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Sons and Brothers: Literary Community in the English
Poetic Tradition, c.1377-1547.

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17 DEC 2008



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Elizabeth Evershed

Abstract

This study examines the importance of literary communities in the works of a number of key English poets: Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340-1400), Thomas Hoccleve (c.1367-1426), John Lydgate (c.1370-1449), John Skelton (c.1460-1529), Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). It focuses on 'horizontal' peer-based literary communities and the support and literary friendships that such groups might provide, rather than 'vertical' patronage networks, and discusses ways in which these poets envisaged themselves as part of a community or communities of writers and/or literati, both actual and ideal, and what this contributed to their imagined identity as writers and the kind of poetry they produced.

The Introduction analyses some of the critical terms and frameworks from within which a discussion of literary communities may take place. Chapter One provides a survey of some of the forms, functions and practices of literary communities in Europe from antiquity to the early modern period. The remaining chapters examine English literary communities chronologically, focussing on the above poets as individuals and their identification of particular receptive audiences for their work from within their own social milieu. Chapter Two discusses the extent to which the group of men Paul Strohm identifies as Chaucer's circle may be viewed as a literary community, and the difference such communal contexts make to our reading of Chaucer's poetry. Chapter Three looks at Hoccleve and Lydgate as Chaucer's immediate successors in the fifteenth century. It concludes that a significant proportion of Hoccleve's poetic output is shaped by his place within the community of the Privy Seal Office and that this community offered him opportunities to write on its behalf. It also considers Lydgate's interaction with a wide range of receptive communities, and examines his success in inspiring idealised authorial communities (Chaucerian and Parnassian) as a governing ideal for his readers, and the authors who followed him. Chapter Four focuses on Skelton's negotiation between different literary communities (academic, courtly and urban) and re-examines his agonistic and antagonistic attitudes to contemporary writers, focussing particularly on *The Garlande of Laurell*. Chapter Five offers a brief analysis of Wyatt and Surrey and the 'new' company of gentlemen poets they represented by way of conclusion, looking particularly at Wyatt's epistolary satires to friends.

Although England may not have developed formal literary societies equivalent to those on the continent in the late medieval to early renaissance periods, in the case of each of the poets examined in this study the informal literary communities they did associate with, both actual and imagined, were influential in shaping their poetry and offering them encouragement to write.

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List of Abbreviations

Add.	Additional
BL	British Library
<i>ChR</i>	<i>Chaucer Review</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Language History</i>
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>MLN</i>	<i>Modern Language Notes</i>
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SAC</i>	<i>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</i>
STSS	Scottish Text Society Series
TCD	Trinity College Dublin

1. Introduction

The idea of the literary circle or coterie community, applied to medieval English culture, may appear something of an anachronism. In comparison with the resources available for the study of the Bloomsbury Group, the Blue Stocking Circle and even the Tribe of Ben, we are often frustrated in our attempts to unearth the sort of material about authors' lives that allows us the intimacy with our subjects that modern literary biography has taught us to expect. Those surviving incidental documents pertaining to medieval writers as individuals frequently tax the ingenuity of the literary historian seeking to further our understanding of the social context of their writings, and in particular the personal relationships and exchanges which may have shaped their creation and reception. Denied much in the way of personal correspondence, contemporary anecdotes, and critical biography, it is difficult for us to re-construct the private lives and social networks of medieval writers in the kind of detail that makes up the meat of contemporary literary biography. As Richard Firth Green comments, there is no 'counterpart in the middle ages to the great mass of diaries, correspondence, memoirs, biographies, and critical reviews which help define for us the literary audiences of later periods.'¹ Of course it would be wrong to say that no interest is shown in the lives of medieval authors by their contemporaries and immediate successors. In one respect at least, the lives and writings of medieval authors were intimately related for their readers in that literary works were often regarded as the fruit of an author's moral character. This kind of interest is

¹ Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 3.

generally implicit in meta-narratives of the predecessor's life, part of the attempt by contemporaries and successors to grasp its meaning.

The comparative silence of medieval authors concerning the lived conditions from which their writing arose may indicate, as Green suggests, a lack of interest in the 'narcissistic realism' pursued by later authors.² Yet it may also be seen as part and parcel of those conditions -- a symptom of the author's embedded-ness in his society, perhaps especially in the case of a manuscript culture where writers tended to circulate their work in coterie communities rather than to anonymous readers through the book trade and, later, the printing press.³ Such coterie communities could be extremely influential for the literary development of the writers who belonged to them. In an age where writing occupied 'some ill-defined no man's land somewhere between a job and a hobby,' it appears that the desire to write frequently found a supportive outlet in literary friendships, either through personal contacts within particular social networks, or as part of an informal mentoring scheme in which writers asked their friends to critique work for them, or in which established writers were requested by newer ones to take them under their wing.⁴

The kinds of sources mined for information regarding the social circle of any late medieval author in England can usually be divided into two main camps: the 'historical' legal and administrative records on the one hand and the 'literary' evidence on the other. This may be gleaned from an author's surviving writings, information about the people or institutions that preserved them, occasional references to the author or his work by other

² Green, *Poets* 3

³ I have chosen to adopt the masculine singular pronoun when talking generically about medieval authors for convenience, and because all of the key authors in this study are male.

⁴ Green, *Poets* 12.

writers, and palaeographical evidence concerning manuscript production and circulation. Legal records (such as the granting of powers of attorney, or bequests made in wills) can also be useful in adducing relationships of trust and esteem, if not active friendship, between particular individuals. Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* (1989) -- a pioneering study in this respect -- utilises such sources alongside the evidence provided by particular literary works in order to reconstruct Chaucer's social circle.⁵ Similarly, while administrative details such as household accounts or university records may not provide us with any concrete evidence for literary friendships, they do help us infer the proximity of individuals to one another, and thus the likelihood of their being in a position to form such friendships.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, it is generally the writings of the authors themselves that offer the most compelling evidence for the existence of distinctively *literary* communities instrumental in their conception, together with glimpses of how they might have operated. The references in literary works to contemporary authors or reading communities as well as more obvious inter-textual influences all help to furnish us with evidence for creative relationships between particular writers or literati, as well as providing insights into the effects that these relationships may have had upon their writing. Of course this kind of evidence must always be evaluated and interpreted according to its literary context, taking into account the generic expectations of the form employed by the writer. Conversely, we should also note the effects that the literary circle may exert on form, as for example in coterie-manuscripts such as BL MS Add. 17492 (the 'Devonshire MS' connected with the Howard family) or Paris, BN fr. 25458 (the

⁵ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989).

personal manuscript of Charles d'Orléans and his circle at Blois, now known as MS O¹). The communal contexts shaping such works are evident in the form in which they have been preserved.

So far I have been using the terms circle, coterie and community to describe the kind of literary cultural groupings which may have provided a forum, formally or informally, for medieval writers to develop their literary skills. In order to set the critical boundaries of my research, it is necessary to examine such terms in more detail. In spite of the interest shown in literary circles, especially in later periods of English history, there has not been much critical discussion of the labels and metaphors used to describe relationships between writers: a fact noted by Raymond Williams in his essay on the Bloomsbury 'fraction.'⁶ In a recent analysis of early modern manuscript communities, Jason Scott-Warren has questioned why 'scholars have tended to employ a range of terms [to such groups] as if they were straightforwardly interchangeable' noting how 'manuscript communities are by turns "spheres", "circles", "peer groups", "elites" or "coteries"' without much discussion of what such terms mean.⁷ One problem raised by any study of relationships between writers, whether in terms of manuscript compilation and dissemination or the more abstractly literary, is defining what we mean by these cataloguing metaphors, each of which tends to carry its own connotations and assumptions.

⁶ Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction,' 1980. *The Raymond Williams Reader*, ed. John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001) 229-30.

⁷ Jason Scott-Warren, 'Reconstructing Manuscript Networks: The Textual Transactions of Sir Stephen Powle,' *Communities in Early Modern England: Networks, Place, Rhetoric*, ed. Alexandra Shepard and Phil Withington (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000) 19.

Such questions have begun to be posited with regard to renaissance literary communities by scholars such as Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, who, in *Renaissance Literary Circles and Cultural Communities in Renaissance England* (2000), have asked why, if ‘nearly every prominent Renaissance writer has been assigned to one or more circles or literary communities... the phenomenon [of the literary circle] itself remains largely unexplored.’⁸ To the best of my knowledge, it has not been fully analysed with regard to medieval literary communities either. Looking at some of the prevailing associations of the literary circle in general, Summers and Pebworth conclude that:

[...] most often, the literary circle is defined as a coterie whose members are linked by shared social, political, philosophical, or aesthetic interests or values, or who vie for the interests and attention of a particular patron, or who are drawn together by bonds of friendship, family, religion or location.⁹

However, as their study notes, although this appears to be a capacious definition, it cannot encompass all of the literary circles that exist, or appear to exist, whether in particular texts and their relationships to other texts, or in the assumptions about such communities that they may challenge or propagate. Actual literary communities have a tendency to blur the boundaries with imaginary ones, in part because of their literariness. Literary communities, by their very nature, tend to commit themselves to texts and as textual constructs they are not bound (or not bound in the same way) by space and time, but only by the individual cultures that mediate them. Circles are swiftly idealised,

⁸ Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, introduction, *Literary Circles and Cultural Communities in Renaissance England*, ed. Summers and Pebworth (Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2000) 1.

⁹ Summers and Pebworth, 1-2.

demonised or catalogued by outside observers as well as their participants in such a way that the group itself may come to stand for something more than the personalities or texts that originated it. John Keats' 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' perfectly illustrates the complexities of dealing with any literary circle which is itself realised in literature: the poem presents us with an idealised conception of a circle of some kind, the membership and activities of which were embroidered on by later writers, and transforms it into an imaginary circle in an imagined Elysium. However, as Peter Burke reminds us (following the ground-breaking work of Benedict Anderson on the growth of national identities), imaginary communities of this kind may have clearer boundaries than real ones, and 'like other figments of the imagination, [they] have real effects.'¹⁰ Whatever level of actual realisation it attained, the idea of the Mermaid Tavern circle has had an enduring effect on our conceptualisation of literary tradition.¹¹

Even when we are talking about actual circles of real authors existing in some kind of relationship to each other in both fictional and non-fictional texts, it is difficult to define what such a circle is, or should be. As Judith Scherer Herz points out, the wide range of cultural groupings that have been identified as literary circles in the early modern period takes in a bewildering array of physical and relational characteristics, so that each time

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *Language Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004) 6. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revd ed. London: Verso, 1991.

¹¹ Further see Michelle O'Callaghan, 'Patrons of the Mermaid tavern (act. 1611),' *DNB*, 28 October 2007, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/theme/95279>>. On the development of the Mermaid tavern legend see I. A. Shapiro, 'The Mermaid Club,' *MLR* 45.1 (1950): 6-17.

[...] we speak [...] of the Sidney circle, Great Tew, the Sons of Ben, the Inns of Court circles, the Lawes circle, or Katherine Philip's Society of Friendship, we mean something different. Sometimes we are talking of lived spaces - houses, taverns, universities, Inns of Court, theaters - at other times of the structure of social relations and gender relations; of brothers, sisters, cousins; of friendship, love, and conversation (in its sexual sense, as well); of patronage and politics; and of intellectual networks and religious affiliations. We are, too, talking of textual spaces: of title pages, of dedicatory poems and epistles, of circles and circulation, and of issues of genre, both those genres that derive from the circle [...] and those genres from which we constitute the circle after the fact - dedications, records of conversations [...], letters and diaries.¹²

With this in mind, we must continue to acknowledge the slippery nature of the circle as a concept, for it is clear that even the 'real' circles we identify may exist more fully in the imagination than in actuality, and fulfil multiple needs of writers, readers and literary critics. Imposing limits on the circle, as the metaphor itself encourages us to do, or talking of a 'centre' and a 'periphery' in relating to the members or activities associated with it, calls for a recognition of our own role in defining and limiting the group according to our own critical interests. Indeed, if we could examine all the different groups that have designated 'circles' at one time or another, it would become clear that,

¹² Judith Scherer Herz, 'Of Circles, Friendship, and the Imperatives of Literary History,' Summers and Peabworth ed., *Literary Circles* 15.

as Herz comments: ‘depending on how you focus the lens, either circles do not exist or there are only circles.’¹³

From the Renaissance onwards, the term ‘literary circle’ has tended to suggest a group of writers and litterateurs united by shared goals and interests. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially, it has frequently been applied to what we might think of as counter-cultural groups: circles with distinct aesthetic and/or political agendas. The assumption of conscious agenda cannot necessarily be made of communities representing literary trends in the medieval period. As John Burrow reminds us, ‘the Alliterative Revival, whatever else it may have been, was not a literary “movement” in the modern sense’ (with a manifesto, publicity and poster boys).¹⁴ However, even this later idealisation of the literary circle around the notion of a particular agenda, and a level of self-conscious organisation of its activities to this end, does not radically circumscribe the forms such a circle may take. A recent exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, *Literary Circles: Artist, Author, Word and Image in Britain 1800 – 1920* (2006), explored some of the creative exchanges of nineteenth-century circles and came to a conclusion similar to that of Herz concerning the diversity of the communities we might choose to designate literary circles:

[they] can very enormously, from the casual interaction of like-minded friends, united in the conscious pursuit of deeply-held ideals, to the satellite-orbiting of literary glitterati and formal societies intent on promoting, reviving or preserving

¹³ Herz, 16.

¹⁴ J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the ‘Gawain’ Poet* (1971; London: Penguin, 1992) 3.

particular literary forms. In each of its manifestations, the literary circle extends beyond the author, to embrace the advisors, listeners and critical commentators who form the necessary ballast in the creative enterprise.¹⁵

However, in each case, there is the expectation that the circle is offering authors a communal forum conducive to creativity, whether this is acknowledged explicitly or implicitly.

We might contrast the associations of the literary ‘circle’ with those of the literary ‘network’ when these terms are applied to the relationships between modern authors. Following the conceptualisation of twentieth-century literary circles (for example, the Oxford-based Inklings group or the Cantabrigian Bloomsbury circle), the assumption seems to be that participants in such a group are all known to each other (assuming they were in membership concurrently) although here, again, there is a tendency to locate a centre and a periphery to the group in the sense that some friendships and influences within it may be viewed as stronger or more significant than others in terms of their effects on the character of the group as a whole. By contrast, in a literary network, not all the participants would necessarily be known to each other, and it is harder to pin a corporate identity on the network as a whole, though we could probably map family resemblances between some of the participants and the kinds of writing they produced (which may indicate circles or nexuses within larger networks). The greater number of participants and complex of ‘networking routes’ might allow the wider network to contain literary groups antithetical to each other in outlook. Contacts developed within

¹⁵ Jane Munro, ‘Creative Relationships, Creating Collections,’ *Literary Circles: Artist, Author, Word and Image in Britain 1800-1920* (Cambridge: The Fitzwilliam Museum, U of Cambridge, 2006) 10.

the network are potentially limitless and open, whereas the idea of the circle suggests boundaries, at least perceptually - a fixed membership or an inner ring.¹⁶ However, it is clear that the distinctions I have drawn between these terms cannot always be applied to the socio-literary interactions of medieval writers, because the fragmentary nature of the evidence allowing us to posit the existence of the grouping in the first place frequently makes it hard to identify it as either a closed 'circle' or an open 'network.'

Another popular cataloguing term applied to medieval communities is the 'school,' used to describe a wide range of communities, both literary and intellectual. A school may be defined both as a body of disciples, imitators or followers of a particular philosopher or artist, or as a group of artists whose works share distinctive characteristics. According to the first model, it is implied that the channel of literary influence is solely from master to disciple. In the second this is not implied, and the group is defined instead by family resemblances between their artistic theories or products. However, there are many instances where the interaction between authors in a particular school is more dynamic than a simple master/disciple model would suggest, and concentrating on similarities of form or content in particular works allows us to create for the group a collective identity which may or may not have had meaning for the authors themselves.

The term 'coterie' has come to be employed in a specialised sense by scholars interested in early modern manuscript culture, who have attempted to isolate a 'coterie style' or genre of poetry that clearly advertises its connection to an intimate audience of peers and friends. In his pioneering study of John Donne as a coterie poet, Arthur Marotti demonstrates how

¹⁶ A further, interesting discussion of the network can be found in Jason Scott-Warren's 'Reconstructing Manuscript Networks,' 18-37. My analysis here is quite similar to his.

[...] virtually all of the basic features of Donne's poetic art are related to its coterie character. His creation of a sense of familiarity and intimacy, his fondness for dialectic, intellectual complexity, paradox and irony, the appeals to shared attitudes and group interests (if not to private knowledge), the explicit gestures of biographical self-referentiality, the styles he adopted or invented all relate to the coterie circumstances of his verse.¹⁷

Marotti's observations here help to identify some common characteristics of so-called coterie verse: its dialectical or conversational structure (the epistle is an especially common form of coterie poetry); its intimate, and frequently obscure range of reference; its playfulness, shared jokes, games of insults or humorous self-deprecations (where familiarity and trust already exist between the writer and the reader, the writer is presumably freer to adopt this kind of tone without fear of misinterpretation); and ultimately its projection of a private world, which a modern reader, at best, accesses in the position of a voyeur; at worst, as one over-hearing one-half of a telephone conversation, tantalised and frustrated by a partial completion of meaning.

Considered as a genre or style with particular characteristics, coterie verse frequently evokes the kind of group solidarity it both reflects and fosters. In its more private and exclusive range of interests, it may distinguish itself from a 'laureate' style that aims at a wider or more 'public' kind of audience, and has generally been given preference in traditional accounts of literary history, as is evident in the lesser attention

¹⁷ Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1986) 19.

given to the coterie verse of laureate poets who wrote in both idioms. In such cases it is common for coterie poems to be siphoned off from laureate verse as shorter or 'minor' works, which, too often, attract less critical interest. Likewise, 'coterie verse' has often been used as a special category of literature in those cases, after the establishment of the printing press, where an author has made the deliberate choice to restrict his poetry to manuscript circulation, thus making his coterie-readership more discernible. Poets like Wyatt and Sidney, and later Donne, distinguish themselves as coterie authors (and gentleman-poets) in this way, whereas poets like Skelton, and later Jonson, who sought roles for themselves as laureates of one kind or another, employed both public and private means of circulating their work strategically according to the kind of audience they wanted to attract at particular points in their careers.

Yet although this distinction between coterie poetry and other kinds of poetry may help to identify the involvement of literary communities in the genesis of particular works, such compartmentalisation may also be damaging if it leads us to restrict the influence of the literary coterie to the works written in this idiom. In a more radical sense, almost all creative literature emerging from a manuscript culture can be seen to belong to some kind of coterie, circle, or community. The manuscript culture of late medieval England created receptive contexts conducive to the formation of literary communities. The conditions of production, transmission, reception and patronage were such that most authors, at least in their own lifetimes, reached a limited circle of readers, whose access to these works was either courtesy of the author, or part of a chain of transcription facilitated by personal exchanges. Most of the literary works of this period are written by authors who can be located within particular literary communities (the universities; the

courts; the religious houses; informal friendship circles and/or the patronage networks of great households). The same is true for much of the poetry of the early modern period, as J. W. Saunders comments:

Whether poetry was produced in isolation, in the quiet of a study, in prison, in idleness or ‘furtive hours,’ on guard in a lonely outpost, or in melancholy solitude, or whether it was produced as a direct result of companionship, competition, social communion and group suggestion, it found its first audience in the circle of friends.¹⁸

In this sense all poetry can be ‘coterie poetry,’ whether or not the circle of friends is directly present to the author at the time of writing, and the system of amateur and gentlemanly versifying that most early modern writers participated in was also radically shaped by such contexts.

Whenever we apply the term ‘circle,’ ‘network,’ ‘school,’ or ‘coterie’ to a particular body of authors and/or literati we are in danger of elevating the cultural group into something greater than the sum of its parts. Herz comes to the conclusion that, whenever we adopt the term ‘circle,’ we are not describing a community so much as opting for a particular method of analysing it. In her view, what we are primarily choosing is:

¹⁸ J. W. Saunders, ‘The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry,’ *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 153.

[...] the construction of an archive where the circle functions as a cataloguing mechanism and as a heuristic, that is, as a way to pose questions about textual production and reception, and about the subtle and not always predictable intellectual, political, and literary affiliations that connect families, friends and colleagues.¹⁹

The act of positing such an archive encourages us to ask questions about the way in which the affiliations it embodies illuminate the writing practices of those associated with it.

I have decided to adopt the term ‘literary community’ as my controlling metaphor for the analysis of individual instances of medieval literary circles, networks, schools or coteries to which the writers in this study may belong. I will use the term variously to denote three different kinds of community: first, the actual body of literary friendships of fellow writers or literati which may have provided a support-base for particular authors; second, those more structured literary communities in which an author might be a participating member (the university, the court, or any formal literary club, for example); and third the kind of literary communities, real or imagined, with which the writer may have aligned himself in his literary work.

The idea of the community is, of course, no less a cataloguing mechanism in its way, and is no less open to associations that may prove limiting. As Peter Burke comments in his recent study of language communities in early modern Europe, the danger of using the term community to describe any body of human relationships is that

¹⁹ Herz, 15.

it may seem to imply ‘a homogeneity, a boundary and a consensus that are simply not to be found when one engages in research at a ground level.’²⁰ Yet without denying the conflicts and diversities that may exist within communities, he admits we must acknowledge that as ‘collective solidarities and identities’ they *do* exist, socially, culturally and linguistically, and remain a significant part of our lives and the way in which we conceptualise identities.²¹ It is these collective solidarities and identities that I am interested in exploring: how far authors envisage themselves as part of literary communities, both real and ideal, and what implications such an identification (or the lack of it) may have for our interpretation of their writing.

In charting various ways of understanding the term ‘community’ in another recent study of early modern England, Phil Withington and Alexandra Shepard have noted how two key associations of the community are its ‘conceptual vagueness’ and ‘rhetorical warmth.’²² They draw, in turn, on Raymond Williams’ discussion of the word in which he notes that in spite of its semantic complexity it has never been used unfavourably.²³ Like the circle, the concept of the community has been deployed, generally with positive associations, across a wide range of social groupings for different effects. As Withington and Shepard state, it has often served as ‘the converse and critique of modernity in general,’ implying an alternative body of values to the present age that may be considered preferable, for instance, to those of the industrial corporation or a perceived cult of individualism in the contemporary age.²⁴ The community has been a debated concept

²⁰ Burke, *Languages* 5.

²¹ Burke, *Languages* 5.

²² Shepard and Withington, 2.

²³ Raymond Williams, ‘Community,’ *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana, 1983) 75-6.

²⁴ Shepard and Withington, 3.

among medieval historians, who are increasingly choosing to see it not ‘as an actual harmonious and co-operative entity so much as sets of precepts and practices that sought the promotion of co-operation towards certain ends.’²⁵ While such a change in emphasis clearly heralds an important paradigmatic shift for historical research, it may not have equal relevance for a study of literary communities. After all, the impression of a harmonious and co-operative community, which such research may legitimately be at pains to destabilise, derives, very often, from its literature (for example, guild statutes or the simplistic three/four caste model of feudal society still perpetuated in Chaucer’s time by medieval moralists). Because the realisation and idealisation of a literary community often take place simultaneously in the literary exchanges through which it is mediated, questions about the relationship between the actual and the ideal community must be posed, if they are posed at all, quite differently.

As far as this study goes, the rhetorical warmth of the term community actually works in its favour. It is a central premise of this study that the literary community denotes something positive: a supportive forum for literature. While the notion of the community may be conceptually vague in some respects, the other terms I have examined above are no less problematic. The use of community as a controlling metaphor has the virtue of being flexible enough to cover a diverse range of social groupings with literary interests, especially where the evidence for their existence, functions and practices is necessarily more limited.

²⁵ Shepard and Withington, 6. This concept is considered at more length in Craig Durew’s essay in the same collection, ‘From a “Light Cloak” to an “Iron Cage”: Historical Changes in the Relation Between Community and Individualism,’ 156-179.

This study will focus on the importance of literary communities in the works of a number of key English poets operating in England between c. 1377 and 1547, that is from the beginning of Richard II's reign to the end of Henry VIII's: Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1340-1400), Thomas Hoccleve (c.1367-1426), John Lydgate (c.1370-1449), John Skelton (c.1460-1529), Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). A number of other writers contemporaneous with these poets will also be considered as a part of their literary communities. Some well-known authors of the period will not be mentioned, or only discussed in passing, either because they do not appear to have connections with the writers I am studying, or because their significant writings were not in English. So, for example, although he provides an obvious focal point for the study of early renaissance literary communities in England, I have omitted Thomas More from this study, partly because his best known work, *Utopia*, is not in English, but more significantly because a proper consideration of the communities which supported his literary activities would entail closer scrutiny of international humanist coteries than the scope of this study permits. Finally, this will be a study of literary relations chiefly, although not exclusively, between those of similar social standing. That is, I will only be concerned with 'vertical' patron-client networks of literary patronage insofar as they coincide with 'horizontal' networks of literary friendships in providing the kind of situation in which such literary friendships could occur.

Beyond the fact that they fit my period of interest, the poets I have chosen to study have in common a number of things which facilitate comparison between them: first and foremost, their choice to write in the vernacular. In spite of their facility with more prestigious languages of their day, all of these poets chose to invest in the literature

of their own tongue by producing a substantial body of poetry in English; in doing so they signal their intention to graft themselves onto a distinctively *English* literary community. Each of these writers can be located within a centralised English literary tradition of which Chaucer was nominated founding father: the tradition which emerged through the writings of Chaucerian disciples of the fifteenth century, and would be further crystallised conceptually (though often problematically) in the sixteenth century in discussions of the English literary tradition such as Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (c.1580) and George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589).

Although the remit of their work is in no case exclusively courtly in its theme and subject matter, all of these men had some level of association with the English court and were conversant with courtly culture. Likewise, their poetry had to be juggled alongside other official careers. Chaucer and Hoccleve were both civil servants, albeit of differing social standing, and so pursued their literary interests in the hours they could spare from their official responsibilities. Although he markets himself as a writer by divine vocation, Skelton was also priest and university-man as well as courtier and royal tutor. Wyatt and Surrey were courtiers too, though of differing social rank. Lydgate probably came closest to being what we would think of as a professional writer in his own day in that he or his agents generated a substantial volume of commissions for his pen, but then he was also a monk and while this probably furthered his writing career it must have imposed its own duties on his writing schedule. Lastly, all of these poets were writing within, or mainly for, a manuscript culture, although a small proportion of Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey's work was printed within their own lifetimes.

In spite of these similarities, the kinds of audiences immediately available to each of these authors as their most natural bases of support were subtly tailored to their own life-circumstances. For Chaucer, a number of gentle-persons, clerks and chamber knights addressed occasionally in his poetry seem to have provided his primary audience, and encouraged him in his writing. Hoccleve's immediate social circle was that of the Privy Seal office, and the larger community of clerks in the parts of London where he lived and worked. Lydgate, as a member of the influential Benedictine community at Bury St Edmunds, had ready access to a community of literate and educated men, and one which seems to have supported and encouraged his literary vocation, although this may not have been the most important kind of community that supported him. Skelton belongs to the academic community as a laureate poet, and was clearly conversant with both a clerical and courtly milieu, and probably also an urban one. As a courtier and ambassador for Henry VIII, Wyatt enjoyed literary friendships with men of similar social standing within the courtly network. The same is true of Surrey, although as a member of one of the leading aristocratic families, he also acted as a friend and patron to men of letters of lower social standing. The different kinds of literary communities in which these authors moved -- administrative, clerical, academic, urban, courtly, aristocratic, or, indeed, a mixture of these -- highlight the fact that such informal circles or networks of support for those seeking to write within the mainstream English poetic tradition could come from a variety of social contexts.

Chapter One provides an overview of some of the forms, functions and practices of late medieval and early modern literary communities in Europe, with reference to other kinds of cultural communities and important exemplars where relevant. In it I distinguish

between formal and informal kinds of literary communities, the different sorts of host-spaces in which such communities might gather, and the effect these had on the activities of the communities themselves, and I also examine those institutions which themselves constituted literary communities, such as the church, the university and the court. When talking of the principles implicit in the making of literature in the Middle Ages, I will not be concerned with critical theories of authorship as they have been identified in the hermeneutical work of scholastic writers so much as with the observable social functions of particular literary communities and the kind of models they provided.²⁶

The next three chapters will consider the work of four late medieval authors in light of their relationships with particular literary communities: Chaucer; Hoccleve and Lydgate; and Skelton. I consider the various ways in which these poets may have envisaged themselves as part of a community or communities of writers and/or literati in their works, both actual and ideal, and what this contributed to their imagined identity as writers and the kind of poetry they produced. To this end I will examine the kind of social circles they may have moved in, and the ways in which they reference particular receptive communities in their writing. Contemporary references that may throw more light on their literary milieu will also be examined.

Each of these chapters also considers issues pertaining to these authors as individuals. Chapter Two examines different constructions of Chaucer's so-called literary circle, building on the foundational research of Paul Strohm. I discuss to what extent the group of men Strohm identifies as Chaucer's social circle may be viewed as a literary community, and what difference such communal contexts make to our reading of

²⁶ Further see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scholar P, 1984).

Chaucer's poetry. Chapter three focuses on Hoccleve and Lydgate as Chaucer's immediate successors in the fifteenth century. Although Hoccleve frequently adopts the role of outsider and plaintiff in his poems, or has been viewed in these terms in the past, I conclude that a significant proportion of Hoccleve's poetry is in fact shaped by communal contexts, particularly his place within the community of the Privy Seal Office. By contrast, I consider the impact of his more successful contemporary Lydgate in inspiring a kind of virtual literary community among his readers and the authors who followed him, and the importance of particular communities, imagined and actualised, to a reading of his work. Chapter Four focuses on Skelton's negotiation between different literary communities, explores some of the ways in which he can be seen both as insider and outsider in the Tudor literary establishment, and examines his attempts to place himself within an imagined literary community in *The Garlande of Laurell*.

Chapter Five examines the importance of literary communities to the work of the early renaissance poets, focussing particularly on Wyatt and Surrey and the 'new company' of gentlemen poets they represented.

Given the uncertain conditions of authorship as a profession in the Middle Ages, it is not a radical contention that the often private and informal circles of like-minded friends and colleagues provided the most natural sphere in which would-be writers could exercise their literary talents, and offered means of gaining recognition and appreciation for their literary efforts other than those available through vertical channels of patronage. However, no single study has considered at length the importance of such communities to poets writing within the centralised English poetic tradition in this period, or the effects

which their own concepts of particular literary communities have on their writing. This thesis aims to enhance our appreciation of its subjects of study by placing them within the particular contexts of their immediate literary communities, and to show that such contexts are highly relevant to our interpretation of their work as a whole. It offers a new synthesis of material from this perspective, provides original readings of particular authors (especially Hoccleve and Skelton), and aims to situate the activity of each of the poets it examines within the larger conceptual framework of literary community in the wider European tradition (outlined in Chapter One).

The recent growth of interest in cultural studies has facilitated research that seeks to evaluate authors alongside their contemporaries. This research has not merely been concerned with situating individual authors within the culture of their period at large, but also with embedding them more firmly within their particular social, artistic and intellectual milieu and viewing their writings as a product of these communities as much as of the individuals who produced them. Stanley Wells' recent monograph, *Shakespeare and Co.* (2006), is a notable example of what such a study has to offer with regard to writers who occupy a central place in the English canon. In mapping Shakespeare's place alongside contemporary actors, writers and other theatre personnel, Wells concludes that: '[...] to see him [Shakespeare] as one among a great company is only to enhance our sense of what made him unique.'²⁷ This sense of the uniqueness of the author needs always to be balanced against an awareness of the social relationships that sustained him and enabled him to write. Authors may break with tradition and influence their

²⁷ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and Co.: Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Dekker, Ben Jonson, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher and the Other Players in His Story* (New York: Pantheon, 2006) 231.

communities in profound new ways, but they are also products of those communities and exist in a symbiotic relationship with them.

The attraction of the 'literary greats' model of literary history must be set alongside the disadvantages of isolating great writers as 'lone eminences' from their place within the larger constructs of contemporary culture.²⁸ Some authors may of course seek such a role for themselves, but to do this is also to participate in a tradition, a genealogy of eminences which is in itself another construction of literary community. Even authors like Lydgate who consistently (though not unremittingly) adopt a public or laureate voice which may be thought to preclude any private coterie readership clearly had a particular set of readers in mind for their work, and co-operated with others (scribal communities and patrons) in order to access them. Imbalances of perception encouraged by an uncritical subscription to the 'literary greats' model should be redressed by attempts to relocate 'the various social sites' of authorship, perhaps especially in the case of those established writers who tend to be treated independently as the focus of individual studies.²⁹ In a recent essay on Milton, possibly the most self-conscious of the self-appointed laureate poets, Stephen Dobranski draws attention to the benefits of situating an epic writer like Milton more decisively within his socio-literary milieu; he demonstrates how in 'reading beyond the persona of the independent poet that Milton implies in many of his texts, we discover a complex, sometimes inconsistent writer, predisposed to socializing and dependent on his friends and acquaintances as part of the creative process.'³⁰ This study will track the various 'social sites' of authorship, and their

²⁸ Wells, ix.

²⁹ Stephen B. Dobranski, 'Milton's Social Life,' *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, ed. Dennis Danielson, Cambridge Companion to Literature Ser, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 2.

³⁰ Dobranski, 2.

realization in the writings of Chaucer, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey, all of them (with the exception of Hoccleve) later accepted as mainstream, canonical writers, and all (including Hoccleve) attempting to write within the English poetic tradition established by Chaucer.

As well as the debts mentioned in the acknowledgements, I would like to note the influence of a number of scholarly works on the genesis and development of this thesis. My thinking on literary communities in general has been critically sharpened by the guiding remarks on the subject by Raymond Williams, and the essay by Judith Scherer Herz discussed earlier in this introduction. The general analyses of medieval and Renaissance literary culture by Peter Burke, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet and Arthur Marotti, among others, have proved helpful in identifying some of the issues and categories of material relevant to my research. Two monograph studies of particular authors which I have found indispensable are Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer* (1989), a ground-breaking study in analysing the evidence for, and importance of, Chaucer's literary circle to his art, and Ethan Knapp's *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (2001), which explores Hoccleve's relationship to the community of the Privy Seal Office.³¹ I have also benefited from the recent revival of critical interest in Lydgate. Lastly, Richard Firth Green's *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (1980), another seminal study of medieval literary culture, has been a shaping influence on the direction of my research. In drawing attention to the conditions of the medieval author at court, Green provided the necessary point of departure for this thesis: if the vertical channels of

³¹ Ethan Knapp, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2001).

patronage and employment were so uncertain, what was it that provided the author with the impetus to write? One of the observations he offered in passing was that:

[...] in the absence of any formal recognition for literature, [the] attempt [by writers] to create, as it were, a brotherhood of poets is not insignificant.³²

My conviction that the creation of such brotherhoods, whether actual or ideal, and their effects on the literature of the later Middle Ages, were indeed significant and worth exploring in their own right formed the guiding principle for this study.

³²Green, *Poets* 208.

2. Communities and Contexts

In an influential essay on the Bloomsbury group, Raymond Williams offers some general remarks on the structure and analysis of cultural groups which provide a good starting point for discussion of late medieval and early modern literary communities:

In the case of a cultural group, the number of people involved is usually too small for statistical analysis. There may or may not be organized institutions, through which the group works or develops, but even the most organized institutions are different in scale and kind from those of large groups. The principles which unite the group may or may not be codified. Where they are codified, one kind of analysis is immediately relevant. But there are many important cultural groups which have in common a body of practice or a distinguishable ethos, rather than the principles or stated aims of a manifesto.¹

Leaving aside the somewhat anachronistic notion of the manifesto, with its connotations of a modern kind of political consciousness, the idea that cultural groups can be viewed as possessing codified or non-codified principles is a useful one. Williams' analysis invites the belief that the distinction need not be too rigid. As regards medieval cultural communities at least, it is perhaps more useful to think of such communities existing somewhere on a continuum, embodying principles that are more and less clearly articulated to those outside them. At the former end of the spectrum we find the more organised literary groupings (including many literary clubs or societies which tend

¹ Williams, 'Bloomsbury,' 229.

towards fixed traditions/activities that are enshrined in a charter or set of statutes) and at the latter the more informal friendship groups and private coteries whose activities were less prescribed, and whose existence must sometimes be inferred merely from inter-textual relationships between writers or contemporary references to them. Analysing the kind of group structures and principles common to these kinds of literary-cultural grouping helps us gain further insight into the social function, or functions, of literature across the medieval and early modern period.

At first glance, it would seem that the literary social group as a phenomenon was less popular in England than continental Europe, where we have abundant evidence for the existence of urban literary communities such as the *puys* and, later, the academies, which were widespread and often highly organised. These groups provided would-be writers with the opportunity to develop their literary skills and to sample those of past authors and their contemporaries, and generally offered a focus and a forum for such creativity. The attitudes towards literature they encouraged could be highly professional and their influence on literary culture profound. In France, the practice of the medieval *puys* can be shown to have influenced the practice of the court-poets and vice versa, leading to the development of new verse forms. Likewise, the model of the academy first developed in Italy among humanist literati in the late fifteenth century, and adapted in a variety of ways by their successors, became a significant catalyzing force within literary culture in the early modern period and was widely copied in countries like France, Spain and Germany.

The meagre evidence we have for these kinds of highly organised literary groupings operating in England in the late medieval period does not mean they had no part in English culture. A desire on the part of literary societies not to publish their activities and to limit their membership to a carefully chosen circle may explain why evidence of their existence is hard to come by. Yet even so, we must conclude that the lack of evidence for many organised literary societies active between the medieval and Elizabethan periods strongly suggests that they were not a major feature of English culture before the seventeenth century in contrast to the rest of Europe.

Of the examples that do survive, we must include the London Puy (fl. 1300) whose activities will be considered later in this chapter. We might also include Hoccleve's *Court de Bone Conpaignie* (fl. 1421) as a possible case; Hoccleve's poem on behalf of this group indicates that it was probably a fraternity or dining society which had rules similar in some respects to those of other fraternities, and which perhaps encouraged poetry as part of its festivities. Robert Allen uses this rather enigmatic court as the first example of an English literary club in the pre-history of clubbing in his survey, *The Augustan Clubs of London*.² In a largely unpublished thesis on English literary societies from c.1572 to the 1640s, W. R. Gair argues that from the dissolution of the London Puy to the congregation of Jonson's friends and 'sons' who met in the Apollo room in the Devil Tavern, there is 'no historical continuity of form' and that the Tribe of Ben essentially picked up where the London Puy had left off in providing a set of fixed rules for its meetings.³ However, he makes no mention of Hoccleve's club, active over a

² Robert J. Allen, *The Clubs of Augustan London* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1933) 6.

³ W. R. Gair, 'Literary Societies in England from Parker to Falkland (1572 - c.1640),' doctoral thesis, Cambridge U, 1968, 2. A report on the subject of chapters six and seven have been published as 'La

century later, and Allen deems it probable that 'similar groups of convivial gentlemen must have formed from time to time' in the intervening period.⁴ If this was the case, we must conclude that they did not leave a discernible imprint on English literary culture by drawing attention to themselves as literary societies (in marked contrast to the textual evidence testifying to the impact of clubs on the development of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century letters).

One possible sociological explanation for England not having a proliferation of literary societies comparable to those on the continent until the advent of the club is the distrust with which private and associational forms of community tended to be regarded by the government. The crown investigation into private associations in 1320, and the refusal to obtain support for an English academy (in spite of several attempts to found one), reveal how private organisations of any kind frequently laid themselves open to suspicions of political dissent on the part of the government, simply by being organised and private (and indeed, the tendency of the clubs themselves to construct their membership along the lines of their political allegiances is interesting in this respect). The early established system of central administration in Westminster created a country that was to remain traditionally hierarchical in its structures of power, and the close relationships established between the monarch and the universities (both in terms of patronage and personal intervention) and between the monarch and the Church (especially after the reformation) are symptomatic of this. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the decline of the court as a centre of literary patronage coincides with the hey-day of the club in England and of the salon in France.

Compagnie des Enfants de St. Paul,' (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1967).

⁴ Allen, *Clubs* 7.

The French appellations in the two medieval examples of English literary societies cited above indicate the influence of continental literary culture on their formation. As far as the London Puy is concerned, it is possible that some of its members were French merchants who had settled in London, although the group seems also included some prominent English merchants who could themselves have founded the community as a result of contacts with French culture. It may also be significant that both these groups were based in the capital. While, as Malcolm Vale notes, the English court was organised along the same lines, and partook of the same lifestyle, as the courts of northern France and the Low Countries: 'English towns were not equivalent in size, power and cultural influence to the great cities of Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Arras, Douai, and their like.'⁵ We could argue that London was the only city in England of comparable size, influence and cosmopolitanism, and the kind of economic and cultural conditions that would encourage the formation of literary organisations of this kind. Yet this, again, must remain a tentative assumption. While the importance of London as a centre for literary production in the fourteenth century cannot be doubted, evidence suggests that production was more regionalized before this time, and carried on being heavily regionalized in the case of certain textual communities like the Lollards.⁶ Unlike Paris, London had no universities attached to it until relatively late in its history, and the Oxford-Cambridge-London triangle of cultural influence further problematises notions of 'urbanity' and 'provincialism' in terms of literary culture - at least in Southern and Midland England. It has been argued that collective expressions of literary culture at a

⁵ M. G. A. Vale, *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe, 1270-1380* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 3.

⁶ Ralph Hanna, *London Literature: 1300-1380*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 2.

popular level were in fact more organised in the North where the guild-communities of cities like York and Chester were active in sponsoring, and possibly also in staging, cycles of mystery plays for Church feast days (a practice popular on the continent as well).⁷ These guilds may have had a hand in adapting plays for their own purposes, but evidence concerning the details of their composition suggests that others -- usually clerics -- were responsible for originating the scripts they used.

The apparent scarcity of formal urban literary societies comparable to those on the continent need not suggest a slump in English literary culture. There were plenty of cultural environments within the country as a whole, both large and small-scale, which provided opportunities for more informal literary communities to crystallize, although they may not have lasted longer than the generation of friendships that spawned them. These were generally places where learning and literacy were encouraged: the universities and inns of court; the monasteries and convents; various noble and ecclesiastical households; a smaller proportion of *gentil* and mercantile ones; and, of course, the royal household itself, and its satellite bodies (like the Privy Seal Office where Hoccleve worked). Potential centres for literary activity also existed in the guilds and fraternities, which might allow members a forum to compose songs or verses for their common entertainment or sponsor others to provide it for them. Another potential centre for literary activity was the tavern or public-house which, along with the coffee-house, became a popular forum for literary clubs in the early modern period and the Augustan age.

⁷ Lawrence M. Clopper, *Drama, Play and Game: English Festive Culture in the Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2001) 141-142.

While there is no one formula to account for the establishment of informal literary groupings, we can draw a few general observations about this. It seems usual for such groups to arise out of pre-established personal relationships in which one or more hosts act as the catalyst for the group's activities. Famous literary lions often attract their own circles: it is common to find a charismatic figure who has made a name for himself as an author or man of letters, and who, by his personality and/or his literary reputation, attracts a group of friends and disciples around him. This was the case with a number of the tavern-based coteries, in which the importance of the personalities rather than the venue for holding such groups together is evident in the fragmentation of the group after the lion's death. A twentieth-century example of this can be found in the Inklings group, which met every Monday at The Eagle and Child in Oxford, and for which C. S. Lewis was the catalysing force.⁸ In other cases, the catalysing force may simply be a person with a bent for patronage (like the Countess of Bedford) or a genius for friendship (as with Thoby Stephen of the Bloomsbury circle). Ben Jonson (1572-1637) may be invoked as the literary lion *par excellence* - a founding or associate member of a range of literary communities. Paul Strohm's analysis of Chaucer's social circle suggests that he, too, may have played the lion to his own circle, albeit in a more modest way -- a claim I will be examining further in the next chapter.

The influence of such small, informal groups on the outside world can be significant yet hard to analyse, perhaps in part because of our modern distinction between

⁸ Further see Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends* (London: Allen, 1978).

the public and the private spheres.⁹ While it is necessary to recognise the group of friends as a unique complex of human relationships, we must also, as Williams again suggests, look at its significance in terms of its cultural alignments and influences.¹⁰ As we might expect, informal communities of friends tend to share religious, political or philosophical values, or a similar social and cultural background, which can be seen to have contributed to the formation of a 'distinguishable ethos' or 'body of practice' that characterises the community as a group. Analysing such groups in these terms helps us place them in the wider context of medieval and renaissance culture. Many of the more informally-structured groups with literary interests active in England in the late medieval and early modern period can be described as horizontal networks of friendship that were, in many cases, affiliated to institutions like the church, court or universities, which were themselves particular kinds of community that valued literature, and literacy for different purposes. Such horizontal networks might intersect with, or arise from, contacts made within vertical networks of patronage, as can be evidenced in the case of literary men who congregated at the houses of noble men and women and became, in a fashion (and allowing for some level of deference and accommodation between writers of different social standing), their friends through a shared pursuit of literary interests.

In the first part of this chapter I survey a range of literary-cultural groups, beginning with those more organised groups with codified principles for the light they throw on the function of literary communities as a whole. Although England does not seem to have emulated the highly organised literary associations of its continental

⁹ For a discussion of the impact of this perceived dichotomy on the study of friendship see Julian Haseldine, introduction, *Friendship in Medieval Europe* ed. Haseldine (Gloucester: Sutton, 1999) xvii–xxiii.

¹⁰ Williams, 'Bloomsbury,' 232.

neighbours between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, a brief description of some of the more visible literary-cultural groupings which flourished in late medieval and early modern Europe will be useful for comparative purposes. In the second part of the chapter I will consider some of the environments and institutions that themselves constituted, as well as hosted, literary communities during this period (such as the court, the church and the university) and the kinds of literature such environments produced. In the final section of the chapter I will discuss some common features of literary communities (the literary contest, for example) and influential ways in which communities of writers have been configured by key authors in the western canon with particular focus on Dante: a seminal author for Chaucer and later writers in terms of his visualisation of a literary history which sets the writer in dialogue with past and present, and real and ideal, literary communities.

The following exploration of some of the ways in which formal literary associations encouraged writers offers us a basis for some consideration of how writers' needs might be met in more informal ways in England. To this end, I will provide a brief overview of a selection of literary communities active in the medieval and early modern periods (the *puy*s, other literary guilds and the academies) combined with an account of some relevant antecedents (like the Greek and Roman literary associations) and post-sixteenth century developments (like the English clubs). I have deliberately discussed the communities listed below by type with a view to isolating common aspects of literary communities active in Europe in this period.

Greek and Roman Literary Culture: *Symposia* and *Convivia*

The variety and popularity of voluntary, private associations was one of the main features of city life in Greek and Roman society. The clubs of fourth-century Athens were commonly linked by cult-worship, the ritual of a shared meal, elected officials, club premises, and their own private regulations. In Rome, voluntary associations serving a similar range of functions existed in the form of *collegia* or sodalities (priestly cults) and also enjoyed their shared banquets, rituals and celebrations. Although these clubs could take a variety of forms, their contribution to the cultural, political and social life of ancient city-dwellers was considerable. They existed at all levels of society, and could be composed of any class of persons, ranging from the privileged sons of long-established families to immigrant communities. As Nicholas Fisher argues, ‘evidence from both literary sources and innumerable inscriptions suggests how much such clubs contributed to the sense of identity, leisure activities, and security of individuals in an uncertain and often hostile world.’¹¹

Not only might individual clubs include literary entertainment as a part of their activities, there were also special groups established for professional writers. In Greece there were a number of professional poets’ clubs, along with associations of actors and musicians called the Artists of Dionysius. The latter was highly organised, and banded together to look after their economic interests. They had their own assemblies, magistrates and ambassadors (modeled on the organisation of the Greek city-states), and

¹¹ Nicholas R. E. Fisher, ‘Roman Associations, Dinner Parties, and Clubs,’ *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Grant and Rachel Kitzinger (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988) 1200.

established cultic centres for the worship of their patron god. Schools of philosophy also represented distinct literary communities, akin to the monastic schools in their practice of removing themselves from the world. Fisher suggests that in Greece both the cultic communities and philosophical schools ‘served as a model for the institutional organisation, often under royal patronage, of poets, philosophers, or other intellectuals,’ which resulted in cultural achievements like the Museum of Alexandria (itself both a library and a temple to the Muses in which poets acted as priests).¹²

In Rome, a college of professional poets and actors (*collegium scribarum histrionumque*) was attached to the temple of Minerva, and existed in some form or other between the time of the middle republic to the early empire.¹³ As a group they seem to have cultivated associations with scribes and minor officials, underscoring the fact that the position of poets in Roman society was inferior, socially, to that of poets in Greek society. As a result, professional poets in Rome were probably more conscious of themselves as a class, and keener to shape their poetic activities in terms of an established career-path their patrons would want to support. They wrote flattering poems for patrons, presented material for public occasions, and, like soldiers, could be given public honours for their contribution to the state. Furthermore they enjoyed a delicate relationship with their aristocratic patrons in which the language was that of *amicitia* (friendship) but the social inequality of the relationship ensured that the *clientela* was beholden to his *patrinocinium* for favours, and had certain obligations towards him. In this respect, the position of the professional Roman poet places him closer to that of the household poet in

¹² Nicholas R. E. Fisher, ‘Greek Associations, Symposia, and Clubs,’ *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean: Greece and Rome*, vol 2, 1194.

¹³ Joseph Farrell, ‘Greek Lives and Roman Careers in the Classical Vita Tradition,’ *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Patrick Gerard Cheney and Frederick A. De Armas (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002) 35-6. See also Fisher, ‘Roman Associations,’ 1219-20.

the late medieval period, who might also gain work as a tutor to the aristocracy. We can draw a similar distinction in Roman culture between professional poets as a class who were engaged to write poetry on commission, and the wealthier amateurs like Catullus, men of significant standing who wrote poetry for recreational purposes and largely to please themselves and their associates.

The methods for disseminating literature in the Ancient world also invite comparison with medieval literary practices. Again we have a loosely ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ structure to account for the presence of poetry in a communal context: the *rhapsode* or public performer with his audience (analogous to the medieval minstrel) and the group of friends or private club that made literary entertainment for themselves (analogous, perhaps, to the activities of court-circles and medieval guilds). In both Archaic and Classical Greece, private drinking parties called *symposia* were popular, especially among the leisured classes, and provided a significant forum for the dissemination of literary culture. As Oswyn Murray has said, ‘it is from the symposiast’s couch that Greek culture of the Archaic Age makes most sense.’¹⁴ The amount of literature produced for, or about, the *symposion* and its Roman equivalent, the *convivium*, is considerable, and reflects back on a whole variety of assumptions and practices forged in sympotic communities. Alessandra Lukinovich notes how the context of the *symposion* has made its mark on the evolution of elegy, iambic poetry, and the epigram.¹⁵

The ideal of the *symposion* as a learned banquet, in which the social ritual of eating and drinking occasioned poetical flights of inspiration and cultured intellectual

¹⁴ Oswyn Murray, ‘Sympotic History,’ *Symptotica: A Symposium on the ‘Symposion’*, ed. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 11.

¹⁵ Alessandra Lukinovich, ‘The Play of Reflections between Literary Form and the Sympotic Theme in the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus’ *Symptotica* 264.

discussions amongst the guests, receives its most famous expression in Plato's Socratic dialogues, and was a particularly influential model for the renaissance humanists. This is the picture of the *symposion* at its most dignified: a forum for philosophical debate. In reality, however, sympotic practices varied according to the company and the host. The *symposion* brought men together for relaxation and entertainment in which the arts of refined conversation, music, singing and poetry all played a part. But it could also be associated with debauchery and chaotic violence; the excessive drinking engendered by the *symposion* could turn the party into a *komos*: a drunken rampage of party-guests through the streets on the look-out for sex and new entertainments, and frequently terminating in fights, assaults and civic disruption. Perhaps it is not surprising that as a motif in Greek literature, the *symposion* should often be 'poised between the opposed ideas of harmonious *charis*, and quarrels and *hybris* (insolence),'¹⁶ a communal outlet for both convivial and hostile impulses.

These tensions inherent in the *symposion* between collective expressions of idealism and cynicism, freedom and restraint, competition and collaboration, were also reflected in its literary activities. Competitive improvisations of songs or verses on set themes (variously political, moral, satirical, abusive or erotic) were popular as well as quotations or recitations of others' songs and poems. Lukinovich draws attention to the importance of the *symposion* as a place in which poetic tradition can be both preserved and re-created by a variety of literary games such as speeches and debates on chosen topics where participants were judged for their linguistic performances. Others included

¹⁶ Fisher, 'Greek Associations,' 1174.

tests of memory and ingenuity like the setting of riddles, or the challenge of finding verses in Homer that started or finished with a given letter or syllable.¹⁷

The Romans inculcated some of the values of the Greek *symposion* into their *convivia*. The main changes that they inaugurated were the inclusion of respectable women, and a greater emphasis on dining. Writing to his friend Papirus Paetus in 43 BC, Cicero paints an idealistic picture of the *convivium* as the epitome of civilised living, advising his friend that it is the conversation and good company, rather than the physical pleasures of eating and drinking that provide the greatest satisfaction at the *convivium*.¹⁸ If the aims of successful *convivia* were to promote harmonious living between participants, Roman authors often disagreed on the methods of producing it. For some, the ideal *convivium* was an occasion where normal relational conventions and considerations of rank could be relaxed, allowing participants to treat each other as equals. For others, notions of hierarchy prevailed in discussions about the seating arrangements and which dishes should be assigned to which class of guests. As in the *symposion*, the role of literary recitation and conversation at the *convivium* was important, both for providing recreation and, especially for the upwardly mobile classes, as a means of demonstrating civility. Patrons might take author-clients to a *convivium*, and the most famous of Roman literary patrons, Maecenas, owned gardens with areas that seem to have been designed for convivial gatherings. Horace, Catullus, Plutarch, Cicero, Macrobius, Aulus Gellius, Petronius, Martial, Statius, and Juvenal all wrote within the context of particular *convivia*, or mention the topic in their writings.

¹⁷ Lukinovich, 264.

¹⁸ Cicero, *Ad Familiares*, 26.9.

This brief survey of Greek and Roman literary associations is not intended to fuel the argument that they provided a popular model for medieval literary communities as such. What it does demonstrate is some of the ways in which the collective reception of literature functions as a natural corollary to particular patterns of communal behaviour: for example, the social ritual of formal meals and religious celebration (Dante's *Convivio* cleverly uses the metaphorical image of a banquet of wisdom to provide philosophical commentary on his poems in this way). Classical notions of the *convivium* or *symposion* and the private association did provide conscious models of literary community for humanist writers in Europe. In Germany, for example, small groups of humanists formed sodalities connected to particular cities or regions.¹⁹ One such group was the *Sodalitas Literaria*, a private group of literary intellectuals founded by the educator Jacob Wimpfeling (1450-1528). This group counted Sebastian Brant, author of the *Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools) among its members, and was visited by Erasmus. In England, Jonson's *Leges Conviviales* (Sociable Rules) for the meetings in the Apollo Room of the Devil Tavern show a debt to convivial culture, and its perpetual debate about convivial etiquette.

The history and development of these Greek and Roman associations also draw attention to some common impulses which have shaped the activities of such literary communities throughout European history, and which might be broadly characterised as Dionysian (or 'Bacchic') versus 'Apollonian.' Here again, I borrow another useful critical polarity from Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, who speaks of the ways in which these associational forms of literary fellowship tended to develop in two directions:

¹⁹ Antony Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present* (London: Methuen, 1984) 116.

Ce réseau horizontal se développe sous deux aspects: celui des confréries Joyeuses, compagnies bachiques et goliardiques, réseau *in praesentia* des amis avec lesquels on festoie; celui des compagnies sérieuses, des cercles d'humanistes, réseau *in absentia* des amis auxquels on écrit.²⁰

In convivial literature, tension between these two modes of community is often present, but the relationship between the two may be complex, and indeed they often shade into one another (as in Jonson's *Leges Conviviales*, of interest as an Apollonian defence against Bacchic excess, or the French Courts of Love which, in seeking to uphold the honour of women, were also legislating against real or imagined abuses against it within their own membership). Cerquiglini-Toulet's identification of the differences between communities that are realised *in praesentia* and *in absentia* is important. While the former may not always be ruled by wine-fuelled inspiration and bonhomie (with its ever present threat of excess and discord), communities chiefly realised via written discourse may well be more influenced by idealistic 'Apollonian' constructions of community, such as the *Respublica Litterae* (or Republic of Letters) or the Church as the Body of Christ.

Literary Guilds and Fraternities

For Greek and Roman thinkers as for later ones, the civilized individual, ideally, was also a literary individual: one able to appreciate, and participate in, literary culture.

²⁰ Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, *La Couleur de la Mélancholie: La fréquentation des livres au XIVe Siècle 1300-1415*, Collection Brèves Littérature (Paris: Hatier, 1993) 145.

Referencing Colin Morris' discussion of monastic friendship and troubadour *cortezia* as a means of privileging personal experience, Judith Scherer Herz identifies the notion of the civilized individual as one of the fundamental beliefs inspiring the formation of medieval and renaissance literary circles (which Raymond Williams also identifies as a popular self-defining construct of the Bloomsbury group).²¹ By this time, ideas of civility and of civilization as a whole, had been modified by the powerful cultural forces of Christianity, which, in turn, affected the systems of critical judgment applied to the arts. However, in both pre-Christian and Christian cultures, the choice to define oneself as civilized could be realized through membership of the voluntary, private association.

One type of voluntary association popular in the medieval and early modern period that could provide an informal setting, or model, for literary associations was the guild or fraternity. Guild communities of one kind or another appeared in many different forms in medieval Europe, from the craft-guilds in which practitioners of particular crafts grouped together principally to look after their members' economic interests, to the fraternities of a social and/or religious character which might also impose obligations of mutual aid on their members.²² Fifteenth-century England had around 30,000 of these organisations, which would work out as roughly three per parish, although altogether the concentration of guilds in cities, large towns and commercialised areas was probably denser than for the more sparsely populated village parishes.²³ Members paid a fee on joining, shared expenses for various communal projects, and involved themselves in a variety of civic responsibilities in the wider community, like caring for the poor. The

²¹ Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200* (1972; New York: Harper, 1973); Herz, 12-13; Williams, 'Bloomsbury,' 236.

²² For a detailed history of the origins and functions of the guild in Europe see Black, 1-11.

²³ Gervase Rosser, 'Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England,' *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994): 431.

composition of these associations could be socially diverse, although in the case of the craft guilds their most staple membership was often that of tradespersons.

The guild provided a focus for communal identity. The extent to which membership of such a community created fraternal bonds between its members has been summarised evocatively by Susan Brigden:

Guild members processed and worshipped together on the day of their patronal feast and maintained lights in churches. They attended the marriages and funerals of their fellows and the ‘drinkings’ afterwards: such was the action of a friend, the mark of respect of a colleague, but also the sworn duty of a company member.²⁴

As with the *symposion* and *convivium* of classical antiquity, the guilds and fraternities generally arranged a yearly feast which provided a particular means of asserting the solidarity of its members, an occasion for reconciling any differences within their ranks, and for celebrating their regional and communal identities and forging links with other communities in the person of associate or visiting members (although this was not always successfully realised at feasts which, like the *convivium*, might descend into disorder and excess). The formality of the feast marked it out from other communal meals. It was held once a year, often at local church, and usually included a variety of instituted customs (for example, the arranging of tables according to their private social hierarchy; the dressing the officers of the guild in special robes or garlands; the passing of a communal

²⁴ Susan Brigden, *New Worlds, Lost Worlds: The Rule of the Tudors 1485-1603* (London: Penguin, 2000) 77.

drinking cup between members; and the performance of set songs, prayers or recitation of the company's statutes).

The feast might provide an occasion for literary entertainment. Many guilds were wealthy enough to sponsor literary performances at their feasts, and records kept of payments for players and musicians on such occasions indicate that they frequently did so.²⁵ One instance of a poet who wrote verses on behalf of his guild, perhaps for recital at its feasts, can be found in the text of a poem from the Guild of the Holy Cross at Abingdon. The main subject of the poem is the building of Culham Bridge, a local project in which the guild were involved, and it celebrates the financial contributions of a local merchant Geoffrey Barbour, and the people of the community who 'preved her power with the pecoyse [pick-axe].'²⁶ As a literary piece, the poem shows some sense of style and incorporates different literary devices. Efforts to frame the story of the bridge into a narrative of religious significance are evident from the opening lines:

Off alle Werkys in the Worlde that ever were wrought,
 Holy chirche is chefe, there children been cherisid
 For be baptim these Barnes to blisse been i brought
 Thorough the grace of god, and fayre refreshed.
 Another blessed besines is brigges to make²⁷

²⁵ For an example see *A Caxton Memorial: Extracts from the Churchwarden's Accounts of the Parish of St. Margaret, Westminster, illustrating the Life and Times of William Caxton, the first English Printer 1478-1492*, [ed. Charles Theophilus Noble] (London, 1880) 20.

²⁶ A copy of the poem is printed in the appendix to pt. 10 of *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, vol 5 (London: G. Bell, 1910) 117.

²⁷ *Itinerary of John Leland*, vol 5, 116.

If such comparison seems a little heavy-handed, the poet does show some skill in the depiction of scenes like the men digging the ditches, and the wives flocking out to feed them.²⁸ It is likely that in some cases the recitation of poems about the company, or composed especially for entertainment its feasts, became a regular part of guild customs. As Gervase Rosser suggests, 'the relation of such civic legends, reflecting glory on the assembled society, may often have formed part of the entertainment at the fraternity feast.'²⁹ Rosser cites the example of the re-enactment of a narrative of pilgrimage to the Holy Land undertaken by two members of the Palmers guild, in Ludlow, Shropshire, at the time of Edward I, a scene which has been preserved in a stained glass window in the local parish church (c. 1450).³⁰

We know that English guilds and fraternities were involved in producing dramatic spectacles in the form of pageants, plays, maskings and mummings for both religious and civic occasions like the Corpus Christi festivals or royal pageants of entry. In York around fifty guilds were involved in the production of mystery plays, which meant an obligation to fund the pageant wagon, costumes and props (the wealthier guilds, like that of the bakers and mercers, taking on the plays with the more elaborate spectacles), and to appoint their own Pageant Masters who organised a director and actors for the play and ensured the production was of good quality.³¹ The involvement of such associations with religious drama was widespread throughout Europe in the later Middle Ages. The practice was common among the Italian

²⁸ *Itinerary of John Leland*, vol 5, 117.

²⁹ Rosser, 445.

³⁰ Rosser, 445.

³¹ Further see Richard Beadle, 'The York Cycle,' *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Beadle, Cambridge Companions to Literature Ser. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 93.

disciplinati, Dutch *Rederjikers* and French *Basoche*, as well as the English and German craft-guilds.³²

Not only was ownership of literary texts reasonably common among the wealthier members of the craft-guilds in the late medieval period, but guild members might participate in writing projects in their spare time. Anne Sutton notes that the mercer, Thomas Frowyk, and his household were part of a literary circle in the precinct of St Bartholomew's hospital that produced their own chronicle.³³ We also have evidence that the associational model of community provided by guilds and fraternities could be adapted to form literary societies in their own right. This was the case with the *Puys de Notre Dame* in France, fraternities with a special devotion to Mary. The origin of the word *puy* suggests a hill, a platform or a podium: a meaning that seems to have been adapted to include a gathering or court at such a place.³⁴ These so-called *puys* came together to follow literary, or quasi-literary, pursuits, chiefly the composing of songs to honour the Virgin. They held regular festivals, *festes du puy*, with competitions to determine the best song (both words and music) in the tradition of early medieval lyric poetry. The *puys* became widespread in thirteenth-century France and were particularly strong in the North. They had strong urban attachments, and were connected to important towns and cities such as Amiens, Rouen, Dieppe and Arras.

The influence of the court on the practice of the *puys*, and vice versa, is interesting. It seems significant that the *puys* were organised along a quasi-courtly

³² Lynette Muir, 'European Communities and Medieval Drama,' *Drama and Community: People and Plays in Medieval Europe*, ed. Alan Hindley, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 1 (Turnout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999) 1.

³³ Anne Sutton, *The Mercery of London: Trades, Goods and People, 1130-1578* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 168-169.

³⁴ For discussion of the term see Chas B. Newcomer, 'The Puy at Rouen,' *PMLA* 31. 2 (1916): 211-231.

structure with an elected 'Prince' and his companions. We know that the Arras Puy organised some distinctly courtly literary pastimes, the *puy d'amour*, involving a contest between two writers who produced a *jeu-parti* between them: a two-part lyric debate on the theme of love comprising six stanzas and two envoys in which a question is posed by the first poet in the opening verse, answered by the second, and his answer then challenged by the first poet in the conclusion. One such contest between a canon of the cathedral at Arras, Lambert Ferri, and another poet called Robert de Caisnoi was judged in 1263 by the future Edward I when he visited Arras.³⁵ Over a century later, Eustache Deschamps (1346 - c.1406), in his *Art de Dictier* tried to separate the activities of the writers of the *puy*s from those at the court by marking some verse forms, like the *sirventes*, as appropriate for *puy*s d'amours and not noblemen or courtly writers.³⁶ However, in practice the relations between the two seem to have been more fluid. The *puy*s often invited court-poets and *grand rhetoriquers* to compete in their contests; Jean Froissart (1337-1404), Jean Molinet (1435-1507), and Clement Marot (1496-1544), among others, are known to have participated.

The branch of the *puy*s active in London in the late medieval period seems to have been founded in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, probably some time in the 1270s and to have been active for at least thirty years. The latest evidence for the existence of the London Puy dates to 1304, when records of a legal dispute specify a payment towards the works of its chapel at Guildhall.³⁷ Its statutes were included in the

³⁵ Anne Sutton, 'Merchants, Music and Social Harmony: The London Puy and its French and London Contexts, Circa 1300,' *London Journal* 17.1 (1992): 7.

³⁶ Eustache Deschamps, *L'Art de Dictier*, ed. and trans. Deborah Sinnreich-Levi, *Medieval Texts and Studies* 13 (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues P, 1994) 82-83. Quotations from the treatise and the translation will be from this parallel text edition and will be cited by line number.

³⁷ Anne Sutton, 'Merchants,' 4-5.

city's guildhall records, compiled by Andrew Horn in the *Liber Custumarum* (c.1327).³⁸ This document contains two sets of statutes, the second of which was probably composed by 1299. They provide an unusually detailed account of this fraternity established primarily for the crowning of *un chaunson reale* (a royal song) and for the judging and praising of such songs at its yearly feasts or sittings.³⁹

The statutes tell us the festival was founded in honour of God, Mary, the Saints, and the King and barons, and for the renown of the city of London. The Puy described themselves as a *confrarie* (brotherhood) and a group of *amorous campaignoun* (loving companions).⁴⁰ The nurturing of their companionship was one of its principal aims, and in this respect, it employs the utopian language of brotherhood adopted by other guilds and fraternities. Like them, they were expected to be closely involved in the lives of their brother-members, as is evident from the regulations regarding the attending of ordinations, marriages, deaths and funerals. T. H. Riley has suggested that the London Puy was chiefly composed of foreign merchants, but the only member mentioned in the statutes, the third Prince, a 'John de Cheshunt,' is clearly an Englishman.⁴¹ Anne Sutton has also unearthed another twelve conjectural members of the Puy from legal cases in which the group is mentioned. The surnames of most of these suggest English origins, and the group includes men at the very centre of London politics: various aldermen and sheriffs, seven mercers, two mayors and the recorder and the chamberlain of the city.⁴²

³⁸ 'Regulations of the Feste de Pui,' *Munimenta Gildhallæ Londoniensis: Liber Albus, Liber Custumarum, et Liber Horn*, vol 2.1, ed. H. T. Riley (London, 1860) 216-228. The translations provided in parenthesis after each quotation are from the appendix of vol. 2.2 of the same work, pp. 579-594.

³⁹ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum* 224 and 589.

⁴⁰ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum* 216 and 579-80.

⁴¹ Riley ed., introduction, *Liber Custumarum* li.

⁴² Sutton, 'Merchants,' 5.

Like other guilds and fraternities, it demonstrates a careful balancing of hierarchy and equality in its internal structure, and a concern to share expenses equally. The social standing of its members also indicates that it was a community at the centre, rather than the margins, of London life. Sutton argues that Edward I may even have had a hand in its creation.⁴³

The London Puy provides the earliest set of statutes pertaining to a *puy* in existence, and thus also throws light on the possible practices of the continental *puys*. The arrangements for the feasts occupy the chief of the statutes and demonstrate what a major event this was in the life of the company. The feast was held in a room decorated with tapestries and cloth hangings of gold and silk in the earlier days of this *puy*, but this was commuted to a decoration of leaves in the later articles and a special seat for the singers covered with a cloth of gold. At some point the lavish expenditure for the feasts must have become a cause of concern for the brotherhood, for the articles stipulate that limits should be set to regulate the *outraious despens* (outrageous expenditure) of successive Princes in increasing the munificence of the feast at their own cost.⁴⁴ As a result, the members agreed to share the cost of the feast equally among themselves, excepting only the clothing of the Prince, and to limit the meal to a certain number of dishes and a moderate amount of alcohol. The new prince was to be chosen by the old one, and they, together with the winner of the competition (who was also crowned) paraded through the city on horseback afterwards, suggesting the value of the event as a civic spectacle.

The activities at the feast itself, however, were private. The statutes stipulate that no one should be present other than the members. If a man who was not of the company

⁴³ Sutton, 'Merchants,' 1.

⁴⁴ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum* 226 and 581.

chanced to be there, the singers were instructed not to sing unless he went away or became a member of the Puy there and then.⁴⁵ Women of all kinds were excluded from the company, and the reason for this is interestingly worded in the statutes:

E tuit soit ensi qe honeste pleisaunce de bone dame soit droite matire et principale enchesoun de chaunt roiale, e chauncoun roiale trover e fornir, ja tardais est il ici purvu qe nule dame ne autre femme ne doit estre a la graunt [seige] du Pui, par la resoun ke om doit de ceo ensaumple prendre, e droit aveyement, de honurer, cheir, et loer trestotes dames, totes heures en touz lieus, au taunt en lour absence come en lour presence. Et ceo voet noretur e tote bone afferaunce.⁴⁶

(And although the becoming pleasance of virtuous ladies is a rightful theme and principal occasion for royal singing, and for composing and furnishing royal songs, nevertheless it is hereby provided that no lady or other woman ought to be at the great [sitting] of the Pui, for the reason that the [members] ought hereby to take example, and rightful warning, to honour, cherish, and commend all ladies, at all times in all places, as much in their absence as in their presence. And this breeding requires and all good propriety).⁴⁷

The idea that the absence of women should be enforced as an occasion to compliment them may seem a little odd, but in the language of the time, it suggests the Puy's genuine desire to honour women. Leaving aside the wider questions of gender relations in this

⁴⁵ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum*, 217.

⁴⁶ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum*, 225.

⁴⁷ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum* 590.

period, the primary purpose of misogynistic jokes in an all-male environment must have been not to offend women who were not present, but to solidify group identity by the sharing of jokes on a common theme. The stipulation of the statutes implies an existing inclination in all-male groups to entertain misogynistic jokes amongst themselves when there were no women around to complicate their reception. By thus applying themselves to the task of praising women in their absence, the London Puy were asserting their gentility against that of other homosocial groups that met recreationally.

From what we know of *puy* competitions in the rest of Europe, members were usually given a theme or opening line on which to elaborate in creating their own compositions. The continental *puy*s developed a variety of different verse forms, and also started the habit, later adopted by courtly poets, of including an envoy to the Prince. In the late fourteenth century, Deschamps speaks of the French *puy*s *d'amours* as places for poets who composed: ' [...] sirventois de nostre dame, chansons royaulx, pastourelles, balades et rondeaulz, [ils] portoient chascun ce que fait avoit devant le prince du puy, et le recordit par cuer' (148-151) (sirventes for Our Lady, chansons royales, pastourelles, ballads and rondeaux [...], [these men] brought their compositions before the Prince of the Puy and recited them by heart).⁴⁸ It seems that in London the requested *chanson royale* could either be on the subject of love or a religious theme, although some of the *puy*s in France would limit the theme of the song to the praise of the Virgin.

The London Puy's method of assessing the entries was highly professional. Care was taken that the judges, the old and new Princes and a group of *les mielz entendanz des compaignons* (those of the companions who understand it best) should select the winning song knowledgably and impartially (in the second part of the statutes the number of

⁴⁸ Deschamps, *L'Art de Dictier* 65.

judges was reduced to two or three).⁴⁹ The judges had to agree on oath not to be swayed by personal prejudices, friendships, kinships, bribes or any other reason from giving a disinterested assessment of the songs' quality. After the feast the winning song was written out and displayed beneath the standard of the Prince where it remained until the next year. The statutes demonstrate the importance of song to the company as a means of reflecting glory on the company and enhancing its prestige, of contributing to the wider *communitas* of the city of London, and of honouring the Saints, especially the Virgin Mary, and respectable women in the chivalric tradition. However, the Puy's idealisation of itself as a loving brotherhood was not fully realised, judging from the new injunctions added in the second set of statutes to ensure its members fulfilled their obligations.

Anne Sutton argues that the *puy* at Arras, with its strong trading links with London, was the probable inspiration for the London Puy, and that Horn's decision to include the statutes in his records can be explained as a product of his own efforts to preserve the liberty of the city.⁵⁰ On this interpretation, the Puy's loyalty to London and the ideals of civic and social harmony that they sought, but ultimately failed, to establish within their own membership justified the inclusion of their statutes as an example to his readers. If Riley is correct, the organisation was already in decline when the second set of statutes were penned.⁵¹ How much later than 1304 it survived, however, is a matter of conjecture. It has been argued that Chaucer, Gower and Henry Scogan may have participated in meetings of the London Puy in the late fourteenth century, a claim that will be further examined in the next chapter.

⁴⁹ Riley ed., *Liber Custumarum*, 217 and 581.

⁵⁰ Sutton, 'Merchants,' 12-13.

⁵¹ Riley, introduction, *Liber Custumarum* lii.

Variations on the *puy* model were popular elsewhere in Europe. The *Cameren van Rhetorica* (or Chambers of Rhetoric) which flourished in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland and Holland in the fifteenth century can be seen as a Dutch offshoot of the *puy* phenomenon.⁵² The first recorded statutes of a rhetorical chamber date from 1488 at Ghent, concerning a confraternity which called itself the Fountain. As Dirk Coigneau tells us:

[...]in the description of the member's financial, administrative and devotional duties, the charter of the Fountain is not very different from the statutes of other guilds and confraternities [...]. It is only in the stipulation of rules for certain literary activities that the chamber's most distinctive characteristic is apparent. These rules concern the ritual of the *refrein* contest, a poetic competition that was to be organised every three weeks. For each contest a member was appointed by lot to write a poem, a so-called *refrein*, which had to be 'imitated' by the other members. It was also the model-writer's duty to provide a prize for the winning poem.⁵³

As Coigneau says, the chambers were organised much like any other kind of fraternity except for their literary interests, which included poetry and drama. Like the *puys*, they held competitions in their individual chambers and also held annual competitions

⁵² Dirk Coigneau, "De Const van Rhetoriken," Drama and Delivery,' *Rhetoric - Rhetoriciens - Rederijkers*, ed. Jelle Koopmans, Mark A. Meadow, Kees Meerhoff et al. *Proceedings of the Colloquium, Amsterdam, 10-13 November, 1993* (Amsterdam, Holland: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1995) 125.

⁵³ Coigneau, 125.

between different chambers. These were the famous *landjuwelen* in Antwerp, first held in 1496, which involved no less than twenty-eight separate chambers of rhetoric.

The reasons given in the statutes of the Fountain for its creation are interesting, and link the chambers, again, with the practice of the *puy*s. They state that the chamber was founded firstly as a weapon against melancholy (a commonly cited reason for writing in the middle ages), secondly, for devotional purposes (as many *puy*s were), and thirdly to protect the dignity of Ghent because, in their view, it was not proper that Ghent should have no chamber, while a number of lesser towns did. There was one important difference between the practice of the *puy*s and the practice of the *rederijkers*. Whereas the *puy*s exalted the individual's performance, the chambers tended to subsume the individual in the company identity, thus functioning more like teams.⁵⁴ This was borne out in the fact that in the chambers 'even when a poem was signed with the author's name or, more often, with his device, it was presented in the name of his chamber.'⁵⁵

During the sixteenth century, the *rederijkers* channelled their energy into giving dramatic performances, although they still practised poetry as well. They formed an important part of civic life in the Netherlands, composing plays for special occasions, and organizing recitals, pageants and processions in their respective cities. While, as Pamela King says, they were initially 'truly communal and democratic and produced only anonymous work under the name of the chamber... they [also] attracted the patronage of the nobility and had their own internal hierarchy.'⁵⁶ This hierarchy was quite similar to that of the *puy*s with a *coninc* (king), a position usually held by a prominent citizen, and a

⁵⁴ Coigneau, 128.

⁵⁵ Coigneau, 127.

⁵⁶ 'Redijkers,' *The Penguin Companion to Literature 2: European Literature*, ed. Anthony Thorlby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 643. See also Muir, 'European Communities and Medieval Drama,' 1-17 for a discussion of the influence of the *puy*s on the practice of the *rederijkers*.

prins (prince) to assist him. Church ministers often took organisational roles within the chambers, which had a *factor* (manager) who was paid and a *nar* or *sot* (jester) attached to them as well. Most chambers were forced to close in the late sixteenth century because of the laws passed against organized meetings. Of those that remained, the *Het Wit Lavendel* and *De Eglantier* in Amsterdam were the most important and played host to some notable poets in the seventeenth century.⁵⁷

In fifteenth-century Germany, schools of *Meistersinger* (Master-Singers) formed in key towns like Mainz, Worms and Strasburg. They were made up of local burghers organised into a guild-format which can also be seen to parallel the practice of the *puy*s. They held their own competitions for members to excel at *meistergesang*, a specialised form of poetry set to music that developed from the *Minnesang* tradition. These activities, known collectively as the *Singschule*, were held in churches and the rules surrounding them were extremely strict, forbidding performance of the songs in public or the printing of them. The titles to be won were gradated from *Singer* (for performance), to *Dichter* (for composing a new text to an old tune), to the coveted title of *Meister* (for composing both text and tune together). *Meistergesang* as a genre could be both spiritual and secular. Each type of performance was relegated to separate areas: the religious poetry of the *Singschule* belonged in church and the secular songs belonged to the celebration in the taverns afterwards.⁵⁸ Whereas the competitive and devotional functions of the *Meistersingers* links them with the *puy*s and chambers, ultimately, as Mary Garland

⁵⁷ 'Redijkers,' 643.

⁵⁸ 'Meistergesang,' *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*, ed. H. and M. Garland, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1986) 610-1. See also J. G. Purdie, *A History of German Literature*, 3rd ed. (London: Blackwood, 1959) 138-9.

states: 'the strictly esoteric nature of the guilds [...] and the extreme rigidity of the Tabulatur condemned the form to sterility.'⁵⁹

From these examples, we can conclude that the guilds and fraternities often provided a significant forum for townspeople to pursue literary interests, and that these in turn could be formalised in acts of private or public ritual, entertainment or display. In the case of the London Puy, the fraternity had become a model of community that could be adapted to support the literary interests of its members. Nonetheless, as with nearly all literary activities in this period, the exercise of these interests occurred within the context of pre-established social relationships, and was directed towards other ends than the production of poetry *per se*. The strong religious and regional identities of many of these literary guilds ensured they were most concerned with what they would have regarded as the most worthy end of any song or play (the lauding of Christ, his mother and the saints) and also that their literary productions reflected the glory of their particular city or region. Such priorities remind us that, at least ostensibly, the creation of poetry in the medieval period is always fitted to a pragmatic end, be it devotional, social or political, and in this way, it always seeks to channel itself back into the good of the whole community, not a clique of aesthetes. Yet there was room, it seemed, for a kind of literary professionalism to operate within this remit. Although he lists these kinds of group among the amateur manifestations of popular culture, Peter Burke concludes that, 'these organisations were at once expressions of civic patriotism [...] and an indication of how seriously the performing arts were taken in those days.'⁶⁰ In effect, those guilds and fraternities who chose to develop literary interests in this fashion could become training grounds for

⁵⁹ 'Meistergesang,' 611.

⁶⁰ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978) 104.

aspiring writers, offering support, criticism and a focus (through competitions or performances) for their literary activities. We might note the number of significant writers who emerged from this guild context on the continent: notable examples include Adam Le Halle (c.1240c.1288), Hans Sachs (1494-1576), Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679) and Henric Spiegel (1549-1612), and the number of prominent poets from outside their ranks who attended their competitions.

The Academies

The academies first appeared in *Quattrocento* Italy as informal gatherings of humanists seeking a forum for discussing philosophy, philology, the sciences and other kinds of scholarly learning in the light of their more direct exposure to the literature of classical antiquity. The often quite disparate meanings of the word ‘academy’ used by the academicians over the fifteenth century have been profitably discussed in recent revaluations of Marsilio Ficino’s Platonic Academy.⁶¹ Amongst the humanists of Ficino’s day, the term academy could denote a school of Platonic philosophy, the whole body of Plato’s works, or, more simply, a group of literary friends and by extension the place where they met: a small country retreat or ‘philosopher’s cottage’ of some kind (the earliest academies took place in members’ houses).⁶² Over time, the term was also extended to mean a university. This was a natural development as some humanist academies had pretensions to establishing themselves as independent institutes of learning with the ability to grant degrees, and some were eventually developed into

⁶¹ James Hankins ‘The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence,’ *Renaissance Quarterly* 44.3 (1991): 433- 436.

⁶² Nikolaus Pevsner, *Academies of Art Past and Present* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973) 5.

universities.⁶³ The academies themselves could be more or less informal in nature, but generally speaking, became more rule-bound and specialised over time.

In the academies of the early sixteenth century, interests in poetry and linguistics combined in a strong emphasis on transposing culture into the vernacular. Members were interested in rediscovering their classical heritage, translating its learning and literature, and presenting the fruits of new researches. They also wanted to produce worthy poems in their own tongues, building on the examples of the ancients and of Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) and his successors. Academies such as the *Accademia degli Intronati*, the *Accademia degli Infiammati* and the *Accademia Fiorentina* appointed presidents known variously as the *principe* (prince), *archintronato* (arch-intronat) or - in the case of the Florentine Academy - *console* (consul). Among the lesser officers were a number of *censori* (censors or editors) whose job it was to edit all the poetry submitted for presentation at the academy and make sure the diction and style were of the highest standard. Scholarly lectures on poets and philosophers were organised by the academy and attended by both members and visiting scholars from other countries. The leading academies also attracted associate or rusticated members, who would follow the proceedings of the academy at a distance, occasionally attending meetings.

Analysing the model of the *Accademia degli Infiammati* in Padua, Samuels comments on how the academy provided a focal point for the literary activities of its members:

It filled a need which would have had to have been met even if there had not been convenient models available. It provided its members with a unique and efficient

⁶³ Pevsner, 3.

means of completing, communicating, and publicizing the literary and scholarly work they had long been involved in on an individual, and often less formal, basis. Instead of sending sonnets back and forth to various friends by post, members could now submit them to a board of expert *censori* who could touch them up to perfection without delay. Instead of waiting for an invitation to submit their works for inclusion in an anthology of verse, or instead of subsidizing the publication of works themselves, they now had a ready-made audience at their disposal, eager to give them instantaneous gratification for their creative efforts.⁶⁴

As the existing university structure had not yet moulded itself into a framework suitable for assimilating the entrepreneurial scholarship of the humanist amateurs, or their desire to express themselves in the vernacular, the academy offered poets an important outlet for their creativity. The unifying interests of these academicians were humane studies and the emulation of particular poetic styles, rather than the desire to praise the virgin or participate in a game of love. Writing directly for an audience of scholarly peers who were meeting because they were interested in the vernacular canon and *literae humaniores* naturally raised both the standard and enjoyment of literary production, which in turn raised the profile of the academies. It was the academies that provided the most significant forum for nurturing literary culture in the early modern Italian states and principalities, attracting such figures as Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), Luigi Alamanni (1495-1556) and Baldassar

⁶⁴ Richard S. Samuels, 'Benedetto Varchi, the 'Accademia degli Infiammati,' and the Origins of the Italian Academic Movement,' *Renaissance Quarterly* 29.4 (1976): 611.

Castiglione (1505-1571), to name but a handful of Italian writers whose fame reached England.

Over the course of the sixteenth century, the number of academies in Italy grew phenomenally. Over two thousand academies dating from this period until the nineteenth century have been catalogued in M. Maylender's multi-volume *Storia delle Accademie d'Italia*.⁶⁵ However, it is important to note the large variety of literary organisations the name *accademia* encompassed after the appellation became fashionable, some less serious than others about scholarly learning. One of the more frivolous academies was the *Accademia della Virtù* (founded c.1532). For a brief period before Lent, this academy appointed a 'king' each week to host a banquet for the members. At the banquets there would be a literary competition in which members presented the king with verses and mock orations - a custom clearly linked to the institutionalised 'misrule' of the festival period. As can be seen, the organisation of this academy was quite close to that of the *puys*, although the target of their verses was not religious.

The academic movement was extremely popular in both France and Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of these later academies specialised in philology and literary interests, *amene lettere* or *belles lettres*, and their members spent time 'composing, reciting, and criticizing' poetry and hosting addresses on ethics and rhetoric, critical discussion of the vernacular canon and, in some cases, the performance of plays.⁶⁶ Following the Italian lead, many of these more overtly literary academies made it their mission to promote their own vernaculars as vehicles of literary

⁶⁵ M. Maylender, *Storia delle Accademie d'Italia*, 5 vols. (Bologna: Capelli, 1926-30).

⁶⁶ Pevsner, 8. See also the history of the French academies provided by Frances A. Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* Studies of the Warburg Institute 15 (London: The Warburg Institute, 1947).

achievement. Such was the mission of the most important forerunner of the academic movement in France, active in the sixteenth century -- the group of poets who christened themselves *La Pléiade* (after the seven visible stars in the Pleiades constellation): Pierre Ronsard, Joaquin du Bellay, Jean Antoine de Baïf, Rémi Belleau, Etienne Jodelle, Pontus de Tyard and Jacques Peletier.⁶⁷

As with the *puys* and chambers of rhetoric, the continental academies were increasingly organised into formal societies which appointed leaders and officers, constitutions and bylaws, regular meetings and even prescribed behaviour. Members engaged in debates and dialogues, proclaimed their shared identity with private mottos and devices in keeping with the prevalent fashion for emblematic literature, and assumed fanciful pen-names. As we might expect, the success of such groups in producing literature for a non-academic audience was mixed, with the more closed or elitist groups tending towards an esoteric or self-congratulatory insularity. Others, however, were instituted in a public capacity, like the prestigious *Académie Française* (1635), which was granted a royal charter and mandate to regulate the French language. This academy had its genesis in an informal group of litterateurs that had been meeting to discuss literary matters over a period of years. It was established with an exclusive membership, set to no more than forty members.⁶⁸

In an article on the influence of the academies on seventeenth-century Spanish literature, Willard King provides a detailed description of the literary practices of the Spanish academicians:

⁶⁷ Further see Yates, 18-19.

⁶⁸ Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2002) 264.

[...] each week [the academicians] wrote poetry on previously assigned topics and in the verse form prescribed (dealing in the main with love and mythological subjects, almost all of it light, humorous, frivolous, much of it satiric, and a certain small amount of it verging on the obscene).

Frequently also they prepared prose discourses on set topics [...]. Some academicians wrote plays to be read or acted within the precincts of the group, and occasionally they amused themselves by inventing emblems or producing *ex tempore* either brief poems or whole comedas. But decidedly the favorite entertainment of most academies was the poetic contest (the *certamen* or *justa poetica*) in which many poets submitted compositions on the same theme in the hope of carrying off a prize - perfumed gloves, a silver cup, or a cut of fine cloth. These affairs developed an elaborate organization, complete with an opening *oracion* by the president of the academy, humorous *prematicas* and *memoriales* which poked fun at literary life and conventions and, to close the proceedings, a *vejamen* full of barbed comments on the competing poets.⁶⁹

As King notes, such customs could stir up animosities between poets which threatened to split the academies, and contributed to what Ellen Lokos describes as the 'bellicose climate',⁷⁰ of the academic movement in Spain. Whereas in Italy the atmosphere of academies in general 'constituted a sort of sanctuary for humanists, where writers could be in each others' company, compliment each other and recognize themselves among

⁶⁹ Willard F. King, 'The Academies and Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature,' *PMLA* 75.4 (1960): 371.

⁷⁰ Ellen D. Lokos, 'Cervantes and the Academies,' *The Solitary Journey: Cervantes's 'Voyage to Parnassus'*, *Studies on Cervantes and His Times* 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1991) 103.

equals,' those that developed in Spain established an 'almost tyrannical' hold on literary fashion, tacitly encouraging the persecution of their own members in pursuit of it.⁷¹

Success in the *justas literarias*, or literary jousts, came to dominate Spanish literary culture during this period, and this, together with the narrow range of styles promoted by the academies, did not always attract the most gifted writers. The academies in Spain actually ended up marginalizing men like Cervantes (1514-1616), who would express his own longing for an academy that could support his creative talents by creating a fictional *academia de ocasión* for himself in his *Viaje del Parnaso* (1614). Such a work serves as a reminder that those writers who focus on ideals of literary community may also be those who have been deprived of, or excluded from, them.

In England, periodic proposals to found academies never obtained the support which they had on the continent, although men of letters were aware of the potential of an academy for encouraging both literary and scholarly endeavours, if not national pride. Milton's travels in Italy in 1637-8 allowed him to attend meetings of some of the private academies in Italy, which made a favourable impression on him judging from the evidence of his letters in which he writes that: '[the institution of the academy] deserves great praise not only for promoting humane studies but also for encouraging friendly intercourse.'⁷² The academies' unique forum for fostering friendships between men of learning, men excited by the new vistas for literary experimentation and independent research that humanist scholarship was revealing, was clearly envied by some of the English literati who feared their nation was missing out. The poet Richard Carew (1555-1620) wrote to Robert Cotton that, 'it importes no litle disgrace to our Nation, that others

⁷¹ Lokos, 102.

⁷² John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Volume IV: 1660-1665*, ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven, CN: Yale UP, 1966) 615-16.

have so many Academyes, and wee none at all, especially seeing wee want not choice of wyttes every waye matcheable with theirs, both for number and sufficiency.’⁷³ Attempts to discover an English academy in Gabriel Harvey’s cryptic reference to the *ἀρειοπαγω*, or *Areopagus*, of Sidney and his friends would be premature, and probably misguided.⁷⁴ Although Sidney offers us a literary agenda of sorts in his *Defense of Poesie*, he belongs, like Wyatt and Surrey, to the informal literary coteries of the gentlemen-amateurs.⁷⁵

There was some support within the Society of Antiquaries (established c.1580s) for moving that institution further in the direction of the continental academies. This society, which met regularly in the Herald’s Office at Darby House for over twenty years, had no charter, but its meetings and activities had become more formal over time, and included the summons of members by formal invitation to conferences at which set questions of theological or historical interest might be debated.⁷⁶ The society requested permission to establish a national library and public academies to give lectures on historical and antiquarian subjects, but this was denied - partly because of governmental fears that such groups would mine historical and theological records for political ends, and partly, perhaps, because of semantic confusion about the term: an academy was more commonly used to mean a finishing school rather than a learned society in seventeenth-century England.⁷⁷ This was a problem for the antiquary Edward Bolton, who also drew on the example of the Society in formulating a proposal, in 1617, to found an *Academ*

⁷³ H. Ellis ed., *Original Letters of Eminent Literary Men* (London: Camden Society, 1898) 99.

⁷⁴ Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991) 191-192.

⁷⁵ Richard Helgerson and J. W. Saunders distinguish amateur writers of the renaissance from the professionals (and laureates, in Helgerson’s case). Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1983) 28; Saunders, *The Profession of English Letters* (London: Routledge; Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1964) 31-48.

⁷⁶ For an account of this society see Joan Evans, *A History of the Society of Antiquaries* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1956).

⁷⁷ Evans, *Antiquaries* 16.

Roial, or Royal Academy.⁷⁸ Robert Cotton, George Chapman, Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, among other literary figures, were proposed as members.⁷⁹ While they were not successful in founding an English academy, such communities, as Gair says, ‘continued to set a pattern for literary co-operation,’ which would be continued informally in the activities of the circle at Great Tew.⁸⁰

The English Clubs

Although later than the period I shall be concerned with, the clubs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries deserve consideration as a uniquely English form of community which might provide a supportive forum for writers. Like the Italian Academies, most of these clubs enjoyed an ephemeral existence, tied to the social habits and shifting interests of their members. They rarely outlived their founding generation. Historically, the purely literary club or society as an organised grouping was a relatively late development in early modern England. The earliest records of clubs of writers and literati from the early modern period suggest such groups arose from pre-established social and/or political contexts, and that their literary interests, while they may have formed a part of their activities, did not constitute these groups’ first *raison d’etre*. Even at the gatherings of the Apollo Room at the Devil Tavern, the role for poetry laid out in Jonson’s *Leges Conviviales* (which Bruce Boehrer translates as ‘Laws of Feasting’) implies it was conviviality and not literary pursuits *per se* that provided a focus for this group. The first half of the *Leges* is concerned with the choice of guests and the quality of the victuals;

⁷⁸ Evans, *Antiquaries* 16-19.

⁷⁹ Baugh and Cable, 264.

⁸⁰ Gair, 35.

the second, with the entertainment and the behaviour of the guests, and it is in this context that poetry is mentioned:

16. Admisso; risu, tripudiis, choreis, cantu, salibus, omni gratiarum festiuitate
sacra celebrantor.

17. Joci sine felle sunt.

18. Insipida poemata nulla recitantor.

19. Versus scribere, nullus cogitor.

20. Argumentationis totus strepitus abesto.

21. Amatoriis querelis, ac suspiriis, liber angulus esto.

22. Lapitharum more scyphis pugnare, vitrea collidere, fenestras excutere,
supellectilem dilacerare, nefas esto.

23. Qui foràs vel dicta, vel facta, eliminat, eliminator.⁸¹

Alexander Brome's rendering of these lines in English in his second edition of *Songs and Other Poems* (1664) is of interest as Brome himself was a son of Ben:

With laughing, leaping, dancing, jests and songs

And what'er else to grateful mirth belongs

Let's celebrate our feasts. And let us see

That all our jests without reflection be;

Insipid poems let no man rehearse,

⁸¹Ben Jonson, *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson, Oxford Authors Ser. (Oxford: OUP, 1985) 510. Quotations from Jonson's poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number. See also Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *The Fury of Men's Gullets: Ben Jonson and the Digestive Canal* (Philadelphia, PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997) p. 69 for a modern translation.

Nor any be compelled to write a verse.
 All noise of vain disputes must be forborne,
 And let no lover in a corner mourn.
 To fight and brawl like Hectors let none dare,
 Glasses or windows break, or hangings tear.
 Whoe'er shall publish what's here done or said
 From our Society must be banishèd: (22-31)⁸²

In the preoccupation of the *Leges* with good wining, dining and beneath it all the threat of violence (as well as the banishment of the *umbra*, the 'shadow' or uninvited guest; *Leges*, 1) we can see an engagement with convivial literature. The Dionysian and Apollonian impulses identified earlier as influences in the formation of late medieval literary communities are evident in the organisation of the Apollo group, and the rules themselves turn on a tension between these two impulses. The activities of the Apollo group are painted by Jonson as exclusive and esoteric: these gatherings are billed as the place of witty, wine-fuelled conversation, but poetry itself is at best presented as an optional corollary to this. On the one hand, the recitation of insipid poetry is banned (which might suggest that Jonson demanded only the best poetry on such occasions, and that his standards were exacting). Yet in the nineteenth rule, 'Versus scribere, nullus cogitor,' we hear that no one is to be forced to write poetry, almost as if the group was intended as a refuge from versifying rather than a spur to it. However, the notion that the group -- or its activities -- could (or should) act as a spur to poetic inspiration is present in the set of

⁸² This text is taken from *Ben Jonson*, ed. Donaldson, 511. It was originally published in Brome's *Songs and Other Poems*, 2nd ed. (London: Brome, 1664) 325-26. Donaldson's edition has more modernised spelling.

verses Jonson wrote for the doorway of the Apollo room in which wine becomes the ‘poets’ horse’ (13) on which the whole company (‘you all’; 14) may be mounted. Such contradictory impressions of its aims and activities help to create an exclusive, but at the same time intriguingly paradoxical identity for this equivocally ‘literary’ club.⁸³

Timothy Raylor notes that the terms favoured for seventeenth-century clubs included ‘society’, ‘fraternity’ and ‘order,’ which suggests continuity with the earlier European literary groups.⁸⁴ The model for such groups could be fraternal, scholarly, religious, familial, chivalric or classical in origin, and sometimes a mixture of these: viz. *the Tribe [or Sons] of Ben; the Priests of Apollo, the Order [or Family] of Fancy*, or various *convivia philosophica* (including the circle at Great Tew).⁸⁵ The eighteenth-century clubs, both real and fictional, demonstrate the same variety. Whilst the name might suggest something of the nature of the group, abstract terms like ‘college,’ ‘order,’ ‘club,’ and ‘society’ do not always enable us to distinguish between them in terms of their literary activities and may be used interchangeably of the same group by different writers associated with it. What they do reveal is the ongoing tendency within the membership of such groups to adopt fictional identities for themselves, both corporately and individually. These kinds of fictions are often played out in the social structures of these societies and in the writings they produce within their own coteries. They usually involve a recasting of the community into a particular model of social relations or encourage members to take up play-names or roles which were only meaningful within

⁸³ On the equivocal nature of the *Leges* generally see Boehrer, pp. 72-74.

⁸⁴ Timothy Raylor, *Cavaliers, Clubs and Literary Culture: Sir John Mennes, James Smith, and the Order of Fancy* (Newark, NJ: U of Delaware P; London and Toronto: Associated UP, 1994) 69-70.

⁸⁵ For an example of an early seventeenth-century *convivium philosophicum* configured in literature see Michael Strachan, *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate*, (London: Oxford UP, 1962) 142-44.

the perimeters of the community, just as a number of the academies and medieval ‘orders’ and ‘courts’ had done.

One of the more famous instances of projecting fictionalised or play-identities occurs in one of Thomas Coryate’s letter of 1615, in which he addresses the *Sireniacs*, one of the shifting groups of writers, ‘wits,’ and inns-of-court men who congregated at the Mermaid Tavern:

To the High Seneschall of the Right Worthship^{ful} Fraternitie of Sireniacal
Gentlemen, that meet the first Fridaie of euery Moneth, at the ^{signe} of the Mere-
Maide in Bread-streete in London, [...] ⁸⁶

The playful nature of this address is evident at once. Coryate acknowledges a hierarchical structure in the group he addresses and the element of ritual in its proceedings as a group that meets regularly at a particular place and time. The reference to the Seneschal refers to the actual title of a position held by a member of this group, and the nod to the fraternities, similarly, links it with the traditional social groupings of medieval culture. Perhaps the imposition of alternative identities onto a group by its members can be taken as one mark of a distinctively literary coterie. Having found a responsive audience, it is not surprising that the writers attached to such a group should turn their creative impulses inwards as well as outwards, transforming and re-organising the group according to the shaping narrative structures of fiction. However, this could also shift the identity of the group itself, and some of its activities, into the realm of the literary. As Michelle

⁸⁶ Thomas Coryate, *Thomas Coriate Traueller for the English Wits: Greeting from the Court of the Great Mogul, Resident at the Towne of Asmere, in Easterne India* (London: Iagard and Fetherstone, 1616) 37.

O'Callaghan says of Coryate's references to the Sireniacal Gentlemen, 'the textual nature of these traces of a tavern society or societies suggests that it [the Mermaid Tavern] was as much a textual space as a lived space.'⁸⁷

There are literally hundreds of examples of this propensity towards the creation of, and participation in, fictions of corporate identity in both the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century clubs. The self-fictionalising impulse can also be seen among groups that were not at all literary, like the disreputable orders of the Bugle and the Blue who went around terrorising Londoners after dusk. As in the case of the medieval courtly communities, these projections of alternative identities onto the literary group by its members admit a number of sociological explanations, and Stephen Greenblatt's analysis of the self-fashioning strategies of writers is also relevant to ideas of group-fashioning here.⁸⁸ Self-fashioning relates to group fashioning, in that self-fashioning is normally played out as a decision to align oneself with the values of one community and reject those of another.

Timothy Raylor's study of the Order (or Family) of Fancy, a group of dissolute young Cavalier poets, provides a useful analysis of ways in which the alternative casting of identity offered through the structures and activities of such a group might have appealed to its members. Contemporary commentary on this club tells us that it included players as well as the younger sons of aristocratic families, that its members engaged in heavy drinking, and that they competed in producing 'nonsense' and grading it for

⁸⁷ Michelle O'Callaghan, 'Tavern Societies, the Inns of Court, and the Culture of Conviviality in Early Seventeenth-Century London,' *A Pleasing Sinne: Drink and Conviviality in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Adam Smyth, *Studies in Renaissance Literature* 14 (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) 46.

⁸⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1980).

wittiness.⁸⁹ As Raylor demonstrates, those surviving verse epistles sent between members of the group tell us much about its aims and functions:

From these fragments one may perceive the outline of a group of ambitious young malcontents, anxious about their status within society, keen to better themselves within the available social channels, and determined also to seek psychological release from the place in society to which they were consigned. Such release was achieved through the deployment of a variety of 'social creativity strategies.' Through fraternal bonding, the members of the order created an alternative society that would favor qualities they possessed but which were ignored by society at large.⁹⁰

The Family increased their sense of solidarity by insulting other groups in public in ways that sought to make their own club appear more favorably, and, in Raylor's words, 'sought to escape from social restrictions through drunkenness, through imagination, and through the use of nonsense.'⁹¹ These social 'restrictions' were linked to the tenor of its membership, which was largely drawn from the younger sons of the gentry and 'alienated' middle-class intellectuals. In this way, Raylor concludes that the Family:

[...] acted as a kind of mutual support group [for such persons]. Its structure established strong fraternal - and paternal - bonds of loyalty between members

⁸⁹ Raylor, 84.

⁹⁰ Raylor, 102.

⁹¹ Raylor, 103.

who sought opportunities to assist one another [...]. On a more general level [it] constituted a kind of surrogate family in which privileges of birth and the unjust system of primogeniture were exchanged for a system of intellectual meritocracy in which one stood or fell on one's own abilities. Massinger may have had a paternal role, but it was the wittiest 'son' (the member who spoke the best nonsense) not the eldest, who was given the best seat at meetings.⁹²

As such the group offered its members a refuge from the values of a world which had marginalized them. The same trends can be seen in the Greek clubs of *hetaireiai* whose drunken symposia frequently led to acts subversion and dissidence, a point which Oswyn Murray makes explicit: 'like the *hetaireia*, the club was a defence against a hostile world, an alternative way of life defined by its refusal to accept the values of conventional society.'⁹³

Conversely, there are many cases in which the construction of a group identity via the club could also empower its members to engage with the world through its collective mask and challenge those conventions, giving them the freedom to write quite differently from their usual authorial personas. This was the case with one of the most famous English literary clubs, the Scriblerus Club (fl. 1714) begun by Pope, Congreve, Arbuthnot, Swift and others.⁹⁴ This group conceived of the character of Martinus Scriblerus, a fictional scholar, through whose memoirs the club 'was to have ridiculed all

⁹² Raylor, 103.

⁹³ Oswyn Murray, 'An Affair of the Mysteries: Democracy and the Drinking Group,' *Sympotica*, ed. Murray, 159.

⁹⁴ Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. James M. Osborn, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 56.

the false tastes in learning.’⁹⁵ The club collaborated on this project together, sometimes writing individual items for the memoirs separately, and sometimes in conjunction with others. Pope also used the pseudonym on other occasions for his own purposes, and later asserted that ‘it was from a part of these memoirs that Dr. Swift took his first hints for Gulliver.’⁹⁶

One characteristic feature of early modern literary clubs is the sending of verse epistles between members. These might be concerned with the giving and accepting of social invitations and the arrangements pertaining to them. Jonson’s ‘Inviting a Friend to Supper’ is in this vein, and the existence of Hoccleve’s lines to Henry Somer concerning a forthcoming feast of the *Court de Bone Compagnie* suggests some continuity between the late medieval and early modern practice. Raylor suggests that the sending and receiving of poetry in this way could actually signal the desire to start a club, remarking that: ‘in his poem “On the Muses of his Friend M. Drayton” Jonson denies that this, the first poem to Drayton, marks an intent to ‘raise a riming club / About the towne,’ implying that such an intent might be construed merely from the evidence of one poem.’⁹⁷ Other kinds of occasional verse arising from a club context in the seventeenth century include laudatory verses on the club itself or clubbing in general, and idylls of feasting (or, more often, drinking) which link them, at least by affectation, with Greek and Roman practice. Political and satirical verse was often circulated among members, and it was common to write complimentary verse on the publication of each other’s literary works (which might then be printed with the works themselves if their authors were of sufficient stature).

⁹⁵ Spence, 56

⁹⁶ Spence, 56

⁹⁷ Raylor, 75.

Another tendency of the English club which is worth noting is its penchant for sealing itself off from outsiders, both unconsciously through the channelling of literary impulses towards internal goals, and consciously by forbidding members to ‘publish’ the activities of the club or its literature, or allow non-initiates to attend meetings. However, there is also a sense in which the very secrecy of the club could be part of its strategy of advertising itself as an elite to be envied by the outside world. As Thomas Boehrer notes, the fact that the *Leges Conviviales*, or Sociable Rules, were painted above the Apollo Room at the Devil Tavern demonstrates how, paradoxically, ‘the Apollo Room’s elite hermeticism manifests itself again and again in public pronouncements [...]. It is as if the privacy of the club existed precisely so that it could be transformed into a kind of public literary spectacle.’⁹⁸

The host-spaces of literary communities

In previous sections I have discussed the *symposion*, *convivium*, fraternity or guild, academy, and club as particular models of literary communities available to late medieval and/or early modern writers. I want now to offer some discussion of the host-spaces that might spawn writers in these periods. Some (the Court, the Church and the Universities) were institutions that functioned as literary communities in their own right (that is, as communities which encouraged literacy and literature for their own ends: viz. diversion, diplomacy, devotion or instruction, or a mixture of these) and generated their own kinds of literary groupings (such as the goliards or the play ‘courts’ and ‘orders’ of French courtly society). Some host-spaces (such as the tavern, and the domestic spaces of the

⁹⁸ Boehrer, 77.

private house, country retreat and salon) might be better described as neutral congregational zones that provided a forum for informal literary groupings. In the discussion below, I will be devoting most space to the court as the one site of literary community that links all of the writers in this study in one capacity or another.

The Court

A great deal has been written on the court as a forum for literary culture in medieval and early modern Europe, with opinions ranging as to the relative importance of the court as opposed to the town or city in determining literary fashion, and the degree of support it offered writers. Whilst the value placed on literary culture obviously varied at different courts and at different points in history, the court as a construct continued to play an important role in the setting of literary fashions throughout the medieval and early modern period. As Malcolm Vale concludes, both the 'high', and 'late' medieval periods, saw the European courts as 'a focus and forum of literary activity [which] functioned as both a centre and a vehicle for the reception and dissemination of primarily French literary themes and genres.'⁹⁹ In England, French and Burgundian fashions were an important influence on English court culture from the reigns of Richard II to Henry VIII, the focal period of this study.

While the English court acknowledged the importance of literature by inculcating the value of polite letters in its courtiers, royal or aristocratic commissions did not provide a reliable source of patronage for writers *per se*, because literature was not yet granted the status of a profession. In this respect, the scribes and stationers who copied

⁹⁹ Vale, 287.

and disseminated their texts were generally better off. Although they did not partake of the derivative gentility the household poet gained from his association with the court, the scribes and stationers had other benefits from belonging to the artisan classes: guilds to look after their interests, and an acknowledgement that they deserved remuneration for their work. England's relatively casual approach to rewarding men of letters dismayed the continental humanists who sought patronage from English nobles in the fifteenth century, and who perpetuated the notion that England was, relatively speaking, a cultural backwater. Lydgate is the first English writer known to have asked for financial compensation for his services as a poet, twice requesting money from his patron Humphrey of Gloucester in the *Fall of Princes*. Green describes this as 'a fairly daring suggestion' for its time, adding that 'it is doubtful Lydgate would have been able to go so far had it not been for the obvious practical, almost professional, value to his patron of the work he was translating.'¹⁰⁰

In England, writers often gained employment at the court as chaplains or secretaries (and, later, as diplomats and orators) as was the case in other European courts. Such employment might restrict their opportunities for writing, but it also offered them occasions for literary exchanges with other writers. As Green demonstrates, men like Chaucer, who had the good fortune to be fostered out as pages to courtly households, were put through an educational program that allowed them to participate in European literary culture.¹⁰¹ In this way, access to courtly circles encouraged the formation of friendships between men with literary interests and heightened their sense of belonging to an international community of literati. Where there was a high number of talented writers

¹⁰⁰ Green, *Poets* 156-57.

¹⁰¹ Green, *Poets* 71-100.

and literati attached, even loosely, to a particular court this seems often to have had a positive effect on the range and quality of their literary productions. As John Benton notes in his study of Marie de Champagne's court as a literary centre:

The remarkable literary flowering of twelfth century France grew from the fruitful meeting of representatives of different intellectual traditions [...] This mixing occurred most often at the courts of great lords, either because authors met personally in that varied and changing society or because they wrote for an audience which they knew had sophisticated and eclectic tastes.¹⁰²

Although the court provided a forum for writers and literati to meet, Benton suggests that the importance of direct personal contact between writers at great courts was not so significant as the opportunity for them to hear each other's works read in that environment. If a ruler really wanted to reward an author for his writing: 'the grant of a quiet prebend as a canon would encourage more future writing than a post at the busy court.'¹⁰³ On the other hand, the contacts that an aspiring writer could make at court were significant, and the role of courts in attracting men of letters was perceived by authors themselves to be an important part of a cultural education. As late as the eighteenth century we find Johnson advising Boswell, if he is going to travel, to go 'where there are courts and learned men.'¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² John F. Benton, 'The Court of Champagne as a Literary Centre,' *Culture, Power and Personality in Medieval France*, ed. Thomas N. Bisson (1961; London: Hambledon, 1991) 3.

¹⁰³ Benton, 5.

¹⁰⁴ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 290.

The court, both regal and legal, as a meta-construct is significant in providing a setting in which authors could place reading and writing communities. This in turn is a good indicator of what kind of literary communities we should expect them to be. In literature, courts are frequently envisaged as places of literary exchange and refined conversation, and provide a fictional setting for many philosophical conversations (such as those concerning an ideal courtier in Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano*, for example) just as the *symposia* and the *convivia* had done in antiquity. By convention, it was often a noble or royal figure at the centre of a court whose authority was called upon to settle debates (as in Castiglione's court of Urbino, Machaut's *jugement* poems or Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*) and it was not only in fiction that royalty was called upon to arbitrate in literary quarrels, as Christine de Pizan's involvement of Isabeau of Bavaria in the *Querelle de la Rose* demonstrates.¹⁰⁵

That the trope of courts as a vehicle for judgments on morals, manners and taste should be commonplace in fiction is perhaps unsurprising given that the manifestation of power in its most idealised form was frequently envisaged to be that of a wise monarch, able and honest ministers, and dutiful subjects. To medieval and early modern audiences the court was more than just a community *per se*: it was also a structure of power, a cultural and social cynosure, and a law-making institution with all the associations of morality and authority that entailed. In spite of the deep ambivalence felt by many towards courts as actual institutions (which itself spawned a current of anti-courtly literature that railed against the court's worldly vices), the court as an embodiment of

¹⁰⁵ Further see *La Querelle de la Rose: Letters and Documents*, ed. Joseph L. Baird and John R. Cane (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1978).

divinely-ordained power featured as a locus for human, and indeed early humanist, aspirations represented a possible vehicle of earthly glory.

The image of the court both as a structure of power, and as an image of literary community, is frequently used as a model for literary communities, as in the case of the *puy*s and chambers of rhetoric. On other occasions, as John Stevens puts it, the device of the court became not merely a literary fiction, but ‘a formula for courtly ‘pleyinge’.’¹⁰⁶ The example of the *Cour d’Amour* (Court of Love) is a case in point. This court had its roots in both the urban, bourgeois model of the *puy*s and the chivalric orders of knighthood, as is evident in the huge roll of members with their heraldic devices, and in the establishment of its charter, which was ‘published’ at the Hôtel d’Artois, the Parisian residence of the Duke of Burgundy, on St Valentine’s Day, 1400.¹⁰⁷ The charter, drafted by the ‘prince’, Pierre de Hauteville, tells us that the court was formed during an epidemic of the plague as a way of passing the time more graciously, much like that of the fictional community of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. The roll of members listed for *Cour d’Amour* indicate that it was peopled by dignitaries from a whole range of groupings within French society both noble and bourgeois, including various rankings of clerical and lay persons, and ‘contained all the offices or functions of a royal court’ at a detailed level (for example, ministers, judges, treasurers, hunters, gardeners, secretaries).¹⁰⁸ Many eminent figures are on the list of the court’s charter, including those who could not have been present at its establishment. This suggests that it functioned at a symbolic as well as at a literal level. Indeed, Richard Firth Green suggests that the real origins of this court

¹⁰⁶ John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court*, Cambridge Studies in Music (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 167.

¹⁰⁷ 1401 according to our modern calendar.

¹⁰⁸ Jacqueline Cerquiglini, ‘1401, St Valentine’s Day: Trials of Eros,’ *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 115.

are in fact traceable to a modest gathering of Isabelle of Bavaria's household at Mantes.¹⁰⁹

The practices of the court as they are revealed in its literature aligned it in many ways with the *puy*s. It instituted its own literary festival, a *puy d'amour*, on the first Sunday of each month and auspicious days like St. Valentine's Day and festivals of the Virgin. Its members were supposed to dedicate themselves to humility, loyalty, and to the honouring, praising and serving of all ladies and maids. Like the *puy*s, its activities included 'the composition of ballads on a given refrain and poems in honor of the Virgin, dinners and masses as well as debates and decisions on questions of love' on which it passed its own laws.¹¹⁰ Discussing the function and purposes of the *Cour d'Amour* in *La Couleur de la Mélancholie*, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet comments that the court was in effect: 'un jeu de roles, dont le principe est d'acquérir de la louange, de la renommée.'¹¹¹ This game was played using serious juridical language, in which 'la codification minutieuse est à la fois amusement et trace d'une angoisse.'¹¹² The careful recording of the court's activities constituted an attempt to preserve values which some at least of its members perceived to be waning. In this way it was a defence against chaos and instability, and, in Cerquiglini-Toulet's terms, the pervasive *mélancholie* of the age.

The analysis of this court reveals a number of interesting points about the function of literature within this kind of courtly community. First, that although this was not the final end of such a court, it did set out to encourage a high standard of writing in its poetic productions. The poems submitted by its members were to be judged strictly and

¹⁰⁹ Richard Firth Green, 'The Familia Regis and the Familia Cupidinis,' *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (New York: St Martins P, 1983) 89.

¹¹⁰ Cerquiglini, '1401,' 114.

¹¹¹ Cerquiglini-Toulet, *Mélancholie*, 53.

¹¹² Cerquiglini-Toulet, *Mélancholie*, 50.

impartially according to prevailing rhetorical ideals: no obvious defects of rhyme, metre or line-length were to be present in the winning verses. Secondly, the desire to establish the fame of the court for posterity ensured that the court had obvious value as both a social and literary spectacle in which, as Cerquiglioni-Toulet observes, ‘le jeu de l’amour ne se joue plus dans la chambre des dames... mais devant la galerie.’¹¹³ This leads us to reflect on the tendency of lyric love poetry, especially in this period, to appeal to a double audience: the lady or ladies who occasioned it, as a reality or fictional construct, and the particular group of readers beyond the framed recipient who enjoyed playing this game (the *familia Cupidinis*, generally a predominantly masculine community of urbane clerics and courtiers). Thirdly, membership of such a group permitted the construction of an alternative identity for its players, allowing them to act out their shared values in ways that differentiated them from non-members -- an idea which will be elaborated on in conjunction with the final point: that this identity was also constituted along factional lines (in this case that of the Burgundian faction).

Christine de Pizan’s *Ordre de la Rose*, founded a year later, represented another quasi-heraldic order in the name of love, but proclaiming an allegiance to the Orleans faction. While the Order of the Rose was not a real order any more than the *Cour d’Amour* was a proper court, its conception was similar to that of existing chivalric orders, and like the *Cour d’Amour* it sought to establish a hierarchy of moral worthiness. Writing about the establishment of the order in the *Dit de la Rose*, Christine creates a vision in which the goddess of Loyalty appears to her as the messenger of Love and describes the need for the founding of an order to combat the slandering of virtuous women (and perhaps also, it is implied, the behaviour of certain disreputable members of

¹¹³ Cerquiglioni-Toulet, *Mélancholie*, 54.

the *Cour d'Amour*). The goddess speaks of an elect band of nobility, noble by virtue of their moral worthiness rather than their lineage, who are fit to wear the rose, the badge of the order, which is in turn to be given out by an elect band of ladies that Christine is to identify. The device of the rose is for Christine a construct that empowers women, within the framing social fiction of the game of love, to ennoble those men they choose to ennoble, and create their own badge of honour for the purpose of doing this.

Both of these groups can be seen to contain a literary dimension (and perhaps to have been more 'literary' than realised constructs) but neither could be said to have the production of literature *per se* as their chief concern. Rather, they made use of poetry as one of a number of means of playing a part in a complex social fiction that was essentially concerned with the assertion of their values and aspirations, social, moral and political. However, the community itself - whether real or ideal or a mixture of both - was also a vehicle for bringing those values into being, of incarnating them symbolically within a human institution. Huizinga sums this up rather poetically by asserting that, in the case of the *Cour d'Amour*, 'the cause of chivalry triumphed in the form of a literary salon.'¹¹⁴ It was in the ideals inherent in the concept and statutes of such play courts, orders and companies that the values of the age were given expression, and life enjoined to imitate art. In practice, the relationship between life and art is far more dynamic in this respect: it is notable, for instance, how earlier medieval forms of literary community like the *puy*s and courts of love replicate contemporary structures of power internally, exhibiting a divide between ideals of social hierarchy and social parity (as with the customs of feasts of the medieval guilds). With this in mind, the distinction between real

¹¹⁴ J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, trans F. Hopman (Harmondsworth: Peregrine-Penguin, 1965) 112.

and imaginary forms of literary community becomes less important. Actual chivalric institutions like the Order of the Garter and wholly fictional ones like the Provençal courts of love could fulfil the same function of promoting ideal constructions of social relationships. Furthermore, the idealistic standards of behaviour championed at the imaginary love courts had the advantage of not being undermined by the failings of an all-too-human membership.

In his discussion of the courts of love as part of the ‘game’ of love in courtly literature, John Stevens offers the opinion that the ‘grand and pompous’ scale of the French *Cour d’Amour* presupposes the existence of smaller institutions along similar lines elsewhere.¹¹⁵ He concludes that, despite the lack of evidence for such courts in England, ‘the circumstantial evidence for them is strong,’ given the fact that the English aristocracy were keen to participate in French culture.¹¹⁶ There is a considerable number of references to literary or quasi-literary institutions of a courtly nature within English poetry of the period, but the poetic nature of these references make it difficult to ascertain whether they had any kind of reality off the page, as, for example, with the orders of the Flower and the Leaf depicted in the fifteenth-century poem of the same name.

Richard Firth Green takes a more pessimistic view than Stevens, concluding that ‘what objective historical evidence there is [of the existence of such communities] is negative, suggesting, as we should expect, that if the courts of love achieved any degree of realisation at all [in England] it must have been on a very modest scale.’¹¹⁷ However, literary works in the English courtly tradition reveal their familiarity with the courts of

¹¹⁵ Stevens, *Music and Poetry* 165.

¹¹⁶ Stevens, *Music and Poetry* 165.

¹¹⁷ Green, ‘Familia Regis,’ 102.

love in their cultural literary debates, companies of the flower and the leaf, and other kinds of courtly pastimes. When discussing such literary communities, we must be aware of how frequently they were fictionalised and fashioned in language by their participants, blurring the boundaries between the real and the ideal, and consider the effect of imagined literary communities on individual writers and writing practices. Whatever their degree of realisation, these socio-literary communities form part of the symbolic language of the court which might be utilized in jousts, pageants and spectacles. Established festivals, both secular and Christian, might produce occasions for participation in such quasi-literary games such as the acting out of Robin Hood fictions in courtly and civic culture for May-day celebrations and the nomination of ‘lords of misrule’ in wealthy households to supervise entertainments at Christmas.¹¹⁸

The extent to which such literary and quasi-literary communities achieved an actual realisation in English culture is perhaps less important than the fact that all of the writers in this study knew what kind of society these communities belonged to, what kind of values they incarnated, and what kind of literary traditions gave birth to them. The invocation of courtly communities by English writers will be discussed further in subsequent chapters with reference to the ways in which identification with or isolation from such communities allows the writer playfully to negotiate his own position within the community of the court and its literary ‘games’ of love.

¹¹⁸ For some further examples see the section on sports and pastimes in John Stow, *The Survey of London* (1598), ed. H. B. Wheatley (London: Dent, 1987) 84-91.

The Church

Christianity placed a special value on literacy and promoted itself as a literary community. Epistolary culture was an important feature of the church from its earliest origins, both for communicating with, and strengthening, new or potential converts to the faith, and -- as the Church grew in size and influence -- as a means of administering individual church communities at a distance, and of mediating friendships and intellectual life within them. In the Middle Ages, the Church's common language was Latin: the language of theological debate, of pastoral administration of the Church across a wide area, and most importantly of the liturgy, which as Peter Burke says, 'encouraged a sense of tradition, which might be defined as membership of a community that includes the dead as well as the living.'¹¹⁹

Until the later Middle Ages, literacy was traditionally the province of the cleric, and most writers of secular romance were in orders, creating a humorous divide between the knightly figures that appeared in romance fictions of love and adventure and the clerics who wrote about them. The stereotypes of the literate *clericus* and illiterate *laicus* continued into the 1300s and 1400s, even if by this time the distinction between literate and non-literate was more fluid than this simple designation of roles allowed (for example, Chaucer's Franklin refers to himself as 'a burel man' to account for his lack of rhetorical training in the prologue to his tale).¹²⁰ Even in the later Middle Ages, many

¹¹⁹ Burke, *Languages* 49.

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Franklin's Prologue,' *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988) 716. All quotations from Chaucer's poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

household poets were in orders as priests or chaplains (including, with relevance for this study, William Dunbar and John Skelton).

The medieval Church was not an indiscriminating promoter of creative literature *per se*; its aversion to paganism and licentiousness acted as a check on certain kinds of fiction and popular entertainment, and the opportunities it found for mediating faith and illuminating doctrine through rhetoric made it keener to foster others (such as religious plays, sermons and hagiography).¹²¹ In medieval England, religion (along with bureaucracy) was a key motivating force behind the formation of a national, literate culture.¹²² At a parish level, the Church encouraged private devotional reading, and religious and liturgical drama. In his *Survey of London* (1598), John Stow notes how from the twelfth century, the medieval Londoners outstripped the Ancient Romans in piety, for instead of ‘shows upon theatres, and comical pastimes,’ the city ‘hath holy plays, representations of miracles, which holy confessors have wrought, or representations of torments wherein the constancy of martyrs appeared.’¹²³

More significant was the part played by the monasteries in encouraging the production of literature -- both scribal and authorial -- and in their diligent archiving of texts.¹²⁴ The importance of the monastic orders as centres of learning and literature varied from century to century, and house to house. The history of monasticism in England saw periods of anti-intellectualism or even hostility to letters, in which religious houses were run more as businesses and independent reading was discouraged or replaced by an

¹²¹ Further see the discussion of the Church’s role in Clopper, 63-107.

¹²² See Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Languages and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983); and M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066 – 1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

¹²³ Stow, 84.

¹²⁴ Christopher Cannon, ‘Monastic Productions,’ *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998) 319.

increased concentration on the liturgy. In an assessment of monasticism's influence on the English literary tradition, Christopher Cannon asserts that its chief importance lay

[...] less in the way monastic life encouraged writing than in the resilient and successful institutional structures monasticism provided for preserving writing... and the way in which this writing tended to create (and then to recreate) a milieu in which British writers and writing *could* flourish.¹²⁵

In this way, the existence of the monasteries as self-perpetuating literary communities which included, until their dissolution, the libraries of the greater monastic houses such as Durham, St Albans, Bury St Edmunds or Christ Church, Canterbury, preserved the nation's most substantial repositories of literature, and thus helped to create the conditions necessary for a sense of literary tradition to emerge.

Despite periods of neglect or decline in literary activities, the culture of monasticism also created the conditions for the production and consumption of certain genres of writing within its walls: in particular history, hagiography, letters, sermons and other literary stimuli to devotion, as well as books of *sententiae* and *florilegia*.¹²⁶ As Derek Pearsall suggests, an abbey in the fifteenth century may not have been unlike Oxford and Cambridge colleges in the eighteenth: 'wealthy, privileged, celibate, rich in books and heavy with tradition, learned and scholarly, though often in an antiquarian

¹²⁵ Cannon, 319-20.

¹²⁶ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham UP, 1961) 187-232.

way.¹²⁷ I will be examining the place of monastic culture in shaping vernacular writers further in chapter three as part of my discussion of Lydgate's literary career.

The University

The medieval university has been described as 'an academic guild,' an all-male collegiate community in which students and masters lived together in close proximity.¹²⁸ Although not all the members of a college were in holy orders, many were, and the character and discipline of the medieval college were inherently clerical. However, it was not exclusively so, as R. N. Swanson argues:

While life in a university college superficially matches a monastic existence, with the communal life, livery, liturgical demands, probationary periods and oaths of admission, the parallels are imprecise. Similarities with other bodies -- secular collegiate churches, and fraternities -- are also important. The statutes [of Oxford and Cambridge colleges] emphasise the idealised community, its members enjoined to live together in charity and fraternity.¹²⁹

The charity and fraternity of this idealised community were, however, not always amenable to communal literary entertainments among its members. The medieval

¹²⁷ Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge, 1970) 27.

¹²⁸ Alan B. Cobban, *The Medieval English Universities: Oxford and Cambridge to c. 1500* (Aldershot: Scolar P, 1988) 8.

¹²⁹ R. N. Swanson, 'Ideals and Imagination in Medieval University and College Foundations,' *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities, 1200-1630*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees Jones (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) 51.

universities in England prohibited most kinds of non-academic amusements, including plays and music.¹³⁰ The university authorities often forbade plays and gaming, even chess, in the colleges and halls in case they distracted students from their studies. Some relaxation of these rules was allowed at Christmas and other festival seasons when minstrels or mummers might visit the college, and a 'lord of misrule' or Christmas king was appointed (in Oxford, formularies survive containing a mock-correspondence between rival Christmas kings).¹³¹ Story-telling by the fire and the reading of poems, chronicles and travel narratives might also be allowed in the hall at this season.¹³² Plays that were deemed to be of a religious or educational value might be 'grudgingly tolerated.'¹³³ The university drama as an internal generic development of academic culture began to flourish only in the early modern period (Skelton's lost play, *Achademios*, may have been intended for this setting). Even then, 'the comedies which began to be acted in the halls or colleges towards the end of the fifteenth century form almost the only amusement of an intellectual character which relieved the stern monotony of academic life.'¹³⁴

Scholars at the universities originated their own distinctive traditions of light poetry which reflect the character and preoccupations of the scholarly community. Examples might include traditions of misogynistic verse, *clerc et chevalier* debates, and goliardic poetry (the *ordo vagorum*, an 'order' of wandering scholars, provides an interesting model of a Bacchanalian community of scholar-rebels which produced its own

¹³⁰ Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. and revd. F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 419-424.

¹³¹ Cobban, 373.

¹³² Rashdall, 424.

¹³³ Cobban, 377.

¹³⁴ Rashdell, 424-5.

distinctive brand of Latin verse).¹³⁵ More pervasive, perhaps, is the influence that training in the schools exerted on the fictional writings of many of its graduates, both stylistically and in terms of their intellectual content. These currents of scholarly discourse (especially the encyclopaedic approach to knowledge) were popularised and incorporated into the larger discourse of courtly literature as a whole via medieval ‘bestsellers’ like the *Roman de la Rose*.

In England, medieval students were usually sent to university in their mid-teens, and began their studies with a general arts course that included both arts and sciences.¹³⁶ Rhetoric and grammar were the two branches of the liberal arts that might concern themselves with the composition of poetry. The medieval rhetorical arts included *ars poetica* (the art of poetry) as well as *ars dictaminis* (the art of letter writing) and *ars praedicandi* (the art of preaching). By the later Middle Ages, the first two were usually taught as part of the instruction provided in grammar, with more attention being paid to the second than to the art of poetry (which reached its zenith in the high Middle Ages, and is represented by treatises like Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria Nova* c.1210). Students studying grammar could, however, expect to become familiar with a variety of literary authors (among them, Cicero and Virgil). Such training allowed students to develop an interest in poetry and the language skills to engage with classical literature (and we might note that the link between poetry and learning is fundamental for most medieval writers, who often describe the great pagan authors as ‘clerks’ with apparent unselfconsciousness). In the later Middle Ages ‘poet laureate’ became an academic title,

¹³⁵ On the goliards see Helen Waddell, *The Wandering Scholars: The Life and Art of the Lyric Poets of the Latin Middle Ages* (1927; New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1961).

¹³⁶ An account of the subjects and texts studied on the BA course in late medieval Oxford can be found in G. R. Evans, ‘A Degree in the Liberal Arts,’ *John Wyclif: Myth and Reality* (Oxford: Lion, 2005) 43-66.

a development that may have coincided with the growing interest in humanist studies (a tradition which will be explored further in Chapter Four).

Tied in with notions of the academic community is the *Respublica litterarum* or Republic of Letters: an imagined community of educated readers that stretched across Europe. In this republic *litterae*, or letters, stood for learning as well as literature. This community was essentially a humanist construction, in which fluent Latin was the criterion for membership.¹³⁷ As Peter Burke notes:

This Latin phrase [*Respublica litterarum*] appeared in the early fifteenth century, became more common at the time of Erasmus, and remained in use until the eighteenth century. In this republic, the citizens in the full sense of the term were the scholars, while the second-class citizens were the boys who had attended grammar schools.¹³⁸

The rise of the vernaculars in the later Middle Ages prompted debate about the use of Latin as both a literary and scholarly language. An educated writer's choice of writing in Latin or the vernacular reflected the kind of audience he or she wished to reach. The choice of Chaucer, Hoccleve, Lydgate, Skelton, Wyatt and Surrey to adopt the vernacular for most of their poetic output signals their wish to write for a specifically English literary community. In England, it was part of a poet's task to be the translator or mediator of Latin (or French or Italian) literary culture to the vernacular reader in keeping with his status as a man of letters, that is a figure of literature *and* learning. Ideally, the

¹³⁷ Burke *Languages* 58. See also Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, 1998, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2001).

¹³⁸ Burke, *Languages* 58.

serious writer should also be a member of this international community which, after the fifteenth century, would be known as the *Republica litterarum*.

Finally, two other educational environments that provided literary training of some kind for their members also deserve mention. The Inns of Court represented another all-male community that could support literary entertainments and produced its own poetic coterie; both John Donne and Ben Jonson found coterie audiences for their work within this community.¹³⁹ The administrative offices of the royal household might also play host to aspiring writers (such as Hoccleve) and this latter environment will be considered in my second chapter. In the same way as the debates of the schoolmen entered mainstream literature, legal and bureaucratic forms of discourse such as the testament, the charter and the petition are also to be found in both courtly and popular literature in this period, reflecting the fact that those writers of middling social origins who attained a level of literacy sophisticated enough to pursue literary activities had often received such education in a bureaucratic, legal or scholarly environment.

The Tavern

In the medieval period, tavern culture also spawned its own kind of poetry (R. H. Robbin's collection of popular lyrics in his anthology of fourteenth and fifteenth century secular poetry contains a whole section devoted to drinking songs).¹⁴⁰ Minstrels and players frequently performed at taverns, inns and beer-cellars, and certain inns 'were

¹³⁹ See Marotti, *John Donne* 25-95; Michelle O'Callaghan, 'Ben Jonson, the Lawyers and the Wits,' *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 35-59.

¹⁴⁰ Rossell H. Robbins ed., *Secular Lyrics of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1955) 7-10.

important cultural centres, with the innkeeper acting as impresario or *animateur*.¹⁴¹

Particular public houses, and the regions in which they were located, spawned a culture of public and popular entertainment which might be of a literary nature: in Southwark, plays were being performed in the yard of the Queen's Arms up until the eighteenth century. In Gracechurch Street, The Bell, the Cross Keys and the Bel Sauvage were places where one might see clowns, fencing and plays.¹⁴² John de Cheshunt, Prince of the Puy in the late thirteenth century, owned a tavern called the Tumbling Bear that may have provided a host space for literary entertainments among its mercer clientele.¹⁴³

Michelle O'Callaghan discusses the emerging class-distinction in the early modern period between the ale-houses patronised by the lower-classes, and the 'respectable taverns [which] could provide a relatively privileged space for the performance of elite social identities.'¹⁴⁴ Professional men of the city (drawn largely from the Inns of Court, but not exclusively so) were keen to assert their gentility, and forge political and social links in the elite and convivial society that such venues could provide. Given the social composition of this society, these tavern-based communities were likely to contain writers and literati. While these societies were social and political constructs, and did not generally market themselves as literary clubs in the way that some of the clubs which met at the taverns and coffee-houses of the eighteenth century did, their literary activities often formed an important part their social and political identities. As Callaghan notes:

¹⁴¹ Burke, *Culture* 110.

¹⁴² Burke, *Culture* 110.

¹⁴³ See Anne F. Sutton, 'The "Tumbling Bear" and Its Patrons: A Venue for the London Puy and Mercery,' *London and Europe in the Later Middle Ages*. Ed. Julia Boffey and Pamela King. Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 9. London: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College, U of London, 1995. 85-110.

¹⁴⁴ O'Callaghan, 'Tavern Societies,' 41.

The societies that frequented the Mitre and the Mermaid [taverns] were characterised by their wit and versifying. Poetry in these spaces, in part, appears to function as an aesthetic commodity, a pleasure available to a cultivated elite possessing the requisite education, leisure, and, above all, civility for its appreciation. [...] The tavern societies that frequented the Mitre and the Mermaid may have been talking politics, but all the available evidence indicates that they were also making poetry. Writers in this period speak of taverns as places where the drinking of wine went hand in hand with the making of poetry.¹⁴⁵

Such groups were often able to secure private rooms within the Tavern to separate themselves from other patrons. The Apollo Room at the Devil became associated with the Jonsonian club to the extent of having his verses on the group written above the entrance, and the layout of the room structured hierarchically with a dais where Jonson sat alongside a bust of Apollo. The poet Henry Vaughan (1621-1695) describes the setting for a Tavern meeting in his 'Rhapsody,' which he tells us was: 'Occasionally written upon a meeting with some of his friends at the Globe Tavern, in a Chamber painted over head with a cloudy sky and some few dispersed stars on the sides with land-scapes, hills, shepherds and sheep.'¹⁴⁶ Although the meeting takes place at mid-day, the darkness of the locale and its painted ceiling invites:

¹⁴⁵ O'Callaghan, 'Tavern Societies,' 42.

¹⁴⁶ Henry Vaughan, 'Rhapsody,' *Henry Vaughan: The Complete English Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven: Yale University P, 1976) 40-42. Quotations from this poem are from this edition and are cited by line number.

Our active fancies to believe it night:
 For taverns need no sun, but for a sign,
 Where rich tobacco, and quick tapers shine;
 And royal witty sack, the poet's soul,
 With brighter suns than he doth gild the bowl (2-6)

Vaughan's poem partakes of the spirit of dissolute revelry and symposiastic culture accorded to Club literature in this period, and also found in Alexander Brome's *Songs and Other Poems*.¹⁴⁷ His meeting is thus poised between an Apollonian sense of this poets' meeting being a refutation of the 'riotous, sinful plush' (39) of the world outside the tavern and the stylised decadence of the 'Sack Sonnets' of figures like Suckling and his friends, in which Bacchus figures as the source of wit and inspiration. Taverns that played host to private clubs with literary interests in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London include the Mermaid, Mitre and Devil Taverns, The Bear at the Bridge-foot (where Suckling, Davenant and Jack Young met) and the Turk's Head in Soho (in which Dr Johnson's Literary Club gathered).¹⁴⁸ The Society of Antiquaries also originated from meetings of friends at The Bear in the Strand.¹⁴⁹

Domestic Spaces

If the Bacchic will intrude in the tavern, an alternative 'Apollonian' venue for the more civilized proponent of literary community was the private house and the private chambers

¹⁴⁷ See n. 82.

¹⁴⁸ Boswell, 338-9.

¹⁴⁹ Evans, *Antiquaries* 36.

that replaced the great halls of the earlier medieval period. It is a dinner party in one of the Paris houses of the Duc d'Orleans that provides the setting for Christine de Pizan's *Dit de la Rose* (1402). There, 'en une maison close' (32) (in a private house), the dinner-guests talk 'de beaulx livres et de dis' (71) (of beautiful books and of poetry), and compete amongst themselves to see who can write the best ballads.¹⁵⁰ The forum of the private house was popular with the Renaissance humanists, in whose writing the motif of the company of friends in a private setting is often used as a framing device for narratives of social debate, paralleling the forum of the courtly community. Tied in with the idea of the private house is the more specific ideal of the rustic retreat, in which the removal to the country house or the garden often signals a movement towards an ideal of the simple (and studious) life, and a forum of civilized debate or Utopian enquiry. Such removals create a fictive distance from the present world for a variety of literary purposes (including, more cynically, the literary 'performance' of friendship for a non-coterie audience). This is the context of Wyatt's first epistolary satire to John Poyntz, to be examined in my concluding chapter.

In accordance with the observation of Virginia Woolf that to write requires a room of one's own, and, in consequence, financial independence, the most significant private spaces to attract literary communities tended to be those owned by wealthy individuals or aristocratic families, such as the Sidney family home at Penshurst, Robert Cotton's Library or Lucius Cary's house at Great Tew. Such individuals might create their own ideal retreats in which literary activities could be pursued. So, for example, in the fifteenth century Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, attracted a community of literati

¹⁵⁰ Christine de Pisan, 'Dit de la Rose,' *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster and Mary Carpenter Erler (Leiden: Brill, 1990) 94. Quotations from this poem are from this edition and will be cited by line number.

around himself at his ‘palace of pleasaunce’ at Greenwich, where he pursued his interests as patron and book-collector.¹⁵¹ In the sixteenth century, Surrey was to plan a literary haunt for himself at Surrey house in Norfolk.¹⁵²

The domestic forum could also be a gendered space amenable to female literary activity. If women led a more secluded life than their male counterparts, this did allow them opportunities for cultivating art and literature in the privacy of their own homes if their household incomes permitted it. Women’s reading circles were often situated in private chambers, whereas men generally had more freedom to congregate outside the home, or in its more public spaces, and read, sing and talk together. Indeed, it is possible to speak of ‘male’ versus ‘female’ literary spaces in terms of public and private space in this period. As Andrew Taylor comments, there could be a gender divide in perceptions of the literary activities appropriate to men and women, and these could be regulated to different spheres, in which ‘elaborate devotional practice may have been seen as more suitable for women, while oral entertainment in the hall or outer chambers became a form of homosocial bonding for men.’¹⁵³ Women could make a role for themselves as literary hosts within these domestic spaces, and the custom of men of letters finding encouragement, moral and financial, in wealthy households often led to their providing literary entertainment in such settings. We might note in passing that the court, too, was often constructed (chiefly by male writers) as a female space in which women were both

¹⁵¹ For recent commentary on Humphrey as a literary patron see Alessandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester*, Brill Studies in Intellectual History 124 (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

¹⁵² W. A. Sessions, *Henry Howard, The Poet Earl of Surrey: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) 143-174; 175-177.

¹⁵³ Andrew Taylor, ‘Authors, Scribes, Patrons and Books,’ *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory*, Exeter Medieval Texts and Studies, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor et al. (Exeter: U of Exeter P; Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania UP, 1999) 363.

object and audience, or the professed audience, and as such the symbolic ‘hosts’ of lyric poetry as part of the game of *fin amor*.

The role of women as literary hosts became especially prominent in seventeenth-century France where women such as the marquise de Rambouillet and others moved literary culture away from the court by offering an alternative space for refined conversation and literary display which they created within their houses. The influence of the salons, as they came to be known in the nineteenth century, was far-reaching. They existed side by side with the all-male academies in France in the early modern period, but attracted literati of both sexes and helped raise the profile of women’s writing.¹⁵⁴ Like the academies, they spawned their own kind of poetry, novels, literary debate and political intrigues; and were run exclusively by women who did not just play hostess, but actively directed the proceedings. Each salon leader determined the membership and character of her group, and its activities and subjects for discussion.

As Joan DeJean notes, ‘members referred to these gatherings either by the day of the week on which they met [...] or by an architectural term, such as *ruelle*, literally the space between the bed and the wall where the marquise de Rambouillet seated her regulars.’¹⁵⁵ The marquise’s *chambre bleu*, and other, later salons, offered a domestic and essentially feminine space in which a woman’s traditional role as hostess could be channeled into providing an environment in which refined conversation was to be cultivated. As such they presented ‘a parallel sphere’ to the academies, one ‘with its own rules, activities and schedule,’ a sphere ruled by women, and thus subject (in chivalric

¹⁵⁴ See Carolyn C. Lougee, *Les Paradis de Femmes: Women, Salons and Social Stratification in Seventeenth-Century France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1976) and Joan DeJean, ‘The Salons, “Preciosity,” and the Sphere of Women’s Influence,’ *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989) 297-303.

¹⁵⁵ DeJean, 299.

terms) to their civilising influence.¹⁵⁶ In England, the Blue Stocking gatherings in London, which became popular in the eighteenth century, also began with a small circle of women hostesses. Women attended as writers (as in the case of Hannah More who, however, disassociates the Blue Stockings from the salons in her poem *Bas Bleu*).¹⁵⁷ The success of the Blue Stocking gatherings was in part a result of their ability to win over the male writers and literati who subsequently patronised them.

Communality and Literary Culture

Ultimately, of course, any kind of literature both creates, and emerges from, contexts of communality (the ‘two-way,’ socially conditioned and conditioning, property of discourse).¹⁵⁸ In offering a means of preserving human wisdom and experience within an oral or textual memory, literature inevitably provides a means of preserving and enhancing our sense of belonging to a particular group culture (and culture is here considered as itself a communal construct: ‘a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied’).¹⁵⁹ It thus provides us with a way of reflecting on, and asserting, such communal identities.

Yet there is also a sense in which particular communities may give birth to particular modes of artistic enterprise at specific points in history. Such a view of cultural history has been proposed by Arnold Hauser, and further discussed with relevance to late

¹⁵⁶ DeJean 299.

¹⁵⁷ Hannah More, ‘The Bas Bleu,’ *Selected Writings of Hannah More*, ed. Robert Hole (London: Pickering, 1996) 25-35.

¹⁵⁸ Ruth Wodak, *Disorders of Discourse* (London: Longman, 1996) 17.

¹⁵⁹ Burke *Culture* xi. Burke’s definition derives from discussions in A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: The Museum, 1952).

medieval writers by Paul Strohm in an early essay on Chaucer's fifteenth-century audience.¹⁶⁰ In this view, 'a particular style is perpetuated when it finds its "point of attachment" in the encouragement of a socially-defined class or group of readers,' and therefore 'the emergence of a new style is likely to be associated with the emergence of a new group.'¹⁶¹ With this in mind, we can see how communal contexts shape the kinds of poetry produced by them: the edgy subversion of much club literature; the dense, playful and allusive literature of the court; the often competitive literary regionalism of the guild-societies; the club's concern with convivial etiquette; all reflect the collective identity and preoccupations of the communities which originated them.

The acknowledgement that particular communities have a role to play, not only in interpreting but in engendering new modes of literature, leads us to reflect on some of the more common social functions of literature within such communities as a whole. In the medieval period in particular, it is notable how frequently religion and civic custom provide a focus for communal literary activities. Such priorities remind us that the creation of literature before the modern era was generally perceived as an act best fitted to pragmatic ends (whether devotional, social, educational or political) and, at least ostensibly, channeled back into the good of the wider community. Having explored some of the group-structures and environments that contributed to the formation of formal and informal literary communities in the late medieval and early modern periods, certain patterns and themes begin to emerge in these communal constructions of literary activity which are worth further analysis.

¹⁶⁰ Arnold Hauser, 'Art History Without Names,' *The Philosophy of Art History*, Meridian Ser. (Cleveland, NY: World P, 1963) 207-36 and 253-76; Paul Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience and the Narrowing of the 'Chaucer Tradition',' 1982, *Writing After Chaucer: Essential Readings in Chaucer and the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel J. Pinti (New York: Garland, 1998) 101-126.

¹⁶¹ Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience,' 102.

The literary contest deserves our attention as a recurring feature of literary communities, and may in fact be what creates, or draws attention to, their existence. Such contests were an established part of ancient culture, exemplified in the activities of the *symposion*, and in the festivals of Dionysius. Examples of the literary competition known to medieval poets would include the shepherds' singing contests that were to become a feature of the Virgilian pastoral tradition, although, as Helen Cooper argues, the idea of art for art's sake that the singing-match implies would only be fully re-appropriated in the renaissance.¹⁶² Of course, there are many examples of the literary contest in world literature, from the framing narrative of the *Arabian Nights* and the more playful contest of the *Decameron* to the rather sinister artistic trials that recur in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These seem to reflect a fundamental fascination on the part of writers and readers alike with the struggle to excel, and even to redeem, through the act of artistic creation.

The literary competition served all sorts of functions, and could both create communities of writers and fragment them. In the case of guild or associational communities, such contests could become a feature of regional or civic festivals, such as the *jeux floraux*, or Floral Games, of Toulouse. These games were instituted in 1324 by seven local poets who called themselves the *Consistoire du Gay Savoir* and were named for the prizes of bouquets offered to the winning poets.¹⁶³ The organisation of these competitions had become highly elaborate by the sixteenth century: they lasted three days and involved a series of public processions, neighbourhood fêtes, the feasting of the town's dignitaries and minor officials, the decoration of the whole city with flowers and

¹⁶² Helen Cooper, *Pastoral: Mediaeval into Renaissance* (Cambridge: D.S.Brewer; Totowa: Rowman, 1977) 14.

¹⁶³ Robert A. Schneider, *Public Life in Toulouse 1463-1789: From Municipal Republic to Cosmopolitan City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989) 15.

the handing out of bouquets to women attending the games.¹⁶⁴ The Floral Games thus served as a focus of regional identity and offered themselves as spectacle to the whole community. Here we see how the literary competition could become an occasion for conviviality and chivalric display.

Other modes of contest could be less gracious. For example, literary contests of abuse in which poets strive to out-insult each other are repeated in many different forms across Europe. In England, the tradition may have become more influential via the Scottish genre of ‘flyting’ popularized in the sixteenth century. The term originates in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Scotland, where to ‘flyte’ with someone meant to scold or reproach them in billingsgate fashion (the phrase ‘billingsgate,’ meaning verbal abuse, was coined in reference to the notoriety of the language employed in the fish market in Billingsgate, London). In Scotland noisy flyters could be punishable by law, but the notion of flyting also had a specific, literary meaning as a contest of poetic virtuosity as each poet strove to out-insult the other.¹⁶⁵ As such the flyting also relates to wider traditions of poetic quarrels in European literary culture in which the humanist *invectiva* and French *tenson* were comparable modes. In Scotland, ‘flyting’ poems arose as a contest held between two poets, and intended, it seemed, for public amusement. Such contests could be held publicly for entertainment at the instigation of the king. In the ‘Flyting of Montgomerie and Polwart’ (c.1580), Montgomerie threatens to ‘debar the Pe

¹⁶⁴ Schneider, 76-7.

¹⁶⁵ For an account of the history and practice of flyting in Scotland see Patricia Bawcutt, ‘The Art of Flyting,’ *Scottish Literary Journal* 10.2 (1983): 5-24. The term has been extended to cover all formalised contests of abuse by poets and literary characters. For a history of literary flytings in Europe that extends to the sixteenth century, see Antje G. Frotscher, ‘The War of the Words: A History of Flyting from Antiquity to the Later Middle Ages,’ doctoral thesis, Oxford U, 1993. 1-6.

kingis kitching nuik' (111). This suggests that the two poets may have been competing for the king's favour as symbolised by the right to occupy a place in the royal hall.¹⁶⁶

The actual level of animosity in such exchanges is debatable as many literary quarrels of this nature are ritualised as a kind of game, with the emphasis being on the entertainment value for the spectators. In fact, in many famous literary quarrels in medieval literature, the elements of publicity and spectacle evident in the exchanges in which they are preserved problematise a straightforward reading of the quarrel as contention and conflict. The very literariness of a number of famous literary quarrels suggests that, like the early courts of love, their foundations are far more 'literary' than 'historical.' This is likely to have been the case with the German *Sängerkrieg*, or Singer-War, celebrated in the thirteenth-century German poem, 'Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg,' which tells of a poetic contest of Minnesinger held at the Wartburg castle of Hermann of Thuringia (indeed, the dramatic potential of this narrative recommended it to Wagner as the subject of his opera, *Tannhäuser*).

Other modes of literary quarrel, such as the controversy surrounding Alain Chartier's 'La Belle Dame Sans Mercy,' may take one literary form under the guise of another, such as the accusation of having insulted women, which Richard Firth Green reads as 'a stalking horse,' used to initiate a more personal attack of one poet upon another.¹⁶⁷ In this case, according to Green:

¹⁶⁶ *Poems of Alexander Montgomerie and Other Pieces from Laing MS. No. 447*, supplementary vol., ed. George Stevenson, STSS os 59 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1910) 138. Quotations from this flyting will be from this edition and will be cited by line number (from the text based on the Tullibardine MS).

¹⁶⁷ Green, 'Familia Regis,' 103.

[...] the tribunal before which the offender is to be tried is simply the familial coterie within which their poems circulated; judgment need imply nothing more than the general censure or approval of this group and punishment exclusion from the fashionable amusements of the literary circle. The elaborate machinery of Cupid's court, in other words, can be seen as merely the metaphorical embellishment of a literary feud; there is no compulsion to regard it as reflecting a formalised social ritual.¹⁶⁸

Green is surely right to emphasise the self-consciously literary nature of such quarrels. However in Chartier's case this stalking horse (that a poem which celebrates female independence should be thought to dishonour women) is patently ridiculous, begging the question of whether the quarrel itself was not more game-like than Green suggests, its motions instigated for the amusement of the *familia Cupidinis* as a sophisticated literary joke. The slender pretexts provided for many literary *flytings* would confirm this.

This is not to say that such quarrels were never genuine. In contrast, the *Querelle de la Rose* (another literary debate about the propriety of Jean de Meun's continuation of *La Roman de la Rose* begun in 1401, and configured in conversation and in an exchange of letters between Christine de Pisan and Jean Gerson on the one side, and Jean de Montreuil, and Pierre and Gontier Col, on the other) seems to have represented a real and principled disagreement among its participants. However, Christine was not slow to publicise this quarrel as a literary event by presenting a dossier of the letters of the debate to Isabeau of Bavaria and sending another to the Provost of Paris in 1402, asking for their judgement of the quarrel along the lines of the love-debates of Machaut's *jugement*

¹⁶⁸ Green, 'Familia Regis,' 103.

poems. The elements of publicity, spectacle, game and literary rivalry are thus intermingled in many of these quarrels and contests in ways that tend to stimulate, rather than hamper, literary creativity.

A corollary to the idea of literary rivalry is the notion of poetic laureation, which also dates back to antiquity. In Ancient Rome, a laurel wreath was awarded for military victories and an ivy wreath for poets, but in the medieval period and later the two kinds of wreath are both used in descriptions of crowning ceremonies. The laurel and the ivy are, respectively, Apollonian and Dionysian symbols, and the cult of both gods sparked literary activities in Greek culture. The notion of competing for such tributes was a well-known topos for medieval writers; the first of the troubadour poets, Guilhem IX, Duke of Aquitaine, cheekily proclaims the superiority of his songs over other poets in his poem ‘Ben vuelh que sapchon li plusor’ (‘I’d Like Everyone to Know’) in declaring ‘qu’ieu port d’ayselh mestier la flor’ (4) (‘for I bear the flower of this craft’).¹⁶⁹

The word laureate could be used in a number of senses in the Middle Ages. As a verb, to be laureated was to enjoy some mark of distinction. Chaucer and Lydgate use ‘laureate’ in the sense of praising a victory as well as to describe writers they admire, but it could also refer to the actual ceremony of crowning a poet. John Selden, in the second edition of his *Titles of Honor* (1631), includes some account of the history of the poet laureate for his friend Ben Jonson which may help illuminate the earlier practice.¹⁷⁰ Selden traces the custom back to an Imperial Roman tradition instituted by the Emperor Domitian, of a fierce competition between poets and other creative artists held once a year or every five years, depending on whether Pallas or Jupiter was the presiding deity.

¹⁶⁹ ‘Guilhem IX: Texts and Translation,’ *The Music of the Troubadours*, ed. Peter Whigham, Provençal Series (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1979) 158-9. The translation of line 4 is mine.

¹⁷⁰ John Selden, *Titles of Honor*, 2nd ed. (London: Stansby-Whittakers, 1631) 402 – 413.

After the competition, the Emperor and his judges chose which of the poets were to receive crowns made of oak leaves, or of olive leaves mixed with gold. If only one poet was thought to merit such a distinction he was crowned *contra omnes Poetas* (against the other poets). Selden's understanding of the origins of the ceremony implies a backdrop of poetic rivalry. However, he also acknowledges the later European custom of giving of laurel crowns to poets as an academic degree conferred by a state power, that of the Emperor or his delegates. In this way, universities might have devolved powers to create poet laureates as a symbol of their academic and/or public services.

Poets could also be nominated as laureates posthumously. Selden describes how at the tomb of Gower in the priory of St Mary Overy (now Southwark Cathedral) the poet's statue was draped with roses and ivy. Probably the most famous act of crowning a poet laureate in the beginning of the Italian Renaissance period was Francesco Petrarch's coronation as poet laureate on the Capitoline Hill in Rome in 1341. This event captured the imagination of literary Europe, as Petrarch, who assiduously courted his own literary fame, no doubt intended it should. Such ceremonies seem to have become increasingly elaborate as time went on. I will be discussing different notions of the poet laureate, and the ceremonies pertaining to the granting of that title, at greater length in relation to Skelton.

We might also consider the tendency of writers to construct idealised notions of their own literary communities. Whether or not they were publicly honoured by their peers, writers often fantasised about their own apotheosis, carving a place for themselves in an imagined community of 'great' authors through the ages: a 'college' of prestigious

writers located in the heavens, or in a Parnassus or an Elysium or a symbolic hall of fame. Such gestures, though frequently playful in nature, were also a measure of the ambition of the author to make his mark on posterity: the desire to be part of a tradition envisaged as a community of people and not just texts. This ambition is discernible in the works of a number of Roman poets who playfully envisaged themselves as glorified in the heavens in a *collegium* of great poets, perhaps by having a constellation named after them. Horace, who chooses the ivy-crown instead of the charioteer's palm, asks to be added to this company of poets:

quodsi me lyricis vatibus inseres,
sublimi feriam sidera vertice. (*Odes* 1, 1:35-36)

(But if you enrol me among the lyric bards
My soaring head will strike the stars.)¹⁷¹

Similarly, Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* announces that:

parte tamen meliore mei super alta perennis
astra ferar, nomenque erit indelebile nostrum (XV: 875-76)

([...] with the better part of me, I shall be borne for ever
above the stars on high, and my name will be indelible)¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Horace, *Horace 'Odes' I: Carpe Diem*, ed. and trans. David West (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 34-35.

¹⁷² Ovid, *Ovid: Metamorphoses XIII-XV*, ed. and trans. D. E. Hill (Warminster: Aris, 2000) 122-23.

We might compare this with Skelton's Gower in *The Garlande of Laurell*: 'Brother Skelton... / Ye have deserved to have an enplement / In our collage above the sterry sky' (400-3).¹⁷³ Skelton's rather brazen confidence in his own literary talents here is nothing new in literary history, notable as it is after the strategic self-denigrations of other fifteenth-century poets.

Familial metaphors are often used by writers to characterise writer-writer or writer-reader relationships, especially those of Father, Brother and Son. Ben Jonson attempted to act out this metaphor of adopting poetic 'sons' while he was still living, but such relationships were more often developed on the part of the living towards the dead through the virtual encounters provided in reading. Familial appellations are often applied by living writers to dead ones, sometimes to solidify their position within an illustrious company of predecessors, sometimes to denote the intensity of the bond experienced by the living writer towards his adopted mentor. There are many affinities of this kind evident in the work of medieval and early modern authors. We might think of Petrarch's relationship with Augustine and Cicero as detailed in his *Secretum*, or 'secret book' and in his *De ignorantia*, or of Erasmus's relationship with Jerome, or of Dante's with Virgil. This habit of adopting poetic fathers itself has an ancient pedigree, as A. C. Spearing notes:

There is ample precedent for seeing the authority of the literary precursor over his successors as analogous to the authority of the father over his sons. Lucretius

¹⁷³ John Skelton, 'The Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell,' *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Scattergood, Penguin English Poets (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 400-3. All quotations from Skelton's poems are from this edition (unless otherwise stated) and will be cited by line number.

refers to Epicurus as father; Horace and Propertius both refer to Ennius as father; Cicero calls Isocrates the father of eloquence and Herodotus the father of history [...]. Descent and inheritance from father to son provide a basic explanatory model for literary history.¹⁷⁴

Yet the crucial difference between natural and poetic begetting is that the latter is a parentage of voluntary association. If each generation of writers chooses its own 'fathers,' then its choice of parents tells us a lot about their poetic 'children.' The creation of a genealogy of poets within English literature begins with Chaucer, or rather the adoption of Chaucer as father or master by his successors, as Richard Firth Green comments:

Many fifteenth-century authors refer to Chaucer as their master, though probably only Scogan and Hoccleve knew him personally. Their intention, presumably, is to imply that their study of the work of a recognised poetic authority serves in some sense as a justification of their own efforts [...]¹⁷⁵

Green is probably right to point out that the act of praising their predecessors cannot be seen as entirely disinterested on the part of poets struggling to earn remuneration for their skills in aristocratic households. However, this metaphor of the predecessor as master or father persists throughout English literary history, including many instances where the economic conditions of writers have been constructed differently. William Morris, for

¹⁷⁴ A. C. Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985) 92.

¹⁷⁵ Green, *Poets* 208.

example, aligns himself with the fifteenth-century poets by referring to Chaucer as his master in *Jason*.¹⁷⁶ Here we find a Victorian writer invoking the relationship of master and apprentice to assert his literary allegiances (to medieval -- or medievalist -- ideas of artistic craftsmanship).

The trope of a 'college,' 'school,' or 'family' of great writers was useful to writers seeking to forge a link between their own writing practices and those of the most venerable figures of literary tradition. As with the Republic of Letters, this notion of the brotherhood of writers, expressed in different forms, might offer authors inspiration to persist in their solitary vocations through the act of imagining themselves labouring alongside their peers, living and dead. In this sense, a 'brotherhood' or 'college' of poets adopts a similar role to the communion of saints in Christian theology. The act of visualising a privileged community outside time with which one could be in communion, can be seen as a source of inspiration to medieval and Renaissance authors struggling to gain recognition from their contemporaries.

For those writers whose relationships with their own contemporaries were dysfunctional or destructively competitive, the notion of belonging to a brotherhood of great writers could be a substitute for more substantial forms of literary community. Such imaginary literary communities had the advantage, amusingly explored by Skelton in *The Garlande of Laurell*, of being malleable to the author's whims. The locales for these imaginary communities of writers are often as venerable as their members: viz. Keats's Elysium, Parnassus or Helicon, and a whole range of more shadily sketched idealized natural reserves.

¹⁷⁶ '[...] O Master! – Yea, my Master still, / Whatever feet have scaled Parnassus' hill' (XVII: 11-12). William Morris, 'The Life and Death of Jason,' *The Collected Works of William Morris*, vol. 2, Elibron Classics Ser. (Austin, TX: Elibron, 2005) 259.

This might suggest that where they are depicted, such communities are necessarily strongly idealised, but this is not always the case. Both Skelton in his *Garlande of Laurell* (1523) and Gavin Douglas in his *Palice of Honour* (1501) include some amusing personal characteristics of contemporary writers in their catalogues of great authors. It was a tradition strong enough to be parodied, not without affection, in works like William Bullein's *Dialogue Against Feuer Pestilence* (1578), in which a number of famous English and Scottish poets are caricatured.¹⁷⁷

The merging of ideal and actual literary communities is neatly focused in the work of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). Dante's *Vita Nuova* provides insights into how literary networking functioned in the Middle Ages, detailing the creation of a cycle of poems which is shaped by the poet's interaction with different figures within his community: readers, writers, and those who represent for him a kind of coterie of writer-friends considered to have special insight about love. At a number of points in the poem Dante mentions the sending of poems to other writers for comments. In fact, the very first poem of the *Vita*, Dante tells us,

[...] fue risposto da molti e di diverse sentenzie, tra li quali fue risponditore quelli, cu' io chiamo primo de li miei amici; e disse allora un sonetto, lo quale comincia: *Vedesti al mio parere onne valore*. E questo fue quasi lo principio de l'amistà tra

¹⁷⁷ William Bullein, *A Dialogue Against the Feuer Pestilence*, ed. A. H. and M. W. Bullen, EETS es 52 (London, 1888) 15-18.

lui e me, quando elli seppe ch' io era quelli che li avea ciò mandato. (*La Vita Nuova*, 3: 57-63)¹⁷⁸

([...] drew replies from many, all who had different opinions as to its meaning. Among those who replied was someone whom I call my closest friend; [Guido Cavalcanti] he wrote a sonnet beginning: *In my opinion you beheld all virtue*. Our friendship dated from the time he learned that it was I who had sent him the sonnet).¹⁷⁹

Dante here refers to a common practice among aspiring medieval poets of sending one's poetry anonymously to established writers in the hopes, it seems, of sparking their interest and encouragement (in Dante's case, he had already sent some of his teenage love poems to another poet active in the same period, Dante of Maiano, who, however, did not respond seriously to them in the way that Cavalcanti did). The poets who replied did so in poetry, initiating a literary exchange and possible friendship thereby.¹⁸⁰

Dante's *Commedia* is likewise a seminal text for the study of literary communities with respect to its conscious placing of itself within the framework of particular communities of literary tradition. In the *Commedia*, Dante presents interactions with a variety of writers past and present, actual and imaginary, including those of his own literary milieu. A brief discussion of some of these will be useful for a comparison with English writers' engagement with their own idealised literary communities in later

¹⁷⁸ Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, ed. Tommaso Casini (Florence, Italy: Sansoni, 1962) 20-22.

¹⁷⁹ Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 33.

¹⁸⁰ For an account of Dante's interaction with contemporary poets see Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and the Lyric Past,' *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 14-33.

chapters. In *Inferno*, the traveller Dante, accompanied by Virgil, meets Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan. Although, as unbaptised pagans, these authors are excluded from paradise, Dante takes care to assure us that they were virtuous men whose fame on earth is justified by the honour in which their names are held. As a group, they live a dignified life set apart from the other inhabitants of Limbo, a fact which prompts comment from Dante, who receives Virgil's explanation that the fame of their names on earth gains them a special grace. Dante describes this company admiringly as 'la bella scuola' (that splendid school). In spite of the fact that Dante had never read a line of Homer's work, he follows the tradition which exalted Homer in first place as 'poeta sovrano' (sovereign poet): he is chiefly interested in passing on something he takes on trust, a pre-established canon of literary greatness. Dante takes his place amongst this splendid school, at their own prompting:

Ch'e' si mi fecer de la loro schiera
 si ch'io fui sesto tra cotanto senno. (*Inf.* IV: 101-2)¹⁸¹

([...] they invited me to join their ranks
 I was the sixth among such intellects) (35)

Their invitation is further proof of their courtesy. In the act of picturing himself as sixth in this school, however, Dante is also hinting at the scale of his own literary ambitions.

¹⁸¹ *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (1980; New York: Bantam, 1982) 34. References to the *Commedia* will be to this edition. Quotations from the poem will be cited by line number, and quotations from the translation will be cited by page number.

On joining these ‘savi’ (sages) he subsequently shuts the reader out of his conversation with them, stating that they were:

parlando cose che 'l tacere è bello,

Sì com' era 'l parlar colà dov' era. (*Inf.* IV 104-5)

(talking of things about which silence here

is just as seemly as our speech was there) (35)

In effect, Dante the author creates his own imaginary literary circle here by having Dante the character intimate that he shared secrets with these men to which readers of the *Commedia* have no access.

In *Purgatorio*, Dante meets poets closer to his own age through a lens of poetic factionalism. In Cantos 24 - 26 a division is apparent between Dante, Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel on the one hand, and Guittone d'Arezzo and Bonagiunta de Lucca on the other, as representatives of different schools of poetry, that of the *dolce stil nuovo* (the sweet new style) and the Tuscan and Sicilian schools. Dante's treatment of the relations between these schools is distinctly partisan in his meeting with Bonagiunta in Canto 24. Bonagiunta's designation of the younger poet as *frate* (brother) lays a potential quarrel between them, and Dante makes Bonagiunta accept that Dante's school followed the more authentic poetry of love. As a corollary to this, in his meeting with Guido Guinizelli in Canto 26, Dante nominates Guido as the father of his school, but Guido indicates a

better role-model in Arnaut Daniel, who, like the poets in *Inferno*, walks ahead of the others at a distance denoting his artistic superiority:

[...] fu miglior fabbro del parlar materno.
 Versi d'amore e prose di romanzi
 soverchiò tutti: e lascia dir li stolti
 che quel di Lemosi credon ch'avanzi...
 Così fer molti antichi di Guittone,
 di grido in grido pur lui dando pregio
 fin che l'ha vinto il ver con più persone.¹⁸²

([...] he was a better
 artisan of the mother tongue, surpassing
 all those who wrote their poems of love or prose
 romances - let the stupid ones contend,
 who think that from Limoges there came the best.
 So, many of our fathers once persisted,
 voice after voice, in giving to Guittone
 the prize - but then, with most, the truth prevailed.) (247)

Here literary history is depicted as a struggle between warring camps of poetic tradition, in which, finally, the superior artisan must win through. Dante places confidence in the

¹⁸² *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (1982; New York: Bantam, 1984) 246.

ability of the literary community of posterity as well as antiquity to recognize who is deserving of literary fame, something Chaucer, in the *House of Fame*, will be more reluctant to do. However, Chaucer took also his cue from Dante in envisaging himself as part of an international literary community, both with regard to ancient authors and a handful of later authors, both English and continental, whom he admired. The famous submission of *Troilus and Criseyde* to ‘alle poesy’ (and, later, to the ‘correction’ of Gower and Strode) brings a number of these issues to the fore:

Go, litel bok, go litel myn tragedye,
 Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
 So sende might to make in som comedye!
 But litel book, no making thow n’envie,
 But subgit be to alle poesy;
 And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace
 Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan and Stace. (1786-1792)

Chaucer here notes the potential isolation of the creative artist seeking a receptive audience for his work, and the potential for competitive rivalry within the wider community of makers (‘no making thow n’envie’) yet imaginatively contains both these fears in an act of humble submission to those he acknowledges to be greater talents, and by seeking to align himself with this pre-established community of Greek and Latin authors.¹⁸³ In doing so, as A. C. Spearing notes, he becomes, if not the father of English

¹⁸³ We might note that Horace in Dante’s list is replaced by Statius in Chaucer’s list, perhaps to facilitate the rhyme.

poetry, 'the father of English literary history: the first English poet to conceive of his work as an addition, however humble, to the great monuments of the classical past.'¹⁸⁴

Paradoxically perhaps, Chaucer's attempts to create an English literary history are consciously predicated on this identification with the literary 'fathers' of another cultural past. From the beginning, the English poetic tradition he initiates consciously places itself in relationship to an international literary community of 'alle poesy.'

¹⁸⁴ A. C. Spearing, 'Lydgate's Canterbury Tale: 'The Siege of Thebes' and Fifteenth-Century Chaucerianism,' *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984) 335.

3. Squaring the Chaucer Circle

Intrigued by the references linking Chaucer and contemporary writers and litterateurs, scholars have sought to identify a body of literary friendships for the poet in England and abroad. Casual allusions to a 'Chaucer circle' occur frequently in general surveys of Chaucer's social and educational milieu, but accounts of who belonged to this circle may differ. Early twentieth-century critics interested in reconstructing Chaucer's literary milieu tended to configure it primarily as a courtly construct comprising royalty, courtiers and aristocratic friends, and often elided notions of the literary circle, or friendship group, with those of the primary audience.¹ This belief was reinforced by the apparent image of the poet reading to an elite audience depicted in the frontispiece to an early fifteenth century manuscript of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS. 61), whose relation to Chaucer's actual audience has also been the subject of scholarly debate.² Later scholars have been keener to distinguish between a more general audience for the poet's work, which might be broadly located somewhere between the royal household and the city, and the special audience of the circle as represented by the addressees of Chaucer's envoys to Bukton and Scogan.

To date, critical consensus on the social composition of the Chaucer circle has followed Derek Pearsall in locating it within 'the multitude of household knights and officials, career diplomats and civil servants, who constitute the "court" in its wider sense, that is, the national administration and its metropolitan milieu,'³ and R. T. Lenaghan in characterising Chaucer's immediate literary milieu as gentlemanly and

¹ See for example Aage Brusendorff, *The Chaucer Tradition* (London: Oxford UP, 1925) 19-27.

² See Margaret Galway, 'The "Troilus" Frontispiece,' *MLR* 44.2 (1949): 161-77, and, for a different view, Derek Pearsall, 'The "Troilus" Frontispiece and Chaucer's Audience,' *Yearbook of English Studies* 7 (1977): 68-74.

³ Pearsall, 'Troilus' Frontispiece,' 73.

clerkly ('clerks in the precise sense that combines the roles of civil servant, courtier, and man of letters').⁴ For Lenaghan, such a circle is, crucially, configured in terms of the 'lateral allegiances' between its members in which poetry functions as 'exchanges between equals.'⁵ This construction of the Chaucer circle in terms of the social parity between its members has recently been challenged by Stephanie Trigg, who, in discussing how the 'emphasis on Chaucer's audience as a group of social equals replaces the earlier image of Chaucer as the highly favoured poet in a sophisticated English court culture,' notes that the new model, while it 'relies heavily [...] on documentary and sociological research [...] also seems to suit a more democratically orientated criticism.'⁶

Trigg's caution reminds us that attempts to pin the poet's intended audience down to any particular group should not be too exclusive, and as David Wallace reminds us, 'the 494 items that make up the Chaucer Life-Records suggest that Chaucer was schooled in social mobility from an early age.'⁷ Given his mercantile family background, his literary interests and the diversity of his career in the king's employment, there is every reason to suppose that throughout his lifetime Chaucer remained open to assimilating the values of a range of different cultures, both socially and aesthetically. Indeed, Wallace argues that 'Chaucer's skilled mobility suggests the historical possibility of movement between particular social groups that need not require the final repudiation of any one of them.'⁸ As part of this general rehabilitation, critics such as Elizabeth Salter and Richard Firth Green have sought to reinstate the idea of Chaucer as a courtly poet in a more modified form, as, for

⁴ R. T. Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan": The Uses of Literary Conventions,' *ChR* 10.1 (1975): 46.

⁵ R. T. Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's Circle of Gentlemen and Clerks,' *ChR* 18.2 (1983): 157.

⁶ Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern*, *Medieval Cultures* 30 (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2002) 35-36.

⁷ David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and*

example, in considering the influence of the court and its milieu on his social and intellectual training and development as a poet.⁹

Lenaghan's designation of Chaucer's immediate readership as a circle of gentlemen and clerks continues to form the governing image of Chaucer's literary circle for contemporary scholars, balanced by a heightened critical awareness of the ways in which Chaucer himself shifts the terms of his narrative address between a number of differently imagined audiences: male and female; courtly and urbane; ideal and actual; aural and readerly. To date, Paul Strohm has produced the most detailed study of the outlook and composition of Chaucer's actual audience. In *Social Chaucer* (1989) Strohm revisited the available evidence, both 'literary' and 'historical,' for a Chaucer circle in a way that has helped crystallise our conceptions of the men who formed Chaucer's closest audience. Sifting through the Chaucer Life Records and other sources, Strohm outlined 'the contours of an amicable circle'¹⁰ of men friendly with Chaucer at various points in his life and who seem to have shared his literary interests. This group is largely though not exclusively composed of royal and civil servants of a similar social status to Chaucer. Strohm's final list names Sir Richard Stury (c.1327-1395), Sir Lewis Clifford (c.1330-1404), Sir John Clanvowe (c.1341-1391), Sir William Nevill (c.1341-1391), Sir Philip de la Vache (1346-1408), Sir William Beauchamp (c.1343-1411), Henry Scogan (c.1361-1407), Peter Bukton (1350-1414), John Gower (d.1408) and Ralph Strode (d.1387) as cultivated men friendly with Chaucer with whom he probably shared his work, and who may have had some creative influence in shaping the direction of it. Following the reception of Strohm's work, the idea of the Chaucer 'circle' has been firmly fixed in critical

Italy (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997) 11.

⁸ Wallace, 11.

⁹ Green, *Poets*, pp. 71-72 and 110-12. Elizabeth Salter, 'Chaucer and Internationalism,' *SAC* 2 (1980): 71-79.

discourse. Although the applicability of the term 'circle' to this notional group, rather than network, coterie or cultural community, might be debated, I will be adopting the now-established notion of the 'Chaucer circle' for critical convenience when discussing this particular body of men which Strohm identifies. In this respect, the circle is posited not as an established entity, but (following Judith Scherer Herz's terms discussed in my introduction) as a cataloguing mechanism, which may, of course, prove more or less useful to an analysis of its collective literary oeuvre.

Other possible candidates for admission to this group considered by Strohm include another London author, Thomas Usk; Sir John Montagu, a poet and a chamber knight at Richard's court; the poet Thomas Hoccleve, who claims to have known Chaucer in person; and the French poet Oton de Granson, a retainer of both John of Gaunt and Richard II. Adam Pinkhurst, Chaucer's scribe, might also be considered a conjectural member of the Chaucer circle for reasons I shall examine further. Usk praises Chaucer in his *Testament of Love*, and would have had access to some of the same social networks as Chaucer in the 1380s. He was evidently familiar with Chaucer's *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, and perhaps owned or borrowed a manuscript of *The House of Fame*. Montagu and Granson were certainly part of the extended literary network in which Chaucer operated, and Montagu was a friend of Christine de Pizan.¹¹ Granson is given a complementary reference in Chaucer's 'Complaint of Venus,' and his name occurs side by side with Chaucer's in John of Gaunt's accounts on more than one occasion. Granson was also friendly with Lewis Clifford, and both he and Clifford were friends of Eustache Deschamps who mentions them each by name in separate ballads, all of which suggests that the international

¹⁰ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 42.

¹¹ For more information on Montagu and his literary interests see J. C. Laidlaw, 'Christine de Pizan, the Earl of Salisbury and Henry IV,' *French Studies* 36 (1982): 129-143.

networks of literati between England and France were quite close-knit.¹² While Hoccleve would have been only just embarking on his poetic career when Chaucer was alive, his claim to have known the older poet is credible, especially considering the fact that Chaucer retired to Westminster at the time Hoccleve was working there, and it has also been argued that his claim can be substantiated by manuscript evidence.¹³ Although Strohm expresses doubts about the inclusion of Hoccleve and Usk in Chaucer's immediate social circle, he situates them alongside these core members as a part of Chaucer's primary audience, noting that the surviving writings of Hoccleve and Usk testify to a personal engagement with Chaucer's work, and a willingness to identify with it in their own literary projects, even if they belonged to a lower social stratum than he did.¹⁴

This chapter will examine some existing constructions of Chaucer's literary circle, and will question how useful these constructions are as a critical cataloguing mechanism in situating the literary activities of this group of men against the wider background of medieval literary culture. It will discuss the extent to which the group of men Strohm identifies as part of this circle may be viewed as a literary community, and what difference such communal contexts may make to our reading of Chaucer's poetry.

¹² Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) 181. Granson appears in Ballad 893 of Deschamps' collected works. *Oeuvres Complètes de Eustache Deschamps*, vol. 5, ed. Le Marquis de Queux de Saint-Hilaire, 11 vols. (Paris, 1882) 77-78.

¹³ For discussion of the realistic portraiture of Chaucer in the Hoccleve manuscripts see Annabel Patterson, 'The Human face divine': Identity and the Portrait from Locke to Chaucer,' *Crossing Boundaries: Issues of Cultural and Individual Identity in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Sally McKee, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 3 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1999) 155 - 188.

¹⁴ Strohm *Social Chaucer* 42. See also Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience,' 108, and Strohm, 'Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s,' *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380 - 1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1990) 83-112.

Chaucer's Literary Circle: Historical Contexts and Constructions

The ten men Strohm identifies as part of a Chaucer circle can be further divided into three sub-groups: the chamber knights whom he probably met at court or in the king's service abroad; his 'London-based' friends, Gower and Strode; and his later friends, younger men connected to the court, Bukton and Scogan.

Of the first group, Stury, Clifford, Clanvowe and Nevill all belong to the community of 'Lollard knights' named in the chronicles of Walsingham and Knighton (the others are Montagu, Sir Thomas Latimer, Sir John Trussell, Sir John Peachey, Sir Reynold Hilton and Sir John Cheyne) and analysed in detail by K. B. McFarlane in *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights*. He includes Philip de la Vache in this number as another figure closely associated with the Lollard suspects, and William Beauchamp can also be aligned with them.¹⁵ Among other things, McFarlane notes the startling 'compactness' of these men as a group evident from legal records:

Of very widely scattered geographical origins and of widely different inherited blood and property, their public careers and employments had brought them into intimate association over a long period. Their names occur together in scores of private instruments, as witnesses, feoffees, mainpernors, and executors. There is clear and plentiful evidence that ties of friendship and mutual trust existed between them.¹⁶

As well as the accusations of Lollardy which were directed at them by contemporaries, these men shared a number of things in common: socially they were,

¹⁵ K.B. McFarlane, *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 167.

¹⁶ McFarlane, *Lollard Knights* 160.

in McFarlane's words, of 'gentle but varied' origins; they had experience, as Chaucer did, of time spent as soldiers in Edward III's campaigns, and they were cautiously aligned with the Ricardian faction at court (although more ambivalently in Beauchamp's case).¹⁷ None of these men bar Vache is mentioned by name in Chaucer's poetry, but their names are linked with his in the Chaucer life-records in ways that suggest that their contact with Chaucer extended beyond the professional and perfunctory. Stury, along with Guichard d'Angle, was a fellow negotiator with Chaucer at diplomatic talks between the English and the French at Montreuil-sur-Mer in 1377, and Clifford was the intermediary between Chaucer and Deschamps in 1385.¹⁸ Chaucer stood mainprise for Beauchamp in 1378, and Beauchamp, Nevill and Clanvowe were witnesses on Chaucer's behalf in the case concerning the *raptus* of Cecily Champain in 1380.¹⁹ Such references suggest that these men enjoyed a personal relationship with Chaucer.

As McFarlane has examined the careers of these men in detail, I will concentrate on the characteristic most relevant to this study which defined them as a group: their bookishness. As McFarlane comments, the literacy of these knights was exceptional, and extended to both secular and religious literature. What we know of the literary interests of the chamber knights, insofar as they can be reconstructed from literary evidence and the records of their book bequests and personal libraries, shows them to have been conversant with the literary fashions connected to a courtly milieu. Stury owned a copy of the *Roman de la Rose*, and was friendly with the French poet and chronicler Jean Froissart. Clifford, likewise, seems to have been on friendly terms with the French poets Eustace Deschamps and Oton de Granson. Evidence of their

¹⁷ McFarlane, *Lollard Knights* 161. Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 42-3.

¹⁸ Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson eds., *Chaucer Life Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966) 49-51. Hereafter *Life Records*. For relations between Chaucer, Clifford and Deschamps see pp. 27-29.

¹⁹ *Life Records*, 343 and 279-81

interest in pious, devotional reading matter is even stronger: the Duchess of York left Clifford two bibles, two primers, and a book of vices and virtues in her will, and he in turn left Philip de la Vache, his son-in-law, a mass-book, and his daughter a 'book of tribulation.'²⁰ Vache's widow in turn mentions a library of devotional tracts and a commentary on the gospel of St. Matthew in her will, along with an unidentified book in English entitled 'Pore Caytife,' (whether or not she had come by these through her husband, it indicates the intellectual climate of their household). William Beauchamp was suspected of owning a Lollard library in the early 1400s, and Stury, Clifford and Clanvowe may have influenced, or been influenced by, an anti-clerical religious climate in the households of the Black Prince and his widow, Joan of Kent (the latter named these knights as the executors of her will).²¹

The chamber knights can thus be associated with two very different kinds of English textual community -- or readerships -- active in fourteenth century London: the vernacular Chaucerian community (which provided the foundations for standard courtly and bureaucratic English, and would come to represent, in Ralph Hanna's words, the 'canonical English national tradition' for a later audience) and the expanding market for bible-based prose texts which were widely circulated in the capital at this time, and frequently implicated in Lollardy.²² For McFarlane, the evidence for the group's interest in courtly literature was hard to reconcile with the penchant for 'serious-minded' reading to be expected of a Lollard sect, making them 'anti-clericals' and 'worldlings' in their reading tastes.²³ That these two spheres of literariness were not felt by the knights themselves to be incompatible is suggested by their representation in Clanvowe's extant works: *The Boke of Cupide*, a Chaucerian-

²⁰ K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 236-7; *Testamenta Vetusta*, ed. Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas, vol. 1 (London: n. p., 1826) 164-5.

²¹ Nigel Saul, *Richard II*, Yale English Monarchs Ser. (Newhaven, CT: Yale UP, 1997) 298.

²² Hanna, 305.

style dream vision-cum-love-debate in the register of courtly poetry, and *The Two Ways*, a moral treatise in prose on how to lead a righteous life.

The second sub-set of the Chaucer group, ‘the London intellectuals,’ comprises the poet John Gower and the philosopher and/or lawyer Ralph Strode. Gower was born between 1330 and 1340, so may have been up to ten years older than Chaucer. Evidence suggests that he was from a Kentish family (he is referred to as an esquire of Kent in records of a land-purchase in 1382) and he may also have held office as a Sergeant of Law or similar for a time, judging by the remarks in his *Mirour de L’omme* that:

[...] je ne suy pas clers

Vestu de sanguine ne de pers

Ainz ai vestu la raye mance

Poi sai Latin, poy say romance (21772-75)²⁴

(I am not a cleric clothed in scarlet and blue, but I have worn only striped sleeves – I know little Latin and little French).²⁵

The striped sleeves mentioned in this passage could denote an official of the law-courts. Interestingly, Gower shrugs off a more traditional ‘clerkly’ identity as a writer, yet goes on to maintain his right to speak authoritatively about the clerical abuses of his age. His claim not to have much scholarly facility with languages here is clearly disingenuous; his three major works, *Mirour de l’omme*, *Vox Clamantis* and

²³ McFarlane, *Lollard Knights* 185

²⁴ John Gower, *Mirour de L’Omme* in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899) 246.

²⁵ John Gower *Mirour de L’Omme* (*The Mirror of Mankind*), trans. William Burton Wilson, revd.

Confessio Amantis, are in French, Latin and English respectively, and he also wrote a variety of minor poems in each of these languages.

Gower's first documented association with Chaucer occurs in May 1378 when he was appointed one of two attorneys of the poet's affairs prior to Chaucer's departure to Italy (it may be significant for the argument that Gower was a practitioner of law that the other attorney, Richard Forester, was himself a lawyer). From at least 1398, Gower lived in Southwark, at that time a suburb of London, in the precincts of the priory of St Mary Overy, although John Fisher argues that Gower may well have been living at the priory in the 1370s, and his residence there would have given him access to a library and a scriptorium.²⁶

Contemporary records offer two different careers for a Ralph Strode: that of an Oxford philosopher (a fellow at Merton from at least 1359) and a London lawyer (from 1373 onwards). This Strode may well have been one and the same person.²⁷ The Oxford Strode was a scholastic philosopher of some repute, which would fit with Chaucer's appellation of him as 'philosophical Strode' (V: 1857) in *Troilus and Criseyde*; the memory of his theological arguments with John Wyclif has survived in Wyclif's responses to them (*Responsiones ad decem questiones magistri R. Strode* and *Responsiones ad argumenta Radulphi Strode*). His influence as a logician extended to Italy, where parts of his *Logica* were required reading at the University of Padua.²⁸ A note in an early fifteenth-century catalogue of Merton College mentions

Nancy Wilson Van Baak (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992) 291.

²⁶ For details of Gower's life see John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (1964; London: Methuen, 1965) 37-69, and, more recently, John Hines, Nathalie Cohen and Simon Roffey, 'Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta: Records and Memorials of his Life and Death,' *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) 23-42. The extent to which the scriptorium may have provided a centre for Gower to supervise productions of the *Confessio Amantis* has been a matter of debate.

²⁷ See J. D. North, 'Strode, Ralph (d. 1387),' *ODNB*. 28 October 2007.

<<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26673>>.

²⁸ See North, 'Strode, Ralph (d. 1387),' *ODNB* and for context see also William J. Courtenay, 'The Early Stages in the Introduction of Oxford Logic into Italy,' *English Logic in Italy in the Fourteenth*

that he was a poet and author of a work titled *Phantasma Radulphi* which, if correct, would indicate that he took an interest in literature.²⁹ As a lawyer, Strode was a neighbour of Chaucer's in Aldersgate, where he held a life-tenancy from 1373 to 1386 (his efforts on behalf of Merton College in this period do suggest some continuity with his Oxford life). He and Chaucer stood mainprise for the draper John Hende in a legal dispute in 1381.³⁰

Aside from the possibility that they were both practitioners of law and were resident in London at the same time as Chaucer in the 1370s and 1380s (neither of which, in the case of Gower, can be absolutely proved) the main reason for considering Gower and Strode together in relation to Chaucer's friendship group is the dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde*, in which Chaucer humbly offers his work to both men for their 'correction':

O moral Gower, this book I directe
 To the and to the, philosophical Strode,
 To vouchen sauf, ther nede is, to correcte,
 Of youre benignities and zeles goode. (V: 1856 – 9)

Here Gower and Strode function, at least on an imaginative level, as tutelary guardians to Chaucer's book. He appeals to their benevolence, wisdom and moral sense 'to correcte of your benignities' and to help him with any changes 'ther nede is.' Of course this act of submission is self-conscious and literary, not necessarily literal in its intentions. Yet it testifies to the fact that Chaucer admired and respected Gower's insight into moral philosophy, along with Strode's insight into philosophy

and *Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Alfonso Maierù, *History of Logic* 1 (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1982) 13-32.

²⁹ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 44-45.

(the term 'philosophy' could signify learning in general, natural science or moral philosophy in this context).³¹ It also testifies that their approbation was being sought for Chaucer's greatest literary effort of the 1380s, and possibly that the direction of the work had been shaped by conversations they had had together.

In Strohm's third sub-group, we have Henry Scogan and an unspecified 'Bukton', men whose friendships with Chaucer have been dated to the 1390s, based on the estimated compositional dates of the two 'coterie' poems addressed to them, the 'Envoy to Scogan' (c.1393) and the 'Envoy to Bukton' (c.1396). Henry Scogan came of landed family in Norfolk, served as an esquire to Richard II from 1394, and later tutored the sons of Henry IV (who form part of the audience of his *Moral Ballad*, and to whom the advice in the poem is directed). His career as a royal servant places him in the same social stratum as Chaucer and the chamber knights. May Newman Hallmundson's research into Scogan's career has unearthed some more information about the poet which helps us further map his social relations with Chaucer and his friends. Not only were most of his associates connected with the court (and Clifford, Nevill and Stury are among the chamber knights he would have known there) but he also had social ties with other Norfolk-born men who were friendly with Chaucer (the merchant Hugh Fastolf and king's butler, John Payne) as well as some of Hoccleve's colleagues in the Privy Seal Office. As Hallmundson concludes: 'the existence of such a "Norfolk group" within the Chaucer circle offers an interesting speculation concerning Scogan's early connections with Chaucer and his friends.'³² Bukton has been tentatively identified by Ernest Kuhl as Sir Peter Bukton of Holderness,

³⁰ *Life Records* 281-84.

³¹ 'Philosophie,' definitions a, b and d, *MED*, 1980 ed.

³² May Newman Hallmundson, 'Chaucer's Circle: Henry Scogan and His Friends,' *Medievala et Humanistica* 10 (1981): 135.

Yorkshire (vice Sir Robert Bukton of Suffolk).³³ Bukton was a royal servant, and a member of parliament for York in the 1390s. His social milieu overlaps with Chaucer's at a number of points. He was in the service of John of Gaunt from 1369 and accompanied John's son, the future Henry IV, on missions abroad.

Finally, we might consider one other individual who stood at an oblique angle to Chaucer's literary circle as Strohm visualised it in the 1980s. Recent research by Linne Mooney into the career of Adam Pinkhurst, Chaucer's 'scribeyn,' and what it adds to our knowledge of Chaucer's literary practices, has certain implications, in turn, for our understanding of Chaucer's social circle. As Mooney suggests, Adam's links with the London mercery and their political concerns may reflect on Chaucer's political sympathies in the same period, as well as highlighting an interesting connection between the clerical employment of freelance scribes like Adam by the London guilds and vernacular literary writing evidenced by other associations between writers and guilds (such as that of Thomas Usk with the Grocer's Company, for example, or Hoccleve's with Thomas Marleburgh of the Limners guild).³⁴ The poet's association with Adam may then indicate a deliberate attempt on Chaucer's behalf to market his writing to a city-based clientele, and as Mooney points out, the manner of Adam's presentation of the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts would indicate that he had some knowledge of Chaucer's plans for *The Canterbury Tales*. We could therefore include Adam in a discussion of Chaucer's literary circle as someone with whom Chaucer shared his work.

³³ Ernest P. Kuhl, 'Chaucer's "My Maistre Bukton",' *PMLA* 38 (1923): 115-32.

³⁴ Linne R. Mooney, 'Chaucer's Scribe,' *Speculum* 81.1 (2006): 103 and 112. For Hoccleve's poem for Marleburgh see *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall and I. Gollancz, revd. Jerome Mitchell and A. I. Doyle, EETS es 61 and 73 (London: Oxford UP, 1970) 289. All references to Hoccleve's minor poems will be to this edition and will be cited by line number, with the exception of the 'Complaint' and the 'Dialogue.' See Chapter Three, n. 10.

Strohm's work on Chaucer's circle opens up some important questions about the effect of literary circles on the kind of art it produces, most specifically Chaucer's. In an earlier essay on the fifteenth century and the narrowing of the Chaucer tradition, Strohm advances a number of propositions about the function of literary communities as a crucible for art. For Strohm, writing, often seen as a solitary activity, is paradoxically best enabled from within a sympathetic, highly charged community that both releases and stretches writers towards achieving their potential. The existence of such communities may owe something to the congenial political or cultural conditions for their formation, and to the opportunism of motivated individuals within it.

If we accept the designation of the group which Strohm identifies as representative of a literary or intellectual circle associated with Chaucer, then we must acknowledge that these men almost certainly never thought of themselves as a literary circle in the modern sense, and that they almost certainly never met together as a single company.³⁵ The Lollard knights form the one group of Chaucer's friends who were close-knit in their own right, and Chaucer is distinguished from them in that, although he served as an esquire in the king's household for a time, he was not himself a chamber knight. Strohm constructs a narrative of Chaucer's circle as 'a constantly shifting group' in which, he suggests, Chaucer's association with Gower, Strode and the chamber knights was most active in the 1370s and 1380s, and his associations with Scogan, Bukton (and possibly also Hoccleve) in the 1390s.³⁶ He argues that the shifting nature of this circle was principally due to the political machinations of the later 1380s in which members of the Ricardian faction were forced into subjection, and subsequently executed under accusation of treason, by the Lords Appellant in 1387-8. The Appellants Crisis threw the surviving members of the

³⁵ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 45.

³⁶ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 45.

king's affinity (with which Chaucer and the chamber knights were allied) into retreat from the public sphere.

If it is impossible to imagine this group as a whole meeting regularly as the later literary club might, and if its membership could indeed best be described as 'shifting,' we might ask in what sense, if any, the contours of Strohm's circle, or earlier formulations of the Chaucer circle discussed below, are discernible as a *literary* construct? Is it useful to speak of Chaucer's circle as if it were a nexus of literary relationships, or would it be more helpful to visualise it more loosely as a series of individualised literary friendships with like-minded authors and litterateurs? And if we do visualise it as a closed 'circle,' rather than an open 'network,' what kind of impact could the circle be said to have on the writings of its members, and in particular Chaucer himself? Is the existence of such a circle at all discernible in the thematic or stylistic unity of its collective oeuvre?

The physical proximity of the chamber knights, Strode (and maybe also Gower) to Chaucer during his residence in London in the late 1370s and 1380s finds some correlation with the pattern of their literary output insofar as we can reconstruct it from the surviving evidence. The period 1377-1386 in particular stands out as a time of productivity for Chaucer (most scholars link the composition of the *House of Fame*, *Parliament of Fowls*, *Boece*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight's Tale* to this period) with Gower composing his major works around the same time (the *Vox Clamantis* can be dated to the early 1380s; the *Confessio Amantis* was conceived after 1386 but completed, in its earliest version, in 1390; and the conjectural composition date for the *Mirour de l'omme* of c.1376-1379 coincides with the locus of Gower's documented acquaintance with Chaucer in 1378). If we accept Strohm's claim that 'the period culminating in 1385 was not only the period of greatest stability in

Chaucer's life, it was the period in which he would have come closer than ever again in his career to participation in a stable social and literary circle,' it is possible to see this stability as one factor which may have affected Chaucer's literary output.³⁷ Yet limiting the literary influence of such friendships to periods of social stability and physical proximity would be simplistic. We know that Chaucer continued to develop as an artist in the subsequent decade and a half, and work on *The Canterbury Tales* as a cohesive project is first undertaken in this period: a work even more ambitious, at least in its size and encyclopaedic scope, than the earlier *Troilus and Criseyde*. Another environmental factor which may have contributed to Chaucer's creativity during this later period might be his own removal from London to Kent in 1386 (which could well have provided the impetus for the genesis of *The Canterbury Tales*, along with a quieter environment for executing it). Scogan's *Moral Ballad* was written sometime after Chaucer's death in 1400, and Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupid* is datable to the period 1386-1391, so if we accept the period culminating in 1385 as the hey-day of Chaucer's association with a London circle, and the 1390s as a time of new literary friendships with men like Scogan, then the poems of Clanvowe and Scogan must be considered as retrospectively influenced by their authors' most intensive period of association with Chaucer. Likewise, Chaucer's coterie poems of the late 1380s and 1390s could perhaps be considered retrospective reflections on friendships that were being mediated at a distance through letters. The meditations offered in 'Truth,' a ballad composed c.1382-7, and subsequently adapted to contain the envoy to Philip de la Vache, would be particularly relevant to the period directly after 1386, as Edith Rickert has argued.³⁸

Chaucer was appointed Clerk of the King's Works in 1389, and so would have

³⁷ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 63.

³⁸ Edith Rickert, 'Thou Vache,' *Modern Philology* 11 (1913): 209-225.

had occasion to be in the capital from this period onwards, although he remained 'in semi-retirement in Kent,' (probably Greenwich) for most of the 1390s.³⁹ There is some evidence of his residence in the city in 1398, and more in 1399 when he leased a house in Westminster.⁴⁰ Chaucer's *Envoy to Scogan* with its plea to 'mynne thy frend' (48) has been taken as a comment on his relative distance from the London scene in the early 1390s. Strohm's belief that Chaucer's poem to Vache and the poems to Bukton and Scogan 'suggest both his continuing commerce with old friends and his ability to recruit to his literary audience new, younger persons,' is reasonable, but his assertion that Chaucer's re-appointment in London in 1389 signified his return to 'an altered and diminished circle, ...one he probably had a hand in reconstituting,' is ultimately speculative, relying, as it does, on the importance of London itself as the host-space for this community and the dating of the friendships with Bukton and Scogan to the 1390s.⁴¹

There are also problems with using these few surviving poems to trace a progressive process of literary recruitment on Chaucer's part, not least of which is that their casual tone suggests that they were not isolated instances of coterie activity, but poems whose significance can be weighed only within the larger fabric of literary exchanges of which they were part. In the Variorum edition of the shorter poems, Alfred David concludes that, 'poems of this kind were ordinary enough to be thought not worth preserving,' and that:

The lines to Adam and the epistles to Bukton and Scogan do not give the impression of being the sole instances of the kind of *vers de société* with

³⁹ Pearsall, *Life* 224.

⁴⁰ Pearsall, *Life* 225.

⁴¹ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 66 and 67.

which Chaucer occasionally surprised and amused his friends.⁴²

The epistolary nature of these poems also gives pause for thought, raising the possibility that the literary activities of the group as a whole need not have mirrored their political fortunes. The influence of such a circle on Chaucer's art could well have been sustained at a distance from the capital through a belief in that circle as an ideal construct: an imagined community of readers he carried with him from London to Kent and which continued to be reified through letter-exchanges and occasional meetings.

Having briefly examined the conjectural core membership and social composition of the Chaucer circle, and some elements of Strohm's construction of it, I will now go on to discuss some of the pre-established models of literary community that have previously been projected onto Chaucer and the other writers in this circle: that of the courtly makers, the Lollard reading school and the urban literary association.

Chaucer's Literary Circle: Courtly Makers

Scholars attempting a survey of Richard II's reign have sometimes imposed a collective identity on Chaucer, Gower and the chamber knights by virtue of the fact that they were all either in service at court or had connections with it. Their proximity at court then becomes the means of unifying this group, or at least the writers in it, into a literary institution there. For example, Nigel Saul, in his biography of Richard, makes the assumption that:

⁴² Alfred David, 'The Poems of Part One,' introduction, *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Minor Poems, Part One*, vol. 5, ed. George B. Pace and Alfred David (Norman, OK: U of

It was during the middle and later years of [Richard's] reign that there came together at court a group of litterateurs more talented than any before seen in England.⁴³

And later that:

Chaucer, Gower, Clanvow and Montagu were the principal 'polite' poets, or 'makers' at court.⁴⁴

Similarly, Gervase Mathew assumes, rather optimistically, that these men were viewed collectively by the court as professional makers, used to fuel its 'perpetual need for evening entertainment.'⁴⁵ Such comments might mislead us into thinking their position as a literary group at court was assured, and their corporate identity evident merely in a willingness to put their talents to work for it. It also suggests that they were conscious of themselves as a group, and that outsiders -- those belonging to the wider courtly milieu of England and France -- would have recognized them as such.

Constructing these writers as a circle of courtly makers grouped around Richard as a patron certainly provides us with an attractive, ready-made social context for their poetry. As we have seen, the European courts and households, both royal and noble, provided a theatre for polite letters when they met for cultured discussion and relaxation, and some of the writings of the Chaucer group seem well tailored to a

Oklahoma P, 1982) 7.

⁴³ Saul, 359.

⁴⁴ Saul, 359.

⁴⁵ Gervase Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: Murray, 1968) 5.

courtly audience in search of an evening's entertainment. *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Boke of Cupide* and *Cinkante Balades*, for example, as well as Montagu's poetry (if it was, as is supposed, written in French) might fit such an audience.

However, there are problems with this approach, not least of which is the lack of evidence for Richard's influence as a patron of letters. As far as we know, all the poets at Richard's court were writing in the security of an income unconnected to their literary activities. Although we have records of Chaucer receiving gifts and payments from Richard and John of Gaunt, these can be linked to his services as a civil servant. We know that Gower was commissioned or requested by the king to write some 'newe thing' (Prol. 51*) which became the *Confessio Amantis*.⁴⁶ Yet the work is ambivalent in its treatment of Richard, and in later versions of the text Gower's account of the commission is excised.⁴⁷ Indeed, the most 'courtly' texts of the Chaucer circle are often crisis-texts, ambivalent in their presentation of courts and the values they embody, as, for example, in Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide* which Lee Patterson sees as offering its readers nothing more substantial than 'the eloquence of taciturnity' as a response to the vicissitudes of a courtier's life.⁴⁸ If we read Chaucer's God of Love in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* as a covert representation of Richard himself, it says little for him as a literary critic. In the poetry of the period, anyway, Richard (or his literary shadow) can often seem a disturbing rather than unifying force.

Both Chaucer and Clanvowe mention Richard's Queen, Anne of Bohemia, in

⁴⁶ G. C. Macaulay ed., *The English Works of John Gower*, vol 1, EETS es 81, 2 vols (1901; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 5. All references to the *Confessio Amantis* are to this edition and will be cited by book and line number.

⁴⁷ This may not have been due to political reasons. Gower's control over subsequent versions of each recension of the poem may have been more limited than previously thought. See Peter Nicholson, 'Gower's Revisions in the *Confessio Amantis*,' *ChR* 19.2 (1984): 123-143.

⁴⁸ Lee Patterson, 'Court Politics and the Invention of Literature: The Case of Sir John Clanvowe,' *Culture and History. 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. David Aers (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1992) 26.

a manner that might indicate that she took an interest in their work. Clanvowe, in his *Boke of Cupide*, ends with a plan for a parliament to take place: 'Before the chambre wyndow of the Quene' (284), decorously deferring to the Queen as arbiter of the love-debate.⁴⁹ Similarly, in the earlier version of the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer has Alceste order his narrator-poet to give his book of good women to the Queen at one or another of her palaces, and Gower makes reference to Anne's influence on the fashions of the court in the *Confessio Amantis*, referring to the 'new guise of Beawme' (VIII: 2470). However, it is impossible to say whether these compliments occur in a context of patronage, or were simply an instance of courtly cap-doffing. As mentioned in the previous chapter, we do find many instances of queens and noblewomen employing men of letters in their entourage throughout the Middle Ages. In the time of Edward III, Philippa of Hainault's patronage of men like Jean Froissart and Jean de la Mote provided a living example of how such a circle might have been inculcated into the English court, and Anne herself came from a distinguished family of poet-patrons. However, the compliments in Chaucer's and Clanvowe's works do not amount to a formal dedication (and, indeed, a dedication, as John Benton reminds us, can only provide evidence of the hopes of the author, not the inclinations of the dedicatee).⁵⁰

As Richard Firth Green has argued, most English poets writing in the later Middle Ages found steady patronage difficult to obtain and there is no reason to think Richard's court was any exception to this. Those courts where the level of literary patronage *was* exceptional seem to be those whose rulers believed strongly in education, or who saw its potential as a means of inspiring desirable chivalric

⁴⁹ John Clanvowe, *The Works of Sir John Clanvowe*, ed. V. J. Scattergood (Cambridge: Brewer; Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1975) 52. All quotations from the *Boke of Cupide* are from this edition and will be cited by line number.

⁵⁰ Benton, 4.

attitudes, or on a more cynical level as a means of social display and Richard does not seem to have been particularly alive to the possibilities of literature on any of these fronts.⁵¹ In this he stands in contrast to his contemporary Charles V of France, who was frequently praised for his investment in a huge royal library and for recruiting a community of intellectuals to translate important cultural works into the vernacular.⁵² Indeed, John Scattergood concludes that the English king 'seems to have been anything *but* an assiduous book collector.'⁵³ From what the limited records of aristocratic libraries reveal, fourteenth-century noblemen owned few books in English, none in Italian and generally favoured books in French and Latin, with French romances providing their main form of literary diversion.⁵⁴ As far as we know, no manuscripts of Chaucer's or Gower's poetry were owned by the king or the aristocracy until the fifteenth century, or -- for that matter -- poetry by more recent French writers like Machaut or Deschamps.⁵⁵

Yet the fact remains that Richard II's reign was an outstandingly fruitful period for English poetry, and it is tempting to attribute this to the character of the Ricardian administration in some way -- if not as the result of a deliberate cultural program, then as an indirect consequence of the environment or social relationships it fostered. In terms of its general expenditure, Derek Pearsall sees the climate of Richard's reign as 'far more congenial' than that of Henry IV towards creating a

⁵¹ For a contrary view see Patricia J. Eberle, 'Richard II and the Literary Arts,' *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, ed. Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 231-253. Eberle includes a list of works thought to have been directed to Richard, with or without his encouragement and argues that they advance an ideology of kingship he approved. However, there is little evidence that Richard took an interest in enough of these works to justify an interpretation of them as part of a deliberate cultural programme.

⁵² Saul, 362.

⁵³ V. J. Scattergood, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II,' *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (New York: St Martins, 1983) 34. Italics mine.

⁵⁴ Further see Scattergood, 'Literary Culture,' 29-43.

⁵⁵ Scattergood, 'Literary Culture,' 36. We should note that records of book ownership in this period are scanty, however. Elizabeth Salter offers some contrary instances of co-inciding literary tastes of members of the aristocracy and those of men in Chaucer's friendship group which discourages drawing too rigid a distinction between these two classes of readers. Further see Salter, 78-79.

climate of prosperity in which the arts could flourish.⁵⁶ And Pearsall, Strohm, Lenaghan and Saul all concur in identifying a separate literary culture among ‘the officials and administrators who worked and lived together at court’ and who, as a result of the expansion of the king’s household, had developed their own group identity and interests.⁵⁷ It is within this subset of the wider courtly milieu that Saul locates Chaucer, Clanvowe and Gower, arguing that these men ‘found their primary audience in each other and in fellow officials of their type.’⁵⁸ While this simplifies Chaucer, Gower and Clanvowe into a homogeneous group professionally (Gower, it seems, was only loosely affiliated with the court; and Chaucer, except for a brief period of his life, was not based at the royal household) it does not invalidate Saul’s conclusion that for those writers who shared a professional and/or cultural association with it, the court itself was ‘of little significance [to them] as a source of patronage,’ which is also the conclusion of Scattergood in his survey of literary culture at Richard’s court.⁵⁹ With this in mind, we should ask ourselves how far a literary community with a specifically courtly identity forms an important model for Chaucer and this group of gentlemen, clerks, officials or administrators connected, whether loosely or intimately, to the royal court.

The wider environment of the late medieval court as a cultural and political centre would certainly have offered Chaucer and his fellow civil servants at the English court a strong cultural and European identity separate from that of the provinces, and opportunities for literary networking with their continental counterparts. Chaucer and the chamber knights probably gained an education in letters

⁵⁶ Pearsall, *Life* 180.

⁵⁷ Saul, 363.

⁵⁸ Saul, 364.

⁵⁹ Saul, 364.

from the instruction provided for pages in noble households that Green details, and then embarked on an advanced course of reading for themselves, stimulated by cultural exchanges with other literate courtiers at the European courts.⁶⁰ Gower excepted, many of these men were closely involved in the central affairs of the realm and royal household, present at parliaments and councils, and sent abroad on diplomatic commissions. The similar career paths taken by writers at the French and English courts in this period, and the use of French as an international language, tended to foster cultural intercourse between courtiers on both sides of the channel. The Hundred Years War may actually have served to intensify such exchanges; the captivity of the French King in England during Edward III's reign provided social as well as political opportunities for contact between court personnel (we also might note how, in the fifteenth century, the French poet Charles d'Orleans enjoyed literary friendships with some of his warders during his captivity in England).⁶¹

We have two pieces of evidence of how such interactions at home and abroad provided opportunities for literary networking in Chaucer's circle. The French poet and chronicler Jean Froissart's account of his re-acquaintance with Stury in 1395 gives a glimpse into the way in which such networking may have functioned. On arriving in Richard's England, Froissart finds that everything has changed since he was last in the country. He visits the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury and learns that the king will shortly arrive with his entourage. When the king and his party arrive, Froissart is abashed to find no-one he remembers in the company. The first person he looks for as a friend in this strange new environment is Stury, and when he finally sees Stury again he gives us the following account of their meeting:

⁶⁰ Further see Green, *Poets* 71-100.

⁶¹ Further see Salter, 74-75. Salter notes that the French king 'still functioned as a patron of literature and the arts during his English captivity' (74), and gives details of some of the literary activities of the king and his household during this time.

[...] après disner, je me acointay de ung ancien chevalier que jadis en ma jeunesse je avoie veu en la chambre du roy Édouard et pour lors il estoit du destroit conseil du roy Ruchard et bien le vailloit, et estoit nommé messire Richard Stury, lequel me congnut tantost et estoient bien XXIII ans passés que il ne m'avoit veu, et la dernière fois où ce avoit esté, ce fut à Codenberghe à Brouxelles, en l'ostel du duc vincelant de Brabant. Messire Richard Stury me fist très-bonne chièr, et me recueilly et conjouy grandement et doucement et me demanda de plusieurs nouvelles.⁶²

(After dinner I met an old knight whom I had seen in my youth in the household of King Edward. He was now in King Richard's privy council, of which he was well worthy, and his name was Sir Richard Stury. He knew me straight away, and yet it had been twenty-four years since he had last seen me at Codenberg and at Brussels in the house of Duke Wenceslas of Brabant. Sir Richard Stury welcomed me warmly and asked me many questions.)

Several interesting things emerge from Froissart's account of this meeting in the *Chroniques*: the two men's (or at least Froissart's) exact memories of their last meeting with each other twenty four years ago; the rapid, close engagement of the discussion and the informality of its context (strolling around the galleries at Eltham); and, later on in the passage, Stury's decision to give Froissart early intelligence of the outcome of debates over the duchy of Aquitaine. Froissart's construction of this episode is, of course, consciously literary and the exchanges between the two men are

⁶² Jean Froissart, *Oeuvres de Froissart*, ed. M. Le Baron Kervyn de Lettenhove, vol. 15. Osnabrück, Germany: Biblio, 1967. 157.

constructed according to accepted ideals of courtly behaviour. However, we could construct this encounter as proof of a friendship that prompted a certain amount of literary networking facilitated by Stury on Froissart's behalf. It is Stury who is one of the intermediaries between the poet and the king in providing Froissart with the access he needs to make a presentation of his poetry to Richard. Later, Stury's influence again points him in the way of literary connections:

Et advint que ce propre dimence que le roy Richart ot receu et retenu en très-grant amour mon livre, ung escuier d'Angleterre estoit en la chambre du roy (et estoit nommé Henry Cristède), moult homme de bien et de prudence grandement pourveu et assés bien parlant la langue de France: si se accointa de moy pour la cause de ce que il ot veu que le roy et les seigneurs me orent faite moult grant chière et très belle recueillotte, et avoit veu le livre lequel j'avoye présente au roy, et ymagina, sicomme je vey les apparans par ses paroles, que j'estoye ung historien, et aussi il luy avoit esté dit par messire Richart Stury [...]⁶³

(On the same Sunday when the King accepted my book with such appreciation, there was an English squire present called Henry Chrystede [the King's Esquire, Henry Kyrkestede] a very worthy and serious man who spoke French quite well. He made friends with me because he had seen how warmly the King and the great lords received me and he had also seen the book I had presented. He supposed, as I gathered from his words, that I was a historian -- and indeed Sir Richard Stury had said as much to him.)⁶⁴

⁶³ Froissart, *Oeuvres*, 167-68.

⁶⁴ Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978) 409.

It is in a literary capacity, as a maker of histories, that Stury talks of Froissart to Kyrkestede and knowing this, Kyrkestede offers him more information for his chronicles. This kind of casual networking between writers and litterateurs at court was presumably quite common.

We find more insight into the literary networking of the Chaucer circle, and of Chaucer's own activities within it, in the ballad to Chaucer from the French poet Eustache Deschamps (c.1386) which Deschamps tells us is being delivered to Chaucer by Lewis Clifford. Clifford qualifies as a friend of Deschamps in his own right, and not simply a message-bearer (he appears in another Deschamps poem, *Ballade* 536, as 'L'amerous Cliffort,' to whom questions of love should be addressed).⁶⁵ How well Deschamps knew Chaucer's work in English is uncertain. He may not even have heard of Chaucer until approached by Clifford with a request from Chaucer for some of his verses.⁶⁶ It seems reasonable to suppose that Clifford must at least have talked to him about Chaucer's poetic activities, and Deschamps' response to the request shows quite a particularised conception of what Chaucer was trying to achieve with his poetry. After variously praising Chaucer's philosophy, morality, practicality and science along with his speaking and writing skills in the usual polite complimentary vein, Deschamps goes on to talk of him as one:

[...] qui as

Semé les fleurs et planté le rosier,

⁶⁵ Deschamps, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, 375-376. See also G. L. Kittredge, 'Chaucer and Some of His Friends,' *Modern Philology* 1.1 (1903): 7.

⁶⁶ For further discussion of the contexts of this poem see Derek Brewer, 'Images of Chaucer 1386-1400,' *Chaucer and Chaucerians: Critical Studies in Middle English Literature*, ed. D. S. Brewer (London: Nelson, 1966) 242-243, and William Calin, 'Deschamps "Ballade to Chaucer" Again, or the Dangers of Intertextual Medieval Comparatism,' *Eustache Deschamps, French Courtier Poet: His*

Aux ignorans de la langue pandras (*Ballade* 285: 8-9)

(who scattered flowers, who planted roses, [in England]

a guide for those who do not know the language).⁶⁷

And in the next stanza he says that:

[...] un vergier ou du plant demandas

De ceuls qui font pour eulx auctorisier,

A ja longtemps que tu edifias. (*Ballade* 285: 18-20)

(long ago you began an orchard

for which you asked for plants from those you

understood to have authority).⁶⁸

He finishes politely by calling himself a nettle in Chaucer's garden, but agrees that Chaucer shall have some of his own seedling poems as requested. The deference Deschamps shows towards the English poet here is, as Laurie and Sinnreich-Levi argue, remarkable given the similarity of age between them, and matched only by his deference to his own 'master' and 'father' in poetic skill, Machaut.⁶⁹ The personal injunction at the end of the poem, *Mais pour scavoir, de rescipre te prie* (Write me back so that I really know it) indicates he was hoping for a response, and probably

Work and His World, ed. Deborah Sinnreich-Levi, AMS Studies in the Middle Ages 22 (New York: AMS, 1998) 73-83.

⁶⁷ *Eustache Deschamps: Selected Poems*, trans David Curzon and Jeffrey Fiskin, ed. Ian S. Laurie and Deborah M. Sinnreich-Levi (New York: Routledge, 2003) 71.

⁶⁸ *Deschamps: Selected Poems* 71.

⁶⁹ *Deschamps: Selected Poems* 24.

further literary exchanges between them.

This poem offers us an intriguing insight into Chaucer's poetic ambitions as they were understood by a writer outside England, and his use of other authors to further them. The orchard of plants in Deschamps' poem refers to Chaucer's own writings. The implication that Chaucer was soliciting famous authors for poetic material to help him create a collection of poetry for his own cultural community (something like a giant *florilegium*, perhaps) is interesting, and the encyclopaedic nature of the *Canterbury Tales* would support this. Deschamps' ballad highlights the importance, for Chaucer, of contact with other writers. Given the ephemeral quality of such epistolary verse, the surviving evidence may support Strohm's impression that Chaucer was, in effect, attempting to write his own literary community into being by sending out verses to other poets as other aspiring authors before him had done.

The persistent idea of literary activity and debate belonging to the refinement of the courtly circle, whether real or ideal, made an association with courtliness attractive to a new generation of poets who wrote not in song, but in Deschamps' *musique naturele*.⁷⁰ Chaucer certainly demonstrates his familiarity with literary or quasi-literary parlour games played in courtly and aristocratic circles, prevaricating at some length on the subject of the companies of the Flower and the Leaf in *The Legend of Good Women*. In the F version of the Prologue, generally thought to be the earliest of the two versions, Chaucer's narrator invokes all the lovers who have been writers to further him in his own poetic labours, 'whether ye ben with the leef or with the flour,' (72) and to bear with him for rehearsing the material of their songs as he does it

⁷⁰ Deschamps, *L'Art de Dictier* 62.

[...] in the honour

Of love, and eke in service of the flour

Whom that I serve as I have wit or myght. (81-3)

This apparent statement of the narrator's adherence to the values of the flower (with its relevance to the particular cult of the marguerite or daisy popular in French poetry) is hardly polemical, yet he subsequently feels impelled to qualify his preference for the flower as follows:

But natheless, ne wene that I make

In preysing of the flour agayn the leef,

No more than of the corn agayn the sheef (188-190)

His own story, he tells us, harks back to a time 'er swich stryf was begonne' (196). These elaborate qualifications rather suggest that such reference to the flower may have provoked, or been expected to provoke, a playfully ambivalent response from those to whom it was read or circulated. In the amended G version of the Prologue, the narrator similarly reassures his audience that what he says is for the 'fortheryng and honour / Of hem that eyther serven lef or flour' (69-70). The fact that Chaucer refuses to pin his colours to the mast in associating himself with either community could suggest his reluctance to get embroiled in the debate, as Derek Pearsall argues, or (by leaving his readers to guess at his own allegiances) a shrewd desire of intensifying it.⁷¹ On either reading, however, Chaucer's author-narrator deliberately creates opportunities -- or textual spaces -- for others to engage in such debates

⁷¹ Derek Pearsall, introduction, *The Floure and the Leafe and the Assembly of Ladies* ed. Pearsall (London: Nelson, 1962) 23.

merely by the manner in which he mentions them.

The level of engagement with the realities of life at the English court in the courtly poetry produced by Chaucer and his friends has been debated. Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupid* has been described by R. H. Robbins as an apolitical poem designed to encourage 'intellectual and social diversion and amorous dalliance among a miniscule elite group.'⁷² This view has been questioned by Lee Patterson, who sees Clanvowe's poem as a more complex work that posits 'a two-fold audience -- one engaged in mere dalliance, another capable of reading ironically.'⁷³ Patterson's discussion of how the kinds of verbal ingenuity in courtly conversation encouraged at court conditioned a deft and allusive poetry, and of Clanvowe's use of the language of the court as a way of exploring its own limitations in engaging with the social and political realities of life there, paves the way for a different construction of literary community: a community of insiders who understood such coded appeals to the common frustrations of the Ricardian courtier. The *Book of Cupid* might therefore appeal to an elite group in this sense, but not an apolitical one.

In a more general sense, poems like *The Book of Cupid*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Legend of Good Women* (and, indeed, the *Confessio Amantis*, with its framing device of Cupid's court and its appeal to the shared experience of lovers) represent for the reader an imagined literary community embodied as a court. These poems thus revivify, in Richard Firth Green's terms, 'that informal *cour amoureuse* which sprang into being wherever members of the *familia Regis* fell to discussing love poetry,' and in which 'we can sense the presence of a tight-knit group of initiates

⁷² R. H. Robbins, 'The Structure of Longer Middle English Court Poems,' *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays presented to Paul E. Beichner*, ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1979) 245.

⁷³ Patterson, 'Court Politics,' 29.

playing with literary and social conventions at which we can now only guess.’⁷⁴ For Green, this group of initiates, embodied in literature as the *familia Cupidinis*, is always a ‘closed, predominantly masculine, and self-consciously literary society,’ and ultimately a self-referential, inward-looking one.⁷⁵

What relationship might such a literary community have with Chaucer’s circle? Are we to imagine such poems to have emerged from an actual group of courtiers meeting after supper to while away an evening debating questions of love, (and thus read them as a spur to courtly role playing), or should they be interpreted purely as using literary constructs? Teresa Tinkle’s discussion of the imagined community that emerges from a particular collection of Chaucerian love poetry compiled c.1450, Bodleian MS. Fairfax 16, and her insights into how the device of the love-court could be used as a symbol of masculine affiliation for its writers and readers, provide a basis for a more detailed analysis of the functions such literary communities could serve for these authors and their readers, and of their relevance to the social and political realities of contemporary culture.⁷⁶ Tinkle looks further at ways in which real and ideal courtly communities interact with each other in this period, and integrates the English literary debate in courtly literature with the pre-existing social and literary communities available to courtly poets. As she visualises it, the *familia Cupidinis* offered its participants an alternative, congenial identity to that provided by the old hierarchical forms of affiliation, which were constantly being challenged and re-defined:

The English literary debate centers on two conventional motifs - the royal

⁷⁴ Green, ‘Familia Regis,’ 106.

⁷⁵ Green, ‘Familia Regis,’ 108.

⁷⁶ Theresa Tinkle, ‘The Imagined Chaucerian Community of Bodleian MS Fairfax 16,’ *Chaucer and the Challenges of Medievalism*, ed. Donka Minkova and Theresa Tinkle, Studies in English Medieval

court and the religion of love [...]. At the same time, a number of factors undermine these imagined communities in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England: the royal court is nonexistent for much of this time, and Church unity is challenged by the papal schism and spread of heterodoxy. In this age of transition, the old hierarchical orders are breaking down [...] and new horizontal forms of affiliation are beginning to replace them.⁷⁷

In her view, a compilation such as MS Fairfax 16 (containing poems by Chaucer, Hoccleve and Lydgate among others)

[...] allows us insight into this historical shift: the manuscript displays how writers draw on the motifs of court and religion, but it also reveals that they are re-imagining their affiliations. [...] the poems of Cupid in this manuscript represent for the mid-fifteenth century reader an imagined masculine community of vernacular English writers and readers – a pre-national (and pre-print) alternative both to the Latinate clerical brotherhood and to the Gallic court.⁷⁸

Considered in this light, writers like Chaucer and Clanvowe (and Hoccleve and Lydgate) were consciously forging a literary community of their own to appeal to a specifically English readership. As well as the obvious solidarity of a common national identity, this vernacular community could be said to offer an alternative repository of literary and social identity to that of the ecclesiastical and scholarly communities or the French courtly poets. Although it was, of course, ultimately

founded on the traditions of philosophical and social debate initiated by these more established communities, these traditions were being brought to bear on a specifically English social context: life under the Ricardian, and later the Lancastrian, administration).

In discussing these negotiations between an English and a European literary identity, we ought also to consider the decision of the writers within the Chaucer circle to write poetry in English when courtly culture in the fourteenth century as a whole was heavily francophile. Was their use of English as a poetic medium the result of a growth in nationalism, a practical response to changing habits of literacy in fourteenth-century England, or a considered bid to make English a literary language of prestige, evidence of a new literary agenda derived from continental poets like Dante who aimed to develop the poetry of their own vernaculars?

Thomas Usk is the only writer in Chaucer's primary audience who discusses his decision to write in English, but his reasons for doing so may illustrate his distance from that level of immersion in French culture experienced by Chaucer, Gower and the Chamber knights. In *The Testament of Love*, Usk tells us that only in one's own language can one most sincerely apprehend truth:

[...] the understandyng of Englysshmen wol not stretche to the privy termes in Frenche, what-so-ever we bosten of straunge langage. Let than clerkes endyten in Latyn, for they have the propertee of science, and the knowing in that facultie; and let Frenchemen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kindely to their mouthes. And let us shewe our fantasyes in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Tinkle, 160.

⁷⁹ Thomas Usk, *Testament of Love*, ed. Gary W. Shawver (London: U of Toronto P, 2002) 45.

Interestingly, the ‘us’ in this passage clearly differentiates English writers who chose to employ the vernacular both from English poets who wrote in French and the clerical community that also included Englishmen, but transcended national barriers by virtue of its universal language, Latin, and its subjection to papal rather than temporal authorities. For Usk, the idea of forging a specifically English *familia Cupidinis* alternative to both these traditions is clearly attractive. However, the sentiments quoted here may not illustrate his distance from the Anglo-French culture so much as a desire on his part to *make* it distant as a means of defining and solidifying an English national identity.

By contrast, Chaucer’s ‘Complaint of Venus’ appears to acknowledge an inferiority in English as a poetic language in lamenting that

[...] rym in Englissh hath such skarsete

To folowe word by word the curiosite

Of Graunson, flour of hem that make in Fraunce. (80-82)

In the context of flattering a fellow poet this may be disingenuous however; compliments from Chaucer’s fifteenth-century successors show that they, like Deschamps, believed that he was seeking to transplant the best features of French and Latin literature, its erudition and sophistication, and infuse English with the same values and even formal arrangements, in order to ennoble their own language. How far Clanvowe and Scogan shared such an agenda is questionable, but they evidently admired its results enough to produce an English poetry of their own, at least at an occasional level.

Chaucer's Literary Circle: Lollard Schools

As we have seen, several of the chamber knights known to Chaucer were named as Lollards by the chroniclers (notably Stury, Clifford, Clanvowe and Nevill), and there is evidence to suggest that William Beauchamp and Philip de la Vache were Lollard sympathisers as well. In his discussion of a 'Chaucer circle,' Derek Pearsall asserts that involvement with the Lollard movement, at least in its earliest stages, was a factor in shaping 'the real life' of a poet such as Chaucer, as characterised by his place within 'a close-knit group of friends [...], with common intellectual and literary interests, exciting political and foreign contacts, a whiff of danger, [...].'⁸⁰ This begs the question of whether Lollard reading communities could have been a shaping influence on a Chaucerian literary circle.

Lollardy was a high-profile, anti-clerical religious movement fuelled by the controversial teachings of the Oxford scholar John Wyclif, a number of which were condemned as heretical by the Blackfriars' Council of 1382. At the grass-roots level, the Lollard movement manifested itself as a move towards laicising religion and found a degree of support in its early stages among the gentry and prosperous middle classes. Many of Wyclif's ideas were attractive to those of the laity who saw a need to reform the clergy and monastic orders in this period, and who questioned the enthusiasm of traditional religion for cults, relics and rituals. As the movement developed, the Lollards came to be identified with certain beliefs: they were against pilgrimage, the adornment of the churches, the veneration of holy items and the reverence shown to the consecrated host as practices tending towards a misplaced idolatry.

⁸⁰ Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry*, The Routledge History of English Poetry, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1977) 195.

Stury and Clifford, who were significantly older than the other knights in Chaucer's set, shared a history of religious radicalism, which may have been promoted in the Black Prince's, and later the Princess of Wales's, households. Walsingham believed that these men were among those responsible for the posting of the *Twelve Conclusions*, a Lollard manifesto calling for church reforms, at the parliamentary session of 1395. While Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond think this unlikely, Walsingham's chronicle highlights how frequently suspicions of Lollardy were directed at these knights by their contemporaries.⁸¹ Both Stury and Clifford were asked to renounce Lollard beliefs publicly, but their willingness to do so counts for little when we consider that many Lollards resumed their activities after abjuration. Clanvowe's treatise *The Two Ways*, while orthodox in its sentiments, may indicate Lollard influences. A manuscript of this work was later found in the possession of William Beauchamp's clerk, suggesting that the knights were in the habit of circulating such literature amongst themselves and their households (and as this is the only complete manuscript copy of the treatise to have survived this also suggests that Clanvowe's friends invested considerable care in its preservation); Beauchamp himself had been a contemporary of Wyclif at Oxford.

From its earliest days, the Lollard movement was associated with literacy and book production. Lollardy was a movement with literary aspirations in that it encouraged self-education through religious reading as a means of widening the laity's access to spiritual truths. Wyclif and his followers were keen to circulate a variety of religious literature in English, foremost of which was their translation of the scriptures. As Lollardy spread, membership of the sect became increasingly linked to the possession of suspect sermons, treatises, tracts, and, above all, the Lollard Bible.

⁸¹ Further see Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, introduction, *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Aston and Richmond (Stroud: Sutton; New York, St. Martin's P, 1997) 1-27.

'Lollard schools' developed as alternative communities of learning, and Margaret Aston notes that these 'groups of fervent readers, listeners and learners attending scriptural meetings, are characteristic of the Lollards from the days when their translated text first became available.'⁸²

If Chaucer and his friends had been involved with such a group, it would certainly have given them a fixed identity heightened by their apprehension of being in a minority. As Anne Hudson comments: 'Lollard communities were tightly-knit and inward looking enclaves in a hostile world.'⁸³ Wyclif himself had outlined a special role for knights as *pugiles legis Dei* (defenders of the Law of God). One of the Lollard manuscripts surviving from this period (Durham MS Cosin V.iii.6) contains a debate between a doctor of canonical law and a knight, in which the scriptural learning of the knight wins the victory.⁸⁴ Lollard tracts often presented such debates in dialogue format, and knights and other groups traditionally situated on the margins of literacy, were encouraged by the Lollards to educate themselves to take a role in debates that were previously the province of the academic community. This 'hands-on' approach to gaining a practical education in God's law, which ecclesiastical institutions naturally found threatening, was, for the upwardly mobile *gentils* and prosperous middle classes, an enfranchisement of a different kind of intellectual life from that offered through formal education. The Lollards backed lay literacy as helpful for furthering their cause, and supervised the copying of religious texts in the vernacular in their own centres of book production. The dissemination of Lollardy through sermons and other polemical texts gave its proponents a tightly focussed religious agenda with a strong literary-cultural dimension. By the time of the

⁸² Margaret Aston, *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambledon P, 1984) 198.

⁸³ Anne Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books* (London: Hambledon, 1985) 169.

⁸⁴ Hudson, *Lollards and Their Books*, 182.

Oldcastle Rising of 1414 we find a significant number of Lollard supporters involved with the book-trade in London, further establishing the link between Lollardy, literacy and book production.

On the face of it, the possibilities for linking Chaucer's intellectual circle to a Lollard community seem promising. However, there are a number of problems. For one thing, even the chamber knights most frequently suspected of Lollardy appear to have been inconsistent in their practice of Lollard beliefs. The *Twelve Conclusions* condemned pilgrimages as 'of kin to ydolatrie,' and 'manslaute be batayle' as contrary to the New Testament; yet Chaucer and several of the chamber knights had taken part in foreign wars, and we know that Clanvowe and Nevill went on pilgrimage together in the 1390s.⁸⁵ The poet's wider circle also contained men hostile to, or at least questioning of, Lollardy and its beliefs. Strode (if he is the philosopher contemporary with Wyclif at Oxford) is known to have argued against some of Wyclif's ideas about predestination. Gower was not sympathetic towards the Lollards either, and includes an attack on Lollardy ('Contra demonis astuciam in causa Lollardie') in his *Carmen super Multiplici Viciorum Pestilencia* (c.1396-7).⁸⁶ So if Chaucer was equally friendly with both kinds of men then his circle, whatever perimeters we impose on it, is likely to have been less inward-looking than other kinds of Lollard community.

There is another problem, in that the literary-cultural remit of Lollardy did not, strictly speaking, extend to literature in the more specialised sense – a Lollard literary circle might even be a contradiction in terms. Lollard writing tended to exclude the kind of ornamentation it despised as superfluous in traditional religion. Most Lollard

⁸⁵ 'Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards,' *Selections from Wycliffite Writings*, ed. Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 27 and 28.

⁸⁶ Further see Anne Hudson, 'The Context of Vernacular Wycliffism,' *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 409-411.

sermons use repetitive phraseology and tend to be devoid of the kind of aesthetic qualities that might lead us to view them as distinctively *literary* texts. Although, as Peggy Knapp remarks, Wyclif himself left us with no views on fiction in general, the unofficial Wycliffite line was opposition to the inclusion of non-biblical material in the pulpit, and the Lollard template for sermonising is accordingly rigid. While fictional dialogues might be employed in other kinds of Lollard literature, the style of which could rise to pithy irony at times, the movement's severe approach to the arts and crafts in general as wasteful and distracting was not likely to encourage literary extravagance. Chaucer's Parson, accused of being a loller by the host, follows the Lollard line in being a stringent opponent of fables:

Thou getest fable noon ytoold for me,
 For Paul, that writeth unto Thymothee,
 Repreveth hem that weyven soothfastnesse
 And tellen fables and swiche wrecchednesse.
 Why sholde I sowen draf out of my fest,
 Whan I may sowen whete, if that me lest? (Parson's Prol. 31-6)

He advocates 'Moralitee and vertuous mateere' (38) as being the only legitimate kind of story material for his listeners, 'pleasaunce leefful'(41) as he says, the implication being that many of the other tales were not. Yet after railing against literature, the Parson excuses his lack of literary pretension with regard to the form of his own 'myrie tale' (46) in a manner that suggests his difficulty with literature might be more personal than doctrinal. And in practice the fertility and resilience of the human imagination often manifest themselves as something that can never quite be

suppressed, even by the most censorious of Lollard supporters. In practice we find puzzling double standards evident in poems like *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, which -- if it was expecting its readers to accept its strong denunciation of tales and fables -- would have had to be the last poem they ever read! Scattergood posits the view that there may have been two strands of opinion about literary texts in the Lollard movement, one which was more willing to include non-biblical literature in the library of 'pleasaunce leeful' when it could be proved to be profitable to Christian learning.⁸⁷ This division of moral and immoral kinds of literature could be discernable in Chaucer's retraction, but its implementation as a literary mandate would still involve either a drastic pruning of the kind of literature produced by Chaucer's circle (if we take Chaucer's own estimation of what constitutes a profitable story in the retraction to be the orientating criteria) or a more lenient approach to what constitutes a worthwhile story.

Peggy Knapp suggests that Chaucer was familiar enough with the ideas and vocabulary of the Lollard sect to have incorporated aspects of Lollard discourse into the larger discursive framework of the *Canterbury Tales*.⁸⁸ But while he may well have admired the strong conscience and clean living of those associated with the movement, he sits uneasily in the role of Lollard propagandist because the scope of his writing is just too various to allow that discourse to emerge as the undisputed victor in the larger debate of the tales. Anne Hudson uses the 'Lollard ideals' of Chaucer's Parson as an example of Chaucer's ambiguous treatment of Lollardy in an investigation of the contexts of vernacular Wycliffism. On the surface level, the host's identification of the Parson with the Lollard movement is spurious: if the Parson had been a Lollard he would be unlikely to take part in a pilgrimage, and nothing in his

⁸⁷ John Scattergood, 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede': Lollardy and texts,' *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* 92.

sermon marks it out as especially heterodox. However, the appropriation of Wycliffite language to describe and characterise the Parson at different points is surely deliberate, leading Hudson to remark on the way in which ‘ ‘Wycliffite’ concerns coincided with the intellectual interests of the time.’⁸⁹ In this way, the language and vocabulary of Wycliffism was being appropriated into ‘the areas of social, theological and ecclesiastical questions,’ by serious thinkers inside and outside the universities whether or not they defined themselves as Wycliffites.⁹⁰

Perhaps an understanding of the indeterminate status of Lollardy in the 1380s and 1390s provides us with a better framework within which to get a sense of the group’s religious bearings. Although certain of Wyclif’s beliefs were branded as heretical in 1382, Lollardy co-existed with orthodox piety in the highest circles for some years afterwards before it was seriously treated as heresy. In Richard’s reign, at least, the gap between Lollardy and orthodoxy could be as little as a few pages in a single manuscript, as evidenced by many compilations containing both devout and dissident texts that were circulated in this period. *The Two Ways* is a good example of a text implicated with the Lollard movement yet perfectly orthodox in its expressions and sentiments; what identifies it with Lollardy is not anticlerical polemic, but a plain style, quotations from the bible in English and a noticeable but not incriminating lack of reference to the Church as a source of spiritual guidance. As Richard Rex observes, this perspective on the relationship between lay piety and Lollardy gives rise to the curious fact that ‘[...] any unconventional display of piety, whether unusual in kind or merely in degree, could strike the unsympathetic as smacking of heresy.’⁹¹ *The Two Ways* illustrates this ambiguity in the only passage that mentions Lollardy directly.

⁸⁸ Further see Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 61-94.

⁸⁹ Hudson, ‘Vernacular Wycliffism,’ 393.

⁹⁰ Hudson, ‘Vernacular Wycliffism,’ 393.

⁹¹ Richard Rex, *The Lollards* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 80.

After contrasting the worldly with those who are humble and meek, Clanvowe tells us: ‘swiche folke þe world scoorneth and hooldeþ hem lolleris and loselis [...]’ (512).⁹² Interestingly, he does not say that these people *are* Lollards, but that the world is liable to label them as such. Clanvowe recognises that ‘lolleris,’ like ‘loselis,’ can be used as a term of abuse, but the question remains as to whether the specimens of Christianity he is championing should be identified as true Wycliffites unfairly abused, or merely the devout misunderstood and then branded as Wycliffites. When we consider that the kind of people sympathetic to Lollardy were often the thoughtful, questioning, pious believers who would have thought of themselves not as heretics but as sincere Christians seeking a better understanding of their faith, it becomes easier to see how Chaucer and his friends might be better described as religious radicals. It also explains how a writer like Clanvowe could participate in the radicalism implicit in Lollard concerns without committing himself to Lollardy in a way that would have been damaging to the kind of literature he wanted to produce.

If Chaucer and his friends could better be described as religious radicals, we might ask whether such a label has any bearing on the character of their collective writings in a way that distinguishes them as a group. It could be argued that Chaucer, Gower and Clanvowe share a preoccupation with reconciling the claims of refined love and Christian duty. In Chaucer’s conclusion to *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrator goes beyond the Boethian remit of the *Knight’s Tale* to direct the reader to faith in Christ and encourages those ‘yonge, fresshe folkes’ (V: 1835) most desirous of love to ‘repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte’ (V: 1837). Chaucer’s decision to represent Troilus after death, looking down on ‘this litel spot of erthe’ (V: 1815) and feeling a sense of the disproportional importance of his pursuits there underscores this mix of

⁹² ‘The Two Ways,’ *Works of Sir John Clanvowe* 70.

Boethian resignation and Christ-centric concern for the afterlife. Likewise, Gower's *Confessio Amantis* also moves the lover from the obsessive pursuit of love to the consolations of religion and preparation for death. Yet the *Confessio* also includes matter for eligible lovers in demonstrating that the service of Love is not outside the bounds of traditional morality. A similar scepticism about the efficacy of *fin amor* emerges in Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide*. Following Chaucer's lead in the *Knight's Tale*, Clanvowe frames his poem with a Chaucerian discourse on the ambivalent powers of the god of love and moves us on to a conclusion that gives us no final assurance of his benevolence: 'With such a lorde wolde I neuer be' (201) announces the Cuckoo memorably, underscoring our sense of Love's ministry as 'dyuerse' and 'willful' (205). Like Chaucer's in the *Knight's Tale*, Clanvowe's is an essentially Boethian outlook: Love himself as a personified force or deity is not to be trusted to bring the lover happiness of a lasting kind. Although a courtly audience's natural sympathies in the love debate belong with the nightingale, it is the cuckoo who appears to win the debate by arguing the nightingale into silence: a response that would have been taken for a defeat in the medieval schools.⁹³

Yet this tension between the claims of religion and *fin amor* is by no means an exclusively Chaucerian preoccupation. Chaucer, Gower, Clanvowe and Scogan all present us, in some fashion, with an interrogative moral vision of the world, but this hardly differentiates them from other late medieval authors, including their most famous contemporaries, William Langland and the *Gawain*-poet, with whom (as far as we know) they were not in contact. So, hazarding any conclusions about a common philosophical, religious or ideological agenda in the work of Chaucer and the other writers in his circle based on their relationship to the Lollard movement is

⁹³ Scattergood, introduction, *Works of Sir John Clanvowe* 84.

problematic. It may be more accurate to talk of their religious radicalism more generally as a 'Ricardian' characteristic, following John Burrow's suggestion that the major poets of Richard's reign share a number of traits in common.⁹⁴

Chaucers Literary Circle: Urban Models

Retrospectively, it was Chaucer and Gower who left the biggest imprint on the English poetic tradition from the Ricardian generation. As Burrow comments:

This consciousness [of Ricardian poetry] was chiefly formed by the judgments of writers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who owed relatively little to Langland or to the traditions which he represented. For these writers and their readers it was Chaucer and Gower - the 'London School' - who really counted.⁹⁵

This notion of a 'London School,' is, as Burrow himself admits, 'a convenient fiction of the literary historian,' another cataloguing mechanism which may or may not help us pose questions about the relationship between writers in the Chaucer circle.⁹⁶ It is the physical host-space of London, once again, that is fixed on as the defining feature of such a school, which, if we imagine it as a regional and/or socio-linguistic construct, might then include other members besides Chaucer and Gower, potentially other London-based authors such as Usk and Langland.

However, in terms of his social connections with writers other than Chaucer, Gower's social participation in a London-based literary 'community' cannot be

⁹⁴ J. A. Burrow, introduction, *Ricardian Poetry* 1-10.

⁹⁵ Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* 6.

verified. In a recent essay on Gower's urban contexts, Robert Epstein notes that 'none of the conjectural members of the Chaucer circle appear anywhere in Gower's life records.'⁹⁷ Strode's is the only name that occurs alongside Gower's (and in Chaucer's poetry) as a co-dedicatee of *Troilus and Criseyde*, leading Epstein to conclude that 'if Gower was a member of such a convivial literary fraternity, there is little evidence of it in his own poetry.'⁹⁸ Gower's more 'laureate' and authoritative style, and the 'deliberately impersonal' voice to which Fisher calls attention, might well preclude literary allusion to the more intimate audience of the coterie, had Gower belonged to one.⁹⁹ However, Epstein and Strohm are probably right to stress that Gower's independence from the rest of the group is evident on a number of levels, both social and artistic. By contrast, Clanvowe's *Book of Cupid* and Scogan's *Moral Ballad* are recognisably Chaucerian in the sense that they transport passages of Chaucer wholesale into their work, almost as if their authors are seeking to graft their identity onto his. From a Bloomian, 'anxiety of influence' perspective, we might say that Chaucer – as the strongest author in this group – has overwhelmed their creativity, and Gower's artistic isolation from the others is proof of the strength of his own poetic vision. However, if we see the writings of Clanvowe and Scogan as having been elicited by Chaucer's invitation to them to join him in participating in a literary community, we can read these men as engaging imaginatively with Chaucer's art in a way that forges this community.

Some degree of friendship and trust between Chaucer and Gower, along with mutual admiration for each other's poetry, is evinced by the references to each other in *Troilus and Criseyde* and the *Confessio Amantis*, and in Chaucer's decision to grant

⁹⁶ Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry* 3.

⁹⁷ Robert Epstein, 'London, Southwark, Westminster: Gower's Urban Contexts,' *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004) 46.

⁹⁸ Epstein, 'Gower's Urban Contexts,' 47.

Gower power of attorney over his affairs in 1378. The poetic allusions suggest that they were both careful readers of each other's work, at least during the 1380s. Seeking to characterise this literary relationship further, scholars have attempted to map the direction of literary influence from Gower to Chaucer, and occasionally vice versa, but usually configuring Chaucer as Gower's more brilliant disciple.¹⁰⁰ These references linking Chaucer and Gower by name have been interpreted by John Fisher as corroborating this picture of Gower as Chaucer's mentor:

During the decade from 1376 to 1386, when they appear to have been living close together, the references proceed from Chaucer towards Gower. It was Chaucer who entrusted Gower with his power of attorney in 1378, and again it was Chaucer who dedicated *Troilus* to Gower in the mid-eighties. When, later, Gower responded, the allusion at the end of the *Confessio Amantis* took the form of an admonition [from Venus to Chaucer to write a testament of love].¹⁰¹

Here Fisher imposes a narrative of friendship and literary influence on the few surviving references of interaction between the two poets, constructing them in terms of gesture and response: causal links in an evolving relationship. But in actual fact, there is no evidence that the admonition in the *Confessio Amantis* should be read as a response to Chaucer's dedication (and given the uncertain dating of both poems, it is possible that these passages were composed years apart). Such assumptions again highlight the difficulties of interpreting such isolated pieces of evidence, and the

⁹⁹ Fisher, *John Gower* 206.

¹⁰⁰ For a different perspective see Richard Axton, 'Gower - Chaucer's heir?' *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 21-38.

tendency to infer more from them than they can sustain.

It has been suggested on separate occasions that Chaucer, Gower and Scogan may have attended meetings of the London Puy. Fisher, who made the most extended case for Gower's involvement with this group in 1964, constructed his argument on the basis of the poet's celebration of married love and his attaching of envoys to ballads, a practice which was popularised in the continental *puys*.¹⁰² In his view, many of the *Cinkante Ballades*, presented to Henry IV after the accession 'Por desporter vo noble Court roial' (27) (for the pleasure of your noble royal court) could originally have been composed for recital at its meetings.¹⁰³ Following Fisher's discussion, Martin Stevens suggests Chaucer's use of rhyme royal may have been influenced by an association with the London Puy, and Donald Howard perpetuated this idea in *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (1987).¹⁰⁴ May Hallmundson Newman argued that Scogan could also have been present at meetings of this Puy, along with others of 'London's literary community.'¹⁰⁵

However, since there is no evidence for the London Puy having survived into the late fourteenth century, its influence on these men seems improbable. Given the social prominence of the Puy in the late thirteenth century, it is hard to imagine why, if it was active a century later, there is no mention of its feasts, charitable works and civic processions. We might also question why it does not feature in the crown's investigation into private associations in the 1320s. Eagerness to adopt the London Puy as a model for a Chaucerian community may confirm the existence of a critical

¹⁰¹ Fisher, *John Gower* 207.

¹⁰² Fisher, *John Gower* 78-83. Anne Sutton suggests that it is more likely that Gower and Chaucer knew about the practices of the French *puys* of the late fourteenth century from their contacts with French culture, rather than membership of any London-based *puy*. Further see n. 13 in Sutton, 'Merchants,' 13.

¹⁰³ Macaulay ed., *Works of John Gower*, vol 1, 337.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Stevens, 'The Royal Stanza in Early English Literature,' *PMLA* 94.1 (1979): 62-76; Donald R. Howard, 'Rhyme Royal and the Merchant Puy,' *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Dutton, 1987) 266-68.

preference that such a community should more closely reflect the democratic ideals of modern society.¹⁰⁶ So for example, according to Donald Howard, the Puy comes to constitute a sort of evolutionary half-way house between 'courtly' and 'public' poetry which 'was courtly in its models and mannerisms, but was a merchant-class event -- very possibly an ingredient in Chaucer's notion of his audience.'¹⁰⁷

While there is no evidence that the London Puy exerted any influence on Chaucer's literary circle, Robinson mentions the possible influence of the Puy's adoption of the literary competition on the framing narrative of *The Canterbury Tales* in his notes to *The Riverside Chaucer*.¹⁰⁸ Harry Bailly couches the competition in these terms:

Which of yow that bereth him best of alle --
 That is to seyn, that telleth in this caas
 Tales of best sentence and moost solaas --
 Shal have a soper at oure aller cost
 Heere in this place, sittynge by this post,
 Whan that we come agayn fro Caunterbury. (GP 796-801)

The host's organisation of a literary competition among the Canterbury Pilgrims could be read as appropriate to his role as a landlord.¹⁰⁹ His declaration that the supper shall be 'heere in this place, sittynge by this post' imposes an air of ceremony on the proceedings, and parallels the hieratic terminology of the Puy, who refer to the 'jour

¹⁰⁵ Hallmundson, 131-2.

¹⁰⁶ Trigg, 35-36.

¹⁰⁷ Howard, 268

¹⁰⁸ See the note on lines 796-801 in Robinson ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 826.

¹⁰⁹ See Chapter One, pp 92-3.

du siege' or the day of the sitting repeatedly in their statutes.¹¹⁰ Money matters were as important to the Puy as they seem to have been for Harry. It was a marked concern of the Puy's statutes that the cost of the feast would be shared among the members, not incurred by the Prince (although the Puys stipulated that those who provided a new song for the occasion did not have to pay this fee).

A more recent reading of the imagined community of the Canterbury pilgrims as a model of community influenced by guild ideology can be found in David Wallace's *Chaucerian Polity*.¹¹¹ Wallace draws attention to the role of the host as the governor of this *felaweshipe*, with its literary competition and the practical arrangements for supper, and to the guild-like terminology of oath-swearing and corporate drinking that accompanies its 'statutes':

This thing was graunted, and oure othes swore
 With ful glad herte, and preyden hym also
 That he wolde vouche sauf for to do so
 And that he wolde been oure governour
 And of oure tales juge and reportour,
 And sette a soper at a certyn pris
 And we wol reuled been at his devys
 In heigh and lough; and thus by oon assent
 We been acorded to his juggement.
 And thereupon the wyn was fet anon;
 We dronken, and to reste went echon, [...] (Gen. Prol. 810-820)

¹¹⁰ For discussion of the London Puy and their statutes see Chapter One, p. 47-52.

¹¹¹ Wallace, 65-83.

Here we have a more organised form of literary community in which Harry is made master of the revels, and the desire to direct its activities towards moderation and away from the internal anarchy or excess that might threaten the harmony of such a community is vocalised in the fixing of supper ‘at a certyn pris’ and the nomination of the host as ‘juge’ of the tales. In this light, it would be possible to read the framing narrative of the *Canterbury Tales* as depicting the institution of a more formal kind of literary community -- an association of storytellers not unlike the literary guilds competing for the prize of a dinner, one whose social distinctions are, to some extent, levelled by their equal status as members of this fellowship. Although the host attempts to impose a structure of hierarchy on the company by beginning with the knight, it is not social prominence, but literary talent which will determine who wins the prize.

The activities of guild-culture in general may offer an instructive comparison to the poetic practice of Chaucer and his friendship circle in the context of the social functions of literature in the later medieval period. (Here, too, it may be worth recalling that Chaucer himself emerged from a mercantile background). As mentioned in Chapter One, dining was frequently combined with literary amusements on the feast days of guilds and fraternities and other, more informal, urban associations. Such a convivial gathering provided the occasion for Scogan’s *Moral Ballad*, which the Chaucerian scribe and bibliophile John Shirley locates ‘at a souper of feorthe [worthy] merchande in the Vyntre in London, at the hous of Lowys John,’ himself a wealthy wine merchant. Kittredge imagined Chaucer’s poem to Bukton in this kind of convivial setting: ‘read at a farewell dinner, amidst the inextinguishable laughter of the blessed bachelors.’¹¹² The playfully misogynistic discourse of this poem, however,

¹¹² G. L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (1915; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1970) 34.

would align it with a different form of literary community to that of the London Puy, who made it their aim to honour women.

The notion of the poem to Bukton as an ‘epistle’ or ‘envoy’ subtly changes the context of the poem from a convivial gathering at which the poet himself is present to an imagined literary community, creating a poem which mediates the presence of its author at a distance by letter. This was also the context for Scogan’s own ‘Moral Ballad’ as well, according to Shirley and the antiquarian John Stow.¹¹³ This is corroborated by Scogan’s own mode of address at the opening of the poem:

My noble sones, and eek my lordes dere,
I, your fader called, unworthily,
Sende un-to you this litel tretys here (1-3)¹¹⁴

Critics who have discussed the *Moral Ballad* often admit disappointment at the tonal slippage between Chaucer’s playful envoy to Scogan and the apparently soberly didactic tone of Scogan’s own surviving poem. Strohm interprets the poem as an irredeemably ‘solemn’ and monologic production, and evidence of ‘the narrowing of Chaucer’s tonal range’ in the work of his fifteenth-century disciple.¹¹⁵ In contrast, I would argue that what we know of Scogan’s personal history, together with the receptive context of this ballad/treatise, affects our interpretation of this poem, shifting the tone quite subtly. After Scogan’s address to the princes, his ‘sones,’ he makes a lament (or ‘complaint’) for his ‘misspent juventè’ (11), advising them to flee vice and ‘shapeth to dispende’(40) their own youth in virtue. Scogan moves on to

¹¹³ Stow, 216

¹¹⁴ Scogan’s ‘Moral Ballad’ has been printed in W. W. Skeat ed., *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol 7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1897) 237-244. All quotations from the poem are from this edition and are cited by line number.

consider his master Chaucer's wisdom on the subject, embodied in Chaucer's own ballad 'Gentilesse,' which he quotes entire (the substance of this is that only virtue constitutes gentility, that virtue must be sought by each individual, and -- unlike riches -- cannot be inherited). He goes on to rebuke modern youth for being ungovernable, and invokes the examples of Boethius, Tullius Hostilius, and others, to elaborate various general moral points about the superiority of a life of virtue to one of vice.

A number of extraneous details concerning the poem's receptive context complicate our interpretation of Scogan's strategy here, however. First, although the poem is addressed to the princes, the preface reveals a second, implied audience: Lewis John (a probable associate of Chaucer) and the other merchants of the Vintry with whom the princes are dining, and to whom, presumably, the poem has been sent in order to be read aloud sometime during the evening.¹¹⁶ Secondly, it seems reasonable to suppose that Scogan would have been familiar to at least some of the members of this second audience of older men: Hallmundson's research reveals that he knew the king's butler, John Payne, that he had visited the Vintry district himself, perhaps regularly, in the 1380s; and had been involved in a brawl there with another prominent merchant and acquaintance of Chaucer, Hugh Fastolf, in 1387.¹¹⁷

From the princes' perspective, the moral advice in the poem could be read quite straightforwardly, but bearing in mind Scogan's personal history as outlined above, the poem might have appealed to its merchant audience on a number of other levels: first, Scogan's references to his own misspent youth could have been intended to raise a private laugh among the kind of men who had probably heard about, if not been party to, his own nights-out in the Vintry ward; second, his inclusion of this

¹¹⁵ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 77

¹¹⁶ G. L. Kittredge, 'A Friend of Chaucer's,' *PMLA* 16.3 (1901): 450-52.

particular Chaucer poem, with its doctrine of a gentility that is universally attainable to anyone who pursues virtue, would clearly be flattering to a non-noble audience; third, as Chaucer himself derived from a family of Vintners, Scogan may well have been playing on further, familiar connections between his audience and its author. The ‘sober’ tone of the poem is further complicated by Scogan’s reference to himself, figuratively, as a ‘father’ to the princes. This is rather humorously juxtaposed with Chaucer’s ‘firste stok, fader of gentillesse,’ (105) Adam. On one level, of course, the reference to Adam is a politely unifying one: in pointing to one common ancestral source of humanity, Scogan effectively draws together an audience of royal and non-noble personages. However, in choosing to invoke the text of ‘Gentillesse,’ Scogan also opens up the possibility of a parallel between himself and Adam (as a source of *gentillesse* or original sin?).

As Hallmundson points out, the poem closely echoes the themes of age and wisdom versus the rashness of youth that permeates Chaucer’s own poem of fatherly advice to the ‘pleasure-seeking’ Scogan; although she finds no awareness of deliberate irony in the poem it could well have been intentional.¹¹⁸ Scogan is sending his poem to four princes on a night out in the Vintry without their tutor, and his advice to them to avoid ‘slogardrye, ryote and distaunce,’ (161) is clearly topical, and quite possibly intended to raise a smile. Scogan’s choice of the epistolary form shows him discharging his own debt to look after their virtue, perhaps a little coyly, in the conclusion: ‘Doth as you list, I me excuse expresse’ (186), which reads like a final shrugging-off of responsibility, not without a twinkle of amusement. In view of this contextual information, then, we can interpret the tone of this poem as more dynamically involved with both its audiences: not playful as Chaucer is playful, but

¹¹⁷ Hallmundson, 131-32.

¹¹⁸ Hallmundson, 133.

certainly open to a reading that admits the possibility of mixing advice with humour, a reading of tonal complexities which depends on some familiarity both with its author and the work of Chaucer, and places itself within an imagined, and convivial, mercantile setting, one with which both Scogan and Chaucer had social ties.

Chaucer's Literary Circle: The Argument from Poetry

To some extent, Chaucer's literary circle has here been defined in terms of what it was *not*. As far as we can tell, it was not a literary circle in the sense of having a fixed aesthetic, religious or political agenda, or even a fixed membership. Nor was it a spin-off of the London Puy. Nonetheless it participates in more broadly conceived notions of literary community found in religious, urban and courtly contexts (the civil-service culture represented by Deschamps and his friends at the French court; convivial notions of literary community within a guild or mercantile setting; the religious radicalism of late fourteenth-century London; and more abstract courtly communities like the 'court of love').

The best argument for the existence of a 'Chaucer circle' to date remains Chaucer's poetry, or rather the references in his poetry to contemporary individuals who seem, by their tone, to belong to an intimate category of readers. Such impressions emerge from the Gower and Strode dedication in *Troilus and Criseyde*, and in Chaucer's coterie poems, a minor canon of verse within the shorter poems. As Strohm puts it, the intimate tone and playful mode of address employed in these references create their own sense of community, implying a 'shared understanding' between writer and audience, and 'that Chaucer's poetry was comprehended

sympathetically by members of his circle.’¹¹⁹ Robert Epstein goes even further in concluding that ‘the very idea of a ‘Chaucer circle’ is a product of Chaucer’s poetry.’¹²⁰ The idea that the Chaucer circle exists, in some respects, as a construct of Chaucer’s own verse -- that is, as something that is realised in literary exchanges, and not just social ones -- merits closer analysis. If, as Epstein again argues, ‘the impression of such a literary coterie -- of a group of men of roughly equal status, like-minded, literary, convivial, mutually supportive -- derives from the allusions in Chaucer’s verse,’ we need to consider the specific impressions of this coterie that emerge from these poems, and the relationship of such poems to the rest of his oeuvre.¹²¹

The *Envoy to Scogan* (c. 1393), the longest and most original of these poems, is also the hardest to classify, being something between a begging-poem, a personal letter, and a cryptic meditation on friendship. In it the speaker laments the shattering of ‘the statutz hye in hevene’ (1) and the divine weeping that has occasioned a ‘diluge of pestilence’ (14) on earth (a probable reference to topical instances of contemporary flooding). The cause of this, he asserts, is Scogan’s ‘offence’ (13) in recklessly blaspheming against the goddess of love by declaring that he will no longer serve the lady who ‘sawe nat [his] distresse’ (18). The speaker then affects fear that the consequences may be the revenge of Love on men like himself and Scogan, and ‘on alle hem that ben hoor and rounde of shap’ (31). There follows a discussion of the speakers’ waning powers -- poetic and (it is implied) sexual. The speaker finishes, in the envoy, by appealing to Scogan who ‘knelest at the stremes hed’ (43) to remember his friend ‘forgete in solytarie wilderness’ (46), which Chaucer’s early editors interpreted as Greenwich, away from the ‘stream’s head’ of the court.

¹¹⁹ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 74 and 75.

¹²⁰ Epstein, ‘Gower’s Urban Contexts,’ 47

The logic connecting the shifting statements of this poem, as Lenaghan has observed, is far from straightforward, and the subject matter of the poem is not reducible to a single statement. Both Lenaghan and Scattergood have shown how the poem seems concerned, on some level, with ideas about friendship, introduced in the closing injunction to ‘thenke on Tullius kyndenesse’ (47) -- read by both to mean Cicero’s ideals of friendship as discussed in *De Amicitia*, a popular text in the Middle Ages. Lenaghan argues that Chaucer sets up the Ciceronian ideal of elite masculine friendships as an alternative to sexual love and the fashionable worship of *fin amor* in courtly circles, although, as Scattergood points out, this is not a dichotomy that Cicero propagates in that text.¹²² Scattergood, in contrast, sees Chaucer’s reference as linking the concerns of friendship (embodied in Cicero’s text) and those of aging (embodied in *De Senectute*, a work often combined with *De Amicitia* in medieval manuscript compilations).¹²³ However, the kind of ‘fruit’ that Chaucer expects from Scogan’s meditation on Cicero -- whether for himself or his friend -- is not clear.

The poem’s epistolary form also imagines and pre-empts Scogan’s own responses, giving the impression of the poem emerging from a joking conversation between both men:

But wel I wot, thow wolt answeere and saye,

‘Lo, olde Grisel lyst to ryme and playe!’

Nay, Scogan, say not so, for I m’excuse –

God helpe me so! – in no rym, dowteles,

¹²¹ Epstein, ‘Gower’s Urban Contexts,’ 47.

¹²² Lenaghan, ‘Chaucer’s “Envoy to Scogan”,’ 54. John Scattergood, ‘Old Age, Love and Friendship in Chaucer’s “Envoy to Scogan”,’ *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 35 (1991): 97.

¹²³ Scattergood, ‘Old Age,’ 94-97.

Ne thynke I never of slep to wake my muse,
 That rusteth in my shethe stille in pees.
 While I was yong, I put hir forth in prees;
 But al shal passe that men prose or rhyme;
 Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme. (34-42)

The speaker's protestation here that he will not 'wake his muse' elicits a natural comparison between sexual virility and literary creativity, and raises the possibility that Scogan expected some kind of literary 'rhyming and playing' from Chaucer as a love poet (which, paradoxically, is what he gets, despite the speaker's protestations that he is unfitted for it). It is thus a poem which displays the characteristics of coterie verse that Marotti identifies, namely 'a sense of familiarity and intimacy, [...] fondness for dialectic, intellectual complexity, paradox and irony,' and 'appeals to shared attitudes.'¹²⁴

The *Envoy to Bukton* (c.1396) likewise has all the characteristics of coterie-verse as defined by Marotti. The poem concerns the decision to be married (presumably a decision Bukton himself had already made, or was in the process of making, at the time of composition). Chaucer begins with the direct address to Bukton, but thereafter the poem is anything but direct, as the speaker makes a series of statements on the nature of marriage that he subsequently qualifies and undermines in ways which radically destabilise the meaning of the poem, posing a challenge to his readers. In the first stanza a rather haunting allusion is made to Christ's silence on being questioned by Pilate. The relationship between Christ's refusal to describe the nature of truth and the speaker's caution in giving advice about marriage is not

¹²⁴ Marotti, *John Donne* 19.

immediately obvious. Chaucer says he had intended to describe the disadvantages of marriage, but now finds himself cautious of tempting fate by writing any 'wickedness' about a trap into which he could fall again himself. After professing this desire to tread cautiously, he goes on to refer to marriage backhandedly as the chain of Sathanas, or Satan, problematising even this statement further with the qualification that marriage is a kind of chain by which Satan himself would prefer not to be bound. He then appears to change tack completely in referring to St Paul's advice that it is better to marry than to burn with lust; here we have the authority of holy writ in *support* of marriage. But this new concession that there may be worse things than marriage, is again undermined when we learn that these 'worse' things do not include being captured by a brutal band of Frisians. Finally, he refers Bukton to another authority on the matter: his own Wife of Bath, which again creates more problems than it solves for interpreting this poem.

Chaucer seems to be expecting the readers/listeners of this poem to follow arguments and attitudes that seem more impressionistic than logical, disjointed threads of conversation whose significance is fully released only through the personal logic of friendship. This is clearly a literary performance in which he simultaneously commits himself to a playful revelation, and a playful withholding, of the self and in doing so makes that self very present in the mind of the reader: a familiar epistolary strategy. The performative and rhetorical dimensions of this epistolary poetic, as Richard Horvath comments, shift the receptive context of the poem to one in which 'Bukton becomes less a private missive than an emissary of Chaucer's poetic identity.'¹²⁵ This is also a poem in which Chaucer appeals to a shared body of male experience concerning marriage through the device of instructing Bukton, a mode of

¹²⁵ Richard P. Horvath, 'Chaucer's Epistolary Poetic: The Envoys to Bukton and Scogan,' *ChR* 37.2 (2002): 181-82.

discourse which embodies what one of Iris Murdoch's characters identifies as 'the complicity of males,' that is, 'a kind of complicity in crime, in chauvinism, in getting away with things, in just gluttonously enjoying the present even if hell is all around.'¹²⁶ Yet this peculiarly masculine complicity is also bordered by irony and self-criticism in the transparent absurdity of the speaker's rhetorical strategies.

The other coterie poem of Chaucer's which deserves consideration here is the ballad of counsel posthumously titled 'Truth,' a moralistic poem that contains an envoy which appears to direct the poem more particularly to Philip de la Vache (the sole surviving manuscript copy containing the envoy, BL Add. 10340, is datable to the early 1400s). The first three stanzas of the poem survive by themselves in twenty-nine manuscripts, and are memorable in their advice to flee from the 'envious' 'prees,' (4) in their sober Boethian conclusion that 'wrestling for this world axeth a fal' (16), and in the beautiful closing injunction to 'look up' (19) and 'lat thy gost thee lede' (20). In the personalised version, the direct address of the concluding envoy 'Therefore thou Vache, leve thyn old wrecchednesse' (22) can be read as turning the 'distant moralist' into 'a familiar friend,' (as David and Pace rather whimsically put it).¹²⁷ It also encourages us to read a humorous construction in 'Forth, beste, out of thy stal!' (18) in the pun connecting the French *vache* with English cattle. The concluding lines of the envoy in particular may indicate that Chaucer had a specific situation in mind in its advice to the reader to pray 'For thee, and eek for other, hevenlich mede.' (27). The 'other' here is diplomatically ambivalent; it could be a reference to a common friend, or body of friends (the chamber knights in general, or others disadvantaged by the events of the later 1380s?). If Vache had been familiar with an earlier version of this ballad minus the envoy (thought to be composed around

¹²⁶ Iris Murdoch, *The Sea, The Sea* (1978; London: Vintage, 1999) 159-60.

¹²⁷ David and Pace, ed., *Minor Poems*, 51.

1382-7) it would set up an interesting inter-textual relationship between the last stanza and the first three, the old piece of advice framed with a new applicability to his own situation.

The impression of the Chaucer circle that we derive from these coterie poems is actually one of separately mediated friendships conducted through verse-letters. Excepting the linking of Gower's name with Strode's in the dedication to the *Troilus*, Chaucer does not address his friends collectively, but as individuals in accordance with the epistolary form (although this need not indicate the poems were intended to reach only their named readers). The tone of such poems is, however, unified by their semantic intricacy and the confidence of their mode of address, which suggests a pre-established familiarity with the audience: a receptive culture of masculine bonhomie.

Stephanie Trigg finds these masculine structures of reading problematic, even disturbing, as an image of literary community for modern readers. She draws attention to undercurrents of misogyny and sexual violence in the envoys to Bukton and Scogan, which she believes Chaucerian scholars have been at pains to repress in order to participate in a fiction of congenial fellowship between his readers across the ages. Chaucer does not invariably offer us a homosocial construction of literariness in his writings (the memorable scene with Criseyde and her women reading together is a contrary instance), but in his coterie poems, and many of those which deal with refined (or not so refined) love, he does appeal to a shared body of male experience, and particularly to male experience of women in marriage or sexual relations.

Critics more sympathetic to the homosocial structure of these poems have sought to isolate a shared 'coterie' perspective on love implicit in jokes about lack of success in love or a humorous apprehension of being physically ill-fitted for it. R.T.

Lenaghan suggests that the kind of close male friendships evoked by the coterie poems may have offered such men a refuge from the constant, almost narcissistic adulation of *fin amor* at Richard's court.¹²⁸ The wry comments of Chaucer about 'hem that ben hoor and rounde of shap' (31) in the *Envoy to Scogan*, would fit with this, as would the conclusion of the *Confessio Amantis* in which the aging figure of Amans/John Gower is forced to admit that 'the grene lef is overthrowe' (VIII: 2854) and is sent away from Venus' court, smiling 'in [him] self' (VIII: 2958) at the conclusion of his pains: a black rosary of prayer and repentance. However, as we find much pity and profundity in Gower's anatomy of love, and as Chaucer was famed as the poet of love by his contemporaries, we cannot really accuse these authors of grounding their identity as writers on a dismissive reaction to *fin amor*.¹²⁹ There are, of course, many instances of Chaucer humorously overturning refined ideals of love for comic purposes, and of 'churlish,' but curiously persistent, voices creeping into the discussions of love in Clanvowe's *Boke of Cupide* as well as Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowls*, but this is all part of the wider strategy of debate literature.

The homosocial culture evoked by these poems does link them with the new body of lyric verse being produced by Chaucer's contemporary, Deschamps, which draws similarly on the outlook and experiences of civil servants at the French court. Lowes, Brusendorff, Kittredge, Lenaghan and David all compare the characteristics of Chaucer's style in his coterie poems to friends with the coterie verse of Deschamps, even down to possible borrowings from the latter.¹³⁰ Deschamps (1346 - c.1406) was

¹²⁸ Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's 'Envoy to Scogan',', 59.

¹²⁹ In Usk's *Testament of Love*, for example, Chaucer appears as Love's 'owne trewe servaunt, the noble philosophical poete in Englissh [spe]che, evermore hym besieth and travayleth right sore my name to encrease. Wherefore al that willen me good owe to do him worshyp and reverence bothe; trewly, his better ne his pere in schole of my rules coude I never fynde)' Usk, *Testament* 160. This places Chaucer in an imagined school of love-poets.

¹³⁰ G. L. Kittredge, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Bukton",', *MLN* 24.1 (1909): 14-15; John Livingstone Lowes, 'The Date of the Envoy to Bukton,' *MLN* 27.2 (1912): 45-48; Brusendorff, *Chaucer Tradition* 485-493; Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan",', 49-52. David, introduction, *Minor Poems*, 6.

almost the exact contemporary of Chaucer, and, as we have seen, was known to him. As David argues, 'both are court poets, and they write about the same things in their short poems: the degeneration of the age, the folly of marrying a second time, the desperate state of their finances.'¹³¹ For both David and Lenaghan, the more extensive body of coterie verse that we have from Deschamps helps us better understand the mentality of Chaucer's. A number of its characteristic features do indeed provoke points of comparison with the English poet, among them, Deschamps' subtle mixing of 'game and earnest, idealism and scepticism.'¹³² Such a poetics, Lenaghan argues, 'makes social and psychological sense in a life spent in the practical operation of government and in respect for the high values of chivalry.'¹³³ It also posits a circle of friends which:

[...] would provide the community of awareness upon which irony depends, and since irony is the obvious way to strike an attitudinal balance between contrary stresses in bureaucratic service and life, the literary and social circles close quite neatly in the poetry of Deschamps.¹³⁴

For Lenaghan, Chaucer's celebrated irony becomes especially pithy in his coterie-verse because we sense that such communities of awareness are embodied in the immediate audience of the circle. It is thus a poetics that both creates and sustains friendships within this common environment. In this way, we can read Chaucer's coterie poetry as something intimately shaped by his particular social milieu in which the presence of this particular coterie-audience in turn encourages this kind of coterie-

¹³¹ David, introduction, *Minor Poems*, 6.

¹³² Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan",' 49.

¹³³ Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan",' 49.

¹³⁴ Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's "Envoy to Scogan",' 49.

style with its projected intimacies, allusiveness and tonal complexity.

Such qualities of tonal complexity are, of course, characteristic of Chaucer's art as a whole. The impression of a receptive community which appreciated these qualities that we gain from the coterie poems may, in turn, further the argument that Chaucer's close ties with his coterie-readership helped shape a view of art as an act of communication between writer and reader/listener.¹³⁵ As Trigg puts it:

The powerful image of communication in Chaucer's writing found in his addresses to his own friends: Bukton, Scogan, Strode, and Gower [...] is an image supported, though not unequivocally, by other instances of brotherly friendship in his fictions: Pandarus and Troilus, Palamon and Arcite, Aleyn and John [...]¹³⁶

We could see such impressions as being supported, in actuality, by the romantic ideal of brotherly friendship exemplified by two of Chaucer's circle, Nevill and Clanvowe, sworn brothers whose affection for each other led to their joint expedition to Constantinople and subsequent burial in the same grave there in 1391.¹³⁷

Chaucer himself engages with the notion of literature as communication in a number of places, suggesting that for creative fiction to flourish, it needs to 'speak,' or engage with, the community (or, in Hauser's terms, find its point of attachment). The most notable example of this, the host's exchange with the Monk after drowsing through a dreary portion of his tale, is worth quoting in full:

¹³⁵ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* 48-49.

¹³⁶ Trigg, xxi.

¹³⁷ Alan Bray has discussed the relationship of Nevill and Clanvowe as an example of romantic friendship in the medieval period. Further see Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003)

‘Sire Monk, namoore of this, so God yow blesse!

Youre tale annoyeth al this compaignye.

Swich talkyng is nat worth a boterflye,

For therinne is ther no desport or game.

Wherfore, sire Monk, daun Piers by youre name,

I pray yow hertely telle us somewhat elles;

For sikerly, nere clynking of youre belles

That on youre bridel hange on every side

By hevene kyng that for us alle dyde,

I sholde er this han fallen doun for sleep,

Althogh the slough had never been so deep;

Thanne hadde your tale al be toold in veyn.

For certainly, as that thise clerkes seyn,

Whereas a man may have noon audience,

Noght helpeth it to tellen his sentence.

‘And wel I woot the substance is in me

If any thyng shal wel reported be.

Sir, sey somewhat of hunting, I yow preye.’

‘Nay,’ quod this Monk, *‘I have no lust to pleye.* (Prol. NPT 2788-2806)¹³⁸

Interestingly, in advising the monk to shape his contribution to something he knows about, the host implies that he has detected a note of insincerity or affected mannerism in this tale (this is, after all, the monk who fears studying will drive him mad) and, unlike in the portrait of the monk in the ‘General Prologue,’ his personal

13-41.

¹³⁸ Italics mine.

voice has not come through. In refusing to 'pleye,' the Monk confirms the host's belief that the telling of stories in the context of the community should be a matter of 'desport and game' -- a playful exchange between writer and audience -- but the host's appeal to clerkly authority and common-sense in this respect simply annoys the monk, whose obstructive character manifests itself in his refusal either to pore over a book in a cloister or to enter into the game of story-telling as it is conceived of by the rest of the company, as represented by the host and the knight.

Richard Horvath opens up a new area of debate in relation to the coterie poems, in drawing attention to the epistolary poetics of the envoys to Bukton and Scogan, and how they vacillate between public and private registers in ways that suggest a deliberate desire on Chaucer's part to make them available to an audience beyond that of the immediate friendship circle.¹³⁹ While they do not follow a classic *ars dictaminis* structure, they employ the epistolary art of turning the personal letter into a public performance in which the absent self is made present to the reader. One way of doing this is through the medium of the poetic persona. In these poems, as well as in the *House of Fame* and the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's self-deprecating caricatures of himself (as fat, 'elvish,' dull-witted, and similar) are a potential bonding agent between himself and his audience.

Horvath shows how the calculatedly conversational and rhetorical style of the coterie poems demonstrates a 'negotiation between personal sentiment and a public rhetorical perspective,' which thus creates opportunities to make those poems available to disassociated readers in effect by making them private and public at the same time.¹⁴⁰ In Horvath's view, the very point at which the *Envoy to Bukton* ought

¹³⁹ Horvath, 173-89.

¹⁴⁰ Horvath, 182.

to be most personal -- the closing envoy -- reveals its public nature with its reference to the Wife of Bath, which shows it to be more than simply, 'a sort of bachelor-party joke, [in which] the Wife of Bath reference bespeaks the camaraderie of a familiar circle,' but 'an acknowledgement of her literary reputation or *fama*,' that makes us aware of the potential for that fame to make her an object of currency with other audiences too.¹⁴¹ Horvath is right to draw attention to the performative aspects of these coterie poems, and the ways that would seek to include a future audience as well as a contemporary one. However, surely it is deeply paradoxical that the persona through which Chaucer seeks to make himself available to this future audience is that of 'an ironic *naif* whose self-deprecating humor masks, just thinly enough, an ambivalent attitude toward literary fame.'¹⁴²

In the *House of Fame*, the work which engages most extensively with ideas of literary tradition, Chaucer's narrator-persona Geoffrey comes face to face with the great authors of the past in Fame's palace, ranged on a series of heavy metal columns and bearing, on their shoulders, the fame of their subject-matter. This illustrious company includes Josephus, Statius, Homer, Dares, Dictys, 'Lollius,' Guido delle Colonne, Geoffrey of Monmouth (the only English author), Virgil, Ovid, Lucan, and Claudian and many more figures bearing up the fame of great deeds: so many figures, in fact, that Chaucer tells us rather offhandedly that he cannot be bothered to recall this 'full confus matere' (1517). However, when Geoffrey is asked, later, whether he has come to this place to seek fame, he expresses a kind of fear at the idea that, after his death, any reader should 'have my name in honde' (1877). So although he may make a play for the attention of posterity, Chaucer's tone in discussions of this remote and unknowable audience testifies to his feeling more secure in the immediate

¹⁴¹ Horvath, 181.

¹⁴² Horvath, 184.

audience of the circle. At best, as R. F. Yeager has argued, the dedication to Gower and Strode in the *Troilus* functions as a 'bridge, carrying us from temporal fears [that the work will be mistransmitted or misread]' to a more stable locus of judgment, ultimately manifested in 'the merciful protection of Christ.'¹⁴³ As moral and philosophical authorities, these friends become a benevolent but judicious lens through which the work can be projected to a wider, unfamiliar public, and, finally, the completely unknown 'public' of posterity. At worst -- a fate to which Chaucer seems to resign himself in the *Envoy to Scogan* -- the interest of the immediate audience represents the only certain life-span for any work of art, at least as far as its author is concerned, for 'al shal passe that men prose or ryme; / Take every man hys turn, as for his tyme' (41-2).

Another feature of Chaucer's coterie verse which unites its recipients as a group, and which may also be related to its homosocial character, is the depreciatory humour it employs towards its addressees. This presents us, I think, with another method of cataloguing those inside and outside his literary circle. Aside from the dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde* to Gower and Strode, Chaucer's references to the men in his circle are not, on a surface level, all that complimentary: Vache is compared to a beast escaping from its stall; doom is foretold for Bukton's marriage; Scogan is accused of instigating a deluge of pestilence through the ill treatment of his mistress; and 'moral' Gower writes dreadfully wicked stories. It may seem an obvious point, but this kind of language is socially permissible only within the structures of friendship and more particularly, perhaps, within masculine ones. Interestingly, this view is reinforced by a number of modern linguistic studies, which suggest that

¹⁴³ R. F. Yeager, ' "O Moral Gower": Chaucer's Dedication of "Troilus and Crisseyde",' *ChR* 19.2 (1984) 90.

insults between men often function in a positive way in cementing male friendships.¹⁴⁴

With this in mind, we can map a clear divide between those addressees which Chaucer treats deferentially and those whom he humorously disparages, even across the same genre. In his begging poem to Henry IV, for example, Chaucer distances Henry from his friendship circle as the conqueror of Albion, whereas at the same time that he appeals to Scogan for assistance, he suggests Scogan is becoming too fat to do well in the game of love: clearly this would be a counter-productive strategy in anything other than a genuine friendship. Lenaghan's argument in 'Chaucer's circle of gentlemen and clerks,' that Richard II and Henry IV should be included, if not in the circle, then as part of Chaucer's general audience who might still be addressed in the same tone (in the sense that the poems to all these individuals are addressed to men who operated under the same social fiction of gentility) is not so convincing in this respect, for clearly there is a tonal divide between the coterie poems which are penned to Chaucer's social equals and the poems of advice to princes: a monarch cannot be the subject of such ribbing.¹⁴⁵

Another poem directed in a derogatory fashion at a particular contemporary, 'Chaucer's Wordes unto Adam, his Owne Scriveyn,' might be considered, although it is not quite in the same category as the poems to Bukton, Scogan and Vache. This poem seems to have been occasioned in the context of a professional relationship in which Adam had, presumably, justified Chaucer's accusations of negligence through inattention to his work. However, besides the general accusations, the extravagance of the curse put upon Adam: 'vnder thy long lokkes thowe most haue the scale / But after my making thowe wryte more truwe' (3-4), is closely related to the hyperbolic

¹⁴⁴ For examples see Mary M. Talbot, *Language and Gender: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) 97.

idiom of *The Envoy to Scogan*, which jokingly links the health of the natural world to moral behaviour. This poem may, of course, not merely have been offered as a warning to Adam, but deliberately designed as an ephemeral piece intended for the amusement of a wider circle of readers. Yet on balance the poem also suggests a degree of familiarity between the poet and his scribe. As Linne Mooney notes, 'Chaucer could not have been writing entirely in jest, or there would be no call for such a poem; on the other hand, if he were really exasperated by Adam's rate of errors, he would have never employed his services again' after the mid-1380s, when the poem is believed to have been penned.¹⁴⁶ Mooney's recent identification of Adam Pinkhurst as the scrivener who executed the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* is significant in that it shows that Chaucer worked closely with Adam in supervising the production of his work for at least fifteen years, and that their relationship was close enough to prompt a humorous poem.¹⁴⁷

I believe it is also in the light of these structures of humorous depreciation that we should read the account of Chaucer's 'quarrel' with Gower. John Fisher charts the progress of the quarrel as legend, finding its origins in Tyrwhitt's edition of Chaucer (1773-78), in which Tyrwhitt identified an attack on Gower in Chaucer's denigration of the Gowerian tales of Canace and Apollonius in the Man of Law's prologue, and propagated the idea that there was an interruption to their friendship, which he thought corroborated by Gower's apparent excision of the complimentary greeting from Venus to Chaucer in revisions of the *Confessio Amantis*.¹⁴⁸ These two pieces of evidence for a quarrel between the two men are ambiguous and literary. Neither poet

¹⁴⁵ Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's Circle,' 159.

¹⁴⁶ Mooney, 103.

¹⁴⁷ Mooney, 105.

¹⁴⁸ Fisher, *John Gower* 26-36.

directly insults the other: one of Chaucer's characters appears to voice criticism of Gower, and Gower appears to have removed a passage in which one of his characters praises Chaucer. Gower's excision can be accounted for as part the mechanics of revision rather than personal pique.¹⁴⁹ However, the passage from the *Canterbury Tales* is more intriguing, and susceptible to the interpretation of an 'attack' on Gower in the manner of a medieval *poetomachia* or poets' war. Here the Man of Law, in discussing what kind of tale he is going to tell, casts around for literary models and appears to be comparing Gower unfavourably with Chaucer:

But certainly no word ne writeth he [Chaucer]
 Of thilke wikke ensauple of Canacee,
 That loved hir owene brother sinfully --
 Of swiche cursed stories I sey fy! --
 Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,
 How that the cursed kyng Antiochus
 Birafted his doghter of hir maydenhede,
 That is so horrible a tale for to rede,
 Whan he hir threw upon the pavement.
 And therefore he, of ful avysement,
 Nolde nevere write in none of his sermons
 Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions,
 Ne I wol noon reherce, if that I may. (Prol. MLT 76-89)

Linda Barney Burke sees the Man of Law as an intentionally limited narrator,

¹⁴⁹ Nicholson, 123-143.

intended by Chaucer as a caricature of a sanctimonious reader, and possibly as a rueful comment on a priggish, but vocal, section of the general reading-public.¹⁵⁰ Others have drawn attention, rather confusingly, to the Man of Law as a possible caricature of Gower himself: if this caricature appears in the text solely in order to insult Gower's art this would be rather bizarre. Certainly he attracts attention as a complex character in his own right: his condemnation of the Gowerian tales is not straightforward (his cursing seems excessive, and a prurient and even sadistic interest in the 'unkynde' or unnatural subject matter of the tale is implied in his dwelling on the description of the violated daughter thrown 'upon the pavement'). However, if we compare the denigration strategies of the Man of Law's Prologue as a whole with those of the *Envoy to Scogan* we can see how Chaucer, in both cases, can be read as offering a joking or mock-disapproval of his friend, signalled by the occurrence of such 'disapproval' hand-in-hand with denigration of himself as a lover in the *Envoy to Scogan*, and as a writer in the Man of Law's Prologue:

I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn
 That Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
 On metres and on rymyng craftily
 Hath seyde hem in swich Englissh as he kan
 Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
 And if he have noght seyde hem, leve brother,
 In o book, he hath seyde hem in another. (MLP 46-52)

¹⁵⁰Linda Barney Burke, 'Genial Gower: Laughter in the 'Confessio Amantis', ' *John Gower: Recent Readings. Papers Presented at the Meetings of the John Gower Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, 1983-88*, ed. R. F. Yeager, Studies in Medieval Culture 26 (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan UP, 1989) 39-63.

The Man of Law's praise of Chaucer functions rather as a back-handed insult, undermining his poetry as the product of a lewd, limited and encyclopaedically prolix talent, and in his casual referencing of 'one book or another' shows him to be no very discriminating reader of Chaucer. In the circumstances, his elaborate praise of Chaucer's moral delicacy is rather hollow. Furthermore, the Man of Law's reference to Chaucer's 'sermons' in the passage directed at Gower should alert us to the irony which accompanies Chaucer's praise of himself. This joking mockery is best read as directed at both Chaucer and Gower together. As such it functions as a way of drawing the two men closer together, along with, potentially, a group of contemporary readers familiar with both their work. It also represents another characteristically Chaucerian reflection on the arbitrary workings of literary fame: if Chaucer's poetry has reached, or is anticipated to reach, 'many a man,' the reactions of such readers will be unpredictable, and possibly (as in the Man of Law's case) quite unpalatable to the author and his original purposes. In this respect, Chaucer and Gower are likewise at the mercy of their ever-expanding readerships.

The history of the quarrel has been recently examined by Carolyn Dinshaw, who admits that the quarrel represents 'a legend of interaction for which there is *no* external evidence at all.'¹⁵¹ She sees it as the product of a critical need to articulate individual poetic identities in terms of rivalry, in contrast to the harmonious complementarity identified by older commentators, as 'witnessed by the lingering appeal for those scholars of the quarrel legend, even in its genial and playful form.'¹⁵² A number of twentieth-century critics have indeed continued the legend in a more playful form, suggesting a cooling of relations between the two poets, and

¹⁵¹ Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Rivalry, Rape and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer,' *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R F. Yeager, English Literary Studies 51 (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 1991) 130.

¹⁵² Dinshaw, 133.

predictably, perhaps, they are usually more protective of Chaucer's reputation than Gower's. Even Fisher, in his study of Gower, constructs a narrative of interaction in which Gower rebuked Chaucer for turning from love legends to fabliaux, and Chaucer expressed boredom with the *Legend of Good Women*. However, he notes that Chaucer's allusion to Gower's tales of incest is quite vague (for example, the detail of Antiochus' daughter being thrown on the pavement does not appear in Gower's version of the tale, which might turn the joke more decidedly against the Man of Law, who thus betrays that he has not read Gower's version and is judging it only on hearsay).¹⁵³ Pearsall, in his biography of Chaucer, also keeps the possibility of the quarrel open. While the story, 'may well be fiction,' he also notes that Gower 'may have been upset' at Chaucer's fabliaux, and 'may have thought his efforts [in the stories of Canace and Apollonius] were being mocked.'¹⁵⁴ Perhaps the persistence of the legend of the quarrel is indeed a way of negotiating between the genuinely artistic differences between the two men, but, as Dinshaw's comments suggest, in identifying a quarrel or disagreement between the two men, and subsequently a winner and a loser, we risk obfuscating the identity of both.

In conclusion, the idea that the literary output of Chaucer's circle should reflect the lateral allegiances between the authors and addressees within it is worth closer interrogation. Lenaghan in particular has argued that the coterie poems to Bukton and Scogan, 'are joking exchanges between identifiable equals' and thus offer themselves to a 'lateral' reading.'¹⁵⁵ While it is true that all the men in the circle which Strohm identifies were, broadly speaking, of the same social class as Chaucer (*gentil*, bourgeois, socially mobile) the poems produced by the members of this circle

¹⁵³ Fisher, *John Gower* 289.

¹⁵⁴ Pearsall, *Life* 133.

do not present themselves as exchanges between equals on a literary level. Interestingly, there are also hierarchies (literary and familial) at play in these poems, which complicate readings of them as purely lateral exchanges. The poems to both Bukton and Scogan dispense advice in an avuncular mode. Bukton (as far as we can tell) does not engage with the advice that he is given (that is, Chaucer does not imagine or pre-empt his response in the text of the poem itself). In the *Envoy to Scogan*, the confidence which gives the speaker the right to berate his friend for his defiance of Love gives way to protestations of personal feebleness, and the image of the author kneeling in submission: a state which is linked to a perceived diminishing of his literary powers (subtly countermanded by the stylistic control of the poem itself). Chaucer also places himself in a position of submission to Gower and Strode, in a more literary sense, in placing his book -- and by extension, his literary reputation -- under their correction and guardianship, configuring himself as the disciple, rather than the equal, of these men on an intellectual level. Of course such structures of submission are self-conscious, driven by real or affected modesty, and need not reflect the perceived literary merits of their author. But they are gestures which tell us something about Chaucer's imagined relationship to the members of his circle, and of the ways in which he may have looked to them for support.

Finally, when we consider the literary output of the rest of the writers in the Chaucer group, we notice a significant tonal gap in the ways in which they refer to *him*. Unlike Chaucer's poems to them, none of their references to Chaucer are at all derogatory in a playful way, and they do not seem to be responding to Chaucer's art with Chaucer's confidence: that is, they do not give the impression that they perceived themselves to be his artistic equals. Clanvowe's choice to begin *The Book*

¹⁵⁵ Lenaghan, 'Chaucer's Circle,' 157.

of *Cupide* with a quotation from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* could signify his intent to play a literary game with Chaucer in which a particular line or theme is set by one author for another or several others as a stimulus for composition. However, although Clanvowe creates a poem that plays with Chaucerian themes in something like the Chaucerian spirit, he never mentions his friend directly. Gower's 'greeting' to Chaucer in an early version of his *Confessio Amantis* (c.1390 or earlier) is the only reference which engages with Chaucer's art in a way that seems intended to stimulate a response from its author. In this passage, which constitutes Gower's only direct reference to Chaucer, the goddess of love praises Chaucer as her special poet. It is coupled with Amans/Gower's own enjoined act of penance and is part of the closing sequence of the poem, intended as a summing up:

And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,

As mi disciple and mi poete:

For in the floures of his youthe,

In sondri wise as he wel couthe,

Of ditees and of songes glade,

The whiche he for mi sake made,

The lond fulfild is overall:

Wherof to him in special

Above alle other I am most holde.

For thi now in hise daies olde

Thou schalt telle this message,

That he upon his latere age,

To sette an ende of alle his werk,

As he which is myn owne clerk
 Do make his testament of love,
 As thou hast do thi schrifte above,
 So that mi Court it mai recorde. (VIII: 2941*-2957*)

Unlike the comments of the Man of Law, this praise of Chaucer is straightforwardly positive: Gower shows a degree of playfulness, however, in using a literary persona to address his friend, and exerts authority in making Venus request, or perhaps prophesy, that Chaucer write a Testament of Love (something he may already have embarked on with his *Legend of Good Women*). The mode of this request also offers scope for further literary play between both poets. By giving Chaucer the chance to respond to Venus, Gower offers his friend a way of doing what Chaucer himself does so superbly in the *Canterbury Tales*: disappearing into his own literary creation by fictionalising the process of composition as a kind of literary game in which the author-self can simultaneously lead an existence on and off the page (as Gower does with Gower/Amans, and Chaucer with Geoffrey and his narrator-pilgrim), and receive a 'commission' from a fictional character within it (as Chaucer also does from Alceste), but in this case through a greater leap of inter-textuality from one poet's oeuvre to another. We can also see it, in the manner of the 'trials of the author' in courtly circles, as a kind of literary gauntlet, albeit a friendly one (Gower has written the lover's confession; it is time for Chaucer to write his testament). Either way, it is clearly designed to stimulate creativity. However, Venus acknowledges that it is Chaucer, not Gower, who is the supreme poet of love. Chaucer himself had celebrated Ovid as Venus' clerk earlier in the *House of Fame* (HF 1487), the memory of which might make the force of the compliment here stronger: Chaucer, by implication, is the

English Ovid. Praise indeed.

By contrast, Scogan's *Moral Ballad* (and Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*) are overwhelmingly deferential in their references to Chaucer in a way that implies that, at least artistically, their authors envisaged a teacher-disciple relationship rather than exchanges between equals. This pattern of deference to Chaucer's authority as a poetic mentor, and proclamation of a lack of equality with him (as a literary artist, a literary authority and -- especially in the wake of Lydgate's influence -- as a rhetorician) becomes the default response of all subsequent Chaucerian writers (with an exception, perhaps, in Henryson who charmingly turns the tables in *The Testament of Cresseid* by asking, 'quha wait gif all that Chaucer wrait was trew?' (64).¹⁵⁶

Although Chaucer's circle may be made up of 'equals' in a social sense, none of his literary friends, Gower included, configures a response to Chaucer's art as if he were his equal in literary talent: rather, these friends and fellow-authors bow to him as 'master' or 'father,' or simply as a better craftsman. This would imply that, even before his death, Chaucer had attained the status of a literary lion among his followers. Lydgate's memory of Chaucer in his *Troy Book*, that he did not 'pinche nor gruche at euery blot' (V: 3522) in other men's writing, but 'seide alweie þe best' (V: 3524), although probably derived from hearsay rather than direct interaction with the poet, does suggest that, unlike Jonson, Chaucer had enough delicacy -- or security -- not to lord it over his literary 'sons.'¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Henryson, Robert. 'The Testament of Cresseid,' *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 113.

¹⁵⁷ Lydgate, John. *Lydgate's Troy Book*, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS es 97 (London: Kegan Paul, 1906). Quotations from the *Troy Book* will be from this edition and will be cited by book and line number.

4. Parnassus and the Privy Seal

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the English poetic tradition in the fifteenth century, aside from its Chaucerian inheritance, is its commitment to the public sphere. Attempts to discern an intimate coterie audience for Lancastrian poets must be balanced by an appreciation of ways in which their authorial strategies, in David Lawton's words, seek to 'reclaim access to the public world.'¹ For Lawton, the public personae which fifteenth-century writers like Hoccleve and Lydgate develop in their writing are essentially more 'formidable' than any of the impressions we receive (fleetingly in Lydgate's case; more substantially in Hoccleve's) of their private selves and their relations with contemporary writers and literati.²

Of course, such public poetry can be more exclusive than it appears. As Maura Nolan argues in *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* (2005), in many of his most public texts this most central of Lancastrian poets addresses himself to an imaginary public of a few influential groups and individuals, 'the king and his household, nobles and the London elite.'³ Understanding this public culture, for Nolan, means 'understanding precisely what "public" means at any given moment;' noting that the term may cover 'the London crowds in 1432,' or 'a tiny group of lords and princes understood by Lydgate to represent the realm in its totality.'⁴ In this way, the public sphere is a construct that both contains and creates its own imagined audiences, some of them not at all 'public' in a democratic sense.

¹ David Lawton, 'Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,' *ELH* 54.4 (1987): 762.

² Lawton, 763.

³ Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 58 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005) 4.

⁴ Nolan, *Public Culture* 5.

Such imagined publics may also, as Lawton reminds us, be configured as ‘a private group,’ with their own ‘coterie signatures’ (signalled, in literary terms, through the carefully coded language of a group-identity enshrined within the advice-to-princes tradition or the game of love).⁵ Works directed at the public sphere may thus draw their own lines of demarcation between different kinds of readership, creating insiders and outsiders within their actual audience in their bid for the attention of a readership with, and part of, the instruments and institutions of public decision-making. Yet of the imagined publics identified above -- the London crowds or select circles of aristocrats, magnates and princes -- none conform to the kind of informal, peer- or friendship-based literary communities that I have been focussing on in this study, although they might of course participate in literary communities of an elite, courtly nature or a populist, urban one. On the surface at least, vertical structures of patronage and patron seeking seem to exert the greatest influence on the compositional strategies and conditions of production employed by these poets, rather than the laterally configured support-base provided by the literary community considered as a group of friends and peers.

For Strohm, this shift from peers to patrons can be accounted for in part by changes in the social and cultural climate of England with the break-up of the Ricardian royal household and the growing vicissitudes of religious and political life under the Lancastrians. Writers of the fifteenth century who attempted to appropriate the Chaucerian tradition were disadvantaged by their ‘relative artistic isolation’ compared to the opportunities for convivial literary exchange enjoyed by Chaucer and the other writers affiliated to the Ricardian household.⁶ While what remained was not a cultural

⁵ Lawton, 793.

⁶ Strohm, ‘Chaucer’s Fifteenth-Century Audience,’ 46.

vacuum, it is Strohm's thesis that the apparent lack of intimate groups of congenial litterateurs as primary audiences for writers like Hoccleve and Lydgate impacted negatively on their creativity, depriving them of 'certain benefits'⁷ that might have facilitated their artistic development had they written for such a readership. This shift away from the poetry of the informal coterie is partly also, for Strohm, a matter of choice because in his view neither writer sought to remedy this isolation by seeking such audiences amongst their own milieu:

If Hoccleve had chosen to write for his "fellows of the prive seale" or if Lydgate had identified a congenial audience among monks at Bury and clerics at Oxford, their poetry might not have become more "Chaucerian," but it would have benefited from some of the confident familiarity of Chaucer's tone.⁸

The clerkly and clerical audiences that Strohm identifies as the most natural support-bases for Hoccleve and Lydgate's work do, I think, play a more significant role in their poetry than is here assumed. Part of the remit of this chapter will be to examine how such communities are, in fact, more closely involved in informing the poetry of both authors than Strohm suggests (quite explicitly with Hoccleve; more implicitly with Lydgate).

Previous accounts of fifteenth-century literary history have tended to concentrate on the ways in which Hoccleve and Lydgate engage with Chaucer. Although neither of these authors produces the kind of coterie-verse that Chaucer directed to members of his circle, they do attempt to graft themselves onto a Chaucerian literary community, in ways

⁷ Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience,' 110.

⁸ Strohm, 'Chaucer's Fifteenth-Century Audience,' 110.

variously configured as appeals to a circle of Chaucerian readers or experiences of literary son-ship or discipleship with an imagined Chaucer. Such strategies will be examined as part of a larger investigation into the ways in which Hoccleve and Lydgate emerge from, and address themselves to, certain audiences in their writings, concentrating on how congenial or associational audiences may be implicitly invoked, even within works that have been commissioned or addressed to social superiors. I will not attempt to unearth a group of litterateurs equivalent to the 'Chaucer circle' for either poet, but will offer a re-consideration of how both authors evince their investment in particular literary communities, actual and ideal, which may have offered them support for their literary activities other than purely financial or political modes of support supplied within official contexts of patronage.

Thomas Hoccleve (1367-1426)

Nothing is known of Hoccleve's early education and social background, although it has been suggested that his family originated from the village of Hockliffe in Bedfordshire.⁹ From 1387 we have records of his employment as a clerk at the Privy Seal office in Westminster. In his free time he pursued a career as a poet, although he never obtained the quasi-laureate status of his more successful contemporary Lydgate. Although the position of a Privy Seal clerk was relatively secure in the later medieval period, Hoccleve frequently describes himself as short of money, and a number of his poems include petitions to influential figures to ensure that Hoccleve and his fellow clerks received their

⁹ For a succinct account of Hoccleve's life see J. A. Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' *English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, *Authors of the Middle Ages* 1.4, ed. M. C. Seymour (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994) 185-248.

backdated annuity payments. He solicited aristocratic patronage for at least some of his poetry, a strategy that seems to have succeeded with *The Regiment of Princes* (1411-2), a book of advice for Prince Henry that survives in forty-three manuscript copies. Sometime around 1414 Hoccleve suffered some kind of mental breakdown, a period of 'wilde infirmite,' (40) which he refers to in the collection of poems his editors titled the *Series* (c.1419-22).¹⁰ The *Series* explores the poet's efforts to come to terms with his illness and its aftermath, but is far more than a document of social interest, raising questions about the nature of literary composition, both personal and communal.

Critical reception of Hoccleve in the last hundred years has been mixed, and linked, very often, to questions of authorial self-presentation that have never been fully resolved. On the one hand, Hoccleve's poetry has attracted scholarly attention because of the unusual extent to which he utilizes material from his own life in the presentation of his author-narrators; this has caused some scholars, however, to assume too straightforward a correspondence between Hoccleve the writer and his poetic persona: an anxious, inept and rather pitiful figure. The general consensus seems to be that he is easy to pity, but hard to like. Even John Burrow, who has probably done most to defend Hoccleve's poetry in recent years, acknowledges that 'his artistic defects do not fully account for the common response, which seems to have in it something of the herd's reaction to a wounded animal.'¹¹

¹⁰ 'Complaint,' *Thomas Hoccleve's 'Complaint' and 'Dialogue,'* ed. J. A. Burrow, EETS os 313 (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999) 4. This edition supersedes that of the 'Complaint' and lines 1-252 of the 'Dialogue' printed in Furnivall and Gollancz ed. *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*. As the first two quires of the *Series* in Durham MS. Cosin V. III. 9 are missing, part of the older edition of the *Series* was based on a transcript of these lines by Stow. Burrow's edition re-constructs more authoritative texts of these two poems from other sources. References to both poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

¹¹ John Burrow, 'Experience and Books,' *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1984) 270.

The myth of Hoccleve as a social misfit or outsider owes much to the work of Frederick J. Furnivall, pioneering scholar of the Early English Text Society, whose modern editions of the *Regiment of Princes* and the shorter poems have, with some revisions, remained the standard texts since the 1890s. Furnivall's tendency to refer to his subject by the adjectives 'poor' and 'old' did not do his author any favours.¹² Furnivall, crucially, never entertained the idea that Hoccleve's confessions of his weakness and cowardice in 'La Male Regle' might be humorously construed, thus postulating Hoccleve as an anxious little author who offers us straight autobiography whenever he talks about himself. He also drew attention, more sympathetically, to Hoccleve's period of mental instability, but again placed him in the role of victim by underscoring the pathos of his sufferings. While later critics have been far more sensitive to the complexities of literary invention at work in Hoccleve's self-portrait, they have tended to centre around these linchpins of madness, autobiography and subjectivity when exploring Hoccleve's influence on the world of letters. This has tended to reinforce the image of the poet as a misfit: either as a strangely self-conscious writer in a medieval world, or as an unfortunate sidelined from society by mental illness.

Malcolm Richardson's essay, 'Hoccleve and his social context,' broke new ground in attempting to evaluate the success of Hoccleve's career as a clerk of the Privy Seal office, with reference to the history of the Privy Seal, and the careers of those who worked there.¹³ But he, too, focussed on Hoccleve as a square peg in a round hole: 'the little man who tries unsuccessfully to manoeuvre in a bureaucracy designed to crush

¹² In Furnivall's introduction, Hoccleve is variously referred to as 'poor poet,' 'poor old fellow,' 'poor old versifier,' and 'poor sensitive old poet,' and Furnivall even urges his readers not to 'throw stones at old Hoccleve.' *Hoccleve's Works: The Minor Poems*, xxii, xxvi, xxxvii, xxxviii, xxxix and xlv.

¹³ Malcolm Richardson, 'Hoccleve in His Social Context,' *ChR* 20.4 (1986): 313-22.

him.’¹⁴ Building on the picture of Hoccleve as the ‘official failure’ that had already been propagated by T. F. Tout in his survey of the general conditions of life at the Privy Seal Office in his *Chapters in Mediaeval Administrative History*, Richardson demonstrated that several of Hoccleve’s fellow clerks were much more successful in their careers, accumulating benefices, business interests and lucrative promotions, whereas Hoccleve waited a long time for his benefice and seems to have relied on his clerk’s salary, and whatever uncertain profits might be had from his poetry, to make ends meet.¹⁵ He concluded that Hoccleve should be viewed as a conspicuous under-achiever -- ‘a bungler, misfit and perpetual also-ran,’ reminding us that the author himself echoes this picture in his poetry.¹⁶ Richardson’s evaluation takes Hoccleve’s author-persona too much at face value. Hoccleve tells us that he was a lay-about in the *Male Regle*, but this is a mock-penitential poem in which he had reason to exaggerate his vices. Similarly, in the Prologue to *The Regiment of Princes* when the author-narrator tells the old beggar-man that he has not been able to educate himself much in French and Latin, the beggar (who seems to function both as an advisor to the narrator and as a shadowy premonition of his future self) replies that he suspects that Hoccleve can do better there than he lets on (1856-1862), alerting us to the fact that his self-denigration may be intended as a show of modesty, or even a disingenuous means of authorial empowerment.¹⁷

¹⁴ Richardson, 313.

¹⁵ Richardson, 320-21. See also T. F. Tout, *Chapters in the Administrative History of Medieval England*, vol. 5, Publications of the University of Manchester, Historical Ser. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1930) xi. Tout’s research into the office, household and staff of the Privy Seal can be found in pp. 54-112 of this volume.

¹⁶ Richardson, 321.

¹⁷ *Hoccleve’s Works, Part III: The Regiment of Princes*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS es 72 (1897; Milwood, NY: Kraus, 1978) 67. Quotations from *The Regiment of Princes* will be from this edition and will be cited by line number. For the notion that the fifteenth-century modesty topos could be used as a means of authorial empowerment, see Lawton’s essay on fifteenth-century ‘dullness’ (n. 1 above).

The persistent notion of Hoccleve as a dysfunctional outsider has been further complicated by Hoccleve's own conflicted presentation of the author both as an isolated individual and as a member of community in the Prologue and the *Series*. As Richardson observes, the nature of Hoccleve's profession could not have given him much leisure to be solitary, and this seems to create a problematic gap between the communal reality of Hoccleve's existence and the isolation of his author-narrators. Richardson's remark that 'Hoccleve's subtle insistence on his isolation reveals a psychological and poetic truth, not a literal one' prompts speculation as to what kind of 'poetic truth' such isolation is meant to embody, and how far Hoccleve insists on it as part of the creative process.¹⁸

It is true that many of the most memorable scenes in Hoccleve's poetry occur when his narrators are by themselves: tossing and turning in bed at night, or staring at their anxious faces in the mirror. However, an analysis of the broader sweep of the major poems shows that this insistence on isolation is ultimately, in Hoccleve's view, a perverse and unhealthy attitude which from which his narrators must be dislodged. Both poems chart a movement from social seclusion towards social integration, in which writing and 'communing' are necessary parts of the rehabilitation process; and in this way, such isolation actually functions as a device which helps reveal the individual's need for community.¹⁹ Each of his narrators begins from a position of Boethian isolation and melancholy (which is further complicated by Hoccleve's Chaucerian trick of voicing the complaint through the mouth of a character who is not above our laughter), from which they are forcibly ejected by the appearance of an insistent dialogue-partner. Neither the

¹⁸ Richardson, 314.

¹⁹ Further see James Simpson, 'Madness and Texts: Hoccleve's "Series",' *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen, King's College London Medieval Studies 5 (London: King's College, Centre for Late Medieval and Antique Studies, 1991) 15-29.

friend in the *Series* nor the old man in the *Regiment* corresponds exactly to the figure of Reason or Philosophy: the beggar does offer the narrator the kind of advice he needs, but it is really a two-way dialogue with the narrator contributing as much to the discussion as his mentor; the friend gives ambivalent advice, but his entrance produces a positive change in Thomas that convinces us, as readers, that the narrator's authority can be trusted. In both poems, the search for consolation begins with reading, or the reminder that being a reader should help one towards a position of consolation. Yet books in themselves can only be the beginning of this cure, and Hoccleve goes on to effect it through dialogue with others, transporting his author-selves from a state of passive suffering to the action of writing something that will reaffirm their links with their communities around them. In this respect Hoccleve's narrators differ from those in Chaucer's dream visions. Chaucer's narrators are awkward, solitary bookworms who keep their suffering bottled up, and often stand at a remove from the visions they are observing (although this attitude is, of course, thus treated ironically). In Hoccleve's poetry, the movement is always from isolation towards integration, matched by the Boethian movement from personal anguish to universal wisdom. On a psychological level, we could see the author's isolation as comparable to the wilderness experience and a necessary prelude to new insights, but to remain alone, trapped in the solitude of melancholy, is not the way back to health or life, which can only come about through social interaction. For Hoccleve then, dialogue with one's community is presented as an escape-route from the ultimately solipsistic experience of the self left to its own devices, and is also essential to the business of writing.

Aside from Richardson's essay, little attention had been paid to re-evaluating Hoccleve's poetry in terms of his social context until recently when Ethan Knapp's study, *The Bureaucratic Muse: Thomas Hoccleve and the Literature of Late Medieval England* (2001) drew attention to the links between Hoccleve's scribal activities in the Privy Seal office and his activities as a poet.²⁰ Knapp is especially interested in Hoccleve's poetry as an early chapter in the literature of bureaucratic culture, a literature that he sees as characterised, among other things by its 'hopes for community.'²¹ He recommends that we learn to read Hoccleve's poetry 'not as the sound of personal alienation, but a voice shaped by a shared culture.'²² It is with such encouragement in mind that I will consider the poet's self-presentation in terms of this shared culture. In doing so, I hope to strengthen the case that Hoccleve's writing does not just express hopes for community, but the security of belonging to one that was reasonably sympathetic towards his poetry.

Hoccleve and the Privy Seal Office

Most of Hoccleve's adult life, public and private, centred around his work in the Privy Seal office. This office was not large, with between four and twelve clerks working there at one time, and no more than twenty-six men are mentioned in connection with the office between 1399 and 1425.²³ Occasionally a clerk might have the chance to travel as part of the king's household (some of the Privy Seal clerks accompanied the king to

²⁰ For publication details see Introduction, n. 31.

²¹ Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 186.

²² Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 186.

²³ A. L. Brown, 'The Privy Seal Clerks in the Early Fifteenth Century,' *The Study of Medieval Records: Essays in Honour of Kathleen Major*, ed. D. A. Bullough and R. L. Storey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 262.

France between 1417 and 1422), but mostly they were based in Westminster.²⁴ Hoccleve and the other clerks would have spent their time copying out various kinds of writs, petitions and grants to be sent back and forth between the king and different government offices. They would have trained and worked alongside one another in a close-knit community and were housed with others in literate professions, including other government clerks, attorneys and apprentices to the law, with whom they probably socialised after hours. According to the testimony in the *Regiment of Princes*, Hoccleve himself lived at Chester's Inn, attached to the Middle Temple, for over ten years before he was married: a period he humorously recounts in 'La Male Regle' (c.1405-6).²⁵

Tout has made a general analysis of the physical and social conditions of clerks at the Privy Seal in the fifteenth century, with later work on the history of the Privy Seal office being undertaken by A. L. Brown.²⁶ Knapp draws attention to the solidarity of these clerks as demonstrated by the way in which they testified for one another in court, and were nominated as executors in each other's wills, and Tout finds 'signs of personal familiarity and collegueship' in the correspondence of government clerks as a whole in this period.²⁷ Hoccleve's fellow clerks seem to have looked after his financial interests during his breakdown by collecting his annuity for him, and his alter-ego in the *Series*, Thomas, implies the support of his fellow clerks in this period, and his own close identification with this community. Notably, the nameless, suspicious crowd that

²⁴ Brown, 265.

²⁵ For an account of the poem's mock-confessional structure see Eva M. Thornley, 'The Middle English Penitential Lyric and Hoccleve's Autobiographical Poetry,' *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 68 (1967) 295-321.

²⁶ See n. 23.

²⁷ Knapp, Ethan. 'Bureaucratic Identity and the Construction of Self in Hoccleve's Formulary and La Male Regle,' *Speculum* 74.2 (1999): 363. See also Tout, *Administrative History* 109, n.1.

threatens Thomas with a 'straunge contenance' (70) in the 'Complaint,' does not include the Privy Seal clerks. The crowd, Hoccleve tells us, have enquired:

Of my felawes of the priuee seel,
 And preied hem to telle hem wiþ herte vnfeined
 Howe it stood with me, wethir yuel or wel.
 And they the sothe tolde hem euerydel,
 But Pei helden her wordis not but lees; (296-300)

Here Thomas enlists the support of his fellow clerks, who are telling the truth about their colleague, but (as usual) nobody listens to them.

Brown suggests that Hoccleve, 'with his literary interest, his dining club [the 'court of good company'], and his scruples, was probably more cultured [...] than the average clerk,' but there is no evidence that Hoccleve's interest in letters was regarded as unusual for a man in his position, and plenty to suggest that his education made it easy for him to pursue this interest.²⁸ Tout's conclusion in 'Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century' was that the average civil servant of the late medieval period had the kind of training in letters which 'enabled him to befriend literature,' and the significant proportion of medieval writers that emerges from a bureaucratic context in this period (Chaucer, Scogan, Hoccleve and Ashby, for instance) reveals it to have been a popular day-vocation for such men.²⁹

²⁸ Brown, 272.

²⁹ T. F. Tout, 'Literature and Learning in the English Civil Service in the Fourteenth Century,' *Speculum* 4.4 (1929): 369.

Although Tout finds a discrepancy between the business of the day-job and the activity of creative writing in declaring that such ‘occupations [were] quite foreign to [such a man’s] literary profession,’ the careers of such men suggest that would-be men of letters without independent financial means were not only attracted to, but actually created from, the educational opportunities offered by this environment.³⁰ With this in mind, it may be significant that Hoccleve’s *Formulary* (a collection of scribal templates for use in the office) and that of his colleague, Roger Frye, reveal certain literary proclivities in their inclusion of ‘collections of proverbs, phrases, exordies, even forms of wills, as well as old diplomatic letters considered to be good examples of composition.’³¹ This may fuel Knapp’s argument that the literature of the ‘bureaucratic’ world and the more mainstream canon of courtly literature are, at least in this period, subtly connected.³² Certainly it would imply (as Knapp would also argue) a closer relationship between the kind of education provided for a nascent civil service in this period and the emergence of noted writers from their ranks.

Hoccleve’s education would have included training in the arts of composition: a training he shared with other government clerks. Richardson notes how the Inns of Chancery, where Hoccleve was lodged:

[...] were filled not only with various levels of king’s clerks but also with attorneys, apprentices to the law, and scriveners, all young men who hoped to make their way in life through the use of the written word. They were united,

³⁰ Tout, ‘Literature and Learning,’ 381.

³¹ Brown, 264.

³² Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 186.

whatever their grades, by the study of the English writ system and the medieval *dictamen* or art of letter-writing.³³

Until the 1430s, most of the official documents copied at the Privy Seal were in Latin and French, the foremost literary languages of their day. The narrator's interlocutor in the *Regiment of Princes* talks of the linguistic training he must have received at the office:

Of alle thre [Latin, French and English] thogh oghtist be wele leerid

Syn thou so long in hem laboured haast

Pou of pe pryue seel art old I-yeerid [...] (267-9)

Such clerks, it is assumed, would have the linguistic skills needed to engage with both the classical and continental literary traditions. For Hoccleve it seems there were opportunities afforded by both the social and professional circles he moved in, not only to pick up knowledge of French and Latin, but also to swap books and to talk about them. In 1392 we find record of a book bequest to Hoccleve from Guy de Rouclif, a senior clerk at the Privy Seal Office, mentioned in Rouclif's will as *uno libro vocato Bello Troie* (a book called the war of Troy), probably a romance or a chronicle. Hoccleve refers quite casually to book-borrowing and book-lending in the *Series*, in which Thomas discusses literature in general, and his own writing in particular, with his 'friend.' We know that he managed to obtain a manuscript of Christine de Pizan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours* within three years of it being written, which suggests that, whether through patronage or bureaucratic links with the clerks of the crown in Paris, he had contacts with a wider literary network.

³³ Richardson, 314.

He evidently had social and professional links with the London book trade, since he was employed as a copyist for producing part of a manuscript of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (Trinity College, Cambridge MS. R.III.2), and one of his minor poems in praise of the virgin was made at the request of a London stationer, Thomas Marleburgh, who served for a time as warden of the Linners and Text-Writers Guild.³⁴ Hoccleve may also have made other city-based literary friends and connections from the upper middle classes: in 1444 one of the autograph collections of his shorter poems, Huntingdon MS. HM 111, was in the possession of the Fylers, a Mercer family.³⁵

While there is no conclusive evidence for Hoccleve's friendship with contemporary writers, there is evidence that other clerks at the Privy Seal with whom he was friendly had social and professional dealings with them. Guy de Rouclif, who left Hoccleve the Troy book, evidently knew Gower, for he sold two manors to him in 1382, so it is possible that Hoccleve, too, had come into personal contact with him.³⁶ Of greater interest, perhaps, is the possibility that Hoccleve was acquainted with Chaucer's scribe, Adam: both their hands are discernible in the Trinity College *Confessio Amantis*. Hoccleve's friend Lawrence Bailley, who is mentioned in one of Hoccleve's petitionary poems, evidently knew Henry Scogan. He and two other clerks known to Hoccleve, Roger Elinham and Simon Gaunstede, were mainpernours together in 1390. May Newman Hallmundson suggests it was 'quite feasible that these mutual acquaintances facilitated the exchange of ideas and manuscripts between Scogan and Hoccleve,' and notes some similarities between Scogan's *Moral Balade* (1400 x 1407) and Hoccleve's

³⁴ A. I. Doyle and M. B. Parkes, 'The Productions of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century,' *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and A. G. Watson (London: Scolar P, 1978) 163-210; Chapter Two, n. 33.

³⁵ Sutton, *Mercery* 168.

³⁶ Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' 197-98.

La Male Regle (1405 x 1406), chiefly their confessional structure and eight-line stanzas, as possible evidence of this.³⁷ This in itself is not a convincing argument for their mutual influence, besides which the audiences and strategies of these poems are quite different (Scogan is writing in the advice-to-princes tradition, Hoccleve within a petitionary and mock-confessional structure).

The formative influence of Chaucer on both writers, however, is clear, and there are some interesting points of convergence in their engagement with Chaucer as father and master in the *Regiment of Princes* and the *Moral Ballad*. Hoccleve claims to have known Chaucer personally as his poetic mentor (the old beggar man in the *Regiment* remarks that, ‘Þou were acqueynted with Chaucer, pardee’; 1867) which is plausible considering the fact that the older poet retired to Westminster in 1399 while Hoccleve was working there, and that he states this relationship in a text that enjoyed a wide, high-profile circulation. Although there is no record of Hoccleve in Chaucer’s poetry, Hoccleve speaks of Chaucer as the master ‘of which I wont was han conseil and reed’ (1960) in *The Regiment*, which, alongside other such comments, would suggest a more interactive, tutelary relationship:

My derë maistir, God his soulë quyte!

And fadir, Chaucer, fayn wolde han me taght;

But I was dul, and lernèd lite or naght. (2077-2079)

Here and elsewhere, the relationship between Hoccleve and Chaucer is characterised not just as that of master and disciple, but also of father and son:

³⁷ Hallmundson, 134-35.

O vniuersel fadir in science!

Allas! Pat Pow thyn excellent prudence,

In Pi bed mortel mightist naght by-qwethe! (1964-1966)

Hoccleve's lament that Chaucer's skill and 'prudence' cannot be passed on genetically is reminiscent of Chaucer's own argument in *Gentillesse* that virtue, and by extension gentility, cannot be inherited, the same poem that Scogan, Chaucer's other contemporary poetic 'son,' adopts as the centre piece of the *Moral Balade*. Although I do not think the evidence is sufficient to prove that the two shared manuscripts of their work with each other, it is interesting that both Hoccleve and Scogan configure their relationship with Chaucer similarly in these poems that emerge in the years directly after his death, and that both offer meditations on literary paternity.

Knapp locates an Oedipal struggle to break free, in a literary sense, from the father under the surface of the *Regiment*. However, in some respects, the controlling image of the relationship with Chaucer for both Hoccleve and Scogan in these poems is that of the wayward or prodigal son who squanders his opportunities and ultimately fails to emulate the father's character ('I was dul and lernèd lite or naght,'; RP 2079, 'the fader whiche is deed and grave, / Biquath nothing his vertue with his hous'; MB 67-8). This presents us with a different metaphor for literary influence: in both these poems moral virtue and literary skill are paralleled in ways that suggest, in Scogan's terms, a more 'laborious' (69) process of inheritance: an inner conversion, in fact, that is necessary in order to integrate the moral and artistic excellence of the father. In Scogan's poem, the eventual

fruition of this process is implied by his adoption of a role as 'father' to the princes, and mediator of the Chaucerian literary inheritance: the prodigal son has metamorphosed into the wise parent -- at least in his tutelary function. In Hoccleve's *Regiment*, the prodigal son is still, in the Prologue, in the process of imbibing the counsel of the father figure as represented by the old beggar man (who has also been read, on occasion, as Chaucer himself as well as an older and wiser Hoccleve). In the body of the *Regiment*, however, he, too, becomes a fatherly counsellor of princes.

Any account of Chaucer's friendship with Hoccleve must be modified by an awareness that the latter, as a Privy Seal clerk, differed from Chaucer in belonging to a class of men who, in a professional sense, formed their own literary community and whose social identity was only recently and precariously *gentil*. As Knapp comments, 'these laicized clerks might well be considered the first class one could point to whose identity was based solely on a relationship to the written word.'³⁸ This identity offers the narrator a point of departure from melancholy in Hoccleve's *Regiment of Princes*. In the Prologue to the *Regiment*, we see the narrator 'Mvsyng upon the restles bisynesse' (1) of the world and sleepless with worry about the future. The next morning, still grieving and in search of privacy, he walks out to some fields at the edge of the city and wanders about by himself for a while. Here he meets an old beggar, who seems to serve as a double for an older Hoccleve, and who offers the writer counsel in his intense 'thoght' (106) or anxiety. Hoccleve at first repels the beggar's attempts to talk to him ('me list no compaignye'; 141) but the beggar insists. His program for rehabilitating Hoccleve, interestingly, revolves around his prospects as a 'lettered' man:

³⁸ Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 31.

If þat þe likë to ben esyd wel
 As suffre me with þe to talke a whyle
 Art þou aght lettred?' 'ya' quod I 'som dele.'
 'Blissed be god! Than hope I, by seint Gyle,
 þat god to þe þi wit schal reconsyle,
 Which þat me þinkeþ is fer fro þe went.
 Þorgh þe assent of þi greuouse turment.

'Lettred folk han gretter discrecioun,
 And bet conceyuë konne a mannes saw,
 And rather wole applie to resoun
 And from folyë soner hem with-draw
 Þan he þat noþer reson can, ne law,
 Ne lerned haþ no maner of lettrure [...] (148-60)

We might expect a group of clerks who defined themselves by the profession of writing to be more than usually alive to the advantages of literacy. For the old man, the civilising properties of such advanced literacy, the ability to read, and derive benefit from books, are what distinguish the clerks from the rest of society, and Hoccleve's literary education means he will be more open to reason than an illiterate or uneducated man. More than once in the prologue, the narrator draws what he views as an important distinction

between ‘‘vnkonynges’ (990) folk (men who work outside and know nothing of literature) and men like the clerks who work indoors over writing:

This artificers, se I day be day,
 In þe hottest of al hir bysynesse
 Talken and syng, and makë game and play,
 And forth hir labour passith with gladnesse;
 But we labour in trauaillous stilnesse;
 We stowpe and stare vp-on þe shepës skyn,
 And keepë muste our song and wordës in. (1009-15)

The world of the office may be silent and songless, but it is also a place of superlative craftsmanship. Those outside might think that writing is just a game, but Hoccleve and the other clerks know better. This opposition between men who ‘swynke’ and men who read and write is frequently the stuff of humour in Chaucer (we might think of the opposition between Nicholas and John the Carpenter, or between the pilgrim Chaucer and Harry Bailey). For Hoccleve, however, this conflict is charged with a ‘them’ and ‘us’ mentality. ‘Vnkonynges folk’ are enemies to the art of letter-writing. In both Chaucer’s and Hoccleve’s poetry, we find the literary self defined through contacts with the non-literary, or those who read myopically with a limited agenda; Chaucer, as we should expect, playing with a variety of notions about literariness with different levels of seriousness, and Hoccleve, more defiantly, defending the ‘lettred folk’ against the

‘unkonnyng men’ who can never understand them. As such, the Privy Seal clerks represent, for Hoccleve, their own specialised literary community.

Given the closeness of this community suggested by both the historical records and Hoccleve’s strong identification with it in his poetry, it seems reasonable to suppose that the other clerks in the office knew about Hoccleve’s writing activities, and that they were also known to a part of the larger community of clerks with whom the Privy Seal clerks would have shared lodgings and socialised. Indeed, the literary evidence suggests that Hoccleve found opportunities to produce poems to amuse his fellows in the office, either on inclination or request. Taking my cue from Strohm’s comments that Hoccleve might have had more success and confidence as a writer had he written for his fellows at the Privy Seal, I would like to explore some of the ways in which Hoccleve does in fact direct his writing towards, and on behalf of, this kind of clerkly community. Indeed, these two impulses dovetail in a number of the petitionary or ‘begging’ poems: at the same time as they open themselves to an official audience of bureaucratic, royal or aristocratic superiors who are being petitioned for aid, they also derive confidence from their sense of identification with the clerkly community Hoccleve belongs to, with its shared jokes and financial anxieties.

Hoccleve’s petitionary poem, ‘La Male Regle,’ (c.1405-6), survives in the holograph collection of shorter poems, Huntingdon MS. HM 111 (compiled c.1422).³⁹ An extract from the poem with Hoccleve’s name removed also exists in a fragmentary state in a manuscript held in the archives of Canterbury Cathedral; the existence of this

³⁹ For a list of the contents of this manuscript see D. W. Dutschke, *Guide to Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, vol. 1, (San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, 1989) 144-47.

suggests that an adapted form of the poem was circulated after the composition of the original, and without the context of the particular appeal to Lord Furnival, the treasurer, who is addressed in the final stanzas in the hopes that Hoccleve will get the ten pounds due for his annuity payment.⁴⁰ This would imply that the poem reached a wider audience than Furnival to the extent of becoming divorced from Hoccleve's authorial control.

Hoccleve himself may have expected the poem to reach more than one kind of audience, and indeed, the poem shifts its imagined audience continually in this poem from the abstract god, Helthe, addressed throughout and the treacherous flatterer, Favel, to the 'Lords' (generic or aristocratic?) who should beware of flattery, and Furnival who displaces Helthe in the last stanza to become the dispenser of the medicine, 'coyn' (446), which may heal the sick 'body and purs' (409). The poem also lends itself to an audience of the clerks with whom Hoccleve mixed -- both in the use he makes of the comic persona developed within it, and in its very specific visualisation of a clerk's eye-view of late medieval London. The poem is constructed so that the narrator, 'Hoccleve' (a transparent self-caricature of Hoccleve himself), details the account of his sins from within the framework of what must have been a fairly typical pattern of a clerk's day away from the office, focussing on the journey from London to Westminster and vice versa, and the time spent eating and drinking at the taverns along the way. This daily journey to and from the city was shared, as Brown and Richardson note, by hundreds of other government clerks and officers: the kind of people with whom Hoccleve 'must have talked, dined and roistered almost exclusively' after hours.⁴¹ The fact that Hoccleve is quite specific in describing the locales of his sins (the taverns around Westminster Gate

⁴⁰ For details of this ms. see Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' 241.

⁴¹ Richardson, 314.

and a particular tavern, Paul's Head, where he fraternises with chatty harlots) suggests his audience would be expected to recognise these places. Perhaps the success of *La Male Regle* with a clerkly audience would have helped bring it to Furnival's attention.

In speaking of his excessive drinking bouts, for which he has no match 'in al the priuee seel'(308), Hoccleve draws attention to the antics of two other clerks, Prentys and Arondel, with whom he appears to have shared lodgings for a time. Records from the Patent Rolls document the existence of two men with these names as king's clerks between 1399 and 1413 (one of them, John Prentys, later became a clerk of the king's chapel and subsequently Dean of St Stephen's, Westminster).⁴²

I dare nat seyn Prentys and Arondel
 Me contrefete, and in swich wach go ny me;
 But often they hir bed louen so wel,
 Pat of the day it drawith ny the pryme,
 Or they ryse vp. Nat telle I can the tyme
 Whan they to bedde goon it is so late.
 O helthe, lord thow seest hem in Pat cryme!
 And yit thee looth is with hem to debate. (321-8)

These two cheery reprobates, Hoccleve tells us, are unfairly blessed by the god Helthe. They can stay up all hours, painting the town red, sleep off their hangovers and still keep their sound constitutions. This allusion works best if we presume Prentys and Arondel to have been in on the joke as well. It is the kind of poem we could imagine starting out as a

⁴² Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' 202, n. 54.

jeu d'esprit to be passed around the office and the inns for the amusement of the clerks.

In the context of a real confession, Hoccleve should not be mentioning other sinners by name, but if he is adopting such a pose for entertainment, he can do so for comic effect, and all the better if the other sinners are known to his audience.

The particular sins Hoccleve details in *La Male Regle* show he had learned from Chaucer to use the derogated self as a site of humour. The chief sin of Hoccleve's confession is gluttony, arguably the least glamorous of the deadly sins (with the possible exception of sloth) and an easy subject for mirth. His timidity, or indeed inability, to do more than kiss the 'venus femel lusty children deere' (138) whom he courts in the tavern, and his 'manly cowardice' (174) further aligns him with the kind of personae Chaucer employs in the coterie poems, dream visions and *Canterbury Tales*: enfeebled selves whose sexual, physical and indeed creative power is either spent or doubtful. In addition, his vanity at being called 'Master' by the boatmen on the Thames who thus flatter him into giving more generous tips than he can afford is likely to have resonated amusingly with his fellow clerks whose social identity was, as Knapp puts it, defined by a combination of 'financial vulnerability and social aggrandizement.'⁴³

A more subtle kind of humour, perhaps, resides in the tonal complexities of the persona Hoccleve constructs for himself in *La Male Regle*, and his creation of a discourse that is artfully garrulous and self-contradictory in a way that might have been especially amusing to those who shared Hoccleve's clerkly milieu. As with Chaucer's coterie poems to Scogan and Bukton, Hoccleve's discourse consistently and laughably undercuts its own claims to appear intellectual, and to provide bookish or rational authority for the moralising it offers us. Not only does the narrator seem unable to keep to the strict frame

⁴³ Knapp, 'Bureaucratic Identity,' 364.

of his confession, he actually draws attention to his digressions in ways which underscore the flimsiness of the confessional cover ('Now wole I torne ageyn to my sentence,' 160; 'No force of al this' 305; 'Be as be may, no more of this as now / But to my misreule wole I refere.' 289-90). This has the effect of destabilising the speaker's authority in comical ways, and, more interestingly, of marking the digressions as the real 'sentence' of the poem, as with the passage on the behaviour of Prentys and Arondel:

[...] it sit nat vnto me,
 Pat mirrour am of riot and excesse,
 To knowen of a goddes pryuetee;
 But thus I ymagyne and thus I gesse:
 Thow [Health] meeved art, of tendre gentillesse
 Hem to forbere, and wilt hem nat chastyse
 For they, in merthe and vertuous gladnesse,
 Lordes reconforten in sundry wyse.

But to my purpos [...] (329-337)

Here Hoccleve's narrator confides that although he, a riotous sinner, is not privy to this god's reasons for not punishing Prentys and Arondel in the ways that he has been punished, he guesses it may have something to do with their ability to 'reconforten' (that is to amuse or entertain) Lords. Hoccleve places emphasis here on the clerks' ability to entertain their superiors as a means of winning favour or patronage (which is also, of

course, Hoccleve's own strategy in *La Male Regle*). A more overt connection is drawn between the ability to entertain and to win patronage in the Prologue to the *Regiment of Princes* in which the beggar advises the narrator:

[...] if Pou woldist

To be releevéd: wost Pou what to do?

Writtē to hym [Prince Henry] a goodly tale or two

On which he may desporten hym by nyghte

And his fre gracē schal vp-on Pe lighte. (1900-04)

Here the gift of literature as a source of disport becomes the prelude to the dispensing of grace, or largesse, and Hoccleve undertakes this task with the confident expectation of reward.

In reminding both Furnival and Henry that his own annuity needs to be paid, Hoccleve is also reminding them that his fellow clerks at the office need to be paid as well. Although the clerks' jobs were relatively secure, payment of annuities was always behind, and this common experience of financial anxiety often resulted in the drawing together of groups of clerks into 'collective economic units.'⁴⁴ Legal records show that the clerks tended to look after each other's interests, banding together to buy land, to sell their services as mainpernors or lend money as part of a syndicate when needed.⁴⁵

Hoccleve's proverb in *La Male Regle*, 'the dounb man, no lond getith' (433), seems significant when we look at the number of times Hoccleve speaks up for this community

⁴⁴ Knapp, 'Bureaucratic Identity,' 363.

⁴⁵ Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 26.

in drawing attention to their uncertain finances. In the Prologue to the *Regiment*, for instance, Hoccleve is brutally ironic about the clerks' financial vulnerability:

'But how ben þi felawes lokyd to

At hoom? ben þey not wel beneficed?' [asks the beggar]

'Yis fadir, yis! [says the narrator] Þer is on clept 'nemo';

He helpeþ hem; by hym ben þei chericed, (1485-8)

Here the narrator describes how the clerks are often cheated from gaining money from private commissions by the middle-men of great lords, who pocket the money themselves. They dare not tell the lords they are being cheated, 'Lest oure compleynte oure seluen ouerthrowe' (1526). Nemo is the clerks' friend because no-one looks after the clerks' interests. But strictly speaking this is not quite true, for Hoccleve himself is speaking out for the clerks in his poem. He is the one alerting the great lords to their cheating servants, so he -- it seems -- is playing the role of No-one.

A number of Hoccleve's petitionary poems are actually voiced from the collective standpoint of a body of clerks, such as the ballad to Henry Somer (c.1408), in which Hoccleve writes to Somer on behalf of himself and three other Privy Seal clerks who were his contemporaries in the office: Thomas Baillay, John Hethe and John Offorde. Somer (d.1450) was himself a clerk who had rapidly risen to the post of Under-Treasurer or clerk to the Exchequer in December 1408, and was to become the Chancellor of the Exchequer in June 1410. It seems probable that he and Hoccleve were friendly, given

Somer's own administrative background. This poem was evidently written during Michaelmas when annuities were due, and as a prelude to Christmas - the season of largesse and gaiety. It revolves around a play on Somer's name, expressing the clerks' confidence that 'summer' will hasten their harvest:

We, your seruantes, Hoccleue and Bailley,
 Hethe and Offorde, yow beseeche and preye,
 'Haastith our heruest as soone as yee may!'
 For fere of stormes our wit is aweye;
 Were our seed inned wel we mighten pleye
 And vs desporte and synge and make game.
 And yit this rowndel shul we synge and seye
 In trust of yow and honour of your name. (25-32)

Hoccleve draws a negative correlation in this ballad between financial stability and the clerks' ability to play and 'make game,' making an allowance in Somer's case because of the faith the clerks have in his 'freendly gentillesse' (17) and summery nature. Unlike the more sombre petition to the king (in which Hoccleve sends the poem as a bill, or letter, on behalf of three other clerks and himself) the ballad to Somer has an interesting double-existence as a begging poem and a *jeu d'esprit* which, given its corporate mode of address, was probably passed around the office before reaching Somer's desk.

The most intriguing piece of ephemera to emerge from this clerkly context, however, is Hoccleve's poem to *La Court de Bone Conpaignie* (or Court of Good

Company), apparently the name of a Temple Dining Club of which he was a member. A meeting of this company produced a second ballad to Somer that is clearly written on behalf of the company as a response to a letter from Somer, acknowledging arrangements for their coming dinner. Although it was originally thought to have been composed in 1410, Burrow demonstrates that it must have been penned in 1421, when Somer was Chancellor (which rather challenges any notion of Hoccleve's spiral into social isolation after his experience of mental illness).⁴⁶

Hoccleve's comments in this poem reveal a number of details about this court. The court had been long established ('our old fundacioun'; 24); however, whereas it was founded 'to vse largesse' (12) in order to disport itself in 'solace' and 'gladnesse' (9), its continuance was felt to be threatened by the temptation to 'outrageous waast' (27) or over-spending, leading Somer to re-institute 'an othir rule' (7) of moderation and pledging extra funds for a feast on the first of May out of his own pocket, and in addition to his usual membership due. Hoccleve's poem also suggests that the court had its own customs and its own steward (who, at the last meeting, had enjoined Somer to arrange the next dinner himself).

The preoccupations of Hoccleve's Court are not unlike those of the Puy (indeed, Seymour suggests the Puy as 'a comparable court' in his notes to the poem).⁴⁷ Although we have no reason to suppose it was a club that specialised in literary activities, the fact that Hoccleve expends poetry in such a cause (acknowledging a letter) indicates that literary entertainment, official or informal, may have accompanied or formed part of its proceedings. The date of the feast (1st May) suggests an occasion of festivity. The theme

⁴⁶ Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' 217, n. 114.

⁴⁷ M. C. Seymour ed., commentary, *Selections from Hoccleve* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 111-12.

of misrule versus right-rule (c.f. the theme of misrule in *La Male Regle*) and the importance of regulating the Bacchanalian excesses of the club in view of its 'outrageous' (27) expenditure on food and drink is central to this poem, aligning it with earlier and later traditions of convivial literature with their concern for table-etiquette. The tensions present in convivial literature between extravagance and moderation are certainly evident in this poem. On the one hand, Hoccleve and the others appear to submit to the new rule of moderate expenditure that Somer advises and place the arrangements for the feast in his hands. On the other, Hoccleve suggests that Somer himself should be acting according to the 'limitacioun' (51) of the steward, and advises him – somewhat bombastically - that their court will be threatened with destitution if Somer does not provide for their drinking and dining needs.

In making the otherwise rather mundane arrangements for a gathering of this court a matter for poetry, we are reminded of the practice of the early modern clubs. Such a comparison also raises the possibility that Somer's letter, referred to in the poem, might also have been in verse (in which case, Hoccleve has been elected the poetic 'spokesperson' in responding to it). Hoccleve's poem thus provides us with some insight into the kind of private associational community that might produce poetry of this kind among its members, and to which a man in his position might contribute. Whether or not this 'Court of Good Company' was an actual literary society like the London Puy or simply a dining club attended by the kind of men who, like Hoccleve, were interested in poetry, Hoccleve is once again using poetry as a means of representing this community, both drawing attention to its needs and contributing to its entertainment.

Writing and Community in the Series

Hoccleve's *Series* (1419-22), a collection of poems and moralistic prose connected by a framing narrative, interacts with a number of actual and ideal literary communities, and, like the earlier *Regiment of Princes*, presents the integration of the isolated writer with his community as one of its main themes. The *Series* provides a remarkable commentary on the act of composition as a collaborative affair between the writer, Thomas (whose links to the author are undisguised) and his 'friend' (a humorous figure who can be interpreted as an independent character, or, again, as Hoccleve's alter ego). It affects to offer us a blow-by-blow account of a manuscript collection as its contents are variously composed, translated and collated by the writer, with frequent commentary and intervention from the friend, who 'interrupts' the poem as it is being written to suggest the addition of new material. In this way we are made aware of a text in creation as something constantly, and perhaps alarmingly, open to changes of direction, and ultimately something that emerges interactively through dialogue as part of, and for, the wider community.

The evolution of the *Series* as a commentary on the act of composition, and the rather amusing picture of literary influence we encounter within it is worth a more detailed analysis. It begins with the 'Complaint' of the Hoccleve-persona, Thomas, in the grip of acute feelings of alienation from the rest of society occasioned after his mental illness, which has made him, he feels, an object of talk and suspicion. The writing of the 'Complaint' is an outlet for this unhappiness: Thomas is adamant that he has fully recovered his sanity, and feels that his madness and his recovery have both been sanctioned by God. Having arrived at a position of tentative calm, the friend interrupts

Thomas (with much hollering and banging on the door) and the 'Dialogue' begins. The friend asks what he has been doing and, in one of Hoccleve's many naturalistic touches, the narrator reads him the poem he has just written. The friend is horrified that Thomas intends his complaint for publication 'amonge Pe peple' (24) and advises him to 'kepe al pat cloos for thin honours sake' (28). Initially the balance of authority between Hoccleve and the friend appears evenly spread. From the outset, we instinctively side with Hoccleve in believing in his recovered sanity. The friend does not disbelieve in it, yet his assertion that Hoccleve is being over-sensitive in assuming people are talking about him introduces a breath of fresh air to Hoccleve's rather morbid outlook previously.

The friend asks whether the 'Complaint' is the prelude to more writing and Hoccleve replies that yes, he proposes to translate a Latin treatise, 'Lerne to Dye.' The purpose of this work will be to encourage himself and others to 'acounte and rekne' (221) the deeds of their lives, and make confession with a clear mind before the final judgement. This idea comes, he says, at the request of a devout man whose identity is left vague, and will be his final output as a writer. The friend fears that although Thomas has 'a good entente' (295) he is not yet well enough to undertake this work of translation and goes on to blame Thomas's literary activities for driving him mad in the first place:

'Thy bisy studie aboute swich mateere
 Hath causid thee to stirte into the plyt
 That thow were in as fer as I can heere. (302-4)

The friend here betrays the fact that he has only heard of Thomas's state from a distance. In this, he voices the same suspicions as the crowd who judged the narrator harshly in the 'Complaint.' Hoccleve confesses himself hurt by his friend's lack of trust and deals with this in a rather literary manner by quoting Tully (Cicero) and Solomon on the steadfast qualities of friendship, with intimations of the friend's lack thereof. The friend's response that there is no 'variance' (371) to be found in him becomes ironic later when he reveals that his opinions are extremely variable. He too refers to Solomon and argues that Thomas is not wise in refusing to listen to others' judgement. Thomas modifies his tone and argues instead that he is well enough to write, and although he 'neuere yit was brent with studies hete' (500) he will be careful and only write when he feels the desire to do so. The friend confesses himself content with this and goes on to ask whether the poem is intended for the Duke of Gloucester, to whom he owes a book. Thomas agrees, and introduces a new motive for writing: pleasing his patron.

Thomas discusses what material might be suitable for presentation to the Duke and the friend gives more advice about writing. He develops the common metaphor for writing as building a house, along with a picture of how a work should be envisaged by a writer in its totality before composition. Thomas asks his friend what he thinks he should write, and the friend stands 'a long time in a studie' (659) before coming up with the Chaucerian injunction that Hoccleve should write something 'in honour and preysynge' (673) of women, since he has allegedly offended them by making his *Epistle of Cupid*. The Friend also cites the Wyf of Bath as 'auctrice' (694) mentioning her as evidence that women don't like to have any vices pinned on them.

The narrative here harks back to Chaucer's own trial of the author in the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*, except that this time the author on trial is Hoccleve and he is not answering for himself in either a real or ideal court, but in a conversation that anticipates such a trial at the hands of noble ladies to whom the Duke might show his book. Thomas responds to the friend's accusations in much the same way as Chaucer's narrator does in the *Legend of Good Women*, by back-peddalling first in stating that he was only 'a reportour / of [other] folkes tales' (761-62), and then shifting to a more aggressive defence by saying that his accusers have not read his epistle properly, and asking the friend for his opinion on the conclusion:

'The book concludith for hem is no nay

Vertuously my good freend dooth it nat?'

'Thomas, I noot, for neuere it yit I say.'

'No, freend?' 'No, Thomas' 'Wel trowe I, in fay;

For had yee red it fully to the ende,

Yee wolde seyn it is nat as yee wende.' (779-84)

The confession that the friend has not actually read the epistle, or not to its conclusion, undermines his pretensions as a literary critic. In fact, it links him with Chaucer's God of Love and his Man of Law as a short-sighted, high-handed reader unable to distinguish between tone and content, narrator and author, and ultimately basing his judgements on others' reports of books rather than the books themselves.

The friend saunters off the page towards the end of the 'Dialogue,' telling Thomas he will return to make sure he is not writing anything 'Wherthurgh thou mightest gete any maugree' (795). Thomas, rather surprisingly, seems to have taken his friend's admonitions to heart: 'Whan he was goon I in myn herte dredde / Stonde out of wommennes benevolence' (799-800). It is with the desire to praise and appease ladies that he begins the tale of Jereslaus' wife, a moral poem about the undeserved sufferings of a Roman Empress. After this, Thomas regards the manuscript as finished, but the friend returns 'aftir [...] a wike or two' (Epil. to 'The Tale of Jereslaus' Wife,' 1) and appears again in the prologue to the tale of Jereslaus' wife when he takes the manuscript 'into his hand and it al ouersy' (6), and asks why there is there no moral at the end of it. He offers to lend Thomas a book, another version of the tale, which does contain such an exemplar and goes off to fetch it. Returning with the book, he reads it to Hoccleve, and leaves it for Hoccleve to copy from 'in prose wrytynge it hoomly and pleyn / Ffor he conseillid me do so certeyn' (25-6). The friend re-establishes himself as a bookish man in this exchange, and again takes charge over the book. Following this addition is the promised treatise on the art of dying, which Hoccleve translates in verse until line 918, then in prose because, he says, he does not have the skill to continue writing it in poetry.

After a magisterial conclusion on the joys of heaven and pains of hell, Hoccleve again says that he thought: 'This booke thus to han endid [...] / But my freend made me change my cast' (Prol. to 'The Tale of Jonathas,' 1). The friend now asks Thomas to translate the tale of Jonathas as an example to youth (and specifically the friend's teenage son) not to keep prostitutes, because it is soul-destroying and (which seems more important to the friend) ruinous on the purse. He now wants a tale of a woman 'Pat was

unchaast and deceyuable' (31-32). Thomas reacts with a vivid picture of what women might say of him if he translates this tale ('O, beholde & see the double man o, yondir... He nat meneth as he spekith or writ: / O lewde dotepol straw for his wit!'; 48-49) and points out that the friend's advice earlier was very different. The friend replies that no good woman can possibly object to a story about a bad one. Here the friend effectively contradicts his own advice that a work of art should be first 'with his mental ye' (640) be 'seen pourposid cast & ment / How it shal wroght been elles al is shent' ('Dialogue,' 641-42). The re-echoes of 'cast' and 'purposid' in Thomas's response (2-3) make it clear that we are meant (at least from within the text) to see this action as destructive of any integrity it had as a Great Work pre-imagined and controlled by its author. Thomas, again, agrees to toe the line, and the friend disappears, sending him the copy of this new tale. Thereafter we have the proposed tale of Jonathas and another exemplar followed (in Durham MS. Cosin V: III. 9, Hoccleve's autograph copy of the *Series*) by a final, short dedication to the Countess of Westmoreland.

Unless in a figurative sense, the *Series* is not a coterie manuscript (Hoccleve is the only writer) and its meta-fictional complexities ensure that the friend functions on one level as a limited – or at any rate, distanced – reader of Thomas's madness and his literary work, and on another as the means by which Thomas is able to develop his current literary project and the pretext for the inclusion of its disparate inset material. Knapp makes an interesting argument that the friend represents one of Hoccleve's colleagues at the office: a good copy-editor who puts the *Series* 'through a process very like that which

would have been used in producing correspondence sent out under the Privy Seal.’⁴⁸

However, there is nothing to connect the friend specifically with Hoccleve’s colleagues, to whom he refers separately elsewhere; he is clearly someone who is not -- like the clerks -- closely involved with Thomas’s immediate recovery from his illness. Hoccleve presents him to us as an old friend (‘my good freend of fern agoon’; ‘Dialogue,’ 8) and the Friend declares that it is a long time since he has seen Thomas (‘for this quarter I nat thee sy’; 6). It is also possible to read him as a metaphorical embodiment of Hoccleve’s wandering wit, now returned (who, like the friends he mentions in the beginning of the ‘Complaint,’ went on pilgrimage). However, in questioning Thomas’s fitness for undertaking a literary project, he functions more as a sympathetic representative of ‘Pe prees’ (‘Complaint,’ 191) who doubt the extent of the narrator’s recovery. In terms of the rehabilitating structure of the poem as a whole, then, he comes to represent a kind of everyman - a quizzical, but sympathetic reader who voices Hoccleve’s own fears (or those of his extended community) that he may not be up to the task of writing.

The friend is not a dead loss as a literary critic: although he admits to judging the *Letter of Cupid* without reading it, he shows himself knowledgeable about literature in checking over the work and producing books from his own library for Thomas’s use. However, his real significance lies in his co-authorship of Hoccleve’s literary project. Although the appeal of the work is of a very different kind to that of the *Canterbury Tales*, the influence of the imagined audience is also important. Essentially, the *Series* offers us a picture of author’s relationship with his reading ‘public’ embodied in a single reader, in which that reader ‘answers back’ and collaborates on the evolving plan of the work in general chiefly by introducing, and pre-empting, the possible response of a range

⁴⁸ Knapp, *Bureaucratic Muse* 183.

of different reading communities to which Thomas's evolving work might be addressed (thereby guiding the responses of the actual audience who may be more attentive to what the friend, in his limited reading of Hoccleve's work, may have missed).

Hoccleve's ability to move comfortably between real, imagined and wholly fictional audiences in the *Series* suggest an interest in creating his own community of carefully attuned readers. The *Series* is indeed extraordinary in its constant, and subtle, shifting of such imagined receptive contexts. To begin with, Thomas declares his intention of 'publishing' or circulating the 'Complaint' among 'the peple' ('Dialogue,' 24) after which this general audience is pared down to Hoccleve himself and the unnamed 'deuout man' (235) who has asked him to undertake a translation of the treatise 'Lerne for to Die' (206), Isidore of Seville's *Synonyma*, then to the Duke of Gloucester, to the ladies with whom he imagines he socialises (who represent, en masse, a shadowy entity of aggrieved female readers who need to be placated – a popular construct of the game of love), to the fictional son of the friend, and, finally, (in the Durham MS.) to the Countess of Westmoreland. It therefore interacts with, or seeks to attract, a range of different readerships: aristocratic, courtly, devout, popular and adolescent. This constant shifting of audience in the *Series* cannot be explained solely in pragmatic terms of a change from one aristocratic patron to another. In this sense the *Series* becomes a communally-owned text, or one that gestures towards different kinds of reading community, mediated through dialogue with one less-than-ideal, but concretely imagined reader: the unnamed 'friend.'

Hoccleve's interest in directing his work to the aristocratic literary circle of Humphrey of Gloucester in the *Series*, and the desire expressed to secure Humphrey's good offices with any ladies he may have offended by his *Letter of Cupid* deserves further consideration. For Richard Firth Green, this is another mark of Hoccleve's status as an outsider to this particular kind of literary milieu and his failure to understand its humour. Thus Hoccleve's appeal to Humphrey not only demonstrates how out of touch he is with an aristocratic audience, but indicates that he had actually incurred the mockery of the closed literary coterie of the *familia regis* -- more because as a clerk of the Privy Seal he was, socially, an outsider to it, than because of anything he had said in disparagement of women (and in point of fact, his source for the *Letter*, Christine de Pisan's *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, is a pro-feminist text). In Thomas's worried response to this imagined backlash of Cupid's court, Green suggests, 'we can sense the genuine puzzlement of an outsider made the butt of a joke which he cannot fully understand.'⁴⁹

However, there are problems with this reading. For one thing, as Green himself notes, 'Hoccleve completed his translation in 1402 when the debate [of the *querelle de la rose*] was at its height, but it was not until twenty years later that he found himself having to answer for it.'⁵⁰ If the poem had been disparaged in such a way as to bewilder Hoccleve, there seems no reason why this disparagement should occur twenty years after the poem's release when the controversy surrounding the *Roman de la Rose* was a more distant memory. Furthermore Hoccleve's decision to translate Christine's text in the first place, and at the beginning of his literary career, implies his interest in this literary quarrel and desire to be involved in it. The success of the *Letter* is suggested by the fact

⁴⁹ Green, 'Familia Regis,' 108.

⁵⁰ Green, 'Familia Regis,' 108.

that, aside from his own holograph copy, ten copies of this work survive in manuscript form, more copies than for any of Hoccleve's other short poems, which would indicate that it enjoyed a healthy circulation. Furthermore, as John Burrow points out, in its surviving forms the *Letter* is generally found in compilations of courtly verse about women (including Oxford Bodleian MS. Fairfax 16), which suggests that Hoccleve *had* penetrated the Court of Cupid – at least in a literary sense.⁵¹ This begs the question of whether Hoccleve was, indeed, 'having to answer' for this poem in the *Series*, or whether he himself was playing a sophisticated literary game in discussing the possibility of needing to do this.

I think Hoccleve's method here is not to defuse a genuine literary quarrel so much as to initiate, or try to initiate, the literary game of the quarrel whose format he had already learned from Chaucer. The Friend's reference to the Wife of Bath as an authority alerts us to this strategy early on. Following the hints of *The Legend of Good Women*, Hoccleve develops the role of the author-figure who must submit to an imagined 'trial' of his work – in part, perhaps, to exorcise his own fears of being misunderstood by his readers, but also to provoke others in this essentially masculine community of courtly lovers to engage in such a 'quarrel' as part of a literary game (as Chaucer does in *The Epistle to Scogan*). Evidence for the absence of a pre-existing quarrel in Hoccleve's case would include the fact that it is the friend who raises these accusations, that the reason for the accusations themselves are left vague, and that Hoccleve (at the friend's prompting) balances an exaggerated concern to praise women early on with the later inducements to write a tale about a faithless woman (which would suggest a desire to tease his audience, or at least to reproduce a literary debate in miniature -- as Chaucer does on the subject of

⁵¹ Burrow, 'Thomas Hoccleve,' 201.

marriage in the *Canterbury Tales*). Hoccleve's expressions of hope and fear that Duke Humphrey might show his book to the ladies with whom he has 'dalliance' (?) can thus be read as an invitation to the Duke, and perhaps also a more general readership, to use his text to initiate this kind of literary debate. As such, it shows its sensitivity to the kind of courtly community with which the Duke would be familiar.

Although we do not know whether Hoccleve obtained any concrete encouragement from Humphrey, we do know that the latter owned a copy of the *Regiment of Princes*, and Hoccleve may have received some assistance from the royal family during the most successful phase of his literary career: the scale of production accorded to the *Regiment*, both in number and quality of manuscripts, would suggest royal or aristocratic backing. Evidence of some encouragement from, and knowledge of, the kind of audience found in a noble household occurs in two of his short ballads written during this period, the *Balade* to Edward, Duke of York (accompanying a pamphlet of ballads) and another to John, Duke of Bedford (possibly accompanying a manuscript of the *Regiment*). In the ballad to the Duke of York, Hoccleve describes:

How ones at London desired he

Of me þat am his servant and shal ay

To haue of my balades [...] (11-13)

Probably the Duke had shown an interest in Hoccleve's poems (he himself wrote poetry), and Hoccleve's description of the contents as a display of his '[...] nycetee / For my good

lordes lust and game and play' (17-18) suggests he had acquired a reputation as a comic poet (perhaps with *La Male Regle*). Hoccleve then goes on, with elaborate delicacy, to express the hope that the Duke will show the book to the Duchess, and finally that the (personified) book will *not* be shown to:

[...] my maistir Picard

I warne thee Pat it shal be ful hard

For thee and me to halte on any syde

But he espie vs yit no force, abyde.

Let him looke on his herte is to me ward

So friendly Pat our shame wole he hyde. (40-45)

This 'Master Picard' has been identified as a financial officer of the Duke's house, a man whom Hoccleve may already have befriended ('his herte is to me ward / So friendly'). He adopts a more playful tone to address Picard, which suggests confidence in a personal acquaintance. This appeal reminds us that the audience within a noble household was itself mixed, and included another potential audience for a writer like Hoccleve: those who belonged to an upwardly mobile social class of men with education enough to pursue literary interests, and who might be employed there as chaplains, secretaries, household clerks or tutors. In submitting his work to Picard rather than to the Duke for correction, Hoccleve is following Chaucer in identifying a protector, promoter and critical mentor for his work not in a patron (or potential patron) but in a man more like himself. Hoccleve adopts the same technique with 'my maistir Massy' (10) in his ballad

to the Duke of Bedford (although the mode of address is slightly more distant here, which may imply that he did not know Massy as well as he knew Picard). Two of the three stanzas of the latter poem are directed at Massy, asking him to gauge ‘what myn entente is’ (24). Whatever the degree of their personal relations with the author, Hoccleve is clearly hoping that such men will secure the good-will of the nobles on his behalf, as one literary man might do for another, in order to gain recognition and remuneration of some sort for his efforts. However, there are enough instances of this mode of double-address (to patron and peer alike) by fifteenth-century authors to merit further investigation of the roles of these secondary addressees and their relationship to individual authors. In some cases an official or commissioned poem may also provide opportunities for engaging – explicitly or implicitly - with literary friends and peers.

John Lydgate (c.1370-1449)

Interest in the voluminous John Lydgate has grown steadily over the last ten years, the consequences of which minor critical renaissance are still being evaluated. New readings of Lydgate’s poetic technique as more self-conscious, politically complex, and even subversive, than hitherto supposed, have emerged to vie with the more established picture of the poet as a tame and monolithic laureate of the Lancastrian regime. Reviewing the terrain of Lydgate studies for the twenty-first century in *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture and Lancastrian England* (2006), Larry Scanlon and James Simpson suggest that we learn to view this poet as representative ‘less [of] a single authorial consciousness in the traditional sense of a solitary genius than a point of transmission between often-powerful

institutions in their readers.’⁵² Lydgate’s multivalent writings serve, in their view, as a kind of nexus or host-space for different literary systems (and, by extension, different reading communities) and ‘often serve as the mediating voice between one institution and another.’⁵³ This voice, which seems less personal than Hoccleve’s, emerges from the context of Lydgate’s position as semi-official laureate and proto-professional writer, and may be viewed as characteristic of a new literary aesthetic which aims, in Maura Nolan’s terms, at a mode of public art which is ‘both elite and representative.’⁵⁴

Although Lydgate rarely offers us personal insight into the kind of literary friendships and formative influences that may have supported his vocation as a writer, I will be examining some of the social sites of his authorship further in an effort to conceptualise his vocation in these terms. Given the size of the Lydgate corpus, the exploration of literary communities offered here will necessarily be both broad and selective, and will focus on ways in which Lydgate addresses and interacts with various audiences in some of his works, along with some consideration of the responses to Lydgate of his contemporaries and immediate successors, and the light they shed on Chaucerian-cum-Lydgatian literary communities.

The impressive range of literary commissions undertaken by Lydgate suggests that he belongs to a multiplicity of literary milieux, or, in reaching so many, that he belongs, in a special sense, to none. The diversity of Lydgate’s *oeuvre* together with his appearance on the literary scene just before the advent of a print culture in England, and in the most developed phase of manuscript culture, gave him access to a wide range of

⁵² Larry Scanlon and James Simpson, introduction, *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture and Lancastrian England*, ed. Scanlon and Simpson (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 2006) 8.

⁵³ Scanlon and Simpson, 8.

⁵⁴ Nolan, *Public Culture* 28.

fifteenth-century readers both before and after his death. The manuscripts of his work that survive from his own century indicate ownership across a range of social backgrounds: 'the nobility, bourgeoisie, religious institutions and individual clerics - in fact a full spectrum of potential fifteenth-century readership.'⁵⁵ As Derek Pearsall notes, Lydgate's poetry is always public, occasional poetry in the sense that it is 'conditioned and determined by outer needs and pressures, not inner ones,' specifically the needs of his different patrons, and the literary expectations engendered by the wide variety of genres he employs (which include epic-romance; secular lyric; hagiography; mummings and various other species of civic-occasional verse; political and philosophical, devotional and confessional poetry; and the kind of practical and proverbial wisdom disseminated in works like his popular *Dietary*).⁵⁶ Lydgate's list of patrons is as varied as his literary output, and belong to a number of different groups: monarchs and lesser royalty like Humphrey of Gloucester; aristocrats like Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick or Thomas Montagu, Earl of Salisbury; influential female patrons such as Queen Katherine (mother of Henry VI) and Alice Chaucer (daughter of Thomas Chaucer and granddaughter of the poet), and local patrons like Lady Sibyl Boyes of Holm Hale in Norfolk; civic patrons (both communities and individuals); clerical patrons (both communities and individuals); and a variety of unnamed or literarily-coded patrons (probably courtiers and aristocrats) like 'a squyer þat serued in loves court.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ A. S. G. Edwards, 'Lydgate Manuscripts: Some Directions for Future Research,' *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study: Essays from the 1981 Conference at the University of York*, ed. Derek Pearsall, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983) 22.

⁵⁶ Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 5.

⁵⁷ John Lydgate, 'A Ballade of Her That Hath All Virtues,' *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, vol. 2, EETS os192 (1934; London: Oxford UP, 1961) 2 vols. 379. All quotations from Lydgate's minor poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

Lydgate's life and literary career can be divided into stages: his childhood education, novitiate and ordination at Bury St Edmunds; his education at Oxford (where we first hear of his activities as a poet); his early career as poet (in which, among other things, he produced *The Troy Book* for Henry V, as well as *The Life of Our Lady* and *The Siege of Thebes*); his mature career as a Lancastrian apologist, in which he was based at Hatfield Broad Oak, undertook a wide range of commissions for a wide range of patrons, and produced, in rapid succession, a series of mummings for royal and mercantile audiences (during which period he also travelled to Paris in the Earl of Warwick's retinue); and finally, his later career after his return to Bury, in which he maintained his public profile as England's premier poet, and wrote an assortment of saints' lives, *The Fall of Princes* (for Humphrey of Gloucester) and his *Testament*.

The idea of Lydgate as a premier, public poet deserves closer analysis, emerging as he does from the traditionally private context of the cloister. From a young age Lydgate was committed, ostensibly at least, to a life secluded from the world as a monk attached to the Benedictine community at Bury St Edmunds. While the prominence of Bury as a monastic house in the late Middle Ages ensured that it received a wide range of visitors (including many of Lydgate's patrons), and Lydgate may have been given extra freedoms to pursue his writing activities, he must still have spent a considerable proportion of his time at Bury with his brother monks, reading, praying, labouring and chanting the hours. The extent of his physical interaction with the outside world was dependent on the will of his abbot, who, according to the rule of St. Benedict, was required to give permission for monks to leave the monastery and to monitor any letters

they received.⁵⁸ In his study of the history of the religious orders in England, David Knowles viewed Lydgate's centrality as a poet in the English tradition as something of an anomaly given his identity as a monk: a position that could best be accounted for by assuming that Lydgate had enjoyed long periods spent outside the cloister in attendance on the court. Such freedoms would, in Knowles' view, have been less noticeable because of 'a relaxation of the bonds of community life' in the monastic orders at this period, and the growing evidence of patronal and social interaction between prominent families and those from monastic communities.⁵⁹

The relationship between these two environments of court and cloister continues to engage Lydgate scholars. In his most recent bio-bibliography of the poet, Derek Pearsall concludes that despite the fact that the pattern of Lydgate's life was more outward looking than most religious (exemplified and encouraged by his time at university, and his unusual freedom of movement in the latter part of the 1420s), 'we should be wary of assuming too readily that he was a frequent visitor in society, especially after the election of the administratively rigorous William Curteys,' and that whereas 'his profession did not debar him from the court and city [...] his presence there was always remarkable.'⁶⁰ He also notes that contact between Lydgate and many of his more illustrious patrons could have occurred under the eye of his abbot within Bury's precincts: Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick and William de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, as well as his wife Alice (née Chaucer) were all received as associate members of the abbey's fraternity. Indeed, Curteys seems to have cultivated prominent patrons for

⁵⁸ Saint Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann (London: Burns, 1952) 122-23.

⁵⁹ David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1955) 274.

⁶⁰ Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate (1371-1449) A Bio-bibliography*, English Literary Studies Monograph Ser. 71 (Victoria, BC: U of Victoria, 1997) 22.

Lydgate, as his commissioning of Lydgate's *Life of St Edmund and St Fremund* for Henry VI during a visit to the abbey in 1434 suggests. The deluxe presentation copy of this text for the king represents a team-effort on behalf of the whole Bury community, with the abbot commissioning, Lydgate composing, and the brothers in the scriptorium executing, the finished work.

The Benedictine houses of the later Middle Ages represented their own kind of literary community. They incorporated periods of *lectio divina*, or contemplative reading, into their daily schedule alongside periods of manual labour, although this was not viewed by Benedict himself as an opportunity for intellectual development so much as a means of combating idleness.⁶¹ According to Christopher Cannon, *lectio divina* 'was, more often than not, the pious *re*-reading of the scriptures and patristic exegesis; it was never intended to encourage writing per se or to foster a monastic culture in which writing played a central role.'⁶² However, Lydgate extends the terminology of the rule's advocacy of devotional reading to other forms of reading and writing. In the Prologue to Book 4 of the *Fall of Princes*, great writers are commended for triumphing over 'slogardie, necligence and slouthe' (IV: 37).⁶³ Chaucer, Humphrey of Gloucester and Prince Henry are all praised for mastering sloth and idleness by engaging in literary activities.⁶⁴

Writing is also, for Lydgate, linked to the preservation of history: another typically monastic view of literature. In the *Fall of Princes*, the long endurance of writing

⁶¹ *Rule of St. Benedict*, 110-11.

⁶² Cannon, 319.

⁶³ Henry Bergen ed., *Lydgate's 'Fall of Princes'*, vol. 2, EETS e.s. 122, 4 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1924) 474. All references to the *Fall of Princes* will be to this edition and will be cited by book and line number.

⁶⁴ *Troy Book* I:83; *Fall of Princes* II: 309-10; II: 396-399.

is set against the dullness of nature, which would otherwise forget the treasures of memory that writing preserves (IV: 22-35). Monasteries like Bury St Edmunds played a key role in ensuring the survival of literary history through the cultivation and careful organisation of its library holdings: a process to which Lydgate contributed, at Curteys' request, with his versified cartularies.⁶⁵ (Curteys himself had broad literary interests: he owned copies of Cicero, Ovid and Virgil's *Aeneid* while he was at university).⁶⁶ The library at Bury was especially well stocked with around 2,000 volumes by patristic and classical writers. Lydgate himself has been judged to be a superficial classicist. His writing exhibits a thorough knowledge of Ovid, but he probably based the rest of his knowledge of ancient writers on excerpts from proverbial collections and *florilegia*.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, his more abstract sense of the weight of literary history, from the authors of antiquity to relatively modern writers like Petrarch and Boccaccio (and his own master Chaucer), is reflected in his interest in the establishment of literary genealogy, an impression that may have been fostered, in part, by his proximity to a vast collection of books.

Church historians such as Eamon Duffy have drawn attention to the way in which many of Lydgate's religious poems were designed to instruct lay-readers, both noble and non-noble, in a better understanding of the meaning of the key rituals of Church life, such as the mass and liturgies.⁶⁸ His superiors at Bury seem to have encouraged him in this: in

⁶⁵ Jennifer Summit, '“Stable in Study”: Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* and Duke Humphrey's Library,' *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England*, 215.

⁶⁶ James Clark, 'University Monks in Late Medieval England,' *Medieval Monastic Education*, ed. George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig (London: Leicester UP, 2000) 67.

⁶⁷ Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 35-6.

⁶⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400- c. 1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1992) 173 and 223.

De Profundis, a shorter religious poem also requested by Curteys, Lydgate describes how the while reflecting and praying ‘in myn Inward hertyly Orratorey’ (5):

Another charge was vpon me leyd,
 Among psalmys to fynde a cleer sentence,
 Why De Profundus specyally ys seyde
 For crystyn sowlys [...] (9-12)

Here we see Lydgate’s verse being accorded an edifying role, and ‘another charge’ rather indicates that there were several. Lydgate’s religious poetry shows him to be, in Cannon’s terms, ‘a quintessentially monastic versifier, ‘ who wrote saints’ lives, popularised doctrinal truths, and produced poems like *The Life of Our Lady* ‘whose close connections with monastic life [...] and independence from any clear patronage, suggest the most deliberate piety.’⁶⁹ However, isolating Lydgate’s ‘laureate’ and ‘religious’ poetry as two separate modes of his literary output may not always be helpful as concerns from each often penetrate the other. For example, Nigel Mortimer argues that Lydgate’s claustral experience is relevant to the interpretation of major ‘laureate’ poems like the *Fall of Princes*, which are implicated in a number of ways with issues of ecclesiastical polity.⁷⁰

Besides the monastery at Bury, Lydgate also spent extended periods of time in two other Benedictine environments: as a member of Gloucester College, Oxford (where he may first have attracted notice as an aspiring writer) sometime between 1406 and

⁶⁹ Cannon, 342.

⁷⁰ Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate’s “Fall of Princes”: Narrative Tragedy in Its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 2005) 130-151.

1408, and as Prior of Hatfield Broad Oak from 1423 to 1434 – both of which seem to have had an impact on his writing career. Indeed, Lydgate's superiors may have made provision for these licensed secondments from Bury with his literary interests in mind. His trip to Paris in 1426, and his appointment to the smaller Benedictine community at Hatfield Broad Oak may have been concessions to his status as a national poet. Lydgate's appointment to this smaller house coincided with a period of extensive literary productivity in which, as Pearsall again notes, he 'was integrated into the financial world of secular patronage to a degree that seems unusual in terms of conventional expectations of the monastic life and its obligations.'⁷¹ Lydgate's status as a semi-professional, semi-laureate poet in this period is evinced by the impressive list of his commissions: he produced a series of mummings for both royal and civic occasions, and a variety of poems for royalty and aristocracy, prominent London guilds and citizens, abbots, ladies and local gentry. He was clearly receiving, or expecting to receive, some form of payment for at least some of these commissions, judging from his appeals to Humphrey of Gloucester for money, and from the appeals to nobles for money on his behalf from John Shirley. Lydgate utilises the same petitionary techniques to win money from patrons as secular men of letters like Chaucer and Hoccleve, only in his case remuneration was connected directly to his writing.⁷² Technically, monks were not supposed to receive an income, but Lydgate sought -- and actually obtained -- an annuity for his services from the crown. This would place him closer to modern conceptions of the professional, laureate poet.

⁷¹ Derek Pearsall, 'If Heaven Be on This Earth, It is in Cloister or in School: The Monastic Ideal in Later Medieval English Literature,' *Pragmatic Utopias: Ideals and Communities 1200-1630*, ed. Rosemary Horrox and Sarah Rees-Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 21.

⁷² See Green, *Poets* 156-57.

In summarising the impact of recent politicised readings of Lydgate, Nigel Mortimer suggests that, for many critics, ‘the tantalizing tension between cloister and court seems to have been resolved, with the Monk of Bury of fifteenth-century readers becoming a civil servant for their modern successors.’⁷³ Yet, as Mortimer also notes, as well as informing his personal outlook in a variety of ways, Lydgate’s status as ‘the monk of Bury’ formed an important part of his identity for a contemporary audience in the marketing of his works by Shirley, and was probably also a factor in his attractiveness to the Lancastrian establishment.

Lydgate’s Chaucerian Communities

Lydgate produced no coterie-poems in the Chaucerian vein, but (as with Hoccleve) the ways in which the author chooses to address different audiences tell us something about his placing of himself within the contemporary literary scene. Lydgate’s first major narrative poem, the *Troy book*, commissioned by Henry V while he was still the prince and composed between 1412 and 1420, is a good example of a work that mediates between different readerships in this respect (both addressed and implied, ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’). The primary audience in this case is Henry, who is fulsomely praised at the beginning and close of the work, and in the appending envoy, as we should expect. However, Lydgate also invokes other kinds of audience in the closing lines of the *Troy Book*: among them, his brother-monks at Bury (those who know his personal flaws) and any Chaucerian disciples that may read the work (as the desired ‘correctors’ of it). Here Lydgate describes again how he has been asked to rhyme the siege of Troy by Henry:

⁷³ Mortimer, 52.

He gaf me charge Pis story to translate
 Rude of konnynge, called Iohn Lydgate,
 Monke of Burie be professioun,
 Vsyng an habite of perfeccioun,
 Al-be my lyf accorde nat Per-to-
 I feyne nat; I wote wel it is so –
 It nedeth nat witnesse for to calle,
 Record I take of my brethren alle,
 Þat will nat faille at so gret a nede. (V: 3467-3475)

The invocation of the Benedictine community at this critical juncture of Lydgate's epic work is especially noteworthy because in his later works Lydgate rarely identifies with his brother-monks so explicitly, or makes mention of his own experience of monastic life in such detail, excepting some discussion of his childhood and novitiate in his *Testament*. Lydgate draws attention in this passage to the community that surrounds him: the brethren who both watch and supervise his spiritual welfare, and who know the gap between the monastic ideals that Lydgate strives to uphold, and the ways in which he falls short of them. Both they and he understand his spiritual inadequacy, both for the life of a religious and, by implication, for fulfilling the task he has been set of writing the *Troy Book*. Here the notions of spiritual and literary inadequacy are closely intertwined for Lydgate (a theme that is also present in the *Testament*, in which Lydgate describes his 'disordinat [...] langage' (713) which, like his disordered self, undergoes a process of

conversion and submission to the rule before he is in a position to take up his pen and write works of devotion).

Lydgate then goes on to address ‘all þat shal þis noble story rede’ (V: 3476), but immediately draws a distinction between those readers who have no skill in either prose or verse-making (but are eager to criticise those who do) and a more educated and sympathetic body of readers who are ‘ay redy to seie wel’ (V: 3518). Such an audience is epitomised for Lydgate in Chaucer, who, like them, ‘seide alweie þe best’ (V: 3524). The implication here is that Lydgate’s ideal audience, effectively, is Chaucer himself. In submitting his book for correction, he seeks a specialised audience of Chaucer’s literary followers:

And in þis lond □if þer any be,
 In borwe or toun, village or cite,
 þat konnyng haþ his traciſ for to swe,
 Wher he go brood or be shet in mwe –
 To hym I make a direccioun
 Of þis boke to han inspeccioun (V: 3531-6)

This address is quite provocatively nuanced. On a simple level, it suggests Lydgate’s own eagerness to locate other Chaucerian writers, and to bring this physically divided community of individual Chaucerians together. However, the idea of such writers being ‘shet in mwe’ draws our attention back quite deliberately to Lydgate himself as one such follower shut away from physical contact with the outside world (including this potential

community of Chaucerians) because of his adhesion to another one. The *Troy Book* itself, then, has the potential to become the vehicle for a virtual literary community of readers, rather than a physically actualised one, connecting such followers with each other by word-of-book. But this reference to Chaucerians who may be 'shet in mwe' is also susceptible to further interpretation: it implicitly declares Lydgate's ambition to follow Chaucer, and, as such, functions as a challenge to the imagined Chaucerian writers he identifies elsewhere who are, in some fashion, his competitors.

These potential competitors are likewise potential friends and mentors, and in identifying the proper literary community to apply to for protection and correction of his work, Lydgate was probably thinking back to the famous dedication of the *Troilus*, in which Chaucer used the same formula to submit his then most ambitious poem to those of his literary friends he deemed skilled enough to judge of its value properly. The *Troy Book*, likewise, was Lydgate's most ambitious poem at the time of its composition and the one that marked his entrance onto the literary stage of Lancastrian England. At this crucial moment, he entrusts his fallible soul to his monastic community and his fallible book -- half wistfully, half challengingly -- to a Chaucerian community projected out into 'borwe or toun, village or cite.'

In the *Siege of Thebes* Lydgate again self-consciously constructs himself as Chaucer's heir, and directs himself into -- and towards -- two differently imagined communities: the fictional community of the Canterbury pilgrims, and, more implicitly, an imagined community of readers who are, like himself, already familiar with Chaucer's work. Lydgate's insertion of himself as pilgrim-narrator into Chaucer's Canterbury fellowship in place of Chaucer as a pilgrim has been read as indicative of an Oedipal

wish to eliminate the father (appropriate, as Spearing points out, for Lydgate's Oedipal tale).⁷⁴ Yet it also functions as a means of completing a gap in the community as a literary construct: Lydgate effectively takes over the narrative where Chaucer left off - the return portion of the journey. In this way he chooses to join the company at the point where Chaucer the pilgrim (and, by extension, Chaucer the author) was forced to leave it, to become, in effect, a replacement Chaucer in leading the pilgrims back from Canterbury, not elbowing him out of the way on the journey there.

As there is no record of the *Siege of Thebes* being undertaken for a particular patron, most scholars have chosen to read it as a work in which Lydgate indulges his own literary interests. That Lydgate did expect an audience (and perhaps also a commercial value) for this work, however, is indicated by the twenty-eight surviving manuscripts of the *Siege* – a considerable number, suggestive of the work's popularity with fifteenth-century readers. This confirms the physical and commercial presence of that Chaucerian community of readers envisaged more speculatively at the conclusion of the *Troy Book*. It probably also reflects the medieval desire for narrative wholeness and completion, as Rosamund Allen argues (a desire reflected in the work of Benedict Burgh, Lydgate's self-confessed disciple, who finishes Lydgate's own *Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, left incomplete after his death).⁷⁵ In this respect, Lydgate's attempts to fill the narrative gap left by the incomplete *Canterbury Tales* met both a commercial need for a full text, and thus value for money and a fifteenth-century reader's need for an authoritative ending.⁷⁶ And Lydgate's suggested ending, at least in one respect, is rather clever: chronologically,

⁷⁴ Spearing, 'Lydgate's Canterbury Tale,' 359.

⁷⁵ Rosamund S. Allen, 'The "Siege of Thebes": Lydgate's Canterbury Tale,' *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry* ed. Boffey and Cowen, 131.

⁷⁶ Allen, "'Siege of Thebes'," 131 and 138.

the Theban history of Lydgate's tale occurs prior to that of the Knight. This would make such a completion of meaning part of a circular narrative, which weaves itself back into the fabric of Chaucer's own sequence of tales.

Evidence of another live Chaucerian literary community with which Lydgate may have aligned himself exists in his poem 'On the Departing of Thomas Chaucer,' written to coincide with one of Thomas Chaucer's diplomatic trips to France (1414 seems the most likely date, as opposed to 1417 or 1420), perhaps at the instigation of his wife. It is likely to have been at Oxford that Lydgate first made contact with Chaucer (son of the poet) and his family. The Chaucer family home at Ewelme was only a few miles south of Oxford. Chaucer's daughter, Alice, became another of Lydgate's literary patrons, and the aristocratic circles in which she and the Chaucer family moved may have facilitated Lydgate's introduction to others. Pearsall suggests that the 'frequent and glowing' references to Chaucer in the *Troy Book* may be a result of his association with the Chaucer family, but it is more probable that a keen interest in Chaucer had recommended Lydgate to his family in the first place.⁷⁷ As Chaucer's son, Thomas Chaucer had reason to be friendly to poets, and had risen to become a key administrator of the Lancastrian government, chiefly as a result of the family's connection with the Beauforts.

The importance of 'On the Departing' for sketching an early receptive circle for Lydgate's work involves some differentiation between the formal and informal tones of address in Lydgate's shorter poems. Unlike more formal poems for prominent individuals such as 'On Gloucester's Approaching Marriage,' 'On the Departing,' blends rhetorical extravagance with a detailed impression of the hospitable atmosphere of the Chaucer

⁷⁷ Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 161.

household with its mixture of 'high' and 'low' company. Lydgate addresses Chaucer's friend ('gentyl Moleyns, myn owen lord so der'; 43) his wife, Maud, ('Lat be youre weping, tendre creature'; 50) and the gentlemen of the surrounding countryside. He offers practical advice in Sir Thomas's absence: to cheer up, to pray for his safety and to have good hope that he will return to them again. At his final stanza he turns inward to his own state of mind, implicitly situating himself within this circle as a member of this grieving company. The uncharacteristically personal parting shot carries all the simplicity of a felt emotion:

And for my part, I sey right as I thenk,
 I am pure sory and hevy in my hert,
 More Pan I expresse can wryte with inke
 Þe want of him so sore doþe me smert (71-4)

Ultimately this is a matter of conjecture, but one could see here a gesture towards a more intimate style.

There have been attempts to construct a political-literary agenda from Thomas Chaucer's friendship with Lydgate. John Bowers suggests that Thomas Chaucer related to Lydgate as 'a patron facilitating the formation of an official poetic that was Lancastrian in its social commitments and Chaucerian in style and subject-matter,' and that this was a cynical gambit on the son's part to improve his own political standing by 'establishing an official succession of named poets as a counterpart to the orderly

succession of monarchs to which his political efforts were so energetically committed.⁷⁸ Building on the undisputed fact that Chaucer retained the lease of his father's house at Westminster, Bowers conjectures that this building was used as a storage house for the Chaucer archives to which Lydgate as an approved reader would have been granted access. He admits, however, that this is a fanciful interpretation of a small amount of evidence. John Fisher's article, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England,' develops a similar theory more persuasively. Aligning Lydgate's poetry with a Lancastrian strategy to make English the national language, Fisher suggests that this policy had its genesis in an 'Oxford circle' active between 1398 and 1403, which would have included Prince Henry, Henry Beaufort, and possibly Thomas Chaucer and Lydgate too.⁷⁹ This also seems improbable, however. Not only would such a theory require the stretching of very limited evidence that these men were all at Oxford at the same time, but the principal evidence Fisher cites for Lydgate's involvement is the fact that between 1406 and 1408 Henry wrote a letter on Lydgate's behalf asking that he be allowed to remain at Oxford. Such a letter, as Pearsall notes, need not pre-suppose the personal acquaintance of Henry and Lydgate at this stage, merely the Prince's willingness to oblige the University's Chancellor, and in any case the supposed period of their association is several years earlier.⁸⁰

Visits to Ewelme might have furnished Lydgate with opportunities to meet other influential people: Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and the Earls of Warwick, Salisbury and Suffolk (the latter two were successive husbands to Chaucer's daughter, Alice). The

⁷⁸ John M. Bowers, 'The House of Chaucer & Son: The Business of Lancastrian Canon Formation,' *Medieval Perspectives* 6 (1991): 139 and 140.

⁷⁹ John H. Fisher, 'A Language Policy for Lancastrian England,' *PMLA* 107.5 (1992): 1168-80.

⁸⁰ Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 30.

influence of such networking seems likelier when we consider that Alice Chaucer also commissioned work from Lydgate after her marriage to the Earl of Suffolk, William de la Pole. Suffolk was also a poet, or at least a ‘transmitter’ of lyrics, and a friend of Charles d’Orleans.⁸¹ He also owned a deluxe manuscript of *The Siege of Thebes*. The date-span of the poem to Chaucer places it early in Lydgate’s literary career, so it is tempting to attribute the snowballing of Lydgate commissions subsequently to the influence of this family on his behalf. However, Pearsall cautions that although Lydgate might conceivably have visited Ewelme, it is likely to have been ‘an exceptional event,’ and in the absence of further evidence we should be wary of attributing too great a role to Chaucer as a literary agent.⁸²

Lydgate and Courtly Literary Communities

Lydgate’s involvement with the socially prominent Chaucers raises the question of how far he can be associated with courtly literary communities, and especially those linked to aristocratic circles. The above-mentioned ‘Reproof to Lydgate,’ a poem of protest at Lydgate’s misdeeming of women from an imaginary Court of Cupid, is interesting in this respect.⁸³ It is also preserved alongside the poetry of Chaucer, Hoccleve and Lydgate in the mid fifteenth-century collection of love poetry found in Oxford Bodleian MS. Fairfax 16. In it, the anonymous author aligns himself with the order of the Flower in the Flower

⁸¹ See Henry Noble MacCracken, ‘An English friend of Charles of Orléans,’ *PMLA* 26.1 (1911): 142-80; Julia Boffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages*, Manuscript Studies 1 (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1985) 65-67.

⁸² Pearsall, *Lydgate: Bio-bibliography* 22.

⁸³ The poem has been printed in Eleanor Prescott Hammond ed., *English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey* (1927; New York: Octagon, 1965) 200-1. Quotations from this poem will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

and Leaf debate. He then turns his attack on the 'Monke of Bury' (26) who seeks to 'occupye' (28) the place of Chaucer, the worthiest of poets. He shows some familiarity with Lydgate's poetic aesthetic, and echoes it in his own terminology of praying to God to 'elumyne' (29) his pen. Although he does not state which exactly of Lydgate's poems have occasioned his ire, he rebuffs a number of Lydgate's general accusations against women in some detail, building to a crescendo of scorn at his 'corrupt speche' (68). The closing stanza advises him:

Be not to hasty com not in presence
 Lat thyn attournay sew and speke for the
 Loke yf he can escuse thy necglygence
 And forther more yit must thou recompence
 Ffor alle that euer thou hast sayde byfore (79-83)

The poem thus attempts to initiate a literary quarrel with Lydgate in the manner of a Love Court debate (or, indeed, a more gentlemanly version of a flyting in which poetic 'seconds' are employed). The idea that Lydgate must be forced to make recompense for his slighting treatment of women, perhaps in the form of a literary commission, may suggest the writer's desire to provoke love poetry from Lydgate in the mode of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. More interesting is the suggestion that the monk ought to provide an 'attournay' (80) or deputy to speak for him. This might imply that somebody else -- perhaps a friend of Lydgate or of the writer -- was being invited to defend the monk in verse. Did Lydgate himself hope to provoke such a response? In Oxford MS.

Bodley Ashmole 59, Shirley's final anthology, Shirley gives a heading to Lydgate's 'Beware of Doublesse' which reads 'Nowe foloweþe a balade by Lidegate of women for desporte and game per Antyfrasim'. This might suggest Lydgate was appealing to an audience meant to indulge the misogynistic sentiments poem at least for their value in producing playful debate among Lydgate's readers or listeners.⁸⁴ However, as far as we know, Lydgate did not reply to any of the accusations in the 'Reproof,' either in person or through a nominated 'attorney,' which might indicate that he was operating at a distance from the circle which would have entertained the 'Reproof.'

In his analysis of the 'Reproof,' Richard Firth Green argues that 'the quarrel is purely a literary one and [...] the question of discourtesy to women [...] little more than a stalking horse.'⁸⁵ Its author may have intended the poem to stimulate a squabble over poetic territory (through the implication that Lydgate is not filling the place of Chaucer, the poet of love). But on the other hand, it seems likelier that the poem is in fact saying more about its author's desire to embark on his own literary 'game of love' by adopting the chivalric role of defender of women, than about any sense of rivalry -- or real pique -- with Lydgate as a writer. After all, Shirley, an erstwhile marketer of Lydgate's work to a courtly readership, inscribed his own humorous protestations against a selection of Lydgate's misogynistic remarks in the margins of BL MS. Harley 2251.⁸⁶ Such protestations probably reveal more about their reader's desire to identify themselves with the social values and parlour games espoused in courtly circles where misogynistic

⁸⁴ Margaret Connolly, *John Shirley: Book Production and the Noble Household in Fifteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998) 44. Julia Boffey makes the same point, noting how 'scribal comments often seem to have been formulated to provoke debate and discussion between the women and men of this mixed audience [for Lydgate's lyrics]' Boffey, 'Lydgate's Lyrics and Women Readers,' *Women, the Book and the Worldly: Selected Proceedings of the St. Hilda's Conference*, Oxford, 1993, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor, vol. 2 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995) 141.

⁸⁵ Green, 'Familia Regis,' 103.

⁸⁶ Further see Boffey, 'Lydgate's Lyrics,' 141.

sentiments could not be allowed to pass without comment, and often became a vehicle for courtly playing.

A particular aristocratic circle to which Lydgate may have had access was that of Duke Humphrey, who commissioned Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. While Humphrey's influence as a patron of letters and his contribution to the introduction of humanist culture to England has been a matter of debate, he is known to have been a cynosure for English and Italian literati, and to have cultivated literary men at his Greenwich 'Palace of Pleasaunce'.⁸⁷ The anonymous English translator of Palladius' *De Rustica*, commissioned by Humphrey, praises the Duke's literary activities in his prologue, noting that he has 'boked thair libraiir vniuersal' (96)⁸⁸ at Oxford with his regular donation of volumes from his own collections, and befriended men of letters such as '[John] Whethamstede and [...] Pers de Mounte' (102).⁸⁹ The author also alleges, perhaps flatteringly, that the Duke 'taught me metur make' (109).

The comments of this anonymous translator, and of Lydgate in the *Fall of Princes*, show that Humphrey took an interest in the composition process as well as commissioning translations, lending books and offering suggestions and corrections as the works progressed. However, Lydgate's response to Humphrey's intervention in the *Fall of Princes* is less enthusiastic than that of the Palladius poet: he generally

⁸⁷ For a variety of perspectives see K. H. Vickers, *Humphrey Duke of Gloucester: A Biography* (London: Archibald, 1907); Roberto Weiss, *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967) 22-70; Susanne Saygin, *Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester (1390-1447) and the Italian Humanists* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); David Rundle, 'Humanism before the Tudors: On Nobility and the Reception of *Studia Humanitatis* in Fifteenth-Century England,' *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*, ed. J. Woolfson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 22-42; Petrina, *Cultural Politics* (Chap One, n. 151).

⁸⁸ The prologue is reprinted in Hammond ed., *English Verse*, 203-06. All quotations from this poem will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

⁸⁹ 'Pers de Monte' is Piero del Monte, the papal collector in England from 1434-39.

acknowledges such intervention and moves on, leaving us unsure as to how far he was actively receptive to Humphrey's suggestions, how far dutifully submissive to them. In a recent study of Humphrey, Alessandra Petrina suggests that Lydgate can be associated to the Duke's intellectual circle 'only with some straining.'⁹⁰ In any respect, unlike the Palladius poet, he was not working within the Duke's household, and does not address Humphrey with the same warmth as the Chaucer family whom he addresses in ways that suggest admiration and personal interaction that might have shaded into a literary friendship.

Lydgate's involvement with Richard Beauchamp, the Earl of Warwick, links him more persuasively to another kind of literary circle connected with an aristocratic household. Lydgate was with Beauchamp in Paris in 1426, where we have a note from John Shirley of his composing 'The Title and Pedigree of Henry VI' for him. Beauchamp himself wrote poetry and his daughter Margaret, later Countess of Shrewsbury, commissioned a life of Guy of Warwick from the monk. Shirley was in the service of the Earl during this period, and as it is he who preserves so much of Lydgate's poetry and provides contextual information for his readers regarding its social contexts, the link seems significant. An assortment of Lydgate's poems can be found in Shirley's BL MS. Add. 16165 - a manuscript that seems to have been executed while Shirley was still in Warwick's service, and perhaps passed around the members of Warwick's household. It is dated to the mid 1420s, the beginning of Shirley's career in copying literary texts, and preserves what were probably some of Lydgate's earliest poems: pieces of Chaucerian imitation such as 'The Complaint of the Black Knight' and 'The Temple of Glas.' ('On

⁹⁰ Petrina, 281.

the *Departying* -' is also included, the only copy of this poem which survives). Shirley also includes poetry by Chaucer and by Warwick himself in this collection, as well as that of a 'Halsham squyer' identified as Richard Halsam, who had served abroad with Warwick. However, it is Lydgate who is the most heavily represented poet in the collection, and Shirley may well have intended the collection, in part at least, as a showcase for Lydgate's work. His verse prefaces to BL Add. MS. 16165 and BL Add. MS. 29729 are both highly complimentary to Lydgate, and try to enlist aristocrat sympathies in order to better his finances.⁹¹

Shirley has been described as Lydgate's 'literary agent,' a man who had access to a considerable number of Lydgate's poems, and who copied and disseminated them to a courtly, or would-be courtly, audience.⁹² How well he knew Lydgate is unclear, but they may have met through Warwick (Shirley was certainly in Calais with Warwick at the beginning of 1427, and may also have been with him at the time of Lydgate's visit to Paris in 1426). Shirley takes an interest in the authors of his compilations, especially Lydgate, not only in asking a noble audience for material thanks for his efforts, but in expressing an awareness of the labours of authors to retrieve and re-tell old stories. His headings and rubrics give the impression that he had intimate knowledge about Lydgate's activities, although this could have been gained second-hand. Debate has ranged as to whether he was running a business, copying or loaning texts for clients, or whether he was merely an amateur litterateur who ran a lending library for a small audience of acquaintances.⁹³ A. I. Doyle believes that Shirley regarded his books as 'et amicorum,'

⁹¹ For the most accurate transcription of these prefaces see Connolly, *John Shirley*, Appendix 3. 206-211. All quotations from Shirley's prefaces are taken from this text and will be cited by line number.

⁹² Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 75.

⁹³ For recent contributions to this debate see A. S. G. Edwards, 'John Shirley and the Emulation of Courtly

and Margaret Connolly concludes that there is no evidence that Shirley sold books although he evidently lent them out, and she suggests that, based on the information given in Shirley's introductory prefaces, collections like BL MS. Add. 16165 need not have circulated outside Warwick's household and those of a few gentry families associated with them, and that this was the group that clearly constituted his primary audience.⁹⁴ The mixed social readership available in such households would account for the reference in the preface to the 'Pe gret and Pe comune' (18) among his readers.

Shirley certainly seems to have cultivated literary friendships with men connected to Warwick's household, like the above-mentioned poet Halsham, to whom he gave a copy of a hunting treatise.⁹⁵ Towards the end of his life, when he was living in St. Bartholomew's Close, he may have had more opportunities to pursue such friendships. Connolly has drawn attention to Shirley's connection with Richard Sellyng, another man with literary interests who was in Warwick's service for a time, and who addresses Shirley personally in an envoy to a poem of good counsel, asking him to 'amende' (167) his work and expressing the hope that:

[...] we may mete daylye in on place

And assemble to speke of thynges trewe

Off fernyeeris also oure talis renuwe (171-173)⁹⁶

Culture,' *The Court and Cultural Diversity: Selected Papers from the Eighth Triennial Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society*, Queens University, Belfast, 26 July – 1 August 1995, ed. Evelyn Mullally and John Thompson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 309-18; Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 130-3; A. I. Doyle 'English Books in and out of Court,' *English Court Culture*, ed. Scattergood and Sherborne, 176-77.

⁹⁴ Doyle, 'English Books,' 177. Connolly, 190-95.

⁹⁵ Connolly, 112.

⁹⁶ Rept. in Connolly, 190.

Sellyng's poem, preserved by Shirley, suggests their joint pleasure in literature.

Shirley's prefaces show a desire to imagine his audience as one 'companye' (101) drawn together in a congenial fashion by their common literary experience: this may, of course, merely have reflected his desire to inspire such a community, but assuming it to have had some level of reality we might note the way that Lydgate's poetry is being marketed to this particular readership. As well as a treatise on hunting, and other more serious pieces like the gospel of Nicodemus and Chaucer's *Boece*, Shirley includes a number of Lydgate's poems on courtly love in BL Add. MS. 16165, among them a variety of shorter lyrics both praising and undermining women such as 'A Lover's New Year's Gift,' 'The Servant of Cupide Forsaken,' and one 'Balade of Wymmen's Constance' (also titled 'Beware of Doublesnesse'). This divergence of material is pointed out in descriptive information, viz. 'Amerous balade by Lydegate Pat haPe loste his thanke of wymmen' (the heading from 'A Lover's New Year's Gift'). Although, as Connolly reflects, some of these headings seem bizarrely mismatched to the poems' content, the poems thus participate, intertextually, in their own game of love in which women are alternately presented as icons of beauty and virtue or inconstant ingrates, linking them to other courtly compilations such as BL MS. Add. 17492 (the 'Devonshire MS').⁹⁷ Shirley's expectation of attracting a mixed audience for these compilations is revealed in the closing injunction of his preface that 'God sende hem loye of hir lady / And euery woman of hir love' (102-3). Although we have no way of knowing how involved Lydgate was with Shirley and his company of courtly readers, it is tempting to think that he was at least aware of this readership through his contact with Warwick's household, and, quite possibly, contributed material for it directly to Shirley himself.

⁹⁷ Connolly, 43.

Tullius' Garden

Lydgate was sent to university in his twenties, some time after his ordination as a priest in 1397. It was customary for the greater monastic houses to send a small proportion of their monks -- usually one in twenty -- to study at one of the religious colleges of their order. In Lydgate's case this was Gloucester College where other Benedictine monks from the south were sent. The life of a monk-scholar in Oxford differed significantly from that of the secular students from whom they were, to a certain degree, segregated. They studied for a shorter period (up to five but often fewer years, as opposed to the secular students' fifteen or longer) and travelled back and forth from their home-houses quite frequently, doing a certain amount of study there. The instruction they received was also different in a number of respects from that offered by the mainstream university courses.

New research in the education and interests of monk-scholars in late medieval Oxford suggests that the monks appear to have received some instruction on rhetoric not included in the university arts course until the latter half of the fifteenth century.⁹⁸ James Clark's recent study of the intellectual lives of these monk-scholars as reconstructed from their own commonplace books and anthologies, and details of the books they owned, suggests that they enjoyed a great deal of freedom in pursuing their own intellectual interests in this period. In particular, he notes, from the evidence of such collections, that

[...] many of [the monks] seem to have been drawn to the study of rhetoric and dictamen, not simply as a practical skill but as the basis for a deeper

⁹⁸ Clark, 63

understanding of poetry and prose, and the use of colour, metre and the cursus [...]. Such was the vitality of these studies that, in the early decades of the fifteenth century, Oxford's monastic colleges seem to have emerged as important centres for the teaching of dictamen and rhetoric.⁹⁹

This interest extended, in some cases, to monks producing rhetorical treatises of their own. For example, in the first decade of the fifteenth century when Lydgate was at Oxford a group of three monk-students from different houses collaborated 'in the composition of a sequence of letters designed to serve as models of rhetorical style.'¹⁰⁰

There are also records of monk-scholars owning copies of Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*. Monks might also write, and even publish, literary works of their own while at university.¹⁰¹

Some recognition of the opportunities for developing writing skills at university is implied in Lydgate's short poem on the history of Cambridge, in which Lydgate discusses the foundation of the university. He imagines the students flocking to the university from diverse countries, 'To gather fruits of wysedom & science / And sondrie flowers of sugred eloquence' (83-4). According to a scribal note from Shirley, Lydgate produced his version of Aesop's fables while at Oxford, and Clark notes the mention, by one of the Oxford Greyfriars, of a non-surviving work on the Trojan War composed in the 1370s, as well as requests for a book on the Trojan war by another monk, an indicator of contemporary tastes among the monkish community which may have a bearing on

⁹⁹ Clark, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, 66.

¹⁰¹ Clark, 67.

Lydgate's *Troy Book*, written soon after his time in Oxford during 1412-1420.¹⁰²

Another literary monk and later patron of Lydgate, John Whethamstede, kept a commonplace book at Oxford in which he composed verses and epitaphs on classical models.¹⁰³ Looking back at his time in Oxford in 1458, Whethamstede described his monastic college in glowing terms as a place of inspiration akin to the fountain of Helicon:

[...] fontem Caballinum, in medio Oxoniarum scatutientem, [...] ut ita repente poeta prodires, [...] ut sic scires cum musis singulis in singulis musaicis singulariter decantare [...]¹⁰⁴

([...] a Cabalinian fount which gushing forth in the midst of Oxford, makes it unexpectedly rich in poets [and where] one joins with the Muses in the singing of extraordinary melodies.)¹⁰⁵

The significance of this period to Lydgate's subsequent development as a writer may need re-examination in the light of this research, which suggests that the monastic colleges of the early fifteenth century had become an unexpectedly dynamic forum for writers. Within the context of his exposure to this kind of environment, Lydgate's development into a major English poet begins to look less extraordinary. That Lydgate himself and/or his friends and patrons at the university were benefiting from his time at

¹⁰² Clark, 67.

¹⁰³ Clark, 68. For a discussion of Whethamstede, see Weiss, 30-38.

¹⁰⁴ H. T. Riley, ed. *Registra Quorundam Abbatum Monasterii S. Albani. Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores* 28, vol 1. (London, 1872) 313-14.

¹⁰⁵ Clark, 68. NB – this translation does not capture Whethamstede's word-play on singularity.

Oxford is suggested by the record of a letter from Prince Henry dating between 1406 and 1408 asking that Lydgate be allowed to continue his studies there. Prince Henry's letter betrays some confusion as to whether Lydgate was studying canon law or divinity, but if he had embarked on either of these courses this would imply that he had undertaken prior study of the *trivium*, and in any case, a period of university study would have given him opportunities of a social and literary nature to own books, make friends, and pursue his own intellectual interests.¹⁰⁶

The importance of such studies to Lydgate's own formulation of the writer's role is suggested in the commentary on rhetoric in *The Fall of Princes* where he remarks, through Bochas, that whereas natural rhetoric may be imbibed in the rhythms of speech and from scriptural readings

Crafft of rethorik yove to no creature

Sauff to man, which bi gret diligence

Be studye kometh to craft of eloquence (VI: 3413-6)

In 'Isopes Fables,' his first datable work, he jokes that the reader should 'Have me excused: I was born in Lydgate; / Of Tullius gardeyn I passyd nat the gate' (32-3). This draws attention, backhandedly of course, to an expectation that Ciceronian rhetoric would be fittingly employed in poetry. In propagating this ideal of the writer as a rhetorician who works with aureate language, Lydgate is shifting the role of the English court poet considerably from its Chaucerian moorings. In fact Lydgate re-fashions Chaucer to conform to this ideal of the poet as golden rhetorician in significant places in his work

¹⁰⁶ Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 29 and 30.

(‘Noble Galfride, poete of Breteyne, / Amonge oure englich Pat made firest to reyne / Þe gold dewe-dropis of rethorik so fyne’; II: 4967-9). Throughout his poetry, Lydgate propagates a concept of poetry as illumination, returning again and again to favourite terms like ‘enlumyne,’ ‘adourne,’ ‘aureate,’ ‘goldyn,’ and ‘sugrid,’ which contain a heightened sense of significance for him.¹⁰⁷ In employing this particular register of language in which to talk about, and in, poetry, he initiated a critical vocabulary that would be widely adopted by other fifteenth-century writers.¹⁰⁸

Lydgate’s ideas about aureate poetry are often linked to classical fantasies of mythical and ancient places as the source of inspiration in which the muses grant the aspiring writer their support. The imagined poetic community of Parnassus is invoked at the outset of the *Troy Book*. Here Lydgate laments his ‘faute of eloquence’ (32) and lack of ‘aureat licour’ (31) and implores Mars to ‘[...] maketh Clyo for to ben my muse, / Wyth hir sustren that on Pernaso dwelle’ (41-44). Parnassus re-appears again in the *Fall of Princes*:

[...] I haue no fresh licour
 Out of the conduitis off Calliope,
 Nor thoruh Clio in rhetoric no flour
 In my labour for to refresshe me
 Nor of the sustren, in number thries thre,
 Which with Cithera on Pernaso duell -
 Thei neuer me gaff drynk onys off ther well! (III: 8-14)

¹⁰⁷ Further see Lois Ebin, *Illuminator, Makar, Vates: Visions of Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1988) 19-48.

¹⁰⁸ Ebin, 20.

Lydgate regularly invokes the topos of Parnassus at key moments, but as a place of inspiration that he can never access.¹⁰⁹ Later writers, beginning with Benedict Burgh, eagerly took up this motif of the aspiring poet as a perpetual exile from Parnassus. Burgh's sentiments towards his own poetic skills when comparing them with Lydgate's in his 'Letter to Lydgate' are of a piece with Lydgate's when prostrating himself before Chaucer:

Nat dremed I in ye mownt of pernaso

Ne dranke I nevar at pegases welle

The pale pirus saw I never also

Ne wist I never where ye muses dwelle (1-4)¹¹⁰

Although both Lydgate and Burgh protest themselves unused to the company of the Muses, in making reference to such mythical realms of eloquence this notion of a poets' Parnassus becomes more present to the reader, intensifying the honour and mystique surrounding the privileged few (like Chaucer) who do frequent such a place. Lydgate also takes up the Chaucerian image of the House of Fame as a literary community, apparently without recognition of the considerable irony with which Chaucer invests the idea of literary fame. It is by writing, Lydgate tells us, that one receives the glory of an eternal name imagined as inscribed in such a place, as in the case of Petrarch:

¹⁰⁹ For more examples see *Troy Book* III: 553-56; *Fall of Princes* I: 239-245.

¹¹⁰ Printed in Hammond ed., *English Verse*, 189-90. Quotations from the poem will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

[...] by writing he gat himself a name
 Perpetuelli to been in remembraunce
 Set and registered in the Hous of Fame,
 And made Epistles of ful hih substaunce. (IV: 120-23)

Unlike Chaucer's, Lydgate's House of Fame is just that: akin to Parnassus, it offers, in Shakespeare's phrase, 'a local habitation and a name' to an imaginary company of great men and poets, to whom Lydgate claims to stand in a subservient role. This strategy of self-denigration is clearly related to what Robert Meyer-Lee has discussed as the poet's 'laureate pose,' in which, despite having no official status as laureate:

[Lydgate] must reinstall himself in that office with each poem, and one of his most powerful rhetorical strategies for doing so is to proclaim ostentatiously his unsuitability for it.¹¹¹

To adopt this pose as a fifteenth-century, post-Chaucerian writer is thus to proclaim one's place in a club of poetic self-legitimation achieved, ironically, by self-denigration. Benedict Burgh, George Ashby, Osbern Bokenham, John Cletham and Stephen Hawes all assert their membership of this Lydgatian laureate club in the terms of membership-via-denial that Lydgate himself had staked out.

Knowledge of Parnassus and its denizens also becomes an index of culture for Lydgate's urban readers from the mercantile classes in his *Mumming for the Mercers*, 'a letter made in wyse of ballad,' as Shirley tells us, and in which, as Maura Nolan says,

¹¹¹ Robert Meyer Lee, 'Lydgate's Laureate Pose,' in Scanlon and Simpson ed., *John Lydgate* 52-53.

‘the invocation of Parnassus instantiates a literary travelogue from classical rhetoricians to vernacular poets.’¹¹² Shirley’s glosses to this work suggest that he felt readers might need explanation of mythological places and characters being referenced, and also of the list of classical and continental poets Lydgate offers (or, just possibly, he is taking pains to display his own erudition, adding extra details about other authors such as Dante). The market for such knowledge among the London mercantile community was already well established. Anne Sutton’s history of the London Mercers’ Guild reveals that a considerable proportion of fifteenth-century mercers owned books, and that the kind of books they owned included copies of Gower, Chaucer, and Hoccleve, which implies an interest among the mercantile community in the literary authors of the Chaucerian tradition.¹¹³ As Nolan argues, the Mercers’ commissioning of such a mumming suggests their desire to accrue part of ‘the store of cultural knowledge that authorizes and affirms elite identity in fifteenth-century England,’ and can be seen to form part of ‘a process of acculturation by which merchants may be integrated into the codes and practices that distinguish the elite.’¹¹⁴ From Lydgate’s perspective, it offered a means of propagating the mystique of the laureate club, and turning this community into a kind of spectacle for outsiders, those who want to buy into the community by proxy.

With an ever-widening circle of readers accessing Lydgate’s poetry within his own lifetime, the concept of Lydgate’s literary communities shifts to include those silent, ‘virtual’ reading communities whose growth is synonymous with the establishment of a

¹¹² For Shirley’s note see MacCracken ed., *Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 695. Maura Nolan, ‘The Performance of the Literary,’ Scanlon and Simpson ed., *John Lydgate* 189.

¹¹³ Sutton, *Mercery* 168.

¹¹⁴ Nolan, ‘The Performance of the Literary,’ 189.

nationally imagined community.¹¹⁵ This transition between reading communities visible and virtual, countable and uncountable was facilitated by figures like Shirley -- and, later, early printers like Caxton and Pynson -- who, in their packaging of Lydgate as a literary authority, led the way for a new encounter with his poetry; but it was largely Lydgate himself who, in articulating and romanticising the laureate tradition in which he attempted to write, inaugurated the cult of himself as a laureate writer and made this kind of 'virtual' literary community possible.

Lydgate's catalogue of Chaucer's works in *The Fall of Princes* offers some indication of what he thought the career of a laureate writer should be like. Here he shows a particular interest in the creative contexts of Chaucer's poems (telling us, for example, that Chaucer wrote the *Legend of Good Women* at the request of the Queen; 330-32). Whether or not Lydgate's assertions have authenticity or are merely fanciful extensions of hints in Chaucer's own work, this passage indicates how he thought Chaucer's career ought to be read and remembered, and as such it forms an early essay in the construction of a writer. The kind of interpretative and incidental information with which Lydgate contextualises Chaucer's works is similar to the kind of information that Shirley includes in his headings to many of the Lydgate poems in his manuscripts. For instance, Shirley tells us that the ballad 'That Now Was Hay Some-tyme Was Gras' was made, somewhat poetically, 'at þe commaundement of þe Quene Kateryn as in here sportes she wallkyd by the medowes that were late mowen in the monthe of Iulij,' and that a translation of a Latin text, 'Gaude Virgo Mater Christi,' was 'made by Daun Iohan

¹¹⁵ This notion of the nationally imagined community derives from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. See Introduction, n. 10.

þe Munke Lydegate by night as he lay in his bedde at London.’¹¹⁶ In rubrics to other poems, Shirley exhorts his readers as a community of friends united in their literary experience:

Loo my freendes here beginne
 Þt Þe translacyoune out of Latyne in-to Englishe
 of Gloriosa dicta sunt de te, &c. translated by Lidegate daun John þe Munk of
 Bury at Þins[t]aunce of þe Busschop of Excestre in wyse of Balade. Beholde
 and rede
 Þe I prey yowe.¹¹⁷

Paradoxically, however, the effect of this personal information -- while it may bring readers closer to Shirley -- is to distance them from the author, placing him, his life and his works within an editorial frame, and investing them with a conscious literariness.

Lydgate’s ‘professional’ poetics of occasion, especially those of civic spectacle, also tend to increase the distance between writer and consumer, and may be viewed as a product, in part, of the conditions of production he himself experienced, relatively secluded for at least part of his life, and often fulfilling his commissions at a distance from their intended recipients. Gordon Kipling has examined the production contexts of Lydgate’s mumblings and other occasional art-forms such as sotelties, pageants, wall-hangings and paintings, stressing that Lydgate’s role in these projects is as a deviser, rather than a playwright or executor, and that this would have been possible, and indeed likely, to have occurred at a distance from London at his writing desk at Hatfield or Bury. The absence of concrete performance details for many of the mumblings, together with

¹¹⁶ MacCracken ed., *Minor Poems*, vol. 2, 809; vol. 1, 288.

¹¹⁷ MacCracken ed., *Minor Poems*, vol. 1, 315.

the evidence of Lydgate's correspondence with the town clerk, John Carpenter, regarding the description of the pageantry in 1432 for 'King Henry VI's Triumphal Entry into London,' offers some confirmation of this.¹¹⁸

Although Lydgate rarely gives us much information about the social contexts of his commissions, he and Shirley often draw attention, in envoys and rubrics, to the condition of Lydgate's pieces as poems to be sent out, or devices to be painted or acted, for various target audiences. In a versified prayer to St. Thomas, Lydgate imagines how this 'litle Table' will 'goo forth' (113) and be placed in the martyr's shrine at Canterbury for the benefit of the pilgrims and the monastic community there. One of the poems commissioned by Curteys, *De Profundis*, is likewise sent out, the envoy tells us, to be hung on the wall of his church. Similarly, Lydgate's 'Exhortation to Priests' in the collection of 'Poems on the Mass' is sent out as a 'lityll byll' (49) to an unspecified body of priests, and his 'Virtues of the Mass' in the same collection imagines how this 'lytyll trefte' will be inspected by 'folk of grace' (657). The abundance of such epistolary signatures in Lydgate's poems to particular citizens, clerical communities and local gentry may explain his tendency of falling back on formal and 'literary' ways of engaging with his audience, and of deflecting attention from concrete to idealised imaginings of those communities in an abstract sense.

This sense of the author's physical distance from his imagined audience goes hand in hand with a fixation on the figure of the writer as a bookish individual, labouring alone in his study. 'Poetis to sitte in ther librarie / Desire of nature, and to be solitarie' (III: 3807-08), Lydgate tells us in the *Fall of Princes*, and makes the figure of the writer

¹¹⁸ Further see Gordon Kipling, 'Lydgate: The Poet as Deviser,' *Chaucer and the Challenges of Medievalism*, ed. Minkova and Tinkle, 73-101.

in his study the framing narrative for this work. Paradoxically, this image of the solitary, scribbling writer becomes a means of expressing a sense of communion with other writers. Although he lacks the meta-fictional vision of Hoccleve, Lydgate often draws attention to the writing process in a self-conscious fashion, as for example in 'The Legend of Saint Gyle,' where he describes how a letter was brought to him from 'a cryature' asking him to translate the legend from Latin (25-32).

Lydgate also makes us mindful of the physical conditions of the writer, returning to the image of the writer's quaking pen as an extension of the writer's self, trembling through an excess of fear or emotion. This attention to the mechanics of writing is shared by some of Lydgate's clerical contemporaries and successors: most imaginatively, perhaps, by Osbern Bokenham who envisages his pen as a creature with a snout that needs sharpening (901) in his *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* (c.1443-7).¹¹⁹ Benedict Burgh breaks in with similarly homely details in his fan-poem 'Letter to Lydgate' (c.1433-40) in telling us that he wrote 'at thabbey of bylegh chebri place / With frosti fingers and nothing pliaunt' (190). Indeed, towards the end of Lydgate's life he was already providing a role model for younger ecclesiastical writers with a university education such as Benedict Burgh, John Metham, Osbern Bokenham and John Capgrave, all of whom were based, like Lydgate, in East Anglia, which increases the likelihood that they may possibly have met or corresponded with Lydgate, or at least heard about him from others in their religious houses. Burgh's 'Letter to Lydgate,' requesting that he be taken on as the older monk's apprentice, was probably sent as a means of making his acquaintance. In it, Burgh shows himself to be conversant with Lydgate's rhetoric of laureate

¹¹⁹ Osbern Bokenham, *Legendys of Hooly Wummen*, ed. Mary S. Serjeantson. EETS o.s. 206 (London: Oxford UP, 1938) 25. Quotations from this work will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

community and the kind of erudition pertaining to its poetic members. Burgh offers a Lydgatian catalogue of great writers and rhetoricians, whose works are ‘a motli mede’ (23) in which Lydgate has gathered flowers, and speaks of his ‘master’s’ book as ‘a goldyn bible’ (28), something between a primer and a religious relic. As Eleanor Hammond points out, Burgh’s roll-call of Lydgate’s learning in this poem is wildly optimistic.¹²⁰ Burgh’s letter is a piece of fan-mail which says more about Lydgate’s effect on his own development as a writer and his growing status as cultural icon among a younger monastic community.

One result of this emulation of Lydgate among such authors, was their inclusion -- following the practice of Lydgate himself in works like *The Life of Our Lady* -- of a laureate pedigree (Chaucer and/or Lydgate) for religious works like saints’ lives, integrating such ambitions of authorship into traditionally monastic genres. Lydgate seems to have given these men confidence to pursue their writing in both formal and informal contexts. Bokenham dedicates his *Life of Saint Margaret* to a cleric friend, Thomas Burgh, and jokes that he must keep his identity as the author of this work from those ‘wyttys [...] ryht capacityows and subtyl’ (208-09) who may gather ‘at hoom in Caunbrygge in your hows’ (207). If they do discover the manuscript, Bokenham says, Burgh must tell them it originated from a friend who used to sell horses (217-18) - a humorous touch that implies a well-established friendship as well as Bokenham’s anticipation that Burgh would pass it around the Cambridge set. Bokenham also suggests his friendly relations with a local patron, the Countess of Eu, in a preamble to the ‘*Life of the Magdalen*,’ where he describes a commission from the Countess occurring as they

¹²⁰ Hammond ed., *English Verse* 188.

chatted together in her house while her four sons were busy dancing (5035-88), a detail which would not be amiss in a Shirley rubric.

Conclusion

In Hoccleve's final work, the *Formulary*, a collection of scribal templates for his colleagues in the office, the author disappears into a real-life literary community, his individual identity blurring with the scribal community at the Privy Seal. Whereas Hoccleve shows little interest in the kind of idealised poetic communities propagated in Lydgate's work, Lydgate becomes the catalyst for an imagined conception of literary community, one that he himself encourages. By the time of his last work, *The Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, he had already paved the way for his canonisation -- literally and metaphorically -- among an idealised community of the great authors of the past. This work began immediately with Burgh's continuation of *The Secrees*, left unfinished after Lydgate's death, which begins with the rubric 'here deyed this translator and nobil poete: and the yonge folowere gan his prologe on this wyse.'¹²¹ Indeed, the dramatic cliff-hanger of Lydgate's last sentence, 'Deth al consumyth, which may nat be denyed' (1491) pointing outside the text to the death of the writer in a way that, in turn, invests that very death with literary meaning, is, as Pearsall notes, remarkably apposite.¹²² It hardly matters whether Lydgate himself staged such a literary ending, or Burgh or an anonymous editor imposed it on the text. By this time Lydgate's actual literary

¹²¹ Robert Steele ed., *Lydgate and Burgh's Secrees of Old Philisoffres*, EETS es 66 (London: Kegan Paul, 1894) 48. This quotation is cited by line number.

¹²² Pearsall, *John Lydgate* 297.

communities of readers, editors and writers were already constructing themselves along the lines of his ideal ones.

5. Calliope's Household

One of the most intriguing questions about John Skelton -- intriguing because, as with many of the questions we ask about this most mercurial of poets, there is no final answer to it -- is which literary community or communities, if any, he really belongs to. Whom did he think of as the natural audience for his writing, and how radically did this community alter over the course of his life? Such concerns link back to the question of whether he is better viewed as an insider or an outsider at court, and are perpetually complicated by what Paula Neuss refers to as Skelton's protean qualities as they are manifested in both his life and his poetry.¹

The relationship of Skelton's poetry to the English poetic tradition has been debated, with Skelton often regarded as an outsider, an eccentric innovator or even an aberration, following the Elizabethan tendency to see a radical disjunction between the art of Skelton and his younger contemporaries, Wyatt and Surrey. George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie*, cannot quite obliterate Skelton from the canon, but nor can he bring himself to admit him to the fold of polite letters (210; 212).² Among Skelton's contemporaries, opinion as to his place in the Republic of Letters is similarly polarised, ranging from Erasmus' flattering appeal to him as *vnum Brittanicarum litterarum lumen ac decus* (the one light and glory of British letters) -- which, if it does not prove his pre-eminent position in literary culture in England at this time, suggests at least the humanist's view of him as a person of influence at court -- to William Lily's condemnation of him: *doctrinam nec habes nec es poeta* (you have no learning, nor are you a poet) -- a judgment probably coloured by a sense

¹ Paula Neuss ed, *Magnificence*, The Revels Plays (Manchester: Manchester UP; Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1980) 9.

² Puttenham's treatise has been reprinted as 'George Puttenham, English Poetics and Rhetoric' in Brian Vickers ed, *English Renaissance Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) 190-296. The spelling of this edition has been modernised. For Puttenham's comments on Skelton see p. 210 and 212.

of personal injury at Skelton's support for the 'Trojan' side in the so-called 'Grammarians' War.'³ Jane Griffiths, who has produced the most recent full-length study of Skelton, notes that even for his more sympathetic critics in the twentieth century, Skelton's transitional position chronologically and his idiosyncratic experiments with style place him 'at an oblique angle to the writing subsequently identified as canonical.'⁴

What we know of his occupational history tends to reinforce the impression of Skelton as the quintessential man of letters: someone who can simultaneously be connected to the academic, courtly and clerical communities, environments which traditionally spawned writers in the Middle Ages. An ambitious graduate, he enjoyed the favour of royalty and the nobility at least in the first part of his career. He was recruited, or managed to recommend himself, for a position at Henry VII's court, subsequently gaining a post as tutor to the young Prince Henry. As translator, educator, scholar, courtier, priest, king's orator and poet laureate, Skelton's early career shows him taking the path of any man wishing to pursue a literary vocation in the early Tudor period as that vocation was understood by men of his social background, and he in turn was clearly impelled by a sense of this vocation throughout his lifetime, defending and extending the role of the poet in his own writings.

However, in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- his belief in the importance of his work, Skelton can also seem a figure isolated from his contemporaries at court: men like Stephen Hawes (c. 1474 – d. before 1529) and Alexander Barclay (c.1484-1552), and the continental courtier-poets employed at Henry VII's court, such as

³ Anthony S. G. Edwards ed., *Skelton: The Critical Heritage*, The Critical Heritage Ser. (London: Routledge, 1981) 44 and 48. Hereafter *Critical Heritage*.

⁴ Jane Griffiths, *John Skelton and Poetic Authority: Defining the Liberty to Speak* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) 1.

Bernard André (c.1450 - 1522), Pietro Carmeliano (c.1451-1527) and Giovanni Gigli (1434 - 1498). In a discussion of Skelton's relations with Barclay, David Carlson notes that whereas the relationships amongst the younger humanist circles represented by figures like More and Erasmus, and the 'new company' of courtier poets represented by Wyatt and Surrey were generally supportive, we have an ominous lack of evidence for Skelton's good relations with his poetic contemporaries in England a generation earlier.⁵ Skelton's early career parallels that of André, the official poet of Henry's reign, in a number of respects, but neither poet mentions the other, and the 'less well-defined' body of vernacular makers to which Skelton belongs is, in Carlson's eyes, only a group at all in the sense that Skelton, Barclay and Hawes were all 'similarly situated in the Tudor literary system.'⁶ We do not know whether Skelton and Hawes were ever friendly, but Skelton and Barclay engaged in a literary spat over Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe* in the early years of Henry VIII's reign. I will be considering Skelton's relations with contemporary writers connected to the English court in this chapter in an attempt to situate Skelton's own 'social sites' of authorship alongside them.

Skelton's work can also be fruitfully read against the poems of the Scots 'Makars,' particularly William Dunbar (c.1460 -1513 x 30) and Gavin Douglas (c.1476 - 1522). In spite of Skelton's known prejudice against the Scots, some of the areas of overlap and disjunction between their works are worth exploring.⁷ I shall be commenting briefly on Dunbar's flyting with Walter Kennedy in conjunction with *Agenst Garnesche*, and on Douglas' *Palice of Honour* in conjunction with Skelton's *Garlande of Laurell*. What is striking about the work of the Makars is their

⁵ David R. Carlson 'Skelton and Barclay, Medieval and Modern,' *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1.1 (1995) 28 October 2007. <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/01-1/carlskel.html>>.

⁶ Carlson, 'Skelton and Barclay,' 1.

⁷ Further see Gregory Kratzmann, *Anglo-Scottish Literary Relations 1430-1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980) 129-68.

visualisation of a European tradition of poetry, which, unlike the impressions derived from the English poets of this period, clearly extends to their peers in Scotland. This is most memorably articulated in Dunbar's 'I that in Heill Wes and Gladnes,' more commonly known as 'The Lament for the Makars.' In learning to accept the inevitability of his own death, Dunbar lists a number of great men who have already died, and over half the poem is taken up with the men of his own profession. After mentioning the traditional English triad of Chaucer, Lydgate and Gower, Dunbar lists the poets of his own country in more detail, from 'gud Syr Hew of Eglintoun' (53), 'blind Hary' (69) and others to his own contemporaries: Robert Henryson, John Ross, 'Gud gentill Stobo and Quintyne Schaw,' (86) and finally his own flyting-partner, 'Gud Maister Walter Kennedy' (90), then on the point of death.⁸ Such a poem suggests largely supportive relations, or at least the strong identification, of poets in Scotland with their contemporaries at this time, as well as an attempt to preserve their memory as a cohesive body of literary tradition. Skelton's sense of belonging to an English tradition is rather monolithic by contrast. His communion with Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate in the *Garlande of Laurell* occurs in an ideal sphere. Neither Barclay nor Hawes nor men like Andre appear in Skelton's company of laureate poets in the *Garlande of Laurell*, though he does include contemporaries like the French writer, Robert Gaguin.

Even if we see Skelton as an isolated figure not obviously connected to a literary coterie of fellow-poets, we can identify a variety of social groupings which seem to have provided an audience for his poetry from his appeals to particular

⁸ 'I That in Heill Wes and Gladnes,' *The Poems of William Dunbar*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, vol. 1, Association of Scottish Literary Studies 27, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Association of Scottish Literary Studies, 1998) 94-98. All quotations from Dunbar's poems are from this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be cited by line number.

individuals and communities within his work. Closest to a coterie, perhaps, are the 'lettred men' that he addresses in his addition to *Phyllyp Sparowe* (1361) or, similarly, the 'Latin men' of the envoy to the *Garlande of Laurell* (1545). Perhaps these 'Latin men' belonged to the circle of university acquaintances with whom he sometimes dined. Such a group could also have included men like William Ruckshaw, whose authority he refers to in 'Upon the Dolorous Dethe and Muche Lamentable Chaunce of the Mooste Honorable Erle of Northumberlande' (c.1489), or Robert Whittington, who sided with him in the Grammarians' War. Another potential coterie audience for Skelton's poetry exists in the aristocratic gathering of ladies grouped around Elizabeth Howard. This provides a supportive reception for his achievements in the *Garlande of Laurell*, although the view that Skelton represented the Howard faction at court is now out of favour.⁹

Attempts at reconstructing Skelton's readership from the manuscript and print contexts of his work further extend our notions of the kind of readers his first audience might have comprised. As A. S. G Edwards demonstrates, Skelton's decision to publish some poems in manuscript and some in print suggests he had a range of reading communities in mind for his poetry.¹⁰ With the printed poems, especially, it is likely that his use of particular printers at different times was strategic. Similarly, the variety of manuscripts in which his poems are preserved indicate his ability to attract a variety of audiences at different points in his career, ranging from his inclusion alongside William Cornish and William Peeris in BL MS. Royal 18 D II, a lavish compilation owned by the Percy household (Cornish and Peeris, contemporaries of Skelton, are both associated with courtly and noble audiences) to

⁹ Greg Walker, *John Skelton and the Politics of the 1520s*, Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) 5-34.

¹⁰ A. S. G. Edwards, 'Skelton's English Poems in Print and Manuscript,' *Sources, Exemplars and Copy-Texts: Influence and Transmission, Essays from the Lampeter Conference of the Early Book Society*, Lampeter, 1997, ed. William Marx, *Trivium* 31 (1999): 87-100.

the political satires which survive in BL Harley MS. 2252, the commonplace book of the London mercer John Colyns.¹¹ The wildly disparate images of Skelton that emerge after his death reveal just how multi-stratified these reading communities may have been, and his success in reaching a wide audience -- by reputation if not through his poetry -- is attested in folk memories of him as a satirist and a popular jest-book figure.

Dealing with the fragmentary nature of the Skelton tradition (textually, biographically, and critically) is a problem for the Skelton critic, for many different images of the poet are postulated ('learned Skelton,' 'merry Skelton,' 'vicious Skelton,' 'courtly Skelton,' 'popular Skelton,' 'political Skelton,' 'Catholic Skelton,' 'proto-Protestant Skelton,' to name but a few) all of which are, to some degree, merited. Skelton has a foot in many camps -- strategically, I would argue -- because he sees himself as a poet who wishes to operate at the centre of national affairs, to master a wide range of genres and access a variety of influential audiences, while remaining open to the greater audience of posterity. The calling to be a poet is, for Skelton, a sacred charge and public duty. Yet often the poetic strategies he employs seek to isolate a more select or discerning readership among courtiers, university men, city-based intelligentsia and those in aristocratic households: readers who have the education or political knowledge needed to de-code his more complex texts, and whom he addresses specifically in poems like *Speke Parott*. In this respect, many of Skelton's poems do pander to coterie audiences.

¹¹ For a discussion of this manuscript in particular see Carol Meale, 'The Compiler at Work: John Colyns and BL MS Harley 2252,' *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983) 82-103. For a discussion of mercantile literary culture see Carol Meale 'The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye and Mercantile Literary Culture in Late Medieval London,' *London and Europe in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Julia Boffey and Pamela King, Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 9 (London: Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College, U of London, 1995) 181-228.

Skelton's Lettred Men

Skelton is recorded as attending university at Cambridge in 1480, and may also have studied at Oxford between 1480 and 1488. That his social links with Cambridge continued after his period of study is evidenced by his association with two prominent Cambridge men, John Blythe (chancellor of the university and bishop of Salisbury) and John Syclyng (later master of Godshouse). Skelton dined with them both in London in 1495, and with Sycling on a number of occasions in 1501.¹² Skelton mentions his acquaintance with another Cambridge man, William Ruckshaw, at the conclusion of his earliest extant poem, the aforementioned lament for the Earl of Northumberland:

Accipe nunc demum, doctor celeberrime Ruckshaw,
Carmina, de calamo que cecidere meo;
Et quamquam placidis non sunt modulata camenis,
Sunt tamen ex nostro pectore prompta pio.¹³

(Famous Doctor Ruckshaw, receive now at last the songs which have fallen from my pen, and although they are not made musical in sweet poetry they nonetheless come from our dutiful breast.)¹⁴

¹² Maurice Pollet, *John Skelton: Poet of Tudor England*, 1962, trans. John Warrington (London: Dent, 1971) 22-23.

¹³ Scattergood ed., *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, 35.

¹⁴ Scattergood ed., Notes, *John Skelton: The Complete English Poems*, 390. Scattergood's translation here has been amended by Robert H. F. Carver.

Ruckshaw, who had just been installed as succentor at York, was a friend of the Percy family and had been at Cambridge with Skelton in 1480.¹⁵ The Latin address to him at the conclusion of 'On the Dolorous Dethe,' is interesting in terms of content (it is one of the most complimentary of Skelton's personal references) and the way it casts a new light on what has gone before. 'The Dolorous Dethe' is addressed at the outset to his heir, Henry Percy, the fifth Earl of Northumberland, and its declared subject is the untimely death of his father, the fourth Earl, at the hands of Yorkshire rebels. Another court poet, Bernard André, had also produced a poem on the same theme. However, such a formal and occasional poem also provided an opportunity for Skelton to advertise his poetic ambitions, as the second stanza with its address to Clio makes clear, and subsequent stanzas in a similar vein, such as this:

If the hole quere of the Musis nyne
 In me all onely wer sett and comprisyde
 Enbrethed with the blast of influence dyvyne
 As perfightly as koude be thought or devysd;
 To me also all thouthe yt wer promysyde
 Of laureat Phebus holy the eloquence
 All were to litill for his magnyfycence. (155-161)

On a surface level, such a passage offers a familiar rhetorical strategy of praising the departed, yet drawing attention to the poet as the vessel of such praise. From the point of view of Skelton's later obsession with poetic inspiration, however, the desire to become infused with all nine of the Muses at once already hints at the grandiose

¹⁵ Pollet, *John Skelton* 10.

nature of Skelton's poetic ambitions. This poem is simultaneously addressed to the interests of the orphaned Percy, in its sentiments of loss and praise, and in its careful craftsmanship and bid to be considered as a serious poet, to an alternative audience as represented by Ruckshaw (who may, in fact, have taken charge of the letter). The quatrain to Ruckshaw rather suggests that he knew of Skelton's poetic ambitions, and very possibly that Skelton had talked of sending him poetry before.

Skelton also advertises his association with an academic literary community in his contribution to the 'Grammarians' War' in *Speke Parott*. This so-called war was initiated in 1519 with the publication of a new Latin treatise for use in schools. The author of the treatise was William Horman, then head of Eton, and his *Vulgaria* was a departure on the traditional method of teaching Latin as advocated by the established authority, John Stanbridge. Horman advocated a greater emphasis on emulation of the classics and less on prescriptive grammar rules as the best way of learning the language. His text-book was adopted for the curriculum at St. Paul's by its headmaster, William Lily. These men -- situated in the most progressively humanist camp -- were the 'Greeks.' Robert Whittington, a disciple of Stanbridge, was on the side of the 'Trojans' and published his own rival *Vulgaria* in 1520.

At its height, the Grammarians' War was conducted through the medium of literary abuse, in which an epigram from Whittington against Lily was fixed as a gauntlet to the door of St Pauls. Lily and Horman wrote longer works, both entitled *Antibossicon*, attacking Whittington, and Whittington published an *Antilycon* in response. Horman's *Antibossicon* reproduces material from Whittington and various poems belonging to the quarrel, in which the authors represent their opponents as allegorical figures and employ poetry to undermine their academic and literary reputations. These Latin poems, with their self-conscious display of classical learning,

become the means, not just of attacking their opponents, but of advertising the writers' credentials as men of letters in densely woven displays of classical allusion. Skelton took Whittington's part in the quarrel in 1521, criticising the results of the Horman/Lily method of teaching Latin in *Speke Parot*, and may have involved himself in the affair before this since Whittington published an extremely flowery Latin ode in praise of Skelton in 1519 as part of a series of poems in praise of contemporaries, in the same year as Lily published a poem criticising him.¹⁶ What may have begun as a principled disagreement about the teaching methods of Latin grammar, ended as an inglorious literary scrap over academic and literary reputations. The Grammarians' War thus stands in contrast to the larger and far more serious, intellectual war of the Reformation in which writers could be real casualties.

Lily attacked Skelton's vanity and viciousness in a Latin poem, an extract of which is quoted below with the English translation by Bishop Thomas Fuller:

Quid versus trutina meos iniqua

Libras. Dicere vera num licebit

Doctrina tibi dum parari famam

Et doctus fieri studes poeta:¹⁷

(Why are my verses by thee weigh'd

In a false scale? May truth be said?

Whilst thou, to get the more esteem,

A learned Poet fain wouldst seem)¹⁸

¹⁶ This collection was printed as *Opusculum Roberti Whittintoni in Florentissima Oxoniensi Achademia Laureati* (London: De Worde, 1519)

¹⁷ *Critical Heritage* 48.

¹⁸ *Critical Heritage* 48.

Lily picks up on the familiar topic of literary fame, implying that Skelton had criticised his own poetry, and that in engaging in such quarrels he was only seeking more fame for himself. Whittington's poem inverts this criticism, allotting Skelton undying fame in a monologue from Apollo with the Muses in the idealised setting of Parnassus. Here Whittington has the god of poetry praise Skelton as one who sings songs in his praise in a gesture that may refer to his laureate ceremonies: '*canit hic vel carmina cedro / Digna, Palatinis et socianda sacris*' (83-84) (he sings songs worthy of the cedar even, songs to be added to the Palatine rites).¹⁹ Even if the eulogy was no more than a piece of flattery attempting to gain Skelton's backing in the quarrel, however, the imagery it employs shows the degree to which Skelton's own exalted and essentially competitive rhetoric of the poet and poetic fame, as applied to himself, was shared by a fellow Oxonian laureate:

Grande decus nobis addunt sua scripta, linenda
 Auratis, digna ut posteritate, notis;
 Laudiflua excurrit serie sua culta poesis,
 Certatim palmam lectaque verba petunt; (85-88)

(His songs give us [Apollo and the Muses] great glory and should be overlaid with gold, as worthy of posterity. His polished poetry runs in a chain flowing with praise and the selected words seek the palm in rivalry.)

¹⁹ *Critical Heritage*, 50. The translation is taken from the same volume, p. 52.

Elsewhere, Whittington's Apollo echoes Ovid in his command to 'stellify' Skelton: '*Illius ac astris fama perennis eat*' (134) (let his fame be perennial in the stars), pre-empting Skelton's own praise of himself in *The Garlande of Laurell*.²⁰ The poem affords us a further glimpse into how Parnassian rhetoric was used by such men to bolster the image of an idealised literary community -- the humanist 'court rhetorical,' with the dignity it invested in the man of learning. To attribute membership of this community to a writer was simultaneously the highest accolade and a means of proclaiming one's own fitness to access this community, at least by proxy, through judging the fitness of others for it.

Skelton's place in the academic community was already assured through the conferral on him of the title of poet laureate. It is impossible to read Skelton's poetry without noting his insistence on this title, 'the dignity laureate' (100) as he refers to it in 'Agenst Garnesche,' but in actual fact, he was one of many poet laureates of his age. In Skelton's generation, it seems the appellation was mainly thought of as an academic qualification: an honorary title conferred as a mark of achievement in grammar and/or rhetoric. Some confusion of the roles of grammar and rhetoric in the Middle Ages was common, as both were concerned with style and presentation of language, and with using it correctly and effectively.²¹ According to the rhetorician Quintillian (who, interestingly, takes the first place in Skelton's list of great poets in *The Garlande of Laurell*, before Theocritus, Hesiod and Homer), grammar included literary criticism as well as the art of speaking and writing correctly, and rhetoric was the art of speaking well, including the study of literary models. Skelton's laureations at the universities were probably related to his study in one or both disciplines, and

²⁰ *Critical Heritage*, 53

²¹ For a history of rhetoric in the medieval period see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1974).

symptomatic, perhaps, of the growing importance placed on humanist studies in the universities during the latter half of the fifteenth century.

As Nelson concludes, Skelton's garland was most likely to have been viewed by his contemporaries as 'a stamp of excellence in an academic discipline.'²² He suggests that the laureation of poets as poets was not the usual practice at Oxford or Cambridge, although it is not beyond the realms of possibility that an exception may have been made in Skelton's case.²³ However, there was a precedent for scholars of the previously minor faculty of rhetoric being laureated and/or permitted to teach their subjects at a university level in a way that implied their expertise in poetry too, and this is the manner in which the grammarian Robert Whittington seems to have been made poet laureate. Thomas Churchyard's praise of Skelton in 1568 corroborates this: ('Skelton wore the lawrell wreath, / And past in schools, ye knowe').²⁴

Judging from the Oxford records, the laurel was conferred through the fulfilment of some kind of literary commission: the composing of verses, plays, epigrams or the reading of certain works aloud. Skelton earns his in a similar fashion symbolically in *The Garlande of Laurell* by composing a garland of poetry for the ladies who are weaving his own garland or chaplet of laurel for him. This accords with John Selden's ideas about the rites of poet laureate ceremonies in Europe, which also had their own element of process and ritual in which the candidate had symbolically to prove his suitability for the title. In recounting the details of such a ceremony for one Ioannes Paulus Crucius in Strasbourg in 1616, Selden describes how the poet commenced the ceremony by reciting a petitionary epigram asking to have the laurel conferred, after which the presiding Count Palatine gave a speech in

²² William Nelson, *John Skelton. Laureate* (New York: Columbia UP, 1939) 47.

²³ Nelson, 42-7.

²⁴ *Critical Heritage* 58.

praise of the art of poetry.²⁵ The Latin formulae of the conferment are highly stylised, with pre-set parts allowing both the conferring dignitary and the poet himself to be honoured. Crucius recited a poem of three hundred verses, hexameter and pentameter, on a theme of his choosing. He also took an oath of good service to the Emperor and his successors before finally receiving the laurel, which suggests that such a ceremony could also take on a public significance, as it had done for Petrarch. Skelton and Whittington are held up as the most recent examples of English laureates in Selden's history:

John Skelton had that title of Laureat under Henry VII. And in the same time Robert Whitingdon called himself Grammatica magister & Protovates Anglia, inflorentiſſima Oxoniensi Academia Laureatus.²⁶

Whittington, we know, was granted his title from Oxford in 1513. According to the university records, he was presented with a laurel as a result of his years as a scholar and teacher of grammar and rhetoric, on the condition that he compose one hundred verses and he also received a dispensation permitting him to wear a silken hood.²⁷ This invites comparison with Skelton's reference, in his poem 'Calliope,' to the special habit he wore, bearing the legend *Calliope* in golden letters in honour of the muse. However, Skelton's title is given 'under Henry VII' which may suggest that the king had a special hand in his promotion. His famous description of the Oxford conferral in 'Agenst Garnesche' links the ceremony in Oxford with the king's commendation of him:

²⁵ Selden, 403.

²⁶ Selden, 412.

²⁷ Nelson, 43.

A king to me myn habyte gave
 At Oxforth, the universyte
 Avansid I was to that degre;
 By hole consent of theyr senate,
 I was made poete lawreate. (80-84)

We know that Skelton was laureated at three universities quite early in his career, by Oxford (probably in 1488, and no later than 1490), the French university of Louvain (in 1492, according to Whittington) and Cambridge (in 1493, according to the university records). These were marks of distinction. However, Skelton mentions only the Oxford ceremony in 1514, which seems to have been the one that made the greatest impression on him. It was also c.1488 that he entered royal service. If he had been acquainted with the king before his Oxford ceremony, this might place the king's conferring of the 'habit' at the occasion of the ceremony itself, or perhaps Skelton had been taken into royal service after the ceremony, and it was this that had attracted the notice of the monarch.

In the early Tudor period, then, the title of poet laureate can be said to convey an academic, and possibly royal, authority. However, not all those poets who were using the title of poet laureate at the European courts can be identified as graduates who had been distinguished by a special ceremony. Skelton's insistence on his title as an indicator of his own authority as a poet could mean that the honour had made an unusually deep impression on him -- his own private dating system suggests this, or that his ceremony (or ceremonies) had marked him out as specially honoured in this way.²⁸ Such recognition gave poets a mandate for their activities as a clear sign of

²⁸ Pollet, 11.

their acceptance into the *respublica litterarum* by the academic and literary community. In Skelton's case, however, the authority conferred by such a ceremony becomes a symbol of a sacred calling, one whose authority is, ultimately, not located in the authority of any secular community or even the monarch. 'Calliope,' penned sometime after 1512, is quite radical in its answer to the question: 'Why were ye Calliope, embrawdred with letters of golde?'

Calliope.

As ye may se,

Regent is she,

Of poetes al,

Whiche gave to me

The high degre

Laureat to be

Of fame royall;

Whose name enrolde

With silke and golde

Thus for to were.

Of her I holde

And her housholde;

Though I waxe olde

And somdele sere (1-16)

The authority of the king and the academic community is here replaced with that of Calliope, the chief muse associated with epic poetry. Skelton and the other poets are thus retained in her 'servitude' (20) and the conceit derives its force from the idea, suggested by the nature of the garment, of the poet wearing the livery of the Muse. What we know of Skelton's conception of the importance of his role as a poet, however, leaves the poem open to the implication that his chief allegiance is to his own vocation, exemplified by his place in this imaginary household of a monarchical muse rather than one of terrestrial kings. Fuller's account, published in 1662, of the epitaph over the poet's grave, *J. Skeltonus Vates Pierius hic situs est*, (J. Skelton, poet of the Muses, is buried here) further suggests this symbolic allegiance was an important part of his public identity, at least for a posthumous audience.²⁹ Such an exalted community is only surpassed by the communion of God with poets proposed in Skelton's final poem, 'A Replycacioun,' in which he declares that 'God maketh his habytacion / In poetes whiche excelles, / And sojourns with them and dwelles' (376-78), conflating the theological notion of the in-dwelling of God the Holy Spirit with that of poetic inspiration.

Skelton and the Court Poets

Skelton joined the Tudor court in 1488 in an unspecified capacity. Not much is known about his origins before this appointment, although it has been suggested that after his time at Cambridge he was employed in an aristocratic household. He became tutor to Prince Henry, the second son of Henry VII, in 1496 and it was during this period that he also entered holy orders. In 1502 or a little later, Skelton ceased to tutor Henry

²⁹ *Critical Heritage*, 72.

(probably as a result of Prince Arthur's death) and was given the rectorship of Diss in Norfolk. His former pupil, now Henry VIII, acceded to the throne in 1509 and Skelton was among those who sought royal favour back at court in poetic petitions. Whether or not Skelton was actually based at the court after 1509, he was certainly closely involved with it, and as Scattergood notes, his poems from this period take on a more national scope of interest.³⁰

After 1512 Skelton refers to himself as 'Orator Regius' (king's orator) a role he held in common with Bernard André, Giovanni Gigli, and Jean Maillard. A brief look at the careers of some of the continental courtier poets in England proves illuminating. Like Skelton, these men were aligned with the church and universities, dividing their activities between ecclesiastical, academic and courtly spheres. Of the Italians, Giovanni Gigli was a cleric of merchant origin with an Oxford education, who settled in England permanently as the papal collector in 1477. He wrote incidental poetry and some ecclesiastical treatises, and lived in England until 1490 where he was useful to Henry VII as a diplomat and orator. The humanist Pietro Carmeliano claimed the title of poet laureate and resided in England from 1481 where his Latin skills made himself useful as a secretary. He also had some links with Oxford and possibly taught there. He secured a number of benefices, later becoming one of the king's chaplains.³¹

Bernard André's career provides us with a useful comparison to Skelton's. Both had a role as public 'laureate' poets writing on national themes, and both tutored

³⁰ I have drawn on Scattergood's biography of Skelton in the *ODNB* for the biographical material in this paragraph. John Scattergood, 'Skelton, John (c.1460–1529)', *ODNB* 28 October 2007. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/25661>>.

³¹ For the biographical material on André, Gigli and Carmeliano in this paragraph see the following *ODNB* articles: David R. Carlson, 'André, Bernard (c.1450–1522)', *ODNB* 2 May 2008. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/513>> ; J. B. Trapp, 'Gigli, Giovanni (1434–1498)', *ODNB* 2 May 2008 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10670>>; J. B. Trapp, 'Carmeliano, Pietro (c.1451–1527)', *ODNB* 2 May 2008. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4699>>.

sons of Henry VII. André was only a decade older than Skelton (closer to his age, in fact, than Hawes and Barclay who were fourteen and twenty-four years younger respectively). Like Skelton, André was admired by many of his contemporaries, and as a tutor he clearly prided himself on his knowledge of fashionable humanist studies.³² He was also a clergyman, an Augustinian Friar from Toulouse who spent most of his life in England. André wrote history, panegyric poetry and religious lyrics for the Henrican courts, mainly in Latin and a few works in French.³³ He seems to have been recommended to the service of Henry VII by the senior churchman Richard Fox, whom he calls his Maecenas. On paper at least, André occupies a more central role than Skelton, that of personal poet to Henry VII and official chronicler of his reign, leading Greg Walker to speculate that Skelton, failing to elicit an equivalent degree of patronage at court, turned instead to Westminster and London-based communities for support in the early 1500s.³⁴

The openings for a poet-rhetorician at the Tudor court were extremely varied. Such men offered a measure of the court's worth in the eyes of outsiders. They took a prominent role in promoting the fame of the sovereign and his court, providing speeches for diplomatic exchanges with other nations, making entertainment for the sovereign and his courtiers and celebrating state occasions as necessary. This raised the profile of the court poet considerably, as Richard Firth Green argues:

By the end of the fifteenth century the convention of inaugurating diplomatic negotiations with grandiloquent Latin speeches had come to provide in fact yet

³² Further see David R. Carlson, 'Royal Tutors in the Reign of Henry VII,' *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.2 (1991): 253-259.

³³ See David Carlson, 'The writings of Bernard André (c.1450 – c.1522),' *Renaissance Studies: Journal for the Society of Renaissance Studies* 12.2 (1998): 229-50 for a list of André's works and a discussion of them.

³⁴ Walker, *Politics* 35-52.

one more vehicle for expressing the intense competition between courts – a situation which gave literary men their first genuine professional foothold in the household hierarchy.³⁵

A court poet might compose letters, broadsides, pleasantries and scholarly treatises as the king commanded. Such men would also be expected to concoct and interpret polished Latin speeches at diplomatic functions, and reply to challenges ‘off the cuff’ in Latin when need be. One such incident in which some of these poets were involved (Skelton himself may also have been, and would certainly have heard about it) evinces the ways in which the struggle for diplomatic and literary prestige overlapped in this period. In the summer of 1489 Robert Gaguin, a poet-scholar and ambassador from France, arrived at Henry VII’s court hoping to negotiate a peace treaty with England. When he failed in his commission, he wrote a bitter satire in Latin against the king. This was answered, also in Latin, by Giovanni Gigli, Petro Carmeliano, Cornelio Vitelli and others. Bernard André recounts this incident at some length in his history of Henry VII’s reign, describing the satires of both the Italians before recounting how:

Et nos quoque, qui de grege poetarum sumus, non paucos ut illi, sed pene ducentos in illum debacchati sumus, quippe nil audacius est malo poeta.³⁶

(We ourselves also, being sealed of the poets’ tribe, raved upon the fellow,

³⁵ Green, *Poets* 174.

³⁶ Bernard André, *Historia Regis Henrici Septimi*, ed. James Gairdner, *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores or Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland During the Middle Ages* 10 (London, 1858) 57.

not (as they) in a few lines, but in almost two hundred: truly there is nothing bolder than a bad poet!)"³⁷

André takes care to include excerpts of some of the poems in the history, he says, for remembrance or rather ostentation's sake.³⁸ H.L.R. Edwards notes that other parts of this exchange (Pietro Carmeliano's response, Gaguin's original lines and Giovanni Gigli's response) are also preserved in Cambridge Trinity College MS O.2.53.³⁹ Interestingly, as Edwards notes, 'the quarrel did not long survive its occasion.'⁴⁰ Any ill-feeling occasioned by this skirmish was quickly dispersed, judging by Skelton's straightforward reference to Gaguin as a historian in *Why Come Ye Not To Court?* and the complimentary lines to Carmeliano which Gaguin published in 1498.⁴¹ The situation is more complicated with regard to Vitelli, a former friend turned rival of Gaguin's, who had recently arrived in England and was not an established poet at Henry's court. For the participants, however, it seems this public, poetic quarrel was viewed largely as an opportunity for self-display.

Several interesting points emerge here. The first, drawn from André's account, is the strong sense of community that existed amongst Henry's court-poets at that time. Edwards' translation, 'we ourselves...being sealed of the poets' tribe,' invests the rhetoric with a rather Jonsonian spin.⁴² The precise phrase used by André is *qui de grege poetarum sumus* (we who are of the flock, or sect, of poets), which hints at a more general conception of a group identity shared by professional poets.⁴³ Further,

³⁷ This translation is from H. L. R. Edwards, 'Robert Gaguin and the English Poets,' *MLR* 32 (1937): 431.

³⁸ Edwards, 'Gaguin,' 431. André, *Historia* 57.

³⁹ Edwards, 'Gaguin,' 432.

⁴⁰ Edwards, 'Gaguin,' 434.

⁴¹ Edwards, 'Gaguin,' 434.

⁴² It was Jonson who would later develop the notion of being 'sealed of the tribe of Ben.' Further see Conclusion, p. 385.

⁴³ André, *Historia* 44.

the prestige of the poet is as important as that of his patron. André's desire to preserve the ephemeral poetry that arose from this impromptu literary skirmish is presented as a means of increasing the fame of the poets themselves. André also employs the phrase *debacchati sumus* here: this likens the poets to frenzied *Bacchae* and suggests, perhaps, their possession by divine forces of chaos and inspiration. Finally, we are not told that this community includes Skelton because André never refers to him. This could be interpreted as a deliberate snub. Skelton may also have composed a satire against Gaguin at this time; he certainly attacked Gaguin at some point in his career judging from the presence in *The Garlande* of a work entitled 'The Recule Against Gaguyne of the Frensche Nacyoun' (although Carlson argues that this work was in fact composed later in response to Gaguin's history).⁴⁴ Neither Skelton nor his poem are mentioned in the extracts from the poets in André's memoir, or in the pieces preserved in the Cambridge manuscript. At that time, however, Skelton was still a newcomer to the court, having been there less than a year, so he probably remained on the periphery of the established circle of older, foreign poets. Greg Walker goes even further in suggesting that, 'a newly arrived poet may have encountered some animosity from this 'closed shop' of continental *literati*.'⁴⁵ The continental poets were not bound to embrace Skelton into their fold, especially if they perceived his background to be alien to theirs. In fact, Skelton may well have been seen as a threat to these established poets by seeking to move in their milieu as a poet of public events, and of academic and clerical culture.

A humorous, but subtly disturbing fable of the newcomer at court is found in Skelton's first poem to appear on the open market: *The Bowge of Court*. This poem, printed by Wynken de Worde in 1499, and possibly written in 1498, although

⁴⁴ David Carlson, 'Politicizing Tudor Court Literature: Gaguin's Embassy and Henry VII's Humanists' Response,' *Studies in Philology* 85.3 (1988): 287-88, n. 29.

⁴⁵ Walker, *Politics* 38.

estimates of its composition vary, follows the fortunes of an aspiring courtier called Drede, who -- like Skelton -- appears to be a bookish man. As such, he fails to fit in with the lifestyles and attitudes of the other characters at court. One of the dissolute courtiers, Ryote, reproaches him for not making merry amongst the common crowd of courtiers 'as other felowes done' (380) and advises him not to 'studye or muse on the mone' (383). The more sinister Dyssimulation tells him:

I knowe your vertu and your lytterkture
 By that lytel connyng that I have.
 Ye be malygned sore, I you ensure,
 But ye have crafte your selfe alwaye to save. (449-453)

Interestingly, *vertu* (power) and learning/literature are allied in Dyssimulation's speech. It is the dreamer's craft (associated with his book-learning) that seems the more certain definition of his creative power: a power to defend himself against his detractors. For Griffiths, 'Drede's failure as a poet [...] may be attributed to his failure as a courtier,' that is, his failure to interpret, and employ, the double-language of the court effectively.⁴⁶ If this is true, it is where Skelton and Drede part company, for the publication of *The Bowge of Court* represents, as A. S. G. Edwards notes, a new trend in printing as 'the first appearance in print of any substantial poem by a living English poet,' occurring ten years before De Worde's decision to publish another contemporary and court-based poet, Stephen Hawes.⁴⁷ Whereas the *Speculum Principis* composed by Skelton for Prince Henry was reserved for a limited circulation in manuscript form, Skelton seems to have used De Worde's services to

⁴⁶ Griffiths, 61.

⁴⁷ A. S. G. Edwards, 'From Manuscript to Print: Wynkyn de Worde and the Printing of Contemporary Poetry,' *Gutenberg-Yahrbuch* 66 (1991): 143-44.

publish the *Bowge* in order to access a wider market from Westminster. De Worde's willingness to take on this new project, probably at Skelton's prompting, stands in sharp contrast to his more conservative ventures in printing prior to this, and would indicate that Skelton's reputation as both a courtier and a man of letters was established enough to assure him of a readership within these circles (as, indeed, the reprinting of the *Bowge* in 1510 suggests).

At about the same time, Caxton used Skelton's name to help market his *Eneydos*. For Caxton, Skelton's laureate status is an indicator of his academic authority. Here Skelton is felt to be a fitting dedicatee of this work in view of its target market of learned, genteel and courtly readers, as Caxton's preface makes clear:

[...] this booke is not for euery rude and vnconnyng man to see but to clerkys and very gentylmen that vnderstande gentylnes and scyence [...]. I knowleche myselfe ignorant of connyng to enpryse on me so hie and noble a werke but I praye mayster Iohn Skelton, late created poete laureate in the vnversite of oxenforde, to ouersee and correcte this sayd booke, [...] For hym, I knowe for suffycyent to expowne and englysshe euery dyffyculte that is therin. For he hath late translated the epystlys of Tully and the boke of dyodorus syculus, and diuerse other werkes oute of latyn in-to englysshe, [...] in polysshed and ornate termes craftely, as he that hath redde vyrgyle, ouyde, tullye, and all the other noble poetes and oratours to me vnknownen: And also he hath redde the ix muses, and vnderstande theyr musicalle scyences, [...] I suppose he hath

dronken of Elycons well. Then I praye hym, & suche other, to correcte, adde
or mynysshe where as he or they shall fynde faulte.⁴⁸

In his fulsome praise of Skelton, and polite protestations of his own 'unconnyng', Caxton demonstrates his conversance with the language of aureate and laureate poetics, of the academic credentials thought necessary for the enterprise of translation, and of the close links between poetry and oratory in contemporary humanist rhetorical training. The preface also suggests the strong influence of a courtly and educated literary milieu on the kind of audience Caxton was hoping to attract. Seth Lerer reads the preface's allusion to 'suche other' as referring to the continental laureates, which might indicate that, almost ten years later, Skelton had indeed become a member -- at least in the eyes of men like Caxton -- of their *grex poetarum*.⁴⁹ The manuscript evidence certainly suggests that Skelton had gained a readership in courtly circles by this time, and perhaps had friends among the musicians there: some of his lyrics are found in BL MS. Add. 5465, a collection of courtly songs owned by Dr Robert Fayrfax, a gentleman of the Chapel Royal and organist of St. Albans, and another gentleman of the Chapel, Robert Pen, owned a copy of Skelton's translation of Diodorus Siculus.⁵⁰ If Caxton wanted to include the other laureate poets at court among his dedicatees, however, we might ask why he singles Skelton out for mention and not the others? One possible answer is that the continental poets were not, as Skelton, interested in English as a literary medium. Another is that Caxton did not

⁴⁸ William Caxton, *Caxton's Eneydos, 1490: English from the French Liure des Eneydes, 1483*, ed. [M.] T. Culley and F. J. Furnivall, EETS es 57 (London: Trübner, 1890) 3-4.

⁴⁹ Seth Lerer, 'William Caxton,' *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace, New Cambridge History of English Literature Ser. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 737.

⁵⁰ John Scattergood, 'The London Manuscripts of John Skelton's Poems,' *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts: Essays Celebrating the Publication of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. York Manuscripts Conferences: Proceedings Series, vol 2. ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991) 174.

know these men well enough to hazard declaring them the special protectors of his book, but that he had some personal knowledge of, or acquaintance with, Skelton which made him believe he would receive both the compliments and the association favourably. Either way, it suggests the connection, or at least attraction, of Skelton to a Westminster-based book merchant and litterateur like Caxton with links to the court and the city.

In the eyes of posterity, the brilliance of younger humanists like Thomas More and John Colet would eclipse the more modest achievements of André and the Italian poets at Henry VII's court. However, it was the vernacular writers of the period, Hawes, Barclay and Skelton, who were continuing the Chaucerian-cum-Lydgatian tradition more self-consciously and seeking, at least at the beginning of their careers, recognition of their literary achievements at court. Hawes and Skelton never allude to each other directly in their writings, although they must have known of each other. Spearing draws attention to similarities in their work, especially their penchant for dark allegories.⁵¹ However, this need not set Hawes and Skelton apart from other Henrican authors; in many key works of the period, strategies of allegorical obscurity or rhetorical playfulness may be deliberately employed to diffuse an underlying seriousness of moral or political purpose (as with More's *Utopia* or Erasmus' *Encomium Moriae*) and were recognised, both by their authors and contemporaries, to conceal deeper meanings.

Hawes' position as a gentleman of the chamber may have made him more of an insider at court, and in some ways, he is perhaps a more straightforwardly courtly poet, but it is notable that he, too, shared Skelton's sense of victimisation by certain

⁵¹ Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance* 260.

sections of his readership: this sense emerges in the *Conforte of Lovers* (c.1510/11) in comments that Hawes' work has been deemed threatening by some, and that his writing-hand has been bound 'thre yeres' (135), a narrative of personal crisis that remains obscure.⁵² How far Skelton viewed himself as a court-poet is a matter of conjecture. The tenor of poems like the *Bowge*, along with satires like *Against a Comely Coystrowne*, may suggest that he experienced the court as a place of intrigue and personal friction. However, as Colin Burrow suggests this was probably the case for all writers associated with the court in this period, and in fact, 'no Tudor writer felt entirely on the inside of the court, largely because there may well have been no inside on which to be: early Tudor politics existed as flux, negotiation and gossip.'⁵³

Gluck and Morgan discuss the possibility that Skelton may have been among Hawes' rivals at court.⁵⁴ A cryptic comment in the *Conforte of Louers*, occurring in the context of a discussion of Amour's/Hawes' unnamed enemies, has been taken to allude to Skelton's poem: 'Surely I thynke I suffred well the phyppe, [sparrow] / The nette also dydde teche me on the waye' (890-91). Barclay's objections to *Phyllyp Sparowe* in 1509 and Skelton's rejoinder to criticisms of it in a later version of the same poem date to roughly the same period as the composition of the *Conforte*, which, if we take Hawes' reference to 'suffer[ing] well the phyppe' (itself a cryptic phrase) as a reference to *Phyllyp Sparowe* may suggest a contemporary furore over the poem within the literary community. However, the meaning of this passage, if it does allude to relationships with other writers and their works, is obscure, and further

⁵² Stephen Hawes, *Stephen Hawes: The Minor Poems*, ed. Florence W. Gluck and Alice. B. Morgan (London: Oxford UP, 1974) 97. Quotations from Hawes' minor poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

⁵³ Colin Burrow, 'The Experience of Exclusion: Literature and Politics in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII,' *Cambridge History of English Medieval Literature*, ed. Wallace, 795.

⁵⁴ *Minor Poems*, ed. Gluck and Morgan, 160-162.

complicated by the fact that Amour compares his own position to that of a bird trapped in a net in subsequent stanzas.

Gluck and Morgan also find verbal parallels between Hawes' *Pastime of Pleasure* and Skelton's *Phyllyp Sparowe* (both composed c.1505 or a little later) that may suggest 'a teasing animosity' between the two poets.⁵⁵ Yet it is not clear whether either of these parallels, in which Skelton briefly echoes first a phrase and then two lines of Hawes' in his poem, are meant to mock Hawes as they suggest or whether they simply demonstrate Skelton's familiarity with his writing. Given the ambiguity of these hints and borrowings, and in the absence of direct reference to Skelton by Hawes and vice versa, attempts to impose a narrative of rivalry on their relationship may reflect a desire to bracket Hawes as another of Skelton's literary adversaries. Other verbal parallels between the two poets might, in fact, be read more sympathetically. For example, Drede, in *The Bowge*, begins by:

[...] callynge to mynde the great auctoryte
 Of poetes olde, whyche, full craftely,
 Under as coverte termes as coude be
 Can touche a troughte and cloke it subtylly
 Wyth fresshe utterance full sentencyously (8-12)

Hawes, in the prohem to the *Conforte of Louers*, opens with much the same assertion:

The gentyll poetes vnder cloudy fygures
 Do touche a trouth and cloke it subtylly

⁵⁵ *Minor Poems*, ed. Gluck and Morgan, 161.

Harde is to construe poetycall scryptures

They are so fayned & made sentencyously (1-4)

Although this idea is an established commonplace with Hawes (see, for example, *The Pastime of Pleasure*; 36-56) his choice to place his declaration of poetic subtlety at the start of his dream vision in terms that echo those of Skelton's earlier dream vision (which is also about enemies at court) is striking, and may suggest that he had Skelton's *Bowge* in mind when writing.⁵⁶

Both Hawes and Barclay model their literary careers, at least to some degree, on the example of Lydgate. For Hawes, this involves a dedication to a literary community of the past: Lydgate chiefly, but also Chaucer and Gower. At the same time that he declares himself disciple of Lydgate, Hawes speaks slightly of contemporary poets attempting to win fame for themselves:

None fyth his [Lydgate's] tyme art wolde succede

After theyr deth to haue fame for theyr mede

But many a one is ryght well experte

In this connyng but vpon auctoryte

They fayne no fables pleasaunt and couerte

But spend theyr tyme in vaynfull vanyte

Makyng balades of feruent amyte

As gefstes and tryfles without fruytfulnes [...] (1385-1392)

⁵⁶ Stephen Hawes, *The Pastime of Pleasure*, ed. William Edward Mead, EETS os 173 (London: Oxford UP, 1928) 6. References to this poem will be to this edition and will be cited by line number.

Although this passage need not have been intended for Skelton in particular, it is interesting that Skelton goes to some length to create a role for himself as a writer of jests and trifles, exactly the kind of writer whom Hawes (and also Barclay) criticise ('Elynour Rummyng', for example, is described as a 'gest'; 621). In the list of Skelton's works in the *Garlande of Laurell*, humorous pieces feature equally alongside the serious, and are said to require skill: 'To make suche trifels it asketh sum konnyng / In honest myrth' (1235-36). Nelson sees this as a rejoinder to Barclay's comments about the false 'cunnyng' of 'iests' like *Phyllyp Sparowe*; however, as there is no direct reference to Barclay it could just as well have been a rejoinder to Hawes' comments in the *Pastime* about the 'connyng' of 'gefstes and tryfles without fruytfulnes.'

In naming Lydgate as his master in *The Pastime of Pleasure*, Hawes seeks '[...] his name to magnify / With suche lytell bokes' (1396-7). Barclay seeks rather to magnify 'God omnipotent,' (Prologue to the *Eclogues*, 122) however his status as a Benedictine, had, as Eleanor Hammond points out, put him in the way of inheriting Lydgate's role at court.⁵⁷ When supervising preparations for 'The Field of the Cloth of Gold' in 1520, Sir Nicholas Vaux wrote to Wolsey to recommend that Master Barclay, the 'black monk' and poet 'devise histories and convenient raisons to flourishe the buildings and banquet house withal.'⁵⁸ The pattern of Barclay's life as a writer after he became a monk in 1513 suggests a close correspondence with Lydgate's. While attached to the priory of Ely Cathedral, Barclay wrote prolifically for particular benefactors or the religious community itself, including translations of

⁵⁷ Alexander Barclay, *The Eclogues of Alexander Barclay*, ed. Beatrice White EETS os 175 (London: OUP, 1928) 4. All references to the *Eclogues* will be to this edition and will be cited by line number.

⁵⁸ Hammond ed., *English Verse* 295.

works of history, saints' lives, and the *Mirror of Good Manners* (1518).⁵⁹ Skelton's relationship to Lydgate is complex. On the one hand, he quickly abandoned the modesty topos employed by his English predecessor, but he evinces a similar generic range and social versatility in his literary career as a whole -- more so than Barclay and Hawes. In *Phyllyp Sparowe*, his Jane Scrope suggests that Lydgate is diffuse and writes 'to haute' (812) but her views in other respects are clearly intended as a subject for comedy. Nigel Mortimer believes that Skelton 'cruelly parodies [Lydgate's] more encrusted aureation,' in the *Garlande of Laurell*, but this seems ambiguous.⁶⁰ While there may be some humour intended in Skelton's portrait of Lydgate, he is still accorded respect in an English pantheon of great predecessors alongside Chaucer and Gower.

Skelton's altercation with Barclay is interesting given that he had much in common with Barclay as a fellow cleric, scholar, and teacher. Their contemporary, Henry Bradshaw (d. 1513), another Benedictine monk in Cheshire, fails to register the quarrel at all when listing Barclay and Skelton alongside Lydgate and Chaucer in his *Life of St. Radegund*.⁶¹ Similarly, in *The Life of St. Werburge of Chester* he submits his book:

To maister Chaucer and Ludgate sententious

Also to preignaunt Barkley now being religious

To inuentione Skelton and poet laureate⁶²

⁵⁹ For further discussion of Barclay's life and literary output see Nicholas Orme, 'Barclay, Alexander (c.1484–1552),' *DNB*. 28 October 2007. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1337>>.

⁶⁰ Mortimer, 6.

⁶¹ *Critical Heritage* 48.

⁶² *Critical Heritage* 47.

There is no hint of a quarrel between Skelton and Barclay here, but Bradshaw's phraseology does suggest some differences between the two men in the eyes of their primary audience. He draws particular attention to Barclay's recent choice to join the Benedictines, and while he praises both writers, clearly sees them as having different merits. Whereas Barclay is 'preignaunt' (weighty, cogent and convincing), Skelton is 'eloquent' and 'inventive' (resourceful in his treatment of his subject matter). He is also singled out by his title of poet laureate: more confirmation that the title was an aspect of Skelton's identity for contemporary readers.

Barclay's disapproval of Skelton has been inferred from certain passages in his *Shyp of Folys* (c.1509) and his *Eclogues* (c. 1513-14), and John Bale's mention of a non-surviving work, *Contra Skeltonum*, which, if it was written, suggests the quarrel with Skelton had solidified into a serious dispute.⁶³ It is in the *Eclogues* that Barclay sets out his own poetic manifesto -- a creed which seems to mould itself in opposition to contemporary court poets. Barclay's fourth eclogue (based on the fifth eclogue of Baptista Mantuanus) addresses issues of literary patronage in a dialogue entitled: 'Codrus and Minalcas, treating of the behauour of Riche men agaynst poets,' where Minalcas represents the voice of the talented, but impoverished artist pleading for a just reward and a place at court. Barclay's poem attacks the envious courtiers and hangers-on who drive the good poets away from the court, leaving the field for bad ones. Barclay identifies such corrupt or 'rascolde' poets, as a 'shamful rable' of foolish prince-pleasers:

And to what vices that princes moste intende,

Those dare these fooles solemnize and commende.

⁶³ John Bale, *Index Britanniae Scriptorum*, ed. R. L. Poole and Mary Bateson, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) 19. Bale's list was composed between 1549 and 1557.

Then is he decked as Poete laureate,
 When stinking Thais made him her graduate.
 When Muses rested, she did her season note,
 And she with Bacchus her camous did promote:
 Such rascolde drames promoted by Thais,
 Bacchus, Licoris, or yet by Testalis,
 Or by suche other newe forged Muses nine
 Thinke in their mindes for to haue wit diuine.
 They laude their verses, they boast, they vaunt and iet,
 Though all their cunning be scantly worth a pet.
 If they haue smelled the artes triniall
 They count them Poetes hye and heroicall. (IV: 683-96)

Nelson argued that Barclay expanded on this passage in such a way as to direct a personal animosity at Skelton, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the rather transparent pursuit of literary fame evidenced by André and the courtier-poets in the Gaguin anecdote and by Skelton in a number of places could have drawn this kind of criticism -- an attack that some might argue was warranted: an unsympathetic reading of Skelton's poetic manifesto would probably interpret his impulse towards self-promotion along these lines.⁶⁴ There is also some correspondence with Skelton's academic career in the mention of certain 'drames' being 'decked' as poet laureate, and made a graduate by Thais (who, in this context, can be read as a symbol for Oxford or Cambridge) and in the contempt expressed for those who have dabbled in the 'artes triniall'. Barclay also includes a separate section towards the end of the

⁶⁴ Nelson, 143.

fourth eclogue, the song of the poet Minalcas describing a tower or castle of 'virtue and honour' (849) in which great men are enshrined. We might expect this company to feature literary heroes, as in Skelton's palace of Fame in the *Garlande of Laurell*, Chaucer's *House of Fame* or Gavin Douglas' *Palice of Honour*, but the only laureates here are those who have performed acts of chivalry on the battlefield (rewarded for their 'marciall actes with crownes laureate'; 862) especially Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, not men famed for poetry. In the *Shyp of Folyes*, Barclay takes up Dunbar's theme of the death of the makar in a personal envoy on the inevitability of death:

Where ar the Phylosophers and Poetis Lawreat
The Great Grammaryens and pleasant oratours.
Ar they nat dede? [...] ⁶⁵

As in Dunbar's list, the poets are mentioned last (and after a list of kings and conquerors), but Barclay does not demonstrate Dunbar's sense of kinship with a native poetic community, English or Scottish. ⁶⁶

In considering the Skelton and Barclay quarrel, scholars have, to date, focussed on which of the two poets was the more progressive and which the more backward in their relationship to humanist culture. ⁶⁷ Barclay is not expressly anti-humanist, but, like Lydgate, his enthusiasm for classical literature is held in balance with his duty to God. Barclay develops his own persona as a poet in the prologue to the eclogues, a role constructed in implicit contrast with Skelton's. In the guise of the

⁶⁵ Sebastian Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, trans. Alexander Barclay, ed. T. H. Jamieson, vol 1, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Paterson; London: Sotheran, 1874) 270. Punctuation mine. The work was originally printed as *The Shyp of Folyes of the World* (London: Pynson, 1509).

⁶⁶ Barclay may, in fact, have been Scottish himself although he spent his adult life in England. Further see n. 59.

⁶⁷ Further see Carlson, 'Skelton and Barclay,' 1-17.

plain or rural man, he claims that he is writing from the desire to reprove moral faults, albeit in less exalted terms than some of the other poets:

No name I chalenge of Poete laureate.
 That name vnto them is mete and doth agree
 Which writeth matters with curiositee.
 Mine habite blacke accordeth not with grene,
 Blacke betokened death as it is dayly sene,
 The grene is pleasour, freshe lust and iolite,
 These two in nature hath grete diuersite.
 Then who would ascribe, except he were a foole,
 The pleasaunt laurer vnto the mourning cowle.
 Another reward abideth my labour,
 The glorious sight of God my sauour
 Which is chiefe shepheard and head of other all,
 To him for succour in this my worke I call,
 And not on Clio nor olde Melpomene. (Prol. 104-17)

Barclay's view of poet laureates here is more ambivalent. Perhaps disingenuously, he associates them with rhetorical skill -- more skill than he has -- but there is a definite suggestion that the values of the 'pleasaunt laurer' are secular, and therefore inferior to those professed by the sober Christian. Barclay, like Lydgate, is a black poet in orders, which makes Skelton a 'pleasaunt,' or frivolous, green one. The contrast is made explicit in Lydgate's reference to his attire in the *Siege of Thebes*: 'a cope of

blak and not of grene' (73). For Barclay, 'these two in nature hath grete diversite' and can never be reconciled.

Barclay does not object to lust and jollity *per se* as a mode of literature (he notes earlier that wise poets 'to sharpe and proue their wit, / in homely iestes wrote many a mery fit'; Prol. 15-16), but jests are considered to be the lower mode of art, and compared negatively to poems 'of weyght and grauitie' (18). 'Jest' itself is an ambivalent term for Barclay. *Phyllp Sparowe* evidently offended his sense of propriety enough for him to mention the poem by name at the close of his *Ship of Fools* (a work he expanded from Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff*) as part of 'A brefe addicion' concerning some 'newe Folys.' Here he juxtaposes jests with wanton and vicious impulses, epitomised for him in Skelton's poem:

I wryte no Iest ne tale of Robyn hode
 Nor sawe no sparcles ne sede of vyciousnes
 Wyse men loue vertue, wylde people wantones
 It longeth nat to my scyence nor cunnyng
 For Phylp the Sparowe the Dirige to synge.⁶⁸

Barclay seems rather disingenuous here in protesting that such jests are too cunning for his skill (in the *Eclogues*, his position was almost the opposite). The implication is that even if he had the skill, he wouldn't choose to employ it in *that* way.

Skelton's reaction to some of the criticism against *Phyllp Sparowe* can be inferred from his defensive addition to the poem in which he again accepts the role of jester, but places his critics as inferior craftsmen (although he does not mention

⁶⁸ *The Ship of Fools*, vol. 2, 331.

Barclay by name), and converts this attack into material for a defence of his own attitude. Critics of the poem, he intimates, take life too seriously, and are only jealous because they have no skill to compose such works themselves:

The gyse now a dayes
 Of some jangelynge jayes
 Is to discommende
 That they cannot amend,
 Though they wold spend
 All the wyttes they have.
 What ayle them to deprave
 Phillip Sparowes grave?
 His Dirige, her commendacyon
 Can be no derogacyon,
 But myrth and consolacyon (1268-1278)

Two lines of attack are being pursued here. First, contempt is expressed for those perceived to be lesser talents: if these critics cannot 'amend' such poetry for themselves, they have no right to criticise. The custom of the lesser poet offering his book to the correction and protection of a greater talent is thus inverted in Skelton's dealings with his critics. Second, Skelton makes an appeal to humour, seeking to establish himself as the poet of mirth and contentment. The commendation of Jane Scrope is presented as 'no derogacyoun, but myrth and consolacyon.' This may have been a genuine, temperamental difference between Skelton and Barclay in which the latter disapproved of what the former believed to be good-natured ribaldry. This is

easier to imagine when we reflect that Barclay also refused a request from a patron, Sir Giles Alington, that he make an abridged amendment of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* on account of the 'wantonnes' of some of its passages, which, Barclay says, some readers would feel was unfitting to his age and status as a Benedictine monk.⁶⁹

On the face of it, there seems to be more evidence for Skelton's adverse relations with contemporary literati than supportive ones. However, it is important to situate Skelton within a culture of public display, in which aggressive and defensive modes of discourse frequently characterise relations between writers, both in the 'solely' literary and in the religious, academic and political spheres (spheres which, indeed, blend into each other). A fashion for abusing one's poetic contemporaries is evident in the literature of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and could be considered a corollary to the increasing prestige of humanist writers and poets in the European courts, and their growing preoccupation with the idea of literary fame, also present in the work of English writers like Hawes and Skelton. These quarrels were not limited to differences of taste and judgement, or even to the naming and shaming of awkward Latin users, and they do not accord with the notion of 'polite' letters. The spectacularly vicious literary quarrel between the humanists Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo Valla in the mid-fifteenth century was famed throughout Europe; for example, a caricature of Poggio appears in the company of poets in Gavin Douglas' *Palice of Honour*, standing 'with mony gym and grone / On Laurence Valla spyttand and cryand 'Fy!' (1232-3).⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Alexander Barclay, *The Mirour of Good Maners*, The Spenser Society 38. Burt Franklin Research & Source Works Ser. 150 (1570; New York: Burt Franklin, 1967) 3. The passage concerning Gower has also been printed in Heinrich Spies, 'Goweriana,' *Englische Studien* 34 (1906): 172.

⁷⁰ Gavin Douglas, 'Palice of Honour,' *The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas*, ed. Priscilla Bawcutt, 2nd ed, STSS 5.2 (Chippenhams: Rowe, 2003) 1-134. All quotations from this poem are from this edition and will be cited by line number.

In keeping with the publicly adversarial nature of this poetic culture a significant number of Skelton's poems are constructed *against* someone or something: Dundas, Garnesche, Gaguin, the Scots, heresy, 'a comely coystrowne,' or the more vaguely construed 'venemous tongues' at court. The degree of seriousness in some of these exchanges can be difficult to gauge; agonism and antagonism in early modern literary relations can be closely knit. On the one hand, apparently hostile antagonism can exist as part of more impersonal satirical strategy, and should not necessarily be taken to signify deep or lasting animosity. On the other, the performance of rhetoric is often linked to the performance of honour (both of a man of letters and his patrons) in a public context, and as such may impact on lived realities, both personal and political. Our reading of the notorious anti-Wolsey poems of the early 1520s, for example, is complicated by the apparent shift of allegiance to Wolsey in 1523. Was Skelton's allegiance bought, or indeed compelled, by Wolsey at this time, or should we read both the former animosity and subsequent flattery as part of a complex rhetorical strategy on the poet's part? The chance provided by a literary or political quarrel to perform before others, and win fame, might supersede any real hostility (as in the case of the Gaguin episode in Henry VII's court) or, on the other hand, might further inflame it (as in the example of the Grammarians' War). The performative nature of these literary quarrels gives them their own logic, in which an element of game is clearly evident. Stanley Fish has argued that poems like 'Agenst Garnesche' and 'Against Dundas' present 'a display of rhetorical (or vituperative) virtuosity for its own sake.'⁷¹ Such displays are frequently linked to the notion of winning fame, and so some element of poetic rivalry and gamesmanship often creeps in as a corollary to that. In this respect Skelton can be viewed as a writer firmly embedded in

⁷¹ Stanley Fish, *John Skelton's Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1965) 208.

the wider literary community of his time with its alternately aggressive and defensive, rhetorical and ludic, modes of public discourse.

Skelton's place within this literary culture can also be evaluated in the light of his flyting 'Agenst Garnesche.' -- a formal contest of abuse in which two poets attacked each other in verse.⁷² The rules of flyting remain vague, but in the surviving examples, two poets attack each other in verse in successive rounds of combat, and may also have seconds supporting them as in non-verbal duels. The number of rounds - if they were fixed - is not certain, but the general pattern of flytings seem to have been characterised by certain features such as the formal naming of the opponent, of calling him out and voicing the challenge formally, and then the main body of the attack, a longer more developed battery of invective. Skelton's opponent, Christopher Garnesche, had been made a gentleman usher of Henry VIII's court in 1509, where he quickly rose to become a favourite and was made a knight during Henry's invasion of France in 1513 just before the poem was written. In Skelton's case, the poet continually draws attention to the flyting with Garnesche as an exchange of letters and bills. Unfortunately Garnesche's part in the exchange has been lost so we continually have to guess the contents of his broadsides from Skelton's. We do not know whether Garnesche was a poet himself, and Skelton suggests at one point that someone else -- maybe his second -- was writing his exchanges in the flyting for him, although this could have been part of Skelton's defamatory strategy.

The flyting was the natural home for obscenity, for earthy and bodily humour. The abuse it employed could be personal in the extreme: a poet's appearance, morals, family history and social background were frequent targets, not just the disparagement of his skill as a poet -- although that, too, was important. From the point of view of

⁷² See also Chapter One, pp. 101-02.

the audience, it was better if the poets did not spend all their ammunition at once, but started slowly, building up to a climax of derision. The best surviving example, 'The Flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy,' was composed sometime between the 1490s and 1505. It is uncertain whether Dunbar and Kennedy's flyting was actually performed before James IV, or took place as an exchange of broadsides (Kennedy refers to Dunbar's 'rowis' (rolls of paper or parchment) when returning his challenge (32), but this could signify the initial, formal, part of the challenge). The text of the flyting was first printed in 1508, and Kratzmann has argued that Skelton may have had access to one of these copies during his composition of 'Agenst Garnesche' (c.1514).⁷³ As only Skelton's contributions to this quarrel survive, it is worth analysing the Dunbar and Kennedy flyting for comparative purposes.

Dunbar's flyting opens by asking his second, John Ross, to note the existence of a work by Kennedy and his second, Quentin, in which they have allegedly praised themselves too highly ('thame self aboif the sternis styld'; 3). Kennedy accepts the challenge, turning the tables on Dunbar by accusing *him* of presumption, and solidifying his own challenge with a volley of insults. This initial exchange sets the scene for the flyting proper: two longer exchanges where each poet undermines the other's reputations in sallies of technically accomplished verse. The flyting is unashamedly personal and draws on regional rivalries to involve its audience. Dunbar identifies Kennedy as a highland vagabond and a bard, the impoverished, thieving yokel from the highlands. Kennedy in his turn attacks Dunbar's family origins, associating him with the earl of March, an infamous turncoat and achieves the crucial last word as the final speaker in the exchange.

⁷³ Kratzmann, 153.

In analysing the language of these exchanges, we can see how the flyting is a performative game with its own logic, in which the tone and scope of the rhetoric employed must be matched and mastered. Although Dunbar and Kennedy's flyting is composed in the 'low style' fitting to a brawl, both poets talk at some length about the art of poetry in a manner which places their own reputation as poets at the centre of the quarrel. Predictably perhaps, they each attack the other's literary skills and laud their own, Kennedy threatening to launch his 'laureat letters' (28) on him and Dunbar retorting that with his rough Gaelic origins and highland accent, Kennedy has none of the eloquence that he has claimed ('Ane Lawland ers wald mak a bettir noyis'; 56). Kennedy creates a memorable scene in which both poets visit the home of the muses:

I perambalit of Pernaso the montayn,
 Enspirit wyth Mercury fra his goldyn spere;
 And dulcely drank of eloquence the fontayne,
 Quhen it was purifit wyth frost, and flowit cleir;
 And thou come, fule, in Marche or Februer,
 Thare till a pule and drank the padok rod,
 That gerris the ryme in to thy termis glod,
 And blaberis that noyis mennis eris to here. (337-344)

Whereas Kennedy drinks from the fountain of eloquence while it is still fresh, Dunbar arrives in March or February, by which time Helicon is a muddy pool and all he manages to drink is the 'padok rod,' or frogs-spawn, which accounts for his blabbering style -- a superb moment in which the topos of Parnassan inspiration is sustained, but also transformed into an insult to the rival poet, another instance of the

kind of satirical invention required by the flyting genre, in which a successful poet proved adept capturing and converting each other's material into ammunition for his own cause.

The degree of genuine animosity between the poets in any flyting can be difficult to determine. Although it may have been crafted to give the impression of spontaneity, the level of technical accomplishment it displays makes it almost impossible to imagine the flyting of Dunbar and Kennedy as delivered spontaneously. The poets must have collaborated in order to be able to respond to each other's challenges properly, and this probably also meant they would have determined in advance who had the crucial last word. Although the poem asks us to judge who got the worst of the flyting, neither poet seems to have been damaged by the stigma of 'losing' the quarrel after the event. In fact, the exchange may have been of equal benefit to both poets as a publicity stunt, judging by the popularity of this flyting in Scotland (it was one of the earliest texts to be printed in Scotland on its first printing press, that of Chepman and Myllar). Although both writers tap into a fund of common prejudices to make their insults funnier, we have no reason to suppose they had a history of antagonism. The preamble to the flyting, in fact, describes it as 'jocund and mirrie.'⁷⁴ Finally, although we cannot be sure that Dunbar and Kennedy were friends it may be significant that Dunbar mentions John Ross, Quentin, and 'guid Maister Kennedy' among the catalogue of famous Makars in his lament for human mortality. This would imply that he respected them as poets, and probably that he mourned their deaths as well.

Skelton's 'Agenst Garnesche' follows the form of the Scottish flyting in a number of ways. Skelton's first broadside indicates that Garnesche began the quarrel

⁷⁴ Printed before the main text of the poem in Bawcutt ed., *The Poems of William Dunbar* 200.

by calling the poet a knave, and that the king requested that Skelton reply, moving both participants to enact a flyting for him. In the first poem, Skelton sets out his answer in the form of a refrain questioning Garnesche's right to challenge him:

Sey me now yet, Syr Satrapas, what autoryte ye have

In your chalenge, Syr Chystyn, to cale me knave? (6-7)

Skelton uses denigrating titles (Sir Satrapas, Sir Ferumbras and Sir Topas etc.) throughout the first poem, which probably means he is poking fun at Garnesche's new title. Like the opening to Dunbar's flyting this is a short piece, only forty lines, in which Skelton homes in on Garnesche's appearance: he is a swarthy Saracen, an ignorant pagan who hides an ugly, bristly back behind his fine clothes. The second poem, also around forty lines, introduces Garnesche's second, Greasy Gorbelyd Godfrey (an unidentified figure, though some scholars have speculated on his similarity to the dwarf Godfrey Gobelive in Hawes' *Pastime of Pleasure*).⁷⁵ The insults mount in longer lines, and the word-play becomes more pronounced. Now the formal challenge is out of the way, Skelton leaps in with his own insults. The refrain in this poem advises Garnesche to 'beware of cheke-mate' suggesting that Skelton has come to view this flyting rather as a game than a battle. In the third poem, Skelton switches from conventional metre into a patter of Skeltonic rhymes to create a character, and a risible history for Garnesche as a snivelling kitchen page, a greasy knight and an awkward lover. The insults mount into a crescendo ('thou toad, thou scorpion / thou bawdy babyone [...]'; 162-63).

⁷⁵ *Pastime*, 3487-3507. For a summary of the argument see the note in *Minor Poems*, ed. Gluck and Morgan, 162. As Gluck and Morgan comment, the theory that Hawes was Garnesche's second is based on the assumption that Hawes was still alive after 1510-11. This is called into question by Hawes' apparent lack of literary output after this date and the record of the death of a Stephen Hawes, rector of Withern, at this time.

The final poem, in response to another rhyme from Garnesche's party, is probably the most successful of the flyting. Skelton begins by disparaging his opponent's technique: Garnesche shows no originality, he can only sing the cuckoo song. Skelton adopts Kennedy's strategy of exalting his own status as court-poet at the same time as denigrating his opponent's moral character: cranking the obscenities up a level, he depicts Garnesche as a sordid frequenter of brothels whereas Skelton is a poet laureate with Calliope as his patron, the man who taught the King himself to sip from Helicon's well. There is a suggestion, too, that Garnesche may have taken a hit in the previous round. Skelton tells us that his opponent has deemed the poet's raillery 'ovyrthwarthe' (136) -- that he finds Skelton too perverse and scurrilous. R. B. Gill discusses flytings as a contest of skill and formal mastery in which one's position is weakened by abandoning the game of poetic skill and self-display and reverting to denials, 'self-defense or a sincere attack.'⁷⁶ If this is the case this may be the signal that Skelton has won: either Garnesche has been outwitted, or he has shown himself unable to appreciate the art of literary obscenity and can only fall back on the notion of himself as a gentleman who refuses to use *that* kind of language. However, in censuring Skelton satire as being in poor taste, Garnesche may also have been drawing on more established criticisms of Skelton's satirical art as a whole as being vicious and indelicate, as suggested by the manner of Skelton's additions to poems like 'A Ballade of the Scottyshe Kynge,' so this kind of criticism may have provoked Skelton, as a more generally combative poet, to offer a more serious defence of himself.

In Dunbar and Kennedy's flyting readers are asked to judge who got the worst of the quarrel. In Skelton's case we might infer that Skelton won the flyting from the

⁷⁶ R. B. Gill, 'The Structures of Self-Assertion in Sixteenth-Century Flytings,' *Renaissance Papers* (1983): 39.

fact that his contributions to the flyting were the ones preserved, but we have no certainty that he did, or even that he gained the last word. The preservation of the poem by the mercer John Colyns may indicate that the London audience he represented were interested in the exchange as a satire against Garnesche, perceived to be an upstart. If we are judging the results of the flyting as a competition for royal favour rather than a literary game *per se* Skelton's flyting might be viewed, as Scherb suggests, as 'a pyrrhic victory,' because the flyting does not seem to have increased the volume of Skelton's court commissions or to have halted the career of Garnesche at court.⁷⁷ The manner of the contest might offer evidence for the lack of friendly relationships between Skelton and other court poets during Henry VIII's reign. He does not have a second, and stands proud in his abilities to see off all challenges by himself.

Scherb would have us view Skelton's poem as an act of poetic territorialism in which the flyting becomes 'a forceful attempt by the laureate poet to articulate and defend his poetic territory,' which begs the question of how far that territory was actually under threat.⁷⁸ Skelton's constant reminders that the flyting is taking place 'by the King's most noble comaundment' (I: 43; II: 45; III: 206; V: 181) draw attention to the exchanges as a formal event taking place with the king's knowledge. Dunbar's initial 'challenge' to Kennedy -- that he and Quentin were getting big-headed -- is not properly speaking a challenge at all, but seems to be an excuse for a poetic knock-about rather than a real provocation. However, the idea that they styled themselves above 'the sternis' (planets) might suggest that they were making a bid for poetic fame imaged as stellification -- to be set 'above the planets' would imply that

⁷⁷ Victor I. Scherb, 'John Skelton's "Agenst Garnesche": Poetic Territorialism at the Court of Henry VIII,' *Quidditas Journal of Rocky Mountain Association* 19 (1998): 140.

⁷⁸ Scherb, 126.

they belonged in the region of stars.⁷⁹ The alleged impetus for Skelton's poem, Garnesche's calling Skelton a knave, is vague enough for it to be interpreted simply as the necessary gauntlet to initiate the exchange. Skelton's accusation that Garnesche has challenged him by 'rudely revilyng me in the kynge's noble hall' (I: 2) draws attention to the quarrel as a public spectacle (which may itself have been initiated by Henry VIII). Skelton's responses to Garnesche certainly suggest that the quarrel has been interpreted, by Skelton at least, as a challenge to his poetic authority: a considerable proportion of the flyting revolves around a detraction of Garnesche's, or his ghost-writer's, literary skill and an exaltation of Skelton's. That Garnesche or his deputy may have had some literary pretensions is suggested by Skelton's taunt 'ye wolde be callyd a maker' (III: 108), but without the responses of Garnesche's party it is hard to ascertain how serious these pretensions were. Skelton also shows a tendency to shift other personal and political quarrels onto literary grounds, as in *Against Dundas*, where the metre of the Scottish writer comes under fire along with the matter at which Skelton is objecting (Dundas's propagation of a story that English men have tails). Similarly, in the flyting with Garnesche, Skelton is standing on his dignity as poet laureate, and criticising his rival's rude English, and in the final poem offers Garnesche a mini-lesson on rhetoric.

In the case of *The Flyting Between Polwart and Montgomerie*, the possibility of the fame that might be conferred by the flyting is suggested early on in Polwart's reply to Montgomerie's challenge: 'quhair þou beleivit to win a name, / thow sall be blasit of ane beild' (19-20) which shifts the interpretative context of the flyting subtly towards a publicity opportunity (in the manner of the Gaguin episode). In an essay on the structures of self-assertion in flyting, R. B. Gill draws a parallel to the way in

⁷⁹ Further see Chapter One, pp. 107-08.

which many renaissance literary satires and invectives pay more (or at least as much) attention to the author than the satire: 'Translations, imitations, epigrammatic wit, academic exercises, and fashionable railing often do not have a compelling interest in their subject matter and are, therefore, freer to divert their attention to matters of form and self-display.'⁸⁰ Skelton's flyting can be seen as another such mode of self-display, one which probably gained him some publicity, and the king's attention. However, Skelton seems also to have used the flyting as an opportunity to establish the nature of his own vocation as a poet, breaking -- or perhaps transcending -- its generic rules in order to establish himself as a poet in a more serious manner than the usual mode of flyting would allow (in expecting the flyter to concentrate on attacking his opponent rather than defending himself against the opponent's charges). This Skelton does in several passages, answering Garnesche's charges at length and setting out his credentials as a laureate poet in a way which disrupts the flyting's usual emphasis on the art of verbally ingenious ridicule. Because of this, *Agenst Garnesche* is not merely a flyting but another chance for Skelton to proclaim his membership of Calliope's household. Indeed, in the final sally of the flyting it is Calliope, again, rather than the king who has 'pointyd me / to rayle on the' (V: 87-88).

Skelton's London Audience

Greg Walker has characterised Skelton as 'rather a Westminster or London poet than a court poet,' a frustrated talent who enjoyed court patronage only for brief periods in the 1490s and in 1512-13 when he was recalled to the court and made Orator

⁸⁰ Gill, 40.

Regius.⁸¹ Skelton was certainly capable of directing his literary productions towards a more regional scope of interest and is something of an occasional poet in this respect. During his time of 'exile' from the court at Diss in Norfolk, poems like the *Lamentatio Urbis Norwicen*, and two 'Choruses of Diss' (*Chorus de Dys contra Gallos* and *Chorus de Dys contra Scottos*) testify to his identification with this regional community, and *Phyllyp Sparowe* arose in part from his association with the Scropes, a local Norfolk family. Yet during this period, too, Skelton's continuing links with the clerical and academic community are suggested by the fact that his satirical 'epitaphs' for two of his parishioners 'knaves of Diss,' were copied by the Parish priest at Trumpington, the official copyist of Cambridge University. Similarly, his links with the Westminster community are suggested by the commissioning of epitaphs for Henry VII and Lady Margaret Beaufort by the Bishop of Westminster.

Skelton should indeed be regarded predominantly as a London poet in that most of his manuscripts derive from London, but it is likely that this London audience comprised both courtiers and other reading communities. As John Scattergood comments, the manuscript evidence suggests that Skelton's London audience extended 'beyond the court, to provincial gentleman who came to London for court and governmental business, and to the professional and mercantile areas of the literate citizenry.'⁸² On Walker's reading, Skelton turned his attention more exclusively to a city-based, politically conscious audience in his political satires from the safety of his sanctuary at Westminster during the latter half of his literary career. One indication of such a shift of focus may be Skelton's increasing penchant for circulating his work in manuscript rather than printed form in the 1520s, which, as A. S. G. Edwards notes, represents 'a reversal of the general movement from manuscript to print in the early

⁸¹ Walker, *Politics* 51.

⁸² Scattergood, 'London Manuscripts,' 174.

sixteenth century,' and was itself 'a form of clandestine or coterie circulation seemingly enforced upon a number of his most politically sensitive poems [perhaps] because of the very awareness of his identity that had been created in part by print.'⁸³ The most substantial collection of Skelton's work in manuscript form, BL MS. Harley 2252 (which contains copies of *Speke Parott* and *Colin Clout*), a manuscript compiled by John Colyns (c.1525) suggests interest in Skelton among the mercantile community at this time, and as Edwards notes 'the coterie circulation of poems opposing [Wolsey] seems a natural response of such a politically aware book owning class.'⁸⁴

How far Skelton sought to recommend himself to a mercantile readership in this period is an interesting question. As Scattergood reminds us, the priorities of compilers such as Colyns were not necessarily the same as Skelton's.⁸⁵ The changes Colyns made to his copy of *Speke Parott* suggest some slippage between the audience originally for the poem and the mercantile community keen to circulate it: Colyns was clearly not interested in those aspects of the poem that deal with the Grammarians' War because he removes them from his text.⁸⁶ The academic interest of *Speke Parott* is, however, an important part of Skelton's original, which seems to have been designed not only to engage with this debate, but an opportunity to demonstrate the breadth and depth of his learning. As well as functioning on some level as a political satire, *Speke Parott* clearly aims at a coterie of attentive readers who were themselves equipped to decode its complex of learned allusions. Nonetheless there are premonitions within the main text of the poem itself that Skelton's attempts to appeal to, or in fact create, such a coterie readership for *Speke Parott* will be frustrated, for

⁸³ Edwards, 'English Poems,' 98.

⁸⁴ Edwards, 'English Poems,' 95.

⁸⁵ Scattergood, 'London Manuscripts,' 179.

⁸⁶ Scattergood, 'London Manuscripts,' 179-180.

with the exception of Galathea, the ladies within the poem who listen to his discourse also fail to engage in the business of completing Parott's meanings.⁸⁷ Skelton's ideal readership for the poem was probably an audience of men from the same educational milieu as himself, so that we may posit, in Walker's terms, 'a manuscript, or series of manuscripts, written in or around the poet's Westminster home and circulated among a small number of educated courtiers, clerics and scholars.'⁸⁸ The poem's failure to win approval and understanding from those who read his poem is suggested by Skelton's first envoy, railing at the 'folys' (292) who do not have the learning (or the patience) to seek out its meaning. In a further series of envoys, he is more explicit about his designated readership of 'lordes and ladies' (358) and 'notable clerkes' (359) but does not mention a mercantile audience.

Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (c.1519), however, may have been designed with a mercantile audience in mind. If we accept that the play derives much of its topical significance from the expulsion of the minions at court, then the likelihood is that it was written in 1519 or just after, a period when Skelton was living in the city, retiring, in Chaucer's footsteps, to a house in Westminster. It also occurs at the start of what may have been a new phase in his career, and one in which he may have been attempting to access new readerships. As with the satirical poems circulated in the 1520s, *Magnyfycence* deals with politically sensitive themes, but it does not make too many demands on its audience's erudition or decrypting skills. If it assumes some level of knowledge of the court in its political topicality, it contains this modestly enough within the machinery of moral allegory, so it remains open to a general audience while simultaneously gunning for a politically astute one. The gap between *Magnyfycence*'s composition and its publication in 1530 soon after Skelton's death

⁸⁷ Griffiths, 98-99

⁸⁸ Walker, *Politics* 120.

suggests that it was composed on request or commission for a particular audience before its transfer to print. The two possibilities suggested by Scattergood are a merchants' guild-hall or a noble household.⁸⁹

Collaboration between individual writers and guilds for ceremonial purposes was fairly common in the medieval period as is evidenced in a variety of pageants, royal entries, mummings and devices which allowed both the writer and the civic communities he represented to enter into a public dialogue with those in authority, and for probing or reinforcing the nature of the social relationships that sustained them. Lydgate had provided a role model for the collaboration of an official 'laureate' writer and a London guild, (Skelton's 'Greek' adversary, William Lily also wrote for such civic occasions).⁹⁰ However, if *Magnyfycence* was intended to be played in the King's presence, we would expect some allusion to this, as in the case of *Agenset Garnesche*. Attempts made to accommodate a royal audience in a later interlude, *Wealth and Health*, are quite revealing in this respect. This interlude, composed around 1554/5 in T. W. Craik's estimation, is clearly derived from Skelton's play and the extant printed version shows that it was intended for performance before the Queen.⁹¹ In essence it presents us with a shorter and simplified form of *Magnyfycence* without its central character. Here Wealth, Health and Liberty are imposed upon by the thieving vices, Ill Will and Shrewd Wit, to whom they trust the governance of their household. The play begins with a friendly debate between Wealth and Health, in which Wealth describes himself as the necessary companion of the Queen and her

⁸⁹ John Scattergood, 'Skelton's "Magnyfycence" and the Tudor Royal Household,' *Medieval English Theatre* 15 (1993) 44.

⁹⁰ Kipling, 'Lydgate: The Poet as Deviser,' 80-81.

⁹¹ See T. W. Craik, 'The Political Interpretation of Two Tudor Interludes: "Temperance and Humility" and "Wealth and Health",' *RES* ns 4.14 (1953) 98-108. Although *Wealth and Health* was first printed in 1557 (according to a note in the Stationers' Register), it only exists in a badly printed version from the time of Queen Elizabeth. It has been reprinted as *Wealth and Health*, Malone Society Reprints [32] (London: Chiswick P, 1907) and can also be accessed online: 'Wealth and Health,' *The Gutenberg Project*. 28 October 2007. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/17270>>.

council, and also claims a place for himself beside men of the law and ‘ioly rych marchaunts’ (92) suggesting, perhaps, that such people were also in the audience. The vices exhibit the same kind of behaviour that the vices in *Magnyfycence* do; they swear, quarrel with each other and reveal their true intentions in private to the audience. Health, Wealth and Liberty are rescued by a single virtue, Good Remedy, who makes it clear that he is acting under the jurisdiction of the Queen and in accord with her purposes. Pains are taken to dissociate the Queen’s actions from the success of the vices at court and the impact of the play is unified by a strong current of nationalism absent from Skelton’s interlude. The existence of *Wealth and Health* as a parallel to *Magnyfycence* suggests that Skelton’s play was regarded as easily transferable to a courtly setting, but not without some adjustments to accommodate a royal audience felt necessary by its anonymous writer.

The personification of wealth as a character may have been particularly appropriate for interludes designed for a mercantile audience. A diminutive Wealth, a part intended for a dwarf (or perhaps a boy-player), appears to deliver a prologue in front of an audience of Edinburgh merchants and townspeople in an early sixteenth-century fragment known as ‘The Manner of The Crying of Ane Play,’ composed around the same time and sometimes attributed to the Scots poet Dunbar.⁹² This Wealth jokes that his ancestors were giants, and that he himself has been banished from the city for a long time but is returning now with his companions, Welfare, Wantonness and Play. In celebration of this, he invites the merchants in the audience to ‘Addres yow furth with bow and flane / In lusty grene lufraye’ (139-40) for the May-time games. Wealth makes a series of fantastical, regional and politically nuanced jokes designed to amuse his company: he says he cannot be in the same

⁹² ‘The Maner of the Crying of Ane Play’ is reprinted as ‘Harry. Harry, Hobbillschowe’ in *William Dunbar: Poems* ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 102 - 107.

country as the King of France, for example, a topical allusion to events of 1509.

Dunbar here assumes a variety of shared concerns in his civic and mercantile audience, and an interest in public affairs. Skelton's *Wealthful Felicity* was not a dwarf as far as we know and his speech seems much more serious in intention, but he too ruefully acknowledges that in this world 'welthe and felicite is passynge small' (21).

If *Magnyfycence* was designed for a guild-hall performance then the audience would probably have been less intimate than that of a noble household, though neither setting need suggest a fully homogenous social grouping. Those who have argued for the possibility point to references in the text which would make such a setting conducive. As well as the London topography of *Magnyfycence*, Fansy's comment that 'Measure is mete for a marchantes' hall' (382) would work well as a compliment to a mercantile audience as well as being a general, ironic statement about measure as the rightful concern of parsimonious merchants, not monarchs -- a statement to which the play itself gives the lie. Most interesting, however, is *Magnyfycence*'s comment to Liberty: 'Ye have eten sauce, I trowe, at the Taylers Hall' (1404). This seems a pointed allusion to the Merchant Tailors' Hall in Threadneedle Street. The Tailors, who had recently acquired their politically significant prefix of Merchant from the King, owned a large banqueting chamber known as Tailors Hall from the early fifteenth century.

What we know of the history of the Merchant Tailors makes them a viable institution for hosting such a play.⁹³ The Tailors were a major livery company whose

⁹³ As the account books from the guild are missing from the 1490s to 1545, we cannot ascertain whether *Magnyfycence* was performed in their hall. The possibility that it was written for another guild must also be considered. Its themes might have appealed to mercers like John Colyns, but the Mercers' Guild did not have a proper hall until the sixteenth century, and was engaged in building one around the time *Magnyfycence* was composed. It is possible to read the comment as being directed against the Tailors for the amusement of a rival guild, such as the skimmers or drapers (*Magnyfycence* would then

fortunes had been steadily improving since their formation in the fourteenth century.⁹⁴ The wealth of the Tailors collectively, and in the case of a number of their members in particular, was substantial at this time. This together with their interest in education would have made them attractive as a source of social and financial support for men of letters. The wealth of Stephen Jenyns, for example, who founded Wolverhampton Grammar school, was estimated at £3,500 in 1522/3.⁹⁵ Thomas White, another member of the company who founded St John's College, Oxford, was reckoned to be the richest man in London in the 1550s.⁹⁶ The Tailors were quite able to hire musicians and players of various kinds to provide entertainment at important occasions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the records which survive before and after the period of *Magnyfycence* show that they often did so. The later history of the company in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries demonstrates their propensity to patronise art and scholarship both inside and outside their ranks. The company archives record the awarding of a pension to the antiquarian John Stow, a Merchant Tailor 'who taketh much paynes in wryting of Chronicles and matters of Antiquities' and a handout to another member, John Ogilby, in acknowledgement of a gift to the company of his translation of Virgil and Aesop's Fables 'for his encouragement.'⁹⁷ It was Stow who was responsible for the first edition of Skelton's collected works in 1568; he certainly owned Skelton manuscripts and another Merchant Tailor, John Ryche, may have done.⁹⁸ Members of the company also

allude to the Tailors' Hall as a likely place for Liberty to have picked up his sauciness) however, I think the balance of evidence favours the Tailors' Guild as the most likely guild to have hosted it.

⁹⁴ For a history of the guild see Matthew Davies and Ann Saunders *The History of the Merchant Taylors' Company* (Leeds: Maney, 2004) 86. I shall be referencing Davies' chapters on the early history of the Tailors in this chapter.

⁹⁵ Davies 93.

⁹⁶ Davies 66.

⁹⁷ Charles Matthew Clode, *Memorials of the Guild of Merchant Taylors of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist in the City of London and of its Associated Charities and Institutions* (London: Harrison, 1875) 185 and 187.

⁹⁸ Scattergood, 'London Manuscripts.' 177.

commissioned, and perhaps generated, poems for civic and royal ceremonies after the reformation. As part of the entertainment arranged by the Tailors to mark the election of Thomas Rowe to the mayoralty in 1568, the clerk recorded some verses to be spoken at a pageant and others to be written about it 'if it shalbe thought good.'⁹⁹ When James I feasted at the hall in 1607, another laureate poet, Ben Jonson, was asked to provide a series of dramatic speeches on the occasion.¹⁰⁰

If the play was performed at the Tailors' hall at their own request, the most likely setting for it would be the annual feast of the Fraternity of St John the Baptist, the association from which the Tailors derived.¹⁰¹ A large turnout for the fraternity's feast was to be expected as it was the highlight of their social calendar. Plays were often performed on such occasions, and the scale of the event itself could be magnificent. The accounts of the Guild of Our Blessed Lady's Assumption at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, (of which Caxton, Wynken de Worde and others in the publishing trade were members), records a comparable banquet 'kept and holden at the Archbishop of York's place' in 1489.¹⁰² A performance of some kind is indicated in the payment of seven shillings to 'the pleyers for a pley' and the feast was on a lavish scale. There are records of payments incurred for a pipe of red wine; a hogshead of claret; barrels of ale; nine turbot and the 'portage and bote-hire' costs in transporting them; dozens of chickens, geese, capons, conies and swans; thirty two pike-fish; and payments to labourers for 'watching for two nights,' presumably to ensure that none of the victuals were stolen.¹⁰³

It has been argued that imagining a mercantile audience for *Magnyfycence* would fix Skelton as a London poet writing for an audience of guildsmen revelling in

⁹⁹ Clode, 119.

¹⁰⁰ Clode, 149 and 154.

¹⁰¹ This was held on the 25th June, the day after their Saint's day.

¹⁰² *Caxton Memorial* 20.

¹⁰³ *Caxton Memorial* 22.

‘their own daring and impudence’ in staging a play deemed subversively critical of the king.¹⁰⁴ However, given the evidence of *Health and Wealth*, it is unlikely that Skelton’s play would have taken the same shape if the king had been present, and the probability is that it would not have been staged on the Tailors’ behalf if they deemed it to be in any way a threat to their own good relations with him, given their recent political history.¹⁰⁵ If *Magnyfycence* was performed in the Tailors’ Hall, it would almost certainly have attracted a reasonably large, wealthy and influential audience. The Tailors were one of the largest of the London livery companies: the freemen attached to it numbered c. 3,000 in the 1560s, compared to c. 900 in the 1460s.¹⁰⁶ Visitors and honorary members would be invited to the feast, and these would have included men from other craft guilds and the city government as well as representatives of the clergy and nobility, and even foreign ambassadors.¹⁰⁷ This tends to complicate the notion of Skelton’s later London audience replacing an earlier courtly audience; the two may have been different, but they were not mutually exclusive and their interests often overlapped. At the end of the day, Greg Walker is probably right to stress that whether the play belongs to a noble household or a guild hall, the interlude remains a genre for the privileged: an elite form of drama that attracted an elite audience.¹⁰⁸ In this respect, the audience of *Magnyfycence* would also have been a select literary grouping.

¹⁰⁴ Alistair Fox, *Politics and Literature in the Reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 239.

¹⁰⁵ Further see Elizabeth Evershed, ‘Mete for Merchants? Some Implications of Situating Skelton’s “Magnyfycence” at the Merchant Tailors’ Hall,’ *Medieval English Theatre* 27 (2007) 63-79. I develop this argument at more length in this article, drawing on contemporary accounts of the antipathy between the Tailors and rival guilds, and the intervention of the monarch in city politics on their behalf.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, 35.

¹⁰⁷ Davies, 36.

¹⁰⁸ Greg Walker, *Plays of Persuasion: Drama and Politics at the Court of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 28.

Skelton's *Garlande of Laurel*

In examining some of the social sites of Skelton's activities within contemporary literary culture, I hope to have set the stage for an analysis of Skelton's *Garlande or Chapelet of Laurell*, which provides us with an extended exploration of the author's place in literary culture, past and present. *The Garlande* takes the form of a dream vision that flits between straight narration, satire, lyric, and cryptic Latin asides. It was not written at one sitting but evolved, like *Speke Parott*, over a period of years. The original context for the poem seems to have been a visit by the poet to Sheriff Hutton Castle in 1495, where, the preamble tells us, the poem was 'studiously devised' (312) (although it is Scattergood's opinion that some of the lyrics included in the poem predate this).¹⁰⁹ A revised version of the poem was printed in 1523 by Fakes: one of the few pieces of Skelton's work to be printed during his lifetime.

The complex plot of the *Garlande* is as follows: the poem begins with the narrator (a fictional version of Skelton himself) walking in the 'frytty forest of Galtres' (22). He falls half asleep in gloomy meditation on the mutability of fortune and sees a decorated pavilion in which Athene (Dame Pallas) is shown receiving a supplication from the Queen of Fame. The Queen tells Pallas that Skelton should be erased from her books because he is too lazy, and asks that some 'good recorde' (215) of Skelton's achievements should be brought forth to justify his coronation as laureate. Pallas agrees, and calls on Eolus to summon a retinue of famous poets, suggesting that they wait to see whether Skelton 'wyll put himself in prease / Amonge the thickeste of all the hole rowte' (239-40). At Eolus' trumpet 'a murmer of

¹⁰⁹ Melvin Tucker has argued for a date in the 1490s based on what is known of the Howards' itinerary in this period and narrowed this estimate more precisely to 1495 based on an astronomical dating of the poem. Melvin J. Tucker, 'Skelton and Sheriff Hutton,' *ELN* 4 (1967): 254-9; Owen Gingerich and Melvin J. Tucker, 'The Astronomical Dating of Skelton's 'Garland of Laurel'.' *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 32 (1969): 207-20.

mynstrels' (270) enters, headed by Orpheus whose harping delights the forest so much that even the blasted stump of oak the poet is leaning on leaps 'an hundreth fote back,' (282) prompting Skelton to spring towards Pallas' pavilion. There he arrives to find 'a thousande poetes assembled togeder' (286) led by Phoebus wearing a laurel crown. Skelton describes this company as 'poetis laureat of manye dyverse nacyons' (324) and lists some of their names, moving from ancient to modern authors and culminating with Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate. These three poets each address Skelton warmly, and bring him to Pallas' tent. Pallas then commands that he should be brought to the palace of Fame. Here Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate tell Skelton that Occupation, Fame's registrar, will keep him company until they return.

Occupation welcomes the poet and assures him that she will publish his fame far and wide. She escorts the poet to a field surrounded by a slippery stone wall, and past many thousands of gates which lead out onto different nations. They reach a gate called *Anglea*, where, looking over the wall, Skelton sees 'innumerable people' (603) crowding for admittance. A burst of gunfire scatters them, wounding some and driving the others home. The clouds clear and Skelton finds himself in a beautiful arbour where there is a laurel tree 'with levis continually grene' (666). Here a company of dryads, the nine muses, and Flora, queen of summer, dance around the tree with green garlands and chaplets, while Apollo plays the harp and Iopas sings a catalogue of poems and stories (as he does in the *Aeneid*).¹¹⁰ Skelton agrees with Occupation that such a place would be paradise for those meant to be here, from which Occupation infers that he is wondering why a certain 'blunderer' is included in the company. The 'blunderer' is identified in a numerical code as one Roger Statham (of whom little is now known). Occupation tells Skelton that 'his name is Envyous

¹¹⁰ *Aen.* 1:740-6.

Rancour' (753) and a Latin satire is interpolated *in vatis adversarium* (on the poet's adversary) the meaning of which is obscure. The succeeding lines, however, align Statham, rather unflatteringly, with the devil (765).

Occupation then brings Skelton into the chamber of the Countess of Surrey and commands the Countess and other gentlewomen to weave Skelton's laurel crown, especially as he has 'the library' (780) of all ladies (that is, the power to gain them a place in Fame's court through his poetry). At her request, Skelton offers lyrics in praise of each of the ladies, starting with the Countess, Elizabeth Tylney Howard; then Ladies Elizabeth Howard, Mirriell Howard and Anne Daker; and then Mistresses Margaret Tylney, Jane Blenner-Haiset, Isabell Pennell, Margaret Hussey, Gertrude Statham and Isobel Knight. Occupation commands him to put on the completed laurel, and tells him he must be brought to the Queen of Fame to 'answer to' (1092) his name before the assembled company. Casting his eye about the chamber, Skelton spies a Master Newton making a picture of the scene.

Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate then return and lead Skelton where all the poets sit 'in there degre' (1104) and praise Skelton's laurel as being 'the goodlyest /That ever they saw' (1112-13). The Queen of Fame, however, glares at him and asks him to explain why he deserves a place at her court. Occupation then brings forth a splendidly decorated book of remembrance, and reads a catalogue of over a hundred works (said in a prefatory note to amount only to 'sum parte of Skeltons bokes and baladis with ditis of pleasure, in as moche as it were too long a proces to rehearse all by name that he hath complyd').¹¹¹ In the middle of this recitation the lists shifts into a passage containing the defensive addition to *Phyllip Sparowe*, and the list breaks off again when Skelton begs that one particular work ('Apollo that whirllid up his chare')

¹¹¹ John Skelton, *Complete English Poems*, ed. Scattergood, 345.

be erased from the books, but learns from Fame that this is impossible. Occupation carries on reading the list until finally (and chiefly because Skelton says it irks him to write any more) a great roar of 'Triumpha, triumpha!' (1506) arises among the assembled poets. The heavens and earth tremble, the Queen of Fame commands that the book should be closed, and Skelton wakes to see Janus in the heavens making his almanac for the new year.

There follows a series of Latin and English envoys: one in praise of the poet and scorn of his enemies; one anticipating the reception of the work; one dedicating the work to the King and to Wolsey; one in praise of the laurel; and finally a rather disjointed collection of English and Latin fragments on the abuses of the age. The earliest text of *The Garlande*, an imperfect version of the book in manuscript form (now BL MS. Cotton Vitellius E. X.), shows that Skelton also included marginal glosses in Latin and English alongside the text, and a number of these are extant in the latter half of the poem. These glosses are not printed in John Scattergood's standard edition of the English Poems, but are in F. W. Brownlow's edition of this poem, and have been profitably discussed by Jane Griffiths in her recent study of Skelton.¹¹²

After a simple rehearsal of the content of *The Garlande*, we might agree with Skelton's nineteenth-century editor, Dyce, in finding it a poem 'unparalleled for its egotism,' -- a bombastic exercise in self-promotion which seems the exact inversion of the fifteenth-century modesty trope.¹¹³ In tackling criticisms of Skelton's vanity in *The Garlande*, Scattergood argues that 'it has to be remembered that Skelton is here not claiming for himself anything more than his contemporaries thought he deserved,' but such knowledge does not make such an apparently outrageous project of self-

¹¹² Griffiths, 117-128.

¹¹³ Rev. Alexander Dyce, *The Poetical Works of John Skelton*, vol 1 (London: Rodd, 1843) xi.

advertisement more attractive to a modern audience.¹¹⁴ The general impression created by the tangled texture of this poem, however, is more complex, allowing for humour and ambiguity. It is true that Skelton's continual praise of himself seems a characteristically unmedieval indulgence, something between a self-congratulatory ego-trip and a puerile assertion of the self against its real or imagined detractors. Yet it is also possible to read *The Garlande* as a more creatively agonistic work.

The playfulness of Skelton's poem is more evident if we consider the poem alongside its obvious precursors: Chaucer's *House of Fame* and Gavin Douglas' *Palis of Honor*. The traditional dream vision backdrop of squabbling gods and a limited, foolish or persecuted narrator permeates all three. There are many echoes and parallels to the *House of Fame* in *The Garlande*; Skelton struggles with the Chaucerian inheritance of Fame -- the process of getting it, the desire to achieve it, and the nature of fame itself -- as deeply ambivalent. In Skelton's poem too, there is a sense of arbitrariness to some of Fame's decisions and the insecurity of her court as a place where personal ambition is pursued at the expense of humanity. The gunfire which wounds and scatters the huge crowd of petitioners outside the gate of *Anglea* leaves an uncomfortable impression on the reader. There is a certain amount of tension and anxiety present in the court scenes (a motif the poet had already explored at length in *The Bowge of Court*). At a number of points Skelton shifts his community of poets from the potentially cut-throat setting of the court towards a remote, idyllic location -- the pastoral arbour or the chamber in which his gentlewomen patrons sit and weave his laurel crown.

¹¹⁴ John Scattergood, 'Skelton's "Garlande of Laurell" and Chaucerian Tradition,' *Chaucer Traditions: Studies in Honour of Derek Brewer*, ed. Ruth Morse and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 128.

As Gordon Kipling notes, however, Skelton is perhaps the first English poet since Chaucer to approach the journey to fame with humour.¹¹⁵ Neither the Burgundian literary circles, nor the post-Chaucerian English poets, had attempted to treat the subject as playfully as Skelton does. Unlike Chaucer's Geffrey, Skelton's namesake chooses eventually to move himself forward to receive fame, but the idea that the getting of it is not to be taken too seriously is raised quite early on in the lines on Skelton's meeting with Occupation:

[She] Came towarde me, and smylid halfe in game;

I sawe hir smyle, and I then did the same. (529-30)

If the business of purchasing fame is something of a game to Skelton, the idea of poetry itself as a game seems to resonate as well. When poetry is discussed in *The Garlande* it is frequently presented as a means of recreation. The dryads and muses in the arbour make 'moche solacyous game' (683) around the Laurel tree. 'Merry' is an epithet frequently applied to Skelton's works by his early editors, and in this poem he also applies it to himself: 'May this contente you and your mirry mynde?' (708) Occupation asks, as they stand together in the laurel arbour. This poetic arbour seems to be the natural home of a merry mind: a place of pleasure and recreation:

Here dwellith pleasure, with lust and delyte;

Contynuall comfort here may ye fynde,

Of welth and solace no thyng left behynde;

All thyng convenable here is contrived

¹¹⁵ Gordon Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour: Burgundian Origins of the Elizabethan Renaissance*, Publications of the Sir Thomas Browne Institute General Ser. 6 (Leiden: Leiden UP, 1977) 24.

Wherewith your spiritis may be revyvid. (708-14)

Although, as we have seen, Skelton provides serious arguments for why the critics are wrong about his work, in the *Garlande* his best defence against such criticism is his cultivation of an image of himself as a poet of good humour, which sets up a contrast between himself as the representative of ‘honest myrth’ against his un-merry-minded detractors.

The links between wine, poetry and conviviality common in the goliardic tradition, and in the writings of ‘dissolute’ poets like François Villon and later club literature, are maintained in *The Garlande*, where the draughts of Bacchus figure more prominently than those of Helicon’s well in inspiring and refreshing the company of poets. In fact, Skelton suggests at the very beginning that the dream may be the product of a drunken stupor, a vision derived ‘[...] of humors superflue, that often wyll crepe / Into the brayne by drynkyng over depe’ (32-2). Skelton’s association with drinking culture is a marked feature of the *Merie Tales*, published shortly after his death, in which he figures as a jest-book hero: ‘Skelton did love wel a cup of good wyne,’ its author tells us, and the final tale includes a lesson on wine given by the poet to a dishonest vintner’s wife: ‘all wines must be strong, and fayre, and well coloured; it must have a redolent sauoure; it must be colde; and sprinklyng in the peece or in the glasse.’¹¹⁶

In *The Garlande* Skelton is assisted by a brotherhood of English poets in the triad of Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate. These poets stand ‘togeder in armes, as brethern, embrasid’ (393) clothed in fabulous garments, lacking nothing, except the dignity of the laurel (which need not mean that Skelton thought himself superior to

¹¹⁶ Dyce ed., ‘Merie Tales of Skelton,’ *Poetical Works of John Skelton*, lxxiii.

these poets, simply that they had not been honoured publicly in the same way as he had been). Like Dante in *Inferno*, Skelton is welcomed into this group as an associate member; Gower calls him 'brother' (400) and assures him of his place in 'our collage above the sterry sky' (403); Chaucer, in uncharacteristically laborious terms, tells Skelton that their company has decided they should bring him before the Queen of Fame to claim the place for which he has been appointed; Lydgate laments that his brother-poets have left him nothing to say (could this be intended as a literary joke?) except to announce that Skelton should be appointed prothonatory, or chief recorder, of Fame's court. This makes Skelton responsible for the fame of the other poets who are named in *The Garlande* (and leaves him two degrees removed from Chaucer's poets in the *House of Fame*, who are responsible not for their own fame, but only that of their subject matter). It is something of a meta-fictional joke that Skelton, the author seeking fame, should be the chief recorder of the names of the famous (which in Anglo-Norman Law, would actually make him the judge or chief official at court). We could either read this as a supreme act of literary egotism (to be mentioned in Skelton's works is to be made famous) or, more sympathetically, as a comic destabilization of the authority on which assertions of fame are made.

If the initial impulse motivating *The Garlande* was a celebration of Skelton's achievements, in parts it reads more like a defence of them: an attempt by Skelton to justify his place in literary tradition to the critics with whom he is always shadowboxing. As with other Skelton poems, the intention of *The Garlande* seems deliberately veiled in parts suggesting buried meanings. The Latin interpolations, number games and cryptic allusions, can be hard to decipher, and the poet frequently engages in shadow-boxing with various hidden, and not so hidden, competitors. The

background to such quarrels is hidden from us (at least within the text itself) suggesting, perhaps, that Skelton expected to reach a readership already primed on its competitive contexts. The description of laureate poets in Phebus' company are described as 'orators and poets' (454, *passim*), and throughout the poem Skelton has others (Dame Pallas, Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, Occupation) articulate a defence against challenges to his own role as poet. The initial discussion between Pallas and the Quene of Fame as to whether this poet is fit for Fame's court begins with a defence by Pallas of Skelton's alleged idleness, 'dullness', his attacks on vice and his parabolic obscurity. Skelton is said to be lazy in purchasing his fame, lacking the impetus although not the talent to write (although the later list of works renders this statement ironical). Pallas interprets such dullness as the silence of the virtuous man in the company of some of Fame's more disreputable entourage. The obscurity for which Skelton is criticised is defended as the prerogative of the poet: 'a poete somtyme may for his pleasure taunt, / Spekyng in paroblis' (100-1) (a defence profitably applied to a poem like *Speke Parott*.) As for the reproving of vice, Pallas tries to win sympathy for her poet by reminding us that some of the greatest classical authors were criticised for similar faults. Like his perspective on fame, Skelton's attitude towards his critics and competitors in *The Garlande* is alternately playful and serious. There is a degree of humour in Skelton's reference to Gaguin frowning on Skelton 'full angerly and pale' (375) in the great company of poets, but despite this taunting reference to the poet, Skelton embraces him within the fold of laureates. Far more confusing is the presence of the vilified Statham in the garden (unless we concede that there must always be a serpent in paradise). It is not at all clear what Statham has done to merit a place there or even if Statham is a writer.

In the discussion between Dame Pallas and the Queen of Fame there is an extensive, and at first puzzling aside on why Fame should have included Aeschines in her list of the famous. Aeschines was famously routed by the greatest orator, Demosthenes, in an oratorical competition in Athens after which he retired from Athenian public life. Fame argues that although Aeschines has been vanquished, ‘yet was he not shamyd’ (161), and his honour, though lessened, still remains because he was defeated only by the best orator in the world, and was subsequently magnanimous enough to perpetuate Demosthenes’ fame by praising him. The rivalry between Demosthenes and Aeschines provides a pertinent backdrop to the defensive tone of *The Garlande* in this respect. Aeschines had challenged Ctesiphon’s proposal that Demosthenes be awarded a golden crown for his service to the Athenian state, forcing Demosthenes to defend his worthiness to accept this honour in a public oration, *On the Crown*. Skelton’s poem is similarly a defence of his worthiness to wear his laurel and like Demosthenes the author displays some awkwardness at the thought of being forced to praise himself in his own defence (‘if he gloryously publisse his matter, / Then men wyll say how he doth but flatter’; 83-4). It is possible that we should view some of Skelton’s opponents as playing the role of Aeschines, a loser of the poetic contest who has nonetheless demonstrated his manhood by struggling with the victor. Such a reading might explain Gaguin’s presence in the company of poets and why Statham is in the company of Phoebus in the Laurel tree arbour. However, the fact that Statham is not named directly in the text of the poem could also suggest that, in Skelton’s view, Statham does not even deserve the derivative fame that he might accrue from having been celebrated as Skelton’s opponent.

David Carlson has demonstrated how Robert Whittington’s *Lauri Apud Palladem Expostulatio* (printed in 1521 as the last section of his *AntiLycon*) shares a

number of ideas and themes with Skelton's *Garland of Laurel*, indicating that the two authors may have shared manuscripts.¹¹⁷ Whittington makes Laurus, the Laurel, a character in this work, bring a complaint on Whittington's behalf: a case that is upheld by Pallas and Apollo, and ends with the nine muses producing a set of poetic tirades against Whittington's opponent, Lily. Although Whittington's poem is much shorter and simpler than Skelton's, Carlson notes that 'the two poems have in common as their central organizing conceit a quasi-juridical process, whereby ancient deities and correlative personified abstractions - the Queen of Fame and Laurus - seek to reach and render judgement in matters pertaining to the reputations of the authors of the fictions in which they appear as characters.'¹¹⁸ However, whereas Whittington's case is decided in his favour, Skelton's favourable decision is deferred, and ultimately undercut, by the tonal and formal complexities of the *Garlande* which render it less certain and more playful in its attitude to literary fame.

It is interesting that it is a group of native poets who present Skelton to the Queen of Fame for laureation. Unlike Chaucer, Skelton focuses on a specifically English corner of fame in the gate of *Anglea*. Although Skelton notes that the authors in the great company of *poetis laureate* are from many different nations, a special bond is set up between Skelton and these three English poets indicating that Skelton probably viewed them as mentors and exemplars for his poetic career. There are no English poets after Lydgate and none of Henry VII's court poets are named specifically. Gower makes it clear that it is Skelton who stands in the line of succession after Lydgate in restoring the fortune of English letters:

Bycause that ye encrease and amplify

¹¹⁷ David R. Carlson, 'Skelton's 'Garland of Laurel' and Robert Whittington's 'Lauri Apud Palladem Expostulatio', *RES* ns 42.167 (1991): 417-424.

¹¹⁸ Carlson, 'Skelton's 'Garland of Laurel', 421-22.

The brutid Britons of Brutus Albion,

That welny was loste when that we were gone. (404-6)

This puts Skelton in communion with an imaginary company of past poets, not any contemporary ones. Those contemporaries who do appear are viewed as critics or competitors. In this respect, it may be significant that Skelton's attitude to Robert Gaguin is (by default, perhaps) probably the most positive of his poetic responses to contemporary poets with whom he had some contact. Surprisingly, figures like Bernard Andre and Carmeliano are not named in *The Garlande of Laurell*, but – as previously noted – Gaguin does appear, although he is frowning. This may have been a literary joke: Gaguin, the opponent of England, cannot stomach such a fiercely patriotic poet as Skelton. But nevertheless Skelton includes him alongside Poggio Bracciolini in his list of laureate poets, suggesting his respect for this literary opponent.

Looking at the parallels between Skelton's work and Chaucer's *House of Fame*, we could argue that there is a comic contrast intended between the reasons for which Skelton *ought* to be given the laurel, and the reasons that are actually offered to the reader. Skelton seems unaware of, or else unable to bridge, the obvious disjunction between the ordinary, disreputable petitioners for fame and those, like himself, petitioning for fame as a poet. Nor is his Queen of Fame a particularly attractive character (compared, say, with Hawes' 'goodly lady' Fame in the *Pastime of Pleasure*; 156).¹¹⁹ Chaucer, it will be remembered, adopts a standoffish attitude to Fame. He understands that she is fickle and refuses to risk distortion of his character by courting her favour. For Skelton, on the other hand, even Pallas's recommendation

¹¹⁹ See Hawes, *Pastime* 155-161.

is not enough to become a laureate poet. The only way he can achieve his fame is by self-assertion: thrusting himself forward amongst the other poets at the outset in language which echoes that of the *Envoy to Scogan* (where Chaucer's sleeping muse is no longer put forth 'in prees'; 40), charming the ladies and finally crashing the canon by sheer quantity of poetry.

This approach, however, seems to be legitimised in Fame's court. Fame's comment: 'In ovr courte, ye wote wele, his name can not ryse / But if he wryte oftener than ones or twyse' (1154-5) takes an amusingly mechanistic view of literary greatness. The poem's rather humorous juxtaposition of impressively weighty works with slight ones make it look as if volume is all that matters (though if we take Skelton's own commentary into account, he may have valued the 'slighter' works as much as the 'weighty' ones). We could of course interpret Fame's words as a more serious comment on the means of winning fame as a late medieval poet. In practical terms, the more that is written the greater the chance that some of it may be preserved through a family of manuscripts into the next generation. As mentioned earlier, it had become an established practice for ambitious poets to give a catalogue of their poetry in at least one of their poems, presumably to record something of their corpus and literary reputation for later generations.

The list of Skelton's works contains poems on a vast number of subjects and includes many different modes of discourse: 'Diologgis of Ymagynacyoun' and 'Automedon of Loves Meditacyon' alongside mirth-making 'trifles' such as 'Manerly Margery Maystres Mylke and Ale'; an English grammar; a Latin epitaph; and a ballad about a mustard tart. A number of the poems are in the Skelton canon as we know it today, but a greater majority are lost or possibly never existed. Scattergood discusses the possibility that the list may be partly parodic in his essay on *The Garlande* and

Chaucerian tradition.¹²⁰ Given that the records of the Chaucerian canon with which Skelton was familiar probably included works that his generation, like ours, would not have known, inventing extra works for his own canon might have been a good joke to make at posterity's expense (and one in keeping with Chaucerian humour). However, Skelton was entering the final stage of his poetic career in 1523 and probably *could* have penned all of these works he mentions if he had been writing since his twenties, and if he had, this would not have been without precedent. A contemporary catalogue of Bernard André's work lists forty-six items of a similar diversity: various educational treatises, poems, the official chronicles of Henry VII, a number of religious pieces and an epitaph for the young Prince Arthur.¹²¹ It could be argued that this scale of output was more or less expected from anyone contending to be a laureate poet. Lydgate, the last writer to attain national standing as an official poet commenting on contemporary events, had already set other fifteenth-century poets a formidable standard.

Skelton's court of fame contrasts with that of Gavin Douglas' *Palice of Honour*, another medieval dream vision that concerns the pursuit of fame, in which the dreamer is protected from the wrath of Venus by Calliope, Skelton's own patron-muse. While humour (at the expense of the dreamer, and of Venus and her court) is undoubtedly present in Douglas' poem, the understanding of fame it presents is in a number of ways more stable, positive and idealised than Skelton's. For Douglas, fame is transmuted into honour, linked directly to the practice of virtue, and is not measured by worldly success. In fact the progress towards Honour (who, unlike Fame, is a male figure) is also a progress towards clarity and understanding for the dreamer, leading

¹²⁰ Scattergood, 'Skelton's Garlande,' 131.

¹²¹ This Latin catalogue is from BL MS. Arsenal 418 and is reprinted in Nelson, 239-42.

him to write his poem in praise of honour. In the mid-part of the *Palice* there is a long description of the Muses' procession, 'Ane heuinly rout' (787), and laurel-crowned court that delights the dreamer and lifts his doleful spirits. Here he is introduced to:

[...] the court rethoricall

Of polit termys, sang poetical (835-36)

Like Skelton's dreamer, he watches as a great crowd of famous poets and scholars process past him. Douglas' 'court rethoricall' also contains a mixture of classical and contemporary poets. Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate appear again. Lydgate, interestingly, rides 'musand him allone' (921) suggesting an identification with his self-caricature in the *Siege of Thebes*. But there are no English poets listed after this. (Skelton himself is not mentioned, but perhaps his literary success by 1513 had not been notable enough for Douglas to include him, or perhaps he would not have included such an anti-Scottish poet!). Douglas concentrates on the contemporary poets of his own nation as the real 'makars' of this period. A Scottish triad emerges in three of the 'flyters' mentioned earlier:

Gret Kennedy and Dunbar, □it undede,

And Quynntyne with ane huttok on his hede (923-24)

The dreamer is granted a reprieve from Venus at the request of Calliope, who then assigns a nymph to transport him on a journey which ends at the Muses' pavillion, where he joins a feast with great writers and hears Ovid and Virgil reciting stories. Here, also, a humorous note of discord is introduced with character sketches of some

of the poets. Juvenal stands alone like a jester, scorning every man who passes; Martial acts as the cook; and a snarling Poggio Bracciolini spits on Lorenzo Valla.

For Skelton as for Douglas, the Muses' court is a space of joy and recreation, but the ending of *The Garlande* and *The Palice* are quite different.¹²² *The Garland* builds to a climax of apotheosis, in which Skelton is honoured by Fame and her court of poets and then, in a final paragraph, wakes from his dream and then wipes his eyes 'for to make them clere' (1512) (which could suggest, perhaps, that an encounter with Fame clouds one's judgment). Douglas' dreamer wakes, and reaches back imaginatively to his encounter with Honour, praising this 'Gem vertuus, maist precius, gudlyest' (2117) as a pearl of great price which should not be mislaid: 'He docht, rycht nocht, quhilk out of thocht, the tynis' (2127). He then asks for help from Honour to free him from his gloomy position and to be his prize, but there is no certainty that he will get it.

The boundaries between real and ideal literary communities blur in *The Garlande*. Skelton's sense of audience may well have changed between his composition of the verses in 1495 and 1523 when the work was printed. By 1523, however, his purposes for the poem may have shifted, prompting him to release it in print rather than circulate it in manuscript. This begs the question of who exactly Skelton intended for his audience by the time Fakes printed the poem. The Countess of Surrey and her ladies? Enemies of the poet like Barclay and Statham? The 'Latin men' that he speaks of in his envoys? Wolsey, who together with Henry VIII, is addressed in flattering terms towards the end of the poem? Or was he thinking chiefly of posterity? By this time Skelton was in his sixties so *The Garlande* would read

¹²² I discuss the ending of the original poem here, not the later envoys and additions.

naturally as a memorial to his poetic career, and the long catalogue of works which the poet gives us in the latter half of the poem strongly suggests that he wanted to preserve them for his posthumous reputation. As Brownlow suggests, 'Skelton evidently intended *The Laurel* to enact his poetic career in microcosm.'¹²³ However, as we have seen, its attitude towards literary fame is not straightforward.

The earliest version of the poem may have been prompted by the wish of the Countess of Surrey and her friends to celebrate Skelton's laureations by Oxford, Louvain and Cambridge universities.¹²⁴ This courtly circle at the household of the countess, embedded at the centre of Skelton's dream vision, seems to have had some level of actuality as the forum for Skelton's collection of lyrics to individual ladies. Julia Boffey has drawn attention to the existence of a collection of lyrics to ladies compiled by one Humphrey Newton, including some of those named in the *Garlande*, that seems to have been intended for such a context, which would corroborate Skelton's picture in *The Garlande* of Master Newton, a scribe or clerk attached to the household, 'Dyvysynge in picture, by his industrious wit, / Of my laurel the process every whitte' (1098-1099).¹²⁵ This would suggest that the heart of the poem revolved around an actual social occasion of which Skelton was part, and which involved a playful literary commission to earn this particular garland or chaplet from the Countess and her ladies through writing poems in their honour -- a process that obviously parallels the symbolic gesture of earning of the laurel in an academic setting through the composing of verses.

Among the fragments appended to the end of his vision, the first envoy to *The Garlande* directs the poem more particularly to a community of Latin men analogous

¹²³ F. W. Brownlow, *The Book of the Laurel* (Newark, NJ: U of Delaware P, 1990) 11.

¹²⁴ For details see Scattergood ed., *The Complete Poems* 496.

¹²⁵ Julia Boffey, ' "Withdrawe your hand": The Lyrics of *The Garland of Laurel* from Manuscript to Print,' *Trivium* 31 (1999): 81-83. A John Newton attached to the Howard household who may have been a copyist has also been identified by Walker, *Politics* 20.

to the 'Lettred Men' of *Phyllyp Sparowe*. This envoy, couched in the tumbling Skeltonic metre and haphazard syntax which sometimes obscures the logical connections of its subject matter, is recognisable in its employment of the traditional formula of 'go little book' and submitting the work to literary friends and/or reputable men for their correction and protection:

Welcome shall ye
 To sum men be;
 For Latin warkis
 Be good for clerkis,
 Yet now and then
 Sum Latin men
 May happily loke
 Upon your boke,
 And so procede
 In you to rede,
 That so indeed
 Your fame may sprede
 In length and brede (1540-1552)

Skelton seems to differentiate between his book, and 'serious' Latin works, but likewise indicates that his ideal audience is a learned one, and that such an audience may do most to spread his fame. He appears to be anticipating the reaction to the work of such 'Latin men' in this envoy as a whole. He fears envy and obloquy from some quarters (reflected in the comment that the book will be welcome to 'sum

men'). However, he also asks for their correction, and for them to spy out 'Any worde defacid / That myght be rasid' (1581-82) (echoing his own judgment of his work titled 'Apollo that Whirleth Up his Chair'), concluding with the hope that the book will 'Contynew still / With there good wyll' (1585-86).

The discourse of *The Garlande* clearly signals its special availability to a learned public in a number of respects, leading Brownlow to comment that Skelton must be regarded as an intellectual first and foremost, not as a courtier.¹²⁶ Skelton refers to a considerable body of learning on topics like hunting and astronomic lore in the text of the poem itself, and the poem also includes a variety of numerological codes and puzzles designed for the contemplation of a peculiarly engaged and sophisticated set of readers. The manner in which Skelton glosses his vernacular text in *The Garlande* with Latin quotations is playful in ways that would appeal particularly to those erudite in both scriptural and classical learning, and, as Griffiths argues, tends to complicate or destabilize meaning in ways which provoke a more knowing and interactive relationship with their audience -- in effect, the *Garlande* (like *Speke Parott*) is a poem designed to cultivate a coterie readership.¹²⁷ For example, at the end of the poem when the crowds of poets gather to commend Skelton the poet includes a gloss in Latin which is derived from the book of Daniel: 'millia millium [ministrabant ei] et decies millies centena millia Ac. Apocalypsis.'¹²⁸ Here the comparison to the situation of the *Garlande*, in which the poet also finds himself the subject of judgment, is whimsically bombastic, suggesting Skelton's ironic detachment from this scene of his apotheosis and his willingness to undercut the seriousness of the poetic ambitions it voices.

¹²⁶ Brownlow, *The Book of the Laurel* 49.

¹²⁷ Griffiths, 117-128.

¹²⁸ The full context of the verse, in English, is as follows: 'A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened.' (Dan. 7:10: KJV)

By the time *The Garlande* was printed the sense of audience expanded again to include official addressees (the King and Wolsey) and posterity. The original contents of the poem were now envisaged as a part of Skelton's authorised canon:

What began as intimate lyrics of commendation, which we seem implicitly invited to imagine as single leaves or bills hastily written out by the poet and handed round personally to individual women, are turned into part of the treatise or book which is *The Garland of Laurell*, next made to feature in Occupation's retrospectively constructed canon of Skelton's 'works,' and eventually printed by Fakes for open sale as something 'studiously devised by master Skelton, poet laureat.'¹²⁹

This process, as Boffey suggests, has implications for our understanding of Skelton's own evolving conception of his audience. The final version of *The Garlande* represents Skelton's attempt to weave his own literary career into a unified whole, mediating between real audiences, who are themselves fictionalised in his text, and those of posterity. The inclusion of fragments of other works, Skelton's English and Latin glosses, and the gesture of integrating material pertaining to old and new literary quarrels, thus function as accretions to this original anthology of lyrics which are likewise submitted to a tying up process in which the whole of Skelton's *oeuvre* is gathered together and represented in a single work, unified thematically by its meditation on literary fame. *The Garlande* itself thus encapsulates Skelton's fragmentary legacy.

¹²⁹ Julia Boffey, "'Withdrawe your hand",' 82.

Conclusion

Colin Burrow has suggested that ‘Skelton’s whole panoply of laurels, muses and inspiration was more of a substitute for courtly favour than a reflection of it,’ and it has been argued that Skelton’s seeming obsession with literary fame, his remarks about the dignity of the role of poet laureate, and, ultimately, his investment in a poem about his own apotheosis are indicative of his personal insecurity in the face of his lack of a supportive audience at court.¹³⁰ To some extent such arguments are unanswerable, depending, as they do, on a psychological reading of confidence as part of a compensation strategy, perhaps unconscious, on the poet’s part. Analysis of *The Garlande*, however, shows that the poem is not a straightforwardly self-congratulatory ego-trip.

There are also some factors that must qualify or complicate such a reading when we evaluate the substantiality of Skelton’s ‘panoply of laurels’ in the context of the literary activities of his fellow poets and scholars. Dark allusions to hidden enemies and the insecurities of court life are reflected in the situation of most writers associated with the court in this period, who never felt themselves entirely secure from its ‘venomous tongues’ and power-politics. In spite of this, some kind of interest in Skelton’s writing is shown at every level of courtly society (from the monarch, to aristocratic coteries like that of the Howards, to the gentlemen whose employment connected them to the court). Neither is the mercantile element of Skelton’s London audiences necessarily diametrically opposed to the courtly -- indeed, both of these elite audiences often interacted with each other. Skelton’s ideal audience was probably composed of an elite body of clerics, scholars and educated courtiers who

¹³⁰ Burrow, ‘Literature and Politics,’ 797.

circulated in London society, and who constituted the kind of discerning readership he sought to un-riddle his more obscure writings. Although he clearly encountered criticism from within this community of intellectuals, it remained the community he appeals to most consistently in his writing.

In the *Garlande* Skelton commits himself to an ideal community of laureates, but more playfully than Lydgate, for example, does. This commitment to an imagined community -- that of Calliope's household -- evidently outweighed his affiliations to actual, contemporary literary communities on some level. However, Skelton's self-confidence, his interest in poetic fame and in his own reputation, and his desire to elevate and ennoble the role of the poet in society are not idiosyncrasies. As we have seen, he shares this preoccupation (and often the same kind of rhetoric) with many of his contemporaries, while injecting his own brand of humour and energy into the poetry of fame. Barclay's rejection of the laurel as a symbol of literary egotism is actually more radical in this respect as a signal of his refusal, perhaps disingenuously, to play the game of fame in which many of his fellow poets, Skelton included, were so deeply immersed.

6. The New Company

As specified in the introduction, this thesis has sought to situate the work of a number of key English poets between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries in the context of particular literary communities with which they aligned themselves on personal and social levels. It has explored the way in which their individual consciousness of such communities, both real and ideal, shaped the direction of their literary output, and especially their sense of audience; and it has concentrated on those congenial or peer-based communities that could have provided an alternative source of support and recognition of their poetic activities. It concludes that these communities were indeed important in offering poets encouragement and distinct socio-literary identities. For each of the poets on whom I have chosen to focus, a consideration of the bearing of such communities on their literary development has proved fruitful in contextualising their work as a whole, as well as producing new contexts of interpretation for reading individual poems. This concluding chapter will briefly examine some issues of friendship and communality in the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey as a way of considering the transition from medieval to Renaissance literary communities. In it I will be focussing particularly on notions of friendship and literary culture at the early Tudor court, Wyatt's epistolary satires and Surrey's appropriation of Wyatt's poetic legacy.

In a way we are asked to engage with a literary community over and above the individual talent when engaging with Wyatt's poetry. Wyatt's canon is extremely unstable, his surviving poems embedded in coterie manuscripts and early print anthologies alongside those of other writers from a courtly milieu. A number of

poems from these sources can be established as Wyatt's on the strength of notes in his autograph copy-book (BL MS. Egerton 2711) or by inscriptions from friends and contemporaries that seem reliable, but nonetheless a large body of non-ascribed or problematically ascribed poems remain to tax the ingenuity of his editors, reminding us that Wyatt himself emerges only as one of the more sharply defined faces of that shadowy group of amateur poets whose work is preserved in early Tudor verse compilations. Any attempt to separate out genuine Wyatt poems from the anonymous offerings in these collections is fraught with difficulties. This seems to have been the case even for the first editors of Wyatt's lyrics. Richard Tottel's *Miscellany* of 1557 shifts poems to and from the Wyatt canon across two editions of the same year, suggesting that already some of the Wyatt lyrics in circulation were less recognisably Wyatt's than others. In the final analysis, the identity of the men and women who composed and copied poems into the main manuscript sources for Wyatt's work (as well as the Egerton MS, these are BL MS. Add. 17492 (the 'Devonshire MS'), Arundel Castle MS. Harrington Temp. Eliz. (the 'Arundel-Harrington MS'), and TCD MS. 160 (the 'Blage MS')), remain, at least to a later generation, insistently collective.¹ Kenneth Muir tacitly acknowledges this by titling his edition of previously unpublished poems from the Blage MS as the works of 'Sir Thomas Wyatt and his circle.'² These problems of canonicity may be frustrating for those who want to study Wyatt's work in isolation, and may also undermine assessment of Wyatt's individual contribution to poetic tradition. However, the indivisibility of the Wyatt poems themselves from their manuscript contexts encourages an exploration of his poetic career in terms of the social contexts that encouraged and enabled it.

¹ In subsequent references these manuscripts will be referred to as the Egerton MS, the Devonshire MS, the Arundel-Harrington MS, and the Blage MS. For further discussion of all four manuscripts see Richard Harrier, *The Canon of Sir Thomas Wyatt's Poetry*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975).

² Kenneth Muir ed., *Unpublished Poems of Thomas Wyatt and His Circle Edited from the Blage Manuscript* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1961).

The decision of Wyatt and Surrey to circulate their poems in manuscript form during their own lifetime signalled their wish to write for a coterie community, and, for gentleman amateurs, the desire to avoid the 'stigma' of print.³ The manuscript collections of Wyatt's poems all belong to a broadly 'courtly' milieu. The Egerton MS, which has been taken as the most authoritative source for Wyatt's poetry, was intended by the poet as an album of fair copies of his poems, initially executed by secretaries and then added to and corrected by Wyatt himself.⁴ An analysis of the inks used in different parts of the manuscript reveals that Wyatt took the manuscript to Europe with him in 1537 and that a number of poems were composed, or at any rate copied, there.⁵ When he died, it is thought to have passed to his eldest son, who briefly lent it to Nicholas Grimald who edited Wyatt's psalms for publication, and then is likeliest to have passed to the Harington family during the younger Wyatt's imprisonment in the Tower of London. At this time Sir John Harington of Stepney was also imprisoned in the Tower, and clearly had access to the Egerton MS, because he copied poems from it into his own manuscript anthology, the Arundel-Harington MS.

This latter manuscript, a family-owned anthology of verse compiled over two generations at the Tudor court by Sir John Harington and his son, reflects the interests of the Haringtons in identifying themselves with a courtly milieu, and their 'participation in the recreations of an educated elite.'⁶ The elder Harington was in service as a musician at Henry VIII's court from 1538, and so would have had some

³ Pynson published Wyatt's translation of Plutarch's *De Tranquillitate et Securitate Animi*, *The Quyetie of Mynde*, for Queen Catherine in 1528. No other work of Wyatt's was published during his lifetime. Surrey took the unusual step of publishing a short collection of laments for Wyatt (under the title *An Excellent Epitaffe of Syr Thomas Wyat, With Two Other Compendious Dytties, Wherin Are Touchyd and Set Forth the State of Mannes Lyfe*) shortly after Wyatt's death in 1542.

⁴ Harrier, 3.

⁵ Further see Jason Powell, 'Thomas Wyatt's Poetry in Embassy: Egerton 2711 and the Production of Literary Manuscripts Abroad,' *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 67.2 (2004): 261-283.

⁶ Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995) 63.

personal knowledge of Wyatt, Surrey and their friends at court. The Haringtons collected verse by both poets, as well as other gentlemen-amateurs like Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville, and they may have also been responsible for preserving a letter from Wyatt to his son. The Blage MS, dating to the 1530s and 1540s, also contains poems written by Harington. Although it has been discredited as a significant repository of Wyatt poems, this manuscript is also of interest because Wyatt's friend and fellow poet, Sir George Blage, owned it for a time. Besides entering a number of his own poems in the manuscript, Blage marked a few of the other poems in the collection as Wyatt's.

The Devonshire MS belongs to members of the Howard family and their friends, and also dates to the 1530s and 1540s. Most of its contents are love-lyrics, but it also contains Wyatt's first and second epistolary satires. The chief compilers were women: Surrey's sister, Mary; his friend, Mary Shelton (who seems to have had charge of the manuscript most often); and Margaret Douglas (whose doomed love for Surrey's uncle, Thomas Howard, was given expression through its contents). Surrey himself must have known about the collection, although none of his poems appear in holograph in the manuscript. The manuscript indicates a dynamic and interactive engagement of its compilers with its contents, as Julia Boffey notes: 'some of the contents actually take the form of communications between them.'⁷ Shelton's annotations in the manuscript may suggest the compilation was viewed as 'an album of courtly games, verbal and musical,' designed for recital and performance within this close-knit group.⁸

⁷ Boffey, *Love Lyrics* 8.

⁸ Harrier, 28-9.

Wyatt, Surrey and the New Company

George Puttenham, in his *Arte of English Poesie*, looked back on Wyatt and Surrey as the 'two chieftains' of a 'new company of courtly makers' who had 'sprang up' in the latter part of Henry VIII's reign.⁹ As John Stevens notes, a company of courtly makers could not be a new phenomenon in English literary culture.¹⁰ However, although the disjunction between Wyatt and Surrey as 'courtly' writers and their older contemporary, Skelton, was not as radical as Puttenham wished to believe, his perception of the novelty of Wyatt and Surrey may reflect felt distinctions between these poets as gentleman-amateurs and household-poets like Skelton. The function of poetry for the gentlemen-amateurs (though not, in themselves, a new phenomenon) differed in some respects from that of the household-poets of the fifteenth century whose poetic talents could be utilised as part of their service to the court, and who hoped to gain patronage for them through official and hieratical channels.¹¹

Whether new or not, Puttenham's comments identify Wyatt and Surrey as part of a discernible literary community -- a 'company' of poets at court. This begs the question of to what extent their contemporaries viewed them as such. Kenneth Muir draws attention to the court as a source of literary friendships in his assertion that:

The courtiers with whom Wyatt was on intimate terms were nearly all poets, though their verse, if it has survived at all, is hidden in the various collections

⁹ Vickers ed., *Renaissance Literary Criticism* 210.

¹⁰ Stevens, *Music and Poetry* 147.

¹¹ Patricia Thomson, *Sir Thomas Wyatt and His Background* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1964) 32.

of anonymous verse and in the manuscript collections containing Wyatt's own.¹²

J. W. Saunders, in his *Profession of English Letters*, gives an impressive list of both prominent and lesser courtiers, fifty in total, known to be poets between 1520 and 1650, including, among Wyatt's own friends and acquaintances: Surrey, Leland and Sir Francis Bryan. Others not mentioned by Saunders, but also associated with Wyatt include Sir George Blage and George Boleyn (later Lord Rochford, and a neighbour of the Wyatts in Kent).¹³ However, the sheer number of courtiers who exhibited literary interests in this period says more about the fashion for humanist letters at court (a marked feature of Henry VII's court also) and does not help us identify any particular company within this wider community.

The households of the nobility, landed gentry and upper middle classes emerged as important centres of literary production for the Tudor culture of this period. With this in mind, we could perhaps draw a distinction between occasional and vocational writers among the poets of the courtly milieu, placing Wyatt and Surrey in the latter category as men who cultivated literature more seriously, in spite of their status as gentleman amateurs. Surrey himself had personal connections with a number of poets and scholars: among them, Thomas Challoner, George Blage, John Leland, Hadrianus Julianus, John Clerke, and John Cheke (who wrote an elegy for Surrey after his death). Thomas Churchyard was also engaged as a page in Surrey's household from 1537 to 1541. W. A. Sessions suggests that Surrey viewed Surrey House in Norfolk as a retreat from which he and they could indulge in literary and

¹² Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1963) 8.

¹³ Saunders, *English Letters* 35-36.

intellectual interests, and that he acted as both a patron and participant of his own literary circle.¹⁴

In his laments for Wyatt published shortly after his death, *Naeniae In Mortem Thomae Viati Equitis Incomparabilis* (1542), the antiquary John Leland declared that:

Nobilitas didicit te praeceptore Britanna

Carmina per varios scribere posse modos. (110-111) ¹⁵

(Wyatt our Nobles as their master take,

Who taught them songs of different kinds to make)¹⁶

Such comments probably reflect the example set by Wyatt's poetic practice, rather than describing an actual school of literary disciples gathered around Wyatt at court. However, Leland also identifies three friends whom Wyatt had chosen specially from other men at court, and with whom he probably shared literary interests:

Candido amicorum numerum dedit aula Viato,

Sed tres praecipue selegit amicus amicos.

Excoluit largi Poyningi nobile pectus,

Ingenio Blagi delectabatur acuto,

Doctrinae titulo gratus Masonius albo. (50-54)

¹⁴ Sessions, 175-177.

¹⁵ John Leland, *Naeniae In Mortem T. Viati Equitis Incomparabilis* (London, 1542). A scholarly edition of this text is available online: John Leland, *Naeniae In Mortem Thomae Viati*, ed. Dana F. Sutton, *The Philological Museum*, 28 October 2007. <<http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/naeniae/text.html>>. All references to the *Naeniae* will be to this edition and will be cited by line number.

¹⁶ Muir, Appendix A, *Life and Letters* 266. All subsequent citations of the poem in English will be from this translation and will be cited by page number.

(The Court gave spotless Wyatt many friends,
 But three, above all, he chose out himself:
 He honoured Poynings for his generous heart,
 He took delight in Blage's subtle mind,
 He valued Mason for his radiant learning.) (p.263-64)

Poynings (Sir John Poyntz) is the addressee of two of his epistolary satires. George Blage, a radical protestant, wrote a number of poems which are preserved alongside Wyatt's in the Blage MS, and was also a friend of Surrey and an addressee of one of his poems. John Mason was a friend of Thomas More, who had procured him a royal exhibition to study in Paris. He accompanied Wyatt on embassy abroad, and their intimacy during this period was such that Wyatt's enemy, Edmund Bonner, remarked sarcastically on their closeness.¹⁷

In spite of a difference in age of almost fifteen years, and a marked difference in social rank, Wyatt seems to have been friendly with Surrey during 1540-1542, the final years of his life. Surrey has been identified as the 'Mine Earl' of Wyatt's 'Sometime the pride of my assured truth,' a poem which Sessions interprets as a response to Surrey's intervention through his Howard cousin Queen Catherine on Wyatt's behalf in 1541, when the older poet was again imprisoned in the Tower.¹⁸ Both Surrey and Leland were clearly keen to establish links between the poet Earl and Wyatt, publishing commemorative poems shortly after his death. Leland dedicates his *Naeniae* to Surrey in a way that suggests a close relationship between the two men, which is configured as a spiritual as much as a literary affinity:

¹⁷ Muir, *Life and Letters* 68.

¹⁸ Sessions, 242-44.

Accipe regnorum comes illustrissime carmen,
 Quo mea Musa tuum laudavit moesta Viatum
 Non expectato sublatum funere terris.
 Nominis ille tui dum vixit magnus amator,
 Tu modo non vivum coluisti candidus illum,
 Verum etiam vita defunctum carmine tali
 Collaudisti, quale suum Chaucerus avitae
 Dulce decus linguae vel iuste agnosceret esse.
 Perge, Houarde, precor virtute referre Viatum,
 Dicerisque tuae clarissima gloria stirpis (6-15)

(Accept, illustrious Earl, this mournful song
 Wherein I praised your Wyatt, whom in brief space
 Death brought beneath the earth. He greatly loved
 Your name. You revered him while he was alive
 And since his death have given him due praise
 In such a song as Chaucer had approved
 As sweet, and worthy of his mother-tongue.
 Continue, Howard, his virtues to revive,
 And you'll confirm it by your honoured race.) (p. 262)

urrey is here presented as the successor of Wyatt (and, indeed Chaucer), who must
 like on Wyatt's mantle -- that is, his poetic and personal virtues -- if he is to confirm
 is worthiness for this role. Yet it is also a dedication in which Leland makes the dead

Wyatt validate Surrey by affirming that ‘Nominis ille tui dum vixit magnus amator’ (While he lived, he was a great lover of your name), and in which Wyatt, in some sense, belongs to Surrey as ‘tuum Viatum’ in the same way as Wyatt claimed Surrey as ‘Mine Earl.’

Puttenham links the novelty of his company of courtly makers more decisively with a particular body of poetic practice when he alleges that Wyatt and Surrey, ‘having travelled into Italy,’ found inspiration there to polish the ‘homely’ and ‘vulgar’ condition of English poetry (although Surrey, in fact, never visited Italy), and that they were ‘novices newly crept out of the schools of Dante, Ariosto, and Petrarch.’¹⁹ Such comments reflect Wyatt’s reputation as the first imitator of Petrarch (although Chaucer had, in fact, already introduced some Petrarchan poems into the language) and of later Italian authors such as Serafino and Luigi Alamanni (and, through him, Ariosto). Surrey can be seen to graft his own poetic practice onto Wyatt’s in a number of respects, not only in his own translations from Italian models and experimentation with new verse forms, but in his adoption of Wyatt’s intimate mode of address in shorter lyrics to friends. He also followed Wyatt’s lead in making English versifications of a selection of psalms and of parts of the book of Ecclesiastes. However, his summary of Wyatt’s poetic achievement is secondary to his appreciation of Wyatt the man as a moral critic and figure of virtue, as Surrey’s four poems for Wyatt after his death make clear. Surrey’s sonnet for his friend, ‘Dyvers thy Death’ (one of the few poems of Surrey’s to be published during his lifetime as part of his ‘epitaph’ for Wyatt) does not even mention Wyatt’s poetic achievements. Likewise, his most extensive elegiac effort for the elder poet, ‘W. resteth here, that quick could never rest,’ mentions that achievement only in general terms in the fourth

⁹ Vickers ed., *Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 210.

stanza, although in a manner which acknowledges Wyatt's skill as a poetic innovator (27). Aside from the reference to an aphorism in Wyatt's poem to Sir Francis Bryan in Surrey's lines to Thomas Radcliffe (32), 'The Great Macedon' is the only one of Surrey's poems to engage with Wyatt's poetry in any detail. Here it is Wyatt's English versifications of the penitential psalms that attract Surrey's attention, not only for their piety, but in their ability to shame princes out of their 'synfull slepe' (14). Surrey's eagerness to identify with Wyatt the man for political and temperamental reasons is thus strongly apparent, and his interest in Wyatt as a literary figure is subordinated to this.

It was Surrey, more than Wyatt, who became the figurehead for a new company of Henrican courtier-poets marketed to a wider public in Tottel's *Miscellany* of 1557. As well as Wyatt, Surrey and Bryan, Tottel's representation of authors included Thomas, Lord Vaux; and 'Edward Somerset' (presumably Edward Seymour, also known as 'Protector Somerset'), who, according to Roger Ascham, was a noted patron of the arts. Several of the younger poets who featured in Tottel's anthology and early manuscript collections of Wyatt's work may also have been friendly with Wyatt in later years. He could have known John Harington of Stepney, who came into contact with the Egerton MS shortly after Wyatt's death, and Nicholas Grimald, who edited some of the Egerton MS, and features heavily in the first edition of Tottel's *Miscellany*.

Wyatt, Surrey and Contexts of Courtly Friendship

The unusual degree to which Wyatt's life experiences seem to animate his poetry have led some critics to suggest that his life and poetry should be treated 'as an

integrated whole.’²⁰ Tudor historians such as David Starkey and Susan Brigden have produced studies of Wyatt poems which argue for the efficacy of such literary evidence, where official letters and other historical documents fail, in offering private information as to the political activities and motivations of these men.²¹ Such critical enterprises must be balanced against our awareness of the conventions of representation that separate literary works, and especially poetry, from the non-literary, and of the impossibility of fully penetrating the workings of the closed group of friends and intimates for which such poetry was intended. However, what we know of the coterie contexts in which Wyatt and Surrey’s work was circulated suggest that life and literature were often bound together for the writers and readers in these elite manuscript communities. As Julia Boffey says of the Devonshire MS, the close relationship between the lives of its compilers and the manner and the matter of the poems they copied made it ‘less like a collection of courtly love lyrics put together for the purposes of compiling a ‘book’, and more like a sequence of letters, with a particularly, although not exclusively, personal application.’²² In this way the subjectivity and densely personal allusions of the lyric forms adopted by Wyatt, Surrey (and later Philip Sidney, and other gentlemen-amateurs) could become a way of encoding individual experiences of the machinations of the Tudor court for a coterie of friends who were fitted to understand them.

Joost Daalder notes that the figure of the treacherous mistress and the deceitful enemy at court are often virtually interchangeable in Wyatt’s poetry.²³ In the ballad

²⁰ Joost Daalder, introduction, *Collected Poems: Thomas Wyatt* (London: OUP, 1975) xiii.

²¹ See David Starkey, ‘The Court: Castiglione’s Ideal and Tudor Reality, Being a Discussion of Sir Thomas Wyatt’s “Satire Addressed to Sir Francis Bryan”,’ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 45 (1982): 232-38; Susan Brigden, ‘“The Shadow That You Know”: Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Francis Bryan at Court and in Embassy,’ *The Historical Journal* 39.1 (1996): 1-31.

²² Boffey, *Love Lyrics* 9.

²³ Daalder, xiii.

‘That Time That Mirth Did Steer My Ship,’ Wyatt’s mistress takes up her pen and writes to her distressed lover:

Then in my book wrote my mistress

‘I am yours, you may well be sure,

And shall be while my life doth dure.’ (5-7)²⁴

No sooner is this promise written, the lover tells us:

But she herself which then wrote that

Is now mine extreme enemy (8-9)

The lover’s inability to accept that the mistress who appears, momentarily, in his book cannot be as faithful as her written promise reflects Wyatt’s own mingled hope and cynicism concerning human constancy, and its embodiment in literature. Whereas the figure of the mistress often functions as an unstable presence in Wyatt’s poetry, Wyatt locates moments of stability and shared understanding within an audience of men similar to himself: men who can recognise, and imaginatively participate in, experiences of isolation, frustration, and ironic distance from the concerns of the court. Wyatt’s Italian models are also manipulated to allow this awareness of commonality to emerge. For example, the lover’s pursuit in no. 190 of Petrarch’s *Rime sparse* of the woman who, in Wyatt’s version, may or may not have been intended for Anne Boleyn, makes an appeal to shared masculine experience (of the hunt, and its appropriation as a metaphor for sexual pursuit) in its title and opening

²⁴ Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Sir Thomas Wyatt: The Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (London: Penguin, 1997) 127. All quotations from Wyatt’s poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

address, 'Whoso list to hunt [...]' (1). Although Surrey's lyrics are generally more sympathetic in their efforts to imagine the experience of love from female perspectives, he also produces a remarkably poignant account, in the persona of a friend, of his sympathy for another jilted lover in 'To dearely had I bought my grene and youthfull yeres.' Here the torment of the scorned lover, and of his friend in witnessing his torments are virtually indistinguishable.

The image of the friend, and the notion of friendship, is an animating one for both poets. Wyatt appeals to particular male friends at moments of heightened emotion in a way that shows him to be investing such friendships with the power to secure the self against its outside enemies, whether actual or psychological. This is the case, retrospectively, in 'The Pillar Perished' (an elegy for Cromwell), and in the lines to Sir Francis Bryan from the Tower, and in 'Sometime the Pride' (the poem to 'Mine Earl'). Despite gaining a more public readership subsequently, such communications retain their personal force. It may be significant that a number of the poems which are closely concerned with actual friendships, including Wyatt's first satire, Surrey's 'So Crewell Prison Howe Could Betyde, Alas' and his poem to George Blage from the Tower ('The soudde stormes that heave me to and froo'), derive from occasions of enforced rustication or imprisonment. Just as the epistolary poem makes the author present to the reader, it also makes the recipient present to the author, mitigating the loneliness and uncertainty of times of isolation by reaching out to an imagined communion and solidarity with the absent friend. In such cases friendship, and indeed the friend himself, comes to channel the author's hopes for the endurance of good faith in a world of suspicion.

Surrey invests the image of the friend with a mystically potent nostalgia for a lost world of the past, both personal and chivalric. The friend becomes a symbol of

the personal integrity that he saw as being threatened by Tudor factional politics. A number of Surrey's poems commemorate the death of particular friends: Wyatt himself, Thomas Clere, and Henry Fitzroy, the Duke of Richmond (Henry's bastard son by Elizabeth Blount, who was closely associated to the Howard family and married Surrey's sister). In 'So Crewell Prison,' Surrey speaks of the then-dead Richmond as his 'noble fere' (46) and remembers:

The secret thoughtes imparted with such trust,
 The wanton talke, the dvyers chaung of playe,
 The frendshipp sworne, eche promise kept so just,
 Wherwith we past the winter nightes awaye. (37-40)²⁵

Likewise, in 'Norfolk Sprang Thee, Lambeth Holds Thee Dead,' his elegy for Thomas Clere, Surrey speaks of the tender 'league' (6) of friendship between himself, Clere and Mary Shelton. The bonds of friendship are represented as an almost sacred union by Leland, who claims that his own friendship with Wyatt dated from their time together at Cambridge:

Me tibi coniunxit comitem gratissima Granta,
 Granta Camoenarum gloria, fama, decus.
 Dividet illa animos mors ingratissima nostros.
 Non faciet. Longum, chare Viate, vale. (38-41)

(By lovely Granta I was joined to you

²⁵ Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, *Poems*, ed. Emrys Jones, Clarendon Medieval and Tudor Ser. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964) 26. All quotations from Surrey's poems will be from this edition and will be cited by line number.

In friendship, Granta, the glory and renown
 And ornament of the Muses. Shall grim death
 Sever our minds? O let it not be so!) (263)

The claim that Wyatt and his friends experienced an affinity of *mind* is quite striking. Both Leland and Surrey focus on the image of Wyatt's mind as something to which they had a privileged access. In 'Dyvers thy death,' Surrey effectively draws a ring around Wyatt's dead body and himself as chief mourner, separating both off from Wyatt's (unnamed) enemies, and those who did not understand him as Surrey claims to have:

But I, that knew what harbourd in that head;
 What vertues rare were tempred in that breast;
 Honour the place that such a jewell bredd,
 And kysse the ground whereas thy coorse doth rest (9-12)

For Surrey, Wyatt's honourable death becomes an occasion for crowing at the enemies who wished dishonour for him, and – more laudably, perhaps – for meditating on the destructive factionalism of Tudor politics to which they were both privy. In this way, his poems of personal grief move beyond the death of the friend, using it as a springboard for a public dissection of the corruption of the state: a corruption felt in, and through, the loss of the friend (Richmond, Clere, Wyatt) and for which that loss is, in a peculiar sense, symptomatic.

More generally, the importance placed on private associations of friendship in these courtly communities, and their configuration in, and mediation through,

literature, may also reflect a turning inwards for security in the wake of the suspicions directed towards other, more public modes of associational community. In a study of the fashion for sentimental friendships within the humanist communities of sixteenth-century Europe, Peter Burke suggests that:

The invisible or 'imagined' community of friends (especially pairs of friends) linked by letters and occasional conviviality may [...] have offered some kind of substitute for the decline of such groups as the religious confraternities [and the craft-guilds, brothers-in-arms, and groups of young people threatened by cultural, economic and religious reforms]²⁶

The attraction of Cicero in humanist circles was in part an attraction to the modes of friendship he espoused, and there is evidence that Ciceronian models of aristocratic and intellectual male friendships formed an ingredient in the ideals of friendship upheld in courtly communities at this time. According to Cicero, friendship is most likely to occur between men of a similar age and social position, but older men may be friends with younger men and true friendship may exist between those of unequal social rank in such a way as to obliterate social distinctions (as, perhaps, in the case of Wyatt and Surrey). Friends should not be made through need or profit, but through an attraction to virtue, and only virtuous men can enjoy the higher kinds of friendship. The quality of one's friendships is therefore an indicator of one's moral character.

The elder John Harington translated Cicero's *De Amicitia* while he was imprisoned in the Tower between 1549 and 1550 (a popular text in the Renaissance as well as in the medieval period: of the 4-500 manuscript copies of it which survive, the

²⁶ Peter Burke, 'Humanism and Friendship in Sixteenth-Century Europe,' *Friendship in Medieval Europe*, ed. Haseldine, 270.

majority are Renaissance productions).²⁷ Harington's translation, printed by Berthellette in 1550 as *The Booke of Freendship of Marcus Tullie Cicero*, describes friendship as:

[...] the verie fellowship, wherein all thynges be, whiche men think to be wished after, as honestie, glorie, quietnes, and pleasure of mynde, so that where these be, there is the happy life and without these it can not be. (53^v)²⁸

Harington's decision to translate this treatise on friendship in the Tower is not an arbitrary one according to his preface dedicating the work to the Duchess of Suffolk, in which he claims that he:

[...] tried prisonment of the body, to be the libertee of spirite: aduersitee of fortune: the touchstone of freendship, exempcion from the world, to be the contempt of vanities: and in the ende quietenes of mind, the occasion of study. (ii^r – ii^v)

This passage demonstrates Harington's endorsement of sentiments familiar to Wyatt: that the personal experience of friendship can be a stabilising influence that is revealed in times of adversity and isolation, and of the value of attaining the elusive 'quietness of mind.' In Harington's phrasing, friendship involves knowing 'a mans hert to the bottome' (61^r). True friends should offer counsel to each other, and the greatest enemies to friendship are dissimulation and flattery. Even if one's friend dies,

²⁷ Cicero, *Cicero: Laelius On Friendship and The Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. J. G. F. Powell (Warminster: Aris, 1990) 24.

²⁸ John Harington, *The Booke of Freendship of Marcus Tullius Cicero* (London: Berthelette, 1562). All quotations from this book are cited by page number.

he friendship is not extinguished and the example of his virtue remains. These ideals of friendship, to which Harington, an enthusiastic collector of Wyatt and Surrey's poems, was attracted, resonate strongly with those we find in their poetry.

Wyatt's Epistolary Satires as Coterie Poems

Wyatt's epistolary satires bear affinities to Chaucer's coterie poetry in their intimate mode of address, invocation of shared interests between writer and addressee, and emotional complexity. Wyatt's first satire is a close adaptation of the Florentine Luigi Alamanni's tenth satire (a poem which was in turn influenced by Ariosto and Horace).²⁹ Alamanni had been exiled from Florence in 1527 for his opposition to the Medici government, and subsequently spent much of his life in exile, taking shelter with Francis I at the French court, and writing a series of neo-classical and anti-courtly satires during this period. Wyatt could conceivably have met Alamanni while abroad on his ambassadorial duties, but in any case he must have found some correspondence between the alienation from courtly life and moral indignation at its corruption felt by the speaker of Alamanni's poem and his own mood at the time. This may indicate that it was composed soon after his first imprisonment in the Tower in 1536 where he had been held on charges of treason as a result of his identification with the Boleyn faction at court. Although Wyatt follows Alamanni's text quite closely, the changes he makes are not just cosmetic: the republican sentiments of Alamanni's poem are diplomatically muted and Wyatt strongly anglicises his poem, adopting an English frame of reference throughout, not least by employing allusions

²⁹ For a discussion of the Horatian influence on Wyatt see Colin Burrow, 'Horace at Home and Abroad: Wyatt and Sixteenth-Century Humanism,' *Horace Made New: Horatian Influences on British Writing from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles Martindale and David Hopkins (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 27-49.

o medieval English literary tradition in place of Alamanni's classical ones, in referring to Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas and the medieval figure of 'Favel'.³⁰

The voice of Wyatt's satire emanates from the Wyatt family home in Allington Castle in Kent, implying a personal context in which this epistle should be read. The speaker confesses himself to have fled 'the press of courts' (3) with all their duplicity and double mindedness, for the liberty of walking the 'lusty leas' (84) of the country: a healthier, simpler life where he is free to live more or less as he chooses and occupy himself with gentlemanly leisure pursuits. The majority of the poem, however, is taken up with a backward glance at the habits of the court and the speaker is appalled by what he finds there. He declares himself unable to simulate the kind of behaviour that is *de rigueur* at court: the false flattery, ambition and self-delusion that leads evil acts and motives to be cloaked as good, and be talked about as virtuous. Above all, it is a passionate outcry against the fragmentation of the self that the atmosphere at court encourages: the pressure to suppress or distort unpleasant truths 'under the thrall of lordly looks' (4-5) and to prostitute one's soul for the purpose of pleasing others.

In Alamanni's poem, the satire is addressed to his friend Thommaso Sertini ('Thommaso mio gentil'; 2).³¹ Wyatt chooses John Poyntz for his addressee, a neighbour of the Wyatts in Kent and one of the men mentioned by Leland as one of Wyatt's particular friends. Poyntz was also active at court and involved in Tudor government in the late 1530s, serving as Commissioner of the Peace in Essex in 1536, and also on the Commission of Sewers in 1528. From the way in which Wyatt

³⁰ Thomson, *Wyatt and His Background* 258-9.

³¹ Alamanni's poem has been printed in the commentary to the *Collected Poems of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Kenneth Muir and Patricia Thomson, Liverpool English Texts and Studies (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1969) 347-49.

invokes his friend's presence at the beginning of the satire, we are encouraged to imagine the poem as an answer to Poyntz's request for information:

Mine own John Poyntz, since ye delight to know

The cause why that homeward I me draw (1-2)

There follows a catalogue of vices peculiar to the courtier. Wyatt alters it a little in places from Alamanni's account, but keeps the repeated denials ('Non saprei...' 'Non sono...' 'I cannot...' 'I am not...') that recur throughout. The impression of intimacy created by the repeated references to his friend by name, and the repeated appropriation of that name as *my* Poyntz (which is more pronounced in Wyatt's than in Alamanni's version) posits a close understanding between the two men.

The tone of the poem falls halfway between a defence and an attack, begging the question of whether Poyntz should be viewed as a quizzical or supportive listener. Is Wyatt preaching to the converted here, sure of a sympathetic audience in Poyntz, or does his friend present him with a silent antithesis against which he wishes to argue? In a discussion of Wyatt and sixteenth-century Horatianism, Colin Burrow makes the case that Wyatt intended his first epistolary satire as 'a piece of privy communication' with Poyntz, meant as a warning against corruption to a man becoming more involved in Tudor politics.³² He sees a 'carefully calculated jibe' at Poyntz in lines such as 'None of these points would ever frame in me.'³³ Burrow intuits a sarcastic stress on 'me' here, but granted that the play on Poyntz/points was tempting, the line could just as well be read: 'None of these, Poyntz, would ever frame in me,' (which would align with the sense of the earlier line: 'My Poyntz, I cannot frame my tune to feign').

Burrow, 'Horatianism,' 39.

Burrow, 'Horatianism,' 39.

Poyntz's implied role in this poem is not simply that of confidant, but also that of judge, not only of how the speaker spends his time, but of the validity of the sentiments of the poem itself. This theme of judgment is paralleled in the predicament of the courtier who can only succeed by twisting his own judgement, praising 'Sir Thopas for a noble tale / And scorn[ing] the story that the knight told' (50-51), as well as agreeing that Pan 'Passeth Apollo in music many fold' (49). The court, then, might also be read as a limit on artistic 'judgement' as well. It is in Kent, and not the court, where Wyatt's speaker truly feels himself to be 'Among the Muses' (101). However, this invocation of something like a humanist rustic retreat is counter-pointed by his expressed preference for the active life over the passive; the speaker will hawk and hunt, and only sit at his book when confined indoors by bad weather.

The irony of the poem is that Wyatt's rustication (arranged by Cromwell as an alternative to his execution, probably in exchange for the freedom of Bryan) was not the free and conscious choice that the appeal to Poyntz suggests, and that Poyntz himself probably knew this. Should we read the poem, then, as an act of defiance, or bravado on Wyatt's part? Did it proceed from the personal desire to reassure his friend that the Wyatt he knew was alive and well, or to send a more calculated statement proclaiming the kind of values Poyntz himself would share and understand, the careful craftsmanship of which could conceal hidden depths of sympathy and irony open to a discerning audience of courtiers?

Tottel suggests the applicability of the poem for a wider audience by titling it: 'Of the Courtiers life written to Iohn Pains.'³⁴ This aligns the first satire with the contents of the second, also addressed to Poyntz. Tonally, the second satire is more complex than the first. It begins in a homely fashion with the Horatian fable of the

³⁴ *Songes and Sonettes (Tottels's Miscellany) 1557*. Leeds: Scolar P, 1966. liii r.

Town and the Country Mouse, in which, again, a country existence -- harsh though it may be -- is implicitly preferred to the dangerous urban sophistication of city and court. Wyatt's speaker turns from this anecdote to lament how 'men do seek the best / And find the worst by error as they stray' (70-71). Initially, Wyatt seems to be pressing the moral of the fable by suggesting that men who seek wealthier and more luxurious lives for themselves reap misery from their ambitions. Wyatt speaks of such desires as transitory and ultimately unsatisfying, presenting them as a personal choice, implying that both he and Poyntz were familiar with the same dilemmas. Here the sense of the poem fluctuates a little: Wyatt seems at first to be saying that the satisfaction of such desires soon palls; then, that they are only a mirage for something else, and that what is actually being sought can never be attained from sources outside the self.

The satire is in fact a more complex meditation on the desirability of attaining contentment with one's lot in life and gaining quietness of mind -- a popular theme with Wyatt, and a product, perhaps, of his lifelong attraction to Stoicism and possibly also of his reading of Boethius. It is represented in this poem as an elusive quality or state already 'sitting in thy mind' (99), and this kind of cryptic shorthand reference to a body of thinking that Wyatt expects his readers to understand again suggests a coterie readership. After berating the madness of continuing to think otherwise, the satire takes a more astringent tone:

Henceforth, my Poyntz, this shall be all and sum.

These wretched fools shall have naught else of me.

But to the great God and to his high doom

None other pain pray I for them to be

But, when the rage doth lead them from the right,
 That looking backward, Virtue they may see
 Even as she is, so goodly fair and bright. (103-09)

The poem appears to stage a decisive moment in Wyatt's own thinking: the private character of the emotive reference to the 'wretched fools' suggests this hard-won wisdom is being applied to personal circumstances of which the speaker and addressee are already aware, and the poem ends with an almost apocalyptic vision of Virtue as the prize that his enemies have lost. Poyntz' role in the second poem throws additional light on his role in the first. In the act of free communication, of unburdening his mind and attaining a kind of stability thereby, Poyntz himself becomes a point of stability: the friend who can be trusted with what appears to be the speaker's private outburst, and understands the reason for it.

The third satire, addressed to Sir Francis Bryan, is still more complex in its negotiation between satirical strategy and personal friendship. There are indications that the real Bryan would have appreciated Wyatt's satire, which could well have been composed when both men were on embassy together in 1538. Like Wyatt, Bryan was a literary man. His fondness for collecting proverbs and *sententiae*, reflected in his own poem 'The Proverbes of Salomon,' is the probable reason for Wyatt's employment of proverbial sayings to open the discussion of the third satire. That Bryan himself may have been attracted by anti-courtly themes is suggested by his publication, in 1548, of *A Dispraise of the Life of the Courtier*, a translation of a French version of Antonio Guevara's *Menosprecio de Corte y Alabanza de Aldea* (1539).

Here Wyatt's speaker posits an understanding between himself and Bryan, that seeking to 'counsel man the right' (10) in writing is a gracious act. Ironically, however, this statement is the prelude to a deliberately *ungracious* act of counselling in which the speaker advises Bryan of various immoral and underhand ways of advancing himself at court, in a way that implies the speaker's distance from the advice that is being given. The poem probably owes something to one of Horace's satires, in which a ghostly Tiresias gives Ulysses cynical advice on legacy-hunting.³⁵ Tottel's heading for the poem, 'How to vfe the court and himfelfe therin,' implies that this poem arrives at the same anti-courtly values as the previous two by ironically inverting them.³⁶

In spite of the disparity in satirical strategy, the third satire represents a search for the stability of mind lauded by the second. It begins by noting the endurance of proverbs, 'that length of years their force can never waste' (6), and proceeds with rapid shifts of tone and sense to revive an imaginary conversation between the two men, in which Bryan's 'voice' emerges as distinctly as the speaker's. The problem for which Bryan desires counsel is that of finding ways of replenishing his financial resources, exemplified in the proverb of the spending hand which has 'need to have a bringer-in as fast' (2). This was a perennial problem for ambassadors abroad. Wyatt himself had been obliged to lend him £200 to save the king's honour when Bryan racked up huge gambling debts at Nice in 1538, a fact Wyatt subsequently grumbled about in letters to Cromwell.

To flee truth is the speaker's first piece of advice as one cannot purchase useful friends by relying on it. Virtue, too, should be used 'as it goeth now-a-days / In word alone to make thy language sweet.' (37-8). Next the speaker advocates the

³⁵ Horace *Satires* 2.5.

³⁶ *Songes and Sonettes*, liv v.

courting of rich, sickly old men and their widows, and disregards niceties of feeling with regard to courting advantageous marriages in the superbly calculated nonchalance of 'It is but love. Turn it to a Laughter.' (72). By inverted axioms, then, the opposite body of values emerges. Scholars have often pointed out that this cynical advice has some correspondence with what is known of Bryan's life, in which a reputation for drinking and gambling coincided with a certain degree of economic and political opportunism, suggesting he was already quite adept at 'using' the court as the speaker in this satire advises. The Bryan of the poem, however, functions as a repository of the kind of values which Wyatt really seeks to promote: a man who is quick and sure in his responses to the speaker, and who early on declares the loyalty to his prince, 'thy lord and mine' (25), which drives him to forsake Wyatt's vision of rustic plenty in rather violent terms in favour of the wearying life of running 'from realm to realm, from city, street, and town' (13). The speaker's worldly advice eventually succeeds in pressing Bryan to an even clearer declaration of a non-worldly set of values, however lightly the historical Bryan wore them. Finally, as friendship, too, is disregarded, 'Be next thyself, for friendship bears no prize.' (78), the speaker is interrupted by Bryan's laughter:

Laugh'st thou at me? Why? Do I speak in vain?

'No, not at thee, but at thy thrifty jest.

Wouldest thou I should for any loss or gain

Change that for gold that I have ta'en best --

Next godly things, to have an honest name? (79-83)

Bryan's stated preference for 'godly things' was not ironic: his religious interests are suggested by his ownership of a copy of the English Bible and his household, which included biblical scholars, has been described as 'as much a seminary for the rising generation as Cambridge.'³⁷ His valuing of 'an honest name' above money aligns him with the Bryan who had gained a reputation for truthfulness. This was a virtue he shared with Wyatt: as Brigden notes, both Wyatt and Bryan were famous for speaking their mind with unusual freedom at court.³⁸ Here Wyatt's speaker predicts that Bryan's penchant for maintaining a 'free tongue' (87) will lead him to adversity; an uncannily prophetic statement of Wyatt's own situation when imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1541, when his political opponents attempted to twist the records of his frankness of expression into treasonable utterances. In Wyatt's later poem from the Tower, 'Sighs are My Food,' he addresses Brian as someone who would sympathise with the bitter situation in which he then found himself:

Sure I am, Brian, this wound shall heal again

But yet, alas, the scar shall still remain. (7-8)

Surrey was clearly struck by these lines on the unfading scar for he employs the same image in his poem to Radcliffe.

In each of the satires, Wyatt's choice of the friend used as his addressee is not arbitrary. Poyntz, valued by Wyatt for his generosity of spirit according to Leland, seems to provide the speaker with a sympathetic reflection of his own values: a man who will understand the kind of integrity with which Wyatt seeks to align himself with in his first and second satires, epitomised in the figure of Virtue. Unlike Bryan,

³⁷ David Starkey, *The Reign of Henry VIII: Personalities and Politics* (London: Phillip, 1985) 133.

³⁸ Brigden, "'The Shadow'," 5-6.

Poyntz' role is always to listen; to give Wyatt's speaker space to discharge his mind; and for this reason the force of his listening presence is subtly reassuring. In contrast, Wyatt's choice of Bryan as his interlocutor for the third satire draws on the understanding they both shared of the life of the ambassador abroad, and, rather cynically, on the consequences of maintaining one's freedom of speech at court. The predicament of the honest courtier, of which both are painfully aware, emerges in the contrasts of perspective revealed in this dialogue. In this way the figure of the friend becomes the lens through which Wyatt directs his comments and observations on the courtier's life, and thus -- at least for those in his intended coterie readership -- a pointer for interpreting the poem.

7. Conclusion

In some respects, the terminus for any study of the transition between late medieval and early modern literary communities is not Wyatt and Surrey, but Ben Jonson: a man whose personal charisma united real and ideal conceptions of literary community. Jonson's success in establishing himself as a literary authority is reflected in his participation in a variety of literary communities: viz. the royal court, the inns of court, aristocratic literary circles, convivial tavern-based coterie and the world of the theatre. Jonson established his own literary community: the sons of Ben, known collectively as 'the tribe of Ben,' a living community of friends and disciples. The right to call oneself a son of Ben, and the notion of membership of such a tribe draws on the scene in the book of Revelation in which twelve thousand are 'sealed' 'of the tribe of Benjamin [...]' (Rev. 7.8; KJV). This reference is reminiscent of Skelton's comparison of the group of laureate poets to the company of the redeemed in the *Garlande of Laurell*. For Jonson, as for Skelton, this was an exclusive club. Not all of Jonson's friends attained the status of sons: this was a privilege granted only to those who had proved themselves able to live up to Jonson's own ideals of friendship.

The elements of theatricality and display in Jonson's performance of his own literary friendships sits uneasily, perhaps, with the poet who proclaimed in his 'Epistle to One Who Asked to Be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben' that such friendships should be 'Not built with canvas, paper, and false lights' (65). As long as poetry to individuals remains in the sphere of the manuscript community it can be what it claims to be: a private communication between friends that must, notionally at least, be personally intercepted or shared by other readers (perhaps intentionally on the part of the author) in order for them to access it. Donne's decision to circulate, but not to publish, his own coterie poetry nicely illustrates this balance of public and private interests for the

coterie poet with literary ambition. By contrast, Jonson's decision to publish his *Epigrams* (1612-13) turned his coterie poetry, and the literary communities he identified himself with, into a performance for a wider audience. Like Chaucer, Jonson assumes an interest on the part of his readers in the author as a social being, yet his marketing of himself as a literary personality in relationship with other literary personalities allowed him to become a literary legend within his own lifetime for the national audiences he reached through print. This was something the medieval 'laureate' Lydgate had also achieved, albeit in a more modest way and without Jonson's unprecedented degree of self-revelation, through his idealisation of the figure of the author and his interaction with a range of elite literary communities in fifteenth-century England.

My study of late medieval and early sixteenth-century authors indicates the continuing importance to authors of the communities that first offered them scope to develop their writing talents as a source of support and literary friendship. Although, in their more deliberate bid for canonical status, medieval 'laureates' like Lydgate and Skelton also sought to reach a wider, nationally imagined community of elite audiences, they retained their monastic and scholarly identities, and continued to write for, or within, these communities, and from perspectives derived from them. Each of the authors focused on in this study can thus be seen to have been radically shaped, at least in part, by the interests of the literary communities from which they emerged, whether courtly, bureaucratic, academic or religious. It is notable, in fact, that there is no single social career or type of community to which each of these men belonged, even although they each wrote, or attempted to write, for the canon of an evolving English poetic tradition (or subsequently became assimilated into it by later writers and arbiters of literary history). Lydgate and Skelton in particular, and Chaucer to a

lesser degree, engage explicitly with the idea of an imagined community of writers, appropriating classical and English topoi in images of Parnassus, the winning of the laurel, the House of Fame (or similar architectures of fame or honour), and national and international pantheons of poets in distinctive ways. Surrey, in his adaptation of Wyatt's legacy, and Hoccleve in his adaptation of Chaucer's, also localise an imagined community on their sense of communion with an immediate predecessor.

Chaucer and his 'circle' represent an organic literary community: a congenial set of friendships from which Chaucer probably drew his most immediate audience, and which seem to have provided a more important source of encouragement for his literary activities than royal or aristocratic patronage, if indeed he received any. While their religious interests and links to urban culture have encouraged some scholars to associate them with more organised socio-literary groups like the Lollards or the Puy, they remain an informal group united only by their relationship to Chaucer, both as a man and a writer. The best evidence for their existence as a literary community is the fact that these friendships are mediated through Chaucer's poetry, and in references to such friendships by contemporaries like Deschamps, the tone of which indicates the familiarity of these contemporary literati with Chaucer's poetic ambitions. The poetry of Clanvowe, Hoccleve and Scogan shows Chaucer's influence on the direction of the writing of men in his circle, and his creation of a group of literary disciples.

In spite of Hoccleve's interest in securing patronage -- or simply his annuity -- from his social superiors, and a period of success in marketing himself as a poet of public affairs, his relationship to the literary community of the Privy Seal office remains the most stable component of his writing career; and he identifies strongly with this particular community in his poetic projects, acting as a spokesman for it. Hoccleve's most convivial poems, *La Male Regle* and the *Ballad to Henry Somer* on

behalf of the *Court de la Bone Compaignie*, suggest that he found a congenial audience for his poetry in this wider community, as the humour and frame of reference are clearly derived from the culture shared by the government clerks. In the *Series*, Hoccleve explores the complex relations between the actual and imagined literary communities of his own society in his interactions with an imaginary friend, thus offering us a picture of the process of composition as something influenced informally, in this case humorously so, by conversations between friends.

Lydgate's position as a member of the Benedictine order probably ensured that he did not have regular access to most of the communities he wrote for (although he may have had more than 'ordinary' monks did in this period). In many cases he may have worked at a distance from them, responding from his study to requests and commissions as a professional writer and divisor. This may have prompted him to identify more strongly with bookish notions of virtual communities as unifying symbols of affiliation for a more abstract community of readers and writers. In the work of Lydgate we can trace a sustained and successful attempt on the part of an English poet to identify himself with an ideal literary community influenced by classical models: a chain of great authors stretching back to antiquity, symbolically located in Parnassus or equally venerable locations and symbolically patronised by Apollo and/or the muses. Lydgate's abstract community is not just that of Parnassus: he also develops the more concrete notion of a specifically Chaucerian reading community encountered in works like the *Troy Book* and the *Siege of Thebes*.

For Skelton, affiliation with the ideal community of Calliope's household enables the poet to operate through a personal authority in the present; in this way he remains independent from actual literary communities like the court, although he interacts with them in poems like 'Agenst Garnesche' and 'The Bowge of Court.' In

The Garlande of Laurell Skelton's relationship to such abstract literary communities as Fame's Palace, Apollo's garden, and the company of great poets may be humorously constructed as part of an intellectual game designed especially for a select and erudite readership. Actual literary communities exert as potent an influence on the *Garlande* as imaginary ones, as Skelton uses the poem as a means of interacting with his opponents -- political and literary -- as well as signalling the community of lettered men like himself, which he seems to have identified as the most congenial audience for his work.

Although Wyatt and Surrey are often judged to belong more decisively to the Renaissance than Skelton, they may be seen to have more in common with Chaucer in their identification with an elite group of courtiers, and the proportion of their literary output devoted to love-lyrics intended for courtly consumption. Indeed, it is Chaucer who is mentioned by Wyatt and Surrey (and, later, Sidney), rather than Skelton or Lydgate, as a congenial model for English vernacular poetry. They relied on attracting a readership for their poetry from their friends, and the conditions of life at the Henrican court were such that the kind of poetry produced by its courtiers was deeply implicated in the political turmoil of the times. The exclusive nature of such circles, and preoccupation with ideals of constancy and friendship evident in the poetry of those authors who wrote for them, were a symbol (as was Wyatt's stoicism) of the felt need to turn inwards for security to a readership that could be trusted both to keep secrets and interpret them. In this respect, Wyatt and Surrey are in some ways more socially embedded, both in their particular communities and in the concerns of the state, than their fifteenth-century predecessors were.

A number of general studies of the English literary tradition from Chaucer to renaissance authors from Wyatt onwards have emphasized a model of poetic relations

between Chaucer and his successors that privileges a struggle for the individual voice or talent to define itself against the collective community or communities of poetic tradition.¹ Tropes of fatherhood and son-ship, mentor and disciple, used by these poets and/or their critics to characterise the nature of literary influence are frequently read in terms of a Bloomian subjugation of the weaker artist to the stronger. This study has not attempted to challenge the validity of such readings as applied to individual authors. Nonetheless, one outcome of its shift of emphasis towards associational modes of literary relations as a support-base for writers may be the realisation that any account of literary history which conforms too closely to such a controlling narrative of literary relations risks ignoring the significance of a whole body of experience: of collective identities, group solidarities, and idealisations of past and present writing communities, with whom individual authors may forge a supportive relationship. Without considering the role of these communities, associations and informal friendship groups in encouraging English writers -- especially in an age amenable to manuscript circulation (and before the emergence of more formal societies of authors and literati, copyright laws, and finally professional associations of authors), we fail to engage with the experiences of medieval and early modern poets in their entirety, both 'lived' and literary. I hope that this study has gone some way to redressing this balance.

¹ See, for example, Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers: Imagining the Author in Late-Medieval England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993) and Spearing, *Medieval to Renaissance in English Poetry*.

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