An historiated initial on the opening page to a manuscript of John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (Chicago, Newberry Library MS 33.3) has escaped notice and is not mentioned in any published descriptions of the manuscript (Fig. 1). As A. S. G. Edwards’s devoted scholarship shows, the manuscript history of Lydgate’s verse is a long work in progress, which has been and continues to be written in increments as new fragments surface and important discoveries are made. The purpose of this article is to supplement these labors by recording the presence of this historiated initial and by drawing attention to some of the larger issues regarding the illumination of Lydgate’s works that this representation raises. This initial is the single surviving representation of a figure at a desk—whether reading or writing—at the beginning of any Lydgate manuscript, and as such is a remarkable addition to our knowledge of the visual apparatus that accompanied manuscripts of his works.

The manuscript is an elegant mid-fifteenth-century volume that contains only John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*. The decorative features of the manuscript localize it to London, and both these ornamental elements, which appear to have been executed by a single illuminator, and the hybrid anglicana and secretary hand of the single scribe who copied the text suggest a date close to 1450, but certainly within the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Throughout the manuscript, each stanza’s rhyme scheme is denoted by red brackets, and apparently the same pigment used to create the brackets was also used to underline proper names and chapter summaries and to provide
Figure 1. Man at a Desk. John Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, London, c. 1450–1475. Chicago, Newberry Library MS 33.3, folio 1r.
the sporadic chapter heads. Likewise, these chapter heads appear to have been written by the same scribe who copied the main text. With the exception of the explicit to the Prologue, explicits and incipits are written in large black letters throughout the manuscript, and where they do mention the author of the text, they refer to “Bochas” (i.e., Boccaccio) as opposed to John Lydgate. Overall, it is a well-organized, carefully written volume that confers prestige on the text by virtue of its careful apparatus and attractive—but not sumptuous—illumination.

At some unknown point, however, water beset the manuscript and obscured the historiated initial that adorns its opening page. From a modest distance, the initial seems only to be decorated (as opposed to historiated), and only a tentative note in an internal file hazards that the letter might frame representational content. Under close inspection, it is clear that the miniature shows a man bent over an open book upon a desk; it is no longer possible to discern whether he is engaged in writing or reading. What is easily discernible is the desk itself, which contains a cupboard filled with two books, the one red and the other blue. The figure at the desk wears a dark brown habit, but no other features of his attire or physiognomy are, in the miniature’s present state, legible. No other manuscript of the *Fall of Princes* nor of any work by Lydgate features this kind of image at its opening.

The five extant copies of the *Fall of Princes* with figural illumination vary considerably in their decorative programs, leading Lesley Lawton to remark that they “represent in microcosm the various interpretative and technical solutions available to producers of illustrated manuscripts in a late medieval English context.” The most lavish copy (San Marino, Huntington HM 268, along with the fragment from it that is now British Library, Sloane MS 2452) provides fifty-eight narrative illustrations, each in a framed column miniature. The only miniature in this manuscript that portrays Lydgate shows him seated beside Boccaccio, receiving a book from his auctor. Another deluxe copy, British Library, Harley MS 1766, contains 156 unframed marginal illustrations of the exempla in addition to a half-page prefatory miniature portraying two monks kneeling before St. Edmund enthroned. If we can extrapolate something about the manuscript from which the Montréal, McGill University MS 143 fragment was excised, it seems to have flaunted a plentiful schedule of framed column miniatures that illustrate exempla: of the two surviving miniatures it contains, one represents the decapitation of Duke Gaultier, while the other includes an image of Lydgate kneeling before Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, before the work’s envoy. Philadelphia, Rosenbach Library MS 439/16, in contrast, has a more modest pictorial cycle that prefaches seven of the poem’s books with a column miniature. Most of these miniatures address the poem’s frame and show Boccaccio seated at his desk and encountering characters whose tales are told in the
book to follow. And Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 263 contains a single frontispiece miniature before Book I, which brings together a medley of twelve scenes, ten of which represent exempla recounted in the first book of the poem. In neither of these latter manuscripts (Rosenbach and Bodley) does a representation of Lydgate appear. In light of this variation, I would go further than Lawton’s assessment quoted above and infer that manuscript producers were undecided as to the most appropriate illustrative apparatus for this, a monumental poem in English.

Although the historiated initial in Newberry MS 33.3 is located in the space that one would associate with an author portrait, determining its subject is not so straightforward. The sober opening verses to the *Fall of Princes* record the name of its original Italian author, Boccaccio, and its French translator, Laurent de Premierfait. What is more, the first word to the poem, “He,” refers to Laurent, and it is in the initial ‘H’ that we encounter the representation described above. The question this historiated initial raises, then, is: Whom does it depict? Boccaccio? Laurent de Premierfait? John Lydgate? On the one hand, the logical answer would be Laurent, because he is the subject of the opening verse; and equally possible is Boccaccio, since he, too, is mentioned. On the other hand, the figure’s attire—a dark (though not black) habit—might suggest Lydgate.

Whether or not the illuminator had a particular figure in mind, the fact that the portrait’s identity is even open to debate is a signal symptom of the conditions of Middle English poetic production at this time. Specifically, in producing so much of his nondevotional work in translation, Lydgate left open to interpretation his authorial role, a topic that is explored at length by Alexandra Gillespie, with respect both to Lydgate’s output at large and to his *Fall of Princes* in particular. In the case of this manuscript, nothing of its paratext mentions Lydgate, and a reader might easily overlook or be unaware of the identity of the person who composed this English poem. What a fifteenth-century audience would have made of the person portrayed on the manuscript’s first page cannot be determined, but the mere presence of a figure at a desk in the classic style of an auctor may not have had the same authorizing effect on the English language that such images are often thought to confer. Instead, a late-medieval audience may have perceived this figure as the French translator or even the Italian, Latin-language auctor whose name peppers the text. Because the absence of medieval ownership marks and heraldry leaves us ignorant of the manuscript’s patron(s), I am reluctant to deduce anything about the interests of the reading community for which this copy was produced other than to say that they apparently saw an English version of Boccaccio’s *De casibus virorum illustrium* as a worthy investment. A final note about the production of this manuscript compounds the questions it raises about the illuminator’s role in mediating the
identity of the poem’s author. In certain places in the manuscript, the rubricated brackets that highlight the rhyme scheme run over the decorative illumination (Fig. 2). As we know from numerous incomplete examples, manuscripts were typically copied first and then supplied with illumination. This standard order does indeed appear to have been the operating procedure for this manuscript as well, where, for example, on folio 41v, the frame for the large decorated initial breaks in order not to run over the ‘f’ in the verse that begins, “full wele” (Fig. 3). Yet, to reiterate, the red bracket lines run over both the text they bracket (naturally) and, at times, the illuminated ornamentation (unusually).

The following, then, is the order in which parts of the manuscript were created: first, the scribe laid out and copied the text; then an illuminator provided the illumination; and finally a figure supplied the red and blue paraph marks, brackets, and underlining throughout the text. If we assume that the scribe and illuminator were different individuals, this sequence would require the gatherings to originate with a scribe, be passed off to the illuminator, and then return to the scribe for rubricating. Alternatively, for this last phase, the illuminator might have been entrusted with the rubrication. The potential movement back and forth between artisans strikes me as inconvenient, particularly in light of the small work spaces of London illuminators and stationers, which by no stretch of the imagination could accommodate multiple practitioners in the style of a scriptorium. While it cannot be proved that the scribe and the illuminator were one and the same...

Figure 2. Rubrication over decorative border. John Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, London, c. 1450–1475. Chicago, Newberry Library MS 33.3, folio 1r.
individual, this manuscript provides grounds for considering the possibility. If the illuminator of this manuscript was also its scribe—a scribe who not only copied the text but was also sufficiently attentive to its form that he accentuated its rhyme scheme—then the unusual illumination at the opening to the manuscript may be the product of an attentiveness to the poem’s formal and thematic properties, resulting in an image of authorship that equivocates on the identity of the man it portrays because the poem itself equivocates on its own authorial origins.

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NOTES

1. For a brief description of the manuscript, see Paul Saenger, *A Catalogue of the Pre-1500 Western Manuscript Books at the Newberry Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 60–61. This manuscript was unknown to Henry Bergen, Lydgate’s modern editor. For descriptions of other *Fall of Princes* manuscripts, see Henry Bergen, *Lydgate’s Troy Book*, Part IV, EETS, e.s. 126 (1935): 1–54. The copies of the *Fall of Princes* that contain figural illumination amount to a modest number (previously numbering only five, and now, including Newberry MS 33.3, numbering six) of the total number of extant copies (thirty-five), making this finding all the more significant. These manuscripts are: London, BL Harley MS 1766; Montréal, McGill University MS 143, a fragment comprising four leaves with two miniatures; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 263; Philadelphia, Rosenbach Library, MS 439/16; San Marino, Huntington HM 268 and a fragment from this same manuscript, now London, BL Sloane MS 2452.


3. Pace Bale, there is no extant image of John Lydgate writing in his study, although one manuscript of the Fall of Princes (San Marino, Huntington Library HM 268, fol. 79v) does depict a “man” (not Lydgate) writing, and another manuscript of the Lives of Saints Edmund and Fremund (BL, Harley MS 2278, fol. 74r) depicts Burchard (not Lydgate), Fremund’s secretary, writing. See Anthony Bale, “From Translator to Laureate: Imagining the Medieval Poet,” Literature Compass 5 (2008): 918–934, 929.

4. While it is impossible to know for certain when this damage occurred, the manuscript’s possible provenance includes its presence in a collection damaged by fire (and presumably by the water that quenched it). See J. R. Hall, “William G. Mendlicott (1816): An American Book Collector and His Collection,” Harvard Library Bulletin, n.s., 1 (1990): 13–46, esp. 30, n. 58; and Catalogue of a Collection of Books Formed by William Mendlicott of Longmeadow, Mass (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1878), no. 2715. The latter records that the manuscript was “defaced by the fire at Sotheby’s in 1865.” My thanks to Tony Edwards for these references and his suggestion that this refers to the George Offor sale at Sotheby’s on June 27, 1865 (email correspondence, May 3, 2016).

5. “The initial ‘h’ at the beginning seems to have a portrait miniature in it.” (Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 33.3, internal file).


7. Ibid., 64.

8. Many leaves have been excised from this manuscript—their whereabouts are unknown, or they may simply have been destroyed—and Lawton estimates that the complete manuscript might have contained more than ninety miniatures (Lawton, “‘To Studie in Bookis,’” 65). See Kathleen L. Scott, Later Gothic Manuscripts, 1390–1490, 2 vols., Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles 6 (London: H. Miller Publishers, 1996), II, no. 79.

9. San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 268, folio 18r. Although Seth Lerer assumes that the image imagines the moment when Lydgate presents his work to his “patron” (i.e., Boccaccio), logic suggests to me that the book is passing in the opposite direction: from the long-dead auctor to his follower to translate. See Seth Lerer, Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 40–44.
10. On this manuscript, see Sarah Louise Pittaway, “The Political Appropriation of John Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*: A Manuscript Study of British Library, MS Harley 1766” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2011); and Sarah Pittaway, “‘In this signe thou shalt overcome hem alle’: Visual Rhetoric and Yorkist Propaganda in Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (Harl. MS. 1766),” *British Library Journal* (2011): article 4. Each of these monks has a banderole hovering beside him, but these were left blank originally. On one of these banderoles a later reader wrote, “dan John Lidgate.” The added words are attributed to a sixteenth-century hand in Catherine Reynolds, “Illustrated Boccaccio Manuscripts in the British Library (London),” *Studi sul Boccaccio* 17 (1988): 113–183 (143), but they may be of the later fifteenth century.


13. Before Book II there is a blank space for a miniature, which was never completed; and the first two leaves of Book VIII have been excised. See Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts*, II, no. 119.

14. For the tradition of illumination in the French copies, see Anne D. Hedeman, *Translating the Past: Laurent de Premierfait and Boccaccio’s “De Casibus”* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2008).

15. “He that did som tyme his besi diligence / The boke of Bokas in frensh to translate owte of latin i called was laurence”; Newberry Library MS 33.3, folio 1r; I have silently expanded all abbreviations.


17. The words “forget nott” appear in a c. 1500 hand on folio 45r, as well as the letters “FENRGET” along with a closed S. The manuscript also contains the bookplates of George E. Leighton of St. Louis, Missouri (b. 1835), with a monogram shield “Wrenwood,” and his son George B. Leighton of Monadnock Farms, New Hampshire. Apparently, “a conspicuous feature of the Leighton home is an extensive library, which could hardly be duplicated in the West. The books have been collected in Europe and America with great judgment, and reflect the taste and studies of the collector”; *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: White & Company, 1893), 4:361–362. Perhaps Leighton acquired the manuscript at the Offer sale or from George Mendlicott (see above, n. 4). The absence of medieval ownership marks and