated by Petrarch and Chaucer's Clerk. Unlike her counterpart in the *Clerk's Tale*, however, Margaret responds, not with resignation and acceptance, but with the active emotionalism of a Senecan tragic hero:

Fond Ate, doomer of bad boading fates,  
That wrappes proud Fortune in thy snaky locks,  
Didst thou inchaunt my byrth-day with such stars  
As lightned mischeefe from their infancie?  
If heavens had vowed, if stars had made decree,  
To shew on me their forward influence,

If Lacie had but lovd, heavens, hell, and all,  
 Could not have wrongd the patience of my minde.

(10.137-44)

Margaret rails against external conceptions of Fate. Where her medieval counterpart would gesture towards God's will, and accept her fate philosophically, Margaret instead places priority on the personal immediacy of love, which conquers even astrology. Manifesting a thoroughly modern scepticism (she would have been at home with Greene and the other Renaissance 'prodigals', especially Christopher Marlowe), Margaret places inner truth and lived experience above all external forces and structures, which she gives little credence. She acknowledges and even revels in the intensity of her feelings: the very mention of Lacie makes her swoon, 'ah, give me leave to sigh at every thought' (152). Her decision to retire to a nunnery is motivated not by the occasion to devote 'my loves and libertie to God' (159) but by the opportunity to showcase her broken heart. If she can't take part in a story about personal fulfilment, Margaret may as well shave her head and play another role. Although her disenchantment makes her see the world as 'vanitie; / Wealth, trash; love, hate; pleasure, dispaire' (155-6), Margaret expresses herself wholeheartedly, unselfconsciously and (despite herself) humorously, even as she renounces the world: 'Farewell to friends and father! Welcome Christ!' (14.30).

As the love plot of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* plays with its audience's expectations about the Middle Ages, at times falling into conventional patterns and at other times subverting them, the rivalry of Lacie and Edward fades into the background. Margaret's headstrong and vivacious character emerges out of this jumble of the past, as she enjoys an individual relationship to the traditions and *topoi* that precede her. A female participant in the predominantly male pastime of erotic worship, Margaret's love for Lacie is handled with sympathy.<sup>16</sup> A woman who complains

I loved once, – Lord Lacie was my love;  
 And now I hate my selfe for that I lovd,  
 And doated more on him than on my God  
 For this I scourge myselfe with sharpe repents

(14.12-15)

deserves love's rich rewards, not self-recrimination. With its lively heroine and multiple editions throughout the sixteenth century, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* enjoyed a popular appeal that reflects the importance of women as theatregoers and as consumers of the printed book.<sup>17</sup> Like any character in a contemporary bodice-ripper, Margaret is a modern girl

dressed in period costume. Anticipating debates concerning the early modern (or medieval) invention of the individual, Margaret maintains her individuality as she is held up against a variety of paradigms, from the medieval past as well as from the humanist and theatrical present.<sup>18</sup>

### III

At first glance, Greene's handling of Friar Bacon appears anything but independent. He presents only one side of the story: the side that viewed Roger Bacon as a ham-fisted necromancer, and the side that Greene was, himself, unlikely to hold personally. Having studied at Oxford, which preserved a tradition of Bacon's towering intellect, as well as manuscripts of his work in their libraries, Greene must have known better. Nevertheless, he reworks sensational material from the *Famous Historie*, such as the brazen head, the rivalry with Vandermast, and the duel prompted by the glass prospective, to launch an apparent argument against magic, which is presented as faulty, absurd and violent.<sup>19</sup> Yet Greene's handling of the narrative reveals the limitations of a historical trajectory that carves out the Middle Ages as a space for magic and the occult, leaving modernity free to claim reason and science for itself.<sup>20</sup>

Fusing the legend of Bacon constructing the brass head, treated in detail in the *Famous Historie*, with the idea of constructing a brass ring around England (interestingly, the *Famous Historie* does not mention a brass wall, although it does mention a brass *ball*), Greene brings down the ideal of national integrity along with magic: both of which, he implies, are medieval creations. Friar Bacon attaches the idea of a brass wall around England to his other pointless project, that of the brazen head, which explodes instead of spouting philosophy:<sup>21</sup>

I have contrivd and framed a head of brasse,  
 (I made Belcephon hammer out the stuffe)  
 And that by art shall read Philosophie:  
 And I will strengthen England by my skill,  
 That if ten Caesars livd and raignd in Rome,  
 With all the legions Europe doth containe,  
 They should not touch a grasse of English ground;  
 The worke that Ninus reard at Babylon,  
 The brazen walles framed by Semiramis,  
 Carvd out like to the portal of the sunne,  
 Shall not be such as rings the English strond  
 From Dover to the market-place of Rie. (2.53-64)

The frequent repetition of these intentions throughout the play does nothing for their stability.<sup>22</sup> Like Margaret, Friar Bacon makes extremely problematic references to the past. In a play that refers to Henry III as a 'brave Plantagenet' (4.13), highlighting his status as a Norman, and conquering, ruler of England, Friar Bacon's desire for an impermeable island appears particularly bizarre. The desire to seal off England from foreign invasion may be noble; however, Friar Bacon's reference to Rome reminds us that it is impossible to reverse the effects of a Roman invasion of Britain that has already taken place in history. Like the wall, the brazen head's 'strange and uncouth' (11.18) words emphasise the impossibility of erasing or preventing a foreign presence in England.<sup>23</sup> By comparing his wall to that of Ninus and Semiramis at Babylon, moreover, Friar Bacon defines his construction project with references to walls that are collapsible and empires that are ultimately destroyed.<sup>24</sup> A classic exemplum for the temporality and contingency of empire, Babylon is the shakiest model imaginable for English nationhood.

Like any good politician, King Henry III speaks as if the wall is already constructed:

Great men of Europe, monarchs of the West,  
Ringd with the walls of old Oceanus,  
Whose loftie surge is like the battlements  
That compast high built Babell in with towers, –  
Welcome, my lords, welcome brave westerne kings,  
To Englands shore, whose promontorie cleeves  
Shewes Albion is another little world: (4.1–4)

Henry's reference to Babel links the wall once again to Babylon, recalling the biblical story about the division of tongues and its ensuing national and imperial rivalries. For all the play's celebration of England's separateness ('another little world'), Prince Edward's marriage negotiations with Eleanor of Castile, and Henry III's entertainment of the Holy Roman Emperor and his sidekick, Vandermast, illustrate the inescapability of internationalism.<sup>25</sup> Like the brazen head that can speak in tongues, Vandermast has learned to speak in the various tongues of the magic centres he has visited: 'A Germaine borne, past into Padua, / To Florence and to fair Bolonia / To Paris, Rheims, and stately Orleans, / And talking there with men of art, put downe / The chiefest of them all in aphorisms' (4.48–52).<sup>26</sup> While Vandermast's failure as a magician may be read in light of England's imperial rivalry with the Holy Roman Empire in the late sixteenth century, and especially the triumph

of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the play's emphasis upon the instability of empire produces little confidence in Henry's ambitions for England, emphasising its vulnerability over its strengths.<sup>27</sup>

Formally renouncing magic, Friar Bacon explains that it is in the best interests of the nation, drawing upon the longstanding myth of English descent from Troy:

I find by deep praescience of mine art,  
Which once I tempred in my secret cell  
That here where Brute did build his Troynovant,  
From forth the royall garden of a king  
Shall flourish out so rich and fair a bud,  
Whose brightnesse shall deface proud Phoebus' flowre,  
And over-shadow Albion with her leaves. (16.42-8)

Of course, Friar Bacon's dream of a protective wall recalls that other, famously penetrable, wall of Troy. His belief that magic can serve nationalistic and imperialistic ends ('Thus glories England over all the west' (76)), is renounced, instead, for a 'mysticall' (63) prophecy of Elizabeth. Although the Trojan allusion provides the ultimate example of the folly of wall construction, the Tudors, along with many other European royal families, claimed for themselves a Trojan genealogy.<sup>28</sup> References to 'Troynovant' and 'Albion' (7, 27, 48, 67) gesture towards Elizabeth's personal mythology, and the prophecy of how the other flowers shall 'stoope and wonder at Dianas rose' (62), situates Elizabeth as Virgin (and as huntress) within her Tudor genealogy. As Greene undoes the dream of national insularity and integrity, he replaces magic with a myth of Trojan descent. With the image of the shiny golden rings that wed Prince Edward and Eleanor of Castile, as well as Lacie and Margaret, losing its power and potential by their visual association with the bright brass wall encircling England, Greene offers a canny compliment to a queen for whom marriage and heir-begetting was no longer a viable option.<sup>29</sup> The play thus concludes, not with an image of courtship celebrated, but with an image of singularity: 'peace from heaven shall harbour in these leaves / That gorgeous beautifies this matchless of flower' (55-6).

With a succession of inappropriate classical allusions and historical references, Greene rhetorically and comically undermines the trajectory from medieval to modern that the plot of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* paces out. As references to Babylon and Britain's invasion by Rome suggest the contingency of all empire, weakening Friar Bacon's dream of the wall around England, they also qualify the notion of replacing a flawed and credulous

past with a far-sighted and far-reaching present. Classical allusions such as Margaret's reference to Aspasia undermine confidence in representations of the past, suggesting that the present never understands or formulates it correctly.

The disruptive effect of classicism on medievalism in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* explains the curiously split personality of Friar Bacon's sidekick Miles. We first encounter Miles reverentially greeting Friar Bacon as '*doctissime et reverendissime doctor*' (2.2). He defends and protects Friar Bacon when Burden expresses doubt at the plausibility of a talking head and a wall of brass. Beaten publicly by Friar Bacon, he drowns his sorrows in drink. In his cups, Miles is a changed man:

*Salve, Doctor Burden! This lubberly lurdn,  
Ill-shapte and ill faced, disdained and disgraced,  
What he tells unto vobis mentitur de nobis.*

(7.40-2)

Arrested for being a public nuisance, Miles expresses his discomfiture by adopting the verse forms of John Skelton, whose curious combination of scholasticism and alliteration looks back to both the Latin and the native English Middle Ages. Skelton's is the voice of dissent, of crankily pointing out that things are not as they should be, and of using classical learning for political ends. A liminal figure, at once medieval and early modern, Skelton is also associated with resuscitation of the classical past, radically reformulating it in the interests of cultural and political critique.<sup>30</sup>

Recalcitrant to the end, Miles interrupts the grave and grand marriage negotiations between Edward and Eleanor of Castile, chafes at his role as steward at the feast, and, ultimately, produces the climactic moment by failing to awaken Bacon when the head utters its epigrammatic 'Time is . . . time was . . . time is past' (9. 52-71). Bacon laments:

Villain, if thou had'st cald to Bacon then,  
If thou hadst watcht, and wakte the sleepe frier,  
The Brazen-head had uttered aphorismes,  
And England had been circled round with brasse:

(11.98-101)

If it hadn't been for Miles, Bacon believes, he could have kept his magic and built his wall. Having instigated the resulting temporal and epochal break from 'the medieval', Miles is exiled: with a book in his hand, a wide-sleeved gown on his back, and a cap on his head, he is sentenced to 'rome and range about the world' (11.114). A figure of human resistance to the automaton, of internationalism and particularly of Latin learning, Miles, like Skelton,



rails against English insularity, and the status quo. As Miles is carried away most happily to hell, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* signals the extent to which Skelton provides a model for Greene's deconstructive purpose by offering an account of hell that closely resembles Greene's idea of heaven:

Faith, 'tis a place I have desired long to see: have you not good tipling-houses there? may not a man have a lustie fier there, a pot of good ale, a paire of cardes, a swinging peece of chalke, and a browne toast that will clap a white wastcoat on a cup of good drinke? (15.31-5)

## IV

A collection of discordant classical allusions and a generally uneasy relationship to literary paradigms constitute what we might call Robert Greene's rhetoric of temporality. Together, they prompt a reconsideration of the kinds of pat notion of the past promoted by the brazen head's 'Time is . . . time was . . . time is past', and symbolised by the popular portrayal of Bacon as a magician. Greene's rhetoric of temporality questions this legend and its role in articulating Reformation conceptions about the past that has since come to be referred to as medieval. Ultimately, the play demands renewed respect for the rich and uncontainable history that Elizabethan culture mined for inspiration.

My essay's title takes the phrase 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' from a well-known essay by Paul de Man.<sup>31</sup> In this essay, de Man rejects the Romantic symbol in favor of allegory, a more traditional form of rhetoric that he feels has 'fallen into disrepute'. For de Man, allegory has played Martha to symbol's Mary: the former is tamed, ordered, prosaic, overshadowed by the latter's imagination and spirit. De Man argues that the symbol, associated since the Romantics with a spiritual association between man and nature and a fusion of subject and object, is too universal. Its clunky predecessor, allegory, is not only historical in nature through its association with the Middle Ages and early modern period, but temporal in function. De Man contends that, for all its unabashed constructedness, allegory's emphasis on the distance between the sign and its meaning is more honest. Whereas the symbol obfuscates the truth, which is that the self and the object cannot ever coincide, allegory highlights and is in fact predicated upon what de Man calls 'the temporal predicament'. Dismissing the symbol as a site of nostalgia for a unity that never existed, de Man praises allegory as a site of difference, of historical as well as physical distance from the origin.

*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* deconstructs the ideology of the Middle Ages in much the same way that de Man deconstructs the symbol. Lacie's

opening speech gestures toward a pastoral framework that the later Romantic poets associated with the Middle Ages: a time and a place of fusion between nature and humanity.<sup>32</sup> The figure of Friar Bacon is similarly evocative of a firm and fixed conception of the 'medieval', even before such a term had been invented. Yet, as I have shown, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* resists this 'symbolic' or homogeneous vision of the Middle Ages, as the explosion of Friar Bacon's talking head calls into question a linear and compartmentalised vision of history. As the play highlights the distance (and difference) between a historical moment and its imaginary and literary representation, suggesting that history is more fractured and intractable than our representations of it lead us to believe, it demonstrates how easy it is to refashion the past for purposes of the present, and how limited and essentially 'interested' traditional conceptions of period (and of discipline) can be.

In place of a 'symbolic' vision of the Middle Ages, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* engages allegory and its associated tropes and genres that, as De Man argues, highlight the discontinuities between sign and meaning: irony, melancholy and doubling. Friar Bacon's brazen head is ironised when Greene fuses it with an implausible brass wall around Britain, transporting it from the realm of the fabulous to that of the ridiculous. When Lacie laments the prince's 'melancholie dümpe', he shifts from nostalgia, a trope that believes that there once was a true home, to melancholy, the feeling of inescapable exile. For De Man, doubling (or 'dedoublement') is an effect of the alienation produced by allegory: along with allegory and melancholy, doubling frustrates the fusion of sign and meaning by producing multiple signs. In *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, there is even the doubling of doubling. Friar Bacon encounters his German *Doppelgänger* in Vandermast, a figure who recalls Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. If we believe, as is quite likely, that *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* followed Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, then Vandermast suggests how Greene's play is also doubling Marlowe's. With Vandermast as a double both for Doctor Faustus and for Friar Bacon, the plurality of zany magicians does away with any vestiges of seriousness that may remain.<sup>33</sup> And of course, Friar Bacon has a further double in Friar Bungay, the bungler, who at appears first as an inferior foil to the magisterial Bacon, and then as an anticipation of his limitations.

As it compromises as well as deconstructs nostalgic ideas about the Middle Ages, *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* offers a sharp corrective to the readings of the medieval that were taking place in the early modern period. While we may use De Man's felicitous phrase to describe Greene's strategies, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' also offers some insights into our own

constructions of periodicity. His primary move is from the margin to the centre: sidelining symbol, which has enjoyed poetic pride of place since the time of the Romantics, and replacing it with long-maligned and newly recuperated allegory. As a result, De Man enacts a shift in values, with the symbol's limitations expostulated while the virtues of allegory are extolled. To extend this to the wider concerns of this book, the Middle Ages, long considered derivative, secondary and inferior to the Renaissance, are coming to the forefront, as long-overlooked medieval material is increasingly being shown as central to Renaissance texts. De Man's movement from the false certainty of the symbol to the harsher truths of allegory also suits the evolving shift from entrenched beliefs about the Middle Ages as a space of unquestioning faith, untroubled social distinctions, and easy collectivity and communalism to the present agnosticism. Not only do we now see the Middle Ages as a site of conflict; we are conflicted about how we see the Middle Ages. We are unhappy with the traditional distinctions between medieval and Renaissance, yet we nevertheless intuit a Renaissance self-consciousness about the period that was later dubbed the Middle Ages. Even as we try to grasp these elusive differences, we are forced to acknowledge the eternal disconnect between a historical moment and the scholarly terms and literary texts that attempt to represent it.

think we should be able to acknowledge that we can learn, directly, from the past. I nevertheless allow that many texts will fascinate us without at the same time being assimilable within an 'affective historiography'. I propose a model of texts as friends rather than lovers. See Nicholas Watson, 'Desire for the Past', *SAC* 21 (1999): 59–97. I have replied more fully to this article in 'Confessing Literature', *ELN* 44 (2006): 121–26.

## 2 FRIAR BACON AND FRIAR BUNGAY AND THE RHETORIC OF TEMPORALITY

I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and Clare Hall, Cambridge for generously supporting my research.

1. See, *inter alia*, Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*; Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists'; Patterson, *Negotiating the Past*.
2. On the temporal or epochal notion of a 'middle' see G. S. Gordon, 'Medium Aevum and the Middle Age', Society for Pure English Tract no. 19 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 1–25 and Brian Stock, 'The Middle Ages as Subject and Object', *New Literary History* 5 (1974): 527–47. For discussion see Ruth Morse, 'Shakespeare's Ages', forthcoming in *Shakespeare Survey*.
3. See the discussion of Roger Bacon in A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller (eds.), *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* (New York: Putnam, 1911).
4. See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970). Thomas demonstrates the persistence of occultism well into the seventeenth century.
5. See J. Hackett, 'Roger Bacon: His Life, Career and Works', in J. Hackett (ed.), *Roger Bacon and the Sciences: Commemorative Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 9–23; on the legend see E. Westacott, *Roger Bacon in Life and Legend* (New York: Rockliff, 1953). See also René Pruvost, *Robert Greene et Ses Romans* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1938) and John Clark Jordan, *Robert Greene* (1915; New York: Octagon Books, 1965).
6. See A. G. Molland, 'Roger Bacon as Magician', *Traditio* 30 (1974): 445–60. Bryan Reynolds and Henry S. Turner explain Bacon's divergent reputation as a function of his celebrity as a professional writer and the increasingly public face of academic culture. See their forthcoming articles, 'From *Homo Academicus* to *Poet Publicus*: Celebrity and Transversal Knowledge in Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (c. 1589)', in Edward Gieskes and Kirk Melnikoff (eds.), *Writing Robert Greene: New Essays on England's First Professional Writer* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming), and 'Performative Transversations: Collaborations Through and Beyond Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*', in Bryan Reynolds, *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries: Fugitive Explorations* (London: Palgrave, 2006). I would like to thank them for giving me access to their work before publication.

7. The text concludes, 'Thus was the Life and Death of this famous Fryer, who lived most part of his life a Magician, and dyed a true penitent Sinner, and an Anchorite.'
8. *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (London, [c. 1555]), F4v.
9. Roger Bacon, *The Mirror of Alchemy* (London, 1597), A2r.
10. T. M., *Frier Bacon His Discovery of the Miracles of Art, Nature, and Magick* (London, 1659), A3 r–v.
11. There are no recent scholarly editions of the play: one is sorely needed. Existing editions include Daniel Seltzer's (1963; London: Edward Arnold, 1964) and J. A. Lavin's (London: Ernst Benn, 1969). It also appears in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2002). I have used the edition in *The Chief Elizabethan Dramatists*, ed. William A. Nielson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911).
12. See Stephanie Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).
13. See James I. Wimsatt, *The Marguerite Poetry of Guillaume de Machaut* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970) and John Livingston Lowes, 'The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* as Related to the French Marguerite Poems and to the *Filostrato*', *PMLA* 19 (1904): 593–683.
14. On Aspasia see Plutarch, *Pericles*, ed. and trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1916); Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, ed. and trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1926) and, for discussion of the tradition of Aspasia see Madeleine M. Henry, *Of History: Aspasia of Miletus and Her Biographical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
15. Rachel Speght, *Mortalities Memorandum, with a dreame prefixed, imaginarie in manner* (London: Edward Griffin, 1621).
16. Like Doctor Faustus's 'all is dross that is not Helena', (5.1.103). *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* references *Doctor Faustus* in its handling love as much as magic: 'Shall I be Hellen in my forward fates, / As I am Hellen in my matchless hue, / And set rich Suffolke with my face afire?' (10.93–5).
17. See Jean Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994); David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Editions of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* were printed in 1630 and 1655.
18. See the discussion of this debate in the Introduction, 3–5.
19. Bacon even imagines it as adding to the trials of Christ: 'And from those wounds those bloudie Jews did pierce, / Which by thy magick oft did bleed afresh, / From thence for thee the dew of mercy drops, / To wash the wrath of hie Jehovah's ire, / And make thee as a new borne babe from sinne' (13.102–6). It seems that this speech might have anticipated Shakespeare's 'The quality of mercy is not strained / It droppeth as a gentle rain from heaven' in *The Merchant of Venice* (4.1.184–85).
20. On the limitations of this historical framework from a postcolonial perspective, see the introduction to Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

21. Marlowe's Doctor Faustus plans to 'Search all corners of the new-found world, / For pleasant fruits and princely delicates . . . wall all Germany with brass / And make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg' (1.1.85–92).
22. Examples include: 'I tell thee, Bacon, Oxford makes report, / Nay, England, and the court of Henry saies, / Th'art making of a brazen head by art, / Which shall unfold strange doubts and aphorismes, / And read a lecture in philosophie; / And, by the helpe of divels and ghastly fiends, / Thou meanest, ere many yeares or daies be past, / To compasse England with a wall of brasse' (2.22–9); 'Thus, rulers of our academic state, / You have seene the frier frame his art by prooffe; / And as the colledge called Brazennose / Is under him, and he the Maister there, / So surely shall this head of brasse be framed, / And yeelde forth strange and uncouth aphorismes; / And Hell and Heccate shall faile the frier, / But I will circle England round with brasse' (2.162–9); and ' . . . the brazen head / That, by the inchaunting forces of the devil, / Shall tell out strange and uncouth Aphorismes, / And girt faire England with a wall of brasse' (1.18–20).
23. 'Strange' is a word typically applied to foreignness in early modern England.
24. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed the year after *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* was printed, also engages with the idea of the permeability of the Babylonian walls. Ninus and Semiramis built the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon; it was actually Nebuchadnezzar who built the walls. On Babylon and the idea of empire in Middle English literature see Deanne Williams, 'Gower's Monsters' in Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams (eds.), *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127–50.
25. As Greene was writing *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Elizabeth's longstanding enmity with the Holy Roman Empire had prompted an alliance with the Ottomans.
26. Orleans is a place associated with magic in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* (see *Canterbury Tales*, v.1118) and in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1.4.35).
27. We may compare this to the additions in the B-text of *Doctor Faustus* concerning the Holy Roman Empire. See, for discussion, Leah Marcus, 'Textual Instability and Ideological Difference: The Case of *Doctor Faustus*', *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1989): 1–29.
28. See Heather James, *Shakespeare's Troy: Drama, Politics, and the Translation of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
29. See, for further discussion, my 'Dido Queen of England', *ELH* 71 (2006): 31–59.
30. On Skelton, see my *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, 121–80.
31. Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in Charles S. Singleton (ed.), *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 173–209.
32. In reaction against the mechanisation of modernity, the Romantics dwelled on imaginary pasts: a nostalgia that was occasionally classical (as in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn') but just as often medieval, especially among the German Romantics.

33. Just as *The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, an English translation of what is known as the German Faust-book, provides the material for Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, so *The Famous Historie* constitutes a prose outline for *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. Like Faustus, Bacon conjures figures to entertain royalty, invokes the devil, and gets into all kinds of trouble. See *The Historie of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* (London, P. F. Gent, 1592) and *The Famous Historie of Fryer Bacon* (London, London: G. Purslowe for F. Grove, 1627). On the dating of these texts and their relationship to the plays, see John Henry Jones (ed.), *The English Faust Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

### 3 LANGLAND, APOCALYPSE AND THE EARLY MODERN EDITOR

1. Patterson, 'On the Margin'; Aers, 'A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists'.
2. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, II.
3. David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Form in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.
4. Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 2.
5. *Ibid.*, I.
6. Louise Fradenburg, "So That We May Speak of Them": Enjoying the Middle Ages', *New Literary History* 28 (1997): 205–30 (217–19).
7. The term *new historicism* was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in the introduction to a special double issue of *Genre*, 'The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance', *Genre* 15.1 and 2 (1982). From the very beginning its status was largely heuristic (Greenblatt describing it 'as no single critical practice', 5).
8. Helen C. White, *Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 1–40.
9. Ironically, what now has become a historicist commonplace began as a formalist-inspired attempt to focus attention on the specificities of Langland's poetic achievement, and to insulate that achievement from the exigencies of history. Thus, Lewis in *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936) equates Langland's poetic genius with a political quietism: 'Scholars more interested in social history than in poetry have sometimes made this poem appear much less ordinary than it really is as regards its kind, and much less extraordinary as regards the genius of its poet . . . As a politician, Langland has nothing to propose except that all estates should do their duty' (158–9). Donaldson, in *Piers Plowman: The C-Text and Its Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), calls Langland 'a moderate and a traditionalist, if not a reactionary' (108). For further discussion of this point see Larry Scanlon, 'King, Commons, and Kind Wit: Langland's National Vision and the Rising of 1381', in Kathy Lavezzo (ed.), *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 191–233 (198–9).