

LITERARY PRACTICE IN LATE MEDIEVAL LONDON

Many men, fadir, wenen that writynge
No travaile is; thei hold it but a game [...] ¹
It is well gretter labour than it seemeth¹

When, in 1411, Thomas Hoccleve penned these words – at home on the Strand, or perhaps at work in his Westminster office – it had been twelve years since Henry Bolingbroke’s dramatic seizure of the throne of England, twelve years since the launch of a Lancastrian dynasty which, in the six decades of its rule, was to see the full reestablishment of English as the common language of noble, poet and bureaucrat alike. In the early fifteenth century, the use of the vernacular served some nationalist interests; it was in the fourteenth century that the groundwork was done. New learning flourished and was embraced by the middle classes. Books, scribes and readers rushed to centres of commerce and learning, towns like Oxford, York and London. In fact Harvey Gaff estimates the male literacy rate in fourteenth century London to have been ‘around 40 percent’², an impressive figure for that time.

And with a population of over forty thousand, London was by far the largest town in medieval England. It was also the richest and shared the north bank of the Thames with the Court and an array of royal, ecclesiastical and bureaucratic institutions. It is easy to see how it became the cultural centre of the kingdom. But my intent is not to give a centralised, homogenised picture of what is a diverse literary history or to sustain the myth of the ‘London School’ of poets, to borrow John Burrow’s term and disapproving stance³. Indeed Derek Keene has emphasised the importance of immigration to the demographic, commercial and cultural development of London⁴. William Langland is a good example; a Londoner with regional links. Instead, I hope to explore some of the implications of reading, writing and book ownership in the London region; to assess, particularly, two kinds of medieval textual anxiety: one generated by the political and religious climate, the other rooted in the nature of books themselves, their production and dissemination.

The acquisition of books in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was an expensive game. Although literacy (and the associated demand for books) was on the rise, the ownership of manuscripts in the pre-print era was to a great extent limited to those who could afford to pay. Tentative evidence of the early development of the book trade in late medieval London does not disprove the fundamental premise that books in this period were available only to those capable of commissioning the production of unique manuscripts, that is; aristocratic and upper-middle-class readers, as well as ecclesiastical, royal and civic institutions. In the mid- to late fifteenth century some efforts, presumably inspired by Lollard attitudes to

¹ Thomas Hoccleve *De Regimine Principum* ed. Charles R. Blyth (TEAMS, 1999) ll.988-9, 993

² Harvey J. Gaff *The Legacies of Literacy* (Indiana, 1987) p.97. Gaff’s figure applies to the citizenry only.

³ J.A. Burrow *Ricardian Poetry* (London, 1971) p.3

⁴ Derek Keene ‘Metropolitan values: migration, mobility and cultural norms, London 1100-1700’ in *The Development of Standard English, 1300-1800* ed. Laura Wright (Cambridge, 2000)

learning, were made to make devotional texts available to the ‘greet multitude of pore persoonys’⁵. Such schemes – for example the production and circulation of common-profit books – were nevertheless restricted to relatively small groups of readers. Manuscripts were commonly passed from hand to hand along lines of friendship, family and professional acquaintance. They were, as Felicity Riddy explains, ‘static icons of prestige’⁶; like today’s fast cars and mobile phones.

Individual books were frequently bequeathed in wills and were regarded as sufficiently valuable to be involved in legal cases. The records of the City of London document several instances of books as the alleged targets of theft. One fifteenth century manuscript warns its reader ‘He that stelys this booke / Shul be hanged on a hooke’⁷. On 8th July 1382 a certain ‘Margery, living at the Coppedhalle near the Herber in London’ was brought before the court for refusing to surrender to Richard Coventre, clerk, certain goods that had been entrusted to her, including a copy of *Corpus Legis Canonici* worth £10⁸. She was found not guilty. In the previous month of that year Robert Joynour, an apprentice, was also acquitted of stealing from William Causby, chaplain, ‘a psalter of the value of 6s 8d, [and] another large book containing several grammatical treatises of the value of 33s 4d’⁹. That these two books are recorded alongside ‘£30 in gold and silver’ gives an indication of their relative worth.

In a case of the same year involving somewhat more substantial figures, John Salman, ‘burgess of Bruges’, offered two valuable items as security for a debt of £100 to the plaintiff, one William Walworth, former mayor of London:

Thereupon a valuation was made by Thomas Rolf and Richard Marleburgh, stacyneres... as follows: a book of Romance of King Alexander in verse, well and curiously illuminated, value £10.¹⁰

Unlike Coventre’s book of Canon Law and Causby’s psalter and treatises, Salman’s ‘book of Romance’ was composed in the vernacular, in the common language of his adopted country¹¹. In fact *King Alisaunder* is one of the texts comprising the Auchinleck manuscript (National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ Ms. 19.2.1), an early anthology of vernacular texts produced in London in the 1330s or 40s. Evidently, this kind of text was held in some esteem by such well-connected personages as Walworth the ex-mayor and the two sheriffs of London, John Hende and John Rote, who resided over the court. Moreover, it was deemed appropriate in this instance to solicit the advice of two ‘stacyneres’, members of the London book trade, in order to make an accurate valuation of Salman’s book. If Richard Marleburgh was some relation to the stationer Thomas Marleburgh, an acquaintance of Thomas Hoccleve whom C. Paul Christianson suggests as a possible scribe of the Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*¹², then it is also likely that Thomas Rolf and Richard Marleburgh were prominent members of this trade. Indeed, Margaret Rickert has identified Rolf as a limner who was involved in the

⁵ Bishop Reginald Pecock: *Reginald Pecock’s Book of Faith* ed. J.L. Morison (Glasgow, 1909) p.117

⁶ *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late-Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* ed. Felicity Riddy (York, 2000) ‘Introduction’ p.5

⁷ Printed in *Reliquiae antiquae: scraps from ancient manuscripts* ed. Thomas Wright & James Orchard Halliwell (London, 1845) V.II p.163; reprinted in *England from Chaucer to Caxton* ed. H.S. Bennett (London, 1928)

⁸ *Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda of the City of London 1381-1412* ed. A.H. Thomas (Cambridge, 1932) p.19. All quotations are in the editor’s modernised form.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp.17-18

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.11

¹¹ As the language spoken in the Low Countries was not dissimilar to (late) Middle English, it is not improbable that a Fleming would wish to acquire and read an English text.

¹² C. Paul Christianson ‘A Community of Book Artisans in Chaucer’s London’ *Viator* 20 (1989) p.218

illumination of a lavish two-volume missal produced in 1384 for Nicholas Lytlington, abbot of Westminster. The missal cost Lytlington £34 14s 7d¹³. Rolf himself was paid 70s 11d for his labour¹⁴.

What is clear from these examples is the considerable value – in terms of both money and prestige – of books in late medieval England, and some of the ways in which this value was exploited by their owners. In Riddy's words, 'Manuscripts... repay debts, they enforce obligations, they establish advantageous networks'¹⁵. But of course any book means more than just the parchment, ink and paint with which it is constructed. And in the late medieval context of rising literacy rates, the rapid growth of vernacular composition and a paranoid civic authority, books in London *meant* a great deal. As Iain Sinclair says of late twentieth century London, paralyzed by fear of Irish (and now Islamic) terrorism:

The new City has exploited images of terror, wrecked buildings, newsreel carnage routines, as an explanation of its desire to seal itself off, to put up physical barriers at all ports of entrance.¹⁶

Whilst the methods of surveillance may have changed, the levels of civic anxiety have not. In fourteenth century London the bells of four churches sounded the curfew at eight o'clock each evening (nine in the summer). Anyone out past this hour was subject to interrogation by the night watch, squads of armed men appointed by the civic authorities to patrol the streets and inns after dark in search of criminals and *potential* criminals¹⁷. In this atmosphere of terror and suspicion which characterised London in the late Middle Ages, the text became a key site of conflict.

As Sheila Lindenbaum has suggested, it was the 'institutions of documentary culture'¹⁸ that came under particularly fierce assault during the Rising of 1381. By and large the rebels were methodical and discriminating in their programme of violence and destruction in the City. The Inner Temple, which had been occupied by lawyers since 1347, was attacked and rolls of parchment, responsible – the rebels believed – for maintaining the dreaded Poll Tax, were destroyed¹⁹. The house of John Fordham, Keeper of the Privy Seal, where Thomas Hoccleve would be at work only six years later, was also raided. However, for all the apparent idealism of the rebels, the events of 1381 offered the opportunity for the settling of old scores. A.R. Myers has drawn our attention to what he terms the 'suspicious' behaviour of the rebels during the sacking of John of Gaunt's palace at the Savoy²⁰. Not only did they destroy Gaunt's rich tapestries, furniture and treasures; they seem also to have made a systematic (but unsuccessful) search for the Jubilee Book, a document compiled by John of Northampton which restricted the trade monopoly held by the victuallers. Perhaps then, suggests Myers, there was a victualling interest at work within the rebels' own ranks. When, in 1386, the Jubilee Book is finally in the hands of a victualling mayor, Nicholas Exton, it is publicly burned.

¹³ To give some indication of the relative value of books, the yearly wage of a chantry priest in the late fourteenth century was around £4.

¹⁴ Margaret Rickert 'Illumination...' in *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (v.1) ed. John M. Manly & Edith Rickert (Chicago, 1940) pp.566-67

¹⁵ Riddy 'Introduction' p.4

¹⁶ Iain Sinclair *Lights Out for the Territory* (Granta, 1997) p.91

¹⁷ A more detailed description of the watch is given by A.R. Myers in *London in the Age of Chaucer* (Oklahoma, 1972) pp.70-72

¹⁸ Sheila Lindenbaum 'London Texts and Literate Practice' in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* ed. David Wallace (Cambridge, 1999) p.286

¹⁹ Myers *London in the Age of Chaucer* p.35

²⁰ Ibid. p.94

Whilst the rebels of 1381 were keen to destroy documentary records held by the civic authorities, they themselves drew from other texts to support their ideologies. Anne Hudson argues that references in the Letter of John Ball, a ringleader, suggest that the rebels were familiar with *Piers Plowman* and, to some extent, employed it as a ‘rallying call’²¹. In his literary persona ‘Johon Schep’, Ball, a lapsed priest, bids ‘Peres Ploughman go to his werk, and chastise wel Hobbe the Robbere’ and enjoins his readers to ‘do wel and bettre, and fleth synne’²². Although *Piers Plowman* shares *certain* beliefs (in particular those concerning social injustice and the mismanagement of government) with the loose ideological programme of the rebels, Langland would certainly not have wished to have been associated with, or held accountable for, their actions. Indeed, many critics²³ regard his second reworking of the poem, the C-text, as a reaction to both the 1381 Rising and the condemnation of Wycliffe in 1382.

Such an instance of reworking occurs in the Pardon scene (B.VII, C.IX), a scene which calls to mind the grievances – and subsequent actions – of the 1381 rebels. In both versions, the priest promises to read the Pardon, written in Latin, to Piers, to ‘construe ech clause and kenne it thee on Englissh’²⁴. In the B-text, Piers’ reaction to the Pardon’s glib message is to tear it in two ‘for pure tene’ (l.115). Then, after Piers continues with a scriptural quotation, the priest is obliged to recognise the foolishness of his assumption that Piers is illiterate: “What!’ quod the preest to Perkyn, ‘Peter! as me thynketh, / Thow art lettred a litel – who lerned thee on boke?” (ll.131-2). As Piers and the priest begin to argue, Will awakes and thinks over the significance of the scene. He interprets Piers’ tearing of the Pardon as the rejection of a worthless document. If, as the Pardon states, ‘Do wel and have wel, and God shal have thi soule’ (l.112), then there is no need for pardons at all. The Pardon is laced with the germs of its own destruction:

I sette youre patentis and youre pardon at one piers hele! (ll.195)

In the C-text, Will’s condemnation of pardons and indulgences remains. But, most significantly, Will awakes at the very point when, in the B-text, Piers tears the Pardon. The twenty lines of B in which Piers censures the humiliated priest are compressed into one: ‘The prest thus and Perkyn of þe pardon iangeled’ (l.294). Langland’s toning down of this scene and, specifically, his exclusion of the destruction of the Pardon reveal his newfound fear of being associated with the parchment burners of 1381.

And Langland was right to be anxious. In April 1412 two men, William Sutton, clerk, and John Leek, a leatherworker, were imprisoned (and later summoned before the king) on the charge that ‘the former had written a paper in English, which the latter had affixed to the door of a garden in the parish of All Hallows Berkyng in Tower Ward, where on 24 Jan. certain persons had broken down the earthen wall surrounding the garden’²⁵. The paper is unspecific, but appears to be in the form of a warning towards the owner of the garden to ‘gader up your erbys & trees or ellys it shal al be destried’. The threats of violence and the lawbreakers’ self-portrayal as ‘a cumpanye of trewe men by comen assent’ able to call for support on ‘al the craftes of alle this worshipful Citee’ suggest that Sutton, Leek and their

²¹ Anne Hudson ‘The Legacy of *Piers Plowman*’ in *A Companion to Piers Plowman* ed. John A. Alford (California, 1988) p.252

²² The Letter of John Ball (Royal Ms.) printed in *Medieval English Political Writings* ed. James M. Dean (TEAMS, 1996) p.135

²³ E.g. William Langland *Piers Plowman: An Edition of the C-Text* ed. Derek Pearsall (London, 1978) p.16

²⁴ William Langland *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (B) ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (Everyman, 1995) VII.106

²⁵ *Calendar of Select Pleas and Memoranda* p.313

companions were involved in one of the many inter-guild feuds of medieval London. With the usurper-king Henry IV seriously ill and the Lollard insurgent Sir John Oldcastle at large in the City, it is not surprising that the authorities were keen to maintain order.

In fact the Lollards, and their books, remained a constant presence throughout the early fifteenth century. On 17th August 1415 John Claydon, a London currier, was burned to death at Smithfield. His copy of the Lollard text *The Lantern of Light*, the production of which he had confessed to financing, was burned with him. A similar fate awaited the writings (though not the person) of Reginald Pecock, Bishop of Chichester, burned at St Paul's in 1457²⁶. Paradoxically, Pecock was a strong *opponent* of Lollardy, condemning its overemphasis on Scripture and defiance of the established Church. However, his methods of combating the heretic threat involved the promotion of access to devotional texts in the vernacular; hardly an orthodox approach. And though he espoused this approach as a means to discrediting the theological basis of the Lollards, his writings reveal an acute sense of textual anxiety. The Prologue to Pecock's *Donet* shows the author uneasy with the implications of vernacular composition. He asserts 'it is not myn entent for to holde, defende, or favoure... enye erreure or heresie' and that 'if enye such it happe me to write... Y schal be redi it to leeve, forsake and retrete, mekely and devoutly, at the assignementis of myn ordinaries, fadris of the Chirche'²⁷. For Pecock, obedience to the Church is paramount. If a reader is unsure of the meaning of the words, he continues, 'recourse may be had to my person for to aske of me'. Pecock makes great pains in this Prologue to limit the perceived authority of his text:

an errour or heresye is not the ynke written neither the voice spokun, but it is the meenyng or the undirstonding of the writer or speker signified bi thilk ynke writen or bi thilk voice spokun

This proto-Saussurean distinction between the signified and the signifier and, by extension, between the man and his words, enabled Pecock to escape execution himself. Only his books were destroyed.

The cases of Sutton, Leek, Claydon and Pecock illustrate the extent to which the civic authorities went to crack down on the production and ownership of unauthorized texts. In the right hands, however, written work was encouraged by London's political elite. Surviving wills indicate that accounts of the history and mythical origins of the City were popular possessions in late medieval London. The Auchinleck Ms., as good a touchstone as any for the tastes of an early fourteenth century reading public, contains a version of the *Short Metrical Chronicle* (extant in differing forms in seven other manuscripts). As Ralph Hanna contends, the Auchinleck *Chronicle* is longer than any other 'at least in part because of added London materials'²⁸. This material includes the legendary founding of London as 'Newe Troye' by Brutus, and the construction of Ludgate by King Lud and London Bridge by Hengest's 'pre hundred fendes of helle'²⁹. These additions, clearly made for a London audience, were intended to reinforce the readers' sense of civic pride. Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale have identified several other manuscripts – Bodleian Library, Rawlinson C.86 and Douce 95; British Library, Egerton 1995; Lambeth

²⁶ The burning of Pecock's books is recorded by the London Chronicler: *A Chronicle of London From 1089 to 1483* (Llanerch Press, 1995) p.139

²⁷ Printed in *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory 1280-1520* ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor & Ruth Evans (Exeter, 1999) p.99

²⁸ Ralph Hanna 'Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript' in *New Directions in Later Medieval Manuscript Studies* ed. Derek Pearsall (York, 2000) p.100

²⁹ See the National Library of Scotland's Auchinleck Manuscript Project [<http://www.nls.uk/auchinleck>] ed. David Burnley & Alison Wiggins (2003)

Palace Library, 306 – comprising predominantly London material: lists of City churches, chronicles, historical and political lyrics, the poems of John Lydgate and so on³⁰. And as Boffey and Meale explain, to a London readership ‘civic pride was related to issues of national politics to an extent which was not equalled anywhere else in the kingdom’³¹. London, on paper as in life, was the physical backdrop against which the rituals and scandals of the elite – and the not-so-elite – of England were performed; a symbolic space in which the language of the city became imbued with resonances beyond mere geography.

One fifteenth century Chronicle – extant in three British Library manuscripts (Harley 565, Egerton 565 and Cotton Julius B.i) – gives us a particularly vivid picture of the City as ‘a chaos of... competing hieroglyphs’³². Following the example of Paul Strohm, the Chronicle invites interpretation as an expression of ‘the peculiarity of medieval space... the extent to which it is already symbolically organised by the meaning-making activities of the many generations that have traversed it’³³. The Square Mile of medieval London was walled, patrolled and fiercely independent. Guilds worked vigorously to sustain their trade monopolies. Places of inclusion in and exclusion from the liberties of the City assumed a highly symbolic status. During the uprising of 1450 the rebels, led by Jack Cade, gathered first at Blackheath before entering the City over London Bridge ‘to riful and robbe’³⁴. Sir James Fiennes, Henry VI’s Treasurer, was beheaded and his body ‘drawen into Suthwerk’, where the rebels were holed up until

... on the Sonday at nyght, the lord Scalys and Mathewe Gough with theire mayny, and with men of London, wenten over the brigge to the Stulpes in Suthwerke, and faughte with the capitayne and his host al that nyght.

This episode highlights the way in which the Chronicle makes meaning of the City; here, sharply delineating the physical and symbolic boundaries between London and its malevolent cousins: Southwark and Kent. Fiennes’ lifeless corpse is *dragged* into Southwark as if into some sordid den, home to thieves, whores and rogue traders. Blackheath is also infused with dangerous connotations as a traditional assembly point for dissenters: the Kentish rebels, who camped there; the Cornish, defeated there in 1497.

The suppression of the 1381 Rising is another powerful example of the use of London’s symbolic space. After the failure of young Richard II’s initial attempts to placate the rebel leaders by meeting them *on their turf* at Blackheath and then Mile End, east of the City walls³⁵, he summoned them, at William Walworth’s suggestion, to Smithfield. Like Mile End, Smithfield was outside the City. However, it was located diagonally opposite the rebels’ encampment at Blackheath: north-west of London’s north-west corner. And Smithfield’s suitability as the location for the encounter was not only geographical. Medieval Smithfield was a place of violence; along with the Tower and the gallows at Tyburn, a popular spot for the execution of dissidents and heretics, like the priest ‘that beleved nought on the sacrament of

³⁰ Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale ‘Selecting the Text: Rawlinson C.86 and some other books for London readers’ in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge, 1991) pp.149-53, 162-6

³¹ Ibid. p.163

³² Sinclair *Lights Out* p.103

³³ Paul Strohm ‘Three London Itineraries’ in *Theory and the Pre-Modern Text* (Minnesota, 2000). Unpaginated.

³⁴ *A Chronicle of London* p.136

³⁵ The Kentish rebels were camped at Blackheath, the Essex rebels at Mile End.

the auter'³⁶, burnt at the stake there in 1410. It was also home to bloodshed of a distinctly different kind: the sanitized, ritual combat of the tournament. This is the courtly violence of Malory, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and the Auchinleck Romances. The Chronicle logs numerous jousts, 'fetees of werre in Smythfeld for divers chalgenges'³⁷. In December 1441, Henry VI watched a 'batayle in Smythfeld, withinne lystes... between the lord Beaufe a Arrogonere'³⁸ and a squire of his own household, John Ashele. Only a few months before, he had overseen a contest between Sir Richard Woodville and a Spanish knight, who fought for the honour of his 'lady love'³⁹. The Middle English *Brut* records the 1390 tournament for which Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the Works, describing the congregation of 'lordez, knyztis and skquiers', the 'grete ffestis' and 'grete yftis', and the striking appearance of the King's men, emblazoned with the Royal Livery: the White Hart⁴⁰. In view of its geographical location, and its symbolic associations with both execution and the display of royal power, Smithfield was the perfect choice for the King's encounter with Wat Tyler. If Tyler was to be killed and the rebels defeated, it would take place on the King's terms.

In 1381 Richard and Walworth presented a united front against the Rising. But in medieval London (and particularly in the late fourteenth century) politics was rarely that simple. Conflict and rivalry between the City and the Court, and within the City itself, was frequent. And our Chronicler, more than mere copyist, does not conceal his own political prejudices. He condemns the election of the fishmonger Nicholas Brembre as Mayor, instead supporting the non-victualling (and anti-Ricardian) faction of John of Northampton. In 1383 Brembre is chosen 'be stronge hand of certeyne craftes'⁴¹, and in 1384 he is re-elected by 'the said craftes and be men of the contre at Harowe and the contre there aboughte, and not be fre eleccion of the citee of London as it owith to be'⁴². And whilst the Chronicler makes every attempt to portray Brembre's administration as illegitimate and factional, Northampton's return to London in 1390 is couched in terms which emphasise his legitimacy (my italics): 'And in this yere John Northampton cam *home* and posseded *his goodes*'⁴³.

The London region was also *home* to the royal institutions; at Westminster, a mile or so south-west of the City. During the turbulent reign of Richard II, tensions rose between the Court and the citizens of London, always zealous guardians of their autonomy. Again, the Chronicler does not suppress his urban pride when describing the numerous disputes and street brawls between men of the Court and the indigenous population of London. In 1392, the year of the Court's unpopular removal to York, the servants of the Treasurer of England, Bishop Waltham, 'arreded a grete debate in Fletestrete ayens men of the towne for an hors loof'⁴⁴. However trivial the cause of this dispute⁴⁵, it was considered sufficiently serious for Waltham to complain to Richard – or as the Chronicler disapprovingly puts it, he 'wykkedly enformed the kyng'⁴⁶. Richard's reaction, miscalculated as ever, was to demand a payment from the City of ten thousand pounds, to replace its elected sheriffs and mayor, and seize 'the fraunchise

³⁶ Ibid. p.92

³⁷ Ibid. p.91

³⁸ Ibid. p.130

³⁹ Ibid. p.127

⁴⁰ *The Brut or The Chronicles of England* ed. Friedrich W.D. Brie (London, 1960) pp.343-4

⁴¹ *A Chronicle of London* p.75

⁴² Ibid. p.75

⁴³ Ibid. p.78

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.79

⁴⁵ A loaf of horse-bread ('Bread made of beans, bran, etc. for the food of horses' *OED*).

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.80

and the liberte of London into hys hond'. Five years later, and relations between Court and City had not improved. More cash is demanded by Richard, this time by the 'selyng of blank chartres'⁴⁷, and, much to the dismay of the 'citizeins of London', he brings his notorious Cheshire followers into the City:

Chestreschire men maden a gret fray in Fryday street on a nyght in there innes; the whiche were wel beten and hurte with arowes and brought thanne to the countor.

This was not the first quarrel to involve men of Cheshire and a Friday Street inn. Paul Strohm has provided a careful analysis of the Scrope-Grosvenor heraldry trial, at which Chaucer was a notable witness⁴⁸. To Strohm, Friday Street represents 'political space, the space of faction, of contention' as it bisects several ward and parish boundaries. More significantly it is the urban space to which 'a newcomer', the Cheshire knight Sir Robert Grosvenor, 'has staked his claim, first territorial and then seignorial and genealogical'. The Scrope-Grosvenor dispute may not have ended in violence as it was to do in 1392, or in the 'affray' of 1458 (also in Fleet Street), but the Cheshire knight's confrontational display of arms says just as much about the animosity between Londoners and outsiders – or to use the City idiom, *aliens*. Given such widespread hostility, it is not surprising that Chaucer was willing to testify against this Cheshire usurper.

The victims of the Chronicle's prejudices – the Cheshiremen, the victualling faction, and the King – indicate that its author was a strong opponent of Richard II's government. But our Chronicler is not a blind critic of the monarchy. His yearly entries constitute a coherent system of political condemnation, targeted at one man and his supporters. The original compiler (up to 1442) was, after all, rarely writing about current events. Rather, he scrutinizes London's recent history from a staunchly early fifteenth century, *Lancastrian* perspective, realising Iain Sinclair's Orwellian claim that 'History, private and universal, is rewritten by the man who owns the pen'⁴⁹. For the Chronicler, London is more than just a city, more even than the capital of England; it becomes, like Augustine's vision of the world as an assemblage of Divinely-composed 'harmonious discourses', a page on which to write⁵⁰. Or, to be more precise: a palimpsest. A text inscribed time and again by Strohm's meaning-makers; layers of history simultaneously fastened and laid bare by the pen.

Unlike, however, the unaided Divine authorship of the Word, the work of mere mortals was exposed to more complicated and pressing concerns of textual authority in the age of the manuscript, before the printed page could provide 'a point of fixation'⁵¹. Like the palimpsest, the late medieval text makes manifest the collision of competing points of authority. As I have explained, Bishop Pecock was rightly anxious lest his words be misinterpreted. But Pecock had additional fears, concerning not the *meaning* of his texts but their *material* existence: as manuscripts in the hands of others. He complains that his books have 'before the device and setting of this present book, ben runne abroad and copied ayens my wil and myn entent', and attacks the 'uncurtisie and undiscrecioun of freendis into whos singular sight Y lousid tho writingis to go'⁵². Pecock is not specific about the significance of this copying except that it was carried out without his authorization and the approval of his superiors. He does not mention that the

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.83

⁴⁸ Strohm 'Three London Itineraries'

⁴⁹ Sinclair *Lights Out* p.132

⁵⁰ St. Augustine *Confessions* Bk.13 XV:16

⁵¹ Elizabeth J. Bryan 'Medieval Scribal Culture and the Enjoining Text' in *Collaborative Meaning in Medieval Scribal Culture* (Michigan, 1999) p.6

⁵² Reginald Pecock *Prologue to The Donet* in *The Idea of the Vernacular* p.100

content of his text had been tampered with, though that is clearly his concern. So, by producing this version of the *Donet*⁵³, with its neurotic Prologue, Pecock attempts to counteract the illegal dissemination of his work by producing an accurate and definitive text, endorsed by the Church and by its author.

Pecock, though, is unusual. His eagerness to prevent the unauthorized copying of his work owes more to his fear of persecution as a heretic than to any efforts to form an authorial identity, at least not in the modern sense. Pecock's reasoning here calls to mind the metadiscourses of a much earlier author. Much has been said of the self-reflexive rhetoric of Ælfric's prefaces. Commonly his introductory passage sets out the conditions under which the text has been composed: the name of the patron, the purpose of the commission, the difficulties of the task, and so on. It also contains instructions to its *future* users: readers and, more significantly for us, scribal copyists. In the Preface to his translation of *Genesis*, for instance, Ælfric appeals to prospective re-writers:

Ic bidde nu on Godes naman, gif hwa þas boc awritan wylle, þæt he hig gerihte wel be þære bysne, for þan þe ic nah geweald⁵⁴

Like Pecock, Ælfric's injunction is specifically aimed at preserving the theological integrity of the text despite the inevitable loss of his authorial 'geweald'. As Joyce Hill argues, 'the establishment of authorial identity was for him a functional device, motivated by a sense of theological responsibility'⁵⁵. For both writers, it is the spiritual content of their work that prompts such anxiety.

In contrast with Pecock's outright denunciation of unauthorized copying and Ælfric's pragmatic resignation, John Lydgate actively engages his readers with the unstable nature of his text. Introducing his *Troy Book*, he submits his work

to alle that schal it rede or se,
Where as I erre for to amenden me
Of humble herte and lowe entencioun
Commytting al to her correccioun.⁵⁶

Lydgate's humility and his empowerment of reader/copyist is matched elsewhere in this Prologue by the further deferral of textual responsibility to external points of authority. He styles himself as the hapless author 'beset with cloudis dym and dirk' and summons the Gods to his aid, 'my stile to directe, / And of my penne the tracys to correcte'⁵⁷. His writing is reduced to mere 'translacioun'; it is 'wirk of hertly lowe humblesse /... / Devoyde of pride and presumpcioun'. The creative flair of the author bows in deference to his patron, the future Henry V, to 'obeie withoute variaunce / My lordes byddyng fully and plesaunce'⁵⁸. And in a typically medieval call to *auctoritates* (sources), Lydgate namechecks the Classical historians of Troy – Ovid, Virgil, Lollius and so on – and his immediate source, 'O Guydo

⁵³ The *Donet* survives in one manuscript alone: Bodleian Library, Bodley 916, fols. 1v-4r.

⁵⁴ 'I ask now in God's name, if anyone wishes to copy this book, that he follows the exemplar well, because I have no control'. Printed in *A Guide to Old English* ed. Bruce Mitchell & Fred C. Robinson (Blackwell, 2001) p.195

⁵⁵ Joyce Hill 'Ælfric, Authorial Identity and the Changing Text' in *The Editing of Old English* ed. D.G. Scragg & P.E. Szarmach (Woodbridge, 1994) p.184

⁵⁶ Printed in *The Idea of the Vernacular* p.48

⁵⁷ Ibid. p.44

⁵⁸ Ibid. p.45

maister... / Whom I schal *folwe* as nyghe as ever I may'⁵⁹. The Prologue thus sees Lydgate making a systematic search for alternative sources of authority: his readers; would-be scribes; the Classical Gods; his royal patron; the literary tradition in which he finds himself. And perhaps it is from Chaucer, Lydgate's 'Flowre of Poetes'⁶⁰, that this Bury monk learnt such tricks?

In the Envoi to his *Complaint of Venus* Chaucer promises to '*folowe* worde by worde the curiosite / Of Graunson, floure of hem that maken in Fraunce'⁶¹, whilst we find self-portraits as translator throughout his work. Much of this rhetorical apparatus is concerned with downgrading Chaucer's role as author. But to what extent is this modesty a form of rhetorical posing? Did Chaucer have a clear notion of authorial and/or textual integrity or, as a literal reading of his Retraction would suggest, was he eager to forfeit all responsibility? A crucial piece of evidence to support the latter is his failure to compile any authoritative manuscripts of his work. Yet he was not indifferent to the possibility of his texts becoming contaminated (as many were) after his death. In his famous conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, Chaucer urges future copyists neither to 'myswrite' nor 'mysmetre' his work 'for defaute of tonge'⁶². He fears not misinterpretation or deliberate misuse of his text, but that a scribe unfamiliar with the London dialect might copy in error. At the very least, Chaucer's conception of authorship demanded linguistic and metrical accuracy. Indeed, Derek Pearsall argues that 'the author who prayed for the text of his *Troilus* had a sense of the sanctity of artistic form which the modern editor can approve and be reassured by'⁶³. Conversely, in the line 'Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedye'⁶⁴ Chaucer releases his text from the bonds of authorship, sending it 'hurtling off into space and down the ages'⁶⁵ as Ruth Kennedy puts it. Discharged from the body of its creator, the book is free to take up its position in the greater authority of the Classical literary tradition, alongside 'Virgil, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace'⁶⁶. Furthermore, *Troilus* is now exposed to forces of change beyond the poet's control: scribe, editor, compiler, critic. Like Ælfric before him, Chaucer creates an authorial identity which is, at once, concerned with preserving the integrity of the text and aware of the impossibility of doing so in the face of time's contingencies. Roland Barthes has proposed: 'writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin'⁶⁷. But Chaucer's deconstruction of the author at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* owes less to theory than to the practical implications of writing in the Middle Ages.

Chaucer's failure to produce any manuscripts of his work within his lifetime seems to us even more surprising when we consider the case of Thomas Hoccleve. For Hoccleve, writing was both a creative and professional activity: from c.1387 to c.1425 he was employed as a clerk in the office of the Privy Seal. His circumstances were not unusual. As Ralph Hanna explains, 'scribal involvement in multiple writing situations is a long-lived London business'⁶⁸. Take, for instance, the Chancery-trained scribe 3

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.48. My italics.

⁶⁰ Prologue to *The Siege of Thebes* ed. Robert Edwards (Kalamazoo, 2001) l.40

⁶¹ Printed in *The Idea of the Vernacular* p.28. My italics.

⁶² All Chaucer quotations are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (3rd ed., 1987). *Troilus and Criseyde* ll.1795-6

⁶³ Derek Pearsall 'Texts, Textual Criticism, and Fifteenth Century Manuscript Production' in *Fifteenth Century Studies: Recent Essays* ed. Robert F. Yeager (Archon, 1984) p.127

⁶⁴ *Troilus* l.1786

⁶⁵ Ruth Kennedy 'Re-creating Chaucer' in *Writing the Lives of Writers* ed. Warwick Gould & Thomas F. Staley (Macmillan, 1998) p.62

⁶⁶ *Troilus* l.1792

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes 'Death of the Author' (1977) in *The Rustle of Language* trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986) p.49

⁶⁸ Hanna 'Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript' p.95

of the Auchinleck Ms., or the anonymous author of 'A Bird in Bishopswood'⁶⁹, a scrap of alliterative verse jotted down on an account sheet of 1395/6 by some clerk of St Paul's. As author *and* scribe, Hoccleve produced a number of holograph manuscripts in the 1420s⁷⁰. It is perhaps no surprise that a man trained in the practices of the bureaucracy would wish to compile an authoritative and accurate anthology of his works. Indeed, this civil servant was simultaneously assembling a vast anthology of Privy Seal documents entitled the *Formulary*. Hoccleve's holographs served two purposes. Firstly, they 'fixed' the text. Unlike Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, whose metre is regularised by the Ellesmere Ms., we are left in no doubt as to Hoccleve's precise intentions as author. Any subsequent alterations can be easily attributed to scribes or editors. By composing his poems in his own hand, Hoccleve effectively narrowed what Foucault dubs the 'scission'⁷¹ between author and writer. Secondly, the holograph manuscripts contextualise his work by providing heavy rubrication: when and why the poems were composed, for whom, and so on. As John J. Thompson has shown, these rubrics show Hoccleve to have been in contact both with members of the royal/political elite and with prominent participants in the London book trade⁷². Moreover, whilst we are left constantly guessing at the true identities of Langland's Long Will and the bereaved knight and naïve narrator of Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess*, Hoccleve's poetry is more explicitly autobiographical. He talks of his drunken journeys home from the Privy Seal (in *Male Regle*) and, in his *Complaint*, of his despair 'whan... in Westmynstre halle / And eek in Londoun among the prees'⁷³. Indeed it is in his *Complaint* and *Dialogue* that Hoccleve is at his most candid, documenting the physical and mental struggles of an ageing civil servant-cum-poet from the very moment a loud voice calls out:

How, Hoccleue, art thou heere?
Opne thy dore⁷⁴

Supporting a trend perceived by Strohm in three other texts, Hoccleve's authorial crisis is prompted by 'a visitation, a conversation'⁷⁵. His unnamed friend advises him not to publish the *Complaint*, a confessional piece, but to 'keep al þat cloos for thyn honoures sake'⁷⁶. And later, he warns Hoccleve against undertaking the translation of a Latin treatise *Learn to Die* for fear of overwork and because of a commission he already owes to 'My lord of Gloucestre'⁷⁷: finally, agreeing to 'ouersee'⁷⁸ the book's production. By the creation of holograph manuscripts and, within them, such vivid self-portraits, Hoccleve exposes the practical challenges of writing and asserts his identity as 'true' author. As Helen Barr has pointed out, his speakers perform in a world far removed from Chaucer's unreliable narrators⁷⁹. So when he declares himself to be 'noon auctour / ... nas... but a reportour / Of folkes tales'⁸⁰, we are not to be fooled.

⁶⁹ Edited by Ruth Kennedy and printed in *Medieval Literature and Antiquities* ed. Myra Stokes & T.L. Burton (Brewer, 1987) p.83

⁷⁰ Durham, University Library, Ms. Cosin V.iii.9; California, Huntingdon Library, Mss. HM111 & HM744

⁷¹ Michel Foucault 'What is an Author?' in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (Penguin, 1984) p.112

⁷² John J. Thompson 'A Poet's Contacts with the Great and Good: Further Consideration of Thomas Hoccleve's Texts and Manuscripts' in *Prestige, Authority and Power in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts* ed. Felicity Riddy (2000)

⁷³ Thomas Hoccleve *Complaint and Dialogue* ed. J.A. Burrow (Oxford, 1999) C ll.72-3

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* D ll.3-4

⁷⁵ Strohm 'Three London Itineraries'

⁷⁶ Hoccleve *Complaint and Dialogue* D l.28

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* D l.534

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* D l.796

⁷⁹ Helen Barr *Socioliterary Practice in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 2002) p.33

⁸⁰ Hoccleve *Complaint and Dialogue* D l.760-62

What Hoccleve fought against was that to which Chaucer and Lydgate were resigned: the failure of the author to control his text. In the pre-print era when the faithful copying and authorised dissemination of books were atypical practices, the author was – whether he liked it or not – not a lone artist but a participant in a *collaborative* process of composition. But to what extent is such authorial theorising born out by the hard facts of manuscript production in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? Self-evidently, the inability to make multiple copies of a work accurately and at speed prevented the establishment of the single, authoritative edition and encouraged the proliferation of corrupt texts. As manuscripts were copied, recopied and copied again, all features of the original – spelling, syntax, vocabulary, structure, layout, and so on – were exposed to alteration, falling victim to a long and complex game of Chinese Whispers. As Pearsall explains, when Langland came to revise *Piers Plowman* for the second time he had only ‘a scribal copy of the B-text in a fairly advanced state of corruption’⁸¹ as exemplar. And it was not only between author and scribe that gaps opened up. Extant manuscripts show that the employment of several copyists on one project was frequent practice in the capital.

The vast Auchinleck manuscript, for example, is not the work of one man. It shows the hands of no less than six scribes in its production. Similarly, a manuscript of John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* now held in Trinity College, Cambridge⁸² was worked on by five scribes. But who were these men, and under what conditions were they employed? Laura Loomis, perhaps with the monastic ideal in mind, first proposed that the Auchinleck Ms. was produced ‘by professional scribes, working in some sort of lay bookshop’⁸³. For Loomis, the unity of design and the ‘interinfluence’⁸⁴ of texts copied by different hands indicate that all six scribes were working simultaneously, in the same place and under the supervision of a bookseller or *stationarius*. As appealing as this theory is, Loomis overlooks some key questions. If the Auchinleck Ms. is the product of a professional scriptoria, why are the workloads of the six scribes so markedly uneven? Both Timothy Shonk⁸⁵ and Ralph Hanna have explained scribe 1, who copied around seventy percent of the text and provided all the catchwords and folio numbers and most of the titles, as a kind of contributing-editor. It is he – not some invisible *stationarius* – that organised the book’s production. And the unequal distribution of work indicates that his team of copyists was assembled on an informal basis. Hanna even envisages a project initially accepted by only one man: ‘like Ringo, scribe 1 called in his friends when the going got tough’⁸⁶. Clumsy joins between different sections of the manuscript – repeated text, blank spaces, ‘blatant filler’⁸⁷ and so on – further resist Loomis’s hypothesis.

Another question, though, remains: from where (or from whom) were the resources needed for an undertaking as large as the Auchinleck Ms. acquired? If we are to assume that scribe 1 was responsible for the planning of the project, did he have access to some kind of library of exemplars? As the great monastic and noble libraries were unlikely to have held many vernacular books at this time, he must

⁸¹ Pearsall ‘Texts, Textual Criticism...’ p.127

⁸² Trinity College, Cambridge Ms. R.3.2

⁸³ Laura Loomis ‘The Auchinleck Manuscript and a possible London bookshop of 1330-1340’ *PMLA* 57 (1942), reprinted in *Adventures in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1962) p.154

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p.183

⁸⁵ Timothy A. Shonk ‘A Study of the Auchinleck Manuscript: Bookmen and Bookmaking in the Early Fourteenth Century’ *Speculum* 60 (1985)

⁸⁶ Hanna ‘Reconsidering the Auchinleck Manuscript’ p.94

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

either have borrowed individual copies from various sources one after another (a laborious process which Hanna favours) or have had a stock of over forty English texts himself. Indeed, Pamela Robinson has suggested that the manuscript was formed by bringing together individual booklets pre-prepared on a speculative basis⁸⁸. Boffey and Meale present a similar scenario in their study of another eclectic, metropolitan manuscript, Rawlinson C.86⁸⁹. Again, we return to Loomis's bookshop, this time stocked with inexpensive unbound booklets. But at this early date, would the speculative production of such things have been economically feasible? Surely these booklets must merely have been exemplars to be farmed out to scribal collaborators rather than finished copies to be bound and sold.

The evidence of the Auchinleck manuscript is fragmented and inconclusive. Perhaps a later example will be more revealing? We certainly know more about the five scribes who worked on the Trinity College copy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* than we do about the Auchinleck collaborators. They are a mixed bunch. Two of the five were prolific textwriters: scribe B worked on the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* and a copy of *Troilus and Criseyde*, whilst scribe D had copied *Piers Plowman*, Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon*, the *Canterbury Tales* (twice) and an additional six manuscripts of *Confessio Amantis*. Yet alongside them are two men trained in the new secretary script of the royal bureaucracy. And one of these – scribe E – was Thomas Hoccleve. According to Malcolm Parkes and A.I. Doyle the convergence of quire boundaries with scribal stints show that 'the exemplar had been distributed in portions among the scribes for simultaneous copying'⁹⁰. Like the Auchinleck Ms., 'awkward transitions from one stint to the next'⁹¹ indicate that *onsite* supervision was absent. In fact Parkes and Doyle perceive little evidence of any supervision in this manuscript – there is no obvious scribe 1 here. It is clear then that the men who worked on the Trinity Ms. did not work together in a commercial scriptoria. The overworked poet-bureaucrat Hoccleve could hardly have had spared the time, though he needed the money⁹². Moreover, there is no common script, no sign that any of the scribes conformed to a house style. That none of them ever collaborated together on any other extant manuscripts not only reinforces our sense of them as an 'ad hoc team'⁹³ but also puts in doubt the notion that such books may have been produced speculatively in this period.

The establishment of the Guild of Stationers in 1403 reveals the growing commercialism of the book trade in London, which by the late fifteenth century had a market great enough to accommodate Caxton's print runs. But during the hundred or so years between the publication of the Auchinleck manuscript and the burning of Pecock's books at St Paul's, publishing beyond the walls of the monasteries and bureaucratic institutions remained a haphazard and decentralized affair. C. Paul Christianson's work *has* unearthed a community involved in the production of manuscripts in late medieval London. But in step with the evidence presented by the Auchinleck and Trinity Mss., he finds the 'small, cramped space of individual artisans' shops, such as those in Paternoster Row'⁹⁴ ill-suited to Loomis's vision of the lay scriptoria. In its place, an informal and often improvised network of

⁸⁸ Pamela R. Robinson 'A Study of Some Aspects of the Transmission of English Verse Texts in Late Medieval Manuscripts' unpublished dissertation (Oxford University, 1972)

⁸⁹ Boffey & Meale 'Selecting the Text' p.168

⁹⁰ M.D. Parkes & A.I. Doyle 'The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century' in M.B. Parkes *Scribes, Scripts and Readers* (London, 1991) p.202

⁹¹ Ibid. p.203

⁹² In *The Regiment of Princes*, Hoccleve complains that, despite his annuity of twenty marks, 'paiement is hard to gete adayes' (l.825).

⁹³ Ibid. p.223

⁹⁴ Christianson 'A Community of Book Artisans' p.210

professional scribes, artists and stationers working collaboratively and on commission – as Hanna puts it, ‘cultural organization [which] was a piecework and utilized temporary connections’⁹⁵.

This is the unstable backdrop against which are set Chaucer’s Babel nightmare and Lydgate’s synthetic humility, Pecoock’s exasperation and Hoccleve’s neurotic autobiography. No longer can we separate text from manuscript, author from the conditions which shaped him. The medieval book is not a kind of series of floating, transcendental signifiers, but an artistic and cultural artefact, ‘a scrap of the past, immobilized in a space that is reduced to the page or the book’⁹⁶. It is the valuable cargo of the rich, a dangerous tool in the wrong hands, the architect of history, the writer’s unruly creation.

In late medieval London we uncover the fragmented picture of an urban cultural space in which the literate and literary practices of reading and writing in the vernacular were exercised to a degree unknown in the previous two and a half centuries. As the English language, and at its head the London dialect, began to reform and recapture its old positions, its literature was simultaneously reaching new heights of poetic form, emotional sensibility and socio-political consciousness. The work of New Historicists and manuscript scholars has opened up new corridors for us to explore. And so, like the ‘alien’ narrator of *London Lickpenny*, let us approach the City, ‘where trouthe shuld be ateynte’⁹⁷, with excitement, awe and a critical eye.

⁹⁵ Ralph Hanna ‘Studying Late Medieval Literary Culture’ Lecture to the Academic Senate of the University of California, Riverside, April 14th 1998 [<http://acadsen.ucr.edu/Committees/fri/Lectures/Hanna%20Lecture.pdf>]

⁹⁶ Paul Zumthor ‘The Text and the Voice’ *New Literary History* 16 (1984) p.71

⁹⁷ *London Lickpenny* ed. James M. Dean (TEAMS, 1996) 1.2

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