

New Light on the Author of the Twenty-Four Poems in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 102

Louis J. P. Verheij

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Abstract The twenty-four poems preserved in MS Digby 102 are anonymous. Josef Kail, their first editor, in 1904 drew a profile of the author that has remained unchallenged for more than a century. Over the years, Kail's conclusions were copied virtually without comment in anthologies and incidental thematic publications on individual poems. In 2009 two new critical editions of the complete sequence appeared virtually simultaneously and wholly independently from each other. One is by Helen Barr, the other I wrote as my doctoral thesis (Verheij 2009). On the subject of the identity of the author of the Digby poems we reached very nearly identical conclusions, albeit along wholly different lines. In this paper, which draws extensively from my thesis, I propose to deal in some detail with only my line of argument, Helen Barr's conclusions of course receiving due recognition. I examine in close detail the poet's profile as drawn by Kail of 'a priest, most probably an abbot or a prior', who 'as such ... occupied a seat in parliament and voted with the Commons'. In succession, all possible parliamentary roles for the writer are considered and dismissed. Internal thematic indications combined with external evidence of certain historical occurrences then lead to an alternative profile of a poet who worked and lived in close proximity to the Westminster centre of political power.

Keywords Middle English · Religious verse · Devotional verse · Moral criticism · Digby poems · Parliamentary history · Lancastrian kings · Benedictine Order

The twenty-four anonymous poems under consideration are preserved as one of four texts in a single manuscript in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 102. The consistent style throughout the sequence, and the recurrence of favourite phrases and notions

L. J. P. Verheij (✉)

Department of English Language and Culture, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands
e-mail: lverheij@hotmail.com

justify the conclusion that the poems are indeed the work of one poet. The manuscript leaves us no clue as to his identity, as is the case with the bulk of medieval verse. But the Digby poems do raise intriguing questions about the identity of their author, because of the unusual mixture of fierce nationalism, outspoken moralism and deep piety that permeate these pieces. Josef Kail (1904), the sequence's first editor, ascribed the poems to 'a priest, most probably an abbot or a prior', who 'as such ... occupied a seat in parliament and voted with the Commons' (p. ix). Kail's assumption was accepted, albeit in one or two instances with a note of caution, by later commentators and bibliographers.¹ Recent voices are more critical, however. Dodd (2006, p. 318n.), disagrees with Kail, but does not put forward any argument for his own suggestion that 'perhaps he (i.e. the author of the poems) came from the localities (possibly a minor cleric).' Barr in her edition of the Digby poems (2009, pp. 73–78) sketches the authorial profile of a pro-Henrician Benedictine monk from Gloucestershire 'who was present in London' and who 'had access to public occasion and parliamentary politics.' Barr bases her conclusions on arguments of a linguistic and stylistic nature, rejecting outright Kail's history-oriented contextual arguments underlying his identification of the poet. Yet, although Kail may indeed have been unduly focused on the historic context of the poems, there can hardly be any doubt that his arguments pointed in the right direction, that is to say: to a member of the clergy very near to, and quite knowledgeable about, the Commons and its business. I therefore decided to start my approach of the poet's identity with a critical re-examination of Kail's history-based arguments, and to proceed from there to attempt drawing a more accurate and sharply defined authorial profile.

To make an unpromising start: to say that our poet was an abbot or prior who sat with the Commons, as Kail did, cannot be true, simply because the higher clergy at no time sat with the Commons, but with the lords.² Now, what alternatives for Kail's identification of the author present themselves? The nearest alternatives are either that the poet did indeed sit with the Commons, but as a member of the lower clergy, or that he was actually an abbot or a prior, but as such occupied a seat with the lords. Let us consider each possibility in turn, bearing in mind that there is reference in six poems to business transacted in six almost consecutive parliaments between 1399 and 1414.³

Could the writer of the poems have been a member of the lower clergy in the Commons? Pollard observed that:

as late as 1332 clerical proctors [i.e. deputies elected to represent the diocesan clergy, cathedral chapters and collegiate churches of the respective church provinces] put in an appearance in parliament; but they deliberated apart, and in time their appearance in parliament ceased altogether.⁴

¹ See Mohl (1933, p. 108), McGarry (1936, p. 259), Robbins (1959, p. xxviii), Scattergood (1971, pp. 17–18), Coleman (1981, p. 107).

² See Brown (1989, pp. 156–176, esp. p. 174).

³ To be precise, the parliaments of 1399, 1401, 1404, 1406, 1410 and 1416, as documented in the Rolls of Parliament covering these years.

⁴ Pollard (1926, p. 109). Lowry (1933, p. 454) confirms that the constitutional practice of clerical proctors attending parliament gradually died out in the 30 years after 1340.

This observation would seem to lead to the conclusion that half a century later a member of the lower clergy could not possibly occupy a seat in the Commons. Indeed, the lower clergy, as a body, met in separate, although as yet simultaneous, convocations (i.e. provincial church synods), and after 1340 technically under the jurisdiction of the archbishops of Canterbury and York.⁵ Yet, as McHardy points out, proctors of the lower clergy after 1340 continued to be appointed for parliament. And even though ‘it is true that the number of appointments for any one parliament never reaches double figures ... there is no evidence of a tailing off of attendance at the end of the century’.⁶ McHardy’s study makes it clear that, although ‘the lower clergy made no impression on the parliamentary scene’, there is ample evidence for the appointment of proctors.⁷ McHardy adds that the lower clergy took their parliamentary duties more seriously than so far assumed,⁸ but this assertion seems somewhat optimistic. Appointment to parliament and actual presence in parliament were by no means the same thing. Actual attendance of knights and burgesses and of the lords temporal and spiritual was recognised as a serious problem, as will be discussed below, and there is no reason to assume that the situation was any better where the lower clergy were concerned. On the contrary, practically the only parliamentary issue of interest to the clergy was the king’s demands for taxation, and by the fifteenth century such matters were considered and decided in clerical convocation.⁹ If we add the requirement that a representative of the lower clergy, to qualify at all as our poet, must have attended in person at least six virtually consecutive parliaments, the conclusion seems justified for taking a look elsewhere.

Let us consider the other alternative: could the author of the poems have been an abbot or prior, as Kail assumed, but sitting with the lords? A severely restricted and regularized number of abbots and priors, the residue of a longer list for earlier parliaments, was still summoned to parliament, as lords spiritual.¹⁰ The first question that comes to mind is whether these secular and regular magnates could have any knowledge at all of the business dealt with in the Commons, a prerequisite, as we have seen above, for one of the spiritual lords to qualify as the author of the poems. This is a valid question, because the lords convened in separate locations, with the exception of the joint opening session; moreover, their business was different from that of the Commons.¹¹ The answer is: yes, they could. Petitions from

⁵ The king continued to summon the lower clergy under the *premunientes* clause in each bishop’s royal writ, but after 1340 obedience to the clause was no longer enforced by the crown (McHardy 1973, p. 97).

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 100.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 106. McHardy’s view is supported by Denton (1981, p. 100).

⁸ McHardy (1973, p. 107).

⁹ See Clarke (1936, pp. 125–153).

¹⁰ By the 1370s, the number of lords spiritual had been regularized to comprise ‘all the 21 ... archbishops and bishops, and an almost standard list of heads of religious houses, normally 25 abbots ... the prior of Coventry and the prior of the Hospitallers’ (Brown 1981, p. 113).

¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 111–112, 123–124.

the Commons came up for discussion and reply in the lords, and on occasion there were joint sessions of representatives from the Commons and from the lords.¹² Enough opportunities, in any case, for the prelates to become acquainted with the business dealt with in the Commons.

The next question to be asked is whether any of the abbots or priors summoned to parliament actually attended in person at least six out of ten sessions over a period of 15 years. The historians are agreed that actual attendance of the lords spiritual left much to be desired, with only a few abbots and priors attending, and those quite often seeking to evade attendance.¹³ The successive kings in the fourteenth and the early part of the fifteenth centuries had great difficulty in persuading the magnates and prelates not to excuse themselves from attending the parliamentary sessions to which they were summoned, except if acquitted because of pressing military or religious emergencies.¹⁴ Roskell presents a wealth of detailed documentary evidence attesting to the lack of attendance of the lords in parliament, especially on the part of the lords spiritual.¹⁵ The conclusion seems justified, therefore, that the chances of finding the author of the poems in this assembly are, again, very remote.

We are left, then, with the lay members of parliament: the lords temporal, and in the Commons: the knights of the shire and the burgesses. Kail does not consider any of these categories, because they do not conform to his profile of the writer of the poems as discussed in the beginning. Indeed, the author's preoccupation throughout the poems with matters of church and faith does not immediately point to a lay magnate. Moreover, the same evidence that Roskell presents with respect to the frequent absence of the lords spiritual (see above) applies to the lay lords. The situation as regards election, re-election and personal attendance of the county gentry and the burgesses in the Commons is slightly more promising. As we have seen, for the writer of the poems to have been a lay member of parliament, he should have been (re-)elected to at least six parliaments between 1399 and 1414. Statistics compiled for the years immediately preceding the period under review show that five or more re-elections did occur, but not frequently. Lewis (1933) analysed the twenty-six parliaments held between 1376 and 1397. Out of a total of 74 knights (two from each of the 37 shires), the number of members returned six times typically varied between one and five, 1 year peaking with six. The number of county members returned ten times—the required frequency to fit the author's profile, as we have seen earlier on –, varied between nil (most often) and two. For the representatives from the boroughs the corresponding numbers are lower. The

¹² Brown (*Ibid.* pp. 124–125) points out that 'petitions ... sent up from the Commons were read before the lords and advice was offered to the king on how they should be answered Over a period of weeks separate sessions, joint sessions and sessions with an intercommuning group of lords were held.'

¹³ Brown (1981, p. 116), and Pollard (1926, p. 64).

¹⁴ Roskell (1956, pp. 153–204).

¹⁵ 'There have actually survived the letters of excusation of more than half of the abbots in the case of each of no fewer than forty parliaments in the course of the fourteenth century The surviving letters of excusation for the successive parliaments of 1391, 1393, 1394, 1395, and January 1397 (by which time twenty-seven abbots and priors were being regularly summoned) number respectively 16, 19, 19, 17, and 16. An examination of the record of the heads of individual monasteries ... suggests that in the vast majority of cases it was really exceptional for an abbot to attend parliament in person' (Roskell 1956, p. 174).

number of burgesses returned for the sixth time typically varied between nil and three, with an occasional peak of five or six, out of a total of about sixty borough representatives returned. The number of burgesses returned ten times typically varied between nil (most often) and two.¹⁶

The numbers dramatically go down even further when taking into account actual presence, rather than official (re-)election. In his *Evolution of Parliament*, Pollard demonstrated that actual attendance of the Commons in parliament remained at a lamentably low level until the middle of the fourteenth century, mainly because of the tendency of the boroughs to abstain themselves.¹⁷ Therefore, if we were to seek our poet in the Commons, he could conceivably be found among the very few county representatives who were regularly present, but almost certainly not among the city and borough members. However, in terms of statistical chance, the option is only barely conceivable. What pleads even further against the notion of the author being a knight is the subject matter and tone of voice of a number of the poems themselves. The traditional complaints and appeals of God to man in poems X, XVII and XIX, the criticisms of the secular clergy in poems X and XIV, and of the regular clergy in poem XVIII, the versifications of biblical passages in poems XXI and XXIV, and the thoroughly theological poem XXIII, all point to a clerical rather than a secular background.

The above analysis shows that the writer of the poems was almost certainly not a member of parliament. Yet, the internal evidence keeps pointing in the direction of Westminster. The poet must have been familiar with the proceedings of at least six out of ten parliaments spread over a period of 15 years. He demonstrates a lively interest in specific political issues, at home and abroad. Whilst his sympathies lay with the Commons rather than with the lords, he found himself near the centre of power, the place where he thought it expedient to address not only the king, but also a 'kyngis chaunceller', a 'kyngis counselere', 'lordis' and those 'that ouer puple han gouernaunce'.¹⁸ At the same time, the poems give evidence of the writer's strong religious bent. He commented critically on the morals of both the secular and the regular clergy. Moreover, the tenets of the Christian belief and the theological dogmas underlying the sacraments of the Church had no secrets for him.

With this profile in mind we are in fact looking at a man closely involved with the parliamentary business of the Commons without being a parliamentarian himself; a man near the centre of power without being part of it; a devout and strongly motivated member of the clergy. The figure best fitting this picture is that of a clerk in the royal Chancery, most of whom were clerics. One of the manifold duties of this vast administrative machinery of medieval royal government was to issue summons to parliament, and to receive on behalf of the king all private and common parliamentary petitions.¹⁹ In Chancery, our author was not only

¹⁶ Lewis (1933). But occasionally a commoner was returned even more frequently. In the parliament of January 1395, one borough representative was returned (although not necessarily present!) for the eighteenth time, an absolute record in the statistics available to us.

¹⁷ See Pollard (1926, pp. 319–321).

¹⁸ A social positioning which also Robbins makes explicit (1959, p. xxviii, and 1975, p. 1417).

¹⁹ For a comprehensive description of the governance of late medieval England, see Brown (1989), especially p. 2 (clerks as clerics) and pp. 44–52 (the workings of Chancery).

knowledgeable about parliamentary affairs, but as much about political affairs at home and abroad. The conclusion that the poet was a Chancery clerk finds concurrence with Giancarlo's remark in his study of the relationship between the English parliament and English literature in late medieval times, that 'to be a poet in this period was, by and large, to be a clerk and to have had clerkly-clerical training. All of these poets (i.e. those referring extensively to parliamentary matters) moved in the clerical and bureaucratic circles that were a distinctive feature of the London-Westminster environment'.²⁰ Furthermore, Barr (1993, p. 17) suggests that the author of *Richard the Redeless* (and by implication also the author of its continuation *Mum and the Sothsegger*), because principally concerned with contemporary affairs, could have been a parliamentary clerk.

Chancery clerks were either laymen or clerics. I have argued above that the author was in all likelihood a cleric. There are indications that make it probable that he was a regular cleric, more precisely a Benedictine monk. First, he devoted a whole poem (XVIII) to an elaborate set of conventual rules, in which echoes can be heard of the Provincial Capitulary of 1422 concerning the behaviour of Benedictine monks, about which complaints had been made to King Henry V in 1421.²¹ Second, the place where the author of poem XVIII was most likely to have become familiar with this particular Capitulary was evidently a Benedictine monastery, and the nearest, the Benedictine Westminster Abbey, was literally next door to the royal palace of Westminster and its Chancery offices. Third, in the early part of the fifteenth century the Chancery personnel, besides career clerks and secular clerics, still counted clerics who had taken major or minor orders, albeit in rapidly diminishing numbers.²² The Register of 'the Brethren of the Convent' of Westminster (Pearce 1916) only shows the names of the monks who held conventual offices, so within the precincts of Westminster Abbey. But those of the monks who held no such office and, as a result, remain anonymous, account for more than half of the total number. It is therefore conceivable that among them were monks employed as clerks in the nearby Chancery offices. The brisk demand for scribes that the elaborate government machinery engendered could be readily satisfied from the nearby Abbey. In any case, our particular monk will not have encountered much difficulty in obtaining permission from his abbot, the powerful William Colchester. Colchester occupied a prominent seat in the Upper House, and was closely engaged in the national and international affairs of the king, who in his turn was patron of the Abbey church.²³ Engaging in secular business was not frowned upon among the Benedictines, in any case. They enjoyed a 'remarkable degree of identification with the secular life of their times,' in particular the monks of Westminster Abbey, whose 'position was to some extent unique,' and whose 'royal associations affected the life of its monks'.²⁴ The intrusive influence of the worldly affairs of the Palace of Westminster upon the monastic life in Westminster Abbey is best illustrated by the

²⁰ Giancarlo (2007, p. 10).

²¹ See Kail (p. xxii).

²² See Brown (1989, p. 60).

²³ See Harvey (2008).

²⁴ See Harvey (1993, pp. 1 and 5, respectively).

fact that the sessions of the Commons in Parliament in those days took place regularly within the precincts of the Abbey, either in the chapter house or in the refectory.²⁵ That the vow of *stabilitas loci* was not strictly enforced, moreover, appears from a remark by the compilers of the Register of Monks, who also tried to ‘trace them (i.e. the obedientiaries) in occupation of offices elsewhere’.²⁶ For instance, the Register makes mention of the monk John Stokes, who ‘was absent from the Convent from about 1421 to 1436’.²⁷ There was also the monk Roger Cretton, who from 1399 till 1413 held, among other offices, the office of ‘Warden of Q. Alianore’s and of Richard II’s manors’,²⁸ which must have made him an *outridere* like Chaucer’s ‘monk out of his cloystre’ in the *Canterbury Tales*.²⁹ Cretton’s office, incidentally, is illustrative of the Abbey’s close links with the king and his court. To mention one other example, our poet’s confrere of greater renown, John Lydgate, a Benedictine of Bury St. Edmunds, in 1426 spent time in France, and during the six following years in and around London, on all occasions writing numerous commissioned poems for aristocratic patrons, including the king.³⁰ The profile of a Westminster monk working within the royal palace of Westminster, if correct, will have changed abruptly in the year 1421. In this year the great assembly took place in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey, chaired by King Henry V, as referred to earlier. Sixty Benedictine abbots and priors and more than three hundred monks were present, among them undoubtedly their host, the Westminster abbot, and quite probably his subordinate, our poet. The king peremptorily demanded that the monks reform themselves.³¹ It is not inconceivable that the king’s criticism should have resulted in the author quitting Chancery, either on his own initiative, or so instructed by his abbot, if only because the latter wished to demonstrate his loyalty to his neighbour the king, who for good measure held full jurisdiction over the monastery’s abbey as a ‘royal *peculiar*’. A strong indication in support of this interpretation is the tenor of poem XVIII, presumably written in 1422, in which the writer forcefully admonishes his fellow monks on the same points of criticism as censured in the meeting of the previous year 1421. In this poem, the writer immediately puts a (self-) accusing finger on the sore spot of the Benedictines’ worldly occupations. Poem XVIII, moreover, fits effortlessly into the unbroken sequence of contemplative verse that starts with the immediately preceding and deeply devout poem XVII, datable at the crucial year 1421 of the corrective Benedictine assembly. Admittedly, nothing can be said with absolute certainty about the date or dates of origin of the poems. However, upon careful

²⁵ See Brown (1989, p. 212). When the Commons had their sessions in the Palace, they met in the Painted Chamber.

²⁶ See Pearce (1916, p. 21).

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 34.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 31.

²⁹ See Benson (1988, GP, l. 181).

³⁰ See Pearsall (1997, pp. 18–32).

³¹ See Kail (p. xxii), who refers to Goodwin (1704, p. 303), who refers to the *Chronica Maiora*, covering the years 1377–1422, of Thomas Walsingham, chronicler at the royal Abbey of St. Albans (for an English translation, see Preest and Clerk, 2005, pp. 440–441).

re-examination of Kail's bold effort to put a date to the poems on the basis of internal historical evidence (p. x), I have adopted Kail's conclusion that the poems I to XVIII were probably composed roughly year-on-year covering the years 1400 to 1422. Since none of the poems XIX to XXIV provide the slightest clue connecting them to any datable events, any periodicity after 1422 is no more than conjectural.³² From XVII onwards the poems have lost all allusion to outward-looking matters of political, social and moral import, and testify to a dramatically different way of thinking: inward-looking, religious and seeking personal salvation only, varying in mood from the devotional and deeply pious to the dogmatic and biblical.

Having refashioned the identity of the author of the poems, we may conclude that Kail was off target with his profile of the poet, but only slightly so. He saw the poet as 'a priest, most probably an abbot or prior', who 'as such occupied a seat in parliament, and voted with the Commons.' It is demonstrably more likely that the writer of the poems was neither an abbot nor a prior but a Westminster Benedictine monk, not a member of parliament but a royal Chancery clerk.

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³² Barr (2009, pp. 6–18) severely restricts the period of origin of the full sequence to 1413–1414, 'the early years of Henry V.'

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