

The inharmonious Argues that the Complaint against Blacksmiths was intended in context to be an ironic compliment to the Choristers' Lament, and that it satirises Pythagorean musical theory choristers and blacksmiths of MS Arundel 292

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by Richard J. Schrader

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¹ Salter, "A Complaint against Blacksmiths," in her *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 199. Her essay first appeared in *Literature and History* 5 (1979): 194–215.

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The manuscript dates from around 1300, with additions in four later hands.³ As it happens, the two poems follow a Latin piece (also an addition) on what to do in case of accidents at the Eucharist, and they precede another Latin work, *St. Patrick's Purgatory*.⁴ The trilingual miscellany probably originated at the Benedictine priory of Norwich cathedral, and Salter has remarked on the ease with which "Choristers" can be "contexted": "This wry and technically expert satirisation of the rigorous training imposed in monastic or cathedral song-schools presents no problems as an item in a miscellany of monastic provenance: moreover, the clerkly and essentially orthodox tradition of impudent criticism to which it subscribes provides it with a network of relationships in an established literary mode."⁵ "Blacksmiths" is far less easy to account for unless it continues the same satire.

"Choristers" consists of fifty-two rhyming long alliterative lines in thirteen *aaaa* stanzas, dating from the middle or later fourteenth century; the dialect is Northeast Midland.⁶ Editors have difficulty glossing and punctuating it, but at least three voices are heard: the disgruntled choristers Walter and William, along with their French choirmaster. The poem is salted with musical language, and its humor stems from the juxtaposition of "proficient use of technical terms for musical pitch and notation with [an] inability to comprehend their meaning and perform accordingly."⁷ For example, William says,

Reader: Liturgy, Law, and the Constraints of Performance," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999): 135–41. The text of "A Complaint Against Blacksmiths" ("Blacksmiths") is from *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose*, ed. Kenneth Sisam (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 169–70. It also appears in *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 106–7; Sisam, *Oxford Book*, 372–73; J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, ed. Douglas Gray, *The Oxford History of English Literature* 1.2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 391 (with gloss); and Salter, *English and International*, 199 (original manuscript format). Both poems have been modernized, not always accurately, in Edith Rickert, comp., *Chaucer's World* (1948; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 126–28, 16–17. Throughout the essay, citations from both poems will be noted parenthetically within the text.

³ The manuscript is most recently described in *The Middle English Physiologus*, ed. Hanneke Wirtjes, Early English Text Society 291 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), ix–xv, and in Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 128–29. "Choristers" is cited on 70^v–71^r, "Blacksmiths" on 71^v.

⁴ On possible links between the English poems and the Latin works, see Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 129–30, and Salter, *English and International*, 213–14.

⁵ Salter, *English and International*, 200.

⁶ Russell Hope Robbins, "Poems Dealing with Contemporary Conditions," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050–1500*, gen. ed. Albert E. Hartung, vol. 5 (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1975), 5:1472; Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 100–101, 136; Utley, "Choristers' Lament," 194.

⁷ Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 118.

Of bemol and of bequarre . of boþe i was wol bare
 Qwan i wente out of þis word [sic] and lifte til mi lare
 Of effauȝ and elami ne coudy neuer are
 I fayle faste in þe fa it files al mi fare.

(37-40)

[I knew nothing of either B-flat or of B-natural when I went out of this world and began my music lessons. Before that I knew nothing of F-fa-ut and E-la-mi. I completely fail with fa; it muddies my whole journey.]

The dialect of "Blacksmiths" is Southeast Midland, and its twenty-two long alliterative lines are probably from the later fourteenth century, though the hand may be from the second quarter of the fifteenth.⁸ The poem's memorably echoic language and vivid representation of the energies of metalworkers do not suggest a monastic connection at first glance: "'Tik, tak! hic, hac! tiket taket! tyk, tak! / Lus, bus! lus, das!' swich lyf þei ledyn" (19-20) ("Tik, tak! hic, hac! tiket taket! tyk, tak! / Lus, bus! lus, das!" such a life they lead). But as Salter argues, the "preservation in a strongly traditional and moral setting" of this denunciation of blacksmiths raises the possibility that it was "fed, in part, by older religious attitudes."⁹ Her argument, the only extended analysis of the poem and its context, takes her in directions that need not be retraced in detail here, but the case I will make for the dependence of "Blacksmiths" on "Choristers" for its full point relies indeed on a learned (religious) tradition that would have occurred to any reader at that time and place.

The two poems share vocabularies that call attention to themselves and a verse form that underscores the unusual diction. Salter remarks elsewhere that in "Blacksmiths" we have "a poem which aims to appeal and please by a vigorous, and even by an exaggerated use of alliterative language."¹⁰ The poem is all the more notable because little about it connects to the regions or forms normally associated with alliterative verse of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries.¹¹ It is as if the verse form were chosen ad hoc in response to similar clangorous disharmonies in "Choristers." J. A. W. Bennett's *Middle English Literature* enters it uneasily in a chapter on lyrics, calling it an "onomatopoeic masterpiece" and reprinting it whole, but it observes also, "It is notable that in this period unrhymed alliterative verse seems (judging from the surviving corpus)

⁸ Robbins, "Poems," 1472; *Middle English Physiologus*, x; Salter, *English and International*, 199, 208.

⁹ Salter, *English and International*, 205.

¹⁰ Salter, *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 74.

¹¹ Salter, *English and International*, 208.

never to have been usual as a form for lyrics."¹² Even allowing for the amorphous nature of "lyric," such a category grants the poem more autonomy than it has in context, as if it were just another plaintive cry. The poem is deceptive because it *can* be read in ignorance of its monastic origin, and it is comprehensible just as a complaint about noise pollution. When read *in situ* it means more, as we shall see. Francis Lee Utley answered a similar oversimplification about "Choristers," written likewise in the "popular" alliterative tradition: "the poem is surely monastic rather than 'popular' in its inspiration. Its technical terminology is scarcely a possession of the folk. Apart from that terminology the poem contains colloquial language, but the words *colloquial* and *popular* are not synonymous."¹³

In its popular aspect, "Choristers" has been read by Bruce W. Holsinger as a response to *Piers Plowman*, one drawing on Langland "precisely to satirize the monastic clergy and its pedagogical severity." The anticlericalism is gentle, he argues, and the speakers satirize not only the pedagogy but also themselves by what he calls a "stylized vernacular response."¹⁴ This comically heightens the distance between institutional ideals and private reality, for a number of Latin musical terms are first recorded in English here,¹⁵ forcefully competing in their sudden vernacularization with ordinary language and some baffling colloquialisms. The sense was apparently not meant to be discerned easily by the unwary monk who came upon folio 70^v, and the *lack* of harmony is among the things further parodied by the nonsense sounds of "Blacksmiths." Musical terms are not the only words making a first appearance here. The master says that Walter begins "to clondre" like an old cauldron (22). In the days before the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), Utley translated *clondre* as "clink and drone" without explanation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) glosses this unique appearance as "? to make a rumbling noise, to drone," while the MED has "to drone, hum," explaining unhelpfully, "Prob. imitative." One senses that "clink" fits the context better (and better anticipates "Blacksmiths"), but of all the alliterating words with that sense (or any other) our poet chose the one without a history.

¹² Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, 391.

¹³ Utley, ed., "Choristers' Lament," 195n.

¹⁴ Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 131, 134–35. Elsewhere he writes that it may be "a humorous parody of student complaints" ("Pedagogy, Violence, and the Subject of Music: Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* and the Ideologies of 'Song,'" *New Medieval Literatures* 1 [1997]: 181).

¹⁵ Cf. Holsinger, "Langland's Musical Reader," 120–21.

A bit further on, Walter laments, “Me is wo so is þe be . þat belles in þe walmes / I donke vp-on dauid . til me tonge talmes” (29–30) (I’m as sorrowful as the bee that buzzes [half-drowned] in the well. I hammer away at the Psalms until my tongue falters). Holsinger and the *MED* cannot improve Utley’s translation, which requires this bee uniquely to *bell* in the way of a hound or bull. The simile is not proverbial or based on a fable, and it would make better sense if one assumed that the scribe mistakenly alliterated the verb with *be* instead of *wo* and *walmes*.¹⁶ On the other hand, the subsequent clause appears to be just as nonsensical until one compares its twin in *Piers Plowman*, which was pointed out by Holsinger.¹⁷ *Donken* here clearly implies, as he says, “a repetitive beating at the Psalms during performance.” The image and the echoic word at its heart are caught up in the next poem’s response to this odd clatter. Moreover, while the pervasive language of frustration may not bear out Holsinger’s claim that “Choristers” “imagines violence as an essential part of musical learning on every level,” it does speak volumes “about the daily strains on the mouths, throats, eyes, and ears of young singers entailed by the learning of plainchant.”¹⁸

The same kind of physical affront carries over into “Blacksmiths,” which has some oddities of its own, especially in a pair of lines that seem meant to recall the experience of “Choristers”: “Þe mayster longith a lityl, and lascheth a lesse, / Twyneth hem tweyn, and towchith a treble” (17–18). For the uses here of *longen*, *laschen*, *twinen*, *touchen*, and *treble*, the *MED* tautologically adduces “Blacksmiths” to support unusual senses that appear to fit the context: respectively, “lengthen (a piece of metal),” “hammer (a piece of metal),” “join (two pieces of iron),” “strike (a high or sharp note)” —citing “Choristers” 23 for the same sense —and “?a high or sharp note.” These follow the customary editorial glosses, which render the lines thus: “The master (smith) lengthens a little piece and hammers a smaller one, joins the two together and strikes a treble note.” Salter’s unique translation is “The master-smith beats out a small piece of metal, and flattens an (even) smaller piece, (hammers) the two together, turning them edgewise.” She suggests that the lines “may be intended to convey quite precisely medieval welding processes” but also that “‘towchith a treble’ may refer to nothing more elaborate than the high-pitched ringing noise of hammer upon metal

¹⁶ For *wellen* (6), “to boil” in the figurative sense of “to suffer,” the *MED* offers several examples that collocate the word with *wo*.

¹⁷ *Piers Plowman*, B 3.312, cited in Holsinger, “Langland’s Musical Reader,” 139.

¹⁸ Holsinger, “Langland’s Musical Reader,” 139; “Pedagogy,” 181. The *MED* does not support the denotations of actual beating that he finds.

during forge-activities.”¹⁹ All renderings are tentative, and the possible reasons for lack of clarity range from arcane blacksmith lingo at one extreme to deliberate gibberish at the other. The unintelligibility, together with the collocation of “mayster” and “treble” (their only appearance in the poem) strongly suggest to me the language of complaint in “Choristers.” There the master accuses Walter: “Þu tuchest nowt þe notes . þu bites hem on-sonder / Hold vp for shame . þu letes hem al under” (23–24) (You fail to touch the notes; you bite them all to pieces. Leave off for shame! You flatten all of them!). This is in contrast to the elements combined and the clear note “touched” in “Blacksmiths,” assuming that welding is involved and “treble” is a musical reference. That word may have a punning link to “tweyn,” since the ordinary meaning of *treble* is “the highest part in a three-part contrapuntal composition” (MED)—the new sound results when two previously beaten pieces of different length are joined. In contrast, Walter finds neither sound nor sense in the differently sized materials of his craft: “Summe notes arn shorte . and somme a long noke / Somme kroken a-weyward . als a fleshoke” (11–12) (Some notes are short and some a long angle; some are bent every which way like a meat-hook). He has special trouble with *fa*: “Mizti him neuere hitten in ton for to ta” (44) (I can never *hit* him to take him in correct pitch).

The rest of “Blacksmiths” is decidedly unmusical. The choir of this intrusive secular institution is introduced with redundancies to emphasize its diabolical appearance—“Swarte smekyd smeþes smateryd wyth smoke” (1) (Black, smoky smiths begrimed with smoke)—and then the theme is stated: “Dryue me to deth wyth den of here dyntes” (2) (Drive me to death with the noise of their blows). On we go to echoic, alliterative examples of the noise they make by day and by night. Apart from the hammering, they loudly cry (4, 5), tell tales (8), grind and gnash their teeth (9), and groan (9), all presumably audible above the hammer blows and accompanied by their mechanical equivalent, the bellows: “‘Huf, puf!’ seith þat on; ‘haf, paf!’ þat oþer” (7). Unlike the results of Walter and William’s befuddlement, this cacophony is built-in and ordinary. Harmonious blacksmiths are rare, but they are significant in the history of music. We shall see that “Blacksmiths” provides no relief from the discords of “Choristers” precisely because, as a pair, the poems subvert the expected relationship.

Beyond the ironic similarities in diction and situation, the two poems

¹⁹ Salter, *English and International*, 333–34n.

are related generically as complaints, though, again, together they are something more. Taken by itself, "Blacksmiths" presents difficulties in this regard. Salter has investigated the satiric or burlesque purposes that might underlie it, and she notes that if "we are tempted to associate it, for the greater degree of seriousness which informs its outlook, with complaint literature in general, its moral vantage point still seems elusive of definition."²⁰ To put this another way, why does it appear in a manuscript belonging to a cathedral priory? An appropriate Latin precedent might be the classical theme of disturbance in the city, which had some points in common with medieval anticurial satire. In speculating further about the literary context, Salter also adduces manuals on the art of composition, citing a set piece in Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova* on blacksmiths.²¹ She finds in this distant analogue a parallel to our poem's partial concern with celebrating, "in richly echoic language, the rapid skills and the massive energies of craftsmen and craft-processes."²² In that sense, the poem could stand next to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Village Blacksmith" and Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Felix Randal." Topical reasons for its composition and provenance are even more uncertain than the hypothetical literary contexts. London provides the only civic documents relating to complaints about nighttime smithwork.²³

Returning to the literary affiliations will bring us closer to the poem's probable reason for being where it is. The thorough study by Salter includes a survey of classical, biblical, and medieval blacksmiths. In a note, she mentions one of the most likely medieval associations: "The words 'and towchith a treble' . . . may conceivably, with their musical metaphor, be a reminiscence of the widely-known passage in Macrobius . . . which describes how Pythagoras worked out the theory of musical intervals by listening to the sounds made by hammers of different weight in a blacksmith's shop."²⁴ She does not take the next step and use this legend to connect the entire poem to "Choristers." That is what Utley does tentatively with the related legend of Tubalcain, but then he withdraws the idea, saying that the poems' only link "is their appearance side by side in the same manuscript."²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., 209; 209–12.

²¹ Ibid., 211. Geoffrey's text (ll. 813–29) is quoted and translated on 334–35n.

²² Ibid., 212.

²³ Collected by Salter, *ibid.*, 200, 202–4.

²⁴ Ibid., 334n. See 205–7 for the survey.

²⁵ Utley, "Choristers' Lament," 195.

The first chapter in book 2 of Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* transmitted to the Middle Ages the classical world's version of the origin of musical theory. It begins with wonderment over the harmony of the celestial spheres (borrowed for an early scene in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*), harmony which is the pattern for earthly music. Pythagoras discovered the correspondence by a famous experiment:

Cum enim casu praeteriret in publico fabros ignitum ferrum ictibus mollientes, in aures eius malleorum soni certo sibi respondentes ordine repente ceciderunt, in quibus ita gravitati acumina consonabant ut utrumque ad audientis sensum stata dimensione remearet et ex variis impulsibus unum sibi consonans nasceretur. His occasionem sibi oblatam ratus, deprehendit oculis et manibus quod olim cogitatione quaerebat. Fabros adit et imminens operi curiosius intuetur, adnotans sonos qui de singulorum lacertis conficiebantur. Quos cum ferientium viribus adscribendos putaret, iubet ut inter se malleolos mutant: quibus mutatis, sonorum diversitas ab hominibus recedens malleolos sequebatur. Tunc omnem curam ad pondera eorum examinanda convertit cumque sibi diversitatem ponderis quod habebatur in singulis adnotasset, aliis ponderibus in maius minusve excurrentibus fieri malleolos imperavit; quorum ictibus soni nequaquam prioribus similes nec ita sibi consonantes exaudiebantur. Tunc animadvertit concordiam vocis lege ponderum provenire collectisque numeris quibus consentiens sibi diversitas ponderum continebatur, ex malleis ad fides vertit examen et intestina ovium vel boum nervos tam variis ponderibus inligatis tetendit qualia in malleis fuisse didicerat talisque ex his concentus evenit qualem prior observatio non frustra animadversa promiserat, adiecta dulcedine quam natura fidium sonora praestabat.

[He happened to pass the open shop of some blacksmiths who were beating a hot iron with hammers. The sound of the hammers striking in alternate and regular succession fell upon his ears with the higher notes so attuned to the lower that each time the same musical interval returned, and always striking a concord. Here Pythagoras, seeing that his opportunity had been presented to him, ascertained with his eyes and hands what he had been searching for in his mind. He approached the smiths and stood over their work, carefully heeding the sounds that came forth from the blows of each. Thinking that the difference might be ascribed to the strength of the smiths he requested them to change hammers. Hereupon the difference in tones did not stay with the men but followed the hammers. Then he turned his whole attention to the study of their weights, and when he had recorded the difference in the weight of each, he had other hammers heavier or lighter than these made. Blows from these produced sounds that were not at all like those of the original hammers, and besides they did not harmonize. He then concluded that harmony of tones was produced according to a proportion of the weights, and made a record of all the numerical relations of the various weights producing harmony.

Next he directed his investigation from hammers to stringed instruments, and stretched intestines of sheep or sinews of oxen by attaching to them weights of the same proportions as those determined by the hammers. Again the concord came forth which had been assured by his earlier well-conceived experiment, but with a sweeter tone, as we might expect from the nature of the instruments.]²⁶

Thus Pythagoras discovered the numerical ratios of the fundamental musical concords—ratios that Macrobius goes on to explain in technical detail. Boethius's account was also well known, and it adds, among other things, that there were five hammers, one of them discordant.²⁷

Another story was eventually made part of this myth of origins. According to Genesis, Lamech "took two wives: the name of the one was Ada, and the name of the other Sella. And Ada brought forth Jabel: who was the father of such as dwell in tents, and of herdsmen. And his brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of them that play upon the harp and the organs. Sella also brought forth Tubalcain, who was a hammerer and artificer in every work of brass and iron."²⁸ In the twelfth century, Peter Comestor decided in *Historia Scholastica* that Tubal (often the spelling for Jubal) discovered the art of music from his brother Tubalcain's metalwork and that the Greeks were wrong to give the honor to Pythagoras.²⁹

The blacksmith story was the subtext of most of the significant references to the founding of musical science. They draw upon biblical and classical history and sometimes classical mythology. The alternative choices of an origin became a kind of topos on many occasions when the subject was raised; this pattern was set by Isidore of Seville: "Moy-ses dicit repertorem musicae artis fuisse Tubal, qui fuit de stirpe Cain ante diluvium. Graeci vero Pythagoram dicunt huius artis invenisse primordia ex malleorum sonitu et cordarum extensione percussa. Alii Linum Thebaeum et Zetum et Amphion in musica arte primos claruisse

²⁶ Macrobius, *Commentariorum in Somnium Scipionis Libri Duo*, ed. Luigi Scarpa (Padua: Liviana Editrice, 1981), 2.1.9–12; *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1952), 186–87.

²⁷ Boethius, *De Institutione Musica*, 1.10–11; *Fundamentals of Music*, ed. Claude V. Palisca, trans. Calvin M. Bower (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 18–19.

²⁸ Gen. 4: 19–22 (Douay-Rheims).

²⁹ "Genesis," cap. 28; quoted in Paul E. Beichner, *The Medieval Representative of Music, Jubal or Tubalcain?* Texts and Studies in the History of Mediaeval Education 2 (Notre Dame, IN: The Medieval Institute/University of Notre Dame, 1954), 10–11. See 7–8 on the frequent confusion of Jubal and Tubal. In "Jubal vel Pythagoras, Quis Sit Inventor Musicae?" *Musical Quarterly* 64 (1978): 1–28, James W. McKinnon surveys the dispute over the inventor of music from the beginning to modern times, with valuable citations of primary and secondary texts.

ferunt" (Moses says that the discoverer of the art of music was Jubal, who was of the stock of Cain before the flood. The Greeks, however, say that Pythagoras discovered the beginnings of this art from the sound of hammers and from the striking of stretched cords. Others related that Linus the Theban, and Zethus, and Amphion first acquired fame in the art).³⁰ So too, in the early twelfth century, Hugh of St. Victor notes in the *Didascalicon*: "musicæ repertorem Moyses dicit fuisse Tubal, qui fuit de stirpe Cain, Graeci Pythagoram, alii Mercurium, qui primus tetrachordum instituit, alii Linum, vel Zetum, vel Amphionem" (Moses declares that the inventor of music was Tubal, who was of the seed of Cain; the Greeks say it was Pythagoras, others that it was Mercury, who first introduced the tetrachord; others that it was Linus, or Zetus, or Amphio[n]).³¹ Chaucer cites Peter of Riga's *Aurora*, which drew upon Peter Comestor:

Although I koude not make so wel
 Songes, ne knewe the art al,
 As koude Lamekes sone Tubal,
 That found out first the art of songe;
 For as hys brothres hamers ronge
 Upon hys anvelt up and doun,
 Therof he took the firste soun —
 But Grekes seyn Pictagoras,
 That he the firste fynder was
 Of the art (*Aurora* telleth so);
 But therof no fors of hem two.³²

A final example, from the middle third of the next century, shows the vigor of the tradition through the time of "Blacksmiths":

They wrote also who that fyrst musyk found:
 Some sayd Tubal, some Linus Tibeus,
 Some Zetus, Amphyon, as they dyd understand,
 Some sayd also it was one Orpheus,
 Some playnly said, for ought they coude discusse,

³⁰ Isidore, *Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 3.16.1; trans. Beichner, *Medieval Representative of Music*, 6, 8. Beichner follows Jacques-Paul Migne (*Patrologia Latina*, 82:163) in reading "Jubal."

³¹ *Didascalicon: De Studio Legendi*, ed. Charles H. Buttmer (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1939), 3.2; *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 84.

³² *Book of the Duchess*, 1160–70, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Chaucer's contemporary Ranulf Higden held out for Pythagoras as the discoverer of concord if not the inventor of song (Beichner, *Medieval Representative of Music*, 14–15).

That by the sounne of hamers in a forge
 Pyctagoras fyrst musyk ganne to forge.³³

The connection between blacksmiths and harmony outlasted the Middle Ages, and the possibilities in subverting the link occurred to Edmund Spenser, who presents what is perhaps the nearest analogue to the image in "Blacksmiths." After Ate (Discord) causes Scudamour to suspect the loyalty of Britomart and Amoret, he encounters a man whose face is "blacke and griesly," "Besmeard with smoke":

His name was *Care*; a blacksmith by his trade,
 That neither day nor night from working spared,
 But to small purpose yron wedges made:
 Those be unquiet thoughts, that carefull minds inuade.

In which his worke he had sixe seruants prest,
 About the Andvile standing euermore,
 With huge great hammers, that did neuer rest
 From heaping stroakes, which thereon soused sore:
 All sixe strong groomes, but one then other more;
 For by degrees they all were disagreed;
 So likewise did the hammers which they bore,
 Like belles in greatnesse orderly succeed,
 That he which was the last, the first did farre exceede.³⁴

He is compared to the Cyclopes in Vulcan's smithy, who work "day and night" to forge Jove's thunderbolts, and the sounds deny Scudamour rest. Allegorically, the noise represents his "gealous dread."³⁵ The "sixe strong groomes" derive from a late (1480) variation on the five smiths of Boethius, according to John M. Steadman,³⁶ and the image has been demystified to the point that the sounds are exactly what they are in reality. The hammers, rather than chiming together according to their weights, "by degrees they all were disagreed." They make noise; they do not provide a key to celestial harmonies. In Steadman's analysis, behind the smithy are two antithetical concepts of the forge: it is a symbol both of jealousy (a Renaissance development) and of harmony. The latter association derives from the Jubal/Pythagoras legend, but

³³ *The Court of Sapience*, ed. E. Ruth Harvey (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), stanza 291.

³⁴ Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, 4.5.35–36, in *The Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1912).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.5.37, 4.5.46.

³⁶ Steadman, "The 'Inharmonious Blacksmith': Spenser and the Pythagoras Legend," *PMLA* 79 (1964): 664. The ultimate source of the six smiths was Franchino Gafuri's *Theorica Musicae* (Beichner, *Medieval Representative of Music*, 26).

Spenser's point is that any instrument has the potential for disharmony as well. Though the hammers progress as "orderly" as bells, they nonetheless "disagreed." So it is with friendship, the topic of book 4.

"Blacksmiths" responds in a similar way to what went wrong for Walter and William amongst the choristers. Presumably, had they been able to hit those notes squarely, "Blacksmiths" would have more faithfully imaged the discovery of music. It was the custom in verbal and pictorial representations of Music to include her celebrated theoreticians in a kind of diptych or as a necessary pendant. The common representations of the Liberal Arts were largely inspired by Martianus Capella's *Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, where the contributions of Pythagoras (though not the handy smithy) are listed among others.³⁷ Émile Mâle has shown the extent to which Martianus inspired the representation of the Arts in the cathedrals but observes, "Of the personifications, only Music has lost all the features which distinguished her in the original." Martianus's Harmonia was replaced by a seated woman striking bells with a hammer: "In the Middle Ages Music rarely had other attributes."³⁸ This is an index to the power of the anvil tradition, which was grafted onto both the Jubal story and Martianus's icon. Mâle finds another trace of the myth in thirteenth-century Psalters which represent David striking bells (the reverse of "donke vp-on dauid"!). The dyadic convention of the Arts accompanied by the great men who cultivated them may be seen at Chartres. Like the other Arts, Music (with her bells) has a seated figure beneath her. It is probably Pythagoras, pen in hand, jotting down the musical ratios.³⁹ Paul E. Beichner offers numerous examples showing that a man or men hammering in a smithy, whether Tubalcain's or the one visited by Pythagoras, was a standard feature of musical iconography.⁴⁰ Even the puffing "bellewys" (6) of "Blacksmiths" have a counterpart in this context: David the musician can be seen playing an organ or accompanied by one, with a man working the necessary bellows.⁴¹ It was therefore a commonplace when Chaucer's Black Knight, in the passage quoted above, appended to his statement about

³⁷ 9.922; *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts, Volume II: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, trans. William Harris Stahl et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 357.

³⁸ Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 83, 85, 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87, figure 44. Cf. Beichner, *Medieval Representative of Music*, 22.

⁴⁰ Beichner, *Medieval Representative of Music*, 19–26, with illustrations. Cf. Steadman, "Inharmonious Blacksmith," 665.

⁴¹ See Georg Kinsky, ed., *A History of Music in Pictures* (London: Dent, 1930), 39 (illustration 1), 45 (illustrations 6, 7).

song-making a reference to Tubal and Pictagoras. Conversely, Hand 5 of Arundel 292 must have thought it natural to follow the ineffectual modern musicology of "Choristers" with the evanescent and abrasive sounds from next door.

One other aspect of musical theory seems in play here, and that is its incomprehensibility. Then as now, its full meaning was available only to the specialist. Knowing the terms is one thing; comprehension leading to application is another. As noted before, that divide is the source of much humor in "Choristers." Walter and William represent the many who failed (and fail) to move from the common experience of ordered sounds to its expression in notes and thence to music as science. The two choristers have been stymied at the second step, which saved them from the highly abstract treatises of the third⁴² but ensured that smoky smiths gabbling above the din of their work, and not characters from books of history or myth, would appear in "Blacksmiths." Opaqueness is built into the technical parts of the *loci classici* in Macrobius and Boethius, and both use it as a rhetorical ploy to force close attention to their argument. Macrobius's version of Pythagoras and the blacksmiths is but the prelude to an explanation of the six numerical combinations he discovered to be the basis of harmony; these combinations, such as sesquiter-tian, produce intervals, such as dia tesson; tones, semitones, and even smaller intervals are distinguished; the five consonant (human) chords are listed with mention of those in the range of celestial harmony beyond the human ear; and all of this has led us to a philosophical discussion beginning with the World-Soul of Plato: "Hinc Plato, postquam et Pythagoricae successione doctrinae et ingenii proprii divina profunditate cognovit nullam esse posse sine his numeris iugabilem competentiam" (Plato, guided by Pythagoras' revelation and drawing upon the godlike power of his own extraordinary genius, had recognized that no union could be lasting except one based on those numbers).⁴³ The philosophy is clearer than the musical theory on which it is based, and dictionaries do not greatly speed the journey from smithy to World-Soul.

In his discussion of the combinations and intervals, Boethius keeps the focus on the five hammers (one of them discarded because *inconsonans*) but retains the dense terminology as a necessary part of the musical discipline. The translator observes, "The above narrative seems con-

⁴² On fourteenth-century musical treatises, most of which discuss music only as a mathematical science, see Clair C. Olson, "Chaucer and the Music of the Fourteenth Century," *Speculum* 16 (1941): 64.

⁴³ Macrobius, *Commentariorum*, 2.2.1; *Commentary*, 188–89.

strued to make it difficult for the reader to follow the weights and sounds of the respective hammers. The emphasis is on the resounding consonances and the proportions discovered between hammers producing consonances. The Pythagorean tetractys is not introduced until the very end of the chapter, and then 'for the sake of illustration.'"⁴⁴ That is, just as we emerge into the World-Soul in Macrobius, so we are given the clarity of arithmetic in Boethius: the ratios of the hammers are 12:9:8:6.

In the subversive pairing of "Choristers" and "Blacksmiths," we achieve neither harmony nor clarity. The musical argot is just more sound, conveying even less to the nonspecialist than it does to Walter and William; the banging of the smiths is just noise. These hammers mock the origin of abstract harmonious sound and are rightly a concrete afterthought, not a prelude, to the painful labor of "Choristers." For all their assaults on the senses, constituting much of the vaunted realism of the scene, the only thing the smiths certainly produce is a racket. The only indications of a material outcome are the vague pair of lines about the treble and, in all editions until recently, the word "clopemerys" (21)—properly "cloye merys": mare-lamers, not mare-clothiers.⁴⁵

Not only is "Blacksmiths" an ironic compliment to "Choristers," forming a parody of the conventional dyad, but it also deconstructs the Pythagoras story. Like the passage in Spenser, it forces listeners—at least those of the past, for whom the village smithy was not exotic—to think hard about the traditional association of hammer and anvil and music. In reality the intrusive noises of the forge must almost never have achieved pleasant harmony. Reality imposes itself in another way: that Pythagoras discovered the ratios is true, but the blacksmith experiment has been tested and found to be a fabrication; the weights of the hammers make little or no difference.⁴⁶ Hand 5 probably suspected that, using common sense to remark on the occasional futility of the mechanical enterprise lamented by Hand 4.⁴⁷

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⁴⁴ Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, 18n.

⁴⁵ See Salter, *English and International*, 199, 330 n. 4.

⁴⁶ Macrobius, *Commentary*, 187n; Steadman, "Inharmonious Blacksmith," 665 n. 14; McKinnon, "Jubal vel Pythagoras," 21, 22; Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 90, 295 n. 37.

⁴⁷ I am indebted to Professor John V. Fleming for his helpful advice in developing this argument.